Babila Mutia

Mami-Wata

Cameroon

TAGS: Mythology

We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.

General information

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<th>Title of the work</th>
<th>Mami-Wata</th>
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<td>This is a brief summary of the interview I had with Babila Mutia, who told me the story of Mami-Wata. His account of this myth largely corroborates those widely available on the internet (see <a href="http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/180">here</a>, accessed: August 22, 2018).</td>
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<td>Author of the Entry</td>
<td>Daniel Nkemleke, University of Yaoundé 1, <a href="mailto:nkemlekedan@yahoo.com">nkemlekedan@yahoo.com</a></td>
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Babila Mutia, b. 1951
(Storyteller)

Babila Mutia is an associate professor in oral literature and creative writing in the department of English at ENS, University of Yaounde 1. He is a widely travelled short stories writer. He earned his BA in English from the University of Benin in Nigeria, his MA in Creative Writing from the University of Windsor, Canada and a PhD in English from Dalhousie University, Canada. He has been a visiting Fulbright scholar in Western Washington University. He is a professional storyteller whose short story The Tiger Trail was broadcast on the BBC in 1979. His best known published works include: Whose Land (1996), Coils of Mortal Flesh (2008) and The Miracle (2012).

Bio prepared by Daniel Nkemleke, University of Yaoundé 1, nkemlekedan@yahoo.com
Origin/Cultural Background*: The people of the coastal region of Cameroon, also called the Sawas, are part of the Niger-Congo family and of the Bantu origin. In the 16th century, they were leading traders in Cameroon. Their long contact with Europeans colonisers helped in shaping Cameroon slave-trade history. Interior coastal groups include the Bakoko, Bakweri, Mungo, and Bassa. Their inheritance is mainly patrilineal. They practice polygamy and admit the presence of Christianity. Popular among their beliefs is the belief that their ancestors reside in water. Consequently, the mediators between the coastal people and God are their demi-human water spirits. The coastal people of Cameroon have secret societies that keep them united. These secret societies include the Ngondo of the Sawas and the Ngele of the Batangas. Similarly, the people of the riverine regions in Nigeria also hold that their deities originally lived below the water around them. They constantly pray and organize different festivals dedicated to their land and individual deities. Thus, worshipping water spirits is a perpetual practice among the coastal people of Cameroon and Nigeria.

Mami-wata spirit in popular culture:

- Mami-wata images in paintings, and wooden sculptures are usually bought by wealthy Africans and tourists visiting West and Central Africa and the Caribbean. Many people use them to decorate their living rooms, bars, public places and so on. Many writers, poets, musicians and filmmakers also use Mami-wata as a theme in their works**.

Summary

The myth of Mami-Wata is very common in West, Central and Southern African countries. According to many accounts, Mami-Wata* is a water mermaid with special interest in human affairs. Her features may vary across different locations but generally she is depicted as a very attractive and sexually appealing lady, who is sometimes half-fish and half-human and half-snake. It is believed that she is often spotted on beaches or gliding on waterfalls. According to Babila Mutia (narrator cited above) many people in coastal areas of Cameroon (Douala and Buea area) and even in Nigeria claimed to have seen or hear stories about Mami-Wata. He said, “there are some very rare accounts from people in these areas who said they had seen a “Mami-Wata” in her full human form before she later transforms into her hybrid form**. In many of the accounts of the myth, Mami-Wata can either bless (with wealth or health) or curse the people she meets depending on their characters or looks. Mami-Wata is worshipped by many peoples in Cameroon, Nigeria, America and the Caribbean. Her worshipers implore her for fertility, wealth, success, and other personal or community needs. In some places in Nigerian and Cameroonian, she is said to sometimes transform into a beautiful lady or prostitute and then lure her victims into bed. The wayward man would wake up to find himself at the sea-shore, or Mami-Wata might demand his total faithfulness and discreteness in exchange for protection and blessings. There may be some links of Mami-Wata with India. Some sources claim that in the mid-20th Century, some African traders imported copies of Snake Charmers*** from Bombay and sold them in many parts of Africa including the Democratic Republic of Congo, Senegal, and Zambia. The story of the snake charmers, it is believed, might have given rise to the Mami-Wata story in Africa.
The Mami-wata, literally known as sea mother, as indicated by the above narrator, with her multi-forms appearances (spirit, human, half human and half fish etc.) comes in to regulate societal behaviour and assist in creating a link between humanity and the world beyond, especially in riverine regions in Africa. This phenomenon, with it varied spiritual and human manifestations, can be compared to the Greco-Roman water nymphs, Nereids and Potamides. Nereids and Potamides, like the Mami-wata, are depicted as beautiful young maidens and as goddesses of the sea who watch over the sea’s enormous bounty. The Nereids as the Greeks record, were also believed to be fifty in number, and were worshipped in ancient Greece, especially in the sea ports. The Greeks also believed that these water nymphs were often accompanied by Poseidon, the sea god, and could help sailors whom they found favor in. Beside the above, Mami-wata parallels the love and sexuality associated with Aphrodite, and the healing powers of the god of medicine, Asclepius, in Greek mythology. The members of the Ngele secret society in Batanga, Cameroon, who worship these Mami-wata phenomena, also believe in their healing power. The above account of the myth equally bears semblance with Peitho, the goddess of persuasion and seduction (or desire) in Greek Mythology. Finally, it is important to note that different accounts are given by different people on this phenomenon, depending on where they come from and how it manifest itself in their individual societies.

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**Mythology**

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts

**Appearances Humanity Relationships Romance Water**

Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture

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**Further Reading**

Homer. *Iliad* XVIII.


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**Addenda**

Classical motifs:

- Water Nymphs and mermaids in Greek Mythology

- Mami-Wata parallels the love and sexuality associated with Aphrodite, and the healing powers of the god of medicine, Asclepius, in Greek mythology.

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- Mami-Wata also bears resemblance with Peitho, the goddess of persuasion and seduction (or desire) in Greek Mythology.