



Face of the Gods: The Artists and Their Altars

Author(s): Robert Farris Thompson

Source: *African Arts*, Vol. 28, No. 1, (Winter, 1995), pp. 50-61

Published by: UCLA James S. Coleman African Studies Center

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3337250>

Accessed: 16/08/2008 01:00

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=jscasc>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We work with the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

# FACE OF THE GODS

## THE ARTISTS AND THEIR ALTARS

**C**urated by Robert Farris Thompson, with special assistance from C. Daniel Dawson, "Face of the Gods: Art and Altars of Africa and the African Americas" presented approximately eighteen altars composed of more than 100 African and African-American artworks. Originating at the Museum for African Art in New York City (September 24, 1993–January 9, 1994), the exhibition has traveled to the Seattle Art Museum (see review in *African Arts*, Autumn 1994, p. 74) and is currently at the University Art Museum, Berkeley, through February 1. Future host institutions are the Museum of Fine Arts, Montgomery (March 19–May 21), and the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond (June 27–September 10).

The altars in the exhibition were installed after the companion catalogue, by Robert Farris Thompson, had been written (336 pp., 27 b/w & 286 color photos; \$70 hardcover, \$39.50 softcover) and therefore do not appear in that volume. *African Arts* is pleased to illustrate most of the African-American examples in the following pages, together with discussion drawn from the exhibition texts and short biographies of their makers.

### ROBERT FARRIS THOMPSON

**A**ltars everywhere are sites of ritual communication with heaven, ancestors, and spirits, marking the boundary between the ordinary world and the world of the spirits. Elevated or grounded, simple or elaborate, personal or communal, they focus the faithful in worship. Altars are central to African religions on both sides of the Atlantic, inspiring women and men to set down offerings to the gods and build models of heaven.

This exhibition articulates two principal metaphors for altars in the African-Atlantic world—one Yoruba, one Kongo. Among the Yoruba and other Kwa speakers of West Africa, the altar is referred to as a "face of the gods," a place for appeasement, where votive pottery is placed and cool liquids are poured from vessels. Yoruba altars gleam with massed vessels whose fragility demands tact and delicacy in worship. In contrast, Kongo civilizations of Central Africa consider the altar to be a "turning point," the crossroads, the threshold to another world. Kongo worshipers make the tombs of their ancestors into altars, using a cross-in-a-circle pattern mirroring the passage of the sun to signify the cycle of life and chart the immortal journey of the soul.

In terms of museum practice, "Face of the Gods" adopts a range of approaches that are usually separate. Some of the objects on display had religious applications long ago, but have acquired a second history in museum exhibits or collections. Others were created and sanctified by religious leaders in the Museum for African Art, and these exhibits have religious applications now. Still others are partial or total reconstructions, as in the dioramas found in traditional natural history museums. As a secondary issue, the exhibition thus explores the contested borders between authenticity and inauthenticity, art and belief.

## YORUBA GODS AND THEIR EMBLEMS

The Yoruba of Nigeria, sixteen million strong, are heirs to an ancient culture renowned for its complexity. One section of the exhibition presents the visual vocabulary of Yoruba worship on both sides of the Atlantic. The orisha, or deities, in the Yoruba pantheon distinguish themselves in altars by their colors, foods, banners, and icons. Under creole inventive pressure, these emblems vary and change, but nonetheless they span three continents and many centuries with remarkable consistency.

Transparent beads on Yoruba altars speak of the goddesses of the waters; blue and white symbolize Yemoja and the Atlantic Ocean; transparent yellow, the color of love, honey, and sweetness, personifies Oshun. Black and red, symbolic of extreme power, including night and fire, identify the trickster Eshù-Elégba. Raffia and seed stand for Nana Bukúu and her son, Obaluaiye, the deity of earth and disease.

Foremost among altars of boldness and immediacy on both sides of the Atlantic are those dedicated to Shangó, the thunder god. Religions of Yoruba origin have been named for him throughout the Caribbean and Brazil. Shangó's colors are red and white, red indicating the flash of his lightning—like a knife in the eyes of all liars and adulterers—and white his controlling calm and purity of character. Manifested in storms, Shangó brings to the world a purifying moral vengeance.



PHOTO: JERRY L. THOMPSON, COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM FOR AFRICAN ART

### Ojú Oxala: Afro-Brazilian Altar to the Yoruba Creator God

Based on an altar made by Mai Jocelina in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil, summer 1982. Mounted by Eneida Assunção Sanches, with altar metalwork by Clodimir Menezes da Silva (Oxala staffs, metal plates), and Eneida Assunção Sanches (crown, bells, spoon), both of Salvador, Bahia, Brazil.

This immaculate altar (*ojú*) conveys the glory, honesty, and purity of Oxala (the Yoruba Obatálá), god of creativity and custom. Clean white cloths, flowers, metals, and ceramic tiles are evocations of his spotless reputation. Before the altar is a bed in white linen upon which devotees may kneel and meditate before his inspiring presence. The tin staffs (*opaxoro*) by Clodomir Menezes da Silva (Mimito) signify the maturity and wisdom of Oxalufom, the eldest of Oxala's avatars.

Eneida Assunção Sanches

Born in 1962 in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil, Eneida Sanches began studying painting, sculpture, music, dance, and *copeira* under the tutelage of Robita Balgida, Director of the Little School of Art in Bahia. She went on to study painting and film at the Antonio Vieira School and architecture at the Federal University of Bahia, receiving her bachelor of science degree in architecture in 1990. Sanches learned religious metalworking from master metalworker Gilmar Tavares; their technique descends from a long tradition originating in Africa. Sanches has traveled extensively, studying multiple forms of architectural and spiritual art, and is currently working as a sculptor in Salvador. She has exhibited in Brazil at the Boa Morte Festival in Cachoeira, the Casa do Benin, and the Centro de Estudos Afro-Brasileiros; and in the United States at the Caribbean Cultural Center, New York City.

### Obatalá's Warriors

Made by John Mason of New York.

Obatalá, the Yoruba god of creativity and purity, has four warriors or avatars dedicated to his protection: Eshù, the trickster (the head in the low earthenware bowl); Ogún, the blacksmith (metal implements and iron pot); Oshóòsi, the hunter (antlers and bow); and Osanyin, the doctor (staff). Joined together, these four deities provide an everlasting shield in Obatalá's honor.

John Mason

Initiated as a priest of Obatalá in 1970, John Mason is the director of the Yoruba Theological Archministry in New York City and has taught and lectured throughout the United States on a wide variety of subjects, most recently on Yoruba art at the Art Institute of Chicago. His study of Yoruba culture in the African Americas, based on field research in the U.S., Cuba, Haiti, Brazil, Trinidad, Jamaica, and Puerto Rico, has yielded the books *Onje Fun Orisa, Food for the Gods* (1981), *Black Gods: Orisa Studies in the New World* (1985), and *Orin Orisa: Songs for Selected Heads* (1992). He has also worked on feature-length films on American Yoruba traditions, including the BBC's *New York: Secret African City*, and was a special consultant to El Museo del Barrio in New York for the exhibition "Santa Commida." Mason is also a designer, musician, and drum maker, specializing in the music of Cuba, Haiti, Puerto Rico, Trinidad, Nigeria, and Ghana.



PHOTO: C. DANIEL DAWSON



PHOTO: C. DANIEL DAWSON





PHOTO: JERRY L. THOMPSON, COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM FOR AFRICAN ART

### Altar to Seven Yoruba Deities

Made by Alberto Morgan of Union City, New Jersey.

Here, seven prominent deities (*orichas*) can be distinguished by the color of their cloth and symbolically coded bead necklaces. They are, from left (the spelling of each Yoruba deity is Cuban-Yoruba): Changó (red and white), Obatalá (white), Ochún (yellow), Eleguá (black and red), Oya-Yansá (maroon), Yemayá (blue and white), and Olokun (dark blue and coral). The faces of the Yoruba deities in Cuba are masked within covered tureens holding stones of spiritual power and authority. The *orichas*, each richly draped, are placed together for an initiation anniversary or the feast day of an individual *oricha*. Creole recombinations are evident in the iconography.

### Alberto Morgan

Alberto Morgan was born in Havana, Cuba, in 1939 and came to the United States in 1980. A priest of Santería for thirty-two years, he combines his artistic talents and spiritual sensibilities to build altars. He studied dance, drama, and painting at Havana's well-known San Alejandro School and has toured France, Spain, and Belgium as a performer and dancer. Very active in the theater, Morgan travels between Puerto Rico, Union City, and Miami. He has performed in *Ochun Obejeye*, a play about the African-syncretic saints/deities Ochún, St. Lazarus, St. Barbara, and Eleguá; at Carnegie Hall and Radio City Music Hall with Olga Guilló; and with Celia Cruz in a tribute to the Cuban musical genius Benny More. An author of songs and plays based on Cuban legends, his current musical project is a collaboration with Ruth Fernandez, who is called "the Celia Cruz of Puerto Rico."



PHOTO: C. DANIEL DAWSON

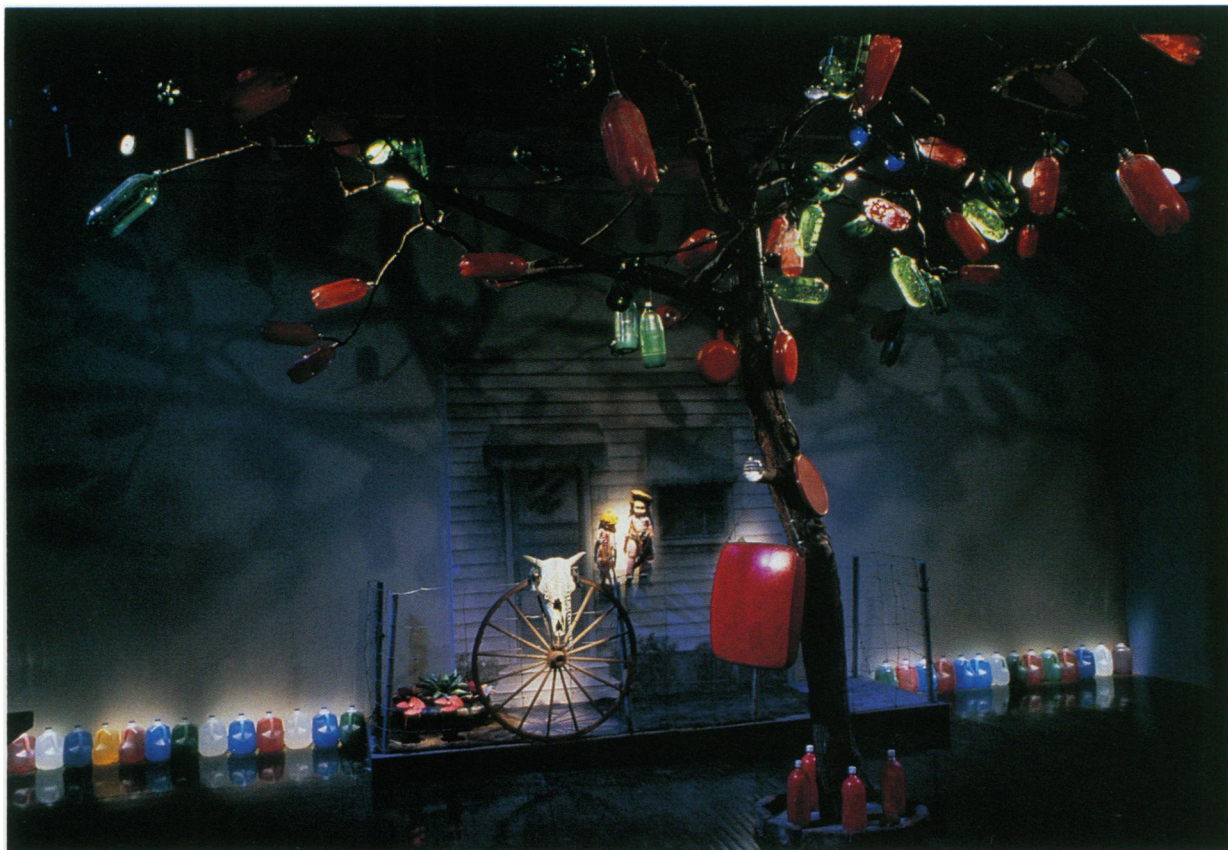


PHOTO: JERRY L. THOMPSON, COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM FOR AFRICAN ART

## TIED SPACE AND SPIRITUAL CIRCLING: KONGO-ATLANTIC ALTARS

About forty percent of the ten million persons taken from Africa in the Atlantic Trade between 1550 and 1850 came from Kongo-influenced Central Africa. To this day, Kongo elders "tie" plates belonging to ancestors to trees or branches in the cemetery to arrest their talents for the benefit of the living. Under creole pressure, this custom reemerged in the African-American and African-Caribbean "bottle tree," where spirits, attracted by the flash of the bottles, are captured. Tying is the metaphoric binding together of spirit and object, or spirit to a location, such as inside a bottle. It can be symbolized in various other ways, among them wrapping with string, driving in nails, and chaining and padlocking an object.

The powerful Kongo tradition of the *nkisi*, or "medicine of God," tells the spirit what to do with material ideographs. Hence a figure with a mirror drives off evil in the flash of the glass, or soars invincibly with feathers, or blesses mystically with other symbolic elements. "Face of the Gods" includes two small mirror-*nkisi* from Kongo and culturally related feather- and mirror-studded "Kongo pacquets" from Haiti. Opposite these, a yard show provides an answering black North American tradition of using mirrors on the porch or on the front wall to guard a house from evil.

### Bottle Tree (foreground)

Combines the string-and-hurl style of Cornelius Lee of Tidewater, Virginia (in which bottles connected with string are thrown over a branch), and the stub-and-jam style of the Mississippi Delta (bottles are jammed onto the ends of branches). The latter recalls the impaled plates of Kongo.

Customs like "tying" the talents of the dead to trees with plates, and the belief that the flash of glass when hit by light can attract and capture evil, have fused together in North America in the festive-looking bottle tree. It implies the following message: "If you come to do harm, here are dead trees and dead branches from the forest of the protective dead, but if you come in good faith may your soul be strengthened in the flash of their spirit." Spirit-repelling skulllets are painted red to resemble the taillights of an automobile.

### Yard Show (background)

Bottle lawn in the style of Black Austin, Texas; prepared guardian dolls and wheel with skull by black traditionalist Gyp Packnett of southwestern Mississippi.

Bottles filled with colored water "ward off dogs," but more than dogs are being turned away. The power of bottles and medicines as protective art forms is hallmark here. In this composite of various African-American yard traditions, Gyp Packnett tied twin dolls, one with a pistol, to the front wall of his house so that all might realize forces under God guard his premises and "know how to take care of things." In addition, a tire planter, blades from electric fans, and a wagon wheel encode the preoccupation with the cycling and continuity of the soul.



### Kongo Tree Altar to the Ancestors

Prepared and consecrated by Dr. K. Kia Bunseki Fu-Kiau of Zaire and Boston.

The Kongo custom of showing affection for the dead by surrounding the grave with plates attached to sticks prefigures one kind of North American bottle tree. The plates' resemblance to mushrooms evokes a Kongo pun:

*matondo/tonda*, mushroom/to love. K. Kia Bunseki Fu-Kiau offered the following words at the consecration of this "mushroom tree":

In Africa, before any dedication event such as the dedication of this "mushroom tree," one would always say, *Mfuma na mfuma, nganga na nganga*. This motto states, "Politicians deal with politicians; doctors with doctors." We gather here because we all love and appreciate art and its hidden meanings, yesterday, today, and tomorrow. When a powerful individual—a leader, a chief, a twin-mother, a hero, a community healer, or the community historian—dies, one says, *N'ti ubundúbidi*, "The tree has fallen," or *Sisi kizimini*, which means "The flame is gone." This fallen tree in the upper world joins the ancestors in the lower world, and to offer thanks, jars, pots, knives, plates, bottles, and bracelets are laid on the ancestral tombs.

K. Kia Bunseki Fu-Kiau

Originally from Zaire, K. Kia Bunseki Fu-Kiau now works at the Suffolk County House of Corrections outside Boston. There he developed and implemented the courses "African World and Culture," an insight into the African roots of African-American culture, geared toward building self-esteem and a sense of pride among inmates of African descent in particular. He has also taught at several universities, among them Yale and Tufts, and published numerous articles on Kongo faith and healing traditions. Fu-Kiau has received degrees in psychology and cultural anthropology, as well as master's degrees in education and library science, and a Ph.D. in education and community development from the Union Institute in Cincinnati.



PHOTO: JERRY L. THOMPSON, COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM FOR AFRICAN ART

### Saamaka Altar

An evocation of the Saamaka high altar to the ancestors at Asindoopo, Suriname.

A flag altar to the ancestors would have housed a guardian figure with funereal white headwrap and the striped cloths prized by the ancestors. Pegged and dramatically hoisted toward heaven, the fabrics exalt those who liberated themselves from plantation slavery. The surrounding fence is an old-style ornamentation meant to please the ancestors through re-creation of their art forms.

### FLAG ALTARS TO THE ANCESTORS

In the rain forests of Suriname, South America, multiple African and European traditions fuse in the flag altars of the Ndjuká and Saamaka. Composed of peoples of Mande, Akan, and Fon/Ewe, as well as Kongo and Yoruba origin, these African-influenced maroon societies use flags to signal spiritual presence and cultural independence. They specially honor heroic ancestors who “heard the guns of war”—who successfully fought for liberation from plantation slavery in the eighteenth century.

Honoring the ancestors with cloth is a tradition of the Yoruba, Kongo, and other cultures throughout West and Central Africa. Yoruba-Cuban practitioners drape their altars with vertical pieces of cloth to create throne-like atmospheres. The Kongo use flags spiritually to capture the wind; their word for “flag” also carries meanings of wind and spirit, a banner waving in the breeze that represents an honored ancestor.

Two maroon flag altars, both communal, are represented in the exhibition. One is an evocation of the Ndjuká high altar to the ancestors at Dii Tabiki, the capital of the Ndjuká people. It recalls how Ndjuká altar makers suspend long, immaculate white cloths from the top of a T-form cross within a carpentered enclosure to call on God (Gaa Gadu) and the ancestors. The second, a Saamaka altar, is shown here.



PHOTO: JERRY L. THOMPSON, COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM FOR AFRICAN ART



## THE CIRCLING OF THE SOUL AND KONGO MEDICINES OF GOD

At the core of classical Kongo religion is the cosmogram called *dikenga*, a cross within a circle, a symbolic chart of the voyage of the soul. It revolves like a star in heaven, a shining circle, the sun in miniature. As a miniature of the sun, the soul has four moments: birth (sunrise), flowering (high noon), fading (sunset), and the return in the dawn of a coming day. The *dikenga* sign also takes the form of a cross without a circle, a simple diamond, or a diamond with adornments at each of the four points. Because the Kongo believe the soul resides in the forehead, *dikenga* motifs often adorn the foreheads of masks.

The *nkisi* (pl. *minkisi*) is a "medicine of God." It is created by a priest, filled with earths to summon spirits, and with ideographic writing and objects to tell the spirit how to protect the soul of its owner and others in need. Among the more dramatic *minkisi* are the *zinkondi*, the famous Kongo blade images, studded with thorns, wedges, nails, and blades, and used in Central Africa for oath-taking, protection, and healing. In Cuba, *minkisi* are placed in isolated rooms, closets, corners, or crossroads, and adorned with feathers, stones, sticks, beads, earths, and iron. Many *minkisi* are set in spiritual motion with multiple feathers.

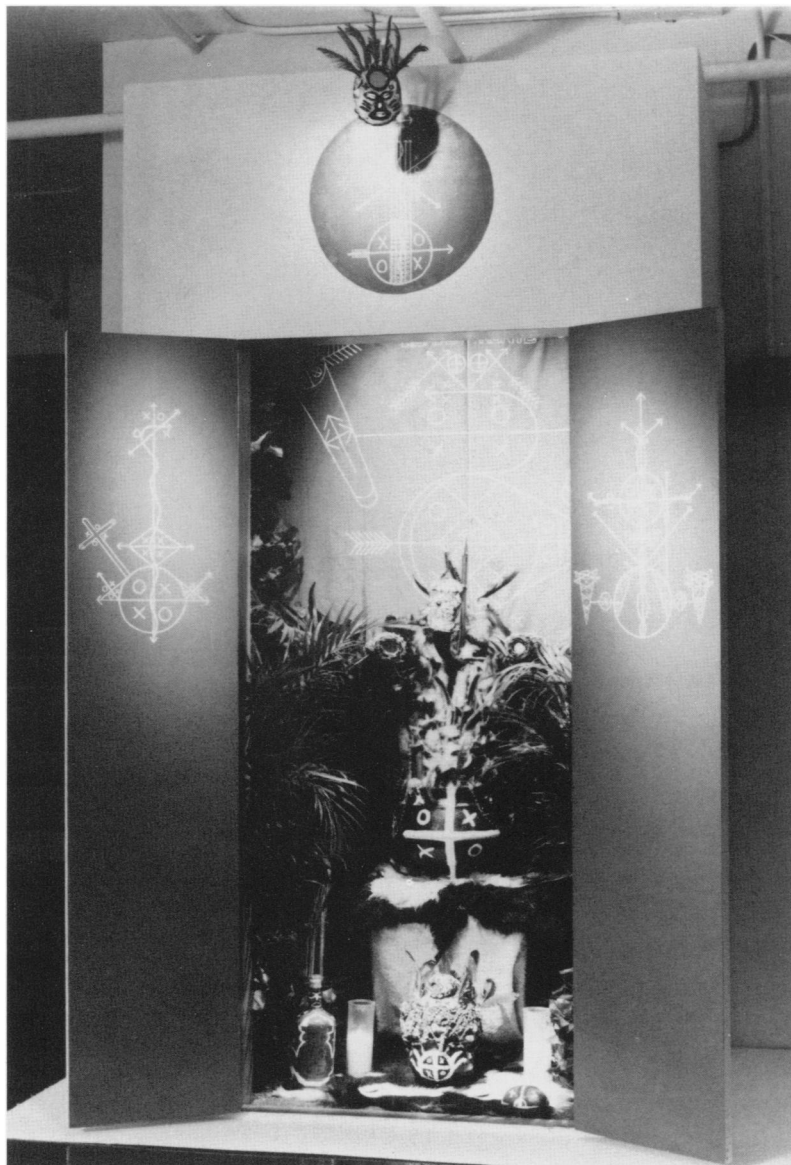


PHOTO: JERRY L. THOMPSON, COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM FOR AFRICAN ART

### Altar to the Spirit Sarabanda Rompe Monte

Designed and executed by Felipe García Villamil of Matanzas (Cuba) and the Bronx (New York). Wall drawings (*firmas*) executed by Alfonso Serrano, flag executed by Santiago Barrios, and metal symbol of Sarabanda made by Ogundipe Fayomi.

*My name is Nkuyu Watariamba.  
My road is Sarabanda.*

*I was born on the twenty-first of September,  
1993.*

One form of Kongo altar found in the Afro-Cuban religion of Palo Monte (also called Palo Mayombe) is *nkisi* Sarabanda. Sarabanda is considered by some Palo priests to be the spirit of a powerful railroad worker. This *nkisi* was created by a priest and is composed of objects from the world of the living (e.g., bones, shells, feathers, plants) and other objects such as stones and different types of soils. The altar displayed here is based on a closet model in which

Felipe García's Sarabanda was mounted. Hanging from the *nkisi* are beaded animal horns used for protection and divination. The horns with mirrors are called *vititi mensu* (leaves about the eyes), and one without a mirror is called a *mpaka* (horn).

On the floor in front of Sarabanda is another *nkisi* called Lucero Mundo, which represents the morning or evening star. It acts as a squire to Sarabanda and assists him in his work. The bottle on the left contains *chamba*, a mixture of rum and herbs used to salute and activate *minkisi*. The small white shells on the floor are called *chamalongo* and are used for divination. Above the closet enclosure hangs a protective spirit, Gurufinda. The *nkisi*, the closet doors, and the large red flag on the back wall are covered with protective signs called *firmas* (signatures) or *gandós* (spiritual locks). These signs are also used to assist the *nkisi* in its movement through time and space.

### Felipe García Villamil

The synthesis and syncretism of Afro-Cuban religion and music are Felipe García Villamil's heritage. A master musician and craftsman in both Yoruba and Kongo traditions, he was born in Matanzas, Cuba, into a well-known musical and spiritual family. His mother, Tomasa Villamil, is the granddaughter of Yoruba musicians from the city-state of Oyo, Nigeria. His father, Benigno García García, held seven degrees in Palo Monte. From his Yoruba great-grandfathers García Villamil inherited a set of sacred *bata* drums and was initiated as their caretaker. A skilled drum maker, he also creates exquisitely beaded ceremonial objects and cloth banners that present the ideographic writing of his religious tradition. In Cuba, García Villamil became a member of the all-male society, Abakua, that brought the drums, beats, and costumes of Calabar, Nigeria, to the island. He founded the folkloric group Emikeke, serving as musical director, musician, and teacher. García Villamil emigrated to the United States in 1980 and currently lives in the Bronx. He performs and teaches at many educational institutions, including the American Museum of Natural History, Columbia University, the Caribbean Cultural Center, and Yale University.



PHOTO: JERRY L. THOMPSON, COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM FOR AFRICAN ART

**Kongo-Cuban Altar to Lucero Mundo, Francisco Siete Rayos, and Comición India**

Designed and installed by José Bedia of Havana, Cuba.

José Bedia was initiated into Palo Monte in Havana. To conceal his faith he created an altar which he hid in a laundry hamper. The altar in "Face of the Gods" is similar to the one in Havana in design and proportions. Central is Lucero Mundo, a descendant of the *nkisi nkondi*, with a "nailed" hooked stick of power, a cross honoring God Almighty, and a seashell for long life and the soul's eternal journey. At left is the spirit Francisco Siete Rayos; at right is Comición India. The paintings on the backdrop portray the two worlds: night and day, the ancestors and the living.

**José Bedia**

José Bedia is a Cuban-born painter who has exhibited throughout Europe, Latin America, and the United States. He studied at the School of Art in San Alejandro and the Superior Institute of Art in Havana before moving to Miami. His works hang in the permanent collections of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Arkansas Art Center, the Museo de Belles Artes in Caracas, and the Centro Cultural/Arte Contemporaneo in Mexico City, among others. Bedia is an active participant in the Palo Monte tradition, a creole mix of the ancient traditions of Kongo and Spanish Catholicism, and contributed an altar reflecting his Afro-Cuban spiritual development and heritage. "When (Robert Farris) Thompson saw the personal altar at my home, he asked me to make one for the show. Normally people have only one altar for personal ritual, so the one I am creating in New York will be a replica. I'll construct the altar in a corner space, a crossroads, where two walls meet; on the one side I'll paint the day with the sun and on the other side the moon with the stars—a cosmogram. On the floor will be a brick triangle filled with earth representing a garden, and on top of it rests the Lucero Mundo, in this case a large seashell, with a bundle of healing medicines inside, surrounded by broken branches."



## FUSION FAITHS

Afro-Atlantic altars often form a locus of healing and moral reckoning. The altars in this section demonstrate the creative fusion of symbols inspired by Yoruba and Kongo art in the Western Hemisphere. A Yoruba-Brazilian altar to Omo-Olu, the deity of pestilence—now associated with protection from AIDS—combines pierced earthenware bowls symbolizing spots and skin eruptions with wrought-iron staffs to honor Osanyin, the Yoruba god of herbal healing (right). Omo-Olu uses the threat of disease to provoke peoples' social conscience. Symbolically spotted things—sesame candy, perforated pottery, speckled guinea hen feathers, and brain coral—are employed as morally intimidating signs of infections and disease. The ultimate creolization of healing arts is an Umbanda altar devoted to charity and mental healing. It brings together saints, feathers, candles, and cosmograms to form a syncretic mix of Yoruba, Kongo, Catholic, and Amerindian power, medicine, and practices (next page).

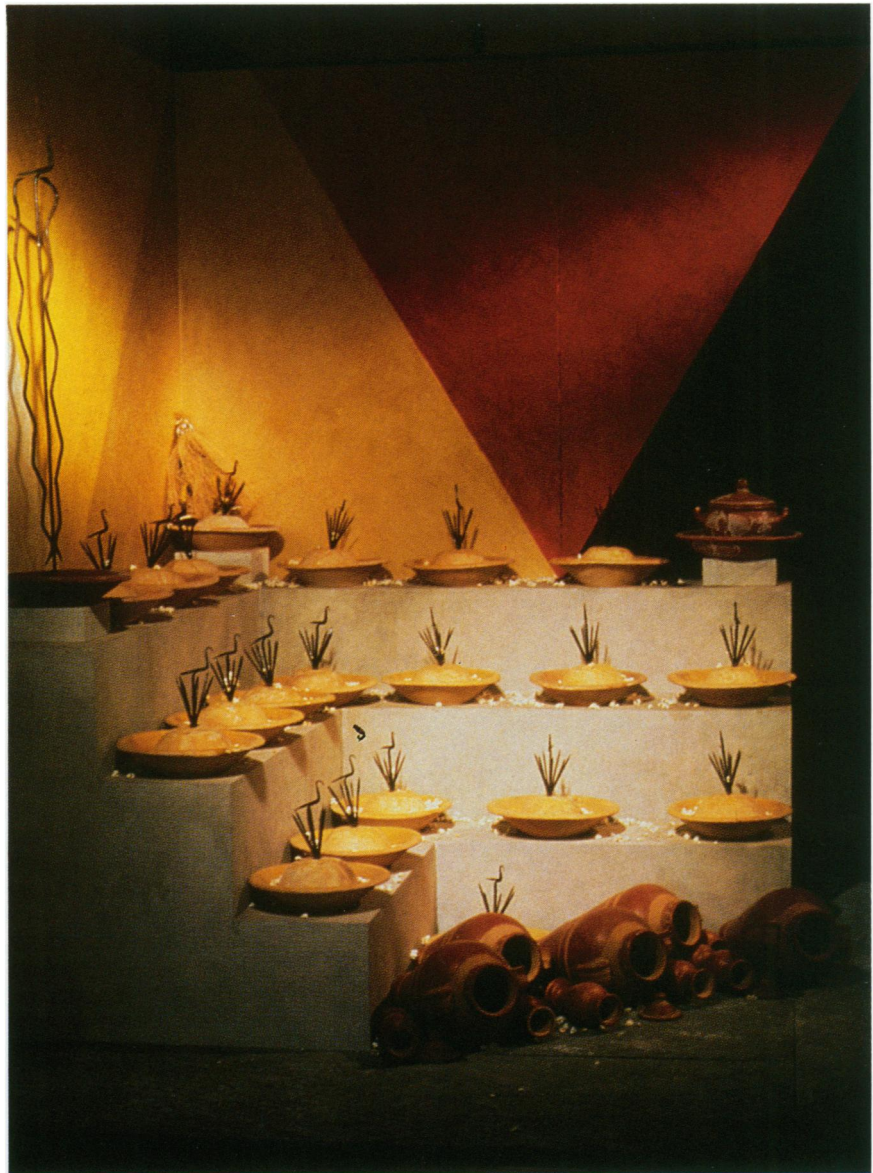


PHOTO: JERRY L. THOMPSON, COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM FOR AFRICAN ART

### Omo-Olu Altar

Designed and installed by Pai Balbino (Daniel de Paula) of Salvador, Bahia, Brazil. Executed by Balbino, Anailton Mauricio da Conceição, and Eneida Assunção Sanches. Metalwork by José Adario dos Santos of Salvador; the miniature straw image of Omo-Olu (center back) by Dentinha de Xangô of the *terreiro* (temple) Ilé Axé Opô Aganju in Salvador.

Omo-Olu ("Child of the Lord") is one of the many aliases of Obaluaíye, and is the name commonly used in Brazil. Omo-Olu now tackles the horror of AIDS; the pots resting on their sides at the foot of the altar are dedicated to those who have died. Customarily, women place their own pottery base for the deity's presence on the left side of his altar. Men place their offerings on the right-hand side. *Ajere* dishes, symbolically perforated, are set upside down. The underlying bowl contains a stone for Omo-Olu. Bird-topped wrought-iron staffs, attributes of Osanyin, the deity of healing, provide hope for the future and the prayer that a cure for AIDS will soon be found.

### Balbino Daniel de Paula

Babalorisha Balbino Daniel de Paula was born at Ponta de Areia on the island of Itaparica, Salvador, Brazil. He comes from a family of practitioners of the Candomblé religion in Brazil, and was himself initiated by Mae Senhora, a famous priestess in Bahia. Balbino is a priest of Shango and the head of the Candomblé *terreiro* Ilé Axé Opô Aganju. In Nigeria he received the titles of Mobangunle and Alade, and was confirmed as Obaxoru in the *terreiro* of Baba Egun on Itaparica. Balbino has been the subject of international scholarly and popular writings and has been featured in many films, including *Brasileiros da Africa: Africanos de Brasil* by Pierre Verger, *The Orisha Tradition* by Angela Fontanes, and *Ile Aiye* by David Byrne.



### Umbanda Altar

Designed by Amira Lepore of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and Queens, New York. Constructed by Daniel Lepore, Eduardo Monaco, Amadeu Menuzzo, and Aurelio Menuzzo.

Charity is essential to Umbanda. In this altar, designed by a ranking Umbanda priestess, the deities in the Yoruba pantheon, now in the guise of Catholic saints, have gathered on and around a table in a tribute to the charitable human spirit and the art of healing. Hues of blue translate the domain of ocean into the sky, honoring Yemanjá (Brazilian spelling of Yemoja), the goddess of the waters, who appears with palms extended in a framed image on the wall. Oxala/Jesus (Oxala is the Brazilian Obatalá) is central among the *orixa*/saints. Obaluaiye (Omo-Olu) has become Saint Lazarus, his wounds associated with the signs of disease. Exu (Eshu) is represented in three forms: that of a horned devil, a suave man in a zoot suit, and a charmingly loquacious sailor.

### Amira Lepore

For the last twenty-nine years Amira Lepore has been an active Umbanda practitioner. She founded her own spiritual house in Brazil, as well as the Foundation Amadeu Bricanção, named after her father. The Foundation supports the work of dentists and doctors who give free inoculations and other medical services to the poor people of Rio. Lepore was honored for her good works in 1987 by the Brazilian government as a Carioca Citizen and was given the Pedro Ernesto medal, an honor she shares with the Pope. She is now writing a five-volume work called *Force of the Spirits* for the Brazilian publisher Editora Abril. While her temple is still maintained in Brazil, in 1988 Lepore relocated to Queens, New York, and opened the first Umbanda temple in the U.S. on April 25, 1992. Each Friday night, over 200 people attend her sessions during which she receives the spirits Zé Pelintra and Dr. Adolf Fritz. The well-known Brazilian magazine *Manchete* has featured her successes, and her following in the United States is growing.



PHOTO: JERRY L. THOMPSON. COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM FOR AFRICAN ART

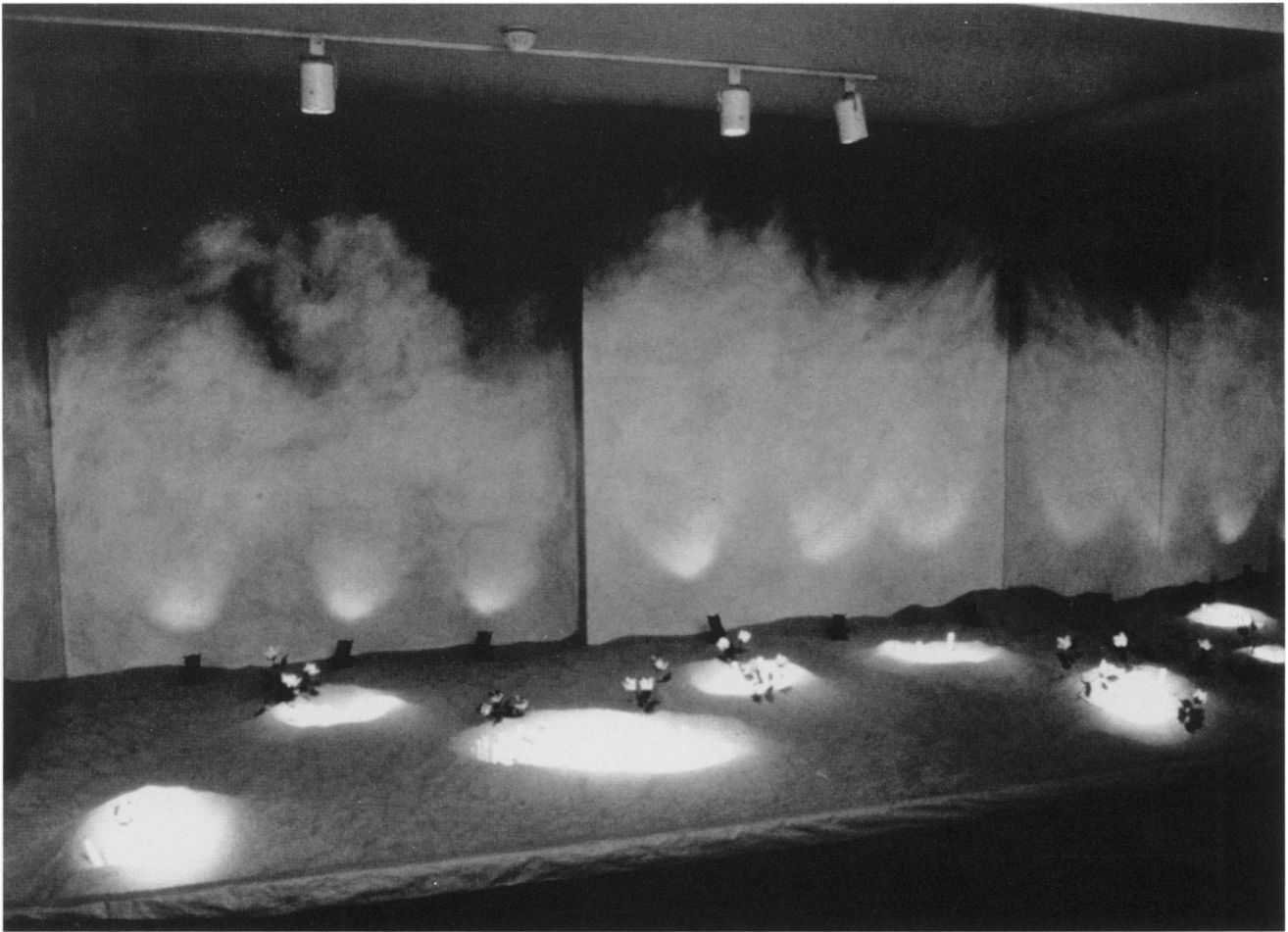


PHOTO: JERRY L. THOMPSON. COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM FOR AFRICAN ART

## THE ULTIMATE ALTAR: THE ATLANTIC OCEAN

Addressing the Atlantic Ocean as a vast altar of Yemanjá, Brazilian-Yoruba goddess of the waters and abundance, thousands of the faithful go to Copacabana, Ipanema, and other beaches of Rio on New Year's Eve. There they ask her blessing for the coming year, and dedicate altars to Oxum (goddess of love) and Ibêji (twin spirits). Some hold floral offerings aloft like banners, say a prayer, then hurl them into the sea. Others carve out cavities in the sand and light candles within these wind-protected spaces, often adding white roses ("the most perfect of flowers") and champagne ("the foam of her ocean"), until by midnight the beach blazes with twinkling miniature altars as far as the eye can see. Associated with the rise of Umbanda in the '20s and '30s, Rio beach altars represent an explosion of cultural improvisation and dramatize the ongoing twentieth-century fusion of African, Christian, and Amerindian icons and ideology. The aesthetic creativity typified by this rich blend of iconographies has given spiritual and moral sustenance to Africans in the Americas for centuries.

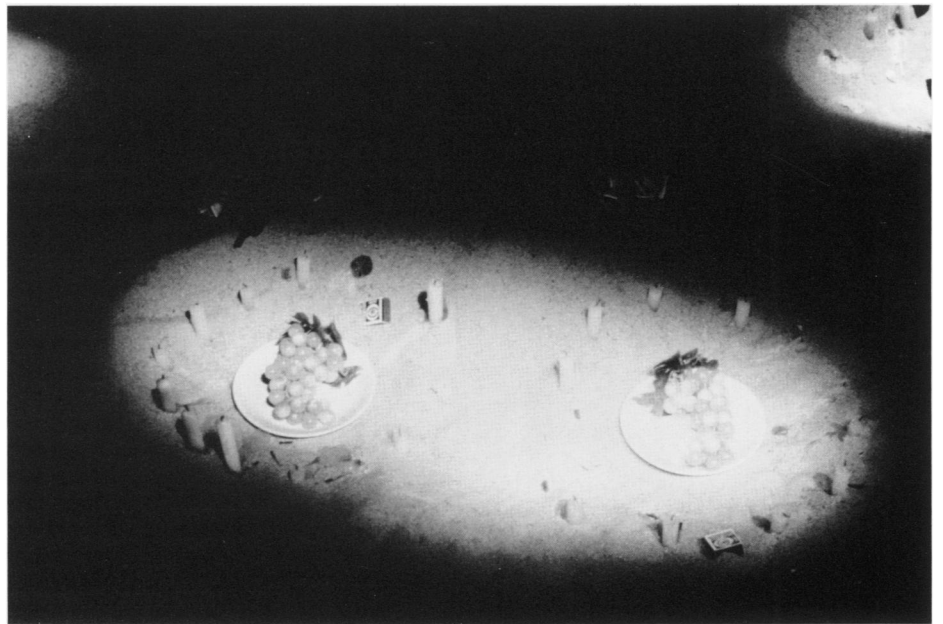


PHOTO: C. DANIEL DAWSON