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MARTIN HOLBRAAD

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Religious ‘Speculation’: The Rise of Ifá Cults and Consumption in Post-Soviet Cuba*

MARTIN HOLBRAAD

Abstract. With an ethnographic focus on the prestigious cult of Ifá, this article seeks to account for the recent effervescence of Afro-Cuban cult worship in urban Cuba. It is argued that, since worship involves a marked emphasis on ritual consumption, the cult’s rise can be related to wider transformations that have taken place in the field of everyday consumption in Havana during the economic crisis that has followed the collapse of the Soviet bloc. In particular, Ifá has provided an arena for what *habaneros* call ‘especulación’, a style of conspicuous consumption that has become prevalent among so-called ‘marginal’ groups in recent years.

Conducting ethnographic fieldwork among practitioners of the Afro-Cuban diviner cult Ifá in Havana at the turn of the century, I was struck by a paradoxical situation that seemed to be the source of much anxiety among cult practitioners. On the one hand, since the collapse of the Soviet bloc in 1989–1990, Cubans have experienced a dramatic and generalised drop in their standard of living and well nigh universally consider this period as one of relative poverty. On the other hand, this same period has seen a veritable explosion of Afro-Cuban cult activity. Intriguingly this intensification, characterised by more and more young neophytes becoming initiated in lavish ceremonies, has gone hand in hand with an extraordinary price-hike in the fees charged by cult members for initiation ceremonies and other ritual services. The central question that motivates this article, then, is this: why, in a situation in which people feel that money is harder to come by than ever since the socialist Revolution of 1959, should more and more people be willing to pay inflated prices for increasingly lavish initiations and other ritual services? How can these two phenomena – generalised poverty and ritual inflation, so to speak – go together?

The line of argument advanced here might best be described as ‘economistic’ in style. In order to shed light on some of the more important reasons

Martin Holbraad is R.A. Butler Research Fellow at Pembroke College, University of Cambridge.

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that have led to the unprecedented growth of Ifá cults in recent years, issues pertaining to cult worship will be linked with certain transformations that have taken place in the field of everyday consumption more generally in Havana. In particular, it is argued here that a new brand of initiates, whose emergence is central to the rise and transformation of Ifá in recent years, can be associated with a style of conspicuous consumption which has become a salient model of and for behaviour among so-called 'marginal' groups in inner-city Havana of the post-Soviet period, a stereotype of ostentatious spending that *babaneros* call colloquially 'especulación'. Drawing critically on Day, Papatziarchis and Stewart's argument that, placing a premium on 'living for the moment',¹ such apparently imprudent behaviours on the part of marginal groups constitute strategies of ideological contestation, I propose to defend two main points. First, that because Ifá cults have always and inherently emphasised luxury expressed in uncalculating monetary expenditure, they have provided an apposite arena for the performance of *especulación*, this peculiar phenomenon of the 1990s. Second, that 'religious *especulación*' (as people in Havana sometimes call it tongue-in-cheek), in other words, the conspicuous consumption of ritual services in the cults, provides a way for young initiates to overcome the problem of vulnerability that the happy-go-lucky hedonism of *especulación* ordinarily implies. By way of conclusion, the point is made that while the affinities between Ifá and *especulación* may help to account for the rise and transformation of cult practice in recent years, the two are nevertheless uncomfortable bedfellows, to the extent that their common emphasis on luxury and unplanned spending is motivated differently in each case: while *especulación* implies ostentatious spending on one's desire as a means of transcending poverty 'in the moment', Ifá is meant to involve luxurious expenditure in an ethos of submission to deities who obligate initiates through oracular demands.

A couple of preliminary points are in order here, one on scope, the other on method. It will be evident from the tenor of the above summary that in seeking to identify salient causes for the recent rise and transformation of Ifá in certain practices that are peculiar to the life of the cult, I am effectively treating Afro-Cuban religious manifestations separately from the activities of the Catholic church and various Protestant denominations, all of which have also been on the rise in post-Soviet Cuba. As discussed below, the advantage of limiting the scope of the argument in this way is that it allows one to gauge the peculiar features of the effervescence of Afro-Cuban cult activity, and particularly some of the ways in which worship has changed over this period. Nevertheless, it should be made clear that treating the cults separately from the activities of the institutional churches is to a certain

¹ S. Day et al. (eds.), *Lilies of the Field: Marginal People Who Live for the Moment* (Boulder, 1999).

extent artificial, since the two are connected in a number of ways. For a start, the relative freedom that cult worshipers have begun to enjoy in recent years can be seen partly as an effect of a more general opening on the part of the Cuban State towards religious expressions of all kinds, including Christian denominations (see below). Moreover, there are substantive links that connect the cults to the churches both ritually and sociologically, so it could be argued that their respective fortunes are intertwined. The most obvious example of this has to do with the so-called 'syncretic' character of Ifá and Santería, in other words their 'creolisation' in the New World context of Cuba, whereby cult worship came to incorporate a number of important Catholic elements.² Since these elements include substantial ritual connections, such as the fact that the worship of individual cult deities involves regular visits to Catholic churches on annual saint-days it could be argued that the rise of Ifá in recent years can be seen in the context of a wider ecclesiastical renaissance. Conversely, it may also be noted that the intensification of Afro-Cuban cult activity is taking place in a context of increasingly vigorous competition from a variety of new Protestant denominations.³ These have tended to adopt an exclusive stance vis-à-vis the Afro-Cuban traditions, actively discouraging their members from continuing to practice 'heathen' forms of worship. So it could also be argued that an exhaustive analysis of the circumstances of the rise of Ifá would need to take this form of dynamic competition into account as well.

Notwithstanding the relevance of such contextual factors, this paper proceeds on the assumption that the internal dynamic of cult worship – and particularly the peculiar role of consumption within it – is worthy of analysis in and of itself. Indeed, it would be risky to treat the recent rise of Ifá as just an instance of a more general religious upsurge. Such an approach might not only miss the peculiar character of contemporary Ifá, but could also underestimate the significance of such cults as dominant religious forces. It would be useful to be able to illustrate the significance of Ifá and other Afro-Cuban traditions by providing a quantitative estimate of their distribution across the population. Unfortunately, however, this issue is still politically sensitive in socialist Cuba, so the data is scanty and unreliable.⁴ Nevertheless, as my

² For a definitive study of this process, see G. Brandon, *Santería from Africa to the New World: The Dead Sell Memories* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1993).

³ Although quantitative data are unavailable, it is probably fair to say that a large proportion of recent Protestant converts come from non-white and less well-heeled parts of Cuban society, which is also the traditional constituency of the practitioners of Afro-Cuban cults.

⁴ For an indication of how politicised this quantitative question still is in Cuba, see Hagedorn's extract from her interview with María Teresa Linares (a leading Cuban folklorist), which appears as part of Hagedorn's pioneering study of Afro-Cuban music and religion in socialist Cuba; K. J. Hagedorn, *Divine Utterances: the Performance of Afro-Cuban Santería* (Washington and London, 2001), pp. 173–9. For a couple of tentative (and rather

account below indicates, there can be little doubt that Afro-Cuban religious manifestations are a dominant presence in the everyday lives of ordinary *babaneros*, particularly in the mainly non-white inner-city areas of Havana, such as Centro Habana where I collected the bulk of my material.

This brings me to a second point, on methodology. As already mentioned, the material presented in this paper is drawn mainly from my own ethnographic research among cult practitioners in Havana, with whom I worked for a total of 16 months. Much of my time in Havana was spent observing and participating in the activities of one particular group of Ifá initiates (*babalawos*) who were linked to each other through relations of ritual kinship,⁵ ordinary family ties, or simply friendship or acquaintance. In view of the urban context of Havana, as well as the open structure of Ifá cult organisation (see footnote 5), the notion of a ‘group’ here should not be taken in too strict a sense. A large proportion of my material was collected by spending protracted periods in the house of two *babalawos* (Javier Alfonso and his son Javierito), participating in their ritual activities, conducting more or less formal interviews, and generally following the rhythm of the comings and goings of clients, friends, relatives and so forth. As my acquaintance with their network grew, I was able to follow up on many of the relationships I established in Javier’s home, accompanying a number of informants as they went about their business (ritual or otherwise) in the city. In this way I was able to complement the more in-depth research conducted in the house of Javier with material collected from a total of approximately 15–20 *babalawos* from varied backgrounds, as well as a large number of uninitiated practitioners from different walks of life, including clients and practitioners of Santería. Since Ifá is an exclusively male cult, it is probably fair to say that my material tends to concentrate more on the male perspective on ritual life, as does the argument outlined here, although the views of female non-initiates are also considered.

vague) estimates in recent Cuban research, see A. Díaz Cerveto and A. C. Perera Pintado, *La religiosidad en la sociedad cubana* (La Habana, 1997), and J. Ramírez Calzadilla and O. Pérez Cruz, *La religión en los jóvenes cubanos* (La Habana, 1997).

⁵ Initiation into the cult of Ifá engenders series of ritual kin ties. Potential neophytes are brought into the cult (so as to be ‘become Ifá’, as initiation is referred to – *hacerse Ifá*), by soliciting the favour of an already established initiate in exchange for money, various ritual goods and services and, in principle, life-long respect and subordination. This ritualised relationship between the neophyte and the presiding initiate is conceived in terms of godparenthood: godchild (*abijado*) to godfather (*padrino*). Once initiated, a neophyte can himself become godfather to further recruits, who then become great-godchildren to his own godfather. In this way cult membership is organised in terms of ritual lineages (referred to as *ramas* – branches), which can be extended indefinitely across successive generations. Ritual lineages also extend horizontally since initiates who share a godfather become ritual siblings (*abbares*), and are considered to owe each other mutual support in both ritual and mundane contexts.

Poverty, 'struggle' and especulación

The 'economically informed' argument regarding the rise and transformation of Ifá cults during the crisis of the 1990s may be introduced by means of a brief account of the radical economic transformations that Cuba has undergone as a result of the collapse of the Soviet bloc. It is well documented that the flagship, and indeed momentous, achievements of Castro's socialist Revolution in Cuba (including guaranteed subsistence, housing, health-care, and education for all citizens) were made possible partly by Soviet backing.⁶ Partly in reaction to a bellicose US trade embargo, Cuban economic policy was from an early stage founded on two pillars: export primarily of sugar and nickel to the Soviet Union and COMECON countries on trade terms that were extremely advantageous relative to the world market; and rouble 'debt-financing' from the USSR that allowed Cuba to run persistent balance-of-payment deficits. During the period from 1989 till 1991 both of these pillars were shattered. First the COMECON countries and then the USSR itself cancelled deals with Cuba one by one, and began to demand debt payments in hard currency. In 1990 Fidel Castro declared that the country was entering a 'Special Period in Times of Peace', and by 1992 the economic crisis was so deep that 70 per cent of the country's purchasing power had been lost.⁷

The regime reacted to the crisis by instituting drastic austerity measures on the one hand, and relentlessly pursuing hard currency on the other. As a result of cuts in all forms of energy use in the early 1990s (as well as curtailments of the labour-force itself), agricultural and industrial outputs plummeted. This had an immediate impact on the population, since many of the goods and services that were previously provided at affordable prices by the state became increasingly difficult to procure or, in many cases, disappeared altogether. During my fieldwork in the late 1990s, people's most urgent complaints related to the rationing system, which throughout the Revolution had formed the back-bone of house-hold consumption: while 'before' the crisis families could live adequately off the goods provided on the rations-book (*la libreta*), 'now' rations tended to last only for 10 days in every month. On the other hand, cutbacks were accompanied by reforms that would have been unimaginable a few years earlier. In the early 1990s, on the slogan 'capital yes, capitalism no', the regime courted hard currency not only by opening up to foreign investors (not least in the tourist sector, which

⁶ S. E. Eckstein, *Back from the Future: Cuba Under Castro* (Princeton, 1994), pp. 31–59, A. Kapcia, *Cuba: Island of Dreams* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 203–4, H. Thomas, *Cuba: The Pursuit of Freedom* (London, 2001), pp. 1011–2, cf. W. M. LeoGrande and J. M. Thomas, 'Cuba's Quest for Economic Independence,' *Journal of Latin American Studies*, vol. 34 (2002), pp. 325–63.

⁷ Eckstein, *Back from the Future*, p. 93.

has expanded rapidly throughout the 1990s), but also by tapping into dollars which were already circulating inside Cuba illegally, largely due to remittances sent by relatives in the USA and elsewhere.⁸ In 1993 the government decriminalised the possession of dollars, thus incorporating a significant slice of the black market which was rife at the time. With Fort Knox-like security measures, more and more state shops were opened to sell retail goods in dollars. By the time I arrived in 1998, vast arrays of products (including basics like cooking-oil and detergent) were only available in dollar-shops (or, as Cubans call them, *la chopin* – from the English ‘shopping’).

This encroaching dollar market has effectively divided Cuban society in two. There are those who are lucky or clever enough to possess dollars. Depending on the quantity at their disposal, these people are able to live relatively comfortably, and in some cases may even be able to afford luxuries such as a car or a colour TV. Then there is the majority who still have to make do with pesos. Although estimates vary, average wages run at roughly 200 pesos per month (less than \$10), an entirely inadequate figure if one considers, for example, that one litre of vegetable oil costs \$2.15. During my time in Havana, practically everyone I met would either supplement or replace salary payments through some form of illegal activity or other. A laboratory assistant rented a room in her flat by the hour to couples, a truck driver bred poultry in his yard, an intellectual dreamed of becoming a porter in a big hotel. The most prized commodity among this large and dispossessed segment of Cuban society is, of course, *el dólar* itself. During fieldwork I became accustomed to hearing the same sociological observation from different informants and in a variety of contexts. ‘In Cuba today we have two classes: those who have dollars, and those who don’t. It wasn’t like that *antes* (before the Special Period). It isn’t easy!’ Indeed, it is worth noting that with the steep drop in people’s purchasing power implied by the relative demise of state provision and parallel proliferation of expensive dollar goods, even those who do have access to dollars share in the bitterness of such statements. ‘These days *no-one* has enough for their needs’, is a statement that well nigh everyone assents to in post-Soviet Havana (that is to say, dollar-haves as well as dollar have-nots). Listening to *habaneros* talk about their current ‘poverty’ or ‘need’ (the term that they use is *necesidad*, which amalgamates the two connotations),⁹ one gets an image of a people suspended in a kind of economic no-man’s land, between a half disintegrated socialist

⁸ L. Barberia, ‘Remittances to Cuba: An Evaluation of Cuban and US Government Policy Measures,’ http://web.mit.edu/cis/www/migration/pubs/rrwp/15_remittances.pdf. [cited 15 February 2003]

⁹ On concepts of ‘necesidad’ in Mexico see Miguel Díaz Barriga, ‘Necesidad: Notes on the Discourses of Urban Politics in the Ajusco Foothills of Mexico City,’ *American Ethnologist*, vol. 23, part 2 (1996), pp. 291–310.

system of state provision, and a world of capitalist plenty which is nevertheless practically beyond reach, for, as *habaneros* often say with a tinge of Revolutionary irony, dollars are the object of ‘struggle’ (*la lucha por el dólar*).¹⁰

It is within this context of ‘necesidad’ and ‘struggle’ that a peculiar stereotype of consumptive behaviour that *habaneros* colloquially refer to as ‘especulación’ has emerged as a seemingly paradoxical phenomenon, one which, by *habaneros*’ account, has become a sign of the times in the 1990s. In socialist discourse ‘especulación’ (literally ‘speculation’) refers to spurious profiteering associated particularly with middlemen who take advantage of workers’.¹¹ On the streets of Havana, however, *especulación* is used as a slang term in reference to a certain stereotype of behaviour that has more to do with consumption than with production. The typical image that *especulación* conjures up for *habaneros* is of a man, normally black or mulatto, in designer sports-wear and heavy with golden bracelets and neck-chains, looking for excuses to show off his wad of dollar notes: dollar beers, dollar rum and dollar women will all be consumed on protracted and ostentatious spending-sprees, starting perhaps in a dollar cafeteria and moving on later to a dollar night-club, deep into the night.

Especulación is not an unambiguously positive term. In fact *habaneros* are generally loath to own up to being *especuladores* (‘speculators’). For example, when a young mulatto friend of mine criticised his cousin for being too prudent with his dollar income (earned at a hotel), I asked him how he would prefer to spend the money:

None of this saving up to buy spectacles business ... I’d rent a TUR [cars designated for tourist rental], fill it up with whores, and hit the clubs! [Question:] So you’d speculate? [laughing:] No man! You’ve just got to enjoy life (*vacilar la vida*).

Given such usages, it might seem prudent to consider *especulación* as some kind of discursive caricature, which it surely is in certain senses.¹² Yet, living in Havana, it is striking how often the behaviour of *habaneros* conforms to the *especulación* stereotype. On visits to dollar cafeterias or clubs, one certainly becomes familiar with the sight of groups of men drinking loudly around tables covered with uncleared beer-cans and Havana Club rum-bottles. Indeed, armed with my own dollars, I was able on numerous occasions to

¹⁰ For a comparison with a post-socialist case, see Lemon’s account of ‘currency apartheid’ in 1990s Russia (Alaina Lemon, “‘Your Eyes are Green Like Dollars’: Counterfeit Cash, National Substance, and Currency Apartheid in 1990s Russia,” *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 13 part 1 (1998), pp. 22–55.

¹¹ J. F. Pérez-López, *Cuba’s Second Economy: From Behind the Scenes to Center Stage* (New Brunswick, 1995), p. 88.

¹² For a subtle treatment of a similar dilemma with respect to the notion of ‘scrounging’ among working-class people in N. Ireland, see Leo Howe, ‘Where is the Culture in the “Culture of Poverty”?’ *Cambridge Anthropology*, vol. 20. part 1–2 (1998), pp. 66–91.

accompany friends and acquaintances on such outings. What was generally remarkable was the ostentatious style with which ‘luxury’ goods were consumed. Dollar-notes would be held out in display as large orders of food and drink were shouted in the waiters’ direction, and pretty girls were invited to sit on the understanding that they too could order to their heart’s content. On such occasions, the objective seemed invariably to be to create an atmosphere of opulence: the more glamorous and expensive the goods consumed, the more successful the outing. Indeed these are precisely the elements that are emphasised most when men think back, in conversation, to memorable nights. Teasing me for having declined an invitation the previous evening, a 35-year old male friend of mine described:

Forty beers man! [...] Chichi and I really caned it (*apretamos*). I don’t know how we left Las Vegas [a dollar nightclub] with all those women sitting on us [indicating his crotch]... look! I’ve got the bottle [taking out a half-empty bottle of 5-star Havana Club]

The negative connotations of ‘*especulación*’ can be traced partly to the fact that the term evokes groups who in many contexts are considered to be marginal. Not only are *especuladores* typically imagined as being non-white (‘whites don’t speculate’, as a black female friend told me), but they are also – by definition – expected to be involved in some kind of shady economic activity – be it hustling, pimping or dealing on the black-market. Speaking about the behaviour of her brother, a ‘runner’ (*corredor*) for an illegal real estate operation with whom I had been out on several occasions, a middle-aged black informant of mine (Gisel let’s call her) explained:

Look, if we had an opportunity to travel, or to make investments, or do whatever we dream of doing, we wouldn’t be spending our money the way we do. But as here everything is illegal, and frowned upon, well we just take our money and spend it as we please. Of course we’re not like you foreigners, always planning everything. For us this doesn’t make sense. If we did that, we’d only draw attention to ourselves, and the police would be constantly on our case in the neighbourhood. So what we do when we have \$100 in our pocket is speculate.

The connection between marginality and conspicuous consumption has been explored in anthropology at least since Oscar Lewis listed the ‘[in] ability to defer gratification’ as a defining trait of the ‘culture of poverty’.¹³ The theme has been picked up more recently in a seminal collection of essays entitled *Lilies of the Field: Marginal People who Live for the Moment*. In the introduction the editors make a case for looking at ‘anti-economic’ behaviour, such as conspicuous consumption, as part of a repertoire of practices through which marginal groups construct ideologies that are antithetical to

¹³ O. Lewis, *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty – San Juan and New York* (London, 1965), p. xlv.

the mainstream. In this context it is suggested that anti-economic behaviour can be understood as a distinctive relation to time, which in turn, constitutes a crucial site of 'ideological' contestation. The latter proposition owes much to Bloch's Marxist idea that ideology is constructed on symbolic negations of temporal duration,¹⁴ while the former is reminiscent of Parry and Bloch's perspective on the ideological significance of long-term deployments of money.¹⁵

Along these lines, the editors of *Lilies of the Field* mobilise examples from various ethnographic settings to show how radical forms of short-termism in the consumption of money facilitate a departure from dominant ideological structures, since the latter rely on long-term economic notions about planning, saving, stable labour organisation and so forth. In sum, the efficacy of 'anti-economic' deployments of money as 'oppositional ideology' is rendered here as a double negative. On the one hand practices such as conspicuous consumption straightforwardly negate mainstream ideological emphases on longer-term economic prudence, and hence may be branded as 'oppositional'. On the other hand, such practices are also 'ideological' since they rely on negating notions of temporal duration. What distinguishes mainstream from oppositional ideology is that while the former constructs 'timelessness' with reference to symbolic representations of a permanent order, the latter does so like a pointillist painting, by privileging representations of the present at the expense of the past and the future. As Michael Stewart puts it in his article on the Rom's opposition to Magyar socialism, marginal ideology is premised on the idea that 'it is possible to live on a continuous unfolding present in which life is a process of becoming'.¹⁶

Especulación bears out the idea of 'living for the moment' in a rather interesting way. In Gisel's words on the subject, the idea of 'anti-economic' behaviour and that of an oppositional stance from a marginal perspective emerge clearly. In the hands of the *especulador*, money becomes the ultimate consumable, and the moment of its consumption is celebrated for its purchase on desire: beer, rum, women and 'you've got to *enjoy* life'. To a snapshot of the *especulador's* protracted night-time of hedonics, one could well append the lottery-winner's *spend! spend! spend!* There is a huge difference,

¹⁴ Maurice Bloch, 'Cognition to Ideology,' in his *Ritual, History and Power: Selected Papers in Anthropology* (London, 1989), and M. Bloch, *From Prey into Hunter* (Cambridge, 1992).

¹⁵ Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry, 'Introduction,' in Jonathan Parry and Maurice Bloch (eds.), *Money and the Morality of Exchange* (Cambridge, 1989).

¹⁶ Michael Stewart, "'Brothers" and "Orphans": Images of Equality among Hungarian Rom,' in S. Day et al. (eds.), *Lilies of the Field*, p. 41, cf. Michael Stewart, 'A Passion for Money: Gambling, Luck and the Ambiguities of Money amongst Hungarian Gypsies,' *Terrain*, vol. 23 (1994), pp. 45–62.

however. While the English lottery-winner may spend 'like there is no tomorrow' because she knows that tomorrow she can spend again, the *especulador* spends in the same manner for the *opposite* reason, as Gisel explained. For, in fact, the *especulador's* 'unfolding present' never lasts very long. *Qua* marginal, *especuladores* are as subject to *la necesidad* (poverty) as everyone else, so 'tomorrow' for them, like 'yesterday', is a day of 'struggle' once more. The paradox in *especulación* is that as a concerted effort to hold the misery of empty pockets in abeyance by privileging notions of desire albeit 'for the moment', this type of behaviour is itself motivated by the conditioning force of poverty and life on the margin of things. And, as the editors of *Lilies of the Field* also point out, ideologies of 'living for the moment' also contribute to marginal peoples' very real vulnerability, which in the case of Cuban *especuladores* takes the form not only of a bad hangover, but also of an empty fridge and angry and most likely hungry wives and children.

The central proposition of this article is that the style of conspicuous consumption associated with *especulación* has been an important ingredient in the rise of Ifá worship in the 1990s, and has contributed to certain salient transformations that cults have undergone during this period. Making such an argument, will involve three tasks. First, the claim that Ifá (along with other Afro-Cuban cults) has become increasingly prominent in the 1990s is briefly substantiated. With the caveat that the argument about economic behaviour is put forward only as part of the explanation for the rise of Ifá, the ways in which initiates have sought to dispense ritual services under the new circumstances associated with dollarisation and *la necesidad* are then charted ethnographically. The central theme here is the tension between strictures of ritual propriety and temptations to 'commerce' (*comercio*). Finally, the argument is sealed by turning from supply to demand, as it were, in order to show that a crucial factor in the increased popularity of Ifá has been the emergence of a new breed of dollar-wielding practitioners. The central hypothesis is that with its well-established emphasis on 'uncalculating' luxury, Ifá furnishes an arena for the kind of conspicuous consumption associated with *especulación*.

The rise of Afro-Cuban cults in the Special Period

The history of Ifá and Santería in Cuba is in large part a story of persecution and clandestine worship. Based primarily on elements brought to Cuba by Yoruba speaking slaves from West Africa during the nineteenth century, the cults evolved fluidly in the poorer and predominantly non-white neighbourhoods of Havana, Matanzas and Cárdenas, incorporating elements associated with Catholicism and Spiritism, as well as practices from a variety

of West African tribes.¹⁷ Although the rich devotional universe of Ifá and Santería did capture the imagination of intellectuals and artists from the first decades of the twentieth century onwards, and the prestige conferred upon initiates within their own communities accounted for a certain amount of electoral wooing on the part of some politicians, it is fair to say that, from a mainstream point of view, cult practice remained heavily laden with connotations of backwardness and marginality following the abolition of slavery in the late nineteenth century.¹⁸ This situation did not change substantially after Fidel Castro's Revolution in 1959. Notwithstanding significant successes in redressing the racial injustices of previous times in important areas of social policy, the new regime made few attempts to accommodate Afro-Cuban religious practices within the Marxist-Leninist frame of official revolutionary ideology.¹⁹ Throughout the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, Afro-Cuban cults were practised with muffled drums, so to speak, and behind closed doors.

During the 1990s, however, cults like Ifá and Santería became arguably more visible and widespread than ever before in recent Cuban history. It is practically impossible to quantify the change. Published statistics are too scanty to form the basis for a reliable synthesis, and those commentators who have remarked on the change often do not disclose sources.²⁰ Nevertheless, available material does suggest a marked increase in Afro-Cuban ritual activity starting from the mid-1980s and peaking in the mid-1990s at the height of the Special Period. For example, Cuban scholar Lacién Zamora cites a long-term study showing devotees' participation in the annual pilgrimage to the sanctuary of San Lázaro on 16 and 17 December, one of the high points of the ritual calendar. The study records an almost steady rise in the number of pilgrims from 34,444 in 1983 to a high of 94,109 in 1995, dropping slightly to 83,776 in 1998.²¹ Quoting results of studies by the same

¹⁷ Brandon, *Santería from Africa to the New World*, pp. 59–99.

¹⁸ Brandon, *Santería from Africa to the New World*, pp. 82–5, Hagedorn, *Divine Utterances*, pp. 173–202, cf. R. Moore, *Nationalising Blackness: Afro-Cubanismo and Artistic Revolution in Havana, 1920–1940* (Pittsburgh, 1997).

¹⁹ A. Argüelles and I. Hodge, *Los llamados cultos sincréticos y el espiritismo* (La Habana, 1991), pp. 141–71, Natalia Bolívar, 'El legado africano en Cuba,' *Papers*, vol. 52 (1997), p. 165, Teresita Pedraza, "'This Too Shall Pass": Religion in Cuba, Resistance and Endurance,' *Cuban Studies*, vol. 28 (1998), pp. 16–39.

²⁰ Eckstein, *Back from the Future*, p. 122, Rafael L. López Valdéz, 'Los Orishas resuelven. Antropocentrismo y redes informales en los sistemas religiosos de origen africano en Cuba,' in A. Núñez Jiménez (ed.), *Conferencia Internacional Presencia de África en América* (La Habana, 1995), p. 95.

²¹ L. Zamora, *El culto de San Lázaro en Cuba* (La Habana, 2000), p. 245. The study was carried out by members of the Department for Socioreligious Studies (Academy of Sciences of Cuba). It should be noted that the pilgrimages that these findings describe involve ordinary Catholic devotees as well as practitioners of Afro-Cuban cults, although, as Zamora notes, the Afro-Cuban element is very pronounced (*Ibid.* pp. 259–62).

state agency, Díaz and Perera report a marked increase in assistance to ‘religious festivals’ by ‘the young’ (without defining either category), from 31.5 per cent in 1984 to 46 per cent in 1993, with a high of 53.6 per cent in 1991.²²

Practitioners’ own perception resonates with these data. ‘Don’t be fooled’, a middle-aged *babalawo* told me when I commented on his busy ritual schedule, ‘before (*antes*) things were not as you see them now’. Certainly, signs of cult activity are ubiquitous in Havana these days. Walking around the less grand neighbourhoods of the city, even the most uninterested visitor must perforce become familiar with the sounds of ritual drumming (*tambores*) emanating from packed flats, or with the sight of whitely clad and colourfully beaded neophytes (*iyawós*) going about their daily business on the street.²³ Bright and chunky initiation-bracelets (*iddè*) weigh down the wrists of young initiates all over town.

There is no doubt that many factors have contributed to this palpable change. The most obvious are political, and relate to the state’s gradual relaxation towards religious manifestations in general (including Catholicism and rising Protestant denominations as well as Afro-Cuban cults) at least since 1992, when a new Constitution declared Cuba a ‘lay’ rather than ‘atheist’ state.²⁴ Explanations for the State’s relative *rapprochement* both with the historically dominant Catholic Church and with newer Protestant denominations abound in the literature.²⁵ The new visibility of Afro-Cuban practices has been less explored, although the authorities’ recent permissiveness on this matter can perhaps be seen as part of the government’s more general attempts in the early 1990s to relieve some of the pressures on the population in view of the danger of social unrest during the crisis.²⁶ This would make sense considering that, despite their well-publicised gains under the Revolution, many non-whites (including many initiates) count themselves among the hardest hit by the recent crisis.²⁷

²² Cerveto and Perera Pintado, *La religiosidad en la sociedad cubana*, p. 18, cf. Ramírez Calzadilla and Pérez Cruz, *La religión en los jóvenes cubanos*. For contrasting data from the 1980s see Argüelles and Hodge, *Los llamados cultos sincréticos y el espiritismo*, pp. 150–8.

²³ In Santería initiation – usually a prerequisite for Ifá initiation – the neophyte is required to spend a year dressed only in white.

²⁴ P. Schwab, *Cuba: Confronting the US Embargo* (London, 1999), p. 117, cf. Rhoda Rabkin, ‘Ideological Responses to the Era of Socialist Crisis,’ *Cuban Studies* 22 (1992), pp. 31–49, Aurelio Alonso Tejada, ‘Catolicismo, política y cambio en la realidad cubana actual,’ *Temas*, vol. 4 (1995), pp. 23–32.

²⁵ J. M. Kirk, *Between God and the Party: Religion and Politics in Revolutionary Cuba* (Tampa, 1989), Pedraza, ‘“This Too Shall Pass”,’ pp. 20–24, Schwab, *Cuba*, pp. 103–31.

²⁶ Juan M. del Aguila, ‘The Party, the Fourth Congress, and the Process of Counter-reform,’ *Cuban Studies* 23 (1993), pp. 71–90, Francisco León, ‘Socialism and *sociolismo*: Social Actors and Economic Change in 1990s Cuba,’ in Miguel A. Centeno and Mauricio Font (eds.), *Toward a New Cuba? Legacies of a Revolution* (Boulder, 1997).

²⁷ Alejandro de la Fuente and Laurence Glasco, ‘Are Blacks “Getting out of Control”? Racial Attitudes, Revolution, and Political Transition in Cuba,’ in Centeno and Font (eds.), *Toward*

Nevertheless, explaining the new vigour of the cults in ‘hydraulic’ terms as a function of the relief from political pressures is inadequate by itself. Crucially, such approaches do not in themselves account for certain salient *transformations* that cult worship has undergone in recent years, or not at least in a way that resonates with practitioners’ own experience. An insight into what is really at stake for them can be gained by quoting an extract from one of many interviews that I conducted with Javier Alfonso, a 78-year-old *babalawo* who was initiated in the 1960s. And talk of ‘stakes’ here is not out of place since, as Javier’s ambivalent words show, the issue turns mostly on economic concerns with money and its expenditure.

[Our religion] used to be for slaves and now it is for the rich. Recently I was buying coffee there in front and I heard someone saying that Ifá is an exploitation. I asked him: ‘Are you an initiate yourself? No, you just talk from what you hear. These days it takes a lot of money to make Ifá [in other words to conduct an initiation] [...] I agree that it’s an exploitation. But it is not the initiates doing the exploiting. It is the traders who sell the animals [for ritual sacrifices], the *chopin*, and the food is very expensive, for none of the things we use can be bought on *la libreta* [the rationing system]. Above all when we do an Ifá we live it up, we do a ceremony for a king. We have to prepare three full dinners for all the *babalawos*, and beer for everyone throughout the week, and that is very expensive. [...] It is this society that we’re living in that has made things like this, not the *babalawos*.’ These people who criticise don’t look for the reasons behind the situation. [...] Before, even to the most senior *babalawos* they’d give 50 pesos. But now even the young ones need 100 pesos as a minimum for the week.²⁸ Today the luxury is of course even grander: beautiful *iyavó* [neophyte] clothes from abroad and all the rest of it. When I was an *iyavó* I would dress in flour sacks because of our poverty. People today are ashamed to walk in such clothes. [...] In the old days [...] a housemaid would save up for years and years. Now in many cases people just get initiated because the money came in, say for people who get dollars sent from the North [remittances from the USA] Certainly, if you don’t have a good income it is hard to be initiated.

a New Cuba?, Juan A. Alvarado Ramos, ‘Relaciones raciales en Cuba. Notas de investigación,’ *Temas* 7 (1996), pp. 37–43. It is indicative that a large proportion of the *balseros* (rafters), whose mass exodus towards Florida in the summer of 1994 probably marked the most tense period of the 1990s in terms of popular unrest, were Afro-Cubans (see Holly Ackerman, ‘The *Balsero* Phenomenon: 1991–1994,’ *Cuban Studies*, vol. 26 (1996), pp. 169–200). Indeed, many of the accounts of that fateful summer told to me by relatives and friends of the departed included references to hastily organised Santería rituals, mostly dedicated to Yemayá and Olokun, goddess of the sea and deity of deep waters respectively.

²⁸ Javier’s rhetorical figures are well on target. For his own initiation in 1967, he was charged 700 pesos in fees (*derecho*) by the initiates who conducted the ceremony. His son Javierito, initiated in 1988, paid 1,800 pesos. In 2000 the going rate for Cubans was quoted in dollars at roughly \$300 (equivalent to 7,800 pesos at the time). Note that these figures do not include the even more substantial costs involved in purchasing numerous sacrificial animals, food and drink for the weeklong ceremony and ritual paraphernalia of various sorts.

It is worth noting that, as a defence against the *babalawos'* retractors, Javier's rhetoric turns on an intriguing double premise. On the one hand, by casting his rant in terms of the opposition of 'before' *v.* 'now' – *babaneros'* generic idiom for reflecting upon the everyday travails of the Special Period – Javier is effectively appealing to the self-evidence of *la necesidad*. Connecting the price-hike within the cult with the general deterioration in people's purchasing power during the Special Period, he is able to heap the blame for 'exploitation' on to 'this society that we're living in'. The message is one that his neighbour, like anyone in Havana, can recognise: 'it isn't easy these days'.

On the other hand, Javier's case also relies on a tacit premise that has less to do with contingent economic circumstance, and more with the nature of Ifá worship as such. As a respected *babalawo*, Javier can vouch for the fact that the hefty purchases associated with Ifá initiation (sacrificial animals, ceremonial dinners, beer, and the like) are ordained by liturgical order rather than personal choice, as accusations of 'exploitation' would have it. While recent price-hikes may be a matter of general regret, the emphasis on luxury as such is not, since luxury is integral to the ritual exigencies of initiation, quite properly considered as the 'birth of a king'. Indeed, it is important to note here that the requirement for liturgical propriety in Ifá (including expenditures for all manner of rituals) is rendered a matter of divine necessity by the practice of divination. One of the hallmarks of *babalawos'* prestige is that, unlike initiates of other Afro-Cuban cults such as Santería, they are able to ascertain the will of Orula, the patron-deity of divination, by means of their privileged access to the oracle of Ifá, through which Orula 'speaks', as it is said. While the undisputed prestige of the oracle of Ifá enhances *babalawos'* standing, enabling them to use their divinatory expertise for the benefit of uninitiated clients in exchange for fees, the oracle also plays a crucial role in regulating matters of worship within the cult itself. One might say that Ifá worship is premised on a thoroughgoing divinatory logic, inasmuch as ceremonies (with their inevitable expenditures) are in each case *prescribed* by the oracle itself. Sacrifices, consecrations, magical remedies, or – indeed – initiations, are only properly performed if they have first been sanctioned by the oracle, so that Orula himself may establish what task ought to be performed, when, how, by who or on whom. As in all matters, Orula's will on ceremonial issues is compelling, since it is understood that to 'disobey' him ('caer en la desobediencia', as practitioners say) is to risk all manner of personal misfortune. Indeed, ritual propriety in accordance with the oracles' temporary and unpredictable demands is an abiding source of anxiety for practitioners in these expensive times. Certainly the difficulty of bridging the gap between divine necessity and mundane *necesidad*, as it

were, is one that *babalawos* like Javier are well aware of. As he explained to me once:

These days people go to a *babalawo* and it turns out they need to do an *ebbó* (sacrifice), [...] a chicken to Elegguá²⁹ maybe. Who can afford that? I always begin by asking [Orula, through the oracle] about simpler things: a bath, whatever. People can't afford even a simple *addimú* (offering). Elegguá wants three sweets and they buy one for five pesos and then cut it in three pieces and give it to him.

Now, although Javier's good faith in such matters is by no means unique, one can only understand the subtext of his case by taking into account his status as an elderly *babalawo* – perhaps representing a bygone era –, as well as his undisputed reputation in cult circles for honesty and humility. For the argument from divine compulsion may apply to his own case, but, as his disillusioned neighbour probably would attest, not all *babalawos* are like him. One worry that Javier's words do not quite address is that *babalawos* might *abuse* their role as mouthpieces of Orula, exacting expenditures that go beyond the call of ritual propriety. Indeed, knowing Javier, I suspect that in a less defensive mood he might agree with the view expressed to me by Lázaro, his 34-year old nephew. Lázaro is initiated to *Santería* and has for a number of years been waiting for the financial opportunity to be initiated to Ifá, as the oracle had ordained at an earlier ceremony. Working on and off at a shoe shop, his chances looked bleak. I asked him whether he felt that the 'moral crisis' of the 1990s had affected Ifá:

I don't worry about that. My family has a long tradition in the religion, I have trustworthy people. [QUESTION: So not everyone is trustworthy?] Of course not! If you don't know, the *babalawo* tells you 'do this', 'no, buy this', they argue about the food, or steal the things [that are bought for the ceremony.] [...] Let me explain it to you. The problem is commerce (*el comercio*). Everyone wants to be a *babalawo* and they are all doing their own thing, inventing (*están en lo suyo, inventando*).³⁰

Certainly, it is not difficult to find instances that give the truth to Lázaro's suggestion. Just as an example, one might mention the case of Agustín (not his real name), a *babalawo* who had acquired a reputation for having amassed a large number of 'godchildren' (by presiding over their initiation) during recent years. Now, although having many godchildren is generally considered a mark of prestige, it is interesting that Agustín has become something of an *ur*-object of criticism in the circles that I moved in. Often recounting cases, and with no special axe to grind as far as I can tell, informants disapproved of the speedy and indiscriminate way in which Agustín

²⁹ Elegguá is the trickster deity of the Yoruba pantheon, thought of as the gods' messenger.

³⁰ The slang term 'inventar' refers to improvised (usually illicit) ways of making money, or 'resolving problems', as *habaneros* like to say more generally.

recruited his godchildren. The comments of one middle-aged *babalawo* were typical:

Look, there is Ifá and there is the gang (*la banda*). Agustín and his people get you and if they see you have money they put you in the room [referring to the initiation ceremony] and you come out a *babalawo* no matter what happens. The guy is tremendous, if you don't have the [financial] conditions he won't bother with you. He likes to walk around with all this gold ... But he doesn't know much, he just wants to get you into the room!

Although I never got a chance to get Agustín's own views on the matter, I did see him twice and admittedly he fitted the stereotype – golden bracelets, dollar beers and all. Certainly one would expect him to deny these accusations, perhaps putting them down to 'envy' (*la envidia*), as practitioners often do in such disputes. Yet, for our purposes what is important is that practitioners *are* anxious about so-called 'commerce' in Ifá, and that they consider it a sign of the times.³¹ The question then becomes why the anxiety about *comercio* and the 'trustworthiness' of initiates has become so heightened in the 1990s? Furthermore, to what extent is the rise in the number of *babalawos* relevant, as suggested by Lázaro and the case of Agustín?

An important part of the answer is quite straightforward. Given that monetary transactions have always been a legitimate component of Ifá practice, it is not surprising that, in times of *necesidad*, initiates should be using their influence over clients as a weapon in their own 'struggle' for dollars. And insofar as this 'struggle' has unpalatable connotations for everyone, it makes sense that *babalawos* too might be tempted to cross normative boundaries, even going as far as to mask their own calculating 'inventions' with the alibi of divine stricture. Indeed, to understand the temptations of *comercio* it is crucial to consider how much the financial stakes have risen with dollarisation.³² The point is that the price-hike in initiation fees since the

³¹ Note that Ifá 'commerce' is not a new phenomenon. Guanche, for example, recounts similar concerns in pre-Revolutionary times (J. Guanche, *Procesos etnoculturales de Cuba* (La Habana, 1983), pp. 362–4, cf. Stephan Palmié, 'Against Syncretism: "Africanizing" and "Cubanizing" Discourses in North American *Orisà*-Worship,' in Richard Fardon (ed.), *Counternetworks: Managing the Diversity of Knowledge* (London, 1995), p. 79). Nevertheless, the present argument relies on the idea that the inordinate price-hike of recent years, as well as the rising number of new initiates, suggests that 'commerce' has become increasingly prevalent and important.

³² This argument on *comercio* is offered as an addition to a well-established body of literature on similar phenomena in other ethnographic regions; see C. C. Taylor, *Milk, Honey and Money. Changing Concepts in Rwandan Healing* (Washington, 1992), Christian Krohn-Hansen, 'Magic, Money and Alterity Among Dominicans,' *Social Anthropology*, vol. 3, part 2 (1995), pp. 128–46, Judith Farquar, 'Market Magic: Getting Rich and Getting Personal in Medicine After Mao,' *American Ethnologist*, vol. 23:2 (1996), pp. 239–57, Laurel Kendall, 'Korean Shamans and the Spirits of Capitalism,' *American Anthropologist*, vol. 98 (1996), pp. 512–27, Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, 'Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction: Notes from the South African Postcolony,' *American Ethnologist*, vol. 26:2 (1998), pp. 279–303.

onset of the Special Period is directly related to the distinction between dollar 'haves' and 'have nots', as Javier's reference to 'dollars from the North' would also suggest.

Indeed, my own ethnographic data confirm this point. During fieldwork I was involved in four full initiation ceremonies and was told details regarding over a dozen more (both Ifá and Santería). With prices ranging from \$450 to over \$2,000, the pattern was invariably the same: whether the neophyte had been planning years in advance or simply taken advantage of an opportunity that had arisen unexpectedly, every ceremony had been funded either entirely or in large part by a windfall of dollars – in many cases a one-off windfall. In most cases initiations were funded entirely by dollar remittances sent by relatives in the USA, Spain or Italy. The most striking example was occasioned by a Spaniard's brief visit from Madrid with his Cuban wife. He himself was initiated to Ifá together with his brother-in-law, who lives in Havana, and he also paid for the Santería initiation of his wife's teenage daughter and niece, also locals. Although I was not able to ascertain the exact figures, I was told that the whole affair cost the Spaniard \$5,000 or \$6,000.³³

The rest of the cases involved hefty amounts of dollars earned in more or less illicit activities (black market deals, hustling foreigners, money smuggled in from a trip abroad, and so forth), and often pooled together with remittances. The case of Arsenio (not his real name) is typical. A talented woodcarver, he had managed in 1996 to obtain a licence to sell his work at a dollar street-market for tourists. 'I didn't know much about Ifá then', he told me. There he met a number of *babalawos* and soon he got interested in the religion, as he explained. In 1998 he found more lucrative work at a storage house connected to the port of Havana, where he still worked when I met him in 2000. Here there were good opportunities to do 'deals' (as he called them) involving imported containers of foodstuffs. Within a year he had found the money to make Ifá (about \$1,200). When I asked why he got initiated, he gave me the standard response: 'for health and development' (*por salud y desenvolvimiento*).³⁴ To my question whether he now practises as a diviner, his reply was more cagey: 'no, not yet'. Indeed, although he was clearly proud to wear his initiation bracelet, Arsenio did admit that he was not actively involved in worship.

³³ The increasing influx of foreigners (as well as Cuban-Americans) who wish to be initiated in Cuba has also contributed to the recent price-hike. Some initiates now dedicate themselves entirely to these lucrative ceremonies (cf. Hagedorn, *Divine Utterances*, pp. 219–33).

³⁴ 'Desenvolvimiento' is ordinarily translated from the Spanish as 'development' or 'disentanglement'. In cult circles in Cuba, however, the term is habitually used to refer to an improvement in one's financial fortunes (such as a better job or a windfall of money).

In light of this material, which may be taken as representative of dominant trends in recent years, it may be concluded that the intensification of Ifá ‘commerce’ is intimately related to the emergence of dollar-wielding worshippers in the 1990s. More precisely, if the advent of *comercio* can be said to characterise the *supply* of ritual services in recent years, then one must also appreciate that it has gone hand in hand with changes in the field of *demand*. In quantitative terms, the change in demand is both stark and simple: on the one hand, the pool of potential neophytes has become smaller, with a vast proportion of practitioners – like Lázaro – having no access to the kind of money now required for initiation; on the other hand, the pool has also become deeper, since the income differential between those who can and those who cannot afford initiation fees is massive.

So why then should the demand for expensive ceremonies in this shrunken market be so pronounced – so much as to sustain initiation fees at forbiddingly high levels? Why, in Lázaro’s words, does ‘everyone want to be a *babalawo*’? We saw that *la necesidad* is experienced as an abiding condition *across* the dollar/peso divide, so that even those who have access to dollars feel they do not have enough to meet their ‘needs’. How is it, then, that some of these people consider it feasible to splash out on initiation ceremonies, the cost of which represents many months if not years of comfortable living? Here, I would argue, the phenomenon of *especulación* becomes relevant.

Religious especulación

Considering the inordinately positive associations that initiation has for practitioners, it may not seem surprising that people are willing to spend their precious dollars on Ifá. In fact, when asked to comment, informants were despondent: how, after so much investigation, could I still fail to appreciate the sheer value of initiation? That those who can afford it should go ahead with it requires no explanation: Ifá gives ‘health and development’. Moreover, everybody knows that the benefits of initiation are overwhelming in financial terms too: ‘Orula compensates you for everything’ (*Orula te lo recompensa todo*), people often say, in shorthand reference not only to the fees that *babalawos* can expect to earn by providing ritual services to clients, but also to the more vague metaphysical notion that Ifá consecration enhances one’s personal fortune (*iré*) in all senses, including the economic.

Nevertheless, there are grounds for looking a little deeper into the eagerness with which young initiates have entered Ifá in recent years. The relevance of *especulación* in particular, as a factor in the rising demand for Ifá initiation, becomes apparent if one probes the subtext of informants’ statements. Return, for example, to Javier’s comments on the changes of recent

years. It is hardly accidental that he juxtaposes initiates' recent taste for 'luxury' and 'clothes from abroad' with a contrast between 'before', when prospective initiates would spend years saving up for the ceremony, and 'now', when people often get initiated 'just because the dollars came in'. Arguably Javier's tacit association of heightened luxury with a spontaneous or 'anti-economic' manner of spending on it corresponds closely to the trademark behaviour of so-called *especuladores*. Indeed, more explicit references to *especulación* do feature prominently in practitioners' commentaries on the new breed of dollar-wielding initiates, often coming as part of a cluster of criticisms regarding, for example, the rise of criminality among the new generation of *babalawos*. Nor are such comments just the product of cantankerous or 'envious' minds. Much like Agustín or Arsenio, plenty of initiates – especially the younger ones – very much fit the bill. Not only do many of them lead just the showy, 'hard fun' lifestyle associated with *especulación*, but, more significantly perhaps, they also give the impression that for them being *babalawos* is an *ingredient* of that lifestyle. One might go as far as to say that among many inner-city dwellers, Ifá initiation has come to acquire a new kind of street-credibility as the kind of thing one can show off, not unlike a motorbike, gold accessories, or cool Nike gear.

As an indicator consider the use of initiation insignia. As already mentioned, at initiation *babalawos* are given a consecrated bracelet (*iddé*) of green and yellow beads, which they are encouraged to wear permanently as a mark of their new status as *babalawos*. Now, traditionally bracelets for such daily use have a single line of beads, while bracelets intended for certain ceremonial purposes may be much thicker, consisting of a 'bunch' of interwoven beaded strings (*iddé de mazo*). Interestingly, however, in recent years it has become increasingly common for young *babalawos* to use their *iddé de mazo* as permanent initiation insignia, a practice much derided by people like Javier. 'It's their way of 'speculating' (*su forma de especular*); they want everyone to know that they are *babalawos*', an uninitiated friend of mine observed. And, sure enough, *iddé de mazo* are very much on show 'on the street' in Havana these days, not least in the dollar bars.

For purposes of the present argument, it is crucial to note the way in which the *especulador's* macho desire for luxury resonates with the ethos of Ifá, which emphasises the regal dignity of *babalawos* as priests of Orula. This is not only a matter of the character of Ifá initiation itself, as an occasion for men to 'live it up' in celebration of the 'birth of a king'. As we saw earlier, in *especulación* the desire for luxury is an integral expression of the impulse to 'live for the moment', since *especuladores'* disregard for *la necesidad*, macho and momentary, is made visible in the conspicuous magnitude of expenditure. This connection – between high expenditure and 'the moment' – is integral also to the divinatory logic of Ifá worship. As we have

seen, practitioners' obligation to the deities in general – and Orula in particular – is expressed in terms of a series of ceremonious expenditures, each of which is made necessary through the temporary (or 'momentary' if you like) commands of the oracle. Furthermore, practitioners' standing within the cult depends largely on their position on an escalator of expenditure – from uninitiated clients' humble offerings, to the 'kingly' extremes of full initiation –, and the movement of the escalator, so to speak, is dictated by Orula's oracular demands, which are as unpredictable as they are compelling.

This parallel provides an insight into why *habaneros* who lead the kind of lifestyle associated with *especulación* find the regal prestige of Ifá so attractive. As already argued above, *especulación* presents a paradox: as an attempt to keep 'need' and 'struggle' at arm's length by revelling 'for the moment', *especuladores* heroically subvert mainstream ideological strictures; but falling straight back into *necesidad* once the cash is spent, they are as vulnerable as the moment of their desire is short. Ifá arguably provides a way out of this paradox. On the one hand, it furnishes a recognisably prestigious arena for just the kind of conspicuous consumption 'for the moment' that *especuladores* thrive on. For, while the ostentatious character of the *especulador's* spending is well suited to the regal opulence of Ifá worship, the wilfully unplanned expenditures of *especulación* can be similarly accommodated to the divinatory logic of Ifá worship, insofar as this too is premised on the unpredictable character of the oracle's prescriptions. On the other hand, it is understood that – unlike dollar bar-outings, motorbikes, or gold bracelets – Ifá initiation bestows a *permanent transformation* on those who undergo it. Rather than just behaving *as if* they were kings, *especuladores* who become *babalawos* are re-borne *as* kings, through consecration. 'Ifá gives you *fundamento* in life', initiates explain, the term understood both in the colloquial sense as 'foundation' – with its connotations of permanence –, and in a technical sense as a synonym for consecration. Effectively, Ifá provides a way for *especuladores* to make virtue of their *necesidad*, by turning the logic of *especulación* on its head. While the gestures of 'living for the moment' are ultimately an index of the *especulador's* vulnerability, initiation to Ifá provides a way of rendering those same gestures as trappings of a permanent regal status. Indeed, if *babalawos* have always displayed the permanence of their transformed status by means of their initiation-bracelets, it is indicative that *especuladores* should render just these insignia as conspicuous as possible.

Conclusion

I have sought in this article to shed some light on the popularity of Ifá during the crisis of 1990s Cuba by looking mainly at issues relating to money and the consumption of ritual services, emphasising some of the

key transformations that Ifá has undergone as part of the process of its rise. In a rather obvious way these results make sense. Insofar as *babaneros*' concern with money and its expenditure has indexed momentous transformations in Cuban society (with abiding notions of 'need' and 'struggle' in the post-Soviet era), it is hardly surprising that by focusing on these issues we should have come to gauge key transformations in cult practice also. Indeed, with its connotations of continuity, the notion of 'transformation' takes the parallel further. Just as *babaneros*' complex stance with regard to money and *la necesidad* has its roots in the 'before' of discourse (when 'everyone had enough'), so the intensified trends towards *comercio* and *especulación* in Ifá are sustainable, as argued here, because they are congruous with the way initiates have 'always' done things.

Nevertheless, there is a crucial slippage in the analogy between Ifá and *especulación*, one that helps explain the ambivalence with which many practitioners view the phenomenon of 'religious *especulación*'. For there is a conflict between the *especulador*'s urge to spend indulgently on his *own* desire for luxury, and the *babalawo*'s commitment to spend luxuriously on the *deities*' oracular demands. Crudely put, the difference is between self-assertive vanity and submissive dignity. Indeed, there is considerable unease among some *babalawos* about the religious credentials of the new *babalawos-especuladores*, as may be gleaned from some of the quotes from my informants. Given the respect that *babalawos* feel they owe to each other, this unease is expressed mainly through innuendo. But, in tenor, practitioners' comments often intimate doubts as to whether those *babalawos* who like to parade their chunky *iddé*, and spend their days doing deals and 'caning' dollar beers, are entirely dedicated to 'serving Orula', not least in view of the expectations placed on young initiates in terms their commitment to acquiring ritual expertise. And, as Arsenio's half-embarrassed admission that he did 'not yet' practise Ifá actively would indicate, this kind of conflict of ends is by no means a fiction.