

# EXPENDING MULTIPLICITY: MONEY IN CUBAN IFÁ CULTS

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Countering the assumption that money acts as an agent of abstraction and ‘disembedding’, anthropologists tend to draw money into analogies with other objects of exchange, downplaying its uniquely quantitative nature. This article seeks to disentangle the association, implicit in this tendency, of quantity with abstraction. Focusing on the peculiar character of money as a ‘purely multiple’ object, the aim is to account for ‘embeddedness’ without bracketing quantity: what does quantity look like when it is not viewed as an abstract denominator? The question is explored with reference to Ifá, an Afro-Cuban diviner cult that takes monetary transactions as a cosmological premise.

A central contribution of the anthropological literature on money has been to refute the assumption that money is best understood as what Anthony Giddens has called a ‘disembedding mechanism’ (1991: 18). While from Aristotle onwards social theorists have tended to portray money as a catalyst that abstracts economic transactions from other orders of social relations, anthropologists have for a number of years been pointing to contexts and senses in which the opposite may be the case. Far from necessarily aiding an ineluctable differentiation of economic activities from moral, religious, aesthetic, or political ones (the process of ‘disembedding’, deemed famously by Polanyi as integral to the development of modern market economies – Polanyi 1957, cf. Carrier 1998), it is evident that money often features in ethnographic contexts where these domains are fused. The supposition that money needs to be associated with developed market economies had begun to be unsettled with classic debates about whether certain tribal groups did or did not ‘have’ money (Bohannan & Bohannan 1968; Counts & Counts 1970; Dalton 1967; Douglas 1967; Einzig 1948; Firth 1929; Malinowski 1921; cf. Godelier 1977; Hodges 1988: 96–124). Similarly, early studies of the effects of colonial currencies in tribal contexts suggested that while Western currencies did have ‘corrosive’ effects – insofar as, in Mary Douglas’s words, they ‘seeped into’ orders of exchange that were previously kept separate – some of the more socially significant or prestigious fields of exchange remained immune to monetization (Douglas 1963: 61–4, see also Barth 1967; Bohannan 1959; Firth 1959: 146–54). Warnings against seeing money as an obvious agent of ‘disembedding’ took a more radical turn in the 1980s. Partly as a reaction to Marxist-inspired arguments on the role of money in processes of

'commoditization' (particularly Kopytoff 1986; Taussig 1980), a number of critical studies exemplified the ways in which money may actually serve to bind economic concerns to the social (moral, political, religious, etc.) fabric in which they are embedded (Hart 1986; Parry & Bloch 1989; Strathern 1988: 76–86; Zelizer 1989). Most influentially, Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry mobilized diverse ethnographic evidence in their introduction to an edited volume on *Money and the morality of exchange* to show that, far from dissipating social relations, money often plays a key role in their long-term reproduction (Bloch & Parry 1989). Indeed, if the notion of an increasingly commoditized world has gained ground since the 1980s – spurred by a flurry of research on topics such as 'globalization', 'modernity', and the anthropology of 'the state' (Akin & Robbins 1999; Comaroff & Comaroff 1999; Foster 2002; Geschiere 1992; Radin 1996; Verdery 1995; cf. Englund & Leach 2000) – assent to Bloch and Parry's message that the category of 'money' needs thoroughly to be 'relativized' has also been abundant (Humphrey 1995; Leach in press; P.J. Stewart & Strathern 2002; Weiss 1996), not least with regard to money in modern Western economies (Helgason & Pálsson 1997; Knorr Cetina & Preda 2000; Zelizer 1997; for a stimulating synthesis, see Hart in press).

While very much in sympathy with attempts to disengage discussions of money from assumptions about abstraction and commoditization, the present article is also motivated by one of the main shortcomings of the trend.<sup>1</sup> For what is remarkable about this literature is its insistence on what one may call 'qualitative' aspects of money – the sensual qualities of precious metals or crispy banknotes, the fact that money might be cooked or drunk or purified, as well as gifted or bartered, that portions of it may be 'earmarked', and so on. It is as if the move away from abstraction must *a fortiori* carry with it a suspicion of quantity. The underlying syllogism seems to be this: if disembodiment involves the increasing abstraction of economic transactions, and money is supposed to facilitate this by virtue of its own abstract character as a quantitative denominator of value, then attempts to qualify notions of disembodiment must somehow downplay the quantitative character of money in favour of its many 'thing-like' qualities.

Without wishing to return to the checklists anthropologists used to debate when deciding which objects qualify as 'money', I do proceed from the premise that what most obviously distinguishes money from other things people exchange is its quantitative character (cf. Crump 1981). For reasons that will become apparent, I take quantity in a minimal sense: the form of money as a plural aggregate of particles or, as one might say, its multiplicity. So if quantity – multiplicity – is money's trademark quality, the question is this. How might one account for 'embeddedness' in a way that does not render money analogous to other objects of exchange by bracketing its quantitative character? In particular, how might this be achieved without conceding that money must serve as a catalyst for abstraction? Or, in other words, what does quantity look like when it is not viewed as an abstract denominator?

My central point will be that quantity has more advantages than just abstraction and serves to distinguish money from other objects of exchange when the possibility of abstraction is effectively suppressed. Crucially, I will argue, the multiplicity of money renders it supremely suited as a medium of

exchange, where ‘medium’ is understood as a synonym of ‘environment’ as well as ‘object’. That is, by virtue of its pliable partibility – its multiplicity – money serves as the logical ‘ground’ on which the ‘figures’ of exchange (objects, sacrifices, favours, etc.) can, literally, move in exchange. So ‘encompassed’, money is different from other objects of exchange not only in that its multiplicity makes it more fluid, but also in that its fluidity renders it a premise, as well as an object, of exchange.

The case is made with reference to Cuban Ifá, a diviner cult that I have been studying ethnographically in Havana since 1998. Two points on strategy are warranted here. First, in the argument that follows, the relationship between theory (namely regarding the multiplicity of money) and ethnography (namely on money in Cuban Ifá cults) is not one of generalization. The point is hardly that Cuban Ifá provides empirical evidence that the fluidity of monetary quantification is more important than hitherto acknowledged theoretically; in itself, Ifá is far too parochial to carry such an inductive argument. Rather, the strategy is that of a thought experiment (cf. Gell 1999: 34). To the extent that the role of money in Ifá contradicts ordinary assumptions about the role of money in general (such as its ‘disembedding’ tendencies), might we think of money in a new way that takes into account such ethnographic possibilities? In other words, the objective of the exercise is to generate a new analytical vantage point. Whether this perspective is useful beyond the study of Ifá economy is an open question, but it is at least interesting insofar as the analytical perspective on offer is internally coherent.

This relates to a second point, regarding the nature of the ethnographic account that follows. Readers who are familiar with contemporary Cuban economy may be surprised that the socio-economic upheavals of recent years, following the collapse of the Soviet bloc, do not feature more prominently here. For example, almost no mention is made of the palpably significant effects exerted on the life of the cult by the introduction of the US dollar as legal tender on the island in 1993.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, while I have written on the importance of these contextual changes elsewhere (Holbraad 2004), the focus here is on the normative logic of Ifá economy, which, as practitioners themselves so often point out, may be contradicted in practice. This is because it is at the level of ‘logic’ – or, if you like, of economic cosmology – that Ifá most clearly presents these distinctive economic features which provide the scope for thought experimentation. Indeed, as we shall see, practitioners themselves pit the logic of monetary transaction in Ifá against the economic contingencies that constrain these transactions, as – so to speak – ‘ought’ against ‘is’.

### Money in Ifá

Like Santería, the best-known Afro-Cuban religious tradition, Ifá has evolved on the basis of elements brought to Cuba primarily during the nineteenth century by for the most part Yoruba-speaking slaves from West Africa (Brandon 1993; Brown 2003). While Ifá shares with Santería an extremely rich mythical and devotional universe, full initiates of Ifá (*babalawos*, sing. *babalawo*) tend to consider themselves superior to practitioners of Santería (*santeros*), partly

because Ifá follows on from Santería as a further and more selective grade of initiation (i.e. Santería initiation is a prerequisite for Ifá) open only to heterosexual men who fulfil certain conditions. The most significant of these is that neophytes be chosen ('called') to initiation by the oracle of Ifá (Holbraad in press). The regulative role of the oracle in this matter (as in all) corresponds to the exalted position that Orula, the patron deity of divination, occupies within the cult of Ifá. Indeed, what distinguishes *babalawos* from initiates of Santería is that at their initiation they alone 'receive Orula', the idol deemed to be the diviner deity who from then on demands their daily adoration and whose 'secrets' they are supposed to study for life. Crucially, initiation enables the neophyte to learn how to use his deity in order to divine. While many initiates use these skills only for their own well-being and protection, others go on to become dedicated diviners, using their oracle for the benefit of clients, among whom they command respect. Indeed, the prestige of the *babalawos* is rather enhanced by the fact that initiation is an extremely costly and arduous affair, as we shall see. Nevertheless, throughout its history in Cuba and up until today, Ifá has largely been practised by marginal groups, particularly in inner-city *barrios* of Havana, Matanzas, and Cárdenas. From the point of view of a mainstream Cuban mindset, Ifá is still associated with the black segment of the population (despite the fact that many well-known *babalawos* today are white), and its history has been bound up with persecution until very recently (Hagedorn 2001; Wirtz 2004).

There are four main ways in which monetary transactions enter the practice of Ifá in Cuba. First, the reasons for which clients solicit *babalawos'* divinatory services more often than not have to do with their worries about personal financial circumstances. In principle, every major decision involving money – a change of job, a deal in the black market, remittances of dollars from family abroad, and so on – must be sanctioned from the gods through a divinatory *séance* where the *babalawo* can interrogate Orula on matters of concern to the client. Out of eighteen *séances* for which I have comprehensive data, seven were brought to the diviner on these kinds of grounds, while five touched heavily on financial concerns during the course of the session. I say 'touched on' because questions about finances are actually enshrined in the liturgical order of the *séance*, money (*owo*) or its lack being one of the main forms that good or bad fortune (*iré* or *osobbo*) may take. So it is not at all rare for a client to go to the *babalawo* with a different worry in mind – a health problem perhaps – and end up being advised on her<sup>3</sup> financial arrangements also.

To illustrate the importance of financial concerns for those who consult the oracle, take the case of Antonio,<sup>4</sup> an acquaintance of mine, who over three months visited a *babalawo* no less than six times, trying to find out about (and influence through magic) events relating to a credit card that his Italian wife was supposed to send him from abroad. Commenting on his case, his godfather joked: 'This one has gone mad or something! He is going to end up owing so much for [divination and magic] payments that even his foreign credit card won't save him'.

This brings us to the second way in which monetary transactions can be said to be central to Ifá, namely that *babalawos'* services are paid for. Indeed it is feasible to view the totality of Ifá 'services' – understood both in an

economic and a ritual sense – relative to an aggregate of exchanges, whereby money tends to move upward in the religious hierarchy. From the point of view of the consumers of these services (clients, neophytes, etc.), interaction with *babalawos* involves a moving escalator of expenses, starting with smallish consultation fees and ending with full initiation, which is extremely costly (cf. Holbraad 2004). Two types of expenses can be distinguished: payments that are made directly to *babalawos* for their services (*derechos*, lit. ‘rights’) and expenditures involved in purchasing ritual paraphernalia and offerings, ingredients for which are sold on the market.

Take ordinary divinatory consultations as an example. To start off the *séance*, the client is obliged to hand over a relatively small fee to the *babalawo*,<sup>5</sup> having first crossed herself with the money (see below). In consultations conducted with an ordinary divining-chain (*opuele*), *babalawos* will often begin by wrapping the paper notes around the middle of the divining-chain until the first main divinatory configuration (*oddu, signo*) is cast,<sup>6</sup> after which the fee is placed on a divining-mat (coins are placed there from the start, next to a heap of cowry shells, which, as one *babalawo* explained, represent ‘payment for the consultation even if the client has no money to pay’). Using his divining-chain, the *babalawo* first ascertains whether the consultee is *iré* or *osobbo* (loosely, whether he has good or bad fortune), and then proceeds to find out which particular deities are responsible for the client’s current fortunes, whether an offering is in order, and, if so, what it should be. Each deity has preferences for particular offerings, so the questions are framed accordingly, ‘*hasta que lo coja*’ (i.e. until the deity assents to a proposed offering). So, for example, say a client is told that she is currently *iré* thanks to the protection of Obatalá (*mafer-efún Obatalá*), the *oricha* of peace and wisdom. And say that Obatalá ‘asks for’ a meringue and some white flowers. The consultee is then obliged to go to the market as soon as possible (which often means as soon as she can afford it) to buy the eggs and sugar for the meringue and the flowers. ‘*Todo es dinero*’, as a friend, exasperated by a run of *séances* indicating *osobbo* (bad fortune) and corresponding *ebbós* (exorcistic offerings), put it: ‘everything is money’.

Although eggs and flowers are not trifling expenditures for most Cubans, the amounts involved in such everyday oracular requests pale into insignificance when compared to the costly process of initiation itself. Indeed, when I first started investigating Ifá practice, I was impressed by the fact that often practitioners were rather hesitant to consult *babalawos* about matters which were obviously concerning them. ‘I don’t want to know’ was a friend’s reaction when I asked him why he would not seek Orula’s advice about a serious health complaint. My tendency at the time was to interpret such apprehensions as a confirmation of people’s faith in divinatory verdicts. Later, however, I realized that these hesitations have as much to do with money as they do with knowledge. For it is understood that the more serious the problem facing the client, the more elaborate the magical remedy, with a likely divinatory prescription being that the client should himself undergo initiation (cf. Holbraad in press). Orula’s ‘call’ to initiation involves the potential neophyte in a series of exponentially rising expenditures, associated with various stages of initiation and the corresponding ritual expenditures. Just the first step of initiation (receiving the Warrior deities) normally costs around 300–400 pesos (\$15–20),<sup>7</sup> which corresponds to over a month’s average salary. Initiation to

Ifá costs a minimum of 20,000 pesos (\$1,000), but can easily come to cost double that amount or more. The salience of expenditure as an issue for cult practitioners is illustrated by an anecdote told to me by Javier Alfonso Isase, an elderly *babalawo* with whom I worked closely:

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 Santería is an exploitation (*una explotación*). I asked him: 'Are you a *santero* yourself?' No, you just talk from what you hear. These days it takes a lot of money to make a *santo*, and the [initiates] get the least of it. I agree that *Santería* is an exploitation. But it is not us doing the exploiting. It is the traders who sell the animals, the *chopin* [dollar supermarkets], and the food is very expensive ... 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 these days ... Before, the neophyte would buy thirty cases of beer. Now he does it with ten, which he has to manage for the whole week. And the food for the *babalawos* is necessary because they won't turn up just to be left starving ... Before, to the youngest *babalawos* they'd give 20 pesos, to the slightly more senior ones 30, and to the most senior ones 50 pesos. But now even the young ones need 100 pesos as a minimum for the week ... Certainly, if you don't have a good income it is hard to be initiated.

Elsewhere I have discussed the implications of Javier's worries about 'exploitation', poverty, and the character of *Santería* and Ifá after dollarization in the 1990s (Holbraad 2004). Here my focus is on the question of prices and their position in Ifá cosmology. For while Javier acknowledges that *babalawos'* charges are thoroughly marketized, keeping in pace with an increasing cost of living, the premise of his defence is that these charges are made in accordance with ritual propriety. Indeed, however sensitive to market conditions, as servants of Orula, *babalawos* are always subject to divine intervention, as it were. In the long term, they are bound for life to the detailed prescriptions and prohibitions ordained during their personal *itá*, a lengthy divination carried out for each *babalawo* as part of his initiation, whereby the oracle allocates him one of 256 possible *signos*, which from then on is taken to characterize his personality (much like star signs do in Western astrology). Given the salience of money to Ifá, it is not surprising that these prescriptions often have to do with money and pricing. Javier's own *signo*, for example, is *Oggunda Teturá*,<sup>8</sup> which is a 'poor man's *signo*'. This, he often explained, prevented him from using Ifá to become rich, and consequently he strove to keep his services cheap.

Orula's influence on pricing is also felt in the short term, through divinatory séances that *babalawos* habitually perform for themselves every morning for the coming day. An extreme example is Miguelito Febles, one of the most notorious and influential *babalawos* of past generations (cf. Brown 2003: 88–92), of whom it is said that one day he had obeyed (at great personal cost) Orula's auroral prescription that the next man to enter his house should be initiated entirely for free, beers and all. Indeed, related to this is the fact that haggling with a *babalawo* is generally considered a *faux pas* in Ifá practice. What *babalawos* charge is, after all, a 'right' conferred upon them as priests of Orula by divine sanction.

Divine influence over the prices that *babalawos* charge for their services is fascinatingly encoded in the form of the price itself, though this is empha-

sized less in everyday practice. Jesus Guanche points out that in the beginning of the twentieth century, when a consultation would cost 1.05 peso, it was explained that the 5 *kilos* (cents) were ‘for Orula’ while the 1 peso represented the *babalawo*’s own ‘right’ (1983: 383–4). Rafael Robaina (pers. comm.), another leading Cuban expert on Ifá, explains that while raising the price successively during the century, individual *babalawos* maintained the ratio of 1 peso to 5 kilos: 2.10, 3.15, 5.25, and so on. Indeed today when prices are quoted or written down this convention is observed, though when money actually changes hands the *kilos* tend to be dropped for reasons of convenience.

The encompassment of *babalawos*’ professional services by Orula’s divine sanction is also captured by the notion of ‘working Ifá’ (*trabajar Ifá*), which refers to *babalawos*’ prerogative to use their skills for the benefit of paying clients. Although there is no obligation to dispense services in this way, *babalawos* commonly remark that Orula ‘calls’ his devotees to work (*Orula llama al trabajo*). The case of Elpidio, a recently initiated *babalawo* whom I got to know in Matanzas, illustrates the point. ‘I have my Ifá and take care of it, but he has not called me to work yet’, he told me. Months later I heard from his uncle, a well-established *babalawo* in Havana, that the state grocery-point that Elpidio managed had been robbed, and that he was being charged by the local state authorities for the lost produce – a devastating state of affairs for him. Interestingly, Elpidio had recently consulted the oracle and Orula had warned him to avoid safekeeping things for others. Apparently on the night of the robbery Elpidio was hiding a carton of (probably stolen) Marlboros behind the counter for a friend. Talking to me, his uncle attributed the shop’s robbery to Elpidio’s ‘disobedience’ and added that this was a good occasion for him to start ‘working his Ifá’.

Such ideas about divine influence accord with practitioners’ more general understanding of the merits of initiation and Ifá ‘work’ as an investment for the future. As they frequently emphasize, initiation boosts one’s chances of success and happiness in all sorts of ways because ‘it gives you *aché*’. Much like Polynesian *mana*, *aché* is a nebulous concept-cum-substance, often translated rather vaguely as ‘power’, ‘capacity’, ‘luck’, or ‘positive energy’ (see Cabrera 2000 [1954]: 99, 103, 301). However, health and financial success are usually singled out as the obvious senses in which initiation ‘gives *aché*’. Indeed, when illustrating the benefits involved, practitioners are as likely to switch to the idiom *iré* and *osobbo* (good and bad fortune). Commenting on his godfather’s increased affluence in recent years, one *babalawo* explained: ‘all those beautiful things that you see in his home, all that *iré*, ... all is because of Orula’. Indeed, a maxim-like phrase that one often hears among *babalawos* is that ‘with Ifá comes good fortune’ (*con Ifá entra el iré*), and *iré* here is understood to mean first and foremost financial fortune (cf. Wedel 2004: 64–7).

This brings us to a third area of interest in examining the monetary dimension of Ifá practice, one which relates to the fact that in Ifá cosmology deities and humans interact, not least through exchange. As already mentioned, the *orichas* have ‘likes’ and ‘dislikes’, and it is up to humans to solicit their favour by catering to them. This is done through two types of offering: *addimú*, which are usually explained as smaller thanks-giving offerings, often made to enhance one’s *iré*; and *ebbó*, which have a more drastic effect on the *orichas*, and are

often used to influence particular events. The most effective means of pleasing deities is to ‘feed’ them with the blood of their favourite animals (*dar les a comer*). All major Ifá ceremonies involve sacrifices, and the quality of each animal is judged principally on the amount of blood it sheds on the consecrated stones (*otán*), which ‘are’ the deity, as practitioners explain (Bascom 1950; cf. Holbraad, in press). Animal sacrifices are the most expensive offerings, and Ifá practitioners are invariably well versed in the prices of livestock sold in various legal and illegal establishments throughout Havana. ‘Everything is money’, as my exasperated friend said.

Money itself – notes and coins – is also offered ritually to the *orichas*. This is done primarily when initiates put their idol-deities on display, which in Ifá happens on ‘the day of Orula’ (4 October),<sup>9</sup> and on the *babalawo*’s own ‘birthday’, that is, the anniversary of his initiation. On these occasions, visitors to the *babalawo*’s house (and particularly his godchildren [*ahijados*], i.e. practitioners over whose initiation he has officiated) are expected to pay their respect to his Orula idol-deity by placing money in a basket in front of him. Amounts offered are usually modest (often a few peso coins), though devotees may seek to make a good impression by offering larger amounts, or even US dollars. Furthermore, on a more everyday basis, magical remedies (*ebbós*) prepared for various purposes often should include a number of coins (*opolopo owó*, cf. Bolívar Aróstegui 1994) – details are included in the various recipes that *babalawos* pass to each other.

That money should be offered to the *orichas* directly in this way is perhaps not unrelated to a fourth point regarding money in Ifá, namely that Ifá mythology is full of references to the *orichas*’ own interest in money. Examples appear below, but in general one may note that plenty of myths depict the *orichas* or other divine creatures earning, spending, hoarding, wasting, stealing, and so on. Every conceivable use of, or attitude to, money finds its mythical archetype, so to speak, in the corpus of myths (*patakines*) that *babalawos* spend a lifetime learning and interpreting. Both during divination and in more informal contexts, *babalawos* are continually referring to such myths and bringing them to bear on everyday events, which so often have to do with financial worries.

### The logic of divine encompassment

By way of summary, we may note that the four monetary dimensions of Ifá, so to speak, meet at a rather familiar vanishing point in anthropology, namely the idea of an ‘embedded’ economy (Mauss 1954; Polanyi 1959). The picture of Ifá sketched here is one where monetary transactions – however self-interested – are encompassed and sustained by divine influence. This is quite clear with respect to transactions that take place within the constraints of Ifá rituals themselves (i.e. involving exchanges between humans and gods, etc.), since the deities themselves ordain these, not least during divination. However, the subjugation of monetary exchange by the influence of the *orichas* extends to all aspects of practitioners’ lives, for, as Elpidio with his unlucky Marlboros would attest, even the most everyday transactions are subject to divine inter-



vention. Hence the frequent séances on matters financial as well as the hope that initiation itself will lead to prosperity.

The deities' sovereign role over even mundane monetary exchanges is illustrated by one of the many Ifá myths that address economic concerns:

Once there was a man who had a ram who could talk.<sup>10</sup> Everyone who saw it was amazed, so the man decided to tour from town to town, charging people in the markets for listening to his animal talk. What he didn't know was that hidden inside the ram was Changó<sup>11</sup> who was doing the talking. At some time Changó appeared to the man and asked for the ram as *addimú* (offering). The man refused, not wanting to lose his source of income. Angered, Changó killed the animal himself and the man was left with nothing.

Note that the myth presents the encompassment of monetary exchange (namely charging at the market) by divine influence (namely Changó's) as a state of affairs that is far from self-evident, for the story turns on the opposition of two alternative perspectives. First we are given the man's perspective, which is straightforwardly entrepreneurial: faced with a choice between sacrificing his ram (incurring the corresponding opportunity cost) in return for Changó's favour, or marketing the ram for further gain, the man opts for the latter. His choice involves calculating the relative value of each alternative (Changó's favour < ram's future returns). From this perspective, then, commensuration is the name of the game: two alternatives are measured with reference to a third element, namely the quantitative scale provided by money itself (see Fig. 1).

The significance of triangulation will be discussed in due course. Note here, however, that in the myth it is precisely the sovereignty of money in such triangular comparisons that gets disrupted by the deity. By killing the ram anyway, Changó displays the futility of trying to calculate the worth of divine protection. Had the man not attempted such a calculation, presumably he would have been rewarded. The story, then, coaches the listener away from the man's perspective, and towards that of Changó, for, by factoring in Changó's anger, we arrive at an inversion of the triangular prototype of

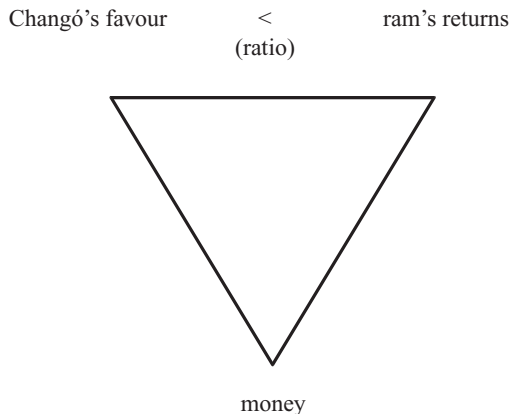


FIGURE 1. The man's perspective.

monetary calculation: the sovereignty of money is substituted for by that of Changó himself (see Fig. 2). Rather than the analytic comparisons involved in calculation, we have now a synthetic fusion whereby the ram's future returns and Changó's favour are revealed to be identical. Indeed, the tragic irony of the story is clear: even unawares, our fortunes – understood financially as well as existentially – are under the *orichas'* sway.

The myth's message, that divine encompassment is not self-evident, has implications in terms of what philosophers would call 'modality' (i.e. regarding notions like possibility, necessity, and actuality). Consider the modal properties of the two triangles above. In the first one (Fig. 1) we have a choice between distinct and alternative possibilities, which become the object of comparison. The man, after all, feels that he could sacrifice the ram. In the inverted triangle (Fig. 2) Changó himself discards the very possibility of choice. The futility of the man's calculation, following Changó's willy-nilly claim, is tantamount to the futility of representing alternative courses of action at all. Tragic irony indeed: whatever the man might 'think' he 'could' do, the ram must of necessity be sacrificed because Changó ordains so. The possibilities computed were never really open.

Indeed, the supremacy of the oracle as an instrument for regulating such matters in the daily life of the cult reproduces the logic of the myth, though the tragic ironic element is absent, the point of oracles being that they give access to truth. As I have argued elsewhere, *babalawos'* normative insistence that in principle their oracle is infallible implies, from a logical point of view, that oracular verdicts deal in necessary rather than contingent truths (Holbraad 2003). So, analytically speaking, the obligations that oracles are deemed to impose have to be imagined in a rather counter-intuitive way. Just like Changó in the myth, the oracles do not, as one might ordinarily assume, oblige people to act in a certain way in the face of alternative possibilities (namely do this rather than what you 'could have' done). This would be tantamount to claiming that oracles present contingent truths (namely while this is what you should do, it 'could have' been otherwise). Rather, inasmuch as oracles present necessary truths, their version of obligation is one that

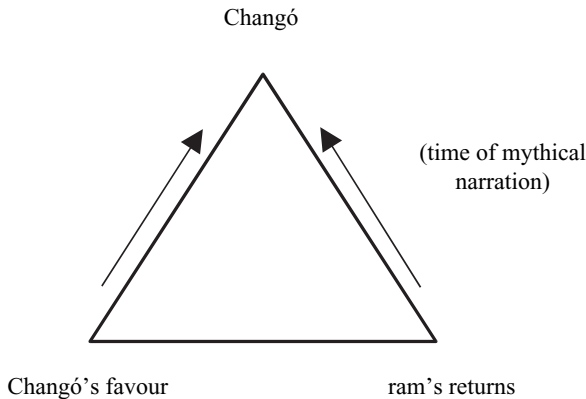


FIGURE 2. Changó's perspective.

cancel the very possibility of choice – the possibility of possibility, if you like: this is what you should do because, contrary to what you might have thought, there is nothing else you ‘could’ do (Holbraad in press). In this sense, the deities’ encompassing remit over practitioners’ finances – exemplified in the myth of the ram – is in perfect logical accordance with its own divinatory execution in cult practice.

I want to argue that the modal character of encompassment has far-reaching consequences for understanding the role of money itself in this context. This point is less obvious, partly because, as explained below, both theorists and consumers themselves tend to posit money as an object of exchange that is so special precisely because it allows people to commensurate alternative possibilities – in this case possible values – just as the man of the myth tried to do. On this view, it would seem that if oracles oblige people by eclipsing possibility with necessity, then money must in some sense be incongruent with, or even resistant to, divinatory encompassment. As we have seen, however, the ethnographic evidence suggests otherwise. So it would seem that some analytical work is required to resolve the seeming paradox that a cult as thoroughly regulated by divination as Ifá should nevertheless be permeated by money.

### Calculation and the immanence of expenditure

As noted in the introductory remarks, the idea that money is distinguished by its commensurating capacity has become part and parcel with a tendency to view monetized ‘economies’ as relatively autonomous domains. For example, Marx’s historicist argument about the increasing alienation of exchange from the moral order of production through labour is tied up with the idea that the objects of exchange (commodities) become abstracted from the social bonds that bring them about insofar as their value is reckoned in terms of their potential for exchange rather than use. Money, for Marx, is integral to this transformation in that it allows for such reckoning, serving as a ‘universal measure of value’ (its ‘first chief function’ – Marx 1990 [1867]: 188). Simmel places a similar emphasis on abstraction (though for him this also has positive connotations since, as a catalyst for abstract commensuration, money enhances individual freedom and contributes to the foundation of societal trust – cf. Bloch & Parry 1989: 4–7; Frankel 1977: 24–5; Hart 2001: 262–3). ‘As a visible object,’ he writes, ‘money is the substance that embodies abstract economic value ... Money is a specific realization of what is common to economic objects ...’ (Simmel 1978 [1900]: 120).

As noted earlier, the assumption that money must necessarily act as the ‘embodiment of abstraction’ (made by neither Marx nor Simmel, incidentally) has come under consistent fire from anthropologists. Indeed, if the turning point in the debate was Bloch and Parry’s demonstration that connections between money and abstraction are ethnographically contingent, the extent of Western analysts’ ethnocentric ‘fetishization’ of abstraction (Bloch & Parry 1989: 3) was subsequently exposed by Marilyn Strathern (1992) in her contribution to Humphrey and Hugh-Jones’s seminal edited volume on barter. Her argument is worth examining here because it lays out in precise terms

the role of quantitative thinking in analysts' imaginings of exchange in general, and monetary transactions in particular.

Following Chris Gregory's influential analysis of gift exchange in Melanesia (which included a consideration of the role of money as a 'gift' rather than as a 'commodity' – Gregory 1982), Strathern's task in the article is to show how premises that underlie Western monetary calculation have been allowed to inform analyses of all forms of exchange, such as Melanesian barter and gift exchange. The crucial element of this implicitly 'monetarist' logic (her term) is the priority that it gives to quantitative over qualitative relations. This, she argues, is a concomitant of 'the magic of reification' (Strathern 1992: 172), a peculiarly Western ontological position which sees exchange as a mutual swap of discrete and already valuable objects. According to this 'barter model of value' (Strathern 1992: 169), the exchangeability of things (pigs, time, labour, money, etc.) follows 'naturally', as it were, from the priority given to their individual identity, which allows them to be abstracted as 'units', seen as valuable insofar as they can be counted. On this view, rather than being treated as one among others of a thing's qualities, quantity is transcendentalized and hence comes to be understood as encompassing all other qualities (value, labour, colour, or whatever), which are thereby digitalised and made commensurable through enumeration. The exchangeability of things is thus built into their discrete fabric, and exchange simply makes value visible in the form of a ratio relating quantities of things 'against' each other. In the case of barter the ratio established relates objects (e.g. pigs for shells), whereas in gift exchange the ratio is supposed to hold between subjects (my prestige against yours, say). Barter, then, tends to be viewed as a proto-commodity situation that leads teleologically to a monetized economy, where money serves to objectify value in the form of the price.

Referring to Melanesian exchange, Strathern shows up the limitations of this kind of emphasis on the abstract operations of quantification. Looking at barter and gift-giving, she argues that, for the Melanesians involved, exchange turns not on establishing a quantitative equivalence between the objects exchanged, but rather on transactors' ability to coerce each other into viewing the objects as qualitatively 'substitutable' (Strathern 1992: 171; cf. Strathern 2000). Indeed, the fact that Strathern treats money on a par with barter and gifts when lining up her critical examples suggests that for her a monetarist logic of quantification does analytic violence to Melanesian monetary transactions as well. For example, she cites Healey's study of Maring trade, pointing out that haggling is absent, with traders accepting banknotes only in standard amounts, and customers paying for each item they buy separately rather than summing prices up (cf. Healey 1985). Such practices would suggest that quantitative scales should not always be assumed to occupy the transcendental position with which Westerners invest them. As Jadran Mimica puts it, speaking of the Iqwaye's attitude to banknotes, 'What matters to them ... is not the abstract quantity as such but the *exact* and *concrete* material properties of the exchanged quantities' (Mimica 1988: 20, original emphases).

Strathern's Melanesian material clearly resonates with the case of Ifā: for example, the absence of haggling, the standard differentiation of *babalawos'* fees in terms of divine and human components, and so on. Indeed the continuity between gift, barter, and monetary exchange implied by her argument is

enticing in that the multifarious uses of money in Ifá arguably defy such categories (e.g. when practitioners solicit the deities' protection by offering them money, are they 'gifting', 'paying', 'sacrificing', or what?). Nevertheless, the revision of assumptions about money that Strathern culls from her ethnographic thought experiment is potentially overdrawn. For while she may not intend the guiding contrast of her article – between the relative priorities of quantitative commensuration and qualitative substitution – to be distributed 'culturally' ('we think quantitatively while they think qualitatively'), the contrast is certainly presented as an analytic antinomy: 'we give logical priority to quantity but, to make sense of certain ethnography, we should prioritize quality instead' – anthropological analysis as substitutive exchange, as it were (cf. Gell 1999; Pottage 2001).<sup>12</sup> The Ifá myth of the talking ram suggests a third possibility: that commensuration and substitution might be articulated together in the form of money itself, so that, rather than an analytic antinomy, their contrasting demands may present a properly ethnographic paradox – a condition with which transactors themselves must reckon.<sup>13</sup> Some formal considerations may be helpful here.

The quantitativist view sees money, with its digital denominations, as transcendental with respect to the valuables it measures. Standing behind them it renders other valuables commensurable, taking the position of a third element with which two others can be compared quantitatively, hence establishing a ratio between them. The digital character of money as a measure of value allows it to be implicated in modal 'as if' scenarios, whereby a given sum of money is imagined as potentially convertible into all the different things it could buy. Gazing at my pound, I get carried away and start thinking that it could buy me 2 Kit Kats, or 1 bus ticket, or \$1.85, or whatever. From the point of view of its quantity, my pound enters into triangular comparisons whereby different goods are commensurated: 2 Kit Kats = 1 bus ticket, etc. (see Fig. 3).

Crucial here is the logical work that this triangular relationship performs. Consider a comparison. Imagine a world in which only two goods were for sale, say a bunch of plantains and a bottle of oil. Also imagine that this world

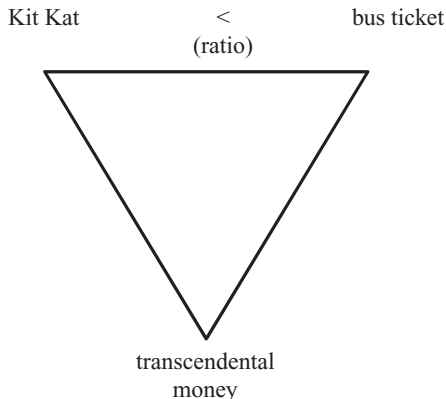


FIGURE 3. Monetarism ('as if' comparisons).

was mad enough to have two currencies: pesos and dollars. Now imagine that for some reason the plantains were only available for pesos (e.g. for 6) and the oil only for dollars (\$2.15), and that pesos and dollars could not buy one another, so that triangulation would be effectively precluded. In such a world money is quantitative, but it is not transcendental, for pesos and dollars are no more a measure of the value of plantains and oil than plantains and oil are a measure for pesos and dollars (2.15 for 1 or whatever). In other words, to point out the quantity of \$2.15, for example, does not say anything more about that entity than would a qualitative statement, namely that it buys you a bottle of oil.

Now, arguably this world sounds more outlandish than it is. This is because abstract thought (both lay and scientific) easily represents money in its own image, as it were, privileging its digital aspect (the fact that money can be divided and iterated in principle) to such an extent that it obscures the temporally bound moments when money is actually deployed – the moment of its consumption in a particular purchase. For the point is that the moment I decide actually to spend my money, the ‘as if’ scenarios necessarily recede. One scenario has been chosen regardless of the opportunity costs, and my pound is now important not because it could buy anything that has that price, but because it will buy me something in particular. In theory money might be able to buy many different things, but in practice it only buys one thing at a time. The moment of consumption, then, eclipses the purview of possible worlds with a concrete exchange, and thus immanently strips money of its transcendental character. At the moment of expenditure, then, money is not deployed as a digital criterion of value, but is rather integrated as a temporal entity in its own right by the one-to-one gravity, so to speak, that the entity being purchased exerts on it. Spending is not only the consumption of money as a determinate quantity, but also its consummation as an integral and uniquely qualitative entity.

These considerations allow us to see why the peculiar connection between divination and money in Ifá is not really paradoxical, or no more paradoxical than money is itself. For, in effect, divine demand curtails exactly the triangular ‘as if’ comparisons that render money transcendental (should I buy the hen that Orula asks for or should I use the money to buy a chicken for the house?). In this sense, money, as means of expenditure as well as calculation, lends itself to divine encompassment (and is hence ‘embedded’) by reproducing the logic of divinatory obligation in its own dual form: expenditure eclipses the possibility of calculation, just like obligation eclipses the possibility of choice.<sup>14</sup>

### **Money and the mobility of exchange**

At this point the argument may appear to have an air of overkill. To say that oracles are able to regulate monetary transactions only by curtailing the potential of money for abstract calculation seems tantamount to saying that in Ifá money is stripped of the one attribute that distinguishes it from other objects of exchange. On this view, candles, flowers, or animal blood are just like money, for they too are integral and uniquely qualitative entities that can be

earmarked by oracles for consumption. This would, though, be a misunderstanding – one that arguably underlies much of the anthropological critique of assumptions about abstraction, as I argued in my introductory comments.<sup>15</sup> In obviating calculation, oracles do not strip money of its peculiarly quantitative quality. They just ‘dumb quantity down’ as one among other qualities of money (however special), thus eclipsing its otherwise transcendental position. Indeed, I want to argue that in Ifá the pervasive use of (and concern with) money is owed to its quantitative character. As I propose to show, quantity confers more advantages to money than just the possibility of commensuration, and these advantages render money particularly suited as a medium of exchange in the encompassed space of divinatory regulation.

*Babalawos* explain the merits of money with reference to the best-known origin myth of money in Ifá (the ‘birth’ of money, as they put it<sup>16</sup>), linked with the divinatory *oddu* Oragún,<sup>17</sup> who is the last in the hierarchy of the principal *oddu* and associated with darkness and suffering.

Oragún was once in the marketplace (*la plaza*), when he noticed Obara Meyi<sup>18</sup> going about his business. Obara had arrived at the market with two empty sacks – nothing else. Soon he approached a trader at his stall and proposed that he exchange some of his goods for one of the empty sacks. ‘Why should I do that?’, asked the trader incredulously. Obara explained that with the empty bag he could transport his goods better. The trader agreed to swap. Armed with the goods, Obara went up to another trader and managed to agree another advantageous deal, and then another, and so on. In this way Obara’s wealth grew fast. Watching all this, Oragún could not help admiring Obara’s skills. But it occurred to him that too much time was wasted in the market with all these cumbersome swaps. So he decided to go to Olofin<sup>19</sup> and propose to him to let people buy and sell things for money, rather than having to swap them all the time. Olofin was sceptical, ‘What do people need money for? Things work fine as it is’. Oragún said, ‘Let’s do this: give them money to use, and if there really is no sense in it you retire it immediately and banish me for ever. But if I am right, you will see that people will begin to believe more in money than they believe in you’. Not one to swallow his pride, Olofin accepted the challenge, and gave the people cowries to exchange with. As Oragún had said, people’s obsession with making money became so great that they began to disrespect Olofin himself. It is for this reason that Ifá says that money is cursed (*el dinero está maldito*).

The fact that Oragún was inspired to invent money while watching Obara Meyi’s deft but slow barter deals at the marketplace may suggest that the myth should be read as a dramatization of the familiar model that depicts money as the *telos* of barter.<sup>20</sup> Is, however, a trite lesson in evolutionary political economy really the point here? Perhaps the explicit theme of speed is more telling. After all, notions of abstract calculation – basic to the teleology of the ‘barter theory of value’, as Strathern explained – are conspicuously absent from the myth. Oragún only invents cowries as a medium of exchange in view of the ‘cumbersome’ character of Obara Meyi’s swaps with the traders. And the capacity of money to ease and quicken transactions is not as such related to its role as a scale of value. At issue here is the technology of expenditure (how best to ‘buy and sell things’), so, like Olofin, we are invited to think of money in its ‘encompassed’ guise, and to consider its relative advantages over swapping.

The advantages of money can be gleaned by attending to its chief distinguishing feature, namely its quantitative nature as a purely multiple object.

Swaps were cumbersome, as Oragún observed, because trading partners had to persuade one another that their goods were worth swapping – a judgement that depends on the qualitative attributes of what is on offer (using a sack for transport, etc.). With money, however, quantity is the only relevant quality. If exchange involves the substitution of one whole object for another, money is the perfect medium just because its multiplicity renders it partible; divided at any appropriate point, digital series of cowries (today, pesos or dollars) still constitute substitutable ‘wholes’, for no quality other than quantity distinguishes them from the series from which they are detached – no ‘structure’ other than multiplicity.<sup>21</sup> So, unlike a sack or any other object whose equivalence to another good is constrained by its own qualitative nature, money quickens the bargain, so to speak, since its ‘equivalence’ depends only on the qualities of what it buys, which money mirrors just by integrating itself as a sum of the ‘right amount’.<sup>22</sup> Rather than a haphazard negotiation over disparate qualities (e.g. the sack’s ease of transport, size, comfort, or whatever), purchasing becomes a simple quantitative operation (6 pesos for plantains, \$2.15 for oil).

With this point about the eases of partibility comes a more radical concomitant that gives a stronger sense of why Oragún saw such revolutionary potential in money – one with which even Olofin could be challenged to a bet. After all, the partibility of money does not explain why people might become obsessed with making it, as Oragún suggests. Why might instituting money as a means of exchange render it willy-nilly an end worth pursuing in its own right? I would suggest that a shift from means to end is implicit in the very notion of monetary expenditure. If money is an object (and hence means) of exchange due to its partibility, it actually follows that it must first be deemed an end in its own right. As we saw, the partibility of money – its capacity to be divided into wholes – presupposes the idea of a series from which sums might be partitioned. So, unlike swapping, which is based on the notion of efficient whole-for-whole substitutions, as Strathern has described (see note 15), monetary purchases are meant, as a matter of logical principle, to leave a residue – the whole that is left over once the expenditure has been extracted. In other words, the partibility of money as an object of exchange is premised on its perviousness as a resource; as a collection of particles (1 cowry + 1 cowry + 1 cowry + ...), money constitutes a pool out of which ‘parts’ can be extracted for a given purchase. Obtaining goods is no longer a matter of persuading vendors to substitute one’s own for them, but, rather more simply, one of having enough money to afford to ‘part with’ some of it for the sake of a purchase. So if having gains logical priority over spending, then money is an end before it can serve as a means.

This suggests a figure/ground reversal that presents the role of money as more than just an especially flexible substitute for other objects of exchange (i.e. those that are swapped), for with money the ordinary image of exchange as a substitution of one object for another (as in Fig. 4) can be turned inside out. If exchange can be imagined as a substitution (a sum for an object, ‘figure’ for ‘figure’), it can also be thought of as a displacement, a dent in the ‘ground’ from which the sum is detached – as figure – when it is expended (‘expended’). Or, as we say, a ‘drain on resources’ (see Fig. 5).



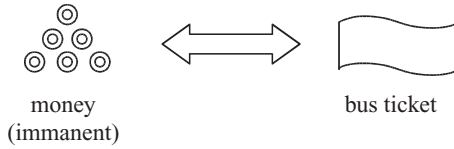


FIGURE 4. Moment of consumption (integration).

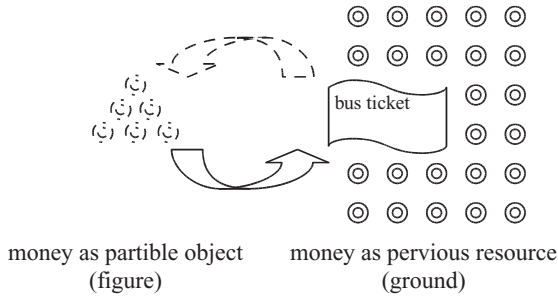


FIGURE 5. Expenditure as displacement (the movement of exchange).

Of course, all exchange implies displacement in this sense – to obtain something I have to give up another thing. The point, however, is that, rather like Archimedes’ bathwater and unlike sacks and such, money is able to register displacement – indeed, to act as its catalyst – by virtue of its pervious form. Its purely multiple constitution allows it to facilitate the movement of exchange insofar as, at the moment of expenditure, it can be displaced at just the ‘right’ amount. So one may think of money as a ‘medium’ of exchange in more than the customary sense. Not only is it an ‘object’ that gets exchanged, but also it provides an ‘environment’ that allows exchange to get going. One might say that in this sense money is a condition for itself.

**Conclusion: money and its potential**

The argument of this article can be summarized with reference to one of the most striking leitmotifs in the anthropological literature on money, namely the relationship between money and religious ‘potency’ or ‘magic’. Certainly the observation, first associated with the classic anthropological debate about *mana*, that in a number of societies (including early Judaic ones – Crump 1981: 285) money is deemed to have divine potency resonates with the ethnography presented here (Durkheim 1995 [1912]: 215, 421; Mauss 2001 [1972]; cf. Lambek 2001). As we have seen, this is not only a matter of the explicit connections that *babalawos* make between money and divine power, in ritual procedure as well as by reference to myth and cosmological principles such as *aché* and *iré*. The ‘structural’ role, so to speak, of money as a catalyst for every aspect of cult practice (fees for *babalawos*’ services of divination, magic and initiation, sacrifices to the gods, etc.) makes for a system of worship

that is literally animated by monetary expenditure. Of course, one might imagine money as being auxiliary to the life of the cult, a contingent result of modern economic circumstances with no cosmological significance. Worse, one could imagine – as do ‘rationalists’ of various colours, including Cubans in positions of authority – that the monetary underpinnings of the cult are an index of its ‘exploitative’ character (recalling Javier’s defence above), or even that money is an alien element that serves to ‘commodify’ worship. Such prejudiced positions would, however, ignore the way in which divinatory regulation – the major premise of Ifá practice, ‘embeds’ money as an integral element of worship precisely by curtailing the abstract operations that ‘exploitation’ and ‘commoditization’ would involve. Reproducing in its own dual form the logic of the oracles that regulate it, money is rendered an agent of expenditure rather than calculation. And since, as we saw, monetary expenditure furnishes a uniquely fluent format for exchange, and exchange is the form that all major acts of worship take, money becomes a premise for Ifá practice, and thus a proper part of its cosmology.

Indeed, in allowing us to explore the peculiar characteristics of money in its ‘encompassed’ guise as an agent of expenditure, the logic of divinatory regulation speaks directly to the anthropological literature on the religious ‘potency’ of money. Although the literature is too vast to be reviewed here, it may be fair to say that the peculiarly ‘mystical’ power of money has tended to be explained by appeal to its capacity for abstraction,<sup>23</sup> at least since Marx, who saw ‘fetishist’ notions of money as the result of misattributing the creative powers of human labour onto money itself because of its capacity to extract surplus value by translating (measuring) use-values into exchange-values (Marx 1990 [1867]: 163–69). This is so for David Graeber (2001, cf. 1996), who has mobilized arguments about the source of money’s value in a penetrating synthesis of the anthropology of value in general. His central claim about money – in contrast to other valuables like the heirlooms of Maussian discussions of gifting – is that it tends to be regarded as powerful (and is therefore valued) due to its ‘capacity to turn into many other things’, since ‘[m]oney is the potential for future specificity’ (2001: 114, see also note 12 on Strathern). Hence, he argues, the frequent associations of the potency of money with its invisibility while it is withdrawn from circulation and hoarded as a resource. By contrast, Ifá suggests an analysis of mystical potency that turns on oracles’ ability to cancel money’s capacity to turn into ‘many other things’. So while Graeber is right to connect the power of money with its invisibility as a resource, the present analysis predicates invisibility (and thus power too) on the unique character of money as an instrument of expenditure rather than calculation. As a multiplicity, money purchases things by dividing itself from what is indeed an invisible resource to the extent that it stands as ‘ground’ to the ‘figures’ of expenditure (namely the sum expended and the goods it buys). And therein lies the peculiar power of money in contrast to other objects of exchange: like a hidden premise, it provides a motile medium within which exchange – the most important of acts in Ifá – can be consummated.

None of this is to deny, however, that money has the potential for abstraction. Divinatory encompassment is, as we saw, not self-evident; it needs to be

achieved through the strictures of oracular regulation. So while the monetary premise of Ifá worship is manifestly not a matter of, say, commoditization, the potential for money to escape the demands of the deities is still there. Indeed, in the origin-myth of money, Oragún – harbinger of bad things – knows that in money he is instituting a mixed blessing: ‘you will see that people will begin to believe more in money than they believe in you’, he warns Olofin. In fact, when asked why they get clients to cross themselves with consultation fees before handing them over, *babalawos* invariably pit money against Olofin (the divine regulator *par excellence*) with reference to the story of his bet with Oragún; ‘Olofin cursed money’, they say. This notion, I would argue, amounts to a recognition of the tragic counterpart to the (ironic) myth of the talking ram – the man ignores Changó and thus gets his animal killed. For while the logic of divine encompassment may preclude the possibility of using money to calculate alternative purchases in the ‘as if’ mode, it cannot preclude the possibility that this logic itself may be ignored. Oracles may oblige, but, other than with threats of calamity and tragedy, they cannot oblige obligatorily, so to speak. Any practitioner who has chosen on occasion to take a chicken demanded by Orula and used it instead to feed his family would attest to this.

## NOTES

The article is based on my original Ph.D. fieldwork in Havana (1998–2000), funded by a studentship from the Economic and Social Research Council, as well as a field trip in 2004, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Board. I am grateful to both bodies for their support, as well as to the Centro de Antropología for hosting me in Havana. The paper has benefited from seminar presentations of earlier versions at the Centre of Latin American Studies at Cambridge, the Department of Anthropology at University College London, and the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology at Oxford. I am particularly grateful to Javierito Alfonso, Victor Betancourt, Maurice Bloch, Caroline Humphrey, Morten Pedersen, Rafael Robaina, and Marilyn Strathern for reading and commenting on drafts. I also thank Keith Hart, Stephan Palmié, and two anonymous assessors who, as readers for *JRAI*, offered highly stimulating comments.

<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the trend in recent years has been to see abstraction not as an inherent characteristic of money, but rather as a corollary of specific social practices, be they scientific/epistemological (cf. Callon 1998; Carrier & Miller 1998; Gudeman 1986) or political/ideological (Dillely 1992; Gregory 1997: 233–96; Papataxiarchis 1999; M. Stewart 1994).

<sup>2</sup> Although the US dollar was withdrawn from (legal) circulation in Cuba in November 2004, the economy continues to be dual, with ‘convertible pesos’, pegged 1:1 to the US dollar, being used alongside the ‘national currency’ of Cuban pesos.

<sup>3</sup> While only heterosexual men may be initiated into Ifá as *babalawos*, their clientele is predominantly female.

<sup>4</sup> Unless surnames are given, pseudonyms are used throughout.

<sup>5</sup> During my fieldwork in 1998–2000 the fee for Cuban clients was usually 3 or 5 pesos – roughly 15–25 cents of a US dollar. Foreigners were expected to pay many times more (cf. Hagedorn 2001). Presently, as dollars become ever more consolidated as a medium of everyday transaction, Cubans too are increasingly willing and expected to pay *babalawos* in dollars, according to their ability.

<sup>6</sup> Ifá divination involves two alternative methods, both of which are designed to yield one out of 256 possible divinatory configurations, referred to in Yoruba as *oddu* or in Spanish as *signos* (lit. ‘signs’, see Bascom 1991 [1969]; Holbraad 2003). For more everyday purposes (mainly the *ad hoc* consultation of clients) a consecrated divining-chain is used. In more ceremonious

divinations (those conducted as part of larger rituals such as initiation) the *oddu* are cast by the use of sixteen consecrated kola nuts, deemed to be Orula himself (hence these ceremonies are described as '*bajadas de Orula*' – lit. descents of Orula).

<sup>7</sup>All prices are from 1998–2000 and the peso-dollar exchange rate is taken at 20:1, as it stood then.

<sup>8</sup>Each of the 256 *signos* has its own name. As a rule, *babalawos* call each other by the name of their *signos*, so effectively one's *signo* also becomes one's name (Bascom 1966; Holbraad in press).

<sup>9</sup>Each *oricha* has his or her own saint's day (*día del santo*), an occasion for elaborate ceremonies in his or her honour. This is perhaps the most obvious sense in which Santería and Ifá are 'syncretic' cults, since saint's days are celebrated according to the Catholic calendar (e.g. since Orula is identified with St Francis of Assisi he is celebrated on St Francis's day – 4 October).

<sup>10</sup>In Ifá, particular myths are associated with each of the 256 divinatory *signos*, and are often referred to as 'paths' of the *signo* (*caminos del signo*, cf. Holbraad 2003). This myth is associated with the *signo* Ofún Tempolá.

<sup>11</sup>A virile and popular *oricha*, Changó is the patron of the thunder.

<sup>12</sup>I am not sure whether Strathern's more recent work on money in Papua New Guinea tempers this (see 1999: 89–116). Her informants' focus on quantitative features, such as the 'partibility' of money, which forces them to contemplate 'too many' possible purchases (1999: 96), may suggest that abstract calculations of value are after all important in Melanesia. However, Strathern does not connect these points to her 1992 argument, so one wonders whether for her these 'unfamiliar observations' are indices of a Melanesian 'modernity' (both expressions are hers). In such a case, the antinomy of quality v. quantity is distributed temporally, either as an ethnographic novelty (old v. new Melanesia) or 'analytically' across Strathern's papers (1992 v. 1999)!

<sup>13</sup>Marx and Simmel both came close to articulating such a scenario, commenting on the paradoxical character of money as both a measure of value and a value of itself (Marx 1990 [1867]: 199; Simmel 1978: 122).

<sup>14</sup>This argument about the divinatory encompassment of money is at odds with Bloch and Parry's Durkheimian point that certain monetary exchanges constitute a central modality through which transcendent social or cosmic orders are 'reproduced'. I am referring here to Bloch and Parry's famous typology of 'long term' v. 'short term' monetary transactions (1989: 23–30), whereby the former – which are typically ritualized – co-opt transient individual lives and actions in a project of cosmic and social reproduction, while the latter remain the 'legitimate domain of individual – often acquisitive – activity' (1989: 2). Without going into the detail, it should be clear that such a distinction is not borne out in Ifá, which tends to *fuse* the everyday with the divine: human fortunes, however self-interested, just *are* the outcome of divine forces. Indeed, I would argue that Bloch and Parry's contention that when money is involved in sustaining representations of transcendent entities it must enter 'long-term' cycles of transaction plays on an unjustifiably general equation of transcendence with permanence, endurance, or – indeed – infinity. In this connection I find convincing Mircea Eliade's claim that such tacit detemporalizations of the divine are peculiar to Judaeo-Christianity (Eliade 1991 [1954]: 124–37). What is crucially different in cosmologies such as that of Ifá is that divinities are adored not for their transcendental sovereignty over an infinite universe (this, for *babalawos*, is a matter of speculation), but for their power to inject their otherwise transcendent influence into everyday temporal affairs. Hence the focal role of the oracles. Unlike their Judaeo-Christian equivalent – prophecy – oracles provide temporal gates, so to speak, through which transcendent deities can blend into the immanent minutiae of everyday life. So Bloch and Parry's transcendentalism does to divinities what monetarism does to money. An inordinately theoretical focus on the omnipotence and immortality of divine entities tends to eclipse the fact that their power is manifested at particular times and places or, if you like, in short-term events.

<sup>15</sup>For example, Strathern closes her critique of the Western 'barter model of value' thus: '[W]hat people exchange is always a totality ... And thus the only possible quantity at issue is one. We may speak of a ratio, but if so it is one of an otherwise unquantifiable magnitude – the act of another agent as a measure of oneself as an agent. The difference is qualitative' (1992: 188).

<sup>16</sup> In Ifá cosmology ‘everything’, as *babalawos* emphasize, can be explained with reference to its ‘birth’ in one *oddu* or other.

<sup>17</sup> Surrogate name for the *oddu* Ofún Meyi.

<sup>18</sup> Obara Meyi is the name of another *oddu*, and, like all *oddu*, is personified as a deity in his own right.

<sup>19</sup> Olofin stands at the apex of Ifá mythology, as the all-powerful and unapproachable god of the sun (sometimes identified with the God of Catholicism).

<sup>20</sup> For anthropological critiques see Hart (2001: 264–72; in press); Humphrey (1985); Humphrey & Hugh-Jones (1992: 1–20).

<sup>21</sup> The absence of structure is also what distinguishes this notion of ‘partibility’ from Melanesianists’ use of the mathematical concept of ‘fractality’ (cf. Gell 1998: 137–40; Wagner 1991). A fractal object is one that reproduces structural features at different scales. The ‘partibility’ of money, however, comes down to the fact that it reproduces an absence of structure at whatever scale gradation.

<sup>22</sup> Note, of course, that determining what amount may be ‘right’ is an explicitly comparative exercise that puts money in the role of transcendental measure, as described above. The point, however, is that such comparisons presuppose partibility, that is, the ability of a multiplicity to divide into integral (and thus determinate) sums.

<sup>23</sup> The paradox here is that, as discussed above, abstraction is also meant to explain the tendency of money to disembody itself from moral orders such as the ‘religious’. This contradiction may be sufficient ground to doubt the validity in this context of arguments from abstraction!

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## **Multiplicité dépensière : l'argent dans le culte Ifá à Cuba**

### *Résumé*

En contradiction avec l'hypothèse selon laquelle l'argent est un agent d'abstraction et de « dés-intégration », les anthropologues ont tendance à établir des analogies avec d'autres objets d'échange, minimisant ainsi la nature quantitative propre à l'argent. L'auteur cherche ici à défaire l'association, implicite dans ce type de procédés, entre quantité et abstraction. En se concentrant sur le caractère particulier de l'argent comme objet « purement multiple », il cherche à rendre compte de « l'intégration » sans occulter l'aspect quantitatif : à quoi ressemble une quantité lorsqu'on ne la regarde pas comme un dénominateur abstrait ? Cette question est explorée en relation avec l'Ifá, un culte de divination afro-cubain dans lequel les transactions monétaires constituent les prémisses cosmologiques.

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