



***DO or DIE: Affect, Ritual, Resistance*, by Dr. Fahamu Pecou**

Exhibition Dates: January 19 – April 28, 2019

DO or DIE: Affect, Ritual, Resistance by Dr. Fahamu Pecou explores the intersections between African-based spiritual traditions and the political and societal violence against black male bodies in the US. Pecou positions these bodies within Ifá, a diasporic religion of the Yoruba of southwest Nigeria; here, where spirits are infinite, a healing alternative exists for slain Black men—Martin Luther King Jr., Medgar Evers, Emmitt Till, Trayvon Martin, and Michael Brown among them—and their communities. Centered around his Egungun mask, Pecou uses paintings, drawing, photography, and video to depict the spirit's journey, including its encounters with divinity and its invocation through the ceremonial Egungun dance. The Carlos Museum will present Pecou's work alongside historical Yoruba masks and divination tools in its collection, illustrating the continuing practice of this tradition.

This exhibition has been organized by the Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art at the College of Charleston, in collaboration with the Michael C. Carlos Museum at Emory University.

Exhibition Education Goals:

In alignment with our educational mission, *DO or DIE: Affect, Ritual, Resistance* by Dr. Fahamu Pecou provides opportunity for broad interdisciplinary learning and conversation. The educational goals for this exhibition are to:

- Enhance visual literacy.
- Learn how artists use their practice to explore current issues.
- Discover how art can serve as a tool to discuss complicated social issues.
- Examine the social, cultural, and societal effects of the African diaspora.
- Examine the lasting effects of historic and systematic racism in the United States on Black people in America.
- Explore how the movement of people across borders impacts their cultural traditions and understanding.

Course Connections:

6 -12 Academic Areas: Political Science, US History, World History, English, Media Studies, Visual Art, Music, Psychology

Higher Education: Social Justice, Visual Art, Psychology, Anthropology, Religious Studies, Sociology, Dance, Theatre, Music, History, African American Studies, African Studies, American Studies, English and Creative Writing, Ethics, Art History, Society and Culture, Media Studies, Political Science, Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies

Key Ideas with Discussion Questions

Based on the educational needs of a group, one or more of the following themes may be used to focus a tour experience and provide context for student before or after their visit. Each theme is followed by a set of questions that may be used to enhance dialogue, or for writing prompts, to aid in a deeper investigation and understanding of *DO or DIE: Affect, Ritual, Resistance*. Many of these questions do not have answers that are immediately identifiable as correct or incorrect, and are designed to encourage further discussion and research.

Theme I. Resistance and Recovery

Pecou's artwork in *DO or DIE* places the legacies of slain African American men within Ifá's spiritual context. By placing these figures within this context, Pecou explores religion's role in our understanding of life, death, resistance, and recovery.

- How does Pecou incorporate the idea of an infinite ancestral spirit from Ifá in his artwork? How can this idea be used as a form of healing for those affected by race-motivated conflict?
- How can art be used as a form of protest?
- What comfort can religious or spiritual beliefs provide after a tragedy?
- Violence and the threat of violence against Black bodies in the U.S. have been historically used to dehumanize and prevent Black people from having agency, (or the capacity to act independently and to make their own choices free of consequence). What defines an individual's agency? How can art be used to reclaim historical agency?

Theme II. Religion, Ritual, and Movement

Yorubaland refers to the cultural regions of the Yoruba people in West Africa, spanning the modern-day countries of Nigeria, Togo, and the Republic of Benin. The Ifá religion grew from Yoruba *orisha* traditions and spiritual beliefs. Under the influence of colonial rule and pressures from other religions, traditional beliefs and practices were discriminated against in Yorubaland and began to wane. However, Ifá is still practiced in Yoruba communities, and by the African diaspora in the Americas and the Caribbean.

- When a group of people move, what do they take with them?
- How does the forced movement of African peoples affect their various cultural and spiritual traditions?
- How might Afro-Caribbean and African American spiritual beliefs have been shaped by the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, and the subsequent history of racism and discrimination in the United States?
- *Egungun* is a visible manifestation of the spirits of ancestors who revisit the human community. The performer dances, with the intricate fabrics moving, accompanied by drumming, singing, and celebration. Compare and contrast Pecou's *Egungun* with traditional Yoruba *Egunguns*. What similarities and differences do you see? How does this affect the meaning of the *Egungun*?

Theme III. Societal Impact

Consider the effects of prejudice against Black people in American history: slavery, the Black Codes, Jim Crow laws, and the Ku Klux Klan. Political and societal injustices have inspired the birth of movements and organizations like abolition, the Civil Rights Movement, the NAACP, Black Power and Black Lives Matter. With continuous media coverage of racialized murders, Pecou both calls to attention and reclaims the idea of Black death as spectacle and ritual.

- Who has controlled the narrative of black people in the United States throughout history? Why does this matter? Who controls the narrative today?
- How has the spectacle of death affected contemporary Black communities?
- How does Pecou reclaim the idea of spectacle through Ifá and Yoruba traditions?
- Pecou combines traditional African objects with contemporary clothing. How do aesthetics and fashion contribute to ideas of spectacle, public image, and perception?

Vocabulary:

Ifá: Yoruba religion as it is practiced in the African diaspora. Ifá is a term used predominately by African Americans in the Yoruba religion. Other religions exist within the diaspora that grew from Yoruba traditions.

Diaspora: the movement, migration, or scattering of a people away from an established homeland

Orisha: (also spelled orixa or orisa) a word that describes a Yoruba concept of a complex multidimensional unity linking people, objects, and powers.

Yoruba: a Niger-Congo language of southwest Nigeria and parts of Benin and Togo

A/so: a member of any of the Yoruba-speaking peoples of this region

Divinity: the quality or state of being divine

Divination: the art or practice that seeks to foresee or foretell future events or discover hidden knowledge usually by the interpretation of omens or by the aid of supernatural powers.

Ritual: 1. according to religious law

2. done in accordance with social custom or normal protocol

Religion: a personal set or institutionalized system of religious attitudes, beliefs, and practices.

Resistance: 1. an act or instance of resisting

2. the inherent ability of an organism to resist harmful influences

Affect: to produce an effect upon

Civil Rights Movement: mass protest movement against racial segregation and discrimination in the United States that came to national prominence during the mid-1950s.

Cowrie Shell: a thick, glossy shell. Cowries occur mostly in coastal waters of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The money cowrie (*C. moneta*), a 1-inch yellow species, has served as currency in Africa and elsewhere.

Egungun: a Yoruba masquerade from southwest Nigeria, produced by Egungun societies for special dance ceremonies enacted at funerals and annual festivals. Egungun means “the powers concealed” in Yoruba language; the mask and masquerade give shape to spirits and ancestors that otherwise cannot be seen. The word Egungun refers to both the mask and the performance.

Syncretism: the combination of different forms of belief or practice.

Supplemental Materials

Readings:

Invisible Man Exhibition Catalog

Invisible Man, Ralph Ellison

Things Fall Apart, Chinua Achebe

Arrow of God, Chinua Achebe

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, Maya Angelou

Between the World and Me, Ta-Nehisi Coates

The Ballad of Emmett Till, Ifa Bayeza

The Way of the Orisa, Philip John Neimark

“Mississippi - 1955”, Langston Hughes

“What Does it Mean to Be Black and Look at This?” A Scholar reflects on the Dana Schutz

Controversy”, Siddhartha Mitter, Hyperallergic, <https://hyperallergic.com/368012/what-does-it-mean-to-be-black-and-look-at-this-a-scholar-reflects-on-the-dana-schutz-controversy/>

Audio/Video:

Emmett Still, by Fahamu Pecou (on view in *DO or DIE: Affect, Ritual, and Resistance*)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y0k6KVIOVOA>

Ancient African Religion Finds Roots in America <https://www.npr.org/2013/08/25/215298340/ancient-african-religion-finds-roots-in-america>

This Education Guide focuses primarily on Art and History, but it should not be considered all inclusive! ***DO or DIE: Affect, Ritual, and Resistance*** contains artworks and themes that can be applied across many disciplines. Listed below are the Georgia Standards of Excellence for Art History, U.S. History, and World History.

9-12 Standards:

Art History

VAHSAH.PR.1 Identify and discuss related themes throughout the history of art (e.g. power and authority, sacred spaces, human figure, narrative, nature, spiritual objects) as expressed in different media within each culture and time period.

VAHSAH.RE.1 Identify and describe how artistic expression is conveyed visually through subject matter, media, technique, and design.

VAHSAHRE.2 Discuss aesthetic issues (e.g. why humans create, criteria for defining an object as art, the effect of how content affects value, standards of beauty and beauty's role in defining art, how needs are fulfilled by art in varied societies).

VAHSAH.RE.3 Compare and contrast works of art, artists, cultures, and eras based on visual and contextual evidence.

VAHSAH.CN.1 Evaluate the influence of historical, political, economic, social, cultural, religious, and technological factors on the development of selected works of art from prehistoric to contemporary times and in a variety of societies

VAHSAH.CN.3 Utilize a variety of resources to see how artistic learning extends beyond the walls of the classroom.

U.S. History

SSUSH2.b Describe the Middle Passage, the growth of the African population and their contributions, including but not limited to architecture, agriculture, and foodways.

SSUSH10.d Explain the Black Codes, the Ku Klux Klan, and other forms of resistance to racial equality during Reconstruction.

SSUSH13.b Examine and explain the roles of women in reform movements.

SSUSH13.c Connect the decision of Plessy v. Ferguson to the expansion of Jim Crow laws and the formation of the NAACP.

SSUSH16.d Describe the impact of radio and movies as a unifying force in national culture.

SSUSH16.e Describe the emergence of modern forms of cultural expression including the origins of jazz and the Harlem Renaissance.

SSUSH21.b Connect major domestic issues to their social effects including the passage of civil rights legislation and Johnson's Great Society, following the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

SSUSH21.c Describe the impact of television on American culture including the presidential debates (Kennedy/Nixon, 1960), news coverage of the Civil Rights Movement, the moon landing, and the war in Vietnam.

SSUS21.d Investigate the growth, influence, and tactics of civil rights groups, Martin Luther King Jr., the Letter from Birmingham Jail, the I Have a Dream Speech, and Cesar Chavez.

SSUS21.e Describe the social and political turmoil of 1968 including the reactions to assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr., and Robert F. Kennedy, the Tet Offensive, and the presidential election.

SSUSH23.c Examine the policies of recent presidents including Reaganomics.

SSUSH23.c. Examine the influence of technological changes on society including the personal computer, the Internet, and social media.

World History

SSWH6.c Understand the blending of traditional African beliefs with new ideas from Islam and Christianity and their impact on early African societies.

SSWH10.d Examine the effects of the Transatlantic Slave Trade on Africa and on the colonies in the Americas

SSWH21.a Identify ethnic conflicts and new nationalisms, including: Pan-Africanism, Pan-Arabism, and the conflicts in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Rwanda.

SSWH21.c Analyze terrorism as a form of warfare in the contemporary world.

Orisha Religions: An Overview of History, Terms, and Ideas

Yoruba religion is organized around the devotion to more than 400 deities, called *orisha*. Each *orisha* is associated with specific qualities, skills, natural phenomena, occupations, colors, and temperaments. Orisha communities recognize Olodumare (also called Olorun and Olofin) as God, to which most of the created order is attributed. There are also antigods, collectively called Ajogun. Another key tenet is the principle of *ashe*, the life force that energizes and empowers everything within creation and is commonly understood as “the power to make things happen.”

Orisha traditions illustrate that religion is ultimately a way of life and offers humans tools for developing their worldview. To manage life well requires mastering the self. Self-mastery is facilitated by the development of *iwa pele* (gentle and noble character) and acceptance of one’s *ita* (life purpose). By living in accordance with the collective wisdom of the ancestors and the ethical teachings of the tradition, Orisha devotees negotiate personal and communal life with the aim of overcoming misfortune, disease, and oppression in the here and now.

Tradition in Africa

Orisha traditions have their beginnings in the Yoruba regions of the area of what is now southwest Nigeria. In the pre-colonial era, there was no single unified Yoruba religion, and no single *orisha* was universally worshipped.

It is a misconception that individuals only worshipped one or two *orisha*. Towns and communities were often under the patronage of specific *orisha*, but devotees could worship other *orisha* for a variety of reasons.

- Different family lineages might be devoted to specific *orisha*, and intermarrying brought together the worship of both.
- Children might inherit the worship of an *orisha* from an ancestral line.
- Children with unique physical characteristics, such as albinism or a distinct pattern of hair growth, were associated with an *orisha*.
- A person may discover that he or she “belongs” to an *orisha* as a response to a hardship prompting them to seek a diviner’s suggestion for neglected *orisha* to worship.
- Individuals could also stop worshipping one or many *orisha*.

Over time, as people worshipped several different *orisha*, worship patterns evolved. Parents aided children in the worship of their family’s *orisha*, until they were old enough to worship on their own. A person worshipping several *orisha* might be a member of different groups, though these groups were autonomous.

Tradition in the West

Orisha traditions have unfolded with some variation in the Americas and the Caribbean, brought by enslaved West Africans. For example, Santeria developed in the mid-nineteenth century by manumitted slaves in Cuba, based on the beliefs and practices they, their parents, and their grandparents brought from their African homeland.

With the permission of colonial and church authority, they created clubs called *cabildos*, quasi-political government bodies where members of the same ethnic groups could meet, socialize, and provide social and economic services for other members. By law and custom, members of each *cabildo* were members of the same African nation who shared dances, drum types, and songs that were considered ethnically significant symbols. The colonial purpose of these *cabildos* was to quell discontent among members and insert a wedge between groups based on their different customs. The unintended consequence was the reconstruction of their religious traditions. The Spanish authorities did not connect their dancing and drumming rituals with worship, since it was so dissimilar from quiet Catholic prayer, so the “social” rituals were allowed, and even encouraged.

African encounters with Christianity became evident in the syncretic rituals of orisha expression. Devotees of Orisha protected themselves and their spiritual inheritance by accepting aspects of the Catholic faith. Catholic saints were adopted into the tradition who shared similar tastes, powers, and proclivities as an analogous orisha. These innovative developments protected the Orisha traditions from extinction.

As Cuba moved toward independence from its colonial oppressors, the cabildos were regarded as sites of abolitionist and anti-colonial sentiment. Even though slavery was abolished in 1886, African traditional religious were largely persecuted. Religious rituals added an element of heightened secrecy. In the early to mid-20th century, practitioners of the African traditions moved away from the cabildo system and toward independent *casas de Ocha* (houses of the Orisha). The members of each group looked to a leader as their religious guide. The founders of each group worked together, and the worship of the Orisha in Cuba formed the community into a single religious system, like the one we know today.

References:

Religious Cultures of African and African Diaspora People, Duke University Press
<https://www.dukeupress.edu/Catalog/ProductList.php?viewby=series&id=2877705>

"Orisha Traditions in the West," *The Hope of Liberation in World Religions*. Dianne M. Stewart, edited by Miguel A. De La Torre, 239-256. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008.

"Santeria: Correcting the Myths and Uncovering the Realities of a Growing Religion." Mary Ann Clark, 15-25. Westport, CT, Praeger Publishers, 2007.

"African-Derived Religions in the United States." *African Spirituality in the Americas*. Mary Cuthrell-Curry, edited by Jacob Olupona, 450-465. New York: Crossroads, 2000.