

CORROBORATION AND CONTENTION IN 'CONGO' CONSECRATIONS: AN  
ANTHROPOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF CUBAN REGLAS CONGAS

By

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To my family and friends living and dead.

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## LIST OF RELIGIOUS TERMS IMPORTANT IN REGLAS CONGAS AND AFROCUBAN RELIGIONS

Abakua	Referring to the secret male society dominated in the Western part of Cuba. Abakua origins are identified as Carabali (see Palmié 2006).
Ahijado/a	A God child of the Tata or Yaya.
Bilongo	Spell. Ritualized objects. Religious encantations.
Bititi Menso	A horn filled with secret materials and sealed by a mirror. It is placed in the nganga and serves practitioners in divination. Also known as Mpaca Menso.
Brujeria	A term referring to mailific religious craft and in AfroCuban religiosity is associated with Reglas Congas.
Brujo	A witch. A term historical applied to most African-identified practices in Cuba but today is applied commonly to paleros.
Briyumba	A division within Reglas Congas.
Chamalongos	The divination technique that uses four coconut shells, or seashells.
Contienda	A religious family, group, or lineage. It may also refer to the location or house of religious ceremonies (see munanso).
Firmas	The ritual drawings that direct nfumbi spirits.
Fundamento	A name for the nganga.
Kimbisa	A division within Reglas Congas.
Kimbese/a	A practitioner of Kimbisa.
Lucumi	A historical term used to refer to several groups of West African locality. A conglomerate reference to Yoruba people associated with Reglas Ochas/Santeria.
Madrina	Yaya or mother of initiated persons.
Mayombe	A sect of Reglas Congas and a common ethnicity associated with Palo Monte (i.e. Palo Monte Mayombe). It may also refer to Reglas Congas in general.
Mayombero/a	A practitioner of Palo Monte Mayombe.
Minkisi	pluarl of nkisi, referring to the various object of the lower bakongo region as examine by Wyatt Macgaffey. Refers to the spirit or nfumbi.

Mpungo/u	Grand spiritual force, generally associated with natural forces. Examples of mpungo are as follows:
Lucero	Lucero Mundo. A grand spirit of crossroads, ceremonial beginnings and trickery.
ZaraBanda	Warrior associated with iron, crossed machetes, and blacksmith craft.
Seite Rayos	(Seven Lightning Bolts) The Congo mpungo associated with lightning, gunpowder, dance, and magical works. Synonymous with Nsasi.
Kalunga	The Congo mpungo of the sea.
	Other mpungos include: Centella Ndoki; Mama Chola; Baulunde (Kalunga); Copa Yende; Lukancasi.
Muinda	Candle.
Munanso	Religious family or temple of the nganga
Ndembo	{Nbembo}-African people, possible derived from Mdemdu people of present day Angola.
Ndoki	A spirit of war, malice, typically used to attack but also protective spirit (Doki, or Doki Bueno).
Nfinda	Forest.
Nfumbi	The spirit of a dead person.
Nganga	The cauldron that holds the spirit of the dead.
Ngangulero	Practitioner of Palo Monte. Includes kimbesero, briyumberos, and palero
Ngo	A tiger or cat.
Ngo Nfinda	Tiger, Lion (literally forest cat).
Nkisi	Spirit, or object enchanted by the spirit.
Nkombo	The body.
Npemba	Chalk used for spiritual drawings called firmas

Nsasi	Spirit associated with lightning bolt, Seite Rayo.
Nso	Same as 'munanso', religious family.
Nsunga	tobacco/cigar.
Nzambi	The creator of the world.
Padrino	Tata or father of initiated persons.
Prenda	The nganga or object containing the spirit.
Reglas Congas	Refers to Congo-identified religions of Cuba. Known as Palo Monte, Palo Monte Mayombe, Kriyumba, Briyumba and Kimbisa.
Reglas Ochas	Refers to Yoruba-identified religion in Cuba. Also known as Santeria and centers on the interaction with Orisha, a supernatural being.
Tatanganga	Father of the nganga.
TataNgundu	The Ceiba tree (sometimes YayaNgundu, feminine)
Yaya	{yayita}- mother
Sayings:	
Quindiambo?	Who are you?
SalaMalecum-MalecumSala	Peace to you. A greeting said between practitioners.
Kiaco Kiaco Kuenda Nsila-	Cuban saying that means little by little you will arrive at your goal (or the destination). Another version is 'Piango Piango Kuenda Nsila'. Spanish version is poco a poco llega lejo (Mason 2004).

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This study examines the practices of Cuban Reglas Congas and the conceptualization of 'Congo' identity among AfroCuban religions. The aim is to explore the recognition of Congo religion in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century interpretations, literature, and histories of Cuba that reveal the sociopolitical construction of AfroCuban identity by multiple historical and contemporary actors. The colonial notions of race and religion intersect with dialogues of researchers and practitioners and uncover a typically negative and aggressive characterization of Central African cultures. This exploration of Reglas Congas includes the analysis of research accounts, history, the observation of religious practice, and the perspectives of religious practitioners. The ways 20<sup>th</sup> century researchers and practitioners construct African ethnicity, religion, and history produced a unique religious identity that continues to influence the understandings, representations, and practices of Cuban Reglas Congas.

CHAPTER 1  
'CONGO'-'MADE IN CUBA': THE CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS PRACTICES OF  
CUBAN REGLAS CONGAS

**Positioning Reglas Congas in Literature, Method, and Theory**

The common response I hear when I tell someone about my studies of Central African-identified religious practices in Cuba is, “you mean Voodoo, right? ”. What does it mean to understand all African religion under one category? How are terms like Voodoo understood as a monolithic descriptor in African-identified religions? This study does not focus on Voodoo in Cuba rather it focuses on how ambiguous categories like Voodoo reveal a political construction surrounding African-derived cultures. More specifically, this study examines the representation of religious identity associated with the practices of Reglas Congas<sup>1</sup> and the notions of ‘Congo’ among other AfroCuban identities. Knowing the cultural diversity associated with the populations of Caribbean and the Americas, what do responses that conceptualize culture in homogeneous terms tell us about the politics of representation? My study focuses on the Central African identified practices of Cuban Reglas Congas also known as Palo Monte. In Cuba, the distinctions between West and Central African religious forms are made real by aesthetic representations of ritual and ideology. West African-derived Santeria is generally a highly regarded Cuban cultural treasure, where as, Palo Monte is typically regarded with suspicion. Although Santeria shares the same persecutory history as all African-identified subjects its contemporary representation is more favorable than its Central African counterpart. Obviously, there are still some who refuse to change their derogatory view of African and African diasporic religion.

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<sup>1</sup> Reglas Congas refers to the African-identified religious practices of Central Africa established in Cuba. These include Palo Monte (Palo Monte Mayombe), Briyumba and Kimbisa. Reglas Congas is commonly referred to as “Palo” and is synonymous with Central Africa origins. Briyumba and Kimbisa are made distinct by various ritual forms and are categorized as a sect of Reglas Congas.

The Cubans who inquire about my anthropological study typically respond with surprise when I tell them I am studying Palo Monte (Reglas Congas). Comments like, “you should be careful” and “that’s dangerous” are common. These remarks were seldom used when speaking of Santería (Reglas Ochas). It became clear to me that the strong responses and prejudicial perspectives that I encountered (and continue to encounter) are a result of what David Scott refers to as “the shifting field of power and knowledge” (Scott 1994:175). That is, the common understanding of Palo Monte has resulted from concepts derived first in colonial discourses and second in the interpretation, competition, and perceptions of Cuban actors. The ways that concepts like the *‘nganga’*, *‘brujo’*, and *‘bilongo’* are made meaningful in and about Cuban Congo productions are never static. The public’s interpretation of Palo Monte as mostly malefic, does not always reflect practitioners’ perspectives, but relates to a greater intercession of actors in the formulation of Cuban religiosity.

The intention of this dissertation is to show how all understandings of culture are filtered through political perspectives, both in cognitive definitions and representations, and fashioned in conceptual and physical spaces. Drawing on the methodological contributions of David Scott, I hope to show how people conceive of the practices of Palo Monte through a meta-assessment of production and representation in contemporary and historical space. Additionally, my evaluation of the practices of Reglas Congas, drawing on Palmié’s notions of ‘modernity’ in the practice of Palo Monte and Matory’s work on the ‘live dialogues’, assist my attempt to show Reglas Congas as a fluid political construction created by multiple actors. That is, how and through what means is Palo Monte understood as a cultural marker and how is this construction a modern phenomenon of political interaction? Five hundred years of interactions and productions by multiple actors constitute what is today a feared and respected religion. Formations of identity

and religiosity, the combination of sources that construct Palo Monte Mayombe as a ‘Congo’-derived religion, include research accounts, analysis of historical resources, and current spaces of discussion and practice. The recognition of Congo religion found in the interpretations, literature, and historical events of Cuba suggest its importance in AfroCuban heritage. How have those definitions changed in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century? What is the relationship between how Palo Monte is practiced and how others represent this religion?

The political distinctions of ethnicity and religious identity, influenced by colonial notions of Africa and produced by 20<sup>th</sup> century actors in Cuban space, are at the center of this study. More specifically, this study examines the dichotomized and communal relationship between the foremost AfroCuban identities, the ‘Congo’ and ‘Yoruba’, and their associated religious practices, Reglas Congas (Palo Monte) and Reglas Ochas (Santeria). The negative connotations typically reserved for representations and interpretations of Palo Monte (Reglas Congas) exemplify a colonial legacy of racism applied by 20<sup>th</sup> century writers, scientists, and practitioners in Cuban political space. Typically, Palo Monte is understood by depictions of immorality and malice formerly found in colonial depictions of Africans, where as, most contemporary descriptions of Santeria transcend past colonial markers. In light of the variability of beliefs and practices, what makes the characterization of Congo-derived religions in AfroCuban religiosity commonly negative? Many Cubans, including santeros and some paleros, describe Palo Monte as working with harmful spirits. Most practitioners acknowledge negative intentions in some Palo rituals but claim the majority of practices do not involve producing harmful consequences. If the practices of Palo Monte are not reflective of its description as malefic and barbaric, why is it consistently represented in that manner?

My first encounters with the several paleros of Santiago de Cuba in 1997 raised many questions regarding the multifaceted characterizations of AfroCuban religious identity. Practitioners presented distinct conceptual differences in religious beliefs and ritual between Santeria and Palo Monte. Concurrently, many individuals practiced both religions, keeping them distinct. Ritual practices of Santeria and Palo Monte never intersect but maintain certain conventions that make important both religious practices in an initiate's development over time. More specifically, the requirement of some practitioners to initiate neophytes in Palo rites before an initiation in Santeria is common. The practitioners sometimes explain the initiation of neophytes in Palo rites as a religious progression further illustrating Palo Monte as secondary and arguably primary in AfroCuban religiosity. These crossed practices and notions within AfroCuban religiosity are particular to Cuban religious landscape and represent a specific formulation of diasporic culture, politics, and production.

The plurality of AfroCuban religiosity, specifically distinctions between Santeria (Reglas Ochas) and Palo Monte (Reglas Congas), illustrate a genealogical development that represents the predominance of Santeria (Reglas Ochas) and the subordination of Congo forms in 20<sup>th</sup> century representation. Additionally, the developments of these practices together uncover the interconnected conceptual and political context for their understanding. What does it mean to practice both religions? Why do representations of Reglas Congas continue to reflect colonial perspectives of 'traditional African religion'? What do the interaction between religious actors tell us about the production of cultural representation, particularly with regards to Reglas Congas?

### **The Literature and Anthropology on Congo-derived Religion**

This section examines 20<sup>th</sup> century literature on Afro-Cuban religion that has predominantly focused on the study of Santeria, a belief system that is connected to Yoruba

peoples of West Africa<sup>2</sup>(Castellaños 1977; Montejo 1968; Apter 1991). The orisha of Santeria (Reglas Ochas) are identified by practitioners as divine entities and are the foci of ritual practice and religious belief. How literature represents AfroCuban forms with established religious models underscores the characterization of difference in AfroCuban religiosity. Though Santeria was also marginalized by Catholic hegemony, it is popularly considered to be above the more “savage” Central African forms of Reglas Congas. The importance of literature constructs not only a historical production of representation but also a genealogical reference of AfroCuban development. The strong associations between the orisha and Catholic saints reflect a century-old development in Cuban life, one that has tempered the representation and public understanding of Santeria. How has literature on AfroCuban religions made distinct Reglas Congas/Palo Monte from Santeria/Reglas Ochas?

One commonly presented subject, the symbolic associations between certain orisha of the Yoruba pantheon and that of Catholic saints, remain a common point of analytical departure. In contrast, Palo Monte has been described as ‘brujeria’, or black magic, existing in the shadow of Santeria (Barnet 1995; Castellaños 1977; Cabrera 1979; Montejo 1968). It has long been known that enslaved Central African peoples were forced in large numbers to Cuba, yet during the 20<sup>th</sup> century the religious practices identified as Congo in Cuba were less celebrated publicly and certainly more notorious. The arrangement of ideas surrounding Palo practices suggests that colonial perspectives have racially connected the people of West Africa in representations of civility and represented Central African forms as bound to the “lowest state” of religiosity. This is exemplified in 20<sup>th</sup> century descriptions of Reglas Congas that describe it as primitive, immoral, and malefic (Palmié 2002; Ortiz 1906). The representation of Palo Monte is significant

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<sup>2</sup> The Yoruba ethnicity was formerly known in Cuba as ‘Lucumi’, a classification that consolidates several groups from proximate African regions.

because many practitioners are engaged in both religious practices (that is Santeria and Palo Monte). As such, the practice of both forms suggests recognized hierarchical distinctions between these practices, emerging through displays that both dichotomize and cooperatively engage the ritual performance of both practices<sup>3</sup>.

The realities of religious ritual practice, its intentionality, ideology, and dogmatism, are only partly consistent with the drastic display of Congo-derived forms found in the literature. The representations of Congo religious forms as immoral reflect past constructions of religiosity (anthropological or otherwise) and result from the competitive spaces of 20<sup>th</sup> century cultural practice. In anthropology, religious practices have been a key component in the philosophical analysis of culture. Religion has been a standard site of inquiry through which ‘culture’ is constituted and, within the context of christianized knowledge production, ethnocentrically ordered (Mbembe 2001; Mudimbe 1985; Foucault 1972). The centrality of religious beliefs, rituals, and rationalities as knowable and socially efficacious rely in part on the descriptions of cultural identity through skewed definitions of religion (Herskovits 1937; Morgan 1877; Eliade 1957). Scholars of the African diaspora have continued to privilege the use of religious practices to describe and map ‘New World cultures’ by building upon the assumptions that religious practices (and their study) contain certain degrees of consistency, lineage, and essential cultural meaning (MacGaffey 1993; Bastide 1971; Herskovits 1937).

Religion as a trope for cultural identity, along with interlocutors that connect religion to race, social development (modernity), and culture, calls attention to the importance of religion as a site of analysis, in this case, as it applies to the African–identified culture in Cuba (Dirks 2001;

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<sup>3</sup> Palo Monte and Santeria are never performed simultaneously but maintain a relationship that at times requires religious knowledge (initiation) of Palo before some Ocha (Santerian) initiations are undertaken.

Van Der Veer 1996). The ethnology of religious practices fixed and ordered cultural notions of Africa (Ortiz 1906; Herskovits 1937; Frazier 1942; Mudimbe 1998), and analytically constructed Africans and African cultures within colonial political agendas (Scott 1994; Amstelle 1998; Mbembe 2001; Dirks 1996). The emerging Cuban nation recognized the importance of Afro-Cuban citizens but still privileged European cultures (Ortiz 1906; Duany 2000). This is exemplified in descriptions of the ‘syncretic’ process as a means of assimilation and progressive development (transculturation), that is, cultural productions ascending closer to European notions of a civility and securing the nationality of Cuba as primarily Spanish (Ortiz 1906; Barnet 2001). In the case of Santeria, the adoption of Catholic symbols for the orisha seems to position Santerian identity closer to European forms, where as, Palo Monte has retained the former European depiction of Africa and Africans.

Cultural forms do not compete in social space independently; people who produce, accept, and reject cultural meanings are key to the social construction of meaning. It becomes clear that within literature the term ‘syncretism’ packages neatly the cultural phenomena within the Caribbean basin and in other parts of the world. Unfortunately, the syncretic analysis ignores deeper meanings in knowledge formation, particularly through its use of symbols, which serve to describe a reality whose meaning, use, and power are never static yet commonly accepted as incontestable illustrations<sup>4</sup> (Scott 1999; Apter 2002; Foucault 1975). Questioning the term ‘syncretism’ helps us to better understand the underlying assumptions in past frameworks. How and why such concepts are used to facilitate more clearly the constant state of negotiation in

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<sup>4</sup> David Scott questions the theoretical concepts of “nationalist-modern visions” that mark groups in “identity/difference” not unlike the ethnic-religious groupings in AfroCuban religiosity (D.Scott 1999: 219-220). Apter underscores the political discourses of practice that shape cultural direction and religious representation in his deconstruction of Herskovit’s concepts of retentions (Apter 1991: 256). Foucault has shown that the institutional frameworks contain underlying power to differentiate and characterize through time (Foucault 1995/1977: 160). All these authors contribute to views that deconstruct cultural production as bound to politicized concepts, practice, and power.

cultural processes evokes notions of acculturation, assimilation, and a power dialectic existing between cultural groups. An idea of a syncretism attained in cultural processes then begs the question as to the particularities of culture and what drives certain manifestations of practice and meaning over others? The simplifications of cultural analysis through charged terminologies, those that label a process such as syncretism without deeper inquiry, build definitions around ideas, which have certain politically produced associations.

In regards to Caribbean culture, particularly to African-derived religions, ideas of impurity and corruption are reflected in their categorization and representation. Curiously, the use of syncretism to describe culture are directed, never at all religions, but consistently to peoples who have a cultural 'genesis' associated with of the 'New World' phenomena and the Caribbean (Ramos 1935; Malinowski 1948; Ortiz 1946). This suggests that the directed usage of syncretic analysis is reflective of a political agenda or at least a political model, dogmatic or inherent. Past intellectual pursuits, guilty of racist underpinnings and politically determined categories, suggest the conceptual flaws of certain cultural theories (sympathetic or otherwise)(Malinowski 1948; Ortiz 1906). Syncretic approaches may take a more romantic view without considering the assumptions inherent in certain terms. Using syncretism as the basis for observations of practices and beliefs unintentionally underscores an evolutionary model made of fixed cultural forms. Most importantly, the dialogues of 'race' intercede in colonial representation of 'religion', marking Palo Monte with certain colonial connotations of racial contamination.

Labor studies have focused on the economic parameters of group identity, the unification of people in occupational constraints, and economic stratum that position the cultural experience (Fanon 1967; Patterson 1982; Cooper 2000). Hence, like colonial theory of religion, which constitutes its subject through an analysis of religious practice, so too, postcolonial theories of

labor regimes constitute subjects through the productions of labor in economic processes (Fanon 1967, Thurner 2003). Research on the expansion of slave labor, economic production of sugar, and sociopolitical changes (i.e., abolition, revolution, nationhood, political upheavals) has explored the important impact of such moments in Cuban history (Moreno Fraginal 1985; Knight 1977; Ortiz 1946; R. Scott 1985; Mintz 1974). The relationship between labor regimes and racial constructions reveals a symbiotic relationship that maintains a political economic directive by constructing subjects through ideological tropes (Dirks 1998; Holt 2000; Cooper 2000; Patterson 1982). The colonial construction of African identity relied on characterization of inferiority, savagery, and profanity, as racialized justifications for their status as non-human subjects of labor (Patterson 1982; Stoler 2002; Mbembe 2001; Cooper 2000; Scott 1999; Holt 2000). The emphasis of labor in identity formation focuses on the importance of capital, consumption, and class in the reproduction of sociocultural activities (Marx 1977; Mandel 1972; Cooper 2000).

A comparison of religion and labor, as sites for social scientific research, reveals the philosophically dissimilarities in theoretical approaches in sociocultural composition (Scott 1999, 1994). Both approaches to cultural production have been highly critical of each other, for instance, religious scholars observing ritual/ideological processes rely on ideological foundation in cultural formation, whereas, Marxist and class approaches account for difference mostly through the production value and class formation. The ideological principle of religion as a primary producer of cultural meaning has several shortcomings. Initially, the understanding of 'religion' as created by the political intentionality of its presentation, conceptualization, and 'a priori' requisites is often slow to acknowledge other factors that produce meaning. More specifically, the conceptual designs of religious scholars and religious identity are made meaningful in the lived experiences. On the other hand, class distinctions and economic

perspectives leave little room for ideas, cosmology, and/or, world-views in the dialogue of culture operations, relying on labor activities, economic conditions, and social struggle to define identity. More clearly, all perspectives make distinctions of subjects/concepts along lines of a position, inherently political, whether unconscious or deliberate. The constitution of 'culture', specifically African diasporic religiosity, remains an ongoing formulation, but the possibilities for understanding the human forces that create meaning suggest new ways to conceptualize diasporic research. By historicizing perspectives of religion and labor, we are better able to evaluate the pertinent construction of meaning in cultural processes.

The colonial organization of Africa contains multiple discourses that build a characterization of religious culture. Accounts of ritualized blood sacrifice, dance, music/song, and spiritual possession and position arrange disparate cultural groups while simultaneously addressing certain strategies that construct meaning about African cultures in general (Evans-Pritchard 1976; Ortiz 1926). A crucial interlocutor in these processes is the identification of African art (MacGaffey 1998; Thompson 1983). Current approaches to African art deconstruct the meaning of 'primitive art', noting the colonial perspectives that corrupted the realities of sacred objects as artistic works. Additionally, the labeling of art within fields of cultural designation assisted a colonial ordering that failed to recognize the fluidity of objects, groups, and meaning in Africa. The critical perspectives of some art historians uncover similar prejudices in the religious, social, and economic depiction of Africa by social scientists, theologians, and others (MacGaffey 1998; Napier 1992; Clifford 1988). The result is a Eurocentric meta-trope of Africa supported by colonial mappings of geography, language, religion, art, and literature (among others) (Mudimbe 1988; Scott 1994; Foucault 1984). A range of colonial tropes, perspectives, and concepts continues to direct ideas in the construction of New World cultures by

a continuation of misappropriation of cultural phenomena and processes (Dirks 1998; Herskovits 1937; Ortiz 1906). Subsequently, the use of religion as a cultural marker, through observable cultural practices versus self-proclamations/preservations, contains racialized assumptions that only 'religion' (religiosity) can distinguish an African subject (Mbembe 2002; Dirks 1998).

Current contributions in anthropology have critically illustrated how representations of culture are produced and maintained within communities and speak to the wider context of what constitutes African cultural diaspora in religious productions, that is, 'dialogues' (Matory 1993), 'deep knowledge' (Apter 2002), 'modernities' (Geshiere 1992; Palmié 2002). These perspectives have gone beyond past theoretical frameworks that treat culture as a bounded object and attest to new sites for understanding culture formations, diasporic identities, strategies, and subjectivities. The constitution of culture in forms of witchcraft discourses, deep knowledges, live dialogues, and modernities, allude to an understanding of culture within a postcolonial status that (sometimes) subverts national or colonial subjectification through subaltern interpretations and practices (Geshiere 1992; Palmié 2002; Apter 2002; Matory 1993). Andrew Apter recasts cultural practices, particularly religious syncretism, as modalities of revision and resistance. He shows the importance of 'deep knowledge' (religious strategies) as a negotiation of social position within the sociopolitical terrain of diasporic spaces.

The discourses surrounding Las Reglas Congas, perpetuated in Cuba (and elsewhere) on certain varying levels, remain stigmatized as the most barbaric religious practice, but as a result, help to shroud Palo Monte in secrecy, very rarely investigated (in depth) by outsiders. How has the negative historical persecution of Reglas Congas constituted a space for strategic maintenance and performance of religious knowledge, past, and present? Have such negative representations remained important to internal discourses that produce a strategy to maintain

secrecy, fear and power? This investigation is witness to aspects of Congolese representation (i.e., literary and scientific project in Cuban nationalism) as political – a critically important part in social production that is often neglected for the sole consideration of syncretic phenomena. The syncretic analysis ignores the deeper meanings of symbols-“European”, “African” or otherwise- within religious production and carries certain connotations of racialized contamination. The consideration of social space in the development of memories, its political and social comprehension, are crucial to how this project will construct notions of Palo Monte as a diasporic example of Cuban ‘Congolese’ identity.

In many ways these ethnographic descriptions formed significant references for the comprehension and practice of AfroCuban religiosity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Fure 1979; Barnet 1995; Bolivar 1970; Millet 1996). The contemporary and past works of many researchers remain crucial but sometimes forgotten, or yet to be discovered by an interested public (R. Lachatanere 1956, T. Fabelo 1974; Larduet 1999; Millet 1998; James 2002; Meneses 1993). The insight and knowledge built into local perspectives and among local levels of representation remain key sites for the production of Afro-Cuban religiosity. On the other hand, the critical perspective of cultural studies expose an essentialist perspective built within a bound romantic view of culture processes (Barnet 1995, Ortiz 1916; Stuart Hall 1994). Some works ignore divergent theoretical questions, relying on accepted models or labels, such as ‘syncretism’, and serve as unquestioned categories of cultural production. The examples of such literature, theoretically oriented or not, impacts both how culture is spoken of and how the representations, preservations, and authentication of Cuban culture are presented and learned. In many cases, regarding Reglas Congas, the institutional productions of cultural activities and presentations are done in

conjunctions with local paleros (Casa de Africa/La Habana, Santiago, Casa del Caribe/Santiago and others) (Ayorinde 2004).

Religious ideology and rituals produced by specific families and groups contribute to specific and regional production of religiosity in Cuba. How, when, and by what means these ideas and practices are presented in scholarly, artistic, and or public displays help determine a set of politically constructed concepts and perspectives. The distinctions here, as seen within ethnographic depictions, are formulas for authentic presences in academic discourses and cultural investigations. The commonly contrasting theoretical sources of production include historical representations, scholarly observations, and lived practices, revolve together to situate Congolese-identified religion in Cuba. At times these practices, publications, and perceptions act in concert or separately and affect various social spaces, perspectives, and power. The intersection of practitioners' knowledge and academic analysis (researchers) is common and such encounters form the context for meaning within both religious practices and the general subjectivism of religiosity (Larduet 2002).

This study attempts to represent Palo Monte in an ethnographic framework (20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Century) that recognizes the colonial replications of ethnicity and religiosity as problematic but powerful agents in 20<sup>th</sup> century productions of AfroCuban religion. The analysis of current and past perspectives of culture, history, and religion, that is, the critical evaluation of social polity surrounding our construction of 'religion', act in contemporary formations of social identity (Ortiz 1916; Cabrera 1979; Dirks 2001). These formulations of identity embody the colonial subject/object, but also, our own theoretical assumptions (Scott 1994; Mudimbe 1994; Mbembe 2001). Does the development of contemporary representations, theories, and methodological approaches continue to produce unquestioned discourses? By examining race and religion, two

key tropes that form current understandings of the Afro-Cuban experience, we are able to critically trace the dialogues that make meaningful the process of identity formation and religiosity. Understanding how we conceptualize culture, ethnicity, and religion shape future contestations of representation and uncover the importance of meaning, context, and power in cultural production and analysis (Foucault 1972; Bourdieu 1994; Scott 1994).

### **The Politics of Diaspora: Race, Religion, and Representation in Cuban Reglas Congas**

The designation of African ethnicity produced in Cuba represents the historical intersection of diverse peoples under new conditions, ideologically and physically. Prevailing colonial ideas, and then national assignments, regarding slavery, citizenry, and then AfroCuban ethnicity underscores the ideological construction of AfroCuban religion. The inclusive label ‘African’, ‘AfroCuban’, and ‘black’, resulting from racial distinction and homogenized cultural identification, define specific cultural phenomena in places like Brazil, Haiti, The United States, and Cuba (Matory 2005; Apter 2002; Palmié 2002). Matory emphasizes the relationship between participants of different diasporic sites, as well as African spaces, that illustrate a network of relationships in the production of identity (Matory 2005). Differences found between diasporic communities reveal not only the particularities of religious ideological development but also the underlining commonalities of cultural identification throughout the Western hemisphere. More specifically, the identification of African ethnicity in Cuba, that is “Congo”, “Lucumi/Yoruba”, “Carabali” etc., characterize a fluid African-identified diasporic grouping, one reflective of the Caribbean’s diverse populations and less of its far removed African ‘origins’. Ambiguous notions of ethnicity accepted and used in daily life constitute not only their use in identity politics but also the ways its is possible to speak of African ethnicity, culture, and contemporary religious practices. What Stephan Palmié calls “two conceptually distinct but practically intertwined ritual idioms...” referring to Reglas Ochas (Santería) and Reglas Congas (Palo

Monte), illustrates the complexities of diasporic development in Cuba but also a politics of productions between religious practices (Palmié 2002:25). The dichotomous relationship of these religious/ethnic identities, their historical and political relationship as part of racialized concepts of Africa and their distinct interaction in the Cuban experience, underscore religious distinctions while establishing an interrelated configuration of AfroCuban religiosity and ethnicity.

Even in light of the heterogeneous nature of the African diaspora, the notions of ‘race’ homogenized dialogues of diasporic discourse and projected new social realities upon the people of both the colony and the nation. How race translates into diasporic identity relates closely to the distinction of race as cultural category. Notions of Africinity disseminated through aesthetic religious descriptions, particularly descriptions from colonial and national perspectives, presented African-identified religion as primitive. Some African religious philosophies flourished in the New World, others faded away, and still others exist in dynamically interrelated productions of new social conceptions and experience. The common descriptions of Reglas Congas as ‘magic’ and ‘witchcraft’, seldom applied to Santeria/Reglas Ochas, uncover a representation and practical perspective of religious ranking. This interpretation results from both political conceptions of supposed African identity and their corresponding religious forms. By examining Reglas Congas in contemporary description of AfroCuban ideology and ritual as ‘crude’ and ‘malignant’ strongly suggest the representation of culture as socially construed and contingent on corporeal and theoretical corpus.

The colonial demarcation of subjects produced representational differences through the observation and categorization of religious practices. Historical analysis of such theoretical tropes makes clear the institutionalized colonial perspectives of certain subjects, typically in negative and racialized manners. The continuations and contestations of these ideological tropes

marked failed national attempts to define citizenship outside of ethnic, racial, and religious categories (Ortiz 1906; Anderson 1988; Moore 1995). The policy and representations built around the ‘Congo’ in Central Africa (and among the colonies) remained stigmatized by cannibalism, witchcraft, and brutality, while, for some, the practice of Reglas Congas served as a strong source of identity. Past discussions of ‘religion’, as well as ‘magic’ and ‘witchcraft’, by anthropologists and historians of religion construct hierarchism among such terms. These terms are still used to describe contemporary cultural forms in terms of their value as representatives of a modern reality (Palmié 2006; Geschiere 1992). Palmié argues that the political context of contemporary bodies is ever-present in the forms of personalized AfroCuban ritual objects (Palmié 2006). The deconstruction of cultural meanings in fields of power, legitimacy, and practice, uncover how multiple social actors integrate concepts of ‘religion’ to understand and categorize the cultural activity of Palo Monte and Afro-Cuban religiosity. How ‘religion’ exists in conceptual fields of society influences the practical and theoretical formations of identity. Past ethnocentrically ordered cultural schema expounded ‘religion’ as a cultural marker and produced arrangements of racialized subjects.

The word ‘culture’ in every context has ambiguous meanings but in the case of AfroCuban religion established a generally twofold reference to African-derived identity, both Congo and Lucumi/Yoruba. Although a multitude of diverse peoples had arrived in Cuba (Mandinga, Ganga, Ibo, Carabali, Arara, etc.), these identifications only reside in historical accounts and in past dialogues of Cubans<sup>5</sup>. Within a mostly Congo/Yoruba dichotomy of religious expression, the representation of social and historical connections to African cultural practices is somewhat

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<sup>5</sup> In the case of the Carabali many forms and beliefs have been evoked in Abakua societies of Western Cuba. Arara forms are still present but are confined to regional areas, among personal and artistic contextual displays, and are at the peripheries of greater AfroCuban representation (Feijoo 1986; Martinez Furé 1979; Millet 1998).

limited. What remain important are the ways people embrace and express ideas of identity utilized through past models to construct their own meaning. These categories, events, histories, and interpretations produce social connotations distinctive to Cuba and fashion a distinct cultural experience.

“Lucumi”-a reference to West African people including Yoruba, Ibo, and many others, (now referred to as Yoruba) represent a Cuban category not unlike “Congo”, which also arrange several different people in a single classification. Palo Monte (Reglas Congas), Santeria (Reglas Ochas), and special socio-religious groups like the “Abakua”- a secret society of disparate religious affiliates joined together in a Carabali-identified fraternal union are examples unique to Cuba. The social space, cultural activity, and religious concepts of Cuba illustrate well exceptional hybridity of Caribbean culture (Mintz 1984; Palmié 2002). Palmié’s description of Aponte’s library illustrates hybridity by examining his literary sources pertaining to history, African identity, and philosophy. Palmié furthers the analysis by contending with the ways Spanish officials interpreted Aponte’s social position, along with of his arrangement of images and iconography, as a threat to Spanish control. The reputation of Palo Monte is no less political and is routinely scrutinized as witchcraft. The position of Palo Monte is less prestigious or at least the representation of religious practice and its underlying motives tends to be negative. Some practitioners of Santeria reserve these Palo practices for only malefic intent, specifically referring to it as black magic, brujeria<sup>6</sup> (Gonzalez 1992). But the interpretation of brujeria, that is, the word’s usage in the context of Palo practices and beliefs, does not reserve the use of such a word to the dark belly of spiritual warfare but a source of power (not necessarily evil). The use of ‘brujo’ as a descriptive word illustrates clearly the diversions or derivations of meaning

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<sup>6</sup> Brujeria refers to negative religious work or witchcraft. In AfroCuban religiosity Palo practitioners are referred to as brujo (sorcery or witch).

among people. A brujo, as it is associated with Palo practices, is known to be efficient and effective, reserving a potent position in the practices of AfroCuban religion (Cabrera 1954/1983).

Researchers and students alike ignore metaphors of ‘mixing’ and understand culture production as a dynamic reality, pinpointing pressures, people, and processes in a field of negotiated symbolic and practical operations (Bourdieu 1994; Baudrillard 1996; MacGaffey 1993). The context of the Caribbean, or, more specifically, the black populations of Cuba, illustrates a spatial sociopolitical means of cultural formation. The variation that exists today in religious families and existed in cabildos and associations of African descendants suggest differences in identity production. The ability to distinguish practice from disparate fields of identity, always keeping in mind spaces of power that politically unified and categorized people, speaks to a cultural synergy of production. This is part of why today we have strong ideas of ‘Congo’ in Cuba, not solely due to colonial ordering, but to the production of cultures on the level of practices. The meaning of ‘culture’ is formed by individual/group ideas through cognitive processes of learning, presenting, and contesting in sociopolitical spaces. This study is an attempt to frame the practices known as Reglas Congas and analyze critically the magnitude of representations of race and religion in the transfiguration of antecedents in ‘Congo’ identity in Cuba. Representation produced within European empires and currently in nation states have their foundations in constructed meaning and designation of past colony, its spaces, its languages, and its standards. Colonial historical departures from Africa, that coalesce within the Cuban Islands, are present in the conceptualization of history, theory, and specifically in the negative representations of AfroCuban religiosity. Even today those practicing Palo Monte deal with a great deal of misperception and prejudice.

Descriptions like ‘Black’, ‘Cuban’, ‘African’, ‘Caribbean’, and ‘Congo’ represent several abstract categories used in the assembly of Cuban social identity and diaspora (Mintz 1976; Hanchard 1999; Gilroy 1993; Hall 2001). A “worldwide subordination of nonwhites” was accentuated in approaches to African culture by identifying the cultural, religious, and moral inferiorities of African people (Ferreira da Silva, 1998, p.230). The 20<sup>th</sup> century distinctions of Cuban religious practice, separated in theory by vague (but socially significant) ethnic categories like Congo (Reglas Congas/Palo Monte) or Lucumi/Yoruba (Reglas Ochas/Santeria), replicate a shell of former cultural groups consolidated racially and, at best, in a handful of African-identified cultures. The foundations of diasporic definition, that is, ‘origins’, ‘movement’, and ‘continuity’, are no longer the main focus of diasporic analysis yet our language is inherently producing its conceptual essence. Perspectives developed in negotiations of African representation and practice in Cuba established a unique religiosity only found in Cuba, yet always comparable, and even compatible, to other diasporic cultural production and other local African spaces. The development of Cuban African ethnicity is better understood by the interaction of actors in AfroCuban communities and their relationship with the conceptions in the immediate space. This analysis seeks to uncover the meaning of diasporic religious distinctions, not by connecting people to geographic or cultural origins (original spaces) but by understanding sociocultural dynamics of heterogeneous people within a socially racialized homogeneous status. Practitioners engaged in both religious practices represent a greater AfroCuban religious identity, one that is multifarious and interconnected, both in competitive definitions of difference and as components of interrelated diasporic religious consciousness.

The confines of transatlantic atrocity attacked the cultural fiber of its participants and resulted in a particular cultural development in new fields of community, conception, and

character (Patterson 1983; Fanon 1967). First, African-identified religion contends with a historical stigma of primitivity that continues today. Second, that politics of practice produces both competition and interdependency between distinct cultural identities that developed (together) a unique AfroCuban religiosity. Ideas expressed in 20<sup>th</sup> century anthropology and the depictions of practitioners' perspectives intersect, forming a partial landscape of AfroCuban religious idiosyncrasy. Not unlike the colonial theoretical representations, practitioners have their own biases and distinct ideas about AfroCuban religions. The diasporic politics produced derivative meanings of colonial frameworks and are part of many paleros' schemes of history, spirituality, and power.

### **Methods and Ethnographic Perspectives in Researching Reglas Congas**

The majority of my fieldwork was spent in El Oriente province, but I also spent time in the provinces of La Habana and La Matanzas. The ethnographic portion of this dissertation presents multiple practitioners' perspectives (from three provinces of Cuba) on religious identity, ritual, and belief. Multiple practitioners' perspectives demonstrate at times contradiction and continuity. So too, many paleros (nganguleros, mayomberos, and kimbiseros) are not represented on public levels but are active participants in the production of these practices. Missing from this inquiry are the views of practitioners from Camaguey, Pinar Del Rio, Cienfuegos and other areas of Cuba. I once heard that you can't explain mystery and Palo Monte is known as a deeply secretive and mysterious religion. These secrets are not the focus of this dissertation; rather I intend to show the representations (inside and outside of religious practice) of Reglas Congas, and its connections to African-identified cultural identity. How practitioners identify themselves connect religious practices to greater forms of social mechanism, community, and religiosity. This ethnographic description represents one narrative possibility and is not representative of all practitioners of this religion. A wide range of personal and institutional perspectives generated

in this text represent my interpretation of several Cuban practitioners' and researchers' viewpoints.

The works of Natalia Bolivar, Jose Millet, Jesus Fuentes, Joel James, among others, have created a body of Cuban work centered on the Congolese diaspora in Cuba (Bolivar 1998; Millet 1998; Fuentes 2001; James 2001). My reading of recent ethnographic representation and my interaction with practitioners and researchers will assist my critical understanding of conceptual methods through which Reglas Congas is understood as both a cultural marker and as an example of 'diaspora' and 'identity'. This examination of Reglas Congas will contribute to a body of anthropological perspectives and knowledge surrounding the political representation of contemporary African-identified cultures of the Americas (Matory 2005; Apter 2002; Palmié 2002). That is this study contributes to the understanding of Palo Monte by engaging Matory's contributions as fluid interactive networks, Palmié's reinterpretation of the modern meanings or 'modernities', and Apter's 'deep knowledges'. This approach questions fixed notions raised in theoretical approaches to culture and focuses on the sociopolitical context where actors produce ideas and motivate cultural forms and meanings.

Multiple aspects of Reglas Congas are disputed among practitioners. Distinction of variations within forms such as Briyumba, Kimbisa, and Mayombe are recognized and accepted by many practitioners according to their histories, families, and nfumbis (dead spirits). The productions of culture and its representation results from the networks or social circles in any given religious production, between religious ceremonies or debates held in oral (or written) presentations/publications, disagreements among religious families, and contrasting artistic productions and public displays of authenticity (Barnet 1984 verses Zueske 1997). Cuban research institutions, for example, Casa de Africa (La Habana and Santiago), Casa de Caribe

(Santiago), and Fundacion de Fernando Ortiz (La Habana), offer both educational opportunities for research and opportunities for cultural recognition. Unfortunately all systems are bound in institutionalized networks, set up by researchers, and typically reflect specific pursuits. Consciously and unconsciously, these pursuits are mandated by selected agenda. So who and what are seen? This is an important part of understanding how the representation of cultural phenomena exists in the production of ethnography and research as authentic.

The ways perspectives are understood about Palo Monte, those images, ideas, and actions associated with this religion, and how such ideas have been changed, appropriated, and rejected, are part of my research considerations. Descriptions of my ethnographic interactions with Palo practitioners- a series of observations, conversations, and interviews- are presented using fictitious names and the locations of religious munanso are kept abstract. My experiences in Cuba, in the ceremonies of prominent paleros, over the last eight years reinforce my ability to speak of these practices but also have uncovered the limitations of my foreign perspective. The position as foreign researcher is not a subtle one; it possesses benefits and limitations in research already demonstrated by many Cuban scholars (James 2001; Millet 1998; Larduet 2002). The connection between Palo Monte, its depiction as 'Congo', 'brujo' and 'magic', stems from historical conceptualizations of Africa, religion, and race but also a process of identity formations within Cuban communities. Colonial ideas and structures still linger, but how and what has been formed through communities/individuals subverts particular meanings to recreate new notions of identity.

The following pages focus on my ethnographic experience and critical interpretation of perspectives surrounding Palo Monte in Cuba. The second chapter addresses the 20<sup>th</sup> century production of Cuban history and the important role it plays in our current representation and

understanding of Congo identity in Cuba. The third chapter examines the specific arrangements of religious practices formed by interactions between practitioners, and represent how Cuban Congo religious philosophy is practiced within Palo munansos (religious families). How Congo philosophy interacts with West African orisha worship of Santeria formed a historical contingent for interdependency and competition among AfroCuban representation and consciousness. My experiences and interviews with multiple practitioners, particularly nganguleros, are at the center of this study. The fourth chapter considers the ritual object known as the nganga (cauldron of the dead), which is the central focus of Palo ritual practices (MacGaffey 1993). Specifically, the connections of nkisi power objects (of Central Africa) to the ngangas of Cuba, representative of a cultural form, link diasporic practices to Central Africa peoples (MacGaffey 1993; Thompson 1984). The anthropological/cultural representations of African forms (art, culture, religion), specifically African Caribbean and Central African cultural forms, have greatly impacted the ways we speak of Reglas Congas. The fifth chapter evaluates the literary production, institutional representations, and contemporary practitioners' perspectives that contribute to the 21<sup>st</sup> century understanding of Congo-derived cultural forms. Representational agents create what is being produced and consumed as Cuban Congo. The sixth chapter addresses the use of diaspora and diasporic classification as it relates to Cuban Palo Monte. The demographic dynamics of Cuban citizenry and conceptual formulation by actors in the socio-historical space construct the African diasporic cultures of Cuba. The last chapter examines the importance of race and the ways that the identification of African peoples by former colonial powers impacted our current understanding of contemporary Palo Monte. The ways Central African-derived religion were understood by the Cuba's early scientists and writers continues to dominant their representation. This study focuses on Cuban Reglas Congas as a prevailing set of ideas and activities negotiated

by communal actors and set in motion by contemporary interpretations of history and African identity in Cuba.

CHAPTER 2  
THE HISTORICAL GENEALOGY OF REGLAS CONGAS: CUBAN DIALOGUES AND  
THE IDENTIFICATION OF AFRICAN RELIGION

**Narrating ‘Afro’ and ‘Congo’ Ethnicity in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Cuban History**

In 1902, Cuba’s independence from Spain was celebrated and new characterizations of “raceless” citizenship emerged throughout the nation. These first attempts of establishing the Cuban population as culturally diverse continue to be pertinent in contemporary Cuban identity. Nevertheless, early 20<sup>th</sup> century perspectives regarding the make-up of Cuban citizenry informed lingering colonial fears of black insurrection, which left little room for empathetic interpretations of AfroCuban citizenry (Duharte 1993; Ferrer 2000; Duany 2000). The first notable Cuban contribution to the study of AfroCubans came about from Fernando Ortiz’s research as a criminologist (Ortiz 1906). Soon abandoning the prejudicial frameworks of criminology, Ortiz focused on Cuban culture, particularly African-derived Cuban culture (Ortiz 1926). According to Fernando Ortiz the composition of Africans who were transported to Cuba during the Spanish reign included the following groups: Abalo, Abaya, Acocua, Achanti, Angola, Angunga, Apapa, Arara, Arriero, Bambara, Banguela, Bañon, Benin, Berberi, Berun, Bibi, Biringoyo, Bondo, Bosongo, Bran/Bras, Bricamo, Briche, Brisuela, Bungame, Cacanda, Cambaca, Campeche, Carabali, Casanga, Congo, Dahome, Efi, Egguaddo, Eyo, Elugo, Embuyla, Enchica, Engüei, Ensenza, Entontera, Epa, Esola, Fanti, Fee, Fire, Fulas, Ganga, Gola, Guineos, Hatan, Iechas, Ibos, Ingré, Iola, Iolof, Isieque, Loanda, Loango, Longoba, Lucumi, Macua, Machagua, Mandinga, Manî, Masinga, Matumba, Mayombe, Mina, Mobangue, Mombasas, Mondongos, Montembo, Mozambique, Mumbala, Mumbaqué, Mumboma, Mundamba, Mundembo, Munyacara, Muyaca, Musabela, Musombo, Musongo, Musoso, Musundi, Oro, Orumbo, Popo, Quisiamá, Quisi/Kissi, Rey, Siguatos, Suame, Tacua, Viafara, and Zape (Ortiz 1916: 41-59). Today in Cuba no such diversity exists in religious or cultural representation. Spanish archives

assisted researchers like Ortiz in the reconstruction of Cuba's African legacy, but the realities of AfroCuban religion, its lived practice, are only partly represented in these colonial papers. That is, the religious dialogues of contemporary Cuba do not reflect Ortiz's diverse ethnic register and suggest that the reality of cultural production is subject to ongoing sociopolitical genesis (Mintz 1976; Trouillot 1998). The reformulation of various ethnic identities by social recognition and cognition underscore both a sociopolitical enactment of ethnicity and the conceptual and material interaction of its actors.

In this chapter I address the conceptualization (and consolidation) of African-identified groups in Cuba, reflected in distinctions like 'Lucumi<sup>1</sup>' and 'Congo', developed over time. Today the Yoruba and Congo identities are connected to the two most represented African-identified religions (Santeria and Palo Monte) in Cuba. The ways that Cuban African-identified religions are juxtaposed, sometimes complementary, oppositional, and simultaneous, demonstrate a political construction of ethnic status and religious representation. The arrangement of religious knowledge and cultural identity of both religions, embraced by individuals concurrently, illustrate the Cuban notions of 'cruzado<sup>2</sup>' common in the discourse of AfroCuban practitioners and researchers (Barnet 1995; James 2001). The history of political exchanges, colonial conceptions, and corporeal interaction created context for the construction of AfroCuban identity.

This study traces perspectives on African culture from monothestic racial certainty to 20th century ethnographic cultural representation and examines how African culture is sorted by perspectives of geographic, linguistic, and cultural difference. By understanding historical

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<sup>1</sup> The term Lucumi is no longer used and was replaced by Yoruba. Lucumi was determined improper because it consisted of several groups (see Brown 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Cruzado refers to the convergence of several religious traditions in one practitioner (for example, a person who is a santero, palero, and a espiritista, etc.) see Miguel Barnet 1995.

perspectives of ethnic categories, we are able to better understand the impact of representation of contemporary AfroCuban religions. What are the foundations of difference in the 20<sup>th</sup> century categorical dissection of African identity in Cuba? How can we understand the process of identity within the production of history and how is that construction important to contemporary African-identified Cuban religions? What does this maturation of African Cuban identity say about how we understand and identify ‘culture’ and ‘cultural affiliation’? What do stories and histories surrounding current African-identified religion tell us about the political construction of reality? Most specifically, what makes the characterizations of Reglas Congas, represented as coming from the Congo, distinct within the development of AfroCuban religiosity?

### **Chapter Synopsis-What is this Chapter and What is it Doing?**

The point of this chapter is to show the importance of historical space in representations of AfroCuban religion. The construction of cultural ideas and images by a set of colonial conceptions, particularly those of race, religion, and civility, frame the national characterization of AfroCubans. The enduring legacy of Spanish heritage and Catholicism continues to be produced in Cuban construction of religious ideas, ethnic categories, and racial distinction. National perspectives focus on dialogues of egalitarian citizenry while continuing to privilege Spanish constituency and undermining constructions of AfroCuban representation. Early national constructions of AfroCuban identity were plagued by negative characterizations that further complicated the conditions of liberated black communities. How conceptions of religion and race underscore dialogues of difference in AfroCuban religiosity is the main focus of this chapter.

I will introduce the ideas and practices that have created a cultural understanding surrounding Congo-identified religions in Cuba. This will include literature that produced notions about African descendants, AfroCuban religiosity, transatlantic migrations, and

Caribbean cultures. Cultural practices are sustained, in part by ideas and rituals, but how such ideas and practices are reproduced remains varied. The variation of religious perspectives speaks to modes of change and pervasive politics in religious representations and practices. These characterizations, whether romantic or demonic, are important to the ways such practices are embraced or categorized in both cultural analysis and religious activity. The importance of what is learned in the religious families of Palo is not necessarily dichotomized or separate from what is generated at the public level, in academia, or in tourism (Geertz 2001; Foucault 1984; Appadururai 1996). The historical factors that have shaped the way Palo Monte is lived and the diasporic identity of the Central African diaspora are fundamental to this analysis.

I intend to illustrate how Reglas Congas is understood, or at least how, action, belief, and representations have relied on ideas derived from colonial constructions of culture. In both African localities and in the Western Hemisphere, the demarcation of African peoples for the justification of producing labor regimes underscores the corporeality of diasporic identity (Fanon 1967; Patterson 1982; Mbembe 2001). How historical constructions of ethnicity became a foundation in religious identity within Palo practices reveal a socially constructed conception. The idea of “Congo” diasporic categorizations fits within an assortment of other diasporic notions in Cuba (Spanish, Haitian, Chinese, Judaic, Native Americans, Lucumi/Yoruba, Arara, and others). The colonial frameworks are not absolute and are at times, learned and executed outside of formal institutions. Social spaces where people interact and express identity are constantly fluctuating, within a set of ideological and material factors, creating the dynamic for invocation of belief, ritual forms, identity, and history. The ideas understood as orthodoxy are negotiated and enacted within the constructs of one’s practice and belief (Bourdieu 1994; Scott 1994).

AfroCuban literature has had great impact on the understanding of African-derived practices in Cuba and is one of the most famous diasporic spaces of the world. Many have come to know Santeria (Reglas Ochas) as a result of this large body of literature, which has increased the participation of these popular religious practices. Reglas Congas (Palo Monte Mayombe) has recently gained more public interest for its unexplored cultural particularities. Although literature on the Congo practices in Cuba exists, generally public interest and publications have centered on West African diasporic phenomena (Cabrera 1979; Barnet 1995). This study then centers its critique on theoretical notions presented by such figures as Ortiz, Bastide, and others, while simultaneously gauging a sociopolitical impact of such notions. Critical insight can be gained by reexamining notions like 'diaspora', 'syncretism', 'origins', 'culture', and 'identity' in the production of meaning (Palmié 2002; Matory 2005; Apter 2002; Hall 2001). In order to understand meanings produced in Cuban literature on Afro-Cuban religiosity and the spaces of operation in practice, I hope to show both practice and representation as both a predetermined sociopolitical construct and a spontaneous and unpredictable production.

The study of religion was crucial in the perspectives formed about AfroCubans. The early ethnographers tended to treat religious practices as fixed representation of culture. Early studies focused on rituals, beliefs, and ceremonial activity. In the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century, anthropologists and researchers approached African-identified peoples with new perspectives of culture (Apter 1991; Mintz 1983; Trouillet 1992; Scott 1991; Martinez Furé 1979, Bolivar 1970; Barnet 1995). The examination of the musical rhythms, beliefs, myths, ceremonial rituals, religious paraphernalia, and languages has continued to be a focus in late 20<sup>th</sup> century cultural investigation (Millet 1996; Lachatañeré 1992; Castelleños 1977). Nevertheless, researchers shifted focus from understanding culture as a consistent set of forms to engaging people's

(practitioner's) formulation of meanings in personal narratives. New methodological approaches abandoned views that gave importance to orthodoxies of cultural forms and instead centered on the perspectives of practitioners. The 20<sup>th</sup> century interpretations of practitioners by researchers legitimized the reputations of those studied but also reflected attempts by researchers to present authentic perspectives. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the practitioner became the focal point of AfroCuban religious studies and in many cases authored their own books (Larduet 2002; Beltancourt 1995). What ideas produced in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century still contribute to the current understanding of Reglas Congas? What part do representational reconstructions of history play in Cuban national understanding of its African-identified constituency?

This chapter centers on reconstruction of AfroCuban history by national perspectives of identity and religion. The historical perspectives that continue in current descriptions and analyses of Cuban culture frame my analysis of contemporary Reglas Congas. Critical evaluations of methodological and conceptual models force us to bear witness to our historical constraints while concurrently understanding their influences. The spaces of 21<sup>st</sup> century practitioner still coincide with the edifice of former colonial perspective but reflect distinctive Cuban realities of plural religious identity. The historical considerations of political space, colonial history, and cultural models serve as a foundation for the representation and practice of AfroCuban religions. The ways 20<sup>th</sup> century researchers studied religion and culture reflect a paradigm of both political and cultural nature. Today, numerous cultural studies by practitioners, state institutions, and researchers focus on African-derived cultural practices and illustrate the current exaltation of African-identified cultural forms in Cuba (James 2001; Barnet 1995). Historically, this was not the case. In order to understand in part the religious characteristics of

actors and activities of AfroCuban religions one must examine the historical presence of the Catholic Church as well as the impact of early national discourses.

### **What Every Good Scholar Should Know About Reglas Congas: Spanish Catholicism and Nationalizing African Cuban Religious Practices**

The emergence of African religions within the production of European perspectives by writers, explorers, and missionaries dominated early national perspectives of African identity (Nisbet 1789; Mungo Park 2000/1799; Weeks 1914; Cureau 1915; Ortiz 1916). How Cubans understood and described various African groups, their political structures and cultural activities, developed over periods of exchanges and confrontations. The subjects discussed in the descriptions of these encounters generally dominated with observations of travel, nature, and Eurocentric comparisons to Christianity. The descriptions of African traditional religion created a monolithic understanding of African religions with subtle distinctions between African groups. The core of such observations illustrates how conceptual models of religion were typically applied to conceptualizations of a racially homogenized Africa. The established term of 'fetish', coined by the Portuguese, suited European description of religious paraphernalia and was typically applied throughout all of Africa. The description of West African group by Mungo Park, Scottish explorer, like many descriptions of African religion, Central African or otherwise, placed emphasis on the Christian value of monotheism but also 'primitive' superstitions (Park 2000). Using terms like "Pagan natives", "superstition", and "wretched mortals" to describe African peoples, Park notes the unworthiness of "Negros" religious perspectives and points to their noncompliance with Christian beliefs (Park, Mungo 2000/1799: 247-248). The representations of African cultures using distinctions of 'race' and 'slave' characterizations during the periods of exploration and colonialism continued in the national understanding of AfroCuban.

Authors like Ortiz used many historical perspectives to piece together the diasporic presences of African diversity. The collection and analysis of African religious images, cultural forms, and 'primitive' art reflected the condescending ethnocentrism of the time (Schildkrout and Keim 1998). French, English, Portuguese, and Dutch descriptions of African religion, landscapes and fauna intrigued European readers. Close to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the revolutions in print media increased descriptions of African culture (Parke 1969[1891]; Anderson 1983).

The inhabitants of the districts neighboring the Nyanza appear to have great faith in the rain-giving powers of the more gifted member of the human family. And as so many of their worldly possessions, whether articles of necessity or luxury, depend largely on fair supply of the moisture descending from above, a professional rain-maker is a person possessing vast social importance-somewhat similar in kind to that of the nganga (charm doctor) of the Lower Congo, even if not quite so high in degree. We afterwards ascertained that among the Bari tribe in the equatorial province there is a hereditary practitioner of this profession who is greatly venerated and looked up to, and who displays great skill in extracting large fees for useless advice.

Since we left the Congo I have not seen any idols, and all the aborigines, so far as I have met them, appear not to believe in any supreme being. This is also conclusive proof of the absence of Masonic principles amongst these people (Parke, Thomas Heazle 1969[1891]: 221).

In this case, the conceptualization of the charm doctor (eventually known as the African witchdoctor) directly link the so-called fetish object (charmed object) to the Nganga Priest. Notions of religious inferiority and racialized homogenous categorizations, assumed in superficial dialogues of African cultures, created religious, and eventually scientific, means of validation. The descriptions of Central African people were not unlike most European descriptions of other African groups. The monolithic representation of racialized savagery and religious differences make clear the core of early representation of Africa. The distinction of Congo, its history of actors and events, solidify the European paradigms of the time. The various and eventual concept of 'Congo' centered on ideas of uncharted regions and their geographical (and ideological) distance from civilization. The production of perspective and cultural

representation of 'Congo' continued to become more pronounced and poignant during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Concurrently publications about culture focused on religious beliefs, ritual practices, to explain differences between religious forms (Bohannon and Glazer (eds.) 1988). Questions of monotheism, magic, myth, and ritual were common focal points in the analysis of religion and civilization. The later depiction of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* captured the imagination of many 20<sup>th</sup> century Europeans and their colonial diaspora regardless of the several hundred years of interaction between European nations and Central Africa (Conrad 1902). The association of Central African people and uncivilized characterizations of religion, mentality, and culture left its mark of the development and distinctions found in Cuban Africanity.

Cuban identity is marked by the evaluations of Christian political perspectives. The theoretical models of religion, culture, and race created within the institutions of Europe undermined non-European peoples (Mudimbe 1988, Said 1979). These models intersect with political notions of national citizenry and later to AfroCubanismo of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The influence of Catholic ritual and cosmology, reflected in symbolic exchanges of representation and ritual in many African-derived religions, suggest the political processes involved among AfroCuban practitioners and researchers. Spanish Catholicism has marked the fabric of symbolism, aesthetics, and cosmology of Cuban Espiritismo, Reglas Congas, Reglas Ochas, and Voodoo. The use of Catholic iconography in Reglas Congas, although not as prolific as the adoption of Catholic images for the Santerian Orisha, is representative of a Caribbean spatial context where symbols and ideas crossed and developed into current forms. The historical presence of the Catholic Church helps underscore the current identification of Catholicism in Cuba identity but also its dominance in the formulation of religious identity.

## The Formulation of Reglas Congas and AfroCuban Religiosity

The dialogues about African descendants in Cuba were not invented overnight. Both, the practice and descriptions of culture developed from an experience of representation, coordination, and conception (Howard 1998; Ortiz 1916). African frontiers and colonial developments in the New World created a historical context for the national perspectives on African-identified religion. So too, how enslaved people passed the African-identified religious concepts, ritual practice, and activities to future generations contended with colonial conceptions of religion, identity, and culture. The Spanish traditions of *cofridas*, *cabildos*, and mutual aid societies are a common source for uncovering African histories and identity in Cuba (Ortiz 1921, Howard 1998). *Cabildos*<sup>3</sup> preserved the identification of certain groups and united people under an implicit identity. Carabali, Congo, Mina, Mandingo, Lucumi are some examples of ethnic categories found in historical records (Howard 1998; Childs 2006, Howard 1998). At first *cabildos* leadership and policies related directly to the Spanish law, but as Spanish power waned, so too did the control and oversight of *cabildo* activities (Brown 2003; Palmié 2002; Ortiz 1992). Matt Childs illustrates the various ways self-identification revolved around the categories made real by European encounters with Africans. This references the constructing of *cabildos* titles, roles, and meanings.

While government officials referred to the *cabildo* leaders as *Capataz* or captain, some nations came up with their own titles. The free black José Caridad Herrera described Antonio José Barriga, the leader of the Carabali *cabildos*, as “Captain General”. Authorities learned that “inside the house” of the Kongo nation, members called the *capataz* Joaquin “Kongo King”. The difference between the government-given titles of *capataz* and the chosen title, by some *cabildo* leaders, of the captain general or king probably did not represent any vast difference in the function of nations. The distinction does not reveal the tension that informed the process of identification and self-

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<sup>3</sup> *Cabildos*, or later known a mutual aid societies, were social organization set up by freed or enslaved Africans for sociopolitical activities in the AfroCuban communities. These organizations were approved by Spanish authority and are known to exist as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century (see Howard 1998).

identification. The decision by the Kongoleses to give their leader the title of king might be considered as something more than a generic reference to monarchial authority.

Throughout the eighteenth century one of the claims to legitimate rule in the Kongo region was made by asserting, "I am the King of the Kongo". Civil wars split the Kingdom of the Kongo into various camps that claimed adherence to a military king or a blacksmith king, which may have informed who became selected as a leader of a *cabildo* in Cuba. Some *cabildos* eschewed the leadership titles of *capataz* and *captain* provided by the colonial government. Perhaps they did so in reaction to how colonial society disproportionately shaped the discourse of identity, from stripping Africans of their birth names to deciding what titles could be given to *cabildo* leaders (Childs 2006: 112).

The membership of African-identified *cabildos* were numerous and ethnically diverse (Howard 1998). The dominance of Yoruba slaves in the nineteenth century coupled with the slow down of Central African arrivals suggests the repercussion of Lucumi/Yoruba ideological dominance on 20<sup>th</sup> century religious production. Yet, such a suggestion misses the obvious pluralism in Cuban realities. The organizations of religious beliefs and traditions, let alone African ethnicities, are produced by what Trouillot calls "local social relations", "colonizer's sociocultural outlook", "imperial tensions" and "metropolitan context" (Trouillot 1989: 704). The transitions from being a Spanish colony to an independent Cuban nation framed the ways AfroCuban identity was first a part of the national discourse.

### **The Cuban Nation, Ortiz and AfroCuban Religiosity**

The new ideological images of Cubans set forth during independence were comprised of ideas about equality and newly liberated images of Cuban national identity. The benefits of equal opportunities upon gaining national citizenship yielded little results for the first AfroCubans. Nevertheless, the ideas reflected in new notions of 'Cubaness' reveal a political reality of Cuba's demographics and an idealized formulation of citizenry seldom attained among all citizens.

Intellectuals, politicians, and public figures of all colors and ideological tendencies argued throughout the postindependence period over whether the republic of all and for all was an achievement or simply a goal to be pursued. A dominant discourse is clearly discernible, however. It maintained that both blacks and whites had struggled together for

independence, that the republic did not recognize privileges of any kind, and that the constitution clearly stated that all Cubans were equal before the law. Blacks allegedly enjoyed the same opportunities as all citizens, based only on their merits, education, and patriotism. They could vote, hold public office, enter educational institutions, and perform any job for which they were qualified (De la Fuente, Alejandro 1998:46).

New national distinctions, like past colonial perspectives, still represented African subjects as inferior by typically constructing racial distinctions (Brown 2003; Ortiz 1906). The role of African descendants in the development of the Cuban nation was honored, but the political assembly was dispassionate about the participation of the AfroCuban citizen. Ideas about AfroCubans grew from a platform of discourse focused on disparities and prejudices distinguished by race, but by also culture and folklore. The governmental appointments of men like Israel Castelleños and Fernando Ortiz, who studied the criminality of Cuba's population, represent the beginning of national constructions about AfroCuban citizen.

Fernando Ortiz's extensive works on African culture in Cuba are today considered a national treasure. A great number of Cuban institutions researching AfroCuban heritage and Cuban history honor Ortiz's legacy and owe much to his pioneering writings. Most importantly, the cannon of his work is seldom questioned in history of AfroCuban depictions and parallels perspectives still held by many Cubans. His first work, *El Brujo Negro*, 1906, exhibited the commonly held racist perspectives connecting criminal behavior to Black Cubans. Before Fernando Ortiz became an advocate for the study and preservation of AfroCuban culture, his work helped the state to demoralize its AfroCuban citizens. Later, Ortiz developed more admiration of AfroCubans during his extensive investigation of various music, religions, and histories of AfroCubans (Ortiz 1921(1992), 1926, 1992, 1993). A change in Ortiz's perspective was eventually reflected in national perspectives. The characterization of AfroCubans in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century represented a newly acquired component of Cuban citizenship but also the struggle to be a collaborative member of the Cuban nation. The past conceptions of

Africa still plagued the production of representation surrounding the AfroCuban citizen and racist realities that were a part of their political position.

Images of hybridity, equality, and liberation surrounded the notion of “Cuban” and even today the island’s diverse citizenry is a point of national pride. 20<sup>th</sup> century theoretical contribution to Caribbean studies positioned the examination of such spaces by historicizing events of enslavement, warfare, colonization, emancipation, industrialization, and revolution (Ortiz 1947; Mintz 1976; Truillot 1998). Earlier national policy centered on increasing white populations and ignored the needs of black citizens. “The 1902 immigration law restricted nonwhite immigration, and between 1900 and 1929, approximately nine hundred thousand people from Spain and the Canary islands immigrated to Cuba” (Ayorinde, 2004: 41). Ideologies surrounding national identity, like the colorless Cuban, ignored racial distinctions in public rhetoric but maintained discriminatory actions following independence. Perspectives that silence the distinction of race in hopes of articulating a common Cuban identity are topics of several historical accounts of Cuban nationality. The threats from racial uprising and insurgency remained a concern of the state for many decades. The newly developed Cuban republic was not quick to embrace the African Cuban citizens. Formal government policies, scientific research, and political assignments suggest prejudicial treatment of AfroCuban citizens by the state (Ortiz 1906; Ayorinde 2004; De la Fuente 1998). The immoral description of African religious traditions was commonly part of such racist constructions.

More readily, the Cuban state’s fear of becoming a black nation spurred attempts to whiten the island by promoting the importation of Spaniards to work in Cuba. The condemnation of racial distinction became exceedingly more difficult to uphold, as social injustices were more and more evident. The AfroCuban citizens did not stand still but, in many instances, fought the

racist policies and segregation of the Cuban population. It is also true that political alliances were established between government officials and religious leaders (Brown 2003). The fear of a black Cuba and the apparent disregard for wellbeing of the AfroCuban stands at odds with the national rhetoric of Cubanity. These patterns of modern hybridity, its particular characterization of African derived religion, accentuate the production of cultural practices in Cuba. The contributions of Caribbean studies uncover the basic exchanges and development that have shaped the theories of Ortiz, Mintz, Price, Trouillot and others (Ortiz 1947; Mintz 1976; Price 1973; Trouillot 1998). The cultural variations found throughout the Caribbean are equally diverse and particular in the experience of AfroCubans. The accentuation of Cuba's pluralist character is also apparent in the fraternity of AfroCuban religion. How did the first national characterizations represent Central African-identified religious practices? And what do these first national characterizations reveal about the politics of cultural representation and the epistemology used in their construction?

### **20<sup>th</sup> Century Accounts of Reglas Congas in AfroCuban Religion: The Historical Description of 'Practices' in the Examination of African Religion**

The categorical associations of African religion with terms like 'primitive', 'folklore' and 'fetish' are present in much of the literary production (Pritchard 1937; Boas 1911; Ortiz 1916). The ways such terms are permissible for African identification exemplify a pattern inherent in western religious analysis. Such signification, its position as a subject, and to whom and what it is signifying, creates meaning through its position within established ideological models. The religious categories are both meaningful as descriptions, but more importantly, as points of reference, where arrangements of relationships to the referents, like 'primitive' and 'fetish', assume meaningful assignments. The arrangement of religion as 'primitive', 'modern', 'traditional' or 'local' also follows a historical and conceptual manner in the representation of

foreign people or subjects. The formulations of models of religion and the manners of their description speak to inherent cultural meanings ascribed to studies of religion, anthropology, and culture. These models have innate meanings in their conception. The approaches to African religion that focused on such things as animal sacrifice, ceremonial music, ritual paraphernalia, and the manipulation of the living world by ritual processes illustrate a certain categorical predisposition.

The literature on AfroCuban music, history and religious practices produced by Ortiz set a foundation for the research on AfroCuban ritual (Ortiz 1916, 1924, 1986, 1992). The distinction made between forms of beliefs and ritual and African religion set up the national understanding of the African-identified religions (Barnet 1969; Cabrera 1970). The descriptions of ritual and practices in AfroCuban religion are instantly connected to African origins and attached to the stigmas of colonial histories and political models. The theoretical assumptions that a set of ritual practices (or an orthodoxy of ritual manipulation) are key sources in the descriptions of African culture and are sustained by 20<sup>th</sup> century anthropological discourse (Evans-Pritchard 1937; Turner 1969; Mair 1969). The development of a set of ritual prescriptions underscores many of the first attempts at explaining AfroCuban religious practices (Herskovits 1937; Bascom 1950; Simpson 1978; Verger 1984). The categorizations of ritual paraphernalia, from drums to offerings, correspond directly to the formulation of a precise qualification of religious identification, meaning, and origins (Ortiz 1992/1921; Herskovits 1937). The relationship between uncovering distinct ritual practices and marking authentic ethnic types positions the logic of researchers' models as a process of uncovering fixed cultural productions. Such anthropological inquiry relies on assumptions of resilient forms in religious life, such as ritual and beliefs, and validates forms by comparisons to African 'cultural sources' (Apter 2001;

Matory 2005). Matory's analysis revolves around the migrations and interactions of actors while Apter's approach uncovers deeper meanings within ritual practice.

The suggestion that ritual analysis contains a set of racialized political meanings is important to understanding past descriptions of religion. Rituals have consistently been a part of the discourse on religion but the definitions of ritual have consistently changed over time (Evans-Pritchard 1937; Turner 1969; Geertz 1983). The distinctions between these practices by their social construction outside of practice and within practices situate differences between, say, Reglas Congas, Reglas Ochas, Espiritismo, Voodoo, and other Cuban religious practices. These characteristics speak to an already molded set of attributes resulting from past interaction between actors and ideas. These representations are subject to past descriptions of translated ethnic categories and sometimes contrived cultural meanings. The century old ideas circulated about Africa and specifically, Central Africa, range from fantastic to fascist (Tylor 1873/ In Bohannen(ed) 1988; Ortiz 1906; Weeks 1914). The Congo, known as the heart of Africa, embodies not only century old notions that depict the inferiority of African peoples but also the imagination of past European subjects. The past descriptions of Central African culture continue to be reproduced in the current representations of Central African identified religious diaspora.

The shift from Spanish colony to Cuban nation did little to change the negative representations of African-derived religious practices (Palmié 2002; Ortiz 1906; Howard 1998). The distinctions of Central African-identified religious forms as immoral and crude suggest the negative placement of Reglas Congas in AfroCuban religiosity. The role of witchcraft attached to the Central Africa society is reflected in the religious terrain developed in African identified Cuban religion. These negative descriptions that plague Palo practitioners represent a hierarchy in the representation of African Cuban religious persona. Not surprisingly, such distinctions

made by practitioners are maintained in separate practices of both traditions. Currently, practitioners of Reglas Congas have a reputation similar to past colonial images that portrayed African cultures in the most despicable light. It is also true that many practitioners embrace the image of the great African necromancer and self identify as ‘brujo’ (witch). The fear built around such representations serves to perpetuate the social effectiveness of bilongos (spells energized by the dead and natural forces) produced by Palo practitioners. The hierarchies of African-defined identity that rank moral and aesthetic distinctions do not always reflect the comparability or the reality of such religious beliefs, but rather, reflect reputations built from social interaction of practitioners.

### **The Contemporary Description of African Religions through the Analysis of the ‘Practitioner’**

The consideration of practitioners has always been a part of religious analysis, specifically, the individual’s socio-religious position of kinship, structure, and power. Rarely did past examinations focus deeply on individuals but rather on their title or position: “tatanganga”, “witchdoctor”, or “informant” (Cabrera 1979; Evans-Pritchard 1937; Turner 1969). The specific characterizations of narratives and studies of individuals’ relationship to the world increased in the literary narratives and representations of Cuban religious practices. (Millet 1998; Meneses 1994; Bolivar 1998; Murphy 1988) Yet the individual is always subject to the world around him/her, which suggests the tenuous relationship between representation and reality. The relationship between researcher and practitioner is at the intersection of presentation and perception (Cabrera 1979; Barnet 1968). More and more the depiction of anthropological subject specializes in precise analysis of historical instances or specific individuals (Millet 1998; Palmié 2002). Millet’s examination of practitioners’ perspectives and Palmié’s inquiry into Aponte’s life illustrate a direction of specificity. No longer are sweeping generalizations on cultural consensus

applied to a bound cultural group but single perspectives are arranged in the rubric of many possibilities and perspectives.

Students of Ortiz continued to investigate 20<sup>th</sup> century AfroCuban culture and expanded the ways religious experiences were understood and portrayed (Cabrera 1970; Martinez Furé 1979; Barnet 1995; Bolivar 1970). Bolivar demonstrates the authorship that accentuates the practitioner in the renditions of practices as related to AfroCuban religiosity. Detailed lists of religious practitioners, their religious names, speak to the authentication of her work throughout Cuba (Bolivar 1998). The relationship between researcher and informant is the central foundation in ethnographic portrayals and present in doctoral dissertations, cultural tributes and published anthropological work (Castelleños 1976; Mason 2002; Brown 2003; Nodal Ph.D. 1998). The collaboration of Cuban authors and practitioners within cultural displays accentuate the variations of local perspectives and symbolism but also core concepts that repeat throughout many examinations of Palo Monte Mayombe (Millet 1998; Monroe/Casa de Caribe 2000; Castelleños 1976).

By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, practitioners were no longer relegated to descriptions like “the old black Cuban woman”, but identified as practitioners, sometimes un-anonymously, in displays and description of AfroCuban practices (Ortiz/Foreward in Cabrera 2003; Millet 1998). Authors and researchers sometimes served practitioners as editors, liaisons and endorsers of practitioners’ religious testimonies (Millet 1998; James 2001; Bolivar 1998). The various languages, ritual activity, and cosmological philosophies were subject to practitioners’ explanations and the authors’ representation of those perspectives. The presumed perspectives associated with observers’ views, their effect on the representation of identity, history, and culture, were uncovered in many groundbreaking works (Said 2001; Foucault 1972; Fanon

1963). The recognition of individuals in the production of religious ideas and activities was more common in literature of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, which suggest a shift in the theoretical and methodological tactics of the researcher. The ways AfroCuban identity has continued to be explored throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century suggests a shifting outlook on cultural production (D. Scott 1991; Trouillot 1989).

### **Considering Methods in Contemporary and Historical Approaches of Signifying of African and African-Identified Religion: Historicizing the Methodological Shift from ‘Practices’ to ‘Practitioner’**

The methodological shifts that focuses on the practitioners and away from ritual reflect a reconsideration of static formulations of culture uniformity in religious practices. According to Fanon, the colonial and national production of African people referred to the construction of “the Negro” which underlines terms like ‘AfroCuban’ (Fanon 1963). Nevertheless, changes in the methodological approaches that question racist approaches and uncover the racialized experience of diaspora actors in Cuba and abroad (Lachatanere 1961; Geertz 1973). The critical reevaluations of concepts about subjects, cultures, and religion opened up new approaches that were less influenced by older perspectives. The past conceptions that represented knowledge/cultural transmission as fixed equivalence are highly questionable. The shift from ‘practices’ to ‘practitioners’ suggests the reconstruction of theoretical approaches to incorporate the personal experience of a given individual within various social relationships. The creation of several realities as opposed to a unified reality reflected more closely the perspectives of new theories of culture (Apter 2001; Scott 1999; Matory 2005). The politic of perspective intrinsic to these approaches corresponds directly with a critical cultural investigation (Mudimbe 1988; Bourdieu 1994).

Theories that searched for traceable origins and salient features are questioned by contemporary authors who construct culture in integrated forms that depend more on the

environments of actors and their productions of ideas (Palmié 2002; Brown 2003; Apter 1992). The reinterpretation of how representation acts as a signifier continues to suggest the fluidity of meanings that may be more about authored perspectives than the views of the practitioner. The portrayal of meaning by researchers is a matter of interpretation and is negotiated among various social and individual levels of perception. The historical evaluation of methodological approaches uncovers the political construction of changing attitudes in theoretical analysis (Scott 1991; Mudimbe 1988; Mbembe 2001). The critical assessment of empowerment and the ability of society to throw off the colonial and national constructions of African identity continue today.

The production of representation surrounding AfroCuban religion has reached new levels. Many researchers across the globe seek publications, studies and materials about AfroCuban religions. The collaboration of researchers and practitioners lead the literary production of description of AfroCuban religions (Bolivar 1997; Millet 1998; James 2001). The ways authors present practitioners perspectives and the ways practitioners present themselves have become essential in the depiction of AfroCuban religion. The considerations of culture and cultural authenticity by both anthropologists and practitioners involve dialogues with the past. These dialogues construct the points of validity and theoretical matters through the emphasis on practitioners' and anthropologists' knowledge production. A host of such productions illustrate not only changing perceptions of culture and cultural analysis, but also the materials and ideas that make Reglas Congas a distinct reality. Practitioners and authors are constantly in dialogues with the institutionalized construction of knowledge and history. The reexaminations of such concepts underlie the investigation of cultural forms and categories. The advancement of cultural analysis must engage the politics and developments that make ethnic markers and the production of cultural models distinct.

Today practitioners are sought for authentic information and are researchers' informants, public representatives, and authors of religious literature (Beltancourt 1995; Lachatañeré 1961; Larduet 2003). The ability of practitioners to represent themselves situates new representations in literature, cultural displays, and religious descriptions. The representational choices made by researchers and practitioners construct the contemporary understanding of AfroCuban history. The dialogues and discourses have never been more open to discussion. The approaches to cultural analysis that show how we signify meanings of religion, race, and identity connect the ways we engage our perceptions of reality both conceptually and practically.

### **The Historical Production of AfroCuban**

The convergence of a diverse cultural pool, colonial distinctions, national perspectives, and intellectual investigations impact how we construct history and meanings regarding AfroCuban religion. The productions of imagery, concepts, and meanings uncover an interpretive political dialectic that underscores the development of religious imagery and ethnic persona. The importance of critical evaluations surrounding how we speak of AfroCuban religiosity uncovers a construction of both political realities and the fluidity of cultural formulations. What is considered when addressing how we make ethnic and cultural distinctions? How does a construction of history produce the ways we speak of AfroCuban religion? What makes early categorization of African ethnic groups like Yoruba (Lucumi), Congo, Caribaldi heir apparent in contemporary categorization of AfroCuban religion? What are the historically significant junctures of political construction of African groups and identity and how do they reflect a political construction of social consensus and power within Cuban ranks and within the formulation of AfroCuban history? How has Reglas Congas been formed in relation to the other actors and religious categories within Cuba and how is it reflected by 21<sup>st</sup> century practitioners?

The examination of theoretical and stylistic approaches to the AfroCuban phenomena situates a Cuban literature and the political importance of representation and impact in Cuban society. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, actors such as Ortiz (eventually), separated themselves from older perceptions of religion formed from the colonial exploration of Africa. Herskovits, Ramos, Bastide, and Simpson generated a canon of work about the Africans of the New World. By the mid century a number of Cuban writers focused on the various aspects of AfroCuban religions, history and music (Lachchaneré 1946; Cabrera 1954; Leon 2001; Martinez Furé 1961; Barnet 1995; Bolivar 1970; James 2001; Millet 1996). According to David Brown, the current practices of Reglas Ochas are not the result of the ‘first ‘ Africans but an exchange of the later arrivals and a series of reform movements in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Brown 2003:132). The question is whether inevitable sociopolitical aspects of African warfare and colonization, including the enslaved, constitute a diasporic demographic. Groups of disparate actors whose ideas and consensus collaborated platforms of identity produced the interpretations that form their political and religious consciousness (James 2001; Larduet 2003; Bolivar 1998).

The popularity of AfroCuban religion continues to grow. The state supported tourist programs and academic and religious examination of Santeria, Palo Monte and Voodoo demonstrate a changing political perspective (Brown 2003; Hagedorn 2001). Researchers’ distinctions between local practices depend, in part, on an interpretation of Cuban history, specifically those histories that connect the presence of African populations, persons, and groups to certain regions (Hagedorn 2001; Brown 2003). The works of Cuban pioneers such as Ortiz and Cabrera stand as icons of AfroCuban research and have inspired the continuation of such studies. These authors remain a part of the construction of AfroCuban religion and are frequently a part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century representation. The reevaluations and critique of such figures are

essential to understand the historical perspectives of Cuba. Furthermore, the new researchers that form new relationships and interpretations, mindful of historical circumstances, are better prepared to contribute to an ever-changing Cuban experience.

Today, anthropologists contribute and compete with other anthropologists (and practitioners) in the representation of AfroCuban culture. The African representations of Cuban culture that intrigue researcher and tourists are part of informal and formal national productions. The representation and realities of Reglas Congas rely in part on its evocation of history. The ways that practitioners envision the past and set up the context for religious involvement underscore the contemporary representation and authentication. To solely understand Reglas Congas by its contemporary practice or its historicized place in past centuries will not uncover the complexities of cultural designation or its lived experience. The consideration of both the movement of contemporary practices and the characterizations of historical development are crucial in understanding commonly held perspectives on AfroCuban religions. The proliferation of African diasporic representations in the Western Hemisphere and the reputation of African-identified religions in Cuba are strong and numerous. The ways we shape our history impact how we construct our future identity. In the case of Palo Monte and its Congo identity, the examination of well-established dialogues of difference uncover more ambiguities than distinctions, and speak to political dissuasion of cultural production.

CHAPTER 3  
PALO MONTE PRACTITIONERS: RELIGIOUS RITUALS, BELIEFS, AND IDENTITIES IN  
CUBA

**Inquiries of ‘Congo’-Identified Religion in Cuba**

In 1997 the AfroCuban religious practices were well established in the lives, literature and educational institutions of Cuba. I had come to Cuba to research the less popularized African–derived practices known as Palo Monte. Having familiarized myself with the literary distinctions of Bantu and Yoruba forms I set out to learn more about the Central African-identified religion. 20<sup>th</sup> century authors and practitioners created our current representations and investigations of AfroCuban culture. The distinctions emphasized between religious practices are less significant than the fact that many practitioners involved themselves in several religious identities. Additionally socio-religious connectivity and variations of practitioners in the same neighborhood, in other parts of the island, and globally, secured for me not only the sundry manner of ritual and belief but also the modes of cultural production that contain a conceptual core of principles. Religious distinctions and concepts arranged by practitioners, that is, the descriptions presented to me and witnessed in ceremonial activities, varied among individuals of different religious munanso<sup>1</sup> and sometimes among individuals with the same affiliation. The manners through which practitioners enacted Congo rituals communally illustrated the importance of relationships between practitioners and how formulation of munanso activity produce a particular experience of identity, belief and practice. The route of initiation, instruction and practices produced in the confines of parental roles taken on by elders of the religion, specifically the Tata (Yaya) or Padrino (Madrino) direct the transmission of forms to the ahijados or newly initiated.

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<sup>1</sup> Munanso is understood as the associates of your Palo lineage or religious family. The sacred space that houses the nganga.

May 2, 1999-Tata NgoNdembo hadn't told me anything except that he wanted me to accompany him to an ahijado' house. We walked for about three blocks during which several people said hello in passing. We entered into the house and greeted those inside the house. TataNgoNdembo sent for his ahijado, TataEntoto, a reputable palero in his own right. We waited a while and inside when TataEntoto arrived they disappeared in a back room. Others began arriving. One man, TataNkunia<sup>2</sup>, whom I had met the year earlier arrived and was surprised to see me. This was my first interaction time with TataEntoto, but I had been acquainted with his Godfather two years earlier. The constructive nature and relational dynamics between members ties together the production of ritual and belief. Over the years of my interaction in Cuba, I uncovered individual and group distinction in the styles of ritual expressions and perspectives (Monroe 1999: El Oriente)

At this point I began seeing the interconnectivity expressed in the relationship between Tatas/Yayas and Ahijados. The involvement of religious ceremonies and the relationships inherent in their formulation prove important to the productions of Palo religious activity. I began to see the interpersonal relationships that make up a religious munanso and the politic of meaning formation in practice. Networks of people and their ngangas connect neighborhoods, regions, and spaces abroad. The practice of religion, the ways it is taught and understood as knowledge, constructs its own parameters and conceptual space. These private and public spaces intercede in certain ways, providing the representation and interpretations of 21<sup>st</sup> century religion. The nature of religious representation, ritual practice, and belief provided by practitioners, and sustained by our conceptual approaches, are at the foundation of sociopolitical generation of religious practice and AfroCuban identity.

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<sup>2</sup> I was introduced to TataNkunia by another palero in 1998. TataNkunia provided me with an interview and was very helpful to my research.

A variety of people practicing Palo Monte Mayombe, Briyumba, or Kimbisa are found throughout Cuba. The provinces of El Oriente, La Habana, and to a lesser degree, the province of La Matanzas, are localities where I gathered perspectives from a variety of practitioners. All three localities are known to be strong centers for Palo practices. In this chapter I present some perspectives of multiple people who are self-proclaimed paleros, ngangulero, mayomberos and or kimbeseros. The names of these practitioners will be fictitious for purposes of anonymity and reference. By engaging multiple practitioners I hope to show how religious practices are enacted and how such engagements create a space of identity, history, and religiosity. I intend to situate how the creation of meaning surrounding Palo religious practices form cultural identity and how historical productions surrounding culture and religion have formed differentials among African derived religions in Cuba. The conceptual and participatory considerations of practitioners contend with the colonial notions of the past, subverting negative characterizations into forms of power and potency. Uncovering the dynamics of diasporic space, as it relates to representations and religious practices of Central African identified corporeality and philosophy in Cuba, are central to my arguments in this essay.

The representation of Palo Monte has a lot to do with our past understanding of what is known as 'Congo'. Specific references to the colonial records situate a politics of representation in regards to Africans (enslaved or otherwise), a characterization that at times contradicts itself and most certainly exposes its prejudices (Amstelle 1998; Patterson 1998; Mbembe 2001; Said 1979). Inquiries into how Cuban practitioners embrace Congo identity relate directly to the context of their conceptual and intentions in expression of religious identity. Identity and self-identification as a 'palero' or 'ngangulero' is an interpretive station that evokes religious notions of power, history, and ancestry. Practitioners' perspectives differ but their lives create a field of

productions within communities and outside of communities. The Congo-identified religious practices (Reglas Congas) in Cuba are typically divided in three religious forms, but perspectives and forms of practices vary. A mayombero of El Oriente said this about Reglas Congas:

La Regla de Palo has three lineages. They are Kimbisa, Briyumba and Mayombe. Kimbisa is the rule of brujo of the herbs, in order to think in manners of curing, Briyumba is to engage mystery. They proceed in part through the working with the mpungos a little here and there with invisible things. In Mayombe everything is with the nganga. The nganga is everything in the religion. (Monroe/TataNgoNdembo 2002; El Oriente)

This description of these three types of religious practices refers to a production within Cuban history of Congo derived forms. The distinctions do not necessarily reflect African ethnicity but working forms of religious schema in Cuba. Additionally, how one understands the breakdown of Reglas Congas, that is, the impact of Central African people on religious practices within Cuban communities, reveals a perspective of experience.

The understanding of Palo Monte depends on the construction of internal practices and at times interfaces with how and which descriptions are produced by outsiders. The impact of a palero who demonstrates his/her craft in literature or publicly, as opposed to other practitioners whose voices are left unheard present us with differences in fields of power, whether beneficial or harmful. Researchers' agenda shape the production of any given representation through associations in fieldwork but also through the ideological forms established in various researchers' determinations of the subject(s). The practices of Palo Monte and the production of analysis surrounding such practices revolve in part, separately or in concert, with constructions of what, who, and how such representations exist in cultural studies, anthropology, or within public interpretations. I state this, in part, to consider that what is important to a palero is not necessarily understood by or important to researchers. Furthermore, the practitioner's identity and perspective of this religion may or may not be derived from an experience of such perspectives through social engagement. Connecting notions such as Congo, Cuban, brujo,

paleros (nganguleros, kimbесeros, briyumberos, mayombero) relate to religious philosophy, power, and practice and illustrate the intersection of religious and colonial ideology in the production of an ethnic conceptual marker.

Paleros from the province of El Oriente, La Habana, and La Matanzas, are represented in this account of my experiences researching Palo Monte. My inquiries into the perspectives of Palo practitioners and their ritual activities began in 1997. Some of the following paleros' perspectives will be used in research gathered in El Oriente. TataNгоNdembo, TataNkunia, TataNtoto, TataZarabanda, TataNgombe, TataCheChe are all tatangangas of the same Mayombe lineage with whom I have worked over the last several years. The previous names are fictitious. Their munanso I will call NsasiNdembo (also fictitious). My interaction with these practitioners and munanso included multiple interviews, ceremonial observations and conversations on the subject of Palo Monte Mayombe. In El Oriente many practitioners gave me multiple interviews over this seven-year period and have accepted me into their homes as family. Additionally, there have been other practitioners that continue to help me understand the meanings and practicalities of Reglas Congas in Cuba. TataMбу, TataNbanda, TataFranciso, TataYende are representative of four separate munansos that I have worked with since 1997 in the same region. First, I am going to describe my perceptions and observations of mainly two munanso, one in El Oriente and one in La Habana. However, I will not limit my analysis to these two munansos, drawing on other practitioners' viewpoints (from various religious families) to illustrate a variety of perspectives on general beliefs and practices.

### **The Production of Munanso in Cuban Reglas Congas**

The munanso is crucial to the dissemination of religious knowledge and maintenance of socioreligious practices enacted in Cuban Palo Monte Mayombe. A munanso may literally signify a house or space where the nganga is stored but also may be interpreted as the scope of

the group membership. Not speaking in absolutes, the training of a palero, ngangulero, or mayombero depends on the initiation and participation in religious ceremonies and activities. The craft of Palo Monte is said to require a slow but steady reinforcement of religious belief and ritual implementation. “Kiacó kiaco kuenda ensila” (also “piango piango kuenda nsila”) was a common saying among practitioners having multiple interpretations and meanings, but roughly meaning ‘ little by little and you will arrive at the goal/root/far/destination’ (Monroe 2004: La Habana, 1999: El Oriente). This proverb is also spoken in Spanish and is common in Santería circles and in the general public “poco a poco llega lejo”(Mason 2004). The godfather or tata (padrino–Spanish, tatanganga- Palo) has a reservoir of knowledge gained through years of interaction with the dead, his elders, his tata and or yaya, and other religious members. Some paleros have hundreds of ahijados while others may have only one or two. Over many years these ahijados eventually initiate others and form their own munansos<sup>3</sup> (the term “nso” is used too). My experience among various paleros and munansos will represent a small fraction of religious families of Palo in each locality.

A ‘munanso’ is a religious constituency, centered on members and sometimes has extended participation throughout communities nationally and in many cases internationally. Spanish terms like padrino (father), madrina (mother), ahijados (children) are used describe the familiarity of initiates with respective nganguleros. It is in these socioreligious circles where Palo practices are generated. The impact of a munanso is felt by non-initiates and among the general public through a placement of services and social proximity. Munansos provide certain routes of interaction in the production of practice. The foundation of religious language, rituals, and

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<sup>3</sup> The extension of these religious family networks may be considered the same munanso; certainly their historical lineage comes from the same source. On the contrary religious houses that come from the same lineage may be considered distinct munanso depending on the perspective.

beliefs among a myriad of other socioreligious phenomena are taught within the ranks of the munanso. Formally speaking, the initiation into a religious munanso (group) rests on the initiate and padrino/ madrina, and eventually those present that lead by example. How tatas or yayas empathize, teach, and initiate perspective ahijados is a varied affair. The foundation for fellowship, its benefits and responsibilities are socially powerful and supply members with both a position within community and a nascent religious identity.

A munanso is a community of practitioners or families, whose numerous members have grown up with ritual ceremonies, songs, and meanings. The relationships that constitute religious kinship remain flexible and nuanced among paleros. People from various munansos may contribute to a ceremonial practice, by playing drums, singing and bringing religious supplies like tobacco, rum and such. Attendance at such ceremonies usually requires a small contribution, sometimes in the form of a few pesos or in the labor of ritual activity (from food preparations to animal sacrifice). Those non-initiates who seek the advice or powerful influence of a palero are generally expected to pay a fee or an exchange of some goods or services. This is not to say that palero think in those terms; there is a great negativity associated with the commercialization of AfroCuban religions by initiating too many Cuban and foreign people. The elder initiates hold higher status in and among group members, and as years pass most become tatangangas. Of course there are always those who perform specific tasks well (whether singing, drumming or handling ritual processes) and or possess charisma or special relationships with their respective tatas/yayas. Thus participation in ritual activity provides a space for social expression, status, and knowledge. It is important to note the abilities of certain individuals in the implementation of ritual activities, social tact and resources and their importance in the religious ranking of a

group's designations and signification. "There are different levels. Each *contienda*<sup>4</sup> has its own occupation, for example the 'Mayodormo', the 'Baconfula', 'Patifula', the 'Guardero', the 'Manzanero', the 'Cepulturero', the 'Mandaero', 'Talanquero', and they have their functions" (Monroe/R.Mateos/ TataBangansa 1997, La Matanzas). The degrees of formality and position depend on the understanding and implementation of roles and status within practitioners' systems of operation and initiation.

The initiation gives a person access to the protection, ceremonial participation and the guidance of *munanso* members, specifically the *tatanganga*. Ritual languages are learned as song and in the instruction of ritual formulas and titles. This includes your religious affiliations with the religious family. Without the knowledge of ritual language, access to ceremonies may be denied. The participation in ritual activities, acquiring ritual language for *mambos* (religious songs), reinforces meaning of ritual language and its usage. Little by little the initiate learns the songs of the religious family in ceremonial settings. This is a participatory religion and although millions are initiated not all members are destined to take prominent roles. Participation is important to maintain religious knowledge and individuals excel at varying rates. The process of learning is contingent on the maintenance of the relationships between the *tatangangas*, *ahijados*, and the *nfumbis*. The relationship between the *padrino/madrina* and their *ahijados* represent the major sources of how the practices are learned, understood, replicated-improvised and or organized. The general understanding of the number and reasons for taking on *ahijados* remain diversified, but any number of *ahijados* can be entrusted.

Certainly a prolific individual can impact greatly how practice is conceptually understood, and conceptually and ritually enacted. Religious leaders or central figures, in this case

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<sup>4</sup> 'Contienda' is like 'munanso'-your religious group/family.

tatangangas, lead by example and instruct in a communal praxis but also build social networks. A religious munanso may consist of some family members and a few intimate friends. Others may include a large percentage of local neighborhoods reaching out for international religious relationships. Some paleros have hundreds of godchildren and others only a few. Not all paleros take on ahijados. An ngangulero, Tata Yende, in the eastern region emphatically stated to me that he himself had only two (maybe three) godchildren and that some paleros initiate as a commercial enterprise (Monroe/Tata Yende 2002; El Oriente). At this point AfroCuban religion has brought many foreigners to Cuban soil (not to mention academic projects) solely for the purpose of religious initiation, training, and knowledge. This too has brought a great deal of criticism, whether publicly or privately, by practitioners. Certainly these dissenting views could illustrate how forms and structure within munanso have their own course and administration. That is not to suggest that such practices are devoid of orthodoxy in practices/belief but imply how such productions are a sociopolitical contest (which may or may not be important to practitioners). Not unlike colonial representation of race, Africa, and slavery (and so on) the distribution of religious knowledge has its biases and agenda.

Munanso politics are inherently part of authorizing and enacting religious practice. The ways practice is executed and given meaning are essential to inquiries of religious identity. Ritual language, titles, and names of dead spirits direct associations of munansos and represent a practitioner's connection to his cultural identity and his understanding of history and practice. Munansos have local distinctions expressed by historical or personal terms passed on by their predecessors, specifically their tatangangas or godfathers, are at the foundation for a groups religious identity. Some munansos are related and share certain histories of practice and belief. These religious relationships extend like a family tree. Interactions among practitioners of

disparate munansos are usually fluid and familiar (sometimes competitive) and interactions between people of different munansos represent a great solidarity between Palo munansos<sup>5</sup>. Many paleros have multiple religious identities concurrently practicing and identifying as a santero/a, espiritista, and catholic. Others practitioners solely identify as palero/ngangulero /kimbisero. Such testimonies illustrate the multiple forms of religiosity-their AfroCuban development, for example, a great number of Cuban palero associations with traditions of Reglas Ochas, Ifa and Abakua, and Espiritismo. These forms of identity operate simultaneously for many Cubans. The categorization of African lineage in Cuba, comprised in a formulation of religious practice, but also in the colonial views of enslaved peoples and continental Africa, situates the ‘hows’ and ‘whys’ of the Congo legacy in Cuba.

The ethnicity associated with Central Africa by paleros, within Cuban literature, and within Cuban representations, continues to be reevaluated but also re-invoked. While references to ‘Congo’ ethnicity happens in 21st century Palo practices, these moments are circumscribed by the upheavals of African pasts and colonial conceptual precedents. Nevertheless, how such ideas are re-inscribed within practitioners’ evaluations of themselves as ‘Congo’ versus-and or in conjunction with- others’ identity (academic or otherwise) is a Cuban reality. Mayombe, Bititi Congo, Musundi, Luanda, Malongo and Mbansa are some examples of Congo ethnicity named in my encounters in Cuba. The spatial relationships among people in Cuba and their migration, unification, and sociopolitical formations reflect on religious practice, specific localities, and cultural identities. The productions of Congo religion in Cuba, always contemporaneously

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<sup>5</sup>In the province of La Habana, I was acquainted with a ngangulero whose friend (another palero) permitted an important ceremony of another munanso at his home and within the confines of his nganga. The host’s ngangas was not in the same room. This ceremony, although private at times, illustrated to me the fluidity among practitioners’ sharing resources and belief (Monroe 2004: La Habana).

internally and externally generated, are fraught with a historical development of oppression and subjugation, but also resistance and empowerment.

The ways in which Cuban locations sustain a history of Congo heritage, a comparison from Havana to Santa Clara or Santiago, Camaguey, Cienfuegos, or Pinar del Rio are important in many paleros' testimonials. It becomes clear that in Cuba the provincials (those people not from La Habana) deal with certain derogatory onslaughts, as La Habana has been the major national destination of many Cubans. The capital, for most Cubans, is the center of social, political, and economic activity. This is also evident in the spheres of recognition: economic opportunities and prestige that are imbedded in the ranks of state run educational and cultural institutions. The production of both academic, sociocultural publications and presentations surrounding African-derived practices in Cuban are centered in Havana. Although most regions, particularly provinces, are represented in local historical educational and cultural agendas of the nation, the distribution of power is rarely equal (UNEAC, Casa De Africa). While Reglas Congas has strongholds in provincial areas of Santa Clara, Cienfuegos, Pinar del Rio, or Camaguey, its representation in both literature and national and cultural festivals is limited to a particular number of well versed Cuban authors (Barnet 1995; Martinez Fure 1979; Bolivar 1998; Fuentes 2002; James 2001).

Cultural forms represented by the acknowledgements of religious actors, productions of researchers and consumptions of audiences facilitate the meaning of Cuban 'Congo' identity. The productions of practitioners are closely tied to the execution of practices as a conceptual tool of knowledge dissemination and identity formation. It can be easily inferred, and witnessed by my interaction in such communities, that personalities touch the ways that Palo is understood by the initiated. This is also true of how Reglas Congas is represented by cultural institutions and

within scholarly depictions. I would venture to say that certain practitioners are more powerful or socially potent than others. Some paleros work more closely with family or small numbers of people while others maintain a wider range of religious affiliations. This point becomes relevant as large munanso may be formed by one ngangulero's work in a lifetime and such a powerful presence impacts the invocation of representation<sup>6</sup>. TataNkunia described his late godfather, TataNgoNdembo, as being a 'Cabildo'<sup>7</sup>, which reflected the significance of TataNgoNdembo's presence in productions of ritual, perspective, and religious training. The commemoration of practitioners, maintained by family members and religious affiliates, are venerated in ritual practice and connect practitioners' historical identity of Cuban people<sup>8</sup>. Furthermore, practitioners do not limit interaction between various religious factions (i.e. between Palo munansos or other AfroCuban religious traditions) suggesting the great variation of personal and group identities in practices, ideology, and identity.

### **Ritualized Perspectives of Congo-Identified Practice and Belief: The Cuban Nganga**

The rituals of Palo Monte are presented to the dead of the nganga or prenda<sup>9</sup>. For practitioners, the nganga is the main ritual route for the communication and communion with the dead. This object is constructed in a meticulous and secretive fashion and serves as a habitat for the dead. The cauldron, pot or container is filled with various artifacts of nature to assist the dead in its preservation, protection, and peace. The philosophies surrounding the ways the nganga

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<sup>6</sup>There are many cultural productions centered on AfroCuban subjects, (i.e. dance groups, authors, cultural institutions) all over the island. Havana based institutions typically receive more international exposure. Localities outside of Havana sometimes struggle to receive recognitions or participation. Choice, agency and implementation interplay in representation of current national festivals and displays.

<sup>7</sup> Tata Nkunia's perspective of Tata NgoNdembo, *El Oriente*, 2003. Cabildos were social organization of African descendants in the 18th and 19th century coordinated with Spanish colonial governance. See Philip Howard 1998.

<sup>8</sup> Ritual ceremonies begin with ritual salutations to past tatangangas of the munanso.

<sup>9</sup> Prenda is a word commonly used to refer to the nganga.

works are varied and each palero has his/her way of expressing the dynamics of his/her necromancy. Typically most ritual offerings and sacrifices are presented to the nfumbi by ceremonial offerings to the nganga. The ritual activities of ceremonial singing, drumming (claviers, metal timber, etc.) and the sharing of rum, tobacco are centered in front of the prenda. There are many mysteries about the nganga that only practitioners are privy to but to understand Reglas Congas in Cuba one must begin and end with the nfumbi (the dead) of the nganga.

Nganga is a pot that contains all kinds of power, soil, a recipient that has earth, vegetables, everything that moves. It is a great power, it is nganga, a spirit that is fed by the kinds of tools and things-to make a force.... nganga is a recipient that has all the natural elements of the world. This is not folklore, because this is tradition, but when we talk about nganga we talk about something sure and firm, folklore we can say because of the customs of our tradition, but we are talking about the nganga, the fundamento, the exact religion as such. {Monroe/R.Mateos/TataNgoNdembo 1998; El Oriente)

Here TataNgoNdembo emphasizes the fact that the religion is a concrete tradition, in other words, a type of vocation or communal identity verses a custom or something that has a history of repetition within his community. The nganga is a ritually prepared object and derives its power from the ngangulero's intimacies with the dead. The exchange of material resources and directed human energy strengthens the relationship between the living and the dead. This pact with the dead brings the practitioners a great deal of power. The nfumbi of Central African-derived Cuban necromancy utilize the natural properties of nganga. The formulation of ingredients and arrangements of the ngangulero's bilongos<sup>10</sup> are exemplified in the nganga. The dead are the source of inquisitions and appeasement and set the ngangulero's bilongos in motion. Without the nfumbi (dead) the nganga is a hollow vessel and doesn't act. The preparation of a power object, an nganga or amulet, is a serious endeavor and remains guarded among practitioners. The forms of ngangas in Cuba vary within material and conceptual reasonings of

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<sup>10</sup> Bilongo is commonly translated as 'spell'. At the heart of bilongos is the accumulation and application of various substances substances and invocation to the dead that harness and direct forces

practitioners. Generally speaking, ngangas hold to certain Cuban conceptual forms, that is, a type, or an mpungo association, for example a Siete Rayos (seven lighting bolts), Kalunga/Balende/Madre de Aqua (mother of the sea), Zarabanda, Mama Chola, among others. I will further explore the association of mpungos to ngangas in the following pages.

### **Describing Los Nfumbi, Nzambi, and Los Mpungos**

The pact with the dead spirit remains a varied and guarded subject. A wide range of manifestations and descriptions of the dead occurs in the forms and positionality of various types of spirits. Most spirits are connected to natural space, past African spirits and Caribbean or native spirits. The characterizations of spirits are points of variations, illustrating flexibility in recognition of spiritual entities, particularly the dead. The center of this assortment, for the Cuban ngangulero, is the Congo spirit, but nganga are known to house several spirits at a time. Typically there are multiple nganga in a munanso's space. Essentially the force behind the nganga is the nfumbi and beliefs of such powers are the driving force in ritual productions. The possession of the dead has always been a source of this communication but is not a necessity in such exchanges. Paleros also communicate without a possession of the dead as if spirit could be spoken with at will, as if the dead were standing right next to the palero. The dead is sometimes referred to as "mi Congo" (my Congo), which reveals the distinctions of Palo practices (Monroe/R.Mateos/TataNkunia 1998; El Oriente). Typically for the palero the connection to the world and its resources relies in part on the connectivity to his/her 'Congo' companion.

The nfumbi are then specific for each practitioner of Palo. The threshold for understanding and interacting within the ceremonial center, la ngagna (with the power that the dead can supply to the initiated), is sometime described as violent/crude but effective. This description of Palo practices with the dead as effective but dangerous is common among many practitioners and is typically compared to a more subtle or less aggressive orisha practices of Santeria. A Babalao of

La Habana, also versed in Palo practices, said, “the dead do what they do” (Monroe/TataGurunda 2004; La Habana). Such characterizations of the dead as more unpredictable situate the approaches to ritual manipulation and the description of prenda spirits as dogs (Palmié 2002). The common reference to the nfumbi spirit as a dog speaks more to the construction of spiritual power as manipulative (like Palmié’s comparisons to tropes of slavery and slave bodies) and less to the variety of approaches taken by practitioners to interact with the dead. Practitioners recognize many types of dead. There are commonly accepted notions of other types of spirits such as close relatives, haunting ghosts, malicious dead sent by others or not, non-African spirits-typically native American, among others. The nfumbis are then treated in a variety of ways. The representations of domination and control in Palo practices have been formed accordingly and speak to Palos positionality within other Cuban religious practices. Although the dead are the dominant focus of practitioners, the notions of a creator play an important part in Cuban Congo cosmology and belief.

The idea of Nzambi, the creator of all, is very strong in many sects of Mayombe. Nzambi deserves respect because without Nzambi, there is nothing (‘no hay nada’). Nzambi is given salutations in beginning ritual songs of certain Mayombe ceremonies. Nzambimpungu/o (the great power or creator) is, for some practitioners, an ever-present but distant creator. It seems to be a basic premise that God is Nzambi. Nzambi is not seen as an mpungo, nor seen as a spirit of the dead, but as the ever-presence essence of everything.

Nzambi is God, or Zambi, Nzambi, Nzambimpungo, however you say it we understand. The relationship that exists between ngaguleros and Nzambi is that he is our god and without him there is nothing. (TataFula chimes in) This is an ignorance the catholics have, they say that we don’t believe in God, The first thing we do is to invoke God, Nzambi, any recognition we do to the prenda, any sacrifice, and when we forgive, bititi- that is sight to the one we have made the consecration with Nzambi and with a candle, when he opens his eyes, he has just been born, it is the first thing he sees in front of him (Monroe/R. Mateos/TataBangansa 1997; La Matanzas).

Nzambi is always given salutations but is rarely the recipient of ceremonies. Nzambi is crucial in the initiation of Mayombe (like a child born into the world) and the *tatanganga* seeks the permission of Nzambi to accept the neophyte. The idea of Nzambi is a strong tenet of Palo belief and is a primary principle of Palo practices. A cauldron is not created for Nzambi but sometimes objects/symbols are used as references, specifically the crucifix. Sometimes the cross is missing and the figure is used alone. The connection of Nzambi to certain *ngangas*, that is good or bad affiliations, say between Judaic/evil/Ndoki (malefic) versus Christian/good/Nzambi (remedial) is commonly spoken of by practitioners. The characterization of signs upon spirits and or *ngangas* illustrate-not that there is a belief (or isn't) in Christian ideologies but- a reinterpretation of such signs as Nzambi. Furthermore, such distinction illustrates the dichotomy of Jewish practices as malignant and Christian as benevolent, integrating attitudes of past Spanish catholic ideologies and oppressions. The distinctions between good *ngangas* and bad *ngangas* are present in Palo practices, that is, Ndoki is associated with a type of entity that stands apart from Nzambi.

Ndoki is generally thought of as a type of dead that can do harm, "Ndoki Malo". Additionally there are positive references to Ndoki<sup>11</sup>, or "Ndoki Bueno" (sometime "Doki Bueno"), which indicate a good intentionality (Monroe/TataNgoMusundi 2004, La Habana). Ndoki stands in opposition to Nzambi, that is, Ndoki has certain associations with the devil. The categorization of Lukankasi, Kariempembe, and Tombola is generally connected to imagery of the devil or a powerful and sometimes malefic spirit (Monroe/NsasiMusundi 2004; La Habana; Monroe TataEntoto 2004, El Oriente). Distinctions between good and bad in symbolic

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<sup>11</sup> Centella Ndoki, commonly corresponding to Oya in the Yoruba pantheon, is a title given to some *ngangas* as well and its represents the forces of cemeteries and the dead. It does not imply good or evil although refers to the station of the dead, cemeteries, and storms.

representations of ngangas illustrate a formation of conceptual meaning produced in the practice of Palo. The historical and spatial influence of Catholic Spanish ideologies and its relationship to Judaic perspectives suggests the pretense of such divisions in the meanings and practices of Cuban Palo Monte. Symbols like the Star of David and the crucifix signify the energies of the dead within the nganga. Such symbolic illustrations correspond to how certain dead entities formed a moral precipice. These translations of symbols create meaning in the interpretation and representations of Palo practices. However, the distinction between good and evil is not always important, in fact, many ngangas are not distinguished by these symbols. The nganga, whether recognized as good or evil may do as the palero intends, that is, it is a mutable point and depends on the belief and use of the nganga by the practitioners. Of course, there are ngangas that have specified purposes, some oriented toward curing and others toward harming. So although commonly referred to (the distinction between christianized or Judaic ngangas) as good or bad by incorporating the crucifix or other symbols, it is not a mandatory or orthodox rule to use such symbols. More common is the association of an nganga to los mpungos, a type of spiritual force commonly compared to the orisha of Santeria.

The nganga is made in accordance with divination and family secrets and according to the denomination of the Mpungo, that is, a Siete Rayos, Zarabanda, Lucero Mundo, Centella Ndoki, Mama Chola, or Kalunga (etc). An nganga is generally understood under affiliations of mpungos and may be thought of as a type of spiritual force, like qualities or forces found in nature. The explanation of the mpungos of Reglas Congas in Cuba is typically constructed within a comparison to the orisha of Regla Ocha. An approach comparing beliefs and forms throughout various Cuban religious systems illustrate such negotiations of compatibility or parallel notions. Distinguishing and drawing associations between los mpungos and los orishas- a Cuban

phenomena- illustrate a Cuban particularity. The dominance of a particular religious system is tied to the interaction among people within conceptual spaces. This accounts for both a union of diverse people-some forming coalitions and others not, and political production of difference in diasporic cultural construction. Political and social strength of groups within frameworks of power intercedes in all cultural production. Mpungos are not the same as orisha but they are derived from the same source, a domain or force in nature or consciousness. These similar forces are comparable entities in separate religious systems. The correlation between mpungos and orisha are as follows (Palo/Ocha), Seite Rayo-Chango, Zarabanda/Oggun, Lucero Mundo/Ellegua, Centella Ndoki/ Oya, Mama Chola/Ochun, or Kalunga/Yemaya. In describing the difference between a mpungo of Palo versus an orisha of Santeria TataNgonDembo said the following. "...It is different than the Ocha<sup>12</sup> because it is not the same when we have an Ogun (that has different things) or when we have a Zarabanda which have different soils, animals, bones" (Monroe/TataNgonDembo 2002; El Oriente). The production of such practices, tracing history and religious identity, intercedes with the politics of representation and power. The analysis of Congo representations, categorizations, and descriptions in Cuban Palo Monte, particularly the common association of Congo mpungos and the orisha of Santeria, uncover a particularly Cuban relationship within diasporic formulations of African identity. This correlation demonstrates the importance of cognitive usage in transmission diasporic space and power, most importantly practices conceptually intertwined within scopes of language and presentation.

The relationship or conceptual correlations of mpungos to the orisha is an example of a development in the AfroCuban diasporic religion. The correspondence of Congo spirits to orisha

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<sup>12</sup> Referring to Regla de Ocha, Regla Ocha or Santeria

of Santeria suggests intimacies of AfroCuban conceptual formation, an ease of conceptual comparison in categorizations of a broad spectrum of forces. This explanation of such dead spirits as or within a spiritual religious archetype, that corresponds with a particular orisha, most likely through a shared association in nature (i.e. the river, the sea, cemeteries, lightning, mountain) but also within a shared sociopolitical space, is pronounced in Cuba. This raises the question of whether there are ngangas without a correspondence to an mpungo? “One always has to have a correspondence to mpungos because...What thing is an mpungo? A mpungo is nothing more than the reality that is represented in potential of divinity and nature” (Monroe/TataKriyumba 2002; El Oriente). According to another respected palero in El Oriente there is an nganga without a correspondence to the orisha, which he stated he did not own, that takes a sacrifice of a dog and is an nfumbi with the power to deliver maladies (Monroe/TataNkunia 2002, El Oriente). He further stated that this type of nganga in opposition with those consecrated under Nzambi and are said to do malefic actions by the nfumbi (ibid, 2002). One can further infer that the absence of an mpungo suggests a malefic stature.

The mpungos represent potentials through which action and energy are exchanged. According to Joel James, the forms of the nganga, their meaning of mpungos and nfumbi, are multi-representational and contain representational forms that overlap with each other and position the powers and meanings of the nganga (James 2001). Clearly the multi-representational aspects of beliefs and ritual related to forms of nganga illustrate a fluid center of operations and spiritual forces. The comparability of mpungos to the orisha, which has been used by other writers and practitioners alike to explain Palo practices, situates a context for the interaction between disparate (but eventually tied together in AfroCuban religiosity) practices in the history of the island (Barnet 1995; Cabrera 1979; Millet 1998). The categorization of such

ngangas in accordance with a correspondence with Reglas Ocha or Santeria remains a Cuban characteristic that illustrates a contextual relationship within religious communities and the ways that such relationship formed specific ideologies that designate spiritual forces by referencing the orisha. The construction of conceptual references in AfroCuban religiosity reflects the processes of diasporic alchemy in moments of social exchange and ideological contemplation.

### **‘Congo’ Craftwork in Cuba**

Each nganga, like each santos, has its effective animal that one puts inside. Each animal (pause), for example pig has my trust and it is important for our branch (“rama”) (group/mayomberos). But other ngangas like Lucero has the goat, like Zarabanda, Brazo Fuerte, with Siete Rayos and Madre de Aqua they have their sheep (Monroe/TataNgonDembo 2002; El Oriente).

The relationships between practitioners, such as godfather to godchildren, underscore the position of skill and order among practitioners. There are varying degrees of responsibility, expectation and talent in the construction of ritual and operation. For many Cubans being a palero is their job, that is, nangulero support families with the craft of necromancy. Rituals are performed according to individual and group needs. Generally, rituals center on initiations or dates of initiations, although there are a great number of reasons to perform a ritual. Ritual events are performed for several reasons year round. Munansos work together in order to form a strong family knowledge and training. The work of Palo is at times a very communal affair directed by tatanganga. Working with the spirit involves a simultaneous application of ritual work taught among practitioners including the language, songs and rhythms, and the responsibilities related to the preparation of animal, herbs, Palo. Additionally, preparations of religious objects and processes of any alchemic endeavor, along with a sense of ritual composure and behavior, situate how ritual is learned and experienced.

‘Bilongo’ is a term referring to directed force within an object, space or person (person’s life). Bilongo is a type of enchantment propelled by forces at the palero’s command and within

the context of the Palero's will or intention. According to nganguleros of the province of La Matanzas, there are many forms of bilongo. "Bilongo is 'brujo', is 'brujeria', some examples are: when you want to tie the four 'nsilas' (knots), that is the four ways, so when you have a party to avoid problems, so that everything goes with good faith, and so the police do not arrive, the four 'nsila' are tied...."(Monroe/R.Mateos/TataBangansa 1997; La Matanzas). They explained that this type of bilongo involved applying 'firmas' (symbolic designs) and offerings of foods (rice, beans, pepper, and honey), rum, tobacco, and a slug. Tied together in with a specific herb called "kimbansa" they tie a ("cango") knot in each corner (Monroe/R.Mateos/TataBangansa 1997; La Matanzas). Another ngangulero added, "...Another form of bilongo is what we do over the prenda, works that are done over any malongo nkisi or any person who goes to the 'fundamento' to solve any problem because this is 'brujeria' that is done to avoid things. We practice it actively, he is 'padre nkisi', anyone comes to see him to solve a problem, for example problems with justice, or problem of illness, we actively maintain it, to have things go well, these are the forms of bilongos, to open people's ways" (Monroe/R. Mateos/TataMalongo 1997; La Matanzas). Bilongo has many applications in the practices of Palo and is commonly tied to things in the natural world. Common ingredients from nature are used in the creation of bilongos.

Nganguleros are known to have deep knowledge of herbs and natural remedies. The trees in the forest have significance like all forces of nature. Herbs and trees are not only used in construction of the nganga, these plants can be used to protect in spells (bilongos), according to intentions. Cuban trees construct the nganga, as to protect and to give the essences of nature to the force of the dead. Specifically they are known for their special despojos, by which people are cleansed of bad influences, unwanted dead or harmful sorcery. These despojos are involve any

number of fresh herbs and natural ingredients, not excluding, of course, rum, tobacco, honey, fowl, perfume, pulverized seeds, barks and sticks (etc). Despejos are usually the first action within rites of initiation and are an important practice for freeing the malignant unseen forces. The plant kingdom is a source of power for spirit communication and control. Baths with certain ritual herbs are common remedies. Herbs can also be used to cause malefic results. Herbs, sticks (trees), and natural substances serve the mayomberos in the preparation of bilongos or despejos.

### **Munanso NsasiMusundi (La Habana April 14th 2004)**

I witnessed a ceremony in which a nonmember sought the services of an ngangulero to resolve a problem. Several days earlier she had come to the house of TataNgoMusundi and expressed a suspicion that a person had put a hex on her. It was unclear whether the consultation with the tatanganga had uncovered that or if she came to him with this idea. Nevertheless, this is how it was described to me by the nganguleros of the munanso. All present munanso members were involved in the ritual process. The ritual work began with one ahijado digging a hole in the ground while others began tying together various colored stripes of cloth. Still others gathered things needed for the ceremony such as cigars, candles, wine, rum chamba<sup>13</sup>, and chalk. Scissors, a knife, two broad leaves, and some sticks of a coconut, along with a black rooster, had been set aside for the ritual.

There were eight munanso members present, along with the client who had petitioned the tatanganga. A candle was lit and a coconut leaf was placed inside the hole. Sticks were placed around and over the hole. An older female member drew firmas on several potshards. These were sprayed with rum and tobacco. The client was surrounded by the practitioners and made to

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<sup>13</sup> Chamba is a mixture made by practitioners of aquadiente (high alcohol rum), various herbs and roots along with other secret ingredients. The various substances are soaked in the bottle of aquadiente and it becomes a very hot mixture, a mixture that burns the mouth and makes many people cough after it has been sprayed.

stand in front of the hole. TataNgoMuasundi began to sing and the other members replied in a chorus style response. The singing continued throughout the ceremony. While singing, the tata marked the women's body with the loose chalk substance. She was sprayed with rum and dry wine. A black cloth was placed over her head. TataNgoMusundi began to chant in a commanding emphatic tone while chalking the women's black-clothed body. He tied the multicolored cloth around the woman. Meanwhile singing continued.

The older women brought several herbs over to the client. The ahijado sprayed the herbs with rum and handed them to the tata. He lightly brushed and taped the bundle of herbs all over her body. The tata threw it into the hole. She was sprayed continuously with rum and cigar smoke. The rooster was sprayed with rum and tobacco as well. The tata leaned his body against hers and then began to rub her with the rooster. This was done over her entire body. The rooster was sacrificed and placed in the hole. The head of the chicken was passed over her hands and feet. The woman was told to spread her legs, as a potsherd with a pile of gunpowder (fula) was placed on the ground between her legs. TataNgoMusundi prepared a bottle with water, rum, chamba, herbs, soil and the head of the chicken. He shook it up and placed it nearby. He crossed the woman's arms and lit the gunpowder with the tip of a cigar. He immediately capped the bottle with the hot wax of the candle and placed it into the hole. She was asked to uncross her arms and was sprayed with cigar smoke, rum, and chamba. He took the coconut and rubbed various parts of her body in a circular motion and knocked it to the ground. He abruptly smashed it on some nearby rocks. He read the signs of the fallen pieces of coconut. He placed the pieces together and determined, according to the way the pieces fell, that Nsasi/Siete Rayos/Chango had spoken. He began to cut the colored ribbons that were tied to the woman. The practitioners threw the remaining cloth, herbs and final coconut leaf into the hole. Earth was thrown over the hole

and she was made to jump backwards over the hole. She was instructed to stomp on the top of the hole. She was led away and TataNgonMusundi placed a potsherd over the hole along with a candle.

### **Munanso NsasiNdembo (El Oriente/Province, May 15th 2002)**

In Eastern Cuba TataNgonNdembo had a particular day (wednesday) when he would help clients and the spirit would possess him. TataNgonNdembo and I arrived at the munanso about midday. The candle in front of the nganga was lit and several paleros were singing accompanied by a bell. This continued for some time until the dead took a hold of (possessed) TataNgonNdembo. The possession was abrupt and accompanied with gasps, yells and convulsions of the body. The spirit that possessed TataNgonNdembo was called 'TaNdembo'<sup>14</sup>. TataNgonNdembo was no longer conscious and TaNdembo controlled his body. The ringing stopped. There were social greetings from the nfumbi to those present in the room. People had already arrived and had been waiting in a front room. People came with offerings of flowers, fruit, or some pesos to present to the spirit/practitioner/nganga. A teenager escorted the first people in to see him. From outside the room, a rattle sounded throughout the house, accompanied by singing and invocation to Santa Maria, Ellegua, and Santa Barbara. Yelling, kissing, and clapping and a song to Babaluaye filled the room. Abruptly, an older woman left the house. Shortly thereafter, she returned with more flowers.

Chanting and singing continued to fill the air. The possessed palero counseled those in need of remedies or solutions to their various problems. He used chamalongos<sup>15</sup> but also cowries depending on the situation. The room of the nganga would be closed off so as not to let any who

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<sup>14</sup> This is a fictitious name of the dead. The dead spirit dominates the consciousness of the practitioners and is able to communicate to the living.

<sup>15</sup> Chamalongo is a divination form that typically use the shells of coconuts which are read by the practitioner.

walked by to enter and disrupt the consultations. At other moments the door was open. People waited in the front room with various ritual offerings for the dead. Chants would echo out of the room on occasion. One could hear the rattling of the divination shells among other random voices from the outside.

There was a break and several ahijados had gathered outside the room. We had been asked back into the room to speak with TaNdembo. Family members, some Tatanganga themselves, had gathered in the room and TaNdembo greeted those present. Greetings included shaking hands (by crossing), and touching left shoulder with right shoulder and vice versa. This was usually followed with a full circular turn directed by the guiding arm of the possessed. TataNgombe and others were present, assisted by both the nfumbi and TataNgonDembo during the ritual process. There was a certain folly in the room when TaNdembo suddenly questioned the ahijados. “Quindiambo?” (What are you called?). The various practitioners replied in a mix of Cuban Congo and Spanish. TaNdembo questioned all that were present and some seemed uncertain in their command over the language. Their replies were religious names given to each member at initiation. He seemed satisfied with a few responses and critical of others. Questions regarding the mastery of the language seemed to be at the heart of this display between ahijados and the dead. Poor skills brought some ridicule. Certainly different ahijados had varying levels of mastery over ritual language and as the dead typically speaks in Kikongo forms, the abilities to understand KiKongo is essential.

More people had come in and we were asked to leave while several people sought counsel. A set of twins in their late thirties (or early forties) arrived bringing cigars. One twin explained to me that his brother was going to move to the city of La Habana and sought information from TaNdembo. We spoke for some time talking and smoking until his brother was finished. Later,

several members of the munanso and I were back in the room of the nganga and TataNgonDembo had a black cloth tied around his head. Ritual words filled the room in a chant-like delivery. TataNgonDembo cried out, rum was sprayed on his head. Another ahijado rubbed him while as he continued to yell. Some moments passed, and he asked what time it was. It was about 6:00 pm. He was surprised and immediately asked for some cold water. He seemed to be in a great deal of pain. Everyone present shared some rum. That day he had consulted about fifteen people, some in groups and others individually.

### **Ritual Language and Ritualizing Language**

An important part of membership in a Palo munanso is learning the ritual language, particularly songs. The ritual language consists of language passed from the tata to the ahijados. Additionally, this language is said to be important for the communication with the dead spirits. Language is important in rites of identification and salutations to the nganga. There are ceremonial responsibilities that require its acquisition. The songs and titles of practitioners, the names of the dead and of the munansos consist of ‘Congo’ and Spanish words. Typically it is both. The presence or absence of either Spanish or Congo occurs as well. Many have stated that the invocation of Congo spirit, Mayombe or otherwise, stands at the forefront of ritual actions in the practices or Reglas Congas. There is great ceremonial importance to a member’s understanding ritual words for many reasons, from the ability to understand visiting nfumbi during possession to commanding such spirits in a particular manner. The process of learning language among initiates remains a key to becoming a useful member of the munanso but also to understanding the vast number of ritual expressions, contexts, and songs. Thus language, its inclusions and exclusions, serve most importantly as a tenet of knowledge among paleros.

The use of Spanish in Palo ritual language has been considered a sign of degradation (more like a lack of resilience or continuity), or social acculturation in diasporic continuities/survivals

(Herskovits 1937; Moreno 1984; Fuentes 2002; Matibag 1996). This association suggests that colonial accounts of fetishes and other formulations of Africa are influential in anthropological accounts of syncretic phenomena and Africa survivals/continuities (Bastide 1971; Ortiz 1906; Herskovits 1937). Current perspectives diverge from past constructions of diaspora by omitting absolute notions of origins and culture. The new conceptual approaches illustrate both progressive notions of hybridity in social phenomena and flexibility found in linguistic usage/shifts (Hall 2001; Gilroy 2003; Lee 1997; Matory 1993). The nature of language use and development is always shifting. This is particularly pronounced in cases of diasporic movements and political constraints of enslavement and bigotry.

The vocabulary of a palero consists of words related to such things as forces of nature, spiritual forces, actions/commands, and anything around people and nature. This type of language is common in rituals, during possessions and within songs, invocations, and greetings among members. Many munanso have special greetings between their members. The importance of language situates the ritualized demands of communication with the nfumbi and represents a lineage of former practitioners working with dead. The construction of Congo linguistic and ritual actions directed to the Congo spirits, Central African personage, whether Mayombe, Bititi Congo, Malongo, Musundi, or Luanda, vary among practitioners. Thus the historical construction of such language and its continuation are reinvented and made meaningful in every moment. These contextual developments and practices are illustrated precisely in use of Spanish words in ritual songs.

Singing is a crucial part of ceremonial activities. Typically singing is done throughout the whole of ceremonial activity. A person's ability to lead ritual songs, and impress others with their knowledge and sound aesthetics, sometimes becomes a competitive and pixilated display

among nganguleros. There are numerous songs sung during ceremonial celebrations. Sometimes these displays of lyrical salutations last from the daytime hours to the next morning. There are ceremonial moments when certain songs are prescribed and other times where the ritual space is opened for practitioners to sing any number of mambos. Certainly there are those, specifically the Tatanganga, that set the tempo of the ceremony, sometimes correcting and teaching ahijados. Particularly, the fluctuation of tonality, structure, and delivery are illustrated by the tata. Older members commonly make corrections, objections and contestations to younger members' ordering of ritual songs and or their construction of ritual language. The number of songs sung in ceremonial practices is vast and, at times, reserved for those initiated. There are of course, those that are commonly known and frequently sung in ceremonial practice. For instance:

Nsunganga dialanga bilongo  
Nsunganga dialanga bilongo  
Nsunganga sura nkombo  
(Monroe/Munanso NsasiMusundi 2004; La Habana)

This song is used when cigar smoke is sprayed or blown over a person's body whether with a cleaning (despojos) or in an initiation. 'Nsunga' ('nzunga') means tobacco, 'dialanga' signifies protection and 'bilongo' is defined as spell/brujo. 'Sura' means to clean and 'nkombo' refers to the body. This type of ritual application cleanses and protects the person through ritual incantations and ritual application of cigar smoke. This use of cigar smoke, sparying rum or applying various substances, is also done during divination rituals.

Divination is a common activity in front of the nganga. There are several variations in the divination practices that exist in the African-derived religions of Cuba. Frequently nganguleros cast four coconut shells, chamalongos<sup>16</sup>, in a similar fashion to the way coconut rinds are used in

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<sup>16</sup> Chamalongos are a divination technique through which the dead may speak. Shells from the river or sea are also used in this fashion.

Santeria rituals. The codes of deciphering such shells are basically like Santeria practices. Alafia, four up (that is the interior of the shell facing up), signifies yes. When alafia is cast, the caster and those present give a kiss to the ground. Performing such divination techniques is part of the initial ceremonial activities involving the nfumbi. The nfumbi's agreement and permission to proceed with the ritual is common. Typically any ceremonial sacrifice, consultation or 'bilongo' crafting involves divination. The tataNganga presents the questions directed at the spirit. Typically over candlelight, the chamalongos are sprayed with tobacco and rum or dipped in water or perfumed water. Typically questions are directed at the nfumbi after the tatankisi salutations and confirmations to the spirit are complete. Chamalongos are cast on to the floor in front of the nganga or wherever the work may be orchestrated (i.e, a cemetery, oceanside, or riverside). According to questions posed and their ascending answers, the tatankisi uncovers the nfumbi responses. Such inquiries may last for only a few questions and others may last for hours, depending on the context of the interaction.

In provinces of La Habana and El Oriente some paleros use seven coconut shells (seashells or cowries), stating that either type of divination is according to preference or orthodoxy lost to the use of four coconut shells. I have also witnessed other forms of divination with the nfumbi, particularly, the use of cowry shells in divination. TataYende of El Oriente preferred to use seven cowry shells to question his nfumbi. He stated that the dead prefer using cowries as opposed to coconut shells. TataYende used the cowries to divine, but on one occasion, with another palero present, he used both coconut shells and cowries to communicate with his nfumbi. Another younger palero used a combination of cowries and coins to inquire about the perspective of his prenda (Monroe/TataMbu 2003: El Oriente). One Babalao told me that originally the

tatanganga of the Congo used seven or nine pieces of human skull to consult the dead (Monroe/TataGurundu 2004; La Habana).

### **The Firmas of Palo Practices**

The drawings, the rituals and the chants differ between Congo and Yoruban. They differ from each other because in the Bantu, in the Mayombe, they are firmas of Zarabanda Briyumba, Zarabanda of the four winds. Each way (Zarabanda has 21 firmas) has a different firma. They are 21 firmas too. Then you can say that it is completely different from the Lucumi ritual. The difference lies in the fact that the Lucumi has no firmas. Lucumi is talking, singing and dancing. With firmas it arrives, the dead also arrive. That is a part of the Congo. And in the Congo through drawings written on the floor, you can manifest, through these traces, the good and evil that you can do. In Lucumi neither good nor evil takes and with firmas, things are done and it is enough. In Palo each firma has a proper way to follow, ways of good and evil (Monroe/TataNkunia 1998, El Oriente).

Firmas are ritual designs or drawings inscribed on the ground (or floor) in order to direct the dead. Paleros use manufactured chalk or eggshell (clump together) called cascarilla. Generally these drawings are used in conjunctions with sacrifices and or bilongos of the ngagna. Firmas have been most associated with Congo practices although these practices are also utilized within Abakua society (Monroe 2004, La Habana). Commonly the firmas are drawn at the beginning of certain ceremonies but are also used during smaller rituals. The firmas are generally sprayed with rum and tobacco smoke to entice the spirits. Firmas represent the exchange between spirit and the living, energies mandated by the ngangulero in order to communicate a specific direction or meaning. It has also been described as a manner of identification, a mark of signification linking the spirit world to the living world, and or a symbol of territory of the dead spirit (TataGurundu, La Habana, Monroe 2004).

Paleros and writers alike have stated that firmas are etched inside the nganga and are guarded secrets for fear of another person taking control of their dead spirit. Multiple paleros have said that when drawing firmas while others are present, one should always leave a portion of the firma out in order to maintain the design's totality a secret, even from fellow practitioners.

Firmas are very individual and each nganga has its own mark. Additionally, there are many more general firmas commonly used in Palo practice, for example, cuarto vientos (four winds/ four directions) that may at times be connected to Lucero but may be used in various bilongo or as a part of greater firmas. For example, a palero may connect a firma of Lucero to the nfumbis' firmas for specific reasons of connectivity, a specific alchemy or other various reasoning. The common affiliations to genus (as associated with mpungos) of an nfumbi, for example Zarabanda, have certain commonly understood designs in the firma shared- a pattern of an "x" or crossed diagonal lines. Nevertheless, diagonally crossed machetes (or arrows, lines etc.) are commonly associated with Zarabanda and such designs, both specific and general, are an essential part of Congo identified ritual in Cuba.

The activity of such productions contains a placement of both commonly understood firmas and a range of variations in firmas among munanso/cabildos and individual practitioners. In individual cases, firmas are guarded secrets and yet there exist a format of symbols that is widely understood as containing certain meanings. That is not to say that symbols, particularly firmas, are stationary in the framework of meaning, but that their consistencies and mutability coincide with intentions, conversions, and translations of practice. Furthermore, such symbols now stand in the public displays to celebrate the Congo-Cuban traditions. These symbols are sometimes displayed in a festival setting, displaying African dance and folklore groups as attractions and entertainment for foreigners and Cubans alike. These firmas are recognized as Congo forms of religious practice in Cuba, and as such speak to a distinct set of Congo identification. The perspectives of such displays of Congo identity, certainly more popular now, were less prolific in the past and conjured up ideas of sorcery, witchcraft and malice. Today such notions intrigue and promote the interest in Congo forms in Cuba. The increasing numbers of

research seminars on AfroCuban religions including presentations on Reglas Congas are met with more and more international interest (Monroe 2004, La Habana).

### **Possession in Palo Practices**

Possession is a central focus of many researchers who analyze the practices of Palo (Millet 1998, James 2001, Barnet 1995). Ceremonial activities and spiritual beliefs frequently revolve around possession. The possession of practitioners by an *nfumbi* is not a matter of due course. In fact, some practitioners dislike such seizures of the body. Some prefer to work with the spirits at a more controlled distance, avoiding dangers associated with the possession. The potential violent actions possibly taken by a dead's visitation can be unpredictable. In this process the living are unconscious or otherwise subdued by the presence of dead. According to what I have seen in El Oriente, a person chosen by the dead will not remember the words or actions that took place once the dead has passed out of the body. The possessed person does not recount the counseling or socializing done by the dead after the exodus of the dead. The ritual processes surrounding the arrival of dead, their interaction, and eventually departure vary among customs and rules established within *munansos* and by the instruction of the *tatanganga*. The variation of *nfumbis'* requests, counsel and behavior stem from the specific spirit at work. That is according to the history of the *nganga/nfumbi*, certain characteristics are established within past practices/possessions of the *nso*. In ceremonial practice a possession does not always occur, but many times there are possessions.

Possession is a key component of communication between the dead and the living. According to a well-versed *palero* and *santero* of El Oriente the dead arrive more wildly (“*salvad'*”), with velocity, versus *Santeria*, which is very peaceful, very distinct (Monroe/TataNkunia 2002, El Oriente). Do all *nganguleros* become possessed by the *nfumbis*? “No, all *nganguleros* do not get possessed by the *nfumbi*, because...because not everyone came

to this world to be possessed with an yimbi, nfumbi it's a yimbi...as un brujo, not all tatas get possessed with a yimbi but all tatas have the companionship of a yimbi, the company of a nfumbi". "There isn't a better tata. What happens is it happens or it doesn't happen. And there are tatas that don't do it and it doesn't happen. Collaboration is what happens. They are equal tatas if it happens or it doesn't happen" (Monroe/TataBititi 2004; La Habana,).

### **A Hot Summer Day in El Oriente (June 6 2002)**

It was a hot summer day in the Sierra Maestra. I had been invited to a ceremony of Brazo Fuerte; an ajihada had her second birthday of the prenda and was planning an offering. I had arrived early at around nine in the morning. I had been acquainted with the family for many years. I watched as preparations were made for the ceremony. Several ahijados arrived and began preparing the necessary materials for both the ritual and practical aspects of such a ceremonial feeding. The arrival of the woman (ahijada) who was presenting to the nganga, along with family and friends, brought some excitement to the house. She brought her two children, some candles, tobacco and two coconuts. There were many greetings and a few questions from her padrino, TataNgombe. Other godchildren and members of the household were moving in and out of rooms, seeking things from the market and neighbors.

The nganga was prepared. The spirit-directing firmas were drawn on the ground in front of the nganga while those present sang. The firmas were sprayed with cigar smoke and aquadiente (strong rum) and the nganga was placed atop the firma. A yellow candle sat atop the fist sized black stone/matari. A clear glass of water sat next to the candle. The TataGombe began the ritual by calling out to those past and present. Each individual called out his/her religious name and responses of ritual words were spoken by all present. Ancestral salutations were made to past friends, religious parentage, and others close to the munanso. In rituals of Palo, a ritual salutation to the people present and the past nganguleros associated with the munanso are typical. The

chamalongos, the shells of coconuts, were used to verify the sanctioning of the ceremony by the nfumbi. On this day the responses were very positive, beginning with an alafia (four facing up) and ecana (three facing up) and then back by an alafia (four facing up). A medium-size pig (dark in color) was led out by an older ahijado of TataNgombe. Song rang out.

“Pasando la nina, pasando la”

(This phrase was repeated over and over with cadence between one singer and the group. A pig was brought forth during this time, which I believe to be female corresponding with the women presenting to the nganga-a pig/ngulo was then lifted above the nganga and the sacrifice began.)

“Menga va corre, como corre”

“Corriendo va...”

(This too is repeated while the blood is spread over the ngagna  
Two ahijados held the pig while the TataNgombe does the cutting.)  
(Monroe/Munanso NsasiNdembo 2002; El Oriente)

After the sacrifices of the pig/ngulo, a rooster was given to cool the hot blood of the four-legged animal. The TataNganga cleaned the practitioner presenting with the rooster or hen. Songs repeated, that is typically songs are situated according to ritual actions of the ceremony. “Menga va corre como corre”... was sung during the first blood letting of all sacrificed animals. Other substances were given to the nganga like water, honey, tobacco and rum. All members participated in the feeding of the nganga with tobacco and rum. When the blood and other substances had been fed to the nganga, the practitioner presenting to the dead cleaned the feathers, blood and other materials that cluttered the floor with her bare hands. All members of the munanso sang specific songs during this process, typically led by older members of the munanso.

After the floor was cleaned a bell rang out for more singing. A younger member of the munanso suddenly hit his head against the floor after shaking his head violently. He began laughing loudly and inching his way toward the nganga. The tata begin to ritually consecrate his body in various manners. The dead had arrived and the tatas present began to prepare for the

dead's comfort and requests. This was done in a variety of ways by singing soothing songs and offering cigars and rum to the dead. After multiple violent spurts and the soothing voice of the Tata the nfumbi was present and stable. A candle was lit and wrapped around his head and he greeted those present. Consultations and greetings took place for around an hour or so until the ritual setting provided for an exodus of the spirit, usually initiated by the tata. Many songs continued throughout the night. The practitioners present took turns singing with all present contributing to the exchange.

When the dead possesses a practitioner eventually he or she will counsel the people participating or present at the ceremony. Among the munanso NsasiNdembo in El Oriente, certain gestures identified the spirit that had arrived and some members knew the exact spirit that arrived from its behavior, vocalization, and characteristics. Ritual greetings are given when anyone addresses the dead—the dead takes the person's hands (hand to hand, pull them towards the earth, spins them as if dancing in a circle (in both direction), and embraces the person. Typically the dead began to explain an individual's situation; if there are problems with the family, health or heart, the living are informed and counseled. Many times the client, those initiated, or fellow Tatankisi would be asked to verify if what was stated was the truth or a falsity ("verdad or mentira"/ "Is it a lie or the truth"). This is a type of confirmation between nfumbi and client. The consultation would take only a few minutes (or longer if necessary) and the dead would proceed to another person present with similar greetings or with a special signification. For example, an nfumbi comes across a Tatangagna in the room and lets out a joyous burst of recognition as if the nfumbi recognizes him as a friend. The dead spirit recounts people's pasts. Warnings are issued to particular initiates and announced by the visiting dead. The nfumbi may proceed by issuing a prescription of resolution and advices. It is commonly said that during

possession the dead never used matches or lighters to light their cigars but would only light cigars from the burning candle. The dead spirit makes itself awaken in the person, although not all palero are possessed in the same manner or at all (Monroe 2004: El Oriente).

Ritual formulas for the exodus of such a spirit include covering the possessed with a black cloth and the spraying of rum around the person's head, sometimes over the whole body. This process may take a few minutes and other times may be more arduous and timely. The mayombero is not able to account for the occurrences during possession and sometimes is dehydrated and exhibits exhaustion. The dead spirits can liberate you from negative things in your life (sickness) and entice positive change (lover, job). Therefore, the ritual practices are center around the needs of members within the munanso. The calendrical rituals usually relate to the owner of the nganga and the days when the practitioner was initiated or a date that has religious significance to the nfumbi. The paleros' motivations rely on the relationship established between themselves and the nfumbi. How, when, and why rituals take place, vary greatly between religious houses (munansos). Rituals can include close to whole neighborhoods or just one or two people.

Rituals are done for various reasons directed by the owner of the nganga, typically in conjunction with demand from the dead. So too, demands on the paleros are made by dead spirit. Basic ritual understanding comes from a wide range of traditional knowledge acquired from the practice and interactions with munanso members. In certain instances the knowledge of a palero relies on the desire to know more, practice more, and build a stronger relationship with the dead. The forms of belief, and ritual rely on the transmission of such knowledge and belief. The central relationship that exists between padrino, tatanganga, and also the relationship with the dead (nfumbis) remains the source of action and understanding. The personal motivation to have such

relationships and maintain a social status is contingent on the forces of social political spaces. Hierarchy, competition, and confrontations are at play in any munanso and such interactions nurture meaning and model ideas within practice and belief.

### **Claiming ‘Congo’ Identity in African-Derived Cuban Religions**

Cuba is known for its syncretic culture, rather underscoring a demographic intermingling of diverse peoples. Ultimately, newly negotiated senses of culture, based on those accessible or known references to belief and practice, language and meaning, as well as potential perceived character within colonial and postcolonial representation, guide our analytical approach surrounding Congolese identity in Cuba. A corporeal experience, and its ideological predecessors, form all diasporic experiences but such conceptions, whether they pass through religious practices or other social phenomena, identify categorizations (such as ‘Congo’) and illustrate how meaning, particularly meaningfulness, create terms of identity, ethnic or otherwise. The political significance of linguistic choices, cultural representations, and histories are produced within spaces of power but the ways that these ideas are embraced or rejected, selectively or otherwise, situate one’s production of self and others. On one hand such representational assemblages of individuals and groups are produced within degrees of presence, publicity, and disclosure stationed in productions of power—those things commonly known or spoken of in certainty, and are inherent in language and in historical constructions of the subject.

The identification of Cuban African religious personage is quickly referred to Yoruba/West Africa, Cross River region and Congo or Central Africa people. These distinctions refined in Cuba, becoming more ambiguous but also an irrefutable presence over time, position the AfroCuban religions as markers of identity. What becomes important is the ways ideas of African ethnicity depend on personal and group representations, displays, and practices of Palo

Monte. Does Palo Monte, described by practitioners as “Brujo”<sup>17</sup>, connect the Congo to the same type of brute energy, forceful spirit and violent nature? The reputation that surrounds Palo Monte and its identification as having origins in Central Africa situate a correspondence to the ways cultures are represented. “They have more fear of the nganga because of the violence, the force and the energy. It is more raw and when lan nganga goes like this in possession and in the work” (TataNgombe, 2002, El Oriente). Palo Monte has the reputation for being a strong, maybe the strongest, force of the spiritual practices of Cuba. Generally speaking, the underlying references to violent and potency of Palo spirits has deemed it “brujeria”, a term sometimes embraced by practitioners. “It is a very strong word (brujeria), and because Palo works are very strong, it is a way to describe the characteristics of Palo” (2002, TataMbu, El Oriente).

The stories told of our past usually revolve around associations with ancestors, from mother/father to daughter/son, and it is that parental (whether nationalistic, religious, intellectual, etc.) model that created and nurtured us. Our various social models situate our perspectives and conceptual understandings of history and identity. The concept of forefathers or mothers of the nation (or people) runs deep in forms of identity and this is true for religious munansos (godparent/godchild relationship) and most Cuban families. The histories of Central African descendants in Cuba, and their correlations to the histories of religious development, exist in the Spanish colonial past of sugar mills, tobacco farms, and the oppressive acquisitions of enslaved labor. The transatlantic slave trade to Cuba has situated and situates the attempts to trace the ‘whens’ and ‘wheres’ of AfroCuban religious identity, history and ethnicity. Nganguleros’ perspectives of their craft and the importance of their communal legacy, their own histories and current production of their spiritual world, follow the colonial productions of labor, race and

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<sup>17</sup> Translated to English as ‘witch’ or ‘sorcery’

religion but have developmental distinctions as to the particularities of the AfroCuban experience.

The ideas of ‘Bantu’, colonial in its ordering and establishment, are insulting to some people and standard conceptual reference to others. This categorization is common among paleros and is regularly used in speaking of Palo practices and African heritage. The re-invocation of colonial ideas, concepts and histories is an inevitable product of learning language and functioning in contemporary society. The foundations of cultural distinctions, specifically in the case of diasporic movements of enslavement, create ideas of inferiority and situate a diaspora of imprisonment in a colonial catacomb of conceptions. Nevertheless, the basic forms of our understanding of self and group, be they racist or empowering, are then contextualized in spaces where the invocations or meanings produce our histories. The forms of Congo-identified Cuban religion, bound through the context of enslaved labor and European interpretation of African people, compounded within a colonial space of corporeal and sociopolitical realities, maneuver through reinterpreting colonial markers and re-invoking ancestral connectivity for contemporary identity.

Comparing multiple perspectives of paleros in El Oriente to multiple views from La Matanzas and La Habana illustrate a politics of choice when determining historical particularities of Congo-identified religious development in certain Cuban localities. In describing the variations of Reglas Congas a young ngangulero from La Habana (twenty-five years old), stated this about his perception of paleros in Santiago de Cuba:

In Santiago, the prendas are much stronger there than in Havana. In Santiago it’s stronger this religion, like the religion of Santeria-Ifa in Santiago is less. The reality is in this religion, there is one place where it is stronger than Santiago and La Habana, its La Matanzas (Monroe/Tatakisikalunga 2004: La Habana province).

There were many examples where paleros would consider their zone of the country as the Palo stronghold. Taken from a story of a practitioner in La Matanzas, the distinctions among Cuban localities are apparent.

When Africans arrived to Cuba, they became slaves. At that moment there were three Congos: Congo Luanda, Congo ---- and Congo Carabali Real. They came in a ship and they had a rebellion on the ship, and created there the first nganga, named Zarabanda, because of the struggle that happened on the ship. The head of one African was cut and it was put inside a fruit of Calabash tree with pieces of machetes and guns, they prepared that prenda when they arrived in 'Cunavianda', that is Cuba. They brought the nganga and the blacks were sent to different sugar mills, and Congo Luanda, who is the strongest of all, that is our branch, came here, and said, "This African cannot go to the Oriente", he stayed in Havana, he was the unique African that was not a slave, he was a unique who returned to Africa flying. (TataLuanda, 1997, La Matanzas/RM)

Here is a practitioner's perspective from Sierra Maestra Mountains.

The thing here in Santiago de Cuba, it is very strict concerning the secrets of the briyumba, the mystery of the Congo, that is why it didn't spread over the territory, because of its secrecy. That is why La Matanzas, to the contrary, is known as the origins of Palo, where it is spoken and developed. But in fact, all the mystery and the things of the Mayombe belong here, this earth nfinda labatuniwue, it is called Nfinda Labatuniwue el monte (the mount) because here you can find the best sticks. In Matanzas they have different names, and when you go looking for them the names do not coincide." (TataNkunia, 1998, El Oriente/ RM)

Questions of locality, authenticity, and history produced by various practitioners construct notions of Cuban Congo ethnicity and identity by connecting personal narrative of recent pasts to the production of the past by 20<sup>th</sup> century perspectives. How paleros traced their lineage to La Matanzas, Cienfuegos, El Oriente, and La Habana correspond to a production of the past, highlighting the history of localities and events in Cuba

The identification of African ethnicity in Cuba stems from a diasporic multiplicity of experiences developed, connected, and built from the participation of several actors. The ideas that center on the initiation or raymiento (to be cut) in Reglas Congas as a precursor to began a path in Ocha (Santería) remain a hierarchy maintained in many social and academic circles.

Deaths, national and trans-national migration, and shifts in religious roles, mark many variations of this religion over time. This is true in religious practice as in life. The importance of African heritage and the essentially powerful presence of the black and non-black population in Cuba remains ever present in the presentation of Cuban culture. That is to say that the typically essential forms are sought connecting linguistic forms in Cuba to their African cultural spaces (i.e. Mayombe, Nsongye, Bititi, Musundi, Teke) (Fuentes 2002; Bolivar-Arostegui 1998). So too syncretism is a widely held paradigm depicted in certain 20th century, a position among cultural 'forms', a type of uncritical lip service that follows the lead of former theorists (Bastide 1971; Barnet 1969). That is not to say that a syncretic process is not happening, but that formulation of culture must be approached in fluid non-essentialist ways.

The family history, not unlike religious branches of Reglas Congas, contains the seeds of identity. So too the religious practices empower and maintain ideas centered within frameworks of history, practice, and ethnicity. "In La Matanzas it is very strong, it is the strongest in Cuba, in Jovellanos, it is the root. In La Matanzas we founded the first *contienda* of Palo" (Monroe/Mestre 1997, TataBangansa, La Matanzas). To be 'Cuban' is to host many notions, ideas, and representations. My experiences in my research of Palo Monte, like anyone's ethnographic depiction, contend with certain limitations of the ethnographic process. The ways in which anthropologists experience, participate, and portray any given social experience has its particularities. The imagined political characterizations, interlock in exchanges of empowered expression and distinctions, combining forces of production whether within local communities or within public distinctions of varied populations. Cultural practices and ethnic racial categorizations are socially imagined (for better or worse) in the description and conception of culture. The foundation for any such distinction is contested and asserted.

To practice Palo Monte is to connect with personal lineages of a Tatankisi. In ritual practices, references in song and dialogues among the practitioners produce the religious importance of people's passage, power, and personage. The invocation of religious ritual language produces meaning and capacities to identify Congo spirits, Cuban Congo ancestry and a Cuban Congo identity. The veneration of recently passed family members, the salutations of past ancestors, the control, attraction and exploitation of human spirits, the possession, interaction and counsel of the dead are all at play in the lives of Nganguleros. This identity has its particularities and differs from other Caribbean and New World localities. Diaspora is a very particular experience, developed over several hundred years of sharing religious ideologies and practices with a diverse number of actors and power dynamics. The network of consanguinity, friendship, and religious authority is at the heart of Palo practices and essentially produces meanings that construct its representation. Essentially these actors produce and have produced what we have come to know as Reglas Congas.



Figure 3-1. An nganga from 1998 ©Lonn Monroe

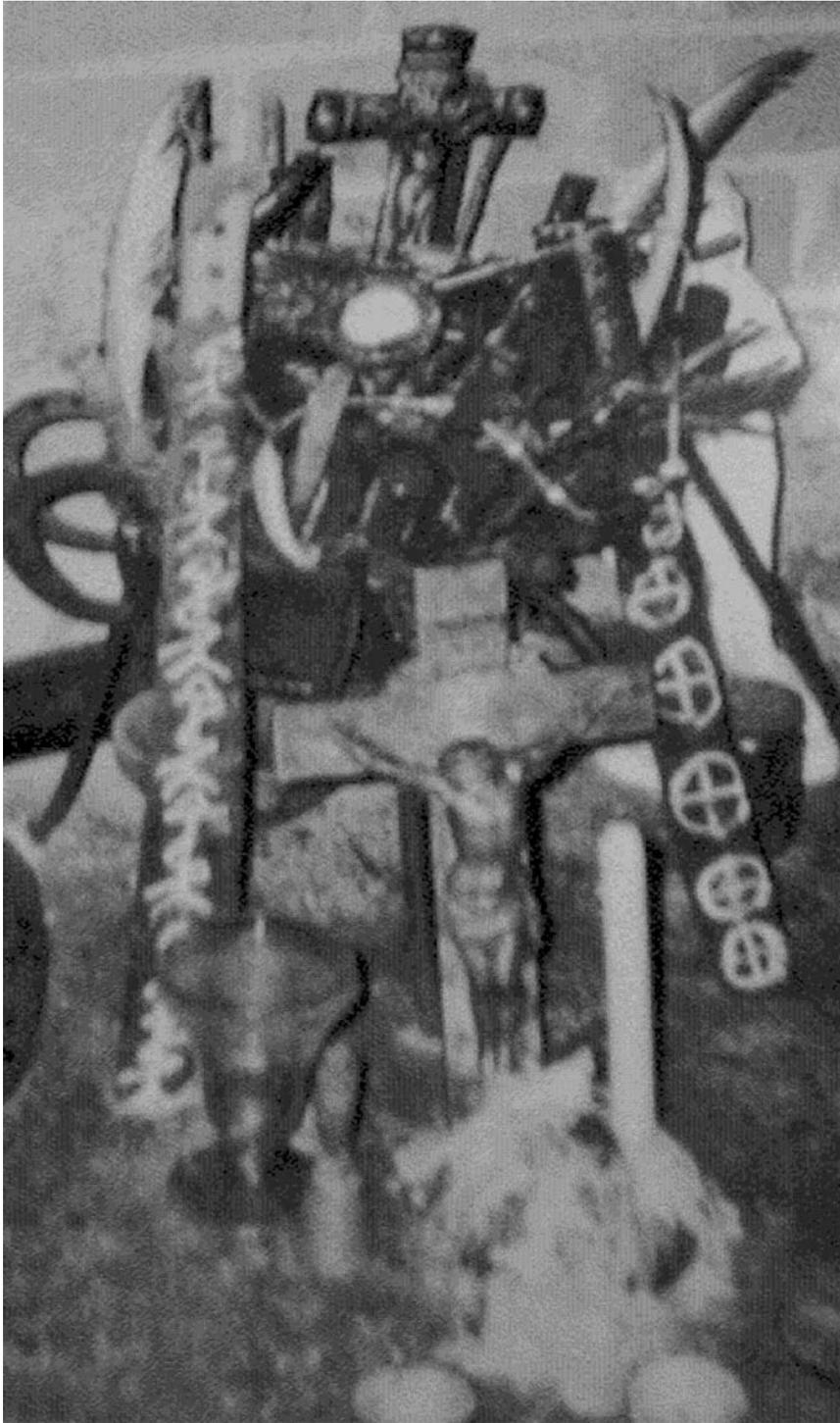


Figure 3-2. An nganga from 1999 ©Lonn Monroe.

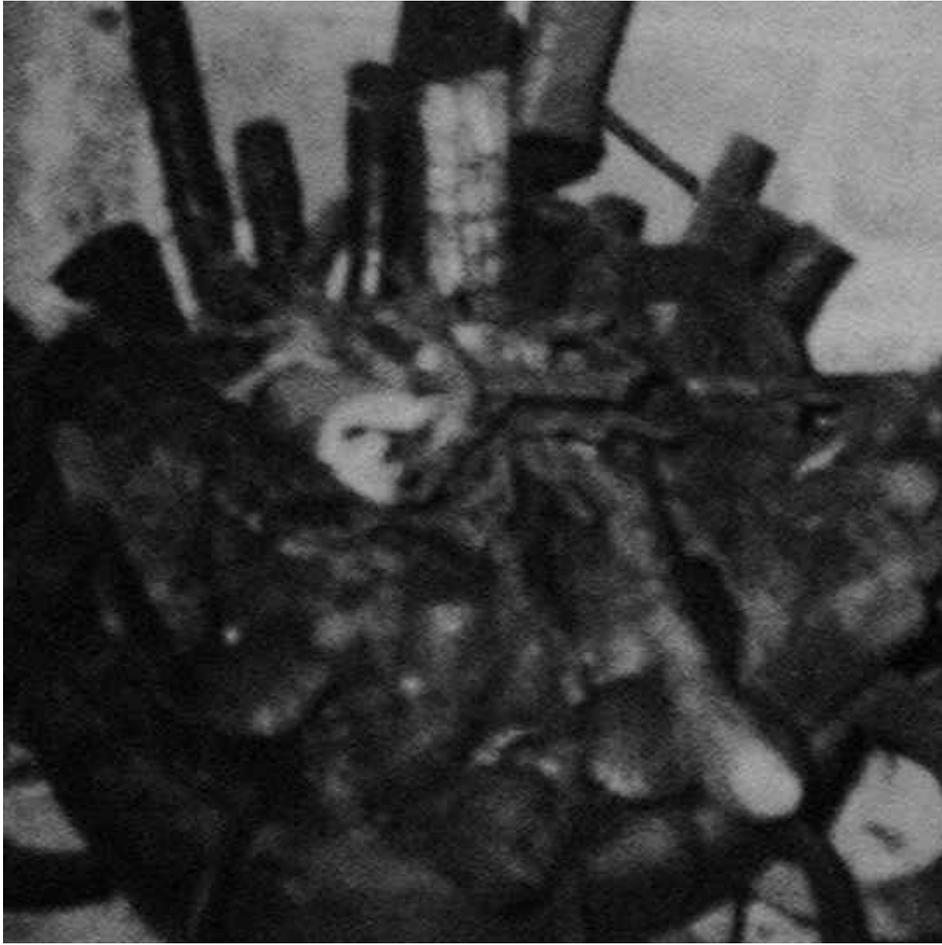


Figure 3-3. An nganga from 2000 ©Lonn Monroe.



Figure 3-4. An nganga 2002 ©Lonn Monroe



Figure 3-5. Offerings to the nganga 2000 ©Lonn Monroe



Figure3-6. Chamalongos, candle (muinda), and symbol of Nzambi Mpungo in front of the nganga 2000 ©Lonn Monroe

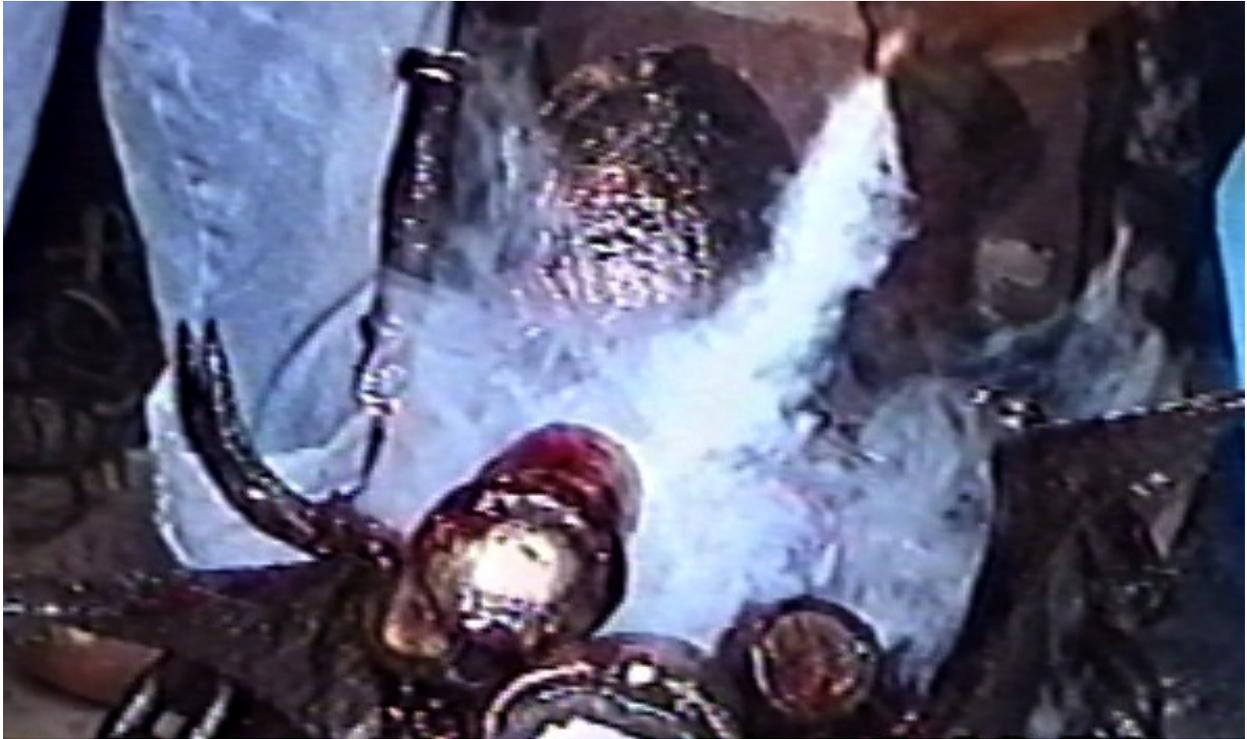


Figure 3-7. Feeding the nganga with tobacco (nsunga) 2000 ©Lonn Monroe.



Figure 3-8. Feeding the nganga with blood (menga) 2000 ©Lonn Monroe.



Figure 3-9. A recently fed nganga 2002 ©Lonn Monroe

CHAPTER 4  
THE NGANGA OF REGLAS CONGAS: AN ANALYSIS OF AESTHETICS AND MEANING  
IN CONGO-IDENTIFIED CUBAN NECROMANCY

**Positioning Distinctions and Derivation in the Cuban Nganga**

The “nganga” is the central object of ritual in Palo Monte and has been a key component in the identification of Central African cultural forms in Cuba. The nganga centrality in ritual practices and its importance as a cultural marker have made it a subject in many books (Ortiz 1906; Cabrera 1979; Palmié 2002). There are several questions raised in the analysis of the nganga. First, questions concerning the transmission of African culture and the diasporization of cultural elements in Cuba. Second, how have characteristics developed in Cuba instilled particular religious notions and practices surrounding the nganga? Lastly, how are the rituals and beliefs of the nganga a main referent in the production and conceptualization of Congo identity in Cuba?

The Congo-identified religion is represented in specific ways that suggests the importance of examining politicized conceptualization in the formations of social and religious knowledge. More specifically, the formation of the Cuban nganga intercedes with concepts of history, race, and culture. The nganga is subject to multifarious meanings, administrations, and reinventions in Cuba, and like sociocultural identity in Cuba, it stands distinctly apart from its African counterparts while concurrently reproducing certain philosophies. The social contentions between disparate individuals and cultural forms in spatial and symbolic confines of enslavement, colonial ordering, and communal populace within codes such as slave, black, African, AfroCuban, surround the constructions and meanings of the nganga (R. Scott 2000; Howard 1998; R. Moore 1997; Ortiz 1926). Ritual objects and ‘African art’ have had a long history of colonial examination and represent a crucial site for critical evaluation of categories put forth in cultural representations of the nganga (Mudimbe 1988; Said 1979; Mbembe 2001).

The categorization of African Art and African cultures produced meanings in African representations throughout colonial expansion circa 15th century and beyond (MacGaffey 1988; Amstelle 1998; Stoler 2002). The notions concerning spirit vessels are bound historically to ideas of ‘fetish’ emerging with Portuguese contact and typically illustrating a demoralized primitive position (MacGaffey 1977). The nganga as associated with Palo Monte has several negative associations. This is not to say that the practitioners perceive these representations, but a long history of persecutions and hearsay stand at the heart of the great fear surrounding Cuban paleros’ ritual practice (Ortiz 1906; Palmié 2002; Cureau 1913). Past descriptions and negative translations of nkisi forms<sup>1</sup> by Christian European imperialists, traders, and explorers represent the earlier depictions of African culture to Western audiences (Park 1816; Weeks 1913; Volavkova 1972). In this case minkisi of the Central African take on a representation of ‘primitive art’. Collectors desecrated these objects by removing ceremonial manipulations and presented them without the religious context of their creation. Nevertheless, such reinterpretations consummate a history of African identity as constructed typically by European and Americans museums and educational institutions (Mudimbe 1988; Laman 1962; Schildkrout and Keim 1998).

Practitioners’ perspectives and their representations by Cuban cultural institutions both in academic and public settings (cultural/tourist publications) cultivate the connections to Central Africa and Cuban reinvention of the nganga. This chapter explores ideas of ‘origins’ and ‘reinventions’ in religious forms, both as Caribbean (Cuban) and African identity (Matory 2005; Hall 2001; Gilroy 1993). How is the nganga defined as having ‘origins’ in Central Africa and how are definitions assigned in Cuba? How is the nganga significant to participants of Palo

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<sup>1</sup> Nkisi is singular; minkisi is plural.

Monte and how is it related to a Central African past? Specifically, how is the nganga discussed and how are such objects presented in ceremonies and public displays in Cuba? How does the ‘space’ of the nganga serve to provide a framework for the expression and formation of cultural meaning and identity? Thus when we present a perceptible understanding of spiritual qualities, supernatural presence(s), and religious sacred objects as having the culture of the Congo, what are we speaking about?

The nganga is a sacred space of the dead, changing both materially and ideologically in the hands of practicing individuals and religious families. The Cuban nganga and the Central African minkisi, and their meanings, both as philosophical and ceremonial objects, have been analyzed and connected by many researchers, explorers, and writers. The Cuban nganga and the religious philosophies surrounding them have developed as practitioners teach and instruct godchildren but also contend with the perception of outsiders. Comparing past perspectives with interpretations of current viewpoints held by practitioners builds an understanding of the nganga, as it exists currently. This illustrates a conceptual history and a contemporary presence that make understandable the continuation of cultural identity in religious practices but also the make up of its processes.

The analysis of the nganga is partly understood by interpreting the distinction of past connectivity and current productions of cultural objects. What material processes and philosophical meaning are consistent in the creation and life of an nganga? How are the productive forces a part of a formula of Congo derivation? How is the nganga understood and developed as Congo in Cuba, and what makes it distinct from and attuned to the minkisi of Central Africa? The nganga is a living entity (active dead spirit), and people commonly refer to it with Spanish names like “fundamento” and “prenda”(Millet 1996, Arostegui Bolivar 1998, and

Monroe 1997:TataBangansa, La Matanzas). The minkisi are best understood by focusing on a process within ritual consecration that creates and sustains a spiritual relationship. This is also true of the Cuban nganga. Both the Cuban nganga and Central African minkisi share a history and diverge according to time and space exemplifying cultural production as commensurable. An approach that seeks ‘an original’ African culture only reinstates a limited and politically rigid assembly of past categorizations and theoretical models. Cuban connections to people’s interactions, successes, and productions in fields of oppression and liberation have, both practically and conceptually, formed Reglas Congas and the nganga.

This chapter explores what it means for the nganga to be culturally connected to the minkisi objects of Central Africa while concurrently being understood as a Cuban or New World phenomenon. An exploration of Central African cultural identities and concepts such as minkisi reveal drastically varied cultural practices but many perspectives have linked philosophical, etymological, and ritualistic similarities to the Cuban nganga. This chapter looks at the make-up of the Cuban nganga through definitions and observations of Cuban practitioners and examines the material aesthetics attached to practitioners’ philosophies. Most importantly the Cuban nganga represent a religious object of cultural status that parallels the production of ethnic status of AfroCuban representation. The Cuban nganga represents for some an object of cultural genesis and for others, is proof of Congo cultural continuity but regardless has an established role in the understanding and practice of Cuban Palo Monte.

### **Evoking Congo in the Cuban Nganga**

The presence of Central Africans in Cuba, the individuals and groups referred to mostly as ‘Bantu’, ‘Congo’, ‘BaKongo’ and many more specific assemblies of identity, is irrefutable. Labels, terms and categorizations are less easily navigated and are created within the spaces of production, politic, and perceptibility. Uncovering the parameters of cultural re-assembly (its

people, spaces, and events) and refuting ideas of fixed cultures, acknowledges that even in a relative static corporeality, the assembly of culture is mutable. The importance of this research is not in capturing modeled notions of cultural dispersion (not fulfilling a continuation of completion or perfection over time) but in underlining the creation of any given reality as contained and fashioned through space, events, power, and dynamics. The degree to which certain cultural forms set precedence over others reveals a sociopolitical development among individuals, groups, and diasporic spaces is crucial. The gaps in historical, social, and theoretical inquiries rest in the exploration of cultural ideas, practices and identities that avoid the pitfall of ‘absolutes’, ‘origins’, or ‘continuities’ of culture and explore the forces that elect or result in any given form of consciousness, representations or practice.

The Cuban *nganga* illustrates a cultural phenomenon shaped by the actors’ (past and present) conceptual construction of religious ideologies buttressed by sociopolitical pressures of imposed identity formation. The production of identity is formulated in experiences and within the construction of meanings in society. These experiences and ideologies are products of the interaction among forms of power, adaptation, and mutually exclusive corporeality and exist within any social production. Research that follows a straight line from Central African cultural practices to the Congo-derived practices of Cuba fails to recognize the reality of cultural processes. Attempts to secure an authentic genesis, although at times politically justified, only capture a potential of transatlantic cultural flows. Whether real or imagined, these approaches present ‘culture’ as static. This ignores examples of mutability in any production of culture. The *nganga* evokes a site of Cuban cultural particularity, a marker for authentic history, and a social reality in formulations of diasporic identity.

‘Congo’ productions of Cuba must be prefaced by the variability that exists within African demarcations, localities, and histories. The constructions of Central Africans and their diasporic evocation rely on the creation of ideas about identity, the sacred, and history. The designation of colonial or national demarcations continues to shape the assignment of ‘Congo’ and situate objects such as the nganga, religious practices, and African ethnicity in Cuba. Numerous 20th century works have centered on people from the Central region of Africa and have contributed to a greater field of understanding and perspectives on Central African cultures (Laman 1972; MacGaffey 1998; Fabian 1998; Thompson 1983; Jacobsen-Widding 1976). The western misunderstanding of minkisi in the colonial discourses surrounding the early (15th century on) exploration of Central Africa and continued throughout the development of western cultural categorization, philosophy and scientific perspectives. The objects in question were generally referred to as carved wooden figures endowed with supernatural powers, particularly the possession of a spirit (Volavkova 1972; Van Wing 1941). These objects take on many shapes and sizes. Sometimes minkisi take anthropomorphic form (figures) and others are pot-like containers made of wood, metal, or other materials. The original European explanation of minkisi resulted in a misunderstanding of conceptual and functional uses. Typically, these objects were categorized as ‘fetishes<sup>2</sup>’ and became a crucial part of categorizing ‘primitive’ African art, religion and ethnicity.

“Congo” religious philosophy, the beliefs and implementation of ritual production as a resilient body of knowledge, is said to center around the dead and religious ritual objects (MacGaffey 1988; Bockie 1993). Formulating ideas about the past and tracing forms of

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<sup>2</sup> Fetish was commonly used to categorize spirit possessed objects, sculptures, and amulets, particularly African-identified materials. The Portuguese coined this term and was commonly used to describe ritual objects throughout Africa.

religiosity under ethnic analysis pertain to questions of perspective, production, and the politics of identity formation. The distinction between how an nganga is made and understood in Cuba versus a minkisi of the Yaka, Yombe, Musundi or other groups constructs the necessary circumstance for the analysis of cultural production and forms the questions regarding identity and the development of cultural phenomena. Ritual objects in the forms of dishes, posts, masks, sacs, vessels, and statues are known by a number of names and have various cultural meanings. The religious objects may be important to initiation into manhood, funerals, ceremonial rites and witch killing, so religious objects are not all minkisi but contain a wide range of specific socioreligious abstractions and utilities (Poynor 2001). The minkisi reveal a clarification of ideas and processes in such religious practices and distinguish minkisi according to context and ideological constitution. Ideas of 'bilongo' as alchemy or a methodological process of communications or communions with spiritual forces ancestral, natural, or otherwise, situate the context for understanding the ngangas of Cuba as well as the minkisi of Central Africa.

The notions of nkisi, nganga, mukanda, among the other socioreligious ideas and institutions within the various groups of the Congo river basin are commonly referred to as having similar or consistent cultural forms. There are other groups, such as the Teke of the lower Congo, who, among other practices, have spirit objects called other names like 'mati' or 'nkira' (Poynor 2001). This is to point out that minkisi is not a solitary practice that embodies all religious activity. The 'pfembe' (a fertility sculpture), the funeral practices ('niombo'), grave markers (tumba), ancestral pots ('bitumba'), ancestral figures ('mati') all represent religious cultural practices that reflect cultural productions fashioned similarly to minkisi objects (Poynor 2001). The scopes of consensus and characterization of such cultural forms are positioned by ideas and notions of the practitioners but also the interpretations of outside actors, in this case,

European explorers, missionaries, and merchants. The cultural practices associated with minkisi involve a variety of actions that invoke supernatural spirits by both expressive ceremonial activities and ritual prescriptions. It is also true that the nkisi was accepted terminology and practice for several groups in spatial zones around the Kongo sovereignty (Van Wing 1941; Thompson 1983; MacGaffey 1993). The point that spirits were acknowledged by many different groups near the lower Congo region by various names reflect the concentration and diversity of the minkisi.

Today the understanding of African groups in Africa is much more astute but still relies on conceptualized markers such as religious practices, art, and language to connect various smaller groups to a spatial whole. How we group people reveals the importance of meaning in sociocultural categorizations, and how cultural representations have been politicized drives the relevancy of signification, labels, or identities. The elements of power and categorizations accompany each other in various dialogues of performance and ideology (Foucault 1972). The complications arise when theoretical understandings of objects are applied to disparate political geographies and historical cultural productions. The minkisi are produced in temporal moments and spatial context determined by the way they are used, named, and maintained by practitioners. Wyatt MacGaffey's consideration of 'operative processes' in the creation of minkisi relies on the ability to show shared characteristics in a wide range of individual creations and the people's shared socioreligious understandings and meaning of these religious objects (MacGaffey 1993, Jacobsen-Widding 1976).

According to MacGaffey, the nkisi is a spirit invoked by the living for specific social and spiritual purposes. Nkisi was a term used by many within the Central African region (but not all groups within the region) particularly associated with the Yombe, which is part of a name

associated with Reglas Congas–Palo Monte Mayombe. The connection to linguistic identity and categorizations in Cuba suggests the potency of Mayombe peoples in the representation of the greater Central African region (MacGaffey 1968; Van Wing 1941; Laman 1962). Nevertheless, those practices and linguistic signifiers rely on points of colonial contact and ethnographic representation. In the case of ‘Congo’ identity, specific cultural practices and ethnic associations begin to represent a larger, more varied practice within disparate groups. The Kongo kingdom of colonial Africa had political power in the Congo basin and represented a political stronghold but not a unified cultural group (MacGaffey 1968). Searching Central Africa for the origins of the Cuban nganga combines both the tracing of corporeal migrations (within this region) along with the extraction of the political and conceptual productions of social identity, religious belief or any cultural form. As in any account of history or historical development, a production of the present has its own inclinations. Let’s examine more closely what is said about minkisi as a cultural object and its production of meaning in its negotiation, implementation, and presence.

20<sup>th</sup> century research of the Bakongo, apart from Islamic and Christian influences in the region, proposed the importance of past ancestors, natural spirits, and other powerful entities as active participants in the world of humans and reflected a core religious ideology (Van Wing 1941, Laman 1962, MacGaffey 1974). The nkisi is a link between the supernatural and natural and construct the active principle of interaction between the dead and the living. The minkisi are active participants in human society. It is generally understood that the nkisi (spirit) is one of many types of spirits in a range of supernatural beliefs that acknowledge a distant creator Nzambi (Sambia, Zambi) (Jacobsen-Widding 1976). Researchers have stated that nkisi objects (and their spirits) were generally accepted as entities that can kill evildoers (robbers, killers, etc.) and witches (and their spirits) (Van Wing 1941). Ceremonies took place in the event of such a

circumstance and typically included the preparations of ritual ingredients, offerings, and the arrangement of ceremonial space. MacGaffey described the ceremonial operations of *minkisi* through the descriptions of an elaborate set of actions. This included singing, drumming, ritual application of substances (chalk, herbs, dyes, foods and blood, secret mixtures), chalk drawings, offerings and visual placement of the *minkisi* for the participants and observers. The ceremony continued through a varied and obscure set of interactions (MacGaffey 1974).

Most importantly, the interactions between the religious objects and the *Tatanganga* (magician/priest/necromancer) reveal secrets, knowledge and choices of action. The processes of placing substances into hollow spaces inside the sculpture (or container) are sometimes part of their interactions. Commonly blood, water, and other substances are applied or dropped on (in) these objects. The time spent in ceremonies varies, maybe lasting for a day or weeks, depending on technical operations of *nganga* (practitioner) and, in part, on the recommendation of the spirit (*nkisi*). The exchanges of practitioners with such ritual objects result from a confrontation of said 'evils', 'obstacles' or other circumstantial prospectus such as initiatory, protective, and communal matters. These ceremonial productions and their social implications stem from a history of associations with such *minkisi*. The constructions of such objects are seldom witnessed in great detail but the resulting figures contain many observable traits, materials and designs. Essentially, the types of *minkisi* vary by the preferences of the individual *tatanganga* that create such objects.

The word for magician, *nganga* comes from *vanga*, to make, and could be translated 'operator': Bakongo use 'technician', in French, to explain what they mean. There are as many different kinds of *ngangas* as there are technique *ngang'a n'kisi*, usually translated as 'witchdoctor', describes the kind of magician, who operates a charm ('fetish'), for whatever purpose. *Ngang'a mbuki* (*buka*, to heal) is a healer, usually a herbalist; *Ngang'a Ngombe* is a diviner; *Ngang'a Lemba* was a priest of the Lemba cult. Such general categorizations of magician are subject to a particular local and technical definition (MacGaffey 1970:28).

The recognition of the Congolese nganga's (practitioner's) role in the formation and maintenance of such figures is an essential part of how the minkisi are understood. The making of the nkisi proceeds in secrecy but includes a social knowledge that work at times by consensus and in others times through the sole intention of the individual. The sculpting, rearrangement and additions of such objects are certainly a part of the importance of visual impression and sometimes include multiple specialists in its construction. The significance of a power object's visual impact is considered in the process of minkisi conception and interaction with the force therein (MacGaffey 1988). That is to say that its religious and spiritual ingredients are formulated through a process that may include considerations of visual effect by anticipating the role and power of these objects through its impressive appearance (MacGaffey 1988). MacGaffey's "operative complexes" refer to how these objects are involved in a series of aesthetic, religious, political, social production of meaning (MacGaffey 1993).

Minkisi as metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche are constantly set in motion around these practices. Minkisi have been described as a metonymic containment of the spirit in the metaphorical container (MacGaffey 1988). This magical site of operation serves to interrelate several similes that serve to connect clients, priest, spirits, histories, other objects, evil deeds and doers, cures, benefits, and any subject imagined into a play of interpretive ritual. Visual and verbal metaphors are contained in the ways in which the minkisi are addressed and dressed. Chants and songs describe the action of the nkisi and the nganga. 'Vigor'; 'swiftness' and 'perception' were commonly witnessed in descriptions of the Swedish ethnographer Laman (MacGaffey 1988). The inclusion of snail shells called kodya is apparently connected to the verb, kola (to be strong) and its spiral shape, kizinga, connects to the word dizinga (long life). An nkisi nzyodi, is said to contain such objects and is used in cases where healing the body (and its

encasements) is the prescription (MacGaffey 1988). Visually this principle is witnessed in the decoration of colors, textures, and subject/object relations, for example, in the same nkisi nzyodi, there were held two snail shells equal in size, but one is chalked red and the other white. MacGaffey points to the color signification through its association with male (red) and female (white) principles, but this association is also observed in reverse (Jacobsen-Widding 1976; MacGaffey 1988). The ritual use of remains at a scene of a crime or the pieces of clothing connecting to a thief or enemy are attached to the nkisi (connecting the subject and the nkisi) so that the spirit will catch him or her (MacGaffey 1988). “The actual material in nkisi is synecdoche, that is, a part stands for the whole: the beak for the bird, the leaf for the tree, and so on; much of the work of the nganga in preparing medicines consist of scraping off (reba) small portions to be included in a bundle or medicine pack” (MacGaffey 1988:194). The play of words speaks to a great emphasis of local understanding and usually remains in the realms of interpretive capacities or choices. The illustration of these tropes situates the context of meaning derivation, that is, a specific context in time and space (Mbembe 2001). This is also true within the disparate and new contexts of meaning derivations in uses of certain material and cultural concepts with the operative complexes of nkisi-like objects.

MacGaffey states that the operative complexes are missing from the descriptions of 19<sup>th</sup> century art collections that display these dead cultural objects. Operative complexes refer to the philosophical and religious voices that imbue life into these objects and reflect the social, historical and political lives of past peoples (MacGaffey 1993). The materials used in such devices illustrate how meaning is expressed at the site of nkisi. These religious objects contain numerous meanings and multiple cultural expressions that construct a religious philosophy and cultural identification. The understandings of what means to ‘eat’ something, ‘knot’ something,

or cry like a bird reveals a cultural perspective (MacGaffey 1988). The minkisi are formed and maintain through a series of meanings, some creative, political, religious, and particular to an individual. Not unlike the Cuban nganga, the minkisi of the 1800s, incorporated European symbols such as the crucifix and other religious symbols. “Captain Tuckey, in 1816, saw at Noki, in the region of the cataracts, that “the crucifixes left by missionaries were strangely mixed with the native fetishes and the people seemed by no means improved by this melange of Christian and Pagan idolatry” (Zdenka Volavkova 1972:55). MacGaffey states clearly that his intentions in exploring the minkisi are to delineate a unity in the class of minkisi (and its role in religion, politics, and society).

This conceptualization of minkisi uncovers how notions in the Americas manifest a correlation to African ‘origins’. The colonial interpretations of ethnic space continue to be the way that Central African culture is understood, practiced, and represented in the ‘New World’. Nevertheless, these constructions have produced a site through which cultural practices continue to refashion themselves (Mbembe 2003; Gilroy 1993; Thompson 1984). The nganga constitutes a legacy of Central African religious forms and consolidates or rather recreates an object not solely of an origin but derived from supposed origins within the development of Cuban Palo Monte. It is crucial to note that minkisi-the historical and cultural specific creations-bear the historical and ethnographic evidence of a Congo past but does not represent a whole of Central African cultures. Furthermore, the Cuban nganga is not solely a product of Central African peoples but of those peoples involved in the development of Reglas Congas, that is all the other various Cubans (African, European, Native American and Chinese) that have been a part of the nganga history in Cuba. The processes and creations of such objects in Cuban Palo Monte

Mayombe, created by multiple ideas of multiple people, were ignited by ‘Central African philosophy’ and today are enacted in lives of many Cubans.

MacGaffey’s contribution to the Central African studies centers on the idea of operative complexes that illustrate a process that is both ritually established and culturally directed. At the same time the ambiguities of cultural distinctions of the nganga and among Central African minkisi objects underscore a broad association of Central African legacy in the Americas. The elusive nature of cultural origins reflects the ambiguities of cultural recognition and reveals the importance of concepts shaped by contemporary actors. More precisely, the development of the Cuban nganga is the result of the historical and contemporary construction of ritual practice and religious ideology in Cuba.

#### **Nganga as Cuban Culture Congo Style: Deriving Beliefs in Cultures of the Cuban Nganga**

It does not take long to see similarities in the ngangas of Cuba and the minkisi of the Congo Basin. The linguistic referents of the nganga in Palo Monte speak to its Congo antecedents with a well-established and varied ritual language in Cuba (Bolivar 1998; Millet 1996; Fuentes 2001; Cabera 2001). Linguistic references in ceremonial speech connect the spiritual power of the Ngangulero to the spirits of their prendas, fundamentos, and ngangas (Castellenos/Castellenos 1992; Millet 1996; Fuentes 2001). Such words as nkisi, nganga, mpungu, mayombe, and Tatanganga are easily connected to the groups of the Congo Basin region (Fuentes 2002; MacGaffey 1988). Their arrangement and usage inform other factors created by Congo practitioners’ ritual language in Cuba. Although far from being a Spanish spiritual practice, practitioners rely on the referents of concept in order to maintain a link to Congo spirits (Valdes Acosta 2002). The religious historicity, contemporary (developmental) spaces, and diasporic meanings of the nganga of Palo Monte currently possess a construction derived from Central Africa but also contain symbols of Spanish and Cuban experience and

belief. What are the aesthetics associated with the Congo that manifest them in the ritual belief and practices surrounding the Cuban nganga? How are culture and aesthetics related in realities and analysis? How are aesthetics of religious practice and object given meaning? What are the meanings within a given aesthetic and philosophy?

Diasporic religious tenets are understood and developed by practitioners representing and enacting their beliefs. The balance between the conceptual representations of ideas developed by Cuban and Spanish subjects and the connection to a belief of past ancestors receives a fair share of analysis (Barnet 1995). There is a range of perspectives about the nganga and the authentication of such practices, methods, and dogma. This link to the ancestors and spirits of the dead create a link between those predicaments of daily life. The nganga is a spirit companion's abode and yet this may be thought of in various ways. Sometimes the depiction of the Nganga is more crudely pictured as forms of domination. These descriptions, by practitioners and researchers alike, have portrayed the relationship between *nfumbi* and *tatangana* as controlling, like an owner and his/her dog (Palmié 2002; Matibag 1996). The distinctions of such types of relationship remain varied as such necromantic techniques or relationships are not solely situated in the master/slave dynamic. And likewise, how people relate to dogs, let alone an ancestral spirit, remains distinctly varied among practitioners. The genus of various ngangas, with reference to *mpungos* such as *Seite Rayo*, *Kalunga* and *Lucero Mundo*, parallel the variation of spiritual and elemental characteristics of Central African *minkisi*. Moreover, the differences between the Cuban nganga and BaKongo *minkisi*, situated by Spanish and other African ideologies, are created and interact in varied conceptual and productive fields. Those first ideas created by the enslaved, whether Mbundu, Musundi, or Mayombe, reproduce themselves in unique expressions of religiosity, securing certain practices (or representation) as Congo, but also

a conciliatory and contested development of identity by their producers within a wide range of belief, practices, and productions in Cuban society.

The nganga is the dead's house, a reservoir of spiritual power, and a point of intersection for the living and the spirits of the dead. The practitioners create, interact, and sustain a relationship with the nganga to fortify the link with the dead spirits but also to acquire the power associated with acts of necromancy. The importance and control of dead spirits reflect similar conceptual principles between minkisi sculptures and the Cuban nganga. The commemoration of the dead and the acknowledgment of their presence underscore a belief in the persuasiveness of such belief in the living world and a philosophy that these forces can be manipulated for mundane purposes. The spirits of the dead can cure the sick, give sickness and impact the outcomes of conscious life. The spirits of the dead are said to have little limitations once communication with practitioners establishes the spirits' access to materiality of life. This connects the dead to the world of the living and the resources of our reality. The idea that a spirit can be contained or attracted to an object supplies some grounds for commonality between Central Africa philosophy and the nganga of Cuban Palo Monte.

Producing distinctions in spiritual representations in Cuba, like simultaneous practices of orisha worship and catholic identity in proclamations of some nganguleros, illustrates the experience between people's religious cosmologies and multifarious religious belief. The considerations of uncovering religious themes or phenomena operate within and outside of the influences that are spatially and conceptually proximate. Regardless of postulations about cultural philosophies in the Caribbean, whether Spanish Catholic, Haitian, Chinese, Yoruba, Mayombe, Carabali or indigenous, their presence among all others establish a cultural repertoire in a politic of prospectuses. This politic of prospectuses or perspective accompanies the

positions of subjects and subjectification in Reglas Congas within distinctions of ethnic identity and representation of the colonial past. So tracing Congo belief is only a part, certainly a significant part, of a whole set of histories and interactions in the development of Cuban Palo Monte.

The ritual application of substances (rum, honey, water, blood, tobacco, smoke) and the use of the natural things, such as sticks, herbs, rocks, suggest a similar operative process between the Cuban Congo ritual and rituals of the Central African nkisi. The ritual usage of various symbols and specific objects illustrate a similarity within the beliefs, pinpointing such processes as spiritually potent and important in the exchanges of energy between the living and dead. The consolidations or amalgamation of materials in these objects, not unlike the concept of bilongo, illustrates aspects of religious ritual tactics that utilize practitioners' intentions and natural materials in ritual production. Religious beliefs connect the objects of the dead to the material of the living and establish an interdependence of acceptances, rejections, and exchanges with possession, divination, and clairvoyance. Questions of domination, enticement, aggravation, collaboration of the spirit world grow from the foundations of remembrance and acknowledgment of death and the dead. An underlying process of beliefs, rituals, and meanings is constantly under new fields of interaction/interpretation and is formulated within new contexts of production. Belief in nganga and the forms of initiation, ceremonial sacrifice, and ritual language have shaped how the nganga exists within the mysterious practices of Reglas Congas.

There exists a philosophy of ritual application among the practitioners of Palo, some of which differ from others, but which also reserve a relatively consistent episteme. Ritual practices are believed to be process that one may make communion, manipulate and revere dead spirits. Singing salutations to the nfumbi or feeding the nganga with special prescriptions of animal

blood incorporate beliefs and gives meaning to ritual activity. Joel James proposes several factors that situate the belief in multiple representations that exist in the nganga, that is, the practitioner's relationship to the nfumbi and the responsibilities and structure of munansos (James 2001). Generally the formulations of a distinct genus of nganga represent a wide range of conceptualization (i.e. the mpungos, and distinctions between good and evil) and variation that exists in religious practices (James 2001; Millet 1998).

### **Potentials and Symbols in Rituals Processes of the Nganga**

Multiple representations are contained in the nganga, both materially and spiritually. Nganguleros collect numerous natural objects to create an nganga. Ceramic pots, iron pots, and cauldrons, and multiple other containers usually of metal, wood, or stone, are the vessel for the amalgamation of the Cuban minkisi. The nganga has stages of consecration but inevitably the nganga is ever changing at the hands of those that direct ritual activities. The nganga is a religious space of partnership, collaboration, and expectations, and does not stand as a passive object, like an idol or a relic forbidden to touch. The nganga is a vessel created and maintained to please (appease) and contain a spiritual force or spiritual forces of the dead. The pot or cauldron and its ingredients therein are utilized by the spirits and help practitioners in the negotiation of mundane day-to-day living by other worldly means. The corporal operations executed in ceremonial practices situate ritual processes associated with techniques created and maintained in a body of knowledge held by practitioners. Most importantly this process of techniques is centered in the belief that the construction and maintenance of any nganga rely on the communication of the Ngangulero with the spirits.

The construction of nganga is always a guarded secret but some general notions are well understood and spoken of in books, articles and cinema (James 2001, Larduet 2001, Barnet 1994v.). The containers are filled with a specially selected assortment of natural items,

associated with forces of nature, the power of the mpungo, in conjunction with the tatanganga's guidance. The container of the nganga (sometimes referred to as nkisi in Cuba) contains a variety of natural objects including, branches from specific trees, cemetery and other soils, bones of animals and humans, feathers, stones, beads, seeds, waters, minerals, skins, tools, and other objects. Earth, stones, branches, bones, chains, animal parts (skulls, horns), metals of various places and types typically fit inside the Ngangulero's pot. These soils and natural objects are arranged in an assortment of way specific formulas only known to the initiated and learned ngangulero/palero. The inclusions of such natural objects illustrate a synechical form in the construction of the miniature world for the nfumbi (Matibag 1996). Conceptual tropes prearranged in the context of meaning and knowledge formation underscore a rationale for the ritual productions. In the Cuban nganga, spikes, horseshoes, metal objects, and chains line the edge of the container. Also palos (sticks) stand vertically lining the container intermingled with the other metal objects. Many authors have compared the form of the nganga to a fortress or defense barricade (Matibag 1996; Palmié 2002).

The bilongo is translated as medicine, brujo, or spell and is an object constructed under prescribed ritual methods and ingredients in order to produce a desired result. Bilongo have a great many variations and definitions. Bilongo seems to describe how the creation of and interactions with the nganga exists as an enchanted object. Alchemic invocation directed at spiritual forces attracts and directs the nfumbi (dead) or nkisi (spirit). A philosophy of invocation by practitioners along with the enticement of earthly things, and dead spirits may be harnessed for insight and solution. The constitution of the nganga is a mass of natural forces compressed within its space, not unlike the minkisi of the Congo river basin that take on an awesome appearance and have spaces filled with herbal mixtures or special combinations of mystic

chemical design (MacGaffey 1988). The offerings of rum, tobacco and blood are administered to the nganga either by spraying pouring or blowing them. The application of knots and herbal mixtures, chalks, shells, machetes, and mirrors (and anything under the sun) contains meaning in the practitioner's administration. This is particularly true in the case of the mpaka menso or bititi menso, a horn typically covered by a wax-sealed mirror containing secret cargo, which serves both as a protective device and a divination object. It is sometimes described as the eyes of the nganga. This is reminiscent of the minkisi sculptures in which spaces were filled and topped with reflective materials or mirrors (MacGaffey 1993). The consideration of such synecdoche and the make-up of this Cuban nkisi opens up the variations of such Central African objects as specified ritual processes and conceptual containers of meaning. Ultimately the owner of the nganga controls its ritual interaction and the various things sacrificed and offered to the dead spirit. The dead are first and foremost the intended destination for ritual supplication.

The ritual processes surrounding the nganga include singing, drawings-called firmas (symbols and lines that direct the spirit), dancing, music, sacrifices of animal blood, and offerings of honey, water, fruits, coffee, herbs and spices (separate or mixed), rum, and tobacco. Commonly, candles and incense are burned around the object during ceremonies but also on a daily basis<sup>3</sup>. The ceremonies and ritual usually occur with several paleros/mayomberos present and ceremonies last from the day into the night and occur in calendrical regularity or when a problem or condition arises that requires attention. Great lengths are put forth in the ceremonial dressing of the nganga where goods and sacrifices are offered to the spirit during ritual processes. The knowledge acquired in the communion with the nfumbi is paramount in the ritual and belief surrounding the Cuban nganga. The tatankisi go to great lengths to teach proper

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<sup>3</sup> I commonly saw this in the Oriente province during visits to the island 1997,1998, 1999, 2000 2002, 2003-2004.

etiquette in the ritual manipulations of the nganga and form the basis for initiates' understanding and treatment of such religious objects.

The minkisi are understood as present in the practice of Palo Monte Mayombe through the central role of the nganga (Matibag 1996; Millet 1998). The connection between Reglas Congas in Cuba and minkisi of the 'Congo' is directly related to a sociopolitical understanding of Africa and the religious practices of contemporary and past peoples' productions of identity, religiosity, and representation. The past lives of people in Cuba reveal how religious tradition have been performed, passed on, and proclaimed as an identity of Central Africa personage. A relationship exists between how we understand African ethnicity (or how paleros imagine his/her connection to dead, spirits and people of Central Africa) through a bound geographic slate that fixes people to places (spaces) in an ahistorical representation of culture by means of imagined authenticity (Anderson 1988; D. Scott 1994). The ways that we legitimize connectivity through similarities and differences of concepts such as religion, culture, and art are contingent on the understandings of such complex processes and conceptualizations. The historical discourses of understanding people, places and history have been produced to such a degree as to precede our formulation of what is relevant and how it should be framed in our present discussion (Said 1979, Foucault 1972). So I approach this analysis of 'nganga', 'nkisi' and 'diaspora', comfortably skeptical of distinctions between the concepts we use to frame a Congolese diasporic cultural object in Cuban Palo Monte Mayombe. To understand the cultural processes operating in the creation and life of an nganga with the physical, social, political, aesthetic mediums that constitutes its nature, creates distinctness in a myriad of ideas that have formed a understanding of AfroCuban religion.

The similarities in ritual containment of natural and manmade objects in minkisi and the processes in meaning formation reveal not the African psyche or African cultures, but culture

itself. This is true of both Africa and its various diasporas. Apart from origins or diaspora, the processes of intoxication, enticement, composition and offerings parallel a system of interaction described in both society and within the world of the spirits; that is, they are strikingly similar in many ways. The nganga has within it spirits of ancestral Congo that parallel the descriptions of nkisi spirits (Millet 1998). Both nganga and nkisi perform certain tasks for the people and practitioners who request changes in circumstance, others, and society (MacGaffey 1993). This can include healing sickness, protecting against mishaps and evil intentions, harming or causing obstacles to enemies, along with general success in love, business and life. Philosophy, principles of taste, and the context of corporeal position of past AfroCuban subjects are part of how 20<sup>th</sup> (21<sup>st</sup>) century practitioners interpret their identity and religion. Great numbers of cultural practices existed and exist in this region and reflect the processes and ideologies contained in the Cuban nganga. Many have formulated a diaspora schema through the analysis of artistic expression or a cultural aesthetic as prominent in a number of disparate forms present in Central Africa and the Americas (Schildkrout and Keim 1998; Thompson 1993, 1990). The exercise of drawing on past interpretations and perspectives suggests clear political and social perspectives in formulations of anthropology and cultural studies, history and religious studies and illustrate the importance of critical cultural analysis in conceptualizing processes in identity, and culture.

### **The Cuban Nganga: Considering Consequences of Creation and Critique**

The various forms of nkisi objects in Central Africa, with their particular emphases on healing, witch hunting, kingship, fertility, among others, illustrate the versatility of characterizations, materials, and belief. The Cuban nganga also contains variations of material and characteristics, and constitutes a framework of composition like minkisi of the past times in Central African space. The forms created in the nganga today display a creation of nkisi on a

grand scale. The ideas of Cuban bilongo (a spell, ritual action, constructed amulets, etc) said to transfer the powers of nfumbi in smaller containers usually are enacted for purposes such as protection, luck and or other specified intentions. Such objects have been the focus of multiple works that trace the Congolese diaspora and their derived cultural practices in the Americas (Thompson 1990; MacGaffey 1993). The Cuban nganga illustrates the fluidity, hybridity, and power in the expressive religious practices of Cuban Reglas Congas. The fluid nature of culture in general, with an especially cautious perspective that recognizes a less rigid sense of cultural boundaries and ethnic ordering, is exemplified in the Cuban nganga. In order to avoid general assumptions about what constitutes nganga production and the peoples who create (and maintain) such objects, the definitions of meanings are paramount. The ways actors, researchers, and outsiders form ideas about nkisi objects (Cuban or otherwise) derive meaning from concepts such as 'religion', 'Africa' and 'Congo' proliferated in their representations by applications of power and politic. The underlying forms of belief in the Cuban nganga and Central African minkisi by the proclamations of practitioners and researchers, both spatially and temporally distant, contain similar meanings for many participants and observers. The potential traits of the Cuban nganga, the ritual processes and spiritual belief surrounding nganga constitute diasporic form apart from notions of purity, authenticity, and consistency. The manners of Reglas Congas and the nganga as a cultural constitution results from an amalgamation of Cuban correlatives built within and without notions of a 'Congo philosophy' and 'philosophies' as stated, disseminated, and created by its practitioners.

The formulation of Reglas Congas is made up of multiple histories and is subject to the assemblage of histories within corporeal relationships and their politically potent representations (Barnet 1995; Lachnaterne 1961; Ortiz 1906). Governing bodies of Spanish Empire and the

impact of powerful Congo cabildos of the 19th century are actors that produce a specific history (Howard 1998; R.Scott 2000). The concentration of Congo representations present in secret negotiations of munanso but also publicity, both within current displays of ‘culture’, ‘tradition’, and ‘heritage’, are constantly in negotiation. The pressures of alienation and prejudice in the colonial reign, continued with nation building, are sustained in notions of brujo (witchcraft), savagery, and human sacrifice associated with Reglas Congas (Palmié 2002; Ortiz 1906; Patterson 1998). The ways the nganga has been associated with evildoers and baby killers speaks to formulations of ethnocentric and domineering economic and racist political perspectives (Palmié 2002; Ortiz 1906; Monroe 1998: El Oriente). Regardless of the ritual and beliefs produced within AfroCuban communities, the formulations outside retained these negative distinctions. Considering the questions of culture as static or fixed, of language-oral and written, or of origins, diaspora, and cultural change, one is faced with the critique of conceptualization in the analysis of histories, cultural properties, and representations of various Central African peoples. A context of historical events, political productions, and the invocation of meanings in language are present everywhere and in all cultural production. This begs the question about formulating bound concepts in cultural analysis and an ever-increasing fluidity in corporeal and ideological aspects of life and cultural production (D. Scott 1999; Mbembe 2002; Mudimbe 1988). The nganga is a material example of cultural meanings and practices situated by a political space of actors as well as a socioreligious ideological core.

The use of religion, agricultural practices, language, kinship systems, and expressive modes furthers such cultural divisions and the significance of cultures in representations of the Congo Basin (MacGaffey 1970, Evans-Pritchard 1973, Jacobsen-Widding 1976). The ways culture is enacted, and also how culture is represented through presumed notions of ‘diasporic identities’ as

‘continuities’ or ‘survivals of Africa’ are a production of necessity and reality (Anderson 1988, Matory 1995). More specifically, illustrated by Anderson and Matory’s work, actors construct the notions and experiences of their identities. Realities are products of personal and institutional representation of identity and culture. The ways in which we understand the ‘minkisi’ formation do not originate from a historical presence of culture but represent a social process of conceptualization that results from new spaces and communities enacting belief and practice. Such enactment then contends with the political constitution of cultures that categorizes and binds producers in colonial demarcations. This is true for explaining previous complexities that existed among former groups and practices in Africa as well as within any diasporic space. No space is absent of difference whether imposed by economic, conceptual, or social distinction. Also social space of cultural production is marked by demographic fluctuations of the community but also power. How such formulations of identity arise reveals how people enact such forms, individually and within groups.

The presence of nkisi-like objects in Cuba and the Americas uncovers a cultural form (i.e., religious objects) forged through religious ideas by a unified and disparate constituency and represents a process of specific meanings and is meaningful to particularly Cuban practitioners. We think of MacGaffey’s understanding of operational complexes in minkisi as flexible religious dialogues through which the ancestors (dead), religious bodies, and political spaces provide a conduit of action in the production of meaning. In other words operative processes in the nkisi represents a cultural process deeper than merely the production of religious objects, one that provides meaning and produce strategies to resist and transcend political and social changes in society. The Cuban nganga, too, has continued the nkisi reinventions within the great spiritual tenets of Cuban paleros. The past categorization of cultural groups and cultural practices assumes

political ‘continuities’ were disrupted in the social upheaval of enslavement, yet the context and processes, although specific to Cuba, illuminate the nganga’s ceremonial subtleties (R. Martinez 1979; Joel James 2001). The nuances of the nganga are particularly Cuban and profoundly Congo or profoundly Cuban and particularly Congo.

The analysis of such objects, and the processes that surround them, open a site for the analysis of cultural production, including aesthetics and religion in material forms. The contexts through which we approach these objects speak to how we construct cultural meaning, unity, and variation. The investigation of the nkisi as a cultural form of operative complexes represents alternatives to linguistic, cultural, religious, and political understandings of the African diaspora and, if approached cautiously and meticulously, may yield a better understanding of cultural hybridity and cultural change. This illustrates an example through which an epistemological understanding of an object can reflect a multitude of sociocultural phenomena and situate meanings and forms within the diasporic approaches. The facets of religious, sociocultural, political, and economic determinates that create an nkisi subject speak to how the representation and conceptual understanding of such operational complexes illustrate cultural sources of meaning. The negotiation of such titles as ‘nkisi’ and how (and to whom) they are applied or evoked illustrate the political importance of representations in identity formation as well as the importance of social negotiation in these representations. However, the observation of the nganga or nkisi in a particular instance (in a particular place) does not necessarily reflect the meanings of its process as understood by the operator (Geertz 1983). By naming or categorizing nkisi we position the idea of the spirit within the object, its operator and the religious context of its character. Those meanings derived from the assessment of historical moment then situate the

Congolese diaspora around certain spiritual practices that may now lack meaning. This point is to emphasize that marking an object has limitations within its cultural-conceptual representation.

The relationship between the palero and the nganga lasts a lifetime (in most cases) and represent a mutually beneficial exchange between the living and the dead. The example in Cuba and among Las Reglas Congas suggests a connection to the practice around nkisi objects of Central Africa. This also illustrates the variations in naming, material processes and cultural constructions, that is, the framework through which they are enacted and understood (MacGaffey 1993; Thompson 1984). The contemporary practice of Palo Monte and the use of the nganga speak to a historical and cultural production that has been created by diasporic communities of disparate peoples. The ideas that portray such phenomena as a direct survival of solely Central Africa descendants fail to recognize the disparities, assumed in fixed notions of culture, that distort our historical and contemporary understanding of culture. Of course, Reglas Congas wouldn't exist without Central African peoples' presence in Cuba. The current practitioners of Palo Monte may or may not have a direct 'physical' link to the families and peoples of current (or past) Central Africa but certainly have a real connection. Over the past four hundred years, present day Palo Monte developed through the discourses that inform its practice and consist of a great variety of local and global perceptions (Miller 2000; Lux 1972; Barnet 1995; Ortiz 1906). The role of the nganga in Cuba and the Caribbean basin relate to how past perspectives, specifically men and women such as Fernando Ortiz and Lydia Cabrera, have constructed it in past depictions. These perspectives still help us to understand these cultural processes in fluid change over time. This continues today in the works of various Cuban and foreign research (James 2001; Ayorinde 2004; Palmié 2002; Millet 1998).

The political influence of the Kongo kingdom reaches far within the Central African basin but perhaps further into the colonial mind, through its corporal interaction and historical exchanges with Europeans. The ways that we choose to represent culture as diasporic must be cautious of the historical context and representations of subjects (objects or people-usually both) and also the depiction of present day phenomena. These ethnographic and historical forms sometimes precede the negotiation of practitioners' identity, practice and ideological understanding. Thus the notions of authenticity are gauged through different productions of meaning and the political significance of the ngangas' use as a means of sorcery and brujeria (black magic) (MacGaffey 1988; Ortiz 1906; Weeks 1913). These cultural representations are produced by a conceptual, spatial, and temporal construction of meaning. These cultural mediums (art, pictures, ethnography, oral histories, and objects) buttress a site of politicized history. Speculating on such historical productions of representation encloses the portrayals and meanings of minkisi as 'primitive art', animistic religion, and hedonistic morality. The rigid notions that minkisi objects have similar ideological and ritualized constructions ignore the production of culture as a fluid enactment of cultural meaning. The assignment of the nganga to a particular cultural group does not address the disparate range of peoples that contributed to the production of such an object. Furthermore, the nganga, produced within Caribbean spaces, political pressures, and perseverance of Cuba represent a Cuban phenomenon of Congo identity, heritage, unity, and struggle.

The nganga is a key site in the recognition of Congo culture in Cuba and illustrates varied and flexible manners of cultural forms and of interpretations about cultural processes. The identification of Cuban nganga as Central African progeny speaks more to its ethnic arrangement in broad classification than to the actual development of nganga as a Cuban religious object and

representational form. The clarification of the importance of origins in representation inevitable undermines a clear view of cultural processes and the productions of diasporic actors. In order better understand the cultural processes involved in the construction of ideological concepts and religious objects we must detach ourselves from misguided conceptual goals. The nganga is one site through which multiple actors have shaped an understanding of Reglas Congas and Cuban society. I will further the analysis of the nganga by addressing how practitioner's work ritually with this sacred object and how it uncovers another productive aspect of Palo Monte.

CHAPTER 5  
BETWEEN THE TANGIBLE AND LOS TRATADOS 1 CONGOS: THE MATERIALITY OF  
NFUMBI IN THE CUBAN NGANGA

**The Tangibility of Mystery: The Living Nganga**

The nganga comes in many forms. The range of appearances that an nganga may adopt is vast. The examples shown in this document are only a small fraction of the possible appearances of an nganga (see figure 3.1 through 3.9). Ngangas may climb to the ceiling or barely reach ankle height. The descriptions of how paleros' work with ngangas illustrates a crucial dimension of the practices of Palo Monte by showing the logic of ritual. More specifically, the ritual reasoning of Palo practitioners show an aspect of this religion that reflects the conceptual and material construction in a process of cultural production. While the beliefs of Palo Monte contend with various conceptual and ethereal meanings, it is the nganga that situates those meanings in the physical world. The production and management of the nganga create a reference for the analysis of material culture, diasporic identity, and diasporic culture. How do ngangas reflect a cultural process that is absent in the discourses of these religions? How do paleros manage their ngangas what does it reveal about religious ideology and material ritual objects?

This chapter is not a dissection of the nganga; rather it is a meta-assessment of processes that involve the nganga both as a centerpiece in ritual activity and as a sacred object. No two ngangas are alike yet there tend to be certain traits, be they ritual requirements or visual similarities, commonly a part of the nganga's appearance. The ways nganguleros work with their ngangas provide a space of inquiry beyond the literary dialogues surrounding Palo Monte. An exploration of the relationship and activity commonly part of the interaction between these personal objects and the religious families, particularly the owners of the nganga, underscores a

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<sup>1</sup> From the verb 'tratar', to handle or deal in. In this case it refers to 'arrangements' (Larduet 2003).

rarely examined site of analysis. The ways that physical and material interactions with the nganga exemplify a cultural experience particular to Cuba while illustrating a site apart from the development of spiritual beings are at the center of this chapter.

Throughout the last decade of visiting Cuba I have seen many ngangas. My interaction with the practitioners and their ngangas has consistently been a part of my research investigation. The nganga's sometimes-awesome appearances have led many outsiders to greatly fear the intentions of acting nganguleros while for the practitioner there is a sense of pride and unconditional adoration that surrounds these objects. Many times I was asked to acquire things for the nganga. It seemed like every year I would return to the States with a new request for unusual materials ranging from animal bones to crucifixes. It was always part of my interaction to help my friends in Cuba with the fight ('la lucha') whether it was by bringing clothes, books, or other non-religious material goods hard to come by in Cuba. But it was the great many requests for natural objects and some unnatural that presents a context for the creation and management of the nganga.

The physical make-up of nganga objects, including the common appearance of horseshoes, railroad spikes, pieces of wood, skulls of animals and even human bones are a part of the alchemic process produced by nganguleros. My intention is not to deconstruct the importance of commonly constructed parts of the nganga, for example the mpaka menso (see figures 3-2 and 3-7) which refers to the eyes of the nganga; rather I hope to uncover a more abstract dialogue present in the ritual processes of the nganga. This dialogue is part of my observation of the ritual activity surrounding the nganga and the ritual processes of practicing mayomberos. This description furthers the understanding of how practices surrounding the nganga work on the ground and reflect a philosophy of procedure. The consideration of these practices adds to the

dialogue on the way practitioners make real their religious ideology and its influence on the religious discernment. Furthermore, the analyses of the nganga parallel the production of culture reflecting both the material and conceptual surroundings. This chapter addresses the material processes involved in a wider assessment of the nganga and is not a deconstruction of its parts but more exactly a perspective of general themes that speak to a non-discursive formulation (outside of literary and public discourses) of this religion.

### **Collecting and Disbursing Power: The Corporeal Life of the Nganga**

The nganga expands and contracts like the process of breathing-in and out. It reaches out to collect things and then disperses those things from its inside out. The expansive aspect of the nganga, the material and ritual processes involved in its maintenance and construction, has been ever-present in my interaction with practitioners of this religion. The same can be said for a consistent dispersal of nganga materials. Parts of the nganga are added to small protective amulets or exchanges between ahijados and their Tatas/Yayas. The nature of knowledge transmission between munanso members involves material exchanges between ngangas. From teacher to student or in the work of bilongos, the exchanges that take place in the material life of the nganga continue to be part of Reglas Congas. What does the nganga tell us about the production of material culture in practitioners' lives and how does it inform a cultural identity? What does it tell us about cultural production and the formation of meaning? I draw on several instances from my experiences in Cuba that center on my observations of the nganga and its role in practitioners' lives.

Over the years I saw TataNbanda frequently. We first met in 1997 and continue to be good friends to this day. TataNbanda was a quiet man of little ego and great compassion. His nganga was located in a separate building away from the house of his family. Many nights we sat in front of the nganga talking about our lives, the nfumbi, and Palo Monte. Through the years our

relationship grew and we shared our experiences and our time. Many years I would bring objects that I thought would be useful in the practice of Palo Monte: things like candles, perfumes, unique stones, beads, and others things, not to mention perishables like rum, cigars, cascarilla. On one occasion TataNbanda requested a piece of a deer antler for his nganga. He specified that it did not have to be a full set or very large, that it need only be the size of a fingertip. This type of request was common. I have brought many things for many ngangas throughout my travels to Cuba. Some things I am still searching for, waiting until I encounter the more elusive items requested by practitioners. Most times I am successful in finding items for the nganga but sometimes I fail to find the necessary goods. Thank goodness for the understanding nature of my Cuban friends, as I have never been punished for coming up short-handed.

Although I was never permitted to take a picture of TataNbanda's nganga it was a site that provided me with intimate details of TataNbanda's relationship with this sacred object. It wasn't until after several years visiting his nganga that I actually saw the concentrated cauldron body. For several years it had been held inside an even larger wood husk, keeping its intimate parts from my inquiring eyes. Furthermore the spaces around the nganga seem constantly changing. Objects were place inside and outside the nganga at various times and never once when I returned to his home was the nganga the same as it was the year before. As I continued to study Palo Monte this ever-changing status of the nganga object became a crucial point for my understanding of this religion and my own theoretical approach to culture.

My experience with TataNbanda has shown me the subtleties of nganga ownership, a responsibility that connects practitioners to an ongoing process that is in concert with (and disrupted by) material interaction, an object that reaches out through people in the physical world, absorbing its objective goods while at the same time closing itself off as if to protect itself

or consolidate itself in a larger world. My experience with TataNbanda nganga has shown me the expansive and contracting nature of the nganga. The very nature of this interactive religion parallels the nganga object: its contradictions and consistencies within a compulsory and spontaneous production of form. I would like to further examine what I saw surrounding the nature of the nganga, particularly its dispersion.

The nganga does not always receive-it gives too. Dispersion is a process commonly found in the ritual interactions of the nganga. From transferals of power (from nganga to nganga) to its importance in the construction of bilongos, dispersal is a common theme in the ritual technique of the nganga. Although there are no pictures that show how the nganga spreads itself in ritual, I have had many experiences that illustrate the action of dispersal in ritual notions and activity. In the late 90's TataFrancisco provided me with many interviews and tended to have a protective attitude toward me. In the third year of friendship TataFrancisco told me that he was going to make something for me.

He pulled out two pieces of different colored cloth; several different freshly picked herbs, a bottle rum, and two cigars. He lit one cigar and handed the other to me. The candle in front of his nganga was lit and he continually sprayed his nganga with rum and cigar smoke. Periodically he asked the nfumbi questions regarding this amulet by using his chamalongos. He occasionally asked me to spray the nganga with cigar smoke. With a large machete he stood over his nganga. Rather gently he placed the machete over a large stick that stood vertically inside the nganga. He partitioned a piece off this branch while chanting in a firm but quiet manner. He sprayed both rum and cigar smoke on the branch and the small piece of wood. He placed the piece of wood and several small amounts of herbs in the partially sewn rectangular cloth. He reached into the nganga and pulled out what looked like nothing. But between his finger and thumbs was a sandy

mix of the material that lie at the bottom of his nganga; He put this pinch of substance into the cloth. Before sewing up the amulet he sprayed both rum and cigar smoke into the open end. After sewing up the small bag he place it inside the nganga. He told me to come back in seven days to pick up my new amulet. He gave me simple but crucial instructions in keeping this amulet well charged and protected. Occasionally in the following years he altered this object.

The connection of this amulet to the nganga is reflective of how the nganga works in the practices of Palo Monte. The ngangas' accumulation of objects and energy is balanced with various types of dispersals. My experience with the construction of this amulet represents one way that an nganga spreads its power throughout the family and friends of the palero. It is not uncommon for the nganga to spread its essences throughout the world, whether for the creation of a new nganga (related by kinship) or for assisting clients. This activity may also take place for the Paleros' own power and protection. The spirit-embodied nganga (and its parts) are subtly and secretly moving throughout the world. The nganga is made of the world around it and is part of a secretive process that is performed and incited for the communion with the dead. What is significant about the secretive nature of the nganga, its processes and presence?

### **Seclusion, Secrets, and Subtlety: Performing Mystery in the Rituals of the Nganga**

The nganga is notoriously an elusive subject. I was once told 'you can't study mystery' and, at one point in my research, I came to realize there were many things that would never be divulged to me. Additionally, it was this realization that made clear the embedded secrecy important in dialogues of mystery present in the rituals of the nganga. Attaining mystery therefore seemed intrinsic in understanding and executing precisely the rituals of Reglas Congas. The greetings between practitioners of 'salamalecum' 'malecumsala' sometimes continues as follows, 'mano a mano no diata, el dia que diata el mundo acaba'. This roughly translates to 'hand to hand we never tell our secrets, the day we tell our secrets the world will end'. For this

reason the nganga sits in seclusion protected from the believers and nonbelievers alike. Its very ritual processes provide a curtain of secrecy. The confidential exchanges between the dead and the practitioners, whether employing subtlety while collecting herbs from a public space or keeping hidden a firma (sacred drawing) for protective measures, represent a process intrinsic to the production of the nganga.

Secrecy has many degrees and what is a secret for some is not a secret for others. While some paleros do not allow pictures others are proud to have the nganga shown in photos. For some practitioners photos only show a superficial and momentary glimpse of the appearance of the nganga. These objects naturally hide the various ingredients packed inside and their creator only knows many of materials used in its creation and maintenance. I would venture to say that the nganga, through the many years of ritual activity, is even mysterious to his/her owner. The many formulaic processes involved in the life of the nganga seem far too numerous to recount them all in detail. This alchemic process creates something more than its parts alone. In this case, the world of the nfumbi (the nganga) is ongoing, that is the ritual velocity propelled by the relationship between the practitioner and the dead create its physical and mental quality, mysteriously as vast as the various qualities of the world.

This mystery is intertwined in the various ways of ritual, whether in song, music, words, drawings, communal activities and other ceremonial rites. On the ground these activities revolve around the nganga. The activity of drawing firmas exemplifies the secrecy, intentionality, and significance of the nganga. Firmas are an important part of nganga rituals that are both outside and the inside of the nganga. (See figure 3-4). Additionally firmas are sometimes inscribed on the side of the nganga and upon the tools of the nganga. (See figure 3-2) The firmas, not unlike a

signature, connect the intentionality of the practitioner to the spirit of the nganga. These sacred drawings are a part of all ceremonial activity, not unlike singing and feeding the nganga.

It was a late summer afternoon in the 2002 when conversation about firmas arose between TataMbu, TataFrancisco, and myself. TataMbu and TataFrancisco were friends but came from different Palo lineages. TataFrancisco introduced to me to TataMbu to help further my perspective of Reglas Congas. TataMbu was approximately a decade and a half younger than TataFrancisco but had been practicing Palo Monte extensively for many years.

During an interview with TataMbu a question regarding firmas came up. It was asked about the importance of firmas and at that point I knew its spirit directing principle as well as its importance as a munanso signature or territory. TataMbu stated emphatically the importance of the nganga's firma. He stated that the full firma is never divulged outside of the nganga. That is, during ceremonial practice, which involves other people- typically members of the same munanso, the firma is never drawn in full. Parts are left out to insure the palero's safety and control of the spirit. This statement got TataFrancisco's attention and he emphatically agreed. At that point TataMbu began to show me less personal firmas that help direct the spirit in certain activities. He asked me never to show these to anyone and that they were for me alone. The conversation continued but not after several drawings were temporarily demonstrated on the floor of his home. TataFrancisco also contributed to this demonstration of firmas.

Like most things that surround the nganga, the ritual techniques, whether drawing firmas, singing songs, chanting commands, or applying substances, are considered sacred and many times secret. On the other hand there are commonly known songs, signs, and meanings associated with the rituals of the nganga. Additionally whole communities understand and participate with these symbols and processes. The nganga is a product of a confidential language

not solely produced in words but in rituals of Palo Monte. It is here where secrets transfer to privilege, privileges of working with spiritual powers, a concession permitted to those who are trained in their use, and contextualize a process of participation and communal language.

### **Communal Participation, Privilege, and Power of the Nganga**

The communal nature of this religion makes particular the role of the nganga within ritual participation. Rituals are held consistently throughout the year, sometimes regularly and other times unpredictably. Participation in rituals of the nganga may be small or large depending on the context of the ceremony. A bond between religious members reveals a shared participation with the ngangas of their brothers, sisters, fathers and mothers. This participatory activity may vary according to the munanso and represent the expansive and communal interaction centered on the nganga. When a ritual is conducted, participants may come from outside the nuclear religious family, which represents a greater ritual solidarity and privilege. In most circumstances only initiated are allow into the nganga ritual space. Sometimes exceptions are made with limited access to the ceremonial activity. To be allowed into these proceedings is a privilege. In a way the whole religious family contributes to the ritual process and therefore its physical make-up. Contributions to the nganga (See figures 3-5, 3-7, and 3-8) ultimately bind the nganga's physical elements and participatory community.

Multiple ceremonies I have witnessed speak to the participatory nature of rituals surrounding the nganga. It is typical that all people present in Palo ceremonies have several ritual interactions with the nganga. Practitioners contribute to ceremonial activities by providing songs, group resources, and consecutive individual feedings throughout the night. Every person present feeds the nganga with rum and cigar smoke (among other things). Brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, all contribute to ngangas that are not necessarily their own. A ceremony will generally begin with a few practitioners and by the end of the night large groups of people have

passed through the munanso. Most contribute what they can, either by presenting an offering or helping in the procession. By the end of the night, sometimes morning, the nganga has interacted, in ritual processes, with numerous individuals. The nganga, within all its secrecy, has a great deal of social interaction and is known and valued throughout the community. Its contribution to the community and by the community represents a socially shared secret and a potent privilege of ritual interaction. This layered ritual activity resides in the materialization of the nganga and makes powerful religious ideas, both communal and private, in this religious object.

The particularities of the nganga are then made real through the relationship with the nfumbi. The knowledge of the nfumbi, that is, the intimate knowledge of the dead spirit that resides in the nganga, uncovers a socially constructed awareness of its characteristics. This may or may not be discernable by its physical appearance. The success and practices of many practitioners are distinctly reflected in how larger social constituencies interact with their sacred object. Most specifically, in the case of possession, where a present member becomes possessed by the nfumbi of the nganga, consultations are one social benefit for many of the participants. The dead, as stated in Chapter 3, confide, comfort, and counsel those involved in the ritual. Additionally, the nfumbi may give advice concerning people who are not present, usually through a relative or friend who is present at the ritual. In TataBititi's description of possession (see Chapter 3) he emphasizes collaboration among practitioners and not the importance of or ability to become possessed. The dead are for everyone and not just the person possessed. The person possessed has little recollection of the event and in many cases does not gain from the experience. This participation, and the power it creates, is part of a dialogue of practice reflected in the rituals and presence of the nganga.

The nganga is a potent social force. Literally speaking through the people and within the networks of practitioners, the nganga touches lives and is touched by many people. The energy projected into the nganga and the perceived consequences of the nganga's energy changes and directs lives. Thus to fully understand the depiction and composition of the nganga is to consider the many actors that contribute to its presence.

### **Concluding the Dynamics of Nganga: Making a Mystery**

As stated by Aberlardo Larduet in his book *La Nganga Centro de Culto Palero* (2002), the nganga is the center of Palo Monte, particularly ritual practice. Ultimately the requests of the dead alter the appearance of the nganga and make possible a facet of tangibility in the material practices of Reglas Congas. At the same time this process is shrouded in secrecy and its interaction reserved for the initiated. The discourses of object codify a requisite context for the building of the nganga. Concurrently, the fluidity of concepts and beliefs lead the construction and attendance of the nganga into a diverse field of appearances. The constructions of requirements in the making of the nganga are constantly negotiated with the production of this religion. This negotiation takes place between teachers and students but also between the spirits of the dead and their living partners. Perspectives that set boundaries on the make-up and authentication of these objects fall short of a concrete assemblage regarding the material formula of the nganga. Part of the nganga's mystery is the variability of its forms, secrecy of its components, and particularity of repeated rituals that place obscurity around its physical state.

The development of the nganga is part of a Cuban sociocultural process that has had many contributors and is a part of a greater representational diasporic consciousness attached to the people and cultures of Central Africa. The manner through which the minkisi (and the nganga) are made, maintained, and changed results from what MacGaffey calls the operative complexes (MacGaffey 1993). A dissection of its parts finds metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche but also

contradiction and consistency in seemingly endless arrangements of practitioners' perspectives. The nganga is a myriad of symbolic and material substance, reflected in the use of crucifixes, coconuts, and cauldrons that distinguishes it as Cuban. The conceptual and physical accumulation of ideological and religious processes present in the nganga represents the transitioning corporeality of cultural consciousness. The 'Cuban' nature of the nganga is evident. So too, do the operative complexes present a cultural argument for its Central African identification. Most importantly, the representation of Central African groups, concepts, and images produced throughout the world and specifically in Cuba construct and attend to a political construction of ethnicity, religiosity, and culture. The nganga is part of that construction as practiced by nganguleros and represented in the larger social arena.

The nganga results from entangling the tangible in arrangements never duplicated and motivated by socially potent religious ideology. The nganga is the material impetus for expressing Congo-identified religious ideology in Cuba. Its very construction and ideology are reflective of overlapping conceptual and political fields of interaction (James 2001, Appadurai 1996). The nganga may be considered an amalgamation of the various fields of "ethnoscape", "technoscape", "ideoscapes", "financescapes", and "mediascapes" presented in Appadurai's perspective on the cultural processes and formation (Appadurai 1996: 33-35). The Cuban nganga entails the "complex, overlapping, fractal shapes constitutes a simple, stable (even if large-scale) system" and according to Appadurai's approach to cultural production, what is most important, are the dynamics (Appadurai 1996:46). I have intended to show that the dynamics involved in the process of ritual, ideology, and social relations focus on the activities of the nganga not the fractal formation of the nganga.

The corporeal and ideological aspects of the nganga are identified as 'tratados Congos' (Congo arrangements) in Cuba and suggest the nganga's essential foundation as Central African (Larduet 2003). Equally present are the contributions of other actors, ideas, and elements present within the diasporic site of Cuba, be they Spanish, Christian, or other identifiable cultural sources (See figures 3-2 and 3-5). The nganga must be understood within these various sources, fluid and irrefutably unique, holding conceptual genealogies of traceable consciousness and constructed into hybrid forms. The significance of this analysis speaks to a discourse of performance in the ngangas' production and suggests the proximate forms of thinking present in the diasporic space of Cuba. The nganga represents an important material production of Cuban Congo religiosity and is significant to a discourse that engages how culture is reflected in the processes of performance and ritual. This ritual representation of practitioners is furthered contextualized in sociopolitical formations of other types of constructions, specifically the dialogues of researchers, institutions, and literature.

CHAPTER 6  
ACTORS, INTERMEDIARIES, AND THE PRODUCTION OF REGLAS CONGAS

**Considering Context, Collusion, and Craftsmanship of Cuban Congo**

Research on Central African culture in the Americas has uncovered distinct identities and common ideas that have pervaded across numerous productions of African diasporic identity (Metraux 1972; Ortiz 1916; Bastide 1967). Cuban blood, speech, art, music, and religion, are in part products of Central African constituencies. What we have come to know as ‘Congo’ in Cuba is a rich part of the Cuban experience. Palo Monte is a unique example of diasporization, that is, a political arrangement of ideas and activities within newly acquired circumstantial relations (in this case religion), and is a common representation of Central African culture in Cuba. Contemporary practices of Palo Monte contend with a myriad of ideas, including ideas separate from the religious production of knowledge. Concepts that exist in a continuing dialogue about Reglas Congas in Cuba, from historical constructions of 20th century authors to the unknown religious testimonial of the first enslaved (Mayaka, Mayombe, Musundi, or any other Central African group) speak to the predicament of cultural production as political (Barnet 1984[1965]). The production of ritual forms, literary representation, cultural displays, and institutional perspectives constitute potential sources for reformulation of both Cuban identity but also ethnic distinctions like ‘Congo’ or ‘Bantu’ in AfroCuban Religion (Caberra 2001; MacGaffey 1968; Thompson 1984).

Today the representation and commodification of AfroCuban religious practices are seen throughout the island. Practitioners contribute to the presentation of Cuban culture by speaking as experts, writing articles and books, and providing researchers with crucial insight into their religion. Although not all practitioners engage in such activities, many practitioners regularly participate in inquiries and presentations of AfroCuban religion. The involvement of

practitioners in contemporary cultural representation illustrates the changing parameters of political power involved in the acknowledgement of cultural authority, identity production, and cultural representation. The perspectives of the practitioners still central to inquiries regarding AfroCuban religiosity are no longer solely reliant on the construction of the researcher. Nevertheless, the 20<sup>th</sup> century researchers maintain a stature of both authority and national pride that permeate the representation of Cuban history and culture (Barnet 1995; James 2001).

Political figures, religious individuals, researchers, theater groups, social organizations, religious families, foreign institutions and researchers, are all involved in the process of meaning construction. Following in the footsteps of 20<sup>th</sup> century writers, the depiction of AfroCuban religion and its practitioners continue to dominate cultural research in Cuba. So too, the palero become key informants in researchers' knowledge of Palo practices. Many researchers are also practitioners, increasing the level of personal understanding and potential personal biases in public representation. The intercession of practitioners in cultural displays of Cuban heritage and historical literature brings together the varied arrangements of ideas. The legacy of AfroCuban identity, religious or otherwise, is generated in all areas of the island, but it is Havana where many outsiders are first exposed to the Cuban experience.

Havana serves as the central tourist spot and is the commercial center of Cuba. Researchers inside government institutions who are in charge of regional or national cultural projects remain the voice for Cuban religious and cultural expression. Some Cuban authors complain that opportunities to publish rely on competitive environments in Cuba and rare relationships with foreign publishing houses. The power of individual and cultural institutions to produce meaningful notions of history, culture, and religions formulate approaches to future investigations but also religious knowledge. Cultural centers nation-wide are responsible for the

dissemination, selection, and construction of cultural representations. Museum displays, music, dance, literary presentation and publications fill Cuban cultural centers and festivals held annually throughout the island. Relationships formed between religious practitioners and cultural institutions produce cultural representation and provide platforms for identity formation.

Arguably, the production of representation has its critics and supporters; countless times I have heard the critique of Cuban cultural institutions as commercial endeavors (Monroe F/Ph.D.2003, 2004). The multiple institutions in Cuba make up an intellectual network crucial to current productions of Cuban history and national identity.

This chapter addresses social engagements between practitioners, debates among researchers, and innovation of perspectives in theoretical approaches that construct representation for public consumption. Equally important are distinctions between representation and practice. The construction of ideas in practice and analysis are never absent from one another's influences, directly or indirectly. Palo Monte Mayombe is understood through the productions of practitioners, researchers, along with institutions of publishing, education, and culture. These producers of AfroCuban religiosity (whether Santeria, Espiritismo, or Palo Mayombe, etc.) act in conjunction with each other. Practitioners work with researchers, educational facilities, publishing houses, and national displays that depict Cuban culture. The corroboration and contestation of representations of Reglas Congas by researchers, institutions, and practitioners continue to uncover both the politics of identity construction and historical ideas that preside over discussions of Central African-identified diaspora. Institutions' directives and researchers' perspectives continue to grow from new discoveries derived from interpreting historical materials, archives, and contemporary practitioners. This chapter focuses on the

changing perspectives in research and practice that alter the understanding of cultural practices, cultural materials, and critical interpretations of various AfroCuban religions.

### **Ngangulero's Administration**

The Ngangulero or Mayombero is the primary participant in the contemporary productions of Reglas Congas. The lessons of departed ancestors fashioned in religious notions, ritual processes, ceremonial songs, and codes of behavior are the foundation of Palo religious activity, narration, and history. The recited experiences and perspectives produced in personal and group histories and in current and past exchanges, including the production of ceremonial craft and the 20<sup>th</sup> century dialogues (literary or otherwise), uncover the foundations of this religion. The nganguleros' frameworks of ritual communion and interaction with the dead (los nfumbis) are products of training but also spontaneous forms generated during ritual processes. The perspectives of belief aligned with ritual instruction and communal consensus unites munanso membership and memory. Tatas and Yayas of religious munansos represent the authorities in the Palo religious models and construct (formally or otherwise) the space of communal religious ideas. If we are to examine the particular individuals, munansos, or local regions of Palo practices we must recognize the fluidity of cultural expression in concert with accessible or inaccessible sets of events, players, and perspectives. Both religious participants and outside audiences produce historical and contemporary ideas. Practitioners, not unlike the researchers, debate about particularities of religious tenets and sometimes form consensus but also disputes. The production of Palo practices contends with sociopolitical arrangements of religious belief, ceremonial practice, and the facilitation of religious consumption and representation.

Thus practice is intrinsically linked to knowledge formation in Palo craft. The logistics of religious munansos are active by extension of their religious initiations, patronages, family, and community networking. The processes of ritual participation are the platforms for the transferral

of religious meaning and knowledge. Ritual serves as a primary mechanism of learning, illustrating both obligations of munanso membership and a stature of religious wellbeing. Furthermore, ceremonial interactions provide the context for social group dynamics and instruction of ritual execution, ceremonial participation, ritual aesthetic, and etiquette. The variation existing in the linguistic arrangements of ceremonial songs, their appropriate moments of delivery, intonation, and pronunciations may distinguish a certain munanso membership and or locality. Other times such mambos are consistently delivered in many locations and are more readily known by their publications in works of Cabrera, Barnet, and Bolivar (Cabrera 1979; Bolivar 1998, Barnet 1995). The variations of ritual language such as ‘mpungo’ versus ‘mpungo’, ‘ngundo’ or ‘ngundo’ and other differences in usage, such as Spanish, Arabic, and French words used in salutation and greetings<sup>1</sup>, illustrate how social usage and representation determine correctness of KiKongo forms present in Cuban Congo ritual languages (Acosta 2002; Dias 1974; Cabrera 1979; Bolivar 1998). This negotiation of performance, presentation, and procession in Congo-identified religion is constructed through Cuban space both, linguistically, physically, and conceptually. Attempts to claim Congo connections are irrefutable but the manners that manifest in 21<sup>st</sup> century palo munansos differ according to contemporary means of producing meaning in religious practice. The central actor in the Palo munanso is the Tata or Tatanganga.

Tatanganga is responsible for the newly initiated ahijados and guide them in models of behavior, tact, and strategy in religious matters, not to mention spiritual protection. The Tatanganga teaches his sons and daughters the ritual language by instruction and submersion in

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<sup>1</sup> It is common for Spanish words to have significant use and meaning in ritual references. (“La prenda”, “El fundamento”, “palero”, etc). An Arabic greeting among Palo members, “Salem-Malecum”, (reply) “Malecum-Sala”, is common throughout the island. An elder tatanganga of Havana insisted that the greeting among practitioners was “Bonsoir”.

ceremonial practice. Their skills and knowledge of ceremonial activity, be they vocal ability, knowledge of songs, drum rhythms, or ritual strategies, vary from person to person. The members do not solely learn from their Tata or Yaya but also learn from other experienced members of the group. Members are expected to share these same affections for their new brothers or sisters.

Initiation can begin at an early age. In a Mayombe munanso of El Oriente adolescent children (approximately nine years old) versed in ceremonial songs participate in ritual processes. This includes activities such as feeding the nganga, receiving limpiezas<sup>2</sup>, and initiation. Children even younger are sometimes initiated into Reglas Congas. In an initiation held outside of Havana, a young Cuban couple brought their young son, a toddler, and together they were initiated as a family (Monroe 2004).

I have listened to several accounts of how a Tatanganga's life and death may drastically change the social dynamic of communities and the productions of related munansos. I met a young palero who spoke of his brethren (all thirty-some years old) and their experiences with a less than honest tatanganga, who initiated them but (according to the young palero) then began to feed them lies<sup>3</sup>. Upon discovering this problem, these men traveled to the mountains and sought counsel from the spirit(s) of the Ceiba-Tatangundu/MamaNgundu (the male and female Congo word for the Ceiba tree common all over Cuba). Some days passed after they decided to leave the deceitful godfather and shortly thereafter the tatanganga had died. Upon the passage of time this group of practitioners formed new alliances with other acquaintances in the community (Monroe 2003; El Oriente).

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<sup>2</sup> Limpiezas is translated as "a cleaning". Fresh herbs, rum, cigar smoke, cascarilla (chalk-like substance), roosters and other things are use by paleros to clean clients, ahijados or others.

<sup>3</sup> The description of the particularities of the lies or deceit was not forth coming.

Another palero told me that after many years of friendship he separated from his godfather because of matters of disagreement and that this wasn't that uncommon (Monroe 2002, El Oriente). At certain points in the individuals' development of religious identity and ideology, social schisms occur, new bonds are formed, so that religious development is in a constant state of reformulation. The religious relationships that are established are like any social or personal experiences, showing the resilience of the human spirit but also its fallibility. It is not uncommon that new arrangements are created through relocation and the desire of practitioners to maintain and nurture fruitful relationships in a shared spiritual development.

The differences found among practitioners throughout the regions of Cuba reflect a subtle or blatant distinction of diasporic identity. A comparison of the various known localities in Haiti, Cuba, Brazil, Venezuela, and The United States make clear particular nuances of national cultural production. Similarities and differences interplay, forming African-derived diasporic patterns but also the particularities of national and regional arrangements of religious variations, branches, and specific lineages. The historical and local particularities shape the communal characteristics of various regions in Cuba, for example, the Abakua practices in provinces of Matanzas and Habana or the smaller presence of Arara-identified productions in Matanzas (Palmié 2006). Santiago de Cuba is known for having strong paleros, espiritistas, and hougans (Millet 1996; James 2001). The particularities of local Cuban practices, ideas, stereotypes, and history preside over distinctions that illustrate fluid migrations throughout the island of Cuba. According to many accounts, paleros of El Oriente trace their religious heritage to Matanzas or Ceinfuegos. Likewise, nganguleros of La Habana trace their religious families to Santiago, Santa Clara, or Pinar del Rio. These testimonials uncover a web of production distinctly part of Cuban identity and history. More specifically, the connection between places such as Havana,

Santiago, Matanzas, Camaguey, Cienfuegos, Santa Clara and Pinar Rio is a strong part of local lineages, histories, and heritages of many Cuban palero/as, whether personal or historical (Bolivar 1998; James 2001; Fuentes 2001; Martínez Furé 1979).

The importance of individuals and groups in the historical development of Cuba precedes our current ideas and beliefs about Reglas Congas as ethnic identification and African-derived religion. The influences of great nganguleros, not unlike great leaders, situate communal directions. The identification of enslaved peoples, the exploration of Africa, and descriptions of Africans, contribute to the new perspectives of culture that critically preside over our past constructions of identity and present cultural epistemology. How such practices are known as Palo Monte Mayombe, Briyumba, or Kimbisa are coined from the Cuban experience just as the religious forms, derivative linguistic markers, that exist as a result of transatlantic enslavement but importantly have their meaning in the Cuban diasporic space. The perpetuation of certain practices, taught many years ago, represent moments that compel translations of cultural data into new spaces and dialogues. The centerpiece of any such belief system, including ritual practices, is the practitioner, for without their rationalities (and activities) there would be no arrangement of knowledge acquisition. Apter's perspective of "hegemony-ideology" in "Black critics and Kings", 1992, illustrates the intersection between official representations and those that are developed within religious interaction. Conceptual productions frame the strategies of a registry whether historical, scientific, or religious (Apter 1992). How current (and past researchers) portray nganguleros of Reglas Congas, their ideas and beliefs, construct perspectives of Congo identity in concert with the work of practitioners, public and private.

The production of practice is engaged by great numbers of Cuban paleros, nganguleros, mayomberos, kimbisero, and briyumberos and stands at the heart of this religion. The practice of

Reglas Congas continues to fashion what it means to know 'nkisi', 'nfumbi' or 'los muertos'. The craft of this religion has a very personal resonance, made up not only of relationships between brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers, but also with the dead. The administration of both individual religious practice and the presence of established Palo munanso direct the ways communities witness and experience this religion. How the religion is administered and experienced by people can greatly vary and lead to numerous perceptions, observations, and meanings. How productions are made meaningful only sometimes reverberates into formulated representation of articles, presentations, and books. Today the gap between researcher and practitioner is blurred, a situation in which practitioners engage in scholarship and no longer just answer questions, and further the engagement of a growing cultural representation of Cuban Congo forms. Without question, books had greatly influenced the understanding of AfroCuban religiosity and have become a key component in the perception of Reglas Congas. In AfroCuban religious studies, no author is more known than Fernando Ortiz.

### **The Ortizian Legacies: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Authors on AfroCuban Religiosity**

Fernando Ortiz's impact on Cuban research and considerations of African-identified cultures in Cuba is unquestionable. Ortiz's research on African ethnicity, slavery, music, and social groups (cabildos) represents a body of literature not surpassed by many Cuban authors (Ortiz 1906, 1916, 1947, 1992, 1993, etc.). Ortiz developed transculturation in "Contrapunteo Cubano del Azucar y el Tobacco" work of that seemed to accentuate the Cuban experience not only within economic and spatial analysis, but also cultural processes (Ortiz 1947). He utilized the work of many European authors, typically exploring Continental Africa, to explain the AfroCuban culture (Weeks 1913; Cureau 1915; Stoler 2001). The early 20<sup>th</sup> century writing on both Cuba and Central Africa, along with other regions of Africa and the world, had some important contributions to the canon of cultural analysis (Van Wing 1941; Herskovit 1937;

Bascom 1950). Ortiz's work uncovered Cuban culture to a wider audience, establishing a reputation and body of work that created distinctions among Caribbean subjects and African diasporic spaces. A great number of resources used in the arrangement of such work came from writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Some literary contributions have faded, and others have been revered, criticized, or contested. The nature of academic production and the politics of cultural analysis have a historical lineage (not unlike the *nganguleros* of Cuba) and some researchers' work set precedence, surviving long after their deaths. The accumulation of cultural research within the 20<sup>th</sup> century is considerably large with contributions by famous authors and other relatively unknown scholars (Cabrera 1979; Ortiz 1940; James 2004; Millet 1996; Larduet 2002).

A number of 20<sup>th</sup> century Cuban writers investigated the subject of AfroCuban culture, particularly the religious practices and their related musical, expressive, and conceptual attributes (Ortiz 1926; Barnet 1995; Martínez Furé 1979; Cabrera 1979). These representations of AfroCuban culture are typically described as deriving from several disparate peoples of two general localities, Central Africa and West Africa. This twofold categorization of African Cuban culture, condensed to 'Congo' and 'Lucumi/Yoruba', only represented a categorical grouping of different people among a greater variations of ethnic diversity in Cuba<sup>4</sup>. This sociopolitical distinction of groups is a result of conceptual and corporal potential, whether demographic or ideological, and typically overplays other African identity. The presence of two dominant religions in African-identified religion reflects the colonial groupings of African cultural groups (Mudimbe 1994; Mbembe 2001; Said 1979). The political formulation of cultural realities rely most on the representations that distinguish themselves among other people or unify subjects

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<sup>4</sup> The considerations of ethnic variation addressed by Ortiz and others illustrate the diverse groups that arrived in Cuba. The considerations of sociocultural identity within the atmosphere of Cuba and among Cuban populations contextualized the process through which a Congo/Yoruba distinction is made real. This potency does not disavow the presence of say the 'Arara' forms found in Matanzas or any other forms within Cuban cultural practices.

(i.e.-religion) among dialectics of cultural elements. In this case, Congo religious belief and ritual, as well as ritual language ('nkisi', 'nganga', 'nfumbi'), is distinct from others such as Lucumi/Yoruba, Arara, and Spanish religious practices.

At the same time the notions of syncreticism compel other 20<sup>th</sup> century Cuban writers to contribute to the dialogues about African hybridity and Cuban folklore (Martínez Furé 1979; Lachatanere 1961; Feijoo 1984). Martínez Furé's imaginary dialogues speaks to Cuban arrangements and circumstantial constructs that make real the identity, ritual, and African traditions in Cuba. Martínez Furé explains the underlying production of culture as imagined and real, comparing African spaces to the Cuban experiences (Martínez Furé 1979). The explanations of African-derived religion typically begin by looking eastward toward the African localities of departure. The process of connecting cultural practices, lexicon and language, among other specific practices, from scarification to percussive rhythms, is typically addressed within such approaches to cultural inquiry. These linear approaches continue today and suggest a reliance on the transatlantic passage to demonstrate authenticity and continuity. The reliance on literature that engages specific African cultures in order to confirm Caribbean forms confirms only a part of the whole process of dialogues involved in the representation and practice of Reglas Congas.

The production of literature on AfroCuban cultures since Ortiz has been profound, and several authors have written distinctive essays evaluating and explaining these cultural phenomena. An interest in separating the syncretic nature of diasporic communities in order to distinguish African ethnicity and Cuban cultural forms was a common motivation for many researchers. 20<sup>th</sup> century distinctions between, say, Santería and the Bantu forms are uncovered in the publication of R. Lachatañere. In "La Influencia Bantu-Yoruba en Los Cultos AfroCubanos" (1961), Lachatañere makes distinctions in the localization of spirits, specifically

identifying differences between Santiago de Cuba and La Habana, and situates historical movements of Yoruba practices as originating in the western province of Havana and arriving later in the mountains of El Oriente. Upon its arrival in cities like Santiago and Guantanamo, Yoruba forms were embraced within Congo-derived interpretations of ritual and spirit potentials (Lachatañere 1961). The magnification of this perspective suits the ideas that the enslaved from Central Africa were the first Africans to establish precedence on the island. This mid 20<sup>th</sup> century perspective stills stands within the perceptibility of current local distinctions and historical perspectives (Castellanos 1977; Cabrera 1979; Ortiz 1916; Bolivar 1990).

Miguel Barnet's works on history and religious practices, and his professional contributions to the Foundation of Fernando Ortiz (La Habana), continue today (Barnet 1968, 1995). Specifically, his work on AfroCuban religion, translated in 1995 to English, illustrates the distinctions of such religions as Reglas Ochas and Reglas Congas in a general synopsis of AfroCuban religions. This introduction to various Cuban religious traditions stresses these phenomena as a product of new spaces, new interactions, and interpretative religiosity. In this work the reader sees clearly the variation and interpretations existing among practitioners and the historical and national space through which AfroCuban identity is expressed and developed. This book is roughly devised into the analysis of Reglas Congas and Reglas Ochas and several chapters address the analysis of Cuban myths and ceremonial practices of African-identified religions. Barnet is quick to illustrate the development of multiple religious traditions simultaneously present among Cubans. Barnet states the following about the various sects within the rubric of Reglas Congas.

These are, in essence, the main groups or tendencies of the Congo sect in Cuba, though others that derive from these can still be found today, one example is the Mayaca group, discovered in El Oriente in the 1960s. These groups are less important and have a looser, more improvised structure. They are found in outlying areas and are named after gods or

Congo prendas that rule them or to which they are dedicated. They are associated with the specific powers concentrated in the nganga of individual practitioners (Barnet 1995: 97).

Barnet accepts the influence of individuals on the productions of ritual forms but seems to maintain the status quo in his representation of Central African forms as flexible, degraded, and fragmented (Fuentes 2005; Matibag 1996; Barnet 1995). Reflecting Arthur Ramos's depiction of Bantu forms as lacking coherent cosmologies, Barnet speaks of the newly arranged characteristics of Cuban Congo culture as enriching its own values by co-opting external elements (Barnet 1995). Nevertheless, such depictions of Central African diasporic forms in Cuba, albeit recognized in the Cuban cultural experience, construct a Congo philosophy as weak, broken, and barren. Although Barnet contributes greatly to the understanding of such Congo forms in Cuba, questions as to whether the depictions of Central African forms are naturally disintegrating only speak to distorted notions of purity in cultural production. Nevertheless, Barnet's works have inspired the public to discover or uncover Cuban Congo religion from the fearful and oppressive representations of the past (Macgaffey 1968; Barnet 1995; Bolivar-Arostegui 1998).

The works of Lydia Cabrera have been crucial to the body of literature on religious practice of the AfroCuban. Specifically, 'El Monte' (1954) displays the cohesion of Cuban African experiences interpreted within her descriptions of religious practices and beliefs. Herbal remedies, tales of the orisha, the religious significance of la palma, ceiba, and ritual languages fill the pages of her book. Cabrera's descriptions reflect the simultaneous diasporic dialogues that interplay between her transitions from Congo related languages, rationales, and rituals to the Lucumi/Yoruba, Abakua, and even the Arara perspectives. El Monte has already gained a legendary status. Cabrera's Congo dictionary casts a wide net of categorization, meaning, and examples throughout a somewhat obscure but certainly extensive list of Cuban Congo

terminology (Cabrera 1984). Cabrera's works situate an observer's interpretations of interactions with various practitioners. Most importantly, her life's work represents a library of research surrounding the various religious practices present in Cuba, including many traditional Cuban stories she recorded, the compilation of several dictionaries on religious language, and her rich descriptions of AfroCuban religiosity (Cabrera 1979, 1984, 2001).

Natalia Bolivar-Argostegui has produced a great number of works on Palo Monte Mayombe since her classic *Los Orishas de Cuba*-focused on the Reglas Ochas/Santeria (1990). Her works on the Congo-identified AfroCuban religion include "Ta Makuende Yayas y Reglas de Palo Monte", "Cuba Santa" and many other books on AfroCuban culture (Argostegui 1970, 1996, 1998). Her work is very informed, drawing from a variety of locations in Cuba including Pinar del Rio, Santa Clara, La Havana, La Matanzas and El Oriente. Bolivar-Argostequi continues to work with other Cuban scholars such as Lazara Mendendez and the legendary religious figure Lazaro Ross, among others (Bolivar and Gonzalez Dias de Villegas 1997; Bolivar and Romolo 1998). Her approach is concise including ritual vocabularies and the names of practitioners' spiritual entities in many cities around Cuba. She categorizes various herbs (their associations) and ritual uses found within the rubric of Reglas Congas. Not unlike Cabrera, Natalia Bolivar-Arostegui has also dealt more readily with the great number of female practitioners in Congo-identified traditions and continues to illustrate the role of the Yaya in the construction of religious ritual practices. Bolivar-Argostequi's critical analysis of Cabrera's work has provided platforms for the critique and praise of Cabrera's lifetime of scholarship. The conglomeration of Cuban authors that formed ethnographies, vocabularies of ritual language, and explanations of beliefs about African-derived Cuban religion, have a long tradition of production

(Cabrerria 1979; Fabelo Dias 1974; Argostequi 1998; Lachatanere 1961; Larduet 2002; Millet 1996).

### **Historical Contingencies and AfroCuban Identity**

AfroCuban identities and cognition of cultural practice are products of 20<sup>th</sup> century religious ethnography, literature, and history. The interpretation of actors illustrates how variations and contention in representations are replicated on multiple sociopolitical levels. Formulations of religious practices and their analysis are constantly contested among researchers but also practitioners. Meaning is essential to the cultural production but reveals a paradox of subversion and reinvention in strategies of identity and religious philosophy (Apter 2002). The production of AfroCuban literature brought to light the forms of various religious practices, the historical readings of the transatlantic passage, and the political thresholds that formed the national and cultural identity. The missing component in the considerations of contemporary African-derived religion in Cuba, the representation and characteristics inherent in their explanations, is the reconsideration of politically motivated descriptions, specifically ethnic categorizations, and their inherent impact on the constructions of identity, culture, and religion.

The investigations of Cuban history uncover conceptual formulations surrounding religion and ethnic denominations of African peoples (Franco 1986; Moreno 1978; Leon 2001). The significant numbers of Central African people throughout the slave trade versus the concentrated influx of West African people in the 19th century are crucial to many perspectives regarding the double faced (Congo/Yoruba) dominance of Afro Cuban religious practices (Lovejoy 2003; Curtin 1969; Moreno 1978). The consideration of collective identity, as with Cuban Lucumi/Yoruba, illustrates the impact of historical actors that form recognizable cultural categories and are political concentrated in diasporic space (Brown 2003, Ayorinde 2004, Matory 2005). The political foundation for productions of Yoruba Cuban identity, both in

cultural ideologies and practices (as an outwardly political social body), is a part of a history of actors and ideas (Brown 2003). The constructions of African identity in Cuba characterized, in this case, through observable differences between ‘Congo’, ‘Yoruba/Lucumi’, and others, is historically connected to the arrival of large numbers of West African peoples. The particularly strong presence of Yoruba peoples in this period, enslaved in the decades just prior to the eradication of slavery in Cuba, situate large numbers of West Africans in Cuba’s population. The construction of cultural meaning and identification of the enslaved throughout the brutal history of slavery, in this case, translated by Spanish economic and ideological control, revolved around ideas concerning labor, social control, physicality, and morality. Colonial perspectives, produced in the narratives, archival records, and policies of *cabildo* (Spanish approved African fraternal organizations), reveal subtle distinctions that are projected in national constructions (Ortiz 1916; Barnett 1968; Howard 1998). The important relationships between the circumstantial developments in AfroCuban representations-like the ways African *cabildos* were conceptualized and established as cultural identity-and the current religious productions help to establish a historical precedent.

Current Cuban scholars have uncovered and deciphered historical documents about African populations in Spanish archives. Jesus Guanches has published numerous articles and books, producing a historical view of African ethnicity in Cuba (Guanches 1996). This detailed work illustrates the diversity of groups that arrived in Cuba. The work of historians such as Franklin Knight examine the environment of policy, labor, and social affiliations produced, and point to the importance of historical junctures (Knight 1977). National monuments of revolution and independence that praise the role of AfroCubans in nation building contextualize Cuban history (R.Moore 1997; C.Moore 1988; James 2004; Portuondo 1994). The investigations into

black communities during enslavement and abolition uncover memories of labor- sugar cane enterprise and other agricultural undertakings- and the unquestionable inequalities faced by black subjects. The colonial persecutions of black people were reflected in multiple distorted images of barbarism and immorality (R. Scott 2000; Howard 1998; Patterson 1982; Knight 1988).

Specifically, the homogenizing of African identity by race and former constructions of ethnicity (terms such as Congo and Lucumi) are at the foundation of a Cuban conceptual history. Today, reexaminations, renaming, and reconsidering historical representations are debated in contemporary productions and reflect new considerations in historical analysis.

Cuban practitioners publish works on their religion typically through connections with Cuban and foreign researchers, Cuban institutions, and or Foreign publishing houses (Larduet 2002; Beltancourt 1995). Institutions provide avenues for representation of Cuban culture typically in written publications and performances (Ayorinde 2004; Monroe 2004; Hagedorn 2001). The Cuban institutions take their lead from former Cuban scholars and expand interpretations of past direction and research styles (Ortiz 1916; Rogelio Martínez Furé 1979; Barnet 1965; James 2001; Bolivar 1998; L. Menendez 1990). The impacts of researchers' work are sometimes temporal and, at other times, provide a foundation for theories, styles, and perspectives. Academics, tourists, believers, and researchers are the audiences of institutional presentations. Distinctions between how practitioners invoke their religiosity and how researchers represent the religion uncover similarities/differences consumed in both fields. Cuban cultural institutions provide a platform for social expression and explorations of cultural identity (Larduet 2003; James 2001). There are commonly accepted models for how cultural institutions, education directives, and research agendas are executed and envisioned by their leaders. Scholarship is constructed, debated, and authenticated within walls of education

facilities. Researchers' work, guided sometimes by devotion and other times by aspiration, is centered on the acknowledgment of interpretative cultural experiences, ideas, and actions. The conversion of old ideas about culture and the interpretation of new ones set deliberate formulas. The literary representations of Cuban culture continue to change and although Cuban articles and literature continue to be produced, foreign authors are also publishing materials at a steady rate (Fuentes 2002; Guanche 1996; Mason 2004; Brown 2003; Palmié 2002).

Contemporary foreign publications, written by anthropologists, sociologists, religious specialists, and others, have impacted the international view of Cuban African diaspora (Diantrell 2000; Palmié 2002; Hagedorn 2001; Brown 2003; Ayorinde 2004). While some authors account for belief systems, music, or ritual practices, others explore historical and contemporary meaning productions and trace a history of identity formation within diasporic spaces (Matory 2005; Palmié 2002; Apter 1991). The analysis of Aponte's library in Palmié's "Wizards and Scientists" (2002) uncovers the complexities of tracing meaning in the lives and events of Cuba's past. More specifically, the Spanish perspective of Aponte's presumed connections to political conspiracies against the Spanish crown and to AfroCuban religions illustrates the production of cultural hybridity in New World polities. Palmié illustrates cultural production by exploring Aponte's experience of identity formation as contingent on contextualized space and immediate sociopolitical community. This historical perspective shows a single man's political prosecution, and the confiscation of his intellectual property, as dialogic predicament centered within the interpretation of meanings. Exploring perspectives of sociopolitical directives, symbolism, and identity formation parallels the exploration and formation of Cuban religious and ethnic realities. That is, cultural production takes on ambiguous forms and creates meanings in politicized concepts such as religion and race.

Aponte's position, as a freed AfroCuban, reveals an identity and experience shaped by his current space within colonial control, racial prejudice, and his means of expressing socio-religious identity (Palmié 2002).

Aponte's case in sum exposes not just a body of data resisting easy assimilation into the procrustean categories that continue to plague the literature on slaves and other "invisible people". It also indicates the need to shift our focus away from conventional emphases on integration, homogeneity, boundedness, and seemingly passive "endemic" reproduction of social and cultural forms and toward perspectives capable of analytically accommodating constellations of heterogeneous but contiguous, perhaps overlapping, forms of knowledge and practice; "syndromatic" clusterings of cultural materials whose distribution in social space at specific temporal junctures need coincide neither with their historical origins, nor with structurally identifiable collectivities, nor even boundaries maintained by self-identified social groups (Palmié 2002: 139).

The research of foreign authors reflects established ideas about the practices of AfroCuban religion and use representations of morality to reveal variation in AfroCuban religiosity (Diantrell 2000). Diantrell's dissection of the negative and positive characteristics reflects a view found among many people but such moral constructions merely reveal assumed dispositions in the political religious representation and practice. The social construction of ethics in religious practices reflects a social reality but also the power to maintain its meanings and interpretations as good or bad. Rigid assertions serve only to separate appropriate or legitimate fields of operations from empowered sociopolitical representations. Although there is always room for disagreement, the formulations of Palo practice as negative, versus the role of Ocha or Ifa as positive, ensconce a politics of representation. Even when an individual practitioner—that is, when a person holds simultaneous titles of babalao, santero, and palero- and only reserves Congo practices for malefic activity- it is not representative of all perspectives of Palo practices. Unquestioned themes of witchcraft/'brujo', violence, and malefic spirits repeat throughout depictions of Congo-identified practices in the Americas, but its religious beliefs are not reliant on a negative foundation of ritual practice and etiquette (Metraux 1972 (1959); Apter 1991;

MacGaffey 1968). Such formulations seem to ignore depictions of Palo ritual activities void of malign turpitude and, more likely, represent a contextualization of communal identity and hierarchy.

Extensive research has explored the aesthetic production surrounding Santeria ritual and representation (Bolivar 1996; Poynor 2002; Hagedorn 2001; Brown 2003). Many cultural displays of African heritage in Cuba have focused on theatrical performance of myth and folklore accompanied by the colorful garments of Caribbean flair, choreographed dance, and musical traditions (Hagedorn 2001; Brown 2003). The dominant productions of West African forms are reflected in the focus of many researchers (Brown 2003; Mason 2002; Ayorinde 2004). Many 20th century authors (and now 21st century authors) continue the work of understanding contemporary AfroCuban religious practices, their historical and cultural identity. The analysis of Palo Monte Mayombe and the archaeology of Congolese diaspora is still a vibrant area of cultural discover (Bolivar 1998; Matory 2005). Research is ongoing in Cuba and many Cubans and foreigners are currently researching and representing Reglas Congas. The crucial questions revolve around the relationship between contemporary practices and the current proliferation of representation. The connections between Congo religious aesthetic- the impact of Palo Monte as violent and effective, versus the Lucumi/Yoruba characterization of gentle and subtle reveal hierarchy in Cuban Africanity (Palmié 2002; Ortiz 1906; Martínez Furé 1979). The arrangement of representational materials embedded in the ways people make distinctions between African ethnicities and currently between AfroCuban religious practices begin to part from the past notions. Nevertheless some things can never be undone and situate the analysis of development in precarious ways.

The intellectual exploration and representation of Cuban culture has continued into the 21st century with many of the same researchers and also many new investigators. There are still a number Cuban authors producing crucial work today who have been contributing since the sixties and seventies (Barnet 1968; Guanche 1996; James 2001; Millet 1998; Bolivar 1998; Medendez 1990; Martínez Furé 1979). This field of research has flourished with new institutional directives focusing on religious history and religious identity, specifically targeting Central African forms in Cuba (Larduet 2002). The consideration of literature is paramount, as its influence on the authentication of contemporary practices/identity serves practitioners and cultural specialists alike. The various manifestations of Reglas Congas, a once taboo cultural practice, are slowly ascending from the negative connotations and persecution of centuries past. The evidences of what has been passed down through the ranks of religious munansos, cabildos, colonial documents and within literature account for many perspectives and debates. The state reliance on cultural institutions to support the tourist's appetite for religious history, dance/music, and ceremonial representations is a contemporary circumstance.

### **Public Displays and Contemporary Publications: Folklore, Facsimile, and Facilitation**

Casa del Caribe of Santiago de Cuba is well known for its research publications on Cuban history and culture. Casa del Caribe focuses on a broad spectrum of cultural research, contemporary and historical, and doesn't solely focus on African-derived cultural practices. Nevertheless, Casa del Caribe has contributed greatly to the local representation and research of AfroCuban practices and beliefs. A block up the road is another building known as Casa de Religiones Populares, which I came to know as building II of Casa de Caribe. This location houses a number of AfroCuban religious displays. In the gallery building there are several rooms devoted to AfroCuban religious representations, including the orisha of Santeria, los nfumbi of Palo Monte, and spirits of Espiritista. Each room is separate and contains personal displays of

different local practitioners (Monroe 2002: El Oriente). An overview of Cuban religions, described by Cuban authors, practitioners, and researchers, is presented to audiences touring the facilities (Larduet 2002; Millet 1996; James 2001; Meneses 1994). Audiences are typically comprised of foreigners, Cuban educators, and students. Both buildings frequently facilitate performances by musical and dance groups.

Casa del Caribe is a unique Cuban institution and is an internationally recognized cultural facility. Supporting both academic research and cultural presentations of local and international artists, writers, and researchers, Casa del Caribe is a Cuban cultural resource. For twenty years *Del Caribe*, a publication of Casa de Caribe, has been producing numerous articles on historical and cultural topics. Authors from around the world contribute to this magazine (Lovejoy 2003; Scott 1991; Diantrell 2000). *Del Caribe* has published several articles pertaining to *Reglas Congas*, particularly focused on practices and practitioners of El Oriente (James 2001; Larduet 2002; Millet 1998). This region's production is recognized internationally and nationally as a rich part of Cuba's cultural identity, for its colorful history and strong religious practices (James 2001; Millet 1996). The importance of institutions such as La Casa Del Caribe derives from research that uncovers and represents local practice, contributing to a national landscape of Cuban religiosity. From practitioner to researcher, from institute to the public, such production, examination, and understanding of culture involves a number of crucial relationships between practitioners, researchers, and audiences.

From Santiago to Havana, annual festivals are held for the day of the revolution, New Years, and other local affairs. These celebrated events include theatrical parades, musical groups, art displays, research presentations and other events. Throughout the city, institutions host these various events. Dance groups compete and artists from all over the nation come together for

several days of exhibitions and celebrations. In Santiago de Cuba, the “Festival del Feugo”/ ‘Festival of Fire’ is a regional celebration of culture, typically surrounding a theme of a particular country, such as Brazil, Haiti and others. This festival typically hosts local artisans and scholars to represent Cuban culture. Generally during such events, activities are happening throughout the city; groups such as UNEAC, Universidad del Oriente, Casa De Africa, and Casa de Caribe (and many others) host presentations and exhibits. Universities, galleries, cultural institutions, and music venues participate in this Caribbean celebration, which typically involve a great number of Santiagueros. In many towns and cities across Cuba people organize celebrations or public activities for religious reasons, such as December 17<sup>th</sup> for Saint Lazaro, or December 4<sup>th</sup> for Santa Barbara/Chango. The great presence of AfroCuban forms in the representation of Cuban celebrations, such as New Years, July 26, or Carnival, represent the cultural production connected to African-Identified Cuban religion. These conceptualizations of ‘Congo’ religious cultures, whether in historical analysis and or contemporary observation, contend with the historical and colonial concepts of Cuba’s past. The acts of publication, public representation, and cultural authentication work upon past notions but also continue to expand notions present in the work of Cuban nganguleros.

In Havana there are several institutions of research and cultural interests for visitors and scholars alike. La Fundacion de Fernando Ortiz publishes a magazine, *Catauro: Revista Cubana de Antropologia* (founded in 1999), that focuses on a wide range of subjects from historical, linguistic, archival, and anthropological scholarship. In the volume year 2000, number 1, a compilation of famous authors such as Natalia Bolivar, A. Leon, Miguel Barnet and others wrote on the work of author Lydia Cabrera. Living and deceased scholars examined Cabrera’s contribution to the understanding of the various religious traditions established in Cuba. It is

common for research institutions, such as La Fundacion de Fernando Ortiz, to revisit and reinterpret the historical actors, authors, and events of Cuba's past.

In the first month of 2004, a weeklong conference titled *Taller de Anthropologia Social y Cultural AfroAmericana*<sup>5</sup> was held in Old Havana. The conference featured scholarly presentations, display various artists, religious displayed, and choreographed musical arrangements (Monroe 2004: La Habana). Institutions from around the city contributed to the conference including: University of Havana, Unesco, Casa del Benemerito, Fundacion Guayasmin, Casa de Africa, and the Basilica y Convento San Francisco de Asis. The presenters came from University of Havana, Casa Del Africa, Casa del Cultura de Matanzas/Cotorro/Caibarien, among others, and represented fields of tourism, librarians, religious specialists, museum curators, and specialists in other fields and reflected a diverse make-up of international and Cuban scholars. Scholars from Italy, The United States, Austria, Argentina, and other parts of the world presented and attended the events. The conference had a great number of focuses including Reglas Congas, Santeria, Abakua, and other contemporary and historical subjects. From Holguin, a well-known artist displayed multiple paintings and one grand sculptural arrangement. The first floor of Casa De Africa was arranged in large banderas (a flag with Congo firmas stitched into the cloth). Firmas were chalked on the floor and linear mounds of earth moved outward from the centerpiece. The centerpiece was a large nganga, accompanied by stones, pots, candles, and other paraphernalia, and was encircled by earth. Various objects hung from above the nganga, and candlelight illuminated gallery.

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<sup>5</sup> "Taller de Anthropologia Social y Cultural AfroAmericana", scientific program, January 6<sup>th</sup> 2004 sponsored by Universities and cultural centers of Havana; Festival of Fire, Santiago de Cuba, Casa de Africa, Casa Caribe, La Universidad de Oriente.

Such public displays are an amalgamation of work produced by performers, authors, practitioners, and institutions. The consistency of perspectives and aesthetics are determined by degrees of disclosure in social consumption and representation. The frameworks of religious production exist in ritual operations and categorical arrangement of Cuban Reglas Congas. The body of knowledge on AfroCuban religious practices, whether describing a specific trait of an orisha, or the powerful nkisi of 'brujos' as connected with Reglas Congas, serves as a conceptual formulation of these cultural practices. Publications have historically been associated with socially connected actors, academically trained persons who had the power, prestige, and resources, thereby raising more questions concerning the politics of representation. Today, authors who have the knowledge base, the sociopolitical connections, and the technological means, are able to present articles, write books, and explain religious beliefs and rituals. For many Cubans writing about religious practices and history of AfroCubans is a frustrating task because of limited publishing opportunities. Many Cubans publish outside the country for the recognition of international exposure but also for opportunity (Millet 1998; Beltancourt 1995). Foreign scholars and researchers are considered to have economic and technological advantages when seeking publication and recognition. Certainly both foreign and Cuban perspectives, their methods and theoretical dispositions, contribute to the growing canon of African Diaspora literature.

In 1990, the University of Havana published a collection of essays titled *Estudios AfroCuban* (AfroCuban Studies) (1990). This collection, edited by Lazara Mendendez, includes work that spans across the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The first volume contains the historical interpretations of such authors as Argeliers Leon, Fernando Ortiz, and Manuel Moreno and highlights the impact of the Atlantic passage and colonialism on Cuba. This collection focuses on the cultural

distinction towards the physical make-up of Cuba and the cultural forms highlighted in ethnography of African-identified forms. This four book series included manuscripts on Santeria, which dominated the focus of this scholarly compilation. Many articles address the Reglas Ocha (Santeria) and various notions of Cuban popular culture, yet only two selections address the 'Bantu' or Central African forms. This collection brought together a great number of Cuban authors and compiled the work focused on African-identified cultural phenomena of Cuba. This series represents past and current explorations of Cuban identity, history, and development but also provides a framework of portrayal in 20<sup>th</sup> century AfroCuban representation.

The presence of Central African peoples and cultures in the works of Ortiz and Caberra was consistent. 20<sup>th</sup> century writers mostly focused on the West African derived orisha practices (Bascom 1950; Bastide 1971; Verger 1984). The century old domination of Lucumi, Congo, and Carabali representations illustrates the political importance of recognition (Bolivar-Arostegui 1996; Mendendez 1990; Martínez Furé 1979). Debates as to whether social acknowledgment is constructed from constituency among communal religious forms, practices, and representations or is produced in politically preferred forms underscore the historical context of sociopolitical determinations. Identity politics and the incorporation of cultural representation constitute the production of public histories and representation of Cuban culture by accessing resources in the educational institutions (cooperation among governmental agencies) and communities. These types of representations typically stand apart from religious practice, although at times they intercede with corroborative efforts. Actors make the difference with the understanding, emulation, and evaluations of 'culture'. Individuals who construct a lifetime of research, practice, or experience are key contributors to understanding heritage or identity. Cultural institutions that display cultural forms of Cuban diversity sometimes prefer certain forms to

others. In any situation there exists a sociopolitical context. A great number of informants have spoken about the commercial influence in ceremonies held for foreign tourists.

The research and academic production center on AfroCuban religions is strong in Cuba's university system and cultural institutions. Individuals and departments push directives, maintain research agendas, and support national representation of the African Diaspora in Cuba. The attraction of these practices to tourists, researchers and others is partly responsible for the commercialization of its practices. Administrative powers and the allocation of research agendas constitute the constructions of culture and history. Conceptual consensus or conformity continues to reconstruct itself through critical evaluations of cultural practice and history. Much can be said of organizations such as Casa de Caribe, Casa de Africa, and La Fundacion de Fernando Ortiz that embrace local cultures (both locally and internationally) and give voice to artistic, historical, and scholarly interpretations of culture, identity, and history (Ayorinde 2004). At the heart of this research is the practitioner.

Many successful scholars align themselves with prestigious practitioners. Key informants help researchers assemble an understanding of the religion. The transfer of field experiences into description, explanations, or interpretations of culture (or religion) is typically reliant on interaction with informants. The researcher's network and interpretation are essentially part of any literary representation. A public acknowledgment of cultural power, affiliated with the work of researchers, has certain benefits for practitioners. It builds authenticity and respect (or criticism) within religious circles. I have met multiple practitioners who are authors and represent Palo Monte or other AfroCuban religions in professional/public displays. On the other hand, I have met other Nganguleros that do not speak with the public (in two cases) (Monroe

2004: El Oriente). The manners in which researchers present arguments and represent culture underscore vast potential of difference and interpretation involved in such analysis.

The potential approaches to historical and contemporary analysis of AfroCuban religiosity are crucial. Stephan Palmié's analysis of Apontes's library and pictograms and Barnet's slave narrative of Esteban Montejo illustrate the direction of cultural identity and its predication in reality (Martínez Furé 1979; Palmié 2002; Barnet 1995). The consideration of culture processes becomes conceivable and sometimes viewable through innovative approaches to the analysis of culture. Devoted researchers reveal contemporary history and offer new avenues of cultural recognition and analysis. Contemporary historical accounts continue to be produced and also contested (Barnet 1984; Zueske 1997). Authors such as Fernando Ortiz and Lydia Cabrera are still speaking from the past, as critiques, praises, and references surround their cultural contributions (Barnet 1995; Arostegui 1998; Leon 2001; Ortiz 1947). The public display and research projects continue to tell a story of the Cuban Congo legacy, one that connects every Cuban to a history of Congo peoples and practices.

### **Compiling Congo: Coercion and Continuity in Cuban Religiosity**

On many levels, descriptions of Santería, Palo Monte Mayombe, and Epiritismo are well established. The conceptual connections to notions such as 'syncretism', 'transculturation', and 'survivals' are common in many descriptions of AfroCuban religions (Ortiz 1940; Herskovits 1937; Bolívar 1998). There is a consistent style and method in 20<sup>th</sup> century Cuban descriptions of AfroCuban religions. Practitioners, writers, researchers have contributed to an ongoing academic lineage (Ortiz 1906; Lachatañere 1961; Bolívar-Arogestequi 1990; Menendez 1990; Barnet 1995; James 2001). Our interpretation of historical events and past concepts of culture, art, race, and religion underscore the acknowledgment of Palo Monte in a formatted power-knowledge arrangement. The renowned Cuban literature has marked the representation of African-identified

religion and is important on various levels of production. Today, institutions of culture, tourism, and research rely on the work of the former to frame the contemporary representations of AfroCuban history, ethnicity, and religion. How current actors and institutions produce notions of culture contend with the conceptualization of past practitioners and researchers' descriptions. The qualifying sociopolitical factors that supplied a context of communal identity through religious, ethnic, and racial characterizations situate my approach to the production of culture and Reglas Congas in Cuba. The colonial legacies of enslavement, particularly the derogatory characterization of the cultures and peoples of continental Africa, continue to lurk within the ways we conceptualize our world. The work of practitioners, researchers, and cultural institutions constitute the forms and distinctions of Reglas Congas with concepts such as ethnicity, religion, ritual and history. Tracing diasporic forms to their African localities is effective on many levels but unfairly supersedes more pertinent matters, such as the distinctly different set of political actors and circumstances (Mintz 1995; Palmié 2002; Matory 2005). The examination of 20<sup>th</sup> century authors, practitioners, and productions of AfroCuban religions uncovers a sociopolitical production of culture and identity. The interaction of actors in various fields of consumption and production position the understanding of this religion by scopes of political knowledge building.

The Ngangulero's conceptualization of beliefs and his/her implementation of ritual practice are at the center of this study. The search for a set of concrete forms within Reglas Congas or an arrangement of ideas on ritual and belief will ultimately display some disparities and conformities. The perspectives of ritual arrangement or ideologies, argued and supported within religious families, are gauged by social consistency of religious practice. The consistencies of ceremonial acts and their philosophies instruct the recently initiated in the knowledge of nkisi,

nganga, or other important aspects of practice. These learned processes pertain to the formulations of ideological tenets among ceremonial relationships. The considerations of the religious families, in both consanguine and non-consanguine relations, represent an important part of the Palo's religious reputation. The relationship between the values of the lived identity, beliefs/practices, and the consumption of public discourse illustrate the dynamics of interaction, exclusion, and inclusion in fields of cultural production. The disparities and imperatives of perspectives inform academic discourses, and the ways such perspectives constitute religious reality remain problematic but pertinent.

Palo Monte is made explicit by a body of mostly 20<sup>th</sup> century literature. Such books, articles, and presentations by anthropologists, sociologists, cultural experts, artists, and historians represent the rubric of national and educational actors that contribute conceptually to the comprehension of AfroCuban religions. Readers, presenters, and participants include tourists, scholars, students, and devotees. Figures such as Fernando Ortiz and Lydia Cabrera are common references in the 20<sup>th</sup> century approaches to Cuban cultural practices. The canon of Cuban literature within the 20<sup>th</sup> century reflects a legacy of Ortizian qualities, both in style and content (Lachatañere 1961; Cabrera 1979; Bolivar 1996; Millet 1998). The descriptions of belief and ritual, religious ceremonies, and a lexicon of ritual language are seldom missing from Cuban literature on AfroCuban religion. The powerful part of literature production is evident in preservation of historical moments, perspectives, and practices described by authors, government officials, practitioners, citizens, and visitors.

Cuban institutions play an important role in the expression and cultural representations of AfroCuban religion, both locally and internationally. Cultural institutions, in conjunction with educational and government facilities, coordinate publications, museums, and festivals.

Networks of people involved in the interactions and propositions that support public displays and educational directives support these institutions. Cuban scholars, along with the visiting scholar, contend with the arrangement of opportunities and support within these existing networks. The perspectives of values and importance, incentive and priority, preference and polity are intrinsic in all origination of representation. The ways in which cultural representations are proposed, fortified, or created, do so with preconceived ideas, both culturally and epistemologically. In this case, the categorizations of religion, race, and culture are key concepts in the history of AfroCuban religiosity. The consideration of academic perspectives as means of authentication is both politically powerful and conceptually limited in the various representations of Reglas Congas.

In the case of Cuba, the relationship between Reglas Congas and Reglas Ochas constructs a particular politic and is paramount in understanding the nuances of cultural production (Hobbes 1985/1651). The dominance of Santeria or West African conceptualizations and representations are a 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon. Cuban scholars continue to work on drawing clearly practitioners' perspectives and distinguishing local differences throughout Cuba (Millet 1998; James 2001; Bolivar 1998; Barnet 1995; Larduet 2002). Today, the production of literature and representation is directed toward certain audiences (academics, tourists, and practitioners) and is flourishing. What is the political significance of being represented in literature? The ideas inherent in language and representation, although never truly static, illustrate both the political context of recognizable forms and departures of difference in conceptual forms, ideas, and schema. The creation of what we know as 'Reglas Congas' is and has been produced by individual/group interaction throughout the past. Religious munansos, cabildos, freed and enslaved African descendants, and Spanish (and European, Asian and American) populations

contributed to Palo Monte's make-up. The history and politics of representations, but also the various actors in a specific Cuban history of construction, play a role in how Palo Monte is practiced and understood today.

CHAPTER 7  
'CONGO' CULTURE AS DIASPORA: DEFINING CONTEXT IN CONTEMPORARY AND  
PAST REPRESENTATIONS OF CONGO IDENTITY IN CUBA

**Dissecting the Meanings in the Cultural Analysis of 'Diaspora'**

'Diaspora' can be defined in many ways and is commonly associated with the movement, establishment, and cultures of people in new geographies (Fanon 1963; Bastide 1971; Herskovits 1937). Late 20<sup>th</sup> century perspectives of diaspora call into question the previous assumptions about origins, history, memory, and cultural continuity (Hall 2001; Gilroy 1993; Matory 2005; Apter 2001). The approaches to diaspora in cultural analysis contend with assumptions about the ways that religious practice and belief represent a conceptual consistency (Herskovits 1937). Matory has shown that diaspora rarely occurs in isolation and, specifically, uncovers an interaction with new spaces, peoples, and ideas (Matory 2005). Conceptual presumptions about culture, particularly ideas of purity and unity, are attached to diasporic analysis. The activities and ideas associated with diasporic experiences illustrate more concisely the impact of power and the mutability of cultural representations in social spaces. As stated by Jacqueline Brown in her analysis of Black America and Black Liverpool, "The anthropology of the diaspora must attend, therefore, to the multiple plays of difference underlying its formation. The effects of these show, in turn, that the identities lying at the heart of diasporic subjectivity are never fully positioned" (Brown 1998: 318). A complex web of social relations influences how ideas and practices are formed in the invocation of history and identity. On one hand, the flexibility of identity and diasporic consciousness can be understood through multiple tropes, i.e., religion, race, and language, and present many possibilities for conceptualizing diaspora. Secondly, anthropological critiques of diasporic approaches question intellectual representations of traits and markers, symbolic or cognitive, and reveal the production of representation in diasporic politics (Scott 1991; Mudimbe 1994; James 2001).

This chapter examines the consumption of ethnic and religious categories that results from a fluid and particular conceptualizations in Cuban diasporic experience and space (Brown 2003; Martínez Furé 1979; Apter 2002). The very concept of ‘diaspora’ denotes unity, community, and a typically homogeneous experience. A great emphasis is placed on religious practices in diasporic studies, not unlike the European perspectives that see African cultures in mostly religious terms (Verger 1984; Herskovits 1937; Bastide 1971). The critical approaches that distinguish diasporic experiences as formed from social processes present a more accurate depiction (Matory 2005; D.Scott 1991; Apter 2002). Formerly, ‘diaspora’ was only used to depict Jewish or African migrations but today diaspora can be applied to any movement of people. Many anthropological studies construct meanings through tropes of migration, citizenship, and globalization, and illustrate new interpretations of diaspora (Ong 1999, Fikes 2000). Aihwa Ong points out that racial marginalization implied in African diasporic approaches marginalize subjects in a subaltern position<sup>6</sup> (Ong 1999). The past conceptions of cultures and histories uncover instituted racism. The considerations of diasporic development lie in the meanings of representations, policies, and empowerment (Palmié 2002). The case of Aponte illustrates self-motivated identity production and also the impact of outside perspectives. The diasporic identity is a product of dynamic actors, conditions (historical or otherwise), and communal participation that produces the ethnic, religious, and cultural representation.

The examination of Central African peoples and their influence in the Americas has increased dramatically since the middle 20<sup>th</sup> century (MacGaffey 1968; Thompson 1984; Cabrera 1979; Acosta 2002, Palmié 2002). The suggestion that Yoruba forms dominated the 20<sup>th</sup> century exploration of African Diaspora seems moot yet reflective of cultural processes nevertheless. In

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<sup>6</sup> Ong notes a political call to arms by intellectuals to uncover unvoiced subjectivities. She has a critical view of certain conceptual formation of culture as inherently attached to past perspectives (Ong 1999).

Cuba, the representation of Africans and Africa impacted the political representations of Cuban character. The relationship between negotiations of character and the schema of cultural markers arranged certain meanings in the production of AfroCuban ethnicity. The outline of political ideas produced by Spanish colonial perspectives muted the voices of a diverse conglomeration of African peoples. The diasporic conditions of ‘African(s)’ represent the racialization of culturally diverse people as one homogeneous black community. In several disparate spatial contexts the African diaspora constitutes itself in hybrid formations but also a universalized social body of racialized make-up (Matory 1993; Gilroy 1992; Mercer 1994). Black subjectivities are created by multiple conditions and perspectives of sociopolitical importance and are constructed in varying ways (C. Moore 1988; R. Moore 1997; Hall 2001; Ortiz 1906). Diaspora studies supports, at times inadvertently, a racialized subjectivity. This reality of the black experience is sometimes embraced, shunned, or ignored but is inevitably created from perspectives and experiences made real in rebellion, alliances, and policies. The production of ‘race’ underscores the social production of African diasporic cultural forms in academic perspectives but also in the everyday dissemination of knowledge.

Paul Gilroy’s proposition of understanding ‘blackness’ as a counterculture of modernity not only suggests a history of expressive “tropes and genres”, but also marginalized discourses positioned against westernized separation of cultural and academic bodies, politics, aesthetics, and ethics (Gilroy 1993). Gilroy does not rely on binding racial subjectivity but positions black cultural perspectives in an emancipatory process of the diasporic experience (Gilroy 1993). Gilroy illustrates the separation of religion, politics, and race to provide separate conceptual supports for a series of sociopolitical constructions. How have notions of race, political

representation, and power helped to support the construction of religious identities as meaningful in sociocultural production (Apter 2002; Matory 1999; Foucault 1984)?

What makes Reglas Congas and Cuban Congo identity a good example for diasporic analysis is that it has long been positioned more negatively than its West African counterpart and is represented as malignant witchcraft, magic before religion, and a crude practice (Arostegui 1996, Millet 1996). Like Gilroy, Mercer suggests that the treatment of the black subject has been a vehicle for the production of a “radical democratic chain of equivalencies”. These productions have constructed a racialized selfhood that counters an embedded racialized position within social space (Mercer 1994; Gilroy 1993; Fanon 1963). Can we say this about the reputation of Palo Monte practices in Afro-Cuban religiosity? Has the space of subjectification –that is, the portrayal of Palo practitioners as ‘brujo’-created empowerment, where Palo’s bilongos (constructed spells), aligned with witchcraft, are deemed the fastest, most dangerous, and powerful spells (Castellenos 1976; Millet 1998; Matibag 1996)?

The questions of ‘origins’ are evoked in diasporic history and cultivated personal memory and are typically symbolic points of reference (Bourdieu 1994). The discussions of origins are fundamental in validating cultural heritage, diasporic research, and identity construction (Matory 1999; MacGaffey 1993; Apter 2002). Diasporic identities rely on the interpretation of past cultural forms as inherently anchored in the cultural practices in new spaces (Herskovits 1937; Yelvington 2001; Apter 2002). The authorization of cultural identity overlaps with the anthropological discourses of established difference and serves to authenticate cultures in the New World (Scott 1991). Some recent anthropological discourses have questioned the focus on origins in the cultural-political designations of the Caribbean (Trouillot 1998; D.Scott 1991; Mintz 1977). Many understand the historical discourses through political fields of production,

interaction, and directions, and view historical representations as cultural phenomena politically produced for its intended goal (Scott 1991; Foucault 1984; Mintz 1976). The importance of examining origins lies in the ability to glean unity, history, and belonging from its 'mapping'. Apter states that a 'dynamic of creolization' constitutes the reevaluations of origins not only in western anthropological discourse, but also in the discourse produced within historically directed discursive fields (Apter 2002). So notions of 'origins' have with it an epistemological a priori, politically formed and problematic, that anthropologists have nevertheless deemed (the intention of tracing of 'origins') a political priority but an ontological impossibility (Apter 2002; Gilroy 1993). Apter suggests new sites of analysis like "deep knowledge", through which shifting political spaces and actors alter such 'knowledge' and where such spaces are also altered by that 'knowledge' in a revisionary religious strategy (Apter 2002). By revisiting the original site of representations in religious practices, we are able to redefine origins within a social process of unifying a political struggle, a political struggle maintained by religious meaning and through religious identity (Apter 2002; Mercer 1994; Gilroy 1993).

The importance of understanding the aesthetic religious representations among various depictions of AfroCuban religions reveals the ways such religious identities have developed collectively over the past centuries (Sarduy/Martínez Furé 2000; Hall 2001; Lachatañere 1961). A rigid understanding of slave society ignores the fact that it was not bounded but connected to the rest of socioeconomic and cultural life (Knight 1988; Howard 1998; Moreno 1978). To restrict our understanding of the African diasporic experience to purely 'African' exchanges and ideas would be a shortsighted view of the realities of the Cuban experience. The risks of reaffirming fixed notions of origins, black subjectivities and bound notions of community stand at the forefront of problematic diasporic conceptualizations. Understanding the impact of political and

conceptual formations in and around cultural practices reveals the context in which the telling of histories produce new meanings, which stand outside past politics and inside new emancipatory politics (Scott 1992; Apter 2002; Matory 1993; Gilroy 1993).

My work seeks to understand the colonial impact of the formation of African identity but also the empowerment of those same notions that depict, exclude, and include representation of the lives of AfroCubans. The understanding of a Congolese diaspora relies on the colonial delineation of Central African space and constitutes a paradigm that now exists in the postcolony as African diaspora, 'black populations', or AfroCubans (Mbembe 2001; Mudimbe 1988; MacGaffey 1977; Ortiz 1921). Meanings evoked by the colonial fantasies have also distinguished and empowered cultural identity in people's new political notions and histories (Mbembe 2003). The reevaluation of origins as essential in diasporic analysis helps to uncover the political context for the placement of contemporary practitioners of Palo Monte in the African Diaspora. This chapter examines Reglas Congas as exemplary of cultural production, paralleling other experiences and meanings of Central African identity in other nations and other black diasporas, but also representative of a unique diasporic production distinct to Cuba (Ortiz 1916; Metraux 1972; Matory 2005; Brown 1998; Thompson 1990).

### **Congo Identity in Cuban Religious Consciousness**

A genealogy of values, morality, asceticism and knowledge will never confuse itself with a quest for their "origins" will never neglect as inaccessible the vicissitudes of history. On the contrary, it will cultivate the details and accidents that accompany every beginning; it will be scrupulously attentive to their petty malice; it will await their emergence, once unmasked, as the face of the other. Wherever it is made to go, it will not be reticent-in "excavating the depths," in allowing time for these elements to escape the labyrinth where no truth had ever detained them (Foucault 1995[1977]: 364).

Today, depending on the person's perspective, paleros are treated with respect, fear, exaltation, and disdain. Most practitioners proudly embrace their identities as palero, ngangulero, brujo, and tatanganga, and many times reference their Congo heredity. These concepts are

inherently connected and interchangeable. Congo identity in Cuba is made most accessible by the Congo legacy of spiritual knowledge incorporated in contemporary Cuban life, as history, heritage and religious belief. This religious identity is present throughout most Cuban communities. The transformation of religious ideologies and practices, once only embraced by freed or enslaved persons of Central Africa, is now accessible to any person in the Cuban population. The identity of a practicing Ngangulero has its own set of resources and communal reputation. Generations of Cubans have undergone a process of initiation in Reglas Congas and connect these practices to ideas brought by Central African people who arrived in past centuries. Thus the impetus to understand conceptual religious notions, like Nzambi, ndoki, or the mpungo, is bound by relationships between practitioners and nfumbi/dead. On the other hand, the translations of religious notions, the context in which they are defined, from sympathetic or derogatory observers, are products of relationships between different dialogues that intercede in explanations and instruction. The ideas of 'Congo' continue to play a part in the construction of AfroCuban munanso and in religious expressions of ritual and belief in contemporary Cuban communities (Howard 1998; Barnet 1966; Millet/ Hernandez 1997; Larduet 2002).

The proponents of Cuban Congo identity are reliant on how meaning is produced inside a relational set of represented cultural energies (distinction or difference within cosmologies, language, and meaning). Congo identity was defined according to dynamics of fluid social processes in socioeconomic conditions of the Cuban colony. Today the high number of Palo practitioners no longer includes only those that have a blood connection to Central African groups. This is to say that the religious practices are no longer contained within any socioeconomic group, or any other bounded factor of community, and are ceremonially embraced by many Cubans. The ideas formulated in Cuba through the brutality and blossoming

social process of the Caribbean expanded a repertoire of religiosity that has its sources in Cuban space and illustrates the elasticity of cultural phenomena, in this case, an amalgamation of Central African and other cultural forms. The processes of contention, persuasion, and affirmation of identity production fluctuate in changing perspectives of actors and political posts (Ortiz 1940; Lachatañere 1961; Cabrera 1979; Palmié 2002).

How people understand Congo identity is varied, but how enslaved peoples experienced the past speaks to the development of religious identity. Rogelio Meneses, a scholar of theater and Cuban folklore, investigated past descriptions of the Congo people as clever, astute at tucking things and ideas away, like secrets, away from the eyes of strangers (Monroe 2002: El Oriente). His research titled *La Regla De Palo Monte o Congo*, said this about the Congo identity in Cuba:

Las etnias portadoras del fenomeno a que hacemos referencia puedan reconcerse dentro de la cultura bantu a traves de los nganga, vivi fula, carabali olugo e izuama, congos, etc., por solo nombrar a los grupos mas importantes, que se mezclaron en estas tierras en el proceso de nuestra formacion nacional, en las otras islas del Caribe, y aun en ese Caribe continental que mira a nuestro mar, pues multiples relaciones del fenomeno al que voy a hacer referencia pueden encontrarse en cualquier lugar donde la mano de Nzambi, supremo dios de los congos, haya tocado tierra en este Nuevo Mundo (Rogelio Meneses 1994: 103).

Colonial portraits of African-identified religions and how the enslaved and freed individuals negotiated religious views can only be partially pieced together. Religious practices were a distinctive analytical site, framed by colonial ordering of religion, and later depicted in the analysis of religion by 20<sup>th</sup> century scholars (Lachatañere 1961; Ortiz 1916; Fabelo 1972; Martínez Furé 1979). Religious histories first centered on past Tatangangas of the munanso, who were then connected to certain groups and certainly localities (Monroe 2002: El Oriente; Barnett 1966). Practitioners have historical connections to specific parts of the island, such as Matanzas, Cienfuegos, Camaguey, Santiago de Cuba, and Havana. To some degree, transatlantic points of arrival to Cuba, typically the provinces of Havana and Matanzas, have historical significance for

tracing Palo lineage. There are many associations with Cuban localities that mark an important part of tracing personal (religious) histories. Some paleros from Havana trace their history to Santiago de Cuba, and there are Santiagueros who trace their religious heritage to Cienfuegos, La Habana, and Matanzas. Many paleros make historical connections to other Cuban localities where past teachers instructed their ritual practice and beliefs. At times, practitioners venerate African groups such as Mayombe, Ndibu, Mumbata, Musundi and others and speak of those groups as crucial in the development of Cuban Reglas (Bolivar 1996; Cabrera 1979; Monroe 2004, 1998).

The institutionalization of cabildos and mutual aid societies, predominately in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century (but as far back as the 17<sup>th</sup> century), present us with one example of the conceptualization and socialization of African ethnicity arranged in the institutional perception of the colony (Padilla 1996; Ortiz 1923; Leon 1970; Howard 1998). Contemporary practitioners use words ‘cabildo’, ‘munanso’, and ‘nso’ (and even ‘rama’ or branch) as if they are synonymous and describe contemporary religious structure and fellowship within these historical requisites (Monroe 2003, 1997). The African-identified cabildos, approved by Spanish authorities, were made up of diverse groups that produce their own dialogues and activities (Howard 1998). Realistically, cabildos may have had, at certain times in certain instances, membership made up of solely Lucumi, Carabali, or Mayombe descendants, but within the context of demographic shifts of people and the variation in AfroCuban communities, a more inclusive environment would have been more successful (Howard 1998). The constituencies were made up of a wide variety of AfroCubans but constructed under a unified assembly, like the categorical umbrella used in the colonial arrangement of labor, race, and religion. ‘Congo’, ‘Lucumi’, and notions such as ‘AfroCuban’, ‘Brujo’ or even religions names, ‘Palo Monte

Mayombe' or 'Santeria', represent a process of transference, conceptually, linguistically and in social reality (Bolivar 1996; Ortiz 1906; Castellanos 1977).

These Cuban perceptions of 'palero', 'ngangulero' or 'mayombero', born of the colonial past and present in the populations of the nation, have strong associations. "Palo Monte means, for us and for everyone who knows what Palo Monte is, 'brujo' because we work directly with the dead. That is a nkuni (palo/stick/branch) is born and an nkuni is dead because among us this is the significance it has. We are a branch/"rama" of Palo Monte. Nkuni means stick ('palo'), this religion is forever, because in the Cabildo "... that is from my father"(TataBangansa/Monroe 1997: La Matanzas).

The cabildos of the past colony are part of the Cuban experience and connect contemporary religious munansos to Cuban history and situate religious transmission as both identity and instruction. The continuations of religious languages and religious concepts in Palo groups constitute a production of religious forms and create social markers in social identity and religious philosophy (Ortiz 1923; Howard 1998; Knight 1970).

Linguistic analysis is a common source of knowledge in transatlantic research of diasporic peoples in Cuba (Fabelo 1972; Millet 1996; Fuentes 2002; Schwegler and Fuentes 2006). Spanish-speaking Cuba has a rich expressive vocabulary particular to the island space (Castellanos 1977; Dias Fabelo 1974). In some regards, the tracing of linguistic forms back to Africa seeks verification within the collective Cuban forms, and potentially reforms current use and reference in practice and representation, but also creates an unrealistic sense of linguistic continuity in cultural movements. Over time, languages change; it is par for the course, and the context of diasporic language movements and other languages complicates production and contextual usage. Spanish linguistic dominance over various other languages, spoken by

disenfranchised colonial subjects expose the linguistic development in this diasporic space. The colonial conditions speak to linguistic context and the specific religious use of Spanish words, references, and phrases (Valdes 2002; Castellanos 1977; Fuentes 2002). Ritual practices are dependent on linguistic forms to serve as both representations of conceptual abstracts and the identification of descent, ethnicity, and religious identity. People respond to the context of usage in diasporic space changing, not only, meaning, but also spelling, and pronunciation. Over time and space, language aligns meaning with other cultural forms in the spatial parameters of diasporic development (Ortiz 1940; Bastide 1971; Larduet 2002; James 2001).

Group identities are attached to notions of race, religion, and language and are the interlocutors in common references to the study of diaspora (Gilroy 1993; Hall 2001; Ortiz 1940). People create various histories, languages, and conceptual references to certain sites, in this case, localities of national or regional identities, and even specific alliances with distinct neighborhoods. People of any given locality possess their own set of historical facts, circumstantial history, geography, and arrangement of representation (Apter 1992; Millet 1998; Bolivar 1998; Cabrera 1979). The common perspectives about diasporic formations are traced from 'original' localities of people but are seldom original. The ways communities (networks, family relations and lifestyle) identity (symbolic, historical, philosophical) distinguishes itself among social power relations are taught and understood through the passage of knowledge from one person to another. The ideas and meanings that we produce are made real through the conception, replication, and reception of social interaction, and represent a variety of perspectives, from practitioners to outsiders. So too there are questions of adoption, substitution, supplication, and mutation in religious ideas that precede a person's acquisition of 'religious knowledge' or participation. "It is precisely this relation between implicit social knowledge and

political economy- what in my Yoruba research has emerged as a hermeneutic of power-that defines the horizon of Africanity in the New World: not as core values or cultural templates but as dynamic and critical practices” (A. Apter 1991: 251).

The analysis of Reglas Congas as a site of cultural production, diasporic space, and observable cultural form illustrates how ideas, ideology, and social relationships help shape our understanding of religion, ethnicity, race, history, and truth. Reglas Congas was first produced by enslaved and freed peoples throughout the Spanish island colony, which currently haunts national perspectives of Reglas Congas with connotations of malefic activity, spiritual warfare, and human sacrifice. The continuation of cultural stories, lineages, and histories of Cuba are products of cultural recognition and allusion (Ortiz 1916; Said 1979; Dirks 2001). Many Cubans who practice Palo Monte Mayombe, Brillumba, Kimbisa, or work with ngangas understand it as a Congo practice. Other practitioners understand Palo Monte and its Congo legacy as influenced by other cosmologies, systems, whether symbolically or ideologically, and are clear about the hybridity of their religious identities. Cuban religiosity-what many refer to as syncretic- reflects a utilization of conceptual and symbolic forms present in the population that maintain these ideas and symbols or create new meaning.

The critical analysis of colonial productions enables us to better understand how meanings are socially and politically alive. The critical assessment of how terms contain various meanings is at the foundation of identity formation. A critical evaluation of past cultural perspectives underscores our contemporary formed interpretations, and creates a context for a critical understanding of ‘culture’, ‘identity’, and ‘knowledge’. Reglas Congas illustrates a social construction of religious resilience, aesthetic, and power. It is a concrete example of how our cultural processes are constantly contained, contested, and liberated from a political panorama.

This religion, which in spite of its reputation of ‘brujeria’ and its frequent representation as the underbelly of Afro-Cuban religiosity, continues to negotiate a space from inside and out (Bolivar 1996). Certainly Reglas Congas is one of the great legacies of Congolese culture in the New World. The ways in which practitioners understand their ‘Congo’ identity does not necessarily oppose a deconstruction of ‘Congo’ identity. That is, practitioners’ dialogues with ancestral spirits, in-laws, academics, or anyone else corroborate the view of Palo Monte.

Historical materials that depict an understanding of ‘ethnic’ groups, connecting geography to religious practices (particularly in expressive, ‘artistic’, material forms), arguably have interpretive aspects to their meanings and represent the multiple self-authorized ‘empirical’ views of administrative perspectives. On the other hand, the proclamation and personification of cultural recognition are very real and produce ‘real’ identity within social space (MacGaffey/Stout 1993, Bettelheim 2002, Stubbs/Sarduy 1993). This approach to Palo Monte Mayombe is an attempt to change the way we think about what it means to identify one’s self or others as practicing diasporic religiosity and to illustrate how social identity is formed in this sociohistorical continuum (Amstelle 1998). The stigma of Palo practitioners as a malefic, barbaric, and violent, owes much to colonial depictions of Central Africa as the heart of (a racialized) Africa. The designation of the ‘African’ in the New World was understood in its racialized context, accompanied by other conceptual schemas, including the position of blacks as (ex) slaves in a politically oppressive space (Mbembe 2001; Fanon 1967). The geographic, religious, racial, economic identities represent the importance of the sociopolitical arrangement of ideas in the formation of ‘community’, ‘culture’ and ‘identity’ (Mudimbe 1988; Foucault 1984). This is also true of concepts in Cuban Congo liturgy such as ‘Nzambi’, ‘nfumbi’, ‘nkisi’, and ‘ndoki’ that are arranged by Palo practitioners according to their religious understandings.

## **Reading Representation, Replication, and Reception of ‘Congo’ in African Diasporic Representations of Cuba**

The colonial institutions that produced ‘observations,’ interpreted text (whether written or in other media), gathered material data, typically outside the realization of any internal designation, illustrates the importance of revisiting past ethnic understandings of Africa (Mudimbe 1988; Dirks 2001; Amstelle 1998). The irrefutable connection between colonialism and the production of knowledge reveals the need to contextualize how European powers produced ethnic designations and impacted our consumption of cultural representations (Said 1979; Coronil 1995; Mbembe 2001). Reglas Congas is arguably a religious identity based partially on its colonial designation. Palo Monte illustrates how power directs the way culture is identified and understood by a particular sociopolitical perspective within socio-historical perpetuity. The evaluation of ideas in human recognition of power, scopes of perception, and social positions in the analysis of colonial productions are critical. In order to create new knowledge about identity formation, we must first understand how our views and the perspectives of others have a political and social context through which knowledge is made meaningful. The historical conditions of enslavement, ideological and physical, are at the root of various dismantled cultural structures, beliefs, rituals and representations.

Meanings are not stationary but are constantly reformed and are the result of a process of fluid actions in mental and corporeal fields. Critically challenging the ways meanings are embedded in discourses of ‘reality’, ‘history’ and ‘culture’ is paramount to the critical approaches in anthropology and public understanding of cultural identity. The colonial enterprise of enslavement was responsible for the consolidation of population into a single group, for example ‘black’, ‘African’, ‘slave’, and later ‘liberator’. Although it was not a homogeneous affair, these types of labels represented a reality for many people (Martínez Furé 1979; Palmié

2002; Gilroy 1993). There are many colonial terms that dwell in our cognitive representation of Cuban ethnicity and continue to place the reinterpretation of meaning into question (Amstelle 1998, Dirks 2001).

It is clear that our present day understanding of life, culture, history, and identity have been developed, in part, through a colonial perspective. The construction and meaning of words such as 'culture', 'history', and 'Africa' (although predating colonial expansion/or occurring simultaneously), are enforced through the hegemonic reconstitution of their usage in colonial productions. The approaches to African diasporic studies follow colonial markings, a reality of contemporary racism and distinctions, directing conceptual forms around notions of skin color and religious beliefs that concurrently exist in our ideas of how culture is represented and authenticated (Herskovits 1937; Ortiz 1906). The use of markers such as 'Africans' that assume a monolith of cultural traits based on solely geographical designations and racialized markers forms a deceptively unified concept of social and cultural subjects. Colonization isn't solely about bodies of labor and geographic expansions. It is also the control, formation, and implementation of politically formed ideas within those spaces (Foucault 1972).

The main problem with past ethnic formations in the Spanish colony stems from an understanding of Africans as economic commodities or chattels (goods) (Patterson 1982; Howard 1998). The enslaved African rarely had the distinction of being anything other than brutish, heathenish, and non-human, with the exception of his/her monetary value (Patterson 1982; Holt 2001; Dunn 1972). The implications of the word 'African' and its slave status left little room for the representation of specific African identities. Only superficial descriptions of mental and physical capacities, constitution and disposition, and phenotypic descriptors were of importance to slavers (Patterson 1982; Cooper 2001). The enslaved were left to maintain their

own senses of identity and selfhood in foreign surroundings. The common description of bozales (full-blooded/African born) implied a dull intellect, the lack of facility in language, and little ability to follow directions. As a result, bozales were placed in the field (Knight 1970, Perez 1992). The domestic work was left to the well behaved and became the space for those deemed more civilized (Perez 1992).

The common naming of enslaved people took on a labeling of sorts that made reference to their assumed geographic locality in Africa, for example, “Francisco Engola”, “Congo Jack”, and “Ebo Jack” (presumed Angolan, Congo, and Ibo). The sources of these names as self-identified or imposed on the person remain debatable (Knight 1988; Deschamps 1963). The context for self-identification slowly grew in the context of increasing production sites, freed slaves, and a slowly growing condemnation for slave practices, their import and treatment (Ottobah CuGoano 1787, Equiano/Vassa 1937; Hume 1752). Some scholars situated Africans in five ‘tribal’ categories; Gangas, Mandingos, Lucumi, Carabali, and Congo (D. E. Pichardo 1875, Dumont 1915, Deschamps and Perez de la Riva 1974). These historical perspectives of proposed African and slave ethnic groups illustrate the condensing of African peoples in organized spatial units.

The earlier understanding and application of ethnic categorization are contained in an inconsistent application of descriptors. The ‘Lucumi’ (a Cuban designation of Yoruba and proximate groups) were usually described as the most important group, in relation to their numbers in Cuba and strength in work. Intelligence was bestowed on the Lucumi along with strength and independent thinking (Dumont 1915, Pichardo 1875). Typically designated as black (i.e., ...a black named Francisco...), the ‘Lucumi’ were described as having a reddish color, a large build (with a propensity to become fat), accompanied with body decorations (earrings, facial markings, etc) (Deschamps 1993; Pichardo 1875). The ‘Mandingos’ (“Sierra Leone” and

other regions) were called an intelligent ‘race’ with an ability to write, reddish in color, and were usually connected to Arabic influences (Ortiz 1923). A comparison of Henri Dumont claims the anthropological inferiority of ‘Gangas’ to ‘Mandingos’, who he feels are superior, noting a distance from the equatorial line and the differences in coastal or mountainous terrain as evolutionary distinctions of adaptation. The name ‘Gangas’ (Senegal/Gambia) was sometimes confused with the name of a priest (Nganga) of the Mayombe (‘Congo’) group (Ortiz 1916; Pichardo 1875). One such of Pichardo’s descriptions portray a ‘Ganga’ or ‘Congo’ slave as having a large nose and black skin, but the ethnic grouping was unclear (Ortiz 1916) ‘Carabalis’ were described by their distinctive teeth formation (pointed) and commonly described as having many symmetrical body markings. ‘Carabalis’ were sometimes described as bozales, black or reddish, and were geographically placed in Nigeria and Cameroon (Deschamps 1993; Ortiz 1923). The view of ‘Congos’ people were more diverse both possessing positive and negative characteristics, sometimes described as timid, other times as agile good workers (Perez 1992; Ortiz 1916). They were commonly called bozales, described as having black coloring, and were commonly assigned to the country (Pichardo 1875; Ortiz 1923; and Deschamps 1993). Angolans, synonymous with ‘Congo’, were known to have a strong disagreeable odor (Ortiz 1916).

African ethnic representations were fraught with mistranslations and debated ethnic categories that sometimes assumed the containment of other ethnicities, by combining colonial and travel descriptions, archives, newspapers (Ortiz 1916; D. E. Pichardo 1875). Quite tenaciously, Fernando Ortiz compiled and wrote an extensive body of literature about ‘Afro-Cubans’ that changed the understanding of 20<sup>th</sup> century social analysis, ethnological approaches, and authentication of Afro-Cuban culture (Ortiz 1906, 1916, 1926, 1946, 1950, etc.). Regardless of Ortiz’s detailed work on the various African ethnicities, merely three or four specific groups

are represented in contemporary religious identity. Such distinctions and consolidations, like that of the Cuban 'Lucumi' and 'Congo' as a viable grouping, underline the manners of conceptual change within diasporic pressures that produce fields of categorical ordering.

These productions were deeply imbedded, especially in earlier works, in colonial depictions and categorizations of Africa and concurrently by perspectives of historical and contemporary actors (Ortiz 1916; Palmié 2002). How 'race' informed people's understanding of ethnic difference, particularly in relation to Africa's position, vis-à-vis Spain and the New World, underscores AfroCuban identity. Many individuals identified themselves through an understanding of 'blood' relations to Spain that served to stratify people by phenotypic-descriptions, for example, pardos (some Spanish blood/mulatto), morenos (less Spanish blood), bozales (blood-full-blooded African) (Howard 1998; Deschamps Chapeaux 1993). A continuation of descriptions with phenotypic meaning is present at the verge of Cuban independence. The use of blanco (white), triqueno (wheat-colored), moreno or negro (brown or black) illustrate the importance of racial ideologies among scholars and the public (R.Scott 2000; Palmié 2002; Ortiz 1906; Isreal Castellanos 1916)

The critical understandings of Africa, first, places its focus on the production of the subject formations surrounding Africa, and second, on how those formations are socially reinterpreted in the political body. It is important to understand that colonization doesn't happen solely on the bodies and within spaces of Africa and its diasporas; it also happens in the minds of people (Fanon 1967; Mudimbe 1988). The 20<sup>th</sup> century authors and practitioners brought a great deal of public knowledge concerning African forms in Cuba. Nevertheless, a certain politics of recognition can be witnessed in the historical events, policies, publications, and testimonies that produced the descriptions of African-identified religious aesthetic, identity, and national pride.

The analysis of colonial interactions and colonial perspectives helps uncover how culture constitutes meaning in the metamorphosis of signified perspectives. How colonial productions are used determines the significance of their meanings and illustrates a similar circumstance of how ideas and identities are produced in an imagined political fabric (Anderson 1989; Apter 1991). The designation of Africans in the New World created a new space of analysis, no less politicized but much more telling of cultural processes.

The experiences of Africans throughout the Americas formed new social identities, some of which placed little importance on their specific African ethnic heritage. 'Community' is assumed in diasporic approaches but must be critically contextualized as determined by the intermingled productions of political spaces. Jacqueline Brown defines communities as a cluster of interaction in the demarcation of space within larger hierarchies and cultural constitutions (Brown 1998). The realities of African diaspora are shaped by experiences that emerge from reflections on interaction in society and community. This includes the political impact of past oppressive colonial policies, concepts, and actions. The epistemological question of how we represent our identity stems from our understanding of geographical origins and exacerbates the fact that this question is only part of the impetus for culture. It is the construction of praxis that is at the heart of cultural representation. The Africans of the New World experienced new racial identity, politically sequestered in colonial frameworks, and produced unified resistances of action, culturally and politically, in the history of Cuba (D. Scott 1991; Mudimbe 1988; Apter 2002). The reputation of Palo Monte Mayombe as 'brujo' raises questions about the impact of racial markers within a categorization of African difference (Bolívar 1996). What is the relationship to racial distinctions and ethnic difference in the depiction of Congo practitioners of the past?

CHAPTER 8  
UNCOVERING THE ‘CONGO’ LEGACIES: RACE, RELIGION AND REPRESENTATION  
IN CONTEMPORARY PRACTICES OF REGLAS CONGAS

**Conquests and the Colony: Colonial Conceptions of Race in Construction of Religion**

Most colonial perspectives have represented Central Africa/ ‘Congo’ peoples through a limited political view. The reconstructions of cultural identity by Palo practitioners illustrate different views. How culture and identity is understood and represented for all actors, both outside and inside, is imagined and made real. Categorical terms like ‘Congo’, designate personage, history, and locality but also historical construction of Central African pasts, Transatlantic slavery, and our current understanding of AfroCuban ethnicity. What we have come to know as ‘Congo’, and our understanding of its usage, its proclamation, and its meaning, result from many interpretations. How does the reference of race create a context for the representation of Reglas Congas in AfroCuban religiosity? How are racial distinctions deployed in the analysis of culture and religion? How is contemporary Reglas Congas represented in this deployment of analysis and how is it both embraced and resisted in religious practice?

The ways it is possible to speak of African ethnicity and religious practices are founded on past colonial dialogues of race and cultural analysis (Ortiz 1906; Bascom 1950; Bastide 1971). The ethnic categorization produced in Cuban religiosity sometimes reflects century-old understandings of ‘Africa’ but more precisely has been negotiated in the personal narratives and history produced in Cuban populations. The production of cultural representation in both literature and by practitioners’ informs specified audiences and sociopolitical spaces. The 20<sup>th</sup> century intersection of cultural representation and cultural practice reveals new cultural assemblies unique to Cuba but suggestive of greater political current in constructions of various diaspora. Critical inquiries into AfroCuban religion and identity contend with the historical representations of ‘religion’ and ‘Africa’ not unlike Cuba’s past historical participants. Today the

representation of Cuban 'Congo' forms occupies a mostly morally corrupt status in the hierarchical overview of AfroCuban religiosity.

The colonial exploration of Africa and its subsequent mapping, both geographical and cultural, played a significant role in how culture was understood and subsequently assigned meaningful markers of distinctions and similarities in cultural traits, groupings and geography. The distinction of African religion by affiliates of the Catholic Church seldom focused on the commonalities of religious life but instead sought to create distance from the cultural beliefs and practices of any non-Christian practice. The recognition of the descriptive markers 'Africans' and 'Africa' illustrates a colonial conception of knowing that situates the geographic and cultural context of space and its people through a monolithic connection to race. The colonial imprint has gravely marked Africa and Africans in ways that go unspoken. The colonial discourses on identities of Africa are so strong that I cannot address the people within this region without the use of the continental monolithic descriptor and its inconspicuous positions of geographic unity, cultural sameness, and bounded racialization.

The considerations of religion as cultural marker and the politicized representations surrounding non-Christian religion suggest the importance of 'race' in religious identity construction. AfroCuban identity is a racialized national category that connects nationality and African ancestry. The correlation of Reglas Congas to that of Christianity, specifically Catholic, are made distinct through racial distance in representation of religious practice. Degrees of blackness and whiteness are politicized realities that continued in the Americas, whether constructed on skin pigmentation or the relationship one had with Spain. The Cuban/Spanish descriptions of Cuba's' enslaved never contained a consistent form, sometimes emphasizing decorations, skin color, or facial features, and other times omitting these descriptions. The

positioning of non-Spanish peoples (and the non-Catholic religions) by Spanish Catholic doctrine, royal and papal directives and decrees, interconnect cognitive meanings between racial and religious identity. Past perspectives continue to influence today's reality in construction, continuation, and components of religiosity in Cuba.

The political recognition of African space exemplified in colonial divisions of labor reveals former understandings of Africa as monolithic. The diversity of cultural actors remained hidden in our African past, and homogenized conceptualizations of culture reside over our new cultural space. The conditions of forced labor and its living arrangements set up a context for new sociopolitical interactions and formations. New understandings of the political self and of the everyday shaped the development of Cuba's AfroCuban genesis. This conceptual and corporeal intercession reveals the importance of 'race' in local or national distinctions of Cuban religiosity. The century old development of enslavement, liberation, and citizenry of black populations in Cuba represent, in part, socio-historical interactions that have produced a station of African identity in Cuba.

The construction of 'blackness' in New World spaces, a new social context that associates racial connectivity experienced as a specific cultural condition, relies more on the delineation of 'race' than 'culture' to construct difference and sameness (Van Der Veer 1996). These frameworks represent diverse approaches to the African Diasporic experience, separating, on one hand, the notion of unity within hegemonic spaces, and on the other, the continuities (discontinuities) that exist in specific regional spaces and among diverse diasporic communities (K. Mercer 1994, P. Gilroy 1993, J. Brown 1998). According to Paul Gilroy, the legacy of diasporic cultural production relies less on the continuation of past African memories than on an analysis of a contemporary position, its racialized delineation within a social condition of

exclusion (Gilroy 1993). Researchers of AfroCuban religion should be mindful of the national and colonial inclination to represent Palo Monte and other African-identified religions as strictly practicing “African” religious forms. The depiction of religious identity in national discourses can be perceived at times as negative and, through other eyes, perceived with pride. The particularities of Palo identity have formed and currently pose questions of social status, whether anti-modern, counter-modern, inferior, or modern, in the political arrangement of contemporary cultural representation (Palmié 2002; Gramsci 1970; Gilroy 1993).

The invocations of the past are present in Cuban Palo ritual and essentially all cultural groups worldwide. At the heart of a diasporic history, memory, and identity is a conceptual production. Writers, institutions, and practitioners are key to the contemporary and historical production of social space, political status, ideological structures, and affiliations. All families, groups, nations, or ethos construct a foundation for social negotiations of identity and representation (Anderson 1991). The interpretations of meaning constructed through the spatial relationship with others (and their ideological constructions) reveal the power of representation and production (Mdembe 2001, Foucault 1977; Scott 1994; Said 1979). The important focus for diasporic research is to uncover conditions in which identity is constructed, imposed, and lived (Fikes 2000; Brown 1998; Zhen 2001). That is, a corporeal space of interaction frames the production of ideology and ideologies interpret that corporeal space. Conceptual constraints, effecting both status and mundane pursuits, limit how and in what ways we recognize ourselves but not how we interpret that recognition (identity) as special, significant, or personally satisfying.

My analysis centers on the formations of political bodies inside and outside of colonial models of history and cultural difference. How the Caribbean experience informed identity from

the conceptual and physical boundaries of colonial and national custody uncover larger questions regarding all culture production (Scott 1994; Amstelle 1998; Dirks 2001). Both notions of connectivity and differences intersect in current AfroCuban religiosity. A compilation of historical interpretations and regional practices represents a distinctive set of disparate practices/beliefs and a distinctive interdependent Cuban diaspora. An examination of diaspora approaches should focus on culture and identity formation as sociopolitical disbursements of powers and ideas that inform practice, everyday life, and self (Hall 2001; Gilroy 2003). The ambiguities in the racial demarcations uphold a rather misguided evolutionary and biological understanding of 'race', which seemingly, but not seamlessly, followed a southerly direction of racial and cultural blackening. The context of understanding diasporic cultures in the New World within diasporic frameworks is fraught with experiential nuisances of interactions in larger fields of subordination. A critical understanding of conceptual regimes that impose and enable identity (and its reactive and interpreted repercussions), explain how relationships between language and meaning set distinctions of representation.

This chapter contends with how notions of race, accompanied by concepts of religion, impacted the experience, representation, and identity of AfroCubans. To rectify an identity such as Congo, Lucumi/Yoruba, Carabali in Cuba speaks to the context through which these identities are lived and established as criteria for cultural unity. The prior categorizations of identity, specifically colonial, national, and communal demarcations of African or African-identified peoples and cultures, contend with the ideas of racial homogenization. This chapter illustrates how ideas of race are embedded in the discourse of religious and cultural representation. The ethnic representations of Africa, first filtered through a racial trope, anchored a negative racialized perspective of African culture. How contentions of racialized difference were

translated in the representation of hybridity, syncretism, and *cruzado* in Cuban cultural identity, more specifically the practitioners of Palo Monte Mayombe, are at the center of study.

### **Defining National Order: Race, Religion, and Representation of Cuban Progeny**

Nineteenth century intellectual views of culture, formed with 'race' as a manner of categorical distinction, were pronounced in the first scholars of Cuban culture (Bohannon and Glazer (eds.) 1988; Ortiz 1906). The development of social and cultural analysis, anthropology, sociology, and the human sciences successfully established an ethnocentric paragon of cultural forms. The epistemological arrangements of nonwestern geographies such as Africa, Asia, and the Americas, distinguished people in racial terms and often with exotic religious cultural depictions (Said 1979; Dirks 2001; Amstelle 1998). These discourses on culture included the works of 19<sup>th</sup> century theorists such as Morgan, Spencer, and Tylor and partly constitutes a legacy of established attempts of racialized cultural analysis (Bohannon and Glazer (eds.) 1988). The consideration of race in cultural production was one consideration of many, such as religion, geography, and language. The formulation of a science of religion, race, and society was a main focus for many scholars at the turn of 19<sup>th</sup> century, and Cubans were no exception.

The assumption that religion is always at the root of 'culture' was present in the early literature of anthropology and is significant in the critical evaluation of African diaspora. In the past, religion has been tied to a number of theoretical and methodological approaches, for example, 'universals', 'empirical observation/ethnographic description', 'evolution', and 'an objective comparative method' (Bohannon and Glazer (eds.) 1988). By critically evaluating the sociopolitical link between our constructions of 'religion' and 'race', in the contemporary formation of categories and theories, we are better able to explain the production of cultural divisions (D. Scott 1991; Mudimbe 1988; Mbembe 2003; Dirks 1998). Studies in the New World have situated 'African' cultures through an analysis of religious tropes, ritual practice and belief,

thus making religion and its political representations crucial to distinguishing African cultural differences.

The description of race in Cuba typically noted the color of skin, treated each ethnic grouping by specifying a type of black ("especie de negro"), or as 'races' separate of each other<sup>1</sup> (Ortiz 1916; Perez 1992). Characteristics of personality, intelligence, distinctive marks, and body types accompanied these phenotypic descriptions. Many times these descriptions were wrought with contradictions, speculations and inconsistencies. Fernando Ortiz compiled an understanding of the Afro-Cuban population through his recording of several authors, including Henry Dumont (1915) and E.T Pichardo (1862), who constructed an 'anthropology' of the black slave<sup>2</sup>. This illustrates how early nations' intellectuals conceptualized race, loosely defined and applied in a socio-theoretical foundation of difference. The transition from Spanish colony to Cuban nation did little to change the colonial distinctions of race, but new cultural forms and meaning produced among the cultural dialogues of 20<sup>th</sup> century national populations contain other insular political nuisances.

The many early Cuban perspectives supported persecutory policies toward black populations noting associations with criminality, anti-brujeria operations, and theories of racial inferiority (Castelleños 1916; Ortiz 1906; Lombroso 1971[1876]; Bronfman 2002). Inherent in political dominated terrain, past interpretation of "religion" played an important part in the dissemination of particular histories and culture (Martínez Furé 1979; Cabrera /X.Marmier

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<sup>1</sup> Fernando Ortiz spoke of 'race' as black, white, and yellow with further excepted variations of these types of color schema (Ortiz 1916). 'Race' was talked about as a signification between color and in other instances it was spoken of as a distinction of ethnic groups or breeds.

<sup>2</sup> The descriptions of ethnic groups were commonly understood by their ability to work accompanied with an analysis of behaviors, personality traits, and cleanliness (Ortiz 1916). Additionally, the contribution of other 19<sup>th</sup> century authors who described the African interior through their historical travel accounts were common references to representations of AfroCubans (Park 1816; Weeks 1914; Arnot 1914).

1959). In part, early national perspectives continued the colonial degradation of black populations and connected religion to culture in order to illustrate the process of religious and social evolutions (Castellenos 1916; Ortiz 1906). The hegemonic actors and the technologies that formulate these first religious characterizations of AfroCuban religions framed cultural expressions, reinventions, and resistances but also the constructions of ethnic religious bodies in Cuba (Apter 2002; Palmié 2002; Howard 1998; Franco 1973). The descriptions of various African ethnicities exhibit a morally stratified conceptual aesthetic and depict Congo identified practices as religiously primitive. The dialogues of negotiated African individuality, group identity, and cultural production reveal a religious schema upheld by a New World aesthetic.

The work of Herskovits (1937) essentialized the meanings of African culture through interpretive and comparative analyses of religious entities throughout the Caribbean and South America. 'Negro' populations were represented through their retained and recognizable forms (Verger 1984, Simpson 1951, Bastide 1978). Using the notion of syncretism, Herskovits sought to connect various New World syncretic religious ideas and practices, specifically Yoruba practices, to Africa (1937). Religion was believed to be a vessel of cultural sustainability and was exemplified in notions of religious syncretism aimed at New World religious practices (Bastide 1978; Simpson 1951; Metraux 1959; and Ramos 1937). These perspectives assumed that culture was a fixed essence, in this case, the idea of Africa as essential and original, in a syncretic process. Investigators hoped to reveal disparate cultural affiliations through religious observations (or accounts) and comparisons of ritualized blood sacrifices, dance, music/song, and spiritual possessions. Subsequently, the use of religion as a cultural marker, through observable cultural practice and theories, exhibit racialized assumptions that African subjects can only be recognized in religious distinctions (Palmié 2002; Mbembe 2001; Dirks 1998). Religion

served as a trope of production through which depictions of African cultures were dependent and repeatedly an example of racialized cultural phenomena (Dirks 1998; Herskovits 1937; Ortiz 1906).

Religion as a trope for cultural identity, along with interlocutors that connect religion to race, labor, social development (modernity), and culture, underscores the discursive hegemonic importance of religion as a site of analysis and identity in anthropology (Dirks 1996; 2001; Van Der Veer 1996). The ethnology of religious practices, fixed and ordered cultural notions, are epistemologically centered and constructed within political agendas (Ortiz 1926; Herskovits 1956; F. Boas 1920; Scott 1994; Amstelle 1990; Mudimbe 1993; Mbembe 1988). Curiously, from the conception at syncretism, its applications remain directed, never at all religions, but consistently to peoples who have a cultural 'genesis' associated with the 'New World' phenomena (and typically, non-western cultures) (Ramos 1937; Malinowski 1948; Ortiz 1926). Syncretic approaches are at the intersection of several conceptual interlocutors, most importantly, the dialogue of 'race', which in the national representations of religion, carries certain connotations of racialized contamination (Ortiz 1906; Malinowski 1961; Herskovits 1928; Ayorinde 2004). The syncretic analysis sometimes ignores deeper meanings in knowledge formation, particular through its use of symbols, which serve to describe a reality, but whose meaning, use, and power are never static (D. Scott 1991; Apter 2002; Foucault 1977). Historically, political representations of religion, race, and culture parallel economic directives and socio-political prejudices of the time. The importance of religion in interpreting culture was significant in 20<sup>th</sup> century anthropology and represents an ideological trope that inherently speaks to a conceptual history and understandings of such a term.

‘Magic’, represented as a less developed spiritual practices, reflects the evolutionary attempts of religious scholars to attach cultural progression as knowable and predictable. Palo Monte has the reputation among practitioners as being a swift and effective form of ‘magic’, associated with bilongos, although Palo’s general reputation as a magical practice is contested<sup>3</sup> (Millet 1996; Matibag 1996). The forces of Palo are known to act quickly and those practitioners that maintain multiple traditions such as Reglas Congas and Reglas Ochas, among others, make distinctions between ritual activity and meaning. The philosophies of nfumbi, nkisi, and other key concepts of Palo Monte are constructed by practitioners in various manners. The mannerism through which cultural identity is built relies on its capacities to incite a permanent memory or knowledge of symbols and meanings. The distinctions of religion and magic are common in 20<sup>th</sup> century categorization and description of Reglas Congas versus Reglas Ochas. This distinction relies mostly on an assumption that magic and religion are not equal in cultural divisions, that is, magic is represented as a less developed spiritual stage than, say, religion (Bohannon 1988; Patton/Ray 2000). By examining religion, key tropes that form current understandings of the Afro-Cuban identity, we are able to trace critically the dialogues that make meaningful the process of representations in cultural formation.

The correlation between how one is seen and how one reacts to such gazes frames the various collections of culturally articulated materials, whether ethnographic, instructional, and representative of ‘culture’, cultural production as a political translation (Macgaffey 1998; Desai 2001). Central Africa has a reputation for producing witches, like many places around the world (including West Africa), and a great deal of research has centered on witchcraft in this region (Van Wing 1941; Laman 1962; Macgaffey 1988; Mair 1969). If one accepts that witchcraft is

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<sup>3</sup> Practitioners generally refer to Palo Monte as a religion and do not associate it with a magical practice distant from religion.

present in most societies of the world, then how is it that the development of AfroCuban religions has made distinct the placement of Palo Monte as brujeria/witchcraft? The various interpretations, representations, and practices uncover religious aesthetics that parallel the constructions of race in the production of Cuban religion. That is, degrees of civility and barbarity are infused in the descriptions and representation of nfumbi and Congo identity that set it apart from the orisha practices and Yoruban identity, Catholic practices and Spanish identity. Today Palo is still feared. Some contemporary research has dispelled some of the more negative depictions of Central African cultures and more research has opened a clearer understanding of certain practice of Palo Monte in Cuba. Racist notions, that is, those notions that understood Africa as the savage continent, have influenced the development, and most assuredly representations, of Palo Monte.

The exploration of 20<sup>th</sup> century anthropology shows significant changes within the theoretical conceptualizations of 'culture', both as questionable and unquestioned in critical anthropological texts. An assumption that religion produces culture implies that religion itself is constructed outside of an ordered sociopolitical space of authority and production. The historical precedents for the negotiated space of Reglas Congas in AfroCuban religiosity so commonly associated with 'brujo' (witchcraft) stems in part from an interplay of political struggles and symbolic representations by AfroCuban practitioners to nurture cultural identity in an environment that demonized association with African derived cultural production. Thus the interaction between religious and cultural actors and the markers set forth in representation of race, religions and Africa speak to the political distinction of spiritual philosophy as well as cultural ethnic categorizations. The descriptions of the orishas as refined and graceful, versus the unpredictable, crude, and violent actions of nfumbi, exhibit a stratification of religious aesthetics

that contextualizes a philosophical landscape of religious meaning. What can we infer about the constant reputation of Congo traditions as brujeria/witchcraft and how can we connect such definitions of Palo Monte as reflecting a response to the grave notoriety associated with Africa?

Connecting ideas of primitivity, race, and religion preoccupy the national literary and scientific productions of the Cuban nation. Primitivity as an evolutionary supposition, eventually challenged, perpetuated the ideas of malice and hysteria within the cultural interpretations, representation, and categorization of African-identified culture in Cuba. The great number of Cuban practitioners, authors, and institutions who have liberated, evaluated, and contributed to the study and practice of this religion continue to engage the historical and contemporary significance of Congo identity in Cuba (Bolívar 1998; Barnett 1995; James 2001; Larduet 2002; Martínez Furé 1979). A 20<sup>th</sup> century retrospective shows significant changes in scholarly perspectives, engaging the voices of African-derived identity, but also the ghastly hold of colonial categories and racist ideologies that continue within cultural interpretations and practice. Now let us examine more closely how African distinctions developed into a mostly bifurcate empowerment of African religious identity but also interrelated practices that incorporate these distinctions and account for multi-dialogic African identity in individual Cubans.

### **AfroCuban Realities: 'Congo' Hybridities in National Legacies, Religious Identity, and the African Diaspora of Cuba**

The consideration of religious and cultural formation in concepts such as diaspora and AfroCuban illustrates the importance of race as a cultural marker. By no means are Cuban religious practices restricted to any racial phenotypes and typically the membership reflects a variety of skin tones like the diversity of Cuba. Identity formation in Cuba stems in part from national legacies of revolution, exile, and, for many Cubans, a strong national pride. The constitution of black identity in the struggles and productions of Cuban populations is today an

essential part of Cubans' cultural character (Sarduy/Stubbs 2000; R. Moore 1997; C. Moore 1988; Bronfman 2002). The densely packed power of religious identity, certainly potent within tourist presentations and national depictions of Cuban culture, has made its mark on Cuban culture, regardless of the corruption and representation of past and present. The landscape of Cuban religiosity speaks to the manners in which identity and culture are evoked and suggests the importance of ideological and material production by communities, the nation, and individuals (Bourdieu 1994; Anderson 1991; Hagedorn 2001; Brown 2003; Ayorinde 2004). Uncovering the ideas and actors that situate meaning within frameworks of African-derived identity and religion in Cuba is bound to racial conceptions that cast specific images on religious practice, public representations, and theoretical interpretations (Cabrera 1979; James 2001; Martínez Furé 1979).

Notions of AfroCuban identity during the 20th century gained wider recognition and cultural authenticity in the literary productions of notable Cuban Authors (Ortiz 1916, 1926, 1947; Cabrera 1979, Barnet 1995). The African Cuban citizens of the first half of the twentieth century met with considerable prejudice and persecution. It was not until the late 20th century that the representations of African-derived culture were widely recognized as culturally important to Cuban society and depicted within cultural studies and historical accounts (Barnet 1995; Cabrera 1979; Bolivar 1997). The legacies of race center on the rubric of AfroCuban, unquestionably underlying the African element in Cuban citizenry, and construct (and constructed) the reality of blackness in postcolonial Cuba. In Cuba, anthropology did not have an early start officially, but the role of ethnography was very strong in cultural studies, particularly in the recording of Afro-Cuban religion and culture (Ortiz 1916; Cabrera 1979; Lachatañere 1992/1939; Barnet 1995). The recordings of festivals were main sites for ethnographic

exploration along with rich descriptions of costumes and cultural materials associated with Santeria (Hagedorn 2001; Brown 2003; Ayorinde 2004). Such practices continue today in the media production of Afro Cuba religious practice (Miguel Barnet 1995). Lydia Cabrera's observations of a dance known as the macuta, which was stated to be an ancient religious dance (secret in nature), is translated as follows (Barnet 1995).

Black women dressed in their best attended the makuta- my informant refers to them as yuka or makuta. The makuta dancer wore an apron made from the skin of a wildcat or buckskin. He wore little bells on his waist, shoulders and legs; hanging over his chest, a gangarria [bass instrument]. Using his whole body to mark the beat, he pursued the woman, who wore a very full skirt, and he attempted to "vaccinate" her (Cabrera 1979:77-78; Miguel Barnet 1995: 101).

According to many perspectives on AfroCuban culture, the main trope of religion produces dance, dress, art, and music (drumming), and cuisine and does not necessarily exist independently from their origins in religious practices (R. Moore 1997; Ortiz 1926; Millet 1998; Thompson 1984). The focus of researchers in Africa reflects similar uses of religion for the representation of various African cultures, typically by the categorization of ritual work, religious belief, language, social structure, and art (V. Turner 1969; J. Clifford 1988; Thompson 1981). Lorand Matory compares the ethnographic process to a translation and insists on its ability to bridge understanding between cultures while he still acknowledges the problems of ethnography (Matory 1994).

But certain techniques of writing ethnography create the impression of a chasm and verticalize it, not after the manner of missionaries preaching to "pagans" but worse, like conquistadors hoisting a flag over a "New Spain," wholly renaming the realities of a local dialogue. This time the flag usually says "Marx," "Weber," or "Durkheim," but there are other Western standards of salience as well, such as "art," "theater," "underdevelopment," and "women's position" (J.L. Matory, 1994: 221-222)

The representation of mixed cultural symbols and beliefs formally implied a quality of impurity and degradation, apart from the views of hybridity, multiplicity, and plurality in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century perspectives (S. Hall 1990; Gilroy 1993). In many ways the projection of religious

schema attached religious descriptions to ethnic, economic, political, and racial evocations of culture. The assignment of 'primitive' was illustrated by a group's inability to express their cultural forms without religious activities. More politically directed questions regarding the depiction of 'cultures' through religion reveal the context of colonial and national productions that seek to simplify the understandings of 'Africa', as to permit trespasses and evade compromise. The depictions of African-identified religions as retrogressive illustrate the use of ethnographic observations in overt political hierarchies produced in past discourses (Ortiz 1906; Mbembe 2001; Dirks 1998). A boundless set of associations, practices, ideas, and epistemological analyses of Reglas Congas in Cuba reveals historical and contemporary religious representations that typically reflect older theoretical models.

The later 20<sup>th</sup> century illustrates an elevation of images and support of AfroCuban Culture particularly fixated on religious ideologies and practices. The legacy of colonial thought held in 20<sup>th</sup> century representation of Palo Monte, describing the cultural forms of religious practices as magical systems versus religious cosmology, circumscribes the representation of Central African Culture in Cuba. Congo practices represented as black magic, brujo, or as malefic African sorcery have their root in incidents of an early nation. Stories of practitioners seeking white infant blood for a nfumbi feeding are recorded in the documentation of the early nation and today plague the reputation of Mayomberos (Palmié 2002; Monroe 1998). For many Cubans the initiation into Reglas Ochas/Santeria is preceded by ritual initiation into Reglas Congas/Palo Monte. Although this is not always the case, its prevalence exemplifies a particularity between different African-identified forms regarding Cuban religious identity. The first is that the interaction between such religious philosophies is accommodating, not necessarily in regards to similarities of ideas and ritual forms (Lachatañere 1961) but to their sociopolitical circumstances

and status as racially bound within cultural representation of Cuba (Martínez Furé 1979). Perhaps coincidentally or not, the historical presence of people from Central Africa in earlier centuries of the Spanish colony parallels the stages of initiation within the practice to ‘scratch’ individuals in Palo initiation before receiving any orisha of la Ocha/Santeria. More importantly, these forms of Cuban ritual ideology situated by a multitude of historical actors, events, and relationships speak to movements of cultural identity as constructed on different levels. Race and racial notions, particularly skin tones, connected diverse cultures together in the black experience of the New World, producing an amalgamation of cultural ideas within new distinct relationships (Mintz 1983; Ortiz 1947).

Practitioners’ interactions constitute the ways that nkisi, nfumbi, and Cuban Congo cosmology is passed from Cuban to Cuban. Cuban Congo religious philosophy and practice, held by some in the past as black magic or malefic spiritual craft, and others as a mysterious knowledge of African-derived spirituality, continue today. The comparison to and interaction with the more approved Santeria establishes an interaction of dependency, hierarchy, and subterfuge. The relationships between Cuban identities (in this case, between the Reglas Congas and Reglas Ochas) are inseparable from the precedence of their interactions. The distinction between the religious actors and their constructions of ideas in a racially homogenized community constitutes their characterizations and connections. Practitioners are an amalgamation of religious philosophies, that is, there are, at times and in many instances, practitioners who identify as santeros, paleros, espiritistas, catholics or even hougans. The exactitude of ritual interactions where individual practitioners illustrate the particularities of several distinct religious forms but also the relationship between them, uncover a distinct Cuban reality.

Today the concept of culture, and the sites of its constitution, including religion, structure, symbols, power, productions, text, hybridity, and reality lie in question, mutable, anticipated and unanticipated (Turner 1969; Marx 1848; S.Hall 1990; Taussig 1998). Scholars of the African diaspora have continued to privilege the use of religious practices to describe and map 'New World cultures' by building upon an assumed conviction that practices of religion (and their study) contain certain degrees of consistency, lineage, and essential cultural meaning (Matory 1993; Apter 2002; Palmié 2002; Scott 1999). Diasporic approaches contextualize the meanings of subjective spaces, Creole formations, and public empowerment through the tropes of religion, race, and representation (Trouillot 1998; Gilroy 1993; Mercer 1994; Apter 1991; Matory 1999). The reevaluation of syncretic phenomena in religious studies must critically illustrate the social negotiation that makes meaningful a Congolese identity, or any such designation, through a person's involvement in socially derived context and concepts. Hegemony is present in both corrupt texts-those perspectives authorized from 'above' and suggestive of colonial superiority-and sensory-substantive observances, which are produced outside the records in everyday life (Scott 1994; Stoler 2002; Palmié 2002; Barnet/Montejo 1968; Foucault 1984). According to some perspectives in African diasporic literature, the significant factors in the formations African diasporic identities is the shared racialized experience, consistent with the conceptualizations of 'blackness' as lived experience, reifying 'black' as social and not racial (Gilroy 1993; Brown 1998; Patterson 1982). These politicized spaces, bodies and ideas, remain paramount to our realities and critical inquiries into conceptual productions.

Anthropological inquiry by critiques of epistemological forms exposes a set of relations, more politically directed in their conceptions, both within our work and throughout our cultural understandings, productions, and actions. This raises the question about the consequences of

cultural representation (Mbembe 2003; Dirk 2001; D.Scott 1994). No longer can we state that religion, economy, race, or kinship solely determines cultural production. Religiosity is intrinsically tied with economic, political, and social spheres that shaped our religious worldviews. Associations to economic, racial, or hierarchical concepts prearranged in definitions of religion uncover concepts of historically and politically molded interpretations. In the case of Congo ethnicity and its recognition as a facet of the Cuban cultural tapestry uncovers “imagined dialogues” of Africanity, specifically through religion (Martínez Furé 1979). Cuban dialogues uncovered the politics of representation, its distinction within Cuban blackness, and the manners through which Africa identity are described using certain concepts (Lucumi, Congo, Arara, Carabali, etc)(Martínez Furé 1979; Lachatañere 1961; Hall 2001). Religion has been the standard site of cultural inquiry formed within the context of Christianized knowledge production and reveals the ethnocentrically ordered status of all African culture (Mbembe 2001; Mudimbe 1993; Foucault 1977).

## CHAPTER 9 CONCLUSION

The intent of this chapter is to summarize the points I have made throughout this study. My purpose is to address the concepts, representation, and production of Cuban Reglas Congas on multiple levels of discourse. This includes practitioner's perspectives and literary representations that have dominated 20<sup>th</sup> century production of Reglas Congas. Building upon Palmié's notions of cultural modernity, I hope to show Palo Monte as a construction of modern circumstances and politically formed arrangements (Palmié 2002). Most important in this dissertation is assessing how people conceive of the practice of Palo Monte. Following the work of Matory, this dissertation focuses on the networks of practitioners as a primary source in the conceptions of Reglas Congas (Matory 2005). Borrowing from David Scott postcolonial criticism on the historical-conceptual moment, I hope to show the context through which Palo Monte has been partial understood as malefic, barbaric, and as witchcraft (Scott 1999). This analysis of Reglas Congas illustrates the influence of historical moments that define AfroCuban religiosity and ethnicity by colonial conceptions of race, religion, and culture.

First, I address the conceptualization (and consolidation) of African-identified groups developed in Cuba, reflected in distinctions like 'Lucumi' and 'Congo'. The ways that African-identified religions in Cuba are juxtaposed, sometimes complementary and other times in opposition, demonstrate a political construction of ethnic status and religious representation. The arrangement of religious knowledge and cultural identity in both Santería and Palo Monte, sometimes embraced by individuals in tandem, illustrate national notions of 'cruzado' common in the religious discourse of AfroCubans (Barnet 1995; James 2001). Chapter 2 engages the history of political exchanges, colonial conceptions, and corporeal interactions that created a context for the assembly of AfroCuban identity.

Chapter 3 reveals the conception of Palo Monte as dependent on production of internal practices and concepts present in the religion. The authority of prolific paleros who demonstrates his/her craft in literature or publicly, as opposed to other practitioners whose voices are left unheard, suggest the importance of power in the representation of this religion. The practices of Palo Monte and the production of analysis surrounding such practices revolve in part, separately or in concert with constructions of what, who, and how such representations exist in cultural studies, anthropology, or public interpretations. I state this, in part, to consider that dialogues important to paleros are not necessarily understood as important to researchers. Furthermore, the practitioner's identity and perspective of this religion may or may not be derived from an experiences and perspectives in public engagement. The notions, such as 'Congo', 'AfroCuban', and 'Brujo', common in dialogues of paleros illustrate the intersection of religious ideas and broader social ideology in everyday ethnic understanding and religious identity.

Chapter 4 investigates what it means for the nganga to be culturally connected to the minkisi objects of Central Africa while concurrently being understood as Cuban or New World phenomenon. An exploration of Central African cultural identities and concepts such as minkisi reveal drastically varied cultural practices that many have linked, by philosophical, etymological, and ritualistic similarities, to the Cuban nganga. This chapter considers the make-up of the Cuban nganga through definitions and observations of Cuban practitioners and the ideological and material aesthetics attached to their philosophies. Furthermore, this chapter addresses the understanding of the Cuban nganga as an object of cultural genesis and as proof of Congo cultural continuity.

Chapter 5 explores the ritual processes specific to the nganga objects and includes the common ways practitioners engage the nganga in abstract thought through the assembly of

material substances. My intention is not to deconstruct the importance of commonly constructed parts of the nganga; rather I hope to illustrate the common dialogues present in the ritual processes of the nganga. This chapter illustrates another aspect in the production of Palo Monte and is reflective of cultural dialogues produced by its actors. The analysis of ritual activity surrounding the nganga is important to uncovering diasporic experiences determined in part by a negotiated ritual logic and its enunciation in cultural space. This chapter addresses the ritual processes involved in the production of the nganga that speak to a material formulation of this religion.

Chapter 6 addresses the social engagements between practitioners, debates among researchers, and innovative theoretical approaches that construct representation for public consumption. Equally important are the sometimes-contradictory distinctions between representation and practice. Drawing on the ‘live dialogues’, as presented by L. Matory (2005), I have intended to show the importance of the interactions among Cuban actors that have made these dialogues real. Furthermore, the work of S. Palmié (2002), which illustrates the impact of political circumstances and interpretations, have greatly contributed to the understanding of Palo Monte as a both politically and corporeally produced modern religion. The construction of ideas in religious practice and analysis are constructed by multiple actors and, in the case of Palo Monte Mayombe, is understood through the productions of practitioners, researchers, along with institutions of publishing, education, and culture. Practitioners work with researchers, educational facilities, publishing houses, and national displays that depict Cuban culture. The corroboration and contestation of Reglas Congas by researchers, institutions, and practitioners continue to uncover both the politics of identity construction and historical ideas that preside over discussions of Central African-identified diaspora. Institutional directives and researchers’

perspectives continue to grow from new discoveries and are derived from interpreting historical materials, archives, and contemporary practitioners. This chapter focuses on the changing perspectives in research and practice that alter the understanding of cultural practices, cultural materials, and critical interpretations of various AfroCuban religions.

Chapter 7 explores the understanding of diasporic analysis but also the empowerment of diasporic notions that depict, exclude, and include representations of disparate African cultures. The understanding of a Congolese diaspora relies in part on the colonial delineation of Central African space and constitutes a paradigm that now exists in the postcolony analysis as African diaspora, black populations, and AfroCubans (Mbembe 2001; Mudimbe 1988; MacGaffey 1977; Ortiz 1921). The dissection of Africa by colonial categories has also distinguished and empowered cultural identity in new political notions through historical circumstances (Mbembe 2003). The reevaluation of origins helps to uncover the political context for the representation of culture and contemporary depiction practitioners of Palo Monte as a Cuban phenomenon. Furthermore, this chapter examines Reglas Congas as exemplary of Central African-derived cultural production, paralleling other experiences in different nations, but also represents a unique diasporic production of Cuba (Ortiz 1916; Metraux 1972; Matory 2005; Brown 1998; Thompson 1990).

Chapter 8 contends with how notions of race, accompanied by concepts of religion, influence the experience, representation, and identity of AfroCubans. To fully understand African Cuban identity one must recognize the context through which people live and establish criteria for cultural unity. The prior categorizations of identity, specifically colonial, national, and communal demarcations of African cultures or African-identified peoples and cultures, are loaded with former ideas of racial homogenization. This chapter illustrates how ideas of race are

embedded in the discourse of religious and cultural representation. The ethnic representations of Africa, first filtered through a racial trope, anchored a negative racialized perspective of African cultures. At the center of this study is the way that we understand racial difference and how that understanding is translated in the representation of hybridity, syncretism, and 'cruzado' in Cuban cultural identity.

This dissertation is an archaeology of production focused on African-identified cultures of Cuba, particularly the religious practices known as Reglas Congas and its association with Central African peoples. I have attempted to show how the conceptions of Palo Monte are products of historical, political, practical and epistemological directives present in the diasporic space and history of Cuba. The contemporary practices of this religion, its formulation in public representation and in levels of practice, are formed in part through conceptions of race and religion. This study contributes to a body of knowledge on the African diaspora, religious identity, and cultural production, by applying a meta-assessment of conceptions in understanding the practices of Palo Monte (Palmié 2002, Matory 2005, Scott 1999).

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

In 1996, I earned my bachelors degree in anthropology at Wayne State University. I continue studying cultural anthropology under the direction of Dr. G. Montilus. In 1998, I completed my Masters degree in cultural anthropology with a focus on the Central African religious forms in Cuba. In 2000, I began my doctoral studies at the University of Florida.