Acknowledgments

Long in the making, this book is based on fieldwork that I conducted in Havana between 1998 and 2000 for my doctoral thesis, completed at the University of Cambridge in 2002, and a series of subsequent field trips to Cuba throughout the 2000s. I thank the Economic and Social Research Council, King’s College, Cambridge, and the Department of Social Anthropology at Cambridge for financially supporting my doctoral studies. For funding on subsequent visits to Cuba, I thank the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the British Academy. Pembroke College, Cambridge, where I was a Research Fellow from 2002 until 2004, provided an optimal environment for sustained postdoctoral research. A magnificent place to do anthropology, the Department of Anthropology at University College London has since been my academic home. I am grateful to the department’s administrative staff, and particularly to Helen Cooper, Diana Goforth, Chris Hagisavva, Alena Kocourek, and Martin O’Connor, for their part in making it a pleasure to work there.

Of the many friends and acquaintances who helped me in my research on Afro-Cuban religion in Havana, I would like to mention in particular Victor Bentancourt and his family and associates, Lázaro and Anaïris Panfét, Mira Petrunic, and Carlos and Mayra Torrens. Mette Berg and Lloyd Rundle made all the difference in the early stage of my doctoral fieldwork in Havana and Dimitris Kerkinos was a close companion throughout. For their love, friendship, and guidance for now well over a decade, I am profoundly grateful to Jacinto Herrera and Eloanél, Juana and her family, and especially Maritza Díaz and her family. Of the many academic and administrative staff at the Centro (now Instituto) de Antropología who helped me during my original fieldwork in Havana in 1998–2000, as well as in subsequent visits, I give special thanks to my two academic advisors, Juan
Alvarado Ramos and Rafael Robaina Jaramillo. Without their friendship, anthropological insight, and ethnographic guidance my research in Cuba would have been impossible.

Since our wedding in Havana in 2004, Zoraima Segón Valdés has been a constant support and source of inspiration, first as wife and now as lifelong friend and confidante. Her family, and particularly Remédios (Tata), Euclides, Ernesto, Leonardo, and Dorka, have in recent years been my first port of call in Havana, and I am immensely grateful for their immutable affection. The same goes for my Havana soul-mate Javielito Alfonso, whose passion for music, books, Ifá, and friendship opened new horizons for me. As initiates of Ifá, Javielito and his father, Javier, provided the main anchor of my research. As can be seen in the pages of this book, most of what I know about Ifá life comes from the many hours I spent with them and their extended family and ritual associates in Havana, Matanzas, and Unión de Reyes. Javier himself became my Ifá godfather (padrino de guerreros and mano de Orula) in 1999 and, until his death in 2004, was as wise, perceptive, and tender a mentor as one could hope for, in life as in Ifá. This book is dedicated to his memory.

Of the many teachers and friends in Cambridge whose help I recorded in the acknowledgments of my doctoral thesis, here I would like to single out Caroline Humphrey, my PhD supervisor. Her unflagging support and intellectual stimulation during my studies, and in the years since, have been of immense value to me. I would also like to thank Stephen Hugh-Jones, my second PhD supervisor, as well as Marilyn Strathern and Maurice Bloch, my internal and external PhD examiners respectively. All three were of major inspiration as teachers, and the influence of their work is amply evident in the pages of this book. The same goes for Morten Pedersen who, as fellow student in Cambridge and anthropological soul-mate ever since, has been my closest intellectual companion throughout the writing of this book. While our friendship is in so many ways more encompassing than anthropology, our common sense of anthropological fun has perhaps been its most abiding feature.

I also owe thanks to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, whom I first met in 1998 during his visiting professorship at Cambridge, and who has since become my most steadfast anthropological mentor and interlocutor. Having followed my research from its beginning, he has been my most engaged reader and critic throughout the writing of this book, acting also as reviewer of the manuscript for the publisher. His profound influence is amply evident in the final product. In fact, his inspiration, support, and
guidance at all stages of the book’s development have made me come to regard him as something of a godfather to the whole endeavor. I dedicate the book to him, as well as to my own godfather, in recognition of this and in gratitude for his friendship.

For mind-bending conversations, recommendations on literature, and all-round inspiration and moral support I would like to record my gratitude to Ben Alberti, Viorel Anastasoaie, Alex Argenti-Pillen, Alexandra Bakalaki, Alessandra Basso Ortíz, Barbara Bodenhorn, Casper Bruun Jensen, Victor Buchli, Phil Burnham, Matt Candea, David Cooper, Alberto Corsín Jiménez, Ludovic Coupaye, Magnus Course, Giovanni da Col, Philippe Descola, Piero di Giminiani, Sev Fowles, Luke Freeman, Alice Forbes, Sergio González Varela, Keith Hart, Lars Højér, Bruce Kapferer, Jose Kelly, Babis Kondarakis, Susanne Küchler, James Laidlaw, Murray Last, Jerome Lewis, Geoffrey Lloyd, Yvonne Marshall, Lucia Michelutti, Peter Morton-Williams, Andrew Moutu, Marjorie Murrey, Chloe Nahum-Claudel, Becky Nastou, Morten Nielsen, Chris Pinney, Ato Quayson, William Rea, Nanneke Reclift, Adam Reed, Rodney Reynolds, Balkis Rouached, Ami Salmond, Buck Schieffelin, Matan Shapiro, Barrie Sharpe, David Sneath, Tânia Stolze Lima, Alan Strathern, Tao Sule, Soumhya Venkatesan, Henrik Vigh, Sari Wastell, Graham Were, Jo Whiteley, Rane Willerselev, and Chris Witmore. For also reading and commenting on draft chapters I thank Patrick Curry, René Devisch, Terry Evans, Marcio Goldman, David Hillel-Ruben, Jamie Leach, the late Peter Lipton, Maria Livanou, John Peel, Lise Philipsen, and Michael Scott.

Much of the thinking presented in the book took shape in the anthropology department at UCL, particularly in conversation with participants in the research group on Cosmology, Religion, Ontology and Culture (CROC) and students on my course on Alterity and Experiment. Of friends and colleagues in the department, I would like to single out Allen Abramson, Alice Elliot, Rebecca Empson, Diana Espirito Santo, Danny Miller, David Napier, Sara Randall, Ellie Reynolds, Mike Rowlands, Julia Sauma, Dan Sherer, and Charles Stewart for their friendship and support, not least at the very final stages of writing. Jenny Adejayan, Nikos Giannakakis, Panos Giannakakis, Hera Karagianni, Giorgos Papagiannopoulos, Dimitris Psimaras, Joe Rodriguez, and Dimitris Vassos and his daughters Nefeli and Rallou have been there throughout.

As well as to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, thanks are due to two anonymous reviewers for the University of Chicago Press for their invaluable comments, and to David Brent, the Press’s editor, who brought the project
to fruition. Piers Vitebsky helped to put me in contact with the Press, and I am supremely grateful for his advice, as well as for his inspiring influence as teacher. I am also grateful to Priya Nelson at University of Chicago Press for her assistance in the book’s production, as well as to Therese Boyd for her thorough editorial work on the manuscript. In chapters 3, 5, and 8 I draw on two previously published papers of mine: “The Power of Powder: Multiplicity and Motion in the Divinatory Cosmology of Cuban Ifá (or Mana Again),” which appeared in Thinking Through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically, edited by A. Henare, M. Holbraad, and S. Wastell (London: Routledge, 2007), 189–225; and “Relationships in Motion: Oracular Recruitment and Ontological Definition in Cuban Ifá Cults,” Cahiers Systèmes de Pensée en Afrique Noire 18 (2009): 219–64. I thank the publishers for permission to reprint parts of these texts.

Finally, I would like to make explicit my deep sense of gratitude to my family for their love and support during the years of the book’s gestation. My sister Sonya and her joyful family—Matt, Anna, Samuel, Alexander, Mae!—have been my most solid emotional anchor in Britain during what has felt like a period of incessant shuttling between the UK, Cuba, Denmark, Greece, and elsewhere. My mother, Christina, and father, Carsten, also shuttlers by nature as well as necessity, have nevertheless always been there for me. Both of them intellectuals, they have each read multiple versions of the chapters that follow and have contributed immensely to their content as well as their form. Having dedicated my doctoral thesis to them, here I would like to record my unconditional gratitude for standing by me at every turn of this book’s production. A big thing for me.