Daniel A. Nkemleke, "Entry on: Mami-Wata by Babila Mutia", peer-reviewed by Divine Che Neba and Elizabeth Hale. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2018). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/180. Entry version as of October 31, 2026.

Babila Mutia

Mami-Wata

Cameroon

TAGS: African Mythologies African Storytelling African Traditions





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

General information	
Title of the work	Mami-Wata
Country of the First Edition	Cameroon
Country/countries of popularity	Cameroon, Nigeria
Original Language	Unknown
Registration Files	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 here, accessed: August 22, 2018).
Country of the Recording of the Story for the Database	Cameroon
Full Date of the Recording of the Story for the Databasey	January 18, 2017
More Details of the Recording of the Story for the Database	Yaoundé, Cameroon
Genre	Myths
Target Audience	Crossover
Author of the Entry	Daniel A. Nkemleke, University of Yaoundé 1, nkemlekedan@yahoo.com

This Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 681202, *Our Mythical Childhood… The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, ERC Consolidator Grant (2016–2021), led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak, Faculty of "Artes Liberales" of the University of Warsaw.

Peer-reviewer of the Entry	Divine Che Neba, University of Yaoundé 1, nebankiwang@yahoo.com Elizabeth Hale, University of New England, ehale@une.edu.au

This Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 681202, *Our Mythical Childhood… The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, ERC Consolidator Grant (2016–2021), led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak, Faculty of "Artes Liberales" of the University of Warsaw.

Creators



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 A. Nkemleke, University of Yaoundé 1, nkemlekedan@yahoo.com

This Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 681202, *Our Mythical Childhood… The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, ERC Consolidator Grant (2016–2021), led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak, Faculty of "Artes Liberales" of the University of Warsaw.

Additional information

Origin/Cultural Background/Dating

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**.

- Caribbean writer, Wayne Gerard Trotman, for instance, depicts her as Mama Dlo in his novel *Kaya Abaniah and the Father of the Forest* (2015). There is also a satirical Cameroonian newspaper, titled *Mamy-wata* and a book, *Mami Wata – Short Stories in Nigerian Pidgin English* (2009) by Oluwgbemiga Ogboro-Cole, among many others. Musicians such as S. J. Tucker in “La Sirene” and Hugh Masekela in “Mami-wata” also refer to her in their songs.

This Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 681202, *Our Mythical Childhood… The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children’s and Young Adults’ Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, ERC Consolidator Grant (2016–2021), led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak, Faculty of “Artes Liberales” of the University of Warsaw.

* Source:

Esoh Elamé, "La prise en compte du magico-religieux dans les problématiques de développement durable: le cas du Ngondo chez les peuples Sawa du Cameroun", Vertigo VII.3 (2006), available at journals.openedition.org (accessed: May 27, 2019).

** Literarily “Water Mother” where “Mami” is the Pidgin English spelling of the word mammy or mother and “wata” is water.

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 Nigeria and Cameroon, she is said to sometimes transform into a beautiful, promiscuous lady luring her victims to 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.

This Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 681202, *Our Mythical Childhood… The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children’s and Young Adults’ Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, ERC Consolidator Grant (2016–2021), led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak, Faculty of “Artes Liberales” of the University of Warsaw.

* Here we can also see a reference to the Jengu myth in this database.

** When I was growing up in my own village (Alou in the Lebialem Division of the southwest region of Cameroon) in the 70s, there was a stream at the entrance to the village, where it was believed Mami-Wata" dwelled in. The stream was a boundary with the neighbouring village. Today that steam still exist, but few people talk about the presence of Mami-Wata there again.

*** *Mumbai Photo: snake charmer in Mumbai, India*, tripadvisor.ca, January 2010 (accessed: August 22, 2018).

Analysis

The Mami-wata, literally known as sea mother, as indicated by the 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 its varied spiritual and human manifestations, can be compared to the concept embodied by water nymphs from various cultures. The members of the Ngele secret society in Batanga, Cameroon, who worship these Mami-wata phenomena, also believe in their healing power. Finally, it is important to note that different accounts of this phenomenon are given by different people, depending on where they come from and how it manifest itself in their individual societies.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts

African Mythologies African Storytelling African Traditions

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

Appearances Humanity Relationships Romance Water

This Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 681202, *Our Mythical Childhood… The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, ERC Consolidator Grant (2016–2021), led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak, Faculty of "Artes Liberales" of the University of Warsaw.

Further Reading

Bastian, Misty L., "Married in the Water: Spirit Kin and Other Afflictions of Modernity in Southeastern Nigeria", *Journal of Religion in Africa* 27.2 (1997): 116–134. JSTOR, (accessed: January 22, 2021).

Drewal, Henry John, ed., *Sacred Waters: Arts for Mami Wata and Other Divinities in Africa and the Diaspora*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008.

Oluwgbemiga Ogboro-Cole, *Mami Wata – Short Stories in Nigerian Pidgin English*, Germany: Athena Verlag, 2009.

van Stipriaan, Alex, "Watramama/Mami-wata: Three centuries of creolization of a water spirit in west Africa, Suriname and Europe", *Matutu: Journal for African Culture and Society* 27/28 (2005): 323–337.

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

This Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 681202, *Our Mythical Childhood… The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, ERC Consolidator Grant (2016–2021), led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak, Faculty of "Artes Liberales" of the University of Warsaw.