

FILM REVIEW

C.J. Obasi, dir. *Mami Wata*. 2023. 107 minutes. Pidgin. Nigeria. Fiery Film Company, Guguru Studios. Ifind Pictures & PalmWine Media. No price reported.

C.J. Obasi is an arthouse filmmaker with a mission to bring Nigerian cinema back to its traditional values with methods, and innovative techniques and stylistics not often found among the works of his contemporaries or pioneers. He cofounded the Surreal16 Collective, which created a manifesto to inspire a new kind of cinema that explores genres like fantasy, sci-fi, horror and crime, thus stimulating a consciousness in arthouse cinematic experimentation. Inspired by Ousmane Sembene, the father of African cinema, and committed to creating films which reflect the socioeconomic and political realities of Nigeria, Obasi is prominent for making the zero budget feature *Ojuju* (2014). The award-winning director interrogates unconventional, Afrocentric topics such as juju, myths, and traditional beliefs as evident in his films *O-Town* (2015), *Visions: Bruja* (2017), and *Juju Stories* (2021). In *Mami Wata*, he adapts the West African folktale of the water deity called mami wata (water goddess). His reconstruction of the mythic, the mysterious, and magical in *Mami Wata* is illustrative of what it means to demystify the water goddess (*Mmuo Mmiri* in Igbo and *Yemoja* in Yoruba contexts) as an evil and demonic creature causing harm to human beings in metaphysical terms. *Mami Wata* is an example of a cinematic piece that elevates and upholds traditional and cultural beliefs in African worldview. Obasi offers a visually compelling narrative, artistically delivered in black and white cinematography, in which he upholds and celebrates Africa's proud communal coexistence.

The concept of coexistence also shapes the film's visual narrative. An early scene depicts Mama Efe, her daughters, and community members uniting to support a mother whose child receives traditional medical attention. This collective display of care and solidarity embodies the African values of communal support, shared joy, and collective sorrow. The scene's visual composition reinforces this theme. Shot from a left angle, the medium frame captures the community's collective effort to revive the child. Each character occupies equal space, seated side by side and facing the camera. This framing echoes African-centered aesthetics, reminiscent of traditional African theatre.


Set in the modernity resistant, matriarchal village of Iyi, *Mami Wata* can be read as a metaphor for the three-way intergenerational conflict currently distressing Nigeria and many other nations witnessing an upsurge in youth populations. Mama Efe, the once powerful and respected, albeit traditional, Iyi leader and intermediary for the water goddess, is currently striving to manage looming crisis at home and in the community. At home, Mama Efe's biological




daughter, Zinwe, is disappointed at her mother's recent inefficiencies as an intermediary. She hopes, and urgently so, to take over and improve the old ways. Her adopted sister Prisca, empathizing with as well as sharing the sentiments of the increasingly dissatisfied villagers, pushes for an integration of modernity into their traditional modes of existence. When a stranger, Jasper, washes up on the shore of the river by which Iyi sits, and fraternizes with a rebellious group headed by Jabi, *Mami Wata* climaxes as the demand for a bridge between the traditional and modern takes a reprehensible turn. Mama Efe is murdered in a revolt, but the uprising which unseats her is marked with corruption and lack of direction, leading to a bigger clash.

Rather than portray the character of *Mami Wata* as a mere antithesis to Western or Christian doctrines, which encourages devotees to object to certain African cosmological practices and notions of tradition, Obasi presents the water goddess as a life-giving spirit available to humans who seek direction in their daily existence. Importantly, through *Mami Wata*, Obasi suggests that humans must imbibe a culture of being responsible for the safety and welfare of others. He offers his audience a story imbued with aesthetics and narrative structures that run counter to conventional (pioneer) Nollywood films of the 1990s such as *Living in Bondage*, *Blood Money* and other films which present metaphysical beings as architects of ritual killings in an occult sense to provide riches for disillusioned people who seek spiritual answers to real-life problems. Obasi celebrates a reality that exists in Africa's past, but to a large extent still applies today in the present, unfolding differently in the lives of the people and transcending African boundaries to resonate with audiences globally. He makes the idea of *mami wata* come alive and become relevant in our present, serving as a way of interrogating the wisdom behind individual and collective decisions.

In *Mami Wata*, Obasi presents the viewer with options on how people, irrespective of age, ethnic orientation, and creed can nurture ideas and ways to understand coexistence and mutual relations in a global context, especially through the safeguarding of one's cultural heritage and community values. Yet, one does not have to remain mired in static practices. Cultures can evolve while still maintaining the core values of their traditions. In keeping with the strict rules and guidelines of the Surreal 16 Collective manifesto, *Mami Wata* is a true African tale targeted especially at the African audience, hence its selection as Nigeria's official submission for the 2024 Oscars.

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