Holbraad, Martin

*The whole beyond holism: gambling, divination, and ethnography in Cuba*


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Wholes Reduced, or Holism

Bringing the proverbially divergent “schools” of American, French, and British anthropology under the single rubric of “holism” would probably be either misguided or messianic. Were such a use of the term to afford practice of what it preached, it would somehow have to provide an understanding of each of those traditional “parts” of the discipline with reference to a “whole” to which they may be imagined to belong. As we and our professional detractors know, however, no such whole exists. Certainly “holism” hardly denominates something we have in common as anthropologists. If anything, it is one of the recipes for what looks like our confusion – the fact, a cause for pride to some of us, that we are an undisciplined discipline of “parts.” Boas, we say, was a holist, by which we mean that the elements that make up a “culture” only make sense in terms of each other (Boas 1940). Malinowski was also a holist: to get the native’s point of view, the ethnographer must learn to appreciate how the various bits of his world hang together (Malinowski 1953). But Durkheim, too, was a holist; any given social fact is to be understood in terms of its contribution to the workings of society taken as a whole (Durkheim 1982). These diverse insights, often in contact, have spawned so many more wholes in anthropology that one can only admire the size of a discipline that – whole or not – can fit them all in!

When faced with a mess, the temptation is either to order or to abandon. The latter impulse seems ascendant in recent developments in the social sciences – in spheres as disparate as cognitive science and actor-network theory – that spring from a common wish to go beyond holism and its tendency to reify its objects (though see George Marcus’ Chapter 3 in this volume for an alternative genealogy). Hence, in place of “society” or “culture” we now have “schemata,” “modules,” “assemblages,” “multiplicities,” and so on (e.g., Sperber 1996; Law 2004; Latour 2005). Less radically, this article raises the possibility that holism might be equipped to go beyond itself, leaving the morass of its many available versions to one side in favor of a new one. Such an attempt starts from the premise that existing versions of holism are not holistic enough. In particular, if the opposite of holism is “reductionism” – which suggests that any

This chapter is dedicated to Panos Giannakakis and to Tata and her family.
given phenomenon is best understood in terms of its constituent parts and their relationships – how are we then to deal with the paradox that current conceptions of holism are essentially reductionist in a crucial sense?

The central idea here is that anthropologists’ traditional affection for holism, however articulated, turns out to be directed not at the whole as such, but rather at models of the whole. So, very roughly speaking, the whole in British holism is traditionally posited as an observable structure – the nuts and bolts of everyday life that Malinowski encouraged us to chart, and that Radcliffe-Brown (1961), for example, institutionalized as designs that might “function” (social structures). For the intellectualist French the whole that is society is indeed empirically observable, but only because it comes about in collective acts of representation. The whole’s reality is representational and therefore also socially constructed, since representations (including those of society itself) emerge socially – a circular idea with which Dumont ran all the way to “hierarchy” (Dumont 1970). Finally, for the Americans the whole, which they call “culture,” is a corollary of the irreducibly meaningful character of human phenomena (e.g., Geertz 1973a). So, as with the French, it is a function of human representation, though in this case the whole is not posited as a content of such representations, but rather as the total web of internally connected representations that lends each one of them its meaning – the hermeneutic whole (another circle, of course).

In each of the three styles of thinking, then, the whole features as a model, either because social reality is itself model-like or because it is constituted in the making of representation – or indeed a bit of both, as in Giddens (1986), Bourdieu (1990), and the ethnomethodologists (e.g., Garfinkel 1967), to take respective heirs of the three national schools. The whole is in that sense a reduction of the plenitude of the world – a summary of its most important parts. Holism, then, is the injunction that such a summary serve as a baseline for understanding any given phenomenon that falls within its encompassing purview.

The reduced character of holistic wholes seems sensible. Holism, after all, is supposed to be an analytical strategy, and it is hard to see how analysis could proceed from anything other than some kind of reduction of the world. Surely the world taken as a totality “in itself” is hardly graspable, let alone a good starting point for that discriminatory process we call analysis. Indeed, the power of holism as an analytic approach would seem to lie precisely in the fact that while recognizing that analysis is model-like, it posits that models need to be total in order to have a purchase on a world that is given by definition as a totality.

The problem is of course familiar as nothing less than the backbone of Western philosophy, taking off from the Greek concern with the mismatch between One Reality and Many Appearances (e.g., see Lloyd 2006: 303–17). In modern times the problem has received perhaps its most systematic expression in Kant, the idea being, broadly, that our apprehension of the world must be a function of its correlation to the “categories” we bring to it. As Quentin Meillassoux has argued recently (2008: 1–49), this move toward “critique,” posed against the putative dogmatism of thinking that the world could be apprehended as it is “in itself,” is one that Western thought has been unable to think itself out of ever since.

Certainly anthropology would be typical in this respect – exemplary even, considering the discipline’s basic concern with, precisely, the variety of ways in which the world may be apprehended by different peoples. Indeed, while this concern with variety is so basic to modern anthropology that it cuts across the discipline’s national traditions, the problem posed by the putative mismatch between the “total” reality of the world and the largely but arguably reductionist strategies of anthropology, as is often posteriori suggested by ideas like those of Franz Boas or the Balinese cosmology today, might even be seen as a uniformity in the discipline’s conception of the world.

For better or worse, anthropologists are in the business of articulating world views and, by that much more, the relationship between the world we understand to be a uniform set of cultures and the way we think about them – that is, thinking about them.

As any student of Western philosophy is aware, the worlds of the Balinese cosmology today, for example, are even more complicated than that of the Balinese cosmology of the past. As Meillassoux has argued recently, the Balinese cosmology is a much more intricate and even more varied one than it was in the Balinese cosmology of the past.

In fact, it was essentially integral to the Balinese cosmology of the past, as it had existed since the Balinese cosmology of the past. As any student of Western philosophy is aware, the worlds of the Balinese cosmology today, for example, are even more complicated than that of the Balinese cosmology of the past. As Meillassoux has argued recently, the Balinese cosmology is a much more intricate and even more varied one than it was in the Balinese cosmology of the past.

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the world and its "partial" appearances from different sociocultural standpoints has arguably received its most explicit and creative treatment by the French. In particular, if, as is often remarked, Durkheim sought to translate Kant's a priori categories into a posteriori sociological ones (Durkheim 1995; see Schmaus 1994: 187–93), then Lévi-Strauss most magnificently transposed the relationship between such categories and the world whose apprehension they organize as the central problem for humanity and, by that virtue, for anthropology too, namely, the fabled problem of Culture's relationship to Nature (e.g., Lévi-Strauss 1964, 1966; cf. Schrempp 1992). Indeed, if cultural constructivism has become, quite literally, second Nature to much anthropology today, that is partly because Lévi-Strauss' Kantian problem of how Nature, taken as a uniform whole, could be assessed through the partial (albeit holistic) structures of Cultures was deemed insoluble – the tragic condition of classification, one might say, thinking back on Lévi-Strauss on myth and ritual (1981).

For better or worse, this chapter offers a solution to the problem. Or it seeks to articulate one, since part of my point is that anthropologists have de facto been working on the premise that the problem is already solved. That is to say that beyond anthropologists' explicit proclamations of "holism" in its various senses lies an implicit conception of the whole as such, and of anthropologists' capacity to access it.

To prove the point, I shall start with a bit of whole-accessing of my own, in this case demonstrated through my fieldwork in Havana among gamblers and diviners. In particular, I look at the contrasting ways in which gamblers and diviners in Cuba engage in something analogous to what Anna Tsing (Chapter 4, this volume) calls "worlding," that is, the contrasting ways in which the relationship between "parts" and "wholes" is articulated in their respective activities (the mereological terminology is Tsing's, though I shall gloss the problem in terms of the parallel distinction between "cosmology" and "cosmos" for reasons that will become apparent).

Wholes Produced: Gambling in Havana

As any statistician will tell you, gambling doesn't pay. So why do so many people gamble so much of their money away? The question has seemed like a good one to academics of all sorts – economists, sociologists, psychologists, and, of course, a number of anthropologists (e.g., Woodburn 1982; Stewart 1994; Papataxiarchis 1999). As indicated by the emblematic character to the discipline of Geertz's essay on the Balinese cockfight (1973b), for anthropologists the question of gambling poses a favorite challenge: that of providing a sense for practices that seem to lack one.

In fact, in socialist Cuba today, the question seems a particularly good one. Considered counterrevolutionary, gambling in all forms is heavily persecuted on the island, so that punters risk not only a dent in their pockets but also legal prosecution, with hefty fines and even time in prison. Marxist distaste for "speculation" is only part of the story, for even before Fidel Castro declared the Cuban Revolution socialist in 1961, gambling already stood for what the Revolution stood against. Casinos in particular became an emblematic target of revolutionary reform since, along with prostitution, they were integral to the corrupt image of Cuba as a playground for North American tourists and Mafiosi (Schwartz 1997). But lotteries, and particularly the National Lottery, which had existed on the island at least since 1812, also had a tainted image, associated with the corruption of the so-called pseudo-Republic at the turn of the twentieth century.
(Thomas 2001: 306–7). So, following the revocations of casino licenses in the early 1960s, the National Lottery was discontinued as part of a "revolutionary offensive" later in the decade, and gambling of all kinds has been penalized ever since.

The ban has not been very effective. Although official data on the subject are hard to come by, there is little doubt that a number of forms of gambling have continued to be practiced under wraps throughout the revolutionary period. The most widespread of these is an illicit lottery, commonly referred to as la bolita (the little ball). Indeed, while the disruption caused by the discontinuation of the National Lottery should not be underestimated, and for many people the very word "lottery" (lotería) has prerevolutionary connotations, punters' own narratives today often speak of resilient practice in adverse circumstances. Such stories of continuity are historically accurate, inasmuch as unofficial lotteries like la bolita existed long before the Revolution, even featuring in nineteenth-century travel accounts (e.g., Howe 1969: 102–6; see also Ortiz 1986: 206–8). Like today, these games were organized privately at a neighborhood level, and often piggybacked on the weekly draw of the National Lottery by using its six-digit winning number for the sake of transparency.

From the punters' point of view, one of the main advantages that these side games had over the National Lottery was that they divided its six winning digits into three separate numbers, effectively taking bets on three separate two-digit numbers and their combinations. Thus, for example, if the National Lottery had drawn the number "123456," the illicit boliteros, as they were called, would pay bets on "12" (referred to as fijo, meaning "fixed"), as well as on "34" and "56" (referred to as primer corrido and segundo corrido, respectively, meaning "first runner-up" and "second runner-up"). This allowed for a much higher frequency of winning bets, paid at correspondingly lower prices, as well as a greater degree of flexibility in the kinds of bets that could be constructed (see Table 5.1). Most importantly for our purposes, cutting the winning numbers down to a code of symbols the guessing gets easier.

The preferences draws locally were of the Revolution, more urgent since organized draws (apuestas) at consider. Heard on the is the two most prominent lotteries the boliteros at a station devoted to the eyes of the tout.

Apart from a revolutionary bolitas, Operating clan elements that need to be paid Street-level colleagues o'clock in the (apuntadores), banks. After the bookies meet at this point, the bankies meet or meet with the money is then the ground in the.

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But this is not stilted conversations, friends, since in young and the of the Comm plausible hypothesis, the hope and so forth. But the ethnography told, by way of at a petrol rally occasionally:
numbers down to two-digit size allowed punters to place their bets on the basis of a
code of symbols associated with each number from 01 to 99, turning the lottery into
the guessing game that punters call la charada (the charade), as explored below.

The preference for piggybacking on an established draw rather than organizing
draws locally was, if anything, intensified after the National Lottery was banned by
the Revolution. As punters today explain, the need for transparency became all the
more urgent since the authorities’ persecution made it impossible to hold locally
organized draws in public. Thus, since the 1970s, boliteros have run betting lists (lis-
tas) at considerable personal risk by using the draws of foreign lotteries, which can be
heard on the island in the evenings on shortwave radio. In Havana for a long time
the two most popular draws were taken from Venezuelan radio, though currently
most boliteros are using the daily draw of Radio Marti, a Miami-based Cuban American
station devoted to transmitting antirevolutionary propaganda to the island—which
of course only serves to confirm the counterrevolutionary associations of the game in
the eyes of the authorities.

Apart from adding persecution as an extra dimension of risk to bolita gambling, the
revolutionary ban has raised the administrative costs of the outfits that run the game.
Operating clandestinely, these so-called bancos (banks) use Mafia-like security arrange-
ments that take the form of a pyramid of four or more tiers of personnel, all of whom
need to be paid a proportion of the profits, calculated on the basis of the risk involved.
Street-level collectors (recogedores) collect punters’ tickets and bets until about 7
o’clock in the evening. They then distribute the bets to one or more bookkeepers
(apuntadores), each of whom may hold a number of “lists” pertaining to different
banks. After the results of the draw are declared on the radio, later in the evening, the
bookies meet with agents of the banks to settle the accounts of the day for each list. By
this point, the money collected may run into thousands of Cuban pesos. The agents
then deliver profits to and/or draw payments from the owners of the bank themselves,
or meet with a further secret intermediary, and so forth. The eventual destination of
the money is the subject of urban myth-like speculation: “they bury it in a box under
the ground in the countryside,” one recogedora from Havana told me.

The costs of these complex secret arrangements are passed on to the punters in the
form of very expensive bets. As shown in Table 5.1, the bank’s gross margin on the
various types of bet on offer ranges from a minimum of 25 percent (or, in the case of
the least generous banks, 30 percent) to a maximum of 70 percent. From the bank’s
point of view, the fact that profit margins tend to increase as the odds of the bets get
longer is due partly to the high risk of bankruptcy for these relatively low-liquidity
outfits. The bancos’ profits are of course the punters’ losses, so my ethnographic ques-
tion to the latter was “Why do you do it?”

But this is not a very good question — something I realized after the umpteenth
stilted conversation on the topic with my gambling friends, which is to say most of my
friends, since in the inner-city areas where I work most people gamble on la bolita: the
young and the old, housewives and their husbands, black, white, and even members
of the Communist Party. Sure, people would dutifully discuss with me all manner of
plausible hypotheses that I would come up with — the entertainment value of the
game, the hope of cheap cash when money is as hard to come by as it is in Cuba today,
and so forth. But in each of our conversations, there was a strong sense — familiar to
the ethnographer — that all this was somehow beside the point. Here is what I was
told, by way of getting to the point, by a friend of mine in his mid-thirties who works
at a petrol refinery. “Like everyone else,” he says, he likes to play on la bolita
occasionally:
If you read Fidel’s [Castro’s] History Will Absolve Me you see why the government never liked the gambling in this country … although if for whatever reason they authorize it again in the future they’ll probably take even bigger share than the banks do today! … But the game will never disappear, you know why? Because we Cubans like to play. Cubans like three things: drinking, gambling and women. It’s in the idiosyncrasy of the Cuban, he likes this way of winning, it’s easy! He’s walking on the street and sees a car with a 27 on the number-plate and he thinks, “this is giving me a cabala [sic], let me play 27,” and then he puts 50 pesos on 27 and loses. Or maybe he wins! And then tomorrow it’s something else, and so forth. Cubans are like that.

My friend’s folk-psychological appeal to the happy-go-lucky aesthetic of “the Cuban” is a standard feature of these conversations. But just as typical, and arguably more telling, is the apparent tautology of his account. The answer as to why people gamble, in spite of state prohibition and poor prizes, is that they like it. Indeed, the essentializing overtones here (“the idiosyncrasy of the Cuban,” etc.) only serve to emphasize the cyclical character of the reasoning: “we gamble because we gamble — it’s what we do” (or, “it’s what we like” — the ultimate conversation stopper). That this tautology is the brunt of my friend’s comment is clear by the role of his illustration. The hypothetical story about the man and his number-plate cabala (and more on this notion below) does little to explain Cubans’ taste for the game. Rather, what it does is illustrate the form that a taste for the game may take. The implication is that the game’s attraction is its own explanation: the game explains itself. Indeed, in the context of this tautology, even the apparently crucial matter of winning or losing is treated as a contingent externality, almost beside the point. A love of “easy winning” is stated, only to be swiftly swept aside: whether he loses or wins, “the Cuban” will be playing again tomorrow.

Taking my friend’s lead, we may attend to the form bolita playing takes. The scenario of the man and his number-plate cabala describes the rudiments of the game as a search for motivations for playing. At stake here, however, is not a search for a motive for playing in general (which was my anthropological concern), but rather a search for motivating a bet on a particular number. This is what the game is about, as far as the players are concerned: to play you must have a motive to play on a number, and this is “given” to you, often in the form of a so-called cabala — a term used to refer generically to everyday events that are in one way or another attention-grabbing enough to warrant a bet. Now, playing on number-plates or on the figure of a certain number seen in the mud while taking a walk, as another informant described, and indeed betting on one’s birthday or some other significant date are perhaps the most straightforward instances of what people mean when they speak of cabala. Just as typical, however, are cabalas that are generated by a more arcane system of number symbolism, to which players refer either as just la charada, or sometimes as la charada china (the Chinese charade). The latter designation suggests at least a notional connection between the number symbolisms people use in Cuba today and numerological systems promulgated by Chinese immigrants who began to arrive on the island in the latter half of the nineteenth century (see Cailliois 2001: 148–52). But significantly, as we shall see, when I quizzed punters (including Chinese descendants) for historical details on this connection I was unable to get much further than the fact that the present form of la charada works on the same principle as the numerological associations of numbers with symbols that the Chinese introduced. The main difference, I was told, is that while the Chinese “system” (as informants called it) used only numbers from 1 to 36, the creolized version was expanded to include numbers from 00 to 72.
73 to suit la bolita. Beyond this, no one had much to say either on the provenance of the number symbolism of la charada, or on the manner of its expansion from 36 to 100 numbers. Providing reasons on this score is not a matter of interest.

What is of great interest, however, is the series of charada symbols associated with the numbers. As a retired factory worker told me, after I had thanked him for a long interview on his favorite cábala stories (more of which below), “What you still haven’t learned is the most important part of the game, which is the meanings that each number has.” He continued,

It’s complicated, but without it you can’t play. Horse is 1, butterfly is 2, child is 3, etc. But lion is also 1, so you can play it like that too… I learned these things when I was still a child, one gets used to it, because everyone in my family used to play la bolita… People know this system and in this way they play, from dreams, or what happened to them on the street, what someone told them, cábala.

Table 5.2 shows the entire symbolic series, from 01 to 00, as it was given to me by a housewife in her mid-thirties. Having listed the symbols on the trot “from memory,” as she said, my informant was keen to emphasize that each number has many more meanings (significados) than she could remember. She added that although most numbers had some “classic” associations that everyone knows (e.g., 15 = dog, and 50 = policeman), had I asked someone else for the whole series I would surely get a different list. Indeed, over the years informants have given me a plethora of overlapping lists, so for some numbers I have compiled more than 10 symbolic associations. I shall return to the question of apparent redundancy later.

Whatever the grade of its elaboration, however, charada symbolism serves to amplify exponentially the field from which cábala motivations can be drawn. To the rather literal story of the number-plate cábala, I could add dozens of stories told to me by players in the figurative modality of la charada. Indeed, these are the stories players are most interested in telling, not just for my anthropological benefit but also, more generally, whenever la bolita is brought up for discussion. For example, this is one of the stories the retired factory worker told me, before urging me to “learn the numbers”:

I was getting bread one day and in the queue I met an old comrade of mine who started telling me how he only had a year left to work before retirement. I told him, “Don’t worry, a year goes quickly enough.” Just as I was saying it, this man who had had a few drinks comes up and gives his hand to my friend to greet him. My friend greeted him alright, but when the man left he said, “Do you know this guy? I don’t!” I told him, “Look, this is a sign (una señal), you should play 49 today” [49 indicating “drunkard” – see Table 5.2]. I had already played something else that morning, but when I got home I put two and one [i.e., 2 pesos on fijo and 1 on corrido] on 49 as well. Next day I’m waiting for the bus and a comrade says to me, “You see what happened yesterday?” – I had forgotten about it. “They drew double 49 with 90!” [i.e., 49 fijo, 49 primer corrido, and 90 segundo corrido]. I made 200 pesos. But I should have played old man too, I would have got the parle! [“Old man” should have been suggested by the earlier conversation about retirement, indicating the number 90.]

The having and telling of such experiences are clearly part of the fun of the game, and comprise the fabric of which players’ bolita talk is made. As Huon Wardle has put it, with reference to a similar Jamaican lottery called “drop pan,” the symbolic associations of la charada furnish the imagery of a fleeting poetry of urban experience.
Table 5.2 Number symbolisms of la charada

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Symbol</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Symbol</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Symbol</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Small horse, lion</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Horn</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Snake</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Butterfly</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Moon, San Lazaro</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Frog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Sailor, child</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Small fish</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Steamboat</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Cat, Changó</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Worm</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Pigeon</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Nun, Ochún</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Bedpan</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Precious stone</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Tortoise</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Snake</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Doctor, eagle</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Shit, Yemaya, shell</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Frog</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Wasp</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Small dead person</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Steamboat</td>
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<td>Goat</td>
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<td>9</td>
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<td>24</td>
<td>Pigeon</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Mouse</td>
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<td>10</td>
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<td>25</td>
<td>Precious stone</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Shrimp</td>
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<td>11</td>
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<td>26</td>
<td>Doctor, eagle</td>
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<td>Wasp</td>
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<td>Moon, San Lazaro</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Pig</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Witchcraft, black hen</td>
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<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Small fish</td>
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<td>Hawk</td>
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<td>Frog</td>
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<td>38</td>
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<td>Meringue, queen</td>
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<td>Knife, adultery, picture</td>
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<td>Carriage, hanged man</td>
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Source: Collected from a single informant, 1999.

(Wardle 2005). As he writes, “The archetypal figures of drop pan reappear in day to day narratives: a man poisoned while attempting to kill a rat, a dog hit by a car, the appearance of a local madman are all grist to the drop pan mill” (Wardle 2005: 89). The same could be said of la bolita.

Here, however, we may focus on how bolita players themselves view the relationship between charada imagery and the day-to-day experiences on which it seems to feed. In particular, I want to consider in some detail an analogy suggested by players’ own accounts of the role of the number symbols, namely, between la charada and divination – that other favorite, and much better documented, activity in Cuba (e.g., Brown 2003). After all, when my elderly informant told his comrade that the drunken stranger’s greeting was a “sign” that he should bet on 49, or when he later kicked himself for "lies"), we can see in the imprecision of my informan Castellán’s account. Indeed, As can be seen from the examples cited, the use of divination is profound and often associated with religious practices and beliefs.

Once I was present at one of these sessions when a friend of mine got into a dispute over money... and began to use the number symbols in a way that seemed to be interpretative rather than merely decorative. The situation was related to a problem with the money he had won in a lottery. He was about to deposit this money in a bank account when an old lady appeared in his dream. In the dream, she held out a small apple and said, “Take this and be happy.” He woke up with a feeling of accomplishment and decided to invest the money in a business venture. His friend, who was present, noticed his change in mood and asked him what had happened. The friend explained that the dream had given him a sign to make a new investment. This example demonstrates the importance of divination in everyday life and how it can influence decision-making and actions.

La charada, like other forms of divination, is based on the principle that there are certain symbols that can provide guidance and insight into the future. In Cuba, the number symbols are often used in games such as charada, bolita, and other forms of betting and speculation. Therefore, it is not unusual for people to consult these symbols when faced with important decisions or problems in their lives. The ability to interpret these symbols correctly is considered a sign of good fortune and success.

(Section on La charada and divination by Wardle 2005)

La charada is a type of divination that involves the use of specific symbols to predict the future. These symbols are often associated with specific events or situations, and are believed to have a certain meaning or significance. For example, a butterfly might symbolize change or transformation, while a dead animal might indicate danger or difficulty.

La bolita is another form of divination that is practiced in Cuba and other Latin American countries. It involves the use of a small ball with a symbol or number printed on it. The ball is then thrown or dropped from a certain height, and the outcome is believed to predict the future. Like la charada, la bolita is often used to determine the outcome of important events or decisions.

In both cases, the symbols are believed to have a supernatural power that can provide insight and guidance. However, it is important to note that the symbols are not always interpreted correctly, and that the outcomes of these divination practices are often seen as coincidences or natural events. Despite this, the use of symbols and divination remains an important part of Cuban culture and is often used in conjunction with other forms of ritual and belief.
himself for missing the significance of his comrade’s comments on aging (90 for “old man”), was he not exemplifying an essentially divinatory way of thinking? The salience in this context of the notion of *cábala* seems to corroborate such a view. While my impression is that the mystical connotations of the word are lost on most of my informants,1 the term does have more prosaic associations relating to the ordinary Castellan usage *hacer cábala*, which literally means “to guess.”

Indeed, divinatory symbolism forms part of the symbolic series of *la charada* itself. As can be seen in Table 5.2, certain numbers are associated with particular deities from the West African pantheon that forms the basis of the divinatory practices associated with the Afro-Cuban cults of Santería and Ifá: 4 for Changó, the virile patron of thunder, and for Orula, the patron deity of Ifá divination; 5 for Ochun, the goddess of rivers and love; 7 for Yemaya, the maternal goddess of the sea; and so on. Consider, for example, the favorite *cábala* story of my friend who works at the petrol refinery:

> Once I woke up feeling desperate – I didn’t have money at the time and had all sorts of problems. I went to my San Lázaro [referring to a statue of the saint he keeps in his living-room] and spoke to him. “Please San Lázaro, give me some kind of sign – help me out?” Then I went to my boveda [a shrine devoted to dead spirits that is kept in the home] and lit a candle. After a while – I was in the kitchen – the candle fell over and started a fire. “My God,” I said, “this must be the sign!” … So I went and put all the money I had on 6 [fire], on 76 [hose] … on everything that has to do with fire. Next day my mother calls and tells me that 17 had won, which is San Lázaro! So I lost everything … because I played on my *cábala*, whereas San Lázaro was telling me to play on him. That’s what desperation is like [laughing].

*La charada*, one could surmise, is analogous to divination in that it furnishes a system of “signs” which, when generated in an appropriately nondeliberate manner, yield predictions of otherwise unforeseeable events. The candle’s falling over is taken as a “sign” that suggests a particular number (6, 76, or, as it turns out correctly, 17), much like in Santería divination a particular configuration of cowry shells (or, in Ifá, palm nuts) cast by the diviner in an uncontrolled manner during the consultation is taken as a “sign” (*signo*) that has particular predictive associations (such-and-such a divinatory *signo* portends death in the family, another heralds the cure of a particular ailment, etc.). One could perhaps go as far as to compare my friend’s failure to work out the correct significance of San Lázaro’s sign to novice or unscrupulous diviners’ “errors” or “lies,” for which savvy clients are always on the lookout (see Holbraad 2008).

Nevertheless, there is a crucial breakdown in the analogy between gambling and divination that pertains to the role of “reasons,” the question with which we started.2 When asked to explain the predictive power of their oracle, diviners commonly point to its ability to provide “the reason for things” (*el porque de las cosas*). The following extract from an interview with Lázaro Panfet, a young initiate of Ifá whom I probed about his enthusiasm for divination, is typical:

> Anything you need to know is in Ifá. [Q: In the *signos* of Ifá?] Yes, in the “paths” of Ifá [viz., the myths associated with each *signo*; see below]; the birth of the world, of people, of the deities, wars, progress. You speak to a babalawo [i.e., Ifá diviner] who knows, and he’ll be able to locate even the most insignificant detail. Even the Internet is in one of the *signos* … That’s why Orula [the patron deity of Ifá divination] tells you what’s happening to you, your past, present and future; because everything is there, in the *signo* that he gives you [in the divinatory consultation].
Elsewhere, I have discussed the peculiar logic by which diviners bring the mythical knowledge of the signos to bear upon the everyday concerns of their clients (Holbraad in press). Here we may note only that this logic is explicitly etiological. Divinatory prediction is premised on the notion that all worldly affairs (including everyday matters predicted for the benefit of clients) have a “reason” that can be found “in” the signos. In this sense the signos anchor what one might think of as a “total” cosmology, described in the myths, that is deemed to explain “everything you want to know,” as Lázaro Panfét put it. For divinatory purposes the cosmology of the signos – an object of fascination and study for initiates and anthropologists alike – constitutes a world of “the reasons for things”: a “logocosmy,” if you will.

Gambling could not be more different. As we have already seen, bolita players are characteristically short on explanation as to the provenance and significance of charada number symbolisms, or indeed as to why they play the game at all. Astonishingly to the ethnographer prepped in diviners’ awe, this indifference extends to what could reasonably be assumed to be the major premise of bolita number guessing, namely, that the occurrences that precipitate players’ guesses are somehow connected to the results they purportedly predict. Even when discussing examples that most resemble familiar forms of divination (e.g., how a dead relative might “give” a number in a dream), players would invariably treat my requests for exegesis in speculative tone, as if the matter was ultimately beside the point. The aforementioned retired factory worker gave the most direct response. When I asked him to explain how a seemingly irrelevant occurrence like a drunken stranger’s handshake could serve to predict the evening’s lottery draw, his reply was nonchalant:


These things have no explanation. They are just coincidences. I bet on my cabalas, but if you start counting you’ll find that most of the times I lose.

Provided we credit Evans-Pritchard’s famous point that in divination coincidences are characteristically loaded with significance (1976; and see Holbraad in press), the contrast between divination and gambling is stark. As their disinterest in exegesis would indicate, bolita players are happy to treat cabalas as insignificant happenstance, just as Evans-Pritchard assumed his European readers would treat the occurrences involved in Zande divination (e.g., 1976: 152). The only difference – equally surprising from the viewpoint of divination and of European “common sense” – is that players should nevertheless base their guesses on such coincidences. In other words, players bet (and too often lose) good money for what they appear to be admitting is, quite literally, no good reason.

The characteristics of the “a-rationality” of bolita gambling (which, as we shall see, can be distinguished sharply from irrationality) become clearer if one pursues the comparison with divination, concentrating on the formal properties of the two practices. Formally speaking, I want to argue, gambling can be seen as an inversion of divination. If divination draws on a “logocosmy” to offer reasoned predictions, gambling draws on the process of prediction itself, to offer, if not “reasons” as such, then the raw cosmological elements on which reasoning can be built. Put differently, while divination involves the application of a cosmology, gambling pertains to its original inception – a theme to which I shall return.

As we have seen, gambling and divination are both “predictive” inasmuch as they are geared toward gauging as yet unforeseen events in terms of events that are already given – given, therefore, as somehow “significant.” In gambling, the unforeseen events...
in question are very specific, namely, the nightly bolita draw of a particular number from 1 to 100. The given events that serve to predict the draw, on the other hand, can be just about anything—any cábala that tickles the punter's fancy. In divination, however, this situation is reversed. Here it is the predicted events that can be anything, while the given events that ground the prediction are the specific ones, namely, the diviner's draw, with the help of cowry shells or palm nuts, of a particular divinatory signa, from 1 to 256. So, simply put, in gambling anything can be used to guess something, while in divination something is used to guess anything. In both cases the "something" is a technically induced outcome derived from a set of numbered possibilities, while the "anything" is simply the unfolding of events that comprise life.

As can be seen in Figure 5.1, in both cases the movement from given events to as yet unforeseen ones—the process of prediction—relies on a symbolic matrix that facilitates a translation. In la charada the matrix consists of the various symbolisms associated with each of the 100 numbers (as in Table 5.2). The matrix, which is relatively "open," involving a large degree of redundancy and divergence from player to player, is used to decipher all manner of everyday occurrences to make predictions within a "closed" set of 100 numbers. Added to the fact that players may often go beyond the frame of la charada itself for their guesses (finding cábula in number-plates, personally significant dates, or what have you), it is precisely the flexibility of the symbolic matrix of la charada that allows "anything" to be translated into "something." Matrix-like yet "open," the series of number symbolisms of la charada mediates between life and the 100 numbers of la bolita, rendering the two commensurate, allowing the imponderabilia of everyday life to have a purchase on the guessing game.

The same holds for divination in Santería and Ìfá, only the other way around. Here the role of matrix is taken by the myths with which each of the 256 divinatory signos is associated—the "paths of the signa," as Lázaro Pantèt explained. Diviners draw on their knowledge of these myths to "interpret," as they say, the significance of the signo cast, so as to arrive at an appropriate prediction,³ taking into account the particular circumstances of the client, since the mythical associations of each signo are so complex
that a host of alternative interpretations is typically possible (see Holbraad in press). For example, in Ifa the *signo* Otura Tikú (one out of 256 possible configurations) is, among many other things, associated with death, impotence, intellectual prowess, and ascent in matters of Ifa worship. Depending on the circumstances, diviners may deem it appropriate to focus on any one of these associations when advising a client about their prospects. So, once again, it is the relatively “open” character of each *signo*'s mythical associations that allows for translation. Only here the mythical matrix serves to open up the closed set of *signos*, so that they may have a purchase on the totality of events that comprise everyday life – events that would otherwise remain imponderable indeed.

My argument regarding the “a-rationality” of gambling turns on the idea that this inversion goes deeper than it may initially appear, straight to the question of etiology. True, a superficial reading of Figure 5.1 would posit an analogy between the etiological rationale of divinatory prediction (from mythical “reasons” to everyday events) and the process of number guessing in *la charada* (from everyday events to numbers). As we have seen, however, gamblers resist this. The *cábala* that *la charada* translates into numbers are not presented as “reasons” for the draws they purport to identify – these are “mere coincidences,” as the old man said. But this, I would argue, follows directly from the inversion we have been examining. Diviners’ ability to gauge the “reasons for things,” we saw, relies on their having at their disposal a cosmology, described in the myths they spend a lifetime studying. “Anything you need to know is in Ifa,” Lazaro Panfet said, meaning that all events, including the most everyday, can be inferred from the stories of the myths through a process of interpretation. “Anything you need to know is in Ifa,” Lazaro Panfet said, meaning that all events, including the most everyday, can be inferred from the stories of the myths through a process of interpretation. But without even going into the detail of what such a process might entail (see Holbraad in press), it is clear that interpretation is only possible – indeed necessary – because the mythical cosmology contains “everything” only in *reduced* form: it maps the territory of life in the manner Eliade called “archetypal” (1991). Indeed, it is in this sense that diviners consider that myths contain the “reasons” for things, as opposed to the things themselves: divination can provide a logocosmy *only because* it provides a cosmology – a logic of the cosmos.

But gambling, as we have seen, inverts just this picture. If anything is supposed to provide the reasons for gamblers’ number guessing, it is the *cosmos itself*. For the *cábala* that motivate the guesses are not drawn from an abstracted cosmology, but from the minutiae of life in its concrete unfolding. To treat such motivations as “reasons” is a non sequitur, precisely because the very idea of a reason implies a process of logical manipulation, if you like, *of the world* – the kind of principled reduction cosmologies provide. In other words, if gambling is geared toward guessing “something” in terms of “anything,” then its predictions cannot be based on reasoning, because reasons necessarily discriminate: “anything,” or the cosmos, is too indiscriminate – too big – to be a reason.

Now, this key point about the a-rational (or just a-proportional) magnitude of the cosmos, as opposed to its cosmological reduction, may sound like sleight of hand. The counterargument might go like this. Surely punters’ *cábala* do serve precisely to discriminate particular events from the total ebb and flow of everyday life, rendering life proportionate to the events that *cábala* purport to predict – that is, the result of the draw. “Anything,” after all, only describes the domain from which *cábala* can be drawn, as appropriately little “somethings.” Given this, *cábala* could certainly be construed as “reasons” in some pertinent sense, by analogy to the role that events play in inductive reasoning, typical of all manner of empiricism. Indeed, in such a view, gamblers’ practice a recognition of a game that is (cf. Malaby 1990), a game that this in turn necessarily makes space multifarious and thus to look for from the reality... An interjection...
Gamblers’ proclivity to dismiss their cábala as mere coincidences may well amount to a recognition of a failure of inductive reasoning, misused in this context: the futility of a game that gets your (inductive) hopes up only to dash them in a wave of randomness (cf. Malaby 2003).

But this seemingly hardnosed empiricism is as wrongheaded as it is patronizing of gamblers’ supposed “fallacies.” Not only does it ignore gamblers’ indifference to the charms of reason, but also, more significantly, it fails to recognize the peculiar form that this indifference takes. “Mere coincidence,” the old man said, sweeping the expectation of reason aside (and therefore also the accusation of unreason), only to make space for a conception of his own. Coincidence captures it: what bolita players’ multifarious appeals to cábala share is the insistence, and great care in practice, that these events be given over to life – they must, as it were, “happen.” As my friend’s story about San Lázaro and the fire aptly illustrates, cábala are not events one sets out to look for, but events one merely finds. Only because cábala distinguish themselves from the run of everyday life are they deemed significant enough to warrant a bet. An interjection on the part of the gambler in this process of events’ self-revelation, in an attempt to “tame chance” as Ian Hacking described the rise of statistical reasoning (1990), effectively nullifies the cábala. So inasmuch as reason must involve discrimination – singling out something from the totality of everything – then coincidence is a-rational inasmuch as it discriminates without discrimination, singling out something – sure – but only qua anything. In mock Kantian, one might say that in coincidence the cosmos is revealed in itself, from behind the matrix of cosmology. If, as Galileo said, mathematics is the language the cosmos speaks to us, then coincidence is the language it speaks to itself.

So this is why the number symbolisms of la charada are anything but a cosmology. In divination, as we saw, myths serve to provide reasons for things by apportioning the imponderabilia of everyday life to the systemic matrix of 256 signos. Things have “reasons” insofar as they can be organized, interpretatively by the diviner, in the cosmological scheme of the myths. It follows that by inverting this picture, as in Figure 5.1, the translations performed by means of the matrix of charada symbolisms amount to a disorganization, and are by that token a-rational. Far from serving to predict the lottery’s draw by connecting it to a specific cosmological element, charada symbolisms help gamblers to guess the draw by effectively disconnecting it from any particular event that may serve to explain it, rendering the whole cosmos – “anything” as such – relevant to it. Far beyond cosmology, the matrix of la charada facilitates translations indeed, though not for the benefit of reasonable men, but for the cosmos itself as well as the gamblers who strive to get caught up in it.

In view of this a-rational image, the peculiar underelaboration of charada symbolism, discussed earlier, makes sense. If the role of the matrix here is to translate strictly coincidental events into numbers, then any cosmological accounts regarding the provenance or import of, or relationship between, the symbols involved could only compromise the coincidental, “anything”-like character of the events they tag. For the cosmos to appear, as we saw, cosmology must be rescinded, and that is what these symbols do.

Nevertheless, as the stories of players kicking themselves for having bet on the wrong cues would indicate, gamblers’ efforts to insinuate themselves into this process of cosmic revelation are largely in vain: “if you start counting you’ll find that most of the times I lose,” the man laughed. This is the comic counterpart to Lévi-Strauss’
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Figure 5.2 Cosmological comprehension and cosmic apprehension in divination and gambling

tragic view of classification – the joke being that coincidences can only be compromised by the gambler’s inevitable crunch-point decision to bet on one instance rather than another (comedy as self-conscious tragedy, so to speak). For such choices pertain not to cosmic revelation but to cosmological judgment. I am sure my friends would love it if they could render coincidental their decisions to bet on cabala coincidences – I imagine such a scenario as some kind of zombie-like divestment of choice, perhaps a form of spirit possession, although I admit I have not discussed this with players in Cuba. As it is, they are left with the predicament of having to efface the anything-like character of the cabala they apprehend, by comprehending them as betting “options” – proto-cosmological “somethings,” if you will, that can be manipulated as reasons (betting on 49 “because” one met a drunk, and so on). Gambling, then, could be said to lay bare the origins of cosmology. Coincidences, as the language of the cosmos, provide the raw materials out of which cosmologies may be built. Indeed, while I would hardly want to tell a faux Tyloresian story about how coincidences originated savage cosmologies (precisely because Tylor saw awe-inspiring coincidences as objects of explanation), gambling does serve to make the logical point that the role of coincidence with respect to cosmology (or, plainly, thought) is, if you like, originary (cf. Tylor 1970).

So, in summary, the comparison between divination and gambling in Cuba yields two contrasting images of the relationship of cosmology to the cosmos, represented diagrammatically in Figure 5.2. In divination, the cosmos is – literally – “comprehended” by cosmology, and thus everything in it can – in principle – be explained. On this image, however, the cosmos in its total plenitude remains opaque – the age-old philosophical problem. Worldly particulars are posited as explananda only insofar as they can be brought into proportion with the cosmologies that furnish their explanation, and this presupposes that they are already extracted from the world as “particulars.” In gambling, on the other hand, the picture is inverted. The gambler’s question is not how to elements out of how particulars conditions the provides the ground of. As cosmic apprehension, cosmic self-reasons – cosmology.

By way of contrast, gambling a-role in culture, society, as of the sign of sense. But as it summarizes it to make it no sense. By way of contrast, culture, society, as of the sign of sense. But as it summarizes it to make it no sense.

Now, the problem (which is, as an anthropologist, however, most typical of “the same role in culture, society, as of the sign of sense. But as it summarizes it to make it no sense.

Gambling, in this way, suggests that beyond etiology, the gambler apprehend the conditions that govern the cosmos as well as the cosmos. In modeling, toward the articles seem to we saw. Face might explain.
is not how to explain things by cosmological recourse to reasons, but rather how the elements out of which such "reasons" are made might be generated in the first place—how particulars might emerge from the cosmos. So if, for the diviner, cosmology conditions the cosmos, for the gambler it is the other way around: the cosmos provides the ground for cosmology by giving itself over as such at moments of coincidence. As coincidences, worldly particulars can recommend themselves, as it were, to apprehension. And as the gambler's comic predicament of loss demonstrates, these cosmic self-recommendations are distinctive precisely in that they do not constitute reasons—cosmic revelation is demonstrably not about etiology.

By way of conclusion, I want to argue that the contrast between divinatory reason and gambling a-reason (etiology vs. revelation, so to speak) can elucidate a contrast between traditional understandings of holism in anthropology, and an alternative one. It will be clear that divination is holistic in the traditional sense, since myths play the same role in diviners' reasoning as "wholes" do in anthropologists'. Much like structure, society, culture, the imaginary, habitus, or what have you, the mythical totality of the signos provides the larger backdrop against which particular phenomena make sense. But as with anthropological wholes, this mythic totality is also reductive. It summarizes all worldly particulars by encompassing them in rudimentary form, so as to make it possible for diviners to find their reasons. For anthropology and for Ifá, then, holism is a concomitant of etiology.

Now, the problem with holism is not that it is necessarily a bad way of doing etiology (which is perhaps the usual quip), but rather that etiology itself is not as appropriate an anthropological agenda as is usually assumed. I shall not make this argument here, however, other than to state the problem. If one accepts that anthropologists' most typical challenge is making sense of practices that appear to lack one (making sense of "the Other," as people used to say), then it is unclear how etiology might be fit for the purpose. Unlike the diviner, who may rest assured that his mythical etiologies are god-given, the anthropologist is left wondering: if making sense of the Other is a matter of explaining it, then whence might the terms in which such explanations are cast (holists' wholes, for example) be derived? If they too are Other (as so-called relativists would have it), then a debilitating regress of Otherness ensues (the hermeneutic circle). And if they are not Other (the universalistic option), then the object of explanation is merely shown up not to be as Other as it appeared—that is, its alterity is just denied, explained away.

Gambling, I think, offers a way of articulating anthropologists' concern with alterity, suggesting an understanding of what "making sense" amounts to, that goes beyond etiology. Gamblers' cábala, we saw, turn on the idea that it is possible to apprehend the cosmos as such. Its cosmological reductions are bypassed insofar as the gambler allows coincidences to suggest themselves to him. But this is arguably a fair description of the anthropologist's stance to alterity— or, better, the stance of alterity toward the anthropologist. Alterity, we say, comes down to the fact that certain practices seem nonsensical to the analyst—gambling is an example, particularly in Cuba as we saw. Faced with such practices, the common reaction is to search for a reason that might explain them. I did that in my original fieldwork, as described earlier. Searching
for reasons, however, presupposes that one already has a grip on the perplexing practices, as particulars that require explanation. In other words, it presupposes that these practices already feature in one’s analytical cosmology – for example, we know what gambling is, so the question is why Cubans do it. So if the problem is that this approach effaces alterity, as already shown, then the solution must surely be to bypass our cosmological presuppositions, like gamblers do.

Now, there is an apparently banal sense in which this agenda is already built into the practice of anthropology, namely, in the method of ethnographic fieldwork. The habitual justification of fieldwork is roughly that long-term engagement with people allows us to get a deeper insight into their point of view. But this is arguably a poor justification, since such appeals to experiential osmosis – verstehen in German – hardly crack the logical conundrum of alterity (the dilemma of infinite regress vs. obliteration outlined above). A better justification would advertise the role of coincidence. If there is one thing we know about fieldwork (though we feel we should keep it a secret), it is that it is the antithesis par excellence. We go to the field only to expect the unexpected, which is to say the coincidental. In that sense, fieldwork is the exact opposite of lab work: an experiment out of control, fieldwork is by nature oriented not toward planned eventualities but rather toward arbitrary coincidences. Happiest when things happen to themselves, the ethnographer is professionally vulnerable to the unexpected. Indeed, arguably the value of pretending that fieldwork could ever be systematic (the writing of proposals, research itineraries, and even the key – but typically arbitrary – decision as to where to do fieldwork in the first place) is that such pretenses construct a backdrop against which the coincidental character of what finds us in the field can appear as such. Viewed in this light, the ethnographer’s investment in fieldwork as a conduit for the unexpected is far from banal. Rather, fieldwork becomes the experiential correlate, so to speak, of alterity itself: it is precisely because of its repercussions on the intellectual problem of alterity that the practical “happenstance” of ethnographic fieldwork is anthropologically compelling.

Now, if you take my core argument about gambling – that coincidences are the language in which the cosmos appears from behind cosmology – it would follow that ethnographic fieldwork is a gambler’s paradise, and that the ethnographer is, as it were, a cosmic expert. We know, however, that things are not nearly that simple. In fact, the analogy between ethnography and gambling makes a virtue of coincidences as alterity, the breakdown of the analogy is just as revealing. For the chief difference between the gambler and the ethnographer is that while the former is happy merely to apprehend the coincidences that surprise him, using a readymade matrix of symbols to translate them into numbers, the ethnographer is professionally invested in making sense of his own surprises, and, to boot, has no readymade vocabulary with which to do so. So the question arises: what might this exercise in making sense of ethnographic alterity look like, and on what resources might it draw?

Understood as a (coincidental) divergence between analytical assumptions and ethnographic data, as we have seen, the problem of alterity issues in a series of misunderstandings. In assuming that gambling could be provided with a rationale, I effectively misunderstood what kind of activity gambling is. In assuming that the guessing game of the charada is quasi-divinatory, I misunderstood its peculiar orientation toward coincidence. So the first point to note about alterity is that the challenge it poses to anthropological analysis is that of understanding (cf. Viveiros de Castro 2003; Henare et al. 2007; Holbraad 2008). That is to say, contra holism and other forms of etiology, the problem that things like gambling pose is not that we do not know why people do them, but rather that we do not, properly speaking, know what they are doing.
But this way of setting up the challenge also suggests the manner in which it may be taken up. If our misunderstandings of ethnographic data are a function of the analytical assumptions we bring to them, then it would follow that overcoming our misunderstandings must involve rethinking the assumptions that led to them. Indeed, this is how the analysis of the present chapter has proceeded. Making virtue of the apparently nonsensical data that, rather, made nonsense of my initial assumptions, I have sought to transform the latter in order to make sense of the former. In an exercise of what may best be described as reconceptualization, I used well-worn analytical procedures such as logical sequencing, transposition, and inversion to try, for example, to make the expectation that gambling must involve a rationale give way to the notion that gambling turns on the possibility of bypassing processes of reasoning altogether. Similarly, to articulate the form of this “a-rationality” (the neologism is meant to connote the analytical departure), I turned the supposed parallel with divination into an inversion, where coincidences become sources, rather than objects, of cosmological reckoning.

So, in conclusion, we may note that while the gambler and the anthropologist are similarly concerned with the possibility of bypassing familiar ways of thinking in order to allow the world to reveal itself — and in this sense they are indeed both “cosmic holists” in the sense I have sought to articulate — their manner of doing so is rather different. More fascinated, perhaps, than challenged by the possibility of bypassing reason, the gambler is content to channel the cosmic self-revelations of his cábula directly into bets, translating them into numbers by means of the transparent ciphers of the charada: a chance encounter with a drunk is a “sign,” is “drunkard,” is 49, is worth a punt. By contrast, the anthropologist’s fascination with the coincidences of ethnography derives from the problem they pose: namely, the fact that they cannot be “translated,” that is, they cannot be shown to make sense in terms of concepts that are already familiar to him. So rather than facilitating “translation,” as the symbols of la charada do for the gambler, the anthropologist’s initial analytical vocabulary (his familiar “cosmology”) hinders it. In doing so, however, this initial vocabulary also provides the tools for its own correction: articulating ethnographic alterity as a series of palpable analytical misconceptions, it provides both the starting point and the direction for the processes of reconceptualization that are required in order to arrive, finally, at sense. For example, the ethnographic realization that gambling in Cuba makes nonsense of the assumption that gambling must involve forms of reasoning has not left us merely in the aporia of having reached the limits of our way of thinking. It has also set the coordinates for our effort to change our thinking in a way that meets the ethnographic challenge. What is it exactly about the notion of reasoning that gambling contradicts? And how might we rethink this notion to overcome the contradiction? As an answer to just such questions, the conceptualization of the a-rationality of cosmic holism that I have offered in this chapter, precipitated by the alterity of Cuban gambling, is intended as a recursive, proof-in-the-pudding illustration of this kind of intellectual endeavor — one that conceptualizes the potential of anthropology as an originator of concepts rather than a mere user of them.

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Notes

1 In fact, in conversations with me players often mispronounced the word as *cabula* (which is meaningless as far as I know) or even *cabra* (which means goat!).

2 I thank Morten Pedersen for encouraging me to explore the limits of the analogy.

3 Santería and Òrì divination is often used to predict future events, but also serves as a diagnostic of present and past circumstances of which the client may be unaware (e.g., explaining a current ailment by pointing to an earlier ritual transgression, identifying the source of ongoing sorcery, etc.).

4 For a fuller discussion, see Holbraad (2008).

5 I borrow the term from Debbora Battaglia (2007), who has written about the role of “happenstantial” connections in anthropological comparison (see also Holbraad and Pedersen 2009).

References


Gambling, Divination, and Ethnography in Cuba


