Eleggua in la Costa Chica of Guerrero, Mexico: The Persistence of Traditional Indigenous African Spiritual Beliefs in an Afromestizo Community

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Cover Page Footnote
This article is from an earlier iteration of Diálogo which had the subtitle "A Bilingual Journal." The publication is now titled "Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal."
In this essay, the folk character, El Niño de la Boca del Río will be considered as an example of a figure of contemporary popular culture whose characteristics may be archetypally related to a divinity of the Yoruba system of traditional Indigenous African religion. Aspects of El Niño’s persona are like the Yoruba deity Eleggua, messenger of the Orishas, the deities of the Yoruba religious system. Eleggua is a shape shifter who moves as quickly as Mercury, often appearing in the places where he is least expected. His job is to distribute ache, or good energy to the other Orishas and to make intercessions between humans and gods. Related to his movements, Eleggua is also known as the Eternal Wanderer (Gonzalez-Wipplre 2003: 28). The persistence of archetypal similarities between Eleggua and El Niño raises the possibility that aspects of traditional African Indigenous belief systems have been preserved in the communities along La Costa Chica in the state of Guerrero, Mexico, since the time of the beginnings of the Afro-Atlantic Slave Trade.

SLAVERY IN THE PACIFIC COAST OF MÉXICO

Within the first ninety years after the Spanish colonists’ arrival in Mexico, an estimated 75-96% of the Indigenous population had died (Carroll 2001: 7). Aguirre Beltrán (1989: 37-38) attributed the demise of the North American Indigenous groups that occurred in the mid 1500’s not only to the Spanish colonists’ infectious diseases for which Indigenous groups had no natural immunity, but also to culture shock, defined as the reaction to the total transformation of the social, agricultural, economic, religious, artistic, and linguistic traditions of the affected communities. In order to meet the demand for manual labor in this region of New Spain, Africans were imported via Mexico’s participation in the Afro-Atlantic Slave Trade. Enslaved Africans were brought from various regions of the African continent including the areas presently known as contemporary Western and Central Africa. Along La Costa Chica, African groups lived and mixed with the North American Indigenous peoples living there, including the Amuzgos, the Mixtecs, the Tlapanechos, and the Chatinos (Alvarez Santiago n.d.).

The factors that may have served to protect the Africans from experiencing the full effects of culture shock that decimated the North American Indigenous communities are not known. Possibly,
The relationship between Orisha and Oyá is personal and for the individual, and in response, the believer participates in personal rites to honor the god, for example offering prayers and ritual foods at a home altar. Community rites, are also held, for example, in support of the initiation of new members of a particular Orisha's cult (Deren, 1953:188).

EMBOIDMENT

Another concept that may help explain how aspects of traditional African Indigenous spiritual systems may have been conserved in the New World in general, and in Mexico, 500 years after the arrival of the first Africans is "Embodying". In his discussion of embodied states, Corbin (1972: 18) writes that "The relationship of interiority expressed by the proposition 'in', and 'inside of' is inverted. Spiritual bodies or entities are not in any world, nor in their world, in the same manner as the material body is in its place or may be contained in the common body. On the contrary, their world is in them [...] each spiritual entity is the entire sphere of Heaven." Concerning Embodiment, Bosnak writes: "In the same way that dreams phenomenally speaking are self contained worlds within which we dwell, not contained within an overarching space beyond the dream – where we participate fully in a substantive image, we are bodied forth by it. We become it." And also: "An embodied image is the interface between self and other. [...] When fully confronted with embodied imagination, both self and other turn inside out, and we become a mutual body, a mutual state" (2007: 21).

In Yoruba and other traditional African religious systems, interfaces between the physical body and the realm of the archetype is that the Orisha are an essential part of spiritual experience. Bosnak (2007: 21) discusses the experience of the participation in an image in an embodied state. He describes a self-contained world that he likens to a dream. He also speaks of self and spiritual other sharing a mutual body or a mutual state. Considered from Bosnak’s perspective, embodiment is relevant to the metaphysical aspects of the Vodun religious systems described by Deren (1953: 16, 246, 333) in which practitioners take on the persona of a god and "live" as the divinity for a period of hours or days. Or alternately, a practitioner is "ridden" (Deren's title, "Divine Horsemen" refers to this experience) by a god, called Loa as the two are joined in a space of embodied imagination, dancing and behaving in the ways that are typical of the persona of a particular god and which validate those aspects that are most valued by the community, in effect strengthening and healing the psyche.

The concept, Embodiment may also be relevant to the discussion of other aspects of traditional Indigenous African religious systems. In such traditional systems, images, objects, and elements of nature are considered to be containers of the ache, or "good energy" that is shared in the Yoruba based spiritual systems, or as the spiritual matter of the Loa, in the Vodun systems that exists in sacred places on the earthly plane. Elements from nature, like trees and rivers may "hold" or contain an Orisha or Loa, as may the feminine vessels, soperas that are ritual objects on Yoruba/Santería altars, or the special cigar shaped stones where Loa reside in baskets in the Vodun system. Such containers create an imaginal space in which the Orisha exists and in which the practitioner may enter via ritual practices. Rosen (1993: 33) identifies ritual art (of which an altar is a component) as a space of communication with the divinities. Accordingly, the shrine or altar embodies spiritual forces.

JOURNEY

As I prepared to visit La Costa Chica of Mexico in 2005 as part of an ethnographic research project, I began asking women from the...
an ethnographic research project, I began asking women from the area who have migrated to Atlanta about places I should visit on my trip. El Niño was frequently suggested. Along with the recommendation that I go to the little town of La Boca del Río to see El Niño, I was given instructions about how the visit was to be made. Mirella, from the town of San Juan de las Flores near La Boca del Río told me:

El Niño de La Boca del Río is very miraculous. When people go there, he wants them to visit him first, before doing anything else. A young woman went to see him [in la boca del río] and didn’t go to see him [in his chapel] first. Instead, she went to the beach. She didn’t greet him first, and she drowned. He’s very miraculous, and he also has a quick temper. When he doesn’t like something, he turns his head to the side because he’s angry.

I kept Mirella’s advice in mind as I travelled to the town of Chautengo to stay with my host, Leonor. Chautengo is a small town of about 1100 people that is located along La Costa Chica of Guerrero state. By definition, La Costa Chica includes the small towns along the Pacific coast east of Acapulco in the state of Guerrero, and west of Puerto Ángel (near Puerto Escondido), in the state of Oaxaca. Chautengo is located on the coast, about 70 kilometers east of Acapulco.

On a day that my host Leonor was able to take time off from her business preparing lunches for students at the local middle school, we set off in the family truck – not in the best condition. We drove to the market town of Cruz Grande, and then turned off onto the dirt road that led to La Boca del Río. Apparently, La Boca del Río isn’t far from Chautengo along the coast, but over land, it is a long, hot bumpy ride. We drove over miles of open land where there were no towns or houses, only strands of palm trees rooted in white sand. The old truck began to groan, and the transmission began to slip. A fox ran along the side of the truck, and a huge snake humped its way across the road in front of us, which, according to Leonor, is a sign of good luck. We passed through the town of San Juan de las Flores, where Mirella’s mother lived. However, following Mirella’s instructions, we went to see El Niño first.

At the entrance to the town, there were people selling freshly caught fish and cooked meals in stands covered with tarps. A few hundred feet ahead, along a sand road and very near the ocean shore was El Niño’s chapel. The truck barely rolled up to the door, overheated and unable to stay in gear for more than a few seconds at a time. El Niño’s chapel was constructed of wood and had an altar in front and a few rows of simple benches in the back. The chapel was ablaze with Christmas lights, with musical decorations playing Christmas songs, all at the same time, all of the melodies mixing together. The music greeted us even before we entered the chapel. My impression of the chapel was that it appeared a child had decorated it: joyful, uninhibited, anxiously awaiting Christmas day. Clearly the focal point of the chapel was El Niño’s altar.

A wooden rail protected him. El Niño was a tiny white doweling figure about 5 inches tall with the painted features of a little man, housed in a wood and glass shadow box. He wore a flowing white gown draped with gold chain ofrendas.

A family arrived in an old pickup truck with a special chair for an adult family member in the bed of the truck. This woman appeared to have Down syndrome or another developmental disability. The family got out of the truck and approached the altar. One man played the guitar and the others sang a beautiful, sweet song, an offering to El Niño. As soon as the song finished, the family climbed into the truck, and drove away.

Leonor and her family had a picture taken with El Niño. As Mirella had instructed, we walked along the beach after visiting El Niño. Then we drove back to San Juan de Las Flores to visit Mirella’s mother and her family. Miraculously, the truck had “fixed itself” while we were in the chapel, and the gears shifted smoothly all of the way home.

I kept thinking about El Niño, and how he was described by the women I had interviewed, his persona, his personality—much larger than the four to five inch dowel figure in the shadowbox on the altar. I thought about his importance in the surrounding communities, and how the women I talked to regarded him in an intimate way, fully expecting him to help them with all of their problems, the mundane as well as the catastrophic.

I remembered the story told about him by a woman from the town in Chautengo concerning how El Niño arrived in La Boca del Río. According to the story, a woman was walking on the beach and she found three El Niño dolls, but kept only one, who became the miraculous El Niño who lives in the chapel. El Niño’s personality seems to be playful, lighthearted, and childlike. I remembered the bright lights and decorations and music and lighting in his chapel, designed according to his tastes. El Niño himself takes the form of a doll, made of a wooden dowel. Mirella told me:

He likes people to make music for him. He likes fireworks. He is very lighthearted. And there are also five or six groups of people playing music for him. The music is what they promised him to acknowledge the miracles he performed.

Edith, who lives in Atlanta and is from the nearby town of Chautengo told me:

There, in La Boca del Río, there’s a little child saint or statue, like a representation of the infant Jesus. He has his little altar. He’s inside like a little box with glass doors. He’s kept in his
El Niño is celebrated with the things that children love, music and songs, and fireworks. His celebration day on January 6th is shared with another miraculous child, El Santo Niño de Atocha, who is said to have brought food to Christian prisoners in 13th century Spain. Like a child, he is prone to mischief and tantrums. Mirella told me:

He’s miraculous, but he has a quick temper. When he doesn’t like something, he turns his head to the side because he’s angry.” She also told me that El Niño doesn’t always like to have his picture taken.

So I’m lucky that I got one good picture of him!

He is also like a 2-year-old child, exemplified by his reactions when things don’t go his way. El Niño has a tantrum, and then he punishes those involved. Edith told me:

A person has to go there with faith, because if a person just goes there without much faith, he punishes […] Usually when they have this party for him every year, sometimes people drown in the sea. Because there in the town where he lives, there is a beach. There are a lot of people, people who drown too […] and according to the people, they say he punishes people who don’t honor him.

El Niño is like a trickster or a clown. He likes to tell the kind of riddle that is a challenge to solve, or to understand, yet which illuminates some metaphorical truth. Mirella told another story:

And when a woman asked to borrow him [El Niño figure] and to honor him in her home, and another woman had already borrowed him, the second woman was offered a photograph of El Niño. The woman was from Chautengo, and when they gave her the photo, she said, “Why the photo and not the real “El Niño”? And then her car broke down there. And the next day, the mechanics couldn’t fix it at all. I think this happened because the photo of El Niño and El Niño are really the same thing.

The woman didn’t understand the “riddle” and was therefore punished.

As a trickster, El Niño moves about unhindered by the usual spatiotemporal constraints, keeping himself safe from harm. Mirella notes:

Another time there was a huge storm and water from the ocean flooded everything. The chapel where El Niño was kept was ruined. Everything else was burned. But he remained and was fine. The reason he wasn’t burned is that he is miraculous. Nothing happened to him. The same way, last year, the ocean flooded, about three times. The water came up to where the palm trees are, and again, El Niño wasn’t harmed. There were people who lost their houses in the high flood waters. His chapel is very close to the shore, but nothing happened to him.

Like other tricksters, El Niño’s celebrations meld aspects of the sacred with the profane. El Niño is described as miraculous and his home is a chapel, similar in architecture to other tiny Catholic churches in the area. Yet the descriptions of the party given on his day January 6th are not all together holy. Edith remembered:

The party they give for “El Niño: a lot of musical groups from different towns give a free concert. People come to sell beer. People buy beer and tacos and food. People dance. And they continue to party as long as their bodies hold out. The party may last until 3 or 4 in the morning. It’s a celebration. Everything’s a big dance. People get drunk and the next day some people end up in jail. That’s because the police are patrolling at night and they find the couples who have stolen away in the shadows.

El Niño’s party, like other trickster’s celebrations blend the sacred with the profane. In front of the holy little chapel, people feast, become inebriated, and have sex, all as part of his celebration.

YORUBA GODS

As I continued to think about El Niño, I realized that he reminded me of a god of the Yoruba system of traditional Indigenous African religion. When I asked documentary filmmaker Tony Romero, who is a devotee to the religion to tell me about Eleggua (also known as Legba and Gede in Haiti), he described him:

Eleggua is the first and last in all of the folkloric celebrations in Cuba where there is singing and dancing. The first and last songs are always for him. He is identified with a child, he is silly, talkative, a smile […] he is happy, but also sad, he opens and closes pathways. There are 21 variations of Eleggua. In my opinion, it is fundamental to ask him when you look for a good path in your life. In the Yoruba pantheon, he is one of the most important foundations.

In the Yoruba traditional African Indigenous religious tradition, Eleggua was charged by the supreme god Olofi with the distribution of ache, the “good energy” to the other Orishas and to humans. Because of Eleggua’s importance, during rituals, sacrifices must be made first to Eleggua, before offerings are made to the other Orishas. Humans must make an offering to Eleggua first in order for their requests to be successfully carried out (Fernandez Martinez and Porras Potts: 2003: 2). If Eleggua does not receive what he needs to act constructively, he retaliates in a way that blocks goodness and may cause destruction. He is of a dual nature, he is feared and also revered.

Mirella warned:

When people go there, he wants them to visit him first, before anything else.

Edith said:

And this Niño likes parties a lot. Because if they don’t give him a party, he gets mad…there are a lot of people, people who drown too.

These actions are similar to Eleggua’s.

The Yoruba Orisha, Eleggua is the god of crossroads and points of transition. “Crossroads” may be considered literally and metaphorically. In Santería, the Yoruba based religious system
practiced in Cuba, his image is kept near the front door of a house, to provide protection at the point of transition from indoors to outdoors (Gonzalez-Wippler 2003: 28). Offerings to Eleggua are made that include the ritual the pouring of cool water at crossroads and roadway intersections (Farris Thompson 1984: 19).

*El Niño* is also located at a crossroads of sorts. He lives in a little box with glass doors, perhaps similar to the little houses constructed for representations of him by Santeros, the practitioners of Yoruba based religion in Cuba. His chapel is constructed on the beach, at the border between land and sea. Here lies the line that divides the familiarity of life in the town from the unpredictability of the sea, of what is consciously understood from the depths of the unconscious.

As messenger to other *Orishas*, and intermediary between humans and *Orishas*, *Eleggua* carries and deposits metaphysical energy or *ache* at critical junctures in the spiritual realm (Farris Thompson 1984). He is related to destiny, opens and closes paths and doorways, and brings luck or calamity. *Eleggua*’s dual nature is a quality that is similar to *El Niño*, exemplified by *El Niño*’s implied involvement in the drownings of people who didn’t acknowledge him first in Mirella’s story. *Eleggua* is also related to the metaphorical aspect of “crossroads.” He formulates riddles or puzzles to test humans’ compassion and wisdom about life and situations (Farris Thompson 1984).

Verger records such a riddle attributed to *Eleggua*:

> He killed a bird yesterday, with a stone he threw only today. If he becomes angry, he steps on a rock and it bleeds. If annoyed, he can enter the skin of an ant. When he is seated, his head reaches the ceiling. When he stands, his head does not even reach the height of the brazier.” (1981: 78)

Mirella’s story about the two women who wanted to borrow *El Niño* to adorn him in their home is an example of a crossroads message. When a second woman couldn’t borrow the actual *El Niño* figure and refused to accept a photo of *El Niño*, her car broke down and couldn’t be fixed. Here the “lesson” was that both the sculptural and the photographic representations of *El Niño* convey the same meaning. Both are tangible representations of the same spiritual being.

**TWO TRICKSTERS**

*Eleggua* is described as a trickster by Gonzalez-Wippler (2003) and Moreno Vega (2000). His “punishments” are like malicious pranks, he has a dual nature, miraculous and quick tempered. *Eleggua* has an ability to heal his believers’ illnesses and injuries, and has an ability to save them from danger and misfortune and also to create calamity. These are all characteristics typical of the trickster motif (Jung 1959:135). He is childish, mischievous, and has a dynamic, jovial personality. He is a wanderer, moving as spirit, he is the Eternal Wanderer (Gonzalez-Wippler 2003). His symbols are toys, and offerings are made to him in the form of candy.

*El Niño* is a trickster too. His punishments are also like childish pranks. For example, the woman’s car wouldn’t start after she refused to accept the photo of *El Niño* to honor in her home when the sculptural *El Niño* was not available. He is lighthearted and jovial. He likes to have music played for him as is evidenced by the use of musical ornaments to adorn his chapel in La Boca del Río. He also enjoys fireworks. Edith talked about his party on January 6th, actually on the same day that *Eleggua* is celebrated in Cuba. His party is described as like the celebration created for a child’s birthday.

*El Niño’s* celebrations meld the sacred and the profane: Edith described drinking, dancing, and sex, around his chapel, the location of his sacred and miraculous acts. Per Jung (1959:135), the sacred and profane dual nature is another characteristic of the Trickster archetype. This is another way in which *El Niño* is similar to *Eleggua*. *Eleggua* also has his “profane side,” evidenced in his very sexual nature. An aspect of *Eleggua* known as *Gede* in the Vodun system is described as the Lord of Eroticism; beyond good and evil and beyond the elations and despair of love (Deren 1953: 102).

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![image](image-url)
 invested with manna, a magical quality that acts on people, changing them spiritually. Dolls are counted among *Eleggua's* symbols. The Holy Infant of Prague, a doll-like image of an infant with a crown embellished with a cross and also holding a ball with a cross is also one of his symbols, as is the Holy Infant of Atocha. These images are derived from Catholic iconography. Offerings made to *Eleggua* include things children enjoy: candy and sweets.

*El Niño* is in the shape of a dowel, a tiny phallic figure. In Africa, *Eleggua, or Esu* as he is known there, and as *Legba* or *Gele* in Haiti, is sexualized and masculine. His representation is a phallic symbol, wearing a giant conical hat that faces backwards, or as a statue of a figure squatting, observing his own giant phallus (Deren 1953). I have observed other references to the sexualized *Eleggua* in dance in other towns in Guerrero.

*Eleggua* has been traditionally associated with the number three and multiples thereof. There are twenty-one versions of *Eleggua* that exist in traditional African Indigenous religious systems (Moreno Vega 2000). A ritual to honor *Eleggua* consists of three drops of water offered in front of his symbolic representation. Per Jung (1969:134), the number three is masculine and denotes polarity. Three is related to the holy trinity and light and salvation, but also the darker shadow side and potential for evil. Within the number there is a tension between opposites. The number three is well suited to *Eleggua's* dual nature.

The stories of *El Niño* also refer to the number three. The Boca del Río community members’ stories about the origin of *El Niño* state that a woman originally found three *El Niño* dolls and kept only one. Mirella’s stories about the disasters *El Niño* survived include the story of his escape from three floods. Both *El Niño’s* and *Eleggua’s* day of celebration are on January 6th, six also being a multiple of three.

**ARCHETYPAL CONVERSATION**

Campbell, writing about the process of the conservation of elements of African metaphysics in relation to the Vodun spiritual system states: “[…] that congeries of displaced persons ravished from various African homelands to the hell of Hispaniola, where Spain had already all but annihilated the native Indian population, should have been competent to revivify, out of their spiritual realizations and with whatever guidance splintered ancestral traditions can have afforded, those perennial symbolic forms” (1952: xi).

Is it possible that aspects of the Yoruba *Orisha Eleggua* were archetypally conserved by the Africans who forcibly migrated to the coastal regions of Mexico more than 500 years ago? Perhaps aspects of *Eleggua’s* archetype have been “revivified” through *El Niño’s* story: the woman’s discovery of the *El Niño* doll, and his installation in the little chapel on the beach where he began, again to perform his miraculous, metaphysical acts.

Adams (1996:104), in his discussion of Jung’s work emphasizes Jung’s definition of archetypes as forms or categories of the imagination that are collectively inherited. Particular images derived from archetypal categories are presumably acquired through personal experience. A particular image that is considered to be archetypal becomes a conscious element of the psyche related to an individual’s own personal experiences. Such an image is derived from categories that are collectively informed and inherited by all members of the human species.

In the little town of La Boca del Río along the Pacific coast of Mexico, the luminous figure, *El Niño* may be informed by the archetypal category that is also related to *Eleggua*, the African deity who originated in the regions of contemporary West Africa inhabited by the Yoruba cultural groups more than 1000 years ago. An archetypal category related to *Eleggua* may have been a component of the collective unconscious of the Africans who forcibly migrated to New Spain during the Afro-Atlantic Slave Trade more than 500 years ago.

The sum of the individual experiences of the Africans who arrived to La Costa Chica during the Afro Atlantic Slave Trade may be considered to be related to aspects of cultural history and also as elements of the formation of Afromestizo culture. The collection of the historical individual experiences of the people of the communities of La Costa Chica may have contributed to the development of the image of *El Niño* derived from the archetypal category related to the Yoruba deity *Eleggua*. In La Boca del Río, *Eleggua’s* archetype was reborn in the form of a tiny wooden dowel figure found on the beach.

From Bosnak’s perspective, the process by which *El Niño* as a derivative of the *Eleggua* archetype was formed, or “revivified” as Campbell (1952) describes may be related to the concept of embodiment. In a dimension beyond the physical space marked by *El Niño’s* chapel, at the location where the sea meets the shore, Afromestizo community members have experienced the imaginal category that is related to *Eleggua*. There, people have “participated fully in a substantive image” (Corbin 1972) that has become very personally related to their lives and struggles, and to the historical context of the communities of La Costa Chica. Perhaps, as the woman in Mirella’s story walked on the beach and found the tiny dowel figure, it became a symbol that evoked the archetypal category that is shared by *Eleggua*. There on the beach, where the sea meets the shore, and the conscious encounters the unconscious, more of the details related to *Eleggua’s* persona and metaphysical being became embodied in the form of the little doll. Installed in his tiny chapel, *El Niño* has since been a presence that sustains and strengthens the collective psyche of the members of the Afromestizo communities of La Costa Chica who share the historical experience of translocation from the cultures of Western Africa to southern Mexico during the Afro-Atlantic Slave Trade.

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PHOTO taken by Wendy E. Phillips.


DE NUESTRA AMÉRICA