



**Object Research Essay: analysis of the Efik *Decorated Brass Dish*, taken from the McManus Gallery collection, Dundee.**

Suggestions of a sustained cultural exchange between Efik people and pre-colonial European imperialist powers, and further intensification following colonising missions, are fundamentally evidenced by the artistic production of the Old Calabar region of south-eastern Nigeria. Particularly poignant in manifestation when considering objects of religious purpose, coloured by ever evolving spirituality, and artworks materially and visually impacted by the prominence of trade within their locus of creation. Any discussions of hybridity and dynamic cultural encounters will subsequently be evidenced by virtue of a detailed case study of an Efik made *Decorated Brass Dish* [fig. 1] currently in possession of the McManus Gallery and supplemented by a comparative analysis of similar object types located in other Western institutions. Consequently, the dish is defined as rooted in adaptation, transculturality, external influences and a simultaneous expression of tradition and convention. This is compellingly indicated by the identification of the elaborately punch decorated figure as Mami Wata, possibly representative of the local water spirit Nnimm – thus reflective of diverse beliefs and practices surrounding the divinity, their evolution deeply influenced by contact with other societies.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the potential material composition of the object and journey from the African continent to Scotland should be understood as complex, painted by a juxtaposition of multifaceted exchange and colonial violence. It should thus be noted that while conducting due diligence within provenance research is imperative and should unequivocally lead to a revision of prevailing historic narratives, a nuanced understanding reflective of various perspectives may facilitate multinational discourses leading to restitution and reparation where appropriate and an alternative deeper understanding of

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<sup>1</sup> Henry John Drewal, *Mami Wata: Arts for Water Spirits in Africa and its Diasporas* (Los Angeles: Fowler Museum at the University of California, 2008), 40; see also: Jeremy Coote, Jill Salmons, 'Mermaids and Mami Wata on Brassware from Old Calabar', in *Sacred Waters: Art for Mami Wata and Other Water Divinities in Africa and the Atlantic World*, ed. Henry John Drewal (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).

origin.<sup>2</sup> Simultaneously, as corroborated by this case study, the unscientific and fragmentarily documented removal of artworks from their original context and associated violations of cultural heritage rights, result in a contemporary demand for detailed research by their current institutions – particularly in the prevailing and unethical absence of donation records and details of acquisition.<sup>3</sup> Finally, reflecting on contextual findings, probable provenance history and a detailed analysis of the visual characteristics of the *Dish*, an argument for the revision of display practices and museum labels within the gallery space will be made.

It should be stipulated that cultural hybridity and exchange is evidenced by the illustration of the water spirit Mami Wata and her importance within the Efik social structure. Elaborate punched or chased metalwork decorations on the wide rim and recessed centre of the circular deep *Dish* feature a mermaid-like figure surrounded by conventionally associated aquatic and maritime animals, including a reptile identified in comparable depictions as a crocodile and what appears to be an atypical illustration of a bird [fig. 2].<sup>4</sup> Triangular designs, evoking a sense of geometric symmetry, decorate the edge of the plate, while the curved border features what is described as ‘heart motifs’, but may rather be a representation of leaves – possibly *Epipremnum aureum*, or golden pothos naturalised in large parts of the region.<sup>5</sup> Though generalised within the pantheon of water deities, the lower body of the principal figure depicted is characterised by a fusion of serpent-like qualities while following the anatomy of double-tailed mermaids. The snake coiled around the circumference of the dish and enveloping the female torso further indicates the influence of compositional structures associated with depictions of Mami Wata. Attributes such as a comb, purse and headdress made from peacock feathers

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<sup>2</sup> Christine Mullen Kreamer, ‘Pursuing Provenance: Perspectives on the Arts of Africa’, in *Collecting and Provenance: A Multidisciplinary Approach*, ed. Jane Milosch and Nick Pearce. (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019), 281.

<sup>3</sup> Peter R. Schmidt, ‘The Human Right to a Cultural Heritage: African Applications’, in *Plundering Africa's Past*, ed. Peter R. Schmidt and Roderick J. McIntosh (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 19, 22.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Mami Wata brass tray’, *National Museums Scotland: Global Arts, Cultures and Design*, accessed May 4, 2023, <https://www.nms.ac.uk/explore-our-collections/stories/global-arts-cultures-and-design/mami-wata-brass-tray/>.

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Proctor, *Cultures of the World: The Ethnographic Collections of Dundee Art Galleries and Museums* (Dundee: Dundee Art Galleries and Museums, 1994), 45, no. 512; discussion of the plant’s naturalisation across the continent in: Desika Moodley, Serban Proches, John R. Wilson, ‘Assessing and managing the threat posed by *Epipremnum aureum* in South Africa’, *South African Journal of Botany* 109 (2017): 178–188.

are indicative of wealth, status and reveal the divinity's prestige, identifying her as a member of the social elite.

Subsequently, as is suggested for the comparable *Punch-Decorated Tray* [fig. 3], the dish is most likely to have been created by Efik women, particularly from the Ironbar family resident in Duke Town (*Atakpa*) along the Cross River, known as having developed the technique on imported brass trays.<sup>6</sup> Serving as ceremonial objects associated with female rites of passage marking the transition into womanhood, the dishes were created in the context of fattening rooms or the ritual of *mbobo*, whereby in addition to conjugal duties and traditional etiquette, young girls were taught the production of customary artefacts in isolation from the larger community.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the method of creation is indicative of veiled associations with Ekpe, the male secret leopard society, both through the concealed power of the decorations recognisable for initiated and perhaps more overt involvement.<sup>8</sup> Rigid gender constructions and ideologies of sex inequality ought to be understood as introduced following colonial conquest and missionary activity, banishing previous flexibility of the binary in favour of Victorian social structures – thus omitting the pre-colonial possibility of women's subversive social power and complex social positioning.<sup>9</sup>

Consequently, the representation of Mami Wata is reflective of the 'sacred feminine' and therefore imbued with an understanding of the feminine as a site of ambiguity. The term Mami Wata, and its variant spellings, is used twofold: as the personal name of a specific divinity and as a generic title referring to a 'pantheon of localised water spirits with specific names and identities' – here most likely the Efik *ndem mmon* (maritime deity) Nnimm.<sup>10</sup> It would be reductive to superficially characterise the aquatic divinity solely as an expression of modernity due to extensive associations with renewal and

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<sup>6</sup> Drewal, 'Mami Wata', 40.

<sup>7</sup> Ofem Enang, 'The Fattening Rooms of Calabar – a breeding Ground for Diabesity', *DiabetesVoice* 54 (2009): 41.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash the Spirit* (New York: Random House, 1983), 247.

<sup>9</sup> Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (London: Zed, 1987), 119, 189.

<sup>10</sup> Drewal, 'Mami Wata', 21; Stella A. Ansa, Basse A. Okon, 'Names as Index of Social History: The Efik Example', *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences* 4, no. 28 (2014): 87.

rebirth, as this interpretation of the new is intrinsically mediated through the much older localised beliefs and practices related to water as a source of sustenance and spiritual development.<sup>11</sup>

Representations of Mami Wata are defined by the dichotomy of modernity and tradition, deriving from earlier depiction of spiritual entities with assumed hybrid forms, leading to her introduction in the cosmology of water divinities as a 'natural progression'.<sup>12</sup> Contradicting Fraser's assumption of art historical authenticity bound to cultural centrality, concurrence with local artistic expressions and comprehensive dispersal, while maintaining the suggestion that depictions of a mermaid-like figure predate the arrival of European peoples in Nigeria, Drewal critiques the singularity of the argument as miscalculating inventiveness of African artists and as expressing an ignorance for the propensity of transforming imported imagery and imbuing new meanings.<sup>13</sup> Visually, the representation is associated with the conventional attributes of European mermaid depictions, transmitted to the continent via flags, marine sculpture, trade items and literature.<sup>14</sup> Importantly, frequently adorned by mirrors indicating her simultaneous propensity for vanity and alluring beauty, thus transforming her into a dangerously destructive creature that may equally bestow wealth upon her devotee. This is evidenced by the aforementioned attributes depicted on the *Dish*, whereby the comb symbolises status and beauty, while the purse and extensive body adornments are indicative of wealth. Her vast power over male subjects is equally discernible from the symmetrical composition of face and body, similarly associated with splendour. Generally, her figure denotes foreignness, presenting a sense of exotic otherness, subsequently interpreted along indigenous values, re-inventing dynamic depictions reflective of local aesthetics and social requirements.<sup>15</sup> Mami Wata is thus a multi-national, multi-

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<sup>11</sup> Joseph Nevadomsky, 'Mami Wata, Inc', in *Sacred Waters: Art for Mami Wata and Other Water Divinities in Africa and the Atlantic World*, ed. Henry John Drewal (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 358–9.

<sup>12</sup> Drewal, 'Mami Wata', 28.

<sup>13</sup> Douglas Fraser, 'The Fish-Legged Figure in Benin and Yoruba Art', in *African Art and Leadership*, ed. Douglas Fraser and Herbert M Cole (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1972), 277; Drewal, 'Mami Wata', 43.

<sup>14</sup> Henry John Drewal, 'Mermaids, Mirrors, and Snake Charmers: Igbo Mami Wata Shrines', *African Arts* 21, no. 2 (1988): 38.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

cultural figure, defined by ambivalence and incongruity – both a colonial invention and reflective of a much older pantheon of water spirits.<sup>16</sup>

Additionally, these older images of anthropomorphic serpent-human and half-aquatic renderings pave the way for the adaptation of another European depiction of an ‘oriental other’, represented by the figure of the snake charmer. This fantastical construction is prominently determined by the practice of *Völkerschauen*, and more specifically by the staged performance of Maladamatjauta – a southeast Asian woman depicted in a 1887 studio photograph [fig. 4], the composition of which later invertedly influencing Mami Wata portrayals.<sup>17</sup> The costume, particularly the shape of her bodice, coiled belt around her hips and bangles on her upper arms, as well as the position of the snake around neck and torso informs the prevailing chromolithograph poster made for her routine and disseminated by sailors and merchants across the globe, including the ports of Old Calabar.<sup>18</sup> Though the original image does not survive, a near identical reprint from 1955 may be used to illustrate this argument [fig. 5].

One of the earliest impacts of the print may be observed in its mirroring by an African headdress, featuring straight black hair with a middle part, comparable earrings and garment neckline but most significantly the positioning of a snake in her right hand [fig. 6].<sup>19</sup> While the hair is covered, the peacock feathers of the representation adorning the *Dish* are similarly parted, possibly recalling the print. Given the convention of full body depictions within a wider pan-African context, the chromolithograph’s waist up rendering of the figure evokes ambiguity – commonly read as an attempt to conceal her fish tail, only furthered by the uncertainty of the monochrome backdrop suggesting an underwater scene.<sup>20</sup> The absence of landscape renderings is equally found in *Dish*, disrupted only by the decorative quality of the snake, reptile and (maritime) bird. Although the general silhouette recalls the dual tail of a mermaid, her lower half equally imitates a serpent – a clearer representation of this

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<sup>16</sup> Madhu Krishnan, ‘Mami Wata and the Occluded Feminine in Anglophone Nigerian-Igbo Literature’, *Research in African Literature* 43, no. 1 (2012): 2.

<sup>17</sup> Drewal, ‘Mami Wata’, 51.

<sup>18</sup> For a depiction of merchant accommodation see: Martha G. Anderson, Philip M. Peek, *Ways of the Rivers: Arts and Environment of the Niger Delta* (Los Angeles: Fowler Museum at the University of California, 2002), 62, fig. A3, A4.

<sup>19</sup> Drewal, ‘Mermaids’, 38.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 39.

‘secret’ fish-half may be observed in another *Brass Mermaid Dish* [fig. 7]. Additionally, the role of the snake within the representation furthers the suggested association with Mami Wata, as serpents are conventionally depicted surrounding and protecting as well as being controlled by her. Being an important symbol of the rainbow, the curved overhead position reinforces ties to its arch and equally the celestial serpent.<sup>21</sup> Symbols of wealth attributed to foreign cultures, appropriated for the depictions on Efik metalware, indicate a further parallel between these external influences and the composition. The conventionality of these symbols of status and subsequent power is indicated by their recurrence in similar object types, including an example in Edinburgh, the *Mami Wata Brass Tray* [fig.8].

The metal composition of the objects is another poignant indicator of the fluidity of belief systems and duality associated with the figure of Mami Wata, reflective of the complex histories of the region and sustained exchange with European merchants. Material analysis completed at the request of the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford for the *Brass Mermaid Dish* [fig. 7] revealed its composition as made from recycled alpha-beta brass.<sup>22</sup> The sheet is suggested to have been manufactured between the 1860s and 1870s, slightly predating the Dundee *Dish*, and has been reinforced by alloying it with zinc thus indicating its likely use for the sheathing of a ship’s hull. It may thus be assumed that the metal used for *Dish* is equally European in making, which is supported by the proposition of the Ironbar family’s affinity for repurposing imported brass dishes. Regardless, the sustained and early importance of transnational trade in the Old Calabar region, as evidenced by the appearance of local merchants in maritime archives and Scottish ship logs, supports this thesis.<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, missionary activity within the region, equally connected to capitalist aspirations of international commerce, is indicative of cultural and perhaps material exchange, thus locating such

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<sup>21</sup> W. D. Hambly, ‘Serpent Worship in Africa’, *Field Museum of Natural History Publications, Anthropological Series 21*, no. 1 (1931): 37.

<sup>22</sup> ‘Brass mermaid dish, Nigeria’, *Pitt Rivers Museum*, accessed May 6, 2023, <https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/brass-mermaid-dish-nigeria>.

<sup>23</sup> Ini Akpan Udoka, ‘The Shipping Industry in the Lower Cross River Region, Nigeria: 1865–1955’, *Transafrican Journal of History* 24 (1995): 205; Stephen D Behrendt, Eric J. Graham, ‘African Merchants, Notables and the Slave Trade at Old Calabar, 1720: Evidence from the National Archives of Scotland’, *History in Africa* 30 (2003): 39.

objects within the Efik social context.<sup>24</sup> Hence, the missionary endeavour is of particular essentiality given the donation of the *Dish* by a religious institution. Though significantly in association with the Wishart Church, Presbyterian missionary activity was not limited to Mary Slessor's travels and educational ideology, being much rather coloured by a variety of Scottish individuals – all potentially involved in the removal of Efik artefacts for a multitude of reasons.<sup>25</sup> Seizing the spiritually imbued objects may hence be connected with religious colonialism and forceful subjugation to Christianity by Western imperialist powers within the Efik territory, particularly given the continuous demonisation of local divinities including Nnimm – and Mami Wata at large. Despite the conceptualisation of water deities as resembling Judeo-Christian saint figures following their growing popularity, engagement with modern morality has transformed their understanding. While Drewal's argument is proposed in relation to contemporary adaptation as a personification of 'immorality, sin and damnation', demonisation of indigenous African faiths should hardly be understood as an exclusively present-day phenomenon.<sup>26</sup> It may be fruitful to consider their removal as caused by claims of satanic imagery and hedonistic representation. Additionally, it is valuable to consider the reasoning of the considerably recent donation by the church in the early 1990s – the plate's substantial visual resemblance of conventional communion plates, the shape mirroring that of the *Mapledurham Communion Plate* [fig. 9], may allow for speculations regarding its uses once located in the Scottish context.

However, in conjunction with narratives of violent military and religiously motivated extraction of art objects, it is vital to consider demonstrations of agency, trade and diplomacy, whereby the personal action exercised at least partly determines which cultural material is obtained by European institutions.<sup>27</sup> This consideration ought to be made here, given the absence of Nsibidi – Ekpe pictographic script for initiates – featured on the *Brass Mermaid Dish* [fig. 7] but equally missing from the *Mami Wata Brass Tray* [fig.8]. Following the religious importance of the object, the

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<sup>24</sup> W. H Taylor, 'Missionary Education in Africa Reconsidered: The Presbyterian Educational Impact in Eastern Nigeria 1846–1974', *African Affairs* 83, no. 331 (1984): 191.

<sup>25</sup> Taylor, 'Missionary', 197.

<sup>26</sup> Drewal, 'Mami Wata', 67.

<sup>27</sup> Zachary Kingdon, *Ethnographic Collecting and African Agency in Early Colonial West Africa: A Study of Trans-Imperial Cultural Flows* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019), 1–2, 151.

omission of this detail representative of spiritual power and association with Ekpe ritual action necessitates further inquiry and may stipulate the nature of this object as designed for trade or diplomatic gifting rather than ceremonial use.

It would consequently be imperative to access the archives of the Wishart Church, as well as locating a potential letter of accompaniment for the donation – likely in existence given the considerably late gift – as this might provide insight into theories outlined above. Regarding the object's figurative representation it may be of interest to contact Henry John Drewal given his sustained demonstration of expertise regarding Mami Wata's varied depictions. Equally, Jeremy Coote and Jill Salmons more recent work on specific Efik punch decorated brass dishes may provide valuable understanding of cultural and representational specificities beyond the scope of this paper. As outlined above, nuanced provenance research is essential and ought to be reflected in the nature of gallery displays as well as object labels, allowing for respectful and informed exhibition notwithstanding limited space for individual display. Furthermore, a museum's role in the creation of national identity by virtue of the codification of 'heritage, articulating visions of history' and educational function, crucially extends responsibility of meticulous research.<sup>28</sup> Consequently, the revision of accompanying object labels may be beneficial given the undertones of ethnographic curiosity within the writing, evoking a sense of 'othering' regarding Efik societal practices.<sup>29</sup> Contrarily greater specificity regarding the visual representation and hybrid cultural context of the objects creation may pose an alternative.

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<sup>28</sup> John Warne Monroe, 'Restitution and the Logic of the Postcolonial Nation-State', *African Arts* 52, no.3 (2019), p. 8.

<sup>29</sup> Object label: *Decorated Brass Dish*, brass, 46x46x7.2cm, late 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Efik People, Nigeria. Dundee: McManus Gallery, 1991-58, on permanent display, accessed on March 22, 2023.



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Object label: *Decorated Brass Dish*. Brass, 46x46x7.2cm, late 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Efik People, Nigeria. Dundee: McManus Gallery, 1991-58, on permanent display, accessed on March 22, 2023.

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**FIGURES:**



**Figure 1:** *Decorated Brass Dish*, brass, 46x46x7.2cm, late 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Efik People, Ekpe Society, Old Calabar, Nigeria. Donated by the Wishart Church in 1991. (Dundee: McManus Gallery, 1991-58).



**Figure 2:** Illustration of the Mami Wata design on the *Decorated Brass Dish*.



**Figure 3:** *Punch-Decorated Tray*, brass, 45.7x45.7cm, 19<sup>th</sup> century. Efik people, southeast Nigeria. (New York: Cavin Morris Gallery). In *Mami Wata: Arts for Water Spirits in Africa and its Diasporas*, by Henry John Drewal, 40, fig. 18 (Los Angeles: Fowler Museum at the University of California, 2008).



**Figure 4:** *Studio Photograph of Maladamatjaute* taken in Hamburg Germany, photograph, ca. 1887. Published with the permission of Wilhelm Zimmermann in *Mami Wata: Arts for Water Spirits in Africa and its Diasporas*, by Henry John Drewal, 50, fig. 30 (Los Angeles: Fowler Museum at the University of California, 2008).





**Figure 5:** Adolph Friedländer Company, possibly Christian Bettels. *The Snake Charmer*, chromolithograph, 35.6x25.4cm, originally commissioned 1880s, reprinted 1955 by the Shree Ram Calendar Company, Bombay, India. (Private Collection). In *Mami Wata: Arts for Water Spirits in Africa and its Diasporas*, by Henry John Drewal, 51, fig. 31 (Los Angeles: Fowler Museum at the University of California, 2008).



**Figure 6:** Green, J. A. *Photograph of a Water Spirit Headdress*, photograph, 1901. Taken in Bonny, Niger River Delta, Nigeria. (Lagos: Nigerian National Museum, 106.94.17). In *Mami Wata: Arts for Water Spirits in Africa and its Diasporas*, by Henry John Drewal, 53, fig. 32 (Los Angeles: Fowler Museum at the University of California, 2008).



**Figure 7:** *Brass Mermaid Dish*, 'muntz' metal (brass), 1860s or 1870s. Efik People, Old Calabar, Nigeria. 'Collected' in 1919, donated in 1942. (Oxford: Pitt Rivers Museum, 1942.13.1089)

<[https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/styles/listing\\_image\\_gallery\\_image/public/prm/images/media/1942.13.1089.jpg?itok=ArpCs--Y](https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/styles/listing_image_gallery_image/public/prm/images/media/1942.13.1089.jpg?itok=ArpCs--Y)>



**Figure 8:** *Mami Wata Brass Tray*, brass, 46x46x3.7cm, early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Efik/Ibibio People, Old Calabar, Nigeria. 'Acquired' from a dealer in 1911. (Edinburgh: National Museum Scotland, A.1911.194)

<[https://www.nms.ac.uk/media/1158261/turtle.jpg?mode=pad&width=700&height=525&bgcolor=000&rnd=132925225330000000](https://www.nms.ac.uk/media/1158261/turtle.jpg?mode=pad&width=700&height=525&bgcolor=000&rnd=132925225330000000;)>



**Figure 9:** Barnard Edward, John and William. *Mapledurham Communion Plate*, silver gilt, 25x25x2.6cm, 1831. (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, LOAN:MAPLEDURHAMCH.6) <<https://framemark.vam.ac.uk/collections/2006AN2419/full/1400,/0/default.jpg>>