



Sibusiso Hyacinth Madondo

Chimerical Appearances of Substance as Common Elements in Myths and Legends Relating to Water Sprites

ABSTRACT

Water sprites feature prominently in the myths of many countries. What these mythical tales have in common is the pivotal function of illusion in the structure of the narrative. The typical form of the narrative is that of a serpent or a water sprite materialized in the guise of a beautiful, irresistibly seductive young woman that makes a pact with a human partner. The latter, naturally violates the pact, thus provoking the wrath of the water sprite. In the end he learns the hard way that the whole experience of a blissful relationship with a beautiful female was an illusion and that he was a victim of a cruel deception: the beautiful maiden was really a serpent, and the wealth was nothing but a semblance of substance. This paper explores myths of the people of the sea (*selkies*), the water sprites (fairies, *umamlambo*, the Karina) and their illusionistic practices.

KEYWORDS

Fairies; Selkies; *Umamlambo*; the Karina; Serpent of Good Fortune; Tyamaba (Tyanaba); Lamia; Illusion.

SIBUSISO HYACINTH MADONDO

Université d'Afrique du Sud
Madonsh@unisa.ac.za

The illusory serpent of good fortune is one of the most common beliefs featuring in world myths and folklore, yet its nature as represented in myth is elusive and as vaporous as the grail itself whose sighting happens only in the rarest of instances and is reserved for the happy few. In most European myths and legends, the serpent of good fortune is usually associated with fairies or is a fairy itself as in the legends of Melusina, Morgan, etc. In the story of Melusina the typical form is that a fairy leaves fairyland to marry a human knight whom she richly endows with wealth and fame but lays an injunction on him not to reveal her true nature to his people and in some versions to observe certain special conditions. The inviolable condition in the case of Melusina is that she may not be seen during her bath on Saturday. Of course things go awry as the knight forgets his promise to the fairy mistress and violates the pact through curiosity or under peer pressure, only to learn, then, that hell truly has no fury to match the wrath of the scorned water sprite who in her paroxysm of anger leaves the human lover at once, taking away all her wealth and in some versions even kills him and all his family.

One of the earliest known myths which speaks of the illusory nature of the serpent-woman's riches is related by Philostratus in the biography of Apollonius of Tyana. In this tale Lycius, a young Corinthian lad, is

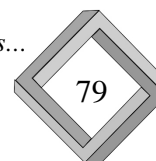


seduced by the serpent-woman Lamia who has assumed the guise of a beautiful rich lady with the aid of Hermes to reward her services in tracking down the invisible nymph with whom Hermes had fallen in love. On the day of the marriage Apollonius Lycius's master arrives uninvited at the wedding feast and spoils it by revealing that Lamia is in fact a serpent, a vampire who is fattening the young lad in order to prey on his flesh at a later stage. Lamia thereupon vanishes with all her riches and Lycius dies of grief. The riches of the "serpent of good fortune" are as illusory as the serpent-lady herself who is "neither flesh nor fowl nor good herring", and Apollonius likens her riches to "Tantalus's gardens which both exist and do not exist and also describes them as "the insubstantial appearance of substance" used to dupe human lovers and lead them to their death or inflict madness on them.

The folklore of the British Isles offers an interesting parallel to the serpent of good fortune in the myth of selkies or the "people of the sea". These mythical creatures are said to be human beings of surpassing beauty who inhabit a marine world whose sky is the surface of the sea. "Selkie" is a Scottish word derived from the Old English *seolh* meaning a "seal". The legend has it that when these fabulous beings want to visit the human world, they assume the skin of a seal to be able to come to up from the depths, then abandon the garb on reaching their destination and revert to their human form. As in the legend of the swan maiden, if the selkies' integument is lost or stolen by men, the netherworld maiden cannot accomplish the journey back into the depths, is compelled to stay with the inhabitants of this world and sometimes marry and bear children. Like the fairies or the serpent of good fortune, the selkies are shapeshifters, men on land and seal on sea. Considerable

reference to them is made in Celtic popular literature and in Scottish ballad, "The Great Selkie of Sule Skerry" which has been popularised in modern times by singers such as the American folksinger Joan Baez ("The Great Selkie"), the English folk rock band Trees ("The Great Silkie"), the Irish band Solas ("Grey Selchie"), and even the Breton folk band Tri Yann in their album *Tri Yann an Naoned*. The French adaptation of the ballad called "*le Dauphin*" ("the dolphin"), probably the word *phoquin/phoquine* used in the French translation of Neil Jordan's movie *Ondine* was not yet coined. The Child ballad number 113, "The Geat Selkie of Sule Skerry" recounts the tragic story of a woman who had commerce with a selkie during one of his excursions on earth. She is sitting on the river bank lamenting that she does not know her father's son, whereupon a man emerges from the water and claims to be the father. He is a man only on land and a seal in the water. He gives her a purse and takes his son. He predicts that she will marry a gunner who will kill both him and his son. It is interesting to note that like the fairies and the serpent of good fortune the selkies are considered to be endowed with special magical powers of clairvoyance and healing as the selkie predicts his and his son's death. Such powers of predicting the future are chief attributes of amphibian and hybrid creatures such as the otter, the seal, the snake etc. During his travels in the British Isles and West of Ireland, David Thomson recorded many stories about selkies. One of these is about Mrs Carnoustie who was suspected of being a selkie whose legs were thought to be like flippers since she wore a dress that covered both her hands and feet:

I remember her arms too. It's perfectly true. They only came down a little below where the elbows should be and they were supposed to be flattish, but



you never really saw them because she wore big sleeves, big full ones, and I think they were sewn up at the ends. But they looked flattish, like flippers, and she held them against her sides or across her chest and she moved them rather awkwardly. But you could never see her legs. We always wanted to. We wanted to see her in her bath and of course we couldn't, and it was terrible, I remember, never being able to know, and of course we couldn't ask her or anyone else really – anyway we couldn't get proper answers from anyone. And, you see, she was in the same kind of dress – a long grey shiny dress, silk I think that fastened at the neck with a close collar and came right down to the ground and everything. [...] And her face was round and plump too, with a small nose sort of flattened and a big wide sort of mouth. And I think she had a kind of moustache¹.

Stories of selkies abound in the movie *The Secret of Roan Inish* based on Rosalie Fry's novel *The Secret of Ron Mor Skerry* in which a fisherman steals a selkies' pelt while she is sunbathing and she is forced to stay with him, marrying him and bearing his children. She feels very unhappy and spends most of her time playing in the shallows of the sea. One of her children discovers the pelt and asks her what it is. She immediately recognises her seal integument, drops everything, puts on her pelt and without hesitation runs straight to the sea and returns to the netherworld. The heroine of the movie, Fiona (played by Jeni Courtney) hears a lot of stories about selkies including the one about her baby brother who was abducted to the sea to live as a selkie, when they were emigrating from the island of Roan Inish and that of an ancestor who married a selkie.

In the movie *Ondine* Jordan underscores the fairy aspect of the bringer of

good fortune or In Apollonius' words the creator of "Tantalus' gardens which both exist and do not exist." The heroine who in Annie and other character's opinion is supposed to be a selkie accompanies the hero Syracuse during his fishing expedition and sings a "siren song" which attracts many lobsters into his cages and fishes in his nets. This goes on for some time, but when the "siren" song stops the hero begins to experience a run of misfortune as in the cases when the netherworld maiden has been angered and is taking revenge on the hero. Though Ondine is not really a selkie Jordan manages to play around the myth of the Celtic water sprites by creating the illusion in the cinemagoer's mind by making him/her see the movie through young Annie's fantastical point of view or her imaginary work as she is projecting all the elements of the myth of selkies from the books she is reading from the local library. When the denouement comes, all the illusion in the reader's mind vanishes into thin air like the gifts of the fairy maiden: surprise surprise! Ondine is not a selkie but Joanna, a drug mule from Romania. Surprise, surprise! The "siren song" is a popular hit of the moment that can be heard from the local television and the mysterious man that Annie supposes to be Ondine's spouse from the netherworld is a Romanian drug peddler looking for Joanna and the bag of heroin. Finally the "selkie coat" that Ondine hides in front of "omniscient" awe-stricken Annie is a bag of heroin.

In South Africa folklore of black communities the serpent of good fortune is known as *umamlambo* or *ichanti* which is the name for a water snake. Like the fairies and other water sprites *umamlambo* has no definite form:

No two persons if asked, independently of each other, to describe the appearance

of the *i-canti*, will give an identical description. Indeed, there is more variety in the delineation of this fabulous water-sprite than in the description of any other thing known or unknown. Its appearance and qualities depend entirely on, and are subject to, individual fancy. One will explain that it first appears as a chain, then transforms itself into a goat-skin bag, and again into a piece of tin, and so on. Another, that it resembles first a hoe, then an unusual feather, a pipe or a piece of honeycomb. Still another will describe it as a snake of unusual appearance, which has the power to mesmerize people. It is never one thing for long, but undergoes a constant series of changes. Among the Indians of the Punjab there is a similar belief; it is called the “Chhaleda”. This is supposed to be a spirit which appears as a stone, or a goat, or a dog, or as anything, but its peculiarity is that it is supposed to change its shape.” – *Explorer*, in *Public Opinion*, 1931. These successive alterations of form do not seem to have any special meaning, but are simply characteristics of the *canti*. The kaleidoscopic changes are brought before the senses with the end in view of causing fear, derangement of the mind and death².

Like the fairies and the selkies, the African serpent of good luck marries its owner and at the same time brings him good luck and protection against all perils. If the owner of the serpent is a boy, the serpent becomes his wife but does not bear children for him. Sean Morrow and Nwabisa Vokwana relate the story of a rich businessman from Mdantsane Township in East London who was known to be in possession of the serpent of good luck which was kept in the

swimming pool of his palatial mansion. Each time he brought a woman to his home the snake would be jealous and scare them away. When the rich man wanted to marry one of the women, the serpent provoked the rich man to kill the woman first and then himself³. This kind of jealousy is not unfamiliar in the myths and legends of the water sprites e.g. in tales such as Herr Peter Dimringer von Staufenberg etc. In his book on the anthropology of the Bhaca society, Hammond-Tooke tells the story of a boy who refused to get married and could not bow to the pressure from his peers. One night when he was seen in a company of a beautiful maiden who disappeared when they approached her, his friends soon realised that she was *umamlambo*⁴. Like the fairies and selkies *umamlambo* gives instructions to be followed by the husband. Such instructions may be of a drastic, brutal nature. For example she may tell the husband to sacrifice an animal regularly so that the serpent can gorge itself on the animal's blood. Non-compliance with this injunction results in loss of the owner's run of good fortune, which makes way instead for a state of misfortune without the serpent's protection. Unlike fairies and selkies *umamlambo* remains with its former protégé to wreak further havoc in his life until he dies. In fact, this aspect of the serpent of good fortune brings it closer to the Arabic demon or shadow called the *Karina* also known as *Um-al-Sbjjan* (mother of children) or *Tabi'a*. The *Karina* is the female shadow of a man and the *Karin* is the male shadow of a female:

Should the woman marry, then her *Karina* marries the man's *Karin*. Should the woman become pregnant, then the *Karina* launches into her devilish activities. First, she tries to drive the woman out and take her place. If the *Karina* meets the pregnant woman, she

will strike her in the body to try to cause a miscarriage. If this does not succeed and the woman has children, the *Karina* will herself give birth to the same number of babies. The *Karina* continually tries to create discord in the relations between husband and wife.⁵

In fact, in many West African countries the serpent of good fortune is known as the *Tyamaba* (*Tyanaba*) and it is usually the twin of a boy whom it endows with great wealth: gold, cows, milk etc. As in either similar instances in various mythologies, peaceful coexistence with the serpent depends on the existence of *Tyamaba* the boy's and the mother's well-kept secret. The *Tyamaba* is kept away from home, in a body of water and the mother and the boy take turns to feed the serpent with milk every day. Things go wrong when the boy gets married to an inquisitive woman who becomes suspicious of the boy's behaviour and his daily routine. One day she decides to follow him secretly and when the eyes of the woman and of the *Tyamaba* meet a disaster ensues. The *Tyamaba* is bewildered, comes out of the water and with its magical powers exerts an irresistible pull on all domestic in the vicinity, with the result they mill around it uncontrollably. When the *Tyamaba* sees its twin brother it commands him to chase the animal so that it can return to the water. The twin successfully drives away all the animals and the *Tyamaba* dives back into the water where it dwells.

In all myths discussed above the importance of keeping the cohabitation of the hero and the serpent of good fortune or water sprite a close secret is paramount and flouting of this condition can lead to disastrous consequences, including death for the offending party. In the case of *umamlambo* violation of the pact of secrecy is punishable with death even to those who are not owners of the serpent but who happen to see it by

pure chance. John Soga tells the story of two girls who saw glittering bracelets under the surface of a river. When they retrieved them they turned out to be kitchen utensils. Shocked, they ran back home. One girl spoke of the odd experience and was found dead the next morning while the other girl, who had not spoken of the curious incident survived⁶. The serpent of good fortune is therefore an illusionary agency which makes the "husband" live an illusory life not realising that he is married to a demon and that he is risking great calamities. The final analysis is that the serpent of good fortune, or rather myths about this chimerical being illustrate the essential impossibility of a union between a man and a water sprite and at the same time illustrate the uneasy relationship between man and his animal nature. The gifts, money, gold, silver etcetera that come with the fairies and water sprites are as trivial and insubstantial as the tinsel and the glitter wax that decorate a child's birthday party. They are a semblance of substance that will vanish in a moment as if they never existed, like a mirage.

Notes

¹ David Thomson, *The People of the Sea: A Journey in Search of the Deal Legends*, London, Arena, 1989, p.18-19.

² John Henderson Soga, *The Ama-Xosa: Life and Customs*, Cape Town, Lovedale Press, London, Paul Kegan, 1931, p.193.

³ Sean Morrow and Nwabisa Vokwana, "Oh! Hurry to the River: *uMamlambo* in the Eastern Cape, South Africa" in *The Eastern Cape: Historical Legacies and New Challenges*, Fort Hare Institute of Social and Economic Research, Working Paper No. 15, 2003, p. 7.

⁴ W. D. Hammond-Tooke, *Bhaca Society: A People of The Transkeian Uplands*, South



Africa, Cape Town Oxford University Press, 1962, p. 286-87. See also the article by the same author, "The Nguni Witch Familiar Construct" in *Man*. New Series, Vol. 9, No 1, (March, 1974), p. 132.

⁵ Sigmund Hurwitz, *Lilith, The First Eve:*

Historical and Psychological Aspects of the Dark Feminine, Einsiede In, Daimon Verlag, 1992, p. 137

⁶ John Henderson Soga, *The Ama-Xosa: Life and Customs*, Cape Town, Lovedale Press, London, Kegan Paul, 1931, p. 193-96.