



AFRICAN ODYSSEY: PREVIEW

Mami Wata

Mami Wata

Directed by: C.J. 'Fiery' Obasi

©: Fiery Film Company Ltd

Executive Producers: C.J. 'Fiery' Obasi, Francis Nebot, Kelechi Udegbe, Mautin Tairu, Hamad William, Abbas Nokhasteh

Co-executive Producer: Ododo Ashaka

Produced by: Oge Obasi

Co-producer: Francis Nebot

Line Producer: Aduago 'Falcon' Uzoma

Unit Production Manager: Arnold Setohou

Location Manager: Prince Daniel

1st Assistant Director: Christopher Miles

Script Supervisor: Anges Rock Hounga

Written by: C.J. 'Fiery' Obasi

Cinematography by: Lilis Soares

Visual Effects Design: Alexandre Dachkevitch

Editor: Nathan Delannoy

Associate Editor: Nayla Baghdadi

Production Designer: The Fiery One

Set and Props: Prince Obarasua, Clinton Ovunda

Set Decorator: Chinagorom Ogbonna

Costume Design: Bunmi Demilola Fashina

Key Make-up Artist: Campbell Precious Arebamen

Key Hair Stylist: Adefunke Olowu

Music by/Original Score Composed by:

Tunde Jegede

Vocals/Kora/Ngoni/Percussion: Tunde Jegede

Dance Choreographer: David 'Avincin' Oparaeke

Sound Designer: Samy Bardet

Sound Recordist: Sunday Adesugba

Sound Editing: Julien Tourmeuillet

Stunt Co-ordinator: Tough Bone

Cast:

Evelyne Ily (*Prisca/Mami Wata*)

Uzoamaka Aniunoh (*Zinwe*)

Emeka Amakeze (*Jasper*)

Kelechi Udegbe (*Jabi*)

Rita Edochie (*Mama Efe*)

Tough Bone (*Ero*)

Tim Ebuka (*Moussa*)

Sofiath Sanni (*Alima*)

David 'Avincin' Oparaeke (*Ajah*)

Idayatou Ibrahim (*Oli*)

Monalisa Stephen (*Binti*)

Nigeria 2023

107 mins

Digital

+ intro and panel discussion with director C.J. 'Fiery' Obasi and producer Oge Obasi, hosted by Jumoké Fashola

Filmgoers outside Africa may never have heard of Mami Wata, the supernatural being who gives the Nigerian director C.J. Obasi's film its title. She hasn't attained the status of, say, Norse or Greek gods, whose pantheons have been propped up by Hollywood blockbusterdom, but Obasi, who also wrote the screenplay, has made sure that prior knowledge is not necessary to enjoy his film – Nigeria's official entry for next year's Academy Awards. Still, it is perhaps useful to understand the hold that Mami Wata has for people across West Africa – including Obasi, who has said that his film was inspired by a vision he had years ago.

It is not clear how much of that vision derives from childhood memories, but the director certainly knows things his generation of Nigerians learned from their elders: Mami Wata grants wishes, Mami Wata can make you rich, Mami Wata can be vengeful against people who break promises. Children learn that they should flee if they ever see her on the beach – though in a 1960s hit, 'Guitar Boy', the Nigerian musician Sir Victor Uwaifo (who features on this film's soundtrack) gave a different instruction: 'Never you run away.'

In Obasi's telling – only loosely related to popular versions of Mami Wata's activities in Nigeria – Mami Wata is de facto ruler of a fictional West African coastal village, Iyi. Her intermediary is Mama Efe (Rita Edochie), the village leader, whose primary duty is to relay the goddess's will to the people. At first everything is fine. The people have no qualms about the leadership and the system of governance works well enough. But the death of a child upsets the balance. Mama Efe conveys Mami Wata's wishes: the child will remain dead.

This highlights a weakness in Iyi's political arrangement, and maybe even in Mami Wata's vaunted powers. Within the top family's household, Mama Efe's headstrong daughter Zinwe (Uzoamaka Aniunoh) rebels and, despite the pleas of her adopted sibling Prisca (Evelyne Ily), expresses her anger openly. Outside the household, a cohort led by the noisy, reckless Jabi (the chameleonic Nollywood actor Kelechi Udegbe) is thinking the same thoughts as Zinwe – only violently.

There is no escaping the political implications of a story involving a man looking to upend a system headed by a woman and a female deity. But *Mami Wata* doesn't spend too much time on the gender dynamics – Obasi has other fish to fry. For one thing, as his story develops to include a white man providing arms to a group intent on war, the parallels to Africa's real political history are barefaced.

It's easy to see that Jabi's wish for progress has merit; but so does Mama Efe's fealty to a deity who has given Iyi peace. Some viewers might see this as equivocation, but such ambiguity is an honest reflection of the politics of civil wars. Obasi evidently wants to put forward a particular interpretation of Africa's blood-spattered history and, as is the case with the history of too many nation states in the continent, Iyi becomes the setting for protracted violence.

Unfortunately, while the strikingly beautiful black-and-white camerawork and Nathan Delannoy's editing use the cover of night to their advantage, the fight scenes fail to match the film's philosophical and aesthetic ambitions. But it is



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for its ambition and its visual choices that *Mami Wata* stands out. Cinematographer Lílís Soares deservedly received a Special Jury Award at Sundance earlier this year.

The markings on the bodies of the Iyi people – reminiscent of those on the bodies of the Nigerian musician Fela Kuti's dancers – are dazzlingly luminescent. In one ravishing scene, drops of water fall like streaks of interlinked, elongated photons. Obasi's film is a rich visual experience.

Oris Aigbokhaevbolo, *Sight and Sound*, bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound, 16 November 2023

C.J. Obasi also known as 'Fiery' or 'The Fiery One' wrote and directed the feature films *Ojuju* and *O-Town*, both of which has screened in many festivals, including the Gothenburg Film Festival and Fantasia Film Festival, garnering acclaim from the likes of *Screen Anarchy*, *IndieWire*, and *The Hollywood Reporter*. He received the Trailblazer Award at the Africa Magic Viewers' Choice Awards (AMVCA). His short film, *Hello, Rain* premiered in the International Competition of Oberhausen, and in over 30 festivals like Fantasia Film Festival, where it won the Special Mention of the Jury prize, and the BFI London Film Festival where it was nominated for the Short Film Award. His anthology film with the Surreal16 Collective *Juju Stories* won the Boccalino Award for Best Film at Locarno Film Festival 2021. His feature film, *Mami Wata* premiered at Sundance in early 2023 and has been released in Nigeria, the US, Switzerland and more.

Oge Obasi has production experience spanning almost a decade; having worked on various formats for TV and film, on such projects as *The Figurine*, *Amstel Malta Box Office*, *Miss Earth Nigeria*, *Heineken's Champion's Planet*, *Desperate Housewives Africa*, and *MTV Base Shuga* where she worked in the capacities of production coordinator and production manager. Oge is the partner and production head at Fiery Film Company; a production company founded in 2012 by filmmaker C.J. Obasi to create genre-based films from an African perspective. Her latest project is *Mami Wata* – a female-driven revenge thriller based on the Mermaid Goddess folklore of West Africa, directed by C.J.

Jumoké Fashola is an award-winning Radio and Television Broadcaster, Actress and Jazz Singer. On radio, she currently presents the contemporary Jazz show *J to Z* (BBC Radio 3); *The Jumoké Fashola Show* (Friday's, BBC Radio London); *Sunday Breakfast – Inspirit* (BBC Radio London). Her other radio credits include *Everywoman* (BBC World Service), *Pause for Thought* (BBC Radio 2), *You and Yours* (BBC Radio 4). Her theatre credits include Kwame Kwei-Armah's *Beneath's Place* (Young Vic / Dir. Kwame Kwei-Armah); Temi Wilkey's *The High Table* (Bush Theatre/ Dir. Daniel Bailey); Zawe Ashton's *For All the Women Who Thought They Were Mad* (Hackney Showroom/ Dir. Jo McInnes), and Kurt Weill's *Lost in the Stars* (Southbank / Dir. Jude Kelly). Television credits include *Riches* (ITV/Amazon), *Big Age* (Channel 4), *Hard Cell* (Netflix), *Mimi's World* (Channel 5), *Ama's World* (Sky). As a vocalist, she has appeared at the Royal Albert Hall alongside Dionne Warwick, performed with Bobby McFerrin at the Meltdown Festival – Royal Festival Hall, sung Handel's *Messiah* at the London Arena and performed with the Royal Ballet. She is the first woman ever to sing the role of the Evangelist in Bach's *St John Passion* performed with the Chorus of Dissent. She is the creator and host of the Jazz Verse Jukebox, a night of poetry and improvised jazz, which had a 7-year residency at the legendary Ronnie Scott's Jazz Club in London. www.jumokefashola.com // Twitter: @jumokefashola // Instagram: @jumokef