

MAIDENS OF THE SEA: EXPLORING THE HISTORIES OF MERMAIDS, MAMI WATA
AND YEMAYA

by

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DEDICATION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my ancestors – your presence, guidance, support and love has been felt from the moment I came into existence. I would also like to dedicate this to my incredible husband, Agustin Guzman. Thank you for the immense love, support, and encouragement you have given me throughout this entire process. Lastly, but certainly not least, this paper is dedicated to my two sons, Emeterio Albizu Guzman and Cacique Taíno Guzman, who remind me every single day that miracles are real, and that love is unconditional.

Introduction

Of all the creatures discovered or imagined none have had the lure like that of the half-human, half-aquatic entity. Sometimes referred to as gods, mermaids, water spirits or deities, these incredible creatures have been the inspiration for folklore, art, literature and religion for hundreds of thousands of years. Their existence can be traced to multiple continents, cultures and communities of faith throughout history. Three of these beings have garnered the attention of people around the globe. Their appeal has crossed boundaries, languages and beliefs. Mermaids as experienced throughout Europe and Western civilization, Mami Wata and Yemaya both of African descent, have had a tremendous influence throughout time. Their existence, history and lore has been discussed, debated and contested for thousands of years. What is it about these entities that has allowed their presence to remain relevant in cultures today? Despite the fact that these sea deities have roots in many continents and cultures there are many similarities between them. All three deities, despite their different origins, have inspired a combination of fear and devotion amongst people around the world who believe in their existence.

Mermaids

*“I am the star that rises from the sea, the
Twilight sea
I bring men dreams that rule their destiny.
I bring the dream-tides to the souls of men;
The tides that ebb and flow and ebb again-
These are my secrets, these belong to me.”*
-Dion Fortune (Alexander 136)

One magnificent creature whose story has spanned several continents and centuries is a mermaid. This mystical creature is known to some as a beautiful enchantress of the seas and to others as a hideous beast with the face of a human but lips of an ape, and there exists many interpretations of the mermaid in between. The existence of this creature has inspired tales, literature and art alike. "Passing from ecclesiastical to secular decoration, the mermaid has, at one time or another, and in one way or other, been made to enter somewhat largely into the designs for metal-work for personal ornament, and for wood carvings for domestic articles" (Llewellyn 170). In folklore, the mermaid is seen as either a beautiful, alluring creature that is the cause of the demise of sailors or as a creature that comes to the aid and rescuer of sailors and men alike. She, depending on the tale, can be representative of life or death. The combination of fear and devotion to her can be seen in myths and stories throughout history. Through a Westernized lens, her appeal is quite exquisite; the mirror and comb she holds are representations of her beauty and vanity. In the words of Lord Alfred Tennyson:

*"Who would be
A mermaid fair,
Singing alone,
Combing her hair
Under the sea
In a golden curl,
With a comb of pearl,
On a throne?
I would be a mermaid fair;
I would sing to myself the whole of the day;
With a comb of pearl, I would comb my hair;
And still as I comb, I would sing and say,
'Who is it loves me? Who loves not me?'" (Alexander 10).*

But what are her true beginnings? Though the existence of this enchanted creature cannot be confirmed, there are a plethora of writings, drawings, canvases and artifacts that can help piece together some of her story. What we have come to know as the mermaid in present-day is largely attributed to the Assyrian goddess Atargatis, who is “depicted on ancient coins as a fish standing upright on its tail and wearing the head of a human woman. Some early artwork shows her with two legs as well as a tail.” Although the legend of the mermaid is connected with Atargatis, the beginnings of half-human, half-aquatic beings can be traced back to the early Babylonians. They credited “the man-fish god Ea (Oannes) with teaching humankind agriculture, architecture, and much more” (Alexander 15). Then there were the Phoenicians who worshiped Dagon, a creature that was half-human and half-fish. Later, Ancient Greek and Roman art would depict water spirits and deities that had characteristics of both humans and sea creatures. The most famous depiction became Triton, who was the son of Poseidon and Amphitrite, rulers of the sea (Alexander 16). One of the many recorded writings of mermaids was drafted in First Century A.D. by Roman writer Pliny the Elder. In his thirty-seven-volume work published in 77 CE, titled *Natural History*, he writes about the whole of the natural world. There have been a variety of translations of his text. In chapter four of his work titled *Natural History*, one translation indicates that Pliny states,

A deputation of persons from Olisipo,¹ that had been sent for the purpose, brought word to the Emperor Tiberius that a triton had been both seen and heard in a certain cavern, blowing a conch-shell,² and of the form under which they are usually represented. Nor yet is the figure generally attributed to the nereids³ at all a fiction; only in them, the portion of the body that resembles the human figure is still rough all over with scales. For one of these creatures was seen upon the same shores, and as it died, its plaintive

murmurs were heard even by the inhabitants at a distance. The legatus of Gaul,⁴ too, wrote word to the late Emperor Augustus that a considerable number of nereids had been found dead upon the sea-shore. I have, too, some distinguished informants of equestrian rank, who state that they themselves once saw in the ocean of Gades a sea-man,⁵ which bore in every part of his body a perfect resemblance to a human being, and that during the night he would climb up into ships; upon which the side of the vessel where he seated himself would instantly sink downward, and if he remained there any considerable time, even go under water (Pliny the Elder 1855).

In this context, it is assumed by translators and historians alike that the Triton mentioned above refers to what European and Western cultures have come to call a “merman” and that the Nereids mentioned above are our “mermaids.” Pliny the Elder’s findings in his work would influence society’s views and knowledge of the natural world for over a thousand years – as that was about the amount of time that his books were consulted. Sightings of this half-human, half-fish entity was continuously seen thereafter. In 1493 while sailing in the ocean near Haiti, Christopher Columbus reported seeing a mermaid. Many believe that what he truly saw was a manatee and his claim that the mermaids were “not as pretty as they are depicted, for somehow in the face they look like men” substantiated this belief. In 1608, the English explorer Henry Hudson also claimed he sighted a mermaid. In his logbook, he recorded,

This morning one of our companie looking over the boord saw a Mermaid...from the Navill upward, her backe and breasts were like a woman’s, her body as big as one of us; her skin very white; and long haire hanging down behind, of color black; in her going downe they saw her taylor, which was like the taylor of a porposse and speckled like a Macrell (Norell, Mark, and Laurel Kendall 34).

As intriguing as this account was, there continued to be debates about the conditions of the mind of sailors after having spent months or sometimes years at sea. Still more accounts continued to be reported. In 1614 Captain John Smith claimed he too saw a mermaid describing her as having “round eyes, a finely shaped nose, well-formed ears, and long green hair. The creature, he said, was “by no means unattractive.” One of the 20th century sightings was reported in County Clare, Ireland around 1910. (Norell, Mark, and Laurel Kendall 34). The fact that the sightings of mermaids were normally by men, and the mermaids themselves were women led psychoanalyst Carl Jung to explore the concept he termed ‘anima’. “He used the term ‘anima’ to describe the feminine part of a man’s psyche and noted that often men repress this part of themselves. According to Jung, when someone doesn’t integrate a facet of his nature, he tends to project it outward and see it represented in his external circumstances-and he’s usually both attracted and repelled by what he sees...women sometimes report seeing mermaids but mostly its men who spot them” (Alexander 22).

What is the lore of these magnificent creatures? Why have they become such an impactful part of the lives of countless people in different continents, of different cultures and religions? Although there are many depictions of mermaids depending on the region or era they are being described, there is a generally agreed upon imagery by the masses. In “The Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend” typical mermaids have graceful slender bodies and can be about 5’6 tall normally weighing between 110 to 115 pounds. Although the European mermaid is normally depicted as having white skin, mermaids have been known to have black, green blue, yellow or even turquoise skin. Sometimes the texture is that of fish scales over their entire bodies. Their hair is long and flowing and usually dark. At times, a mermaid's hands are

depicted as being webbed and although the face is like that of a human, their eyes tend to be a bit larger. The color can vary between black, blue or green. Their breasts and naval are usually exposed and many will have a mirror and comb in hand as expressed in Lord Tennyson's poem The Mermaid. Although not always, it is generally agreed upon that mermaids are beautiful creatures and for that reason, their looks can lure in anyone who gazes upon their face.

In addition to their mesmerizing looks, the mermaid has been given attributes that fascinate humans around the world. At times, she is a tempest, often luring storms and turbulent seas. In this aspect, sailors interpreted a mermaid's presence as bad luck. During the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church linked mermaids to sinful behavior – often associating them with vanity and lust – these personality traits often linked to women during those times as well. Christian churches would sometimes utilize the imagery of mermaids to warn people against sexual temptations. The sexual aspects of mermaids are often exaggerated, and many times linked as the cause of the destruction of men. But they weren't only lustful creatures of misfortunes. At times, they represented good fortune, levity and joy. In some African and Caribbean traditions, there were depictions of water deities healing the sick, as guides to those who were lost and those who brought wealth or fertility to humans.

Mami Wata

“Mami Wata as the Divine African Mother/God/dess has been worshiped and celebrated around the world for thousands of years. From Egypt as Isis, in Asia Minor (Ephesus) as Sibyl (Cybele), in Greece as Rhea, Hekate and Artemis, and in Rome as the great Magna Mater amongst her other holy names.”

-Mama Zogbé, “Mami Wata: From Myth to Divine Reality” (Alexander 138)

In African religions there were stories of a beautiful creature whose upper body was that of a dark haired, dark skinned woman who gracefully handled a snake but whose lower body remained unseen in images due to the belief that she concealed her secret there: a fish tail. “The ambiguous rendering of the cloth below the waist, reminiscent of fish scales, reinforces this idea” (Drewal, *Mermaids, Mirrors and Snake Charmers* 39). Though attributed to African practices and worship, Mami Wata has somewhat ambiguous beginnings and, at times, diverging creation myths or histories. Influences from “representations of ancient, indigenous African water spirits, European mermaids and snake charmers, Hindu gods and goddesses, and Christian and Muslim saints” (Drewal, *Mami Wata* 60) have all contributed to the construction of her image. Though we know little of the beginnings of Mami Wata, there are some theories that attempt to explain her beginnings and the spread of her popularity in Africa, the Diaspora, and eventually around the world.

One explanation of the creation of the imagery most closely associated with Mami Wata came by the way of a fish merchant, Carl G.C. Hagenbeck, whose entrepreneurial vision saw that people’s fascination in Hamburg, Germany during the 1840s was not only of bizarre creatures, but bizarre humans as well. After deciding to hire a hunter, named Breitwieser, to explore different continents and obtain creatures that would fascinate audiences he came to meet a performer (also a wife of Breitwieser) by the stage name of “Maladamatjuate”. “Maladamatjuate” would become one of the main attractions as the snake charmer act in Hagenbeck’s “People Show.” Shown in a photograph with long black hair parted down the middle, coins that adorned her curvaceous bodice, the lifting of one hand towards her face and, most importantly, the presence of a snake wrapped comfortably around her neck leaves “...little

doubt, therefore, that “Maladamatjaute” was the model for the image” eventually utilized for the depiction of Mami Wata in Africa and beyond. Though this image printed by the Adolph Friedlander Company was originally commissioned in the 1880’s and reprinted in the 1950’s, this does not mean to imply that these were the beginnings of Mami Wata’s existence as a deity or spirit in Africa. Even a basic knowledge of African religions can allow someone to understand the fluidity, vastness and ever-expanding nature of religions in the Motherland. Due to our exposure of Western religions (primarily Christianity) where the existence of Heaven and Hell (and at times purgatory) encompass the understanding of any realms ‘beyond’ that of Earth, in so-called pagan religions, the realms that exist in the ‘beyond’ are extraordinarily complex. Some scholars argue that they may also be more developed and familiar than its Western counterpart. As expressed in Benjamin C. Ray’s “African Religions: An Overview.”:

At the theological level, African religions contain both monotheistic and polytheistic principles. The concept of a supreme God is widely known in tropical Africa and existed before the coming of Christianity and Islam. The idea of a supreme God expresses the element of ultimacy, fate, and destiny, which is part of most African religions. ...In contrast to the invisibility and remoteness of the supreme God, the lesser gods and the ancestor spirits, which often serve as the supreme being's intermediaries, are constantly involved in daily affairs. Their many shrines, images, and priesthoods make them highly visible and important features of traditional life. They are sources of both protection and harm, depending upon how faithfully they are served. People regularly attend their shrines to pray, receive advice, and make offerings, usually in the form of animal sacrifice. (Ray 2005, 84)

In their understanding of the spirits and deities that ruled the many facets of life, nature and its elements, the Earth and the Universe, Africans (particularly from West Africa) had a

conceptualization of water deities similar to and of Mami Wata. Interestingly enough, although Mami Wata is thought of as a “single deity, “Mami Wata” [can refer] to a pantheon of African water deities as well; these deities are part of Africa’s ancient spiritual belief system, which was matriarchal [in certain aspects] like those in many other areas throughout the world prior to the ascent of the patriarchal religious structures typically embraced today” (Alexander 138). Though the idea that matriarchal and patriarchal societies are unable to coexist is commonly held, it is important to note that elements from both can be found in societies at any given time. Also important to note is that the introduction of the image of the mermaid by Europeans does not equate to the introduction or creation of the deity herself; it merely suggests that Africans may have borrowed the imagery brought by Europeans (and many other cultures) and made it their own. Though, at times, they did incorporate the European imagery as a sign of wealth or the existence of realms in the ‘beyond’, the depictions were purely of African descent. No matter the influences of European or Hindu culture, Mami Wata was, is and will continue to be of Africa. As stated by Henry John Drewal in “Mami Wata: Arts for Water Spirits in Africa and Its Diasporas”:

...Much textual and visual evidence indicates that the concept of Mami Wata, if not her name, originated long before the massive dispersal of Africans to the Americas (from the sixteenth to nineteenth century) and the colonial era (1900-1957). The antiquity and prevalence of indigenous African beliefs in water Deities, widely imaged as hybrid human-aquatic creatures, served as a basis to understand and translate European mermaid myths and images into African ones from the first momentous Euro-African contacts in the fifteenth century. (Drewal Mami Wata 66)

But what is it about Mami Wata that has intrigued people across the globe? As described above, Mami Wata's appearance is not only intriguing but also mesmerizing. Most depictions of this deity portray her as a copper-skinned woman with thick, wavy black hair parted down its center. She often wears bright colored clothing, gypsy-like in style with coins draping from her voluptuous body upon her waist. Upon her shoulders, she confidently holds a large snake; in some images she holds the snake with both hands while another slithers up her torso. Her facial expression bears resemblance to Mona Lisa – a bit austere, serious and yet, if one looks closely enough, a slight sly smile can be seen. Her large, almond shape brown, sometimes hazel eyes, pierce into anyone who looks her way. In some illustrations she holds a comb and a mirror gazing admiringly into it as she fixes her hair. Much like the mermaid, the intrigue of Mami Wata inspires both fear and devotion from her believers and those who follow her in religion.

Yemaya

“Yemaya reminds us that even the worst catastrophes can be endured and that, with her help, we can learn to negotiate the ebbs and flows of change in our lives with her wisdom, courage, and grace.”

-Sharon Turnbull, author of Goddess Gift (Alexander 141)

Yemaya is one of the most popular and beloved Orisha by those who practice Santería or any traditional West African religion. She is the mother of life and of all the Orishas. She is the ruler of the seas and represents the ocean as a fundamental stream of life. Her punishments are harsh, and anger is terrible but when evoked, is deemed as justified. She is categorized as one of the Orishas that represent maternity and maternal love. Yemaya is known as Yemoja in Yorubaland, which means “mother of fish”. It is said that Yemaya is the “Hispanicized spelling

of the Yoruba “Yemoja”, a diminished form of the phrase “yeye omo eja” meaning “mother of the children of fishes”. She is also referred to as Olodo meaning “Owner of Rivers” as a praise name. In Brazil, she is referred to as Iemanja (Canizares 2).

In Africa and the Diaspora, the stories and teachings of Orisha’s were shared in the form of Patakís. These stories are of significance because it is how humans learn about the different personalities and aspects of Orisha’s. It is also how they learn lessons – each Patakí has a moral, lesson, or discusses situations that are relatable to humans. In a Patakí of Yemaya that explains the creation of the Earth, it states that in the beginning there was only fire, rocks and lava that existed. Because of this, Olofi, the Almighty, decided to create clouds that would bring rain. As the fires were put out, the waters filled the gigantic crevices that were left behind. It is in these crevices that Olokun - the depths of the ocean – was formed. Everyone feared Olokun’s terrible nature; but because of the duality of the ocean, the existence of good was also present. The waters that touched the edges near the water gave life to plants, animals and humans. This goodness is Yemaya, mother of the waters. Out of Yemaya came life in many forms: rivers, Orishas and anything that sustains and lives on Earth (Arostegui 241).

In yet another Patakí, Yemaya’s intelligence, cunning, and powers are described. This is one of the stories that has been shared, particularly in Cuba, for hundreds of years. Yemaya was the wife of a great Diviner, Orunla. As he grew in popularity, her frustrations grew. She was fascinated with learning and had yearned to be able to divine with cowry shells. Because she was the mother of the seas, she felt that she had a right to the practice. The cowry shells used came of the sea and she was the one that collected them and gave them to her husband; why shouldn’t she

be able to utilize them herself? Orunla was a very traditional husband and did not want his wife to work. He denied her the right to learn and develop the gift of divination. Not heeding her husband's instructions, she would sneak into the room when Orunla was divining. He would throw the shells on the ground and then depending on the patterns created and whether they fell facing upward or downward, he would interpret the messages. Yemaya would quietly watch and began memorizing what each pattern meant. She also memorized the chants, songs and incantations that went along with each throw of the shells. With the help of Eshu, the god of choices, she learned all of the secrets of dilogun behind her husband's back. When Orunla went on an extended trip out of town, she let people know that she was available for consultations. Her gift was undeniable and soon her clientele grew bigger than her husbands! She was so successful that clients of Orunla would wait until he went out of town to go see Yemaya for divination. As time passed, Orunla began noticing that although his business had slowed down due to seeing less clients, that the economic situation of their household flourished. He began to suspect that her wife was cheating on him, or worse, prostituting herself to earn extra income. To find out what was going on, he said he was going out of town but disguised himself and came back later that day. When he arrived at his house, he saw a long line of people – many of which were his former customers. When he asked someone what was going on, they informed him that they were here to see Yemaya; That she was an even better diviner than Orunla. He held his fury and preceded to wait until it was his turn. When he entered, Yemaya did not recognize him. When she threw the shells, they all landed face up – something that rarely happened and that was a trademark of Orunla. She quickly realized he was the one sitting in front of her. Afraid of his temper, Yemaya ran as fast as she could. She sought refuge on a beach where a group of

homosexual men were frolicking in the water. Orunla, who was a bit homophobic, refused to go near them but demanded that they give up Yemaya. When they resisted he went back home. Yemaya thanked the men for what they had done and declared that she would be the protector and champion of Gay men (to this day, Gay men have a special love for Yemaya because of this incident). When she finally went back home, Orunla had cooled off but gave her an ultimatum: either she stopped divining, or they would have to divorce. With great sadness, Yemaya opted to divorce her husband to not give up her dream of becoming a diviner. She truly loved him but wanted to realize her dreams. Orunla was so upset that he vowed never to use the cowry shells again. Yemaya continued to be a great diviner and even went on to teach others the gift (Canizares 8-12).

Patakí's such as these illustrate her fierceness and determination as a woman. It is said that "strong-willed, independent women are often daughters of Yemaya. Children of Yemaya tend to be nurturing and selfless, yet also haughty and of regal bearing. They hold grudges. Children of Yemaya love luxury and can be overly observant of hierarchical structures" (Canizares 19). Although Yemaya is often portrayed as a loving, mother figure her fierceness is widely known. Once again, believers of Yemaya can be filled with both fear and devotion to this powerful deity much like the mermaid and Mami Wata. Those who honor or are children of Yemaya wear a necklace with a pattern of seven dark blue beads followed by seven clear beads. A non-initiate to the religion of Santería can honor her by creating an alter that contains sand, shells and anything that resembles or comes from the ocean. At times, a glass bowl with water dyed blue can also be present. Yemaya was synchronized with the Catholic saint the Virgin of Regla. Her feast day is September 7th, although some lineages celebrate her on September 12th.

Her color is blue, and her number is 7 (Canizares 16).

Descriptions of Yemaya's appearance are vast but unconfirmed. When she is represented by the Virgen of Regla, it is usually as a Black woman. Her appearance is similar to that of an Afrikan deity from Benin or Yorubaland. Many times, she is depicted as a beautiful woman with long hair emerging from the ocean. Her hair covers her breasts and she can be adorned with jewelry. Some of the imagery only shows the upper half of her body – this has led many to believe that she, like Mami Wata, is hiding her fish tail. Other depictions of Yemaya show her as a beautiful fair skinned or copper skinned mermaid. Just as the traditional mermaid, she has long flowing hair, clam shells for a top and a scaled fish tail. Her interpretations as a deity are as fluid as the waters of the sea that she governs. Again, due to her close association to waters, the ocean and of Olokun – Yemaya's imagery has been and continues to be depicted as a mermaid. Though it does mention of this physical manifestation of Olokun, there are either no Pataki's to confirm this or they are just not known yet of Yemaya's appearance. When speaking to Mercedes Molina, a Spiritualist/Santera from East Harlem, she expressed,

Sometimes it is easier for humans to conceptualize aspects of religion, or anything for that matter, which we don't comprehend with imagery, descriptions or traits of concepts or beings that we do understand. This does not mean that one is the other. There are times we cannot take spiritual teachings literally and other times when we must. The distinction happens on a personal level depending on what the need of that person is at that moment in time. Yemaya is not a mermaid, but to attempt to better understand her essence, humans have attached the imagery of the mermaid – all for their sake, not for a portrayal of reality (Molina 2018).

While oral traditions may be less common in modern Western civilization, it is an error to believe that it should be categorized at a lower level than information found in written texts. It can be argued that oral histories are as capable of being as reliable as written texts; it can also be argued that oral histories are not less likely to be as well preserved as texts. In order to conquer a nation or ethnic group without violating one's own sense of morality and humanity, the dehumanization of the 'other' must occur. In discussing oral traditions, Joel E. Tishken states,

The neglect of orally transmitted religions goes hand-in-hand with the denigration of certain regions and cultures of the world. Native Americans, Africans and Oceanians, while once primarily (but not exclusively) nonliterate, have historically also been the cultures most deprecated by Western scholarship. Literacy has been used in the past as a measuring stick to evaluate a civilization's level of sophistication. However, as many scholars have gone to great lengths to illustrate, while oral traditions are certainly different from written texts, they are not inherently inferior (310).

Despite uncertainties about this great deity, her popularity is immense. She is the epitome of how a queen should behave. She is regal but not arrogant, has beautiful garments and adornments but is not gaudy, she is strong but not strident. Her motherly appeal is far reaching. In his book, *Yemaya: Santería and the Queen of the Seven Seas*, Baba Raul Canizares explains,

Along with Obatala, Shango, Oshun, and Oya, Yemaya is one of the most commonly "seated" Orisha in Cuban Santería. Although no formal surveys have been conducted to determine what percentage of all Santeros are priests and priestesses of Yemaya, I wouldn't be surprised if it were twenty-five percent or more. Yemaya's dignified demeanor and motherly warmth gives comfort and solace to all Santería practitioners. Her place as a queen in her own right makes her one of the most important members of Santería's Celestial Court (27).

Maidens of the Sea

European Mermaids, Mami Wata and Yemaya have all made significant contributions to a vast amount of cultures, arts, literature and religions around the world. Their existence and presence have provided blessings, good fortune and inspiration to many. Depending of the region or culture of a people they may claim that these three entities are actually one; others may claim that one was the inspiration for the others; while yet others may say that they are three completely separate and unique beings. Regardless of what the truth may be, it cannot be denied that they have many similarities and attributes.

European mermaids and Mami Wata have a similarity that they do not share with Yemaya – they can be androgynous. Depending on the time period or culture in which they are being described they can be represented as either male, female or a combination of both. Another unique similarity between these two is that they may not be representative of one being or deity, but rather a host of beings or deities. Lastly, although Yemaya can be provoked, European Mermaids and Mami Wata are more known for the existence of a dark side to them. Some myths or tales depict them both as purely evil beings that bring misfortune to any who provoke them and are almost always the demise of men.

On the other hand, there are qualities that Mami Wata and Yemaya share that are completely different than that of the European Mermaid. First and foremost, Mami Wata and Yemaya both existed and were worshipped as deities long before the introduction of European Mermaid imagery by explorers and colonizers. While the convergence of cultures during the age of exploration did occur, their existence had been known before any contact with Europeans had been made. Both Mami Wata and Yemaya are also often depicted with bronzed, copper or dark skin – even if in the likeness of the European Mermaid. Their hair is often dark, curly, and wild.

Another similarity between the two is that they both share qualities that exemplify motherhood, nurturing and love. Some attribute both deities to love and fertility often building alters, shrines or engaging in ceremonies that will gain them favor in what they desire.

Mermaids, Mami Wata and Yemaya can all represent the power of femininity, beauty, and elegance. In modern times, they can be associated with feminism and feminists' movements. Although the existence of all three precede the term “feminist,” it is their personalities and powers that encourage the association between them and the term. While they are often depicted as being motherly and gentle, it is known to many that their patience and tempers should not be tested. As compassionate as they can be, at times, all three have also been shown as cold, fierce warriors who demand respect and will ensure they obtain it at any cost. It is often said of all three entities that they are as powerful, elusive, beautiful, calm and turbulent as the ocean itself. Again, it must be stated that they all command fear and devotion from those who believe in them.

In the end, it is of no concern of who came first, or which influenced the others. It is clear that the emergence of half-human, half-aquatic beings were being discovered, seen and revered in several continents during similar eras – some without ever having any contact with the others. The mystique and lure of these fascinating creatures has been experienced by humans around the globe. But why the fascination? How is it that these stories have survived and have continued to thrive in popular culture today? In her book *Mermaids: The Myths, Legends & Lore* Skye Alexander beautifully states,

We may also be connected to mermaids in a physical way as well. Science tells us that mermaids' oceanic home is also the source of human life – we all started out as aquatic

creatures eons ago. As embryos, we developed from fish-like beings in the salty amniotic fluid of our mothers' wombs, in order to finally become Homo sapiens. If that's so, perhaps we share a similar ancestry with these mysterious and alluring water spirits. Maybe there's a bit of merfolk in all of us (23).

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