

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Ani Gavino

The Gods Live in Philadelphia

by Anielille "Ani" Gavino

"We have our own spiritual traditions as people that honor the pantheon of deities written within us." - Agkhira S. Augkh (Yoruba community member)

The Philadelphia Yoruba Performance Project took us on a journey exploring the history and contemporary expressions of Yoruba-rooted practices through Intercultural Journeys' *Modupúe | Ibaye*. The project was organized by Artistic Co-Directors Lela Aisha Jones and Alex Shaw in collaboration with project advisor Germaine Ingram and media artists Laura Sofía Pérez, Aidan Un, and Muthi Reed, and partially funded by the Pew Center for the Arts and Heritage. Not only did this dynamic, immersive display inform me about Yoruba culture, it also highlighted Philadelphia as a community of thriving Yoruba practitioners.

The Icebox at Crane Arts was transformed into an anthropological art gallery and sanctuary. I was particularly drawn to the ancestral homage memorial display, made up of a woven mat laid on the ground, pitchers of water as offerings, photos of departed ancestors, an altar adorned with flowers, a traditional mask, and many other divination pieces. This shrine beatification felt like a portal to the [Egun](#) and a daily reminder that the ancestors are always with the living. Monitors displayed interviews with Philadelphia Yoruba-rooted community members generously sharing their knowledge on the history and practice of Yoruba.

The [Yoruba](#) are a people, a language, and, in this context, an ancient spiritual practice from Africa which continued to exist after the transatlantic slave trade. It spread to separate branches in Cuba, Haiti, Brazil, and Puerto Rico, and its emergence as Santería, Candomblé, and Vodou are evidence of the transcendental powers of Yoruba's lineage.

Two years of research involving story circles and collaboration between Yoruba-centered organizations culminated in a three-day event featuring an immersive installation, dance performances, and a lecture by Dr. Ngiza Metzger. I attended the last day and partook in a

community dialogue on the representations of Yoruba on pop culture and contemporary art led by Arielle Julia Brown.

“Why pray to a White Jesus?” “Why pray to a god who don't look like us?” “I always thought of Voodoo as black magic.” These were some of the thoughts shared during the dialogue. I considered the demonization of Yoruba-rooted culture in U.S. media arts: I have seen it firsthand in films such as the 1932 [White Zombie](#), which portrayed a white couple visiting Haiti where a Haitian man lures the woman and turns her into a zombie slave. We also discussed the work of visual artist [Nike Okundaye](#), the animated film [Orun Aiye](#), and [Beyoncé's appearance](#) as Oshun in the music video *Lemonade*. Dr. Metzger addressed the shallow interpretations of Beyoncé who popularized the deity [Oshun](#) in popular media. One member added that Beyoncé fed into the capitalism and objectification of an ancient tradition. Others mentioned that this video became a point of departure for conversation on Yoruba culture.

The closing ceremony featured a display of moving body archives through the work of [Kùlú Mèlé African Dance and Drum Ensemble](#). The performance, *Timelessness of Obatala*, displayed a devotion to the orisha [Obatala](#), the grandfather of peace and creation. A parade of dancers and musicians under a white canopy graced the room, led by the sounds of the [Bata](#), a call and response chanting, and syncopated undulating movements. In Yoruba culture, each orisha has a specific drum rhythm, dance moves, and costuming. Here, Obatala repeatedly sweeps an iruke (a prop that looks like a horsetail) over one shoulder to another. Hovered over with upper body bent down to the ground, dancers continued undulating their spines, and traveled in slow, gentle, and rhythmic patterns. Perhaps this simplicity of movements and the all-white costume symbolizes Obatala's wisdom, purity, and dignity.

Arthur Hall was also honored as a choreographer, dancer, and teacher responsible for raising awareness on Yoruba diasporic beliefs and culture over the last three decades. The archival film *Obatala* by the [Arthur Hall Afro-American Dance Ensemble](#) served as visual backdrop against Kùlú Mèlé's presentation of Obatala. This dance against film from two influential Yoruba-centered dance ensembles seemed to represent the meeting of past and present lineages in Philadelphia.

I wished I had more time to absorb what this three-day media archive installation had to offer. I spent merely four hours at Crane Arts; those hours had me feeling slightly overwhelmed yet proud to be part of a city playing an important role in the fight to keep Yoruba traditions alive. “Modupue!” “Thank you!”

[Modupúe | Ibaye](#), The Philadelphia Yoruba Performance Project, Icebox at Crane Arts, December 12-14.

By Anito Gavino
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