Formal retentions and survivals of African cultures do exist in the African diaspora, and there remain striking similarities between cultural elements on both sides of the Atlantic. However, as Mintz and Price (1992: 53) convincingly argued, these are “rather products of independent development and innovation, within historically related and overlapping sets of broad . . . ideas.” There may have been a general, common outlook on life, nature, and the cosmos, which could be called West African and which was transplanted to the Americas by the enslaved. However, most of the cultural luggage Africans took with them to the New World had to be transformed one way or another into something new. To survive, they had to adapt quickly to the new labor and living conditions, a new physical environment, different surrounding cultures, and each other.

This resulted in the creation of new, Afro-Caribbean cultures in which the cultural sources—Africa itself, for example—can still be traced but are found in the new cultures to be transformed and intertwined with a variety of other sources. Within a few generations, such new cultures began to stabilize and the explosive dynamics of the initial phase gave way to the cultural dynamic common to most living cultures that have had to adapt to changing circumstances and undergo cultural confrontations: nothing stays exactly the same, while much remains unchanged. This whole process has come to be known as creolization.1 In what follows, one example of it is illustrated and analyzed: the way West African knowledge of and experience with water goddesses have been transformed and creolized by the enslaved and their descendants in the Dutch-Caribbean colony of Suriname, from the late seventeenth century onward.

The Dutch seemed to have struck a good bargain when they traded New Amsterdam (later New York) for Suriname after the second Anglo-Dutch war in 1667. The basis for a flourishing plantation colony had already been laid out by the British, and large-scale agricultural production turned
out to be a remunerative business. As everywhere in the Caribbean, slaves imported from the West and Central African coasts were used to work these plantations. During the third quarter of the eighteenth century, the Suriname plantation economy reached its absolute zenith, when over 400 plantations, worked by some 57,000 enslaved Africans, produced mainly coffee and sugar for the Dutch market. Another 3,000 enslaved served their masters in the colony’s capital of Paramaribo (Van Stipriaan 1993a: 311). All of these activities were concentrated in the coastal region. The remaining 90–95 percent of the country, thickly covered by Amazonian jungle, was not colonized. In this uninhabitable interior lived the remainders of the autochtonous Amerindian population and several hundred to a few thousand Maroons, former slaves who had escaped from the plantations and now formed independent communities in the jungle.

Between 1667 and the 1830s, when new slave imports were finally stopped, a total of almost a quarter of a million enslaved Africans were landed in Suriname. As in most Caribbean plantation colonies, the Suriname slave population was composed of all the major slave “producing” areas between Senegal and Angola. The mixture of these different ethnic groups varied by colony and by colonizing power, as well as over time.

The outcome of the process of creolization—newly developed Afro-Caribbean cultures—was determined largely by three factors. The first was the composition of the ethnic and cultural source areas, African as well as non-African. A second decisive factor was the order of arrival of the ethnic groups: those that came first established the basis on which the new culture could be erected. Third, there were the specific local circumstances to which the enslaved had to adapt, such as the omnipresence of water in Suriname.

During the first three-quarters of a century of Dutch slave importation in Suriname circa 1670–1740, some 75,000 Africans were landed, of whom about 45 percent were so-called Papa, a generic name used in Suriname for Africans shipped between West Nigeria and Togo; 25 percent were Loango (from the Congo-Angola area); and 25 percent Cormantin (in Surinamese: Kromanti) from the Gold Coast, while the remainder came from different places along the African coast. During the next phase, 1740–1808, almost 135,000 Africans were imported, among whom were Kromanti and increasingly Mandingos from the coasts between Senegambia and the Ivory Coast (30 and 35 percent, respectively), 30 percent Loango, and now no more than 2 percent were Papa. During the final decades of imports, 1808–1830, the Mandingo share among the approximately 30,000 Africans landed in Suriname was probably dominant—as most of them were then imported by French slavers—and perhaps still supplemented by a substantial number of Loangos (see Emmer 1974: 108; Postma 1990: 186–212, 297–301; Van Stipriaan 1993a: 314; 1993b: 145).

Taken together, during the whole period of slave imports, the share of Loango, Kromanti, and Mandingo was approximately the same (25–30 percent each), whereas the Papa share was only half that much (10–15 percent). However, in the creolization process, total numbers seem to have been far less important than the time of arrival and the continuity of influx of peo-
ple from the same area. For example, by the time the Mandingo share among imported Africans began to rise to substantial numbers and the share of Papas almost disappeared—that is, after the 1730s—much of Afro-Surinamese culture, such as a common language and socio-religious institutions, had already been established. In this culture, at least initially, Papa influences were as dominant as Loango, and much more important than Mandingo influences. The creation of the Afro-Surinamese religion, or Winti as it came to be known, might illustrate this.

When (white) observers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century mention songs and dances, they always referred to these cultural artifacts as either Loango or Papa, or Creole in origin, never Kromanti, Mandingo or any other ethnic reference. Today, in the four godly pantheons that are differentiated in Winti religion (earth, sky, water, and bush gods or Winti) the most powerful (groups of) gods are either Loango, Papa, or Kromanti—never Mandingo or any other ethnic reference to the West African (Senegambian) region, where during the last half century of imports most slaves had been boarded (Stephen 1985: 40–60; Wooding 1972: 302–364). Instead, there is a prominent place for Ingi (Amerindian) Winti. This again is an indication that creolization is not only a question of numbers, because soon after the colonization of Suriname, the Amerindian population was completely marginalized by the colonists and outnumbered by the rest of the population. A crucial element in Winti religion, and perhaps even the basis of Winti itself during slavery, was the Watramama cult, and its best known expression (by whites) the inflammatory Watramama dance.

This Watramama dance was considered to have such “dangerous effects” on the enslaved that in 1776 it was decided by the authorities “to forbid and interdict the watermama and similar African dances on the plantations as well as in Paramaribo” (Schiltkamp and De Smidt 1973: 896). This prohibition, which was changed into an interdiction of all Winti-related activities later in the nineteenth century, lasted until the early 1970s. However, it is not quite clear whether the authorities knew what they prohibited, nor, retrospectively, how far Winti had already developed into a general and full-fledged religion. Possibly Watramama was only practiced when whites were around, as a kind of decoy to attract attention and so protect the more secret and powerful elements of Winti culture. Perhaps whites came to view Watramama and African religion as identical, labeling every religious dance a Watramama dance and forbidding the category, rather than making separate laws against every single religious dance or “dangerous” ceremony.

Most contemporary observers stated that the enslaved were indeed very secretive about their religion and that it was almost impossible for whites to learn something about Watramama and other ceremonies, be this only because all ceremonies were held at night in secret places, usually in the woods (see Blom 1787: 388; Kunitz 1805: 104; Nepveu 1775: 245). For example, Anthony Blom published a planter’s handbook in 1787, after an experience of more than thirty years living and working on plantations in Suriname. And despite his keen observations on most aspects of life in this colony, he admitted that the Watramama is “one of those secrets whites will
never penetrate.” He only knew that this dance “more than commonly heats their imagination, and that when one or another is up to a reckless undertaking, he faints, and when he comes to his senses tells about having spoken with his god, who ordered him to do such an undertaking; and even if such a Negro or Negress ordered to raid the plantation and kill the whites, those present would be willing, maybe unthinkingly, to undertake it” (Blom 1787: 389). If this was indeed the case, then it is not hard to imagine why this dance was forbidden. However, one may wonder why the general and frequent dancing of the Watramama dance (despite its prohibition!) did not result in more plantation uprisings and Maroon activities. Again, the explanation may be that Watramama was only used by the colonists as a general term to describe something much more complex. In this case, Watramama embodies the fact that the colonists were able to enslave Africans physically, but proved to be unable to enslave their minds. It was this unbroken mind that was able to create a new culture that inspired the enslaved to all sorts of resistance. It was the spirit of what the dance stood for, more than the dance itself, which was the real threat for colonial society.

There is another parallel explanation for the lack of more plantation uprisings and Maroon activities that consists of two complementary factors. First, the process of creolization was not yet finished, and there was therefore as yet no common and binding culture that could convey this rebellious inspiration to all the enslaved. Second, it is most probable that Watramama was much more than just a dangerous inflammatory dance, and that she and her cult were beginning to form part of a much wider and deeper socio-religious complex, the complex we now call Winti. This explanation seems to be confirmed by another keen eighteenth-century observer who also seems to have been one of the best informed whites around: the later governor Jean Nepveu. In his manuscript (circa 1775) he stated that “the papa, Nago, Arada and other slaves who commonly are brought here under the name of Fida [Ouidah] slaves, have introduced certain devilish practices into their dancing, which they have transposed to all other slaves; when a certain rhythm is played, totally flat, and to which the women very softly add their noise, then some get what they call “blown ones” a habi hem wintie, or winti fom hem, also winti kissie him, that is he has his wind, or his wind has beaten him, also his wind has got him or taken possession of him; dancing the body like a snake—which they take for a god and worship—moving to the rhythm, often also jumping up as if in a frenzy, they finally make themselves . . . and then, so the others believe, they are possessed by their god, which is generally called Watramama; there are also among them who are held in higher esteem than others, and when they are in that state, they pretend that they can not stand the smell of poisoners who are among the crowd and who drive them mad; when these are driven away, they start dancing again, their movements gradually becoming softer, and then they faint again, often twisting their whole body, arms, legs and even their neck in such a way that one supposes everything is loose. No matter what has been done against it, no matter what punishments were adopted to ward off this evil, it could not be eradicated completely. Now, they do it as covertly as possible” (Nepveu 1775: 232–234).
A few elements in this description indicate that Watramama was indeed more than just a furious dance. It was part of a wider religious context. For example, for the first time in historical records, the term Winti is used to describe gods who take possession of a person. Furthermore, snakes are mentioned as personifications of a god. This was also a Papa element, although other African groups, as well as Amerindians, knew this practice too, and until today snakes, particularly the dagwe-sneki, or aboma (boa constrictor), are considered to be manifestations of the most powerful gods (Wooding 1972: 171–174). Finally, there is the indication that the Watramama dance was used to deal with poisoners among the enslaved. In other words, the positive metaphysical forces (obeah) were applied to oppose negative metaphysical forces (wisi, black magic). This dimension of Watramama could also be found in neighboring Guyana (Benjamin 1987: 7–10). In Suriname, Nepveu’s description is the only one in which this connection is made. The practice is still part of Winti ceremonies, but not in connection to Watramama.

It is obvious from Nepveu’s account that not all imported Africans were acquainted with Watramama-like cults, and that particularly Papa slaves introduced it in Suriname. As we saw before, Papas were one of the two major ethnic groups who entered Suriname during the first phase of slave imports—unavoidably also the first phase of creolization. It is therefore not hard to imagine how from the very beginning Papa influences must have been very important in the formation of Afro-Surinamese culture, and that this new culture was already firmly settled at the time that new ethnic groups were entering the colony on a massive scale and beginning to partake in it.

But it is not easy to explain why Africans with other ethnic origins caught up this cult of a water goddess, or at least accepted its incorporation into the winti religious complex. The most probable explanation was that the phenomenon of water gods or water spirits was not uncommon to all West Africans. Moreover, the dominance of water in the lives of Surinamese slaves can hardly be underestimated, as most plantations were actually “polders,” eternally under the threat of inundation by the sea, the rivers and/or heavy tropical rains. Oral tradition suggests that the arduous digging of polder canals and trenches in the heavy sea clay of the coastal plains provoked deep resentment. More than two centuries post hoc, Saramaka and Ndjuka Maroons still recall abhorrence of this work as a prime factor motivating their forebears to escape from the plantations to the tropical forest of the interior (cf. Oostindie and Van Stipriaan 1995: 85–87).

Today, in the district of Para, which formerly was the border area between colonial and bush society, one of the pantheons in the Winti complex consists of water gods, or watra-wenu, among whom the Watramama is the most important. She is known under several different names, some of which point to different African origins. According to Wooding, for example, the name Mama Bosi, which is used with great respect in the Para district, originates from the Fante-Akan, and there seems to be a resemblance with a goddess in the Cape Coast district of present day Ghana. However, Watramama is also called a Papa Winti in Para, and in the village of Hannover, the name Mama Tobosi is used; this name refers to a water-deity in present day Benin,
never penetrate.” He only knew that this dance “more than commonly heats their imagination, and that when one or another is up to a reckless undertaking, he faints, and when he comes to his senses tells about having spoken with his god, who ordered him to do such an undertaking; and even if such a Negro or Negress ordered to raid the plantation and kill the whites, those present would be willing, maybe unthinkingly, to undertake it” (Blom 1787: 389). If this was indeed the case, then it is not hard to imagine why this dance was forbidden. However, one may wonder why the general and frequent dancing of the Watramama dance (despite its prohibition!) did not result in more plantation uprisings and Maroon activities. Again, the explanation may be that Watramama was only used by the colonists as a general term to describe something much more complex. In this case, Watramama embodies the fact that the colonists were able to enslave Africans physically, but proved to be unable to enslave their minds. It was this unbroken mind that was able to create a new culture that inspired the enslaved to all sorts of resistance. It was the spirit of what the dance stood for, more than the dance itself, which was the real threat for colonial society.

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a country formerly known as Dahomey and the home of the Papa (Wooding 1972: 179). She also bears resemblance to the Mende (in our categorization: Mandingo) goddess Tingoi. And to complicate matters further, when Wtramama speaks through a person who is possessed by her during a Winti ceremony, she speaks the sacred Loango-language. According to Wooding (1972: 312) the water gods of the Mende, Fante-Akan, Ewe-Fon and West-Bantu are "brothers and sisters" in Suriname. It proves, he says, that the (descendants of) the enslaved "have moulded the parallel institutions from the four culture areas in West-Africa into one general pattern." Thus, Wtramama may have been brought to Suriname by Papas, but in the process of creolization she became part of a West/Central African mix and was adopted to circumstances in Suriname.

One of these circumstances, of course, was the omnipresence of water. Another was that the autochtonous Amerindian population—with whom enslaved Africans frequently were in contact, particularly during the initial phase of creolization—worshipped water gods or water spirits, too. They even knew about water people, living in the rivers, who were highly dangerous to humans. According to the stories told to the German missionary Quandt, who lived among Amerindians between 1771 and 1780, these water people sometimes knocked over boats, whereafter some of the Amerindians aboard were dragged down under water and never were seen again (Quandt 1807/1968: 107).

It is possible that in this process of culturally adapting to another environment, other circumstances, and other people, Africans learned about Amerindian water gods and water people already living in Suriname. It is highly probable that the first groups of Africans in Suriname, out of respect, paid tribute to the gods of their new land, at least to those who bore similarities to African gods. This, of course, paved the way for the introduction and later transformation of African (water) gods, and eventually even for the introduction of Amerindian Winti’s into Afro-Surinamese religion.

In Nepveu’s account, it seems that Wtramama is already firmly established within a generally accepted, creolized Afro-religion. This is doubtful, however, as in Nepveu’s time the Kromanti’s had only recently become a substantial ethnic group among the enslaved, and from later accounts it is obvious that Kromanti elements became as important as Papa and Loango in Winti religion. Thus, the first phase of creolization was still underway and major changes or extensions in the new Afro-Surinamese culture were still possible.

This seems to be confirmed by Nepveu’s contemporary Blom who, after having described the dangers of the Wtramama dance (see above) continues: "Because usually they consist of different nations, of which one does not trust the other, that is why, when they perform this dangerous dance (which is always done secretly), always just part of the [slave] force is present, and the other Negroes, who do not believe in such an imagined ordeal of a God they do not worship [and] in whom they do not confide that much, would not be ready so easily to join them" (Blom 1787: 389–390). And Blom was not the only one who observed that there was still little
cultural and ethnic unity among the enslaved. For example, Stedman (1790/1988: 292) visited a plantation in 1774, where he was present at a “Loango-Dancing, which was performed by the Loango-Negroes, male and female, and not by any others.” So in this time and place, the ethnic division was still quite strong, and creolization certainly was not finished yet. However, when speaking about the occurrence of mermaids in the rivers of Suriname, Stedman is told by several old Africans and Amerindians that “though they were Scarce, Nothing was more Dreaded by their Wives and Children than the Watra Mama, Which Signifies the Mother of the Waters” (Stedman 1790/1988: 457). This indicates that Amerindian water people and West African water goddesses had already gone through a process which merged them into one Surinamese Watramama.

Not much is known about the way the Watramama was envisioned by her followers in the beginning. However, one thing is certain: she was a fearful being, who was to be kept satisfied by all means. Otherwise, great misfortune couldbefall a person or his or her relatives. The informants of an unknown author in the early 1740s left no doubt about this: “It sometimes happens that one or the other of the Black Slaves imagines truthfully, or out of roguishness pretends to have seen and heard an apparition or phantom which they call water mama, which phantom would have ordered them not to work on such and such a day, but spend it as a holy day to make a sacrifice with the blood of a white hen [and] to scatter this or that along the riverside and other such monkey business. In such cases adding that if they do not follow these orders Watermama will make their child or husband etc. die soon or will do other harm” (Ontwerp 1744: 317).

Some 130 years later, when he was traveling along the Upper Suriname River, the writer of the lemma “Watramama” in the Encyclopedia of the Dutch West Indies (Benjamins and Snelleman 1914–1917: 739–740) was seriously warned, probably by Amerindians, not to take a bath in the river at night because the Watramama would come to keep him company and then all would go wrong with him.

Presumably Watramama was much feared indeed, because several authors noted that slaves paid respect to her—by singing and offering—when they rowed the boats of their masters. As most traffic in Suriname went over the rivers by slave-rown boats, these rituals must have been almost part of daily life for everyone concerned. This is why it is particularly travelers through Suriname that give the most detailed accounts of such rituals. For example, Benoit (1839: 64) noted that:

[one] day, around eleven at night, we were sailing along the shores of the Commewyne River, when suddenly our boat hit a wooden object which we recognized as a small canoe or boat, ten to twelve feet long and which was explained by our Negroes as an offering of a bush Negro. I let the boat be taken out of the water. It contained a jar of raw sugar rum and another filled with genever, a bottle of Bordeaux, a comb, a mirror, a pair of scissors, knives, needles, thread, several samples of printed cotton and linen, a decorated calabash filled with all sorts of seeds and fruit, corals, fake pearls, cabbage, potatoes and onions. It was the most extraordinary offering I had ever seen.
Despite the unifying creolization of Watramama, she seems to have remained a many-sided goddess, whose character differed according to the group that worshipped her. In the interior of the country, among Amerindians, she seems to have retained her aggressive “water people” attitude. Within the Winti complex of Maroons and (formerly) enslaved people in rural districts like Para, she lost her central position—assuming she ever had it. There, in the hierarchy of gods, she ended in a middle position. Today, the earth gods and the air gods are more powerful than the water gods, and during a Winti ceremony she enters somewhere halfway through the ceremony (see, e.g., Stephen 1985: 43–47; Voorhoeve and Lichtveld 1975: 51–52; Wooding 1972: 300–310). She may be addressed then with songs like the following:5

A d’ a liba Mama o,
Tide a d’ a liba Tata e!
Aisa, Gedeonsu Tata (Goron),
Kaba den ba,
D’ u lai boto.
Mama e Verekesje.

Oh, Mama is in the river,
Today she is in the river!
Mama Aisa, Goddess of Death,
Give them forgiveness,
The boat is loaded,
Oh Mother of Death.

This song is played and sung when Watramama has not yet appeared at the ceremony. It is a song of lamentation, in which people express their sorrow and ask Mama to leave her palace in the river and come to attend the Winti ceremony. The phrase “the boat is loaded” means that the ceremony is in full swing (Wooding 1972: 309). Although this and other songs for the Watramama are considered to belong to the Loango repertoire, they sometimes contain elements that point to other ethnic origins as well. This again is proof that she was the outcome of a creolization process to which different African culture areas have contributed.

The references to death in the song quoted above may point at the still rather violent or aggressive character of Watramama. However, this may be only one side of her character, as it is not uncommon for African gods to unite two opposing character traits; depending on the circumstances, one or the other may dominate. This might explain the transformation Watramama seems to have undergone in the course of the nineteenth century among the enslaved in the plantation districts and their later descendants in town, the so-called Creoles, or Afro-Surinamese. Their circumstances increasingly differed from those of the inhabitants of border districts of colonial society like Para, not to mention from those in the bush, relatively far away from Paramaribo. In these areas, circumstances did not change fundamentally until quite recently. Life was rather hard, colonial control was marginal, people still lived in the vicinity of rivers and creeks, and there was enough room to practice Winti religion, although missionaries tried hard to get people to abandon these “heathenish” activi-
ties. The Afro-population in Paramaribo and its surrounding areas, on the other hand, became more involved in the colonial economy, and were much more subject to western influences. For example, compulsory education in Dutch was introduced as early as 1876, and almost everyone was converted to Christianity by the end of the nineteenth century. The latter, however, did not mean that people had forsworn Winti. Particularly among lower class Afro-Surinamese, Christianity and Winti were—and still are—not in opposition to each other and can both be practiced by the same person, sometimes even within one ceremony.

However, knowledge about the Winti religious complex became increasingly obscured among urbanized descendants of the enslaved and it is generally admitted by them that people from the interior of the country have a much deeper understanding of Winti. In this process of change among Afro-Surinamese, the once horrific Watramama seems to have transformed into a more lovely, mysterious water nymph. According to the description of a planter in the early 1850s who asked the rowers of his boat about her, she was “highly honored” by the slaves, who brought her all kinds of offerings. They envisioned her “as a beautiful [Amer]indian woman with a child, wreathed with water-lilies, humming-birds fluttering around her, their feathers glittering in the sun like gem stones” (“Iets over Suriname” 1854: 156).

A much more detailed description of Watramama was given by Willem Frederik van Lier (1877–1957), a former plantation manager who worked among Maroons in the interior of Suriname during the first decades of the twentieth century and finally became a colonial officer with the Ndjuka Maroons. He is considered to have been a keenly observant amateur ethnographer of Afro-Surinamese culture, of which he left several publications to stand witness. The following description of Watramama is from one of these publications (van Lier 1919: 13–18).

According to van Lier, of all Afro-religious mysteries in Suriname, Watramama was by far the most famous. There were probably no two people in the country who had not heard about her. Compared to other gods, however, the least was known about her. For example, according to van Lier, unlike other deities, no one knows the purpose of Watramama’s existence. On the other hand, everyone knew how she behaved and what she looked like. She lived in the upper rivers of Suriname, and probably even more so in the waters of the more colonized coastal area. People who swore to have seen her described her as one part fish, with the upper part that of a very handsome young woman, with beautiful, long, deep-black hair. Nine out of ten who saw her told van Lier that she was busy combing her hair and sometimes that she was nursing her child. She mainly appeared at dusk, mostly at her own, cherished places, like the old stone walls of sluices at abandoned plantations, or, as in the interior, on a rock in the river. Despite her shyness, she was sometimes even seen in a moored boat, but at the first human sound she quickly disappeared under water.

Often, when forced to flee hurriedly, she leaves her comb behind. However, when people take hold of the comb, they never succeed very long in keeping it in their possession, because at night Watramama would come to

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the finder and start crying in such a heart-rending way that finally the person had to throw the comb back into the water. Generally, however, the water spirit was heard laughing cheerfully and no one ever mentioned that a human being was harmed by her. On the contrary, says van Lier, it was believed that she protected people who have fallen into the water from drowning by taking them to her residence under water, which, according to some, is a palace full of gold and diamonds.

In 1915, one of van Lier's more important informants, a man from the village of Hannover in Para, told an interesting story that explains how people have this information on the underwater palace of Watramama. According to this informant, Watramama lives in a whirlpool near Soekibaka, close to Paramaribo, where the water can be very rough, particularly during the dry season; many boats have been knocked over and people drowned. Some time in the 1880s, a boat had been knocked over. Everyone aboard was saved except for an old woman called Ma Asavé. However, her body was never found. A few years after the accident, people in her former village began to be possessed by Wintis who told the villagers that Ma Asavé was alive and well living in the underwater palace of Watramama, who had taken her along out of pity. Since that time, in van Lier's words, "a real epidemic of testimonies broke out among the Wintis in Para." This reached its zenith when a Winti dancer was possessed by Ma Asavé herself. She told of the luxury and beauty that surrounded her in Watramama's palace and particularly of the large quantity of gold, silver, and gemstones. Despite all the luxury and the splendid hospitality she enjoyed, Ma Asavé longed to return to her own village in Para. And via the Winti-man who was possessed by her, she told the people that she would return if they would organize the biggest possible Winti ceremony. At the height of the dance, around midnight, when the drummers would reach their climax, she announced that the wind would become stronger and the river would become increasingly rough. It would become lighter and at a certain moment she would rise from the water, surrounded by flames, and step ashore. However, if any of the drummers, dancers, and singers would show fear she would disappear into the water, never to come back again.

It would not be easy to organize such a large scale Winti dance in the vicinity of Paramaribo, and therefore the people decided to ask the Governor permission for this special occasion. And, to everyone's surprise, the Governor granted his permission on the condition that he could be present at the ceremony himself. However, if Ma Asavé would not appear, the Governor would put every one of the petitioners in jail. They settled on a day and time, and when the day had come, a large crowd gathered at the agreed upon place. Half an hour before the ceremony was to start, at eight PM, the Governor and some high officials arrived at a bridge, not far from Soekibaka. There they were stopped by Roman Catholic and Moravian missionaries who asked the Governor not to go any further, "because if the Wintimen were successful, this would mean a severe blow to the church." The Governor was susceptible to this argument and returned to Paramaribo. As a result, the whole ceremony was canceled and nothing was ever heard again.
of Ma Asavé. Why the ceremony could not be continued without the presence of the Governor remains unclear. Maybe he did forbid the dance after all, or maybe Ma Asavé had been so honored by the announced presence of the highest official in Suriname, that everyone knew his absence was enough reason for Ma Asavé not to appear, so they did not even try to persuade her. However, no one was punished by the Watramama either, which again indicates the transformation through which she had gone.

In other areas of Afro-Surinamese folklore, Watramama still was reputed to know how to punish behavior displeasing to her. This was particularly the case in oral tradition, and especially in the Anansi stories. In these stories, centered around the trickster spider, Watramama frequently makes her appearance, and although Anansi is one of her best friends, she also punishes him for his greediness. For example, she is held responsible for the strange shape of the spider's head. The reason was that Watramama possessed a magic cooking pot. Only one grain of rice, put in this pot, was enough to cook a whole meal. She showed this to Anansi, who often dined with her. When she left Anansi alone with the pot to fetch some meat, he became greedy and threw several grains of rice in it. After a while there was so much rice in the pot that it began spilling over the side. Anansi ate as much as he could, and then put the magic pot on his head and ran off. However, Watramama met him on the way and cursed him, saying the pot would stick to his head until a blacksmith would knock it off. And indeed, whatever Anansi tried, the pot stuck to his head. When he desperately knocked with his head and the pot against a tree, the pot broke in two pieces. However, the bottom of the pot could not be removed from his head, and even today a closer look at the spider will show that it is still on (Helman 1978: 99) (fig. 41.1).

Biologist and anthropologist Van Capelle (1857–1932), gathered a large number of stories from Afro-Surinamese oral tradition, a selection of which he published in 1926. In these stories, Watramama makes her appearance several times. At one point Van Capelle states:

"They say that it is dangerous to let albinos, who frequently occur among the Negroes and are called Watramama-pikien, go often over the water when they are grown up, because sometimes Watramama takes them with her."

In the times of slavery there was a young albino Negro, by the name of Skruro-ki, who often descended to the bottom of the river to get all sorts of objects. The Watramama was his friend. He went to eat with her and sometimes he stayed under water for days at a time. She had warned him not to tell anyone about the things he heard or saw, but Skruro-ki did not comply with her request, and when he descended to the riverbed once more he did not surface ever again (Van Capelle 1926: 336–337; author's translation).

These stories make clear that Watramama is willing to share her wealth with common people, but only on her own conditions. It is not known when Watramama acquired this reputation. In none of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sources did this aspect of her come forward. Nowadays, it is almost the only aspect most people know about her, particularly among the urbanized descendants of the enslaved. Today, the story goes that when Watramama loses her golden comb and comes to the finder at
night to claim it, the finder may ask of her anything he wants; his desires will be gratified punctually. There is only one condition: he has to become her ever-faithful husband. Otherwise he will lose at least his new found wealth, and maybe even his life (see, e.g., Neumann 1961: 488; Wooding 1972: 180–181). In this interpretation of Watramama, she actually loses her comb on purpose to seduce a man upon whom her eye has fallen. And because of the great rewards, men offer her a lot to attract her attention.

According to Neumann (1961: 485) and Wooding (1972: 180–181) this part of Watramama cult bears a great resemblance to cults in Liberia and Sierra Leone,14 the countries of origin of enslaved Mandingos. As the Mandingos were the last culture group who entered Suriname, it might be possible that it took them a while to have their tradition become part of the already existing Watramama canon. It is not clear whether those Libran and Sierra Leonean cults are old cults or part of more recent Mammy Wata cults. In the latter case, the Mandingo explanation probably is not valid.

But this does not exclude another explanation, namely, that this new side of Watramama only became meaningful because major transformations took place after the abolition of slavery in 1863. First, the formerly enslaved increasingly left the rural districts, most of which now became Asian because of the large scale immigration of indentured laborers from British India and Java. Actually, only Para and Coronie stayed Afro-Surinamese districts, while the overall majority of the Afro-Surinamese, apart from the Maroons, came to live in urban areas. A consequence of this urbanization was the (gradual) disappearance of the omnipresence of water with its eternal threats to their lives. This may have made it easier to romanticize the water goddess.

Second, since the end of slavery, and even more so after that time, Watramama could develop her more frivolous and wealth-bringing character traits, because ex-slaves became heavily involved in the money economy as market-oriented (proto-)peasants, artisans, gold diggers, rubber tappers, and later industrial laborers in the bauxite industry. During most of slavery, they had depended on the planters for their material well-being, and although there had been some differentiation among the enslaved between “wealthy” and poor, this was mainly in a relative sense. Now, they increasingly became dependent on their own capacity to make money, an effort in which some were successful, but most merely survived. A little luck in this respect was quite welcome, particularly if luck could be helped a bit by making offerings. Furthermore, it must have been socially helpful to explain away metaphysically the growing economic differentiation among Afro-Surinamese, in a community which had been, and mentally still was, more egalitarian than competitive.

The same seems to have occurred in those parts of West Africa where Mammy Wata cults became popular. According to Paxson “[s]he often appears in a society when it is changing from traditional values to modern ones . . . from a gift-giving to a money economy, with all the accompanying shifts in values and patterns of behavior. She often bestows wealth in the form of money, and is used to ‘explain’ sudden wealth” (Paxson 1983a: 415–417).
That corresponds nicely with developments from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards in the plantation districts of Suriname, and maybe even more so in towns, where the role of Watramama was changing. And although the “urbanized” Watramama seems to have become more part of newly developing popular culture than an element in the socio-religious Winti complex, she has not become a cult of her own, as in West Africa. Different aspects of Watramama dominate in different socio-economic contexts, and, dependent on how “deep” a person, or group, is into Winti religion, Watramama forms part of that background. In the early 1930s, this made the chief of the Saramaka Granman Yankuso sigh that “[i]n the city, where they do not believe in kunu any more, they are not afraid to use magic to enrich themselves, or hurt their neighbors” (Herskovits 1934: 75).

This differentiation also explains why there is not one single Watramama. Her name seems to be a generic name for all sorts of water gods and spirits, and not even the only name. The differences between all these water gods are not only those between Amerindians, Maroons, rural or urban Afro-Surinamese, but also differences within each ethnic group, depending on the locality, the hierarchical level of (Winti) religion, or the ceremony. Actually this seems to be typical of the way creolization has worked in Suriname. Instead of gradually mixing all the different West African—and some added Amerindian and European—elements together into an eventually unidentifiable whole, differences were never denied or cleansed away. On the contrary, all these differences still exist today among the Afro-Surinamese, but now they have become ritualized, particularly in religion. Gods have different ethnicities—Loango, Papa, Kromanti, Ingi—they speak in different languages, they have different drum rhythms and songs, different ceremonies, and they have their own followers whom they possess. Obviously, there also has been mixing, but the real unity is the religious system wherein the former ethnic-cultural differences between enslaved Africans have been sublimated.

Of course, these developments have occurred only gradually, and the process in which Maroons and rural and lower class urban Afro-Surinamese grew apart (as illustrated by the different faces of Watramama) was absolutely not completed before World War II. This becomes clear upon reading the observations published by the famous anthropologist couple Melville and Frances Herskovits after their research in Suriname during the early 1930s. They found that apart from bringing offers for Watramama to the riverside, Maroons also maintained shrines for her at several places along rivers and creeks. They visited one of these when they were traveling through the land of the Saramaka Maroons. This shrine was at Mamadam, a place along the Upper River Suriname, marked by dangerous falls and rapids in the river, which was then, according to the Herskovitses, a sacred place for Afro-Surinamese from the interior as well as for those from the rural districts and the urban areas. Today the community between these different Afro-Surinamese groups sublimated in a sacred place like Mamadam does not seem to exist anymore.

This is what the Herskovitses experienced. “There are many shrines on the river. At the G’an Creek, a man would speak his prayer from a distance, call the creek ‘ancestor,’” state his errand, and continue his journey. Far up

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the stream, where the juncture of the Pikien Rio and the Grand Rio forms
the river which the Bush Negroes call the Saramacca, is the Tapa Wata
shrine. There, our men said, we would do well to avoid looking, though our
boat rested across the river more than a quarter of a mile away. It seemed
dangerous even to notice the strip of white cotton which showed high
above the falls, though the stick from which it hung we could not see.”
Despite warnings that human eyes should not go there, the shrine at the
Mamadom turned out to be a friendly place. According to the Hersko-
vitses it was “the home of the Great Mother of the inland waters, she who,
above all else, had secured to the ancestors of these Bush Negroes their
freedom from slavery.” The eldest of the Herskovitses’ paddlers entered
the shrine and after having called on the Gods, including the Mother of the
River, and the ancestors, and having thanked them for a safe journey, he
picked some sacred leaves from behind the pineapple bushes which he
would later crush, put them in water dipped at the Mamadam, and use for
a purifying bath (Herskovits 1934: 82–87).
Shrines like this one for the Mother of the River probably still exist
among the Maroons in the interior of Suriname, although there is no infor-
mation at hand. Oral information among urbanized Afro-Surinamese re-
veals that, particularly among elder women, Watramama is still worshipped.
Some have a little shrine in a small separate room of their house where only
the person who is recognized by Watramama may enter. “Watramama is a
spirit or jeje who takes care for the children who recognize her. She is like a
godmother who may tell you for example: ‘if you give me a beer and keep to
my rules, I will reward you with my riches’. Watramama tells her worshippers
how to behave in her realm. In some parts of her realm everything is allowed,
in other areas it is forbidden to throw soapsuds in the water and/or menstru-
ating women may not bathe in that river. Watramama cannot be reached
without walking on the ground, therefore, Mama Aisa [the Earth Mother]
cannot be avoided either. Obviously the two work together.”

Physical Appearance

In the course of time, the existence of Watramama/Mammy Wata in Afri-
can and Afro-American cultures has tempted present-day observers to
speculate on an explanation of her physical appearance. Many of them
come to the conclusion that it must be related to seacows, or manatee, liv-
ing in the waters of the societies they studied respectively (for example, see
Benjamin 1987 and Salmons 1977). The only eighteenth-century writer
who linked the Watramama to the presence of manatee seems to have been
Stedman when he observed

that in many Rivers between the Tropicks both on the Coast of Guinea
and South AmericaAppearSometimeshalfAboveWatter, a Fish, that
has Some Distant resemblance to the Human Species, but is Less, And of
a Blackish Green Colour, the head is round, with a Deformed kind of
Face, And a Strong Fin from near the Eyes to the Middle of the Back, in
Place of flowing Hair-the two Quadrum Arms are no Other than two
Fleshy fins, or Digitated Swimmers, the Female has Breasts Assuredly
like a Womans, being a Viviparous Animal While the Tail is Exactly like that of a Fish, All in which it Agrees much with the Seal [...]. The Above information I had from Several Old Negroes and Indians, Who all Agreed Perfectly in the Description, they added further that they Sung /Which I Apprehend to be no Other than a Grunting Noise like Many other Tropical Fishes/ and Concluded by Assuring me that though they were Scarce, Nothing was more Dreaded by their Wives And Children than the Watra Mama. (Stedman 1790/1988: 456–457)

Van Lier also was of the opinion that it had to be a water animal which, seen from a distance, has a human-like shape (van Lier 1919: 18). And the Encyclopedia of the Dutch West Indies (Benjamins and Snelleman 1914–1917: 740) concluded the same, but suggested the watra dagoe (water dog) instead of the manatee as the malefactor.

The people who worshipped Watramama, however, have probably never made a connection between water animals, such as the manatee, and the water goddess.21 On the one hand, several sources22 indicate that Amerindians, Maroons, and enslaved Africans alike hunted the manatee for its delicate meat, which makes a connection between animal and god highly improbable. On the other hand, van Lier stated that he wished he had received a penny for every fisherman who had told him the story about having been present when a Watramama was caught in a net and pulled in the boat, but eventually always quickly jumped overboard again and escaped (van Lier 1919: 14). Quandt (1807/1968: 104) further reported about a colonial officer in the interior who once saw “a water woman” rising out of the water; when he prepared to shoot her the Amerindians who were present warned him not to, because they were afraid it would bring them harm. The same author described a story about some Amerindians in neighboring Berbice (now Guyana) who also had caught a “water woman” and took it with them in their canoe. They laid it on its back, but every time they did so it turned around “as if it felt ashamed.” When they arrived at their destination it jumped upwards, went overboard, and disappeared under water (Quandt 1807/1968: 106). So manatees were hunted for their delicate meat, but a water goddess of flesh and blood could not and should not be harmed.

Another, less physical explanation of the specific appearance of the water goddess made by several authors points to an aspect of the creolization process that has not been discussed so far: the European contribution. In the case of Watramama/Mammy Wata, the influence of European sailors with their stories about sirens and mermaids are mentioned, as well as the impression mermaid- and Neptune-like figureheads on European vessels must have made on Africans and Afro-Americans (see Benjamin 1987: 16–19; Paxson 1983a: 408; Salmons 1977: 8). Again, Stedman was the first who put Watramama in a wider, European context. When he tells that a certain major Abcrumby had “declared that a Mairmaid was Lately Seen in the River Suriname,” Stedman responds by quoting Homer, Horace, and Virgil in order to show that mermaids have been described since antiquity—”... who has not Read of the Mariners being Changed into Dolphins, by the Alluring Charms, and Singing of the Sirinis” (Stedman 1790/1988: 454–457).
Stedman's remark not only shows that stories and visualizations of the European mermaid were present in the New World; the way he quotes this major Abercrumby also tells us that among Europeans in Suriname, there were people who believed in mermaids, and the same has been stated for planters in neighboring Guyana (Benjamin 1987: 17). This European iconography could explain some aspects of Watramama, like her fish tail, which does not seem African, or Amerindian in origin, and the (golden) comb, which can be traced back to pre-mediaeval Europe. There is, however, no reason to suppose that Watramama/Mammy Wata, or at least the way she was visualized, has a purely European background. For example, connotations of seduction and eroticism in the world of gods, and between gods and humans, are as common among African and Afro-American religions as they are in pre-Christian European religions. Furthermore, in Guyana the water spirit is sometimes described as fair-skinned and blond-haired, while in Suriname she resembles an Amerindian woman. This could indicate that the European contribution to the Guyanese Watramama is bigger than to the Surinamese. Even more striking is the fact that the urbanized Afro-Surinamese seem to adhere to the most Europeanized version of Watramama, whereas the Maroons seem to have the most African version of her. But even the more European version, which obviously belongs to the group that had interaction with Europeans more than any other, is a creolized version built on African and Amerindian elements. This suggests that European elements could be added, but only to something which was already in existence.

Obviously, the difference between Guyana and Suriname is the presence and spiritual influence of Maroons in the latter country, resulting in a slightly more African undertone in the outcome of the creolization process. On the other hand, the Asian contribution to the creolization process seems to be bigger in Guyana than in Suriname, although in the latter country Asians now constitute the majority of the population. Nevertheless, the similarities between Watramama in Suriname and Guyana are best described in the words of Benjamin (1987: 2) when he states that the Watramama "is in reality a spectrum in which a number of forms can be roughly distinguished." Watramama is part of the Winti complex of Maroons in the interior and rural Afro-Surinamese in those districts; she is part of Amerindian religion, mainly in the interior (for both groups, Watramama is more or less a generic name for a whole sub-spectrum of water deities); and finally, she is found in a more westernized Afro-culture in the urban areas where she is still part of a rather vague Winti-religious context, but acts with much greater independence. In the latter context, she bears the most resemblance to European mermaids and sirens as well as to the present-day West-African Mammy Wata.

One of the most striking differences with the West-African Mammy Wata, as well as with Afro-Caribbean water goddesses who were creolized in Roman Catholic countries, is that the Surinamese Watramama has hardly ever been pictured by local artists. Actually, I only know of four examples: one the book illustration from 1927 (see fig. 41.1), the second a decorated calabash dated 1831 (DVD figs. 41.2a and 41.2b), and finally two paintings dated 1988 and 1982, respectively, the first by John Lie A Fo (fig.
41.3), the latter by Erwin de Vries and according to the catalogue titled "Water spirits," although at the exhibition in the Municipal Museum of Amsterdam it definitely was called "Watramama."

The calabash was sent as a gift to his missionary headquarters in Herrnhut (Germany) by a Moravian Brother called Böhmer then living in Paramaribo. It is now part of the Suriname ethnographic collection of the Ethnographic Museum of Herrnhut/Oberlausitz. The first (and until now last) publication on this unique object—fortunately accompanied by pictures—was done by Peter Neumann (1961). On this calabash, Watramama is pictured three times. Once, with a double fishtail, she is probably combing her hair while looking in a mirror;24 the second time, she holds a leafy twig in one hand, and something that looks most like a sort of necklace;25 the third time, she holds again a comb, while in the other hand she holds an object that Neumann describes as a typical Amerindian club. All three Watramama figures are surrounded by different kinds of objects, the majority of which resemble suns and stars. Maybe these are meant to be gemstones referring to her luxurious underwater palace, or perhaps they refer to the wealth she brings to select humans, like the two men and two women depicted. A sort of swimming fish might be a manatee, as Neumann (1961: Figure 41.3. "Watra mama." Gouache by John Lie A Fo, 70 x 80 cm, 1988. Courtesy of the artist.

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suggests. This would be an indication that after all, people did link Watramama with the manatee, maybe as a sort of vehicle.

The symbolic meanings Neumann attributes to these three images seem to me too far-fetched to reproduce here (Neumann 1961: 495–496). However, in one regard he is absolutely correct: these carvings and the rest of the ways this calabash is decorated suggest that this was made by a black person—a man?—living in the city of Paramaribo; the calabash was not made by a Maroon, nor an enslaved African in the plantation districts, nor an Amerindian. Neumann even goes as far as to compare it with present-day Afro-tourist kitsch and suggests this calabash to be the beginning of a tourist industry (Neumann 1961: 496). Be this as it may, these pictures of Watramama seem to fit in best with the image urbanized Afro-Surinamese were developing of Watramama as the seductive bringer of wealth, if you were lucky enough to attract her attention and find her comb.

The 1988 picture of Watramama shows another part of the spectrum, or so it seems (fig. 41.3). The picture was done by a professional artist, John Lie A Fo. Born in Suriname (1945) of parents with Chinese and Javanese origins, he migrated to the Netherlands when he was only fifteen years of age. After having been educated as a painter, he started looking for his roots and discovered for the first time, in the Royal Tropical Museum in Amsterdam of all places, the richness and profoundness of the myriad cultures Suriname accommodates. He became particularly interested in the spiritual world of Maroons and Amerindians. After having returned to South America, he made this spiritual world a central theme in his paintings along with, and not unrelated to, the relationship between human beings and animals. Snakes, birds, and caimans often appear in his work. The painting gives no clue whether this is a Watramama from the interior (Maroon or Amerindian), or from the urbanized coastal area. The blond hair might be an indication of the latter, although in itself the color of Watramama’s hair is almost invariably described as shining black. In Guyana, she is also sometimes described as fair-skinned (specifically from the waist up) and with golden hair (Benjamin 1987: 16–18). In Lie A Fo’s painting, Watramama is accompanied by a huge fish. Maybe this was done to indicate that Watramama is situated here in her underwater world. She does not look very harmful, nor wealthy, but actually that does not say much in the context of Lie A Fo’s other work: such indications are lacking in all his paintings.

Why is it that these are the only Surinamese images of Watramama, whereas her sisters in West Africa are among the most pictured subjects of popular painting? She also has a few sisters in South America, who have been pictured frequently (in Haiti, Cuba and Brazil). This is probably due to a number of factors. First of all, plastic arts have always been rather underdeveloped in Suriname until quite recently. Of course, exceptions are Maroon and Amerindian woodcarving, textile arts, basketry, and wickerwork. Second, there was no Protestant-Christian or an Afro-Surinamese religious tradition involving the portrayal of religious phenomena. And although the Roman Catholic church later became important—though never dominant—
statistics of saints were always scarce in Suriname, and statues for Winti-gods non-existent except, of course, for insiders.

Yet there is one famous statue of Watramama, not in Suriname, but in Europe. It was rediscovered by one of Suriname’s finest poets, Trefossa, when he visited Copenhagen:

san dja na mofo se? eh-eh!
Watramama na ju sidon
na ston?
Watramama mi sabi ju,
tru-tru.
Watramama,
tjeba-a-a . . .
ju gootu kan-kan, pe
a de?
mi gudu-gudu taig mi dan,
mi w’wan.
Watramama j’è watji mi
so pi-i-i . . .
enhè, mi sab p’aj tan:
Sranan!
What is here at the harbor?
Hey!
Watramama, is it you
sitting on the stone?
Watramama I know you,
Really true.
Watramama,
Well, well . . .
Your golden comb
Where is it?
My sweetheart, tell me then,
Just me.
Watramama, you’re watching me
So silently . . .
Ah, I know where it is:
Suriname!

According to Suriname’s most famous literary critic, Van Kempen (1986: 34), this is written by one of Suriname’s finest poets, with a typical Surinamese literary motif: being torn between the western and the Surinamese world, between globalized modernity and local tradition. Remarkably, this is the only reference in which Watramama is linked to the psychological and cultural turmoil that confronts the modern migrant. This is in sharp contrast with Mami Wata studies of West African societies in which her pan-African creolization is often attributed to migration and urbanization (cf. Van Stripsaan 2003: 330). This modern mobility means a loosening, and sometimes even the complete loss, of communal ties such as kinship or village; in their place come individualization, feelings of insecurity, and changing social and gen-

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nder relations. In fact, Mami Wata symbolizes all this in one. According to Barbara Paxson (1983a: 413–416) and Sabine Jell-Bahlsem (1997: 126–129), for instance, she is as unpredictable and aggressive as city life: she can make people rich or dump them, she appeals to the individual, not the community, and she gives women in particular new means of empowerment—such as priesthood or the possibility of sudden wealth—in sometimes highly sex-segregated societies. Mami Wata-like cults help people to cope with great transitions, and with their sense of being uprooted. That is exactly what is happening in modernizing postcolonial Africa . . . and that was exactly what happened during the Middle Passage and on the slave plantations in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Suriname, too. The Watramama helped people to find a new individuality and at the same time created a new “we” in a context in which most people were “others,” and as a reaction to a dominant culture, be it colonial or a (westernized) global culture.

The difference between developments in Africa and Suriname, or in the Caribbean generally, is the time of her creolization. In Africa, the psychological and cultural turmoil and the socioeconomic transitions in which the Mami Wata cult flourishes took and still takes place in the era of (developing) mass media, mass communication, and increasing mobility. This has doubtlessly contributed to Mami Wata’s internationalizing momentum and new creolizing force. Caribbean mothers of water, such as the Surinamese Watarama, creolized and gained momentum during the traumatic experiences of slavery, when mobility within (let alone between) these slave societies was limited as much as possible. Intra-African creolization, therefore, was confined to the (insular) borders of these individual colonies. And despite many more crises after slavery, which increased intra-Caribbean mobility and communication, there was probably not enough common ground, and what little common ground existed was not substantial enough to create a pan-Caribbean water goddess. Yet while creolization of the Watramama seems to have stopped a long time ago, paradoxically, she seems to expand from popular culture to elite culture, as she has become the subject of works by some Surinamese painters and writers. Watramama now actually can be met in books, museums, and theaters.28

Notes

1. Although there seems to be a general idea of what creolization involves, there is no general definition of this cultural phenomenon, which was initially borrowed from linguistics (cf. Van Stipriaan 2002: 83–87). Today, creolization is no longer even restricted to the Caribbean, nor to the social sciences, but has turned out to be a useful term to describe processes of cultural interaction in times of globalization (Hannerz 1992: 261–267), or the emergence of tourist art or urban popular art, particularly in Africa (Ben-Amos 1977; Wollen 1993).

2. These Maroons formed several different peoples in the interior of the country. As they were always at war with the colonial armies and formed a constant threat to law and order on the plantations, the most important Maroon groups, such as the Ndjuka, Saramaka, and Matawai, succeeded in the 1760s in forcing the colonial authorities to enter into peace agreements with them. Since that time, they were recognized as semi-autonomous communities. Officially they came to be known as Bush
Negroes, or Bushland Creoles, as opposed to the descendants of the enslaved, who were called Creoles. Today they are again often referred to as Maroons.

3. Winti, of course, is much more than a complex system of gods, spirits, and ancestors and the dances and other ceremonies created to worship and communicate with them. It is also a socio-philosophical system that explains about good and bad and how to live. Furthermore, it has psycho- and physio-therapeutic aspects, and metaphysical powers can be manipulated positively (obeah), or negatively (wis). (c.f. Wooding 1972).

4. Wooding (1972: 178-179) states that in Para, she is a soft-hearted goddess who manifests herself by a big caiman. According to Ellis, whose book Wooding uses to prove this Ghana connection, in Cape Coast “she is monstrous in size and whitish in Colour, but is not malignant, and supplies salt for the people” (Ellis 1887: 39).

5. According to Wooding, Tobo or Togbo is a Dahomeyan water god, and the addition—si—is a common Dahomeyan female conjugation. In the same region lives a god called Tokpodu, who materializes as a caiman (Wooding 1972: 179).

6. Melville and Frances Herskovits (1936: 57) found that “in certain situations, the magic of the Indian takes precedence over his [the Afro-Surinamese] own, because the Indians, as the autochtonous inhabitants of the land, have the greatest control over the spirits of earth and water.” And once they heard a Creole woman say in anger to a man of (partly) Amerindian descent: “Luku bun, mi nanga yu habi na sre-rcf Gron Mama (Take care, I and you have the selfsame Earth Mother)” (Herskovits 1934: 63).

7. After the peace treaties with several Maroon groups in the 1760s, they came to be known as “Bush Negroes,” a term that is still used today.


9. For example, in a song for Watramama’s husband Tata Bosu there is a phrase “Bosu o, eru a Daumé,” meaning Bosu [is] responsible to Dahomey, which used to be Papa country (Wooding 1972: 311).

10. Since the 1930s, the Para district has become less and less isolated due to the opening of bauxite mines. According to Wooding (1972: 179), today Watramama is considered a “sweet-tempered” goddess.

11. The development of the geographical distribution of the Surinamese population is summarized in Van Stipriaan 1993: 311-314, Koloniaal Verslag 1921. N.B. The people of the interior are calculated at 2,000 in 1750, 4,000 in 1863, and 10,000 in 1920. N.B. 2. In 1920, ca. 43 percent of the population is of Asian descent, imported indentured labor from British India and Java. However, 80 percent of the inhabitants of Paramaribo are Creoles, who constitute 46 percent of total population. Today about half of the population of ca. 500,000 is of Asian descent, about one third is Afro-Surinamese (i.e., Maroon and Afro-Creole), one-eighth calls itself “mixed,” and about 3 percent is Amerindian. More than 80 percent of the population now lives in Paramaribo, or within 30 kilometers distance (census 2004).

12. Later Willem Frederik van Lier (1944) wrote a PhD thesis on Afro-Surinamese religion, thus outgrowing his amateur status.

13. “Children of Watramama.”

14. This resemblance made Barbara Paxson (1983a: 418) even suggest “that Mammy Water may have come from the New World, and was carried to Africa in the nineteenth century with repatriated freed slaves, where she spread subsequently to neighboring areas.” And “[th]ese countries affected by repatriation of freed slaves—Nigeria, Liberia, and Sierra Leone—have a stronger web of connections with New World Mammy Water ideas and images than those that did not receive freed slaves” (p. 422). Moreover, she says, all African evidence of Mammy Water occurs within the twentieth century, whereas particularly Surinamese sources on Watramama are much older. This, however, is absolutely impossible, as
not a single freed slave from Suriname went (back) to West Africa. Actually, Paxson seems to be turning history upside down.

15. "Kunu, a supernatural force controlled by the ancestors and gods, which punishes with extinction the families of those who violate the laws of the ancestors. It would seem to be derived from the Ewe (Togoland) word kunu, 'death'" (Herskovits 1934: 350).


17. According to the description by the Herskovitses, the shrine was situated on an island in the Suriname River: "As we gained the island where the shrine itself stood and looked about us from the high rocks of the sacred spot, there lay before us in the early morning light a scene of inexpressible beauty." [ . . . ] "As soon as the mist had lifted, we walked up the rocks to the shrine. Facing us and the lower river, a tall slender pole, weathered to a pale silver, stood higher than the roof of the shrine in front of which it was planted. At its top were the crude outlines of a head and, some three feet from its base, two side pieces were nailed to it and grounded at an angle to steady the image against the onrush of a sudden wind. A short distance from the pole was the shrine itself, an open shelter under a thatched roof resting on four posts. Inside it, upon the ground, lay a flat stone whitened with sacred clay, and on this a bottle stood. Directly behind the stone was the altar, a low table on which lay several egg-shaped stones which had come from the bed of the river. A circle of iron, perhaps two fingers' breadth in thickness and having a diameter of ten or twelve inches, rested on the ground under the altar. A stick had been planted to face the thicket of wild pineapple that made a wall at the back, and from it hung a strip of white cotton for the ancestors. To the left of this was a simply carved stool, the tracery of its design become all but indistinguishable under the coat of white clay which covered it. Several bottles lay at the foot of this stool" (Herskovits 1934: 82–87).


19. The Panafrican News Agency (Dakar) reported from Ghana April 5, 2001: "Ghanaian scientists are sure they have found a clue to the mystery mermaid, called 'mami water,' which has been the centrepiece of folk tales in many riverside communities in West Africa. Scientists from the Institute of Aquatic Biology of the Centre for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) and the Wildlife Department told the Ghana News Agency that 'mami water,' the sea goddess reputed to be a source of absolute beauty and money could be the West African Manatee, a large aquatic herbivoruous mammal. 'When spotted in night, its scale body against moonlight creates the impression of half fish and half woman,' adding that the female manatee has two breasts with teats and dwells in tropical waters, whether fresh or saline" (www.allafrica.com/stories, April 13, 2001).

20. Lutra brasiliensis, an otter with a maximum length of 1.8 meters.

21. The only exception to this is Benjamin (1987: 17) when he states that "Amerindians seemed to have associated the Water Mama with manatees, and held the latter in great awe."

22. Benjamins and Snelleman 1914–1917; Quandt 1807/1968: 107; and Stedman (1790/1988: 453) reported that when one day a dead sea-cow, shot by Maroons, floated by his military camp near the River Suriname "the Negro Slaves fell on it like so many Crows on a Piece of Carrion Swimming round it, Some with a Rusty knife, some with a Bill Hook, & each Carrying off a piece for his Dinner or Supper."

23. "The comb [ . . . ] can be seen arguable as being derived from the trident of pre-Christian sea deities or from a plectrum for plucking lyre-strings" (Benjamin 1987: 18).

24. Why Neumann describes both items as typical Amerindian clubs remains unclear.
The Ever-Changing Face of Watramama in Suriname