



## Collecting and exhibiting at the crossroads: in honor of eshu

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j. lorand matory

Variants of the following story are told in virtually every locale where the Yoruba-Atlantic *òrìṣà* (Nigerian Yoruba), *orixá* (Brazilian Portuguese), or *oricha* (Cuban Spanish) gods are worshiped.

Two friends stood talking in the marketplace. They were such constant and loving companions that others called them *kòríkòsùn* – meaning literally, “If they do not see each other, they will not sleep.” No day ever ended without their having seen each other.

Yet, as they chatted in the market that day, a man in a hat walked right between them.

“Did you see how that rude red-hatted man walked right between us?” exclaimed the friend on the right.

“What do you mean?” asked the friend on the left. “He was wearing a black hat!”

“Are you blind?” retorted the first friend, accusingly. “It was red!”

“No! You’re the blind one. It was black!”

The debate accelerated, and the insults grew less and less forgivable, until the man in the hat came back and walked between the friends again, whereupon they realized that one side of the rude man’s hat was red and the other black.

This is the foremost sacred color combination of the god known in Nigeria as Èṣù or Elégbára, in Brazil as Exú or Leba, in Cuba as Elegguá or Echú, and in Haiti as Legba (see Figures 1 and 4). In English, any of these avatars may be called “Eshu.” He is the lord of the crossroads, the market, communication, mischief, confusion, and virility. Yet he is not everywhere the same. In Cuba he is normally regarded as a small child and, in Haiti, as a bent but wily old man. However, unpredictable heterogeneity and contrasts of interpretation are his hallmarks everywhere.

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Eshu is most famously described as a trickster. That he is. However, he is also a Janus, looking not only to the future and the past but also to the inside and the outside (see Figures 2 and 4). He is the male principle of penetration that complements the female principle of containment, a dialectic that is the heart of the Afro-Atlantic spirit possession religions. Equally important is the power that Eshu derives from seeing and being seen in contrasting but contemporaneous worlds. This is the essence of the things—living or not—called “fetishes” (Matory forthcoming).

## The “Black Gods and Kings” Lecture and Ritual Series

Such animated objects, the long-term social relationships of which they are a part, and the rituals that help to keep these objects alive in diverse social worlds are central to the Sacred Arts of the Black Atlantic Collection at Duke University. I have assembled this collection and engaged a diverse range of participants in doing so because the objects are not properly understood or experienced outside the networks in which they thrive. Hence, every few years, in connection with a Harvard University course called “Afro-Atlantic Religions” and, more recently, a Duke University course called “Black Gods and Kings: Priests and Practices of the Afro-Atlantic Religions,” I have invited priests and priestesses of Haitian Vodou, Cuban Santería/Ocha, Brazilian Candomblé, and West African Yoruba Èṣin Ibílè, or “indigenous religion,” to lead class discussions, to deliver public lectures, and—in campus residential facilities, divinity school chapels, or at my house—to conduct rituals to which all interested members of the Harvard and Cambridge, Massachusetts, or Duke and Durham, North Carolina, communities are invited.

Hence, these spirited things animate relationships among priests in five countries, Harvard University students and alumni, Duke University students and alumni, University of Vermont faculty and students (who, in fall 2017, will mount a major exhibition of the Collection), and me, as well as my department chair, the Duke University deans, the US federal government, and IACUC—the university’s Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee, which monitors Duke’s compliance with federal regulations regarding the care and use of animals during medical and scientific research. Controversially, IACUC became involved in the most recent, 2011 iteration of the lecture and ritual series because of the animal sacrifices involved in the feeding of these Eshus. IACUC entered the dialogue despite the fact that, in my



**FIG 1**  
House for Elegguá in the Cuban Santería/Ocha tradition, intended to house the worshiper's Elegguá and other related gods. Made in South Bronx, New York, around 2008. (Photo: Jerry D. Blow.)

view, this religious use of animals falls beyond the legal authority of IACUC and, according to the 1994 Supreme Court decision in the “Church of the Lukumí-Babalú Ayé v. The City of Hialeah,” is actually protected by the First Amendment of the United States Constitution. However, the debate about IACUC’s authority over this issue continues in the run-up to the fall 2016 lecture and ritual series. For such reasons, the permanent online exhibition (<http://sacredart.caaar.duke.edu/>) will document not only the material Collection itself but also the many social relationships and debates over the proper order of social life that it animates.

### A Cyborg Anthropology: Revolutionizing the Online Catalogue

The Sacred Arts of the Black Atlantic Collection combines human-made gods and the crafted materials that sacred communities use to make them. We cannot understand these animated objects unless we recognize the multiple cognitive and social worlds in which they circulate—both physically and mentally. So this online exhibition of objects that embody gods showcases priests’ analysis of what makes them gods, and the priests’ aesthetic, theological and practical evaluations of their construction—but not the analysis and evaluations of the priests alone. The approximately 1000 objects in the Collection are also agents in the self-fashioning, the livelihood, and the world-making of non-worshippers, including the artists, the owners of *botánicas* (Latino religious supply shops) and “tribal” art galleries, African and modern art collectors, scholars of religion, anthropologists and art historians.

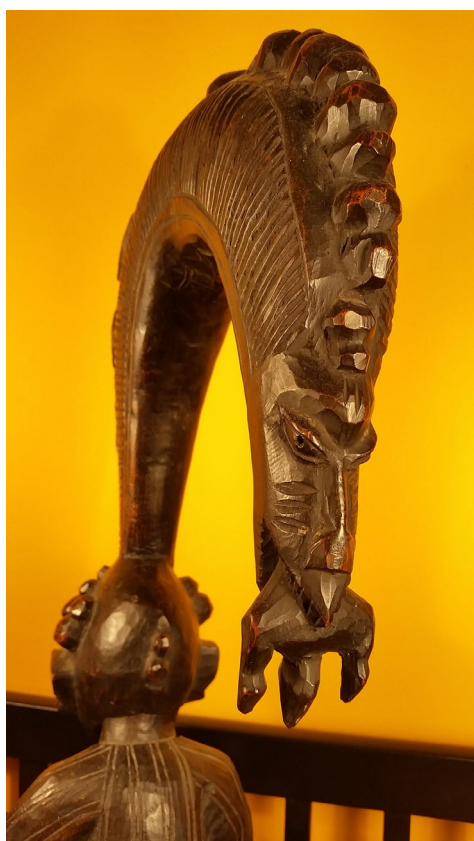
Hence, it is important to recognize that the ontological assumptions embodied by these objects are not uniform, permanently fixed, or



**FIG 2**  
West African shrine sculpture of the Yoruba god Eṣù, probably from Nigeria. Note the phallic extension from the head, known as the ògò. (Photo: J. Lorand Matory.)

determined by priests alone. These animated objects remain living bearers of meaning and generators of human conduct when they move among artists’ ateliers, *botánicas*, temples, commercial galleries, museums, and private homes. They acquire additional meanings, still, from the gaze of administrators, neighbors, police, courts of law, employers, and the press. Indeed, for such heirs to the Enlightenment legacy, the Afro-Atlantic gods often become the anti-types of a collective Western self that these heirs wish to distill from a far messier Western reality. For their parts, the priests of the African-inspired gods continue to travel or migrate from one “modern” nation-state to another, serving extant local material and spiritual needs under diverse social, legal, and imaginary regimes.

Since 1982 I have collected these animated objects in Nigeria, Benin Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Brazil, Cuba, Haiti, England, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Spain, and the USA. And, since 1987 I have recorded in these countries hundreds of hours of



**FIG 3**  
Rear shot of Eṣù's òḡo. (Photo: J. Lorand Matory.)

video footage of pertinent rituals and interviews with priests, as well as thirty-odd hours of interviews with gallery owners, religious goods merchants, collectors, and university scholars. This footage awaits editing, subtitling, and posting on the Sacred Arts website. "Office Hours: Vodou and Other African-Inspired Faiths" (<http://sacredart.caaar.duke.edu/content/vodou-and-other-african-inspired-religions>, 2010) illustrates such interviews.

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In the future and wherever possible, this online exhibition will attach to each object webpage original video footage of rituals in which these or other, similar objects appear in their respective performative contexts, along with captions in translation. We will also make available samples of the ritual music and of the commercially recorded popular music that cites the gods and the practices of these religions.

The aim of this online museum is to midwife the previously unnoticed intercultural and interdisciplinary truths that emerge from the dueling perspectives of the diverse actors who live their lives at least partly through this sacred art and



**FIG 4**  
A Beninese Eṣù (center) and his circum-Caribbean cousins—a Bahian Exú (top left) and Exua (top right), and a Cuban-American Elegguá (lower right)—eating together in the author's home in 2011. (Photo: J. Lorand Matory.)

amid the convergence of the objects and their diverse performative contexts. It is unimaginable that a bricks-and-mortar museum could make such a rich interpretive context available in one exhibition. And, as far as I know, this will be the first online exhibition that fully exploits the technological potential of the Internet to do so. The Sacred Arts of the Black Atlantic online exhibition moves the decentering of the scholar's authority to a whole new level—a cyborg anthropology partaking of the nature of the assembled beings that are both the objects of our study and major agents of our understanding. The success of this exhibition will be measured not by its analytical closure but by the public dialogues and connections that animate it.

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