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Image [modified]: *Nganga* of palo monte, Cienfuegos, Cuba. Author's archive.

Aesthetic Emotions in Afro-Cuban Ritual Stagecraft

Emoções estéticas das cenografias rituais afro-cubanas

Katerina Kerestetzi*

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the emotional impacts of aesthetics in Afro-Cuban religions, with particular regard to the consultation séances organised by ritual specialists of Palo Monte, Santería, Ifá and Espiritismo to resolve their clients' ailments. It demonstrates how each element of ritual stagecraft (interactive frameworks, decorative styles, material apparatus, instruments) leads the client on an emotional journey that constitutes the effective power of the séance. From this angle, each of these cults offers a unique emotional configuration, a kind of affective signature that distinguishes it unambiguously from the other religious modalities grouped together under the label of Afro-Cuban religion. An interesting notion at a time when certain researchers are questioning the sense in continuing to study these Afro-Cuban cults separately, given the porous overlap between them in terms of shared followers, concepts and cosmologies...

KEY WORDS

Ritual aesthetics. Ritual stagecraft. Aesthetic emotions. Consultations. Afro-Cuban religions.

RESUMO

Este artigo examina os impactos emocionais da estética das religiões afro-cubanas. Ele trata do caso particular das consultas, as sessões organizadas por especialistas rituais do *palo monte*, *santería*, *ifá* ou espiritismo, visando a resolver os males de seus clientes. O artigo revela que cada cenografia ritual (contextos interativos, estilos decorativos, dispositivos materiais, ferramentas) conduz o consulente a um percurso emocional que está no cerne da eficácia da sessão. Nesse sentido, cada culto oferece uma combinação emocional única, uma espécie de assinatura emocional que o distingue inequivocamente das outras modalidades religiosas subsumidas sob o nome de religião afro-cubana. Trata-se de uma constatação interessante no momento em que alguns pesquisadores se perguntam se ainda faz sentido estudar separadamente essas religiões, cujas fronteiras são tão porosas que elas compartilham seguidores, conceitos, cosmologias...

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Estética ritual. Cenografias rituais. Emoções estéticas. Consultas. Religiões afro-cubanas.

RESUMÉ

Cette étude s'intéresse aux impacts émotionnels de l'esthétique des religions afro-cubaines. Elle traite le cas particulier des consultations, ces séances organisées par des spécialistes rituels du palo monte, de la santería, de l'ifá ou du spiritisme, pour résoudre les maux de leurs clients. Elle révèle que chaque scénographie rituelle (cadres interactifs, styles décoratifs, dispositifs matériels, outils) entraîne le consulté dans un cheminement émotionnel qui est le cœur même de l'efficacité de la séance. A cet égard chaque culte propose une combinaison émotionnelle unique, sorte de signature affective qui la singularise sans ambiguïté des autres modalités religieuses réunies sous le vocable de religion afro-cubaines. Un constat intéressant à l'heure où certains chercheurs se demandent s'il y a encore un sens d'étudier séparément ces religions afro-cubaines dont les frontières sont si poreuses qu'elles partagent adeptes, concepts, cosmologies...

MOTS-CLÉS

Esthétique rituelle. Scénographies rituelles. Émotions esthétiques. Consultations. Religions afro-cubaines.

All religions have an aesthetic identity that forms the basis of their transmission. Some anthropologists even claim that religious groups evolve around “aesthetic formations” that create a sense of belonging and a community of thought and affect (Meyer 2009). Indeed, through their material culture, the arrangement of their ritual spaces and the way in which they cultivate the attention and sensitivity of their followers, religions establish “sensory orders” (Howes 1991) and unique experiences.

This article adopts this aesthetic approach in regard to religious phenomena in Afro-Cuban religions, a label designating the category of animist religions that developed in Cuba from the cult elements transmitted by African slave populations. The most widespread of these are Santería and Ifá, both of Yoruba origin, whose practitioners connect to African deities called *orichas*; Palo Monte, of Bantu influence, whose followers form relations with “dark” spirits of the dead, *nfumbis*; and Espiritismo Cruzado,

a blend of Allan Kardec's spiritist movement and Afro-Cuban religions.

While the question of aesthetics could potentially be applied to all religious practices, it assumes particular importance in the case of Afro-Cuban religions, which operate outside any normative institutions in terms of style. These religions are overwhelmingly practiced in domestic spaces, lacking any public ritual buildings designed according to uniform stylistic rules, such as Catholic churches, which must adhere to a specific architectural layout as well as objects and images produced from standardised models. Here, the altars and rituals exist in the homes of practitioners, and the form that they take is dependent on idiosyncratic conditions (economic/spatial feasibility, personal tastes). It thus falls to each practitioner to constitute their own religious world, to each ritual organiser to create a space that adequately reflects the principles of their cult. The weight of this duty is clearly evident in the agitation, stress and expenditure that accompany preparations for Afro-Cuban rituals. Where to place this effigy – in the living room, in the courtyard? What should adorn it? How to get the flowers, fabric and offerings for the ceremony? These questions may seem trivial but are in fact crucial, sometimes more so, in the eyes of the practitioners, than the means of contact with the other side, the purpose itself of the ritual. Unless these two aspects are, in actual fact, inseparable...

This article focuses on the cognitive and emotional effects of ritual aesthetics. By this term, I refer to the decorative style of each ritual space, but also to its olfactory, auditive and kinesic identity, among other aspects. Here, "aesthetic" does not simply designate questions of beauty but remains true to its broader etymological sense of aisthesis, relating to the sensorial (Meyer 2009). This essentially anthropological understanding of the term aims to highlight the concrete effects of the senses on social reality (Howes, 1991, 2003; Pink, 2009; Rodaway, 1994; Stoller, 1989; Pinney, 2004; Meyer, 2009; Halloy, 2018).

One objective of this text is to challenge a widespread theory in the

field of research of Afro-Cuban religions, whereby these cults constitute a “unit”, a “single system of representations” (López Valdés, 1985; Argyriadis, 1999; James Figarola, 1988; Palmié, 2002), ideas and logics. There is indeed a continual exchange between these groups of religious symbols, technical devices, arguments, and even followers and deities. An adherent of Palo Monte may, for example, use a divinatory procedure from Santería in a consultation, commune with a deceased spirit of Espiritismo during a magical operation, or borrow an Ifá myth to explain a phenomenon. A spiritist medium may be asked to exercise their gifts in a Santería ritual, an Ifá initiate may request magical help from one of Palo Monte, etc. It is, moreover, perfectly common for one person to practice several religions simultaneously. This situation has the potential to blur the boundaries between the various cults, to the extent that it can sometimes be difficult to pinpoint what is definitively *palero*, *santero*, spiritist... Unsurprising, then, that some researchers see little value in studying the various Afro-Cuban religions separately. However, while conscious of the likenesses that interlink their cults, practitioners retain an image and a very clear sense of the individuality of each.

This angle of aesthetics, ritual stagecraft and emotivity sheds an interesting light on this anthropological debate. We will see in particular how it serves to objectify this distinction through forms, sounds, bodily reactions, facial expressions, movements and affects, while also highlighting certain similarities and principles that lend these cults an air of kinship. For instance, visual references to Africa are universal (countless African-style statuettes, straw hats, effigies of Africans, cigars, etc.), as is the vitality of their materialised entities... At the same time, notably, the expression of these constants varies so starkly from one cult to the next that they provoke emotions in outsiders ranging from wonder to fear; affective differences that preserve tangible borders between each religion.

This study is confined to a single type of ritual situation: consultations.

I choose these over, say, initiations or other collective rituals because they provide a framework that is simpler to analyse, with a smaller number of participants; and they involve individuals, clients, who do not necessarily possess any knowledge of the ritual world. The manifestation of emotions in these actors from outside the cult is arguably more direct and more sincere than that of seasoned practitioners during collective rituals, where they subject themselves to a “mandatory expression of feelings” (Houseman 2016: 225).

The data in this study comes from a series of field investigations conducted over nearly 20 years in Cuba, predominantly in the Cienfuegos region, which gave me the opportunity to attend countless consultations and rituals, and interact with well over a hundred practitioners and clients. In this article exploring the preverbal and visceral stage of aesthetic emotions, I make significant use of a specific category of data relatively neglected in ethnographic works, which could be qualified as “instinctive” or “natural”. This might include the short, spontaneous remarks of those whom I met, for example, just as they enter the consultation space, as well as their body language, postures, gestures, facial expressions, the whole gamut of their movements... Additionally, the still vivid memory of my own early consultation experiences helped me grasp more intimately the emotions of those who were discovering this religious realm for the first time.

1. Staging presences: material densities

Consultations with specialists of Afro-Cuban religions have the effect of rendering the presence of their spiritual entities palpable and perceptible. This is hardly exclusive to them, of course: any religious practice can be considered as the presentification of another world within the immediate ritual space (Hanks 2001; Stépanoff 2013). Whether in Palo Monte, Santería,

Ifá or Espiritismo Cruzado, the visitor has the impression of conversing with, consulting and being healed by deities and the deceased. We now explore how each interactive framework emphasises a different modality of presentification: Palo Monte, where the material density of the ritual stagecraft renders the spiritual presences immediate; Espiritismo, which functions through incorporation; Santería, which might be qualified as “mediative”; and finally Ifá, which introduces presences vicariously.

The active presence of the dead in Palo Monte

As a rule, Palo Monte consultations take place in a room dedicated for this purpose; it may be a confined wooden hut at the back of a courtyard or an entire room in the house. The client enters an environment that has been arranged for the comfort of the *nfumbis*, the “dark” deceased protagonists of every Palo Monte ritual. The space is usually poorly lit (simulating the darkness of the grave), dirty and untidy¹, and decorated with elements taken from nature or cemeteries (favourite places of the *nfumbis*), including branches, leaves, stones, animal remains, etc. Strewn across the dirt floor or piled up on shelves are plastic bags, glass pots or containers filled with magical elements, sometimes living creatures (a dove, an iguana, a cockerel, etc.). The air is heavy with the stench of animal carcasses and rot. The visitor sits on a low stool facing an altar. Near them, at the same level, sits the *palero* and his cauldron(s), the *ngangas*. These objects, which recreate a body for the *nfumbis*, contain human bones dug up from graveyards and a plethora of other vegetable, animal or mineral elements. Their impressive size and abundant materiality, the morbid vitality evoked by the ooze of overflowing organic matter “fed” with sacrificial blood, impose their active presence on the scene².



FIG. 1. The palero Marelis. Cienfuegos, Cuba. Author's archive.

The *palero* addresses his *ngangas* orally, as he would a person. But he can also interact by spraying them with rum or perfume or blowing tobacco smoke at them. The *ngangas* are thus presented to the client as beings endowed with sensitivity, that physically partake in the consultation, that understand, listen, respond, see and feel. It is therefore the physical presence of the dead that is exhibited during consultations in Palo Monte (true, in fact, of all their rituals). Clients thus have the impression of interacting with them directly and up close. Although this occurs through the *palero*, the practitioner is a mere messenger between the parties; an intermediary tasked with ensuring effective communication between the client and the dead, though done so in an ordinary manner, as might an interpreter between two foreigners.

The staging of the consultation also highlights the unique character of the *palero*, particularly his intimate relationship with the dead. He seems to thrive in the company of his cauldrons. This singularity is also visible in his

attire, a far cry from the usual care that Cubans, male or female, take in their appearance: soap or perfume, jewels and fine clothes for every occasion, grooming (manicures, pedicures, styled hair, etc.). The *palero*, conversely, presents himself to the client bare-chested and barefoot, wearing only old trousers rolled up to his calves. Female diviners are also barefoot and wear modest, everyday clothes that can be readily stained with sacrificial blood and spilled beverages. Both men and women drink rum from roughly carved half-gourds and smoke or chew on cigars with masculine vigour. Their “savage” appearance reinforces the primitive, foreboding aspect of the space.

In short, ritual stagecraft in Palo Monte creates an entirely unique, unnatural space that serves to exhibit the vitality of terrifying beings and their immediate, active presence. It also showcases the privileged relationship between the *palero* and his *ngangas*, and the notion that considerable power is embedded in this connection between the dead and their living counterpart.

The dead embodied in Espiritismo



FIG. 2. Altar of Spiritism installed in the hallway of a house. Palmira, Cuba. Author's archive.

Consultation stagecraft in syncretic Espiritismo provides a similar, yet highly distinct example. Similar, in that, here too, the entities mobilised are spirits of the dead; but these are quite distinct from the terrifying and “materialist” *nfumbis* of Palo Monte, for the dead in Espiritismo are “bright”, “pure” beings that the living must free from their last material attachments so that they may ascend to higher celestial planes. In contrast to the hyper-materialisation of the dead in Palo Monte, presentified in atypical objects, the representations of these spirits are characterised by their unobtrusiveness. Placed atop modest altars composed of a simple table draped in a white cloth, they are depicted quite mundanely by photos of deceased relatives, portraits, dolls or everyday objects that belonged to the spirits that they represent (a watch, a bracelet, etc.). These perfectly commonplace objects remain peripheric to the visitor, devoid of agency by the inertia and thingness that they evoke. It might be said that their presence evokes an absence. An uninformed observer could easily miss their specifically ritual or religious essence.

The setting for an Espiritismo consultation is equally “ordinary”. The client is invited into the practitioner’s domestic space, sometimes next to the altar, sometimes just around the kitchen table. The spiritist bears no distinctive marks and is dressed in everyday clothing. The scene appears set for a mundane, face-to-face interaction. Yet this is far from the case. As the consultation progresses, the dead will manifest with increasing intensity, using the body of the practitioner as their vessel. The spiritists are mediums who perceive the dead directly through their senses: they have the ability to see, to hear, or to be possessed by the spirits of the deceased. Each time that a spirit manifests, the practitioner’s body reacts: shaking, sighs, gooseflesh, intense stares, convulsions, etc. In this way, the spiritist’s body is presented to the client as unique, distinct from those of others in its receptiveness to invisible spirits. The spiritist may sometimes employ various devices to communicate with the other side during the consultation (cards, tarot, glasses of water, cups of coffee, or even oracles from Santería

or Palo Monte) (Espíritu Santo 2010). Yet it remains clear, including to the client no doubt, that these objects are mere facilitators, simple tools for the translation of spiritual messages that the medium receives through their senses, a means of helping them to structure and organise the discourse. This is borne out by the fact that the practitioner generally speaks freely, spending most of the consultation expressing the point of view of the dead spirits without recourse to their oracular instruments. All of which renders the exchanges more fluid, almost natural, and thus more banal too. Overall, Espiritismo stagecraft is inscribed in domestic aesthetics, thus concealing its exceptional or spiritual aspect, opting instead for discretion and absence. In the neutral, unremarkable consultation space, the special and extraordinary character of the medium's body is magnified, a form of living altar constituting the actual space of religious activity.

Staged mediation in Santería

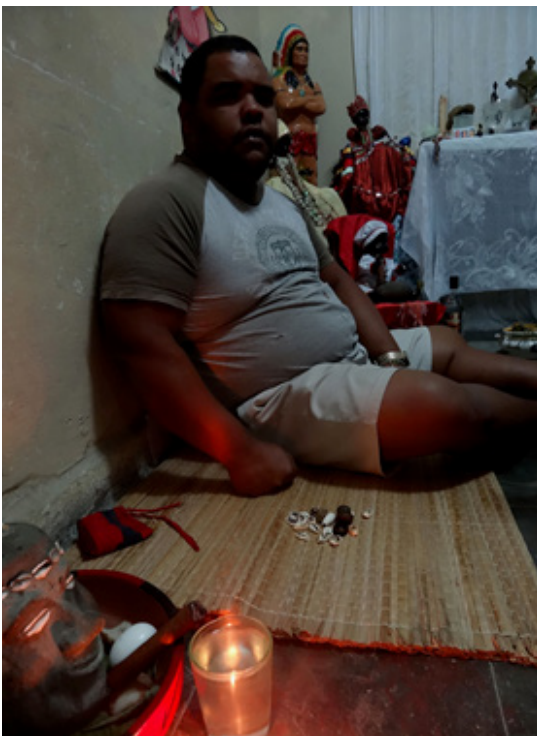


FIG. 3. *Santero* seated in his consultation mat to show his usual position during the rituals. Cienfuegos, Cuba. Author's archive.

The consultation framework in Santería falls somewhere between Palo Monte and Espiritismo: here, in essence, it is neither the objects nor the body of the practitioner that make the spiritual presences palpable, but a combined use of both. Unlike in the previous two examples, however, the bodies and the objects of the practitioners in Santería are not the site of presentification for the entities as much as their instruments of mediation. This situates us in the realm of pure indexing: the ritual objects, the practitioners' movements, all point towards the existence of the *orichas*. It may be that the objects that do embody them are present within the space of consultation, sometimes even within the practitioner's line of sight. Yet *santero* materiality remains more indexical than incarnational, a far cry from the objects of Palo Monte that smell and sweat and ooze vitality. There are some deities referred to as "warriors" that are represented by cauldrons not dissimilar to the *ngangas* of Palo Monte, but these are small and placed behind doors and on the ground out of sight. The majority of the *orichas*, the most prominently placed, are represented by porcelain tureens, effigies of Catholic saints (each saint having been syncretised with an *oricha*) or dolls adorned with jewels and shiny, colourful fabrics or other trinkets. These objects are not intended to evoke the *orichas* themselves so much as their beauty and majesty; that is, their characteristics more than their presence. They can be placed in any room in the house, such as the living room or a bedroom. In some cases, they occupy an entire room, which creates a non-ordinary space, yet the exuberant colours, shiny objects and store-bought items have more to do with decorative effect than divine agency. In this way, even in such a space, the visitor does not necessarily feel as though they are in the presence of gods.

The *séance* may take place in any room of the house that can be arranged into a consultation space, even, say, the corner of a bedroom. In fact, any part of the house is acceptable, as long as it is peaceful and there is enough room on the ground to lay out the *estera*, the large ritual straw mat

on which the consultation occurs (approx. 1 by 1.5 metres). The *santero* sits upon it, legs out straight and crossed over, leaving around half of the mat's surface free on which to cast his divinatory cowry shells, the *diloggún*, that will focus the attention of the client. The latter is seated on a chair or stool positioned alongside the mat, immediately opposite the practitioner and his divinatory apparatus. The *santero* tells the clients to place their bare feet on the mat so that the deities may recognise them, and their energy flow can circulate between them and the various entities summoned into the space formed by the mat. The client understands that this is no ordinary straw mat, but rather an active surface – the *santeros* say that it “houses deities”. The divinatory cowries, themselves animate, are designated the “mouth” of the *orichas* (Wirtz, 2018). Throughout the consultation, the *santero*'s gestures and comments will strengthen their agency. He kisses the cowries before throwing them, touches them against the client's skin to imbue them with the latter's person, asks them permission to proceed, and states that five of the 21 cowries will be put aside as impartial “witnesses” to the divination. The cowries and the mat are thus endowed with vitality as well as a form of judgement. They are not *orichas* in themselves, but rather entities that serve as intermediaries to them; they indicate rather than embody them. What the *santero* says on each throw of the cowries is equally indexical: “Eleggua says...” or “Yemayá says...” (Wirtz, 2007). It could be argued that Santería stagecraft emphasises distance with the gods rather than copresence and proximity, as in Palo Monte.

The practitioner's bodily aesthetic is carefully nurtured. Most *santeros* are dressed from head to toe in an immaculate white robe or vividly coloured clothes reminiscent of African dress, often in coloured satin for men and long multicoloured skirts for women; men also wear a satin ritual beret to match the colour of their guardian spirit, women a sort of white headscarf. All wear numerous ritual pearl necklaces and bracelets that correspond to the *orichas* that protect them. The *santero*'s vestments clearly indicate a distinguished status – an elegant and deliberate image that forms

an integral part of the divinatory apparatus' aesthetic.



FIG. 4. *Santera* during a ceremony, preparing ritual necklaces. Cienfuegos, Cuba. Author's archive.

The *santero* functions as a humble spokesperson or translator for the cowries. After each throw, he interprets the sign that is formed by the number of concave and convex sides respectively, often launching into long explanations and interpretations drawing on the myths and proverbs associated with each outcome (Wirtz, 2007; Konen, 2009; Panagiotopoulos, 2011). Like the *palero* with his cauldron, the *santero* forms a pairing with his apparatus, a union that is primarily expressed in spatial terms in the equal division of the straw mat on which the cowries are cast.

While in Palo Monte the cauldrons are stationary (it is their heavy, dense materiality that indexes their agency), in Santería the cowries are continuously in motion (it is this movement that attests to their agency).

The client's attention shifts alternately between the latest configuration of the cowries on the mat and the *santero's* face as he comments on them; as such, it is not the deities that the client looks at but their mediator and the mediator's mediator. Indeed, it is the cowries' agency and the role of the ritual specialist that are highlighted in this staging. It could be said that the setting is arranged in such a way as to evoke not the power of the spiritual presences but the power of the consultation itself – in which the stagecraft elevates it to the status of protagonist. What is being sacralised here is the instrument of divination itself.

Vicarious presences in Ifá

Ifá consultations provide yet another example of the cognitive impact of ritual staging. For the way in which the bodies and artefacts are arranged here, though similar to *Santería*, ultimately projects different messages. The spatial layout is identical: the consultation takes place in a domestic environment, sometimes in a dedicated room (the *igbodu*). The ritual mat is unfolded on the ground and the client sits near it, barefoot, at one end. Here, however, the practitioner, known as the *babalao*, and exclusively a man in the cult's Cuban expression (whereas women may also be initiated in Nigeria), does not sit on one side of the *estera* with his legs crossed, but in the middle, legs apart, leaving room in front of him for his *tablero*, a round wooden board some 40 centimetres in diameter, on which he spreads his divinatory powder evenly, the *ache de Orula*. Using the tip of his finger, he draws fine grooves in it to form divinatory symbols. The diviner may also use the *ekuele* to consult, a divinatory chain to which are attached eight circular pieces of coconut husk. According to Alain Konen (2009: 106), in this scenario, the diviner sits with right leg folded, left leg outstretched, taking up considerable room on the *estera*.



FIG.5. Young *babalao* requesting a favor from Orula, the main deity of the Ifá. La Havana. Photograph of Luis Carlos Castro Ramirez.

In both scenarios, the operation's true protagonist, the object of attraction and, arguably, the sacred object itself is not the ritual object as in Palo Monte or the divinatory instrument as in Santería, but the *babalao* himself. The *babalao's* primacy is even more evident in consultations featuring several practitioners, as is frequently the case in Ifá. With several working together, the theatrical effect of the Ifá performance is accentuated – and often, moreover, the coreligionists synchronise their gestures and incantations in a form of choreography that is strange yet enjoyable to watch. This collaboration draws even more attention to the extraordinary

status of the *babalao*, insofar as it lends an aura of self-confidence and of belonging to an exceptional group, which can be read in the faces of its practitioners. In Ifá, the *babalao* is under tremendous social and personal pressure to live up to the image of excellence associated with his role. These ritual specialists consider themselves the elite among practitioners of Afro-Cuban religions, the “crème de la crème” (*la flor y nata*) to borrow the expression used by one of them: they boast of their wisdom and above all the extent of their knowledge regarding divinatory outcomes and their associated myths. In short, these “perfect” practitioners must at all times project this image of mastery. It is no surprise then that their liturgy should be arranged in such a way that they are never liable to lose control: for example, possession by deities, a moment of frenzy and loss of self, is forbidden. And in the philosophy of Cuban Ifá, an entire debate surrounds the *babalao*’s body, which stresses the imperative of his bodily integrity, without flaws or disabilities, thus instilling the notion, if not of his sacrality, then at least of his association with the divine: for example, it is said that the right hand is purer than the left, and that the middle fingers are the purest parts of the hand (Konen, 2009). In Santería and Palo Monte, the practitioners’ bodies, even though they bear the mark of their guardian entities, are not perceived as purer or more perfect than those of others. *Paleros* consider themselves “normal people” and present themselves as such, demonstrating a certain discretion and modesty (in both their clothes and words); whereas *babalaos* constantly flaunt their status with displays of spiritual and intellectual superiority. Little wonder, therefore, that Ifá rituals should seek to showcase a personality, in contrast to Santería and Palo Monte, where the staging serves more to highlight objects of power and instruments. If we propose a continuum of staged ritual identities, *babalaos* and spiritists arguably occupy the two extremes: the former, learned alpha males, characterised by authority, self-assurance, and mastery of the situations in question; the latter by their sensitivity and the vulnerability of

their bodies, susceptible to shaking and losing control with every spiritual wave. Meanwhile, *paleros* and *santeros* occupy a middle ground, with each practitioner exhibiting his or her own balance between mastery, authority, naturalness and fragility.

2. Aesthetic emotions

We will now explore more systematically the way in which the configuration of spaces, objects and bodies impacts on the practitioners' emotivity. First of all, let us highlight the fact that the continuum of Afro-Cuban religions is not only representational, but also emotional. The repertoire of emotions unleashed in each of these cults is undoubtedly the same, though each realises it in different proportions and by different modalities. Each Afro-Cuban ritual may instil fear, pleasure, wonder, respect, interest, to name but a handful of affects. Yet each ritual blends these emotional components in different ways, resulting in a unique affective cocktail. Without claiming to be exhaustive on the subject of aesthetic emotions, the following paragraphs highlight a number of relevant conceptual and methodological premises.

To begin with, I will attempt to posit some artificial distinctions, which nonetheless seem pertinent to me in the context of a bid to theorise ritual aesthetic emotions. I will first consider the prevailing emotions that emerge from each ritual setting; each group develops its own emotional trademark, so to speak, by emphasising specific emotions that could be qualified as monolithic (fear, pleasure, joy, etc.); those who experience these have no trouble in identifying, describing or qualifying them, nor in judging their positive or negative aspect, for example. These are identifying marks, and as such, must be clear, obvious and simple – simplistic even – so as to be easily recognised.

Next, I will describe what we might term “hybrid” emotions that

combine conflicting or contradictory emotional states, such as positive and negative emotions. For instance, any successful consultation scenario in Afro-Cuban religions, and no doubt in many others too, instils this blend of fear, respect and admiration; a kind of hybrid psychological state that can be aptly condensed into the word “awe” (Meyer, 2015). One might argue that emotional contradictions or mixed affects (as in the pairings of fear/pleasure or familiarity/strangeness) necessarily manifest in consultations in order to create an extraordinary experience. It is this tension between conflicting emotions that must be balanced in the séances. In fact, emotional contradiction may well be considered a component part of religious faith, Afro-Cuban or not, and of the mystery that accompanies it. It accompanies the ineffable, the transcendent and the religious other side. We will now explore how each of the Afro-Cuban religions produces this emotional tension through unique combinations of opposing affects.

2.1. Emotional marks or dominant affects

The main emotional marker of each ritual aesthetic can be defined in simple terms as a primary emotion, one that the client experiences as soon as they enter the realm of a certain practice for the first time. An initial impression that will persist and colour to some extent their experience of the ritual and structure it in a certain way. This is a key element of the “induction of strangeness” that represents the almost obligatory point of entry into each of the Afro-Cuban religions. Whether Palo Monte, Santería, Ifá or Espiritismo, the one principle in common is that the ritual experience must in some way break with the everyday. Yet each group goes about this differently.

In Palo Monte, the strangeness is induced by the interstitial, counter-intuitive nature of the ritual space. Built by a human for the benefit of dark

deceased spirits partial to wild places, it is situated at the frontier between nature and culture, life and death. In Santería, conversely, it is possibly the overly decorative nature of the materiality that creates the strangeness – the surprising spectacle of all-powerful gods of thunder, the sea and other cosmic elements embodied in tureens adorned with rhinestones and trinkets. In Espiritismo, it is the medium’s bodily reactions that trigger the plunge into the unfamiliar.

Obligatory fear in Palo Monte

In Palo Monte, the most common feeling among novices and first-time visitors is generally fear, ranging from low-level anxiety to dread. The origin of this fear can unquestionably be found in this cult’s morbid aesthetic and in its imagery exacerbated by the presence of undead things oozing with sacrificial blood, adorned with the skulls of animals, pervaded by a nauseating stench. But this is not all. It also resides in the indecipherable nature of this environment for the client. The abundance of materials – piles of logs sitting alongside sacks of unseen contents, altars overloaded with vaguely defined objects, elements half-overflowing from the ritual cauldrons – and the considerable disorder serve to compound a visitor’s anxiety through the confusion that they trigger. As some psychological studies on emotion have shown (Fingerhut and Prinz, 2020), the harder an environment is to apprehend and to absorb conceptually, the more blurred its visual stimuli, the more they provoke discomfort, confusion and potentially even revulsion and evasive reactions. This is certainly the effect in Palo Monte, to the extent that some of its initiates, particularly those that have practiced it by necessity (to heal an illness, for instance), admit to avoiding as much as possible these beings that are nonetheless supposed to protect them, as well as the places that they inhabit. From initiates to newcomers, qualifiers employed to describe the cult include “bad” (*malo*) and “powerful” (*fuerte*).



FIGS.6-7. *Nganga* of palo monte (background) protected by the deity Lucero (the sculpted head smoking) who opens and closes the paths of life. Cienfuegos, Cuba; Consultation space in the Palo Monte. To the right of the client, held by a net, we see the invasive presence of an enormous *nganga*. Author's archive.

Now, to pose an interesting functionalist question, what is the purpose of fear and revulsion? One might suspect that these negative sentiments are counterproductive, not only for the ritual specialist's career but for the consultation itself. But only if we consider them a point of departure: starting from this alarming strangeness in order to eventually generate relief and calm. I attended many consultations that began with an icy atmosphere before ending in laughter and drunkenness. Naturally, rum, drunk in copious amounts during the rituals, has a considerable hand in

this. Yet this uninhibited consumption of alcohol is itself indicative of the relaxed atmosphere that prevails in this cult.

In the context of the consultation, the initial tension wrought by the aesthetic gradually gives way to release. Fear takes hold instantaneously and unconsciously: this is evident in the closed-off demeanour of the clients, in their timid, restrained gestures, in the rigidity of their bodies, in the seriousness of their facial expressions, in the quiver of their voices. Then, once the consultation begins, its arrangement further accentuates this somatising of the cult's primary affects by forcing the client to be passive. First, verbally, when they try to explain their problems and the *palero* commands them to be quiet, explaining that he would like to hear it from the deceased spirits. Then, through an entire repertoire of ritual treatments of the client's body, such as cleansing, which the latter must endure without moving or speaking, often standing still or lying on the ground for a sustained period. Their body is marked in chalk with magical symbols, rubbed with live chickens, sprayed with alcohol, cigar smoke blown at it, exorcising fires lit before their eyes, under their feet, etc. One can easily imagine how such disturbing sensory experiences translate into anxiety and bodily tension. Yet at the end of the consultation, this tension suddenly releases. A release that contrasts so starkly with the negativity of the experience that it produces a sudden sense of lightness, a feeling of a weight being removed or, in the case of healing consultations, of being cured. Briefly put, one enters a consultation through negative emotions to emerge at the other end with positive ones. In the other cults, the client is led through an inverse emotional process that starts with the triggering of pleasant affects, only to finish in discomfort and bewilderment. What matters in consultation experiences is not so much the nature of the emotions provoked as the contrast that is interpreted as a change in the client's psychosomatic state.

Agreeable affects in Santería



FIG.8. Santería altar. The four effigies of saints, dressed in red, blue, yellow and violet are the avatars of the Changó, Yemayá, Ochún and Babalu Ayé divinities, respectively, with which they are syncretized, Cienfuegos, Cuba. Author's archive.

According to Silvia (2005), the emotion that results from aesthetic experience depends on its “coping potential”, that is, the ability of the observer to grasp it, to process it, to confront it. The more visually intelligible an environment or an object is, the more reassuring and pleasant it is. This is the case, for example, in Santería settings, which largely trigger agreeable emotions. The altars are neat and clean. Space is left between each object so that its different components can be made out without difficulty. The objects themselves are relatively familiar and therefore easy to process; they are

not handmade from scratch as in Palo Monte, but rather pre-fabricated store-bought products that have been distorted or altered for religious use, such as porcelain tureens, effigies of Catholic saints decorated with fabric and jewels, children's dolls filled with various substances, trinkets that bear a clear relation to certain gods (say, a mermaid for the sea goddess), jewels. Even the "natural" elements are usually purchased: bouquets of flowers, offerings of fruit arranged in bowls, beautiful shells. Despite the abundance on certain altars and the accumulation of objects, few things induce a sense of strangeness by their appearance. We find ourselves here in the realm of the known, the banal even. One might describe it as a decorative ritual aesthetic comforting in its familiarity. There is a sort of fluidity or cognitive ease here that contrasts with the disorientation of the *palero* world.

Those with only the vaguest knowledge of Santería are able to identify the deities on display by their colours; each *oricha* is associated with a colour or combination of colours, such as white and red for Changó. And even when the *santero's* client has no religious knowledge at all, the customary compartmentalisation of the altars into different colours brings some visual intelligibility to proceedings. The division of space into red, blue, white, yellow serves to simplify not only the general aspect but also its interpretation by reducing the profusion of objects on the altars into a limited number of chromatic categories. Colours prevail over shapes, which fade into the crowd.

The beauty and preciousness of the objects and the spaces, their orderliness and cleanliness sometimes even arouse exaltation. "Aesthetic pleasures" that form a sense of attraction, like being invited to eat a magnificent cake, enter a sumptuous space, or have sex with a desirable body (Fingerhut and Prinz, 2020: 230). I should add, as Michael Houseman (2016) observed in regard to neo-pagan rituals, that kitsch has this same direct and positive effect on emotion that is akin to pleasure. The aesthetic of Santería is considered by its followers and other Cubans as the epitome of good taste;

in describing it as kitsch, I risk being accused of imposing my own tastes on the analysis. I will therefore limit my comparison with kitsch – neo-pagan or otherwise – to its naivety, its intensity, its colours and its bling. And as with kitsch, *santero* materiality is inherently sentimental (Houseman, 2016: 231). The emotion of followers when they describe their mystical experiences is unquestionable in this regard; one once told me wide-eyed of his vision of Yemayá, goddess of the sea, sitting on the beach, wearing a beautiful blue dress studded with diamonds, illuminated by a ray of light. Generally speaking, followers and other practitioners of Santería qualify their religious experience in terms of “bright”, “beautiful” and “calming”.



FIG.9. The goddess Ochun in her porcelain tureen.
Photograph: Luis Carlos Castro Ramirez.

In certain Santería rituals, feelings of pleasure are embodied in an almost literal, sensual manner. For example, during a ritual in honour of

Ochún, goddess of fresh waters, sexual love and wealth, one can observe the slow, sensual gestures of the congregation rubbing their bodies with honey, flowers and cinnamon, before plunging into cold water with rapt facial expressions – not unequivocal of erotic pleasure.

Nonetheless, *santero* rituality is not exempt of fear-inducing situations (is this emotion not, after all, an integral part of all forms of religiosity?). Indeed, some incarnations of bellicose deities that manifest in the bodies of mediums are particularly impressive, exhibiting behaviours that are violent (screams, aggressive stares and gestures) and intrusive (indiscreet glances, potentially harmful words that may publicly reveal a participant's deepest secrets). But during a consultation, the first emotions that a client feels are closer to admiration. Then, as in Palo Monte, where the spatial aesthetic and experience of consultation produce highly contrasting effects, the aesthetic pleasure, sense of calm and the immediate character of the emotional responses to the beauty of the Santería setting are followed by less comfortable psychological states, as we explore now.

Reflexive emotions



FIG.10. *Ifá* consultation with the ekuele chain. The introspective posture of the client can be seen. Photograph: Luis Carlos Castro Ramirez.

For certain psychologists of emotion, the lines between the cognitive and the emotional effects of aesthetic experience are not necessarily clear, inasmuch as the messages and thoughts that it transmits automatically trigger emotions, such as confusion, surprise or interest, that are difficult to dissociate from their reflexive core. Some use the terms “emotion of knowledge”, “epistemic emotion” (Fingerhut and Prinz, 2020: 231) or “reflexive emotion” (Cupchik, 1994: 185, quoted in Diessner *et al.*, 2020: 3) to designate these affects that are not immediately triggered by a stimulus, like pleasure or fear, but which develop progressively by setting in motion processes of reflection and evaluation, and are more complex and less spontaneous in form. These are at work in the staging of *santero* and *babalao* consultations and can produce in the client a feeling of having learned something about themselves, a sort of self-awareness. In each of these cults, clients commit to a form of introspection – a reflexivity found in set consultation phrases like “to consult oneself” (*consultarse*) or “to look at oneself” (*guardarse*) (Gobin, 2012: 20). The experience can sometimes lead the client to completely rethink their life and behaviour. For both *santeros* and *babalaos*, the centrality of oracles in their ritual stagecraft, as well as the proverbs and myths associated with each divinatory outcome, provides the opportunity to formulate highly detailed discourses on the client’s life. Theirs is a holistic approach, in the sense that they do not deal with problems out of context but instead relate them to the personality and history of the client, to their “past, present and future” as the saying goes. This involves a relatively stylised discourse, in that it is rhythmic, punctuated and embellished with prayers and recitations, and mythicised by a ritual language that is wholly unintelligible to the client, referring to the mystery of Yoruba deities and the collective imaginary associated with them: Africanness, power, ancestral tradition. In contrast, in Palo Monte consultations, the practitioner’s discourse is pragmatic and uninterested in the behaviour, or even the morality, of the client. He focuses instead on the idea of directly

destroying the source of misfortunes (notably, of interfering spirits of the dead) and treating their symptoms (through cleansing and exorcism).

Discomfort in Espiritismo

The approach of Espiritismo practitioners is again different. Their words do not provoke so much reflexivity and introspection. The arrangement of their consultations, which is based on their direct and bodily communication with the dead and not on the authority of a learned oracle, produces affects that are more direct, more stirring, less intellectual. The shivering, the quivers in their voice, the tears in their eyes when they behold, say, a deceased relative of the client are sometimes enough to bring the latter to tears. I myself have succumbed to it (even though I do not believe in the spirits of the dead). The body is a powerful tool for the conveyance of psychological states in the way that it triggers an instantaneous, unconscious empathy.

Before tears, however, discomfort is arguably the emotional starting point in an Espiritismo consultation. The possibility to communicate directly with the omniscient dead, without any material mediation, allows spiritists to profess oracular wisdom any place, any time. The spontaneous intrusion of the spiritual realm, during an ordinary conversation, for instance, contrasts strongly with the modalities of other cults, which enshrine the relationship to the spirit world through rigid protocols. Spiritist spontaneity may be disturbing outside a deliberate consultation for the relational asymmetry that it instigates. As the conduits of omniscient forces, spiritists feel entitled to initiate a dialogue, even with strangers, on highly intimate and sensitive topics. It is not they but the spirits who are being indiscreet, and as good intermediaries, they feel obliged to convey their messages. This intrusion into their private space may force the individual into a vulnerable

position, in that they must discuss highly personal issues. An asymmetry that is compounded by the tendency of spiritists to make frequent use of a rhetorical device whereby the interlocutor is asked to verify or deny the statements of their dead (asking, for example: “true or false?”). The individual is then forced to respond to the spiritist’s onslaught with simple “yes” or “no” answers. This phenomenon is so firmly rooted in the spiritist mode of sociability that even anthropological researchers must endure it. In my case, there was invariably a moment in my interviews with spiritists when their dead began to whisper things about me that my respondent felt obliged to share. As such, our roles were reversed, with me temporarily becoming the subject of inquiry. A kind of indiscretion enough to put anyone ill at ease. Indeed, some go so far as to avoid contact with spiritists, like one Santería follower who whispered in my ear after a medium’s possession: “spiritists make me nervous (*me ponen nerviosa*)”. A few seconds later, she left the ceremony.

2.2. Conflicting emotions: familiarity-strangeness, degrees of materiality

The emotions that can be felt during a consultation with specialists of Afro-Cuban religions are never monolithic, as we have already seen. Palo Monte does not induce fear exclusively, in the same way that Santería brings more than just pleasure, Espiritismo more than discomfort. On the contrary, the effective power of each cult, that is, its ability to convince, seems to derive from its emotional tension, from the blend of positive and negative, of the opposite or the opposing. In Palo Monte, the greater the initial sense of fear, the more intense the subsequent feeling of relief. The more joyful and pleasant the setting in Santería, the more hard-hitting the gravity and seriousness of the specialists’ words will be. And the more vulnerable the

position that the client is placed in by the spiritist, the more power the latter gives them to externalise their emotions.



FIG.11. Palo monte ritual. Cienfuegos, Cuba. Author's archive.

This article does not seek to be exhaustive on the subject of aesthetic emotions or their contradictions. Yet I allow myself one last contrast that seems to me essential, and also serves to round out my argument. I have already discussed the principle of obligatory induction of strangeness that each practice must fulfil in order to deliver a satisfying religious experience. In the case of Afro-Cuban religions, this strangeness goes hand in hand with feelings of familiarity. For each group (as I have repeatedly stated), these two feelings are expressed in very different ways. I will finish my article with a brief analysis that relates this phenomenon to the type of materiality

professed by each cult.

In a Palo Monte religious space, the strangeness is all-consuming for a newcomer such as a client. Yet this is followed by an unexpected familiarity that emerges from the *palero's* comportment. The latter addresses his spirits naturally, without any particular deference, as he might a friend or relative. His gestures may even instil a form of equality between them: he kisses them, shares his cigar smoke, pours them a little coffee. One might argue, without too much hesitation, that this incorporation of the dead in large, almost human-sized objects, overflowing with vitality, serves to humanise them: the *palero* treats these beings, which are physically present, drinking and smoking, according to ordinary codes of interaction. In sum, although the *ngangas* of Palo Monte are utterly unfamiliar objects, the modalities of interaction with them are altogether banal. In contrast, the avatars of spirit entities in Santería and Espiritismo, lacking any material density and more ethereal in essence, create a mode of interaction that is less natural and less familiar.

Generally speaking, a spirit of equality characterises the interaction in a Palo Monte consultation. As with his cauldrons, the ritual specialist addresses his client in natural terms, without excessive ritual jargon, often using humour and good-natured teasing. His behaviour, his modest attire or his manner of speaking and standing are not intended to show off superiority, as is sometimes the case with *santeros* and *babalaos* for example. The lack of formality in the consultation and the disorder of the ritual space mean that, in the end, the client feels more relaxed than they would before a *santero* in his vestments and the precious display of ritual objects. Overall, the *palero's* client may feel just as much comfort as discomfort during the consultation. Or what we might call a *familiar unfamiliarity*.

Conversely, the setting for an Espiritismo consultation provides a diametrically opposed example, characterised by an unfamiliar familiarity. At first glance, everything appears mundane and everyday, from the

furniture and the ritual objects to the medium's clothes. Even the latter's discourse is ordinary in its lack of opaque language or esoteric jargon. And yet the client is left with a feeling of strangeness and surprise when they observe the practitioner's bodily convulsions. And the more ordinary the framework of interaction, the more jarring and surprising the spiritist's uncontrolled physical reactions appear. When one enters the bizarre space of a Palo Monte consultation, one is prepared to encounter the extraordinary. Here, however, it is the element of surprise that acts as the catalyst for religious emotion. In Santería, the situation is similar: the decorative aesthetic of its altars and the use of everyday objects can also create an air of familiarity. The strangeness then emerges from the discourses steeped in Yoruba mythology regularly interspersed with words taken from an indecipherable ritual language; and from the incantations and prayers that plunge the visitor into another time, another space.

Ultimately, religious emotions are formed by exploiting the remove between the known and the unknown. It is in this interplay between the departure from and return to the familiar that the extraordinary and its original emotivity are built. In short, the surprising ways of fashioning the things around us.

Conclusion

In the course of this article, we have ventured into the perilous terrain of feelings, perilous for the subjectivity that they inevitably entail. But we have partly overcome this difficulty by focusing on aesthetic emotions that are reflected in externalised, shared anchor points, such as spatial configurations, materialities, ritual interactions, and bodily reactions.

We have further established the connection between consultation stagecraft and certain emotions. But we have shown that it is not so much

the nature of the emotions experienced by visitors that have a structural effect as their juxtaposition and the order in which they arise in the séance. The confusion that emerges from these successive conflicting psychological states is thus one of the sources of religious mystery and awe, of ritual effectiveness.

To conclude, one of the goals of this article was to contribute to the theoretical debate on the supposed homogeneity of Afro-Cuban religions and on the value in studying them separately. The answers provided in this article may seem as ambiguous as the question itself. It seems reasonable to suggest that the unique configuration of emotions induced by each cult, and indeed by each individual practitioner, attests to a certain autonomy. Nonetheless, examining them all together facilitates a better understanding of them individually by discerning what it is that makes each so unique.

Translation from French: Dominic Horsfall.

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Notes

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1 For a detailed description of the aesthetics of sites of worship, see (Kerestetzi, 2018).

2 For a description of these objects, see (Kerestetzi, 2011).

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