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Definitive evidence, from Cuban gods

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Based on evidence collected during fieldwork among practitioners of Afro-Cuban religion in Havana, this paper seeks 'recursively' to redefine the notion of anthropological evidence itself. It does so by examining ethnographically practitioners' concern with the 'evidence' deities give (e.g. successful divinations, divine cures, etc.), by virtue of which people's relationships with deities are cemented. To the extent that this indigenous concept of evidence is different from notions of evidence anthropologists take for granted in their own work, it occasions the opportunity to transform those very assumptions. But such a procedure is itself evidential – pertaining to the relationship between ethnography and theory. The paper sets out the virtues, both ethnographic and theoretical, of this circularity.

Ethnographic evidence

In Cuba people seem concerned with the evidence gods give. Much ethnographic evidence could be adduced to show this, though, with that intention, I take a detailed vignette (see also the Introduction to this volume). This is Jorge, a well-established actor and tango singer in his 50s, speaking to me in his flat in the Old City of Havana in 2005 about Afro-Cuban religion, and particularly about what he calls *pruebas*, or, in rough English, 'proofs':

> I love this religion and I love all the deities (*santos*), because they've given me a lot of *pruebas*. Shall I tell you the story? I'd been wanting to move here to the centre for many years – too many buses to work – but it wasn't easy [referring to the legal ban on house purchases in Cuba, which prevents people from moving home unless they can persuade someone to swap their own with them]. So four years ago, when I was on tour in Santiago with the troupe, I went to see the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre [the patron saint of Cuba whose sanctuary outside Santiago de Cuba is the focus of pilgrims' devotion, and who is often identified with Ochún, the Afro-Cuban deity of sexual love and rivers]. We were standing there with two pals of mine – I wasn't really into it at that time. One of them goes to me, 'ask her for what you want, ask her', and I thought all I want is to move house, so I did ask her, and I said that if she helped me I would come back and bring her her flowers [the Caridad del Cobre particularly likes offerings of sunflowers]. When I get back home to Havana my neighbour tells me that a man had been by my home and had made enquiries about a house-swap (*permuta*). And really, I'm not joking, ten days later here I was in my new apartment and, well, here we all are and here is Ochún with her flowers.

Jorge was pointing at the ceremonial pot inside of which Ochún is placed, in the form of a beautiful river stone, as part of consecration ceremonies in Santería – the most

widespread Afro-Cuban religious tradition in Havana, on which this paper focuses. Jorge's Ochún – the decorous pot with its consecrated contents – was on display alongside a number of other *santos* (Changó, Yemayá, Oyá, Obatalá, etc.), each with his or her ritual insignia and paraphernalia, to form what is called a 'throne' (*trono*), a ceremonial display that Santería initiates (*santeros*) mount for special occasions (Brown 2003). The occasion in this case was Jorge's third anniversary of initiation – his third 'birthday', as *santeros* put it, to emphasize that Santería initiation is about 'giving birth' to the neophyte and to the deities he or she 'receives' as part of the ceremony: the ones Jorge is now displaying in his *trono*. In fact, the occasion of his third birthday and the story of Ochún's *prueba* are not unrelated. Jorge continued:

> I've had so many *pruebas* it's hardly worth counting. A few months after moving into this house I started getting headaches all the time, the light would bother me ... a lot of pain. I told a friend of mine who is a spiritist and she said that I should check to see if there's a dead spirit (*muerto*) bothering me in the house ... So I went to see a woman who had attended me before in these matters, a *santera*, and she came here and cleaned me up and the house too [namely a ritual cleansing referred to as *limpieza*] and everything was fine after that ... It was these things that brought me closer to the whole story of Santería and the spirits, so I decided that it would be good for me to do it [to 'make himself *santo*', namely to get initiated into Santería].

Jorge's story is one of persuasion – conversion even. Four years ago, on tour with his troupe, he was 'not really into' Santería. Then, with the *pruebas* mounting, three years ago he decided to be initiated himself. And now, surrounded by his gods on his birthday, he tells me of their *pruebas*.

Arguing with evidence

To introduce the argument of this paper, we may begin by noting that recounting Jorge's story at the outset is supposed to do two things at once, both of which are characteristic of anthropological ways of arguing. First, suitably contextualized, Jorge's story is supposed to provide 'ethnographic evidence', in this case of religious practice in contemporary Cuba, and particularly of the role of *pruebas* in the practice of Santería. To the reader unversed in Afro-Cuban religion, Jorge's story is meant to serve as a descriptive entry into a set of ideas and practices that are to a degree unfamiliar, and to provide some of the data that the reader will have to bear in mind in order to understand the argument that is 'built upon the data', as we might say, and to judge its merits.

Secondly, as well as providing ethnographic evidence, Jorge's story serves to set up an 'ethnographic problem'. For while the degree to which what Jorge had to say may appear unfamiliar to the reader would depend on what the reader happens to know about *pruebas*, Santería, or similar phenomena in other parts of the world,[1] Jorge's story, presented as an ethnographic vignette, is also meant to be unfamiliar in a more deliberate or principled sense. Much like the classical 'problems' of cross-cousin marriage, magic, or gift exchange, Jorge's account of *pruebas* is anthropologically interesting at least partly because it conflicts with assumptions the anthropologist may fairly deem, for the sake of argument, to share with his readers (e.g. that promises to a saint are not an efficient way of securing a flat, that headaches are not due to spirits and cannot be cured by ritual cleansings, and that none of this is evidence of the *santos*' powers). Here unfamiliarity is not a matter of a reader's psychological state or cultural background but rather an analytical condition that resides in the difference between a set of assumptions, on the one hand, and, on the other, ethnographic data that appear

to contradict them. For all I care (anthropologically), you, or I, may actually think spirits give headaches and so on – indeed, you may happen to be Jorge. The point is that such notions are anthropologically interesting – they constitute a 'problem' – insofar as they are entertained 'critically', which is to say in relation to their alternatives. By way of convention, we may call the constitutive unfamiliarity of ethnographic data 'alterity'.

It is my contention in this paper that the idea that ethnography can both constitute 'evidence' and be an index of 'alterity' is in a crucial sense incoherent, and that much anthropological argument is hostage to this muddle. Since I take it that a concern with alterity as outlined above lies at the heart of anthropological thinking (although my argument does not depend on the stronger claim that alterity must be the only concern of anthropology), it would follow that the notion of ethnographic evidence requires revision. In the main body of the paper this is done with reference to *pruebas* and what Jorge had to say about them. As will be explained, notions of *pruebas* are both close enough to anthropological ideas about evidence to warrant comparison, and different enough from them to occasion a revision. Before getting to this, however, it is necessary to make clear why anthropologists' joint concern with evidence and alterity is incoherent.

The issue, I argue, turns on how one interprets the notion of alterity. As we saw, alterity can be articulated in formal terms (rather than cultural or psychological ones) as an apparent divergence between ethnographic data and the assumptions that are taken as initial for purposes of analysis. For example, Jorge's story is 'alter' since, as we shall see in more detail, it appears to negate a number of common assumptions about the nature of evidence, much like, say, for Mauss the ethnography of Maori exchange seemed to negate common assumptions about the market, or for Evans-Pritchard Zande witchcraft seemed to negate common assumptions about causation.[2] But what do these apparent negations amount to? Logically speaking, there are two possibilities. One is that the apparent negations are indeed genuine. For example, the reason for which Jorge's story appears to contradict, say, the assumption that headaches are not caused by spirits may be that Jorge is in fact asserting that headaches are caused by spirits. There is, however, an alternative possibility. The appearance of contradiction between Jorge's comments and our initial assumptions may just as well be due to misunderstanding. Jorge may appear to be asserting that headaches are caused by spirits but may in fact be saying something quite different – something we fail to grasp, not because it contradicts our assumptions, but rather because it goes beyond them. Like hammers to which everything looks like nails, we may be thinking that Jorge is talking about what we understand as 'headaches', 'causation', 'spirits', and so on, while he may in fact be attaching quite a different meaning to such notions – a meaning that is unavailable to us from within the framework of our own assumptions. Jorge may, in other words, be talking not against us but rather past us.

In view of the distinction between the alterity of genuine negation and that of misunderstanding, it is plain to see that the notion of ethnographic 'evidence' is compatible only with the former. Ill-understood data can hardly serve as evidence that may 'inform' (let alone 'support') an argument. It follows that if ethnography is to serve as evidence, as anthropologists habitually assume, then its alterity must take the form of a genuine (and therefore straightforward) negation of the analytical assumptions anthropologists take for granted for the purposes of their arguments.

While such a formal definition of alterity may seem somewhat technical, the strategy it describes is arguably a very familiar one in anthropology. For example, if I were to say

that in this paper my objective is to understand why Jorge might think spirits cause headaches, I doubt many anthropologists would bat an eyelid. Universalists among them would perhaps expect me to go on to identify the processes (existential, psychological, evolutionary, or what have you) that explain how Jorge may have come to hold such a view. Relativists, on the other hand, would tend to expect an answer with reference to other local ideas and practices with which Jorge's views may be shown to cohere. In either case it is assumed that Jorge's views are understood as such, so that the anthropological problem they pose is why he might hold them.

I suggest that this assumption is both unwarranted and pernicious. It is unwarranted because, as we have seen, there is an alternative to assuming that the content of ethnography is understood, namely that it is not. In fact, the idea that the alterity of ethnography must lie in its negation of our own assumptions smacks of a crime most anthropologists – universalists and relativists alike – proclaim as capital, namely ethnocentrism. If the fallacy of ethnocentrism turns on reading onto another 'ethnos' (or 'culture') assumptions drawn from one's own, at issue here is a similar projection. The ethnographic dog, imagined as the locus of alterity, is in fact wagged by the tail of the analyst's own assumptions, albeit by negation. Moreover, what makes this fallacy of 'negative projection' particularly pernicious is that what it projects onto ethnography – i.e. onto people like Jorge – is essentially falsehood. On this view, after all, ethnography poses analytical problems just because it negates what we, for whatever analytical reason, take to be true (e.g. why might Jorge think that headaches are caused by spirits, given that, as we assume, they do not?). Smarter-than-thou chauvinism, fairly taken as the brunt of ethnocentric sin, here emerges as a constitutive principle of anthropological reasoning.[3]

So, provided one wishes to avoid the unwarranted assumption that what makes the people we study interesting is that they get things wrong, we are left with the idea that, far from constituting evidence, ethnographic data consist in misunderstandings. The job of anthropological analysis, then, is not to account for why ethnographic data are as they are, but rather to understand *what* they are – instead of explanation or interpretation, what is called for is conceptualization. And note that such a task effectively inverts the very project of anthropological analysis. Rather than using our own analytical concepts to make sense of a given ethnography (explanation, interpretation), we use the ethnography to rethink our analytical concepts (see also Corsín Jiménez & Willerslev 2007; Henare, Holbraad & Wastell 2007; Viveiros de Castro 2003). This follows directly from the formal definition of the problem of alterity. If our misunderstandings of ethnography stem from the fact that it is incongruous with the assumptions we take as initial, then it must be those assumptions that require analytical attention.

Furthermore, the fact that these initial assumptions lead us to misrepresent ethnographic data as a series of falsehoods (i.e. negations of assumptions we take to be true) suggests an appropriate method for the work of conceptualization, namely that of altering those assumptions in such a way as to arrive at the position of being able to represent the ethnographic data as truths. If, for example, the assumption that spirits do not cause headaches leads me to misrepresent Jorge as claiming the opposite, then the onus is on me to rethink my assumptions about spirits, causation, headaches (and their relevant corollaries) in a way that would allow me to formulate Jorge's views as statements of truth. So the question would be: what must we take 'spirits', 'causation', and 'headaches' to be in order to be able to assert truly that spirits cause headaches?

Elsewhere I have called this approach 'ontographic' (Holbraad 2003), to indicate that, by contrast to some habitual anthropological strategies, it addresses alterity in ontological terms (e.g. what is a spirit?) rather than epistemic ones (e.g. what do Cubans – or whoever – think about spirits?).

The rest of this paper illustrates and further explores such an approach with reference to the ethnography of *pruebas*. Its argument serves as an example inasmuch as *pruebas* present the problem of alterity in the terms already outlined. As we shall see, while the best translation of *pruebas* is 'evidence', Jorge's comments on *pruebas* (and other relevant ethnography) conflict with our common understanding of the notion of evidence to such an extent that they appear absurd. Illustrating the approach I have outlined, the latter half of the paper seeks to reconceptualize the idea of evidence in such a way as to remove this apparent absurdity.

It will be noted, however, that by addressing an ethnography of evidence, the paper adopts a strategy that could be described as 'recursive' (see also Henare *et al.* 2007: 15). Unlike other concepts one might seek to conceptualize anthropologically ('spirit', 'person', 'gift', or what have you), the concept of evidence pertains to the very process of anthropological analysis, as already shown. For, as will be detailed, the assumptions with which the ethnography of *pruebas* conflicts (and which render the idea of *pruebas* absurd) are integral to habitual ways of thinking about the role of evidence in anthropology. It follows that if the present analysis uses the ethnography of *pruebas* to rethink the concept of evidence, it also uses it, effectively, to rethink *itself* – or at least its own evidential procedures.

Indefinite evidence

My dictionary translates the Castellan *prueba* as 'proof', and that is how people in Cuba often use it. But Jorge, speaking of his *pruebas*, seems to be describing evidence – the evidence gods gave him. If, as we ordinarily understand it, proof is meant to be an incontrovertible demonstration of a hypothesis, then Jorge's plural usage of *pruebas* (proofs) as a succession of events ('hardly worth counting') that cumulatively 'brought him closer' to Santería and the spirits seems redundant. In his reckoning, gods are not proven once and for all – like a theorem might be in mathematics, or like God might have been for some scholastic theologians – but rather slowly, as if by a process of induction, or perhaps, to switch from logical analogies to legal ones, by deposition (see Good, this volume). In either case (induction or deposition), what is at issue is not proof but evidence, understood as facts that lend a hypothesis support (see, e.g., Howson 2000). Jorge, one might surmise, is speaking loosely, much like I do when I say that my kettle 'proves' that water boils at 100°, or that our inability to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq 'proved' that Saddam did not have them and therefore – more loosely – that the war in Iraq was illegal.

The impulse that makes us think of Jorge's mind as a kind of lab or courtroom allows us to assume the same of anthropology. Indeed, the scientific analogy is particularly intuitive to anthropologists, as the instituted aggrandisement of the discipline as a 'social science' indicates – hackneyed objections notwithstanding (e.g. Geertz 2000; Sperber 1985, for critical comment see Strathern 2005: 33-49). Our notion of evidence is integral to the intuition. Anthropology is scientific mainly inasmuch as it admits ethnographic evidence that may offer support for theoretical hypotheses. When Ernest Gellner wrote, from the borders of anthropology and philosophy, of the 'legitimation of belief', he also had in mind the merits of *ethnographic* legitimation for theoretical belief

(Gellner 1974: 149-67). In doing so, he was fortifying a connection (self-evident to him) between anthropologists' interest in ethnographic particulars and philosophers' concern with the rigours of evidence in science – concerns with verification, falsification, prediction, and so forth.[4] So, on this premise, if Jorge's *pruebas* can be translated as 'evidence' by analogy to kettles and boiling-points, it can do so by analogy to anthropology too.

It would seem, then, that Jorge's interest in the evidence the gods give him is basically similar to the evidence he and other 'informants' may give to us about, say (and this is where my argument turns recursive), the concept of evidence itself. We hypothesize that Jorge's notion of *pruebas* concerns the relationship between a hypothesis and its evidence. Our hypothesis to this effect is supposed to be supported by my ethnographic vignettes about Jorge on *pruebas*. For is he not doing the same thing? In his case the hypothesis in question regards the efficacy of the gods at the first instance and maybe, by implication, their existence. The evidence, cumulative in character, is the *pruebas*: Ochún's help with the house swap, the headaches caused by spirits and the *santera*'s cure, and all the help the *santos* have given Jorge since his initiation. If, as Imre Lakatos put it, 'the hallmark of scientific behaviour is a certain scepticism even towards one's most cherished theories' (1978: 1), then Jorge's approach to his gods has something of science about it.

For Lakatos, however, such a comparison, though apposite, does not serve to elevate Jorge's concerns with *pruebas* as scientific, but only to denigrate scientists' concerns with evidence as superstitious. In the famous lecture from which the quotation is taken, titled 'Science and pseudoscience', Lakatos makes a point of refuting the idea that willingness to provide evidence for hypotheses may in itself qualify as the kind of 'scepticism' he considers the hallmark of science. Pertinently, the discussion is set up with witchcraft in mind: 'If we look at the vast seventeenth-century literature on witchcraft, it is full of reports of careful observations and sworn evidence – even of experiments. Glanvill, the house philosopher of the Royal Society, regarded witchcraft as the paradigm of experimental reasoning' (Lakatos 1978: 2). Bastard sisters spring to mind: as for Frazer, Lakatos's assumption is that Glanvill's concern with evidence could only ever be *pseudo*scientific (cf. Frazer 1911). But while for Frazer what made the comparison between science and witchcraft viable was partly their common appeal to evidence, for Lakatos appeals to evidence were exactly what made witchcraft suspicious from what he would want to deem a properly scientific point of view. Indeed, what is so interesting about Lakatos's argument is the way it attributes the concern with evidence not to a hard-nosed scientific outlook, but rather to an essentially theological mindset – science as bastard sister of magic, so to speak. I quote him at length:

> One can today easily demonstrate that there can be no valid derivation of a law of nature from any finite number of facts; but we still keep reading about scientific theories being proved from facts. Why this stubborn resistance to elementary logic? There is a very plausible explanation. Scientists want to make their theories respectable, deserving of the title 'science', that is, genuine knowledge. Now the most relevant knowledge in the seventeenth century, when science was born, concerned God, the Devil, Heaven and Hell. If one got one's conjectures about matters of divinity wrong, the consequence of one's mistake was no less than eternal damnation. Theological knowledge cannot be fallible: it must be beyond doubt. Now the Enlightenment thought that we were fallible and ignorant about matters theological. There is no scientific theology and, therefore, no theological knowledge. Knowledge can only be about Nature, but this new type of knowledge had to be judged by the standards they took over straight from theology: it had to be proven beyond doubt. Science had to achieve the very certainty

> which had escaped theology. A scientist, worthy of the name, was not allowed to guess: he had to prove each sentence he uttered from facts. (Lakatos 1978: 2)

There are two strands of argument here, both of which are relevant to Jorge's *pruebas*, though for present purposes one is more interesting than the other. The less interesting point regards the socio-historical psychology of persuasion, as it were: caught up in the transition to Enlightenment, seventeenth-century scientists' naturalism could be made respectable by drawing on already established *theological* concerns with proof. A converse argument could be made about Cubans like Jorge. Insofar as the idiom of evidence is peculiarly salient in the case of Afro-Cuban religion (and this is an open ethnographic question), one may wish to argue that in a Marxist context – incidentally, Lakatos's contemporary bugbear of 'pseudoscience' (1978: 3) – where religions like Santería have been repressed until recently, *santeros*' religiosity may be able to curry more favour by drawing on dominant *scientistic* concerns with evidence (cf. Palmié 2002). For example, the popularity among *santeros* during my fieldwork of a book written before official openings towards Santería in Cuba, titled *Materialism explains spiritism and Santería*, by an author sometimes assumed to have been a *santero* himself (Gaston Aguero 1961), may lend credence to such a hypothesis. And certainly there is no denying the enthusiasm with which my informants recounted their *pruebas* to me in particular, taking me not only as a lucrative potential neophyte (cf. Holbraad 2004), but also for a 'scientist'.

However, in line with Lakatos, this is not the kind of evidence in which we can afford to be interested here, for Lakatos's point about the theological roots of proof from evidence arguably has more implications than he had foreseen, pointing towards a *different concept of evidence*, and thus leaving the door open for an alternative conceptualization, as outlined above. In particular, we may take up his suggestion that scientists' concern with evidential proof is motivated by divine standards of indubitability. For Lakatos, the apparent paradox of this position is a matter of historical contingency. Scientists are caught between two worlds, using the template of a theological past to articulate the aspirations of a scientific future, 'stubbornly resisting elementary logic'. But leaving the historical argument to one side, Lakatos's logical point relies on a clear-cut normative distinction between proof as a theological concern and evidence as scientific one. However, while it may be fair to charge scientists with straddling that divide oxymoronically, it certainly is not fair to Jorge (and presuming the same token, nor is it to Glanvill and the alchemists). His interest in evidence is unapologetically theological. Far from seeking to prove that unprovable, to Lakatos's lights Jorge's concern would emerge as that of providing evidence for the indubitable. But then Jorge's thinking looks not merely fallacious but altogether absurd. One can see why one might aspire to derive a proof from evidence – Lakatos himself gives a plausible account. But as to why one might conspire to provide evidence for a hypothesis that is already defined as being beyond doubt, we are in the dark. If theological knowledge is indubitable, then why bother to provide it with evidence? There are two ways out of this *reductio*. Either theological knowledge is not indubitable or evidence is not what is at issue. Or, limiting the argument to the case in hand, either in Santería the influence of the *santos* is not beyond doubt, or 'evidence' is in some crucial respect a misleading translation of *pruebas*. I shall argue for the latter option.

Infinitive evidence

That the question of indubitability is at the heart of Santería becomes clear when one considers the abiding role of divination in the life of the cult. Practically all aspects of

worship, from incidental appeals to the *santos* to help solve everyday problems (like Jorge's headaches) to soliciting divine sanction for the performance of important ceremonies (such as the consecration of neophytes, as in Jorge's 'birth' as a *santero*) require the disclosure of the *santos*' will through divination (Holbraad 2005; in press). Indeed, worshippers' ascent through a series of initiatory steps is largely measured against a scale of divinatory expertise, starting with knowledge of the rudimentary coconut-shell oracle (*los cocos*) that all worshippers are free to use for their own benefit, through the cowry oracle (*los caracoles*, *diluggún*) that only fully initiated *santeros* are taught to use for themselves or for clients, and up to the most prestigious oracle, that of Ifá, which requires a special initiation reserved for heterosexual men who are chosen as 'fathers of secrets' (*babalawos*) by Orula, the patron deity of divination, through the oracle of Ifá itself.

That divination should be so important in the life of worshippers indicates the essentially 'pragmatic' character of Santería. As is often remarked in the literature, Santería has almost no eschatology, its imperatives are decidedly practical rather than categorical, and even its remarkably rich mythology is interesting to worshippers mainly as a guide for the performance of what they call 'works' (*trabajos*) – often glossed as witchcraft (*brujería*) (see, e.g., Lachatañere 1961 contra Ortíz 1906, cf. Goldman 2005). Divination is integral to this here-and-now orientation, since it provides the principal means by which worshippers can gauge the will of the *santos* regarding their particular concerns, from house moves and headaches to initiations and funerary rites. In fact, it is precisely the pertinence of the *santos*' divinatory pronouncements that worshippers most typically have in mind when, like Jorge, they speak so enthusiastically about the *pruebas* they have had. Inasmuch as it is through divination that the gods typically speak, it follows that evidence that what they say comes to pass is evidence for the efficacy of the oracles. Divination posits hypotheses, it would seem, and *pruebas* confirm them.

Notice, however, how peculiar these 'hypotheses' are. As diviners themselves emphasize, oracles are required to arbitrate on so many aspects of worshippers' lives precisely because their pronouncements are *beyond doubt*. In divination, they often say, the *santos* 'never lie' and they 'never make mistakes'. Diviners themselves may certainly do so – since they are 'imperfect humans', as one practitioner put it – but not the *santos* who speak through them. But if in Santería false divinations are logical oxymorons, it follows that divination here is defined as indubitable. To doubt the truth of a divination is to doubt whether it is really a proper divination, since proper divinations *cannot but be true* (see also Holbraad 2003).

So we are left with the question: why the *santeros*' apparently redundant interest in *pruebas*? Given that, as we saw, providing evidence for the indubitable is absurd, a possible suggestion would be that *pruebas* are relevant to the one question that does admit of doubt in these matters, namely whether any particular divination is a genuine one. On such a view, the more truth one finds – accumulating *pruebas* like Jorge, who has 'had so many' – the more grounds one has for believing that its origin is divine, the trademark of divinity being, precisely, truth. That such a solution to the conundrum commits worshippers like Jorge to the inductive fallacy (*à la* Lakatos, piling up the evidence as if it proved something) is perhaps excusable. The real problem is that the claim is ethnographically untenable. As Jorge indicates at the very outset of his story, his *pruebas* fuel his love of the *santos*, not of the *santeros*! Indeed in his first story, about the house move, doubtful human mediation does not feature at all; it is Ochún's divine power that the *pruebas* are meant to demonstrate.

We are left with the absurdity of evidence. In line with the introductory comments to this paper, the onus is upon us to reconsider the premises of such a notion, changing our conceptualization of evidence in light of the ethnography of *pruebas*. The key for doing so, I argue, lies in the relationship between *pruebas* and divination, since it is in this connection that the absurdity of providing evidence for indubitable truth emerges. Indeed, the need to reconceptualize evidence in this context is owed to the fact that the concept of truth itself in Santería divination departs radically from common-sense assumptions about truth.

As I have argued in more detail elsewhere, divinatory truths present a problem (that of alterity) because, although practitioners define them as indubitable, they seem to take the form of ordinary statements of fact – i.e. statements that can be *doubted* with reference to facts (Holbraad 2003). For example, the truth of the *santera*'s pronouncement that Jorge's home was occupied by spirits appears to depend on whether Jorge's flat was in fact occupied by spirits – a doubtful matter, to say the least.[5] However, this apparent contradiction depends on our assumption that the *santera* is making what philosophers call a 'predicative' statement, that is, that what she is doing is 'ascribing a property' to his house (the property of being occupied by spirits), in the sense Knight and Astuti discuss in their contribution to this volume. Under such an interpretation, the idea that divinatory pronouncements are indubitable appears dogmatic – as if, by cultural fiat, what makes such pronouncements indubitable is the fact that they are pronounced by a diviner.[6] But what kind of truth is this that can be brought about by a mere speech-act?

To avoid the imputation of native dogmatism, I have argued, we need to move away from the assumption that the truth of divinatory statements is meant to be predicative, for an alternative would be to treat them not as statements of fact but rather as *definitions*. On such a view, the truths of divination are to be understood not in epistemic terms, as 'representations' that make claims 'about' the world, but rather as ontological operations. So, for example, when the *santera* says that Jorge's flat is occupied by spirits, she is not making a claim about an already existing state of affairs. She is bringing such a state of affairs about, pronouncing a change in 'the world's furniture', to use the ontologists' expression: Jorge's home is *redefined* as one occupied by malevolent spirits, his headaches are *redefined* as caused by the spirits, the spirits themselves are *redefined* as vulnerable to the *santera*'s expert cleansing, and so on. Divinatory power, then, resides in the possibility of inventing entities through acts of definition. Following a suggestion by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (pers. comm.), I propose to call these acts of inventive definition 'infinitions'. Shorthand for 'inventive definition' (cf. Holbraad in press), the term would also indicate that such acts presuppose that entities are infinite in their potential for transformation through redefinition[7] – their only constancy is that they are under permanent ontological reconstruction.

Positing divinatory pronouncements as infinitions gets us out of imputing dogmatism to the *santeros*. Infinitions are indubitable because they are true by definition, rather like the statements philosophers call 'analytic' (e.g. 'bachelors are unmarried men'). Nevertheless, the idea that infinitions (mere speech-acts like 'your home has spirits in it') can have properly ontological effects may sound mystical or, worse, 'constructivist'. Is it really credible to say that Jorge's home can be brought forth as a new entity (one that is occupied by spirits) just on a *santera*'s say-so? Is this not merely to elevate the very absurdity of divination as an analytical principle? By way of defence, I propose to demonstrate that the idea of 'infinition' is not as logically abhorrent as it

perhaps sounds. As we shall see, delving into the logic of infinition also brings us closer to conceptualizing *pruebas*.

Consider what I am doing right now. Stringing meanings together ('definition', 'ontology', 'effect', etc.), I am proposing that you take on board a new concept, appropriately christened with a new name – 'infinition'. Even if you see no sense in this new concept, surely you can accept that it is at least conceivable that it *may* make sense as such (unless you are a Platonist, in which case you see any sense the concept makes as proof of its prior existence as an immutable Form). In (non-Platonic) principle, then, you accept the possibility of conceptual novelty. You may even agree that the history of ideas is *made* of such instances of conceptual invention – e.g. who had thought of a Form before Plato? Indeed, those philosophers who have followed Nietzsche in thinking of philosophy as an 'untimely' enterprise have sought to theorize this possibility of conceptual invention (e.g. Deleuze 1994; Heidegger 1968; cf. Nietzsche 1997). And so have anthropologists who see the creation of new meanings not just as a philosophical prerogative, but as an irreducible aspect of social living (e.g. Ardener 1989; Latour 1999; Strathern 1999; Viveiros de Castro 2002; Wagner 1981).

Now, why claim that infinitions must *ipso facto* have ontological effects, bringing forth the objects they define as existing entities?[8] Well, consider the alternatives. One would be to claim that when I, say, define infinitions as inventions of new concepts, I am merely giving a name to a phenomenon that already exists – indeed, how else could I appeal to Plato and his Forms as a convincing precedent of what I have in mind? But this is contradictory. If infinitions already exist, then they do not exist as *new* concepts, which is what they are defined as. Infinitions may be logically quirky, but not as quirky as having the capacity to pre-exist themselves.

The other alternative would be to claim that the concepts that infinitions inaugurate may well be just that, *mere* concepts. On this view, infinitions are treated on a par with 'unicorn', 'the golden mountain' , or 'the current King of France', as at most senses with no reference, in philosophical parlance (e.g. Frege 1980), and hence their purported ontological effects are, quite literally, fanciful. But appealing as it may be to a common-sense viewpoint that would deem diviners' infinitions as unicorn-like psychedelia, such a move is a throwback to the epistemic frame, which insists on treating concepts as 'representations' (here read 'sense') to be contrasted to 'the world' (here read 'reference'). Apart from the question-begging, the problem here is that treating infinitions as representations implicitly pastes over their putative novelty. If one assumes that the ontological effects of infinitions must be measured against the world of 'evidence' that gives them their epistemic purchase, then one precludes novelty on two counts. For one thing, the world to which infinitions might refer is presumed to be already given (as an evidential benchmark, so to speak), so any question of their ontological effects *upon* such a 'world' is already foreclosed. But more to the point, such epistemic litmus tests ('does the new concept refer to an existing entity or not?') also implicitly deny the novelty *of the concepts* they purport to measure against the world. The suggestion that an infinition might not, as it turns out, have a referent gives logical priority to the putatively new concept (read 'representation') over the world to which it may or may not refer *a posteriori*. Thus for the question of an infinition's reference even to be raised, the supposed novel concept must be taken as already given, that is, its novelty, *qua* infinition, must be effaced.

Provided this *reductio* of the alternatives is fair and the alternatives are exhaustive, it follows that by accepting the notion of a new concept we willy-nilly accept that such

new concepts must have ontological effects – they must bring forth, into existence, the entities they infine. Now I want to argue that such a move allows us to make sense not only of the *santeros*' claim that what their gods say is indubitable, as we have seen, but also of their apparently paradoxical insistence that these indubitable truths nevertheless admit of a kind of confirmation – I will not say evidence! – by *pruebas*.

A chief reason, perhaps, for which one is tempted to find the idea of infinition psychedelic is what one might call its hyper-nominalism.[9] If nominalism, loosely, is the thesis that every thing is itself and nothing other than itself, then infinitions are hyper-nominalist inasmuch as they are themselves and nothing other *qua new concepts*, and novelty, as we have seen, wears off quickly. No sooner has Jorge's flat been infined as occupied by spirits than the infinition becomes unavailable for *a posteriori* testing, so to speak, lest its novelty disappear. Infinitions pertain to the moment of what Roy Wagner has called 'invention' (1981). Indeed they *are* such moments. This temporal hyper-nominalism, I would suggest, has direct implications for the question of what may count as a 'confirmation' of an infinition, that is, for the question of *pruebas*.

If what *a posteriori* evidence tests is the epistemic purchase of a representation upon the world, then at issue for infinitions must be something like an 'ontological purchase'. Return to the example. As an infinition, the *santera*'s divination brought Jorge's spirit-infested home forth as a new entity. It follows that its confirmation is the existence of Jorge's home *as such an entity*, for example as one that can be cleansed ritually so as to cure Jorge's headaches. However, Jorge's cured headaches cannot be construed as 'evidence' for the existence of his newly defined house-of-spirits, since, as we saw, infinitions do not admit of evidence, at pain of evaporating into thin (epistemic) air. Indeed, since an infinition does not outlast its own novelty (namely it does not outlast *itself*), it would follow that the only way to confirm its ontological purchase is to *re-enact it*: an infinition's 'test' can only be a *further* infinition. In a logical universe where entities are under permanent ontological construction, as we have said, their existence *qua* constructions only has purchase inasmuch as they become implicated in further acts of construction. And such acts of further construction – infinitions in their own right – 'confirm' the existence of the infinitions they transform by showing that they can indeed be engaged *as transformations* – taking them, as it were, for an ontological spin. Put in twentieth-century pop science terms: with infinitions, to know something *really is* to change it.

That, then, is how *pruebas* work. The cure of Jorge's headaches confirmed the *santera*'s divination about the spirits not because it provided evidence that it was 'correct', but because it took the entity infined by the divination – Jorge's house-of-spirits – as the baseline for an act of further infinition, namely that of the cure itself. For, just like the divination transformed a seemingly 'ordinary' house into one occupied by spirits, so its *prueba* transformed the alleviation of Jorge's pain into an event of spiritual significance: not simply a disappearance of headaches but a 'cure-of-spiritual-influence'. The ontological purchase of the latter infinition (the existence of Jorge's cure of spiritual influence) confirms that of the former, since it is by appealing to the *santera*'s infinition of his home that Jorge is able to infine his alleviation as a cure of spiritual proportions. But note that this confirmation is not a matter of 'coherence', as it might be articulated were one to think of the infinitions epistemically as representations or, as it is said, 'beliefs' (e.g. Evans-Pritchard 1976; see also Keane, this volume). Jorge's cure confirms the pernicious spirits in his house not by merely presupposing their previous existence, but by actively transforming it – in this case by removing the

spirits from the house through the cleansing ritual. His *prueba* takes the form of an infinition that is not just precipitated by the infinitions of the divination, but also (and by that virtue) acts to transform them.

In this sense the relationship between divination and *pruebas*, which so looked like that between 'hypotheses' and 'evidence', elevates the aforementioned 'pragmatism' of Santería to the level of logic. The logic of Santería practice, if you like, is that logic is practical, or even 'pragmatical' – to follow the Greek association of actions (*praxes*) with things (*pragmata*), as infinitions do. The fact that Santería is so orientated to the here and now, rendering doctrinal or cosmologically speculative concerns subservient to 'work' ('witchcraft'), is not a matter of arbitrary local convention. Such an orientation is a function of its 'infinitive' logic. In place of induction (read evidence), deduction (read proof), abduction (read hypothesis), or what have you, the logic of Santería posits *production*, understood as the activity of ontological transformation that infinition involves. Indeed, it is for this reason that practitioners' interest in *pruebas* is far from absurd, as it would have to be if it were glossed as a matter of providing 'evidence' for the gods' indubitable truths. The problem there, as we saw, was that evidence is logically redundant in the face of indubitability. Contrastingly, if *pruebas* are recognized as infinitions, far from redundant, they emerge as an indispensable constituent of the logic of worship, for, as we have seen, *pruebas* are effectively a concomitant of the temporal hyper-nominalism of infinition. Even if providing evidence for divinations were not absurd, it would certainly be optional – representations do not as such *depend* on the provision of evidence for their existence. Infinitions, on the other hand, exist by virtue of being implicated in further acts of transformation, and that is what makes *pruebas* not only logically sensible but also pragmatically necessary.

The infinitive logic of Santería has far-reaching implications, and charting these in diverse areas of worshippers' lives is my ongoing project. That such a project should *remain* ongoing follows from its own infinitive character – a meta-anthropological point raised in the conclusion of this paper. Before doing so, however, we may note some of the dividends of such an analysis, first for Jorge's story, and then a bit beyond.

Jorge's account, we noted, can be read as one of personal conversion. From a position of relative indifference four years ago at the sanctuary of the El Cobre in Santiago, his *pruebas* helped him get to where he is today, a proud initiate celebrating his 'birthday'. Now, anthropological accounts often present conversion as a matter of 'persuasion' or at least as some kind of change in people's 'beliefs' – an approach that takes off from the kinds of 'epistemic' assumptions we have sought to discard here, and which were no doubt central to Protestant missionaries' thinking on the matter (cf. Whitehouse 2000). However, the emphasis Jorge places on the role of *pruebas* in precipitating his initiation would suggest otherwise. For if initiation itself can fairly be thought of as the apogee of ontological transformation – and what better metaphor for bringing forth new entities than 'birth', which is how *santeros* conceptualize neophytes' initiation (see above and Holbraad in press) – then Jorge's notion that his *pruebas*, in his words, 'brought [him] closer to Santería and the spirits' makes perfect infinitive sense. As infinitions in their own right, *pruebas* brought Jorge closer to initiation not by 'convincing' him that it may be a good idea, but by implicating him into the world of the *santos* through successive acts of ontological reconstruction. Initiation, then, comes as a consummation of a longer trajectory of transformation with which it is logically continuous. Indeed, in this context, the ostentation of the initiate's celebratory *trono* display, which allowed Jorge in the interview literally to point to his *santos* as indicators

both of his *pruebas* and of his conversion, illustrates (no, *constitutes*) the ontological productivity of this trajectory in appropriately 'pragmatical' terms – pots, stones, and other beautiful regalia being the *pragmata* of the *santos* (see also Holbraad 2007).

Of course, Jorge's story happens to be a happy one. In fact, much like Evans-Pritchard showed for the Azande (1976: 154-63), in Santería dissatisfaction with divinations is far from uncommon. Horror stories abound in Santería probably as much as those of *pruebas*, with people frequently lamenting how far divinations they were given diverged from how things turned out to be. Considering that oracles in Santería are infallible, it may not be surprising that such divergences provoke reactions ranging from confusion to indignation, and can sometimes cause considerable distress. For example, this is what a young woman told me after a long and particularly important divinatory séance (*itá*), conducted for her as part of an initiatory ceremony:

> It was terrible. [The diviners] said many things that have nothing to do with me ... That I will never prosper until I kneel at my mother's feet and ask for her forgiveness. What is that? I've spent the past hour talking and crying with my mum, trying to work out what I've done to her. I asked her for her forgiveness but she didn't give it because I haven't done anything! We've always been so close, and none of this is going to change that.

Traditionally, anthropologists keen to make sense of native 'belief systems', so called, have felt that such stories pose a problem. Indeed, if one assumes that the diviners' statement is best construed as a representation of the woman's relationship to her mother, then her vehement denials are certainly problematic: the woman appears not to believe in the divination, so, inasmuch as divination is construed as part of the local system of belief, such a case requires explanation. Ingenious analytical footwork such as Evans-Pritchard's 'secondary elaborations of belief' is then produced (1976: 155).[10]

However, an analysis based on 'infinitive' logic dissolves the problem. This is a point in its favour, I take it, since the whole point is that for the natives such cases, distressing as they may be, pose no 'problem' – or not, at least, the kind of 'crisis of representation' that lurks underneath anthropologists' worry that divination might be shown up as a sham to the natives themselves. On an infinitive account, the woman's divinatory fiasco is articulated not as a matter of the world giving the lie to the divination, but rather as a refusal on the woman's part to accept the oracle's reinvention of her. The notion of 'acceptance' is of course used advisedly here. At issue is not some kind of disagreement between neophyte and priest ('you may say I owe my mother an apology, but I don't accept that'), but rather a more literal – or at least 'pragmatical' – sense of 'acceptance'. The woman does not 'take' the diviner's infinition of her inasmuch as she refuses to use it as the basis for further acts of infinition. Nothing is going to change her closeness with her mother, she says. Such stances pose no analytical problem since they are already implicit in a hyper-nominalist characterization of divinations, which premises their purchase not upon accurate depiction, but upon ongoing acts of transformation. In divinatory fiascos the oracle's infinitions are simply *allowed* to dissipate out of existence. So in response to the classical worry about how people can continue to practise divination in the face of its many failures, we may just note that there is no absurdity in allowing some infinitions to drop out of the world, while building whole lives on others. Infinitions make no 'claim' on the world, for they partake of it.

Anthropological evidence

Anthropology, too, partakes of the world. Or so the present mode of analysis would seek to demonstrate. At the outset of this paper we raised the possibility that the

ethnography of *pruebas* could serve as a lever for transforming anthropological assumptions about the nature of ethnographic evidence. The homology between anthropologists' concept of evidence and *santeros*' concept of *pruebas* suggested this possibility, while their difference made it worth pursuing. Given its subject matter, it was proposed, such an approach would in this case have to be 'recursive'. Since anthropologists would assume that the relationship between ethnographic material (such as Cuban notions of *pruebas*) and anthropological analysis (such as the notion of 'evidence') is itself evidential, the merits of transforming the latter in light of the former would have to be borne out in the act. An evidential account of how the notion of anthropological evidence could be cashed in could hardly recommend itself.

So the strategy of this paper instantiates its argument. We began by testing evidentially the hypothesis that the notion of 'evidence' captures Jorge's concern with *pruebas*. This, we found, would render Jorge's concern absurd, since the indubitable truths of the gods do not, logically, admit of evidence as this is ordinarily conceived. Given that evidence is what *pruebas* nevertheless look like (certainly that is what such concerns have always looked like to classical anthropology), an 'extraordinary' analysis of *pruebas* would be required, which would transform the notion of 'evidence' in a way that could render *pruebas* intelligible. To this end, we found we had to discard the epistemic assumptions upon which ordinary concepts of evidence are founded, in favour of the analytics of 'infinition'. The absurdity of providing evidence for indubitable divinations was thus removed, since the role of infinitions is not to make claims about the world that could be doubted, but rather to populate the world with entities through acts of conceptual transformation. *Pruebas* do not 'test' these acts, but rather consummate them *qua* transformations by prolonging them as such, that is, by transforming them further.

But this is also what *we* have been doing. The conceptual transformation required to arrive at 'infinition' is, of course, itself an infinition. Indeed, the analytical strategy that I have just summarized could be told in the language of Santería. Our 'headache' has been the relationship between ethnography and analysis. Out of an impulse that would appear no less exotic than Jorge's love of the *santos* (it certainly does to non-anthropologists!), we took our ailment to Cuba. Could an ethnography of Santería cure it? Not unless that act was itself understood as part of the cure, was the ethnographic oracle's pronouncement – that is, not unless we accepted that what we were doing was what we were finding: *pruebas*. We could, of course, do like the young woman and simply drop the ethnographic pronouncement, sticking to our initial assumption that ethnography's role is to provide evidence. But that would not remove the headache. So we *took* the ethnographic pronouncement, confirming its ontological purchase by transforming it into the analytics of infinition. Reconceptualizing anthropological analysis as reconceptualization, we transformed ethnographic *pruebas* into anthropological ones. The upshot of the exercise is not only a new anthropological concept (infinition), but also a new concept of anthropology (again, infinition).

To close, we may merely note that the idea of anthropology as infinition effectively draws a line under anthropologists' long-standing insecurities about their relationship to science (see above). On the assumption that the project of science is characterized partly by its investment in the notion of evidence (a contentious assumption perhaps – cf. Latour 1999), our eschewal of this idea here would render the attempt to measure anthropology up to science a straight category mistake. But this is not to throw anthropology into the soft arms of 'interpretation' or 'the arts', as it is often assumed. Rather,

the idea of infinition arguably places anthropology much closer to philosophy, inasmuch as philosophy can be seen as a project of conceptual production (see above) by means of what Anglo-Saxon philosophers sometimes call 'conceptual analysis'. But this *is* contentious – though, again, recursively so, since defining philosophy is itself a philosophical problem.

NOTES

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[1] In fact, nothing is *that* unfamiliar after a century of professional anthropology and other forms of self-conscious travel.

[2] While such 'common-sense' assumptions are often most relevant for gauging the alterity of ethnography, there is no principled reason for assuming they are the only ones. As the anthropological tradition of inter-regional comparison demonstrates, one may set the ethnography of any locality against assumptions prevalent in any other – for an example see Holbraad & Willerslev (2007). (I thank Chloe Nahum-Claudel for thoughts on this matter.) Moreover, since the relation of alterity is to be understood at a logical rather than a cultural level, there is no principled reason even to 'territorialize' geo-culturally either ethnography or the assumptions from which it may diverge (cf. Holbraad 2004).

[3] With respect to the indelicacies of this chauvinism, universalists and relativists part company. While the former tend to bite the bullet, taking it as their task to explain the conditions for the occurrence of native falsehoods, the latter merely refuse to pass judgement, claiming – by liberal dogma – that native views must hold their own 'local' truth. But relativist magnanimity – what Vassos Argyrou calls the stance of 'redemption' (2002: 28-59) – is just an absurd fudge: by law of excluded middle, if the natives contradict our assumptions, only one of us can *actually* be right.

[4] It may not be accidental that the present volume should be associated with the London School of Economics and Political Science, where Gellner's concerns with scientific rigour were formed in (disciplinarily liminal) dialogue with such figures as Popper, Lakatos, Watkins, and Feyerabend.

[5] In his story Jorge did not mention the divinatory origin of the *santera*'s conclusion. But this is only because he assumed that I would know that *santeros* use their cowry oracles to determine (and then to resolve) such problems – divination is the premise of *santeros*' expertise.

[6] For a fully worked-out theorization of this possibility, see Boyer (1990).

[7] An added connotation of the term relates to the philosophical distinction between 'intensional' and 'extensional' theories of meaning. Extensional theories define the meaning of a given expression in terms of its purchase on a world of referents (i.e. in 'epistemic' terms). Intensional theories define meaning with reference to the conditions that would determine such a reference (see, e.g., Chalmers 2002). So in defining *x*, the extensionist proceeds by asking 'what things are *x*?', while the intensionist asks 'what counts for a thing to be *x*?' Infinitions transform intensions (a matter of conceptual definition) rather than merely changing extensions (an empirical concern with the 'application' of a predetermined concept).

[8] It will be clear that this argument is closely related to 'ontological arguments' in theology. As such it deserves a more extended exposition, since such arguments are notoriously difficult to pin down. As Bertrand Russell put it, 'it is easier to feel convinced that [ontological arguments] must be fallacious than it is to find out precisely where the fallacy lies' (1946: 609, cf. Millican 2004). Mindful of the pitfalls, I put this argument up for consideration tentatively, in the hope that criticism might allow me to sharpen it in the future.

[9] I thank Professor David Kirsh for suggesting this.

[10] Compelling as it may have been mid-twentieth century as – effectively – a precursor of Popperian philosophy of science (e.g. Popper 1959; cf. Horton 1967), the analytical armoury of 'secondary elaboration' is just that: a secondary elaboration of Evans-Pritchard's own, which serves to preserve his guiding assumption that oracles make representational truth-claims that could be verified or falsified by evidence. The cost of such a move is charged on the natives. The possibility of falsification, live on Evans-Pritchard's evidential account, is barred only by imputing dogmatism *tout court*: for every oracular 'error' another 'mystical belief' must be added to the natives' tab, its absurd integrity guarded cyclically by its coherence with others.

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Preuves divines et définitives à Cuba

Résumé

Sur la base des preuves recueillies au cours d'un travail de terrain parmi les praticiens d'une religion afro-cubaine à La Havane, le présent article cherche, de manière « récursive », à redéfinir la notion de preuve anthropologique elle-même. Pour cela, il ethnographie l'attention apportée par les praticiens aux « preuves » que leur envoient les divinités (par exemple des divinations réussies, des guérisons divines, etc.), grâce auxquelles la relation entre humains et déités est consolidée. Dans la mesure où ce concept autochtone de preuve est différent de la notion de preuve que les anthropologues tiennent pour acquise dans leur propre travail, il donne l'occasion de transformer ces hypothèses même. Cette procédure a toutefois valeur de preuve par elle-même, puisqu'elle est liée à la relation entre l'ethnographie et la théorie. L'auteur expose ici les vertus, ethnographiques aussi bien que théoriques, de cette relation circulaire.

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