

“The Blood That Runs Through the Veins”

The Creation of Identity and a Client’s Experience of Cuban-American *Santería* *Dilogún* Divination

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A woman in Washington, DC, cannot sleep at night. She is restless, nervous; her eyes dart about searching the darkness for a clue to her discomfort. She is about to leave town, move back to her mother’s house after many years away. She realizes that she needs help. Early the next morning, she calls a friend; through him, she makes an appointment to consult an *oriaté*, a diviner and priest in the Afro-Cuban religious tradition of *la Regla de Ocha*.¹

When she and her friend arrive at the diviner’s house, she rings the bell for the upstairs apartment and is let in by a small Cuban woman who explains that her husband, the *oriaté*, is still in the shower. Together, they climb the stairs. The visitors are asked to sit with the newborn baby; the television broadcasts professional wrestling. At the left corner of the far wall, the woman sees the shrine to the *oricha*, the deities of *la Regla de Ocha*. Two bookcases stand side by side, one for the woman who answered the door and one for the *oriaté*; on the shelves are soup tureens in various colors. These tureens contain the sacred stones, or *otanes*, physical manifestations of the *oricha*. Symbols for each *oricha* surround the tureens: There is Obatalá’s white cowtail switch, traditional African symbol of authority, perfect for the senior *oricha*. The bookcase in the corner has a large blue and white tureen on top, with blue carnations next to the tureen; it is for Yemayá, mother of the *oricha* and ruler of the sea. There is Oyá’s black cowtail switch—perfect for the only *oricha* not afraid of the dead—and with it, her copper crown and nine tools. There is the *batea Changó*, a wooden covered bowl that rests on top of an overturned wooden mortar; *Changó* is the majestic king. The tureens all have food around them. Yellow pastries are for Ochún, the flowing goddess of rivers and love. The watermelon at the base of the bookcases is for Yemayá. In

the right corner stands a small, low table covered with white cloth and containers of water; this is the *bóveda*, the shrine of the dead, and next to it rest several dolls to represent important spirits.

After a while, the *oriaté* appears from the back of the apartment and the woman and her friend follow him into the kitchen. Seated at a table, the diviner has in front of him a small, flat reed basket; on the basket lie 21 cowrie shells, with their rounded side removed so they can fall up or down. There are also some hard candies and a small red and black clay figure. This is Eleguá Oníkokó, the god of speech and the knower of destiny. As he prepares the table, the diviner asks the woman if she is married to the man who has come with her.

"No," she responds.

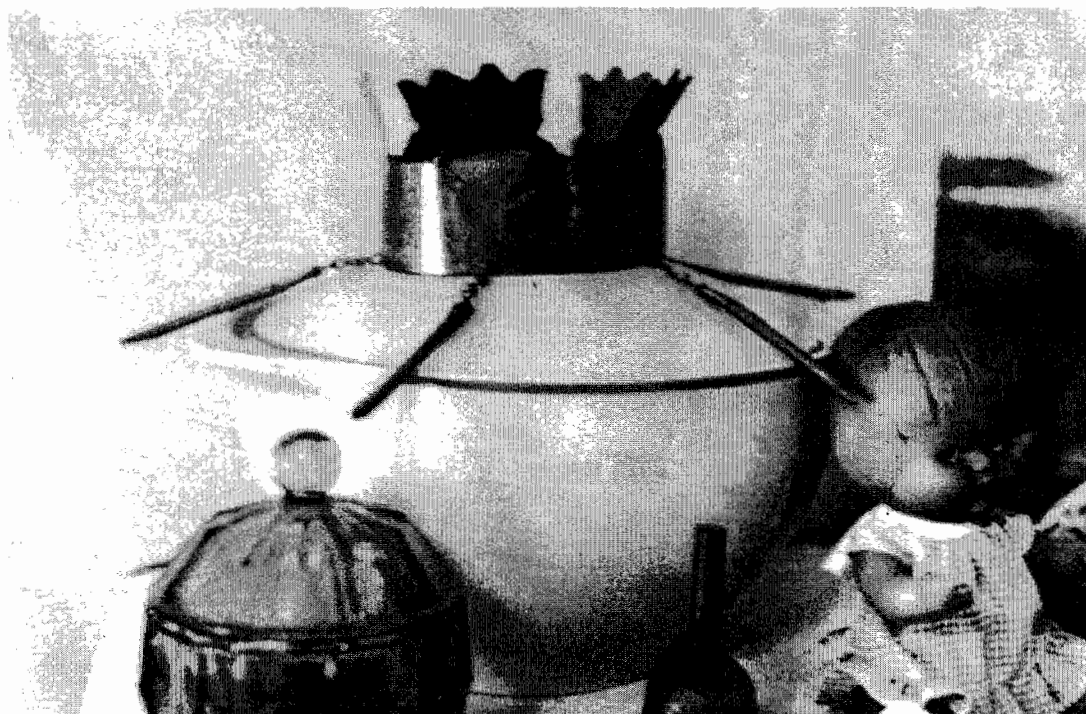
"*Hermanos?*" (Siblings?) counters the diviner.

"No."

"Oh, just friends," he says laughing.

The *oriaté* begins to chant prayers in Lucumí, a dialect of Yoruba that is used as a liturgical language in Ocha. As he prays, he dips his fingers into a small glass of water and dribbles it on Eleguá and on the shells, another manifestation of the *oricha*. After this, he rubs the shells together in his hands and then in small circles on the basket. He holds the shells to the woman's forehead and shoulders. After finishing with this procedure, the *oriaté* raps on the basket three times as three is the sacred number associated with Eleguá. He drops the shells and counts those that land with their serrated "mouths" up. Five. *Oché* is the name of this *odu*, or figure. He begins to describe the situations that the figure reveals, he uses a proverb, and describes Ochún, who rules this *odu*. He gathers the cowries again and again drops them. Eleven cowries land with their "mouths" up; *Ojuani* is the figure through which San Lázaro speaks. It portends much danger. Again the diviner describes the specific situation, but now he is focusing

1. An urn of the goddess Oricha Ochún in Havana, Cuba, sits next to a doll. Ochún is the flowing goddess of river and love. (Photo by Michael Atwood Mason)



on the entire double-figure, Oché Ojuani. He uses proverbs, gives advice, and asks more questions about the woman's social situation. She responds to all his inquiries, elaborating on the details of her life.

The oriaté again raps on the table three times. "*Iré, Eleguá?* Does the figure carry good luck, *Eleguá?*" Oché. He throws again to clarify. Oché again. He explains that *Oché Meji*, as this figure is called, is the only figure to carry luck here; the woman is very lucky and the diviner seems amazed. He interprets this figure in the same manner as before. Proverbs, advice, questions, stories. The process repeats as the diviner discovers what kind of good luck the woman has. He asks about her family; she responds that she is about to return to her mother's house, which is torn by anguish. The mother has recently broken up with a long-time lover; the sister has recently tried to commit suicide; the woman is troubled by her feelings and cannot seem to find a solution to her problems. The oriaté finds out which oricha will help the woman and what sacrifice should be offered. Each time he throws the shells, he has new advice and new questions for the woman. With each throw, she relaxes a little more.²

The woman, María, is troubled; even if she is just trying to learn more about herself, at some level, she is in crisis. The divination ritual helps clarify her position in the social and supernatural worlds. After her situation is clarified, she is able to act, to make a sacrifice that plants her squarely in the larger cosmological context. The ritual of *dilogún* divination just described synthesizes a multitude of experiences within the client and provides a method for action.

My goal here is to understand one aspect of the experience of the client. In using a phenomenological approach that allows the field experience as data to speak to me (see Jackson 1989:4), the event under study becomes enmeshed in my own vision of the other people involved in the field ex-

2. *The Oricha Eleguá routinely lies on the floor, and it is often represented by a small sculptured head. (Photo by Michael Atwood Mason)*



perience; we experience the divination together (see Devereux 1967:20); the meanings emerge from that shared experience.

This shared experience, however, cannot be fully communicated. Although many factors make this the case, perhaps radical empiricism addresses the most significant. Experience, as lived by real people, never fits perfectly into categories of thought or anthropological and folkloric models; experience overflows the concepts used to describe and understand it (see Sartre 1969:49). Similarly, the experience of another person is always inaccessible. We cannot completely know the experience of another person; we can only understand the expressions of their experience, the symbols used to represent life. These idioms exist in different genres and I have tried to gather as many representations of divination experiences as possible. I have been "read" by the *dilogún*, interviewed many other people who have been read and many diviners, and watched the process repeatedly; the involvement leads to a double goal: to present divination in a way that fits with these various commentaries by friends and informants and to present it in a way that resonates with my own understanding of the tradition and experience.

After finishing the chanted prayers, the oriaté raps on the basket three times to summon Eleguá. He drops the shells and counts the ones that land "mouth" up. Five. Oché. "Thanks be to Ochún. Oché speaks of the blood that runs in the veins (*la sangre que corre por las venas*) and you must guard everything inside, do you understand me?"

The interior world of the client, almost invisible to the diviner's eyes, troubles her and presents danger. From the beginning of the *consulta* (consultation), the client's inner world needs attention. Her own emotional, social, and historical position becomes the focus of the *consulta*, which reveals the present crisis, its supernatural solution, and the destiny of the client (see Brandon 1983:222). Destiny, as construed in the Regla de Ocha, occupies an important space and encompasses all past actions, present troubles, and the future (Cabrera 1980:197). The cowrie shells and the diviner confront the client with her own experience.

Divination apparently reduces anxiety and provides a basis for action; this is a truism. But the method by which divination clarifies situations and offers solutions remains unclear. In this case, the single fall of the shells (Velasquez 1990b), implies a specific proverb which the diviner and then María can employ as an essential and inexhaustible interpretive frame for the problem at hand. Despite some variation in the Regla de Ocha, Oché regularly evokes "The blood that runs through the veins."³ Advice follows the proverb and accompanies the rhetorical question "Do you understand me?"

The diviner again gathers the shells. Eleven. Oché-Juani. He asks about troubles with the police; María says no, no problems with the police. The diviner continues to explain that she must guard against troubles with the police. She resists this idea and seems unrelated to what is happening, amused and almost uninvolved. He says that it could be someone in the family.

"Are there problems with your family?"

María must confront the blood that runs through all the veins of her life. The questions asked of the client in this specific *consulta* reveal the common concerns and crises that compel people to visit the diviner. The interior—her body, her emotions, thoughts, her spiritual concerns—surface almost immediately and become a central context and concern of the ses-

sion. Is she worried? Always thinking about today's business? And tomorrow's? Is she healthy? Has she visited a doctor? When a person's health fails, she often visits a diviner.

The next questions relate María to the larger society; frequently, it seems, members of the Cuban-American community interact with the police and the court system.⁴ Putting aside the causes of this interesting and disturbing phenomenon, it is important to note this concern with the more institutionalized parts of American culture. Is there trouble with the police? Are you in trouble with the law? The Oché-Juani figure suggests being caught at something, being trapped. When María replies with surprise and hesitates to agree, the diviner suggests that perhaps it is someone in the family; this connection of the individual to her social surroundings implies a sense of self different from that of Euro-Americans. The boundaries of the self are not limited to the individual, but encompass family and the political environment. The trouble that brings the client to the oricha may be a problem in her own life or a problem in the life of a family member; a problem in the family creates a problem for the individual.

After María hesitates again, the oriaté once more asks, "Have you had problems with your family?" Attention now bears on the family itself. María quickly says that she does not have problems but her sister has been troubled (*yo no tengo problemas, pero hay problemas con mi hermana*). The details of the trouble are revealed: María's sister has been fighting with her mother. A problem emerges that is significant and disturbing to the client.

"The blood that runs through the veins" is mapped onto different levels of the client's life. Oché-Juani suggests that there is a problem somewhere, and, in fact, few people visit a diviner unless a problem exists. The blood can be the literal blood of the client; the relationships within a family can also be construed as its life, its blood; and the members of a society are as its lifeblood. The life of the body, the family, and the whole society merge in the proverb. The visual part of the metaphor—the blood coursing through the veins—unites the different realms of potential crisis.

Pictorializing in this way we can inspect the organizing images that are at play in ritual performance and see how microcosm and macrocosm, inner things and outer things, centers and peripheries, upper things and lower things, time-present and time-past are related. For out of such parts are wholes constructed. (Fernandez 1986:165)

The image applies to each area of social life—the body, the family, and the polity—and further exploration, through cowrie shell divination, offers a solution to the problem. The metaphor, which emerges from the extraordinarily diverse choices possible in cowrie divination, is activated by the fall of the sign Oché and becomes meaningful and useful in comprehending the immediate circumstances. Thus a dialectic begins in which the shells, as the mouths of the oricha and through the oriaté, suggest the contours of the problematic situation, and María responds positively and negatively until a consensus emerges. For María to be at peace, to be in balanced relationships, and to live productively, her blood must run smoothly.⁵

The problems at hand, the lack of money, the appearance and sense of failure as she returns home, and the anxiety of that return—all of these elements create stress. María changes her normal behavior and seeks out a different community in which to find answers, to develop solutions; a breach of normalcy occurs (Turner 1988:74). She leaves the Anglo-dominated world in which she usually lives and works and finds an alternative community that, at least to some extent, resembles the Puerto Rican society of

her mother's family. The crisis continues as she struggles for clarity and a path of action. María performs a social drama with a cast of one, although not completely alone because her friend accompanies her. She frames this event as meaningful and important; several facts evidence the importance of the ritual to her. At a time when she struggles financially, María pays the diviner a ritual fee (*derecho*) of 25 dollars; this money represents an important investment as it could have been used to buy something more physically essential. At the end of the day, after returning from the bookstore where she holds a part-time job to augment the income of her full-time job as an editor for a nonprofit organization, María discussed the consulta at length with me and recorded much of it in her journal; she also requested that I make a copy of the field tape for her so she could review the reading later. The monetary sacrifice and the desire to consider the reading repeatedly and in detail indicates its import as part of a larger drama in María's life, and that it is an "extraordinary experience" for her (see Abrahams 1986:60). She explains, "I enjoyed what he said about me, you know, I like participating in things like that. . . . I, I just took it as an opportunity to learn more about myself" (Hernandez 1991).

"Are there problems in your family?" asks the oriaté.

"I don't have problems, but there are problems with my sister."

"Problems she has had with, with your mother?"

"Yes. They fight a lot."

"Are you married?" he asks.

"No," she responds quickly.

"Do you have a boyfriend?"

"No," again quickly.

"Have you had one?"

"I used to have one."

Through many questions, the diviner asks María to tell him things about herself. She responds quickly and, in general, candidly. When asked about problems with the law, she laughs. When asked about troubles in the family, she answers the question and adds useful and pertinent information. The questions and answers significantly add to the ritual (cf. Fitzgerald 1975:227); this diviner blends the information that he sees in the sign of the shells with what the client reveals (Velasquez 1990b).

These questions offer, in the course of the consulta, an opportunity for self-revelation. Frequently a person volunteers not just a bit of helpful information, as María does, but whole narratives about the troubling situation; if the diviner hits on a relevant concern, the client can expose as much or as little of the circumstances as she chooses; she can externalize as much or as little of her interior self as she chooses. When asked if she has visited a doctor, María responds that she has not, and then asks if the problems with "*lo interior*" (the interior) are "physical or mental or emotional or spiritual" (Velasquez 1990a); she asks the oriaté to clarify the idea of the interior as she attempts to understand better its importance and meaning.

While many people reveal the details of their personal lives in response to the diviner's questions, no one is required to say anything. Commonly, a person gives no clarification of his reasons for coming to the diviner; the client whispers a question to the shells and, thus, the diviner cannot manipulate the client (cf. Bascom 1969:68–69 and 1980:5). Still, even in the extreme case where the client refuses to aid the diviner, questions are answered.

In my fieldwork, as I said, I have had several consultas with the cowries.

I have tried different strategies to see what effect, if any, they had on the readings.⁶ I have had readings in which I spoke little after each question; in others I provided only the information requested, only answered the questions; in still others, I used the questions as opportunities to speak candidly and at length about my concerns and feelings. Each degree of participation produced readings with a distinct character. When revealing only what was asked directly, the readings were brief and laborious; essentially the diviner defined my experience solely by what the shells suggested. Here, I had to refrain myself from speaking; it seemed as though the oriaté was arbitrarily defining my situation as I struggled silently to evaluate whether his definition fit my experience. When I offered detailed accounts of important issues in my life, the readings left me feeling renewed, refreshed, and with a sense of having revealed myself⁷; these readings seem to flow naturally. Despite the differing tones, however, it is important to remember that in each case the structure of the ritual remained the same and it was my experience that changed; not only did the ritual structure my experience,⁸ it provided options for different kinds of experience.

These different kinds of involvement and experience within the ritual structure suggest that the person being "searched" (*registrado*) can experience what I will call "reflective flow." In the literature on experience, authors commonly posit a dichotomous and dialectical relationship between reflexivity and reflection about experiences on the one hand and uninterpreted, uninterrupted experience on the other (see Csikszentmihaly and Robinson 1990; Turner 1986:42 and 1988:86). In many situations, especially in ritual, there exists a kind of experience that is equally reflective and fluid. In the consulta, the client is objectified and her life is defined and narrated by the oriaté, creating an intense sense of self-consciousness (Abrahams 1986:56), but actions and responses to questions still transpire in a natural and comfortable way. Here reflexivity and flow are simultaneous as María answers questions about herself; she "restores behavior" as she narrates a different and more detailed version of her life (Schechner 1985:35). Although her presentation of self occurs in the discontinuous format of questions and answers, she performs her life in a comfortable, fluid manner. Of central importance here is the role of ritual. Erving Goffman presents an valuable vision of ritual:

In brief, a play keys life, a ceremonial keys an event.[. . .] Once it is seen that ceremonials have a consequence that scripted dramas and even contests do not, it is necessary to admit that the engrossment and awe generated by these occasions vary greatly among participants. (Goffman 1974:58)

Although in a given ritual or ceremony, not all the participants have the same experiences, I am arguing for the possibility that some people will experience reflective flow, where they are hyperconscious of their actions and still not self-consciously inhibited.⁹

But as María answers the oriaté's questions and performs herself, she also reveals the fundamental diversity of her own experiences. In the example that opens this section, she comments about many things in a short time; the exchange transpires in about four seconds. Despite its brevity, the exchange uncovers many aspects of her life. First, she positions herself socially; she is not married nor does she have a boyfriend. The fact that she has had a boyfriend indexes her sexual tendencies; she is either bisexual or heterosexual. This exchange also contrasts two specific times in María's life. She responds, "I used to have one [a boyfriend];" this period of her



3. Here Eleguá, the god of speech and the knower of destiny, is adorned with a cowrie shell crown. (Photo by Michael Atwood Mason)

life, of her past, contrasts with the present when she lacks that kind of companionship and intimacy. More generally, this issue of the past and present is especially important to Cuban-Americans living in exile who make up the vast majority of practitioners of Ocha; the present in the United States often contrasts drastically with the past in Cuba.

Other questions index different aspects of her life. The questions about her family again touch on social relationships, and she states that she has a sister, that her mother is alive, and the two of them do not always get along. Her position in her family appears as central to the reading. At another moment, when the *oriaté* gives her advice, she assents to the fact that she is constantly worried about the future, that she is troubled inside. The diviner "said some things that I think are true about my personality" (Hernandez 1991).

She reveals herself as a "multiple presence" of "infinite layers" (Trinh 1989:94): Past and present, social life internalized and external. These differences, all part of María's life, do not annul identity but aid in its creation; her experience of herself includes all these times and relationships, not to mention the feelings that she has about them, and it is precisely these remembered historical moments and specific relationships that make her most naturally and completely herself. Like Gayatri Spivak, "I do not intend a simplistic definition of identity (1990:38);" instead I offer questions about the "experiencing subject" (see Bruner 1986:9).

An experiencing subject can be seen as a function of social relationships; individuals are equated with their social roles. María is a *woman*, a *writer*, a *lover*, a *daughter*, and a *Puerto Rican-American* whose father is from the northwestern United States and whose mother is from Puerto Rico. Each of these social positions has traditional behavior attached to it; she is none of these things in isolation. Yet, paradoxically, María is all these things at once. Similarly she fits into many rhetorical positions; she is *I* when speaking and *you* when addressed (cf. Lacan 1978:298); she occupies no singular position in social life or discourse. Still her identity and subjectivity can be

seen "as an emergent property of historicized experience" (Alcoff 1988: 431). Thus, María as an experiencing subject exists in a specific historical context that acts as a frame and helps create meaning. She experiences herself and the events of her life through all of these different lenses.

The "self" cannot, therefore, be treated as a thing among things; it is a function of our involvement with others in a world of diverse and ever-altering interests and situations. (Jackson 1989:3)

Social roles and groups frame what people experience and thus give their experiences specific kinds of meaning, but this meaning is never final, exclusive, or determinate. Yet neither María nor her experience can be reduced to these facts of social life; she is more than the sum total of her social positions. I have tried here to describe both general experiences of divination and those specific to her.

The oriaté discovers which oricha will help the woman and the sacrifice that should be offered. Ochún, the ruler of the sign Oché, will help María. "Acuaró, Ochún?" (A sacrifice of partridges, Ochún?). Six followed by seven shells. Obarra-Dí. Yes, a sacrifice of two partridges will clear the road.

The shells speak and tell María that Ochún, who rules "sweet" water, honey, love, passion, and lo interior, will come to her aid; to gain this assistance, María must make an *ebó* (sacrifice) to Yalorde (a praise-name for Ochún). The sacrifice will reestablish the balance between the supernatural world and the human world; this lack of balance between the worlds causes the troubles. The act of sacrifice, then, becomes an essential moral act. To sacrifice is to create balance and evoke healing; after sacrificing to Ochún, María is more likely to receive Her help and call on Her in the future. Thus, the establishment and maintenance of relationships with the oricha represents an important part of destiny, as construed by members of the Regla de Ocha.¹⁰

As a point of contact between these two domains, the sacrifice acts to unite the two. Divination and the subsequent sacrifices often objectify the immediate and subjective situation, recast it in a large, mythological context, and provide a route for action (see Jackson 1989:66), but my interest here is the method of the recasting. As I have already made clear, the various parts of the client's life come to the fore during a consulta de dilogún. Rather than attempting to simplify any singular problem, the reading records a series of conflicts and tensions within the client. Although predominantly verbal, the ritual orchestrates different kinds of experience to intensify the crisis (see Kapferer 1986:194). Here, the divination figures evoke or "contain," as the diviners say, certain proverbs. These proverbs lead to questions that personalize the situation and involve the client in the reading; also contained in the figures are stories of mythical characters and their troubles. Advice, culled from the generalities of the proverb and the stories, instructs the client how to live, what to do and what not to do, how to interact with the family, and how to win the help of the oricha. Each turn represents a subtle variation in the theme at hand. The blood that runs in the veins can be any kind of internal problem, but each question intensifies the issues, even if it only provides an example of what the client is not experiencing. Although the problems that plague the client are not solved, that is, there is no guarantee that María's sister and mother will stop fighting and that María will stop worrying, the reading intensifies the situation.

Indigenously, the problems' cause lies in some imbalance between the supernatural and human worlds. After this intensification of the realities of

life, the diviner offers a method to transcend the situation. "Ochún wants partridges," he tells her. Each oricha has particular foods: Ochún is partial to fish, partridges, eggs, shrimp, oranges, and pastries. The conflicts are further intensified by the deity wanting something. Not only is María worried about her family and her finances, she now has to concern herself with the demands of the goddess. These demands are numbered along with her other concerns but carry a different weight. This problem can be solved: a sacrifice to Ochún.

The diviner carefully evokes the problems of the client but does not solve them. In reality he cannot solve her problems, nor can he make her stop worrying. The issues remain in their original tension but are more explicit and are now juxtaposed with the new problem—the sacrifice. This intensification and clarification forces the client to identify more and more with the reality of the situation (see Lévi-Strauss 1979:321, 323). The sacrifice, as a method to solve one problem, becomes a catharsis for all the tensions discussed during the consulta.¹¹

With each throw the woman relaxes a little. Because she lacks the time and money to return to the oriaté and sacrifice the partridges, she goes to a river, the home of Ochún, and offers five yellow candles, five oranges, and five chocolate chip cookies.¹²

Notes

1. This article is based on fieldwork done for the District of Columbia Commission on the Arts and Humanities.
2. A transcription and translation of this divination session can be found in Mason (1992).
3. Although some diviners disagree about the proverbs that accompany specific figures, Oché seems to be associated universally with the same proverb. For examples where the same figure carries different proverbs, see Ecún (1988:131) versus Gonzalez-Wippler (1989:130).
4. Many references evidence this fact. David Brown (1989:369) discusses sacrifices to free people from jail and others that must be performed at a police station or a courthouse, and Obá Ecún (1988:37, 89) gives several small sacrifices (*adimú*) for freeing prisoners. The causes of this phenomenon deserve future research.
5. It is interesting to note here that divination can be seen as a quintessential negotiation between structure and agency. The shells speak through the diviner; the figure that appears refers to traditional materials and interpretations, and the client either accepts or rejects this understanding of the situation. This reading of the ritual, of course, examines only the structural interaction of the diviner and the client while ignoring the larger traditional frame of the ritual itself.
6. Jackson's work on radical empiricism suggests using the ethnographer's experience as primary data (1989:4). I have offered this information as an addition to the other data presented here.
7. It is not surprising that I feel as if I have been seen by another person after retelling the stories of my life; Sandra Dolby-Stahl has argued forcefully that the personal experience narrative functions frequently to create intimacy (see Dolby-Stahl 1977 and 1989:37-43).
8. See Munn (1969) on the ritual structuring of personal experience.
9. I have used the occasion of this paper about the experience of the client of dilogún divination to express the possibility of reflective flow. The idea emerged over a long period of time as I reflected upon my experiences of important rituals in my own life. The issue as it appears here and applies to an anthropology of experience was greatly clarified through repeated conversations with Rory P.B. Turner, whose help and friendship I gratefully acknowledge.
10. See Bascom (1980:35) for the Yoruba view of destiny and its relationship to divination. See also Murphy (1981), which posits this relationship as fundamental to the ritual system of santería.

Intensification
& clarification
of the problem

11. This interpretation of sacrifice only works for the consulta; other sacrifices are made in a Regla de Ocha that are not structurally related to catharsis. The best example is the large annual sacrifices on the anniversary of initiation (see Brown 1989:419–32).
12. It is important to notice that María did conform to the diviner's instructions. Instead of returning to him, she alters the sacrifice and offers Ochún foods that she likes. This alteration of tradition can be seen as a resistance to the oriaté's position of power: Although María accepts the information that she receives from him, she chooses to perform a private sacrifice that does not include him. María explains, "I did offer Ochún some oranges and some chocolate chip cookies and some candles. [. . .] I just told her [Ochún] that I had somehow made a promise to her that I hadn't kept and that I was trying to keep my promise, which is what he [José] said. [. . .] I did it to show my respect. I took it to be a serious moment" (Hernandez 1991).

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