
Voodoo Sacrifices At Lady Liberty's Feet

By Elizabeth Hanly

If New York City is a sacred landscape, it's not exactly obvious. But in certain spiritual traditions, places and things become more than themselves. Take the Statue of Liberty. In the Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Brazilian communities of New York, where people practice the religions of Santería, Candomblé and Umbanda, many look at the hulking female form, rising as she does out of the sea, and see nothing less than a giant icon of Yemanjá, West African goddess of deep waters and motherhood. It's no surprise, then, that candles, flowers and sacrifices are often found around her base.

From time to time, candles also appear mysteriously around an uptown police station, or "Handcuff City," as it's known in the neighborhood. Like Lady Liberty, the station has become a found altar, this time to Ochosi, god of traps (including, presumably, handcuffs), and hunting (Ochosi is especially gifted in "snaring" good luck). With ever

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Voodoo Sacrifices Enshrine Statue of Liberty's Feet

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increasing migrations from the Caribbean, "the whole city is becoming wired for spiritual sound," according to Yale art history professor Robert Farris Thompson, who curated the current show of Yoruba and Kongo altars, as well as their New World incarnations: the altars of Santería, Umbando and Palo at the Museum for African Art. (It runs through Jan. 9.) As the professor noted, there are black parties for the gods in the Bronx; the downtown jazz club S.O.B.'s offers classes in sacred Afro-Cuban dance; and the ancient deities have long penetrated the avant-garde esthetic of such artists as José Bedia and the late Keith Haring, who have become initiates in the Afro-Atlantic faiths.

Mr. Thompson originally studied sacred art in Africa but he didn't stop there, focusing instead on how those world views have survived in the Americas via the diaspora created through slavery. His exhibition encompasses both 19th-century and early 20th-century African religious sculpture and their New World incarnations. The same Creole imagination that transforms a city police station into a sanctuary for a god creates an altar presenting Changó, lord of lightning and just causes, as a column draped with leopard skin covered with feathers and beads; alongside it is what might have been a wedding bower of lace and doves dedicated to Obatala, god of mercy and purity; and all that stands amid a profusion of peacock feathers, sunflowers and gold cloth mirroring Ochún, the goddess of love.

Although the altar show has been publicly applauded by the art world, there have also been some private doubts. Paced with the altar to Changó, Obatala and Ochún, a visiting curator from a major U.S. museum turned to his companion and muttered, "This has got to have been all gussed up for the museum. This can't be the kind of work people make just for themselves."

"Indeed it is," insisted Mr. Thompson. Having spent a lifetime trying to define what an altar is and documenting the Afro-Atlantic religious imagination, which he refers to simply as "spirit," he delights most in showing how that imagination has influenced mainstream culture in ways few of us realize.

Blame It on the Mambo

All of his work, for example, began with mambo. Mr. Thompson recalled himself as "a young squirt living in West Texas who went to Mexico on a lark in 1950, got caught in the middle of the mambo craze, and was swept away. I came home to my job at the gas company and proceeded to blow just about every cent I earned on mambo records. Who knew then that mambo was actually a masaje having to do with activating sacred medicines? But all the hints were there in the music."

When he pursued those hints, they led to graduate work at Yale and weekends at New York City's mambo palace, the old Palladium. "It so haunted the place that Tito Puente would wade to me when he came in," Mr. Thompson said. Following mambo's history led to fieldwork for the academic in Cuba, Haiti and Brazil. (He fell in love with samba and its sacred roots as well.) And mambo sent him exploring, too, among the Kongo, Yoruba and Ejuagha peoples in Africa. Today he calls his early vinyl editions of mambo records "sacred tablets."

"It's impossible to overestimate Thompson's role as a pioneer scholar on African faith," said John Mason, a Harlem-born Yoruba priest who heads a church, the Yoruba Theological Archministry, in Brooklyn. (Two of Mr. Mason's altars are included in the Museum for African Art show.) "When he began to write, [the entire] library on Yoruban thought couldn't have been more than two feet wide."

Continually expanding outward from mambo, his Rosetta stone, Mr. Thompson

began to spot key symbols that connected various traditions. For instance, he recognized the Kongo cosmogram—an invocation to keep the soul moving on its cyclic journey—on bits of pottery found by archaeologists in the Carolina lowlands. And he saw those same circular symbols in yard shows and grave markers with their tires and pinwheels all over the rural South.

The professor came to regard spirit possession, or trance, so central in African tra-

Robert Farris Thompson, Yale art history professor and Yoruba initiate, is at work on a study of the women painters of the Pygmies, as well as an introduction to the diaries of fellow initiate Keith Haring.

ditions, as a living altar, and to understand the drum as a chalice in Yoruba culture. Drums began to punctuate his Yale lectures. (Today, Mr. Thompson is quoted almost as often by musicologists as art historians.) He learned of the African gift for abstraction and verbal punning, vehicles that enabled sacred traditions to survive throughout slavery's centuries. "Converted," Yoruba slaves dressed up their gods in the clothes of the Catholic saints who seemed somehow parallel to those gods. Thus thunderous Changó became St. Barbara, whose persecutors were struck by lightning.

Secret Message in Black-Eyed Peas

Using the same logic, Mr. Thompson began to see Afro-Atlantic foods for what they were: disguised cosmograms of spirit. He describes the black-eyed peas brought on ships from the motherland as "natural ideographs of mystic continuity: the word *ewa*, black-eyed peas, is a pun on *ewa* or *wa*, the essence of existence." Whites tasted these foods and learned to love them, but had no idea—and most still don't—that they embodied secret writings.

"Africa has a genius for meaning," Mr. Thompson said. "This is perhaps the greatest of the debts white culture owes to black. Afro-Atlantic traditions are able to draw whole networks of meaning between what other peoples see as separate events." Mr. Thompson's *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*, published in 1983, a classic in the field, is full of such illustrations.

Several of the traditions Mr. Thompson includes in the Museum for African Arts show define an altar as "the face of god." Mr. Thompson moved these altars into a museum "to bring them as much exposure as possible," he said, "thus speeding up the appreciation of Afro-Atlantic faiths as world religions." The more he comes to understand these faiths, he explained, the more he is struck by how much other world religions—Judaism and old-time Aramaic Christianity particularly—share with them.

Indeed, over the years Mr. Thompson found so much in common with the Afro-Atlantic traditions that the Yale professor chose to be initiated into three of them. Most of the altars in his show were built by priests and priestesses, who sanctified or "activated" them. Perhaps the most dramatic case is that of an altar to Sarabanda,

banda in a mambo Mr. Thompson first heard around 40 years ago.) The figure that serves as his altar carries a veritable rain forest of sacred herbal medicines in his belly; Sarabanda is regarded by Kongo faithful as so potent that a devotee walked before him as he entered the museum spraying cool water along his path.

"When I saw him sliding into the museum on that secret river," said Mr. Thompson, "I knew I didn't have to worry about the show anymore." In what may be a first for any museum show, at least in the United States, the altars are now quite spontaneously receiving devotions. That is, many visitors are leaving small sums of money at their bases, as is customary in Afro-Atlantic tradition. "The altars are maintaining their own upkeep," Mr. Thompson said with a grin. "You can't expect to have an altar, a real altar, and for it to stand there inert."

Not in New York, at least. A former student of Mr. Thompson's, Emory University professor David Hilary Brown, who "discovered" through his doctoral work the altars at the Statue of Liberty and other public sites, has estimated that there are tens of thousands of the faithful in the metropolitan area. Mr. Mason judges the figure to be closer to a million. There are so many believers here that, for a time, Lincoln Hospital in the Bronx initiated a referral system of spiritists, Paleros (Kongo priests) and Santeros (Yoruba priests) for out-patients whose dilemmas seemed more "spiritual" than "psychological."

'Goodbye, Post-Modernism'

Museum director Susan Vogel has said, "What I would love, would be if every non-believer saw a believer at the show and vice versa," and she has been getting her wish. Just about any time one visits Mr. Thompson's exhibition, chances are that somebody will be there dressed all in white. (Santería tradition asks its followers to wear white for one year after initiation.) "I'd love for each person's experience to be tempered by the other," said Ms. Vogel. "This is, after all, the major tension of the show: where the boundary is, if indeed there is a boundary, between art and religion."

At one point in the show's 300-page color catalogue, Mr. Thompson writes, "Goodbye post-modernism, hello spirit."

"These altars are a declaration of war on fashion," he explained. "First there was structuralism. Then there was post-structuralism. There was post-modernism. Then what? Post-post-modernism? After a while, vertigo sets in. For such a long time art has been a pack of fashionable cards." Spirit, he said, "is different. Spirit is forever."

With the Afro-Atlantic religions claiming more and more practitioners, he predicted, "We're going to see more and more artists like Cuban José Bedia"—currently represented by the Frumkin-Adams Gallery, he has an altar included in the show—"who with exquisite modesty illuminates Kongo religion much like medieval artists did the Torah and the Bible. We're going to see more artists who don't ask about training or style but, rather, what do you know?"

That question is paramount for Mr. Thompson as he pursues his next projects. He's at work on a study of the women painters of the Pygmies, as well as an introduction to the diaries of Haring. (As Mr. Thompson puts it, "Just as for me everything else came from what I learned at the Palladium, so it was for Keith at the Paradise Garage, a black dance hall in SoHo.")

There's an old mambo record on the wall of the rooms Mr. Thompson uses as Master (in charge of cultural affairs) of Timothy Dwight College at Yale. It's from the 1950's, when the possibility of nuclear war seemed very real indeed. "Take all those headlines," advises the mambo, "and make yourself a start out of them."

"Talk about cutting fear down to size." Mambo, Mr. Thompson said, "is a kind of massive psychoanalytic act, all about sass." So are the traditional faiths from which it springs. To look at his show is to learn that "Mambo and Afro-Atlantic faiths are all about getting up and getting on with it," Mr. Thompson said. "How much is that worth? Surely