

Axé: Art and Spirituality in the Black Diaspora (Vienna, 22–24 Apr 26)

Vienna, Apr 22–24, 2026

Deadline: Sep 15, 2025

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The Yoruba concept of Axé/Aché/Aṣẹ, the belief that every being, expression and object has an inherited spiritual energy granted by the creator Olódùmarè, as well as many other cultures and religious beliefs from West and Central Africa, travelled with its people on the ships of the transatlantic slave trade since the 16th century to the colonised Americas and Caribbean. The cultural expressions of these involuntary migrant communities can still be found in music, dress, art and spirituality of the people of countries such as Brazil, Cuba and Haiti, and in museum collections all over the world, forming a unique part of the broader African diaspora.

Focusing on the diasporas which resulted from the transatlantic slave trade, we examine diaspora identities as a “matter of becoming and being” (S. Hall) through the material and artistic expressions and practices of these newly formed identities. Exploring themes of translocation, continuities and local histories in transnational contexts, we are looking at cultural and aesthetic self-redefinitions and how communities created spiritual and artistic alternative spaces of varied forms of black identities in Central/South America and the Caribbean. To what extent can these new traditions and visual languages be understood as resistance and refuge (P. Gilroy)? As the representation of a continuous dialogue from coast to coast in the diaspora (K. Mercer) or as practices of “rememorying” (T. Morrison) and “critical fabulations” (S. Hartman)?

We see art and spirituality as spaces of an ongoing negotiation, self-redefinition and dialogue with what came before us and will come after us, thus we are interested in themes such as:

Creative and artistic practices as memory care:

- What generative potential lies at the intersection between faith and art-making?
- How have altars entered contemporary art spaces?
- What role do creatives and artists play as mediators between communities?

Care practices in worship spaces and communities:

- Going beyond Western-centric ideas of ‘preservation’, what values might orient the treatment given to historical and sacred objects?
- What can we learn from practices of ritualised repair or disposal of material culture?
- What role does connection to ancestors play in community care?

Material and immaterial diasporic archives: ancestrality, cultural memory and storytelling:

- How can music, dance and dress function as archives?
- What role does the body play as holder and expression of said concepts?

Museums: challenges in and strategies for curating African diasporas:

- How can we honour the nuanced biographies of transatlantic and diasporic objects when dealing with museological categories, such as time periods and bounded geographies?
- How should we deal with the division between 'art', 'craft', 'ethnography' and 'material culture' as boundaries between different museological spaces?

We invite researchers, artists, and religious leaders and practitioners as specialists on these subjects to present their work. This conference prioritises the often overlooked perspectives and relationships of the diasporas of South/Central America and the Caribbean with continental Africa. We understand this as an ongoing dialogue between the diasporas and the continent.

This encounter will be held in hybrid format (in person and online) across two days from the 22.-24.04.2026 in Vienna, Austria.

Please send your 250-word abstract proposals for 15 minute presentations to Mariama.de.Brito.Henn@univie.ac.at and luisakarman@gmail.com till the 15.09.2025

Submissions will be accepted in English, Portuguese and Spanish. Papers can be presented in these same languages and translation will be made available.

We will attempt to secure funding to cover travel and accommodation for attendees from the Global South.

Reference:

CFP: Axé: Art and Spirituality in the Black Diaspora (Vienna, 22-24 Apr 26). In: ArtHist.net, Jul 18, 2025 (accessed Jul 20, 2025), <<https://arthist.net/archive/50417>>.