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" Water Spirits and Mermaids: The Copperbelt Case"

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Much has been written over the last twenty years about Africa's European-looking mermaid, called Mami Wata (Mother Water) in West Africa, and Mami Wata or Mamba Muntu (Snake or, in kiSwahili, Crocodile Person) in Congo-Kinshasa and Zambia. The most extraordinary claims are made for this African mermaid. Johannes Fabian, for example, claims 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). In other words, we are supposed to believe that the image of a mermaid - not just the belief in a water spirit, but the image or symbol of a mermaid - is indigenous to Africa. We are supposed to believe this in spite of the fact that Salmons (1977), Drewal (1988), and Hecht (1990) offer undeniable visual evidence that the oldest known Mami Wata wooden carvings - from the river areas of southern Nigeria, ca. 1901 - derive from "Der Schlangenbandinger" (The Snake Charmer), an 1880-87 chromolithograph of the exotic, long-haired, snake-charming wife of a Hamburg zookeeper. Moreover, it has since been determined that the copies of this popular lithograph being sold in West Africa in the mid- to late 1950s originated in Bombay and England (Salmons 1977:11-13; Drewal 1988:169-71; Hecht 1990:82-83; Gore 1997:108-09).

This paper examines the history of the Central African Copperbelt's mermaid figure, the lake spirit of the Lamba and kindred peoples of the Copperbelt and Shaba Provinces. It suggests that the image of the mermaid is an example of diffusion, or cultural borrowing, and that this shadowy lake spirit only assumed the guise of a European-looking mermaid in the 20th century.

Mamba Muntu and the Lamba *Chitapo*

Until replaced by Old Testament scenes and portraits of Jesus in the 1980s, the Mamba Muntu mermaid - also known as *la sirčne* (the mermaid), and, in Kolwezi, as *madame poisson* (fish lady) - dominated the popular art of urban Shaba Province for twenty years. First introduced into Lubumbashi by West African traders by the 1950s, she became the omnipresent subject of bar murals, sitting room paintings, and record covers (Szombati-Fabian &

Fabian 1976:19n12, 20n24; Fabian 1978:317-19, 322-23; Jewsewiecki 1991:133, 1997:110, 112). By the 1970s, the Congolese painters living in Kanyama Township had introduced similar mermaid paintings into the bars, shops, and marketplaces of Lusaka, Zambia (Jules-Rosette 1981:112-13, 120-21, 125).

Whether reclining or seated, Mamba Muntu is an arresting and seductive figure. She is typically adorned with jewels, a watch, comb, and mirror, and inevitably has a large snake wound around her body.¹ She generally has light skin, long, flowing hair (sometimes blonde), and has her torso turned so as to gaze directly into the viewer's eyes. She exemplifies "the seductive dangers of the material world" (Gore 1997:110), for, like the West African Mami Wata from which she derives, she is an ambivalent water spirit "which can wreak havoc or bestow great riches according to whim" (Salmons 1976:8). She seduces, then destroys those who approach her. Yet any man who obtains her comb or other piece of personal property can use the purloined object to obtain sudden wealth and power, but only so long as he honors his pledge of absolute secrecy and sexual fidelity (Fabian 1978:319; Szombati-Fabian & Fabian 1976:17; Jewsewicki 1991:133; Jules-Rosette 1981:120-21; Vellut 1982:114-15). Thus both a Zulu and a Bemba *ng'anga* whom Jules-Rosette interviewed in the Lusaka area each regarded this mermaid as an evil spirit which caused the men she possesses to abandon their wives (Jules-Rosette 1981:160; Burton 1961:58; Grévisse 1956-58,33:144).

But an identical mermaid figure also appears in the interior murals of the Zambian Copperbelt's beer bars and Chibuku taverns. This second mermaid seems to be one of the several stock figures - like those of a giant snake, a giant crocodile, and men cutting trees - which frequent the painted landscapes on the interior walls of bars and taverns.² This mermaid is specifically identified as the *chitapo* or *nakamwale*, a water spirit common to the Lamba and linguistically related peoples of the Congolese-Zambian Copperbelt. It is death to meet her face-to-face, for she captures people's shadows and they then disappear into her lake. The same bartender who forbade me to photograph her image told me these mermaids are found in Lakes Kashiba and Mweru, at Victoria Falls, and in the Atlantic. But the *chitapo* spirit seems to have begun as a shadowy apparition, and only assumed the guise of a mermaid in the last fifty years or so. In order to bolster this interpretation, let us first take a look at other water spirits and witchcraft familiars elsewhere in Southern and Central Africa.

Other Southern and Central African Water Creatures

South of the Zambezi River, a number of snake-like river spirits or witchcraft familiars seem to have assumed the modern guise of mermaids. The Shona peoples, for example, have long associated pools and rivers with ancestral snakes, and in the 1920s Shona *shin'anga* told of acquiring their skills while living with these spirits at the bottoms of pools or rivers (Bourdillon 1982:154, 157). These same or similar ancestral spirits are evidently now envisioned as mermaids, for the same Vapastori Prophet in the Copperbelt who told me that mermaids inhabit rivers, lakes, and kopje tops throughout modern Zimbabwe went on to relate how another Baptizer had rescued a young girl from the mermaids in a deep well in Congo-Kinshasa.

A similar shift seems to have occurred among the seSotho-speaking peoples of Southern Africa, where the monstrous *khanyapa* (cyclone or thunderstorm) river snake - the awesome "Lord of the Deep Waters" in chapter four of Thomas Mafolo's novel *Chaka* (1931) - and the *mamolapo* or *mamogashoa* (mother of the river/deep) snake are considered the tutelary spirits of diviners, healers, and spirit mediums (Setiloane 1976:55-56, 265; Kekana 1996; Coplan 1994:126, 236-37). Simon Kekana (1996) informs me that, these days, "[c]onceptions of mermaids are fairly common in South Africa;" and that the Sotho folktales of the *mamolapo* or *mamogashoa* tell how it lures over-confident young men to their dooms by appearing in the guise of a "very beautiful and attractive" mermaid. Like the old *khanyapa*, these Sotho mermaids, when angered, travel about as horrifying tornadoes.

Still farther south, the Xhosa and neighboring Bhaca share a common belief in the snake-like *umamlambo*, the wealth-giving familiar which labor migrants can purchase from Indian shopkeepers. Though it can transform itself into a particularly beautiful sexual partner, this *mamlambo*, like the Congolese Mami Wata, is a jealous partner, and often requires the sacrifice of its owner's mother, father, or wife (Hunter 1936:286-87, 540; Pauw 1975:234,251; Hammond-Tooke 1962:285-86). Sean Morrow, who has been studying the clay-modeling

tradition of Auckland village, near the Hogsback resort in the Amatola Mountains, wrote me of a "fairly recent addition" to this repertoire of clay tourist art. This is a mermaid figurine of the "irresistibly and dangerously beautiful women" which "the modelers themselves call mamlambo" (Morrow 1996). Whatever its origin or origins, the supernatural snakes of Southern Africa are now commonly envisioned as mermaids.

This also seems true of the Zulu. Berglund's (1989) book on Zulu thought and symbolism includes the autobiographical sketch of a diviner who began his career after being taken to a certain pool to meet a great python (*inhlwathi*). This *inkosi yamadlozi* (lord of the ancestral spirits), or *inkosi yamakhosi omkhulu* (great lord of lords, i.e., Lord of the Sky), was there surrounded by the "snakes of our fathers" and accompanied by "a lady there with very big breasts" who gave birth to and suckled those "children of the python" (Berglund 1989:140-49). The large-breasted woman here suggests how such water snakes might assume the guise of 20th century mermaids.

North of the Zambezi, in the Congo and Zambia, mermaids would likely fall into the wide category of the fabulous creatures and spirits which the Luba call *bakishi*. These creatures, each with a different name, inhabit "[t]he springs, rivers, river mouths, rapids, waterfalls, grottos, caverns, plains, forests, mountains, the large isolated trees and blocks of stone, found on a plain or near a path" (Verhulpen 1936:169). Many of the culture heroes in the Luba Genesis myth - Verhulpen's "certain great chiefs" - dwell as spirits in springs, waterfalls, and water-fed caves, and water is almost always connected with the headquarters (*katenta*) of a spirit (Burton 1961:43, 50).

Once again, these water spirits, however, most often take the form of snakes. Verhulpen, for example, cites the cases of *Buya na Ilunga*, the snake which inhabits a termitarium near the source of the Kiseke River; and of *Kabwe*, a pond-dwelling python near the Lualaba which receives beer and pearls for his assistance in warfare and hunting (Verhulpen 1936:168-69, 366). Still other Luba examples include *Kilumba* and *Mpumina*, the huge, many-tailed pythons of Lakes Boya and Bupemba, the very sight of which causes immediate death. Yet there is also the *Muntonkole* of Lake Kisale, which appears as a floating clay pot (Burton 1961:77).

Farther south, along the Kafue Hook in Zambia, the Ila recognize the *bapuka*, a "wide-ranging category of insects, reptiles and fabulous animals" which inhabit the trees, pools, and forests (Smith & Dale 1920,i:224, 389). Chief among these is the great Kafue River monster called *Itoshi*, a 50-foot creature with a crocodile's body, a man's head, and the fins of a fish. Invisible to all who lack the proper medicine, it seizes people and take them into its burrow beneath the river bed (ii:128-29). An illustrated hut drawing, however, depicts it as a flat-headed snake with anterior fins (i:120). "What concerns us here is the fact that many people, especially chiefs, enter the water after death and become these monsters" (ii:129). Most of the Ila water beings, then, take reptilian forms, and are often associated with ancestors or spirits of the dead.

Down in southern Zambia is the Tonga's *Nyaminyami*, the "great River God" of the Zambezi, first documented by Major A. St. Hill Gibbons in 1898-99. It is not clear what status *Nyaminyami* had as an ancestral shade, but it caused those foolish enough to shoot the rapids of Kariba Gorge to disappear from face of the earth, and its tail was blamed for the 1957-58 destruction of bridges and coffer dams during the construction of Kariba Dam (Clements 1959:12-13, 18, 22, 88-89, 143-44).

Smith and Dale (1920,ii:129) call a similar Tonga being *Maloo*, and liken it to the Lozi's *Lengolengole*, which King Lewanika once saw as a hippo-sized creature with a the tail of an iguana. Brelsford (1936:60) describes the *Ing'ondotuya*, a similar Lozi creature which drowns canoe occupants and collapses the banks under riverside villages. But his account of this and other large, horned creatures like the *chipekwe*, or "water rhino" clearly betrays an older tradition of European speculation which long populated the remoter parts of Northern Rhodesia with relic dinosaurs (Lechter 1911:159-62; Stephenson 1937:210-12; Doke 1931:352; Smith & Dale 1920,ii:129).

None of the water beings mentioned so far bear any great resemblance to the mermaid figures of the Central African Copperbelt. The closest approximation to a mermaid I have found appears in Torrend's (1921) folklore collection, in a tale he recorded from a 12-year-old Tonga girl in January 1906.

In this tale a woman went down to the lake for water and there found a "child of the temple" (*mwana wa mu marende*). The woman picked her up and took 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 this child in the sand where she had first been found. They repeatedly beseeched her, saying "Pray, mother, come to this place in the lake belonging to such as you." But the child repeatedly refused, and 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). In other words, the people disappeared into the lake's waters.

It is not at all clear in this story what sort of child this was supposed to be. She was evidently not human, for while she seems to have had hair and fingernails, she never ate, slept, walked or talked. The Tonga had a relatively egalitarian society, so it is not at all clear what Torrend meant when he said that Tonga folklore consistently assumes that such "royal children" are born of and are at home in the water; that "the very goods of the kings ... are all supposed to come down from the sky with the rain" (Torrend 1921:153-54n). The spirits of Ila and Luba leaders, chiefs, and culture heroes also find their homes in the water, but this Tonga lake child lacks the usual form reptilian form. No tail is mentioned, but this lake child did not walk and had to be carried. This may well be the first documented description of a Central African mermaid. Yet, by itself, this tantalizing lake child from a 1906 folktale does not necessarily falsify my working hypothesis that the mermaid figure was a 20th century innovation.

The River Snake of the Copperbelt and Shaba Pedicle

There are two different water beings in the folklore of the Lamba-speaking peoples of the Copperbelt and Shaba Provinces: the female lake spirit, called *chitapo* or *nakamwale*; and the great river snake, variously known as the *funkwe*, *nsanguni*, or the *Solomoni* snake. The latter creature has no affinity with the ancestors or the dead, but it does follow the general Central and Southern African pattern of envisioning water beings as snakes or other reptiles.

Though the *funkwe* and *nsanguni* are analytically distinct, they both denote giant, water-spewing, snake-like river creatures with fish-like tails. The *funkwe* lairs in a hole below a river course, and its movements are revealed by flooded streams and marshes. A Lenje (Bena Mukuni) folktale in Torrend's collection - the Lenje live just south of the Lamba and Lima - includes a number of references to "the *funkwe*, lord of the rivers (mwine mulonga)," which he accurately describes as a fabulous snake, many miles in length (Torrend 1921:56-57).

Doke's *Lamba Folk-Lore* (1927:246-49) includes one tale of a *funkwe*. But this is a thoroughly unremarkable monster story, one in which a *funkwe* once assumed human form to marry an unsuspecting wife. Her brother, though, discovered its true fish- and frog-eating identity, and killed it. A multitude of angry snakes then appeared, but an obliging frog concealed the people in its belly and took them home.

The *funkwe* of these folktales seems to predate the 20th century, for William Kennelly, a British South Africa Company Collector, encountered notions of a similar creature in May 1900 when he visited Lake Chilengwa, a 180 by 250 yard "sunken lake" eight miles east of Chiwala's village (modern Ndola). The Africans accompanying him were said to have "a superstitious horror of the place, and did all they could to dissuade Mr. Kennelly from going down to the water," some 30 yards below its rim, "assuring him that there was a large snake there" (Chesnaye 1901:48). *Chilengwa*, chiLamba for "a thing created (by God)," is said to be linked by an underground passage to Lake Kashiba, some 80 miles to the southwest (Doke 1975:124-25).

Nsanguni, on the other hand, was the name given to the fabulous Luanshya River snake which was held responsible for the floodings and deaths during the early development work at Roan Antelope Mine (Doke 1927:324; Spearpoint 1937:3-8). It is also the term which Doke and the other translators of the Lamba Bible used for the sea monster, Leviathan, in Psalms 74:14, 104:26, and Isaiah 27:1.³ However Doke's (1931) and Lambo's (1946:315-16) ethnographies describe the *nsanguni* as a witchcraft familiar, and Melland (1923:207-09) explicitly says that *sung'unyi* is the archaic Kaonde term for the *mulombe*, a human-headed, snake-like familiar

which consumes its victim's shadow (Marchal 1933-34:83). Doke (1931:317-19), in two contiguous passages, treats the *nsanguni* and *mulombe* as two distinct familiars, both of Kaonde origin.

This suggests that Luanshya's *nsanguni* or *Solomoni*⁴ snake began as a *funkwe*. At any rate, the three terms now seem interchangeable, for Verbeek (1987:101) says the giant river snake living at the source of Lake Namulolobwe's waters, near the Kafubu River, northeast of Lubumbashi, is called both a *funkwe* and *nsanguni*, and a local informant there called it *Solomoni* (Verbeek 1990:192-93, 198-99).

Work at Roan Antelope began in 1925. But until the Luanshya River was channeled and its swamps drained during the 1929-32 anti-malaria campaign, Roan's workers suffered such high illness and mortality rates from malaria and blackwater fever, as well as from typhus, dysentery and pneumonia, that the mine had great difficulty keeping African laborers from one week to the next (Spearpoint 1937:3-8; Watson 1953:13-14, 92-93). It became common knowledge that the local Lamba attributed these problems to a giant snake, which wriggled along the river and mine shafts causing floodings and cave-ins, and spewing poisonous gas.

Brelsford (1936:56) refers to this creature by the nonsensical name of *Mulilo* (Fire), describes it as a four-foot long black slug, and tells how it can be trapped and killed. But Brelsford was surely describing another creature,⁵ for every account I obtained insisted that all attempts to net or trap this immense and invisible snake ended in failure.

The Luanshya Snake finally left the mine in 1928, after "Chirupula" Stephenson was consulted and brought in elders from the Lamba chiefly clan, and they, in turn, beseeched their ancestors to intervene on the mineworkers' behalf (Dobney 1964:24-25; Rukavina 1951:233-44; Stephenson 1965). Just where it went is not clear, though Lake Kashiba is frequently mentioned. Readers may recall that a subterranean channel supposedly links Lakes Kashiba and Chilengwa, and that Kennelly was warned of the Chilengwa snake in 1900 (Chesnaye 1901:48). A similar "snake monster" is said to dwell in Chilengwa's neighboring lake, Lake Ishiku, which is also said to have an underground link to Lake Chilengwa (Dobney 1964:25-26).

The Lake Spirit of Copperbelt and Shaba Provinces

The Lima people of southern Copperbelt Province are host to a great sunken lake, one commonly known by the redundant name of Lake Kashiba, *kashiba* being the Lamba term for "lake" or "pool".⁶ This is a very deep, rectangular lake, some 300 by 400 yards in size, with sheer rock walls on most every side.⁷ It is, in Doke's terms, "a lake shrouded in mystery and pregnant with native superstition" (Doke 1931:34n2). Its reputation is that of a lake whose waters cannot be drunk; and whose fish cannot be caught, but, if they are, they cannot be killed or cooked. It is impossible to throw a stone or shoot across it, for the stone or bullet will invariably plunge into the lake halfway across. Moreover, a bark-stripped pole dropped into Lake Kashiba, Chilengwa, or Ishiku will eventually surface in one of the other two lakes (Doke 1975:42-43, 122-25).

Oddly enough, the Temba people northeast of Lubumbashi attribute the same identical properties to their own Lake Namulolobwe, some 130 miles northwest of Lake Kashiba. There, as at Lake Kashiba, sleeping mats, cooking pots, and bamboo baskets are said to occasionally float to the surface. And while Lake Namulolobwe lacks the subterranean link to another lake, it does supposedly have an underground channel to the Kafubu River, one frequented by a giant *Solomoni* snake (Verbeek 1990:190-99). Clearly, the awe these lakes inspire reflect something more than the fact that "the Sanga and most of their neighbors are pitiful (*piçtres*) swimmers" (Grévisse 1956-58,32:123).

Some of the awe attached to Lake Kashiba is revealed in its full name: either *Kashiba ka Bena Mbushi* (Lake of the Goat Clan) or *Kashiba ka Bena Mofya* (Lake of the Entangled Ones). Both of these refer to the Lamba myth of Chief Chipimpi,⁸ and how his Goat Clan became so upset with their first chief's murder and the loss of the chiefship that they went off to Lake Kashiba, tied themselves together with bark rope, and plunged into the lake. The floating mats, baskets, and pots are often taken as evidence that the Goat Clan now occupies a village at the bottom of the lake. Thus a Lamba (and Seventh Day Adventist elder) informant told me how Europeans with a

diving suit once came to sound Lake Kashiba, that they found the lower waters very warm, and that they heard voices coming from the light and warmth down below. While it would appear that the floating mats and such at Lake Namulolobwe have a very different explanation, Verbeek (1987; 1990) argues that the Lamba myth of Chief Chipimpi dates is a parable of their late 19th century conquest by Mwenda Msiri's Yeke. If this is true, the floating mats, pots, and baskets at Lakes Kashiba and Namulolobwe may have originally been attributed to a *chitapo*.

For equal awe is accorded to Lake Kashiba as being the home of the *chitapo*, "that which takes by force,"⁹ or *nakamwale*, the "female/Mother of" form of *kamwale*, a chiLamba term for "an adolescent girl" (Doke 1963:71). In Doke's *Folk-Lore collection*, a similar creature which causes its victims to plunge into a marsh pond is called *Chimina-bantu*, or "Man-Swallow" (Doke 1927:254-57).

Though I was often told about the *chitapo*, there are only three published references to it. The first, Stephenson's autobiography covering the period of 1900-02, includes a confused account of "Madame-Mother-Mofya" (evidently his mistranslation of *ka Bena Mofya*), "the lovely Goat-Clan heroine who rises to the lake's surface when her clansmen make her offerings of beads" (Stephenson 1931:210-15). The second, that from a 1917 missionary tour by Olive Doke, mentions a not quite visible "spirit of the lake" which answers the prayers of barren women (in Doke 1975:125). And finally, there is Dobney's more ominous but better informed account of Kashiba's "*Ichitapa* monster":

It is said that if a man stands on the rocks by the lakes' 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).

Like the *funkwe* water snake, the *chitapo* is nobody's relative or ancestor, but was created by Lesa (God) alone.

Whatever the source of the floating mats, pots, and baskets at Lake Kashiba, those at Lake Namulolobwe are attributed to its *chitapo*, an evasive, shadowy apparition (*chinshingwa*), something like a whirlwind (*kankungwala*). Indeed, Namulolobwe might best be translated as "She (who) has always been concealed (or lost) within".¹⁰ She is the one who causes the mats, pots, and baskets to appear and disappear, for they are lures to draw people near or into the water, where they are dragged under by their arms, never to be seen again.

Just such a fate supposedly befell a girl drawing water from Lake Nakamwale, near the same area's Kanseba River (Verbeek 1987:101). This story is probably apocryphal, for *nakamwale* is just another name for the *chitapo*, and one which incorporates a chiLamba term for "adolescent girl". Thus the people near Lake Namulolobwe are said to have made a medicine (*muti*) for the *chitapo* there out of large, tobacco-sized *umunota* leaves and spilled it into the lake "in order to kill its fierceness" (*umulandu wa kuk[u]jipaya ubukali bwa kiko*) against the people drawing water there. This is all Verbeek's 65-year-old female informant had to say about "worshipping" (*ukupupa*) the *chitapo* there (Verbeek 1990:192-95).

Olive Doke may have been told that the *chitapo* at Lake Kashiba answers the prayers of barren women. But both of Verbeek's informants - both women, 55 and 65 years of age - link Lake Namulolobwe's *chitapo* to the disposal of the ill-omened baby, called *lutala* or *chinkula*, one whose upper incisors had erupted before its lower ones. Such a child was not allowed to live, for it was considered the embodiment of an evil spirit (*chibanda*), and a relative would die with each milk tooth that it lost. Such unfortunate parents were not permitted to mourn, for, if they did, their next baby would manifest the same trait (Doke 1931:138; Marchal 1933-34:84; Verbeek 1990:190-91, 194-95). The Luba, Kaonde, Sanga, Lala, Ambo and Bemba all shared this belief; only the immigrant Yeke did not.¹¹

Most ethnographies claim such ill-omened children were dropped into rivers or lakes to drown. But Verbeek's elder informant says they were dropped off women's backs into the bush near Lake Namulolobwe, and that a great wind would come later - she then likens the *chitapo* to a whirlwind - and pluck the dead off into the lake (Verbeek 1990:194-95). Such disposals were associated with much prayer, but, contrary to Olive Doke's account,

these were not exactly the prayers of barren women. And it is not even clear that they were directed to the *chitapo* (pp. 190-91).

Further insight into these beliefs and practices can be garnered from Stefaniszyn's account of the Ambo (sometimes called Kambonsenga), who straddle the Luangwa River in Zambia's Central Province. Like the Lima and Swaka, they seem to be another offshoot of the Lala, and, as such, are linguistically related to the Lamba. Stefaniszyn says that an old Ambo women would supposedly dispose of *lutala* in a big pool near the Lukusashi River, and, while doing so, would tell it, "You go and wash yourself, do not follow us, because you grew the upper teeth first for which reason we have thrown you into the water" (Stefaniszyn 1964:78-79, 151). Then, in a later passage, he describes the Ambo's avoidance of a hill near the Lukusashi called Chililangoma (literally, sound of or weeping of the drum), a place inhabited by drumming and dove-breeding evil spirits (*fibanda*, sing. *chibanda*) called *tuoma* (little drums).

One suspects that Chililangoma Pool, like Lake Namulolobwe, was a place for disposal of ill-omened children; that the hill's *tuoma* were the spirits of these ill-omened children; and that the sounds of their drums and, as in at least one Lamba folktale (Doke 1927:114-15), those of the doves they bred were taken as signs of mourning. This hilltop pool also seems to host its own *chitapo* or *funkwe* snake, for "[i]t is believed that on the top of Chililangoma is a pool of water with only one fish in it, but I have no further information for an analysis of this" (Stefaniszyn 1964:153). The general pattern here among the Temba, Lamba, Lima, and Ambo is for the *chitapo* to inhabit pools wherein these ill-omened infants were once disposed. The *chitapo* of Copperbelt folklore did not originally look like nor behave like the seductive Mamba Muntu mermaid.

From Lake Spirit to Mermaid

This paper has tried to show that the water spirits and/or creatures of Central and Southern Africa were originally envisioned as snakes or other reptiles. While a few of these, in the Shona, Zulu, and Ila cases, are considered to be ancestor spirits, the majority of them are fabulous river creatures which, intentionally or not, can cause people great harm. Even the Lamba's fish-tailed *funkwe* snake of Luanshya and the Shaba Pedicle falls under this category.

But Lakes Kashiba, Namulolobwe, and Nakanwale of the Copperbelt and Shaba Provinces are home to a different sort of spirit, a shadowy female spirit who lures people to their death, and who was in some way linked to the disposal of anomalous, ill-omened children. And like the Lubumbashi representations of the Mamba Muntu mermaid, the *chitapo* of Lake Namulolobwe is said to share her lake - or at least its subterranean passageway - with a great fish-tailed river snake. Similar claims are often made for the Copperbelt's Lake Kashiba.

Given the former popularity of European-style mermaids in the popular art of Lubumbashi and much of urban Congo-Kinshasa, I think it only natural that the bar and tavern murals of the Zambian Copperbelt should also have adopted the figure of the fish-tailed mermaid, wound about with a sinuous snake, to represent the region's own indigenous, if originally apparitional folklore creatures. This process may have begun in the western Shaba Pedicle, for the Temba people near Lake Namulolobwe are just northeast of Lubumbashi, and there is a long history of trade and labor migration across this section of the Congo-Zambia border.

Since this formless, shadowy apparition of precolonial times did not originally assume the form of a mermaid, it seems safe to assume that this spirit did not originally represent Europeans or things new and foreign (Drewal 1987 & 1988), the powerlessness of the urban proletariat (Szombati-Fabian & Fabian 1976; Fabian 1978), "the good and evil of the contemporary urban scene" (Jules-Rosette 1981:121), or the "blind alley of consumption-oriented individualism" (Frank 1995:343).

More baffling to me is the suggestion, made by Fabian and others that the mermaid is an ancient African symbol which diffused from there to both sides of the Atlantic (Fabian 1996:197-98). The debate over the antiquity and foreignness of the African mermaids may never be resolved (Kasfir 1994; Fraser 1972). Biederman, however, traces the belief in alluring, treacherous, and soul-stealing, female water spirits to the *apsaras* and *seirens* of the

ancient Hindus and Greeks (Biederman 1992:375-76), and Frazer, more than a century ago, linked the English fear of encountering a "water fairy" to the common fear of the Zulu, Sotho, and the ancient Indians and Greeks of losing one's soul by looking into pools (Frazer 1981,i:145-46). It is possible that the Rhennish Lorelei, and that the sirens and mermaids of 14th century France and England all ultimately derive from a source or sources in Africa. Yet it would be more parsimonious to claim that the belief in water spirits, whatever form they take, is a near universal, and has no single source.

The form these water spirits take is a separate issue. Yet the Mamba Muntu of Shaba Province and Lusaka, Zambia, do seem to derive from the Mami Wata of West Africa. Moreover, the earliest wooded images of the Mami Wata, ca. 1901, are rounded representations of a German chromolithograph from the 1880s. Accordingly, it would appear that the image of a fish-tailed mermaid does derive from Europe. A number of snake-like 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.](#) For images of Zaire's Mami Wata or Mamba Muntu mermaid, see Fabian (1978:320), Szombati-Fabian and Fabian (1976:6; 1996: Fig.1.19, opposite p. 209), and Vogel (1991:18, 132-33, 164, 286).

[2.](#) I say this mermaid "seems" to be among the stock mural figurines because I only saw two mermaid figures in the many Copperbelt bars and Chibuku taverns I visited. One was in a bus stop bar in southern Luanshya, and the other was in the rural Treasury (i.e., old Native Authority headquarters) motel bar west of Masaiti Boma. Though I had my camera the second time, the bartender forbade me to photograph her image, saying it was unsafe to do so.

[3.](#) While the crocodile-like Leviathan of Pss. 74:14, 104:26, and Isa. 27:1 is translated as *insanguni*, that of Job 3:8 and 41:1-34 is translated as *kongamoto*, which is also the term for the "dragon" of Pss. 74:14, Isa. 27:1 and 59:9, Ezek. 39:3, and Rev. 12:3. I cannot explain why the Leviathan of Job 3:8 and 41:1 is translated as *kongamoto*. But this is the name of the legendary, pterodactyl-like creature which supposedly inhabited the Jiundu Swamp of Kaonde country (Melland 1923:237-42; Brelsford 1936:58), and which Dobney (1964:24) later identified as an errant whale-headed or saddle-billed stork. Though their translations of the "Leviathan" are inconsistent, it appears that Clement Doke and the other translators of the Lamba Bible chose one pair of non-Lamba legendary creatures to translate another non-Hebrew pair. For all of these passages, see the 1959 Lamba Bible, *Amasiwi aBaLesá* (Lusaka: The Bible Society of Zambia, 1975).

[4.](#) This Luanshya Snake is also known as the *Solomoni* snake. The source of this name is unknown. I am unable to confirm one Lamba informant's claim that it was originally called *Solo*, and that the Europeans changed its name to *Solomoni*. Still another Lamba informant claimed that the Mufulira Mine, with a similar history of flooding problems, had its own *Solomoni* snake.

[5.](#) Apart from its length and its use as a garden medicine, the snake Brelsford (1936:59) describes, and the apparatus used to kill it, sound remarkably like the *ng'umfwilila* in *The White Fathers' Bemba-English Dictionary*. This is described as a

fabulous snake of tremendous length, used as [a] charm to kill game. The natives say that he who wants to obtain that charm must make a hut mudded all round and without any opening, and with sharp iron spikes inserted in the outside wall. He shuts himself inside with a cock; when then cock begins to crow, the *ng'umfwilila* snake comes along and coils around the hut, trying to get at the cock. The sharp spikes kill it, and the lucky person has any amount of charms for his hunting expeditions (White Fathers 1954:574).

6. (*Lishiba* is the chiLamba term for "pond" or "pool"; those for "lake are (*lishiba* or *chishiba*. Thus while the addition of the diminutive *ka-* prefix in *kashiba* literally transforms a lake to "little lake," *ka-* is often used as an understatement for things that are understood to be large. In this particular case, *kashiba* certainly connotes a "large lake".

7. Though the African accounts of Lakes Kashiba and Namulolobwe stress the inability of Europeans to sound their incredible depths, the weekend scuba divers I met at Lake Kashiba would probably have disagreed with Doke's (1931: 34n2; 1975: 42n4) claim that it has been fathomed at 350 feet. Still, the noonday clarity of its waters do enhance the sense of its impressive depth.

Throughout this paper I have consistently replaced the *ki-* noun prefix and concords used in the Shaba Pedicle with the *chi-* used in Zambia. Thus *kitapo* and Kipimpi, for example, are rendered as *chitapo* and Chipimpi.

Verbeek (1987: 81-82) describes the language of rural Lubumbashi's Temba people as transitional between kiSanga and chiLamba, the languages of the Temba's northwestern and southern neighbors. With few exceptions, most of the Temba texts recorded in Verbeek's *Le monde des esprits* (1990) are readily translated using the *White Father's Bemba-English Dictionary* (1954) and *Doke's English-Lamba Vocabulary* (1963).

8. The myth of Chief Chipimpi (or Kipimpi in Zaire) appears in a variety of sources, including Doke (1922; 1931:31-36), Marchal (1936), and Verbeek (1982; 1990:88-111). Analyses of this myth include Siegel (1985) and Verbeek (1987:9-16; 1990: 20-22). Stephenson (1937:214-17) and Dobney (1964:5) cover only the collective suicide episode at Lake Kashiba, as does the Ila version in Smith and Dale (1920,i: 20).

9. The term *chitapo* does not appear in Doke's (1927, 1931) books on Lamba folklore or ethnography. It presumably falls under the broad family of "apparitions and ghostly forms and visions which they [the Lamba] designate generally by the terms *imipishi*, *imichishi*, or *bamukupe*," synonymous terms which "signify something evasive, which one has seen indistinctly, but which disappears entirely when one would investigate it closely." The mirage (*ichamichishi*) falls under this as same category, as do the ghostly visions seen by the spirit-possessed, "and is believed to represent a river, swamp (*mushitu*), lake, or pool belonging to the long-departed dead" (Doke 1931:241-42).

While *chitapo* is the chiBemba word for "a place to draw water" (White Fathers 1954:134), in chiLamba it and *ifyakutapa* are alternative nouns for "booty" or "spoil" (Doke 1963:19, 150). The relevant verbal root here is -*tapa*, which not only means "to draw water," but also means "to plunder, spoil, or take by force" (Doke 1963: 51, 119; White Fathers 1954:752). Thus *chitapo* might best be translated as "that which takes by force." Moreover, this translation is fully consistent with the statement by Verbeek's older informant that

over there [at Lake Namulolobwe] is the little *chitapo*, the one they call Kasansa, that's the one that takes people by force, it's like a little/large whirlwind (*akalipo ni kakitapo, ako beba ati akasansa, kalya akatapa abantu, akaba kwati kankungwala*) (Verbeek 1990:194-95).

In this passage, *kasansa* is the diminutive form of *chisansa*, or "palm of the hand"; and the verbal root -*sansa* is "to take by surprise, or fall upon unexpectedly" (White Fathers 1954: 126, 659). As explained in Note 5, all the "little" things in this passage--the *kakitapo* (or *kacitapo*), *kasansa*, and the whirlwind--can also be understood as "large."

10. This translation of *Namulolobwe* - "She (who) has always been concealed (or lost) within" - assumes that *Na-* is the common "female/Mother of" prefix; that *-mu-* is the locative infix "within"; and that *-lolobwe* is the perfect passive (-*we*), repetitive tense (-*loloba*) form of the intransitive verb *-loba*, "to disappear, be concealed from view" (White Fathers 1954:353). The text of Verbeek's (1990:192-99) interview always uses one or another form of *-loba* in the sense of "to disappear."

11. The many references to these ill-omened babies include Burton (1961:42) on the "unfit" Luba children; Melland (1923:50-51) on the Kaonde's *lutala*; Grévisse (1956-58,34:128-29 & 1967:355) and Roland (1963: 121) on the Sanga's *lutala* or *chinkula*; Doke (1931:138), Marchal (1933-34:84), and Lambo (1946:254) on the Lamba's *uwanakunamwa* or *lutala*; Stefaniszyn (1964:78-79, 151) and Lambo on the *lutala* of the Lala and their Ambo off-shoots; and the White Fathers (1954:40-41, 114) and Lambo on the Bemba's *buchinkula* and *chinkula*.

Grévisse (1967:355) says that, "The Yeke, by contrast, consider these infants as signs of good fortune, and attended them with extra care."

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