

THE HAND OF NZAMBI: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF PALO MAYOMBE  
NKISI MALONGO ACROSS THE ATLANTIC

By

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To my ancestors: Odessa, Minnie, Charles, Mary, Frank, Larry, Betty B, Juanita, Sylvia, Eddie, John, Rodney, Lauren, Chad, and all those unlisted or unknown. Thank you for walking with me daily

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## LIST OF DEFINITIONS

Kimpungulu	The raw energies or forces of nature that assist humans in their every day lives.
Ko	No
Kuenda	Yes
Ku Mpemba	The land of the spirits or realm of the dead.
Ku Nseke	The land of the living or the physical realm.
Mfinda	Forest
Mpungu	The singular version of Kimpungulu
Munanzo	Derived from the Kikongo term nzo, which means house. The Munanzo is a spiritual house or Nkisi Malongo temple.
Ndoki	The term for sorcerer in Kikongo
Nfumbe	The spirit that a Tata makes a pact with. It is housed in the Nganga to assist him with whatever they need help with.
Nganga	The original term for priest or spiritual specialist. Today it is used to refer to the cauldron that houses the Nfumbe spirit.
Nkondi	Statues with nails and other objects created by Nganga and Ndoki for spiritual defense or attacking enemies.
Nkuyu	Ghost
Nzambi	God

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Nkisi Malongo, which translates to sacred medicine in Bantu, is an African Traditional religion and healing practice brought to Cuba by enslaved Africans who were trafficked across the Atlantic from the Kongo Kingdom in central Africa. Today, it is most known to the masses by the moniker, Palo Mayombe, and is practiced mostly in Cuba and the United States. The tradition evokes fear and hysteria within the minds of those who have been misled to believe that it is the “dark side” of Lucumi (Santeria). This popular mendacity is an extension of the ongoing attack against African religions and spiritual traditions since the arrival of European missionaries of the cross on the African continent. Accordingly, this thesis seeks to shatter the negative stigmas and false narratives attached to the tradition by centering Nkisi Malongo as its own sovereign religion with a unique set of beliefs and practices that are independent to the Kongo region, despite many sources associating it with Yoruba traditional religions and spiritual practices.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION: SHATTERING THE REAMS OF MISCONCEPTIONS

Nkisi Malongo as it is practiced today in Cuba and the United States, is a culmination of Bantu shamanistic practices that were forced into a process of syncretization between African spirituality, cosmologies, and practices, with Spanish Catholicism to deal with the realities that its practitioners were up against during the period of colonialism and enslavement. The institution of chattel slavery, the precursor to racial capitalism, forced Kongo people to reshape their spiritual practices to enhance their gifts and abilities as warriors, both literally and spiritually. The painful, brutal, and inhumane circumstances which enslaved Kongo peoples had to endure in Cuba is what molded the many different Bantu practices into what we now know as Palo Mayombe. It is a closed tradition that reveals its' secrets only to those that have sworn an oath before the Kongo spirits with live witnesses present to become initiated into a particular Munanzo<sup>1</sup>. The closed nature of this tradition along with the many spiritual tools within it such as skulls, bones, and various offerings has led to the immense speculation from outsiders which has resulted in the circulation of false truths, misconceptions, and hysteria. This is exhibited throughout various entertainment mediums, social media, academia, etc. as people outside of the tradition tend to speculate while developing a strong inquiry for what they do not know or comprehend. The traditional spiritual and religious practices of Africans have found themselves in a frequent war against the gaze and ideals of the imperialist pawns of the Christian church, who justified the subjugation and enslavement of Africans by pointing to their religions and spiritual practices as primitive machinations that symbolized evil, inhumanity, and barbarity.

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<sup>1</sup> The term Munanzo, which I will use frequently throughout this project derives from the Kikongo word muuna nzo, which translates to house in English. In Nkisi Malongo and its many branches, Munanzo refers to the spiritual house that adepts become a part of when they are initiated.

In addition to the association of this tradition with evil, there is a frequent push by many to associate or blend Palo Mayombe with another African Traditional Religion that made its way across the waters to Cuba from the lands of the Yoruba peoples, located in modern day Nigeria. Lucumi (Santeria), which is an extension of the Yoruba spiritual system Ifa, is the name of the tradition that Palo is incorrectly associated with, despite these traditions deriving from separate regions in Africa. Although there are similarities when Palo and Lucumi are juxtaposed, they are their own separate traditions with unique worldviews, approaches to spirituality, and rituals that differ according to their origins and beliefs. Outsiders of Palo and the many other Kongo traditions frequently refer to it as the dark side of Santeria (Kail, *Narco Cults: Understanding the Use of Afro-Caribbean and Mexican Religious Cultures in the Drug Wars*, 2015). This is an inaccurate depiction, as the religion is not the same as Lucumi, and each tradition contains different modalities to approach or work the spirit that is viewed with disdain by each one, unless someone is initiated into both traditions concomitantly. Referring to Nkisi Malongo, or any Palo branch as a dark side of Lucumi attacks the legitimacy and sovereignty of Kongo religion and instead of situating it as its own sovereign religion with roots from a completely different ethnic group in Africa, it undermines the religion and fuses it into a tradition that it has nothing to do with and cannot be practiced with simultaneously. This erroneous notion also holds similar ideals that once fueled the European conquests of Africa, Caribbean islands, and the Americas which led to the genocide of millions of indigenous peoples, their cultures, and spiritual beliefs. The casting out of Nkisi Malongo into the dark as a religion used for evil upholds and promotes the white supremacist claims that have been used against non-white people since the period of colonization and enslavement throughout the diaspora.

It is my upmost intention to put an end to such nonsense by providing an insider's account of the tradition as a soon-to-be initiated researcher, sharing what can be told to the public without breaking any rules set by the members of the tradition, the Kongo ancestors, and spirits that are both the custodians, guardians, and transmitters of this tradition to ensure its' survival and longevity. My access to the tradition is granted via Cuban immigrants that have settled into North Central Florida, as well as the grandson of both a Tata<sup>2</sup> and Yaya<sup>3</sup> that still lives in Cuba today. Since the creation of this thesis has taken place amid the COVID-19 pandemic that is still harvesting and collecting the souls of people throughout the globe, I have chosen to rely on phone calls, video calls through Skype, Facebook messenger and Zoom, text messages, and emails to maintain a relationship with my research participants. I was given permission and invited to attend ceremonies in person, however I chose to wait until the pandemic subsides for me to attend in-person ceremonies. To accommodate me, the communities I have been in contact with and learning from have allowed me to participate in Misa spirituals<sup>4</sup> and cleansings with them via video calls. While virtually participating in these ceremonies I am still expected to do what I would do as if I was in attendance. This requires me to wear certain items of clothing that carry different meanings, light specific candles for specific purposes, sing songs dedicated to various spirits in unison with members of the Munanzo, dance, recite specific prayers and pleas to the spirits, or leave offerings. My virtual fieldwork experiences took place between the months of August and December 2021. However, I am also relying on the

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<sup>2</sup> Tata is a title that is given to male elders in the Kongo and Kongo religions that means father. It is also used to refer to someone that has been granted the secrets to enter priesthood.

<sup>3</sup> Yaya is a title that is given to female elders in the Kongo and Kongo religions that means mother. It is also used to refer to someone that has been granted the secrets and status to assume the role as a priestess.

<sup>4</sup> A Misa is a ceremony incorporated into Nkisi Malongo to communicate with the spirits of the dead, relying on mediumship, signs, senses, and spiritual mounting (possession) for the spirits to relay messages to adepts.

experiences I had in person in Cuba, and in Ocala, Florida when I first arrived in Florida during late Spring of 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic was still in its early stages.

Also, it is imperative for me to note that throughout this thesis, I will be referring to the region and its practices as Kongo, rather than addressing it as ‘Congo’ with a “c”, which is associated with the result of European imperialism, colonialism, Christianity, slavery, and the dismantling of the Kongo kingdom by these foreign institutions that wreaked havoc upon the Kongo region. Kongo is the name of the kingdom that once spanned across numerous regions and provinces in central and west central Africa. It was named by the original peoples of the region who spoke the KiKongo language, and I will honor, respect, and uphold their legacy by using ‘Kongo’ when I speak about the kingdom and its people, culture, traditions, and all the spiritual traditions that were birthed from her proverbial womb. I will not refer to the Nkisi Malongo in any way that associates it with Yoruba religious practices, as that is the antithesis to this project that seeks to center this tradition as a unique Kongo practice. By providing a detailed account as someone who has relationships with living practitioners and spends time learning with them, my goal is to recenter Nkisi Malongo as its own sovereign religious tradition with its own unique origin, cosmology, conceptualization of spirits, rituals, ceremonies, regulations, and way of approaching life in all aspects. Nkisi Malongo is the formal name, although I will use it and Palo simultaneously throughout this work.

Although there are many books, articles, and documentaries that have been produced about Palo, I do not use them as the basis for my research, as most of them were written by outsiders that did not develop substantial relationships within the community (that is, people who conducted research primarily from the seat of their office), individuals that intentionally

disseminated false information, those that did not gain the knowledge from a reputable source, and those that did not receive the license to write certain things about the tradition.

Each house has many mansions, meaning that each house practices the tradition differently. However, there is a foundation laid from the Kongo ancestors that a Munanzo is supposed to follow at the most “basic” level. The communities I have learned with are a part of three different ramas, or branches within the Palo system, which contains unique differences that I will discuss in later chapters. The information used to complete this ethnography is a culmination of the countless lessons that I have received from the Tatas I have met, ngeuyo<sup>5</sup>, individuals who I have developed sibling-like relationships with, historical records, and Nzambi a Mpungu (God), as the creator is both my purpose and push to complete this work. Lydia Cabrera’s book *Las Reglas de Congo*, published in 1979, along with Donato Fhunsu’s English translations of them have helped me tremendously. Dr. Kimbwandende K. B. Fu-Kiau’s work and lectures on the African cosmology of the Bantu Kongo have also influenced my work and helped with my understanding of the Kongo worldview. However, the structure and style of this ethnography is heavily influenced by the work of two special women I admire that conducted field research and wrote books about Haitian Vodou, Zora Neale Hurston and Maya Deren. *Tell My Horse*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and *Divine Horseman* were three books I read by these authors that catapulted me into the intellectual study of African Traditional Religions and contributing to the production of knowledge by researching, participating, and writing about them. These two writers and anthropologists serve as the drumsticks that help produce the sound which vibrates from this work as if it were a drum itself, communication the messages of the Kongo spirits and ancestors who desire to have their story told. This work is structured in a

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<sup>5</sup> Ngeuyo refers to those that have just been initiated into Nkisi Malongo and allowed to learn the secrets.

manner that first explores the origins of the tradition while its practitioners were still present in the Kongo kingdom before they were ripped from their land and trafficked across the Atlantic. Then I address its transformation as it landed to Cuba and the United States. By adopting what I coin Kongo hermeneutics, I interpret the cosmology, ceremonies, deities, ceremonies, and other aspects of the tradition that are accessible to the uninitiated public. My intention is to make this work as accessible as possible, breaking down the many aspects of the tradition that I am allowed to so that the children of the Kongo throughout the diaspora and other people seeking knowledge can obtain it. This work is a precursor for what will come, as I will expand on it when I travel to the Kongo, back to Cuba, and undergo initiation in the future.

### **Positionality Statement**

I am an African descendant male from the South, born and raised in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Growing up, I was surrounded by spiritually strong women that prayed often and attended the Baptist church. I can recall many instances from my childhood spending time in my late grandmother Odessa's apartment and witnessing her kneeling by the bedside praying and reading in the large Bible that is still in possession of my family today. My paternal grandmother Jacki is also a spiritually strong and faithful woman of God who reads her Bible and prays daily. My aunt Jade and my mother Tammy have also remained praying women that have always had a solid relationship with God, regardless of if they attended church frequently every Sunday or not. While I was a child, my family attended both New Zion Baptist church and the historically significant Goler Memorial African Methodist Episcopal church located in downtown Winston-Salem. However, for me there was something about Christianity that did not resonate with my spirit and understanding of the cosmos. It was not that I did not believe in God, but I always questioned that we read from a book that was supposedly written by a supreme being that no one had ever seen before. It also confused me that every physical representation of Jesus and God's



angels depicted them as white. The older I got the more I began to develop a passion for studying history, which led to me inquiring about the history of the relationship with African and indigenous people and the Church, especially the Black Christian church. It was during those moments of inquiry that I discovered the forced conversion of Africans from our traditional spiritual practices to Christianity during the period of enslavement. This sparked my curiosity in wanting to learn about what traditions my people practiced before they were forced into the Christian institution.

The passion for studying the complexities within African Traditional religions intensified after my intellectual experiences in undergrad, taking courses regarding the presence of these traditions in the Americas and Caribbean. This intellectual passion and curiosity deepened after studying abroad in Cuba in 2019. After getting the opportunity to visit a spiritual house and speak with elders, witness a celebration for new initiates, and become overwhelmed by a barrage of drum rhythms calling me to dance-I knew that contributing to the production of knowledge by researching ATR's<sup>6</sup> was a part of my life's vocation. I am concerned with studying and documenting the histories, traditions, and cultures of African and African descendant people because there it is both my passion and because there is an intentional ploy of Western academia and society to undermine and/or subjugate the knowledge and histories of African people. In my perspective and work, there is no room for telling a one-sided story of our people, as we are all important pieces in the cosmos or grand machine that we call life. I am aware that although my heart and intentions are pure, there is sometimes a reluctance from African and Indigenous communities to be open with researchers in the field work process. The potential for this to occur has been eliminated through my participation in the tradition in Florida, the use of participant-

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<sup>6</sup> Abbreviation for African Traditional Religions.

observation methodology and building rapport with the Tatas and members of the munanzos by participating in certain ceremonies, spiritual cleansings, and building great relationships with them. The moments of joy, laughter, eating, and getting to know each other outside of talking about spirituality is what allowed for me to become closer to my research participants which I am grateful for. By recentering Nkisi Malongo as an ancestral system of spiritual wisdom and knowledge, the stigmas will be removed, negative stereotypes and myths will be debunked, and the beacon of light that this research serves as-will shine bright enough to lead those to the tradition that want an authentic experience or just learn about it without succumbing to scams or those that provide false information.

### **Applied Africana Studies**

Applied Africana Studies is a theoretical framework that guides the production of scholarship that is both centered and relevant to the needs and interests of people of African descent (McDougal, 2013). I am using this theoretical approach as an anchor in my work because I am concerned with studying the histories, traditions, and cultures of African and African descendant people. This approach is an extension of the values that Africana studies was founded upon which unquestionably shines a light on the lives and conditions of African people on the continent and throughout the diaspora. It also assists with conjuring solutions to the problems that have been caused by imperialism, colonialism, racism, the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and a myriad of other oppressive isms and institutions. I use this framework while studying African Traditional Religions due to the circulation of negative stigmas about them and hegemonic ideological forces present in academia and entertainment that continuously scrutinize these traditions, casting them as witchcraft, primitive, and demonic. The Applied Africana studies approach is situated at the root of my work, as it is only possible to raise the consciousness of African people by operating from an African-centered location (McDougal,

2013). An African centered theoretical approach is necessary in my research and work, as academia and entertainment are infected by ideological and cultural biases that reflect Eurocentric and Western ways of thought which intentionally exclude Africans and the totality of African experiences and histories. By anchoring my work with this approach, I seek to recenter Palo Mayombe as not simply a religion or what the dominant narratives and stigmas have defined it as-but as an Ancestral system of wisdom and knowledge that provides its' initiates with a blueprint to maneuver through this life and those follow it. This approach is not a method, but it is a framework that guides the mixed methods that I will use throughout my research. The Applied Africana studies theoretical approach allows one to have a grand purview which recalls the essence of African religions as they functioned on the continent prior to the colonialism and enslavement and their evolution as devotees landed in new terrains and conditions once they arrived on the ships.

### **Religious Syncretization**

Afro-Catholic syncretism has predominantly been analyzed through the metaphor of a mask in which African slaves ingeniously employed the traditions of Catholic saints to disguise their worship of African deities, ensuring the preservation of their traditions (Ogunnaike, 2020). Syncretism is a theory and process that both fall flat when discussing what has occurred between Africans and African religions throughout the centuries since they have been in contact with Christianity, colonialism, and the institution of chattel slavery. It tends to fall flat because syncretism presents historical events at a surface level and conveys the “creolization” process as one that insinuates that African and indigenous people just laid down their traditions in favor of adopting another. This is not the case at all when we discuss African Traditional Religions or in this case, Nkisi Malongo. In this thesis, I seek to expand the theory of religious syncretism by presenting it as more of a process of transformation for both African and European religions. I

consider it transformation because it was more than just Kongo Africans using Catholic saints and Christianity as a mask, but they took certain concepts within Christianity and made them their own. A shining example of this would be the observation of Doña Beatriz Kimpa Vita of the Kongo kingdom who asserted that Jesus Christ and saints of Catholicism were African and born in the Kongo region. We can also observe the adoption of the cross or crucifix into Kongo traditional religion as symbol to represent both Nzambi and the cycle of life as it is shown in the Bakongo cosmogram.

## **Research Methods**

### **Participant-Observation**

To carry out this project, I rely heavily on participant observation. Participant observation is the process of entering a group of people with a shared identity to gain an understanding of their community. This is achieved by gaining knowledge and a deeper understanding of the actors, interaction, scene, and events that take place at the research site (Allen, 2017). The Munanzo (spiritual house) in Ocala, Florida where I conducted my research is also the house that allowed me to engage in ceremonies, which gives me an insider's perspective that allowed me to observe various ceremonies, rituals, songs, and objects that were transported from Cuba and the Kongo. My position as an African descendant male who also practices a form of African traditional spirituality comes without any inherent biases that were developed to diminish or slander Palo Mayombe or any other African traditional religion, so this method used is not just for the sake of collecting data, but a way of life that I myself am a part of.

My interaction with the members of the Munanzo in central Florida began in the early part of Fall of 2021, when I attended my first Misa ceremony to communicate with the ancestors and spirit guides. From that moment, I was in frequent contact with the Tata, Yaya, and initiated members of the Munanzo daily for about five months. Although everyone does not live in the

same vicinity, we communed daily through an internet chat service called Discord to discuss Palo Mayombe, receive lessons and instruction from Tata, and interact normally as a family would-discussing life, laughing together, supporting each other during trying times, etc. To build genuine relationships with this Munanzo in Florida outside of worship and discussing the tradition for research purposes, I spent time with those that live in Florida who were in driving distance from where I lived in Gainesville, Florida. If the space was open and required facemasks, I attended concerts and other venues with some of the members so that we could drink together, eat together and just spend time enjoying each other's company which allowed us to create and strengthen our relationships. The community is blended with both men and women of all races, socioeconomic backgrounds, and sexual orientations. It is imperative to note that this Munanzo was accepting towards all walks of life because this refutes many of the claims that have been made about Palo Mayombe over the years. Although I am a heterosexual male, it still blew my mind and made me respect the Munanzo in Ocala tremendously because over the years it has been declared by some who practice and some outside of the tradition that Palo Mayombe does not initiate gay men or women. I consulted with the Tata of this Munanzo and the Tata in Cuba that I was put in contact with, and they informed me that their Munanzo's did not follow those claims because they left it up to the spirits to decide who would and would not become initiated into the tradition. This attitude towards the tradition and leaving it up for the spirits to decide in participation and initiations regardless of someone's sexual orientation or gender showed that there was no ounce of sexism, ego tripping fueled by machismo. Spending time learning with the Kota Lima Munanzo in central Florida showed me the exact opposite of what I was expecting prior to my first encounter. Even the titles that women are given in this Munanzo once they are initiated reflect that there is no sexism or machismo that wedges between the desire

to practice the tradition amongst a community and elevate spiritually. For example, after one becomes initiated, it may be in their destiny to obtain the title of priesthood. In the Kota Lima Munanzo, women that obtain this status are addressed as Yaya, rather than Yayi which is different than many other Munanzos. I was informed by Tata Rompe Pecho and initiates within his Munanzo that people refer to female priests as Yayi in a disrespectful manner which means “thing” which places them a step lower in the hierarchy compared to the status of the male priest, Tata. There are also very strict rules set in place by this Tata for the entire Munanzo regarding the development of relationships. On my first day of learning with them, he made it very clear that there would be no sexual or romantic contact with anyone in the Munanzo, unless a husband and wife or boyfriend and girlfriend already knew each other prior to joining and learning the tradition under his tutelage. Since I was raised in a household surrounded by women, I already have the upmost respect for women and do my best to make anyone comfortable in my presence. I was not worried about overstepping any boundaries or making anyone uncomfortable by desiring an inappropriate form of intimacy during the research process because those were not my intentions, but Tata’s strict rules that he put in place at his Munanzo made the research process much smoother and greatly diminished the room for nervousness and hesitancy when I ask questions to learn, from both my female participants because they did not have to worry about the potential for someone to get close to them with lascivious intentions beneath the surface.

When there were important ceremonies or initiations most members of the house try to make their way to Florida so that they can attend. Those that are unable to attend certain ceremonies like Misas and other ceremonies can log in and video call so that they can participate and learn. Participant-Observation as the preferred method of choice for my research is

imperative in the study of Palo Mayombe, as most researchers in academia that have written about it in the past were “arm-chair” anthropologists that were not properly instructed in front of elders, the spirits, or able to receive the information that I am able to receive since they were not surrounded by elders or in the process of becoming initiated. There are many inconsistencies and incorrect conclusions that are drawn about closed traditions if one relies heavily on certain books, articles, and documentaries to research them. Using the Participant-Observation method and speaking directly with elders is a fool-proof way of eliminating the chance of producing or reproducing an incorrect analysis about Nkisi Malongo, and other African Traditional Religions. The data collection methods I use are qualitative, as I am working with humans and the traditions about the forces of nature to complete my research.

### **Oral History**

The use of oral history to pass down the knowledge of one’s roots, mythological origin stories, spiritual religions, songs, and culture is a customary feature of African Religions and cultural traditions throughout the diaspora. It is an extension of the practices that were used by the griots of West Africa and the Nkisi (priests) of central Africa that inhabited the Kongo region whose descendants I focus on in this research. While the griot and Nkisi were viewed as the storytellers and/or healers of society, their presence served a role that was much more expansive than just recalling and retelling the stories that their forefathers and foremothers shared among the generations before them. These people were the repositories and vessels for communicating the history of the communities that they were a part of. While it has become the norm of societies in this era known as modernity to scribe and recant the history of communities and civilizations through books, articles, and journals, African and indigenous societies still place the use of oral history as a dominant medium for teaching about the intricacies, histories, and knowledge about the religions and spiritual traditions of our people. Since a very young age, I

was taught to sit, listen, and learn from my elders as they speak so that I could receive and use the information on various topics that was being poured into me. Through oral history, researchers can access information that is considered lost, unavailable, or difficult to obtain.

### **Interviews: Open-Ended Narrative Interviews & Group Interviews**

The use of interviews as a method for collecting data is imperative for my research, as the passing down of knowledge and information in African Traditional Religions differs from the Abrahamic religions such as Islam and Christianity. Unlike the Abrahamic religions, African Traditional Religions rely on the use of orality, art, and divination to pass down information rather than using sacred scrolls or books, apart from certain things being provided to newly initiated ngeuyo. As we were ripped from our homelands in Africa, the necessity and significance of oral history was augmented to maintain our identity, culture, histories, and traditions. Today, the usage of oral history is still prevalent in the realm of Palo, although the Tata of the Briyumba branch I encountered allows his godchildren to write certain things to help them memorize their lessons. This is one of the driving forces for me choosing a myriad of participant observation methods and interviewing methods. The narrative interview method will be used as I work with various Palo elders and initiates to construct a timeline of the arrival of this tradition in the Western hemisphere, how it evolved, and the impact of external and internal forces. Open-ended narrative and group interviews are both incorporated into my research methods which has assisted in the process of getting to know the research participants better and receiving information that I didn't initially think to ask about since I let them guide the conversations once I present my specific questions.

### **Accessibility**

Unlike many researchers that conduct fieldwork with their participants and never share their work with them once it is complete, this work is created with the members of my Munanzo



(Palo house) to avoid inconsistencies and errors. It will be dispersed to each member of the house and eventually shared on our social media platforms to reach those that seek the information. Most of those that are interested in Nkisi Malongo exist outside of Academia, but my work will be accessible to both academic and non-academic spaces. It is imperative for me to make my work accessible in both spaces, as I am guided by my respect for the Kongo traditions and spirits that want their stories told in a respectful manner and acknowledge their presence in these spaces. Since this thesis is written in English, my intention of making this work accessible is more likely, as most books and articles that have been written about the tradition are written in Spanish and Kikongo. The non-English words that I use will be thoroughly explained and I will provide definitions to explain important concepts, names and mechanisms of the tradition.

## CHAPTER 2 MY FIRST VISIT

My first-time meeting Tata face-to-face was at a misa ceremony I attended at his house on Thursday, July 23, 2020. When I walked through the garage, it was already as if I had seen these people before. My naivety led me to enter before I had cleansed myself. So, I was instructed to exit then go to the front door of the house. Lucille, one of the female members of the Munanzo showed me what it meant to cleanse myself at the door before entering. I looked down and saw a basin full of a light, electric green liquid that smelled like Florida water<sup>1</sup>, cologne, various essential oils, and it also contained some white flower petals that were swimming in it. After I watched Lucille, I mimicked her motions by first beginning with cleansing my hands. Then I rubbed some of it from the top of my head making my way down my body, flicking away and swatting downwards to rid myself of any negative energy or spirits that I had accumulated throughout my day. I was rocking all white, as I had been instructed to-white jeans, a white silk polo, and some all-white Nike Air Force Ones that I had on the tuck for a while inside my closet which were still shining pearly white as if I had just bought them from the store. After cleansing, I walked through Tata's home, greeted his kids for the first time, his barking guard dog which was a ferocious chihuahua named Olaf, then I made my way to the garage from entering the door to the left of the kitchen.

When I stepped foot in Tata's garage it felt as if I had jumped straight back to the Kongo Kingdom and left the United States. I was immediately transported back to the continent that my ancestors once inhabited, getting lost in my thoughts by overthinking and wondering if I was

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<sup>1</sup> Florida water is eau de cologne that was brought to the United States in 1808. It was initially used for medicinal purposes, to alleviate headaches, fevers, and colds. In the African Traditional Religions community and other Spirit based traditions the product is used often to cleanse the spiritual grime that negatively impacts a space, individual, and/or community.

looking at the exact things they would have held and smelling similar things that they would have smelled. I did not even know what to say at first about everything that I was seeing because everything that I had seen in books and websites was there. In person I was viewing the Nkisi Nkondi statues with the nails and piercing eyes, Nganga pots, Lucero Mundo mounds, dolls, a variety of palo (sticks), a machete that still had the stains of blood from an animal sacrifice that looked like it was there for several months, firmas<sup>2</sup>, etc. I had a childlike sparkle in my eyes while staring at this stuff, and although I wanted to go and touch everything, I kept my composure as much as I could although I was smiling nonstop. Once I finished looking at everything, I made my way to one of the chairs that was open and ready for someone to occupy it.

We were all sitting in a circle and there was a large square table in front of us. The table housed the Boveda, which was lit up with a candle and six tall goblets of water, three in each row in line to the right and left of an even taller goblet of water standing with a crucifix inside of the water. While there were about eight of us in attendance, another member of the Munanzo sat in the middle of the circle with her backs to the rest of us circling her. There was a water goblet placed behind her with a red cover next to a burning white candle then we began the Misa with multiple prayers. It blew my mind at the number of prayers we said and how we used both Kikongo and Catholic prayers. Tata began with the Kongo prayer, the Lord's prayer, another member requested to say one, and so did another, then once we finished the prayers everyone lit up their cigarettes and awaited the messages to come from the spiritual realm, I do not smoke cigarettes, so I chose to enjoy a thick, mild flavored cigar. The Misa ceremony is a part of the

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<sup>2</sup> The firmas are Kongo symbols that are like the Vèvè symbols that are traced on the ground in Vodou religious ceremonies. They are used for a myriad of reasons, mostly to contact a certain spirit or manipulate the energy of a situation to benefit the will of the person or community that drew it.

espiritismo tradition in which those who participate communicate with the spirits of the dead, ancestral spirits, and since they are also common in Palo Munanzo's-the Kongo spirits also convey messages. It is a ceremony in which those present rely on their skill of mediumship to communicate what the spirits want to say. Usually, the messages are received from the spirits through random thoughts that pop up in one's head, physical feelings that one feels (changes in body temperature, alterations in mood, pains, itching, etc.), or someone can be mounted by a spirit which leads to trance. I sat in the chair with my feet flat on the floor, arms uncrossed with my palms flat down on my knees as I had been instructed and I waited for the messages to come to my mind. It wasn't long after the prayers ended that people in the circle began receiving and relaying messages. Once this happened my right and left hands began to shake vehemently. I closed my eyes and convinced myself that I was unintentionally psyching myself out, but when I took two deep breaths and opened my eyes, my hands were still shaking. Tata received a message from a spirit that he described as "that man in that red suit that sometimes rocks black pants and a white shirt to confuse people." With his piercing eyes he looked at me and said that is my spirit guide and asked me if I knew him. I hesitated then said, Legba? He confirmed that but informed me that in Nkisi Malongo and other branches of Palo, he is called Lucero or Nkuyu. The woman in the middle of the circle received a message for me, looked at me, addressed my various relationships and said that I need to focus more on myself and pour more of that energy into myself. Another person in the Munanzo received a message, looked at me and described a spirit that surrounds me as a North African man dressed in a turban that is an intellectual. Honestly, I took most things with a grain of salt and brushed these messages off at first, doubting their legitimacy. But when Tata was mounted by his Palo spirit, things got real fast and my doubt was shattered. While mounted he told me that someone in my dad's family

practiced Nkisi Malongo a long time ago, and that I did not choose Nkisi Malongo, the tradition and the Kongo spirits chose me. He even described the things that I have in my apartment while smiling at me. He said, “what is that red item to the right of your door when you enter? I like that.” The item he described is my Legba shrine and painting. He also described several things in my life and past that only I would know. It was at that moment that I knew I was on a ride that would completely turn my world upside down, test all the knowledge I thought I gained about African traditional religions from reading books, and teach me things that no book or documentary could show me. This thesis is built upon the wisdom that was poured into me from Tata Rompe Pecho, another Tata who desires to remain nameless, and one of my elders who grew up around his grandparents that practiced in Cuba. The majority of this thesis was completed with the assistance of oral history, in addition to the knowledge acquired from books to trace the history of the tradition in pre-colonial Africa.

### CHAPTER 3 KONGO ORIGINS: BANTU ROOTS

Long before Africans were trafficked across the Atlantic to appease the European colonizer's God of commerce and imperialism, there were a myriad of shamanistic practices that were present throughout central Africa in the Kongo kingdom. Nkisi Malongo, Las Reglas de Kongo, or Palo Mayombe is a culmination of those shamanistic practices that were used by the Bantu speaking peoples that were present nearly 150,000 years ago. Prior to the establishment of "organized" religion in Africa, whether traditional or those of Abrahamic faiths, the spiritual practices that were led by these shamans and bushmen were heavily imbued with ancestral veneration, the use of plants and herbs for medicinal or spiritual purposes, drumming, singing, and divination to diagnose physical or spiritual conditions and prescribe the remedies and solutions to heal the afflicted. Nkisi Malongo contains a myriad of Bantu beliefs and practices from three main groups who were forced and trafficked across the Atlantic to Cuba. Although they inhabited the same region in central Africa, their cultures and way of life were diverse, and there were many different subgroups of people within these groups of people. The three main groups that remain alive within Nkisi Malongo today despite the ramifications of its founders being ripped from their homelands are the Bambuti, Mbenga, and the Twa. Anthropologists in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries conducted fieldwork to study these groups from central Africa. They mocked them for their short stature, which created an umbrella term still used today to address these groups of the Kongo region as one rather than highlighting their own unique cultures and names that they used to describe themselves. To diminish their presence and significance as those that once heavily populated the region the Mbuti, Mbenga, and Twa peoples became known as the Pygmies, or Pygmy people.

The significance and presence of the Mbuti in Nkisi Malongo today can be observed in the worldview that serves as the foundation and blueprint for the way that members of the tradition see the world and how they situate themselves and other beings within it. When one speaks of the Mbuti they are also referring to the Efe and Sua peoples that lived near the Ituri forest of Kinshasha which is in the eastern region of Kongo. The Mbuti are a nature-based people who place a great emphasis on the reverence, love, and protection for the forest, nature, and beings within nature that each have their own specific role in the cosmos. It is common for certain scholars and anthropologists to categorize any communal people who have a strong connection to the land, animals, plants, and spirits as animist. However, this was not the case for the Mbuti or other groups that were present in pre-colonial Kongo. For the Mbuti, the forest served as more than just their home. It had a parental role, it was their mother and father that would never turn its back on them, regardless of their circumstances (Mukenge, Culture and Customs Of the Congo, 2002). This adoration and respect for nature amongst the Mbuti still emanates within Palo today, as nature, and the forces within it are pillars within the tradition. The Mbuti carried out elaborate funeral rites that were held shortly after a member of their community crossed over into the realm of the spirits. The funeral rites that were most important were those that involved singing, chanting, dancing, and calling out to the spirit of the Forest who was viewed as their mother, father, and protector. According to Tata Rompe Pecho, the Mbuti believed that the impetus for death was that the spirit of the forest had fallen asleep and allowed their child to be taken to the realm of the dead. Although this meaning behind the death of a loved one no longer remains in the tradition of Nkisi Malongo, there are extensive and elaborate ceremonies after the passing of a loved one who is initiated that involves singing, chanting, dancing, offerings, and other key rituals that I am not allowed to share.

The BaTwa were once scattered into different subgroups along Great Lakes Twa, Lake Tumbatwa, Kasai Twa, and Luvua Twa. Their descendants still inhabit the regions, which were once all considered a part of the Kongo Kingdom. The Batwa peoples practiced a form of shamanism that acknowledged the existence of one God which was known as /a'an. While /a'an created the world and all beings within it, there was also another lesser deity acknowledged by the BaTwa which was known as /a'an 'e la tleni. For humans, /a'an 'e la tleni was the lesser deity that functioned as an intermediary between themselves and the creator. This lesser deity was the being that worked with and dealt with humans more closely compared to the supreme being (Mukenge, Culture and Customs of the Congo, 2002). Although various aspects of their traditional practices are still open and waiting to be recovered through conducting thorough research in the region, it is worth mentioning that their presence can be observed in two Kongo-based practices that are alive and thriving in Cuba today. While the focus of this thesis is Nkisi Malongo, I learned through speaking with elders that the BaTwa is heavily related to another tradition that is heavily guarded and more secretive than Nkisi Malongo. This tradition is known as Abakua, which functions as more than just a religious tradition, but more like a secret society or fraternity for heterosexual men. The Abakua is a tradition that is stricter on following bloodlines and there is less say from the spirits about who decides to become initiated because it is typically held for a certain group of people that are Cuban only and can trace their lineage to specific Kongo ancestors that made their way across the Atlantic. Other than the derogatory moniker pygmy, the BaTwa peoples were also called the AbaTwa people of the Great Lakes. The spelling and pronunciation of both Abatwa and Abakua highlights a connection between the the tradition and the cultural group of the Kongo region. Although the Kongo based Abakua society is strict on following bloodlines in Cuba, the importance of lineage is also heavily present



in Nkisi Malongo today. I will expand upon the imperativeness of lineage and roots in this work in later chapters.

The final group that I will discuss which helped lay the foundation for what would eventually become known as Nkisi Malongo or Palo Mayombe in the diaspora today are the Mbenga. The Mbenga is a group that also has several subgroups within the larger group. The most common subgroup is known as the Abaka people, whose shamanistic practices remain present within the tradition today. For example, The Abaka Mbenga people believe in the presence of one God. The name that they use to describe this supreme being is Komba, who is known for creating all things that exist within the cosmos. The Abaka shamans also used a myriad of herbs for different purposes. The use of herbs extended beyond them being ingested, they were also used in tandem with roots, animal parts, and other elements of nature for spiritual purposes. The herbs themselves housed the essence of both the creator and intermediaries that assisted humans on their behalf.

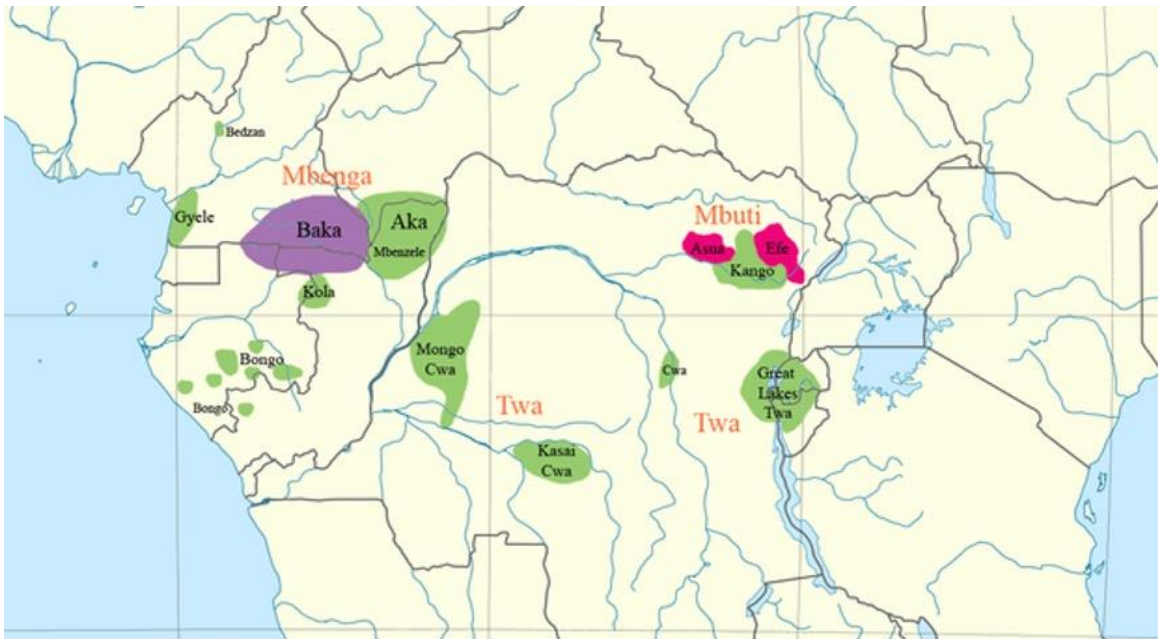


Figure 3-1. Map of Africa that shows the groups present in the Kongo region that laid the foundation for Nkisi Malongo.

**Early Kongo Religion and The Impact of Christianity:** Eventually, after several territorial disputes, migrations, and intermarriages, the various ethnic groups in the region fused to become inextricably woven into one fabric, the fabric of central Africa which came to be known as the Kongo kingdom. This kingdom stretched over the vast lands which housed the countries we know of today as Angola, DR Congo, the Republic of Congo, and a part of Gabon. According to oral history accounts, Nima a Nzima of Mpemba Kasi and Nsaku Lau of Mbata founded the Kongo kingdom towards the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Nima a Nzima's son, Lukeni Lua Nimi became the first king of the Kongo (Susan Cooksey, 2013). During these times there was a widespread form of spirituality and religion that was built upon the various beliefs of the Bantu worldviews and spiritual practices that were already present in the area prior to the establishment of the Kongo kingdom. In this section I will explore some of the Kikongo terms that are used today in Nkisi Malongo that derive from words that were spoken in the Kongo region prior to descendants of the area being trafficked across the Atlantic for enslavement in the Caribbean. Some of the key words that are used in the diction of adepts within Nkisi Malongo today are Nganga, Nkisi, Ndoki, Nkondi, Nzambi, Bakulu, Bankita, Mpungu, and Wanga. There are several others, but I will only provide these since I can use them throughout this ethnography without sharing information that is withheld to outsiders of the tradition. These terms that are still used today allow us to peek through the grand window of Kongo history and culture to see the continuities between Nkisi Malongo today, and the spiritual practices of the people that were living during the days of the Mwene (ruler/king) Kongo. In the old Kongo kingdom, the Nganga was the name dedicated to the priest who held great power and spiritual wisdom to assist their

community with metaphysical ailments and other adverse conditions in their lives. Today, the Nganga refers to the cauldron that is constructed and used by Tatas, or Palo priests.

In the Kongo, those that were destined to become Nganga were taught by knowledgeable elders who had the license and ability to teach about the matters of spiritual and medicinal healing. Becoming an Nganga required candidates to undergo a series of strenuous initiation ceremonies in the *mfinda*, or forest where they were isolated from the rest of the community to receive lessons and learn the skills required to be spiritually reborn as an Nganga. There were three secret societies that initiated members of the community to teach them the ways of Kongo spirituality and wisdom that would carry along their journey as an Nganga. These societies, which function as indigenous education systems are known as Kimpasi, Lemba, and Khimba. The society that is of most importance when speaking about the foundations of Nkisi Malongo today or even the Kongo Petwo rite of Haitian Vodou is known as Lemba (Fu-Kiau, 2001). These societies still exist in the Kongo region today but remain closed, highly secretive, and are underground which means that they are only accessible to those that have direct connections to their members. Members of these societies went underground to avoid further persecution or death during the initial underdevelopment of Africa by European nations, when openly practicing traditional African religions and refusing to convert to Catholicism would result in physical abuse or death.

Those who were Nganga were highly skilled in the art of divination, communicating with the forces of nature, and working with plants and herbs. They also had the ability to construct *Minkisi* figures for defensive purposes. It is imperative to note that the term has multiple meanings, depending on what one is addressing. *Nkisi* is the term used to refer to the sacred medicine that was granted by Nzambi, or God to the Kongo people. The term is also used when

referring to the objects that are constructed by the Nganga with the purpose of containing a particular spirit or energy to carry out different tasks. Some of the most common that are shown frequently in Kongo museum exhibits today are the *Nkondi* statues with nails protruding from them. These are considered the most aggressive of all the Minkisi and were commonly used to defend against spiritual attacks. The *Nkondi* were both the shield and the sword, since the *Nkondi* were also used to wreak havoc on the enemies of the Nganga. The spirits housed within these figures obtained the role and nature of hunters, considering that the priest would send these spirits to do what they required, then they would return to the vessel.

Since the early arrival of the Portuguese in the region, these *Nkondi* figures have fascinated the European mind and they have been labeled as nail fetishes without highlighting their use for spiritual defense and attacks. They are stored in the most elaborate museums of the day which is unfavorable considering that they are very intimate objects for the individual who created them. Showcasing these statues within museums or exhibits is offensive and inappropriate because they contain materials within them that are sacred to the Kongo communities and those that were trained to handle the energies that emanate from each piece that completes them. Several *Tatas* and members of the tradition that I have spoken to have similar sentiments. While sitting at the feet of *Tata Rompe Pecho* and letting him speak about this subject, I concluded that he viewed the *Nkondi* sitting in museums as trophies for those that had conquered his fallen brothers and sisters that practiced the tradition.

The term *Ndoki* can be considered the opposite of what the Nganga was, although they are two sides of the same coin in the matters of Kongo spirituality. In the Kikongo language, the term means sorcerer, which informs us that this specialist was skilled in the left-hand path of bending the forces of nature or making pacts with “dark” or aggressive spirits to complete certain

tasks. While the Nganga was the magician of the light in the eyes of those that lived in the region, the Ndoki was the sorcerer that had the ability to create chaos, spiritual sickness, and bring bad luck for those that were their targets. Ndoki would construct amulets used in the first stages of spiritual preparation or encouraging a specific outcome for those that were in possession of them. Some Tatas in Palo today are viewed in the same way that the Ndoki were viewed in the Kongo, especially when one reads books written by those like Manuel Barnett or browses through social media, witnessing the reams of misconceptions and misinformation circulating through threads on Twitter or Instagram. Although there has been much negativity attached to Tatas that insinuates that they are mischievousness, this does not truly reflect who they are and what they do. There is a right-hand and a left-hand path within African traditional religions. This does not mean that although one is on a darker path that they are evil, because within Kongo cosmology the presence of the light and dark is one of the aspects that signifies cosmic balance.

*Nzambi* is the Kikongo word which still reverberates strongly throughout the diaspora in the ceremonies and prayers of Nkisi Malongo adepts, as it refers to the creator of all existence. Nzambi, is who the Kongo people accredited for creating the cosmos and everything of it, and this remains the case for Nkisi Malongo adepts today (Cabrera, 2001). The Kongo people acknowledged and categorized ancestors in a hierarchal system that was contingent upon the lives that these beings had while they were living and the way that they died. The most venerated ancestors are those departed elders and noble members of the clan who lived exemplary lives on earth, they were referred to as *Bakulu* (Mukenge, Culture and Customs of the Congo, 2002). The ancestors who possessed characteristics that were the opposite of the Bakulu were referred to as the *Matebo*. These ancestors were those that made the lives of those around them miserable and

had a negative effect on those that encountered them. They are treated are not venerated or approached for assistance since they are depicted as spirits who feed on the flesh of humans and bring suffering to the community (Mukenge, Culture and Customs of the Congo, 2002). The status as an ancestor and rank in the realm of spirits is heavily contingent upon the event or way that this spirit was separated from the vessel that once housed it. For example, since the Bakulu lived with exceptional character and died naturally or peacefully they achieve a rank and status in the psyche of their descendants that is rather pleasant, respectful, and favorable. However, those that perished in conquest wars and victims of assassination or suicide, form a separate category of ancestors that are known as *Bankita* (Mukenge, Culture and Customs Of the Congo, 2002). Although the Bankita experienced violent or brutal deaths, their status is not viewed in the same way as the Matebo spirits. The separation of the Bankita from the Matebo spirits is due to the nature that the Bankita may have had while they were living. Individuals who become members of this category of spirits may have been warriors, founding fathers, Nganga, or noble people that treated others with much respect and admiration. However, the nature of their deaths heavily impacts the way that they operate in the spirit realm because they can become untroubled spirits due to their untimely or brutal demise, or they can become more aggressive (Mukenge, Culture and Customs of the Congo, 2002). Another class of spirits that were present in traditional religious practices in the Kongo which survived the horrors of the trans-Atlantic slave trade are known as the Kimpungulu. These are the raw forces of energy or spirits that govern various aspects of nature. There have been claims made that certain Mpungu did not exist in the Kongo and did not become visible until the children of the Kongo were trafficked to Cuba and blended with the Yoruba. However, this is not the case because the Kimpungulu were always present in the Kongo. Although most of the information about these forces was not written and their

histories were passed down orally, we can observe Kongo mythological origin stories and other tales about these forces. There are ancient Kongo myths that detail the origins of Kalunga, the Mpungu that rules over the ocean, seas, and the border which separates the telluric realm of the living from the realm in which beings such as the ancestors, and other spirits that reside. Nkuyu Mfinda, who has been called Lucero Mundo and associated with St. Anthony and since arriving in Cuba, has also existed since the first grain of the sands of time descended into the primordial hourglass crafted by Nzambi a Mpungu. Nsasi is another example of an Mpungu that has existed long before the thought of the transatlantic crossed the mind of Europeans to even transport the children of the Kongo to Cuba. Sitting at the feet of Tata Rompe Pecho, I asked how the Kimpungulu were approached in precolonial Kongo. I was provided with the response that although they always existed, they were never approached until the pain inflicted by European imperialism, trading of enslaved Africans, and internal conflicts between rivals in the Kingdom reverberated throughout the region. It was during those moments when the need to shift from venerating only the ancestral spirits to incorporating the Kimpungulu occurred. To combat the troublesome and horrid conditions they were up against, the people of the Kongo decided to venerate and evoke the various forces of Nzambi who Gods in their own right. I will discuss these Gods in depth further in my later chapter about the Kimpungulu in Nkisi Malongo.



Figure 3-2. The Nkondi statue used for spiritual warfare and attacks against enemies.

The arrival of Christianity along with the Portuguese is a topic that has been debated amongst historians, anthropologists, and scholars for centuries. It has been declared by some that the Kongo Kingdom willingly accepted Christianity and that many of the Kings were adamant in their decision to reject their traditional religious beliefs in favor of beliefs that were from outsiders (Thornton J. , 1984). This is due to the replication and heavily reliance upon Portuguese writers and missionaries that were present in the Kongo during the days of the old kingdom. One popular narrative used was written by Portuguese writer Rui de Pina, who declared in his account that the baptism of the King and his major nobles went smoothly, and both sides seem to have been well pleased (Faria, 1966).

Although there is an abundance of accounts that suggest that the conversion of the Kings and people of the Kingdom to Christianity was peaceful and approached pleurably on both sides this should be observed with much skepticism and approached with caution due to the positionality and potential for ulterior motives of those that produced and replicated these accounts. While Rui De Pina and other historical accounts insist that this is the case, I would



assert that this could not have been the case if we consider the oral history accounts of not only the people that were directly impacted by this interaction between the Europeans and the Kongo kingdom, but a few of the images that were produced during the time which show the Catholic missionaries burning Nkisi statues, traditional religious temples, and committing atrocious acts that evoked fear throughout the people of the Kongo kingdom.

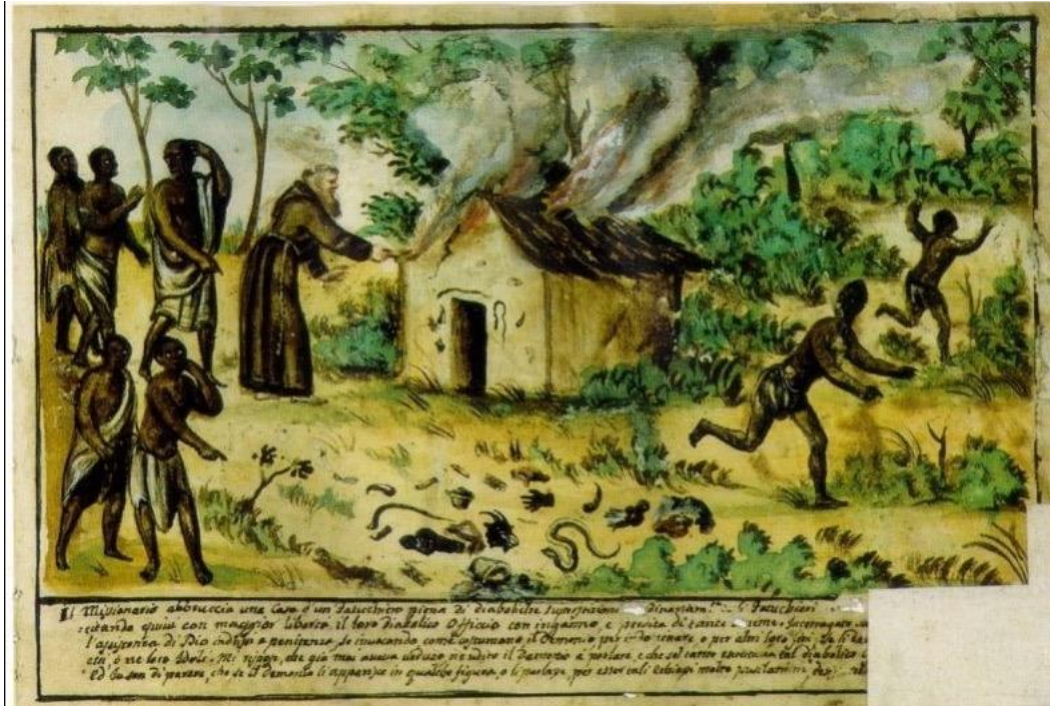


Figure 3-3. The Catholic missionaries shown setting religious temples ablaze in the Kongo kingdom. Depicted in front of the burning temple are a myriad of items that are common in Kongo traditional practices [Missione in Practica ca. 1750]

The dagger that pierces the mendacity of the notion that the Kongo kingdom willingly rejected their religious beliefs and cultures to accept Christianity lies within a key aspect of Kongo traditional religion that must be examined further. This aspect is the process known as religious syncretization. Syncretization is usually discussed when the topic is centered on the imposition of European religions and social concepts on African and Indigenous peoples during the early stages of colonialism and enslavement. This type of discussion surrounding the process

of syncretization leaves out many questions and concerns that could be raised when exploring the continuities between what was practiced before and after the imposition of European culture and religious beliefs. When writers generalize the Kongo conversion to Christianity after relying on mostly Portuguese sources replicated during the 15th century, it dims the lights on the question surrounding resistance and the sovereignty of Kongo traditional religions. It builds upon the mendacity created from white supremacist ideals about Africa and African people, insinuating that prior to the introduction of European religion, customs, and cultures, Africans had no conceptualization of God or civilization. The people of the Kongo Kingdom and their descendants fused their religions, cultures, and various bodies of knowledge through the Catholic church. One example that is still present in Nkisi Malongo today is the use of the cross to symbolize Nzambi a Mpungu. The children of the Kongo knew the creator God under this name. Nzambi is the God who was responsible for creating both the realm of the living and the realm under the proverbial waters which contained the souls of the dead and unborn (Asante, 2008). Nzambi is far removed from the access of human beings and dwells in the heavens. The presence and role of Nzambi as the supreme being that created the cosmos and everything within it informs us that the people of the Kongo region already had a complete and concise conceptualization of God or the creator long before the arrival of Portuguese missionaries, colonizers, and traders. This is important to think about when we approach the conversation of Kongo conversion to Christianity and the process of syncretization because it allows us to see that despite what Portuguese writers of the 15th and 16th centuries declared about the process of conversion being welcomed by the Kongo, it would make no sense for these people to reject what they already had known and acknowledged for centuries without even having contact with the European conceptualization of God and religion.

Furthermore, the Antonian movement led by Kimpa Vita is a shining example of resistance against the Portuguese and their form of Christianity. Kimpa Vita (Doña Beatriz) was one of the major voices that spoke out and warned the Kongo kingdom about the dangerous seeds that were being sown by the Portuguese. She was a noblewoman born in the Mbidizi valley of the once illustrious Kongo Kingdom. During the era of Kimpa Vita, the kingdom that was once comparable to the other noble civilizations throughout African history had been butchered and segregated into multiple chiefdoms across the region. By the year 1703, she had become ill with a spiritual illness that led to her being mounted by St. Anthony. When she was healed from her sickness, she began to travel throughout the Kongo region healing the sick, alleviating the ailments in others that caused infertility, advocating for the rejection of European conceptualizations and origin stories of Christianity, promoting the reunification of the Kongo kingdom, and urging the leaders and people of the region to not trust the Portuguese because she received messages from St. Anthony that they were untrustworthy and would eventually enslave those that put their trust in them (Thornton J. K., 1998). Kimpa Vita was an Nganga which granted her much insight into the realm of the spirits and heightened her mediumship abilities. The focus of her Antonian Movement in years past has been characterized as an Afro-Christian Peace movement. However, there was much more beneath the surface of her being mounted by Saint Anthony and relaying his messages. Although most historical records of the time focused on her relationship to Saint Anthony, if you place the role of Kimpa Vita, her title as Nganga, and the relationship between the Christian Saints and the Kongo Kimpungulu, then one can see that there is great potential to uncover more about the early Kongo traditional religions that require much examination. If we place the historical accounts of the Antonian movement written by the Portuguese and place them side by side with aspects of Kongo traditional religion, then

the window to understanding the origins of Nkisi Malongo widens. Her declaration of Jesus, Mary, and St. Francis as Black people who originated in the Kongo, the destruction of large wooden crosses, rejection of sacraments performed by the Portuguese clergy, and designation of São Salvador as the true birthplace of Jesus shows us how the Nganga and traditional religious practices were transformed after the implementation of Christianity in the region. I assert that it is not the case that the region just willingly rejected their religious beliefs and practices after the arrival of the Europeans, they were just forced into a continuous process of transformation. Some would use the term syncretization, but I use transformation to avoid the trap of discussing religious syncretization which rarely presents us with the case of examining who was victorious and who was subjugated in that process of blending two distinct religious practices and cultures. Although I will not expand further for the sake of this project being an ethnography about Nkisi Malongo, I will state that Kimpa Vita's relationship with St. Anthony that has been cemented in world history is likely to have been a relationship that she had with the Kongo Mpungu or spirit, Nkuyu/Lucero. Nkuyu is Nzambi a Mpungu's divine messenger that opens and closes the door to opportunity and impacts the destiny of humankind. This being has a myriad of roles, responsibilities, names and characteristics. But the most visible aspect of Nkuyu within Kimpa Vita and the Antonian movement is the desire and will to disseminate divine wisdom and revelations from God to those that are lost. Nkuyu is a great warrior and will go through the fire itself to see that those who are loyal to him have the means to make it across the way on their journey to prosperity. Nkuyu/Lucero was fused with the Christian Saint who served as the blueprint and foundation for Kimpa Vita's movement, St. Anthony. While there are no written accounts that have been uncovered yet of Kimpa Vita or the "Little Anthony's" that followed her addressing St. Anthony as Nkuyu, I have consulted with multiple Tatas who have agreed that it is

more than likely that Kimpa Vita was referring to Nkuyu, considering that she was an Nganga herself who would have been well versed in aspects of Kongo traditional religion and the Kimpungulu. Through multiple conversations with Tatas, Yayas, adepts of the religion, and those that grew up around it, I have understood that the Nganga and children of the Kongo did not just do away with their understanding of the cosmos or the various aspects of the tradition, in favor of converting to Christianity. Once the plans of the Europeans began to unfold shortly after they arrived in the Kingdom, the Kongoleses were put in a position that forced them to acknowledge and incorporate aspects of Christianity. It was not the case that the Kongo rejected Nzambi for the Christian God, or that the Kongo rejected the Nkisi and Kimpungulu for the Christian Saints. They began to see the Saints through the eyes of the Nkisi and Christian God through the eyes of Nzambi a Mpungu to ensure the survival of their cosmological lens, history culture, and traditions. When Mwene Kongo knelt at the feet of the Portuguese in front of the cross, it was expected that all their adepts did the same. As history shows us, those that did not rebel immediately and meet their demise, converted along with their leader, brothers, and sisters. This reality played a massive role in the elaborate puzzle of Kongo religion and history, as it was what allowed the traditional religious practices of the once great kingdom to survive and travel across the waters with its sons and daughters who had been kidnapped or sold to be enslaved in Cuba for the sake of commerce and greed.



Figure 3-4. This cross became a symbol for the Kongo creator God, Nzambi a Mpungu. [The Met Museum at Fifth Avenue, the crucifix is on display at the museum and image is available for public usage.]



Figure 3-5. The kneeling of the Kongo peoples in front of the cross. [Missione in Practica” circa 1750

## CHAPTER 4 NKISI MALONGO IN CUBA

To understand how Nkisi Malongo was able to take root in Cuba and become what it is today, it is imperative to observe the conditions on the island that were created and influenced by Roman Catholicism, colonialism, the enslavement of Africans, rebellions on the island, and religious persecution of non-Christian faiths by Catholics and law enforcement. Initially when the Spanish first arrived in Cuba they swindled and enslaved the indigenous Taino population to work in the mines and extract gold, silver, copper and other raw materials. The exploitation and enslavement of the original inhabitants of the island did not last long, as they were practically wiped out from diseases and the harsh conditions that were consequences of enslavement. The Taino who remained fled to the mountains and resided there for until they were eventually face to face with the African maroons that banded together with them to fight against enslavement and recreate a community that was free from enslavement, persecution, etc.

After the Taino population plummeted and the industry switched from focusing on mining to producing cash crops like sugarcane and coffee, the shift to importing and enslaving African people skyrocketed. The first group of Africans were brought to the Cuba in 1512. Directly or indirectly, legally and illegally, African slaves were systematically introduced in Cuba which numbered a minimum of 850,000 people brought from various countries in west and central Africa (Castellanos, 1987). Much attention is given to the Africans that were brought from the Yoruba kingdom of Oyo and other surrounding areas which is now known as Nigeria. This is reflected in the mass production of books, articles, journals, documentaries, and other forms of cultural production that focus on the religions and spiritual practices of the Yoruba more than those of the Kongo who were also brought there. Lucumi, or better known as Santeria is the

name of the religion and worldview that this group is a part of. However, of the 850,000 Africans who were brought to the island, a vast portion of that number was accumulated from the amount of people brought from the Kongo kingdom. Research and a closer examination of this group of Africans brought to Cuba is much needed, as these people brought with them a religion and spiritual practices that are still widely misunderstood today throughout the diaspora. Nkisi Malongo, Las Reglas de Kongo, or Palo Mayombe is the name of the African Traditional Religion that shines beautifully on the Afro-Cuban cultural canvas which stretches across the diaspora today due to the migration of its adepts. Although Africans were brought to lands that were foreign to most of them, they would soon find out that Cuba, and the Caribbean in general, would provide the stage and opportunity for them to replicate their religious and cultural practices.

**Sowing the Seeds of Africa in the Caribbean:** Two characteristics about life in Cuba made the ground fertile enough for enslaved Africans to sow the seeds that would lay the foundations for transporting their religious beliefs and cultural customs in the Caribbean. The geographic location of Cuba and its close relationship to the equator and tropic of cancer makes the climate of the island tropical, which makes the Caribbean region more like the climate that the Kongo people experienced while they were living in Africa before being trafficked across the Atlantic. Although they were transported to a new location with different plants, herbs, animals, trees, and other things they were accustomed to, they were able to discover things that would supplement what they were used to, or at least serve as the Cuban equivalent to the Kongo version of a particular item. The presence of certain plants in the Caribbean that were native to West and Central Africa also highlight the transportation of seeds with Africans as they came across the waters on the ships. The climate of the region allowed these seeds to be sown and take root just



as they would have if they were still in Africa with the people who planted them. For example, Black Abrus Precatorius is an important seed that has various uses within African Traditional Religions. It has a spot that mimics an eye which allows it to function as a tool for divination, it offers protection for those that wear or possess them, and when ground into a fine powder it can be used as a poison. Poisoning was a widespread act of resistance against enslavement, colonialism, and the horrid conditions that Africans faced in Cuba. Many of the individuals who were skilled in concocting poisons and herbal remedies were practitioners of Nkisi Malongo and other African Traditional Religions. Poisoning was practiced in both the Caribbean and ATR cultures in the Old and New World tropics, and seems to be a significant reason for slaves to transport Abrus with them on their voyage because it had the potential for protection against evil spirits that they would be forced to encounter as they made their journey to the western hemisphere (McClure, 1982). Ricinus Communis, the plant that is used to produce Castor oil also made its way across the waters with the sons and daughters of Africa that used it for a myriad of purposes. This plant is still used today in Nkisi Malongo, Lucumi, Candomblé, and other ATR's throughout the diaspora.

In addition to the persecution of their beliefs that occurred in Africa after they had been sabotaged by European imperialism, enslaved Africans still had their beliefs attacked and outlawed by Spanish colonists, missionaries, and leaders of the Roman Catholic church. One of the first acts of spiritual warfare against African people as they found themselves in the western hemisphere was the forced conversion to Christianity. However, there were major differences in the conversion of Africans depending on who the colonial powers were that enslaved them. In the North American colonies, the dominant form of Christianity was Protestantism. In Protestant America, the African was accepted as a member of the church only after participating in

religious indoctrination (Kirby, 1985). After undergoing religious indoctrination in the Protestant colonies, it became difficult to maintain the religious beliefs, traditions, and ceremonies that they were used to in Africa. This is due to the vast differences in style of worship between the English Protestants and Spanish Catholics. The Protestant colonies were also much more aggressive in their measures to prevent the practice and spread of African religions. For example, in Protestantism there is no veneration of saints because the focus is placed on praising God and only God. Approaching the saints for assistance is considered unbiblical and synonymous with the worship of idols, unlike the Catholics who have over 4,000 saints that are venerated. In Protestantism there are only two sacraments that are practiced: baptism and the Eucharist. In Catholicism there are seven different sacraments practiced: baptism, the Eucharist, matrimony, penance, holy orders, and extreme unction. In Cuba, the Catholic style of worship aligned more with aspects of Nkisi Malongo and other African Traditional Religions.

While Kongolese and other groups of Africans were kneeling to the cross and accepting the Christian God as their lord and savior while they were in the presence of Spanish colonists and mercenaries of the cross, they were strategically conjuring ways to maintain their religious beliefs and practices through the practice of Catholicism. Rather than rejecting the Nkisi and throwing them away to venerate the Catholic Saints, the children of the Kongo began to see the saints through the eyes of the Nkisi and Kimpungulu.

There has been an influx in the production and reproduction of mendacities in the African Traditional Religion community surrounding the purpose and origins of the concept known as 7 African Powers. This concept refers to the method of syncretization in which the Kimpungulu were fused with the Catholic Saints. This concept can also be used when speaking about the Yoruba tradition of Ifa. The exact date of this process happening is unknown although it is very

likely to have occurred over a period of several years after the arrival of Africans once they were able to grasp more of the Catholic concepts and style of worship. African religion was discouraged, depicted as devil worship, criminalized by the Spanish colonists and pushed to the margins of society. But using the Catholic church as a mask and establishing Cabildos for different ethnic groups from Africa allowed African religions to live and thrive. The Cabildos were based upon the Spanish confradias/fraternities but were transformed to fit the needs of Africans in Cuba. They became more than just places where certain ethnic groups came together to entertain themselves with music, drumming, and dancing, they were mutual aid societies in which Africans came together to combine resources and money to purchase the freedom of its members and practice their religions in privacy (Barcia, Reyes, & Delgado, 2012). Each Cabildo was organized by certain members of a particular ethnic group and their names were reflective of the ethnic group that they belonged to. In historical records and documents, one could determine if that Cabildo had members that were Kongo, Yoruba, etc. By bringing together people of similar ethnic backgrounds, and by acting as extended families, these institutions, or “nations”, enhanced solidarity among slaves and reinforced the survival of African cultural patterns (Kirby, 1985). This type of institution played a massive role in the sprouting of the seed that is known as Nkisi Malongo or Palo Mayombe. The earliest recorded date of Nkisi Malongo existing in Cuba takes us on a journey back in time to 1792 when the religious council known as Cabildo Rey Mago San Melchor of Havana was formed in the heart of the city (Lima, 2022). This Cabildo was instrumental in liberating its people, which made the survival of Kongo religions possible. The name of the Cabildo itself points to the need for Africans to mask their beliefs through the fusion of African and Catholic beliefs. While Cabildo Rey Mago San Melchor is considered the first Kongo cabildo which makes it the first institution to practice Nkisi Malongo in Cuba, the

construction of the first Fundamento or Nganga cauldron is widely debated even amongst various branches of Palo. Before examining the erection of the first Nganga in Cuba, it is imperative to explore the different *ramas*, or branches in Palo since they all have different origin stories and approaches to the tradition.

## CHAPTER 5 THE RAMAS/BRANCHES OF PALO

Just as there were various ethnic groups that practiced different versions of Bantu shamanism in the Kongo, in Nkisi Malongo there are different branches that those who are called to initiate into the tradition may choose or resonate with. For an outsider to understand, it is easy to comprehend the ramas if I provide an example that references Christianity. The Christian church has a particular belief in a creator God and an origin story surrounding the religious figure, Jesus Christ. However, there are various denominations that interpret the Bible, Christianity, and the relationship with God differently. Although these various denominations within Christianity do things differently, at their core they are still Christian, and they share that foundation despite the differences or tension that may be wedged between them. In Palo, these distinctions made between certain denominations are known as ramas. At their core and on the surface, they are indeed Nkisi Malongo, they just have different modalities and use different means to work the spirit and interpret certain things. Most of these branches existed and were practiced by certain lineages in Kongo before Cuba, however there is one that was reshaped and developed in Cuba. These branches of Nkisi Malongo today are Palo Briyumba, Palo Mayombe, and Palo Monte. The original branches that were present in the Kongo were Palo Mayombe and Palo Briyumba. Palo Kimbisa existed in Africa, however the lineage died in Africa and was extinct until it was reestablished in Cuba. There are miniscule differences between these ramas, however these minuscule differences produce vast outcomes when working the spirit. In Palo Mayombe there is less work that is done with the use of human bones. The main Mpungu that protects and walks with the Munanzo of the Palo Mayombe branch is Nsasi, which is important because Nsasi was the first Nkisi that was brought to Cuba after Kongo Africans were enslaved

and trafficked across the Atlantic. Ngeuyo of Palo Mayombe are known as Mayomberos and Mayomberas. Initially, Palo Mayombe was the prominent branch in Cuba and there were strict rules put in place to protect the tradition.

I asked a Tata of Briyumba and Mayombe about some of these rules and one that I am allowed to share was that Palo Mayombe was closed to all white people, and even mulattos. It was a tradition that was reserved for Kongo Africans that were dark skinned in complexion and it was a belief that this rule would keep the tradition pure and free from further persecution and becoming diluted. This rule and the need for Palo Mayombe to become more private and secretive was warranted considering the nature of chattel slavery in Cuba and the fact that there were informants that frequently snitched and fed information to masters and overseers. Although the primary Mpungu of Palo Mayombe is Nsasi, it was Zarabanda that did not allow white or people with light complexions to enter the doors of the tradition and learn the ways of Nkisi Malongo. Ironically, it was also Zarabanda that changed this rule so that mulatto's and even white people could initiate into the tradition. I was informed by Tata Rompe Pecho that this was done because Zarabanda began to see that not every person of lighter complexions is the enemy and that even the darkest of shades could turn their backs on members of the Cabildo or Nkisi Malongo altogether. Although the tradition would remain secretive and only accessible to those that became *ngeuyo* (initiates), eliminating the requirements based on skin color would benefit the survival of the tradition and sacred knowledge that is embedded within it. Tatas and the Nkisi began to rely more on peeping the hearts and souls of men and women to determine eligibility for initiation, which has proved to be a successful decision made by Zarabanda since the tradition is still alive and thriving today. The branch that was established after this decision was made is known as Palo Briyumba. Unlike the Mayombe branch, the Mpungu that is the head of

munanzos in the Palo Briyumba branch is Zarabanda. In Briyumba, the use of working with human skulls and bones is more prevalent and there are more Kimpungulu that are venerated and evoked. The heavy use of skulls and bones in this branch is reflected in the name itself, as Briyumba, or Vriyumba, means to work with the spirit of death (Kail, Narco-Cults, 2015). Palo Kimbisa is the branch that tends to face much scrutiny by Tatas of the Mayombe and Briyumba branches. This scrutiny stems from the origins of this branch, the hostile relationship between itself and the other two branches, and the tension that remains that was born from the spiritual wars that occurred between these three branches in Cuba. If you were to ask a Tata who is a part of the Mayombe or Briyumba branches, depending upon their positionality they might tell you that the Palo Kimbisa branch was started without obtaining the proper *licensia*, or license to start a brand-new branch. I was unable to learn secret information about what is required for someone to separate from the original branches to create a new one, but I was told that the branch would have to come from a lineage that was not severed and made it across the waters from Africa.

Palo Kimbisa was founded in 1843 in Havana, Cuba by Andres Facundo de los Dolores Petit after he visited Monte Oscuro, an area where many enslaved Africans lived (Kail, Narco-Cults, 2015).

Regardless of my personal views, I can understand why certain elders and ngeuyo view the Kimbisa branch with disdain. Since Andres Petit incorporated what he learned from Kongo Africans in Cuba and blended their beliefs with foreign elements such as Freemasonry, Catholicism, Lucumi, Vodun, and Espiritismo, it seems very likely that during his time he viewed the Kongo tradition as it was currently constructed, as inadequate and incomplete. Petit chose to name his branch Regla Kimbisa del Santo Cristo del Buen Viaje, fashioning his branch after the name of a lineage that existed in Africa but had died out before they got the chance to

arrive in Cuba. Andres Petit sought to align himself with the spirits of the Briyumba lineage that had died out and fuse them with spirits that are present within the Orisa based traditions of West Africa. If you ask a Tata of the Kimbisa branch, they will tell you that they believe the branch was founded in Kongo during the rule and lifetime of King Alfonso I. Ngeuyo and elders within the Kimbisa branch refer to themselves as Kimbiseros. Although some Tatas of the Mayombe or Briyumba branches refuse to acknowledge Palo Kimbisa or refer to it as a tradition that incorporates religious elements from various traditions outside of the Kongo, I respect the creation of this branch because it was done in a way that did not shun, condemn, or subjugate any other traditions in the process. In the perspective of Andres Petit and his spiritual descendants who still practice the Kimbisa rule today, they believe that this branch was created to combine the “best” elements of each tradition. In doing so, they assert that this would unite the modern man and woman who needed more assistance to navigate the world and circumstances they found themselves in due to the ramifications of colonialism, enslavement, and the many machinations of racial capitalism. After the arrival of Palo Kimbisa, that is when more claims that associated Palo Mayombe and other Nkisi Malongo branches with Lucumi (Santeria) began to spring forth in conversations and documents. But this association between these two distinct traditions usually places Lucumi in the light, while casting Nkisi Malongo to the dark, labeling it negative, a matter explored in more detail below



## CHAPTER 6 THE FALSIFICATION OF KONGO CONSCIOUSNESS AND RELIGION

Carlos Montenegro, one of the authors of several books about Kongo traditional religion in Cuba and the African diaspora has been one of the leading voices that associates Nkisi Malongo with Lucumi. He is adamant in his belief that Palo Mayombe is even the “dark-side” of Santeria (Montenegro, 1998). This sentiment is the same in several other texts, some more aggressive than others which openly state that Palo is for those that only seek to dabble in the work of the devil. Miguel Barnet declares:

Regla Conga, Regla de Palo, Palo Monte and Mayombe refers to the sticks or branches from the forest that are used as magical elements in spells. This definition can include other Cuban Congo sects, and in fact it encompasses the magical rites of almost all the others. Mayombe or Palo Monte is one of the most widely known and popular rites. It is said to be used for evil. People use it when they wish to dabble in evil. Coal and gunpowder are used in bad works that are performed, preferably on Tuesdays, as that is the day of the devil. (Barnet, 2001)

It is an interesting take to consider any branch of Nkisi Malongo a dark side of Lucumi, or any other religious practice considering that it is from the Kongo and is its own sovereign tradition. Although there are elders, ngeuyo, and other adepts who may be initiated or involved in both traditions, it is still imperative for us to note that they are different. Ignoring the sovereignty of Nkisi Malongo and fusing it with Lucumi as it’s “dark side” leads to the falsification of not only the tradition itself, but Kongo consciousness as well. When we consider the cosmology of the Kongo and worldview of those that are adepts of the tradition, there is no concept of evil in the way that is described when many outsiders describe it. There is a frequent push by outsiders and adepts of Abrahamic religions to associate the Christian version of the

devil and evil with Nkisi Malongo. However, there is no concept of the devil that exists in this tradition, regardless of the branch that is practiced. The only dark, powerful spirit or force of nature that may be associated with chaotic behavior, misfortunate, or inflicting spiritual warfare against an enemy of an initiate is known as Lukankazi, Lungambe, or Kadiempembe.

The conceptualization of good, evil, the devil, and the images that are attached to them stem from the consciousness, culture, and religious traditions of Europeans. If one examines Nkisi Malongo and many other African Traditional Religions, they will discover that the idea of these concepts has vast differences. In each branch of Palo, the Nkisi, Ndoki, Kimpungulu, Bankita, and other spirits do not operate according to the laws created and maintained by human beings, especially those that demonize or do not understand the culture, worldview, and religious practices of African people. While someone who is an outsider or unfamiliar with African cosmology may consider that what a Tata or Ngeuyo uses Lukankazi or any other Nkisi for is evil, these spirits do not see their acts of service through these lenses. The lens in which they see their actions through is contingent upon whether they helped their partner or not. The relationship that the Tata, Yaya, Ngeuyo, or adept has with certain spirits after initiation is one that is best symbolized as a mutually beneficial, symbiotic partnership. Whether their actions bring misfortune, trauma, or any other unpropitious effect towards the target is of less concern to the spirit than if they help their partner. So, in the perspective of those trained to see the world through the western gaze of Christianity or lens of whiteness, those acts that are committed by the spirit which bring negative effects are considered evil. However, if we apply that same western gaze to observe this at an alternative angle, that same individual could view these acts committed by these spirits as good since they helped their partner in some way. To understand

Nkisi Malongo better in a less complicated way that is not dictated solely by juxtaposing it to Christianity, it is important to examine the Kongo cosmology and worldview.

## CHAPTER 7 KONGO COSMOLOGY: NZAMBI'S BLUEPRINT

Kongo cosmology is something that continuously sparks interest within the minds of those unfamiliar with Nkisi Malongo. However, it is often misunderstood and misrepresented due to the reproduction of narratives created by those that relied on European sources and textbooks that ignore the efficacy of approaching an elder to understand the tradition that is maintained and supported by their wisdom, souls, brains, and backs. The Kongo view of the cosmos has been instrumental in the lives of African people throughout the diaspora, as shown in its' implementation into Haitian Vodou, African American Hoodoo, and Nkisi Malongo. Within this cosmological blueprint, there exists a certain worldview which allows adepts of Nkisi Malongo, and other Kongo influenced traditions to see the world and everything within it through a unique perspective and determine their role in the cosmos.

Within Kongo cosmology, there is one God that exists in which all beings must answer to regardless of their status or positionality. This God that is present within each branch of Nkisi Malongo carries the same name that he was referred to back in the days of the ancient Kongo kingdom. This supreme being which is responsible for creating the universe and everything within it is known as Nzambi a Mpungu, Nzambi, or Nsambi. To put it as plain as possible, Nzambi is the grand architect, painter, and sculptor who molded the world to be the way that it is and will be in the future. If we compare the universe and the cosmological hierarchy for spirits and other beings within it to a ladder, Nzambi would sit at the top. According to Kongo mythology, Nzambi gave humankind the knowledge on how to create sacred medicines from plants for a myriad of purposes (Cabrera, 2001). While sitting at the feet of a Tata of the Briyumba branch I was taught that the world was constructed by Nzambi's voice, literally speaking the universe into existence. Since then, Nzambi has remained silent and almost out of

reach for human contact. If Nzambi's voice was to be heard again by human ears, it would suggest that the end of the world was near. Within Kongo cosmology, Nzambi is omnipotent and ubiquitous, vast and omniscient. Although there is no image that can capture what Nzambi looks like, it is best to use all five senses to get a glimpse of how massive Nzambi a Mpungu is. I sat in silence for about five minutes trying to understand Nzambi in comparison to all beings of the universe while I was in Tata Rompe Pecho's garage. He broke it down to me and said that if Nzambi were to be represented by the beaches and great seas then everything that exists in the universe, both seen and unseen, would only measure as a minute grain of sand regardless of the manner that we perceive it with our eyes. Even the most massive animals in the world all placed together in one herd still wouldn't measure up to how massive Nzambi is. While this supreme being is everywhere all the time, adepts of the tradition generally do not seek out Nzambi to carry out the work that they need done because the creator is far removed from human contact. This is done by the other Gods, or Kimpungulu.

Within each branch of Nkisi Malongo, there is an Mpungu, or Kimpungulu (plural) that are specific to that branch. In Palo Mayombe the main Mpungu is Nzazi. Within the Palo Briyumba and Kimbisa branches the main Mpungu for these Munanzos is Zarabanda or Sarabanda. If we compared Nzambi a Mpungu to a human hand, the Kimpungulu would be the fingers that extend from the palm. Everyone has a main Mpungu that assists them and the dominant energy or temperament that everyone has is contingent upon the Mpungu that is the strongest within their lives. There is also an Mpungu that is specific to that individual's family, and the overall community that the individual belongs to. I will describe the functions of the seven main Kimpungulu of Nkisi Malongo further along in this thesis.

In addition to the Kimpungulu that exist to help each human being reach their greatest potential and become closer to Nzambi, there are elemental spirits that exist in the cosmos. These elemental spirits are known as the Nkisi, Simbi, Nkita, and Ntembo spirits. The Nkisi are spirits of the Earth that can be approached through the trees, herbs, roots, etc. Although the Nkisi is a type of spirit, the word is also used to refer to a certain object or charm that is created by Tatas for different purposes. These objects are infused and controlled by persons of a certain social status who are endowed with special supernatural might acquire through certain mystical operations, purchase or inheritance.

The topic of Nkisi can get confusing, and I am still looking forward to understanding them better as time progresses and I expand on this work. According to Tara Rompe Pecho, Nkisi refers to the spirits that are naturally found on Earth. The Simbi spirits are found in certain waters on Earth. These water spirits, who were known as Bisimbi in the old Kongo kingdom, live by the creeks, springs, and ponds (Mukenge, Culture and Customs Of the Congo, 2002). The Simbi spirits that inhabit these waters are known as their guardians and are approached with great respect, because they can bring chaos, destruction, or even death to those that disturb them. These spirits play a massive role in not only Nkisi Malongo, but they also made their way to Haiti and are present in the Kongo-Petwo nation of spirits within the African Traditional Religion, Vodou. The Nkita are the fire spirits that inhabit the spaces in which the element of fire is most prevalent. After the Nkita are the Ntembo spirits which dwell in the air.

Following the elemental spirits are those known as the Nfumbe. Each spirit in the universe plays a massive role in Nkisi Malongo, but these spirits are the ones that are approached most frequently when a Tata approaches his Nganga, or spiritual cauldron to work with the spirits. The Nfumbe means the “dead one” in Kikongo and is a blanket term to refer to the forces

of the dead, or collection of ancestral spirits (Ochoa, 2010). Although this is an ancestral spirit, an Nfumbe does not have to be an immediate ancestor of Ngangulero because it can be an ancestor that is a part of the much larger collective that they belong to. The Nfumbe refers to both the spirit itself and the physical vessel that is used to contain them. The Nfumbe is contained and housed within a particular bone of the human body that is collected by the Tata that has the authority and ability to fuse the spirit within that bone. The bones that the Nfumbe is fused into does not have to be the bones that once belonged to a particular spirit, and there is a certain ceremony done to initiate and complete this process. The bones that are used to contain the Nfumbe are the skull, Tibia, etc. As someone who is not an initiate or an elder, I am not authorized to insinuate what all the purposes of the Nfumbe are, but through speaking with Tata Rompe Pecho and my other sources, I was allowed to learn that the Nfumbe are used by the Tata to help communicate with the Kimpungulu and other forces of nature.

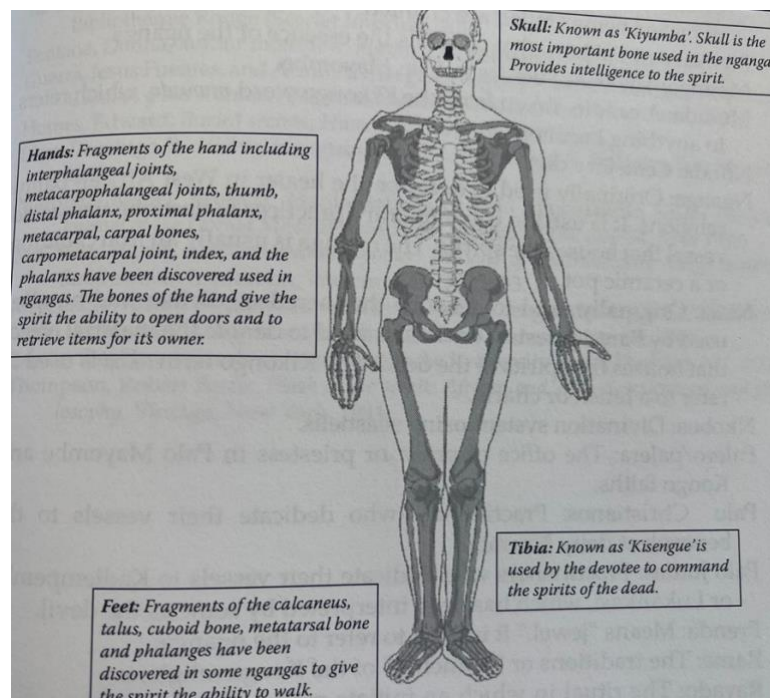


Figure 7-1. The bones used for the Nfumbe in Nkisi Malongo and their purposes. [Kail, Narco-Cults, 2015]

In Nkisi Malongo, there is a linear hierarchy that categorizes the spirits of the cosmos and those that are approached by the adepts of the tradition. The individual first acknowledges and approaches their individual spirits. These spirits are exclusive to this person and are only in their “spiritual court” meaning that they are not involved with anyone else except for the person that they are behind. After the individual spirits are those spirits that are a part of the individual’s family. These family spirits are the ancestral spirits and other benevolent spirits that protect and watch over the bloodline that the individual is a part of. Some of these spirits may be more present in one family member’s life over another family member, but regardless of the person that they walk with the most, they are able to be contacted and venerated by the entire family or those that are a part of that specific bloodline. Following the familial spirits are the spirits that belong to the community. The simplest way to break this down would be observing a neighborhood in a city or rural area. In a neighborhood there are multiple families that inhabit this neighborhood, who belong to different bloodlines. Although these people that live in the community originate from different bloodlines they still belong to that neighborhood, or that community. Keeping this approach in mind, there are spirits that are unique to the community and can be venerated or approached by all members that belong to this community, regardless of their familial background. In the Kongo cosmology, these community spirits are the great Kongo spirits that belong to a specific community. These may be the spirits that belong to the lineage that the Munanzo is a part of the ancestral spirits that are within that branch of Nkisi Malongo, etc.

Also, within the Kongo cosmology is an overall understanding of the sense of life, birth, death, and time. This is best described when viewing the Dikenga cosmogram which serves as a clock for understanding this continuous cycle of life.



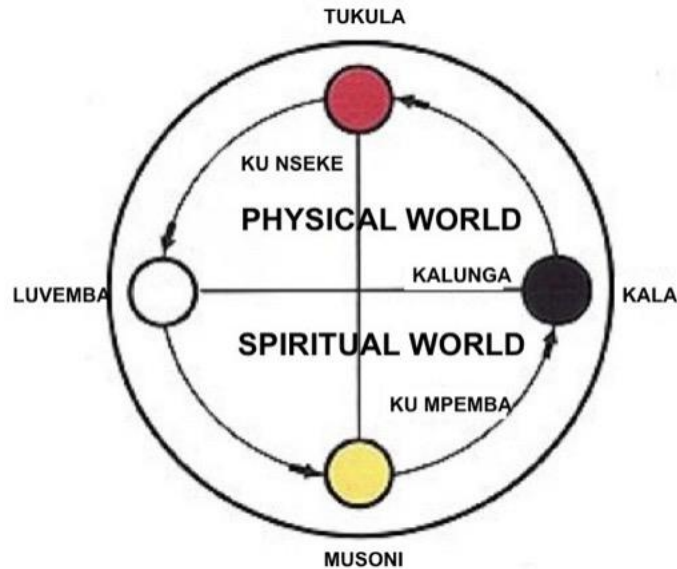


Figure 7-2. The Dikenga cosmogram that is a part of Nkisi Malongo and pre-colonial Kongo religious traditions. It has numerous uses within the tradition itself, but in this context, it is the clock for understanding the cycle of life.

Unlike those who subscribe to the western conceptualization of the telluric and supernatural realms, those that are elders, ngeuyo, and adepts of Nkisi Malongo who live according to Kongo cosmology do not separate these realms or planes of existence. The physical and spiritual realms are interconnected, yet they are separated by the primordial waters of the Mpungu which governs all the oceans, Kalunga. The Kalunga line on the Dikenga cosmogram represents the separation between the world of the seen and unseen. The space below the Kalunga line is known as Ku Mpemba. This is the realm of the spirits, ghosts, and unborn, and they inhabit this space until they are sought after to assist those that call upon them, or if it is time for them to return to the land of the living through the birthing process. Before you are born this is where your soul resides, and once your time is up in the land of the living you shed your physical vessel so that your soul can return to Ku Mpemba. The space above the Kalunga line is known as Ku Nseke and can be interpreted as the land of the living. It is the physical aspect of existence and is the desired destination for spirits awaiting their birth in the land of Ku Mpemba.

Although Ku Nseke and Ku Mpemba are separated by the great waters of Kalunga, these worlds share a close relationship with each other (Fu-Kiau, 2001). Although the spirits themselves do not have physical vessels or the means to present themselves as they would if they were humans, they are still able to communicate and manifest themselves within the land of Ku Nseke. The spirits that reside in the lands of the dead are always conveying messages to the land of the living, and in brief moments they manifest themselves physically by attaching themselves to a living human being through the process known as mounting or spirit possession. When a spirit from Ku Mpemba mounts their target, they can relay various messages to those present after displacing the consciousness of their host for a moment. In this moment the spirit makes their host speak in verbal or non-verbal ways by using speech, dancing, body jerks, etc. The four circular points that are outside each portion of the circle represent the cycles of the sun. The Dikenga cosmogram makes it easier to understand the conceptualization of both life and death within the Kongo worldview that is a part of Nkisi Malongo, and other Kongo based religions.

Death is natural facet of life, yet the west has shrouded it in fear and utter mysticism. This may have a lot to do with the Western philosophy and approach to life that does not view the land of the living and land of the dead as one that is interconnected. Today, we have grown to fear and become repulsed by death. But according to the cosmology of the Kongo, we should become more comfortable with the process of death, as death is present in all aspects of life.

In Nkisi Malongo and most African Traditional Religions, death is not only the process of the soul departing from a vessel which it once animated. It is a phase of life itself-something undergoing a shift, shedding, and rebirth of some sort. When a body no longer houses a soul, what is left behind is the spirit that continues to live in the memories of those that the person impacted and embedded deeply within each atrium of their hearts. The spirit will live as long as

those impacted remember and keep their legacy alive. However, while the spirit of that person is still present on Earth, their soul has been transported to the realm of Ku Mpemba, where the other souls of the dead reside. Death is not limited to the transportation of the soul once the heart produces its last beat and lungs take their last breath, the reaper can also come to collect versions of yourself that existed in previous years but can no longer exist in the present or future. Death can collect passions, vices, or what once brought you excitement. It is a reminder to let us know that nothing is cemented in time and that all things are subjected to change and facing the sands of time.

We are all tiny grains of sand in the grand mechanism of life created by Nzambi a Mpungu to make this mechanism function as intended. This makes death a beautiful necessity. In Western society, most people fear and are repulsed by death, but it is a beautiful thing considering that it is simply another side of this coin called life. Ku Mpemba is the land beneath the primordial sea of Kalunga that is both a tomb and womb in and of itself. It is a tomb because it is the destination for the souls of those that have shed their physical vessels, or bodies that once housed them. It is also a womb because it is the canal which allows spirits to return to Ku Nseke, the land of the living. The concept of Bakulu, or the ancestral spirits within the Kongo cosmology, is important when considering the idea of birth.

The ancestral spirits dwell in Ku Mpemba for a certain period until they eventually make their way back to Ku Nseke (Fu-Kiau, 2001). This space which is above the Kalunga line is the realm in which you (who are reading this) and I temporarily inhabit. It is the space that is best categorized as the realm of the seen, or the physical realm in which things that are within Ku Mpemba can manifest themselves into an actual form rather than just a spirit. There is an understanding within African Traditional Religions and even in the Black Christian churches of

the United States that I have been a member of, that when someone is born, they are just an ancestor that has returned to inhabit the land of the living once more. Although the Nseke and Mpemba realms are separated, they are interconnected simultaneously. There is always interference by the spirits within the realm of the living and interference by the living within the realm of the spirits. This is exhibited through ritual and ceremony. Religious rituals and ceremonies create a particular rupture between space and time so that there is the ability for each realm to gain access to the other in that moment. Without disclosing any secrets of the tradition, we can examine the process of giving offerings to certain Mpungu or other Nkisi. When these offerings are made, this is not just a symbolic act. It is an act that initiates contact between the physical and the spiritual world. The offering, especially if it involves the use of animal blood, is what animates or provides the spirit with the means to carry out the task that is required of the adept who contacts it.

In Nkisi Malongo, there is no parasitic relationship or “slave and slave-master” type of relationship between the spirits and the Ngangulero. For the spirit to manifest itself in the Nseke realm this offering is required of the initiate. Drums, and singing also play a massive role in this process, as they are the means to let the spirits know that they are being called upon and that it is time for them to make their way to the Munanzo within this physical plane of existence. On the Dikenga, the circles that represent the cycles of the sun also represent the cycles of life that each being experiences in life. The arrows, which travel continuously on the cosmogram tells us that the cycle does not end, even after the death of someone.

The cycle of life occurs in a counterclockwise manner, beginning with Musoni to Kala, which is the stage of birth. Kala to Tukula consists of the journey from childhood to adulthood and the many different stages that accompany this transition (adolescence, puberty, etc.). Tukula

to Luvemba symbolizes the transition from adulthood to old age. From Luvemba back to Musoni is the transition that one makes when they die and return to the Mpemba realm. The Kala stage of childhood, which is the sunrise on the cosmogram, symbolizes joy, hope, and is represented by the color Black (Fu-Kiau, 2001). The Tukula stage of adulthood, which is noon on the cosmogram, symbolizes the first animals on Earth, the physical power of men, and is represented by the color red. The Luvemba stage of old age, which is sunset on the cosmogram, symbolizes the first humans on Earth that were created by Nzambi, and is represented by the color white. The Musoni stage of death which is also the beginning stage and midnight on the cosmogram, symbolizes spiritual power, the beginning of the Earth, and is represented by yellow (Thea Lautenschläger, 2020). The Dikenga cosmogram has many other purposes and is used often in Nkisi Malongo. There are variations of this cosmogram when members of the tradition trace *firmas* on the floor with chalk or powder before ceremonies. The firma is the symbol which is used as a conduit to call upon the Kimpungulu or other spirits and energies to carry out a specific purpose or mission. It is imperative to note that although some people may come across a firma, I was told by elders that initiation into the tradition is what will give someone the “keys” or knowledge to make the firmas work. This means that someone who is not initiated can trace a firma on the floor, but it will still be inactive even if it is the correct symbol, because they do not have all of the knowledge to make it come to life. They are used the same way that the Vévés in Haitian Vodou are used, and in Nkisi Malongo you can even see some that are used in Haiti if the ceremonies you attend is of a lineage that stems from the Kongo. Lineage plays an important role in Nkisi Malongo and is both the backbone and guide for the tradition, regardless of the branch that is observed.

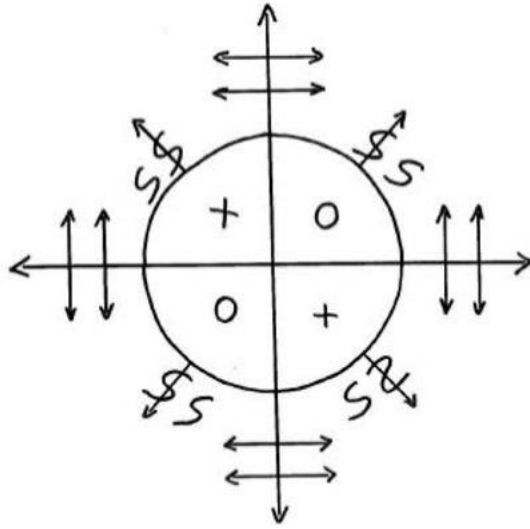


Figure 7-3. An example of a firma used in Nkisi Malongo. The Dikenga cosmogram seems to serve as the base for the firma, however there are variations.

## CHAPTER 8 THE IMPORTANCE OF LINEAGE IN NKISI MALONGO

Just as the trees, flowers, herbs, and succulents in nature must have roots to receive the nutrients water, and oxygen to survive, so does Nkisi Malongo. Roots, or lineage is the compass in which we use to trace our origins. In this tradition, you either have a clean unbroken line that extends back to the time of the ancient Kongo, or you do not. There is no estimating or guessing, the roots for a branch and Munanzo within Palo must be linear. This means that a living elder had to pass down the sacred knowledge and information down to the next generation, and this cycle continued to the contemporary times. The importance of having a lineage which has survived through the transmission of knowledge by an elder in Nkisi Malongo allows to see that we are practicing the exact same thing that our ancestors practiced without guessing. It does not matter if a person is a blood relative or not within this tradition, if a living Ngangulero or elder teaches and passes down information to an initiate, the lineage survives. It was said to me by several Tatas that without lineage, there is no Kongo and without Kongo, there is no lineage. In the tradition of Nkisi Malongo, an uninterrupted lineage is important because history is written in a biased way and can be corrupted with several holes in it. Internal history of a lineage is not affected by the outside world's potential to inflict their biases on the tradition because one of the elder's responsibilities is to provide the information to initiates that will allow them to see where their Munanzo, branch, and tradition originates.

Regardless of the branch, Nkisi Malongo remains an oral tradition, but not some things are able to be written to help pass information and add an extra layer of protection in the goal of preserving the tradition. Initiates that have sworn an oath before the Nganga are allowed to write information obtained from their Tata/Yaya and the Kongo spirits. However, although they can

write this information, it is expected and required of them to memorize prayers, information regarding the Kimpungulu, personal prayers, firmas, and other information received during initiation. The elders and Kongo spirits do not mind if an initiate reads prayers from a notebook, but if year has passed since someone's initiation, they will begin to question them and their decision to allow them into the tradition.

Long story short, an initiate can write notes but a Tata of the Briyumba branch told me that memorization and effort is a requirement for most things that must remain secret to ensure the longevity of the tradition. Learning Kikongo words is also inevitable as one becomes initiated into the world of Nkisi Malongo. Despite being displaced across the ocean, Kikongo remains the dominant language used in Nkisi Malongo, although there was a mixture between Spanish and Kikongo since the tradition was forced to adapt to the conditions of colonial Cuba. By telling and retelling the history of a lineage, the tradition can survive and recount the moments of history that are not written in textbooks. Through oral history, I was able to learn about the construction of the first Nganga in Cuba after enslaved Africans were forcefully brought across the Atlantic.



## CHAPTER 9 THE FIRST NGANGA IN CUBA

There has been much speculation about the origins of the Nganga within the tradition. This speculation is warranted considering the meaning behind the term itself. When we observe the precolonial Kongo region and the Kongo kingdom, the term Nganga was used to address those who were the conduits between Nseke and Mpemba. In the Kikongo language, Nganga derives from the root word which means knowledge or skill (Thornton J. K., 1998). In Dr. Fu-Kiau's lectures he made it clear that an Nganga, regardless of their gender, was skilled in the matters of approaching the world of the supernatural and alleviating the suffering or ills of those that were impacted by adverse conditions that negatively impacted their spiritual, physical, and mental wellbeing. In their own right, the Nganga was a doctor and had the ability or license to diagnose and prescribe remedies to foment the healing process within the minds and bodies of their clients. Today, the term Nganga is used to refer to the cauldron or pot which is the cornerstone for working the spirit within all branches of Nkisi Malongo. Not only is the Nganga a means to communicate with the Nfumbe and different classes of spirits within the tradition, it also holds a key purpose to maintain the lineage of the tradition and grant the permission for one to become an Ngeuyo into the tradition. In the old days of the Kongo kingdom, ensuring the longevity of Nkisi Malongo was maintained through specific bloodlines. The institution of chattel slavery and the ramifications of colonialism intentionally disrupted the bloodlines of Kongo people and their descendants, so adepts of the tradition were unable to solely rely on the maintenance of familial bloodlines to protect the tradition. The use of spiritual tools, objects, and initiating people that were outside of the "traditional" Kongo bloodlines were ways to ensure that the lineage would continue despite the societal pressures, harsh reality, and brutal conditions that African people faced during the period of enslavement in Cuba. The Nganga became a tool to

ensure the longevity of the tradition and made sure that Nganguleros and all adepts of Nkisi Malongo could trace their lineage back to Africa. In this sense, the Nganga functions as more than a means to work the spirit, but it is a cauldron which occupies multiple times, places, and spaces. This means that the Nganga operates on a timeframe that is like the currents and tides of the seas, in which it travels forward and backwards concomitantly.

The Nganga is not as confined to the present as the bodies of humans are since they are the link to the Kongo. Even in the initiation process that is done in front of the Nganga, there is a certain moment when the newly initiated person is transported to the origins of the branch and tradition itself, which shatters the western conceptualization of time.

The Nganga as it is represented today, has a complicated history, and the origin stories vary according to what branch one approaches and what Tata one goes to. Through the knowledge acquired from Tatas I have spoken to in and outside of Cuba, I was told that the first pots for Palo Mayombe and Briyumba both existed in Africa. The hills of Mayombe in Cabinda and Calabari in the Kongo region are the origins of the first Nganga of the Palo Mayombe branch, that was constructed in Pinar del Rio Cuba during the period of enslavement (Kail, Narco-Cults, 2015). When Africans were brought to Cuba from the Kongo region, they were transported with none of their belongings. This meant that the only aspects of Nkisi Malongo that were brought from Africa were the Nkisi, the spiritual specialists that knew how to approach or work them, and the ability to communicate with the various facets of Nzambi a Mpungu present within nature. I wasn't clear about how the pots came to Cuba, and initially I thought that someone brought them on the ships somehow across the Atlantic. However, while I was in Tata's garage I was informed by him that no pots made their way across the ships, but the first

Nkisi that made the voyage across the Atlantic was Nzazi, who was brought with Tata Denamotuto who established the Mayombe branch in Cuba.

As Nzazi made his way across the Atlantic and the Mayombe branch was established in Pinar del Rio Cuba, the shift from the Nganga being the priest to the pot occurred. The spiritual specialist, priest, and scientist of the dead and spirits became known as Tata. The word for the cauldron became Nganga, which meant mystery. The term that is now used today to refer to the priests and priestesses within Nkisi Malongo and each branch is Tata Nganga/Nkisi or Yaya Nganga/Nkisi, which translates to the father or mother of mystery. Several books that have been written throughout the years have expressed that the Tata and adepts of Nkisi Malongo need to be in front of the pot to work the spirit and carry out their duties. However, this is something that must be analyzed in depth and challenged, considering the establishment of the tradition in Cuba. Africans who were brought from the Kongo did not bring any cauldrons with them across the Atlantic, which means that if the Nganga must be always present to communicate with the spirits and get work done, then the tradition would not have been able to get transported across the waters. The children of the Kongo possessed the ability to tap into nature and communicate with the spirits before the first Nganga was created in Cuba. After one is initiated into the tradition and learns the secrets, they can call upon the spirits and tap into the essence of Nzambi a Mpungu through various modalities and approaches. This ability assisted the Tatas when they arrived to Cuba to discover the ingredients necessary to construct new Ngangas once they found themselves in lands that had vast differences and similarities to their homelands in Africa.



Figure 9-1. Two Nganga. These vessels have a myriad of different purposes within the tradition.

**World Within a World: The Nganga is a world within a world itself. In it there are hundreds of items that are used to communicate with the dead and various spirits found in nature. It is a pot that is made of iron or clay, and the items within it must be sourced from various parts of the world under different circumstances that are not open to the public. Everything that is within the Nganga and the reason behind their presence is inaccessible to those that are not initiated into the tradition, but one can see that there are things within it that represent various aspects of nature. Considering that the Nganga is a world within the world that we already exist in, you will find objects that symbolize what you will find in nature. Just as the world we live in has sticks, plants, trees, dirt, animals, stones, water, menga (Kikongo word for blood), bones, shells etc. You can see some of these items within the cauldron.**

Sticks, or Palo in Spanish play a massive role within Nkisi Malongo and the construction of an Nganga. Within the Kongo spiritual system and science of the dead, sticks and trees carry

the essence of different spirits and offer different results whether these results foment healing or destruction for the one who casts spells or their target. The purpose behind the different branches of trees used in the spiritual work of those who practice Nkisi Malongo is not able to be conveyed to the public, but it is worth noting that each branch is either numbered or tied with a certain fabric to distinguish the properties and purposes for the stick that is inside of the Nganga. The construction of a Nganga is a strenuous, expensive and time-consuming process that can take several years to complete. Some of the ingredients are sourced around the world, and some of the ingredients require a lot of money to obtain since they are from different regions of the world or come from a certain species that is rare. If a Nganga is constructed in a short timeframe, that is a tell-tale sign of a fraudulent Nganga and the chance of it missing vital pieces is likely. Some Tatas maintain the stance that it could take up to three years to create an effective, living, and working Nganga, while others believe that it could take six or more months to complete this process. While the various items within the Nganga take time to obtain, there is also a period where the Nganga must sit and undergo secret ceremonies to become one that is working and infused with the spirits and energies that the Tata needs to work with the Nfumbe and Mpungu. The Nganga that is constructed must come from another Nganga that has a lineage that can be traced back to the Kongo. There is a divination process to determine if a Tata is ready and able to possess a Nganga, and this is a process that cannot be overlooked or ignored.

In addition to the palo (sticks) that are placed within the Nganga, human and animal bones are also important to include inside of the pot. A kiyumba, or skull is the part of the human skeleton that I have seen most common within the Ngangas of Tatas I have encountered. In the United States there has also been many articles written about government officials seizing skulls and other human bones in Miami from those that practice the religion. These articles typically

generalize the practice as evil or negative, since the articles are focused on those that sell drugs or try to use Palo for other mischievous things. Along with the skull, the tibia and femur are common bones that are found inside of each branch of Nkisi Malongo. Each bone has a unique purpose that is not completely different than what function they were used for while they were attached to a living and breathing human being. For example, the skull that is placed within the Nganga serves as the center of thought, knowledge, and intelligence for the spirit that will be infused within the bones. The tibia is used in a similar fashion that a band director uses his baton to conduct his musicians to create the sounds of a beautiful symphony. With the tibia or femur, the Tata conducts the spirits to carry out a task and direct the energies of the dead.

The bones that are collected from the feet of the dead allow the Nfumbe to walk, while the hands collected from the bones of the hand allow the Nfumbe to collect items for the Tata. The Nfumbe, which is an ancestral spirit that becomes fused within the bones that the Tata collects, is housed within the Nganga. Selecting a spirit to become the Nfumbe is a secret and private process where the Tata approaches a spirit and creates a pact between himself and the spirit that lasts until the day that he sheds his physical vessel and departs from the realm of the living to return to the land of the dead beneath Kalunga's great waters. The Nfumbe becomes bathed within a mixture of different herbs, plants, and objects that are reflective of a particular Mpungu, which is usually reflective of the type of branch that the Tata belongs to. For example, in a Briyumba branch I encountered, the Tata's Nfumbe was once a Jamaican man. This Tata's Nfumbe had the energy and behaviors of the Mpungu that is associated with the Palo Briyumba, which is the ferocious and intelligent warrior Zarabanda. A Tata from the Palo Mayombe branch could have an Nfumbe whose bones once belonged to Chinese man. His Nfumbe would have the energy, behaviors, and carry the spirit of the cunning and tactful warrior Nzazi. The physical

appearance of a live and working Nganga that has been in use for several years is one that is far from polished and clean. Unlike Lucumi (Santeria) which Nkisi Malongo is incorrectly associated with, cleanliness and purity are not required by the spirits to conduct work. After ceremonies, offerings, and animal sacrifices are made, the Tata does not clean the blood or animal feathers from his Nganga, as the objects and remnants left on the Nganga amplify the power of the Nfumbe, Mpungu, and spirits of the dead that are present within the Tata's Nganga and Munanzo. The Nfumbe and Kimpungulu of Nkisi Malongo (except for Chola Wengue) differ from the Orisha of Lucumi in the sense that they are not beings that must be approached while one is clean, "pure", or abstinent.

## CHAPTER 10 KIMPUNGULU: THE FINGERS OF NZAMBI'S HAND

After Nzambi a Mpungu molded the universe, separated Kalunga's waters of the heaven from the sky, created human beings and everything within the universe, there was the Kimpungulu left on Earth. The Mpungu, or Kimpungulu (plural) are like the fingers that extend from Nzambi's mighty hands, or Nzambi's custodians sent to assist human beings. They are here to ensure that human beings can reach their potential to fulfill our purpose(s) while we are making progress in our journey in the land of the living. The Kimpungulu govern certain aspects of nature, and depending on their characteristics and tastes, they can be found places that humans frequent. Before I met Tata Rompe Pecho, I was misinformed about the Kimpungulu because someone that was not initiated into the traditon told me that the Mpungu was invented in Cuba once the Kongo Africans interacted with the Yoruba and their Orisha based traditions. While I was sitting in front of Tata with my notepad, I was informed that they have existed long before humans tapped into our potential to create written and spoken language, but before European imperialism ravaged the Kongo region, they were not venerated the way that they are today within Nkisi Malongo, and other Kongo based traditions. Once the children of the Kongo found themselves up against the unmerciful talons of European colonialism, imperialism and enslavement, they began to seek spiritual help that was beyond the veneration of their immediate ancestors. They approached the Kimpungulu, who are Gods in their own right, for assistance to engage in spiritual warfare with those who enslaved and exploited them. The Kimpungulu are ferocious Gods and forces of nature, who carry energies that humans can tap into at specific moments to manipulate energies to their benefit or detriment. There are thousands of Kimpungulu, however there are seven main ones, known as the seven African powers, that are



known and acknowledged by the public. Seven African Powers refers to the forced transformation of the Mpungu after they made their way across the Atlantic from the Kongo. They became associated with Catholic saints in Cuba. We cannot pinpoint the exact date that this transformation occurred, but I was told that this was a long process that occurred over several years. Each Mpungu corresponded with a Catholic saint that has similar characteristics, likes, and dislikes. To avoid religious persecution, this transformation process and making the Catholic saints their own rather than just accepting them and rejecting the Mpungu, the tradition was able to survive. I will briefly expand on these seven Kimpungulu below.



Figure 10-1. 7 African Powers candle used to evoke the Kimpungulu for different reasons. This candle can be used in the Lwa and Orisha traditions as well.

### **Nkuyu Nfinda: Lucero Mundo**

He who opens the gates to communication between realms is known as Nkuyu Nfinda, or Tata Nfinda. Lucero Mundo is the Spanish name given to him as his descendants made their way to Cuba on ships from the Kongo. Nkuyu Nfinda is the divine messenger, as he relays messages

between the realm of the spirits and humans. The name given to him in Cuba which means “light bringer” is fitting considering that Nkuyu not only provides the light to initiate communication between humans and spirits, but he shines light on the path between the land of the living and land of the dead so that the spirits can make their journey to or from each realm. Nkuyu loves nature and can be found in the forest or anywhere that a crossroads is near, which highlights its permanent residence at the crossroads between the land of the living and the land of the dead. His Kongo name itself is Nkuyu Nfinda, which translates to Ghost of the forest. Depending on the branch, he can be associated with St. Anthony of Padua, St. Peter, St. Nobert, etc. Nkuyu is the first to be approached to open communication with other Mpungu, and an Nganga cannot be constructed without Nkuyu because he is the Mpungu that serves as the key to open the door to the spirit realm. Without the “key” or blessing of Lucero, no other spirits would be able to enter. While he opens the door to allow the spirits into the physical world, his counterpart who does the opposite is known as Kobayende, who deals with dead, contacted for healing, and is associated with St. Lazarus. Another role of Lucero is that he can determine the outcome of men and women, as he is the one that can open the gates to possibilities or close them depending on the way that he is approached. The role and nature of this Mpungu makes him one that could bring either positive or negative, pleasure or pain, laughter or sorrow. Nkuyu Nfinda, or Lucero loves the colors red and black, and he loves sweets, chickens, goat, and rum. He is an ancient man with childlike qualities that could turn either sweet or sour quickly.



Figure 10-2. Nkuyu Nfinda/Lucero Mundo or he who opens the gates to communicating with the realm of the spirits. Unlike the Orisha and Lwa, there aren't many physical representations of him, but he is usually referred to as that man in the red and black

### **Kalunga/Madre Agua**

While Nkuyu Nfinda/Lucero is the one that opens the door to communicating with the realm of the spirits, it is Kalunga who serves as the path in which these beings travel across to reach their destination. Kalunga is the Mpungu which governs all the great seas, oceans, and is always found in these salt waters. Kalunga is not just one of the most important Mpungu, she is one of the most important aspects of Kongo cosmology considering her role in separating the realms of Ku Mpemba and Ku Nseke. When Nzambi a Mpungu separated the waters from the sky, Kalunga was designated as the barrier to keep the realm of the living separate from the realm of the dead. Her role was designated by the creator to maintain balance. After we have lived our lives in the Nseke realm, we return to Mpemba by traveling across Kalunga's waters. Her nature is described as cool, although just as the waters in the ocean have the potential to create the most ferocious tsunamis, hurricanes, and tropical storms, Kalunga can become volatile and destructive if approached incorrectly or neglected. Kalunga is the mother of the oceans that loves and protects children, which makes her the Mpungu that is approached often by expecting

mothers, or those with infertility issues who seek to become pregnant. Her favorite color is blue, and her favorite offerings are blue flowers, blue fruits, watermelon, and rum. Although they both govern certain types of waters found on Earth, she is not to be associated with Chola Wengue, as they have different purposes, temperaments, likes, and dislikes.



Figure 10-3. Kalunga, the mother of the oceans and salt waters. She is often associated with the Lwa Lasiren in Vodou, and Orisha Yemaya.

### **Zarabanda/Sarabanda**

When one thinks of a ferocious warrior that will obliterate any obstacle in their path or defeat any enemy that stands in front of them in battle, Zarabanda is the Mpungu that comes to mind. Zarabanda, or Sarabanda is the Mpungu that is the God of war, however he has other characteristics and functions that make him highly respected and revered amongst other Mpungu and all adepts of Nkisi Malongo. He is the Mpungu that governs metal, which makes him favorable amongst blacksmiths and other people that work with metal. He is found often near the mountains and railroads. When one sees a railroad spike near a Nganga, or Firma where spiritual work is going to be conducted, you can be sure to see Sarabanda soon. Other than this Mpungu

being a God of war, it is imperative to address the character that he exudes to understand why he is respected and sought after for a myriad of tasks. When there is a task at hand that must be completed, Zarabanda will have the courage and drive to get the work done effectively. One could have the number of ideas or ambition to fill up every pool on Earth, but if they do not have the courage to act then they nothing would get done. This is the energy that is embedded within the spirit of Zarabanda. His favorite colors are green and the offerings he likes are cigars, rum, and machetes. To ensure the longevity of the tradition and avoid further persecution of their religious practices, adepts of the tradition associated Zarabanda with St. Michael. Out of all the Mpungu to receive animal sacrifices, he is the Mpungu that can handle the most blood considering the energy that he carries. Zarabanda is the primary Mpungu of the Palo Briyumba branch of Nkisi Malongo. One may be familiar with the energy of Zarabanda if they are familiar with the Lwa Ogou in Haitian Vodou or Ogun in the Yoruba based traditions.



Figure 10-4. Zarabanda/Sarabanda the Mpungu of war, metalworking, clearing obstacles, courage, and wreaking havoc/vengeance upon those that wrong him or his children.

### **Nzazi/Nsasi/Siete Rayos**

Nsasi, or Nzazi is the Mpungu that is an intelligent, cunning, and ferocious warrior of Nkisi Malongo. He is the warrior that possesses a temper that could crack the lands apart of each

continent as he uses bolts of lightning. His ability to strike and scorch the Earth with rays of lightening is why he was named Siete Rayos (Seven Rays) when his children were brought to Cuba. He was the first Mpungu to make his way across the Atlantic and is the main Mpungu of the Palo Mayombe branch. Red is his color and the Catholic Saint he was fused with is Saint Barbara. Although Nsasi is a fierce warrior, it is imperative to note that he is frequently sought after to deal with the matters of the heart. He is depicted as a handsome man with a love for women, and his children are known to be charming. When lovers are in domestic disputes or cannot see eye to eye, Nsasi is approached to bring balance or to fix, repair, and bring back the love that once was there and vibrant. In nature he is found at the palm trees and when he is given offerings he enjoys palm leaves, palm oil, red wine, and roosters. Leopards are the animals that are most associated with him and in some of his depictions you are likely to see him wearing an outfit that was created from leopard skins.



Figure 10-5. Nsasi, the main Mpungu of Palo Mayombe who was the first Nkisi to be brought to Cuba from the Kongo kingdom. [Unknown artist. This depiction is widely circulated throughout African Traditional Religion forums.]

**Mama Chola Nguengue/Chola Wengue**

Mama Chola is the Mpungu that can be hot tempered, yet cool tempered at the same time. She is the Mpungu that can be found in the waters, but unlike Kalunga who is found in the salt waters, Chola is found in freshwater areas in nature such as rivers or streams. She is the Mpungu that deals with the principal present within most human beings whether it is undeveloped or developed, which is love. Love shown by Chola Nguenge can be as sweet as the finest honey, or as tough and fiery as the blazing sun itself. If a small child were to ask, what is love? A person might respond by saying that it is a warm, fuzzy feeling that permeates one's soul at the glance of a being that brings sparkles to their eyes. Or that it is to be nice, or even harsh to heal someone, regardless of if the message would be liked. Or it could be described as the satisfaction that one feels while you taste one's sweet nectar in the moments of erotic intimacy. The truth is, love according to this Mpungu is a combination of all those things I mentioned, but varies depending upon the circumstances. Love for Chola Nguenge is a mirror to hold someone accountable, a fertilizer to help the community grow, and it is more than beautiful words, but the actions that we show. Chola Nguenge is often misunderstood due to her personality, but the truth is, if we are to understand her then we can examine our own conceptualization of love and the relationships that we have with ourselves and other beings. Love is a moment that has highs and lows, peaks and valleys, and this Mpungu personifies this aspect of love. She is depicted as a beautiful woman that is a master of seduction who could seduce even the harshest of men. Her favorite color is yellow, and her offerings are typically sweet citrus fruits, yellow flowers, expensive perfumes, honey, cinnamon, and the Catholic Saint that she was forced to merge with to ensure the longevity of the tradition to practice in secrecy was La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre. She is generous towards her children and those that are generous towards her, while she is harsh towards those that do harm against her or those that she loves. She is an unforgiving

Mpungu, and if someone makes a promise to give her something in exchange for her services, she expects what is promised or she could make matters very difficult. For her children and those that evoke her, she ensures material wealth, love, and prosperity but only if she is approached properly.



Figure 10-6. Basílica Santuario Nacional de Nuestra Señora de la Caridad del Cobre in Santiago de Cuba, Cuba. Although many people go to this church to pray to La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre, people also leave offerings for Mama Chola.

### **Centella Ndoki/Mariwanga**

If death were to exist in the form of an Mpungu within Nkisi Malongo, she would be Centella Ndoki. She is the keeper of the cemeteries which means that she is who guards the gates that surround the cemeteries. Her energy is often misunderstood considering her proximity to



death and the spirits of the dead. While she is unforgiving, does not accept even one mistake in offerings prepared for her, she is loyal and devoted to protecting those from darkness and destruction that she cares for and respects. As Nkuyu Nfinda or Lucero is the Mpungu that shines the light on the passageway between the realm of the living and the dead, it is Centella Ndoki who ensures that spirits that are making their way from Ku Nseke do not get lost when they are finding their way within Ku Mpemba. There has been a lot of negative connotations attached to Centella Ndoki over the years since she has been associated with Santa Muerte, who is often venerated for those that dabble in the matters of the underworld and the many things that come with this. Cartel members, drug traffickers, murderers, etc. have added more fuel to the fire that seeks to burn the true nature of Centella Ndoki, but it is imperative to keep in mind that the spirit's conceptualization of good and evil are not reflective of the moral compass of human beings. The spirits themselves are independent from how people use them. Centella Ndoki's color is mostly burnt red or maroon, although she does have many other colors that she identifies with. While she is the fiercest when she is angered and can evoke fear within even the most seasoned Tatas and Yayas, her nature is typically cool and calm. She is present in areas where the dead typically inhabit such as morgues, funeral homes, cemeteries, and places where many have recently died and must cross over Kalunga's great waters into the afterlife.



Figure 10-7. Centella Ndoki, or Mariwanga the Mpungu who is the keeper of cemeteries and custodian of the dead. [Tata Rompe Pecho, 2021]

### **Kengue/Tiembla Tierra**

Kengue is the Mpungu who imparts divine wisdom and although he is a warrior just like the other Mpungu, Kengue or Tiembla Tierra typically uses his mind and intellect to maneuver over the obstacles that are placed in his path. His nature is cool, laid back, and he is difficult to anger, but if he is brought to that point then it is a sight that one does not want to witness or experience. Nzambi a Mpungu imparted grand wisdom upon Kengue, and his role is more than to spread wisdom, but ensure that justice is served to maintain balance. He is considered pure in the sense that he is the Mpungu that is associated with all things good, and the color white is associated with him for this reason. Kengue is also known as Tiembla Tierra, or Earth Trembles in Cuba which conveys his massive power in addition to the divine wisdom that he has. While Nzambi a Mpungu is the creator of all things, Kengue is the father of the universe that was created by Nzambi. Just as there is no Nganga without Nkuyu Nfinda/Lucero to open up the doors to the spirit realm, there is no Nganga that can be created without Kengue to depart the wisdom of Nzambi a Mpungu and all wisdom of the universe. He is approached by members of

the tradition for a myriad of purposes, but some of the reasons that can be discussed publicly are for discernment when making a decision, clearing the mind of mental fog, achieving mental and emotional balance, and seeking justice after one has been wronged. He is depicted as an old and wise man dressed in white. Some of his offerings are white doves, white flowers, sweet fruits, and they are left at the places where he is commonly found which is in the mountains or Ceiba trees.



Figure 10-8. Kengue/Tiembla Tierra bestowing his wisdom upon his children. [Artist Unknown, image commonly circulated throughout African Traditional Religion Forums about Palo Mayombe and Briyumba, 2021]

There are thousands of Kimpungulu that exist, but these are the main 7 that are approached and agreed upon within the three branches of Nkisi Malongo. Before one becomes initiated into Nkisi Malongo, it is customary for the Tata or Yaya to use divination to determine who one's Nsila are, or the Mpungu that are most present within the lives of an individual. Your Nsila are your spiritual custodians that assist you throughout your life and are the energies that are most dominant within you. Determining who your Nsila are, is just one minor step in the process of initiation into Nkisi Malongo.

## CHAPTER 11 RAYAMIENTO/INITIATED INTO NKISI MALONGO

The initiation process into a branch of Nkisi Malongo is referred to as Rayamiento. It has this name because of the small cuts that are administered on various parts of the body by the Tata on the new initiate. It is imperative to note that while one thinks that they are choosing Nkisi Malongo to become a part of it is the exact opposite in the sense that Nkisi Malongo and the Nkisi themselves are choosing who they want to initiate and impart the secrets of Nzambi and the Kongo science of the dead into. Long before the blade even pierced the skin of someone's body, there are a few processes that one must go to before even considering initiation. The first steps towards initiation are research, consulting one's own personal spirit guides, then finding a reputable and trustworthy Tata that has the credentials to initiate someone in front of the Nganga. It is a crucial step to align yourself with a solid Tata who cares more about ensuring the longevity of the tradition and teaching, rather than selecting a Tata based on their status in society, material possessions, or looks. Just as capitalism has harmed African people, it has also negatively impacted African Traditional Religions and now there are many that hide behind the tradition claiming the title of Tata to prey on the spiritual weaknesses of people to accumulate a mass amount of wealth and status.

After a reputable Tata is found and a person's energy aligns with the Tata and his Munanzo, the next step to become initiated is divination. Divination is an important step because after someone resonates with it and determines that they want to become initiated, the spirits determine if the individual is allowed into the tradition. Divination in Nkisi Malongo is done

with different tools. These methods are using Chamalangos<sup>1</sup> and Vititi Mensu<sup>2</sup> or Mpaka. You must ask the spirits if Nkisi Malongo is in your destiny and if the Munanzo you are in is supposed to be the house that initiates you.

### The Day I Asked the Spirits

It was my second time at Tata's house today. Three people had just gotten initiated the day before so by the time I arrived they were taking notes and getting a lot of the knowledge that they need in the beginning stages since they are now Ngeuyo (new initiates) into Palo Briyumba. While I was observing them Tata said that he gives his godchildren more than just new Palo names and individual firmas (signs), so that they can fend for themselves. I came here today because I wanted to know if it was in my destiny to get scratched into Nkisi Malongo. That must be determined through divination with the Chamalangos coconut shells, while sitting on the mat in front of the Nganga. Tata said his prayers which as relayed in nothing but Kikongo words, and he made sure to get the attention and acknowledgment of everyone there so that they could serve as witnesses to what was cast and shown in the coconut shells for when he was about to throw them. He laid out a straw mat in front of the Nganga, Nkisi statues, Lucero Mundo mound, Native American statue, and several other Palo tools and objects. With his hands he motioned for me to come and sit in front of him while he sat with his legs crossed and his back facing all the objects I just mentioned. He touched both my forehead and the back of my neck then began asking several questions. The chamalangos provide simple answers depending on the way that the shells land and which side they fall on. The answers are either yes or no, which is Kuenda or

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<sup>1</sup> Four coconut shells carved into round discs with two sides.

<sup>2</sup> A carved-out horn with a mirror placed at the end which allows the Tata to see messages from the spirits while divining. It possesses the same secrets that an Nganga has which allows the Tata to do whatever he needs to do without having to transport the Nganga pot.

Ko in the Kikongo language. I could not tell what the Kikongo words meant individually as he said them, but I could feel what he was asking and what he was receiving from the shells since I am used to doing a form of divination myself since I have dabbled in Hoodoo over the years. He asked about my destiny in Nkisi Malongo, if I am supposed to be a part of the Munanzo, who are the Mpungu that walk with me, and I was given some proverbs. The reading affirmed my path in Nkisi Malongo, that if I want to initiate into this Munanzo that I can, and that my Nsila (Mpungu that walk with me) are Nkuyu Nfinda/Lucero and Kalunga/Madre Agua. I began to have my doubts about the reading for a second because I was having thoughts that anyone could look at me or be around me and see that I have a lot of Lucero or Legba dominant energy. But once the proverbs were laid out in the reading and Tata began to discuss things about myself and my life thus far that no one would know, and that is when I began to witness more, of the power of Nkisi Malongo.

#### Presentations/Scratched

After someone receives confirmation that Nkisi Malongo is in their path and that they are allowed to become scratched into the tradition, the date for initiation must be set. Three days before initiation one must undergo a period of abstinence from sex, alcohol, and any mind-altering drugs. The initiation process must be done completely sober, with no influence from things that can cloud the mind because rayamiento is a process that is already taxing on the mind, spirit, and body without the use of drugs. They are also not allowed to eat anything other than a soup that contains the same ingredients that their Kongo ancestors ate. On the day of initiation, presentations occur which is the process of the Tata and Yaya introducing the Mpungu and Nkisi within nature to the soon-to-be initiate. There are seven different places that the Tata takes his ngeuyo to during presentations. Each space during presentations reflects the Mpungu that governs these spaces. For example, the ngeuyo meet Nkuyu Nfinda/Lucero at the crossroads or

woods, Kalunga at the beach, Zarabanda at the railroad tracks, Chola Wengue at the river, Nsasi/Siete Rayos at the palm tree, Kengue at the mountains or Ceiba tree, and Centella Ndoki at the cemetery. The presentations in front of the Mpungu in the places that they inhabit is a key step that cannot be overlooked or skipped, since this is the process where both the ngeuyo and the Mpungu formally meet each other face to face. In this regard I would compare presentations to introducing yourself to someone before you can use their kitchen appliances or any of their belongings. If the Tata does not introduce the ngeuyo to the spirits, then they do not have the license to approach them, work with their energies, and they will not be acknowledged. After presentations the initiation process continues, and after it concludes a person is reborn again as a ngeuyo into Nkisi Malongo. I am not allowed nor willing to share what I have seen or heard about the initiation process, but it is a step in someone's life that drastically changes the way they see the world and approach it. They are essentially shedding their old lives which no longer serves them, which is reflective in the burial or burning of the clothes that were worn on the day of initiation before being scratched in front of the Nganga. After someone becomes initiated into Nkisi Malongo they are provided with a name that reflects their temperament and unique path or role in the tradition, Dimbri or Collar de bandera which is a necklace worn like sash from left to right (male initiates) or right to left (female initiates), a Lucero mound to protect themselves against spiritual attacks or send them, and a notebook full of prayers, recipes, and other secret information about the tradition.



Figure 11-1. The Dimbri beads that are worn around from neck to shoulder like a sash. While the Yoruba wear their elekes like necklaces, the Kongo wear their dimbri like flags. The Dimbri are worn during ceremonies or doing spiritual work. [Mercado Libre Mexico, 2021



## CHAPTER 12 CONCLUSION

To conclude, Nkisi Malongo is an African Traditional Religion that was brought to the Western hemisphere by enslaved Africans that were brought from the Kongo. It is a practice that has many misconceptions surrounding it and is often misunderstood as a tradition dedicated to darkness or working with the “devil” according to outsiders. The bad reputation that it has is the result of misconceptions and false information being cycled through various platforms. When news outlets discuss Palo Mayombe, it is mostly centered on government officials extracting spiritual objects from the homes of drug dealers and murderers that use the religion for mischief and their own lascivious intentions. This, in combination with Hollywood movies that depict African religions as evil and exaggerate the use of animal sacrifice within them has created many stereotypes that cloud the judgement of those that have not learned from those that are a part of Palo.

Through speaking with elders and members of the tradition, it is clear to see that Palo Mayombe is a henotheistic, nature-based tradition that teaches initiates how to tap into their greatest potential and work with the forces of nature that were created by Nzambi. It is like Hinduism, Buddhism, and some forms of Christianity in the sense that there is a conceptualization of one creator God but there are also intermediaries that assist human beings that could be considered Gods in comparison to human beings.

Despite many associating it with Yoruba religious practices, it is its own sovereign tradition that originates from Bantu shamanistic practices and the spiritual knowledge from the Lemba indigenous society that has remained secretive in the Kongo region today, yet still highly visible in African Traditional Religions throughout the diaspora. Although the tradition was forced to undergo the process of transformation while dealing with the Portuguese in the Kongo

and the Spanish in Cuba, it has maintained a great bulk of what made it uniquely and unapologetically Kongo. Each tradition that was brought to the western hemisphere by enslaved Africans requires closer examination without solely relying on the western gaze molded by Christianity and anti-Black racism, to understand their cosmologies, foundations, and functions. While there needs to be more research and work written about Kongo traditional religion, I assert that Nkisi Malongo and each branch offers us a window to explore what many consider to be lost or undiscovered. For centuries many writers have relied on the narratives of European missionaries to make assertions about the Kongo, the religions or spiritual traditions that were present prior to the introduction of Christianity, and the conversion of Kongo people to Christianity. It is necessary to interrogate the historical records and documents available, while using alternative methods and sources to re(define) the history, culture, and spiritual traditions or religions of African and indigenous people. Some of the documents that are still being used today do not promote Nkisi Malongo as a tradition that stands on its own without Lucumi or Christianity. It is depicted as a hybrid religion that is a dark side of Lucumi with Christian elements. This depiction does a great disservice to those that practice the tradition, and it prevents us from uncovering more information about traditional spiritual practices of the Kongo and the people that descend from this region where the once-great kingdom flourished. This tradition, and any branch that is a part of it should be viewed as its own tradition considering that there are elements that cannot be practiced in tandem with other traditions. The Kongo cosmology and spirits that are present within each branch of the tradition (excluding Kimbisa which combines other spirits and religions) cannot be practiced alongside Yoruba spirits or Orisha, because the Kimpungulu and Kongo spirits function differently. While the Lucumi practitioners work with the Orisha, the Kongo tradition works more closely with the spirits of the

dead and spirits that tend to be more hardened and don't require a clean or "pure" approach. It is worth mentioning that in the Lucumi tradition, communication between certain spirits that would be considered ghosts is not acceptable or respected, while this is a big part of Nkisi Malongo considering the Misa ceremonies in the tradition, where communicating with ghosts and other spirits from the realm of the dead occurs. The Orisha are even said to work slower than the Kimpungulu, who work faster considering their nature. I heard a quote from many Tatas and initiates that showcases the characteristic of the Mpungu. They said that one goes to the Orisha for blessings and Palo for results. This indicates that if there is a task that needs to be carried out immediately, the Kongo spirits will make this happen. Even in the Kongo-Petwo nation of spirits in Haitian Vodou they are said to work faster and are hotter tempered than their counterparts that derived from West Africa.

Allocation of time and resources towards the study of Kongo religions is needed. Although Palo Mayombe and other Kongo traditions are more secretive than other African Traditional Religions, it is imperative that we document them in a better manner instead of reproducing notions about them that focus on the negative aspects, which could be said about any religion. Kongo spirituality and religions have always provided a solid foundation for resistance throughout the diaspora in various time periods. Gullah Jack, Francois Makandal, and Doña Beatriz Kimpa Vita are just a few examples of Kongo spiritual leaders who each played their part in kickstarting resistance movements for social change. I hope that this thesis serves as a foundation for studying Palo Mayombe and Kongo spirituality, and that it will continue to be refined and built upon for generations to come, even after I shed my physical body and depart the realm of Ku Nseke.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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