

Stories about Female Mining Spirits in Katanga

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In large parts of West and Central Africa, there is a lot of talk of Mami Wata ('mother water'), a spirit described as a beautiful, fair-skinned woman with big compelling eyes and long hair. Sometimes, she is portrayed as a mermaid, but she can also be depicted as an elegant lady with high-heeled shoes, dressed in the latest fashion of Lagos or Kinshasa. As far as her character is concerned, she is said to be two-faced: on the one hand, she promises her victims all kinds of luxury goods, while, on the other hand, she makes them sick or even kills them when they fail to comply with the rules she imposes on them. Most observers agree that Mami Wata should be considered as a mediating figure between the local and the global. Her hybrid appearance is assumed to symbolize the ambiguous feelings of indigenous groups with regard to the advantages and disadvantages of rapid wealth accumulation and changing kinship and gender relations in the context of an increasing incorporation into the modern capitalist world economy (Frank 1995; Meyer 1999; Bastian 1997; Jewsiewicki 2003; Ellis & Ter Haar 2004; Pype 2008; Drewal 2008; Davies 1998). This paper argues that one of the ways in which Katangese artisanal miners try to give meaning to their living and working conditions is by telling each other stories about female mining spirits, to whom they ascribe characteristics similar to the ones of Mami Wata. In these stories, artisanal miners relate how the spirits impose all sorts of taboos on them in order to mark the boundary between the space of the mines and the space outside of the mines. In the opinion of the miners, the spirits play the role of gatekeepers, who encourage them to treat the mines as bulwarks of male power and domination, and who incite them to protect their working places against the polluting influences of women. It will be demonstrated that artisanal miners show a remarkable tendency to recycle longstanding local ideas about the relationship between mining, gender and death, while they are also inclined to reinterpret these ideas in the light of their own socio-economic situation.