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Brian Siegel

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Water Spirits and Mermaids: The Copperbelt *Chitapo*

Brian Siegel (Anthropology)
Sociology Department, Furman University
Greenville, SC 29613

Mermaids and Water Spirits: The Copperbelt *Chitapo*

Her unwavering gaze and Mona Lisa smile set her apart from other African women, that and the fact that she was the only female in that bus stop bar. Proper, modest Zambian women avoid eye contact with strange men, and unaccompanied women are rarely seen in African bars. But there she was, just below the standard issue photo of the President. Posed like an old Betty Page “girlie” picture, she was nude to the waist, with long, wavy hair and light-colored skin. What was going on here? Then I noticed that the creature in this arresting painting had a fishtail instead of legs, and that the “boa” wound around her was, in fact, a rather large snake. I was a stranger in this southern Luanshya bar and, anxious not to miss my bus back home, I drank my beer and left.

My next and final Mamba Muntu encounter came when the Public Works Department truck which had given me a lift took an unexpected detour and pulled up in front of the motel bar at the Rural Council Treasury — the old Native Authority headquarters, west of Masaiti Boma — for a lunch hour beer break. There, behind the doorway side of the bar, hung a dimly lit portrait of another, chubbier mermaid. I pulled out my camera and was fiddling with the exposure when the bartender ambled over, and planted himself directly in front of my camera. He forbade me to take a photo, saying only that it was “dangerous” to do so.

At this point, I was hailed, then joined by a friend and neighbor, a prosperous Mambwe poultry farmer, who deferred to the bartender’s judgment. When I asked who this mermaid was, they said that here, in Lambaland, she was known as the *chitapo*, the mythical inhabitant of the celebrated Lake Kashiba, who reportedly grabs people and pulls them under the water. They told me that such water spirits were common throughout Zambia and elsewhere — in Lake

Mweru, the Kafue, Lake Kariba near Victoria Falls, and even in the Atlantic — but that the local one was called *chitapo*. Neither Mamba Muntu nor Mami Wata was ever mentioned.

I later mentioned this episode to the Shona market gardener with whom I was staying at the time. According to him, mermaids are found at rivers, lakes, and kopjes throughout modern Shonaland, and he went on to tell me an incredible tale of how a fellow Apostle of Johanne Maranke had recently plunged into a deep well in the Congo and rescued a girl from her mermaid abductors.

My point here is that my acquaintance with the Mamba Muntu/Mami Wata mermaid was entirely casual and fortuitous. At the time, I had no clear idea what these mermaids were, and it was not until I was back at the University of Wisconsin-Madison that Prof. Jan Vansina identified them as Mami Wata portraits, icons of Congolese popular culture.

Much has been written over the last twenty years about Africa's European-looking mermaid, who is called Mami Wata in West Africa, and either Mamba Muntu ("Snake Woman") or Mami Wata in Zambia. Extraordinary claims have been made about this mermaid, some of which suggest that "[m]ermaids are among the most ancient and widespread symbols in Africa," and that while they have since "gained global currency, yet they remain the foremost image of African culture on both sides of the Atlantic" (Fabian 1996: 197-98). This paper, largely based upon library research, attempts to reconstruct the history of this mermaid figure among the Lamba and related peoples in Copperbelt and Shaba Provinces. Like Jell-Bahlsen's (1997) paper on the water goddess of the Nigerian Igbo, it suggests that this shadowy *chitapo* of the Lamba-speaking peoples was not originally envisioned as a mermaid, but only assumed this guise through a twentieth century process of diffusion, or cultural borrowing.

Mamba Muntu and the Lamba Water Spirit

From the 1960s to the 1980s, the Mamba Muntu (“Snake Woman”) mermaid — also known as *la sirène* and, in Kolwezi, *madame poisson* — dominated the popular art of urban Shaba Province. First introduced to Lubumbashi by West African traders in the 1950s — presumably in the form of the famous *Der Schlagenbandinger* (The Snake Charmer) chromolithograph, an extremely popular 1880s portrait of a Hamburg zookeeper’s snake-charming wife (Salmons 1977: 11-13; Drewal 1988: 169-71; Hecht 1990: 82-83; Gore 1997: 108-09) — she appeared on record covers, bar murals, and sitting room paintings everywhere (Szombati-Fabian & Fabian 1976: 19n12, 20n24; Fabian 1978: 317-19, 322-23; Jewsiewicki 1991: 133; 1997: 110-12). By the 1970s, the Congolese painters living in Lusaka’s Kanyama Township had their mermaid paintings hanging in the bars, shops, and marketplaces of Zambia’s capital (Jules-Rosette 1981: 112-13, 120-21, 125, 160). No doubt Congolese painters had also frequented the Copperbelt bars, for thousands of Luba-speaking Watchtower refugees had settled south of Luanshya in the 1960s (Cross 1970), and similar paintings appear in some of the local bars.

For the Lamba peoples here, this Mamba Muntu mermaid represents the *chitapo* of Lake Kashiba, the redundant English name for *Kashiba ka Bena Mbushi* (Lake of the Goat Clan) or *Kashiba ka Bena Mofya* (Lake of the Entangled Ones), names which refer to a dramatic episode in the Lamba myth of Chief Chipimpi (Doke 1922; 1931: 31-36; Marchal 1936; Verbeek 1982). Framed by sheer rock walls, the very deep and clear waters of this 300 by 400 yard rectangular lake are “shrouded in mystery and pregnant with native superstition” (Doke 1931: 34n2).¹ Supposedly, its waters could not be drawn or drunk, its fish could not be caught or cooked, and a slingshot stone or bullet would inevitably plunge into the lake before reaching the other side.

Mysterious underground channels allegedly connect Lake Kashiba to two other sunken lakes some 80 miles to the northeast, east of Ndola. Thus a pole dropped into one of these lakes will eventually surface in one of the others (Doke 1975: 42-43, 122-25). And, even more amazingly, cane sleeping mats and baskets occasionally come floating up to the lake's surface. This is no ordinary lake.

Imagine my surprise when I discovered that the Lamba-speaking Temba people, living northeast of Lubumbashi, attribute the same mysterious properties to their own Lakes Nakamwale and Namulolobwe², some 130 miles north of Lake Kashiba. According to Father Verbeek, Namulolobwe's waters are not to be drawn; it has a subterranean channel to the Kafubu River; and it too has mysterious mats, pots, and baskets. These the local Temba attribute to the lakes' *chitapo* or *nakamwale*, an evasive, shadowy apparition (*chinshingwa*) or sometimes a whirlwind (*kankungwala*), who uses these things to lure people down near the water, whereupon they are seized and never seen again (Verbeek 1990: 190-99). Just such a fate, it is said, once befell a girl drawing water from nearby Lake Nakamwale (Verbeek 1987: 101). Thus the people near Lake Namulolobwe, fearing its *chitapo*, have been known to doctor the lake with medicines "in order to kill its anger" (*umulandu wa kukuipaya ubukali kwa kiko*) against those who draw water there (Verbeek 1990: 192-95).

Although the Temba's *chitapo* at Lake Namulolobwe is described as a shadowy apparition or whirlwind, none of the published accounts of the one from Lake Kashiba describe its appearance. Two of these, tales from Clement Doke's *Folk-Lore*, seem to be about the *chitapo*. In the first, two young husbands are cautioned against ever seeing their reclusive mother-in-law, and no sooner does one of them catch a glimpse of her ears than she, her two daughters, and then their husbands all throw themselves into a large lake (Doke 1927: 226-29).

The second tale is about the *Chimina-bantu* (“People-swallower”), the unseen owner of a marsh pond who swallows the people who drink its waters (Doke 1927: 254-57). The third account, coming from Olive Doke’s memoir of a 1917 mission tour, mentions Kashiba’s not quite visible “spirit of the lake,” who answers the prayers of barren women (in Doke 1975: 125). And last, there is a journalist’s account of Kashiba’s “*Ichitapa* (sic) monster”:

It is said that if a man stands on the rocks by the lake’s edge with his shadow falling on the water, the *Ichitapa* will swim up and swallow the shadow. The man will either become paralyzed or will fall into the lake and drown. If one’s shadow is eaten then death is inevitable, say the local tribesmen (Dobney 1964: 25).

It seems odd that these three Europeans offer no description of the *chitapo*’s appearance. Logically speaking, one would not expect to find many descriptions of an invisible creature whose victims all disappear. But fabulous creatures are often assigned some physical characteristics, and the fact that none of these published accounts mention a mermaid does suggest that this shadowy *chitapo* was not originally envisioned as one. A humanoid water spirit, however, does appear in a tale Father Torrend recorded much farther south from a 12-year-old Tonga girl in January 1906. Here, a woman went down to the lake for water and found “a child of the temple” (*mwana wa mu marende*).³ She picked her up and carried her home. But the child refused to eat or sleep, and continually dug her nails into the woman’s flesh. At dawn the next day, the woman and her companions returned to the lake to hide the child in the sand where she had been found. Again and again, they urged it into the lake, saying, “Pray, mother, come to this place in the lake belonging to such as you.” The child did not move, so they carried her ever deeper into the lake — to the height of her waist, chest, and head. Finally, when

only her hair could be seen, she dove into the depths and the “people went away with the current” (Torrend 1921: 152-55).

The child in this Tonga tale shares some of the attributes of the Temba and Lamba *chitapo*, for it is evidently female and, like other “royal children” in Tonga folklore, is born of and at home in the water (Torrend 1921: 153-54n). Like the *chitapo*, she continually seizes onto the woman who found her. Finally, all the people who see her, and who draw water from the lake, disappear into its waters. This is not a human child, for it never eats, sleeps, walks, or talks. But it does have such human traits as fingernails and hair. The only thing missing here is any mention of her lower body. This tale may well be the first published account of a Zambian mermaid. Still, even if it is, it does not tell us whether the concept of a mermaid was indigenous to Tonga culture, or was introduced by the local Jesuit missions, by traders or railway workers from the south, or by labor migrants returning from Southern Rhodesia or South Africa.

So what is this *chitapo* all about? Olive Doke wrote that the one at Lake Kashiba answered the prayers of barren women. She was figuratively right, for although Verbeek (1987: 101) also throws thieves and witches into Lake Namulolobwe, two of his informants — both women, 55 and 65 years of age — linked its *chitapo* to the widespread fear and disposal of the anomalous infant (sing. *lutala* or *chinkula*) whose upper incisors erupt before its lower ones. In the past, such a child was considered an evil spirit (*chibanda*) which had to be drowned, lest one relative die with the loss of each milk tooth (Doke 1931: 138; Lambo 1946: 254; Marchal 1933-34: 84; Verbeek 1990: 190-91, 194-95). While most ethnographies state that these anomalous infants were dropped into rivers or lakes, Verbeek’s eldest informant says they were dropped off women’s backs into the bush near Lake Namulolobwe, and that the whirlwind *chitapo* would

come later and pluck them off into the lake. Such disposals were associated with prayer, but these were most likely prayers against the rebirth of such evil spirits (Verbeek 1990: 190-95).

The testimony of Verbeek's eldest informant also ties together seemingly disconnected elements in Stefaniszyn's account of a *lutala*'s treatment among the Ambo, or Kambonsenga, far easterly relatives of the Lamba and Lala. Stefaniszyn (1964: 78-79, 151) says that elderly women would drop such infants into a large pool near the Lukusashi River. Then, in a later passage, he says that the Ambo avoid a hilltop near the Lukusashi called Chililangoma (literally, "weeping of the drum"), a place inhabited by drumming and dove-breeding evil spirits (*fibanda*) called *tuoma* ("little drums"). Furthermore, "[i]t is believed that on top of Chililangoma is *a pool of water with only one fish in it* [italics added], but I have no further information for an analysis of this" (1964: 153). The Ambo material sounds very much that of the Temba pattern, one in which a solitary water creature — perhaps a *chitapo*, or a giant snake — dwells in a pool associated with the disposal of anomalous, ill-omened infants.

Giant Snakes, Whirlwinds, and Mermaids in Central and Southern Africa

The *chitapo* is not the only water creature which I heard about among the Lamba of Copperbelt Province. In fact, I heard a good deal more about the *funkwe*, a gigantic, but invisible, fish-tailed snake. It lairs in a hole below a river bed, spitting out water, and its presence is revealed by suddenly flooded streams and marshes (Doke 1931: 352-53). It is also known as *nsanguni* or *solomoni*. My informants tended to use these terms interchangeably; so did Verbeek's when discussing both the giant snake of Lake Nakamwale, and the one that frequents the underground channel between Lake Namulolobwe and the Kafubu River (Verbeek 1987: 101; 1990: 190-99). A similar "snake monster" is said to inhabit the Copperbelt's three

interconnected lakes: Kashiba, Chilengwa, and Ishiku (Doke 1975: 124-25; Dobney 1964: 25-26).

Some colleagues have tried to convince me that this *funkwe* is just the local manifestation of the Luba's great rainbow snake. I think it is far more likely to belong to the same conceptual family as the Ila's and Tonga's *itoshi*, a fabulous but invisible water snake which carries people away (Smith & Dale 1920,2: 128-29; Kelly & Brown 1940: 115). Father Torrend, working south of the Lukanga Swamp, recorded a Lenje (Bena Mukuni) folktale which features "the *funkwe*, lord of the rivers (*mwine mulonga*)," a creature many miles in length (Torrend 1921: 56-57). And Doke recorded a Lamba folktale in which a woman married a *funkwe* who was able to assume a human form (Doke 1927: 246-49).

The *funkwe* of these folktales seems to predate the 20th century, for William Kennelly, a British South Africa Company Collector, was warned against a similar creature during a May 1900 visit to Lambaland's Lake Chilengwa, a 180 by 250 yard sunken lake, east of Ndola. The Africans in his party were said to have "a superstitious horror of the place," and, "assuring him that there was a large snake there," did all they could to dissuade Kennelly from going down to the water, some 30 yards below its rim (Chesnaye 1901: 48). According to the Lamba, a similar *nsanguni* was responsible for the high labor turnover during the early development work at Roan Antelope (Luanshya) copper mine (Doke 1927: 34; Spearpoint 1937: 3-8), where it wriggled through the shafts, spewing water and poisonous gas and causing cave-ins. "Chirupula" Stephenson, the former Native Administrator, arranged an *ad hoc* "exorcism" of the snake in 1927 (Stephenson 1965). While none of my informants were sure of where it went, Lake Kashiba was considered its most likely destination, with Lakes Chilengwa or Ishiku coming in second.

There is still another relationship to be explored here: that between water spirits and whirlwinds. Since the whirlwind is often the means of transport used by water spirits, it might best be understood as a metaphor for spirit possession. In Southern Africa, for example, the tutelary spirits of Sotho diviners, healers, and mediums are the monstrous *khanyapa* (“cyclone”) and the *mamolapo* or *mamogashoa* (“mother of the river/deep”) river snakes (Setiloane 1976: 55-56, 265; Coplan 1994: 126, 236-37). According to Simon Kekana’s response⁴ to my H-Africa discussion list inquiry, “[c]onceptions of mermaids are fairly common in South Africa,” and the *mamolapo* is now envisioned as a “very beautiful and attractive” mermaid who lures over-confident young men to their deaths. When angered, however, these Sotho mermaids assume the guise of the old *khanyapa* and travel about as horrifying tornadoes. Among the Sotho, then, the old river spirits have been variously (and successively?) envisioned as river snakes, giant whirlwinds, and mermaids.

Still another example of a snake-like spirit assuming a mermaid’s guise is that of *umamlambo* spirit of the Xhosa and neighboring Bhaca in South Africa. She may have been a water spirit; her origins are unknown. When she appears in the ethnographic literature, it is as a wealth-giving familiar — or, perhaps originally, a Mami Wata lithograph? — which labor migrants could purchase from Indian shopkeepers (Hunter 1936: 286-87, 540). Not only can she make her owners rich, but, just like the Mamba Muntu, she can transform herself from a snake into a very beautiful and jealous sexual partner, one which often requires the life of its owners’ wives and parents (Pauw 1975: 234, 251; Hammond-Tooke 1962: 285-86).

Sean Morrow also answered my H-Africa inquiry. Then studying the clay-modeling tradition of Auckland Village near the Hogsback resort in the Amatola Mountains, he wrote me of a “fairly recent addition” to the repertoire of clay tourist art: that of a mermaid figurine of the

“irresistibly and dangerously beautiful woman” which “the modelers themselves call *mamlambo*”.⁵ In this case, the snake which can assume a woman’s form has now become a mermaid. However, the similarities between this *mamlambo* and the Congolese Mamba Muntu are entirely too close to be fortuitous.

My final example of whirlwinds and mermaids is that of the Shona *njuzu* or *nzuzu* in Zimbabwe, the creature my Shona market gardening host mentioned to me in his story of the Apostle and the mermaid abductors. Translated as “water-sprite” in a reprint of Hannan’s 1959 *Standard Shona Dictionary*, according to Prof. Hazel Carter⁶, the *njuzu* is a creature who seizes people, then tutors them in legendary arts of healing. Gelfand offers two different accounts of this *njuzu*:

Perhaps the greatest nganga of all is the one who obtains his medicine from the pool where he is supposed to meet in consultation a *nzuzu* (a mermaid). It is believed that he is driven or carried into the pool by a whirlwind and lives at the bottom with the *nzuzu* for at least a year. His relations suddenly discover that he has completely disappeared and in their anxiety consult an nganga to learn what has happened to him. They are informed by the nganga that *Nzuzu* has taken him and . . . they must wait quietly until he returns. Finally he reappears as suddenly as he vanished, bearing with him his medicines and gona. He is now acclaimed a nganga and is regarded as the most highly qualified type. He is able to cure all ailments and his prophesies always eventuate. Whenever he needs new medicines a whirlwind carries him back to the pool where he can obtain them (Gelfand 1956: 105).

And:

The pool doctor inherits his skill through a special water spirit *shave* [an alien or non-human spirit] which has possessed one of his relations or ancestors. . . . It is believed that the *shave*, which has been lying dormant all these years, suddenly decides to possess one of its descendants in order to make this medium a *nganga*. The person selected may be engaged in ordinary employment. He may be a herdboys, and one day when he is herding his cattle he comes to a river or large pool and sits down on the bank to fish. Suddenly a whirlwind arises and draws him down into the depths of the pool. He sinks to the bottom and is taken by the water spirit. Perhaps the person in question is a young girl who is drawn into a well by a strong wind while she is drawing water and here she is snatched by the water spirit. Then again the girl or boy may be swimming in a pool or river with other youngsters when a whirlwind suddenly arises and drags down the selected medium who is then captured by the water spirit. It is assumed by the parents that the youth has been accidentally drowned. When they consult a *muvuki* they are told by him that their son or daughter is still alive and that one day he (or she) will return with the paraphernalia of a healer-diviner (Gelfand 1959: 106).

There are several familiar features in these two accounts of the Shona *njuzu*. Like other diviners elsewhere (e.g., Berglund 1989: 140-49), the *n'anga* in these accounts is taken below to be instructed by water spirits. Like the Sotho *mamolapo* and the Temba *chitapo*, the *njuzu* is either a whirlwind or uses one. And like the Sotho *mamolapo*, the *njuzu*, by 1956, was

conceived of in the form of a mermaid. By the time that Dale's Shona-English dictionary came out in 1981, the "water-sprite" of Hannan's 1959 *Standard Shona Dictionary* had been defined as a "mythical water creature with human head and torso; (mermaid?)".⁷

As Dale's dictionary's definition suggests, there is some reason to believe that the Shona *njuzu* was not always envisioned as a mermaid. Gelfand (1959: 106), for example, identifies the snatching "water spirit" as a non-human *shave*, the *mashave* being "the spirits of aliens [including animals] who died away from home or of young unmarried persons" (Bourdillon 1982: 232-33). While his 1956 passage glosses the *njuzu* as "mermaid," the same passage also includes a summary of Father Burbridge's 1923 piece, "How to become a Witchdoctor," in which such creatures are simply called pool spirits (Gelfand 1956: 105-06). Not to put too fine a point on it, but pool spirits, alien water spirits, and water-sprites are not necessarily the same things as mermaids, and it is odd that the Europeans describing them so often avoided the term. This shift in nomenclature suggests that the *njuzu* tradition has also been reinterpreted over time to reflect the growing Shona conception of these spirits as mermaids.

Unfortunately, there is little to suggest that the Lamba and Temba *chitapo* or *funkwe* have much to do with whirlwinds or spirit possession. A female-dominated spirit possession cult definitely exists among the Zambian Lamba, though it is not mentioned in the literature on the Lala or Ambo to the east, nor in that on the Congolese Lamba or Temba. Thus this cult's presence among the Zambian Lamba probably reflects the influence of their Lenje neighbors to the south, down around the Lukanga Swamp.

Such spirit possession groups are led by the *bamukamwami* — literally, the "spouses" (*bamuka*) of one or another dead Lenje chief, *mwami* being the Lenje, Ila and Tonga word for "chief" (Doke 1931: 258-67; Kelly & Brown 1940: 209). These chiefs recruit their followers by

afflicting them with illnesses which only they can cure, and are, I was told, the most stubborn and dangerous spirits ever encountered by exorcists from the Lamba Baptist church. And while the *bamukamwami* do speak to such women's concerns as gender status, conception and, formerly, female initiation ceremonies, they have no apparent links to the *chitapo* or to whirlwinds.

The fact that Lakes Kashiba, Namulolobwe, and Nakamwale are all inhabited by both a *chitapo* and a *funkwe*, the female lake spirit and a giant, fish-tailed snake, might well explain why some Lamba now envision the *chitapo* as a Mamba Muntu mermaid. If these two creatures are conflated, the result is something like a mermaid. At the very least, the snake-wound Mamba Muntu image does represent the idea that both of these two creatures share the same lakes. The Lamba-speaking peoples may not conceive of this as representing the marriage between the lake goddess and the river god (e.g., Jell-Bahlsen 1997: 117, 120), but I was once told that the *funkwe* helps to protect the *chitapo*'s diamond or emerald treasure. Similarly, the spirit of Lake Nakamwale takes the form of a little diamond which resides in an underwater serpent's mouth (Verbeek 1987: 101).

From Lake Spirit to Mermaid

Lakes Kashiba, Namulolobwe, and Nakamwale of the Lamba and Temba peoples are all supposedly home to a shadowy female spirit who lures people to their deaths, and who, in some way, seem to have been linked to the disposal of ill-omened, anomalous infants. The Mamba Muntu or Mami Wata mermaid paintings in Copperbelt beer bars are now said to represent this *chitapo*, and the large snake in these paintings is said to represent the *funkwe*, the giant, fish-tailed river snake.

Given the popularity of European-style mermaids in the popular art of Lubumbashi, and the documented spread of Congolese artists and their Mamba Muntu paintings to Zambia's central capital, it is not hard to understand how Copperbelt bar patrons were introduced to the snake-wound figure of a fish-tailed mermaid, or came to regard it as an acceptable representation of the region's own indigenous and apparitional folklore creatures. This process may have begun in the western Shaba Pedicle, where the Temba people near Lakes Namulolobwe and Nakamwale live just northeast of Lubumbashi, for there is a long history of trade, labor migration, and large-scale resettlement across this region of the Congo-Zambia border.

Since this shadowy, whirlwind-like apparition of precolonial times has only recently acquired the guise of the Mamba Muntu mermaid, it seems safe to assume that the *chitapo* itself did not originally represent Europeans or things new and foreign (Drewal 1987; 1988), the powerlessness of the urban proletariat (Szombati-Fabian & Fabian 1976), the repressed desire for the forbidden white woman (Fabian 1978), the ambivalent morality of contemporary urban life (Jules-Rosette 1981: 121), or the "blind alley of consumption-oriented individualism" (Frank 1995: 343). As a pervasive icon of African popular culture, the Mamba Muntu likely represents a number of different things to its viewers, but none of these were original to the local *chitapo*.

More baffling to me is the notion that the mermaid is an ancient African symbol. The debate over the antiquity and the foreignness of African mermaids may never be resolved (Fraser 1972; Kasfir 1994). However, the belief in alluring, treacherous, and soul-stealing female water spirits can be traced to the *asparas* and *seirens* of the ancient Greeks and Hindus (Biedermann 1992: 375-76). More than a century ago, Sir James Frazer attributed these same Indo-European fears of watery soul-loss to the Zulu and Sotho (Frazer 1981,1: 145-46). While it is possible that the Rhennish Lorelei and the sirens and mermaids of 14th century France and England all derive

from Africa, it is far more parsimonious to claim that the belief in water spirits, whatever form they take, is a cultural universal, and has no single source.

The form or image these spirits take is a separate issue. The earliest Mami Wata carvings in West Africa, however, date to around 1901, and very clearly are direct, rounded copies of *Der Schlangenbandinger* (The Snake Charmer), a still very popular 1880s chromolithograph portrait of a Hamburg zookeeper's exotic, snake-charming wife. The Mamba Muntu portraits of Lubumbashi and Lusaka bear more than a passing resemblance to this lithograph, and have been traced to Lubumbashi's West African traders in the 1950s (Szombati-Fabian & Fabian 1976: 19n12, 20n24). It seems reasonable to suggest that Indian or other traders may have introduced the same images through the seaports of East and South Africa. But regardless of whether they did or not, it seems that the image of a fish-tailed mermaid was introduced to Africa from Europe, and, as Jell-Bahlsen (1997) argues for the Igbo, was embraced wherever it was considered an acceptable representation of indigenous water spirits. A number of water spirits from Central and Southern Africa are now envisioned as light-skinned mermaids, and among these is the formerly amorphous and shadowy *chitapo* of the Central African Copperbelt.

Endnotes

¹ An unsolicited email from Zambian scuba diver Neiles Billany, now living in Britain, begins as follows:

"I was born in Mufulira in 1952 and during [the] mid 70's did many dives with friends in the sunken lakes around the copperbelt. We were aware of the fables and myths surrounding these lakes and they were very eyrie places. The lakes were inhabited by very large barbel type fish 'catfish' and I often wondered if seen from the surface they would look like serpents or mermaids tails. Kashiba was 73 metres at the shallow end (South side) and shelved down to approaching 150 metres at the North end. We dived extensively in the lake, four of us dived to the bottom of the shallow end. The walls were sheer and the lake probably formed by the collapse of a limestone cavern. The South side went straight down to a silted bottom, but the walls of the North side began sloping away at about 50 metres to [an] unexplored cavern."

Personal communication from Neiles Brittany, 1 June 2004.

² *Nakamwale* means "She of the *kamwale*," the latter being a common Central Bantu word for an initiated but unmarried girl (Doke 1963: 71; Verbeek 1987: 101; Kelley & Brown 1940:126).

Namulolobwe means something like "She who has always been concealed within." And *chitapo* might be translated as "That which abducts, takes hold of, or seizes by force" (Doke 1963: 1, 158; White Fathers 1954: 752).

³ In Torrend's passage about the "child of the temple" (*mwana wa mu marende*), the *malende/marende* is a rain shrine or prayer site at the graves of chiefs (Kelly & Brown 1940: 168).

⁴ Personal communications from Simon Kekana, Vista University, Sebokeng, South Africa, 15 and 22 October 1996.

⁵ Person communication from Sean Morrow, Govan Mbeki Research Centre, University of Fort Hare, Alice, South Africa, 11 October 1996.

⁶ Personal communication from J. Hazel Carter, Department of African Languages and Literature, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 24 February 1997. In addition to the Shona dictionary references on *njuzu*, Prof. Carter also graciously provided me with photocopies of relevant pages from the ethnographies of Michael Gelfand, M. F. C. Bourdillon, and others. I am very much indebted to her for her help.

⁷ Personal communication from J. Hazel Carter, Department of African Languages and Literature, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 24 February 1997. This definition is quoted within the text of her communication.

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