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### *Introduction*

This paper discusses the Kongo-inspired sacred society of *Palo* and its practitioner-teachers in Cuba.<sup>1</sup> Its focus is the status of *Palo* in Havana at the turn of the 21st century, forty years after the triumph of the Cuban Revolution, and five years into the transformation of the Cuban economy spurred by tourism and the opening of the domestic economy to the US dollar. Ethnographic in character, the paper draws on my relationship with two teachers of *Palo*, who for 18 months between 1999-2000 guided my doctoral research under the rubric of a *Palo* apprenticeship. In tracing an image of *Palo* at the end of the 20th century, this document represents the status of American ethnographic interpretation of African-inspired life in Cuba during this period.

*Palo* is a craft of working with the dead so as to transform the fates of the living. It is taught by knowledgeable women and men, who instruct their initiates in forms of thinking that celebrate the visceral apprehension of the dead as the basis for knowledge and action. *Palo* thrives on this apprehension of the dead, and is perpetuated along with ideas that organize it into socially important registers. Much of *Palo* practice involves engagements with the dead through socially powerful objects, called *prenda nganga* (sing.), which are made and cared for at the heart of *Palo* sacred societies. *Prendas* or *ngangas*, as they are called in the plural, take the form of cauldrons or urns packed

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1. Following the convention of scholars of Africa, I employ an uppercase “K” when referring to Central African cultures that exist and existed along the lower Congo River in what is now Congo and the Democratic Republic of Congo. This is to distinguish the people, their languages and cultures from these political entities and their predecessor states. I employ the upper case “C” when referring to these same people when I cite sources from Spanish, which do not make this distinction; e.g. Kongo Law=La Regla de Congo, see p.5, below.

with innumerable substances, but always including earth, sticks, animal and human remains. From these objects, teachers of Palo manufacture works [*trabajos, obras*] that heal and harm. Because of the considerable air of mystery that surrounds *prendas* and their use, *Palo* is widely feared as a form of witchcraft [*brujería*] in Cuba—a tag practitioners of *Palo* do not always reject.

*Palo* craft includes rites of cleansing, the making of protective bundles, the working of dangerous strikes of fate meant to frighten or kill rivals, and, ultimately, the manufacture of the *prendas* teachers of *Palo* keep at the center of their craft, and from which all other works emerge. Each work engages the dead where these are found in matter, but principally in earth, sticks, bones and blood. Those highly knowledgeable in the secrets of *Palo* work the dead in less palpable registers, such as carefully worded allusions, and in the shadowed flight of rumor. *Palo* is as much the art of crafting matter into fatefully powerful works, as it is a discursive art that creates shapes of fear and hope from the silences that pervade everyday life. Despite the considerable air of dread that surrounds it, Cubans of all sorts are drawn to *Palo* when their immediate prospects seem to sour, and despair enters their lives

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### “Inspiration”

*Palo* is Central African, specifically Kongo-inspired. I am interested in African “inspiration,” rather than “derivation,” thought the latter term is preferred among researchers. My apprehension about the “derived” is that it implies the thing under discussion is in some way a degraded version of an immutable African “essence,” to which it is forever beholden. I choose to think in terms of “inspiration,” as well, because of my discomfort with the term “Afro-Cuban,” also popular among researchers, but which links people and cultural forms to a primary and homogenized African past. Neither of these formulations necessarily acknowledges “the new” that is so crucial a part of Diaspora and Creole hybrid culture. “Inspiration,” as I use it here, functions as a hinge between the past and the future, inspiration being the active, forward-looking, creative spark linking past forms with objects, practices, and rules of fate born anew. Inspiration is a force of the moment that arrives unannounced, which has little time to recognize its debts before being swept up in the currents of its own prodigious, and often unexpected, creation.

Being Kongo-inspired, *Palo* is a social form separate from West African-inspired *Santo*, which is also called *Ocha* or *Lucumí* in Havana (“*Santería*” is not a term preferred by those initiated in *Santo* and *Palo*). Despite the presence of Central African slaves in Cuba nearly since the beginning of the Spanish colony, *Palo* dates to the late 19th or early 20th century, when it

emerged from a cauldron of myriad Kongo-inspirations. Important among these were the healing rites Victor Turner has called “drums of affliction,”<sup>2</sup> the Central African forms of which John M. Janzen has treated under the name of *ngoma*.<sup>3</sup> Among these was *Lemba*, the long-lived trading and healing society that developed on the north bank of the Congo river in the mid-17th century, and thrived until early in the 20th century.<sup>4</sup> *Lemba* was a response to profound social disruptions caused by the trade in slaves and goods initiated by contact with the Portuguese; and like so much of Kongo sacred life, *Lemba* survived the middle passage to inspire Creole religions throughout the Americas.<sup>5</sup>

Another Kongo society to have made the passage before it became a spark for Palo in Cuba was *Nkita*. Among the people of the lower Congo River, who in the 18th and 19th centuries were ravaged by slavery, *Nkita* was a healing society that addressed ruptures in lineage succession. Through initiation, *Nkita* re-affiliated members of the society “with the ancestral source of their collective authority.”<sup>6</sup> The terms “nkita,” “ngoma,” and “lemba,” circulate broadly in *Palo* sacred speech. The healing society I was affiliated with in Guanabacoa, on the outskirts of Havana, was the *Munanso Nkita Mana Nkita Briyumba Congo*, which I translate as “Briyumba House of the Dead, and the Children of the Dead.”<sup>7</sup>

During the century and a half between 1725-1875, when more enslaved people were delivered to Cuba than in all years prior,<sup>8</sup> these inspirations and others from diverse Kongo cultures and peoples were nurtured in Havana’s Kongo mutual aid societies [*cabildos*].<sup>9</sup> *Lemba* and *Nkita* were but two

2. Turner, Victor W., *The Drums of Affliction: A Study of Religious Processes among the Ndembu of Zambia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968) 15-16.

3. Janzen, John M., *Ngoma: Discourses of Healing in Central and Southern Africa* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992) 1-7. *Ngoma* means “drum” throughout much of Central and Southern Africa and names rites or feasts marked by the playing of drums and acts of healing.

4. For an exceptional account of Lemba see Janzen, John M., *Lemba, 1650-1930: A Drum of Affliction in Africa and the New World* (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1982).

5. Janzen, *Lemba*, 273-292.

6. Janzen, *Ngoma*, 11-14, 103.

7. Rev. W. Holman Bentley, in his *Dictionary and Grammar of the Kongo Language As Spoken at San Salvador, the Ancient Capital of the Old Kongo Empire, West Africa* (London: The Baptist Missionary Society and Trübner & Co., 1887) cites *muna* as “those who are enclosed,” 310, 358, and *nzo* as “house,” 407. *Muna-nzo* would thus be “those who are enclosed in the house.” “Munanso Kongo”: Those who belong to the Kongo house; Kongo Community. See also Laman, Karl. E. *Dictionnaire Kikongo-Français avec un Étude Phonétique Décrivant Les Dialects Les Plus Importants De La Langue Dite Kikongo* (Ridgewood, New Jersey: The Gregg Press Incorporated, 1964), 829-839. “Nkita,” is cited by Laman as: “A spirit of the dead that has established a dwelling in water, in ravines,” 721. I take “Mana” to be a contraction of “Mw-ána,” which Laman cites as “Child, descendant, progeny;...a drum played loud,” 645. Keeping in mind the organization of Palo society into a hierarchy based on kinship with the dead, “Nkita Mana Nkita,” by my rendering, is “The Dead and the Children of the Dead.”

among what must have been many Central African inspirations that recombined fortuitously and creatively, just as surely as they struggled against one another for the hearts of people seeking counteragents for the unprecedented misfortunes of trans-Atlantic dislocation and enslavement. When they emerged as a newly relevant entity from the ruin of slavery and Spanish colonialism in Cuba at the turn of the twentieth century, they did so as *Palo*, which in Havana is referred to as *La Regla de Congo*. I translate *La Regla de Congo* alternately as “Kongo Rule” and “Kongo Law.”<sup>10</sup>

*La Regla de Congo*, Kongo Law, *Palo*—I will also call this social force “Palo Society.” It is important to stress that Kongo Law has four branches [*ramas*] in Havana, each of which is ritually, musically, and perhaps linguistically distinct from the other. These branches are *Palo Mayombe*, *Palo Briyumba* (*Villumba*, *Vriyumba* or *Biyumba*), *Palo Monte*, and *Palo Kimbisa*. In the countryside throughout the island, Kongo inspirations assume myriad names and forms. This paper concerns Havana-based *Palo Briyumba*. *Palo Briyumba*, like the other branches, proliferates into smaller communities that I call praise houses [*casas templo*, literally “temple houses”], because they coalesce in the home of practitioner-teachers, and around the powerful *prendas* they keep and feast there.<sup>11</sup> In the mid- to late- 1990’s, *Palo Briyumba* and *Palo Monte* praise houses were predominant in Havana, with the latter apparently more pervasive than the former. Perhaps this explains why *La Regla de Congo* is often referred to in scholarly and popular literature as “*Palo Monte*.”<sup>12</sup> In keeping with popular usage among people who practice Kongo Law in Havana, I have adopted “Palo” as more accurate, if more generic, shorthand for it.

The word “palo” has broad currency in Cuban Spanish. Strictly defined, it means “stick.” “Palo” may also refer to an entire tree in the Cuban vernacu-

8. For estimates that give some indication of the numbers of slaves brought to Cuba during these years see Curtin, Philip D., *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison, Milwaukee, London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969) 265-273. See also Ortiz, Fernando, *Los Negros Esclavos* (La Habana: Editorial Ciencias Sociales, 1975) 37-66.

9. An historical account of African and Creole social and aid societies during this period can be found in Howard, Philip A., *Changing History: Afro-Cuban Cabildos and Societies of Color in the Nineteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998). See also, George Brandon, *Santería from Africa to the New World: The Dead Sell Memories* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993) 69-76.

10. See note 1, above.

11. I borrow the term “praise house” from Margaret Washington Creel in “Gullah Attitudes toward Life and Death,” in Holloway, Joseph E., ed. *Africanisms in American Culture* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990) 71, 93n.14.

12. Recent examples include Palmié, Stephan, *Wizards and Scientists: Explorations in Afro-Cuban Modernity and Tradition* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002); Arostegui, Natalia Bólvivar and Carmen González Días de Villegas, *Ta makuende yaya y las reglas de Palo Monte: Mayombe, brillumba, kimbisa, shamalongo* (La Habana: Ediciones Unión, 1998); Barnet, Miguel, *Cultos afrocubanos: la Regla de Ocha, la Regla de Palo Monte* (Ciudad de la Habana: Ediciones Unión, 1995).

lar, as in “*un palo de mango*” [a mango tree]. Derived from its meaning as “stick,” “palo” also means “club,” or “cudgel.” Moving further into the vernacular, “palo” can refer to a strike or a blow, as in “*¡Le voy a meter un palo a la cabeza!*” [I’m going to knock him on the head!]. Palo can also mean “penis” or “fuck.” The adoption of “Palo” to refer to Cuban-Kongo religious practice lies in the artistry of pun and insinuation surrounding this word in all of its Cuban Spanish iterations.

“Palo” invokes the sticks cut from the branches of powerful trees that are prominent in Cuban-Kongo power objects, the *prendas* used for crafting works of healing and harming. These sticks are imagined as kindling used to light fires in the lives of one’s enemies.<sup>13</sup> From this understanding, it is easy to conceive of *Palo* as do Cubans of all stripes—as dangerous “heat” or “fire” [*la candela*]. “Palo” also refers to the hallowed power of sovereign trees deep in the forest, which are praised in the songs and rites of praise houses, trees seen as dwelling place, and avatar, of the dead. And of course, “Palo” speaks to the blows Cuban-Kongo practice delivers against the fortune of a healer’s enemies, and to the vaunted masculinity of Cuban-Kongo praise societies. Finally, but not insignificantly, “Palo” refers to the fucking-over of an enemy through cleverness and force.

Given this, it is hardly difficult to imagine why relative to *Santo*, *Palo* is considered the “left hand” of Cuban arts of African-inspired healing.<sup>14</sup> When Kongo inspirations emerged as *La Regla de Congo* sometime near the beginning of the twentieth century, they did so in conjunction with, perhaps in response to, the emergence of a similar code that established the rules for teaching West African traditions of inspiration. This was *La Regla de Ocha*, which I translate literally as “The Law,” or “Rule, of the Pure,” but which I will refer to throughout my text as “Santo.”<sup>15</sup> The relationship between *Palo*

13. Ochoa, Todd Ramón. “The Dead and the Living in a Cuban-Kongo Sacred Society.” Diss. Columbia University, 2004. 265

14. Hertz’s elaboration of right and left as regards the use of hands is well known. The left is that which is “repressed and kept inactive, its development methodically thwarted.” The left, in the body and the social alike, is the illegitimate, impure, unstable, maleficent and dreaded. Robert Hertz, *Death and the Right Hand*, trans. Rodney and Claudia Needham (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1960) 92, 100.

15. From Igbo, *Ocha* means “purity,” “cleanliness.” See Williamson, Kay, *Igbo-English Dictionary Based on the Ontisha Dialect* (Benin City, Nigeria: Ethiope Pub. Corp. 1972), 396-397. See also Echeruo, Michael J.C., *Igbo-English Dictionary: A Comprehensive Dictionary of the Igbo Language with an English-Igbo Index* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998) 132, 163, 245, 272. See also Igwe, G. Egemba, *Igbo-English Dictionary* (Ibadan: University Press PLC, 1999) 637, 795. Not by coincidence, *Ocha* is the word used by practitioners of *Santo* when formally referring to their Yoruba-inspired orders of knowledge and practice. *La Regla de Ocha: The Rule of Ocha, the Rule or Law of the Pure. La Regla de Ocha* is popularly referred to as “Santo”—referring to the rule of the sovereigns, the “Saints,” at the exceptional pinnacle of purity rising from the broad base of profane life. Importantly, “ocha” also means “white” in Igbo, which is the color *Santo* initiates don to distinguish themselves from the profane during initiation and feasts.

and *Santo/Ocha* is exquisitely complex, and is superficially characterized by a division of labor wherein *Santo/Ocha* does the healing and *Palo* does the harming. Though not entirely false, this distinction is overly simplistic.

A rivalry exists between *Palo* and *Santo*, between Kongo and Yoruba inspirations in Cuba, that, in its present form at the end of the 20th century, speaks to divisions and strengths pitted against one another since these groups of slaves met on ships crossing the Atlantic. It is not so violent a rivalry that a single practitioner cannot benefit from the dedicated practice of both *Palo* and *Santo*. Rather, *Palo* and *Santo* exist as mutually competing sovereignties [Reglas, Rules] vying to constitute subjects among the living. *Santo* establishes its sovereignty by virtue of its uncontested access to West African-inspired divinities, and the awesome power of Divinity per se. Historically, because West African ideas order experience into realms ruled over by divine powers, *Santo* has positioned itself closer to Catholic understandings of universal order [cosmos] than has *Palo*. In part, its sovereignty in Cuba is derived from the role it plays as mediator between Catholic and Kongo inspirations.

Refusing all dominant terms, either Catholic or Yoruba-inspired, *Palo* claims sovereignty, and thereby cosmological autonomy, through privileged access to the dead. Its love of the dead, and consort with the dead in its craft, led *Palo* to be viewed as malevolent in the eyes of Spanish Catholic Cubans. In response, rather than abandon their dead for greater assimilability, Kongo-inspired peoples appear to have adopted Spanish Catholic prejudices and figures of dread (the witch, the devil, the Jew) as the organizing terms by which Kongo Law is asserted.<sup>16</sup> The command by which *Palo* imposes its sovereignty in Havana is drawn as much from long-fertile Kongo ideas about the dead, as from Kongo-inspired interpretations of 19th century popular Catholic ideology, and from paradoxical folds in Catholicism's narrative of God's Rule, which requires the death of the divine (at the hands of Jews according to 19th century Catholic anti-Semitism) on Good Friday each year.<sup>17</sup>

Just as *Santo* has benefited from proximity to Catholic motifs of divinity relative to *Palo*, so has *Santo* and its practitioners been advantageously positioned to draw greater benefit from the influx of tourist dollars since the economic changes initiated in 1993-4. Those who practice *Palo* are acutely interested in the dollar and the purchasing power it brings at hard currency-only stores, and were it not for the radically inassimilable quality of prendas and *Palo* initiations to tourist aesthetics, would likely have made broader inroads in trading on their practice. Relative to *Palo*, *Santo* societies and their initiates have been awash in dollars, and have transformed accordingly.<sup>18</sup> Yet

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16. Ochoa, 330-332

17. Ochoa, 322-326.

it is important to note that dollars wealth has not transformed the basic cosmological boundaries that separate *Palo* and *Santo*, and which are guarded through a careful balance of power to guarantee mutual sovereignty for each rule of fate [*Regla*]. It is with *Palo*'s boundaries of action, and basis of sovereignty, that the remainder of this paper is concerned.

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### *Aspects of the Dead*

Following my teachers of *Palo*, I have asserted that *Palo* is before anything else a practice of apprehending and working with the dead, this to the extent that its adherents are said to “wander with the dead” [*andan con muerto*].<sup>19</sup> If one in to try to understand the *prendas* practitioners of *Palo* keep, and the elaborate social worlds that coalesce around these, then it is vital to grasp this point. One must have a “sense” of wandering with the dead before proceeding with any attempt to represent *Palo*, its *prendas*, or its practice of healing-harming. Isidra Saez, my principal teacher of *Palo* craft, taught me this through typical *Palo* pedagogy, which involved stories, songs, specific modes of talk and recollection, and not least through the practice of *Palo* craft. In each of these registers, she taught the dead as a mode of visceral apprehension, felt in the body and held in consciousness through it.

If there can be said to be a conceptual statement that communicates this viscosity of the dead, it is the following: the dead are contiguous and immediate to the living—my teachers argued that the material world is comprised of them both. And if this statement can be affirmed, it is only through the visceral apprehension of the dead in the bodies of the living, as sensation prior to codification or signification. I want to stress this because it introduces an argument important to what follows, which is that *Palo*'s understandings of the dead are not only conceptual affairs that revel in the mutual and indivisible affirmation of matter and the dead, but primarily visceral ones felt in the bodies of the living and discerned in the world around. In this, *Palo*'s definitions of the dead reside simultaneously in categories that are generally considered mutually exclusive by scholars inspired by Platonic, and thereafter Hegelian, traditions of dialectical logic: concept and matter, and immediacy and the object.

My characterization of *Palo*'s dead depends on describing these as having many aspects, mutually coexisting and concurrently affirmed. My approach insists that one sustain multiple (at times necessarily exclusive) definitions of the dead simultaneously. This method helps portray, literally, the baffling

18. Treatments of the transformations undergone by *Santo* in the 1990's have been undertaken with tact by Palmié, *Wizards and Scientists*, 260-289; and Hagedorn, Katherine, *Divine Utterances: The Performance of Afro-Cuban Santería* (Washington and London: Smithsonian University Press, 2001) 219-227.

19. Cabrera, Lydia. *El Monte* (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 2000) 42.

proliferation of the dead in *Palo's* teaching and craft. When contradictions arise between these mutually acknowledged definitions of the dead, it is best not to attempt to resolve them by means of dialectical negation, which usually clarifies things. Rather, my teachers taught me to affirm each definition, or aspect, of the dead, while affirming the others at once. In one moment the dead were discrete responsive entities such as a deceased parent or sibling, and in the same moment the dead was an undefined and pressing mass [*Kalunga, el muerto*] made up of infinite numbers of unrecognizable dead. Simultaneously, the dead were/was a chill running up one's spine, or a pinch of ash. The difficulty in characterizing the dead with such variety is that instead of narrowing an understanding of the dead to a single established identity, the logic of affirmation I pursue here leads to a proliferation of definitions.<sup>20</sup> If *Palo* can fix the dead at all, it is only as a ceaseless and glorious propagation that suffuses all things and is immanent to them.<sup>21</sup>

To help describe the proliferation of *Palo's* dead and the mode of understanding these imply—wherein a thing can be itself and its apparent opposite without contradiction, and where this is known in the senses of the body—one must comprehend the dead as proliferating into innumerable aspects, each one a version of the other. A person becoming familiar with *Palo* will perceive these aspects of the dead spreading through lived experience, so that before long the dead will be revealed as a feeling of un-attributable apprehension, and as a bit of sawdust from a powerful tree; the dead will be what is felt as important in a song, and also what is chilling about a skillful allusion in a moment of danger. The dead are the words of ancestors that return to echo in our minds with uncanny poignancy in a given circumstance, and they are bones exhumed from forgotten graves; they are blood and stones. The dead in *Palo* are best imagined as an uncontainable spreading, each aspect becoming yet another, until the multitude that accumulates overtakes and saturates the very imagination that attributes to the dead presence and volition. One can seek to understand *Palo* by approaching it through any aspect of the dead.

20. Wyatt MacGaffey, in his outstanding study of BaKongo thought, refers to this proliferation as a “series” of the dead. Unlike his series, however, the proliferation I suggest for the Cuban Kongo dead is more resistant to the categorizations MacGaffey proposes for the dead among the BaKongo. MacGaffey, Wyatt, *Religion and Society in Central Africa: The BaKongo of Lower Zaire* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986) 76.

21. My use of a logic of affirmation, propagation and paradox in describing *Palo's* dead is indebted to Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990) 1-41, 253-264. For propagation and proliferation as modes of understanding and experience, see Bataille, Georges, *The Accursed Shared, Vol.1: Consumption* (New York: Zone Books, 1988) 19-40. See also Bataille, Georges, “The Notion of Expenditure,” in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings*, ed. Allan Stoekl, trans. Allan Stoekl with Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie, Jr. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) 116-129.

It is necessary at this moment to point out that the Cuban-Kongo dead, the inestimable aspects of Palo's dead, have no dominant entity to authorize their proliferating forms.<sup>22</sup> Rather, what was described to me by my teachers, Isidra and Rodolfo, was an anonymous mass of the dead [*Kalunga, el muerto*], to which no discrete identity is ascribed. All aspects of the dead, including those that comprise the world of the living, are immanent to *Kalunga, el muerto*, before they emerge in discrete form to be apprehended by the sensing body. I learned to perceive this anonymous mass of the dead as an "ambiance," immediate to all matter.

It is no surprise that my teachers would equate the dead with *Kalunga*, the realm of the dead residing beyond the depths of the sea, for BaKongo people.<sup>23</sup> Kongo cosmology emphasizes the dead as an important force in the world of the living, and in its explanations situates the dead not only as residing beyond the sea, but as prolific and excessive, much like the sea in its vastness.<sup>24</sup> The dead are in the teachings of Palo's practitioners much as they were in Kongo thought: immanent to the living. The dead are to the living, in Bataille's words, "like water is in water," dependent on no object and belonging to no subject, rather everywhere within these at once.<sup>25</sup>

*Kalunga, el muerto*—the vast sea of the dead—is comprised of all the dead that could possibly exist or have existed. It is ancient beyond memory, and within it the dead exceed plurality and become instead a dense and indistinguishable mass.<sup>26</sup> This dispassionate mass of the dead is felt pressing close; one is educated to discern it filling-up space and crowding around in

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22. People familiar with Kongo cosmology, or with Palo's dead, will immediately suggest *Nzambi Mpungu* as such an authority, because Nzambi Mpungu is often offered as a likeness to God by those who understand this power either in Kongo or Palo thought. These readers will also recognize that the status of Nzambi Mpungu as a singular authority over the dead is much in doubt. See, for example, MacGaffey, *Religion and Society* 6, 73-76. In the case of Cuban Palo, I propose that Nzambi Mpungu is but another form of the dead. Nzambi Mpungu in Cuban Palo is that form of the dead that is the power in matter that pushes back against human manipulation and imposes itself against a person's will. Like any aspect of the dead in Cuban Palo, Nzambi Mpungu is in practice no higher, or more sovereign, than any other form.

23. MacGaffey, *Religion and Society*, 43. See also Bentley, *Dictionary and Grammar*, 288; Laman, *Dictionnaire*, 207.

24. MacGaffey, *Religion and Society*, 63-88.

25. Bataille, Georges, *Theory of Religion*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1992) 23-25. For a characterization of immanence in relation to subjects and objects see Deleuze, Gilles, *Pure Immanence: Essays on A Life*, trans. Anne Boyman (New York: Zone Books, 2001) 26.

26. Canetti calls this mass "the invisible crowd." He writes: "It could be argued that religions begin with invisible crowds. They may be differently grouped, and in each faith a different balance between them has developed. It would be both possible and fruitful to classify religions according to the way in which they manipulate their invisible crowds." Canetti later depicts the opposition of the crowds of the dead to the crowd of the living as essential not only for social cohesion but for despotism as well. He writes, "The two crowds keep each other alive." Canetti, Elias, *Crowds and Power*, trans. Carol Stewart (New York: Seabury Press, 1978) 45, 63, 265-9.

moments of indeterminate importance. Then it appears to recede. My teachers felt Kalunga suffusing them, as a range of visceralities and ineffable feelings that took form in speech in uncanny metonymy—of liquids. Isidra said that Kalunga, the sea, should be thought of as a broth [caldo] where the dead float and drift among countless other dead.

Feeling *Kalunga, el muerto*, so close—in her body and on her skin—Isidra insisted that the living and the dead float together. Her elaboration of *Kalunga* dissolved the expected opposition of living and dead, so that not only did these two great ordering categories no longer stand in opposition to one another, but at the limit of her characterization became an indivisible coupling, mutually becoming one another like the surfaces of a mobius strip. Placed within the context of Kalunga's saturating immanence, the living are best understood as singular densities of the dead precipitating in a fluid at saturation. In precipitating subjects and objects and lending them density amidst its indifferent flows, *Kalunga* gives them meaning and singularity (though not identity).<sup>27</sup> From out of the immediacy of *Kalunga*, the living and the dead, and the world in which they exist, are a series of emergences, forever becoming, dissipating, and repeating upon themselves.

Having a form that achieves duration, such as a body, involves precipitating with more or less force within the immanence of *Kalunga, el muerto*. Sustaining the duration of a form likewise requires a combination of forces, and such combinations are what we call life. In *Palo*, the combination of forces that gels a life is not protected by social prohibitions such as those that add up to the European values of good and evil. Rather "life" is one set of forces among many sets that subsist in ever precipitating and repeating series that transfer with great speed through the immediacy of *Kalunga, el muerto*. This understanding establishes the living as tenuous and transitory precipitations, perhaps coagulations, of the infinitely generic flows of the dead. Isidra's notion of the dead as a fluid immanence that permeated and saturated life helped her advance the idea that the body is something shared with the dead. Within the immanence that is *Kalunga*, the body is not fixed by the physics of flesh and bones, it is rather more like a membranous peel constituted in any depth it might have by the hydraulic fluctuations and re-arrangements of the dead permitted across and through its surface. Isidra's formulation of the body cast it as yet another aspect of the dead, material insofar as matter was understood as a momentary condensation, precipitation, or coagulation of the fluid immanence of the dead.

These reflections will take one only so far in *Palo*, however, because the principal characteristic of *Kalunga, el muerto*, the ambient dead, is to evade

27. For the critical distinction between singularity and identity see Deleuze, Gilles. *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 43. Deleuze, Gilles. *Pure Immanence: Essays on A Life*. (New York: Zone Books, 2001) 29-31.

determination, remain strange, become unexpected, and forever exceed dominant languages that seek to inscribe it. In Palo teaching, *Kalunga, el muerto*, resides nowhere but saturates what there is to be perceived. Most often, if it was ever evident in my engagements with my teachers, *Kalunga, el muerto*, was a fleeting sensation in the wake of an insinuation or a clever imputation, discerned only by the person who felt it. It can be said that the dead are a studied and refined discourse on the part of the practitioners of Palo, a discourse not only of words, but also of pauses, of creative omissions, of clever puns, unverifiable implications, and allusions born forever anew, as it were, from the overlap where matter and concept, the felt and the thought, the immediate and the discrete object, touch.

### ***Prenda Nganga*—Transformation, the Attack**

*Palo*'s rigid hierarchy, exaggerated masculine aesthetics, secret languages,<sup>28</sup> and violent initiations are intimately bound-up with the *prendas* teachers of *Palo* make and keep at the heart of their praise houses. Furthermore, the webs of insinuation that cast *Palo* as the principal mode of African-inspired sorcery in Cuba are spun out of these elaborate agglomerations of earth, sticks, animal remains, and labored substances, packed into iron cauldrons and terracotta urns. "Prenda" is a word with a remarkable proliferation of meanings and translations from the Spanish, of which "pawn," "collateral," and, by extension, "jewel," are the most common. "Nganga" is 19th century Kikongo (the language of the BaKongo people) for "sorcerer" or "healer."<sup>29</sup> "Prenda nganga," the formal name by which all *prendas* are named in *Palo*, is thus a healer's jewel, her or his guarantee against the afflictions of an indentured life.<sup>30</sup>

*Prendas* are inspired elaborations of matter—they are complex and singular efforts to presence *Kalunga, el muerto*.<sup>31</sup> Their inspiration, like everything

28. The ritual vocabulary of *Palo* is inspired principally by Kikongo. The linguistic anthropologist Armin Schwegler has argued recently that *Palo* speech is the result of a "direct transmission and tight preservation" of Kikongo in Cuba from the earliest moments of slavery on the island. See Armin Schwegler, "El vocabulario (ritual) bantú de Cuba, Parte I: Acerca de la matriz africana de la "lengua congo" en El monte y Vocabulario congo de Lydia Cabrera" in *La Romania Americana: Procesos lingüísticos en situaciones de contacto*, Norma Díaz, Ralph Ludwig and Stefan Pfänder, eds. (Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2002) 101-194.

29. For *nganga* as "sorcerer" or "healer" see Bentley, *Dictionary and Grammar*, 371. See also Laman, *Dictionnaire*, 683.

30. This is best reflected in a type of *prenda* broadly known as *Lucero*, or "morning star." *Lucero* *prendas* often include in the their names, which can be quite long, the phrase "saca empeño," or "extricates from debt."

31. See Cabrera, Lydia, *Vocabulario Congo (el Bantú que se habla en Cuba)*, (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1984) 246. Also Cabrera, Lydia, *Reglas de Congo: Palo Monte, Mayombe*, (Miami: Peninsular Printing, Inc., 1979) 129: "Nganga no es Santo, sino *puntualmente*, el espíritu de un muerto." See also MacGaffey, Wyatt. "Complexity, Astonishment and Power: The Visual Vocabulary of Kongo Minkisi," *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Jan., 1988): 188-203.

in *Palo*, owes to the creative spark that crossed the Atlantic with BaKongo and other central African peoples. *Prendas* are uniquely Cuban forms of Kongo *minkisi* (pl.; sing. nkisi), which are materializations of the influence of the dead that defined, in the 19th century, and continue to define today, Kongo notions of clairvoyance and causality. *Prendas*, like Kongo *minkisi*, are powerful forms of the dead synonymous with curing and affliction, which are traditionally drummed up at the heart of Kongo healing societies.<sup>32</sup>

Like the dead, *Prendas* evade the conceptual stasis that accompanies identification. They seek to grow before all else, to continually transform their surface appearance as layer upon layer of objects, substances, and fluids are placed on them. They want only to eat, to be fed the fates of initiates, who they love to have gathered around them in feasts of praise. They delight in drumming, dancing, and meals of sacrificial blood from fowl, goats, rams, and other creatures. Their greatest joy is to have the dead that course through them made flesh and blood in the body of an initiate, who has pledged her or his life to the object. When the feast is over, *prendas* sink into fetid repose, glorying in the coagulating rivulets of blood and crowns of rooster feathers that cover them. In time, as the initiates offered to a *prenda* become many, as a praise house grows, as the offerings become more sumptuous and more regular, a *prenda* will overflow its receptacle, spilling and spreading through a room like a still life of the uncontainable fluid of *Kalunga*, *el muerto*, itself. A *prenda* (or a collection of *prendas*) will eventually claim entire rooms, which are sealed off and opened only with its permission.

As a praise house becomes influential, drawing scores of initiates into the gravitational pull of its *prendas*, the social force of these objects becomes irresistible. Living and dead circulate through *prendas*. Each is recycled through the body of the objects—the living offer gifts and gestures of obeisance, while *prendas* offer access to a series of privileged encounters with the dead that change petrified configurations of fates and lives. And this is a *prenda's* grace, to dissipate and make anew what is fixed and given; each aspect of the dead that passes through it is at the same moment transformed. The living are forever drawn to this potential when the collection of forces that organize their lives becomes oppressive, and impossible to turn toward good fortune. *Prendas*, their transfers of force forever ambivalent, hold no easy formula for healing, and rather promise only disruptions of what has apparently become inevitable. Such disruptions are neither painless, nor devoid of risk, but the people who come within the atmosphere of change a *prenda* generates find themselves willing to try their fates with the *prenda's* coupling of healing-harming.

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32. Janzen, *Ngoma*, 12, 72, 108.

To choose to disrupt the forces that organize and sustain a life, to seek to dissipate such a combination of forces by means of other, likewise influential forces, such that a life that is fixed is scattered back into the immanence of *Kalunga* and changed, or lost, this is what *Palo* sorcery is about. It is performed through subtle craft, which is worked as much in the realm of labored materials as in the realm of words and silences. It is an art that combines a sensitive apprehension of the dead with lore in the manufacture of fatefully powerful substances, to create objects and situations that are unique, eruptive, and eventful in their capacity to alter those who possess or experience them. These often take the form of protective charms, healing bundles, concoctions made with animal blood, powders, and intimate encounters with a healer wherein the dead are engaged through divination and possession, and animals are offered in sacrifice.

*Palo* healing more often than not involves an attack on an oppressing enemy. Threatening an enemy, chasing them off, promises a transformation in the lives of the afflicted. Healing-harming is effected through *prendas*, which collect the generic force of *Kalunga, el muerto*, and condense it so as to transform it into forms that can be directed against an enemy's subjectivity. These forms are not easy to define with certainty, but often take the shape of ruinous storms, hunting cats, birds of prey, raging bulls, and devious imps, each in immanent, emergent, relation with the multitudinous dead.<sup>33</sup> These predatory aspects of the dead obey the keeper's *prenda* (in many respects they are aspects of the *prenda*), and take advantage of the immediacy they enjoy with *Kalunga, el muerto*, to travel through it at exquisite speed, like waves moving through a heavier, clumsier medium. If the life they seek to disrupt is undefended when they reach it, they pass directly through its density, striking time and again until that shape is dispersed and lost amidst the flows of the dead.

A sensitive study of *Palo* involves understanding that *prendas* are, among their other attributes, relays for imperceptible, yet socially potent transfers of force that can both petrify reality and render it fluidly immediate. In this, *prendas* can be understood as synthesizing agents of reifying-dereifying, reification referring to forms of social organization whereby conscious thought becomes petrified and remote. To paraphrase Hegel, when what is apparently most close to one is in truth most removed.<sup>34</sup> There are strong intimations in Hegel, assertions in Marx, and emphatic appeals in Lukács that the principal device used in the transfer of this subtle social force is the object which, like a gleaming jewel, seems forever to embody more social potential than its simple matter can possibly hold.<sup>35</sup>

33. Ochoa, 372-376.

34. G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) 17-20

But thinking of *prendas* as relays for the transfer of force hardly exhausts this socially ebullient object; they are also agents of transformation capable of inspiring entirely captivating landscapes of desire, as later interpreters of Marx and Hegel, such as Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, observed of the object.<sup>36</sup> This insight lies implicit in Hegel, whose own fascination with the object is often overlooked, as is the role he accords it in the constitution of human consciousness.<sup>37</sup> It is the object—in Hegel’s famous narrative that thing of beauty fashioned by the slave that makes master feel desire—<sup>38</sup>that is responsible for lifting human consciousness out of a consuming “immediacy” characterized by infinite receptivity.<sup>39</sup>

Hegel’s lesson, made explicit by Benjamin and Adorno, and which I have sought to explore here, is that properly manipulated the object can transfer forces that solidify one version of reality, just as they can unexpectedly create a tear in the screens of petrified thought and for an instant make fluid life possible again. “The object,” a *prenda* in this case, is a daunting thing of control and enchantment, just as it holds tremendous potential for change—of thought, of fates and of lives

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### *Conclusion—Aesthetics of Palo*

At the close of the 20th century and the birth of the 21st, *Palo* prizes and educates feelings at the limits of attribution and identification—like intuition, inspiration, and sudden fear. *Palo* loves the implicit and the “given”—the fated—which it revels in turning into something new through a clever play of the will amidst the generic mass of *Kalunga, el muerto*. *Palo*’s discourse of the dead in multiplicity reveals the aesthetic values *Palo* instructs, these being the volatility of substances, speed of decision, the use of secret force against adversaries, and unsentimental action taken to transform fate. The refinement of these is what *Palo* considers beautiful and reveres. These sentiments and values are educated by teachers of *Palo* who instruct their initiates

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35. Hegel, 115. Also Marx, Karl, *Capital, Vol 1* (New York: International Publishers, 1967) 76-87. See also Lukács, Georg, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971) 83-89; 92-95.

36. Adorno contends with the theory of the object and its reifying quality in Adorno, Theodor, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973) 11-12; 31-33; 174-176; 183-192. Benjamin’s concern with the capacity of the object to overtake the imagination is most evident in his sustained inquiry into commodity fetishism, perhaps most accessible in his Paris *oeuvre*. See for example, “Paris Capital of the Nineteenth Century” in Benjamin, Walter, *Reflections*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 1986) 146-162. Also “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” in Benjamin, Walter *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969) 186-192.

37. Hegel, 115-116.

38. Hegel, 115-118.

39. Hegel, 104-106.

to seek them among *Kalunga, el muerto*, as discursive lines of approach and escape running through series of aspects of the dead, often without apparent affinity or resemblance between them. *Prendas*, one aspect of *Palo's* dead, seek ever to grow and draw the fated to the them, so they may be transformed. Such transformations are effected through the organization and condensation of the flows of *Kalunga, el muerto*, into fatefully significant events. Each aspect of *Palo's* dead is singular yet speaks for the others, each in its own irreducible particularity. In so doing, in so valuing the dead and the immediate self-otherness of its multiple aspects, *Palo* scatters itself along the frictionless plane of its becoming, thus eluding attempts to assimilate or appropriate it. By this valuation, which is also a physics of the dead, is *Palo's* sovereignty, is Kongo Rule in Cuba, affirmed.

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