Abstract

On May 16 and 17, 2017, the Transforming Anthropology staff had the pleasure of visiting the “Sacred Arts of the Black Atlantic” collection, which features the living art and ritual objects of Dr. J. Lorand Matory, the Lawrence Richardson Professor of Cultural Anthropology at Duke University, and also to celebrate the eleventh year of his seminal book, Black Atlantic Religion (Princeton University Press, 2005). During the tour and discussion with Professor Matory, Transforming Anthropology’s team was able to explore this extensive showcasing of African and African-inspired religious artifacts, as well as to delve more deeply into his philosophy of “distributed self.” This two-day tour and discussion ended with an hour-long interview with Professor Matory about both his collection and his scholarship on African inspired religions. As part of TA’s special forum on race and religion, we highlight an extended excerpt of the interview, conducted by two of the journal’s editorial interns, Khytie Brown (KB) and Adrian Hernandez-Acosta (AHA). The interview centers on how Professor Matory models his philosophy of “live dialogue,” and the role of objects in mediating relationships among people, spirits, and their gods. To listen to the interview, check out the Transforming Anthropology podcast (https://soundcloud.com/transformanthro).

Khytie Brown (KB): Thank you so much, Professor Matory, for speaking with us. We have had such a wonderful time viewing your precious collection of African-inspired religious artifacts. Throughout the tour, we have been discussing objects. In particular, we’ve discussed your concept of the “hyper-cathected object.” What is a hyper-cathected object? What is at stake? And how does the concept relate to your collection?

J. Lorand Matory (JLM): My general approach is based upon the hypothesis that certain objects deeply embody relationships. This is a Marxist insight, filtered through a Weberian awareness, that social status is not restricted to one’s economic class within the means of production. It is defined by culture-specific roles and conceivable relationships. It is defined by elaborate symbolism and iconography. For example, the goddess Yemayá, in Cuba, is invoked by the color combination of blue and clear. She is present in the ocean, in the duck, in the froth at the shoreline, in homosexual men, in ocean shells, in fish. She is a being that is constituted by a network of things and people who are connected to her and reproduce her being. She has counterparts, like Ochún, Changó, and Oguón, each of which is constituted by a different network of objects, things, and places. Each of these personified networks is present in the bodies of all of us. All of the substances of the universe are present in each of us. But given the circumstances of our birth, our ancestry, and our character, it is clear that some of these personified beings are more powerful than others.

One way to think of them is as beings, but they’re also networks of relationships. Human beings are combinations of relationships, of people who reside in us. Our ancestors reside within us. They leave genetic and personality patterns within us. We react to them in establishing ourselves. All the things we dislike about our parents, we try to be the opposite; but that means they’re still present in us, driving an aspect of us. Our relationship with the beings within us, and the relationships that constitute us are complex, and the religions I research embody these relationships not only in networks, but in emblematic objects that are assembled within vessels, to illustrate who our person is and to whom that person is connected. They are used in managing our relations with those networks, in harmonizing those networks as they come together within us, in cultivating the positive implications of any network and minimizing the negative implications. In
psychoanalytic terminology, I describe the objects used in the management of the self and of relationship as hyper-cathected objects.

The hyper-cathected object, to me, is that object invested with the sentiments and substance of relationships, the emotions, and the debts that bind us to those relationships. Sometimes those objects are altars. Sometimes they are sacred objects. Sometimes they are houses (Figure 3). Likewise, university campuses are hyper-cathected objects.
objects—the very careful landscaping of the place, the costly buildings, and the maintenance of those buildings. They look like medieval castles on plantation manors. So, I don’t mean “hyper” in the sense that our investment in them is excessive but that our investment in them is focalized. We have the agency to create that focus. When we are as thoughtful about the symbolism, the labor involved in producing those foci of emotion and relationship, we assume greater power over our lives. When we imagine that relationship is a disembodied thing—beyond our symbolic control, beyond our choices—that is when we lose our agency. That is when the object does have power over us.

The talk of fetishism during the Enlightenment was the assertion that human beings have an agency independent of objects. “Those silly Africans,” the Enlightenment supposed, “are falsely projecting value and agency into objects. And they don’t really know where the value and agency reside.” But in my view, these African inspired priests and worshippers are highly conscious and deliberately thoughtful about the symbolism and the mechanism of relationship. Objects are used to engineer these relationships in thoughtful, conscious ways that have been removed from reflection by the iconoclasm of Protestantism and bourgeois capitalism.

Adrian Hernandez-Acosta (AHA): You consider your own house and the collection within it—your home—a hyper-cathcted object. Could you speak more to this relationship not only as an anthropologist but also as someone who wants to return, to some extent, the artifacts themselves to the ritual lives out of which they emerge. How does this relationship relate to critical anthropological discussions on the positionality of the scholar? How do you see the artistic, aesthetic life of these objects in relation to the ritual life that first formed them and which you appreciate so much?

JLM: I should take my reasoning of the hyper-cathcted object to the next step. These are objects in one way, but we should be careful when we use the word “object.” That already invokes the Protestant/Enlightenment vision that I am the subject and that is the object. It separates the agency of the viewer from that of the object. These objects are actually a part of my distributed self. There isn’t a clear distinction between them as the object and I as the subject. They make me feel all sorts of emotions that are highly involuntary. There is a dialectical relationship between us with regard to who’s acting and who’s being acted upon.

You pointed out that the objects I possess live multiple lives. For example, the altar behind you, Yemoja, contains a calabash, which was grown by someone in a field and bought (Figure 4). It was then wet and rubbed with kaolin, which was mined from a river and bought by someone. Yemoja is adorned with Venetian beads and Swarovski crystals, which were made by yet another.
The pots on the altar, most of which have a secular purpose in cooking; the threads of cloth are synthetic threads, probably spun in a European factory; the wood from which the Ibeji sculptures were made was cut down someplace—I am emphasizing, in this first round of consideration, the commodity character of many objects with which this altar has been assembled. All of these objects have a life within the circulation of commodities and the family of goods that are exchanged for each other, for money, denominated in the currency of various nation-states. That is a perfectly legitimate aspect of their lives. Hence, when I purchase an object that had a price tag on it, I tend to not be so anxious about taking it off. That is part of its life, its name, and its character. Once it is reassembled and sacrifices are performed over it and it is bathed in herbal infusions, it is bowed down before and prayed to—multiple commodities have been combined with each other in symbolically encoded numbers and recitations under the authority of people who have been initiated—then they acquire another kind of life, which requires their integrity. They are no longer a separate piece of wood, pottery, calabash, bead, and effigy. Once they are assembled, they acquire a shared personality—that is, that’s god there now.

So these objects have a ritual life that did not necessarily precede their life in capitalist exchange. Typically, the capitalist exchange came first...Since I did not have to assemble these items quickly, I had time to visit many botánicas [religious stores] and many art dealers. I’ve made friendships with many priests, and I’ve had the option to look at objects very intensely. Some of them move me more for their proportions, their colors, their age, their smell, and their texture. Their power over me is quite independent from their ritual preparation as gods (because some haven’t been prepared as gods yet)—and quite independent from the price. The real value of it is not measurable in money. Sometimes, I will intensely love something that costs five dollars. It has an aesthetic value far out of proportion to its monetary value. So, there is a world of aesthetics and of aesthetic traditions, and an awareness of aesthetic precedence within the religious traditions.

These objects say something very clear to me, and pretty clear to anyone who visits this house, about who owns this house. You could not mistake it. One student said, “Oh, my father is a doctor, but you don’t see doctor’s instruments displayed all over the house; but you can tell this is an anthropologist’s house.” I never thought of it that way. Everything here speaks the beauty and dignity of Black people from every place in the world. How varied Black people are; how varied are their creations; how varied are the gods that drive Black people! It also speaks of wealth and of time. When they see an altar, when they see me bow down before an altar, they say, “Wow! That is a form of power that is here; I better watch
out.” Therefore, it says all sorts of things about my distributed self. Each of these objects lives in at least those three worlds [of commodity, of ritual, and of aesthetics].

KB: We’ve touched upon human agency vis-à-vis the agency of objects themselves. One thing we haven’t quite talked about yet, but which comes up a lot in Afro-Atlantic traditions, is spirit possession and spirits possessing objects. I see some overlap between Paul Christopher Johnson’s *Spirited Things* and your own work. For him, spirit possession is inextricably linked to what he calls the “thingification” of persons into beings that can be possessed. He focuses on the relation between material possession and spirit possession, on the trope of the body as property, of spirit possession being predicated on an idea of people as property, which stands in contrast to the autonomous liberal subject-citizen. So, I’m just wondering about the agency of objects in relation to spirit possession within Afro-Atlantic religions.

JLM: I buy entirely into your summary of his argument. It seems to me that the Enlightenment was an attempt to clarify the difference between subjects and objects, owners and owned things. It seems to me a novel and valuable insight that the objectification of Black people, denying their subjectivity, is part of the process of owning them. That is indeed a Western configuration of how the universe works. However, deeply embedded in our grammars is the obvious point: every human is both a potential subject and potential object. When I talk to you, you are grammatically an indirect object. When I touch you, you are a direct object. Human relationship is a dialectic relationship of my doing and your doing. Likewise, my relationship with objects is a function of the ways in which I can do and cannot do, and the things that they compel me to do. I’m hesitant to call that agency *per se*. I think it’s an abuse of the English language.

AHA: Returning to the idea of objects’ multiple lives, how can we think about some of these lives as secret lives, perhaps even closeted, especially in light of critical anthropological debates on the ethics of ethnographic transparency and secrecy?

JLM: All of these religions keep certain things secret, which varies from one priest to another, one circumstance to another. These are rules about *who* is allowed to see and *what* is shown, and these rules are a lot more variable than is usually assumed. Some traditions are stricter than others, and in some places, it depends on whether you are considered trustworthy, whether you are male, whether you are dark-skinned—a lot of it is negotiable. I have entered into a particular network of relationships with priests who understand what I need and want, and I understand what they need and want. We decide—sometimes they ask the gods themselves—whether they want to be seen or don’t want to be seen. They tell me certain things that I shouldn’t expose at a given time and things that I should expose. There are decisions they have made and others that I have made about what I’ll talk about and what I’ll remain silent about. All of these are among the immaterial furniture of my relationship with them. To me, that’s the big issue. Within the integrity of my relationship with this person that I love, what rules are we going to agree upon regarding the objects that mediate our relationship? I accord these objects the respect that is expected of them. On the other hand, to me, this is a part of my distributed self, and if I want them to travel, they’re going to travel, because they are a part of me. This might entail some risk for me. I’m trusting they will be taken care of properly.

The public self of these beings is just as important as their private self, and I fight for them publicly on campus. I am not going to let any university officer tell me that I shouldn’t expose things to students that they are not willing to watch. No, he can’t talk about my gods that way, or of my distributed self that way. My deans can talk to me about pedagogical practice, and I’ve been perfectly reasonable. No one in my class is obligated to witness the rituals. They are invited as a privilege if they wish to come. If they show respect, then they are welcome to come. There are parts in which they cannot participate and parts in which they can.

KB: Could you discuss your “live dialogue” analytic, particularly how you see objects fitting into it? And can we, if possible, conceptualize a relationship with Africa and the Diaspora through moving objects?

JLM: The fundamental idea behind “live dialogue” is, following Lakoff and Johnson’s *Metaphors We Live By*, that no scholarly analysis is comprehensive any more than a map of the world diagrams the whole world. If it diagramed the whole world, it wouldn’t be a map anymore; it would be the whole world.

In any story we tell, in any account we give, in any explanation we give, we are paying attention *selectively* to certain dimensions of the
phenomena explained or described, and we often do so through metaphors.

[Professor Matory brought up the metaphors of retention and of creolization, metaphors that have historically framed the study of African inspired religions.]

Each of these metaphors begs certain questions about the nature of cultural change in Africa, about the substance of a practice, whether it is mostly shaped by a memory or mostly shaped by present political circumstances, about the essential motives people have in reproducing their culture: Do people want to intrinsically preserve the way that they did things before or do they intrinsically want to create new forms to express their individuality under circumstances that deny their individuality? All of these matters are debatable. All of these models might usefully highlight some aspects of a particular [way of life] and be less useful in highlighting other aspects of that [way of life].

For example, I found Herskovits’s survival model, which entails metaphors like reinterpretation and syncretism, very useful in discussing the metaphors employed in spirit possession, especially the gendered metaphors. In twentieth-century West African religions, especially around the Gulf of Guinea, the relationship between gods and possession priests is often analogized to the relationship between a horse and its rider; it is also often analogized to the relationship between a male animal and a female animal during a sexual act. The term in Spanish and Portuguese is “mounting.” but the comparable West African term is “gùn.” So, a god is said to mount a possession priest; a male animal is said to mount a female animal in a sexual act; and, a rider is said to mount a horse. Hence, possession priests are often described as horses. The newly initiated ones are called wives of the god. As they mature, they are no longer of man who is willing to be mounted by another woman. Whether that is empirically true or not is not the question. It’s what people infer symbolically. I infer from these parallels that a West African conception of spirit possession as a relationship between gods and human beings has been enacted in the Americas in light of Latin American social categories, which make certain assumptions about penetrability and mounting. But in West Africa, among the Òyó-Yorùbá, I am not aware of any widely acknowledged category of men who are mounted by other men. But in Brazil and Cuba where these are categories of men, that category has been adapted, has been a site of reinterpretation of West African categories.

Likewise, in West Africa, in Yorubaland, self-prostration is a common form of salutation. So, typically a man who is saluting a monarch or his parent would lie down flat on the ground. One of the gestures of female obeisance is for a woman to lie down first on one side and then on the other supported by either elbow. In the Americas, the form of salutation that a person uses to salute a god or an elder is determined not by the biological sex of the one who prostrates, but by the sex of the god governing his or her head. So, if the ruler of my head is a male god, in both Brazil and Cuba, I will prostrate by laying flat on the ground in front of an elder or a god. If I am a man or a woman whose head is ruled by a goddess, I will lie on the ground first on one side supported by one elbow and then on the other side supported by the other elbow. Therefore, it seems to me, the forms of salutations in the Americas constitute a form of survival and reinterpretation of West African precedence. Herskovits’s model works pretty well in describing these phenomena.

Similarly, the creolization model is highly useful in discussing the reproduction of certain religious forms in Cuba and Brazil. That is to say, certain bourgeois and planter elites have been more willing to sponsor and protect West African religious practices from some places or associated with some places in Africa than religious practices associated with other places in Africa. Bourgeois and state elites since the mid-nineteenth century have been much more willing to support, at least not to forbid, West African practices than West Central African practices—that is, the practices of
the ancestors of the people we now call Yorubá and Fon have received much more protection than the practices of the people we now call Kongo. Why? I am not sure. But in the American context, especially in Cuba, there seems to be a moral contrast that is specific to Cuba, between good Lucumí and bad Kongo. That is not an African survival. The ancestors of Kongo and the ancestors of Lucumí had no interactions with each other to speak of. That’s a Cuban contrast. And the proliferation of Lucumí practices and Nagô practices, in Cuba and Brazil as a lingua franca for the definition and description of other peoples’ religious traditions is a specifically New World phenomenon that has been shaped by the unequal access of the practitioners of these different African traditions to education, to books that explain their practices, and to English language rationalizations of the practices.

So, how does this model [of live dialogue] enhance our understanding of objects? The focus of my interest at this moment is about the central importance of beads, cowrie shells, and seashells, as well as maize in West African religions. The art that we see excavated from under Ilé-Ifé representing fourteenth-century portraiture and depiction of social life in that part of West Africa tends to depict highly personalized and socially unique people (Figure 5). People with particular tribal scarification, people with meticulous facial expressions, people at distinctly discernable ages, some look like slaves with their arms tied behind their backs and a stick through their mouths to prevent them from speaking. Some look like people with elaborate headdresses, who look like very important people. They are full of personality, which almost disappears from the art of the nineteenth century and of the early twentieth century. The representation of the monarch includes crowns that have a texture on them that clearly have vertical elevation but neither evidence of beaded crowns, with the beaded veils typical of today’s Yoruba’s crowns, nor evidence of there being even a place to attach bead strands to them. Nineteenth century terracotta and bronze representations of kings in that region often depict people with coral beads all the way up to the neck, often covering up to the nose and covering the eyes, oftentimes depersonalized and abstracted portraits of peoples. The royals themselves, even in photographs that we have as far back as the nineteenth century, typically show monarchs with their faces covered with strands of European glass beads. They’re covered head to foot with beads, and likewise the altars of the gods are full of cowrie shells, which were typically the money of the slave trade. They tended to be cowries originating from the Maldives, which were brought by European mariners to West Africa when the holds of their ships were too empty to keep the ship sitting well in the water. They were used as ballasts. But European merchants found that they could trade these cowrie shells for goods, including human beings, on the West African coast because West Africans found them highly useful as a generalized means of economic exchange. Similarly, seashells are very prominent in the worship of Yemoja even in the interior. Clamshells that have come from afar came to represent things that were happening at the seashore, on the coast, dealing with Europeans, although another element of this goddess’s personality is that she is said to be a woman from the north. This goddess embodies a great many of the inter-cultural and translocal trade relations that Yoruba people were engaged in from the sixteenth century onward, of a sort quite different than what they had engaged in from the fourteenth century backwards.
Professor Matory goes on to discuss some of the specific objects that comprise Yemoja’s altar.

...the objects that are assembled in altars in Candomblé and Santería, or Regla de Ocha, are regularly assembled of carefully selected imported objects (Figure 1). Chinese porcelains are highly valued in the Cuban tradition. European-style porcelains, especially soup tureens, are the choice vessel of the gods and of human personalities in both of these traditions. Imports from Africa are highly important in the Brazilian tradition that duplicate a history in trade of palm oil, kola nuts, straw from the coast (palha da costa). A lot of items that nineteenth-century manumitted African merchants were able to trade—with which they monopolized the trade in and which they provided to their allies who were the chiefs of Candomblé temples—became indispensable objects in the reproduction of these religions, in the initiation of people. European alcohols tend to be very important in the making of West African gods. Rum tends to be very important in the making of gods in Candomblé and Santería. And we know that rum, which is a byproduct of sugar, was one of the main reasons why enslaved people were brought to the Americas. It wasn’t to produce cotton. That was secondary to sugar, and rum became an important element of the taste and the very substance of the gods. So, all these physical objects, prepared with alcohol, with imported goods, with emblems of the transnational, or translocal and transatlantic movement of people are embedded deeply in these objects (Figure 6).

Far from being survivals of some primordial African past, it seems to me they are artifacts of a deeply mutual and transformative interaction between Europeans and Africans since the late fifteenth century. I must add, just as Europe has transformed the selfhood of Africans and African Diaspora people, African Diaspora people, and Africans have transformed the selfhood of Europeans.

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Figure 6. Cowrie shells and red and black Eleggúa beads.