

Veve Afa: The Loa's Trace

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We are guided by our sense of identity, belonging, justice and equality. We defend not only our regional cultural values, but we are also engaged ethically and morally with Humanity to preserve our present for the future. (Taller Ennegro 2011)

I was brought from Dahomey, not even the jungle, nor the sea, nor the whip could wrest me away from the god-filled drums. (Camilo Rivera Fis, Taller Ennegro 2011)

THE MEMBERS OF TALLER ENNEGRO ARE DRIVEN BY A STRONG MORAL AND SOCIAL COMMITMENT that shapes their relationship with their community, their country, and with humanity as a whole. Their ethics, concerns, ideas, dreams, and their artistic, social, and environmental projects have been nurtured by the government's formal education, as well as their informal education received in their communities. But it is in the context of the informal education, in the intimacy of their homes and their community life, that they have received the spiritual foundation that guides, encourages, and strengthens their projects.

Voodoo religion, humanistic foundation of Taller Ennegro

This organization was born the fourth of January of 1995, in the Hounfort (temple) of the Houngan (priest) Jhosvanis Milanés Carbonell in Palma Soriano, Santiago de Cuba. He took the initiative of convening a group of artists that were mostly descendant of Haitians that arrived in Cuba in different periods of time between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They got organized under his guidance and assumed the Voodoo (*Spirit*) religion and its cosmogony as an ethical and humanistic lifestyle. The mission of the organization that they founded is to value and preserve the preciousness, or the cultural legacy, of their ancestors, and to restore the urban and rural environment of the region of Palma Soriano. Since the foundation of the organization, their missions, their artistic and ecological projects, have been inspired and grounded in the moral principles of the voodoo religion: respect and service to the Loas, respect to the eldest and to their ancestors, rules of solidarity, cooperation, hospitality, conviviality, syncretism, and the animistic conviction that Earth, Nature, Cosmos is alive and sacred (Michel 2002; Cabrera 2000).

The group has always been very concerned about what they consider are the main problems of the region: deterioration of the cultural legacy, and degradation of the urban and rural environ-

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ment, including deforestation, water pollution, and soil erosion. To deal with these problems, they have developed artistic and ecological proposals and projects. Taller Ennegro has been working intensely on a creative, aesthetic proposal. Since they are multifaceted artists, they have been developing complex art works as “expo-performance.” Through their art, they express the cosmogony of the Voodoo religion, and their concerns about their culture and the environment. They integrate in their expositions paintings, sculptures, music, literature, and several expressions of the traditional cultures of the region (Figures 1, 2).

The creative process of the art piece is in itself a religious ritual, and is the Loa, the one communicating the messages through the artists. The main design is always a *Vevé* (sacred design) that is first traced with white flour by the Houngan, who serves as a medium to communicate the messages of the Loa. The *vevé*'s designs activate the communication between the material world and the supra-earthly space. Since the creative process is a ritual in itself, the Houngan and the artists are inspired by the Loas and, while in a state of grace, they create their expo-performances. The materials used for the creation of their works of art are diverse, and mostly collected from the natural environment: different kinds of pigments, leaves, branches, stones, seeds, wood, candles, bottles, metals, and others. One of the most successful expo-performance of Ennegro has been “*Mother Earth*.” With this work they inspire the public to meditate about the ecological crisis of the planet, and urge them to be ethical toward the world in which we all live.

The most ambitious enterprise that the members of Taller Ennegro have conceived since the foundation of the group is the Eco Art project *Vevé Afá* (*Nature's Design*), sited near the basin of the Cauto River. The confluence of their religious principles, and artistic, cultural, social and environmental projects can be best perceived there, between the Cauto and the Yarabó rivers.

Figure 1.





Figure 2.

They plan to reforest 45 hectares of land, restore the soils, the river basin, and build facilities to host research and reinforce cultural and environmental education. The reforestation of this area is going to be made following a macro-territorial *Vevé*. This sacred macro design is going to be made with the sacralized elements of nature. The *Vevé Afá* is in fact a macro representation of the Voodoo Cosmogony. The Houngan, inspired by the message of Mahu, has been guiding the group in the process of identifying the chosen land, and serving the Loas to trace the *vevés*. The *Vevé Afá* is the tracing of the Loa, a sacred place where environmental and human restoration will take place.

The group Ennegro has always confronted all sorts of material limitations, nevertheless they are resilient, and persevere for what they are convinced is their highest purpose. Presently they are building the first structure of the *Vevé Afá*, at a location from which the sacred energy emanates.

In the center is the Hounfour, the Loa's home, in the center of the hounfour the Califú (four roads) and the symbol of the Potón Mitán. The main entrance is oriented toward the east, in the center of the design is concentrated all the energy of the Loas. This is the place from which Mahú Lissa ascends and descends, is the place from which the terrestrial and supraterrrestrial establish communication. From this place the words of human beings ascend to Mahú and the words of Mahú descend to human beings. (Taller Ennegro 2011)

This work is based on and includes quote from interviews I made with several members of Taller Ennegro interviews in Palma Soriano, Cuba, during the years 2010–2011 . It is also based on documents provided by them, and personal experiences that I shared with the group and their community during that period of time. Carlos Enrique Isaac, “the man with his feet planted on the

ground and his head in the sky,” has collaborated in many ways for the preparation of this paper, nevertheless the conclusions of the work are the responsibility of the author.

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