

Draft chapter for *The Invention of Culture in the Americas*

## **How Myths Make Men in Afro-Cuban Divination**

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### ***ABSTRACT***

Drawing connections between Roy Wagner's accounts of mythical obviation and his notion of 'expersonation', this paper outlines the logic of myths' man-making capacities in Afro-Cuban divination – their capacity to 'divine' people. Why and how might myth be deemed as the legitimate resource for making people, rather than the other way round, as in, say, anthropological analyses that take for granted that it is myths that are man-made? Indeed, if the notion of 'myth' typically connotes a deficit of reality, how are we to make sense of practices such as divination, in which the power of myth is understood as a peculiar reality-surplus? To answer this question, the paper delves into the logic of divinatory consultations, exploring myths' capacity to make people as function of diviners' capacity to correlate two otherwise distinct 'scales' of motion during the consultation: namely, the mythical 'paths', as diviners call them, that recount in larger-than-life terms the exploits of divinities; and the 'paths' of their consultants, made up of the imponderabilia of everyday life. The people that myths generate, then, are posited as a function of a scalar difference between these two orders of motion: mythical paths have a purchase on consultants' life-paths (and only very rarely vice-versa), because the former is deemed to contain 'everything', while the latter pertains to the scale of 'anything'.

## ***Introduction***

In her classic paper ‘How Man Makes God in West Africa’, Karin Barber showed how the potency of divinities is assumed by their Yoruba-speaking worshippers to be partly a function of the amount of devotees they can attract (Barber 1982).

Metaphysics, so to speak, as a function of sociology. As Barber herself notes in passing, this puts her analysis of the constitution of West African *orisa*, as the gods are called, in the vicinity of classic debates about the constitution of Big Men and Great Men in Melanesia. Given the anachronism, it is unlikely that this comparison could be stretched to include Roy Wagner’s holographic analysis of big and great-manship, published a decade later in ‘The Fractal Person’ (Wagner 1991). This may be just as well, since one of the main consequences of Wagner’s argument there is that the distinction between power (metaphysics) and the people on which it may be imagined to operate (sociology) breaks down. Qua fractal, Big Men and Great Men do not exert power over clan members. Rather power resides in the former’s capacity to instantiate the latter – to *express* the clan own potency, rather than control it – by singularizing the clan in the scale of their person: power as ‘expersonation’, to invoke one of Wagner’s more recent terms (Wagner 2012), to which I shall return. In fact, this way of rendering the relationship between sociology and metaphysics internal (in the philosophical sense, i.e. mutually constitutive) might also allow us to reverse the flow of Barber’s argument, and ask whether the socialization of divine power that she describes might not also amount to a divinization of the worshippers who effect it. The gods men make, according to this understanding, may also make the men back.

In this chapter I explore this possibility with reference to the practice of Ifá divination in Cuba, which I have studied ethnographically since 1998. One way to frame the question would be with reference to the very word ‘divination’. What if we were to reverse the metaphorical extension through which the term divination has come to be understood as a synonym of guessing (designating oracles, augury, seership, and so on) and dwelled instead on the surface of the word, to think of ‘divination’ as indicating the act of rendering things divine? ‘Divine’, then, would be to ‘divination’ simply as ‘deity’ is to ‘deification’. In the case of Ifá, I suggest, such a literalization would be more than just word-play. Building on the by now well-established point that the epistemic projects of divinatory knowledge (prognosis, diagnosis, etc.) may be distinguished by their irreducibly ontic dimensions – diviners are *worldmakers*, as René Devisch says (de Boek & Devisch 1994), I want to unpack

the crucial sense in which Ifá divination is, perhaps above all, a procedure for making divinities, just as the word would suggest, or, more precisely, for making men *as* divinities.<sup>1</sup> In doing so, I want to explore in particular an *asymmetry* that lies at the heart of the cyborg-like status of these confectioned persons (Haraway 1991; Strathern 2004; Holbraad & Pedersen 2009), namely the fact that it is men who get divinized and not, as one could imagine, divinities that get humanised. Correcting a tendency in my earlier work on Ifá divination to underplay this asymmetry and emphasise instead the reciprocity of the transformations that gods and humans alike undergo in divination,<sup>2</sup> here I show how Wagner's idea of obviation, particularly when supplemented by his more recent notion of expersonation, can allow us to get a better handle on how people are made in this process. As we shall see, showing this involves looking quite carefully at how *myths* in particular are to be conceived in this context, since it is above all mythical discourse that furnishes the transformations through which men are 'divined' in Ifá – hence the reference to myths (rather than just gods) in my title.

### ***Divinatory cyborgs***

Afro-American religious traditions are famously about 'making' people. Marcio Goldman (1985; see also Goldman, this volume), for example, has described the long and arduous process through which initiates get ontologically confectioned as they ascend the initiatic ranks of Candomblé in Brazil, by increasingly internalizing a collection of divinities with whom each stage of initiation associates them. As in Brazil, in Cuba initiation itself is referred to most commonly as a process of 'making oneself saint' (*hacerse santo*), and in Santería, with which Ifá divination is associated,

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<sup>1</sup> I refer to men advisedly here, since one of the distinguishing marks of Ifá divination is that full initiation is reserved for heterosexual men exclusively. On the somewhat *macho* character that this ritual stricture lends to the life of Ifá worship, see Holbraad 2004. On recent controversies over the initiation of women see Palmié 2013.

<sup>2</sup> This error was pointed out to me most clearly by Michael Scott, to whom I am grateful for the critical engagement. An early version of the argument of the present paper was prepared for the *Moving Scales and Scales of Movement* workshop organised by the Cosmology, Religion, Ontology and Culture Research Group (CROC) at UCL. I am grateful to the organizers, and particularly Alice Elliott, for the inspiration that this event provided. Closer to its current form the paper was presented in the event in Trujillo, Spain, honouring Roy Wagner's work, organised by Pedro Pitarch – I thank him for the invitation and, alongside Jose Antonio Kelly, for the editorial work on this volume. Versions of the paper were also presented at research seminars in St Andrews, Cambridge, Santa Cruz and LSE. As well as honouring Wagner, the paper honours the memory of its protagonist, Javier Alfonso – an asymmetrical twinning of anthropological and personal mentorship that to my mind adds significance to them both. Ona iré padrino.

this most crucially involves literally ‘seating’ a tutelary divinity (*oricha*) in the heads of neophytes, who from then on carry their gods *inside themselves*. However Orula, the god of divination, is considered too powerful to fit in any one human head. So, as with other so-called ‘major’ *orichas*, Orula is instead ‘received’ by neophyte *babalawos* during the week-long ceremony of initiation, in the form of a set of consecrated items, including a collection of palm-nuts with the help of which the newly ‘made’ *babalawo* will from then on be able to officiate as a diviner. In this sense, ‘making oneself Ifá’ (as *babalawos* refer to their initiation) involves becoming the kind of man who ‘has’ Orula, and Orula himself in part consists of the palm-nuts that allow him to ‘speak’, as *babalawos* say, during divination. So *babalawos* ‘have’ Orula as something like an essential property, if you like, and Orula ‘is’, in part, the nuts. The *babalawo*, then, as man-as-Orula-as-nuts (see also Holbraad 2007; 2012a: 148-156) – a ‘circuit of connections that joins parts that cannot be compared insofar as they are not isomorphic with one another’, which is how Marilyn Strathern expresses Haraway’s idea of the cyborg (2004: 54).

In Ifá, divination itself – the prime activity of *babalawos* – plays a crucial in regulating each stage of these initiatic transformations: diviners are made through divination, in that sense. This is partly because every ceremony of initiation has first to be sanctioned through divination, so divinatory authorization is rigorously constitutive of the transformations initiation entails.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the connection between divination and initiation in Ifá is so close that the two are probably best conceived as versions of each other. This is because in Ifá the ceremony of divination itself becomes the most active ingredient, so to speak, in the seven-day ceremonial sequence of Ifá initiation. In many ways *the* ritual leitmotiv of the whole week, divination has ceremonial pride of place on the first, the third and the final day of the initiation, in which so-called *itá* ceremonies are conducted. These consist of a series of lengthy divinations carried out by the officiating *babalawos* in order to ascertain certain key characteristics of the neophyte. Most importantly, in the *itá* of the first day the *babalawos* must find out which of the 256 possible configurations, on which Ifá

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<sup>3</sup> The prestige of Ifá at the pinnacle of Afro-Cuban ritual complexes, as *babalawos* at least would see it, is owing partly to the fact that, as divinatory experts par excellence (they alone ‘have’ Orula, the patron-god of divination), *babalawos* are able to exert a degree of control over matters of initiation into not only Ifá (where their control is absolute), but also other cults, such as Santería, with which they share major elements of ritual and cosmology (see Holbraad 2008; 2012a: 84-98).

divination is based, corresponds to the neophyte in the most global sense (the subsequent two divinations yield more specific information, including, in the case of the final day's ceremony, matters pertaining to the end of the neophyte's life, as we shall see). Referred to as *signos* (Spanish for 'sign') or, in the original Yoruba, as *oddu*, these configurations are considered divinities in their own right, and are often conceived as manifestations or, as practitioners say, 'paths' of Orula himself, the god of divination. In fact, there is a very literal sense in which they are just that, since the different *oddu* are generated during divination by the technical process of casting the consecrated palm-nuts that, as we have seen, are understood as being a part of Orula himself. So, quite concretely, Orula *becomes* one of the 256 *oddu* by literally morphing into one of them through the motions of the nuts as they are cast.

This ontological extension-cum-transformation of Orula into his *oddu*-paths is fundamental to the process of 'making oneself Ifá' through initiation. For, just as divination turns Orula into an *oddu*, so, during the *itá* ceremony of the first day of initiation in particular, it turns the neophyte into an *oddu* also, since the *oddu* one receives during this divination effectively becomes one's prime identity as a *babalawo* ever after. This is most obvious from the fact that the initiatic *oddu* of the *babalawo*, referred to as 'his sign' (*su signo*), becomes the *babalawo*'s name in ritual contexts and often in everyday use as well. Before initiation you might be called Francisco, but after initiation you'll be referred to by your sign-name – say, Obbeché, or Ogunda Teturá, or Eyobbe. To the extent that one 'becomes' one's name, and one's name in this case is an ontological extension of Orula, initiation effectively 'makes' one into a part of Orula. Again, a cyborg-like ontic amalgam: man-as-sign-of-Orula.

But the notion of becoming here goes much deeper than that. More than just providing neophytes with a name, the binding association with their sign effectively gives neophytes a whole new personality. For them, by far the most interesting part of the divination is the lengthy process by which what *babalawos* call 'the significance' of the sign is recounted and interpreted. Here focus turns particularly on the plethora of mythical stories with which each of the 256 *oddu* is associated, the so-called 'paths' of the *oddu*, which *babalawos* spend a life-time memorising, studying and interpreting. This process of study is indefinitely long, *babalawos* explain, since the volume of myths is inordinately large, describing in its totality Orula's original witness of the creation of all things, which is typically presented in the myths as having taken place in the distant past, in Africa. 'Everything', *babalawos* emphasise,

‘is in Ifá’ (*todo está en Ifá*). ‘Even the invention of the Internet is in Ifá’, as one *babalawo* once explained to me with detailed reference to a mythical account of the use of the talking drum in Africa. That everything should be in Ifá, however, is more a point of principle, since, as *babalawos* also explain, the ‘everything’ that Ifá contains in its mythical corpus is ‘too large to fit in a single head’. *Babalawos* even put a figure on it: each of the 256 *oddu*, some say, has 101 paths, so, notionally, there are 22,856 myths to learn! Others claim there are even more of them. Either way, it is to this awesome abundance of content that *babalawos* point when explaining the marvel of Ifá, and particularly its power, as a device for divination, to shed light on any question one might wish to throw at it, from the invention of the Internet, to the causes of one’s personal strife or, in principle, any contingent life-circumstance whatsoever.

During the *itá* ceremony of initiation, then, the collective task for the presiding *babalawos* is to recount as many of the mythical stories as they can recall (or deem relevant) for the benefit of the neophyte, and then proceed to interpret them for him in order to arrive at what is effectively a global characterisation of his personhood: what dangers lurk for him, and what opportunities, how he should behave, what situations he should avoid, how he should treat people, what he should and shouldn’t eat and drink – think of the star-sign pages of a magazine, only much more detailed. The main difference from star-signs, however, is that in the case of Ifá this mythically-derived idiography carries with it a heavy normative freight since, once one is told effectively who one is in one’s *itá*, it is from then on one’s obligation to live one’s life accordingly (Holbraad 2010; Basso Ortiz 2014). As *babalawos* emphasise, one has to ‘live one’s sign’ (*vivir el signo*).

Elsewhere, following Marshall Sahlins, I have called ‘mythopractical’ the universe into which *babalawos* are propelled by this injunction to live out their mythical *signos* (Holbraad 2012a: 100; Sahlins 1985). To illustrate the poignancy of lives lived in the power of myth in this way, and to begin to unpack the logic that this mythopraxis instantiates, let me indicate the subtleties with reference to the last few years of the life of Javier Alfonso, an elderly *babalawo* I got to know closely during my PhD fieldwork in Havana in the late 1990s and early 2000s, who eventually also presided over my own initial steps of initiation, thus becoming my ‘godfather’

(*padrino*), as practitioners refer to this form of ritual kinship.<sup>4</sup> I choose this example partly because I find it moving, but also because I think that this personal dimension is itself a function of the point I wish to make, namely that *balalawos*' relationship with the *signos* that define them – and which they, in turn, *live out* – runs very deep indeed, encompassing not only general matters of comportment and character, but also aspects that might best be described as existential – indeed, in this case, matters of life and death.

### ***Javier Alfonso – Ogunda Teturá***

I met Javier during my PhD fieldwork in 1998 (in Ifá circles he was known also as Javier Ogunda Teturá, after the principal *signo* he was assigned in his initiation more than thirty years earlier). As I describe elsewhere (Holbraad 2012a: 75-80), I had felt somewhat hustled in my interactions with *babalawos* during my first few months of fieldwork. My agenda of ethnographic extraction, I found, was constantly being trumped by *babalawos*' own attempts to extract dollars from me. Being taken to meet Javier by his son Javielito (also a *babalawo*, and my closest friend in Havana ever since), was a huge relief. As people who knew him would often say, 'The old man is not up to anything' (*no está en nada*), 'still attending to the same people as before [i.e. before the post-Soviet era of tourism, dollars and the hustle], charging the same prices, working Ifá in the old style'. If this was a stereotype, it fully coincided with my own idealised images of *babalawos* as benign sages, which I had derived mainly of my readings on the practice of Ifá in West Africa in colonial times. Indeed, in retrospect, I am sometimes worried that this sense of relief may have been also borne a little of the fact that already at that time Javier was bed-ridden (due to the onset of Parkinson's disease, as I later found out), confined to his tiny and entirely frugal tenement flat in inner city Havana, which he shared with his son Javielito, following the death of Javielito's mother some years earlier – the informant as pliable patient, so to speak, of my ethnographic scrutiny. Still, what I couldn't have suspected at the time was that these very qualities of modesty and frailty were not merely conditioning factors allowing me finally to get on with my research on how divination is lived, but pertained rather to the very heart of my research. For it turns out that what I initially

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<sup>4</sup> I undertook two initiatic ceremonies in 1999 and 2000, while conducting fieldwork in Cuba for my PhD. Referred to as 'receiving the warrior deities' and 'receiving *mano de Orula*', these ceremonies are considered preliminary steps to the full initiation rites referred to above, in which neophytes are 'made' into Ifá and thus become *babalawos*.

attracted me to Javier was itself an expression of his way of living his life, including its encroaching end, in the power of his *signo*'s myths.

In fact, my first inkling of the relevance of mythopraxis to Javier's life was immediate. As a visitor to Javier's home, one had myth literally thrust upon one, fluttering in one's face in the form of a half-a-dozen or so pigeons that were allowed to roam freely in the flat's single (and very tight) living space – perching on chairs, on kitchen utensils, on the consecrated divinities that the two men kept in various parts of the room, and, it must be said, leaving their droppings everywhere. Even in my very first visit to their home, it was impossible not to ask the two men what the pigeons were doing there. Cryptic to me at the time, the answer I received was that Javier kept the pigeons in his home permanently 'por su signo' – on account of his *signo* – according to which they would bring him 'peace and tranquillity, and give him life'. In response to my queries about this, months later, Javier himself used the pigeons as an example of what 'living one's *signo*' involves. His *signo* Ogunda Teturá, he explained, is a poor man's (*signo de pobre*). Many of the paths associated with it speak of modest resources and making do with little, and the pigeons, he said, are connected with that. Here is a full transcription of the myth he referred to, translated from a version presented in a compendium of *oddu* paths used by *babalawos*, in which the story appears under the title 'The Path of Orunmila's Depression':

Orunmila had a big house which was full of his relatives. One day he found himself in a very bad financial state, having woken up with just 15 cents in his pocket. Depressed about it, he said to himself: 'I'll take my own life'. He bought two *ekó* (a corn-based ritual dish used as offering to divinities) and five bread buns and went up a hill. There he ate what he had, allowing the peels and leftovers to drop on the ground, took a loose vine, and just as he was wrapping it round his neck to kill himself, two pigeons appeared and repeated to him three times: "Awó Nagui Aramako, Awó Nagui Aramako." Hearing this, Orunmila asked: "What is it that they are saying?" Then he looked and saw the pigeons eating what he had thrown away and said: "I'm taking my own life, while others are worse off than I." So he picked up and left. Just three days later a great treasure came his way. Before deciding to commit suicide he had done *ebbó* (i.e. performed a sacrifice) involving two pigeons but had let them loose, and it was none other than those two pigeons that had saved him.



By the time he recounted to me this, Javier had already disclosed to me some of the general features of his own initiatic *signo* with reference to his own character and the course that his life had taken – indeed, references to the *signos* of Ifá and their varied and ever-intricate features were abundant in his narrations when, over several sessions, I recorded his life history. Poverty was an abiding theme in these narrations: he had come from a working class family of dock-workers in Matanzas and had worked jobs all his life there and in Havana throughout the Revolutionary period, having two separate conjugal households to sustain, one in each city (a dual arrangement about which he spoke little, and which may have sometimes concerned him as much as the pressures of having too many relatives did Orunmila in his tale of depression). Crucially, he had contracted out of the competitively macho economy of Ifá in the age of the dollar, charging next to nothing for his services. “All this,” he would say indicating the frugal surroundings of his room, “is Ogunda Teturá.”

The pigeons, however, had come in more recent years, as his health had begun to deteriorate. In fact, while the path’s overt story of the destitutions of poverty was very much in line with Javier’s abiding understanding of his *signo*, the role of the pigeons for him seemed more connected to the myth’s more submerged concern with the relationship between life and death – pigeons as death-defying quellers of desperation (*paz y tranquilidad*), and thus also prolongers of life (*vida*), in return for the rather Abrahamic way in which their own was spared in an aborted sacrifice. In short, pigeons as Isaac-like. The divinatory rationale for this shift in interpretative emphasis probably runs deeper than anything Javier ever told me explicitly. But a key element had to do with the convergence between his self-definition as Ogunda Teturá and the abiding role played by a further *signo*, now that he was approaching the end of his life and suffering from increasingly severe symptoms of Parkinson’s disease. This was the most magisterial *signo* – the highest-ranking of all *oddu* – namely Baba Eyogbe, which Javier was given in the final divination conducted in his Ifá initiation – the one that complements the principal *signo* of the neophyte by providing an image of how he will ‘leave life’, as *babalawos* put it euphemistically.

Baba Eyogbe is commonly held by initiates to be the richest and most complex *signo* of all. But while he was very much aware of this complexity, it was striking that in connection to his own relationship to Eyogbe Javier would most often emphasise a single characteristic: namely, the notion of a prolonged period of

deterioration before death. This he derived from two principal associations of this *signo*, which may appear somewhat contradictory, but which Javier himself synthesised to a single and to him, I think, altogether terrifying dia/prognosis: that of a slow death, eyes wide shut. On the one hand, he would often account for the increasing periods he spent lying in his bed with reference to the saying that Eyogbe himself ended his days lying down (*postrado*). More poignantly, however, he would compare his predicament with another image associated with Eyogbe, namely that of an ancient tree slowly being reduced to dust from the inside, due to heart rot (*el arbol carcomido*). On account of this *signo*, as Javier told me once, life was escaping him gradually, from the inside, while his mind remained crystal clear (*se me está iyendo la vida de por dentro pero la mente en sí la tengo clara*).

Having spent extended periods of time with Javier and his son in my periodic return visits to Cuba up until his death in 2004, I got a strong sense that these *oddu*-derived cosmological images of dying played an abiding role for Javier in his final years, as the prospect of death loomed larger and larger for him. In particular, it seems to me that these images provided the conceptual and emotional coordinates for Javier's own experience of his decay, framing his final years as above all an attempt to balance – self-consciously, 'with a clear mind' – the life that was left in him with the encroaching debilitation of his disease, experienced as a metonymy of death gnawing away at one from the inside – the heart-rotting tree. A prime example of the profound sense of adjustment that this involved for him was his gradual retirement from the ritual life of Ifá, as well as the cognate male fraternity of Abakuá in which he had been deeply involved as a high-ranking member since his youth in Matanzas. When I asked him about his increasing reluctance to officiate in ceremonies (as he had done in my own initiatic ceremony in 1999, which I think is the last one he did), he explained it in technical terms: 'making Ifáses takes a lot of *aché*, and I don't have much of that left' – *aché* being the primary metaphysical concept of Ifá, meaning life-force or energy, much like Oceanian *mana* (Holbraad 2007). But I got a sense of the order of loss this forced retirement meant for him on a different occasion, when, along with a friend and one of his nephews I tried to persuade him to let us take him to Matanzas to participate in a major festival of his Abakuá lodge, to which his emotional attachment was perhaps the greatest. Beseeching him clumsily, coming far too close to stating the obvious, namely that this would be his chance also to say goodbye, I soon came profoundly to regret having put Javier in the position of having

to voice his inner anxiety. Deeply agitated, he scolded his nephew (although he knew the idea had been mine): “Why can’t you just leave me alone... You know I have a tiny bit of life left in me, and I want to preserve all I can. Don’t you understand? I don’t want death.”

The pigeons, then, were peace, tranquillity, and *life*. They had saved Orunmila when he was most destitute and closest to the spectre of his own death. For while Javier was certainly not suicidal (quite the opposite), the concern with control *over* death, so prominent in the path of the pigeons, was also very much his own. Living with the pigeons in his final years, then, was more than just an emblem of his inner drama, although perhaps for him it was that too. They were themselves a weapon in his on-going battle with death – a prime ingredient of his attempts to calibrate between it and the life his *signo* told him he had left. If one may be allowed to speak in these terms, they were his way of *dying out his signo*.

### ***Lethal Speech***

Drawing on earlier work in which I tried to conceptualise the notion of truth that underpins the relationship between *signos* and the lives on which they operate (Holbraad 2012a, 2012b), I want to start unpacking the logic of this mytho-practice by pointing first to the role that *motion* plays in it. For there is an important sense in which the highly motile way in which the *oddu* are generated in the very technique of divination (i.e. the motions of Orula’s nuts) is merely the tip of a motile iceberg, in which managing movement is what is most at stake in maintaining and developing one’s relationship to one’s sign. Most crucially, motion, and particularly transformation, is what *babalawos* highlight when they explain the importance of the myths of the *oddu* to their lives, and their on-going projects of interpreting those myths in order to uncover their purchase on their daily comportment. As we have seen, while the paths of each *oddu* – and the motile connotations of the word are significant – typically recount events that happened at a distant past in some part of Africa, whether consulting for clients or ‘living’ the *oddu* himself, the *babalawo*’s job is effectively to transform the path into some form of message that is of immediate relevance and can be operationalized in one’s life: the image of a tree with heart rot transfigures into the experience of Parkinson’s disease, the story of Orunmila and the pigeons becomes an ingredient in an old man’s attempts to stave off death, and rendered entirely concrete in the form of living pigeons perching in a tenement flat.

The literal role that transformative motion plays in such forms of mythopraxis was conveyed to me by Javier himself by way of a vivid account that merits full quotation:

[To consult] you need to know how to speak—to be an orator of Ifá—to manage the ‘metamorphosis,’ as we call it.... You might come to me and from one story I can tell you three things. But you go to someone else and they might tell you ten, knowing how to get the most out of the *oddu* (*sacarle provecho*). There was one guy ... who was famous when I was young. Once I was in a [séance] with him; he was arrogant but with good reason since he knew more than anyone else.... The other *babalawos* were speaking the *oddu*—I did too—but at some point he just stood up and said: ‘now listen to me!’ and, turning to the neophyte [curtly], ‘the fridge in your house is broken!’ [The neophyte], bewildered, goes ‘yes, it is.’ The *babalawo* turns to the rest: ‘Did you hear that?’—that was his way of teaching. We wondered how Ifá can speak of the guy’s fridge.... So he explained himself—I think the *oddu* was Obara Meyi: ‘Ifá says that there was an island where fishermen lived, but all their fish kept rotting. Close by there was another island which always had snow, so the fishermen brought snow from there to put their fish in.’ And so with metamorphosis he says that in the house there must be a fridge, and since the neophyte had turned out *osobbo*, that it must be broken. Do you see how it works?

On the other hand, as we have seen, a reciprocal form of transformation is also expected of the *babalawo* in the demand to *live* the sign. Just as the sign is transformed interpretatively in order to be rendered personally relevant to the diviner, so the life to which the sign speaks must also be transformed in the light of these divinations. Indeed, as Anastasis Panagiotopoulos has shown, here too the notion of a ‘path’ becomes operative. In the context of one’s normative relationship with one’s sign, one’s own life as a *babalawo* is conceived also as a ‘path’ (*camino*) that must be brought continually into line with the mythical paths that are made to have a purchase on it (Panagiotopoulos 2011; 2016). Difficult as they were for him (and that is of course also the point), Javier’s progressive compromises and adjustments in the final years of his life were for him only the last in a series of often sacrificial-looking acts of alignment with the demands of Ogunda Tetura and other *oddu* reining the course of

his life-path (e.g. living Ogunda Tetura as a poor man's *signo* effectively barred Javier from enjoying the aspect of Ifá that makes it most attractive to most *babalawos*, namely the great amount of money and luxury with which it is associated).

In short, then, the man-as-divinity cyborg that divination confections can be parsed as a process of reciprocal motions of transformation: qua mythical paths, the *oddu* are transformed in the direction of the men whose signs they are, while those men transform their own lives in order to embody the divine *oddu* and their myths. In earlier work, I schematised such a reciprocal movement of paths by way of this rather literal-minded figure, adjusted here to fit the terms of the present argument:

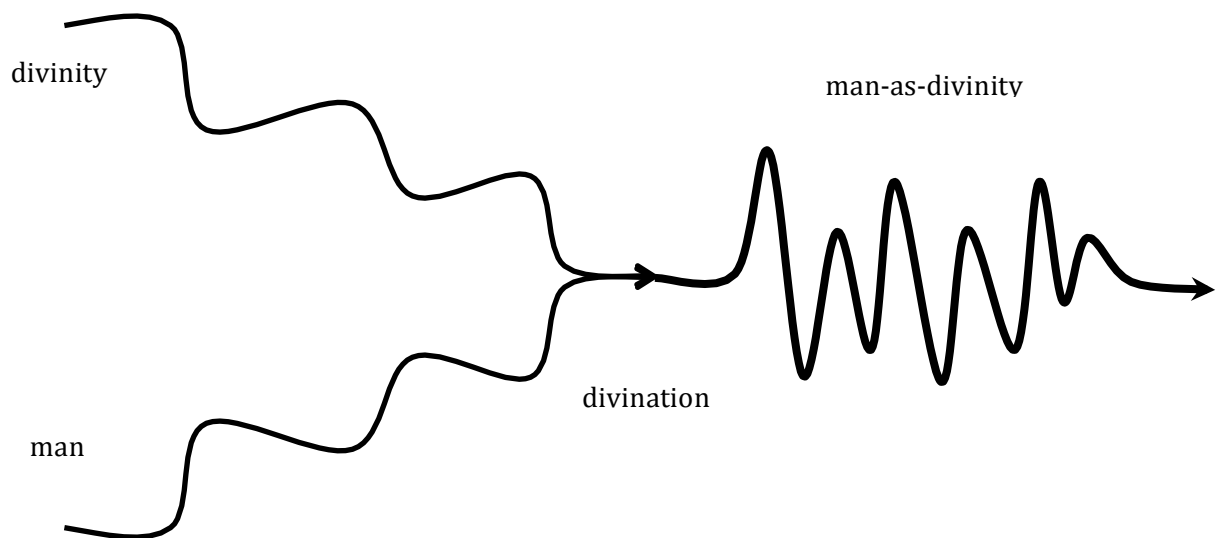


Figure 1: The symmetry of motile mythopraxis

However, while this figure was helpful in the context of a somewhat different argument, regarding the 'motile' character that divinatory truth-claims come to acquire in Ifá (see Holbraad 2012a), it is not in itself nuanced enough to reflect the logic of mythopraxis that is our concern here, nor, indeed, the constitution of the cyborg divinatory confections of men that, as we have seen, emerge out of it. Crucially, in emphasising the mutual character of the transformations that both myths and men undergo in the process of divination this analysis downplays an irreducible *asymmetry* in the reciprocity of this relationship – one that is crucial to conceptualizing the cyborg men-as-divinities that Ifá divination confections.

To see the asymmetry in question, one might ask: why could we not think of the neophytes of Ifá also the other way round, as, say, divinities-as-men? Why, indeed, can we not think of Javier's efforts to live and die as Ogunda Tetura as much as a 'humanization' of the *signo* as a 'divination' of the man? Now, as we have seen, in a sense we can. The myths must indeed be *transformed* in order to have a purchase on the lives over which they reign: mythical island of ice becomes broken fridge, Ogunda Tetura's suicidal path of depression becomes Javier's flat-with-pigeons, and so on. Nevertheless, to a *babalawo* it would be nonsense to suggest that such transformations are analogous to the ones he strives to undergo himself in living his *signo*. To imagine that divination might act to transform the ontological constitution of the divinities (in the same way as it quite properly transforms *babalawos*' own constitution) would be a logical aberration. The whole point about the gods and their myths – the whole reason for which it is worth bringing them to bear on life in the first place – is that, pertaining to the times of origins as they unfolded in a distant 'Africa', as we've seen, they are in themselves timeless and transcendent with respect to the here-and-now realities over which they – precisely – reign, and therefore constitutively immune to being modified by them. A kind of mythical *langue* to the *parole* of the living.

It is in this connection, I suggest, that Roy Wagner's models of obviational sequencing, particularly as developed in his dazzlingly sophisticated conceptualization of myth in *Lethal Speech* (1978), may allow us to make a major stride forward. For one way to gloss the complexity of Wagner's account of mythical transformations is in terms of the role it accords to the asymmetry of their motile sequences (see also Holbraad & Pedersen 2016, Chapter 2). This plays out as a dialectical interplay between what Wagner calls 'collectivizing' modalities, which depict the world through conventional schemes of meaning (think here of cosmology, grammar, kinship patterns, social and political organization, and so on), and 'individual' or 'differentiating' ones, in which these conventional depictions are collapsed in moments of semiotic invention, or 'obviated' in Wagner's terminology, in order to be transformed or distorted so as to reveal new possibilities for meaning (for cosmology, think of the impact of a statement such as 'God is dead', for grammar think of poetry, for kinship think of a scandalous extramarital affair, for social and

political organization think of revolution, or at least of how revolutions often like to think of themselves).<sup>5</sup> Wagner writes:

The plot of a myth is not simply a succession of substitutions or transformations, but a transformational dialectic that embodies the interplay between contextual separation and its obviation. [...] Effectively transformations take the form of alternating constructions of a social (collectivizing) nature and an individual (differentiating) nature. Keeping in mind that the conventional mode, that of social construction, also embodies the property of contextual separation, and that the inventive mode, that of innovation, embodies the tropic properties of contextual assimilation, we can see that this is a special kind of dialectic. Whereas its ‘open’, bipolar form as a dialogue between opposed principles, or semiotic modes, is maintained by one of these modes, a cumulative movement toward closure and resolution, toward figurative self-containment, is maintained by the other mode. The result is an obviation sequence, a self-containing and self-closing dialectic – or better, perhaps, a dialectic that *becomes* something. (Wagner 1978: 35)

In *Lethal Speech* the dialectical contrast between collectivizing and differentiating modes of substitution (the mutual embrace of convention and invention) is divided by itself, to use one of Wagner’s more recent tropes, to characterise two contrasting modalities of myth among the Daribi. *Namu Po*, which Wagner glosses as tales or legends, are stories that are understood to be made up contingently by people, spinning in variously fanciful ways a yarn made of their unique experiences and peculiar characteristics in order to reach an overtly moralizing conclusion about how things should be done. The particular is obviated through the successive substitutions of the story’s plot in order to yield a conventionally understood, collectively applicable ‘moral’. Inversely, *Po Page*, glossed as ‘revealed origins’ or ‘origin myths’, comprise the received wisdom on how the conventions the Daribi take to be innate to the world (cosmology, kin relations, ritual forms, and other such seemingly infrastructural elements of their lives) emerged out of specific circumstances unique

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<sup>5</sup> Wagner’s conception of invention is laid out most systematically in *The Invention of Culture* (1981) – perhaps the closest anthropology has come to providing a theory of everything. For my own (partial) exegesis, see Holbraad 2012a: 37-46. See also Dulley 2015 and Holbraad & Pedersen 2016.

to them. So here it is collectivising conventions that get obviated differentially, in order to be revealed as unique, thoroughly contingent inventions with a specific origin.

While in *Lethal Speech* the inverse (indeed symmetrical) asymmetry of these two modalities is put to work to illuminate the internal symbolic economy of Daribi myths, thus showing how myths operate upon themselves, the sheer elegance of Wagner's distinction can also be transposed more or less wholesale onto the ways in which myths interact with the people to whom they are ascribed in Ifá divination. With reference to Figure 1, it is clear that the symmetry along the horizontal axis of the two motile paths that meet to produce the cyborg man-as-divinity belies a reversal of direction that is identical to the one Wagner draws when contrasting *Po Page* to *Namu Po*. The 'metamorphosis' the myths of Orula undergo in order to collide with the trajectories of the men they characterise is one that obviates the elements of a conventional cosmology, fixed eternally in the complex schemes of *oddu* the *babalawos* must study, in order to differentiate themselves as particularized forms of life, tailored to the unique and contingent circumstances of the person that takes them on and lives them. (Note the difference from *Po Page* however: whereas there particularization pertained to the back-story of cosmology, in Ifá it pertains to its influence over the lives on which it is made to operate). Conversely, the transformations the *babalawos* effect on themselves as they strive to 'live the *signo*' in light of these mythically-derived edicts move in the opposite direction, like *Namu Po* tales: the always-already particular circumstances of the person who enters the orbit of the *oddu* through divination are deliberately obviated, and substituted with explicitly moral intent by the collectivizing images given by the *signos*. So, if the vector that runs from divinity to humanity marks a movement from cosmologically given conventions to the vital artifice of invention, the vector that runs from humanity to divinity moves from the imponderable particulars of everyday life to the innate, always-already given moulds of Ifá cosmology.

Now, in a way we could leave the argument here. Wagner's analytical vocabulary of the innate and the artificial, convention and invention, and collectivization and differentiation is enough in itself not only to describe the asymmetrical structure of Ifá divination, but also to account for it. If, as we saw, the question of asymmetry comes down to *babalawos*' conviction that it is people rather than divinities and their myths that ought to change through divination, then what we



have here is just a straight confirmation of one of Wagner's arch contentions, namely that what distinguishes from our own societies in which such practices as divination hold sway is precisely the fact that while we take conventions to be the result of human artifice (and hence we recognise such things as Ifá myths only very begrudgingly, branding them, precisely, as 'myths' or, worse, 'beliefs'), they take them to be innate – the furniture of the world, to coin a phrase. So the logical aberration of imagining that the inner constitution of divinities and myths could *per impossible* be modified by their contact with humans in divination could in this way be more or less deduced from Wagnerian first principles.

Still, leaving things at that would involve a strong element of circularity. We can only really know that Ifá divination exemplifies the innatism Wagner somewhat sweepingly ascribes to nigh on all peoples other than Euro-Americans (e.g. 1981: 74-5) by pointing to the ontological asymmetries of divinities and humans, so explaining the latter in terms of the former would seem to beg the question. To avoid such a circular argument, it pays to obviate (in his terms) Wagner's own conventional (and too collectivizing) distinction between the innate and the artificial, by adding to it the kinds of conceptual dimension Ifá practitioners themselves enunciate when they distinguish the divinatory operations of myth from those of life – a conceptual language that, as we shall see, is able more strictly to *quantify* the distinction between myth and life. In fact, since the time of *Lethal Speech*, Wagner himself has provided an ingenious concept, namely that of 'expersonation', which can provide a bridge from the broadly qualitative distinction between innate conventions and artificial inventions to the more precisely quantitative way in which *babalawos* conceive of what makes their myths so special.

### ***Conclusion: quantifying obviations***

Expersonation, as Wagner articulates it, is impersonation inside-out. While impersonation, which he glosses as a form of abstraction, involves "an exaggeration of some features and consequent omission or downgrading of others", expersonations "register *more* concrete particularity than is found in the original" (Wagner 2012: S162; see also Wagner 2010). Now, while Wagner himself does not state this himself, we may note that this is effectively a manner of *quantifying* his original distinction between the two modes of obviation, from invention to convention and vice versa, which we encountered in his account of Daribi myths in *Lethal Speech*. To

conventionalize always involves an obviation that cuts things away, subtracting their unique particularities (impersonation), while invention adds to the things upon which it operates, rendering them more particular than it found them (expersonation).

What is so useful in this inventive obviation of the convention/invention duo is that it refigures it as a kind of analytical quantification of ‘more’ and ‘less’ upon which the ethnography of Ifá has a direct purchase. Reminiscent of (although quite different from) medieval theologies that opposed the infinity of God’s perfection to the finitude of his imperfect creations, Ifá, as we saw, articulates the contrast between the mythical paths of the *oddu* and the life-paths of the humans who come under their influence in terms of a similarly quantifying qualification, which can be glossed analytically as a distinction between the *definite* and the *indefinite*. Far from infinite, Orula and his *oddu* may indeed be vast, but are nevertheless strictly (if notionally) circumscribed. ‘Everything is in Ifá’, *babalawos* say, but this is an ‘everything’ on which you can put a number: a *closed set* of 256 *oddu* with a notionally determinate number of paths. By contrast, the sets of circumstances on which Ifá is brought to bear in divination is left deliberately open: *anything*, *babalawos* marvel, can be explained by Ifá – hence the awe of Orula’s power (see also Holbraad 2010).

This melding of differently quantified scales – the definite ‘everything’ of myth and the indefinite ‘anything’ of life – lies at the heart of Ifá cyborgs’ constitutive asymmetry, providing the terms with which such an asymmetry can be analytically articulated. To see this, we may start by glossing the asymmetry in Wagner’s language of impersonation and expersonation. Living one’s signo, on this account, can be articulated as a process in which the *babalawo* is required to ‘impersonate’ himself (reducing his own contingency in particular ways) in order the better to ‘expersonate’ his *oddu* (augmenting it into more than the conventional characteristics given in the myths by adding to it his own flesh-and-blood manner of enacting them). Conversely, viewed from the point of view of the myths rather than that of the men who enact them, the asymmetry is inverted. As the object of *babalawos*’ interpretative metamorphoses, the mythical *oddu* are made to ‘expersonate’ themselves, as they are rendered more and more concrete according to the interpretive exigencies of the divination: mythical ice and rotting fish get turned into real-life broken fridges, Biblical-sounding accounts of self-immolating pigeons become flesh-and-blood birds leaving their droppings in an old man’s flat, and so on. And this they do in order the better to ‘impersonate’ the *babalawo* to whom they are attached in divination, whose

*oddu*-like characteristics they emphasise at the expense of others, which are effectively discarded, suppressed or even sacrificed, as we saw with Javier's poverty and self-restraint. Thus the asymmetry between myth and life that animates this process of mythopraxis can be schematised quantitatively. *Babalawos* become less of themselves in order to make more of the *oddu* they, thus, become. The *oddu* become more of themselves in order to chisel the *babalawo* (who, literally, becomes them) into a more delimited version of himself. Less *babalawo* for more *oddu*, so to speak, and more *oddu* for less *babalawo*.

Yet *babalawos*' own manner of quantifying this asymmetrical relationship between myth and life nuances its conceptualisation further. In particular, articulated in terms of the contrast between the definite 'everything' of myth and the indefinite 'anything' of life, the asymmetry in the heart of the mythopraxis of divination becomes not so much a difference of quantity (i.e. 'less' or 'more' myth or life), but more precisely a difference of intensity: a question of the relative *concentration* of mythical characteristics on the one hand (as in a fruit-juice made from 'concentrate'), and the process of *dilution* that their human enactment in 'real life' involves. Consider first the transformation that the *oddu* undergo by way of the 'metamorphoses' diviners perform when they interpret them during divination.

As we have seen, the *babalawos*' task in these interpretations is to render increasingly contingent a myth that is conceived as forming part of a total (definite) corpus that contains 'everything'. Following through on the logic, we may note that these interpretive transformations cannot, therefore, claim to add anything *new* to the myths upon which they operate, since those myths are understood as already containing everything there is: everything is (always, already) in Ifá. Diviners' interpretations of the *oddu* that comprise the mythical corpus of Ifá needs must operate within its closed universe. The transformations involved, therefore, cannot be conceived as a matter of changing the *oddu* into something different, or adding something new to it (e.g. turning 'myth' into 'life', where the two are imagined as qualitatively distinct, mutually exclusive states of being). Rather they must be conceived as a manner of *making more of the oddu*, disclosing interpretatively elements it is deemed as containing within itself already. As Javier's put it himself, it's a matter of "knowing how to get the most out of the *oddu*".

Such a process of 'disclosure' is indeed an example of expersonation since 'making more' or 'getting the most out' of the *oddu* involves disclosing "more of its

concrete particularity”, in line with Wagner’s definition. But thinking in this way of the transformation the *oddu* undergoes helps to specify this act of expersonation also as a form of ‘intensification’, insofar as the *oddu* is revealed as having had *more content* than initially appeared – the *babalawos*’ interpretative disclosure consists in making this extra content, so to speak, apparent. Since nothing can be added to an *oddu* that is conceived as partaking in a closed off totality that already contains everything within itself, the only way to ‘metamorphose’ the *oddu* in order to bring it (closer) to life is to *concentrate* its content in a particular direction. Thus premising *babalawos*’ interpretive disclosure on the *oddu*’s own ‘closure’ as a definite totality, this concentration of content effectively *adds to the myth its own reality* and in that sense brings it to life (not least in the literal manner depicted in Figure 1). On such an account, we may note in passing, life is rendered as a denser version of myth, and thus the distinction between the two becomes one of degree rather than kind.

The inverse transformation that takes place when a *babalawo* follows the initiatic injunction to ‘live his *signo*’ can also be conceptualised as a question relative intensities. Here the *babalawo*’s task is to turn himself from a constituent of that open and indefinite set of elements that is the ‘anything’ of life into ‘something’ or, better, ‘someone’ who has a place inside the closed off set of ‘everything’ that is the universe of the *oddu* of Ifá, one of which will become the *babalawo*’s own *signo* at initiation. Now, as saw, in Wagner’s terms this can be imagined as a feat of impersonation, in which the *babalawo* seeks deliberately to conventionalise his behaviour, pressing it to the service of the characteristics his initiatic *oddu* prescribes for him – lessening his own quotient of contingency as a flesh-and-blood person in order the better to enact his ‘divined’ identity as a *babalawo*. But again, this less-life-more-myth move can be conceptually specified further when understood as a passage from an indefinite ‘anything’ to a definite ‘something’, which is in turn understood as a constituent of an equally definite ‘everything’. If ‘anything’ is invoked by *babalawos* to convey the awesome abundance of life-circumstances on which their skill as diviners can shed light, the problem this abundance poses in their attempt to live life in accordance with a particular *oddu* is that of excess. Life in itself is too intractably contingent – ‘one damn thing after another’, indeed, *anything* –, so living it according to one’s *signo* involves a process of thinning it out, formatting it to the *oddu*’s more definite prescriptions. Of all the lives you could live, live that of a poor man. Of all the worries you could have, yours should be about the prospect of a slow

death. Life, in that sense, is turned into myth by having its content attenuated into the particular form prescribed by the *oddu*.

So one might say that mythoproxis is living life as if it had a rhyme and a reason – and that is exactly what initiation in Ifá provides, and what Ifá diviners can reveal. What Javier perhaps also knew, however, is that life lived in the power of Ifá in this way is by the same token always also a form of death – an impersonating obviation of the self, as Wagner might put it, for the sake of the *oddu*. But perhaps Javier's drama was the paradox in which this logic caught him: having been given an *oddu* of decay, the body turning from flesh to dust from the inside, barring him from precisely those intensities of the process of divination that are perhaps the payoff of death as a diviner divined. Living the *signo*, for Javier, was not fully to live. Perhaps the peace and tranquillity that the pigeons brought him were the deal he cut with this paradox.

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