



# *A Lenda Iara: The History of Brazilian Folklore and How Colonization Influenced It*

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China.

“.....What noise,  
what sound is that which on wings the wind  
carries, indistinct and similar to a moan?  
Is it the trembling of fronds or a human voice  
that modulates in song to the drone of  
breaking waves? Is it the specter of an ill  
mind, is it reality, is it an illusion?”

-“Iara, the Mother of Water”<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Every year on February 2nd, people gather on the northeastern coasts of Brazil in the state of Bahia and send white flowers and lanterns into the Atlantic Ocean. This ritual is a celebration and worship of the Afro-Brazilian goddess of the sea, Iemanjá. The worship of this goddess originated as part of the African Candomblé religion but has become one of the most widely known festivals in Brazil.<sup>2</sup> The festivals coincide with the Brazilian New Year’s Eve and celebrate the hope that Iemanjá will summon wealth and fertility for the coming year. Similarly, on this day, Catholic churches in Brazil celebrate the Catholic saint Nossa Senhora dos Navegantes, a manifestation of the Virgin Mary, who Europeans believed protected sailors in the fifteenth century.<sup>3</sup> This manifestation of the Virgin is often merged with Iemanjá as both symbolize peace and protection on the seas.

To the south of Bahia along the southeastern coasts of Brazil, people celebrate the festival of the goddess Yemanjá on December 8th instead of February 2nd. This festival converges with the Catholic municipal holiday of Nossa Senhora da

1 Sarah J. Townsend, “The Siren’s Song; or, When an Amazonian Iara Sang Opera (in Italian) on a Belle Époque Stage,” *Latin American Theatre Review* 52/2 (2019), 154.

2 Georgia Grimond, *Brazil’s Goddess of the Sea: Everything You Need to Know About Festival of Iemanjá*, <https://theculturetrip.com/south-america/brazil/articles/brazils-goddess-of-the-sea-everything-you-need-to-know-about-festival-of-Iemanjá/>

3 <https://pipa.com.br/nossa-senhora-dos-navegantes/?english>

Conceição da Praia, or the Immaculate Conception.<sup>4</sup> The Portuguese brought this Roman Catholic holiday to Brazil, where it is now celebrated annually on December 8th. Both the festival of the sea goddess and the holiday dedicated to the Virgin celebrate and manifest fertility in the coming year. Whereas the Catholic holidays feature feasts and parades most frequently, Candomblé holidays often involve dances and worshiping of gods and goddesses through gift-giving, as seen in the festival of Iemanjá.

While these two festivals exhibit essential differences, they both attest to Brazil’s long history with colonialism and the cultural diffusion it brought to the country. This history of colonialism meant that when Brazil gained independence in 1822, the country’s character represented a fusion of cultures introduced during periods of European colonization.<sup>5</sup> The result is what Joana Bahia describes as “a celebration of the different forms of black culture, a multi-axis construction of a common heritage shared among the African diasporas in the Americas, which circulates creatively throughout the so-called Black Atlantic.”<sup>6</sup> Yet, long before the colonial period, tribes in Brazil passed around local myths using oral traditions. One of these traditions was the legend of Iara, a myth that has allegedly been around since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It records of Ipupiara, a sea snake predecessor of Iara among the Tupi tribe in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Brazil’s experience with colonization shaped the different contours and versions of the myth of Iara. The country’s

4 Jen Santos, *Celebrating Nossa Senhora da Conceição (Immaculate Conception)*, <https://salvadorguidebook.com/celebrating-nossa-senhora-conceicao/>

5 Marcus Baccaga, “Medieval’ Islands on the Amazonian Coast: Medieval Remains in the Amazonian Popular Culture and Culturally Interlarded Myths”, in *History Research* 10(1) (2022): 70-77. doi:10.11648/j.history.20221001.18.

6 “Ruins, Religiosity, and Patrimony in the City of Rio de Janeiro: The Festa of Iemanjá,” in *Brazil-Poland: Focus on Religion*, eds. Solange Ramos de Andrade, Renata Siuda-Ambroziak, and Ewa Stachowska (Warsaw: Brazilian Studies Research Group, American Studies Center/University of Warsaw, 2019), 282.



colonial history brought together different cultural traditions, including influences from Portuguese, African, Spanish, and indigenous myths. During this period, one of the versions of the myth, the African Iemanjá, converged with the Iara myth when Spanish Christians proselytized Africans in Brazil. Other European adaptations of Iara were also popularized during the 18th century, which resulted in Iara coming to have blue eyes and blonde hair.<sup>7</sup> In the earliest traditions, Iara was a freshwater mermaid living in the Amazon rivers. In contrast, the Iemanjá was seen as a saltwater mermaid. The myth spread across the Atlantic throughout the 16th to 19th centuries. The line between the two slowly blurred as these different cultures interacted and converged. Unfortunately, this history of colonization meant that much of the indigenous character of the sea creature became buried in the colonial past. The following, however, examines the rich history of the identities of Iara and Iemanjá to challenge and uncover contemporary adaptations' tendency to minimize the myth's African and Indigenous elements.

## HISTORY OF COLONIZATION

As noted above, the convergence of traditions about Iara reflects the historical contours of the European colonization of Brazil. In 1500, the Portuguese explorer Pedro Álvares Cabral discovered the city of Porto Seguro in far southern Bahia, Brazil. Yet, scholars argue that Cabral possibly knew of Brazil long before he made the expedition.<sup>8</sup> Almost a century earlier, in 1415, the Spanish began conquering a city called Ceuta in Northern Africa. It was the root of African slavery and large-scale Christian proselytization, which is why African heritage and culture remain in Brazil today, along with the abundance of Christianity. Today, the city of Salvador in Brazil houses the most African citizens. In fact, approximately 80 percent of citizens in Salvador are of African descent, leading to a billboard campaign sponsored by the State Board of Culture and Traditions in 2001 to nickname it the "black city."<sup>9</sup> During the colonial period, this state was named Salvador da Bahia and was ethnically diverse with Native Americans, Portuguese, and Africans. Here, African heritage is particularly predominant, and cultural details are represented in music, food (traditional African ingredients and spices like Okra, black-eyed peas, and palm oil), and more.<sup>10</sup>

Aside from Spanish colonization in the sixteenth century, Portugal also sent out missionaries and colonizers to settle

7 F.-J. de Santa-Anna Nery, *Folk-Lore Bresilien* (Paris: Librairie Academique Didier, 1889).

8 Charles E. Nowell, "The Discovery of Brazil-Accidental or Intentional," *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 16/3 (1936), 311-338.

9 Heather Shirey, "Transforming the Orixas: Candomble in Sacred and Secular Spaces in Salvador da Bahia, Brazil," *African Arts* 42/4 (2009), 62-79 (67).

10 Shirey, "Transforming the Orixas," 67.

in Brazil in the hope of discovering riches and treasures.<sup>11</sup> They exploited the lands of São Paulo, in a river valley called the Ribeira Valley, where parts of the Tupi Guarani tribe previously occupied. By the end of the sixteenth century, resource exploitation only worsened after the discovery of gold on the banks of the Ribeira River. With the quickening of resource discovery, African slaves were brought into the region between the 17th and 18th centuries. As they were put to work in gold mines immediately, most mines were exhausted by the end of the 18th century, and most colonizers eventually abandoned the region. The abandonment of the site left behind freed black men and some remaining African slaves who were sent to work in rice fields instead of mines to first coexist in the same land.

One of the fundamental reasons for modern Brazil's mixed culture lies in Portuguese colonizers' discovery of the Tupi Guarani and Tapuia tribes along the coast of the Paraguay and Parana River.<sup>12</sup> European colonists recorded rebellious indigenous tribes in a negative light, and peaceful, obedient tribes in a more positive way. For example, tribes like the Aimore fought against the Portuguese with competent military power and were portrayed as cannibals and savages in European records. They did not possess the legal rights of a human, nor were they treated like equals. Not only that but Portuguese priests and shamans also cured locals of diseases. They also built a positive image by recruiting local allies, which reduced the indigenous groups' ability to rebel against foreign powers, leading to the Portuguese conquering present-day São Paulo's state capital, São Paulo de Piratininga. Such oppressive actions eventually provoked small-scale rebellions, such as the slave rebellion in the 16th century, that became powerful enough to obtain independence for Brazil as a country.

On September 7th, 1822, Brazil officially achieved national independence, declared on the plain of Ipiranga in São Paulo. It was the end of a fight that began towards the end of the 18th century, marked by the Inconfidencia Mineira of 1789 in Ouro Preto.<sup>13</sup> During the 1920s, Brazil started to build a consolidated regime. Nearing the 20th century, Brazil's economy took off due to adequate rubber production and export. In 1950, the Festival of Iemanjá gained much more public attention, specifically from lower- and middle-class citizens who gathered on beaches in Rio Vermelho, Sao Paulo etc., on New Year's Eve.

## THE HISTORY OF IARA

The earliest written account of Iara is the legend of a sea snake known as *Ipupiara*. *Ipupiara* is a name given to the sea

11 Gabriela Segarra Martins Paes, "The Negros d'Água of the Ribeira de Iguape River: Myth and History in a Narrative Elaborated by the Ribeira Valley's Black Communities," *Revista Brasileira de Historia* 39 (81) (2019), 1-21 (4, 8).

12 Boris Fausto and Sergio Fausto, *A Concise History of Brazil*, trans. Arthur Brakel (2nd ed.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 7.

13 Fausto and Fausto 59.

snake by the indigenous peoples in the region of the Amazon known as the Tupi. *Ipupiara* translates into English as “what is in the water.”<sup>14</sup> By 1560, *Ipupiara* had become known by European missionaries. For instance, the Spanish Jesuit missionary José de Anchieta discovered and recorded that *Ipupiara* lived in the coastal regions of Brazil and killed local indigenous inhabitants.<sup>15</sup> Shortly after in 1564, as recorded by chronicler Pero de Magalhães Gândavo in his book *History of the Province of Santa Cruz* an *Ipupiara* was seen and killed on the coast of São Vicente by Captain Baltazar Ferreira of Portugal.<sup>16</sup> The European descriptions of *Ipupiara* are significant because they resemble the Tupi name of the creature “What is in the water.” Furthermore, it deals with the glorification of Portuguese generals like Captain Baltazar Ferreira and shows the earliest date of discovery of local rumors among Portuguese missionaries.<sup>17</sup> It is also essential that these sources convey the notion that the creature preys upon the local population.

Tracing the history of *Iara* between the 16th and 19th centuries becomes difficult due to the overall lack of primary sources about the creature from this period. We lack another reference to *Iara* until the late 19th century when, according to Cascudo, *Ipupiara* became *Iara* because of the Amazonian belief that all things in nature are governed by a maternal figure.<sup>18</sup> In fact, the Amazonian culture represents one of the first matriarchal ruling bodies. Since the transition, the earliest extant primary source from the 19th century is 1873. In Francisco Bernardino de Souza’s book *A Yara* published in 1873, he describes examples of the transferring of myths in 19th century Brazil.<sup>19</sup> For example, historian Santana Neri first heard of the *Iara* from friends of a dead man, though he was suspicious that it might have been used to cover up a murder.<sup>20</sup>

Following d’Souza’s book, as the legends of *Iara* spread to different cities in Brazil, intellectuals began analyzing her origins more thoroughly. In his 1881 book, *O canto e dança selvícola*, Joao Barbosa Rodrigues conducted a “study of Amazonian legends in which he acknowledged the *Iara*’s kinship with the ancient sirens but claimed that the climate had modified her features, giving her dark skin and black hair and eyes.”<sup>21</sup> This contrasted sharply with the romantic writers such as Antônio Gonçalves Dias and Alexandre José de Melo Moraes Filho, who depicted her as having golden hair and light eyes.<sup>22</sup> Most significantly, this indicated the widespread knowledge of the *Iara* and how different cultures

took to different descriptions of her based on their own cultural definitions of beauty.

Furthermore, by the time the Spanish colonizers and immigrants had adapted to Brazilian culture, the myths and stories incorporated them as the victims of *Iara*. This move involved the description of Spanish people falling victim to murder by a sea creature. For instance, in his book *Folklore Brésilien*, published in 1889, Federico José de Santana Néri describes two of *Iara*’s victims. “In one, her victim is a Portuguese immigrant set to wed a daughter of Belém’s elite and, in the other (said to have been recorded near Manaus), he is an indigenous man.”<sup>23</sup> What is noteworthy about the descriptions of *Iara* in de Santana Néri’s book is that they emphasize *Iara*’s violence against native and immigrant populations.

An explanation for this interesting phenomenon may be *Iara*’s similarity to Western myths and colonial settlers’ association of and confusion between the two. Ermanno Stradelli, who claims to have heard the myth of *Iara* from the mouths of the Indigenous people, summarizes in the preface to his narrative poem *Eiara* published in 1885 that “the *Iara*’s similarity to the sirens, undines, and Naiads of European tradition,” but also seems to be associated with “the Amazon’s own shape-shifting water snake Boiassu, or Cobra Grande”<sup>24</sup>. The myriad of possible foundations for the myth of the *Iara* that we know today testifies to the probability of multiple myths being merged under the influence of language barriers between European settlers and indigenous habitants when communicating about the myth.

Due to the polarity and variety in accounts describing the myth of the *Iara*, several recent studies have attempted to analyze and contextualize the primary source material about *Iara* in the 16th and 19th centuries. For instance, in his article “‘Medieval’ Islands on the Amazonian Coast,” Marcus Baccega explains, “A not little number of European settlers have followed the Jesuit priest in such depiction, as is the case of Pero de Magalhães Gandavo in *History of the Province of Santa Cruz of 1576...or the Jesuit priests Fernão Cardim in the Treatise of the Land and People of Brazil, of 1583-1601... and Simão de Vasconcelos, who compounded corographies with allusions both to the European Mãe d’Água – in the Portuguese case, the Mouras Encantadas – and to indigenous Ypupiara.*”<sup>25</sup> As Baccega rightly notes, these early references to *Iara* in literature and written records provide only a vague boundary for the chronology of the spreading of the legend of *Iara*. With the actual data, it remains difficult to trace how the legend spread to different racial and ethnic demographics.

Beyond the contextualization of primary sources describing the myth, in her article “Siren’s Song,” Sara Townsend moves beyond an emphasis on the literary history of *Iara* to include

14 “Ipupiara”, <https://mythus.fandom.com/wiki/Ipupiara>  
15 Paes, “The Negros d’Água of the Ribeira de Iguape River,”  
2. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/1806-93472019v39n81-04>.  
16 Baccega, “‘Medieval’ Islands,” 72.  
17 Ibid.  
18 Townsend, “Siren’s Song,” 151.  
19 Townsend, “Siren’s Song,” 165, n. 5.  
20 Ibid.  
21 Townsend, “Siren’s Song,” 152.  
22 Ibid, 153.

23 Ibid, 152.  
24 Ibid, 156.  
25 Baccega, “‘Medieval’ Islands,” 72.

an appreciation of how this mythology has left an imprint upon the performing arts in Brazil.<sup>26</sup> As a result, Townsend's article offers a helpful way to synthesize the primary sources described above. According to Townsend, when the legend of Iara gained attention in 1950, intellectuals and writers featured it in their pieces, which sometimes were translated into Operas. The source describes an example of the cultural and artistic creations based on the legend of the Iara, namely José Cândido da Gama Malcher's opera, which was performed in the Teatro da Paz in Belém on May 4, 1895. This play stems from Ermanno Stradelli's poem about the Iara, another adaptation to the Amazonian cultural myth. Stradelli published notes he gathered during his travels to the Amazon River banks and even "compiled the first Nheengatu-Portuguese dictionary."<sup>27</sup> In his poem "Eiara," he translates the words of the indigenous peoples of the Tupi tribe and forms a final version of the myth based on different versions he had come across.

As the records and studies from the 16th century through the modern period show, the complex history of this legend reflects the historical transformations of Brazilian culture throughout the period of European colonization. Perhaps most notably, the legend of Iara reflected the diffusion and convergence of European, Indigenous, and African cultures. While we may not have a complete picture of this process, an analysis of the primary sources reveals that an indigenous myth is the foundation of all the later colonial and post-colonial adaptations.

## THE HISTORY OF IEMANJA

In another realm of tradition in Brazil, we have a slightly similar creature of the water known as *Iemanjá*. The traditions about Iemanjá may be traced to records from the 16th century.<sup>28</sup> These records indicate that slaves who were transported to Bahia from West Africa brought with them traditions about a water goddess named Yemoja, who the indigenous people of Bahia, later renamed Iemanjá. This name for the goddess has several different renderings, including the Yoruba spellings, Yemoja, Iyemoja, Yemoja, Iyemoja, Iyemoja or Yemoja.<sup>29</sup> Beyond these Yoruba spellings, there are several realizations of the creature in Brazilian, including Yemanjá, Iemanjá, Janaína, Mãe da Água. Moreover, the creature's name is also found in the Spanish spellings Yemayá, Yemallá, Madre del Agua. Due to the presence of at least one French colony in Brazil, the creature also received French spellings that included La Sirène, Mère de L'Eau; the Pidgin spelling, Mami Wata.<sup>30</sup>

26 "Siren's Song,"

27 Townsend, "Siren's Song," 154.

28 Claudia Cerqueira do Rosario, "The Ladies of the Water: Iemanjá, Oxum, Oia and a Living Faith," *Wagadu* 3 (Spring 2006), 143.

29 "Iemanjá," *The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience* (2nd ed.), Oxford African American Studies Center: New York, 2008, 282.

30 Ibid.

Because Iemanjá originated within the Yoruba tribe, it is necessary to provide background information about the West African pantheon within the Candomble religion, an African diasporic religion especially practiced by the Yoruban peoples. This pantheon of gods, most of whom are patron deities of different elements of nature and culture, is known as the Orisha. For instance, two of the more prominent orishas are the patron deity of farming and the patron deity of warriors and metalworkers. Within this pantheon, Iemanjá functions as the mother of all the Orishas in the Yoruba religion.<sup>31</sup> Similar to the Yemoja, and the term Orisha is also spelled differently in different regions due to its widespread acceptance. In Yoruba, it is spelled òrìṣà, while in Portuguese it is spelled orixà and in Spanish-speaking countries, it is spelled orisha, oricha, orichá or orixá. Regardless of the different realizations of the term across these languages, all of the terms contain the root "Ori" which "means the head, but in spiritual matters, it is taken to mean a portion of the soul that determines personal destiny."<sup>32</sup> Many orishas come from Yoruban ancestry. For example, warriors, kings, and founders of cities who passed in glory are often said to have joined the pantheon of orishas.

Records from the 16th century indicate that African slaves brought the figure of Iemanjá to the New World during Spanish colonization; hence the frequent emergence of Iemanjá with Iara, as the two have similar characteristics. The legend of Iemanjá originates from the Yoruba people, and people often associate her with the Virgin Mary and Yoruba Orishá<sup>33</sup>, who symbolize similar blessings. The legend began in the Candomble religion of West Africa and grew to incorporate elements of European and Brazilian cultures and religion or Umbanda.

While the legend of Yemoja originated in the Candomble religion of West Africa, when it was transported to Brazil, it grew to incorporate elements of European and Brazilian religion.<sup>34</sup> Today, many legends originating from colonial Brazil fall under the same cultural category called Umbanda, which is "a syncretic Brazilian religion that blends African traditions with Roman Catholicism, Spiritism, and Indigenous American beliefs."<sup>35</sup> The term initially emerged in the suburbs

31 Graham M. S. Dann, "Religion and Cultural Identity: The Case of Umbanda," *Sociological Analysis* 40/3 (1979): 208-225 (209).

32 "Orisha". *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Chicago, Ill.: Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

33 Goncalves da Silva and Fernando Giobellina Brumana, "Candomble: Religion, World Vision and Experience," in *Brill Handbook of Contemporary Religions in Brazil*, ed. B. E. Schmidt and S. Engler (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 180.

34 Mundicarmo Ferretti, "Non-African Spiritual Entities in Afro-Brazilian Religion and Afro-Amerindian Syncretism," in *New Trends and Developments in African Religions*, ed. Peter B. Clarke (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998), 37-44.

35 Ibid.

of Rio de Janeiro in 1908 but quickly spread to other Latin American countries. It was founded by Brazilian median Zélio Fernandina de Moraes and meant “art of healing” in the Quimundo vocabulary of Angola. Partially, the diffusion of such cultures displays an effort to preserve cultural elements from African religion in Brazil.<sup>36</sup> In particular, during the transatlantic slave trade, African slaves managed only to keep songs, stories, and religious beliefs with them in the Americas. To protect their culture, and in part due to the natural convergence of cultures, African slaves created Umbanda as a belief system that all three peoples (Spanish, Brazilian, and West African) could accept.

Candomblé festivals are widely celebrated in Bahia today because they represent West African culture and attract tourism, contributing to the local Brazilian economy. Simultaneously, the popularization of Candomblé festivals increased the visibility of the religion itself, helping promote West African culture internationally.<sup>37</sup> One of the most distinct aspects of contrast between historical and modern Bahia, or rather a result of the historical events that shape Bahia today, is that Bahians take pride in their Afro-Brazilian culture, contrary to the once racially prejudiced society that occupied the land. Today, Bahians view their identity as unique and exotic, different from southern states in Brazil.<sup>38</sup>

Iemanjá is still widely celebrated today for its representation of Afro-Brazilian culture and African pride. Its Brazilian name and African origin contribute significantly to Brazil’s cultural diversity legacy in the 21st century. While colonization brought with it many negative impacts, celebrating this creature draws attention to the role that resistance played in Brazil’s history and the fusion of cultures that resulted from that resistance. Similar to the Iara, this myth bears the history of Brazil’s colonization on its shoulder, displayed every year to hundreds of thousands worldwide in lights, lanterns, and dances. These lights, lanterns, and festivities celebrate the power of the different cultures found today in Brazil to resist any political forces that might erase their cultural identities.

## **IARA AND IEMANJA: COLONIALISM AND CULTURAL HYBRIDITY**

How does one interpret and reconcile the different traditions about a sea creature in Brazilian history? While the answers to this question may not be easy to grasp, the present paper has argued that one way to explain them is to look back into the history of Brazil’s experience with colonialism. According to this line of thought, the different traditions about a sea creature reflect the convergence of southwestern European, indigenous Brazilian, and African cultures during colonization. The convergence of these different cultures produced the merging of cultural traits onto the variations of this sea creature. For instance, the diverse portrayal of Iara’s physical

appearance, such as blue eyes and blonde hair or green eyes and green hair or dark skin and green hair, reflects European, Brazilian and African culture. Furthermore, Iara merges the indigenous myth of Iupuiara with the English romanticization of goddesses and mythical creatures. In this way, we might agree with folklorist Luís da Câmara Cascudo, who argued that the Iara was created as a merrgence of sirens from the Old World and Mouras Encantadas, which are supernatural beings of the fairy tales of Portuguese and Galician folklore.<sup>39</sup> This merrgence may explain why by the 19th century, the Iara developed Southwestern European features of the Spanish people, such as blue eyes and blonde hair. In other words, when Iara converged with the sirens in Brazil’s landscape, the result was the development of several different versions or variants of the creature, each exhibiting slightly different physical features. In a recent study of the Umbanda religion, Steven Engler argues that the terminology “hybridity” forms a helpful way to study the convergence of religious traditions. Instead of the more traditional terminology of syncretism, Engler suggests that hybridity “more directly acknowledges the complex interactions between religions and their historical, political, social and cultural contexts.”<sup>40</sup> This quote from Engler helps us understand the traditions described in this paper because merging Iupuiara, Orisha, and the European mermaid distinctly portrays how Brazilian culture took on hybridity throughout the history of colonization from the 16th to 19th century. The myth of Iara reflects a merging of religions (Umbanda) and the convergence of social and cultural customs as seen in modern-day festivals such as the festival of Yemanjá held in Brazil. These celebrations are then considered a microcosm of the historical, social, and cultural forces that shaped the contours of this Afro-Brazilian myth.

Post-independence, people all around Brazil still celebrate this myth because it gives voice to multiple periods of Brazil’s history and identities, including the indigenous, the period of colonization, and the eventual resistance to and ending European domination. People from all over the world travel to participate in and watch rituals such as placing white (environmentally safe) gifts in the Atlantic Ocean. These rituals also entail dances and feasts and, at times, converge with Catholic holidays celebrating other gods and goddesses on the same day.

Engler’s definition of hybridity also explores how power dynamics are reflected in cultural interaction. For example, with their evocation of African traditions, the festivals devoted to these goddesses play an important role in preserving elements of identity that colonialism might have erased.

Another critical aspect of the Iara tradition is its use of water imagery and symbolism. While most studies focus on cultural convergence, a focus on water imagery highlights a fundamental tension in these traditions, namely, the tension

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36 Dann, “Religion and Cultural Identity,” 209.

37 Shirey, “Transforming the Orixas,” 67.

38 Ibid, 68.

39 Baccega, “Medieval’ Islands,” 72.

40 Steven Engler, “Umbanda and Hybridity,” *Numen* 56 (2009): 548.

between water as life-giving and water as life-threatening. Water, since the very beginning of civilization, provided humans with the ability to thrive and live, hence the abundance of water spirits and gods in religions. Yet, natural disasters such as tsunamis and floods led people to fear some parts of water as well. In its essence, water leads to both life and death, as “the water we need to drink in order to survive is the same that can drown us and lead us to death.”<sup>41</sup> We can understand the significance of this tension in the mythology of Iara by looking at the natural environment of Brazil. Two main bodies of water constitute the region’s physical geography: the massive freshwater river, the Amazon, and the Atlantic Ocean. The variations of the myth of Iara reflect the combination of freshwater and saltwater gods, goddesses, and creatures, as the Iupuiara was a freshwater monster. At the same time, the African Iemanjá was a saltwater goddess. The Atlantic Ocean, on one hand, represented both the road for economic exchange as well as the slave trade and the colonization of indigenous peoples in Brazil. We can understand then how the festivals would express a concern to evoke the traditions from outside Brazil and a concern for protection at sea by interacting with the ocean. On the other hand, the Amazon River reminds surrounding civilizations of one of the major sources of life for early civilizations in Brazil and the potential dangers, such as the disappearance of indigenous people from the Tupi tribe, which catalyzed the emergence of the myth of Iara.

## CONCLUSION

At the mouth of the Amazon, where the river meets the Atlantic Ocean, there is a line where the fresh water spilling out of the river the ocean’s salt water. The physical environment of the mouth of the Amazon symbolizes the meeting of a myriad of cultures, including pre-colonial Brazil’s tribal culture, African culture shipped across the Atlantic Ocean, and European culture. Given that much of the culture of Brazil reflects this diversity of ecosystems, perhaps it is not surprising that the Iara tradition encompasses so much variety. Today, the Iara myth continues to be reflected in a range of Brazilian literature and film, from children’s books to movie adaptations. However, these books and films portray both characters one-dimensionally instead of stressing how they represent several layers of cultures and history. For example, the Brazilian cartoon *Turma do Folclore* depicts Iara with pink hair and light skin, which is completely inaccurate historically.<sup>42</sup> Many cartoon and movie portrayals focus far more on the plot of the myth rather than its history and the complex identities of its characters. As a result, these cartoons and movies greatly diminish Iara’s historical significance and curb the promotion and spreading of awareness of Afro-Brazilian culture to young children. Similarly, movies often provide monotone embodiments of the myth of Iara by confusing her with traditional European mermaids or sirens

and romanticizing and sexualizing her character. Hence, they ignore and diminish the rich history and culture that her character evokes. Today, in Brazil, despite there being annual festivals to celebrate Iara and Iemanjá, most people who are not of African or Brazilian descent hardly know of the existence of this myth or know it as the average story of a siren. Despite the Iara’s simple storyline, it holds the history and convergence of the cultures of three entire societies.

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