

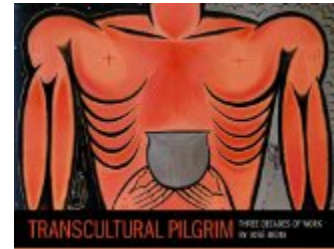


Judith Bettelheim, Janet Catherine Berlo. *Transcultural Pilgrim: Three Decades of Work by José Bedia*. Los Angeles: Fowler Museum at UCLA, 2011. Illustrations. 216 pp. \$35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-9778344-7-1.

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## Internal Destinations of a Transcultural Pilgrim

In my travels I have often pondered the differences and juxtapositions between the arts of what I call the Restless West and the Rest of the planet. It seems that everywhere I have traveled I am reminded of the dichotomy in cosmic views between the ancient telluric Mediterranean Basin and celestial-regarding Abrahamic regions—regions of the earth versus regions of the mind. Perhaps there is a defining generality that could be called the West and the Rest. There just might be something to a loosely constructed proposition that in this regard the world is divided in two. If we compare ancestor veneration among culturally non-Western peoples, we come up with variations on a theme. Differences occur in the styles of liturgical furniture but not in the intent of oration.

A Latin cross, a Maltese cross, an Eastern Orthodox cross are different in style and form, yet all represent the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. However, if much of the history of congregational, proselytizing religions is the handmaiden of internecine warfare, the converse is true among telluric-regarding peoples. They rarely made conversion part of the consequences of conquest because they believed that to disturb sacred ground was sacrilegious, with “sacred” meaning the earth or place upon which religion was practiced. The Rest of the world consists of many cultures governed by conquerors but spiritually led by autochthonous priests. Much of the ease with which José Bedia has been able to create a transcultural art is because the cultures where he has traveled

have a shared respect for sacred ground, and are non-congregational and non-proselytizing.

The coauthors Judith Bettelheim and Janet Catherine Berlo are perfect fits for writing about Bedia. Bettelheim is an interdisciplinarian whose contributions to Caribbean studies have been outstanding. She brings to Bedia’s work an understanding derived from much travel and fieldwork among the cultures that form the basis of his art, ethos, and religion. I first met Bettelheim in 1974 at an African studies symposium at the University of California, Los Angeles. At that time her pole star was choreography. We were participating in the inchoate spring of Africana studies but even I wondered how dance would mesh with art history, archeology, and anthropology. Since then several hyphenated disciplines have made their appearance. Berlo, the well-published author of works on the art of First Americans, complements Bettelheim, because so many African-based New World religions use First Americans as ancestral spiritual guides.

Bedia and several artists whose work could be classified as transcultural, Afro-Descendant, Afro-Atlantic, or neo-African are artist-practitioners of African religions, as is the author of this review. They believe in an otiose, noninterventionist Creator and a cosmic hierarchy of spiritual guides and ancestors. Certain days are observed for prayer, meditation, and sacrifice. Altars are erected to facilitate the transactions between hu-

mans and the suprahumans on whom we depend for guidance. Much of the art made by these neo-African artists are offerings, prayers, or meditations rendered in iconographic accuracy and continuity with classical indigenous Afro-Atlantic forms. Compositional formalism is usually present and is based most often on hieratic grids or scale. This art practice is distinct from works of art merely inspired by numerous nostalgic and decorative treatments of African motifs.

The essays in *Transcultural Pilgrim* include text boxes highlighted in a tan pigment that serve as a synopsis or densely worded *explication du texte*. An example is entitled “Bedia’s Personal Altar.” The text box states: “In Caribbean religious systems, many practitioners—including José Bedia—combine more than one religion both in their ceremonies and their altar installations.... Located in a corner of his Miami studio, Bedia’s altar consists of ... a cacophony of images [that mirror] the artist’s own diverse religious perspectives ... Indians of the Americas, the African slave, and even what he calls “gypsy” forces. In Bedia’s practice of Palo Monte, the Indian is one of the most important ancestral and spiritual guides.... Lakota spiritual and political leader Sitting Bull and a Lakota Ghost Dancer are also present in the artist’s recounting of his spiritual genealogy.... Anyone looking at this idiosyncratic altar would realize that it does not represent one singular religious practice but is instead as eclectic and transcultural as Bedia himself” (p. 79). Here, in this one text box, is the story told in the rest of these pages. Just about everything else is hard data detail and informative narrative.

The clarity with which the reader can relate text to an appropriate illustration is one of the strengths of this book. Much contemporary writing on art does not have a convincing relationship to the art under discussion. Pairings of text and image are meticulous. Take, for example, Bedia’s *Peyote Ceremony* (fig. 4.11) and Berlo’s

essay “Lakota Epistemology and Cuban Artistry” illustrated with two paintings and an 1898 field photograph taken on the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota. The monochromatic paintings represent men in sweat lodges, but the tension between immediate recognition of the revelers and the visceral, dematerializing treatment of their anatomy renders an effect that is transcendent.

In contrast to this very specific pairing of text and image is Bedia’s *Offering of the Black Jaguar* (fig. 5.1). It faces Orlando Hernández’s essay, “Jose Bedia and Ayahuasca Visions.” In this acrylic painting on board, there are pre-Columbian, dynastic Egyptian, Palo Monte, and Kalunga forms. At the extreme left foreground stands a figure in silhouette, painted with an iridescent LED-like contour line. The silhouette evokes a sarcophagus standing on end. The coffin’s mask is that of a jaguar instead of a human. At the extreme opposite right, a hieratically diminutive figure hunkers Kalunga style. These protagonists communicate from head to head to offering bowl with florid *firmas* (graphic symbols that both represent and call forth spiritual forces in Palo Monte religious practice) that resemble captured rays of light coming from a faraway entity. Although the clear relationship between text and image characteristic of Berlo’s discussion is not found in Hernández’s text, the author’s narrative takes us through the backlands of Amazonian Peru. With Bedia in tow, they visit *curanderos* (traditional religious and medical specialists), take leave of their terrestrial minds, and journey beyond the black holes of the imagination. What Bedia saw most certainly inspired *Offering of the Black Jaguar*.

Yes, Bedia is aptly dubbed “transcultural pilgrim” by the authors. Anyone desiring to understand what it means to be an authentic emissary of the Afro-Atlantic will find this book to be a significant contribution both for its scholarship and images.

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