Daniel A. Nkemleke, "Entry on: Jengu by Desire Guifo", peer-reviewed by Courage Yaah and Elizabeth Hale. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2018). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/164. Entry version as of October 31, 2026.

Desire Guifo

Jengu

Cameroon

TAGS: African Mythologies African Storytelling African Traditions Gods





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General information	
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Creators



Desire Guifo , b. 1972
(Storyteller)

Guifo Desire is a secondary school teacher in the town of Kribi in the South region of Cameroon. He teaches African Languages and Cultures to students preparing to write the certificate examination into the university. He hails from Batanga, one of the tribes that lie along the Atlantic Ocean, where the Jengu (i.e spirit of water) myth is popular. Despite his Western education and youthfulness, he holds strongly to the culture and traditions of his people. He claims that he himself possesses the Jengu spirit, like many people of the Batanga do.

Language of narration: French

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Additional information

Origin/Cultural Background/Dating	Background: The Batanga people of the "people of water" to use the common English expression in Cameroon. They live along the coast of the Atlantic Ocean and consequently, their daily activities and cosmology is related to the sea. They worship sea gods, and offer regular sacrifices to the gods of the sea. When there is trouble in the land, the seek solution from the sprits in the sea. They believe that their ancestral spirits live in the depth of the sea, and oversee the activities of the living.
Summary	A Jengu is a water spirit which is believed to appear to people in different forms – sometimes as a beautiful black girl or a mermaid with long hair and a gap-toothed smile. The people who lived in the Southern costal parts of Cameroon (e.g. Douala, Batanga) have worshipped this spirit for centuries. Although Christianity and western culture have had a significant impact here, belief in Jengu has remained strong. Its worshippers believe that Jengu brings good fortune, healing to various ailments and acts as an intermediary between them and their gods. Jengu is associated with many rituals, induction ceremonies, cults and sacred societies as well as ancestral and religious worship. Among the Duala people of the coast of Cameroon, for example, each year the Ngondo festival is organised to showcase their belief in this spirit. A night before the festival ends, members of the Jengu cult would hold a private ceremony to offer sacrifices to Jengu. Among the Bakwere people of Buea, membership in the Jengu cult is restricted to women. It serves as a rite of passage for young girls of marriage age.
Analysis	The Jengu myth is related to the Mami-wata* myth that exists in many west African countries. The Jengu phenomenon, otherwise known as the "Mami water" (water mother), is widespread in many riverine regions in Cameroon in particular and Africa in general. They live in water, but sometimes come to land to interact with humanity. Inasmuch as these water spirits are treasures to humanity, they equally serve as a means of correcting unruliness in society, especially among frivolous men.

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Because of their nature (spirits, humanity, half fish and half human), their abodes are often regarded as sacred places where sacrifices are offered to placate them, and for the appeasement of the land.

* There are some similarities between Jengu and Mami-wata, described in another entry, with the difference that Mami-wata appears more hospitable. One can therefore conclude that there is a certain degree of overlap in the two myths.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	African Mythologies African Storytelling African Traditions Gods
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Appearances Religious beliefs Sacrifice Water

Further Reading

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Beasts: The Reception of Ancient Monsters in Children's and Young Adults' Culture, in the series "Studien zur europäischen Kinder- und Jugendliteratur / Studies in European Children's and Young Adult Literature" 8, Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2020, 387–400.

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Addenda

I asked Mr Desire Guifo if the Jengu phenomenon is real, and he said it is real and many people in Batanga land are possessed by it, including him. He claimed that sometimes it appears to people in a dream or in a trance and instructs them of a particular course of action to take. He cited the example of a woman in his village whose husband would be taken by Jengu to the sea for about two weeks with her consent. He would return with a lot of fish and an assurance of a good harvest. He also said the Batanga people have two annual events in which an initiate would carry gifts in a canoe to the middle of the sea and to offer to Jengu. When Jengu accepts the offering, an invisible hand will appear from the bottom of the sea to receive the containers of gifts, and later will return the empty containers to the surface of the sea or seashore. Sometimes, the Jengu would send a letter that would float on the sea without getting wet and only an initiate can take, read and interpret its contents to the people.

When asked whether a non-native Batanga can see Jengu, Mr Guifo said the Jengu appears only to Batanga initiates. And that Jengu-possessed people may become unreasonably violent. He cited the example of a Jengu-possessed female student who killed a teacher with a single slap. She had pleaded with the teacher not to beat her on her back but the teacher ignored her plea. He further cited the case of a young army recruit from Batanga, who had his superior seriously beaten after sea water was thrown at him by this officer*.

Asked if the Jengu phenomenon is declining with urbanization, Mr Guifo accepted. He however, pointed out that this was only to an extent because many Batanga children are still being born with the spirit and even when they grew up and travel to other towns, the spirit remains in them. He added that the Jengu spirit also acts as a moral

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censor, it can punish promiscuity. For example, he said many people have woken up in roadside gutters after spending a night with women (Jengu spirit) they met in nightclubs or night dance.

* According to Guifo, a Jengu initiate should never have sea water thrown on their back, because it might provoke certain spiritual forces latent in his being. These forces, which are usually reserved for use only during specific traditional Jengu-festivities, when released at odd times, may result in violent and uncontrollable behaviour in the person.

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