

Mami Wata (2023, Nigeria/Benin, 107 min.) Written and Directed by C.J. “Fiery” cinematography by Lilis Soares; with Evelyne Ily (Prisca), Uzoamaka Aniunoh (Zinwe), Emeka Amakeze (Jasper), Rita Edochie (Mama Efe), Kelechi Udegbe (Jabi), Tough Bone (Ero), Tim Ebuka (Moussa), Sofiath Sanni (Alima), David Avincin Oparaeke (Ajah), Hidaya Ibrahim (Oli), Orianne Azangban (The Albino). In West African Pidgin English and Fon with English subtitles.

-- *Things are never as they appear . . .*

With the opening shot of *Mami Wata*, the viewer can see immediately why this film won the Special Jury Award for Cinematography at the Sundance Film Festival (to which it was the first Nigerian film ever to be invited) and then the Best Image and Best Décor awards at the Pan-African Film Festival (FESPACO). High-contrast black-and-white film has rarely been put to such good use, creating images that are both stunning and surreal, individuals made resplendent with intricate, glowing patterns on their black skins and clothing. The image of the young woman sitting on the beach, her face aglow with intricate, almost fluorescent painted decoration, staring at equally fluorescent pattern of the waves, sets a tone of mystery and timeless myth to the film to come. We will come back to the seashore again and again at moments throughout the film, gazing at moonlight reflected off the gentle dark waves, accompanied on the soundtrack by the regular sound of the surf.

The young woman here is Zinwe, daughter of Mama Efe, the Intermediary (Asai) between the people of the fictional seaside village of Iyi and the great sea goddess Mami Wata (more on Mami Wata below). We are soon introduced to Mama Efe and to Zinwe’s adopted sister, Prisca. People come to Mama Efe for guidance, for healing, and for connection to the goddess. Mama Efe is not the queen of the village, but the people treat her as such, bringing tribute to her in appreciation for everything that Mami Wata provides.

But some people—mainly men—are beginning to question Mama Efe’s power to heal and to guide, questioning the very existence of the goddess. Zinwe too is concerned that her mother’s power, or her willingness to use it, has diminished. Born to one day take her mother’s place as Asai, Zinwe takes matters into her own hands, stealing her mother’s totem bracelet of seashells, symbol of her connection with Mami Wata. She goes to the ocean to use it to communicate with the goddess but receives no response. Still, she refuses to return the totem or return home.

Meanwhile, her sister stands loyally by their mother, though she clearly disagrees with Mama Efe’s refusal to bend at all to the influence of new ways, particularly the Intermediary’s refusal to allow an outside doctor to vaccinate the children. Prisca is

well-liked by most, resented by some. The group of malcontents, led by Jabi, continue to grumble, though it's not clear that their complaints will ever go anywhere.

That changes when a man is washed ashore, near death, and is successfully nursed back to life by Prisca and Mama Efe. We learn that he, Jasper, was formerly part of a rebel army (in fact, he may have been a rebel leader), but his motives and allegiances are murky. He will soon form a relationship with Prisca and also with Jabi and the malcontents.

And nothing will be the same for Iyi.

I've always been an advocate that tradition shouldn't be defined as backwardness. Just like modernity isn't always positive and doesn't necessarily equal progress. Those were the two opposites that are at war in the entire film. It has a conclusion that elevates the conversation about balance: How do we find harmony? And it tries to give an answer, because I don't really believe in, 'Go find the answer yourself.' You might agree, you might not. I think that conversation is healthy. But as a filmmaker, I believe that I have a responsibility to try and offer some kind of an answer.

--C.J. Fiery Obasi, CNN Interview:

<https://www.cnn.com/style/article/mami-wata-film-cj-fiery-obasi-sundance-spc-intl/index.html>

As the above quote from the director makes clear, *Mami Wata* is another African film built around the conflict between tradition and modernity and the effort to reconcile the two. The conflict often plays out as a generational struggle. In this film, the theme is embodied in the three central women characters in the film: Mama Efe, Zinwe, and Prisca. Mama Efe here represents the older generation of tradition, Zinwe and Prisca two manifestations of the younger. The dynamic of the narrative and the development of the two sisters provides Fiery Obasi's take on the theme.

While both Zinwe and Prisca evolve over the course of the film, Jasper, the outside intruder, remains a somewhat ambiguous figure. He brings outside-world negativity into the village and seems unable to escape the legacy and inclinations of his past. Unlike every other resident of Iyi, he never adorns himself with painted face patterns. He influences others, but never (fortunately) becomes one with them.

While the film certainly plays with the conventional struggle between tradition and modernity, it does so in a very unconventional way, through a striking, very memorable style. It blends the structure of mythical storytelling with elements of contemporary life, the totemic with the everyday. When we see Prisca, her face glowing with those striking white patterns, riding her motorcycle or smoking a cigarette, it's shocking, even

disconcerting, an unexpected collision of worlds. It's not surprising that the director is part of a group that calls itself "Surreal16" (more on that in the Director's Bio below). As is characteristic of Surrealist art and film, *Mami Wata* presents us with unexpected collisions between everyday reality and the reality of dream.

FROM THE PRESS PACKET: DIRECTOR STATEMENT

I grew up in a large family with women – from my mother, two elder sisters (now late, and to whom the film is dedicated), cousins, aunties and countless relatives taking care of me. As you would imagine, I grew up having a very high opinion and respect for women. In fact, for the longest time I didn't realize that it was a thing not to have a high regard for women, because I just wasn't built that way. Then, as I grew into adulthood and my love for cinema grew along with it, I started to become more aware of how the women I knew – women who were in the forefront of things, running homes, offices, business, and even governments in city and rural life were hardly represented visually. I could never relate in any way to most of the depictions of the African women I see on TV or film; characters who are either hyper-sexualized or caricature one-dimensional beings. This problem created the major intent for writing *Mami Wata*. In creating Zinwe, Prisca, Mama Efe and making them the heart of the story, I wanted to show multi-dimensional women with various strengths, weaknesses, intellect and skill. The women I know. Real African women. I wanted to explore a comradeship between two women who encounter great loss - the loss of a mother, and the loss of self. They are different women in age, strength, and personality who must first find faith in each other, before they can find faith in the invisible. And as a supernatural tale of loyalty and sisterhood, the story is grounded in the very real emotions of love, fear, hate, and pain.

I once walked into a potential investor's office – someone who had indicated interest in funding a movie of mine, but as soon as I said "Mami Wata" she quickly blurted out "Holy Ghost Fire! Blood of Jesus" binding and casting me, before I could utter a word. This has largely been our experience with *Mami Wata* in Nigeria. It is almost a taboo word to be uttered.

My country Nigeria is an extremely corrupt country with many scars from decades of civil war, ethnic bigotry, terrorism and government looting. Also, this is a country that has fully embraced Western Religion (Christianity) as well as Islam. So not only do you have a country full of poor masses, but also... ..one divided along the lines of ethnicity, social class and religion. This is in a way unique, because even though Nigeria has a rich cultural heritage and traditional spirituality amongst her 370 or so ethnic groups and 500 languages – these beliefs are largely eroded by Christianity and Islam – and the old ways are now considered evil and demonic. Also, despite the proliferation of religion across the nation, corruption and poverty still prevails. So I asked myself, were the old

ways better? My full intent is to pose this question to the audience in *Mami Wata*, and perhaps through the story of Iyi village, show that a people can be vibrant, prosperous, beautiful and peaceful by themselves, without an external hand, as many ancient civilizations across the world have proven to be for thousands of years, but as soon as they abandon who they truly are, they plunge deeper into darkness. I think there is a commentary for every human in this as well, to perhaps ponder who they really are; and in their own way find a path back to Mother Nature, just as Zinwe found her path back to Mami Wata.

Mami Wata is a popular West African mythology. And when the vision of Mami Wata hit me in January 2016, I could see this glorious image of the goddess standing by the Ocean's shores, in all her glory and beauty as she calls for her long lost child, who must return to her. I saw this image in deeply contrasted monochrome, and knew exactly the story I wanted to tell! I wanted to tell the story of a beautiful village. I wanted to talk about a powerful Goddess, who gave her daughter as a gift to a people. I wanted to talk about destiny and human strength. As a kid when I found my love for World Cinema growing in leaps and bounds as I experienced with relish, cinema from Asia, Europe, South America washing over me, I found that genre cinema spoke volumes to me in a special way, as I drew imaginary parallels with those stories within the African context.

I love the great African cinema works of Sembene, Diop, Ouédraogo – and some of these works have been celebrated in great festivals from Cannes, Berlin etc.....and have become the go-to reference and definition for what is African cinema anywhere scholarly discussions about African cinema has come up, and they inspire me endlessly. But I have often asked, why unlike other cinema cultures we have not broadened our storytelling into genre filmmaking despite the boundless and inherent potential within our culture to do so. I come from a country that is limited in its scope of cinema and that in itself motivates me to innovate, but also to a larger degree coming from Africa, I feel like there's a huge space in our storytelling, waiting to be explored.

And that space can be explored to the fullest potential through genre film. Genre film, I sense allows for stories to travel beyond just festivals and art film circuits and become accessible to global audiences. I really wanted to make a visually sensual fantasy film about our spirituality, grounded in universal themes and exploring genre through ancient belief systems. African cinema has come a long way, but for us to take African cinema to the next level, and in some ways, perhaps create a new cinema – I believe we must do so through genre – however, genre rooted in culture and spirituality.

And *Mami Wata* for me encapsulates the need to see that new kind of African cinema. Mami Wata is the name of the mermaid goddess of West Africa. Beyond Africa, in the Diaspora, the Americas and the Caribbean, she is known as a goddess of fertility and prosperity to those who worship and pay homage to her. The blessings of Mami Wata

are channeled through a medium or Intermediary to her worshippers, most of whom are women. West African women have been known to enjoy the blessing of the fruit of the womb and enterprise, and men who found favour with her have been known to enjoy great prosperity. In these times of global reawakening for people of African descent, conversations around African spirituality has come to the fore, and become even more relevant to dark people around the world, as we seek to assert our true identity in a world that seeks to take that away from us. Now is the time to take the reins of our narrative, and steer our stories, creating new visions, and charting new cinematic possibilities - and *Mami Wata* represents all of these things, and more.

FROM THE PRESS PACKET: DIRECTOR BIO

C.J. Obasi aka Fiery, or The Fiery One - grew up in Owerri, South-Eastern Nigeria, watching Hammer House horror films and reading Stephen King novels. As a child, he developed a knack for drawing based on all his favorite movies and superheroes at the time. Comics which he would sell to his peers much to their delight. Much later on in life, he would put aside his degree in Computer Science from the University of Nigeria (UNN) to launch into filmmaking, full time.

Obasi, also called "Fiery" or "The Fiery One" premiered his debut feature "OJUJU" - a zero budget film at Africa International Film Festival (AFRIFF) 2014, where it won the award for "Best Nigerian Film". OJUJU has screened in over 40 film Festivals, receiving major acclaim from the likes of *Screen Anarchy*, *IndieWire*, & *The Hollywood Reporter*. OJUJU has gone on to become a cult classic, being listed among several "Best Zombie Film" of all-time list, and more recently been optioned by a major Hollywood studio for series adaptation. Obasi's sophomore feature film "O-Town", a crime thriller arthouse piece, screened at AFRIFF 2015 and the 2016 Gothenburg Film Festival, Sweden. It was nominated for several awards, including the Screen Nation Awards, UK, and the Africa Movie Academy Awards (AMAA). Obasi's short film "Hello, Rain" based on *Hello, Moto* by world-renowned author Nnedi Okorafor had its world premiere at the Oscar-qualifying International Competition of the Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen in May 2018, and has gone on to screen in over 50 festivals, including a headline screening at Southbank Centre in London, Fantasia Film Festival where it won the Special Mention of the Jury prize and BFI London Film Festival where it was nominated for the Short Film Award. *Hello, Rain* has since been featured on CNN and BBC for its strides in African-futurism and fantasy. In 2019, Obasi served as a jury member at the 40th Durban International Film Festival.

Obasi co-founded the new wave cinema collective, Surreal16 with filmmakers Abba T. Makama and Michael Omonua. Together they have produced two anthology projects – *Visions* (2017), a 3-part anthology short film exploring dreams and visions, as well as

Juju Stories (2021), a 3-part anthology feature film exploring urban and mythical tales in contemporary Lagos, Nigeria. *Juju Stories* world premiered in the main competition of Locarno Film Festival, and won the Boccalino D'oro Award for Best Film, awarded by the Swiss Independent Critics.

Juju Stories has since screened in over 20 film festivals, including the BFI London Film Festival, Seattle Film Festival, FESPACO, Indie Memphis and AFRIFF, where it won Best Director(s) Award for the trio of directors. *Juju Stories* was released theatrically by CanalOlympia across 12 African countries on October 29, 2021, and across Nigeria in January 21 by distribution giant, FilmOne. *Juju Stories* has been acquired by Amazon Prime Video and was released globally on their platform on October 7, 2022.

Obasi's latest feature project is *Mami Wata* – a female-driven black and white fantasy film developed with Ouaga Film Lab (Burkina Faso), Le Groupe Ouest's Less is More (Poland, Romand, and France), EAVE (Luxembourg, Serbia and Germany) and Durban FilmMart (South Africa). Filmed entirely in Benin Republic with an international cast and crew from more than seven countries in Africa, the Americas and Europe, *Mami Wata* was selected for Final Cut Workshop in Venice Film Festival 2021, and received post-production funding from Les Ateliers Yennenga in FESPACO sponsored by the Red Sea Film Fund, as well as the Swiss Fund Visions Sud Est. *Mami Wata* world premiered to rave reviews in the World Cinema Dramatic Competition of Sundance Film Festival 2023 where it won the Special Jury Award for Cinematography, as well as in FESPACO (the oldest film festival in Africa), where it won the Best Image, Best Décor and the African Critics Prize. The film premiered at the [2023 Sundance Film Festival](#).

The Tradition of Mami Wata

From the National Gallery of African Art's Mami Wata Exhibit, 2009:

<https://africa.si.edu/exhibits/mamiwata/intro.html>

At once beautiful, protective, seductive, and dangerous, the water spirit Mami Wata (Mother Water) is celebrated throughout much of Africa and the African Atlantic. A rich array of arts surrounds her, as well as a host of other aquatic spirits--all honoring the essential, sacred nature of water. Mami Wata is often portrayed as a mermaid, a snake charmer, or a combination of both. She is widely believed to have "overseas" origins, and her depictions have been profoundly influenced by representations of ancient, indigenous African water spirits, European mermaids, Hindu gods and goddesses, and Christian and Muslim saints. She is not only sexy, jealous, and beguiling but also exists in the plural, as the mami watas and papi watas who comprise part of the vast and uncountable "school" of African water spirits.

Mami Wata's presence is pervasive partly because she can bring good fortune in the form of money. As a "capitalist" deity par excellence, her persona developed between the fifteenth and twentieth centuries, the era of growing trade between Africa and the rest of the world. Her very name, which may be translated as "Mother Water," is pidgin English, a language developed to facilitate trade. Countless enslaved Africans forcibly brought to the Americas as part of this "trade" carried with them their beliefs, practices, and arts honoring water spirits such as Mami Wata. Reestablished, revisualized, and revitalized in the African Atlantic, Mami Wata emerged in new communities and under different guises, among them Lasirèn, Yemanjá, Santa Marta la Dominadora, and Oxum. African--based faiths honoring these manifestations of Mami Wata continue to flourish in communities throughout the Americas, including Haiti, Brazil, and the Dominican Republic. . . .

Mami Wata is a complex symbol with so many resonances that she feeds the imagination, generating, rather than limiting, meanings and significances. She is at once a nurturing mother; sexy mama; provider of riches; healer of physical and spiritual ills; and embodiment of dangers and desires, risks and challenges, dreams and aspirations, fears and forebodings. People are attracted to the seemingly endless possibilities she represents and, at the same time, frightened by her destructive potential. She inspires a vast array of emotions, attitudes, and actions among those who worship her, fear her, study her, and create works of art about her.

Often appearing with the head and torso of a woman and the tail of a fish, Mami Wata straddles earth and water, culture and nature. She may also take the form of a snake charmer, sometimes in combination with her mermaid attributes and sometimes separate from them. She can exist in the form of indigenous African water spirits known as mami watas and papi watas or assume aspects of a Hindu deity or a Christian saint without sacrificing her identity.

In addition to their continually transforming histories of influence in Africa and its diasporas, Mami Wata and other African and African Atlantic water spirits have gained an even wider audience, as well as new meanings and import, by capturing the imaginations of a number of contemporary artists. This section of the exhibition features the work of several artists--men and women from Africa, Europe, North America, and the Caribbean--who have found in Mami Wata and her cohorts a highly intriguing subject matter. Even though they may not worship her, Mami Wata has entered the dreams and waking hours of these artists, seducing them into creating extraordinary works that open our eyes, minds, and imaginations to wonderful possibilities. The unique understandings and involvements of contemporary artists with water spirits also

allow them to employ Mami Wata and other underwater denizens to address issues of gender, race, morality, identity, economics, environment, and politics.

The Chapter Titles (given first in pidgin, then in English)

Mami Wata na the wata spirit wey dem day worship for West, Central and South Africa, dem even sabi am for anywhere wey Afrikan people dey for all dem America...

As plenty plenty time don pass, e get many things wey people don think say Mami Wata be. For Iyi, dem sabi pass everybody...

Till e reach now.

MAMI WATA is the water goddess worshiped and revered across West, Central and South Africa, and among the Afrikan diasporas of the Americas...

Over the centuries, there have been many assumptions about MAMI WATA. Fewer assumptions exist in the isolated village of Iyi...

Until now.

Zinwe, make we go house

Zinwe, let's go home

She no get power again.

She no longer has power.

E fit be say she don answer.

Maybe she has answered us.

If say Iyi na my land, e fit be your land too.

If Iyi is my land, then it can be yours as well...

No prayer fit change am.

No prayer can change it.

MAMI WATA wye una never take una eye see before

MAMI WATA, who you have never seen with your eyes...

Me...I day fear.

Me also, I'm afraid.

Blessing don die for Iyi.

Blessings have died in Iyi.

Dem deceive everybody for Iyi.

They deceived everyone in Iyi.

Make you dey fear woman.

You should be afraid of the Woman.

--Notes by Michael Dembrow