



SPECIAL SECTION

ANTHROPOLOGIES OF DESTINY:  
ACTION, TEMPORALITY, FREEDOM

PREFACE

## For an anthropology of destiny

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This preface develops an argument for a comparative anthropology that takes the concept of destiny as a fertile laboratory for anthropological thought. The articles in this collection show how destiny's distinguishing heuristic feature may be what we call "malleable fixity": a paradoxical juxtaposition of images of temporal and historical fixity with a practical reckoning and open-ended self-reorientation. Exploring the radically different ways in which destiny is evoked, enacted, and (re)theorized locally, we argue that an anthropology of destiny is, at its heart, the comparative study of diverse temporal orderings of human—as well as divine and cosmic—action.

Keywords: destiny, malleable fixity, action, temporality, freedom

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What does it mean to live a life that has already been written? How does one understand the past and prepare for the future when determining forces intersect with human action and imagination? This collection is a close, comparative study of the conceptual and ethnographic powers of "destiny." Tracing destiny's manifestations across different regions and religious traditions, our aim is to provide ethnographic depth and breadth to what are centuries-old philosophical questions about, and classic anthropological engagements with, ideas of destiny. In doing this, our ambition is to discover destiny's distinct potential for fresh ethnographic theorizations of the multiple ways in which people imagine and reckon with determining powers.

Questions surrounding humans' capacity to act and effect change when life and possibility are partially or wholly determined by external, often nonnegotiable, powers have long been at the core of theological and philosophical traditions—from the ancient Greek notion of *moira* and early Asian philosophies of karma, to centuries-old Islamic debates on the concept of *qadā'* *wa'l-qadar* (God's decree and determination). In anthro-

pology, classic works such as *Oedipus and Job in West African religion* by Meyer Fortes (1959) as well as contemporary ethnographic discussions of fate and destiny (da Col and Humphrey 2012a, 2012b; Festa 2007; Guenzi 2013; Hamdy 2009; Harrell 1987; Hatfield 2002; Nieswand 2010; Sangren 2012) testify to destiny's key role in local thinking and practice.

Building on this rich scholarship, in this collection we begin to outline the contours of an anthropology of destiny and develop a comparative framework for the concept's multiple ethnographic manifestations and theorizations, bringing into conversation the Islamic notions of *qadar/nasib* of the Yemeni highlands (Luca Nevola) with the "corporeal destiny" of Fijian rugby players (Daniel Guinness) and the concept of *mingyun* of Taiwanese mantic art specialists (Stéphanie Homola). In doing so, we also reveal the linguistic, epistemological, and indeed ontological challenges of engaging with destiny as a unified object of anthropological analysis. Vast as the cosmos and as specific as the reason for missing an appointment, able to explain anything but not everything, destiny is deeply fluid, ambivalent, and theoretically





slippery. Its radically varied ethnographic imaginations interrogate the very possibility of a comparative project, particularly when it involves engulfing such generative difference within the English term *destiny*, itself a polysemic and historically contingent linguistic category (Bargdill 2006). While all the articles in the collection engage with nuance and care with the possibilities and limits of anthropological translation, in this preface we want to delineate some of the distinctive qualities and possible comparative coordinates for thinking of destiny (and its multiple permutations) as a productive ethnographic concept for theorizing contemporary social and intimate life.

The idea guiding this collection is twofold. First, distinctly from notions of “randomness” and “chance,” destiny evokes conceptions of human lives and futures that are, at least partly, *fixed*—be it by high political powers, cosmic forces, or transcendental entities. Second, such fixity is fundamentally *malleable*—destiny is negotiated and nurtured, manipulated and resisted in complex ways, and unavoidably inflected by other powers ranging from cosmological elements such as fortune and luck to intimate others such as kin. Indeed, perhaps what makes destiny most distinct as an anthropological category is that its fixity is unhinged. This peculiar—even paradoxical—quality opens, we argue, incredible potential for comparative anthropological work on productive tensions between fixity and malleability, human and divine power, freedom and constraint, certainty and unpredictability. An “anthropology of destiny” is, in this sense, a comparative anthropology of the multiple ways in which people conceptualize, imagine, and reckon with different forms of what we call “malleable fixity.”

In this preface, we outline three key sets of questions brought to the fore by the collection’s engagement with destiny and its malleable fixity. In doing so, we delineate three productive coordinates for thinking about destiny anthropologically. First, What makes destiny distinct from other forces and powers, and what conceptual possibility (or possibilities) does this distinctiveness open? Second, What theories of “agency” and “freedom” emerge from lives that are imagined as the result of divine and human will? Third, What happens to ideas of time when past, present, and future are conceived as variedly fixed, drawn, written, or allotted by greater powers? Exploring these questions through the radically different ways in which destiny is evoked, enacted, and (re)theorized locally, we argue that an anthropology of destiny is, at its heart, the comparative

study of diverse temporal orderings of human—as well as divine and cosmic—action.

### Malleable fixity

Anthropology often discusses destiny in conjunction with other powerful forces and entities such as luck and fortune, providence and chance. This analytic aggregation reflects the ethnographic porousness of these concepts and vocabularies in everyday life, where they are often contextually invoked, in varying combinations, to make sense or actively nurture success (D’Angelo 2015; Douglas [1966] 2001) and divine blessing (Jamous 1981), fortune and luck (da Col 2012; Gaibazzi and Gardini 2015; Menin 2016) and well-being (Lambek 1993), or to make past events and uncertain futures partially intelligible (Evans-Pritchard 1976; Guenzi 2013; Hatfield 2002; Holbraad 2012). As Vincent Crapanzano puts it: “There is probably no society that explains every contingent event in terms of a single power, though when pushed for an explanation, they may refer to such power. Rather . . . there seems to be ever-shifting reference to different causes of contingency” (2014: 163).

While influenced by Crapanzano’s warning against sacrificing, through an “analytically justified ordering,” the “half-disciplined chaos” of contingency (2014: 159), one of the aims of this collection is precisely to extricate the concept of destiny from the web of related concepts and idioms. This is because, we feel, there is untapped theoretical potential in *destiny* as an ethnographic category in its own right.

We argue that destiny’s compelling distinctiveness directly emanates from within its peculiar “malleable fixity.” While sometimes luck, fortune, and even chance present some “fixed” qualities, fixity remains a constant question and concern in anthropological reckonings with destiny (see also da Col and Humphrey 2012a: 15; Elliot 2016: 492–94; Gaibazzi and Gardini 2015: 204), making it a useful distinguishing heuristic in an otherwise radically diverse semantic and experiential field. It is fixity that is contained in the Latin word *destinare* (make firm, establish, fix), and in destiny’s corollary notion of predestination (from the Latin *predestinare*, make firm beforehand). An idea of fixity is present also in the Islamic theology of *qadā wa qadar*, where *qada’* indicates divine decrees about major events in people’s lives, written *ab eterno* since the beginning of times. This idea of a (varyingly) “fixed” transcendental writing, plan, or conjuncture is present also in Hindu





conceptions of headwriting (Kent 2009), karma (Keyes and Daniel 1983), and astrology (Guenzi 2013).

Destiny's (varying) fixity is generally understood as being imposed, willed, or spawned by spiritual, supernatural, or cosmological forces—and it is with this broad religious dimension of destiny (from the decreeing Muslim God in Nevola's article to the Chinese Heaven addressed by Homola) that we are mainly concerned with in this collection. A greater order, or scale, of magnitude, however, is implied also in more "secular" idioms surrounding destiny's fixity—from Karl Marx's "historical destiny" and theorizations of history as the unfolding of necessary events (Palmié and Stewart 2015), to the determinist language surrounding "chromosomal destiny" (Rapp, Heath, and Taussig 2001), to the fatalism of Western bureaucracy of Michael Herzfeld's (1992) classic analysis. Divine or chromosomal, historical or individualized, destiny compels people to reckon with the limits and possibilities determined, willed, or known by a greater order, one that supersedes the scale of individual lives and personal wills, and is often experienced or narrated a posteriori as necessary and inescapable.

Crucially, such fixed, predetermined, even necessary qualities of destiny tend to be of a distinctly *malleable* nature. In the anthropological literature as in our own field sites, we rarely encounter "destiny" without also encountering manipulation and negotiation, prediction and divination, interpretation and creativity. It is precisely the paradoxical contraposition of conceptions of (temporal, personal, historical) fixity with the deeply malleable understandings of, and reckoning with, the concept that, we argue, makes destiny such a fertile laboratory for anthropological thought. In her mention of destiny in *Purity and danger*, Mary Douglas ([1966] 2001: 83–84) points out that while destiny cannot, by definition, be changed completely, different societies and religious traditions accord radically different degrees of malleability to the concept.

Such (variable) malleable fixity is precisely what emerges from the articles in this collection. Among Fijian rugby players (Guinness), destiny is conceptualized as an embodied encounter between divine, ethno-nationalist, and professional destinies, and this multiplicity of destinies is both revealed *in* and realized *through* the individual's work on his body. In Yemen (Nevola), the tensions between the fixity and malleability of destiny emerges as the dynamic relationship between *qadar*, the "power to act" within limits fixed by God's decree, and *nasib*, the nonnegotiable closure of this horizon of possibilities.

In Chinese cosmologies (Homola), it is an impersonal Heaven that determines human destiny, and malleable fixity is contained within the very concept of *mingyun* (fate/destiny), *ming* being the fixed dimension of fate, and *yun* the "motile" one.

The different forms of malleable fixity explored in this collection reveal that destiny is not a singular conceptual or ethnographic model but rather a contested field whose different permutations require careful negotiations throughout the course of people's lives, opening crucial questions about human participation in "fixed" events, process, and temporalities.

### Acting within limits

Reflections on the possibilities of human freedom, agency, and intentionality vis-à-vis greater determining orders are at the core of many theological imaginations of destiny—from Christian reflections on the possible co-occurrence of *liberum arbitrium* and divine *providentia*, to centuries-old Islamic debates on the relationship between divine decree and human free will (see De Cillis 2014). The tension between divine destiny and human action has triggered also much of the classic works on destiny within and beyond anthropology. This tension lies at the heart of Max Weber's (2010) classic opus on destiny in early Protestantism, where he attends to the apparent paradox of the coupling of a steadfast belief in predetermined salvation with intense human action oriented toward it: "as if," coupled with "elective affinity," becomes Weber's ingenious solution to the paradox of destiny and human action (Giddens 2010).<sup>1</sup> Similarly, in his landmark anthropological work on destiny, Fortes (1959) explores the problem of divine predestination and everyday existence by tracing Tallensi modes of societal incorporation. Here, good and evil prenatal destinies are worked through to obtain both successful incorporation of an individual in society, and the person's obedience to parents and ancestors. For Fortes, the "fixity" of prenatal destiny is invariably molded by the flexibility of kinship relations—an insight that, as Giovanni da Col notes (2012: 13), directly influenced Edmund Leach's classification of affinal relations as founded on "mystical alliance."<sup>2</sup>

1. For an ethnographic engagement with Weber's "theory of destiny," see Elliot (2016) and Nevola (this issue).
2. See also Caterina Guenzi's (2013) discussion of the constitutive role of affinal and kin relationships in individual destinies in her ethnography of astrology in Benares.





As Homola shows, the productive tension between divine and human action also runs deep in the anthropological scholarship on fate and destiny in Asia. Classic comparative explorations of notions of karma (Keyes and Daniel 1983; Obeyesekere 2002) and fate (Ingersoll 1966) as well as work on the Chinese concept of *ming-yun* (Harrell 1987; Lupke 2005), show that, just as Weber and Fortes argue, the involvement of greater determining powers in human lives does not prevent people from acting strategically, often by resorting to specific cultural practices and selected experts. Attending to the tension between immutable destiny and human action and choice at the heart of Taiwanese *chhiam* divination, Donald Hatfield concludes that, “the theory of fate . . . is more than a consideration of the possible. It is an attempt to act outside of the determination imposed by a given situation” (2002: 871).

Discussing ideas of destiny in West Africa, Michael Jackson also approaches, through an existential frame, the paradox of human participation in divine destiny, describing it as a tension between “what is given and what is chosen in social existence” (1988: 193). Jackson points explicitly to the malleability of destiny: “although people often speak of divine will or ancestral influence in terms of implacable fate, it is always human choice which, in practice, determines the particular course of a person’s destiny” (199). Similarly, Babatunde Lawal (1985) writes that, in Yoruba thought, personal destiny (*ori*) is conceived as a potentiality, its actualization hinging on individuals’ active participation—a point recalled in Boris Nieswand’s (2010) contemporary work with West Africans in Berlin, where a specific Christian charismatic imaginary of “enacted destiny” sees human and divine agencies merging to realize God’s inscrutable plans (cf. Guinness’s concept of “corporeal destiny”).

Variouly raised by philosophers, theologians, anthropologists, and our own ethnographic interlocutors, the role of human participation in destiny (be it divine, cosmological, prenatal, or other) emerges as a fundamental ethical, existential, and theoretical question. Indeed, the tension between acting and “being acted upon” (Mittermaier 2012), often at the heart of local theorizations of destiny, poses intriguing challenges to Foucauldian-inspired theorizations of agency, and opens novel possibilities for thinking of agency and (inter)subjectivity *beyond* intentionality, desire, and rational understanding. As this collection shows, local cosmologies of destiny do often accord people the capacity, and responsibility, to act in their lives. However, when located at the intersection of worldly and tran-

scendental powers, ideas of destiny deeply complicate the relationship between action and intentionality. This emerges clearly in Guinness’s article, where agency emerges as the capacity of working toward a convergence of human and divine intentionality, revealing an embodied dynamic of divine and human will.

As the authors of this collection show so well, the space for action opened at the intersection of human and divine or cosmological power is never absolute—it is a freedom containing and contained by multiple unfreedoms. Reflecting recent anthropological (re)theorizations of agency (Mahmood 2005), destiny compels us to conceptualize freedom as the capacity to act *within* the limits set by divine/cosmic power, rather than as the capacity to overcome them (cf. Foucault 1976; see also Jackson 2011; Laidlaw 2013; Menin 2015; Schielke 2015: 225). An anthropology of destiny is, in this sense, also (and inevitably so) an anthropological reflection on power(s)—a crucial question discussed further in Samuli Schielke’s afterword. Such powers generally emerge in and through time: destiny’s “composite temporality” (Hatfield 2002) constitutes a critical dimension of the malleable fixity discussed thus far.

### Unfixed time

The ethnographies in this collection reveal how destiny has an intimate, deeply enigmatic relationship with time. Time is a key trope through which theories of destiny are formulated, and different temporal positionings of the ethnographic and theoretical gaze can themselves generate radically different understandings of destiny and its efficacy. This is not only because reckoning with destiny requires specific temporal knowledge and careful temporal practices (Hatfield 2002; Nevola, this issue), but also because destiny’s malleable fixity is often positioned *in time*, and reveals itself *through time*—from a person’s lifetime (e.g., Homola, this issue; Last 2013), to the unfolding of human history itself (see Palmié and Stewart 2015).

Ethnographic conceptions of destiny often fold, within it, multiple temporal dimensions, interrogating linear theorizations, and expectations, of time. The *pre-* in the English word *predestination* already points to this multi-layered temporality, indicating that something has been determined, willed, or known *prior* to its emergence in human life. In diverse religious traditions, one’s personal destiny is understood to be determined prior to birth itself, prenatal destiny being a common theme across a variety of anthropological studies (e.g., Course 2014; Fortes



1959; Guenzi 2013). In Islam, one's destiny is determined when soul and body are united (De Cillis 2014), while in Yoruba thought, personal destiny (*ori*) is shaped in heaven and actualized throughout a life course (Balogun 2007). Similarly, in Hinduism and Buddhism, the idea of karma hinges on the ways in which previous states of existence determine a person's present and future (Keyes and Daniel 1983).

In these different cases, a determining decision taken at the beginning, or conception, of a person's life, gradually reveals itself as present time progresses. This is why many divinatory practices connected with destiny are predictive, prospective, anticipatory—trying to anticipate something that is to come in the future, but has been determined, willed, or known prior to its emergence. For Guinness, the rugby player's body becomes a temporal agent containing the potential to actualize a desirable sporting future still to come as well as the physical/spiritual terrain where one is expected to cultivate such a "fixed" future.

However, destiny is not only about imagining, and practicing, the future. Both Nevola and Homola show how destiny constitutes a complex temporal horizon in relation to which one may also, retrospectively, observe and understand the past. As a potent ordering narrative of the past, destiny becomes a meaningful frame (Crapanzano 2014), a native narrative (Course 2014; Hatfield 2002; Homola, this issue) or theory (Schielke 2015), or a symbolic or reflexive discourse (Nevola, this issue; Nieswand 2010). And by providing a retrospective "necessary quality" to events experienced in the moment as random, futile, and even cruel (misfortune, failure, illness), destiny offers a transcendental order that is not only temporal but also meaningful (Crapanzano 2014; cf. Evans-Pritchard 1976). Unlike randomness or chance, then, destiny's specific purpose, albeit often unknown or even unknowable to humans, allows one to look back at an event and explain it precisely *in terms of its (malleable) fixity*, and even necessity. If, as David Graeber notes, a constitutive aspect of the human experience of history itself is the fact that "the unpredictable is constantly turning into the irreversible" (2012: 25), destiny enables people to select specific incidents (or critical durations; Nevola, this issue) in the flow of human life, and transform them into a concatenation of necessary and even meaningful events.

This focus on the *ex post facto* and "functional" qualities of destiny has been critiqued by some anthropologists (Elliot 2016; Hamdy 2009; Mittermaier 2012) for the risk it runs of portraying destiny simply as a "le-

gitimizing or comforting device" (Mittermaier 2012: 258). Indeed, the articles in the collection show how destiny is never just a discursive device for rationalizing past failures or indexing human/divine relationships—it is also a tangible operating force to be reckoned with, ethnographically and conceptually, in the present. By attending to the specific temporal moment of destiny's emergence in Taiwanese social life, Homola, for example, argues that destiny, far from preceding enunciation, comes into being *in* and *through* language. This language of destiny powerfully "catches" those involved in its fated logics by requiring human participation, responsibility, and imagination.

Destiny's complex relationship with time testifies to destiny's constitutive tensions between fixity and malleability, certainty and uncertainty, and, ultimately, human and divine powers. Indeed, perhaps the most striking effect of constructing destiny as a comparative category, as we begin to do in this collection, is the discovery of the logical and ethnographic tensions, contradictions, even paradoxes, contained within the category itself (cf. Berliner 2016). It is precisely this tension, contradiction, paradox, we argue, that makes destiny such a potent trigger for anthropological "mental gymnastics" (Lévi-Strauss 1994: 11), and it is to the gymnastics that destiny requires of anthropology that the collection is dedicated.

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