

FEMINISM AND AFRICAN THEODICY: THE DIALECTICS OF EVIL AND MAMI-WATA SPIRITUALITY

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DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.30596.95360

Abstract

The impact of Christian discourses on the problem of evil on the popular African Mami-Wata spirituality is yet to be addressed. Mammy Water (popularly known as Mami-Wata, that is, Mother-Water) is a goddess/deity that is indigenous to the Africans, central to African religious beliefs and social systems, and the deity's spirituality emphasizes religious practices that accentuate the expression of femininity, prosperity, fertility, womanhood, and sexuality. Studies have shown the various ways Mami-Wata deity has influenced African Christianity, especially the effect of the negative negotiations and engagement between African Traditional Religion and Christianity. Despite the diverse array of voices on how Christianity has contributed to the representation of postcolonial African spirituality, very little has been said about how Mami-Wata deity has been connected to the project of the problem of evil. Using ethnographic approach, this study analyses the way African Christianity has engaged different facets of Mami-Wata deity in addressing African Christians' understanding of the problem of evils and its effect on the female gender. It further seeks to address questions on what could be done to give femininity and feminine spirituality a creative and visible place in African Christianity rather than the demonization of African religion and femininity represented in Mami-Wata deity.

Keywords: Femininity, Theodicy, Mami-Wata, Evil, Demonisation, Christian theology.

Introduction

Mami-Wata (or Mammy Water) is the name of a female water deity worshiped by some Africans, especially among people living in riverine areas of the eastern and southern parts of Nigeria (Igboland, Cross River, and Yorubaland). She is worshiped as one who gives fertility, health, and wealth. She is revered as an embodiment of femininity and power, and her presence wields influence on women's involvement in the social, economic, and religious structures of society. Mami-Wata deity is associated with the belief that a female deity controls the waters and that masses of waters possess a transcendent power that can be experienced by humans. As a powerful deity, she is, sometimes, demonized and dragged into theodicean discourses about the existence and experiences of evil. In some instances, the interconnectedness between Mami-Wata and the female gender has also contributed to some African women being accused as sources of evil.

In recent years, the belief in the existence of Mami-Wata deity has dramatically resurfaced in the number of devotees attracted to her. Her devotees have a particular spirituality developed around her with a community of worshippers that performs special kind of prayers, rituals, offerings, and dance in submission to the deity. They (her devotees) will often go to the shrines or rivers to supplicate before the deity to change their economic, social, and other human conditions. In return, they expect her to provide them wealth, fertility, beauty, healing, etc. They also believe in her creative and transformative powers to punish offenders, punish those who afflict or torment her devotees, and reward the loyal devotees.

During the heyday of Pentecostalism in Africa, preachers and scholars alike have gradually recentralized the marginal discourses of grassroots spiritualities into the mainstream agenda of global Christianity. With a keen eye on engaging African faith and experiences vis à vis the Christian faith and theology, grassroots spiritualities have become indispensable sources for addressing the challenges and crises of faith of some Africans. Within this context, Mami-Wata spirituality has played significant role in understanding the merits and demerits of this new engagements with African traditions and Christian theology.¹

The evidence of the extent of the interest in Mami-Wata spirituality can be seen in the long history of scholarly negotiations with this African deity. Three main approaches characterised previous scholarship on Mami-Wata spirituality. The first is the Meta-historical Approach. This approach examines the origin, nature, and identity of the female deity within the context of the Trans-Atlantic trades.² Here, debates range from where the worship of Mami-Wata is evidenced (such as, among people living in the coastal regions of Benin, Zaire, Ghana, Togo, and beyond Africa), from where it originated and further developed.³ According to Drewal, diasporic movements contributed to the development of Mami-Wata spirituality beyond Africa and the objectification of the multidimensional personality, attributes, image, and visuals of the Water Mother around the globe.⁴ Consequently, Mami-Wata became a socio-religious symbol of resistance to beliefs, rituals, and cultural hegemony.

The second is the Women's Liberationist Approach. It investigates the appropriation of the feminine components of the deity for the empowerment and liberation of women. Ifi Amadiume chronicles how pre-colonial African society revered the water goddess. She maintains that indigenous spiritualities such as Mami-Wata were used to construct identities of resistance and empowerment for women. In pre-Christian Igbo communities, for instance, women were held in great and godly esteem—as the font of both fertility and morality, as well as the source of tradition and culture.⁵ Mami-Wata's influence historically empowered women in specific societies and cultures in Africa. It strengthened women concerning authority, solidarity, compensation, and memory of their relevant past. However, with the coming of Christianity, these social constructs of the water deity were demonized, reflecting not only the impact of Christianity on the African continent, but also how Christian patriarchal ideas marginalised femininity.

The third is the Religio-pragmatic Approach. Here, Mami-Wata deity has been used as solution to religio-cultural questions and critiques about African peoples, cultures, and religions upon African's contact with colonial culture and religion. The Christian missionaries' attempt to demonize the African religious reality or to depict African grassroots spiritualities as

¹Kalu Ogbu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 207-210

²Henry John Drewal, "Mami-Wata: Arts for Water Spirits in Africa and Its Diasporas," *African Arts* (2008): 60-83; Osa D. Egonwa, "The Mami-Wata Phenomenon: 'Old Wine in New Skin,'" in *Sacred Waters: Arts for Mami Wata and Other Divinities in Africa and the Diaspora*, ed. Henry John Drewal (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008), 217-227; Alex Van Stipriaan, "Watramama/Mami Wata: Three Centuries of Creolization of a Water Spirit in West Africa, Suriname and Europe," in *A Pepper-Pot of Cultures: Aspects of Creolization in the Caribbean*, ed. Gordon Collier and Ulrich Fleischmann (Matatu, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003), 323-546.

³There has been profound debate on the origins of this divine feminine. While some assert that it is part of African pre-colonial cosmology, others insist that it is "hybridized river and sea goddesses popularized across Africa and the African diaspora in the nineteenth century". Mado Krishnan, "Mami Wata and the Occluded Feminine in Anglophone Nigerian-Igbo Literature," *Research in African Literatures* 43 (Spring, 2012): 1-18, 2. See also Sabine Jell-Bahlsen, "Eze Mmiri di Egwu, The Water Monarch is Awesome: Reconsidering the Mammy Water Myths," In *Queens, Queen Mothers, Priestesses and Power; Case Studies in African Gender*, Flora Kaplan, ed. (New York: Academy of Sciences, 1997), 103-134, 105.

⁴John Drewal, "Mami-Wata," 61.

⁵Ifi Amadiume, "Bodies, Choices, Globalizing Neocolonial Enchantments: African Matriarchs and Mammy Water," *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*, vol. 2, no. 2 (2002): 41-66, 43.

incongruous with the message of the Gospel culminated in the marginalisation and demonisation of Mami-Wata deity as a representation of the negative forces and energies behind traditional religions and spiritualities. According to John Drewal,

Mami-Wata is celebrated by many but demonized as monstrous by Christian pentecostalist and fundamentalist Islam. These two invasive faiths bring with them notions of a clear-cut divide between good and evil, and ideas about original sin and notions of redemption – concepts absent from indigenous African religions.⁶

Speaking of the Oguta people in East Nigeria,⁷ Lawrence N. Okwuosa et. al. observe how formal Western education and Christian religion were craftily introduced to displace the people's cultural practices and traditions, and how this development negatively affected Mami-Wata spirituality. This negative religio-cultural negotiation with Mami-Wata spirituality, that is, associating the goddess with the presence of evil was aimed at creating negative perceptions, objectification and subjectification of evil in Mami-Wata deity such that the deity became the template of what is described as evil in African Christianity, culture and belief.⁸

Building on the third approach, this study examines how African Christians engage religion and the problem of evil in the light of Mami-Wata spirituality and its implications for how femininity is perceived and expressed. Even though studies have pointed out the religio-cultural and theological association of Mami-Wata with evil, no real study has investigated the dominant trends, diverse opinions, and the possible effects of the Christian-stereotyped traditional theological reflection of evil and Mami-Wata deity on femininity. From the ethnographic data collected through a research carried out in different areas and towns in the East and South of Nigeria, and through interviews of some individuals that are victims of 'Mami-Wata tagging', observations, and listening to real-life stories of peoples, the result of my observations and interactions could be summed into three main paradigms (a) the witch paradigm, (b) the demon-devil paradigm, and (c) the seductress/harlot paradigm.

The three (3) paradigms above are observable contemporary trends in the theological reflections on the effect of Mami-Wata deity on African Christians. The understanding of Mami-Wata as witch, demon or a harlot reflects the kinds of existential responses used by some African Christians to explain the presence of evil, either in their lives, in the society or the reasons for evil. In the belief that God cannot cause or bring about evil to human persons, Mami-Wata has been demonised and used to explain the presence of evil and the stereotyping of women as evil in some African communities through the prism of Mami-Wata deity.

Theodicy and Mami-Wata Spirituality

The awareness of the existence and effect of evil in African indigenous traditions and Christianity is a reality that confronts humanity at large, and the African Christians in particular. In the wake of the Christianisation of Africa, the Western missionaries believed that Africans and

⁶Henry John Drewal, "Beauteous Beast: The Water Deity Mami-Wata in Africa," In *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, eds., Asa Simon Mittman and Peter Dendle (United Kingdom: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2012), 77-102, 78.

⁷Lawrence N. Okwuosa, et. al, "The disappearing Mammy Water myth and the crisis of values in Oguta, South Eastern Nigeria," *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 73.3 (2017), 4 of 8, accessed at a4555. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i3.4555>

⁸Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu, 'The Dimensions of African Cosmology,' *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religion* 2 (2013): 533-555, 541.

their religious cultural cosmology could not comprehend the lofty, abstract, and transcendental nature of God and his kingdom message. This led to “declaring native religions and cultures, anti-Christian and unredeemable” and their spiritual forces ungodly, demonic, malevolent, and satanic.⁹ This demonic tagging of African grassroots spiritualities gained enormous impact on Mami-Wata spirituality largely owing to the influence of her (Mami-Wata's) spirituality in African cosmology and the undermining of femininity in Christian teachings. In the wake of widespread rise of evangelical (Pentecostal) Christians and fundamentalist Muslims, indigenous spiritualities such as Mami-Wata are denigrated and demonised. “For these groups, Mami Wata has come to personify immorality, sin, and damnation. She is considered one of the most powerful presences of Satan, one whose work is to seduce women and men away from the 'path of righteousness.’”¹⁰ It is in considering this religio-cultural appropriation of Mami-Wata spirituality that we understudy the different negative trends about Mami-Wata that have become the hermeneutical lenses to explain the presence of evil in some African religious communities.

The Witch Paradigm

The use of the word 'witch' or 'being bewitched' is one of the common parlances used by some Africans to describe and identify a person presumed to display distinct evil or wicked characteristics.¹¹ Witches are held as mischievous persons who involve themselves in paranormal activities to attack people.¹² The assumption is that witches possess supernatural powers to appear in dreams to cause strange sicknesses (such as HIV/AIDS, cancer, cardiovascular ailments, epilepsy, and leukemia) and to kill humans. Witches are held responsible for many misfortunes in life, including road accidents, untimely death, failure in examinations, lack of promotion in public service, barrenness in women, impotence in men, poverty, and inability to be married. These misfortunes are equally associated with Mami-Wata as the source of evil. In specific cultural settings, witches are agents or representations of the water spirit, such as found among the Edo Tribe and the *Igbe* Cult Religion of *Aguleri* among the Igbos.¹³ According to Madukasi, belief in witchcraft is common among riverine communities because they draw their strength from the water spirit, having been possessed by her spirit.¹⁴

There are various reasons why witchcraft is associated with Mami-Wata. The first is the assumption that witchcraft is embodied in the female gender. In Africa and beyond, witchcraft has been mostly associated with women and femininity.¹⁵ There is only a handful presence of male witches. In a male dominated society such as Nigeria, most of these male witches usually

⁹A. N O. Ekwunife, *What Will Be, Will Be, Why Pray?* (Nigeria: HOSCON, 2007), 44; Andrew Mbuvi, *African Biblical Studies: Unmasking Embedded Racism and Colonialism in Biblical Studies* (London: T&T Clark, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023), 138.

¹⁰Henry John Drewal, “Mami-Wata,” 72.

¹¹Emilie Secker, “Witchcraft Stigmatization In Nigeria: Challenges And Successes In The Implementation Of Child Rights,” *International Social Work* 56.1 (2012): 22-36, 22-23; European Union Agency for Asylum, “2.9. Individuals accused of witchcraft,” <https://euaa.europa.eu/country-guidance-nigeria/29-individuals-accused-witchcraft> (Accessed 5/04/2024).

¹²Brigit Meyer, “Delivered From The Powers Of Darkness' Confessions Of Satanic Riches In Christian Ghana,” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 65, No. 2 (1995): 236-255, 238; Todd Sanders, “Invisible Hands And Visible Goods : Revealed And Concealed Economies In Millennial Tanzania,” in *Dealing With Uncertainty in Contemporary African Lives*, eds., Liv Haram and C. Bawa Yamba (Sweden: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2009), 91-117, 106, 110.

¹³Charles Gore and Joseph Nevadomsky, “Practice and Agency in Mammy Wata Worship in Southern Nigeria,” *African Arts* 30 (2) (1997): 60-69, 95; Francis Chuks Madukasi and Kenchukwu Makwudo, “A Philosophical Appraisal of Spirituality and Witchcraft through Mami Water Belief System in Igbe Cult Traditional Religion in Aguleri Cosmology,” *American Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Development* 2 (2) (2020): 1-14.

¹⁴Madukasi and Makwudo, “A Philosophical Appraisal of Spirituality and Witchcraft,” 10.

¹⁵Silvia Federici, “Witch-Hunting, Globalization, and Feminist Solidarity in Africa Today,” *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 10(1) (2008): 21-35, 27-30. <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol10/iss1/3> 27-30. Emezie Ikenga Metuh, *God and Man in African Religion* (Enugu: Snaap Press Ltd, 1999), 128-129. See also J. Omosade Awolalu and Dopamu, *West African Traditional Religion* (London: Sheldon Press, 1974), 124.

play the role of cult leaders or heads of the guilds.¹⁶ In Africa, and in Nigeria in particular, older women and children are often accused of witchcraft. It is believed that women play a defining role in recruiting witches because the witchcraft spell can be transferred among females, such as mother to daughter, aunt to niece, and grandmother to granddaughter. Women are seen as physical representations of Mami-Wata's existence, symbolizing evil or their bodies as mediums of evil plots. These shared beliefs and association of the water goddess and femininity have created complex issues for many African women.

The second is the assumption that witches can initiate unprovoked evil attacks and in some African communities, Mami-Wata deity is the main deity that causes evil. It means that Mami-Wata can attack people through witchcraft and sorcery. According to Bayyinah Jeffries, the water deity does not only cause people to suffer even when unprovoked, she can also manipulate and destroy people's lives without their willing it.¹⁷

The third is the cultural belief that witches can shape-shift – a phenomenon that has been closely associated mostly with women on grounds of femininity, fluidity, and motherhood. In Oyo-Yorubaland, Nigeria, for example, “shapeshifting coincides with beliefs about motherhood and a woman-centered cosmology that informed all aspects of Oyo-Yoruba culture.”¹⁸ The association of Mami-Wata with femininity, fluidity, demonic attacks, and witchcraft accounts also for popular assumptions and beliefs about women taking the form of snakes or turning into lion.¹⁹

Some Africans believe that witches can assume the guise of other people or animals to attack their enemies.²⁰ Popular stories abound of claims that a person turned into a bird, a hyena, or an object. There are stories of a bird struck dead on the house roof and later metamorphosed into a woman. The result of such stories is that women have been burnt to death, cast out of their homelands, or maimed.²¹ More so, there is a connection between Mami-Wata and shape-shifting witchcraft. Some communities believe that Mami-Wata can shape-shift, manifesting as a monster, a female, or an animal—an array of art depicts Mami-Wata with a snake. According to Drewal, Mami-Wata is portrayed as a mermaid, a snake charmer, or a combination of both.²² Some Africans believe that Mami-Wata can transform herself into the image of a snake, symbolizing demonic presence, hostility, and evil.²³ In addition, Mami-Wata is portrayed as a chrysalis of a moth or butterfly—a sign of beauty and female transformation.²⁴

¹⁶Awolalu and Dopamu, *West African Traditional Religion*, ¹²⁴.

¹⁷Bayyinah S. Jeffries, “Oshun,” in *Encyclopedia of African Religion*, eds., Molefi Kete Asante & Ama Mazama, (India: SAGE Publications, 2009), 509-510, 510.

¹⁸Vincent Maurice Woodard, “The Shapeshifter Figure: A New Cartography of Sex and Gender Formation Within Radical Black Antebellum Culture,” (Diss: University of Texas, Austin, 2002), 1-2.

¹⁹Nathanael J. Homewood, *Seductive Spirits Deliverance, Demons, And Sexual Worldmaking In Ghanaian Pentecostalism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2023), 10-11.

²⁰Matthew Michael, “Aliens, Monsters, and Beasts in the Cultural Mapping of Nollywood Cinematography,” *Humanities Bulletin* 4. 1 (2021): 168-201.

²¹A heart wrenching story of a woman badly burnt by Nigerian youths in Lagos once circulated over the internet. The claims were that she has metamorphosed into a bird, “Flying Bird turn into old woman in Oshodi”. An angry mob gathered around her, naked her, beat her and later burnt her. One of the alleged eyewitnesses said that she confessed to being a witch. Charlotte McDonald, Mukul Devichand and Sam Judah, “Nigeria#BBCTrending: The tragic case of Nigeria's 'bird' woman,” *BBC News*, February 6, 2022.

²²Drewal, “Mami-Wata,” 60-83.

²³Roche Coleman, “Was Eve the first femme fatale?,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 42.1(2020):1-9, 6

²⁴Frederick Lamp, “Cosmos, Cosmetics, and the Spirit of Bondo,” *African Arts* 18 (3):28–43, 98–99, 32

The above engagements with Mami-Wata as a witch are meant also to evoke fear and other negative emotions in the minds of people. Often, the thought of hearing that one is possessed by Mami-Wata or is a witch exposes the life of the individual to danger, which has often led to the killing, maiming or immolation of women and children.²⁵ The dramatic rise of Pentecostal Christianity and its concerns about demonic presence and satanic attacks have brought Mami-Wata spirituality into Christian-religious spaces and theological discourses, and in this context Mami-Wata has been recast as the witch or demon that possesses human beings and that needs to be exorcised. The fear of Mami-Wata as a deadly spiritual entity is also projected into persons accused of being possessed with the spirit of witchcraft, leading to the inhumane treatment, violence and killings of women and children.

The Demon-Devil Paradigm

As already mentioned, Western Christianity contributed to the demonisation of certain cultural and religious practices in Africa. While the early Christian missionaries to Africa undermined and altered certain practices and ideologies about indigenous spiritualities, over the years, the continuous presence of Christianity in Africa has deepened the misconstructions and misrepresentations of African grassroots spiritualities. In addition, the failure of Western Christianity to properly to understand and engage African spirituality has given rise to a blend of Christian/African religiosity that appropriates Western Christianity through the prism of African religious spiritualities, practices and rituals.

For instance, in most healing centres in Nigeria, healing practices and rituals are a combination of the use of the Christian Bible and African rituals. Some Christian pastors are even accused of getting their healing powers from African spiritual diviners and forces. Likewise, Christian discussions about casting out demons (exorcism) or healing the sick are seen in the light of exorcising African spiritual forces. Healing spaces have become something of battlegrounds between the Christian God and the African deity. For various dominant African Pentecostal motifs – such as addressing the reality of evil, lack of faith, financial crisis, prosperity, material blessing, wealth, influence, sickness, and promiscuity – the preacher sets out to cast out the demon present in the African victim.²⁶

In the light of the dramatic growing Pentecostal and Charismatic movements in Nigeria, Christian pastors and preachers easily connect the spiritual and physical problems to Mami-Wata deity. Mami-Wata is projected as an embodiment of cosmic evil or chaos in creation. In the Pentecostal-Charismatic discourses, she is either identified as evil personified, the enemy, the devil, a messenger of Satan, “one of the fallen angels who had been driven out of heaven together with Satan” or “the most powerful presences of Satan, one whose work is to seduce women and men away from the 'path of righteousness.’”²⁷ Mami-Wata wreaks cosmic havoc, destroys

²⁵Sahara reporters in December 29, 2022 gave a report of how four Nigerian men burnt a woman to death on witchcraft allegations. Accessed at <https://saharareporters.com/2022/12/29/four-nigerian-men-arrested-burning-alleged-witch-death-adamawa>. Another case is found in Chris Stein, “Girl Burned to Death in Nigeria after Witchcraft Allegation,” *VOA* (June 19, 2015), accessed at <https://www.voanews.com/a/girl-burned-to-death-in-nigeria-after-witchcraft-allegation/2829215.html>.

²⁶Opoku Onyinah, “Contemporary 'Witchdemonology' in Africa,” *International Review of Mission* 93 (2004): 330-345.

²⁷Drewal, “Mami-Wata”, 60-83, 72; Brigit Meyer, “Mami Water as a Christian Demon: The Eroticism of Forbidden Pleasures in Southern Ghana,” In *Sacred Waters Arts for Mami Wata and Other Divinities in Africa and the Diaspora*, ed. H. J. Drewal, (Fordham University Press, 2008), 382-398, 385.

people's lives, and can change the course of science. She is the source of all forms of immorality, especially those related to sex and money.²⁸ Meyer states that “stories about Mami Water usually thrive on the opposition between the 'powers of darkness' and the Christian God, thereby recasting Mami Water as a Christian demon in league with the devil.”²⁹

To further illustrate the perspective above, recounting an interview on February 26, 2022, on the streets of Lagos, Nigeria, seems appropriate. The interview was conducted by the social media journalist Timi Agbaje with a 54-year-old man named Austin Ogbonna.³⁰ Ogbonna was found living under one of the bridges of Lagos. According to him, his life is in shambles because he married a lady who he alleges worships a snake. He claims that when he was with his wife, he experienced many difficulties, not knowing it was because of her presence. He recounted how he met a strange woman who attempted to initiate her into the Mami-Wata cult and how his refusal led to his destruction.

In my interviews, one discerns a shared pattern of the narrative of demonic haunting and branding economic failure as results of demonic-spirit possession and of human beings acting as mediators of Mami-Wata. A significant highlight of the interview is that the water goddess is ready to give a devotee countless gifts in return for a precious price. When the devotee fails to honor the request, the devotee will be afflicted with all kinds of evil. Such evil will be manifested or mediated through human beings. Additionally, there is an association of evil between the water deity and the female gender. In the interview, the water deity and her cohorts are all female agents. For example, the wife of Austin Ogbonna, whom he alleges shape-shifted into a snake, is a woman. All the people he met and who promised to help him were women.³¹

One marvels at the frequency at which several Nigerians label a person as being possessed, and in most contexts, the demonic possession overwhelmingly concerns a woman. In various analogical ways, women are accused of shared participation in evil with Mami-Wata. For instance, in Pentecostal and charismatic deliverance sessions, women are mirrored and used as examples to project what Mami-Wata possession entails. Women are accused of partnership with Mami-Wata in the mission of causing cosmic and physical havoc. In some circles, women are tagged 'devil incarnates' or 'diabolic agents.' According to Carol Clover satanic possession is gendered feminine even when the portal is a car.³²

Speaking on how pastors have become vulnerable to the workings of Mami-Wata, Vic N. Ronnie argues that some women who embrace the Christian faith are agents of Mami-Wata.³³ In January

²⁸Meyer, “Mami Water as a Christian Demon,” 392; Homewood, *Seductive Spirits*, 10-13.

²⁹Meyer, “Mami Water as a Christian Demon,” 387.

³⁰Austin Ogbonna, “I married a woman that serves snakes,” Interviewed by Timi Agbaje, February 26, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/hashtag/underbridgechronicles> (February 27, 2022). Timi Agbaje is a lawyer and social media journalist whose interest in raising awareness of the social issues and ills in the country takes him to the streets to interview people on their thoughts about the country and about their personal situation.

³¹See <https://www.youtube.com/hashtag/underbridgechronicles> (February 27, 2022).

³²Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women and Chain Saws: Gender In The Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1992), 72.

³³Amb. (Prof.) Vic N. Ronnie, “More Excerpt From Hard-Core Mami and Papi-Wata Deliverance” <https://vicronnie.wordpress.com/2016/10/23/more-excerpt-from-hard-core-mami-and-papi-wata-deliverance/> (accessed January 13, 2022); Min Ada, “A Deeper Understanding About Water Spirits (Mami Wata),” <https://ke.opera.news/ke/en/travel/f2b005f25ae7dcfd9e00ec1b2cac64> (accessed January 13, 2022)

2017, a former Seventh Day Adventist priest, Nicolas Niyibikora, declared women as the source of evil. Preaching to his listeners on Amazing Grace Radio, Niyibikora said: “Women are out of God's favour; there is nothing good you can find in women. If you have read the Bible, who brought sin into the world, it was not a man”.³⁴ The above notion of femininity and stereotypes of women are common among some families, social groups, and religious organisations. Such false assumptions present women as vulnerable and weak. Furthermore, it portrays women as the perpetrators of evil in the world.

This discussion of Mami-Wata demonisation also extends to women and marriage. In some of my interviews, I met with single ladies that have been accused of Mami-Wata possession because the society assumes that they have outgrown marriage age.³⁵ Some are accused of spiritual marriage – that is, the notion that a man or woman is married to a water spirit.³⁶ Some Africans believe in the existence of spirit spouses who are betrothed to humans. Their belief is that when one tries to contract a marriage with a person espoused to a spirit, the spirit spouse becomes jealous and can kill the human spouse. The spirit spouse also prevents their victim from marrying a physical spouse or living a happy married life. A breach of the spiritual marriage leads to infertility, marital issues, persisting single life, family crises, childlessness, and lack of sexual interest in one's spouse.³⁷ In the case of a woman who is considered barren or single, such a woman can be accused of having a demonic husband. According to Rey, “spirit spouses are also said to torment singles, preventing them from finding a spouse.”³⁸ From the interview conducted, majority of the victims accused of spirit marriage were women.

The demonization of the water deity is also connected to eating and drinking in dreams, which is understood as a form of demonic attack. According to Evangelist Joshua, eating or drinking in dreams is a dangerous satanic bondage, a gateway to long-term problems and signs of witchcraft initiation.³⁹ In the view of traditionalists, such an act paralyzes one's destiny and affects one's health, marriage, finances, progress, business, and spiritual growth. It is one of the means to initiate people into witchcraft. Ebere, a young Igbo girl narrated how her experience of drinking and eating in the dream took her to a pastor who accused her of being bewitched by Mami-Wata spirit. She further recounted how her encounter with the pastor did not resolve the problem until she visited a medical doctor who diagnosed her of diabetes.

The other understanding of Mami-Wata is that she is a bloodthirsty spirit and vampire, one who craves blood as a means of nourishment and a requirement for sacrifice. There are popular accounts that Mami-Wata delights in drinking blood. Such stories depict Mami-Wata asking for

³⁴ Abdarrahmane Wone, "Take responsibility. Speak up. Stand with women and girls" #WithHer," in <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/news/let's-stand-our-mothers-our-sisters-our-daughters-our-partners-withher> (accessed December 22, 2021).

³⁵Traditionally, once a woman is above the age of 30, she is considered to be late in marriage. Given that the legal age of marriage is 18 in Nigeria, once a girl passes that age and sets into her late twenties or early thirties, some people will begin to look at the woman with disdain and some may even brand the woman as a witch or Mami-Wata. Mami-Wata deity is not demonized but also personified.

³⁶See also Homewood, *Seductive Spirits Deliverance, Demons, and Sexual Worldmaking In Ghanaian Pentecostalism*, 10

³⁷Jeanne Rey, “Mermaids and Spirit Spouses: Rituals as Technologies of Gender in Transnational African Pentecostal Spaces,” *Religion and Gender* 3, no. 1 (2013): 60–75, 68.

³⁸Rey, “Mermaids and Spirit Spouses,” 68.

³⁹Evangelist Joshua Orekhie, “Dream About Food,” <https://evangelistjoshua.com/dream-about-food/> (accessed February 18, 2022).

the lives of human beings (especially children) in exchange for wealth, money, or fame. The narratives of human sacrifices portrayed in African movies demonstrate the assumption that Mami-Wata delights in the blood of their victims. Individuals are killed to drain their blood as nourishment for the spirits. In recent decades, stories have circulated about Mami-Wata and her devotees causing road accidents. The high rate of vehicular accidents, though often caused by human error and deplorable roads, is frequently attributed to the demonic activities of Mami-Wata. Kanu alleges that “it is a common story in Africa to hear of spirits causing accidents on bridges; these are spirits that dwell in water, often called mummy water.”⁴⁰

The Seductress/Harlot Paradigm

Together with all the many problems depicted in relation to Mami-Wata and the notion of evil, the water deity is also used in appropriating negative and stereotyped traditional and theological reflections about female sexuality and gender. Mami-Wata's gender and sexuality have been used to address both patriarchal discourses and the negative representations of femininity and the female gender. In contemporary Nigerian society, nudity or semi-clad dressing is frowned at as immodest, tempting and degrading especially for clothing that exposes the upper part of the body. Women, especially, are not expected to expose their bodies. It is a taboo for an adolescent boy or girl to speak about his/her sexuality in public. Young boys and girls are to avoid sexual relationships before marriage and are not to speak about sexual arousal in public. It is also a taboo for a girl to speak of having a male partner before marriage. Having dreams with sexual content (such as wet dreams or performing sex) is regarded as evil and a sign of Mami-Wata attack.

In traditional Nigerian communities, negotiations about female sexuality and sexual behaviour are interiorised. In the words of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, “we teach girls that they are not sexual beings in the way that boys are.”⁴¹ A woman is not expected to express her sexual feelings. A woman should feel ashamed to express her sexual feelings in a public space. She is taught to be sexually passive, that is, to express her sexual self by being submissive to the authority and sexual desires of men. Men do not have control over their sexual passions. As such, extramarital and premarital sex is permitted for men and not for women. Furthermore, a woman can be killed on suspicions of infidelity, whether true or false.⁴² Women are advised always to be sexually available to their husbands. A woman is not expected to have sexual feelings. Her sexual feelings are for her husband. She is to be dependent on her husband for protection and survival. Any attempt to oppose or default in any these cultural stereotypes results in tagging the woman as unruly, evil, socially disruptive, sexually deviant, and she can be punished.

Interestingly, these negative representations of femininity are domesticated in the water deity. A girl that is not modestly dressed can easily be called Mami-Wata. If a woman is sexually expressive, she can easily be called Mami-Wata. A girl who looks beautiful and attractive could be called Mami-Wata. Acts of sexual immorality or misconduct are always attributed to women because women are considered as temptresses and evil.

The whole idea of designating women as harlots or temptresses is also rooted in the association of Mami-Wata as temptress and harlot. In the rich array of images depicting the water deity,

⁴⁰Kanu, “The Dimensions of African Cosmology,” 54.

⁴¹Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, “We should all be feminists,” in TEDxEuston https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hg3umXU_qWc#action=share (accessed February 23, 2022).

⁴²Hakeem Adegbenro, “Ogun: Man arrested for killing wife over suspicion of infidelity,” in Blueprint <https://www.blueprint.ng/ogun-man-arrested-for-killing-wife-over-suspicion-of-infidelity/> (accessed April 7, 2022).

Mami-Wata projects an expressive female sexuality. Her body is partially revealing with breasts exposed, with a young woman's face to express her beauty, elegant hair arranged and adorned, and with heavy make-up.⁴³ Her beauty is seen as a symbol of temptation. Her exposed breasts are interpreted as a symbol of attraction, seduction, but also flirtation. By having multiple male intending wooers and admirers, she is defined as a harlot as she defies the traditional expectation of fidelity in marriage. These opposing attributes constitute the social-cultural and religious prism upon which women's good and bad behaviours are judged.

But this negative portrayal of Mami-Wata as harlot is because of colonial introduction of Christianity to African culture and religion. As Misty L. Bastian notes, the negative perception of Mami-Wata's body has come through the Western perceptions of bodies and their representations, especially the understanding that came through “an engagement with commodification and evangelical Christianity, as well as by local and highly mutable taste cultures.”⁴⁴ Christianity brought the idea that nudity is “darkness, disorder, and pollution.”⁴⁵ As Jacques Boileau (a seventeenth-century writer) puts it, “God hates nakedness, because he is purity itself; the Devil loves it, because he is impure.”⁴⁶ Bastian comments that being semi-unclad or undressed was traditionally associated with Pre-colonial Southeastern Nigerians as part of their culture and religious practice. In its time, nudity was not conceptualized in the manner the West understood it – the object of male gaze and colonial patriarchy as against “an innocent, reserved, and artistically constructed undress that supposedly represented humankind's spiritual nature.”⁴⁷ It is in the light of scriptural interpretations such as the above that the Christian understanding of nudity was used as a weapon to fight the African culture of nudity, Mami-Wata deity and by extension, femininity and women.

Mami-Wata has become a household name to designate women who are considered rebellious, subversive, stubborn or deviant. According to Philip U. Effiong, “women are most likely to be considered the bearers of evil”.⁴⁸ In Nigerian movies, on billboards, banners, during sermons, at prayer meetings, healing centres, and even in families, women are projected as evil because they are struggling to free themselves from patriarchal enslavement of their bodies and sexuality. They are personified as 'threats,' 'temptresses,' 'harlots,' or 'evil' to be avoided. For some preachers, men must be afraid of women because through their spoken words, demeanour, and outfit, they can seduce a man and cause him to sin. L. Naicker recounts how a pastor once designated women as devils in disguise. He says, women come to the church to tempt men and break up homes and families, even destroying the lives of pastors.⁴⁹

Femininity, Mami-Wata, and African Christianity

Addressing these negative assumptions about the water deity and female gender raises serious

⁴³See the images of Mami-Wata on Drewal, “Mami-Wata,” 77.

⁴⁴Misty L. Bastian, “The Naked and the Nude: Historically Multiple Meanings of Oto (Undress) in Southeastern Nigeria,” in *Dirt, Undress, and Difference: Critical Perspectives on the Body's Surface*, ed. Adeline Masquelier (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005), 34-60, 37.

⁴⁵Jean Comaroff, “The Empire's Old Clothes: Fashioning the Colonial Subject,” in *Cross-Cultural Consumption: Global Markets, Local Realities*, ed. David Howes (New York: Routledge, 1996), 19–38, 22.

⁴⁶Paul Ableman, *Anatomy of Nakedness* (London: Orbis, 1982), 39.

⁴⁷Bastian, “The Naked and the Nude,” 33, 35. It is worth noting that dressing half naked or stripping down to the loincloth is still in practice, especially among traditional rulers, traditional priests and doctors. According to Bastian, becoming semi-undressed or stripping down to a loincloth during divinations or prayers to deities is a demonstration of one's openness to spiritual forces. Bastian, “The Naked and the Nude,” 39.

⁴⁸Philip U. Effiong, “Haya,” in *Encyclopedia of African Religion* eds. Molefi Kete Asante and Ama Mazama, (India: SAGE Publications, 2009), 309-309, 308.

⁴⁹Linda Naicker, “Sexuality, Marriage and Singleness Among Pentecostal Indian Women in South Africa,” in *Genders, Sexualities, and Spiritualities in African Pentecostalism: Your Body is a Temple of the Holy Spirit*, ed. Chammah J. Kaunda (Christianity and Renewal - Interdisciplinary Studies Series. Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 229-244, 238.

questions about the place of Mami-Wata deity in African Traditional Religion and in Christian theology. The inclusion of the water deity in Christian representations and negotiations with evil projects one of the dreadful impacts of the spread of Christianity through the colonial prism. It emphasizes the oversimplification of Christian notion of evil, a tacit acknowledgement of the use of escape-goat paradigm for successful spread of Christianity, but also the destruction of other religious systems that cannot fit into the worldview of colonial Christianity.

The identification of Mami-Wata with evil, and by extension, women, highlights one of the challenges African Christians are facing with the inadequacies of Christian theology to address the peculiarities of African religiosity. Christian theology is yet to come to terms with how African existential realities form part of African religious experiences. According to John Mbiti, Africans are notoriously religious, not only from the religious dimension of cosmology, but also from the fact that religion permeates all the departments of life.⁵⁰ As Christian theology has yet to engage Africans' social, cultural, epistemology and religious cosmologies, it has continuously raised tensions and conflicts in the understanding and practice of religion, especially in relation to the problem of theodicy. In the absence of a positive and promising solution, Pentecostal and charismatic preachers have come up with theological-African traditional solutions that are indirectly destroying the African reality and Christian theology. More so, the effect it has on women is raising social, religious, cultural, and traditional concerns that are destroying the lives of women today and reshaping the history and story of women tomorrow.

Despite the perceived negative negotiations about the water deity and femininity in relation to questions of theodicy, it is important also to highlight traditional religious reasons why the emphasis on femininity or rather the perceived reasons for the femininity-theodicy relationship. The first is the connection between women's bodily fluid, water and the mysteries surrounding life and death. A woman's body is seen as representative of the mysteries about water and life. Like the earth, the mystery of water evokes fear in many Africans. The fact remains that water mass inhabits metaphysical realities beyond human comprehension. While water is a vital force that enhances human life and the environment, its paranormal activities (such as storms, turbulence, and flood) and movement (fluidity and instability) can be profoundly destructive, leaving humanity with many questions about the workings of the world. In addition, the characteristics of bodies of water appeal more to the mysteries around the female gender, especially in the role of women as life-givers and possible sources of physical or spiritual suffering/pain. Among Africans, there is a complementary focus on the relationship between the female gender and the water goddess and between the mystery of water and the female body.

Femininity bears witness to the mystery of human nature and the cosmos. A woman is held in great esteem among Africans because of her physical nature and ability to interiorize and spiritualize various experiences and realities. In some places, the female is regarded as a spiritual entity. Thus, a woman is considered as one with quick intuition, sensitivity, and sensibility to read and understand emotions and events. She has a spiritual capacity to hear and understand mystic experiences and care for and guide children.⁵¹ She is also praised as one who can spiritually connect with the land, water, universe, and creation.⁵²

⁵⁰John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, (London: Heinemann, 1969), 1.

⁵¹Joseph Hill, "All Women are Guides': Sufi Leadership and Womanhood among Taalibe Baay in Senegal," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 40 (2010): pp. 375-412, 376-379; Sandra Gustafso, "Jonathan Edwards and the Reconstruction of 'Feminine' Speech," *American Literary History* 6 (1996): 185-212, 187-188.

⁵²Njoki N. Wane, "African Women and Spirituality" in O'Sullivan E., Morrell A., O'Connor M.A. (eds), *Expanding the Boundaries of Transformative Learning* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 135-150.

The preceding discussion undergirds the designation of the four segments of the world—earth, sea, fire, and wind—to female divinities. Deji Ayegboyin and Charles Jegede state that “most of the river divinities in West Africa are principally feminine.”⁵³ The deities that control the underworld are feminine. *Oya* is the Yoruba goddess of wind, thunderbolts, tornadoes, buffalo, and fire.⁵⁴ The “Yoruba's *Òrìsá Yẹmọ̀nja* is a female primordial spiritual entity associated with the earth and the river”.⁵⁵ Africa's most famous lake and the second largest freshwater in the world is called the “mother of gods” (*Naluba ale-* mother of guardian gods).⁵⁶ In the Igbo cosmology, *Ana* is the deity that controls the earth. She is the “great mother goddess, the spirit of fertility, and the queen of the underworld. She is generally believed to be the most powerful of all divinities who is also the custodian of public morality, assisted by the ancestors”.⁵⁷

The culpability of the female divinity in the problem of evil and suffering is because of fear of the dynamic ability and otherness of the female gender. The female body is the powerhouse that generates and nurtures everything that lives. Given her transformative functionality, femininity carries a certain sacredness and power that is revered but also feared. According to David Farnell, the creation of evil women or evilness in women is because of fear, “fears of the loss of patriarchal control, of what flood may come after feminine power unseats the masculine.”⁵⁹

Femininity can be considered as a powerful energy because of its generative power. Nevertheless, such power becomes a circuit of absurdity when it cannot resolve all the conflicts attributed to her generating power. The fear of female strength results in rejection and denigration of women. When this female strength is not channelled to positive things, it is redefined as evil. In the absence of positive and sustaining solutions, the feminine gender becomes the scapegoat for theodicean debate. The absence of femininity in mapping social, cultural, political, metaphysical, spiritual, and economic geographies continues to alienate the world and its peoples from authentic realities. Its presence offers an existential and divine touch to human cosmic realities.

Conclusion

Thus far, this work has shown the different ways Mami-Wata is demonised in African Christian theological responses to the question of evil. It has also demonstrated how the demonisation of the water deity is extended to the demonisation of women and femininity. The interconnection between Mami-Wata as a female deity and the female gender has led to African women being demonised as sources and objects of evil – as witches, demons, and harlots. Given the factors responsible for associating Mami-Wata with evil, the essay critiques the patriarchal contentions and the damaging characterisation of femininity in the theodicean debate. By underscoring the importance of femininity in African cosmology and Christian theology, this essay suggested the need to recentralise femininity in a more positive light without demonising the most potent

⁵³Deji Ayegboyin and Charles Jegede, “Divinities” in *Encyclopedia of African Religion*, eds. Molefi Kete Asante & Ama Mazama (India: SAGE Publications, 2009), 209, 212.

⁵⁴Tyrene K. Wright, “Oya,” in *Encyclopedia of African Religion*, J Molefi Kete Asante & Ama Mazama, eds., (India: SAGE Publications, 2009), 514, 515, 514. See also Jedidah Tabalia, “12 famous African goddesses and gods with mind-blowing history,” <https://briefly.co.za/48019-12-famous-african-goddesses-gods-mind-blowing-history.html> (accessed 1 November, 2021).

⁵⁵Patricia E. Canson, “Yemọ̀nja,” in *Encyclopedia of African Religion*, eds. Molefi Kete Asante & Ama Mazama, (India: SAGE Publications, 2009), 735, 737, 735.

⁵⁶Denise Martin, “Lakes,” in *Encyclopedia of African Religion*, eds. Molefi Kete Asante & Ama Mazama (India: SAGE Publications, 2009), 375, 376, 375.

⁵⁷Ayegboyin and Jegede, “Divinities” 211.

⁵⁹David Farnell and Rute Noiva, “Introduction: Perceiving Evil: Evil, Women and the Feminine,” in *Perceiving Evil: Evil, Women and the Feminine*, eds. David Farnell, Rute Noiva, and Kristen Smith, ((Inter-Disciplinary Press: United Kingdom, 2015), vii-viii, vii.

grassroots forces that have shaped African spirituality and the lived experiences of African women. More so, it advocates the need to engage the divine-religious importance of femininity and womanhood in our religio-theological discourses, as this will offer new directions on how African female spirituality can change our views of Christian theology and religious experiences.

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