



Reviving the Divine: Exploring Popular Religiosity in the Art of Jorge Hidalgo Pimentel and José Emilio Leyva Azze

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Abstract

The article deals with the representation of popular religiosity in the work of the artists Jorge Hidalgo Pimentel and José Emilio Leyva Azze. From engraving, painting, drawing and sculpture, both have recreated deities, various symbolic elements, orality, among other aspects that are part of the social imaginary in Cuba. The text chooses representative works of stages in which the artists assume the theme with greater permanence within their work. The examination has been carried out from a qualitative perspective that overlaps the formal analysis of the works and the hermeneutic method, as a generalizing interpretative framework. With different trajectories, motivations and poetics, Jorge Hidalgo and José Emilio Leyva contribute visions that demonstrate the survival of cultural practices rooted in the Cuban people, since they form an intrinsic part of their identity. The works contribute to the safeguarding of these manifestations of intangible cultural heritage. The evaluations given in the text also provide elements that enrich the critical body on this matter within the Holguín visual arts.

Keywords: Holguín visual arts; Jorge Hidalgo Pimentel; José Emilio Leyva Azze; Popular religiosity.

Abstrak

Artikel ini membahas representasi religiusitas populer dalam karya seniman Jorge Hidalgo Pimentel dan José Emilio Leyva Azze. Dari ukiran, lukisan, gambar, dan patung, keduanya telah menciptakan kembali dewa-dewi, berbagai elemen simbolis, oralitas, di antara aspek-aspek lain yang menjadi bagian dari imajinasi sosial di Kuba. Teks ini memilih karya-karya yang mewakili tahapan-tahapan di mana para seniman mengasumsikan tema tersebut dengan keabadian yang lebih besar dalam karya mereka. Kajian ini dilakukan dari perspektif kualitatif yang tumpang tindih dengan analisis formal karya-karya tersebut dan metode hermeneutika, sebagai kerangka interpretasi umum. Dengan lintasan, motivasi, dan puitika yang berbeda, Jorge Hidalgo dan José Emilio Leyva menyumbangkan visi yang menunjukkan keberlangsungan praktik-praktik budaya yang berakar pada masyarakat Kuba, karena hal tersebut merupakan bagian intrinsik dari identitas mereka. Karya-karya tersebut berkontribusi pada pelestarian manifestasi warisan budaya takbenda ini. Evaluasi yang diberikan dalam teks juga memberikan elemen-elemen yang memperkaya tubuh kritis tentang hal ini dalam seni visual Holguín.

Kata Kunci: Seni visual Holguín; Jorge Hidalgo Pimentel; José Emilio Leyva Azze; Religiositas populer.

INTRODUCTION

Popular religiosity is a social and cultural phenomenon that has a significant role in shaping the identity of a society (Bell, 1989; Noor, 2015). In Cuba, popular religious practices are an integral part of people's daily lives (Dodson & Batista, 2008). Over the years, art has become an important medium in representing and sustaining these popular religious practices. In this context, artists Jorge Hidalgo Pimentel and José Emilio Leyva Azze have created works that depict deities, symbolic elements and oral life in Cuban culture.

The work of Jorge Hidalgo Pimentel¹ and José Emilio Leyva Azze² stands out within the field of visual arts in Holguín,³ for displaying symbolic universes associated with popular religiosity,⁴ a phenomenon that, in the Cuban case, underlines its relationship with the Catholic Church, with religions of African origin and spiritualism; at the same time, it reflects interpretations of reality and diverse philosophical-ideological orientations (J. Ramírez, 2003).

The breadth of nuances offered by this aspect of national culture makes it a subject of multiple artistic approaches, as an expression of identity that reveals complex sociohistorical processes led by the various ethnocultural components of the nation (Moreno Zaldívar, 2022b). Visual artists in Holguín have not been oblivious to the motivation to delve into these substrates from the iconographic and semantic resources they provide, to discuss them or engage in dialogue with aspects of the surrounding environment, a trend that became more noticeable in the country after the sociohistorical situation of the 90s of the last century.⁵

It was from that moment of political and social flexibility towards the religious fact that the creators at the center of this study matured aesthetic positions and gave proof to religiosity within its projection; before, they tended to represent popular culture, in the case of Hidalgo, and Byzantine icons, in Leyva's. Except for differences in style and expressive means, in both the significant use of color stands out due to its function in the symbolic representation of the deities, the achievement of textures, as well as the recurrence of specific motifs within the imaginaries that activate philosophical reflections. Numerous solo

¹ Jorge Hidalgo Pimentel (Santiago de Cuba, 1941). Painter, draughtsman, engraver and poet. Graduated in Philosophy and Letters, Universidad de Oriente. Scholar of native cultures and Afro-Cuban magical-religious systems. Founder of the Holguín Engraving Workshop and Casa del Caribe, Santiago de Cuba. He has been Consulting Professor at the Chamizal Museum of Anthropology (Mexico). He is a member of the Yoruba Society of Cuba and the National Union of Artists of Cuba (UNEAC). He has a wide artistic career that has earned him the highest recognitions conferred by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Cuba. His works are part of private and institutional collections inside and outside the country.

² José Emilio Leyva Azze (Holguín, 1964). Graduated from the Professional School of Plastic Arts (1983) and the Higher Pedagogical Institute "José de la Luz y Caballero," Holguín (1992). UNEAC member. He has developed a prolific work in different techniques and supports, including murals. It has numerous personal exhibitions. He has extensive participation in collective projects and events such as the National Salon of Award Winners, graphic contests in Cuba, Egypt, Macedonia and Japan. Designer of the art-book publishing house Cuadernos Papiro. His work has been awarded and is part of institutional and private collections in Cuba and abroad.

³ Holguín is a Cuban province located in the northeast of the island, the third with the largest area and population. It is distinguished by an ethnic-cultural composition with a predominance of Hispanic descent, the development of its industries, as well as a strong artistic movement.

⁴ The concept of popular religiosity can be understood as: "a polychrome and non-homogeneous set of religious manifestations (beliefs, customs, attitudes, practices and perceptions), outside the control of institutional religious organizations" Valle cited by Pérez, (Pérez, 2003).

⁵ With the name of the Special Period, the stage of deep economic crisis that the country as a result of the fall of the Socialist Camp. Referring to religious practices, they experienced a revival with significant impact on a social scale (Moreno Zaldívar, 2022b).

exhibitions and participation in group competitions corroborate the move in that direction. The technical resources used include drawing, painting, engraving, sculpture and installation.

The realization of this article responds to the need to deepen the treatment of popular religiosity in the visual arts of Holguín through two of its most representative exponents. The subject, little discussed, has the contributions of Ortiz (2015), López (2017) and Moreno (2009; 2022a, 2022b) from anthropological and art history perspectives. However, their socialization has been scarce, to which it is hoped that the assessments presented here can contribute.

RESEARCH METHOD

In the development of this work, the information offered by the artists, the review of catalogues, bibliographical texts and the reading of images were essential. The examination was carried out from a qualitative perspective that overlaps the formal analysis of the works and the hermeneutic method, as a generalizing interpretive framework (Álvarez Cuéllar, 2019; Gómez, 2003). It started from the work itself, from the system of relationships that are established inside and outside of it to investigate their meanings, how they connect with a specific cultural tradition, while underlining the underlying symbolic value of the representation.

In the interpretative strategy, the biographical aspect was interesting, according to its incidence in the treatment of the subject, as well as the contextual relationship, since it speaks of the representation of elements with a notable presence in society. The exam relates the elements of the visual language that accentuate the plastic significance of the selected works.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analyzing the representation of popular religiosity, the work of Jorge Hidalgo and José Emilio Leyva is grounded on the concept of *Cuba profunda* by James (1998), where harmonic confluences between diverse cultures subsist with equal intensity as the contradictions, tears and masks, fruits of uprooting, resistance and forced mating. James emphasizes that transculturation and syncretism are components inscribed in the Cuban collective unconscious, which is a major reference of the spirituality that inhabits the history and culture of the Island.

Holguín society, a piece of nation where the processes of ethnocultural formation added peninsular, aboriginal and African components in the same way as North American, Caribbean and Asian, to varying degrees, contributes nuances to the national miscegenation. Therefore, by taking the symbolic universe of popular religious practices to different supports and visual expressions, memories are reconstructed, stories of resistance based on local variants, where the African presence was limited.⁶ The artists in question appropriate aspects of Santería, Palo Monte and Espiritismo de Cordón, among others.

In the selected works, the motifs are linked to the representation of the deities through the human figure, animals and attributes; symbolic objects of a ritual nature, the relationship with nature, the expression of behaviors and human relationships. The plastic elements that carried the greatest significance can be located in the symbolic use of colors, objects and actions that exploited the aesthetic potential implicit in said practices; verbal supplements that resorted to philosophical approaches and

⁶ In Holguín, the African elements responded to the development of a subsistence economy, with some areas dedicated to the cultivation of tobacco and cattle-raising based on small and medium-sized properties. With few exceptions, the slaveholders owned small groups of slaves of origin, mainly Carabali, Congo and Mandinga (Vega, 2002).

incorporated words of African origin mixed with Spanish, which is especially important because, according to Menéndez (2002, p. 140), "*currently there are no people in Cuba who dominate the language of their ancestors.*"

The constructed narratives show the oral transmission of knowledge entrenched in tradition and customs, the resolving nature in the face of daily difficulties, the belief in the therapeutic properties of natural elements, the ontological character of nature, the condition of language as a vehicle to promote cultural, veneration and respect for ancestors, the aesthetic qualities of the aforementioned religious practices.

Jorge Hidalgo: ... in the forests, forest I am

The anthological exhibition *Visiones y presagios* (2018) showed how Jorge Hidalgo has intertwined a critical-reflexive line around human behavior with a side of his discourse featuring the heritage of Afro-Cuban, Caribbean and Mesoamerican religions. This aspect diversifies, achieves synergy in the use of ontological resources and the aesthetic codes of the different practices, which allowed it to extend the messages to present situations. The works offer an interrelation of popular religious referents, while the human figure forms the basis for a highly poetic figuration.

A reiterated symbolic aspect is the forest, which is referred to from different visions as: shelter, nutritional source and origin of life. *El eterno comeyerba* (2007) and *El templo es el monte* (2008), are representations that appropriate an ontological conception of the spirituality of this element and become indebted to the reverence towards nature and the supernatural forces that inhabit it; entity around which worldviews and beliefs bequeathed by the blacks settled in Cuba orbit.

With a philosophical look at existence, *El eterno comeyerba* (Figure 1) shows the artist as an apprentice of that sap. It is declared as stela⁷ personal, highlighting elements of autobiographical value. The use of an ocher palette creates a warm harmony and, together with the position of the figure in the plane, suggests an atmosphere of emotional instability that aspires to healing with the appropriation of the natural element. This purpose seems to be resolved in *El templo...*, where pastel tones predominate and harmony is achieved between natural, human and animal elements.

The titles and iconotexts⁸ they are vital for the understanding of the pieces that, at times, are cryptic when locked in a mythical and ritual universe. In general, they appear as sentences, salutations or illustrative phrases of the represented event, the result of individual or collectivized reflections. They are samples of self-recognition in the tradition that are expressed in the Yoruba language and/or Spanish. They testify to the conjunction between word and life present in the Ocha-Ifá complex (Menéndez, 2017). The complex figure/flat background relationship, present in most of the works, focuses attention on the motifs represented while the texts avoid any visual interference.

⁷ Reference is made to the Mayan stela, a type of vertical carved stone monument sculpted on one or more of its sides and used to remember wars, births or important events (National Geographic, 2013).

⁸ Burke (2005) identifies the iconotext as text incorporated into the image, sometimes as part of cartouches, inscriptions, capable of being read literally and metaphorically by the viewer. The author appropriates the concept elaborated by the art historian Peter Wagner.



Figure 1 Jorge Hidalgo Pimentel. *El Eterno Comeyerba* (2007). Mixed/Cardboard.

Source: Image courtesy of the artist.

The reflection on national identity is a transversal axis, reaching maturity and a level of synthesis in *La Virgen de Barajagua* (2009) and *Cuba, nganga mía* (2010). Starting with the title *La Virgen...* (Figure 2), he proposes an unusual appropriation of the legend; the author rescues the original site of the cult of the Virgen de la Caridad, whose image was sheltered for about six months before its definitive transfer to El Cobre to become the patron saint of all Cubans.⁹ The representation of this virgin stands out for the level of synthesis that strips her of characteristic elements of her iconography (the infraverse moon, the boat with the three Juanes, etc.) as well as for approaching the native ethnocultural trunk of the region and poor strata made up of Caribbean immigrants settled there in later historical stages. In this way, the icon of the virgin is not posed within the archetype of the sensual Ochún, nor that of the Marian invocation of the Catholic cult: such appropriation of the image adjusts to the possibilities seen within the Cuban visual arts. In this way, personal poetics, a will to deautomatize traditional iconography and the construction of meanings of high symbolic density are intermingled.

The figure 2 is suggested from a geometric composition and the use of the colors agreed as characteristic, yellow and green; these, however, do agree with syncretic symbolism (Aróstegui, 1990). It is crowned by the Sankofa bird, an element that places the story in the context of Barajagua, at the same time that it speaks of the enrichment of the oral tradition with Caribbean cultural aspects. Regarding the place, Hidalgo recalls childhood experiences:

There was old Pití, who was Haitian, with his stories about the witch girl, the Sankofa bird, originally from Ghana, that flies looking backwards. It is a symbol that summarizes the need to drink from the

⁹ On February 24, 2012, this site was declared a National Monument, for preserving material evidence of the event, hence its historical significance (Peña, Urbina, & Valcárcel, 2012).

original sources and from there project into the future, collected by Haitian popular tradition. (J. Hidalgo, personal communication, September 2, 2021).



Figure 2 Jorge Hidalgo Pimentel. La Virgen De Barajagua (2009). Mixed / Canvas.

Source: Image courtesy of the artist.

The work shows the myth as "the result of expansions and contractions of sense and meanings" (Menéndez, 2017) that swell the reflection on an identity built from multiple crossings of languages.

For its part, *Cuba, nganga mía* is indebted to the thought of Joel James. The scholar turns to the Palo Monte garment to explain the singularity of Cuban culture as an organic whole that recognizes the diversity of its tributaries in an indissoluble unity, while remaining open to new influences and incorporations (James Figarola, 1998, 2012). For the artist, from the plastic point of view, the ritual object is resized. Inside, the elements of nature that compose it, the *ngandos*,¹⁰ they share space with the national coat of arms. This brings the charge of its symbolism and, as a unifying element, is reworked from religious

¹⁰ The *nganga* is made up of organic and inorganic natural elements: animal, vegetable, mineral and human. It becomes a microcosm that summarizes all the forces of nature based on man (James Figarola, 2012; L. Ramírez, 2014).

attributes. The magical activity of this *nganga*-island is based on a cultural heritage that summarizes autochthonous religious essences of black Africa, a root element in the nation.

José Emilio Leyva: between icons and orishas

The ideo-aesthetic formulation in works by José E. Leyva agrees with the tendency to resignify visual codes of Christianity present in Cuban art since the 1980s and which achieved wide use in the following decade (Mateo, 2013; Mejías, 2018). It is not a matter of taking these elements as a pretext to question the contingencies of the moment, but of pondering an ontological interpretation of man and turning that knowledge into a systematic resource of intellectual and social self-confirmation (Mateo, 2013). The artist successfully ventured into the recontextualization of medieval iconography; then he explored the Marian figure and related the icon to political figures (Martí, Fidel and Che) and with deities of the Regla de Ocha, the latter variant for which he opted.

The interaction between the symbolic charge of the icon¹¹ and the one inherent to the attributes of the orishas is present in *El cazador de fortunas* (1992) and *Mis guerreros y los tuyos* (1998). The use of implicit visual codes in the sense matrices from which it starts, conceives a new reality and symbology that refers to the insular multiculturalism from a careful selection of anecdotes and images. They emphasize, on the one hand, the planimetric construction of the space, the hieratic nature of the figures and the subdued colors; on the other, the semantic load of the motives.



Figure 3 José Emilio Leyva Azze. Mis Guerreros Y Los Tuyos (Triptych) (1998). Acrylic/Wood. 240 X 80 X 140cm.

Source: Image courtesy of the artist.

¹¹ The word icon derives from the Greek *eikon* which is variously translated as 'image', 'likeness' or 'representation'. Although the term may apply to any representation of a holy figure (Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, apostle, etc.) in a mosaic, wall painting, or as small artworks made from different materials, it is most often used for images painted on small portable wooden panels (Cartwright, 2017).

In the triptych *Mis guerreros...* (Figure 3), the reference is to the myth of Saint George,¹² one of the most used in Cuban art (Mateo, 2013),¹³ who is visualized coming out of the ceremonial cauldron, in order to protect the imagined space. It settles in the local through architectural elements of the city, while others open the spectrum towards the insular space. The mythological motif of the hero's combat against the dragon does not contravene the stereotypes of its representation. Along with Afro-Cuban elements, it reveals the exaltation of imaginaries of resistance, unity, and legitimization of the national project in moments of threat to its sociopolitical integrity.

The aforementioned works show extensive use of color and canvas or wood as supports. In the following, the treatment of the icon is abandoned. The predominance of Afro-Cuban religious motifs is resolved with medium or low lighting, in addition to different textures. The expressive searches range from engraving, drawing, installation to the sculptural exercise.

This is how *Él cuida de mi* (2001), *Mi doble fe* (2003) and *Restaurando la cultura* (2007), referring to Babalú-Ayé, exhibit it. In them, the meaning is shifted towards elements and shapes chosen to carry the significance of natural, animal or object origin, "as concentration points of symbolic energy" (Colombres, 2011, p. 106).

Él cuida de mi introduces the image of Babalú-Aye, which maintains the features and hieraticism of the medieval icon. The miraculous figure is inserted in a space made up of one-cent coins typical of popular devotion, which encourages more to place it in a domestic environment than an institutional one. The work exhibits a careful realization in the use of collagraphy, highlighting the use of value and the achievement of textures from the elements incorporated into the matrix.

The variant offered by the installation *Mi doble fe* (Figure 4) dispenses with the human figure and uses symbolic elements. The Cuban flag is made of a jute sack, whose triangle and blue stripes were formed by the overlapping of one cent coins. In addition, it is combined with sculptural objects, rubber dogs covered by coins. The whole maintains the color of the materials and highlights their significant potential. The work proposes a definition of principles that is no longer opposed or incongruous, legitimized in social practice because, as the artist maintains: "more than a religion, I work representing a culture (...) I try to base myself precisely on the content of that process syncretic that has not even stopped occurring yet" (J. E. Leyva, personal communication, December 16, 2020).

¹² Saint George is an image drawn from European folklore widely recreated by literature and the plastic arts of the Middle Ages (Toporov, Ivanov, & Meletinski, 2002).

¹³ Among the works that recreate the medieval tale are the serigraph *De serie San Jorge y el Dragón* (1994) and the oil on canvas *Y así sucesivamente* (1996), by the painter and engraver Ángel Ramírez; one of the most influential Cuban artists in art transmigration of the narrative senses of that Christian epic (Mateo, 2013).



Figure 4 José E. Leyva Azze. Mi Doble Fe (2006). Art Installation. Variable Measures

Source: Image courtesy of the artist.

These two examples fall between the limits of the artistic representation of Babalú-Ayé within Cuban plastic visuality, which ranges from direct allusion to elements of the saint's visual iconography to

more conceptual appropriations (Arce Padrón & Rodríguez Alonso, 2000). This deity, whose popular cult is one of the most widespread in the nation (Aróstegui, 1990; Pérez, 2003) has led several national artists to approach the miraculous figure from different perspectives, as evidenced by works by Wilfredo Lam (*Babalú-Ayé*, 1957), Rubén Torres Llorca (*Esta es tu obra*, 1989) or Julio Neira (*S/T. Serie Entonces David quiso matar a Goliath*, 1995).

CONCLUSION

The treatment of popular religiosity in Holguin's visual arts finds significant exponents in the careers of Jorge Hidalgo and José Emilio Leyva. The different elements that captured the attention of these artists share the imprint of expressions of traditional popular culture and intrinsically carry the complexity pointed out by James; they are samples of cultural diversity. Artistic constructions based on religious codes speak of a living intangible heritage and reveal aesthetic potential from experiences situated in the local sphere.

In this way, the works become a tangible expression in the transmission of traditions, customs and cultural values for generations. These are unavoidable topics in reflections on cultural identity, as a discourse assimilated and diluted in the daily practices of the Cuban population. In the case of Holguin, through the analyzed poetics, which are not the only ones, the symbiotic relationship between artistic and religious discourses is vindicated. A decentered look is provided to a binomial - art & religion - that has been a mainstay for universal heritage.

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