



# THE ISLAND OF CROSSED DESTINIES

## *HUMAN & AND OTHER-THAN-HUMAN PERSPECTIVES IN AFRO-CUBAN DIVINATION*

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*This thesis focuses on the significance and articulation of divinatory practices in Cuba—a place where a number of different religious traditions (mainly of African and European origins) have come to coexist. Reflecting on the particularities of my ethnography, I concentrate on three such traditions: Ocha/Ifá, Palo Monte and Espiritismo. However, rather than engaging with them as different ‘traditions’ or assuming their syncretic character, I attempt to explore the way in which they constitute distinct but related perspectives on human destiny or, as my friends and informants put it, on people’s ‘path’ (camino). I try to illustrate the nature of*

*these perspectives by bringing to the fore the ways in which different divinatory practices instantiate and embody the efficacy or ‘point of view’ of different ‘other-than-human’ beings—be they deities or the dead. Treating these relations as an exchange of perspectives between ‘humans’ and ‘other-than-human’ entities, I argue for the need to focus on ‘ontology’ and the indigenous understanding of these entities’ ‘nature’ in order to avoid both ‘reductionist’ and ‘constructivist’ renderings of divination; in other words, to avoid the theoretical limits of ‘syncretic’ or ‘purist’ readings of the (Afro-)Cuban spirit world and its efficacy. ♦*

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**CONTRAST I**

In the Afro-Cuban religions, offerings to various deities and spirits of the dead are very frequent. Here is one, at the foot of a tree, in central Havana. The ‘contrast’ (contrast for whom, is the immediate question, of course) here is the ‘Festival of French cinema’ at the background.

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**CONTRAST II**

Here is a second ‘contrast’. Another kind of offering to an Afro-Cuban entity, the offering being a goat. The image of the sacrificed animal and the crucifix demolishes decades of efforts to preserve religious and, for that matter, any other kind of ‘cultural’ purity.

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**CONTRAST III**

The Afro-Cuban religions are also part of artistic/folkloric performances extracted from their ‘everyday’ ritual context. Music and dance occurs in order to incite the Afro-Cuban deities to ‘come down’ and take possession of certain individuals. But what of the folkloric performances? Where do the deities go?

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**CONTRAST IV**

As with the ‘Contrast 3’, this photo also depicts an artistic/folkloric performance of Afro-Cuban religions. An audience of locals, tourists, people initiated in these religions, as well as a statue of neoclassical style are all watching the Afro-Cuban drums beating.

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