

On Congo Cults of Bantu Origin in Cuba

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Black Africans who were brought to Cuba as slaves represented a variety of origins and belonged to linguistic groups that were as divergent as their cultural backgrounds. A huge majority, however, originated in the Congo basin. The last officially recorded arrival of a slave ship in a Cuban port took place in 1873.

It would be impossible to classify expressions of Bantu origin that were used in the slave trade. The arbitrary label "Congo" has been applied to most such expressions with a view to noting and suggesting a kinship with the cultural and religious heritage branching off from the Bantu linguistic trunk.

The Congos, as the slaves originating in the Congo basin were called, came from a region that was among those most devastated by the trade in human beings during the time of slavery. This region was originally a highly complex one, comprising a multitude of tribes, dialects, and customs. Even today maps of Africa bear certain names that are still used in Cuba to designate one or another "nation" from this vast territory.

Many elderly Cubans still remember the names of countless tribes or ethnic groups from which their ancestors were captured. These names vary according to the informant; their pronunciation depends on the region of the island where the names were preserved and on the deformations undergone in the process of syncretism. In any case, the *Briyumba*, *Kimbisa*, and *Mayombe* are remembered as three among the sources of cultural and religious influence, which at least in the western zones of Cuba became the principal nomenclatures used to designate the "Congo" cults of Bantu origin. Other sources, such as the *Loango*, *Ngola*, *Benguëla*, *Musundi*, *Kunalungo*, *Kabinde*, *Basongo*, *Bakuba*, and *Bushongo*

“nations,” produced names whose origins are somewhat obscure. Here, ritual differences can be observed among these groups (though less marked than the differences between the Yorubas and the Congos), along with distinct musical styles and other distinctive characteristics.

A very large number of these Congo *cabildos* (brotherhoods)¹ existed in Cuba during the colonial period, principally in the provinces of Las Villas and Matanzas. The vast Colón plain, with its enormous sugar cane plantations, had for economic reasons imported a large supply of Congo men. These brotherhoods, some of which were quite large, celebrated initiation rites and funerals as well as holding open parties for the sake of entertainment and other social gatherings. Among them, the brotherhood of the Congos Reales (“of the Crown”) was famous during the traditional Epiphany festivities in Havana: this group was known for the presenting the showiest performances and the best music. New Year’s gifts were not exchanged at the palace of the Captains General until this *cabildo* had appeared on the Plaza de las Armas with their mask-shows and firecrackers.

At the end of the eighteenth century, the brotherhoods saw a rapid growth spurt, and starting in 1799 they were banished from the city limits by order of the Captain General, as a precaution to avoid the potentially harmful effects of the music, ceremonies, and public activities upon the population. In other cases, they were categorically prohibited under the pretext that these institutions encouraged witchcraft and were detrimental to the development of “civilization,” particularly during periods in which the Wars of Independence were taking shape. All evidence indeed points to the role of certain *cabildos* as gathering places for clandestine activities.

In Matanzas, there were *Musundi* and *Loango* Congo brotherhoods; in Las Villas, there were the *Kunalongos* and *Kunalumbus*, of which the best known was the Sagua la Grande brotherhood (some of whose former members are still alive today). These Congo *cabildos* made a name for themselves through their sumptuous costumes: starched shirts, hats, tunics, batons, bracelets, necklaces, and other articles of luxury.

Lydia Cabrera has written of these brotherhoods:

Throughout the entire colonial period and for some time afterwards, numerous *cabildos* existed for all the "nations," including these Congo groups: *Basongo*, *Mumbona*, *Bateke*, *Mundemba*, *Bakongo*, *Musabela*, *Kabinda*, *Mayaka*, *Benuela*, *Mondongo*, *Mayombe*, *Ngola*, and others, both in Havana and in the villages and provincial county seats. Earlier, the edict of good governance that His Excellency the Count of Santa Clara, Commissioner and Captain General, published in the city of Havana on 28 January 1799 had sent them outside the city limits because of their noisy festivals and gatherings.²

The oldest informants knew these brotherhoods in their heyday, and some of the informants frequented them "during the seventies, when Napoleon had lost power in France and the Ten Years' War had begun here," says Bamboché, an enlisted man who waxed nostalgic over colonial times and the *cabildo* with its Epiphany celebrations (which had been abolished in 1884 because of the secret societies or *Nánigos*)³, carnivals, and Holy Week observances. During the latter decades of the nineteenth century, there was dancing on Sundays in these brotherhoods, as there has always been all over Cuba. The groups were headquartered in houses in Monserrate, Maloja, San Nicolás, Salud, and Compostela streets and other neighborhoods of Havana, as well as in Regla, Guanabacoa, and Marionao. Some of them remained active up until the start of World War I in Europe. The Lucumís⁴ "Changó Terdún"⁵ brotherhood, which had known glorious times, came to a pitiful end: as late as 1927 or 1928, "it suffered from a loss of prestige and from stolen funds, a regular scandal."

The Brotherhood of the Congos Reales, according to the oldest informants, enjoyed great prestige, hitting on a formula for success. The *cabildos* of Santa Calrara, Sancti Spiritus, Remedios, Sagua, and Santiago de Cuba were also important. The following is a transcription of one informant's description:

These were really Congos from *Ntotila*, a real Congo kingdom, with the king and queen, the court, vassals, all in dignified order. For this reason, the Congo brotherhood was called a kingdom. The festivals it celebrated were very good, the best, they were full of opulence; the king, with sceptre and sword, was seated on the throne beside the queen, the two of them surrounded by the court. They governed in the African way; who among the fellows could rival the king or his chosen minister or deputy?

In a daguerreotype in the possession of Don Manuel Pérez Beato, who was a veritable encyclopedia of knowledge regarding Cuba's history and colonial customs, the king of the *cabildo*, who

was also known as the *counter-master* (*capataz*), appears in the splendor of his braid-trimmed tabard, buckled shoes, and scarf draped over his chest. This king does not carry a sword but rather a baton with a pompon. His head is covered with a three-corner hat decorated with feathers.

Thanks to the existence of these brotherhoods, the structure of Congo cults took on a more coherent form. When the brotherhoods disappeared, they left behind their temples, where the various strands of the complex ensemble of Congo influences became increasingly blurred and intertwined. Perpetuating a phenomenon characteristic of societies ruled by a shaman – here the Father or Tata Nganga⁶ of the Congos – each individual followed his own leanings or adopted the tradition of his predecessors, handed down purely by oral tradition.

As a result, a number of imprecise and diffuse values that had originated in the Congo bassin became even more difficult to order in a coherent whole that could be grasped and classified according to conventional rules. The fusion of descendants of each Congo “nation” became increasingly intensive and inevitable. The attempt to preserve a common language above the diversity of dialects peculiar to each “nation” led to the formation of a lexicon mixing Castilian words with Congo words from various dialects of the common root, Bantu. This language assimilated countless other influences, and the creation of new forms resulted in a Congo *koiné*, today reserved for ritual use.

The worshipers of these Congo cults did not know the true ethnic origins of their ancestors or, by extension, the linguistic origins of the words used in rites. Moreover, a certain reticence or mystery created around these words by the users themselves indicates the ambiguity embodied by these languages.

A similar ambivalence is manifested in other more concrete aspects of the religion and its liturgy, as for example in the entities, the gods and demi-gods of the Congo pantheon. None of the surviving elements of Congo culture in Cuba can be precisely linked with a specific ethnographic origin, since the ritual differences, the particular tendencies of each *palero* – each adept or practitioner of *palo*⁷ – are the result of syncretism in Cuba. Although it was the second of the African-derived cults in Cuba, the Congo rite

retained, during the period before the rise of the Yoruba religion, a widespread influence throughout the island, from the remotest corners of Pinar del Río to the mountains of the Sierra Maestra.

The permeability of these Congo sects made it possible for the Yoruba influence to prevail. The Yoruba influence established fixed forms and models, but contrary to the beliefs of some authors the Yoruba religion did not automatically or completely integrate its deities into the Congo cult. At most, the Congo gods and demi-gods, along with the supernatural forces that were worshipped, incorporated elements and characteristics of Yoruba deities, but retained their own corpus of narratives, stories that take us back to the rivers, mountains, trees, and animals of the Congo basin.

There exists, then, an entire Congo hagiography that was first preserved in the colonial brotherhoods and later in the temples.

Moreover, a certain intrinsic flexibility enabled these sects, which had large numbers of followers, to accommodate the different sensibilities and talents of each individual. Other elements were lost in this process of exchange. Through transculturation, original expressions were transformed, and attributes, costumes, rituals, ornaments, glass trinkets, decorated masks, sculptures, and countless other liturgical objects were lost. The very nature of the slave trade entailed change in the social and religious structure of cults of Bantu origin, and a large number of these attributes lost their original informative or allegorical function. Today, many of these traits have been reduced to a merely ornamental existence.

The flexibility of Congo beliefs and their remote and imprecise origins gave free rein to an imagination that was less dogmatic but at the same time more fantastic and creative than among the Yorubas. It can be asserted that in Cuba, the most intensely syncretic processes are found among these Congo sects.

Esteban Montejo, a former slave who had run away to live as a maroon, recalled Congo religious practices among Cuban slaves:

I knew about two African religions in the barracoons,⁸ the Lucumí and the Conga.⁹ The Conga was the more important. At Flor de Sagua it was well known because the witches put spells on people. They gained the trust of all the slaves with their fortune-telling. I came to know the older Blacks more after Abolition.

But at Flor de Sagua I remember the chicherekú.¹⁰ The chicherekú was a little Congo man. He didn't speak Spanish. He was a small man with a big

head who went running through the barracoons. He would jump up and land on your back. I seen it many times. I heard him squeal like a guinea pig. That's a fact, and even in the Porferrerza sugar mill, up to a few years ago, there was one who ran around that way. People used to run away from him because they said he was the devil himself and was allied with mayombe and with death. You couldn't play with chicherekú because it was dangerous. As for me, in truth, I don't like to talk much about him because I haven't seen him again, and if by happenstance ... well, devil take it!

For the work of the Congo religion they used the dead and animals. They called the dead nkise¹¹ and snakes majases, or emboba. They prepared cazuelas¹² and everything, and that's where the secret to make hexes was. They were called ngangas. All the Congos had their ngangas for mayombe. The ngangas had to work with the sun. Because he has always been the intelligence and the strength of men. As the moon is for women. But the sun is more important because he gives life to the moon. The Congos worked with the sun almost every day. When they had a problem with some person, they followed that person along any path and gathered up the dirt they walked on. They saved it and put it in the nganga or in a secret little corner. As the sun went down, the life of the person would leave him. And at sunset the person was quite dead. I say this because it happens that I seen it a lot during slave times.¹³

Regarding the character and lifestyle of the Congos, in the nineteenth century they were described as everything from "joyful and hard-working," in the words of an informant to Lydia Cabrera, to "useless and lazy," as Captain Alexander wrote in the first third of the century. The rural Congos were not the only ones to be accused of laziness: "In Havana, the rich families possess a large number of useless and lazy slaves who had very little to do. They are as idle as their masters and ten times more debauched: they drink, gamble, and raise havoc in the city" – and he added that quite a few of them did as they pleased with their masters.¹⁴

How is it possible to perpetuate such subjective and unscientific generalizations? The Congos never made up a "unified nation." Captives who were brought to Cuba to work as slaves were not a homogeneous group; despite their common linguistic roots, they differed in many respects. The heterogeneity of these groups and their dispersion all over the island as laborers in coffee plantations, mines, or sugar cane mills make it impossible to hazard such generalizations about character. Were the Congos doomed to eternal pacifism and the Lucumís to belligerence? Were the Mandingoes inevitably *marrons* and the Carabali thrifty and conservative? What is the point of applying all these classifica-

tions to descendants who have been totally integrated into the national identity, if not to create obfuscation?

Who could maintain, at least in the case of Congo origins – which are such a convoluted question for those who claim to be Congo descendants – that in the present their everyday lifestyle differs radically from that of any descendent of another African ethnic group? We must not forget that numerous followers of the Yoruba rite also practice *palo* or stick-magic. This hybrid form of religious practices – some say “crossed saints” – reflects the natural fusion that occurred spontaneously among the people of Cuba, integrating expressive factors that originated elsewhere. The slaveholding plantations and sugar mills, veritable Towers of Babel in the nineteenth century, fostered this type of ebb and flow of values. New categories, elements of spiritism and Catholicism, were also transmitted to the island’s Congo sects, which were thereby enriched.

Lydia Cabrera gives an idea of this rich diversity in the following passage:

Like the *Lucumi*, the Congos placed the generic denomination Congo in front of the name of the tribe or region where they originated: *congo babundo*, *congo musakamba*, *congo mpangu*, *congo bakongo*, *congo musundi*, *congo loembi*, *congo mbandala*, *congo kisenga*, *congo biringoyo*, *congo mbaka*, *congo kabinda*, *congo ntotila*, *congo banga*, *congo musabele*, *congo mpenba*, *congo makupongo*, *congo conkasamba*, *congo motembo*, *congo makua*, *congo kumba*, *congo ngola*, *congo kisamba*, *congo nisanga*, *congo muluanda*, *congo lunde butua*, *congo mbanda*, *congo kisiamo*, etc.

Regarding the *Nisanga*, the national archives of Havana preserve a copy of a manuscript (1867 – 1869), in which Prio Morales, a free Black, *congo nisanga*, requests that the *cabildo* be reconvened for deliberations. The counter-masters will be (1) Corrales (2) Eduardo Cabrera, and (3) Ibanez; the matrons will be (1) Mercedes Pulgarón, (2) Marta Tranquino, and (3) Apolonia Domínguez. The patrons were Lord Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.¹⁵

The Congo grandparents of our informants, who were the most authentic repositories of these cultures, are long dead, and their descendants’ memories of them and of their stories are so dense with fantasy as to be virtually impenetrable. When they speak of their grandparents, all of these descendants mention the costumes and religious practices which have little in common with what we know today. The ancestors, like patriarchs, are said to have possessed the truth and the mystery of things; each one, in the tradi-

tion of the *Tata Nganga* grandfathers, criticizes the others, arguing simply that whatever anyone else says is false because the absolute truth belonged to Grandfather alone. Nearly all of the informants attribute unique values to their *nganga*, because of the power concentrated in it, the African elements that it sustains, and its years of experience. And the *nganga* is, precisely, the foundation of the Congolese religion, its main axis or focal point.

Because of this variety of criteria among the Congos, their rites and mythical histories have assumed a flexibility and openness to outside forces that is not present in other cults such as the Yoruba, the Arara,¹⁶ or the Iyesa.¹⁷

In what follows I shall attempt to establish the probable structure of the Congo sects in relation to their origins and their liturgical characteristics. Preserved through the nexus of prison-like *barracoons*, the brotherhoods, and the temples or *munansos*, the Congo ritual forms can be organized according to the following general structure:

The *Palo Monte* Congo rite, the most global conception of all, reflects the presence of the totemic baton as an instrument of magical conjuration. This definition can encompass other tendencies of the Congo sects of Cuba, and thus it absorbs nearly all the other rites of witchcraft. Practitioners of *Mayombe* or *Palo Monte*, one of the most common and popular forms, claim to be working for evil, which is termed *judío* as opposed to Christian; this cult makes use of weeds and establishes communication with the dead. In this rite, "playing with evil" involves using coal and powder for "works" that are preferably accomplished on Tuesdays.

Esteban Montejo describes some of the ritual practices:

When a witch wanted to work evil stick-magic [*palo*], he chose Tuesdays. Tuesdays are the devil's days, that's why they are so evil. It seems that the devil had to choose a day, and he decided on that one. To tell the truth each time I hear that word, Tuesday, just that, Tuesday, I go prickly inside. I feel the devil in person. If they were going to prepare a mean cazuela de mayombe, they did it on Tuesday. It had more power that way. It was made with beef, bones of Christians, shin bones mainly. Shin bones are good for the evil curse. Then it was taken to an ant hill and was buried there. On Tuesdays always.

It was left in the ant hill for two or three weeks. One day, also a Tuesday, it had to be dug up. That was when they swore an oath that meant saying to the prenda, "I will do evil and do your bidding." That oath was spoken at twelve o'clock midnight, which is the devil's hour, and what the Congo

swore became a contract with the devil. In a pact with the Congo devil [*endocui*¹⁸]. The oath was no joke or a tall tale. It had to be done right. If not, a person could even die all of a sudden.

There are a lot of people who die like that, without sickness. It's a punishment from the devil. After the oath is spoken, and the prenda dug up, it was taken to the house, placed in a corner, and other ingredients were put in it to nourish it. The offerings were Guinea pepper, garlic, and guaguao peppers, a dead man's skull, and a shin bone wrapped in a black cloth. That cloth wrapping was placed over the cazuela, and ... take care, whoever happened to look in there! The cazuela, when it first came into the house didn't work, but when all those offerings were put into it, the devil himself would be frightened. There was no spell it couldn't work. It's also true that the cazuela had its lightning stone and its vulture¹⁹ stone, which were nothing less than evil.²⁰

I've seen just about every kind of terrible hex done with that. It killed people, derailed trains, burned houses down, well ... When you hear talk of black magic you have to stay calm and be respectful. Respect is what opens doors to everything. That was how I learned about things.²¹

In the *mayombe*, *Kandiempembe*, the devil himself, the bad *endocui*, represents the spirit of the dead, of murderers, or of suicides; or also, the spirits of witches.

The *mayombe* can also be "Christian," that is, directed towards good, for example healing. The system of surviving Congo religions, however inconsistent, has combined with the fertility of the imagination, the permeability of the Congos' conceptions, the defense mechanisms that hide reality from unbelieving whites while using esoteric keys and a host of other resources to produce enormous confusion in the decoding of the content of these cults in an attempt to pin down their structures.

Even if Arthur Ramos's longstanding claim that "the Bantus had no coherent cosmological system" is still open to discussion, it is nonetheless certain that the myths, stories, and legends that have been collected have received all sorts of influences in their new surroundings, and they have changed. This process produced a language so rich in proverbs and maxims that is typical of the Congos, and, above all, their ability to refashion the forms, which are enriched by external elements. It thus becomes easy to understand why *mayombe* is for some a "Jewish" sect devoted to the practice of black magic and necromancy, whereas for others it is as wholesome a construction as any other religious movement stemming from Bantu traditions.

Let us now examine the philosophical system of the *mayombe* rite. Walterio Carbonell writes of the practitioners of *mayombe*:

The world is ruled by a universal substance or spirit. The universal spirit has the property of materializing, that is, of taking on an animal, vegetable, mineral, or human form. Things take their inspiration from the *Nsambi*²² Animals are endowed with an electrical charge, as are human beings. Certain animals, such as bulls, snakes, and roosters, have superior potential in relation to others. The bull nourishes the *Nganga* of the *palo*.²³

Regarding the sun, also a fundamental element of the Yoruba cult, which terms it *Olorún*, "the Sun is the principal source of energy for the Universe. The *paleros* call it *Ntángo*.²⁴ The *mambo* or hymn to the Sun calls to mind the importance of this star in the interpretation of the existential world."

The adept of *mayombe* or *palo* makes use of earth, wood from the forest, stones, animals and all types of plants or objects that aid in the accomplishment of the conjurations undertaken for the client's sake. All the natural forces and all the living elements of nature, animated and even personified, can be found in the Congo rites: these elements, like the gods or entities, are vehicles through which the *palero* expresses his ritual language. He takes a frankly animistic attitude to nature. His oracle invokes the gods and the natural forces in the course of the natural thought processes: in other words, men explain gods, and not the other way around. There is even an African proverb that gives eloquent expression to this notion: *Sambia jabla con lengua jombre* ("God speaks a human language").

Another of the schools or sects that is widely practiced by the followers of *palo* is *Briyumba*. Aimed at doing good, this tendency has soared in popularity over the past twenty years. It is often encountered in the western part of the island, in the provinces of Havana and Matanzas. Its initiation rites and festivals in honor of the gods are similar to those practiced by other sects.

Kimbisa is a sect that appears to trace its roots back further. Moreover, its nature is more composite: many elements have been taken from western culture, from spiritism and Catholicism. Bowls of water, crosses, and images of the Very Holy Sacrament are used. Few followers of this sect are still alive.

The practitioners of *kimbisa* are distinguished by their recourse to musical elements, such as the presence of a secret drum, the *kin-*

fuiti. This is a sacred instrument that is rarely seen; when it is rubbed it produces a distinctive sound "like the wailing for the dead." Argeliers León describes this instrument as follows:

It is a drum crossed with a cord that is attached to the center of the skin, where it is stroked rhythmically with both hands. The player sits on the same level as the drum, facing it and holding it with his feet. His hands are dipped in a rather sticky mixture and the alternating strokes produce a sort of rhythmic wailing. In general, these "wailing" instruments are secret. The *kinfuiti* itself is played behind a curtain.

This *kimbisa* sect is a clear example of religious syncretism, the fusion of Spanish superstitions belonging to the domain of popular Catholicism with elements of African rites. It has been attributed to André Petit, a renowned religious figure of the colony, who founded the sect under the name *Kimbisa Rite (Regla)* of the Holy Christ of the Safe Journey.

These, then, sketched in broad outlines, are the major tendencies and principal movements among the Congo sects of Cuba; however, there are others derived from these that are encountered today, still going strong. An example of these is the *Mayaca* group, found in the eastern region during the sixties. Such groups are considered less important and their structure is more fluid and more improvisational; in the outskirts are found some named after the Congo gods and talismans (*prendas*) that rule over them or under whose tutelage they are placed; these movements maintain relations with the specific powers concentrated in the *nganga* of a given practitioner.

In recent years, we have seen how this process of involution and disarticulation was brought to term by the actions of young and inexperienced followers of *palo*. These fanatical followers invoke the name of a *prenda*, referring to a grandfather or an ancient *Tata Nganga* whose prestige was solidly established, in order to found their own movement. In this way, religious forms derived from the main Congo sects, but lacking deep or solid roots, can proliferate ... Often, these little sects do not succeed in becoming cults, as they do not hold out a broad appeal for many social groups. In any case, they are rarely more than tattered remnants of the time-honored Congo magical practices that they attempt to emulate.

Music and Dance

Time, without a doubt, has winnowed out many of the songs and mimetic choreographies of Congo dances, such as the *mani* or the *yuka*. These dances, habitually performed in the thatched huts on Sundays, lightened the spirits of the slaves, freeing them momentarily from the shackles of fatiguing twelve-hour (or longer) work days. The dances are still kept alive in Cuba. In the house of any *palero*, they may be performed nearly every day in initiation ceremonies, celebrations of feast-days of certain gods, or simply to ensure the success of the *prenda* or the *nganga*. These dances are distinguished by their collective nature: some, such as the *palo* and the *yuka*, on couples dances; others, including the *macuta* and the *garabato*,²⁵ are more anarchic in character. All of them, however, incorporate a striking element of pantomime.

For example, the *mani* (which is reserved for men, even though cases of women virile enough to dance it are not unknown) represents a man-to-man fight consisting of blows of the elbow or forearm; the opponent is always a member of an opposing group, a rival band. Today, this dance has fallen into disuse.

On the subject of the *mani* dance, Lydia Cabrera writes:

The games of *mani* brought the entire nation running, and they were practiced throughout the island. They appealed to both races, as did the revolting cockfights, "and not just common folks came to watch the games, but also upstanding whites." People bet silver on the *maniceros'* fists and their brutality, just as they bet on the cocks' feet. Many women who were equal to the men in strength would participate in the game, doling out punches that could smash the skull of the toughest men.

In the Mercedes Carrillo sugar mill, where the Congos and the *Arara* were *mani* enthusiasts, Micaela Menéndez broke the jaw of a huge man in one swift blow.

In Trinidad, this sport was so popular that there were stories about a mayor and his daughter who practiced it. It enjoyed a similar popularity in the province of Pinar del Rio, in the heartland, then at Santa Clara and Camagüey as well as Oriente. Just a few years before I left Cuba, I was assured that a group of "black peasants" practiced the *mani* from time to time. I never had time to verify this claim.

In Havana, the colored population still remembers the two famous "solares" (empty fields) inhabited exclusively by Africans: the "Palomar" and the "Solar de Guinea," which was quite extensive; they attended *mani* performances at Marqués Gonzales between Zanja and San José.²⁶

The *macuta*, an ancient religious dance that was kept secret, was performed inside the *munanso bela*, a sacred enclosure like the *Ihgbodú* of the *Lucumí*. It required the participation of two central figures, the King and the Queen. Lydia Cabrera writes of this dance:

When they were called to the *makuta* (*yuca* or *makuta*, as informants say indifferently), the black women would come running in their finest clothes. The *makuta* dancer would dance with an apron made of wildcat hide or buckskin. On his belt, shoulders, and feet he wore all sorts of very small bells and chimes; suspended on his chest was a *gangarria*.²⁷ The man beat the rhythm with his whole body and chased the woman, who was dressed in a very broad skirt, in order to "vaccinate" her: he would stop in front of her and make thrusting movements with his hips. They would spin around many times and the *makuta* dancers would say: *Tingú tiko tiko*.

Some *makuta* dancers were famous: one of these, Villayo, achieved a glory that eclipsed that of Pancho Becker.

Describing the orchestra that accompanied these "*Kisomba Kia Ngóngo*," the Congo celebrations, Nino de Cárdenas writes:

The orchestra included three drums: the *cachimbo*, the drum that kept the rhythm; the *caja*, the most resonant drum; and the *mula*, which struck all the beats of the measure. Behind these three drums were the *koko* and the *kinfuite*, a small drum that resembled a single-stringed harp and was rubbed with a damp cloth, *Kii Kii* ... This ensemble was known as *makuta*. The little drum, the go-between, was called the *samlile matoko*. The *makuta* was accompanied by a chorus of singers who were the dancers themselves. The song leader was called the *Gallo* (cock) *Makuta*. The dancers, both men and women, responded to the *Gallo* or *Gallero*, who stood in the middle of the chorus of singers. This was a very lively dance.²⁸

The *palo* was characterized by abrupt movements of the arms and the chest towards the front, like crawling motions, while the *yuka*, according to Fernando Ortiz, a fertility dance, was profane and erotic, with the clashing of pans connoting the sexual act, the male's possession of the woman.

Three types of Congo drums were used to play the tunes for dances and songs: the *ngoma*, very similar to the *tumbadoras*, with the same type of body; those for the *yuka*; and those for the *macuta*, accompanied by a *guataca* or a percussion iron. As we have already seen, the *kinfuiti* is a secret religious drum, like the *ekue* of the *Abakúa* sect.²⁹

The *ngoma* consists of three drums "in the shape of an inverted cone, with straight staves and studded leather, which the drummer can play while seated or next to the drum."

The three *yuka* drums – the *caja*, the *mula*, and the *cachimbo* – are accompanied by a metallic instrument consisting of a sharpening iron or a ploughshare and a pair of maracas worn around the wrist, known as *nkimbi*. In addition, a hollowed-out trunk, known as the *guacara*, was struck with two sticks.

According to Argeliers León:

For certain forms of secular entertainment, groups of Bantu origin had drums called *yukas*, which are thought to have come to Cuba quite early. They were used to accompany the dance also known as the *yuka* as well as the *mani* fights. They were made in various sizes. Some examples, which have been preserved by the descendants of those Blacks, have large diameters; others are smaller. They are always played in groups of three: the big one was known locally as the *caja*, a name derived from the usual term for the bass drum; the two others were called the *mula* and the *cachimbo*. Added to these three drums were percussion rhythms created with a sheathed stick against a piece of brass, called the *guagua*, and a ploughshare or a piece of scrap iron that could produce a loud noise, making a strident addition to the ensemble. The *caja* is beaten with a large mallet or a hard stick and with the hand, or else with bare fists striking the leather, which comes from a cow's neck. When playing these drums, the player straddles it and attaches it with a ring to his belt: for this reason, it is said that one plays the drum by mounting it. The *yuka* drums are made of studded leather and are not sacred; this is why they have the right to neither sacrifice nor offerings of food; nor does the player have to be initiated. The *yuka* drums are crudely made simply by hollowing out a trunk. For this purpose the trunks of certain fruit trees that are easier to hollow out are preferred: the avocado tree and the almond tree are particularly appreciated for drum-making. The skin is nailed without much concern for detail, and in some cases it is not cut in a circle but rather retains all the irregularities of the original animal skin's shape; there are accounts of one case, a rare example, in which the entire skin of a young goat was preserved and nailed around the body of the drum. These Cuban drums are very different from the closest Bantu examples, many of which sport curious decorations on the extra leather that is not nailed down, or else exhibit meticulously cut circles and skillful nailing. These drums are no longer heard these days except on rare occasions, very special commemorative village festivals. Some elderly people still remember *yuka* concerts given in Havana during the early years of the Republic.³⁰

As for the *macuta* drums, they were played in groups of two or three and were struck with the bare hand; in some cases, to increase their stability, the players attached them to their belts with rope. They are cylindrical in shape, very broad, with staves and the circles painted with radiating patterns, shields, and all sorts of allegorical figures of Congo symbolism.

Dancing the *garabato* or the *palo*, another name for this sliding dance that is sometimes danced in a circle, requires a magic baton from the forest (*palo de monte*), usually from the guava tree, which is called the *lungowa*. Older practitioners claim that the shock produced when these batons are struck during the dance penetrate the force of the earth with magical and beneficial powers. The instrument fulfills both ritual and musical functions; the first of these goes back to the era of fortifications built by black maroons, who used the sound of the baton to signal the arrival of pursuers. Secondly, the crisp sound of the baton accentuates the dance rhythm.

Congo songs are formed of short melodies that are continually repeated. These songs are less complex and more melodically limited than those of the Yorubas, but their rhythmic beauty is unparalleled. Congo expression is also characterized by long recitatives; a good number of these, like the songs themselves, are distinguished by their avowed intention: some serve to make the talisman work, others are prayers invoking supernatural forces or saluting chiefs (*Tata Nganga* or *Tata Nkisi*). The most open-ended and improvisational songs, the *macaguas* or *cantos de puya*, which are surely those described in the memoirs of nineteenth-century travelers, were used by adepts to show off and flaunt their skills. These are allusive, satirical songs with very free texts. One of them, *Alumbra y paga* ("light up and snuff out"), asserts that a *Tata Nganga* is the strongest of men, as strong as dry corn, the one who can light a fire and put it out. Then there is *Pitimini congo éa*, which expresses the old rivalries between the *patuá* Congos (who spoke French) and the Congos of the Crown, who mocked the Haitians with gestures and gibes; the Haitians in their turn challenged the rival group by dancing in a crouching position with great ease, since they were quite small.

As in other groups of African origin, the songs are antiphonal, with the soloist and chorus alternating; the soloist is the "cock" and the chorus represents the "vassals."

Dances, Signature, and Magic

The dances show some elements that are common to all African dances, which are based on line or circle formations, although

recently there has appeared innovative choreography which is said to be derived from ancient memories, in which dancers execute hops and move forward tracing spiral figures with colored handkerchiefs.

In the middle of these dances, which in some cases reach a level of absolute frenzy, instances of possession often occur. This happens when the dancer, receiving in his body the spirit of a certain entity, is transformed into a *perro de prenda* (possessed dog). Up against the full force of the dead person, the "dog" is supposed to receive the spirit until he can neutralize it by dint of the strength and power of seduction of other human beings. Among the Congos, this phenomenon takes on particular characteristics.

The force that according to some believers takes possession of the body and the will of a dancer or of a participant in the ceremony can be considered a demi-god, who is defined in a less mimetic fashion than the Yoruba gods. In rare cases, the "dog" can express himself in a pantomime of great richness. Often, the pantomimes performed by possessed Congos claiming to be "mounted" by *Madre de Agua* (the goddess of the sea and of rivers) or by Sarabanda (the god of iron) are really those of *Yemayá* and *Oggún*, the Lucumi equivalents of these gods, for the Congos have retained few mythological elements that enable them to reconstruct the characteristics of their supernatural entities.

The mutual exchanges and syncretism arising out of new forms have given new life to some ancient forms while eliminating others. *Firmas* (signatures), a form of magical inscription, have endured, however, and retain the incredible richness of complex baroque flavor. As Leovigildo López writes,

The signatures of the "saints" are made for purposes of performing works, in which they play a key role, so important that without the signature it is impossible to accomplish anything whatsoever. When a *tata ngangá* prepares to perform a work, after asking permission of *Zambia* (God) as well as of the dead and the Morning Star, he invokes the saint of the cazuela by tracing a signature, which is what conjures the saint ... If the signature is made with white chalk, then it is a benevolent work, sent to cure someone or to do something else that will not harm anyone. If on the other hand the signature is traced with black coal, things are altogether different, for one is in the presence of a signature meant to accomplish a "*judío*" work, that is, *one intended to do evil*.³¹

Clearly the signature itself is a magical and dynamic element. It takes on an extraordinary importance every time it is used for individual purposes.

Supernatural forces are not the only ones who have a variety of signatures. Each priest, independently of his place in the hierarchy or the prestige each member holds in the *casa de palo* (temple), uses his signature as a means of identification. The signatures are inscribed on the ground, in large circular or rectilinear strokes, on walls, on display windows, on cooking pots, on the doors of the *munanso bela*, on the handkerchiefs that men wear across their chests or over their foreheads (*bandos*). López adds:

It is said that no adept of the *briyumba* writes his full signature, because if he did he would make himself vulnerable to evil deeds worked against him. According to informants, the "saint" is found in the signature, that is, when the adept traces the signature, he causes the saint to be present; from this it can reasonably be inferred that if the adept produces his own signature, he himself is present in it, such that a stranger coming into possession of this signature would have power over his person.

The artistic value and symbolism of these magical tracings have served as inspiration for certain Cuban artists. The drawings have been used in their original form or distilled into art works created in Cuba. The most common elements in the signatures are primitive: they exist in nature, in social reality. The signs that are consistently found in these signatures include circles, arcs, arrows, crosses, horns, skulls, suns, and moons, shapes that the priest of the *palo* rite has preserved over the centuries for liturgical use. Behind each signature is an extraordinary accumulation of ideas that have not been lost in the process of translation to concrete forms; there is no doubt that the signatures belong to the broad repertory of *lingua sacra* that Africans brought with them to Cuba to express their ideas and beliefs.

Congo liturgy is extremely complex, rife with expressive modes that over the years have constantly added to a rich corpus. The *nganga* is the axis of this liturgy, its essential core, concentrating all the powers and imbued with magical animism. The *nganga* is all-embracing; it is itself a magical, animistic force. Everything contained in the *nganga* wields a concentrated power proportional to the time it has spent there, as part of its order. Lydia Cabrera describes the *nganga* as follows:

it is a spirit, a supernatural force, but also the receptacle, a clay pot or tripod iron cauldron, and long long ago, a wrapping, a burlap bag or palm-frond purse for coins, in which are placed a human skull and bones, earth from

the cemetery and an intersection, bones of birds and beasts and other ingredients that make up a *Nganga*, and that form the base upon which the forces dominated by the Father or Mother (mistress) of the *Nganga* or of the *Nkiso*, who must obey their orders. The *Nganga* also signifies "dead"; The *Nganga*, the *Nkisi*, or the *Nkiso* is also a dwelling-place where a force or spirit resides.

Like the sacred stones of the Lucumi, these *ngangas* can hold bad spirits or good ones. For the *palero*, an old *nganga* from colonial times is a priceless possession, a trophy of incalculable value. Without this axis or focal point, there can be no *palo* cult, no Mayombe: without the *nganga*, "there is nothing." All the *mpungus*, the saints or supernatural entities, reside in it. Like a microcosm, the *nganga* condenses all supernatural powers. It distinguishes each *tata* and each believer: it is an important *prenda*, the most important of all, for the *prendas* can be talismans or amulets that are located in an object or fragment of an everyday object, such as trees, stones, shells, gourds, pots, and so forth.

In relation to the *nganga*, the *prendas* are secondary powers; around them revolve numerous small groups of believers. In the words of Esteban Montejo:

The Congos said that a dead man shouldn't keep his eyes open. They closed them for him with sperm, and they stayed closed. If his eyes opened, it was a bad sign. They always placed him face upward. I don't know why but it appears to me it was the custom. They put shoes and everything on the dead. If he was a *palero* he had to leave his *prenda* to someone. Usually when one of those Africans got sick, he made it known who would inherit it. Then the *prenda* remained in the hands of that person. Now, if that person couldn't carry on with the inherited *prenda*, he had to throw it in the river so the current would carry it off. Because anyone who didn't understand about an inherited *prenda* would have his life all screwed up. Those *prendas* could rebel on you like a son of a bitch. They could kill you.

To prepare a *prenda* that works well, you have to gather rocks, sticks, and bones. Those are the main things. When lightning strikes, the Congo mark the place well. Seven years went by, and they would return there, dig a little, and take out a smooth rock for the *cazuela*. Also the buzzard's³² stone was good for its power. You had to be prepared for the moment when the buzzard went to lay her eggs. She always laid two. You would carefully take one of them and boil it in salt water. After a short time you took it to the nest. It was left there until the other egg hatched its chick. Then the hard-boiled one, dry as it was, waited until the buzzard went to the sea. Because she thought that that egg would hatch a chick too. From the sea she brought some magic. That magic was a tiny rough stone that was put in the nest next to the egg. The tiny stone contained a very strong witch. After a few hours a chick came out of the hard-boiled egg. That was the honest truth. The *prenda* was prepared with that tiny stone. So this business was no game.

One of those prendas couldn't be inherited by just anyone. That was the reason the Congos died so sad.³³

For the rite of divination or fortune-telling, the Congos use the *mpake* or *mpaka menso*, a horn that held certain ingredients with magical powers; its opening is covered by a mirror that is generally smoked, which the witch uses to read the figures outlined by the smoke. Used along with a *mpaka* are necklaces with amulets. The *palo* rite of divination uses brandy, tobacco, and even gunpowder. Divination is a matter of the first importance among the Congos. To divine a fortune, to see the future, to order life quickly and effectively: these are the pressing priorities of cults of Bantu origin. The prestige of religion among the Congos is based on rapid and reliable divination, the *palero's* efficiency at this task.

Supernatural Entities of the Congos

God is transcendent, say theologians. He created the world and its people. The world retains his mark and his imprint. God explains and justifies the world; but up there where he remains inaccessible, he is removed from the people down below. The forces of nature dwell in the forest, the rivers, the sea.

This universal, interior god, and the irrational need to attain him, are also found among the Congo groups of Cuba. The *paleros* call this god *Nsambi* or *Nzambi*, *Sambiampungo* or simple *Sambia*. *Nsambi* is thus for the Congos the supreme creator, as is *Olofi* for the Yorubas and *Abasi* for the Abakúas.

An informant tells Lydia Cabrera that "*Sambia* conceived the *menga* or blood that flows through the veins and makes the body move, and through *nkutu*, the ear, instilled the intelligence needed for understanding."

No particular cult is dedicated to *Sambia*, nor to *Nsambi* or *Sambiampungo* (the variable appellations of the Congos never fix the name definitively); nor are any offerings made, nor food provided. *Nsambi* lives in the abstract, remote and imperturbable.

Besides *Nsambi*, the *paleros* worship the souls of deceased ancestors, who are the primary object of veneration; then spirits of

nature, who live in the trees, rivers and seas. These forces or entities, as I have called them, have their own names, which also vary according to the region of the country and the branch of the cult. It would appear to be impossible to establish an adequate hierarchy of these supernatural entities or *mpungus*, as these entities representing natural and supernatural forces are known by countless names and epithets; however, I shall try to establish a ranking based on the relations among the entities. According to my criteria, the most important entities of Congolese cults, independently of their variable attributes or powers, or their proper names, are, after the creator *Nsambi*, the following:

Tiembla Tierra. His names describes him perfectly: he is the master of the earth, of the universe, to the point where he controls the four points of the compass; he executes the designs of *Nsambi* and serves the latter as advocate and secretary. He corresponds to *Obbatalá* among the Lucumi and to the Merciful Virgin (Mercedes) of the Catholic pantheon. The adepts of *mayombe* also call him *Mama Kengue*. He is an androgynous god who embraces everything. He must not be invoked often; it would seem he is best left in peace, for believers report that he is very sensitive and flies into a rage when he is bothered with small requests.

Lucero Mundo (Morning Star World) or *Khuyu*, the "solitary" soul of purgatory, Little Jesus of Prague or of Atocha. He opens and closes paths and rules over intersections. The Yorubas call him *Eleggúa*. For the practitioners of *mayombe*, he resides at the cemetery gates and is the guardian of the moon.

Sarabanda or *Salabanda*. He is strong and wild, like the Yorubas' *Oggun* (God of iron) and the Catholics' Saint Peter. For some Congos he corresponds to the Archangel Michael. The common element is that *Sarabanda* is one of the most powerful entities of the *mayombe* cult. He cannot be absent from the *nganga*. This entity is closely connected to *Siete Rayos*, who reinforces him and assists him in solving problems for the adepts. *Sarabanda* works with the snake (*fioca*) and is part of all the Congo rites; like all the entities of *palo*, he is a perfect example of religious syncretism.

Siete Rayos, one of the most important gods of *palo*, corresponds with the Yorubas' *Changó* and the Catholics' Saint Barbe. *Munalungo* for the *mayombe*, *Ensasi*, he works with fire and powder. He is a

warrior, appealed to in difficult and hasty works of witchcraft. For the practitioners of *kimbisa*, he is also called *Nkita*, a name sometimes used in *mayombe* as well.

Madre de Agua (Mother of Water), *Siete Sayas* (Seven Skirts), *Bal-aunde* is an entity identified with the Virgin "de Regla," mistress of the sea and river mouths. Called *Yemayá* by the Yorubas, this entity is well known in all the Congo sects, highly venerated and present throughout the entire map of Cuban hagiography as few supernatural forces are. She symbolizes the unity of the world, the ebb and flow of universal maternity.

Brazo Fuerte (Strong-arm) corresponds with the Yorubas' *Aggayú* and the Catholics' Saint Christopher. He carries the world on his shoulders and crosses torrential streams. He is also called *Cabo de guerra* (War Chief) because he is a fighter and a victorious one.

Pandilanga, *Mpungo* corresponds to Jesus of Nazareth.

Chola, *Madre* (Mother) *Chola*, *Chola Awengue*, *Ochún* to the Yorubas or the Virgin "de la Caridad del Cobre," also highly venerated among the Congos, is the patroness of fresh waters, rivers and of gold. Often called *Madre de Agua* (Mother of Water), this entity is sometimes confused with the goddess of the sea.

Tata Pansúa, *Pata é llaga*, *Tata Funde*, is one of the most venerated deities, with innumerable devotees throughout the island. Identified with *Babalú Ayé*, the Saint Lazarus of the crutches, god of the sick, miraculous healer, he has also been called *Luleno* or *Asuano*.

Centella (Spark), the entity associated with lightning, *Oyá* to the Yorubas and the Virgin of Candlemas to the Catholics, also rules over sparks. This entity has also been identified with Saint Teresita of the Baby Jesus and in *mayombe* is known as *Yaya Kengue*.

Lufo Kuyo, the Yorubas' *Ochosi*, god of the hunt and the Catholics Saint Norbert, does not have large numbers of followers, but according to believers his *prenda* "puts you in prison and gets you out again."

Bután or *Bután Keye* is the healer, the doctor of the forest, known to the Yorubas as *Osaín*.

Kisimba, *Mpungo*, *Kabanga* corresponds with the Yorubas' sage *Orula* and the Catholics' Saint Francis of Assisi.

Mama canata is an ancient entity identified with the Virgin "del Carmen."

Ntala and *Nsamba* are, like the Yoruba *Ibbeyi*, twins identified with Saint Côme and Saint Damien. They are considered the sons of *Siete Rayos* and of *Centella Endoqui*.

Other *mpungus* receive compound names denoting the variety of the pantheon recreated in Cuba. These *mpungus* – some of which are considered *prendas*, for they originated in a stone, a shell, or other common object, natural or artificial – are also called *endoqui bueno* (good spirit) and *endoqui malo* (bad spirit); there is a possible allusion to *Elegguá* and to *Eshú*, violent forces that are feared by the *paleros*. *María Batalla* (Mary the Battle), *Paso Fuerto* (Heavy Step), *Buey Suelto* (Freed Cow), *Mariata Congo*, *Ma Fortuna*, *Ma Rosario*, *Zapatico* (Little Shoe) *Malacó*, *Tengue Malo* (bad), *Mariquilla*, and then the bad or “Jewish” *prendas* called *Infierno Mundo Camposanto* (Cemetery World Inferno), *Infierno Barre Escoba* (Broom Clean Inferno), *Monte oscuro* (Dark Forest), *Palo Pieta* (Black Wood), *Tormenta Endoqui Virao* (Whirling Spirit Torment), *Saca Empeno* (Draw Resolution), *Rabo e Nube* (Cloud Tail), *Luna Nueva* (New Moon), and so many others that an exhaustive list would be interminable.

The symbology among these Congo entities and their connections to animals, natural forces or various objects warrants more thorough study. The animistic origin of these cults suggests the possibility that a form of totemism attaches to these beliefs. It would be interesting to analyze thoroughly the relations between these categories of gods and entities or *prendas* and the totemism of the Congos’ distant Bantu ancestors.

Translated from the French by Jennifer Curtiss Gage.

Notes

1. *Cabildos*, brotherhoods of black slaves and their descendants who shared common tribal roots, were established for social and charitable purposes in an attempt to recreate the old African traditions. *Cabildos* engaged in ritual worship, singing, and dancing. The first such brotherhoods came into being at the close of the seventeenth century, and a few survived until the beginning of the republican period.
This article is a revised and shortened translation of a chapter in the author's volume *Cultos Afrocubanos* (Havana, 1996).
2. Lydia Cabrera, *Reglas de congo, palo monte mayombe ...* (Miami, 1979), p. 15.
3. *Nānigos*: members of the Abakuá sect, an exclusively male society that had originated in Africa and which still survives in Cuba in the provinces of Havana and Matanzas.
4. *Lucumí*: a popular denomination arbitrarily used in Cuba to designate Africans coming from Nigeria and probably also from other Sudanese regions, particularly the Gulf of Guinea.
5. *Changó*: a Yoruba deity, the god of lightning and thunder, of love, virility, and music.
6. *Tata Nganga*: the totemic ancestor, from the Bantu *tata*, or "father," and *nganga*, "magic power."
7. *French translator's note*: *palo* is the central term of the Congo cult. It refers to a totemic or magic baton or stick. The translations do not do justice to the term's semantic richness, for it refers at once to a material, wood, in the form of a "baton" used in governance or in dancing, and to a pole that symbolizes the earth's axis, and so forth. The *palo* comes from the *monte* or wild forest, a symbol of the primordial cosmos, which as a free territory takes on even richer connotations for slaves.
8. *Translator's note*: The term *barracoon* designates the the slaves' cramped living quarters on plantations in colonial Cuba.
9. *Conga* or *Congo* is the name given in Cuba to Blacks from the banks of the Congo River or to their descendants.
10. *French translator's note*: *chicherekú*: a magic doll of Congo origin.
11. *French translator's note*: *nkise*: a Lingala (Congo) term meaning a "medicine" or a "talisman." Among the Yombés, *nkisi* was the name given to statues peculiar to secret societies.
12. *Cazuela*: a receptacle made of terra cotta in which are placed the magic attributes of supernatural forces worshiped in the Congo rites.
13. Miguel Barnet, *Biography of a Runaway Slave*, trans. W. Nick Hill (Willimantic, Connecticut, 1994), pp. 33-34. Born in 1860, Esteban Montejo had worked on a sugar plantation in colonial Cuba before running away. In 1963, when he was 104 years old, the author Miguel Barnet, then a young writer and ethnologist, learned of his existence through a notice in the press and decided to record his recollections.
14. Lydia Cabrera, *Reglas de congo*, (see note 2 above), p. 213.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
16. An ethnic group originating in Benin.
17. An ethnic group originating in Nigeria.

18. *French translator's note:* In Lingala, *ndoki* means "bad spirit."
19. *Translator's note:* The *urubu* is a type of vulture or buzzard that figures in Congo religious culture; see the story of the buzzard's egg, below.
20. "*Palo judío*" in the original text.
21. Miguel Barnet, *Biography of a Runaway Slave*, (see note 13 above), pp. 123-124.
22. *French translator's note:* In Lingala *nzambe* means "God."
23. Walterio Carbonell, *Mayombe en Cuba* (Havana, 1967).
24. *French translator's note:* In Lingala *ntangu* means "Sun."
25. *French translator's note:* the *garabato* is a *palo* (baton) with a hook at one end.
26. Lydia Cabrera, *Reglas de congo*, (see note 2 above), p. 93.
27. *French translator's note:* the *gangarría* is a musical instrument.
28. Lydia Cabrera, *Reglas de congo*, (see note 2 above), p. 77.
29. *French translator's note:* An ethnic group of northwest Nigeria.
30. Argeliers León (Dir. Gen. de la Culture, Min. de l'Education), *Artes Plásticas 1* (1960) p. 28.
31. Leovigildo López, "Las firmas de los santos," in *Actas de Folklore 1*, no. 5 (1961).
32. The *urubu* is a variety of buzzard found in Cuba.
33. Miguel Barnet, *Biography of a Runaway Slave*, (see note 13 above), pp. 119-120.