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Odú in Motion: Afro-Cuban Orisha Hermeneutics and Embodied Scholarship, Life Reflections of a Lukumí Priest

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ODÚ IN MOTION:

AFRO-CUBAN ORISHA HERMENEUTICS AND EMBODIED SCHOLARSHIP,

LIFE REFLECTIONS OF A LUKUMÍ PRIEST

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by

Alexander Fernandez

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To: Dean Kenneth G. Furton
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by Alexander Fernandez, and entitled Odú in Motion: Afro-Cuban Orisha Hermeneutics and Embodied Scholarship, Life Reflections of a Lukumí Priest, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

_____
Ana Maria Bidegain

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Andrea Queeley

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Albert Wuaku, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 21, 2014

The thesis of Alexander Fernandez is approved.

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Dean Kenneth G. Furton
College of Arts and Sciences

_____
Dean Lakshmi N. Reddi
University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2014

DEDICATION

With heart in hand, I dedicate my thesis to my mother, Daisy, Omi Dina, and my mothers; and to my father, Ramon, Ayalayí Ekún, and my fathers.

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A life of austere devotion to the Afro-Cuban Lukumí tradition gives rise to the crescendo that today is my Master's thesis. Though its inception was an arduous endeavor indeed, recanting the steps of my life in order to produce with the respect it deserves, an accurate account of my personal sojourn as an initiated priest, I now give much due recognition to all the integral parties involved on my journey, Onáreo!

First, and foremost, I look up at the heavens and thank Olodúmare for having rested his merciful gaze on my being, and setting my path out for me, Modupwé!

To my ancestors and orisha, for giving me the substance to persevere through the many lived storms and harmattan winds, Moforibalé!

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To my godfather, Orestes Valdes, Oba Tero, for birthing me into the Lukumí tradition, and his tutelary orisha, Changó, my other fathers, to whom I am eternally indebted for the confidence they deposited in me, even as a young priest; Olorún agwa!

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In Lukumí ritual, the tutelary orisha is always last to receive sacramental tributes and praises during the sequence of ceremonial events. Thus here, at the end of this chapter of my life, I humbly pay homage to my head orisha, the owner of my being, the orisha, Obatalá. To you, my father, I owe my all, from the moment you chose me as your son in that ethereal plane, and throughout the long voyage of my present incarnation.

Your enduring and infallible counsel has been my anchor, even when the waters sought to shipwreck my soul. I come from there, I am here, and I will continue to navigate through this peregrination entrusted solely to you, as you are that light that never falters; Jecüa Baba mi, Jecüa Eyeunle!

Itó Ibán Eshú

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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Florida International University, 2014

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Professor Albert Wuaku, Major Professor

The study of the Afro-Cuban Lukumí, the descendants of the Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria, and their religious practices, has long been of interest to anthropologists and religious studies scholars alike. Unfortunately, Western scholarship has too often relied on the juxtaposition between our rational and their irrational belief systems, explaining away, or acutely ignoring, emic interpretations of religious practice, severely limiting the kind of knowledge produced about these religious phenomena.

My study focuses on three distinct processes of divination and their accompanying ceremonies and ritual ledgers, examining how these shape dynamic and formative pedagogies in the Lukumí initiate's life. Through self-ethnography, and by engaging key theorists, I explore the ways in which the body, as site of religious experience, through divination and initiation, interacts with and is informed by communitas*,* understood as the very spirit of the community in action.

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1:1 Ochareo! Adáche! First Encounter of a Divine Type

Marbles were forbidden in my playroom. My mother was adamant about voicing her dislike of these tiny and dangerous toys. Children put things in their mouths, and can choke. Regardless of her warnings, on her routine Saturday sweep through the house, there would mysteriously appear an occasional few of these small taboo glass orbs. "My son, please tell me who is bringing these marbles?" I remember the reciprocal gaze, "*mima*, the old man with the dogs brings them at night time." Days later, my parents and I would visit the home of Maria Eulalia Sotolongo, *Olálére* (Honor Has Gain[1]), priestess of *Yemayá* (Mother Whose Children Are Fish) the orisha of the seas and maternity. Eulalia was one of the original architects of the Lukumí tradition in the United States, via its ingress, New York City. A master *caracolera* (female cowrie shell *diviner*), Eulalia, a short, portly, dark skinned Cuban woman, with emerald-green eyes, from the perfidious town of Jesus Maria, in Havana, Cuba, had a despotic character, seemingly impenetrable. All the same, her skill of *divination* was reputable, and given the small number of *olorisha* (Lukumí initiated priests) in the United States in the early 1970's, in a land of blind folk, the one-eyed man [woman] is king [queen]. I sat on my mother's lap as Eulalia began the *moyúba* (ritual incantation), congruent with an *omi tutu* (cool water libation), rotating the handful of shells atop the *estera* (straw mat) that separated her from me. Tapping her clenched hand three times she uttered, "ochareo, adache" and opened her fist to let a shower of *dilogún* (16 consecrated cowrie shells of *divination*) cascade

[1] Throughout this thesis I quote both the legal name and the appointed Lukumí initiation name for priests, followed by its English translation in parentheses.

onto the mat before her. Hastily jotting down on a notepad, she looked up at us, and in an unusual smile that inched from behind the pipe clamped in her teeth, she grumbled, "this boy has a pact with *Babalú Ayé* (orisha spirit of the Earth and healing), and this *odú* says the *orisha* (Lukumí deity) visits him at night." She set her gaze on me and asked, "When Babalú comes to you, what you do with him?" I replied, "We play marbles." Eulalia suggested that a statue of *San Lazaro*, Babalú Ayé's catholic camouflage, be *preparado* (ritually infused) and enshrined in my bedroom, so as to acknowledge his presence and calm his active spirit. I felt my mother's comforting embrace tighten. Reflecting on this intersection of my early spiritual development, and my mother's decision to find resolve in *divination*, I echo the words of Muchona The Hornet diviner as reported to Victor Turner:

> When people come to a fork, they must choose exactly where they want to go. It is a place of choice. Usually they have foreknowledge of the way to go. Everyone has such knowledge. But the diviner goes between the paths to a secret place. He [she] knows more than other people. He [she] has secret knowledge (Turner 2008, 77-78).

At seven years old, I had encountered *divination* for the first time. Forty years later, and as a product of that initial consultation, the icon that Eulalia anointed and animated with Babalú Ayé's spirit essence, still occupies a corner of my bedroom with his offering of tobacco, coffee, and permissibly so, marbles. Just as Muchona, the diviner interlocutor, that Victor Turner quotes, I too came to a spiritual fork at an early age. My mother had the foreknowledge of where I was likely to be heading and took me swiftly to somebody that had "secret knowledge," a gifted diviner that could ensure my path was properly illuminated. What I considered playful activity with visiting playmate was the inception of psychic abilities that would later be channeled through and by divination.

Lukumí , the elision of *olú* (I see) *uku* (kin) *mi* (my), a composite word meaning "my brethren," became the term used to distinguish Yoruba descendants from the other African nations present in Cuba. The sunderance of slavery, violently distancing the Lukumí from their tangible religious iconographies, a departure reinforced by the menacing fist of colonial impositions, left a strong linkage to the sacred, their oracle of *divination*. For the Lukumí, oracle, a mechanism of social movement and structure, is the key element in the embodiment of the devotee's connection to divinity through a designated human channel that Max Weber would call the prophet. Weber makes a distinction between priest and prophet where the prophet is distinguished by having a "personal call" and through the operation of "charisma", while the priest gains his/her religious authority through "servitude" to the tradition (Weber 1993).

The term *divination* is an imprecise word to accurately convey the system of prophecy, augury, and knowledge dissemination that the various tools utilized in Lukumí worship convey. In order to better express the ritual incorporation of body and canon, I have created the term "*divinitiation*." The neologism, *divinitiation,* fuses "divination and "initiation" and connotes the intrinsic and intimate relationship between *divinatory* practice, initiation and priesthood. These terms cannot be divorced from each other with regard to oracle and prophecy, and this is not adequately expressed in the term *divination* alone. In Lukumí ritual, *divination* is always performed by an initiated and authorized priest, the intermediary between the divinity *(orisha*) and oracular performance. Throughout my study I implement and specify the use of these terms cautiously, and take great care to explain the process and product faithful to the lived experiences of orisha adherents. Across the Atlantic, and in its many diasporas, acculturating vehicles are a

primary means for attending to all aspects of the devotee's well-being. It is a holistic approach marrying both the body and spirit, interweaving the physical, spiritual, emotional and psychic aspects of being. I start chapter I with the above story to acquaint the reader with the practicalities and lived experiences that are essential for the understanding of how *divination* serves to mediate in all aspects of the Lukumí adherent's life.

1:2 Olúpitán: Engaging Scholarship

Serious scholarly consideration and in-depth exploration of diasporic orisha ritual practice is absent from past and current literatures, in part explained by an extant discursive divide between "scholar" and "practitioner." The discursive divide is evidenced in an all too simplified orchestration of ethnographer as authority, *us,* whose role is to report and facilitate the experience of practitioner, *them,* as discursive subject, a positionality that offers little textual or substantive recourse to focus specifically on initiation and ritual. My research addresses this divide in light of current ethnographic and methodological paradigms that have arisen from a [post]modern critique of deeply entrenched ideas of knowledge production. The producers of ethnography are becoming ever increasingly aware of their role in discursively forming the lives of their respondents. These textual productions sometimes do not match reality and we must be mindful to the positionality of researcher in relation to those which are studied, a task that becomes even more imperative when dealing with subaltern, marginalized or misunderstood groups in which Lukumí religious practice can often be located.

Ethnography, both as process and product, is central to data collection and explanation within religious studies and associated phenomenological analyses. In implementing self-

ethnography as a key anthropological methodology and product for this project, I am guided by Pierre Bourdieu, who states, “nothing is more false, in my view, than the maxim almost universally accepted in the social sciences according to which the researcher must put nothing of their self into their research” (1977, 21). Conjointly, Percy C. Hintzen and Jean M. Rahier state that the visibility, accountability, disclosure and presence of the ethnographer are fundamental for the conduct of fieldwork and within the writing of ethnographies (Hintzen and Rahier 2003, 10). James Clifford (1983), in his work on ethnographic authority, reflects on the possibility of making cross-cultural representations when the ethnographer studies the “other.” Clifford notes that it is extremely hard to pin down “experience” which the ethnographer relies on in order to understand culture. Research is therefore premised on experience as “an effective guarantee of ethnographic authority” (Clifford 1983, 130). These experiences are fashioned into texts by the ethnographer following participant observation, and are effectively generalized and severed from their original interlocutors. The texts are therefore “authored” by the ethnographer and are thus translations and representations of those researched, generating a separation from original experience to written product. Through this gap, authority stays with the writer who has the power to record, evaluate, and report on what he or she has found within the field. The ethnographer is therefore the interpreter and the lens through which one might glimpse the “other,” yet the voices of the “other” are obscured. I concur with Clifford that, “textual embodiment of authority is a recurring problem for recent experiments in ethnography” (Clifford 1983, 141). In order to circumvent the troubling paradigm of authority, I dissolve the barrier between the “other” and ethnographer wherein autoethnography removes the distant and interpretive layer commonly found in ethnographic texts.

Ethnography that omits or invizibilizes the presence of researcher fails to draw a truly objective picture of reality (Marcus and Fischer 2004, 23). As Tessa Muncey tacitly explains, "the autoethnographer is both researcher and the researched" (Muncey 2010, 3). By adopting such a methodological and discursive stance as emphasized in the current study, not only is the distance between the researcher and subject collapsed, the ethnographic product itself is enriched as a result. Carolyn Ellis confirms that, "validity means that our work seeks verisimilitude; it evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible" (Ellis 2004, 124). Muncey cogently insists that ethnography should adequately reflect the dynamic, subjective nature of the person as researcher, who can be privy to multiple identities, and have the ability to adopt different perspectives towards themselves by standing back and reflecting (Muncey 2010, 16). These developments in critical ethnography and reflexivity have opened up important new avenues for the exploration of Afro-Cuban religion both on the island and its diaspora.

Lukumí religion is widely practiced in Cuba and its diasporic communities by men and women, as well as spanning all perceived ethnicities and socioeconomic classes. It is popularly known by its etic and denigrating label, *Santeria*, literally, *the worship of saints*, which favors European and Catholic influence and invizibilizes Afro-diasporic agency (Thompson 2002, 5-6). It is more accurate to state that the religion is composed of African, European and other diasporic systems of thought and constellations of iconography, with a long and complex history spanning continents, slavery, issues of gender, sex and race. The Afro-Cuban religious landscape is complex, rich in historicity (Brown 2003), racial and political discourse (Ayorinde 2004), as well as performative and musical legacies (Hagedorn 2001).

My research directly engages and builds upon existing concepts of liminality, hermeneutics, and multiple somatic layers of Lukumí priesthood through self-ethnography. Critically, very little academic attention has been paid to liminality and hermeneutics within Lukumí religious practices, its initiations, and associated rites from the emic perspective. One exception is Mary Ann Clark's (2005) work on orisha ritual practices wherein the author briefly discusses these aspects with regard to liminality. My work directly contributes to advancing this academic terrain and offering a new perspective on *divination*, priesthood, and textuality.

Within this auto-reflexive description, I draw upon and incorporate the concepts of multidisciplinary theorists, both traditional and radical. The classical approaches are those of Arnold Van Gennep, Pierre Bourdieu, Victor Turner, and Terry Rey. The iconoclastic voices, breaking with previously held paradigms of acculturation, and producing a new epistemological shift to transculturation are those of Fernando Ortiz, and Romulo Lachatanere. These Cuban scholars/ethnologists, working in the early twentieth century, were "agents of metacultural elaboration" (Palmié 2013, 113), and although they were not initiated Afro-Cuban scholars, they were sympathetic to the religions they investigated and sought to include the wider transatlantic scope in their respective research. While they were working with imperfect theoretical paradigms, and for Ortiz especially, whose early work was contra to furthering Afro-Cuban religiosity, they both impacted and constructed enduring ideas of Lukumí and related religious discourse. Ortiz's most popular contribution was transculturation that proceeded acculturation, effectively an idea that subjected different diasporic peoples devoid of culture and heritage.

Transculturation, which arose from Ortiz's work on sugar and tobacco, was introduced in *Cuban Counterpoint,* offering a nation-making blueprint that homogenized disparate ethnicities producing the now famous *ajiaco.* A Cuban cultural stew, *ajiaco*, is the Caribbean equivalent of the melting pot analogy with the notable difference that the individual ingredients retained their morphology and textures yet produced a unified presence. Within this transculturative *ajiaco*, the individual components are indigenous, African, European, and other ethnicities found on the island. *Ajiaco* became the overarching paradigm for the creation of a truly Cuban identity, one that I refer to as a sense of "Cubanicity", also known as *Cubania*, or *la Cubanidad (*Palmié 2013, 96). It is important to note that since its inception, *transculturación* was central to the socio-political ideologies of nation making by the Cuban state. Therefore, we must be vigilant of divesting this term and associated *Cubania* from its specific use as a unifying politically driven notion of what it means to be Cuban. While Ortiz sought to understand the contributions and processes of Afro-Cuban cultures and religions within the specific framework of Cuban identity-making ideologies, subsequent researchers have taken up the gauntlet of transculturation as a stand-alone concept and have applied it to the investigation of several Afro-Atlantic diasporic religions (Yelvington 2006).

I share the view of Stephan Palmié that transculturation and *Cubanicity* are an adequate departure from acculturation and should not be equated with hybridity, the imprecise mixing of African gods and Catholic saints. Equally so, if we understand past contributions to the academic investigation of Afro-Cuban religiosity, there appear major voids in the type of knowledge and information gathered which did not readily fit into the transculturating and Cuban identity-making agendas. One type of such knowledge that has been persistently lacking occurs in the realm of *divination* and its associated hermeneutical interpretation. By

using self-reflection, my work challenges the cultural *silence* resulting from emic/etic binaries in the social sciences. In order to adequately contextualize and negotiate an innovative and path-breaking understanding of the dynamic testimony set forth in this study, I respectfully give equal value to the subaltern scholarship and academically silenced voices of the Lukumí elders I make explicit reference to throughout the body of this work.

A lifetime of searching for a deep-rooted sense of accuracy and transparency within recorded Afro-Cuban religious scholarship has borne little fruit, as the voices of priests and *practitioners* remain textually muted and academically under-perceived. Accordingly, the decision to organize my research through self-ethnography has been a fervent and instinctual endeavor, grounded on the conviction that having a religious upbringing requires devout perseverance and dedication. These aforementioned tenets are intrinsic to the ways that Lukumí *practitioners*, such as myself, equate living and existence as having no discernable separation from religious *practice.* That is, for many Lukumí, *practicing* the religion incorporates every moment and every facet of being, regardless of the specific times and structures dedicated to ceremonial and liturgical praxis. I hope to convey the idea of Lukumí religion as a lived reality, one that echoes throughout each vignette that follows, indicating that it is both the concentrated focus on the religious procedure at hand as well as the wider, normalizing and every day interactions, settings, and interlocutors that are also present, and require capturing.

1:3 Awófalá: Research Aims and Questions

The specific purpose of research, and objectives of my thesis, answer and justify the following questions:

> 1: In what ways does the body become the site for religious experience, a canonical repository, in the context of Lukumí priesthood?
>
> 2: How is Lukumí *divination* a form of "academic praxis?"
>
> 3: How is *divinatory* knowledge produced, expressed, and disseminated [oral]literally, by whom, and in what contexts?
>
> 4: How is Lukumí *divination* knowledge communicated and relayed with regard to composition and performance, its language, recitation and style?
>
> 5: What are the relations between bodily experience and ideas of communitas, liminality, and religious production?

Considering the methodology adopted here, my work answers in what ways and to what extent does the lens of reflexive ethnography meaningfully focus or detract from capturing and interrogating contemporary Lukumí religious experience?

1:4 Komólafé: Methods

Through its methodology, my research unites a personal and life-long affiliation with Lukumí religion, exploring concepts of the body, related practice and performed experiences within the theoretical armatures of hermeneutics, liminality, and somatics. The goal of my self-exegesis of what a priestly life has been, is to foreground the "*I"* within academic treatment of religious practice, how it reencounters itself through Lukumí ritual and ceremony within the socio-cultural setting, and every reality that informs the "*me."*

The genesis of this self-ethnographic journey commenced when I embraced the decision to become a Lukumí priest at the age of 13, almost 34 years ago, and describes the liminal junctures and domains that arose through ritual practice, as well as the dominant

presence and reshaping of my communitas. Liminality as defined by Turner (1991) refers to the crucial threshold stage that a ritual subject experiences during initiation. Turner defines it as being "neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial (Turner 1991, 95).

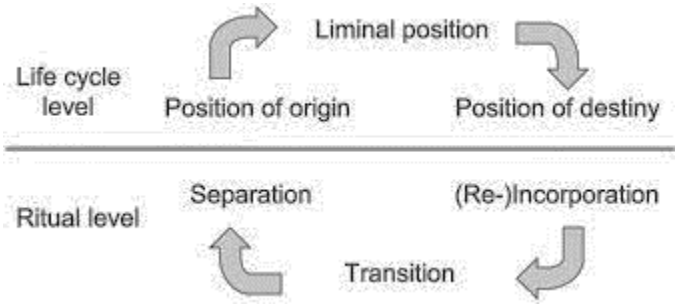

Figure 1: Diagram of liminality following Victor Turner

I construct the current ethnography from lived experiences, inspired by my religious rearing that follow the themes of hermeneutics and threshold crossing, such as the formative and rigorous years of practical training and mentoring with elder priests following my initiation. My experiences are herein discussed and analyzed according to qualitative fieldwork and my multi-disciplinary theoretical training. The decision to use self-ethnography as a central methodological and discursive tool was carefully made as it engages important new critique in ethnographic and anthropological knowledge making, with the intention of understanding the *self* and its association to *others* (Chang 2008).

With all reflexive and non-reflexive work there is cause and pause for concern regarding objectivity, an awareness that requires careful navigation in order to convey representation within the text that serves to bring forth knowledge about those who are studied rather than merely being a self-serving academic exercise. I expound upon these

religious experiences within wider, socio-cultural contextual schemas, and governing epistemologies in which they are located. I introduce a new conceptual framework I wish to label as "*mutualism through contradistinction."* In introducing my conceptual framework, I propose that within Lukumí religion, and others, while there may be contrasting and individuated practices, procedures, and protocols, the debates that ensue, and the voiced contrasts that are evident, may actually operate within a discursive field that when viewed collectively function to reach the desired outcomes and goals, allowing for a pluralistic theoretical discernment of emic and etic religious praxis, occurring within the same body. It is of great significance for my study to situate these experiences in this way in order to afford a more comprehensive arrangement in which these religious practices are lived. In so doing, my thesis takes a necessary departure from often cited meta-narratives and official discourses, such as Christian and Western hegemonic ideologies which can be antithetical and/or contradictory, e.g., popularist sentiments towards African-derived religiosities. These important differences inflect Afro-Cuban Lukumí religious practices both directly and indirectly and are examined thoroughly in my work.

My methodology draws on the wealth of personal experience, and rich ethnographic and phenomenological data that help situate dialectics of an autoethnographic nature within Lukumí religious life. In order to answer the questions raised in this study I use reflexivity as the critical ethnographic process to understand divination and initiation, focusing on journal entries, the examination of divination *libretas*, as well as multi-textual sources that include images, divination narratives, secondary sources, and vignettes of my past discussions and interactions my mentors, and other Lukumí scholars and ritual specialists.

1:5 Oriyandé: Analyzing the Data

The qualitative data produced from the present ethnography distinctly engage hermeneutics within its analysis, drawing on the "assemblage of texts" (Geertz 1973, 97) and furthering it to include all instances of culture production that comprise Lukumí nuances of *untexts*, a term I implement to designate the special and recursive textual productivity within Lukumí religion where *text* is continually produced and directed to and by individual olorisha. Building on the idea that textual production is processual, my analyses closely follow the work of Paul Ricoeur (1992), who expands hermeneutical understanding beyond the sphere of written *text* to include all forms of cultural and ritual action and performativity.

Accordingly, my study is also inspired by the work of Ruth Flannigan (1992), who gives prominence to the considerations necessary when both assonance and contrast, as significant conductors for oral literature, are made prevalent in interpreting Lukumí oracular patterns. My thesis further supports the advancement of somatic theory on Lukumí priesthood and *divination*, framing Lukumí epistemology through the adoption of emic cultural phenomena. With a particular focus on the metaphysical correlation and synergy between the concepts of body and spirit, my research illustrates the embodiment of Lukumí hermeneutics. I opt to situate these data in this way in order to afford a comprehensive model in which these religious practices are experienced and oracular knowledge produced.

As previously mentioned, by examining existing scholarly studies of *sacred texts*, the voices of Lukumí dogmata have been historically absent. My project enriches discourse on Lukumí religious *divinatory* practice, its association with hermeneutics, liminality and somatics, by foregrounding the subaltern voice.

1:6 Kekénigan: Diasporic Relevance

In order to understand the essence of Cuban culture, the precursor to understanding Afro-Cuban religion, it is essential, according to Gustavo Perez, "to go to its black history, because in Cuba this story is inseparable from its white history, it's *Cubanidad"* (Perez 1997, 34). Consequently, I perform a systematic and descriptive analysis of the fundamental aspects of Afro-Cuban religiosity in order to calculate its influence on Cuban culture in general, its diasporic relevance and transnational intersections. The synergy of these two separate worlds, spatial and temporal, oral and written, echoes the physical spaces of exiled, and the struggle to build unity between these two dialectic forces. The Lukumí religion is a thread that runs from Cuba to its diaspora, helping to shape lived experience in varied settings and subject to continual negotiation. The idea of *Cubanidad* similarly is present in diaspora and helps form and inform ways of being and of identification. My autoethnographic analysis touches on both of these fields in some measure, wherein my own religious practice is inherently linked to ideas of being Cuban and the projection of Afro-Cuban religiosity into new terrains.

In the course of the research, I renegotiate the meaning of the term *Afro* in diaspora, and how such a small prefix can be substantially paradoxical. For instance, within established discourse on Lukumí religion, the term Afro-Cuban is often used to describe and denote a history, trajectory and appropriation of ethnically derived and situated religious elements. However there is no Cuba or *Cubanicity* for that matter, without *Afro*, inherent or implied. The use of *Afro* appears to have different definitions and understandings within academic implementation when discussing diasporas in the Americas. We therefore have to proceed systematically and with great caution when referring to any one example or specific usage of the word (Alexander 2005). My work highlights the importance of a spatio-temporal sensitivity of the terms we inherit

academically, the epistemologies that we encounter, and the very real possibility of incautiously losing *something* in translation. Often these terms have longevity because they are intrinsically attractive or aversive to our specific object/subject of study.

It is important to this project to clarify that the Afro-Cuban vernacular used throughout its production is Lukumí dialect, and inherited and modified ritual and cultural language from the Yoruba of South Western Nigeria, and neighboring ethnic groups that has developed in Cuba since the sixteenth century.

1:7 Oyúgangan: A Broader Perspective

The broader perspective and relevance of my research extrapolates how the Lukumí *divination* system, *odú,* a semiotic corpus which makes use of an extensive body of hymn-like recitations and algorithmic formulae, is practiced among Afro-Atlantic communities in Cuba and its diaspora; a global phenomenon that directly relates and interacts with other Afro-diasporic religious traditions. The word *odú* refers to a mystical figure, a sibylline oracle regarded by the Lukumí as the supreme deity of wisdom, acumen, and intellectual development.

In contrast to other forms of *divination* that employ spirit mediumship, *odú divination* does not rely solely on an individual having oracular powers, but rather on a system of signs that are interpreted by a skilled *diviner*, a designated orisha priest/ess. The *odú divination* system is applied whenever an important individual or collective decision has to be made, as well as a directive for life-cycle rituals and rites of passage.

The *odú* literary corpus, consists of 256 prophetic chapters subdivided into verses called *ése* (strophes), which are components of *patakí* (moral parables), whose exact

number is unknown as they are constantly increasing, and ritually adapting to modernity. There are approximately 800 *ése* per *odú*. Each of the 256 *odú* has its own specific divinatory signature, doctrines, correspondences, governing deities, and oratory idiosyncrasies, which are ritually prophesized by the ritual specialist using 16 consecrated cowrie shells, or *dilogún.* The *ése*, considered the most important part of Lukumí divination, are vocalized by priests in a poetic language, *oriki*. The *ése* reflect Lukumí history, language, beliefs, cosmology and contemporary social issues. The knowledge of *odú* has been preserved within the Lukumí community and transmitted among orisha priests for centuries, surviving the depredations of African slavery, the oppressions of colonial and postcolonial rule, and the religious pressures of Western-normative evangelisms.

On a broader level, my study delineates the intergenerational transmission of *odú* through the transfer of knowledge by Lukumí priests via the creation of methodologically standardized and personalized instruments, called *libretas de itá* (divinatory journals). These are emically derived products which are oral and performative, rather than textual and canonical, the latter of which has traditionally been the yardstick by which religious orthodoxy and authenticity have been measured against. *Libretas de itá* are significant for several reasons. They are chronicles of Afro-Cuban religious memory, records of Lukumí ancestors, and help position the priest/priestess within their current life, as well as linking them to ancestors and future incarnations. *Libretas* are the physical manifestations of an ongoing narrative fashioned by *odú* through communitas and priesthood. These journals provide continuous guidance for both spiritual and material purposes; they are the scholarly texts of Lukumí religion. Within academic analysis of global religions there is a

distinct discursive separation evident between those religions considered *global* and *established* resulting from their textuality, and those religions that are vernacular and invisibilized stemming from a lack of unifying text.

Lukumí religion applies *divination* and the formulation of *libretas* in place of a single historically situated canon. An important component of my research engages the historicity of alphabetization, or lack thereof, of the African slave in Cuba (Nwokeji 2002, 366-369). Compellingly, one of my principal aims is to encourage awareness-raising among the global Lukumí community, enhancing pride through the scholarly insight of our culture, as well as to inform academia, and the wider society, of the importance of *odú*; a sacred-living hermeneutical fountain of dogmas, with a deep rooted transnational bond to its Afro-Atlantic genealogies.

Through my approach, which is comprised of reflexivity, hermeneutics, and performativity, I further scholastic discussion into alternative methodologies and amplify lesser known aspects of Afro-Cuban religiosity. Both my approach and the content of my work are informed by a discerning need to investigate and elaborate on aspects of diasporic religion that do not easily lend to Western and Eurocentric concepts of textual production (Hall 1991, 89-97). These are fundamental and important steps into nuanced ways of accessing fields of knowledge and performance that have, thus far, been overlooked by existing foci in academia. In light of the efforts of Lukumí practitioners to preserve their religiosity, I firmly anticipate that this endeavor will propel future work, conducted by others who may be inspired by the content of my ethnography, and find this research theoretically useful by extrapolating the frame of this study to other cognate,

non-textually based Afro-diasporic religious traditions.

1:8 Ipin Iwétó: Chapter Layout and Design

The terminology used to head each chapter and subsequent section of the thesis is Lukumí dialect. The phraseology serves to familiarize the reader with Lukumí dictum commonly used to describe the discourse of *divination* rituals. The meanings of these headings are explained in the glossary of terms and are used because they are the equivalent of terms employed within relevant Lukumí ritual practice. Originally intended to flow in a direct chronological pattern, the natural interweaving of circumstances and events in a Lukumí practitioner's life call for a more dynamic equilibrium. The narrative mode of this thesis will therefore fluctuate temporally to express the fluidity of its events.

Chapter I opens with an autoethnographic vignette, important to the self-reflexive design of this thesis. The chapter addresses the aims, theoretical framework, and methodologies of the study. I discuss the production of ethnography relating to representation, authorship, and authority, along with the need for reflexivity in ethnography.

Chapter II discusses Lukumí cosmology, initiation, and the structure of the religious house, *ilé*, in conjunction with communitas, somatics, and liminality. I elaborate on these concepts with lived examples from my own Lukumí priesthood initiation experiences.

Chapter III details the logistics, regimentation, and agents of *divination,* as well as the distinction between text and untext. I discuss Paul Ricoeur's understanding of the sacred as text, and its associated hermeneutical approach relating to both world religions

and Lukumí practice in particular. I introduce *odú*, *patakí*, and divination tools used by olorisha and babalawo.

Chapter IV acquaints the reader with the emissaries of *divination* rituals, namely the *oba oriate*, the *ofeicitá*, and the participants and recipients of *odú* production. I also discuss the historical development of Lukumí *divination* texts that are derived from *libretas de itá*.

Chapter V elaborates on the systematization of the *itá* ceremony. I discuss the schema of olorisha initiation with regards to the formation of liminality within the initiation process. I state the importance of *cabildos*, mutual aid societies, in forming the foundation of Lukumí *divination* textual practice.

Chapter VI examines and describes the three core *itá* in Lukumí religion; their constituents and production. These itá are derived from Lukumí priesthood initiation, the confirmatory and priesthood status elevating ceremony called *pinaldo*, or knife, and the *awofakan/ikofa* ceremonies.

Chapter VII, the concluding chapter, underscores the importance of sacred text-making and the application in the lives of priests/priestesses post *divination*. I apply Pierre Bourdieu's and Paul Ricoeur's understanding of hermeneutical analysis to Lukumí *odú*, *libretas*, and communitas.

Chapter II
Emíwá Lukumí: I Am Lukumí

2:1 Emírán Koshé: Approaching Lukumí Cosmology

Lukumí dogma comprises a cosmology made of a singular *Deus otiosus,* a resigned Absolute Being, and a pantheon of gendered deities or *orisha* (selected head deities). These deities, male, female, and intersex, each govern distinct aspects of nature and geographical terrains such as rivers, oceans, winds, mountains, thunder and forests, to name a few. The principal name of God in Lukumí is *Olodúmare*, a praise name that means "Supreme Sovereign" (Matibag 1996, 58), but is also known by other praise names in Yoruba, such as *Olófin,* the "Law Giver," and *Olórun,* the "Owner of Heaven," thereby forming the Yoruba triumvirate. Olodúmare is the source of *ashé*, or spiritual panoptic energy. *Ashé* permeates and sets in motion the entire universe, manifested and contained in the physical world through organic and natural media such as stones, plants, animals, and people (Ayorinde 2004, 160-162). *Ashé* is a quintessential and intangible life force; a morally neutral power, that radiates and streams from *Orun,* Heaven, to *Aiye,* Earth, between Olodúmare and humanity, male and female, positive and negative, and between all that exists in creation (Thompson 2002, 5-6).

Ashé is governed and mediated by the orishas on behalf of Olodúmare who is envisaged as remote and disconnected from humanity (Brandon 1997). One direct way of aligning the adherent with their tutelary deity, and thus creating a physical and spiritual lifelong bond, occurs through the process of *kariocha*, which is the elision of *ka* (place), *ori* (head), and *ocha* (deity/orisha), meaning the unification of the body, specifically the head, which is regarded as the *seat* of wisdom and destiny, with the *ashé* of his or her

orisha. A bond is then created which is carried out through elaborate ceremonies requiring the intercession of the initiated priestly community, procedurally guided at every step by *divination*, which produces for the neophyte their foundational *divinatory* markings.

Regardless of biological sex, the initiate is referred to as *iyawó* (junior bride); a term applied to both women and men that have undergone priesthood ordination and, marks the incipient phase of their priestly life (Ayorinde 2004, 130). The *babalorisha* or 'father of orisha', and *iyalorisha*, 'mother of orisha' are those priests, male and female respectively, that are said to have "given birth" to at least one *iyawó*. The gender-neutral cognate to designate a babalorisha or iyalorisha is *olorisha* (one who has orisha).

A third category of priesthood, *babalawo* (father of the sacred knowledge), a denomination open only to men, describes specialists in Ifá *divination* and healing (Matibag 1996, 33). Babalawos are considered a separate yet collaborative corollary in that they are initiated to the orisha *Orunla*, the deity of prescience and prophecy (Brandon 1997, 12). Both olórísha and babalawo perform initiations, sacrifice, *divination,* and healing.

2:2 Ifárakará: Connecting With My Destiny

June 10, 1980 was a very warm day. The shirt collar under my light grey suit felt tight around my neck. As the family car approached St. Anthony of Padua Church, in Union City, New Jersey, my mother turned to me in the back seat and asked, "My son, what do you want as a graduation present?" Luckily, my father's vociferous complaint at the "darn traffic" spared me from having to answer *mima's* question. After the rather long

and arduous graduation ceremony, with all its pomp and circumstance, and the endless sermon by the visiting Archbishop of Newark, on our way to my celebratory luncheon, the question came up again. Opportunely, my father's voiced suggestion as to where we should eat, once again saved me from responding: children of Changó, like my father, are so *expressive* and *well-timed*. Still and all, that inevitable moment finally defeated my evasions. Seated around the table at the Dragon de Oro Chinese Restaurant - Cubans love Chinese food - the inevitable question came up again. This time, a tasty spararib in my father's mouth averted my rescue. As I looked around at my closest relatives, all anticipating my response, I uttered, "I want to make *santo* (be initiated), mom." Particles of pork sprayed all over the table, as my father began to choke on his appetizer. My mother gently folded her hands on her lap, looked at me tenderly, and softly said, "Then let's make *santo*."

Figure 2: Ramon Fernandez, *Ayalayí Ekún* and Daisy Fernandez, *Omí Dina*

A year and a half prior, March 1979, at my father's *itá of santo*, Obatalá speaking through his oracle, *me prendío para ocha* (arrested me to initiation). An orisha arrest is a way of saying that the orisha presses the need for the person identified to be initiated. I remember as chairs and benches rolled aside to make passage for me as I made my way to the mat where *divination* was being performed. Antonio, the *diviner* asked, "And what orisha do you feel is your head?" Everybody knew the strong attachment I had to Yemayá, my mother's head orisha, but, as if guided by a power unknown to me, I responded, "Obatalá!" Antonio nodded, and handed me the two *divinatory* pieces that would change my life forever. Upon his instruction, I shook the items in my hands, as if they were dice in a yahtzee cup, separating one into each tightly clenched fist. Antonio, speaking Lukumí, rotating the cowrie shells on the mat, cast the items and spoke aloud, "What is known is not questioned! This head belongs to Obatalá!" As if to seal the deal, a white *mazo* (multistranded beaded necklace) was thrown over my shoulders from behind by Julia, a priestess of Yemayá, who simultaneously exclaimed, "Obatalá snatched him out of Yemayá's arms, but Yemayá is putting him in protective custody." I had been cuffed and sentenced, and my destiny had come full circle. I was 12 years old.

My parents were well aware that initiation was my in future. Aside from it being mandated during my father's initiation, *odú* had indicated this exact fate for me at my mother's initiation in the early 1970's. To no one's surprise, all of these predictions, and so many more, had been foretold by the interventions of one of my mother's main spirit guides, La Negra Yayumba. An emancipated slave who had lived and died in Cuba, the daughter of a Lukumí mother and a Mandingo father, she was initiated to Yemayá as a young woman in the secrecy of the slave quarters where she lived. Yayumba often visited

in spiritist possession through my mother and could be relied upon for her uncanny accuracy regarding life events, and her detailed messages from the ancestor realm. With all of these accounts ever relevant in our minds, I seized the opportunity given to me over my plate of orange chicken at the Dragon de Oro restaurant to ask for initiation as my graduation gift, knowing full well that it would be cautiously and swiftly observed. Eleven days later, on June 21, 1980, I crossed the threshold into the *cuarto de santo,* the room of the saints. At this precise moment, I remember hearing my father's voice, "How ironic, my son came into this world at 12:24 am. Now he is reborn into the world of the orisha at 12:26 am." Only by hearing this was I made aware of the actual time.

A part of this story that I omit when recanting my personal entrance into the inner circle of Lukumí priesthood is one that speaks about a persistent health issue that I had until the day of my initiation. Born and raised in New Jersey, an eastern state that has all four stations of climate change, I had Seasonal Chronic Bronchitis, a very unpleasant health condition, from the age of six. Four times a year, with the shifts in weather between summer, fall, winter, and spring, I would spend days under intensive medical care, at times requiring hospitalization. The afternoon prior to my initiation, when I was taken to the river for my commencement rituals, a part of which entails ceremonial bathing, comparable to a baptism, I remember how cold the water was, even in June. My mother, well aware of my health issues, accompanied my madrina and the olorisha entourage to the river. Noticing my hesitation in stepping into the frigid water, my mother reassuringly said:

> "*Iyawó*, remember that I made ocha with two malignant tumors in the walls of my uterus, planning for an emergency hysterectomy. In my *itá*, Yemayá said she would heal me without the intervention of modern medicine, and by my third

> month of *iyaworaje*, the tumors had disappeared. Obatalá will not allow you to get sick."

I cautiously stepped into the water, and my sanctification ritual began. Seasonal Chronic Bronchitis was washed way in the waters of Ochún's river, never again to pay me a visit. *Ashé!*

Figure 3: My mother, Daisy and I. Last photo before my initiation, June 1980

The eleven days separating my eighth grade graduation and my initiation are forever impressed in my memory. The plethora of preliminary rituals had been prescribed within the *vista de entrada*, the preparatory divination session conducted by my *padrino* (Lukumí father), which ascertained and mapped out the spiritual and physical preconditions of the space and participants, leading up to the eve of initiation. This first contact with *odú* is the incipience of the liminal process of Lukumí initiation. In order to fulfill these qualifying specifications, constant trips back and forth to my padrino's house, the *ilé*, were necessary. During these days of busy preparation my family and I came into contact with many members of my *ilé* (Lukumí household) whose loving congratulations were unfathomable.

Up until that point, I had been an *aborisha* (Lukumí adherent) of this communitas for over a decade, and now, even without priestly initiation, my natal and spiritual parents, and myself, were being blessed with felicitations. In the work of Arnold Van Gennep, these first transition rites are viewed with having both individual and collective value. Rites for the spiritual and physical safeguarding of those parties intended on facilitating ritual childbearing constitute the holistic wellbeing and preservation of the communitas' perpetual nucleus (Van Gennep 2007, 49). Not only was I beginning to transition, the entire structure of my *ilé* was reformatting. The olorisha collective was preparing to split, as if through some spiritual mitosis, in order to birth a new priest.

As I sat quietly in *penitencia*, a pre-initiation atonement stage the neophyte undergoes, I compare the assignation of duties to the arriving *olorisha* the morning of my initiation to the casting for the last grammar school play I participated in, "The Nativity." There were many *shepherds* scuffling around, preparing the space physically, and others who were assigned the more ceremonial chores. Ritual herbs which had been sent by mail from Miami replaced the image of the straw for the manger. As the animals for the ritual sacrifice were delivered from Sal's Farm, the strong scent of their pelts reminded me of what the lambs and donkey at the manger might have smelt like.

When José Manuel, the aforementioned *oriate* to my initiation ceremony arrived, donned in his impeccable white attire, accompanied by his two assistants, respectfully greeted by the performance of ritual salutations, so entered the *Three Wise Men*. These magi bore gifts of sacred herbs, rum, and coconuts.

The *Joseph* in my story would be my padrino, Orestes Valdes, *Oba Tero* (King Has Great Calm), ever watchful and mindful of the surroundings. A short, robust, light-

skinned Cuban with piercing blue eyes and a Santa Claus-like jovialness about him who had been initiated to the orisha Changó, padrino had initiated over a hundred olorisha at the time of my ritual. His presence was dynamic and charismatic. Padrino was a man of the masses, a father tiger ever protective of his cubs.

Figure 4: Orestes Valdes, Oba Tero

Then there would be the *Mary* character, my *oyubona* (co-parent, midwife), *madrina* (godmother) Dinorah, the first known Lukumí priestess native of the Dominican Republic, eagerly anticipating the birth of the new initiate. Madrina had an aristocratic flair about her. She always made sure that her "*pasas*," as she humorously referred to them, a Cuban-Spanish term for tightly coiled hair, were well *ironed* and *in place*, her hands and feet manicured and pedicured to perfection, and that she was always immaculately dressed in white, the color of Obatalá, her tutelary orisha. In dramatic irony with my allegory, madrina mostly sat around and enjoyed delegating her ritual responsibilities to other priests, assuring that it was a way of sharing her *ashé* with them.

The final actor in the story would be the baby *Jesus*, me, covered at all times by a white towel, sitting in a corner, silently contemplating my energetic surroundings. As the days of substructural ceremonies progressed, it was important that all the rites were documented in the journal that was to become my *libreta of itá.*

2:3 Ágo Ilé, Ágo Yá: Forming and Embracing Communitas

The beginning stages of my initiation, as described above, actively depict the gathering and making of communitas in the Lukumí ritual setting. Within the Lukumí tradition, the importance of communitas and *ilé* is derived from the Oyo of Southwestern Nigeria; as described by William Bascom, with the Oyo, "the clan and sub-clan completely overshadow the immediate family in importance" (Bascom 1984, 46). Thus, the individual familial nuclear unit is deemphasized and subsumed into the broader more important clan relations that together span family and community.

In order to bring about the *divination* that appears in one of the latter stages of priesthood rites, the *iyawó* undergoes the connection of his or her orisha through the mediation of the assembled olórísha. In order to initiate a priest, it requires the presence of approximately 15 olórísha to carry out the ceremonial duties and, crucially, to generate the needed *ashé* for the unification of the orisha to the neophytes head and body, both ethereally and corporally. Through active and direct procedures, conducted on the physical body, for example shaving the head and painting ritual markings by all those present, the congregation directly lends their *ashé* to the proceedings, a reciprocal act that the *iyawó* counter transfers to his or her *ilé*.

Priests and priestesses who are not biologically connected become kin through religious ties, and are defined collectively as *idilé,* literally, a symbiotic collaborative of ritual relatives. Members of the *ilé* refer to each other as god-siblings, initiated by god-parents. However, the use of the word "god" refers here to the parentage of the orisha for the individual. These ritual relationships are as important and binding as sanguineous ones. Through these religious structures we can get a clear sense of what it means to derive communitas. Victor Turner posits that the bonds of communitas are "spontaneous, immediate, concrete, and are not shaped by norms" (Turner 1974, 273), and are directly applicable to the experiences and exigencies of Lukumí ritual that first produce liminal structures, resulting in *divination.* By the coming together of different persons to spontaneously invoke and produce *ashé,* we find that these ritually induced levels of relationship and communitas surpass the mundane or secular relationships that these individuals engage in outside of the *ilé*.

2:4 Kariocha: Initiation Compendium

The kariocha initiation is the quintessential rite of passage marking the symbolic rebirth of the neophyte consistently directed through *divinatory* praxis. It is the assembled priests' duty to guide the initiate undergoing the ritual transition from the initial phase of separation via liminality to being incorporated within the *ilé* and emerging with a new priestly identity. While Turner traditionally associates ambiguity with liminality, this "betwixt and between" stasis is in fact highly ordered and contingent on the knowledge and structure set by divinatory rituals from the onset of religious familial structures.

Recent scholarship has focused on belief-making and religion-making discourses, and the discrepancies and assumptions that early Euro/Christian inspired theologians have produced regarding subaltern diasporic religious practices. Bruno Latour cogently states that "belief is not a state of mind, but a result of relationships among peoples" when referring to the practice and objects of the Afro-diasporic religious cognate, Brazilian Candomblé (Latour 2010, 2). Latour's work makes precise reference and parallels to the ways in which both "savages" and scientists construct their fetishes, arguing that modernity failed to grasp the extent of human constructions of artifacts and their transcendence from fetish to fact. In this vein, I maintain as Latour does, as well as his Brazilian respondents whom he quotes at length, that the real issue is not regarding the presence or absence of power, but rather the sleight of hand and disingenuous machinations of hegemonic Euro-cynical transferences to indigenous psychic products and processes, often labeled as "idols" and "fetishism"(Latour 2010, 4-7). Both Lukumí and Candomblé are examples of local knowledge and their religious structures are based on communitas building and *ashé* imbued practices. These forms of ritual scholarship and text making result in meaningful, power-filled, and status-elevating religious structures, with internal logics define through *divination.*

Thinking through initiation, the diverse experiences that a person undergoes illuminate notions of the body in order to bring about priestly change and attendant *divination*. Thomas Csordas (1993) sees embodiment as a paradigm or methodology that situates the odú within an understanding of the cultural field within which it operates. These are called "somatic modes of attention" (Csordas 1993, 136), which describe, the culturally defined ways of orienting and ascribing meaning to the body according to its

surroundings and the embodied presence of others. The theory aligns exceptionally well with the examples I have drawn upon in this chapter in the context of initiation and the raising of communitas within the *ilé* structure. The vignettes above explore religious phenomenology and embodiment from the perspective of somebody that has undergone the process of initiation and experienced the self-transformation as well as the techniques to the body that cause the shift from the uninitiated state to that of initiated.

Isáro: Silent Meditation

Sitting in isolation and in quiet contemplation, as is required of all initiates prior to entering the inner sanctum to begin initiation, I recall the sensation of my madrina's hands as she guided my body up from my chair, asking me to close my eyes until further notice. Suddenly, I felt enveloped by the coolness of a large shroud of fabric that was placed over me, covering me from head to foot. Accompanied by the ringing of bells and the chanting of the priests surrounding me, I slowly stood up, with my eyes tightly shut and my head bowed, and walked barefoot until brought to a full stop. Madrina directed my right hand into a fist and said, "Knock three times iyawó." I had reached the threshold of Lukumí initiation. As the entry ritual continued, familiar with the area I was traversing, at that moment it was as if a long journey had come to its completion.

Religious somatics is a methodological tool that still requires unpacking in order to contextualize it fully within the dynamic paradigm of religion as culture and religion as change. Roland Barthes (1986) makes a valid distinction between the body and embodiment. In doing so, Barthes separates the experience of the physical frame that of the discourse that exists as a fragmented substance in cultural production (Barthes 1986, 68). The distinction sees embodiment as a heuristic to understand the processes outside

the biological and material realms. I understand embodiment as the intangible bodily experiences that are the starting points for discussing religious practices and the use of "biopower," which can be deemed the energy of the initiates and the initiators, interacting and evoking the necessary conditions for successful *divination* to occur between the *diviner* and the *divinee*.

Csordas asserts that the methodological approach to understanding cultural-ritual phenomena can also make evident the reevaluation of data already analyzed through other lenses. Somatics, therefore, identifies embodied performativity that is otherwise subsumed in other analytics. The strength of somatics is that it builds upon the dearth of anthropological and sociological research in the areas of reflexive ethnography and bodily experience.

Chapter III
Isótélé: Divination as Apparatus

3:1 Odú: A Living, Willing, [Un]Text

The scholarly evaluation of most religious scripture incorporates canonical interpretations that are ambiguously limited by the constraints of a particular and set time, its political considerations, and a historical socio-cultural proximity. These venerable yet archaic chronologies have served as spiritual and intellectual parameters, confining and limiting a more contemporary human reality, prophetically and textually. Information, inspiration, and guidance within religion can come from multiple sources, including religious scripture and divination. While it is uncommon for any particular religion to use both of these in equal measure, there are religions that use these mechanisms to produce divine intercession. *Divination* is the most important institution of Lukumí culture. In his pioneering work on the Yoruba presence in Cuba, ethnologist William Bascom effusively wrote on the complete and undiminished preservation of divinatory rituals among Lukumí practitioners in the mid twentieth century, expressing his amazement at the commitment to the continuity of oracular performativity (Bascom 1951, 17). Bascom's "discovery" of the replete and extensive divinatory thriving in Cuba is a bridge to understanding the place of these performances outside of the written text.

Paul Ricoeur observes a provocative conundrum in the relationship between what is considered a "sacred text" (i.e., Christian Scripture) and, the process of critical editing which transforms the piece into a scholarly interpretation (Ricoeur 1995, 68). Ricoeur states that upon tampering with the text, it ceases to be sacred. We are therefore left with the issue of recasting the idea of the sacred, whereas Ricoeur suggests, "it is not the text

that is sacred, but the one about which it is spoken" (Ricoeur 1995, 17). The movement and transformation from sacred to authoritative text is an activity which involves translation, canonization, and critical interpretation. The latter concept of interpretation, or rather hermeneutics, is pivotal as it is contingent on the point where dialogue ends and textualizing begins (Ricoeur 1976, 32), key words which have great significance to my study considering the focus on the sacred. While Ricoeur exclusively explores Christian and Islamic sacred text interpretations, the ways in which both the sacred and texts are invoked and assembled in Lukumí religion is significantly different.

Within Lukumí tradition, as described in the reflexive vignettes in my thesis, great emphasis is placed on creating sacred space and contact with the orishas, both through *divination* and initiation (*divinitiation*). Texts, relating to *itá* and *libretas,* do occupy a central and important role, given that Lukumí conceptualization of "sacred text" is not confined solely to the written word, as it is embodied in quotidian experience. *Divinitiation* sets parameters for the priest in all aspects of his or her life. We are instructed as to what individual diet to follow, what colors are conduits of positive and negative energy, and should therefore be worn or not, and even what geographic location is more suited to our personal wellbeing. I, for example, do not eat eggs or oranges, avoid wearing black, and should live near the ocean.

Examining the intersection between Lukumí concepts of scripture interpretation as a platform for renegotiating Lukumí *divination,* and its capacity to adapt and engage modernity is foundational to my research, a process that demonstrates when existing advice, gleaned from *odú,* is updated and refitted for the purpose of including examples and instances that the inquirer may face in his or her life at the moment the oracle is cast.

An exact illustration of this is when *odú* forewarns against the riding of an unbridled horse, which can be extrapolated to include contemporary forms of uni-vehicles, i.e., a motorcycles, cycles, and mopeds. The *diviner* would then make an efficient assimilation between both the traditional and contemporary interpretation of the precept.

Inspired by what he identified as "colonial provocations," Juan Noble, *Oba Onyi* (King of Honey) a priest of Changó and my ritual kin, important in my erudition as a *diviner*, propitiously met with the challenges imposed by Euro Christian normative standards of canon analysis. He referred to *odú* as the "conscientious voice of Olodúmare; up-to-date, willing, and alive." His approach of teaching Lukumí religiosities was based on the ideology that since human cognition is perpetually and dynamically maturing, and *odú* is transmitted and interpreted through *ori* (deified human psyche), it would only make sense that the oracular prognosis of our era should differ, and even be at variance with its ancient, and to some extent, outdated voice. He stressed that as most academic disciplines redefine and amend theoretical approaches and methodologies, segueing with modernity, the proximity of the interpretation of sacred scripture to human realities should also be reevaluated, amended, and if necessary, accordingly repaired. Juan was a man ahead of his times.

In Lukumí *divination*, these intricate and rather delicate nuances, are incorporated pedagogies, vital in the indoctrination process of the selected *diviner*, a ritual entitlement reserved for a chosen and privileged breed of Lukumí priests. It is the conceptualization of this distinction that compels me to readdress the emic, which is an essential feature of this thesis. I agree with Max Gluckman's recommendation that more biographies of those exceptional individuals who become *diviners* are needed, allows for a clearer, more

precise rendering of a culture's dynamic elements, both dramaturgical and linguistic alike (Gluckman 2004, 96).

Lukumí discourse on the origins of *divination* refers to *Igba Odú* (calabash of maternal prophecy) as the female deity that embodies the 256 oracular mandates of Olodúmare. *Orisha Odú* (prophet deity), as she is more commonly referred to, is the omnipresent maternal matrix, the ethereal nexus from where the 16 *omodú* (prophets) of the Lukumí oracle of *divination* are born. In Lukumí theology, Orisha Odú represents the muliebral spiritual quality that all human beings have to spiritually reproduce *ashé* and *iwá péle* (good character). The balance of these two metaphysical elements creates *eléda* (acumen), the vital substance of Lukumí ethos. Orisha Odú is the source upon which Lukumí hermeneutics are developed, expressed, embodied, and lived, as she decodes Olodúmare's messages which act as guides in our lives. Orisha Odú provides vitality to the implements used during *divination*, sharing these rites with her husband, Orunmila, the orisha of *divination*.

Lukumí precepts further describe Orisha Odú as the ancestral amniotic sac, a vessel of ecumenical omniscience, past, present, and future alike, where the most remote spiritual and corporal transitions that have taken place in this universe pass through from generation to generation. As stated above, Orisha Odú birthed the 16 deific seers that form the divinatory family of the Lukumí oracle. The following is a composite chart of the 16 odú configured upon the divination mat utilizing consecrated cowrie shells that emanate from Orisha Odú, along with their pertinent correspondences of gender, overarching directive, and associated orishas:

Table 1: Complete list of Odú and their ritual implications

Odú	Gender	# Cowrie Shell Marked	Primary Prophecy	Orishas Governing Prophecy
Okaná	Male	1	Creation	Oduduá, Agayú, Olókun, spirit ancestors
Eyíoko	Female	2	Dualism	Ibeji, Ochosi
Ogúnda	Male	3	Warfare	Ogún, Eleguá, Ochosi
Íroso	Male	4	Testimony	Agayú, Olókun, Yemayá, Yewa, Osaín
Oché	Male	5	Ancestry	Ochún, Ochosi
Obára	Male	6	Dialect	Changó, Ochún, Orunla, Osaín
Odí	Female	7	Anima	Yemayá, Ogún, Oyá, Oba Nani, Erinle
Eyéunle	Male	8	Acumen	All Orisha
Osá	Female	9	Anomaly	Oyá, Agayú, Ogún
Ofún	Female	10	Mystical	Obatalá, Oyá, Ochún, Ikú
Owáni	Female	11	Legacy	Babalú Ayé, Eleguá, Nana Burukú, Osaín
Eyilá	Female	12	Evolution	Changó, Ochún, Eleguá
Métanla	Female	13	Afterlife	Babalú Ayé, Orunla
Mérinla	Male	14	Affliction	Obatalá
Márúnla	Male	15	Scrutiny	Orunla
Meríndílogún	Male	16	Reincarnation	Oduduá, Yewa
Opíra	Gender Neutral	0	Obscurity	Olókun, Oduduá

The Lukumí *divination* system contains an extensive body of literature composed of thousands of symbols, demographics and measurements, each with a name, and a specific order that is respected, observed, and maintained throughout religious practice, in which all possible situations that may affect a human being in the course of his or her life

are represented. At times misconstrued as an allegorical corpus, Lukumí *divination* is by no means figurative or emblematic. The sagas which comprise the *odú* are chronological narratives which recount the sequential historicities of the orishas. The *odú* are by no means extravagant juxtapositions used to illustrate seemingly insubstantial folktales; they are authentic and palpable accounts, sacred biographies of the orisha's lives, before, during and after deification, as some orisha where born mortal and later ascended to deity status, while others incarnate as gods. Reflecting on the analyses of Victor Turner, states of apotheotic liminality posit that orishas, along with other beings of the human world, undertake processual and status-changing rites. Turner notes how these rites enact an elevation in status that cannot be undone, whereby the being in question moves from a relatively low position or status to one that is substantively higher, within a particular and well defined system or institution (Turner 1991, 167). In Lukumí ritual theory, this complex structure of ideologies is the central nervous system of *odú*. My early childhood, listening to the tales of the orishas and other characters contained within odú, made them come alive seem less abstract.

Orín Ipése: Lullabies

I recall the bedtime stories my mother would recite to me as a child. My lullabies were not stories of little girls in red capes, dangerously playing with wolves, or of irritable dwarves with eccentric names, threatening the freedom of a princess locked away in a tower. I fell asleep to the tales of *Yemayá*, the orisha of the seven seas, and her sister *Ochún*, the orisha of the rivers, dividing these water bodies among themselves as a sign of sisterhood. My knight in shining armor was not a soldier in an English tale of chivalry and romantic exploits, he was *Ogún*, the orisha of iron and war, or *Changó*, the

orisha of fire and thunder; brother deities who often fought for the love of a familiar goddess. Or my all-time favorite, an anecdote about a noble giant named *Agayú*, the orisha of the volcano, entrusted with crossing humans to the afterlife on his shoulders, instead of climbing down beanstalks after a boy named Jack. Inaccurately and ineptly, Lukumí *odú* has been relegated and erroneously compared to Aesop's Fables (Gonzalez-Wippler 2009), reducing this dynamic corpus and interactive *divinatory* canon to the status of the tall-tales of an elusive Greek story teller.

In his path-breaking contribution to the study of African ways of knowing, anthropologist Phillip M. Peek writes about the obscure and undefined place of divination as encountered in many indigenous African cultures (Peek 1991). His work counterposes that Yoruba, and therefore Lukumí, historical oral traditions about Ifá and *odú*, interact with adherents in a tangible space, allowing for the sustention of meaning and social order in their lives. I use this example to introduce *odú* as the 'motherboard' of the Lukumí *divination* system, and the *dilogún* (16 consecrated cowrie shells tabled above), the *ikín* (consecrated palm nuts), and the *ékuele* (divining chain), which I will subsequently elaborate on, as the primary components and conductors for this ancient philosophy. The interlocutor, acting as an embodied vortex for oracular philosophy, spiraling dogma from the corpus of *odú,* performing both the mystical and the physical maneuvers necessary for the successful and accurate dissemination of doctrinal acumen, is the *diviner*.

The *diviner*-inquirent role within Lukumí religious landscape is an ongoing and synergistic collaboration. In tandem with the quanta of *divination* a person expends to the community, he or she requires an equal or greater reception of *divinatory* counsel in

return. Therefore, the *diviner* through their ritual activities, generate *odú* not only for the seeker, but for themselves. This constant contact between the *diviner*, the *seeker*, and Orisha Odú is the driving force for religious communitas, and extends the meaning of *divination* to connote not just prescience, but also empire-building in the form of *ilé* and *idilé*, and bringing the will and advice of the orishas to bear on all facets of Lukumí religious existence.

The practicalities of *divination* consist of an appropriately ordained and trained priest or priestess preparing a ritual space, such as demarcating a surface with the sacred straw mat, and all the necessary *divinatory* tools, that may be called upon during the course of a *consulta* or reading. The *diviner* invariably will pour libation and begin the invocatory *moyúba*, calling upon the universe, ancestors, Orisha Odú, and other salient entities to lend their *ashé* to the proceedings, and guide the hands and mind of the *diviner*. The various *divination* items used during this process are constantly manipulated in order to enliven and inform the orishas, who in turn begin to *speak* through the implements. Once the invocation has been completed, the *diviner* will link the *divination* tools momentarily to the client by *presenting* them to key parts of the body and they will then be ready to begin deciphering the oracle. The *olorisha* who uses *dilogún* will cast the 16 consecrated cowrie shells on the mat which make known the *odú* in *conversation* through the amount that land convex side up (the *mouth* of the shell). The *babalawo,* who may use either the *ikín* or é*kuele,* will similarly determine *odú* through the specific processes of manipulation associated with each device used to *divine* via Ifá's systems and mechanisms of oracular expression. Whatever method of determining the *odú* is used, it

is now the responsibility of each *diviner* to connect with Orisha Odú using his or her *ashé* in order to effectively deliver oracular insight and acumen.

3:2 Patakí: Moral Dictum

There are a myriad of sacred tropes attached to each of the 256 *odú* in Lukumí *divination*. These *patakí* (imperative narratives) are designed to incite both the *diviner* and *inquirent* in assimilating the stories of the orishas with the individual's own pressing life events being experienced during the act of *divination*. *Patakí* serve as buffers between human actuality and sacred journeys, yielding humanistic value to deific allegories where gods, animals, and natural elements, form a macrocosm of *divinatory* exegesis. A wise monkey advises, the wind supplicates, the moon counsels, the ocean cleanses, a river purifies, and a sacred tree embraces and comforts. In essence, *patakí* animate nature, performing tangible, cognitive analyses of the ethereal and the mortal. The recanting of *patakí* is a common discourse for Lukumí adherents, and are frequently made reference to during non-ritual gatherings. *Patakí* are used commonly and instinctively as daily reflections for worldly events. An advertence for the choosing of whom to go on a date with may very well reflect the romantic exploits of Changó and Ochún, the proverbial star-crossed lovers, and the rather fatalistic outcomes of their amorous interactions. A difficult decision, with optional outcomes, can recall the *patakí* of Ogún's trusted ally, the dog, who having four legs, is able to only walk one path, therefore narrowing down the choice of one's resolution. Through this oral tradition, Lukumí devotees are reminded of the simplicities of our individual lives, regardless of the complexities of the world around us. By giving similar histories within the *patakí* that

echo the experiences of the orishas to the individual, the quester is made aware that the orisha are cognizant of all aspects of humanity, including suffering, thereby relating directly to the needs of the inquirent.

While the above passage relates how *patakí* in divination discursively operates, the most striking lived example of this transpired during my own initiation. After the festive drumming ceremony, the second day in the week-long initiation interval, the third day, the morning of *itá* had arrived. At sunrise, my ritual bath had been administered, along with the other corporeal ceremonies performed at daybreak. I sat [im]patiently, still animated from the celebration the day before, waiting for the opening rituals of *itá* to commence. I compensated for my mandatory silence, as an *iyawó* cannot speak unnecessarily, by pacing eagerly from one margin of my enshrinement to the other, practicing my newly learned Orisha Soul Train Dance Line moves. My mother, concerned with my anxiety, approached me and said, "*Iyawó,* calm down. You look like a monkey in a cage." Though her intentions were harmless, and her demeanor humorous, our padrino jumped out of his chair, warning that *"*Olófin was listening, oracle is in the ambience, and *patakí* can be persuaded to manifest accordingly." He lovingly embraced my mother, rolling his eyes up in jovial dismay, reminding her that the words of an *olorisha* are enticing to an unknown casting of the oracle. Together they stepped away from my *trono* (sacred alcove) and waited for the *oriate* to commence *itá*.

Inescapably, the first oracle that I cast in my *itá* tells the *patakí* of how the *monkey*, though wise and sovereign over the other animals of the wild, was unhappy and ashamed with his elongated tail in comparison to his rather small body, and asks the orisha Obatalá to shorten its length. Impressed by Obatalá's sagaciousness, explaining

that his tail and size would allow him certain physicalities that the other animals of the wild did not have, the monkey began to jump from tree to tree, merrily dancing, elated that his complex was actually a blessing. In turn, Obatalá touched by the monkey's welcoming reaction to his counsel, made the monkey his confidant, entrusting him with all the wisdom of Olófin's secret library. Exuberant with joy, the monkey enthusiastically danced away. I am still dancing. Ashé!

In the course of my religious training and practice, I have oftentimes encountered instances where an *olorisha* has reflected on a particular *patakí*, only to have the exact parable manifest in an impending *divination* ritual. This example demonstrates my theory of mutualism through contradistinction, juxtaposing the readiness with which Lukumí priests reflect on religious allegories, as would a Christian priest, a Muslim Imam, or a Jewish Rabbi, when applying scriptural symbolisms to an adherent's ordinary life events, allowing these more spiritual resolutions. Thus, the *olorisha's* negotiating of *patakí*, like other scriptural devices, and their interpreters, are channels by which sacred will and precepts are ascertained, serving as guides to accessing holy directives (Awolalu 1996).

3:3 Dilogún: Sixteen Cowries

There is a distinctly Lukumí retelling of the Yoruba myth where Orúnla, the orisha of *divination*, relenting to his wife Ochún, the goddess of love and fertility, and her tenacious and fervent attempts to provide oracular counsel for their people in her husband's absence, gently unfastens 16 cowrie shells from her braided hair and magically gifted these with the oracular power of *odú,* thus creating for her a specialized instrument for her use as *diviner*. This Lukumí tale of how Ochún received her divinatory gifts is

echoed in Nigeria and the diaspora, where similar narratives are routinely discussed and debated by priests and scholars alike. Cowrie shells have historically been invested with socio-cultural value and importance; they were a symbol of wealth and royalty among the Yoruba. The common word for 'shell' in Yoruba is *aye*, cowrie shells, while they can be termed *aye,* when they are consecrated and used for divination are called dilogún. This fact then produces the argument that cowrie shells can only be *dilogún* through rituals of consecration.

Figure 5: Dilogún and accompanying divination tools

The late, great, Antonio Lorenzo Carmona, *Ewín Tolú* (Snail Brings Wealth), priest of Obatalá, Lukumí scholar, and ritual specialist in many of the African traditions practiced in Cuba, had an unequivocally keen pedagogical strategy for making me understand the importance, and hierarchy, of the *dilogún* as *divinatory* apparatus:

> An adult human normally has 32 teeth in their mouth, 16 on the bottom and 16 on the top. There are 16 *odú*, 16 prophets who tell the stories of the orishas. The mark of 32 teeth in a human's mouth, double the amount of *odú*, is why Olodúmare shaped the cowrie shell the way he did, with 16 groves on either side of its opening. It all represents the two aspects of prophetical advice, the good and the bad, positive and negative *ashé* in constant discourse. The clattering sound teeth make when they are tapped together is comparable to the sound that *dilogún* make in the hands of the *diviner* before he or she casts them for *divination*.

> Furthermore, look closely at the color of cowrie shells, there different shades from white to yellowish. Isn't that the color of human's teeth?

To further ingrain this ideology in my mind, Antonio handed me a cowrie shell and asked me to "count the teeth." Not sure of what I was doing, he slowly proceeded to count the crevices on the *mouth* of the shell. Alas, 32 slits, 16 on either side. After years of painstakingly grinding away at, stabbing into, and filing down the rough edges of an innumerable quantity of cowrie shells, readying them for ritual use, either for *divination*, or for sacred orisha regalia, these small objects which had housed some type of mollusk, took on a larger than life significance.

Figure 6: Antonio Lorenzo Carmona, Ewín Tolú

An important lesson, taught at the very inception of my priestly apprenticeship, instilled in me a sense of value and respect for even the most miniscule elements of Lukumí devotional materials. Antonio further elaborated on his reasoning for the connection between *dilogún divination* and human teeth, additionally validating its authority over other forms of Lukumí *divinatory* praxis:

> Not to argue against the dictates of the *verde y amarillos* (green and yellows; bitingly referring to babalawos), but in accordance with Lukumí myths of

> creation, the planet Earth was originally a mass of water. Therefore, shells, in all their manifestations, are one of the oldest signs of life that we know, and were gifted with prophetic energies first, as there were no trees, and much less seed pods (sarcastically referring to the *ikín* of Ifá). Yemayá, the great mother of universal consciousness, shared the knowledge of where the bag of wisdom had fallen in her ocean, exclusively with her sister Ochún. See, in the beginning, Yemayá owned the planet, together with her father Olókun, the orisha of the oceans depth, and was content with her rule.

Antonio's rendition of the story of the precedence of *divination* mechanisms, one that many a learned Lukumí scholar, including myself, agree with, surprisingly finds vestiges in a contemporary Yoruba source. Dr. Wande Abimbola, who is the rare combination of learned scholar and accomplished babalawo, narrates the following *odú* passed on to him during his training from an elder Ifá priest from Ilobu, Nigeria, the region where the following saga is depicted. A *patakí* from the corpus of the *odú*, *Okaná Sorde,* speaks of a bag of wisdom that Olodúmare threw to the earth requesting that all deities seek its location, the prize being that whoever found it would be the wisest orisha. Having showed the bag to all the deities, they each went to different corners of the Earth to look for the God-given bag. Abimbola tells us that since Ochún and Orúnla were an inseparable duo, they decided to look for the bag of wisdom together. Within the 127 line narrative that recounts this story, we learn that it was Ochún who was the first to discover the bag, with the assistance of her sister, Yemayá, at which point Ochún swiftly secreted it into the fold of her dress. Later, Orúnla stumbled upon the bag in his wife's possessions and took it for himself, again without telling anybody. Thus, the *patakí* intimates that Ochún, not Orúnla, was the first deity to use the bag of wisdom for *divination*, before her husband surreptitiously pilfered it and made it his own (Abimbola 2001, 149). If we examine both stories, we can hypothesize that the bag of wisdom, which descended from

Olodúmare, landed in water, the domain of Yemayá. As mentioned earlier in this study, Yemayá had the tendency of sharing her wealth with her sister Ochún. So it came to be that Yemayá would have surely given the bag of wisdom to her sister for safe keeping.

Notwithstanding the tensions and variance found in the above historical accounts, the *dilogún*, both as the fundamental *divination* apparatus, and as a sacred object for the transmittance of *ashé,* is a vital constituent of all Lukumí ritual undertakings and their embodiment.

3:4 Ikín: Seed of Acumen

The legend connected to the presence of the *ikín* in Lukumí *divination* rests on another portrayal of the story of creation. When Olodúmare sent the orishas to the Earth, requesting that they cultivate the planet and prepare it for human occupation, they each reported back that there was no land for them to dismount from their heavenly realm, the planet was a colossal mass of water. Seeing this as an averse act of disregard to his decree, Olodúmare then sought the assistance of *Odúdua*, his master-at-arms, an omnipresent and preeminent orisha, entrusted with unconditionally executing Olodúmare's every mandate. Odúdua prepared for his terrestrial destination, descending to Earth on a silver chain, taking with him a hen, a pouch full of sacred sand, and a handful of grain. Scattering the sand over the watery surface of the planet, then evenly spreading the grain, Odúdua lowered the hen onto the solidifying marshy surface. The hen began to scrabble and claw away at the kernels of grain, and mystically, as the sand and the grain mixed, a crust formed, creating a layer of top soil. Seeing that Odúdua's work was acceptable, Olodúmare once again invited the other orisha to descend to Earth

and resume the task he had originally asked of them. As this rather lengthy story unravels, and the several variations of it add to and take away from its original arrangement, the one concurring feature of this epic tale, acceded to by most Lukumí adherents, is that the first tree that sprouted from the marshy land was the *ikín* tree. Germinating from an enormous cowrie shell, it is believed that the tree was a gift from *Olókun*, the owner of the ocean, Odúdua's younger brother, as a symbol of fraternal solidarity. This temporal detail leads once again to many the ongoing argument among *diviners* that cowrie shell *divination* is therefore senior to palm nut (*ikín*) prophecy, an ongoing gender discourse that eventually reaffirms Ochún's mastery of *divinatory* doctrine over that of her husband, Orúnla, the orisha who serves as the intermediary between man and Olodúmare, for according to this portrayal of the creation myth, it was Orúnla who acted as *eleri ipin*, eye-witness to Odúdua's endeavor. The *ikín* here represents both the material conduit for accessing *divination*, as well as the starting point for the spiritual genealogy that is used to guide contemporary conversations on the practice and development of Lukumí *divination*.

Figure 7: Ikín tree

My first recollection of having seen an *ikín* resonates with certain awe in my memory. Eloisa Duran, *Ochún Funké* (Ochún Embraces Me), the iyalocha who gave me my first *eléke* (sacred necklaces) initiation when I was four years old, was one of the founding mothers of the Lukumí tradition in North America. Born in 1917, in the town of Marianao, Cuba, Eloisa migrated to New York City, in September of 1953. She accompanied her husband, Cuban babalawo Alfredo Montevideo, *Ifáchade* (Ifá makes the crown), a 32 degree Mason in the *Orden de Los Caballeros de la Luz* (The Order of the Gentlemen of the Light), the first brotherhood of Cuban freemasonry established in the United States (Roman and Flores 2010, 74-76).

In 1955, then a young widow, she settled in Union City, New Jersey, where she established a rather large and renowned *ilé.* Madrina Eloisa had the reputation of being a scrupulous priestess, rigid in her practice and augmentation of the orisha tradition.

Figure 8: Eloisa Duran, Ochún Funké

A tall *jabá* (a Cuban term for mixed race females that are phenotypically described as having fair skin and curly auburn hair), with piercing hazel eyes, she always

maintained a certain elegant demeanor, creating an atmosphere of uncompromising opulence wherever she went. Relentlessly amiable, madrina attributed her rather swank presence, making no excuses for it, to being "*hija de La Santisima Caridad del Cobre,"* literally, daughter of the most Holy Lady of Charity, the orisha Ochún's catholic camouflage. On one momentous occasion, I recall madrina rummaging in her bra, which doubled, no pun intended, as a cache for amulets, trinkets, money, and other paraphernalia. While extracting a plethora of items from her *brassierium*, a rather large black marble, or so I thought, rolled off her bosom and onto the floor. Caught in frenzy, she ordered no one to move, and then frantically catapulted herself onto the floor, pressing her lips to the ground.

The company watched as madrina rose to her feet with the dark orb clenched in her lips, arms akimbo, a posture of dominion popular among the female orisha, and their protégé, in the Lukumí tradition. Her *ikín* of Orúnla had accidentally fallen on the floor, and when a consecrated *ikín* drops, it can only be picked up in the mouth, for when an *ikín* plummets, as she explained, "it is an omen of ill fate." Further explanation of the *ikín's* role and use in *itá* ritual is discussed in a proceeding chapter of this study.

Years later, I would remember her performance of picking up the *ikín* when for the first time I accidentally dropped one of my own *ikín* on the floor of the ASVAB (military entrance exam) Testing Center. I had ported my *ikín* in my pocket, hoping that Orúnla would assist me in procuring a high score on the noted challenging examination, securing a more formidable position for myself in the U.S. Navy. It was a cold and snowy winter's day. The floor tile tasted salty. I scored 98 out of 100. *Ashé!*

3:5 Ékuele: Emancipating Chain

Though not an instrument used during *itá* ceremonies, the *ékuele,* or chain of Orúnla, is one of the channels used in the Ifá divinatory network. Given that the substantive argument within this thesis contends that Lukumí *divination* is a noteworthy scholarship, a hermeneutic literature, encoded into numbers and dogma, diffused beyond its Yoruba origin, gleaning nuanced ways of recasting its wisdom, I find it important to mention all of the above which can be described as "sacred tangible conduits" of this ancient doctrine (Gleason 1973, 9).

Figure 9: Ékuele, divining chain of Orúnla

Used by babalawos in their daily divinatory practices, the *ékuele*, given its portability and maneuverability, is used for more day-to-day consultations. Again, though the *ékuele* is never used in *itá divination* rituals, it nonetheless, has equal value in its ability to transfer oracular knowledge. Cuco, *Ogunda Che* (title of Ifá *odú*), the babalawo godfather to my Ifá consecration, gave a rather colorful rendition of the nascence of the *ékuele*:

> The *ékuele* has two traditional ontological allegories. One explains it as strand of metal links representing the silver chain Odúdua used when he descended to the Earth. The other, more accurate and popular rendition, describes *ékuele* as the fetter Orunla used to imprison the soul of his most insubordinate wife, a woman

> whose name is eponymous to this article of *divination.* The legend holds that *Ékuele* was Orúnla's most controversial wife, unyielding of her involvement and public criticisms of the policy-making that was produced through the efforts of her husband's *divination,* constantly challenging his authority. *Ékuele* often spoke her mind, and the priests of Ifá, insubordinates of Orúnla's decrees, began to support her revolutionary and adamant muse-like acumen in the issues against the social disorder in Orúnla's reign. Embarrassed by her constant public impositions, Orúnla magically transformed her into the divining chain, forever enslaving her to do his bidding. Unknown to Orunla, *Ékuele* had been warned of his plan, and vengefully took with her the souls of their eight children. Those spirits are represented in the eight coconut shell badges intercalated into the chain. Separated evenly, four badges on either side, the *ékuele* is divided into two segments, known as legs. Read from right to left, the right side belongs to *Elegua,* the orisha of the crossroads and paths, and the left to Orúnla. Depending on how the face of the badges fall on the mat of *divination*, concave or convex, so the babalawo interpret the *odú* represented. The *ékuele* is understood to be a respected extension of Ifá, also referred to as the ever lashing and acute tongue of Orúnla's apotheosized wife, from whence the name comes, *ékuele*, snaring tongue.

The above mentioned divinatory instruments, both in their respective ontologies and their manipulation for the production of *odú*, heavily and directly invoke tropes of the body and anthropomorphosis. The *dilogún,* whether we equate them to being the first or second eldest tool, figuratively become "mouth pieces." The *ikín* are rendered so precious that special handling, as if they were alive, is required. Picking them up by the mouth is the most intimate and solemn way of conveying the importance of these sacred objects, again furthering the significance of the mouth as prophetic organ in their care and handling. The *ékuele,* rather than simply being a chain and strung coconut disks, is resolutely a physical manifestation of Orúnla's most polemical wife, for who else would a *diviner* work with in order to produce the *ashé* of Olodúmare necessary on this earthly plain?

Chapter IV
Idánwó: The Scholar, the Scribe, and the Subject

4:1 Obá Oriate: Ritual Emcee

All Lukumí ceremonies are officiated by a trained, expert ritual overseer. Though the etymology of the term implies male bearing, the *oba* (king, monarch) is not gender specific. *Ori* (head, wisdom) *ate* (woven palm frond mat) is a term that implies the descent of sacred providence necessary for *divination* onto a woven straw blanket. The *oba oriate* is the ruling voice, authorized to direct and guide every intrinsic action during all Lukumí ceremonies. According to David H. Brown, "the *oríate's* authority were made, not given; they had to be established through rhetorical persuasion and practical struggle" (Brown 2003, 150).

An office which is ascribed to an individual based on the scrutinous evaluation of elders, the *oba oriate* is appointed only when the senior officiate-priest is confident that the trainee is able to perform as a ritual specialist and *diviner*. Brown further expounds on the historicity and emergence of the oba oriate, noting that the role is "without precise African antecedents, the *oríate's* role was both the corollary and catalyst of the condensed Lukumí pantheon within La Regla de Ocha" (Brown 2003, 150). The *oba oriate* is an orisha scholar, a prodigy whose designation is determined at the inception of their personal interaction with *odú*, during their initiation *itá.* In the role of *diviner*, the *obá oriate* is more commonly referred to as, *itálero;* 'ero' being the morphologic designation used in Spanish to denote action, in this case, the action of *itá.*

4:2 Iyalé: All Things Gendered

The origin of the important and prestigious oba oriate role has traditionally been associated with women in the Lukumí tradition in Cuba. Oral testimony handed down to me through my elders, dates the rise and prominence of particular *oba oríates* to the late 18th and early 19th centuries, which are widely regarded as the formative years of the structure of the Lukumí religion. These accounts also inform us that the *oba oríates* were intimately connected with the rise of Afro-Cuban *cabildos*; mutual-aid associations organized along African ethnic ties which also acted as safe-spaces where African-derived religions could be quietly practiced (Brandon 1997, 71).

Intrinsic in these non-familial sodalities was the prominence of the female *oba oríate*s. Remembered through Lukumí narratives and invoked before every religious rite, the names of prominent religious ancestors and progenitors of the Lukumí religion in Cuba are called upon, in order for them to lend their *ashé* to the proceedings. As a result of these ritualized utterances of founders' names, these figures and their biographies are also remembered and routinely retold. It is through the oral recitation at religious functions that we learn who they were. The handful of names of respected *oba oríate*s that are recalled, the architects and progenitors of Afro-Cuban orisha religion were all women. These matriarchs were:

Timotea Albear, *Ayai Lewu LaTuan* (priestess of Orisha Oko)
Ña Rosalia, *Efunshe Warikondo* (priestess of Yewa)
Atikeké (priestess of Yemayá)
Adewa (priestess of Ochún)
Delia Malecón (priestess of Yemayá)
Monserrate González, *Oba Tero* (priestess of Changó)
Fermina Gómez Pastrana, *Oshabi* (priestess of Obatalá)
Ña Belen Gonzales, *Apoto* (priestess of Yemayá)
Guillermina Castel, *Ochún Laibo* (priestess of Ochún)

These ritual masters of ceremony were, by far, the most well-known and respected by orisha worshippers. They are collectively attributed with establishing present-day Lukumí orthodoxy, a quorum of priestesses renowned for being brave and knowledgeable leaders, who were the architects responsible for bringing the diverse threads of *divinatory* knowledge and associated oracular praxis which has so far remained an unexplored and under-reported aspect of the development of Lukumí divination within Cuba.

These elder and renowned oba oríates fashioned a systematic and ritually cohesive spiritual framework within the new, creolized environment. Christine Ayorinde, who has researched the interplay of identity and politics in Afro-Cuban religion, explains that during the essential formative era of orisha worship in Cuba, there were "very few babalawos, perhaps only ten were initiated in the nineteenth century" (Ayorinde 2004, 180), a fact that would historically entrust the emergence of Lukumí divinatory practice in the diaspora almost exclusively to these pioneering matriarchs.

4:3 Ipé Isé: Divine Vocation

The forty ninth *odú*, *Odi meyi*, marked as 7-7 in the count of the cowrie shells, identifies the ability of an individual for being a gifted *diviner*. When this *odú* is marked, the *diviner* encourages the inquirent to study the prophecies of the orisha, making a coherent symmetry between these ancient exegetics, and modern academics. After several hours of sitting through my *itá*, the moment came for my tutelary orisha, Obatalá, to speak. The five previous orisha had spoken of deep rooted spirituality, and the communication and embodiment of celestial beings through possession and trance.

Indeed, I had been a channel for welcomed spirit possession since the age of seven, and clairvoyance had begun approximately three years prior to that. When the shells of Obatalá were cast, my *itálero,* Jose Manuel Ginart, *Oya Dina* (Oya Opens the Roads), counted out loud, "Seven-seven family. A *diviner* is born." Jose Manuel, a priest of the orisha Oyá, a highly respected elder and learned orisha scholar, placed his hands on my knees and with endearing gaze spoke,

> You may elect many paths in life *iyawó*, but you will need to learn to create a perfect balance between modern academics and the ancient scholarship of this Afro-Cuban religion. Obatalá will always bring you back to where the pen and the mat converge.

I had just graduated from grammar school 13 days prior; and all I could think of was, 'wait! More homework?' Thirty three years later, so it was, so it is, so it shall be. *Ashé!*

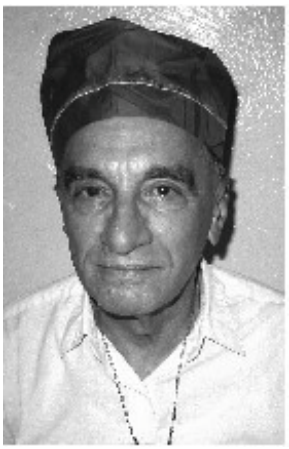

Figure 10: José Manuel Ginart, Oyá Dina

An indispensable agent in the triumvirate of all Lukumí initiation rituals, which includes the *ofeicitá* and the *iyawó,* the *itálero* has absolute diction over the casting of oracle. They are entrusted with the delivery of orisha hermeneutics in a methodical manner, analytically efficient, and systematic in engaging *divinatory* exegetics. The ritual

act of imparting *odú* is exclusively and hierarchically shared with a trained and cultivated registrar, she who bears witness to oracle, the *ofeicitá*.

4:4 Ofeicitá: The Court-reporter

A privilege appropriated only on the most refined notaries, the *ofeicitá* (sees the untold story) serves as the transcriber of oracle during *itá*, responsible for the recording and auditing of the dictums of the *itálero*. If the *itálero* is considered the prophetic delegate, endowed with the knowledge of oracular precepts, then the *ofeicitá* is the journalist, skilled in the correspondence of *odú*, an essayist and biographer of sorts. Bearing in mind that Lukumí *odú* is an intangible, living untext, it is important to note the historicity of the role of *ofeicitá* within the Afro-Cuban Lukumí tradition.

Occupied specifically by women, the role of *ofeicitá* preserves the Lukumí belief that women are better story tellers than men. Though a secret and forbidden privilege, the Lukumí slaves who were made literate by their slave-owners are the progenitors of the written *itá* custom. During the divination sessions such as *itá,* or *divinitiation*, it is the ofeicitá's specific function to record the odú untexts, and accompanying odú notations, within the initiate's journal, *libreta de itá*, forming a tangible copy that the initiate can subsequently refer to over the course of his or her life.

In March of 2000, while visiting Cuba, in the Havana suburb of Poey, I had the distinguished honor of meeting one of the oldest living priestesses and renowned ofeicitá of our time. Natalia Hernandez Cubilla, *Omi Lai*, (Water Shields Me), was born in 1915. In 1921, nearing her sixth birthday, she was initiated to the orisha Yemayá. A severely sickly child, her initiation at such a young age was designated by *divination* as a

lifesaving mechanism. Her auspices as an *ofeicitá* began as a very personal interest to help preserve the advice of the orisha for her own *ahijados* (literally godchildren; spiritual offspring), during a time where women's roles where routinely confined to domestic chores:

> I was born in poverty, yet my life was rich. I should not be here today telling you this story, but I am. Yemayá saved me. She snatched me from the hands of *ikú* (death). We were too poor to go to school, not because it wasn't accessible, but because we could not afford to buy clothes. Instead, my uncle, Arturo, a freemason, taught us all to read and write. I remember I had three carbon pencils, blue ones that my uncle had given me, blue for Yemayá. When he taught us the alphabet, he made us write our name over and over again. I wrote, Omi Lai.

Though home schooled, to some degree, and capable of perhaps finding some type of gainful employment, Natalia chose the life of orisha practice. She expressed to me how she was certain that the only thing she had to give back to the world, her legacy, was to initiate as many orisha adherents as she could, it was her way of "giving back what Yemayá had given her." Honoring the schooling efforts of her uncle, Natalia pioneered the *ofeicitá* movement in Havana.

Other olorisha who had the privilege of knowing her, recall how her initiation preparatory lists always included a brand new notebook, and three unsharpened pencils. When she allowed me a perusal of the only copy her own *itá,* it was a single piece of yellowing, and very fragile paper. Inscribed on it were the *odú*, a list of witnesses, and maybe five paragraphs of oracular advice. It was the lack of 'clerkship' that fired her passion for Lukumí erudition and pedagogy.

In the summer of 2000, at the time of my visit, Omí Laí, then an 85 year old woman, lovingly brazen and tactfully scrutinous, had celebrated 79 years in the service of the orisha. Natalia shared with me her personal journal, a detailed list which accounted

for over 600 *itá* she had been scribe to. When I asked why she kept the log, Natalia simply responded, "I kept it as a private memento." The last recording in Natalia's daybook was October 25, 1995, done for an initiate of Changó. Natalia was 80 at her last performance as *ofeicitá*; "I only like to write in pencil. The quality of pencils is not that good anymore" - her reason for retiring from the role that earned her fame, respect and tutelage of a fading legacy, the written *itá libreta*.

4:5 Itá Bemí: Journal of my Destiny

The *ofeicitá* to my initiation was Maria Renteria, *Ochún Miwá* (Ochún Has Good Character), a name, with all due respect to her memory, which was antithetical to her persona. Maria, an elder priestess of Ochún, stood at most five feet tall. However, what she lacked in height abounded in personality. Her mother, who she only referred to as *Nena,* was a priestess of Yemayá, and one of the founding members of the first women's suffrage movements in Cuba, sometime in the early 20th century. Given that the fruit does not fall to far from the tree, Maria went on to receive her law degree from the University of Havana two years prior to her migration to the United States the late 1950's, a profession she never exercised. She sported the first recollection I have of well-kept dreadlocks, which she consistently adorned with a comb made of five *coide*, the sacred red tail feather from the African-Grey parrot, a symbol of priestly royalty in Lukumí tradition.

Figure 11: Maria Renteria, Ochún Miwá

A well-educated woman, who chain-smoked cigarettes through a tortoise shell holder, Maria was severely fastidious with her style of *itá* composition, and even more severe with controlling the social environment during orisha rituals. She was a knowledgeable iyalorisha, highly respected and sought after. Given that cigarette smoking is one of the taboos in Lukumí ritual spaces, she bartered her right to smoke, insisting that her pet Chihuahua, *Tito*, accompany her to whatever *itá* she served as scribe to. She insisted that *Tito* was her spirit totem, a reincarnation of her late husband, *Ortelio,* a lauded Afro-Cuban babalawo, who "made her life impossible." No one argued with Maria, and luckily, when I occasionally read through the pages of my initiation *libreta de itá,* it is her pencraft that honors and graces its pages.

4:6 Awóye: A Careful Observer

The most important constituent of the Lukumí divination triad is the *awóye* (cautious witness). I emphasize here that this role is not strictly a coefficient born out of priestly initiation. The *awóye,* different than *iyawó,* is anyone, layperson or adherent, who receives *divinatory* counsel. Specifically, the term implies that once an individual has interacted with and encountered *odú,* they attest to its prescriptions, creating an abiding

relationship with the oracle. The *awóye* is the third element of what J.W. Creswell identifies as "the three 'I's'; insight, intuition, and impression" (Creswell 1998, 142). The *diviner* interprets oracular wisdom, the scribe provides textual ingenuity, and the inquirent embodies the counsel provided throughout the *divination* process.

Chapter V
Itá: Mapping Destiny

5:1 Alagwá Lagwá: Commemorating an Elder

Acacía Pérez Forgués, *Yeyé Fún Bí* (Mother's Purity Birthed Me), an elder priestess of Obatalá who was a co-officiant at my priesthood initiation ceremony, a doyenne of the Lukumí community in Union City, New Jersey, in the early 1960's, was renowned for her keen pedagogical expertise of the Lukumí religion. Acacia was born in the *El Vedado* neighborhood of Havana, Cuba, in 1899 to migrants from The Canary Islands, Spain. In 1910, at the tender age of 11, severe hemorrhaging and other critical health issues, connected with the onset of her premature *regla* (menstruation), lead Acacia to orisha initiation under the tutelage of the eminent iyalorisha, Susana Cantero, *Omi Toké* (Water Reaches The Mountain), a priestess of Yemayá, in Regla, Havana, Cuba. Acacia inherited an acclaimed and esteemed Lukumí lineage, congenerous to my own. Akin to my elders, she was an ever-present and endearing companion at all the initiation rituals which took place in my *ilé,* ensuring the inheritance of her *ashé*.

Figure 12: Acacia Pérez Forgués, Yeyé Fún Bí

On the night of my *itá*, once the *divinitiation* ritual had concluded, joyful with the new *divinatory* and orisha parentage I had been assigned, as the neophyte, unable to ask questions, my probably overwhelmed expression must have been the prompt for her spontaneous sermon. When she began speaking, everyone present in that sacred space, including the ritual cooks in the far off kitchen, heeded with close attention and reverence, eager to hear her usually graceful soliloquies. I recall her words clearly:

> Olodúmare is infinitely larger than the constraints of any one religion. His wisdom cannot be contained by society or man. The way in which his global grasp enthralls us is through these *odú* we heard intoned here today. There is no angry pointing of a blazing finger, or the writing of laws on cold, stone tablets. We hear the lullabies of our ancestors, and become the children of an ancient wisdom we call *odú*. As times change and the ancestors return to the Earth to give their counsel on new, and unfamiliar circumstances, *odú* paraphrases its sacred serenade so that we can adapt it to the here-and-now. I tell you, my *abure* (brethren), *odú* is boundless, the orisha are vast, and Olodúmare is infinite. We Lukumí believe that our supreme god and his sacred teachings are open dialogues, with distinct consequences for different societies and cultures, across the spectrum that is human existence. How lucky are we not to be restrained by what could be outdated, inherited misconceptions. That is why when a new initiate casts the shells with their own hands for the first time, we embody our destiny and manifest our very intimate fate. This is our individually designed and personalized Bible, our truth, our *odú*, our *itá*.

As the members and guests of my *ilé* listened attentively to this respected woman's homily, I felt humbled by her every word. I remember looking at my hands, still containing traces of *efún,* from the small ball made of powdered eggshells, used in *divinitiation*, and assimilating not only my oracular inheritance, but my new ritual kin. I was now son, brother, grandson, nephew, and even great-grandnephew, a neonate link in the ancient genealogy of Lukumí ancestry, imparted from the realm of the orishas. Acacia turned her gaze at me and said, "Nothing inhuman should ever surprise you" stressing the principle metaphor of my *odú*, words I have respectfully lived by.

In 1994, a reinstated civilian, having completed my military tour in the U.S. Navy, returning home to New Jersey from California, one of my first visits was to Acacía, and her Obatalá. Then at 95 years of age, still a sprightful woman, I was astonished as to how her cocoa butter facials kept her looking surprisingly youthful. Of course, cocoa butter is sacred to Obatalá, whom she accredited with the aesthetic miracle of her almost wrinkle-free face. That, and the love of her 90 year old partner, Margot Alonso, *Okán Tomí* (Heart Flows Like Water), a priestess of Ochún with whom she had a loving relationship that expanded well over two decades, were Acacia's claim to the fountain of "youthfulness." She often made reference to a passage in her *itá* of initiation, where Ochún promised to fill her life with love and companionship, "If they would have known back in 1910, in that Cuba that was then, that Ochún was referring to the love of a woman, I may not be here telling you this story today." Her impish giggles still echo in my memory. Acacía endearingly owns a piece of my heart and soul.

We sat in her orisha room, drank coffee, and reminisced about the days of orisha work at my padrino's house. She asked me if I was being pertinent to my orisha *encyclopedia,* referring to my *itá*. I responded accordingly, leery of those trick questions elders often asked, only to follow with a serene response; "I live, eat, and breathe my *itá,* Acacía." She smiled, and with a proud gleam in her eyes, nodded with approval, reached to place her hands atop my head, closed her greyish eyes, bowed her head, and gently whispered a *moyúba* to our tutelary orisha, Obatalá.

As we said what would be our final goodbyes, Acacía reached behind her *sopera de Obatalá* (tureen where Obatalá's sacred objects are kept), and handed me a black and white picture of a striking young woman. It was dated 1911, a photo taken just days after

she had finished her year of *iyaworaje*. Today, it rests ennobled on my ancestor altar, a remembrance of one of the first scholars of the dissemination of Lukumí religious doctrines and scholarship in the United States. Acacía passed to the realm of the ancestors less than three weeks after our heart-to-heart. *Ibaé layé torún*, may she rest in peace.

5:2 Itá malé: A Public Declamation

Itá day, the third day of the initiation ritual week, sees a reassembling of the *ilé* communitas. A public event, *itá* regroups olorisha at large, along with secular family members of the initiate, gathered in anticipation of the orisha's overarching *divine* proclamations. *Itá* is the Lukumí oracular manifesto, capable of prescribing edicts for the most latent components of the Lukumí community, adherents and antagonists alike. It is a universal discourse, a pluralist dialogue ecumenical in its ritual structure. *Itá* can speak to all of those present, including the unaware, announcing resolutions that may require spiritual and corporal attention. As previously discussed in my work, Lukumí identify the relationship between priest and *odú* as a distinguishing act of parentage. As the *itá* ritual transpires, the neophyte is ritually engendered by the *odú* he or she casts with their own hands. An inductive ritual act, the first casting of oracle denotes the passing of sacred scholarship to the initiate, putting his or her destiny in their own hands.

The ritual act of interalliance bequeaths spiritually genetic and consanguineous engendering of sacred scripture to the initiate. The priest becomes an *omó* (offspring) of the *odú* they have charted with their hands on the *ate* (mat), a *divine* master plan that forecasts the intimate protocol and predestined characteristic of Lukumí priesthood. The

ritual process of Lukumí priesthood initiation is a septenary of intricate ceremonies. The first treble of these seven successive days are the most spiritually intricate, and ceremoniously infused. The schema of the seven initiatory days is as follows:

> **Day 1.** ***Kariocha*** (initiation) also *coronación* (coronation) and *hacer el santo* (making the saint).
>
> **Day 2.** ***Dia del medio*** (middle day) debut; introduction and presentation to the religious and secular community, at large).
>
> **Day 3.** ***Dia de Itá*** (day of *itá*) Day of *divinatory* pedagogics. The neophyte acts as the living filter for the dissemination of oracular decrees through the vast scope of *odú divination*.

Between the day of initiation and the day of *itá*, a three day conjuncture, the *iyawó* is in a liminal state, a ritually [un]ambiguous mode of being, guided by the communitas, who are directly and continuously governed by the auspices of the oracles that have been designated for the neophyte at the onset of the initiatory ceremonies. *Itá* is the paramount ritual where preordained *divine* testament is revealed to the neophyte. *Itá* is a panoptic, far-reaching, explicit ceremonial dialogue, coalescing past, present, and future events, not exclusive to those present during its performance. *Itá* is ecumenical, a totalizing and comprehensive life blueprint.

According to Victor Turner, the three phases of liminality are defined as separation, transition, and incorporation within a given rite (see table below). The *itá divination* occurs within the incorporation phase of the kariocha rite, and is distinguished by being "post-operative," i.e., falling immediately after the priestly consecration ceremonies and public presentation. *Itá* is also "post-liminal" given that it occurs after the ambiguous stage induced during priestly birthing ceremonies, having been guided by the

divination performed prior and during the initial days of kariocha. *Itá* signals and heralds the "new" life of the initiate as child of Orisha Odú, and marks the continued growth of the *iyawó* as aligned with their orisha.

Table 2: Lukumí table of the liminal stages of initiation

Rite	Phase	Threshold	Boundary	Meaning
separation	pre-operative	pre-liminal	old	preparation
transition	operative	liminal	transitional	performance
incorporation	post-operative	post-liminal	new	procession

5:3 Iwé Tí Ankó: A Lesson Well Learned

In August of 1984, laying on his deathbed, days before joining the world of the ancestors, Nicolas Oviedo Smith, *Ogún Yémí* (Ogún Suits Me), a dear friend, priest of the orisha Ogún, and an esteemed Lukumí ritual specialist, invited me to his home for one of our usual tobacco smoking and coffee drinking reunions. A descendant of Jamaicans in Cuba, in his unique *cumaicano* (his neology for Cuban-Jamaican) accent, left these words imprinted in my soul:

> Look at me, lying here, withered and expired. When my sister Joliette made *ocha* (initiated as a Lukumí priestess), I was in Havana, and she was in Oriente, the polar extremes of the island of Cuba. In her *itá*, it was forewarned that if her younger brother, me, was not initiated immediately, he would surely meet an untimely death. Less than three months later, my parents wired the money to Havana for me. The following week, I was initiated to Ogun, the orisha of drunkards, like me [I remember his wheezing laughter]. In my own *itá*, Ogún not only spoke of my eventual migration, but advised that I should leave my drinking habit behind once I crossed the sea. Forty years later, creator of my own demise, with a hardened liver, a failing pancreas, and one kidney, I still sneak a shot of Elegua's rum, a few times a day. *Itá* is the truth we don't want to hear, good and

> bad. It is a global phenomenon that knows no boundaries, it talks to everybody, insider and outsider. If you learn to do anything to perfection in this religion, learn to be a good *italero*.

On September 12, 1984, at his viewing in Lincoln Funeral Home, in The Bronx, NY, Nicolas received over 100 bottles of rum around his casket. Even posthumously, he was not able to break from the only vice he had kept, even against the decree in his *itá*, a breach that had cost him his life. Echoing George Brandon, referring to *itá divination*, "Man plans for foreseen contingencies, but is aware that much of the future is menacingly unknown" (Brandon 1997, 141). The narrative of Nicolas stoically evokes the fundamental tenets regarding *itá*, in particular its tough life-lessons which can be difficult to hear and adhere to, making our individual choice to participate in these rituals an ongoing state of flux. To have privy to this advice, it is necessary to gain Olofín's blessing through the opening ritual of *itá*, called *nangareo.*

5:4 Nangareo: Divine Imploratory

The ritual of *nangareo* is meticulously performed on the day of *itá* before high noon, the hour of daily judgment, when the hand of Olodúmare passes over the earth. According to Lukumí precepts, before the recitation of *divination*, the *iyawó* has no intercepting projection on the earth. They are shadowless, precariously balanced between existence and non-existence, excluding them from partaking directly in the *nangareo* ritual. Turner describes these ritual states of liminal being as "a space of greater invention, discovery, creativity, and reflection" (Madison 2012, 174). The Lukumí initiatory process, similar to those of sister traditions of West African origin such as

Haitian Vodou and Brazilian Candomblé, concretizes theory in which Turner's examples of ritual liminality serve to argue against the "ambiguous" connotations attached to alternative African diasporic rites of passage. The state of gestation, a fraction of the many liminal stages of Lukumí initiation, fragments when the neophyte is allowed to cast oracle for the first time.

My padrino, with subtle bias for his orisha, Changó, frequently, and proudly, recanted the many legends of his tutelary deity. One of padrino's favorite chronicles narrated the adaptation of the *nangareo* (exalted daybreak meal) ritual, the preluding ceremony to all *itá* rituals:

> Changó was accustomed to dayspring travels, venturing off to neighboring principalities in order to observe the socio-political conditions in which these lived. One journey brought him to a peaceful land called *Ará Imalé* (land of ancestor worship). The inhabitants were prophetic sages, keepers of the *divine* oracle of *odú*, dedicated to the ritual devotion of totemic canons and the afterlife. Upon Changó's arrival, the orisha Obatalá, the chief of this state, invited Changó to partake in a ritual breakfast called *nangareo*. Made of sweetened cornmeal porridge, milk and honey, Obatalá explained how this ritual libation was used to greet Olórun, imploring his blessings and ensuring forthright prophecy and safe spiritual journeys. Changó carefully observed the solemnity with which this ritual was carried out. Placing the sacred gruel in a large gourd, balancing it atop a heap of sand, the entire community, by hierarchal descending order, using their left hand, dipped a smaller gourd into the soup, raising this to face the sun, beseeching Olórun's graces. Hand-over-hand, each member passed the drinking vessel to the next, sipping from the porridge, until all had performed the liquid offering. Finalizing the ritual, all the constituents then danced around the larger gourd on the floor in a counter clockwise rotation, concluding by lifting their hands so as to direct their palms towards the sun, again asking for Olórun's blessings.

I was 13 years old, and only three days out of my initiation when I partook in my first *nangareo*. The first taste of that sweet porridge is still vivid in my mind. I remember the synchronized movements of the cook's hands as she stirred the pot where the sacred elixir stewed on a low fire while it was being prepared. Zoila, *Oba Fumíke* (King Cares

For Me), priestess of Changó, my ritual sister, was a master chef, a culinary artist of ritual Lukumí cuisine. Allowing me to taste the porridge, slapping a hot dash in the palm of my hand, I savored its grainy texture, comparing it to the grits my grandmother prepared for me at breakfast every morning. “You got the first taste, even before the ancestors!” Her casual yet formal dominion over the kitchen, asserting her role as ceremonial cook, brings memories of the heavy-set, *mulata* Cuban woman chasing hungry priests out of her cookhouse *realm*, with ladle in hand. Perhaps my youthful and innocent curiosity was cause enough to move her into letting me taste from her casserole, an adulation few could boast. As I danced around the large gourd on the floor, circling behind the elder olorisha, chanting the ritual praises to Olórun, remembering my padrino’s story, I felt spontaneously and *divinely* connected to centuries of ancestors. D. Soyini Madison, building on Turner’s concept of communitas, describes *nangareo* as a ritual of a commonwealth, a space where individual identities join in a direct and immediate manner.

Figure 13: Priestess performing nangareo

Lukumí rituals are therefore a togetherness of equals, where all racial, class, gender, or structural divisions are dissolved in the spontaneous and immediate feelings of communion that rituals bring forth (Madison 2012, 175). Immediately following the *oríate's* closing *divination* ritual, performed with *obí* (four coconut pieces), ensuring that Olofín approved of *nangareo,* and of those gathered for the recitation of *itá,* the results of the prognostic toss is recorded in the *libreta of itá*. The congregation then proceeds to enter the inner sanctum where the *iyawó* awaits their destiny.

5:5 Libretas de Itá: Oracular Memoirs

As Lukumí oral tradition gleans written format, it transcends atypical standards of linguistics, defrocking modernity-ridden nomenclatures of what can and cannot be made palpable. The *libreta of itá*[2] is the textual example of the scribal formula within Lukumí tradition. At their inception, the *libretas* were log books kept by the Lukumí *cabildo* (slave guild) secretary. The Lukumí *cabildos* were unique in that they were founded around a consanguineous family with the same religious tradition, different than other *cabildos* that were ethnically intermixed. The kindred later settled as a ritual family, built on communitas (Barcia 2012). Customarily a female house slave, schooled with certain alphabetization privilege's not bestowed on other slaves, the role of the *cabildo* secretary was to keep accurate record of these social gatherings, complying with the overseers' requirement that all *leisure* time afforded the slaves where properly documented.

[2] I make here a distinction between *libretas de itá,* and *manuales de instrucción*, educative textbooks printed and circulated by Lukumí priests which are routinely called *libretas*. See Dianteill and Swearingen 2003.

Fernando Ortiz details how the production of these ledgers, *las libretas de cabildo*, were designed to *entrust* the selected secretaries, instilling them with a false confidence, ensuring that no "savage" rituals were being performed during allowed meetings (Ortiz 1992, 50-52). The *cabildo* secretary recorded the names of participants, detailed the activities, kept the minutes of the gatherings, and secured these documents in the hands of the *mayordomo,* the overseer, at the closure of each *cabildo* meeting. Thus, the *libretas* were essential in logging the activities occurring during the meetings, guaranteeing that the administration of the *cabildo* was *secure*. It was these *libretas* that served as a nexus for what would become the *libretas of itá* within Lukumí tradition.

Manolo Reinante, babalawo *Iróso Todá* (Ifá title), one of my mentors in the Lukumí Ifá tradition, shared a synopsis with me, originally told to him in the early 1920's by his own godfather, Arturo Peña, *Otrúpon Baraífe,* a renowned Cuban babalawo of the early twentieth century. During one of our many lengthy evening colloquiums held in his orisha room in The Bronx (ca. 1989), Manolo explained:

> The secretaries of the *cabildos* had what they called, privileges. Those women could read and write, and were from inside the big houses. They used a starch made out of rice water to iron their aprons, the slave owner's underwear, and to hot press the sheets of paper that bread was wrapped in for storage, or stews were covered with for moisture retention, *papel de estraza* (brown paper). On those 'borrowed' loose sheets, the ones that were never returned nor missed, the first histories of our Lukumí religion were recorded. If you shaped and dipped thin slabs of charcoal in candle wax, then wound sewing thread around it, you had the perfect pencil. They wrote small and neat, leaving no uncovered space on those sheets. At the top of the page always went the date, time, and location of the ritual. In the body, this before there were initiations performed, went the description of the events of the gathering. Lastly was the list of *testigos*, witnesses, where those that did not know letters were taught to write their names, or sign with an "X" as proof of the participation. This is where our *libretas de itá* were born. And now you understand why when we want to write a petition to the orisha, we use pencil and brown paper bag, it is more traditional, and effective.

The discussion with Manolo is forever emblazoned on my memory, and I recall it every time I enter a *cuarto de santo* and see an *ofeicitá* sitting before her desk, wearing a starched apron, poised and ready to capture the untext that will guide and shape the life of the new initiate in *itá*. In the above passage, Manolo shares the history of *libreta-dom,* which was born out of a necessity to capture the essence of *divination* for posterity and future reflection. Manolo also reveals that the other major writing tradition within Lukumí religious practice, inscribing words onto brown paper with pencil for use in offerings, is directly connected to the history of *divinatory* writing practice.

As part of understanding the importance of the clerical aspect of Lukumí ritual, the olorisha must know that the wisdom, knowledge and information transcribed in the *libretas of itá* are a unique recapitulation of the sacred discourse of the orishas and the ancestors. Chronicling *odú* is part of the corporeal collective memory of the Afro-Cuban tradition. The *libreta of itá* is the discernible manuscript that serves to record the revered testimonials of the prophets of the Lukumí. In these *divine* monographs are the linkages of the initiates with previous lives, their present existence, and cycling full turn, until we return to the world of the ancestors. An objective and subjective oracular treatise, the *libretas* store the indications made by the orisha for the subject to balance and harmonize the energy of their spiritual and material environment. From the aforesaid, it can be understood that the *libretas of itá* are the scholarly texts that embody the olorisha's metaphysical dissertation that have their provenance in difficult and formative years of slavery and survival. The *libretas* are the concordat of our priestly life on this earthly plane of existence, our accessible arc of the covenant that contains and reveals a small

kernel of the orisha's vast *ashé.*

Chapter VI
Metálóríta: Transcendent Trilogy

6:1 La libreta de Itá de Ocha: A Systematic Prelacy

His words resounded off the walls in his orisha room; "*Cuando en duda, abre tu itá y lee, coño!"* (When in doubt, open your *itá* and read, darn it!). These were the words of my most influential mentor, Antonio Carmona. According to his instruction, there was no reason for error in the life of a Lukumí priest. He was adamant in expressing our good fortune for having the privilege bestowed on us by our ancestors of owning a personalized journal, filled with a custom-made rendition of God's holy word, *the libreta of itá of ocha.* "When you want poetry, read the Bible. If you desire 'realness', read your *itá*." Though all chronicles that record *itá* recitation are important, Antonio referred to the *libreta* of initiation as the pages of the soul. The other two *libretas* important in the olorisha's life were significant addendums.

Figure 14: My libreta of Lukumí priesthood initiation

Ironically enough, for many years I kept my *libreta de itá de ocha* in the top draw of my night table, precisely under the Bible I received as a Confirmation gift from my

eighth grade teacher, Sister Josephine, may she rest in peace. The bright, orange cover of the spiral notebook of my *itá* stood out from under the dark, black leather-clad jacket of that King James Version of the good book. My Lukumí 'bible' spoke directly to me, as if God had inscribed a special edition of his holy word designed exclusively for me. My mother would read to me from my *itá* frequently, describing its contents as my "personal commandments." Per contra, the image of Charlton Heston playing Moses, arduously climbing to the top of Mount Sinai, dodging fiery bolts of lightning, seemed extremely disassociated to the recollection I had of my *itá* ritual. The olorisha present were comforting. The *italero* spoke softly and with great warmth. When the congregation was invited to deliberate, adding to the advice of the *diviner*, their tone was supportive and tender. No intimidating voice of wraithlike dismay, whatsoever. *Itá* was gentle and serene.

6:2 Iwé Kini: Libreta Layout and Design

Libreta is the Spanish for journal or notebook and is the name given to the repository of divinitiation. It also acts as the logbook, keeping record of each significant turn of event throughout the Lukumí priesthood initiation cycle. From scanning the pages of any *ocha libreta*, the different stages of initiation are clearly demarcated through noting the *odú* and other *divination* signs that are recorded at each phase. In a very real sense the *libreta* is continually constructed and acts as a diary, or ongoing official record of religious praxis. The *libreta* continues to be added to post-initiation, and these addenda record supplemental rituals performed throughout the priests' life, culminating in the recording of the priest's own mortuary rituals, *itútu*. The most important use of the *libreta*

is to chronicle *itá*, the paramount *divinitiation* ritual that occurs on the third day of the week long ceremony. The prologue of every *libreta de itá de ocha* begins as follows:

> On this day [INSERT DATE], the 'child' [INSERT NEOPHYTE'S NAME], is crowned by the hands of [INSERT RITUAL PARENTS' BIRTH NAME AND RITUAL NAME], in [INSERT LOCATION/ADDRESS], *italero* [INSERT NAME]
> The pages that follow, where the decrees of particular orisha are inscribed, begin with the word, "*consejos de* [INSERT ORISHA]," or the advice of the orisha.

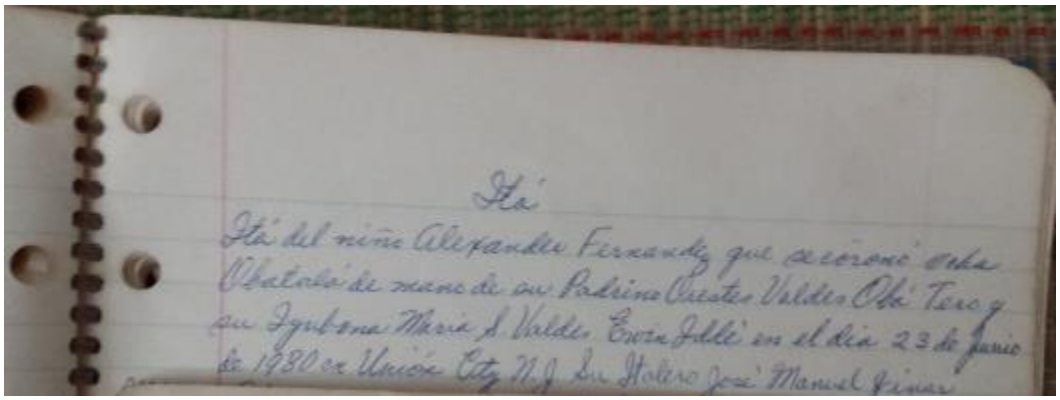

Figure 15: Header page of my itá de ocha, June 1980

The paragraphs that follow these headings are the ritual counsel of the orisha as interpreted by the *diviner*, closely following the combinations of oracular narrative cast throughout the course of each *itá* segment. Intrinsically, the initial cast of *dilogún* for every orisha is performed by the hands of the neophyte, the *iyawó's* first priestly function.

The assemblage of the *libretas of itá of ocha*, or simply *libreta de ocha*, follows a strict format. Initiation *libretas* open with the *divination* ritual which sets the protocol for the *kariocha* (initiation ceremonies). Once the first oracular account is registered, the remaining pages of the *libretas* are compartmentalized and distributed according to the

other rituals which will transpire during initiation. The following is a description of the full formatting of a *libreta de itá de ocha*:

> **Section 1:** *Vista de Entrada* (preliminary reading); delineates entry rites and ceremonies (16 days prior to initiation). Herein, *divination* measures, maps, and specifies the course of initiation rituals from separation, via transition, to incorporation.
>
> **Section 2:** *Ebó de Entrada* (opening consecrations); purification ritual and sacrifices (day before initiation). The parameters for these rituals are outlined in the *vista de entrada*.
>
> **Section 3:** *Egún* (ancestors); recording of ancestral predication (opening ritual at day of initiation).
>
> **Section 4:** *Lavatorio* (ritual ablution); a biphasic rite: the ritual infusion of sacred herbs (*osaín*), and the rudimentary casting of the initiates birthed oracle (day of initiation).
>
> **Section 5-8:** *Itá;* paramount ritual of *divination*, sacred assignations, cataloging and prescriptions (third day of initiation).
>
> **Section 9:** *Testigos* (witnesses); customarily located on the last pages of the *libreta*, a space for the listing and signatures of the participant olorisha (day of initiation and *itá*). Crosses placed next to names are added to indicate priests that have since passed away.

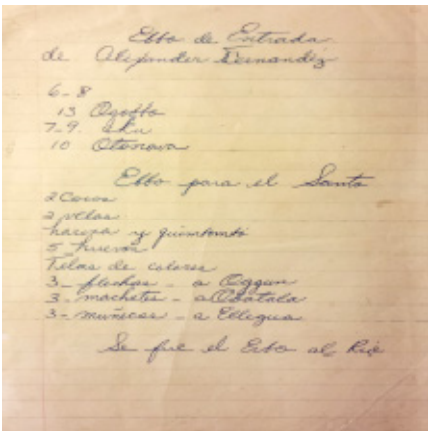

Figure 16: My ebó de entrada

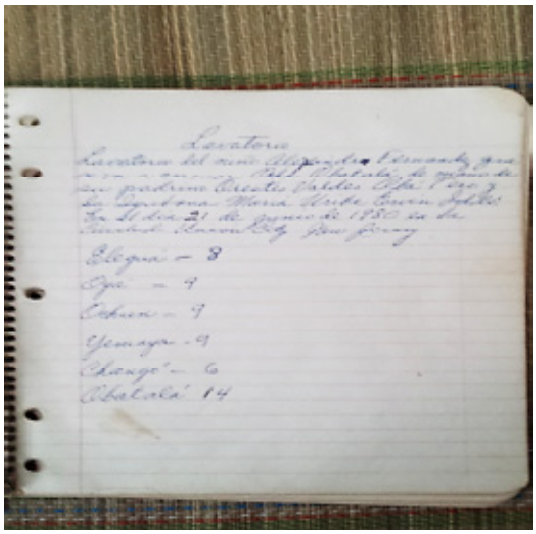

Figure 17: My lavatorio page, numbers indicate odú

Figure 18: Page of testigos, witnesses

The *libreta de ocha* is a complex text, profoundly methodical and meticulously detailed. The *libreta of ocha* is the sacred writ on which the neophyte's priestly life will be formatted and spiritually theorized, his or her personal Lukumí testament and pedagogic treatise. The sacred laws and bylaws imprinted on these pages are what formalize and consign Lukumí scholarship. The divinatory training and instruction that follow initiation are consequential not only to the priests' communitas as a whole, but to the individual, via self-indoctrination and auto-capacitation. As I previously mention, the most formidable education an olorisha undertakes is the bodily internalization and acceptance of the parentage that transpires between oracle and orisha disciple. We are *hijos e hijas* (sons and daughters) of the *odú* cast in our *itá* of initiation; we are the offspring and heirs of Orisha Odú.

Pursuant *libretas* differ according to ritual. The *libreta de ocha* is distinct because it archives the narratives of the physical initiation rituals of Lukumí priesthood. Although subsequent rituals are also recorded in *libretas*, it is *itá* that distinguishes the embodiment

of liturgical documentation. Substantively, my thesis details the particularities of the taxonomies that demarcate the three principal *itá*: *itá de ocha*, *itá de Orúnla,* and, *itá de pinaldo*, their recording in *libretas*, and how these ritual anthologies serve as treasuries of embodied scholarship, in the life of a Lukumí priest.

6:3 Ifádosu: Entente with Orúnla

A fundamental Lukumí ritual demarcated by specific gender bearings, receiving the *mano de Orula* (hand of Orula) is open to all adherents, regardless of initiation status. Exclusive to the execution by, and regulation of babalawo (male Ifá priest), the role of *itá* scribe is performed in this ceremony solely by men. Though the indispensable presence of women in order for these ceremonies to take place is an undeniable prerequisite, the ritual role of women within the Lukumí Ifá tradition is limited, leaving the composition of the *libreta de itá de Orúnla* in the hands of a man.

The highest attainable female rank in Lukumí Ifá rituals is that of *apétebí,* best defined as a ritual acolyte. The ritual title for Lukumí Ifá ceremonies performed for women, where they receive the sacred implements of the orisha Orunla, is *ikofa* (ambassador of Ifá). Notably, if a woman, regardless of age, orisha priestess or not, is not in attendance, *Ifádosu* (Orunla ritual) cannot ensue. Lamentably, further explanation of these complex gender regulations go beyond the scope of my present study. The equivalent ritual for males within Lukumí Ifá is *awofáka* (agent of secret knowledge).

Figure 19: Ikofa

Figure 20: Awofáka

I received *awofáka* ten years after my initiation as *olorisha.* Previously mentioned in my work, Cuco was the babalawo who parented my Ifá ritual. He was a short, slim man, of Afro-Chinese descent. Curiously, I only ever knew my *second padrino* by his popular nickname, Cuco El Zapatero (Cuco the Shoemaker), as he came from a long line of cobblers in Cuba, or by his babalawo name, *Ogúnda Ché*. Both in Cuba, and abroad, he was a respected babalawo, progeny of a bona fide lineage of the Lukumí Ifá tradition who, from his arrival in New Jersey in the early 1950's until his death, October 4, 1997, ironically the feast day of Orunla, padrino Cuco audaciously governed the Lukumí Ifá tradition in the United States.

Figure 21: Cuco, Ogúnda Ché

The other recipients of the *mano de Orula* sat in his outer sanctum, a rather large, square area with cedar plank walls, and a distinct scent I still remember. We were a group of about 10 individuals, some of whom were from my own *ilé*. Cuco stepped out from behind the white sheet that served as a door to the inner sanctuary where the rituals had commenced, and in his generously earnest demeanor, explained:

> This is your other-other family, and I am father number three. Orula is the addendum to what you already know. For those of you that are not already initiated, then be aware that his word is the accessory to what your tutelary orisha will design for you in your *itá.* This religion is a circle within a circle, from the top we see the individual spirals, but from the outside, it is all one divine ring.

My other-other family, the adjunct communitas, was very appealing to me. The *apétebí* carefully tended to our care and comfort. None of us knew what awaited us, but the solidarity we felt sustained us as we uniformly performed our Ifá rituals, ladies first, men after.

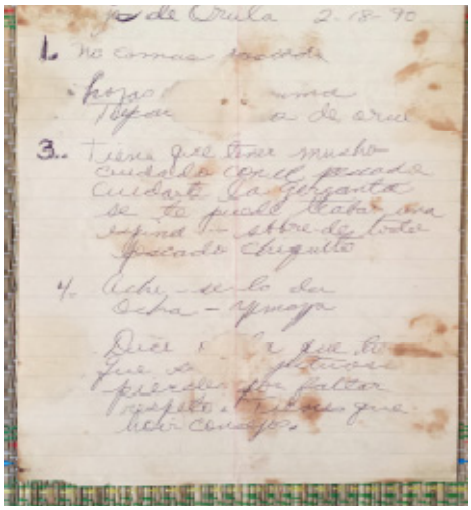

Figure 22: My libreta of Orunla

As customary in paramount Lukumí initiatory rites, the third day welcomed the rituals for *itá*. After a three hour wait, my turn was at hand. Entering the inner sanctum, I remember the impact of walking into an *itá* room strictly inhabited by men. It felt like the men's locker-room in a gym. For the first time ever, in my entire life as a practitioner of several Afro-Cuban religious traditions, there were no woman present in a sacred space. The flawless motherly image of the peplum-bloused, gingham-skirted, turban-clad female, sitting judiciously at her desk, waiting to adscript the *diviner's* oration, left a hallow in my heart. The particular *ofeicitá,* a tall, dark-skinned, burly babalawo named Generoso*,* in translation "generous," was *generously* meddlesome, may he rest in peace. His ostentatious mannerisms and jaunty interruptions produced a scant, three-paragraph *itá* document, out of a two hour *divination* discourse. As he handed me my copy, he said, "don't worry, the message is all in your head (jabbing at my forehead), *odú* is telepathic. Besides, all this writing stuff is for women." Bless him. Almost 24 years in review, the scant jottings on those one-and-a-half pages of my *itá de Orula* have served as an

accurate check list for many a momentous occurrence in my life. Those few words, on those few loose pages have proven exceptionally apropos to the various circumstances that I have encountered to date, and heeding their advice I have ameliorated several significant would-be maladies which are now triumphantly struck off the list of prophecies as foretold to me by Orúnla. Those few words were exceptionally generous indeed.

6:4 Pinaldo: Cutting Edges, Trimming Destiny

Pinaldo, or *cuchillo* (knife), is a Lukumí ritual of distinctly diasporic provenance (Brown 2003, 10). Laconically, the gendered disparities among Lukumí ritual specialists during the colonial period of Cuba's history, gave certain male olorisha, exclusively priests of Ogún, the *achógún* (sacrificial specialists), dominion over ritual sacrifice. A matriarchal figure, known historically as Maria *Towá (*Cutting Edge), a manumitted Yoruba slave of royal lineage, whose tutelary orisha is, to date uncertain, was the pioneer in contracting with the *achógún* for their ritual capacities. Traditionally referred to as the "Queen of the Lukumí," Towá officiated the first recorded Lukumí initiations in Cuba, having to appeal to the *achógún* to carry out the sacrificial component of said ceremonies.

Mary Ann Clark makes reference to the only known rendition of the historic report, explaining the bargain Towá made with the *achógún*, where in exchange for her tutelage in initiatory ritual protocols, they in turn initiated her as an *achógún* (Clark 2005), the inception of the ceremony known as *pinaldo,* or *cuchillo*, in the Lukumí tradition.

Figure 23: Pinaldo, My ceremonial knife (cuchillo)

Antonio had an elaborate way of describing the ceremony of *pinaldo,* which happens chronologically after a person has been initiated to the orisha priesthood, and its important documentation in the *libreta de itá de cuchillo* (the notebook of knife):

> Receiving *cuchillo* is the ultimate pact with Ogún. *Pinaldo* means "to cut a bit of everything," in other words, to snip off the loose strings. Ogún, the owner of all sharp-pointed, piked and fine objects, enables us to confront all those situations that would otherwise cut us down in life. The ceremony is an honor that confirms the olorisha's servitude to the orishas and Olodúmare. *Pinaldo* redefines us as priests and gives us noble status. This is why *pinaldo* is lavish, elegant, and extravagant. We sit at a formal table, and eat from the delicacies prepared for the grand feast, giving tribute to the initiated participants. The guest *pinalderos*, also called *achogunes*, are carefully selected, highly respected olorisha of unblemished character, whose presence announces a heightened formality to this ceremony. Their participation in *itá* is vital to the growth and evolution of the olorisha who is receiving *cuchillo*. This ceremony is our second and ultimate opportunity to solidify our pact with *odú* and Olodúmare. Though nothing can replace our original *itá de ocha*, the *itá de pinaldo* is our second testament; whatever you missed the first time around is readdressed and confirmed here. *'Aquí, todo se afila o se oxida'* (here, everything is sharpened or it rusts).

Figure 23: My pinaldo table. El Cerro, Havana, Cuba, 1997

By early 1996, both my initiatory godparents had crossed over to the realm of the ancestors, a somber freedom which allowed me to seek ritual parentage outside of my orisha lineage in preparation for the acquisition of *pinaldo*. By the end of that year, on one of my first trips to Cuba, I was fortunate enough to befriend a priest of Yemayá who was directly connected to my own orisha genealogy. Soon after, in February of 1997, I returned to Havana with three huge *gusanos* (tubular canvas bags) replete with a caravan of ritual and secular regalia for my *pinaldo* ceremony. It was the tail end of the *"Periodo Especial"* in Cuba, the decade or so following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the cessation of their economic aid to Cuba (Hernandez-Reguant 2009). Needless to say, each olorisha *levantado* (ritually invited) to work the ceremony came exultantly. In the 1990's, a five U.S. dollar *achedí* (Lukumí monetary tribute) was a welcomed fortune in the olorisha community in Cuba. I gifted each of the guests with ten dollars, as well as an apron, head scarf or hat, according to gender, which are traditionally donned for the

ceremony, a deodorant, toothpaste and brush, perfume, and a six inch porcelain doll of the goddess Kuan Yin. I placed all of these items into purposely bought gift bags as is the custom to honor each *pinaldero* that participates. Though the oppressive, and almost breathless atmosphere caused by the economic crisis that seemed to over shadow us, my pinaldo ceremony was made truly memorable by the gratitude I received from the olorisha who partook of this special day.

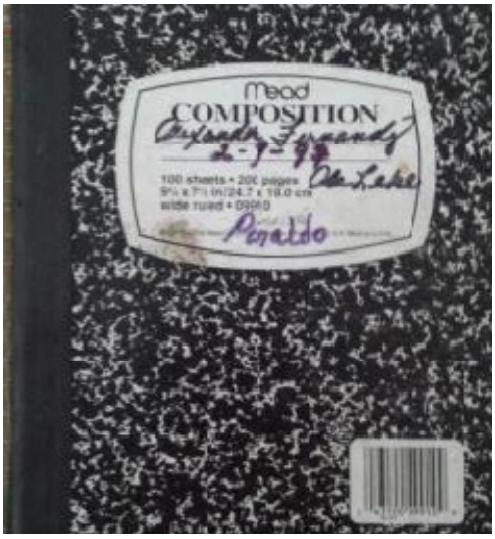

Figure 24: My libreta of pinaldo

The day of my *itá*, as the olorisha entourage returned to bear witness to *divination*, I felt an unfamiliar worry as to the possible outcome of my *pinaldo itá.* The *ofeicitá*, Maria Esther Diaz, *Atí Kéké* (Water Sprite), a known scribe, priestess of Yemayá, intuitively capturing my anxiety, approached me and rubbing my shoulders said, "Remember, repetition is good." I felt at ease by her touch, but more confused at her words. When *itá* had eventually concluded, some four hours later, the *odú* and designations were substantially correlative to those of my original *itá* of initiation, almost 17 years prior.

Figure 25 Maria Esther Diaz, Atí Kéké

As Maria Esther handed me my libreta de *itá de pinaldo,* gazing deeply into my eyes, she crooned, "*mundélé conoce burundanga*" (the wizard knows his magic), an Afro-Cuban saying that implies skillfulness and expertise. My *itá de pinaldo*, the last volume of my olorisha manual, and the final report card a Lukumí priest receives, was an auspicious manuscript, indeed. I am *mundélé*, and I love my *burundanga*.

Chapter VII
Itó Ibán Eshú: Concluding Valediction

My thesis underscores the importance of paying closer attention to theoretical analyses of religions that move beyond the parameters textual sources. Religions such as Lukumí make use of several dynamic oracular dialogues, in place of one broad, historical, shared text. There is a rough discursive divide between what have been routinely described as *global* or *established* religions that are further categorized as text-based, as opposed to the religions that are misunderstood and invisibilized specifically because of the absence of such a text. To understand the latter, research must stress the importance of itinerant, processual-ritual *divination* and dialogue that require different and challenging methodological apparatus than that which has dominated the investigation of so called world religious practices.

Within the Lukumí religion, participants continually, engage, construct and convey sacred texts on an individuated level which relies on the formation of communitas and the bridging of sacred spaces through liminality. I posit that communitas within the specifically Lukumí rendering of it is unique in that it not only refers to the present-day, physical congregation that makes up a spiritual family, but it is inextricably linked to a vast communitas coexisting in the ancestral realm. Lukumí initiated ancestors are routinely called upon to participate in every aspect of ritual and *divination*. Without the invoking of ancestral participation, Lukumí ritual could not commence.

These processes of oracular text making, and divinatory recording which I have called *untexts* within my thesis, utilizes religious social structures (*ilé*) to effectuate *divination* pertinent to the adherent, which then he or she uses as guide for the rest of

their life. These products are the intellectualizing capacities of Lukumí religion, which are upheld as sacred and canonical. I posit that the difference between other *formal* religions and ones such as Lukumí is, in effect, very little with regard to the place and care that both instill in their respective texts. The cumulative ethnographic examples given in my work are approached using the theoretical apparatus offered by hermeneutics which seeks to relate interpretive frameworks and the otherwise disparate objects of our analysis, the objective and subjective that are recorded. As discussed in Chapter II, attention to the body and embodiment as the powerful somatic interpretive framework grounds understanding of *divination* and initiation. What I collectively refer to as *divinitiation* poses new interpretive possibilities within the emic/etic or participant observer/insider viewpoint.

I contend that the domain of religious interpretive methodologies is situated and contingent upon a dialectic that involves both the observer and the observed. While the above experiences related through my self-ethnography position me as the subject of the liminal state, the recipient of advice, and, adhering to divination, I have similar and quantifiably voluminous illustrations that could be included were the roles reversed.

My privileged status as author, editor, and researcher of my text does not preclude me from the adequate and robust analyses of the data offered. I firmly believe it is essential that the researcher, in any field, not just the religious one, must submit to, and have a reflexive moment within the processes of analysis in order to gain understanding of the flux and uncertainty that can imperceptibly occur during academic investigation where the ambiguities between the subjective and objective are not fully realized. I argue

that the cultivation of a self-ethnographic turn, offers core insights and explanation that is often lamentably absent from other critically phenomenological descriptive works.

My understanding and implementation of hermeneutics is also inspired by Pierre Bourdieu's attempt to break free from traditional sociological fortresses of dualisms. In an *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977) in particular, Bourdieu's hermeneutic approach connects the subjective field of socio-cultural praxis to what are the objective structures that both compose and frame social experiences. Objectivism in this understanding, invokes the continual resurgence and manufacturing of the world via its implicit structurations, which is often described can be described as the search for the socio-cultural "Holy Grail" through the formation of grand and sweeping explanations. Subjectivism, on the other hand, evokes the critiqued and agentive fashionings of the world according to the individual or skillful actors (Bourdieu 1977, 22-24). It is the researcher's duty to be mindful and navigate such discursive cartographies.

The interaction of the subjective and the objective through practice is related to the whole in Bourdieu's rendering of hermeneutics, which is the holistic interpretation of social theory that includes written texts, interpretive processes, and symbolic representations. In this vein, the hermeneutic approach allows us to interpret *libretas* as both the written text and symbolic communications of *odú*, from/through one body to other bodies. We are therefore not entertaining a hunt for the pure or objective intentions of the written *libretas,* or the narrated *odú*, but rather assimilate the practical mastery of the knowledge, and social conditions that are at play in producing these unique structures of religious experience.

I am further guided by Paul Ricoeur's analysis narrative and intertextuality. Intertextuality can be understood as the dynamic interaction between various forms of texts and their discursive fields (Ricoeur 1995). Texts, understood separately operate as specific sequences that show their limits from one to the other. However, together they "constitute a network of intersignification, thanks to which the isolated texts signify, something, something more" (Ricoeur 1995, 161). The individual texts in my work are represented as the three individual libretas of kariocha, pinaldo, and Ifá, and together, through intertextuality, their relationship produces what I call mutualism through contradistinction. That is, each may stand alone and be interpreted as such, but when combined and infused with both lived experience and religious practice, they are narratives that not only convey meaning, but become active and critical channels for life.

The culminating act to be performed during all itá of priesthood initiations is the naming ritual, assigning an orisha title to the neophyte olorisha. The *orukó,* or priestly namesake, is a Lukumí word or phrase that is particular to attributes that characterize the tutelary orisha of the *iyawó*, and is ratified through *divination.* My *orukó* is *Alá Leké,* The White Shroud of Prominence.

Ashé!

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX I My Lukumí Genealogy

Ña Rosalia Gramosa Abreu, *Efunshe Warikondo*
Arrived to Cuba as a free Yoruba priestess, approximately in 1840.

Andrea Trujillo, *Ewin Yémí*
Priestess of Obatala. Founder of the *Cabildo Los Ewinyemises*.

Susana Cantero, *Omi Toké*
Priestess of Yemayá. Founder of the *Cabildo Yemayá.*

Maria Ponce, *Chango Bi*
Priestess of Changó.

Reimundo El Cartero, *Ochun Gwé*
Priest of Ochún.

Jesús Torres (Chicho), *Oya Bi*
Priest of Oyá.

Martin Rosel, *Ogún Nike*
Priest of Ogún.

José Ignacio Albuerne, *Changó Funke*
Priest of Changó.

Raul Morales, *Salakó*
Priest of Obatalá.

Marcelino, *Ogún Relekun*
Priest of Yemayá.

Fito, *Changó Leye*
Priest of Changó.

Carlos "Cadillac", *Ewin Shola*
Priest of Obatalá.

Orestes Valdes, *Oba Tero*
Priest of Changó. Founder of the *Cabildo La Quinta Avenida*.

Alexander Fernández, *Ala Leke*
Priest of Obatalá.

APPENDIX II GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Aborisha – uninitiated orisha worshipper

Achedí – monetary fee or contribution

Adáche – accept responsibility

Agayú – male orisha, god of the volcano

Ágo – requesting permission to enter

Ahijados – initiates, godchildren, ritual offspring

Alá – white cloth, shroud

Alafia – with love, lovingly

Alagwá lagwá – exalted elder

Aleyo – outsider, foreigner

Ashé – life-force, balance of energy

Awofáka – Ifá ritual performed for men

Awófalá – research questions

Awóye – careful observer / witness

Babalawo – Ifá priest

Babalú Ayé – male orisha, god of disease and healing

Cabildo – non-ethnic specific mutual aid society

Cabildo de nación – mutual aid society by ethnicity

Changó – male orisha, god of fire and thunder

Coronación – crowning, referring to orisha initiation

Cuarto de santo – see Igbodú

Dia del medio – middle day of priesthood initiation process

Dilogún – set of sixteen consecrated cowrie shells

Ebó – sacrifice, offering, ceremony

Ebó de entrada – Lukumí ceremony of entry

Egún – ancestor, spirits

Ékuele – Ifa divination chain

Elegua – male orisha, god of the crossroads

Emírán – inner discourse

Emíwá – I am, this is of me

Erinle – male orisha, god of medicine

Ése – strophes, verse, stanza

Hija - daughter

Hijo – son

Ibaé layé torún – rest in peace

Ibeji – twin orisha, male and female

Idánwó – scholarly committee, council

Idilé – associated kin

Igba - calabash

Igbodú – Lukumí initiation chamber

Ifádosu – rituals that engage Ifa divination

Ifárakará – life choices

Ikín – seed from the African palm tree used in Ifa divination

Ikofa – Ifá ritual performed for women

Ikú – death

Ipé Isé – priestly vocation

Ipin Iwétó – scriptural layout and design

Isáro – silent meditation

Isótélé – divination tools

Itá - Lukumí priesthood initiation divination

Italero – divination specialist

Itó Ibán Eshú – a satisfactory conclusion to ritual

Iwá Péle – good character

Iwé Kini - the application of design and style

Iwé ti ankó – a well learned and applied lesson

Iyalé – mother of the big house

Iyawó – orisha neophyte

Iyaworaje – year following orisha priesthood initiation

Iworo - communitas

Jícara - gourd

Kariocha – priesthood initiation

Kekénigan – diasporic relevance

Komólafé - methodologies

Lavatorio – Lukumí washing ritual of sacred objects

Leké – prominence, upper most

Libreta – notebook, journal, official ledger

Madrina – godmother, ritual matriarch

Maferefún – give praises to

Malé – discourse, oration, lecture

Metáloríta – a three-fold biography

Modupwe – thank you, gratitude

Moforibalé – bow one's head in worship

Moyúba – praise, incantation of blessing

Mulata – mixed race Afro-Cuban woman

Nana Buruku – female orisha, goddess of acumen

Nangareo – morning imploratory ritual

Obá – king, monarch

Oba Nani – female orisha, goddess of matrimony

Obatalá – male orisha, god of wisdom

Ochareo – I, diviner, clear the way for orisha's blessing

Ochosi – male orisha, god of the hunt

Ochún – female orisha, goddess of love

Odú – divination sign, symbol, text

Odúdua – male orisha, god of creation

Ofeicitá – scribe, seer of the untold story

Ogún – male orisha, god of iron and war

Olodúmare – Supreme God

Olókun – male orisha, god of the ocean depth

Olorisha – initiated Lukumí priest/priestess

Olórun – God, owner of Heaven

Olúpitán – the engagement of scholarly works

Onareo – safe journey

Oriate – skilled diviner, ritual specialist

Oriki – poetic language, narrative ballad

Orín Ipése – lullaby

Oriyandé – data analysis

Orisha – Lukumí deity

Orisha Odú – female orisha, goddess of knowledge

Orukó – namesake

Orúnla – male orisha, god of divination

Osain – male orisha, god of herbalism

Oyá – female orisha, goddess of the winds

Oyubona – co-initiator/godparent

Oyúgangan – a broader perspective

Padrino – godfather, ritual father

Patakí – moral narrative, dictum

Pinaldo – knife, cutlass, a Lukumi confirmation ritual

Santo – colloquial term for orisha, saint

Suwúrulére – introductions, precursory dictates

Testigos - witnesses

Trono – sacred alcove in Lukumí ritual spaces

Tutu – fresh, cool

Yemayá – female orisha, goddess of the sea

Yewá – female orisha, goddess of the afterlife