CARIBBEAN LEGENDS AND MONSTERS: THE TRANSMOGRIFICATION OF INDIGENOUS AND AFRICAN WOMEN IN CARIBBEAN FOLKLORE

Ana Regina Vázquez Barreto

A final research paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of:
Master of Arts in English Linguistics

December 2021

Department of English
College of Humanities
University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras Campus

Approved by:

Dr. Alma Simounet Bey	Dr. Melinda P. Maxwell Gibb
Reader	Reader

Dr. Nicholas G. Faraclas Photakis
Director

“The monster’s body is a cultural body”

Jeffrey Jeremy Cohen (1996) once proposed seven theses behind the imaginary construct of all monsters, his first thesis being, “The monster’s body is a cultural body.” With it, he explained that the conceptualization of a monster is “the embodiment of a certain cultural moment” (p. 4). Every culture has its monsters, manifesting the fears of its people into a physical body. To combat them, specific rituals, which are also established in a cultural moment, must be performed. Understanding the monster is vital to understanding a culture, for as Cohen puts it, “the *monstrum* is etymologically “that which reveals,” “that which warns”” (p. 4). Monsters can reveal many social anxieties internalized deeply in the cultural psyche, and it is only when we step into their lair and pull back the layers of their creation that we can appraise their cultural body—fear of the other, of death, of change. What Cohen’s thesis fails to mention is the plasticity of cultural fear, which ties into the ‘plastic’ nature of monsters. They can be born from anything, transmogrified from myths and legends, even unmade from the monstrous into something sublime.

Another of Cohen’s theses is that of “The monster that dwells at the gates of difference”—people of different sex, gender, ethnicity, religious belief, i.e., marginalized peoples, rejected by the dominant majority as unacceptable, undesirable, and frightening. “History itself becomes a monster,” says Cohen, “defeaturing, self-deconstructive, always in danger of exposing the sutures that bind its disparate elements into a single, unnatural body” (p. 9). In the Caribbean, there exists an extensive archive of monstrous beings: from sensual mermaids to killer sea monsters; to zombies and jumbies; to cannibal Caribs and mestizo she-devils. Not all these monsters originated in the Caribbean, though some were born in the multi-cultural contact that occurred between Africans, Europeans, Asians, and the Indigenous

population of the Americas during and after colonization. Some monsters were once not monsters at all, but beings both benevolent and malicious, who would be generationally transmogrified into terrible beings. Oral legends would be progressively removed from their historicity.

Our research is concerned with the role women play in the conception of monstrous creatures in the Caribbean. As Barbara Creed (2020) tells us, “all human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject” (p. 211). Folklore in the Caribbean is not exempt from the idea of the “monstrous-feminine.” Here, we explore several extraordinary tales wherein women and feminine figures are transformed to inspire fear, woe, and awe, as a result of the ‘plastic’ effect that occurs when different cultures are brought into contact. Among these female figures are the Mami Wata, Watramama, Mamadjo, La Llorona, María Lionza, la Diablesse, and the Soucouyant.

Before stepping into these folkloric traditions, however, it is important to first examine the origins of the monstrous-feminine in the Caribbean. As cultural bodies, sexism and misogyny play a big part in the development of both the horrific and sublime natures of these figures. Furthermore, we must not overlook the histories of African and Indigenous women before colonialization, and how their stories and myths were transmogrified with the advent of patriarchal, Christian, and capitalist colonialization.

Sexism and misogyny in Western Christian tradition

“Women are contentious, prideful, demanding, complaining, and foolish; they are uncontrollable, unstable, and unsatiable.” (Bloch, 1987, p. 3) According to Bloch, this is the

sentiment many Medieval European male writers held about women in general, whether poor, rich, beautiful, ugly, married or unmarried. Woman was blamed for being both rational and irrational, while man was made to be a "pimp" for speaking to one, or "castrato" for refusing to (p. 5).

Rosemary Radford Ruether (2014), who delved into the history of misogyny in Christian tradition, found that the philosophical arguments against women's rational abilities go as far back as Ancient Greece: "the Greek philosophical tradition, particularly Aristotle, which shaped early Christian views on this, believed that women lacked autonomous reason and were therefore inherently inferior and dependent on the male" (p. 84). Women as a sex were not believed to be as capable as men: they had no reason, and so could not participate in academic discourse to defend their points of view. Ruether goes on to expound on how the Christian tradition worsened the idea of women's inherent inferiority. Analyzing the words of Paul in his Letter to the Corinthians as well as those of Timothy, what emerges is a hierarchy where God is first, Man is second, and Woman is third (p. 84). Modern commentaries on these biblical passages often bring up the first sin against God, committed by the first woman, Eve, as something to hold against the entire female sex: "women are said to have been both created second after the male and also to have been guilty of originating humanity's fall into sin" (Ruether, p. 85).

The dichotomy that exists with Christian tradition with regard to women specifically, revolves around her spiritual ability to be redeemed in soul, while also laying emphasis on woman's physical capacity to bear children as both a fault and the sole purpose of her creation. Ruether writes, "the woman in her sexual body is not the image of God, but rather images the body as carnal and prone to sin. As female, even in the original creation of paradise, woman was created to be subject to the male in her sexual roles as wife and childbearer" (p. 85). Ruether

additionally tells us that this split view of the woman as a socially inferior, spiritually suspended, and physically subjugated creature is the basis of the dominant Western Christian tradition. It became women's role, to, as Ruether contends, "quietly and submissively [accept] her husband's rule over her, as well as that of other males in authority, even their harsh words and blows. […] This remains women's place in the Christian era" (p. 87).

Othered and oppressed, women have been depicted as creatures without reason and tainted by sin in Christian discourse. Therefore, to gain spiritual redemption, they must be made submissive, submit themselves to man as their ruler. This anti-feminine dogma accompanied the colonizing Europeans into the Caribbean, where they encountered the pluri-ethnic and pluri-cultural societies that they would forcibly subjugate, enslave and plunder, with the full blessing of the highest authorities in both the Catholic and Protestant churches.

The role of women in African society

Before European colonialization, women in West Africa held their own status and power that did not depend on men. Niara Sudarkasa (1986) writes, "They were queen-mothers; queen-sisters; princesses, chiefs and holders of other offices in towns and villages; occasional warriors; and, in one well known case, that of the Lovedu, the supreme monarch" (p. 91). Unlike the European women subjugated in Christian society, a woman in Africa could be seen occupying positions higher than those held by most other men. The concept of the innate inferiority of women did not exist in their non-Christian cultures; neither did the Aristotelian idea of rationality being the exclusive province of the male sex.

According to Sudarkasa's research on women's status in some indigenous West African societies, men and women play different social roles beyond childbearing. They organize

themselves into three basic kin groups where lineage, extended family, and conjugally based family could be determined, and where "African women have rights and responsibilities toward their kinsmen and kinswomen that are independent of males" (p. 95). Everyone in the community has obligations to one another, whether they are between men, between women, or between both sexes. The terms "husband" and "wife" bear different meaning in African societies. These meanings are tied to kinship responsibilities, as Sudarkasa notes, using an example from Yoruba society, "a husband refers to his spouse as 'wife'; a woman refers to her cowife as 'wife' or 'mate,' and […] female as well as male members of the lineage refer to the in-marrying spouses as their 'wives.'" (p. 96) Within both matrilineages and patrilineages, seniority, and not sex, is the main criterion for respect and deference.

African women have traditionally not been confined to the 'private domain,' as has been the case until very recently for most European women. Many Western researchers, however, tend to project European norms on West African societies. "In West Africa, the 'public domain' was not conceptualized as 'the world of men,'" (Sudarkasa, p. 99). Such distinctions as 'public' vs. 'private' domains are the result of the Platonic binaries that saturate the Western episteme, which insists on drawing artificial boundaries between social groups and their spheres of agency. This is not the case in West Africa, where social agency occurs within more complex and interconnected systems that defy reduction into oppositional binaries such as public and private.

Taking all this into consideration, it can be said that women in many pre-colonial West African societies were not confined to exclusive and rigid roles based on their sex or gender, but instead could play a range of complementary roles with men and other women. For example, as 'wives' women were not forced into a role of submission and deference to their husbands; instead, they could choose among a diverse set of interpretations of conjugal responsibilities,

sometimes even as wives to other women in “women-marriages”. Finally simplistic polarized dualities such as ‘public’ and ‘private’ or even ‘male’ and ‘female’ fail to account for the vast array of sexed and gendered performances in African societies.

The role of women in Indigenous Caribbean societies

Defining the role of women in ‘Taíno’ society is tricky, much like the indigenous designation ‘Taíno’ itself. Katheen Deegan (2004), in an article studying gender and class in indigenous social circles following Spanish conquest, writes that while the term ‘Taíno’ has been the traditional designation of the inhabitants of the Greater Antilles and Bahamas at the time of European arrival, “most researchers recognize that this usage inappropriately reduces the considerable diversity of social, political, and economic formations among these people” (p. 600). What we assume, following Deegan, is that “the Taínos were among the first group of indigenous American [people] to encounter and live with Europeans, beginning with the first voyage of Christopher Columbus in 1492 ….” (p. 598). Given that complex pluri-cultural and pluri-ethnic interrelations existed among indigenous Caribbean populations before colonialization, we must be on our guard not to let artificially imposed colonial ethnic distinctions and divisions, such as those between the Taíno and other local indigenous groups like the Caribs, become obstacles in our investigation of cultural bodies and cultural monsters (Amodio, 1991, p. 573). For this reason, in this paper we will refer to the plurality of indigenous groups—Taíno, Kalinago, Cariban, Waraoan, and so forth—that first encountered colonizers as “the Indigenous people of the Caribbean,’ though Deegan’s paper still classifies those of the Greater Antilles under the category ‘Taíno.’

What, then, was the role of women in these indigenous Caribbean societies? As Deegan writes, "although the paramount rulers among the Taíno were most often men, women could also be caciques (*cacicas*)" (p. 600). From the accounts of the *cacicas* that met and negotiated with the first European colonizers a few are named properly, like Yuiza of Puerto Rico, and Anacaona of La Hispaniola. They were considered the leaders of their communities, and recognized as mediators between the colonizers and the Indigenous peoples as well. They, like African women, could take up positions of power and responsibility over other men and women.

Not only could Indigenous women serve as *cacicas*; they were seen participating in all levels of the indigenous political hierarchy. Sex and gender roles were non-exclusive among the indigenous people of the Caribbean—from food production to crafting, to fighting and politics; "there are few documented social or economic functions that can be attributed exclusively to the domain of either men or women" (Deegan, p. 601). In short, indigenous women of the Caribbean: acted as leaders of their communities and as contact agents between the European invaders and the indigenous peoples; and they could participate in all domains of their community, as *cacicas,* nitanos, or naborias, alongside Indigenous men.

Comprehending the roles women have played in European, African and Indigenous societies is crucial to understanding how women have been envisioned in European, African, and Indigenous minds. It therefore becomes useful to consider how the female figures of indigenous and African legends, how female Indigenous and African historical figures such as Yuiza, Anacaona and Lovedu, as well as how Indigenous and African divinities came to be feminized, sexualized, and demonized after the invasion of the Caribbean by the Christian colonizers and enslavers. Given the Platonic-Aristotelian and Christian misogyny that underpin Western European culture and thinking, it should come as no surprise that wherever women may have

wielded any legitimate, normal, and natural power over men in Indigenous and African societies, these powers, and especially the women who exercise these powers were transmogrified into illegitimate, abnormal, and unnatural abominations under the Western colonial gaze. This is how the female figures examined in the present work underwent a systematic process of being rendered wicked and monstruous in the colonial imaginary. But the monstrous-feminine is not only the product of patriarchal discursive violence; other factors are also at play, such as the fear, trauma and alienation that have accompanied the hegemonic domination of the minds of the peoples of the colonial Caribbean. For example, the monstrous-feminine has become a convenient scapegoat which can be used to explain personal and collective misfortune and disaster in the region. Because "The monster's body is a cultural body," the monstrous-feminine has become and ever-changing and adaptive response to people's needs and anxieties. Cultural stories change and monsters change with them.

Mami Wata, Watramama and Mamadjo

With the transatlantic slave trade, millions of enslaved Africans were forcibly brought to the Americas. They were displaced from their kin, but not totally from their cultures, their languages, or their religions. They carried these with them to the American colonies, into a world that would irreversibly alter them. "To survive, they had to adapt quickly to the new labor and living conditions, a new physical environment, different surrounding cultures, and each other" (Van Stipriaan, 2008, p. 525). In the area of religion and spiritual practices, their enforced conversion to Christianity was particularly devastating, but the enslaved found resourceful ways to Africanize their practice of Christianity. "African-derived religions and systems of belief have been vilified […], often in response to a real or perceived threat to European cultural and

political dominance" (Anatol, 2015, p.xi). The gods they believed in would not be immune from the impacts of colonialism and enslavement, as is demonstrated by the case of Mami Wata.

In the Encyclopedia of African Religion, edited by Asante and Mazama (2009), Mami Wata stands for "a pantheon of water deities found primarily in the Vodun tradition practiced in Benin and Togo" (p. 404). The name is thought to derive from English *mommy* and *water,* although the words can be traced back to ancient Egypt, to *ma* or *mama* meaning "truth" or "wisdom," and *wati* for "water"; in some sub-Saharan languages, *wat* or *waat* means "woman" (p. 404). In its pantheon, Mami Wata could be represented by both male and female bodies, though regardless of their gender, they "are nonhuman and have never been human" (p. 404). Each Mami Wata bears a specific symbol, a color, a ceremony, a tattoo, an order, and a *danmi* or bead. Which hand wears the beads indicates whether it is a male spirit or a female spirit. Her colors are red and white, a duality which represents both violence and healing.

After the transatlantic voyages, many Africans were forced to work in swamp lands and coastal areas. Water became both a source of food and escape, and a source of trauma (Asante and Mazama, p. 405). This transformed the relationship devotees had with Mami Wata into cause for both celebration and fear. Numerous manifestations of water deities in the Caribbean took on different aspects and names: there was *Watramama* in Suriname and Guyana; *Mamadjo* in Grenada; *Yemanya/Yemaya* in Brazil and Cuba*; La Sirène*, *Erzulie*, and *Simbi* in Haiti; and *Lamanté* in Martinique (Asante and Mazama, p. 404). These deities' path through the Caribbean followed where their devotees went, and their stories generally converged into that of a feminine deity or goddess, given that in the colonial Americas, the oppositional binary 'male' vs. 'female' demanded that all religious figures be strictly gendered as one or the other. In contrast to the situation in West Africa, in the Western episteme, there is no possibility for anything in between

the two poles, both poles at the same time, or completely outside of the binary scheme of gendering (Rodríguez Montemoíño, 2019). In the following section, we focus primarily on the figures of Watramama and Mamadjo.

"In Suriname, the first mention of Mami Wata by name occurs in the 1740s, where the observer noted that if proper rituals were not performed, ["Watramama"] would harm her husband or child" (Asante and Mazama 2004, p. 405). Mami Wata in Suriname adopted a creolized identity, as accounted for in detail by Van Stipriaan (2008), as the indigenous people of the Americas came into early and frequent contact with Africans, and both worshiped water gods and spirits (p. 530). The indigenous people told stories of 'water people' who would knock over boats and drag people under water. Those who met Watramama described her as "one part fish, with the upper part that of a very handsome young woman, with beautiful, long, deep-black hair" (p. 533). Thus, the Watramama came to be, in the rivers of Suriname, "a fearful being, who was to be kept satisfied by all means" (p. 531).

Europeans themselves could have contributed to the imaginary of a fearsome fish-woman as well, with their stories of mermaids and sirens, as the attribute of the fish tail is not originally in the indigenous tale of water people nor in the original Mami Wata (Van Stipriaan, p. 539). Though iterations of Mami Wata in West Africa may also depict a half-fish woman wrapped around the waist by a snake, Asante and Mazama's encyclopedia claims this was the depiction of her as a specific deity, "[appearing] as a beautiful creature, half woman, half fish, with long hair and a light brown complexion, and she lives in an exquisite underwater world" (p. 404).

What we find interesting about Watramama and Mamadjo is how similar their descriptions are to this specific Mami Wata deity. Jane Beck (1975) collected and recounted some of the supernatural beliefs held by people in Barbados, through the testimonies of an

elderly man. Among these superstitions is the ‘mermaid.’ Blond haired, with a comb in hand to comb her hair. Beck details as follows:

> This creature is known as *Mamadjo,* thought to be a corruption of *Mama d’Eau,* “Mother of Water,” but which may also be a corruption of the Yoruba term, *Yemoja,* “Mother of Fishes,” an important water deity. Black Grenadians propitiate her four times a year with rum, unsalted rice, sheep, and fowl. The ceremony is performed in a traditional manner with drumming and dancing. In return, the mermaid blesses the crops with rain—all very reminiscent of the *Yemoja*-water-mother concept of African tradition. (p. 237)

This ‘creature,’ as Beck calls her, must be worshipped annually else her rage rain down on her followers, much like Watramama evoking fear in the hearts of Surinamese folk. Patrick Polk (1993) observes Shango rituals and practice in Grenada, and one of the accounts he shares is of a pilgrimage to Grant Etang, a water source sacred to Mamadjo, where Grenadian followers would sacrifice goats and fowls in exchange for rain, sorely needed for their crops of corn. Endless prayers would be addressed to *Mamadjo* during sacrifice, wherein African dance would last until daylight and the devotees would return, ceremony completed, to their homes (p. 75).

Through multi-cultural contact with Europeans and Indigenous peoples, and after the trauma endured by devotees of a waterborne passage into a life of enslavement, Mami Wata was transformed into a half-fish woman, no longer just an African deity, but shaped by a Caribbean landscape, to take residence in the waters that have both sustained and scarred her worshippers. The awe she provokes mirrors the terrors of her domain. Monsters often lie in perilous territories as inhabitants of worlds where humans cannot dwell. However, as time went on, the stories shifted again. The plasticity of monsters is that they are “the embodiment of a cultural moment”

(Cohen, 1996, p. 4), and culture in the Caribbean would become a constantly shifting beast of its own.

The Barbadian gentleman in Beck's documentation that had seen a mermaid, also recounts that he'd attempted to frighten her and take her comb, as he believed he would have been able to sell it back to her for money. The mermaid fled before she could drop her comb. This folkloric belief, drastically different to what we've previously mentioned of the wrathful mermaid, is yet another evolving interpretation of Mami Wata. The water goddess who awards blessings only after the performance of rituals transforms into a harmless and beautiful mermaid, a woman with riches to be plundered. Former plantation owner Willem Frederik van Lier affords us with another story of a wealthy mermaid. As an amateur ethnographer of Afro-Surinamese culture, he published works about the Surinamese creature, saying that, "generally […] the water spirit was heard laughing cheerfully and no one ever mentioned that a human being was harmed by her" (p. 534). To the contrary, it is believed that she protected people from drowning by taking them into her underwater palace adorned with gold and diamonds. This is not the same terrible being who elsewhere needed to be kept satisfied with sacrifice and ceremony. This is a creature that can be adored for her beauty and sacked of her treasure.

In other areas of Afro-Surinamese folklore, Watramama would still punish behavior that did not please her, usually in oral tradition, and especially in cases where she featured in Anansi stories (Van Stipriaan, p. 535). It is not known when Watramama earned the reputation that she could have her wealth stolen or gifted, only that it is the most common story nowadays, very unlike her early 18th and 19th century sources. "Today, the story goes that when Watramama loses her golden comb and comes to the finder at night to claim it, the finder may ask of her anything he wants; his desires will be gratified punctually" (Van Stipriaan, pp. 535-36), much as

was the case with the Mamadjo story in Grenada, where a Barbadian gentleman sought to claim Mamadjo's comb in exchange for riches. In the case of Watramama in Suriname, however, the granting of riches to any particular man comes at a price: he must become her ever-faithful husband.

According to Alex Van Stipriaan, who documented the history of Watramama in Suriname, the transformation from fearsome, frightening water deity to a beautiful and frivolous mermaid may be in part due to the abolition of slavery in 1863, as this shift seems to have taken place thereafter. Former slaves could now leave rural districts and become involved in the economy as laborers, people who could earn their own money. To quote Van Stipriaan, "a little luck in this respect was quite welcome, particularly if luck could be helped a bit by marking offerings" (p. 536). For Afro-Surinamese, urbanization also separated them from the omnipresent threat of water. The role of the 'urbanized' Watramama changed with her people, as she continues to change in different contexts, as protector, provider, or punisher.

Alongside European, African and indigenous influences, we must consider the impact of Asian immigration to the Caribbean as well (Van Stipriaan, p. 536) on these powerful water spirits, which might have played a role in altering her monstrous manifestations into something less frightening and more docile. It can be expected that the figure of Mami Wata will continue to change in the Caribbean as her worshippers also continue to change.

Indigenous legends and La Llorona

The story of La Llorona is one that encompasses not only the Caribbean, but also significant portions of Latin America as well. The transmogrification of indigenous female ceremonial and folkloric figures into La Llorona is a process echoed in the transmogrification of

indigenous female historical figures, such as Yuiza, Anacaona and other *cacicas*. Andrea Yambot Lugo (2007) writes for *El Adoquín Times* that during colonial times, Yuiza, an Indigenous *cacica*, was among the first *caciques* of Puerto Rico who met with the arriving conquistadors (paras. 1). A widow, she ruled after her husband's passing. Her baptismal name was said to have been Luisa, the antecedent to the denomination of the Puerto Rican town of Loíza. She served as mediator and translator between the Europeans and the Indigenous people of the region. It is also said that she married a Spanish mulatto named Pedro Nexia, though no record of this union exists. Her marriage and her involvement with the conquistadors would not be accepted by her indigenous comrades (paras. 2). Because of her cohabitation with non-indigenous people, an uprising took place; fellow *caciques* Cacimar and Yaureibo invaded her territory, along with presumed 'Caribs.' In the aftermath, she and her mulatto husband were killed. Cacimar fell in the battle as well. Some of the indigenous people involved would be captured and sold as slaves by the conquistadors. According to Yambot Lugo, chroniclers at the time compared her to La Malinche from Mexico (paras. 2).

Yuiza's story is not one of a monstrous specter but instead incorporates a sinister trope that has demonized many other indigenous women: the 'betrayer of the race'. Anacaona, an indigenous leader of the neighboring island La Hispaniola, experienced a similar fate to that of Yuiza. According to Gillespie (2021), citing the chronicles of Bartolomé de Las Casas, we know that in 1498, Anacaona negotiated four years of relative peace and freedom from slaughter for her people under Spanish colonialism, but this would not be enough to save them (p. 163). In 1503, she was captured and executed at the hands of the Spanish governor Nicholas de Ovando (p. 163). The conquistadors called her "licentious and untrustworthy and liken[ed] her to the Assyrian warrior queen, Semiramis" (p. 164), another powerful female historical figure who

faced similar condemnation by the men who write the history books. If the character of the indigenous woman was not slandered, then she would either be slaughtered by the conquistadors like Anacaona, or executed by her own people like Yuiza. In their stories, these two *cacicas* would be remembered as betrayers of both the Indigenous peoples as well as of the Europeans.

Similar female characters called 'malinches', after Malintzin, the Indigenous woman who worked as an interpreter for the Spanish during the conquest of Mexico, were women trained to serve as cultural and linguistic mediators for the colonizers, and who would at times be married to European men. "Anacaona and Malintzin, like thousands of other Amerindian women over the centuries of conquest and colonization, were involved in similar negotiations, sometimes with and sometimes without their consent" (Gillespie, pp. 152-53). Once they outlived their use or stepped out of line, their lives would be swiftly forfeited. In the case of Malintzin, hers is a story that would merge with La Llorona's.

In an article titled "The Wailing Woman," Amy Fuller (2017) tells us of La Llorona. "She is often presented as a banshee-type: an apparition of a woman dressed in white, often found by lakes or rivers, sometimes at crossroads, who cries into the night for her lost children, whom she has killed" (paras. 2). A post-colonial myth of La Llorona, recorded by Zoila Clark (2014) gives us more detail:

> [She is the specter of] … a mestiza woman [who]… was beautiful and proud, but she was poor. She married a man from a higher social class, one who owned land and animals, and together they had two children. However, he would leave her alone for months at a time, and eventually married a woman from his own wealthy class. In anger, she threw her two children into the river and then died of pain and anguish. The story goes that until

this day villagers hear her crying by the rivers asking: “Where are my children?” (pp. 64-65)

Marta E. Sánchez (2005), introducing the intercultural connections among Puerto Rican, African American, and Chicano narratives, says that ‘La Malinche’ is the name of a historical Indigenous woman wedded to the Spanish conquistador Cortés: “her real name was Malintzin Tenépal; she was known as Marina to the Spanish” (p. 5). Sánchez goes on to explain that as an informant, a linguist, a translator and mediator between the Spanish and the Indigenous peoples of Mexico, Malintzin became a key figure in early colonial history in the Americas. From her came the term *malinche*, implying “betrayal of self, of group interests—selling out” (p. 5), for being complicit in the plunder and destruction of her own people. When one invokes the image of La Llorona, inside her is the echo of La Malinche and all the *malinches* of the Caribbean: female, indigenous, abandoned, a woman who does not belong with anyone. She is the monstrous-feminine who wails on the cultural fault-lines of colonialism, who causes her own demise, whether by the crime of her interracial marriage, or by the sin of infanticide.

La Llorona’s association with infanticide is so pervasive, in fact, that her origins are uncertain, even conflated, with the indigenous legend of the Mexican goddess Cihuacoatl. In Fuller’s article about La Llorona, Cihuacoatl is singled out as a pre-Hispanic Aztec goddess, said to be an omen foretelling the Conquest of Mexico (2017, paras. 4). It could be that the Mexican Cihuacoatl is the source of La Llorona’s tale, in the same way the African Mami Wata is the source of Caribbean water creatures like Watramama and Mamadjo. Ana María Carbonell (1999) provides us with more information about the goddess who is the patron of midwives, and who “embodies a holistic figure that embraces both death and creation” (p. 53). Some of Cihuacoatl’s

recurring themes also merged with those of La Llorona, like her white dress and her wailing, foreboding cries. To expand upon Carbonell's claim:

> In examining, ethnographic accounts dating back to the colonial period, La Llorona and her antecedent, Cihuacoatl, repeatedly emerge as dangerous and destructive figures. These tales of maternal betrayal describe La Llorona as a treacherous, selfish woman who murders her own children, usually through drowning. The motivations provided include: insanity, parental neglect or abuse, and/ or revenge for being abandoned by a lover. In addition, La Llorona often seeks to murder other children or women out of envy for her loss and to seduce or kill men out of spite. (p. 54)

Such mythical intertwining between Cihuacoatl and La Llorona is fascinating enough, but even more interesting is how La Llorona's myth carries on from here, from tragedy to terror, and from fear to inspiration. One of the versions Fuller quotes is of a 20th century play, Carmen Toscano's *La Llorona,* which "presents a harsh critique of the Conquest and colonial period, with special attention paid to the treatment of the indigenous people by the Spanish conquistadors" (paras. 17). Though she is undoubtedly still a terrifying folk creature, her purpose in plays like Carmen Toscano's continues to be that of a *monstrum:* to 'reveal' the source of cultural fear. This time, she is transformed into a tool with which to reveal the monstrosities of colonialism.

Soucouyant

The *soucouyant* is a vampiric folkloric figure of Dominica, Trinidad and Guadaloupe. Depending where we find ourselves in the Caribbean, this shapeshifting creature could be popularly conceived as *Old Hige* (Jamaica and Guyana); *Asema* (Suriname); *volant* or *loogaroo*

(Haiti); or the *gens-gagée* (St. Lucian) (Anatol, 2015, p. x). A demoness of the night, she is believed to be "an amalgamation of French vampire myths and African mythological entities known as *jumbies* […] malevolent night spirits or demons that terrorize the living" (Robinson, 2016: , p. 66). In the preface for Giselle Liza Anatol's (2015) book, *The Things That Fly in the Night,* she describes the rich storytelling traditions of her Caribbean upbringing:

> According to the stories shared by my Trinidadian aunts, mother, and grandmothers, the soucouyant seemed to be an ordinary old woman by day. Each night, however, she shed her skin, transformed herself into a ball of fire, flew about the community, and sucked the blood of her unsuspecting neighbors. Afterward, she would return home and slip back into her skin, and the repeated practice made her human form unusually wrinkled. (ix)

The soucouyant embodies a specific traumatic aspect of vampiric superstition in the Caribbean: the loss of culture and ancestry. The kidnapping of millions of Africans from their homelands to bring them to the Americas was felt in Africa as well. Timothy Robinson (2016) writes about the border-transgressing appeal of vampiric lore, especially in the telling of African tales, both in American literature and in Africa as a consequence of colonialization and the transatlantic slave trade. He explains it as follows:

> …within regions along the west coast of Africa and locations where the transatlantic slave trade originated and held fast for centuries, vampirism often emerged as the prevalent explanation as to why millions of men, women, and children who were taken during the Middle Passage never returned. (p. 64)

The enslaved Africans who were transported during colonialization to the Caribbean not only lost their homes, but many of their connections to it. They were made to "forget their people," (Robinson , 2016, p. 65).

Vampires as drainers of life essence transcend the boundaries of Europe. Robinson goes on to say that while the term *vampire* is relatively new to Africa, some of its roots may predate the time when the Portuguese first reached the African shores. “European colonists brought their vampire tales with them and Africans adopted and transformed the tales to explain aspects of European slavery and other traumas such as European biological experimentation on Africans” (pp. 66-67). The monstrous idea behind the soucouyant is the genocide of a people, assigned to the form of a merciless, life-draining woman-creature.

María Lionza

Many myths surround the origin of the deity called María Lionza. Daisy Barreto (2020) collects them into a genealogy of the María Lionza cult, in which she presents not only her possible origins, but her development into the contemporary age. In the region of Cerro María Lionza in the state of Yaracuy in Venezuela, Barreto says that there once was a legend of an indigenous lady called María de la Onza, daughter of a *cacique* of the region, “*quien como encanto vive en el fondo de las aguas, bajo la forma de una gran serpiente, de donde sale por las noches a cabalgar montada sobre un danto*” [who, with magical enchantments, lives at the bottom of the waters in the form of a great serpent, and who comes out at night riding on a tapir] (all translations in this work are by the author, unless specified otherwise) (p. 48). Another tale focusses on a different woman, a Spanish lady named María Alonso, who owned great stretches of land in the state of Yaracuy, and with whom pacts were made in exchange for riches (p. 48). The existence of either figure—María de la Onza or María Alonso—cannot be confirmed. If those women indeed existed, they might have lived in the very early stages of colonial rule.

As Daisy Barreto observes, the people of the Yaracuy tell stories of those who made pacts with María Lionza, men who earned riches in exchange for their souls and who would endure in folkloric memory as spirits enchanted by the deity (2020, p. 54). To those who would initiate pacts with her, the deity was known as *Mayuronza,* "*que representa una fuerza telúrica ancestral*" [who represents a terrestrial, ancestral force] (p. 62). Mayuronza was not to be trifled with. A sinister side is counterposed with the more benevolent face of María Lionza: "*bondadosa, protectora de la naturaleza, de los animales y las cosechas*" [kind-hearted, protector of nature, animals, and crops] (p. 48).

As are the historical facts pertaining to the women who are claimed to be her historical source, the origins of the name María Lionza are uncertain. Some, Barreto notes, assume that the name of María Lionza has been superimposed onto that of an indigenous goddess: "*Yara*, *Igpupiara*, *Caapóra*, *Yurupari*, *Chía*, *Yubecaiguaya* y *Bachué*" (p. 42). Others assume either the legend of the Spanish María Alonso or that the indigenous woman to have been true. But, without documentation, we have no way of establishing with certainty why the name of this deity is as such, or what came before. What we can do is look at the importance of her association with both indigenous and African folklore in Cerro María Lionza.

Like the figure of the Mami Wata, she is a terrifying and powerful woman who dwells in an underwater palace. The Christian church may not have repressed her cult directly, but they have declared it to be a 'pagan practice,' one they claim has capitalized and deformed the image of Catholic saints, and the souls of those who worship her, granting her their souls in exchange for favors (Barreto, 2020, p. 105). What is truly incredible is that, like the face of the modern West African Mami Wata, María Lionza owes hers to a real woman: Beatriz Veit-Tané.

Tobias Wendl (2001) asserts that the most recognizable image of the Mami Wata comes from a 19th century chromolithograph of a Samoan snake charmer named Maladamajaute. However, "the original link to [her] was lost; the image was stripped of its original meaning and put into a completely new frame of reference: that of the emerging modern transafrican Mami Wata complex" (p. 271). In the 1950s, Beatriz Correa—known by the name Beatriz Veit-Tané—posed as a model for artists like Centeno Vallenilla y Colina, who would paint María Lionza in her image. A woman, thus becomes the face of a terrifying myth.

Patriarchal Christian and Western thinking places man above woman since creation, as only man is created in God's image. But the question then arises as to "how could she have a redeemable soul if she is not made in the image of God?" (Ruether, p. 85). On the other hand, Indigenous and African traditions have no problem depicting deity and positive spiritual force via female imagery. Commenting on the use of Beatriz Correa's beautiful body to represent María Lionza, Barreto notes:

> *El rostro de Beatriz con grandes ojos negros y su cuerpo de exuberante belleza […] ofrecieron a estos creadores elementos a partir de los cuales conjugan, en el simbolismo del mito, la cultura que se representa en la nación criolla aindiada y la naturaleza personificada en los atributos femeninos como fecundidad, amor y erotismo.* (2020, p. 180)

As a medium of the cult of María Lionza, Beatriz would say, "*El verdadero mito soy yo. Yo veía a María Lionza en mí misma y me sentía como un aparato receptor*" [The real myth is me. I saw María Lionza in myself and I felt like a receiving apparatus] (p. 187).

La Diablesse

La Diablesse, or Jablesse in Caribbean folklore, is a she-devil. As Beck (1975) describes her along with other superstitious creatures like the mermaid, “a *jablesse* is thought to be a woman temptress who leads people astray […] clad in a long dress which hides her [cloven] feet” (p. 239). This story, as quoted by an article of The Rum Nation (2020) on La Diablesse, “endure[s] in African, French, Trinidad and Jamaican culture” (paras. 1). The article goes on to say:

> While stories vary across cultures, there are key themes that continually appear in the legend. Most agree that La Diablesse (female devil) was born mortal but she made a pact with the devil and became a demon. When disguised in human form, she entraps men with her beauty and leads them astray into dark places, where they meet an untimely end. (paras. 2)

The Rum Nation article proceeds to identify Martinique as the place of the origins of her legends, “as the mixing of French and West-African culture gave rise to similar stories of a mysterious and beautiful woman who haunted the forgotten byways of the island” (paras. 7). She has since spread through the Caribbean and made herself known through the villages of Trinidad (Ali, n.d., paras. 1). Angelo Bissessarsingh (2013), writer for the *Trinidad and Tobago Guardian*, says that this is possibly due to many of the island’s French settlers coming from Martinique (paras. 3). In the late 19th century, Lofcadio Hearn’s memoirs introduced the world to La Diablesse, and as Bissessarsingh elaborates, as well as the image associated with her: “a tall woman of Afro extraction, simply but elegantly clad and all the men know and fear her” (paras. 5).

At the heart of the legends surrounding La Diablesse is a complex hierarchy of monstrous attributes that each enhance the other, understood by what we have discussed above as the

‘cultural body of the monster.’ She is part-human and part-animal. As a faceless woman of African descent, she is portrayed as demonic and unchristian. She therefore embodies the monstrous othering of race, sex, and religion, that continues to haunt the Caribbean. We discussed above how African women could navigate both ‘public’ and ‘private’ domains and hold power independently from men, as precolonial African society was not bound by patriarchal Christian traditions or misogynistic European ideologies. In the form of La Diablesse, however, African femininity has been transmogrified and demonized by the gaze that emerged from the Western European, Christian colonial enterprise.

The very name—*diablesse,* she-devil—confirms her undeniable association with the oppositional binary of ‘god/good’ vs. ‘devil/evil’ that saturates the Christian imagination. Beck likens the story of La Diablesse to that of the jack o’lantern of the British Isles, “an apparition usually appearing as a ball of light and known for leading night travelers astray” (1975, p. 239). Perhaps the idea of the wandering lurer comes from European folklore, but we suggest that we need only look at other female-gendered Caribbean folkloric beings like María Lionza to identify a common thread having to do with the selling of souls.

The Monstrous-feminine and feminist empowerment

The social roles that women played in pre-colonial African and Indigenous societies were quite different from those that were accessible to women in Christian Europe in the period leading up to colonialism. Constrained by patriarchal hierarchies and by misogynistic discourse, women were relegated to subservient positions. In the colonial Caribbean, Western European Christian tradition would not only come to dominate African and Indigenous female bodies, but it would also come to dominate the way in which women’s stories would be told, through both

history and folklore. In this process, both women and female folkloric figures became monsters. However, a monster is a cultural body, signifying a cultural moment in time. Their transmogrification speaks more the fears of the culture they emerged from, because the word *monstrum,* from which the term 'monster' is derived, means "that which reveals" (Cohen, 1996, p. 4).

Stephen T. Asma once wrote a short paper about monsters and the moral imagination. In it, he writes as follows about the cathartic journey of coming face-to-face with monsters:

> Monsters can stand as symbols of human vulnerability and crisis, and as such they play imaginative foils for thinking about our own responses to menace. […] Monster stories and films only draw us in when we identify with the persons who are being chased, and we tacitly ask ourselves: […] 'What will I do when I am vulnerable?' (2020, p. 290)

What we can extrapolate from Asma's reasoning is that the conception of women as monsters is a response to the threat posed by women in the patriarchal landscape of the Caribbean. The Afro-Surinamese see themselves in Watramama's victims—victims of the deep waters—and they deal with this by respecting her power and appeasing her with rituals. Mamadjo's comb should be coveted, so that she may grant away her riches. To escape from La Diablesse's deadly beauty, a man must "[take] their clothes off and turn them inside out before putting them on again" (Ali, paras. 2). If one is not careful, the bloodthirsty soucouyant will take one's life and flee into the night again.

At the core of many of their legends, these feminine monsters have been depicted as agents of wickedness, sin, death, and betrayal; but they have also been understood to be powerful, sensual, and independent. Like the women of pre-colonial, pre-Christian indigenous and African societies, they enjoyed status and responsibility. Returning to Asma's argument,

what happens, then, when instead of seeing ourselves in the victims of the monster, we see ourselves in the monstrous, as outcast, reproached, and othered? We already have our answer in the plasticity of some of the stories we have discussed. These same legends have empowered women across the multi-ethnic and pluri-cultural panorama of the Caribbean to see themselves not in the monstrous, but in the *monstrum:* the revelation. La Llorona is considered a symbol of Mexican identity (Fuller, 2017, paras. 18), while La Diablesse is seen as a champion of the oppressed (The Rum Nation, paras. 5). As Beatriz Veit-Tané said, proud and awed of her rank as the artistic face of the myth of María Lionza, "[The real myth is me]" (p. 187).

References

Ali, A. (n.d.) *La Diablese*. Folkloristics: Where legends never die. https://folkloristics.wordpress.com/trinidad-and-tobago/la-diablesse/

Amodio, E. (1991). Relaciones interétnicas en el caribe indígena: Una reconstrucción a partir de los primeros testimonios europeos. *Revista de Indias, 51*(193), 571-606. https://doi.org/10.3989/revindias.1991.i193.1188

Anatol, G. L. (2015). Preface. *The things that fly in the night: Female vampires in literature of the circum-Caribbean and African diaspora* (pp. ix-xi). Rutgers University Press.

Asante, M. K., & Mazama, A (Eds.). (2009) Mami Wata. *Encyclopedia of African religion* (pp. 404-05). SAGE Publications.

Asma, S. T. (2020). Monsters and the moral imagination. In J. A. Weinstock (Ed.), *The monster theory reade*r (pp. 289-94). University of Minnesota Press.

Barreto Ramos, D. (2020). *María Lionza, divinidad sin fronteras. Genealogía del mito y del culto.* Universidad de los Andes, Museo Arqueológico "Gonzalo Rincón Gutiérrez," Ediciones Dabánatà.

Beck, J. C. (1975). The West Indian supernatural world: Belief integration in a pluralistic society. *The Journal of American Folklore*, *88*(349), 235–244. https://doi.org/10.2307/538884

Bissessarsingh, A. (2013, October 26). The legend of La Diablesse. *The Trinidad and Tobago Guardian*. https://www.guardian.co.tt/article-6.2.409936.cd15700cfb

Bloch, R. H. (1987). Medieval misogyny. *Representations*, *20*, 1–24. https://doi.org/10.2307/2928500

Carbonell, A.M. (1999). From Llorona to Gritona:1 Coatlicue in feminist tales by Viramontes and Cisneros. *Melus: Multi-ethnic Literature of The U.s., 24*, 53-74.

Clark, Z. (2014). The myth of *La Llorona* in the film *Mama. Studies in Gothic Fiction, 3*(2). 64-76. https://studiesingothicfiction.weebly.com/uploads/2/2/8/8/22885250/sgf_3.2_final.pdf

Cohen, J. J. (1996). Monster culture (seven theses). In J. J. Cohen (Ed.), *Monster theory: reading culture* (pp. 3-25). University of Minnesota Press.

Creed, B. (2020). Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An imaginary abjection. In J. A. Weinstock (Ed.), *The monster theory reader* (pp. 211-25). University of Minnesota Press.

Deagan, K. (2004). Reconsidering Taíno social dynamics after Spanish Conquest: Gender and class in culture contact studies. *American Antiquity*, *69*(4), 597–626. https://doi.org/10.2307/4128440

Fuller, A. (2017, October 31). The wailing woman. *History Today.* https://www.historytoday.com/miscellanies/wailing-woman

Gillespie, J. (2021). Anacaona and the areito: A generative model for Pro-indigenous discourse in Lope de Vega's El Nuevo Mundo descubierto por Cristobal Colon? In M. Garcia, V. Perez DeLeon & C. Duclos, (Eds.), *Cosmic wit: Essays in Honor of Edward H. Friedman* (pp. 150-69). Juan De La Cuesta Press.

Klein, C. F. (2020). From clay to stone: The demonization of the Aztec Goddess Cihuacoatl. In J. D. Coltman & J. M. Pohl (Eds.), *Sorcery in Mesoamerica* (pp. 330-80). University Press of Colorado.

McInerney, R. (2017, May 28). Yuiza Loiza, A Taino legend. *Medium.* https://medium.com/@rosemcInerney/yuiza-loiza-a-taino-legend-f586ff08d022

Polk, P. (1993). African religion and Christianity in Grenada. *Caribbean Quarterly*, *39*(3/4), 73–81. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40653861

Robinson, T. M. (2016). Octavia Butler's vampiric vision. Fledging as a transnational neo-slave narrative. In D. Fischer-Horning & M. Mueller (Eds.), *Vampires and Zombies: Transcultural migrations and transnational interpretations* (pp. 61-82). University Press of Mississippi.

Rodríguez Montemoíño, N. 2019. Santería discourse: Gendering in *pàtàkì*. PhD dissertation, University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras.

Ruether, R. R. (2014). Sexism and misogyny in the Christian tradition: Liberating alternatives. *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, *34*, 83–94. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24801355

Sánchez, M. E. (2005). Introduction: Intercultural connections. In D. J. González & A. Castañeda (Eds.), "*Shakin' up" race & gender: Intercultural connections in Puerto Rican, African American, and Chicano marratives and culture (1965-1995)* (pp. 1-21). University of Texas Press.

Sudarkasa, N. (1986). "The status of women" in Indigenous African societies. *Feminist Studies*, *12*(1), 91–103. https://doi.org/10.2307/3177985

The Rum Nation (2020, April 4). Tempress, seductress, avenger of the opressed: The legend of La Diablesse. https://therumration.wordpress.com/2020/04/04/temptress-seductress-avenger-of-the-opressed-the-legend-of-la-diablesse/

Van Stipriaan, A. (2008). The ever-changing face of Watramama in Suriname: A water goddess in creolization since the seventeenth century. In H. J. Drewal (Ed.), *Sacred waters: Arts for Mami Wata and other divinities in Africa and the diaspora* (pp. 525-47).

Wendl, T. (2001). Visions of modernity in Ghana: Mami Wata shrines, photo studios and horror films. *Visual Anthropology, 14, 3*, p. 269-292.

Yambot Lugo, A. (2017, March 3). La cacica Luisa: Una mujer adelantada a su época. *El Adoquín Times*. https://eladoquintimes.com/2017/03/03/la-cacica-luisa-una-mujer-adelantada-a-su-epoca/