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Transnational Rituals for the Head across Globalizing Orisha Traditions

Elizabeth Pérez

ABSTRACT: This article traces the emergence of Ori, an Afro-Diasporic ritual with salient transnational dimensions. Ori is performed and transmitted by a growing number of practitioners in the Afro-Cuban Lucumí tradition. The ceremony takes its name from the Yorùbá term (*orí*) denoting both the top of the head and the divine embodiment of personal destiny. Introduced to Lucumí from a branch of Brazilian Candomblé on the initiative of an eminent ritual specialist and scholar, Ori and the sacred object called *igba orí* are increasingly seen as vehicles for individual and collective transformation. Drawing on historical and ethnographic research, this article argues for an approach to Ori that interprets its ascendance less as part of the movement to “re-Africanize” Black Atlantic traditions than as a component of religious subject formation, emergent site of convergence between globalizing traditions of orisha worship, and practical technique for achievement of moral-ethical self-mastery and physical well-being.

KEYWORDS: transnationalization, ritual transformation, embodied practices, Lucumí, Candomblé, Yorùbá traditional religion, African Diaspora, Re-Africanization

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Among the traditions that travel well across diverse social, cultural, and linguistic contexts, Black Atlantic religious formations have proven to be particularly adaptive. Their transnational dimensions may be most vividly glimpsed in rites of passage and ceremonies of object consecration.¹ One such ritual is Ori, currently performed by practitioners of Afro-Cuban Lucumí, popularly called Santería. Its name derives from the Yorùbá term for “head” (*ori*) that denotes both the top of the cranium and the divine embodiment of personal destiny immanent within it.² I first encountered Ori in Chicago at the start of what became long-term personal and ethnographic engagement with a predominantly African American Lucumí community called Ilé Laroye.³ After attending an Ori for a religious leader in 2004, I jotted down some brief impressions: “The image that stays with me is that of [the subject of the ritual] with her eyeglasses off, sitting . . . on the floor. It was as if she had just given birth, not only to her godchildren on either side of the room but to plenty itself, symbolized by the rich foods presented to the [spirits].”

At the time I did not realize that the main spirit, or *orisha*, addressed in the ritual is Orí itself, an entity that has journeyed not only from West Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean to the United States, but also—according to devotees—from heaven to earth.

In his introduction to *Transnational Transcendence: Essays on Religion and Globalization*, Thomas Csordas posits that the potential of religious traditions to expand beyond their initial points of departure depends upon two factors: the portability of their practices and the transposability of the messages conveyed by their aesthetic, liturgical, and disciplinary regimes.⁴ Both eminently transportable and transporting, Ori—capitalized and spelled without an accent in what follows in order to distinguish it from the Yorùbá-derived concept of *orí*—was introduced to Lucumí communities from a *São Paulo* house of Brazilian Candomblé on the initiative of scholar and Lucumí ritual specialist Miguel “Willie” Ramos, the main officiant for the Ori described above.⁵ The Cuban-born Ramos, his protégés, and an increasing number of Lucumí practitioners regard Ori as the restoration of a vanished avenue for individual and collective transformation, rather than a spurious “invention.”⁶ Ori shares with its morphological predecessors in other Afro-Diasporic religions the ability to act as a “portable portal,” a mobile threshold through which to cross into other realms.⁷ For this reason, Ori has begun to attract scholarly attention; it invites inquiry into implicit claims made for Lucumí as a globalizing religion through the transmission of ceremonial protocols and the spread of ritual discourse through print, electronic, and digital media.

The resurgence of Afro-Diasporic religions within the Americas and beyond has spurred much critical inquiry into the aforementioned traditions, as well as Brazilian Umbanda, Trinidadian Orisha, Black

American *Ifá*, and Venezuelan Maria Lionza.⁸ Recent scholarship on their transnational underpinnings has tended to concentrate on “Re-Africanization,” a process that involves classifying European-derived or creole components of Black Atlantic religions as impurities and filtering them out of everyday practice in favor of elements identified as having uncorrupted precolonial African origins. Proponents cast Re-Africanization as an ideological project intended to reinstate orthodoxy within “syncretic” traditions, curtail the corrupting influence of their commodification, decolonize the historical consciousness of practitioners, and provide a means of political resistance. Supporters of this movement tend to valorize the cultural forms of the Yorùbá over those of African ethnolinguistic groups that continue to be stigmatized. Bearing this preference in mind, one anthropologist has proposed “Nigerianization” or “Nagô hegemonization” to refer to Re-Africanization in Brazil, while *yorubización* has emerged as a parallel development in Cuba.⁹

Involvement in such traditions has been cast mainly as a strategy to accrue status and advance the ideological aims of Re-Africanization. Yet, as I have argued elsewhere, scholars have been apt to conflate the political and socio-cultural impetus to secure membership within Re-Africanized religious communities with the motivation to participate in specific ceremonies, and have downplayed the explanations that practitioners themselves have historically offered for undergoing rituals, such as initiation.¹⁰ I have found that practitioners’ reasons for performing rites of passage often fall under the rubric of “care of the self,” entailing practical techniques for moral-ethical self-mastery and physical well-being.¹¹ To return to Csordas’ analysis of transnational traditions, then, I submit that whether Ori “travels well” depends not only on the adaptability of its liturgical procedures and the cognitive and affective appeal of its message, but also on the ability of associated practices to become internalized and embodied in habitus, defined by Pierre Bourdieu—himself concerned with the issue of transposability—as “durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures.”¹²

Bearing in mind that Csordas has pioneered the problematization of embodiment in anthropology, it seems unfortunate that questions of corporeality and healing fall out of view in *Transnational Transcendence*. Prioritizing the somatic dimension of everyday lived religion can simultaneously expose theoretical blind spots and illuminate the contours of growing traditions as they come to reside within and move between human bodies. For instance, Csordas’ typology of intersubjective religious modalities may be useful in bringing to light historical processes that contributed to the intensified globalization of Black Atlantic traditions. But my ethnographic research on the patterns of sensori-motor conduct embedded in ritual performance indicates that these religions have long relied on multiple mechanisms of transnationalization

outlined by Csordas: not only interaction between discrete traditions, but also the development of local institutions reflective of global economic trends and the popularization of novel technologies. In addition, my research on practitioners' narrativization of affliction suggests that these religions exhibit "reverse religious influence" from periphery to center, with the political or commercial marginality of a given locus for authenticity redounding to its advantage in the Afro-Diasporic imagination.

This article enters the conversation begun in *Transnational Transcendence* through a historically grounded ethnographic consideration of Ori. After providing an overview of the literature on *orí*, I chart the ways that the conditions of transatlantic modernity shaped the emergence of the Yorùbá "house for the head" (*ilé orí*). I gesture towards similar objects in Haitian Vodou and Brazilian Candomblé before turning to Ori and the vessel called *igba orí* ("calabash for the head").¹³ While my analysis confirms R. Lorand Matory's characterization of "transnationalism" as "not only a mythological and ontological premise of the Yoruba-Atlantic religions but also a centuries-old material reality,"¹⁴ it also argues for an approach to Ori that locates its advent in specific communities as a component of religious subject formation and a healing form of "care of the self." Drawing on my fieldwork and personal experience of Ori, I underscore its ascendance in Ilé Laroye as one of the rites that furnish Lucumí practitioners with a shared repertoire of bodily capacities, affective dispositions, and sentiments of affinity towards "sister traditions," thereby opening a portal to Others both within and outside themselves.

ORÍ AMONG THE YORÙBÁ

Orí is one of the most thoroughly elaborated concepts in the inter-related histories of Yorùbá art, philosophy, religion, and ethnomedicine. It combines and hypostatizes the qualities of fate (*ipin*), character (*ìwà*), and enabling power (*àṣẹ*). As Barry Hallen writes, "the *orí* is, in a sense, my meaning—is what I shall become while I am in the world, this time."¹⁵ Ori is also conceived of as a god in its own right, and—in contrast to the other spirits, or *òrìṣà*, whose followers are legion—the only one worshiped by its owner alone.¹⁶ The two main components of *orí* are *orí inú*, the invisible "inner head," and *orí òde*, the material "outer head." According to Yorùbá sources, humans choose *orí inú* before birth from a range of options, limited by one's behavior in past lives and incomplete information. Descriptions of this process depict the prenatal self as standing, headless and heedless, in an immense heavenly warehouse, trying to choose a head out of a vast number. At birth one forgets the contents of one's *orí inú*, but it resides in the crown of one's physical

head, a receptacle that protects the inner head by covering and concealing it.¹⁷

Orí is believed to act in concert with other aspects of the person, including sense organs and personality structures, so that its duties go far beyond what is normally construed as thought.¹⁸ The head is the seat of the body's capacities and potentialities, governing not only discrete actions and movement, but also such components of personal style as gestures and comportment. Care of the head, especially in the context of ritual labor, is necessary to ensure virtuous conduct and personal safety. The outer head ideally does not reveal the nature of the inner head; the *orí òde*, including the face, is counted on to defend the *orí inú* by obscuring its contents, much as a masquerader's headdress hides the identity of its wearer while shielding the face from injury. The protection of the inner head requires circumspection and tact, since its disclosure can trigger negative repercussions.¹⁹

Orí has historically assumed a material and aesthetic form that replicates the dimorphism of the inner and outer head by consisting of two separate yet nested parts. Corresponding to the inner head is the *ibori*, a cone-shaped object placed within the embodiment of the outer head called the "house of the head" (*ilé orí*).²⁰ Rowland Abiodun describes contemporary *ibori* as consecrated with protocols and paraphernalia unique to the *Ifá* oracular system, including sixteen sacred oil-palm nut kernels, divination tray, and tapper.²¹ Fabricated by leather craftsmen from strips of hide, the *ibori* is filled with a combination of soil and divination powder (*ìròsùn*), into which a diviner *Ifá*, or *babaláwo* (literally, "father of secrets"), has pressed the divination verse, or *Odù Ifá*, praising *orí*.²² John Pemberton writes that the shape of the *ibori* and its apex is made from "the person's placenta and materials that represent deities, or other [privileged substances]."²³ Just as a placenta carries nourishment for the fetus, so the *ibori* furnishes a vehicle of alimentation for its owner's head.²⁴ In most accounts of the *ibori*'s construction, it is offered prayers by a *babaláwo* in the presence of its owner's intimates and immediate family.²⁵ After the ritual the *ibori* is sealed, then adorned with at least forty-one cowries.²⁶

It is perhaps folly to inquire into the distant origins of the *ibori* form, since its destruction upon the death of its owners has meant that few can be dated to the pre-colonial period. However, the archaeological record has given rise to at least one provocative conjecture. Akinwumi Ogundiran hypothesizes that the modern *ilé orí* [see Photo 1] emerged as a consequence of the transatlantic slave trade and the resulting "abundant and steady supply of cowries, to the Bight of Benin, and the Yoruba hinterland" after the sixteenth century.²⁷ A symbol of royalty restricted to monarchs through sumptuary laws and dress codes, beads were scarce and allowed to flow only through sanctioned channels of inheritance, while cowries became the currency widely available to the



Photo 1. Early twentieth-century “house for the head” (ilé orí), Yorùbá peoples, Nigeria. Glass beads, cowrie shells, fabric, and wood, 30 x 12 in. (76.2 x 30.48 cm). Courtesy of Mead Art Museum, Amherst College.

commoner for acquisition and capital accumulation. Accordingly, the *ilé orí* of royalty were made of beads, and those of commoners, with cowries.²⁸ The shells symbolized an economic regime within which success became tied to one’s labor power and fortunes in terms of business opportunity: speculation, the sale of goods, money-lending, returns on investments, and joint ventures.²⁹

Thirteenth- and fourteenth-century depictions of terracotta heads as ritual objects would seem to argue for deification long prior to the transatlantic slave trade from West Africa to the Americas and Europe. However, it was not until the 1600s that cowries emerged as the ultimate “value register” channeling the religious and worldly *orí* capacities of prosperous people.³⁰ Just as Calvinist reformers were reformulating Christian doctrine in Europe to express the newfound importance of

individual industry and personal piety, with earthly success indicating that a believer was predestined for heavenly salvation,³¹ *orí*—reified in an “invincible” object embellished with cowrie-currency—was gaining in popularity as a projection of the self, an extension of singular personhood and guarantor of wealth in property and people. During this period, the Yorùbá hinterland was integrated into the transatlantic economy in no small part due to the trade in slaves, thus restructuring society in economic, political, and cultural terms that could not have failed to effect a reordering of the religious system.³²

Ogundiran’s thesis would yield one explanation for the salience of wealth and money in modern-day praise-songs to *orí*, for instance, in a funeral procession for the owner of an *ilé orí*, mourners address the *ibori* directly, singing: “Come and see what money can do, money.”³³ But in the case of *ilé orí*, it is vital to note the fusion of religious, political, and aesthetic domains in the contexts cowries have circulated. Contrary to promoting a process of commoditization in which economic transactions were abstracted and differentiated from other orders of social relations, cowry money in the early modern period acted “to bind economic concerns to the social . . . fabric” in which they were interwoven.³⁴ The *ibori*, then, can be said to have been—and perhaps still is—not only a signifier but also a condition for the future accumulation of capital. Resplendent with cowries, the *ilé orí*’s outer form testifies to its ability to create wealth and to the transformative force of the Black Atlantic economy itself.³⁵ In this respect, its emergence represents the first “modality of religious intersubjectivity” delineated by Csordas in *Transnational Transcendence*: the encounter between a local religious imagination, an encroaching global economy, and novel technologies.

HOUSE TO CALABASH: THE HEAD IN MOTION

Social relations were not so much reproduced as reconfigured in the nineteenth century.³⁶ In this time of intense social and political disruption and displacement, tens of thousands relocated to sprawling, radically heterogeneous new urban centers, while others became enslaved war captives and refugees bound for plantation labor in the Americas. The turmoil wrought by the collapse of the Old Oyo Empire (ca. 1600–1836) heightened the value of objects that could be easily transported, a poignant indicator of the widespread deracination of the time. The deterritorialized nature of *orí*, as opposed to that of other deities, meant it would become “the most universal and, next to *Ifá* . . . the most portable of all Yoruba deities.”³⁷ In the religious sphere, *orí* was the quintessential ambulatory object: not only warriors, migrants, and merchants, but anyone far from a cult center or household *òrìṣà* shrine could still

venerate *orí*. Its literally legendary horizontal mobility could match or surpass its devotees' desire for mobility up the status hierarchy towards greater power and prestige. O. B. Lawuyi contends that in Yorùbá legends, the tortoise—which appears to have no body—has represented *orí* for generations.³⁸ Just as the tortoise carries his home with him wherever he goes, so do those uprooted by volatile social conditions: “the *Orí* *must* be mobile.”³⁹

Refugees were precisely those most apt to feel abandoned by *òrìṣà* enshrined in local cult centers and liable to turn to *orí*—one *òrìṣà* with no ties to the land or political dynasties—as their last resort. J. D. Y. Peel interprets the popularity of an *orí* in the shape of “a small circular box . . . made of stiff calico and covered all over with cowries” among women in the nineteenth century as a reaction to their near-exclusion from the cult of *Ifá*, strongly indicating that, contrary to contemporary practice, protocols for confecting *ibori* arose independently of *babaláwos*.⁴⁰ In fact, one Egba observer at the time “generalize[d] that almost every woman had her Ori beside her other gods; and that men mostly had no representation of it—i.e. the cowrie-covered *igba Ori*—but just made sacrifice to their head when they felt they needed to.”⁴¹ Peel elaborates:

This testimony of Ori, as an *especially* female cult, fits with the . . . evidence about . . . Ori: three quarters of the references to it, in the [Christian Missionary Society] journals, are expressly to its worship by women, sometimes wealthy traders such as Osu Daropale, “an influential woman here [Badagry] but . . . of dissolute character,” to whom all the local European and Brazilian traders would send presents on her feast day.⁴²

Even the *orí* of converts are credited with the power to grant progeny, a form of wealth-in-people often associated with the *òrìṣà*. This suggests one more reason why women not only exiled from their birthplaces and ancestral homes but also anxious for offspring would have been intrigued by *orí*. The mention of Brazilian traders—possibly formerly enslaved returnees or their descendants—offers a tantalizing glimpse of routes through which *orí* could have wended its way to Salvador da Bahia and beyond.⁴³

It is not surprising, then, that the concept and ritual practice of *orí* appealed to the descendants of those sent across the Atlantic with little more than the heads on their shoulders and chains on their feet. In circum-Caribbean religious formations, the head has proven to be a central object of ritual discourse and intervention, as in West Africa. In those initiatory traditions that owe a debt to Yorùbá precedents, the head has been the receptacle for ritual substances embodying spirits—whether Haitian *lwa*, or the variously spelled *orishas* in Cuba, Brazil, and Trinidad. The dual structure of *orí* has also tended to remain intact; for instance, in

Vodou, the head also consists of two main parts: the *gwo bònanj* and *ti bònanj*. The notion of the head in Vodou is most dramatically mobilized in the *lav-tèt*, or “head-washing,” one of the first ceremonies of initiation. Reports on the assembly of the *pot tèt*, a covered ceramic jar that seems analogous to the *ibori*, mention it containing remnants of the ritual process and bodily artifacts—including sacrificial blood, feathers, food, fingernail parings, and hair from the crown of the head; the presence of exuviae calls to mind the use of placenta and *iròsùn* in the design of *ibori*.⁴⁴

In Brazil, trade and other contact with West Africa continued long after a late emancipation, and as a result there was no dearth of cowries, even if they sometimes continued to be prohibitively expensive.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, in what would become Xangô in Recife and Candomblé elsewhere, the object corresponding to the *ibori* has been made not of leather but ceramic, as is the Vodou *pot tête*. Spherical and semicircular shapes replace the *ibori* pyramid, and accordingly this object is called not an *ilé*, a house, but an *igba*, a calabash, as in nineteenth-century references to Yorùbá women’s *orí* containers.⁴⁶ In Portuguese, the two near-homonyms rhyme: *cabaça-da-cabeça*.⁴⁷ The central bowl and plates of the *igba orí* are covered by cloth and accompanied by a water-filled *quartinha*, or earthenware jar, as are the other *orixás*; the *quartinha* does usually taper to a small point, but there is no apparent suggestion of a pyramid, and cowries would seem to be nowhere in evidence.⁴⁸ However, the Brazilian *iyalorixá* (“mother of the *orixás*”) and anthropologist known as Mãe Maria d’Oxalá, Maria P. Junqueira, contends that the ritual substances sewn onto Yorùbá *ibori* are in fact cradled inside *igba orí*, so that the *ilé orí* has in effect been turned outside in.⁴⁹

The *igba orí* is confected in a ritual usually called *bori*, a contraction of *ebbó orí*, “an offering to the head,” the same term used for later communal replenishments of *igba orí*.⁵⁰ *Bori* is one of the rituals prescribed, after oracular consultation with sixteen cowries, to address disturbances in both the social and religious spheres. Practitioners emphasize *bori* as a gift to the head offered before it is mobilized in other types of ritual labor—especially initiation, in which the surface of the scalp plays a central role. It is clear, despite some variance in the particulars of such ceremonies, that *bori* frequently transforms a client of the religious community (most often called a *terreiro* or *roça*) into a novice on the road to priesthood. Accordingly, the *igba orí* does not go home with its owner after its creation, as the *ibori* does; just as the *pot tèt* stays in the practitioner’s temple, or *ounfó*, the *igba orí* remains in the Candomblé house where it was assembled until the recipient’s death.⁵¹ Widely regarded as “the typical rite of personal fortification,” *bori* has been performed within many *terreiros* since their inception, and owing to the historical dearth of *babaláwos*—or perhaps reflecting another tradition of *orí* consecration—the ceremony usually has been performed by initiates

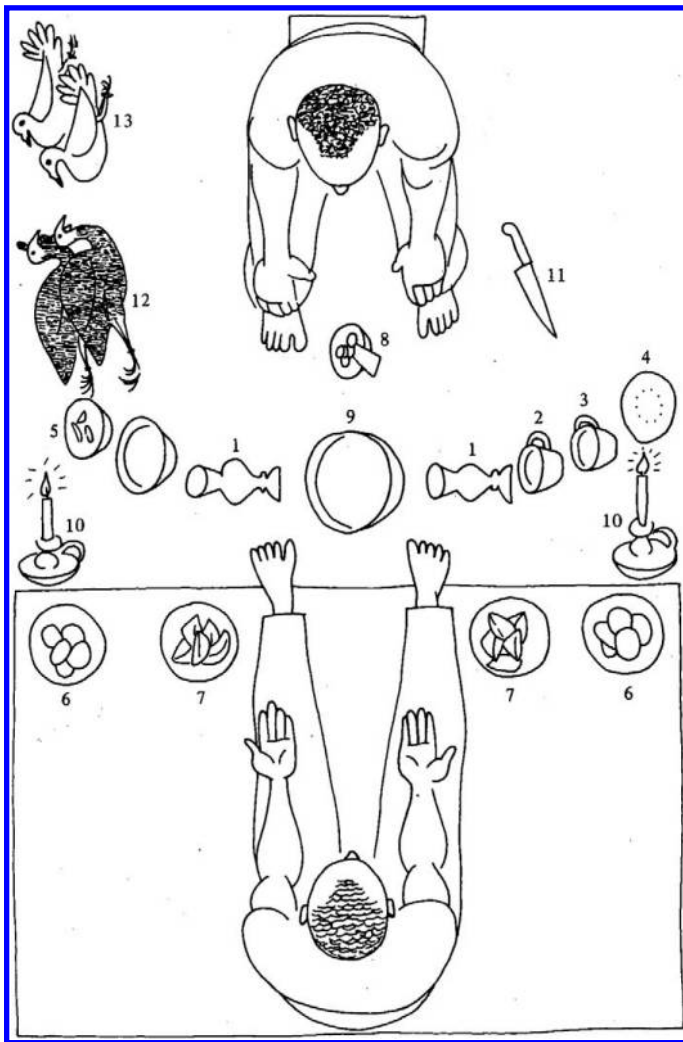


Photo 2. Illustration published in Pierre Fatumbi Verger, “Bori, Primeira Cerimônia de Iniciação ao Culto dos Orixás Nágô na Bahia, Brasil,” in *Olóôrixá: Escritos sobre a Religião dos Orixás* (São Paulo: Ágora, 1981). The numbers in the illustration designate items either offered to the head or required for the ritual; figure 8, for instance, represents money (“dinheiro”).

using cowries and kola nuts for divination, not the paraphernalia of *Ifá*.⁵²

Pierre Fatumbi Verger provided the most thorough ethnographic account to date of a *bori* ceremony, which occurred in Bahia in February 1951.⁵³ According to Verger, after the *babalorixá* paid homage to the orixás and ancestors, he led the community in chanting ritual

invocations to the newcomer's *orí*, urging it to eat and imbibe, presenting it with plates of bean fritters, hominy dumplings wrapped in banana leaves, money, oil, honey, salt, water from two *quartinhas*, two guinea hens, and two doves. [See Photo 2.] The *babalorixá* appealed to the *orí* to grant its owner good fortune and conducted a brief divination to ascertain the disposition of the *orixás* towards the proceedings. The *babalorixá* then sacrificed the guineas and pigeons, draining blood into the vessel and smearing it on the cardinal points of the *igba* recipient's body: crown, forehead, temples, nape, inside both palms and big toe of the right foot. Next the *babalorixá* offered *orí* red palm oil. A mixture of salt, honey and oil was deposited into the *igba* and layered on the spots of the head and body already smudged with blood. After covering the *igba* and its owner's cardinal points with feathers, the *babalorixá* prayed that the recipient of the newly consecrated *igba orí* remain free of death, suffering, fighting, and loss. His head was covered with cloth, and he was told to focus on the good rather than the bad.

In both Lucumí and Candomblé, rituals concerning the head tend to proceed with sounds and substances thought to be cooling, softening, and nutritive. However, in Brazil, the *igba orí* has been confected for continued ministrations to the head within the cult center, while in Cuba the prevalence of a similar object in houses of *orisha* worship is a matter of speculation and dispute. More common, in both the ethnographic and historical record on Lucumí, has been the ritual called *rogación de cabeza*, or "feeding of the head," that employs disposable "white" substances associated with the *orisha* Obatalá, such as cocoa butter, cotton, eggshell powder, and coconut. Ripe coconuts provide an irresistible symbol for outer heads, due not only to their seemingly hairy exterior and placement at the tops of palm trees, but also because their hollow interiors mirror those of inner heads, according to religious formations within the "Yorùbá-Atlantic complex."⁵⁴ Lucumí practitioners envision the elderly Obatalá as molding heads from clay to create the human race, and "ruling" authority, wisdom and peace, "owning" such products of civilization as woven cloth; accordingly, the *rogación de cabeza*—referred to simply by the anglicized term "rogation" in Ilé Laroye—often has been performed to combat ailments associated with cognitive difficulties and emotional imbalances.⁵⁵

HOUSING ORI AMONG THE ORISHAS

The religious house called Ilé Laroye is based in the south side of Chicago in the home of "mother of the orishas" Iyá Nilaja Campbell, a sixteen-cowries diviner, *orisha* praise-singer and medium in the tradition of Kardecist Espiritismo, and adept in Kongo-inspired Palo Monte. In 1986, Campbell was initiated by one of the numerous Lucumí priests

to have immigrated to the United States during the 1980 Mariel boatlift. Along with most of her religious protégés, termed “godchildren” according to Lucumí convention, Campbell was born and raised in the United States and identifies as Black. A majority of Ilé Laroye’s adult members converted to Lucumí after spending their formative years either in Roman Catholic parishes or in Protestant congregations, including Black Spiritual churches⁵⁶ and shrines of the Pan African Orthodox Christian Church. Despite initiates’ continued affective attachment to distinctly African American forms of religiosity, their house of *orisha* worship has observed ritual protocols devised in Cuba during the transatlantic slave trade; it has not adopted those of South Carolina’s Òyótúnjí Village, the headquarters of a Re-Africanizing religious movement termed “Yorùbá Reversionism,” which advocates the practice of Yorùbá traditional religion “cleansed” of European and creole Cuban influences.

Campbell’s godchildren live in Chicago, St. Louis, and several other major North American cities. In addition to the complement of consecrated objects usually enumerated in accounts of Lucumí ritual practice, members of Ilé Laroye and related communities receive an *igba orí* in the style of the Efon “nation” or branch of Candomblé.⁵⁷ The bestowal of *igba orí* and the performance of “bori” in Lucumí houses largely stems from a visit made by Campbell’s mentor, Miguel “Willie” Ramos, to Brazil in 1999, accompanied by a small delegation of Lucumí practitioners. After decades of acting as an *orisha* praise-singer, diviner, and *oba oriaté*, or master of ceremonies for initiation, while conducting rituals alongside independent historical research, Ramos became convinced that important forms of venerating *orí* had fallen out of Lucumí practice when ritual specialists went to their graves with the expertise necessary to consecrate ritual objects such as *igba orí*.⁵⁸ After a series of conversations between Ramos—whose family has a long history of *orisha* worship—and the aforementioned Maria P. Junqueira, Ramos received *igba orí* along with another Lucumí priest at the Re-Africanizing São Paulo *terreiro* Ilé Ashé Iyamí Oxúm Muiwá.⁵⁹

Ramos was not the first Lucumí priest to receive *igba orí* in the Candomblé tradition; this distinction belongs to a practitioner given the *igba orí* in 1992, and Mãe Maria herself consecrated the *igba orí* of a Mexican American Obatalá priest in 1994.⁶⁰ Numerous Black American *Ifá* and Yorùbá Revivalist practitioners have received *ilé orí* in the Yorùbá style from *babaláwos*. Ramos, however, is the most prominent and perhaps only Lucumí priest to pass on the Brazilian *igba orí* to his godchildren in the United States and introduce it to other communities as one of the rituals that must be performed prior to initiation.⁶¹ Members of Ilé Laroye often refer to the Lucumí version of *bori* as “Ori.” The availability of religious literature on *bori* has grown exponentially in recent years, with transcriptions and recordings of prayers and songs,

and Portuguese translations of Yorùbá texts in compact disc format sold online.⁶² As of 2012, the burgeoning library included Ramos' own monograph, *Orí Eleda mí ó... Si mi cabeza no me vende*, but Ilé elders did not use published texts to guide them, preferring to build on apprenticeship to Ramos himself and to consult writings on Ori circulated among initiates, much as handwritten *libretas*, or religious manuals, have been since the nineteenth century.⁶³

During my ethnographic research, a practitioner's preparation for Ori in Ilé Laroye began in earnest with the presentation of two coconuts and two candles to the tutelary *orishas* of Nilaja Campbell or her son Santi, the other leader and main godparent of the Ilé; these were the same offerings given as a prerequisite to receiving other consecrated objects.⁶⁴ Instead of Brazilian-style *quartinha*, Campbell told her godchildren to purchase a lidded "ginger jar" along with the plates and bowl required to hold the ritual sacra, and food items to offer *orí* ceremonially, including banana leaves, yam flour, black-eyed pea flour, hominy, and okra. Teaching about Ori was a priority in the Ilé and has been the subject of special classes taught by Campbell and her son for their godchildren, which included discussion of concepts associated with Ori, rehearsal of hymns sung to propitiate *orí*, and lectures on the theological and historical complementarity of Brazilian and Afro-Cuban approaches to *orí*.⁶⁵ During one class in 2006, elders situated *orí* firmly within the chronotype of royalty that has been analyzed by David H. Brown in terms of ordination to the Lucumí priesthood.⁶⁶

The rationale for these sessions was, according to Campbell, "to get people up to par so that when we have [an Ori] ceremony, we'll be able to do it and do it strongly."⁶⁷ Such classes dedicated equal time to instruction on the optimal maintenance of the *igba* at home and inevitably encompassed training on proper care of the self. Elders portrayed Ori as an occasion for progressive enlargement of their sensori-motor repertoires and moral-ethical horizons as well as their social fields. They voiced their commitment to the ritual within the context of daily transformative practice as if in tacit dismissal of the criticism that Lucumí recipients of *igba orí* are merely "pot collectors," driven to obtain religious paraphernalia yet loathe to expend the requisite intellectual effort to minister competently to their acquisitions. One initiate said at the conclusion of a lesson: "As a priest, [the class] helped me to see how the tools we receive really prepare us for life. . . . We work *everything* that we have, you know. You really don't need a lot; you just need to work what you have."⁶⁸ Her use of the term *work*, understood across Afro-Diasporic religions to signify the performance of ritual labor, evoked her personal struggle to "make do" with few financial assets while raising a family and discharging her responsibilities as a priestess.⁶⁹ Her physical service to *orí* had become an indispensable and tangible instrument of self-fashioning.

GOING HEAD TO HEAD

As one might expect, there has been considerable controversy surrounding Ramos' decision not only to undergo Ori in Brazil but also to circulate it and consecrate *igba orí* within Lucumí communities. His detractors have proven quite vocal, though it is difficult to estimate how sizeable a number of practitioners they represent. The publicly accessible exchanges online surrounding the matter have been exemplary for the way that those with vested interests—either supporting or critiquing Ramos—have mobilized both experiential and scholarly evidence to argue for the legitimacy of a particular perspective. At the crux of the critiques has been not only whether Ramos had the authority to expand the ritual repertoire of Lucumí and profit from the purported “commodification” of Brazilian Ori and *bori*, but also whether the Cuban modes of “ritualization” said to have died out ever existed.⁷⁰ If so, were they then completely “lost”? Could the ritual be viewed as a “recovery” of Yorùbá traditions preserved in Brazil? The degree of Ramos' fidelity to a particular Brazilian religious lineage and guarantees made for the proper transmission of Ori have excited additional commentary, dutifully recorded for posterity by the Internet.

Ramos also visited Brazil in 1988 to obtain the ritual sacra of the *orixás* Logunédé and Oxumarê, and some critics claim that not only do these *orishas* remain in Cuba but that Ori, too, is “alive and well” on the island. They imply that Ramos had no reason to go so far afield to receive them. Others insist, citing historians such as Robert Farris Thompson, that the warrior *orisha* Ósun—whose consecrated attribute is a small metal staff topped by a rooster and four bells—has always played the role of protecting the inner head now occupied by *igba orí*, rendering the latter redundant. At issue as well has been the proper implementation of genealogically autochthonous protocols acquired from Ilé Ashé Iyamí Oxúm Muiwá, and the ontological status of the material contents of *igba orí*. While the ritual itself does not appear to differ radically from Pierre Fatumbi Verger's 1951 account of a *bori* ceremony [see Photo 2] or that of other communities, only elders would be equipped to judge the fidelity of Ori to precedent.⁷¹ Attacks on Ramos' character and credentials accompany many of these assertions, as the relative anonymity of the Internet facilitates *argumentum ad hominem*, the ventilation of resentment, and the degeneration of debate into invective.

The matter has been not simply whether the consecration of Ori itself was valid, but the implication that Ramos sought to arrogate authority for himself—establishing a sort of “bureaucratic papacy,” in the words of one observer—through the propagation of an object alien to other Lucumí communities, whose personnel would thereby be seen as inadequate and whose protocols would necessitate revision. It would seem that Black Atlantic traditions are defiantly acephalous and, despite

attempts at doctrinal and ritual standardization during the recent International Congresses of Orisha Tradition and Culture, resistant to codification and investment of authority in privileged figures.⁷² It may be more accurate to say that traditions of *orisha* worship are hypercephalous, and the many heads are averse to any challenges that might result in a rearrangement of regnant hierarchical structures.⁷³ While the threat seems far-fetched, as an *oba oriaté* Ramos routinely troubles the assumption found in both academic scholarship and popular culture that *babaláwos* are the sole “high priests” with the “final word” in *orisha* worship, a position that has earned him little favor among *Ifá* devotees, whether they maintain allegiances to Cuban or Nigerian lineages.⁷⁴

Others claim that regardless of the manner in which Ori was introduced by Ramos, its positive effects justify its inclusion within the ceremonial repertoire of Lucumí. Some defenders of Ori do not dispute the existence of consecrated objects in Cuba—citing, for instance, a sacred vessel for the *orixá/orisha* Logunédé in a Havana museum—but argue that the procedures for duplicating them fell into desuetude and if they perdure are suspect at best. Supporters assert that the similarity, stability, and coherence of *orí* as a Yorùbá-derived concept in Lucumí and Candomblé warrants continued collaboration between their respective virtuosi. Stefania Capone has enumerated the reasons for the attraction of Lucumí practitioners to Candomblé, particularly in light of the latter’s reputation as a bastion of female leadership, and the efforts made to solidify relationships between African American and Afro-Brazilian devotees of the *orixás/orishas*. Capone situates Ramos’ ritual intervention within a religious field dominated by a discourse of authenticity and cultural unity that allows for the adaptation of African-inspired traditions from one religion to another. In the case of Ori, the transposability of its message has been adduced as justification for the transportation of its practice.

One of the perhaps unforeseen consequences of Ori’s dissemination in Lucumí is that the Brazilian-style *igba orí* now competes with the Yorùbá *ilé orí* in the North American “religious marketplace,” a term that may have greater resonance for scholars of Black Atlantic religions than of many others. Considering the criticism that has met Ramos’ actions, why did he choose not to “jump the local queue to authority and esteem”⁷⁵ and adopt ritualization for the head directly from present-day Nigeria? The sociopolitical and cultural pressure to do so has a long history. Scholars of the African Diaspora have privileged West African forms of worship since the beginning of the twentieth century. For instance, as a conceptual category, “Yorùbá” denotes a historically attested, “regionally coherent” ethno-linguistic aggregate, and has long signified civilization, authentic Africanity, eldership, purity, honor, and “coolness” of temperament as a religious, moral-ethical and aesthetic value in the Caribbean and Latin America.⁷⁶ Such positive associations

for *orisha* religions in particular have come at the expense of older traditions that crystallized among Central Africans, the first slaves to arrive in the Americas in large numbers.⁷⁷ Such religious formations include Kongo-inspired Palo Monte in Cuba—which antedated Lucumí by over a century—and a variety of phenomena with Central African precedents and valences.

Stephan Palmié has delineated the concurrence of Yorùbá ethnogenesis in Africa and of Lucumí ecclesio-genesis in Cuba in order to examine ways that social dynamics and historiographical modes construct religious categories.⁷⁸ Another example is to be seen in Haitian Vodou, and its Rada *nachon*, or “nation.” The term “nation” refers to a set of rites or ritual orthodoxy, and the Rada *nachon* is not only identified with Yorùbáland and Dahomey (referred to as *Guinen*), but also juxtaposed against the polluting power, magic, heat, darkness, and earthy materiality of phenomena said to be of Kongo or Haitian origin and attributed to the Petwo *nachon*. Andrew Apter has theorized that the hegemonic status of Yorùbá-identified religious orthodoxies within Candomblé and Vodou was produced by creolization, when the oppositional, socially transformative, revisionary force of religious practice acquired pronounced class connotations.⁷⁹ These distinctions owe their history partly to the stereotyping of African groups during the slave trade, the reversal of social and ritual roles on plantations, and practitioners’ own sensibilities and hermeneutic orientations. Far from negligible is the heavy emphasis scholars have placed on the Yorùbá contribution to Black Atlantic traditions as a means of forging ties with ethnographic sources and crafting nationalist projects.

Indeed, it was to their Yorùbá foundations—referred to as Nagô or Ketu in Brazil—that Candomblé cult centers strategically appealed in order to obtain legal and cultural recognition in the early years of the First Brazilian Republic.⁸⁰ Therein lies one of the main nodes of affinity between Lucumí and Candomblé, for while both sets of practitioners undoubtedly locate the origins of *orisha/orixá* worship on African soil, the focus of narrative elaboration shifts to the visionary cohort of religious elites—retroactively defined as Yorùbá—in Cuba and Brazil, whose determination to regulate divergent practices in the interest of preserving an elevated level of ritual competence laid down the ceremonial protocols for *orisha/orixá* worship.⁸¹ Both Lucumí and Candomblé practitioners tend to share the view that the enslavement of key ritual specialists such as these, coupled with widespread Christian missionization and Islamicization during the colonial period, led to the irretrievable loss of religious expertise in Africa itself. Bearing in mind the perception that some crucial forms of sacred knowledge survived in the New World alone, it only seems paradoxical, then, that for Ramos’ supporters, his decision to bring *igba orí* from Brazil reinforces the Yorùbá basis of Lucumí.

EARS THAT DO NOT PASS THE HEAD

As intimated above, rather than discuss Ori primarily in terms of Re-Africanization, I would instead foreground the ways that in Ilé Laroye, practitioners propitiate the head as a means of cultivating “moral potentialities,” sensori-motor responses and aptitudes integral to the continued existence of the Lucumí tradition.⁸² While questions of legitimacy and “syncretism” are not completely beside the point for practitioners, concern over these issues dovetails with the communal desire for the corporeal healing supplied by Ori and for the health of the social body strengthened by the ritual. The impact of Ori on somatic health and emotional stability, according to members of Ilé Laroye, cannot be overstated, yet I do not intend to rehearse the curative properties of substances involved in the ceremony. More important is the cumulative effect of rogations, Ori, and other rituals for the head that leave it receptive to future intervention, in the case of affliction, especially in the form of physical illness. Nilaja Campbell has described this process as one of “synthesizing” the body through ritual activity.

On the other hand, illness presents only one source of motivation for performance of the ritual. Within the religious ideology of Ilé Laroye, as in other traditions within the “Yorùbá-Atlantic complex,” the head is conceptualized as hollow, the better to contain the sacred energy of the *orishas*, paradigmatically in instances of spirit possession, yet practically in all forms of ritual labor. In order to become a proper vessel for their power, however, one’s *orí* must be “fed.” To cite a metaphor often employed to clarify the objective of the Ori ritual, the *igba orí* serves to nourish and join the head on earth with the one in heaven, thus “aligning” it with its sacred twin. One member of Ilé Laroye told me shortly before receiving *igba orí* that she dreamt she was dressed in white and wedding herself, saying “that might have been *orí*.” Referring to her upcoming Ori ritual, she used the present tense as if already in the moment: “This is my day, when I’m receiving myself.”⁸³ Couched in an idiom of sacred marriage, the desire for corporeal and cognitive integration deserves more attention than I can dedicate to it here.⁸⁴ Yet her words hint at the ways Ori transcends the transnational to promise a date with destiny, an engagement with one’s most intimate inner self.

Ori also served as an occasion to affirm the sentiments of affinity binding practitioners to one another and their religious community. One of the first major rituals I attended in Ilé Laroye in March 2004 was the feeding of Nilaja Campbell’s *igba orí* with varied foodstuffs and a sacrificial offering.⁸⁵ At the end of the ritual, her friends, godchildren, and family members toasted her, and I was furnished with a glimpse into the esteem, attachment and affection she inspires. One godchild said, “If it weren’t for you and *orisha*, I wouldn’t be here.” A goddaughter told her, “You teach me to be a better mother.” Another echoed, “Thank

you for being the mother I never had.” “I can’t believe it’s been twelve years already,” an old friend added. A fellow elder called out, “Money, Money, Money, Money, Money!” (whereupon others shouted “Health!” to comic effect). Another godchild described Campbell welcoming her into Ilé Laroye when her first godparent abandoned her.⁸⁶ A godsister called her “the hardest-working woman in [Lucumí] in Chicago.”⁸⁷ In articulating their respect for Campbell, her godchildren displayed the extent to which a recently adopted ritual can acquire importance as a platform for “practices of deference and sagacity,” and as a vehicle for the transmission of local values such as reverence for motherhood.⁸⁸

The ritualization of Ori also may be viewed as a “technology of the self” that, alongside longstanding Lucumí practices of Cuban origin, has habituated them into the recognition of initiated elders’ authority and contributed to the transformation of participants’ religious subjectivity. At the time of my ethnographic research in Ilé Laroye, elders barred future recipients of *igba orí* from preparing foods for their Oris or otherwise performing ceremonial labor on their own behalf in immediate anticipation of the *igba*’s consecration. Elders prohibited their protégés from ingesting stimulants such as caffeine or nicotine in the days before receiving *igba orí* for the first time, and on the day of the ritual compelled the latter to sit quietly in old clothes to be destroyed after the cleansing called the *sacudimiento* in the Brazilian literature on *bori*.⁸⁹ In these and myriad other ways, community leaders insisted on establishing a temporality unique to ritual practice that destabilized and disoriented junior practitioners for the purpose of endowing them with new identities as servants of the spirits. The liturgical sequence followed for Ori combined with other rites of passage to reinforce the legitimacy of elders’ status, their command of ritual protocols, and their juniors’ moral-ethical obligations to them.⁹⁰

In the course of my research, Ori emerged as a portable portal not only to the alterity at the heart of religious subjectivity but also to the proximate Others of *orisha/orixá*-worshiping communities, conceptualized as estranged kin. Some of Campbell’s godchildren gravitated to Lucumí after divination sessions with Candomblé priests; others maintained *ilé orí* along with other ritual objects received in Oyótúnjí Village. By accepting Ori in their midst as a welcome “innovation,” Ilé members came to regard themselves as drawing closer to those deemed religious “sisters” or “cousins,” as well as their Yorùbá “parent.” The “de-alienating” rhetorical motif of familial reunion continues to have substantial currency for those not only sundered from the African continent as the result of the transatlantic slave trade, but also separated from their ancestors by the violence of the post-Civil War Reconstruction and the Great Migration away from the South.⁹¹ The poetic irony that slaves championed the preservation of Africa’s religious heritage—in the words of Luke 20:17, “The stone the builders rejected has become the

cornerstone”—also resonates with practitioners whose conversion to Lucumí from any number of Christian denominations has not erased the scriptural sensibility of their upbringings.

As the preceding discussion of *orí* in Yorùbáland was intended to demonstrate, neither the concept nor its material form has been monolithic; its contours have fluctuated along with those of the always-already globalized Afro-Diasporic historical moment. West African ideas of *orí*, as rendered in scholarship and operationalized in practice, have influenced the contemporary ritualization of *orí* around the world to an extent that only further research into the archaeological, anthropological, and documentary record will be able to uncover. In Cuba and Brazil, researchers often cooperated with practitioners in the construction of local orthodoxies and, from quite an early stage in the development of Black Atlantic initiatory traditions, initiates amassed libraries as crammed full of paper, as of the “stones, herbs, and blood” identified as the core of “authentic” practice.⁹² In consonance with this model, the elders of Ilé Laroye placed emphasis on the complementarity of wisdom gained from experience and scholarship, citing sources such as Wande Abimbola, Roy C. Abraham (author of *The Dictionary of Modern Yoruba*), and William Bascom, among others whose volumes have appeared in their libraries.

It would seem that a number of Ramos’ critics are insisting on a vision of the religious past as unitary, pristine, and unalterable, and measuring the authenticity of Ori using a metric that reflects neither African history nor New World realities. It may be tempting for scholars to follow suit, categorizing the portable practice and transposable message of Ori as an “invented tradition,” yet cultural critiques indebted to this notion often rely on Eurocentric conceptualizations of not only culture but also “place” and “people,” which do not capture the complexity of non-elite understandings “on the ground.”⁹³ The term “nation” in Black Atlantic religions is a case in point, for the bodies of ritual protocol designated by this term are not regarded as mutually exclusive; as R. Lorand Matory writes in *Transnational Transcendence*, religious subjects in traditions such as Candomblé can be considered members of rival nations—ritual collectivities—simultaneously.⁹⁴ Mainstream definitions of religion based on dominant post-Enlightenment understandings of religion as faith, and that value cognition at the expense of embodiment, have yet to grapple with the dual, even triple and quadruple, citizenship endorsed by Afro-Diasporic traditions.

A proverb I have heard more than once at Ilé Laroye says, “The ears do not surpass the head.” In this saying, the head serves as a metonym for an initiated elder, while the ears symbolize a junior person, as shallow and devoid of worthy substance as the auditory canal.⁹⁵ Yet, although the ears must defer to the head, they are the means for the head to gather new information; ears are the gateways of comprehension. This proverb

may assist us in theorizing the transmission of transnational rituals such as the Lucumí Ori, and the diffusion of their discourses through mass media. The fledgling phenomenon of Ori is most profitably analyzed not according to its distance from a retroactively idealized prototype—the Yorùbá *ilé orí* or Brazilian *igba orí*—but in terms of its relation to local struggles for well-being, moral-ethical transformation, and habituation into communally defined virtues. Since the dawn of the Black Atlantic world, seemingly novel modes of ritualization such as Ori have proven responsive to the large-scale economic and technological changes that have enabled capital to flow, people to move, and ideas to spread more and more rapidly. As for the venerable African tradition at the chronological and ideological head of many Diasporic religions, it, too, must be rethought, as the cosmopolitan product of a globalized modernity.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Monica Schuler, “Enslavement, the Slave Voyage, and Astral and Aquatic Journeys in African Diaspora Discourse,” in *Africa and the Americas: Interconnections during the Slave Trade*, ed. José C. Curto and Renée Soulodre-La France (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 2005), 185–214.

² In *Orí Eleda mí ó... Si mi cabeza no me vende* (Miami: Eleda.org Publications, 2011), Miguel W. Ramos refers to the Ori ritual as *eborí* or *eborí eleda*, using the same phrase used in other texts for the “feeding of the head” referred to as a *rogación de cabeza*. See for example Lydia Cabrera, *Yemayá y Ochún: kariocha, iyalorichas y olorichas* (Madrid, Ediciones C.R., 1974), 141; and Joseph M. Murphy, *Santería: African Spirits in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 79. My ethnographic interlocutors customarily use the phrase “to do Ori” to refer to the performance of two ceremonies: consecrating the vessel (*igba orí*) to propitiate *orí*, and refreshing the ritual sacra in this object with prayers, foods, and sacrifices. Despite the apparent implications of “do Ori,” members of Ilé Laroye are well aware and insist that, according to mainstream Lucumí religious discourse, one’s *orí* is inborn rather than created or received.

³ Most subsequent ethnographic references to Ilé Laroye are based on four years of IRB-approved fieldwork, 2005–2009. I have changed the name of this community and its religious leaders for reasons of confidentiality.

⁴ Thomas J. Csordas, “Introduction: Modalities of Transnational Transcendence,” in *Transnational Transcendence: Essays on Religion and Globalization*, ed. Thomas J. Csordas (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 4–5.

⁵ Ramos, a published author, is an *obá-oriaté*. The term means “king” and “head of the mat” (the mat used in solemn divination ceremonies and initiation). An *obá-oriaté* is an expert in reading the sixteen-cowries oracle, called *dilogún*, and master of ceremonies in initiation. For a short history of the emergence of this figure in modern-day *regla ocha*, see David H. Brown, *Santería Enthroned: Art, Ritual, and Innovation in an Afro-Cuban Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 150–53.

⁶ For the resonance of these terms in Afro-Cuban religion, see Brown, “Myths of the Yoruba Past and Innovations of the Lucumí Present: The Narrative Production of Cosmology, Authority, and Ritual Variation,” in *Santería Enthroned*, 113–64.

⁷ To my surprise, after I chose this phrase as a title for the present article, I stumbled upon several references to it in information science and technology literature, mobile devices such as “smartphones,” and Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs). Readers are free to draw their own conclusions regarding any parallels between these and the phenomena I discuss.

⁸ See Alejandro Frijerio, “Re-Africanization in Secondary Religious Diasporas: Constructing a World Religion,” *Civilisations* 51, nos. 1–2 (2004): 39–60; Tina G. Jensen, “Discourses on Afro-Brazilian Religion: From De-Africanization to Re-Africanization,” in *Latin American Religion in Motion*, ed. Christian Smith and Joshua Prokopy (New York: Routledge, 1999), 275–94; Paul Christopher Johnson, *Diaspora Conversions: Black Carib Religion and the Recovery of Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Patricia de Santana Pinho, *Reinvenções da África na Bahia* (São Paulo: Editora Annablume, 2004); and Stefania Capone, *Les Yoruba du Nouveau Monde: Religion, ethnicité et nationalisme noir aux États-Unis* (Paris: Éditions Karthala, 2005).

⁹ Ordep Serra, quoted in Floyd Merrell, *Capoeira and Candomblé: Conformity and Resistance in Brazil* (Frankfurt: Vervuert, 2005), 130.

¹⁰ See Elizabeth Pérez, “Willful Spirits and Weakened Flesh: Historicizing the Initiation Narrative in Afro-Cuban Religions,” *Journal of Africana Religions* 1, no. 2 (2013): 151–93.

¹¹ See Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France 1981–1982*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005).

¹² Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1990 [1980]), 53.

¹³ See Stefania Capone, “The ‘Orisha Religion’ between Syncretism and Re-Africanization,” in *Cultures of the Lusophone Black Atlantic*, ed. Nancy Priscilla Naro, Roger Sansi-Roca, and David H. Treece (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 73–104; Stephan Palmié, “Against Syncretism: Africanizing and Cubanizing Discourses in North American Orisà-Worship,” in *Counterworks: Managing the Diversity of Knowledge*, ed. Richard Fardon (London: Routledge 1995), 73–104.

¹⁴ R. Lorand Matory, “The Many Who Dance in Me: Afro-Atlantic Ontology and the Problem of ‘Transnationalism,’” in Csordas, *Transnational Transcendence*, 253.

¹⁵ Barry Hallen, “Phenomenology and the Exposition of African Traditional Thought,” *Second Order* 5, no. 2 (1976): 60.

¹⁶ Early in his first history of the Yorùbá, Samuel Johnson writes of *orí* as “the universal household deity, worshipped by both sexes, as the god of fate.” Samuel Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas: From the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the British Protectorate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010 [1921]), 27. As one informant quoted by Anthony Buckley stated, “We worship the head because it is in heaven and can go to God (Olódùmarè) and beg for us.” Anthony Buckley, *Yoruba Medicine* (New York: Athelia Henrietta Press, 2007), 63. Name Lawal elaborates on the idea of *iborí*’s connection with Esu in “Aworan: Representing the Self and Its Metaphysical Other in Yoruba Art,” *The Art Bulletin* 83, no. 3 (2001): 498–526. See also Rowland Abiodun, “Verbal and Visual Metaphors: Mythical Allusions in Yoruba Ritualistic Art of Orí,” *Ife: Annals of the Institute of Cultural Studies* 1 (1986): 24; and K. Noel Amherd, “Isele Heritages: Strengths and Potentials,” in *Orìṣà: Yorùbá Gods and Spiritual Identity in Africa and the Diaspora*, ed. Toyin Falola and Ann Genova (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 2005), 173.

¹⁷ This notion of forgetting destiny at birth resonates with dominant Hindu notions of karma, especially those sources that posit a prenatal choice of incarnation. As an example of embryology, Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty cites the *Markandeya Purana*, 11.1–21, which describes the forgetting process that induces the baby to forget “the hundreds of miseries of birth that it experienced before” and all the embryo’s resolutions to not repeat the same errors. “Then Vishnu’s deluding power of illusion assails him, and when his soul has been deluded by it, he loses his knowledge. As soon as the living creature has lost his knowledge, he becomes a baby.” See her *Textual Sources for the Study of Hinduism* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1988), 98.

¹⁸ See Oladele Abiodun Balogun, “The Concepts of Ori and Human Destiny in Traditional Yoruba Thought: A Soft-Deterministic Interpretation,” *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 16, no. 1 (2007): 116–30.

¹⁹ Henry John Drewal and Margaret Thompson Drewal, *Gelede: Art and Female Power Among the Yoruba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 73–74.

²⁰ There are disputes as to its popularity; some of the scholarship cited in this chapter holds that it was widely received in the precolonial period but waned in the twentieth century, while anecdotal evidence from recent travelers to Nigeria—such as the Brazilian *iyalorixá* (“mother of the orixás”) and the anthropologist known as Mãe Maria d’Oxalá, Maria P. Junqueira—suggests that it has seen a resurgence of popularity in the twenty-first century.

²¹ Abiodun, “Verbal and Visual Metaphors,” 16. Other types of traditional healers and ritual specialists who are not *babaláwos* have also created *ibori* for clients, but the information on contemporary *ibori* and *ilé orí* either come from *babaláwos* themselves or those approaching *orí* from an *Ifá*-centric perspective.

²² This verse is *Òfún-Biretè* according to Wande Abimbola, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus* (1975; reprint, New York: Athelia Henrietta Press, 1997), 12.

²³ John Pemberton, *Yorùbá: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought*, ed. Allen Wardwell (New York: Center for African Art and Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1989), 32. This use of the placenta—a sort of human leather—in assembling *Orí* reinforces the image of the ideal head as a seasoned container rather than a raw or immature one.

²⁴ Elders chant incantations to ensure the blessing of a good *orí*; one of these songs casts the ceremonial transformation of the devotee as the roasting of a yam, thus implicitly comparing ritual, to the preparation of food for consumption, through heating and softening.

²⁵ Abiodun, “Verbal and Visual Metaphors,” 18.

²⁶ This structure is covered by a more lavishly embellished container that may be covered in up to twelve thousand cowry shells, along with other costly materials. Its summit also may be topped by a figure, such as that of horse and rider. The ritual object that most resembles the *ilé orí* in Lucumí is the crown placed on ritual objects for Dàda Bàyònnì, the *orisha* worshiped as the younger sister of Shangó. This crown is prepared with strands of hair cut from a virgin girl and covered with cowries, representing both curls and wealth. As in the case of *ilé orí*, the number four plays a central role in the decoration of this object, which rests on a pottery stand. Robert Farris Thompson reproduces images from a Nigerian altar for Dàda Bàyònnì that consist of an open-ended covering resembling the *ilé orí* placed over large clay jars in *Face of the Gods: Art and Altars of Africa and the African Americas* (New York: Museum for African Art; Munich: Prestel, 1993), 247. Twelve thousand is a symbolic number that represents infinity, as is four hundred and one, turning up in *Ifá* divination verses having to do with *orí*. Abimbola, *Ifá*, 131. See also Robert Smith, “Yoruba Armament,” *Journal of African History* 8, no. 1 (1967): 88n.6.

²⁷ Akinwumi Ogundiran, “Of Small Things Remembered: Beads, Cowries, and Cultural Translations of the Atlantic Experience in Yorubaland,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 35, nos. 2–3 (2002): 427–57.

²⁸ Ogundiran, “Of Small Things Remembered,” 448. For the significance of beads during this period, see Henry John Drewal and John Mason, *Beads, Body, and Soul: Art and Light in the Yorùbá Universe* (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum, 1998).

²⁹ For the price of slaves in cowry currency, see Herbert S. Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 111–14.

³⁰ Ogundiran, “Of Small Things Remembered,” 448.

³¹ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1930), 98–128, *et passim*.

³² Ogundiran, “Of Small Things Remembered,” 449. Indeed, the evidence suggests that the development of the idea of *orí* contributed to the assignment of distinct and discrete functions to deities, streamlining their roles according to the notion that each has its own *orí inú*, as indicated through the behavior attributed to it.

³³ Abiodun, “Verbal and Visual Metaphors,” 19.

³⁴ Martin Holbraad, “Expending Multiplicity: Money in Cuban Ifa Cults,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 11, no. 2 (2005): 232.

- ³⁵ Ogundiran, "Of Small Things Remembered," 448.
- ³⁶ See also C. A. Gregory, "Cowries and Conquest: Towards a Subalternate Quality Theory of Money," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 38, no. 2 (1996): 195–217.
- ³⁷ Ogundiran, "Of Small Things Remembered," 449.
- ³⁸ O. B. Lawuyi, "Is Tortoise a Trickster?" *African Languages and Cultures* 3, no. 1 (1990): 80. The tortoise figure has conveyed the importance of coordinating the activity of head and legs, in order to move forward through the world, a "field of conflictual interests" symbolized by the armored calabash of the tortoise shell.
- ³⁹ Lawuyi, "Is Tortoise a Trickster?" 79. Emphasis mine.
- ⁴⁰ J. D. Y. Peel, "Gender in Yoruba Religious Change," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 32, Fasc. 2 (2002): 150.
- ⁴¹ Peel, "Gender in Yoruba Religious Change," 150.
- ⁴² Peel, "Gender in Yoruba Religious Change," 150–51.
- ⁴³ See also Peter Cohen, "The Orisha Atlantic: Historicizing the Roots of a Global Religion," in Csordas, *Transnational Transcendence*, 205–30.
- ⁴⁴ Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1953), 221.
- ⁴⁵ Mãe Maria d'Oxalá, telephone interview, 11 February 2007. Mãe Maria currently is based in São Paulo.
- ⁴⁶ Not all Candomblé houses "seat" *orí* in this fashion, however.
- ⁴⁷ Armando Vallado, *Iemanjá: A grande mãe africana do Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Pallas, 2002), 77.
- ⁴⁸ Mãe Maria d'Oxalá, telephone interview, 11 February 2007. They normally are removed only on the condition of disaffiliation from a *terreiro* or death.
- ⁴⁹ Vallado, *Iemanjá*, 79.
- ⁵⁰ This word has no relationship to the West African possession rite and cultic form called Bori.
- ⁵¹ Reginaldo Prandi, translated by Maria P. Junqueira, "Axexê Funeral Rites in Brazil's Òrìṣà Religion: Constitution, Significance, and Tendencies," in *Òrìṣà Devotion as World Religion: The Globalization of Yorùbá Religious Culture*, ed. Jacob K. Olupona and Terry Rey (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 443.
- ⁵² J. Lorand Matory, "The 'Cult of Nations' and the Ritualization of Their Purity," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 100, no. 1 (2001): 189. See also Reginaldo Prandi, *Os Candomblés de São Paulo* (São Paulo: Editora Hucitec, 1991), 124–26.
- ⁵³ Pierre Fatumbi Verger, "Bori, Primeira Cerimônia de Iniciação ao Culto dos Òrìṣà Nâgô na Bahia, Brasil," in *Olóòrìṣà: Escritos sobre a Religião dos Orixás*, ed., C.E.M. de Moura (São Paulo: Ágora, 1981), 33–56. Verger prefaced his description by saying that the ceremony was combined with a consecration of beads for Sàngó, the subject's tutelary spirit. The subject was given a cold bath and accompanied to the *peji* of the *terreiro*, where the altars are located, to undergo the ceremony. As in Photo 2, the initiate sat on a mat in a receptive pose, legs splayed, arms outstretched, palms up, surrounded by offerings to be given to his *orí*; across from him sat his *babalorixá* on a small banquette, palms down. Of course, this vignette does not represent *bori* in every *terreiro*, although the

mechanics and imagery of the ritual would be familiar to practitioners over half a century later, and do not vary greatly in their particulars from the earliest accounts of such ceremonies. See the lengthy description in Michel Dion, *Mémoires de Candomblé: Omindarewa Iyalorisá* (Paris: Éditions L'Harmattan, 1998); in this case of a *bori* in 1959–60, *Ifá* was consulted in the course of the ritual.

⁵⁴ J. Lorand Matory, *Sex and the Empire That is No More: Gender and the Politics of Metaphor in Oyo Yoruba Religion* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 235.

⁵⁵ The most thorough description of a rogation in the literature on Lucumí was given by Lydia Cabrera in her 1954 masterpiece, *El monte: Igbo fínda, ewe orisha, vititínfínda* (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1954 [1983]), 394–96. For a variation that may reflect more widespread contemporary practice, see Ralph Alpizar and Damián París, *Santería cubana: mito y realidad* (Madrid: MR Ediciones, 2004), 81–87.

⁵⁶ On Black Spiritual churches see Hans A. Baer, *The Black Spiritual Movement: A Religious Response to Racism* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001).

⁵⁷ For more on the Efon nation, see Stefania Capone, *Searching for Africa in Brazil: Power and Tradition in Candomblé* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 21–23, *et passim*.

⁵⁸ Such disruptions of tradition have been attested with reference to rituals in the Ewe/Fon traditions of Cuba (called *Arará*), and masking rituals such as Egungun outside Brazil. Ramos' writings include instructional religious texts, some self-published, intended for initiates and serious practitioners—*Ceremonias de Obaluwaye, para iniciados solamente* (Carolina, Puerto Rico: El Impresor, 1982); *Dida Obí: Adivinación a Traves del Coco* (Carolina, Puerto Rico: El Impresor, 1982); *Oro... Egungun*; *Las Honras De Egungun* (Carolina, Puerto Rico: El Impresor, 1982); and *Adimú: Gbogbó Tén'unjé Lukumí* (Miami: Eleda.Org Publications, 2003), among others—as well as academic scholarship. Into the latter category fall such works as “Afro-Cuban Orisha Worship,” in *Santería Aesthetics in Contemporary Latin American Art*, ed. Arturo Lindsay (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 167–86; Roberto Nodal and Miguel “Willie” Ramos, “Let the Power Flow: Ebó as a Healing Mechanism in Lukumí Orisha Worship,” in *Fragments of Bone: Neo-African Religions in a New World*, ed. Patrick Bellegarde-Smith (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 167–86; and Miguel “Willie” Ramos, “The Empire Beats On: Oyo, Batá Drums, and Hegemony in Nineteenth-Century Cuba,” M.A. thesis, Florida International University, 2000.

⁵⁹ Mãe Maria d'Oxalá, telephone interview, 11 February 2007. She added in an email that she “was present and also did a Bori that same day.”

⁶⁰ In my conversation with Mãe Maria d'Oxalá, she made it clear that she felt the *igba orí* was equally, if not more greatly, indebted to Dahomean cultural forms as to the Yorùbá; she pointed to the fact that Ewe/Fon temples were already in operation at the time of the *en masse* arrival in Brazil of the Yorùbá during the 1800s. She cited Bernard Maupoil by name as a scholar who had described—in such volumes as *La Géomancie à l'ancienne Côte des Esclaves* (Paris: Institut d'Ethnologie, 1943)—the theory behind *orí* as she has encountered it in Candomblé, explicitly equating it with the Fon/Ewe concept of *kpoli*, the “life sign” determined in divination that is also, in some ways, the double of its owner.

The descriptions of *kpoli* I have read—including food taboos and restrictions as well as directives—would appear to have their Lucumí equivalent in the post-initiation divination ceremony called *itá*.

⁶¹ Some undergo Ori immediately before initiation, as in October 2004 and July 2005. In “The ‘Orisha Religion’: Between Syncretism and Re-Africanization,” Capone writes, “[Ramos] is believed to have performed over five hundred *borí* with the consecration of *ibá orí*, introducing into the United States a practice that had completely disappeared in Cuba,” 228.

⁶² One of these websites is <<http://www.yoruba.orixa.nom.br>>, accessed 28 October 2012. Books in this genre include Awo Falokun Fatunmbi, *Inner Peace: The Yoruba Concept of Ori* (New York: Athelia Henrietta Press, 2005); indicative of the readership sought for the text, if not the intention of the author, the cover design has an *Ifá* divining board superimposed on a Chinese yin-yang symbol. Run by a Nigerian-taught American-born *babaláwo*, the Awo Study Center offers numerous courses online.

⁶³ See Erwan Dianteill and Martha Swearingen, “From Hieroglyphy to Ethnography and Back: Lydia Cabrera’s Texts and the Written Tradition in Afro-Cuban Religions,” *Journal of American Folklore* 116, no. 461 (2003): 273–92.

⁶⁴ According to Vallado, some future recipients of *igba orí* in Candomblé are given lists of items required for the *borí* that include one *quartinha*, one kola nut, one *orogbo*, one liter of honey, one jar of white oil, one raw fish, various fruits, one white dove, one white chicken, one strand of glass beads for Iemanjá, and one strand of beads for one’s tutelary *orixa*. Vallado, *Iemanjá*, 59.

⁶⁵ This was held in Campbell’s living room.

⁶⁶ Brown, *Santería Enthroned*, 165–209.

⁶⁷ Personal communication, 28 January 2006.

⁶⁸ Personal communication, 28 January 2006.

⁶⁹ Joseph M. Murphy, *Working the Spirit: Ceremonies of the African Diaspora* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 6–9, *et passim*; Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 18.

⁷⁰ According to Catherine Bell, “ritualization” encompasses all practical ceremonial strategies “for setting some activities off from others,” and for negotiating power relationships within particular sociocultural environments. *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 74.

⁷¹ Verger, “Borí,” 33–56.

⁷² The International Congress of Orisha Tradition and Culture, sometimes referred to as Orisha World Congresses, took place in Brazil in 1983, 1990, and 2005; in Nigeria in 1981, 1986, and 2001; in the United States in 1997; in Trinidad and Tobago in 1999; and in Cuba in 2003. The split between Black Atlantic *orisha*-worshiping communities may be regarded as analogous to the situation faced by German and Turkish Alevi in relation to Sunni Islam. Lucumí have long seen themselves as separate from continental African Yorùbá religion rather than a minority group encompassed by it, yet the present globalized moment has opened up both opportunities and challenges posed by redefinition. Many adherents now question their relationship to the “parent” tradition. See Esra Özyürek, “Beyond Integration and Recognition: Diasporic Constructions of

Alevi Muslim Identity between German and Turkey,” in Csordas, *Transnational Transcendence*, 121–44.

⁷³ It is not uncommon for African Americans in *Ifá* communities to have *ilé orí* made in the Yorùbá style in West Africa—even to have *babaláwos* consecrate them in their recipients’ absence and send them by mail to their religious protégés in the United States. Personal communication with a priestess in the Black American *Ifá* tradition initiated in Nigeria, December 2011.

⁷⁴ Ramos’ racial privilege as a light-skinned Cuban considered phenotypically “white” also militates against his acceptance by Black American and Nigerian *orisha* practitioners invested in blackness as a mark of Africanness and therefore religious legitimacy. See Stephan Palmié, “The Color of the Gods: Notes on a Question Better Left Unasked,” in *Transnational America: The Fading of Borders in the Western Hemisphere*, ed. Berndt Ostendorf (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 2002), 163–75; Kamari Maxine Clarke, *Mapping Yorùbá Networks: Power and Agency in the Making of Transnational Communities* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004).

⁷⁵ Matory, “The Many Who Dance in Me,” 256.

⁷⁶ It remains necessary to problematize the notion of ethnicity—one that owes so much to the German Romantic notion of a discrete *volk*, united by blood and soil—and gesture towards the instability of corporate identities, even those upon whose essentialization our disciplines have profited. On “coolness,” see Robert Farris Thompson, “An Aesthetic of the Cool,” *African Arts* 7, no. 1 (1973): 40–43, 64–67, 89–91.

⁷⁷ See the essays in Linda M. Heywood, *Central Africans and Cultural Transformations in the American Diaspora* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Stefania Capone, “Entre Yoruba et Bantou: l’influence des stéréotypes raciaux dans les études afro-américaines,” *Cahiers d’Études Africaines* 40, no. 157 (2000): 55–77.

⁷⁸ Stephan Palmié, “Ethnogenetic Processes and Cultural Transfer in Caribbean Slave Populations,” in *Slavery in the Americas*, ed. Wolfgang Binder (Würzburg, Germany: Königshausen und Neumann, 1993), 337–64; Stephan Palmié, *Wizards and Scientists: Explorations in Afro-Cuban Modernity and Tradition* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002).

⁷⁹ Andrew Apter, “On African Origins: Creolization and Connaissance in Haitian Vodou,” *American Ethnologist* 29, no. 2 (2002): 233–60.

⁸⁰ See Kelly E. Hayes, “Black Magic and the Academy: Macumba and Afro-Brazilian ‘Orthodoxies,’” *History of Religions* 46, no. 4 (2007): 283–315.

⁸¹ See, for instance, Miguel “Willie” Ramos, “*La división de La Habana*: Territorial Conflict and Cultural Hegemony in the Followers of Oyo Lukumí Religion, 1850s–1920s,” *Cuban Studies* 34 (2003): 38–70.

⁸² See Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003), 92; Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005); David Howes, *Sensual Relations: Engaging the Senses in Culture and Social Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003); Jean-Pierre Warnier, “A Praxeological Approach to Subjectivation in a Material World,” *Journal of Material Culture* 6, no. 1 (2001): 5–24; Philip A. Mellor and Chris Shilling, “Body

Pedagogics and the Religious Habitus: A New Direction for the Sociological Study of Religion,” *Religion* 40, no. 1 (2010): 27–38.

⁸³ Personal communication, 13 April 2005.

⁸⁴ For a more extended treatment, see Elizabeth Pérez, “Narrative, Seasoning, Song: Praxis, Subjectivity, and Transformation in an African-American Lucumí Community,” Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2010.

⁸⁵ This was her *igba orí*, received from Miguel “Willie” Ramos several years earlier.

⁸⁶ Field notes, 6 March 2004.

⁸⁷ Campbell’s godsister used the term *ocha*; *Regla ocha*, or “the rule of the orishas,” is often shortened to simply *ocha* and remains a common synonym for Lucumí.

⁸⁸ Michael D. McNally, “Honoring Elders: Practices of Sagacity and Deference in Ojibwe Christianity,” in *Practicing Protestants: Histories of Christian Life in America 1630–1965*, ed. Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, Leigh E. Schmidt, and Mark Valeri (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 77–99.

⁸⁹ Michel Dion, *Mémoires de Candomblé: Omindarewa Iyalorisá* (Paris: Éditions L’Harmattan, 1998), 72. In the case of the *bori* in 1959–60 recorded in Dion, *Ifá* was consulted in the course of the ritual.

⁹⁰ Field notes, 21 July 2005.

⁹¹ Csordas, “Introduction,” 19.

⁹² William Bascom, “The Focus of Cuban Santería,” *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 6 (1950): 68. For instance, not only did Santería manuals called *libretas* inform the ethnography of Lydia Cabrera, often misrepresented as reliant solely on oral tradition, in time *El Monte* came to be used as a source for *libretas*. Dianteill and Swearingen, “From Hierography to Ethnography and Back,” 273–92.

⁹³ Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Byron King Plant, “Secret, Powerful, and the Stuff of Legends: Revisiting Theories of Invented Tradition,” *Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 28, no. 1 (2008): 175–94.

⁹⁴ Matory, “The Many Who Dance in Me,” 232–33.

⁹⁵ *Ilé* members say this in English; in Spanish, the proverb runs, “Oreja no pasa cabeza.” *Pasan* may also be rendered “supercede.”