

FROBENIUS UNBOUND

Black Atlantis and the poetics of displacement in the Yoruba diaspora^{*}

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ABSTRACT. Whatever one thinks of his controversial reputation as a provocative gadfly among pioneering African ethnologists, Leo Frobenius contributed significantly to African studies, not only during his prodigious documentary expeditions throughout the continent but also via his productive imagination in perceiving patterns, regional affinities, and even hidden historicities within African cosmologies and their material forms. In this article, I return to Frobenius's theory of Atlantis as the absent 'origin' of Yoruba culture and civilization. At worst, his theory can be read as a contrived variation of the Hamitic hypothesis applied to a Yoruba civilization predicated on Phoenician origins. On a deeper structural level, however, it mirrors the fundamental poetics of displacement at the core of Yoruba kingship and ritual renewal. I argue that this sanctified ground of originary surrogation in Yoruba cosmology – a figural 'Atlantis' that lies beyond recovery – not only shaped the changing political topology of Yorubaland in West Africa, but also informed the Yoruba diaspora and its historical trajectories in the Americas. Critically reformulated, Frobenius's problematic 'road to Atlantis' charts a course for rethinking the Yoruba-Atlantic.

INTRODUCTION

I begin this exploration of Leo Frobenius's theory of Atlantis with several caveats. First, I would like to underscore my uneven exposure to Frobenius's extraordinary oeuvre. As one who has devoted much of his career to the study of Yoruba ritual, politics and history, and who has acquired a working command of the Yoruba language developed over years of fieldwork in Nigeria, I am reasonably qualified to assess the strengths and weaknesses of his Yoruba research and scholarship.¹ I am less familiar with his other writ-

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¹ Frobenius (1968). The emergence of the ethnonym 'Yoruba' consolidating the various sub-groups (Oyo, Egba, Ijebu, Ekiti, etc.) of Yoruba-speaking peoples into an overarching ethnic identity (but never a unified state) in West Africa only gained regional currency in the nineteenth century. Whereas Ajayi (1960) links its emergence to the standard-

ings, which cover different areas of Africa, often through the lens of cultural morphology. Additionally, I feel an ambivalent empathy toward his trials and tribulations in Yorubaland as he navigated the cultural conventions of social and economic exchange and the barriers blocking access to ‘deep’ religious knowledge. Ambivalent, since the same man who was so undeniably passionate about the culture he sought to unveil and embrace could treat ‘the natives’ with such evident contempt.² Furthermore, I remain woefully unqualified to reanalyse Frobenius’s “The voice of Africa” because I can only read it in English translation, which is a particular limitation for an essay that presumes to explicate the poetics of displacement in his theory of Atlantis.

My theoretical interest in Frobenius’s Yoruba studies began after I finished my first monograph on Yoruba ritual and politics, when I turned to the Atlantic legacies of Yoruba *òrìṣà* worship in the Afro-Caribbean rituals and religions of Cuban Santería, Haitian Vodou and Brazilian Candomblé (Apter 1992, 2018). As an anthropologist working during the deconstructive turn of the early 1990s – a turn which I welcomed and still take seriously – the African Diaspora and Black Atlantic debates were quite charged. They ranged from essentialized arrows of ‘tribal’ transmission from West and Central Africa to the Black Americas, in the tradition of Melville Herskovits, Robert Farris Thompson, Joseph Holloway and Yvonne Daniel to deconstructive attacks against Afro-Atlantic cultural genealogies as anything other than ideological inventions, in the tradition of E. Franklin Frazier, Paul Gil-

ization of Yoruba grammar and orthography by Christian missionaries, and Peel (1989, 2000) extends this argument to the growing political consciousness of Christian Yoruba elites, Matory (1999, 2005) attributes the rise of Yoruba cultural nationalism to the impact of Brazilian Yoruba who returned to Lagos in the 1880s, a perspective expanded by Law (2004) to include repatriated Yoruba from Cuba and Freetown, Sierra Leone. For an internalist counterpoint to such externalist explanations, see Apter (2013). Frobenius (1968) himself uses ‘Yoruba’ in its pan-ethnic dimensions without qualification, indicating its pervasive use by the time of his fourth African expedition.

- ² For a contextualized appreciation of Frobenius’s criticisms of colonial policies in Africa, his significant impact on Léopold Sédar Senghor and his Négritude movement and the importance of his Atlantic-African mythic narrative for African independence leaders and the Afrocentric turn, see Marchand (1997). For effusive praise of Frobenius’s “Histoire de la Civilisation africaine” and “Le Destin des Civilisations as harbingers of Négritude”, see Senghor (1973). For a critique of the Frobenius-Négritude connection (based on a debatable mistranslation of the phrase ‘Ebenmässigkeit der Bildung’ into French) see Jahn (1974:5–6) and Logan (1978). For a damning indictment of Frobenius’s colonial racism based on his “Im Schatten das Kongostaates” (1907), referencing his ‘humorous’ counterpoints to the Congo atrocities which he observed and also decried during his first African expedition (1904–1906), see Fabian (1992).

roy, Stephan Palmié, David Scott and Kristina Wirtz.³ I found myself caught up in the middle of these troubled waters, tacking between the Scylla of retentionism and the Charybdis of inventionism. From my own understanding of *òrìṣà* worship and its cult organization in West Africa, I could see that the dominant diaspora narratives of a coherent Yoruba theological system that had been smashed into fragments during the Middle Passage and partially reconstituted in the Americas were based on mythic projections of an idealized model that never actually existed in the motherland (Apter 1991). On the other hand, I realized that the transformational and regenerative logics of Yoruba ritual renewal were effectively the same on both sides of the Atlantic, although they operated in radically different socio-political contexts (Apter 1995). Over the next twenty-five years I worked out an ethnohistorical position that accounts for Yoruba cultural trajectories that have remade Black ritual and social communities in the Americas without appealing to mythic fictions of an original ‘tribal’ unity. I came to realize that Yoruba ritual is itself deconstructive and reconstructive, dismembering sovereign relations within and between historic kingdoms and remaking – indeed ‘remembering’ them – with variable outcomes which don’t always restore the status quo ante.⁴ From this regenerative perspective, Yoruba *òrìṣà* worship is a fundamentally critical practice, renewing kingdoms by controlling their conditions of possibility, whether in the political kingdoms of West Africa or the ritual kingdoms of the Black Americas.

In this article, I deconstruct and reconstruct Frobenius’s theory of Atlantis as the absent origin of Yoruba culture and diasporic dissemination. At worst, his theory can be read as a contrived variation of the Hamitic hypothesis applied to a Yoruba civilization predicated on Phoenician and early Etruscan origins.⁵ On a deeper structural level, however, it mirrors the fundamental poetics of displacement at the core of Yoruba kingship and

³ See Frazier (1942), Herskovits (1958, 1966), Thompson (1984), Scott (1991), Gilroy (1993), Daniel (2005), Holloway (2005), Wirtz (2008), and Palmié (2010, 2013). In his class lectures (Yale University, Spring 1976) on which “Flash of the spirit” (1984) was based, Thompson replaced Herskovits’s passive idea of ‘retention’ with a more active idea of ‘extension’.

⁴ For the first deconstructive approaches to Yoruba oral literature (particularly the praise-poetry *oríkì*) and Yoruba-Atlantic mythopoetic signification, see Barber (1984, 1991), Gates (1988:3–88), and Yai (1989).

⁵ Robin Law summarizes the Hamitic hypothesis as ‘the view that important elements in the cultures of sub-Saharan Africa, and more especially elaborated state structures, were the creation of people called “Hamites”, who were presumed to be immigrants/inlanders from outside, often specifically Egypt or the upper Nile valley, and racially Caucasian

ritual regeneration. I argue that this sanctified ground of originary surrogation in Yoruba cosmology – a figural ‘Atlantis’ that lies beyond recovery – not only shaped the changing political topology of Yorubaland in West Africa, but also informed the Yoruba diaspora and its historical trajectories in the Americas.⁶ Critically reformulated, Frobenius’s problematic ‘road to Atlantis’ follows pathways of displacement for rethinking the Yoruba-Atlantic.

To chart this course, I will first sketch the basic contours of Frobenius’s Atlantic theory of Yoruba origins to highlight its inherent instabilities – its shifting ground (an island swallowed by the sea), parameters, locations, migratory waves and racial idioms. Here I will focus on the so-called Poseidon-Olókun bronzes, the Idena, Edga and ‘Mia’ terracotta heads that Frobenius excavated in the sacred grove at Ile-Ife, as well as the stratigraphic logic that framed them as relics of an original Atlantic civilization. I will also argue that Frobenius projected his search for Yoruba deep knowledge (*imọ̀ òjìnlẹ̀*) onto artefacts deeply buried in sacred soil. Second, I will address the dynamic instabilities built into Yoruba creation and migration myths that account for the origin of the Yoruba people at Ile-Ife and the dissemination of their sacred kings and compare variants in Samuel Johnson’s “History of the Yorubas” (1921). Finally, I will incorporate Frobenius’s originary Atlantic displacements into a (re)generative model of the Yoruba-Atlantic that shaped its development throughout the Americas. Frobenius may have been shackled by the ideological discourses and dispositions of his day, but his elective affinities (*Wahlverwandtschaften*) with Yoruba ritual and cosmology can be liberated from his Spenglerian narrative of cultural degeneration to illuminate the Yoruba diaspora in ways he may well have dimly intuited but clearly never intended.⁷

(or “white”), who conquered the indigenous black populations’ (2009:293–294). He also describes Frobenius’s Atlantic theory as more diffusionist than Hamitic (2009:300).

⁶ I use ‘originary’ (here and throughout this essay) in its archaic sense of constituting or generating a source rather than identifying a source that already exists, as per ‘original’. See Roach (1996:2–10) on surrogation in relation to the displacements and substitutions of genealogical bloodlines and their putative progenitors in Circum-Caribbean theatrical and festival performances such as Mardi Gras in New Orleans.

⁷ The question of Frobenius’s conscious awareness of the relevance of his vanishing Atlantis to Yoruba myths of origin and rituals of cosmological renewal is a tricky one. My sense is that he had a ‘feel’ for the connection (the importance of affect in his theories and interpretations of culture is undeniable) but no clear understanding. For the possible impact of Aby Warburg’s concept of *Pathosformel* on Frobenius’s affective interpretations of Yoruba art and ritual iconography, as well as on his theory that every culture and civilization has a distinctive *Paideuma*, a term that admits no easy English gloss, but

LEO FROBENIUS AND THE AFRICAN ATLANTIS

Theories, myths and figurations of Atlantis perfuse Frobenius's Africanist oeuvre, framing his second German Inner African Expedition (1907–1909) travelogue, “Auf dem Wege nach Atlantis” (1911), which traversed Senegal, Niger, Liberia and Togo; as well as volume I of “The voice of Africa”, drawing on his Fourth Expedition through southern Nigeria and Cameroon (1910–1912), and focusing on Yoruba culture and society. Clearly, both popular and scholarly interest in Plato's mythic Atlantis was part of a larger romance of science, exploration and conquest at this time when the contours of the Berlin conference were beginning to solidify.⁸ And as Richard Kuba (2010:45) has pointed out, Frobenius was also ‘a clever media strategist’ in promoting his personal and professional agenda through European and North American newspapers.⁹ My aim in focusing on his preoccupation with Atlantis, however, is neither to locate it within Europe's civilizing missions in Africa nor to assess its historical plausibility on the basis of empirical evidence as debated in the 1970s.¹⁰ Rather, it is to track the tropic functions of ‘Atlantis’ as a figure of displaced origins in Frobenius's archaeology of Yoruba culture. On the face of it, his Atlantic theory is difficult to pin down, shifting ambivalently between Eurocentric and Afrocentric genealogies, at times within the broader category of ‘Eurafica’. It shifts dramatically in scale as well, narrowing in on Ile-Ife as the *fons et origo* of the lost civilization of Atlantis and panning out across vast stretches of the continent to incorporate Black Civilization as a whole.¹¹ It also shifts ambiguously between Frobenius's ‘autogenetic’ and ‘symphonic’ registers, distinguishing the indigenous and chthonic from the results of what he called ‘shifting external relations’.¹² And finally, in the concluding chapter of volume one, Atlantis ultimately

blends notions of spirit, soul, education, and style, see Didi-Huberman (2017:115–173); for ‘Paideuma’, see Frobenius (1973:21).

⁸ Plato is credited with introducing the myth of the lost civilization of Atlantis in his dialogues “Critias” and “Timaeus”. For an illuminating intellectual history of the myth of and search for Atlantis, see Ellis (1998).

⁹ See “German discovers Atlantis in Africa: Leo Frobenius says find of bronze Poseidon fixes lost continent's place”, New York Times, 11 January 1911.

¹⁰ See, for example, Kalous (1970) and Ita (1972).

¹¹ It was this more expansive idiom of Atlantis that inspired Senghor (1973) to praise Frobenius as a guiding light of Négritude.

¹² ‘External relations’ served as an alibi for the very diffusionism he appears reluctant to fully embrace: see Frobenius (1968:323).

vanishes through a series of temporal displacements that recede ever further into an irretrievable past.

Turning to the English translation, volume 1 of “The voice of Africa” opens with a fairly conventional “Explanatory note” serving as preface and acknowledgements, followed by an unusual second preface eulogizing the glories of an African civilization waiting to be recovered from its ancient past and excavated from beneath the ground. Appropriately entitled “Fiat Lux”, Frobenius introduces a retrojective vision of enlightenment that brings to light this buried past contra the projective teleologies of Europe’s civilizing missions.¹³ He also introduces the legend of Atlantis as the master narrative of his ‘recovery’ of Africa:

Amidst all the flights of fancy, with which men’s imagination is wont to beguile its leisure hour, there is, second to Paradise, alone, a land which, in obedience to antique traditions, they sought to find beyond the Pillars of Hercules, beyond the confines of the Mediterranean, in the Atlantic Ocean, and which they call ‘Atlantis’. Since Plato’s description of the Atlantic race and the mighty island’s disappearance, mankind has never relaxed its search for Atlantis which is gone (Frobenius 1968:xiii).

This opening *mise-en-scène* frames the dramatic expedition that follows. It locates Atlantis firmly within the Classical Greek canon, establishing a space for the Western recovery of Africa while pointing back further into the past through putative chains of transmission via Plato’s “Critias” and the Athenian statesman Solon, who in turn learned about Atlantis from an Egyptian priest who traced its origins back 9000 years earlier. Already this western genealogy is rhetorically unstable, placing an original land both within and beyond the Hellenic world. It also propels Frobenius’s mission into motion as he joins a noble search of ages like the Knights Templar pursuing the Holy Grail. Prefiguring the results of his heroic expedition, this section concludes:

We took up our spades, our picks and our crowbars and spent the light of day in seeking for the treasure there, where the moaning of the night had whispered in our ears the promise of success.

And the voice of Africa was heard, saying: ‘Let there be light!’ To-day, the noble features of the children of the Gods, fashioned in terra-cotta and bronze, are presented to our gaze in all their pathetic loveliness. The spell has

¹³ My use of ‘projective teleologies’ as a mythic component of developmental ideologies (like the civilizing mission) comes from David E. Apter (1985:271).

been broken. The buried treasures of antiquity again revisit the sun. Europe brings up to the surface what sank down with Atlantis (Frobenius 1968:xv).

As Frobenius foregrounds his dramatic discovery of Atlantis, he implicitly introduces the stratigraphic method that guides his archaeological research, namely the mapping of temporal sequences onto spatial layers beneath the ground, such that the deeper one digs, the further back into history one can see. However, this spatiotemporal layering is hardly neutral for Frobenius, but attests to a protracted process of racial and cultural degeneration whereby the ‘noble features’ of his bronze and terracotta relics would gradually become ‘negrofied’ over the *longue durée* and ‘thoroughly n*gg*rish’ in their contemporary manufacture.¹⁴

There is much to discuss about the organization of Frobenius’s text, which combines the genres of travelogue with scholarly and scientific research.¹⁵ I mention this because those sections that read like a diary contain highly significant details about his methods and experiences, such as his proxy initiation into the secret Ògbóni society in Ibadan (Chapter 3), and his controversial methods of purchasing Yoruba artefacts, which not only problematize the politics of collecting by one whom Wole Soyinka (1986) has called ‘a notorious plunderer’, but also reveal a series of substitutions (African for European, copy for original artwork) that parallel the poetics of displacement in the text.¹⁶ I will save this discussion for a follow-up study and focus here on Chapters V, XIV and XV covering the archaeological relics he unearthed and acquired as well as his theory of Atlantis, which for Frobenius ‘forms the conclusion in every sense’ (1968:vi).

Chapter V, entitled “Into the depths”, chronicles the complex negotiations that Frobenius undertook in gaining permission to excavate in Ile-Ife. As Frobenius penetrates the secrets beneath the soil in the area of ‘Modeké’

¹⁴ Frobenius (1968:317). I am euphemizing the original N-word (of the English translation) out of respect for those readers who may feel its racist impact despite academic appeals to scholarly detachment and precision. Compelling justification for this decision comes from Nghiem (2021).

¹⁵ At the beginning of his Explanatory note, Frobenius himself divides his text into (a) “Narration of voyages”, (b) “Explanation of work”, (c) “Results of work undertaken”, and (d) “Testing the material” (1968:v).

¹⁶ See also Fagg and Underwood (1949), Penny (2002:115–123), and Platte (2010:75–80) for more elaborate discussions of ‘the Olókun affair’, when Frobenius was accused of copying the Olókun bronze and switching it for the original to deceive the Ọ̀nì (titled king) of Ife. For Frobenius’s extensive account of this ‘misunderstanding’, see Frobenius (1968:103, 118–126).



Figure 1: Into the depths: 18 feet beneath the earth in Igbó Olókun (Frobenius 1968: facing p. 86)

[Modákéké] he discovers shards and terracottas whose aesthetic qualities and facial features in his view provide evidence of an earlier immigrant ‘race’ (Figure 1). From ‘one or two bits of reddish-brown terra cotta’ he perceived

a symmetry, a vitality, a delicacy of form directly reminiscent of ancient Greece and a proof that, once upon a time, a race, far superior in strain to the negro, had been settled here [...]. Here was an indication of something unquestionably exotic and the existence of an extremely ancient civilization (Frobenius 1968:88–89).

Additional ‘evidence’ was unearthed in the form of a granite Idena monument, as well as a similar Idena head he temporarily acquired, with the naturalistic features of a remote classical age. But the real breakthrough would occur after Frobenius gained access to the sacred Olókun grove (Igbó Olókun) with the Ọ̀nì of Ife’s putative blessings, excavating what have become the famous terracotta heads from the deepest pits. These heads reinforced Frobenius’s correlation of physical and historical depth with aesthetic

refinement and racial superiority in that ‘the different layers of deposits were quite easily recognizable and the most beautiful specimens of craftsmanship must undoubtedly have been the oldest’ (Frobenius 1968:95). However, they also introduced an anomaly, for among these classical relics was one that broke the mold:

Here, we found exquisitely life-like terra-cotta heads, with clear-cut features and purity of style, differentiated, however, by old-fashioned tattooing marks and the way of dressing the hair. They must be reckoned among the most precious of things we had so far uncovered, because they all went to prove the pre-existence of a race possessing nothing in common with the one usually ticketed ‘negro’, one specimen alone excepted, which was distinctly negroid in character. Now this is a very remarkable fact! And it was the soil of Ebolokun [Igbó Olókun] which yielded this single negro head! (Frobenius 1968:95)

If the ‘negro head’ destabilizes Frobenius’s Hamitic-styled Atlantic narrative, bringing a Black bloodline into his caucasian stratigraphic layer, he lets it rest as a placeholder for further disruptions and displacements down the road.

In the meantime, Frobenius acquired another breakthrough find via circuitous if not dubious means in the form of the soon-to-be celebrated Olókun bronze head, which became his preeminent icon of Atlantic-Yoruba origins. It is worth noting that Frobenius’s team did not exhume this treasure themselves but acquired it from the son of the ‘dotard’ Olókun priest who presided over the grove – an object which, according to the priest’s son, had been dug up in the area during his father’s time. Removed from its bag and placed before them, the Olókun head drew a eureka reaction:

I rubbed my eyes and pinched my leg to make sure I was not dreaming and avert attention from my exceeding joy.

Before us stood a head of marvellous beauty, wonderfully cast in antique bronze, true to the life, incrustated with a patina of glorious dark green. This was, in very deed, the Olokun, Atlantic Africa’s Poseidon (Frobenius 1968:98).

If by January 1911, the New York Times could announce that “Leo Frobenius says that find of Bronze Poseidon fixes lost continent’s place’, in Chapter XIV, on “The archaeological finds”, the bronze relic evokes more specific Mediterranean connections. Frobenius describes ‘the head of Olokun, the Divine’, as cast in the lost wax method or ‘hollow cast, and very finely chased indeed, like the finest Roman examples’ (Figure 2). Combining European

features with African scarification, '[i]t cannot be said to be "negro" in countenance, although it is covered with quite fine tattooed lines, which at once contradicts any suggestion that it was brought from abroad'.¹⁷ From here on is encountered the tug-of-war between indigenous and exogenous, or for Frobenius, 'autogenetic' and 'symphonic' origins, that continued to destabilize the shifting figure of Atlantis. Ruminating on the diadem and flower on the Olókun head (also appearing on an Ife terracotta), Frobenius recalls similar designs on ancient Etruscan terracottas from Sardinia, which vary in style 'between the Greek and Egyptian', which also bear tattoo lines across the cheeks, and in one example, represent 'a typical negro' head (Frobenius 1968:310). Indeed, Plate V in the text (facing p. 312) juxtaposes two ancient Sardinian terracottas drawn by his brother, Hermann Frobenius, with two views of the Olókun head sketched by Carl Arriens, the expedition's illustrator, to provide 'documentary' evidence of their Atlantic connection while conflating race, culture and artistic expression (Figure 3).

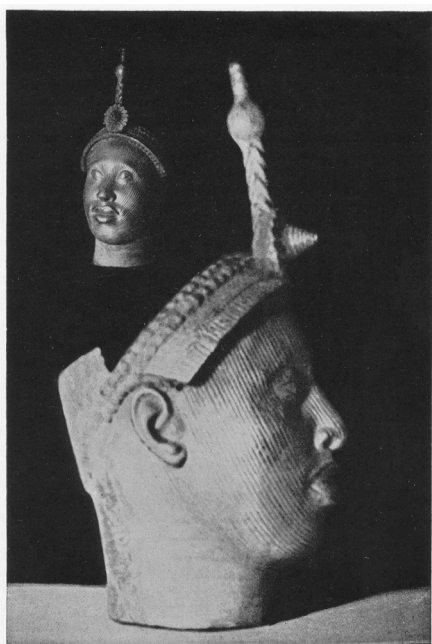


Figure 2: Ife bronze: the Poseidon-Olókun (Frobenius 1968: facing p. 308)

¹⁷ Frobenius (1968:310). The archaeological and art-historical literature on Ife bronze and terracotta heads is extensive, covering lively debates about early Ife history, politics, ritual, kingship and chieftaincy that lie beyond the purview of this essay. For important recent studies, see Abiodun (2014) and Blier (2015), particularly the latter's chapter 5 on "A gallery of portrait heads: political art in early life" (2015:247–287).

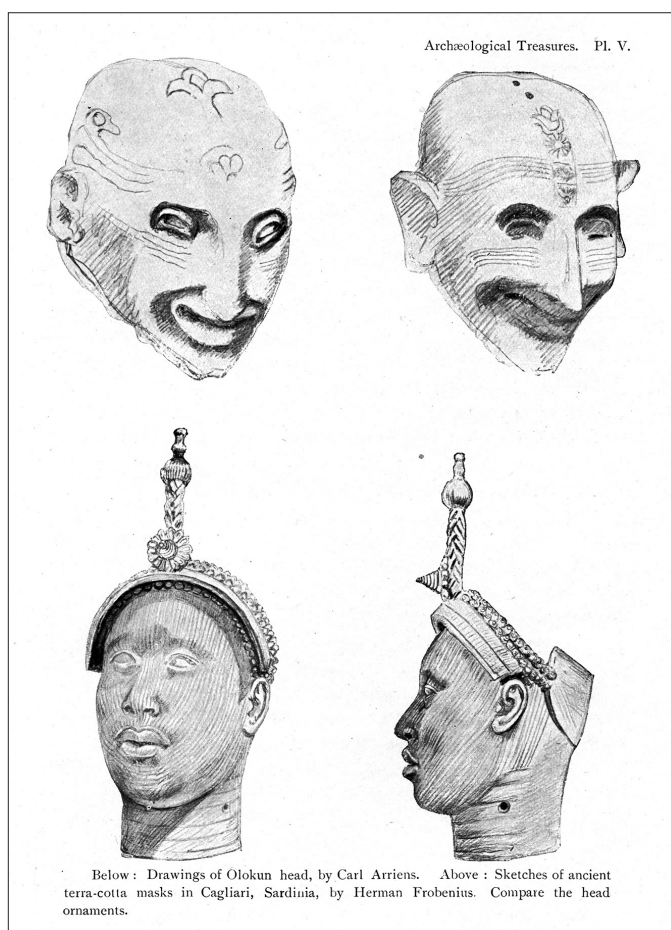


Figure 3: The Etruscan-Yoruba Atlantic connection (Frobenius 1968: facing p. 312)

At this stage in his Atlantic narrative, Frobenius supports a 'symphonic' explanation for the external origins of the ancient flowering of a classical Yoruba civilization, suggesting influences from Ancient Greece, Egypt and North Africa.¹⁸ Like the Olókun statue that merges external characteristics (i.e. phenotype) with local ones (scarification), the terracotta heads exhumed from Modákéké and Igbó Olókun represent not a single type but rather a range of types:

¹⁸ For a critique of the 'Hamitic' genealogies of the Yoruba inspired by the aesthetics of Ife naturalism beginning with Frobenius and further developed by his successors, see Abiodun (2014:207–216).

One of them is an absolute negro, the others are so far removed from that type as to make one think of Libyans and Berbers. And the more aristocratic heads are those which are finer in execution. But is more especially the tattooing and the general expression of all the better examples which correspond exactly with the Olokun character (Frobenius 1968:312–313).

In Plate VI, the 'Mia' terracotta, excavated from Modákéké, portrays the 'finest' features of a presumably noble or aristocratic woman (Figure 4) and represents the apex of the 'non-negroid' Atlantic type, making it 'regarded as the most important hitherto found on African ground and the finest work of art so far discovered outside the narrow Nile Valley on the further side of the old Roman jurisdiction' (Frobenius 1968:313). The others, exhumed from the deepest stratum of Igbó Olókun, are featured in Plate VII (facing p. 318) and represent not just a range of increasingly 'negroid' types, but an associated process of 'degeneration' from the original which, for Frobenius, was linked to 'negrofication' possessing 'no importance as works of art' (Frobenius 1968:318) (Figure 5). The classical 'flowering' of Yoruba arts and civilization was not 'autogenetic', but 'was introduced from afar' (Frobenius 1968:316).

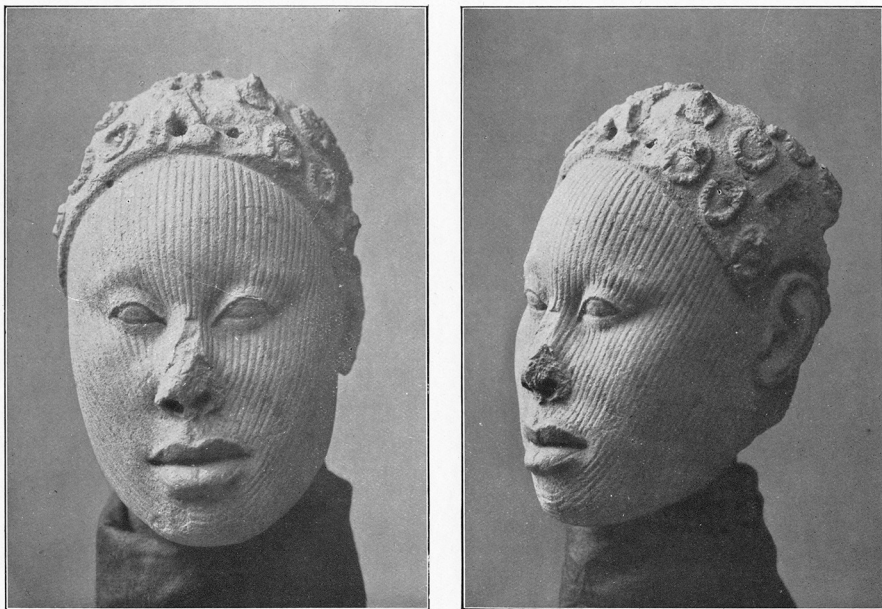


Figure 4: The 'Mia' terracotta: a 'pure' Atlantic type (Frobenius 1968: facing p. 320)



Figure 5: Ife terracottas: 'classical' and 'degenerate' types (Frobenius 1968: facing p. 318)

Thus far, Frobenius's figure of Atlantis favours 'Hamitic' origins for classical Yoruba culture, illustrated by the deepest archaeological discoveries in Ife that suggest Greek, Etruscan, North African and Levantine pathways of cultural transmission and diffusion. Reinforcing these connections throughout his text, as neatly summarized in his final chapter, are the typically 'Atlantic' impluvia and what he calls 'templum' architectural structures that are also characteristic of Yorubaland. But Frobenius continues to equivocate, referencing chthonic and indigenous elements of Atlantic-Yoruba culture that point toward an 'autogenetic' counter-narrative. If the classical attributes of Yoruba civilization came from without, they are also 'essentially African', pointing back to a prior unity, an 'original twinship', from which Etruscan and Yoruba civilizations supposedly diverged (Frobenius 1968:322). However, it remains difficult to locate this Janus-faced origin in time and space. In the final chapter, Frobenius's Atlantis undergoes successive displacements ever further into the past, accounting for the relics of a flowering classical era – bronze and terracotta sculptures, glass beads, steatite carvings and ob-

elisks with ornamental designs – that were brought from a ‘mother country’ via prior waves of culture contact yet somehow remain ‘indigenous to the soil of the country itself’ (Frobenius 1968:340). Through an extraordinary chain of syntagmatic twists and turns, Frobenius ventures the theory that ancient Ife was colonized by Phoenicians circa 800 BC, and earlier by Tyrrhenian-Etruscans circa 1200 BC, as described by Ramses III, who opposed them as they conquered Alashya, Kedé and the Hittite and Amorite kingdoms. These were the wars waged by the once-great naval power of Atlantis, protected by Poseidon, and referred to by Plato as occurring ‘beyond the pillars of Hercules’ according to the legend conveyed in his dialogue by Critias, who heard it from his grandfather, who learned it from the Athenian statesman Solon, who 300 years earlier received it from an Egyptian priest, who in turn maintained that the events took place 9000 years prior! For Frobenius, this chain of transmission, wrapped in fables and myths, contains a ‘core’ truth of the lost civilization which he has rediscovered:

Yoruba, whose peculiarities are not inadequately depicted in the Platonic account – this Yoruba, I assert, is Atlantis, the home of Poseidon’s posterity, the Sea God by them named Olokun; the land of a people of whom Solon declared: ‘They had even extended their lordship over Egypt and Tyrrhene!’ (Frobenius 1968:345)

For Frobenius, the story of Atlantis may be ‘a romance, a saga enwreathed in a myth; but its kernel is [...] essentially real’.¹⁹

BLACK ATLANTIS AND YORUBA MYTHS OF ORIGIN

What are we to make of Frobenius’s Atlantic theory and its relevance to Yoruba historical anthropology? Clearly, I am not interested in assessing its historical accuracy as a valid explanation of Yoruba arts and culture and see no need to evaluate it ‘on its own terms’. Nor am I content to locate it within its historical context, as an artefact of colonial ideology, notwith-

¹⁹ Frobenius (1968:347). Interestingly, Frobenius’s ‘kernel of truth’ anticipates the methodological concept of ‘cliché’ developed by historians of Africa using oral traditions to identify episodic figurations that congeal complex historical processes, such as three brothers leaving an area to settle a new kingdom encoding successive waves of out-migration of three clans to a new polity over decades or even centuries. See, for example, Ogot (1967), Scheub (1975), Miller (1980:6–8, 54; notes 15–17), and Vansina (1985:139–146).

standing Frobenius's admirable propensity to criticize his European peers for underestimating Africa's past glories. Rather, I am interested in certain rhetorical features of his Atlantic theory which, when critically deployed, establish a powerful framework for rethinking the impact of Yoruba culture throughout the Americas. In this respect, the figure of Atlantis as an originary ground that is always already absent captures a central characteristic of Yoruba kingship and the myths of origin from which its sacrality derives. It also works as a useful model for understanding how Yoruba ritual templates have remade Black communities and kingdoms throughout the Americas. We can thus rethink Frobenius's Atlantic theory as a generative myth of origins that is useful to work with. Indeed, it works as a variation of Yoruba myths of origin themselves, three of which he also documented within his text (Frobenius 1968:282–285).

Yoruba myths of origin fall into two general types: creation myths and migration myths. Yoruba creation myths generally state that in the beginning Olodumare, the Yoruba High God, had a son, Oduduwa, who climbed down a chain (*èwòṣùn*) from 'heaven' (*òrun*, also 'sky') to an uninhabited world that was covered with water. Oduduwa pulled out a handful of earth and a rooster from a bag that he had brought with him and placed them on the water. As the rooster began to scratch about in the earth, land spread out over the water. According to this myth, Ile-Ife is the sacred locus of Oduduwa's original descent, where he became the first Yoruba king (*oba*) and fathered future generations of Yoruba monarchs through sixteen sons. This basic narrative, with many variations, is generally thought to express the origin of Yoruba monarchy at Ife, or at least Ife's importance as an early centre of ritual prestige and political power (Horton 1979, Obayemi 1979). It is, moreover, the mythic charter of sacred kingship throughout Yorubaland, since an *oba* of whatever rank must establish a connection with Ile-Ife to justify ownership of a sacred crown, either patrilineally through one of Oduduwa's sons, or cognatically through one his daughters.

Migration myths, on the other hand, tell how Oduduwa, progenitor of the Yoruba people, came from somewhere in the east. Some myths are vague about his point of departure; others cite Nupeland, Egypt or Medina, while Samuel Johnson's "History of the Yorubas" (1921) brings Oduduwa from Mecca (Law 1973). In this latter, Oyo version, Oduduwa, son of a Meccan king, rebelled against his (unnamed) father and Islam and fled with his children to Ife, where he founded Yoruba kingship. Of his seven sons in this Oyo account, the first six left Ife to found the historic kingdoms of Owu,

Ketu, Benin, Ila, Sabe and Popo (Dahomey), while the last born, Oranyan, succeeded his father at Ife. Once settled and sufficiently strong, Oranyan set out to overthrow the Meccan dynasty of his forefathers. Delegating one of his father's slaves to worship the *òrìṣà* in his absence, he travelled northeast with an army through Nupeland until he reached the banks of the Niger River. Here his way was blocked, but rather than suffer the humiliation of defeat, he settled in the bush and founded the town of Oyo Ile, which later became the capital of the Oyo empire. As I have argued elsewhere (Apter 1987), this Oyo-centric migration myth displaces the authority of Ife as the locus of sacred kingship by minimizing its association with Oduduwa's cosmic descent from the sky and by establishing a new, post-Islamic beginning associated with Oyo's expansion and political consolidation through the imperial cult of the deity Shango (Ṣàngó).

However, Oyo's mythic revisionism had its limits and could never quite sunder Oduduwa's heavenly chain. Despite Oyo's best attempts to downplay the origins of Ife, it remained enshrined in the rituals of its conquered territories, as well as in the highly coded verses (*odù*) of Ifá divination.²⁰ Ife's importance as a sacred centre of kingship, moreover, intensified as a foil to Oyo expansionism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, generating an oppositional ritual field to Oyo's hegemonic claims. My point, however, is not to retrace the historical topography of myth and ritual associated with shifting centres of sacred kingship, but to emphasize the historicity and flexibility of their originary frames. If the world began at Ile-Ife, its beginnings were eminently unstable, predating humanity or postdating Islam, with Oduduwa descending from 'heaven' or arriving from the 'east', but always bringing the outside in. In the creation myth, Oduduwa's chain is a complex figure that fulfils a number of poetic functions: as a figure of chiasmus, it crosses the thresholds of heaven and earth (*ilẹ̀*), human and divine, quite literally preparing the sacred ground of kingly dissemination from Ile-Ife. It also establishes (to invoke Jakobsonian poetics) a syntagmatic axis, a genealogical 'chain' of signifiers linking all descendants from a primary progenitor throughout Yorubaland and beyond to the kingdoms of Dahomey, Benin and, as should become clear from my Atlantic emphasis, the reconstituted

²⁰ The formidable literature on Ifá divination is both exegetical and performative. For classic accounts, see Abimbola (1975, 1976) and Bascom (1969). For more recent studies, see Amherd (2010) and Olupona and Abiodun (2016).

ritual kingdoms of the Yoruba diaspora.²¹ This latter association with ritual genealogies overseas evokes the historical density of Oduduwa's chain – in some mythical variants made out of gold – as a key symbol of Atlantic slavery associated with its wealth, its ships, and the visceral materiality of human bondage. As a creation myth, Oduduwa's descent is always already historical.

As for the migration genre of Yoruba origins, it crosscuts Oduduwa's syntagmatic chain with a paradigmatic axis of substitution, replacing Oduduwa's heavenly father (Olodumare) with a Meccan king – identified in some variants as Lamurudu – against whom Oduduwa rebelled. Much ink has been spilled pondering the historicity of these migration myths, leading to speculations about invading conquerors bringing kingship from afar (Beier 1956), the impact of Islam on Yoruba cultural idioms, or, among nineteenth- and twentieth-century Yoruba elites, whether Lamurudu was a mistaken corruption of Nimrod, anchoring Yoruba origins in the Old Testament. In one of the most complex variations of this theme, Samuel Johnson recounts a migration myth in which Oduduwa seizes 'a copy of the Koran' while escaping Mecca en route to Ife, and after reaching his destination repositions it in Ife's central shrines, where it 'was not only venerated by succeeding generations as a sacred relic, but is even worshipped to this day under the name of *Ìdì*, signifying Something tied up' (Johnson 1921:4). Thus appropriated as a sacred relic where it remains a closed book, the Qu'ran is textually re-fetishized within the mythical origins of Yoruba kingship. And the plot thickens. Johnson is bothered by 'traces of error' in this account, and in his speculative re-reading he 'cannot resist' concluding 'that the book was not the Koran at all, but a copy of the Holy Scriptures in rolls, the form in which ancient manuscripts were preserved' (Johnson 1921:7; original emphasis). Johnson thus effects a double displacement of the origins of Yoruba sacred kingship: first from 'paganism' to Islam, then from Islam to Christianity. At the beginnings of Yoruba founding myths one finds what Spivak has called 'catechesis at the origin' (1988:308), a space not just of multiple substitutions, but of infinite surrogation or substitutability.

If we focus on Oduduwa's chain and the cultural work of its poetic displacements, it becomes clear that the syntagmatic axis is a powerful genealogical idiom linking people, kings and kingdoms – and thus the flow of ritual power (*àṣẹ*) – to a deified progenitor; and like any genealogical charter,

²¹ See Roman Jakobson's classic article on syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes in language (1971). For his famous elaboration of 'poetic function' as the transposition of one axis onto the other, see Jakobson (1960).

it can be stretched or contracted to fit conditions on the ground.²² Less obvious, but equally significant, is its relationship to the earth, which Oduduwa not only produces with his dirt-kicking rooster, but decentres and re-centres through his royal progeny. Oduduwa's chain is what Ivy (1995:13) calls a 'mobile sign, detachable from locale but dependent on perpetually evoking it', and in fact reconstitutes origins wherever one finds a palace, a beaded crown or an *òrìṣà*'s shrine, whether in Ibadan, Ijebu, Bahia or Union City, New Jersey. In fact, many *òrìṣà* shrines in Benin and Nigeria have chains in the ground marking the precise spots where an ancestral hero, usually standing on one foot, disappeared into the earth to become a god. All such shrines are furthermore ritual kingdoms unto themselves, replete with kingly priests and priestesses, titled officers, junior wives and 'slaves', who take possession of the political kingdom and make it their own during their annual festivals, thus reconstituting the sovereignty of their former towns of origin through the invocation and praises (*oríkì*) of their gods (Apter 1992:156–158, Fadipe 1970:284–285). In this fashion, Oduduwa's chain attaches itself to multiple terrains, generating cosmic centres, ritual communities and sovereign spaces wherever it goes. Finally, such syntagmatic site-selection at the end of the chain (effected wherever an *òrìṣà* 'mounts' or possesses a devotee) is matched by paradigmatic substitution at its source, whether in Olodumare's 'heaven' or somewhere in Arabia. Like a mathematical Klein bottle, with its empty centre outside of itself, the 'father' of the Yoruba people is infinitely replaceable by bringing the outside in, be it Islam or Christianity from the Middle East, or, as I have also argued elsewhere, patriarchal 'whiteness' from the plantation master's house.²³ Indeed, such substitutability at the source extends throughout the genealogical 'chain', rerouting the flow of social and initiatory 'blood-lines' at any potential 'link' when conditions are right.²⁴

²² Bohannan (1952). The Yoruba term 'àṣẹ' (pronounced 'àsheh' with low-tone followed by mid-tones) refers abstractly to 'the capacity to invoke powers, appropriate fundamental essences, and influence the future' as epitomized by powerful priests, priestesses, chiefs and kings; it also refers concretely to a sticky (and coveted) medicine (alt. *àfọṣẹ*) that the individual can ingest to receive such power (Apter 1992:117). For esoteric explications of how *àṣẹ* actualizes verbal-visual relationships, see Abiodun (2014), especially Chapter 2.

²³ Apter (2013:374–382). For the basic topological features of Klein bottles, see Polthier (2003).

²⁴ The same cultural matrix mediating political fission, dynastic usurpation and contests for power between civil chiefs in Yorubaland governs similar dynamics within the ritual houses and plantation societies of the Americas. On rerouting *àṣẹ* in Brazilian Candomblé (where it is called *axe*), see Matory (2005:129).

Frobenius's Atlantic myth of Yoruba origins bears a family resemblance to its Yoruba counterparts, mirroring their figurative features and poetic functions. First, I would emphasize that both have inherently unstable origins, predicated on empty centres and mobile signs that are detachable from their locations but dependent on perpetually evoking them. As we have seen, Atlantis is always already absent, endlessly evoked but impossible to pin down, expanding and contracting its topological parameters and ineluctably receding into time immemorial (Yoruba: *láiáí*). Second, in this capacity, the figure of Atlantis generates multiple genealogies that shift between the white blood of the Euro-Mediterranean and the Black blood of West Africa, emerging uneasily from 'Eur-African' forbears (Frobenius 1968:348). If Frobenius's equivocation between autogenetic (evolutionist) and 'symphonic' (diffusionist) Yoruba origins manifests this instability, it also recapitulates the very distinction between Yoruba creation and migration myths which bring Oduduwa to Ife either directly from heaven or overland from Mecca. Nonetheless, the Atlantic field of Frobenius's Atlantis, stretching as it does beyond 'the pillars of Hercules', remains a whiter, European Atlantic retrojected into a prehistoric proto-civilization that wavers between European and African wellsprings. Frobenius concludes:

The culture of the Yoruba is the crystallization of that mighty stream of Western civilization which, in its Eur-African form, flowed from Europe into Africa, and, when it sank in volume, left behind it the Etruscans as its cognate and equally symphonic exponents (1968:348).

Like Yoruba myths of origin, this account rests on a fundamental antinomy between 'creation' and 'migration', positing a 'mighty stream of Western civilization [...] flow[ing] from Europe into Africa' that is already 'Eur-African' to begin with, rendering Etruscan and Yoruba cognates 'equally symphonic' (Frobenius 1968:348). From this originary middle ground, Frobenius proclaims: 'I am an African and rejoice exceedingly in any attendant success upon the production of evidence that my own "tedious" Continent has one thing to offer, namely, real puzzles whose eventual solution is merely deferred and a question of time' (Frobenius 1968:349). 'Merely deferred', that is, because endlessly displaced into the shadowlands of prehistory.

CONCLUSION

If I have deconstructed Frobenius's Atlantic quest into a *mise-en-abyme* of infinite displacements, it is not to leave it in ruins, but to reread it from the standpoint of Yoruba creation and migration myths themselves, pivoting perspectives from Atlantic-Yoruba to Yoruba-Atlantic. It is curiously appropriate that in his final fanciful rumination, Frobenius takes this turn himself, reflecting on 'a certain symptomatic conformity of this Western Atlantic civilization with its higher manifestations in America', adding that:

[i]ts cognate features are so striking that they cannot be overlooked, and, as the region of Atlantic African culture is Yoruba which may some day may be made available to some extent as a cable-station or place of anchorage for a fleet between the Mediterranean and America, or, so to say, a hyphen between the state forms of Old America and the Eastern lands, it seems to be a present question whether it might not be possible to bring the marvellous Maya monuments, whose dates have been discovered by our eminent American archaeologists, into some prehistoric connection with those of the Yoruba (Frobenius 1968:348).

Most scholars today would take this statement as the *reductio ad absurdum* of Frobenius's misguided quest, best forgiven as a symptom of his overweening imagination, which was fuelled further by Habenicht's thoughts on the 'former conjunction of Europe and America' and some pseudo-etymological wordplay with 'Atlantic' morphological roots.²⁵ It certainly represents the displacement of origins to their most radically retrojected vanishing point. But if we resurrect the figure of Atlantis as an absent origin that safeguards a space of infinite surrogation and substitution – like the mobile substitutions of Oduduwa's chain – we can privilege its very indeterminacy as a generative framework for identifying Yoruba legacies in the Black Americas, beginning with the African brotherhoods sanctioned by the Catholic Church in Haiti, Cuba, Brazil, and other parts of the New World where

²⁵ Notwithstanding 'the Utopia of the unity of humankind as a universally recognized point of departure for anthropological theorizing' in nineteenth-century German ethnology (Hahn 2010:27; see also Marchand 2009), or 'the general Humboldtian project of total human histories', what made Frobenius stand apart from his contemporaries was 'his willingness to spin out theories and narratives of the past beyond the basis of the empirical data', a tendency 'that made some of his counterparts leery about him' (Glenn Penny, personal communication, 7 January, 2022). For more on the German cartographer Hermann Habenicht (1844–1917) and his "Spezialkarte von Afrika", see Bodenstein (2012).

slavery flourished within the master's religion. Like their *òrìṣà* counterparts in West Africa, these New World brotherhoods were miniature monarchies, consisting of designated Kings and Queens with royal staffs and thrones. Like the Yemoja, Shango and Ogun cult houses in Yorubaland, they created alternative sovereign spaces that remained off-limits to non-initiates, and they did this by recreating Ile-Ife at the centre of their shrines. They would also take over the streets and demand tributary payments (*aguinaldos*) from the same whites who, in secular time, raped their women and exploited their labour (Brown 2003:47–51). Nor were such oppositional strategies merely symbolic. The African brotherhoods pooled resources to manumit their enslaved members, quite literally throwing off the yoke of slavery. They were also consistently associated with slave revolts like La Escalera in Cuba, those of the Quilombos or Maroon communities in Brazil, or with full-fledged revolution in the case of Haiti, whose pathway to the first independent Black republic in 1804 began with a sacrifice to the god Ogun in Bois Caïmin.²⁶ In other words, the ritual kingship that disseminated across the Atlantic not only mobilized significant politics, it made revolutionary history as well.

To see why a critically reformulated 'Black Atlantis' helps locate these African trajectories in the Americas – and by implication, why Frobenius's poetics of displacement remains relevant today – one can return to the debates over retentions and inventions which helped frame the introduction of this essay. For all the refinements that these debates have undergone since the famous Herskovits-Frazier debate, including Paul Gilroy's important paradigm shift from African 'roots' to Atlantic 'routes', the anthropological project of locating African legacies in the Americas remains preoccupied with the error of essentializing the African baseline. It may do this overtly, as in Herskovits's reified 'tribal cultures' and its passive language of cultural retentions, or more subtly, through qualified African cultural attributions that reproduce the same essentialism that they aim to disavow. Understandably, anthropologists are more worried than historians about these problems being intrinsic to the history of the culture-concept itself, and many are rejecting the concept *tout court*, even as it stubbornly returns through the back

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One of the earliest written accounts of the Bois Caïmin sacrifice is by Dalmas (1814:117). Whether myth, history or most likely some combination of both, the event was enshrined by Price-Mars (1928) and became something of a charter for *noirisme* in Haiti. See also Fick (1990:92–94, 104–105), and Laguerre (1989:61). The 'Yoruba' status of Ogun within Haitian Vodou represents the prior mixing and sharing of deities between Fon-Dahomean and Nago-Yoruba communities in the Bight of Benin. Other such shared Fon deities include Fa from Ifa, Legba from Eshu-Elegba, and Oshumare.

door.²⁷ Hence the significant methodological problem: how do we account for African legacies in the Americas without essentializing cultural origins? In the Yoruba case, I have argued that the ritual frameworks and deep knowledge-forms of Yoruba kingship and cosmological renewal are themselves deconstructive and reconstructive processes that remake communities both at home and abroad in ways that transform and innovate as much as reproduce and mediate. I thereby relocate the parameters of the retention-invention debate within the ritual frameworks themselves. I have also argued that this move establishes an Afrocentric critical grounding of Yoruba trajectories in the Yoruba-Atlantic which can be generalized throughout the Black Atlantic, beyond 'Yoruba' critical frameworks as such to include broader West and Central African regions and their 'transverse dynamics'.²⁸

And this is where Frobenius returns 'unbound'. The methodological heuristic of a 'Black Atlantis' reverses his Hamitic arrows from White to Black and diverts them to the Americas at the beginning of the era of Atlantic slavery. It acknowledges that the African origins of Black Atlantic historical pathways and the mediated ground of their cultural recovery are always already predicated on displacements, both externally, from forced enslavement and transshipment overseas, and internally, following the regenerative logics of ritual surrogation. It also relocates the 'common ground' of Europe, Africa and the Americas from his Eurafrican proto forms and supercontinents into formative Afro-Atlantic encounters beginning in the late fifteenth century. It takes from Frobenius not the excavation of a lost civilization beneath the ground, but an archaeology of generative African legacies that have shaped Atlantic history and continue to resonate throughout its oceanic region.

²⁷ On the racialization of the culture concept with reference to Africa, see Pierre (2020:224–226).

²⁸ Mintz and Price (1992), Gilroy (1993)

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