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**PERFORMING ETHICS:
WILL, PERSPECTIVE AND ACTION IN
AFRO-CUBAN RELIGIONS**

PERFORMING ETHICS

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FOREWORD

Alessandra Basso Ortíz registered at UCL's Department of Anthropology, for a PhD on the performance of ethics in Afro-Cuban religious practice, in 2006. Of dual Colombian-Italian nationality, and having also lived and studied in Germany in the 1990s, Basso gained an undergraduate degree in history at the University of Havana, followed by postgraduate studies in Performing Arts and, subsequently, Musicology at the Cuban National Centre for Art Education. By the time she came to the UK to do a Masters' degree in Social Anthropology at SOAS, she had already written a monograph (2005) on the Afro-Cuban religious traditions of the Gangá Longobá community in Perico Matanzas, as well as a series of other publications in journals in Cuba and Colombia, including sleeve notes for a number of CDs of Cuban music.

Having worked on Afro-Cuban religions myself since the late 1990s, and in view of Basso's excellent supporting reference from the late Professor John Peel, her Masters' tutor at SOAS, I became her primary PhD supervisor at UCL, and my colleague Charles Stewart, expert on the anthropology of syncretism and creolization, became her 2nd supervisor. With the support of an AHRC studentship, Basso left for fieldwork in Cuba in 2008. Based at the city of Matanzas, she conducted ethnographic research there and in surrounding towns of Matanzas Province until 2010. After a period of writing up in London, she relocated first to the Canary Islands and then Madrid, where her Cuban husband, Ivan Suarez Santana, was better able to secure work.

In the summer of 2013 Alessandra was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Following a difficult period of deteriorating health and struggle with the effects of chemotherapy, Alessandra died in Madrid on the 4th of June 2014.

When she became unwell Basso was two chapters short of finishing the first draft of her PhD. In between chemotherapy treatments she was able to work intensively on finishing one of them, while also doing her best to tie loose ends in the five already drafted. The Introduction and Conclusion of the thesis were also pending, although,

given the circumstances, her plan was to write only a brief Conclusion and, for the Introduction, to draw heavily on her original ‘Upgrading proposal’—a document presented to our Department at UCL prior to departure for fieldwork—presenting her research project and fieldwork plans in the round.

When we met in Madrid to discuss the thesis in September 2013, as well as in telephone conversations in the months and weeks before her death the following June, Basso made it clear to me that making publically available the work she was able to finish was of paramount importance to her. ‘I was unable to have children,’ she said, ‘but my work is my child’. As I also told her at the time, the work she was able to complete is indeed of great importance. As she explains herself in the thesis, no-one has yet been able to articulate the ethical characteristics of Afro-Cuban religious practice, though, as she demonstrates, this practice is nothing if not ethical, if by that we understand a practice oriented towards the conformation of human action. The question Basso’s thesis sought to answer, then—and the portions of it she was able to complete go a long way towards doing so—is how this ‘ethics’ is to be understood.

Basso’s reply to this question would have involved two elements. The first, developed in dialogue with Nietzsche’s philosophy of ethics, centres on what Basso calls the ‘perspective conception of morality’. Here ethics is understood not as a matter of aligning human action with precepts of the Good, and much less of calculating its Utility, but rather of forging each individual person’s will in a way that allows them to gain a perspective on action that is distinctively theirs. This is an ethics of the particular rather than the universal, one might say (although Basso does not put it in these terms), and the role of Afro-Cuban practices of initiation, divination and witchcraft are all oriented towards forging this particularity, and articulating its implications for action and its situational ‘valuation’, as Basso puts it, drawing on Nietzsche. The five chapters Basso was able to complete make this argument powerfully, with detailed reference to the intricacies of two distinct but related Afro-Cuban religious traditions, namely the Yoruba-based complex of Ocha-Ifá (also

involving what is sometimes referred to in the literature as Santería), and the Central African-based complex of Palo Monte, usually referred to simply as Palo.

The second element of Basso's argument, which she was unable to complete, would have concerned the inherently improvisatory logic of these individuating ethical performances, as Basso saw them. Drawing on her extensive knowledge of Cuban musical traditions, deeply informed by her ethnomusicological studies in Cuba, as well as her own experiences as a dancer there, Basso sought to establish a direct and thoroughgoing analogy between people's situational ethical practices and manners of improvisation that are the life-blood of musical performances in Cuba, both within the sacred musical forms that are so central to Afro-Cuban rituals, and in the secular genres these ritual traditions have influenced on the island and beyond. Central to the analogy between ethical and musical performance, for Basso, is the notion of consonance: much as musicians must deploy, rearrange or recreate from scratch known musical elements in order to perform in consonance with each other, so religious practitioners must strive to forge themselves and their wills in manners that allow them to act in consonance with the divine forces that constitute their ethical perspective, as well as the everyday situations these ethical perspectives are meant to respond to in any given circumstance.

Edited posthumously, the text that follows begins with an Introduction based on Basso's original Upgrading Proposal which was written in 2008, before she departed for fieldwork in Cuba. In some ways the manner in which the overall argument is framed there is more rudimentary than the way it is subsequently developed in the five substantial chapters that follow it, which were written after fieldwork, during the 'writing up' period of Basso's PhD trajectory, from 2010 until 2014 (including some lengthy interruptions due to her deteriorating health). In adapting the Upgrade Proposal for the Introduction, I have edited it substantially in an effort to present the core concerns and arguments of the thesis as clearly as possible. The subsequent five chapters, which develop ethnographically Basso's analysis of the perspectival character of Afro-Cuban ethics, have been professionally, and again substantially, copy-edited by

Marie-Louise Karttunen. This involved tightening up the writing of the original draft considerably, tying loose ends in the referencing and bibliography as far as possible (although we have been unable to trace a large number of references that were incomplete in the draft), and correcting the language for style and grammar (the writing in the original draft was inevitably uneven, since Basso did much of the writing under time-pressure, and was not in any case a native English-speaker). I am enormously grateful to Marie-Louise for the way she took this project to heart, devoting to it the kind of care that goes well beyond professional diligence.

The thesis remains unfinished, since Basso was unable to complete the final chapter on the improvisatory logic of Afro-Cuban ethical practices as well as the brief Conclusion with which she had hoped to round off the argument. I feel, however, that the value and sheer originality of the parts Basso was able to complete justify making her work available to fellow scholars of Afro-Cuban religion, in accordance with her own wishes, even in this incomplete form. In deciding to proceed with this publication, I have also consulted closely with Alessandra's husband Ivan, who has provided steadfast support throughout the editing process, sourcing multiple versions of Alessandra's work from her computer's hard-drive, and providing important information about the context of its development in the final years of Alessandra's life. We hope that, given the circumstances, the inevitable rawness in the construction and execution of the argument will not be judged too harshly.

March 2017, London

Martin Holbraad

Introduction

1. *Overall aims*

The aim of this thesis is to examine how the ritual practices and moral and cosmological conceptions of Afro-Cuban religions provide practitioners with the performative resources to confront varied everyday life contexts that go beyond the confines of religious ritual. Afro-Cuban religions have often been characterized as being instrumental or everyday life-oriented (Brandon 1993; Guancho 1983; Holbraad 2007; 2012; Lachatañere 2007), in contrast to most ‘world religions’ that emphasize the horizon of an afterlife. However, the actual connections that practitioners and believers may establish between their religion and their everyday lives, and how these connections are established, have not been sufficiently explored. The intention of this thesis is to map and examine these connections ethnographically, focusing on two aspects: morality and performance.

I have selected these aspects because, as I propose to show, they are the key to—or the source of—Afro-Cuban religions’ instrumentality. On the one hand, valuations of right and wrong seem to be situational and context-related, as opposed, for instance, to Judeo-Christian morality where certain actions or values are considered right or wrong—or good and bad—in themselves. On the other hand, in Afro-Cuban religious life performance and ritual practice appear to take precedence over other religious aspects, such as belief. A key aim of my research, then, is to explore the connection between morality and performance insofar as performance is the enactment or reaction of a valuation.

To value¹ a situation and react or perform accordingly—or not to do so—are not only fundamental aspects of everyday life, but particularly of the daily life of the Cuban post-

¹ I am using the verb ‘to value’ and the noun ‘valuation’, instead of ‘to evaluate’ or ‘evaluation’, because I am drawing from the literature of philosophy of ethics, especially from Nietzsche’s work. This is the

Soviet 'special period' (*período especial*). After the 'fall' of socialism in Eastern Europe the Cuban government began experimenting with different strategies or formulas to survive as a socialist country. For the everyday life of the population this meant not only more drastic shortages but also that people had to deal with erratic and unpredictable situations in an atmosphere of generalized 'uncertainty' (*incertidumbre*). In that context abilities such as the skill of *resolver* (to solve), *estar en talla* (having control over or being aware of what is happening), and *inventar* (literally to invent, contextually 'to make do') came to the fore. These abilities involve valuing a situation in order to obtain what one needs or wants and reacting or performing accordingly, and are topics of daily discussion and concern in contemporary Cuba.

2. Religious and everyday contexts

Afro-Cuban religions have often been described as syncretic religions, wherein practices and beliefs of various West African peoples have mingled with elements of popular Catholicism (Barnet 1983; Lachatañere 2007; López Valdés 1985; Ortiz 1965, 1981); religions such as Santería or Regla de Ocha/Ifa, Regla Arará and the Reglas de Palo are included in this category. Vodú, on the other hand, entered Cuba via Haiti and is therefore considered Haitian; Espiritismo is European in origin but once again mixed with various elements of the 'main' Afro-Cuban religions; while Abakuá is the subject of an ongoing controversy as to whether it is best understood as a religion or a secret society. Practically every aspect I use to describe Afro-Cuban religions has been debated and challenged: their 'status' as religions—they have been described or referred to as 'cults', religious' or 'magical religious' practices (Bolívar Aróstegui 1990; Guanche 1983; León 2002; López Valdés 1985); their syncretic character (Palmié 2002; Perez y Mena 1998); their being called Afro-Cuban instead of just Cuban, or Cuban of African origin; and explaining the differences between them in terms of ethnic and geographical origins (Palmié 2002). When I finished my studies in Cuba in 2001 these discussions were very prominent in intellectual circles. At stake was not only the obvious question

way he was translated into English to avoid the connotation of rightness or wrongness of 'evaluate', which is precisely against what Nietzsche is arguing.

of how a Cuban national identity was to be imagined and constructed, but also echoes of the old Herskovits and Frazier debate (Lovejoy 1997; Shepherd and Richards 2002; Yelvigton 2006) on whether African cultures survived in America or were new adaptations and new versions: the revisionist approach (supported by UNESCO) vs. the creolization school (Mintz and Price 1992).

While all of these aspects have been debated and contested, virtually every scholar that has engaged with any of these religious practices has at some point made a statement of the sort: “The African religion [in this case referring to Santería] helped people *cope with* the problems of illness and the practical difficulties of *everyday life*” (Brandon 1993:99; my emphasis). Other scholars have described these practices as ‘instrumental’ (Guanche 1983; Lachatañere 2007), ‘everyday life’ or ‘present-oriented’ (Day 1998; Esquenazi 2001; León 2001; López Valdés 1985; Vinueza 1988).

All these religions (including the religious practices of Abakuá) share some characteristics which are relevant to my project. They are all based in the adoration of supernatural beings, gods,² or spirits—including ancestors—that are both transcendent and present in this world (Holbraad 2007), but present in different ways. They are supposed to ‘live’ in, to ‘own’, and to ‘be’—all these expressions are used—certain places, aspects of nature, and objects. For instance, Eleguá, the owner of destiny in Santería, is supposed to ‘be’, ‘own’, and ‘live’ at cross roads, but he also ‘is’, ‘owns’, and ‘lives’ in specific stones that practitioners keep in their homes. Since these entities are present in this world and part of practitioners’ lives, it is not only possible but fundamental for practitioners to communicate with them. While this may happen in various ways, the most obvious are through spirit-possession and divination.

² In each religion the gods have different names: *orichas* or *santos* (saints) in Santería, *foduns* or *santos* in Regla Arará, *muertos* (the dead) or *espíritus* (spirits) in Reglas de Palo, *vodus* in Vodú, *santos* in Gangá Longobá, *espíritus* in Espiritismo and Abakuá. Note that the entities of some religions are called by the names of Catholic saints and identified with them, one of the main reasons these religions are called syncretic. Also important to recall is that the spelling of the entities is arbitrary, since these are names that come from African languages and are pronounced in Spanish. Most of them could be spelled in various ways, for instance *orishas* instead of *orichas*. I am using the spelling which is standard in Cuba

Each Afro-Cuban religion has its own divination systems. Most use various oracles to consult (*consultar*) the gods or spirits about a consultant's personal situation. However, in some cases the gods or spirits will 'talk' directly with people while possessing a believer's body.³ This usually happens within the context of spiritual masses (*misas espirituales*) in Espiritismo, or during ritual festive celebrations called *toques*,⁴ which are performed within the context of most Afro-Cuban religions. The third, and less common option, is when the diviner is possessed during a consultation. This, as far as I know, happens only in Palo.

Probably the more elaborate divination systems are those used within Santería or Ocha/Ifa. There, when a person undergoes initiation⁵ her or his own divinatory sign (*signo*) is determined by consulting the gods through an oracle, called *tablero de Ifa*. This system is exclusively used by *babalawos*⁶ and consists in 256 different signs. Each sign contains various myths and different *orichas* 'talk' (*hablan*) through them. A person's sign will be found (*sacar*) through a complex system of questions and choices posed to the person (for details see Holbraad 2007, 2012; López Valdés 1985).

As we shall see in detail throughout this thesis, a person's sign encompasses the person's ways of being, of acting, of taking decisions, and of understanding and valuing situations. It also describes the person's weaknesses and strengths, the possibilities an individual has to become and to develop and in a very general way certain things or ways that are 'meant to be' for oneself (*lo que está pa' tí*). It would be tempting to describe a sign as a kind of destiny but, as long as destiny is understood as a predetermined fate to fulfil (*cf.* Fortes 1984), it would mean reducing and simplifying

³ People who are possessed are called *caballos* (horses) and the gods or spirits *montar* (ride) them (Deren 1953; Ortiz 1981). Expressions such as *subirse* (get up or go up), *bajarle* (come or bring down), or *caer con* (fall with) are also used for the person possessed, whereas the gods or spirits will *bajar* (come down) or *venir* (come).

⁴ I refer to them in more detail later.

⁵ There are various types of initiation in Regla de Ocha/Ifa all of which are referred to with particular names.

⁶ A *babalawo* is a man who has undergone the two stages of receiving Orula or Ifa, the divination god. It is the highest position in the hierarchy within the Ocha-Ifá complex, and is reserved for men.

the complexity of what is involved, as we shall be seeing. In Santería it is also believed that each person ‘has’ one god that protects them as a ‘guardian’, along with other gods that might influence them. The way to find out who these gods are is through divination. The idea of each person’s having particular gods and spirits (see Horton 1984 among the Yoruba) is deeply entangled with that of having a sign, since both will influence a person’s way of being.

Having various gods and spirits influencing and protecting one, and being initiated into more than one religion, are features of Afro-Cuban religions (*cf.* Argiriadis 2005; Lachatañeré 2007). These religions are, therefore, not only not exclusive (as is the case in the ‘main world’ religions) but inclusive or parallel—a situation of *paralelismo* as López Valdés (1985) phrases it. In his view (1985: 213-214) each religion represents a ‘channel’ or way to communicate with supernatural forces or beings and it is perfectly possible to use all of them to communicate with them. Practitioners will often say that ‘different problems require different solutions’ (see also Palmié 2002), and each religion offers different ways to solve (*resolver*) problems. Most Afro-Cuban religions also share the conception that if a person keeps experiencing a pattern of illness or other problems, it is ultimately due to either the lack of certain power or powers—*aché* in Santería (Holbraad 2007)—or not having such powers under control. Hence, experiencing problems in everyday life, whether related to emotional, economic, health, or legal stability, is one of the main reasons to approach an Afro-Cuban religious specialist⁷ and to get involved in religious practices.

I have been using the term ‘religious practices’ because, while belief is an important aspect of these forms of worship, in a way it is dependent on practice. Many people become actively involved in Afro-Cuban religions because for them they work on a

⁷ I am using the term *religious specialist* in the absence of a better one. One option could be to use the word ‘priest’, but Cubans themselves do not use such a term or anything similar except in reference to *babalawos* who are also called *sacerdotes de Orula o de Ifa* (Orula’s or Ifa’s priest). Other initiated people are referenced by their specific place in religious hierarchies: *santero* or *santera* is a person who has gone through the ritual called *asiento de santo*; *palero* is someone initiated within Regla de Palo in a ceremony called *rayamiento* (something like ‘scratching’) or *jurarse* (something like to ‘promise yourself’).

practical level in that they produce results that are immediately palpable. During consultation, the specialist, after having ‘found’ the causes of the person’s problems, will tell the person to perform certain rituals of various degrees of complexity depending on the person’s problem. It is through such ritual practices that broader cosmologies become clear or apparent to practitioners (Carvalho 2005).

During the *Periodo Especial* after the end of the Soviet era in 1991, everyday life in Cuba became very difficult. As trade with former socialist countries ceased it became almost impossible to find many products previously defined as basic necessities (Eckstein 2003; Pertierra 2006). Scarcity was experienced at all levels, ranging from food, soap and tooth paste to things that are usually taken for granted such as running water, electricity, transport, and the like. Everyday life turned into a struggle—what Cubans would refer as *la lucha*; to be struggling (*estar en la lucha*) became practically a state of being: one would struggle to ‘solve’ (*resolver*) problems, and everything was, in fact, a ‘problem’. After a day at work there was practically no public transport, so reaching home could involve waiting two or three hours in a queue, which was no guarantee of a lift because when the bus arrived everyone would ‘struggle’ to get into the bus to ‘solve’ the problem of getting home. Once at home there was no electricity and therefore no water,⁸ which had to be carried in a bucket from a cistern, so people would be ‘struggling’ to ‘solve’ the problem of lack of water. I could continue for pages explaining all the ‘problems’ a person needed to ‘solve’ every day, but I hope the point is clear.

However, if one has the appropriate skills, awareness, or networks, or, in other words, if one is in the condition referred to by the phrase *estar en talla* (having control over or being aware of what is happening), then one can find easier ways to solve problems or one can invent (invent) solutions. A solution to the problem of getting home, for example, could be knowing someone – a neighbour, a colleague—who has a car, and then finding out what the owner of car needs—probably fuel—and offering it (supposing one knows how and where to ‘solve’ the problem of the lack of petrol) in

⁸ Due to the water supply system in most houses in Cuba, water must be pumped electrically.

exchange for a lift. Or the car might not be roadworthy, in need of an extra part, so one might 'invent' a way to replace the piece in order to offer it in exchange for the use of the car. In both situations the person has 'invented' a way of 'solving' the problem of transport. As will be shown, this way of inventing is closely related with what Afro-Cuban musicians do when they improvise.

Since 'struggling', 'being aware', and 'inventing' practically became all-consuming states of being for Cubans in this period, all possible resources to facilitate positive outcomes were explored, including the practice of Afro-Cuban religions. To return to the fictional example, imagine that for some reason one's boss becomes aware that one is 'solving' the gasoline problem with the help of the company car and one is fired. In such a situation, an Afro-Cuban religious specialist might be consulted, both to discover from the gods how to evaluate the situation and the most appropriate course of action. How did the boss discover the 'invention' with the company's gasoline? Did someone tell him? How should the informant be treated? Is the boss going to file a complaint? How can the possible denunciation be avoided? Should it be denied or accepted? And so on.

This thesis takes as its focus this capacity of Afro-Cuban religious practices to help people cope with everyday life. It asks, for example, how and why receiving a handful of stones or performing in ritual celebrations may affect people emotionally, socially, legally, economically, and even physically, in terms of their health. What happens with a person once they know that various gods, spirits and divinatory signs influence their life? Why and how does such knowledge enable them to cope with their 'problems' in everyday life? How is this related to the way they will perceive or understand the world around them and themselves within it?

3. Aims and premises of research

In order to find the links between everyday life and Afro-Cuban religions this thesis traces the concrete connections that Afro-Cuban religious practitioners establish

between them. In doing so I will focus on the interconnections between two principal groups of people. On the one hand, I focus on the lives of the initiates: diviners, musicians, people who are possessed by the gods or spirits, and others who could be described as religiously 'active'. The aim is to investigate precisely how they perform and value when in a religious situation and how they do so in everyday life, with the view to exploring the way these two levels of action are connected. On the other hand, my ethnography also follows the clients of the diviners, as well as other people who enter the orbit of these religious practices without necessarily having a designated role in religious life. In other words, I am also interested in people for whom religion is mainly 'instrumental'. The aim is to investigate how and to what extent their interaction with religious specialists is carried over into their everyday life, and particularly how the evaluative processes that I see as lying at the heart of their ethical comportment are played out in practice.

My ultimate aim in this ethnographic investigation is to uncover and articulate the underlying logic of these practices and how it manifests in everyday life. So, I propose to explore two characteristics common to most Afro-Cuban religions that are fundamental in the practitioners' performances, dealings, reactions, and enactments in everyday life. They are what I call the *perspective conception of morality* and its *improvisatory logic*. As I will show, they are deeply intertwined. Let me introduce each element briefly, before launching into the ethnographic investigation and analysis to which the main body of the thesis is devoted.

3.i. The perspective conception of morality

With a 'perspective conception of morality' I am referring to the capacity to 'value' one's own actions according to the divine forces whose influence one is under, and to value other peoples' actions in a similar way. This, as I shall be arguing with reference to Friederich Nietzsche's philosophy of morality, involves the capacity to 'unbind' valuations (of right and wrong, good and bad) from given situations and to 'rebind'

them to context-specific situations. Such a capacity, as we shall see, is one of the principal aims in a person's initiation. This can be contrasted with, for instance, the kind of moral realism based on the idea that there are 'moral facts', that is, facts that are good or bad in themselves (Copp 2006).

There are various kinds and hierarchies of initiation within each Afro-Cuban religion. Most of them entail that the person 'receives' (*recibir*) or 'seats' (*asentar*)⁹ a god or a group of gods or spirits that owns the power/s deemed to influence, or 'rule over', the neophyte. Initiations are rituals that, among other things, start a process of learning about oneself: of recognizing how one's own will and actions are intertwined with those of one's gods, and of contextually renegotiating ways of performing or acting vis-à-vis these divine forces.

Being influenced or ruled by a god whose powers one lacks or does not have under control might appear a contradiction. As Diaz Favelo (1960) explains, in Santería one needs to 'seat' the saint that rules over one's head because one's actions and thoughts are in dissonance or disagreement with those of that saint. Such dissonances cause problems or illnesses for the person in question. The *asiento de santo*, then, creates the conditions for a consonance between the neophyte and the divine entities and forces that rule over the neophyte.

However, Afro-Cuban gods are not bounded entities; each owns a range of powers and has different ways of enacting them. In Santería and Regla Arará each god has various avatars or ways of being, referred to as *avatares* or *camino*s (paths). For instance, Eleguá is believed to have more than one hundred avatars. In some of these avatars Eleguá will be a whimsical child that pleases himself by, for instance, stealing things; in others he

⁹ To 'receive' a saint always means to receive it in the hands as opposed to seating it in the head. One of the most important ceremonies within Afro-Cuban religions is *asiento de santo* (or *hacerse santo* or *kari ocha*) which can be translated as 'seating the saint' or 'making saint'. Here the main ceremonies are performed in the person's head which within all Afro-Cuban religions is regarded as the center of a person's body and mind. After the *asiento de santo* the person might still 'receive' other saints but cannot 'seat' any other in the head. During the *asiento*, a person's divinatory sign is also ritually determined.

will be a caring, old, and wise person. For Santería and other Afro-Cuban practitioners being caring and wise or a thief are not qualities or actions that are good or bad in themselves; rather, their valuation depends on specific circumstances. There are myths telling of circumstances in which it was appropriate for that specific avatar of Eleguá to steal. However, in other circumstances to steal can be considered wrong even for Eleguá himself. The same goes for being caring or wise or for any other ‘virtue’ or action that, according to a Judeo-Christian morality (Singer 1994; Rachels 1998), may be considered good or bad, or right or wrong, as such. Consequently, for someone who is a son of Eleguá, and who has a particular divinatory sign connected to that, the act of stealing will be appropriate in certain circumstances.

It is in this respect that the notion of the perspective becomes relevant. The idea of a perspective, as I will demonstrate, implies the existence of an external and in that sense objective standpoint, against which it is possible to assess the validity of one’s own valuations, actions, and interpretations (Nietzsche 1956). That external source of assessment, in this case, is the god’s way of being, the characteristics of one’s divinatory sign, and other such elements with which one establishes a relationship during the course of religious practice.

Here it is relevant to explain that this view of perspectivism is different from that of Viveiros de Castro (2004), which is not related to moral valuations. As I will explain in detail later in the thesis, my conception of perspective derives from Nietzsche’s writings (1956, 1968, 1986, 1997). Equally, it might be tempting to see this idea of perspective as a form of relativism. However, relativism would not be appropriate due to its connotations of ‘everything goes’, which runs contrary to the key idea of an external or ‘objective’ standpoint from which the validity of one’s own judgments can be judged. The existence of external criteria to value actions and situations, together with the capacity to suspend valuations—to unbind and rebind them according to one’s own perspective—is at the core of what could be called Afro-Cuban moral perspectivism. Indeed, one of the main aims of this thesis is to explore the extent to which moral perspectivism is a way to value everyday life situations for Afro-Cuban religious

practitioners, allowing people to perform, enact and react accordingly in their everyday conduct.

3.ii. Improvisatory logic

Another important principle in Afro-Cuban religious practices is what I call its 'improvisatory logic', apparent mainly in their performative aspects, including music, dance, singing, possession, and divination, among others. Since music lies at the heart of most Afro-Cuban religious practices, I take it as a departure point. However, one of my aims is to show that Cuban music in general and Afro-Cuban music in particular can provide an adequate language to describe Cuban and Afro-Cuban everyday life more broadly.

For the purpose of this introduction I will use improvisation in its general musical sense, understood as the creation, new deployment, or re-arrangement of known elements according to a given genre, or style, during performance. I will explain what improvisatory logic entails using two examples: musical performance in toques, and divination within Santería. The former could be regarded as an 'aesthetic performance' (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994; Köpping 2006; Kratz 1994; Schieffelin 1998; and Turner 1987), whereas the latter could be considered 'verbal art' (Bauman 1984) or as 'performative' (Butler 1988).

Music is a fundamental element of Afro-Cuban ritual complexes,¹⁰ and is the defining element in the performance of toques (also referred to as *tambores*); Toque¹¹ literally means both 'to play' and 'rhythm', *tambor* translates as drum. The name of the ritual complex could thus be translated as playing drums. During Toques, in fact, a set of

¹⁰ I call them ritual complexes following Cuban musicology, because they include a series of rituals (Eli et al. 1993). Music in the form of responsorial singing is present in most Afro-Cuban rituals including the *asiento de santo*. However, toques are the most common rituals where there is a set of instruments being played, songs, and dance.

¹¹ I will use the term Toque (pl. Toques) with a capital letter for the ritual complex to distinguish it from *toque* meaning to play a rhythm.

drums is played to honour the gods, who become present at such celebrations by taking possession of the bodies of the believers. There is also a solo singer, while people present comprise the chorus¹² and dance.

The drums involved are of different sizes and often—but not always—include a metal or wooden idiophone. Each instrument has a specific musical function: the improvisatory role tends to be given primarily to the lower pitch drum. The person who plays the improvisatory drum is usually the most experienced drummer in the group. The resulting rhythm (*toque*) is the result of an intricate interlocking of the rhythmical patterns played on each drum. To accomplish this successfully it is important that each musician is aware of what the others are doing and responds consonantly by deploying rhythmical elements that are understood as ‘belonging’ together. In order to know this, musicians need to have the required religious as well as musical knowledge. Both types of knowledge are mainly acquired through practice, by participating and performing in *Toques* and other rituals. Something similar can be said regarding the singer, who needs to know not only a broad repertoire but also be able to recognize the appropriate religious context for each song, since each song has its own ritual purposes. Dancers also need to know the appropriate steps, movements, and gestures that belong to particular songs and rhythms.

The interplay between musicians, singers and dancers are the elements that allow these ceremonies to achieve their main purpose: that the gods ‘come down’ (*bajen*) and become present in the celebration by taking possession of the bodies of their believers. In order for that to happen it is important that everyone involved is aware of what everyone else is doing, and they need to be able to respond and react consonantly with each other (see also Berliner 1994). This ability is at the core of the improvisatory logic of these practices.

¹² The structure of the singing is antiphonal or responsorial.

In divination a similar logic is also at work. As explained, a sign encompasses various mythical narratives that the diviner has to know in order to select the ones that 'describe' the client's situation. Moreover, the diviner also needs to be aware of the person's answers and reactions to be able to value her or his situation and consequently combine and interpret the selected myths accordingly. Here, as in music, what is at stake is awareness and valuation of a situation, and the ability to use the appropriate knowledge to react or respond consonantly.

The way in which moral perspectivism and improvisatory logic are entwined is thus apparent: while the former is about valuing context-specific situations, the latter is about enacting such valuations, or performing and reacting according to them.

Consequently, part of the aim of this thesis is to examine how this improvisatory logic is at work in practitioners' everyday lives, and explore the extent to which this logic may also be at work outside the Afro-Cuban religious world, encompassing other aspects of people's lives in Cuba today.

CHAPTER ONE. THE AFRO-CUBAN RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE

1. Religion in the 'Período Especial'

*Aquí todo el mundo mete brujería, eso lo sabemos nosotros que trabajamos la religión.*¹³ (Jamaica - informant)

*Hay gente que dicen que no creen en ná 'y van a consultarse' por la madrugada.*¹⁴ (popular song)

To state that most Cubans are religious, a claim I frequently heard during my fieldwork, seems to be a contradiction in a socialist country that has made all possible efforts to counteract any kind of idealist worldview and tried instead to promote a “materialistic and scientific conception of the universe” (Cuban Constitution 1975 article 54).¹⁵ Yet religiosity in Cuba has deep historical roots dating back to the colonial era, re-emerging into public life during the beginning of the so-called Special Period.¹⁶ According to the parish priest of Matanzas Cathedral and to the pastor of the first Baptist church in the city, this was the result of the deep crises that the whole country was undergoing and the people’s need for “spiritual hope”. There was also an important economic element in the resurgence: certain churches—mostly but not only Protestant establishments—distributed free goods among their members and in certain cases helped them to leave the country. Meanwhile, practitioners of Afro-Cuban religions found ways to access scarce hard currency either by using the strong

¹³ “Here everyone uses *brujería*; this is something that we, the ones who work the religion, know.” This and all translations are mine, unless otherwise stated.

¹⁴ “There are people who say that they don’t believe in anything, but they go to ‘consult themselves’ at dawn.”

¹⁵ In 1975 during the 1st Congress of the Cuban Communist Party the new Constitution was launched, a year later it was approved by a popular referendum.

¹⁶ The Special Period in Peacetime (*Período especial en tiempo de paz*) is a period of economic crisis that began in 1990 after the collapse of the Soviet Union and Comecon. It can primarily be defined by the severe shortages in energy resources and by a group of measures adopted by the government in order to survive the crisis as a socialist country. Although the years between 1999 and 2007 were officially designated Functional Re-adjustment (*Reajuste Funcional*), the Special Period has not yet been officially declared over.

See: <http://revolucioncubana.cip.cu/logros/desafios-del-desarrollo-economico> (visited 30 April 2011).

networks created by the godparent / godchild institution—a relevant structural landmark in most such religions—or by deploying their rich performative components, including music, dance and mythology, as vital sources of inspiration for choreographers and artistic performance. Those elements were the raw material of the numerous folkloric groups that became widespread in the 1990s thanks to a new and expanding market: tourism.

Even if the Revolution legally warranted religious freedom (Article 54 of the 1975 Constitution), being an active religious practitioner meant facing a series of difficulties in everyday life. Such problems included being banned from certain jobs, social circles and universities, and excluded from la Juventud (Association of Young Communists) and el Partido (the Communist Party), membership of which was important for many people at the time. In that climate of hostility, belonging to an Afro-Cuban religious family placed the practitioner in an ambiguous position. On the one hand, people sought to conceal their practices and beliefs and obfuscate or ignore risky family connections in order to achieve both social status and employment in certain jobs; on the other, the state placed a high value on the study of Afro-Cuban ‘cultures’ mainly under the rubric of folklore. To further such studies a number of different institutions were created in the first years of the revolution and a whole language was developed to catalogue the various folkloric groups who were created with their support. Active practitioners had to register with the Ministerio de Justicia (Ministry of Justice) in order to obtain official permission to perform ritual celebrations, which often involved the playing of drums and animal sacrifice. Consequently, until the 1990s, religious practitioners were caught in a dilemma. Either they openly performed their religious rituals, possibly becoming an object of study as a result—which had advantages including special attention from cultural institutions and disadvantages such as having to renounce aspirations to a professional life (in any field but the cultural)—or they concealed their beliefs. Here it is worth mentioning that, as Ssorin-Chaikov (2003) observed, in a socialist country the state is dispersed in the social body, and to lead a life at its margins is not really viable.

The emergence of folkloric groups was not a new phenomenon during the Special Period. What was new were their large numbers; the venues in which they started to perform, which now included international hotels and tourist places; their audience, which comprised mainly foreigners; and their ‘character’: many musical groups, including Afro-Cuban ensembles, were formed ad hoc to sell their shows in the international market. Thus, thanks to the Special Period, Afro-Cuban religions experienced an exceptional expansion in which wholly new dimensions were added, some of which began to prevail. Nonetheless, while economic factors played a role in attracting large numbers of people, they were not the major draw and they do not explain the substantial rise in specific religious practices. For this, one must look elsewhere: despite the manifold differences between Afro-Cuban religions they share an important characteristic in that their practitioners claim that they *resuelven* (solve or resolve),¹⁷ while scholars have described them as being “instrumental” (Guanche 1983; Lachatañere 2007) and oriented to “everyday life” or the “present” (Day et al. 1998; Esquenazi 2001; León 2001; López Valdés 1985; Vinueza 1988). As Brandon also phrased it, they help “people *cope with* the problems of illness and the practical difficulties of *everyday life*” (Brandon 1993: 99, my emphasis). It is this form of assistance, the capacity to resolve, that is one of the major factors attracting such a large number of people during the Special Period. It has also been one of the few almost taken for granted elements when defining them.

Afro-Cuban religions, such as Santería or Regla de Ocha/Ifá, Regla Arará and the Reglas de Palo, have often been described as syncretic religions in which the practices and beliefs of various West African peoples have hybridised with elements of popular Catholicism (see Barnet 1983; Lachatañere 2007; López Valdés 1985; Ortiz 1965, 1981). Each strand contains prevailing elements from specific African ethnic groups: for instance, Santería is argued to be predominantly Yoruban (Bascom 1950; Guanche 1983; León 2001; Palmié 2002); Regla Arará of Adja-Fon or Ewe-fon origin (Brice

¹⁷ *Resolver* in Cuban slang means not only to solve, but also to enable access to something difficult, often—but not always—using means that might be considered inappropriate or illegal by the authorities.

Sogbossi 1998; Martínez Furé 1979; Vinuesa 1988); while the Reglas de Palo stem from the Bantu borderlands of Congo, Zaire and Angola (Valdés Bernal 1990; Fuentes Guerra 1996; Palmié 2002). There are other religions whose classification as Afro-Cuban is more ambiguous and which are, therefore, still controversial in terms of categorisation. Such is the case of Vodú, entering Cuba via Haiti and therefore subject to debate over whether it may appropriately be called Afro-Cuban (Esquenazi 2001; Vilar 1993), and Espiritismo (Spiritism), which is of European origin and entered Cuba mostly in its Kardecian version before being mixed with various elements of the main Afro-Cuban religions (Lago Vieito 2002; Palmié 2002; Espiritu Santo 2009). Abakuá, considered of Igbo, Ibibio and Oru origin (López Valdés 1985; Sosa Rodríguez 1982), presents a different problem because there is disagreement as to whether it is a religion at all because, while it has religious elements, it is widely regarded as a secret society.

Practically every aspect commonly used to define Afro-Cuban religions has been debated and challenged: their status as religions—they have been described or referred to as “cults”, “magical religious systems” (James 2006) or “magical religious practices” (Bolívar Aróstegui 1990; Guanche 1983; León 1987; López Valdés 1985)—their syncretic character (Mason 2002; Palmié 2002; Pérez y Mena 1998); ethnic and geographic explanations of the origin of their differences (Palmié 2002); and even their Afro-Cuban label. Ochoa (2010), for example, expresses his discomfort with the term because “it binds people and the materials they engage to an ordinary and inescapable African past” without acknowledging “‘the new’ that is so crucial a part of diaspora and Creole culture” (2010: 8); he prefers to regard them, rather, as “African-inspired” (ibid.). Moreover, there are other religious forms which are often left out of the picture in summaries of Afro-Cuban religions, not only because they are limited to small communities but because, as I will argue, they no longer have the capacity to resolve, or they do not resolve for everyone. Such is the case of Gangá Longobá, for example, which is only practised by a kin group in a small town in the province of Matanzas (Basso Ortiz 2005; Esquenazi 2001), and of many family cults that have been absorbed

by Santería and are often ignored or regarded as pre-modern (see Brown 2003) by the relevant literature.

The following sections lay the foundations for later discussion by examining two distinctions often made by Afro-Cuban religious practitioners. The first provides an organizing principle, whereas the second provides the basis of the ensuing argument on the forging of the Afro-Cuban ethical individual. Finally I present three ethnographic examples of how people approach and become involved in Afro-Cuban religious life.

2. El muerto y el santo (the dead and the saints)

Although each Afro-Cuban religion is a religion in its own right with its own particularities, in what follows I treat them holistically for two reasons: first, because even though each religion can be practised independently, it is often the case that most people are initiated into and actively practice in more than one; and, second, because in my opinion they share a common logic, ethics and cosmology, a view I explore in the following chapters. Nonetheless, they may be divided into two categories that respond to a distinction often drawn by practitioners: the ones that work (*trabajan*) with the dead (*muertos*) and those that work with the saints (*santos*). The latter, however, are believed to have died before becoming saints, and for that reason they are considered a specific type of dead. Afro-Cuban religious people often say that “the dead come first”, which provides an organizing principle among the various Afro-Cuban religions: if a person needs to be initiated into a religion that works with the saints it is necessary to establish whether that person might first need to be initiated into another religion that works with the dead. The outcome of this is that many people are initiated into at least two different types of religion; after being fully initiated into a religion working with the saints, however, it is no longer possible to undergo any other major ceremony. This is one of the main principles of the logic of Afro-Cuban initiations, though it has exceptions, as I discuss later.

Each religion has its particular way of working with such beings. Espiritismo and Palo are the main religions engaging with the dead but each works with different types, as Jamaica, a *palero*, *santero*, *espiritista* and *abakuá*¹⁸ explained to me:

The *espiritistas* work with the dead, but with the *muerto sano* (sound or harmless dead); they do not work with evil dead. *Paleros*, on the other hand, do work with the killers, the murders, the ones that died a violent death and the ones that have lost their heads.

Within Espiritismo it is believed that the spirits of these *muertos sanos* are progressing or evolving towards ‘elevation’ through various reincarnations until they might ‘reach the light’ or ‘become angels’, which implies being closer to God (see Córdova Martínez and Barzaga Sablón 2000; Lago Vieito 2002). Since Espiritismo is about working with spirits towards their elevation, it is thus considered ‘clearer’ and more advanced (see Espiritu Santo 2009; Palmie 2002) than Palo, which is often referred as being more ‘primitive’. Within Palo it is commonly said that a *palero* works with the dead being itself (*el muerto*) and not with the spirit of a *muerto*, which entails a much more worldly conception of the beings with which they work as they belong to this world and are not necessarily—although it could become the case—looking to progress into a higher world. *Espiritistas* believe that from birth everyone has various spirits that offer protection and guidance, but only some people are born with the gift (*don*) or virtue (*virtud*) to communicate with them. This does not, in the first instance, depend on the person but on the spirits themselves, who choose the people to whom they manifest themselves. Only then may these persons, in turn, acknowledge the presence of the spirits and decide whether or not to develop the gift offered by them: to choose to work with them, in other words. Usually the chosen person is assisted in overcoming personal difficulties and developing in life, and should also help others in the same vein. Spiritist work is thus conceptualised as

¹⁸ The term *abakuá* is used both for the secret society and its members. When capitalised, the word refers to the society, when in lower case to initiates.

positive in as much as it is considered to be about helping oneself and others by virtue of the assistance given by supernatural beings.

In Palo, however, the relationship between the living individual and the muerto is the opposite. It is up to the individual to seek out a muerto, convince the muerto to go to work, and then make a *tratado* (treaty) of acceptance because, in this case, the muerto is working *for*, and not just *with*, the living person. Nevertheless, occasionally a dead being might become attached to a living one, in which case, if the person wants to work with the muerto, the latter still has to be convinced to make a tratado. In Perico, a city in the province of Manzanillas, the terms *brujo* and *palero* are used interchangeably to refer to individuals who, after having undergone certain initiatory ceremonies, are able to make a tratado with a dead being resulting in the muerto's working for them, as this may be accepted or rejected by the muerto. From the moment that a dead being accepts the tratado, however, he becomes the 'heart' of the brujo or, in other words, is turned into a brujo. The brujo is thus an entity whose being in this world depends on the brujo's will and therefore, works at his will.

I also include Abakuá among the religions whose practitioners work with the dead even though it is considered a secret society rather than a religion by many of its members and also by the state. Currently in Cuba there is an office that is subsidiary to the Comité Central (Central Committee) of the Communist Party called the Oficina de Asuntos Religiosos which is concerned with all religious matters in Cuba but, conspicuously, Abakuá falls outside its remit and into the sphere of the Ministry of Justice. However, besides having important religious elements, Abakuá also shares many cosmological principles with the other Afro-Cuban religions. In fact, when I discussed the role of the dead with Afro-Cuban adherents, they usually argued that most of their religions,¹⁹ including Abakuá, are about the dead. Abakuás themselves

¹⁹ Christianity was included when talking about the subject because, insofar as Jesus Christ died and rose from the dead, he is also regarded as a muerto, if of a very specific kind.

maintain that the dead are invoked in all major ceremonies they perform, as noted by an abakuá informant named Kiki,²⁰ who told me:

In order to start a ceremony in Abakuá the first thing you have to do is to call Sikán's spirit; if she doesn't come the drum doesn't sound. Without Sikán there is no voice and, without voice, there are no abakuá."

This refers to the foundational legend of Abakuá which, among other things, claims that the spirit of a woman, Sikán, has to 'become present' during Abakuá ceremonies in order for the voice of the God Abasí to be heard through the sacred drum called Ekue.²¹ The dead which concern Abakuá are, again, of a different type. While they are referred to as 'spirits', they are not seeking to evolve; rather, they are the spirits of mythical beings that never became 'other', that never became saints, deities or gods. They only become present during Abakuá ceremonies and have little or no input in everyday life.

In all the other Afro-Cuban religions the most important beings are the saints (*santos*), even if the dead play an important role to the extent that almost all ceremonies require their sanction and have to start by invoking them. Most of the saints are considered to have been human beings who, after dying, became saints, an idea expressed by the recurrent saying, "*El muerto pario al santo*" (the dead gave birth to the saint). Each Afro-Cuban religion has a particular term which is used to refer to the beings active in the lives of its members, most of which correspond with the Spanish pronunciation of words used by the African groups thought to be the original source of each religion. Most practitioners use the specific term and 'saint' interchangeably. For instance, in Santería the worshiped beings are called both saints and *orichas*, the latter corresponding to the Yoruba word for such creatures, *orisa* (Barber 1981; Holbraad 2010). This religion is also called Regla de Ocha/Ifá which means the rule or the order of the Ocha/Ifá, where Ocha is another word for oricha

²⁰ All names have been anonymised.

²¹ See Sosa Rodriguez 1982

and Ifá, according to some authors, is another name for Orula or Orunmila, the oricha of divination (see Bolivar Aróstegui 1990; Holbraad 2010; Lachatañere 2007), or the system of divination (Brown 2003). Practitioners of the Regla Arará also call their deities santos, with the specific appellation being *foddúns*, whereas it is *vodus* within Vodú;²² both terms derive from the Ewe-Fon word *vodun* (Brice Sogbossi 1998). The Gangá Longobá use only the Spanish word santos to refer to the supernatural beings they believe in.

All these religions share the conception that people's actions are influenced and guided by various saints throughout life; however, each person has a specific saint that rules over or owns his or her head called the guardian angel (*angel de la guardia*), and the person is thought to be, and referred to as, his or her son or daughter. If a person undergoes the ultimate initiation in Santería or Arará this is the saint that would be *asentado* (seated) in the person's head. For that reason the ceremony is called *asiento de santo* (Spanish), or *kari ocha* (Lucumí).²³ Many Afro-Cuban religions share the idea that the head is the most important part of the person's body. It is not only recognized as the place where thinking processes take place but also as the organ that rules and regulates the working of the rest of the body and is therefore the subject of particular attention both ritually and in everyday life. It is believed in these religions that the guardian angel chooses the person and, as in Espiritismo, everyone is born with one; however, unlike spirits, these saints do not usually communicate with their sons or daughters other than through possession or divination. People only become aware of the presence of their individual guardian angel if the saint wishes or needs it, or if worshipping or being consecrated to their individual saint is in the person's own 'path'.²⁴

²² I exclude Vodú from the ensuing discussion because it was not practised in the town where I conducted my fieldwork, mainly being confined to the east and central provinces of Cuba, with only some smaller communities in the western part, mostly in Havana. Although Vodú does not have a strong presence in western Cuba, it is important to note that many individual practitioners of Afro-Cuban religions know and practice some aspects of it, because they have spent time learning with specialists who either live in the central and eastern part of the island or who have moved to the west.

²³ According to Brown (2003: 369) the Lucumí sentence means: "to put the *oricha* on the head" (see Bolivar Aróstegui 1990: 181).

²⁴ The idea of having a path can be loosely explained as destiny.

3. El creyente y el religioso (the 'believer' and the 'religious')

In one of the many conversations I had in Matanzas with my friend Alexander, a young santero, he argued that in Cuba many people were believers and only a few were religious. He had a theory about it, in which he claimed:

If you believe, it is because you have faith in something; there is something that you love, that you worship. I am a believer [un creyente], and I believe in this [Santería]; I love it, I worship it, and it is the basis for everything in my life. The religious person [el religioso] is the one that has faith in something, but he also believes in the human being; he believes in the people around him, he believes that I can be for the others and not just for myself. The believer believes and resolves for himself, for his own life, his own situation and his own problems; the religious person instead is religious and at the same time is a brother, a friend, a companion because the religion allows him to share and to be not just for himself.

Alexander's conclusion is that most santeros are believers and not religiosos because they 'are for themselves', which means that, for the most part, they think and act in their own interest, in order to resolve their own problems. Although he considers himself a religioso he also includes himself among the santeros who are just believers because, as he says, "I also have to resolve my problems. If the person next to me resolves his problems, why wouldn't I? Am I going to live outside the world?"

It was thanks to Alexander that I first became aware of this distinction as one which, it became apparent during fieldwork, is drawn by many Afro-Cuban practitioners: even if someone practises one or more religions she is not necessarily considered a religioso, and, indeed, might not consider herself as such. This idea was confirmed by a number of Afro-Cuban religious people with whom I discussed the issue. One, a

locally renowned palero named Jamaica (introduced in detail below), had a more radical opinion. He argued:

The believer believes what he wants, believes in what suits him or to the extent that it suits him. He believes [*se cree cosas, es lo que tu te creas*] himself to be important in himself, whereas the religioso is all about [*lleva*] the religion.

When talking about his many godchildren he maintained that most of them were not religiosos but creyentes. In his opinion they believe in him, in his brujo, but they do not necessarily believe in the religion itself; they will do what Jamaica tells them to do, but that is all. After the ‘job’ is done they do not want to know anything further on the subject of religion. Probably one of the most illuminating conversations I had regarding the issue was with Nancy, Jamaica’s wife. She comes from a family with strong Afro-Cuban religious traditions, was baptised in a Catholic church when she was four years old, has been married for over thirty years to someone who works the religion, has received certain religious visitations—occasionally even being possessed—yet, despite all this, she still does not see herself as a religiosa. As she explained:

I am not religiosa because I do not profess any religion. I do not love any religion; I respect them all and if I need one I use it, but because of that I am not a religiosa. Being religioso means to embrace religion, to take care of it, to work it. Yet if I go to consult a religioso it is because I believe in it, and when I do something I do it with faith, I do it with the idea (*conciencia*) that I am going to solve the problem.

What is clear from the testimonies of Alexander, Jamaica, and Nancy is that merely having and acting with faith, or even practising a religion, does not, per se, imply being a religioso. While being a believer (creyente) is quite an open role, retaining its extra-religious connotations (e.g., “I believe that I will win the lottery tomorrow”) and

including a self-centred dimension of ‘being for oneself’ and ‘solving things for oneself’—tacitly at the expense of others—the notion of a *religioso* is something much more bounded. Being a *religioso* entails believing and having faith in what one has and does, actively practising all aspects of a religion and, most importantly, working it in order to resolve not just one’s own problems but also those of others. Therefore, an important element of being a *religioso* is possession of the ritual knowledge, or the resources to acquire it, which is necessary for the resolution of other people’s problems. Consequently all *religiosos* have undergone particular initiatory ceremonies²⁵ providing them with specific faculties (*facultades*) and the channel to working for other people. As a result they commonly commune (*consultar, ver* or *mirar*) with people—either through the medium of an oracle or by becoming possessed—perform ritual jobs (*trabajos*)²⁶ prescribed by the dead or by saints during consultation and are able to initiate other people into the religion or help them to ‘develop’ spiritually. In other words: they ‘work’ the religion.

Most Afro-Cuban religious people who actively work their religion and ‘are for others’ (which includes being available for others) call themselves *religiosos*. For that reason I use the term to refer to any person who believes, has faith and knowledge, and practises and works for others in any Afro-Cuban religion. In Cuba, however, such a generic term is seldom used. In each religion there are specific names to refer to *religiosos* and these are commonly used. For instance, those who work Palo are called *paleros, brujeros, nganguleros* or *tatas*; in Santería and Regla Arará one finds *santeros, santeras* and *obbás*; and those working Ifá are called *babalawos* and, recently, *iyaonifa*. Nowadays it is common to hear a *babalawo* also being called a *sacerdote de Ifá* (priest of Ifá)—terminology which has been borrowed from the Roman Catholic vocabulary—and very rare to hear the term *bokonu*, which designates a *babalawo arará*. Finally, those who work Espiritismo are called *espiritistas*. Within the Afro-Cuban context the

²⁵ Exceptions to this are *espiritistas*, who do not necessary have to undergo an initiatory ceremony. In their case what is important is to ‘develop’ their gift (see Espiritu Santo 2009).

²⁶ *Trabajos* are minor ritual ceremonies such as cleansings which do not require complex or intensive preparation. Sometimes they can even be performed by the consulted person without the assistance of the *religioso*. For that reason I mostly use the word ‘jobs’ to translate them.

word *religioso* is also used to refer to people who actively work other religions, such as a nun, a priest or a pastor, though the reverse is seldom the case.

A further distinction that Afro-Cuban *religiosos* often draw is between being a *religioso* and a fanatic (*fanático*). The fanatic is the person who will attribute to supernatural causes all possible misfortune that happens to him or to the people around him. A *brujo* explained this as follows:

The fanatic thinks that everything is due to *brujería*: if he has a headache it is because of *brujería*; if he loses in a game it is because of *brujería*. But if you have a head it is normal to have headaches, and if you play you might lose!

Like many other *religiosos*, he often insisted that *religiosos* are not fanatical in that they differentiate between things that happen in the normal course of events, such as having a headache, and things that are the result of *brujería*, such as continuing to have a headache after being treated by a neurologist.

Being a believer, an occasional or regular practitioner, a fanatic or a *religioso* are terms that indicate degrees of involvement with Afro-Cuban religions. According to Afro-Cuban cosmology, religious involvement does not exclusively depend on the person's own will but is mainly a response to the will of a *muerto* or *santo* or because it is the person's path. Initiation into the different Afro-Cuban religions is always 'marked' or designated to a person, usually as a result of consultation. People, therefore, cannot undergo initiation according to their own desire; they can only decide to the contrary: that is, not to undergo initiation although it has been designated. This is an opportune moment to examine why and how people become involved with Afro-Cuban religions in the first place. Further to this: what do the different degrees of involvement entail for the person? Discussion of the two issues takes the form of analysis of three case studies: Misladis, a female artist from a family of active communists, and Jamaica and Papo Angelico, both *paleros*.

4. Routes to the Afro-Cuban Religious World

4.i. *Misladis. The path of an artist*

The most common reason for people to consult (*consultarse*) with a religioso, apart from mere curiosity, is because they are facing problems or difficult situations they do not know how to deal with, or which persist even after various solutions have been applied. Problems can be of any kind—health, love, work or family-related—but they share a common characteristic: the person suffering from a misfortune, concern or affliction considers that it cannot be solved without some extra help, guidance and advice. It might be of a type that has been repeatedly experienced or one involving a specific challenging situation such as changing jobs, making commercial deals or going on a trip. Often the person's dilemma can be solved by the performance of *trabajos* which are disclosed to a religioso through the medium of an oracle. Less often it is the case that at the first consultation the person seeking help is told she or he must undergo certain initiations or receive certain saints, both of which imply a more permanent religious commitment.

Misladis' story illustrates this widespread way of becoming involved in an Afro-Cuban religion. Born in Trinidad into a family of active communists, the only religious experience she had as a child was via her paternal grandparents who were Catholic. As an adolescent she moved to Havana in order to continue her fine arts studies, first at the National School of Art (ENA) and then the High School of Art (ISA). Like most students in Cuba she first lived in the student residency but then she moved in with her boyfriend, a dancer living alone with his grandmother. But Misladis and the boyfriend's grandmother did not get on very well. As Misladis recounts:

She didn't like me; she would make a problem about anything I did or I needed to do. One day I was visiting an aunt of mine, who was living in Havana, and I told her about the situation with my partner's grandmother. She asked me whether I had seen [*ver*] a *babalawo*, because this is a must in Cuba! You know,

usually when you are telling someone about your problems people ask you whether you have seen a babalawo!

My aunt was a practitioner of Afro-Cuban religions. She brought me to see an obbá²⁷ who had helped her son with a situation he faced ... So we went there and he registered [*registrar*]²⁸ me for the first time in my life; it was with the [cowry] shells. I don't remember which trabajos he gave me to do very clearly; there were various things such as cleansing [*baños*] with herbs and flowers and an *ebbó*²⁹ with an animal, I think it was with a pigeon. Later on he also told me that I should get [*coger*] three necklaces [*elekes*]³⁰ and that these were enough to protect me. I don't wear them but I always carry them in my bag; nowadays I have many more!

I wouldn't say that the relationship with the grandmother improved but I did feel better. I went to see that man various times during that period but I stopped going there when my boyfriend left the country.

Misladis' story is a common one in Cuba. Someone is facing a difficult situation; at some point he talks about it with a friend or a relative and, as in Misladis' case, usually that person will ask whether he has seen a religioso. Misladis' aunt specifically suggested a babalawo, probably due to their increasing popularity in Havana,³¹ but in my experience people might also simply ask whether you have gone to 'see yourself' (verse) or to 'consult yourself' (consultarse) with 'someone'. The trabajos Misladis was told to perform after consultation are also common: cleansing ceremonies (*limpiezas*) which in her case meant bathing with herbs, flowers and probably some other things; making an offering; and, finally, she needed to get a charm to protect herself—in her particular case the bead necklaces. At that time she was not told she needed to be

²⁷ Obbá is the highest hierarchy in Santería, usually reserved for men.

²⁸ To register (*registrar*) or see (*ver* or *mirar*) are terms used for consultation (*consultar*) with an oracle. Divination is discussed in a later chapter.

²⁹ Ebbós are offerings to the dead or saints that may include animal sacrifice.

³⁰ Lucumí word for beads.

³¹ However, the aunt brought Misladis to see an obbá and not a babalawo.

initiated into any religion or receive any further saints; neither was she told she had a religious path to follow. In Santería each style of beaded necklace belongs to a specific oricha, and there is a ceremony called *entrega de collares* (giving the necklaces) in which the participant is given five or six from the most important orichas related to their own guardian angel. But we are not at that stage yet, and neither was Misladis at the time. In fact, when the situation was over she no longer saw the obbá. Interesting to note is her remark that although her relationship with the grandmother did not improve after doing what the obbá told her to do, she did feel better.

After finishing her studies Misladis started working within the most important young people's cultural association in the country: la Asociación de Hermanos Saínez (AHS)³² (The Saínez Brothers' Association), which developed under the umbrella of the Communist Youth. She was in charge of the fine arts section. During that period she did not practice any religion in any way. When I asked if this was related to her working in a state institution, she indicated that it was not, observing that many changes were taking place at the time, not only within the Association but in Cuba as a whole. These were the hard days of the Special Period, when state policies regarding religion and other issues were changing. People were starting to wear religious talismans such as oricha necklaces openly: not only 'on the street' but also within state institutions such as the AHS; in former years this would have been impossible without having to undergo a 'verification process', probably resulting in being expelled from the Party or the Communist Youth.

In 1998 Misladis started working as a teacher in an art school. Soon after this her father died and her mother wanted to have masses said for the soul of her deceased husband: one in a Catholic church but also a 'spiritual' one. While Misladis was trying to plan the latter, she discovered that the director of her school was a widely recognized espiritista and ultimately he agreed to travel to Trinidad a few times in order to perform and organize not one but three spiritual masses for Misladis' father.

³² For detailed information see: <http://www.ahs.cu>

From an espiritista's perspective, during such masses spirits will possess their mediums' bodies in order to speak with the people participating. When the mass is offered to a specific muerto, Misladis' father in this case, the spirit of that person is made present, allowing him to tell his family about any unresolved issues in his life or about things he might need as a muerto, such as offerings or masses, in order to evolve as a spirit and reach the light. Moreover, the muerto may also give advice to the living and inform them about upcoming situations. To be sure that it is 'really' the spirit of the deceased speaking through the medium, the spirit must speak to people present about intimate matters that only the interlocutor could know about. In the course of this Misladis discovered that her ex-boyfriend's grandmother had performed certain trabajos against her and that these were the cause of her past instability and her recent ill health. After this she carried out the trabajos she was prescribed and this time she received a spiritual Eleguá.³³ While she continued to take care of her Eleguá, completion of her jobs once again marked the temporary end of her concern with religious matters.

It was only about five years before I talked to her, when she started experiencing serious health problems, that she began to get deeply involved in religious life, and from that moment her story becomes complicated. While under medical treatment she started to see another religioso, this time a santero whom she knew from her time as student. He not only gave her some jobs to do, but also recommended her to a specialist doctor. Furthermore, at some point she was having difficulties at home and wanted to see someone who did not know anything about her life. This time she went to consult herself with a santera. According to Misladis, it was the first time that someone had told her things without her saying a single prompting word, going on to discover during consultation the precise problem that had brought Misladis to see her;

³³ A spiritual Eleguá is given by an espiritista; it differs formally from the one given within Ocha/Ifá in that it is a coconut and not a stone.

moreover, she told Misladis that eventually she had to “make the saint”³⁴, but that she must start by undergoing the lower Santería initiations, or reception of saints, because she “had nothing to hold to in life” and the protection she had was not enough. The first of these initiations would involve her reception of the warriors or *guerreros* from Ocha (see below). These she received, followed by the Kofa, and then Olokun, a powerful and mysterious saint or oricha. She also underwent some spiritual ceremonies and, when we spoke, she was planning to receive the oricha Oko.

Within Santería one can receive various saints before undergoing the major initiation of making the saint (*hacerse santo*) but not everyone receiving those saints will necessarily go on to the final stage unless, as I have said, it has been so designated through divination. Each of the received saints is conceived as giving the person special qualities or powers (*aché*) he or she might lack in order to cope or be in consonance with everyday life. Like all Afro-Cuban religions, Santería is not a unified or centralized religion; there are, therefore, many ways in which it is practised that may vary between each santero’s house or *ile ocha*, although it is said that there are different branches (*ramas*) within which variations are supposed to be minimal. Besides the possible historical explanations for this,³⁵ variations reflect Afro-Cuban cosmology wherein certain individual ways of performing are considered to be instantiated by the will of the saints or the dead who provide ‘*inspiración*’ for the practitioner. However, not every individual way of performing or particular innovation is considered the result of inspiration; it has to be within certain parameters and respond to a particular logic, as we will see later. For now, what is important is to emphasise that there is no single orthodoxy in any Afro-Cuban religion and therefore very few prescriptions as to the order and precise way in which each ceremony should be performed. Indeed, the most widely observed prescription responds to what I have called the logic of initiation: after making the saint (seating the guardian angel in the initiate’s head) no further ceremony can be performed with regards the person’s head.

³⁴ This ceremony has a number of names including *kari ocha*, Ocha, *Hacer el Santo*, *hacerse santo* or ‘making the saint’. *Kari ocha* means ‘to seat the oricha’ and during it a person’s main saint / guardian angel is seated in their head, crowning the saint.

³⁵ See Brown 2003, for a detailed explanation and histories of the different *ramas* within Santería and Ifa.

Consequently, if a person's path entails having to undergo ceremonies where the head is involved, they must be performed before making the saint.

To return to the saints a person might receive, exemplified by those of Misladis: the guerreros (warriors) are considered to give a person a foundation (*fundamento*), a solid and stable basis on which to ground and develop one's life, valuations and actions. In Afro-Cuban religious cosmology a person needs to have a fundamento in order to be able to cope with everyday situations in life. People are said to lack a fundamento when they lack stability in matters considered fundamental to life such as family, home, work or studies, relationships and the like; when they constantly change their minds regarding both important and trivial issues; and when they continually act in unpredictable ways with deplorable consequences for themselves and/or for the people around them. Not everyone needs a religious fundamento to ground their lives, however; this is an issue to be discerned through consultation, as is the specific kind of fundamento each person requires, which may well change over the life course. It can be the case, for instance, that receiving the guerreros provides sufficient fundamento at a specific moment, but later something else either within Santería or from other Afro-Cuban religions might be found necessary. Thus, there are various types of fundamentos, which are offered through different ceremonies.

Among the saints the guerreros are the first which are considered when providing someone with a fundamento. *Recibir guerreros* (receiving the warriors) is a ceremony in which three warrior saints—Eleguá, Ogún and Ochosi—are given to a person together with a fourth saint, not regarded as a warrior: Ozun. Eleguá is probably one of the more complex characters among Santería orichas. He is considered to have as many as one hundred and one paths, avatars or ways of being (see Barnet 1983; Lachatañeré 2007). Eleguá is the owner of, among other things, paths, roads, crossroads and people's destinies. Imagined as a whimsical child, he enjoys playing with people's destinies; he might open, close or even mix up a person's path. For instance, he is to blame for unexpected difficulties in life that include spoiled plans, careers, businesses and so on; but he is also held responsible for the opposite, for

successfully achieved aspirations and for opening up new possibilities in life. When one receives Eleguá, one gains the possibility of having him fulfil one's wishes in return for treats, and therefore of having control—up to certain extent; remember Eleguá is a mischievous child—of one's own destiny.

Ogún is the epitome of a warrior. There are hundreds of stories (*patakies*) portraying him leading victorious wars against the most diverse enemies, as well as falling victim to his own temper. As the owner of metals, most weapons and work instruments belong to him including the knife, an instrument of particular reverence within Santería and Ifá. According to many religiosos the knife can only be used by those who have received it in a special ceremony that entitles them to sacrifice four-legged animals for the saints (see Brown 2003). This is, however, a matter of controversy. To receive Ogún with the guerreros is thus to receive his support and the strength to endeavour to overcome difficult situations in everyday life (see Barnet 1983; Bolívar Aróstegui 1990). Ochosi is the final saint of the guerreros trilogy. A hunter and the owner of prisons, he will help the initiate who receives him to overcome possible troubles with justice (see Barnet 1983; Bolívar Aróstegui 1990). Along with the guerreros the initiate also receives Ozun, who contains the person's life and is the person's head. When received with the guerreros, Ozun provides stability in life and thought and, according to Brown (2003: 135) contributes to mental health. Ozun must be placed in the highest possible position in the initiate's house and if he falls it heralds problems or tragedy in life. Thus, receiving Ozun implies the possibility of having one's life and mind under control, as well as that of knowing in advance, and therefore avoiding, possible troubles.

The guerreros can be 'given' by a santero or a babalawo and it is often the case that, when they are given by a babalawo, Orula is also received if it has been designated through the oracle. Orula is the oricha of divination and only men can be fully consecrated to his cult, which is deeply related to, but in practice independent from, Santería. Orula is received by people who lack stability, health and development in life; these are the main things requested when receiving *la mano de Orula* (the hand of

Orula). It is a ceremony that both men and women can undergo; when a woman receives Orula it is also called *kofa* and, less often, *abo faca* when received by a man. It is said that in this ceremony the person only receives half of Orula's hand, while the other half will be received by men when consecrated into the Ifa secrets.³⁶ When receiving la mano de Orula, the person also undergoes a deep 'registration' with an oracle called Orula's board (*el tablero de Orula*) through which the person's sign is detected (*sacar*). In addition to the signs that might emerge during a normal consultation, this is a sign that will be relevant throughout the person's whole life. During this registration, babalawos will also determine which oricha rules over the person's head and which will then be considered the father or mother of the person, depending on the oricha's sex.

Misladis' guardian angel was Oyá. Never before had she thought of herself as a daughter of Oyá, an oricha that is imagined as having a strong character. Owning the winds and the cemetery's entrance, Oyá is considered to have a profound relationship with the dead. Up to that moment Misladis had thought of herself as a daughter of Ochún or Yemayá, both female orichas deeply entwined with maternity. The former is the owner of the rivers, of honey and (mostly sexual) love, and is usually portrayed as the ideal of femininity: beautiful and alluring. Yemayá, on the other hand, is regarded more as the ideal of motherhood, always ready to protect her children, and also as the owner of the secrets of the sea. In fact, Misladis received Olokun, a saint that nowadays is mostly regarded as an avatar of Yemayá, owning the depths of the sea; Olokun is usually received when the initiate lacks good health and stability.

A few years before receiving the guerreros Misladis had undergone surgery. After receiving them she had to have three more medical interventions and her medical problem still persists. It would seem that religion has not been instrumental in her case, yet, as she stated:

³⁶ Some years ago, however, women began to be initiated into Ifá and are called Iyaonifá. Once initiated they have access to knowledge and the divinatory instruments exclusive to Ifá, but they cannot initiate anyone into the Ifá cult.

I started by going to consult myself in order to solve a problem, now I keep on going and doing things to have some support, to feel some sense of ease (*reconfortada*). Having the saints is like having company; you know that they are there, you talk with them; you can tell them your problems and what you want. Then, some of the things that you asked for will actually happen and some others don't.

This could have been said by a believer of practically any religion. However, as Misladis added:

In my view African religions have a deeper commitment to the individual, because in Christian religions you leave everything to God; God will provide, and God knows what he does, isn't that so? But in African religions you work for what you want, you kill the chicken, you offer some food to this or that deity, you do the *trabajos* you were told to do. You create the ideal conditions for things to work as you want them to in your mind and in your environment; you become more assertive.

After about fifteen years of occasional involvement, mainly with Santería and Espiritismo, she eventually decided to follow her religious path and make the saint whenever she could create the necessary conditions. It is a very expensive ceremony and usually people have to start by 'creating the conditions' (*crear condiciones*): buying clothes, ritual paraphernalia, food and many other items, meaning that most people need to save for years before they can actually afford to 'make it'. In her particular case, Misladis has to confront a further challenge: being a daughter of Oyá she has to *pasar muerto* (let the muerto pass through her). If she were a daughter of any other saint this would not be relevant, but since Oyá is perceived as a *muertera* (having to do with the dead) her sons and daughters have to *pasar muerto*, otherwise making the saint will 'hold them back' (*atrasar*); this would contradict the ideal of a

ceremony conceived of as helping a person to progress and making it easier to cope with everyday life situations.

At the time of my field work, Misladis had not yet experienced a 'shaking' [a sign of spirit possession]; however, as she said: "This is not something you learn; it just happens naturally, or it doesn't."

4.ii. Jamaica. *The path of the dead*

At the beginning of the previous section I observed that initiation into the different Afro-Cuban religions is usually designated through consultation but there are cases in which it is marked in other ways. This is often the experience of people who come from, or are related to, a religious context, but there are many variations. A common situation is when a religioso considers that the saints or the dead are expressing their wish that someone be initiated by possessing either the person herself or someone else through whom they make their will clear. There are also cases of children born in abnormal circumstances which a religioso may interpret as meaning that the child 'belongs' to a specific saint; these reports stem mainly from practitioners of Regla Arará. Another possible situation arises when a mother promises her child to a saint while pregnant, after a difficult birth or in return for the cure of a sick infant; such promises often result in the saint's claiming 'the child's head'. In all these cases the individuals know from childhood that they should undergo initiation in a specific religion although sometimes they reject their destiny until something happens that puts them back on the religious path. Predictably, this 'something' is usually connected with experiencing recurrent problems in everyday life, particularly illness.

When Brujería is discussed in the province of Matanzas there are some names that are mentioned with a mix of fear, respect and admiration. Most belong to families with a religious transcendence (*trascendencia religiosa*). Many religiosos use these terms when referring to people or families whose origins are clearly traceable to the African forefathers who created or re-created the various African-inspired (Ochoa 2010)

religions in Cuba. These terms are deeply entwined with two others: *la raíz* (the root) and *el fundamento*. To have a *trascendencia religiosa* entails having an inherent *fundamento*: one that is 'beyond' the self—and often despite the self—and rooted in the ancestors, 'the older people' (*los viejos*), who 'knew the secrets' and were able to 'solve a problem within twenty four hours', which no one can do any longer. Since such people learned to work the religion with *los viejos*, they are considered to possess great knowledge and moreover, to have special gifts and power over life and death. Just by using the power of their *brujo*, only they can perform the three things that can be achieved with *Brujería*: cause a person's death without using a weapon or a traceable poison; make someone mentally ill or even into a zombie;³⁷ and protect an individual so that no harm may come to her.

Papo Angarica and Jamaica are two such names, though they are of different generations and have quite different experiences of, and approaches to, religion. In fact Papo will avoid talking about it altogether where possible, and when he does, he prefers subjects to do with *Espiritismo*, Catholicism and even Greek mythology; he seldom talks about *Santería* and almost never about *Palo*, unless the subject is the medicinal use of herbs and *palos*.³⁸ Jamaica, on the other hand, enjoys discussing religious issues, although mainly with other *religiosos* from whom he considers he has always something new to learn. Yet, despite these and many other crucial differences, they have some interesting things in common. Both come from one of the well known religious families and knew from childhood they had a religious path to follow; both were enthusiastic about *Palo* and much less so about *Santería* and, more importantly, both experienced the same conflict, with the same *orichas*, regarding which one would be seated (*asentado*) in their heads. Both relate that *Ogún* and *Changó* fought over them because both saints claimed their heads and only after an 'agreement' was reached between them could it be decided which one would be crowned or seated

³⁷ Zombie was a term used by *paleros* themselves. Here it is worth remembering the mutual influences between Afro-Cuban religions including *Vodú*. See footnote 12.

³⁸ *Palos* are sticks or branches of trees. In *Reglas de Palo* knowledge about trees (*palos*) and their properties is considered fundamental. Herbs, on the other hand, belong to *Osain*. Although in all Afro-Cuban religions some familiarity with herbs is required, there are *religiosos* called *osainistas* who possess specialized knowledge about them.

(*coronado* or *asentado*). The upshot was that they have to take care of, comply with (*cumplir*) both orichas in the same way, although the experience was completely different for each of them.

Ever since Jamaica was a child ‘things [had] passed through’ him (*pasar por él*), specifically a spirit or *ndoki*³⁹ that had been identified as Sarabanda⁴⁰ by the dead; while ‘riding’ or possessing his grandmother and his mother’s aunt they had told his mother that the *ndoki* possessing her child was Sarabanda and that when Jamaica grew up he had to become a *tata*.⁴¹ There is yet another detail: when Jamaica’s mother was pregnant with him she was about to lose her child but her own mother, while possessed by Changó, wrapped a ‘prepared’ strip around her belly. According to Jamaica, for that reason Changó felt he had rights over him when it came time for him to make the saint; however, when Jamaica was first initiated in Palo his first godfather confirmed that Jamaica had to be initiated (*rayado*)⁴² above Sarabanda. Since his path was to become a *tata* and because, as he phrased it, “If those things pass through you, you have to get *rayado*, so that these things will protect and lead you to get confirmation of them,”⁴³ Jamaica was initiated into Palo when he was fifteen years old.

The first step within Palo is the *rayamiento*, a word loosely translating as ‘scratching’. As with most initiation ceremonies within Afro-Cuban religions, it is secret and only initiated people may participate. Basically, the ceremony consists of some incisions (or scratches) being made on specific parts of the body being initiated using a consecrated knife or razor, which is why the ceremony is called *rayamiento*. This has many

³⁹ *Ndoki* is the name used within Palo for a spirit of the dead.

⁴⁰ Like *Ogún* in *Santería*, *Sarabanda* is the owner of metals and work instruments.

⁴¹ A *tata* is high in the hierarchy of Palo.

⁴² As with ‘make the saint’ (*hacerse santo*), people use the term *rayarse* in the reflexive form, which does not translate as ‘make oneself saint’ or ‘scratch oneself’, in the sense that it is the initiate who performs the ceremony by or to himself. The underlying idea is that the person is the subject of someone else’s actions, someone who has already undergone the necessary ceremonies.

⁴³ Jamaica, like most *paleros*, is often very unspecific when he is talking about the beings of his religion. He usually refers to the dead, the spirits, the *brujos* and sometimes even to the saints as ‘those things’ and ‘my things’ (*mis cosas*), or even ‘[that] which is mine’ (*lo mio*). Moreover, many *religiosos* often use an unspecific language where the word ‘thing’ is constantly employed; this probably has to do with secrecy.

variations, from the instrument used to make the incisions, to the incisions themselves. In some houses they take the form of an elaborate tattoo, in others the scratches are made so that they will disappear after a while and in others no incision at all is made on the person's body. The ritual procedure also varies in terms of how the wound is treated afterwards to make it heal.

The rayamiento is a ceremony that only certain people have to undergo and, like all ceremonies in Afro-Cuban religions, it is designated through the oracles. This must be carefully ascertained, however, because even though it is considered a minor initiation, comparable to recibir guerreros, if the initiate does not really need it, rayamiento might mess up (*salar*) his life to the point that he can be driven to madness. It can be regarded as a minor initiation in as much as it is the first initiation within Palo and because the person's head is not affected, but if performed on someone who does not have it in his path the consequences can be dreadful, comparable to seating the wrong saint in a person's head. In Jamaica's case the rayamiento was explicitly marked by a muerto in the possession of a member of his family. Nevertheless, afterwards he was consulted and it was confirmed that he was to become a tata and therefore he needed first to be rayado. What he asserted in the above quote is that because he was possessed (things passed through him) as a child, he needed to be rayado in order to be both protected by the spirit that possessed him and to begin preparation to be a tata in the future.

Jamaica's first godfather, with whom he was rayado, was someone close to his family and a well known palero at that time, Chinanbele. Jamaica started learning from him about Palo as they travelled together around Cuba, in the course of which Jamaica began to 'open up a world' (*abrise mundo*). This is a phrase frequently used by Jamaica in reference to gaining knowledge, not only in terms of developing as a religioso, but also about people and the actual world. He asserted that when he was young he had to open up the world outside his own home because, despite being born into a religious family, his elders would not teach him, nor any young person for that matter, about religion:

The elders were quite selfish, they were just for themselves; we had to open up a world (*abrirnos mundo*) to become adults, and we had to grow up outside the home because the elders wouldn't help us. They said that this [the religion] was not for children.

All this was happening against the background of the Revolution, years of huge transformation. After the literacy campaign in 1961 other pedagogical programs were launched by the government in order to continue popular education. People who had studied up to the 6th degree were able to become primary school teachers and, after his *rayamiento*, Jamaica joined the Communist Youth in order to become a teacher. He remembers that period as a beautiful time. One of the major economical efforts of the Revolution—*la zafra de los 10 millones* (the harvest of ten million)—was initiated in 1969 with the goal of harvesting ten million tons of sugar cane, an amount unprecedented in the history of sugar production in the country. In order to achieve the target the whole country was mobilized to plant and harvest the cane: the army and hundreds of thousands of volunteers including students, housewives and every kind of professional from academic to artist to cabinet minister participated in the campaign, and so did Jamaica.⁴⁴ About that period he also started to develop as an *espiritista*, and while working in the countryside he met other *espiritistas* who guided him on his path.

When the time arrived Jamaica had to join the army and undergo military service, where he had serious problems with his superiors and was sentenced to five years in prison. Since Jamaica's godfather was in a similar situation his father had to ask his own godfather for help. This was an older man, nicknamed Joseito, who lived in Palmira, a town in the province of Cienfuegos. Joseito visited Jamaica in prison and managed to bring him the things required to cleanse himself (*limpiarse*) and to

⁴⁴ The goal was not reached due to the inexperience of the volunteer cane cutters and a series of catastrophic miscalculations on the part of those responsible for promoting the gargantuan effort. The government then embarked on other campaigns in order to boost the economy.

perform a little *brujería*. Two months later Jamaica was freed and from that moment Jamaica started visiting Joseito every weekend in order to learn about Palo, meanwhile hoping to convince Joseito to prepare him a *cazuela de brujo*.⁴⁵ It took Jamaica some years to convince him because Joseito, like most elders at that time, was insistent that he would not give ‘such things’ to young people. Finally, when Jamaica was about twenty-four years old, he was made a *tata*. More than ten further years passed before he made the saint. Although he knew he had to do it he avoided it as long as he could since he was, and still is, much more engaged with Palo than with *Santería*. It was only after a serious injury that he agreed to it because in his own and his family’s view the injury was a warning from the saints: either he made the saint or he would remain disabled. Jamaica had also avoided making the saint because he wanted to become an *abakuá*, which took place in 1985. But he wanted more than just to belong to the secret society; he wanted to become a *plaza*.

The *Abakuá* secret society is constituted of various groups called *juegos* or *potencias*: quasi-independent organizations that are only accountable to other *juegos*—principally the one from which they were ‘born’—for major decisions. All *juegos* have the same hierarchical structure. There are thirteen high hierarchies or *plazas*, with four chief ones, the kings or *Obones*, which rule each *juego*. The four *Obones*, together with three additional leaders, make up the ‘board’ and the remaining six fulfil other relevant positions. Each *plaza* has its own name and function and the actual organization of each *juego* is complicated: besides there being other, complementary *plazas*, the relevance of each *plaza* changes in different *juegos* (see Cabrera 1958; Sosa Rodríguez 1982). The other members of a *juego* who do not hold a *plaza* are called *abanekues* or *obonekues*, the entry position for all new members. There are initiatory ceremonies to become both an *abanekue* and a *plaza*, but those for *plaza* include ceremonies involving the person’s head; for that reason, if a person wants to become a *plaza*, he has to do it before making saint, which was what Jamaica had in mind. Yet

⁴⁵ A *cazuela de brujo* or *nganga* is the object, generally a kind of pot, wherein the *brujo* lives, and the main source of power in Palo (discussed in greater detail below). Only the *tatas* – or a specially designated person – can work with one.

the position of plaza is a lifelong post; the waiting time to be appointed and approved for one can be a long one; and, as Jamaica suffered his injury only three years after he was initiated as an abanekue, his imminent consecration as a santero made it impossible for him ever to become a plaza. In his view the orichas did not want this for him; indeed, after making the saint he was forbidden to participate in any further Abakuá meeting or *plante*.

When finally he was about to undergo the ceremony of asiento de santo another problem arose: Changó disputed his head with Ogún. This happened during a consultation with a babalawo in Havana. Up to that moment Jamaica had been possessed by Sarabanda, corresponding to Ogún in Palo; he and his family had always thought that his guardian angel was Ogún but during that consultation Changó appeared to claim his head. It was then that Jamaica discovered that Changó felt that he had rights over his person because he had saved his life when his mother was pregnant with him. One of the babalawos present proposed to 'make him' Obbatalá, the owner of all heads, solving in that way the dispute between the two saints. However, a more experienced babalawo proposed to offer Changó a deal: Jamaica would be consecrated to Ogún but he had to provide Changó with exactly the same attentions as Ogún; for instance, if Jamaica were to make an offering or sacrifice to Ogún he had to make an equivalent one for Changó. On that condition, Changó eventually relinquished Jamaica's head.

While Ogún is portrayed as a warrior *par excellence*, although a victim of his own temper and with a fondness for alcohol, Changó is depicted as a womanizer, the owner of drums, music and parties. In Jamaica's view it was because both these saints had influence over his person and were fighting over his head that he was constantly in troubles during his youth: a heavy drinker and a womanizer, he was often involved in fights, even being stabbed a few times. It was only after he made the saint that he started the process of settling down.

4.iii. Papo Angarica. A path from suspicion

The story of Papo Angarica must be told in a different way.

When I met him Papo Angarica was eighty-two years old and getting over a stroke. He did not remember the exact dates of many details of his life including those of his initiations except for the date when he made the saint: 19th December 1961. Prior to that, his narrative is confused. Yet the confusion is not simply because he jumps from subject to subject while telling a story, or because he might be losing his memory; rather, one gets the feeling that he wants it to be that way. Being an old and prestigious religioso many people from all over the world have come to his house over the years seeking religious knowledge. But he feels alone. Even though he lives with his wife and his youngest child, he feels he has been deserted by his older sons, many of whom are also well known religiosos, and by his godchildren. He has experienced considerable disenchantment during his life and is therefore very cautious with new people. Moreover, he has a hot temper and mercurial mood swings, easily switching from anger to amiability and back in a very short space of time.

When recounting his involvement with religion one strand of his story is concerned with his difficult childhood: even when quite young he instigated so much trouble that he was on the point of being sent to a children's rehabilitation centre when a santera elder told his mother what his problems were caused by:

the saint, the dead and the brujo. The saint says that he has to be made saint, the dead says this and the brujo says that... His head cannot bear all that. His head needs to be prepared so that first one thing can be done and then the other.

Papo claimed that at that time he used to laugh about espiritistas and santeros, and that he was only keen on the brujo because of the music, the aguardiente⁴⁶ and the festive atmosphere.

Another strand of the story is that as a young man he did not believe in anything supernatural: neither in religion nor in non-human beings. After the death of his mother-in-law, his wife started seeing and hearing her deceased family members, including her mother and, while he could not believe that she could see and hear what he could not, she was very distressed and eventually he decided to take her to a spiritual centre. While waiting for her outside the room where a spiritual mass was taking place, a participant told him that she could see a being standing next to him that was saying that he would “pass through him”. Papo answered, “Since you can see it, please tell it to pass whenever he wants!” He adds that nothing passed through him besides the fact that his wife felt better after her visit, so he accompanied her again the following week. Once again he remained outside but this time he took hold of a bunch of flowers and started to hit people with it, which caused them to become possessed. He also started saying things to them like: “Such and such is happening to you,” or, “You are experiencing this or that problem.” He maintains that in all this he was just playing around, saying whatever came into his head. Afterwards, however, people started to look out for him, hoping that he would predict ‘things’ for them too and, gradually, he started to be known as espiritista. Some time after that, while participating in a ritual festivity, he started shaking and lost consciousness. For the first time he was possessed.

All these events happened in his late teens and early twenties and he talks about them freely. He also tells many stories about his initiation as a santero. But there is a gap of almost twenty years during which he was rayado and became a tata, a period he avoids in his story-telling, except for an anecdote about when people began calling him Papo Diablo. The nickname was given to him by a well known santero of the time,

⁴⁶ A drink made from sugarcane, aguardiente has a high alcohol content (usually 40%).

apparently because although many trabajos (acts of witchcraft, in this case) were ‘sent’ against him, he remained unaffected. Papo counters that he always found *el daño*⁴⁷ and was able to counteract it.

In many conversations, he maintained that as a young man he had not wanted to become a santero, although he stresses that Ogún himself taught him about religion and about palos and their properties. When people came to ‘consult themselves’ (consultarse) with him Ogún would tell Papo what had to be done to solve the person’s problem; moreover, Ogún used to possess him. When eventually he decided that he would make the saint he started to create the conditions to make Ogún. Although the ritual ceremonies of the asiento de santo follow a common pattern there are significant variations according to the saint that is to be made. Highly relevant for the person who will undergo the ceremony is that each saint has its particular attributes, colours and food preferences which the person needs to take into account, along with those of the other saints that are commonly received with the head oricha; plus there are specific clothes to be worn on the various days that the whole ritual lasts, and animals to be sacrificed.⁴⁸ There are many other details that make the asiento specific for each saint, some of which the future initiate does not necessarily know about in advance. When at the last minute it is discovered that the oricha to be made is not the one for which the person has prepared, it is obviously very distressing, although less because of the material requirements than because of the implications it has for the initiate.

When Papo was ready to undergo the asiento he started seeing and dreaming constantly of a different oricha, Changó. As he recalls,

I saw Changó everywhere. I saw myself seated on Changó’s pedestal (*pilón*); if I felt asleep I would dream of Changó; when I was awake I saw Changó; if I closed my eyes there he was! I thought that I was about to go mad!

⁴⁷ A daño is a specific kind of trabajo made with the purpose of harming a person.

⁴⁸ For detailed accounts of this see Brown 2003; Mason 2002.

As Papo explained, the issue was that Changó was claiming his head but Ogún had raised him and would not allow Changó to take his son away. His godfather decided to go to Havana to see a babalawo, Guillermo Castro, in order to get Orula's definitive verdict. When Castro first saw them he was distressed; he thought that they had come in order to test him. Papo's godfather had to explain that they were there in order to confirm which saint had to be crowned in his godchild's head, because, "Ogún dances that head and he does it for real."⁴⁹ The babalawo was upset because both Papo and his godfather belong to families with a *trascendencia religiosa*. Papo's godfather was Sixto Fumeiro, a recognized santero who was consecrated and taught by the Africans⁵⁰ themselves and, as already noted, Papo comes from a prestigious family of religiosos; merely mentioning the Angarica name among Afro-Cuban religiosos is, even today, enough to wake their respect and awe.

Reassured by Fumeiro's account, the babalawo consulted Orula about the matter. Orula's answer was, "*Maferefún Changó*" (Changó is to be made). Despite this pronouncement, they still had to perform many ceremonies in order to convince Ogún to renounce his son. Eventually, they offered Ogún the same deal which, years later, was offered to Changó in Jamaica's case: Papo had to worship and care for both saints in the same way. Only after this compromise would Ogún give him up—and Papo Angarica was finally crowned with Changó.

The question about what, precisely, the various initiations entail for the initiate will be discussed in the following chapters, focusing on those which forge the person as a particular and unique 'individual'. But such a discussion still needs what Afro-Cuban religiosos would call a *fundamento*—a foundation on which to build further

⁴⁹ "Ogún *baila esa cabeza y la baila de verdad.*" Papo was in fact possessed by Ogún.

⁵⁰ Sometimes Papo would even speak of his godfather as African. This is just possible but not very plausible since the last slave ships to arrive in Cuba were in the 1870s (Brandon 1993). Fumeiro would then have had to be over 80 years old when he made saint to Papo and also live a few more years in order to teach him and to share the experiences that Papo relates. Besides, Papo maintains that he has lived to a greater age than all his godfathers.

understanding—which in my opinion is to be found in Afro-Cuban religious cosmology. This is the subject of the following chapter.

CHAPTER TWO. THE OTHERS

1. The sorcerer, the saint and all that.

*El brujo y el santo y todo eso es la misma cosa, pero es distinto...*⁵¹
(Papo Angarica)

As discussed in the previous chapter, people do not choose a religious path of their own free will; it is something dictated by the will of others: ‘immaterial’ others that either wander the world—in the case of the dead and spirits; or own certain of its objects, places or natural phenomena, as saints. This chapter concerns these other beings that determine whether a person has a religious path they must follow: what they are; the circumstances in which they manifest their will; the variations entailed in this and the ways in which a human’s will is shaped as a result.

I engage first with the *muerto* and then with the saints, attending, meanwhile, to further subtle distinctions made by Afro-Cuban religiosos. Among *muertos* the main divide is between the *muerto sano* (the healthy or harmless dead) and the *muerto oscuro* (the dark dead), an important division as it defines two different religions: Espiritismo, which works with the former and Palo, which works with the latter. Moreover, both categories of *muertos* encompass a multiplicity of beings, each of which is understood as possessing a will of its own and relating to humans in particular ways. Saints likewise comprise a wide range of beings which are divided by religiosos mainly on the basis of how they relate to humans: either to a community—often a family—or to the individual.

2. The *muerto sano* (healthy dead)

⁵¹ “The sorcerer, the saint and all that is the same, but different.”

*El que tiene que desarrollar el muerto y no lo hace, se atrasa.*⁵²

(Piyuya – a santero informant)

Afro-Cuban religiosos have incorporated the understanding from Espiritismo that everyone is born with an attendant multiplicity of spirits to guide them through life. Espiritistas divide this *cordón espiritual* (spiritual cord) into two sets: the *guías espirituales* (spiritual guides) and the *guías protectores* (protector guides). The former are spirits that belong to one's own personal story and past and are, therefore, always deceased kin: mother, father, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, grandparents, great-grandparents and the like. Among them there is always one that is considered to be *encargado* (in charge) of the cordón and is sometimes called *guía protector* (protector guide, in the singular). This is usually the spirit of a family member who died at a mature age, as Yoel, one of the espiritistas I worked with, explained it: "The guía protector is always an adult who has had experience in life, so that he can guide you in your life." This personal guía protector is not to be confused with the set of spirits who are also called *guías protectores* (in the plural) who are not related to the person by any bond of kin or affinity; on the contrary, the *guías protectores* are thought to be from a different land and ethnicity than those whom they protect: Indios (indigenous people from the Americas), Arabs, Haitians, Africans, Congos (from the area around the Congo River), or Gypsies.⁵³ However, they can also be from unspecified places and are then referred to by their occupation: nuns, doctors, scientists and so forth. Each person is considered to have seven *guías protectores* among whom there is usually *un desconocido* (an unknown), so called because nothing is known about his or her nationality or profession. El desconocido is often one of the two orichas which are conceived to number among both the dead and the saints simultaneously: either Oyá

⁵² "Those who have to develop the dead and don't do it are held back in life."

⁵³ These are the main groups which have immigrated to Cuba or who were indigenous. When I asked for other nationalities the common answer was that they were too known to be a guía protector. A special case is that of 'Chinese' people (in Cuba any oriental person is referred to as Chinese). Although there was a great migration from China to Cuba, mainly in the form of indentured labour (Lachatañeré 2007: 251–252, Guanche 1983), they are excluded from the cordones espirituales as they are considered to practise a powerful form of religion which is feared by most Afro-Cuban religiosos. The usual, generally held opinion was that to have a Chinese spirit as part of one's cordón was not an option ("¿Estas loca? tener un chino atrás!").

or San Lázaro. As with the guías espirituales, there is one spirit among the guías protectores that is ‘in charge’ of the rest and that is also called el guía protector. A person can be possessed by either of the two main guías protectores, but also, though less frequently, by any of the guías espirituales or protectores.

A personal cordón espiritual is, however, more complex than that. The guías protectores are not precisely bounded entities; each is connected to and represents a larger group of spirits called a *comisión*. As Espiritu Santo properly maintains: “a *comisión* contains all those beings that have historically—through their lives—become a part of it, by way of identity, ethnicity, profession, religious affiliation, or even cause of death” (2009: 103). In addition, espiritistas believe that a person has also a ‘guardian angel’—the oricha that rules over a person’s head. Consequently, people are not only under the influence of an ever unfolding multiplicity of beings but, as they develop within Espiritismo, they get to know them and to channel the will of all these beings while they also learn the inverse process: that of channelling their own wills through that of the main guías protectores.

As already noted, these spirits are conceived of as wandering this world because they have not fulfilled their ‘mission’ while alive; since they have an aim or a mission to fulfil, they possess a will (*voluntad*), but this can only be exerted through the medium of humans. Consequently, spirits are perceived as choosing certain people who will actually perform their will, people who are thought to possess a special don (gift) or virtud (virtue); they have what Cubans call a *medio unidad*: they can feel, hear or see the dead. Having such a gift, however, can often be quite distressing.

Imagine a little child playing by herself with an old doll; imagine this doll telling her to protect her parents from future misfortunes. Imagine the reaction of a father when his small child tells him not to do something he has done or he wants to do. Imagine that nothing extraordinary happens to the father that day or the following days. But the child keeps ‘hearing’ warnings that she is afraid of repeating to her father ... Eventually a misfortune happens

in the family precisely as the child had warned her father it would. For him it is a coincidence.

Imagine that other 'coincidences' take place. Sometimes the child starts saying whatever comes to her mind and she knows someone is putting these thoughts there and she feels frightened; adults think she is talking nonsense. After a while the unexpected visitor does appear; the numbers she had predicted win a prize in the lottery; or the neighbour's son has an accident ... Eventually, her mother takes her to see an espiritista. The child is asked to sit in front of a glass of water and wait; for her it is a punishment. After sitting for a while – which feels like forever – she starts to feel 'something' in her little body. She becomes afraid. She feels that her head is becoming bigger and bigger. She starts to cry; she just wants to go home.

This is Nona's story. She knew from childhood that her path was to be an espiritista, but she could not help others. Sometimes she would tell her father what she 'felt' and not her mother, as she was instructed to do, but her father did not take her 'warnings' seriously. She was scared by her thoughts and by what she felt. When her mother finally became aware that her child was a medium she tried to help Nona develop that medio unidad, but Nona could not overcome her fears. She would not allow the dead to 'come' and the espiritista could not help her. One day the only spirit of which Nona was not afraid, the girl who talked to her through her doll, told her that she would no longer come and play, that she would go away, because Nona would not help her mother, nor do or say what she told her to.

Nowadays, Nona is over eighty years old. She knows that her life would have been different if she had developed as a medium. But, as she put it:

It was something I had to do myself. I had to be able to say: taca, taca, taca, taca; talk to people, as I'm talking to you. But I didn't feel what I was told to say, so why should I say such things? I was a child and I was scared. I'm still

scared of the dead. I have blocked myself (*me tranquilé*). I never had any money, or anything I wanted. I was held back in life.

Because she was unable to channel the will of the spirits that chose her, Nona lost her *virtud* and with it the possibility to determine and perform her own will. As she expressed it, she “was held back in life”. This is, of course, just one example; Matanzas is full of cases of people who did manage to channel the will of the spirits, develop their *virtud* and become renowned *espiritistas*. Furthermore, it is not always the case that it is the *muerto* or the spirits that look for and locate people able to perform their will. Frequently it might be the person who seeks out a *muerto* in order to be able to extensively enact and exert their own human will. This is the case in Palo or, as many people call it, *el brujo*.

3. El brujo

*El brujo es un espíritu materializado, el brujo tiene 50 cosas que se hacen para materializarlo.*⁵⁴

(Papo Angarica)

The *brujo* has already been introduced as an entity created by a *palero*: a *muerto* that was transformed into something else and that works at the will of the *palero* or *brujero*. But, what precisely is that something else? And why would a *muerto* agree to work for a human? In my view, the concept of the *brujo* is one of the most complex within Afro-Cuban religions, and it is so not only because it encompasses different beings and processes but because practically every *brujero* explains and uses it in a different way. The term *brujo* is even used to refer to the *Regla de Palo* in general, as well as to a particular object—or an assembly of objects—with which the entity is deeply entangled, although the set of objects is also known as a *nganga*, *prenda* or

⁵⁴ *El brujo* is a materialized spirit. There are 50 things to be done to materialize it.

cazuela, interchangeable terms occasionally replaced by others, such as *caldera*, simply meaning cauldron, and the usual form of the container for the assembly of objects.

3.i. *The prenda / nganga / cazuela*

According to Palmié,

Bantu-Cuban *nganga* objects are New World variants of a western Central African type of *sacra* known in Kikongo ... as *minkisi* (sing. *nkisi*). Just like Kongo *minkisi*, Afro-Cuban *ngangas* are highly complex aggregates of heterogeneous materials the conjunction of which is thought both to contain a spiritual presence and to render its power ... accessible to human manipulation. (2002: 168; italics in the original)

The *nganga / prenda* is a vessel, often of iron, containing a range of *palos* (sticks) and all sorts of highly disparate elements: pieces of metal; the remains of sacrificed animals—feathers, blood, bones—and old toys, necklaces, bits of chain, knives, machetes. This is what one can see, but however impressive the contents of a *nganga* might be, it is their smell which is overwhelming. *Paleros* often have more than one *nganga*, all of which are usually placed in a room (*el cuarto de fundamento*) of their own or, where possible, outside the house in a kind of shed built for that purpose. Although some *paleros* like to show off their *prendas*, often as a way of impressing people, most are very cautious since potential enemies could take advantage of the knowledge thus gained. Furthermore, precautions must be taken with all visitors. Generally, upon being invited to see a *prenda*, I was first asked whether I was having my period. Trusting someone to the point of allowing her to see this most precious possession presupposes a level of familiarity that would allow a *palero* to ask about menstruation. *Ngangas* are fed with blood and it is considered that if a woman is menstruating she might be in danger in their presence. Indeed, it is precisely the smell of the sacrificed animals, bits of which are usually left in the *prenda* to decompose, which is so powerful. *Ngangas* are not just objects or a compendium of objects; they

are 'alive', inasmuch as they have a will of their own, and need to 'eat' in order to keep up their strength; the smell of blood in el cuarto de fundamento can awake their lust for it (see Palmié 2002: 173, 333 note 28). Even if at first sight a prenda appears to be a disparate combination of things, each of its elements has been carefully selected and is there according to a specific tratado (see below). They are regarded by some paleros as the 'house' of the brujo, whereas for others they are the brujo itself. Whatever the case might be, most paleros will argue that for ngangas to work, they need to have a 'heart', and that heart is a muerto.

As we have seen, muertos and spirits have wills of their own in Afro-Cuban cosmology and will often select a person with whom to work, as is the case with Espiritismo; if not, potential brujeros must find a muerto for themselves and, moreover, then convince it to work with and for them. According to paleros there are a number of different ways to find a muerto: it might simply be picked up in the streets or it might become attached (*pegado*) to someone because it has been sent to do harm. In the latter case the future palero, often with the help of a godfather, might convince the muerto to change sides. Probably the most common way for a palero to find a muerto, however, is by going to a cemetery and convincing one to work for him. The fact that it is considered possible to do this is a hallmark of Palo and has important implications (discussed below).

Here it is important to emphasise that Palo is a highly individualistic religion. Practically every palero practices it in an idiosyncratic way. There are of course certain general principles, but variations are the rule rather than the exception. Indeed, Katerina Kerestetzi (2011) claims that Palo is defined by its fluidity and innovation, noting that its practice is reinvented in the intimacy of el cuarto de fundamento where the ngangas are stored. I argue, on the other hand, that Palo is constantly reinvented or re-created at every ritual and most—including initiation—are performed outside the cuarto de fundamento. These variations respond to a logic that Palo shares with all Afro-Cuban religions, but for now, it is enough to stress that they primarily depend upon the way in which knowledge is acquired, in which the muertos play a

fundamental role as they are deemed to teach their palero about particular ritual procedures. Consequently, each practitioner receives different forms of knowledge. Besides, many paleros also seek to learn with as many teachers as possible—usually with older brujeros (los viejos)—then apply what they have learned according to what the muerto tells them. Inevitably, their knowledge and practice of ritual becomes an idiosyncratic re-composition and deployment of what they have learned from different sources. It is, therefore, difficult to find two paleros who use the same ritual procedures, which seems to be a contradiction in terms. However, some basic steps and norms that the neophyte learns through his godfather are usually followed, unless otherwise ordered by the muerto.

Another reason for the highly individualistic nature of Palo is the role that secrecy plays within it. For instance, the effectiveness of the palero's work (in this case witchcraft) is often ascribed to the secret and idiosyncratic procedures of each bruero. In fact, brujeros are the most evasive of Afro-Cuban religiosos and most prone to avoid speaking openly and directly about their practices. In order to comply with their values—and honour their trust—the following accounts will be kept anonymous and, in some cases, I use their allusive language to avoid disclosing details, often echoing their repetitive use of 'thing' (cosa) to refer to a wide range of elements in the religion.

As noted above, all ngangas need a muerto which is thought to govern or dominate them. Since, according to Afro-Cuban cosmology, *el espíritu entra por lo material* (the spirit enters through the material),⁵⁵ something of the dead person must be stored in the prenda through which the spirit can be called and thus enter this world. That 'something' is a subject of dispute among brujeros and moreover, it has been—and still is—the cause of recurrent legal accusations against them for alleged involvement in criminal activities. As one bruero told me:

⁵⁵ This is a variation of Papo's own phrasing.

In the past it was usual to take the skull of the muerto, but nowadays you can easily go to prison for that. Instead, you have to go to a cemetery and bury a stone in the grave you want. You need to leave the stone there for a while so that it takes the strength. You prepare the stone with certain things so that it can call the muerto, so the one who wants to can ‘take possession’ of it.

Whether the prenda contains the skull or the bones of a corpse, or a specially prepared stone of which the muerto has ‘taken possession’ (*apropiarse*), in the religiosos’ view, as Joel James observes, “the bones are there because of the deceased own will” (2006: 33). In other words, the muerto has accepted the tratado offered to him.

3.ii. *El tratado* (the pact)

The word tratado is used by religiosos to denote various meanings. When referring to the arrangement between a religioso and a muerto discussed above, it suggests a pact or agreement (see James 2009: 33-44; Palmié 2002: 167). The term is also used in other Afro-Cuban religions such as Santería with similar connotations but applied to the saints as well as to the mythical stories or patakie which are often presented as explanations for specific ritual procedures. A common saying is thus, “*Eso tiene su tratado*” (it has its own tratado), which is often a way to elude providing further explanations to the non-initiated—unless of course the details of the tratado in question are given. The idea of the tratado therefore entails the possession of religious knowledge and its performance as well as the agreement that can be reached with other beings as a result.

Before the future bruero can leave the cemetery with the bones or the stone, he has to convince the muerto to go with him. That is the first part of the tratado. In order to convince the muerto, the neophyte—often with the help of a godfather—has to explain to the muerto what he wants from him and, more importantly, something has to be offered in return for his services. This is often food (*comida*), mostly in the form of animal sacrifice, but that is not the only alternative. The muerto of a prenda will

also 'eat' palos and certain plants and roots. In certain cases, as reported by Palmié, they are fed with human blood and even with cocaine, "not only to enhance the spirit's vigilance, but to bind him ever more closely into a relation of dependency" (Palmié 2002: 173), as was the practice of a drug dealing bruero in Miami. Once the muerto has accepted the pact, the prospective bruero still has to pay for what he has taken from the cemetery. This payment is made by leaving some coins in the grave where the corpse is resting. In that way the first part of the tratado is sealed.

Now, after the spirit of a dead has been taken, a different kind of tratado has to be made. A prenda has to be built. Here is where knowledge becomes relevant. The source of that knowledge can be the muerto itself, who might tell the future bruero how to prepare the prenda, or an experienced bruero who will do it for the neophyte. In the former situation, it is still often the case that at some point the person has to turn to an experienced practitioner, perhaps to confirm that his prenda is properly constructed, but mostly to arrange its ritual consecration as a tata nganga. The bruero has to place the bones of the muerto or the stone that was appropriated by the spirit inside the prenda. Then he has to call the muerto by the name he had as a living person, let us say, for instance, Juan Pérez. Knowing the muerto's name is very important because he will work only when addressed by his own name. This can be found in the cemetery registries, or the muerto might disclose it by possessing either the bruero himself or a medium at a spiritual mass. This name is only known to the owner of the prenda and his close religious kin.

Each prenda is thought to belong to, or to be part of, one of the beings that are worshipped in Palo. Such beings are called *nfumbies*⁵⁶ or, more precisely, *mpungos* (Barnet 1983; James 2009). Each nfumbi has a particular name, and each is understood to have a particular character and to own certain elements and places. Some of the most popular nfumbies in Cuba are Sarabanda, Siete Rayos, Madre de Agua and

⁵⁶ This was the term I heard more often during my fieldwork, while mpungo was rarely used. However, the common way in which paleros referred to their beings was by using their specific names or the Spanish word *espíritu* (spirit). According to Palmié nfumbi "derives from Kikongo: *mvundi*, 'corpse'" (2002: 332, note 14)

Lucero, among others. Relevant to this are the ‘correspondences’ Afro-Cuban religiosos have established between Palo nfumbies and Santería’s orichas; they say, for instance, that Sarabanda corresponds to Ogún, or that Lucero corresponds to Eleguá (see Barnet 1983: 226-228; Lachatañeré 2007: 276-287). Moreover, they attribute to their nfumbies the character and other characteristics of the orichas and sometimes they even use the name of the oricha to explain how a prenda of a particular nfumbi is constructed.

It would seem there are two different spirits in each prenda: the muerto—for example, Juan Pérez—and a nfumbi. This picture gets complicated when paleros further explain that a single nganga might contain many spirits, but this is the outcome of a different tratado. In the example with which I am concerned now, the first muerto, Juan Pérez, whose bones are in the prenda and who is said to govern her, ‘takes the path’ of a specific nfumbi, such as Sarabanda, when the tratado is completed. To that end, the brujo has to add particular things that belong to the nfumbi: particular palos, and objects such as knives and machetes in the case of Sarabanda, for instance. Next, he has to sacrifice an animal that is thought to be preferred by Sarabanda and leave it in the prenda for a number of days. The way in which paleros refer to this process is very telling: either they say, “I gave her a Sarabanda path,” or, “I made a Sarabanda.”⁵⁷ The former option suggests that all prendas share common elements and that they only become specific to a nfumbi by giving them something representing that nfumbi. When I asked how the prenda was given a Sarabanda path the answer was usually something like, “By placing Ogún’s stuff there.” Here of course one needs to know what this ‘stuff’ of Ogún’s is.⁵⁸

The idea of ‘giving a path’ to a prenda also hints at the notion that nfumbies are not fixed entities but, rather—as if this world were a path—they ‘become’ by moving along it. This resonates with Holbraad’s idea of orichas as motions: “Ifá divinities are to be conceived of neither as individual entities, nor as relations, but rather as motions”

⁵⁷ In Spanish: “*Le dí camino de Sarabanda,*” or, “*Hice un Sarabanda.*”

⁵⁸ As mentioned, particularities of one religion are often explained in terms of another.

(2007: 209). This idea is underpinned by the second way in which paleros phrased the making of a nganga: “I made a Sarabanda,” by which it appears that nfumbies can be ‘made’. It follows, therefore, that if nfumbies are ‘made’ then they do not exist prior to the making and, furthermore, that they can be made countless times. Although this last conclusion is a tempting idea, it is not fully accurate for at least two reasons: the first is the precise way in which paleros express the idea. What they say is, “*Hice un Sarabanda*,” using the indefinite article ‘un’, and not, “*Hice Sarabanda*.” In fact, the being / nfumbi Sarabanda cannot be *made* because he exists for paleros independently of the prendas to the extent that he can take possession of certain people, as was the case with Jamaica.⁵⁹ What is made in order to animate a nganga is a specific and unique path for Sarabanda that exists in this world only as something that belongs to and becomes constitutive of the bruero himself as *mis cosas* (my own things) or *lo mío* (that which is mine).

In fact, for Sarabanda fully to be in this world as the unique path of a bruero, he needs the spirit of an actual dead person; he has to be merged or ‘crossed’ (*cruzado*) with a *muerto*, *giving the muerto knowledge*. For that purpose, the bruero has to talk to Juan Pérez and explain, among other things, why he is in the nganga and, again, what he will receive in exchange; this is called ‘*darle conocimiento*’, (giving the muerto knowledge). Finally, a definitive ceremony has to be performed; the bruero has to add some secret things—those fifty things that Papo mentioned—which are thought to provide the prenda with *potencia* (potency, strength, power). When the whole process is completed, what the bruero has brought into the world and what can be made countless times is not the nfumbi itself—Sarabanda, for example—but a unique, powerful, and individual being: the brujo. The brujo is thus many things; he is the compendium of everything which is inside the prenda / nganga; and also the new being that came into existence when Sarabanda was actualized in this world through the matter and the spirit of Juan Pérez and became not just Sarabanda, and not just

⁵⁹ If understood as motions, when nfumbies possess someone’s body they would be undergoing a process of “ontological transformation ... from relatively transcendent forms to relatively immanent ones” as Holbraad (2010: 185) argues for divinities in Ifá during consultation.

Juan Pérez, but, for instance, “Sarabanda *vira mundo* etc., etc., etc.,” (Sarabanda turns the world etc., etc., etc.). As with every newborn, when a brujo comes into the world, he receives a name, one that encompasses that of the nfumbi—Sarabanda in this example—his particular path, here *vira mundo*, followed by “etc., etc., etc.” indicating information which is only known by the palero himself and which possibly includes the name of Juan Pérez, the muerto that governs the prenda of this example. Keeping the last part of his name secret is the main guarantee that the brujo will only work at his creator’s bidding. The tratado to make a brujo, then, is not just a pact with a muerto that entails particular knowledge and its practical performance; rather, it is an act of creation and of definition of a newborn being—the brujo—and a new kind of person—the brujero.⁶⁰

From what has been said, it would be easy to conclude that the muerto, the nfumbi, and the prenda / nganga are all different entities that, put together by someone with the appropriate knowledge—a brujero—produces a new brujo. However, such a picture would distort the complex ontologies of each of the component beings. In fact, within Palo, each of them not only ‘is’ in relation to each other, but they also ‘are’ each other. The palero’s muerto is not only the spirit of a dead person, but is also that spirit amalgamated (*cruzado*) with that of a particular nfumbi; meanwhile, he is also the prenda. Without the prenda the muerto would not have the *potencia* (strength or power) to effect something in this world. The nfumbi without a muerto would be an undefined being confined to performing on a limited number of occasions through possession. The nganga without a muerto *cruzado* with a nfumbi would be just a collection of palos and ‘things’; she would not have a heart, feelings, a soul, a life beaten into her, a will; she simply would not ‘work’. The brujo is the muerto, the spirit, the nfumbi, the palos, stones, earth, chains, and every single thing which is in the prenda, as he is something else inside the prenda. Various sources described this to me in various, apparently conflicting ways: “In the brujo’s cauldron there is always a spirit, he is the nganga’s spirit. That spirit is (*está*) in the nganga, but he always comes

⁶⁰ See the following chapter.

(*está*) with me wherever I go.” But, at the same time, the brujo, the muerto, or the spirit is not in the prenda: “The spirit is never in the prenda, the spirit is always roaming about; you have to call him. The soul is never enclosed; no one can lock in (*encerrar*) the soul.” Or, “The muerto can’t be inside the brujo, because if the brujo were taken, your brujo would have been taken. The muerto has to be inside you.” It is the norm to encounter discrepancies and inconsistencies in brujeros’ accounts of their knowledge and practice but this is such a major contradiction that it is hard to imagine how it might be resolved. However, the last informant amplified his explanation somewhat on a different occasion:

They⁶¹ are inside me sometimes but other times they are there in the cazuela. If they were inside me all the time, with all that *carga* [heavy load, power], I would die; I couldn’t live, because they are not natural things. People have houses, don’t they? That—the prenda—is their house, the cazuela is where they... They rest in there, and when they are going to eat they go there, most of the time they are there. This is why you have to prepare it and do all these things.

3.iii. *El tratado del esclavo y el verdugo (The pact of the slave and the executioner)*.

As noted above, a nganga might contain more than one muerto, in which case it becomes what brujeros call *el tratado del esclavo y el verdugo* (the pact of the slave and the executioner). Paleros often speak of their muertos as slaves.⁶² The idea is that the more slaves or servants a person has, the more work, and of more diverse kinds, can be achieved; with such a principle in mind paleros may seek to have as many muertos as possible working for them. As we saw, however, before muertos can work, a full tratado has to be performed. When a palero establishes a tratado with new

⁶¹ He is referring to the brujo. He speaks in plural because he has more than one brujo.

⁶² See below. For an insightful historical analysis of the relation between Palo and slavery see Palmié 2002, Chapter II.

muertos either each one becomes a new brujo or they can be added to an existent nganga. In the latter case those muertos will take the path of the nfumbi that owns the nganga—Sarabanda in the example discussed above—taking his potencia and residing and eating there; in short they will become part of that particular nganga.

But, since the nganga was made for and with Juan Pérez, the first muerto, the palero must rely on him to add the other muertos. This is an offer that the first muerto is unlikely to reject since all subsequent muertos will become not only slaves of the palero but also of Juan Pérez. Thereafter, most of the work will be accomplished by the new slaves and the palero will trouble Juan Pérez only with work that he considers especially difficult. It is up to the first muerto to decide who has to accomplish each task. As paleros have it, the first muerto commands inside the prenda:⁶³ “He is the guy. You have to rely on him for everything.”

While it is fairly clear what the term esclavo refers to in this kind of tratado, the referent for verdugo is less obvious. Although it seems that the most recently added slave plays the role of the executioner because he is the one who executes the orders, this could also be filled by the palero himself since he gives the orders in the first place and even, for that matter, by the original muerto who commands inside the prenda.

3.iv. The will of the brujo

Probably one of the most ambiguous issues in Palo concerns the voluntad (will) of the brujo. On the one hand, as I just mentioned, he is regarded, and treated, as a slave who works at his master's will. On the other, he is invested with a will of his own in as much as the brujero has to rely on him. In fact, every single time that the brujero

⁶³ Here the structures of slavery prevalent in the sugar plantations are reproduced. The first muerto would act as the *mayoral*: a slave selected by the master of the plantation, whose job is to command other slaves and make sure that they accomplish their work. For a detailed account of slavery in the sugar plantations see Moreno Fraginals 1978.

wants to work with the brujo, he has to ask him explicitly whether or not he will undertake the task:

When I ask him to solve a problem he answers either yes or no: only two words. If his answer is no, I say to the person: “Don’t get mad at me, I can’t resolve your problem; the brujo is telling me that he can’t do it and I’m not going *menoscabar* (to discredit) myself and waste your time. I’m not the one who solves problems; I work out the task, but the one who resolve is the brujo. So, you better go to see somebody else.” Now, if he says yes, it is yes. He can’t betray me because I live for him, he is my life. He can’t embarrass me or make a fool of me. When his answer is yes you can be sure that he is going to ‘resolver’.

The fact that the brujo is considered a slave is of course no coincidence, as Palmié observes: “Many of the ritual activities associated with the activation of Afro-Cuban *ngangas* resonate with allusions to a history of New World slavery” (2002: 175). Moreover, he also maintains that “the Afro-Cuban *nganga* complex condense[s] historical experiences, not only of control and brutalization, but of resistance and violent retaliation as well” (Palmié 2002: 176). Much as “the Afro-Cuban *nganga* complex” condenses historical experiences, it also condenses the major paradox of slavery: being denied their human condition, slaves were regarded as objects, as commodities (see Moreno Friginals 1978; Palmié 2002). But here, I argue, the paradox is inverted: instead of objectifying human beings, objects become humanized and endowed with souls and wills. Conceiving the new being, the brujo, as a slave, reinvests slaves with their denied human condition; from this perspective the brujo represents a way of coming to terms with historical predicaments.

The fact that paleros work with a created entity points to a crucial difference between Palo and other Afro-Cuban religions. Espiritistas and santeros conceive of themselves as working with beings that are thought to be in this world regardless of whether they receive human acknowledgement or not. Practicing Espiritismo is about developing a

personal relationship with such beings—muertos—while initiation in el santo is about making, seating or crowning a saint or oricha in one's head (to be discussed in more detail in the following chapter), although, as one old santera claimed: "Actually, we don't make a saint, we just crown it." Paleros, on the other hand, work with beings that they themselves have created. As noted by one informant: "The brujo is something you make according to your own will and you can take it to any extreme you want." This is not the case with the saints or with muertos sanos. Since muertos sanos have wills of their own they will first value human wishes and then only grant what they consider right or good. Moreover, they are answerable to a supreme being, God, who will eventually accept or reject what they grant to humans. Both espiritistas and santeros see themselves as working towards good ends and with God, yet their workings have an ingrained network of procedures, which I call 'the bureaucracy of good', that makes the good elusive. A religious elder expressed it as follows:

The saint is the highest religious rank but it works slower [than the brujo]. When I do some work in Santería I have to ask X saint, and he has to ask Y and Y has to ask Z and so forth until it arrives with God; then one has to keep on waiting for the authorization to come back through all these steps; one has to wait for all these people who want to resolve a problem for you ... This is why humans had to create the brujo, to exert their will.

The last sentence is very telling. The brujo, unlike most Afro-Cuban entities, provides its human creators the option to exert their own wills and to enact them in the here and now. But, in order to do that, they need a powerful being on their side, a being with a potencia that humans lack, without preconceptions about what is right or wrong, and without an aim or a mission of its own. For that reason a specific muerto is needed to create a brujo, but not any muerto will do it; it must be a muerto oscuro (dark dead). Due to the circumstances of his death or to the type of life he led, a muerto oscuro is attached to this world forever; he will not progress as the muertos sanos do. He is conceived of as having no ambitions, no aims, and no set of values of his own and is therefore free to grant humans what they want without any

consequences beyond becoming of this world and gaining potencia and strength every time he is fed. In my opinion the lack of an aim and therefore of a pre-established set of values is one of the reasons why the brujos' works are ascribed to the Devil—but this is the subject of another chapter.

In as much as the creation of a brujo offers humans the option to perform independently of any pre-established set of values, it can be understood as a step towards self-determination, towards assuming and forging the individual will and towards its actual enactment. Moreover, within Afro-Cuban religions it is not just any step, but rather the first step to be followed—if someone has a religious path that calls for it. As I see it, the reason why it is often said that Palo is 'more primitive' than el santo is precisely because it is about this primal step towards self-determination.

However, being enabled to empower and exert one's own will can be a dangerous process, a view that is probably connected to the enduring human concern with losing perspective through an excess of power. It involves a risk that is acknowledged by Afro-Cuban religiosos when they insist that not everyone can be *rayado* (first initiation) and that people should only be initiated into Palo after intensive 'investigations'—using the oracles—otherwise it might mess up (*salar*) their lives. Moreover, religiosos, including paleros themselves, often claim that "Palo holds a person back" (*da atraso*); it has its own ways of dealing with the danger. Created from a being without its own agenda, the brujo could follow his master's will as slaves were supposed to do; however, precisely because he is conceived of as slave he is endowed with the will that slaves were denied the right to exercise, and with a goal shared with slaves: that of freedom. Furthermore, once created, the brujo becomes a newborn being, separate from his creator and 'other' than the beings and matter from which he was constructed. Yet, despite his otherness, the brujo is at the same time each of the beings and types of matter that converged in his creation, thereby encapsulating both self-identity and self difference (Viveiros de Castro 2004: 7-8, quoted by Holbraad 2007: 210)—hence his ambiguous being. But the ambiguity of the brujo is not one based on the contradiction of insisting on his multiple identities or his intrinsic

differences; it is rather the product of an arrangement whereby the qualities of each component can become modifiers of the others and of the palero owner. This transitivity is evident, for instance, when the muerto oscuro, ostensibly devoid of an agenda, is invested with the aims of the slave and thus rebels; or when he is invested with those of the owner and consequently performs his will; or, alternatively, even when he is thought to follow his own will and either accepts or rejects the requests of the owner. As a slave the muerto oscuro might work for, or rebel against, his owner. The brujo is objectified through the bones of the muerto oscuro, the palos and other items, only to be de-objectified by investing him with a will of his own, and also by bestowing on him the spirit of the muerto and of the nfumbi. As an ensemble of objects, other objects can endlessly be added, but the brujo is endowed with the soul of the nfumbi and humanized as a slave and as a muerto. By incorporating a muerto the brujo becomes an immanent being; by virtue of the assemblage of matter that is contained in the prenda he is actual in this world; in his possession of potencia he is an acting entity; while, through being crossed with a nfumbi, he becomes a transcendent being. Meanwhile, due to his otherness he acts as an external source of objectivity, reminding the palero of the limits of his will, rebelling against him if he abuses his own potencia or that of others.

The multiplicity of the brujo might well be a source of danger and madness for many people—another reason why for many it is just the first step in their religious path, while for others it is a step to be avoided. Yet there is no other entity which enables humans to perform their individual will as the brujo does; he does not value human actions according to any pre-established value system of right or wrong, good or evil. In fact, to paraphrase Nietzsche, he stands “beyond good and evil”.

CHAPTER THREE: THE SAINT. (EL SANTO)

1. Making saint, making initiate.

*El santo también es un espíritu materializado porque se coge una piedra y se materializa, o se consagra esa piedra pa' el santo.*⁶⁴

(Papo Angarica)

In a chapter on fetishism in his book, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*, Bruno Latour (2010) selected Brazilian Candomblé to illustrate his thesis on the man-made nature of divinities (or fetishes) because, as Goldman (2009: 114) notes, “its deities (*orixás*, *voduns*, or *inquices*, depending on the ‘nation’ of the *terreiro*, that is, ‘temple’ or ‘cult house’) are ‘made’ in the process of initiation, at the same time as the persons that they will possess are made”. In the course of his discussion Latour quotes an account collected by anthropologist Patricia de Aquino from a Brazilian Candomblé initiate in which he used the term *assentar* (Portuguese) to reference his consecration to his guiding saint (see Chapter One on “making the saint”). De Aquino translates *assentar* as “to seat” and then, in parentheses, explains that the divinity “asked, through divination, to be seated, installed, made, fabricated” (Latour 2010: 6). As in African-Cuban religions, in Candomblé the initiatory ceremony is also called *fazer o santo* (to make the saint) a concept, as Goldman observes, that “seems tailor-made for Latour’s theses” (2009: 114). Goldman implies, however, that perhaps Latour has missed something, adding:

[I]f you were to ask an adept of *candomblé* if he is the one who makes the divinities, the reply would certainly be negative. However, if you were to ask if this or that divinity was made by someone, the answer would be positive. This is because the *divinities, like people, already exist before being made*—although, of course, not in exactly the same way. The crucial point, to simplify hugely, is

⁶⁴ “The saint is also a materialized spirit; one takes a stone and materializes him or the stone is consecrated for the saint.”

the distinction between the “general *orixás*” [...] which exist as a finite number, and the intensive multiplicity of individual or personal *orixás* [...] Only these latter could be described as having been made, the former having existed forever, since mythical times. (Goldman 2009: 114; emphasis added)

In the same vein I would argue that similar caveats apply to Afro-Cuban religions that work with the saints, with the difference that, if one were to ask a santero/a, for instance, whether he or she has installed (*instalar*) or fabricated (*fabricar*) a saint or oricha, the answer certainly would be in the negative. In Cuba the expression ‘to make saint’ (*hacer santo*) is not interchangeable with any synonym and it does not only refer to the making of the individual saint but to the whole ceremony, which lasts at least seven days. Yet, resonating with Candomblé, the name of the Cuban ceremony is ‘to make a/the saint’ and not “to make an *oricha*” (Goldman *ibid.*). Moreover, the expression *hacer santo* or *hacer un santo*, is only used by santeros/as—that is, consecrated religiosos—when they are leading such a ceremony. The most common expressions used by initiates themselves, or when talking about someone who will or has undergone the ceremony, take the reflexive form: *me voy a hacer santo* (I will make myself saint) or *me hice santo* (I made myself saint) or *se hizo santo* (he or she made him or herself saint). The direct English translation⁶⁵ is misleading, however, since in the context of Afro-Cuban religions it means that someone was the subject of a series of ceremonies that transformed him or her *as well as* the saint that ‘was made’ and the others that were ‘received’ (see Chapter Four).

Thus, as argued by Goldman for Candomblé, it can be claimed that Afro-Cuban religions working with the saint are about making persons—individual moral persons as I argue here—as much as they are about individualizing other, non-human beings. The individualization, as Opiari contends (also in relation to Candomblé) does not suppose a “Western sense of the individual, that is, the unification of the being, but a singularization and a personalization” (2004: 276). Although, unlike their Brazilian

⁶⁵ The meaning of the expressions would not be understood outside the context of Afro-Cuban religions even when used in another Spanish-speaking country.

counterparts, santeros do not make an explicit distinction between general and individual orichas, they do speak of ‘my saints’ (*mis santos*) in contrast to those who influence people’s lives more generally. This latter group comprise those: that own and live in nature, as well as in the mythical beyond (see Holbraad 2012; Panagiotopoulos 2011); that usually manifest themselves in divination; that decide whether a person is to be initiated; and, other than within Candomblé (see Goldman 2007, 2009; Sansi-Roca 2009), possess their children whether initiated or not. In contrast, the individual saints are those that are received by a person⁶⁶ in addition to the one that is seated during the making the saint ceremony.

Those individual saints have a very concrete and material form—the spirit enters through the matter (see Chapter Two)—therefore when ritually appointed they need to be consecrated in specific material objects. Usually, they are materialized in stones and other items that vary according to the saint—seashells for Yemayá, for example—which are placed within a specific kind of container which likewise varies depending on the saint to which they are consecrated: a wooden pilón⁶⁷ for Changó and Agayú and a *cazuela de barro* (clay pot) for Saint Lazarus. Both items and containers—also called fundamentos—are thought to belong to the person as the material manifestation of his or her individual saints (*mis santos*); in fact, they are regarded as providing and being the foundation both of the saints to which they are consecrated and the person who receives them. The difference that religiosos draw between ‘seating’ (*asentar*) and ‘receiving’ (*recibir*) resonates with Latour’s (2006) satirical remarks about the anti-fetishist slumbering within us when confronted with claims by Candomblé initiates that they “make, fabricate, seat, situate, construct these divinities”. Latour suggested that the Moderns’ response—exemplified by the colonizing Portuguese—might take the form of the question: “Are you so unaware of the difference between *making* what comes from yourselves and *receiving* what comes

⁶⁶ It must be remembered that saints can be received at any moment in a person’s life independently of initiation. Furthermore, as we saw in the previous chapter, some saints have to be received before initiation, while others whenever they express a wish to be received during divination.

⁶⁷ “The *pilón* is a cylindrical-, hourglass-, or pedestal-shaped hollow mortar of cedar or mahogany, often adorned with low bas-relief, hand-painted, or burned-in surface designs” (Brown 2003: 191).

from elsewhere?” (2010: 6; emphasis added). However, he concludes his parodying of the ‘anti-fetishist’ by asking: “Can we recover [the initiate’s] way of thinking for our own use?” (2010: 7)

In what follows I engage with a range of conceptions about the saints in Afro-Cuban religions. I dwell on ideas about their existence, that is, what kind of beings they are, where and how they are thought to be, how they relate to humans and how humans discover their will. To pre-empt one conclusion of this section, the inquiry about the saints’ existence will lead to the finding that rather than their being made during the initiatory processes—as the name of the ceremony seems to suggest—they become as individualized in the course of the process as the person does.

2. The existence and ways of the saints

2.i. Qualifying syncretism.

As with the brujo, to explain plainly what the saints are and how they are conceived is a difficult task. It is, however, not because of any secrecy that surrounds them as in the case of the brujo, quite the contrary: saints are very well known beings, so well known that it would be redundant to ask precisely what they are. There is, moreover, a rich literature about them, eagerly consumed by religiosos, which has contributed to generalizing certain ideas about them. For instance, Miguel Barnet describes the orichas in the following manner:

In principle the orisha would be a deified ancestor whom, while alive, established such links as to assure control over certain natural forces including the thunder, the wind, the water, and moreover to perform activities such as hunting, working with metals, and knowing about plants and their use. After his death, the ancestor-orisha’s power or *aché* would have the faculty to be temporarily embodied in one of his descendants through the phenomenon of

possession, which he himself induces. The passage from living in the earth to becoming an orisha, experienced by those exceptional beings possessing a powerful *aché*, happens ... in an instant of passion... (1983: 169; my translation)

According to Barnet (ibid.: 170), such deified ancestors would not have died natural deaths, rather suffering a “metamorphosis” when experiencing an emotional crisis caused by anger or some other violent feeling. In my experience, most religiosos will maintain that saints were human beings who became saints after dying, though the precise circumstances of their deaths or their becoming saints is not always as clear as stated by Barnet.

There are two interesting views regarding the saints’ passage from being humans to becoming saints which I discuss below. The first was expounded by an elder religioso, initiated in various Afro-Cuban religions, whereas the second was put forward by Yoel, a younger religioso mainly practicing Espiritismo and Santería. The elder has a very idiosyncratic theory about the formation (*formación*) of the saints. As we will see, it could be described as syncretic, but it would be syncretism of a very creative type, one that, to a certain extent, reflects Sansi-Roca’s comment that syncretism “is a process of reinvention of the cult” (2009: 142). Although engaging with the debate about syncretism is beyond the scope of this work, it is almost impossible to avoid referring to it in the context of Afro-Cuban religions. As I see it, the problem is that syncretism has become more a descriptive term than an explicative one, as Palmié suggested some years ago with regards the concept ‘acculturation’ when he observed that it was being treated “as an *explanans* whereas it really should have been the *explanandum*” (1993: 338). On the other hand, it can also be argued that

[R]ather than reducing religious syncretism to a complete incapacity to absorb overly abstract religious precepts, or to the assimilation of unconscious archetypes, ... it would be more useful to consider that a system based on ritual and the exploration of continuities possesses remarkable flexibility and

the enormous power to assimilate the new realities with which history confronts it. (Goldman 2007: 106-107)

Goldman's argument speaks directly to the specific historical circumstances in which the term has been used, and the value that has been ascribed to it, which is the subject of Stewart's (1999) article *Syncretism and its Synonyms*. There the author emphasises that an anthropology of syncretism is concerned with: "the various arguments made for or against the notion of religious mixture" (ibid.: 58) and, therefore, "[w]henver syncretism occurs or has occurred, it is usually accompanied by a parallel discourse that might be termed metasyncretic: the commentary, and the registered perceptions of actors as to whether this is good or bad" (ibid.). In my experience, in Cuba such metasyncretic discourse is usually positive. In what follows, I will, however, avoid using syncretism as an explicative term, merely pointing out situations in which it has taken place.

2.ii. Jesus Christ and the formation of the saints.

According to the older *religioso* the saints became such through the intervention of Jesus Christ who was able to select people to rise from the dead with him, thanks to a faculty given to him by God. In order to form (*formar*) the saints, Christ chose people from everywhere in the world, including both those who were considered virtuous and respectable and also sinners and criminals; this was done with the intention of 'completing the world'. A popular Cuban saying that sheds light on this idea is that "the world in order to be what it is needs to have a bit of everything".⁶⁸ In other words, by definition the world is made of good and evil, right and wrong, clever and foolish, lawful and criminal, and so on, plus everything between, and therefore, all must be represented among the saints.

⁶⁸ "El mundo para ser mundo tiene que tener de todo."

According to the elder's account, when Christ selected those who were to be resurrected with him, he did away with their pasts. However, they retained their characters after becoming saints and, if they were that way inclined, they would continue to err, making mistakes which partially constitute the origins of the *odduns* (the signs that 'come out' through the oracles; also *oddus*). For the oracle's *odduns* speak of the saint's lives and faults both while they were alive in this world as humans and when they became saints; each *oddu* comprises various stories or myths (*patakie*) about the orichas' lives; moreover, the *odduns* are said to be deities in their own right (see Holbraad 2007, 2012). The elder stressed two points: firstly, that the saints were humans and as such committed mistakes—indeed, it was often precisely because of their errors they were chosen to rise with Christ; and secondly, that as saints they also had faults, which kept their relations with humans empathetic.

Although the details of this account are quite particular, including the way in which the elder uses and interprets the Catholic narrative and the ease with which he shifts from one religion to the other, the main ideas he presents are quite common among Afro-Cuban *religiosos*. Many argue that the saints were once humans, that they became saints—though versions of how this happened differ—that they committed errors both as humans and as saints, and that details such as these are contained in the *odduns* of Santería's oracles. One example of this is the story I was told about Yemayá. As already mentioned, Yemayá is a female oricha, owner of motherhood and the sea. However, when she was in this world her name was Odí, which is the name of the principal *oddu* through which she speaks, and in one of the stories about her Odí is described as an inconstant and adulterous woman. As an oricha she becomes both a loving mother and the source of life, though a different aspect of her—a different 'life path' or *camino* (see below)—is portrayed as Oggún's wife to whom she was unfaithful (see Lachatañeré 2007: 363).

2.iii. Routes from human to saint.

Another relevant aspect of the saint's being is that stressed by the younger santero, Yoel. Being an espiritista, he is well aware of the theory of the progression of the spirit and he framed his ideas against this background. He claimed that the saints or orichas did not undergo the process of becoming a muerto. Although, as human beings, they died as humans die, they became saints straight away, meaning that they did not experience being one of the dead, nor the process of progressing as a spirit from a lower status attached to this earth to a higher one closer to God. Nevertheless, he argues, there are two exceptions that did undergo such a process: Saint Lazarus⁶⁹ and Oyá. In his view, both of these saints experienced dying, being a muerto, and resurrecting, before finally becoming orichas. He further sustained that because those saints had been muertos they are the only ones that might become part of someone's 'spiritual commission', that is, part of a group of muertos that belong to a person, according to Espiritismo's cosmology.

His idea of how certain humans became saints is closer to Barnet's argument in that it suggests that rather than dying and becoming muertos certain people underwent a transformation or metamorphosis and became saints. A classical example of such transformation is Changó's story (*pataki*). Changó is thought to have been the fourth king (*alafin*) of Oyó, but in a moment of extreme rage his *aché* left his body, becoming an oricha. Thereafter, all his wives—Obbá, Oyá, and Ochún—when running away from the thunder into which their husband had been transformed, became rivers and orichas themselves (see Barnet 1983: 169-170).

Yoel's argument is that the saints are a particular kind of dead for whom dying was just a transformation from one state of being to another that occurred suddenly, without any form of process. It appears that because of this lack of a transition period between the two states of being, the saints, despite being non-human, retained their humanity in as much as they continue to experience passions and to err. Precisely for that reason they are in a privileged position to help humans; as ex-humans they are

⁶⁹ Saint Lazarus (San Lázaro) is probably the only saint who is almost always called by his Catholic name.

able not just to understand but to experience as humans do whereas, as divine entities, they can intervene in human affairs and change the course of circumstances, helping their sons, daughters, or protégées to solve their problems, and even achieving God's intervention when required. This explanation also seems to suggest that by becoming saints, they also became part of nature; Changó, for example, became thunder in a moment of rage, and his wives became rivers. The saints are thought to be, to inhabit, and to own certain natural elements and phenomena. Therefore, Changó is not only the de-materialized force (*aché*) of the fourth king of Oyó, but he is also thunder. Like all the saints, he is not only an entity thought to live somewhere in 'the beyond' (*el mas allá*), he also lives and *is* (*está*) in this world as part of nature in the form of palm trees, in thunder, and in thunder storms.

When Afro-Cuban religiosos maintain that their saints *own* particular elements of nature it entails their owning certain powers (*poderes*) ascribed to such elements or phenomena. Continuing with the previous example, Changó is considered to be (*ser*) thunder, to be present in (*estar*) it, and to own it. Owning thunder is understood as also owning the power of fire, war, and sound. Changó is thus portrayed as a king and a warrior who led numerous battles, and as someone who enjoys music and parties. In fact, he does not just enjoy music, he is considered to own the *batá* drums—the most important instrumental ensemble within Santería—and their music. Changó, along with the rest of the saints, is also thought to own certain man-made objects such as the double-headed axe and specific aspects of human culture—in Changó's case this includes music and divination.

2.iv. 'Leaping' between caminos.

Saints are conceived of as having multiple paths (*caminos*): avatars (*avatares*), as they are often termed by religiosos. In other words, the same saint can seem to embody very different characters and trajectories depending on the context of contact (see the story of Yemayá, above). This can be confusing, and there are a number of explanatory theories for the inconsistencies that appear as a result, as Barnett (1983: 193) points out.

It is possible, he suggests, that the various (and sometimes conflicting) caminos accorded to the gods (or saints, or orichas, depending on terminology chosen) might embody different periods in their lives as mortals. He feels, however, that a historical explanation is more likely: different gods became amalgamated due to socio-political circumstances. A larger and more powerful tribe, such as the Yoruba, for example, might have superimposed one of their gods on that of a neighbouring tribe and vice versa (Barnet 1983: 193).

In my experience Afro-Cuban religiosos use the term camino in reference to a saint or oricha when they want to highlight various ideas. One of these resembles Barnet's theory of different periods of mortal life, although not necessarily in terms of a temporal axis—that is, in time periods. Rather the orichas are thought to have lived under various guises as humans and in each guise the oricha is depicted as having a specific—often different—temperament or ways of being (*modos de ser*), and the same follows in their 'lives' as deities. Despite these differences, each oricha can be thought of as presenting a range of themed variations. For instance, one of Changó's main features, or themes, is his warrior status; in that sense he overlaps with Ogún, who is also a warrior, although their characters as warriors are completely different (see Goldman 2005). Changó went into battle to expand his territory or on behalf of a woman, whereas many of Ogún's wars were due to his temper: either because he had lost it, or because he considered a particular situation unfair and his intervention crucial. As already noted, Ogún is portrayed as having a strong temper and Changó as more easy going. But Changó is more than a warrior and a king; he is the epitome of virility, a womanizer who protects his partners to the fullest extent and enjoys the pleasures of life, yet is ready to give up his talents to avoid commitment or to provide for others such as his brother Orula.

The presence of these various paths implies the possibility of different modes of existence: as humans and as non-humans. As non-humans the orichas are equated—syncretized—with Catholic saints and with beings from other Afro-Cuban religions precisely because they are also considered paths. On the other hand, in the view of

some religiosos, it is the possession of various paths (caminos) that allows orichas 'to leap' (*brincar*) from one religion to another. In other words, what has been often been interpreted by scholars as syncretism of the various entities is portrayed by some religiosos as a leap from one kind of non-human being to another. For instance, the oricha Changó is also the Roman Catholic Santa Barbara, the Arará foddún Jebioso, or the nfumbi Siete Rayos because these are all considered paths of the deity, who can leap from one to another 'way of being' at will.

It is precisely these characteristics of having or being various paths, together with the idea of their being somewhere in the beyond (*el más allá*) and at the same time in particular places and embodied in the elements and phenomena of nature, makes their being elusive. Moreover, these characteristics have given rise to some of the most innovative theories concerning the orichas' being.

2.v. *Being (entities) or becoming (movement)*

In Goldman's seminal article, "How to learn in an Afro-Brazilian spirit possession religion: ontology and multiplicity in Candomblé" (2007), he offers a complex ontology of orixás (Afro-Cuban orichas) in which he claims that they are to be understood as multiple beings. In brief, he argues that orixás—like everything that exists in the world—are modulations of a single force called *axé* (Afro-Cuban *aché*), which he describes as "a force that from general and homogenous is continuously diversified and concretized" (*ibid.*: 8). Therefore, for Goldman, rather than being "individualities", orixás are a "flux" that can be dissected in different ways and actualized on different levels that correspond to individual orixás (*ibid.*: 9).

In a recent publication Holbraad elaborates on Goldman's idea of *axé* / *aché* as a diversified force and proposes to expand it as "the premise of diversification itself" (Holbraad 2012: 168) arguing, "Orichas 'have *aché*' precisely to the extent that they are able, qua motions, to 'become' the various elements of the world." In that text, as in a previous one (2007), Holbraad points to the "multifarious uses of the concept of paths"

(2012: 151) among *religiosos*, which include the multiplicity of guises in which the *orichas* appear in myths; the myths (*odduns*) themselves; the initiatory trajectory of people consulting the oracles; and even the whole life of a person, thereby underlining the concept's affinity with that of destiny (Panagiotopoulos 2011). Holbraad further relates the concept of a path to transcendence and immanence. As he points out:

[T]he concepts of transcendence and immanence capture abiding ideas in *Ifá* about qualitatively different manifestations of the divinities—from the larger-than-life majesty of the *orichas* as depicted in the mythological “beyond” of the absolute past (or the sky), to their matter-of-fact appearance in the here-and-now, through the consecrated enactments of ritual, including, of course, divination. (2012: 163)

In short, Holbraad's main argument is that motion is a basic ontological principle within *Ifá*. Motion is suggested by the use that practitioners make of the word *paths*, is premised on the multiplicitous concept of *aché*, is elicited by *babalawos* during divination, and—what is more important here—the *orichas* themselves are to be conceived of “as motions rather than entities” (2012: 152). As motions, the *orichas* transform themselves from a ‘relative transcendence’ to a ‘relative immanence’ when elicited to presence by the ritual means of divination.

2.vi. *Transcendence and immanence*

Expanding on Holbraad's ideas, Panagiotopoulos argues that the *orichas* “are ‘transcendent’ and have a transcendental perspective” (2011: 156) which is also brought to immanence by the act of divination, but he emphasizes the idea of a “relative immanence” in which their “transcendent” perspective is not lost (2011: 169, 183). Since according to Panagiotopoulos *orichas* do not have a bodily form, during divination they are not only elicited to presence but they become embodied in the oracles (2011: 168). In fact, he suggests that divination is predicated “on the way in which the movement from immanence to transcendence—for the dead—and from

transcendence to immanence—for the deities—can also be seen as a movement from embodiment to disembodiment and vice versa” (2011: 223). Finally he also proposes that “while the living and the dead *have caminos*, the *orichas are them*” (2011: 138). Panagiotopoulos also dwells on the idea of the orichas being understood as ex-humans, departing from the popular saying among religiosos that “the dead (*muerto*) gave birth to the saint”⁷⁰ and arguing that the orichas are different kinds of entities than the dead mainly in that highly evolved muertos tend to become de-materialized whereas the orichas “exhibit an excess of ‘materials’ and ‘materializations’” (2011: 144) in the form of stones, soup-tureens, the objects through which they speak, and so on. Orichas and the dead also differ in that the orichas have “othered” themselves to the extent that they can offer “their biographies unchanged in the form of myths and oracular signs” (ibid.), which for muertos would imply a halt or even a step backwards in their progression. Instead the author proposes to understand the saying as proposing “a common ontological thread of personhood that relates the living, the dead and the *orichas*” (2011: 143).

Regarding this last issue I concur with Panagiotopoulos’ suggestion of interpreting the saying ‘the dead gave birth to the saint’ as proposing ‘a common ontological thread of personhood’ relating the living and the beings that populate the Afro-Cuban ‘beyond’; however, as shown above, religiosos do insist on the fact that saints ‘were born’ of muertos. Here one should remember the interest shown by Afro-Cuban religiosos in origins, evidenced by their use of the term *fundamento*. This could be understood in light of Eliade’s argument about the origin of something representing a source of power (1991), as Panagiotopoulos suggests with regard to myths and divination. If muertos are regarded as a source of power in as much as they gave birth to the saints, it would justify religiosos’ argument that ‘without the dead there is no religion’ (*sin el muerto no hay religión*), and the fact that most ceremonies within any Afro-Cuban religion start with invocations to the dead. As already pointed out, for many religiosos saints were once living persons, hence their capacity to empathize with humans. In my

⁷⁰ ‘*Iku lobi Ocha*,’ in Lucumí, which he renders also in its plural, ‘the dead give birth to the saints’ (*los muertos paren los santos*) and as ‘death gives birth to Ocha’ (*la muerte pare a la Ocha*).

view the idea that saints were once humans who went through a form of death, is not in conflict with Panagiotopoulos' argument that they are different kinds of 'entities' from muertos—if one were to regard them as entities. In fact, the author's contention that the orichas are beings who "have othered themselves" (2011: 144) to the extent that their ontological status as divinities is not questioned is fully compatible with the idea of their otherness being due to their being other than humans and other than muertos, as religiosos maintain.

As divinities in many religions, the orichas or saints are thought to be in particular places—in the world of the living (i.e., immanent)—and at the same time somewhere else in the beyond (i.e., transcendent). However, unlike, for instance, the Catholic God, the orichas are not everywhere⁷¹ and are not conceived of as manifestations of one God. Each oricha is considered to be present in precise elements or phenomena of this world and each is also considered to *be* such elements or phenomena. For instance, Yemayá is thought to be present (*estar*) and to live (*vivir*) in the sea (and not in thunder or palm trees like Changó) and in the consecrated fundamento (the stones and other items) that the initiated receive when they receive her, and she is also understood to be (*ser*) the sea and the fundamento themselves. In my experience, when people need to communicate with an oricha—Yemayá, in this example—religiosos might send them to the seashore to talk with the saint. The same religioso might also suggest that they talk with their "own" Yemayá, that is, with her fundamento. In fact, it is very common to hear religiosos saying that they talk (*hablan*) with their saints (the individual ones) and that after consecration 'one is never alone'.

Something similar happens with offerings and sacrifice. The individual saints need to be regularly fed with the blood of particular animals. A major sacrifice requires four-legged animals, a minor comprises feathered creatures, while fruits and food are usually offered in exchange for intervention in everyday life affairs; there are also other types of offerings that are made to the saints when religiosos have worked with them.

⁷¹ But see Panagiotopoulos (2011) for a different interpretation.

All such offerings are left in the places where the orichas are thought to live, to own, or to be⁷²—in the sea in the case of an offering for Yemayá. Animals are sacrificed to the individual saints on a regular basis, commonly once a year; this is phrased as ‘feeding the saint’ (*darle de comer*). Religiosos argue that the individual saints need to be fed regularly in order to have the strength to be able to look after their children actively. Although rare, on some occasions animals are sacrificed to the places in nature that are regarded as being or belonging to the saints.

In light of these practices, I would argue that besides being somewhere in the beyond, the orichas are perceived as being here, present in this world, in particular natural elements and phenomena, and in their consecrated fundamentos, which need to be fed regularly in order to accord them the power to act for their children. Moreover, the orichas are also considered to be (*estar*) in the heads of their consecrated children and temporarily in the bodies of people that they possess, as well as in the odduns that ‘come out’ (*salir*) in divination. Rather than arguing the orichas’ ability as non-bodies to “diffuse themselves to a multiplicity of ‘bodies’ and ‘objects’, such as their oracles” (Panagiotopoulos 2011: 225) they could be deemed as actually *being* a multiplicity of objects, elements of nature, and natural phenomena: able to diffuse to multiple human bodies when properly instantiated (through possession) or consecrated (through initiation).

Another possibility is that suggested by Holbraad of conceiving of the orichas as motions rather than as entities with particular bodies or matter. Such a conception allows the understanding of their multiple states of being, not only as multiple paths (*caminos*), but also as simultaneously participating in this world—as particular elements or phenomena of nature—and being in the beyond:

Motions through and through, the deities are never divorced from humans, stuck in an ontologically discrete state of transcendence—to say so would be to

⁷² This has to be confirmed through the oracles.

place limits on the logical priority of motion. But nor does this suggest some form of permanent immanence... (Holbraad 2012: 162)

According to Holbraad, it is through divination that the multiple becoming of the orichas can be directed towards the diviner's board (oracle) "by transforming the deities along an intensive, self-differentiating axis that runs from the relative ontological distance of transcendence to the relative proximity of immanence" (2012: 172). As I understand it, divination becomes a means to elicit the orichas's presence (or immanence as Holbraad phrases it) by effecting two kinds of transformation: one of form—ontic form—in which the orichas become oddus, the signs in the diviner's board; and the other of status from transcendence to immanence. I suggest that divination also does something else that makes it similar to possession: in both cases the deities' presence is elicited so that humans can relate to them and, furthermore, possession and divination are the only means humans have of knowing the wills of the deities and of establishing two-sided communication—or, as religiosos often phrase it: a conversation.

3. Establishing conversations.

Whereas humans can easily talk with their divinities either by going to the places where they live—the sea for Yemayá, a palm tree for Changó—or, in the case of the initiated, their fundamentos, this type of communication is always one-sided; only the person is able to talk. Although deities can express their will by influencing people's lives in various respects, the only ways in which humans can overtly know whether this is happening and whether and how they should act in consequence is through divination and possession. Within Afro-Cuban religions the notion of conversation (*conversación*) is widely used within divination, possession, and music. When using the cowry oracle, the shells that fall in certain position are the ones which are counted; the total corresponds to a particular oddu. The position is called 'conversatory'

(*conversatoria*). Moreover, each oddu or combination of two odduns⁷³ is said to have various conversations (*conversaciones*) which, broadly speaking, correspond to the myths (*patakies*) contained in the oddu, as well as to the way that the diviner combines them to interpret it for the client. In fact, when the diviner starts interpreting the sign he or she usually says something like: “Let’s start the conversation.” After interpreting the sign the client is often offered the opportunity to ask direct questions of the saints. In that moment the conversation among the various odduns is extended to include the client.

In possession, on the other hand, the idea of holding a conversation with the deities is more straightforward; by possessing someone’s body they can speak directly with people present. In such cases the conversation can be started either by someone who has a question to ask or by the divinity that may have something to communicate to a particular person. In religions in which adepts work with the saints, possession usually occurs within the context of ritual festive celebrations⁷⁴ called *toques* or *toques de tambores* at which an ensemble of consecrated drums is usually played.⁷⁵ Each religion has its particular set of drums; the wider variety of ensembles is that used within Santería (Eli Rodrigues and Casanova 1997) among which the batá drums are considered the most sacred. This is partly because they are thought of as inhabited by a particular deity, Aña, who is able to call the orichas into humans’ bodies directly, though for that to happen both the drums and their players have to undergo a complex consecratory ceremony. The batá drums are also those on which the larger range and the more complex rhythms (*toques*) are played. The batá ensemble is composed of three drums of different sizes with different pitches; on each drum a different rhythm is played which, between them, builds a new rhythm: the one that ordinary listeners hear. Consecrated batá drummers call such an interlocking of rhythm ‘conversation’. Batá drums are thus said to hold a conversation among

⁷³ Actually it is the combination of two odduns that makes a sign, for instance: Osa-ché is the sign composed by the odduns Osa and Oche, which in turn correspond to the numbers 9 and 5 of the cowry shells that fell in the conversatory position.

⁷⁴ This does not rule out the possibility of possession taking place outside such context.

⁷⁵ The terms literally mean ‘playing’ and ‘playing drums’. The word *toque* also means rhythm and *toque de tambor* can be rendered as drumming.

themselves, which is often quite rich and complicated; with the dancers, whose movements respond to the particular toques; and also with the orichas before and after possessing people's bodies. Although the term 'conversation' is most often used within the context of the batá music, it is not limited to it, however. Musicians also use the term when playing other kinds of drums and music including, for instance, that played in non-religious genres such as rumba. It should also be noted that, although it is not common, I have witnessed cases in which saints have possessed humans' bodies while unconsecrated sets of drums were played. This is more likely to occur in instances involving muertos who manifest themselves whenever they want, regardless of being called or not and regardless of context.

To recap, the beings called santos within Afro-Cuban religions are conceived of as 'inherently multiple' (as argued by Goldman regarding the orixas in Brazil). Most of them are regarded as ex-humans and are thought to have multiple paths (caminos). Saints are also thought to leap from one path to another and from one religion to the other; moreover, they are understood to move between various elements, features, and phenomena in nature, as well as man-made objects; they are also perceived as moving between states of relative distance and relative proximity to humans. Humans can elicit and direct their motions towards them (Holbraad 2012) and establish a conversation basically through divination and possession. The main reason for humans to elicit saints into what—extrapolating from the divinatory jargon—I call a 'conversatory position' is in order to overtly know how and why they are influencing their lives, and to know their will—mostly in periods of illness, discomfort, when confronted with major decisions, when people feel that they cannot solve everyday problems by themselves, or when they find themselves at a crossroad. Moreover, people also seek to know the saints' will with regard to their religious path. A case at hand is that of Yoel, the young santero and espiritista who explained to me about the leap from being a human to becoming a saint.

4. Stopping the conversation

I first met Yoel around the turn of the century, when he was almost adolescent and living in the same place (*solar*) as a recognized Afro-Cuban musician and religioso, Chachá. We talked for the first time during preparations for the anniversary of Chachá's initiation. Animals were sacrificed and Yoel taught me how to take the bits called *acheses*⁷⁶ (plural of *aché*), which are offered to the saints, meanwhile explaining some differences in how this was done in Chachá's house and that of his grandmother Cristina. At the time I found his story unusual. Cristina was not his consanguine grandmother, he just called her that due to her age and because she had brought him up. When he was a child his mother decided to move from Matanzas to the countryside and since he stubbornly refused to go, his mother left him with a neighbour, Cristina. She is a very well known santera in the town, one of the few initiated to Saint Lazarus. Unlike the rest of his family Yoel grew up in an Afro-Cuban religious environment, becoming enthusiastic about it and learning from his grandmother, from Chachá, and from other religious elders in the neighbourhood.

He was quite young when he started to develop as a medium and a few years later while we were at a toque I also saw to my surprise that he was 'mounted' by an oricha, thereby demonstrating that anyone, whether initiated or not, could be possessed; people gave me some of his garments to hold while it was going on.⁷⁷ Yoel's oricha was Oyá who, as the owner of the doors of the cemetery, is said to have a close relationship with the muertos. When he was finally to be initiated his grandmother Cristina, who was going to be his godmother, consulted the Santería cowry shell oracle in order to confirm that Oyá was the owner of his head. But Obbatalá talked through the oracle, expressing his wish for Yoel's head. This was totally unexpected; up to that moment everyone, including Yoel himself, had thought that he was a son of Oyá.

⁷⁶ Among the multiple versions, uses and meanings of the word *aché* is its often-used plural, mainly in Matanzas, to refer to the parts of the sacrificed animal which are first offered to the saints; in Havana they are called *iñales*.

⁷⁷ When a person is being possessed all jewellery is removed because of the risk of breakage; shoes are also taken off.

Although unexpected, however, it was not an uncommon situation. Remember, something similar happened with Papo Angarica and Jamaica; in both cases their godfathers decided that Orula was to settle the matter and visited a babalawo in order to receive the definitive word. Yoel's case was somewhat different. Obbatalá is considered to be the owner of all heads; when two orichas dispute a person's head, he or she might be eventually be consecrated to Obbatalá. It is also said that if a person takes too long to undergo initiation the oricha owning his or her head may become tired of waiting and give up their child; in such cases the person might also be consecrated to Obbatalá who, as owner of all heads, is considered to take everyone in.

Yoel started to prepare everything to be consecrated to Obbatalá, but one day while at a *toque* he was mounted by Oyá. On that occasion, in Yoel's words, "Oyá stopped the drums' conversation"; in other words, she ordered the drums to stop, which also terminated the normal course of the celebration. Then Oyá spoke directly to Cristina, expressing her will to have Yoel's head. Oyá was not going to give up her son, not even to Obbatalá. The oricha herself had spoken and Yoel was eventually consecrated to Oyá. That happened over ten years ago. Nowadays Yoel is a recognized santero with many godsons and goddaughters; moreover, religiosos in Matanzas often count on him to perform ritual ceremonies, mainly those related to the dead, including the one performed on the first anniversary of Chachá's death. This was due to his relationship with the dead, both as a son of Oyá and as medium within Espiritismo. In his opinion his consecration to Oyá was the right thing to do; the saint 'came down' (*bajó*) during a public event, stopping the 'normal' course of the drums' 'conversation', and spoke 'in person' to express her will. Such an event could not be ignored. Furthermore, in his view the fact that he has 'progressed' as a person and as a religioso provides the final evidence that it was the right thing to.

Within Santería it is not unusual that, at the moment of confirming the oricha that is to 'be made', a different one claims the person's head. Such a situation raises various issues. The first is the conflict that occurs between possession and divination as the means of knowing the orichas' will. This is more common when the religiosos involved

in the ceremony are also paleros and/or espiritistas because they give primacy to knowledge acquired through possession. In their view human knowledge has a limit, which in this particular case implies that divining with the oracles is limited to the human capacity to learn the odduns and their stories and then interpret them. In contrast, they argue that while someone is possessed there are no limits to knowledge since the dead or the saints themselves—who are thought to have a more encompassing perspective (see Panagiotopoulos 2011) of this world and the beyond—tell people what to do and how to do it. This issue, moreover, reflects a latent conflict between most religiosos—paleros, espiritistas, and santeros—and babalawos due to claims by the latter of privileged access to truth (see Holbraad 2007, 2012) and knowledge; it is, however, a prerequisite of becoming a babalawo not to become possessed. Nonetheless, the issue of various orichas claiming a person's head is often resolved through the intervention of a babalawo since, as noted, Orula is regarded as pronouncing the final word regarding human's affairs. On the other hand, sometimes babalawos are accused of misinterpreting Orula's word or of not having performed a sufficiently deep investigation when the wrong saint has been seated, which happens, even if not often. In fact, I have met a few santeros who claimed that the wrong oricha was 'seated' in their heads, and considered that, in consequence, their lives had been messed up. In short, the issue reflects the tensions about ways of attaining knowledge.

There is a second issue at stake when two orichas claim a person's head. As with humans, an oricha's will may change, thereby coming into conflict with that of other orichas. Subjects of passion, the orichas also enjoy 'stealing' each other's children. For instance, Oggún, Changó, and sometimes Saint Lazarus, are said to do this constantly—but they are not the only ones. In many cases, the conflict is resolved by initiating the person to Obbatalá, but experienced santeros argue that it is better for the person's wellbeing to reach an agreement between the parties, as in Jamaica's and Papo's cases. That arrangement highlights an interesting situation wherein the usual order of other beings' influencing the human will is reversed and humans have their turn at influencing and altering the wills of the saints.

A final issue latent in conflict between orichas concerns destiny. Within Ocha/Ifá it is believed that people have a destiny throughout their lives (e.g. see Abimbola 1997 for Ifa in Nigeria), which is implied in the ideas of having a path and a guardian oricha from birth and is sometimes overtly expressed by santeros/as—yet their conception of destiny is of a particular type. Rather than being absolute and predefined, destiny is conceived of as an outline which humans and non-humans have the agency to alter, and in which hazard also plays a role. The latter is often epitomized in the interventions of the oricha Elegguá, who can alter a person's path regardless of the will of other orichas. For that reason religiosos seek to keep Elegguá on their side by offering him constant treats, thereby avoiding being subjected to the tricks of fortune.

5. Acting without 'being made'.

Apart from the dark dead, saints are perceived by religiosos as having aims of their own and as actively participating in human affairs. As discussed in the previous chapter, one of the most intimate and enduring ways in which their will becomes human action is when they are 'seated' in someone's head. Through initiation their will becomes entangled with that of the person, forging him or her anew, while their power (aché) is directed to the achievement of individual goals. This is, however, not the only way in which they are perceived as forging humans. As became apparent to me in the course of research, not everyone needs to undergo initiation, and there were—and still are—religiosos who had individual saints without undergoing the 'making the saint' ceremony. This is something that was more common some decades ago when initiation was not as widespread as nowadays. Over the many years I lived in Cuba, I met, mainly in Matanzas, various uninitiated religiosos who claimed to have their 'own things', though the precise meaning of 'having one's own things' is unclear: sometimes it implies having one's 'own' saints in the form of fundamentos; on other occasions it is emphasized that some of the uninitiated who have their 'own things', possess arcane knowledge and, more importantly, that they are no less able to use it to exert their will than some who are fully initiated. In other words, they had the control

of certain powers, specifically the power (*aché*) to make certain ‘things’ happen. Most stories concerning such non-initiates are about knowledge, the capacity (*aché*) to cure illness and, in certain cases, even to bring back to active life people who have been in a terminal state.⁷⁸ Stories also circulate about their power to ‘animate’ objects and make them work for them, as well as to ‘materialize’ spirits for the same purpose. In short, some of these people—as well as the fully initiated—have the *aché* to make humans, non-humans, and nature effect their wishes in terms of helping other people—and, less often, themselves—to deal with and overcome (*resolver*) difficult life situations.

Some of these *religiosos*, who were alive until fairly recently, claimed to have either a *santo lavado* (washed saint) or a *santo parado* (standing saint) (see Brown 2003).⁷⁹ Neither of these forms of ‘having’ saints entails undergoing initiation; the saints’ *fundamentos* are ‘washed’ with certain herbs—or consecrated with secret ceremonies—but the saint is not seated in the person’s head. It is said that many Africans or *criollos primitivos* (the first Africans’ offspring in Cuba) consecrated or washed the *fundamentos* themselves. In addition to these variants, there are a number of contemporary communities who claim to have a ‘family saint’ (*santo familiar*). In other words, their saints’ *fundamentos* do not belong to an individual person but were inherited by the whole family when their particular owners—initiated or, more often, uninitiated *religiosos*—died. Some such communities claim to practice a particular religion (e.g., the Gangá Longobá), others define themselves as being a form of *Santería* (e.g., the *Iyesá* from the town of Jovellanos), and still others regard themselves as actually practicing *Santería* (e.g., families descending from a particular *santero* or *santera*, such as Tomasa Zuasnabar). In most cases their religious practices are exclusive to family members and, certainly, no one can be incorporated into them given the lack of initiatory ceremonies.

⁷⁸ It is said that currently only a few *religiosos* know how to perform this ceremony, which is called *cambio de vida*: literally, ‘change of life’ and contextually, ‘exchanging lives’.

⁷⁹ For a full discussion of these see Basso Ortiz 2015.

Having discussed these exceptions at length elsewhere (see Basso Ortiz 2015), the main point that I want to underline here is that besides individual initiation there are other ways in which saints forge human will. Although outside the scope of this work, I would propose that the *santo lavado* and *santo parado* are ceremonies in which the human involved underwent processes similar to those of initiation while the saints did not. In other words, these are far less complex ceremonies than initiation and were, in previous times, more concerned with the making of the person as part of a community and not necessarily as an individual, while the making of the individual saints was not at issue at all. These more rudimentary ceremonies have themselves changed over time partly because of the wider growth in initiatory ceremonies. Currently they are seen as providing an immediate solution for problems (resolver) without the person involved undergoing the processes of disentanglement and ‘learning to value’ that initiation entails (see next chapters); while the saints are thought to perform their will by influencing the person for a limited period of time and/or in a limited manner precisely because they do not need to become individualized. *Santo lavado* and *santo parado* are also performed in cases in which the saints make it clear that someone does not need to undergo the full initiatory process but that he or she might just need a ‘guide’ or ‘support’ in some aspects of everyday life.

In the case of the ‘family saint’ (*santo familiar*) the saints’ will is performed through the community and the community needs to come together for them to be elicited into action. This is usually done once or twice a year, on particular dates, within the frame of idiosyncratic ritual-festive celebrations (*toques*), with the exception that communities might gather when a family member experiences a serious situation that is perceived as needing the intervention of the family saint. Otherwise, members of such communities either have to wait until their annual celebration or consult other *religiosos*. During such celebrations these saints become active beings in this world by exclusively possessing family members and communicating with their children in that way, though they might occasionally do it through the oracles of another Afro-Cuban religion. Since those saints can only be elicited through mass gatherings of family members, they are not perceived as solving everyday life problems, or only those at the

community level. For that reason many of their worshippers have undergone initiation within other Afro-Cuban religions. Rather than forging individual persons the *santo familiar* is about building communities, a value that has been relegated to the background—probably more decisively since the Special Period—given that solving problems at the individual level has practically become an ontological state, with the individual person becoming the main the focus of ritual performances.

6. The will as individual action.

The idea of movement is encapsulated in the various ways of conceptualizing the *orichas*, whether as a flux that can be cut into and actualized (Goldman), as motions to be elicited in divination (Holbraad), or as paths and non-bodies that diffuse themselves in a multiplicity of objects and bodies (Panagiotopoulos). If regarded as motions, paths, flux, or any kind of movement, theirs would be one directed towards an aim. As I will show in the next chapters, initiation is the beginning of a complex process of learning about one's will and its entanglement with that of others, of disentanglement from any pre-given values, of acquiring new powers (*aché*), of re-valuing one's powers, and of learning to bring them under control. Initiation is, moreover, a process that aims at situating initiates in a perspective from which he or she may perform in consonance with his/her will and specific everyday life circumstances.

As for the saints, initiation is also an individualization process in which they learn to live with the initiated, in their heads and in their *fundamentos*. Now, singled out with a name, as particular paths, *odduns*, *guises*, and *matter*, they must learn to infuse their *aché* into the initiated to guide him/her to act in consonance with their aims. Thus, as claimed by Latour about divinities (2010: 50): whatever else the saints might be, they are also action. In fact, for the individual persons that they forge they become the 'root': the fundament of their acting in this world.

CHAPTER FOUR: INITIATION AS FORGING THE (INDIVIDUAL) WILL

*Cuando entras en el sindicato de la religión ya
tu no puedes hacer lo que se te da la gana, el
santo que tu te hiciste es el que te gobierna y
tienes que hacerle caso, sino, vas al piso.*⁸⁰

Piyuya (a santera informant)

1. Introducing 'the will'

As I have argued, if Afro-Cuban religions can be regarded as being instrumental—or as *religiosos* phrase it, can 'solve people's problems'—it is mainly because they seek to forge or create a particular kind of person: one that values everyday life situations according to an individual (that is, singular and personalized) perspective and performs accordingly. As I understand it, it is mainly through initiation that the process of forging such an individual is set in motion.

One of the main issues that came up recurrently in my interaction with *religiosos* had to do with the person's will (*voluntad*). As one informant told me, "The *brujo* is something you make according to your own will and you can take it to any extreme you want." *Brujeros* often emphasise the idea that their religious practices enable them to exert their will to obtain what they want—within certain parameters, as I will show. Meanwhile, in religions working with the saints the person's will also plays an important role but in a different manner; here the goal is not about exerting one's will but, rather, about learning how it is entangled with that of others, particularly with non-human others such as saints or *orichas*. Piyuya's explanation at the beginning of this chapter encapsulates the idea that once people undergo initiation it is their head

⁸⁰ "Once you enter the religious 'trade union' you can't do whatever you want to do. The saint that you 'were made' is the one that governs you; you have to obey him/her otherwise you will go down."

oricha who ‘governs’ them; another, more common way to express it is, “When you undergo initiation you must obey the saints’ will.”

In fact, learning about one’s will and its entanglement with that of non-human others, and forging it anew by seeking an aim, a purpose, is one of the main aspects of the process started by initiation. But what do *religiosos* mean when they assert that the *brujos* offers humans one way to exert their will? Or, in the case of those working with the saints, what do they mean when they argue that after the seating ceremony (*asiento*) one has to follow the saints’ will? In this chapter I demonstrate that when *religiosos* speak of will (*voluntad*) within the religious context, they do not necessarily refer to a temporary wish or desire, but, rather, to the capability (*capacidad, potencia, poder, aché*) or faculty (*facultad*) of making appropriate choices and lasting decisions. This requires, above all, the determination to strive to fulfil one’s purpose, a goal entwined with discerning and acknowledging one’s virtues, gifts, capacities and needs, as well as with what *religiosos* call ‘that which is meant for you’ (*lo que está pa’ ti*). Initiates must learn about their weaknesses and strengths and how they are interwoven with the powers (*potencia, poder, aché*) of the non-human others that affect them. Moreover, they must learn to bring these powers under control, to master them.

Although I have thus far referred to initiation as though it were a single process, this is not entirely accurate as initiation entails multiple processes in which each *fundamento*⁸¹ affirms and/or confirms the others, and this is just as likely to happen in a discontinuous as a linear progression. Moreover, as previously stated, each religion has different and variable initiatory stages which do not end after consecratory ceremonies; they are just set in motion (see below) by those ceremonies. Afro-Cuban *religiosos* are well aware that a person cannot be made in three or seven days, or even in a year of intensive religious commitment. They know that during the consecration ceremonies neophytes merely receive the *fundamentos* that are intended to equip

⁸¹ The matter or material ‘items’ containing non-human others and their ‘power’; see Chapter Two.

them to strive for the necessary ‘determination’ to fulfil their goal or purpose and attain a particular perspective from which to value everyday life. Furthermore, this is a perspective that shifts according to the different beings affecting the person in his/her various ‘becomings’ in the course of life, as we shall see in the next chapter.

In the present chapter I shall focus on the process the initiate undergoes both within Palo and Santería with regard to the discernment, strengthening and forging of the will, beginning with elaboration of the idea of the will first presented in the introduction. Here I will be drawing on Nietzsche’s work on the will because of the peculiar resonance his theorising has with the search for purpose and goals in life—and the determination to achieve them—that is so much a part of the reasoning behind initiation into African-Cuban religions. I very briefly present a number of themes in his thought that have helped me to value and understand the teachings of the African-Cuban religiosos who discussed with me some of the steps in the processes that they use in initiation. I also feel that this is the place for discussion of an argument made by Goldman about possession within Brazilian Candomblé that, as I understand it, sheds light on initiatory processes within the various Afro-Cuban religions more broadly. Following the author’s line of argument I also introduce ideas developed by Deleuze and Guattari (2005 [1980]) that provide an interesting perspective from which to interpret various aspects of Afro-Cuban religions, including the initiatory process. These somewhat theoretical framings are then discussed in light of ethnographic examples drawn from observation of the initiates and religiosos whom I knew and worked among for two decades. Given that each religioso emphasizes—and conceals—different aspects of his/her initiatory process, I use a number of life stories to illustrate some of the multiple ways in which initiation might work.

1.i. Nietzsche and ‘the will’

As pointed out in the introduction I mainly draw from Nietzsche’s conceptions when speaking about the will; however, he does not provide a single or bounded account of it, often characterizing it in different terms: another point of resonance with African

Cuban religious thought. A possible starting point is his famous phrase “will to power”, the precise meaning of which might be less familiar than the phrase itself, which was used to title a volume of collected works published after his death (Nietzsche 1968).⁸²

There Nietzsche maintained:

that the will to power is the primitive form of affect, that all other affects are only developments of it; that it is notably enlightening to posit *power* in place of individual “happiness” (after which every living thing is supposed to be striving): “there is a striving for power, for an increase of power,” — pleasure is only a symptom of the feeling of power attained, a consciousness of a difference ...; that all driving force is will to power, that there is no other physical, dynamic or psychic force except this. (Nietzsche 1968: 366)⁸³

Without engaging in a prolonged philosophical discussion I wish to highlight two different points. The first is that here, as elsewhere, Nietzsche undertakes a critique of philosophical⁸⁴ and religious traditions, in particular Schopenhauer’s conception of will, which elsewhere he calls “Schopenhauer’s superstition” (1997: 16). In the quoted passage he is directing his critique towards a field of ethics called ‘virtue ethics’ which, broadly speaking, is based on the idea that happiness and pleasure should be the main principles for moral behaviour. The second issue concerns Nietzsche’s idea of affects. Elsewhere in the text he refers to them as: “Affect, great desire, the passion for power, love, revenge, possessions—: moralists want to extinguish and uproot them...” (Nietzsche 1968: 383). The conception of affect as passion or feeling is central to Nietzsche’s idea of will, something which is also fundamental in Deleuze and

⁸² Nevertheless, as Kaufmann notes in his translation: “Nietzsche himself had contemplated a book with the title *The Will to Power*. His notebooks contain a great many drafts for title pages for this and other projected works...” (1968: xvii, italics in the original). See also Nietzsche 1956: xxvii, when Nietzsche mentions his intention of dealing with asceticism in a book called *The Will to Power*.

⁸³ Original punctuation has been retained here and in all following Nietzsche quotations unless otherwise stated.

⁸⁴ His critique includes all fields of philosophy: ethics, epistemology, metaphysics, etc. In fact, Nietzsche suggested the subtitle *Attempt at a Revaluation of All Values* for the book on which he was working under the title *The Will to Power* (see Kaufmann in Nietzsche 1968: xvii).

Guattari's rendering of 'becoming'; in both senses the notion of affect is relevant for my understanding of initiation.

In the previous passage and as various authors have suggested, the 'will to power' seems to be a kind of *causa prima* or monism postulating the existence of a single force for everything in the world. Nietzsche himself affirmed: "The world as it is seen from the inside, the world defined and described by its 'intelligible character'—would be simply 'will to power' and that alone." (1997: 36). Nevertheless, to understand Nietzsche's 'will to power' as a *causa prima* is highly problematic, first because among the many issues that the author criticizes is that of causation; in many of his writings he criticizes the notions of cause and effect as means of explanation, calling them fictions and "mechanistic foolishness" (1997: 21). Moreover, Nietzsche also criticizes the notion of 'being', placing it in opposition to that of 'becoming', to which I return at a later point.⁸⁵ For now the relevant question is whether the will to power is something that exists as such or is a particular—or rather a generalized—form of will. And more to the point: what, then, is the 'will'? Nietzsche himself poses the question:

Is 'will to power' a *kind* of 'will' or identical with the concept 'will'? Is it the same thing as desiring? or *commanding*? Is it that 'will' of which Schopenhauer said it was the 'in-itself of things'?

My proposition is: that the will of psychology hitherto is an unjustified generalization, that this will *does not exist at all*, that instead of grasping the idea of the development of one definite will into many forms, one has eliminated the character of the will by subtracting from it its content, it's 'whither?' ... It is even less a question of a 'will to life'; for life is merely a special case of the will to power... (1968: 369)

⁸⁵ "More strictly: one must admit that nothing has being—because then becoming would lose its value and actually appear meaningless and superfluous. Consequently one must ask how the illusion of being could have arisen" (1968: 708); and then he continues: "But here one realizes that this hypothesis of being is the source of all world-defamation..."

Up to this point, we know that for the author the will is neither just desiring nor commanding, that “one definite will” develops into many forms, and finally that life is a special case of “will to power”. The question that arises then is: if “one definite will” develops into many forms, what are these forms? In the same text he has previously stated:

For there is no will, and consequently neither a strong nor a weak will. The multitude and disgregation of impulses and the lack of any systematic order among them result in a “weak will”; their coordination under a single predominant impulse results in a ‘strong will’: in the first case it is the oscillation and the lack of gravity; in the latter, the precision and clarity of the direction. (1968: 28-9)

Here we are faced with a contradiction: is there “one definitive will” or is there “no will” at all? In a different passage the author has also asserted: “there is no will: there are treaty drafts of will that are constantly increasing or losing power” (1968: 381). This sentence is supplemented by an editor’s footnote on “drafts of will” where Kaufmann states: “perhaps the point is that the will is not a single entity but more like a constantly shifting federation or alliance of drives” (Kaufmann 1968: 381, fn. 91). Here Kaufmann’s point of understanding the will as a constantly shifting alliance of drives corresponds with both the idea that it is not an entity and Nietzsche’s previous statement where he holds that a strong will is the result of the coordination and direction of a multitude of impulses under a single impulse, where the ideas of a *multitude*, a *direction*, and a *predominant impulse* are key points. As he notes in *Beyond Good and Evil*:

Let us say that in every act of willing there is first of all a multiplicity of feelings, namely the feeling of the condition we are moving *away* from and the feeling of the condition we are moving *towards*... so must we likewise recognize thinking: in every act of will there is a commanding thought ... This consciousness lies in every will, as does a tense alertness, a direct gaze

concentrated on one thing alone, an unconditional assessment that “now we must have this and nothing else”. (1997: 19; final emphasis added)

For now, it is possible to argue that the will is not a single or unique ‘thing’ but rather a complex and multifarious drive in which a multiplicity of feelings and a commanding thought are involved in producing a particular emotion: that of command—though the act of willing also involves obeying, as well as the alertness to concentrate on one thing alone. It is precisely that “commanding thought” which coordinates and gives direction to the multitude of impulses, feelings, and thoughts, which results in a strong will. In an aphorism Nietzsche answers the question of how one—or, rather, one’s will—becomes stronger: “By coming to decisions slowly; and by clinging tenaciously to what one has decided” (1968: 486).

Yet, in contrast to the dictum of “clinging tenaciously” in order to become stronger, in his 1886 preface to *Human all too Human* Nietzsche describes the process that the spirit undergoes in order to become free: the *Loslösung*, sometimes translated as “great separation”, “great liberation”, or “disentanglement”. Of principal relevance for this study of African-Cuban religions is his description of one of the final stages of *Loslösung*, where the ‘spirit’ learns the reasons for having undergone it:

You had to become your own master, and also the *master of your own virtues*. Previously, your virtues were your masters; but they must be nothing more than your tools, along with your other tools. You had to gain power over your For and Against, and learn how to hang them out or take them in, *according to your higher purpose*. You had to learn that all *estimations*⁸⁶ have a perspective, to learn the displacement, distortion, apparent teleology of horizons, and whatever else is part of perspective... (Nietzsche 1986: 9)

⁸⁶ Here “estimation” is used for *Werthschätzung*, which Zimmern, Hollingdale, and Faber translate as value judgment (<http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB/MA-I>).

Although Afro-Cuban religions are not about making ‘free spirits’, in my view the above sentences apply to the kind of persons that initiation seeks to re-make or forge. In this chapter, I demonstrate that the different initiatory steps within the various Afro-Cuban religions are precisely ‘steps’ towards becoming one’s own master: master of one’s virtues, capacities, potencies, powers, and affections. In other words they are steps towards gaining power over your ‘For and Against’. Unlike in Nietzsche’s descriptions, however, within Afro-Cuban religions the person does not move alone through that process but is guided by a godfather or godmother and often also by a religious family. Another chief difference is that the aim of the whole process is not precisely about reaching self-determination, as Nietzsche seems to suggest at the beginning of the prologue,⁸⁷ although, to certain extent, it could be understood as entering “zones of proximities” (Deleuze & Guattari 2005) with non-human others and acknowledging or discerning how those others will affect one’s determination—a form of the will that can be referred to for now as ‘othered self-determination’. Despite these differences, initiation insomuch as it resembles the process described by Nietzsche as *Loslösung* can be understood as a process of becoming. As I discuss below, there is a very different yet complementary route to the same understanding of initiation: an argument made by Goldman in his analysis of Brazilian Candomblé.

Before opening discussion of Goldman’s insights, and on a final note with regards the thought of Nietzsche, in *The Birth of Tragedy and the Genealogy of Morals* (1956) Nietzsche stresses the importance of honouring promises which should be made sparingly but bindingly, an argument which is presented with regard to rapport with others:

It is natural to him to honor his strong and reliable peers, all those who promise like sovereigns: rarely and reluctantly; who are chary of their trust; whose trust is a mark of distinction; *whose promises are binding because*

⁸⁷ See Melendez (2007). According to him the sentence: “you had to become your own master”, refers to the inner imperative first felt by the spirit that Nietzsche describes as an “outburst of strength and will to self-determination” at the beginning of the text.

they know that they will make them good in spite of all accidents, in spite of destiny itself. (1956: 2-II, emphasis added)

The unequivocally binding nature of promises is one of the principal values among Afro-Cuban religiosos, particularly among those initiated into Palo. In fact, initiatory steps in Palo involve learning about the responsibility of making promises that are to be made good ‘in spite of all accidents’. Moreover, during the most important consecration ceremony in that religion the initiate must make a particularly binding promise called ‘taking an oath to the Devil’ (*jurar Diablo*), which I consider in more detail in Chapter Five.

1.ii. Initiatory processes through the lens of Goldman, Deleuze, and Guattari

In an article about learning in Candomblé, Goldman argues that in trance “the worlds of the gods and humans converge; the Candomblé adept and his or her *orisha* almost overlap; ... raising humans to almost divine status” (2007: 112). The author warns us, however, that this does not mean that humans are transformed into orichas, and here he introduces Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of becoming:

Becoming is the extraction of particles from the form one has, from the subject one is, from the organs one possesses or from the functions one fills. Relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness that are closest to that which we are about to become and through which we become are installed between these particles. (Quoted by Goldman 2007: 113)

He goes on to explain that becoming is about relations that can be “thought of as a *form of movement through which a subject abandons its own condition* (human for example) by means of a *relation of affect* established with another condition (animal or divine, for example)” (Goldman 2007: 113; emphasis added). Following Deleuze and Guattari he asserts that “‘affect’ ... has nothing to do with emotions or sentiments, naming rather something that affects, alters or modifies” (ibid.), and offers the

authors' example of a child for whom to "become-horse" does not mean that he turns into a horse or identifies himself with the animal, but that "what can happen to the horse can happen to me" (ibid.), concluding that "[b]ecoming uproots us not only from ourselves but from any possible substantial identity" (ibid.).

Given that not everyone initiated into an Afro-Cuban religion becomes possessed, 'becoming' does not play the same crucial role as seems to be the case within Candomblé. However, Goldman's interpretation of possession as 'becoming' can be used to understand the processes a person undergoes through initiation.⁸⁸ Rather than eliciting, for instance, a process of identification with the beings to which the person is consecrated (see Mason 2002 on Santería), initiation can be interpreted as starting a process of discernment of how and in which ways the initiate's will is entangled with that of the beings to which s/he is consecrated. Or, to phrase it in Deleuze and Guattari's vocabulary: it is the beginning of a process of learning or discerning how one's will is 'affected'—that is, altered or modified—by that of non-human others; and how it is to become the will of the brujo or saint. In fact, Deleuze and Guattari's conceptions of becoming and affect offer an interesting perspective from which to interpret particular aspects of Afro-Cuban religions. In *A Thousand Plateaus* (2005 [1980]) they dedicate a chapter to the notion of becoming. Relevant to the study at hand are the following statements:

Becoming produces nothing other than itself. We fall into a false alternative if we say that you either imitate or you are. What is real is the becoming itself, the block of becoming, not the supposedly fixed terms through which that which becomes passes. Becoming can and should be qualified as becoming-animal even in the absence of a term that would be the animal become. (Deleuze and Guattari 2005: 260; emphasis added)

⁸⁸ In a later article (2009) the author also relates initiation to becoming. However, my interest in this particular article is his use of Deleuze and Guattari's ideas of affect as well as his conclusion about the consequence of 'becoming' upon identity.

Here it should be added that they recognize various types of becoming such as 'becoming-woman', 'becoming-child', and 'becoming-molecular', among others (ibid.: 274). They also assert that: "a *becoming lacks a subject distinct from itself*; but also that it has no term, since its term in turn exists only as taken up in another becoming of which it is the subject, and which coexists, forms a block, with the first." (ibid.: 260, emphasis added). Noticeable here is that their idea of becoming in many respects seems to be a further elaboration of Nietzsche's. The latter argues: "one will become only that which one is" (1968: 182); and "[b]ecoming must be explained without recourse to final intentions; becoming must appear justified at every moment" (1968: 377).

For Deleuze and Guattari becoming also "...*concerns alliance*. If evolution includes any veritable becomings, it is in the domain of *symbioses that bring into play beings of totally different scales and kingdoms*, with no possible filiation." (2005: 260; emphasis added), moreover:

...the term we would prefer for this form of evolution between heterogeneous terms is '*involution*,' on the condition that involution is in no way confused with regression. *Becoming is involutory, involution is creative*. To regress is to move in the direction of something less differentiated. But *to involve is to form a block that runs its own line 'between' the terms in play and beneath assignable relations*. (ibid.: 260, 261; emphasis added)

Affecting involves not only an alteration or modification but, as Deleuze and Guattari suggest: "it is the effectuation of a power of the pack that throws the self into upheaval and makes it reel" (2005: 262). The authors use the term 'pack' to designate multiplicity; for them, "packs, or multiplicities, continually transform themselves into each other, cross over into each other." (2005: 271). They argue that it is impossible to predict whether a multiplicity will become or cross over into another one, because such becoming follows alogical consistencies and compatibilities, but there are

thresholds and doors according to which multiplicities change into one other. Initiation for these authors invokes such thresholds and doors (ibid.: 271-272).

While they argue that singing, composing, painting, and writing aim at unleashing these becomings (ibid.: 294), in my view so does initiation. If initiation is understood as setting in motion or unleashing a process of becoming and if it aims to situate the person in a perspective from which everyday life may be valued, that perspective is to shift in the various stages of journey where “becoming itself becomes” (ibid.: 271).

Initiation could then be understood as unleashing processes of becoming by directing one’s will to enter into what I describe as ‘zones of proximity’ (following Deleuze and Guattari 2005 [1980]) with different kind of beings—humans and non-humans— affecting both one’s own and their actual being and performance in this world. Initiation into Afro-Cuban religions is not about unifying the person’s will under that of the beings affecting the person; on the contrary, it is about acknowledging that persons are a bundle of affects ‘affected’ by a variety of multiple beings: spirits, muertos, and deities. It can be argued that the process of discernment of the will is one of discerning its affects, whereas re-forging it entails acknowledging the multiplicity of these and settling (*asentar*) them in a particular order.

In the following two sections the practical aspects of initiation into firstly Palo and then those religions that work with the saints are discussed in light of the theoretical framework presented above, and illustrated by case studies drawn from observation of, and conversations with, the initiates and religiosos whom I knew and worked among for two decades.

2. Initiation into Palo

In Chapter One, I discussed a number of circumstances that might lead a person to approach Afro-Cuban religions. However, between knowing that one is marked for

initiation and actually undergoing the ceremony, there is a gap to be bridged: the person must decide whether or not he/she is to take such a step, thereby raising the issue of agency. Many brujeros maintain that their godsons underwent initiation (rayamiento, scratching ceremony) in order to 'belong' (see below) to the brujo and to be able to demand his⁸⁹ help when they need it. At first sight, this seems to be a rather utilitarian relationship: a 'free' agent 'freely' deciding to take advantage of the relations established through this first initiation. As I will demonstrate, when someone is first initiated into Palo the foundations of a complex relation between the godfather, the godson and the brujo are laid, and to a certain extent it entails belonging, demanding, and reciprocity. But much more than that is involved. If one pays attention to the context and ways in which undergoing initiation is both phased and phrased, one can see that there is something more at stake than merely 'agency'. These do not suggest "intention ... of action" (Barnard and Spencer eds 1996: 891), nor "the implication of possible choices between different actions" (ibid.); on the contrary, initiation as we know is usually referred to as being 'marked' by non-humans through possession or divination and usually confirmed through an oracle.

As Holbraad has convincingly argued for Ifá divination:⁹⁰

[O]racular pronouncements are as much edicts as they are verdicts, in the sense that the initiatory path that Orula marks for neophytes in divination is one that they are *required* to take. Divinatory regulation presents initiatory paths not as options but as obligations: paths have to be followed. (2012: 87)

This also applies to other Afro-Cuban forms of divination. Holbraad argues that in divination the difference between the subject / agent (the consultant) and the predicate (the oracular verdict, e.g. one of initiation) collapses, defining and

⁸⁹ Remember: the brujo is conceived as a male being and not an object. I will, therefore, use the male pronoun to refer to 'him'.

⁹⁰ Ifá is the main divination system used within religions working with the saint (el santo). Orula is the oricha owning Ifá's particular oracle, which only specifically consecrated men or babalawos might use. See also Chapter Three.

inventing—in an act that he calls *infinition*—a new person who must undergo initiation. Thus, the conflation of persons and divinatory verdicts in the divination act produces a ‘trajectory of meaning’ eliding choice which would conceptually “*interrupt* a change in order to intercalate its putative alternative” (2012: 230, emphasis in original). Holbraad concludes that a divinatory verdict that, for instance, says, “you have a path of Ifá’ does not *prescribe* a course of action in the face of possible alternatives, but rather *describes* (or *predicts*) a course that cannot but be as it is” (ibid.: 231) and therefore “becoming a babalawo is something one ‘has to’ do in the sense of having the ceremony ahead of one, as a necessary constitutive element of whom one is (rather than in the ordinary normative sense, where ‘have to’ is a synonym to ‘ought to’)” (ibid.).

Undergoing a marked initiation could also be interpreted in a different way. Following Deleuze and Guattari (2004), it can be argued that through divination and the ritual actions often indicated in its course—that is, minor ritual ceremonies or ‘works’ (trabajos)—the person is led to a zone of proximity with those non-humans that are referenced in the oracles and to whom the ritual works are directed. Remember, saints, spirits and nfumbies⁹¹ are thought to become present during divination (see Holbraad 2012; Panagiotopoulos 2011) by performing the indicated trabajos a relation of affect is elicited between humans and non-humans. For religiosos/as are under the influence of orichas, spirits, and sometimes nfumbies, and if those beings decide that someone should be consecrated into their cult they will lead the person towards initiation by affecting the person’s life (see Goldman 2009) and in particular his/her will. Combining both theories it could be argued that becoming is first unleashed by divination while initiation is a further stage or threshold in the process.

The most common way in which non-human affects become evident in a human’s life is either through possession or their causing ‘problems’ or, rather, through problematic or troublesome situations with which the person feels unable to cope, or

⁹¹ Nfumbi (pl: nfumbies) is the name of the non-human beings in Palo, see previous chapter.

unable to solve by him/her self. As discussed in Chapter One, such situations might range from either being recurrently ill as in Misladis' case, to being involved in constant troubles and even quarrels with family, friends, and work colleagues, often even with the law as happened to Jamaica and Papo Angarica. Many beings might affect a person and, depending on their relations, "there correspond intensities that affect it, augmenting or diminishing *its power to act*" (Deleuze and Guattari 2005: 278, emphasis added). As we know, the brujo contains the potencia that exists in the world. Often just by 'belonging' to him and thus having him on one's side is enough to augment one's power to act and strength one's will in order to cope with or solve problematic situations.

2.1. *The first initiation in Palo: the scratching (el rayamiento)*

As already noted, Jamaica is one of those brujeros whom people respect and fear, and often the fear overcomes the respect. I witnessed the way in which his godchildren, his wife, and even his parents behave during religious ceremonies, obeying him without question, even when he loses his temper and when his orders were in my view erratic. Given that he is a prestigious brujo, many people consult with Jamaica, but to become his godchild or goddaughter is a different story. To be first initiated (rayado, scratched) in his house—as in most Palo houses—means entering a strong community, where by virtue of sharing the same godfather the bonds between initiates are considered family ties (see Palmié 2003 on Santería). Before performing any new rayamiento Jamaica usually consults with his godchildren, as they have to agree to accept the future initiate as a brother or sister. As being first initiated into Palo requires an intensive 'investigation', some months, if not years, might pass from the moment that the person is told to undergo such a ceremony to its actual performance. During that time, the neophyte often spends time with his godfather⁹² to be, participating in ritual ceremonies, performing minor trabajos, and the like. It can be argued that through such performances the godfather enters a zone of proximity

⁹² Since brujeros, i.e. possible godfathers, are mostly male I will refer to them using only male nouns and pronouns.

with his potential godchildren. However, to paraphrase Deleuze and Guattari (2004), it is not always the case that particles are emitted that take on certain relations; Jamaica explained that it might be that, after coming to know the potential initiate or after ‘psychologising’ him/her, the godfather will send the person to be scratched by someone else or the person may decide to undergo the ceremony with a different godfather.

Affects might not develop into a zone of proximity in another way. The investigation process prior to initiating someone into Palo includes establishing the particular *nfumbi* to which the person is to be consecrated. This is usually done through an oracle. When a particular *nfumbi*, for instance *Sarabanda*, has claimed a person, the godfather has to ask his own *Sarabanda brujo* whether he accepts the person to be consecrated ‘above’ his *prenda* or *nganga* (the *brujo*’s substance). It might happen that his *brujo* does not accept the person. In that case the godfather has two options: either to go to his own godfather and perform the ceremony ‘above’ that *prenda*—a course of action which must also be previously confirmed through an oracle—or send the person to be initiated by someone else. Although this is not often the case, I was told that it has happened. Remember: for *religiosos* there is a difference between the ‘general’ *nfumbi Sarabanda* who claimed the person and the specific *nfumbi* that became the ‘*brujo Sarabanda vira mundo etc. etc., etc.*’ (see above), who has his own will and might reject the person. Since becoming creates nothing other than itself, it could be argued that the path of the specific *Sarabanda* was not the one affecting the possible initiate and therefore he/she could not ‘evolve’ in that direction.

The *rayamiento* is one of the few Afro-Cuban ceremonies where initiates do not necessarily ‘receive’ something material—that is, a *fundament*; rather, it is they who ‘give’ something in order to establish a relationship with the *brujo*. This is probably the reason why the ceremony is phrased as being ‘above’ (*arriba*) a *prenda*: the initiate’s body is scratched in particular places and his/her blood is spilt ‘above’ it. Since the ceremony can only be done above a *brujo* that has the path of the *nfumbi* that claimed the person—such as *Sarabanda*—*brujeros* tend to have various *prendas*,

each of a different *nfumbi*, which enables them to avoid ‘giving’ what they have, rather ‘receiving’ as many initiate’s offers as possible, which is perceived as strengthening their *brujos*’ potency and consequently their own.

Once it has been confirmed that he, his godchildren, and one of his *brujos* have accepted a potential initiate to be scratched in his house, Jamaica will, in his own words: “give them the Havana Declaration” (*Declaración de la Habana*);⁹³ that is, he will tell them the rules of his house.

After having psychologised them so that I know I will do it [the *rayamiento*], I sit down with them and ask: “Do you really want me as a godfather? Although I like to play around and make jokes, I’m an old man with a bad temper... When I’m talking seriously, it is serious. If someone ever did anything against you, I would intervene, risking my own life if it were necessary; but when I tell you something you have to obey me. My punishments are hard. Do you accept that?”

His punishments are indeed hard, for which reason his godsons and goddaughters accept his orders without a quibble. This reflects one aspect of the ethics of Palo: abiding by a set of rules based on its normative ethics. But there is a further dimension to being first scratched in Palo that reflects a different aspect related to the ‘making’ or ‘forging’ of ethical persons or ‘subjects’, which Foucault (1985) called ‘practices of subjectivation’. Next, I will turn to what I consider a fundamental aspect of the latter: learning about one’s will.

2.ii. *Strengthening the will*

⁹³ Like many other *religiosos*, Jamaica incorporates references to historical events and Revolutionary jargon into his ‘slang’. The Havana Declaration alludes to two of Fidel Castro’s public speeches during which he stated, among other things, the rights and principles of the new Revolutionary State. See: <http://www.bohemia.cubasi.cu/2005/sep/01/sumarios/historia/primer-declaracion.html> http://www.radioflorida.co.cu/secciones/memoria_viva/septiembre2006/memoria_viva_020906.asp (visited 16/04/2008).

By scratching the initiate's body and allowing his/her blood to spill above the prenda,⁹⁴ a three-way relationship develops between godfather, godson or goddaughter, and the brujo. To the previously described relationship between the brujo and his brujo a new party is added. From that moment, the initiate is considered to belong to both the godfather's house and the brujo; he/she also receives a new name, to be used exclusively within the religious context, that will allow the religious community and the brujo to recognize him/her as initiated. Belonging in this context entails both giving and receiving and therefore a particular form of reciprocity is established. On the one hand, the neophyte, in addition to paying an amount of money⁹⁵ for the ceremony, commits to abiding by the rules of the godfather's house and to practically assisting his/her new religious brothers and sisters as well as the godfather. The godfather in exchange is to assist his godchildren whenever they need it, which implies not only working with the brujo when they are experiencing troublesome situations, but also an enduring commitment in everyday life situations. Moreover, the godfather also commits to teaching them about their responsibilities towards the brujo, instructing them with regards their actions and promises, referred to as 'giving one's word', and training them to control their impulses and passions. He does this through the example of his own everyday life, his behaviour towards them, and through ritual performances during which he allows them to see and perform certain minor rituals or trabajos. Although money is at stake when it comes to religious performances, a rapport of mutual trust, care, and support is meant to develop between godfathers and their godchildren.

On the other hand, by offering their blood and that of a sacrificed animal, initiates commit to the brujo in various ways, the most obvious of which is to feed him regularly through ritual offerings. But initiates also commit to obey the brujo's orders,

⁹⁴ Often the scratching ceremony includes offering and placing above the prenda other body elements, which might include some hair, fingernails, and so forth. Here it is important to recall that sometimes the ceremony does not include the actual cutting (rayamiento) of the body; in such cases marks are drawn in the initiated body and since no blood is spilled above the prenda the other bodily elements become more relevant.

⁹⁵ The sum of money is at the godfather's discretion. As a rule it is far less than initiations within religions working with the saint.

along with those of their godfather, to assume the consequences of the any of the brujo's performances which are carried out on their behalf, and to 'keep their word'. In exchange, the taste of their blood, the bits of their body, and the ritual name enables the brujo to recognize and protect new initiates in difficult situations wherever they might be. Even though godfathers mediate the relation between his godsons / daughters and his brujo, initiates will often have access to the room the fundamentos are kept, thereby being exposed to the brujo through proximity. Initiates in Palo are said to have strong potency on their side whenever they need it.

In Deleuze and Guattari's words (2004), it could be argued that, through the rayamiento, the initiate, the godfather, and the brujo enter a zone of proximity and a web of affects is woven between them. Affect here should be understood both as emotions or sentiments as well as something that alters or modifies, yet emotions and feelings are restricted to the relationships between the godfather and his godchildren. In Palo there is no room for feelings between humans and non-humans. Given that the brujo comprises a dark spirit whose principal aim is to become active in this world, he will use whoever offers him the opportunity to do so, without developing any feelings towards those who have created and attend him. This is one of the main reasons for keeping the brujo's name secret, otherwise anyone with the appropriate knowledge, such as another brujo, would, through practices of subjectivation, be able to convince the brujo to work for him by offering a better tratado.⁹⁶ Brujeros express this by saying that "above the prenda there are no feelings".⁹⁷

Meanwhile by scratching initiates' body and by regular physical immediacy, the zone of proximity between them and the brujo is enhanced. Thanks to the sacrifices and offerings the brujo becomes stronger, while his presence in this world becomes further enhanced and empowered by his enabling initiates to exert their will. In fact, the main elements of initiates that the brujo affects, alters, or modifies are their wills and values. Even if initiates in Palo have strong potency on their side, they must learn that

⁹⁶ Also agreement or commitment.

⁹⁷ "Arriba de eso no hay sentimiento."

it is not to be used to fulfil random wishes but only long-range determinations which are moulded by the determination of the multiple being above whom they were scratched. As we know, the brujo is a creature whose aim is to become active in this world, a goal he achieves by enabling his creator to exert his will. The new initiate has thus to submit not only to the brujo's but also to the godfather's will. Within Palo it is most certainly the case that *willing* a certain action entails commanding and obeying. Initiates must learn to obey their godfather and his brujo in order to feel the emotion of command. In as much as their will is affected by both the godfather's and his brujo's, the scratching ceremony can be understood as a first step towards othering self-determination.

In Palo, such a determination is founded upon one main premise: 'keeping one's word', fulfilling one's promises. 'Trusting those who keep their word' is its corollary. Making promises that are binding and being trustworthy are some of the main values of paleros. In an environment that places high value on machismo, such a quality is mainly ascribed to men. As already noted, most initiates in Palo and, ultimately, most brujeros, are male. Women do sometimes undergo the first initiation (scratching), but only a few continue on to receive a prenda and become a *madre* nganga—the female equivalent of a *padre* nganga—who occupy the second tier of prestige and authority in any Palo house after the tata (male) ngangas (Ochoa 2010: 73). Although it is often argued that women have limitations when working with a prenda or nganga because of their menstruation (see above), the unspoken reason, or one of them, is that women are not considered as trustworthy as men. Unlike heterosexual men, women need to 'prove' their trustworthiness constantly, while homosexuals are as a rule excluded from any initiation in Palo because it is believed that only *hombres enteros* (full men)—a common way to refer to male heterosexuals in Cuba—and some exceptional women are capable of making their promises good in the face of all obstacles and accidents. In fact, keeping one's word or making promises that are binding, which is

also phrased as a quality one possesses—i.e. *tener palabra* (to have a word)—is often expressed as a male quality.⁹⁸

Undergoing the first initiation in Palo (scratching) entails entering into a relationship of reciprocity based on belonging, where the godfather acts as a mediator between godchildren and the brujo. However, while the godfather ‘owns’ the brujo and the brujo ‘owns’ both godfather and godchildren, the godchildren do not own anything besides their word. Even when they have learnt some basic ritual procedures, they depend on the godfather to instantiate the brujo effectively. It is the godfather who dominates or masters the potency of the brujo and who possesses the knowledge of the matter and non-human others that formed him. As Jamaica phrased it:

There is a huge difference between the brujero and the scratched person [rayao]. By belonging to the brujo the rayao might solve his/her problems easily as long as he/she keeps his/her word to him. ... [Yet, while] the brujo determines the person, to survive I dominate him.

In order to have an unmediated relation with a brujo and therefore to dominate or master his potency and access the knowledge he contains, the person will need to receive his own prenda.

2.iii. *Becoming a brujero*

The major initiation in Palo is to become a brujero or tata nganga (father of nganga). A tata nganga or simply a tata is someone who possesses his own prenda (or nganga), who is empowered to work with it, who knows how to build a new one, and is someone who has godchildren: “one becomes a tata (father) only by having children,” goes the saying. In most Afro-Cuban religions, becoming someone’s godfather or

⁹⁸ In Cuba the common expressions are: *tener palabra* (lit. ‘to have word’) or *te doy mi palabra* (lit. ‘I give you my word’), both implying a commitment to something whatever might happen. To ‘have a word’ and therefore be able to make it good—i.e. to keep it ‘in spite of destiny itself’—is also referred to as *palabra de hombre* (a man’s word)

godmother marks the attainment of a higher position in Palo hierarchy. As I see it, becoming a godfather or godmother is a creative act, which religiosos express as ‘giving birth’. Godfathers or godmothers—padrinos, madrinas, tatas or madres nganga—create, give birth, or bring into existence new individuated human and non-human beings as well as “crafting matter into fatefully powerful substances” (Ochoa 2010: 2). Arguably, as with artistic creation (see Sancí-Roca 2005), in order to become a godfather / mother one needs first to have developed certain capacities, strengths, and knowledge; moreover, one needs to master or dominate them.

To formally become a tata nganga entails undergoing a long process involving a series of ritual ceremonies that vary from house to house in terms of the time span which the whole process takes to reach fulfilment, and the details of each ceremony. The most common steps include the processes of preparing the nganga and the tratados to be made with the muerto in order to turn him into a brujo, described in Chapter Two. Then, the first set of ‘confirmation’ ceremonies is performed, during which the initiated has to ‘give knowledge’ (*dar conocimiento*) to the various places from which he/she should receive strength and blessings (a river, the sea, various institutions etc., discussed below) and receives the potencia (potency, capacity, or ‘powers’) from the elements that were used in the creation of the brujo. After that, the proper consecration takes place when the tratado between the brujo and the brujeiro is sealed and their mutual belonging confirmed. From now on, the brujeiro will learn to control the received potency in order to work with it. The consecration includes the ritual ceremonies of *entrega* (the act of ‘giving’ the prenda to the godson) and *asentamiento* (seating) that is usually, but not always, performed at the same time. In the asentamiento, the emphasis is placed on ‘seating’ the prenda or nganga in the godson’s home rather than on the act of formally giving the prenda to the godson to work with it, although the difference is subtle and not necessarily always made among paleros. The consecratory process is complete only after undergoing a second ‘confirmation’. This time brujeiros from other houses or branches (*tierras*, lit. lands, or *contiendas*) are included to ‘give shade’ (*dar sombra*) to the initiated. Below I will show how those processes relate to forging or strengthening the initiate’s will by concentrating their

impulses, feelings, and actions in the service of a single thought or aim and directing them towards its attainment.

2.iv. Giving knowledge, receiving power

From childhood, Jamaica knew that his path was to become a tata. He knew it because it was marked directly by a nfumbi while possessing a member of his family, and because 'things' passed through him. Being quite eager about Palo he started to frequent Joseito, the brujiro who managed to get him out of prison after he tried to evade military service. It took Jamaica years of visiting and working with Joseito to enter a zone of proximity with him and his brujo. Jamaica told me that eventually one day Joseito asked him:

“Do you really want me to prepare (*montar*) a prenda for you?” Of course I said: “Yes!” Then he told me: “Go to the room and take a book and a pencil; when you have gathered all the stuff I will tell you, I will prepare you the prenda.” At the time, I did not know most things that he told me to look for, and I had been working the Brujería for quite a while, but I wasn't discouraged. I went to see various paleros, most told me: “I don't know this, I don't know that.” But, whatever I could find, I brought it to Joseito. He just told me: “Leave it here. There are still many things missing.”

Once, I went to visit an elder to show him the list, and he told me: “I don't know where are you going to find all those things, most of them no longer exist!”

Eventually one day Joseito called me and said: “I will prepare you the prenda. I will provide what is missing.”

Joseito had given Jamaica a list of items which were almost impossible to find. He thought that Jamaica was too young to dominate a prenda and that first he needed to

learn to dominate or control himself. The task that Joseito gave him aimed at coordinating and directing a multitude of impulses under a single goal, which, in Nietzsche's view, results in a strong will. If Jamaica's determination to become a bruero was strong enough he had first to prove that he was able to do whatever was necessary to that end; in other words, he needed to prove that he was able to make his promises good. For now his will was directed towards one thing alone: collecting what he was told to find in order to build a prenda. It was Jamaica's time to learn to obey his godfather and his elders in order to learn to command himself, or the 'something in himself that obeys', as well as the brujo. He had also to develop a 'long-lasting will' and to prove to Joseito the strength of his determination. It took him about three years to get most things of that list and to convince Joseito he was trustworthy enough to have a prenda.

Before the formal consecration ceremony of receiving the prenda, Jamaica underwent a series of confirmation ceremonies (general format discussed above). Currently, when he gives someone a prenda he follows the same procedure that his godfather used with him. However, not all brueros follow the same rules. According to Jamaica, different 'powers' (*poderes*) or potencias are given to the initiate in confirmation ceremonies which result in the initiate gaining a potency (*una potencia*, in the singular):⁹⁹ that of the brujo. Becoming a bruero is precisely about learning to dominate or master it. As he explained, those potencies 'belong to' or are 'contained in' almost everything that 'was created' either by God or by men. In order to gain such potencies and to have them under control—that is, to be enabled to work (*trabajar*) with them—the initiate has to be brought to as many different 'places' as possible, including a river, the sea, various types of trees such as a palm or a Ceiba tree; and also institutions such as a church, a cemetery, a hospital, an airport, a courtroom, and a police station. For instance, when brought to the river the initiate has to speak with it, and tell it about his existence, his determination to undergo consecration and his intentions of working with it in the future. This is called 'giving the river knowledge' (*darle*

⁹⁹ The use of the plural and singular clearly alludes to the multiplicity of 'powers' or potencias that the initiate receives and that constitute the brujo, which are singularized and individuated in the latter.

conocimiento al río). Afterwards the initiate has to ask for the river's blessing while washing his hands in its water; finally he should take some water with him in a small bottle or a river pebble. In exchange, the initiate has to leave some coins in or by the water. In Jamaica's view this ceremony enables the initiate to work with the river in the future, because the river 'knows' him already: "You can't go to a river and say: I'm going to do this and that. Because the river's answer would be: who are you? I don't know you!"

A similar ritual procedure is to be followed in each 'place'. Each time the initiate must repeat his determination to be consecrated as a *brujo* and to work with the potency received in each place. The process of 'giving knowledge' might therefore spread over a few days. As in the case of the river, the initiated has to take something 'from' or 'of' each location visited; for instance, when brought to a tree he could collect some leaves, earth, or roots, and the same applies when visiting a hospital, a police station, and so forth. In Jamaica's opinion, it does not really matter what is taken from each place as long as it was 'in' the place or 'belongs' to it. In a hospital or a police station, the initiate can, for instance, collect the butt of a cigarette, an empty packet that was lying on the floor, a bit of earth, or anything else that was there. The initiate can even ask for something such as a form, or some written information, from someone who works there. All those items will be 'worked' by the godfather and placed inside the *prenda* where they will become constitutive of the *brujo's* matter and potency. The more places to which an initiate has 'given knowledge'—and therefore the more 'items' he has collected to build the *brujo*—the more comprehensive and complex his *potencia* to affect becomes. Such places can be as many as exist in the world.

An older *brujo* once told me that one of the main differences between the saint (*santo*) and the *brujo* was that *santeros* only work with the saints whereas *brujeros* work directly with 'everything' that exists in the world, including what existed before the saints were created. Therefore, in his view, *brujeros* 'occupy', hold, or possess 'more world' (*ocupan más mundo*) and have a greater *potencia* than *santeros*. This corresponds with Jamaica's previously mentioned claim that *brujeros* work with what

“has been created” as opposed to santeros, whose work, in his view, is mediated by the saints—what I called ‘the bureaucracy of the saints’. Some brujeros, mostly older ones, refer to the act of giving a prenda as: *le di mundo* (I gave him/her world¹⁰⁰). ‘Giving world’ is perceived as giving potencia: the strength, capacity, or power of that which exists in the world and, no less important, the knowledge to master and work with it.

Following Deleuze and Guattari, it could be argued that through the confirmation ceremonies “an alliance” is sought, a symbiosis that brings into play beings of totally different scales and kingdoms. However, such an argument would not be precise, mostly in the light of their further argument that

no one, not even God, can say in advance ... whether a given multiplicity will or will not cross over into another given multiplicity, or even if given heterogeneous elements will enter symbiosis, will form a consistent, or cofunctioning, multiplicity susceptible to transformation (2004: 276).

We know that becoming produces nothing other than itself and, as they claim,

each multiplicity is already composed of heterogeneous terms in symbiosis, and that a multiplicity is continually transforming itself into a string of other multiplicities, according to its thresholds and doors” (2004: 274, italics in original).

Rather than seeking a symbiosis, the precise terms would be those used by religiosos: confirmation ceremonies are precisely about ‘confirming’ the terms in symbiosis and enhancing them by directing becoming towards those potencies that are already part of the person even if only in latent form. This might be one of the reasons why initiation into Palo, particularly when becoming a bruero or a tata, requires previous intensive investigation; such potencies can only be ‘given’ to those who already ‘have’

¹⁰⁰ Notice the way in which it is phrased: “I gave him world” and not, “I gave him a world” or “I gave him the world”.

them. In other words, before unleashing becoming the terms in symbiosis need to be confirmed. Deleuze and Guattari argue that there are dangers in the passage between two multiplicities, for example: the borderline between them, or as they called it the “line of flight”, might turn “into a line of abolition, annihilation, self-destruction” (2004: 276). Nevertheless, they also claim that: “Case by case, we can tell whether the line is consistent, in other words, whether the heterogeneities effectively function in a multiplicity of symbiosis” (ibid.). In light of this analysis, it can be argued that confirmation ceremonies are performed before the actual consecration because, through them, the godfather can tell “whether the line is consistent [and] the heterogeneities effectively function in a multiplicity of symbiosis”.

Through the confirmation ceremonies becoming is thus unleashed with a set of criteria, as well as a direction. For now becoming is directed to involve or form a block with the potency contained in the places where the initiate was brought to give knowledge of his existence and will, a potency of which he was unaware or did not have under control until that moment. On the other hand, the act of giving a prenda or ‘giving world’ can be understood as the commencement of a process ultimately enabling the initiate to control and use such a potency: to master it to affect the world by giving him the appropriate knowledge or access to it. Knowledge is, however, a valuable resource within Afro-Cuban religions; most brujeros—and religiosos in general—argue that one should neither give everything one has nor disclose everything one knows. Knowledge is therefore ‘given’ carefully, gradually, and almost never fully; often it is intentionally made difficult to access. Yet one important way to access knowledge within Afro-Cuban religions is through sight. The most prized objects, ritual processes, and ceremonies are considered secret and are consequently kept out of sight. Conversely, through initiation the neophyte is allowed to see ritual performances and how ‘things’ are made or brought to be. For instance, as Jamaica observed, “When I saw how my godfather prepared my prenda, I learned how to do it. It was the first time I saw how a prenda was prepared. If you don’t see, you can’t know how to prepare it properly.”

Jamaica explained that his consecration took place on a Good Friday, though he arrived at Joseito's house the day before, when some ceremonies were to be performed. Early on Friday, Joseito started to prepare the prenda, allowing Jamaica to observe the process and, in Jamaica's words, "to take mental note of how it was done". Jamaica had brought the animals to be sacrificed to the prenda once it was ready and he was hoping to leave with it. However, when it was finished, Joseito told him to go home with the animals and to have them and some other things ready in twenty-one days, when he would 'seat' the prenda (*darle asentamiento*) in Jamaica's home. Jamaica was deeply disenchanted: first, because the prenda was quite small, smaller than most he had seen; and then because he had to wait another twenty-one days to have it with him. Jamaica had been waiting for almost four years to have his own prenda or nganga and twenty-one more days seemed an eternity.

The fact is that Jamaica did not wait only twenty-one days to receive his own prenda. He had been waiting while learning with Joseito for the last four years. He had waited since leaving home to 'open up a world'; since he was first initiated (*rayado*) and started learning about the hidden potencies of the world. He had been waiting since he was a child and vaguely knew that he was to become a tata. During all those years he was strengthening his will; he was 'coordinating his impulses under one commanding thought' and was directing them towards a single purpose: that of becoming tata, a goal to which he had clung tenaciously. Once consecrated, he still had a long way to go; he needed to learn about the displacements of his aims; he needed to master the potency affecting him in order to affect others; he had to learn to keep it under control and 'to hang it out or take it in, according to a higher purpose'. Having to wait a further twenty-one days was another step towards mastering his will and preparing himself to receive and command the new being that he had helped to create, his brujo, who was to other his self-determination.

2.v. The shading (*dar sombre*)

Jamaica emphasised the first part of the consecratory process to become a bruero. He did not say much about the ceremony of receiving or seating the prenda, or about the second confirmation, that of 'shading' (dar sombra) the initiate. It was another bruero, Miguel, who placed great emphasis on the latter part of the process. It is not always the case that a palero receives the prenda straight after it has been prepared. In fact, Jamaica's case is quite rare. Most paleros have to wait for years in order to receive their prendas and actually to become a tata nganga. In those years they must learn as Jamaica had when visiting and 'working' with Joseito. As many explain it, it is usually the muerto or the brujo who determines when the initiate is to receive the prenda. This was Miguel's case.

Miguel was scratched (rayado) as a child because he suffered from some affliction, a fairly common story; from that point he enjoyed being at his godfather's home, where he participated in the ritual life of the house. As Miguel grew up he underwent other consecrations, until his godfather prepared him a prenda. The name of the nfumbi of the prenda was Siete Rayos (Seven Thunders). As a young man, Miguel became an abakuá, but before he could attain a position in the hierarchy within the secret society he was told that he had first to be 'confirmed' in Palo. He explained that he had to undergo the first set of confirmation ceremonies because the muerto expressed this requirement through an oracle.

A few years passed until one day during a toque (festive celebration with sacred drums, see Chapter Three) a muerto, while possessing someone's body, told his godfather that he "had to give something" to Miguel. Only then was the 'giving' (*entrega*) ceremony finally performed and Miguel received his prenda. In Miguel's view, this is the ceremony when a palero is actually made tata; in other words, from that moment he can have his own godchildren.

Then I was given the prenda (*me hicieron entrega*). This is the confirmation ceremony. It is the ceremony in which you are made a tata. In that ceremony the cauldron (prenda) is lifted on top of your head, well... this is done in some

houses; in some others they don't do it. There are many variations from house to house, we all work differently... Well, what is important in the confirmation is to receive the shade (*sombra*) of the people present. They have to touch you, which is the confirmation that they were present in the ceremony. They are the ones that later on might confirm that you were made a *tata*. This is why one should invite *tatas* from other *tierras* (lit. lands, branches, houses) to this ceremony.

In Afro-Cuban religious cosmology shade and shadow play very important roles and there are often specific rituals involving a person's shadow. It is, for instance, important to strengthen it ritually when someone is considered to have a weak will, personality, or health, as is expressed in some *Ifá* and *Santería* stories (*patakie*)¹⁰¹. According to some *brujeros* there are two 'things', as *brujeros* themselves put it (sometimes to avoid being specific—see Chapter 1, fn. 37), that represent the person: the centre of the eyes and the shadow. The relationship between the two is not straightforward. The centres of the eyes are considered to guide people and enable certain people to 'see' what is about to happen, other people's problems, or *muertos* and spirits; at the same time they are regarded as guardian angels. Remember: to see is an important resource for attaining knowledge within Afro-Cuban religions.

On the other hand, I was told that the guardian angel is at the same time a person's shadow. Thus, both the centres of the eyes and the shadow are regarded as guiding and protecting the person. I was also told that the shadow is "another person of you" or "another person of yourself" (*otra persona tuya*) and, therefore, that to perform certain ritual actions to the shadow is a (another) way to affect the person. Moreover, within *Santería* there is a concern with not projecting the shadow, which is explained as passing unperceived, or as not making an impact on people or situations. Projecting the shadow can thus be understood as projecting that 'other person of you' that guides and protects and therefore gives you the strength to affect others. When someone

¹⁰¹ In *Santería* and *Ifá* there is a sign (oracle configuration) that talks about 'the person who does not project his/her shadow'.

does not project his/her shadow s/he might need to strengthen it with an animal sacrifice to feed the earth because that is where the shadow is projected. In short, the shadow is something or someone of the initiate that projects him/her in the world, enabling him/her to affect others, and that at the same time can be used as a means to reach and affect the initiate him/herself.

The ceremony of ‘giving shade’ (*dar sombra*) or ‘shading’ can be interpreted as a ritual ceremony in which elders from other religious branches (*tierras, contiendas*) give something of themselves to the initiated, something that might be projected as part of the self. Because they belong to a different religious branch or land (*tierra*) their potency and knowledge are thought to be other and from another (part of the) world. By shading the initiate, his affections—in both senses of the word—and capacity to affect multiplies. To ‘give shade’ can, moreover, be understood as strengthening or enhancing that ‘other person of the initiate’ that projects him and makes him perceptible in and by the world; or, as Miguel once phrased it in relation to his will to become a *brujo*: “I wanted him [the *brujo*] in order to be a person in this world.”¹⁰² Finally, to shade also implies to concretise the birth of a new *brujo* by confirming it to others. In *paleros*’ idiom, ‘to be a person in this world’ thus involves projecting the self and being acknowledged by others as well as ‘receiving’ and mastering the world’s potencies—as contained in the *brujo*. In short, it entails having the potency to affect the world.

The consecratory step of ‘shading’ is not to be confused with another ceremony that is also called ‘shading’ or ‘giving shade’ (*dar sombra*), which is performed in a different context. This is a ceremony that takes place when someone who was scratched (*rayado*) with a *tata*, wants or needs to have the protection and guidance of a different *brujo*. This is often the case when the first godfather dies or moves away, or when there is a quarrel between godfather and godchild. In such cases the scratched person might approach a *tata* either from the same or a different branch (*tierra* or *contienda*)

¹⁰² “*Para ser persona en el mundo.*”

and ask him—less often her—to take him as a godchild. If the approached tata accepts, a ceremony is then performed through which the scratched person becomes the tata's godson. That ceremony is also called *dar sombra* or just 'to shade' (*sombrear*). In this context to 'give shade' entails giving protection and guidance to the new godchild.

Another important moment of the consecration process, mentioned by Miguel in his testimony, is when the *prenda* is momentarily placed on the person's head, which is the reason often offered by religiosos to argue that consecration in Palo should precede that in the saint. I was told that the *prenda* is only momentarily placed on the person's head, and that the head is not subject of any particular ritual during consecration in Palo as it is in the saint (see below). Moreover, according to Miguel and other paleros such an action is not performed in all Palo houses or branches. In fact, within Palo the head does not play a particularly relevant role as it does in religions working with the saint. As evidenced by the scratching ceremony (*rayamiento*), the focus of Palo ceremonies is the person's body which is scratched or drawn on in various places; sometimes marks or tattoos are left in the scratched parts, while elements of the body such as blood, hair, and finger nails might be used to prepare the *prenda*. During the ceremony of becoming tata the body becomes the 'container' of the potency of the world and sometimes of the newborn being, the *brujo*.

When referring to their initiation as a tata most paleros focus their narratives either on the ceremonies of 'giving knowledge' as Jamaica did, or on those of shading. Although Miguel focused on the latter, he mentioned in passing the act of placing the *prenda* above the head. But there is a crucial aspect of the consecratory ceremony which is often veiled. In fact, some *brujeros* assert that it is no longer performed. Nonetheless, according to some elders, during consecration the neophyte must swallow 'something' of the *brujo*. No one ever specified to me precisely what that 'something' was, but it was made clear that, as a result, the *brujo* would then be inside the person. In that way, the *brujo* becomes the *brujero* and the *brujero* becomes other

within himself. While the otherness of the brujo is internalized by materially having another being inside, it is externalized in the materiality of the prenda. From that moment, brujo and brujo will affect each other. Remember: affecting involves alteration or modification as well as “the effectuation of a power of the pack” (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 265). Since the brujo is many beings, webs of affects might be woven among them and the brujo. The brujo does not only become other, but multiple others, and hence his self-determination becomes othered.

One of the more apparent and distressing aspects of such affect is that the brujo, having incorporated the brujo into himself, might undergo certain of the same experiences as the brujo’s muerto when he was alive. Given that the muertos lending themselves to the tratado of becoming a brujo commonly underwent the most extreme experiences of human life—as outlaws, criminals, robbers, killers, and so forth—or died sudden and violent deaths, those experiences are often of a violent or tragic nature: illnesses, accidents, imprisonment, and violence. But remember: the brujo’s muerto also became other, as he was crossed with a nfumbi and ‘things’ were added to him. Therefore, the relationship between the muerto and the brujo is mediated and limited by the degree to which the brujo enables the brujo to overcome the muerto’s affects. As long as the brujo is inside the brujo’s body it could be argued, paraphrasing Goldman (2007), that actually the worlds of non-humans and humans converge; however, instead of raising humans to a divine status, as Goldman argues for possession, here non-humans attain human status, while humans become human, all too human.

3. Initiation and ‘the will’ in religions that work with the saints (orichas)

If the brujo supplies the option for humans to exert their will, religions working with el santo are all about learning how the will is entangled with that of particular non-human others: saints or orichas. While becoming a brujo requires strengthening of the will and the forging of a long-lasting determination in advance of initiation;

initiation into religions working with saints / orichas requires the opposite: the temporary restraint of one's will. In that way the wills of non-human others may be enacted through the initiate's will, eliciting a process of acknowledging their multiple affects and their further 'settling' (*asentamiento*) into the desired order and coordination under the precision and clarity of direction perceived as being provided by the head oricha. As I will show, during the seven days of the asiento ceremony, most performances on the part of the initiate that appear to be the response of his/her own will or determination are greeted with dismay, while those that are perceived as being effected by the head oricha are encouraged. In that way a zone of proximity is enhanced, allowing the initiate's will to be affected by that of the head oricha. Moreover, during those seven days the person becomes the subject of ritual actions performed by the godfather or godmother, his/her main helper the *yubon / yubona*¹⁰³ and other religiosos who play an important role during the ceremony. It could be argued that during those first seven days the person's actions are fully responsive to the will and wishes of others, both humans and non-humans.

Although the main initiatory ceremonies are performed within the space of seven days, the whole initiatory process into religions working with orichas extends over a year during which the initiate, considered a newborn and treated as such, must abide by strict rules that penetrate every single aspect of their lives. Only after that first year are initiates regarded as competent to re-assume their everyday lives.

The main ways in which initiates learn about and re-forge their will is by directing and developing what religiosos call a gift (*don*) or a virtue (*virtud*) in order to establish a zone of proximity with the head oricha, and by learning and acknowledging that what is usually perceived as *aché* (power, capacity) and *inspiración* is the result of the oricha's affects. In other words, initiation into the saint is about directing a process of becoming so as 'to involve or form a block' with the orichas considered to affect the person. As a process it strives towards learning to master or have under control one's

¹⁰³ Also spelled *oyubon* or *oyubona*. According to Mason it means: "the one who witnesses" (2002: 60); it also refers to the second godfather / mother or assistants during the ceremonies.

gifts, virtues and *aché* in order to reach what I have called othered self-determination. In what follows I focus on the processes through which the initiate's will is first revoked before being redirected towards a zone of proximity with the head *oricha*, subsequently to re-form and become what Afro-Cuban *religiosos* understand as a gift, virtue, *aché* (power, capacity) and inspiration.

3.i. Forging identity or becoming individual

The main initiatory ceremony within *Santería*—the *asiento de santo* (seating of the saint)—has often been described as a rite of passage that aims at some kind of identification between the neophyte and his/her *oricha*. An example at hand is that of Mason's *Living Santería* (2002) wherein the author offers a detailed description of the various ceremonies that initiates undergo during the seven days that the whole ceremony lasts. Following the classic phases of a rite of passage—separation, liminality, and aggregation (Van Gennep 2004 [1960]; Turner 2008 [1969])—Mason describes the *asiento* as starting with a ceremony performed by the river. There the initiate has to discard his/her old clothes and, after being washed and purified with the river's water, he/she dresses in new garments, which in Mason's view marks the separation phase: "The initiated sits in seclusion She is betwixt and between, as if dead. No one addresses her directly, but *she can do nothing alone*" (Mason 2002: 62, emphasis added); "many images of death have enveloped the initiate" (ibid.: 77). In the author's view, the next phase of "liminality and *comunitas*" starts with the crowning ceremony and ends after the *itá* (an intensive oracular consultation when the initiate's new *orichas* speak to her for the first time): "the royal and nuptial metaphors intermix and govern the next phases of the *asiento*. These processes *identify the new initiate with the orichas* in general and with the head-ruling *oricha* in particular" (ibid., emphasis added)—in other words, they mark a separation from the everyday and *comunitas* with the *orichas*. Regarding the last phase, that of aggregation, he just

mentions that “on the seventh day, the oyubona take the iyawó¹⁰⁴ into the world” (2002: 67-68). The author focuses on ceremonies he considers identify the initiate with his ruling oricha as well as linking them symbolically (ibid.: 81). His main argument is that:

The identification of the initiate with the head oricha in the asiento results in the slow merging of their personalities and social faces in the years following initiation. The standard characteristics of the head oricha become increasingly visible in the social actions of the priestess. These qualities become fluid parameters for the identity of the initiate. (Mason 2002: 81, emphasis added).

At first glance it does seem that identification between the initiate and his/her head-ruling oricha is sought. In fact, I have often witnessed religiosos’ regarding the actions, tastes, perceptions, personal histories, and even some character features of santeros/as as being those of their tutelary oricha. However, a total identification is criticized. Humans belong to this world and are to act according its ‘laws’,¹⁰⁵ whereas the orichas move between this world and the beyond (más alla). It is not rare to hear criticism such as, “He thinks he is Changó himself,” when a son of the oricha acts in an extreme way that can be attributed to the oricha’s personality or life, demonstrating, for instance, arrogance—given that Changó was a king—or mistreatment of women—given that the oricha was a womanizer. Consequently, santeros often highlight the difference between themselves and their orichas: “Changó is Changó, and I’m myself”.¹⁰⁶

Rather than interpreting the asiento and the following process as one of identification with the head-ruler or even with any other oricha, I suggest that as in the case of the

¹⁰⁴ *Yawó* or *iyawó* is the lucumí term used for the person who has just undergone initiation in Santería and for the first year after being initiated. According to Mason it means “younger wife” (2002: 129), which stresses the nuptial metaphors of the process (ibid.: 79).

¹⁰⁵ There is a sign or *odú* (oracular configuration) containing a saying that plainly expresses this idea: “You have to learn to live in this world—or according to its laws—or you will learn in the other.”

¹⁰⁶ “*Changó es Changó y yo soy yo.*”

brujo, initiation is better understood as becoming. As we know, becoming should not be confused with transforming into something different—that is, an oricha—or with “similarity ... imitation or identification” as maintained by Goldman (2007: 113) but, as the author suggests, it rather entails uprooting “us not only from ourselves but also from *any* possible substantial identity” (ibid., emphasis in text).

As a process of becoming, initiation in the saint encompasses not only the person but also the non-human beings involved. As discussed in Chapter Three, initiation is not just about ‘giving birth to’ or ‘making’ new *persons*, it is also about giving birth to or making new individual saints (see Mason 2002: 72-76). As Goldman claims for Candomblé: “‘making the saint’ ... actually means the ritual production of *two* individualized entities out of two generic substrates. A more or less undifferentiated individual, who becomes a structured person and a generic *orisha* who is actualized as an individual *orisha*.” (2007: 112, emphasis in text)

Initiation could then be understood as one of the critical stages of a process of becoming that is usually unleashed by divination, where zones of proximity between different kind of beings—humans and non-humans—are heightened or enhanced, affecting their actual being and performance in this world. Although, in general, orichas might affect their sons and daughters by, for instance, inspiring them to perform certain actions or perform them in particular ways, such an influence is not always acknowledged and sometimes it is even disregarded. However, when the orichas become individualized in the asiento ceremony they also become subjects of constant attention, receiving the periodic animal sacrifices that, *religiosos* claim, enable them to talk through their oracles, and also give them the strength to perform in this world.

Here a new layer or ‘axis’ of movement could be added to that proposed by Holbraad for the orichas whereby, through divination, they are transformed along a “self-differentiating axis” (Holbraad 2012: 146) from relative “transcendence” to relative “immanence”. I suggest that through initiation a self-differentiating axis also runs

from generic orichas to individualized, building a block that involves them with the initiate. In as much as he/she is affected by the will of multiple beings—but mostly by that of the head-ruling oricha, which provides precision and clarity of direction—the initiate should become not a ‘unified being’ but a unique and singularized (see Opiari 2004) ethical individual engaged in a constant and unsteady process of othering his/her self-determination and the specificities that personalize and singularize him/her.

In the following section I discuss the details of the asiento ceremonies that relate to the initiate’s will, how it is temporally restrained, and the ways in which it is perceived as being the field for the head oricha’s performances. As illustration, I use the account of a relatively young santero: Evaristo.

3.ii. Setting the process in motion.

When Evaristo had finally created the conditions¹⁰⁷ to make the saint, he visited his godmother and gave her the money needed to pay the santeros/as that were to work during the ceremony. Within Santería jargon that money is called *derecho*, which has a direct translation of ‘right’ (see Holbraad 2005). Rights are paid to each santero/a working during the seven days that the ceremony lasts. Initiation entails performing numerous ritual ceremonies and activities for which many people are needed. Those people—who are mostly initiated themselves, that is, are santeros/as—are said to be ‘lifted’ (*levantar*) to work. The underlying idea is that as santeros/as might be busy in their jobs or homes, if their services are required one has to ‘lift’ or ‘pick’ them up by paying, not a salary or commission, but a ‘right’ for their knowledge and performances.

Although Evaristo had everything he needed for the asiento he still hesitated about undergoing it. A few days after having paid the rights, however, his godmother asked him to visit. As he told me, after having a short chat with her, he was brought into a

¹⁰⁷ See Chapter Two.

room and there she placed Ogún's necklace over his head. Remember that each saint or oricha is conceived of as owning different items (*atributos*), among which are necklaces of particular colours and combinations of colours. This 'catching' (*prendimiento*) is a simple ceremony with which initiation starts and from that moment Evaristo was caught (*prendido*) by and for the saint. The godmother or godfather just places the tutelary oricha's emblematic necklace around the initiate's neck, though in some houses they use Obbatalá's, since he is the oricha that owns people's heads. This ceremony could be said to start the separation phase, if the *asiento* is being framed as a rite of passage. From that moment the person is considered to be a prisoner (*estar preso*), or as having been caught for the saint: he/she can no longer leave the house where the ceremonies are to be performed unless given permission, and from that moment, must obediently follow the directions of his/her godfather or godmother and of the elders participating in the ceremony. In other words, from that moment initiates can no longer perform any action involving their will, and most of the following rituals reinforce the fact that the person's will is first to be revoked only to be forged anew during the year following initiation through ritually given 'faculties' (*facultades*), among other ceremonies.

As previously mentioned, *religiosos* refer to the seating ceremony as the birth of a new person, and certain other ceremonies underscore the idea. There, is for instance, the ceremony that Mason refers to as starting the separation phase: the river ceremony, which "cleans away the previous life and identity of the initiated. The old clothing represents the old life that is cast away, and thus this ceremony begins the process of rebirth by 'erasing' ... the past" (2002: 76, emphasis added). In his view, during this and throughout some of the following ceremonies, the individual is 'dissolved' or 'erased' since he/she "lacks agency and a name; she cannot eat or talk" (2002: 77). As I understand it, rather than 'erasing the past'—which could only be achieved metaphorically—the person becomes disentangled from his/her previous will and values, a process that is marked by cutting or tearing off (*rompimiento*) the person's old clothes both by the river and before the crowning ceremony (*coronación*).

During the seven days of the *asiento* the person is not allowed to do anything by him/herself; as observed by Mason, “she can do nothing alone”. The neophyte is fed, washed, and dressed by the *yubon/a*, the main helper of the godfather or godmother. This is just the start. As mentioned, for the first year after initiation—known as the *yaworaje*—the new initiate has to observe strict rules of behaviour regarding every aspect of everyday life; in other words, there are rigid prescriptive moral rules to be followed, although usually the first three months of *yaworaje* are the most restrictive. During the year, the person is not called by name but by the generic term of *yawó* or *iyaw*; they must dress only in white, and eat only from their own plates and cutlery on the floor, that is, they cannot take a seat at a table. Moreover, *yawós* cannot use a mirror and therefore all the mirrors in their houses must be covered with a white cloth; their heads must always be covered and they should not go out in strong sunshine or get wet when it rains. If *yawós* work, they should return home directly after it finishes; they should not hang around with friends or go out at night; and they should abstain from alcohol and sexual relations—among a long list of interdictions. Only by undergoing particular ritual ceremonies will the *yawó* be re-enabled (*facultado*) to perform most of the mentioned forbidden actions.

Evaristo, like many other *santeros*, describes the year of *yaworaje* as a time during which ‘one cannot do what one wants’ but must follow the godmother / father’s advice. Even if there is a special occasion requiring the *yawó*’s presence or participation—for instance, a laic family or work festivity—the *orichas* themselves must first approve it through the oracles. *Yawós* do not, however, always conform to the norms as strictly as they are expected to, and Evaristo was no exception. Being a young man, he was keen on parties, drinking, and hanging out with friends. On a few occasions he broke the rules and went out with friends, but living in a small city like Matanzas has its disadvantages and he was seen by elder *santeros/as* who would either admonish him or tell his godmother. Eventually, he chose to visit his godmother or other religious kin when he did not want to go home straight after work.

According to Evaristo, since there are not many things that can be done as a yawó, he had lots of time to think and to learn. For instance, when he got home from work he would read the book containing the notes that were taken during his itá, and as, in common with many initiates, he wanted to know more about his sign (the particular oracular configuration), he read whatever he could on the subject. Spending lots of time with his godmother who was often surrounded by santeros/as was one of his main sources for learning about religion and in particular about his ruling oricha and sign. Since yawós are discouraged from expressing their opinions and performing most everyday activities, the first year after the asiento is often regarded as a time of listening, observing, and reflecting.

The asiento ceremony varies according to the saint that is crowned in the person's head. As a son of Ogún, Evaristo had to undergo a ceremony in the bush (*el monte*) which he describes as beautiful. He was brought there blindfold and in the company of five daughters of Ochun. After some ceremonies were performed, he found himself alone in the bush but he could hear Ochun's daughters singing and laughing. At some point, he was possessed by Ogún. There was something he had to find in the bush and bring back to the house where the ceremony was taking place. As he explained, it was not he who had to find this but Ogún. It was a proof (*prueba*) that Ogún had actually possessed him.

There are at least two other moments during the seven days of the asiento when the saint is compelled to 'come down' (*bajar*) to possess or 'ride' (*montar*) the person: during the crowning and in the initiate's 'presentation' to the batá drums. The latter is a public ceremony during which the initiate is literally presented or introduced to the community of religiosos invited for that purpose and to the drums; from that moment onwards the newborn is allowed to dance in front of the sacred drums. Those are the only instances when initiates actively perform during the asiento, although religiosos perceive the actions as being performed by the deity and not by the initiate. In their view, during such moments the initiate is merely a means for the saints to become active in this world.

Evaristo's experience of being possessed is not universal; when it does not take place, it is then understood that the person was not chosen by the saints to act as their medium. If the person is possessed at a later point, religiosos will question the authenticity of the experience and ignore it or dismiss it as a stage performance. There is another implication to not being possessed: if the potential initiate is male, it means that he can be consecrated as a batá player. Since batá drums are considered to establish and hold a conversation among themselves, and given that the orichas are able to compel the drums to possess their children's bodies, a batá player who becomes possessed himself puts at risk the flow of such conversation (see Ortiz 1965). This is an explanation which has often been offered to me, though mainly in Havana and Matanzas city. On the other hand, I have also witnessed batá toques in the countryside where a consecrated batá player was possessed and another player readily took his place. It seems that the requirements for being consecrated as a batá player are less strict in the countryside, thereby allowing for variations.

A further implication of not being possessed during the asiento in the case of a male initiate is, as we know, that he can be further initiated into Orula's cult (entailing access to knowledge of Ifá, the main divinatory system), going on to become a babalawo, providing that he has such an initiation in his path. There are cases in which initiation into Orula's cult has been 'marked' by the oracles before an initiate has undergone the 'seating' ceremony but during it the person was possessed; in such cases the person can no longer be initiated into Ifá, as his possession is perceived as the saints exerting their will to have the person for themselves. This adds a new dimension to the tensions between santeros and babalawos mentioned in the previous chapter. Although babalawos are recognized as the highest religious authority within Ocha/Ifá, and their supremacy in determining initiatory paths through their oracles is widely accepted—but not necessarily always followed—among santeros, such authority is practically subverted by according temporal priority to the asiento ceremony. By having temporal priority, the orichas that are seated are given precedence over Orula's divinatory verdicts in determining initiatory paths since

during the asiento the orichas are compelled on a few occasions to possess their children. In other words, the hierarchical initiatory order within making the saint of first receiving certain orichas—usually but not always beginning with the ‘warriors’ (guerreros)—then later moving on to the asiento ceremony and finally, if male, to becoming a babalawo, is perceived as ultimately determined by the will of the orichas who can become humanized by possessing their children and the wills of their children. From the previous chapter we know that only those orichas who possess their children can be ‘made’ or ‘seated’ in their heads, while those who do not come down (bajan) and mount (montar) their children—as in the case of Orula—are to be ‘received’. It could be objected that the initiatory step of making the saint can be avoided and a man can be directly initiated into Orula’s cult if this ‘comes out’ through divination, and there are indeed many cases of this. However, avoiding such a step does not depend on the will of either Orula or the potential initiate. Most men are directly initiated into Orula’s cult because their tutelary oricha has not expressed his/her will that he be consecrated.¹⁰⁸ Such babalawos are, however, not allowed to participate in any Santería ritual, which eventually undermines their authority within that religion. Santeros argue that babalawos previously initiated into the saint—which comprise the majority—have abandoned the saints’ cult for Orula’s,¹⁰⁹ or, rather, the other way round: that the saint abandoned his/her child when allowing him to pass (pasar) into Ifá. When a man is to be initiated into Ifá he should not work with the saints, that is, he should not actively perform as a santero. This points to the critical role of performance in the making of ethical persons within Afro-Cuban religions.

Ogún was not to abandon Evaristo, however, and ‘mounted’ him again during the actual seating: the crowning (coronación) ceremony, which is the most important ceremony of asiento, giving its name to the whole process. The asiento is sometimes also referred to as ‘mounting a saint’ (*montar un santo*) by the person who actually performs and directs the ceremony—that is, the godfather or godmother—which

¹⁰⁸ It should be remarked that there are a number of babalawos that claim complete independence from Ocha.

¹⁰⁹ This further reflects the tensions between santeros and babalawos.

probably also alludes to the fact that the saint that is being mounted might mount or possess the initiate during the ritual ceremonies. Nowadays the most widespread form of the asiento also consists in receiving another four or five orichas in addition to the one that is seated on the person's head.¹¹⁰ Those additional orichas are known as the 'pillars' (*pilares*) because they are understood to provide support for the newborn person. Receiving them also allows the neophyte to initiate other people into their cult in the future. Remember that within most Afro-Cuban religious one can give only that which one already has.

It is held that the pillars support the initiate by giving him/her *aché* (power). In fact, each oricha that a person receives—whether during initiation or not—is considered to give, or rather enhance, the individual's capacities, gifts, virtues, and *aché*, powers that the person does not have under control. This also applies to the main oricha seated in the person's head, which is his/her most important source of *aché* (power). Thus the initiatory process also entails learning to master those powers, virtues, or gifts in order to work with them. During the actual seating ceremony all the orichas—that is, their material fundamentals (*fundamentos*)—are momentarily placed on the initiate's head while the participating *santeros* sing songs in their praise. The last oricha to be put in place is the tutelary oricha, but it is not just momentarily placed but, rather, literally seated (*asentado*); one could say that the oricha is practically ingested into the head, which thus becomes a container of the oricha, with his/her *aché* (power) becoming the initiate's own.

As with the *brujo* it can be argued that by the act of literally seating the tutelary oricha in someone's head the oricha becomes the initiate and the initiate becomes the other within himself. While the otherness of the *santero/a* is internalized by materially having the power (*aché*) of another being within the person, it is externalized in the materiality of the oricha's fundament. Much like the *brujo*, the orichas are conceived of as multiple beings. Unlike the *brujo*, however, their multiplicity is not due to their

¹¹⁰ For other forms of asiento see Brown 2003, Chapter Three.

being composed of multiple and variable beings but, as already noted, they are, become, or move between a multiplicity of objects, elements of nature, and natural phenomena, besides having multiple paths and becoming them or being them (Panagiotopoulos 2011), or being motions through and through (Holbraad 2012). Via initiation, their motion or becoming is directed towards the initiate's head, which will then contain the multiplicity. However, after the actual seating or crowning ceremony, the tutelary oricha's path is determined during the itá (the detailed oracular consultation), which, on the one hand, organizes the multiplicity according to the path's direction and, on the other, singles out or individualizes both the person and the oricha. The oricha's and initiate's multiple becomings are further multiplied and at the same time further individualized through the various signs and paths that 'come out' during the itá (see next chapter). Since, according to Afro-Cuban cosmology, the head controls the body, if the initiate is a brujo the head-ruling oricha is held to control the brujo, and his/her particular path is bound to direct both the brujo's and the brujo's multiplicities.

There is a further way in which the person is individualized—or individuated—through initiation in the saint. As already noted, according to Afro-Cuban cosmology every person comes into the world with a gift, a virtue, or aché, which are perceived as being intertwined with the various orichas affecting the person, in particular with the tutelary oricha. An important way in which initiation in the saint sets in motion a process leading to, or enhancing, zones of proximities between humans and orichas is by its enhancing those gifts, virtues, and aché—considered the result of the orichas' affect—that make the person unique. In consequence of this the orichas are perceived as performing through the person—using the person as a medium, in other words—thereby othering his/her self-determination. In order to illustrate how this works, I will discuss the example of a santero we have already met, one who placed great emphasis on such notions: Papo Angarica.

3.iii. From suspicion to inspiration

As he disliked talking about Santería and avoided answering questions, Papo's stories were always fragmented, and he limited them to the aspects he wanted to share at a particular moment. A theme on which he often insisted was that of having what he—like other religiosos—called a gift (*don*), a virtue (*virtud*), or *aché*. He was, however, never specific about precisely what he meant by a gift, or what a virtue or *aché* might be and, although he insisted that his *aché* was inherited given the *trascendencia religiosa* of his family,¹¹¹ he would not specify what it was; moreover, he would define different gifts or virtues according to the story he was telling. Sometimes he would talk about having a gift or a virtue as something different from having *aché*, whereas at other times he referred to them as being the same.

Aché is one of those subjects that have interested not only Afro-Cuban but also Afro-Brazilian scholars. In the previous chapter we saw how Goldman referred to it as a single force that “is continuously diversified and concretized” in everything that exists in the world including the ‘*orixás*’, whereas in the Cuban context Holbraad regarded it as “the premise of diversification itself”, arguing that “[t]he role of *aché* is to provide the conditions for the transformation of divinities as motions from (or better, of) transcendence to immanence” (2012: 157). In a different vein, Mason (2002) offers the notions of *aché* propounded by a prestigious santero in the USA, Ernesto Pichardo. Interestingly Pichardo draws a comparison between *aché* and *mana*, as Holbraad does when discussing the subject, although they do it in different ways. According to Pichardo, “[a]shé is the *mana* of every person and every object. The capacities of human beings to attract the spirits and divinities are one aspect of it, and each object has its own *ashé*” (cited by Mason 2002: 93). In his view *aché* varies from one person to the other and consecrated people have it within themselves, as noted above. Another important text on the subject of *aché* is Lydia Cabrera's classic *El Monte* (2000). In that book, rather than offering specific definitions of the term, she only sometimes broadly explains what is meant by it, using it in various contexts such as when she links *aché* with grace, virtue and gift, which resonates strongly with Papo Angarica's occasional

¹¹¹ See Chapter Two.

use of the term as equated with virtue or gift. In fact, Papo once told me: “I know a bit about religion because the elders (los viejos) taught me, and besides I was born with something, which I don’t even know what it is.” Yet he continued: “It is aché. Aché is a grace that God gives you; it is a grace with which you come into the world that nature gives you.” I asked him how he knew what his aché was and he answered:

Well, I don’t know, people say that. What I know is that I didn’t believe in any of these things and I rejected and criticized them. But I was born into a family with a *trascendencia religiosa*—that has a gift; they have it from Africa and when they came here, they kept having it.

On a different occasion, while talking about how he does his consultations, he told me that he does not ‘see’ or ‘hear’ the muertos, but that he has aché; and then he corrected himself and added, “Well, I don’t have it any longer.” It was in that indirect way that he told me that aché is something that a person can lose. In fact, he is not the only elder who refers to the loss of aché. It seems that it can be lost with age and due to a lack of attention. But we are not at that stage in discussion. On the contrary, we are at the other end of the continuum, at the point when someone first realizes they have a gift or aché.

Although Papo was not interested in becoming a santero, at some point he started to experience various situations related to his future initiation. Dreams were an important part of those experiences; he told me that he dreamed about most of the aspects of the seating of his saint. For instance, he dreamt that he should go to particular places and there he would find something he needed for his *asiento* ceremony. But, apparently, he refused to pay much attention to his dreams, and, likewise, he would not state precisely when they started to happen.

One story he told concerned the *oricha* that opens and closes the paths, the owner of destiny, and the first to be received within *Santería*: *Eleguá*. On one occasion Papo dreamt the precise details of how to consecrate the *oricha*’s *fundamento*, but it was a

while before he actually performed what he had dreamt. The most direct remark he would offer on this was that when ‘people’¹¹² saw his Elegguá, they asked him who had ‘given’ it to him. Within Santería, as I have noted, people traditionally receive their individualized orichas in a ceremony led by a consecrated santero/a. When I brought this up, Papo’s answer was simply, “I did it myself,”—thereby challenging established ritual procedures. He explained that he just followed his ‘inspiration’ and did not want to get involved with practicing santeros. Inspiration was another important term in Papo’s vocabulary. Many of the things he did within the various religions he practiced were not of his own determining but the work of other beings, which ‘inspired’ him to perform in certain ways. Those other beings were muertos, the spirits, and the saints. Inspiration can thus be used to explain how people might be led to enact the will of non-humans who manifested mainly in dreams; sooner or later after having such dreams Papo would feel the urge to perform what those beings had inspired him to do.

One of the most remarkable stories he told me concerned the way in which he had found Yemayá’s and Changó’s stones. Usually there is someone in charge of collecting the stones used as fundamentos for the saints, and the godfather or godmother has to ask each saint through an oracle whether they accept the stone as theirs. Since saints have a particular number of stones the question has to be asked of every one, therefore for an asiento ceremony it has to be posed over twenty times (for further details see Mason 2002: 70-71). But Papo’s case was different. He knew that most of the stones he had collected both ‘were’ and ‘belonged to’ particular orichas, making it pointless to use the oracles to confirm it. He knew it because, as he told me, it was a muerto himself who gave him the stones. In the case of Yemayá and Changó, it was a muerto in the shape of a ram.¹¹³

¹¹² He did not precisely specify who asked him that question; from the context I could only assume that consecrated santeros/as were among such ‘people’.

¹¹³ Muertos might appear to people in different guises including animals. The ram is the preferred sacrifice to both Yemayá and Changó. Notice that it was a muerto and not the orichas themselves who provided the orichas’ fundamentos.

One night, he dreamt that he was walking in a field in the countryside and suddenly he saw a ram. As he approached, he could hear the ram talking, telling him to come closer and pick something up, because that something was his. Papo replied that he would not pick anything up and then the ram started to sing. Afterwards, Papo saw a little house and an old woman coming out of it; she started to explain what was going on with the ram. At that point, he woke up. As usual, he did not pay much attention to his dream. However, some time later, he went into the countryside and realized that he was walking on the same field as the one in his dream and he started looking for that 'something' that the ram had offered him. He did not find anything on that occasion and he returned to that field again, and again, and again, but he still did not find a thing. He told me that he became obsessed with finding that something. One day, while searching the field, he became furious and told himself that he would no longer look for anything and kicked a big stone lying on the ground nearby. But then a smaller stone came out of it, and when he bent to have a closer look he saw all of Yemayá's stones and, close by, those of Changó. He claimed that they came out 'ready' to be used for the saints' fundamentos. Later he discovered that these stones had had an owner, a deceased initiate.

On that occasion, Papo also explained that nowadays many santeros sustain that a dead person's 'saint's stones' should not be used to initiate someone else, although, if they are, then they must first be ritually washed. Nevertheless, the stones he found were used in his consecration, and without performing any previous ritual cleansing. He argued that the ritual cleansing was not necessary, and nor was interrogating the saints to see whether they would accept them. Fifty years after his initiation he knows with his heart that they were the right ones for him and his saints.

Papo's dreams, and his obsession with finding that something that was his, could be interpreted in various ways. First, it could be argued that Papo was undergoing similar processes as those described by Nietzsche in the first stage of the *Loslösung*: the process of becoming a free spirit. Here it is important to note that for Nietzsche such a process is in no way related to religious becomings; on the contrary, religion is one of

the main focuses of his critique and probably something from which to be separated or disentangled in order to become free. That apart, there are striking convergences between the processes of becoming a free spirit and those undergone by Papo—and probably by many other religiosos. As Nietzsche describes it, during the first stage the “separated man ... wanders about savagely with an unsatisfied lust” (1986 [1878]: 3); “[t]here is some arbitrariness and pleasure in arbitrariness to it, if he then perhaps directs his favour to that which previously stood in disrepute—if he creeps curiously and enticingly around what is most forbidden” (ibid.). Papo certainly directed “his favour to that which he previously disregarded”: the religion of his elders, which in his own words he had “rejected and criticized”. Furthermore, he was creeping “curiously and enticingly around what was most forbidden” with “some arbitrariness and pleasure in arbitrariness” when, for instance, he first consecrated Eleguá by himself challenging the elders, an action that can also be qualified as “the first outburst of strength and will to self-determination” (ibid.). There was also “arbitrariness and pleasure in arbitrariness” in arguing that the stones he found did not need to be confirmed as being and belonging to the saints. Previously, in order to find them, Papo had apparently “wandered about with an unsatisfied lust”. Here it should be pointed out that what might appear as “arbitrariness” was assumed by religiosos to be the result of the orichas’ will inspiring Papo to perform those actions.

Another way of interpreting Papo’s dreams, actions, and obsessions is by using Deleuze and Guattari’s idea of affect as an analytical framework: Papo was experiencing “the effectuation of a power of the pack [of multiple orichas] that throw the self into upheaval” (2004: 240). In his case the ‘upheaval’ was eventually to be directed towards initiation. A final interpretation is that offered by Papo himself: it was the saint who incited his dreams and inspired his apparently arbitrary ritual performances; it was the muerto who gave him the stones to be used in his asiento ceremony because it was the saint’s will (voluntad) that he became a santero. In claiming the muerto had offered him the saints’ stones he elaborated on the cosmological premise that the dead give birth to the saint which, following Eliade’s

previously discussed argument on origins (see Chapter Three; Eliade 1991), could be understood as using a myth of origin as a source of power.

Papo's stories about events leading up to his being initiated do not end there. There is, for instance, another tale about how he found the stones of a further saint, but by chance rather than in a dream: one day while returning home he walked over a bridge and there he saw some stones; recognising them as Obbatalá, he collected them. For him it was further evidence or proof (*prueba*) that he had to make saint. At that time, around 1950, Papo got to know a potential godfather named Cheo Changó, a famous santero from Matanzas city who was a friend of his mother and other members of his family. Cheo, like Papo, enjoyed drinking and parties and the two of them started to spend a lot of time together. Papo told me that one time when Cheo visited him, he saw Obbatalá's stones and asked who had 'washed' (ritually cleansed) them. Once more, Papo's reply was that he had done it himself. On that occasion, Cheo used the coconut¹¹⁴ oracle and confirmed that the stones were indeed Obbatalá's.

By 1952, Papo had decided to undergo initiation with Cheo Changó as godfather and gathered together almost everything he needed for the big step, including the sacrificial animals which are usually the last thing to be bought. But something happened between them, and Papo decided not undergo initiation at that time. Another ten years had to pass and a revolution to take place before Papo felt that he was ready again. He was eventually consecrated in 1961—the same year as the famous Bay of Pigs invasion¹¹⁵ when an army of Cuban exiles supported by the US government¹¹⁶ tried to overthrow the new revolutionary government of (then) Prime Minister Fidel Castro. This is how he referred to his consecration, although he was not politically engaged; however, he also liked to recount an incident in which he was saved by revolutionary soldiers in the first year after his consecration, while he was a

¹¹⁴ The coconuts, the *obi* or *biague* oracle, is the simplest of those used in Santería.

¹¹⁵ Whereas in English-speaking countries the invasion is known as the Bay of Pigs (Bahia Cochinos), in Cuban history it is recorded as Playa Girón. The Bay of Pigs is the name of the larger geographical area whereas Playa Girón is the coastal site where the most important fights took place.

¹¹⁶ See <http://www.jfklibrary.org/JFK/JFK-in-History/The-Bay-of-Pigs.aspx> and for the Cuban version [http://www.ecured.cu/index.php/Playa_Girón_\(Ciénaga_de_Zapata\)](http://www.ecured.cu/index.php/Playa_Girón_(Ciénaga_de_Zapata)) (visited 18.08.2012).

yawó. The story goes that once while he was in Havana, he got involved in a fight in a cemetery; he was disarmed and alone against five or six men but at that moment soldiers of the new regime appeared and, as he tells it, because he was unarmed and fully dressed in white he was freed while the others were taken by the soldiers—they probably recognized him as a recently initiated santero. In his opinion, it was his father, Changó, who sent the revolutionary soldiers to save him on that occasion.

By the time he was initiated as a santero Papo was already known as an espiritista and brujo who had the dead on his side; but he was insolent and rude and many feared him while others avoided him. In order to follow his path of working with the saint he had to learn to control his gifts and aché, so that the people who approached him seeking advice would remain on his side. His feelings, passions, and affects were “great sources of strength”; his challenge was to learn to “put them into service”, to master and use them to specific ends.

3.iv. Dealing with inspiration

As I understand it, unlike in many other cases, Papo’s initiation was not about receiving aché to enhance the power of the saint that was seated on his head or those he received during that ceremony. His aché clearly manifested itself long before he was initiated, but he did not have it under control. Moreover, he was not aware that his aché was the result of the orichas’ affect and regarded it as inspiration. Remember: the first time he was inspired to perform as a diviner he was accompanying his wife to a spiritual mass. On that occasion, he just said whatever came into his head and it was only later that he learnt that his words had been actualised. Nowadays, he sustains that he was inspired by the muerto to say what he did but at the time he hesitated to make this claim. Indeed, he remained unaware that his aché manifested itself as the gift of telling people about their lives until the day he dreamt of his dead father. In that dream his father told him: “Get used to saying things just once. When you say something once and maintain it, what you have said will come true; if it isn’t true I will make it so, and if I don’t do it, *he* will do it.” And Papo added that ‘he’ was the brujo.

At that time, Papo was already a bruero and was learning to master the powers that affected him in order to affect others. His father's advice resonates with Nietzsche's idea of directing a "constantly shifting alliance or federation of drives" (Kaufmann 1968: 381, fn. 91) under a commanding thought and clinging tenaciously to it; by following this advice his words would become actual and he would reach self-determination. Slowly he realized that even if he did not want to perform and work as a religioso the beings affecting him did. He started to get a feeling of satisfaction when people came back to thank him. After the dream about his father, he slowly became more confident and eager to learn about religion. From his long walks in the countryside and some instruction, he learnt about trees (palos) and herbs and their healing and harming qualities. He considers the ease with which he developed expertise in the subject part of his aché, and observes that he was taught by the elders, the saints—particularly Ogún—and by his muertos. Both the saints and the muertos taught him through dreams; for instance, he would dream that a certain leaf, stick, or root would cure a particular affliction. He also states that he became dedicated to reading about the subject, first to confirm his dreams and later because it became a passion.

During the 1950s, when he first started to create the conditions to undergo initiation into Santería, he had to drive to Havana quite often due to his job. There he visited bookshops, initially looking for books related to the use of plants for healing; then he became interested in botany more broadly, later medicine, and then homeopathy, alchemy, folkloric studies, anthropology, religion, and occultism. He bought and read every available book on the subjects, from black magic to Greek mythology, passing through *The Golden Bough*, *The Bible*, and the famous book by his cousin, Nicolas Angarica, titled *Manual del Oriaté (The Oriaté's Handbook)*. He was proud of having had one of the largest libraries in the countryside. He was not satisfied with what he learnt from the muertos, the saints, and the elders; he wanted to enhance his aché, his store of learning, with knowledge from every possible source. At some point he started to consult the *ekuele*, an oracle consisting of a chain made of eight pieces of coconut

shell, which is used exclusively by babalawos. Papo used it without being consecrated as one and without really knowing how it worked. But his muertos would guide him, and he was successful: many people went to consult him. Like many sons and daughters of Changó, Papo was a ‘diviner by nature’ (*por naturaleza*) regardless of the oracle he used; this was part of his *aché*. Nevertheless, religiosos criticized him. Things had changed since the time of his forebears and babalawos were the owners of that oracle; he had no right to it.

He recounts that his cousin, the babalawo Nicolas Angarica, offered to initiate him into Ifá. But as I have mentioned, and as he also knew, he had been mounted by Ogún and someone who is possessed cannot become a babalawo. Whether his cousin actually made such an offer is impossible to know for certain; maybe he did it hoping that Papo would realize that he was ‘usurping’ Orula’s territory and causing conflict between Ocha and Ifá religiosos. Papo never became a babalawo and, at some point, he stopped using the ekuele. He was not explicit about when all this had happened, whether it was before or after his initiation into Santería.

When he was thirty-six years old Papo was eventually crowned with Changó. His godfather was not Cheo Changó but, as we know, Sixto Fumeiro—one of the many godsons of Obadimelli, the African who was made king twice.¹¹⁷ Obbadimelli had also godfathered Papo’s older cousin, Nicolás Angarica, the same man who became a babalawo and offered to initiate Papo into Ifá, and one of the first religiosos ever to publish books on Santería—including the abovementioned *Manual del Oriaté*.

3.v. Discerning the will’s threads

For Papo, as for many santeros/as, initiation into el santo was the start of a long and difficult process of discerning which of what he called his inspiration and his many

¹¹⁷ According to Papo, Obbadimelli is a Lucumí term meaning the one who was king (Obbá) twice. See also Brown 2007.

gifts—including divining, performing as a musician,¹¹⁸ and even his inclination for parties and fights—were the result of the wills of his tutelary and other orichas. From that point on, he was to learn which orichas were affecting him and how. Moreover, he was to learn to settle and direct such affects under his tutelary oricha's will. For Papo it was as difficult to learn to rescind his own will and obey or 'submit' to that of others, whether humans or non-humans, as it was to accept the guidance and support of his godfather and his religious family.

Being an Angarica, Papo did not undergo one of the most important ceremonies of initiation: the ritual cleansing by being bathed in a river which, as we saw, might be considered as starting the initiatory process (see Mason 2002: 76). This was due to the *aché* he inherited from his elders. His grandfather Cresencio Angarica, known as Tata Cuba, is said to have had direct dealings with the *madre de agua*, a divinity worshipped in most Afro-Cuban religions; the mother of water, she is thought to live in ponds, lakes, or rivers and to own their waters. Tata Cuba was one of those *religiosos* who was never formally consecrated although many well-known *santeros* of the time offered to do it—even without charge. According to his grandson he did not need to undergo the seating ceremony because he was consecrated by the mother of waters herself; therefore, if formally consecrated, the potential godfather would have received the mother of water's *aché*. But Tata Cuba was not interested in working the religion; he was more attracted to parties, music, and cock fights, just as Papo was himself for a long time.

Although Papo did not undergo the bathing ceremony, every time he arrived at a *santero's* home during the first year following his consecration, water was thrown at him. He felt humiliated. He did not see it as a tribute to his grandfather who received the gift of working the saint from the mother of water herself; rather, having grown up in an environment where even a minor disdainful gesture was perceived as a manhood challenge, he was prone to respond with his knife. This was one of the many lessons

¹¹⁸ Papo plays and has owned his own *batá* ensemble ever since he was consecrated as *omo ña*. Remember: *Changó* is considered the owner of such drums.

through which he was to learn to control his impulses and dominate his passions in order to gain the ability to use them for a purpose. In fact, as he expressed it, undergoing initiation into Santería helped him to ‘settle’ or ‘settle down’ by directing his powers towards that ‘which was meant for him’. In fact, religiosos claim that merely by undergoing the asiento ceremony, a person starts the process of asentarse, of becoming stable and calm as well as “becoming established in some routine, especially ... after a period of independence or indecision”.¹¹⁹ In Papo’s case, the beings influencing him had also to be settled, that is, to be placed “in a desired state or in order”.¹²⁰ Remember: spirits, muertos, and saints had been influencing him from childhood.

Papo had started to develop his muertos within Espiritismo, later he became a brujo, and now he needed to settle as a santero. In order to achieve this goal, there was another issue to be settled first: the dispute between the two saints claiming his head, Ogún and Changó. As mentioned above, Ogún had brought Papo up, had taught him, and had also driven him into dangerous situations from which he was saved by Changó. It was only when Papo was about to undergo initiation and it was confirmed through the Ifá oracle that it was Changó who would be crowned in his head, he became aware of the extent of the oricha’s influence in his life. Changó had claimed Papo as his son; it was Changó who would settle him down by being seated in his head.

Prior to his consecration, Papo saw himself as a son of Ogún, and this was how he explained his violent character and tendency to get involved in fights, the ease with which he lost his temper, and his propensity to drink. On the other hand, he also attributed his being a hard worker and a defender of the underdog to Ogún. When it was confirmed that Changó was his tutelary oricha, however, he started a process of re-valuing himself. Although he already knew that Changó played an important role in his life, being a son of the deity was a different matter. Slowly he started to see

¹¹⁹ <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/settle?s=t>

¹²⁰ Ibid.

many aspects of his life from a different perspective: for instance, his gift as a diviner. Nowadays, he attributes his ability to divine with the babalawos' coconut chain to Changó's influence, saying, "All of that belonged to Changó anyway, and he gave it to his brother Orula." Here he is referring to one of the famous stories (*patakí*) in which Changó, who was a diviner, gives his older brother Orula the divination board and teaches him its secrets. In one version, he did this to enable his brother to make a living since Changó himself was more interested in music and parties than in the responsibilities of performing as a diviner—as was also the case with Papo. Papo's own interpretation of his use of the *ekuele* to divine was that in doing so he was following one of the *oricha*'s paths. According to Mason's argument, this could be understood as Papo identifying himself with his tutelary *oricha*, but this would not be precise. Papo's actual assertion was that he underwent the exact same experiences as his tutelary *oricha* at various points in his life.

The ideas of Deleuze and Guattari seem more apposite to Papo's line of argument. In this light, he had entered into a zone of proximity with Changó as he had previously with *Ogún*, who had affected him from childhood. As Deleuze and Guattari describe, "[multiplicities] continually transform themselves into each other, cross over into each other ... [so that] becoming and multiplicity are the same thing" (1987: 249), which in Papo's case is accurate. But he was not only affected by the two *orichas*; other non-humans beings also had impact. As the old *santera* had told his mother: too many beings were influencing him, and his head needed to be prepared. Too many beings were, in Deleuzian terms, moving into a zone of proximity with the power to affect Papo, throwing him into upheaval—hence his conflictive childhood and youth. By undergoing various initiations his affects were given a direction facilitating alliances with "beings of totally different scales and kingdoms" (*ibid.*: 238). As seen, an affect entails that 'what happened to the *oricha*, can happen to me', which strongly resonates with Papo's own interpretation.

However, as proposed by Deleuze and Guattari, "becoming" follows "alogical consistencies and compatibilities" (1987: 276) and becomings unleashed by initiation

could be said to respond to the determination of non-humans to become active in this world, enhancing their relations with particular humans through the consecration of the latter into their cult; this determination or will is accessible to humans both through possession and divination. Another significant difference with the authors' idea of becoming is the impossibility of predicting whether a multiplicity will become or "cross over another". Initiation into Afro-Cuban religions is precisely about directing such cross-overs from a particular multiplicity—the initiate—to another—the spirits, muertos, brujo, and eventually the orichas, particularly the head oricha. Meanwhile, as I have been arguing, a fundamental aspect of making an ethical person through initiation into the saints—beings that "have othered themselves" (Panagiotopoulos 2011: 144)—is to forge his/her will as a particular kind of self-determination that is constantly to become othered.

To revisit the Afro-Cuban religious conception that initiation into Santería is the last ceremony to be performed in a person's head: this entails that if someone has a path of working with the spirits, muertos, and the saints—as was the case with Papo—consecration into religions working with spirits and muertos must precede that into the saint.¹²¹ Religiosos often argue that the saint is the highest in the hierarchy and nothing can be placed above it; it is also said that the saint is the person's head and since we have only one head, which controls the body, only one saint can be seated in it: the one who controls the person. If another ceremony were performed in the head after the asiento, it is considered that it would split or divide the person, with dreadful consequences.¹²² A further reason for this organization of initiatory ceremonies within Afro-Cuban religions is also provided by Palmié who observes:

[T]o go from ocha to palo would signify a spiritual regression. While the initiation into ocha established a link to a divine entity, the purpose of the

¹²¹ However, there are variations of such ceremonies that are performed when the person has already undergone the seating ceremony.

¹²² Santeros do not specify the consequences of undergoing another ceremony that involves the person's head beyond considering it harmful. In the few remembered cases of people who were initiated twice, such as Obbadimelli, he was crowned both times with the same saint, thereby causing no conflict between two different beings.

rayamiento was to relate the initiated to a being of decidedly lower order: the spirit of a dead human. (2002: 164-165)

According to Palmié both religions “are treated as functionally differentiated ritual technologies” (2002: 165) and although both belong to an “aggregate of knowledge” they “circumscribe images of sociality that, ... stand in relation of crass opposition” (ibid.).

Religiosos assert that when a person has undergone previous consecrations with other beings—the dead and spirits—these are subordinated to the saint. It is the saint that, from the point of the seating ceremony, guides the person, re-making him or her anew. While spirits are thought to help the person to develop (*desarrollar*)—as they are also developed in turn—the brujo and the saint are conceived of as forging or making individual persons and their capacity for determination, adequate choices, and lasting decisions, although they do it in different ways. Initiations into Palo first seek to strengthen or forge a self-determination that is to be othered through a multiplicitous being: the brujo. The brujero’s main aim is thus to ‘involve’ the world’s potency, received in the form of the brujo, and master it. This enables him to value everyday life from an individual perspective and, moreover, to other that perspective.

In religions working with the saint, self-determination is considered to be the result of the saints or orichas’ affects. Initiation into those religions therefore results in othering a ‘self-determination that is conceived as other from the start. It does so through a multiple process that first encourages the temporal restraint of the initiate’s will in order to unleash a process of discerning its ‘affects’, then forges it anew by acknowledging those affects and settling (*asentar*) them under the direction of the head-ruling oricha. Since the saints are the only beings that have ‘othered themselves’ by transiting from a human to a divine condition as a result of being dead, their movement between perspectives is the more encompassing one. This process of further othering ‘self-determination aims at enabling santeros/as to shift between multiple perspectives in order to value everyday life. In my view, initiation into the

saint is the last ceremony to be performed in a person's head because it entails an extreme complexity of will and perspectives which, however, allows for further complexities as long as the head is left intact in the future. In other words, becoming is a never-ending process that after the seating ceremony is coordinated with precision and clarity of direction. In fact, after the seating the initiate might not only receive other orichas—including Orula—but, disrupting the traditional organization of initiatory ceremonies in the different Afro-Cuban religions, he/she might start developing within Espiritismo or even be initiated into Palo. This is possible for at least two reasons: firstly, Afro-Cuban religions respond to a particular logic that allows for multiple variations; and, secondly, becoming an ethical individual within Afro-Cuban religions entails not only learning that all valuations have a perspective, but also learning about the displacement, distortion, and whatever else is part of each perspective, as I will show next.

CHAPTER FIVE: ATTAINING A PERSPECTIVE

As I argued in the previous chapters the initiatory process can be understood as one of becoming, whose stages and aim can be fruitfully interpreted in light of one of the late stages of the process Nietzsche calls “the disentanglement” or “great separation” (*Loslösung*) previously used with regard to a person’s will. In this chapter I want to emphasize the second part of the already quoted fragment from his 1886 preface to *Human all too Human* where he describes the process that the spirit undergoes in order to become free. As we saw in Chapter IV he argues:

You had to gain power over your For and Against, and learn how to hang them out or take them in, *according to your higher purpose*. You had to learn that **all estimations**¹²³ **have a perspective**, to learn the displacement, distortion, apparent teleology of horizons, and whatever else is part of perspective...
(Nietzsche 1986: 9; italics in the original, bolds mine)

We already know that for Nietzsche forging a strong will is a process of learning to control the ‘For and Against’ or ‘pros and cons’ in order to reach self-determination, which entails giving oneself an aim, a purpose. The ‘For and Against’ could be understood as a person’s weaknesses and strengths, as his/her affects and passions (see Chapter Four), and also as any pre-given conceptions of right and wrong. In the latter case, to hang out the For and Against would imply learning to suspend usual valuations, whereas learning to value each situation according to one’s higher purpose or aim would be to ‘take them in’. In fact, Melendez, a recognized Nietzsche specialist and translator, offers a similar interpretation, when he argues that “pros and cons” allude to valuations expressing a judgment in conformity or inconformity with what is valued “with respect to” one’s aim (2007: 10).

¹²³ The quoted text is translated by H. Zimmern in 1909-1913; in a more recent translation, first published in 1986, instead of using the term ‘estimations’ for *Werthschätzung* R. J. Hollingdale uses ‘value judgment’, which in my view could also be translated as ‘valuation’ as both authors do in other passages. (<http://www.nietzschsource.org/#eKGWB/MA-I>)

An important idea for Nietzsche is that actions are not right or wrong in themselves, that is, they do not have an intrinsic value, which is clearly in opposition to the Kantian conception of actions as inherently good or wrong (see Singer 1994).

Nietzsche clearly expresses this idea in his *Genealogy of Morals*: “to speak of right or wrong per se makes no sense at all. No act of violence, ... is intrinsically unjust since life itself is violent’ (Nietzsche 1956: 208). In fact, in that book he asks: “under what conditions did man construct the value judgments *good* and *evil*”? (ibid.: 151), thereby manifesting the underlying idea that good and evil are a human construction.

Elsewhere he further argues that “an action in itself is perfectly devoid of value, it all depends on *who* performs it. One and the same ‘crime’ can be in one case the greatest privilege, in another a stigma” (Nietzsche 1968: 292). This is a crucial aspect of his conception of the perspective.

Another important aspect of his ‘perspectivism’—or, as he calls it, ‘the perspective’—is that it implies objectivity. This is a crucial point that makes his theory different from that of moral relativism where every valuation and consequent action is acceptable. In fact, he makes an important argument for objectivity, as he sustains it “is not meant here to stand for ‘disinterested contemplation’” (Nietzsche 1956: 255), which in his view “is a rank absurdity” (ibid.). For Nietzsche objectivity is “an ability to have one’s pros and cons within one’s command and to use them or not, as one chooses” (ibid.), further arguing:

All seeing is essentially perspective, and so is all knowing. The more emotions we allow to speak in a given matter, the more different eyes we can put on in order to view a given spectacle, the more complete will be our conception of it, the greater our “objectivity”. (ibid.)

As it is often the case, Nietzsche does not offer a blunt explanation of his conception of the perspective. In the *Will to Power* he frequently refers to the perspective in various contexts by qualifying it; for instance he argues that all valuations are made from a “definitive perspective: that of the preservation of the individual, a community,

a race, a state, a faith, a culture” (Nietzsche 1968: 259). He also argues that “correlations of Yes and No, of preference and rejection, love and hate” (ibid.: 293) express a perspective, and that there are no facts in themselves. Even the idea of ‘essence’ is in his view something perspectival, at the bottom of which lies the question of “what is that for me?” (ibid.: 299). In my view one of the author’s clearest formulations of perspective is in relation to knowledge. Remember that in his view all seeing and knowledge are perspectival: “Coming to know means ‘to place oneself in a conditional relation to something’; to feel oneself conditioned by something and oneself to condition it” (ibid.: 301).

In sum, it could be said that to attain a perspective for Nietzsche entails making conscious one’s emotions and affects and learning to have them under control, as well as learning to suspend usual valuations and to value according to one’s aim, or the aims of others. It also entails placing oneself in a conditional relation to something, a relation that is conditioned by the question of what that something means for me, which will in turn condition our value judgments about it.

For the purpose of this work it is important to keep the above in mind since there is in anthropology another important conception of perspective, best known through Viveiros de Castro’s theory of Amerindian perspectivism. Although both theories are about various viewpoints or perspectives from which to interpret the world, or different worlds in Viveiros de Castro’s case, there are significant differences.

Amerindian perspectivism is described by Viveiros de Castro as “a label for a set of ideas and practices found throughout indigenous America” (2004: 5), which he treats as a cosmology that “imagines a universe peopled by different types of subjective agencies, human as well as nonhuman, each endowed with the same generic type of soul, that is, the same set of cognitive and volitional capacities” (2004: 6). Since all subjective agencies, which he also calls ‘species’, have a common original soul, they all possess similar concepts “which determine that all subjects see things in the same way” (ibid.). However, since each possesses a different body—understood as a bundle of affects and capacities (1998: 478)—each species sees a different world. In fact he

calls that kind of perspectivism a “multinaturalism” (see Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2004) that “supposes a constant epistemology and variable ontologies, the same representations and other objects, a single meaning and multiple referents” (2004: 6). As he summarizes it “a viewpoint is nothing if not difference” (1998: 478).

My use of ‘perspective’ or perspectivism thus differs from Viveiros de Castro’s Amerindian perspectivism. While Amerindian perspectivism is about different subjective agencies or species seeing different worlds given their bodily differences, my idea concerns how initiates in Afro-Cuban religions become unique and singular ethical persons, a process that involves attaining a particular—that is, individual—viewpoint or perspective from which to value everyday life situations and act or perform consonantly. Since as we know that, according to Afro-Cuban cosmology, the world is populated by different ‘subjective agencies’—muertos, spirits, saints / orichas, brujos, and so forth—it could be asked whether they also see different worlds, and what their viewpoint of this world is. This would be, however, a subject outside the scope of this thesis, which has been treated by other authors (see for instance Panagiotopoulos 2011). In what follows I demonstrate what attaining a perspective entails within both el brujo and el santo. Within the former the main concern is with good and evil and right and wrong, whereas within the latter it is about discerning how different orichas are entangled with the self, as well as learning about the displacement of perspectives; both processes are closely related with divination.

1. El brujo: the good and the evil

Practically every single brujo that I have known in the last twenty years has seen their religious practice—that is, the working of their religion—in terms of good and evil. Following Christian cosmology, they ascribe good to God and evil to the Devil. God is conceived as the most powerful being—the creator of nature and humans, and the source of good—who would do no harm to humans. On the other hand, when paleros talk about the Devil it is often in terms of the Catholic story of the angel that

rebelled against God. In some versions it is God who allows the Devil's interventions in this world while in others it is argued that it is the Devil's quest to displace God's power over humankind and for that reason he embraces everyone God rejects: criminals and outlaws of any kind.

In fact it is often said that there are two main lines of work within Palo: a brujo commits himself either to resolving other people's problems or to doing harm to others. Both 'lines of work' are equally respected and both are given equal value. However, brujeros who dedicate themselves to helping others often argue that they also need a profound knowledge of evil: they need to know all possible kinds of evil, its sources, and how it works in order to be able to help a person. Remember: to have a prenda means one has potencia on one's side and only a strong potency can counteract serious harm. As paleros often phrase it: "A potencia can only be overcome by a stronger potencia." But the argument is more complex than that. Brujeros work on the understanding that one person's wellbeing is another's harm, and that their intervention might be considered for good or for evil depending on the standpoint from which their action is judged. As Jamaica once told me:

Have you ever heard that one's evil is someone else's good? Suppose someone does something to harm you and I try to take it away from you, I am doing something evil to the other person. If that person wanted to harm you and I "take away" the harm (*daño*) from you, of course I am harming that person! And I am clashing with the person as well, thus he/she might even become my enemy!

So, it seems that even if a brujo is committed to solving people's problems, he might end up causing harm. He might do so because in Afro-Cuban ethics good and evil are not opposed categories and their respective association with God and the Devil are not as straightforward as in the popular versions of Catholicism. In fact brujeros' perceptions of God and the Devil are quite idiosyncratic. On the one hand, when it comes to human desires or requests, God is perceived as taking his time to value

whether the person should or should not be granted them. Besides, as God is conceived as being distant from humans, they need the saints as intermediaries in order to reach him; for that reason, as already noted, religions working with the saints are considered to work at a much slower pace than those working with the brujo, because ingrained in them is what I called the 'bureaucracy of the good' (see Chapter Two 3.iv). More striking is the idea that although God encapsulates the conception of the good and is almighty he is perceived as having faults. As an older brujo once told me:

Why do I have to do everything God wants? I personally draw my conclusion: God is selfish. His son, even when he grew up, when he became an adult, even being God, he had to do what God wanted, exactly as he wanted it. Why? Because he is selfish.

Do you understand what I mean? You have a son, he has his own way, which is different from yours; of course you have to correct him, but when he does something good or nice you praise him. The good things he does are not the same as you do, why should they be? Why should your son be compelled to do everything you want, to fulfil your will? What are you then? You are selfish.

In this statement, in which the brujo is interpreting the line, "Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," he is conveying an opinion that I hear from many brujeros: God wants humans to exert his will and not their own. He created humans but he does not allow, and even less supports, their reaching self-determination. He provided humans with a code of values and any deviation from it is considered a sin. Therefore, if humans want to exert their will they need to seek support from another powerful being. When seeking self-determination, which involves attaining an individual perspective from which to value actions, brujeros borrow from Christian cosmology and turn to the Devil as the only being powerful enough to oppose God. Since the Devil is conceived as being on a quest for power, he will grant human requests much

faster than God and, importantly, he will not only provide humans with evil but also with good. In Jamaica's words:

The Devil's work is much faster and he also does good things because he is *seeking to gain ground in this world*. If you ask him for evil he gives [resuelve] you evil; if you ask him for good he gives [resuelve] you good. Thus, he wants you to trust him. God gives you things when he wants to, whereas the Devil does it when you ask him for them. Once you 'have' him he gives you all the good things you might ask for, so that you do not need to ask God for them. (My emphasis.)

The Devil is thus understood as a more comprehensive being than God, both because he encompasses good and the evil and because he understands humans better; furthermore, as he is opposed to God, he is not selfish nor patronizing and he grants humans' requests whereas God tells humans what to do. In that sense, the Devil is perceived as being in a closer relation to humans than God. Given that he is 'seeking to gain ground in the world', he will not value human requests according to any given set of values which, I argue, allows humans to construct their own values and their own value system. As I see it, initiation in Palo precedes that in el santo because working with the Devil is the first step¹²⁴ towards attaining an individual perspective from which to value situations and actions according to one's own (or specific others') aims rather than according to a pre-established frame. This also entails the re-valuation of given ideas of right and wrong and good and evil. An important aspect of that process is a ritual ceremony involving what Deleuze and Guattari would call an 'alliance' with the Devil.

¹²⁴ It is the first step for people who have it in their path. As I will show later on, in the saint the initiate undergoes a similar process but in a very different way.

2. Taking an oath to the Devil (*Jurar Diablo*)

According to Deleuze and Guattari, “wherever there is multiplicity, you will also find an exceptional individual” (2005: 265). Such an individual is viewed as the leader, the master but he is also the loner (ibid.), “the borderline of a pack or multiplicity” (2005: 267) with whom an alliance must be made in order to become. They refer to such an individual as the “anomalous”, and describe the Demon as the power of the anomalous (2005: 268). If, as I have been arguing, initiation can be understood as a form of becoming, Deleuze and Guattari’s idea of the Demon as the anomalous individual of a multiplicity might shed light on what is considered one of the darkest areas of Palo: its relation to the Devil.

Within Palo in order to work with the Devil one needs, as Jamaica put it, to ‘have’ him on one’s side. Some *brujeros* argue that making a *tratado* to create a *brujo* also entails making it with the Devil, while others phrase it in terms of “taking an oath to the Devil” (*jurar diablo*). The precise content of such an oath is secret knowledge, but we know that in order to create a *brujo* at least one *muerto oscuro* is needed. Remember: these are the dead that will not ‘progress’ and will never reunite with God. Since God is not to embrace them the Devil will, thereby extending his power in this world. *Muertos oscuros* are, moreover, considered to help the Devil to accomplish his mission in this world by causing harm, by helping those who cause harm, or by giving humans knowledge of how to do so. The assumption behind this is that while the Devil needs the dark dead to extend his power,¹²⁵ God does not need other beings to be powerful.

¹²⁵ The Devil could be regarded in Deleuze and Guattari’s terms as both building a multiplicity with the dark dead and also holding the anomalous position among them. The authors are explicit about the fact the anomalous should not be considered “the bearer of a species presenting specific or generic characteristics in their purest state; nor is it a model or unique specimen” (2005: 266); rather, in their view, “[t]he anomalous is neither an individual nor a species; it has only affects, it has neither familiar or subjectified feelings, nor specific or significant characteristics’ (ibid.). Consequently, in this formulation, the Devil is not necessarily to be understood as the model or the generic type of *muertos oscuros*, but rather as their borderline phenomenon, the boundary within which their affects are encapsulated. Given this position of the Devil, the consecration of a *brujo* involves an alliance with him, not because of his preferential position within the multiplicity but because he is considered the strongest potency—

When Miguel affirmed that when brujeros are consecrated they “take an oath to the Devil” (*jurar diablo*), he also added that “when it comes to the brujo (*arriba de eso*) there is no suffering; he does not believe in anyone, neither family, nor friends”. He explained that when a brujo exerts his will through the brujo or asks him to perform a ritual job (*trabajo*) for someone else, the brujo will do it without any regard for the possible suffering it might cause and without taking into account the personal relations of the brujo or the other person. Such a statement resonates with Nietzsche’s idea of objectivity as learning to have one’s own ‘pros and cons’ under control and using them as required in every single situation. In other words, the fundamental step people must take in the process of becoming a brujo is that of learning to have their affects and values under control, thereby situating them in the specific perspective of valuing people and everyday life according to their own aims and wills or those of his clients. Miguel once told me a story of one of the many *trabajos* (witchcraft in this case) he has performed, which might illustrate it.

A woman came to consult him because she was having problems with her boss. The woman, let’s call her María, had a good job in a taxi company. Recently she had separated from her partner and initially her boss was quite supportive but then he started making advances. She rejected him. Her boss insisted and when she did not succumb he began to make things difficult for her at work. Eventually, her case was brought to a commission and she was about to lose her job. At that point, she went to see Miguel. He told María to tell the brujo her problem and what she wanted. She told

“the higher power of the pack” (Deleuze and Guattari, 2005: 265)—a brujo can have to work with, whichever line— helping or harming—he decides to take.

I have argued that knowledge is something that is carefully and never fully transmitted within Afro-Cuban religions. One of the reasons is that it can be used to harm others including one’s own teachers. Knowing that most brujeros will not pass on all they know, neophytes often seek to learn from as many sources as they can. It is considered the dark dead provide less restricted sources of knowledge because they have nothing to risk by giving it: they have no aim other than becoming active in this world to which they are attached. Consequently, the dark dead are perceived as helping the Devil in his quest to gain ground in this world by giving humans what they want and need, including knowledge: about harming and relieving harm, certainly, but also, they are alleged to have a profound knowledge of the world more broadly, as they are attached to it. As multiplicities, they encompass deep human motivations, drives, and deeds, and since becoming a brujo means directing one’s will to enter into zones of proximity with different kind of beings including the dark dead and the brujo, their knowledge must affect the initiate. However, it is the direct alliance with the Devil that provides a brujo’s power.

the brujo she wanted her boss to stop bothering her and to keep her job. After consulting the brujo, the palero performed the indicated trabajo. A few days later, the boss did not show up at work. Maria heard that he was in hospital because he had had a sudden heart attack. Next day she was told that he had not survived it. Miguel concluded his story by saying, “You see? I did solve her problem but what about her boss’ problem? Eventually, what I did was good for her, but not for him. Did I do good or evil?”

Later, I asked him what he would have done if it had been the boss who had asked for help to attract her. His answer was that if the boss had come first and his brujo had agreed to ‘do the job’ he would have done it, as he had done such trabajos in the past. However, the question remains: would he have perpetrated good or evil? Miguel answered, “In that case the job would have been good for him, but then: what about her?”

Miguel’s reflection on the story points to two different issues. Although he sees himself as ‘working the religion’ to help others rather than harming them, he also sees good and evil as belonging together and as a matter of perspective. From Maria’s perspective, he was doing something good: the boss stopped bothering her and she kept her job; but, from her boss’ point of view, it was something evil. Even though Miguel, like most brujeros, might value a situation from different perspectives, he will adopt that of his client when performing a ritual ‘job’ (trabajo). But a further issue is at stake: once Miguel has adopted the perspective of his client he will not switch to that of his client’s rival. When he argued that he would have helped Maria’s boss, it was on the condition that the boss had visited him first; had he come seeking his help after he had performed a ritual job for Maria, like most brujeros he would have turned him down. Remember: becoming a brujo entails developing an enduring will which involves the ability to ‘keep one’s word’ (see Chapter Four). As I see it, this is precisely what makes the perspective of brujeros ethical rather than relative: being able to value a situation from various perspectives, they adopt that which is consonant with their own or their clients’ aims and, once such a perspective is attained, all affects,

feelings, desires, and value judgments (i.e., 'pros and cons') are subordinated to it. In Nietzsche's terms it could be argued that Miguel, like most brujeros, placed himself in "a conditional relation to something" and that he "feels conditioned by that something as well as [conditioning] it" (see Nietzsche 1968: 301). It could also be argued that Miguel was being 'objective' in as much as he "had his pros and cons within his command and used them as he chose" (Nietzsche 1956: 12). In the above situation, Miguel thus attained a 'definitive' perspective, that of the preservation of a particular individual.

From all the above, it emerges that even if a brujo has chosen the line of solving problems, he might end up causing harm, largely because in Afro-Cuban ethics good and evil are not dichotomous categories. They are not to be understood as opposites, or as being in a dialectical relation. Rather, good and evil, right and wrong, contain and presuppose each other as circumstantial events of a wider whole of relations one builds with others and with the self. There is, however, a different way of building such relations, one in which the others seem to shape the self.

3. The saint (El santo)

Differing from the brujo, the central concern of religiosos working with el santo is not necessarily the pairing of good and evil, which is not to say that it has no role in such religions. Most santeros see themselves as working for 'good' since, as they argue, their ritual performances (trabajos) come from 'the hand of God'; that is, they are perceived as being performed through the medium of the saints, with God's approval. I have argued that initiation in the saint is about forging persons who must learn that their will is deeply imbricated with the wills of others and also attain a perspective that grasps what Nietzsche phrased as the "displacement, distortion and merely apparent teleology of horizons" (1986: 9) However, attaining a perspective, rather than revolving around the philosopher's question of 'what something means for me', evokes what

Cubans call ‘that which is meant for you’ (*lo que está pa’ ti*), an idea that closely relates to that of destiny.

As we know from Chapter Three, although destiny and predestination are elements in the cosmology of Afro-Cuban religions, divination, as Panagiotopoulos plainly asserts, “does not reveal a state of affairs that is superimposed on the individual in an eschatological way; it does not reveal a kind of destiny that whatever the case it is ultimately bound to occur” (2011: 140-141). The author also argues that religiosos use the word path (*camino*) to refer to one’s path in life, which is sometimes interchangeable with the notion of destiny (*destino*), as in my experience it is with the framing of ‘that which is meant for you’. In Panagiotopoulos’ view, in Cuba ‘divination’ (*adivinación*¹²⁶) is an ‘umbrella term’ that refers to communication with ‘the beyond’: providing both a means to perceive the beyond which is populated by a number of entities (2011: 47) and, more importantly, “an essential part of bringing these entities into existence” (2011: 146) as it is a means of revealing more or less permanent aspects of one’s path (*camino*). Thus, his argument is that divination brings the path of humans and of ‘other-than-humans’ “to the fore and shows them, but it also instantiates their mutual constitution and tight interrelations” (2011: 31).

In Panagiotopoulos’ opinion oracular messages harness a person’s life-course or path and compel action such as initiation as a way to realign the person with their ‘true’ path when deviations occur (2011: 141). Holbraad’s argument (2012: 231), on the other hand, is that they describe a course of action “that cannot but be as it is” and thus redefine people who consult the oracles. Both arguments oppose the widespread view that divination provides a means of decision making (see Peek 1991), but Holbraad clearly rules out the latter possibility in the face of alternatives when it comes to

¹²⁶ Here I disagree with Panagiotopoulos’ translation of divination as *adivinación*. In fact the term *adivinación* is rarely used by Afro-Cuban religiosos, or non-religious Cubans, to refer to divination. As mentioned earlier the term used is *consultar* (consultation) or the reflexive form *consultarse* by those who undergo divination. There are other terms used such as *ver* (see, watch), *mirar* (look at, see, watch). In fact many religiosos argue that they are not *adivinos*, i.e., fortune-tellers or foretellers. Therefore, in my view what works as an ‘umbrella term’ and can be rendered as divination, is the term *consultar/se*.

oracular verdicts (2012). As previously argued, I also understand Afro-Cuban divination as a means of knowing the will of a non-human will of establishing a 'conversation' with them.

According to Panagiotopoulos there are two different kinds of divination in Ocha/Ifa. One refers to the current situation of the client and is of relatively short reach, whereas the second, which he argues is always accompanied by a "[sort] of initiation" (2011: 126), "brings forth a more permanent relation between the 'client' and the oracle's outcomes: the signos, the relevant orichas, who are usually the object of such initiations, and the various prescriptions, prohibitions, warnings and advice that follow it" (ibid.). In his view this second kind of divination "refers to one's *camino*, not as a fragment and at no specific point, but in its totality" (ibid.). As shown in the first chapter, anyone might occasionally consult a diviner which, in Ocha/Ifá, can be a santero/a or a babalawo; such 'occasional consultations' correspond to the first kind of divination mentioned by Panagiotopoulos. The second form is a more thorough divination called itá. An itá usually closes initiatory ceremonies but it might also be performed when an initiated offers a four-legged animal to the orichas, it is, therefore, not necessarily always 'accompanied by a sort of initiation'. In Ocha or Santería an itá is usually performed by a male santero with the highest hierarchy in that religion: the Obbá. According to santeros an Obbá or king (Cabrerá 1996) is not 'made but born' (*no se hace sino se nace*) by which it is meant that for a male santero to become an Obbá is not a matter of undergoing a particular initiatory ceremony but rather of having a gift, the gift of learning and interpreting the oracular configurations (signos or odduns) that come out during divination. However, during initiatory ceremonies the Obbá is also responsible for performing the animal sacrifice; in order to do that he might have undergone a ceremony called 'receiving knife'¹²⁷ (*recibir cuchillo*) that enables him to kill four-legged animals with that tool. Meanwhile in Ifá an itá is performed by at least three babalawos.

¹²⁷ 'Receiving knife' is an initiatory ceremony through which the 'faculty' (facultad) of killing is received; as with most initiatory ceremonies it also closes with an itá. Any santero might receive such a faculty, therefore it is not exclusive to Obbás.

As in any ‘occasional consultation’, during an itá within Ifá it is considered that Orula (the god or oricha of divination) ‘comes down’ to hold a ‘conversation’ with the client through the oracle, Orula’s board. Within Ocha or Santería in an ‘occasional consultation’ the oracle used—the *diloggun*, consisting of sixteen cowry shells—is that of Eleguá; therefore, all the other orichas are considered to ‘speak’ through that oricha’s oracle. However, when a thorough consultation or itá is performed within Santería, the oracle of each oricha that is received—and/or ‘made’—is used. The idea is that each oricha ‘comes down’ to ‘have a conversation’ or to ‘speak’ with the client through his/her own oracle. According to Holbraad (2012) and Panagiotopoulos (2011) the orichas are understood to be in a state of relative transcendence or in the beyond (Panagiotopoulos 2011) and to ‘come down’ (*bajar*) to a state of relative immanence during divination (see Chapter Three). However, there is a more mundane reason for the fact that the orichas are said to ‘come down’ (*bajar*) and divination is phrased as ‘bringing down’ (*bajar*) a particular oricha. As discussed above, most orichas are thought to ‘live’, ‘be’, and ‘own’ particular stones and other material elements, known as the saints’ fundamentos (see Chapter Three) which are normally kept in a special cabinet (*canastillero*), which can be more or less elaborate according to the economic situation of its owner (see Brown 2003) and his/her aesthetic taste. The important issue is that the saint’s fundamentos should not be placed directly on the floor apart from on specific occasions: one is to receive animal sacrifices, and another is during divination. When I asked why it is said that Orula or a particular oricha is ‘brought down’ in divination, the common answer was that the oricha—that is, his/her fundamento—is brought down from the place in which s/he usually lives to a mat on the floor. The orichas that are brought down to the floor are the individuated orichas that a santero/a or a babalawo has received, but in a divinatory session it is held that the general oricha is the one who speaks. For instance, it is not the babalawo’s *own* Orula or the santero/a’s *own* Eleguá who are perceived as speaking through the oracle, but Orula or Eleguá themselves. Therefore if the orichas become immanent or present in divination, it is not only because of *aché* as power / powder as argued by Holbraad (2012, 2007), or due to the orichas’ temporal embodiment in the oracles as

proposed by Panagiotopoulos (2011), but, I argue, it is also because the individuated orichas have the *aché* of othering themselves. In doing so they become the multiplicity that in turn ‘involves’ them into becoming present as the individual odduns, those that have the *aché* to ‘speak’ and to have a ‘conversation’ with their clients.

In other words, it is my contention that through divination the orichas indeed become immanent or present as the general oricha and the individual odduns, but there is a prior motion of becoming ‘generalized’, of becoming the multiplicity from which they were individuated through initiation. Expanding on Holbraad’s idea that divination effects two kinds of transformation of the deities “along an intensive, self-differentiating axis” (2012: 172)—the first being of ‘form’ (which he calls ontic form) in which the orichas become odduns, and the second being of ‘status’ from ‘transcendence’ to ‘immanence’ (ibid.)—I propose to add a third kind of transformation effected by divination: from the individuated oricha to the multiplicity of the indeterminate or ‘general’ one, a transformation that could be called of ‘condition’. As a result it can be argued that if the orichas become present in this world during divination it is because they were present before it, but their presence was one in which they were ‘unable’ to hold a conversation with humans. However, due to the transformations effected by divination, the orichas first become part of the multiplicity to which they belong, then become present again as the individuated odduns, a state that is intensified as they take a particular name and path in the case of an initiatory *itá*.

In fact, according to Panagiotopoulos (2011: 130-136, 168-170), in divination the process of individuation that takes place consists of a number of stages. First, a particular oddu or sign is drawn from a totality of 256 in *Ifá* (or a totality of 16 in *Ocha*). A second individuation takes place when it is established whether the oddu comes with a positive (*iré*) or a negative (*osogbo*) tendency, since each oddu is believed to ‘come out’ with one or the other. Next the nature or type of *iré* or *osogbo* is explored; for instance, in the case of *iré*, to see whether it comes through the blessing of heaven, the sea, the dead or, among other possibilities, an oricha. In the latter case it is then

established which oricha in particular is responsible for it and whether it is possible to quicken or strengthen it, which would lead to further ritual actions, offerings, sacrifices, or even initiation (2011: 131). All of these steps entail individuations. According to Panagiotopoulos the oddu or sign is finally interpreted and more individuation takes place since the diviner must then choose the relevant myths (patakies) and proverbs that pertain to the client (2011: 169).

It is my contention that the individuation process that takes place in divination, particularly during the itá, also situates initiates, precisely, in an individual perspective from which to value everyday life situations and, moreover, in a “conditional relation” (see Nietzsche 1968: 301) with the odduns and the consulted orichas. However, during an itá a neophyte does not only attain a single perspective, s/he also learns about the displacement between perspectives because, during an itá, a number of odduns or signs are drawn. In the case of the first Ifá initiation the main oddu is accompanied by two others called ‘the witnesses’ (*testigos*), which are equally relevant for the initiate’s life in order to shift his/her perspective when valuing a particular situation. During the main initiation in Santería, the ‘seating’ ceremony, the itá is more complex, since each initiate receives an oricha and the ‘made’ one ‘speaks’. The result is that after each oricha has ‘spoken’ an initiate will have at least five to six different odduns to attend to, one for each oricha. Therefore, if each oricha’s ‘conversation’ with the initiate is about situating him or her in an individual perspective, the whole itá is about multiplying such perspectives, as each oricha situates the person in a different one. This entails that from the very beginning of the initiatory process the neophyte learns about “the displacement of perspectives” (Nietzsche 1986: 9) as I will show next.

4. Divine conversations, human perspectives

Magdalena Herrera, better known as Piyuya, underwent the ‘seating’ (*asiento*) ceremony in 1968, the same year I was born. She ‘was made’ Yemayá, the oricha owner

of the seas and of motherhood, but Magdalena never became a mother, nor did she make the saint for anyone. Her saint forbade her to become a godmother and predicted a tragedy if she ever initiated someone into Santería; this happened almost ten years after she was first consecrated when she offered Yemayá a ram. As she told me, every time that a four-legged animal is offered to the saints an itá might take place, unless the initiate decides the opposite. It was one of the last itás that was ever made for her. In her view the saints have ‘spoken’ with her enough and they do not have anything new to say. That time Yemayá warned her ‘in person’, speaking through her own oracle she ‘came down’ as her own oddu, Odí. As Magdalena explained, Odí is not only Yemayá before she became an oricha, but is also the hole that is dug in the ground in order to bury a person and, therefore, Odí is also the dead. Hence, when such an oddu ‘comes out’ (*salir*), one has to look after the dead.

In Ocha/Ifá divination an oddu or sign never comes alone; they come in pairs, so that the santero or babalawo has to ‘throw’ the oracle twice in order to have a complete oddu. The two first odduns that ‘come out’ are called a ‘letter’ (*letra*), but also ‘sign’ or ‘oddu’ in the singular. Magdalena’s complete oddu that time was Oché-Odí, or Oché-Di, as santeros usually phrased it. At that time the oddu ‘came’ (*vino*) with *osobgo*, a negative tendency, and further: “*ello elese ocha*”—it would be a tragedy (*ello*) if she touched someone’s head (*elese*) to make the saint (*ocha*). At that stage, she had only performed as a *yubona* (the main helper during the initiatory ceremony, but she already had four different people who wanted to be initiated by her. She turned them all down. As she told me:

I might perform anything within Santería; I might consult you, I might wash your head, I might give you necklaces, but I can’t place [*poner*] her [Yemayá] in your head, because she would bring a tragedy. I will get a problem [*salación*], or I might even get you in trouble. And all for getting 4 pesos! No, no, no! Once you enter into the Santería ‘union’ (*sindicato*) you have to follow the saint’s will otherwise you will go down!

After that itá she attained a new perspective; knowing that she cannot ‘make the saint’ she will not consider people who approach her for a consultation to perform a ritual ‘job’ (trabajo) as a possible godson or goddaughter. Her stance as a santera is that she will never start a ritual family of her own and, therefore, will never become a *mayor* (someone in a high position) in Santería. She also knows that within that religion she will only earn money¹²⁸ through minor ritual jobs. However, Yemayá also told her not to worry about money because she will provide her with the means to survive as long as she does not get involved in any illicit activity, such as hazard games or similar.

When she was first initiated, most of the letters (letras), signs (signos) or odduns of her itá came with iré, that is, with a positive tendency. Since she received Elegguá as one of the pillars, the itá started with that oricha—remember: Elegguá always opens all ceremonies within Santería. Oggunda-Di was the letter that ‘came up’ when the oracle of Elegguá was used and, as she explained, the ‘path’ (camino) that it took was “*iré arikú yale*”: a benefit (iré), or something positive, that comes through the dead (muerto, *arikú*). According to her, the word ‘yale’ is a confirmation of the positive tendency, or the benefit, which makes it the perfect iré. Therefore, she argues, Elegguá received her with open arms. Here, she used the word ‘path’ to refer to the second part of the ‘throw’, which Panagiotopoulos called individuations: the positive tendency or benefit that comes through the dead.

Each letter, sign or oddu contains multiple stories and can be interpreted in multiple ways, but knowing that it comes with iré first reduces the possibilities of interpretation and knowing that the iré comes through the dead further individualizes the letter. For instance, Oggunda-Di usually talks of betrayal, tragedy, violence, accidents, operations, problems with justice, arguments, and other troubles that unbalance a person’s life. Due to that sign Magdalena acknowledged that she was prone to get involved in troublesome situations and also accepted that she might eventually have to undergo surgery. Although she was told that she would overcome

¹²⁸ Earning money through working the religion is an important aspect of all Afro-Cuban religions.

some of these situations with the help of the dead she also learnt that she had to control her temper in order to avoid them in the first place. Consequently, after her itá she started thinking twice before arguing with people. In other words, the perspective in which Elegguá situated her is one of carefully valuating situations in order to avoid troubles with people and with justice, and of taking care of her health in order to avoid undergoing surgical procedures. Yet her main sign is that of Yemayá, the saint with which she was crowned. When Yemayá ‘came down’ (bajó) the letter was Oche-Bara, and the path it took was “*ano otonowa lariche*” (see below). In this case Magdalena did not specify whether it came with a positive or negative tendency—iré or osogbo—but, as I understand it, the tendency was probably negative or it would not have spoken of illness (*ano*). She explained it as follows:

Ano is illness and otonowa is heaven; therefore the illness comes from heaven and not because someone has sent me some brujería (witchcraft) or given me poison or something like that. Since I was born my mother was always busy with me because I was always sick as a child, but the illnesses came from God: from heaven and not from the hand of men.

About the word lariché she simply stated that it indicates that what was said was about her head. Here Magdalena explained that an itá speaks of the ‘past, present, and future’, a view most santeros hold. She told me about her illness as a child and that her mother often had to take her to the local hospital; in fact most nurses and doctors knew her well because of that. However, as an adult Magdalena had enjoyed good health; only once since her itá had she been truly ill and had to spend some time in hospital. However, she overcame the setback without major consequences—in her view because of the ‘things’ (cosas, i.e., rituals) that were performed for her.

In my experience, when santeros argue that the oracles speak of the ‘past, present, and future’, it does not necessarily refer to events or incidents that have taken place in the past, are happening in the present, or will take place in a future, but rather to

tendencies that a person had, has, or might develop. In Deluze and Guattari's terms it could be argued that the oracles speak of a 'line of becoming', which

passes between points, it comes up through the middle, it runs perpendicular to the points first perceived, *transversally to the localizable relation to distant or contiguous points* ... a line of becoming has neither beginning nor end, departure nor arrival, origin nor destination. (2005: 315, my emphasis)

They further argue that "[i]f becoming is a block [a line-block], it is because it constitutes a zone of proximity and indiscernibility, ... a nonlocalizable relation sweeping up the two distant or contiguous points, carrying one into the proximity of the other" (ibid.). Following those authors it could be suggested that the oracle's conversations draw a 'line of becoming' between distant points—past, present, and future—constituting zones of proximities and indiscernibility with the odduns, their myths, proverbs and paths, and with the orichas. Precisely because the oracle's conversation speaks of a line of becoming it is possible to alter or re-align it through offers and sacrifices (ebbo) and, as argued, through initiation.

During the itá which takes place after the seating ceremony, various santeros might be present; however, only the Obbá is allowed to speak with the initiate. No other santero/a present should interrupt the 'conversation' unless the Obbá so asks. It is he who interprets the letter (letra) or sign (signo) and selects the myths (patakies) and proverbs that bespeak the newborn person. During such an itá there is usually a santero/a that takes care of recording the most important issues of the 'conversation' in a notebook. While it is uncommon for the myths to be written down, the central proverb/s—usually more than one—of the main letra (i.e., that of the head oricha) are usually recorded. That proverb, together with its letra and the path it took, are the key clues that will lead an initiate to attain an individual perspective from which to value everyday life and to act consonantly. Other proverbs, letras and paths will enable him or her to shift perspectives according to particular situations.

4.1. *The drunk thinks one thing and the wine-seller another.*¹²⁹

The above proverb is the one that Magdalena has written in her notebook under Oché-Bara, her main sign. As she interpreted it:

The drunk thinks that today he is going to drink for free, because every day he goes to the wine-seller and manages to get a drink without paying. However, today the wine-seller is thinking that if the drunk comes by either he pays what he owes or he won't get a drink.

She added, "If you analyze real life it is true," and she gave me a few examples of situations she had experienced that illustrate it. One of them was about something that took place while she was still a yawo.¹³⁰ A santera who was initiated together with Magdalena went to the police to ask for authorization to perform a religious ceremony, but the police refused the authorization on the grounds that it had not been reported that she had ever made the saint and that she was not inscribed as a santera. The woman responded with the details of her ceremony which incriminated Magdalena as being initiated alongside her, so Magdalena was brought to the police station and interrogated for four hours; she denied the fact that she had undergone initiation. That was how I learned that when someone undergoes initiation it has to be reported to the police and that initiates are then registered with the Interior Ministry; thereafter, whenever a santero/a wants to perform a major ceremony they must apply to the police for a permit, which is most obviously necessary for ceremonies requiring drum playing.¹³¹ However, many santeros do not report being initiated or performing new initiatory ceremonies in order to elude governmental control.

¹²⁹ In Spanish: *Una cosa piensa el borracho y otra el bodeguero*

¹³⁰ The initiate is called yawó during the first year after initiation when he/she has to fully dress in white (see Chapter Four).

¹³¹ As mentioned, there is a variety of ceremonies based on drum playing (toques) including the 'drum presentation' (*presentación al tambor*) which closes the seating ceremony.

During her interrogation Magdalena remembered the message of her main letra and reflected that the policeman was thinking one thing—how to catch her—while she was thinking another—how to get out of the situation; and she realized that the issue was not about convincing the policeman but about getting out of the situation. The policeman first asked about the necklaces she was wearing;¹³² she answered that they were sold in the shops, so she bought and wore them. Then she was asked why she dressed in white and her answer was that that she was fulfilling a promise contingent on her mother's illness, and added,

The chief commander [*el comandante en jefe*—Fidel Castro] dresses in olive green and he is proud of it; likewise I'm proud of wearing white clothes because my mother is sick and, as far as I know, it isn't an infraction. When it becomes an infraction I will no longer dress in white.

After a while she was released and was not summoned on that issue again. Years later she did register herself in the Ministry as a santera.

When she finished telling me that story she also remarked that Elegguá was warning her about possible betrayals and problems with justice. She had the feeling that her religious sister had betrayed her and hence generated her problems with the police. Then she explained that one has to pay attention both to the path and to the letter; Oggunda-Di is a harbinger of problems therefore even if the letter came with *iré*, “it does no harm to do some things [*cositas*—ritual offerings] from time to time”. The main issue is that through her *itá* Magdalena became aware of ‘what was meant for her’. She realized that she was meant to be involved in situations where people would understand her doings or behaviour in a different way than she intended; that she was prone to be betrayed by people she trusted and to fall into troublesome circumstances, particularly with the law, but also with the people around her. Consequently

¹³² Usually during the first three months after consecration the neophyte has to wear the necklaces of all the saints he/she received; thereafter only that of the tutelary saint and might add at will those he/she wishes.

Magdalena had to attain a perspective that provided her with the means to act in a way that would be favourable for her and, due to the different signs, she learned to shift perspectives; this allowed her, as in the above case, to value a situation from different points of view. Recalling Nietzsche she was attaining ‘objectivity’ since “the more different eyes we can put on in order to view a given spectacle, the more complete will be our conception of it, the greater our ‘objectivity’” (1956: 255). A further point is that—like all initiates—she had a whole year as a yawó to think about her itá and, importantly, to undergo and perform various ritual ceremonies that would lead her to a zone of proximity with her orichas. Among these she would receive what santeros call faculties (facultades) which enable initiates to perform both ritual ceremonies as well as everyday life activities; such performances will become the fundamento or foundation for their performing in this world.

Initiation within both the brujo and the saint enable neophytes to attain perspective, but they do it in different ways. Within the brujo, neophytes undergo a process requiring the re-valuation of pre-existing ideas of good and evil and right and wrong, whereas within the saint the process is one of becoming aware of that ‘which is meant for me’, which is unleashed by divination. It is precisely this question of whether ‘something is meant for me’—rather than “what is that for me?” (Nietzsche 1968: 301)—that seems to lie at the bottom of what could be called an Afro-Cuban ethical perspective. Such a perspective shares with Nietzsche the idea of ‘objectivity’ as “the ability of having one’s pros and cons within one’s command and to use them or not, as one chooses” (1956: 255), the capacity to “view a given spectacle” with “more different eyes” (ibid.), and learning to shift between perspectives.

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