



January 2023

Mami Wata

John C. Lyden

University of Nebraska Omaha, johnclyden@gmail.com

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Recommended Citation

Lyden, John C. (2023) "Mami Wata," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 27: Iss. 1, Article 29.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol27/iss1/29>

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Mami Wata

Abstract

This is a film review of *Mami Wata* (2023), directed by C.J. "Fiery" Obasi.

Keywords

Indigenous religion, West Africa

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Author Notes

John Lyden is the Department Chair and Blizek Professor of Religious Studies at University of Nebraska Omaha. He has been the Editor of the *Journal of Religion & Film* since 2011. He is the author of *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (NYU Press), and the editor of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Film* and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture*. He also co-edited, with Ken Derry, *The Myth Awakens: Canon Conservatism, and Fan Reception of Star Wars* (Wipf and Stock 2018).



Mami Wata (2023), dir. C.J. “Fiery” Obasi

This is the first feature from a Nigerian filmmaker to appear at Sundance, and it is an excellent example of the ways in which West African films can enrich the festival. While many “Nollywood” films (produced by the Nigerian film industry) represent indigenous religion as backward or even Satanic in comparison with Islam or Christianity, this film presents a complex and nuanced portrait of the ways in which traditional African religion remains relevant to cultural identity and an important resource for the future.

Filmmaker Obasi first had the idea for this feature when he had a vision of the African goddess Mami Wata on a beach in West Africa, and he decided to update the traditional folklore about her. In his story, Mama Efe (Rita Edochie) is the aging intermediary with the goddess who can channel her power to healing for the village. Her powers are fading, however, as she proves unable to save some from illness and death, and there are those in the village who want to discard their traditional beliefs and turn to modern science and technology for medicine, hospitals, schools,

and electricity. Tribute is paid to Mama Efe which allows her and her family to live in relative opulence, and this is also resented by those who view it as exploitation. When an outsider named Jasper (Emeka Amakeze) arrives, he soon takes charge over a violent overthrow of Mama Efe which is at first accepted by the villagers due to the promise of modern medicine and schools. But after the rebels take the villagers' money to buy guns rather than to invest in schools or medicine, it becomes clear that they have no intention of helping the locals but are only interested in power as they continue to terrorize the village.

Mama Efe's daughter Zinwe (Uzoamaka Aniunoh) and her adopted daughter Prisca (Evelyne Ily Juhen) find themselves as targets of the new regime and must find a way to defend the village. Prisca in particular understands that there must be a compromise found between the traditional ways and modernity, as she embraces technology such as vaccines which Mama Efe opposes. Obasi noted in the Q and A session after the showing that his goal was to show that the choices for traditional religion and modern technology are not mutually exclusive, but rather that their traditions are a powerful resource for them that can safeguard their identity even while they adapt and accept the benefits of the modern world. At the same time, it is shown that those who promise modernity is the solution to all problems may have their own hegemonic agenda that prevents the benefits from flowing to the people, as indigenous people have repeatedly learned throughout history.

The film also represents the power of *Mami Wata* as real and no mere metaphor: in this way, the film is like another Sundance premier this year, the Chilean film *Sorcery* which shows the magic of the indigenous religion as a real and powerful resource for resistance.¹ This realistic representation of magic might be viewed as escapist by some, in the same way that religion has been called the "opiate of the people" since Marx, offering false hopes that cannot save the

oppressed. History is also full of examples of failed indigenous resistance where magic did not save them. But transcendent religious hopes have also inspired real action and resistance in this world that have made a difference, as those who believe in something higher are not always passive in the face of oppression: from Mahatma Gandhi to Martin Luther King, Jr., to Malcolm X, to Thích Nhất Hạnh, religion has been a force for social protest and change. I found this film significant in the way it showcased indigenous religion as a crucial resource for cultural identity in the modern world—in the same way that the land acknowledgment shown before every Sundance film this year indicates the ways in which indigenous people fight for the Earth and safeguarding it from exploitation and environmental degradation. Indigenous religions have long been viewed as “primitive” or outdated, with no relevance to modern life, and this view needs to be continually challenged with reminders of the value of these traditions as an ethical, religious, and political resource for the future. This film is a fine addition to the growing body of work that does just that.

¹ See my review of *Sorcery* in this issue, John C. Lyden, "Sorcery," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 27, issue 1. [Sorcery \(unomaha.edu\)](http://unomaha.edu)