

“THE WATERS WERE MADE FOR HER”

River Mumma beliefs in 19th and 20th century Jamaican ethnographic accounts¹

[Received August 28th 2021; accepted September 29th 2021 – DOI: 10.21463/shima.141]

Hilary Sparkes

<hilary.sparkes@warwickgrad.net>

ABSTRACT: During her fieldwork in Jamaica in the 1920s, the American anthropologist Martha Warren Beckwith was told by an interviewee that he had seen a river mumma sitting by a pool near St Ann’s Bay, combing her long hair. The river mumma, a form of duppy or spirit, was said to inhabit ponds, lakes and rivers. Not only was she believed to be guardian of such bodies of water, but she was also accredited with the ability to cause and end droughts, bestow the power to heal and to wreak revenge. In this article I examine the folklore and spiritual beliefs surrounding the river mumma in 19th and 20th Century Jamaica and look at where her origins may lie. There is a particular emphasis on material from the late post-emancipation era as this was a time of an awakening interest in Jamaican folk cultures and a number of influential ethnographic accounts, such as Thomas Bainbury’s *Jamaica Superstitions* (1894) and Martha Warren Beckwith’s *Black Roadways* (1929), were published.

KEYWORDS: river mumma, Jamaica, Africa, ethnography, water spirits

Introduction

When researching the folk cultures of the African-Jamaican peasantry in the 1920s, the American anthropologist Martha Warren Beckwith was told by George Parkes, one of her interviewees, that he had seen a river mumma sitting on a rock at a wide pool off the Llandoverly River near St Ann’s Bay, to the north-west of Kingston. According to Parkes the creature had brown skin and long waist-length hair. He guessed it was a water spirit because the pool had a reputation for having three river mummammas living there since “ancient times” and “[i]n a moment” the creature vanished (Beckwith, 1929: 102). The river mumma of Jamaica is one of a number of female water spirits or deities who appear in the African-based religions and folk beliefs of the Caribbean. These entities include the Haitian

¹ This article, much expanded and with new material added, arose from posts I had written for my blog ‘Nature and Supernatural Nature’. The blog examines connections between the world of nature and the African-Jamaican spirit world. It uses as its base research on Jamaican folk cultures from the 1920s by the American anthropologist and folklorist Martha Warren Beckwith and grew out of my PhD thesis, ‘Shadow worlds and “superstitions”: an analysis of Martha Warren Beckwith’s writings on Jamaican folk religion, 1919-1929 (2015)’.

Iwa La Sirène, consort of the sea god Agwé, and Oshun/Ochún, spirit of fresh waters and rivers, who appears in the orisha-based faiths of Brazil, Cuba and Trinidad.

In this article I examine the possible origins of the river mumma (also known as the rubba missis, fair maid, river maid or, confusingly, the sea mahmy) and the lore surrounding her. There is a particular emphasis on material from the late post-emancipation period, 1880-1938 as not only was it a time of an awakening of interest in Jamaican folk cultures but also an era when a number of influential ethnographic accounts, such as *Jamaica Superstitions; or the Obeah Book* (1894) by Thomas Banbury, *Black Roadways: A Study of Jamaica Folk Life* (1929) by Martha Warren Beckwith, *Psychic Phenomena of Jamaica* (1934) by Joseph John Williams and Zora Neale Hurston's *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica* (1938) were published.

Who is the River Mumma?

The African-Jamaican clergyman Thomas Banbury, who collected folk beliefs in the mid-late 19th Century, described the river mumma as being a type of “mermaid” or similar to the “water nymph of England” (1894: 35). Like Parkes, Banbury also mentioned that the river mumma was wont to sit by the water’s edge combing “her long black tresses” (ibid). He further noted that she was believed to always appear at midday and, if approached, as George Parkes discovered, she would disappear immediately (ibid). On occasion, combs were found near places, such as the fountainheads of rivers, where river mummas were reputed to live (Banbury, 1894: 35). American folklorist MacEdward Leach also heard one account of a river mumma who sat on the shore of a lake near Mandeville holding an umbrella. Leach stressed that in his experience this was an “unconventional” depiction of the creature (1963: 71).

Although, in the 1950s, American anthropologist George Eaton Simpson described the river mumma as being “half human and half fish”, (1956: 358) mentions of the fish tails commonly associated with mermaids don’t often appear in late 19th and early 20th Century ethnographic accounts of her. However, the authors often use the word “mermaid” to describe the creature and the idea that the river mumma is some form of mermaid has proved strong throughout the decades. For instance, in the 1920s, Beckwith termed her “a kind of mermaid” (1929: 101) and in Leach’s collection of Jamaican folklore published in the 1960s, he described the river mumma (or as he called her, the “sea mahmy”) as:

the mermaid of English folklore who has been duppized by the Jamaicans... the sea mahmy is a sweet-tempered duppy who cares for little except sporting in the water and sitting on the bank, combing her gorgeous hair (1963: 71).

Moving into the 21st Century, Arvilla Payne-Jackson and Mervyn C. Alleyne found that modern followers of the Revival faith who contact river mumma as part of their spirit work use the term “mermaid” (2004: 112). Payne-Jackson and Alleyne themselves describe the river mumma as “a syncretism of the European mermaid and the African water sprite [who] are half human and half fish and speak a language of their own” (ibid).

Payne-Jackson and Alleyne were told by their interviewees that river mummas “like only clean water” (ibid). Earlier sources make no mention of the cleanliness (or otherwise) of the water in which river mummas lived. Nevertheless, all were consistent in their depictions of where they may be found: in lakes, rivers, sizeable ponds and pools, with

Banbury commenting that it was believed mummas inhabited “every fountainhead of an inexhaustible and considerable stream of water in Jamaica” (1894: 35). Leach stated that the “most famous... sea mahmy” lived “in the great blue hole near Port Antonio” (1963: 71). Beckwith was told by Parkes that as well as in the Llandoverly River, other river mummas inhabited the Black River, the Rio Grande, the Great River, the Cabaritta and the Rio Cobra. According to him they preferred to “live in deep pools away from where people pass” (1929: 102). He also commented that more than one mumma may inhabit a particular body of water, but it was hard to gauge the exact number as “they all look alike” (ibid).

River mummas fall into a class of Jamaican spirits known as duppies. In African-Jamaican spirit beliefs every person possesses two spirits - the duppy or shadow and the soul.² After death, the soul goes up to Heaven or down to Hell, whilst the duppy remains on earth. Duppies may appear in human or animal form and the term encompasses other supernatural creatures such as the rollin’ calf, long bubby Susan, whooping boy and the three-legged horse. Whatever form duppies may take, they frequently interact with the living. However, George Parkes was adamant that in the case of river mummas, they “can do nothing for people. They cannot talk, and they disappear the moment one sees them” (1929: 102). His view appears to be an isolated perception as other commentators often mentioned the river mumma’s ability to interconnect with humans or otherwise affect their lives.

One example of such interactions between human and water spirit is the healing power attributed to the river mumma. Simpson was told that if a stone that contained the spirit of the mumma, or was said to be under her power, was placed in holy water, it would “increase the curative powers of the water” (1956: 37).³ Also:

When the stones are brought into the [Revival] church they may be sprinkled with consecrated water or with a mixture of salt and consecrated water or of consecrated water and sugar “to keep the mission a healing place.” (ibid).

Stones which contained the spirit of a river mumma were thought to have other protective qualities. For instance, Simpson gave the case of one Revival leader who carried such a stone when he was “being sought by the police on an obeah charge”, believing that it would protect him from arrest (ibid).

Despite the river mumma’s healing abilities and Leach’s description of her as “a sweet-tempered duppy” (1963: 71), there was another side to the water spirit’s dealings with humans. According to Banbury, people would come to harm if they looked into the river mumma’s eyes (1894: 35). Gerald Hausman (1994) cites the story of another river mumma who guarded the treasure belonging to an Arawak chief and was very protective of her property. When “[a] Spanish explorer tried to steal the mermaid’s golden comb ... she drowned him” (Payne-Jackson & Alleyne, 2004: 194). The river mumma’s powers could also be employed by those looking to gain revenge. In one method detailed by Simpson, a person seeking vengeance should fill their mouth with water from a river where a Mumma lived, then walk:

² Some texts class the shadow as a separate spirit but often shadows and the duppies are used interchangeably. Mervyn Alleyne and Arvilla Payne-Jackson note that in modern Jamaica, ‘shadow’ has largely fallen out of use (2004: 71-72).

³ Simpson found that there was some disagreement amongst Revival leaders as to whether the stone was just under the spirit’s control or whether the spirit was *actually* present in the stone (1956: 357).

downstream in the river, thinking constantly of his enemy. He spits the water in his mouth into the river and gets out of the river on the same side he entered the stream. After coming out, he makes a wish, the wish being that every morsel of food his enemy eats and every drop of water he drinks 'should be evil germs to him.' (1956: 391).

In the case of the umbrella-carrying sea mahmy mentioned by Leach, one day a man stole her umbrella. She begged him to return it but after he refused, she vanished and the lake she inhabited dried up (Leach, 1963: 72). A number of other accounts by folklorists and ethnographers mention a belief that river mummas were either intrinsically linked to, or guardians of, the bodies of water where they lived. For instance, Parkes told Beckwith that “[t]he waters were made for them, and if you catch one the rivers would dry up” (Beckwith, 1929: 102). In some cases, a river or pool inhabited by a river mumma was considered sacred (Banbury, 1894: 35). Writing on African-Jamaican folk cultures in the early 20th Century, Brian Moore and Michele Johnson note that:

In some communities, where the river mumma made her appearance, people did not eat the fish that came from those rivers, because they were believed to be the children of the river goddess and whoever ate them would suffer (2004: 35).

The idea of the river mumma being considered as a deity is further illustrated by Banbury’s comment that in the past sacrifices were made to her:

the slaves on water-works used to persuade their overseers or masters, to sacrifice an ox at the fountain-head of the water turning the mill in times of much drought, in order to propitiate the mistress of the river, that she may cause rain and give an adequate supply of water to turn the mill. It is said a bullock was yearly killed on some sugar estates at such places for this purpose (1894: 35).

He also noted that those of the Myal faith would take food to the river for the water spirit and perform songs and dances there in her honour (ibid).

As well as preventing drought, Moore and Johnson argue that the concept of the river mumma as a deity was important to some communities in Jamaica because of people’s powerlessness against other kinds of weather events:

[w]hen the rivers became swollen after heavy rainfall, and crops, animals and people were washed away, the might that could be contained in water was apparent. And a goddess who could be appealed to in such circumstances represented yet another attempt to deal with the reality of the circumstances within which Jamaican people had to operate. The legend of the river mumma was not constructed outside of a context; she had been spotted in the communities where her presence might make a difference (2004: 36).

Being considered a deity was not the only link between the River Mumma and religion in the late post-emancipation era. Another key connection was her intrinsic association with water as especially in the rite of baptism, water played an important role in the majority of

Jamaica's folk religions and spiritual beliefs. For example, sects like the Native Baptist movement, put great emphasis on baptism by full bodily immersion.

The Native Baptist movement, which developed initially out of the ministries of the early black Baptist preachers from America in the late 18th Century, were influenced by Myalism, another African-Jamaican religion in which water and the rite of baptism played a significant part. As mentioned above, Myalists believed in the river mumma and brought food and danced and sang at bodies of water where she was thought to inhabit. Although Myal became less prominent in the 20th Century, the river mumma continued to have an influence on its beliefs, illustrated by Beckwith's description of Myalists in the 1920s as carrying "a 'Fair Maid' in their baskets" (1929: 146). She did not elaborate on what form these fair maids took but they were most probably river stones believed to be imbued with the power of the river mumma.

Another African-Jamaican folk religion in which both water and river mummas played significant roles was Revival. The faith developed in Jamaica in 1860/61 after the Third Great Awakening, a major religious revival that had swept through Britain, Ireland and the United States in the late 1850s came to the island. A flurry of new sects emerged which mixed elements from both Christianity and African belief systems. Water was important in a number of Revivalist ceremonies and rites. Mass baptisms held by popular Revival leaders such as Alexander Bedward and Charles Higgins attracted large crowds. The British travel writer and ethnographer, Bessie Pullen-Burry, who attended one of Bedward's baptismal meetings at the Hope River in 1904, noted that "thousands... were assembled" to watch the immersion of 300 people (1905: 146).

Water, either drunk or in the form of baths, was also used in Revival for curative purposes, and fountains and pools were a feature of the balmyards (healing centres) of Revivalist healers. A number of natural springs (sometimes called fountains) were claimed by Revivalists to have medicinal properties; for instance, in 1895 the *Gleaner* newspaper reported the discovery of a spring being used for such purposes at Williamsfield in the parish of St Catherine (Unattributed 1895: 3). Ten years later, one healer, Alexander Crawford, was reported to have "a new fountain" in Bath, St Thomas (Moore and Johnson, 2004: 70). In the early 1970s, an elderly Revivalist, Sister Dixon, told Jamaican anthropologist Barry Chevannes about a Revival meeting that she attended as a child many decades earlier, describing the water from the Mona River where the ceremony was held as: "Pure God water... the water spring up from the hole near the river... And im consecrate it and is dat water heal people" (Chevannes, 1994: 79). A testimony published in A.A Brooks' *A History of Bedwardism* (1917) described how Miss Francis Moore who had been ill with back, leg and heart problems, travelled to "the medicinal stream at Augustown", and after getting baptised, she was able 'to return home in perfect health and strength' (1917: 28-29).⁴

In addition to its use in healing, water was used to encourage spirits to appear during Revival rituals. During his fieldwork in Jamaica in the 1950s, Simpson found that glasses of water were placed on altars to entice the spirits down into meetings and water was drunk during a ceremony as "a vehicle through which the spirits gain entrance into the members" (1980: 171). Consecrated water was also sprinkled on the floors of Revival churches in order to keep them "pure" (ibid). Another connection between the Revival faith and river mummas can be seen in the names of some of the church officers. As well as the main

⁴ As the majority of followers of Revival beliefs were, Miss Moore was most probably an African-Jamaican like Sister Dixon.

leader, Revival churches have a number of different officers. Simpson found that in the Morant Bay area the title 'river maid' was given to a certain rank of officer (ibid.: 172). Female officers who took charge of those going to be baptised were called water mothers or water shepherdesses and that they were described as serving "the River Maid" (ibid: 196).

There is little mention of river mummas in 19th and 20th Century accounts of Obeah in Jamaica although manipulation of a variety of spirits was part of its practice in that era.⁵ During her fieldwork in Jamaica between 1919 and 1924, Martha Beckwith wrote that she had "never heard of Mermaids being employed by Obeah Men in Jamaica" (1929: 101). However, she did cite a notorious murder case from elsewhere in the Caribbean that included a 'Fair Maid' as part of an Obeah practitioner's equipment (ibid). In Demerara, in June 1918, six men were charged with the kidnap and murder of a 19-year-old girl. The men had been worried about losing their jobs so consulted an Obeah man who told them that if they provided him with parts of a white child's body, he would be able to change their employer's mind (Beckwith, 1929: 134-135). The Obeah practitioner was said to have a Fair Maid in a basket although Beckwith was unsure "if the Fair Maid of Demerara is like that of Jamaica" (ibid: 101). While river mummas may not have featured in 19th and early-mid 20th Century Obeah beliefs, there is a theory that the word 'Obeah' itself may have its origins in the name of an African water spirit. Melville Herskovits suggested the provenance was derived from "the tutelary water spirit of the river 'Bia' [in] the Ashanti country" which could both protect and harm (1930: 337).

As previously mentioned, some late 19th and early 20th Century commentators on African-Jamaican folk culture classed the river mumma a type of mermaid.⁶ The idea that the river mumma was regarded by Jamaicans as a mermaid in the British tradition is a possibility as Jamaican folk culture contained a significant amount of British and European influences. Like the river mumma, mermaids are depicted as having the tail of a fish and the upper body of a human woman and were commonly described as having long hair that they spent hours combing (for further examples of European influences in descriptions of water spirits in the Caribbean see Young, 2021b). Also, like the river mumma, they interacted with people, even taking human lovers or spouses. Just as the river mumma was accredited with healing powers, at times, the British mermaid could bestow the ability to heal on those who helped her. One such illustration of this can be found in the Cornish tale, known as 'Droll of the Mermaid'. Lutey, the tale's human protagonist, rescues a mermaid who grants him three wishes. Lutey opts for the "knowledge to break other people's spells, for power over familiar spirits, and that these capacities should run in his family" (Bottrell, 1870: 60-67). The mermaid grants Lutey's wishes so enabling him to become a prosperous and renowned healer (ibid).

Another similarity between the river mumma and the British mermaid is that as well as good fortune, they can bring adversity. Sailors, in particular, regarded the sightings of mermaids as harbingers of misfortune as their sighting meant that a storm was brewing (Alexander, 2022: 193; Briggs, 1974: 155). Not only were mermaids accredited with raising storms, but they would also attempt to lure men into the sea to become their lovers or to deliberately drown them. For example, the Cornish mermaid encountered by Lutey wanted him to join her in her watery world and tried to drag him under the waves, although she

⁵ Obeah is a spiritual belief system of African origin which combines elements of witchcraft, healing and manipulation of the spirit world.

⁶ See for example, Beckwith (1929: 101) and Banbury (1894: 35).

still granted his wishes when he refused.⁷ A freshwater mermaid who lived in Blake Mere in Staffordshire would entice men into the lake with her singing and then drown them (Larrington, 2015: 174). While animal sacrifices were made to placate the river mumma, British mermaids demanded a different type of sacrifice. As Carolyn Larrington notes “men must die for her, whether dragged down below the lake’s placid surface or struggling in the towering seas” (ibid: 176).

Just as mermaids could lure men to their death, some other British female water spirits, like Jenny Greenteeth, had a reputation for killing the unwary. In northwest England there are tales of her with sharp teeth, claw-like nails and long green hair, preying on children who wander too close to the ponds and streams she inhabits (Young, 2019). British rivers, lakes, and ponds are also associated with another type of spirit – female ghosts; in particular, White ladies. Some white ladies are believed to be the spirits of drowned women. The lore surrounding others, such as a Shropshire white lady who would emerge from her watery abode to dance “on the green at night”, appears more akin to the fairy tradition than ghost beliefs (Davies, 2007: 23, 22).

A goddess out of Africa

Looking at the above, the river mumma appears to have British roots. Her background may also lie in Attabeira one of the deities or *zemi* of the Taino, the indigenous people of the Caribbean who inhabited parts of Jamaica. Attabeira ruled bodies of water and was depicted as a naked woman. However, the importance of water to Jamaican folk religions and spirit beliefs has equally strong African origins as well. When the British gained control of Jamaica from the Spanish in 1655, they initially introduced indentured labour, often convicts and prisoners of war from Oliver Cromwell’s campaigns in Ireland, to work on the nascent sugar estates.⁸ As commercial sugar production developed, large numbers of enslaved Africans were imported as plantation labour. This altered the island’s demographic and by 1719 the ratio of Jamaica’s black population to its white was 8:1 (Heuman, 2006: 20). More Africans arrived in the mid-19th Century, along with Indian immigrants, to work as indentured labour after the abolition of slavery in the British colonies in 1834.

Africans brought to Jamaica their beliefs in water deities and the sacredness of water. In Africa, “[o]ceans, seas, lakes and permanent ponds are often thought to be inhabited by spirits or divinities” and much like the river mumma, these entities often “have to be propitiated when people are using the water” (Mbiti, 1990: 54). In the case of the Ashanti of West Africa, all major bodies of water were believed to be “related to the Supreme God” and contained his power (Stewart, 1992: 136). The American anthropologist Joseph John Williams disagreed with Banbury’s assessment of the river mumma being like a mermaid or English water nymph. Instead, Williams claimed that she was “a residue of the old Ashanti myth about the divine origin of water” (1934: 173). In addition to being the habitat of spirits, water is an important ritual element in West African religions. Simpson noted how priests of West African river cults had significant status amongst other religious leaders in their communities and that:

⁷ Although the mermaid did return to claim Lutey nine years later (Bottrell, 1870: 60-67).

⁸ Indenture meant that a person was forced to work for an employer for a set amount of time. They were unable to leave during this period or refuse to do the job assigned.

Visits to the river or the ocean to obtain sacred water are parts of ceremonies among the Yoruba, the Ashanti, and in Dahomey. Among the Ashanti, visits to sacred bodies of water occasion possession (1956: 422).

The importance of water in West African religious beliefs and practices is significant when it comes to looking for the possible origins of the river mumma, as during slavery, people from West Africa, particularly the Ashanti, made up the majority of the enslaved Africans transported to Jamaica. The next most numerically dominant groups among the enslaved people brought to Jamaica were the Yoruba and Igbo (Barrett, 1976: 16). They, too, attributed deities like Yemoja, Obà and Oshun to bodies of water; deities which have to be propitiated by people using the water of the seas, rivers, streams and lakes which they inhabited. Creatures that are part human, part fish appear in spiritual beliefs and folklore in other parts of Africa. For instance, in Kenya there is the *nguva*, a female water spirit, mermaid-like in appearance who lures the unwary into the water. Yemoja, a river goddess associated with women and childbirth, is often depicted as a mermaid. Mami wata (Mother Water), one of the most well-known of the African water spirits and whose followers span the continent, is frequently portrayed as a mermaid. Jill Salmons, who researched mami wata beliefs between the Niger Delta and the Cross River of Nigeria, found a diverse range of descriptions of water spirits. However, there were some commonalities:

Nearly all the spirits... have the common characteristic of being very beautiful, fair-skinned, and with long, soft hair of European or Indian type... Some spirits sit on the rocks, combing their long, silky hair, while others can only be seen peering up from the depths of the water. Most spirits are naked, but some are said to wear beautiful jewels and gold medallions (1977: 8).

Mami wata worship began to arise after Europeans arrived on the coast of Africa at the end of the 15th Century when, as further European contact occurred, Africans incorporated new spirits like the mermaid into their existing belief systems. An ivory carving, “[t]he earliest documented example of an African rendering of a mermaid” (Drewal, 1988: 161) shows her accompanied by crocodiles.⁹ Europeans arrived in Africa via the sea, therefore Africans associated them with water. This association, combined with the carved figureheads of mermaids which some of the European ships anchored at African ports had on their prows, contributed to a syncretism of African and European concepts of water spirits which emerged in the form of new deities like mami wata (Salmons, 1977: 8). That the ships’ carved figureheads were an influence on water spirit beliefs is illustrated by them appearing on “water divinity altars at least as early as the nineteenth century” (Drewal, 1988: 162).

Because the mermaid adorned the European ships that brought wealth in the form of commerce from overseas, her image in Africa came to be associated with wealth and foreign trade (ibid: 170). Just as the British mermaid is believed to confer good fortune on those who she favours, the strong association with wealth and commerce which came from overseas, contributed to the idea that mami wata bestows good fortune in the form of money on those who serve her. Her connection with financial prosperity is illustrated by images of the goddess that show her bedecked in necklaces and jewels. Accounts from those who claim to have visited her underwater palace mention its lavishness and riches

⁹ The carving is known to have existed in Denmark prior to the 1740s (Drewal, 1988: 161).

(Salmons, 1977: 8). There is a further similarity between mermaids and mami wata – they both lure people into their watery abodes although the eventual fate of the lured differs. While those who follow mermaids into the waves risk death by drowning, in Nigeria, Salmons was told of people who had been enticed into the water by mami wata but who had returned “[a]fter seven days... with bone-dry clothes and beautiful, remote-looking faces” (1977: 8). Subsequently, such people often became devotees of the goddess. Another parallel between mami wata and the British concept of a mermaid is that both use a mirror as an accessory. Henry Drewal argues that the mirror has become an integral part of ideas surrounding mami wata worship as it has come to represent “the boundary between the cosmic realms of water and land, a symbol of the permeable threshold crossed by mami wata when she enters the bodies of her mediums” (Drewal, 1988: 162).

Mami wata’s foreign origins do not lie solely in Europe, however. As Salmons has noted, in some images mami wata is depicted with the “long, soft hair of European or *Indian type*” (1977: 8 – my emphasis). After Europeans, Indians made up “the majority of overseas foreigners seen by Africans” during the 17th to 19th centuries (Drewal, 1988: 170). Like Europeans, Indians became “associated with commerce”, resulting in ideas of wealth being connected to their deities, spirits and icons like the statues of saints (ibid). Representations of mami wata and other African water spirits wreathed in snakes have been linked to a chromolithograph of a female snake charmer dressed in an Indian style and which was created in the mid-1880s. The picture of ‘Maladamatjaute’, which was “reprinted in large numbers in India and England and distributed widely in sub-Saharan and Central Africa” (ibid: 173), was known to have been circulating in Africa by 1901. In fact, the woman in the chromolithograph was most probably Samoan and performed as a snake charmer in German *Völkerschauen* - exhibitions that featured foreign animals and peoples regarded in the West as ‘exotic’ (ibid: 169-170).

As well as the combination of European and Indian influences, depictions of mami wata contain elements rooted firmly in African cultural beliefs. For example, in the Cross River area of Nigeria, Jill Salmons found that there was a tradition of naturalistic and figurative art (Salmons, 1977: 8). Mami wata’s part human, part fish body has links to pre-European contact African representations of water spirits as fish, crocodiles or other aquatic creatures. Salmons considers the possibility that the African manatee could be basis for the hybrid forms used to depict some water spirits as, being a mammal, it “has breasts and suckles its young” (ibid: 8). She also argues that mami wata’s fair skin has links to traditional African art and rites of passage rituals. For instance, a number of Nigerian carvings of women or spirit beings are painted in “very pale colors” and light pigments were “traditionally daubed on... mbobo girls¹⁰ in the fattening house and initiates in various cults” (ibid: 14). Salmons believes that there is a Western presumption that the use of pale colours to paint the flesh of figures and masks was meant to represent European/Caucasian skin tones. However:

Although Mammy Wata figures are supposed to resemble Europeans, it should be noted that very similar carving of mbobo girls are not – the only distinguishing features being the hair and the snakes on the Mammy Wata, not the color of the skin or the shape of the face (ibid).

¹⁰ Adolescent girls sent to a fattening house in order to gain weight in preparation for marriage.

Conclusion

River mumma lore emerged in Jamaica from a melding of ideas of British mermaids, an Amerindian goddess and the memories of the deities and water spirits which the enslaved Africans brought with them to the New World. Late post-emancipation descriptions of the river mumma rarely mention her skin colour but they often comment on her long hair which links her to both British mermaids and to mami wata. Like mermaids, the river mumma can be shy and capricious. Again, like the mermaid, Jenny Greenteeth and the *nguva*, she can be deadly: causing rivers to dry up, poisoning those who eat fish from her rivers and assisting in acts of revenge. However, just as mermaids and African water goddesses can bequeath good fortune if pleased or propitiated satisfactorily, the river mumma can be benevolent, bringing rain to end droughts, purity to sacred spaces and bestowing healing powers. In the case of the 19th and early and mid-20th Century ethnographers, it is only when they reference the river mumma's connection to African-Jamaican folk religions that they give a sense of her perceived power. The mumma's intrinsic association with water has contributed to her significant place in Myal and Revival partly because of the importance of water in those faiths: in baptism, for purification and as way of ingress for the spirits. Her influence over the lakes, rivers and streams which she inhabited and the creatures who live within them is also an important contributing factor. Whether her origins lie in nature spirit, goddess, ghost or fairy, by propitiating a spirit who could control water, the most necessary of elements, the river mumma provided a sense of agency to those communities or sections of society which felt powerless against the elements, sickness and disease. As mentioned above, the river mumma is still a presence in 21st Century Revival beliefs where she bestows healing and divinatory powers on those she appears to in dreams (Payne-Jackson and Alleyne, 2004: 112). Through this association with healing, the river mumma still provides agency today.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alexander, M (2002) *A companion to the folklore, myths and customs of Britain*, Stroud: Sutton Publishing
- Banbury, Rev. T (1894) *Jamaica superstitions; or the Obeah book - a complete treatise of the absurdities believed in by the people of the island*, Kingston: Mortimer Co. De Souza
- Barrett, L.E (1976) *The sun and the drum: African roots in Jamaican folk tradition*, Kingston: Sangster's Book Stores in association with Heinemann
- Bottrell, W (1870) *Traditions and hearthside stories of West Cornwall*, Penzance: W. Cornish, archived online at:
https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/Traditions_and_Hearthside_Stories_of_Wes/r9FLAAAACAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=0 - accessed 24th September 2021
- Briggs, K.M (1974) *The folklore of the Cotswolds*, London: Batsford Ltd.
- Brooks, A.A (1917) *History of Bedwardism or the Jamaica Native Baptist Free Church* (second edition) Kingston: The Gleaner Co. Ltd.
- Chevannes, B (2007) *Rastafari, roots and ideology*, New York: Syracuse University Press

- Davies, O (2007) *The haunted: A social history of ghosts*, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan
- Drewal, H.J (1988) 'Performing the other: mami wata worship in Africa', *TDR (The Drama Review)* v32 n2: 160-185
- Herskovits, M.J (1930) 'Review of *Black roadways* by M.W Beckwith,' *The Journal of American Folklore* v43 n169: 332-338
- Heuman, G (2006) *The Caribbean*, London: Hodder Arnold
- Larrington, C (2015) *The land of the green man: A journey through the supernatural landscapes of the British Isles*, London, New York: I.B. Tauris
- Leach, M. (1963) 'Folklore of Jamaica: A survey', *Schweizerisches Archiv für Volkskunde/ Archives suisses des traditions populaires* v59: 59-81
- Mbiti, J.S (1999 [1990]) *African religions and philosophy* (second edition), Oxford and Portsmouth: Heinemann
- Moore, B.L and Johnson, M.A (2004) *Neither led nor driven: Contesting British imperialism in Jamaica, 1865-1920*, Kingston: University of the West Indies Press
- Payne-Jackson, A and Alleyne, M.C (2004) *Jamaican folk medicine: A source of healing*, Jamaica: University of West Indies Press
- Pullen-Burry, B (1905) *Ethiopia in exile: Jamaica revisited*, London: T. Fisher Unwin
- Salmons, J (1977) 'Mammy Wata', *African Arts* v10 n3: 8-15, 87
- Simpson, G.E (1956) 'Jamaican revivalist cults', *Social and Economic Studies* v5 n4: i-iv, 321-442, v-vii
- Simpson, G.E (1980) *Religious cults of the Caribbean: Trinidad, Jamaica and Haiti* (third edition), Rio Piedras: Institute of Caribbean Studies, University of Puerto Rico
- Stewart, R.J (1992) *Religion and society in post-emancipation Jamaica*, Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press
- Williams, J.J (date unknown [1934]) *Psychic phenomena of Jamaica*, Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing [New York: Dial Press]
- Young, S (2019) 'In search of Jenny Greenteeth', *Gramarye* n16: 25-38
- Young, S (2021) 'Mermaid toponyms in the West Indies', *Shima* v15n2: 220-220
- Unattributed (1895) 'Bedwardism in St. Catherine' 1895, *The Daily Gleaner* 26th October: <https://gleaner.newspaperarchive.com/kingston-daily-gleaner/1895-10-26/page-3/> – accessed 3rd January 2021