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MERMAIDS AND CROCODILES IN BORNEO AND WEST AFRICA

Kathleen O'Brien Wicker

INTRODUCTION

The island of Borneo in Southeast Asia has been exposed to a variety of cultural influences over the centuries due to the migration of peoples, trade and colonization. This has been the case in Borneo for a longer period and to a greater extent even than in West Africa, which has been subject to foreign incursions through migration, trade and colonization as well.

The mermaid is one example of a foreign cultural representation which has been introduced into the traditional cultures of both Borneo and West Africa, but with quite different results, which I will explore in this paper. I will also touch briefly on the relationship of the mermaid to the crocodile, a traditional figure in both cultures, since the role the crocodile assumes in Borneo may at least partially explain the differences between the appropriation of the mermaid here and in West Africa.

I begin this paper with a brief summary of the introduction and uses of the mermaid in traditional, Christian and Islamic cultures in West Africa. The body of the paper will discuss the examples of mermaid representations that I have found in Borneo during the summer of 1997 and also a few examples of crocodile mythology and other stories of transformation among peoples from different cultural traditions on the island. In the conclusion, I provide a set of preliminary observations on the mermaid tradition in Borneo and a comparative analysis of the uses of mermaid and crocodile representations in Borneo and in West Africa.

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THE MERMAID IN WEST AFRICA

The mermaid was probably introduced into West Africa as early as the 15th century by sailors and traders. Over time, it accreted to traditional water divinities, represented as crocodiles, pythons and other reptilian and natural forms which demonstrate the ability to live in two worlds. During the period of slavery, a tradition about a water spirit in one of the rivers of Surinam became identified with the mermaid as well as with the traditional water spirits of Africa. And in the nineteenth century, due to West Africans'

growing acquaintance with Indian merchants, Hindu divinities also became identified with the water divinities and the mermaid to form a divinity called Mami Water. Mami Water is now well-known in West Africa as well as in other parts of the continent. S/he is most commonly represented as a mermaid or merman, and is considered to have both female and male forms.

Mami Water continues to capture the imaginations of many people in West Africa, though the constructions they make of it are varied. For some, s/he has been identified as a traditional divinity, for others her foreignness is part of her power, while still others regard her as a *métissage* of traditional and foreign elements. In traditional religions Mami Water is considered a very powerful divinity, who is invoked by many for prosperity, for help in dealing with the problems of modernity, and for healing. S/he is also thought to give poetic inspiration and philosophical insight, as well as success in love. S/he is regarded as being able to negotiate both in the human realm and in the world beyond human experience. Muslim *bokos* are known to invoke Mami Water, as one of the *jinn*, to make successful charms. Christians, however, often regard Mami Water as a demon who produces and embodies in his/her sensuousness and rich ornamentations the temptations of unrestrained sexuality and materialism.

MERMAIDS IN BORNEO

Among the many diverse peoples of Borneo, who are now divided into the separate countries of Malaysia and Indonesia and the Kingdom of Brunei, the people in the coastal fishing communities on the South China Sea have arguably had the most foreign cultural influences and interactions, based on their accessible geographic location. However, due to the complex river systems in Borneo which facilitate the rapid dispersion of ideas and goods from the coast, the strategic location of the island on the trade routes, and travel, including the tradition of the *bejalai* or 'wandering,' among the Iban, it can safely be assumed that cultural influences which reach the coast of Borneo also penetrate to the interior of the island. This is the case with representations and stories about mermaids.

FISHERMEN'S TALES

The coastal Malays have stories about mermaids which follow the traditional pattern of European folklore. A beautiful woman, who turns out to be half-fish, manifests herself to fishermen at sea. If a fisherman can capture the mermaid, he will receive many blessings. The mermaid may even marry him and have children with him, but invariably at some point she will want to return to the sea, perhaps also taking her children with her.

Alternately, the fisherman may try to collect the tears of the mermaid as she begs for release from him to return to the sea. On the other hand, the fisherman so unlucky as to see the mermaid but not to catch her may go mad and attempt to join the mermaid in her home under the sea.¹

In a fisherman's tale from Sabah, a Malaysian state in the northeast corner of Borneo, a story is told about Bugong, a man who divided his time between piracy and fishing.² According to the story, Bugong and his company went to sea under favorable weather conditions, but when neither skill nor magical spells produced any fish, they returned home. The next day's fishing expedition yielded the same result. As they returned home the second day, the company saw a big fish jumping out of the sea. They captured it and discovered it was a mermaid. "It had the body of a human but the tail of a fish. Its long hair touched its waist. The mermaid also had small beautiful eyes that are smaller than human eyes." They decided to cut the mermaid up and sell the pieces. Bugong went along with this idea until he saw the tears of the mermaid. He then ordered his men to let the mermaid go but his men defied his orders, killed the mermaid, cut up her body, and threw her bones back into the sea.

When the fishermen sold the mermaid meat, however, it would not cook and had to be fed to the dogs. That night, "Bugong dreamed that the mermaid fell in love with him. The mermaid took him to travel to the bottom of the sea. Bugong just followed the mermaid's wishes and directions. They then came to a house and Bugong was very astonished to see his surrounding. There were all sorts of fishes and their courtyard was fully decorated with sea plants. The courtyard and the walls of the house were carved with stones, cockle shells and snails".

The next day's fishing expedition was unsuccessful, but as the company made for shore a big storm arose. Their boat overturned and capsized. Bugong regained consciousness on the beach and discovered he was the only survivor. He returned to his village, told his story to the villagers, and changed his occupation to farming. The story concluded: "Bugong is highly respected by the residents of his village for his sincere heart and passion for all mermaids".

This etiological story, which explains why a traditional fisherman became a farmer, suggests that Bugong's devotion to the mermaid was unusual in a fishing community in Sabah. It is noteworthy that Bugong retained his devotion to mermaids even after he left his seafaring occupation. Stories of the mermaid may have come to Sabah from the Philippines, where they are also found.³ It is reputed that there is an island off the coast of Sabah