Abstract
The paper focuses on prevalence of water goddess cults in West African and Afro-Caribbean regions. Historical records indicate that West African Slave Coast people called Papa probably introduced such cults into Dutch colonial plantations of Suriname, Guyana, Brazil etc. Subsequently, other enslaved populations from Gold Coast, Congo, Angola, Mandeland, Windward Coast etc. appear to have introduced their peculiar Mamiwata cult variants, all of which were moulded and “creolized” under a generic name. It is explained that the cult flourished among the African Caribbeans because it symbolized a new milieu for coping with New World harsh plantation life immediately following the trauma of the Middle Passage. In the same way, Watramama cults have been assisting Africans to grapple with the destabilizing conditions created by post-colonial urbanization and modernization.

Introduction
Both in West-African and in Afro-Caribbean religions, water spirits, which are more often than not female, have played or still play a prominent role. The importance of water in societies on both sides of the Atlantic is evident. Rivers, lakes and seas formed the main infrastructure for communication, transport and trade and they provided fish for day-to-day subsistence. At the same time, these waters were threatening and unpredictable. People drowned in them, lands were flooded, and rivers also formed easy avenues of entry for intruders from abroad. Water was also important in the lives of enslaved Africans, who had experienced the traumatic transatlantic voyage. And on the plantations, particularly in the Guyanas, where most plantations actually were polders laid out in swampy grounds, the heaviest part of slave labour was directly related to water
the never-ending and back breaking struggle to keep those polders from being flooded, by digging trenches and canals and erecting dikes and dams. Meanwhile, rivers and the sea provided very important additions to the meagre slave rations, and often these waters were the best escape route from the plantations (cf Oostindie & Van Stipriaan 1995). Water thus held a dominant though ambivalent position in the lives of Africans and Afro-Caribbeans. Water spirits, or water goddesses, reflected this position.

Two other elements explaining the existence of (female) spirits in African and Caribbean waters are often mentioned, particularly in relation to her mermaid-like appearance and image. One is the presence of seacows (manatees) in both African and Caribbean waters. The seacow is a mammal which may rather unexpectedly rise out of the water and whose females have human-like breasts. Particularly in the moonlight, these animals may give a mermaid-like impression. The other element is the arrival from the sea of European vessels with impressive figureheads of mermaids and other mythological figures, and the stories told by the sailors on board these ships, for whom mermaids, sirens, water-nymphs and other supernatural creatures from the water formed part of their daily world-view, and who sometimes even worshipped the figureheads on their ships (Salmons 1977; Paxson 1983; Drewal 1988).

On both sides of the Atlantic the water spirit came to be depicted as a very attractive, enormously wealthy mermaid-like woman with long, straight hair and a relatively light complexion, who lives in the waters in a paradise-like underworld, which, according to some, is the ultimate reversal of the daily reality of her worshippers (Kramer 1993:217). Sometimes she kidnaps people while they are swimming or riding in a boat, and she brings them to her underwater palace. On other occasions she might be caught by surprise by people — almost always men — who unexpectedly happen to meet her near the water combing her hair while looking in a mirror. She always flees immediately, leaving behind her comb, mirror or other items. However, she returns in his dreams to demand back her belongings. If he does so, and if he promises to keep silent about their encounter, and if he swears to be her faithful lover, then she will make him rich. If he does not, however, she will bring him and his family bad luck or even death. Women are also visited by the Water Mother in their dreams. They can show their loyalty to the goddess by not having children. The water spirit is also known to mingle in crowds, particularly on market days, disguised as a beautiful woman. Beautiful women are thus often held to be an incarnation of the Water Mother, or at least they are thought to be related to her one way or another.

Furthermore, the water spirit is worshipped in some societies with all kinds of ritual offerings; with altars stuffed with all kinds of (often Western) consumer goods which have reminded some observers of cargo cults, others of the dressing tables of colonial European ladies (cf Drewal 1988b; Wendl 1991);
most important of all, the Water Mother is worshipped in trance dances, during which her worshippers are possessed by her and she communicates with them.

Actually, there is not just a single water spirit or water goddess in West Africa or in the Caribbean, but many. However, it seems that in all of these societies there turns out to be a generic name for all of these water spirits together, and/or there is no doubt about which of them is actually paramount. Here, however, the similarities between the African and the Caribbean Mothers of the Water more or less cease.

In Africa, during the twentieth century, local water goddesses have become increasingly standardized, or homogenized, under the general name of Mami Wata, with an autonomous and institutionalized cult (priests, temples, initiation rites, healing sessions etc) particularly in urbanized areas, and with a variety of more or less standardized icons. The number of cultures contributing to Mami Wata’s formation is still growing today. She is now known in at least twenty African countries; her (iconographical) roots might be traced in all twenty of these, but also in Europe, and even in India and probably the Muslim world too; and she has a number of sisters in the New World (cf. Drewal 1988a and b; Wendt 1991).

Despite being sisters, however, in the New World no such supranational standardization process has taken place. Although there is, or has been, a prominent water goddess in probably most Afro-religions in the Americas, and although they have some or most of the characteristics described above, only a few have a more or less institutionalized cult of their own comparable to Mami Wata in West Africa. In the Caribbean water goddesses have not even outgrown their local identities. In every society she has other names and rituals, like Wattramama (Suriname, Guyana), Mamadjo (Grenada), Yemanya/Yemaya (Brazil/Cuba), La Sirène, Erzulie, Simbi (Haiti), Lamanté (Martinique) etc. In West- and Central Africa a number of water goddesses seem to be creolizing into the internationally known Mami Wata who forms part of processes of African modernization, whereas her Caribbean sisters seem to have stopped creolizing a long time ago and, therefore, might now even be in a state of de-creolization.

It might be useful, therefore, to take a look at developments during the period that the Transatlantic slave trade and New World slavery dominated the ‘Black Atlantic’, with Suriname, Dutch Guyana, as a case in point. Obviously, these historical developments indicate that legacies of the Transatlantic slave trade are substantially socio-cultural in character and go beyond the impact of a-symmetrical encounters and interactions between enslaved and enslavers. It is also the dynamics of interaction among the enslaved that have to be taken into account.
Slave Trade to Suriname

During the formative era of the Guyanese plantation economies; i.e. from the mid-seventeenth to the early eighteenth century, the Slave Coast was the principal supplier of Africans to Suriname (almost three-fifths). To my knowledge, no West-African source at that time, nor during the two centuries thereafter, ever mentioned a water spirit named Mami Wata. In Suriname, on the other hand, the first mention of Watramama was made in the 1740s by an anonymous writer:

It sometimes happens that one or the other of the black slaves either imagines truthfully, or out of rascality pretends to have seen and heard an apparition or ghost which they call water mama, which ghost would have ordered them not to work on such or such a day, but to spend it as a holy day for offering with the blood of a white hen, to sprinkle this or that at the water-side and more of that monkey-business, adding in such cases that if they do not obey this order, shortly Watermama will make their child or husband etc. die or harm them otherwise (Anonymous 1744: 317)

During the 1770s the colonial authorities in Suriname for the first time issued a law against “the watermama and similar slave dances,” which were considered to have “dangerous effects” on the slaves. In that same period, the later governor Nepveu noted 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 [...] they are possessed by their god, which is generally called Watramama (Nepveu 1775)

Between the middle of the seventeenth century and around 1830 about a quarter of a million enslaved Africans were landed in Suriname coming from an area ranging from today’s Senegal to Angola (table 1). Yet, a key factor in the creolization process is that these transports did not consist of a balanced mix of Africans representing the continent’s various cultures. In general the slaves were taken from four major areas which were referred to with generic ethnic names.
Table 1 Embarkation Area for Enslaved Africans Bound for Suriname 1668-1830

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Total landed in Suriname</th>
<th>Grain- &amp; Ivory Coast (Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ivory Coast)</th>
<th>Gold Coast (Ghana)</th>
<th>Slave Coast (Togo, Benin, Nigeria)</th>
<th>Loango-Angola-Coast (Gabon, Congo, N-Angola)</th>
<th>Diverse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1668-1699</td>
<td>c. 27,000</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1 %</td>
<td>36 %</td>
<td>57 %</td>
<td>6 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1700-1739</td>
<td>c. 49,000</td>
<td>1 %</td>
<td>37 %</td>
<td>47 %</td>
<td>9 %</td>
<td>6 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1740-1779</td>
<td>c. 109,000</td>
<td>37 %</td>
<td>28 %</td>
<td>2 %</td>
<td>33 %</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1780-1807</td>
<td>c. 23,000</td>
<td>37 %</td>
<td>46 %</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>17 %</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1808-1830</td>
<td>c. 33,000 (40%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>(40 %)</td>
<td>(20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>total</td>
<td>c. 241,000 (Mandingo (Mendé/Soko) (c. 27 %)</td>
<td>Kormantin (c. 25 %)</td>
<td>Papa (c. 14 %)</td>
<td>Loango (c. 30 %)</td>
<td>Diverse (c. 4 %)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


These figures should not be taken absolutely, because of a high proportion of estimations and extrapolations. They do, however, indicate as best as possible, the areas in Africa from which the Africans landed in Suriname originated, or, to be more precisely, where they had been embarked. One of the most remarkable aspects of these ethnic categories often constructed by Europeans, was that, over time most of these names became used by the enslaved too, and still are until today by Afro-Surinamese. During slavery they were important in the creation of (new) group identities, today these ethnic differences mainly exist in a ritualized form, i.e. to differentiate between certain gods or spirits in Afro-Surinamese winti religion. The ethnic composition of total slave imports over time was as follows.
Table 2 Ethnic Composition of All Enslaved Africans Landed in Suriname

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area import</th>
<th>Generic ethnic name</th>
<th>Percentage in total slave</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Congo-Luango</td>
<td>Luango (Luangu)</td>
<td>c. 30 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slave Coast</td>
<td>Papa</td>
<td>c. 15 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gold Coast</td>
<td>Cormantin (Kromanti)</td>
<td>c. 25 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ivory Coast and Grain Coast (also Windward Coast)</td>
<td>Mandingo (or Mende, or Soko)</td>
<td>c. 25 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diverse (a.o. Calabar)</td>
<td></td>
<td>c. 5 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(NB: percentages are only indications)

Luango slaves were transported to Suriname throughout the period in relatively large numbers and formed almost a third of the total. Papa were transported in large numbers only in the early period, and hardly any arrived after 1730; they formed no more than a sixth of the total. In the course of the eighteenth century Cormantins began to be transported instead of Papa, forming a third of the total. Another substantial group, the Mande or Mandingo, formed around a quarter of the total, although these were latecomers in Suriname so that, despite their numbers, they had to struggle harder to make their mark on Afro-Surinamese culture than the groups that preceded them.

Watraramama’s Creolization

The famous John Gabriel Stedman was 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 Watters* (Stedman 1988: 457). This would indicate that, in his time, the second half of the eighteenth century, Amerindian and originally Papa-and—maybe—other West-African water spirits had gone through a process which had merged them into one Surinamese Watramama. However, this was not the case yet.

In Stedman’s as well as in Nepveu’s account, it seems that Watramama is already firmly established within a generally accepted, creolized slave religion. This is doubtful, however, as in Nepveu’s time the Cormantin slaves had only recently become a substantial ethnic group, 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 Watramama 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 slaves. For example, Stedman 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* (Stedman 1988: 292)

So the ethnic division between the slaves was still quite strong, and creolization certainly was not finished yet.

It is obvious from Nepveu’s account that not all enslaved imported from Africa were acquainted with Watramama-like cults, and that particularly Papa slaves introduced it in Suriname. Papa slaves 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.

However, it is less easy to explain why enslaved Africans with other ethnic origins adopted this cult of a water goddess too, or at least accepted its incorporation into the winti religious complex. Most probably this was due to the fact that the phenomenon of water gods or water spirits was not uncommon to most 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 (Oostindie and Van Stipriaan 1995: 85-87).

Today, in the district of Para, which formerly was the border area between colonial and Maroon society, one of the pantheons in the Winti complex con-
sists 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 Bosu, 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, which refers to a water-deity in present day Benin, formerly the home of the Papa (Wooding 1972: 179). She also bears resemblance to the Mende (in our categorization: Mandingo) goddess Tingoi. And to complicate things further, when Watramama 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, Watramama may have been brought to Suriname by Papa slaves, but in the process of creolization she became part of a West-African mix and was adapted to circumstances in Suriname.

Since each ethnic group was apparently able to retain its own gods and rituals for a long period, and since a kind of cultural hierarchy existed with the first African cultures to arrive taking a dominant position, the circumstances were right for creolization. It was necessary to overcome the mutual differences in order to struggle for space and rights in and outside the system. Moreover, the slaves gradually developed in this process into peasant-like communities, settled on particular plantations in which they now had an interest of their own (cf. Van Stipriaan 1995).

Ethnic-cultural differences gradually became blurred, even if only because many would have found it difficult to find a partner of the same ethnic background. In everyday practice slaves from different African cultures were forced to make all kinds of cultural selections, adaptations, mixes and innovations. Yet this does not mean that the ethnic-cultural differences disappeared. They simply shifted from everyday, material reality to the metaphysical level by being transformed into rituals. Thus a pantheon of gods and deities (winti) emerged comprising Luango winti, Papa winti and Kromanti (Cormanti) winti, each with their own language, rituals and apparitions, whose adherents communicated with their own songs, dances and rhythms (cf. e.g. Voorhoeve & Lichtveld 1975:52; Wooding 1979, Price & Price 1980:178-80). Clearly this shift opened the way for the creation of common ground in everyday life.

In fact, in this creolization process Watramama appears to have lost her prominent and, for many, threatening position and character. Perhaps this reflected the decline of the importance of water in everyday lives of the slaves, while the
role of the soil increased. The battle against the water still had to be fought on most plantations, however, it was in the soil that successive generations lay buried, it was the soil that offered increasing possibilities to lead a (proto-)peasant existence even while still being a slave, by producing for the market; and it was a piece of land the ex-slaves were looking for to settle down after Emancipation. Perhaps this was why Mother Earth, Mama Aisa, developed into the prominent goddess she is in today's winti pantheon. Meanwhile, Watramama also lost her specifically Papa identity. In one respect she emerged in the hierarchically less prominent terrain of 'Indji' (Amerindian) winti; in another she began to take on Kromanti elements as well as Papa, and might inadvertently speak through the mouths of possessed dancers in an esoteric Luango language (Wooding 1972:179). Remarkably, therefore, while she went through an unmistakable process of creolization, through this mixture she also lost some of her distinctive identity, making it difficult to place her in the hierarchy and eventually forcing her into the margins. By the same token, she also lost the element of danger and acquired a gentler role as the intermediary between the human world and Mama Aisa, who, incidentally, also has a Papa background (Stephen 1985:45-8).

While the ban on performing the Watramama dance remained in place, plantation owners gradually became increasingly tolerant in the nineteenth century. Klinkers concludes that they no longer viewed the dance as a real threat (Klinkers 1997:63-5). As late as 1744 Watramama was still described as a demon (spookseh). If her adherents did not follow her instructions to the letter, 'the Watramama would soon make their child or husband etc die or inflict some other evil' (Ontwerp 1744:317). A century later, an observer described a more gentle, conciliatory approach:

the WATERMAMA [is] a god in whose influence they believe and whom they worship avidly. Because they make all kinds of offers of drink and food to her. When I inquired, they depicted the Watermama as a beautiful Indian with a child; why not a Negress, which was oddly denied, I do not know. She is crowned with waterlilies, about which hummingbirds flutter with feathers made of precious stones glistening in the setting sun. The son of the wilderness makes offers of drink and food, with perhaps the same devotion as a Christian says an Ave Maria; and if the ceremonies they perform appear ridiculous to our eyes, the care with which they are executed reveals that these are a serious matter and that is after all what is most important (Letus over Suriname 1854:156).

Around 1900 the governor of Suriname appears to have given personal permission for a dance to celebrate the return to the real world - foretold by a wintiman - of a woman who had been abducted years previously by Watramama and taken down to her underwater palace. Indeed, the governor insisted on
attending the ceremony himself, although a group of missionaries eventually managed to dissuade him (Van Lier 1920:15-8).

References to death in some contemporary Watramama songs 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” activities. The urbanized Afro-Surinamese 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 most Afro-Surinamese were converted to Christianity by the end of the nineteenth century. The latter, however, did not mean that people had forswn 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 Afro-Surinamese and it is generally admitted that people from the interior of the country, particularly Maroons, have a much deeper understanding of Winti. In this process of change among the enslaved and their descendants the once horrific Watramama seems to have transformed into the more lovely, mysterious water nymph described above.

After slavery was abolished in Suriname in 1863, and certainly during the twentieth century, as mass evangelism, Western education and general government policies took hold, winti religion, including Watramama, became marginalised, especially in the towns, retaining its position only in lower-class folk culture. In recent years, however, it has begun to reemerge from this position. Slowly but surely, the partially Westernised Afro-Surinamese intelligentsia has begun to reappraise winti as a way of life and a form of spirituality relevant to them. It should not be forgotten that the prohibition of winti worship — once officially labelled idolatry — was only repealed from the Surinamese legal code in 1971, shortly before independence! Meanwhile, the migrants from Suriname
have brought winti to the Netherlands, the country which had banned winti religion and especially Watramama since the eighteenth century. Not only is scholarly interest in the phenomenon increasing, the winti tradition is being upheld with the support of specialists, especially among Holland’s Afro-Surinamese, in healthcare, in domestic circles, at meetings and ceremonies. And perhaps most surprisingly, in recent years I have encountered two contemporary depictions of Watramama at leading Dutch museums! She appears, therefore, to have taken some fundamental new steps: for the first time, she has ventured beyond Suriname’s borders. As part of what was once a folk religion, she has now forced her way into the spiritual and scholarly experiential world of the upper social echelons in Suriname and the Netherlands, while her image is now displayed in Western temples of art and culture.

Mami Wata

In West Africa the history of Mami Wata, as she is now generally known, has followed an almost diametrically opposed course to that of Suriname’s Watramama. She has developed from a local water goddess within a wider pantheon of gods connected with various societies, into an almost standard, pan-African deity with an autonomous cult, part of a mainly urban and popular folk culture in which the awe that the goddess inspires appears to have precedence over her gentler characteristics. This is not to say that a homogenous, supra-national cult has formed, since all kinds of local varieties still exist. Yet her growing pan-African popularity and the increasing number of publications, films, pictures and Internet discussions, all point in this direction (cf. a.o. Salmons 1977; Paxson 1983; Drewal 1989a and b, Kramer 1993; Wendl 1991; Frank 1995, Jell-Bahlsen 1997). She appears therefore to have become part of Africa’s modernisation and globalization process, and the question is whether this is something completely different from what happened in Suriname.

Three developments appear to have played a key role in West- and Central Africa. As already mentioned, it is possible that the original West African images of water goddesses were influenced by European images of mermaids and similar figures as early as the sixteenth century. Developments since the nineteenth century can be traced with greater certainty. One is the role of trading peoples along the coasts of West Africa, such as the Kru in today’s Liberia or the Ijo in the Niger delta, who undoubtedly had a major influence as intermediaries on cultural changes in that part of the continent (Drewal 198b:38; Wendl 1991:115). It has been demonstrated, for example, that in some societies the name Mami Wata, itself a pidgin English term, became current after the arrival of Kru traders (Wendl 1991:113-6). Thus the development of a standard image of the
pan-African Mami Wata may reflect the influence of the Kru version of the water goddess.

The second major factor influencing the creolization and standardization of the water goddess is a picture of a woman from Samoa, a snake charmer who appeared in Carl Hagenbeck's freak show in Europe during the 1880s. Large numbers of posters appear to have been displayed, eventually finding their way to Africa where, in the course of the twentieth century, the snake charmer became the key image for Mami Wata (Drewal 1988b:38; Wendt 1991:116-21). One recognisable element is the two snakes she holds. In the core territory of the Mami Wata cult, in and around Benin – where Suriname's Papa slaves originally lived – pythons in particular are seen as messengers of the gods and through their ability to predict the future are often linked to Mami Wata (Jelley-Balhansen 1997:108-9). At the same time, her non-African, relatively Asiatic appearance seems to have coincided with the existing image of the water goddess.

In the 1930s paintings and copies of the German poster began to appear in growing numbers. By the 1980s the influence of the original poster could be traced in no less than 41 cultures in fourteen different African countries (Drewal 1988b:96). Clearly a lively market existed for images of Mami Wata. Indeed, Indian businessmen in Africa also cashed in on the trade. They had tens of thousands of posters and derivative prints made in India, resulting in an accentuation of Mami Wata's Asian features and occasionally even merged with images of Hindu gods (Drewal 1988a: 121-3). The image of the pan-African water goddess has therefore developed from a mixture of African, European and Asian elements through a process referred to by Mami Wata researcher Drewal as one of active interpretation, adaptation, and re-creation, not reproduction (Drewal 1988b:45).

The third factor influencing the pan-africanization, or rather creolization of Mami Wata is Africa's rapid social and economic transformation in the twentieth century, particularly in the latter decades. Urbanisation and participation in globalization processes, such as migration, have enormously influenced and changed family, community and gender relations. The clarity and occasionally forced harmony of these traditional links was replaced by chaos, ambiguity, aggression, individuality, as well as the unexpected opportunities and innovations of life in an urban environment. Mami Wata embodies all these aspects of modern life, which have always lain dormant in her. She can be as unpredictable and aggressive as urban life itself, she can make people rich, or drop them like a hot potato, she relates to individuals rather than the community and her insistence on unconditional loyalty from adherents is interpreted by some as a signal for new rules of sexual contact. Moreover, especially for women, she can encourage and justify changing gender relations, opportunities for sudden
wealth, female priesthood and control by the individual over their own sexuality (Frank 1995:340-2, Jell-Bahlsen 1997:118, 126-9).

It has been suggested that Mami Wata symbolises the ultimate ‘other’ (Fabian 1978:327; Drewal 1988a: 101, Wendl 1991:12-4; Kramer 1993:221-7). Because, while she has remarkably human traits, she also has a fish tail, lives in the water, possesses untold wealth and has non-African skin and hair, while the origins of her form can be found in three different continents. So this ultimate ‘other’ would clearly appeal to those whose experiential world used to consist of a clear ‘us’ group and a distinct ‘them’ group, but which now, as a result of urbanisation and migration, has changed into a world in which almost everyone around is the ‘other’. Mami Wata is the – or at least one of the – creolized symbol(s) of the ‘other’, presenting solutions where traditional gods no longer suffice (Cf Meyer 1999).

Mami Wata seems, therefore, to have been the right goddess at the right time for many West African societies as these experienced drastic, ongoing transformations. In the course of this process of change, a creolized Mami Wata emerged from her parochial context and became an autonomous, supra-local god with a whole cult to herself and her own, expanding pantheon of associated gods and spirits, in part coopted from other religions and mythologies. Meanwhile she has retained a local profile in the form of a consistently wide diversity of local water gods and goddesses with often wide-ranging functions. The same applies to her priestesses and priests, some of whom attract clients from far beyond their own society, or who employ material acquired through networks that sometimes reach out as far as other continents (Drewal 1988b:48).

In fact, although Mami Wata is now known in around twenty African countries, she has not always developed into a religious cult. This is especially true in the core territory stretching from Cameroon to Ghana, while in a country like Congo her image has become especially popular as an icon representing (individual) hope and success in a rapidly changing and violent world. Successful people place painted Mami Wata figures – produced since the 1970s by specialised artists known as Watistes – in their living rooms as symbols of their upward mobility, while the figures also protect against evil and the unknown ‘other’ (Paxson 1983:417-8; Vogel 1991:116; 130). Following the most famous Watiste, Chéri Samba, who in fact warns against the temptations of Mami Wata in his work, many Mami Wata paintings have now penetrated the hallows of the international art world in the cities of the West.
Conclusion

Mami Wata-like cults help Africans to cope with great transitions and feelings of being uprooted caused by urbanization and modernization in general. That is what is happening in postcolonial Africa, but that was also the case during the Middle Passage and on the slave plantations in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Caribbean. The water goddess then too symbolized and expressed the new circumstances in which the enslaved Africans had to shape a new life, she 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 in the Caribbean 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 take place in the era of (developing) mass media, mass communication and increasing mobility. This has without a doubt contributed to Mami Wata’s internationalizing momentum and new creolizing force. Caribbean water goddesses, such as the Surinamese Watramama, 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, increasing intra-Caribbean mobility and communication, there was probably not enough common ground, and it was not substantial enough to create a pan-Caribbean water goddess.

However, although creolization of the Water Mother in the Caribbean seems to have stopped a long time ago, it would not surprise me if she had started a new cycle of creolization in the Caribbean diaspora in Europe and the United States. Paradoxically, there she has been a part of the post modern processes which have diffused the borders between what was formerly described as popular and elite or high culture. The water goddess, including the Surinamese Watramama, now has become the subject of works by a number of Caribbean and African painters, sculptors and writers which can be found in Western private collections, museums and book shops, and which are admired by a Western public too.
End Notes

1 The Panafncan News Agency (Dakar) reported from Ghana April 5, 2001: “Ghanaians 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 herbivorous mammal. ’When spotted in night, its scaling 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, 13-04-2001).


4 This is not to imply that these were the only African ethnic categories known in Suriname. In 1835, for example, Teenstra recorded a further fourteen different ethnic groups among which Abo, Damakuku, Tiamba, and Gangu. According to Teenstra, most of these groups were only found in Suriname in limited numbers (Teenstra 1835 II:180-84).

5 Wooding states that in the Surinamese district of Para, she is a soft-hearted goddess who manifests herself by a big caiman. According to A.B. Ellis (Tshi-speaking peoples of the Gold Coast of West Africa. London 1887: 39), 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”(Wooding 1972:178-179).

6 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).

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

8 A bibliography several dozen pages long of publications about winti in the Netherlands and Suriname in the period 1970-1997 by Mildred Rajiannon, which appeared in 1992, has been followed by numerous studies.

9 The first time was in 1994, at the Messenger from the Jungle exhibition at Rotterdam’s Museum of Ethnology (now: World Museum), by Surinamese artist John Lie A Fo, who is actually of entirely Asian background. The second time was in 1998 at Amsterdam’s Stedelijk Museum in an exhibition of work by Suriname’s best known painter and sculptor Erwin de Vries.

10 A lively discussion of Mami Wata can also be found on Africa H-net, <www.h.net.ms.edu/logs/logsearch.cgi> where contributions can be found under search terms such as mammy, mami and wata.

11 Paxson suggests, moreover, that Mami Wata’s popularity has also been stimulated by Arabic Islamic stories of *djinn* - spirits who are able to marry people. Although I have found no precise instance of Mammy Water herself being one with a *djinn* of African Islam, the


Nepveu, J., *Annotaties op het boek van J. D. Herlein 'Beschryvinge van de volkplantinge Zuriname'* (MS, ca. 1775, Municipal Archives Amsterdam, Archief Marquette, 298).


Stedman, John G. *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*, transcribed & edited by Richard & Sally Price; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988 [1790].

Teenstra, M.D., *De landbouw in de kolonie Suriname*. Groningen: Eenhoorn, 1835 (2 vols.)


