Exploring Materiality and Connectivity in Anthropology and Beyond

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5 Intervention

Invoking the gods, or the apotheosis of the Barbie doll

Natalie Göltenboth

Dolls on display

Four old-fashioned Barbie dolls lift their arms skywards. Their frozen gestures evoke a dancing pose, an invitation or a plea. Erected on white pedestals, they are almost at eye level with the audience. Their prominent position attracts attention.

The dolls vary in style and dress. There is a red-haired one with feverish eyes staring at the piece of charcoal in front of her. Next to her stands an elegant dark-skinned Barbie lady surrounded by some rusty iron tools. The gentle blonde wears a dress in white and blue. Her face is mirrored in a bowl of water. And finally, the fourth one is a princess in a colourful lace dress with a glass of honey at her feet.

The Barbie dolls appear as powerful beings, each one with an echo of the past in her glance. They dominate the room with their gestures and silent waiting for something to begin. The materials – honey, water, charcoal and iron – are awaiting their activation. A screen is illuminating the scene with its constantly changing images: a surgery, a beauty salon, a gym, firefighters, junkyards, a fashion show, a spa, burning woods and the sea – extending as far as the horizon – alternate every other second. The video images spread their artificial light over the Barbies’ faces in a never-ending loop.

The installation is inspired by the Afro-Cuban religion Santería and its ideas and concepts, which moved from West Africa to Cuba and as far afield as Munich, disentangled from their familiar icons, appropriating new objects, images and cultural fragments. Playing with the Assumption of the

Figure 5.1 Ochún, Orícha of sweet water, love and beauty. Installation by Natalie Göltenboth, Symposium Connecting Materialities/Material Connectivities, Munich 2017, LMU Center for Advanced Studies. Photo by Vivien Ahrens.

Figure 5.2 Yemayá, Orícha of the Sea. Installation by Natalie Göltenboth, Symposium Connecting Materialities/Material Connectivities, Munich 2017, LMU Center for Advanced Studies. Photo by Vivien Ahrens.
Virgin Mary, it mirrors the elevation in Santería ritual practice of the Barbie dolls, which had been ordinary toys for children before they were brought all the way from Miami to Havana to become sacred figurines representing West African deities called ‘Orichas’ or ‘Saints’, who, in turn, had travelled all the way from Yorubaland to Cuba. Thus, dolls, and especially Barbie dolls, serve as a platform of connection for the most diverse belief systems, cultural values, family ties and aesthetic systems.

Concepts: dis-connections and fractions

Even though the history of the Afro-Cuban religions and their material figures is largely about disruptions and fractions, it is also about the (re)making of connections. New traces and ties have been woven around dolls and saints. But let us first consider the situation of fractions before we follow the pathways of connectivity. One question that will concern us here is: how can a Barbie doll become a sacred figure on an Afro-Cuban Santería altar?

People from different regions in West Africa were transported to Cuba during the transatlantic slave trade, which started at the beginning of the sixteenth century; slavery itself was officially abolished in Cuba in 1886 but continued until the end of the nineteenth century. A variety of West African religious concepts and sacred entities accompanied the slaves in their imagination. In their homelands, these sacred beings had been visualised through carved sculptures and wooden masks that decorated, and still decorate, the Vodou altars in Nigeria, Togo and Benin (Lawal 1996).

It is remarkable that the material culture of the Vodou adepts of West Africa did not survive the transfer into the ‘New World’ (see Brown 1993; Ramos 1996). During the 500 years of the transatlantic slave trade, traditions of skilled manual work, such as carving and painting, were re-adopted in Cuba on only a very few occasions (see Ortiz 1973). One reason was the prohibition of any kind of African religious expression, whence the need for camouflage tactics that led to the Afro-American syncretism – the fusion of Catholic iconography with religious contents from West Africa (see Palmié 1991). Thus, during the first centuries of Spanish colonial rule in Cuba, the sacred beings of the Yoruba pantheon – the Oríchas – were addressed in the figures of Catholic saints. Another reason is given by anthropologist David Brown, who argues that the process of creolisation is accompanied

Figure 5.3  Changó, Orícha of fire, virility and power. Installation by Natalie Gölttenboth, Symposium Connecting Materialities/Material Connectivities, Munich 2017, LMU Center for Advanced Studies. Photo by Vivien Ahrens.

Figure 5.4  Ògún, Oricha of blacksmith and iron, cutting and separating. Installation by Natalie Gölttenboth, Symposium Connecting Materialities/Material Connectivities, Munich 2017, LMU Center for Advanced Studies. Photo by Vivien Ahrens.
INVOKING THE GODS, OR THE APOTHEOSIS OF THE BARBIE DOLL
by the adoption of precious status symbols of the dominant culture, which in colonial times were, first and foremost, colourful images of Catholic saints and porcelain Madonna statues (see Brown 1993, 44–87). In the times of Ken and Barbie originating from the USA, these dolls, among other things because of the values they represent, have replaced the saints and Madonnas, followed by ordinary plastic dolls which also suit the purpose. At this point, we can state that at least three different sets of ties are involved in the creation of Afro-Cuban Oríchas: concepts of West-African religious entities, Catholic iconography and glamorous dolls stemming from US mass production.

The disentanglement of images or figures from their original significance in the context of Afro-Cuban religions creates a situation in which the eye, which we thought to be a useful tool in the distinction of religious objects from everyday things, leaves us disoriented. Entering a house in which the Afro-Cuban religion Santería is practised, the visitor might stumble upon a cuddly toy or cheesy souvenir which is introduced as ‘Yemayá, the goddess of the sea’ or Changó, ‘the Orícha of virility’ (see Göltenboth 2003, 2006). One feels that the aspect of camouflage is still present, and that images and material figurines often do not show but merely hide their meaning. The sacredness of objects in Afro-Cuban religious contexts is not inherent in material figures and images per se, but almost every material thing, even the simplest item, can be chosen to be made sacred, charged in a ritual process, and so change its position from a playroom, a shop or the waste bin to an altar. The selection criterion in the process of choice is the ability of the everyday thing to evoke or trigger the concept of the Orícha (Göltenboth 2006).

Sacred objects in the context of Afro-Cuban religions function as ideograms through which content becomes tangible and accessible. At first glance, there is no accordance between form and content. Catholic saints, souvenirs taken from industrial mass production, dolls, including Barbie dolls, are found on Santería altars today as representations of the sacred beings of the Yoruba. We have to understand a situation in which an image, such as the statue of the Catholic St Barbara, is invoked as Changó, the Yoruba deity of virility, fire and royal power. The decisive factors that enabled the fusion were similarities in their iconography: the red colour of their garments and a combative stance symbolised by a sword. Above all, these similarities where sensory material connotations encouraged Afro-Cuban syncretism (Lawal 1996). However, similarities in representation do not point to similarities in content. In this sense, the Catholic saint and the Barbie dolls function as a kind of disguise for the concept of the Orícha. Once arrived in Cuba, the Oríchas were sacred beings that had been stripped of their ‘bodies’ of representation and therefore developed a strong need to be visualised again in new material objects.
Materiality: connecting bonds

The existence of Oríchas is not limited to conceptual layers, however. The vital force of the sacred beings is directly linked to certain materialities. Honey, sea- or freshwater, blood and iron, and certain plants and stones, can be understood as carrier materials of the Oríchas’ specific vital power – *Aché*. Changó is associated with fire and its remains. Ochún is the Oricha of love and beauty, and honey is the material most associated with this female deity of freshwater. Yemayá is said to live and work in the sea, and Ogún, the Oricha of blacksmiths and iron, is invoked by assemblages of iron tools (Ramos 1996). Another habitat of the Oríchas is specific environments as areas of their activities and labour (*trabajo*): beauty salons, fashion shows and freshwater spas for Ochún, the sea and ships for Yemayá, body-building studios and fire departments for Changó, and junkyards and surgeries for Ogún, whose specific ability is to cut and separate. These examples show the connections that have been established through materials, activities and particular sites, forming a direct link to the specific vital forces of the sacred entities.

Most of the objects that decorate the altars of Santería adepts in Cuba have been adapted to the actual lifestyle in Cuba, including contemporary ideas of beauty and desire. Most of them are souvenirs from all over the world, as well as toys and refuse gathered in rubbish dumps, playrooms and shops. However, Barbie dolls are a particular case; they are commodities acquired in stores in the USA and sent as gifts by relatives. As commodities and gifts, they mirror family ties that for decades have connected Cuba and the USA, countries that have been politically separated since the Cuban revolution in 1959. In addition, Barbie dolls are not only saturated with the sacred aura of the Oríchas; they are simultaneously encrusted with a fine texture of Cuban dreams of consumption and the feverish delirium of departure. Like Catholic saints, Barbies are figurines which are highly charged with their own narrative: the story of Ken and Barbie in the US glamour world, a story of success, power and consumption. In this sense, as mentioned above, Barbies represent a desired lifestyle, and their fusion with the sacred Afro-Cuban entities creates new powerful sacred objects. That is what the Oríchas are about: they are supposed to provide their adepts with power that enables them to achieve their goals and realise their dreams, be they capitalistic or of another sort.

The dolls have to undergo a transition process to become part of an altar installation. Dolls that appear on altars have been subjected to a ritual washing ceremony with decoctions of herbs, associated with the Oricha’s vital power, which allows them to bear the *Aché* of the sacred beings. A bundle of herbs and other substances has been placed inside their bodies.
Throughout these preparations, nothing has changed the outer appearance of the doll, which preserves its fashionable style and smile. What has been changed or replaced is the connecting ties, and, with them, the idea of the object and its place; the Barbie is now part of a sacred altar installation.

The installation of juxtapositions: ‘... beautiful as the chance meeting on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella …’

The creation of a new paradigm in the making of sacred objects in Cuba can be interpreted as an act of cultural creativity, which forms part of the creolisation processes typical of the Caribbean. The shift from manual fabrication to the creation of a new idea for a prefabricated or found object (objet trouvé) is especially interesting from an artistic point of view. I do not want to mix up spheres, but I think we could get some inspiration from the history of contemporary art if we consider the radical change from traditional painting and sculpture to conceptual art, starting with Marcel Duchamp in the 1920s, which put into question the conventional concept of art, together with its related aspects, materiality and skill. The art philosopher Arthur C. Danto explained it as the transition from the appearance of an object to what he calls its ‘aboutness’ (Danto 1981), which might be translated as a thing plus a concept, which, of course, is invisible to the eye.

The most famous example in the area of contemporary art is Duchamps’s ‘Fountain’ from 1917, a urinal that was only distinguishable from other urinals in public toilets precisely because it was not located in a public toilet but in an art show. Following Danto’s method of developing his art theory by inventing specifically designed examples (Danto 1981), we could imagine a show of several Barbie dolls which would all appear equal. Invisibly to the eye, only one of them would have achieved the status of a material thing plus an idea or concept about it that goes beyond its function as a simple doll. This Barbie could be an art object or a sacred art object.

In the domain of the Afro-Cuban religion Santería, we have two possible approaches towards materiality and connectivity. The first is a conceptual layer, where the significance differs from the figure or image that we see with our eyes. The striking issue in that case is the idea, or concept, which has been created for the figure and implemented within its material confines. As a complement to the conceptual layer, there is also a material one, which is characterised by direct connections between certain materialities as part of the environment and the spiritual entities.
The installation reflects the movement of ideas, things and materialities that – after their involuntary dislocation – established new connections, new ties and thus new significances. This juxtaposition might, at first glance, have some similarity to what the French writer André Breton called the surrealist dislocation, quoting the French writer Comte de Lautrédou in *Les Chants de Maldoror:* ‘beautiful as the chance meeting on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella’ (Lautrédou 1978).

The poetic spark that emerges in this process has fascinated me since my first contact with Afro-Cuban altars, and I tried to visualise it in the installation: the dolls might be purchased at a flea market or taken from an altar. The exposed materials could come from waste or a kitchen. Their origins do not matter. Informed by the idea implemented in the arrangement of the installation, figures and materials start to talk their own language.

Notes

2. For the distinction between thing and concept, see also Holbraad and Pedersen 2017.

References


