Dana Rush
University of Illinois

GLOBAL MAMI: "INDIA" AND MAMI WATA IN WEST AFRICAN VODU

E no zon agba, bo no yi kpon xu do dome a.
One does not contemplate the ocean with empty hands (Fon proverb).

Globalization is often thought of in terms of rapid advances of information technology and worldwide economic interdependence. Not as often are cultural or spiritual influences considered in the global equation. Seldom, if ever, are such influences or advances imagined to exist between India and West Africa. This essay addresses the incorporation of Indian imagery into contemporary Mami Wata *vodu* art and veneration in which the present-day concept of globalization, with its compelling notions of international boundaryless-ness, can be understood in a way which goes far beyond the visible, tangible, human domain into a world in which eternity and divine infinity are collapsed into the here and now in *vodu*.

In particular, this essay focuses on the imaginative power of India in Bénin and Togo, as seen in Indian chromolithographs used in *vodu* art and practice. Grounded within *vodu*'s open-ended, globally incorporative structure, I explore how and why the lithographs themselves have been absorbed into *vodu* practice through presenting a few contextual field stories of how a merchant, a pastor, an artist, and a priest have adopted and adapted these prints into their own local visual theologies. I close the essay with a quick look at how chromolithographs - both Hindu and Catholic - play a role in transatlantic Haitian Vodou, and in turn, how one image has returned from Haiti to Bénin.

The Sea = India

For the people living along the Atlantic coastline of Bénin and Togo, the sea -- with its force and intensity, potency and vigor, and unpredictable temperament -- is more than anthropomorphic: it is deistic. The sea gives and takes, it sustains life and it can kill. Most importantly, the sea offers the most fervent spiritual authority along the whole of this coastline. It is home to important primordial spirits such as those within the Hu/Agwe *vodu* complex, as well as to newly emerging spirits, such as those within the Mami Wata *vodu* complex and its associative grouping of India Spirits. Veneration of such sea spirits is based on a contingent relationship with imported chromolithographs in their extravagant proliferations, disseminations, and transformations within *vodu*.

In *vodu* thought, India Spirits are invariably from the sea and associated with an

idea of India, rendering "India" and the sea synonymous; they are known yet unknowable, a paradox mediated through art. Because the sea is as deep as one's own imagination, and vice versa, the breadth of India Spirits, associated India arts, and India experiences is inexhaustible. The Atlantic coastline of Bénin and Togo simultaneously effaces and defines the meeting of land and sea: that is, where Africa and "India" merge. It is a place where awareness can be Janus-faced, and where space and time can and do alter.

At the same time, this very coastline - liminal as it may be - is a gateway to centuries of very real transatlantic interactions and exchanges during the slave trade. In effect, along this West African seaboard, two simultaneous processes have occurred in which the sea functions as both a passageway to vast cultural and spiritual potential and an exceedingly lucrative portal to centuries of travel and commodities exchange.

There are many ideas of India. Trinidadian author V. S. Naipaul, for example, wrote in *India: A Million Mutinies Now:*

…I grew up with two ideas of India. The first idea…was about the kind of country from which my ancestors had come…. There was a second India. It balanced the first. This second India was the India of the independence movement, the India of greatness.… This was the identity I took to India on my first visit in 1962. And when I got there, I found it had no meaning in India.

Thus, "India" does not always refer to the peninsula region of South Asia, south of the Himalayas, between the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea, where Hindus and others live and revere their gods. For Naipaul, "India" represented the country of his ancestors, the India he grew up to revere. But upon arriving on Indian soil, the ideas he brought with him were not what he found. Likewise, in West African *vodu* art and thought, the idea of India goes beyond geography or theology. Rather, "India" within West African *vodu* offers boundless aesthetic and spiritual opportunities in both time and space, going beyond the empirical known world into the un-empirical, un-known world.

Chromolithography in India and West Africa

Lithography, or the process of making prints from a metal plate or a flat surface of stone, was invented in 1796 by Aloys Senefelder of Prague, and color lithography was in use in Europe by the middle of the nineteenth century (Smith 1997:6). In India, however, there was a long history of text printing before the advent and spread of lithographs. In 1556, the Portuguese intended to send the first printing press - via Goa, India - to missionaries in Abyssinia. After the Abyssinian emperor changed his mind about welcoming missionaries, the press remained in Goa where the first book was published on Indian soil in 1556 (Wadley 1995:21). From that point on, printed texts were used extensively by missionaries to spread Christianity in India. Then, in the nineteenth century, print technology became a major factor in the transmission of Hindu and Muslim religious traditions through written text. Chromolithograph presses were operating in India by the late nineteenth century, and color prints, generated from multiple stone blocks, began circulating throughout the subcontinent around the same time. Raja Ravi Varma (1848-

1906), a south Indian portrait and landscape painter, is usually cited as the principal influence in the emergence of India's popular religious poster and calendar art. He not only painted popular portrayals of gods, goddesses, and legendary episodes, but he is also credited with setting up the first chromolithographic press in Bombay in 1891 (Inglis 1995:58). In fact, before 1900 India had several chromolithographic presses, one of which is the press of Hem Chander Bhargava and Company in Chadni Chowk, Dehli, which has been continuously printing chromolithographs of religious subjects for over one hundred years (Wadley 1995:22).

How and when did chromolithographs arrive in West Africa and become a part of the visual theology of *vodu*? The potential for chromolithographs to have been seen in West Africa began shortly after the first color reproductions were executed in Bombay in 1891 (Inglis 1995:22). It is critical, however, to note that the presence of Indian commodities in West Africa dates back to the fifteenth century when Portuguese sea commanders and merchants of the British and Dutch East India Company began trading and selling Indian cloth between India and coastal West Africa (Eicher and Erekosima 1996). Consequently, the sea bordering this coast has been associated with foreign wealth and power since the fifteenth century. Then, the institution of colonial empires and increasing trade, connecting Africa with both East and West, brought about the quick spread of images that were incorporated into West African artistic and religious expression beginning as early as the late nineteenth century. According to Henry Drewal, when Indian merchants set up firms along the West African coast around World War I, West African peoples began observing aspects of Hindu religious practice such as that of the Gujeratis, devotees of Lakshmi, the Hindu goddess of wealth and patroness of merchants (Drewal 1988:174-76). The contemporary appeal of Indian gods to West Africans led to a burgeoning African market in Indian prints. The current availability, however, has declined in the late twentieth to early twenty-first centuries, which has, in turn, enhanced the prints' value.

Elaborately detailed Indian chromolithographs have been incorporated into the religious system of *vodu* precisely because of the open-ended structures and richly suggestive imagery that allow them to embody wildly diverse ideas, themes, beliefs, histories, and legends in *vodu* art and thought. The prints themselves serve as both instructions and vehicles of divine worship; they suggest rules of conduct, recount legendary narratives, and act as objects of adoration. The specific animals, foods, drinks, jewelry, body markings, and accoutrements within these chromolithographs have become sacred to the *vodu* spirits represented. Although, at some point, these images were newly seen, they have been approached in *vodu* as something that was already known and understood; as something already familiar within the *vodu* pantheon. These Indian gods have not been combined with, but rather they are, local gods.

Form and meaning in *vodu* chromolithographs

In the world of *vodu*, the seemingly static nature of a mass-produced image is misleading. Although a chromolithograph used in *vodu* may appear "finished,"

it continues to change in both form and meaning: it can expand in form from a two-dimensional image into three-dimensional spiritual and artistic presences in shrines, sculptures, and temple paintings; and a three-dimensional shrine can be represented by a chromolithograph as an ethereally collapsed ready-made two-dimensional shrine. Visual and spiritual saturation in an economical and portable form is the open-ended potential of chromolithographic art.

Clearly, chromolithographs are outwardly mobile in that they are easily transported, copied, and reproduced. It is precisely this quality that allows for quick external proliferation. Equally important is the fact that chromolithographs are inwardly mobile: their inherent forms and meanings do not remain stationary, and thus accumulate multiple readings. The same chromolithograph easily attracts a second and third audience and, with each audience, a new range of interpretations and conventions beyond, for example, the first-order Hindu reading of the same image. Although various gods in separate *vodu* compounds may derive from the same Hindu image, the gods, the images, and the practitioners' interpretations take on lives of their own. Similar images appear in different *vodu* settings with different names. In most cases, the images are unrelated in any other way than appearance. Arguments among *vodu* priests and priestesses in different *vodu* compounds ensue over "correct" appellation and use of images in religious practice, while the images in dispute are hardly, if ever, local in origin. Admittedly, there is overlap and grounds for potential confusion. However, what appears at first glance to be confusion can and likely will become multi-layered fusion.

The Images of India Spirits

Henry Drewal has documented the earliest evidence to date of the incorporation of a foreign printed image into a local religious vocabulary in West Africa. He has traced the history of the most popular representation of Mami Wata, the African water spirit-cum-seductress, which was based on a late nineteenth century chromolithograph of a European painting depicting a snake charmer in a German (Drewal 1988, 1996; Salmons 1977). Dating from circa 1885, the chromolithograph was reprinted in large numbers in India and England and distributed widely in sub-Saharan West Africa. The edition that Drewal illustrates was printed in Bombay by the Shree Ram Calendar Company in 1955 to copy an earlier version provided by a trader in Kumasi, Ghana (1988:169, fig. 7). During 1955-1956 twelve thousand copies (10" x 14") were sent to this and another trader in Kumasi (Drewal 1988:183, fn 6). The image has since been reproduced even more widely and has been found in the Dominican Republic and Haiti (Houlberg 1996: 30-35, 101), as well as in botánicas throughout the United States in the form of printed images, statues, candles, and pendants (see fig. pag. 20).

Although by far the most popular chromolithograph, the image of the snake charmer is by no means the only print found in West African religious practice. So are chromolithographs of figures from an ancient Indian epic, the Ramayana, other Hindu lore, or religious history, Hindu and otherwise, including prints of Rama, Sita, Hanuman, Shiva, Dattatreya, Hare Krishnas, Shirdi Sai Baba, Buddha, Guru Nanak, al-Buraq, the Pope, Eve, Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, and va-

rious Christian saints. Secular images such as animals and floral arrangements are common as well.

In the 1990s, a particular market stand in the Asigamé Market in Lomé, Togo within view of the Atlantic coast was a "hot spot" for purchasing Indian prints at that time. People used to travel there from the bordering countries of Bénin and Ghana to seek out India spirit prints from Mama Sikavi, the very discerning market woman who kept her stand full to overflowing with wide varieties of constantly changing images (Fig. 1).

It was Mama Sikavi who helped me begin to understand that along this coastal area the sea is not just an apt metaphor for India; the sea is India, or an "idea" of India. When I asked her where she located her images, she would respond either "the sea" or "India." Initially, I thought she was being evasive, but I grew to recognize that "the sea" and "India" are synonymous, and represented to her a place that is unknowable yet a place with which she felt at one because it offered her spiritual and monetary security.

Mama Sikavi also sold decorative promotional calendars that were originally created as a form of advertising within both Indian and Indian diaspora communities in West Africa. She removed the images from the calendars appended to the bottom of the print, though the name of the business was still present on the images themselves. These prints, however, have second and third order significances within *vodu* artistic and spiritual sensibilities: the super-abundance of flowers, gold, jewels, coins, and other luxurious items surrounding the spiritually charged deities depicted in these prints function as links into particular *vodu* sensibilities, especially those of Mami Wata, the *vodu* of wealth and beauty who commands the sea and serves as a source of potential wealth, both religious and economic.

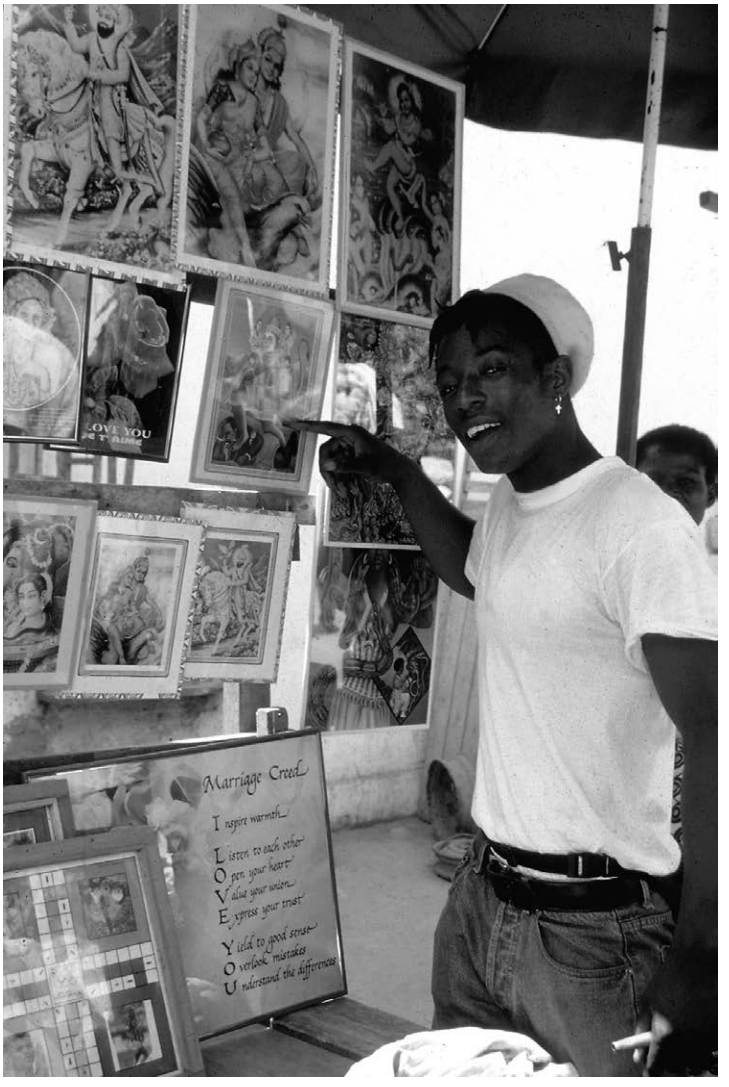

Fig. 1 - Balbi Gadoh pointing to a chromolithograph of Hanuman. Sigamé market in Lomé, Togo. 1996. Photo Dana Rush

Indeed, the images of Indian spirits that Mama Sikavi sold were all interpreted as *vodu* spirits. In Figure 1, above the chromolithograph to which the young man points, is a Hindu print that I thought depicted Krishna with his principal paramour Rhadha. Mama Sikavi corrected me, stating that I was looking at Mawu-Lisa, the androgynous dual deity in the *vodu* pantheon. She also said that the print to the left is Ablolisodji, or Ablo spirit on a horse, not what I recognized as the Sikh image of Guru Gobind Singh Ji. The print to the right is Edan, the serpent *vodu*, not the Hindu image which I incorrectly identified as Krishna playing a flu-

te while dancing on the dangerous snake Kaliya. During another visit Mama Sikavi pointed out the *vodu* spirit Confusci, from an image of Buddha, as well as a print of Mami Sika, close to her own name meaning "Mother of Gold," from the Hindu image of the Durga.

One day while I was talking to Mama Sikavi, she signaled for me to look down the overcrowded market street as a chauffeur driven, brand-new Mercedes slowly approached. She said quietly "kpon", or "watch this." I stepped aside and watched. The car pulled up in front of the market stand, and the Togolese chauffeur stepped out and opened the back doors. A magnificently adorned Indian woman stepped out of one side and her well-dressed husband stepped out of the other. They quickly examined the chromolithographs on display and seemed to have a rather serious discussion. The man removed two images of Ganesh, handed them to his wife, and walked over to Sikavi, giving her a 10,000 CFA bill ($20). Usually customers haggle for a price between 500 CFA and 2500 CFA (500 CFA = $1) for one print. The whole transaction was completed in less than five minutes.

Mama Sikavi later explained to me that Indians are very wealthy, and that they paid whatever she asked because they needed the powers of their gods to remain wealthy. She said that Indians were the only people in the world who can control the sea. She attempted to clarify this by explaining that they had very important ritual ceremonies at the beach. The normally quiet Mama Sikavi continued excitedly without being prompted. She said that she knew when they had "made an important ceremony" [sacrificed animals] at the beach because they wore a red spot of animal blood on their foreheads. The way she exoticized the Indians was very similar to how Europeans, from early travelers' reports to the present-day guidebooks, have been known to exoticize *vodu*. When I returned to Lomé in 2005, Mama Sikavi was gone. After successfully working the same market stand for close to twenty years, she had retired in 2004 (personal communication, market sellers at Asigamé Market, Lomé, Togo, January 2005).

The Pastor's India Prints

Directly facing the ocean, around the corner from where Sikavi used to sell posters, and tucked back between shoe merchants, I found a little stand where chromolithographs could be purchased. I spoke with Edouard, the Togolese merchant who was very excited to answer my questions regarding his India prints. In his display, Edouard pointed to a print of Krishna standing on top of snakes that formed a wave over his head. As with Sikavi, he called the spirit Edan, the snake *vodu*. However, when Edouard pointed to another lithograph of a four-armed Krishna with crossed leg, sitting on Kaliya in the form of a throne of coiled snakes, he called the spirit Aida Wedo. Both India Spirits derive from Dan Aida Wedo, the rainbow serpent *vodu*. He then pointed to the Mexican Virgin of Guadeloupe. He explained that such an image is often bought by Christians because "they" believe that she is the mother of Jesus. I asked him what he thought. He explained that she might very well be Jesus' mother, but so too are Mami Wata and Lakshmi.

When I asked Edouard the source of his posters, he became quiet. Once I assured him that I was interested in his

supplier purely for research purposes, he told me of "the pastor" whose church was in the Hedjranawoê neighborhood on the outskirts of Lomé proper, also known as Lomé 2. Edouard whispered that the pastor had been to India many times, was the only person in Lomé who could exorcise India Spirits, and had great healing powers. Edouard also noted that the pastor traveled a lot and was difficult to pin down.

I had never been to Lomé 2, so I enlisted a friend who had been born and raised in Lomé to help me in my exploration of Lomé 2. No one we questioned knew anything about the so-called pastor. We decided to stop at a market to look around and maybe find some India prints. No prints. After a hot, dusty, unsuccessful, exhausting day, we felt lucky to find an empty taxi to take us back into the city. We were joking about the mysterious pastor "qui n'existe pas" when the taxi driver interrupted us and asked if we were looking for the "Le Pasteur de Nouvel Jerusalem?" We were not quite sure what we were looking for but decided to let the driver take us to this pastor.

This pastor's house was marked with a large sign painting covered with Christian iconography plus the promising exhortation: "Pour Tous Vos Problemes Consultez Le Pasteur de Nouvel Jerusalem." We were not encouraged by the absence of Hindu iconography on his sign, but we still opened the heavy gate and walked inside. Several people, in the outdoor courtyard of his compound, were several people waiting to see the pastor. We learned that some people had been waiting for a consultation since early in the morning. We sat down and were immediately served water and offered something to eat. About an hour later, as evening approached, we decided to head back to Lomé, and return early the next morning.

We arrived early, but it was not until three o'clock that the pastor was ready to see us. His office was filled with books, images, and statues, mostly Christian, but there was a small Hindu and Muslim presence, which he refused to address when questioned. We talked for over an hour yet he continually refused to acknowledge anything having to do with India, India Spirits, Indian posters, or travel to India. He also refused to grant me permission to photograph. I told him about the chromolithographs I had been investigating, and he perked up momentarily, but his enthusiasm was short-lived.

He invited us back multiple times, though we continued to make little progress. During one visit, I commented on a small image in his office: that of Sathya Sai Baba, the enormously popular Indian guru, religious leader, and philosopher. The pastor seemed shocked, and immediately said: "How do you know [about] Sai Baba?" I explained that I had read a few books, but I did not know much. Unexpectedly, he opened his desk drawer and pulled out a thick stack of glossy posters he had just received from India; all of Shiva, one of the oldest gods of India. He still would not tell me anything about the prints except that they were shipped to him from India.

He then stood up, opened the back door, and told us to follow him down an open-air hallway leading to the far end of his compound. He stopped to open a door that had multiple bolt locks, reached in to turn the lights on, and invited us to follow him in. He led us into a sitting room devoted entirely to Shiva but very dimly illuminated by cords of multi-colored lights. There were chromolithographs

framed and hung on next to larger-than-life wall paintings of Shiva on the bluish-green walls; there were large vases filled with peacock feathers and bright artificial flowers, a multitude of Shiva statues, stuffed animal tigers and carved tigers, as well as other objects I was unable to see very clearly. He did not invite us to sit down, but rather escorted us out, turned off the lights, re-bolted the door back and took us back into his office.

I was able to ask at least a few questions about his devotion to Shiva, his Shiva room, and his chromolithographs in general. The pastor was indeed a healer, but he was more of an international businessman who traded goods with India, and visited there often. He fell sick one time while traveling in India, and was healed in a Shiva temple. He had never known Shiva before, but he decided to devote his life to Shiva veneration, albeit with more *vodu* precepts than either Hindu or Christian. In parting, I asked him what he planned to do with his large stack of Shiva prints. He said that they were all for Shiva, and politely told me that I had enough information for one day. That was the last time I spoke with him. He left the country on an extended business trip, and I was never able to catch up with him again.

I returned to the Sigamé market in Lomé to visit with Edouard. I told him how difficult it was to engage in conversation with the pastor, and that he would not admit to supplying prints to local markets. Edouard said that the pastor did not have time to distribute the prints himself, but rather sent his people to do so. I told Edouard that the pastor never talked about exorcising "India Spirits." Edouard said that he had personally learned a lot from the pastor who taught him that India Spirits are the most powerful spirits in the world - more powerful than *vodu*, more powerful than Jesus. He taught Edouard that these powerful spirits come from the sea. I asked if he was referring to the Indian Ocean. He looked at me quizzically, then he pointed to the Atlantic Ocean directly across from his market stand and repeated: "They come from the sea."

Hindu images in Mami Wata *vodu*

Along coastal Bénin and Togo, Mami Wata is much more than a single spirit: she is an entire pantheon. For any new problem or situation that arises needing spiritual intervention or guidance, a new Mami Wata spirit arises from the sea. Life's recently introduced or previously unfamiliar uncertainties (such as birth control, abortion, prostitution, and homosexuality) are often embraced and made sense of through Hindu imagery used in Mami Wata religious practice.

The Mamisi, wives or devotees of Mami Wata (*-isi;* from *asi,* wife in Fon), not only worship their own demanding spirits from the sea, and new spirits addressing the needs of a quickly changing society, but they must also venerate the principal gods found in most *vodu* houses such as Gu, Sakpata, Heviosso, Tohosu, and Hohovi. They have found an ingenious way to do so, with the aesthetic and spiritual flair that has come to be expected of Mami Wata devotees. They have incorporated parts of the Hindu pantheon into the worship of these main gods who are represented by lavish Hindu chromolithographs reproduced on temple walls, and placed in Mami Wata shrines. Some examples of this process can be seen in the work of one artist in particular.

Joseph Kossivi Ahiator and his India Spirits

The rainbow serpent *vodu*, Dan Aida Wedo, arches over, unites, and connects a particular grouping of Mami Wata spirits envisioned by Ghanaian artist Joseph Kossivi Ahiator, and known collectively within coastal *vodu* as "India Spirits." His rainbow serpent, for that reason, forges links between and among Africa, India, and the sea. In most of Ahiator's incorporations of Indian imagery into contemporary Mami Wata art and thought, Dan Aida Wedo serves as the umbrella to make possible all of these inter-oceanic connections. That is, the multivalent trope of the rainbow serpent, with its implied regenerative elasticity, allows for the inspired synthesis of "India" into the organic world of Mami Wata.

Ahiator is the most sought-after India spirit temple painter in Bénin, Togo, and Ghana. He explains his proclivities toward the sea as a result of having been born with India Spirits and of visiting India often; sometimes in his dreams, sometimes while at the beach along the Atlantic coast. When commissioned to paint a Mami Wata *vodu* temple, Ahiator consults his own array of chromolithographs and then elaborates the images based on his own dreams and on the dreams and desires of the temple owner. The representations of a particular set of spirits within the Mami Wata pantheon that Ahiator has envisioned and executed are all recognizably derived from Hindu chromolithographs. He generally places a combination of deities from this particular set of spirits under the protective arch of Dan Aida Wedo. Such conflation is based on the ur-image of Mami Wata (see Fig. 1 pag. 20 in this volume), that itself derived from the snake charmer chromolithograph. A discussion of some local-cum-India Spirits painted by Ahiator follows.

Under Dan's Rainbow

Figure 2 shows the right side of a large Mami Wata mural that was one of the first multiple India spirit murals Ahiator ever painted, in Cotonou in the early 1990s. I will discuss only the images on the right side of the mural here, because the left side does not include India Spirits. Near the center of the right-hand portion is the powerful half-animal, half-human super-being called Gniblin Egu, which can be translated as "cow-person" of Egu in Mina. Gniblin is famous for his power of Egu, the Mina cognate of the Yoruba Ogun, and the Fon Gu, deities of iron, war, and technology. Gniblin Egu is credited with teaching iron technology to people. Although Gniblin Egu comes from the sea, Mami Wata adepts hold that he lives on the road and is associated with traffic accidents. He can travel anywhere and his fiery tail is seen as he flies through the air. If he is angry, he can burn a whole city, and he can use his tail to beat enemies.

Hanuman/Gnibin Egu

The temple painting of Gniblin Egu is based upon a chromolithograph of the monkey-king, Hanuman, a popular Indian hero who became a god in the ancient Hindu epic, the *Ramayana* (Fig. 3). This image shows Hanuman responding to the challenge that he does not have the power to carry the essence of Prince Rama (or Sita) with him wherever he goes. Hanuman has torn open his chest and, to

Fig. 2 - Wall mural of "India Spirits" painted by Joseph Kossivi Ahiator. Cotonou, Bénin. 1996. Photo Dana Rush

Fig. 3 - Chromolithograph of Hanuman. Private collection. Photo Dana Rush

the bewilderment of his onlookers, reveals Rama and Sita within. Similarly, as shown in the Ahiator mural, Gniblin Egu tore open his chest to demonstrate that he carries his deceased parents with him at all times, thus proving his eternal respect for them. Given the importance of ancestral veneration among Fon and Mina peoples, Gniblin Egu is both a *vodu* spirit and an ancestral shrine.

Ganesh/Tohosu

To the right of Gniblin Egu is Tohosu Amlina (center of Fig. 2). Tohosu is the Fon *vodu* of royalty, human deformations, lakes, and streams. Amlina means "strange" in Mina. The painting of Tohosu is based upon a Hindu chromolithograph of Ganesh, the elephant-headed, pot-bellied Hindu god of thresholds, beginnings, and wisdom who removes obstacles. Although he has only one tusk, he has four arms in which he holds a shell, a discus, a club, and a water lily. His means of transportation is a rat, here depicted in front of him. The image of Ganesh visually encapsulates the Fon spirit of Tohosu: royal (surrounded

by wealth, and corpulent from luxurious dining) and super-human (a human with an elephant's head and four arms).

This most popular of Hindu deities is also featured in chromolithographic images. The particular image of Ganesh that inspired this painting has directly influenced the Mami Wata worship of Tohosu Amlina. A Mamisi with the spirit of Tohosu Amlina may never kill rats, for this creature - depicted in the foreground of Hindu lithographs and *vodu* temple paintings - has become sacred to the spirit's devotees. So, not only do Hindu chromolithographs suggest and reify characteristics already inherent in local gods, but they also introduce, influence, and change already established, albeit organic, religious practice.

Shiva/Mami Dan.

To the right of Tohosu in Ahiator's mural is Mami Dan, also called Akpan, known to be as old as the sea, whose job it is to clear the path for Mami Wata. Mami Dan was born, and is always depicted, with snakes draped around his neck. This depiction comes directly from one of the best known illustrations of Shiva, called Shiva-Dakshina-Murti or Mahayogi (Fig. 4). In Brahamic theology, Shiva is the third member of the divine Trinity of Creator-Preserver-Destroyer, and although his name means "the friendly one," he is also the Lord of Destruction. Similarly, the Mina name Akpan means "the one with the bad temper."

The Hindu chromolithograph shows Shiva as an ascetic in deep meditation atop the Himalayas. He is wearing a simple loincloth and is seated on a tiger skin, which Mamisi say is the panther who clears the path for Mami Dan, and in turn, Mami Wata. In northern India, Shiva always has a cobra around his neck and a trident, drum and water jug nearby, all of which also surround Mami Dan in the Mami Wata temple painting. Mamisi call the trident apia, which is reproduced as a protective tattoo pattern and drawn on the earth with sacred powders. Apia tridents are also carried as ritual paraphernalia which, when not in active use, are stored in Mami Wata shrines.

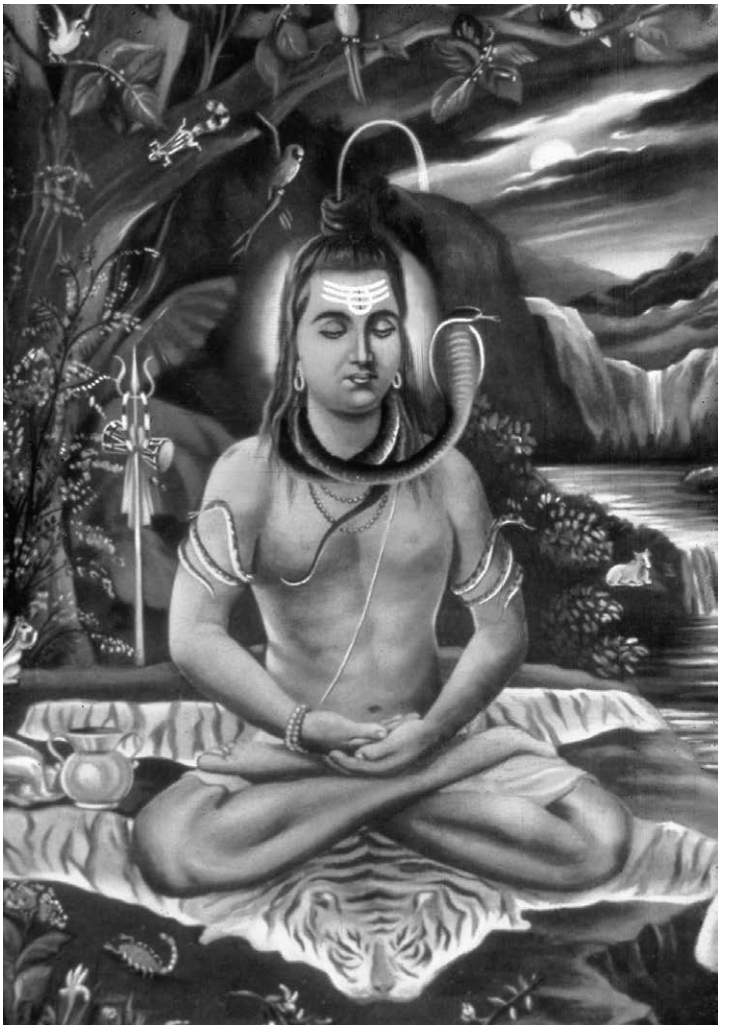

Fig. 4 - Chromolithograph of Shiva. Private collection. Photo Dana Rush

Dattatreya/Densu

Densu, commonly known as Mami Wata's husband, is painted at the far right side of the mural, originating directly from the Indian chromolithograph of Dattatreya, the Triple Giver (Fig. 5).

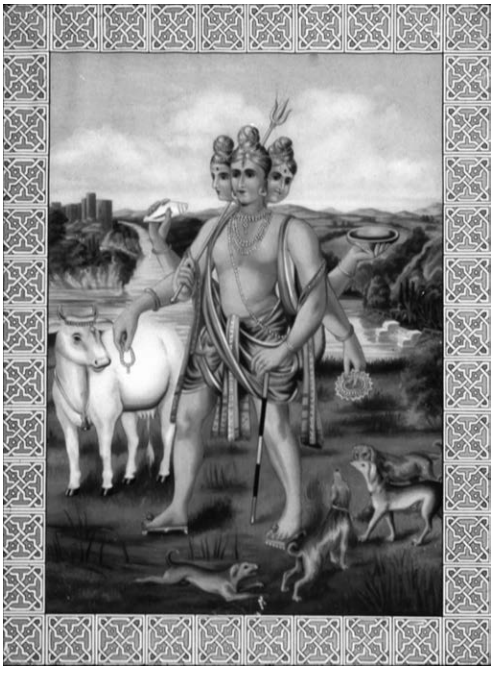

Fig. 5 - Chromolithograph of Dattadreya. Private collection. Photo Dana Rush

Practically reaching his/her tongue/s to the disc in one of Densu's hands, the double Dan Aida Wedo in the mural also connects sea to land, and land to sea, Africa to India.

Sikhism and Islam within Mami Wata India Spirits

On the ceiling directly in front of this wall mural, Ahiator painted another religious entity from India, based on a lithograph of Guru Nanak, the founder of India's Sikh religion. He was born into a Punjabi Hindu family in 1469, and became the voice of Akal Purakh, the Sikh name for god. However, in Ahiator's representation, he is named "Guru Nanak, Etron Opé Amegan," or big chief of the Etron, a *vodu* society with Islamic origins, and sometimes associated with Mami Wata (Fig. 6). In the 1950s, according Ahiator, Guru Nanak arrived on the beach in Ouidah, Bénin, directly from India in an underwater sea lorry. To this day, he still lives in India and along the Ouidah coastline, and only surfaces for important events.

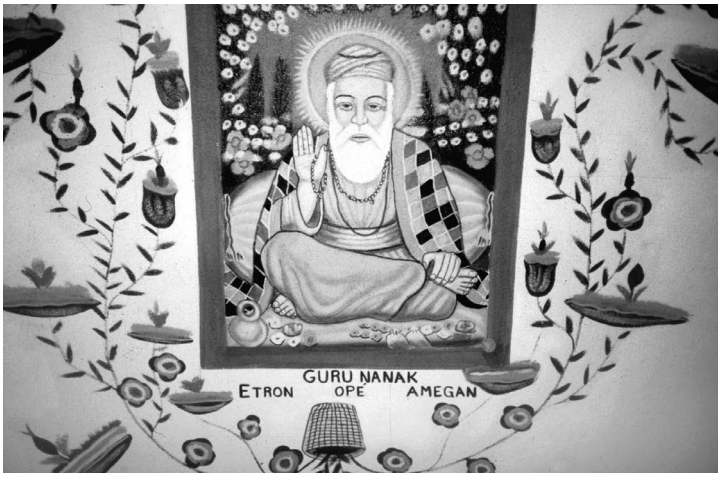

Fig. 6 - Ceiling painting of Guru Nanak Etron Opé Amegan by Joseph Kossivi Ahiator. Cotonou, Bénin. 1996. Photo Dana Rush

In addition to Guru Nanak, Ahiator brings another world religious icon into his Mami Wata/India Spirits repertoire. In an Etron temple in Lomé, Togo, Ahiator painted a very powerful Mami Wata, who not only has command of the earth and the ocean, but has great power in the sky as well (Fig. 7). This Mami Sodji (Mami on horse) derives from a chromolithograph of al-Buraq, the winged and female-headed horse upon which Mohammad flew from Mecca to Jerusalem.

Indian King of Mami Wata

Ahiator has quite recently reincorporated two Indian images from his mental archive into his India spirit *vodu* corpus. In January 2005, he had very vivid dreams of a nineteen-headed Indian King spirit dancing with a nine-headed Indian Queen spirit. He then experienced the same visuals of these figures swimming with him in the ocean. Compelled to paint them, he first painted the King, whom he calls the King of Mami Wata (Fig. 8), under the ever-present rainbow serpent. Unfortunately, Ahiator does not remember the India Spirit name of the nineteen-headed god, as the image was

Fig. 7 - Wall painting of al-Buraq/Mami Wata. Lomé, Togo, 1996. Photo Dana Rush

last shown to him in 1977. However, it is possible that the print was a chromo-lithographic version Virat Swaroop, or Vishnu, in Universal Form. The queen, whom he recalls is named NaKrishna, is likely derived from a multi-headed print of Ravanna.

Mami Wata and Dan: Serpent Appeal

According to one of Melville Herskovits' informants, "Da[n] is the oldest *vodu* of Whydah [Ouidah] and Porto Novo, the first inhabitant of these places" (1938:253, fn 3). In a myth recorded by

Fig. 8 - Painting on canvas of King of Mami Wata by Joseph Kossivi Ahiator, Aflao, Ghana, 2005. Photo Dana Rush

Herskovits, Dan is primordial: "when the Creator began forming the world as it exists today, he was carried everywhere in the mouth of Aido-Wedo, the serpent" (ibid, 248-249). It is thus clear that Dan Aida Wedo existed long before Mami Wata and her proliferation of chromolithographic images surfaced. How, then, did they merge so immaculately? They both possess numerous analogous characteristics, but most noteworthy is that both Dan Aida Wedo and Mami Wata embody the arbitrary nature of power and wealth. They are fickle; that is, unpredictably, they may opt to bestow riches in a manner that appears haphazard, while, at once, they may seize what they had once given, with no warning. The ever-present iridescent serpent in the most widespread image of Mami Wata is Dan Aida Wedo. The visual conflation is seamless.

Not only does this ubiquitous rainbow serpent link coastal West Africa with India, via the sea, but the African Dan Aida Wedo also inextricably joins the Caribbean and the Americas. The reflection of the arching rainbow serpent over the Atlantic Ocean continually re-creates Dan Aida Wedo eternally swallowing its own tail. Anthropologist specializing in Haitian *vodu*, Karen McCarthy Brown, notes, "In Haiti, Aido Hwedo has become Ayida Wedo, the wife of Danbala. Together, the two (both are serpents and rainbows) arch over the broad ocean. Alternately, the rainbow and its reflection in the water below turn the serpent into a circle" (Brown 2001 [1991]:274). According to Brown, this ceaselessly circling rainbow serpent connects Haitians, inextricably, to their long lost transatlantic ancestors. The snake swallowing its own tail has become a transatlantic trope for protection, regeneration, and connection. That is, every time we witness a multicolored arc formed by the refraction of the sun's ray in a rainfall's mist, we are witness to and are protected by Dan Aida Wedo's majestic instantaneity on both sides of the Atlantic.

Clearly, the integration of Indian images into Ahiator's artistic repertoire, in union with multifaceted spiritual fervor, attests to the ongoing, eternally incorporative sensibilities of Mami Wata art and thought. Hindu influence, mixed into local religious systems and combined with other foreign inspirations, extends well into Nigeria as well. Anthropologist Joseph Nevadomsky photographed a chromolithograph of Shiva in a Mami Wata shrine in Benin City, Nigeria, as well as a two-headed, double-haloed female Jesus with a snake around his/her waist held up in two of four arms. The foreheads of Jesus are graced with Hindu bindi spots (1997:58, fig. 4). But the Hindu presence in Mami Wata *vodu* sometimes comes not only from a lithographic imagistic influence but directly from objects imported from the country of India, as demonstrated below.

Deja Vu: Aneho's Mami Wata India Priest

Aneho, Togo, a coastal town known for its high concentration of Mami Wata devotees, also boasts a strong and longstanding tradition of India Spirits associated with Mami Wata. After a few unremarkable exploratory visits to Aneho, I happened upon an extraordinary *vodu* temple. Inside, basreliefs of Shiva and Lakshmi flank the doorway that allows entrance to the heart of Mami Wata *vodu* priest Gilbert Attissou's compound. He was extremely kind and

welcoming, and appeared delighted to answer any of my questions about the presence of "India" in his compound. He offered me water and a chair, and told me he would be right back.

About ten minutes later, Attissou emerged from a room holding a beautiful Shiva trident, and wearing his hand painted Shiva cloth. He then explained the history of his trident, which he referred to as his apia. He bought it in the early 1960s, and said it was his first purchase from an Indian boutique in Lomé, Togo. He said he was always drawn to Indian gods, and their power to control the sea. He bought whatever he could afford - objects and images - in Indian boutiques and forged friendships with the Indian merchants. At present, Indian art and artifacts, outside of the *vodu* context, are primarily found within the Indian expatriate communities generally in large cities such at Lomé, Togo and Cotonou, Bénin. However, Attissou lamented that most of his Indian friends had returned to India long ago because of their economic troubles in Togo.

Attissou also said that during the 1960s, he spent hours upon hours at the beach where he would journey to 'India,' and find himself surrounded by "beautiful things." He would spend months at a time in 'India,' during a few hours at the beach. He reported these "voyages" to his Christian family, and as Attissou's obsession with the sea and his curious behavior grew, his family took him to a Christian Celeste church in order to exorcise these "demonic" spirits from his system. Christian Celeste, however, deemed his India Spirits so powerful that they advised him to nurture them rather than eliminate them. Thus he began incorporating Indian items into his own Mami Wata veneration.

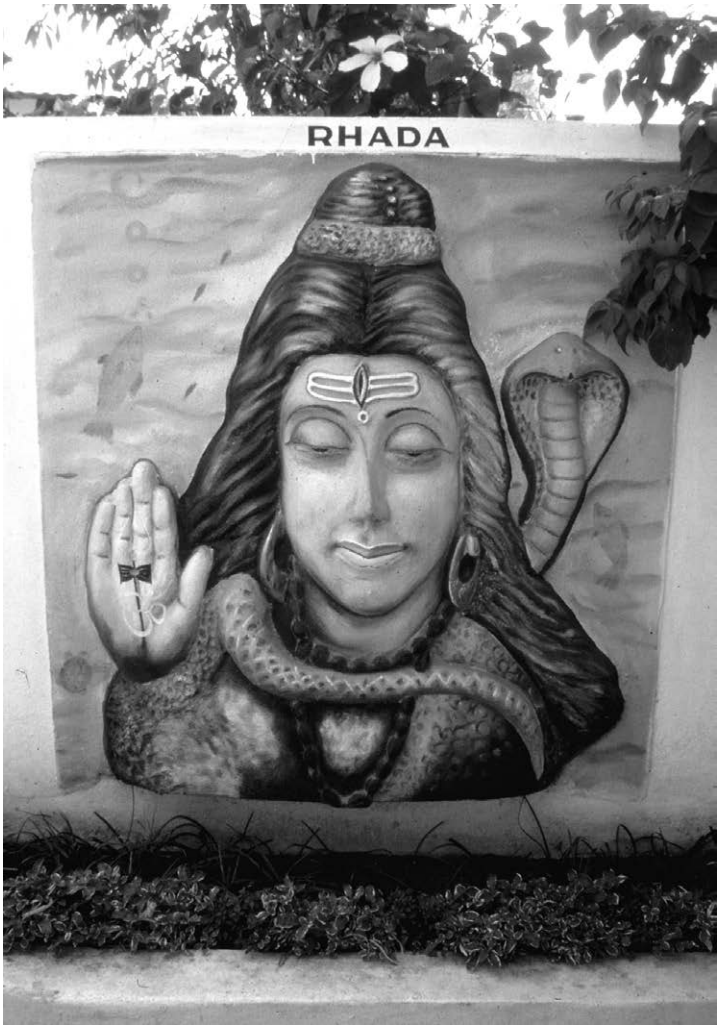

Fig. 9 - Bas-relief of Shiva/Rhada. Aneho, Togo. 1999. Photo Dana Rush

Attissou suggested a tour of his compound. We began with the bas-relief of Shiva outside of the main courtyard entrance (Fig. 9). He explained that "RADA," painted at the top of the wall composition, is one of the many names given to Shiva because, as with most *vodu* spirits, there are times when it is inappropriate to state the spirit name out right. I noticed that the background of Shiva was light blue, and that there were fish swimming in this blue backdrop. "Is he underwater?" I asked. "Yes," he responded, "he is in India." We looked at various other wall paintings throughout his compound, mainly of Shiva and Lakshmi, while Attissou explained that Shiva is king of the underwater world and Lakshmi is a version of Mami Wata. Attissou then showed me his shrine dedicated to Shiva. What appeared to be a very typical *vodu* shrine was, in fact, de-

Fig. 10 - Mami Wata shrine room, Aneho, Togo, 1999. Photo Dana Rush

dicated to Nana-Yo, one of the many *vodu* names for Shiva. In front of the shrine's door there was a carved yoni receptacle representing the female principle and origin of Hindu creation, which was there to receive offerings.

From there, Attisou led me across the compound into a shrine room with four fully decorated walls covered with spirit paintings that seemed to be based on some of the smaller Hindu statues and chromolithographs mounted on the walls next to the paintings. Lord Shiva and Lakshmi were present, but they were surrounded by other multi-limbed spirits in both two- and three dimensions, including various renderings of Mami Wata and her three-headed husband, Densu. Attissou explained that the walls in this room called "India" were blue because, once again, we were underwater.

On the blue walls of this India room, I noticed a handful of nicely framed black and white photos. They reminded me of a handful of photographs in Gert Chesi's 1979 book *Voodoo: Africa's Secret Power,* showing the first Indian chromolithographs I had ever seen in a *vodu* context. Written in the form of a diary, this coffee-table book is illustrated with astonishingly beautiful photographs of *vodu* practice along coastal Bénin and Togo, with a brief jaunt to Haiti. Chesi visited Mami Wata compounds in and around Lomé, Togo in the 1970s. He photographed people, ceremonies, and shrines, one of which stood out due to its mélange of India-produced statuettes and chromolithographs of Hindu gods such as Shiva, Lakshmi, Durga, Krishna, and Dattatreya. I asked Attissou if he had ever seen Chesi's book. His eyes lit up and he said "That is me!" as he pointed to a black and white photo. This photo we were examining, like other framed photos in Attisou's India room, was shot by Chesi in the late 1970s, though most of them did not make the final cut for the book. Attissou was delighted that I recognized him from the book. He then showed me objects in his shrines and on his walls that were also in the photos.

I followed Attissou through another doorway, leading into an even more ostentatious shrine room brimming with more posters of Indian gods, perfumes, powders, alcohol, candles, statuettes, stuffed, plastic and ceramic animals, and other offerings (Fig. 10). This extravagant shrine room may appear too obvious, repetitive, and artificial to be taken seriously by some

audiences. Filled with imported objects, however, it is subtle and powerful within *vodu* aesthetic sensibilities. In comparison to the vibrant color and noises of a West African market, these images and objects appear pale, yet remain potent; they have power and presence, and most importantly, they work; they make things happen. Within *vodu*, these items are spiritual status symbols. This is religious imagery that has reached a high level of commodification, indeed, but on two very different levels: (1) it represents a considerable financial investment on the part of the devotee, and (2) it offers access to powers unattainable through any other means. This is a spiritual marketplace, and India Spirits, themselves, reflect the arbitrary nature of power and wealth.

Transatlantica: Chromolithograph as Crux

Chromolithographs represented, and continue to represent, the potential of *vodu* as a means of expression, assertion, creativity, and faith. They are adoptable and adaptable to all circumstances, from the worst to the best, on both sides of the Atlantic. Indeed, in conjunction with deep spiritual conviction, chromolithographs have been a central and critical feature in the maintenance and proliferation of African-derived religious systems throughout the Americas. The spread of chromolithographic imagery in African diasporic communities is commonly attributed to the stratagem of masking the identities of proscribed African deities. But more than simply an ubiquitous phenomenon in response to oppression, and a means of problem solving under oppressive government regimes, chromolithographs in these communities offered a mechanism for articulating deep-seated, centuries-strong African religious sensibilities in a manner stemming from a firmly established African precedent – that of the "unfinished aesthetic." For example, Donald Cosentino writes that the Catholic chromolithographs of St. James, which are used to represent Haiti's *vodu* Sen Jak, "constitute the single most important contemporary source for the elaboration of Ogou [Sen Jak's African counterpart] theology" (1995:253). While Hindu images are sometimes difficult to locate in Bénin and Togo, the pervasiveness in Haiti of various types of chromolithographic imagery - particularly Catholic - produced and continues to maintain ritual effectiveness in Haitian *vodu*.

From Aziri to Ezuli to Avlekete: Daagbo's Hat as Circuitous Transoceanic Equation

Back in coastal Bénin, Daagbo Hounon, the late Supreme Chief of *vodu* in Bénin, was known for his eccentric, intricately decorated sequined hats. For National Vodu Day 1996, Daagbo Hounon wore a new sequined hat unlike any of his many hats I had seen before (Fig. 11). Most of Daagbo's sequined and beaded accoutrements (hats, shoes, canes) were commissioned from artists living in the city of Abomey, Benin. The new hat that Daagbo Hounon wore was animated by the sequined image of what I thought was clearly Ezili Freda, from the Catholic chromolithograph of Mater Dolorosa. It made sense to me: the name for the Haitian spirit of love, Ezili, comes from the Fon name for the river *vodu* Aziri. However, Daagbo said that his hat represented his *vodu* of

Fig. 11 - Daagbo Hounon, the Supreme Chief of Vodun in Benin, wearing a sequined hat representing his Vodun of the sea, Avlekete, Ouidah, Bénin. 1996. Photo Dana Rush

the sea, Avlekete. Daagbo's sequined hat thus brings together hundreds of years and thousands of miles of transatlantic accumulation in the Catholic chromolithograph of Mater Dolorosa, turned Haitian spirit Ezili Freda, coming from the Fon river goddess Aziri re-manifesting itself in its place of origin, Bénin, as Daagbo Hounon's *vodu*, the sea goddess Avlekete. The ping-ponging of the Catholic chromolithograph of Mater Dolorosa (a.k.a. Ezili in Haiti) and the Fon river goddess Aziri (a.k.a. Ezili in Haiti), with their meanings and names changing as quickly as their geographic locations, exemplifies - transatlantically - an *vodu*'s incorporative sensibilities in terms of iconography, geography, and world religious systems stemming from and perpetuated in chromolithographic imagery.

Essential Chromolithographs

Because India Spirits are not currency, they cannot be exchanged, yet they are undeniably the product of exchange. Imported Indian goods, traded, bought and sold - the epitome of mass production and market exchange - become along coastal West Africa not only a means for generating income, and decorating a temple. They also act as passports for travel to another world because the relationship between these goods and access to the spiritual world is immediate and unquestioned. The sea is eternal, its vastness is undeniable, and its power is transferred into Mami Wata temples via a mass-produced chromolithographic images which represent at once both India and the sea.

Chromolithographs - Indian and Catholic - do more than just echo an African aesthetic precedent in a quickly changing world: they are, and always have been, essential to the process. The visual theology of the chromolithograph - enhanced in its transatlantic pervasiveness - reifies mass-production subsumed by inventiveness and faith. Take the truly authentic "aura" of God, multiply it in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction and find the omnipotence of Indian chromolithograph in *vodu*. Clearly, the integration of Indian images into *vodu* epistemologies, via chromolithography and in conjunction with deep spiritual conviction, attests to the ongoing, globally incorporative sensibilities of *vodu* art and thought.

Bibliography

Babb, L. A. and S. S. Wadley (eds.), 1995.
Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press.

Brown Mc Carthy, K., 2001 [1991].
Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn, Berkeley, University of California Press.

Chesi, G., 1979.
Voodoo: Africa's Secret Power, Worgl (Austria), Perlinger-Verlag.

Cosentino, D. J., 1995.
Sacred Art of Haitian Vodou, UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History.

Drewal, H.,1988.
"Performing the Other: Mami Wata Worship in Africa." *Drama Review* 32 n. 2, pp. 160-85.

Eicher, J. B. and Erekosima, T.V, 1996.
"Indian Textiles in Kalabari Funerals," *Asian Art and Culture* Washington, DC, Smithsonian Institution Press.

Gore, C. and Nevadomsky J.,1997.
"Practice and Agency in Mammy Wata Worship in Southern Nigeria," *African Arts* 30 (2) pp. 60-69.

Herskovits, M. J., 1967 [1938],
Dahomey: An Ancient West African Kingdom, vols. 1 and 2. Evanston, IL, Northwestern University Press.

Houlberg, M., 1996.
"Sirens and Snakes: Water Spirits in the Arts of Haitian Vodou," *African Arts* 29 (2) pp. 30-35.

Inglis, S. R., 1995.
"Suitable for Framing: The Work of a Modern Master," *Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press pp. 51-75.

Morgan, D.,1998.
Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images, Berkeley, University of California Press.

Naipaul, V. S., 1990.
A Million Mutinies Now, London, Minerva Press.

Salmons, J., 1977.
"Mammy Wata", *African Arts,* 10 (3), pp. 8-15.

Smith, H. D., 1997.
"Introduction: The Impact of 'God Posters' on Hindus and Their Devotional Traditions," G.J. Lawson, P. Pal and H.D. Smith (eds.) *Changing Myths and Images: Twentieth-Century Popular Art in India*, Bloomington, Indiana University Art Museum.