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Henry John Drewal, ed. *Sacred Waters: Arts for Mami Wata and Other Divinities in Africa and the Diaspora.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008. Illustrations, DVD. xxiii + 681 pp. $75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-35156-2.

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Mami Wata Reconsidered and Redefined

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Henry John Drewal's edited collection *Sacred Waters* addresses its subject in no less than forty-six essays. Scholars, artists, writers, filmmakers, and devotees from Africa, Europe, and the Americas present their perspectives on topics drawn from art history, visual and material culture, anthropology, and history. The wide range of information, writing styles, research methods, and intellectual approaches gives the reader a rich view of Mami Wata and related divinities. The included DVD presents additional materials for most chapters–music, spoken word poetry, performance videos, and still images. This multimedia offering complements the collection's diverse and hybrid subject.

Sacred Waters' chapters accumulate to reveal Mami Wata's myriad histories as well as the complexity and changeability of contemporary beliefs and social practices that Mami Wata encompasses. Even the pidgin vernacular term "Mami Wata" does not have a fixed meaning; it can refer to a pantheon of water deities or a single (female or male) spirit, or even to a person who exemplifies various Mami Wata characteristics. Not surprisingly, then, essay authors repeatedly stress diversity; for example, Charles Gore discusses the variety of Mami Wata beliefs and practices within one urban center (Benin City), and Martha G. Anderson notes that water spirit beliefs differ between individuals within the same Ijo community.

Furthering this complexity, many authors push the boundaries of "Mami Wata." Brian Siegel discusses the mermaid *chitapo* of Lake Kashiba, Zambia, who has Mami Wata characteristics but is known by a different name. Jean M. Borgatti explains that the Okpella of Nigeria believe in a mythical water beast (*achikobo*) that resembles a manatee and, like Mami Wata, bestows riches on anyone fortunate enough to catch it. Unlike Mami Wata, however, the *achikobo* functions within the bonds of community and kinship to buttress social values including justice and generosity. Adeline Masquelier demonstrates that Mami Wata need not live in water; the divinity migrated from the beaches of Abidjan to the savannah of Niger, where it morphed into the spirit known as Madame Sabot (who is said to have hooves).

Given the pervasiveness of Mami Wata-related beliefs and practices in West and Central Africa and the diaspora, it is not surprising that associated visual imagery is diverse and widespread. Often represented as a female mermaid, Mami Wata appears in paintings, drawings, sculptures, rituals, theatrical performances, films, videos, and manipulated photos in sensationalist publications. She embellishes punch-decorated brass dishes and Haitian Vodou flags, and she also adorns masks that the Ejagham say do not represent Mami Wata at all. Verbal descriptions of her abound in songs, poems, novels, Pentecostal sermons and ephemera, and general lore.

One of *Sacred Waters*' ongoing themes is that Mami Wata is a manifestation of centuries old African religious traditions retooled for contemporary times. To this end, Osa D. Egonwa outlines the metamorphosis of the river spirit Onoku into Mami Wata in Nigeria's Ethiope River Basin. And Dunja Hersak comments: "I came to realize that Mami Wata was not only an appended or perhaps transient concept of modernity, but that it encapsulated essential elements of Vili and Yombe religion of the past and present" (p. 340). About Mami Wata's abil-

ity to move between realms (water and land) and speak in various languages, Misty L. Bastian writes: "Although an argument could be made that this speaks to the transition to postmodernity in Nigeria, a condition of permanent dislocation and hybridity, I would add a cautionary note. Spiritual forces in southeastern Nigeria have long had the ability to transmute" (p. 92).

This embedding of Mami Wata within historical context is particularly noteworthy. Past scholarship often has presented Mami Wata as a new phenomenon, typically as "a foreign (Western) thing" or Other (p. 217). *Sacred Waters*, then, begins to provide a corrective to this misinterpretation; as Joseph Nevadomsky writes: "The employment of the 'Other' is not the way to approach Mammy Wata. This analytical posture minimizes disjuncture, fragmentation and contingency–precisely what agency accomplishes. A limitation of the 'Other' silences indigenous voices and homogenizes experiences by producing monologues" (p. 356).

Many of *Sacred Waters*' essays reveal Mami Wata beliefs and practices as solutions to various societal stressors. Since the 1990s, for example, they have buttressed Ogoni communities in Nigeria during a time of political, social, and environmental turmoil. While conducting research in 2004, Jill Salmons discovered that approximately five hundred Ogoni belonged to the Ogoni Mammy Wata Association, an organization that distributed membership cards. Members called on one another to combine spiritual powers and also to provide financial help for shrines, which Salmons notes functions as "a type of insurance in times of illness" (p. 427).

Barbara Frank discusses Mami Wata as a response to an issue that capitalism raises for many traditional (i.e., premodern) West African belief systems: the problem of individual success. If individuals make a pact with Mami Wata, they can become successful without being considered immoral. In exchange for their wealth, they must promise to be faithful to the divinity. While this means Mami Wata devotees cannot have children and perpetuate the family line, it protects them from the stigma of the older belief that an individual must sacrifice a human life to a spirit in order to profit personally (rather than communally). Significantly, this means multiple incidents of individual success do not cripple the social fabric; also, older belief systems can coexist with newer ones.

Lest the reader develop the impression that Mami Wata's myriad guises offer uncontested solutions to various social ills, however, *Sacred Waters*' authors also address dissension. As a counterexample to the Ogoni community's reliance on Mami Wata during a time of strife, Nnamdi Elleh reports that the collapse of the Nigerian economy in 1983 forced people to turn to Christianity's promise of redemption from daily suffering; consequently, "the images of Mami Wata were sublimated with Christian ones" (p. 402). Demonstrating diversity within a single community, Salmons notes that not every Ogoni is in favor of Mami Wata; sometimes members of various church denominations even destroy shrines that the Ogoni Mammy Wata Association then works hard to replace. Charles Gore and Birgit Meyer show that Pentecostals in Benin City and Accra typically equate Mami Wata with the seductive perils of the contemporary secular world.

One of *Sacred Waters*' major strengths is the self-reflexivity of many of its authors. Materials often are not presented as straightforward truth; rather, authors acknowledge the role of interpretation in research and scholarship. In her essay about Mami Wata Vodun, Sharon Caulder-Hounon, who is both an academic and a practitioner of the Vodun religion, notes that researchers "are usually from the 'outside.' … Even a lengthy immersion in the society under scrutiny cannot overcome these deficits. The observer and the observed do not have the same worldviews" (p. 195). Notably, however, even Caulder-Hounon must rely on a translator during her research and Vodun training in the Republic of Benin. Throughout *Sacred Waters*, other authors mention the dangers of mistranslation. For example, Osa D. Egonwa postulates that inaccurate translations of foreign literature have contributed to misinformation about Mami Wata.

Regarding the accuracy of informants during field research, Chiji Akoma's response to Henrietta Cosentino's essay is particularly insightful. About the nude dead body locals found in a river and told Cosentino was a Mami Wata victim, Akoma comments: "Maybe it's my cultural studies theory kicking in, but you must admit that your being the lone white woman in that community, young, outgoing, sociable, and quite keyed in with many of the townfolk [*sic*], doesn't mean that the locals couldn't overstate some of the mysterious encounters" (p. 102). Akoma hypothesizes that the body may have been that of a bather who was an inexperienced swimmer.

In her essay that features an interview with Zulu Mami Wata devotee Nokuthula Xaba, K. Limakatso Kendall provides the reader with keen insight. After Xaba states that she was underwater with Mami Wata for three days, Kendall notes: "It is difficult to translate this

idea of 'under water' for Western readers. Traditional Zulu people do not strike the dichotomy between dream and non-dream, conscious and unconscious, common in the West. It is possible, in southern Africa, to be poisoned by food one eats in a dream and to experience physical symptoms of that poisoning; it is possible to descend 'under water' while unconscious–and the physical body of the unconscious person remains visible above water to observers" (p. 317).

Insights such as this are necessary to cultivate true cross-cultural understanding. To this end, the final essay in *Sacred Waters* is particularly successful: Vivian Hunter-Hindrew (Mama Zogbé) presents a harrowing account of her struggle as an African American forced to come to terms with an innate (and initially uninvited) African spirituality. Hunter-Hindrew describes how Mami Wata pressured her into becoming a devotee. Since her firsthand account clearly illustrates Mami Wata's power, and in such a personal way, it is an excellent choice for the final essay.

Given the diversity of the essays in *Sacred Waters*, the collection would easily fall apart were it not carefully organized, first by theme and then by place and time. Moreover, this structure allows–even invites–the reader to compare and contrast Mami Wata-related art, practices, and beliefs. It also reveals the unbridled scope of the term "Mami Wata." The combination of academic and creative writing, photo essay, and interview fosters the reader's comprehension of a complex subject, and like the included multimedia DVD offerings, complements *Sacred Waters*' diverse and hybrid subject.

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