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# Biotechnological Cults of Affliction?

## Race, Rationality and Enchantment in Personal Genomic Histories

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My contribution to this volume is somewhat of a postscript to a forum essay that I published in the *American Ethnologist* a few years ago (Palmié 2007). A good deal of my argument in that article revolved around what even some of my most sympathetic critics took to be a purely polemic analogy between the rationality of divination as described in classic ethnographies and that of present-day genomic analyses, particularly the genomically enhanced ancestry searches known as ‘personal genomic histories’ (PGH). The present occasion gives me a welcome opportunity to address these concerns. In what follows, I will only briefly restate my arguments for why I think this was not only not an analogy, but an attempt at suggesting possibilities for establishing what Bruno Latour (1993) might call an epistemological symmetry that makes short shrift of a supposedly science-driven disenchantment of the world.<sup>1</sup> And then I would like to make matters worse! I will do so by speculating about how public representations of consumer demand for, and consumer satisfaction with, PGH might be analysed in terms of another classical anthropological topos: that of initiatory cults of affliction.

Lest you might think that this now really is a frivolous exercise, let me add here that I take my point of departure from a theoretical stance akin to what the late Alfred Gell (1999), in his call for a nonreductive anthropology of art, called ‘methodological philistinism’. Gell notes that social scientific analyses of religion have tended to cleave close to what Peter Berger once called ‘methodological atheism’ – that is, a principled and systematic bracketing of questions about whether religious postulates might be ‘true’ in any literal sense. Recall here the famous closing lines of Evans-Pritchard’s (1956: 322) *Nuer Religion* where, after more than 300 pages on

Nuer practices and utterances concerning the divine, he throws up his hands and conceded that when it comes to the content of what one might call ‘Nuer religious experience’ (whatever that may be), the anthropologist has to cede terrain to the theologian. If so, asks Gell, what then of aesthetic experience? Why do we think we need to relegate the one to the theologians but assume that we can safely speak about aesthetics – as if the ‘truth’ of art or, in Gell’s terms, the effects of particular ‘technologies of enchantment’ were as self-evident as the idea of ‘kwoth’ was to the Nuer in the 1930s – or, for that matter, as the Catholic Trinity appears to have become to Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard, Victor Turner or Dame Mary Douglas after their conversion to Catholicism.

But Gell goes a bit further than merely positing agnosticism *tout court*, and this is where things become interesting for me. In particular, he notes that the ‘technologies of enchantment’ that produce aesthetic (or religious) experience among their consumers tend to rest on the prior ‘enchantment of technologies’: artistic practice in his case, ritual in many others. But of course, we need not stop here, for what this is ultimately about is an approach towards the creation and circulation of value in social life. And here I would like to focus Gell’s insights on the practice of recruitment of individuals and groups, through technologies of genealogical reckoning, into social identities and relations conceived both as storage points and conduits of value. Obviously, in most human societies (though, of course, in widely divergent elaborations) descent functions as a powerful technos of recruitment – evoking as it does, at least among Europeans and Americans, notions of unwilled, non-negotiable consubstantiality to a degree where the truth of identities becomes popularly pegged not just to where you’re at, but where you’re coming from. Given the deep roots of arboreal images in the Western ‘knowledge of begetting’ (genealogy) and given also its deep linkages with the vertical transmission in time of property and properties (i.e., not just estates but also membership in estates), this perhaps should not overly surprise us.<sup>2</sup> Yet if what the French medievalist Marc Bloch (1949) once called ‘*la hantise des origines*’ continues to hold us in its thrall, and if, for some of us, biogenetic descent provides the key to its ineffable mysteries, then there is no reason as to why anthropologists (of all people) should bracket biotechnological means of genealogical past-making as beyond our epistemological ken, and abandon them to molecular biologists and genomic scientists telling people ‘who they really are’ Marks (2001) and therefore how they ought to relate to each other.

On the contrary, and irrespective of what STS can tell us about scientific praxis as such, perhaps we are better served by heeding Max Weber’s (1978: 506) point that the mystifications arising out of the increasing control over our lives of highly rationalized but ultimately occult (for the layperson, that is) expert knowledge call forth their own forms of reactive re-enchantment.<sup>3</sup> Since we will be dealing with contemporary American society in the following text, I shall simply make a point akin to David Schneider’s (1980: 23) argument about how American notions of kinship as biogenetic relatedness rest on the belief that science will truthfully tell us what biogenetic relatedness (and so kinship) consists in. Hence, if theology and aesthetics ought not to serve as epistemological dumping grounds for anthropologists

concerned with religious experience or the consumption of works of art, then science shouldn't be either for those of us interested in what one might call, with a nod to Appadurai (1986), the social life of the 'knowledge goods' that scientific praxis places at people's disposal.

That said, let me briefly return to my *American Ethnologist* essay. Part of the question that originally motivated it was how a notionally cognatic kinship system could possibly support the maintenance and reproduction of what Americans call 'races': that is, a structure of corporative descent groups in which, thanks to the so-called principle of hypodescent, the politically dominant group reproduces itself by perpetually disenrolling people of supposedly 'African' (or perhaps better: 'black') descent from its genealogies. But of course, it works very well – if only because (contrary to widespread belief) membership in American racial collectives has in principle very little to do with bodily surfaces. Phenotypes do work as handy props for visualizing 'race'. So do various techniques of the body or other learned performative capacities. But, deep down, 'race' is a matter of invisible essences conceived of as heritable – though by no means in the kind of limitless bilateral fashion corresponding to most Americans' basically folk-Mendelian views of heredity and relatedness in the abstract.

There is nothing particularly biological here, to be sure. This is a fact that was nicely driven home when genomic analyses appeared to reveal that none other than Nobel Prize winner and belatedly self-outed white supremacist James T. Watson possessed, as journalist Robert Verkaik (2007) put it in London's *The Independent*, 'a DNA profile with up to 16 times more genes of black [*sic*] origin than the average white European'. Now bracketing the question of what in the world 'genes of black origin' might be,<sup>4</sup> who, in this instance, cares what Jim Watson thinks he is or, for that matter, looks like? Clearly, as in the case of Franz Josef Gall, the famously pea-brained founder of phrenology (Gould 1981), poetic justice was at work here, one might say, for in a sense Watson's disparaging pontifications concerning the intellectual endowments of people of African descent simply came home to roost. Although one would still want to ask why socially 'black' people of African descent are rarely accorded the same kind of attention when they spout off comparable views – the controversy over Leonard Jeffries' 'sun' and 'ice people' comes to mind – one cannot help but note that the attraction of the Watson story involves a distinctly subcutaneous moment.

This also became clear in the struggle between the white and black descendants of Thomas Jefferson over burial rights in Monticello, which revolved around the moral implications of probabilistically ascertained molecularbiological correspondences in the Y-chromosomes of some of their members. What was at issue in this instance was the significance of the idea of shared biotic substance for the commitment to and maintenance of ancestry-based 'racial' identities, and the reshuffling of rights and obligations that the acknowledgment of kin relations across the conceptual boundaries of such identities might engender. Here the disappearance of transracial kin relations obeys a logic that anthropologists know quite well – if mostly in the context of unilineal kinship systems, where we have long been wont to regard the phenomenon of 'structural amnesia' as a key to the reproduction of such social orders.

But of course, it isn't really hard to see that the reproduction of American 'races' – and so the enduring racialization of American social life – requires the production of no less systemically necessary dark zones of genealogical consciousness. As the Jefferson-Hemings or Watson cases demonstrate, these can normally only be illuminated in individual instances, and even then only by the seemingly extrapolitical authority of an expert discourse capable of removing the source of such authority from the realm of the social – for example, by projecting it onto the 'facts of nature' it merely claims to render legible.

This, of course, immediately brings me to divination. Regardless of the scale of technology mobilized, if we can accept that inductive (as opposed to inspired, or 'mantic', in the original sense) forms of divinatory revelation are based on principally rational procedures ('technique') aiming to uncover previously unknown facts about the world by putting known facts under novel descriptions allowable within a specific epistemic order, then there should be little reason to reject a priori comparing ethnographically known oracles with the modes of knowledge production that underlie contemporary forms of genomic identity arbitration in public consultational praxis.<sup>5</sup> But there is more to it than mere formal symmetry. No less than, say, the Zande poison oracle contemporary genomics cannot but import into its highly technical operations a set of assumptions about the world it aims to elucidate, as well as a code for translating the signs it produces – dead chicken in one case, allele frequencies in another – into a language that renders these 'findings' comprehensible in terms of the questions the knowledge-producing instrument is supposed to answer. This is so because contrary to, for example, Evans-Pritchard's (1937) famously misguided bracketing of 'science' as a socially unconstrained idiom of thought in *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic*, both the Zande poison oracle and contemporary molecular biology are first and foremost instruments of situated social praxis. As such, they both answer not just to abstract standards of internal logical consistency but to the thoroughly socialized concerns of their practitioners and clients. Thus, in disclosing the 'hidden' or 'invisible' agencies and essences that – again in the eyes of both clients and practitioners – appear to shape particular social arrangements and events, they stabilize and reproduce the cultural order which threw up the questions such oracular systems purport to answer in the first place.

No matter then how much practitioners of genomics may protest their nonbelief in the biological existence of 'races' and tend to define their samples in terms of 'biogeographical variation' or 'continental ancestries', as soon as the findings thus produced are translated back into the language in which the question they are supposed to answer was originally formulated, we are back in the thoroughly racialized social worlds all of us – including molecular biologists and population geneticists – inhabit day in, day out.<sup>6</sup> This is a world where 'race' is no less 'real', and just as embodied in the biotic substance of American citizens, as the witchcraft substance is in the bellies of otherwise seemingly normal and indeed potentially unsuspecting Zande kinsmen. Once we leave the realm of probabilistic reasoning and begin to identify, say, K2 Y-chromosome haplotypes as evidence of Arab or East African ancestry, we are back in the world where place begins to connote race. The latter

example is not arbitrary, for this is precisely how the results of a recent British study of Thomas Jefferson's Y-STR haplotype (King et al. 2007) were immediately read by the American press (Wade 2007). Interestingly, however, interpretations drifted not towards East African (i.e., 'black') or Arab descent, but towards Jewishness – though all of these (biogeographically equally plausible) solutions would have effectively barred Thomas Jefferson himself from burial in Monticello only a half century ago. But such highly mediated genomic trivia are really only the tip of a rapidly emerging iceberg of genuine nastiness.

As we speak, vast sums of money are being poured into genomic investigations that proceed from sample populations defined by recourse to the conventional, census-based racial classifications, only to restate them in molecular biological language as, for example, medical risk distributions among named racial groups in the U.S.A.: a genuinely scientific and in itself eminently rational equivalent to the logic that, in the late 1990s, led to the statistical disaster that became known as 'driving while black'.<sup>7</sup> Harking back to a brilliant formulation by Karen E. Fields (2001), I call this moment 'racecraft' – a principle operative in various often entirely well meant and intentionally anti-racist endeavours that nonetheless work to underwrite the experiential, if not conceptual reality of 'race'. They do so by suggesting that 'race' (like value, capital or indeed witchcraft) has a substantive rather than relative ontological status; that it can be found in individual bodies and objects, rather than in the relations obtaining between them. Among the vectors of 'racecraft', I would argue, figure PGH – individualized genomic ancestry profiles that are nowadays offered by an increasingly large number of usually web-based commercial providers.

One of them, African Ancestry, Inc. is directed by my colleague Rick Kittles at the School of Medicine of the University of Chicago. I do not want to unduly focus on African Ancestry, Inc., but to give you an idea of the dimensions of the industry in genomic ancestry services, according to an interview Kittles gave to *Black Enterprise* in 2005, by then – only two years after the founding of African Ancestry, Inc. – the company's revenue totalled approximately \$300,000 (Gilbert 2005). And that was before Henry Louis Gates, Jr. propelled Kittles to national fame by hiring him for his PBS miniseries *African American Lives* and *Finding Oprah's Roots*. In my *American Ethnologist* article, I go to considerable lengths in trying to unpack what may be wrong, epistemologically as well as politically, with the product companies like African Ancestry, Inc. are selling. What interests me here is the supposed utility of their services. Beyond sheer curiosity value, what kinds of strategies of self-enracination and identity management are they presumed to enable and direct?

Henry Greely (2008) has recently gone to some lengths in trying to answer that question from a systematic comparison of web-based information posted by commercial DNA service providers. Quite obviously, however, it can really only be answered ethnographically – and with significant exceptions such as Nelson (2008a, 2008b) and Schramm (Chapter 7, this volume), to this day, properly ethnographic research on African American PGH consumption still remains to be done (or, at least, to be published). Nevertheless, on a level of public representation, what we know both about the nature of genealogies as legitimacy charters and about the

nature of American racism, public representations of genomically enhanced ancestry searches do seem to point beyond a more generalized North American obsession with genealogy that seems to have gained momentum in the last two decades of the twentieth century. Here, I think, lies an ample field for investigating how contemporary American norms of ‘cultural citizenship’ have come to be articulated with the projection of credible claims upon patrimonialized ‘heritages’, ‘cultures’ and ‘pasts’ tied to notions of horizontally shared biological descent. As Nash (2004: 26) phrases it:

Genetic testing companies draw on the currency of cultural discourses of identity in which identity is both central to political discourses and depoliticised in the service of consumer capitalism. In offering genetic tests to establish genealogical facts, these enterprising ventures play on ideas of possessive individualism in which possession of knowledge constitutes identity. Our genetic identities, we are told, are already in our possession ‘in every cell of our body’ but require technoscience to reveal them to us. Buying Y-chromosome or Mitochondrial DNA tests we buy back what is figured as already ours and what already constitutes us, but in a newly knowable and productive form.

Nash is concerned here with a generalized logic of commercialized PGH products – one that, as she points out in her contribution to this volume, actively bodies forth new forms of ‘genetic ignorance’ (figured as a lack of self-knowledge that one *ought* to possess) which the consumption of PGH services promises to redress. Indeed, as she argues, the African American case may well be modular for strategies of establishing the utility of genomic ancestry services by playing on narratives of displacement, loss and recovery even in targeting groups whose ancestors were not enslaved Africans. But this may be precisely the point. Obviously, the fact that genomic technologies allow black people in the U.S.A. to participate in an American ideology of ‘rootedness’ (by making it possible to bypass documentary obliteration by biotechnological means) does not make their investment in ‘Old World origins’ less American (cf. Schramm, Chapter 7, this volume) – or less ideological, for that matter.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, what has already come to be called ‘recreational genomics’ may play a somewhat different role in the case of African Americans aspiring, and financially capacitated, to engage in the genomic discovery of their biotic Africanity than it does in, say, the case of socially white Americans eager to get their known ‘immigrant roots’ genomically ratified, or surmount gaps in the genealogical record.<sup>9</sup>

In part, this is so because while in the contemporary U.S.A., ‘Americanness’ has come to encompass and encourage the public expression of forms of ‘white’ ethnicity, the ‘mark one or more’ question in Census 2000 and Barak Obama’s electoral success notwithstanding, ‘nonwhite’ identities and statuses are far more ambiguously articulated with an ideology that nowadays renders, for example, Irishness or Italianness largely unremarkable, optative modifiers of white American national belonging. Thus, the same privilege is still decidedly not granted to those

whose social 'blackness' does not allow them to forget their descent from victims of a regime of slavery – a system that obliterated their 'African roots' to a degree where conventional means of documentary ancestry tracing will invariably run into the snag presented by a patronym inherited from a slaveholder or selected ad hoc upon emancipation. Malcolm Little's famous gesture of substituting his last name by the mark of a deliberately willed absence speaks to this issue – an 'X' to be filled by the significance of future action undertaken on behalf of the 'Lost-Found Nation of Islam in the Wilderness of North America'. There is no slaveholder isonymy here, to be sure. But Malcolm X's was only one solution to the pervasive sense of an inability of being a 'Negro' and an 'American' at one and the same time that W.E.B. DuBois, more than a century ago, diagnosed as standing at the heart of a peculiarly African American dilemma: that of inhabiting a social identity that not only threatens to severely curtail your material life chances and aspirations but that also limits your chances of ever fully 'belonging' to the imagined community that is the U.S.A.

One might think here of the resolution historically afforded by revelatory practices of exploring what Marilyn Strathern (2005) calls systems of 'coimplications' within a given semiotic and epistemological system such as W.E.B. DuBois's contemporary Noble Drew Ali's refiguration of 'the Negro' as the 'Afro-Asiatic' or Marcus Garvey's brilliant play on the trope of exodus and return to a Zionistic African 'transnation' of the future. But one might also think of the more recent ways in which the American Yoruba Movement's divinatory 'roots readings' fashion a sense of 'deterritorialized' racial belonging that explicitly negates mundane citizenship (in the U.S.A. or Nigeria, for that matter [cf. Clarke 2004]). Based in the notionally infallible authority of the Ifa Oracle (though, of course, open to mistaken or interested interpretations on the part of its human operators), such 'roots readings' are perhaps the closest functional equivalent to PGH today – except that while genomic ancestry searches displace the sources of divinatory authority downwards from the realm of the social into that of the biotic, 'roots readings' do so by upwards allocation towards the realm of the divine.<sup>10</sup> Yet even though the latter move deprives its users of much of the legitimacy that the American public tends to invest in forms of knowledge production that manage to sail under the flag of science (even when they concern matters such as 'intelligent design'), the logical mechanism involved here is uncannily similar. In both cases an essentially hermetic (if not outright esoteric, in Weber's terms) technos is mobilized to reconfigure the painful experience of exclusion from the imagined community that is the U.S.-American nation into one of inclusion – religious in one case, genotypical in the other – in a community of reborn New World Yoruba or fellow bearers of, say, L-2 haplotypes.

My own fieldwork in the American Yoruba Movement's spiritual headquarter, Oyotunji Village (a theocratic community in coastal South Carolina), dates back too long and was too spotty to enable me to effectively draw upon it here (Palmié 1995). But given the Cuban roots of the American Yoruba Movement, and the similarity of modes of knowledge production involved, let me extrapolate a bit from what I know of the function of oracular diagnostics in the Afro-Cuban religion *regla de ocha*. For here it is clear that – much as in the case at hand – divination can reveal that

persistent, otherwise inexplicable misery and suffering is grounded in the fact that one is entertaining wrong ideas about one's identity. So goes the story repeated again and again by Cuban practitioners of *regla de ocha*: terrible things happen to you for no good reason. You exhaust every conventionally available mode of remedy. It only gets worse. Finally, someone says: why not consult a diviner? What the oracle reveals is that you have been hailed by an *oricha* (deity) and need to submit to initiatory rites that transform your body into a vessel of the divine and induct you into a new line of ritual kinship and descent. After some agonizing deliberations, you undergo the costly and time-consuming ceremony, and are reborn into a form of identity you should have been inhabiting all along: that of a child of a god – *omo oricha* or *hijo de santo* – which is one of the names given to initiated practitioners of *regla de ocha*. The deity now relents and will open the roads to good fortune – provided you will serve it in a series of lifelong sacrificial prestations.

This is what Afro-Cuban divination does: it opens the roads to the future by putting past and present under a new description – a moment that one of the commentators on my *American Ethnologist* essay, Stefan Helmreich (2007), quite brilliantly compared to Charles Sanders Peirce's concept of abductive inference that reimagines the past in order to secure new future relations to it. It is indeed a fine example of the kind of recursive logic Peirce (in Buchler 1940: 151) outlines in the following way:

The surprising fact, C, is observed;  
But if A were true, C would be a matter of course,  
Hence, there is reason to suspect that A is true.

In the absence of empirically convincing refutation (or prior knowledge to the contrary), this, Peirce says, 'will include the preference for any one hypothesis over others which equally explain the facts' (ibid.).<sup>11</sup> For him, abduction functions as a vital logical step in the operation of intuiting and adopting explanatory hypotheses (and so, in a sense, the potential generation of new, albeit fallible, insights).<sup>12</sup> In our case, such reasoning which transforms current states of being by recursively providing them with a cause (and hence a potential course of action to be taken to change such states of being) potentially 'abducts' the reasoner into an epistemic order underwritten by the premise of A's truthfulness.<sup>13</sup> As John Janzen (1994: 167) puts it apropos African therapeutic institutions, in the divinatory processes preceding diagnosis the 'character and role of spirits [think Peirce's 'A'] is more like a hypothesis in which relationship to concrete events in individuals' lives needs to be established'. Indeed, given the eliminative procedure involved in many divinatory systems, 'guessing to the best hypothesis' is very much what is involved here. Yet once acceptance for the oracle's 'assertive acts' (Zempléni 1995) or 'inventive definitions' that reorder 'the world's furniture' (Holbraad 2008: 101) has become – again in Peirce's sense – the basis of further perceptual judgments, and a pragmatic ground for action, not only will 'A' turn into a likely baseline of explanations for surprising facts 'D', 'E', and 'F'. Rather, once assimilated into what Peirce calls a habit of inference, oracular verdicts



may now also come to drive a wealth of future-oriented deductions premised on 'A' or, for that matter, sustain inductive inferences that confirm (the now ontologically transformed facts) as mere effects of 'A'. Abductive recursivity, in other words, may (under certain circumstances) attain systemic proportions.

If this appears to be what is going on in the case at hand, it is because the remedy the Afro-Cuban oracle prescribes also binds you into a cycle of mutual affirmation: by submitting to the 'rule of the oricha' (whence the name '*regla de ocha*'), you make your sense of selfhood contingent upon the reality of the gods. This is, of course, the nature of 'cults of affliction' which indeed tend to operate in an 'abductive' mode: as in the case of Victor Turner's Ndembu *mukishi* ancestor spirits that 'catch' and afflict those of their descendants who neglect or forget them, the ritual aiming to redress the resulting illness or misfortune both reaffirms the ancestor's hold on the present (spirit and victim are, after all, kin) and opens up a path towards a future of novel social relations that take the form of cult associations composed of former sufferers whose vengeful ancestors chose to manifest in one of various specific ways, and that specialize in healing the resulting afflictions. Divination again is the 'abductive' key (in both the logical and social senses of the word) to such transformations. As Turner (1967: 10) put it, 'One is punished [by *mukishi*] for neglect of their memory, but at the same time one is chosen or "elected" to be a go-between in future rituals that put the living in communication with the dead' – thereby, I would add, reproducing the reality of one's status as a Peircian 'abductee' (or alternatively 'inductee' into the cult group) along with that of the mystical being that controls, as it were, the entire process.

Much of this, I would argue, holds for the chains of relationships established through Afro-Cuban divination between humans and the *oricha* into whose cults some of them eventually become initiated, thus joining ritual kinship networks that are completely independent of mundane norms and practices of relatedness.<sup>14</sup> But it also might hold for those whose experience of racist 'deduction' from ideologically normative forms of relationality in American society becomes reconfigured, by genomic means, into one of 'induction' into novel forms of consociation and diffuse, enduring solidarity among bearers of, say, L2 haplotypes. If initiation into the cult of an *oricha* links you with former fellow sufferers with whom you now share a ritually established degree of consubstantiality with a divine entity that (among other things) allows you to lend your body to its manifestation during possession trance, then genomic cults of affliction would seem to perform a rather similar kind of 'cultural work' – provided you invest the same kind of credence in the reality of genomic identities and relations as practitioners of *regla de ocha* normally invest in the reality of the *oricha*.

I do not know, of course, what Turner's Ndembu might have thought about such matters, and we still have no clear ethnographic picture what consumers of PGH services actually 'do with' – i.e. how they imaginatively process and act upon – the genetic information that links them to demographic entities in Africa (be they 'countries' or 'tribes').<sup>15</sup> Still, as Alondra Nelson's (2008a,b) and Katharina Schramm's (this volume) ongoing research indicates, we ought to reckon with a far

more sophistication, eclecticism, and not the least, skepticism in African American projects of what Nelson calls ‘affiliative self-fashioning’ than the purveyors of genetic test kits and the media would have us believe. ‘Away from the glare of the media’, Nelson writes, ‘test-takers can exercise latitude in determining the import of genetic ancestry analyses’ for their sense of selfhood and relatedness’ (2008a: 775); they ‘come to genetic genealogy testing with particular questions to be answered, with mysteries to be solved, with personal and familial narratives to complete’ (2008a: 767); they ‘are judicious not only about the types of genetic genealogy tests they purchase, but also about the significance of the test results’ (2008a: 767), some of which they may reject – not just because a low degree of spatiotemporal resolution may render them irrelevant to their projects but because more specific findings at times ‘may challenge ... prior expectations’, conflict with ‘other evidentiary bases of self-perception and social coherence’ (2008a: 767) or induce what Nelson calls ‘genealogical disorientation’ by failing to orient them towards meaningful relational possibilities with other people or collectivities. What is more, even when the results appear to match their expectations, African American PGH consumers do not simply convert to genomically ascertained ‘identities’ as if becoming reborn into a form of evangelical Christianity. For many of Nelson’s informants, ‘the receipt of genetic facts opened up new questions about identity and belonging, rather than settling them absolutely (2008a: 770), and so led to a ‘course of deliberate and strategic negotiations [between different resources for individual and collective identification] in an effort to create kinship orientation’.

No doubt, these are important and salutary findings.<sup>16</sup> And they are echoed by David Skinner’s (2006: 482) conclusions in a well-balanced critique of hastily dyspeptic generalizations in social scientific assessments of the new genomics. ‘Users of this new genetic information,’ he writes:

seem to be able to manage the apparent contradiction between treating biology as a source of truth about ancestry and viewing themselves as active constructors of their own identities. There are important links here to changing values around consumption, personal development and individuality. Part of the appeal of these forms of genetic testing is the way that they appear to provide a means of reconciling increasingly individualised accounts of self-identity and the constitution of political communities in racialised form.

Yet neither Nelson’s ethnographic data nor Skinner’s call for a more nuanced understanding of the social uses of genomic technologies really contradict the oracular nature of the functioning of PGH in contemporary American society for which I have been arguing in my *American Ethnologist* essay. This is so not merely because most of the better ethnographic accounts of divination depict oracular clients not as credulous dupes (or ‘prelogical’ category mistake-makers), but as rationally-minded, principled sceptics who expect what Evans-Pritchard called ‘experimental consistency’ from their encounter with a revelatory technology (see also Swancutt

2006).<sup>17</sup> To point out as much would be trite. As trite, in fact, as when one of the critics of my *American Ethnologist* essay saw fit to pronounce that the ‘thousands who seek ancestry tests are not forced to do it, and geneticists are no more venal in trying to persuade them to part with their \$200 than anyone else in our market-centered society’ (Weiss 2007: 243). For no doubt: as Nelson shows, African American PGH consumers aren’t simply credulous snake-oil buyers. ‘What if it’s true?’, one of her informants asks when pondering her genomically ascertained ancestry. And what, indeed, if it weren’t!

But of course, aside from the repertoire of ‘secondary rationalizations’ (or ‘secondary elaborations of belief’ to use Evans-Pritchard’s more precise term) that can always be drawn upon to explain counterintuitive or otherwise unsatisfactory divinatory verdicts (‘the poison got polluted’, ‘the operator failed to obey taboos’ – ‘the database is patchy for certain regions’, ‘the AIM markers are too diffusely distributed’) or the fact that the answers to questions asked tend to be beyond experiential verification, there are two other fundamental factors at play in both instances.

The first is that, if I may be permitted to use a Winchian paraphrase of Evans-Pritchard’s text, ‘Americans are only sceptical of particular DNA results and not of genomics in general, and their scepticism is always expressed in a scientific idiom that vouches for the validity of genomic testing as an institution’.<sup>18</sup> This may be to overstate the case. Yet, as Nelson herself observes:

Genetic genealogy testing opens up ‘ethnic options’ ... to blacks in the US and the UK that may have been previously unavailable. However, the affiliative self-fashioning it may spur is enacted from within what might be understood as the ‘iron cage’ of the genome. The testing promises to reveal elusive knowledge, yet the particular longings that root-seekers of African descent seem to feel when they resort to it are shaped by distinct histories of slavery and the continuing realities of racial oppression. Root-seekers’ sense of autonomy and empowerment may come at the cost of acquiescing to a classificatory logic of human types that compounds, rather than challenges, social inequality. (2008a: 776)

Their agency, she concludes, is of a ‘limited type, unfolding from within less mutable social structures’ and, I would add, must (if ‘in the last instance’) take recourse to the collective representations that these very structures place at the disposal of those who would seek to fashion identities that are not only morally plausible but socially viable (cf. Nash, Chapter 6, this volume).

In line with this, the second factor involved in both oracular systems on ethnographic record and PGH consumption relates to the fact that what Nelson calls ‘affiliative self-fashioning’ and Faubion and Hamilton (2007) call ‘the consumption of identity’) can be cast, without much trouble, in terms quite akin to those Turner (1967, 1981) deploys to describe, for example, the protracted remaking of persons and social relationships in Ndembu cults of affliction. Here, too, such processes are

triggered by a divinatory revelation that an ancestral spirit is afflicting a member of the community, proceed to the ‘induction’ of the former sufferer into a therapeutic cult with whose members he or she will learn to identify and – in most instances – an ‘abductive’ reordering of the social field surrounding him or her. This is by no means a mechanical process. Nor are its results a foregone conclusion.<sup>19</sup> And it would certainly not be otherwise in the case of Afro-Cuban religion where people tend to go through lengthy struggles with themselves (and significant others) over whether to ‘heed the call of the oricha’ (some of them, in fact, never follow up on the divinatory revelation of a need to get initiated) or whether to drift back into the realm of some other source of potentially redemptive institution such as biomedicine or the law. What is more, they also experience the integration into new ritual kinship structures and sacrificial duties after initiation not as an instantaneous change of self-conception à la ‘I was lost but now I’m found’. Instead, for them, too, ‘abduction’ into the cult of a deity and the social networks it entails is a drawn-out process of reorganizing (and, as Kristina Wirtz (2007) has shown, renarrating) the self in its consubstantial relationships not only to the divine and the disciplines it enforces upon one’s body and will but towards the new constellations of sociality that initiation makes possible. In other words, what initiation into *regla de ocha* is ‘all about’, to me, looks a lot like what Nelson calls ‘affiliative self-fashioning’ through the consumption of genomic ancestry services.<sup>20</sup>

Still, and this is the point: in each instance, what remains beyond transformation is the categorical apparatus that, hinge-like, enables and organizes the efforts at overcoming an unsatisfactory state of affairs – be it pervasive misfortune or illness in the one case or those aspects of the workings of ‘racecraft’ that consign African Americans to a position where their social blackness inescapably indexes African origins, but where, by the same token, their shared history of slavery and racial oppression appears to bar them from full ‘cultural citizenship’ in a nation that has come to ideologically valorize ‘diversity’ expressed in reference to Old World origins. PGH may well allow sufferers from genealogical affliction some latitude in choosing and expressing how they personally would prefer to gyrate around this double hinge of Old World ancestry and its genomic ascertainment. But to cite Nelson’s (2008a: 776) conclusion once more, ‘their sense of autonomy and empowerment may come at the cost of acquiescing to a classificatory logic of human types’ grounded in the thoroughly routinized categories of a society in which genomics ‘compound ... rather than challenge ... social inequality’.<sup>21</sup>

Here at least, practitioners of *regla de ocha* tend to be Durkheimians in the strong sense, in that they acknowledge that without receiving human attention, the *oricha* would simply curl up and die (though not, of course, without leaving the world in a shambles too). And so, it stands to argue that this says more about Cuban and (*mutatis mutandis*) U.S. society than it says about either the genome or the gods – both of whose reality is, of course, beyond empirical verification in the everyday worlds of those who avail themselves of the transformative powers of their interpreters. What is more, I might add that instances of spirit possession, when *oricha* speak to the faithful through the bodies of their initiated mediums, might

rather fruitfully be compared to cases where ‘race’ becomes ‘visible’ in the bodies of people whose phenotype fortuitously conforms to stereotypical ideas of what ‘white’ or ‘black’ people ‘ought to look like’. After all, the historical scandal of ‘racial passing’ – like that of ‘fake possession’ – always did much more to stabilize the idea of the reality of ‘race’ (or the gods for that matter) than to undermine it (Palmié 2004; Wirtz 2007). Again, you don’t normally (or even only easily) see these things, hence the need for divination – or PGH.

But rather than ramble on about such – I think utterly fascinating – correspondences and the analytical openings they seem to provide, let me close by re-emphasizing that the picture I have tried to paint here largely arises out of public representation of PGHs and not from close ethnographic studies of how genomic ancestry products are actually consumed. We can certainly say that PGH providers targeting African American consumers advertise their services as the divinatory entry into a cult of affliction that reduplicates, for believers in biotechnology, what Afro-Cuban religions and the American Yoruba Movement have been offering long before polymerase chain reaction processing became commercially viable. Obviously, the technologies mobilized, as well as what Latour might call the scale of the resulting networks, differ dramatically (though the public revelation – in *Sports Illustrated*, no less – that Ozzie Guillen, head coach of the Chicago White Sox, is an initiated priest of the Ifa oracle, certainly made for some ‘elongation’). But in both cases, to call any (or all) of this ‘enchantment’ may already be to pull the wrong epistemological switch. The real question is not whether what results is rationality or enchantment – and I think Gell was right when he posited that technologies of enchantment are only mediate instrumentalities, be they works of art whose auratic impact on our experience remains inscrutable, rituals that transform our bodies and social states in largely ineffable ways, divinatory instruments that alter our relations to the world by uncovering otherwise unknowable levels of meaning and relationships or, indeed, polymerase sequencers that reveal our biotic ‘ancestry’ in the form of allele frequencies that are similarly occult – i.e., inaccessible to commonsense rationality. In Gell’s view, their efficacy, in each and every case, rests on the prior social ‘enchantment’ of the technology in question.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the real question is whether, and to what degree, the knowledge produced by and through such technologies will become subject not just to social institutionalization but to experiential routinization as a ‘natural ground’ on which to base conceptions of selfhood and moral community.

This is a point that Durkheim, a long time ago, made very forcefully – and I think we would still do well to consider it in pondering not just the much-vaunted (and by now obvious) ‘geneticization of everyday life’ in general, but in ascertaining how exactly the consumption of the commercialized products of genomic science may enable (or constrain and foreclose) specific practices and strategies of ‘affiliative self-fashioning’ and identity management among no less specific social constituencies. To do so will demand close empirical attention to how PGH users’ sumptuary epistemologies configure the ‘social life’ of the knowledge goods that genomic science sets into public circulation. To try and peek into the black box of science (or theology, aesthetics or economics for that matter) may be a necessary precondition

for such endeavours, if only to ascertain the import of doctrinal regimes of scientific orthodoxy on the shaping of the product (which was part of my goal in the original *American Ethnologist* essay). Still, ethnographies of its consumption will be the only way to accomplish the former goals. Notable exceptions notwithstanding, such work still remains to be done.

## Notes

1. To forestall further potential misunderstandings, let me point out that my use of the term 'divination' is decidedly not figurative and so differs fundamentally from the way in which, for example, Margaret Lock (2005) uses it in her discussion of the destabilization of molecular biological genetic determinism under the impact of epigenetics in the case of probabilistic modeling of susceptibility for late-onset Alzheimer's disease. Unlike her, I am not concerned with ruptures across domains of scientific knowledge but with potential forms of closure that the consumption of revelatory knowledge goods appears to promise to their users.
2. Cf. Klapisch-Zuber (1991) and Bouquet (1996) on the evolution and functioning of the 'family tree' imagery in such processes – from biblical and medieval antecedents to Darwin's transposition of heredity from the social into the biological realm, and on to W.H.R. Rivers' 'genealogical method'. As Nash (2003: 181) so aptly puts it: 'As a device that historically ordered the transfer of property, genealogy continues to be characterised by the language of ownership, possession and inheritance whether spoken about in terms of bodily substance (genes or blood) or memory, culture, heritage, or genealogical information itself.'
3. If, at times, only as a last-ditch effort to render the workings of the 'dialectics of modernity' morally comprehensible through forms of symbolic recoding of that which is otherwise too meaningless to bear.
4. Obviously, Verkaik could not possibly have meant genomic snippets that code for phenotype. If the good Dr Watson 'looked black', chances are that he would never have attained the education, in the U.S.A. of the 1940s and 1950s, that prepared him for his co-discovery of the double-helix. And, even if so, who would have cared about his genome?
5. I would like to once more emphasize that what I am concerned with in the following is the oracular production of personal knowledge, not the attempts to address complex ruptures across multiple scientific knowledge domains that Lock (2005) glosses as 'divination'.
6. Part of what is at issue here is that while the inductive reasoning underlying genomic science may work perfectly well when it comes to assigning random samples of quantifiable units (individual DNA profiles) to classes (statistically ascertainable populations sharing certain genomic configurations), the problem – as Charles Sanders Peirce (in Buchler 1940: 152f.) pointed out – is that once such findings are translated into what Peirce calls 'characters' (i.e., complex properties not amenable to mensuration), induction loses its logical grip. As Peirce puts it in regard to the question of how to test the hypothesis that a man is a Catholic priest, that is, 'has the characters common to Catholic priests and peculiar to them', the problem is that 'characters are not units, nor can they be counted, in such a sense that one count is right and every other wrong. Characters have to be estimated according to their significance'. So it is in the case at hand. Even if it were possible to come up with genomic unit features common to inhabitants of Sweden or

Zimbabwe and peculiar to them, what makes someone a Swede or a Zimbabwean, or a descendant of Swedes or Zimbabweans, is not a matter of molecularbiological mensuration but of social signification. In fact, Peirce's example is highly felicitous for my purposes: while there certainly are people who descend from Catholic priests, such ancestry (while genomically provable, for example, through paternity tests) is irrelevant when it comes to the inheritance of the 'characters that are common to Catholic priests and peculiar to them'.

7. It has its even more sinister equivalent in the mushrooming apprehension and sentencing rates for individuals allocated – somehow, we don't quite know how – to the category 'African Americans' (which, from a genetic point of view, ought to include a vast number of phenotypically and – even more importantly – socially 'white' people, among whom one could count James Watson, if one believed in that particular 'technology of enchantment' currently known as genomics).
8. As Nash's (2003) work on Irish ancestry-seekers in New Zealand, Australia, Canada and the U.S.A. would seem to indicate, the irony in the U.S. case is that an ideology that seems to characterize settler-societies dominated by descendants of Europeans has become available to the descendants of those Africans whose violent uprooting, transcontinental abduction and exploitation under racial slavery played a considerable role in underwriting the emergence of the notion of a white settler commonwealth in the the U.S.A. in the nineteenth century (cf. DuBois 1935; Roediger 1993). It would surely be cynical to say that what DuBois once called the 'wages of whiteness' have been transformed into the 'wages of Americanness' and so has become accessible to some (though certainly not the majority of) African Americans. Still, to what extent this is an unqualified good or merely has opened a new market for the consumption of multicultural 'identity goods' (Faubion and Hamilton 2007) remains to be seen.
9. If anything, genomic ancestry projects appear to promise to fill the void created by the condition of ultimate social deracination – the brutal 'anti-kinship' of slavery – that to this day casts its shadow on the narratives of collective origin that U.S. public culture tends to prescribe for people recruited (by birth, appearance or, more recently, individual choice) into that nation's 'black minority'. Although one should not expect the websites of commercial PGH providers to post all the customer feedback they receive, even a cursory look at such fora gives a strong impression of the sense of satisfaction and relief African American PGH consumers express at being hailed by a set of allele frequencies into what North American racism long denied them: a rooted Old World identity underwritten by one of the most powerful expert discourses available today – and thus a collective 'past', the alleged absence of which Melville Herskovits once defined as one of the key 'myths' underwriting the exclusion of African Americans from what we, today, might call 'cultural citizenship'.
10. Perhaps not surprisingly at all, in both cases the mechanism that Zempléni (1995) identifies as the 'human speaker's evacuation as the subject of the (divinatory) enunciation' is key to the credibility of the divinatory undertaking: in the first case, nature speaks through the allele frequencies ascertained by means of genomic sequencing, while in the second gods and the ancestors speak through the configurations of signs produced by the oracular instrument. See also Boyer (1990: 72–75) for an interpretation of the logic of divinatory truth-production as a pure form of indexicality implying an unmediated causal link between the state of affairs clients want to know about and the description of that state of affairs provided by the divinatory instrument.

11. As, for example, in the case of the a priori foreclosure of interpretations of the Jefferson L2 haplotype as evidence for Arab or East African descent.
12. 'The abductive suggestion', writes Peirce (Hartshorne and Weiss 1960: 113), 'comes to us like a flash. It is an act of insight, although of extremely fallible insight. It is true that the different elements of the hypothesis were in our minds before; but it is the idea of putting together what we had never before dreamed of putting together which flashes the new suggestion before our contemplation.'
13. In what follows, I hope the reader will pardon my playing somewhat fast and loose with the resonances of logical categories such as 'abduction', 'induction' and 'deduction' with the rather different resonances these terms have in contemporary everyday English – instructive as I think they are. I will flag the more egregious instances of this practice by putting the phrase into quotation marks.
14. Including – and that is a key difference that I have explored elsewhere – mundane notions of 'race' as an ancestry-bound status (e.g., Palmié 2002). For practitioners of Afro-Cuban religions, there is nothing problematic or even only curious about a socially 'white' person becoming a consecrated priest of the cult of a notionally African deity. After all, it is the deity that 'elects' its future 'children' – according to some, before we are even born. Despite all other historical relations and shared theological concepts, this is a notion decidedly not shared by adherents of the American Yoruba Movement (Clarke 2004; Palmié 1995).
15. Despite his famous attention to symbolic detail, Turner notoriously falls silent on instances of what Holbraad (2008) calls 'divination failure' (i.e., the patent incongruity of oracular pronouncements with perceived states of affairs – cf. Swancutt 2006).
16. As are Nelson's (2008b) considerations of the 'authentic expertise' that Rick Kittles commands as the socially black scientific director of African Ancestry, Inc. Nonetheless, given Gilroy's (2000) and Jackson's (2006) strictures against North American regimes of racial authentication, and Greely's (2008) analysis of African Ancestry, Inc.'s marketing practices, Nelson's conclusions in the latter essay will necessarily remain open to contestation.
17. Just like occasional inconsistencies or even cases of blatant 'divinatory failure' rarely damage oracular institutions beyond repair (metadivinatory practices – i.e., the testing of oracular outcomes by different kinds of oracles – are, after all, ethnographically not unknown, and indeed present in the Afro-Cuban case), so has, for example, the discreditation of lobotomy as a clinical praxis not led to the abandonment of neurosurgery. It is the 'hopeful' (in Peirce's sense) anticipation of truthful future knowledge that maintains the institutional framework (and its 'utility', from the consumer's point of view).
18. My reference here is to Peter Winch's (1970) rephrasing of a key passage of *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic* where he systematically changes 'mystical' in Evans-Pritchard's text to 'scientific' in his. In my case, the original reads: 'Azande are only skeptical of particular oracles and not of oracles in general, and their skepticism is always expressed in a mystical idiom that vouches for the validity of the poison oracle as an institution' (Evans-Pritchard 1937: 350).
19. As Turner's (1967: 359–93, 1981: 156–98) case study of affliction by an Ihamba spirit clearly shows, they can be highly contingent. More generally, Janzen (1994: 168) writes 'whether or not [initiation] actually happens, there being many "drop-outs", depends on the novice's progress through the early stages of therapy and counseling, on the novice's or kin's means, and to the extent to which the cult is controlled by an elite that restricts access to its basic resources'. All of this, I would think, holds for the case at hand as well.



20. And here I should add that it also costs a lot of money – more, in fact (even in Cuba – and in both absolute and relative terms) than a combined Matriclan™ and Patriclan™ test as currently offered by African Ancestry, Inc.
21. If the analogy with Turner's Ndembu case holds any water here, then the picture would obviously be a rather disillusioning one: if we bought into Turner's Mancunian brand of functionalism enhanced by conflict sociology, then all that undergoing divination (for this, read purchasing PGH products) achieves is to lay bare endemic social contradictions in individual cases of distress. Therapeutic cult associations (for this, read new modes of 'ethnic' affiliation), in turn, do little more than patch up the social fabric (by providing 'palliative' options for new relational practices among the initiates) until the next victim of the aggravations produced by a conflict-prone combination of matriliney with virilocality – and, one should add, colonialism! – (for this, read combination of ideologies of meritocratic equality with racist exclusion) succumbs to social and psychological pressure and consults a diviner (for this, read sends in a mouthswab).
22. The visual splendour of a Trobriand kula canoe (does it really make exchange partners more generous?), a painting attributed to Rembrandt (is it truly an 'original?'), a Zande divination verdict (is the person 'really' a witch?), an ancestry certificate issued by African Ancestry, Inc. (is an L2 haplotype really evidence of, say, Timne, Zulu, Gikuyu or Hausa descent?) or the stunning revelations concerning James Watson's 'blackness' (but what about his social 'whiteness' and professed racism?) are, ultimately, cut from the same cloth: we don't exactly know how it works, but they affect our social relationships – not only to the object of knowledge in question but to each other. Beyond that point, it is neither 'theology' nor 'biology' that takes over. It is folksy 'commonsense' in all its well-known institutional embeddedness and reificatory exuberance.

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