THE KONGO RULE: THE PALO MONTE MAYOMBE WISDOM SOCIETY
(REGLAS DE CONGO: PALO MONTE MAYOMBE)
A BOOK BY LYDIA CABRERA
AN ENGLISH TRANSLATION FROM THE SPANISH

Donato Fhunsu

A dissertation submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English and Comparative Literature (Comparative Literature).

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ABSTRACT

Donato Fhunsu: The Kongo Rule: The Palo Monte Mayombe Wisdom Society
(Reglas de Congo: Palo Monte Mayombe)
A Book by Lydia Cabrera
An English Translation from the Spanish
(Under the direction of Inger S. B. Brodey and Todd Ramón Ochoa)

This dissertation is a critical analysis and annotated translation, from Spanish into English, of the book Reglas de Congo: Palo Monte Mayombe, by the Cuban anthropologist, artist, and writer Lydia Cabrera (1899-1991). Cabrera’s text is a hybrid ethnographic book of religion, slave narratives (oral history), and folklore (songs, poetry) that she devoted to a group of Afro-Cubans known as “los Congos de Cuba,” descendants of the Africans who were brought to the Caribbean island of Cuba during the trans-Atlantic Ocean African slave trade from the former Kongo Kingdom, which occupied the present-day southwestern part of Congo-Kinshasa, Congo-Brazzaville, Cabinda, and northern Angola. The Kongo Kingdom had formal contact with Christianity through the Kingdom of Portugal as early as the 1490s. These Africans brought with them to Cuba their religious beliefs and practices; their healing, harming, and fate-structuring and restructuring arts (kinganga); their language (Kikongo); and their storytelling practices (myths, fables, narratives, songs, poetry) which, in the process of coping with their new condition and environment in the Americas, became the knot of material intimacies of “people from all four quarters of the globe” who labored in this new space to produce commodities for European consumption. In Cuba, they blended their African traditions with the traditions of the
native peoples of the island, of the Asians, and the Spanish and Christian Catholic tradition of the slave masters to produce a distinct, creole inspiration, language, and storytelling mode. Cabrera was inspired to do this work while studying art at the École du Louvre in Paris in the 1930s, after meeting the Négritude poets (Césaire, Senghor, and Damas), whose works she translated from French into Spanish.

The dissertation shows that Reglas de Congo creates what the Congolese philosopher Valentin Mudimbe calls “espace métissé,” a new, creole, hybrid, “translated” space that challenges the colonial assumptions of African and “black” personhood and articulates a religious-artistic, ontological, and epistemological dimension of personhood that, inserting itself on its own terms in this new cosmology, has come to be called “Kongo-inspired” and has led to a reconfiguration of the national project—what it means to be human and Cuban.
Zaya ku utuka, kuzaya ku ukuenda ko.
(Know where you are coming from, not where you are going.)
Kongo proverb

Mbidi bantu, mbidi kizoba.
(A multitude of people, a multitude of stupidity.)
Kongo proverb

You already know enough. So do I. It is not knowledge we lack.
What is missing is the courage to understand what we know and to draw conclusions.
Sven Lindqvist
“Exterminate all the Brutes”, p. 2

To my father and to my mother:
Tata, ikutondedi beni.
Mama, lutondu lu ntima.

To “my” Jesuit Fathers:
Comment vous remercier pour tous ces dons spirituels, intellectuels, émotionnels, physiques et culturels? Dieu seul sait comment je suis reconnaissant de cet “esprit sain dans un corps sain” dont vous avez été les catalyseurs.

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When in the 1930s Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor, and Léon-Gontran Damas, three young students of literature from various parts of the African Diaspora, met in Paris, France, and decided to launch the political, philosophical, sociocultural, artistic, and literary movement that came to be known as Négritude, they were saying one thing: “‘Black’ lives matter!” “Of course, all lives matter!” they were constantly reminded. “Just look how much the Paris cultural scene has appropriated all things African, from the cubism of Pablo Picasso to the surrealist poetry of Guillaume Appollinaire!” The beauty of human existence is that life is big enough to accommodate the voices of Pablo Picasso, Guillaume Appollinaire, and also the voices of Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor, and Léon-Gontran Damas, three inquisitive souls who felt the need to affirm the humanity of people of African descent. For those who, back then and now, experience human history clothed in an Africana skin, it is hard not to feel conflicted and wonder: “If all lives do indeed matter, why do I feel in myself and in my world the paradox of experiencing a negation that compels me to affirm that my life does indeed matter?”

The Comparative Literature Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has attracted me because I have found it to be the perfect home for me, a mansion big enough and with enough rooms to accommodate my many interests in languages and national literatures as well as my interest in the disciplinary fields of translation studies and religious studies, which,
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Technology, in its rich and ever-changing variety, is a tool that is supposed to make our personal and professional lives more effective and enjoyable. However, the time comes in the life of each one of us when technology seems to develop a mind of its own. That is when we need technology-taming angels like Yulianna Aparicio, in the Design Lab, to rescue us. I have always loved angels, but now I love them even more!

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TRANSLATOR’S INTRODUCTION AND NOTES

The Dead in Hybrid Spaces:

Translating Lydia Cabrera’s Reglas de Congo: Palo Monte Mayombe

Preface

Any human endeavor worth undertaking tends to have its own set of challenges. It is as if the proverbial mountain on the many paths we travel in life stands up and says to us: “I dare you to move me!” And whether we undertake to move the mountain physically with a shovel or intellectually with words, the task invariably involves understanding and facing this challenge that constitutes the very work we are called to do. For me, translating Lydia Cabrera's Reglas de Congo posed significant challenges, both intellectual and emotional. These challenges, broadly speaking, are in three realms: the pre-text of the work, the text of the work, and the con-text of the work.

Since I undertook this work as an academic project, the mountain I have faced has been primarily an intellectual mountain, and in seeking to “move” it, I have used words. In using words, metaphors constitute a particularly helpful tool. As the linguist George Lakoff and the philosopher of language Mark Johnson put it in their 1980 book Metaphors We Live By, metaphors are not only linguistic expressions, they are also embodiments of thought processes, manifested in the very ways in which we use our physical bodies in our daily lives. “The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another”\(^1\) In

\(^1\) George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, Metaphors We Live By, p. 5 (emphasis added).
seeking this understanding and experience, I have found it helpful to use, as an epistemological tool, the metaphor of what the Congolese philosopher Valentin Yves Mudimbe calls “espace métissé,” that is, “hybrid space.” I conceptualize a hybrid space as a complex, contested, and thus dynamic space existing in constant political, philosophical, historical, geographical, psychological, and sociocultural tension as it constantly seeks to integrate, in the same “space-ness,” the past, the present, and the future of various constituent geographies and cosmologies. As a metaphor, an espace métissé is neither an inner experience nor an outer phenomenon, but what in Kikongo is called a zita, a knot tying the two, a bridge between the two, which is what the etymology of the word “metaphor” implies (from the Greek meta, over, and pherein, to bear). As a dynamic gate or bridge of powers, energies, or forces, a zita can be purposefully and consciously locked, tied [kukanga] or unlocked, untied [kukutula].

Through this project, I explore this concept of the hybrid space, the knot, the zita, by considering (1) the Cuba in which Reglas de Congo is set as a hybrid space, (2) the Palo which is the subject of the book and the adjacent Ocha/Santo/Lucumí as hybrid spaces, (3) the author Lydia Cabrera herself as embodying a hybrid space, (4) Reglas de Congo, the text she produced, as a hybrid space, and, finally, (5) the act of translation—through which I engage Cabrera’s pre-text, text, and con-text—as a hybrid space. If the writer (of the text to be translated) embodies a hybrid space, then the translator who helps the writer bridge the culture and language gap (and who, after all, is the writer of the translation), embodies also a hybrid space because the two are engaged in similarly creative processes.

1. Cuba as a Hybrid Space

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It was in the Kongo, the culture of my bankulu, my ancestors, that Cuba seemed to resonate as a vital nexus of the Kongo Diaspora. It was in the Congo, the country where I was born (Congo-Kinshasa, politically created, along with twin Congo-Brazzaville, at the 1884-1885 Congo Berlin Conference), that I consciously discovered Cuba for the first time. A friend had shown me an LP of Cuban music and the cover was a photograph of the Afro-Cuban singer Celia Cruz, looking regal in all the splendor of the zenith of her musical career. As I listened to the music, it dawned on me that I had heard this music before. In fact, I had been hearing it all this time in the form of the Congolese rumba and Congolese mambo. In investigating the reason for this familiarity, I discovered that the Congo and Cuba have been entwined in a political and sociocultural embrace, a knot, a zita, for a long time. During the colonial era, in the first part of the 20th century, people listened to this music on the radio in the privacy of their homes, and many people were particularly attracted to this specific music from Latin America. If the Latin rhythms seemed familiar, so did the language of the vocals. Many Congolese singers sometimes sang in Spanish, and indeed several of them learned Spanish basics and wrote their own songs with Spanish lyrics.3 Some of these songs even had Spanish titles like “El que siembra su maíz,” “Linda calegnita,” “Para Fifi,” “La vida África,” “El rumba so,” or “Rumba quiero.” This is a significant development because Spanish was not a language that people in the community spoke; in their daily lives, people spoke Kikongo, Lingala, Tshiluba, Kiswahili, in their rich varieties, and French. Mass mobilization of Congolese able-bodied men during World War I (1914-1918) and again during World War II (1939-1945) to go fight on behalf of the European colonial powers deepened the dislocation of people and disrupted traditional life, creating a mass exodus (known in French as exode rural) to the cities, particularly, for the sake of this project.

Kinshasa (or Léopoldville as it was called at the time) and Brazzaville, across Nzadi Kongo (the Kikongo name for the Congo River), where people could go by ferry. As the anciens combattants, the veterans who had fought as “Belgian” soldiers in Europe and other parts of the world, returned to the Congo, they brought with them new ideas and new sounds. Soon sounds of Europe, the Americas, Asia, and, most importantly, Latin America, permeated Congolese cities. African rhythms previously exported on slave ships now echoed from the grooves of records and from radio loudspeakers. Inhabitants from the two Congos eagerly embraced them. The “rumbas” heard in the two Congos were actually a Cuban style known as son. According to ethnomusical research, the actual rumba had developed in 19th-century Cuba among slaves from Central and West Africa. Several variations evolved, all of which coupled drums and other percussion instruments with call-and-response singing between a vocal leader and a chorus. One of the more popular variants, the guaguancó, served, in the words of the Cuban journalist Leonardo Acosta, as “a social chronicle of the dispossessed.” But above all, the rumba was born to be danced. In the guaguancó, couples performed a pantomime of sexual seduction closely resembling the yuka fertility dance found in parts of Central Africa. The son, on the other hand, married African call-and-response singing, percussion, and thumb piano (called likembe in the two Congos and marimbula in Cuba) with an indigenous, guitar-like instrument of Spanish descent called the tres.

After World War II ended (a war in which, as we pointed out above, the anciens combattants had actively participated) a basic contradiction came to light. The reactionary forces that had ravaged Europe had been defeated, the United Nations Organization had been

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4 Gary Stewart, Ibid., p. 20.
5 Gary Stewart, Ibid., p. 21.
established (in 1945) with the express purpose to build a better world, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights had been adopted (in 1948) with the express intent to affirm and promote these basic human rights as the foundation for this better world. However, even after all these achievements, the people in the Congo, in most of Africa, and people of African descent in the rest of the world, were still not even integrated into the world that was supposed to have been bettered. They were not yet citizens of this better world. The Congo, Congo-Kinshasa, was still a Belgian colony and its people Belgian “subjects.” As the anciens combattants, aware of the existing contradictions in the global world of the time, questioned the status quo, Cuban-inspired music—Congolese rumba, mambo, and cha-cha-cha songs and dance moves—filled the airwaves and the dance floors. The Belgian colonial administration saw these songs and dance moves as threatening to the stability of the colony. In a space where dissent was not tolerated and was treated with violence, the melodies and steps carried veiled creative, artistic critiques of colonialism, a colonial enterprise that Africans saw as frustrating basic human aspirations to full selfhood. Most of these songs were love songs, coupled with expressive moves that used the body in particular ways, dramatizing the heartbreak of a lover whose love is not returned and wonders why. The Congolese who listened to these songs and danced to their rhythms, got the message because they could “listen between the lines” and “move between the spaces.” Love was seen as subversive because it mounted a challenge to the colonial agenda: the human spirit, aspiring to love and be loved, is indomitable. This conviction, a special kind of popular education transmitted aurally and physically, seemed to echo earlier challenges that the ancestors of these singers and dancers had faced at an earlier historical period.

As the Congo finally achieved its political independence from Belgium on June 30, 1960, the song that the people were singing and to the tune of which they were dancing in celebration
was called “Indépendance Cha Cha,” by the singer Joseph Kabasele (born in Matadi, in the Province of Kongo Central, and best known by his artistic name of Le Grand Kallé) and his band, African Jazz. “Indépendance Cha Cha” was a zīta, a knot, a hybrid space in its own right. The lyrics contained lines in Kikongo, Lingala, and French, as the song celebrated kimpuaanza, the Kikongo word for “freedom.” Maybe that is why, from a Congolese song of independence, it quickly became an African song of independence: “As colonial dominos began to topple, Africans across the continent celebrated their freedom to the tune of ‘Indépendance Cha Cha.’”

This cultural and artistic mixing of Cuba and the Congo has continued to this day with band names like the Congolese band “Viva la música,” founded by the Congolese musician Papa Wemba in 1977, or the Afro-Cuban fusion band “Makina loca” (meaning “crazy dance,” from the Kikongo word makina, dance, and the Spanish word loca, the feminine form of loco, crazy), founded in 1990 by the Congolese musician Ricardo Lemvo, and whose songs are, according to Lemvo himself, “[a blend of] Congolese soukous and rumba with Cuban salsa” rhythms, sung in Kikongo, Lingala, Kimbundu, French, Portuguese, and Spanish.

As I went back in time in my endeavor to understand the zīta, the knot, the entangled dance between Cuba and the Congo, it became clear that the music and dance, the cross-fertilization, had begun even earlier still in this place called Cuba, as early as the African slave trade on the Atlantic Ocean front.

When in October of 1492, Cristóbal Colón (known in English as Christopher Columbus) landed on the island of Cuba and claimed it for Spain, without probably knowing it, he was beginning a process that would change the fortunes of many generations to come. Before the arrival of the Europeans, the island had been inhabited by native peoples, among them the

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6 Gary Stewart, Ibid., p. 86.
Ciboneyes, the Guanahatabeyes, and the Taínos. After a period of initial struggles with the indigenous populations and the corresponding formalities by King Ferdinand, Diego Colón (a son of Cristóbal Colón) settled Cuba and Diego Velázquez was appointed the first governor in 1512. The following years saw attempts to establish the city that would come to be known as Havana, which took definite shape in 1515. What ensued was a process of struggles that significantly reduced the population of the indigenous peoples. To this mass destruction, the Spanish friar Bartolomé de las Casas responded by arguing, in his 1542 book *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias*,\(^7\) that Columbus had been chosen by God to bring the Gospel to the New World but that this spreading of the good news should be done peacefully, avoiding the genocidal colonization that had ensued all over the American continent, especially on the island of Cuba, which had “almost been emptied” (8). At the time of its writing and publication, de las Casas’ book was an integral part of the ongoing and ambitious, diverse but unified European political, economic, religious, scientific, psychological, and sociocultural hegemonic discourse of expansion of the period. In situating himself as “the defender” of the native peoples of the Americas, however, the Spanish friar provided an authoritative Christian theological justification for the enslavement of the native peoples of Africa.

The first record of African slavery in Cuba occurred in 1513. A landowner named Amador de Lares got permission to bring to Cuba four Africans from the nearby island of Hispaniola. The first large group of slaves, 300 of them, arrived in 1520. In 1550, the Spanish Crown allowed a privileged group of merchants to import slaves from Africa to Cuba, “because of laziness of the Cubans, who resist all kinds of work.”\(^8\)

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\(^7\) Bartolomé de las Casas, *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias*.

\(^8\) Jerry A. Sierra, *500 Years: The Timeline History of Cuba*, p. 14.
the 17th century continued to be turbulent times for Cuba as the island continued to put in place administrative institutions, Havana officially became the capital in 1607, and the Treaty of Ryswick in 1697 brought under control the external problem of pirate raids on the island.\textsuperscript{9} However, internally, with each passing decade, the composition of the population of Cuba continued to change; Africans continued to be enslaved and they also continued to seek to be free.

As could be imagined, because of the dynamic nature of the slave society that Cuba was and the various archives keeping record of the many activities related to slavery on the island, there are numerous sources, some more reliable than others, from which one could get an idea about the numbers of those involved in the institution of slavery. Two sources that I found helpful are Laird Bergad’s \textit{The Cuban Slave Market, 1790-1880}\textsuperscript{10} and Rebecca Scott’s \textit{Slave Emancipation in Cuba: The Transition to Free Labor, 1860-1899}.\textsuperscript{11} Cuba was an active slave society indeed. As Bergad points out, as slavery continued to develop in the Caribbean, between 1790 and 1867, over 780,000 African slaves were important to Cuba, “making the island the greatest slave-importing colony in the history of the Spanish empire and the center of the nineteenth-century slave trade to the Caribbean” (Bergad 38).

In 1708 the Spanish Crown decreed that slaves may purchase their freedom; slaves who obtained their freedom this way are known as \textit{coartados}. By 1774, census records indicate that Cuba had a total population of 172,620 inhabitants: 96,440 Whites, 31,847 \textit{coartados}, and 44,333 enslaved Blacks. In 1789, King Charles III issued a new Slave Code to regulate the lives

\textsuperscript{9} Jerry A. Sierra, Ibid., p. 15


of slaves. Besides allowing 270 work days per year, slaveholders were to feed and clothe slaves according to prescribed standards, to instruct them in the Catholic Christian religion, and to compel them to attend Mass regularly. The code also mandated the slaves to “obey and respect” their masters. On first reading, this Slave Code would seem to be protecting the slaves by limiting work days. However, as we will see later, if one compares this Spanish Slave Code to, for instance, Le Code Noir\(^\text{12}\) that the French King Louis XIV issued for the French colonies earlier in 1685, it becomes apparent that both codes were very similar in spirit, intent, and language, thus indicating that the hegemonic aspirations of the European powers at this time had a significant degree of continuity. By 1827, census shows a population of 704,000, of whom 311,000 were Whites, 286,000 enslaved Blacks, 106,000 freed Negroes or Creoles. It also shows 1,000 ingenios and trapiches\(^\text{13}\) processing sugar cane, 30,090 ranches, 5,534 tobacco farms, and 2,067 coffee plantations. By 1842, there were 1,037,624 inhabitants. About 448,291 of them were Whites, 152,838 freed Blacks, and 436,495 enslaved Blacks, and there were now about 1,442 ingenios.

Because of the increased number of enslaved people and the harsh treatment they suffered in the hands of the slaveholders, there were many slave revolts. Abolitionist movements also put pressure on the slave system and Spain was forced to act. The Spanish Courts responded first by passing the Moret Law in 1870 (proposed by Segismundo Moret).\(^\text{14}\) The Moret Law was,

\(^{12}\) Le Code Noir was a decree originally passed by King Louis XIV of France, “Le Roi Soleil” (1638-1715) in 1685. Containing a total of 60 articles, it defined the conditions of slavery in the French colonial empire, restricted the activities of free Africans, prohibited the exercise of any religion other than Roman Catholicism, and ordered all Jews out of France's colonies. It is probably one of the most extensive official documents on race, slavery, and freedom ever drawn up in Europe.

\(^{13}\) Ingenios and trapiches designate two institutions designed specifically for sugar production in the slave society of Cuba. Ingenios functioned on a big scale, while trapiches functioned a smaller scale.

\(^{14}\) Rebecca Scott, Slave Emancipation in Cuba, p. 65.
in a sense, an effort by Spain to capture the apparent moral high ground from the insurgents and to win gratitude from freed slaves and their descendants, while stalling abolition itself. While the main purpose was to meet the strategic needs of the moment, part of the attraction of gradual abolition had to do with long-term political and cultural considerations. The proponents of the law hoped that a period of *tutelage* during which free-born children would remain under the authority of their former masters would enable these children to assimilate themselves into the culture and civilization of Spain. “Spanish culture” and “Spanish civilization” were seen as values in themselves, in opposition to the concept of *Cuban* nationality. The Moret Law was conceived both as a non-distributive form of very gradual abolition, and a charitable act that would place Spain in the position of benefactor of the Afro-Cubans—instead of the insurgents in Cuba. Once tentative steps had been taken toward regarding slaves as potential citizens of Spain, then the issue of their loyalty increased in importance. During the 1870s, Spain sought to gain the political and cultural allegiance of former slaves and free people of mixed racial heritage. Spanish colonial officials acted as patrons to black and “mulatto” voluntary associations and supported loyal Afro-Cuban leaders. The people had three possible choices as far as their identity was concerned: they could see themselves as Spanish, Cuban, or African. The proportion of Cuban slaves who were African-born remained high, and the *cabildos de nación*, mutual help societies organized around African ethnic groups, remained a source of identity. African languages like Kikongo and Yoruba or Lucumí continued to be spoken. Many freed slaves retained their African ethnonym as a surname (such as Kongo, Angola, etc.), rather than adopting a Spanish surname, and took their Creole children to activities of the African *cabildos*.

The political and cultural line that Spain walked with the Moret Law was fine indeed. While seeking to win Afro-Cuban loyalty, the Spanish officials also portrayed the law as a legal
instrument that even slaveholders themselves could accept. In debating the proposal of the law, Segismundo Moret noted that he had copied one article directly from a proposal submitted by Cuban slaveholders. In practice, though, Cuban planters criticized the law and attempted to undermine its enforcement, and tended to view this path to abolition with suspicion and even open hostility. Once the law had passed, planters in Cuba, with the cooperation of local colonial officials, managed to stall its publication for several months. They then began to design regulations for enforcement that would minimize the effects of the law. The Moret Law produced paradoxical results. On the one hand, in theory, the freedom it afforded was limited and even illusory. On the other hand, in practice, its provisions led to institutional and attitudinal changes that, though to a limited extent, disrupted the social order of slavery.

The evolution of labor patterns in the period following the passing of the 1870 Moret Law can be understood only when the framework of Cuba’s changing population is taken into account. Between 1862 and 1877, the slave population fell by about 46 percent, leaving fewer than 200,000 slaves on the island by 1877.\textsuperscript{15} The rate of decline varied from province to province. During this time, Cuba had six provinces, which were, from West to East: Pinar del Río, Havana, Matanzas, Santa Clara, Puerto Príncipe, and Santiago de Cuba. Matanzas and Santa Clara, the major sugar producers and the provinces with the largest numbers of fully mechanized sugar mills, had the highest rates of persistence of slavery. Pinar del Río had one third of its slave population in sugar and one third in tobacco. By 1877, Matanzas, Santa Clara, and Pinar del Río had a slave population of over 60 percent of that of 1862, despite the decline due to the legal reclassification of children and the elderly. The province of Havana contained Cuba’s major urban area, and showed a substantially more rapid decline. These numbers seem to suggest that

\textsuperscript{15} Rebecca Scott, Ibid., p. 86.
the bulk of the decline in slave population took place in the city, with much greater persistence on the plantations. Where sugar prospered, slavery persisted, and slavery became increasingly concentrated in the major sugar areas. In 1862, Matanzas and Santa Clara had 46 percent of Cuba’s slave population; by 1877, that population had increased to 57 percent. Around this time, slave lists divided slaves into those on rural estates and those in domestic service, indicating a rural-urban divide. The 55,830 slaves that were counted in domestic service in 1871 constituted about 20 percent of the total slave population of 287,620. By 1879, the number in domestic service was given as 29,992, down to 15 percent of the 200,440 number counted in 1871. These tendencies seem to suggest that the causes of emancipation cannot be found solely within the sugar plantations, because, as emancipation proceeded, these plantations held proportionately more, and not fewer, of Cuba’s slaves. As these contradictions in the 1860s and 1870s Cuban slavery were becoming apparent, the major areas were nonetheless holding on to most of their slaves, or were even acquiring new ones to replace those lost. In Matanzas for instance, in 1862, the slave population was around 98,500. About 20 percent of these slaves were either under the age of ten or over the age of sixty, leaving about 78,800 of working age. In 1877, as a result of the Moret Law, there were still about 70,850 slaves in Matanzas. The slave population of working age had fallen in the intervening fifteen years, but only by around 8,000 or 10 percent, an amount that could be attributed to deaths and a shift in the age structure, partially counteracted by some inner migration, that is, migration from one slave locality to another one within Cuba itself. The planters in Matanzas, the most productive province of Cuba, were certainly not abandoning slaves or slavery.

It is important to clarify the demographics of Cuba at this time. Besides the indigenous peoples of the island, there are Whites of Spanish origin who have come from the Iberian
Peninsula or the Canary Islands, Creole Spanish (those born in Cuba to Spanish parents), Bozal Africans (those imported from Africa, either directly or indirectly from other slave societies), Creole Africans (those born in Cuba), and those referred to as “mulattoes” (who are the offspring of sexual relations, forced or consensual, among mostly Whites and Blacks). The population also included other types of Europeans and Asians, mostly Chinese, who had been brought to Cuba as indentured workers. The 1877 census lists 13,301 Asians in Matanzas and 47,116 for the island as a whole, the majority still under indentures. Evidence from account books and agricultural census suggests that the ratio of slave workers to Chinese in sugar production was about six to one, and the number of Whites doing field work on plantations was relatively small. Cuba then was a confluence of “people from four corners of the globe” or four continents (the Americas, Europe, Africa, and Asia), all of these people engaged, in one way or another, in the production of commodities for European consumption.

The work force was composed of various categories. There were “employees” who exercised the functions of administrators, physicians, nurses, overseers, mayordomos, machinists, cattle handlers, carpenters, distillers, masons, and barrel-makers, among other functions. For the “slave” population, besides the basic categories of domestic workers and field workers, there were libres, libertos, or free workers, and alquilados, or rented slaves, the percentages of men and women being roughly the same in all these categories.

Toward the late 1870s, Cuban slaveholders began to show a decreased emotional attachment to the formal institution of slavery, and the possibility of an eventual abolition seemed to no longer disturb them. The Moret Law and demographic patterns seemed to be pushing in the same direction. Because there were simply not enough future slave workers to replenish the slave system, new sources and forms of labor were being explored.
The pressures of the antislavery movement in Spain itself and in the other colonies in the Americas were keenly felt in Cuba. With the revolution that had happened earlier in 1804 next door in Haiti and the abolition of slavery in nearby Puerto Rico in 1873, Cuban planters anticipated that Cuba might be next. A number of Africans and Asians were already engaging in insurrection, and the possibility that the Courts in Madrid would opt for abolition was also contemplated. Some proactive slaveholders sought to fend off the tide with alternative forms of very gradual slave emancipation. In the same year (1873), they drafted a proposed bill of emancipation that incorporated a ten-year *patronato*, or “apprenticeship” (instead of any indemnity paid by the slaves to the slaveholders), a small stipend for the apprentices, work regulations based on those in force for Chinese laborers, and state-supervised labor contracting after the expiration of the *patronato*. The existence of the Cuban insurrection, threatening to disrupt the social order, was invoked in Spain by those opposed to reform, and served as the basic counter-argument to abolitionist claims. At the same time, the reality of the war within Cuba increased the practical pressures on the institution of slavery. The colonial officials on the island saw the Africans and the Asians in the insurrection as a serious threat to social order, even after the insurrection had been put down. Through the events of the war, the slaves’ desire for emancipation had become a threatening force to be reckoned with.

When the planters in Cuba came up with the concept of *patronato*, they feared that they might suffer the same fate as Haiti, the Radical Reconstruction in the United States, and what was perceived as “general barbarism” from the slave population. *Patronato* was an intermediate status between slave and free, and embraced the idea of gradual change. They argued that only prolonged transition could avoid the evils suffered in “those other places” (held and administered by the English, just north of Cuba, and by the French, just South of Cuba), and they elevated
gradualism to the level of a major virtue, the only way for slaves to become responsible free men and women, and for society to withstand the shock of the sudden change that outright abolition would bring, especially to the economy.

Even though the law establishing the *patronato* resembled a liberal slave code, it departed from the standard provisions of a slave code in a number of ways: First, the law established an expiration date for legal slavery: By 1888, slavery would end altogether, though all former slaves would be required to certify that they were “gainfully employed” for four years from the date of their freedom. Second, the law and the associated regulation established a set of local and regional boards to oversee the operation of the *patronato*, to settle disputes, and to act as intermediaries for self-purchase. Third, the law extended the right to self-purchase, establishing procedures and fixing amounts to be paid. Fourth, the law specified that infractions of its Article 4, which specified masters’ obligations, would be punishable by freeing of the *patrocinado*, the “apprentice.”

Since this was a law that had introduced legal changes, for these changes to have any effect, they had to be enforced. The law had set in motion a struggle between, on the one hand, the *patronos*, or the slaveholders, and, on the other hand, the *patrocinados*, or the slaves, a struggle over each group’s respective rights under the law. In Cuba, the struggle played out in several administrative systems and in a climate of political debate on the wisdom of maintaining the *patronato* system. For the colonial government in Madrid, the maintenance of order in its territories appeared to require both the abolition of an institution called slavery, and its replacement by one designed to appear paternal and transitional. In order to disarm abolitionists and political opposition within Cuba, it was important for Spain, on the one hand, to create a clear distinction between slavery and the *patronato* and, on the other hand, to enforce, in
principle at least, those parts of the 1880 Moret Law that expressed a departure from slavery. At the same time, the officials in Madrid wanted to avoid social disorder or disruption of production and to prevent the alienation of powerful economic interests on the island, interests to which those officials in many cases did have personal and political links. This ambivalence was also felt by those Spanish officials who worked within Cuba. By 1885, however, resistance to the idea of final abolition had diminished significantly. With a financial crisis occurring and a number of ingenios going out of business, in July of 1886, after consultation with Cuban planters, the Spanish Courts authorized the government to abolish the patronato system. On October 7, 1886, by royal decree, the Spanish government declared an end to the patronato, thus officially ending legal slavery in Cuba. By this time, a great majority of patrocinados had already obtained their freedom, and special control over the labor of the remaining 25,000 did not seem worth pursuing.

Because slavery had brought to Cuba a great variety of people who, for better or worse, found themselves sharing the same geographical space of this Caribbean island, a racialized space for all practical purposes, a racialized language also developed. The terms that developed to reflect people’s understanding and experience of race show that their perception was complex and was not only a matter of “white” and “black.” They saw people in terms of skin tones expressed in terms which included: blanco/blanca, negro/negra, prieto/prieta, moreno/morena, trigueño/trigueña, mulato/mulata, amarillado/amarillada, and jaba’o/jaba’a.16 As these expressions show, slavery in Cuba and its aftermath has made Cuba a zita, a hybrid space where

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16 According to the Sapir-Whorf linguistic hypothesis, language tends to reflect experience, or rather, embody experience. Where a culture’s experience with an aspect of human existence is rich, that richness tends to be reflected in the language used to refer to that experience. An example often used as an illustration of the hypothesis is the English word “snow.” While in Standard English there is this one word, the Eskimos seem to experience many fine qualities to snow and, as a result, have many words for “snow.”
the construction of race has produced more nuanced ways for people to experience race, depending on their location on the spectrum represented by these racialized terms.

A clarification needs to be made about the convention of spelling. In *Reglas de Congo*, following the common usage in the Spanish language, Cabrera uses Congo with *C* invariably to refer to the former kingdom in Africa, the people of that kingdom, the culture of those people, as well as the modern country in Central Africa. However, as Robert Farris Thompson points out in *Flash of the Spirit*, Africanists choose to establish fine distinctions. They use Kongo with *K* instead of Congo with *C* in order to distinguish Kongo civilization and the Bakongo people from the post-Congo Berlin Conference colonial entity known as the Belgian Congo (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo, DRC, or Congo-Kinshasa) and the present-day Republic of the Congo (Congo-Brazzaville), which both include numerous non-Kongo peoples. Historically, traditional Kongo civilization has included the present-day Province of Kongo Central in Congo-Kinshasa, northern Angola, Cabinda, and Congo-Brazzaville. Related to the Kongo people are the Suku people and the Yaka people (the Bayaka) of the present-day provinces of Kwango and Kwilu in Congo-Kinshasa, some of the ethnic groups of northern Angola, the Punu people of Gabon, and the Teke people (the Bateke) of Congo-Brazzaville. They share important religious and cultural concepts with the Bakongo and endured with them the plights of the African slave trade on the Atlantic Ocean front. In the early 1500s, the slavers first applied the name Kongo only to the Bakongo. Gradually, though, the use of the name got extended to designate any person brought from the west coast of Central Africa to the Americas. The Kongo convention

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further stipulates that the word Kongo is both singular and plural. It is also both a noun and an adjective, even though some scholars, like John Thornton, use the adjective “Kongolese.”

In this introduction and the translation, I follow the Africanist convention of spelling. I use Kongo with K instead of Congo with C in order to refer to Kongo culture, civilization, and the Bakongo people (and the people related to the Bakongo people, as indicated above). I use Congo with C only to refer to the modern-day countries of Congo-Kinshasa and Congo-Brazzaville.

2. Palo and Ocha/Santo/Lucumí as Hybrid Spaces

Even though both Palo and Ocha/Santo/Lucumí are represented in Western scholarship as African-derived “religions,” the concept of “religion,” understood as a discrete area of human existence, clearly distinguished from or even opposed to “the secular” or “the profane,” as illustrated in the institutional Abrahamic traditions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam), does not do justice to the worldview and integrative nature of these Reglas or Rules. And if the word “religion” is used in the context of this project, this conceptual consideration should be kept in mind. As Todd Ramón Ochoa observes in Society of the Dead: Quita Manaquita and Palo Praise in Cuba, these sacred spaces are better conceptualized as “inspirations,” rather than “religions” as commonly understood.

Palo is a Kongo-inspired cosmology, a worldview based on the relationship among the unborn, the living, and the dead, a relationship mediated through a central object called prenda. The word prenda is a complex term, with a rich range of meanings, ranging from the literal to

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the metaphysical. On the literal level, *prenda* is a complex combination of physical elements, ceremoniously and carefully put together and housed in a container that is usually a cauldron or a pot. On a more metaphysical level, *prenda* is also a body of knowledge of the *bankulu*, the ancestors, and an epistemology, a way of accessing that body of knowledge. The spirit of the dead, known as *mfumbi*, is summoned when needed, being a reliable vital energy or magical enforcer who carries out the invoker’s will, whether to heal or to harm. Like a knot, the *prenda* is a crossroad of forces, a *zita*, where people’s fate can be “locked,” “tied” (*kukanga zita*), harmed, or “unlocked,” “untied” (*kukutula zita*), healed, in an interdependent dynamic called *kanga-kutula*. As Robert Farris Thompson notes, the Bakongo lack a complex pantheon of deities, but “they have, instead, a complex system of *nkisi* (‘sacred medicines’), which they believe were given to humankind by God. The religion of Kongo presupposes God Almighty (*Nzambi Mpungu*), whose illuminating spirit and healing powers are carefully controlled by the king (*mfumu*), the ritual expert or authority (*nganga*), and the sorcerer (*ndoki*). It should be added that the king [*mfumu*] and the priest [*nganga*] exercise also the functions of a warrior [*kesa*].

When the African slave trade displaced the Bakongo to Cuba, the Kongo beliefs, practices, and language combined with those of other people taken into slavery from the African region and those of the people they found on the ground in Cuba to create the diverse and dynamic Kongo-inspired systems of praise called *Reglas de Congo*. Palo has four branches, each with idiosyncratic conceptual, ritual, musical, and linguistic characteristics. These branches are Palo Mayombe, Palo Monte, Palo Briyumba (Villumba, Vriyumba, or Biyumba), and Palo Kimbisa.21

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20 Robert Farris Thompson, Ibid., p. 107.

21 Ochoa, Ibid., p. 9.
It is important to note that even though Palo is African-inspired and seems to posit itself as an alternative to the branches of Abrahamic religion that developed in Europe and were exported outside Europe, like the Catholic Christianity that the Spanish imported to Cuba, the encounter on the island, again occurred at that *zita*, that knot, so characteristic of Palo. The “right-hand” path, or healing path, of Palo uses the *prenda cristiana* (“Christian *prenda*”), while the “left-hand” path, or harming path, uses the *prenda judía* (“Jewish *prenda*”). This aspect of conceptualization does not exist in Kongo culture in Africa. It developed as a creative appropriation and transformation of the Catholic doctrine as European slaveholders and African-Kongo slaves struggled for power and control of fate in this space that was Cuba’s slave society. As Ochoa states, “the use of the terms *cristiana* and *judía* is an open adoption of nineteenth-century Spanish Catholic ideas concerning good and evil in an ethnocosmic register. These ideas were constantly elaborated and constantly renewed through the difference marked by the term ‘Jew’ in Spain from the medieval through the colonial period, if not to the present.”[^22] The use of the term “Jew” as opposed to “Christian” also seems to have been used by the Spanish as a form of religious control, a way to force existential compliance on the Africans. In *Reglas de Congo*, Cabrera’s informants seem to make this point. “*El Intrépido no tenia capilla con capellán y santos blancos. Había que ir a la iglesia para bautizar a los negritos. El que no estaba bautizado por lo católico, se oía llamar judío. As ese lo abochornaban.*”[^23] [“The ingenio El Intrépido did not have its own chapel with a chaplain and white saints. In order to baptize the Negro children, people had to go to the neighborhood church. Those children who were not baptized in the Catholic Church were called *judíos* or Jews. And they were taunted.”]^[23]

[^22]: Ochoa, Ibid., p. 205.

Palo is a hierarchical membership society, open to both males and females. The first level of the hierarchy is occupied by the tata (male) and the yayi (female). They are the makers and keepers of the original prenda. They and the prenda they keep (which is called Fudamento or “the Founding Prenda”) are the “father” and the “mother,” and, ideally, in due time, they will “reproduce” spiritually and have spiritual “children,” disciples or students. Thus each one can become a padrino [godfather] or a madrina [godmother]. The second level is occupied by the padre and the madre. The third level is occupied by the ngueyo, the neophyte or newly initiated. Access is achieved through “initiation,” the formal introduction and welcome into the society.

At the center of Palo, besides the act of making the prenda itself, is Palo craft or trabajo, “work” (either to heal fate or to harm fate), during which the prenda is actually used and its power as a zita, a knot, is demonstrated. The mfumbi, working through the prenda is invoked and commanded to act. Sacred songs are chanted, dance steps are performed, and offerings are made to the mfumbi through the prenda. These offerings can be solid food items (like animals), liquids (aguardiente, wine), which the officiant sips without swallowing and, through the mouth, uses to “spray” or “aspire” the prenda), or gases (tobacco, which the officiant “smokes” and, in directed puffs, uses to “fumigate” the prenda). Thus, through the prenda functioning as a zita, the living and the dead commune on all three levels of matter: the solid, the liquid, and the gaseous. During this ceremony, one of the attendees can get into a trance state and be “mounted” or “possessed” by the mfumbi, thus performing acts of healing, “untying,” or providing needed answers to questions, resolutions to issues, or solutions to problems. The officiant can also use fula, or gun powder, “exploded” as an instrument of divination and another kind of zita to divine or “read” fate, usually also using a firma or signature, a complex combination of geometrical figures and signs drawn on the floor with white clay or chalk. The general practitioners of Palo are known as
palero (the male) and palera (the female), and for the specific branches they would be mayombero/mayombera, or kimbisero/kimbisera.

Like Palo, Ocha/Lucumí, also known as Santo or Santería, is an African-derived inspiration that developed and carved up a vital portion of the existential space in Cuban slave society and still maintains a position of prominence today in Cuban society and culture. As Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert suggest in their book, *Creole Religions of the Caribbean*, “in the final stages of the slave trade, Yoruba-speaking groups dominated, primarily from the southwest of Nigeria and from Dahomey, Togo, and Benin. They contributed most directly to the tradition that would come to be known as ‘Lucumí’ (the name given to Yoruba-speaking people in Cuba and to the religious practice of Regla de Ocha, the rule or religion of the Oricha, considered a variant of the Lucumí religious tradition).”

In order to appreciate the development of Ocha/Santo/Lucumí, one has to understand the development of Catholicism in the Americas. Roman Catholicism was the only religion officially permitted on the island of Cuba. Even though Spanish Conquest and its contingents of *conquistadores* or conquerors is generally seen as accompanied by dedicated missionaries assiduously engaged in the Christianization of the New World, a more accurate image is that colonial expeditions included fewer priests who practiced the official Church religion and more humble people who, back home in Spain, practiced a form of folk religion. Just like the Africans, these European settlers brought to Cuba their home traditions. Despite certain variations, these Spanish men and women shared a strong devotion to the Catholic saints who were seen as intermediaries between humans and a mysterious God, not unlike the mysterious *Nzambi Mpungu Lulendo* of the Bakongo. In a sense, having graduated from the School of Life as human

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beings, the saints were like alumni who knew what it means to be human because they “had been there before” not that long ago. Therefore, they were closer to humans and they understood human needs and struggles better than God, who lives in a non-human world. Again, this view of life beyond the living is not unlike the view of the bankulu, the ancestors, among the Bakongo.

Developing in the sociocultural matrix of the Greek Empire and the Roman Empire, Christianity inevitably borrowed much from the folk Greek religions and Roman religions of Antiquity. The New Testament, after all was originally written in koine Greek, or popular Greek (as opposed to scholarly Greek), and later translated into vulgate Latin (again, popular Latin, as opposed to scholarly Latin), mainly by Saint Jerome, so that the common people of the Roman Empire could be acquainted with the Scriptures. Just as Greek and Roman deities were specialized, Catholic saints likewise became specialized, specializing in the healing of specific diseases, the awarding of specific favors, general protection, or the protection of people engaged in specific types of activities. Even though the Catholic Church eventually took to “canonizing” or authorizing saints, the belief in and veneration of saints was a grass root development that the Church hierarchy was compelled to take over and regulate in order to maintain a certain sense of control of the direction that the religion was taking. This is the type of Catholicism that prevailed in Cuba when the Lucumí people began to arrive on the island, and a combination of demographic and institutional factors allowed for religious syncretism. For the Africans, acculturation was a means of survival. In the slave society, this meant adopting this particular Catholicism of the masters, at least in the open. As the title of Frantz Fanon’s book, Peau noire, masques blancs, suggests, in order to survive in this new space, on their “black skin,” the slaves

had to put on “white masks.” Or to express it another way, “the Negro… [had to get] a white soul.” Just as had been the custom in Spain, in Cuba the colonial administration allowed Church-sponsored mutual aid organizations for the Africans, called *cabildos de nación* and formed on the basis of ethnic origin (*naciones*). These were based on the mutual aid religious confraternities, or *cofradías*, that had existed in Europe in the Middle Ages. While the Counter-Reformation limited the role of *cofradías* in Europe, their existence was allowed to continue in the Spanish and Portuguese colonies, where they were seen as means of social control of the African populations. Even though the African domestic slaves worked in the houses of the Europeans and carried out some of the most vital activities of human existence (like cooking and raising the children for the families), the slave society was, paradoxically, a space of racial segregation. Excluded from the confraternities of the Whites, the Blacks were allowed to organize and govern their own institutions that were a combination of mutual aid societies and social confraternities to plan communal feasts, dances, carnival processions, funerals, and to help members in need. Each *cabildo* usually had its own house and could raise its own funds for its activities. The Cuban Catholic Church sponsored religious *cabildos* for the purpose of evangelization through the policy of “guided change,” which tolerated those African values that could be reinterpreted within Catholicism and radically opposed those that could not. Thus, one of the most celebrated street feasts among the Africans was the *Día de Reyes*, on January 6, which corresponds to the Catholic feast of Epiphany, the day which, according to the Book of Matthew in the Christian Bible, the three *magoi* (literally “magicians” in the original Greek, but

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26 Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs*.
28 Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, Ibid., p. 27
subsequently translated as “wise men,” “kings,” or *reyes* in Spanish) “from the East,” guided by a star, came to visit baby Jesus and brought him three gifts from their homeland.\(^{29}\)

In the 19\(^{th}\) century, both the functions and the memberships of the *cabildos* began to change. They now included African-born slaves, Creole slaves, and free men and women of African descent. Thus, although the associations were encouraged by colonial authorities as a method of controlling slave beliefs and maintaining internal divisions among different ethnic groups (based, for instance, on possible resentments based on inter-group warfare back home in Africa), the *cabildos* helped to replace families and institutions that had been lost in slavery. They also created the space for the Africans to evolve their alternative religious systems. To borrow from the concepts generated by the linguist Noam Chomsky,\(^ {30}\) a two-pronged structure developed at this time. The “surface structure” was made of the European, Christian façade, the Catholic saints (San Lázaro, Santa Bárbara, etc.), while in the “deep structure” lived the African, Yoruba pantheon made of the *Orishas*.

With the restrictions and interferences that the colonial administration placed in the affairs of the *cabildos*, especially after the official abolition of slavery in 1886, the “underground” nature of the Africans’ existence became more vital. Catholic discourse was more strategically borrowed and reinterpreted in terms of African religions under the guise of an alternative form of folk Catholicism. The saints, Jesus Christ, and the Virgin Mary were identified with the African sovereigns (like the deity of metals, the deity of war, etc.) and the ancestors who, in return for sacrifices, would protect the Africans or assist them in their daily activities. These were, literally, “lived traditions.”

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\(^{29}\) Matthew 2:1-12.

\(^{30}\) Noam Chomsky, *Syntactic Structures*, p. 15.
Even though both Palo and Ocha/Santo/Lucumí are African-derived inspirations, today, they are literal *espaces métissés*, hybrid spaces, illustrations of the concept of *zita*. They are mixed and diverse in terms of race, color, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and even religion. It is not uncommon to meet people who, in themselves are living examples not only of religious syncretism, but of religious integration; women who are Catholic and *santera*, or men who are *palero* and *santero*, thus showing that these are indeed hybrid spaces.

3. A Hybrid Lydia Cabrera and her Context

Lydia Cabrera, as a person and a writer, represents the human complexities of the hybrid space that is Cuba, as it relates to identity, belonging, and representation. When Cabrera talked about her own birth publicly, she would usually say that she was born on May 20, 1900, in Havana, Cuba. This information about her vital statistics gave her what she needed to claim that she was “born with the new century,” the 20th century. Her passport and other official documents, however, tell another story. These documents, which contemporary human tradition usually calls “identity documents” or “identity papers,” state that she was born on May 20, 1899.31 In other words, there are, in this case, two versions of who Lydia Cabrera was, one real, the other imagined, but both of these versions entangled in the dynamics of how identities are created, revised, and recreated through stories. This process parallels the main creative activities of the writer as storyteller. In general, a writer conceives, writes, rewrites, revises the story (of the singular Self or the plural or collective Self, or of the singular “Other” or the plural or collective “Other”) and, if that story is acceptable to the writer’s assessment and expectations,

then the writer puts it out for the audience to read (or hear). The writing process is a creative process. The writer as a creator then, is engaged in a constant process of creation, sustenance, and re-creation or evolution, whether that creation is the creation of the literary text or the creation of the components of identity. It is in awareness of this process that the African American writer Alice Walker writes, in the dedication of her 1982 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Color Purple*: “To the Spirit: / Without whose assistance / Neither this book / Nor I / Would have been / Written.”

It helps to remember that Cabrera can be seen as an integral part of an important generation in the history of Spain. The year 1899, the official year of Cabrera’s birth, falls in the “old century,” the 19th century, and comes just one year after 1898, the year in which Spain lost the Spanish-American War. As, because of the military defeat, Spain also lost some of its colonies, including the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Guam, and Cuba, in the Spanish empire, there was a sense of political, economic, moral, psychological, social, and cultural crisis, especially later on in the consciousness of those people born in that year of 1898 or immediately afterwards. The Spanish writer José Martínez Ruiz, best known by his pen name Azorín, in his 1913 essay-manifesto titled “La generación de 1898,” coined the term *Generación del 98* to refer to this particular generation of Spanish citizens, who were doubly wounded as World War I was about to break out. They were a generation deeply wounded in their individual and national pride. Seeing themselves as radical thinkers, these young people, most of whom saw themselves as aspiring writers or intellectuals of some kind, critiqued what they saw as a decadent Spain that had institutionalized ignorance and conformity by forcing on the youth, through regulations like the 1866 *Decreto Orovio*, a “good religious and even literary education,” values that had

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obviously failed. They did not want to associate themselves with the Spain of this time period, the end of the 19th century. This historical context that represented a historical wound in the national psyche could be a lens through which one could interpret Cabrera’s desire to distance herself from this “old century” and, instead, see herself as a new creature, “born in the new century.” It could also be help the reader put in a proper perspective the sense of ambivalence and nostalgia that Cabrera seems to feel toward Spanish slavery and colonization, as a careful reading of Reglas de Congo reveals.

As far as family life is concerned, Lydia Cabrera was born to a relatively big family. She was the youngest of eight children in a family of social and financial privilege in a Cuba that sat at the transition between the old 19th century and the new 20th century. Her mother, Elisa Casanova, was a socialite, a señora of the times. Her father, Raimundo Cabrera Bosch, was the owner and editor of the Cuban newspaper Cuba y América. His commitment to the nation and involvement in politics were such that he had fought, as a freedom fighter, in the war that led Cuba to gain its political independence from Spain, that is, the long war that eventually led to the Spanish-American War in 1898, which culminated, on December 10, 1898, in the signing of the Treaty of Paris and Spain’s withdrawal from Cuba. Raimundo Cabrera Bosch was also a lawyer, a legal scholar, a writer, and a president and member of La sociedad económica de amigos del país in Cuba. Las sociedades económicas de amigos del país were a series of private corporations established in Spain and in many Spanish colonies. The one in Cuba was founded at the end of the 18th century, in 1793. As a writer, he had written several books. Cuba y sus jueces, published toward the end of the nineteenth century in 1887, was among his best-known books. Raimundo Cabrera Bosch became a very important figure in Cuban society at the beginning of the twentieth century. Keeping this family background in mind, we can say that the conditions
where there for Lydia Cabrera to benefit from her father’s intellectual and social status. While she was still a young adolescent, Cabrera was the anonymous author of the column “Nena en sociedad,” first published by her father’s newspaper, *Cuba y América*, in 1913. The column appeared for three years and was dedicated to announcements of such usual social information of interest to the paper’s readers in Cuba as births, marriages, dances, and deaths. *Cuba y América* was a bi-weekly illustrated newspaper founded in 1897. Published first in New York, it was aimed at high-class Cubans in exile and to address the war between Cuba and Spain. When Spain withdrew from Cuba, the newspaper continued to be published in Cuba as an “illustrated magazine,” from February 1889 to April 1917. During this whole time, it was published by Raimundo Cabrera Bosch, who signed some of his articles with the pseudonym “Ricardo Buenamar.” Even in these first writings, young Lydia Cabrera showed a taste for the style of artistic and political critiques for which she came to be known in her adult life.\(^{33}\)

Human societies tend to have common features and patterns that can be easily discerned, concerning politics, the legal system, the economy, religion, or education. In Cuba, as in many other places in Latin America (or in Europe for that matter), the education of the children of prominent families was handled in a clearly discernable way. Like any good *señorita* of the time, Lydia Cabrera’s education was mainly provided by private tutors in her home. She did, however, attend the prestigious private school of María Luisa Doltz, but only for a short period of time. She eventually completed her secondary school education on her own, since it was not customary at the time for women to pursue a high school diploma. Interested in painting, Cabrera studied for a few months in Havana’s *Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes San Alejandro* without the consent of her father. She exhibited her paintings in 1922 and received good reviews. Despite

the positive press, however, she did not become a professional painter as many people in Cuba expected. It seems that her life was calling her to pursue other plans and she did pursue those other plans.

Cabrera was growing up to be an independent-minded señorita. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the international scene offered a few centers of special interest, one of which is worth mentioning. The country of France in general and the city of Paris in particular offered many attractions for the children of prominent families from Latin America. Cabrera wanted to go to Paris, and she wanted to have money of her own in order to accomplish that goal. So, she saved money with that aspiration at heart. To earn her money, for about five years, between 1922 and 1927, she ran an antique store called Casa Alyds and was a committed advocate for the preservation of local antique furniture in Cuba. La Quinta San José, where she lived with her lifelong companion, María Teresa de Rojas, from the beginning of the 1940s until 1960, is a good example of her passion for all things antique. The two women worked to restore this eighteenth-century mansion to its original colonial appearance, filling it with national treasures of antique furniture, art, and crafts of historical value. This house-museum stood well into the second half of the twentieth century. After Cabrera left Cuba following the Revolution of 1959, though, the Cuban government demolished the house and Lydia Cabrera and María Teresa de Rojas lost most of their belongings.

Dreams do come true and Cabrera finally saw her Paris dream come to fruition. In 1926, she went first to Madrid, where she spend the last part of the year and met the Spanish writer Federico García Lorca. Then, at the beginning 1927, she went to Paris. Once in Paris, she lived in Montmartre, in the 18th Arrondissement, studied Asian art at L’École du Louvre, and attended
courses at *L’École des Beaux Arts*. She studied drawing and painting with the theatrical Russian exile Alexandra Exter. In Paris, she established a close friendship with another Latin American socialite, the Venezuelan writer Teresa de la Parra, whom she had met in Havana a few years earlier. To entertain de la Parra while the Venezuelan writer was sick with tuberculosis in Leysin, Switzerland, Cabrera began writing the stories that would later be collected in the book *Cuentos negros de Cuba*. De la Parra died on April 4, 1936, a month after the first publication of *Cuentos negros de Cuba*. Francis de Miomandre, at the time a prolific French novelist and Spanish-to-French translator, read and enjoyed the stories written by Cabrera, translated them into French and gave them to Paul Morand from Éditions Gallimard (Gallimard Press), who published the book in French as *Contes nègres de Cuba* in March 1936. The Spanish version of the collection would not be published until 1940.

Lydia Cabrera had been interested in Afro-Cuban culture since she was a child. As an upper-class child, her first contact with the Afro-Cuban world was very personal. Whether or not Lydia Cabrera’s family had been a slaveholding family, one thing is clear: the Cabrera family had many Afro-Cuban servants who served the household in several capacities. Little Lydia grew

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34 I use the term “Afro-Cuban” to refer to those Cuban people who are of African descent and the cultural productions that they have inspired. I do this mainly for two reasons: First, many scholars use this term for Cubans and similar terms for people in other countries of the planet (ex. Afro-Venezuelans, Afro-Colombians, Afro-Peruvians, etc.) and, second, the general public in Cuba has adopted the same terminology to refer to people of African descent on the island and the cultural productions they have inspired. Moreover, international organizations such as the United Nations and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), have adopted the term “people of African descent” to refer to the people who have dispersed around the planet and whose ancestry can be traced to Africa. I adopt this term with the understanding that, given the problematic history of the European hegemonic interventions in the various fields of human endeavor around the world, many basic concepts have become epistemologically and semantically contaminated, pointing to the need for linguistic cleansing or the coining of more suitable terms. One scholar who makes a good case for this quest is Todd Ramón Ochoa, who, in relation to Cuba, prefers the term “inspiration” to “religion” and “African-derived” to “Afro-Cuban” (Ochoa, *Society of the Dead*, 8). In this work, I therefore use “Afro-Cuban” and “African-derived” and “religion” or “spirituality” and “inspiration” interchangeably in these broad semantic fields.
up with her Afro-Cuban nanny, Tata Tula, and the family’s seamstress Teresa (Omi Tomi), who sparked her interest. Through newspaper archives, we know that in 1923 Cabrera attended the inauguration of the Sociedad del Folklore Cubano, directed by Fernando Ortiz, Cabrera’s brother-in-law.\(^{35}\) Also, in a newspaper article in which he praises Cabrera for her first published book, the writer Alejo Carpentier recounts seeing her in a Ñáñigo celebration that took place in the Havana neighborhood of Marianao in 1927. Once she settled in Europe, Cabrera occasionally travelled back and forth between France and Cuba, mostly in order to visit her mother. In 1937, having just returned to Cuba from Europe, Cabrera reconnected with the Afro-Cuban informants she had met during previous visits to Cuba, especially in 1930. She lived in La Quinta San José, Marianao, which was very convenient because she conducted most of her research in the nearby barrio Pogotti. The community of cultural and artistic critics gave Cabrera a warm welcome when she returned to Cuba because of the recent publication of her book of short stories in France, which also explains the publication of the Spanish version a short time later. For Cabrera, it was a deserved welcome back home, a welcome that many migrant writers need and seek.

One of the scholars who has extensively studied the life and work of Lydia Cabrera is Isabel Castellanos. According to Castellanos, in the introduction to the book Páginas sueltas, three main factors led Cabrera to want to study Afro-Cubans. All these factors relate to the nearly ten years Cabrera lived in Europe in general and in Paris in particular. First, her studies of what was called at the time oriental art (Asian art) in Paris made her reflect on how much Cuban national identity was influenced by African culture. Second, her stay in Europe occurred when African influences were becoming prominent on the art scene. This probably made her realize

\(^{35}\) Diario de la Marina, January 11, 1923.
that the “exotic” she found in Paris had been right there at home in Cuba all this time. And, third, her friendship with Teresa de la Para. De la Para, was seriously interested in the popular culture of her native country, Venezuela, which also was deeply influenced by African culture.\(^{36}\)

Moreover, because Teresa de la Para also appreciated the written medium of literature, she gave Cabrera both an interlocutor and someone with whom to share her interest at a time when studying Blacks in Cuba was not a common thing to do—especially for a white woman such as Cabrera who also came from a wealthy and prominent family.

In a lecture that Cabrera gave and which was published in *Páginas sueltas*, she explained how the discovery of African art and culture opened new horizons for European artists at the beginning of the twentieth century, seen especially in the work and publications of Leo Frobenius of Dahomey,\(^ {37}\) art from Côte d’Ivoire, the Congo, and other parts of Africa. Such painters as Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, Henri Matisse, and Amedeo Modigliani, to mention just a few, were influenced by this discovery. Also, in literature, Guillaume Apollinaire and the surrealist André Breton were touched by what Robert Farris Thompson, the scholar of African and African-American art, calls the “Flash of the Spirit”\(^ {38}\) of the African cultures that were moving through Europe at the time (Castellanos 543). Cabrera lived in the middle of the movement known in France as *L’Art Nouveau*, and as she herself once mentioned, she paradoxically discovered Cuba on the banks of the Seine.

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\(^{36}\) The African influences in the culture of Venezuela have been extensively studied by the prominent Afro-Venezuelan anthropologist and writer Juan Pablo Sojo (see, for instance, *Estudios del folklore venezolano*).

\(^{37}\) Dahomey is the former name of the country in West Africa that today is called Benin.

\(^{38}\) Robert Farris Thompson used the expression “Flash of the Spirit” to refer to the philosophical and artistic genius of the people of African descent spread all over the African Diaspora. He titled the book that he wrote on this particular topic *Flash of the Spirit*. 
Intellectuals usually have many influences in their personal as well professional lives, and Cabrera was no exception. Other direct influences on her work and writings were the Cuban painter Wilfredo Lam, with whom Cabrera maintained a long friendship, the Martiniquais poet Aimé Césaire (one of the founders — along with the Senegalese poet Léopold Sédar Senghor and the French Guyanese poet Léon Gontran Damas — of the political, philosophical, sociocultural, artistic, and literary movement known as La Négritude), who wrote in French. In 1943, Cabrera worked with Lam to produce a Spanish translation of Césaire’s poems. All these intellectuals were touched in some way by the vibrant atmosphere of Paris in the 1920s and 1930s and the developing avant-garde movements in the various fields of human culture. One could go on listing all the famous artists who could have influenced Cabrera in one way or another. For example, one could mention the writer Nicolás Guillén, who, under the name Négrismo, brought the Négritude movement to Cuba (Badíane 2); the writer Alejo Carpentier, who was also working with Afro-Cuban influences in his 1933 famous book Ecue-Yamba-Ó; or any of the Mexican muralists, like Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, or Clemente Orozco, who were also exploring national popular culture and identity in their artistic expressions during those years in Paris. But there would be nothing concrete on which to base these observations, since the intellectual and artistic cross-pollination that was attached to Paris as an international cultural center in those days usually happened in a diffuse way. One fact is certain, though: Paris, like a magnet, attracted to itself from all over the world many people seeking to pursue creative endeavors.

One paradox that catches one’s attention on reading Páginas sueltas is that Isabel Castellanos does not mention the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz as a person whose influence was fundamental or determining for Cabrera’s decision to dedicate her life to studying
the Afro-Cubans. This assessment has some validity. In an interview that she gave to Nedda de Anhalt in 1987, Cabrera herself emphatically stated that she did not like to read books of anthropology. She had this reservation because she felt that in reading such books, the reader always feels confined to the dominant voice of the anthropologist-writer, as happens for instance in the books written by Fernando Ortiz. This reflects the complicated relationship that Cabrera had with Ortiz. After all, Ortiz was an integral part of Cabrera’s family. He was married to Esther, Cabrera’s sister, and had been publishing works about Blacks in Cuba since 1906. Indeed, Cabrera is often thought of as a disciple of Ortiz, and many scholars assume that she was simply continuing his project and themes, especially, Afro-Cuban studies and the concept of “transculturation.” Even Rosario Hiriart, an important scholar of Cabrera, affirms that Cabrera followed the work of Ortiz (Hiriart 439).

My analysis of Reglas de Congo, though, shows that Cabrera’s work displays, to a certain extent, an alternative to Ortiz’s hegemonic national project. There are significant discontinuities between Ortiz’s writings and Cabrera’s writings, and it could be argued that Cabrera might have exerted a certain influence on Ortiz and caused a significant shift in his work. Even though Ortiz has become known to many scholars of cultural studies in the English-speaking world because he coined the term “transculturation,” it is in Cabrera’s writings that we find a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding and application of this concept to actual ethnographic work. Cabrera’s work represents the complexities and ambiguities that Cabrera herself embodied. In her work, Cabrera thought to revitalize a non-hegemonic culture that was part of her individual identity. She undertook to expand the notion of national culture to include the various

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marginalized groups whose predominantly oral traditions she feared were under threat. Ultimately, though, a complex analysis of her work shows that she was concerned with creating space within and for Western written culture, rather than for the cultures whose traditions she was defending.

Lydia Cabrera was an active and prolific worker. Between 1937 and 1948, when her second book of short stories, *Por qué…: Cuentos negros de Cuba*, came out, she was working incessantly, taking notes, attending religious rituals, interviewing her informants, and sometimes even sharing meals with them. Cabrera never had formal professional anthropological training; however, she quickly learned how to be a participant-observer among her Afro-Cuban informants rather than remaining the “white” person who just wanted “information” from the “informants.” Much of the research she conducted during this time culminated in the 1954 publication of her best-known work, *El Monte*, published by a press established by Cabrera and her partner, María Teresa de Rojas: Ediciones C.R. It is hard to give a definite translation of the title of this enormous ethnographic contribution to an understanding of Afro-Cuban inspirations and culture. *Monte* can be translated as “mountain,” but also as “wilderness,” “jungle,” or “woods,” and in the context of Afro-Cuban religion, it is a sacred or magical space where the sacred is sought, found, experimented with, experienced, and expressed. In a sense, *monte* is also a *zita*, in Kongo cosmology.

After she published *El Monte*, Cabrera continued to research and write on Afro-Cubans, publishing *Refranes de negros viejos* (1955), *Anagó, vocabulario Lucumí* (1957), and *La Sociedad Secreta Abakuá* (1958). Being part of a secret and closed society, the Abakuá were, as a rule, reluctant to talk about their religion and, most important, they did not accept women as
members. So, it was a particularly important accomplishment for Cabrera, a woman, to be the first person to collect and publish material about the origin of the group, to talk about the myth of *Sikanekue*[^40] and the hierarchy and functions of the members of the Society. She also compiled an extensive glossary of Kikongo[^41] words that are still used in Cuba, which she published later in book form in Miami as *Vocabulario Congo: El Bantu que se habla en Cuba* (1984). Also of significance was the fact that Cabrera was able to photograph the *Ekue*, which is the Abakuá’s sacred drum, supposed to remain hidden always. There are anecdotal accounts that Cabrera left Cuba not because of the Revolution but because some Abakuá were looking for her to kill her, alleging that she had violated their sacred secrets. These types of oral stories are interesting because of the intrigue they contain. To take these stories seriously would be to prove the very idea that Cabrera set out to disprove in her book about the Ñáñigos and the Abakuá: that they were a dangerous and violent clan. Be that as it may be, *La Sociedad Secreta Abakuá* turns out to be the last book that Cabrera published in Cuba. She left the country in 1960, shortly after the Revolution of 1959, and never returned to the island.

Her writings and her interviews show that Cabrera was clearly against the Revolution of 1959, the movement initiated by Fidel Castro and his associates, and against socialist-Marxist ideology in general. Accompanied by her companion María Teresa de Rojas, Cabrera left Cuba

[^40]: *Sikanekue* is the original myth of how the Society was formed.

[^41]: Kikongo is the language of the Bakongo, the people of the former Kongo Kingdom, which was located in central Africa. After the Congo Berlin Conference of 1884-1885, the territory of the Kongo Kingdom was divided among the European colonial powers of Belgium, France, and Angola, and today occupies the territories of the Congo-Kinshasa, Congo-Brazzaville, Angola, and Cabinda. Linguistically, Kikongo is classified as belonging to the language family of the Bantu Languages, one of the largest language families in the world, occupying a vast geographical area, going from the Senegal region in West Africa all the way down to South Africa, where the Zulu language is also part of the family. The presence of Kikongo in Cuba is one of the pieces of tangible evidence that scholars, like the linguist Armin Schwegler (see for instance *Lengua y ritos del Palo Monte Mayombe*), use to argue that a significant number of the Africans who were brought to Cuba during the trans-Atlantic Ocean African slave trade were Bakongo and came from the greater region of Central Africa.
to live in Miami, in the USA. She was silent for the first ten years in exile, in part because she lacked access to the resources to publish but also because of the pain of her new reality as an exile, as happens to many intellectuals who voluntarily or involuntarily leave their place of birth to settle in a new location.

The friendship between Lydia Cabrera and Wifredo Lam is worth reconsidering in the context of exile. They met when Lam left France due to the World War II, and after he arrived in Cuba in the early 1940s. Cabrera and María Teresa de Rojas had helped Lam and his companion, Helena Holzer, to establish themselves in Havana after his long absence (Lam had left Cuba in 1923). Lam, accustomed to being treated as an equal by other intellectuals and artists in Paris, returned to a hostile space in Cuba that isolated him. Because he was a poor black man living with a white woman outside of the institution of legal marriage, Lam was not fully accepted on the island. Cabrera and Lam had the common experience of “exile” in Paris that was disrupted by the outbreak of war. They returned to a Cuban society full of prejudices. If we take into account the concept of intersectionality that Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw introduced to understand the complexity of identity, we can say that although Cabrera was not at the receiving end of the racial prejudices of the time, she must have felt excluded because of her sexual orientation and the nature of her intellectual work—her ethnographic research on Afro-Cubans. Although it might have been seen as “exotic” and thus attractive in Paris, this type of activity was deemed unacceptable in Havana for a woman of her social class. Whatever the reasons, Cabrera and Lam developed a tight friendship that was suspended because of her exile to Miami and the political and ideological differences that developed between the two intellectuals who found themselves on different sides of the divide created by the Revolution. Lam defended the Revolution, with its promise of a better life for people like him who had always been situated at
the margins of society. Cabrera, on the other hand, did not support the Revolution, and had her own reasons for her position. Once Cabrera left Cuba, the two friends never talked again. Out of physical sight did not mean out of mind, however: Cabrera kept Lam’s work displayed in her house in exile. As if to seal a problematic friendship, in 1982, before Lam died in Paris, he decided to reach out to his old friend and say farewell. He sent Cabrera a drawing dedicated to her. The caption reads: “Para mi amiga Lydia Cabrera, París 9-1982, Wifredo Lam” [“To my friend Lydia Cabrera, Paris, 9-1982, Wilfredo Lam”].

After settling in Miami, Cabrera reedited El Monte and eventually published the book in 1968. But it was not until 1970 that she published her first book written in exile, a book that she titled Otán Iyebiyé: Las piedras preciosas. In 1971, she published her third book of short stories, under the title of Ayapá: Cuentos de Jicotea, composed of nineteen stories in which the main character is the mischievous mythical turtle Jicotea, in the tradition of the trickster often found in the African Diaspora, like the Monimambu character among the Bakongo in Africa.

While in exile, Cabrera did not remain in Miami all the time. In 1972, she spent time in Madrid, Spain, writing three books during her stay there. The first was La laguna sagrada de San Joaquín (1973), a long and ethnographic essay about her last research trip to Matanzas, Cuba; the second was titled Yemayá y Ochún (1974), dedicated to these two famous goddesses of the Yoruba pantheon, and the third was called Anaforuana: Ritual y símbolos de la iniciación en la Sociedad Secreta Abakuá (1975), which, according to Robert Farris Thompson, is a landmark study in the history of “Black Atlantic writing systems.” In this book, Cabrera documents about 512 signs (Thompson 239). One important fact to note is that for each of the books Cabrera

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42 Isabel Castellanos, Páginas sueltas, p. 49.
wrote in exile (including *Reglas de Congo: Palo Monte Mayombe*, the subject of this project), she relies on the ethnographic notes she had collected before leaving Cuba. The extensive field work and research work that she had done gave her a rich collection of materials she continued to use for the rest of her writing life.

After a productive stay in Europe, Lydia Cabrera returned in 1974 to her work in Miami, and she would spend the next decade in an even more productive period of her life, publishing books and articles, collaborating with others on various projects, and participating in conferences. Among the books she published during this decade are *Francisco y Francisca: Chascarrillos de negros viejos* (1976), *Itinerario del insomnio: Trinidad de Cuba* (1977), *La Regla Kimbisa del Santo Cristo del Buen Viaje* (1977), *Reglas de Congo: Palo Monte Mayombe* (1979), and *Koeko Iyawó. Aprende novicia: Pequeño tratado de Regla Lucumí* (1980).

By this time, Lydia Cabrera had become known for her work and her contribution to the understanding of Cuban culture in general and of Afro-Cuban culture in particular. Various intellectual circles began to acknowledge her contribution, especially in Florida, where she was based. In 1976, Reinaldo Sánchez and José Antonio Madrigal organized a conference sponsored by Florida International University that paid homage to Cabrera. The conference proceedings were published as *Homenaje a Lydia Cabrera*, which some consider the best collection of critical studies about Cabrera’s work. Soon after this conference, she was awarded honorary doctorates by the University of Miami in Florida, Denison University in Ohio, and Manhattan College in New York. While the decade of the 1970s might have represented the zenith in Cabrera’s professional life, the decade of the 1980s was difficult for her personally. First, slowly but surely, she began to lose her eyesight. Second, in 1985, after nearly fifty years of sharing a
common life, her companion María Teresa de Rojas died, leaving her distraught. After Rojas died, Cabrera herself became very sick. She managed to live for another five years, however, despite her precarious health. During these last years, with the help of friends and associates, she made a further push in her work and added to her collection of publications. She published *Cuentos para adultos niños y retrasados mentales* (1983), *La medicina popular de Cuba* (1984), *Vocabulario Congo* (1984), *Supersticiones y buenos consejos* (1987), *La lengua sagrada de los Ñáñigos* (1988), and *Los animales en el folklore y la magia de Cuba* (1988). After Lydia Cabrera died on September 19, 1991, her work continued to be published. In 1994, Isabel Castellanos, who holds the copyright to Lydia Cabrera’s work and is her literary executor, published the collection *Páginas sueltas*, discussed earlier, as an homage to Cabrera. Castellanos, who has taught at Florida International University, had been a long-time friend of Cabrera’s, and Cabrera spent the last years of her life in the home of Castellanos. As the title of the book suggests, *Páginas sueltas* contains both previously published writings as well as unedited writings by Cabrera. It is an interesting collection that includes Cabrera’s early and later work, and it offers scholars relevant biographical information from someone who knew her personally. Finally, it is important to note that Cabrera donated her research papers to the library of the University of Miami in Florida, where they are housed in the Cuban Heritage Collection.

Cabrera’s narrative and her representation of the Afro-Cubans function on two main levels: a macro-level and a micro-level. On the micro-level, the Afro-Cubans recount their stories. They say, in their own words, in their own language (both Spanish and Kikongo), who they are. In essence, say that they are human beings whose grandparents, parents, and sometimes they themselves lived in Africa, were people with dignity, members of important social organizations like kingdoms, and who, by a change of fate, at one point found themselves slaves
in a strange land on the island of Cuba. They had to make sense and they are making sense of their new condition in this new environment with new rulers who called themselves (and forced the Africans to call them) “masters” while labeling the Africans “slaves.” The horrors of the long and grueling working conditions, the physical abuses by the masters and the overseers, and the psychological distresses are well conveyed by Cabrera by using a narrative device in which the narration makes space for extensive dialogues by the Afro-Cubans. During those dialogues, we learn that the Africans vacillate between deep despair and measured hope. We hear them reaffirm the importance of their fate transforming knowledge of Palo, the cosmological knowledge that the crossing of the Atlantic Ocean could not erase. We hear them tell how in moments of deep exasperation at their mistreatment, some of them cut their own hands so that they would not be worked anymore like animals, beasts of burden. We also see how in the same moments of exasperation, others run away into “El Monte,” only to be chased down by vicious dogs and torn to pieces. Violence, here, would eventually beget violence. When “the flight instinct” was frustrated, “the fight instinct” would kick in and we hear them describe how they, in turn, would viciously tear to pieces an extremely abusive master or overseer.

In the middle of all this, though, the voice of the meta-narrator, Cabrera, would intervene in the meta-narration and return to the representation by having the Africans state emphatically that, contrary to what the people up North in the United States of America were saying, the masters in Cuba were not evil people. They treated their slaves well and only a few exceptionally bad masters mistreated their slaves. Besides, mistreatment of human beings by their fellow human beings was not limited to white people; some black people in Cuba owned slaves and they were even more abusive masters than the white masters. Moreover, if it had not been for their presence in Cuba, these Africans would probably be miserable like “the savages” still living in Africa. The
analysis of this representation raises many questions about the nature and aims of hegemonic discourses.

When one considers the macro-level of discourse in *Reglas de Congo*, it appears that Cabrera seems to be engaged in a revisionist project concerning the role that white Spain played in the African slave trade that took place on the Atlantic Coast and the kind of slave society that it established in Cuba. Besides arranging the micro-narrative of the Africans to apparently sanitize the Africans’ experience of slavery, Cabrera seems to be defending the enterprise itself by asserting that human-to-human violence, either on an individual level or on a group level, is just part of what it means to be human. When she does acknowledge that there were instances of inhuman treatment and horrific violence visited on the Africans, she seems to resort to another argument: Spain’s treatment of its African slaves was better than Britain’s treatment of its African slaves, especially, the slaves who lived up North in the former British colony of the United States of America. To help her make the case, she brings into the narrative and gives voice to international travelers and international experts who, in her eyes, are authorities in the matter of oppression. And who could be better judges to assess intellectual arguments than the French intellectuals?

And that is exactly what Cabrera does. She uses the testimonies of French travelers who have been to both the USA and to Cuba and lets them say that, in their personal experiences, knowing the conditions of the Blacks in both the USA and Cuba, the Blacks in Cuba were much better off: they were free to practice their religions, they could speak their African languages, and they had kept their African cultures, unlike the Blacks in the USA, who had lost their African religions, languages, and cultures. Why? While the Spanish, as good Catholics, gave the Africans the space they needed to be themselves, the British, as Protestants, stripped the Africans
of everything. To reinforce this message, Cabrera uses further testimonies by British travelers who make the same kinds of observations, as well as testimonies from US travelers and even US political leaders who make the claims that the USA does indeed want to take over Cuba. She uses the direct confessions of these primary sources to solidify her argument.

In assessing the message of a text, the tone of the text is an important factor to take into account. Tone is determined not only in the words and expressions used to convey the message, but also in the way the argument is framed, the kind of evidence used to persuade the reader, and in the spaces of silence—what is in the pre-text and the con-text but might not necessarily be explicitly expressed in the text.

Before assessing Cabrera’s tone in Reglas de Congo, we need to acknowledge that all of us human beings are products of our times and places, our histories and geographies. As discussed earlier, Lydia Cabrera was a white Cuban from a wealthy family. This does not necessarily mean malevolent intent on her part. What it does mean is that hers was the kind of family who were the slaveholders and benefitted, both directly and indirectly, from the slave trade and the slave society that was established in Cuba, and they tended to see history and the world in a certain way. Young Lydia’s nanny was an African woman, and the fact that a little girl would be served by an African woman probably created a sense of power, not unlike the sense that was generated in the many little girls and little boys from the slave-owning families in the various slave cultures in the Americas (whether British, French, Portuguese, or Spanish) who, apparently had the privilege to “own” their own individual slaves, slaves who would cater to their individual needs. Cabrera herself cites many instances of these little girls and little boys in Reglas de Congo. That Cabrera could have these feelings, though unconscious, does not constitute a condemnation of her person or of her work. It is simply a statement of the fact that,
as human beings, we sometimes espouse ideas and engage in practices that, from an ethical perspective, are less than honorable and might even contradict the philosophies—political, religious, or academic—we profess in public. Perhaps it would be helpful to see these areas of our psyche as the blind spots that all of us have.

I would like to address here the objection that one often hears when one tries to assess the ethical import and ramifications of the intersubjective relations conveyed by a text written at another time or set in another culture: “We should not apply our own ethical standards to other times or other cultures. We should judge texts from other times and other cultures using the ethical standards of those times and cultures.” This is a fair statement and is certainly a reasonable and wise guideline. But what times, cultures, and ethical standards are we talking about here? These are European cultures in the 16th, 17th, 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries whose members had dedicated themselves to what the French have appropriately called la mission civilisatrice, “the civilizing mission.” These are the cultures that, for centuries, had seen themselves as the birth place or at least the custodians of the basic ethical standards of the Humanity of Planet Earth, to the point of seeing themselves as “the norm” (what is “normal”) of what it means to be “human.” The rest of the world was a “deviation” that, by persuasion or force, had to be made to submit to this “norm.” It is impulsed by this “conviction” that the Europeans had gone to Africa and presented themselves as “civilized.” They had gone there to “civilize” the African “savages,” to instill in them the modicum of “humanity.” Moreover, these European cultures saw themselves as Christian cultures who, by the time of the contact with the Africans that we call the slave trade, prided themselves for having had the teachings and ethics of the Christ for more than fifteen centuries and the Ten Commandments for much longer than that. This conviction was even reflected in the way they counted the years, using such
expressions was “the year 1500th of our Lord.” As if this was not enough, as documented in the various slave codes, the very first thing that all these slave societies did as soon as they brought the Africans as slaves into their societies was to baptize them, convert them to their version of Christianity, and teach them the Ten Commandments, and the teachings and ethics of the Christ. It seems then that these times and cultures have already had, in theory and for centuries, very high ethical standards by which they themselves said that all aspects of intention, speech, and action should be assessed.

Even though Cabrera does come to the realization of the importance of the African element in Cuba and does acknowledge that without the African element Cuba would not be Cuba, that African element is exoticized and presented as a childish element. It is presented almost as lacking agency and that, left to its own devices, it would not have amounted to anything. It is what it is today because history has happened the way it has happened, the European element has given life to the otherwise lifeless African element.

Concerning religion, even though Cabrera does study and apparently value the religions that the Africans brought to Cuba during the trans-Atlantic Ocean slave trade, these religions are presented as second-class religions and their practitioners as second-class citizens. This, of course, is a fact of the context, and in this Cabrera is a product of her time and space. During slavery, the masters ruled, and only the things that the masters approved could be practiced. The Africans, as a matter of law, were converted to Christianity and Christianity was the only authorized religion. The African religions, festivities, martial arts practices, were supposed not to be practiced. The prohibition was part of the whole slave enterprise that was designed to turn the Africans from humans to things that were bought and sold. One of the main reasons why religious syncretism developed during this time was that, as we already pointed out, in order to
survive, the Africans had to develop a “double life.” On the surface, they had to practice the official, authorized religion of the masters into which they were baptized (in the case of Cuba, Roman Catholic Christianity). But inside themselves, how could their African religions be erased? Though they might not have explicitly articulated it, the basic ontological and epistemological question was: “Is it even possible fully to ‘convert’ somebody, to erase that person’s basic nature and in its place write another nature, in this case the nature of the slave masters?” And so, the life that lived inside the Africans continued to live, with the veneer of Roman Catholicism functioning on the surface. The Lucumí or Yoruba-inspired religion (Santería) is a good reflection of this phenomenon. The Kongo-inspiration is less so. But even here, the terminologies penda cristiano and prenda judío, which we have examined earlier, are indicative of the Judeo-Christian dominant discourse in matters of religion. Due to the physical violence that characterized the slave cultures, the strategies that the Africans developed were, on a fundamental level and literally, strategies of physical survival first. Only then other levels could be taken into account.

Moreover, when some of her informants asserted on page 108 of Reglas de Congo that “Jesus-Christ, in Antiquity, had been to the Kongo,” Lydia Cabrera seemed to be genuinely confounded. She seemed truly baffled, on further investigation of the claims, to discover that as early as the 1490s, in the Kongo Kingdom, where the ancestors of these informants claim to have come from, Christianity had taken roots through an initially friendly encounter and exchange with the Kingdom of Portugal. The first converts had even risen in the Church hierarchy to positions as high as bishops. During the same time, the Kongo Kingdom had also produced its share of those religiously committed souls known as mystics, who have had lasting impact on Global Christianity. As early as the first part of the 1670s, the Kongo Kingdom had produced a
Christian (Roman Catholic) prophetess known as Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita (1684-1706), who, precisely because of the misery that the slave trade and its associated wars were causing on the Kongo people, launched a religious movement known as the “Antonian Movement,” advocated for reform in the Catholic Church (which she saw as complicit in slavery), and called for a stop to the slave trade. The movement is known as “Antonian” because Kimpa Vita claims that she was inspired by Saint Anthony of Padua, also known as Saint Anthony of Lisbon, Portugal (where he was born), before he moved to Italy and settled in Padua. Kimpa Vita justified her zeal by the claim that, like all the prophets and prophetesses who had gone before her in the Judeo-Christian tradition, she had received a revelation and a mission from on High. The only difference was that her revelation and mission were highly contextual; they were designed specifically for the context of the Kongo Kingdom and the Kongo people. She was eventually arrested, judged, condemned, and burned at the stake by the state for sedition and by the Catholic Church for heresy. The heresy was that Kimpa Vita claimed that, because during his ministry in Palestine Jesus had manifested compassion toward the exploited and the oppressed, he would have sympathized with the plight the Kongo people, who were being ravaged by the then-raging slave trade and wars surrounding it. Following her reasoning to its logical conclusion, she stated that “Jesus was a Kongoleset!” and this was the gist of the claims that Cabrera’s informants made about Christianity and Jesus. As Cabrera herself writes, she had a hard time believing that

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43 In the Kongo tradition of naming, one of the factors that influence the way in which children are named is the conjunction of the circumstances that surround the pregnancy of the mother and the eventual birth of the child. The name of this prophetess is significant in two aspects. “Kimpa” is the Kikongo word for “new” and “Vita” is the Kikongo word for “war” or “struggle.” It is as if this child, who was born at a time of political and religious strife and war, was destined to struggle to bring about political, religious, and sociocultural renewal. The fact that her story was being told in the Americas by the descendants of the Africans who had been sold into slavery and is still being told today might indicate that she has indeed achieved some of her aim. *Dona* was the Portuguese honorific address for ladies and *Beatriz* her baptismal Christian name.

44 Thornton, Ibid., 189.
her old informants, who had “no education,” could have such a sophisticated knowledge of religious history, let alone the history of Christianity in the African Diaspora.

One realization that one gets from reading Reglas de Congo, especially the first part that covers the chapter “Los esclavos congo en el siglo XIX contados por sus descendientes,” is that the African slave trade and the institution of slavery itself were extremely violent enterprises. Despite the various minimizing narrative strategies that Cabrera utilizes to sanitize the commitment that the Spanish (like all the other European countries) had to slavery and the slave society that Spain established in Cuba, the very slave narratives that Cabrera uses to narrate the stories of the descendants of the African slaves tell stories of extreme, multidimensional violence. The most obvious form of violence is, of course, physical violence. This physical violence, when inflicted on the slaves by the masters and the overseers, takes various manifestations: whipping to force the Africans to work, corporal punishments for disobedience, revolt, or for attempting to run away. Whenever the Africans managed to run away, dogs were unleashed on them, and dogs being dogs, would bite those unfortunate enough to be caught. The Africans themselves also applied violence on themselves for various reasons. Modern psychology has identified a psychological phenomenon called “learned helplessness.”45 Because many Africans found themselves stuck in a space of dehumanization in which many of their attempts to change or ameliorate their conditions failed repeatedly, they experienced extreme cases of learned helplessness which led them to three types of action: first, self-mutilation, to prevent their labor from being exploited any further by the masters; second, suicide, to put an

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45 The psychologist Martin Seligman defines “learned helplessness” as “a condition in which a person suffers from a sense of powerlessness, arising from a traumatic event or persistent failure to succeed. It is thought to be one of the underlying causes of depression and, often, suicide” (Seligman, Helplessness: Depression, Development, and Death, 50).
end to the suffering of their lives; and, third, homicide, killing their master or the overseer to also put an end to their suffering. There were also cases of inter-generational violence, in which the parent slaves killed their children to save them from growing up in the dehumanizing condition of slavery. This type of violence has been well dramatized by the African American novelist Toni Morrison in her work. Physical violence, of course, was not the only form or level of violence characterizing the slave society in Cuba. At the same time, it is important to note that multidimensional violence was not the monopoly of Spain. All the European powers who were engaged in the trans-Atlantic Ocean slave trade seem to have agreed on one thing and that one thing was that the Africans were not humans, had little or no human worth, and therefore did not deserve to be treated with human dignity. Violence was the outward manifestation of that implicit agreement.

A great deal is known about the attitude that the Europeans had towards the Africans because the Europeans kept good records not only of their practices, but also of their perceptions and ideas in relation to the Africans. One such archive of ideas that gives us this insight is composed of the various slave codes. We already alluded to the similarities between the Spanish slave code and Le Code Noir, which regulated the lives of the African slaves in the French colony of Saint Domingue in particular and, by extension, in all the French colonies. The following few articles of Le Code Noir represent the European attitude toward the Africans and which led them to set the particular juridical and social status of the slaves in the French colonies.

Article 2: "Slaves who are in our islands are to be baptized and instructed in the Catholic religion."


47 Emphasis added.
Article 12: "The children who will be born of marriages between slaves will be slaves and will belong to the master of the slave women."

Article 22: "We declare that everything that the slaves own belongs to their masters."

Article 33: "The slave who strikes his master, his mistress or their children, either causing bruises or drawing blood will be punished by death."

Article 34: "As for slaves assaulting free persons, we want them to be severely punished, even until death if necessary."

Article 38: "The slave who has been a runaway for a month, counting from the day when his master reported his escape to the judge, will have his ears cut off and will be branded with a fleur-de-lis on one shoulder, and if he does it again, counting the same length of time from the day of denunciation, he will have his leg cut off below the knee and he will be branded with the fleur-de-lis on the other shoulder. The third time, he will be punished with death."

Article 44: "We declare slaves to be movable property, and as such, they become part of the joint estate of husband and wife."

One of the proofs that Cabrera gives to argue that the Spanish slave system was humane is that the Spanish allowed the Africans to work, save enough money, and “buy their freedom” and become coartados, as we have discussed earlier. This is an intriguing argument. On the surface, it makes sense. If you can allow somebody to buy back something, then it can be said that you are a fair-minded person who wants to treat others with fairness. But if we dig deeper, we see that the argument does not make sense, and, as Martin Luther King, Jr. pointed out in his speech “The American Dream,” it is both epistemologically illogical and ontologically unethical. It is illogical because one’s freedom is inalienable, that is, non-negotiable. Human freedom is an inherent aspect of the human being; it is not an asset that can be “given” to somebody by an external human power, and, ipso facto, it cannot be “sold” or “bought,” not even “bought back.” The freedom of the Africans belongs inherently and inalienably to the Africans. As a matter of ontological delimitations, the Europeans do not have any power, any right, to “own” that freedom and therefore cannot “sell it back” to the Africans. Ontologically, the freedom has never left the Africans because it cannot leave the Africans. It is unethical because the assumption that the Europeans had about that freedom, that they had “taken” the freedom from the Africans and
they could set up a market system that allowed the Africans to “buy back” that freedom for a hefty amount of money, is deeply immoral. It is doubly immoral, given the fact that, as Article 2 of *Le Code Noir* states, "Slaves who are in our islands are to be baptized and instructed in the Catholic religion." In the French Empire, just as in the Spanish Empire, then, these slaves, these Africans, were, technically, fellow Christians in general, and fellow Roman Catholics in particular. What does it say then, about how the Europeans understood the essential Christian principles and the human worth of the Africans if they, the Europeans, gave themselves the right and the power to not only do the impossible act of “selling” and “buying” freedom and engage in the act of enslaving their fellow Christians, who, whether Catholics or Protestants, according to that very same Christianity they sought to spread, were supposed to be their brothers and sisters in Christ? The gap between the ideals of Christianity as illustrated in the stories of Jesus in the Bible that the Europeans taught to the Africans and the understanding and interpretation of Christianity that the Europeans had developed and the application of that understanding and interpretation in their encounter with “the other” was an underlying line of puzzlement and grief among the Africans, given how the history of their encounter with the Europeans has played out. It did violence to the spirit.

The real problem with this violence in all its manifestations is that it was a seed that, once sowed, seemed to acquire a life of its own and continued to grow, for generations and generations, in the individual and the community on which it was inflicted. In his book, *Peau noire, masques blancs*, in which he does a deeply psychological analysis of this particular situation, Frantz Fanon, who was a philosopher and a psychiatrist by training, writes about “l’expérience vécue du Noir,” the lived experience of the black person. Moreover, black

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48 Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs*, pp. 88-114.
people, Fanon argued in another one of his book of the same title, were “les damnés de la terre,”49 the wretched of the earth, because they have been so systematically violated—during slavery, during colonialism, and so on. This lived experience of the Africans, this systematic and multifaceted violence that was so normatively and casually visited on those enslaved Africans in the slave societies, continues to afflict the people of African descent throughout the world today. The situation, from the standpoint of the lived experience, is so insidious that many current psychological scholars in the African Diaspora, acknowledging that violence is traumatic even in its aftermath, have come to call it “Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome,”50 and, therefore, needs deeply psychological approaches to systematically heal it. Besides, because one aspect of the violence visited on the Africans was an ontological violence that, through physical violence, sought to prove that “Black” was inferior to “White,” part of the healing, as Martin Luther King, Jr. also acknowledged in his speech “The American Dream,” consists in challenging “the myth of White supremacy” and “the myth of Black inferiority.”51 It is not only psychological scholars in the African Diaspora who are concerned about the lingering effects of the violence inflicted on Africans and people of African descent. Since this is a worldwide problem, the United Nations General Assembly has declared the decade of 2015 to 2024 the “International Decade for People of African Descent”52 in order to mobilize all available global resources to acknowledge the

49 Frantz Fanon, Les damnés de la terre.


51 See also Tom Burrell, Brainwashed: Challenging the Myth of Black Inferiority.

existence of this problem; appreciate the seriousness of its implications; and gather the political, spiritual, intellectual, and sociocultural will to address it.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that the zita, the hybrid space, is a complex and complicated dimension of reality. This characteristic of all hybrid spaces also applies to Lydia Cabrera and the hybrid space she embodies. In looking back to Cuba and what it represented for her, Lydia Cabrera seems to be marked by a big sense of loss. When, with the rise to power of Fidel Castro she lost her house in Cuba, La Quinta San José, that loss seemed to represent more than the loss of a building. While she was still living in La Quinta San José, the Franco-Cuban filmmaker and photographer Luis Estévez Lasa visited Cabrera and took a series of photographs of the Quinta. In 1964, once out of Cuba and living in Miami, Cabrera received a surprise package from Estévez Lasa. In her response, Cabrera wrote, among other things:

“No podías haberme hecho mejor regalo en toda tu vida que esas fotos que me envías de San José. No teníamos ninguna. Me servirán para recordar -¿ya qué nos queda?- algo que fue bonito... y que como todas las cosas bonitas están condenadas a muerte en nuestra tierra.”

[“In your entire life, you could not have given me a better gift than these photos of San José that you just sent me. We did not have any photos. They will help me remember—what do we have left?—something that was beautiful…and which, like all beautiful things in our country, are condemned to death.”]

And when she undertook to research and write El Monte, she introduced it by writing that she did not have any “scientific pretension,” and in referring to her informants, elder Negroes, many of whom were children of slaves or had even been slaves themselves, she commented that “they do not know the haste that undermines modern life and sickens that spirit of white people, the
harried pace that is oppression.”\textsuperscript{53} It seems that there was a yearning for this lost world. This is how Lydia Cabrera frames this yearning in \textit{Reglas de Congo}:\textsuperscript{54}

\begin{quote}
\textit{Otro Viejo que lo sabía ‘por recuerdo de sus mayores’, me aseguraba que la esclavitud en África era más cruel que en Cuba. ¡Envidiable memoria africana! La poesía es memoria, decían los antiguos. La memoria es la poesía que cultivaban esos negros que me hicieron confianza.}"
\end{quote}

[“Another old man who ‘knew these things through the memory of his elders’ assured me that slavery in Africa involved more cruelty than in Cuba. Envidiable African memory! Poetry is memory, the elders used to say. Memory is the poetry cultivated by these Negroes, who had given me their trust.”]

If one is to account for what looks like an apology for Spanish slavery, Spanish colonialism, and an ambivalence toward the Afro-Cuban informants that one notices in reading \textit{Reglas de Congo}, this visceral yearning for the past and what it represented for Cabrera needs to be considered.

\section*{4. The Hybrid Text of \textit{Reglas de Congo}}

As a text to read, \textit{Reglas de Congo} is difficult. As a text to translate, it presents a variety of specific challenges related to translation. Given the subject matter and the process that led to its writing, the book could be classified as a work of nonfiction. Following the convention of nonfiction writing in Spanish, one would expect to see a table of contents, either at the end or at the beginning of the book. \textit{Reglas de Congo}, however, does not have a table of contents. It extends itself like the untamed space of a novel.

Moreover, the book has many inconsistencies and irregularities. The most obvious one, typographically, one has to do with how it handles the songs and sayings that are attributed to the Afro-Cuban informants. Most of these passages are set in italics, but some are not, and one fully

\textsuperscript{53} Lydia Cabrera, \textit{El Monte}, p. 7

\textsuperscript{54} Lydia Cabrera, \textit{Reglas de Congo}, p. 108.
identifies them only by reading carefully and sometimes even by going back and rereading.

Another typographical irregularity has to do with the way quotations are handled. Besides the thoughts and speeches of the informants, there are in-the text excerpts from European and North American travel writers who have written about Cuba (like Richard Henry Dana, Jr. and his *To Cuba and Back*, Frederika Bremmer and her *The Homes of the New World*, Arthur Morelet and his *Voyage dans l’Amérique Centrale, l’Île de Cuba*, or Richard Madden and his *The Island of Cuba*). Excerpts from the writings of these authors are incorporated within the text of *Reglas de Congo*, sometimes with clear quotation marks that identify them, at other times without quotation marks, and one has to retrace one’s steps of reading to untangle the thread. In this respect, *Reglas de Congo* is like the complex *zita* that the *nganga* ties with intent.

The second type of inconsistencies and irregularities is introduced by code switching (when, for instance, the text switches from Spanish to Kikongo, French, or English) and code mixing (when a unit of speech, like the sentence, mixes Spanish and Kikongo, which is the form of code mixing that occurs the most often). The challenge of code switching and code mixing is that the reader who knows the various codes involved, whether switched or mixed, can decode the messages and does not encounter serious difficulties; but for the reader for whom one or several of the codes involved represent a “secret” code, understanding the text becomes at best a guess work and at worst an impossible task. Even for a person well versed in the various codes, the challenge of irregularities and inconsistencies remains. Words in Kikongo, for instance, are not consistently used. For instance, *mfumbi*, the Kikongo word “the dead,” a key word in Palo discourse, appears in the text as *fumbi* (page 166) and *nfumbi* (page 186), as well as many other pages. Most of the times these non-Spanish words are italicized to indicate their non-Spanish nature, but many times they are not.
Because the text is based on an oral history of the Afro-Cuban informants among whom Cabrera conducted her research to reconstruct their experienced history of Cuban slave society, the text has an oral quality and poetic rhythm. To make it even more oral and poetic, it incorporates the oral stories that the informants tell and, many times, in the middle of the telling of these oral stories, the informants burst into spoken poetry or sung poetry, thus creating a text that is both “literature” and “orature.”

The main language of *Reglas de Congo* is standard Spanish, but it easily moves into Cuban Spanish, with many Cubanisms seemingly directed to fellow Cubans both in exile and still on the island. There are also many Kikongo and Yoruba words and expressions, besides words and expressions in English and French, thus making *Reglas de Congo* not only a hybrid text, but a polymath and polyglot text-space on which the fate of Africans is being debated, made, and restructured; again, just as a complex *zita* would work.

From the perspective of narratology, the language of *Reglas de Congo* is challenging in many additional respects. First of all, because the book is of mixed genres, Cabrera uses the languages of ethnography, politics, official colonial history and law, political economy, oral history, slave narratives, poetry, music, religion, and theology, thus covering a broad range of meanings and registers. The Spanish language itself is two-tiered; it has two registers: on the one hand, there is the Spanish of the ethnographer-writer Lydia Cabrera, and on the other hand there is the Spanish of the Afro-Cuban informant-speakers that Lydia Cabrera records, staying, up to a certain level, true to the concept of “transculturation” and her method of letting the Afro-Cubans speak in their own voice and with their own words. Even though Cabrera apparently quotes her informants verbatim, there is no way objectively to know what this “voice” and these “words” of the informant-speakers actually are, taking into account Cabrera’s well considered project as an
author. As the Chinese-American novelist Ha Jin points out in his book *The Writer as Migrant*, setting out to be “the spokesperson of a tribe” is a path laden with stubbling blocks.\(^5^5\) In a sense, the Afro-Cubans are characters in Cabrera’s work, and Cabrera, the author-narrator has conceived, developed, and certainly revised the plot of the story she is telling. The “characters” use a Spanish language rich in Afro-Cubanisms and alive with challenging images, figures of speech, syntactic forms, and vocabulary items. The linguistic code switching and code mixing alluded to earlier, the hybrid ritual language of the Afro-Cubans mixing Spanish with Kikongo words and expressions (technically known as “Palo Kikongo”\(^5^6\)), as well as the Creole forms of speech that at times mix Spanish and Kikongo within the same sentence, sometimes even in the same word, present a layer of complication beyong the purely linguistic level. From the narratological perspective then, *Reglas de Congo* is a true zita, a complex work of literature of mixed genres with literary characteristics that belong at the same time to the traditional literary genres of the novel, the essay, drama, and poetry, but with a keenly creative imagination and a rich and complex use of language.

It is important to note the wording of the dedication of *Reglas the Congo*: “*A Robert Thompson, Mpangui.*” The “Robert Thompson” referred to is Robert Farris Thompson, the noted scholar of African and African-American art and philosophy, author, among other works, of the seminal work *Flash of the Spirit*.\(^5^7\) He constitutes, with the anthropologists John Janzen of the University of Kansas and Wyatt MacGaffey, a group of pioneering scholars who opened, for the English-Speaking world, the field of African Diaspora Studies in general, and of Kongo

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\(^{5^5}\) Ha Jin, *The Writer as Migrant*, pp. 3-30.

\(^{5^6}\) Oehoa, p. 33.

Diaspora Studies in particular, especially concerning Kongo cosmology, spiritual practices, spiritual arts, and healing practices. Janzen and MacGaffey’s 1974 book, *An Anthropology of Kongo Religion*, published by the University of Kansas Publications in Anthropology, is another seminal work in the field, based on extensive field research among the Bakongo in the Manianga and Mayombe areas of the Province of Kongo Central in the south-western part of Congo-Kinshasa. Like Lydia Cabrera’s book that contains primary source materials in Spanish and Kikongo, Janzen’s and MacGaffey’s book contains a rich collection of primary source materials in both French and Kikongo. I met Janzen at the University of Kansas, and when he found out that I was born in the Congo and had lived in the Province of Kongo Central, he switched to Kikongo and we continued our conversation in Kikongo. Not only did he speak Kikongo, but both he and MacGaffey were also initiates of Kongo Sacred Societies like *Lemba* and *Kimpasi*, initiated by the Kongo Teacher Kimbwandende Bunseki Fu-Kiau.\(^{58}\) And, according to Tata Fu-Kiau himself, with the crossing of the Atlantic Ocean during the slave trade, *Lemba* and *Kimpasi* morphed into some of the various Kongo-inspired Sacred Societies that exist in Cuba and other parts in the Americas today and of which scholars like Lydia Cabrera and Robert Farris Thompson are initiates (Fu-Kiau 127). The designation *mpangui* is a creolization of the Kikongo word *mpangi*, which means “blood relative” in one’s extended family or clan, and thus “brother” or “sister” in this broader sense. Used in the context of the Kongo-inspired Sacred Societies, the term means “fellow initiate,” indicating that Lydia Cabrera was recognizing Robert Farris Thompson as a fellow initiate of the Kongo-inspired Sacred Societies and was dedicating the

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book *Reglas de Congo* to him. In Cabrera, Thompson, Janzen, and MacGaffey, then, we have, not only a group of scholars of Kongo-inspiration, but also a group of initiates experiencing, studying, and communicating Kongo cosmology from the inside and intimately connected with Kongo Elders and Teachers like Fu-Kiau, thus establishing a link between Africa and the Americas in general and Cuba in particular, separated and and yet linked by *Kalunga*, the Sea and the Dead. It also indicates that Kongo-inspiration is not “Kongo-boundary-bound,” since these scholar-initiates of Kongo-inspiration are of European descent. To this list we can add more recent scholars like Todd Ramón Ochoa, initiated in Cuba into Palo Briyumba by the Teachers Isidra Sáez and Teodoro Herrera of the Muananso Quita Manaquita Briyumba Congo praise house of Guanabacoa (Ochoa 12).

Thematically, the book can be divided into two parts. The first part, which is made of Chapter 1 (“Los esclavos Congo en el Siglo XIX contados por sus descendientes”), consists of a historical account of slave society in Cuba. Here Cabrera tries to recreate the local atmosphere of Cuba during the 19th century and the international dynamics of the slave-trading European powers of Spain, France, Britain, as well as the USA. She uses archival resources of legal documents found in archives in Cuba and in Spain and accounts of scholars, writers, and travelers of the period who travel to Cuba from the same-slave trading powers. These sources convey messages about the representation of intersubjective relations not only between the Europeans and the Africans, but also among Europeans from various countries. Through the narrative device of slave narratives, the Africans are given a voice that they use to convey their knowledge of their own history, religion, language, culture, as well as their understanding of the international political, legal, economic, religious, and sociocultural relations of the time. All this
they do, of course, within the frame set and the constraints imposed by the choreographer of the voices, “the spokesperson of the tribe” Lydia Cabrera.

The second part, which is made of Chapter 2 through Chapter 6 (“Paleros ó Mayomberos,” “Sambi,” “La Nganga Nkisi,” “Mpungus,” and “Nso Nganga, El Templo”) is an extensive account of Kongo-Cuban spiritual beliefs, spiritual practices, initiation ceremonies, and healing and harming practices that constitute the fate transformation aspect of the culture for both individuals and groups. This is Palo craft.

5. The Hybrid Space of Translation

Because of the extensive work that Lydia Cabrera has done with the descendants of the Africans who were brought to Cuba during the trans-Atlantic Ocean slave trade, her grappling with the hybrid or creole nature of the zita, the ‘espace métissé’59 that was created as a result of the encounter of the African element, the European element, the Native American element (the remnant of the descendants of the the Ciboneyes, the Guanahatabeyes, and the Taínos, who were there before the arrival of the Spanish), and the Asians in the space called Cuba, and, as is natural to expect from human beings, her being a product of the attitudes and institutions of her time and space, Cabrera is a good person to help us study the challenges as well as the opportunies or promises of human pluralism in a global world. The Ancient Romans might have said that nihil novi sub sole, that there is nothing new under the sun, but in every generation, the members of that generation need to grapple, in their time and their space, with their own experiences of the perennial human questions, issues, and problems. This time we are living in, then, is a significant moment for us to grapple with this issue of “espace métissé,” especially

59 As I stated earlier, I borrow this term from the Congolese philosopher Valentin Yves Mudimbe, who states that “acculturation is an ‘espace métissé’” (Mudimbe 155).
concerning the people of the African Diaspora. The centuries that have passed since the beginning and the official abolition of the African slave trade (both on the Atlantic Ocean front and the Indian Ocean front) have been marked by an insidious and systematic devaluing of the worth of people of African descent throughout the world. Even though, as Cabrera states of Cuba, “without the African element, Cuba would not be Cuba,” it can be said that without the contribution of Africa and people of African descent, the Planet Earth would not be the Planet Earth. Despite this intuitive realization, though, the value of the African element has been devalued in almost all human institutions on a global scale. As I have already pointed out, the implications of this situation are so far-reaching that the United Nations General Assembly has decided to mobilize all its political, legal, economic, religious, educational, scientific, technical, medical, psychological, sociological, cultural, and artistic resources to address these implications by declaring the decade of 2015-2024 the “International Decade for People of African Descent.” In practice, the declaration means that this decade that began in 2015 is a decade dedicated to people of African descent in recognition of the valuable contribution they have made and continue to make to the rich tapestry of human pluralism on the Planet Earth. One of the concrete actions the United Nations has taken has been to establish, in Geneva, Switzerland, the annual “Fellowship Programme for People of African Descent” which provides the participants with “an intensive learning opportunity to deepen their understanding of the United Nations human rights system, instruments, and mechanisms, with a focus on issues of particular relevance to people of African descent. The Fellowship Programme [allows] the participants to better contribute to the
protection and promotion of political, civil, economic, social, and cultural rights of people of African descent in their respective countries.”

The book Reglas de Congo is a case study in the dialectology of linguistic pluralism. It is written in Spanish, of course, but it is not limited to the usual standard Spanish. It is full of general Cubanisms and Afro-Cubanisms. As mentioned earlier, besides Spanish and its varieties, the book also contains a sizable amount of Kikongo words and expressions and, to a lesser degree, of Yoruba (or Lucumí) words and expressions that are a reflection of the presence of the Africans who were brought to Cuba from the coast of Central Africa and the coast of West Africa. These two linguistic communities also represent the two African-inspirations that form the various branches of Palo, as well as Ocha/Santo/Lucumí.

The cosmologies of these groups, reflected and expressed, as they are in a plural language, have produced also a plural literature. Reglas de Congo is a multi-genre work which contains elements of poetry, drama, the essay, horal history, slave narrative, and the novel, as well as music. At a time (our time) when there is intense academic and cultural debate about what constitutes “World Literature,” it is helpful to hear what the German philosopher and writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe said in his time: “I am more and more convinced that poetry is the universal possession of [humankind], revealing itself everywhere and at all times in hundreds and hundreds of [humans]… I therefore like to look about me in foreign nations, and advise everyone to do the same. National literature is now a rather unmeaning term; the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach.”

In this respect, Lydia

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61 Cited as an epigram by David Damrosch in What Is World Literature? (page 1)
Cabrera is a good person to listen to and *Reglas de Congo* is a good place to look to embark on this path that Goethe suggests we should consider taking.

I have therefore two main intended audiences for this translation. First, the scholars in various fields of human endeavor that have to do with Cuba, especially with Afro-Cuba: politics, law, economics, business, religion, theology, education, science, technology, medicine, philosophy, history, geography (especially human geography), psychology (particularly now that researchers are seeking to find ways to help people who have been affected by various kinds of trauma), sociology, anthropology, and various branches of the arts (the visual arts, the performing arts, and the literary arts). The second kind of audience that I have in mind is composed of all those members of the general public who see themselves as spiritually-oriented or existentially-oriented travelers on the path of life and who seek to live deeper, more meaningful lives by finding alternative ways of understanding and exploring those dimensions of existence that live, move, and have their being beyond or on the margins of the normative hegemonic appropriated Abrahamic discourses on religion and spirituality, especially where non-European-originated epistemologies and ontological explorations are concerned.

Translation is a force multiplier; it helps humans diffuse their creations beyond the boundaries of their own language and culture, and it allows the people beyond those languages and cultures to benefits from the discoveries, inventions, experiments, experiences, and expressions of their fellow human beings. In the case of Lydia Cabrera, however, translation has not helped. Even though Lydia Cabrera is one of the pioneers of Afro-Cuban ethnography and therefore represents a major source of knowledge about Afro-Cuban literature and culture, her works (comprising 24 books) have never been translated from their original Spanish, except for just one collection of Afro-Cuban short stories, *Cuentos negros de Cuba*, which was first
translated into French by Francis de Miomandre and published by Gallimard in Paris in 1936, and only relatively recently translated into English by Alberto Hernández-Chiroldes and Lauren Yoder, with an introduction by Isabel Castellanos, and published by the University of Nebraska Press in 2004. Besides this translation then, there exists no other English translation of the books of Lydia Cabrera. The need is there, but, for several reasons, it has not been met. The North Carolina novelist David Payne alludes to one of the factors involved in the Acknowledgement section of his 2006 novel Back to Wando Passo. In writing the novel, Payne faced a very serious problem: he needed to connect two generations of a family living in two different centuries and he could find no way of establishing the connection—that is, until he had a chance encounter with the work of Lydia Cabrera. The device that solved his artistic-literary problem was the *prenda*, the central element that works as a *zita*, a link between the world of the living and the world of the dead in the Kongo-Cuban tradition of Palo. This is how Payne puts it: “On Palo Mayombe: above all the great ethnographic works of Lydia Cabrera: *La Regla Kimbisa del Santo Cristo del Buen Viaje, Reglas de Congo* and *El Monte* (Their unavailability in English is an impoverishment that I hope the current copyright holders will soon address)” (Payne 438).

Payne is referring here to an aspect of the politics of translation and publication. After I had decided that I was going to translate one of the works of Lydia Cabrera for my Ph.D. dissertation in Comparative Literature (with a focus on African Diaspora Literatures and Translation Studies) at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, I contacted the Miami-based (Florida) Ediciones Universal, the Publishing Press that has been publishing Cabrera’s work. I requested permission to translate *El Monte*, but I was informed that I could not touch *El Monte* because the translation rights to that book had already been given to somebody, and even though that person had just chosen to “sit” on the rights, the book could not be translated because
the rights were not “available” for translation. After thinking about my options, I called back and asked for the rights to translate *Reglas de Congo*. This time, I was directed to Dr. Isabel Castellanos, the copyright holder, who was gracious enough to give me the necessary permission to translate this particular book. But the fact that there are books that cannot be translated simply because some people with the power to trigger or stop the translation have opted for the translation not to happen is, as Payne points out, “an impoverishment” indeed for the scholarly community and for the general public, especially at this particular time when scholarly and cultural trends seem to be moving in the direction of more interdisciplinary inquiry.

I hope that this critical translation of *Reglas de Congo* will contribute to making the work of Lydia Cabrera on the Afro-Cubans better known to the English-speaking world in particular, and, through the English-speaking world, to the wider world by the way of relay translation, thus invigorating the fields of Afro-Cuban Studies and the broader fields of African Diaspora Studies and Religious Studies.

The depth of the work that the translator undertakes in translating a text is effectively captured in this passage by the Edith Grossman, an important translator of Latin American literature, in her 2010 book, *Why Translation Matters*:

The undeniable reality is that the work becomes the translator’s (while simultaneously and mysteriously somehow remaining the work of the original author) as we transmute it into a second language. Perhaps transmute is the wrong verb; what we do is not an act of magic, like altering base metals into precious ones, but the result of a series of creative decisions and imaginative acts of criticism. In the process of translating, we endeavor to hear the first version of the work as profoundly and completely as possible, struggling to discover the linguistic charge, the structural rhythms, the subtle implications, the complexities and meaning and suggestion in vocabulary and phrasing, and the ambient,

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62 Telephone communication with the author.

63 Telephone and email communication with the author.
cultural inferences and conclusions these tonalities allow us to extrapolate. This is a kind of reading as deep as any encounter with a literary text can be.\textsuperscript{64}

As Grossman explains, the act of translation is an act of creative reading and creative writing. \textit{Reglas de Congo}, as a text, exists in the Spanish-speaking world. Before I undertook this work, there was no text called “The Kongo Rule” in the English-speaking world. Just like a derivative \textit{prenda} is connected to the original \textit{prenda}, “The Kongo Rule” is connected to \textit{Reglas de Congo}, but it is an individual creation, released into the world to do its own “work.” As the translator then, as the writer of this translation, in seeking to connect the author Cabrera with readers in the English-speaking world, I had many choices to make, just as Cabrera, in writing her book, made various choices.

The first choice I made had to do with the overarching translation theoretical stance I would take. In Western academic circles of translation studies, there are two basic translation theories that at the same time morph into translation practice. These theories are “domestication” and “foreignization.” If we consider the relationship triad writer-text-reader, the text being the \textit{zita}, the intermediary space through which the author and the reader interact, in “domestication,” as proposed by Eugene Nida,\textsuperscript{65} the translator seeks to bring the writer and his or her world to the reader by creating a “domesticated” translated text. This text will be transparent, fluent, and would be created to minimize the strangeness of the foreign text for the second language reader (the English reader in this case). In “foreignization,” as proposed by Lawrence Venuti,\textsuperscript{66} the translator seeks to bring the reader to the writer and his or her culture by creating a “foreignized”


\textsuperscript{65} Eugene Nida, “Principles of Correspondence,” in \textit{The Translation Studies Reader}, p. 153.

\textsuperscript{66} Lawrence Venuti, “Translation, Community, Utopia” in \textit{The Translation Studies Reader}, p. 482.
translated text that is produced to deliberately break the reader’s cultural conventions by retaining something of the foreignness of the original. Domestication and foreignization need not be seen as two mutually exclusive frameworks and approaches to translation theory and practice, though. For the translator fully to promote the exchange between the writer and the reader, domestication and foreignization need to complement each other, like a couple engaged in a dance (to continue to use the metaphor of dance to indicate interconnectedness and relationship), one leading at times and the other taking the initiative at other times.

This framework, though, does not address a deeper issue: What theory does a translator adopt to translate a text from a culture that in the global space is seen as inherently “inferior,” as has been the case of Kongo-Cuban culture? The most appropriate framework I could find for this context is what the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah calls “thick translation,” which is applicable to translating texts from oral cultures (such as the that of Appiah’s native culture of the Akan people in present-day Ghana) like the proverb “Asém a éhia Akansoô no na Ntafoô de goro brékété” [A matter which troubles the Akan people, the people of Gonja take to play the békété drum] and the oral culture of the Afro-Cubans in Reglas de Congo. Thick translation offers more than a theory of translation, and in practice, it does more than produce strategies of translation: in the zita, the hybrid space of pre-text, text, and con-text, it goes deep into the pre-text because what we translate are utterances, things made with words by men and women, with voice or pen or keyboard, and those utterances are the products of actions, which, like all actions, are undertaken for reasons. In both theory and practice then, thick translation approaches the vector of reading-translating-reading as a political and didactic process, as well as the obvious artistic process that translation is. If, in the act of reading and translating the translator seeks to

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account for the assumptions of cultural inferiority that are attributed to the oral cultures and are imbedded in the text, then, in the act of translating, the translator has to show that there exists a continuity between the oral forms of cultural production and the contemporary written form and that the continuity is a genuine continuity. Simultaneously, the translator has to untangle the zita, to challenge the assumptions of the cultural superiority of the West (burned into its psyche just like the written words that are supposed to attest to that superiority are burned into the page) both by undermining the aestheticized conceptions of value that it presupposes, and by distinguishing clearly between the domain of technological skill, in which comparisons can be made, and the domain of value, in which such comparisons are problematic. This challenge of the assumption of Western cultural superiority requires the translator to expose the ways in which the systematic character of aesthetic judgments of value (literary and others) is the product of certain institutional practices and not something that exists independently of those practices and institutions. This process, then, requires a “thick” and situated understanding of oral cultures like the Kongo-Cuban culture and the types of oral literature they produce, as expressed in Reglas de Congo.

How to address the people at the center of the book represented a conceptual and linguistic challenge. In a racialized space where people are color-coded, it is easy to forget that those color terms do, after all, represent human beings. We capitalize adjectives like Canadians, Europeans, Africans, or French in the English language. Since the English language already does it also for “Negroes” and “Creoles,” I have chosen to extend capitalization to “Whites” and “Blacks” to make the conceptual and semantic field more consistent, more equitable, and thus question some basic assumptions. There are indeed usually unexamined assumptions behind the linkage commonly made between humans and colors (what are supposed to be, though in fact are
not, “the colors” of the skin of those humans) and the positive or negative images-energies that, through what modern psychology calls “the halo effect” (through positive or negative associations), are triggered in the mind, the heart, or even in the body when the words “white” or “black” are mentioned, heard, felt, or thought in relation to that category of difference we call “race.” The labels “white” and “black” carry their own semantic and psychological charges and, in the process of “racialization,” these charges are casually transferred to humans as if these energetic dimensions where naturally inherent in the skin and, from there, could seep into the humans themselves.

One other area in which “thick translation” proves valuable is in addressing the challenge posed by language use that is obviously problematic, but, because it reflects thoughts that are normalized in slave societies, becomes, *ipso facto*, normal. One such example occurs on page 4 of *Reglas de Congo*, where Cabrera uses the expression “*tierra de adopción*,” or “adopted land,” to argue that the enslaved Africans loved Cuba as their “adopted land” because Cuba’s sun reminded them of the African sun. This, of course, is a case of false equivalency. You have to dig deeper, though, to realize that these are slaves she is writing about, that slavery is a forced migration, and that slaves do not choose the land of their bondage as an “adopted land.” Related to this issue, is the question that Cabrera asks of her informants and that she also makes the travel writers she quotes ask of the informants: “Do you want to return to Africa?” Again, if you are brought to Cuba by ship across the Atlantic Ocean against your will and, once in Cuba, you find yourself stuck in the land of your bondage, where you have been working for free for a long time, how do you even begin to decide to return to Africa? When the Africans answer “no,” naturally, this answer is used as a confirmation that slavery is a benevolent act and slaves are so grateful to be in Cuba that they do not wish or seek to return to their homeland. In thoughts and
words, Cabrera avoids confronting the harshness of the slaves’ existence in Cuba. Coach John Wooden, the long-time coach of the UCLA basketball team, seemed to have a poetic reflection that fits here: “Things turn out best for the people who make the best of the way things turn out.” Indeed, this is how things turned out for the Afro-Cubans: they had arrived in Cuba; there was a big ocean between Cuba, the land of arrival, and Africa, the land of departure, and, through Palo and Santo/Ocha/Lucumí, they creatively used all their resources to structure and restructure their fate to make the best of their new situation and environment.

Because Reglas de Congo is, for all practical purposes, an inter-text in which Cabrera puts several texts in conversation with one another, how to handle the translation of those texts originally written (or spoken) in languages other than Spanish was a major problem that I solved only partially and temporarily. In general, Cabrera does not translate into Spanish the text originally written or spoken in Kikongo; she leaves them in Kikongo. I, however, have chosen to give a translation, based on the context of each text of speech, in order to help the reader get the fuller context of what is happening in each instance. When Cabrera uses text written originally in English and French, she translates them into Spanish and incorporates them, usually seamlessly, into the text of Reglas de Congo. There are at least two ways a translator can handle this problem: First, use the language of the original text, or, second, do a back translation, that is, in the case of Reglas de Congo, translate Cabrera’s Spanish back into the original English. The challenge here is that I could track the original texts that Cabrera is quoting (texts like To Cuba and Back, by Richard Henry Dana, Jr., The Island of Cuba, by Richard Madden, or The Homes of the New World, by Frederika Bremmer) and locate those specific passages. For this project, I have opted for the back translation. Besides the obvious convenience it provides, back translation has many advantages, since Reglas de Congo is a multilingual book. Given that I am translating
the book from Spanish into English, the problem of the texts originally written in French 
*(Voyage dans l’Amérique Centrale, l’Île de Cuba,* by Arthur Morelet, for example) can be solved 
only through another strategy called relay translation: the French original > the Spanish 
translation of Cabrera > the English translation of Fhunsu. Tracking the original French texts and 
do a direct French-to-English translation, using the original texts, would also be an option.

But, even then, there is a further twist to this challenge. In checking, for instance, Robert 
Francis Jameson’s *Letters from the Havana,* from which Cabrera says she quotes to illustrate the 
case that she is making about the Christianization of the Afro-Cuban children on page 26 of 
*Reglas de Congo,* I realized that Cabrera does not necessarily do a complete translation of the 
passages into Spanish in *Reglas de Congo.* On the contrary, she does an astute version of what is 
called “summary translation.” “Summary translation” is done when the audience of the 
translation needs to know, not everything the original text says (especially if the text is long and 
complex), but only “the gist.” But just like “full translation,” “summary translation” still has to be faithfully reflect “the gist” of the original text, without dramatic omissions or additions that 
seriously distort the message of the original. In this case though, Cabrera, omits what does not 
seem to fit, adds what she seems to need, and eventually “domesticates” the text to fit the 
arguments she is making in *Reglas de Congo.* As we can see, in all these cases then, 
conceptually, more than translation is involved; linguistically, more than Spanish and English are 
involved in the translation. Translation is a usually a bilingual space where only two languages 
are involved. *Reglas de Congo,* however, complicates the process of translation, expands the 
translation space to include Spanish, English, French, and Kikongo, and constitutes a reflection 
on the very composition of the text itself (in which translation is an important inter-text), making
the text a true *zita*, a true “*espace métissé*” and justifying approaching it through the lens of “thick translation.”

An important choice I had to make was how to handle the speech of the Afro-Cubans. Because these Africans and their descendants had a segregated social development in the slave society of Cuba, their language also developed in different ways from the language of the slaveholders and their descendants. Their Spanish tends to be seen as “non-standard” Cuban Spanish, much of it interlaced with African words and expressions, in this case, mostly Kikongo. In seeking ways to solve this translation problem, I thought about the situation of the enslaved Africans in the British colonies in North America, especially what is today the United States of America, where, because of their particular segregation, the Africans developed a dialect of the U.S. English language that linguists identify today as Black English vernacular or *ebonics*. The concept of “dialect” here should be understood in the linguistic sense of “a variety of a given language,” and not in the popular sociocultural sense of “an inferior form of language.” I thought of the work of the African-American anthropologist-writer Zora Neale Hurston and how she had rendered the speech of her subjects in her work. At the time of Hurston’s writing, this variety of the English language was referred to as “Nonstandard Negro English,” with the connotation that it was a “deviation” from the “right” speech, even though this particular language is a language in its own right, with all the linguistics characteristics of “Standard” English: rules for sound production (phonology and phonetics), word formation (morphology), word order (syntax), verb conjugation, tense formation, formulas of politeness and social registers (discourse analysis, pragmatics, and sociolinguistics), and children who learn this language as their first language learn and internalize all these rules. The same thing happens in the Afro-Cuban Spanish of Cabrera’s informants. So, I decided against the “Hurston choice,” not wanting to exoticize the
Afro-Cubans any further. I therefore chose, in my translation, to regularize the speech of Cabrera’s informants. In choosing this option, some of the particularities of the informants’ speech are “lost in translation,” but, following the rationale of “thick translation,” some human dignity is also “gained in translation” for the Afro-Cubans.

Related to this problem of language was the question of whether to translate the Kikongo terms or not. In *Reglas de Congo*, Cabrera does not translate these words and phrases into Spanish; so, in the translation, they also appear in the original language. But as translator, I have chosen to assist the reader by supplying translations into English, sometimes next to the words in the text, sometimes in a footnote, doing so sparingly. I chose this option, well aware of the politics of translation publication. For example, in the USA, there is the practical consideration that publishers of translations prefer not to have such notes. In conjunction with this strategy, I have prepared a glossary of Kikongo terms, arranged alphabetically in a Glossary section.

Swear words also presented their own challenge. The basic question was whether to spell them out or not. The choice I made was to spell them out wherever Cabrera had spelled them out and to “bleep” them wherever Cabrera had bleeped them. An illustrative example of a bleeping occurs on page 187 of *Reglas de Congo*, where Cabrera quotes an informant who had said the following: “*Hijo de tal, tienes que hacer lo que yo te mande. Tú no puedes más que yo, c*!...” Here we have a spelling out of a swear word or expression, “*hijo de tal*” (though it is a veiled one), and a bleeping, c*. In this respect, I chose to follow the practice that Cabrera has chosen to adopt.

The difficulties presented by the Creole nature of the Afro-Cuban language is illustrated by two examples on page 167 of *Reglas de Congo*. 

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The first example is, “*Kasimbiriko yo tengo nguerra.*” [“Kasimbiriko, I have a war on my hands” or “I am at war” or “I am fighting”]. The Palo Kikongo word *nguerra* is an example of the linguistic and cultural creolization of Kikongo and Spanish languages and cultures. The Spanish word *guerra*, war, is transformed by the linguistic phenomenon of initial consonant clusterization that is a basic characteristic of Kikongo, but not of Spanish. Linguistically, consonant clusters in initial position do not happen in Spanish words, but they are one of the basic characteristics of the language family of Bantu Languages, of which Kikongo is a member. The phenomenon can be seen in Kikongo words like *Nzambi* [God], *nsusu* [chicken], *ntangu* [sun, time], *ngandu* [crocodile], or *mfumbi* [dead]. Depending on the second consonant, the initial consonant can be *n* or *m* (*nd-*, *mb-*, *ng-*, *mf-*, *mp-*, *ns-*, *nt-*, *mv-*, *nz-*). A similar situation happens on page 173, with the Spanish word is *gavilán*, sparrowhawk, which has creolized into *ngavilán*, used in Palo Kikongo. In this case, I provided an explanation in a footnote.

The second example is “*Ya pangiámê*” Here, the gendered nature of the English language presents a thorny issue in translating Kikongo concepts. The Kikongo word *mpangi*, from which the Kikongo-Spanish creolized version *mpangui or pangui* comes, is not gendered. It means, as we already said, “blood relative” in one’s extended family and can therefore be “brother” or “sister” in this broader sense, but with the understanding that the speaker does not have “sex” or “gender” in mind. The English language has few words that express this inclusive, gender-neutral deeper sense of relationships. One might think of the word “kin,” but unlike the Kikongo word *mpangi*, which has a high frequency of use, “kin” in English is a low-frequency word. For instance, though you might hear a lawyer, police officer, or journalist looking for somebody’s “next of kin,” you will not hear a child say “This is my kin” (instead of “This is my sister” or “This is my brother.”). In Kikongo, *mpangi* is the default word that a child (or an adult)
would use. Because of this linguistic challenge, one has to create new language or extend the meaning of existing English language words. One such concept in the English language would be the word “child” or the word “spouse.” The difference is that while in English gender-neutral human-designating words are the exception, in Kikongo they are the rule, the norm. In order to “gender” these words in Kikongo, you have to add a gender particle. Thus a sister would be “mpangi nkento” and a brother would be “mpangi yakala,” “nkento” being the word-marker meaning “of the female gender” and “yakala” the word-marker meaning “of the male gender.”

There is also the challenge posed by the cosmology of Palo. In many places, for the translation to make sense, the reader has to accept the fact that Palo assumes the existence of magic or what theological discourse calls “miracles,” and this does not make it “ridiculous.” If the reader does not make space for magic or miracles, many passages will look like, not only cultural mistranslations, but also linguistic mistranslations. One such example in the description of the magical power of a prenda, as given on page 180 of Reglas de Congo. The Spanish passage reads:

*Castro Baró poseía una de esas extrañas Prendas Makuá a las que no se le canta. Para llamar al fumbi tenía que ponerse un carbón encendido en la boca. O en la cabeza. “Se le quemaban las pasas, pero el cuero no. Una vez ardió su bohío. Se le quemaron sus tarecos, todo, menos la Prenda. En el lugar en que estaba no se encontró ni una ceniza.”*

[Castro Baró had one of those strange Prendas Makuá to which you do not sing. In order to call up the mfumbí, he had to put a burning charcoal in his mouth. Or on his head. “His hair would burn, but not his scalp. One time, his hut burned down. His things burned out, all, except the Prenda. In the place where it was not even ash could be found.”]  

It does not seem to make sense that “in the place where the [prenda] was not even ash could be found,” but that is exactly the point of Palo expressed in this passage: that in the ziña, the knot that the prenda represents, the impossible is possible, that fate can be transformed. And in
English, this “possibility” is conveyed through this seemingly “impossible translation.” This, again, is the advantage of using “thick translation” as a translation theory and practice.

In referring to Cuba, Cabrera uses the word “Cuba” and “La Isla,” “The Island” interchangeably and she does so in a consistent manner. When she uses “The Island” in this particular way, she uses it as a proper noun and she capitalizes it. I have chosen to follow her convention and also capitalize “Island” when it stands for “Cuba.” I capitalize “Island” when the characters in Reglas de Congo use it as a proper noun, as a stand-in for “Cuba,” and I do not capitalize it when it is used as a common noun.

Finally, the process of translating Reglas de Congo has been a mountain of both emotional and intellectual challenges. The work has been emotionally challenging because it has lead me into a world charged with multifaceted violence and where the dehumanization of those people, those fellow human beings I call my bankulu, my ancestors, was justified with a sophisticated network of arguments. And I had to find the right words and right expressions in me to transmit that charge to the English-language reader. These arguments would want us to believe that the dead are dead and gone and do not have anything to do with us, the living, living as we do in today’s world in this first part of the 21st century. But, in these matters, I think that William Faulkner’s Stevens was perceptive when in Act I, scene 3, of the play-novel Requiem for a Nun he stated: “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”68 Because the psychological wounds caused by repeated historical trauma were deep and the fields that contributed to the arguments made by Cabrera were multiple, I had to process centuries of trauma to carry on with the work. The work was, after all, also an intellectual endeavor, an endeavor towards understanding. So, I had to read widely in order to understand that zita, that complex hybrid

68 William Faulkner, Requiem for a Nun, Act 1, scene 3 (p. 73).
space that is the Cuba of Reglas de Congo. It is difficult to give a logical account of what that preparation involved, as one reading led to another. Those readings included the fields of the international politics and law of slavery, the political economy of slavery, religion, theology, education and pedagogy, the science and technologies of slave society production, medicine, the philosophical debates of the period, the general history of Europe, the Americas, and Africa, the history of Christianity in Africa, the psychology of oppression and liberation, the sociology of slavery and slave societies, the anthropology, the arts, and the art history of the representation of “the other.”

Despite all this work, though, the zita, the paradox remains: translation is unfinished mental, emotional, and physical labor. It is indeed a work of the mind, the heart, and the hands; a labor that is always a work in progress, hopefully to be revisited at various intervals. In reflecting on the paradox of the translatability and untranslatability of literature, Gregory Rabassa, the renowned translator of Latin American literature into English, commented that many things are translatable, while may others are untranslatable, a plight captured in the Italian phrase “traduttore, traditore,” “translator, traitor.” “[The] translator must know that this is the best he can do in this place and at this time and must still recognize that his [or her] work is unfinished.”69 As a translator, I have to feel comfortable with this ambiguity and be comfortable in this ever-hybrid space of translation, inhabited by the dead. As a Kongo proverb reminds me, “Bankulu kabafua ko; mu luzingu bena kuakulu.” [“The ancestors, the dead, are not dead; they live and they are everywhere.”]. And the zita, the espace métissé, is a symbol and a constant reminder of this truth.

69 Gregory Rabassa, If This Be Treason: Translation and Its Dyscontents, p. 8
ENGLISH TRANSLATION:

THE KONGO RULE: THE PALO MONTE MAYOMBE WISDOM SOCIETY

CHAPTER 1: THE STORY OF THE KONGO SLAVES IN THE 19TH CENTURY
AS TOLD BY THEIR DESCENDANTS

A JOURNEY THROUGH THE COLONY

[1] Of all the African religions that have taken root in Cuba, the Yoruba religion is usually the one that receives the spotlight. This particular religion seems to have risen above the religions of the other ethnic groups that were brought to the Island through the slave trade. Apparently, it has asserted itself with such force that today, moving with the times and yet anchored in the past, together with Catholicism and mixed with Catholicism, it is seen by many as the religion of the majority of our people.

On a more esoteric level, though less studied by those who in our country have dedicated themselves to researching the African cultures that were introduced through the slave trade, starting as early as the 16th century, the practices of the various Bantu groups that were brought to the Island also deserve a spotlight now.

“When I was born, there were as many Kongo as Lucumí,”[1] we were confidently told by Creole Negroes[70] who had managed to survive the aftermath of slavery on the plantations and in

[70] I translate the Spanish terms negro and negra as “Negro,” to accord with the way the people of African descent are referred to in the English language in the English-speaking world, especially in the United States of America, during the time when Lyda Cabrera does her research among the Afro-Cubans in Cuba.
the cities, and by the Kongo people we met, already few in numbers, natives of Guini. For example, we met a Kongo woman from Pachilanga, on the Coast of Cuba. Still mentally alert, she was living in the El Cerro neighborhood in Havana, where she died in 1928, past the age of one hundred and fifteen years. We likewise met the “Kongo poet” Ta Antón, from Cárdenas, who, also past the mark of one hundred years of age, was still alive in 1955. Finally, we had the privilege of meeting a veteran. This man, who saw himself as a “Kongo of Kongo,” had a pension from the State and a young wife, and he died in 1946 in Marianao.

[2] Of course, it is not possible to know the exact number of Lucumí who came to Cuba, given the fact—not unknown to their descendants—that at the beginning and in the middle of the 19th century, the slave market was full of Lucumí. Moreover, it is possible to know the exact number of Kongo, who have always been present on the Island. It is also difficult to identify the exact regions of Africa from which each group came. However, more is known today about these regions by studying the names of the now defunct cabildos and the acts that record their founding or their dissolution—usually due to bad management of funds—than by examining the inventories of the ingenios, sales, emancipation letters, and other official documents. Besides all these sources, though, more important and interesting information could be evoked from the privileged memory of the old Negroes who knew their origins and the names of the “nations” to which their progenitors belonged. Some of them acquired this knowledge directly from their parents and grandparents, while others, the younger ones, received it through family tradition.

71 The term ingenio in Cuba is a complex term that has to do with sugar production. In this respect, Rebecca J. Scott states: “The process of sugar production varied widely in Cuba, from huge enterprises employing hundreds of slaves and producing thousands of tons of sugar per season to tiny mills with a few slaves each, producing less than one hundred tons. In 1860, Cuban sugar plantations (using the term to apply to the combination of land and mill) included some 1,382 ingenios as well as several hundred very small trapiches, the latter generally producing for local consumption” (Slave Emancipation in Cuba: The Transition to Free Labor, 1860-1899, p. 20).
“An American Black,” we were told recently in Miami by an exile of color, “does not know were he came from. Back home in Cuba, in my village, a black man who did not know where he came from would be a strange occurrence indeed.” And after declaring themselves of Kongo, Lucimí, Carabali, or Orara origin, which were generic names, usually, as we have discovered in so many cases, people did not know if their ancestor was Lucumí Yesa, Egbado or Oyo, Kongo Loango, Angola or Benguela, Carabali Olugo, Isuamo or Otamo, Arará Magino, Kuebano or Sabalu.

The stories the elders told about Africa, about life, about the customs, about the villages, seem to adhere to what one could read, about the Coast, in books written by travelers during the period of the slave trade. I remember a woman from Villaclara who, when talking about the past never said, like others, “during the times of Spain, during the times of María Castaña or of Nana Siré,” but “during the times of King Cami.” Who was this King Cami, who according to her, had existed in the land of her grandfather when her grandfather was brought to Cuba? Salakó knew the names of the kings of Dahomey.72 Bamboché would tell us, as heard from the parents and their contemporaries, about strange African customs—for example, to sacrifice, “to give a living person to a dead rich person” at the rich person’s burial, which, logically, could not continue in Cuba.

Contacts with the continent ceased, but the Creole children did not lose the memory of what they had heard and learned from their African parents. I say that direct contacts with Africa ceased when the commerce of human beings ceased, because the few who went back to their country and did not return to Cuba, and those who had remained in Africa, according to what we have been told, no longer kept in touch with those they had left on the Island.

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72 Dahomey is the name of an ancient kindom, the Kingdom of Dahomey. It existed between 1600 and 1894 and was situated on the West Coast of Africa, on the location of the country known today as Benin.
How much useful information could have been collected when those who could give it were still alive! But it was absurd, back then, to pay attention to those “things of savages, of Blacks.”

Another elderly woman told us that in the 1880s an uncle of hers, a tobacco farmer and “very intelligent,” had gone back to “Abeokuta, the land of Yemayá,” when he was set free. [3] “But, no way! Within a few years he was back in Cuba. He had already gotten accustomed to this. He said that one lived better here.”

This brings to mind the story of another African woman as told by Captain Canot.3 “A forty-two-day trip brought me again to New Sestros, traveling in a comfortable cabin, in the company of two women who had paid their way. The older of the two, very corpulent, was about forty years of age; her companion was younger and prettier.

“Such a respectable lady, after an absence of twenty-four years, was returning to her native country, Gallinas, to visit her father, the king Shiakar. At the age of fifteen, she had been made prisoner and sent to Havana. A Cuban candy merchant had bought her and for many years employed her as a street salesperson for his cakes and cookies. As time passed, she became, thanks to her candies, the favorite salesperson of that town and was able to buy her freedom. Thanks to years of frugal living and savings, she became the owner of a house and an egg store in Havana when, by luck, she crossed paths with a relative of hers, recently imported from Africa and who gave her news of her parents’ family. A quarter of a century had not extinguished the patriotic love in the heart of this Negro woman and, immediately, she decided to cross the Atlantic Ocean in order to see once more the savage man to whom she owed her life.

“I sent these enterprising women to the Gallinas on the first boat that sailed for Sestros and I later found out that they had been well received by the islanders with the usual ceremonies
reserved for such occasions. Several canoes with flags, horns, and drums went to welcome her at the ship. At the shore, the islanders organized a procession and offered a young bull to the captain to thank him for having taken care of the two women.

“When the older brother of the retired egg merchant came to meet her and stretched his arms to embrace her, she dodged his embrace, allowing only a handshake, and letting the brother know that she would refuse all public demonstration of affection until the brother presented himself before her in more decent clothes. That snub, of course, stopped all the relatives on the shore, because the dearth of pants among all the members of the group was deplorable, and it was the absence of this indispensable article of clothing that had caused such a non fraternal welcome. The daughter of Shiakar, despite her trip, was able neither to introduce the mode of pants nor reform her people, and, after a stay of only ten days, said farewell forever to his people and returned to Havana, very annoyed by the manners and customs of her country.”

Other Africans had the same reaction.

“They left here very happy, and when they arrived there, they did not feel well living as [4] savages.” Baró and others remembered that when it became clear in principle that slavery was about to be abolished, in the year of the promulgation of the law that converted slaves into *patrocinados*, a certain Mr. Antonio, nicknamed the Bishop of Guinea, who was living in the now disappeared Plaza del Vapor in Havana, built by Tacón and stupidly destroyed shortly before the communists took power, attempted, by raising money on the Island among the people who were already free, to take a group of his compatriots back to Africa and he failed. None of them accepted the proposition.

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73 The *Ley del Patronato*, or tutelage law, which converted slaves into *patrocinados*, or indentured slaves for a projected period of eight years, was passed by the Spanish Courts in the year 1880. It was unexpectedly terminated in 1886.
“When the Bishop of Guinea was raising money among the Africans and Creoles in the Jesús María neighborhood, he also tried to hook my mother in order to take her to Sierra Leone. ‘Get out of Cuba? No, man, you must be dreaming!,’ she told him. ‘I am a Cuban, a Creole through and through… civilized. Is it paradise there? We live better in Cuba.’”

The fact is that, contrary to what happened in Brazil, according to my informants, the Negroes who returned to Africa were few. And not for lack of love for their native country, which continued to live in their hearts with such powerful force that they turned Cuba into an African country. Saibeke has heard that many people, after the emancipation, returned to Africa, but they could not reach their villages, because the English—“they were damned bitches!”—were making the kings believe that the Negroes who were returning from Cuba were true “rejects” and were not appropriate. Many remained in Liberia. About five traveled with Ernesto the Arará, a “son of Naná Bulukú,” and returned to Cuba immediately because they were not able to disembark. Nothing more was heard about those who had readapted better to the environment or those who had not been able to return to Africa. That is, free, committed to themselves and masters of their own destinies, they did not think about returning to Africa.

The weather in Cuba suited them very well. The Cuban sun was a close relative to their African sun, adaptable, open to what was amicable in the culture of the white man, fitted perfectly in a space that, not only physically but also spiritually, was favorable to them, because, in their adopted land,74 saturated with centuries of Africanness thanks to the white people’s sympathetic attitude, tolerance, indifference, or superstitious curiosity, they did not have to give

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74 The expression tierra de adopción, adopted land, seems to insinuate that, thanks to “the sympathetic attitude” of the Spanish, the Africans had “chosen” to come to the Americas on their own volition and, after arriving in Cuba, they had “adopted” Cuba as their new home, a new home in which, with the passing of time, they would prosper.
up what was for them the most precious heritage: their religion. Nor did they have to give up all
their traditions, their habits, or their foods.

Many years ago, I was walking with a French Africanist in the Pogolotti neighborhood,
and he told me: “The Negroes of Cuba impress me with their beauty and affability. What a
contrast with the poor and sad mood of the Negroes I see freezing in Chicago!”

Good weather and good human treatment, as well as the care that the slave owners put in
[5] selecting their cohorts of Negro slaves, more than explain, throughout Cuba, this contrast of
smiling faces that the descendants of Africans offered, faces that run the gamut from thick
chocolate, to coffee and milk, to caramel.

Going back in time to 1845, the Swedish author and abolitionist Frederika Bremer,⁴ after
a productive stay in Cuba, was able to write to her queen about the results of her observations in
the United States and in Cuba: “The free Negroes of Cuba are the happiest in the world. They are
protected by the laws of the country from the violence and hostile attacks from enemy tribes that
in their own land threaten them. I confess to Her Majesty that for me it has been astonishing and
at the same time heartbreaking to notice that the spirit of freedom and justice in the slavery
legislation in the United States is so much below that of Spanish legislation. And I have
difficulty explaining to myself how the noble disposition and the national pride of the American
people can stand it, knowing that, concerning the freedom of their laws, they are eclipsed by a
nation that they consider inferior in humanity, which is true in many aspects. The Spanish of
Cuba are not mistaken when they despise the Americans and call them barbarians. In Cuba there
are probably more Negroes who are happy than Whites.” And there were also at that time more
Negroes than Whites…
It was Bremer who called the Island “the paradise of the free Negroes.” Continuing her observations, during her stay at the Araidna, the ingenious model of that period, she did not miss the opportunity to visit and interview the Negroes of that area.

Let us accompany her on her morning round one beautiful day in March more than a century ago. This live picture reminds us of the deep sensation of peace that we felt one truly paradise-like, almost timeless morning that we spent with the Negroes in the countryside of Matanzas.

“Each hut in the morning sun seems planted in an earthly paradise. These small farms with their palm shacks are, in the majority of cases, the homes of free Negroes. Until today, I was not very sure what they were. In a nearby compound on the right, I was attracted by some trees and fruits of an exceptional look, and I decided to pay a visit. The entrance was the most dilapidated of this world, but, at the same time, seemed the most disposed to let us pass. I entered and followed a small narrow path that made a sharp turn to the left and led me to a guano-roofed hut. A little further down, there was a small orchard of bananas, a mango tree, and a tree with flexible branches full of round and white fruits. Close to the hut grew other trees, very tall, resembling palm trees, which caught my attention: they were cactuses and trees with flowers. What astonished me more was the appearance of an order and a care that are so rare to find in the houses of the children of Africa. The hut was well built, and around it, the trees had been planted [6] with a love that was obvious. The door was open and on the ground a fire was burning, a sign that the hut was inhabited by an African. The inside was spacious and clean. On the left, a Negro with a woolen cap, dressed in blue clothes, sitting on a low bed, his elbows resting on his knees and his head in his hands, was facing the fire, apparently asleep. He did not see me, and I was able to look around without anybody preventing me. An iron pot on the fire, before the fire a cat
the color of a turtle shell, next to the cat a white hen, standing on one leg. The fire, the iron pot, the cat, and the hen, all were dozing in the sunlight that was washing them. In that moment, the cat looked up at me, blinked and looked at the fire. It was a tropical still nature. Yellow corncobs, fruits, jerked beef, tools, were hanging from the dark walls of the shack. After a while, the man stood up and turned to straighten the bed’s few sheets. He folded them, as well as a small star that stood for a mat; he carefully set everything to one side and, sleepy, sat back on the bed to contemplate the fire. He noticed my presence and asked, “Coffee?”, and, as a greeting, he gave me a friendly look. I could not tell whether he was inviting me to drink coffee with him or if he was asking me for coffee. The cat and the hen seemed to salivate in anticipation of the breakfast what was almost done on the fire and began to fiddle. I assumed that the time to eat the meal had come, and I said to the old man, the cat, and the hen, “Goodbye, I will come back.”

This old man whom Bremer surprised in the intimacy of his shack was a freed slave called Pedro, known in the region for his impeccable goodness and honesty. He was an old Negro like many others I have visited and loved, and who, before 1959 were still living as they pleased in each village, smiling with the same sweetness and friendliness, and offering a cup of coffee to visitors.

“At my request,” Bremer continues, “Mrs. C. (the members of the Chartrand family were the owners of the Ariadna), accompanied me as an interpreter to make other visits. We went to several homes of Negroes, many of them inferior to Pedro’s shack, and whose owners did not resemble him, being thieves and lazy like many others in the Limonar region. I asked them if they wanted to return to Africa, and, laughing, they would answer, No! Because they were fine here. Many of them had been stolen from Africa passed the age of childhood. We hurried back to Pedro’s home. I had supplied myself with coffee and with some Spanish sentences to exchange
them with the people who cared for Pedro and who were in the shack. The trapiche had crushed his arm, and there was nothing else to do but to amputate it above the elbow. After that accident, he bought his freedom for $200 and his wife’s freedom for the same price. I asked them if they wanted to return to Africa. ‘No! What are we going to do there? We are so happy here!’”

It seems strange, does it not? that returning to the country were one was born was not the thing to which the African slaves aspired the most once they achieved their freedom. The testimony of the Africans themselves and of so many foreigners hostile to Spain, always rejecting the unacceptable allegations of those who saw in the color of the Negroes “the darkness that announces the darkness of their souls” and defended the slave trade—indefensible as it was—as a good thing for the Africans, as well as the stories, some of which enlightening, transmitted orally from parents to children, leave no doubt that the state of being of the Spanish and the Creoles, above all, contributed early on, naturally to soften the sad condition of the slaves. Spanish legislation, which continually ordered that slaves be treated humanely—see the 1789 Real Bando de Buen Gobierno—, offered them protection, creating the positions of public servants whose work was to collect accusations and testimonies from the slaves when they were abused or when they were denied the freedom to which they were entitled after having paid the specified amount of money to buy their freedom. “The law orders the owners to free their slaves, not only when the slaves have reimbursed their full cost to the owner, but also when they paid the amount in successive installments” (X. Marmier, Lettres sur l’Amérique)75.

Were these good dispositions respected? The question is relevant, and those who systematically impute to the land-owning Creoles—the land, for the most part, is in the hands of

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75 Xavier Marmier (1809-1892) was a French explorer who visited many places in the Americas. In Lettres sur l’Amérique, published in 1851, he writes specifically about “Canada, the United States of America, Havana, and Rio de la Plata.”
Cubans—all kinds of atrocities, pretend that the answer is “no,” that the unions and the venial courts of law, the lawyers, are on the side of the slave owners. But, as it is natural to assume, if these laws were not always followed, in many instances, they worked. In 1831, the slave Benito Creagh, sues his owner, Don Manuel de Jesús Alemán, because the owner refuses to issue him his certificate of freedom after he has paid. Alemán loses the suit; and, since the slave had been jailed, Don Manuel de Jesús is ordered to pay the costs and the food that the Negro Benito had consumed in prison. In the same year, in January, freedom was granted to another slave who had appealed to the City Council. On March 18, 1865, the governor, General Domingo Dulce, writes to His Excellency, the Regent of the Real Council, so that the Trial Court can inform him about “whatever amount of compensation it could determine in the case of the enclosed petition that the Negro woman Gabriela Lincheta has sent to Her Majesty the Queen,” an interesting document that Comandante Marciano Gajate keeps in his archives. The cruel owners were sentenced—as it happened to many freed slaves who had become slave owners, and who, according to the Negroes themselves, as we will see, were characterized by their cruelty. In those cases in which the owners did not obey the orders despite being convicted, they were fined two hundred pesos. A man called Woermann, an American from the North and a trustworthy source, [8] reached the conclusion that “With all that can be said about the cruelty with which the Spanish treat the slaves, and what is told is overly exaggerated, in the institutions that protect the Negroes who are sick, the Spanish offer us an example that ought to be followed in the states of the South.” That the slaves of Cuba lived better than the peasants of Europe, is a statement that was made many times. Let us remember the conclusion that Humboldt had reached (in 1825).
“In no part of the world where slavery exists is manumission\textsuperscript{76} so frequently practiced than in Cuba, because Spanish legislation, unlike French or English legislation, favors remarkably the achievement of freedom by not making it onerous or by blocking the path to it. The right that the slaves have to look for another owner or to buy their freedom if they can pay the amount of money that their purchase had cost; the religious sentiment that induces many people in the upper classes to voluntarily grant freedom to some of their slaves; the custom of retaining a number of the slaves, of both sexes, for domestic service”—some households had up to sixty slaves, like that of the legendary Count Barreto—“and the affection that the familiar exchange with the Whites instilled in the Negroes; the easiness that the Negroes who worked on their own were allowed to have, to regularly pay a stipulated amount of money to their owner, are the main reasons which explain why so many Negroes in the cities request their freedom.”

“The position of the free Negroes in Cuba is much better than in any other part of the world, including those nations that have bragged for centuries to have the most advanced civilization. We find that Cuba does not have those barbarous laws that are still invoked in our days and which are used to forbid free Negroes from receiving donations from Whites, to sometimes deny them their freedom, and to make it possible for them to be sold for the benefit of the State, if they are found guilty of providing a safe haven to escaped Negroes.”

Let us examine, for example, the differences between the opinions of a French writer and those of his contemporaries who were Americans and English. This is how two abolitionists express themselves. Referring to the slave trade, which, with all that it involved, was the most heated topic at the time when these authors are writing, the French Arthur Morelet,\textsuperscript{5} says:

\footnote{\textsuperscript{76} Manumission is the act of a slave owner freeing his or her slaves. Different approaches developed, each specific to the time and place of a society's slave system. The motivations of slave owners in manumitting slaves were complex and varied.}
“Travelers are shocked to read in a newspaper: Sales of Slaves. For sale for the amount of 600 piasters a Negro woman and her four-year-old daughter. Healthy, without blemishes, knows well how to iron, is active and very submissive, contact... For sale for 400 piasters an eighteen-year-old Negro woman, gave birth eighteen days ago, is very sweet and knows how to sew. These ads are methodically classified under real property sales, follow the ads for animals, conveyances and objects. One feels deep sympathy for these beings, nameless and without a country, who no longer belong to humanity, who have fallen down to the level of real property and are sold on the market place; wretched creatures converted into a simple element of public wealth and destined to pass through the earth without leaving more memories than those accorded to a domestic animal,” and these ads provoke more aversion for slavery than the spectacle of slaves… “I would say that, having accepted this sad heritage, nothing has been spared to attenuate the hideous nature of slavery. Not only is legislation more liberal, more paternal, less exclusive than in any other part of the world; not only has the existence of the Negroes been surrounded with more secure guarantees and they have been prepared a wider path for them to achieve their freedom, but, I also have to add, the nation has lent itself effortlessly to the application of these human principles. There is a big difference, it pains me to say, between the treatment that the Negroes receive in our colonies and the treatment that they receive in Cuba, especially in the cities, where the kindness of the customs, without erasing the flagrant iniquity of slavery, puts them at par with the domestic service of European countries.”

The English Madden reproduces the well-known observation of de Tocqueville, only to destroy it later: “It is common knowledge that in the New World, slavery has acquired with the Spanish a peculiarly soft character. One can come to this realization by reading the Ordinances of the Spanish monarchs. At a time when in other European nations the laws that regulate slavery
are deeply barbaric, the Spanish, who have proved themselves so cruel with the Indians, have always treated their slaves with special humanity. In their colonies, the distinction between Negroes and Whites was less marked than in all the other colonies; the authority of the slave owner was more similar to that of a father of a family than a master.” But this is false, Madden says. “The Spanish have always treated their slaves with peculiar inhumanity.” “What we call humanity for the Negro, there is not a single slave owner in Cuba who would not consider it unjust for the landowner.” “Replace the word Indians with the word Negroes, the word ‘mine’ with the word ‘ingenio,’ and the same work of extermination continues to be carried out. And they say that the Negroes are a happy race! What an error to say that slavery is benign in the Spanish colonies!”

Considering the deep antipathy that slavery and any other types of oppression awaken in those who see liberty as a supreme good, Madden’s book shocks because of its fierce passion. If we consider the historical context, it becomes evident that what guided Madden was not altruism but the poorly disguised interest of an English public servant.7

From my extensive conversations with the elders who had been slaves and with their children, the picture emerges that, at least in Havana, there were more good slave owners than bad ones. This, of course, does not mean that there were not horrible and brutal ones. But it is telling that what Humboldt had observed was acknowledged by many foreign abolitionists who visited and wrote about Cuba: the fact that out of four Negroes one was free indicates that, in fact, the laws favored emancipation.

In general, and in support of what we have heard many times—and this is not the first time that we state this, nor is it the last time—the relationships between the two races were
always cordial, and this according to the Negroes themselves, during the remote days of the colony, in the middle of Spanish domination, and during the Republic until its end.

The foreigners, during their first stroll through the sensual and good-natured Havana of the nineteenth century, which was a collection of samples of people of all colors, as was the Havana before the current regime, which has lost its laughter and smile, would be surprised by the democratic spirit that was prevalent in our country. In those old days, it was possible to make comparisons, as did the sensible Frederika Bremer, with the despotism that in the United States, the supposed birthplace of freedom and the equality among human beings, kept the “colored people” in a degrading status. These differences never existed in Cuba. “I saw on the dock a poor docker take out a cigar and greet a gentleman, and this gentleman stop to help him light his cigar,” observes an Anglo-Saxon, scandalized as if this were something inconceivable.

I think that this simple and cordial spirit, this sense of humanity that brought honor to the Cubans of high classes, they inherited from their Spanish and Christian roots. An old English author, George Barrow (The Bible in Spain), admits that in social relationships, “in no country in the world,” other than Spain, “can we observe the sentiment that human nature deserves or a better understanding of the conduct that human beings must show toward their fellow human beings. I have said that Spain is one of the few countries where poverty is not treated with disdain.”

Another Anglo-Saxon would later say that for the Spanish, “all human beings are equal before God.” It is, therefore, not surprising that the French Huber, after observing the good disposition and the good treatment given to Negroes in slave-holding Cuba, would conclude that all Cuban “business people” were liberals.
In *Some data on the Negro slaves and enfranchised in the Havana of the 16\textsuperscript{th} Century*, published separately from the *Miscellaneous Studies* done in honor of Don Fernando Ortiz by his students, colleagues, and friends in Havana in 1956, María Teresa de Rojas writes: “The documents about slavery on our Island, despite the harsh condemnation of the times, do not reveal systematic cruelty or despotism on the part of the slave owners, and, judging from the slave owners themselves, one infers or easily guesses that the heart put a noble accent of humanity in the relationships between masters and slaves.” About the innumerous certificates of freedom—already at the beginning of our history, that she transcribes and that appear in the three volumes of the *Index and Extracts from the Protocol Archives of Havana*—granted to slaves and for the most part to children of slaves born in the homes of their masters, the masters declare that they free them because “I have brought him up in my home, for the love I feel toward him and for the good service I have received from his mother.” These kinds of statements make it clear that racial prejudice did not influence them.

From the reading of these documents, María Teresa de Rojas concludes that what many Spanish slave owners did was to free their own children, whom they had had with their female slaves.

The legend of the Negroes never ceased to influence deeply the passionate opinions of the Cubans, who, when it was no longer necessary, were taught to look at Spain with spiteful or contemptuous tolerance. Thus they increased that disdain, which reached the point of turning into an inferiority complex in the children of the Spanish. The children of the Spanish were more anti-Spanish than the children of the Cubans.
The Spanish journalist was right when he quoted Don Ramón María de Araiztegui in *Votos de un español:*77 “Be certain, children of Pelayo, you might have achieved many things in Cuba, but, as you have been told a thousand times, you have never made a Spanish.”

“Cubans hate Spain, and this hate sacrifices everything”—a quotation from Arrieta, a self-employed Cuban—, “hate that, diminishing the person who feels it, we must sadly acknowledge it, is at the heart of the Cuban character in general, and the Cuban cannot do without this hate when it comes to Spain and everything Spanish. This hate, over time, does not spare any effort in appealing to the most demeaning epithets and qualifications that show to what extent good nature can be perverted if it falls victim to political exaltation.” It is said that a professor of “El Slavador,” that great Cuban educational institution, made in a geography lesson, “with the perverse and poisonous breath of political passions,” the following statement: “Spain is an inkblot on the map; let us skip it.”

This anti-Spanish phobia, kept alive well into the time of the Republic through exhibitions of patriotism, led two famous Cuban intellectuals to propose—and it was done—that the chair and the teaching of Spanish history be abolished. They managed to do this through speculation and they sustained it by feeding people the stories of the dead heroes of the Cuban uprising of 1868.

We have been persuaded, with demoralizing apparent impartiality, that the cause of all our problems is rooted exclusively in our Hispanic origin. Of course, this argument has the advantage of absolving the national conscience of every sin,—but up to what point did we have a national conscience?—turning Spain, the target of the inflamed rhetoric of the liberation, into the only culprit of our defects and errors.

77 Published in 1923.
Looking back at history, outside observers remarked that this violent antipathy and the division between Cubans and Spanish—peninsular people, as they were called—began to sour after the 18th century. Let us remember that as the Cubans, both white and black, rushed to take up arms against the English, how much those who sided with the English were despised, both during and after the occupation, and what labels the women who had accepted the favors of the English received. The example of the independence of the United States, to which both Spain and France had contributed, had no direct influence on Cuba. Only at the beginning of the 19th century, a century so preoccupied with freedom—when, in 1823, a select minority of Cuban compatriots manifested the desire to be independent—did the aversion of the Cubans towards Spain begin to get stronger. The Cuban consciousness was still for the most part Spanish until the middle of the 19th century, and the indifference of the population toward the expedition by General Narciso López proves it. At that time, an Anglo-Saxon commented: “The Cubans do not have a burning desire for freedom or independence; they only want to have more comfort and to strengthen the current system of government.”

The propaganda and machinations of the English, the aggressive policy of the Yankees, who early on, had their eyes on “the Sugar Island,” logically raised the suspicion of Spain. Spain distrusted the Cubans and kept them away from the most important public offices, a policy that was effective in encouraging separatist ideals, and, of course, the Mother Country itself contributed to widening the gap that divided Peninsulars and Creoles by its negligence, its administrative errors, its inflexibility, the lack of political imagination in its politicians, and, according to its implacable detractors, by the corruption of some of its Captain Generals, corruption that later on would pale in comparison to the corruption of an American acting
governor. This American gave the Cubans lessons in administrative dishonesty, and the lessons were useful and well applied.

Thus, time confirmed what José Antonio Saco had written, that by refusing the Cubans the political rights they justly demanded, “Spain would lose Cuba.”

Murray⁸ and others, already before the middle of the century had written that “the Cubans feel humiliated if they are called Spanish, and a native of old Spain would feel even more humiliated if we called him Cuban or Havanero. However, the manners of a Cuban are as ceremonious and noble as those of any old Spanish.” (What would Murray say today, in Miami, about the manners of those people whom a sharp journalist has called here “Cubichones?”)

Salas y Quiroga (1840) reveals the truth about what is said concerning the sad situation in which parents and children find themselves on the Island: “Compared to the African race, the white class is united and close, loosely divided into three broad classes: noble, rich, and poor, and it is divided in the whole into two big factions: Peninsulars and Americans. And the [13] sympathetic and impartial de las Barra y Prado, to keep the quotations short, explains, with his usual good judgment, the causes of that division, already very deep: “The honest man must tell it all, the Spanish element that prevails in Cuba is not, in general, made of men of great culture and renown, but of men of money, and this is a cause of contempt from those men of renown in the country, who have been educated in the finest universities abroad, and who, for lack of trust, have stayed away from any involvement in public life.”

It was true, Barras adds with his usual frankness that, “The great mass of immigrants who come to work for the business sector, come from villages in the Northern provinces, without having had any contact with educated people and with no more knowledge than that of the first letters. Here, in contact with an advanced society, many acquire a rudimentary education and
only a purely superficial veneer in the refinement of manners and taste. After they make money and become business leaders or retire to live from their business profits, they become full of vanity and arrogance, and, because of their economic standing, they think that they are knowledgeable in all that affects the administration and politics. As a general rule, they become conservative and reactionary because they think that being liberal would betray their plebeian origin and allow people to trace back their origin.” … “There is no meeting in which there is true brotherhood and which brings people together as equals.”

But the Creoles who protected their interests resorted to hand-kissing the Captain General, as they would later in the 20th century, maybe with less dignity, toast with water and whisky with the U.S. Ambassador and to ingratiating themselves with the new Captain Generals, the Presidents of the Republic.

After Cuba declared its independence, despite the bad memories left by the military volunteers and la calle de la Muralla, the Spanish were not persecuted nor did the euphoria of the victory cause vengeance or disorder. Instead, the grudge of the Cubans turned into mockery and disdain.

Time has passed, though not much, and now, in this strange year of 1978, in which only God knows what pleasant surprises are being prepared for humanity, it seems that, due to a strange historical experience and a certain—though incredible—disappointment suffered by the majority of the Cuban people, our Spanish origin troubles us less, is less scornful, and is not rejected so often. What is more, many people even begin to feel proud of their roots.

After all, we have been taught that the Spanish, those abominable forebears, had been sanguinary, despotic, and stupid all over the Americas. “Seize education, and the country will be [14] yours,” the beloved Master, Don José de la Luz y Caballero, “the Socrates of Cuba,” well
in advance of his time, had wisely advised those who dreamed of freeing Cuba from Spanish domination.

But we were talking about the Kongo and the Lucumí, and it can be said that these two ethnic groups divided between themselves the mystical field of the Island with their “Lucumí Rule” and “Kongo Rule,” Palo Mayombe or Palo Monte. At this time, persecuted on the Island and yet flourishing here in exile, the padres nganga or paleros, of Kongo ascendance or lineage, are not less impactful, in number or importance than the popular oloricha, pabajoricha (the padre of Santo) of Lucumí ascendance or lineage. The Lucumí act openly because, since the beginning, “their religion has been frank, and their festivities and their music more refined,” while the Kongo act slyly because their Rule has been more esoteric, and they have been crude, distrusted, and feared.

“Really ignorant and bad!” concluded emphatically, in talking to us about the Kongo, my great informant, the priestess Odedéi, Lucumí to the core, committing perhaps a crime of passion because she remembered a very bad experience she had with a Kongo. Her opinion, though, coincides with the one obtained, decades before, by Sir Charles A. Murray, from landowners and slave owners. “The Kongo Reales, the Loango, the Mondongo, etc., are lazy, wicked, and have a tendency to escape. They have lively entertainments, music, and dances, but they are liars, petty thieves, and given to all kinds of scoundrelly acts.”

The irony of the following anecdote, told to me by S. Herrera as rigorously historic, gives an inkling of how much the Kongo loved hard liquor.

The Kongo Francisco de la Cé—the slaves took the family names of their owners—, foreman of his cabildo, calls a meeting and expresses himself in these terms about the pressing needs of the Society:
“Sires, we need to call a meeting to buy a gift for the Queen…”

One could hear the members of the audience murmur between their teeth:

“Yes it is possible, yes it is possible, you will see.

“Pay attention, folks! Because this meeting has been called so that, I, Francisco de la Cé, say, it has been called so that the Negro can progress and drink better, and to progress it is necessary to buy a keg of aguardiente and…”

Applause. A sudden enthusiasm arose in the audience and all the members emptied their pockets:

“Let it be so! Here it is! I contribute this!”

On the other hand, other Negro informants who were Lucumí descendants and who had known Kongo very well and had lived with them, told us that the Kongo, especially the Kongo Reales, “were very civilized; they had in their cabildo a court protocol, a kingdom.” They were not stupid; no, the stupid ones were the Benguela, the Mondongo, the Musulungo, the Ampanga. That is why many calash drivers and house maids of the rich families were Kongo Reales.

During all the colonial period and shortly afterwards, there were numerous cabildos of all “nations” and of Kongo—Basongo, Mumbona, Bateke, Mubemba, Bakongo, Musabela, Kabinda, Bayaka, Benguela, Mondongo, Mayombe, Ngola, etc.—in Havana and in provincial capitals and villages. In those days, the Bando de Buen Gobierno of His Excellency the Count of Santa Clara, Legislator and Captain General, published in the city of Havana on the 28th of January of 1799, sent them outside the town because their festivities and funerals were too noisy.

My older informants joined the Kongo in their functions and some spent time with them “back in the sixties, when Napoleon lost power in France and here we had the Ten Years War,”
says Bamboché, who had volunteered to fight and like others of his contemporaries, missed the colony, the cabildo, the Day of the Kings abolished in 1884—“because of the Ñañigos”—, the carnivals, and Holy Week. In the last decades of the 19th century, these cabildos, where people danced on Sundays, as always and as in all Cuba, occupied houses on the streets of Monserrate, Maloja, San Nicolás, Salud, Compostela, and other streets of Havana, and in Regla, Guanabacoa, and Marianao. Some continued until the beginning of the First European War. The cabildos of the Lucumí, “Changó Terdún,” which had had its days of glory, ended sadly—“it was dishonored, funds were embezzled, and it was a mess”—, as late as 1927 or 1928.

The cabildos of the Kongo Reales, according to these older informants, enjoyed much prestige and good fundraising practices. Those of Santa Clara, Santi Spíritu, Remedios, Sagua, and Santiago de Cuba were also important. Incidentally, we recopy here some testimony contained in one of our files:

“That was truly Kongo di Ntòtila, the very Kingdom of the Kongo, with the King and the Queen, the Court, the vassals, and all with order and respect. That is why the Kongo cabildo was called Kingdom. The festivities were very good, the best. There was much luxury there; the King would put on his holster and sword and he sat on the throne with the Queen, and around him the Court. Governance there was conducted the African way. Who could challenge any of these taitas, a King, his minister or second in power?” In a daguerreotype owned by, Don Manuel Pérez Beato, who had a very good knowledge of our history and of the colonials’ customs, the King of the cabildo, who also has the title of Capataz or Foreman, is presented dressed in a striped suit, buckled shoes, and a band across his chest. This particular King does not have a [16] sword, but he holds a cane at the end of which is a tassel. A three-corned hat with feathers covers his head.”
Don Fernando Ortiz, in his out-of-print essay on the *cabildos* writes that, when the Spanish government prohibited the street parades on the Day of the Kings, also described in many books by foreigners who had visited the Island, the authorities did not mean to take away from the Negroes their right to assemble. In 1885, the *Bando de Buen Gobierno* made the following clarification: “People in these *cabildos* should continue to assemble. The government only wanted to keep a close eye on them to avoid the disorders that usually occurred (that is why their meetings were presided over by the District Warden, who used to get along well with the Negroes), without causing any inconvenience to the Negroes or violating their customs.”

Without violating their customs! Could it have been possible in those days to conceive anything similar, written in English, in the neighboring great country of freedom?

This humanitarian preoccupation, dating back many centuries, that the Spanish slavery laws show, this tolerance that today surprises us is, among other reasons, what explains why the African cultures—languages, religions, music—have remained so alive in Cuba and why the Cuban Negroes have been able to conserve their *Roots*, those roots that the Negroes in the U.S.A. have completely lost.

In this respect, the following letter, dated 1926, for which I thank Pierre Verger, was given to him in Dahomey many years ago as an object of curiosity. It is by one of the many Baró of Matanzas, Esteban Baró, whom I had probably met during my many trips through that province. The letter is addressed to his king, the king of Dahomey, and it reads verbatim:

“Jovellanos, 18th of August, 1926.

To the Honorable Sir His Majesty the Prince King of Dahomey.

Dear Sir:
Greetings to you with the highest respect and consideration as King of the nation of Arará Dahomey. The servant who writes to you is señor Esteban Baró, President of the Society and he also represents his descendants who call themselves San Manuel Aidájuedáorosú Gadaguiridá Atindó Ojädota. I was asked to write this letter to you because I am a son of Africans. My father is Tosú, of the nation land of Sabalú Aboomé; the mother of my father is Afresí Sodú Fiyí Dojó Sabalú Tomé; the father of my father is Bosu Aghué Yetobí Aguómi Bisese Eyirojó Sabalú Tomé. Mi mother is Asonsiete Fiyirojó Tacuame Tomé. My grandmother is Sé Yidó. Grandfather Gando Fiyirojo Tacuamé Tomé and I, being sons of Africans by father and mother, who are both naturals of Africa as stated in this letter, I vow for these declarations so that it is established that I am of the same race of the same nation Arará and I present this to your attention with the object of having direct communication with you because it is my desire to have the need to travel there as soon as I can because I understand the African language. For this reason I address to you this letter to inquire about the character and purpose of your illustrious nation and at the same time I beg your Majesty to answer me and also to send me a simple book on your kingdom.

Address:
Señor Esteban Baró y Tosú
President, *Sociedad Africana San Manuel*
Jiquima letra H. Jovellanos,
Province of Matanzas, Cuba"
there, in the bay, an English ship appeared. King Melchor sent for the Commander in Chief. The Commander in Chief comes. He looks through the binoculars. Quickly he sends for the Chief of Artillery. The Chief of Artillery brings an *alifante*, a horn as big as a mountain. He puts the canon on the horn. He puts stones, iron, grapeshot, everything he finds, everything he puts in the canon. When he has finished, he takes aim at the English vessel. He aims precisely for four months. He raises the canon, lowers the canon. He aims well. What? He aims for four months. Then he gives the order, Fire! Boom! The canon is thundering for six months. Ta, tin, ta tin, ta tin! And the whole English vessel goes, timbo! timbo! Flop, at the bottom of the sea!

- Bless you! Somebody said.
- Trash, rotten nothing, Creole piece of shit, you know nothing! I tell no lies. Damn! Sambiampungo Kinpanga salayalembo!”

Many Kongo who were nick-named *mbaka*, or midgets, were of short stature, and as a proof of their propensity to lie, Eyeo told us to what one of them, a famous musician, attributed the short stature of his race.

“Over there in our land, men don’t fit in doors, women don’t fit in doors; their heads [18] touch the roof. If you see a hen, there, hens are as big as cows.”

- And why are you so short here?

“Because when the *mundele* took us prisoners, he put us in his boat and he shrank our feet, he shrank everything… and we arrived here short.

“The women in my land had the hair so long that if a woman passed by, you could sit on her hair and be carried like on a cart. But when the Negro women crossed the sea, they lost their long hair.”
It was hilarious to see that particular Kongo who, in the Carnivals of Campo de Marte, directed the masked people caricaturing a battalion of Negro Militias:12

¡Batallón de mureni! Battallion of Negroes!

¡Firimán derecho! ¡Asujete! Stand straight! Hang on!

A su jefe nadie menia Nobody messes with your chief

Camina como yo téñseña78 Walk the way I teach you

¡Trincha derecho! Vira la culo Lean to the right! Stick your butt

pa lo campo tomate, toward the tomato garden,

Vira la culo pa la casa mi comae79 Stick your butt toward the house of my comadre.

¡Carajín, carajín, cán can!... Carajín, carajín, can, can! ...

But we should not particularize; all the Africans and Creoles in general, with very rare exceptions, were amusing. They were effortlessly funny, as A.S., a Venezuelan diplomat and a friend of mine, liked to say, “a joke should come out spontaneously, like a sneeze.” I would not therefore be able to apply to any of the Negroes that I have known the following labels, which, among Cubans, can be fatal for those who deserve them: annoying, boring, or pushy. One can be a rascal, a thief, a traitor, of the worst kind, but in no way …boring.

Nino de Cárdenas has known the Kongo closely. Of all the Negroes he has dealt with in his youth, the Kongo were his favorite. When he used to come visit me back in the decade of the nineteen forties at the now demolished Quinta San José, many times accompanied by his friend Juan O’Farrill, another delightful old man, we would sit down to chat under an immense one-

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78 Here, “ténseña” is a linguistic contraction and transformation of the expression “te enseño,” “I teach you.”

79 There is a linguistic phenomenon called “elision,” which affects usages of the Spanish language in the southern part of Spain and, in Latin America, in the Caribbean islands and costal parts of South America. In practice, this manifests in cases like comadre being rendered as comae. Elision is a major characteristic of Cuban Spanish in general and of Afro-Cuban Spanish in particular.
hundred-year-old laurel three in the back of the compound, and withought wasting time, he
would direct the conversation toward his favorite topic: “Kongo.” The old men would evoke
the Kongo with enthusiasm, they would tell their stories, they would repeat their sayings, they
would talk about their profane and religious dances and songs, and about their genuine and still
current sorceries. They would start to bring back to life a past from which they had not weaned
themselves, and the dead of that past. Some of the characters were legendary, even though they
were still characters of flesh and bones, such as the mfumu and taita ngangas they had known
and whose miracles they had witnessed.

[19] Carried away by their memories, they would forget my presence. Sometimes, I would not
understand what they were saying because they would speak to each other and scream as they
argued in their language. But their gestures were enough; they brought out the surprising vitality
locked up in their worn out bodies (Juan had the blue eyes of a pure old man, and Nino had “the
heart weakened by the years”), the extraordinary power to animate a scene or all that African
world taken to Cuba, forever present for them. However, Nino was a son of Lucumí.

“And the Lucumí loved me very much and I learned the language from them. Until the
age of eleven, I was by the side of my madrina, my godmother, a Lucumí woman, but my natural
inclination compelled me to seek the company of the Kongo. Why? Because their songs and
dances appealed more to me than those of the Lucumí. That, however, did not make me hate the
beats of the agbe, the bembé, the big and round drum, or the batá of Changó, a more refined
drum that is also used to call all the Saints.

“At the age of thirteen, from the ingenio Intrépido (I close my eyes and I see it as it was
back then…, I also see the barracks of the other ingenios where it was said at that time that, at
night, they would lock up Negroes under key so that they would not escape), I transferred to the
ingenio Santa Rosalía de Castañé. The truth is that I run away from the Intrépido with my sister, who was at the ingenio San Antonio de Sabanilla, because a friend of mine, Pedro, had told me: ‘Nino, damn, let’s get out of here!’ And the three of us left for Santa Rosalía. Pedro, my friend, was fifteen. At Santa Rosalía, they were milling the sugar cane, and they needed young people to load the green husks onto carts. As soon as we arrived, we were immediately assigned to a team of Chinese. There was Tadeo, a Kongo, who was a garabatero, the one who separated the husk with a hook. I made a good impression on the Kongo. He would tell me, ‘Come here, boy!’ and one morning, he said:

- ‘Listen, at noon, when you get out, you are going to eat at my house.’ But I went to eat with the Chinese team. Shyness. In the afternoon, he tells me:

- ‘Why did you not come to my house?’
- ‘I forgot,’ I said, lowering my eyes.
- ‘Well, tomorrow then you walk over there. You eat lunch at my house.’

“I went. He made sure I went. He fed me well. At every turn, he would say something in the Kongo language, and since I was delighted by it, I would pay close attention, and I spent three years listening to him. Each day he would give me a lesson, and that is how I learned the words that you are writing down.

“Ah Tadeo! He told me how he was stolen from Africa. He always went out with his father, who was a messenger of the King. But one day, a nice group of traffickers came to visit. There always was some Kongo who did business with the mundele, the white men, to sell them the Negroes that they needed, and his father, trusting, was walking in front with a group of such men, while Tadeo was walking behind, distracted. When he realized it, he was on the canoe.

[20] He was going to run away, to escape, because stealing children was something that
happened every day, but they caught him, they carried him up, they forcibly put him in the canoe and then on a sailboat. Tadeo came in the last shipment of Negroes bought by Durañona and Mazorra, the same year in which I was born.”

Through the veins of some of my informants, men and women, ran royal blood. With almost the same words as Nino and other visitors of the nineteenth century to Cuba, Frederika Bremer writes: “Many of the slaves who are brought to Cuba have been princes and chieftains of tribes, and the people of their race who have accompanied them into slavery render them respect and obedience,” and she tells a story that is similar to other stories that I have heard directly from descendants or acquaintances of those slaves of high rank. “A young man, a Lucumí, along with many people of his nation, was taken to an ingenio, where, for one reason or another, he was sentenced to receive some lashes. The other slaves, as was the custom in such instances, were required to watch the punishment. When the young prince stretched himself on the ground to receive the lashes, his companions did the same thing, requesting that they be given the same punishment.”

The granddaughter of a rich abolitionist landowner often heard told in the landowner’s home the story of two of the landowner’s slaves, Yagumí and Bengoché, who were princesses, sold by their uncle to a slave trader at the death of their father, the king. The uncle had sent them by themselves to the beach to pick up snails, to make the kidnapping easy for the buyer. “One time, my grandfather, after buying a crew of Negroes for his ingenio, noticed a woman who was crying inconsolably. As it turned out, against the law, she had been separated from her daughters! Don G.A. told the salesman that he would pay for the two Negro girls the price charged for adults. Once the transaction was accepted and he bought them, he took them to their mother. They went to the ingenio, and there they were called Florencia and Ignacia, and later Má
Florencia and Má Ignacia. Whenever a child was born in the family of a slave owner, if the child was a boy, he was given a Negro slave boy, if the child was a girl, she was given a Negro slave girl. In my family, these Negroes were called *malinches*. Florencia was a slave in the house of Don G.; she loved me very much. In her old age, she would take me to the *cabildo* of the *ingenio*, to the bembé. Don G. ordered that she be taught how to do everything. She had many children, and even adopted an orphan girl. The orphan girl grew up, was unfaithful to her husband, who, knowing that she was cheating on him, cut open her belly with a knife. Another old slave of Don G., using his bare hands, put her intestines back in her belly and thus saved her life. But there was a piece of intestine remaining outside. What did she need it for anyway? He cut it, and the adulteress died.”

I could stretch to the infinite this interruption of Nino’s story with the stories that other old men have told on the same topic in Havana, Matanzas, and Santa Clara.

[21] “Back in Africa, the women used to go to the market to sell yams, peanuts, and *corojo* butter. One morning while my great-grandmother and her sister were at the market, somebody threw a sheet over them, and when they realized what had happened to them, all they saw was sea and sky! That is how Grandma and Aunty Mercé had been taken.”

“Carmen Bayo went for a walk in the village with her two daughters. She returned home alone. The village Negroes themselves took them and sold them to the white men.”

“For a keg of alcohol, a father would trade in his son, as unbelievable as that might sound. Who sold Teodulio?”

And an old lady, very advanced in age, of the Tulipán neighborhood, used to say that she “came, stolen, to the bay, in Puente Agua Dulce, Casa Consistoriá, called Triconia today. It was all for sugar cane and textiles. The compound of the Kongo was the best. We disembarked right
there, during the time of General Someruelos. My Kongo grandmother was one hundred and seventeen years old when she died. She was baptized in Puerto Príncipe. By the time of the cordonazo malo San Francisco, she had three children”. (The cordonazo malo San Francisco, a frightening and unforgettable cyclone, happened in 1844, a year that was, in all aspects, a tragic year for Cuba.)

A Catholic priest from Cameroon was kind enough to pay me a visit in Madrid, accompanied by Doña Vicenta Cortés Alonso, the author of a famous book of historical investigation, *La Esclavitud en el Reinado de los Reyes Católicos* (*Slavery under the Reign of the Catholic Monarchs*). The priest, although young, told us about the terror that the Negro traders, who used to steal adults and children to sell them to the white men, used to instill in the people who had lived during the last days of the slave trade.

It was said about Latuá, a renowned iyalocha, that she was a princess, the mother of a “fixer,” or *tata*, of a relative of mine, a Mandinga princess, who distinguished herself wherever she went with an indomitable pride. The father of Bamboché, Latikuá Achihuá, was a prince or king. The mother of Odedei was a princess. Má Susana was a queen that a tribal war had made prisoner in the interior of the Kongo Kingdom. I had a long list of the little kings who came to Cuba as slaves to cut sugar cane. In the case of one particular prince-slave, “money was once raised in the cabildo to buy him his freedom,” and the old informants assured us that in the case of these illustrious slaves, those who over there would have been their vassals, always helped them lighten up their burden.

Nino continues: “Tadeo disembarked in Cárdenas and ended up in the ingenio Manacas, and from there went to the ingenio Santa Rosalía. He never heard from his family again, but in [22] his thoughts he continued to live in his homeland. And in Santa Rosalía there were a lot of
Kongo to console him. There he married Má Viviana, a Creole woman, a good woman, dark-skinned and of short stature. Tadeo, an excellent gangulero, was in great demand. He eventually became a cook in the main house. When he finally managed to buy his own freedom, he remained on his job because the master of the house loved him very much, but because the overseer was difficult, he said that he wanted to leave and he left. This happened while the master of the house was absent, and when the master returned, he sent people to bring Tadeo back. Shortly after that, the master died, and Tadeo left the kitchen and went back to work in the fields. During harvest time, he was a harvester.

“Oh, Tadeo! Whenever he felt happy, he would tell me: ‘You are a shameless little Creole!’ I also lived in the ingenio Armonía among Negroes and Whites. Negroes and Whites liked each other well. Back then, the slaves and the children of slaves belonged to the families of the white people. But today, dirty politics, which is involved in everything, is souring the love of the Negroes and the Whites. I am old, and I see it clearly. In other times, the slaves working in the mountains bore their slavery because being a slave was a thing of that time, a custom, and that is why our own people would sell us. Since it was not the white man, the master, but another Negro, who used to give us the slashes, the Negro did not hate the white. But today, politicians want to teach people how to hate, and the one who sows hate receives more votes. Before, the races used to love each other more. You do not believe it? They used to love each other more! Those at the bottom, black-skinned or white-skinned, all in their respective stations, used to get along. And over there at the top, in the family houses, in the mansions, what was happening? Well, there was no little white baby of good stock who did not have a Negro bottle and a Negro playmate. They were raised like siblings. Now that Cuba is free, politicians want to bring out racism. There is so much talk about the history of so many members of a race that has suffered
discrimination, and abuse. There is so much talk about so many marginalized mulattoes, enraged because their mothers were as black as shoe polish. I am telling you that this will end the good climate that has existed here since the past, without any ceremony, because that climate was a true, *a heart-felt union.*

In 1946, when I asked whether in Cuba Negroes were mistreated, Gabino Sandoval, who never minced his words, told me: “No madam! And even today, we Negroes do not have anything to complain about. The law does not pay attention to the color of one’s skin, and it considers all of us as equals. Negroes who would want to ascend could go to the University, to Parliament, to the Senate, wherever they feel like going. But, they really like to sleep and lead an idle life. I do not say that all of them are lazy. If it had not been for the Negroes, Cuba would not have been rich. Who planted and harvested the sugar cane? (And Negroes were lucky because if cows had never been born, the Negroes would have had to pull the carts). Without the Negroes, Cuba would not have been free. Who fought the hardest against Spain? Who gave birth to Maceo? That is right: the Constitution rightly recognizes it and gives us the same rights it gives to white people. I tell you that today when Negroes are born, they are born without color; they [23] put on the Cuban race. And that is bad because, if a Negro mother gives birth to a Negro baby, is that a shameful thing?” he said, grinding his teeth.

It would have delighted me to read to Gabino what was written, years later, in 1961, in the *Special Warfare Area Handbook for Cuba*, prepared by the Foreign Areas Studies Division, Special Operations Research Office, the American University, Washington, under contract with the Department of the Army. It says, among so many false things, that in that year (1961!), “Negroes can now sit down on benches in parks.” Did the learned editors of the *Handbook for Cuba* not know—like many other things—that marriage between Whites and Negroes had been
declared legal as early as 1866? One proof of the little weight that racial prejudices have had since those days of the colonial administration is that in the information for limpieza de sangre or blood cleansing, the antecedents that otherwise were sometimes too evident in the physical features or color of some of the petitioners were overlooked. Mixed-race people were officially whitened, and as it is well known, the administration sold certificates that confirmed that one was white. This shows that in its colonies, Spain defended very poorly its policy of racial purity.

What Nino told us was also expressed, in other words, by an author whose work consisted in analyzing colonial societies and customs: “Where the master lives, there lives the slave at his feet. But nothing unites them except the heart; no bond ties them except love. In honor of one and the other, it is necessary to confess that this bond is rarely broken or relaxed.”

“A heart-felt union!” At times I had the impression that Nino was very reactionary. And perhaps he had many reasons to be so. The demagogic spirit that motivated some of the politicians and pseudo-intellectuals or opportunists could inject into la raza de color, the race of color in our country a poisonous hatred. Though our country has a short memory, such hatred could not be rightfully justified here the way it would be justified in other countries.

Nino continues: “The ingenio El Intrépido had no barracks; it had three streets with huts where the free Negroes lived, with their small plots of land on which to plant crops and raise chickens and pigs. The ingenios El Corto, La Empresa, San Antonio, San Joaquín, La Luisa de Baró, Armonía, San Rafael, San Lorenzo, La Isabelita, and Tinguaro had good barracks and infirmary posts when I was a little boy. Back then, I used to go to the cabildo of El Intrépido on Saturdays and Sundays. In all the ingenios there were cabildos. El Intrépido did not have a

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80 This refers to what the psychiatrist Frantz Fanon calls “whitening,” the set of legal and social processes that, in the multicultural communities of slave societies, help people who are on the darker side of the skin color spectrum to “cleanse” their blood, to “pass” or move closer to the “white” side of the spectrum (Frantz Fanon, Peau noire, masques blancs).
chapel with a chaplain and white saints. In order to be baptized, the Negroes had to go to the neighborhood church. Those Negroes who were not baptized in the Catholic Church were called *judíos* or Jews. And they were taunted; it was said that they were baptized in liquor and [24] celebrated with drums. Oh yes! Back then, baptism was extremely important, just as it is today. All the Africans and the Creoles were baptized in the Catholic Church, and of course, in the African traditions also. My people, just as they used to do in Africa, baptized their children against evil spirits. Seven months or a year after children were born, they were washed in herbs to protect them against evil influences, they were given collars to wear, or small incisions were made on their skin and the necessary products were rubbed in,” whatever the diviner recommended.

As a *mayombero* explained to me, “Of course, whenever Sambia sent a child into the world, the parents, or the mother, if she did not have a husband, would get together seven *nganguleros* so that they could baptize the child in the way of the earth. They would make invocations on the child’s head—they would invoke *kisi malongo*—so that the child would not die or suffer physical harm. They would wash the child with river water or well water. They would then take the child to the wilderness with a rooster and a hutia, perform a ceremony and then, carrying the child in procession, they would emerge from the wilderness singing: *Nganga la musi, nganga la musi*...”

Hernández, one of the many *paleros* of a lineage of illustrious *santeros* and *paleros*, from Sabanilla del Comendador, told us that before or after the baptism in the Church,¹⁵ the child would be taken to a *nganga* and would receive the name of a *nfumbi*, or a dead relative, and, if the child was born for leadership, he or she would be *rayado* or *rayada* this one time, that is, would be initiated into that life and would receive the corresponding marks of initiation.
“Of course, the Negro also got baptized in the African way,” we are told. “Kinani mbonga kuna toto, you know, a child comes to the world. Many padres get together in order to kuende burunkuama kunáncholo, wishing him kunan Sambi Sambiampungo Nsasi Nsasi kunanfinda, in order to strengthen the head of that child and that, with the blessing of God and the sun, the child can walk until death. That is how it is. In the countryside, they would take the child to the wilderness, with a cock and a hutia so that the child does not get spoiled, and they would give thanks to Nsambi, to the people who accompany them, to the madrina, the yeri yeri.

The last person to be greeted is the mother. When they take that child out of the wilderness, they know who his protector is, because the perros, the dogs, are present and the spirit rises and reveals everything. They leave the wilderness singing Kunantédale kuama nganga la musi musi. Because the infant does not speak yet: Nkengue maina maina kuenda nganga mbola. That is what the padrino sings. They all take turns. Yansese wiri kokuna Sambiampungo, Gangá Lucero Gangá kinfumbe nofumbi ndoki la meni meni ya talankó... That the fumbi has already arrived; the parents hold hands and the child is put down on the ground in the middle of the circle formed by those attending the ceremony: the wiri ndoki meni kunansambe. They all bow to the ground, take some soil in their hands and kiss it, or they kiss the fingertips that have touched the earth.

“Also they take the child to the house of the padrino if there is no river nearby, but if there is a river nearby, they all go into the water up to the waist and they put the child in the water. Or, if it is possible, they take the child to the sea to baptize him or her there. Children can also be baptized in a well. There, a perro with the spirit of Mama Fumbe lowers the child into the water, but there must be others who are mounted, or possessed, by the spirit of Lucero Mundo, Cuatro Vientos, or Mama Fumbe. If the child is sickly, they call on the spirit of Centella Siete Estrellas or Cobayende: Indo Cobayende Indo wants mboba.”
Another elder told me that “they baptize a child in a river or, if not, with seven calabashes of water, seven puffs of tobacco, seven men with heart, malafo manputo or aguardiente, seven sticks of seven different kinds of wood, silk-cotton tree, green cedar tree, salvadera tree, poplar, ciguaraya, guamo tree, and carob tree. Seven shades because they give shade.”

Francisquilla Ibáñez tells us about the “wholesale” baptisms of the ingenio San Joaquín. When the priest went there, he Christianized a big number of “little ones.” And many of those he baptized were already big children and were in their second dentition, walking on their own feet to the baptismal fountain, for lack of godmothers who were strong enough to lift and carry these children to the baptism. Because many little babies were dying, they were dying as judíos, Jews, and it was determined that it should be a requirement to have all babies baptized forty days after their birth. But, when they were in danger of death and in the absence of a priest, as frequently happened in the countryside, Francisquilla and all the old women of that time knew how to administer el agua del socorro, the water of salvation, and they would baptize the dying children because, “without being baptized, the little angels would not go up to heaven.”

Judging by the memories of Francisquilla and her contemporaries, one of the most important and joyful events of the ingenios, for both masters and slaves, was the baptism of the little Creole children, especially in the ingenios that were far away from parishes and where there were no chapels or chaplains. Many littles ones “would get indigestion from eating sweets and would get drunk from drinking beer during the celebration of their baptism,” which happened oftern among the Guajiro, who, through procrastination, would put off the baptism of their children for many years, even in the families that were well off.

The Reverend Abbot¹⁷, who saw everything, wanted to know everything and explained everything meticulously in his letters, writes that “when it comes to collectively baptizing the
Negroes of a plantation, there are big profits—the Fathers, the priests, are very interested in baptizing the neophytes because they receive seventy-five cents for each ceremony they perform—in the space of a few days, they can only manage to collect half of that amount. If the landowner decides to take advantage of this fact to save some money, the priest is usually unavailable or busy with some aspect of his ministry that does not allow him to perform the requested ceremony. Some of the landowners, wanting to obey the law and act with care, would negotiate with the Father and the priest would come to perform the services.”

A Cuban by adoption, man of letters, liberal, and patriot, complained in English, [26] under a pseudonym, that the priest did not preach the Gospel. In Cuba’s countryside, there were, apparently, men and women who, after having been baptized, never entered a church again until they got married, and many did not even go back to the temple for this ritual because they lived together all their lives. The priest García Vélez wrote in *The Catholic Truth* that in the countryside, except for one single case, the landowners, though they had the necessary means, did not request the priests or chaplains to instruct their slaves, as the Regulation recommended.

Things were different for the house slaves. They were familiarized with the catechism and learned how to pray in the houses of their masters, where it was a custom to pray the rosary every afternoon. They accompanied their masters to mass, carrying their masters’ rug or stool, they heard sermons and they were very devout.18

The Licenciado Francisco Barrera y Domingo had written: “Despite the fact that poor people in the countryside make great personal sacrifices to get money and buy a Negro, there is only a mere fifteen percent of slave owners who teach their slaves the Our Father, the Hail Mary, the Credo, the Commandments or, more rare still, the sign of the cross.” However, he adds: “From the year 1780 to the year 1797, when I write these lines, there has been a lot of
improvement. A great number of poor priests have come from Europe and have settled in ingenios, where they have a good mission with masses, intercessory prayers, marriages, and baptisms. On Sundays, the priests teach how to pray and to say the mass to the Negro slaves of the rich families who have a chaplain and a beautiful church within the ingenio itself. The ingenio owners pay the priests a good salary. The priests also receive payment from those neighboring ingenios that cannot afford to hire their own chaplain and who share with those who have one. And the chaplain, in his free days, teaches some tenets of the Christian doctrine to the slaves. And since the older and more experienced Negroes have learned something of the holy fear of God, they teach it to the new Negroes when these arrive from Africa, but without knowing what they are doing. However, thanks to an inner light, they eventually come to understand all the things that are necessary for a Christian to be saved.”

Thirty years later, Jameson tells us in his Letters from the Havana: “It is true that the Negroes are taught religion, but only ritual; they set aside their fetiche only to replace it with a relique. The barbarism of superstition remains, and even after several generations have passed, the Negroes maintain the characteristics of their former states.”

Those who pretended to justify the sin of slavery argued that baptism was the salvation of the Negroes, the only way possible for them to achieve eternal beatitude. My older informants never talked to me about eternal beatitude, but they did explain that baptism was seen as important because it “fortifies the head,” it empowers Eledá. Besides bringing them closer to [27] the white race, establishing bonds of spiritual kinship with the white race, integrating them within the Christian family—I repeat here Ceferino’s words—this sacrament “is the one that gives you a name, and no one who does not have a name is somebody. Baptism sanctifies one’s name.”
We have already stated that it is not possible to “get settled” in the Ocha or Lucumí Sacred Society, in which the person being initiated receives another Lucumí name, a secret name, without having previously been baptized in the Church. And this is a tradition that has continued to be practiced in Cuba, according to the older bablorichas and iyalochas who were my informants.

Because many of the foreigners who have written about Cuba in the past have tended to generalize too much, I do not know up to what point what they have written is correct at all. One of those writers wrote that it was obvious that of all the countries that existed in the world, our country was the most negligent in matters of religion. Another one stated that in our country, the Church had given up exercising its spiritual functions, that the majority of Cubans were not interested in religion, that they rarely went to church, that the churches in Havana were empty and only women and Negroes attended them. The confessionaries also were empty, and on Sundays, when people went to church, what is scandalous (for the Protestants) is the lack of devotion, the lack of respect, the loud conversations, the distraction of the parishioners who do not concentrate nor pay attention to the service.¹⁹

Already during the years around the turn of the 19th century, precisely during the days of great religious ceremonies, Good Friday was characterized by such deep silence and respect that one could not hear a fly flap its wings. To have fun, some young student pranksters, would go into the churches with dogs, they would tie the parishioners together by their clothes with the help of pins, they would throw crabs into the fountains of holy water and pour silver nitrate in it, and after the parishioners crossed themselves, they would get dark stains on their foreheads. If the Public Order officers were able to catch the authors of these misdeeds in the act, they would fine them.
By the mid-19th century already, men no longer attended church regularly. The ideals of the French Revolution had crossed the sea, and in some quarters, Voltaire’s *moquerie* was sweeping religious prejudices. Masonic lodges were being built and people were speaking and writing about independence and progress. The majority of Cubans, it is true, understood that religious practices were for women, and, even though scandals were not uncommon, there were many people who preferred a better life on earth over gaining heaven through prayers and sacrifices. There were, however, convinced Catholics and priests worthy of that name. With this [28] Wurdermann agrees. He laments that “priests have families,” have vices, “engage in cock gambling,” but he does not deny that there are many priests “who conduct themselves as gentlemen, whose devotion to the faith earns them the love and respect of their flock, and who in all things act as faithful shepherds.” (“There is more tolerance in Cuba,” he adds, “than in many Catholic communities in Europe.”)

At the same time, more than one hundred years ago, D. Antonio de las Barras, from Sevilla, observed: “The members of the clergy are tolerant and are respected, without anybody curtailing their rights; the country is little religious, that is little devout, so little devout the families attend mass on the first of January with the understanding that this one mass would count for the whole year. There are foreigners of all religions and sects who do not practice their faiths in public, and all the people deal with them and befriend them without ascertaining if they belong to the same faith or not.”

But although more and more people were losing their faith or were becoming indifferent, and although religious education was becoming more and more precarious, being Catholic was, and still is, as natural as breathing. “The enthusiasm of the faith of a nation is measured deep in the heart of its population, according to whether the display the inhabitants make of their
religious faith is high or low. The masses are almost all Catholic, even though, as always, there are sinners but no heretics or licentious people.”

The Reverend Abbot laments in 1830 that “the decay of manners is increasing, that during the religious processions, young people do not remove their hats when the Holy Host passes while their parents spread their white handkerchiefs on the ground, whether the ground is dry or wet, in whatever part of the street they happen to be when the Holy Host passes, and they fall on their knees.” Salas y Quiroga complains that “at the very peak of the sugar industry, a country that is so advanced in matters of industry lags so far behind in matters of education—rural slaves receive no education, not even the consolation of religion.” Despite all this, it can never be said that our people, in their ignorance or religious neglect, ever reached the point of doing away with the baptism of their children, since baptism was seen as an indispensable sacrament, as inevitable as the last sacrament of extreme unction.

“At the moment of death, nobody forgets God. The people who used to pour silver nitrate in the fountain of the holy water in the church of Christ, saying that they were free thinkers, and who used to sing like cocks at the doors of the church during the midnight mass, thinking they were funny, would seek out a priest if a family member was dying or would request a priest for themselves if they were about to die.” The old woman who was telling me this told me a story that I, because of my age, had not been able to observe personally.

“Run, there comes The Majesty! Get the candles, fast! As it happened, the Viaticum was passing, and the bells that announced it were ringing. The priest was carrying the Holy Oil for the dying person. The people who were at their windows or on their balconies would light candles, and those who were in the streets, Whites or Blacks, would follow the Viaticum. Those who could afford it would buy their own candle and would follow the Viaticum. If any person in
[29] the houses in front of which the Divine Majesty passed knew how to play the piano—in those days people played the piano a lot—that person would play the Regal March. The women at the windows, at the doors or in the streets would kneel down; the men would take off their hats. When the Viaticum arrived at the house of the dying person, the people who had accompanied it would wait at the door, with their candles still lit. As the procession entered the house, the altar boy would ring his bell three times. When the procession left the house, the altar boy would continue to ring the bell throughout the streets, and the people would again accompany the Viaticum back to the church.”

Kneeling down as the Viaticum passed was, as in all Catholic countries, a very old custom that was observed in Cuba up to the Spanish-American War. The First Article of the Bando de Buen Gobierno of His Excellency the Count of Santa Clara (January 28, 1799) decrees:

“Upon hearing the sound of the bell that announces in the streets the Most Holy Sacrament, all shall kneel down on the ground, without any distinction of persons, without verifying in the horse-drawn carriages how this should be done. Violators shall be required to pay irremissibly six hundred maravedis for the first violation and double the amount in the subsequent violations. Two thirds of the amount shall go to the clergy accompanying Our Lord and the other third to the court that would execute the law. Those who do not have means to pay the fine shall be imprisoned for three days.”

In the countryside people did not receive religious instruction, but they believed in the efficacy of the absolution and of the Holy Oil. So, when Negroes became free in the villages and towns, in their last days, they would decide to ask for a Catholic priest for themselves and for their loved ones. And the visit of the priest would follow that of the babaloricha or nganga or
vice versa. We already know that since the beginning of the slave trade, baptism was mandatory so that the pagan souls of the Negroes would not be consumed in the eternal flames of Hell, and that, thus saved, the Bozal would not have his head heated up with unintelligible sermons susceptible of producing sayings like the one that still exists in our days: “To remain like a Negro during the sermon”—the feet cold and the head hot. Among the interpretations that the \textit{Bozal} gave to the teachings of the priest, there were hilarious anecdotes. There is, for example, the one about the chaplain of an \textit{ingenio} who asks the \textit{Bozal} to repeat to him what the chaplain had just explained to him about the three persons of the Holy Trinity, and the \textit{Bozal} resolutely answers:

“Holy Trinity is pineapple, apple, and naseberry.”

The puzzled behavior of the \textit{Bozal} during some of the Church ceremonies and festivities provoked laughter not only among Whites but also among experienced Creole Negroes. The Creoles made fun of the \textit{Bozal}.

A Negro woman takes her daughter for the first time to a Church festivity. The daughter, intrigued by seeing an altar boy balancing the smoking and perfumed censer before the altar, asks her mother:

[30] - “Mamy, what is that thing that goes up and gives off smoke?  
- Shut up, dummy, that is the Mandinga sugar used to smoke a delicious snout for the Virgin.”

The author of the well-known verses of “A Negro who went to the festivity of San Marcos in his village” makes fun of and tells us about the ingenuity of the Africans, the impression that a Catholic festivity causes on them and how they interpret such a festivity.
As for another sacrament, that of marriage, it was recommended to the slave owners that the Negroes be married according to the Church tradition. It did not matter that the Negroes belonged to owners of different ingenios; the Church encouraged the owners to avoid illicit unions among their slaves. This was a difficult goal that was rarely met. Because of a certain unimaginable and laughable prudish attitude, when, at the beginning of the 19th century (1818) the ports of the Island are open to international commerce, it offends the moral sensibility of the landowners to have Negros on their lands. José Antonio Saco writes that these landowners found it scandalous to have on their ranches Negros of both sexes who were not married… “And the few women who are brought from Guinea,” an abolitionist protests, “are used for the pleasure of the tyrants.”

In 1833, Captain Alexander writes that “an old fool Spaniard does not allow any woman on his ranches. He argues that doing so would encourage his Negroes to engage in immoral behavior. I do not need to detail the consequences of such a criterion except to state that his Negroes are always escaping.” It is stated that there were ranches where all the slaves were only men. The restriction of the slave trade, of course, modified this absurd and unnatural criterion, but it seems that in the ingenios there were always more men than women, and this was not because of morals.

Now, after such a long digression, let us return to our Kongo.

Gaytan, another one of my teachers, also felt a lot of affection for them. Just like Nino, he also had Lucumí blood. His mother, from the ranch “El Deleite de Gaytán,” and his father, were Lucumí, as well as his grandmother, whom he remembered always singing:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Wé gué lé gué} & \quad \text{Wé gué lé gué} \\
\text{Ara gogó enisá niro} & \quad \text{Ara gogó enisá niro}
\end{align*}
\]
He had grown up in the “Tejad de Valdivieso” where there were many Kongo and where Lucumí, Gangá Ñongoba, Gangá Kisi, some Mandinga, Arará and Carabalí lived in good harmony. Gaytán took pleasure in telling us how in the ranch they made everything they needed. For instance, to make the candles they needed for lighting, they would melt animal fat, especially ram fat, and bee wax; they would cook both substances, and once hot, they would put cotton threads in the molds for the wick. They weaved henequen jackets that are different from the one we have today, and threads of majagua, guamo and henequen. From the beach—the saltmines of the Méndez Beach—they carried sea water in demijohns to las Tejas to get the salt that stayed at the bottom. They also carried water, walking for a league. To season the meals and give them good taste, the Kongo used to take the palm nut from the small palm tree, open it to remove the kernel, which, once dried, they would use as seasoning. To make stews, the Lucumí on the coast used to mix sweetened water and salt water. In general, the Negroes were very industrious, and in the plantations that were far from the capital or the towns, they made whatever they needed.

“They would hunt an animal, cut it and fix it without the flies getting in, and they would eat the smoked meat for some time. They did not remove the scales from the fish. The used to open the fish in the middle, take the air out, and keep it for later consumption. They used to make coal and build huts. Every Saturday, we would have a party in Valdivieso. People had built a house with reed walls and a guano branch roof and that is where we danced to the music of pitchers and kettledrums. People also played the yuca. No Spanish was heard. A niece of Ma Viviana, brown like Casimira Martínez, who spoke more Kikongo than Spanish, married a white man and lives in Havana now… But she no longer wants to speak Kikongo, the vane woman!
“There were in that group of Negroes some Kongo Makimá, and one of them used to play an instrument that was a guira with a wire, which he rested against his chest. While he played, he could not sing. In Las Tejas all the people were happy, healthy, living and eating the African way, each group with its customs and its ‘Santos.’ The barracks were very big; each group played like in its land. Where there were no barracks, there was a cabildo.”

Contrary to what I always heard in Havana from many old Negroes who lived there, that being sent to the ingenio meant for the slave the threat of a horrible punishment—and this opinion is confirmed by a French visitor who writes in 1817 that “the ingenios are the theater of horrific abuses and for that reason the Negroes of the city consider them places of punishment,”—almost all my other old informants, who were born and had lived in ingenios [32] and ranches, believed that life was much better in the countryside than in the city.

If the house slave became bad, “went crazy” or “became stubborn,” he would be sent to spend some time in the barracks of the ingenio, with a “good” recommendation to the overseer, and he would be there for some time, being reformed, and his stay could be extentioned according to the infraction he had committed. If the infraction was unforgivable, the poor house slave would never return. Then, it was possible, and it usually happened, that the emotional strain more than the physical punishment or exhaustion would soon kill him.

“If the Negro Juan Joseph does not walk in straight ways, I will send him to you so that you can sell him to an ingenio for me,” writes from Mexico the priest Arango to his brother Casimiro.

Does this mean that for the rural slaves, despite the heavy work load of the harvest seasons and the abusive authority of the horrible foremen constantly weighing heavily on them, it would be just as terrible for them to be transferred to the capital?
The exhausting work in the *ingenios*, all the miseries, the humiliations, the insults—to which the Negroes were so susceptible that out of sadness or rage, they would commit suicide or let themselves die of starvation—have been described by Anselmo Suárez and by Cirilo Villaverde in the dark pages of his novel, *Cecilia Valdés*, so popular and much read, and, before the abolitionist movement, by Barrera y Domingo, who, with his picturesque and bad style, has left us the following picture of “the hell on earth” that the *ingenio* was for the Bozal.

“Two hours before the break of dawn, all the Negroes would get up—the new ones who had just arrived from Africa as well as those who had already been in the *ingenio* for some time—to do the unbearable work of in the fields. A *manatí* or whip is their breakfast without more reason or fault than the whim of their overseer or foreman.

“From three o’clock in the morning, they are working in the north, in the cold, in the air, in the quiet, watery dew, etc. All the elements fall on them, those wretched naked, stripped souls, unable to turn their sight on anything else, and thus they remain until eight o’clock when the bell rings and they go eat their lunch. But what? A yuca root or a sweet potato roasted or boiled in a pan, this is their meal, without bread. It is a miracle that they try it even if they are sick because sometimes they are given the same food even when they are sick. They receive at the same time as their lunch the ration for their dinner, which is comprised of a very big piece of jerked beef or cured meat, as we call it in Spain, more rotten and older than the leather used to make sandals. The meat is given to a famous cook who, as it is given to him, dips it into a pot that is dirtier than a chimney and that has more verdigris than the spatula of a pharmacist.

“Once they have received the ration from the cook, they return to the fields, their stomach invigorated by such a nutritious and chosen lunch, and thus they will remain working until 12 noon, exhausted and starving. At that time, they will retire to their huts or rotten
shacks to eat that overly bad and overly small ration with a boiled plantain. Their stomachs full with such a splendid, delicious, nutritious, and very copious meal, the Negroes are left to rest so that the food is settled and digested in the lower section of their stomachs until two o’clock. Then they return to their usual work in the fields until prayer time, when they again retire to their shacks, poorer than the holiest of the Saints and the more penitent of the anchorites were in the *Teseida*.

“For days, weeks, months, and years they will remain in this chore, except during the milling season, and then it will even be worse because they do not rest, neither by day nor by night. You reign, oh God of Mercy, in this place where You hold these poor wretched and miserable slaves with Your powerful right hand, bringing light to their crude understanding so that they do not despair and kills themselves, all of them. That is why, even though many do kill themselves, there are many more who abstain from such a miserable attempt and endure with longsuffering all the hardships of Slavery, beatings, starvation, thirst, horrible diseases, nakedness, cold, rains, winds, frost, contumely, insults, disgrace, rape, etc., etc., and if all this is done by Christians, what are we going to leave for the French and the English and the other Protestant sects? This is much worse, judging by what I have seen in one of their colonies.”

The *Licenciado* tells us that the slaves lead excruciatingly horrible lives in the *ingenios*. They are “deprived of any human remedy, condemned to continuous labor, continuously exposed to the rigors of a brutal overseer or a greedy or vicious master. Because of this miserable life, some slaves purposefully put their hands in the *trapiches* so that the hands can be crushed, others burn their own arms or cut them, others throw themselves in the boiling sugar cauldrons, others murder the overseers, take out the overseer’s bowels and eat them, others attack whoever has
authority over them and then run away to become *cimarrones* or *montaraces*, taking refuge in the forests and eating whatever they find.”

However, he goes on to say, as a witness and maybe also exaggerating a little, the following: “I do not deny that in the Spanish colonies there is inhumanity, but I affirm that there is a million times more humanity than inhumanity. The example is clear; for each Negro who is freed in the French and English colonies, a thousand Negros are freed in the Spanish colonies, and I swear by the Holy Cross that I do not exaggerate at all. What I have written about the punishment inflicted on the poor Negro slaves is nothing compared to what I saw in Santo Domingo among the French slaves in Guaranico.” Talking about cruelty, especially French cruelty, he adds: “Iron chains around the neck, with big and sharp spikes; underwear pieces and socks of the same type; thighs, buttocks, arms, face, and neck torn from repeated flogging; face masks made of iron, with sharp points that only leave a little space for the eyes and the mouth. [34] That is how they have the slaves running errands throughout the city, and, in many instances, that is how they rest, those unfortunate slaves. Let those who are unbiased see if such treatments are used by the Spanish.” (Many French authors, referring to the Spanish side of the island of Santo Domingo, agree that in the Spanish side the Spanish do not mistreat the Negroes so much or that the Negroes are more like companions, rather than slaves, to their masters.)

In fact, there is no mention in Cuba, not even during the times when the slaves were treated with the most harshness, that the slaves underwent torments comparable to those to which they were subjected in the English colonies according to Waller, and, in the French colonies, according to Vartec. Documents from the 16th century tell us that offenses committed by the Negroes were punishable by flogging--they were tied to a silk-cotton tree or to a post and there, in public, they would receive the number of lashes that they their offense required—or by
imprisonment, fetters and shackles as it was still done during the 19th century. If the slaves repeated an offense, they would have a nail driven through their right hand or they would have their ears cut off. But our most enraged anti-slavery advocates, no matter how many horrors they attribute to slavery, and rightly so, have not presented us with a character like Chaperon, locking up a Negro in an oven; nor have they described to us, apart from the more or less numerous cases of whipping that are inseparable from slavery itself, the torture of a guilty slave who was torn apart tied to a horse, the feet tied under the belly of the animal and the hands to the tail; the horror of the Negro who is buried alive—as the Africans themselves used to do in Africa to their enemies—with only the head sticking out, covered with honey so that ants and vultures could come devour it. Or the desperation of those Negroes who were cut on purpose and on whose open wounds was poured boiling butter; of the Negroes who had a fire lit under their bellies or who had red hot iron bars applied to their feet to cure them from the desire to run away.

In Cuba, Negro delinquents, just like white delinquents, were executed through the garrotte, but they were not hanged or nailed by the ears. Early on, the slave laws in the Spanish colonies abolished and prosecuted these horrible and barbaric practices, like cutting off people’s legs, ears, or arms. As is known, Negroes were “branded,” just like cows, but this practice was abandoned by order of Carlos III. And for some time, instead of making a mark on the slave’s skin with fire, a small metal plate containing an identifying name was hung around the slave’s neck.

Cuba did not know la Croix de fer de Saint André, or the Iron Cross of Saint Andrew,24 the mask to which Barrera y Domingo makes reference and that was put on those slaves who were fond of sugar cane and sugar cane juice, items that the Negroes loved so much. Nor did Cuba know les Quatre piquets, or the Four Pikes, l’Échelle, or the Ladder, l’Hamac, or the...
Hamac, la Brimballe or other official forms of punishment about which Madden, in attacking [35] “the terrible atrocities of Spanish slavery,” cannot say a single word. In the French colonies and the English colonies, the executioners were slaves who had been condemned to death. Their sentences were commuted as a way to get them to carry out these functions without mercy. Moreover, for each victim they mutilated, burned, hanged, whipped, etc., they were paid some money.

People say that the legendary Count Barreto had made a pact with the Devil, and, one stormy night, when the count died, the Devil carried him away, leaving the coffin empty. However, in his will the count had left instructions that his slaves should be freed. I did have the opportunity to examine the will personally, and what is stated there does not fit the legend built around the satanic character of the count. He did not, to entertain himself, use to “bruler le cul du nègre,” burn the Negro’s butt.

In Cuba, punishment “with prison, chain, pestle, and trap,” and with slashes “that should not surpass twenty-five,” was ordained for slaves, and, until 1883, rarely for semi-slaves, those who were registered. But the chores on the ingenio during the harvest season demanded of Bozals and Creoles alike an effort beyond their natural strength. “There are ingenios,” writes an Englishman around the middle of the 19th century, “where the slaves, of the twenty-four hours of the day, work twenty-one, where men and women are driven to work like oxen and with less mercy than it is done for oxen. The ranchers who plant sugar cane”—in the meadows and on coffee plantations, the work was not so exhausting—“calculate that in treating their slaves in this way, the slaves can die after seven years, and then it would be time to renew their slave labor force.” The money invested in slaves covered seven years of life and produced good profits…
However, it seems logical that it was in the best interest of the landowners, even if they were monsters, to make their slaves last as long as possible, especially since each slave cost—around the middle of the 19th century—five hundred pesos or more. On the other hand, the poor mind of the Creole Spanish did not know how to calculate this way; it lacked that cold pragmatic sense that knows how to make money from everything. Maybe that is why Cuba never had its own “breeding farms,” those farms that bred Negroes and supplied them to plantations in the South of the United States and that, at eight hundred dollars per Negro, turned out to be a brilliant business. On the contrary, during harvest time, in many ingenios, the masters—in clear violation of the Bando that since 1842 orders that slaves work ten hours per day, distributed at the discretion of the master—give the slaves only two hours to sleep, half an hour to eat breakfast and one hour to eat lunch. “Negroes work almost naked in the fields. The women are given, to cover themselves, an empty coffee sack, with an opening in the middle for the head and two openings in the corners for the arms.” An old woman who spent her childhood on a ingenio assures me that “after the female slaves had given birth, they were put back to work two days later.”

Sometimes, the chores did not end with the end of the day. “During the moon-lit nights, slaves carry lumber or construction materials, or they are put to work on other necessary tasks until nine o’clock, when rings the bell that leads them to their stable, the barracks where they are kept like a herd of cattle, the men separated from the women and locked up under tight lock. I am not saying that in all the ingenios the slaves are mistreated, but the great majority of the ingenios do mistreat their slaves, according to what I have heard from the mouth of Spanish landowners.”
“Sunday does not bring any rest to those poor wretched because they are allowed, as a gesture of goodwill, to work in their own fields from ten o’clock in the morning until four o’clock in the afternoon. Individuals of both sexes are cruelly whipped with a cow skin whip. In summary, the Negroes in the ingenios of Cuba are poorly dressed, overworked, and die on the order of ten per cent each year, despite the humane and excellent fiscal regulation promulgated by the Spanish government.”

And an older Cuban lady, Doña Belica Xenes, whose family members had distinguished themselves, among other things, for the goodness and generosity they showed to their crew of slaves, told me:

“I have seen slaves, not in the ingenio of my father, but in other ingenios, where they were treated well. My father felt so sorry for the slaves that when, during the 1868 war they came to draft his Negroes, he bought one of the officers with one thousand pesos so that my father would not have to turn in any of his slaves. Yes, I have seem the male slaves dirty, dressed in rags, barefoot, dressed in a half-long coat and Russian pants. And the poor female slaves, I have seen them in a rough blouse, working the whole day and laboring also on moon-lit nights until ten o’clock only to wake up the next day at the break of dawn. And starving and miserable, for food they had nothing but flour, jerked beef, and plantain, and that without salt because they were not given salt. Nor sheets to protect themselves from the cold! I used to store away food and I would give them what I could because many used to come see me eat breakfast and to ask me, through my room’s window. And they would be insanely happy with what I would give them. That broke my heart and the sad spectacle of slavery made me sick.”

A paragraph from our often cited Licenciado Barrera y Domingo would have evoked in our elder lady friend the sadness that she had not managed to forget, the sadness she saw in the
eyes of those people who, from the other side of her iron-barred window, watched the sad child that she also was eat her meals. “Do not forget that however much you eat, the slaves get overjoyed when they are given something, and if they are given much, that they can fill their stomach, they kneel down in gratitude, dance, and stretch their arms, in other words, all is joy.”

These are the same gestures, expressed through atavism, that I have seen in some elder Negroes when they are in trance, “mounted” or possessed by their Santo during the festivity of Ocha. They would stretch out a hand to a well-dressed white person who would deposit a coin in it. The ingenio! Listening to Doña Belica Xenes, I was reminded of what Bremer has written about that slave-owning society that she knew and hated: “In Cuba, the nobler a woman is, the least happy she might be.”

[37] “You should have seen the maroons, those who used to escape to the mountains, when they were returned, torn apart by dogs, tuned into a horror, sometimes more dead than alive! What a heresy! And their dog bites were treated with salt and liquor! One of the slaves of Don Pedro Armenteros had escaped and when they caught him, they brought the slave to him. The slave had been so beaten up that Don Pedro Armenteros, in a fit of rage, had a stroke and suddenly died.”

It would be incomprehensible for slavery not to produce in any person who is even of an average sensibility the same compassionate indignation that led a sincere anti-slavery activist to public exaltation during the abolitionist campaign in England, a country that had benefited much from the slave trade: “As long as the Negroes are freed immediately, it does not matter to me if the blood of white people spills and that England loses all its colonies, where human beings live as slaves.”

D’Harponville writes that he finds a depressing spectacle in an ingenio that he visits in Güínes, and he is moved by starving and terribly thin Negroes, and there are first-hand accounts
of monstrosities reported by the not so “reliable” Madden, the Englishman for whom, slavery on
the Island, as we already know, “is the most destructive for human life, the most pernicious for
society, the most degrading for the slave, the most degrading for the owner, worse than in any
other slavery-practicing country on the inhabitable face of the globe.” Madden further writes that
he could give accounts of Negro men killed with impunity, of Negro women—how strange!—
separated from their children, of ingenios where there is no old Negro, of amazing crimes
committed by the owners themselves. All these accounts would make slavery evoke in any noble-
born soul the sympathy that we see expressed in these lines by Bremer: “It is true that I
frequently hear the Negro women talk and sing during their never-ending chores, undisturbed by
the crack of the whip, and at night I hear African songs and happy exclamations, even though, if
they come from the trapiche, they lack melody and music. I also know that the workers of this
ingenio change shifts every seven hours, so that they have six hours, every four hours, to rest and
refresh themselves, and for two nights the ingenio rests and the Negroes can sleep. However, be
it as it may, I cannot settle with that. Not even today, even though I can tolerate it better since I
have seen the slaves in their work and in good appearance, including the happy demeanor that in
general they have on this plantation.” Because in Cuba, in some ingenios—there is no shortage
of testimonies—as we are told by another traveler, Dana, the whip was not always overused in
the ingenios that he visited: “No slave has been whipped for the last three years, and such a
punishment has not been inflicted on any woman here.”

And Salas Quiroga writes: “Much has been said about the rigor with which the slaves
have been treated on the island of Cuba. There is in all this much exaggeration, even though
where it is true, it is certainly hideous.”28
One common theme often repeated by those who have visited the Island during the slave trade period is that the house slaves—of whom we will talk later in other notes—are happy, and those who are destined for the ingenios are suffering in hell and, if not, at least in purgatory.

“Especially,” writes X. Marnier, “those Negroes who are under the care of a taskmaster when the owner of the ingenio lives in the city. There, the slaves, constrained to harsh labor, are vulnerable to severe punishments. On the ingenio, to get revenge for the ill treatment that exasperates them, they rebel, they commit suicide, and others run away to the mountains, where they are pursued by dogs that sniff their scent better than the sight hound sniffs the scent of wild game. In front of these dogs, the most courageous Negro loses all initiative and tries to defend himself, but immediately panics. The dogs chew his ears off and brings him back to the fold and to work with the head bleeding.

“I must clarify that these cases are not frequent, and I am convinced that the Negroes, who constitute half of the population of Cuba,\textsuperscript{29} are in general, not to say, all, happier and more satisfied with their lot than those who, freed by philanthropic England, have the honor of living in their colonies. The English, however, scream in indignation when the name of Cuba is pronounced in their midst. They say that they have given seventy thousand pounds to that treacherous island to stop the practice of the slave trade, but—damn!—the money has disappeared in the halls of the administration, and the slave trade goes on undisturbed.”

As the author of \textit{To Cuba and Back} also tells us, the foreigners who come from the North “are gullible enough to believe that they will see chains and blood marks, and if they have letters of introduction to slave owners of the upper class, after observing their way of life and listening to the anecdotes that the ladies tell at the dinner table, they do not find signs of corruption or violence; they probably would think that they have seen the whole of slavery. However, they do
not know that the sugar cane plantation, with its smoking chimneys, of which they have never heard anything and which they will never visit, has been repossessed by the creditor when the owner went bankrupt and is now run by an administrator who intends to milk out of it the most possible in the shortest time possible and sell the slaves without in the least being interested in their future.

“They do not know that the other ingenio that belongs to a young man who spends most of his time in Havana is a den of lust and cruelty. Nor that those huge dogs that are tied in the kennel of the house where they are staying as guests are the sanguinary Cuban mastiffs that are trained to chase and catch fugitive slaves; that the barking they heard the previous night was due to the capture of a slave, capture in which all the Whites had participated. They do not know that the mean looking man who introduced himself to them yesterday and whom the ladies had treated with a certain degree of repugnance, was the professional hunter of slaves.”

Moreover, it is not easy and it complicates life if the owner deeply protects his interests and at the same time is conscious of his duties. In relation to the slaves, the same author points out that “he has to defend them from other Negroes and from Whites, with a slim chance of hearing the truth from the mouth of the Negroes and the Whites, and he has to enforce the responsibilities that fall on those who get married. Watch out for theft, violence, and laziness within the plantation. Investigate what needs to be eliminated and what should be prevented; the work that needs to be done, but not with abuse, and all this without good help, facing the obstacles that are introduced by the white middlemen. It is not only his own men that the owner has to watch. He also has to watch out for the petit thefts and violent incidents of other ingenios and neighboring farms, the night visits that the law prohibits, the theft committed by the enfranchised Negroes who live in the neighborhood and the whites who live down below, which
needs to be prevented and punished. The owner is at the same time a police officer, an economist and a judge.”

According to the experience of the reasonable and humanitarian landowners of the time, it was not difficult to treat the Negroes well. Positively, it was not the master whom they were obligated to obey and whom they had to respect “like a father,” and who had the right to punish them and who often mistreated his Negroes.

“The master was good”; that is what the slave believed. The words “my master,” said by the slave, almost always represented in the eyes of the slave population the role of a compassionate mediator who saved them from the inflexibility of the feared overseer.

If the master is in the ingenio, he will readily bail out a guilty slave. He will intercede and suspend a novenario, will get his shackles removed or will save him from torture.

“My master” represents the providential incarnation of the angel of Mercy. The scene of the slaves welcoming the master when he arrived on his lands must have been moving. All of them, young and old, women, children, and the little Negroes in the suit of Adam and Eve, who usually spent their days playing and running around, would kneel down as he passed by and ask him to bless them. The person that the slaves hated with all their soul was the person who never forgave anybody, the person with the “musinga-ngombe,” the “pachá,” the “cow skin,” the whip.

Were there some hatred, the slaves and all the Afro descendants, would have directed it at Christopher Columbus, who immediately realized that the work of one single Negro was worth the work of four Indians (and, of course, the wonderful Father Bartolomé de las Casas). Their hate was concentrated on this sinister character who watched over them at all hours, cracking the whip, the most repugnant type that slavery had produced, only comparable to the kinglet, chief, or relative who in Africa was selling them to the white man. This character was the Overseer, the
traditional executioner of slavery, aided by his foremen who were much more miserable and hated because they were of the same race. Starting in 1832, the overseer had to be white.

¡Ah! Mayorá son malo Ah, the overseer is bad

Tirá cuero dó mano... From his hand he throws the whip

¡Marayo partida lo Mayorá Marayo split the Overseer

Que to mi cuerpo me está temblá! My whole body is trembling

Que témbere que témbe neye, So much trembling,

Que témbere que témbe fuá So much trembling to death

Vamo Francico a trabajá Francisco, let’s go to work

Que tu no quiere y refunfuñá... Since you want no trouble...

The overseer was the supreme chief of the slave crew. He directed the agricultural activities carried out on the ingenio. The foremen, always Negroes, were heads of teams and they had the task of punishing the slaves, women and men, assigned to the “chapeo,” to planting, cutting the sugar cane, or other chores. They usually abused their power and arbitrarily “spoiled the drink,” that is, they hit the people they did not like, they settled old tribal scores, and discharged all their hatred on the women who did not respond to their sexual advances.

Catalino Murillo, who witnessed a pregnant woman being beaten, face down, told me, enraged: “The bastard on the plantation was not the owner; it was the Negro himself when he was in a position to hit!”

If we take into account the observation of somebody who knew the Bozals well, that “they are moved by a tendency to dominate that goes beyond moderation” and by a primitive cruelty, then it is not strange that to the many adjectives with which the memory of the Negro Overseer is still cursed should invariably be added the saying that “there is no worse splinter than
that of the same wood.” If the rural slaves did not live in a hell, then they must have lived at least in a purgatory, according to the observation made by the Reverend Abbot (1823) in their natural environment: “The foremen punish the little sins with three strikes of their whip; the overseers punish the mayor sins, and these are limited exclusively to a certain number of blows. For the big offenses, theft, drunkenness, etc., the owner takes the liberty to order sometimes up to two hundred blows,” but “treats with care the injured backs. From my window I observed the Negroes, assembled in orderly formation, a little bit before dawn, in order to witness the punishment given by the overseer. I heard the cracking of the whip but no other noise. I heard ten more blows when I already was half a mile away.” These types of scenes were normal in the life of an ingenio. The whip, when it did not fall on the back of the Negro, whistled incessantly, symbolically, in the air, like that of the tamer of wild animals, animals who deserve less compassion then the slave.

[41] A son of slaves, who had never left the ingenio, told us: “Bad, bad, was the ingenio where the owner was absent! Because on that plantation the Negro population was always mistreated, and the overseers, who ruled as supreme, used their whip as they pleased, left and right, and doing all the harm they could. When the owners arrived, the punishments were lifted, the abuses stopped while the owners were still there in the big house.”

And Salas y Quiroga writes: “The master lives during the harvest months, not as a king among his people, but as a patriarch among his children. All there, houses, machines, animals, men, are his property. If a boiler malfunctions or the arm of a Negro is broken, he is equally obligated, for his own interest, to fix the boiler or to heal the arm. So that this link between self-interest and humanity benefits the oppressed race greatly. The master has delegated his authority to the overseer, generally a rustic and tough man, but watchful and intelligent. This man decides
on the punishments and executes them; he scolds and mortifies; he always walks around with a whip in his hand and he is surrounded by weapons. That is why the slaves rarely love him.”

The Countess of Merlin repeats more or less almost the same thing as any of my old informants born in barracks and huts on the ingenios of the province of Matanzas, and these Negroes have not read the writings of the pretty Franco-Cuban writer. “The master,” writes Mercedes de Santa Cruz y Montalvo, “is close to his slaves and listens to them, forgives them if they had deserved some form of punishment, and restrains the overseer, who is always rough and unbending in his rigors. The most feared enemy is the foreman, a slave like the others, and for this reason is rougher and treats his fellow slaves with more cruelty, especially those who had belonged to an enemy tribe of his own tribe: he then can turn implacable, acting in a spirit of vengeance.”

Also, the late Cipriano, who, when I met him, like Juan O’Farrill, had the clear eyes of the centenarian Negroes, explained to me: “The Negroes who came from Guinea, because of the wars that were taking place there in their lands, carried on here without making peace and wanted to eat each other alive. If the foreman was a Lucumí and he happened to punish a Dahomi, the Dahomi knew what to expect, and if he liked his wife or daughter, he also knew what would happen.”

“When I was a little girl,”—Doña Belica Xenes told me,—, “on the ingenio Emilia of Pablo Armenteros, there was a overseer who multiplied the slashes so much so that the poor Negroes could not take it any more. He would wake them up by whipping them. He was a man without a conscience. The foreman, José Catalino, who scared me because he was a very ugly Negro, with eyes that protruded like two balls, came into the barracks to see what was happening
because neither the overseer nor the slaves were coming out. Inside, between José Catalino and the Negroes, they beat the overseer to a pulp.”

[42] “Cause, the bad of old times were the Negro overseers,” says categorically Francisquilla Ibáñez.

María del Peñón de Montalvo, daughter of a slave woman belonging to María de Jesús Pedroso, tells us about what happened to another overseer on the ingenio San Joaquín: “The owner of the ingenio San Joaquín was Don Joaquín Pedroso. He was called Batalla, Battle, I don’t know why, because he and his wife were very good masters and they took very good care of their slave population. But they sold the ingenio, and Don Francisco Feliciano Ibáñez bought it. The new owner brought in mad overseers who punished the Negroes too much. Ibáñez was always in Havana, and the overseer, Fermín Zopato, a very bad mayombero, had him amarrado, tied up. He made passes on us women, and as we did not submit to his sexual advances, screw them all! For this reason, the Negroes decided to eliminate him…” Francisquilla interrupts her expressive gesturing: “That overseer of San Joaquín, a devil, a devil! And bad was San Joaquín; had a torture machine, a dungeon. That overseer had downright killed the late Agripina. She was pregnant, the poor Agripina! Ay, Lord, what have I not witnessed as a little girl! What I can tell! Many women were branded like cows on their buttocks”—whip marks on the buttocks—“and when the slaves killed the overseer, they could not take it any more. He was killed with machetes and clubs, ha, he is well dead, that son of a bitch, he is well dead! After that, the Trustee came and the case was closed.”

Another elder woman, Cornelia, makes the overseer the only one responsible of the misery of the Negroes.
“Yes, I know; he did not have any heart! And look, my mother, who, as a slave belonged to Teresita Herrera, freed herself from the bad overseer. My mother told him not to call her, that she was pregnant, that all a pregnant woman can do is collect grass. The overseer screamed obscenities at her and threatened her, seized her, and threw her down in order to hit her, and she pulled him and grabbed him by that long thing he had. All hell broke loose. The owner came and dismissed the overseer, who went to the ingenio Manuelita. The thing is that for the overseer, even if one worked well, it was still bad, and everything the slave did was bad! The owner was far away. The white man had conscience; that is the truth.”

Juan Francés witnessed the death of a friend of his. A foreman threw his big lash, without intending to kill him, but the lash got entangled around the slave’s neck, and when the foreman tried to pull it, he strangled the slave to death.

In the ingenio Florentina, another witness remembers the following: “An overseer gave a Negro the following punishment: by the time the one o’clock bell rang, the Negro must have cut three hundred heads of sugar cane. Imagine that, all that for one single person! The Negro went to work; if he rested, the overseer would hit him; he harassed the Negro so much that this Negro went mad. The bad thing is that the Negro did not run away. He went to complain to the owner, but the owner did not pay attention. This slave had to work in the mornings. On Sunday [43] afternoons, he did not have to work; so, he went to the drum, and when he arrived, he began to sing:

Ay Dió Dió lo Mayorá! Oh God!, Oh God! The overseer!
Dice que yo tumbá cañaverá He says that I cut the whole sugarcane plantation
Cópé la una All by myself
Yo tumba cañaver. I cut the whole sugarcane plantation.
The owners many times sat down to hear the yuka, and the owner asked him:

- Why do you sing that? What do you mean?
- Cause, since I could not cut the whole sugarcane plantation, I cut him.

And he killed him.

In the Utrera coffee plantation, “an overseer who was in love with a Negro woman who was faithful to her husband, killed the husband. When the owner, who had been absent for a while, returned, the Negro woman went to speak with him at night and told him about the crime that the overseer had committed. The owner knew that the woman was good, serious, and responsible, and decided to fire the overseer. But, that same day, several Chinese and Negroes, who had been working in a clearing, among them all killed the wicked overseer with clubs.”

The wicked overseer was blamed for the Negro, who, mistreated, escaped from the ingenios and ranches to become a maroon.

“The Negro would run away because of a difficult time he might have had,” says Tiyo, “and when he would calm down, he would have second thoughts, and would go to the house of a friend of the ranch owner so that he could be his godfather. And nothing would happen.”

The Negro, like a stranded sheep, would return to the fold. Because, as the father of elder Mantilla had told him, many did not run away because they were mistreated, but because they were “lazy,” and did not like the work of the sugarcane harvest. During the sugarcane harvest, there was an epidemic of maroons throughout the country.

In Matanzas, many of them went to Pan de Matanzas and in Oriente they went to the Sierra. In the countryside, the funny thing was that many maroons went to the ingenios and ranches to fetch food and get water, covered by the “carabelas,” the comrades, who were not “piolas” and who protected them. But among them were those whom Ña Francisquilla called
“piolas,” Negroes who were the white men’s pets, who were of the same crew or from the crew of neighboring ingenios and ranches, who denounced them and who volunteered to catch them in exchange for some pesos. There were, moreover, experts in hunting Negroes, the rancheadores, who dedicated themselves to hunting down the escaped Negroes with their infernal dogs which paralyzed the fugitives with terror. With an infallible sense of smell, these dogs tracked them through swamps, forests, hills, and invariably discovered and attacked them. However, there were maroons who were lucky, were never discovered and who “settled in.” In the mountains of Santiago de Cuba, many maroons joined and formed a village. The village of Palenque in Palma Soriano is called that way in honor of the maroons. There, in the hills, they were safe.

[44] “There were Negroes who could not avoid being maroons; they would run away, they would be forgiven, and they run always again, and just has it happened in the ingenios, it happened in the coffee plantations and in the ranches, in the grazing fields and in the city.”

In the newspapers of that time, there constantly appears, with the sales of the slaves, announcements like the following:

“Since Sunday August 21st the Negro called Simón (Sara in his homeland) has escaped from the house of his master. He is of Mandinga Fula origin, measures 5 feet and 2 or 3 inches; has a flat nose with the end somewhat raised, a round face and a regularly-shaped mouth, with a missing tooth in the upper jaw, and his voice is quite effeminate. There are reports that he is around the Jewish beach of el Ojo de Agua, in the juntas or cabildos of Negroes in the poor quarters where he has fellow countrymen who are facilitating his escape. The person who would return him to Don Pedro Reguier, in Pueblo Nuevo, next to the public school, would receive a reward of half an ounce of gold, anybody who would hide him would answer before the law for the damages and prejudice that might have been caused.”

35
There have always been maroons in Cuba, from the 16th century to the 19th century, but in the plantations there have not been really important insurrections of Negroes—and for sure this is an interesting fact—because plans for insurrections were almost always revealed to the masters by male or female slaves who were faithful to the extreme point of sacrificing their lives for their masters. This was so until the first insurrections happened in 1843 and 1844 in the province of Matanzas.  

Even forty years later, a *matancero*, Don Francisco Ximeno (his big oil portrait, as a child, seated on the knees of his luxuriously dressed Negro nurse, presided, occupying a big space on the wall, the living room of my friend Manuel Ximeno) still blames those bloody events that turned Cuba upside down from 1843 to 1844 mostly on the cruelty on the overseers and foremen who, according to La Sagra, were a misfortune for the landowners.

I have already said that my elder informants from Pedro Betancourt and Jovellanos, and in Matanzas and in Havana the elder *matanceros* with excellent memory, like Saibeke, did not like to evoke bad events, even though they had happened before their time. And when asked what their parents had told them about slaves who rebelled “during the time of Spain” in the plantations that they knew well, the Triunvirate of Alfonso, Luisa de Baró, and Alcancía de Peñalver, their answers were evasive and their information was incoherent. Yes, over there, “it seems that there were some ups and downs a very long time ago,” and “a fire that almost destroyed Matanzas.” I asked them also if they had heard about Plácido. No. Only one elder woman by the name of Diago answered me saying that “he was a singer” (Did she mean poet?).

Maybe the cause of those riots could be attributed, as Wurdermann writes, to the [45] “softness” of the overseers, the little discipline and the tolerance of the owners, who allowed the Negroes to visit the slaves of other *ingenios* and go to the cock fights arenas where the
priests—as we already know through the Protestant Abbot and other authors—if the Negroes had money, would readily bet with them.

But it seems that during the time we are discussing, an English consul showed a deeper sense of responsibility. David Turnbull, was an official agent of the abolitionists, whose book, translated into Spanish by Gustavo Pittaluga, Jr., *Travels in the West: Cuba with Notices of Puerto Rico and the Slave Trade*, London 1844, we were not able to publish. Nor were we, María Teresa de Rojas and I, able to offer to those who are interested in the history of Cuba, the rich and unpublished documentation on the conspiracy inspired by Turnbull, information that is in the archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Madrid, and that, years ago, Professor Mario Hernández Sánchez-Barba kindly had copied for us. Turbull arrived on the Island in 1838, and that same year he was named Honorary Fellow of the Royal Patriotic Society.

The slave trade was no longer convenient for England, or it had escaped from its grip. So, England might as well condemn it as immoral and inhuman. Graville Fox and the admirable Wilberforce had won the contest; from 1807 on, no English ship would transport a single African, and Great Britain now prosecuted those who clandestinely brought slaves to Cuba, after having signed, in 1817, a treaty with Spain for which Spain received four hundred thousand pounds and pledged to stop, once for all, that infamous commerce by 1820. But the Africans continued to arrive illegally, and the numbers of slaves actually increased. They were indispensable for the development of the *ingenios*, and thirty years of uninterrupted importation after the Anglo-Spanish treaty made Cuba the major producer of sugar in the world. So it was in 1850.

Those who doubted the sincerity of the philanthropic sentiments, somewhat delayed, of “Perfidious Albion,” since they well knew that her ambitions were to have the exclusive control
of the sugar business, thought that what she intended to do, when she freed her Negroes in Jamaica, was to give an impressive example that could be imitated in Cuba. England wanted the destruction of agriculture in the Pearl of the Caribbean.

David Turnbull, unlike one of his compatriots by the same last name, Gordon Turnbull, author, around the end of the 18th century, of an inadmissible Apology for Slavery, was a fervent abolitionist, a magnificent propagandist and an excellent servant of the interests of his government.

He was received with that traditional Creole hospitality that so many foreigners appreciated and of which others, like Turnbull, took advantage for their own purposes. It was logical that Cubans of advanced ideals, like Don Pepe, would receive with open arms the representative of a country that was so civilized and the advocate of a cause so noble (I take the liberty of referring as Don Pepe to Don José de la Luz y Caballero, the beloved teacher of the revolutionary youth of that time, whom my father adored, because his portrait, history, aphorisms, and statue were always in my way during my childhood. For instance, for two months I slept watching his meditative figure, painted in oils, a little bit less than natural size, because my father, not knowing where else to put it, had no better idea than to hang, temporarily, Don Jose in front of my bed).

And it also was logical that General Jerónimo Valdés, who happened to be the Governor at the time, jealous of the tranquility of the Island, had his reasons for watching it closely… Turnbull did not waste time. An active propagandist, as it is said, without pacing himself and adopting an arrogant attitude that is very English, so interfered in the internal affairs of the country that a Creole academic and lawyer, José Agustín Govantes, protested before the
government about the intrigues and interferences of the Englishman, which Govantes labeled as humiliating.

In truth, the finances of the Island were not compatible with the philanthropy that in the end England deployed toward the Negroes, demonstrating now with its actions, what its philosopher Locke, so admired by Don Pepe, had said in the 17th century—when England benefited more from the Negroes—that it was inconceivable that an Englishman, an English gentleman, would participate in the slave trade. And Govantes and the landowners, who feared a repetition of what had happened in Santo Domingo—without by that being less gentlemen—alarmed by the English propaganda, argued that the abolition of the slave trade, though desired by the majority of people, should not be the hurried and dangerous result of the interested instigations of Great Britain, but the work of Cuba itself, the mature fruit of prudence. Accepted in principle, its justice acknowledged and desired, it had to be carried out gradually, taking care not to throw the country either into a bloodbath or into economic ruin. And so it was that, without hate or social disturbances, naturally, the freedom of the Negroes was decreed forty years later.

The Spanish authorities demanded the deposition of Turnbull, seeing him as a threat to the peace of the country. Lord Aberdeen, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, the successor to the Viscount Palmerston—who supported Turnbull’s dealings—ordered him to leave the Island. He did so in June 1842, only to return in October of the same year. This time General Valdés, a balanced man and of unimpeachable honesty by all accounts—he did not benefit from the slave trade—felt that he had a duty to arrest him and expel him from Cuba. But the seed that the great abolitionist had sowed in the most strategic sugar-producing areas bore fruit. After riots that were put down in a timely manner, there were other more serious ones in 1843 that cost many
slave lives, such as the riots in the ingenio Alcancía, of Peñalver, in Cárdenas—it is said that its slave crew was won over by the propaganda of the English machinists of the Cárdenas railroad—those of the Triumvirate of Alfonso or the Alfonso Triangle, in which the Negroes looted the neighboring ranches and set fire to the sugar plantations, like those of Luisa de Baró.

General O’Donnell, who succeeded the good Governor Valdés, increased vigilance in those jurisdictions of Matanzas that had been chosen in advance by Turnbull, who had left agents who continued to prepare the ground for an insurrection that would begin in Matanzas and spread to all the Island, and that could, as Turnbull had offered, count on support from England. In 1844, in Matanzas, which is going to be a witness to some sad events, something out of the ordinary could be observed in the behavior of the Negroes, and worrying rumors are circulating. It is a slave, Santa Cruz de Oviedo, who confesses to her master and lover that a conspiracy is brewing to kill all the white people. She hides him in the room where the Negroes meet secretly to talk, and what he hears convinces him that the whistleblower has not lied. He informs other landowners and together they meet with the Captain General who, without wasting time, launches an official investigation. An ambush is set for the Negro ring leaders who are busy putting the final touches on their revolution. It is said that while they meet in the home of a brown man called Jorge López, Luis Guigot, a messenger from Turnbull, speaks. There are mulattoes and Negroes marching united to exterminate the white race; the mulattoes being more intelligent and ambitious, lead the charge. It is discovered that to the post of President of the Central Council they had named Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés; the poet Plácido was Treasurer, Santiago Pimienta Vargas was General, José Dodge was Ambassador because, besides Spanish, he spoke English and French. The revolution would begin with the uprising of the Negro population in the ingenios, and the signal would be a fire that would be set in a big
wooden house owned by Do Antonio M. Lazcano. The Negroes who were foremen were the communication intermediaries between the city and the ingenios and ranches.

That sensational news moved the population, just as it would be moved later when Plácido was executed, reciting from the chapel to the patíbulo his “Adiós a mi lira,” a pure legend.

The black sergeant Domingo José Erice, after saying how much he knew about the conspiracy, preferred committing suicide to being assassinated by the men of his own race. As for Plácido, the great personality of the Conspiracy of the Escalera, the martyr, he refused to confess and maintained all the time that he was innocent, but named Don José de la Luz y Caballero and Domingo del Monte, who were in Paris. It has been said that during the interrogation, conducted with the worst of intentions by the prosecutor, Pedro Salazar, he promised that he would exonerate him if he accused del Monte and Luz y Caballero. The free slave Miguel Florez, a friend of Turnbull’s, did the same thing, despite the fact that the Englishman and Luz y Caballero were good friends.

Finally, on the 15th of June of that year, 1844, a Martial Counsel handed down the death penalty to the heads of the conspiracy, Guigot, Plácido, López, Román, Quiñones, Pimienta, and Torres. Many slaves where sentenced to prison and slashes and on the 22nd at dawn the sentence was carried out in Matanzas.

It was perfectly understandable and honorable for Plácido to have involved himself with that movement. He did not need to proclaim his innocence but to be proud of what he had declared in his poem, “El Juramento,” “The Oath”:

Ser enemigo eterno de tirano “To be the eternal enemy of the tyrant
Manchar si me es possible mi vestido To stain, if possible, my clothes
It was not possible for him to stain his clothes with the blood of the tyrant, but he did manage.

“And necessary to break the yoke.”

And his lyrical protest of innocence, his well-known “Prayer to God,” written on the eve of his death, did not persuade many. To die for the cause that he had wanted to serve, to confess that, because it was noble and just, he wanted liberty and social justice for the black race would have been more beautiful. But Plácido, even though he was not a good poet, was a poet, in appearance more white than black, and maybe he did not want to go into posterity confused with the Negroes. It is said that after being sentenced, he acted with such valor that it would not have been possible to detect in the Plácido who was in shambles during the days of the trials. To give courage to one of his comrades, sentenced to death, he said:

“We are innocent, posterity will absolve us!”

Posterity has made him a martyr.

To end with this story, in the winter of that fatal year, something unexpected happened.

Miguel Florez, a leather worker, the Negro who had dared to denounce Luz y Caballero and Domingo del Monte as being implicated in the conspiracy, now was accusing prosecutor Salazar of having forced him to lie to the white people, and was withdrawing the charges he had made. The true author of those lies was Don Pedro Salazar. General O’Donnell charges him, and his fraudulent acts and tricks earn him eight years of captivity in the prison of Ceula. There he dies, insane. The Owl! It is said that before dying, Plácido had told him that after death he would pursue him in the form of an owl. In the prison, there usually appeared to him an owl that stared at him with his yellow, round and bright eyes, and so great was the terror that Salazar
felt, knowing that it was the soul of Plácido that came to visit him, that he went insane.\textsuperscript{42} And, finally, let us see what Wurdermann wrote about the Conspiracy:

Leopoldo O’Donnell, accustomed to the civil struggles of the old Spain, decided to adopt a system of terror by naming a military commission that used the same tactics used in Ireland in 1798, and if he committed big excesses, it was because he was able to act with impunity. Just like in Dublin, torture houses were established in Matanzas and in Cárdenas. The accused were taken to those houses and they were beaten to force them to confess. The horror was usually sufficient to break the will of the Negro and to extract from him the secret that he kept in his heart. It could be argued that the urgency of the situation required urgent and harsh measures, but the atrocities committed in Cuba that winter leave an indelible stain on the character of Spain and are inexcusable. In some cases, a thousand slashes fell on one Negro. Many of the Negroes died under this continuous torture. And many more still died of shock, wounds or gangrene. Once the confession was obtained from the prisoners, especially when they were under the pressure of the interrogation, they could not always be exonerated. There were no few who, on the verge of dying, said that the declarations they had made were false. A number of landowners, Whites, Creole and foreigners, were arrested due to similar testimonies and secret confessions. Abandoned to the whims of a sub officer who visited the plantation, the entire population was afraid to say anything against such acts, and desperately watched as their properties were sacrificed. It should be said, in fairness to the Cubans, that their feelings of repulsion were so accentuated that they made it possible for O’Donnell to secretly order his agents to tune down their zeal, the Chief of the \textit{Lanceros} of Cárdenas, who had committed the most violent acts, became less cruel. It was considered—as it is today—contrary to the policy of a despotic government to admit that it did not act well, and so the crimes of those men remained
unpunished. The conspiracy was squashed as soon as it was discovered, and the exploits of the Negroes, suddenly, were reduced to a profound submission. It would be an understatement to say that if it had not been so, the horrors of Santo Domingo would have been repeated. Many white people would have been beaten and burned alive, etc. The plans were so ill conceived that the insurgents only would have been able to present to the armed guards who were guarding them an inert mass and their revolution would have destroyed them all.

[50] The French Rosamonde de Bauvallon wrote that Turnbull, “removing the mask of a humanist hypocrisy to carry the red flag of insurrection, is a lesson that is not lost on natural insight. All equally want the abolition of the slave trade and maybe dream in secret about the independence of the Island.”

In Cuba, Bauvallon met many people of order and with progressive ideas, and others whom the treacherous campaign of the English consul had caught by surprise.

But, returning to the topic of the overseers, since in the vineyard of the Lord there is diversity, there were also overseers who, even though they had to be firm with the disgruntled, the rebellious, the sharp tongues and the maroons, fulfilling their duty, it would not have been fair to say that they were wicked. There were many times when I was a child, present at the conversations of “the background”—of the servants—they remembered “the things of the past,” and I heard them comment to those who were of age and to the “cotorronas,” how lucky their ancestors had been, because on their arrival to Cuba, they had been bought to stay in Havana and not to be taken to el monte.

During one of those daily trips in horse-pulled cart through the old neighborhoods of the city, my father, who always took me along with him, showed me an old house, facing the docks,
under whose arcade, for some time, the slaves who arrived at the port were sold. But that was not the ebony market. There were many of them on the other side of the bay, in Regla.

It was my father who, like all the Cubans of his generation, the Generation of 68, had been an abolitionist, from whom I heard for the first time the story of the horrors of the crossing of the Africans in the slave ship. So much has been written on the subject that it is not necessary to repeat here what we all know. I will only give the following scathing comment made by Bamboché:

“If there had not been a drum on board, there would not have been slavery, because not a single Negro would have arrived alive.”

As a matter of fact, in order to aerate and lighten up the Negroes a little, they were often taken on the main deck and made to dance.

Bamboché told about a Kongo man, a friend of his, a witch of the town of Cidra, who became so depressed when he was sold in Loango that he made up his mind to let himself die and did not want to eat. “But they opened his mouth with an instrument, something like a shoehorn, and forcefully they would make him eat because he could not close his mouth.”

The only and small incident that my old lady informant from Pachilanga remembers from her trip to Cuba was that “some pieces of the merchandise were thrown to the sea, maybe in order to lighten the load or avoid some contamination.” Such an action, thinking as a slave trader, did not make any real difference because it did not decrease the profits: at $450, and sometimes at $1,500 per piece, what difference did it make if the sea swallowed a couple of pieces? In 1847, the Negro who was sold in Cuba for $650 was bought in Africa for $10.
And once on the ground, after such a horrific crossing that lasted up to three months, the Africans arrived very often at the peak of fatigue, exhausted, and, as it was said, “nothing but bags of bones and with their souls hanging from the tongues.”

In 1783, Dr. Dionisio de Quesada writes from Camagüey—where, for the time being, it is easy to buy Bozals at good prices—to Don Casimiro Arango: “My father bought three because they were very damaged, and in his house, which was small, he was afraid they would stink. These Negroes are unable to do any work of importance, but those who intended to buy them wanted to experiment and caress them little by little so that they could lose their fear and not run away as is usually the case with slaves of their quality. Of the three that my father bought, I know that two fell sick, and, even though one was cured at home”—the slaves were usually cured simply with fresh food, after the spoiled food they were fed on the ships—the other had to be returned to the warehouse to be medicated until he recovered.”

Normally, the human merchandise, however good and resistant it was, necessarily arrived a little bit damaged.

“What did make a big difference was the recognition. People were handled in their intimate parts to see if they were good down there,” commented Juan B., who knew a lot of “old history.” “But in the end, things were okay after so much fear, so much squeeze, so much pестering, so much danger, they could find a good master.” Because, the fate of those poor beasts the Africans had been made into, bartered in their land for tobacco, liquor, gun powder, fabric, puppies, accounts, glass beads—coral collars were much prized—so that in the Americas they could be disposed of like things, sold, rented, exchanged for “mule or horse”—this could be read frequently in the newspapers ads—or gambled at cockfights—Policarpo’s master gambled his slaves that way—depended exclusively on this plain fact: to find a master with a good heart.
The report that Massé writes about his visit to a market of items from India in Havana, deserves to be translated. Let us translate ourselves with him to the year 1825. “The barracks occupy a large plot of land. They were built for the troops destined to reconquer Pansacola forty years ago. They cost the King four millions and were built for five hundred thousand Francs. It is said that some of the builders are still jailed in el Morro.

“In these barracks are warehoused the herds of Negroes as they are unloaded and sold. The barracks are made of a big room covered with grass and divided into various departments. The first one is for the employees and the jailers; the second one for the women slaves, and the last one is for the men. Several doors open unto a big yard, and on one side there are several annexes used as kitchens and other installations. In the dormitory of the slaves, distributed on both sides, are the beds, consisting of platforms raised about a foot above the ground. During the day, if the weather permits, the slaves are forced to walk in the yard. A few canopies protect them from the sun and there are wooden or stone benches set along the walls.

“The wretched Negroes are disembarked like bulks of cotton or pepper; during the crossing they are treated as if they were potatoes or orange loads, thrown to the sea if they get spoiled, and the rest of the merchandise, more or less sizable, decide the outcome of the speculation in the time that transpires between the unloading and the sale.

“It must be said in praise of the Spanish government that under its watch, up to a certain point, the traders do not dare to violate the humanitarian sentiments with which the slaves have to be treated. This cannot be said about the other European Administrations in the Americas. There are thirteen slave-holding posts. They can be visited, except during rest times. The food that the slaves are given there seemed decent and abundant enough to me. Care is taken to make the slaves sing and dance often and to make them march in cadence. In the morning, the men and
women slaves bathe in the sea nearby, and even though the slaves of both sexes are naked, nothing occurs that violates decency.” Massé observes that the attitude of the women slaves reminds him of the Venus de Medici, but unintentionally, because for them it is a habitual “pose”—*avec la même grâce*—, with the same grace. “When they leave the ship, all the Negroes get their loincloths and use them while they are not yet sold. Thanks to the gift of a captain or sailor, some slaves make turbans with other pieces of cloth, or use them as scarves.

“There are some generous merchants who donate wool blankets to the Negroes of their cargo. The colonists who visit the market check to see if the slaves are strong, young, and of a good breed.”

Massé could not understand that there could be women who were so black and yet beautiful, and he rebels against the prejudice that makes “ñatos” of all Blacks: “No! It is not all the Blacks who have the nose flat, and the lips thick; there are black women whose lips are thin that they would cause envy in French women.”

“Unless a Negro is very sick, he or she is not permitted to stop singing and dancing with the rest of the group so that everybody could look happy and healthy. A merchant of Negroes, a slave trader, is as careful about his merchandise as a storekeeper. The dances are expressive; some are made of steps; others, it seems to me, have a warlike and religious character.

[53] “Separated from their women, the Negro men do not look very happy. The Negro women breathe voluptuousness in the way they walk, the way they gesture and the way they sit, and, being without men, they take over the role of men, and one could see in their dances the temperament of their countries, which, in general, is lustful. Almost all the women slaves are short and well formed. There was one who would not stop dancing, thus obliging her companions to continue dancing, and the white guards did not forbid the excess that makes her
happy. A beautiful white ballerina would drop dead, exhausted. The Bozal Negro women are not concerned about their appearance. There was a Mandinga woman who was naked; her ways and gestures revealed all the pretention that a ‘petite maîtresse’ from a civilized country would exhibit. She had on nothing but a shawl, which she would tie and untie a thousand different ways to cover herself and then only to reveal her charms.

“Different marks distinguish the several nations. The arms, breasts, cheeks, and back receive tattoos, sometimes beautiful ones, which are individual decorations; others are the stamps of the nations to which people belong. The braided hair demonstrates unusual patience; they would put into question the art of our hairdressers. Such hairdos must take the whole day. In slavery, they must sacrifice this care that gives so much grace to their heads. The back of the neck of the slaves is shaved as soon as the slaves disembark.”

Massé enters into ship number seven. (The man who accompanies him likes the Negro women.) There, a young African woman asks for tobacco. The Frenchman gives her a packet that transports her with joy. The slave woman distributes the cigarettes around to her companions who rush, surround the kindhearted white men, take their hands and shout: tobacco! “The first word that the Bozal learns is Havana, and the second, tobacco.”

Massé distinguishes a big variety of shades in the skin color of the Negroes—between the Carabali, he discovers that there are some who are almost red—he sees some who are rather yellow, others… “fair-haired black, with red hair,” and he says: “I am not talking about black Whites, which would be an oddity, and however, there were and there are some—the albinos—for the Lucumís, children of Obatalá.
“Many women of mixed race participate in the dancing and singing festivities of their recently-arrived compatriots. The guards permit some outside Negroes to mix with the new victims, while they keep away others because they come to demoralize them.”

And then arrives the day of the sale, which is advertised in a small leaflet that is distributed with the newspaper. 48

“The buyers wait for the appointed hour in the room where the guards are housed. All the Negroes are locked up in the other room, and the door that leads to it, once opened to the buyers, is assaulted by theirs agents. It is curious to see how people fight for the spots in front of that door. A man in short sleeves sweats like a pig. The time has come; finally the door opens, and the buyers or their agents rush at the Negroes. The spectacle is truly horrible. Each one grabs as many Negroes as can possibly be put together from whom to choose later. When the selection has been made and the sale has been completed and the slaves go out with their handkerchiefs on their arms, then there is an explosion of screams and moans, especially from the women, who, because of where they are located in the room, are the first ones to be exposed to outbursts of those barbarians. They all scream, hug and give in to a violent desperation. The buyers do their best to calm them. They select some of the women, they reject those who are least fresh or who have been set aside by other buyers.

“The women slaves who have been selected receive clothes, and then the women cry less. The sight of a big shirt begins to console them. Sometimes somebody writes on the back of the shirt the name of the owner and the name that will be given to the woman slave. But sometimes it happens that brothers and sisters, or parents and children are put in different groups and they make signs to each other, they wave at each other, and they start to moan. Mothers and small children are sold together, and the children cry when they see their mothers cry. One white
woman leads a child by the hand; she has just bought three small Negroes and she is showing them to her son. The Negroes caress their owner, even though the owners push them away."

In order not to offend people’s modesty, Massé does not describe the process through which the buyers go to examine the slaves.

“They examine their sexual organs because if they have any hernia, the labor would make it worse. All the women were already quiet and dressed when I heard sharp screams in the kitchen, where some Negro men had gone and were curled up in front of the fire. It was a young Negro woman, with a bandage around her eyes, on the verge of losing her sight, who was screaming that way as one by one her companions were leaving.”

Massé, who always calculated in French, tells us that one piece, a first order Negro, was worth 420 piasters, and one meleque, one child, 400; that at that time sellers had stopped giving credit for ten or twelve months; the merchandise was sold for cash. The cargo was not sold out on the same day, and there always remained in the cabins some sick, some blind, and there were some buyers who speculated on this human garbage and who bought them at their own risk, for fifty or one hundred pesos!

H. Tudor, the author of A Narrative of a tour in North America, with an excursion to Havana (Vol. II, London, 1834), saw in the bay a slave ship that arrived with two hundred fifty slaves. The schooner Skip Jack chased him away, but he was able to disappear into the darkness of the night and saw the place where the slaves were confined, naked and with nothing but a loincloth, and exhibited like pigs. Separated by age, they were distributed in groups and seated on the ground, and were eating, or rather devouring, a mixture of boiled plantains sprinkled with 55 eggs and rice, a kind of potage that could be given to a pig.
Three of these poor souls were very sick because of the overcrowding during the crossing, and one of them especially looked as if he was dying. Stretched on the ground and groaning, he was as naked as the day he was born. He was nothing but skin and bones. Nobody took pity on him; nobody gave him clothes, food or medication, as if his masters knew that they would lose their money if they spent it on him because death was closing in on him. Despite their pitiful state, he says that all were put up for sale, and that the Negro who was lying on the ground was lifted from the floor to show that he was not dead and so that a possible buyer would not lose the hope of seeing him completely recovered. However, hunger and disease had eaten him up, and he collapsed, exhausted. “The speculators of human blood, it is strange to say, offered money for this useless body and for two other sick Negroes who were sold … for two pesos.” When he inquired the following morning, he learned that the poor Negro had died during the night.

About the barracks in which the sale of the slaves took place, Bachiller y Morales writes: “I remember, and I was a very young child, the friendliness with which the slaves spoke to the people with whom they sympathized, joyful and pleased, especially the young ones, so that they could be taken out of those corrals.”

This proverbial truism should be repeated: blessed were the Africans who, after the sale, were not taken to an ingenio to pay for their crime—the crime of having been born black.

Three decades later than Massé, an author we have already cited, Richard Henry Dana, Jr., accompanied by a rich and intelligent landowner, also visits the barracks of Regla, crossing in a few minutes the bay in the “Ferry boat,” that “ferry” that linked Havana with Guanabacoa, which many people from Havana, Regla, and Guanabacoa would remember because it functioned until 1928.
Those wide and short steam boats with wheels that provided this service from the wee hours of the morning until nightfall in the middle of the twentieth century, besides passengers—the trip cost one real for one adult, half a real for children from five to eight years of age and for Negroes—, transported cargo, two-wheel and four-wheel single horse-driven carriages with their cart drivers, and other types of carriages, big cars, wheelbarrows, cows and oxen.

In Regla, as Dana tells it, “a few minutes’ trip takes us to a factory where all the workers are Chinese. In the yard in the back of the factory, there is a series of low buildings to which the [56] slaves are taken to put them on display. In the ‘Ferry boat’ we brought a short man with a thin face, who was the salesman. There, the slaves, directed by a buyer and a broker, were standing in a semicircle. The gentleman speaks to them kindly. They are dressed, and they are examined only for the eyes; no proof of their strength or skills is required, none of those offensive files about which we have read so much; what exams did the buyer do or would do in my absence, I do not know. The group had about fifty slaves of both sexes and all ages, some old, others very old, and the gentleman refused to buy all of them. The seller then offered to separate them, and the gentleman chose half of the slaves, who were set aside.

“I observed that all were cautious, those who were chosen and those who were rejected. It was difficult to decipher the character of their emotions. Desperation could be read in the faces of some, and in the faces of others it would have been difficult to say whether the anxiety or the disappointment that could be read on their faces was due to the fact that they had been chosen or rejected. When the separation was done and I noticed that the slaves were not daring to suggest if a natural bond or a bond of love was being severed with the separation, I asked the gentleman if some of the slaves were relatives. He told me that he would take care of that, because he never separated relatives.
“He spoke with each one of the slaves he had chosen and asked them if they had any relative among those who were in the other group. Just a few indicated that they had relatives, and the gentleman bought those identified relatives. One relative was an old mother and another one was a young daughter. I am satisfied that in this case no separation of relatives occurred.

“I asked the gentleman to tell me what was his criterion for choosing the slaves, since it did not seem to me that he had chosen only the stronger ones. He told me that his criterion was the race. Those Negroes were probably from Africa, Bozals, except for the youngest one. The tattoos of the various races were known to the landowners. He named one race that was more intelligent than the others, more difficult to control, but very superior when well treated. All the slaves he had bought, without taking into account age or strength, belonged to that race. I think that this preferred tribe was the Lucumí tribe, though I am not sure.”

And without a doubt, it was. It was during those years of great economic prosperity—from eighteen forty to eighteen sixty-eight—that the demand for Lucumí was the biggest.

But replacing the primitive sugar mills that were powered by animals, leaving behind that famous advance in the sugar industry represented in 1818—which was a big year for Cuba—the machine invented by Martin Lamy, which did two revolutions per minute and produced a jet of [57] cane juice superior to that of ordinary sugar mills, from 1830 to 1840, steam-powered mills were introduced to Cuba. As the years passed, these mills received progressive improvements and lightened the work load of the slaves. The portrait that my oldest informants painted for me about their chores in the ingenios does not show the same dark colors that many authors used in describing the miseries of rural slavery. Their stories rather match those given by Gallanga in his book La Perla de las Antillas, written in 1873, and others of his contemporaries: “The treatment given to the slaves in Cuba is liberally and really patriarchal.” Gallanga saw them in the
plantations of Poey and of Zulueta, “fat, with slow movements, sweet-takers and, at certain times, noisily happy.”

“The slaves in the plantations that I have visited,” he tells us, “are loaded with work. At night, they run the machines until three o’clock. However, their fate is far from being miserable as people imagine it.

“There are two phases in the production of sugar. First: the work in the sugar field, which can be and is currently done in large measure by free workers and in many cases by white men.

“Second: the work in the sugar house, which crushes the sugar cane and converts the sugar juice, which in large measure is done by machines, and these machines are perfected daily. The pride that plantation owners like Poey and Zulueta have is having managed to reduce the labor that before was done by slaves and to decrease substantially the number of ‘hands’—by hundreds and thousands—, leaving those who remain with a workload that in no way is heavier than that of the factory hands in Manchester, Sheffield, or New Castle. Zulueta only uses five hundred manual laborers, skilled for work in the field as well as the ingenio.”

The condition of the slaves had improved, without a doubt. Twenty years before, Dr. Physician had observed that even though the work of the slaves is heavy during harvest time—in the sugar plantations more than in the coffee fields—, since it begins in November and ends in early or late June, “the Negroes appear healthy and strong. They do not lose sleep or appetite.” Of the twenty-four hours of the day, they have five or six to sleep, two to eat and rest at midday. On Sundays, the drums beat in the afternoon and at night. And in 1888, Mathurin M. Ballou declared: “Even though we hate overall the labor system of Cuba, we cannot deny, however, that the slaves, as far as material comfort is concerned, are better fed, housed, and cared for than one
fourth or one fifth of the population of Ireland and of India. What is more, this comparison could be made with the population of most of the European continent.”

The case is that for my elder informants, the good and happy memories had erased the [58] bad ones; they did not talk about the stories that they had heard but not lived themselves, the stories of the slave insurrections in the ingenios of Matanzas, of the 1844 conspiracy, of the mistreatment by the mean foremen, and they only delighted in remembering the festivities and entertainments. Many, however, told me the story of a crime, an act of violence, an accident, and these stories were frequent, like the one told by Francisquilla (the old ladies were more given to telling the calamities they had experienced or witnessed).

“We are in the ingenio house during sugar came mixing time. A Chinese puts some fragments of the mass pincho to start mixing and we are watching the Chinese. The Chinese gets distracted. This Chinese gets hooked, caught between the clogs, which send him to the ceiling. We remove the mass pincho. We are going to put in the sugar cane. My God, Lord! Of the Chinese, not even a single shirt button appeared! And I liked that Chinese.”

The truth is that I have known older people from Matanzas and Villaclara who, even though the capital was nearby, had never visited it nor had ever dreamed of abandoning their niche.

“One had so much fun in the ingenio! One day there would be a drum here in the Cabildo de Santo, another day there would be a Kongo protest over there, and the dancing would begin,” would say Heriberto with a sigh. “The Kongo had cabildos in all the villages. In Nueva Paz, the majority were Kongo. I used to go with my father to the festivities of Macurijes, Bemba, and Sabanilla. They were dance challenges. For me, the best dancers, without a doubt, were the
Kongo. Who could ever forget Agustín dancing the *mumboma*? It was a unique spectacle. No, girl, you have not seen anything!"

“Those parties of the Kongo Reales! May God bless my *nkula*\(^5\) who are now in glory! The Kongo Reales are now done in Cuba. Look, they were so big that on the Day of the Kings, in the Palace of the Captain General, the distribution of the Christmas presents would not begin until the Kongo Reales arrived.”

“Sometimes they played the music for their parties from big bottles that sounded like drums: *umbó kín bín bín mbú*…”

“The cabildo of the Kongo Portugueses and the Kongo Reales was in the *ingenio* Santa Rita. The “Saint” of the Kongo Portugueses was called “Gangasímba, and that of the Kongo Reales was Yeyenkila, but during the open festivities these Saints did not descend.” (During the profane festivities, the trance did not happen.)

“Unión de Reyes, Alacranes, Cabeza, Camarioca, Bemba, Ceiba Mocha, Macurijes, Sabanilla del Comendador, Corral Nuevo, Nueva Bermeja, in all these villages I danced and played the drum. Lift the *ngoma kokero bóbele ngoma*! Do you understand? It means it is time to play the drum, to make it speak!”

“Ah, the festivities of the Hernández family, *mayomberos* who lived in a house that had an immense flamboyant tree, on the same street as Francisco Cataneo, a very intelligent black man, a master and friend of Juan Gualberto Gómez and Campos Marquetti!”

“For those descendants of the Kongo, it was a title of nobility to declare that their [59] foreparents were from the *ingenio* Desengaño, Acana, Santa Rosa or Triunvirato, San Cayetano, Luisa or Armonía.”
Makindó, from the *ingenio* Flora, thanks to a lottery, bought his freedom, and, of course, returned to the fold, to the beloved province, called Ifé de Cuba by the Lucumí and Mbanza Kongo by the Kongo. But before that, Makindó “walked” all over the Island, visiting all the *cabildos* of the Kongo—in Sagua la Grande the *Cabildo Kanalunga*, where there was a well that contained “their mbomas” and their big secrets.” These still existed before Cuba was given over to Russia.

During those days, there lived in Sabanilla del Comendador a Kongo king called “Melchor,” and once a year, all the Kongo from Matanzas went to render him homage because Melchor was the king of all of them.

Makindó considered the province of Santa Clara to be “the most decent of Cuba,” probably because there were more Kongo than Lucumí.

“It is possible—a *pilongo* tells me—that there were a lot of them. Those who participated in the procession of the festivity of the Virgen de la Caridad del Buen Viaje were Kongo and they were very devoted to the Virgin.

“In 1890, I witnessed the burial of a Kongo woman who was the queen of a *cabildo*. On the street, on each corner, there was a ceremony: they would put the cadaver on the ground and many Negroes would greet it with Spanish flags. The authorities gave the Negroes complete freedom to practice their rites.”

However, in the colony it had always been forbidden “to take cadavers of Negroes to the *cabildos* in order to perform dances or mourning according to the customs of their country.” This prohibition, is renewed in all the subsequent Ordinances, in the municipalities of the city of Havana by General José de la Concha, in 1855. We read the following: Cap. IV, Art. 40: “In
order to take any cadaver to the *cabildos* and mourn it there inside up to twenty-four hours, the overseer of the *cabildo* shall inform the neighborhood guard. Fine of two to five pesos.”

“Cap. V. Art. 55: “Those who would participate in the burial of people of color shall use their ordinary clothes and not disguises; they shall go in twos if they went on foot and shall not stop at the doors of the stores or other public establishments, neither on their way to nor back from the cemetery. Fine of five pesos.”

But it seems that this Ordinance was never strictly enforced at any time. In the countryside, of course, it was dead letter.

“The *ikú*, the dead, was always mourned in the African way in the *cabildo* and at home,” Calazán tells me as a clarification. “That is how it was when I was born; that is how it was before I was born, and that is how it is now. The Civil Guard persecuted people who danced with the coffin of the dead at the burials, but I carried, dancing, a lot of dead to their burial. Remando pá Boboya, remando pá Boboya! and one would stop at the stores to get a drink.

[60]  
*Tuñé tuñé vamo a casa Mayomba*  
*Tuñé tuñé let us go the house of Mayombe*

*Tuñé tuñé vamo a tuñé tuñé*  
*Tuñé tuñé let us go tuñé tuñé*

*A casa Kanguera ...*  
*To the house of Kanguera...*

Article 10 of the old *Bando de Buen Gobierno* specifically and clearly stated:

“Neither shall dances be allowed in individual homes where a cadaver might be exposed, nor crying as already stated, even though people might accompany the cadaver, provided proper moderation is kept. In case of violation, a fine of two *ducados* shall be levied against those who would have danced or cried, if they were free people, and, if they were slaves, they would be punished with twenty-five slashes. The free people who failed to pay their fines shall be sentenced to public works for three days…”

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(At the time of the publication of these laws, “crying” meant “funeral rituals.”)

Makindó, just like Calazán, crisscrossing the Island, “cried and danced for many dead people.” In Remedios, he had a compadre, in Trinidad he “got tangled up” and was very much in love “for a time” with a Kongo Mbandola woman, but in matters of women, he did not have any preference; he confesses that he liked the women of all tribes. They both told me that “during those days, nation-free Negroes had three or four wives, and one of them was called the principal or the nkundi. The principal had authority over the others. She ate with the husband, served by the other wives. The remainder of the meal was for the other wives and the children. The male children could not enter the room in which the principal slept with her husband.”

“I know that Ta Susano,” Baró told me, “had two very good wives whom he had as long as he lived, Anita and Santa. Santa was a mulatto woman. The two women lived in the same house, got along admirably well, and loved each other very much. However, in other cases, the various wives of a man were jealous of one another, hated each other, fought…, but in general co-wives got along well.” According to Baró, “it was much more practical to have the wives together in the same house than have one here and another one over there.”

Like the Lukumi, the Kongo put the generic name of Kongo before the name of their tribe or region of origin: Kongo Babundo, Kongo Musakamba, Kongo Mpangu, Kongo Bakongo, Kongo Masundi, Kongo Loembi, Kongo Mbangala, Kongo Kisenga, Kongo Biringoyo, Kongo Mbaka, Kongo Kabinda, Kongo Ntotila, Kongo Banga, Kongo Musabele, Kongo Mpemba, Kongo Makupongo, Kongo Kasamba, Kongo Matembo, Kongo Makua, Kongo Kumba, Kongo Ngola, Kongo Kisamba, Kongo Muluanda, Kongo Lunde Butua, Kongo Mbanda, Kongo Kisiamo, etc.
I have a copy of an entry from the National Archive of Havana, dated 1867-1869, about the Kongo Nisanga.

“Prío Morales, a free Negro, Kongo Nisanga, requests that the cabildo be reestablished in order to have deliberations. The Foremen and Matrons would be, 1st Foreman, Corrales and 2nd Foreman, Eduardo Cabrera, 3rd Foreman, Ibañez. First Matron, Mercedes Pulgarón, 2nd Matron Marta Tranquino, and 3rd Matron, Apolonia Domínguez. They named as Patron the Lord Jesus, Mary and Joseph.

“Out-of-district barrio Pueblo Nuevo, calle de la Salud 167. The police records of Merced Pulgarón, free, and those of Apolonia. They have no police record. They are not unfavorable. They have no information on Rosendo Ibañez, a neighbor residing at Pueblo Nuevo 4 Dr. in the last block before Cuarteles, in a cabildo house, for which reason I issue this document. Then appears a certification by Fermín Pérez. September 7, 1867. The free Negroe Rosendo Ibañez, a natural of Africa, age twenty… servant and a neighbor residing at calle del Salvador no. 8, is of good conduct, and there exists nothing to tarnish him. The barrio of Pueblo Nuevo and the one determined by the government to establish the cabildos, this demarcation corresponding to calle de la Salud 164 as it is within the designated location, November 4, 1867. The permit that has been requested is issued here in the city of Havana this 25th of November 1867. Don Francisco de la Madrid, chief of police of District IV, pursuant the above-mentioned decree, the Government clerk appeared before me at calle de la Salud 164, where had gathered various individuals who make up the cabildo of the Kongo Muango Nation, under the protection of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, numbered nine men and the same number of women and then came the election of foremen and matrons who should lead the cabildo. The following individuals were elected unanimously: 1st Foreman Pico Corrales, 2nd and 3rd Foremen Eduardo Cabrera and
Rosendo Ibañez; 1st Matron Mercedes Pulgarón, 2nd Matron Apolonia Domínguez, 3rd Matron María Marta Franquine. Witnessed and affirmed by Francisco de Alavarado and Francisco de Castro.” (And the document that the government gives in these cases was issued.)

“During this very same year of 1867, two more Kongo cabildos were built and received a permit in Havana. Every time that in these documents mention is made of the cabildos of the Kongo Reales, the Kongo Ngola, or the Agro, Carabali Agro, care is taken to declare that “they exist since time immemorial.”

Juan O’Farril has dealt with many Gangá—“Kongo or very close relatives of them”—[62] Gangá Poanga, Gangá Ñongoba and the Gangá Kuere, who used to dance with an apron that was similar to the wabi of the Lucumí, accompanied by a drum similar to the Ncheme of the Abakuá, lined like it, but without cuñas.

I have heard other elder Negroes, who had their cabildo in Havana, make reference to the Gangá Kisi and to the Gangá Gora, Romu Kono, Misense.

If we believe O’Farril, of all “the Kongo bunch,” they were the best, the ones whom the owner appreciated more for their good character and because “they did not touch the piano,” they did not steal. They were honest. Juan owed the most enjoyable moments of his stay in the ingenio to them. No other African told stories with so much grace. He was deformed and suffered complications from his arteriosclerosis, but all the stories that he told me during those unforgettable evenings under the mythical laurel tree of the demolished Quinta San José he had learned them for the Gangá. He only conceded them one defect, and a very serious one. They were very jealous of their women, and poor Juan, who used to repeat himself, would give again the example of a certain Gangá, Otelo, who had had several women and he prohibited all of them to peek at the door or go out of the house. He buried them alive!
“This Negro courted a Negro woman called Kombó, very beautiful, and, even though her mother had advised her not to pay attention to him, the girl fell in love and married him. Soyangué, the Gangá, carried his young wife far away, in the hills, to a hut in the most isolated part of the hills, where only the coal carts passed. Nobody went there to visit her, not even her relatives, and after a few months, the girl, exasperated, begged him to take her to the village because, if not, she was going to go crazy from loneliness. In that enclosure, she did not go crazy, but she got sick. She wasted away. She no longer spoke, she had strength for nothing, she no longer wanted to live. Soyangué went to the village to get a remedy that he knew, and when he came back, he found her dead.

“That Gangá had two dogs; the name of one was Wayorima and the name of the other was Aé. He left the dogs to keep guard over the body, one on each side, and he went back to the village to buy a coffin to bury Kombó. He carried the pine coffin on his head. When he arrived, he put the girl inside, lit four candles and sat down at the head of the coffin and started mourning her.

Wayorima Aé Kombó Soyangué Kombó, it is us, Wayorima, Aé, Soyangué

Aé Kombó Wayorima Soyangué Who mourn you.

“Around four o’clock in the morning, the coal merchants passed with their coal carts. They see that there is a death in the hut; they stop and get down to inquire.

- How come you did not inform us so that we could accompany you?

And do you know what the Gangá answers them?

- No way, no, because even after she is dead, I take care of my woman. I have always [63] been jealous. Until I bury her, I cannot tell if you are good to me for my sake only. Here I do not want more company than this. And he pointed to the two dogs.”
José Manuel Baró joined Juan to praise us one day, in the village of Limonar, with that ease of expression characteristic of the Gangá.

He had spent all his childhood in this region that he knew like the back of his hand.

He had lived in the ingenio Grave de Peralta and in the coffee plantation of Crabb. From the ruins of the old Ariadna of Chartrand, so much visited in the middle of the 19th century by the foreigners who, despite the fear that yellow fever inspired in them, crossed the sea, some to contemplate the beauty of the Island, others, the Yankees, who envied it, to study the advantages of its annexation or purchase, he took us to the coffee plantation of Crabb, in what he called Baró chiquito—six horses and I do not remember how many ropes. There were the ruins of the main house, the big house that he had known as full of animation and life, completely invaded by vegetation—of the house, the walls of the façade were still standing—there was the house of his parents… because, the slave who was his father, later, with his work he became a cattle farmer. José Manuel seemed truly overcome by emotion. From all sides, he was seeing the departed figures of old acquaintances, even of animals, the ghosts of the male dog Componte and the female dog Diana, fierce guardians of the Chartrand farm, so feared that nobody dared to come close to the property at certain hours; of the mule on which Tá Cesareo used to turn the waterwheel while she sang, hypnotized:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Caminando caminando} & \quad \text{Walking, walking} \\
\text{Caminando caminando} & \quad \text{Walking, walking} \\
\text{¡Hála mula!} & \quad \text{!Go mule!} \\
\text{Caminando} & \quad \text{Walking...}
\end{align*}
\]

In front of the tall fences of the small cemetery, he saw the familiar images of Lorenzo Baró, the well digger, Má Levi and her husband Chekué Chekué, Má Komé Chimba, who used to cook an
exquisite *karalú*, a soup made with vegetables picked on the property itself, with peanuts and sesame. Pablo Noka, the gravedigger, “who, when the grieving relatives did not pay the customary twenty-five pesos, was required to take the dead bodies out of the coffins and throw them into the mass grave.” Ashes to ashes, there rested the Whites, separated from the Negroes. In the place where a huge avocado tree grows, on the corner of the Chinese cemetery, there were the Negroes buried, and, separated from all the others, the *judíos* or “Jewish” children, those who had not been baptized.

[64] There, in the Crabb, this Baró dealt with the Gangá. The Gangá were admired because in the funerals they used to sing songs that were so sad that all those who were present would cry. All of a sudden, they would switch the rhythm, and, with the tears still fresh, the people would roar with laughter. It was an art that only the Gangá had: to make people cry and immediately make them laugh.

“A Gangá would die, the word would spread, and from the neighboring farms, people would come to the funeral,” we were told by another elder man who was from the *ingenio* Jorrín and whose surname was Jorrín.

“You know what? The master of my father was Miguel Jorrín y Moliner, son of Don Gonzalo Jorrín. At four o’clock in the morning, the Gangá, circling around the dead body, singing very important songs that would split the heart, would begin to say farewell to the departed. It was always a woman who began the song. In one of those songs, they sang that God raised His children in order to eat them, because His children made mistakes, and mistakes were punished with death. Like God, the only creatures in the world who eat their children are the crocodile and the alligator.”

Those Gangá venerated a saint they called Eserikita.
In the village of Perico, Florinda Pastor was, for years, chief of a family of more than one hundred people of Gangá Ñongobá origin. They formed a close-knit clan and, as he explained to me, they dedicated themselves to a certain cult of the ancestors. In their funerals, as long as the body of the dead person is still present, they would sing and dance, and with the songs the trances would begin:

*Doyan doyan*  
*Ikikiwe kikiwe yengué*  
*Mañengue bâncleo*  
*Yangué pa mi wana yengué*  
*lo mando al cielo*  
*Van koromaé Nengueré*  
*Yaó bondé yá*  
*Yoyaya yambuke bongué*  
*Lloró lloró kimbi ya oro pondé*

With songs they would accompany the dead to the cemetery:

*Indé indé bondé son de baina...*  
*Let’s go, let’s go, what the heck...*

Every so often, they would celebrate their rituals, and during the anniversaries of their dead, they would make invocations and “lament”:

[K65]  
*Kere yan waio aó maó*  
*Kere weyo yan weío*  
*Vamo a llorá morilé*  
*Lloró lloró kimbi ya oro*  
*Pondé kengue un ke yambasina*
In many of their songs, Florinda Pastor and his people use a jargon intermingled with old Castillian, Bantu and Yoruba words. For example:

- **Dale manguengue, dale gongoní** — Give him manguengue, give him gongoní
- **Dale kó we ma o Iyá Iyá Changó** — Give him kó we ma o Iyá Iyá Changó
- **Obé Obé Obé Oyá Oyá Oyá Oyá** — Obé Obé Obé Oyá Oyá Oyá Oyá
- **Changó koya ma diké obé obé obé.** — Changó koya ma diké obé obé obé.

(Because we mix Palo Monte with Ocha, they explain. They also invoke the Orichas.)

“In all the wakes of the Kongo, people sing and dance; all are alike. They used to play gongoriko or kinfüiti—Sikiringoma Yalulendo Tomasike—, for example:

- **Tango moana tango moana** — This time the Negro child
- **Füiri lurié tango moana** — has died, this time the Negro child
- **Bafiota füiri lurié** — the young Negro has died and will not return
- **Tango moana lé mundele** — This time the white child
**Füiri lurié tango moana** has died, this time the white child

**Mungonga füiri lurié.** Mungonga has died and will not return.

People sang circling around the dead body, which was wrapped in a blanket and stretched on the floor, and people carefully reminded the deceased about the services received from the caravels while in life. As the Ñañigos do in the “ñampes,” some marks were made on the [66] deceased with white chalk, and after each group of the Africans finished singing to the dead, the dead would be lifted from the floor. But the songs of the Gangá for the dead were and are the most beautiful.”

Instead of wax candles, the Negroes used as candelabra banana tree stumps, four, six, seven, or eight of them. The Kongo Musundi usually lighted eight candles. The Creoles, who were the last ones to sing to the deceased, would light four. So, at funerals, Negroes from all nations came together and fraternized: Lucumi, Arará, Hausa, Mandinga, Carabali, Kongo.

From a certain point of view, funerals, which the Negroes enjoyed so much, also had some festive touch among the country’s Whites and the upper classes.

In general, and, of course in relation to the importance and popularity of the deceased and his or her family, funerals were well attended and very “lively.” In the homes of the members of the aristocracy and of the rich, people “had a good time,” despite the imposing funeral apparatus which was prevalent before the mid-19th century and during the period described by my oldest Havana informants: the walls covered with wall carpet in the mortuary room, the tall catafalque of high price, on which a coffin that was not less expensive was set, and around it, the biggest number possible—twelve at least—of metal or wood candelabras, the wax torch candles which had to be burning constantly. Moreover, the sadness of the deceased’s relatives had to be expressed in the most dramatic way possible. So, with all the power of their lungs, the women
screamed their desperation, they were prey to violent nervous breakdowns, the heart-wrenching and deafening scenes were repeated in a spectacular way at the sound of each conventional formula of “I accompany you in your feeling,” still in use, pronounced, touched, by those who approached to present their condolences. If the house was of one floor only, the hallway door and those big colonial windows of romantic honeymoons which opened on to the street were opened wide, so that the passing public could also enjoy the sad and …moving spectacle. Moreover, the doors were open to the public to join the wake, to as many as would want to pray for the soul of the deceased or cross themselves in front of the coffin. In order to perform such a pious, appreciated and commonly performed act, it was not necessary to have even the slightest relationship of friendship with the grieving family.

This is how, in a corner of the hallway of the house where the body had been set, one of the relatives of a deceased discovered a friend of his who was crying his heart out. He went close to him and trying to console him, said:

- “I am so sorry; I didn’t know that you were friends!”
- “No,” the friend answered, drying his tears, “I don’t know him, but I just got news that the ship [67] that was carrying my shipment of sugar sank, and I am completely bankrupt. I was passing by, and no place seemed more appropriate for me to cry out my pain.”

After the wake, despite the explosions of pain, of the lamentations which were the custom, outside the mortuary chamber, people had a wonderful time, chatting, commenting on the current events, gossiping, and the older people, just like today, remembering the past and criticizing the present. In some places, to kill time, people used riddles, and there were people who had a reputation for this kind of things and the presence of such people was appreciated at funerals because of the many things they knew or could invent. As the night progressed, the cups
of coffee and the bowls of tasty stew kept those in attendance awake and talkative, and many romantic engagements were sealed. One could say that under the flickering light of the wax candles, the scent of candles mixed with that of flowers—in Cuba, death smelled like Madonna lilies—and new platonic romances were born among young people.

People did not spare money when it came to funeral and burial expenses. Poor people were the ones who made the biggest sacrifices to lay out and bury their dead with dignity. The luxury displayed in some of the burials of the past has remained stamped in popular memory, like the burial of the Countess of La Reunión de Cuba, for which, a common fact then, it is said that a group of women who were helping the Countess went to the cemetery. There were also the burials of other people, like the renowned lawyer Anacleto Bermúdez, Don José de la Luz y Caballero, accompanied by thousands of admirers. Our people have always loved funerals and burials.

“One likes to mourn one’s dead well,” and “How well she mourned her dead!” is a comment that I heard more than once in honor of some widow.

Let us see how Captain J. E. Alexander, in his *Transatlantic Sketches* (1833), describes a burial in Havana:

“The cadaver is dressed in gala clothes, with a big display of candles. The horse-drawn carriages of the friends of the deceased gather and the coffin is placed in the first carriage, which is then covered with a black cloth. On the sides march in guard slaves dressed in big red jackets with golden embroideries, hats and holding baton in their hands. In procession, they march toward the cemetery. When the coffin arrives, it is removed from the carriage, uncovering the head of the cadaver, which is in constant movement because of the rapid pace of the pallbearers. It is a fast-paced scene. After Mass, they lower the cadaver, without much consideration, into a
shallow tomb and they throw clay and earth on it, while the coffin is kept to be used by the next
deceased who will need it. When they bury children, those in attendance sing cheerful songs in
front of the body. Funerals are conducted in Havana in a way that would shame the most
uncivilized nation.”

What Alexander says about the burial of infants is no more curious than the above note.
The same criticism he makes of burials the way they were practiced in Cuba—and his
description does not seem to be very exact—, we find in the writings of the majority of travelers
who wrote about our customs.

“The Countess of Merlin observes: “The burial of a person of a higher social status is
conducted in Havana with a pomp that seems to pay beforehand the debt of memories. They put
the body in a four-wheel carriage, maybe the only one that exists in the town. The clerics and the
communities of monks walk and pray out loud alongside the carriage and immediately appear a
big number of Negroes in high uniform, adorned with stripes and coats of arms, in short pants,
walking in two rows, with candles in hand. The luxury carriages close the procession which
seems to extend forever. A uniformed Negro, my dear Marquis, is a curious and funny view,
very little in harmony with the serious nature of such a procession, and though unwillingly, in
order to adhere to the historical truth, I add to the sad images of this letter, a portrait of these
luxurious and grotesque clothes that are worn on these occasions.

“Havana families make it a habit to lend their slaves to one another in order to achieve a
major display at funeral services.” It is clear, as he writes, that he must have been amused by the
black shoulder pads with those outfits of embroidered cloth, with the head covered by a high hat,
“they pant and blow like cetaceans, they unbutton their coats, they roll up their sleeves up to the
elbows, they move the shoulders as if to free themselves from that weight, and to complete the
caricature, their hats hardly maintain their balance so as not to fall off their heads” (*Voyage à la Havane*, 1840).

About the funeral services in Santiago de Cuba, Hippolyte Pirron left us this entry: “Next to the deceased, a dozen persons spend the night, without devotion. In the living room, for those who are at the wake, there is a table abundantly served with exquisite plates and wines, and during the whole night, people drink, talk, and laugh. The bereaved do like the others, even though at intervals they go kneel down by the deceased person’s body and let out horrible screams. The moment when people have to scream is regulated: half an hour, more or less, before the body comes out. Time to scream! And they weep and howl so that those observing could have a good opinion of their feelings and to satisfy the souls of the departed.”

Gone are now the black drapes, the impressive catafalques, the *zacatecas* of unforgettable attire for those of us who managed to see them during our childhood: strange, devilish, anachronic characters with wigs, tricorns, short pants and red jackets. The *muñidores* of the [69] funeral homes during the first decade of the Republic continued to dress the same way as the *zacatecas*, minus the shoulder pads that bordered the coats with the coats of arms of the families of the slaves, who guarded the cadaver of their masters and later carried the coffin.

Two employees were riding on the back running board of the hearse, pulled—depending on the financial means of the deceased and his or her heirs—by one or more pairs of horses adorned with feathers. I remember three of those coffins—the most expensive ones—and the funeral home employee riding a horse of the first pair and dressed completely in black. The years have passed and also in the homes that have been visited by death, the mirrors, ornaments, and statues are no longer covered with a cloth, even in the most traditionalist or backward families, however one prefers to call them. The funeral rituals, which were rigorous and endless, “have
lightened up;” so much so that in the town of Santa Clara, the authorities felt entitled to combat them as long as they lasted. Very long, the dress of those funeral rituals was like the cassock of a priest. A pointed hood covered the head of the grieving person, and a cloak hanging from the hood fell on the person’s back. In Villa Clara, this gloomy outfit was called “tacky” by the people. Was this the origin of the outfit wore by the “widows” of Trinidad in our century, women who were not widows but lovers who hid under those costumes and who, at midnight, went to a rendez-vous? During the 1940s, there were still some “widows” moving through the darkness of the narrow streets of Trinidad as the town slept.

And the times changed even more and fast after the First World War, and finally, for the funeral, the dead were taken to funeral agencies—Cuban and noisy versions of the U.S. funeral homes—, the cabarets of the dead, as a great Cuban lady used to call them, with much humor. But the wakes in no way lost their inherent, expansive social character of old times, which clash with the image of the solemn silent etiquette of death. This has always surprised foreigners, and understandably so, especially the Yankees, for whom, as realist and pragmatic people, death only binds the living to an act of presence, the shortest possible, at the funeral home, from where the body will be taken to the cemetery as quickly as possible. Time is money!

Here in exile, the old custom of accompanying the body of a friend and his or her relatives the night before the burial, though it will disappear for lack of time, is still maintained thanks to the Cuban owners of funeral homes. During those wakes, one has the opportunity to meet again with some old friends of whom one has lost track and some other friends whom, due to the constraints of a new and hard life of work and an awful pace of life, one sees more and more rarely, precisely at wakes.
In memory of that palero Jorrín, I visited, one rainy morning, what had been the ingenio of the master of his forebear. Now, as I remember it, I can still smell the rich fragrance that in our land exudes from the moist bowels of the soil. I cannot forget the mud into which our feet sank until we reached the door and crossed the threshold of the crumbling main house, the musical drops that leaked into a washbowl in the middle of the living room, or the chorus of frogs and guasábalos that reached our ears from a window that opened onto the desolation of an abandoned land. In one corner were the cane stand that had, I am sure, kept the canes of Don Manuel Jorrín, his easy chair, a sofa, and an Isabella-style table, another table of the same style but made in Cuba, and the blurred glass of a carved golden mirror that had lost its luster and on which leaned each day, as dusk moved in, the ghostly faces of those who had lived there in 1868.

“Crains dans le mur aveugle un regard qui t’épie.”

[Fear that in the blind wall there is an eye spying on you.]

In the courtyard, surrounded, probably without realizing it, by some female slaves dead about a century ago, an already old white woman, in charge of taking care of the house and who occupied her time planting France roses, Negro princes, Cuban Bombón, and carnations, allowed me to pry around. Suddenly, in the typical and broad kitchen, a sun ray bathed the tiles with force, and three small cats that lived in the oven came out of it to heat themselves in the sun. In the last room of the house was the bathroom: a pan, a tub for sitting baths, washbowls, and Spanish bowls that tickled my collector’s envy.

The good woman recounts the history of other hygienic gadgets that the house conserves: a service chair and various china chamber pots, stressing that some of them were made of silver.

“After the War of Independence, people used glazed chamber pots,” and she concludes, to my big surprise, “After the war, I no longer sought comforts!”
Decidedly, this woman, very attached to her time—an immobile time—or to her past that for her is present, despises the admirable water closet, the showers, and modern bidets that here in the USA people do not use.

The rain had stopped. Shortly I could hear the sun breathe as I visit the ruins of the deserted barracks, where, drowning the songs of birds, a boy sings his head off, and he escapes as soon as he sees me. After walking around for a while, I pass by a peasant scolding a lad in the door of his house. Responding to my greeting, he thinks he is obligated to explain to me why the boy, who must be about fourteen or fifteen years old and is his son, wears his hair so long. He [71] had fallen severely ill and his grandmother had made a promise to Saint Francis that, if the saint cured the child, the boy would not have his hair cut for a year. This particular promise was not so severe; other children were left with the hair growing long for several years. None of this would be practiced today.

Looking for someone with whom to speak and get information about the Kongo, whom I wanted to get to know better, I was lucky that day to run into an old neighbor of “Las Cañas” of Don Juan Poey, who, even though he was a descendant “on the mother’s side” in the mines as was Omí Tomí (“of those mines where people ate dust, opened themselves up, threw themselves into the boiler or committed suicide so long as they did not expose their back”), knew a lot about the Kongo. I do not remember his name, even though he told me interesting things about Mayombe that will come up.

During the 1840s still lived in the colony of “Cocodrilo” three Kongo Makúas: Santiago, Benita, and Anacleta. These Makúas, who toward the end of the 18th century began arriving in Cuba, came from the East coast of Africa, from Mozambique, and were numerous on the Island.
Gaytán also told us about the Makúas Kaureles, “who worshipped their dead,” and about their dance:

“They made their music with two small drums. One is played with two small sticks, the other with the hands. When the Kongo of Las Tejas finished their makuta, the Makúas would come in to play. They danced in pairs. The man barefoot in front of the woman, wore a black vest and white short pants. The woman with flip-flops and a dress that constantly flew into the air. They seemed to imitate the peacocks. He would jump and move toward her. The drums sang:

Pan! Kai kitin kitin tin. Pan!

Pan! Kai kitin kitin tin. Pan!

and la caja, the small drum:

Kete kete kete kete ten kenke tiken ka.  Kete kete kete kete ten kenke tiken ka.

They would move back and move forward again.

The language of the Makúas was difficult, and it was commonly spoken. Also from around Mozambique “which belonged to the Portuguese, they brought some relatives of the Makúas, very friendly, beautiful, jet black, who loved their masters like dogs.” My informant does not remember the name of those Negroes. And others “who went back home flying, and for that reason, were no longer bought.”

[72] It seems that there were many slaves who went back home to Africa flying, when there was no air transport, without committing suicide. How can one explain this phenomenon? Simply, these were witches, “witches who flew.” In the opinion of Ceferino, almost all the male Kongo witches could fly—those from Angola flew from one territory to another—and the female witches could fly too. (The violent trance of Mayombe, the convulsive jumps, and the vertiginous flips lend credence to this belief.)
To support his point, he mentioned the case of a Kongo Mboma prince who became a prisoner of another kinglet, with a niece of his and two hundred other wretches and were sold to the slave trader. Destined for Cuba, during the crossing, this Negro, after saying goodbye to his still adolescent niece, assured her that he was going back flying to his country, and he jumped into the sea. A few days after arriving in Cuba, the niece was transferred, with a lot of fifty slaves, to an ingenio. As time passed, she was able to get news of her family when she recognized as a compatriot one of the new slaves that her master had bought. The compatriot assured her that her uncle was still alive, that he was in excellent health, and that he had not lied to her when he had told her on the ship that he was jumping into the sea in order to fly back to Africa.

All over Cuba, people believed in the existence of the flying female witches who at night sucked the blood of children. The chauffeur who guided us in Bayamo had no doubt about this. These female witches that this good man from Bayamo told me about had nothing to envy the female witches of Matanzas, the frightful ones of Corral Falso, Mamá Viviana, o Tona. There, just like all over the Island, the Canarian witches usually flew, like that Doña María about whom we talked in another part, who flew through the air to Tenerife and surprised her husband with another woman.

Luckily, there are ways to punish these female witches and leave them without skin, as an old man from Mantanzas told us, who saw fly, not a female witch, but a male ndoki, a male witch from his village of Bemba.

“On a farm in Madrugas, there was one female witch who was the reason why no mother saw her son grow up: all the children were dying because she was sucking their blood.
There were in the village a pair of very handsome jimaguítas that the female ndoki did not dare touch. They grew up a little and they asked the permission and blessing of their mother to go free the people from that bedeviled female witch, and since nobody denies anything to the ibeyi, the mother let them go. (Those ibeyi, like the narrator, were Lucumi.) It is well known that they have great virtues, powers, that they are born with divinatory and healing powers, and that the people consider them to be extraordinary beings.

Once far from their hut, one of the jimaguas says to the other:
- Stick your ear to the ground because I feel that the female witch is flying this way. And so it was. He heard a noise similar to the noise of a huge botfly, and in the noise a voice: Mamá bi oba is going to eat ya yén yén, is going to eat ya. It was the ndoki!

The ibeyi improvised a carpenter’s shop and metamorphosed into carpenters. The old woman appeared.
- Have you seen a pair of jimaguas pass by?
- No, ma’m; we manufacture trays; nobody has passed by here.

She moved on, very angry, because she knew where the jimaguítas were going and she suspected their intentions, but since they had grown up, the old woman did not recognize them. They arrived at the village, reverted to their usual bodies and went into a house where they were welcomed and where they explained what they were planning to do. In this house, two children had already died and the mother feared that the child who had been born a few months before would meet the same fate as the others. Immediately, the jimaguas prepared a bucket with salt and ash. At midnight, the witch appeared, and as is the custom of the witches, she removed her clothes and then her skin from her body. The ibeyi, who were keeping watch, seized the clothes and the skin and they covered them with salt and ash. So then, the witch, as she was not able to
put her clothes and skin back on because of the salt and the ash, remained without a body. Once they had surprised her, the *jimagüitas* called the people of the village, who huddled at the back of the house and threatened her while the *jimagüitas* sang, imitating her:

“Mamá bi oba is not going to eat nothing, ya yén yén, ya not going to eat nothing.”

They clubbed her to death, which is what these witches deserve.”

The *ruda* plant, salt, and ash are deadly for them, and if the sun surprises them outside their skin, it can kill them.

In Manzanillo I was told the story of what had happened to two white women witches from the Canary Islands, who had been flying by a house. But in that house there was a *ruda* plant growing, but since that plant is the enemy of sorcerers, an antidote of witchcraft, they did not dare enter, and a sleepless neighbor heard them argue in front of the door:

- You go in.
- No, you go in.
- No way in the world would I go in; there is *ruda* inside!

They raised their voices so much that they woke up the mother of a beautiful child whose blood they had promised themselves to drain. The mother’s room opened onto the street, and cracking the window open, the woman shouted:

- What does the *ruda* have?
- Because the *ruda* is pointed and sharp, nobody knows its content.

And they took off flying like two vultures.

[74] Mariwanga is not only the name we will hear given to many *ngangas* and to the Goddess Oyá of the Lucumís, but when she is invoked and acts in the “plays” of Palo Monte Cruzado and
in the Regla Kimbisa. Mariwanga was a woman of flesh and blood, a black woman slave of the *ingenio* La Diana de Soler.

“Mariwanga came to the Americas with two of her sisters. The sisters went to Santo Domingo or Puerto Rico. As for Mariwanga, destiny sent her to Cuba. But when she arrived at La Diana, she warned the assistant overseer that the day he would make the *musinga*, the whip touch her ribs, he would no longer see her. And that day arrived. She hid in the bathroom, and from there she returned to Africa flying.

Mariwanga used to entertain herself by directing *kimbamba*, witchcraft, to the Kongo of Soler and the surrounding areas, but all believed that the person who was directing those attacks toward them was a man. The situation became so serious that a *Nkisa* of the best and with a very clear sight, looking to see who the enemy was, finally saw in a mirror the figure of a person stretched on the ground. “That’s it,” he said. Here is one with the head down, talking to a cauldron. “Ah! But he has a very big buttock. *Matako mandunga!* This fat ass doesn’t seem to belong to a man.” The people went out, following the *yimbi*—the medium—, who, on all fours, sniffing the ground, and following the tracks, took them to a hut that was Mariwanga’s hut. She opened the door.

“I am Mariwanga indeed! I have seven petticoats!” And she proceeded to take off the seven petticoats and throw them, one by one, to the *mbua*, the person who had discovered her. Then she slammed the door at them.

The *cabezas de prenda*, the witches, called a meeting and, then and there, recognized Mariwanga, and in that meeting which was called *cobayende*, they also recognized the value of Palo Caballero.”
“When a woman says that she is a witch like Mariwanga, let a taita tighten his pants. They are the incarnation of the Devil, and all are witch material. But, sir, was not the Devil deceived by a girl with a face of ‘it was not me’? She said on the plaza one morning that she wanted to marry the man who had all his teeth of gold, all his fingers with rings of gold, a cane with the handle of gold, watch chain of gold, a watch of gold, buttons of gold, the belt buckle of gold, glasses of gold, the spurs of gold, gold, gold in all parts. A man of gold! The wind carried her words to the Devil. He went to see her at her window. She was smack pretty, and he was smitten. He borrowed everything that she wanted and then he went to her house.

‘Here I am,’ he said. I am the one you want as a husband. Look! At the sight of so much gold, the mother gave her approval. And they got married. But after the wedding, he went to his farm in Devil land, taking his wife and his wife’s trunk. But, before that, on the way, he returned teeth and jewels to those who had lent them to him: to a dentist the teeth, to a lawyer with whom he had a pact the glasses, to a boy from Jesús María the belt with the buckle of gold, to a [75] magistrate the watch chain of gold, the watch, the cane, to a busquenque the rings, and, finally, the spurs to a count’s coach driver who lived on gambling and who had rented them to him.

When the girl saw him without the glitter of gold, her soul sank to the ground. How can I get rid of this monstrosity?, she wondered. The Devil set her in his house and charged his watcher, the rooster, that he should always keep her under watch. The very first time the Devil, who worked in the fields, was absent, the girl, who was thinking about escaping, went to the fence that surrounded the farm and, as she jumped, the rooster, who was watching her, alerted the Devil. The Devil went to get her. Two months later, the girl filled two nkutus, two sacks, with corn and emptied the sacks on the ground at the door to the house, sure that while the
rooster ate, she would have time to escape. But the rooster, who was very shrewd, was alert, pecked on the corn:

\[
\text{Kóngoro makongo, tóc!} \quad \text{Kóngoro makongo, tóc!}
\]
\[
\text{Kóngoro makongo, tóc! tóc!} \quad \text{Kóngoro makongo, tóc! tóc!}
\]
\[
\text{Kóngoro makongo,} \quad \text{Kóngoro makongo,}
\]

and while the girl ran away, the rooster, swallowing the last grain of corn, saw her:

\[
\text{Kóngoro makongo,} \quad \text{Kóngoro makongo,}
\]
\[
\text{Kóngoro makon... tóc!} \quad \text{Kóngoro makon... tóc!}
\]
\[
\text{Kóngoro makongo} \quad \text{Kóngoro makongo}
\]
\[
\text{Kokori kongo} \quad \text{Kokori kongo}
\]
\[
\text{¡Yombo se va!} \quad \text{Yombo escapes!}
\]

He sounded the alarm and, once again, the girl had to return. It does not matter. She let some time pass, enough time to let the Devil forget that second escape attempt, and one day, very loving, she asked him a favor:

- I would like you to take my trunk to my mother as a souvenir. We don’t need it, but promise me that you will not open it, because I will be watching you.

- I promise.

In a moment when the Devil got distracted, the girl got into the trunk. The Devil carried her on his shoulders.

- It is heavy, he murmured, and he set out walking with the speed with which the feet of the devils move.

- Don’t open it; I am watching you! she was continuously telling him.
- No, my wife.

The Devil would stop, and the girl’s voice would spur him on:

- Go on, go on, *matoko*, husband; I am watching you!

[76] The Devil would smile and quicken his pace. He arrived at the house of his mother-in-law and delivered the trunk.

The Devil never again saw his wife. She was so young and so pretty!”

The drum that was used to play in the Kongo *cabildos* and recreation societies, the drum to entertain men and women, was the *makuta*, “the father of the Yuca drum,” the long drum that was played with a stick. Two other drums accompanied it, of which only one was played with the hand.

Let us compare the descriptions that my informants gave me with those left by some foreign authors who witnessed the dances of the slaves in the *ingenios*. Bremer, an excellent observer, writes:

“There they are, gathered on the ground behind the house and under the shade of a big almond tree, some forty or fifty Negroes, men and women, all well dressed; the men for the most part with shirts or loose shirts, the women with long and simple dresses. There I saw representatives of various African nations: Kongo, Mandinga, Carabali, Lucumí, and others, dancing the African way. Each nation stamps its dances with its own variations, but in their essence, all the dances are the same. These dances always require a man and a woman, and invariably represent a series of courtships in which the lover expresses his feelings, in part through the shaking of all his joints, to such a point that it appears that he would fall to pieces when he turns and turns around his partner, like a planet around the sun, and in part through some magnificent jumps and flips, often surrounding the ladies with both arms but without
touching them, however this varies in the various ‘nations.’ A Negro, a Carabali, put his hand tenderly around the neck of his small lady while he put a small silver coin in her mouth. And a black foreman, an ugly little man, under whose whip I had seen the women work, sometimes took advantage of his position to kiss the pretty young ladies while they danced with him, and to interrupt the dance of another man with a pretty young Negro woman and take his place, because it is the custom that if one of the observers throws a cane or a hat between the dancers, the dancers must separate and the man who throws the cane or the hat must replace the male dancer. This way, the woman must dance with three or four male partners without abandoning her post.”

Wudermann left us the following lines about these dances of Negroes in Matanzas:

“Sundays, they dedicate them to entertainment. In many parts of the city, in Pueblo Nuevo, you will see flags waving to indicate the places where the Negroes come together to perform their national dances, because that is how all the tribes that have been brought from Africa conserve their customs. One can imagine, seeing them enjoy themselves, that they are in their native lands. Their dance is unique. The music of two or three drums, made of carved tree trunks and covered with patches of untanned cow leather; a group of men and women dressed in flamboyant clothes, who keep the rhythm with their hands, and one woman steps forward and initiates a slow dance, dragging her feet, stumbling, and doing various contortions, challenges one of the men. The most daring of them steps up to the dance ring and the two compete to see who will get tired first, the woman making some moves that the man tries to beat, between the shouts of the onlookers. The woman, who has taken two or three handsome men out of the arena, finally cedes her place to a beautiful impatient woman who had been observing her triumphs with envy. At times, a robust Negro occupies the arena for a long time and the women, one after the other, dance to be vanquished and retire to be celebrated by the laughter of the spectators. All
the time one hears a muffled song, monotone like the music of the drums, in which three or four words are repeated in a more or less animated tone as the actions of the dancers increase or decrease in speed.

“These dances are under the protection of the Civil Authority, who authorizes them on Sundays and on the days of religious festivities.”

He warns that the order that regulates them is due to the respect that the Negroes of each tribe owe to their Kings and Queens.

At the sound of the *makuta*—*yuca* or *makuta* as my informants indistinctively say—the Negro women rushed, adorned in the best dresses they had. The male dancer of the *makuta* danced with an apron made with the skin of a wild cat or deer. Strapped around his waist, shoulders, and feet, he had small bells and rattles, and hanging around his neck, a giveaway prize. The man kept the rhythm with all his body and pursued the woman, who was dressed in a very wide skirt, to “vaccinate” her: he would suddenly stop in front of her, thrusting his hips forward. They would spin many times and the *makuta* would be heard singing: *Tingui tiki tiki*.

There had been great *makuta* dancers; Villayo was one of them, and he managed to eclipse Pancho Becker in fame.

This is how Nino de Cárdenas describes the band that animated those *kisomba kia ngóngo*, those Kongo festivities:

“It was made of three drums. The *cachimbo*, which is the drum that sets the pace; the *caja*, which is the louder, that gives the strokes, the *mula*, which keeps the rhythm. The *koko* is located behind these three drums, and the *kinfüite*, which was a small drum similar to a harp with a rope that one rubbed with a wet cloth, *kii kii*... This set was given the name *makuta*. The [78] small drum, the go-between, was called *samlile matoko*. A chorus of singers accompanied
the *makuta*. They were the dancers themselves. The one who started the singing was called *gallo* *makuta*. The dancers, men and women, responded to the *gallo* or *gallero*, who stood in the middle of a circle of singers. It was a very animated dance.

*Chákrichá*  
*Chakrá*  
*Chakrichá...*

As my elder informant Juana puts it, the drum, the *mula*, would say:

*Kitán kitán*  
and the three together:

*Ande tu vá pera yo*  
*Allá l’equina baracó*  
*Quién son pícaro como tú?*

Many of my informants participated in the glorious Day of the Kings; they frequented the *cabildos*, “the kingdoms,” danced, and sang the *makuta*.

*Kitumbo yalelé lelé úm!*  

“The first *cabildos* that came out for the Days of the Kings were those of the Kongo Reales, the Mumbata, and the Gangá. They would go to the Governor’s Place with a huge parasol and they would carry the three drums: the caller, the *mula*, and the *caja*. The caller said: *Kimbán kimbán kimbán*. The *caja*: *Kereketeketén kereketeketén kereketeketén*. All together: *Kimbá kimbá kimbá*. Whoever did not touch the sticks at the bottom of the *caja* did not have a good time.

“It had always been that way, the first to take part in the parade were the Kongo; after them went the other *cabildos*, the *cabildos* of the Lucumis, the Lucumi King dressed in white,
with an *ideripón* or white cap and a horse; the *cabildos* of the Arará, the Mandingas, and the Carabalis. The creoles carried a bottle to ask for the festivity tip. They sang: “Take it out! Take it out; it is hidden!” and those who gave the tip put the coin in the bottle.

“Each Kongo had his dance. The one that was danced with a dissected cat was very beautiful.” One could still see, in the village of Jovellanos, on San Lorenzo Street, the house where the Kongo held their festivities, and in which was danced that “very beautiful” dance that Bamboché liked. It was the *cabildo* of the Kongo Musunde. Under an altar, they hid their *Fundamento*, their object of veneration. An “albino” cat, adorned with ribbons and cowbells, [79] those who had seen it tell me. When the King and the Queen danced, the King wearing a morning coat and a derby, the cat hung from his waist. While he danced, nobody said a word to him, nor could he speak. The drum gave a signal. The King faced the drum, took two steps with each foot, with a bow of the head greeted the drum and, turning to the audience, greeted the people. Then the Queen stepped forward, followed by three ladies. One fanned her while the other two carried the long tail of her dress. Repeating the same steps as the King, from a distance she greeted the drum and the audience. Then the songs began:

\[
\text{Ma Rosario Ma Rosario} \\
\text{Congo tá acabando...} \\
\text{Ma Rosario was the name of the Fundamento, that is, the cat.}
\]

The *cabildo* owned the home in which it was housed, and the Kongo celebrated their festivities publicly. The mayor of Jovellanos, Don Francisco González, was a firm believer. He built for them that big house and he granted them all the licenses that they requested. To greet the Kings in the Kongo *cabildos*, the *San Guisao* was sounded, a drum beat that was exclusive to Royalty.
“When the Lucumí finished their festivity, they said goodbye to the _Ochas_ and they thanked them with a song; we gave thanks to _Nsambia_. Mamá Yamba danced and sang; she filled her apron with peanuts,

_Je de je de jédedé!_ 

and the Kongo lady threw handfuls of peanuts to the audience.

_Je de jé dé jédedé!_ 

_Piña junka bai_  

_Take these peanuts_ 

_Santo Miniyó_  

_My Santo_ 

_Je de je de jédedé!_  

_Je de je de jédedé!”_

The other night I dreamed that I was with all of them, listening to people sing _makuta:

_Nto tó toil yaye yaye..._

When the beat of the _yuca_ came to a close, an older lady informant assured me, the drum said very clearly:

[80]  

_“Isaura lechuza”_  

_“Isaura owl”_ 

_Cerícalo fremboyán_  

_Cerícalo fremboyán_ 

_Avisa mayorá_  

_Warn the overseer_ 

_“Que ya la fieta s’acabá.”_  

_That the feast is ending.”_ 

The oldest beats of the _yuca_ drum, the “true” ones, in the opinion of Nino de Cárdenas, Juan O’Farrill, Herrera, and Baró, were those of Wataba, Watawa, or Walubia, genuinely African.

The Watawa—the Kongorí Watawa—was no longer played, but the elders never forgot that it sounded:

_Ki Ki Kirijín kí_  

_Ki Ki Kirijín kí_
After that reigned the Manawa of the Creoles, and towards the end of the nineteenth century the Kendeke or Muralla, which ended the reign of the Manawa.

The Tahona was a rumba beat and “was the mother of the Kendeke y the grandmother of the Wawankó. It was the rumba of the elders.”

“When I was born,” says Nino, “the Kongo barely played the Tahona; but from that Tahona came the steps of the conga, yes, of the congas of today that overwhelm. All that is ours today comes from the past.”

Yes, it is danced a lot.

The Manawa was sung everywhere. Sabá Caballero was not a Negro nor a Kongo. He was a mulatto, but he spoke like a Kongo and he was the Caruso of the Manawa. He went from a farm in Guamutas, in Matanzas, to sing in San José de los Ramos, and sang from the morning till the afternoon, in Kikongo and with the Kongo.

Sabá walked without shoes and he had them hanging from one shoulder, and at the same time was very elegant. “Man,” he would say, “but I am the kangoma bone…”

Juan, among others, sings me the following Manawa:

“Pero poco makerato  “But little by little
Si guarina pide ngoma  the sister asks for the drum
Ngoma no pide día domingo  The drum does not ask for a Sunday

Pero poqué motivo  But why

Alacrán para rabo abajo ngoma  is there a scorpion under the drum

Cucaracha que tá bajo yagua  and a cockroach under the yagua

Si eteneme tiene diente  And they have teeth

Cuenta hueso caliente  and hot bones

Kata pare ngondubiola  Cut, stop them

Eh! Kindoki chamalongo tu kuenda  Eh! Kindoki chamalongo, you go

E wé íle weíle blanco yo malo  Go to the White for harm

Kuenda negro él lo manda matá  Go the Black for death

Kuenda chino él lo manda matá...”  Go to the Chinese for death...”

This Manawa, says Juan after a moment of silence, is from the time of the comet, the one that caused much fear, and now I also remember another song.

Tata Perico ven acá  Tata, Wise, come here

Jún!  Jún!

Cuando cometa te salí  When the comet comes out

Ay ay! yay o fuírirí!  Ay, ay! Death follows!

Which meant that wen the comet comes out, I will die.”

When the apparition of Halley’s Comet was announced, there was real panic throughout the country, because this would coincide with the end of the world; so did the people believe.

Great Manaweros were the Kongo poets whom we already mentioned, Sabá Cabarello, Ta Antonio, and Mariano Oviedo of the ingenio Saratoga, which belonged to a Frenchman, Musiú Payet.
“In that ingenio, there was an incorrigible runaway Negro. It was Mariano Oviedo. Musiú had given the order that he should be caught and brought to him. The Guard caught him and put him in the cell in Saratoga. Somebody told him that the Guard was going to kill him, and then, in his cell, Oviedo came up with this song:

\[
\begin{align*}
Ilé lè lè soldao pañol no mata yo & \quad \text{The Spanish soldier will not kill me} \\
Musiú Payet va matá yo Mariano Oviedo & \quad \text{Mister Payet will kill Mariano Oviedo} \\
No, no mata yo. & \quad \text{No, he will not kill me.}
\end{align*}
\]

The crew heard him sing, they rioted, and demanded, in vain, that he be forgiven. Musiú Payet disappeared. Oviedo was punished. He died, and shortly after his death, evil fell on Musiú Payet.

[82] He began to lose, and to lose, and then went completely bankrupt.”

Those delightful beats of the Manawa produced what my informants call “stubborn beats,” which, by their very foolishness, caused much hilarity in the audience.

“One of them said: Bibijagua I grind the grain.

The other answered: And the loser will throw it away.

- And you will simply fly over.

- I was there.

- That is why the roach swallowed its tongue.

- The lizards are servants.

- Once more, I was there. Come on.

- Jurumina\textsuperscript{61} is a gentleman…

In one of those “stubborn beats,” one Kongo, who could no longer hold it, blew off, saying:
When I arrive at the cabildo, courtesy is first. Good morning to the Sir. Good morning to the Madam. Greeting to my Madrina. I greet Nsambia because my mother is a seamstress who threads a needle from seven leagues.

The gallo, a singer who had to have a good voice, stood before the drums and “wrote.” “Writing” was the name given to the solo that the gallo started and that was chorused by the audience. “Another gallero stole the song from him and they sang and responded back and forth for hours. The Creole wrote improvising. The songs that most pleased the people, those that produced more laughter, the author repeated them and the public learned them.” People wrote, improvised, very fast, and Juan, who had a “big chest of gallo Manawero,” with his small voice turned off, cannot help himself now either to display the range of his songs, “because he lost the string of things:”

El ingenio la Gambolina
Ya la caña con volante
Ahora boyero la Polina
Echó vara arriba ngombe
Yo brinca volante.
Entra Pancho Patinanga
Jutía tá en el monte.
Gato pidió zapato
Jutía le constesta que no tiene bodega
Mañana si Dios quiere
me voy a casa Carnero

The ingenio La Gambolina
the sugar cane with a steering wheel
Now the drover Polina
Put the yardstick on the ngombe
I wrestled the steering wheel away
In comes Pancho Patinanga
The hutia is in the forest
The cat is asking for shoes
The hutia answer him that he does not own a store
Tomorrow, with God’s help
I am going the house of the Ram
Pa que me preste su cayuca
so that he can lend me his cayuca

Carnero me contesta que
The Ram answers me that

no pué prestar cayuca
he cannot lend me his cayuca

Po que el día que
Because on the day

el cielo truena,
the skies will thunder

con qué va tocá su casco?
with what will he touch his helmet?

Tata Kian Kémbo
Tata Kian Kémbo

yo lleva trè día
I will take three days

Conversando lo gallo
talking with the rooster

abajo la loma
down the hill

Cabecera Kián Kembo
Headboard Kián Kembo

si no siete luyande
if not seven luyande

Bakalán pemba ngo
Bakalán white leopard

mandembo tuá rire
mandembo tuá rire

Mañana día Domingo
Tomorrow Sunday

tó la mayoca nía Manuela
all the mayoca at Manuela’s

Si no siete bangrima,
If not seven bangrima,

día mundele bangadián
the day the White will eat

Si no es por eso
If not for that

mundele boberiame.
the White confronts me.

Nguembo kereto kubulanga
Nguembo kereto kubulanga

Guen bué kereto angué nboe,
Guen bué kereto angué nboe,

Kubulanga
Kubulanga
Sakana cuento sakananga to play I tell this story
Yo brinca lusanga I fight lusanga
yo encontrá nkala baca abierto I found the nkala with his mouth open
Cómo nkala no me muerde? Why did not the nkala bite me?
Si yo habla mentira Siete Rayo If I do not tell the truth Siete Rayo
uno huevo an egg
Sambilán Sambianpunga Sambilán Sambianpunga
Karabalí wako matari wuan Karabalí wako matari wuan
congo imbangé Kongo imbangé
Lumuenu va kánga mbua, Lumuenu is going to tie up the dog.
cucha bien! listen well!
Kolongu yaya. Kolongu yaya.
Cabeza negro viejo the head of the old Negro
bueno pa la kiyumba is good for kiyumba
Y cabeza de Aura Tiñosa And the head of the Owl
bueno palo pa kindembo. is good for for Palo Kindembo
Cosa yo vito nunca vito What I have seen I have never seen
Mi padre son jatero My father is a jatero
enlaza toro con insengo who seize the bull by the horns
Mi madre lavandera nsukula My mother is a dry cleaner who cleans
lele munantoto clothes for children
Mi marina coturera cosa My madrina is a seamstress as

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81 Another case of linguistic elision, the standard Spanish being “madrina costurera.” The elision of the “d” in “madrina” and the “s” in “costurera” produces “marina coturera.”
yo nunca vito!  I have never seen!
Ensata guja bajo nube  She inserts the needle into the clouds.
Bueno biyaya, sube palo.  Well, family, Palo is rising.
Nunca angarra con la mano.  Never seize it with your hand.
Ndile vamo la Bana a bucá tela real,  Children, let us go get the royal cloth
porque aquí tienda  because here the store of
Don Pancho no vende má tela a real.  Don Pancho no longer sells the royal cloth.
Gallito, abrí kuto, güíri mambi.  Gallito, open your ears; I heard bad things.
Cucha como yo kimbila  Listen how you are singing
Cabildo la gallina no le entra cucaracha  In the Cabildo la Gallina no roach enters
Porque Nsusu se lo ntamba.  Because the chichen snatches it.
Bueno, caballero,  Well, gentlemen,
como no hay bulla no hay guerra.  where there is no conflict there is no war.
Yo estaba chiquitico,  When I was a child,
yo sukula lele munantoto  I used to wash the clothes of children
Mandinga suku fiame,  of the Mandinga,
Santo Barbara Bendito.  Blessed Santa Barbara.
Yo llega, caballero, río seco.  I arrive, gentlemen, at a dry river.
Río seco tá corriente.  And the dry river is flowing.
Zacateca tá pescando.  The bird is fishing.
La mar quiere crecé.  The sea wants to crest.
Gallo no hay lugar.  There is no place for the rooster.
Mostiquito tá preso  The mosquito is prisoner
porque tiene malo genio.  because he has evil intent.
Yo samba, yo lémba,  I pray, I call,
yo cautivo cosa mala  I am prisoner of a bad thing
Mundele lasimbiriko  White lasimbiriko
bondán mbúa bricá lango.  unleashes the dog over the water.
Bueno caballero,  Well, gentlemen,
Bamba cubana matá gando  the bamba of Cuba kills the crocodile
Mató un kumbi día domingo.  who killed a dove on Sunday.
To día tá peleando  Each day there is a fight between
Sol con la Luna,  the Sun and the Moon,
to día tá peleando.  each day there is a fight.
Kángara muka mani:  Tie up the things:
día muerto de cunchencha  the day the dead comes out
Cuanto Kisondo guaddía munga.  as Kisondo keeps watch.
Cuale cuvento guaddía tango...  As the convent keeps time...
Mayimbe, la mayimbe,  Mayimbe, Mayimbe,
abri kuto guaddiá mambo.  open your ear to keep the mambo.
Mundele Kasimbiriko bondán toro  The White is fighting the bull
que awalá lala  now that things are sleeping
Liweña vá cambia palo,  Liweña is changing Palo,
kunda ke  there
Eh Dió Walubbia,  Eh God Walubbia,
yo me ñamo Walubbé  my name is Walubbé
Gallo tiempo malo,
Gallo has a bad time,

Barikó Sarabanda
Barikó Sarabanda

Kekeremene tiene diente,
Kekeremene has teeth,

Mundele tá jugando
the White is playing

Po que tiene sikangombe;
because he has a cow;

si no tiene sikangombe
if he does not have a cow.

Pa mi mundele bobería,
for me the White is nonsense

mundele nkanga mboa
the White ties up the dog

Mi pecho tá roncando,
mi chest is tired,

parece toro galano
looks like a bull

Que etá nriba la loma.
over a hill.

Luwanda, luwanda,
Luanda, Luanda,

yo so congo luwanda
I am a Kongo Luanda

Mirán hueso mi cabeza,
Look at the bones of my head,

tú longán bisi
you see the bones

Bakutu virá,
open your ears,

hueso mi cabeza longán bisi
the bones of my head are true bones

Ngóngoro su ekán suei,
Ngóngoro su ekán suei,

se cambié
changing is happening

Ngóngoro suekan suei
Ngóngoro suekan suei

Tataburire ndiambo,
Tataburire knows,

buey cabeza.
Like the cow head.

Ahora manca perro sube
Now the dog goes up
a mocha guano.

Ahora jicotea,

guano que manca perro mochó.

Lo va tendé la sabana...

Jicotea mocha guano,

manca perro bota fuera.

Cangrejo dice

Kubulá kuame kubulanga

Tulanke, vamos a vé,

vuela chulangué.

Yo llama yerba buena,

nunca pone malo

Yo saulembe congo diangúngua,

ramo la cabeza.

Tuanilá con gualupe

eło juntaron cabildo

Padi cocina kimbamba.

Y ello me convidaron

pa dí a comé kimbamba.

Yo le conteté clarito:

yo no come kimbamba

Poque kimbamba, vianda mala,

fue é que mató mi padre.
Gó! Mambi dió.  
Gó! What an evil, God!

Saludando saludando  
Greetings, greetings,

Yo saludo a Sambia que mi padre  
I thank God that my father

Son ganadero,  
was a rancher,

enlaza toro con guataca.  
seezing the bull by the ear.

Sometimes, there was no shortage of white gallos in the beats, and from a Canary Islander called Don Antonio, my old informants remember the following fragments of one of his improvisations:

Yo ví una jicotea  
I saw a turtle

corn dolor de cintura,  
with hip pain,

Un gato muerto de risa  
a cat who fell dead laughing

y un cangrejo relinchando,  
and a crab whinnying,

Un sapo estaba llorando  
a frog who was crying

porque no tenía corbata.  
because he had no tie.

[85]  
Un día por diversión,  
One day, for fun,

sembré una mata malanga  
I planted a malanga tree

Y del corazón saqué  
and from my heart I took out

un mosquito mojiganga.  
a mojiganga mosquito.

Vino un lechuzo con ganga  
Then came an owl with a nganga

Un aura con tabardillo,  
an aura with sunstroke,

Malo de un dedo un piojillo,  
suffering from a lousy finger,

Y un sapo con espejuelos,  
and a frog with eye glasses,

También yo vide en el suelo  
also I saw on the ground
The Negroes made fun of the Islanders, who, according to Calazán, only pulled from the strings of their guitars, when they accompanied their songs, a perennial refrain.

Before the war of 1895, Gaytán tells me, the old Negroes of Valdivieso used to sing the tunes of another Canary Islander, Don Marcelino de la Rosa, an uncle of Don Carlos de la Rosa, vice-president of Cuba in 1925.

Informaron la Gallinuela

They informed the Woodcock,

El Martillo y la Chinchilla

The Hammer and the Chinchilla.

Luego llega el Rabiahorcado

Then comes el Rabiahorcado

Y se pone a hablar con la Garza

And begins to speak with the Heron

Que el Déspota se aniquila

That the Despot be eliminated

Ya las cosas han cambiado!

Because things have changed!

Luego viene la Yaguasa

Then comes the Royal Palm

Y les dice Se acabó!

And tells them: It is over!

Porque Cuba es libre, afirmo yo,

Because Cuba is free, I declare,

Por la unión de las dos razas.

Because the two races are united.

“And do not believe that before there were no Negroes capable of doing verses, even though they were not able to read,” warned us, among others, Capetillo. “You have never heard about José Isabel Aldecoa?”

Los negros tintos

The red Negroes,

De que soy ufano

Of whom I am proud,
De calumnias y maldades
Through gossips and evil deeds

Me sacan ilesos
Carry me unharmed.

Hay ave que cruza el pantano
There are birds that cross the swamp,

Mi plumaje es de esos...
Of those my feathers are made...

[86] But he did know the composition of Filomeno Arias, who was sponsored and then a slave owner. He was a poet and used to improvise in the restaurants. Already in the days of the Republic, one day he arrived at Central Soledad and there spoke about slavery…

Siendo un negro fiel y digno
Because the Negro was loyal and worthy,

Un hombre puro y severo
A man pure and serious,

Lo vendían por dinero
They sold him for money,

Igual que se vende un puerco.
As they sold the pig.

Jugaban al gallo fino
They played like the refined rooster,

Jugaban la dotación
They played, the people of the crew,

El batey y la cosecha...
The batey, the harvest...

Qué bien sonaba la mecha
How good the sound of the wick

Cuando la Conspiración!
During the Conspiracy!

Entonces, en aquella era,
Then, at that time,

No se daba con estambre
You could not see wool

Amarrado a una escalera.
Tied up to stairs.

Le daban de otra manera
Another way could you see it,

Amarrado a un horcón,
Tied up to a fence post,

Así pidiera perdón
That is how they begged for mercy

Bien le saltaban la sangre
Blood rushing from their bodies
Cuando la Conspiración.       During the Conspiracy.
Ya se acabó aquel error         Over is that mistake,
Esclavitud, despotismo.        Slavery, despotism,
Ahora sí estamos lo mismo      Now we are all equal
Igual el blanco que el negro.   Equal the White and the Black.
Ahora sí estamos mejor         Now we are better
Compatriotas, ciudadanos,      Compatriots, citizens,
En el monte y en los llanos    In the hills and in the valleys
Viva la tranquilidad!          Let peace reign!
Viva el Gobierno Cubano!        In Cuba, long live the Government!

Also many white people wrote festively mimicking the speech of the Bozals, during and at the end of the colony.

Of Don Luis Alfonso, I find among my papers, courtesy of a female relative of Alfonso, these lines:

Quiéne má fuete son que lo caballo? Who is stronger than the horse?
Quiéne má peleadore que lo gallo?  Who fights better than the rooster?
Quiéne má lindísimo animale?      Who is the most beautiful animal?
Ni chivo, ni gato, ni majá, ni alifante! Not goat, not cat, not cow, not elephant

[87] Neye se ñama mujé…         No, she is called woman...
Y é que laguanta               And whoever can stand her
Merece que le den un bujío!    Deserves a light bulb!

In another part, he gets the Negro woman, who rejects the Negro man who courts her, to say:

Apátate de mi lado                Get away from me
Esperpento inconcebible
Para tí no etóy visible
Para tí mé vaporao…

Good for nothing
For you I am invisible
For you I turn into vapor...

The letter of Campoamor delighted our romantic grandmothers.

- Write to me, dear father. (I am not sure that it was not also the troublesome Don Luis who was “afrocubanizing” her.)
- Write to me because it is about a boy, Ventura.
- I know whose son he is.
- You know who it is, and I need say no more?
- I begin. My piece of melon…
- What are you saying?
- Silly! That is love.
- And that you do not understand?
- Sure, you will understand it. A heart break I will have to begin with.
- What? How did you guess?
- Your soul for me has no secrets. That kiss that in time came…
- For me also, you know?
- When one goes and comes, one is not together…!
- The Devil has possessed you!
- What is the world without you? A valle of sorrow… And with you? An Eden!
- The name is written big, Ño Ventura, so that it is well understood!
- If you do not return soon to me, the pain will drown me.
- Do not push me to drown myself!
- Woman, that is not a thing to say…

- I do not want that.

- Where should I see you then?

- I will go to the shopkeeper, since he knows.

- But, woman, that is crazy! I do not do it that way!

- What would be crazy, as you say, is that I kill myself. Ño Ventura, if you do not want that, then come. Hurry up, I am waiting, and I am already tired.

[88] – Come on, I already know that you have a woman over there

you have a woman

and since she does not come tomorrow

I made plans.

Come on, because that shameless Negro woman,

if I get her here,

I will take her heart out,

so she does not think that she can laugh at me.

I set the chair and the fag,

while you were busy

dancing with the Creole Negro woman.

And I will make her pay!

Come on, because I wrote

letter after letter and answers I do not see…

Come on, for, if I get mad I will kick you

for you are shameless.
Ah! How many things have I told you
and you know, write!

- Well, woman, brave love,

then I will come on and let the wind blow.

“To Ño Camilo”. Take,

Get some bilongo and make yourself a stew!

During the war of Independence, the following dialogue between the Negro woman Cleta and
the rebel José Tomá, was widely known among the people:

- Hoy me encontrá con soldá
  Y me punta con ecopeta
  Me pinchá con bayoneta
  Dicie que me va matá
  Que neye va acabá con pacífico insurrecto.

- Today I met a soldier
  Who pointed his rifle at me
  He pinched me with his bayonet
  He said he would kill me,
  That he would end my peaceful
  insurrection

- Siá! Que nengane ese plato
  Mucha yuca hay que rayá.
  Su reto tiene un globito
  Chiquito como ratón
  Y neye lo ña namita
  Y si no jabre joyito

- Gosh! To refuse me that dish
  much yuca you have to cut.
  Your challenge has a little globe
  Little like a little rat
  And you in the morning
  And if you do not open the thing
Y ahí lo coloca bien  And there you put it nicely
Cuando llega la tren  When the train arrives
Dinamita reventá  Dynamite will explode
[89]  To máquina baratá  The whole machine will end,
Y gente murí también  And people will die also

- Ño José Tomá, mira que pañol  - Ño José Tomá, look, the Spanish
Son malo pa peleá!  Are fierce fighters!
Neye dí que va cabá  You say that you will end
Con Méjico y Novayol  With Mexico and New York
Nelle tiene un vapó  But you have no ship
Que foma cuadra la má.  That makes waves in the sea.

- Siá! Qué cuara ni qué compá  - Gosh! What waves and what
   compass!
Si né no tiene serrucho  If you do not have a handsaw
Y manque negro jabla mucho  And Negro woman speaks much
Mucha yuca hay que rayá!  Much yuca you will have to cut!

Coming back to our subject, the songs of gibe, the Makawa, Macagua, or Mukawa, were
delightful, as Francisquilla, who never forgot them, used to say. A Negro woman, who was going
to sleep with the machine operator… or with any other man in her ingenio, would sing:
“Tata Luca trae agua “Tata Luca bring water
Yo va lava pie. I am going to wash my feet.
Yo me voy a casa Mbemba I am going to the house of Mbemba
Hata marugá Till the morning
Mi guataca tá la pueta My thing is at the door
Que lo muela bien Tata Luca Mix it well Tata Luca
Mi cochino tá lo chiquero My pig is small
Que lo cuide bien Take good care of it
Tângo se va Monansó Tango is getting into Monansó
Caballerito oye bien Listen well, gentleman
Toy cantando mi Makawa I am singing my Makawa
Pa tó la vida” For my whole life.”

Tata Luca was the husband.

These gibes were also called macaguardias and sugar cane plantation songs. They were weapons that women wielded against their rivals, arrows that they sent to one another in the bagaseras, planting, catching, or cutting sugarcane with their fan-shaped machetes.

[90] “Tu marío son tuyo Your husband is yours
Tu marío son tuyo Your husband is yours
Son de mí también He is mine also
Kindé kindé kindé Kindé kindé kindé
Sala maleko maleko nsala.” Peace be with you and with you also.”

Another Negro woman, an adulteress who before dawn went to meet a Chinese:

“Mañana marugá “Tomorrow morning
Yo alevanta tempano
I will get up early

Yo vá calentá mi comía
I will heat up my food

Yo vá pa casa chinito
To the house of the Chinese I will go

Hata lamanecé...
Till the next day...

To those who were suspected or known to cheat on their husbands or *arrimados*, it was sung:

“The bitch has gone mad
You will go mad
Bitch, you will weep.”

An old woman—and I do not know if it was for personal reasons—put on a very wicked expression as she sang to me:

“Mateo teo teo valiente
Mateo te oteo brave
Bought me a brave blouse
Brave shoes
Mateo teo teo brave
Mateo the first day
Buys me manila
A shawl of ass
Mateo teo teo
Mateo brave
Bought a pig
To eat it every day.”
Was this Mateo the white husband of my informant, a Spanish man who freed her mother, with
whom she had a daughter, a light-skinned mulata, whom I had met in a central in Matanzas?

“Balencita, a mulata daughter of a Canary Island-born man and an Arará woman, was the
foot of the devil, and to laugh, she threw this song, in the bagasera, to Fermín’s wife, who was
pregnant. Belencita had no children, but the other woman did.

[91] - “Año que viene yo también va parí
- Hijo de quién?
- Del Administraó.
Será mi sagre,
pero no mi coló.

- Next year I also will give birth
- Whose child?
- Of the Administrator.
The child will be my blood
but not my color.

If it appeared that two lovers quarreled or were drifting apart:

“Cuando yo junta contigo
Nadie lo sabé
Ahora yo etá peleá contigo
To mundo lo va sabé.”

“When I met you
No one knew it
Now that I fight with you
Everybody knows it.”

And life was spent singing; one worked singing:

“Si me llama bagasero
Pa llá yo vá
Si me ñama cote cana
Pa llá yo vá...”

“If I am called to be a bagasero,
There I go.
If I am called to cut the sugarcane,
There I go...”

“All Africans are hustlers,” Otako thinks, “but no one is more so than the Kongo” (the same
thing is said about the Lucumí and their descendants). They spread their insights around,
improvising them or framing them into sayings, to laugh or to wound. They were used at all
occasions, and we can still hear them sung in the *nso nganga* by the *taita nganga*, performing the rites of his magic, contaminating the spirits. Also the masters who lived in the capital, when they visited the *ingenios* and attended the festivities, were sung *makaws*.

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“Amo acabá llegá”
“Master just arrived
Que abuso no pué aguantá
I can no longer stand abuse
¡Ah lamito caba viní,
Ah, Master just arrived
Amito cabá viní!
Master just arrived
Julepe ya no pué guantá má.
Julepe can no longer stand it.
Lo ingenio cuero no má
The ingenio only has blows
¡Gope no acabá!
Blows never stop!
Comida poco; amo no cába llegá.”
Food is scarce; Master has not arrived.”
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And when the master was leaving:

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“Mi amore márá la mareta
“My love packed her bags
Y no me dice aió
And did not say farewell.
Hata cuando yo no veo má
Since when do I not see
Niña que pasea la luna
the girl traveling to the moon
Llega acá.”
come visit here.”
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And one could joke with the master:

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“La lotería que yo sacá
The lottery money I won
Lo suamo mío me la quitá
My master took it away
¡Ah, fuá fuá fuá!
Ah, die, die, die!
Casa blanca que yo comprá
The white house I bought
Pa lo figurimo que la paseá
For my woman to have
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Vini mi suamo y me la quitá
My master came and took it away

¡Ay, fuá fuá fuá!
Ah, die, die, die!

Lo cochinito gódo que yo criá
The fat pig I raised

Señó mi suamo se lo comé
My master ate it

Lo negro cravo no tiene ná
The Negro starves and has nothing

No son ni chicha ni limoná
No juice, no lemonade

Majá tintorero! Sále la cueva
He crushed the cleaner! Out of the cave

Kuá kuá kuá.”
Kuá kuá kuá.”

Other big diversions that my elder friends remembered were the *Juegos de Maní*, the Peanut Games, and it was the inhabitants of Mantanzas—so they say—who most distinguished themselves in these barbarous tournaments that consisted, once the players were in line, to turn around singing, giving each other blows that fractured bones, broke teeth and noses, or, on occasion, produced one-eyed people.

*Kurrukutún tún kurrukutún boa,*
Kurrukutún tún kurrukutún boa,

*Si maní sí maní mira gópe que mi dio*
Yes, peanut, yes peanut, see the strike I got

*Inkisa si maní é é si maní*
Inkisa, yes peanut, yes peanut

*Si maní mira gópe que me dio.*
Yes, peanut, see the strike I got

*Yanyé obe é obe konyián*
Yanyé obe é obe konyián

*Yeo obe konyián*
Yeo obe konyián

*Yé una é ya kueo akueo*
Yé una é ya kueo akueo

*Cocotazo dobra yo*
I break the coconut

*Yawe yá were para*
Yawe yá were for

*Má o wéngue ¡cuero wéngue!*
Má o wéngue ¡sing wéngue!
A man, sometimes a woman, stood in the middle of the ring, stretched and pretended to hit somebody. The intended adversary took a defensive position, but the person that the pretender actually hit was another person in the friendly line. The person who had attacked then left the ring, and the person who had been hit took center stage.

The Peanut Games were attended by everybody in the nation, and there were games everywhere on the Island. They were appealing to both races, and it was not only the ñanga bisu, the “nobodies,” who attended the games, but also the “decent Whites.” People bet money on fistfights, on the bestiality of the “peanut sellers,” as well as on the chicken feet. Many women who, in truth had just as much strength as the men, participated in the games and threw blows that could knock out anyone.

“In the Central Mercedes Carrillo, where the Kongo and the Arará played the Peanut Games, Micaela Menéndez, with a wild blow, would dismantle a well-built man.

In Trinidad, this game was so popular that it is said that a mayor and his daughter were playing it. The same could be said of the province of Pinar del Río, inland, and of Santa Clara and Camagüey, or Oriente. A few years before I left Cuba, I was assured that still in a village of Vuelta Arriba, some afternoons, a group of “Negro peasants” played the Peanut Games. I did not have the time to verify the claim.

In Havana, where people of color retained the memory of two famous “pieces of land,” inhabited exclusively by Africans, El Palomar and El Solar de Guinea, this last one being of a good size, in Marqués González between Zaya and San José, people played the Peanut Games.

On the other hand, I have no recollection of anyone of my Negro informants, not even Bamboché, telling me about the bull fights except vaguely, “that when the ten-year war began, there was a bull fight arena by the Belascoain road,” and previously in Regla. In Havana, the
Negroes never missed a celebration, civic or religious. In the provinces, villages, and towns, they attended the now-defunct tournaments that essentially consisted, while on horseback, in cutting off the head of a rooster or duck placed within a marked area. The free Negroes, all over the Island as well as in the capital, lived on good friendly terms with the Whites of the lower classes.63

The days of feasts, “of full festivities,” were many. For my elder Negro informants, the most famous and unforgettable of these festivities has remained the Day of the Kings, about which the foreigners who have witnessed them have written so much in English and in French, as I have already indicated. We repeat here one more description of the testimony of those who witnessed these festivities during the 1870s:

“In Havana, at four o’clock in the morning of the eve, who could sleep? The Ñañigos already would come out to welcome the various potencias, or games. At midnight, first the Kongo Reales, then the Lucumí, with the big-butted woman who went dancing ahead of everybody else… That is why the saying ‘she looks like a big-butted woman during the Day of the Kings’ has remained to criticize a fat woman. Then followed the Arará, the Mandinga, the Carabali, the Makua, the Gangá, the Mina; all the cabildos went to the palace of the Captain General. After the Negroes of nations had marched, then came the Creoles dressed in Indian attires and a group of Mayombe—which was not an organized society—disguised as women and with curls on their heads. Then came the ‘Claves,’ very elegant, in jackets. The Clave Nueva before La Moralidad, El Trovador, El Desengaño. They danced little, they marched with much poise, and they sang. The Clave of Trovador, which later on was called La Discusión, was from the neighborhoods of Sitios and el Puntillo. The Claves were composed of groups of men and women who rented houses that they fixed very well, and from there, they went to other houses to
sing. They maintained a rivalry with one another and they spent a lot of money on clothes, the women on satin outfits and mantles. In order to surprise people and draw admiration on their luxuries, they did not open their houses until the very moment when they were ready to go out. The Clave Nueva sang that it was a glory to hear it. In the living room of the house, they hang a map of the Island, because they sang asking each other questions and giving answers and pointing on the map with a stick. These Claves worked on Christmas Eve, and on the Day of the Kings, they entered the Palace to sing to collect their aguinaldo, their holiday bonus. After that, they did not leave until dusk. At six o’clock, they were still dancing and singing. At night, the performing Negroes danced in the entertainment societies, like La Divina Caridad.” (“Or, in the society of the Negros Catedráticos, which was the name of one society that was very refined, they stuck to etiquette.”)

It was not only the Negroes of Havana who could on that date feel transported to Africa. All the villages and towns of the Island, free and slaves, experienced on this day the same illusion: the dances, parades, masks, costumes of the various imported tribes were a replica of what was seen in the capital. Let us choose at random the account of a Day of the Kings in a village: in the picturesque Villa de San Julián de Güines, as related by Wurdermann.

“Each tribe elects a King and a Queen and parades in the streets with a flag on which they have written their name, a few words, ‘Long live Isabel!’”—Isabel II—“and appears the coat of arms of Spain. His Majesty and Her Majesty are dressed in the latest fashion, are very ceremonious and are attended by a lady who holds a parasol above the Queen’s head. They carry their attributes with that dignity that the Negroes love so much and which they maintain in the presence of the Whites. The whole band is under the command of a Negro Marshal who, with a drawn out sword containing a piece of cane at its tip, moves continuously, maintaining the order
of the files. The main attraction of this group is an athletic Negro with a fantastic straw hat, a thick palm-leaf belt and other additives to his wardrobe. Wherever he stops, people beat the drums, let out their monotone sounds, and this terrifying figure restarts a possessed dance that constitutes the signal for a general dancing frenzy. When these groups stop in from of houses, they collect the money that the house owners give them. Often, the women mix freely with the spectators. Only three tribes paraded through the streets of Güines.” But in Havana, he adds, “on this day there is a perfect guirigay, and the confusion that reigns in the population of color is indescribable.”

The sixth of January ended with a popular dance in which joy and excitement brought together Negroes, mulattoes, and Whites.

In the old town of Sancti Spiritus, so Commandant Gajate tells us, the two most popular cabildos or “kingdoms” of the African “nations” were that of the Kongo and that of the Carbali. As in other parts in Cuba, in those cabildos were appointed as Kings, Queens, Generals, and Captains those who deserved those positions, and each “vassal” felt proud to belong to the cabildo of his or her “nation.” Sometimes problems arose, and if they were serious, as it happened in Sancti Spiritus in a case concerning the elections of the Executive Committee of the Mandinga “nation,” these problems had to be solved on a higher level. In this case, the Mandinga appealed to the Deputy Governor (Town Decree, 1873), and new elections had to be called in the Theater, overseen by the town’s Trustees.

On the Day of the Kings, in the groups of the Kongo, the full Court of the Kingdom took part in the parade. They had in front a herald who marched, shouting: “There come the Kongo Reales, make a wide big space!”
The Caribali instilled fear with their filed teeth—their teeth were like handsaws. “The Caribali eat people!” it was said—and their faces had lined tattoos, scars that indicated their noble origin.

They spilled their savings into the festivity of the Day of the Kings when they paraded through the town with their multicolored capes, zinc crowns, high hats and in the festivity of Corpus Christi.

Saint John’s Day also was a day of great reveling for the Kongo, who had this saint as their patron saint. We should not, a spiritualist warns, confuse the procession of the Kings—during which the King, the Queen, and the Generals put on an air of seriousness that made the mulattoes laugh—with the procession of the Diablitos, who, during Corpus Christi, marched dressed up with barrel hoops around their waists and from which pita fibers hang like skirts. Some displayed animal masks while others, having on huge bladders or disguised as monkeys, asked for money in the houses.

The Kingdoms went into the church with due composure and there they conducted a ceremony, bowing to the floor. They served as the front to the Catholic procession, which came out afterwards.

[96] On Sundays and holidays or “days of two crosses,” they always met and reveled. In Sancti Spiritus, the cabildo of the Kongo was in 1878 on San Justo Street. Later on, by an order of the government, it was transferred near the prison. A General of this Kingdom, Francisco Consuegra Congo, was so insistent on his prestige that he had one of his subordinates, Deputy General León Cancio, taken to the police station for having failed to give the General the respect and consideration he deserved (August 1880).
Also in Santiago de Cuba, the troupe of the Kongo was noteworthy, led by a couple of Negroes, each one holding a banner. “A macebearer was in charge of keeping the dances orderly. He was followed by a number of Negroes in jackets and covered in gold and adorning three-corned hats, in rows of four, very orderly, and united by handkerchiefs that they held by the tips. They carried a small candle and a rattle. After them marched a military band, the musicians modestly clothed, a big battery, big rattles with cone-shaped baskets, a reed harp and a güiro.”

Walter Goodman, who gives us this description in his *Pearl of the Antilles* in 1873, praises the grace of the women, who, behind the King’s escort, march in groups of four, dressed in pink flowered muslin, “with light and graceful movements, stumbling softly.” And he does not forget to underline that “the hated and oppressed Negro who went to the Palace to greet the Governor is not that degenerate creature that some people would like to portray.”

The holidays were so numerous that today we are astonished; in fact, of the three hundred sixty-five days of the year, only two hundred were work days. The days considered to be “holidays” or “days of the cross” were the ones indicated by the almanac as precept days or days to be kept, which were Sundays and the most important dates that the Church celebrated, and there were, besides, the “days of one cross,” which were also precept days and during which people were not supposed to work. During the holidays or days of two crosses, the Tribunals of Justice ceased their activities. Did people keep the letter of the precept that, from old times, ordered that “it is prohibited for the owners of slaves to make slaves work during the hours that are not accepted by customs, on Sundays and other holidays that are to be kept under penalty of a fine of six ducados”? Well, yes, on Good Fridays work was suspended in the ingenios, and legends are told of ingenios that the earth swallowed for not keeping this precept. Our Negro and mestizo population reveled in big ways during Christmas, carnivals, official anniversaries of real...
people and of Paton Saints, and during festivities and parades. During the famous Festivities of San Juan de los Remedios, it was the Negroes who were most excited about the competitions in the barrios of San Salvador and Carmen, went out during the “Little Christmas Eve,” on the eighth of December and on the twenty-fourth. The person who displayed the most colorful [97] lamps, shot the most rockets and outdid the fireworks of the rival barrio was declared winner. It was a Negro elder woman who first told me about those festivities and gave me the gibes that both barrios threw at each other.

¿Dónde vas San Salvador Where are you going, San Salvador
una noche tan oscura? in such a dark night?
Voy a abrir la sepultura I am going to open the tomb
que ya el Carmen se murió. Because Carmen has died.

San Salvador was a poor barrio. There lived the “zurrupia”—people of lesser importance, of “pijirigua,” as we used to say in Havana—but it had many Chinese who were fireworks experts, and their floats during “The Big Christmas Eve” were noteworthy. In Carmen lived the rich people, the families of noble ancestry, and to the challenge of San Salvador, its inhabitants used to respond:

¡Viva el Carmen con fervor Long live Carmen, with fervor!
Con su luz y su bandera! With its light and flag!
Que mueran las chancleteras Let the little insignificances die
del barrio de San Salvador. Of the barrio of San Salvador

In many villages of the province of Santa Clara, not only in Remedios, these festivities continued to be celebrated even when Cuba passed into the hands of Russia. The Day of Saint John, the 24th of June, was a great festival, and I even saw the eve of that day, in Havana, when I
was still a little girl, the last of those bonfires that were traditional, burn in the reefs of Malecón, which was still under construction then. The older people said that on that day every woman cut her hair a little shorter, and everybody had to bathe in the sea or in the river in order to avoid—that was the belief—the body being covered with critters. (The offspring of the birds that did not fly that day, would grow worms.) I do not know if at one time the inhabitants of Havana bathed in the Almendares—the waters were believed to be very cold. In other parts of the Island, in Bayamo, for example, that day the banks of its river overflowed with men and women of all ages and colors.

The waters of the 24th of June are blessed, like everything in nature: “Because on such a day, Saint Peter baptized Saint John and Saint John baptized Christ.” The older women remembered that toward the end of the 19th century, on that day all the girls wore sailor blouses and, in the afternoon and in the evening, they accompanied the ladies, in their own new cars, to San Lázaro Road, on the seafront.

The masses lit big bonfires in the reefs. They collected sticks, planks, boxes that they got from the stores, straw, sacks, old fabrics, whatever trash was good pasture for the flames, and built models of houses and dolls in the houses, full size, small towers, boats, and everybody worked on those constructions that were condemned to the fire that had to burn on the eve of Saint John’s Day.

There, on the coast, were the sea baths called La Delicias, Romaguera, Los Campos Elíseos, San Rafael, Santa Lucía, Carneado. On the twenty-fourth, people began their day with a sea bath, and they spent the day under a canopy, in small restaurants, singing, dancing, and playing cards, and there, finally, the gossipers danced rumbas.
There will certainly be no lack of nonagenarians or maybe an exiled centenarian who would remember also—only as hearsay, because they began to decline at the end of the 1890s—the old and merry carnivals of Havana, during which they saw the puritan hypocrisy of a John Perry. The Cuban women riding in their horse-drawn carriages without hats and with uncovered arms made him blush! According to him, that was “too much indecency in the public conduct to mention…” Indecency? It was logical then that wherever they were in Latin lands, that are lands of smiles and friendship, the thousands of people like Perry, representatives of intransigence and misunderstanding (as a person of Andalusia would say), would see happiness only with negative eyes. They condemned it; they were irritated by what the French call “la joie, la douceur de vivre,” the joy, the sweetness of living that this poor hypocrites had never known. Prudish attitudes were characteristic of the boring country of Perry, where, about a century ago, a performance of French dances—that France, the sinning nation—caused such a scandal that a sizeable number of women in the audience, with hysterical screams of prudish indignation, abandoned the theater.

It has been written that the Honorable Edward Everett used to constantly cover with a veil the nakedness of a copy of the Apollo Belvedere. It is indecent to say “legs” when talking about people; the proper word to use was “limbs,” perhaps to avoid the possibility of an association with sinful ideas. Pregnant women were referred to as being “in family way;” never “pregnant,” like the cows. (Times changed rapidly in the United States, and it is astonishing to see people move from those laughable prudish attitudes to a pedagogical acceptance of sexual freedom and its aberrations.)

This hypothetical centenarian, exiled, would also tell us about the festivities of San Rafael, in Loma del Angel, of the fireworks, about some of the scuffles that always broke out.
between the soldiers and the civilians, and about the delicious San Rafael tortillas that people [99] ate there. “To be of Papa Upa,” or, in short, “of Upa-Upa,” meant—and still there are pure Cubans who use that expression—something that is very good, tastes very good, is of very good quality. The expression comes from the name of a Negro called Papa Upa, who cooked these tortillas on that day. The people of Havana went to buy them or to eat them in Loma del Angel during the festivity of San Rafael, or the festivity of Inle, as the Lucumí called this Saint.

Cuba, the Viscount Harponville said, is (was!) a huge dance saloon. Of course, the place where people dance the most is Havana. There since the tragic incidents of Santo Domingo, which benefited Cuba so much, beautiful French mulatto women performed the best carnival dances. For a long time, there have been many professors of dance, who advertise in the press, and orchestras made of good musicians of color, who also perform their music in churches and in the saloons of the aristocracy.

It can be observed that the Negroes distinguish themselves as virtuosos of the flute, the horn, and the clarinet, with the exception of the piano. They used to earn good money in the theaters, in the public dances, and in the guateques and changuis, there were people of little income but generous. The father of the internationally known Negro violinist Brindis de Salas, to whom the Emperor of Germany gave the title of baron, was the director of an orchestra that had the most distinguished following in Havana.

There are the dances of the high society, the public dances, and the neighborhood dances. During carnival times, the well-attended dances of Teatro Tacón gained fame, as did the dances of Euscarriza, more sinful that those of Tacón. During colonial times, carnivals were the occasion for “hold ups” in all levels of society, and these were still going on in Havana after the First World War.
Those Cubans who were born or grew up in exile might think, when they hear this expression, which designates a criminal act, that it is an armed hold up. No; during those times, the bandits and assassins did not have the ease to act nor did they enjoy the impunity that they have now. The robbers were a group of male and female friends desiring to enjoy themselves and who, spontaneously or with prior agreement with their chosen “victims,” spent the night in the homes of the “victims,” dancing.

Also during the festivities of Saint John, Saint Peter, and Saint Anne, which were the time when carnivals were celebrated in the villages of the countryside, such as the very beautiful village of Trinidad, there were parades of typical caravans of mamarrachos; people danced until they were out of breath. People always danced, except during Holy Week.

La Sirivenga, la Sirivaya
 dice que le dejen descansar
 que viene Semana Santa
 y se quiere confesar.

Sirivenga, Sirivaya
 says that they let her rest
 because Holy Week is coming
 and she wants to confess.

The following Sirivenga, like the Calinga or Caringa

[100] Toma y toma Caringa
 Pá la vieja palo y jeringa.
 Si Caringa se muriera
 Todo el mundo la llorara
 y el mismo sentimiento
 hasta luto le guardarán.

Take, take, Caringa
 to the old lady palo and seringe.
 If Caringa dies
 all will mourn her
 and even feeling itself
 will be in mourning for her.

was a set of dances that the whole population danced. And there were the dances of Ponina, the dances of the “little schools”, the crib dances, in which, intermingling, the Whites—“children”,
often from very good homes—, the mulattoes, and Negroes were delighted themselves in slow undulations or moved at the rhythm of lively and hot melodies. The Negroes of the colonies knew how to dance all the dances of the Whites. The people who lived in the cities, in their “Societies of Entertainment,” which we already mentioned, danced the Minué:

El minuet baile alegre y gracioso

The minuet, joyful and graceful dance

Se baila sólo entre dos

is danced only in couples

con los pasos medidos y ariosos

with the steps, careful and light,

que inspiran decencia y pudor.

that inspire decency and modesty

Hoy el baile, muchachas, muchachos,

Today, for the dance, girls and boys,

la cuadrilla, la danza o danzón

the team, for the dance, the big dance

se abrazan, se besan,

they hug, they kiss

¡ay! Qué baile señor Don Simón!

Ay! What a dance, señor Don Simón!

The Tranca dance, in vogue during the second half of the 19th century, the creole dance—a version of the Spanish dance—, which crossed the sea and in Europe was called Habanera, was so much in harmony with the softness of those Cuban women and the breeze that fans the Island. And polkas, lanceros, rigodons, valses in high social circles; and the tap dance, infanzon chiquito abajo, Timbiyi Bamba, Muchitanga, Titundia, Jardinero, Alamanda, Juan Guerengué, and Juan Perillán, Culebra, Sonorito, Yuka, Wataba, Wawankó, rumbas, Palatino, Colombia, Yambú.

“Don’t think that we only danced to the drum,” says Calazán, who was petimetre; and many elderly women, who carried with pride the names of their former masters, enthusiastically danced for me the very elegant dances of the Society of La Blanca Espuma—1887—, of the Society of Caridad, of the Society of Carboneros, of the Society of Cocheros, and others.
“But the most aristocratic Negro Society in Havana,” I am told by an elder woman, who during her earlier years was in the service of a distinguished Havana family, “was the Divina Caridad, which was on Egido Street. I attended the reception that was given in honor of José Miguel Gómez when he won the elections. This Society was distinguished, just like the Society of Aponte in Bayamo.”

In order to dance, any pretext was good. Even during burials, as we have said, when singing and dancing and mocking the law, people carried on their shoulders the coffin of the carabela in the city and in parihuelas in the countryside villages, until very late.

The Altar of May or Cross of May enchanted my old chroniclers of color, those who lived in the provinces and in Havana.

Since I did not hear about these dances from the people in my circle, I deduce that they had disappeared very early in the upper classes of society and that it was the common people who continued them until the end of the 19th century.

The Cross of May began the third day of that month, exactly the day of the Holy Cross. In the living room of the house in which an altar was going to be dressed up, a first plank was set on which a bouquet of flowers was put. The padrino of the Altar, that is the person who initiated it, got supplies of laguer—of beer. When the first visitor arrived, the padrino offered to this visitor the bouquet of flowers and a glass of beer. This action engaged the visitor, who added to the altar another plank at his or her own expense. This same operation was repeated with several persons. The altar increased in height. It was decorated with flowers, candles, colorful necklaces, burato mantles and other decorations, and at times “they were very luxurious,” since every person who added a level to the altar did the best possible to make sure that his or her level was the most attractive. Once the altar was completed and was shinning, in the evening people ate
and drank at the expense of the padrinos, and until dawn, people danced to the music of a band. This band was an orchestra comprising a violin, a harp, a flute, maracas, and an air barrel or guiro that, when blown into, emitted a “flu, flu” sound. In the band people also used, as an accompaniment—Miguel had heard it from his elders—, a horse jawbone that was rattled with a spoon over the teeth. When people began to put together the Altar of May, Miguel adds, “on the first plank, that was left bare, they put a lit candle. Anybody who blew out the candle had to pay for another plank, candles, and beer. The person was told: “The muñanga, whoever knocks it down, pays for it.” In that altars of malaguaje, of the poorest, the bottles that were used for decoration were covered with crepe paper, and the decoration consisted of bottles, paper flowers and tallow candles.

“But for nine nights in a row, people danced, ate piglet, played, sang, and had a wonderful time.” “They looked for the cross in the sky. During this month, the stars made themselves bigger in order to accompany the cross.”

Finally, we will mention the strange festivity whose pretext is the wake of a child…

Even though these practices were strictly forbidden, people did not stop engaging in them until very late. “The U.S. intervention obstructed these things very much,” said Bamboché, Omí Tomí, Sandoval, Niní, and almost all my elder friends who had attended these festivities. The festivities were true rumbas, and the child, who frequently was decomposing because he was exposed much longer than a cadaver can remain intact in the tropic, “was dressed according to whim,” that is, was disguised, as the daughter of a piano player, a companion of Calazán, and looked very funny, dressed as a Turk in his small white coffin.” Whoever could was proud to change several times the dress of the little cadaver.
Dance was essential in the lives of the *Bozals* and Creoles, who danced each Sunday.

“And it will always be so, thank God and God willing.” There is nothing more certain than what was written in this respect in 1897 by Francisco Barrera y Domingo.

“All Negroes, by natural influence, are very fond of dance and music, as is seen every day. Though they might be in agony and exhausted from the harshest labor, when they hear the sound of a drum or flute, their joy is so high that there is no praise adequate to explain it. They might be dying and when they hear the sound—the sadder the sound the better for them—they open their eyes, manage to get up, and they get up on their own to dance. They might be no more than skeletons, but they will be making faces and will be shaking for more than an hour without getting tired. Such is the joy and passion that from inside move these animal and vital spirits.”

And so, in order to cure the obsessed and hypochondriac people from mainland Spain, the majority of them Catalans for whom a break in their businesses did not lead to a heart attack as it does today for professionals, sales people and business people, and … Cuban exiles, especially those living in this part of the world, but for whom the break did lead to imbalance and turned them into imaginary patients, engulfed in dark melancholy, Francisco Barrera y Domingo advises “that they go visit and see the dances and music of the *cabildos* of the Negroes, which very much delight the spirit. Because of this delight, many quinquagenarian and sexagenarian Catalans have been cured of their obsession.”

To this cure—and it is good to give them credit—the graceful Negro and mulatto women, whom the Catalans liked very much, contributed a lot.

The *cabildos* were open to the Whites, at all times. Hazard (*Cuba with Pen and Ink*, 1873), writes that it was worth visiting them within the city walls, on Egido Street. “People
should not hesitate the least to enter in them, because the visitor will always be treated with the utmost respect by all, including the dancers, who are happy to have a white audience.”

But it was not only the rowdy festivities and the loose and rogue parties that the Negroes enjoyed. They also enjoyed the silent ones—I mean the religious festivities and the festivities of Holy Week. They enjoyed, in Havana, the Good Friday procession, which was attended by the full government. The town council of the town of San Cristóbal of Havana, the army, the congregations of Santo Domingo, San Francisco, San Felipe, La Merced, Belén… The procession [103] of Easter Sunday was followed by whoever had a carriage: the nobility of all luxury, the General Capitan, the full government, the army, the volunteers. It went through many streets of what later came to be called old Havana: Cuba, Sol, Oficios, Havana. After the carts of the ladies, the carts of the beautiful mulatto women of high society, the big gentlemen, very serious, well-packed in their clothes, marched in the procession. “This was what I liked the most,” an old friend told me, “the procession of the Holy Burial, which left from the Plaza de Armas, with lit candles, with the entire protocol Cabildo: the authorities, the soldiers, the clergy. Everybody on foot, in black. Behind the barrow of the Lord were the three Maries. It was very solemn.”

For the centenarian Teresa Muñoz, however, the Holy Burial could not match the procession of the Resurrection. “The descent was celebrated in the Church of Santo Domingo. Saint John and the Virgin Mary were there. The procession started from the Cathedral very early in the morning. The two churches, Santo Domingo and the Cathedral, let their bells fly. It seemed that in all the heavens, the bells rang! The bells of Santa Teresa started ringing at dawn, at five o’clock. The Magdalene was in the Cathedral, and, at the first bell ring, she came out, went to Santo Domingo, entered into the church, paid her respects and as if she had discussed something with the Virgin, went back to the Cathedral. Three times she went back and forth, and
on the third secret talk, she went out with the Virgin and Saint John, and, together, the three of them went into the Cathedral, where the Lord was already seated on the throne, with a small white piece of cloth in one hand. Afterwards, all, in procession, went through several streets.

When they returned, the Resurrection festivity would begin. All was joy. Neither on Good Thursday nor on Good Friday, during which the Lord was dead and people went to the churches to kiss his feet—I went to the Church of the Holy Spirit—was there any traffic; carts did not run, nor did carriages, except maybe those of some physicians. Nor was there music or dance. Nothing. But, yes, people sold caramel bars and cruets, and they advertised:

¡Alcoza, alcoza,       Cruet, cruet,
*a medio y a dos la cara de Dios!*  *half a ducat and two ducats the face of God!*

With egg white and sugar, people made a paste and with it they formed the sea of figurines, the face of Jesus-Christ, small horses, dogs, small boots, shoes…

In the provinces, there is no village that does not celebrate its religious festivities, the processions of its Patron Saints or the Most Holy Virgin. In the old processions in the middle of the 19th century, a girl dressed as an angel, in an open cart adorned with flags, branches and flowers, rode the streets, preceded by six horse riders dressed as Indians, followed by six others dressed as Moors. Behind them the people paraded and the music played. The procession would stop according to plan and there, the angel, that is the winged girl, would declaim a poen, a *loa*, allusive to the Saint who was being celebrated or to the Virgin Mary…

[104] Those who attended and wrote about these pastoral festivities of Easter and Patron Saints say that the people were divided in two groups—the blue group and the red group—and that each group elected a queen. In these elections, there arose rivalries and fights of women and … of
men, but the queen of the group or *patio*—which was also known by this name—who won
invited her defeated rival to a dance, and thus, dancing, all reconciled.

From their two genealogies, the Spanish and the African, the Cubans inherited the
passion for dance.

MORE ABOUT THE LUCUMÍ, MANDINGA, ARARÁ, AND CARABALI

There are many people who think that Odedei was right when he wrote the following
about the Lucumí: “The most noble of the tribes of the Coast, tall, with beautiful and sometimes
regular and noble features of serious expression. Proud, litigant, difficult to control at the
beginning of their slave lives, since they are lovers of freedom and easily excitable to violence,
but if they are treated well and with justice, they are the best and most trustworthy.” That is how
Bremer judged them. And Gan Eden: “Not only are they proud and valiant, but also very
intelligent.” In the *ingenios*, he has seen them charged with taking care of the complicated
machinery and—an interesting piece of information—speaks of a friend of his, a noted chess
player, who was defeated by a Lucumí. This Lucumí had been in Cuba for four years and he
spoke the Spanish language as well as any of the Creoles. About the pride of the Lucumí, the
accounts of the foreigners we have quoted match the accounts of the descendants of these
Lucumí. Any injustice that was committed against them made them respond and they joined in
any punishment that was inflicted on an innocent companion. The indignation of that undeserved
punishment produced in them frequently led them to commit suicide. Here is an example that is
in perfect accord with other examples conserved in the rich archive of the memory of our
Negroes.
“A friend of mine who had bought eight recently-arrived Lucumi, soon had the opportunity to lightly punish one of them,” writes Physician (Notes on Cuba, 1844). “The punishment was administered with the Lucumi lying on the ground, flat on the stomach, and when the Lucumi was ordered to assume that position, the other seven slaves lay down next to him and requested that they also be spanked. Their request was denied and they were told that if at a given time they deserved to be punished, they would be punished.

A boy, the guilty one, was spanked before breakfast, my friend recounts. “I had not been seated at the table for long when the deputy overseer, a Negro, came to the door to advise me to go to the place where the slaves were because they were highly animated, dancing and singing. [105] Immediately, I took my pistols and ran to the place. When the eight Negroes, each one with a rope tied around his neck, saw us, they took off in different directions, looking for trees from which to hang themselves. With the help of other slaves, we quickly took hold of them and rescued them; some died while others were saved when we cut the ropes from which they were hanging before they expired. The Captain of the Party was called so that he could examine the bodies of the dead, which he did meticulously to see if he could discover on them any lash marks, but happily for me, he discovered none because I would have had to pay a big fine. The remaining slaves refused to work. I asked the Captain whether I would be accused if they committed suicide. He answered me that I would certainly be declared guilty if signs of mistreatment were discovered on the cadavers. My neighbors offered to take one of the slaves home, but the slaves refused to be separated. I did not know what to do, when I determined, at the risk of violating the law, to punish them all, and immediately afterwards they went to work and now they are part of my team and, of all my Negroes, they are the best behaved.”
Charles A. Murray witnessed the following incident when he was the guest of Sr. D.—publicity was not in good taste in those days; it was seen as a violation of private life, and Mr. Murray does not reveal the name of the landowner—“One of his Negroes has hanged himself; he is a young man of the Lucumi tribe, the number two. He has been on the Island for nine or ten months and he has never been punished nor has he ever complained of any mistreatment. He requested the new clothes that were owed him and he put them on; he took a pig that he owned, his machete, his few belongings, gathered everything under a tree and hanged himself from a branch.”

Murray attributes this behavior to a belief—“superstition”—common in this young man’s tribe: that in the other world, these belongings could be of use to him…Obviously, the suicide of the Africans responded, sometimes, in the opinion of my living documents, “to the desire to return to Guinea,” to get reunited with a loved one. The Lucumí believed in reincarnation.66

Their pride, insisted Bamboché and other contemporaries of his of Lucumí origin, was due exclusively not to the fact that they were stubborn or brave, no; but to the fact that “they were the most civilized Negroes of Africa.” (And, of all the Lucumí, “the Lucumi Oyó;” the ones who spoke most beautifully.”)

These old people had the notion of a past greatness that only rested on what they had heard from their elders about the importance of the Lucumí at an undetermined time and on the control they exercised over other nations who had been their vassals, like the nation of the Arará, or Dahomey.

That they were superior to the other Africans, “more civilized and intelligent,”67 and that they were imported in substantial numbers from the end of the 18th century, these shipments of [106] human merchandise reaching their maximum around the middle of the 19th century, during
the time of O’Donnell, also explains why, concerning the Negroes, we will repeat once more, that today it is the Lucumí religion that has been kept so alive and with the most purity, imposing itself and absorbing the other religions, with the attraction of its mythology, its divination system, its rituals, its music, its language “easier to learn.” But without displacing the magic of the Kongo. In Havana, Matanzas, Santa Clara—we did not have enough time to go into Camagiye and to Santiago de Cuba, where the Haitian influence is notable at first sight—, the Bantu practices were kept as much alive as the practices of the Yoruba. In all the practice, the ngangulero, cautious in the shadow, has a prominent place next to the Olorisha, as today they continue to work in the Cuban ghettos in exile.

On the other hand, the imprint of the Islamic religion disappeared completely from the Island, judging from the little that the elders tell us, “the name of their Saint was Allah,” and that it was the religion of the famous Mandinga who were much sought after and appreciated all over Cuba: “instructed, pacific, active, funny, refined, the most apt to be disciplined and to domestic service,” 68 as had noted another Anglo-Saxon author.

In the carnivals, their musical groups, the Mandinga Moro Rojo, Mandinga Moro Azul, 69 Turcos de Regla, paraded through the streets of Havana with the musical groups of the Kongo de Chávez, Alacrán, Alacrán Chiquito, los Curros, la Culebra… (“the viper had died, Calabazón son son!”); los Hijos de Quirina, los Chinos, and, during the time of President José Miguel Gómez, I remember having seen one of them pass by my street, Calzado de Galiano, celebrating the triumph of his candidacy.

These Mandinga of Senegal, “who created such a ruckus in their cabildos when they had a festivity or honored the memory of a deceased foreman or child and put their deceased in a burial mound,” arrived in Cuba at the beginning of the colony.
“There were Jolof, Fula, Bika, with straight hair, Yola, Sikuato, Malé. I was a child in an ingenio and I remember the Mandinga celebrating the day of Saint Emmanuel, marking the new year, kneeling down on an ash cross and then circling around like the Lucumi in the Ñangalé, and in the center also there was a large container with cotton. They greeted the New Year with their Sala maleko, Maleko nsala.

“The Mandinga of the half moon worshiped Allah, the moon, and the rainbow. They made very good predictions looking at water. They commanded the respect of other Negroes. Yes, they were somewhat arrogant.”

In Remedios, an elder Negro remembered some words of Mandinga or Mandingo, a language that was spoken in all of Senegal.

“The name of God is Allah. The caiman, bamba; the candle, dimba. Dimba? Not simbo, simbo is money in the Kongo language. The stars, lólo. The pumpkin, one man who planted it in his ritual garden called it mira; a big pumpkin, mira guan, guan. A guayabera shirt, dondoki. And I don’t know more.”

Many of them went to Cuba in 1830 and made themselves appreciated for their skills. They were strong, good humored, smart, quick learners. Good for table service and for many manual chores. In Trinidad, where also they were considered very funny, the grandson of the millionaire Justo Germán Cantera showed me and later gave me a wooden cup exquisitely carved by a Mandinga slave.

“They were honorable. There was the case of one who used to read from a book that only other Mandinga understood; he was caught stealing sugar in the ingenio. Ashamed, he appeared hanging from the branch of a tree.”
However, José Santos Baró did not like them. He insisted that they were very bad, and “honest, honest … Mandinga? I can’t believe it.” And, in order not to contradict Baró, it should be noted that there were two Mandinga who were not honest: Pablo Riverón and José de la Merced del Rey.

In 1864, the Mandinga had a cabildo on Horqueta Street in the barrio of Horcón: the cabildo Our Lady of Pilar, of the Mandinga Nation. On this date, its Head Men and Head Ladies agree to transfer the cabildo to Caserío, that is to the edges of the village of Marianao with the strict advice of governmental dispositions.

“The King of the Nation is called Benvenuto, Mandinga, 50 years of age, a carpenter by profession. Valentín Suárez, Mandinga, 55 years of age. Federico Hevia, Mandinga. The women: Loreta Hernández, Mandinga, and others say that they have not requested the transfer of said cabildo to any other point, because what they intend to do is to dismiss from said cabildo the former Head Men Pablo Riverón and José de la Merced del Rey for not convening the cabildo, since, besides mishandling the accounts, they owed eight months of rent in the houses where they lived, and for this reason, the named Queens have named as new Head Men Benavente del Rey, Agustín Suárez, and Francisco Hevia, as well as Domingo de León, and, for better understanding, they have included with this document the instructions that pretended to transfer the cabildo to Marianao.”

Today, people do not talk much about the Mandinga, even though many of their descendants are still alive; they are only remembered through a saying that all of us Cubans knew and that is still heard from time to time: Kikiribú Mandinga! The expression is used when talking about something that is definitely ending, without leaving space for any hope.
“And there were many Arará.71 Their religion is like the religion of the Lucumí, even though they did not speak the same way. They had five drums; the big one was called Yonufo; the second one Yonajo, the third one Aplité, Igué-gué the fourth, and Okotó the fifth. (A sixth one was the Ogán.) The female singer, whom the Lucumí call Apwón, is referred to as Ojasino, [108] and the seven mutts that they have for their ceremonies are called Akitipó. The Lucumí gave them ifá to foretell with ikís and with a padlock. Babalú Ayé, from the land of the Lucumí, went to the land of the Arará and reigned in Dahomey. Lady Bulukú also is of Lucumí origin. Mabú and Lisa are very important Saints. Before, in old times, the Lucumí and the Arará did not like each other, but their wars have stayed behind… all was forgotten and now they take their drums to the festivities of Ocha. But the ahijados of the Arará Bokono (Bokono is the padrino, the madrina is vodunsi), cannot take their Saints or vodus out of the home of the Bokono.”

“Since the Arará were very withdrawn, they did not have as much influence as the Lucumí. In Matanzas, there were more Arará than in Havana, but even so, the Arará cabildos are disappearing.”

The older Salakó, whom I have quoted so many times, spoke Ewe, the language of the Arará. He used to say that “for the young people, the Arará was much melted into the Lucumí.” All my informants knew that the Dahomeyan—Dajomi, as they pronounced it, their king—“had sold more Negroes than any other African king and that they waged wars for no other reason than to get Negroes to sell to the white people.” Selling people was normal in Africa. Whenever I asked Calazán what he thought about the slave trade, he used to say: “In Africa, there were slaves, and the black people happily took advantage of the business they had selling their own kin. The person who kills the goat is as guilty as the person who holds the goat so that it can be
slaughtered, and the Negro and the White were equal in their greed. One sold his people and the other bought them."

Another old man who “knew these things through the memory of his elders” assured me that slavery in Africa involved more cruelty than in Cuba. Enviable African memory! Poetry is memory, the elders used to say. Memory is the poetry cultivated by these Negroes, who had given me their trust.

But in my conversations, nothing astonished me more than the piece of news that I was given (in 1944) by a man of Kongo descent, who told me his name was Magabú, and whom, to my great regret, I never managed to see again. Looking for him, I learned that he had gone to live in Guanabacoa, where he had died (“of old age.”).

“Jesus-Christ, in Antiquity,” he told me, “had been to the Kongo, yes, sir. In the very Kongo. And over there, there was a church and there were many Christian Kongo. That is the truth.”

Where did Magabú get such a thing from? In no way was it a grotesque fantasy, because, if Jesus in flesh and blood never was in the Kongo, the religion of Christ had been taken there by the Portuguese on the heels of discovery. From 1482, the Manikongo Nzinga Nkuwu (king of the Kongo) had welcomed the king of Portugal and the Portuguese in the person of Diego Cao. A friendly relationship developed between Nzinga Nkuwu and the Portuguese monarch. The Portuguese king sent him artisans, masons, and carpenters to build a church, and Nzinga [109] converted to Christianity. Later, his descendant Nzonga Bemba, baptized under the name of Alfonso I, called his capital Kongo Mbansa, San Salvador. There was, then, a church—churches—and Christian Kongo, at the beginning of the 16th century.
In the comedy *Los Engañados [The Deceived]*, by Lope de Rueda, when Gerardo, one of the characters, asks Doña Guiomar, the Negro woman, “What is this about getting married? You no longer want to be a nun?”, she answers:

“No sir, we have a sad religious nun, prior, cousin Abadesa back in my land of Manikongo, very honest. I, sir, want to multiply the world.”

From those lands that border the Bay of Biafra, deadly for the white men during the days of the slave trade, many slaves came to Cuba. They were also called Caribali—semi-Bantu—and they originated from many “lands” today very well known by the Ńáñigos, through what we might call The Golden Legend of the Abakuá: Efik, Ekoí, Bibí, Ibo, Abaya, Suama, Ota, Eluyo, Isiete, Briches, Okankua, Brikamo, Agro, Ososo, Brasi, Kuna, Nklentati, etc. These Caribali left us their music, their dialects in the secret societies of the Abakuá, the fraternities, “Potencias,” “juegos,” or “tierras” of the Ŋáñigos, that functioned until recently in Cuba, much persecuted by the communist regime, which the Ŋáñigos rejected.72

They were, as the Cuban exiles who assassinate the Spanish language say today, “controversible.” During the slave trade, they are praised as “hardworking and formal,” or they are labeled as “lazy, negligent,” irritable, difficult, disobedient. Like the Bakuá, “more entertaining and intelligent than them,” according to Herrera, it was better to watch them: *Tífi,* *tífi,* they would steal, and run to the mountains.

“Back in their land, they are hot, and here they were not docile like other Africans. You may have heard that the Carabali ate people, and it is true that they did eat people. It was not a joke. That is called anthropophagy. The bibi themselves used to tell about it. When they first arrived, it was necessary to whip them because they were lazier than the upper jawbone.”
This judgment of the Carabali coincides with the assessment of the French Massé, who, comparing them with the Senegalese—the Mandinga—says that “they are less refined in being and customs,” and points out what we already know from the mouths of the Negroes themselves, that the majority of the *aguadores* or water carriers in Havana—water was sold from house to house in pitchers that free slaves and captive slaves carried in carts—were Carabali Briche, whom he characterizes as arrogant and uncommunicative, with deep scarifications on both sides of their face.

[110] There were Negro water carriers all over Cuba: in Santiago, it was Negro women who distributed drinking water.

But the judgment put on the Carabali was not always so severe. If about the qualities and defects of the Carabali there is no agreement among the authors of the past who wrote down what they had heard in the plantations about these Negroes or had observed themselves, the old living documents that I have consulted unanimously agree on one point: the amazing frugality of the Carabali.

“In this state of servitude, they amass a small wealth which they know how to enjoy” (Xavier Marnier).

It not therefore astonishing that among them there were so many freed slaves, a product of their noted stinginess and avarice. The Kongo called them *buimi* and the Creoles referred to them as “Alejandro in tightfist.” It is true that the Negroes of nation, in general, did not spend like the creole Negroes—“the bigspenders”—. Their needs were few, their pleasures… were reduced to drinking *malafí* or *oti*—*aguardiente*—, to smoking tobacco, jorro tobacco, blackout tobacco, and, of course, dancing.
“The Creoles, spendthrift and extravagant, made fun of them because they would have preferred to starve than take out a coin from their money pitcher.” They made fun of them and envied them, said Melitón, who had Suama blood. Calazán says that there was no Carabali who did not have his or her small amount of savings—“the stretched duck”—, and the savings of some were substantial. He remembers that there were Carabali who in life were so miserable that it was impossible to suspect that they were the owners of the fortune that was discovered after they had died.

“On Suárez 81 lived two freed Carabali, husband and wife. The two of them sold lottery tickets. He fell sick, became blind, and died shortly afterward. She, Ña Francisca, left the lottery business and began selling buns and bacon in the Plaza Vieja. That is how many freed slaves earned their living and the kind of work captive slaves did for their masters who had fallen on hard times: with a tray on their head, they sold sweets in the streets. The goddaughter of Ña Francisca took care of her. Some time passed, and Ña Francisca fell sick. Juana would take some soup to her Godmother and she took care of her, thinking that she already had reached the age to pass away to a better life and she was the goddaughter. However, Ña Francisca did not die. The pain has passed, she said one day, and went back to her chores. The shopkeeper Rufino, owner of ‘La Tía María,’ also took care of the Carabali, and the old woman asked the Spanish to keep the papers of her property.

“One day, Ña Francisca did not go to the shop as it had been her custom, nor did she go the next day. Rufino went to see what was happening; he knocked and knocked on the door. He forced the door and found the old woman dead. My mother lived next to Ña Francisca. In the morning, in the tobacco shop, my stepfather told me what had happened and that the neighbors had been stealing the dead woman’s money. Juana la Grande had not been notified. We went out
[111] onto the terrace roof of my stepfather’s house and, through the skylight passed into Ña Francisca’s roof. Jumping and walking like monkeys, we run out only with the eight onzas that we managed to steal. Afterward, the fiancé of the goddaughter of Ña Francisca, Juan Bacalao, was given the Godmother’s mirror so that he could take it to Juana as a souvenir. As the fiancé was taking the mirror to Juana, when he reached the corner, he put it down in order to rest, because it was very heavy. Suddenly, a bunch of centenes came out. Instead of going to the house of Juana la Grande, the fiancé kept the money. The shopkeeper kept the houses. I got four onzas, dividing out part even with my stepfather. Those old people kept the doblones and centenes inside boxes, hidden under a layer of ashes. It was also customary to hide money behind mirrors, or in pitchers under the tiles of the floor.”

“On Mission 73, there fell sick another Carabali Negro woman, Teresa. This time, she had a granddaughter as a goddaughter. Julián Pacheco, the estate administrator, did not notify the granddaughter. He gave part of the inheritance to the Town Hall and they took the woman the hospital. As Teresa was taken to the hospital, she was tightly clasping a lump under her arm. When the physician discharged her, the Negro woman, who was very strong, began to scream, My pillow! My pillow! I ain’t leaving without my pillow! When she was taken to the hospital, she has brought her pillow, in which she had hid her money… and, look as she may, the pillow never appeared.

“Lo and behold, I sir, worked in an American thrift store, where I did small chores. There we collected rags and threw them into a tank with liquids in order to make paper. One day, the Chinese junkmen started a big scandal. A pillow with money! The staff went to see and get what they could. I also got some. The pillow contained blue and red notes.”
Above all, the Carabali beggars are the ones who, when they died, very often left hidden in their hovels surprising amounts of money.

These Carabali, men and women, worked diligently to buy their freedom, and managed to become, in the cities, owners of houses and small businesses, and in the countryside, owners of places and farms that they rented out, and of slaves. They treated these slaves with so much cruelty that many times the authorities had to intervene and forbid them from having slaves. Nor was it rare for a Negro slave, humiliated and brutally mistreated, to take revenge on his Negro master, killing him.

The Negroes with whom I had unforgettable conversations in Pogolotti, often made reference to the abuses committed by the freed slaves, “who bought slaves in order to skin them.”

“For every slash that the white man inflicted on his slave, the Negro discharged ten on the back of his slave.”

“To be the slave of another Negro… there was no bigger disgrace. Death, a Negro rented out by a Negro. In whipping, more brutal than a mundele, a White.”

“No slave of a Negro was treated with a feather.”

These and others of my sources, whose words I reproduce without alterations, had not forgotten the cruelty, the implacable roughness of a certain Ña Francisca, a Carabali and according to them, grandmother of the violinist Brindis de Salas, who lived on Aguila Street, in a “house with a wooden front; she did not know how to read or write, like the majority of the women of that time, not to mention the Negro women, not even the ladies of higher rank did. But
Ña Francisca had houses she rented out, a piano teacher, and goodness!, slaves that she spanked on every opportunity.”

A guest house on Teniente Rey No. 3 belonged to a Negro woman, the owner, moreover, of many slaves. About her, people did not say that she was bad with her “eru.”

However, they said that other Carabali also called Ña Francisca—who was maimed because one time she slapped a white man of a higher class and ended up in jail, where, as punishment, she got one of her hands cut off—was much hated by those of her race. It seems that the names of Francisco and Francisca were well liked by the Africans. Another Ña Francisca, a comfortable freed slave, who was not a Carabali but a Lucumí, was, my informant insisted, the same one referred to in the song that was usually taught to the high class children, nothing certain for sure, and which, with “the little chicken” or “the little duck,” made up the required graceful child repertoire that delighted the adults.

“Let’s see, baby, those little verses that you know”…

María Francisca la lucumí       María Francisca the Lucumí

tenía una cosa tamaño así       had a thing this big;

no son mentiras que yo se la vi   It is not a lie for I saw it.

And the little creature, who expected an explosion of laughter, would indicate with his or her little hands and winking with surprising malice, the size and the unmistakable location of that big thing owned by María Francisca, who also was famous for her cruelty.

The wet nurse of a current septuagenarian told us that “children were taught other little verses about María Francisca, but they were not as funny.” For example:
The granddaughter of Ña Francisca, the rich Carabali, used to tell, maybe exaggerating a bit, about the atrocities that her ancestor had committed and she used to congratulate herself for having been born after her grandmother’s death. She used to say that whenever she punished her own slaves, she never stopped until she saw blood gushing.

Yeya’s mother, always censoring and contradicting Bamboché, was a friend of Ña Francisca, and remembers her, at the end of her life, as “with piercing eyes, rough, with sharp filed teeth, and very obsessed; her head thrown to the side and her nostrils wide open.” Yeya also remembered another Carabali who died in a few hours, twisting with convulsions, for having despised a leper—the Kongo refer to leprosy as nianga—who had asked him for an alm. As during the Middle Ages, the leper, in the eyes of the Negro and of our people, was sacred, and it was from this sacrilege that Ña Francisca died. Leprosy is a supernatural disease that Nsambi sends. So, it was said that nfua insambi—to die in God—is to die a leper.

My elder informants still remembered Inesita Ceballos as a violent and heartless master who so harshly punished her slave María de la Luz—because she had served her food that was low in salt—that the authorities took the slave away from her. “Martínez Campos freed the poor María de la Luz.”

“Oh! Martínez Campos, that was a good Spanish man, even though it was said that he had Cuban blood. That is why he loved the Cubans. During the first war against Spain, he was
here trying to calm the spirits. There was a butcher who had a parrot that he perched by the
window of his house, and every time the parrot saw the soldiers heading for San Ambrosio, it
would shout, very very clearly: Long live free Cuba! Let’s go boys! Get the machete, get the
machete! Luckily for the butcher, it was Martínez Campos who was in power, and I think that
that is why the parrot did not get its neck twisted and nothing happened to the butcher either. Do
you know what the Kongo call Martínez Campos? Nfumo Nbanza Bana.”

That parrot reminds me of the parrot that some very loyalist friends of mine had in
Madrid. Shortly before the Spanish Civil War, it used to shout from the balcony: “Long live
Christ the King!”

This colonial Havana in which many Carabali had made themselves rich in such dirty
ways, this place that was unforgettable for my elder chroniclers, was swarming with beggars of
all stripes. There were many of them also when I was a child and I perfectly remember the
beggars of my barrio: their idiosyncrasies, their vocabulary, and especially a white woman, very
small, very thin, of an imprecise age and of funny expressions, called Pichincha. She used to tell
me that those beggars of the Calzada de Galiano were her companions and they got along well
without taking anything from one another, even though at times they argued. If the argument was
[114] against her, Pichincha would raise her hands to her head, would declare that her head was
hurting very much and would disappear. One day, at the front of my house, where Pichincha was
being given a peseta that I also had asked for, appeared an unknown beggar, a blind man who
used a guiding cane. As the man passed by us, he stopped and extended his hand: “Forgive me,
brother!” responded Pichincha to the gesture, throwing her head back, with the air of a big lady
offended. I never saw that intruder again!
Many of our beggars had a great personality. There would be no doubt in the mind of anybody who in Havana knew the flamboyant Marquise and the Gentleman of Paris, with his black cape and Louis XIII wig.

Begging was not a bad profession. There were beggars in all the barrios of Havana, and I knew those of the church of Monserrate in Galiano and those of the church of la Merced, on Havana Street. They took up positions at the entrances to the temples, businesses, and public buildings, on the sidewalks of the cafés and theaters, in the markets, and walking trails. About the poor people of our parish, I remember the following old anecdote: The Negro women attended Mass with punctuality, and it was said about one of them who was very devout and prayed all the time, that when she was silent, her swollen lips moved without ceasing to murmur prayers. One Sunday, a street dog managed to get into the church, and, without interrupting her Hail Mary, the woman said the following to a boy who was close to her:

\[
\begin{align*}
Dios te salve e María & \quad Hail Mary, \\
Llena eres de gracia & \quad Full of grace \\
El Señor es contigo & \quad The Lord is with you \\
Bendita tú eres... & \quad Blessed are you... \\
Eh! Niño, espanta ese perro & \quad Eh! Boy, scare off that dog \\
que se mea entre todas las mujeres & \quad That pees among women \\
y bendito sea el fruto de tu vientre, & \quad and blessed is the fruit of your womb, \\
Jesus. & \quad Jesus
\end{align*}
\]

In the church of La Merced, another beggar, on noticing a beggar colleague who was going to the altar, could not contain herself and shouted so loudly that the other members of the congregation heard her:
¡Jesús, María y José

Todo aquello se le ve!

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph,

All her things can be seen!

Yes, it was a useful and peaceful occupation, the occupation of beggars! And lucrative when it was complemented with the sale of lottery tickets. And it was that much better when the beggar, Negro or white, was funny; this was worth much more than showing off some physical defect, a deformed foot, a beautiful wound, or a creepy sore on which flies waltzed and sipped a caramel-colored liquor.

To leave empty the begging hand that was extended to us without depositing on it even some small change, that is, not to help the poor, was still called, when I was a child, an “against-god,” an offense against Our Lord.

Among us, charity was a principle that was taught to individuals as soon as they began to reason. This Christian spirit, which infused a simple and stable life and patriarchal customs, lasted for quite a while after Independence. I do not pretend to embellish the past, but read the old wills which almost always contain a bequest for the poor or the letter of freedom for the slaves, and in the absence of wills, let those who are old enough and can sink into their memories simply evoke or analyze what Cuban society was in this humanitarian aspect to which I am referring. Charity, that beautiful word that has disappeared from current language because it is seen as humiliating, was practiced in a personal, intimate, warm, and spontaneous way in that Cuba that has died. Let us say that this charity was much more modest and sincere than the charity that functioned afterwards, when the social chroniclers, who were excessive praise-singers, reigned. The rich, as it was alleged, were not invariably “wicked” and selfish, without denying that some were and are—especially the new rich—, and when they were altruistic, our
rich people were not motivated by any advantage—like tax exemptions—or exclusively by vanity. The truth is that the Cuban, rich or poor, almost always showed compassion.

In the past, it was common in all rich families all over the Island to put aside one day each month to helping the needy. It was “the day of the poor.” I remember those needy people who paraded from two to five o’clock in the afternoon, going up and down the steep stairs of my parents’ house. The alms were given, very frequently, by the lady of the house in person, and when she was absent, by the trusted female servant who was like a member of the family. In Guanabacoa, a declared town with a coat of arms since 1743, an old resort for the Havana aristocracy—the baths of Barreto and Santa Rita were famous—, Doña Dolorita Pedroso, seated at the window of her house, took pleasure in helping however many needy people came to beg at her place, and in each family, there was no racial discrimination for the protected ones. The needy Whites, the former slaves, old and beloved servants, the children or grandchildren of these were treated equally when they came to receive alms and affection. “The day of the poor” in the Cuban rich families and, I repeat, throughout the Island, was an institution that speaks well of our ancestors. It was proof of a goodness that those who most criticized our customs did acknowledge. Despite his dirty mouth, Demoticus Philalethes, the pseudonym of a Cuban who ridiculed some aristocrats and new title holders of that time, writes in his *Yankee Travel through Cuba*, 1853: “It is a custom in the houses of Havana on Saturdays to distribute bread and meat to the poor, many beggars go fetch them, which some people disapprove because they believe that vanity more than charity is the true cause of this practice, but it cannot be denied that this virtue is practiced throughout the Island. And I am told for sure that many poor families are maintained by rich people who give them from thirty to forty pesos each month, and this in
strict secrecy. There have always been calls to funds for charity projects, and the funds that are needed are usually raised in two to three days.”

The North American and English authors, who displayed the least sympathy in judging the Cubans because they considered them Spanish, could not, however, deny that the Cubans “were moved by feelings of goodness,” and they recognize that hospitality was a quality common to all the social classes of the country, even the most destitute.

The upper classes made the stay of the foreigners on the Island very pleasant and economical. The hotels of these foreigners were the private homes where a few lines of recommendation from a friend were enough for them to be dined and wined, and something that today would raise our hair: when in North America people believed that tuberculosis was cured in warm climates, many tuberculosis sufferers came to Cuba—Cuba for the Invalid⁷⁸, seeking the lost health that, of course, they did not regain—and the doors of the Creoles and the Spanish in Havana, in the ingenios and coffee plantations, were open to them broad and wide.

Because of their unsurpassable climate, unique in the world in the opinion of Dr. Physician, Güines, Matanzas, and las Cumbres, suddenly found themselves the favorite places of these lung patients, for whom our “insuperable” climate probably speeded up death.

These authors could not deny either that the Cubans were courteous. One author believed that the good manners he observed in the Creoles were close to those of the French ladies. In fact, French culture was dominant in the most educated circles. Educated people spoke French and English, with preference for French.⁷⁹ In some families, French institutrices were recruited for the girls, and the boys were sent to study in Paris, Louvain, Madrid, and, later, to the best schools in the United States, because they were closer.
The foreigners—the North Americans—, however, found excessive the rules of Spanish etiquette, the compliments, the ordinary formulas of courtesy, some of which the people still used in the 20th century. If an object or animal was admired, the owner would say: It is at your disposal, it is yours. The indicated response was: Thank you; it could not be in better hands than in yours. That was the comment made by an Anglo-Saxon who, had he accepted all the houses and things he had been offered in Cuba, would be the owner of a huge fortune.

Others mistake the congenital kindness of the Creoles for the arrogant attitude that betrays their Spanish origin, and therefore, has to be condemned with everything Spanish. This demonstrated the ignorance of the Spanish character, because it is easy to reproach them a candid honesty that in no way resembles the stickiness of hypocrisy.

It is true that in the neighboring Big Democracy described by Mrs. Trollope, who, without hiding it, was allergic to the nation of Washington and Jefferson, courtesy was noticeable by its absence; it was usually—no, it was absolutely—absent, Mrs. Trollope affirmed. In its place there reigned—and this had its admirers—a sincere, genuine rudeness which was the way that the “American citizens” had for expressing their materialist and egalitarian ideals. “Ordinariness was the norm,” also observed other authors who were less severe. One has to agree that it was not the finest of Europe who crossed the Atlantic to swell the ranks of the “melting pot,” the mixture.

“All the offenses that involve rudeness can be explained as the recognition of a right that one has to equality,” writes the Countess of Merlin, who by the way, gives an example of Yankee education to her friend M. Piscatory when she relates a trip she made by train from Washington to New York: “During the trip, my neighbor decided to rest his back against me. I softly pushed him away. He did not realize it. He did not move. Not because he wanted to be
impertinent, but because that is how he felt more comfortable. Seeing this, my traveling companion, Spanish by blood and French by education, became pale and then red-faced, indignation oosing through his pores. He squeezed his lips and fire shot out of his eyes. I trembled. Suddenly, collecting himself, he extended his hands and laying them on the shoulders of the man, he quietly returned him to his place.

- If I had gotten angry, he would not have understood anything.

These habits, effectively, are common here; bad manners are not seen as insulting: punches are paid with punches, and the rest with money. Morals, order, virtue, religion.”

We read in *Gan Eden* the astonishment of a North American woman who around the year 1850, in a Havana café, on asking the server for the bill for the ice cream she had eaten, was told that a gentleman, who had already left, had paid it. The North American woman, who was beautiful and at the beginning of her stay in Cuba, was angered by the flattering comments that Cuban men made about her as she passed in the streets—“May God accompany you, North American beauty! Long live the United States!—, but soon got used to them.

The judgments and impressions that those who had traveled to or resided in the United States wrote about the North American lifestyle, of a “magnetic boredom,” as Charles Dickens had said, (where, in order to entertain themselves, people always reverted to alcohol), the sketches of daily events—robberies, fires, violence, alcoholism—astonish because they have not lost an ounce of their actuality and allow us to think that in the small Spanish colony there was more civility, more refinement.

When in the big nation that is about to celebrate its two hundred years of independence—too few years to be leader of the world, enough years to have disturbed the world—people began to use knives to eat and help themselves, and this as late as the middle of the 19th century, during
the days when our Countess of Merlin wrote her letters from New York, Washington, and Philadelphia, which do not appear in the Spanish translation of *Voyage à la Havane*, for which Avellaneda wrote the prologue, it had been a long time since on the tables of the Cuban nobility and rich lay the most delicate china dinner service, the most refined crystals, and sterling silver dinner service. The minutely detailed inventories that appear in the wills that are made prior to this period lend credence to the desire that the nobles had to eat well and be served with luxury.

Contemporaneously, I do not remember having read or heard anything in Cuba that would be similar to the observations made by the terrible Mrs. Trollope about the receptions and meals of the Cuban nobles. For example, that the Cuban ladies should be careful, like the North American ladies, that the spits of the “gentlemen” chewing tobacco did not stain their skirts.

There were already true gentlemen in Cuba—the list would be long—when the “wealthy citizens” of the United States began to desire to refine themselves. The visit of some European aristocrats, like the Prince de Joinville, dazzles them; from the 1850s to the 1860s, hundreds of treatises on civility are printed in the USA and there is a flurry of bright genealogists looking for ancestors whom they did not know they had.

The “Mayflower” having no more space, for one hundred dollars, the genealogists linked with a real family those clients who had recently learned from a *How to Behave* that it was incorrect to blow one’s nose with one’s fingers and, what the most humble Peninsular or creole Spanish would never had done—it was the greatest rude gesture—, have one’s hat or cap on in the presence of a woman.

Maybe many Cubans will refuse to believe that the New York of that time, active, dirty, stinky, the New York of the Landaus, Phaetones, Coupés, and four-horse-powered Omnibus
with capacity for twenty passengers, rat infested, its streets 82 full of trash cleaned by pigs that ran loose throughout the city and which were the street cleaners, its inhabitants dirty—since they do [119] not bathe—, its cafés and theaters with the floor covered with spit, was inferior to Havana in hygiene, manners, and elegance.

Of course, hygiene is a relatively modern achievement, and the Havana of the 19th century was far from what one will call a paten. It was, however, cleaner than the current one, which is not shown to the tourists.

In contrast to those neighbors for whom only money counted, one Frenchman defined the Hispanocuban as “courteous and conscious of honor; courtesy and honor constitute essentially the character of a Castillian.”

The people, in their majority, were refined, spontaneously kind, and helpful, and these qualities I was always able to appreciate in my country, at each turn. The Negroes also were courteous, and I think I am neither lying nor exaggerating when I say that those I knew when I was a child were so well educated that, put next to many white new rich of today, those Negroes would be the masters and the flamboyant little new rich would be the servants. Nor were the highlander Negroes less affable or helpful, those who, still in the countryside, expressed themselves like Bozals.

When Teresa de la Parra visited Havana, she wanted to meet one daughter of Lucumí who lived on a small plot of land and about whom I had told her a lot. The old woman, who was enchanting, received us with a naturalness and gentleness that Teresa never forgot and as we said goodbye, she said, literally:

“My God, why am I so poor today that I have nothing to offer to these girls who have bothered to come visit this poor old lady?” She raised her hands to her face, upset. “Yes, I
know!” she suddenly said happily and leaning over to a long and narrow central yard, full of pots, pans, and stoves, shouted at her neighbor.

“Fulana, do me a favor! Bring me one of your chickens to give it to the young ladies.” And, since we had no other solution but to accept the gift, we went back home with a live chicken.

Like parents, like children. Kindness and courtesy were virtues of the Lucumí, for whom, as it is known, hospitality was considered a duty, and I had gone to see her accompanied by a stranger.
CHAPER 2: PALEROS OR MAYOMBEROS

Guided in the beginning by my elder informants, I have extended myself and digressed too much through their memories, on this voyage through Cuban life in the 19th century, which was their voyage. Stopping with other African ethnic groups to whom they made reference, I have strayed from the theme that I had intended to explore: the Kongo and their magical practices.

As it has been seen in exile, the boom and promotion of the Lucumí religion—Santería—that so many Cubans practice, is a fact that no longer astonishes people. It is not exactly a novelty, since the cult of the Orichas, which in the past needed to be hidden as a sign of inferiority, is no longer seen as demeaning. “The Republic and the politicians” have contributed to this improvement of the situation, in the pertinent opinion of an Iyalocha who had helped, very secretly, the wife of a high public servant of the nation. Some of these politicians, coming from the heart of the popular classes, were genuine believers; others were vote-seekers, and since the demise of President Machado, the increasing number of white people initiated into Santería, of devotees who, if in the beginning they did not openly confess their faith in the Orichas, no longer hid the fact that they attended their festivities. On the other hand, it was suspicious, shameful, and apparently it still is, to visit the houses of mayomberos, paleros, villumberos, kimbiseros, tenidos, and witches. Equating, on the one hand, the padre de Santo or babaloricha and the babalawo with the Catholic priest, and, on the other hand, the padre Nganga or palero with the necromancy sorcerer is common. Consequently, the palero, precisely because he is perceived as a witch, has continued to be in great demand, very influential and powerful at times,
“because his help is solicited when the donkey falls in Genaro,” in difficult times, but always silenced, and with whom, because of his supposed evil, both Whites and Blacks deal frequently in secret. Furthermore, the palero is reserved, does not communicate his knowledge, is less talkative than the Oloricha: “They never liked showing off what they know.”

This difference, established by the Africans themselves and the descendants of the Africans, corresponds to the concept that popular culture has of each Regla or Rule.

Even though many of the elders who have been my sources did not know how to read—luckiky, most of them were illiterate; “reading weakens memory”—, they referred to the Lucumí Rule as a religion and to the Kongo Rule as witchcraft. Said with the same words that we recorded, although exaggerating as will be seen later, another informant put it this way: “The Lucumí religion is for making petitions to the Santos for the good of oneself and of others. The Kongo religion is for doing harm.” This, in the European, Medieval mentality could be interpreted, applying to the Kongo religion the label of “black magic,” as reprobate, illicit, or, if one prefers, demonic. Today, the Lucumí priest is commonly called santero; rarely is he referred to as a “witch,” and if he is ever seen that way, it is done out of ignorance.

In order to reproduce only a few definitions in which is notable the harmful role represented by the ngangulero who “works for evil,” we will only copy those that make clear, as [121] we have confirmed, that the ngangulero’s practices are limited to the practices of black magic or goety, but also extend to the practices we understand as white magic or theurgy.

“There are two branches of Mayombe or Kongo Rule: the healing one and the harming one. One that works for the good of the people and another one to undo whoever one wants. One is called the Mayombe cristiano and the other the Mayombe judío. One for good, the cristiano, the other, for harm, the judío. So that for his works the Mayombe cristiano asks and counts on
the favor of God, who in Kikongo is called Sambia, while in order to do his works, the Mayombe judío pacts with Kakiempembe, which is how the Devil is called in Kikongo. If one believes that the Mayombe Rule only serves for harm, that a nganga is able to do only harm, one is committing a big error. That is why those who do not know have so much fear of mayomberos and that is also why all types of mayomberos have such a bad reputation.”

It is true that the mayombero judío came to be in Cuba the equivalent of the Souba bámbara, “who devours the souls.” The mayomberos were persecuted, one of them told us, because they had a reputation of exhuming corpses.

“In Mayombe cristiano, one works with the power of the good dead—the spirits. In Mayombe judío, it is with the evil dead, the ndokis, the spirits of witches judíos, criminals, murderers, murdered, suicides, dead people who are desperate.” And with the spirits of nature, trees, water, animals that the mayombero of one or the other orientation will get to work according to intentions in direction of good or of harm.

These denominations of Mayombe cristiano and Mayombe judío must be very old in Cuba, where, as we have seen, Kongo people appear from the beginnings of the colony, and reveal a long-established syncretism. It is curious that the padres nganga whom we have known, who spoke and knew long prayers in the “languages of the Kongo,” upon intoning their “mambos” and addressing themselves in their rites to their Mpunbo, Nkisi or Nkita, fiūiri, fumbi or fiūidi or the dead, mix with their Bantu words Spanish words pronounced as Bozals, which did not happen nor happens today with the Olorichas, who know well their language and address themselves to their Gods in Anagó (Yoruba). A villumbero elder explains, with a more or less valid argument, that “the Kongo and the Creole did this for the relollos at a time when all
already spoke Spanish just in case some *munangüeye*, a brother or sister, did not understand them and because that is how they liked talking to the dead, who were *Bozals*.

The *rayados, jurados* in the Kongo Rules, like in Rules of the Lucumí lineage or adepts or initiates in the cult of the Orichas, consider themselves to be united through a sacred tie of mystical kinship and like them, also speak and pray in their language. A *mayombero* friend of mine recited to me several prayers that we will publish separately in a glossary of Bantu words compiled during the last days I spent in my country; and that elder, the eyes full of tears, remembering the Kongo mothers he knew during his childhood, in the *ingenio* in which he was born, sang to me the lullaby he used to sing to put his children to sleep:

*Tatá solélé lembaka solembaka*  
*Go to sleep, my child*

*Luñé nené suati kuamé*  
*So that you can go up to the sky*

*Munu sunga Nsambi luñé luné.*  
*And carry some tobacco to Nsambi, God.*

Another elder, on hearing me sneeze, instead of the formula “God bless you” that used to be the custom before, would address me the following blessing: “*Sakula musakula sakula mumbansa musukún denda tatikán sanga ntibá kariri fiyandé*, “May God preserve you like a little plantain banana”.

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CHAPTER 3: SAMBI

“Sambi created us and sent us into the world naked and hungry.”

What were the beliefs of the Kongo transplanted to Cuba? What are the current beliefs of those who claim to be the guardians of the Kongo secrets and to carry on the Kongo practices? What differences exist between these practices and the practices of the Lucumí, with whose descendants and followers they coexist, not in an attitude of antagonism but of borrowing, frequently worshiping at the same time, the Kongo the Orichas—“crossing Palo with Ocha”—, and the Lucumi alternating the cult of their Gods with the care of a nganga?

“We Negroes dance to the tune of all the drums,” said José Santos, “I was raised in both groups” (with Kongo and Lucumi) “and I studied with both groups.” And an Oloricha who is not a Negro has both a Santo and a Nganga, and, of course, separated the one from the other—especially from Obatalá, who rejects sorcery—“because mayombe is faster than Ocha. One sees more quickly the results of what one asks. You do not give orders to the Orichas. They are the ones who give orders and you obey. The dead, the nganga, consents to obey.”

The elder woman of a Central in Matanzas, who used to attend the “plays of Palo” with the same fervor as the festivities of the Ocha, told us “When in a hurry, people seek out Palo Monte,” and about the differences in rituals that are observed in one Rule or the other, here is what we recorded from her report. We will also have to translate it into a clearer Spanish.

“That nganga does what its owner orders to be done. For good, for harm. It does what the owner wants done. That nganga does not eat the same thing as Orisha. Palo festivity is simple and all. One plays when necessary, offers a rooster when one is done. When you play Palo, you
lock the door. Santo opens the door for everybody. Palo does not. The *palero* does not ring a bell for the *nganga*, does not play the *guiro*, does not play the maracas, does not blow the whistle for the Cuatro Trillo. Does not have so many tools, does not have a robe or fan. The *ngangas* are courageous! Drums? They are only for dancing. *Makutere*, the open drum, is played for delight. The *mayombero* calls with mambo. He leans, touches the ground, picks up the sign of the dead. He calls, speaks, offers *malafo*, and says: You are after a good thing. He paints the ground, burns candles. Three sticks of candles. The ceremony of the Santo is more elaborate, and these days much expertise goes in. It is showy. It requires more work and costs more. The Lucumí do not light candles, do not offer *malafo*. In Mayombe all is simple.”

That is: the sacrifices are reduced to the minimum, compared to what the Orichas receive. The festivities, rites, ceremonies are simpler, less expensive in Mayombe or Palo Monte than in the Lucumi cult. In his opinion, less ceremonious, less “showy.” The Palero officiates secretly, behind closed doors. He does not call up the spirit and the forces contained in his cauldron with a bell, guiro, “acheré” or maracas. They do not have robes as in the Lucumi temples to dress up the “horses,” the mediums, of the Orichas when trance occurs; no fans to cool themselves, no accessories, “tools.” The *mayombero* grabs the tibia of a skeleton or a horn to establish contact with the spirit. Squatting, he invites it into the magical receptacle on which he throws clouds of smoke and which he sprinkles with liquor. He pounds the ground three times with his fists, then draws with white chalk a sign that he covers with three little mounds of powder, lights them up, and with mambos and songs that are intoned in a low voice, he calls up the dead and orders them to act.
The Lucumí do not use powder nor do they sprinkle *malafu manputo* or *aguardiente*; they pour water, and only the Deities Eleguá, Ogún, Ochosi, and Osain receive liquor libations.

When the *mayordomo* finishes his function, he prepares some powders, a *nkangue* or *nkanga*, that is a “lock,” and prepares the amulet that is needed, a remedy, etc. —“*cumprió*”—as recompense, the *nganga* is given the blood of a rooster. This is not a requirement in the series of cares that the Orichas require nor in the daily obligations of the Lucumí priest. We will add the comments of another *mayombero*: “Since the times of Spain, in order to play the drum, one has to get a permit. If we sorcerers, who have to do everything in hiding because they are secret works, called with a drum, they would come to us. All the dead flock to the drum. But the * Dundu tonga*, the police, would hear it. One thing is to play in the sight of everybody, to celebrate or the day when we celebrate the *Fundamento*,—that day the *nganga* eats a young bull or goat,—, and another is to play, to work sorcery. That is hush hush.”

All our informants have told us that the Kongo believed, first of all, in the existence of that *Sambi* to whom the little Negro of the lullaby, on falling asleep, carried *súnga* or tobacco.

*Sambi, Insambi, Sambiapunguele, Pungún Sambia or Sambia Mpúngu—Ñami*, as we also heard in Trinidad de Cuba—is like *Olodumare, Olorun* and *Olofi* for the Lucumí, the Creator: “The Almighty, the One who created the world” and absolutely all that exists. (“And he continues to create it, because what is worn out, what dies, he renews it”). The work of *Sambi* goes “from the smallest to the biggest; the hardest, the softest, and what cannot be grasped, the air, fire, thought. Whatever exists here on earth, seas, rivers, mountains, trees, grass, animals, bugs, and over there in the sky, the sun, the clouds, the moon, the stars. All that and what cannot be seen and what cannot be known, was created by *Sambi*.”

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“So that there could be men and women, he made a couple. What were their names? I do not know what their names were! I never heard them called by their names. I know that man is yakara and woman is nkento, and that fathers are tata and mothers are mame and yaya, so, those were the first tata and yaya of humanity.” And he made them himself, unlike Olodumare who delegated this task to his son Obatalá, who molded the bodies that later Olodumare would vivify, infuse with a soul—okán—and “put in their heads Eledá, a piece of his divinity.

“Sambí prepared the menga—the blood—that runs in the veins and moves the bodies, gives them life, and through the nkutu—the ear—he breathed intelligence into them so that they can understand.”

This couple, from whom all of us, “black, white, and yellow,” descend, Sambí showed them what they needed to do to reproduce, feed themselves, defend themselves. And, between these forms of knowledge essential to conservation and protection of life, he taught them how to build a nganga, nkisi, a macuto, “what a man needs to do good or evil, to heal or to kill, come to him from Sambí, who gave us life and death, or a bad life and a bad death. The elders always asked Sambí to give them a good death. Just as white people ask for a good death, God is God, [125] no matter whether He is called Sambiaampunga or Santo Cristo… But that depends on how one acts, whether one dies with one’s mouth twisted and one’s eyes bulging and open, like the mayomberos judíos, and then be badly buried, which is the worst.” Because Sambí punishes the evil doers, rebukes betrayal, falsehood, offenses committed against the elders, and, like Olodumare, keeps account of our good actions and our bad actions.

Another common trait with the Lucumí Creator is that, Insambi, after accomplishing his incomparable work, “retired from the world.” He did not want his creatures to disturb him either, and “he went very far away, to the most remote edge of the sky, where nobody could find him.”
Where airplanes do not reach. All communications between the sky and the earth were cut, and its place settled the infinite distance that now separates them, a distance that did not exist before, judging from many stories. Distant, removed from his creation like Olodumare, only apparently different from the creation, Insambi has not stopped directing everything and continues to order the most insignificant detail; “the air does not dare move a leaf, nor does a fly take flight, nor does anything happen here or in the kimbambas without Insambi disposing it.” He is incomprehensible, inaccessible, and invisible, “because nobody has seen him since he retired.” But he sees everything, and, as a Kongo proverb puts it, “he sees an ant at night” and he does not take his eyes off us. He knows all our secrets. He is an absolute master of the universe, and in the Kongo Rule, just like Olodumare, Olorun, or Olofi in the Lucumí Rule, he is not the object of a special cult. No sacrifices are offered to him. “He does not eat;” he does not need it. “But above all he is respected, he is greeted, he is trusted, his protection is requested, and all is done not to offend him “so that he does not give us lashes.”

As we have already pointed out, in this act of “greeting” Sambi Mpungu, putting oneself into his hands, asking for his help, resides the difference between the “good sorcerer” or “mayombero cristian”o and the “bad witch,” the ndoki or “mayombero judío.”

After Nsambi, the adepts of the Kongo Rule venerate the souls of the ancestors, of the dead, and the nature spirits that dwell in the trees and the rivers and with whom they pact in the mountains and the rivers, as we will see.

“The Kongo were the Negroes who were most attached and took the most care of their dead, and that is why our religion is based principally in the dead,” we were told by the taita nganga José Santos. “We make our pacts with the dead.” And here we fundamentally part ways.
with the Lucumí Rule, in which the dead Elders are implored, venerated, sacrificed to, but “not ordered.”
CHAPTER 4: THE NGANGA, NKISI

[126] It is a spirit, a supernatural force, but that is also the name given to the recipient, clay pot, three-legged iron cauldron, and in a remote past, the wrap, Russian sack or guano fabric, in which are deposited a human skull and human bones, some soil from the cemetery, and a cross, sticks, herbs, insects, animal and bird bones, and other elements that constitute a nganga and are the support on which come to anchor themselves the spirits and forces that the padre or madre, the owner, of the nganga or the nkisi orders to carry out orders. Moreover, Nganga also means Dead.

Like the nganga, the nkisi or nkiso is also the space in which a force or spirit is locked up. So then, when a taita or mpangui, fellow initiated adepts of the Kongo Rule, tell us about a nganga nkisi, they refer, at the same time, to the owner of the cauldron or the object in which resides the force that obeys them.

Nganga, ngangantare, npati nganga, nganga ngombo, kisimpúmbo, mpabia.
nganganbuka, ndongom nfumo, nganga, nkisi wanga, sudika, mambi, and usually, as we already know, taita or padre nganga. ngangulero is, by extension, the name given to the sorcerer who “orders the dead, to the owner of a nganga,” and, throughout these pages, we will still hear him referred to by other names: tata kunanyanga, nfità, tá anabutu, tata kuí, kimanfinda, kumangongo, (father of the moutains, father of the mystery, father of the cemetery, etc.)

These ngangas, nkisos—we have also heard them referred to as mmulungungas or muluwangas—and makutos, contain forces, good and harmful, like the soup tureens—the opón—, the sacred stones of the Lucumí. But these do not emprison human bones, soil samples,
pieces of wood, insects, even though the principle of imprisonment is the same: the Orichas, the Divinities, are anchored in the stones through rites, prayers, and baths with leaves—ewe—that are consecrated to them and to which they infuse their aché, their energy, their virtue.

The Ngangas, Nkisi Wangas, Boumbas, Saku-Saku, Villumbas, Malongos, Makutos, like the Orichas in the stones that constitute their supports, are inherited, given or made, if one does not have them, taking from a padre nganga or padre nkisi the necessary substances. These are fundamentally bones of the dead; one fragment is enough to “have” the dead, to represent the departed in fullness and so that, when called, the dead will come and effectively serve the new initiated because “the dead go to what used to be theirs” and in order to attract them and possess them, it is necessary to have hair, nails, a tooth, the phalanx bone of a finger, ash from the skull, something that had been part of their being. Those items are enough to “have” a dead. As when [127] one wants to strap living people, order them, it is enough to have something that had been well stuck to their bodies, imbibed with their sweat, their scent, their person; in order to have dead people, it is sufficient to collect some soil from their tombs, because it is not always convenient to collect a kiyumba or skull. That way, there is no evidence that would displease the police in case of a search, and, as I am telling you, it is not necessary to have a kiyumba for a dead to work well.” It is clear, however, that in the opinion of all the informants, the most precious item is the skull, the head, and better yet, the brain and the heart. “But it is difficult to obtain brains and hearts…”

“A dead, a spirit, you put it”—supposing that you are an initiate and you know the adequate technique—“in a cauldron, in a pot, in a mpaka, or in something smaller.” Anything that has been trabajado, or “worked,” consecrated by a ngángula, contains the power of a spirit,
a secret force. (The same thing can be said about the babaloricha, who converts any object into the habitat from which an Oricha exerizes its power.)

To have a Nganga, which, we repeat, means Dead, is what is also called to possess a Secreto, a Secret, a Prenda, a Gajo of Nganga. The name of prenda includes, as we will see later, many types of amulets and talismans, because the soul of a dead or any spirit, a Nkisi Mamba, a water spirit, a Nkisi Misenga, a mountain spirit, etc., can be captured in any object: guiros, jar or mpaka, bags, snail, and figurines, the kini-kini, which perform the same function as the chicherekú, the famous wooden dolls of the Lucumi. So, then, a nganga is a microcosm. In it are condensed the forces and spirits of all the kingdoms of nature. Nature and everything that surrounds us, in the worldview of the mayombero, has a soul. But this does not only apply to the worldview of the mayombero; for the Negro believers and practitioners of all the African sects we have studied in Cuba, nothing in the world is without a soul.
CHAPTER 5: MPUNGUS

First Sambia
May all things be for
Sambia above
and Sambia below.

Establishing a hierarchy of the supernatural forces, after Nsambi, whom, for a better understanding we will call the Creator, the Supreme Being, our Kongo people call Mpungus the superior spirits that parallel the Lucumí Orichas and some Saints of our Hagiography.

For example, about Mboma, a spirit who lives in the water and at times adopts the form of a non venomous serpent, we would be told that “Mboma is Yemayá the Kongo way,” and “in the way of the Whites, it is the Virgin of the Rule,” who is also called Mamá Kalunga, Pungo Kisimba, Mamá Umba, Mbúmba Mamba, Nkita Kiamsa, Nkita Kuna Mamba, Baluande, Four Winds, “because it occupies, dominates, the four parts of the world.” And let us not forget this name: Nkita Kuna Masa, “which is the same as Kisimbi Masa.” Nkita is a Father or Mother of the Water, a spirit “ruler of the river”—that is why it is identified as similar to the Goddess of the water of the Lucumi—, and lives, like Yemýá, in rivers and lagoons. This water spirit—yimbi or simbi nkita—act in a Nkisi Masa, which is designed, made of water plants, sand, mud, stones, shells, snake or mboma.

To these lagoons and sacred bodies of water that inspire great respect and fear flock the taitas and muana ntu nganga in search of what they need for their magic, and it is common knowledge that in these very same bodies of water the uninitiated risk their lives.
Besides the water spirits, or nkitas, there are mountain spirits or maningua: nkita kinseke or minseke.

They are assimilations of the Orichas and Catholic Saints:

*Pandilanga* = *Obamoró*: Jesus of Nazareth. *Mpungo Kikorot*: Jesus-Christ.

*Kabanga, Madioma, Mpungo Lomboán Fula* = *Ifá, Orula*: Saint Francis.

*Bakuende Bamba di Ngola*, Patron of the Kongo, much venerated by them as “The King Melchior, who is from the Kongo.”

*Pungún Fútilla, Tata Funde* = *Babalú Ayé*: Saint Lazarus, who has innumerable devotees throughout the Island.

*Nkita, Nkitán Kitán, Mukiamamuilo, Nsasi* = *Changó*: Saint Barbara.

*Yolá, Yeyé, Iña Ñaába, Mama Kengue* = *Obatalá*: Our Lady of Mercy.

*Pungu Mama Wanga, Yaya Kéngue* = *Oyá*: Our Lady of Candles.

*Sindaula Ndundu Yambaka Bután Séke* = *Osain*: Saint Sylvestre or Saint Raymond.

*Mpungu Mama Wánga, Choya Wenge* = *Ochún: The Virgin of Charity of El Cobre.*

*Pungo Dibudi* = *Ogún*: Saint Peter.

*Lufo Kuyu, Watariamba* = *Ogún and Ochosi* together: Saint Peter and Saint Norbert.

*Zarabanda* = *Ogún Achibiriki*: Saint Michael the Archangel.

*Nkuyu* = *The Eleguá Alagwana*: The Lonely Soul of Purgatory.

[129] *Majumbo Moúngu Mpúngu, Ntala and Nsamba* = *The Ibeiyí Oro*: Saint Cosme and Saint Damian.

The Jimaguas Saints, who are considered children of *Centella Ndoki*, of *Oyá*, who did not have for the Kongo, the benign characters of the *Ibeiyí*, much beloved and venerated by the Lucumí. “The *Basimba Kalulu Masa,*” used to say Nino Cárdenas, who used to call them that way, “are
bad in the Kongo Rule.” They serve the ngangas judíos and they respect and obey only their master.

Finally, all the Mpungus together are called Kimpúngulu.

The Mpungus and Nkitas are also given Spanish names, such as Cabo de Guerra to Agayú = Saint Christopher. Siete Rayos to Changó,— “the Saint by excellence, whom we do not lay on a tile floor but on the ground.” Tiembla Tierra to Obatalá—“very dangerous, should not be offended.” Padre Tiempo to Orula—Saint Francis. Para LLaga to Babalú Ayé—Saint Lazarus, etc.

We were unable to find out the equivalents of other forgotten Mpungus of the Kongo Reales of the old Cabildo of the Central Santa Rita, “because they are old,” like Pibabo, Zumbá. “Those Kongo Saints which were in the cabildos, mounted,88 danced, and had nothing to do with the ngangas, the dead.”

“Out of habit,” we are told in another instance, “we address as Santo even a nfumbi judío, and you will hear people talk about the Santo of this person or that person, referring to his or her prenda, when nganga is not a Santo, but more accurately, the spirit of a dead.” For his part, another mayombero of Matanzas, who does not like “the mixing of Santo with Palo,” tells us that “Lucumí is Lucumí, Church is Church, Kongo is Kongo, and here in Matanzas, dead is dead. The two are separate: Kisinpúmbo does not get along with Ocha. If you want to pray to the white Santo, go to Church; to a Lucumí Santo, go to house of the santero; if you want to chécherengoma, go to the house of the Nganga.”

Summarizing the previous classification, I repeat that the adepts of the Mayombe Rule or Palo Monte Rule recognize, “above all else, Sambia. For that reason, it is always said Sambia above, Sambia below, Sambia nsulo, Sambia ntoto. Because there are two Sambias and they are
the same *Tubisian Sambi Sambia Munansulu*: God the Great who is in the sky and *Mpungo Sambia bias muna ntoto*: Sambia who came to make the world and made everything. But Sambia is in the sky and the *Mpungu Nkula*, who live under the earth help us as much as the *Katukemba*, the people who have already died, *fuá.*”

I hope that this last explanation does not put confusion in the preceding explanations: let us remember that “the emphasis in *Mayombe* is the dead.”
CHAPTER 6: NSO NGANGA, THE PRAISE HOUSE

[130] The mayomberos, like the oloriches, do not constitute a congregation bound by rules that are fixed and mandatory for all. They do not answer to a supreme, central authority, who regulates and gives unity to their functions. The organization of a Nso Nganga, the house of the Nganga, of a group of believers who submit to the authority of a padre nganga who initiates them, has many similarities with the Ilé-Oricha, or house of the Santo. Each padre nganga (like each padre de Santo) controls his devotees as an absolute master, but without deviating from or changing in its essence the pattern of an ancestral tradition, or as Makindó used to say, “abiding by the bunganga of the elders,” that is, putting in practice the knowledge, the know-how, sacred legacy of the ancestors.

To explain the organization of a Palo Mayombe or Palo Monte praise house, we are told:

“The Casa Nganga, also called Casa Mundo, is like a tribe: there is the chief or king and his vassals. There is the wife of the king, of the first padre, the mfumo, who is like a queen. This principal padre nganga is referred to as amo, owner, first owner. Next in line is his mayordomo or his two mayordomos, and the madrina, godmother of the nganga—the Fundamento—the ngudi nganga,89 and the madrina, or godmother of gajo, the tikantika or nkento tikatika nkisi. Then follow the nkombos or ngombes, mbua, the dogs or servants of the nganga that the fumbi mounts” (whom the spirit of the dead who serves the taita nganga possesses) “and the moanas.” The moanas are all those who belong to the house of the mfumo. It is the same description that, in profane speech, we hear from some of those who knew the old and now gone cabildos of the Kongo.
“The muana or moana,” Baró continues, “do not have to study. They are introduced to the nganga, they are made to drink kimbisa with seven grains of pepper, they are made to step three times above the nganga and so that the fumbi, the spirit of the dead can know them. A lock of their hair is cut and it is thrown into the prenda, the pot or the magic cauldron.”

To the liquor, the kimbisa or chamba of the nganga, so stimulating that Herrera gives me permission to call it “tonic” and which the future mayomberos drink during their consecration, and the devotees during their “plays,” is added, besides pepper (of Guinea and China) and fula, the blood of the sacrifice, nutmeg, fragrant clove, chili, garlic, a small sherry onion, ginger, crushed peanuts, cuaba powder, malambo, and mountain cinnamon. The pulverizations of this mix maintain the vitality and stimulate the energy of the ngangas.

In the Nso, the muanas have the right to cure themselves because they help in whatever they can. When a rooster or a box of candles are needed, they buy them. But not all of the moanas “are mounted by the Palo,” the spirit. “The one who is mounted”—falls in trance—“is the one called moana ngombe or nganga moana ntu ngombe. These, who in Spanish are called perros, dogs, or criados, servants, need to be prepared very well. It is the ngombe who works. He must identify himself with the Dead because he himself is the dead when the dead enters into his body. He is rayado, initiated. “With a sharp razor blade, crosses are tattooed on their skin. Their sight is prepared—so that they can be clairvoyant—and they are owners of a gajo,92 of a prenda that stops the Dead, the Fundamento, or the Ganga of the padre. Ngombes and moana, in the Nso, are all brethren, children of the same mother, for life, until they ŋán fiũrí, until death and after death, because when you die you go rejoin your loved ones. (The first thing that the padre Mayombe does when he initiates disciples is to call up the dead of their families). And the oath that one takes toward then Nganga is forever binding. “It is a word that cannot be erased; it
remains written into the skin. From then on, all work in the Casa Mundo: the king, the queen, and the vassals.”

And old Baró recalls the memory of his first days as an initiate in his land in Matanzas.

“I was initiated as a mayombero in the Juego Cangre Yuca. Its mayordomo was called Manda Viaje, the Tikantika, the madrina, Má Sabana Limpio, the nkento, the wife of the owner, Susana, the queen, Má Susana. Ah! All the mayomberos initiated in the house, I remember them; all of them, and the names that they had in the Rule, the names that they got from the nganga. They were called Cují Yaya, Espanta Sueño, Komandé, Gallo Ronco, Pajarito, Pisa Bonito, Lucerito, Sacam Empenño, Tumba Tó, Brama Guerra, Mama Bomba, Hueso Cambia, Paso Largo, Gajo Cielo, Acaba Mundo, Viento Malo, Malongo Vira, Vira, Estrella, Mbumba Paticongo, Palomita, Guachinango, Manga Sayas, Tiembla Tierra, Rabo Nube, Guía Lengua, Mabila, Brazo Fuerte, Cara Linda, María Yengueré, Remolino, Mira Cielo, Cabo Vela, María Guerra, Cobayende, Viejo Ciclón… All were strong mayomberos who depended on the house because their ngangas were daughters of the same nganga, of Campo Santo. There, in Matanzas, was the best, the strongest of Kongodom! You should have seen the respect that these strong ones showed to the kintoala mfumu, the chief, who was the father of all, and to the majordomo, the wangánkiso, who is at the service of the nganga to take care of the padrino, the madrina, and the dogs when they are mounted.”

The ahijado or godson of the majordomo, when he, in turn, is the owner of a prenda, helps the padrino with all his heart and with self-forgetfulness.

[132] “In case he has a battle in his hands and does not win it, his ahijado is by his side, working. For example: the padre did something to achieve what he wanted…but did not get the
desired result. The *ahijado* calls: *Vitittingo* come here *Chamalonga*. Vititi has *Chamalongo*. The spirit of the *ahijado* responds and does the work. *Nsaranda*.

\[
\begin{align*}
Tu \text{ chece wánga} & \quad \text{Your chece wánga} \\
\text{Pierde camino}^{94} & \quad \text{Has lost its way} \\
\text{Oh! Mi suamito, ya yo studió} & \quad \text{Oh! My master, I have studied} \\
\text{Sikirimalonga ya se estudió} & \quad \text{Sikirimalonga has already been studied} \\
\text{Yagundé quiere vé} & \quad \text{Yagundé wants to see} \\
\text{Cómo yo Nkanga Ndoki}^{95} & \quad \text{How to tie up the Nkoki} \\
\text{Yagundé} & \quad \text{Yagundé} \\
\text{Palo tá arriba la loma} & \quad \text{Palo is on the hill} \\
\text{Ah! Yangundé, mi suamo} & \quad \text{Ah! Yangundé, my master} \\
\text{Tu quiere vé.} & \quad \text{You want to see.}
\end{align*}
\]

And J. L. on his part says:

“\[In a well-founded, ordered, and harmonious house of Mayombe, all benefit; whether the house is of a Kongo lineage or of a Lucumí lineage, that is well-calculated. I would say that those Negroes who taught us, besides religion, the things of life, and I speak about the earlier Africans who established here their plays, had many ideas about cooperation. They united to defend themselves with their *prendas*, on the one hand, and on the other hand, to help one another with their profits. The profits were shared. People paid a fee to gain the right to be introduced to the the *nganga*. During my time, in order to be a dog or an initiate, the introduction and the rooster cost two pesos and seventy-five cents. Today, if the *mayombero* is serious, it is the same. At least in the countryside. For another right, you had to pay for the *fumbi* to mount you and to give you sight: a total of nine pesos and five reales. Later you recover your money\]”
because you are paid whenever you work, and for whatever work the padre does, he has his portion. Each *Palo* house is a mutual help society. Yes, like the old *cabildos* used to be. For the good of all the *moanas*, since all of us who are initiated in the same house are brethren, family members of the *mganga*. Today, those of us who are legitimate descendants of those *troncos* or *stocks*, continue to function the same way. If they are not corrupted, those who will follow us will also continue to function the same way.”

José Lázaro tells me:

“When I got my *prenda*, there was in my *Kuna Kuan Kuna (Cabildo or Nganga House)* an old Creole who did not want that any boy should find out. My *madrina*, from Baró—there were many of us from Baró—Ma Catalina, was very good. When slavery ended, people took what belonged to them, their *prendas*, but my teacher, Ta Clemente, who taught me very well, [133] kept many of them. There was in his house a room full of his godchildren’s *prendas*, the *prendas hijos* or *prendas*-children of the *prenda del Fundamento* or the *prenda*-parent. Up, in the ceiling of that room, was Guinda Vela inside a crate. The *Tronco* or First *Fundamento* was Mundo Catalina Manga Saya, a cauldron with three feet. The second *Fundamento* was called Ngola La Habana. Ngola La Habana dominated the three; but people played with one or the other, but not with all at the same time. That old Creole, Lao, as I am telling you, did not want that a boy like me learn; he had, set apart, a *nganga judía*, well hidden, and it did harm.

“Old Clemente, my padrino, sold me the *nganga* Mundo Catalina Manga Saya. That *nganga* was mine, yes, sir, and we went with it to Baró. Ta Clemente told me: With it, you may jump over the wall, but don’t pass through the barracks’ door. Lao had a war to death with my *padre*. My *padre’s prenda* was called María Batalla Tumba Cuatro, and it defeated Lao’s prenda.
“In the house of Lao, there were only Kongo. When my father defeated Lao and his Kongo, they put up a white flag. Because they were vengeful to death, the thing did not end there. The moanas, the kombos of my padre remained quiet but those of Lao went to work quietly, and kindambazo here, kindambazo there, Tumba Cuatro could not keep up with so much murumba.97 Ah! But I was informed. Wanga wagaré wagará simandié, and I began to do warfare. Each day, Lao would put some work on my door to do away with me, and the path that led into my house was full of mean sorcery. I came out safe and sound, and none of all that touched me because, as holy luck would have it, my nganga was the mother of his nganga and the old man did not know it! Candela Infierno could not burn the Devil! I had a small black dog that we had raised. The spirit would mount the dog would mount and the dog would take out all the sorcery items and all the nail that they buried to get me.”

(As a matter of fact, the mayomberos say that spirits frequently enter into animals. The dogs who defend the mayomberos, and we mean the actual dogs, have the tip of their tail cut and the hairs of the tail are enchanted. They are made to drink Kalunga water—sea water. As in the case that José Lázaro recounts, all the “works” that are done to harm the mayombero and that are buried, the spirit that acts through the dog works to get them discovered. These dogs never attack any person that the sorcerer does not want the dog to bite).

“Once during a game, a fellow initiate of mine was mounted. I was with my dog. The Negro fell to the ground. My dog examined him, sniffed him, and lay by his side. The fümbo,” the spirit that took possession of that man, “then said: Mbuá98 yá jurán bembo.”

It is also an old belief of the Kongo to state as a fact that a “truly bad sorcerer,” a ndoki, [134] can take on the appearance of an animal, a bird, or a snake. The ndokis who are dead use bats—nguembo—to drink the oil in churches. Many sorcerers also have the power to make
themselves invisible. These, in Santiago de Cuba, are called caveiro “as was the sorcerer Yarey.”

“Finally, Lao, tired of throwing things at me, called me.

- What do you have?

- Me? I have nothing! And I took him to see what was protecting me. He saw my prenda and he threw himself on the ground, on his stomach.

- Who gave it to you?

- Clemente Kongo.

Catalina really saved me!”

Because the nganguleros initiated in the same Nso Nganga, like those seated in a Lucumi Ilé-Oricha, are considered united by a sacred bond of kinship, they are nganga fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, and they cannot, under any circumstance, do harm to one another, it was then a Mother who prevented the two brothers from killing each other.

“All those who came out of a common tree,” the Fundamento, “I mean, the mayomberos who are children of the same house, offspring of a same nganga, were united like the fingers of the hands. The spirit gave them a name, baptized them; they were called by the same name as the spirit that mounted them. They had their prendas in the house of the mfumo, and all of them together formed a tight-knit circle, a land in which the Father was king. When some work was done, the prenda designated which child would carry out which task. Let Guamuta, Tiembla Tierra or Pase Largo approach…”

“My people were great people, and if one did not measure up, one could not keep up with them, and that is why it was said in a mambo:

Lunweña buké buké  Lunweña buké buké
Ngóngoro mala cabeza  
Ngóngoro bad head

Kokún pela Bejuco Real  
Kokún peel Bejuco Real

Tronco no pué enredar bejuco  
The trunk cannot choke the branch

Cuando llueve, llueve pa tó mundo.  
When it rains, it rains for all the people.

Kabi kabi kabita tondele.  
With all heart, we give thanks.

So they clarified that whoever dared to do them harm should accept the consequences.” People make fun of those mayomberos who had good prendas but did not know how to use them:

Ié tierra congo no hay palo  
In the land of Kongo, there is no Palo

¡qué lástima!  
What a pity!

Mangame Dio, Palo!  
Clean me God, Palo!

Monte ta conversando  
The forest is talking

No hay Palo!  
There is Palo!

This other mambo, like all mambos, contains a sarcasm:

Mi mara mío tá kumbí kumbá  
I tied up my father kumbí kumbá

Si mi dóndo  
Yes, my dóndo

Lo negro prieto son cosa mala  
The dark Negroes are bad

Si mi dóndo  
Yes, my dóndo

Mujé con saya que no me jura  
Women with skirt don’t swear me

Que no m’asusta  
That you don’t scare me

Cucha kuenda Matende bana  
Listen Matende children

Si mi dóndo  
Yes, my dóndo

La Campo Finda no tiene guardia  
Campo Finda has no guards

Si mi dóndo  
Yes, my dóndo
Primero Sambia que tó la cosa
Si mi dóndo
Mi Sambia arribe mi Sambia abajo
Si mi dóndo
E pare mío Sambilari
Lo siete siete que son catorce
Padrino mío Barrentino
Kalunga sube, Kalunga baja
Si mi dóndo
Que Nsambia arriba que va karire...

"And what they did when one of them called up to his nganga, asked for permission: Cheche

Wanga fuiri mutanbo Nganga nune.

Nganga yo te ñama
Kasimbirikó
Yo tengo Ngerra
Nganga mío yo te ñama
Nganga ñame Kasimbirikó
Ahora vamo a jugá
Yimbirá vamo yimbirá
Yimbirá un poco...
Kasiro mimo
Traen Guerra
Kariso
Kasiwa traen guerra.99 Woman, bring on the war.

[136] (Ta Francisco used to call up his nganga this way:

*Abrikuto ndinga mambo*  Hear the mambo’s voice

*Con licencia lo moriluo*  With permission, dear dead

*Simindóndo,*  Simindóndo,

*con licencia Anselma mina*  with permission Anselma

*Simindóndo kasimiriko*100  Simindóndo community

*Abrikuto ndinga mambo.*)  Hare the mambo’s voice.)

And the *Yimbi* would answer:

*Ya yangó yo güiri mambo,*  *Ya yangó I hear the mambo*

and would stretch a hand:

*Tondelekuare yo soy mueto*  With thanks I am dead

*donde quiera que voy*  Wherever I go

*yo toi mueto.*  *I am dead.*

and he would begin to order the *Batata*101 and the *fumbi* to work:

*Yo entro nfinda*  *I enter the forest*

*Caramba Casa Grande viti luto...*  *Gosh Casa Grande is dressed in mourning...*

and to make gibes to fight:

*Nganga tiene varón*  *Nganga has a man*

*pa clavá file yo*  to dig in

*Ngó Palo buca*  *I look for Ngó Palo*

*pa acé lo que yo quiere.*  *To do what I want.*

*Ié caballero ya tiene envidia*  *The man is envious*
Pavo Real tiene envidia  Pavo Real is envious
Palomita su prúma  Palomita the cousin
Mira caballero,  Look at the man,
dongún dongún la batalla  dongún dongún battle
Ié yeto yeto Santo Bárbaro Bindito!  Bless us Blessed Santo Bárbara
Cuidado con Saya Mamán gaotica  Be careful with the skirt Mamán gaotica
Cuyao con Mamán gaotica!  Be careful with Mamán gaotica!
Cuanto lengua va dingan claro  When the tongue speaks clearly
dó lengua, cuatro lengua  two tongues, four tongues
Díngan claro allá  Speak clearly there
Valentino allá  Valentino there
Juto traba allá  Juto works there
Mama Téngue allá  Mama Téngue there
[137] Remolino allá  Remolino there
la Santa Ana allá  Santa Ana there
cuanto léngua vá  when the tongue goes
dinga claro allá  to speak clearly there
abri kuto allá  open the ear there
Matanda bana allá  Matanda children there
Madre Ulogía allá  Madre Ulogía there
Lucerito allá  Lucerito there
Gando Cueva allá  Gando Cueva there
Da recuerdo allá  I remember there
Padre mío allá
My Padre there

Y que vaya allá
And going there

y é abri kuto allá...
and opening the ear there...

Palo va pa la loma
Palo goes to the hill

Remolino engaña mundo
Remolino deceives the world

Kutu kutu cambia pémba
Hear, hear change the sign

Kutuyé kutuyé cambia pémba
Hear, hear change the sign

Kutu va camino pémba...
The ear goes the way of the sign...

what they did, I tell you, and what they were able of doing is what no Negro in Cuba today
knows how to do or is able to do.

Como Nkanga Ndoki
Like Nkanga Ndoki

Longuisa ndoki chamalongo
Longuisa ndoki chamalongo

alándoki, alándoki!
alándoki, alándoki!

Other elder mayomberos of Matanzas still remembered the house of Mundo Camposanto, of
Melitón Congo—Jicarita—, of Luis Ñunga Ñunga, and of Pío Congo, this last one of the ingenio
Asturias, near Agramonte: the three great, unforgettable teachers. And the house of Mariata Saca
Empeño, of Andrés Congo, Jacinto Vera, and of Elías el Chino, illustrious names in the annals of
Palo Monte. Another famous name is Benito Jorrín, a Creole who used to carry out big magic
wars with the Kongo and would defeat them:

Kángala muntu fuá lombe yaya
Tie up the dead lombe yaya

Cabildo que yo lleva
The cabildo I carry

nunca falta tragedia.
has no shortage of tragedy.

[138] And when one of those important works was finished:
Kutere Akutere

Acayó Mboma Longankisi

Yo longa moana

I teach the child

And the Fumbi would go,

Ié malembe mpolo yakara

Come out slowly, man

Malembe moana nkento

Come out slowly, woman

Tu kais en nguei

You have fallen

Munu kiá munu malembe,

I have fallen slowly,

he would sing when he was dismissed:

Adió adió adió mi Mama Wanga

Farewell, farewell, farewell, dear Mama Wanga

Tu me ñama, tu m’epanta

You call me, you frighten me

Adió adió mi Mama Wanga

Farewell, dear Mama Wanga

Yo me voy con sentimiento

I am leaving with feeling

Suamito tu me ñama

Master, you call me

Adió Madrina mío

Farewell, dear Madrina

Yo me voy, yo me voy

I am leaving, I am leaving

Mundo se va, Mundo se va

The people are leaving, the people are leaving

Adió adió é ya me voy

Farewell, farewell, I am going

pa la Casa Grande

to la Casa Grande

Mundo se va hata

The people are leaving until

el año de venidera

next year

Si tu me ñama yo reponde

If you call me, I will answer

Mundo se va

The people are leaving
Se acabó Mayimbe ngombo  
Mayimbe ngombo is over

Mayimbe e diablo s’acabó  
Mayimbe and the devil, it is over

Yo kiaku kiaku  
I am yours

Tianganá que amanaqué.  
Let’s part in joy.

In the ingenio Constancia there were such good and wise loangos (another name that some of my elder informants give to the ngangulero), that only three or four Negroes of the crew died during a serious epidemic of Asian cholera. They were mayomberos cristianos, sorcerers who did good.

(The elders told us that in the Kongo, “the dead did not welcome in the other world the souls of bad relatives or godchildren and that here it was the same thing; the mayombero judío the ndoki, when he dies, he suffers a lot, he wanders along the river banks”).

And causing harm, as we will see later.

[139] Like the Otán-Orichas or sacred stones of the Lucumí Rule, the cauldron or pot of Mayombe has as a sanctuary, a room in the house of the padre nganga. Or it shares his only room, if economic means do not allow him to have another room. In this case, which might happen frequently, the padre nganga faces a difficult problem. The sacred presence of the nganga in the room will compel him to abstain from having any sexual relations in that room. This is one of the most severe and categorical constraints that their respective Rules impose on the priests of the Orichas worship and the Kongo magicians and that they must equally observe.

“In the proximity of a prenda or of the Ocha, if the owner is a madre nganga or an iyalocha, she cannot have contacts with her husband. If the owner is a man, a padre nganga or a baba Oricha, he cannot have contacts with her wife.”
Should this prohibition—whose serious consequences are to be feared—be violated, the sorcerer or the Santero commits a sacrilege and handicaps himself or herself physically and morally.

“There were some, and I knew them, who did not respect this law and they slept quietly with their wives in the proximity of their cauldrons. They ended up going crazy fell into complete misery.”

Or, “abandoned by their prendas which no longer respond to them, their works become worthless.” Misfortunes, sicknesses, financial difficulties, an unexpected aggression, persecution, a surprising imprisonment, apparently unjust or deserved… is the work, punishment of offended ngangas. The inoperative magic or the death of some mayomberos is attributed, less to an evil-doing life, but rather more to the lack of concern with which these mayomberos, under the very noses of the ngangas, bundankeni,” fornicate. Thus the need to have the ngangas separated, protected from any possible sacrilege. Only the Tata Wanga, the eldest, in the words of Makindó, “and the eldest women who have already truly lost their desires, who don’t think in certain things,” do not run any risk in living in close quarters with their prendas or Orichas. We have known elder iyalochas who slept on the floor on a mat, next to her stones, and one who, reduced to extreme misery, used to carry the stones of her patron Oricha on her breast. It was a traveling temple! Calculating that the date of her death must not be far off, one day, she threw the stones into the sea.

“The Santos and Nkitas, always keep them far away from the couple. They must be where no filth reaches them,” used to advise Calazán, who, an incorrigible womanizer but cautious, used to rent two “accessories,” one of them exclusively for the nganga. It was a common space about which the elders used to repeat with emphasis: “The mayombero or the
[140] Olúo who is not clean, if he deals with his prendas or his Otán, plays with his life.” That is why ngangas, nkisis, and Orichas must be maintained isolated in a room set apart, no matter how small, so as not to taint them, and to which only the mayombero or Olúo has access, after purifying himself, if he has sinned before that. But, due to plain economic reasons, the cauldrons and magic pots may have to be kept in the only room used by the padre nganga, who, generally, is not an ascetic and cannot be celibate. In this case, an informant, who did not want to be identified, gave us the secret of how to proceed to be with a woman without offending one’s nganga and thus “avoid headaches.”

“If you know what needs to be known, you can sin without sinning,” said Alberto H.

Let us see how to conjure the danger of tainting the nganga. Verbatim, according to this very strict mayombero: “By separating the spaces with a fence that the nganga cannot jump when the mayombero is unclean.” With white chalk you limit within the room the space that the cauldron or pot occupies. In this space—sacred—you enclose and isolate the spirit, which, remains perfectly isolated, without any possible contact with any impurity that might surround it. The magical tracing of the mayombero is “the fencing,” the wall that the mayombero erects and which separates the human being from that force of the other world and other forces concentrated in that sacred magical container. That way, the mayombero can now move freely in this profane space. But, under the risk of repeating what we have already said, let us listen to old Felix, so scrupulous in proceeding according to what he calls “the true pure Palo Monte:”

“Where the ngangulero is, there is his nganga to defend him. In the countyside, he keeps it in the hut, hanging from the ceiling, sometimes in the grill and down on the floor in a corner, hidden in a box. If there is simbo, money, he keeps the nganga in another room, but this is not necessary. What is natural is that a well-rounded man, a timbétimbé, should lead a wholesome
life with his wife, and, knowing how to work, the *prenda* should be well where its owner is. And he does not have to take precautions for anything if he does what he has to do so that the *nganga* does not see him and thus he does not stain the *nganga*. With this operation, the *nganga*, which is close, is at the same time far away, behind a *talanquera*. For the lustful and in order not to fall in error, what we *kuzumbaleros*, paleros, must do is this: you take the *mpemba*, the chalk, put the *nganga* in a box and lock it in there when you are not working and you take it out only when you play, officiate, and there you draw a line like this on the ground, a half circle and three crosses. One cross on each section of the line. You explain to the *nganga*, you say to it: You cannot get out of here… and then the *mayombero* can do as he wants. But watch out when he [141] gets up in the morning, if he slept with a woman and did not wash himself well or if he did not rub his hands with ashes! But if he is clean, he can greet the *nganga*, offer it tobacco smoke and its sprinkle of liquor and touch it. It would not hurt him. What is important is not to throw dirt on it.”

There is more.

The same taboo is observed by both Rules, the Kongo Rule and the Lucumí Rule. “No menstruating woman goes where there is a *nganga* or Santo. Now you will ask me what is the *mayombero* to do who cannot throw his wife out on the street each month for as long as she has her period. I will give you an answer. Well, the married man who has a *nganga* and cannot put it in another room, takes a cloth soaked in the blood of his woman, and makes with it a roll tied with a string of garlic. He puts the *prenda* nn this roll. The *prenda* receives the blood and can no longer harm the woman.”

The *mayombero* proceeds this way not only for the benefit of the woman but also so that in case he is absent, she can take care of the *nganga*, speak to it and ask that it protect him. Then,
in a rite we will call a rite of immunization, the mayombero gets the woman to step three times over the cauldron or pot, and then, taking the cauldron, he runs it on the woman from head to toe, warning the nganga: “This woman is called such-and-such. She is your queen, and if I am not here to do what I need to do, she will do it for me. Obey her.”

To know if the nganga agrees, the mayombero lays beforehand in a straight line, in front of the prenda, on the ground, seven small piles of gun powder and asks: “If you agree, move them all up to the foot of …”—he says the name of his nganga and ignites the gun powder. “Did all the piles explode? Then the nganga agrees.” But in order to confirm the answer in a more affirmative way, the ngangulero puts again the gun powder in piles and next to the last pile, he draws a cross. “Cross of Nsambi, cross of God which is a firm word of oath, and he says: Sacred word, if you agree, fula, move six and leave out one. Fula, don’t go beyond the cross.” He lights up, the six piles explode, and the pile of the cross, the seventh, does not explode. The nganga has expressed its agreement, without the shadow of a doubt.

The mayombero either does not explain to his woman or he does explain but in vague terms why he performs this ritual.

“No, she should not be told for what reason he has performed this ceremony. It is not convenient for her to know that with this ceremony she has the hand, the command, of the nganga, so that the nganga does not discover the woman’s secrets. When a nganga becomes devoted to somebody, it tells that person everything.”

Of course, it does happen that the nganga rejects the mayombero’s woman, since the mayombero first consults the nganga to see if the company of the woman is beneficial or harmful. Not infrequently, the “angels”—the souls, let us say, the characters—of the spouses or [142] lovers are not congenial and this lack of harmony is a source of future conflicts and
disagreements, lamentable because they transcend the field of the mystical. In the Lucumi Rule, it is known that the marriages of the children of the same Orisha do not harmonize, especially the children of Chango, and these, in the end, are forced to separate.

Through the first operation, the nganga, prisoner and isolated in its nkusu, in its fence, does not get stained and “since its does not see what is happening, the mayombo does not offend it and has no reason to hide.” The second operation insures the couple against the danger that the woman represents during the menstrual period, and the third operation empowers her, if she needs it or if her husband is sick or absent, to substitute him in taking care of the prenda during those times when he personally cannot do it and ask her to do it when it is necessary and beneficial.

During the festivitiers, the owners and children of the prendas do not attend the “plays”—tala nkisi, nkita—, the rites of the mayombe, the “patigangas,” without first purifying themselves if they have copulated shortly before the festivities. And under no circumstances do women who are menstruating attend. In these cases, they are excluded from any religious act and we know that this taboo is strictly observed.

In the Lucumi Rule also, the iyalochas suspend all works pertaining to their priestesshood. When impure, they do not approach the Orichas. Like the Orichas, the mpungus, nkita, and ngangas violently reject any impure woman who, out of forgetfulness or inconvenience, enters a Palo play or festivity. In the best of cases, the ngombe discreetly warns the mfumu or padre nganga or the ngua or madre about such a woman. The priest or priestess then asks who it is, and, to avoid embarrassing in front of the congregation whomever the ngombe indicates, the priest or priestess finds some pretext to call the woman aside and order her
to leave immediately the Nso Nganga, for her own good and for the good of all those congregated there.

Also, when a Dead has taken possession of a criado, ngombe or servant—Simba—\textsuperscript{106}, he or she will, as he or she begins the rites, make the round of the room, “of the ingenio,” in the figurative sense, examining the congregants in order to remove whomever is impure or has malicious intentions.

\begin{align*}
{Nd}undu & \text{ da vuelta al ingenio,} & \text{Nd}undu, & \text{circle the ingenio.} \\
{Si} & \text{ hay malo, avisa pa él, Nd}undu & \text{If there is trouble, reveal it, Nd}undu; \\
{tú} & \text{ avisa pa él,} & \text{warn us.} \\
{Si} & \text{ hay sucio, tu bota fuera.} & \text{If there is dirt, take it out.} \\
{Yo} & \text{ va mundo kuenda Misa} & \text{I am going to attend Mass;} \\
{Campo} & \text{ Santo tiene fiesta} & \text{Campo Santo has a feast} \\
{Si} & \text{ hay sucio bota pa fuera.}^{107} & \text{If there is dirt, take it out.}
\end{align*}

[143] If the ngombe deliberately bumps against a woman who is menstruating, even if the ngombe does not stop and continues to turn around without telling her anything, this indicates that this particular woman is impure, and will then say:

\begin{align*}
{Ins}aya & \text{ manguenguén} & \text{Ins}aya \text{ manguenguén} \\
{Tá} & \text{ huelé mancaperro} & \text{A smell goes out of the body} \\
{Ins}aya & \text{ manguén gueré.} & \text{Ins}aya \text{ manguén gueré.}
\end{align*}

The woman, who understands the veiled denunciation of the fumbi, hides her confusion and soon disappears. But shovings, headbutts, and blows are very common ways of lashing out for spirits in plays of “hard” Palo Monte. During these plays, “the fumbi is heavy-handed, rough, enraged,” and the impure women do not come out well. The manifestations of mediums in the
Kongo Rules, are always violent, and it is necessary to watch the ngomes lest they fall victim to the brutality of the possessing spirit.

The mayombero must always officiate barefoot. Some lift up their pants and tie a headwrap around their head.

The distraction caused by any shoe-wearing person entering a space where a Mayombe rite—a simbankisi—is taking place would infuriate the spirit because it is mandatory to assist to these ceremonies barefoot. Whoever, out of negligence, does not do it, will earn a reprimand. “Who has ever seen the dead with shoes?” The mayombero of the nganga would draw a cross in the instep of those attending: “A cross of God, Guindoki—Chamalongo—and let not this name be repeated. It is the emblem of Mayombe, the cross that encompasses the four parts into which the world is divided. This tracing commands such a force that the Kongo in my hometown used to put it in lime ovens to prevent the devil from stealing them away. In all the ngangas and everything that is done in the Mayombe Rule, the cross is traced in order to santuriar, to sacralize it, and when one does the sign of the Holy Cross, one crosses oneself, one says: Sidón lé mbala.”

This Nso Nganga, the room or sometimes miserably small room, or the modest house of the sorcerer, is not distinguishable by its exterior, nor is it distinguishable from the house of the padre de Santo, from all the common houses, neither in the sunbathed city nor in the countryside. Only the eye of a person in the know would identify them by a white and red flag fixed to the roof or the door.

Compared to the house of the Ilé-Oricha, the nso nganga is characteristically rustic and bare. Lacking are the decorations and seals that catch one’s attention in the house of the Ilé-
Oricha. You will not find these decorations in the single room or in the more comfortable house that in the city a renowned *mfumo mbara* dedicates to his *prenda*.

[144] “Nothing is worse for the *nganga* than a ground of tiles!”

There are certain items that cannot be absent from the room of the *nganga*, which is, moreover, the laboratory of the *palero*. Theses items, which must be there, covered with a cloth or tucked into the box under the table, are the following: a mortar to crush and grind the substances that compose the charms or “works;” the *guayo*, to scrape the pieces of wood, and the *nfansi* or *miansi*, the bones of humans and animals; a tin sieve, a piece of muslin to sieve the powders; embroidery canvas thread, scissors, needles, and color beads. Generally, at work time, the *mayombero* goes out to get the materials that are needed for the *trabajo*, the work, and only stocks those materials that are indispensable, that are not easily found, or that are believed unsurpassable to achieve certain results. Examples of these are the excrements of wild animals, the soil from their dens, lion fangs, and claws, which were said to be imported from Africa. Water from the first rain of May, blessed—“because it descends from the sky, the house of *Insambi*”—, and which is called *Masimán Sambi*[^82] *pangalanboko*; and *ngongoro* water, or silk-cotton tree water, to make people clairvoyant; granulated salt, red ocher, pepper; sulfur, mercury, and candles. Candles or candle stubs that had been used in a wake; church candles, especially those that had been used during Holy Week or during processions. Very valuable are the candles that had been used at the funeral of a Chinese. “I have gotten these at some funeral homes,” a sorcerer tells us in confidence, “but it is necessary to know the name of the dead Chinese in order to call him” and establish a relationship with his spirit. It is not strange to see a *mayombero*.

[^82]: In Kikongo, “*masa ma Nzambi*”, “the water of God.”
possessed by the spirit, stretch on the ground, ask for a lit candle and pour on his closed eyes the hot wax of the candle.

Under the light of the candle and in front of the nganga, the mayombero performs all his witchcraft. “Because the candle throws light into the darkness for the dead, and we need the candle to do good or evil. This very same muinda—candle—that you take to church, also helps you obtain whatever you desire and you should hold it in your hand, like the set of wooden horns that you cut on the Day of Saint John, because the horns that are cut on that day do not rot and no insects enter into them. They last a long time and it is not necessary to continually go back to the mountains to get new ones. They are all sprinkled with blessed water. A person comes to you, very frightened because this person wants you to drive insane an enemy who is throwing spells at this person, and it is true, and in order to save this person it is necessary to do away with the enemy? Well, I rip off the tail of a wall lizard, of which there are many in the yard, I light the candle of a funeral wake, and while the tail of the wall lizard jerks, I am cursing the enemy. Then I take a chip of a jía wood, a hook, another chip of guava wood, and I scrape it. I also scrape a piece of the nganga, a bone; I put a tooth or molar, a pinch of earth, and I jam the whole thing with a nail, I burn the tip of the nail in the candle flame. I take this work to the cemetery, I nail [145] the nail to the front of a grave, I call the dead who is there, and I say: ‘May the life of such-and-such, the enemy of so-and-so, be consumed with this candle.’ I leave it there, and the spirit of that dead torments him.”

Sulfur and mercury are two products that are of particular interest to the ngangulero and which is usually always in stock. Sulfur is the incense that the witches need to perform certain “harmful” jobs, mixed with certain ingredients and with bugs endowed with virtues used in benefic or malefic magic. Especially in the malefices intended to separate spouses or lovers, to
create discord, to cause misfortunes, accidents, deaths or to make talismans to fight victoriously, to escape from justice, to seduce, etc.

The *ngangulero* introduces mercury in his amulet as an element endowed with an extraordinary vitality. Because of its mobility, he says that it works in the *ngangas* like a heart that beats continuously, and he uses it as a stimulant.

There is no *padre nganga* with whom we have talked who has not recognized that mercury is excellent in producing madness, in combination with a dead, of course, or with two wings of a filthy turkey. The value of mercury in the art of the healer, in his medicine, inseparable from magic, will be examined in another book. The *palero* will also have in reserve in his *nso* some bird feathers, not to symbolize with them a sacrifice that, in the Lucumí Rule, the consultant of a *olorica* or of a *iyalocha* cannot afford, but to use them in his works of aggressive magic or defensive magic. He will not be without ashes—*mpolo banso*—to purify his hands by rubbing them against one another, which, moreover, has many applications. For certain jobs, he will have in stock some crawling creatures: frogs, scorpions, *macaos*, spiders, ants, green flies, earthworms, woodworms, termites (“Sollanga bad bug. How he walks, the Mundele Telengunda! How she walks Sollanga!”)

For example, to manufacture a *mpaka*—the pot that he holds in his hand when he performs a job so that the spirit, through the pot, can enter into him and speak through him—the *mayombero* needs: a hairless spider, a scorpion, a dog, a centipede, a dragonfly, a cricket, a bat, some soil from a fire ant mound, some soil from a cemetery, a tooth or molar of the deceased, a hand or foot bone from a dead. Worms from decomposing cadavers which are put in the *ngangas* are extremely valuable, “but very difficult to get, like skulls with the brain already rotten.”
The layperson reading these notes will notice that the *fula*, the gun powder, which many elders call “English coffee,” is, in the *nso nganga*, an indispensable element to initiate any magical operation. Under the risk of repeating ourselves, we reproduce the illustrated explanation, with its corresponding signs, that a *villumbrero* gave us.

“The sorcerer cannot work without gun powder. All the Kongo Rules use it to call, to inquire, to order, to project the works: when the *fula* explodes, the *füiri* is propelled to accomplish the mission with which it is charged. The *ngangulero* squats in front of the *nganga*, whistles three times, sprinkles it three times with liquor, hot pepper, Guinea pepper, ginger, and soil. He blows tobacco smoke at it and he himself passes the lit tobacco around his head, then his back, and between his legs. He makes a scrawl on the ground in front of the *nganga*, and above the scrawl, he puts small piles of gun powder: seven or fourteen, twelve or twenty-one, according to what is customary. This is to ask the *nganga* if the spell he is preparing will have an effect or not. The *nganga* answer when the *ngangulero* lights it up with his tobacco. If the work is perfect, it blows up all the piles and the smoke goes toward the pot or cauldron. If there is some difficulty, it is investigated with the gun powder. If of the seven piles three explode and four remain, ‘the thing will not work.’ If the smoke takes out four and leaves three, that is good, and thus, through this process of question and answer from the *fula*, one knows what stands in the way of a perfect job.

*Fula* and *mpemba*, the gun powder and the while chalk are inseparable…

The chalk, used to draw the signature on which the *prenda* is put. The circle, which means security. In the center of the circle, the cross which is strength, the strength of all the spiritual forces that work in the *nganga*. 
Concerning what I told you about the need that a kuzumbalero has to inquire about the result of a trabajo, a job, that he does against an enemy, I will give you this example so that you can see how it works.

[147] I did this drawing—of Nkuyo or Tata Legua, a Kongo Eleguá. The arrow at the right represents the enemy. To ask, one uses the center arrow. In the black point that is at the bottom of the center arrow, one puts the first small pile of gun powder, and the mayombero says: If truly, truly he is my enemy, take way three of the way that is made for him (right) and three of the guide (center) of the right hand. Leave the center free. If six small piles of fula explode and seven remain, the person one suspects is one’s enemy is so indeed. If only the center gun powder explodes, the person is not an enemy.

- Do you want another example? Here, I draw the fimba.
At the top, in the point of the guide (on the vertical arrow where it crosses the horizontal cross), one puts a matario nsasi, a piedra de rayo, a lightening stone. Below the vertical arrow, one lights up the fula after saying: Matari nsasi kuenda kunayandi, look at the river dam; Kunayandi matoko nganga vira vira licencia ntoto Insambi muna lango, God comes down in the water from the sky; Tu kuenda monansula Kimputo. Ay Siete Rayos Kimpesa! One explains the case, what one desires to achieve, and requests that the nganga respond, that it say what needs to be done, lighting up the small piles of gun powder that the padre nganga indicates.

“To draw the sign, one always sings. And if the padre nganga is in disagreement with another person, he asks the nganga:

¿Tré silango tré silango Three paths, three paths,
Cual nsila yo bóban? Which path should I follow?
¿Krabátan sila kié Krabátan, as I seek the path,
Krabátan sila mubomba Ngola? Krabátan, can you show me the path of Ngola?

because there are many lands, tribes of Kongo, and he wants to know his nsila, his way. 

[148] Krabátan sila Krabátan path
Lié karabatan sila Showing the way.

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83 In Kikongo, “nzila”, path, way.
Mu bomba Ngola. Even the path of Ngola

Kié Karabatan sila Karabatan, can you show me the path,

¿Sila luwanda? The path of luwanda?

¿Sila mubomba? The path of mubomba?

¿Sila musundi? The path of musundi?

¿Sila Ngunga?” The path of Ngunga?

Let us not forget another element that the mayombero cannot do without either: the royal palm broom, ntiti, with which to scare away the evil spirits, and hit the nganga when necessary. Especially the ngangas judías. But there are ngangas that are so strong, so strong-willed that their masters do not always manage to escape becoming enslaved by their slave.

Some of my informants blame the untidiness of the mayombero’s praise house on a cultural inferiority of the Kongo, on their supposed rusticity. The Lucumí priests, when they prosper, like to surround their Orichas with luxury. They improve the quality of the soup tureens in which they keep the ritual stones. One should see them now in the Ilé of Miami, some of them are imported and very expensive. One should also see the attributes of the Gods; those that used to be of copper are now of gold, and those that used to be of white metal or lead are now of silver. With prosperity, the basket used to keep the soup tureens is renewed, and it is opened with pride to show off the series of decorations and trinkets that, since its implementation in Havana, the Ten-Cent offered to the Santeros, and here in Miami, the botanical products, and in their rooms the luxurious Catholic image of their devotion is installed. The walls of the the Nso of the padre nganga do not carry decorations and in Cuba I did not see on them big images.
“If in the house of the true nganga you don’t see decorations or trinkets, it is that way in order not to mislead the spirit.”

The abode of the nganga is not affected by the wellbeing of its owner. The mayombero, no matter how much he may make, remains a “child of el Monte.” “His religion is wild.” This does not mean that he will not buy himself a good solid gold chain with a nkangui, a crucifix, or a medal of Mama Kengue, of Nsasi or Mama Mbumba, in their Catholic incarnations (Our Lady of Mercy, Saint Barbara, or the Virgin of the Rule).

[149] “The nkisis are not ostentatious.” “They are nature spirits.” We remember a villumbero who used to make a lot of money, according to what we were told. He lived with his wife and four children in a house so small that when this illustrious murumbero, during the Christmas Meal, sacrificed a nkombo—a goat—to his prenda and many people met in the house, in order to breathe without suffocating, it was necessary to be endowed with a pair of lungs and a stomach that had been tested and tried as solid and resistant. The same thing used to happen in many other houses of paleros.

Six mayomerbos black as coal were sharing the “accessory” of T.P.B., and other six that of the villareño Rosendo, a traveling salesman. But, we ask, How do they fit? Well, they “squeeze well,” Rosendo told us, “in a couple of folding beds and on the floor.” In other small room in the outskirts of Marianao, armed with drawer planks and zinc sheets, lived our good friend J.B., who refused to accept the more spacious housing that we offered him. No, thank you! That is where his prenda liked to live, and with four konguakos—four companions—of his who no longer worked on the plaza but “eat and live from what falls off... and what falls off is always enough.” The nganga provided. The witch does not starve. Hygiene in no way disturbed the existence of those miracle workers who settled on living under such conditions. I do not think
sardines fit better in a can than an incredible number of Negroes in an unbelievably small space, and what is extraordinary is that it is not need that pushes them to it. Had Diogenes been African, he would not have been alone in the barrel.

We were told that a lot of Negroes lived in Las Yaguas, and that one of them, Emilio Acevedo, has a *chicherekú* that had attacked several children.

“Not a *chicherekú,*” Lázaro said, “if he is a *mayombero,* if his Rule is a Kongo Rule, what he has is a *nkuyo,* or a *nkónsi* or a *kini-kini.*” A wooden doll, of some sixty centimeters, in which the sorcerer introduces a spirit. Those dolls walk, speak, run errands for the sorcerer and are, as is known, very much feared. This would be one of the few Nkuyos with a living owner that remained in Havana, since people had discontinued manufacturing them at one point when, in 1916, the police frequently raided the houses of the *brujos* and took away their magic belongings. Many dolls, whose owners have died, still roam the fields at night.

Las Yaguas were a model in the overcrowded spaces of people of color that existed at that time, though there were a few white people in them. They were not, I insist, the product of poverty, but of a very special way of being. Usurping plots of land well-situated in a recently-[150] urbanized area, facing a main artery of flowing traffic, there rose up that exemplary and growing neighborhood of indigents of Havana, but, I repeat, of false indigents in great part, the most extraordinary that one could visit.

Nested in such a central location and visible with its stacked up and dilapidated huts which shrank and pressed one against the other, confusing, in some places, rags, dirt, breaths, and dejections, it was the desperation and shame of the neat citizens. Like other more remote and secluded neighborhoods, El Pocito, Llega y Pon,108 Pon si Puedes, Por mis Timbales, Coco Solo, Pan con Timba, Las Yaguas were a hotbed, hard to measure, of residents who, neither envious
nor envied, lived in the worst imaginable sanitary conditions, buried in stinking mud during the rainy season, and amid dumpsters and dust the rest of the year.

Anybody who dared penetrate there was first surprised to discover that, even though water was scarce, people looked clean. It is true that the Cuban people are surprisingly clean and that they bathe daily, out of sheer pleasure. Showers work on all levels of society. In many of these huts, one could admire the prized three-mirror dresser which allowed people to see their full body, and the beds with woven mattresses. The second thing that surprised the adventurer was to learn that many of the happy residents of Las Yaguas were junior public servants who could have afforded, without big sacrifices, to live in healthier neighborhoods, under more secure roofs. Representing science, there lived a midwife; representing the noblest of teaching, a public school teacher, whose name we recorded; representing the Authorities, police officers, and, representing the ideals of the nation, the botelleros, the “bottle racks”\textsuperscript{109} and the political spinners.\textsuperscript{110} Not all of them were indigents, not remotely, in the desperate meaning of the word. The indigents who lived in those pigsties, challenged without disrespect but with spark—and counting on the indulgence of the Government—any sanitary regulation and well defended by their Eleguas, Makutos, Bisonsos, or by a magical fence, from any attack attempted by the civilization that at all time passed by in a hurry, represented in omnibuses and automobiles, looking away from the labyrinth of eccentric and filthy slums separated by dividers covered in filth, which opened up between them. The huts grew and multiplied in so much disorder and so close together that, in some areas, people fought and shoved for a few inches of space, while the alleys twisted and narrowed more and more each day.

Of course there were in this neighborhood mayomberos and santeros, spiritists and practitioners of all creeds. On the door of many huts, a faded rag indicated the presence of the
mayomberos, as well as the stench of any animal sacrifice that slowly rotted close by from a rusty zinc roof or from the dirty and flea-ridden royal palm roof.

[151] The Negroes can face up to all types of deprivations and inconveniences. All these challenges can be acceptable if people could live according to their wishes and without restrictions. And many freely chose to live under God’s mercy—who squeezes but does not choke—without working—for the cow that does not have a tail, God chases away the flies—and as things turn out. There is no winter in Cuba, and there, the cicadas had no reason to imitate the ants. There is nothing more relative and disconcerting than the extreme poverty of the Negroes, who, with a little bit of music, dance, and laughter, dispel the tragic gesture and sweeten the most bitter of tastes. With the astonishing potential of their joy, with a conformism that I am not sure if it should be envied, misery never runs their spirit down. When it grips them, and many times because of indolence, negligence or lack of foresight, they know how to shrug their shoulders and they have enough strength to laugh a little under the sun, because under the sun burdens are lighter, and the loving sun of what used to be our Island, the generous nature, the easy life, disposed people of all walks of life to not withhold bread from whoever had a bigger void in the stomach than in the heart.

During those years, contrary to what is happening now, the tragedy of poverty did not convince anybody, beginning with its protagonists.111 In a prosperous country that was ruled by jokes and good humor, precisely because in that country everybody ate and where, in the end, all problems were solved, except death—“There is no problem, man, there is no problem!”—economic dramas were converted into comedy sketches with rumba or guaracha ends (maybe that is why we are here, or maybe because the unconscious happiness of Cubans provoked the anger of the Gods).
In other words, people could be poor without running the risk of summarily starving to death. And people rarely died alone and abandoned. In the most unexpected and fantastic way, one day, the poor by vocation, because they did not want to work, could wake up believing themselves rich, when from the sky fell the bank notes that they needed to buy a television set or something else, as it happened to an acquaintance of mine of the Pogolotti neighborhood, a happy philosopher, who urgently needed a new pair of shoes. One day, fortune briefly smiled at him, and thanks to gambling, he cashed some pesos. He bought a saxophone and a silver wrist watch, which ate up all his money, and he did not have enough left for the shoes.

Those needy hamlets, where so many people willingly went to live—the only thing they asked of the philanthropic souls and of the State was that they be left in peace—were far from being, as we believed, gloomy refuges of misfortune, dangerous breeding grounds of infection. It is true that the sun scorched mounds of trash that filled the air with bad odors. But that air is the one that is today breathed, more pestilent, poisoned, in the starving countrysides and towns of Cuba, and in the capital, half in ruins, which is not shown to the tourists. Its houses, because there are no materials with which to repair them, are slowly falling apart. In its streets, we are told by those who have been escaping from there, one can admire the most beautiful samples of rats, which, as they please and like the rain, enter into the houses infested by cockroaches and terrorize the citizens, if we can still use the word “citizens” to refer to the Cubans enslaved in Cuba.

A wonderful enforcer of Marxism-Leninism, set to reduce to misery a whole population in fewer than twenty years! In this aspect, objectively, the new amazing Soviet Cuba is worthy of admiration.
Only once did we visit Las Yaguas neighborhood, an interesting neighborhood because it revealed to us the idiosyncrasy of a section of our population. The neighborhood was demolished at the end of the last legitimate government we had, good or bad, but still a Cuban government. In order to know the *mayomberos*, it was not necessary to acquaint ourselves with the false poverty of some who, in their rundown huts, along with their *ngangas*, had television sets, refrigerators, and for the women, shiny mirrors and Revlon or Guerlain perfumes, as incredible as that might sound.

In the “praise house,” that is, in the room or “accessory” that the *ngangulero* occupies in a plot of land, either in a countryside house or in a house located in the very center of Havana, the *ngangas* are kept covered with a black cloth and are hidden, as we have already said. The room that is dedicated to the *ngangas* in the more spacious houses of the *mayomberos* who enjoy more prosperity remain locked during the days when they are not “playing.”

The priests and priestesses of the Lucumí Rule “greet” their Orichas daily, one by one, invoking their attention, calling them with sounds of bells or maracas, and offer them long prayers, usually spending a part of their mornings in theses devotions. The *mayomberos*, as the reader already knows, limit themselves to sprinkling their pots or cauldrons with liquor, to fumigate them by blowing on them dense puffs of tobacco smoke and to lighting up for them candles that will burn for a while and will be consumed completely, and this once a week or before celebrating a *nkike*, or a *bondankisi*. The most valuable days to *llamar palo*, to call palo, to invoke the spirits, to *simbankisi*, to work with them, to manufacture a protective charm, to harm or to exorcize, “to remove a harm”, to heal, are Saturdays and Sundays, although choosing those days is not indispensable. “One works when it is necessary.”
“Then the mayombero, as he draws on the ground with the mpemba,\textsuperscript{84} says:

\begin{align*}
Kati kampo munantoto & \quad \text{Within this circle in the world} \\
Batukandumbe Bakurunda & \quad Batukandumbe Bakurunda \\
Bingaranmanguei & \quad Bingaranmanguei
\end{align*}

[153] and repeats:

\begin{align*}
Batukandumbe Bakurunda & \quad Batukandumbe Bakurunda \\
Bingaranmanguei & \quad Bingaranmanguei
\end{align*}

and the mayombero calls his nfumbi, burning the three small piles of gun powder so that the dead can wake up in the pot or cauldron that he has laced with coco butter.

\begin{align*}
Tré con tré & \quad \text{Three with three} \\
¿contigo quién pué? & \quad \text{who can overcome you,} \\
Nsusu bare con tó. & \quad \text{Nsusu, who sweeps all?}
\end{align*}

As for the sacrifices, they are neither as frequent nor are they as expensive as the ones offered to the Orichas. Only once a year is it mandatory to offer to the ngangas or nkisos the following sacrifices: a rooster whose bones are buried without a single bone being removed (the taita eats the meat) and a goat, but the bones of the goat are not buried, and the blood is not poured on the nganga because doing so would bring misfortune, disease, and death.

Mimicking the elders, a young palero says that “cholera could enter the ingenio,” an epidemic, any disease could decimate all the Mwana Nso, Mpamba, Konguako, the children and brothers and sisters of the Nso Nganga and all the clients of the witch.

The goat is not sacrificed in the room where the nganga is. In the city, it is slaughtered in the yard of the house, and in the countryside, outside the hut. To offer the blood to the fumbi, one digs a hole in the ground, lights up a muinda, a candle, and the spirit leaves its room and goes out to drink the blood there.

\textsuperscript{84} “Mpemba” is Kikongo for “chalk.”
“If the nganga wins a goat, the goat is offered to it. It gets the goat when it deserves it. And there are occasions, dates, during which a feast is given for the nganga, and the nganga dances: Nganga kinakiaku.”

“In the house of my nkisiwángara,” used to say José del Rosario, emphasizing the strict austerity of the nso nganga, “you will not find pictures or paintings on the wall, or an altar with Saints; nothing! Clean, bare. When there is a ceremony, the prenda is taken out of the box, and the padre calls, opens, saying:

- Bueno día pa to lo mundo de Dió. Greetings to all the people of God.
- Dipué de Dio, Sambiapunga After God, Sambiapunga
- Santo Bárbara bendito Blessed Saint Bárbara
- Todo lo mundo da licencia Give permission to all the people

[154] Campo Santo da licencia Campo Santo, give permission
- Cuatro Equina da licencia Cuatro esquina, give permission
- Bueno día pa to lo mundo Greetings to all the people,
- Chiquito y grande que etá llá dentro. Small and big, who are inside.

Permission is requested to “work”:

- Cheche Wanga füiri mutanbo Cheche Wanga kill the trap

Or one “opens” like one of my informants:

- “Santa Bárbara bindito y Blessed Saint Bárbara and
- Santísimo Sacramento, Holy Sacrament,
- tó mundo dé licencia, give permission to all the people,
- Vamo a vé Campo Santo mío We are going to see, my Santo Campo
Cá uno con lo suyo

Dipué de Insambi tú.”

Each person engaged in work
After Insambi, you.”

Or like Ñico:

Abri kutu Ndinga mambo
Con licencia, con licencia
Lodé Moriluo Simidondo
Con licencia Anselma Mina.
Simidondo.
Kasimbiko abri kutu Ndinga
Con licencia Sambiampungo
Con licencia Santa Bárbara
Sin Santa Bárbara
no hay Palo Monte
Con licencia Mariquilla
Con licencia Mariwanga
Con licencia Kalunga
Con licencia Siete Mundo
Perro con gato pelea
y vive bajo la misma mesa
Diente con lengua pelea
y vive dentro de la boca
Con licencia Jesu Crito
Con licencia Santo Sepulcro

Open the bag Ndinga mambo
With permission, with permission
Praise Moriluo Simidondo
With permission, Anselma Mina.
Simidondo.
Kasimbiko, open the bag Ndinga
With permission, Sambiampungo
With permission, Saint Bárbara
Without Saint Bárbara
there is no Palo Monte
With permission, Mariquilla
With permission, Mariwanga
With permission, Kalunga
With permission, Siete Mundo
The dog and the cat fight
and live under the same table
The tooth and the tongue fight
and live in the same mouth
With permission, Jesus Christ
With permission, Holy Sepulcher
In the room, there is nothing else but the nkiso or the nganga. There are candles, since never is work done in darkness; we already know that the candle illuminates the way for the dead. Tobacco, a bottle with chamba or the consecration wine, a knife, the chalk to draw the patipembas, the signatures or magical tracings, in a flask the “English coffee,” the fula, the gun powder. All this set next to the Nganga, and the singing stops.

The ritual objects that padre nganga or the madre nganga uses are in the pot or cauldron, “receiving force,” infused with the supernatural energies of the dead and the spirits that dwell in trees, and from there the mayombero takes these spirits whenever he needs them: the scepter or invocation baton that functions as a conductor of the spirit to the ngangulero which is a tibia or a piece of a tibia. This bone is wrapped in laurel leaves, one of the trees that are most valued because of its powerful magical virtues, because in this tree, as in other sacred trees, many spirits settle or “live.”
Moreover, to the *Kisengue* or *Kisenguere*—also called *Fisenge, Nwala*, and, in Spanish, *Siete Rayos, Seven Rays*—are attached feathers of night birds, “associates of death.”

The other instrument is a horn, *mpaka*, which has the same purpose as the tibia, which is to put the witch in contact with the spirit and show him the things of the spiritual worlds. The horn, filled with magical substances, with a piece of mirror embedded at its base, *vititi mensu*, or an ordinary mirror, round, the *muine*,113 allows the *mayombero* to see what is hidden. With the piece of mirror embedded in the *mpaka*, the *Nfumo Bata or Taita Nganga* foretells things, gazing in the mirror. For this he has “the sight fixed,” that is, he has achieved clairvoyance through a magical treatment of baths, in which effectively intervene the eyes of certain animals. It is a water solution that contains many virtues for the eyes—secretions and blessed water from church—that is poured into the eyes of the neophyte in order to make the candidate clairvoyant. But when one has the sight “fixed,” one sees not only through the mirror, the intermediary, but also through any other object. Through a glass of water, the nail of a toe, the palm of the hand, pierced with two safety pins forming a cross, the method used by an old Kongo woman consulted by Cándida, a Lucumi Santera, to foretell the future. It can also be done by looking into a piece of white china, as Juan Mayumba and other elders used to do.

People also used to use a *Sanga Ndilé* or a *Kimbúngula*, a necklace with an amulet at one [156] end. Hanging from the hand of the *padre ngangula*, with a circular movement or a pendulum movement, it answers the questions that the *padre ngangula* asks. “Kimbúngula, besides the necklace of the *nganga*, are the Winds.”

One bone is a witch—*ndongo, kindoki*—with sight, just as one is born stupid or intelligent: “Whoever was born with *wanga*, what the Lucumí calls *ache*, this person, before
becoming *Moana Nganga Ntu*, initiated, man or woman, sees what others don’t see; and this person doesn’t know that he or she has grace, that he or she is a *kindamba kusaka*, a seer.”

The *padre nkisi*, before consulting the mirror, passes it, tracing a cross, over the candle flame, blackens it, fills his mouth with liquor and sprays it abundantly before blowing at is the ritual puffs of tobacco smoke. Liquor and tobacco are the indispensable gift that the witch offers to every type of *prendas*, amulets, and talismans. Afterwards, with a piece of clean cloth, he defogs and polishes it and sees what is hidden.

Tiyo says that the *mayombo* does not see with his own eyes but with the eyes of the spirit that “mounts” him and that in order for the eyes of the spirit and the eyes of the *ngombe* align—that the eyes of the *ngombe* do not get damaged—it is necessary to “fix the sight,” “to reinforce it.” Sometimes, the clairvoyance that is acquired with the potion that the *nfumo bata* prepares is so sharp that it is necessary, withought wasting a second, to isolate the initiate from a lucidity that dazzles him and threatens to leave him blind or insane, for all the mysteries that, suddenly, appear before his sight. Then his eyes are washed with rain water and into each pupil are dropped two drops of dry wine. It sometimes happens that the *nfumo bata*, in order, for some reason, to punish the *moana*, deprives him of the clairvoyance that he had previously granted him.  

In the same token, it is possible for the *taita nkisa*—“and it happens a lot”—to blur the sight of an enemy or of a whining or ungrateful *moana mganga*. “The *taita nkisi*, with a mirror and four candles, goes to a crossroads. He fogs the mirror, he traces on it a cross with candle wax and buries it. The godchild immediately loses the sight. He or she will no longer see. *Vititi* is over! Even though he or she might claim to see, it is a lie. *Vititi Diensu* is over until his elder can
forgive him or her.” Of course, the *taita nganga* grants the sight only to those who are worthy of his trust. “The Negroes of nations did know how to impart sight.”

The elder Anastasio knew the ingredients of the preparation done by Taita Maíz Seco, the biological father of Bruno Samá and the master of all the *mayomberos* of his time. The marvelous preparation consisted in the fusion of two types of water. The first one is water in which has been captured the secretion of the eyes of a vulture, of a *nsuso mayimbe*, thus appropriating the powerful sight of those birds of prey who are able to spot, from incalculable heights, the body of a rat. The second one is the water of the eyes of a newly-born dog. When the dog opens its eyes, the *tantandi* is done, along with its good sight, of the noble quality that [157] characterizes this animal: faithfulness to its master, which, interestingly, together with the sight, is transferred to the godchild. But if one wants to make the sight of the *moana* stronger, more penetrating, one adds to these prepared waters, a water that contains the virtues of the eye of an owl, of a *nsuso ndiambo*, which penetrates darkness. Of course, a “right” would be paid to the owl because, as is well known, nothing in nature, whether an animal, a plant, or a mineral, concedes, for free, its powers to the *mayombero* or to anyone else. The *nsunsu ndiambo*, also called *mafuka* or *miniampungo*, a precious bird for the *nganga ngombo*, spirit-bird, we could call it, vehicle of the *ndokis*, a mysterious bird. *Lembo, lembo!,* one of my informants used to say about it.

The *taita wamba*, the old and wise witch, does not do without the *susundamba*, to whom he addresses and orders this way in a mambo:

*Ié lechuza pone huevo en la ceiba*  *The owl lays its eggs in the silk-cotton tree*

*Komayanga*  *Komayanga*

*Lechuza mandadero en la sombra*  *The owl works in the dark*
Pasa por Casa Grande,\textsuperscript{115} passes by Casa Grande,
manda parte pa la Nfinda sent to the forest
Tronco Ceiba tiene lechuza The trunk of the silk-cotton tree has an owl,
De verdad Tronco Ceiba, Truly the trunk of the silk-cotton tree,
Padre mío, abrí kuku. my Padre, open the kitchen.
Cucha cosa Kabulanga Listen to Kabulanga

“When the nganga knows, Susundamba hears the song, and then says in the yimbi:”
Ya yangó, yo wirí mambo It is done, I heard the mambo
Yo entro la Nfinda I enter the forest
Casa Grande vi ti luto Casa Grande is dressed in mourning
Ya yangó, Siete Hueso son Kalunga It is done, Siete Hueso is Kalunga
Mbele va a cotá kambiriso. The knife is going to cut kambiriso.

Mbele, the knife, symbolically will cut off a harm; a harm will be undone, “as if it said:”
Kalunga cota muruwanda Kalunga, cut muruwanda
Embacadero son muruwanda A boat is muruwanda
Kalunga mi kalunga Kalunga, my kalunga
Cota cota muruwanda. Cut, cut muruwanda.

When during the bondankisi, the initiation, the eyes of the kuano, the neophyte, are washed, his or her mbala or nsumbariana, his padrino, makes the neophyte swallow seven heads of pepper and the heart of an eel, a nbundo ngola.

[158] “The eel, which the elders taught us to appreciate very much because it strengthens the brain and defends the body from all that is bad, is called ngola.” But also, and this is the most important consideration for the future nganga ngombe, the eel enables him to read thoughts. It is
said that the same virtues are found in the guabina fish. The heart of the guabina fish is administered in very few cases. The Negroes of nation and the elders distrusted the young Creoles, given to “licking themselves,” loudmouths, unable to keep a secret, and the eels have many secrets that they kept. According to other informants, a small, live, shrimp or a tiny crab, of the kind that is sometimes found in oysters, is ingested at the same time as the peppers and the eel, because “they also clear the mind and the memory” and “along the way, safeguard the body from Ndundu Karire, who is the Devil, the owner of Nsila, of a Cuatro Caminos,” says Casanova. However, the story of the tiny crab and the tiny shrimp does not convince the Trinidad native Félix, who doubted that a Gangulero of “pure mayombe” would use such things.

According to M.C. and Baró, there are two types of sight: simple sight and strong sight. To grant the simple sight to a ngombe—with this sight, the ngombe sees no more than his jurisdiction, for example, if he is in Havana, he would see only what is happening in Havana; if he is in Matanzas or other provinces, he would see only what is happening in those provinces—over his wide open eyes is passed an egg that had been laid on Good Friday and two drops of dry wine are dropped in each eye.

“His eyes should not be baptized with holy water, because the simple sight jumps neither river nor sea.” While the sight we have talked about, the strong sight, the sight that is obtained with a vulture, a dog, and an owl, “this one does reach Guinea, crosses rivers, crosses seas, reaches the bottom of bottoms.”

A young palero “grants the simple sight with alumamba, which is slime from the river bed, earth honey, the honey from a beehive located in the cavity of a rotten tree. He mixes the slime and the honey with ogén, marjoram, geranium, and seven yellow crumbs, and washes the eyes.” “This,” an elder tells us, “is probably done, but it does not get my approval.”
When the *nfumo* has prepared the eyes of the initiate “to catch the light that watches the world,” he is presented the mirror and the following chant is sung to him:

\[
\begin{align*}
Vaya vaya fin del mundo & \quad \text{Go to the end of the world} \\
Nsusu divinando, nsusu divinando. & \quad \text{Nsusu divining, nsusu divining}
\end{align*}
\]

He is already a clairvoyant and that is what he proclaims in a mambo:

\[
\begin{align*}
Yo aprendé divino cosa malo & \quad \text{I learned to divine evil things} \\
Suamito dá yo Lucero & \quad \text{My Teacher gave me a Lucero} \\
[159]\text{Ya yo lucero yo mira mundo} & \quad \text{With my Lucero I look into the world} \\
La fin del mundo la fin del mundo & \quad \text{The end of the world, the end of the world} \\
Ya yo Lucero brinca la mar & \quad \text{With my Lucero I cross the sea} \\
Ya yo ve la cosa mundo & \quad \text{I have seen the things of the world} \\
Mi suamito mío yo mira mundo & \quad \text{My Teacher, I see the world} \\
Mayordomo mío yo mira mundo & \quad \text{My Mayordomo, I see the world} \\
Madrina mía yo mira mundo & \quad \text{My Madrina, I see the world} \\
Yo voy léjo corré mundo & \quad \text{I am going far across the world} \\
Yo coge lucero & \quad \text{I take Lucero} \\
Corre mundo & \quad \text{across the world} \\
Yo avisa Mayombero. & \quad \text{I inform the Mayombero.}
\end{align*}
\]

Or he says:

\[
\begin{align*}
Conguido tu no m’engaña & \quad \text{With you, Kongo, I don’t go wrong} \\
Mira vé la Cosa Mala & \quad \text{Look and see the Evil One} \\
Misuamito da yo lucero & \quad \text{My Teacher gave me a Lucero} \\
Yo mira mundo divino & \quad \text{I see the divine world}
\end{align*}
\]
Cosa Malo yo vé la cosa mundo. Evil One, I see the things of the world.

Sometimes, in order to divine—we will see this when we penetrate a nso of the Kimbisa del Santo Cristo del Buen Viaje—the *mayombero* makes use of seven small sea shells, seven, no more.

“The Kongo used snail shells for decoration, and there were many on their beaches. The most beautiful shells were from the Kongo, from Luanda, and were used as money, like in the land of the Lucumí. The legitimate owners of the divination shell are the Lucumí. The shell of the Bafumba—Kongo—is the *vititi mensu* and that of the Pángue—Lucumí—is the *Dilogún.*”

The *palero* or *patinganga* only takes hold of the shells, which Ta Kuilo calls *bonantoto,* to interrogate the *nganga,* when he wants to save gun powder. The shell answers “yes” or “no” to his questions. “Many times,” I am told, “if we are short on *fula,* we manage to find out what the *nganga* wants or what we are interested in knowing. Let me give you an example. Let us suppose that all of a sudden, I must go on business to Havana. I need to know if my trip will be good or bad. I shake, throw the shells on the ground, and ask: Let’s see Manita what you have to tell me. Is there danger for me? Three shells fell face up and four face down. This tells me: good; I can travel in peace. If there had been five shells face down and two face up: bad. Really watch out. It can also be the case that there comes a person who wants to know something and the *mayordomo* [160] doesn’t want to waste his *fula.* He asks with the shells: three fall face up, four face down… They say that this person is in good health, as well as the person’s family. Ah! But if two of the shells fall face down and five fall face up, what the person has come for is not a remedy for health, nor something to find work. The person has come for Karakambula sorcery; what the person wants is *nkangar*—to tie up—or salt somebody.”
Hate, envy, and carnal desire constitute the capital of the witch. Envy, above all, Bamboché would say categorically, is the mother of *brujería mala*, harmful witchcraft. “This is the way in which one asks if this is yes and that is no, and one asks again with the seven shells, until one finds out about everything.”

These shells, which are not the small cauris of the Meridilogún, frequently cover the little piles of gun powder that the *mayombero* lays down on the ground. With the same language of affirmatives and negatives, as the gun powder explodes, according to the number of the piles that explode and the position in which they fall, the *mayombero* obtains answers from the spirits.

At other times, the gun powder is covered with small china cups, empty condensed milk cans, and bottle caps.

It is said that the divination sight is not conferred on the non-initiated, and it is an integral part, a complement of the initiation, of the *kimba* or *kimbo*, as a member of the Herrera family used to called it.

I was not able to witness an initiation in the n*so nganga*, even though, as a visitor, thanks to the *palero* C.H., I attended a *tala nkisi*, “a play,” in which a young woman was delivered from the bad influences that used to torment her at all times, putting her within a fence of gun powder. To the curiosity of the reader, I can only offer the description made by a septuagenarian practitioner of Vriyumba and the other description made by a godson of Andrés Congo. These descriptions do not depart too much from the descriptions I owe to my other elder informants and which appear in *El Monte*.117

“The person who receives the initiation dies, goes to Kunanfinda, is in the world of the dead and is with the dead as long as the oath lasts. That man that the *nganga* initiated, or that woman, has sealed a pact with the dead.”
“In order to own a nganga, the body of the moana is prepared in the house of the padrino, giving him seven baths of a water boiled with plants; for example yara, guara, rompezaragüey, and during each bath, he is made to take three sips of the same water so that he can also be cleansed from inside. His body is not dried with cloth or towel. The air dries it. There are padrinos who blindfold their godchildren to bathe them; there are those who would not blindfold the godchildren, like the padrinos of the Kimbisa del Santo Cristo del Buen Viaje. And there are padrinos who request that the godchildren take those baths in their own homes. The plants must be boiled in a new pot, and from the fire on which that water is boiled, no one can take a single ember, nor light a cigar, and whatever ash or charcoal remains from the fire will be extinguished with water. The designated bath hour is twelve noon. If the nganga has ordained it, a black chicken is passed—or the initiate does it—over the initiate’s body and afterwards the chicken will be thrown at the cemetery or at the feet of a silk-cotton tree. The initiate must sleep seven nights at the home of the nkai, alone, next to the nganga. In the meantime, the initiate will raise a rooster that is not white or off-white; its color will be the color of the rooster that is customarily offered to the nganga, because not all the ngangas eat the same thing. And the initiate will buy a knife with a white tip and a box of candles.”

After these seven days, the initiate will “pledge nganga”—will be consecrated.

“At the end of the nights when I had to sleep hooked to the cauldron, the padre nganga, the mayordomo, and the madrina met: they removed my shirt, they put on me a non-peaked black cap, having two stripes forming a cross. Nobody witnesses this ceremony. We were alone, only the four of us. With chalk, the mayombero painted seven crosses on me: one above the nipple, another on the forehead, on both sides of the back, and behind, on the neck bone, and another small one that before used to be made on the crown of the head. Seven in total. In my nso they
did not trace on the tongue like the Lucumí, nor on the arms. On these crosses is poured candle wax. Mama Yari, the *madrina*, holding a lighted candle, stood behind me, and the *mayordomo* in front of me, with another candle. The *padre* took the knife and over the crosses painted with chalk, cut my skin. They sang:

- *Mbele Nganga vamo cóta*  
  *Nganga Knife, we are going to cut*
- *Mbele Nganga ndale que cóta*  
  *Nganga Knife, go on, cut*
- *Vamo ya ete Mbele Nganga*  
  *Let’s go Nganga Knife*
- *Manito vamo a cotá...*  
  *Let’s go, dear hand, go on, cut...*

The blood from the cuts is given to the *nganga*. The wounds are rubbed with a stone or with a *mpaka*. They laid me down between four candles and started to sing:

- *E Nganga ya pa ti*  
  *Dear Nganga, he is yours*
- *Moana con Insambi*  
  *Child of Insambi*
- *Hueso cambia, no hay agravio,*  
  *The bones change and there is no insult,*

which means that I am already of the *nganga*, that I changed my life; I am a new man, another spirit. They cut off the head of the rooster, and the *nganga* receives the blood—*menga*; they take out the heart and cut it into four pieces. One piece for the *padrino*, one for the *madrina*, one for the *mayordomo*, and one for me. They swallow seven grains of pepper with a sip of wine and another sip of *aguardiente*. The mambo goes like this:

- *En tó una lengua na má*  
  *In all, it is one language*
- *Yo só Marina di nganga*  
  *I am Madrina of the nganga*
- *Mayordomo di nganga*  
  *Mayordomo of the nganga*
- *[162] Tó una lengua na má*  
  *It is all one language*
- *Hijo di Nganga...*  
  *Child of the Nganga...*
The four of us, the padrino, the mayordomo, the madrina, and I are one: four heart pieces, but one heart. At the same time, this heart piece that you swallow is a shelter to defend your stomach, all your entrails, from witchcraft. There will be no ndiambo that can enter into you, and if it does enter, you will immediately return the bilongo. Well, I already got initiated. The padre invokes protection for his ahijado:

Los que mueren no vuelven más  Those who die do not return
Hueso cambió y no hay agravio. The bones changed and there is no insult.
Los hombres tienen palabra The men have the word
Las mujeres mueren The women die
con sus pechos y sus sayas with their tops and skirts
Buey muere con sus tarros The cows die with their jars
Caballo con sus cascos The horses with their helmets
Perro con sus dientes The dogs with their teeth
Agongorotí, cá uno con lo suyo. Agongorotí, each one engaged in work.

If the person who is going to be initiated is a woman, a piece of her underskirt or nightdress is cut. If it is a man, a piece of his underpants. Or nothing is cut and the entire underskirt or underpants, tunic or suit is taken to the cemetery and is buried there for seven or twenty-one days.”

The one who continues the tradition of Andrés Congo adds:

“Until he puts on the clothes buried near the grave of a dead on the Fifth Floor, he is not introduced to the nganga. Then the Dead is called in. The spirit comes, grabs him, throws him down… already that man or that woman has changed lives. The spirit will be in him, yes, seven days. This body should be taken care of until the nfumbi, the spirit, is taken out. After that, the
spirit will come in each time it is called.” The day of the presentation of the moana, parents and friends can visit him or her in the temple.

Like in the kariocha or seat in the Lucumí Rule, the muana, the future muana ntu nganga, spends a determined number of days isolated in the nso nganga before “giving the head to the nganga,” and after that, until he or she recovers full consciousness.

Let us keep in mind that the initiate has passed from life to death, and then from death has returned to life. Thus regenerated… Kuenda kuako, the initiate goes on, returns to his or her normal life or preoccuparions, leaving in the nganga his or her blood and a hair lock: his or her head. Through that, the nganga takes hold of him or her, and, as it does with all its children, it will punish the initiate if the initiate sins and will protect the initiate if the initiate behaves responsibly.

Some juramentos, or initiations, take place in el monte, under the silk-cotton tree, a very sacred tree—Mama Ungunda, Musina Nsamba; “but in Havana, it is difficult to do things as we do them here in the countryside,” where the rites can take place in open air, in open forest.

Concerning his initiation in el monte, under a “young silk-cotton tree,” an elder from Mantanzas told us about his terrible and unforgettable inner experience.

“They put the kisénguere in my hands. I felt a jolt all over my body. It was the greatest thing in the world! My head got huge, my heart leaped out of my chest and I cannot tell you what I saw. They were wonderful, strange things. The spirit shoved me three times against the silk-cotton three; I could no longer take it, and I lost consciousness. I lost my hearing. I could see that some maracas were moving around me. My thumbs and my toes were burning. My forehead is squeezed; the spirit wants to close my eyes. Struggling, I open them; when the spirit was convinced that it could not do away with me easily—it tested me—, it put me to sleep… I then
closed my eyes, and then I could not open them! But I could hear… I began to recover consciousness, to become aware; I returned to this world. I saw a girl who was a horse for Centella, and she stuck to me, back to back.”

This elder had been a big “horse” or “dog” for a nganga. When I met him, in order to help him eat, I had to raise the food to his head, which had become debilitated.

“When the head of a ngombe is debilitated, the dead has exhausted it, and it is necessary to strengthen it. You make a powder from the skull of a goat of the kind given to a nganga, and you let it dry. You wash the head—ntu—of the muana; with a husk, you draw the signature of his nganga, and at bedtime, you apply the powders of the goat skull soaked in dry wine, as if it were an ointment, and you cover his head with a scarf of the color of his nganga. In the morning, as the sun is barely rising, the padrino and the mayordomo come with a candle, coconut water, dry wine, and more husks. They bring an egg. They remove the scarf with the sticky ointment it has. They break the egg on his head and then they wash the head with coconut water. They cover the head back with a white scarf, and for three days, he remains locked up in the Nso, as he cannot be exposed even to one sun ray. To dispose of the water and the powders that have been used, it is necessary to send out a loaded dog and pay him his fees. This messenger goes to el monte and deposits everything there.”

If the “dejected” head is the head of the ngombe of Tata Funde, he is offered a hen; if it is the head of a ngombe of Nsasi or Bakuende, he is offered a rooster.

We will finally copy this other version of an initiation into Mayombe.

“The padre draws on the ground the signature of his nganga. If there are more padres, they also draw their own signatures and they burn the fula. The nfambi—another name given to the neophyte—already has crosses drawned on the forehead, the arms, the chest, the back, and
the feet. These crosses have been drawn on him with pemba by the mayordomo who, afterwards, sprinkles him with liquor. The neophyte is made to kneel in front of the nganga mayor. The madre, with the left hand, hold a plate with a lit candle, and with the right hand holds a rooster. The padre nganga takes up the knife and says: moana nganga mbele jurankisi, and then begins to cut the tiny crosses into the moana’s flesh. This is what we call rayar or to cut, and there are padres who cut deep! While he cuts, the padre sings:

Mbele gán gán cóta que cóta
Knife gán gán cut and cut

and the mayordomo and the madrina respond to the prayers:

Sambi arriba Sambia abajo
Sambi above and Sambi bellow
Licencia Sambi Awere sorinda
Permission Sambi, grant us
Sorinda awere licencia Sambi
Grant us permission, Sambi
Tata Legua dio licencia
Tata Legua granted permission
Pa jurá nkisi, pa jurá mpembe
To initiate nkisi, to initiate mpembe
Juran kisi malongo.
They initiate kisi malongo
Sambi me dio licencia.
Sambi gave me permission.

These prayers, the mambi or mambo, are not sung loud; they are murmured.”

In fact, one of my elder informants insists that “mambo does not shout. If here I call, there the finda listens.” (And each spirit has its own mambo.)

“The padrino greets the punguele. In the nkiso, there is a stone—a matari—and the Santo comes,” that is, in the stone that is included in the recipient, nkisi, with the bones, the soils and the pieces of wood, has been lodged a spirit, a nkita or sea, river, or ground mpungu.

To a Matari, to a Fundamento Kimpeso will come a Mpungu, a power equivalent to the Lucumí Goddess Oba, catholized as Saint Rita. In another Matari will be installed the old Tata
Funde or Tondá, who is equivalent to Orula, the Lucumí God of divination, and to our Saint Francis. Or the great Mama Lola. “Yolá!”, a centenarian corrects emphatically, “Yolá! Damn! The Virgin, Mama Sambia, Mima Mother of God. Yolá Holiest Virgin Mary, Ngana Mary. The first one an initiated will invoke.”

“Cheche Wanga Furibi Mutambo, is another Mpungu of Vrillumba, and with her one cannot kill anybody and can kill many people. Or Mama Kalunga, the sea.” This is the name in Kikongo, as we know, of the Virgin of the Rule, of Yemayá.

But, let us continue: “The padre greets the Mpumgus:

- Buena noche Mama Lola
- Buena noche Siete Rayos
- Buena noche Choya Wéngue
- Buena noche Mama Kalunga
- Buena noche Tata Wane
- Buena noche tó lo Nfumbi.

He greets the nkulus, the bambutas, the African ancestors, his parents (if they are deceased), his padrinos, and those who belong to the same Fundamento. The dead come to all the ceremonies, they help. I have already told you; all in Mayombe has to do with the dead, I deal with the dead, one is always with them. You never forget one single offering to the dead for the ngangulero and for the one being initiated. The prayers and mambos continue until, suddenly, the padre says:

Gó! Gó means that there should be silence. It is a truce. Gó to interrupt the chant, and after this pause, he repeats three times:

- Mambé mambé mambé

The vassals—the chorus—responds:
All this time, the *mayordomo* holds the *prenda* up high, above the head of the *fambie*. If the *insongo*, the spirit, catches him at this moment, if he falls *simbaô*, it is necessary to restrain him, it is necessary to contain the spirit until the ceremony is over. When the *nganga* is moved away from the head of the person receiving the initiation, it is put back in its place. Then the *fambie* is put to lay down in front of the *nganga*, and the *mayordomo* gives the blood of the roster to the *nganga*. If the spirit has not mounted him, the son himself, with full awareness, holds the rooster so that the *mayordomo* can cut the rooster’s head, since it is always the *mayordomo* who kills and who sprinkles the *menga* on the *prenda*, not the one who initiates or offers the rooster. When the *nganga* has drunk the blood, it is explained to it for what reasons the individual is being initiated. The *padre*, and, if not, a vassal, falls, and the *nganga* speaks.”

When this *moana* has his own *prenda* and, in turn can say to it:

*Tumbanguero vamo a talá Tumbanguero*,  
*Tambanguero, we are going to see*

*Tambanguero*

he will help the *padrino*. Supposing, as it happens many times, that the *padrino* is engaged in a war with another *mayombero* who has said:

*Tángala, tángala mitángala*  
*Ahora sí yo te va jodé*  
*Tángala, tángala, mitángala*

[166] and some of his magical operations, his “works,” are not giving him the results that he expected and he can no longer hold, as we have previously mentioned, the spirit that serves the *ahijado*, invoked by the godson, will come, will act and achieve what the *padrino* had desired.

*Tu Cheché Wánga*  
*Your Cheché Wânga*
Loses its way
Oh, my dear Teacher!

(And the spirit says to the taita).

I am going to defeat this bad kindembo
We are going to defeat this
Kindembo tata
With our power."

Without a doubt, the most delicate position, we are often told, the postion of the greatest responsibility in the nso nganga, is the position for the mayordomo—gando muelando—, helper to the padre, whose work is generally limited to directing “and who materially works less than the mayordomo.” It is the mayordomo who cares for the “dogs,” nweyes,120 pakisame, ngombes or yimbi of the bakuyula ngangas—mediums.

“He is constantly taking care of the dead. Wherever a mounted servant goes, the mayordomo must follow that servant.”

“The person responsible for whatever might happen, the guarantee of the Nganga, the confidence of the padre, is the wawankisa, the mayordomo.”

If the padre orders that the fumbi take possession of a nweye, go down to the bottom of a well or jump into a river, or sends him to the cemetery or to the forest, there goes the mayordomo to take care of him.

“Kisinguere, let’s go to the bottom of the sea to fetch sand”

and the ngombe responds:
Envaya fin fin fin del mundo  To the very end of the world
L’amo me manda la fin del mundo  The Teacher sends me to the end of the world
Amo me manda, yo voy  The Teacher sends, I go
Si Ndoki vuela yo vuelo con Ndoki  If Ndoki flies, I fly with Ndoki
Si él entra la finda, yo entra la finda  If he enter the forest, I enter the forest
L’amo me manda, yo buca ndiambo.”  The Teacher sends, I go fetch.”

[167] And the mayordomo, always watchful for the medium who has been tasked with carrying out a delicate mission, will go to the end, end, end of the world. Naturally, “the nganga bonds so much with the mayordomo that he loves him more than the padre. It is the mayordomo who takes care of everything; serves him, feeds him, is always ready to meet his needs. You can more easily turn a nganga against the padre than against the mayordomo.”

How often, in a play, has the ngangulero barely invoked the spirit:

Tanga Yalende wisinkángala  Tanga Yalende wisinkángala
Pata purí, diambo  Pata purí, diambo
Kasimbiriko yo tengo nguerra  Kasimbiriko, I wage war
Yo te ñama, Vititingo ven acá  I call you, Vititingo, come here

and the spirit comes, “mounts,” invisible, astride the back of a servant,

Bengaraké mambo  Bengaraké mambo
Ya panguiamé  My blood

or the padre himself responds and between them is established long dialogues sung in the metaphorical and sleepy language that the spirit and the witch use, and, together, the servants sing:
¿Quién ñama yo? ¿Quién ñama yo?  Who is calling me? Who is calling me?

Si tu me llama mi amo  If you are calling me, my Teacher

Yo sube la loma llorando I climb the hill crying

Yo taba la ceiba ¿eh? mi amo  I was on the silk-cotton tree, eh, my Teacher

¿Po qué tu ñama Tengue malo?  Why are you calling, a bad thing?

¿Po qué tu ñama amito mío?  Why are you calling, my dear Teacher?

Yo taba la Casa Grande.  I was in the Casa Grande.

¿Po qué tu ñama lo Palo Monte?  Why are you calling Palo Monte

Yo taba la ceja monte  I was near the monte

¿Po qué tu ñama Tengue malo?  Why are you calling, a bad thing?

¿Po qué ñama dorina?  Why are you calling, dear?

Yo taba la loma llorando, I was on the hill, crying

Sobre la loma mi pena llorando  On the hill, crying out my pain

Yo sube llorando la loma,  I climb the hill, crying,

Yo pasa mi pena solito  I nurse my pain alone

Llorando mi pena en la finda  Crying out my pain in the forest

¿L’amo po qué tu ñama?  My Teacher, why are you calling?

If the mayordomo is not present, the spirit will ask for him with so much insistence that it is impossible to get the spirit to obey and do anything until the mayordomo comes and the spirit sees [168] him. The madrina, almost always a daughter of Mama Choya (catholicized as la Caridad del Cobre, the Virgin of Charity of El Cobre), shares with the mayordomo the love of the nganga, and if when the nganga manifests he does not find her in the Nso, he will demand that she be called:
¡Eh! Kengue mayordomito mío

¿Dónde está mi madrina?

Mi suamito

Síñó...

¿Dónde está mi madrina?

¿Mi madrina dónde está?

Suamito mío, mi madrina...

and there will be no other solution than to go get her, no matter where she might be.

“It is very rare,” says F. P., “for a nganga to harm the madrina and the mayordomo. The nganga would rather first harm the padre. The madrina and the mayordomo are like the nannies of the prenda. And the nganga becomes conceited, whining like a child.”

This main madrina of Palo, whom the spirit calls Amita and my queen, “are cut,” initiates, and have to brandish the Warina or Kisenguere, “the bone designed to receive the influence of the spirit. The spirit shakes them, but prevents them from going into a trance. Nothing else can irradiate them.”

“The mayombero asks for blessing. If the madrina sees something that is not good, she points that out. She is well respected. If a dog is destitute, as soon as she calls the spirit, the spirit answers and obeys.”

“When the ngombe loses consciousness and becomes mute, to get him to speak, people beg: Fuiri furi mutambo fuiri kimbin kimbin taté taté mamé mamé matunga matunga yo levanta Lucaya. Kééé? Moambo nsike diamá tokoyo karaba barure kimoana moanantoto mukongo dirilanga.”
Some servants of the nganga have to be protected by those who know how to defend them. Especially when they are possessed by Siete Rayos, they must be cared for by some competent mpangui of the Rule who can dismiss this power without letting it mistreat the medium.

“To dismiss Siete Rayos, you give him a few taps on the back, the same way you do with Ogún in the Ilé Oricha.”

“The madrina121 has much power in the house of the nganga.” She has the right, for instance, to touch the body of the ngombe, which is sacred and taboo while the ngombe is possessed by the spirit. Nobody must dare touch the ngombe, and a woman less still. “If the madrina does not want the fumbi to speak with one of the people who are in the play, to answer a specific question, she traces a cross with chalk on his back, on the bone of the back of the neck, and the fumbi remains mute. No, without madrina and mayordomo, there can be no play.”

[169] Or she tells him: Tapa cari Ndundu malo, tapa cari; because the fumbi never directly addresses the person who comes for consultation, he speaks though the mouth of the mpati nganga, of the owner of the nganga, if he is mounted, and he always transmits his questions and answers to the madrina. Very often, the dead speaks only with her.

“They call him:

_Tapa cari pa montá Mundo ven acá_  Knock, to mount the world come here

_Tapa cari Centella wiri mambo_  Knock, Centella hears mambo

_Ndundu ven acá_  Ndundu come here

and the fumbi answers that he listens and speaks only to the madrina:

_Marinita mía_  My Madrina

_Yo cucha mambo_  I hear mambo

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Yo yengó Marinita mía  I get it, my Madrina
Ya yo wiri mambo.”  I already hears the mambo.”

Each “well-prepared and sight-endowed” ngombe or dog of the nganga fulfills in his Nso Nganga the function of messenger. During the trance, possessed by the yimbi, he leaves the temple to accomplish his mission. He goes to bury a bilongo, a spell, a cursed egg, to spread some dust, “to kill or to heal.” To carry something or to bring something, he goes to the cemetery or to the forest, to the river, or to the hill. He is dispatched by burning gun powder and singing:

“Ata tu ñaré tuñanrongué  Even if you run around
Ogué ogué ¡Guío!”  Ogué ogué, I lead!

The mayordomo, who accompanies him, carries a bottle of kimbisa or chamba to give him something to drink during the trip or when it is convenient. The yimbi carries a mpaka and a bundle of grass in hand.

“When the mayordomo sends out a dog to do a job, those who remain in the house, the padre, the madrina, and the spiritual children who might be there, sing all the time that the dog might be out and they do not stop until he comes back: 122

El jíbaro fue al monte  The mountain-dweller went to the mountain
¡Eh! ¿Cuándo viene?  Eh! When are you coming back?
Jíbaro fue al monte  The mountain-dweller went to the mountain
Mayombe bueno fue Guiné  Good Mayombe went to Guiné
¿Cuándo viene?  When are you coming back?
Lucero Mundo, ¿cuándo viene?  Lucero Mundo, when are you coming back?
Fue al monte  He went to the mountain

Sauranboya  Sauranboya
¿Cuándo viene Mayombe bueno?

When is good Mayombe coming back?

Tenga cuidado con Siete Rayo

Be careful with Siete Rayo

Mayombe bueno ¿cuándo viene?

Good Mayombe, when are you coming back?

¿Eh? ¿Cuándo viene?

Eh, when are you coming back?

Mayombe bueno fue Guiné.

Good Mayombe went to Guiné.

“If one did a very important trabajo, work, a Kimpa, and sent the Ngombe to the cemetery:

La Campo Finda

The Campo Finda

No tiene guardia

has no guard

Sinindondo Kasimbiko

Sinindondo Kasimbiko

with the authorization of the prenda, since it is the prenda who authorizes and directs these works, if he took a long time to come back, one looked in the mirror—muene—and when one saw that the ngombe was desolate, on the ground, in order to raise him up, one hung the cauldron very high in the ceiling. People lifted it singing and the servant did not take long to arrive. People attracted him with the mambos.”

In order for this messenger to go quickly, to go and come back like the wind, people chanted a mambo that catapulted him and made him weightless.

“It is so that, in collaboration with the spirit of Mayimbe and the spirit of Susundamba, his feet be lifted and he could fly through space.”

The “mansanero” opens his arms and imitates the wings of the bird when it flies high and soars.

With this mambo he walks so fast that if one does not see it, one cannot believe it:

Saura voyando jú ú ú

The owl is flying jú ú ú

Mira ta palo jú ú ú

Look, it is Palo jú ú ú
Nsaura yoyando  
**The owl is flying**

Jú ú ú.”  
**Jú ú ú.**

The bird feathers contained in the pots and cauldrons impart power to the *Nganga Ngombos* as well as that astonishing speed.

It is known that the servants or “dogs” of the *nganga*—the mediums—are exposed to the possibility that, through the power of the mambo, the dead who possess them may kill them during the trance, may “take them away.” For this reason, one of the most important considerations is to know how to talk to the dead, to chant the right mambo, to understand their language. “Because sometimes the spirits get upset, and in the same game, if one does not know, [171] one may be killed.” The *mayordomo* and the *madrina* are there to calm him, if the *padre nganga* is possessed by his *fumbi*. For example, the *fumbi* arrives, upset. He threw down the *mayordomo*, left him on the ground, on his face.” The medium, man or woman, falls face down; he or she remains lying on the back or on the side, but never face down.123

And the *fumbi* appears, singing the following mambo:

*E é mao mango. ¡E mañana corobata! It is my mango. It is well-dressed!*

*Tu llega día luna, tu viti corbata You arrive on moon day, well-dressed*

*Hoy tu tá contento. Mañana va mori Today you are joyful, tomorrow you die*

*Diablo Kuyere viti colorá The Devil Kuyere is well-dressed*

*Ya ya yangó tu llega día luna Ya yangó, you arrive on moon day*

*Hoy tu tá contento, mañana va morí. Today you are joyful, tomorrow you die*

Afterwards, if the *funmbi* requests that a candle be held to his feet, you should not honor the request! He should be calmed down. By singing this mambo which is a threat mambo, it is already known that the dead wants to kill the *mayordomo*. Though he gets upset and requests that
a candle be lit at the feet of the ngombe, the mayordomo—or whoever knows—deflects the
question, pretends to be stupid. He asks him:

¿Kindiambo trae mi Siete Rayo  What brings my Siete Rayo
(como se llame)  (as it is called)?
Kindiambo trae con cabo vela?  What brings it with a candle stump?
Tu Kubulanga con tu suamito  You are upset with your Teacher
Tumbé tumbé roña Siete Rayo  Tumbé tumbé upsets Siete Rayo
¿Por qué tu roña?  Why are you upset?
Si é ndiambo tu avisa tu amo  If there is a problem, tell your Teacher
Si é envidia tu avisa tu amo  If there is envy, tell your Teacher
Mi nganga ¿por qué tu roña?  My nganga, why are you upset?
¿Cosa malo arriba lo mundo?  Is there an evil in the world?

Or…

¿Ki moana moana? Ntoto Mukongo  What, my child of Kongo Land?
Dirilanga. Yo tonga moana  Dirilanga. I build up the child
Buta moana nguei tomboka  I give birth and raise up the child
Unsulu moka benantoto.  In heaven and on earth.

And there, sualo, sualo, malembi, malembi, he calms him down, he learns what is happening to
the fumbi. If the mayordomo or the witch has not known this and had lit the candle to the feet of
the nkombo who is possessed, this spirit, with the mambo and the candle, would have suck the
[172] life out of the nkombo’s body. The nkombo would no longer get up, ever. He would remain
in Campo Simba. I must tell you that sometimes the mayombero takes advantage of this and he
sends to Kambonfinda124 whoever he might resent.”
A mambo not only brings back the spirit of the nkombo that gets lost and forces it to reincarnate into the body that it had abandoned, but also it yanks by force and carries away, “steals,” the soul of the one who did not have the least intention of passing into a better life.

“Because dilanga”—the word—“commands power.”

That is, some words, like words of prayers and invocations are charged with energy.

“We can all avail ourselves of those words in order to protect ourselves, to achieve whatever we want, or to harm our neighbor.”

Juan Mayumba defines prayer for me this way: “The tongue to talk to the Santo. The tongue for the Santo and the dead to hear in Sokinakua and the Devil also.”

All my Teachers—of the Lucumí Rule or of the Kongo Rule—are convinced about the great power of words. The mayomberos cannot doubt the efficacy of the mambos.

“Let us analyze,” as used to say my unforgettable and great Calazán, Bamboché, “have we not always seen that the world is done and undone with words? In this world, speech does everything. The word has power. God said, remember, when there was no light and the world was called chaos: Come out, light!, and the light of the world came out. Why do you think the Negroes of Africa used to sing to their dead, and the white people thought they did it because they were savages?”

Why did they use to sing to them, Calazán?

“So that the deceased, who in his body was not going to take a boat, could go back to his land, in spirit through the song, to join his relatives, over there in Guinea.” And there is news, according to Ciriaco, that in Cuba, a slave who was a king in his land, knew through a song that his wife, Nabaré, as he said she was called, had died.
“Nabaré had remained in Africa when he was taken prisoner and was sold. One day, Nabaré climbed a tree to eat fruit. A branch broke off, she fell and died. The witches got together over there, they found a bird of those who learn to speak, they taught the bird what they wanted it to sing, they prepared it and let it go…

“The bird arrived here on a Sunday morning. In his hut the Negro was celebrating, he heard the song of a bird that perched itself on a tree that he had planted to heal himself from a disease, and he understood that his wife had died. He mourned her and he announced the news to all the caravels. It was very sad!”

We also know that “by the tip of mambos” dead people had been raised. Examples abound that demonstrate the force, the power of the chants that dominate and, on occasions, triumph over death.”

[173] “When Ma Secundina, an ahijada of a nganga, died,” J.S. remembers, emotionally moved, “we all mourned her and we sang to her from our hearts:

\[
\begin{align*}
& \text{Diablo lleva mi casamiento} & \text{The Devil carries away my marriage} \\
& \text{Ngavilán}^{85} \text{ lleva sombra} & \text{The sparrowhawk carries away its shadow} \\
& \text{la fin del mundo} & \text{to the end of the world.} \\
& \text{Allá la ceiba to mundo va} & \text{To the ceiba all go} \\
& \text{Chico grande to mundo va} & \text{Small, big, all go} \\
& \text{Chiquito grande to mundo va} & \text{Small, big, all go} \\
& \text{Pobre yimbi dio wá wá} & \text{The poor dead left}
\end{align*}
\]

\[85\] The standard Spanish word is gavilán, sparrowhawk. The word ngavilán, used in Palo Kikongo, represents the linguistic process of transformation that happens in the process of creolization. Linguistically, consonant clusters do not happen in Spanish words, but they are one of the basic characteristics of the Language Family of Bantu languages, of which Kikongo is a member. The phenomenon can be seen in Kikongo works like Nzambi [God], nsusu [chicken], ntangu [sun, time], or ngandu [crocodile].
When they sang to her:

- **Secundina tiene való**
  - Secundina has strength
- **Dale való Secundina, dale való**
  - Give her strength, give her strength
- **Tu deja tu Nganga Mayimbe Nkunga**
  - You leave your Nganga Mayimbe Nkunga
- **Dale való, való**
  - Give her strength, strength
- **Secundina való, tiene való**
  - Secundina has strength, has strength

And it was said again:

- **Kianga Watanga Mambo**
  - Kianga Watanga Mambo

Let the mambo respond: one heart!

Her body jerked, her eye began to tear up, and Secundina, gosh! Secundina straightened up and sat up in the coffin.”

With a very similar mambo, “Arriba Téngue, Severina tiene való,” Severina, a madre nganga who had not come back to life, was mourned.

And L.T.B. also once died. For the wake, they sent for her Madrina Filomena, a madre nganga. Resolutely, she approached the cadaver: “No, son, you are not leaving. With the great power of God, I’m going to pull you up. Agüeita there, gosh! She requested a rooster. She fed the blood to her Prenda. She called all the ahijados. Here everyone is one heart. And I, who was the dead, stretched, well dead. Mambo after mambo; they sang until they could no longer sing.

All night long. Chant and more chant. I was told that in the wee hours of the morning, I opened my eyes. Filomena said: Don’t fear. After I woke up from everything, they gave me the blood, the heart and the gizzards of the rooster. Filomena pulled me up. What she did was to seize my
spirit; she brought it back to me, and the spirit had to return to my body. And only with mambo. Because the people say that they did nothing else for me there except to sing.”

[174] Gabino witnessed something similar. “This time, the person who had departed was a young woman, from the barracks, and four hours after she had been dead, a Kongo Real, mounted by a Santo who was called Abri Campo, brought her back to life. She was a pretty Creole, the granddaughter of a Kongo Portugues, of those who played the botijuelas in their festivities, beating and blowing through the opening of the botija.”

What is admirable is to come back to life only through the power of the mambos. The resurrection of Mabona can be explained more easily. Here the science of the ngangulero, his knowledge of the magical and medicinal virtues of thees, played a role.

“Daughter, Nsango Kongo does raise the dead! I was not looking when Cuevita Mabona, what? Agonizing, no; she is dead and diseased, and says my Teacher: this dead I will raise. Now son, daughter, granddaughter, everyone is mourning Mabona, who passed on. I say to my Teacher: she can no longer be healed. Yes, he answers, with the mighty power of God and Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre. My cousin Pacuá is mounted. He starts the chant:

“Yo va vé si yo pué con é”
La Virgen del Cobre me acompaña
Santa Bárbara me acompaña
Yo va vé, yo va vé si yo pué con é.”
“I will see if I can face her
Our Lady of El Cobre accompanies me
Saint Bárbara accompanies me
I will see, I will see if I can face her.”

“And he goes to the house of Mabona. And he orders a palo to be prepared. He sprays Mabona with the preparation; he lifts the dead, who catches the rhythm: she begins to sing. Gosh! The belly of Mabona does like this, makes a noise, bruburá mbá! When the specially prepared water falls inside Mabona, praise be to the Holiest! I don’t know what that moréndigo had put in her
mouth and in her ass, for there was no Christian there who could breathe next to her. Dead in truth. *Yimbi* said then: Kill a chicken. And he prepared a mambo: How did it go? I’m going to sing it:

“*Como siempre Nganga mira María*  “As always, nganga sees Mary

*Cómo gana batalla Nganga María*  How *Nganga Mary* wins the battle

*Cují yaya, gané bandera.*  Cují *yaya*, I won the flag

¡*Eh! María como siempre gana.*”  *Eh! As always Mary wins.*”

My *padrino* worked his craft until the morning. When he finished his work, Mabona was eating soup.”

Let not the reader throw on my shoulders all the weight of the following affirmation: our sorcerers sometimes bring the dead back to life. I have not witnessed any resurrection personally and I limit myself to transferring to paper what I have been told by those who swear that such a miracle can occur.

It was known that Santa, “the resurrected,” had died of typhoid fever.

“Yes, she died; they gave her up for dead because she stretched down, made a face, threw her eyes back, got cold. You should know that they had already wrapped her in a shroud, they lit [175] the soul candle for her, and people went to tell the *padrino* who was treating her that Santa had given up the ghost. He ran to go see her. The members of the family were waiting for the coffin to arrive, and with the family there were already friends who had gotten the news. The first thing that the *padrino* did after looking at her was to remove the kerchief from her and loosen the shroud. He locked himself up with the deceased in a room. People saw through the crack of the door that he sat by Santa, holding her hand in his hand. He was speaking in a low voice, speaking, speaking, but people could not make out what he was saying. After an hour
more or less, he called in the family. Come in, she is coming back to life, he told them. Santa sighed. Ha! I am very tired! She was almost voiceless.

Where have you been? Bafumo asked her.

- I arrived in heaven, Santa explained after a moment, already more animated. There I saw a man with long hair and long sideburns who was holding a bunch of keys in his hand and leaning by a window. I told him, by God, gentleman, open the door for me so that I can sit down because I am very tired; my feet are hurting so much that I can no longer stand.

- No, daughter, the man answered me, this door cannot open for you now. Don’t you hear that they are calling you? Go back home.

- Yes, I hear… but, I can’t stand it any longer; please open the door for me; I have no strength left to walk again. I am exhausted.”

Santa had no other choice but to turn back. That man disappeared. She said that on her way back she took another path. “I ended up in Spain. How many grapes did I see! Over there I saw nothing but grapes. And from Spain back to my bed.”

The spirit of Santa, from what comes out of her story, already at the doors of heaven, compelled by the prayers of her padrino, came back into her body, which she found was not yet buried.

After her convalescence, Santa got married and was enjoying an enviable health after her resurrection. I have no doubt that she is still in excellent health.

But do not think that invariably the mayombero or a ngando must go into a trance state, “cargado” [charged] or “montado” [mounted], as it is commonly said, accompanied by the nsualo mambi mambi or mayordomo, to deposit the morubas, the brujerías, to blow some powders or to collect what is needed for a nsaranda, a sorcery or spell. A makuto, a defense,
protects him and opens the way for him. There are *encomiendas*, errands, that the *mayordomo*, trusted by *Nfumo Mbata*, carries out alone and in full awareness and lucidity.

The *Nfumo Mbata*, in order to do a good job of *Mayombe cristiano*—for good—will be seen wrapping a white kerchief around his head. The color of the kerchief around his head conveys the essence of the sorcery that he is preparing. In order to cause harm or death, a black kerchief is used.

[176]  

Bilanga son cristiano  
*Bilanga* is *Christian*

Bilanga peñuelo de luto  
*Bilanga* has a *headwrap of mourning*

Bilanga so.  
*Bilanga* only.

Black is always the color of the *ngangas judías*, to which the *ndokí* go to spray the blood that they suck. Red is the color used to act in the two camps, to do good or to cause harm. So then, when the *taita* “wages war,” is about to attack an enemy, he sings:

“Yo tengo nguerra”  
“I wage war

*Nganga* yo te ñama  
*Nganga* I call on you

*Mari Wanga* viti colorá  
*Mari Wanga* is *red*

Vititingo ven acá  
Vititingo, come here

*Nganga* vite colorá.”  
*Nganga* is *red.”

Finally the time arrives to dismiss the *nfumbi*, who has fulfilled the orders of the *padre nganga*, of the *kudiludiá mundu*, of his owner, who again seizes the *kisenguere* or *aguanta mano* adorned with *nkanda*, or feathers; and starts the corresponding mambo. The initiates—*malembe goganti o kuano*—in the *Nso Nganga* and those who had gone there to seek relief, healing, “security”, deliverance from an enemy, shake hands with him in turn and leave the temple.
One other rite, this one very solemn, that we have only mentioned and that is practiced in the nso, is the appropriate food that is offered to the emanations of the deceased nganguleros, the bakula, and particularly to the nkai, the deceased padrino of a padre nganga, who usually appears to him in dreams or through other means, and communicates to him his desire to receive an offering from him.

“No people take as much care of their dead, no people are as interconnected with them as are the mayomberos.” (As for us who hear them speak, we could say that their dead are alive.) Those who had digasa mensu, fwa, had closed their eyes, had died, are offered corn flower and black beans, or rice and beans with peanuts. The corn flour and the beans need to be cooked together. This offering is paid for by all the children of the temple and eaten as a community.

A portion of the wall is covered with a black fabric that has on its center a white cross. Up front on the ground, in front of the nganga, among four lit candles, is laid the cauldron that contains the food. The spirit of the dead is invoked in the customary way, and a special flickering of the lit candles—“the flame trembles, pri, pri, pri, looks like it is going to go out, but it goes up, cries, and flows up”—signals to the mayombero the presence of the deceased, the moment when the deceased comes to receive the offering of all the moana. These moana, seated on the ground, dip their hand into the cauldron and take the food to their mouth. Or, with a calabash or a white plate, as it is done in some praise houses, they help themselves with spoons. As they begin to eat, they sing:

\[
\begin{align*}
Vamo lo convite Sáuro & \quad \text{We are going to feast with Sáuro} \\
Vamo a lo convite Saurero & \quad \text{We are going to feast with Saurero} \\
Nvamo lo convite Sáuro & \quad \text{We are going to feast with Sáuro} \\
¡Dió Mayombero, así vamo Saurero¡ & \quad \text{Mayombero God, so we go, Saurero!}
\end{align*}
\]
¡Dio Suarero! ¡Vamo Saurero! Suarero God! So we go, Saurero!

And while they sing and dance around the cauldron, as the Ñañigos do, they remind the deceased of the attentions and the favors that, while still alive, he received from his carabelas, his companions or mpanga samba, as some of the Kongo used to say. The remainders of the food, together with the butts of the burned candles, tobacco, and a calabash of aguardiente, malafo, are taken to the cemetery and put on the tomb of the deceased padre nganga. If it cannot be determined where he is buried, the offering is left in a place where there are not many tombs, after calling him and lighting four candles for him. Or they are taken to a tree like the ceiba, where the dead and the mpungus come to meet.

The offering of these meals for the dead is stipulated in all the Reglas or Laws. We have already spoken in other parts about the importance of satisfying the dead, and it is not necessary to insist on that here.

About the sacrifice of the goat—kombo—, which is a major sacrifice, as well as the food for the nkulu, the ancestors (the tatawambas, as an elder woman of the Perico used to call them), it must occur at night. Never before sunset. If some Nganguleros—and the same can be said about the Santeros—, moving away today from the rule instituted by the elders, carelessly sacrifice during the hours when the sun is burning, they run the risk of causing in their praise houses some serious setbacks. Blood is already hot enough as it is; if the fire of the sun heats it up, by its flow, without any apparent reason, the people who are heated up, cause tragedy. In the past, say my old informants, the slaughters happened in the cool of the night or when the day declines and the sun has lost its force.

“But in practice, the nganga eats at any time, and the rooster is offered whenever it is convenient,” as we have already been told. The only blood that can be poured into these
nkisi and ngangas, these sacred containers, is the blood of the rooster, or depending on the type or force that they contain, the blood of a jicotea or turtle, a malanda or a fuko. According to several tatas loangos, it is not customary to sacrifice a meme or sheep, a sense or deer, gombo or goat, a ngulo or pig. Even though it is not always an easy thing to do, the officiant pours in the nkiso some blood from a wangala or sparrowhawk, from a kálele or caraira, from an owl, and from a vulture. But the blood of this last one, in truth, “it is better not to give it to the nkiso because the people who go to the Casa Mundo would later be nauseated when they drink the kimbisa.” The kimbisa, or the chamba, let us remember is the ritual drink that is given to the moanas for them to drink, and it contains residues of the blood of the sacrifices mixed with aguardiente that is sprayed over the nganga.

The roosters, save some exceptions, will not be white or off-white; nor would the goat be white but black. For Mama Lola, a boumba nkita, which is very fine and delicate, the roosters are white and the goats are white, and also for Mayimbe Nkimba and Mama Tengue. These, like Mama Lola, instead of aguardiente, they drink dry wine. For both of them, it is necessary to add to the dry wine some cinnamon, and it is indispensable to spray them abundantly with Florida Water from Murray.

Another valuable meal for some ngangas are egg yolks. Sixteen egg yolks beaten with dry wine. Mariata only accepts roosters and black goats. This one is a nganga that, during the rainy months, the owner is obliged to tie it up strongly with a pita fiber because, as he explains, “it is thunder.” The stone that is deposited at the bottom of the cauldron is one of those called stone of lightning, and it does attract lightning. “The nganga begins to call in lightning and the lightning, naturally, goes to fetch the nganga.”
Mama Lola will eat anything, just like Mayimbe Nkunga. Saca Empeño, which is “a male spirit,” and Mariata eat black rooster. Ngola La Habana: “the Kongo made it. They disembarked on Havana, which was the first soil on which they set foot since they left Africa. From Havana, they were sent to the ingenios, and for this reason they gave it the name of their country, Ngola, and that of Havana.

\textit{Ngola tié tié} \hspace{2cm} \textit{Ngola tié tié}

\textit{Ngola la Bana.} \hspace{2cm} \textit{Ngola Havana.}

It eats goat and rooster. A very important \textit{prenda}, Luna Nueva, which is only fed during the new moon, and like all the \textit{prendas} of its praise house, is manufactured during the new moon, besides rooster and turtle, eats wild hutia. It likes the blood of the owl and the vulture. A \textit{nganga} sister of Campo Santo, it is proper to offer her, from time to time, a wild iguana. “She adores it. With a \textit{knife}, the body of the live iguana is opened lengthwise and it is left on top of the \textit{nkiso}.” Of course, the \textit{nganga} is not fed anything from the animal that it contains. (“The cat \textit{nganga} does not eat cat, the dog \textit{nganga} does not eat dog, and the \textit{majá nganga} does not eat \textit{majá}.”\textsuperscript{125}

Very strong \textit{ngangas}, like Tumbiroña, eat vulture, cat, and dog. When they get mad, they are calmed down with beaten eggs. Usually, chickens and doves are kept out of the diet of the \textit{ngangas}. Doves…

“They are of the Holy Spirit, and how would you give a dove to a \textit{nganga} when the Holy Spirit is not in league with the sorcerer? If Obatalá does not allow his child to have a \textit{nganga}? As everybody knows, if a person has been initiated into \textit{mayombe} and later settles into Ocha, that person has to separate his or her \textit{nganga} from the Santos.”\textsuperscript{126}

However, many \textit{ngangas} do eat white birds, like Mama Lola and Mama Tengue, both of the Vrillumba branch. And about this…
“The Kongo Vrillumba Rule was created by the Creoles, when the old Kongo swore them in, they recognized them and counted on them. That is how all their prendas came to be judías, bad. Vrillumba works really fast and does not allow time to reflect. It attacks immediately. It is not made at home, and what it contains inside”—what it is made of—“are bones of a suicide, of a murderer, or of a dead person who had been bitten by a rabid dog. And a rabid dog, a widow spider, a lingüeña (which is what the Kongo call the cameleon of the hills), ndoki owl, and everything that is bad.”

“Some ngangas can be offered certain foods. Others, who eat anything, cannot be offered sesame.” In general, sesame is taboo for a mayombero. Some ngangas, when they ask for food, their owner feeds them, besides birds, frog, majá, scorpion, wall lizard, and rat, since they love all these animals.

A nganga that the palero uses only to cause harm, Campo Santo Buenas Noches, for instance, is fed, besides, scorpion, widow spider, and other critters, little snakes, and wild iguana. This, wild iguana, which must be alive, is opened with a knife and spread over the prenda, it is its favorite meal.

In the endless series of food items fed to the ngangas, chichiwangas, kiwangas, and makutos, we will find some “delicacies” that are as surprising as the elements with which the ngangas are made. Without excluding fecal materials, for instance, a Mbumba of Makuá, Ceferino tells us—the Makúas were reticent and very solemn in their juegos or plays, they did not sing to their prendas—they were fed only the menstrual blood of virgin women.

“The Mbumbas of the Makua who lived near Covadonga, were female. When the majasas are of age, and are young females, they leave their caves to mingle with others, and with the mingling, they are distilled into these formations and the earth, a stone is formed, which
[180] the tatando or the sorceresses collect to make the Fundamento of their prenda. This Mbumba Kuaba is like Yewá, the Lucumi Santo. Its male owner cannot have a wife and its female owner cannot have a husband.”

Castro Baró had one of those strange Prendas Makua to which you do not sing. In order to call up the mfumbi, he had to put a burning charcoal in his mouth. Or on his head. “His hair would burn, but not his scalp. Once, his hut burned. His things burned out, all, except the prenda. In the place where it was not even ash could be found.”

Another Wanga Makuá, Guachinango, fed on ungüento de soldado or soldier ointment, which could be bought in pharmacies, and … candle. No aguardiente was sprinkled on it.

The taita nganga, in turn, abstains from eating what his nganga does not eat. Like the olocha, the ilyá, and the iyawó, the ngangulero also is prohibited from eating certain foods. The taita nganga who owns a “piece” of Siete Campana vira Mundo, does not dare eat, no matter how much he might like it, Indian banana [makondo minganga], purple banana, or okra. The reasons are powerful: bananas, especially Indian bananas, frighten the ngangas cristianas, and the mayombero does not eat them, “lest his fumbi leave him” or lest his powers leave him. So then, when he has worked out a harm that has produced such a desired effect that the victim is already feeling bad, the fumbi comments and celebrates ironically his triumph with this mambo:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plátano morá yo no come</th>
<th>Purple banana I do not eat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Guacate morá yo no come</td>
<td>Purple avocado I do not eat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ciruela morá yo no come</td>
<td>Purple plums I do not eat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mango lele, mango mango lele</td>
<td>Mango, mango</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yo no come...</td>
<td>I do not eat...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Nor, because it is slippery, does the old sorcerer eat the tasty and inconsistent okra [bañé, gombo], especially when he is about to chalángá, to do a nkangue, because otherwise his work would not have firmness or sturdiness, and it would soon loosen up. “It would get slippery.” If, for any reason, those who are not possessed by the nganga have had to eat the forbidden food, care is taken to warn them afterwards to wash their mouth with water and ash.

The owner of the nganga Campo Santo Medianoche abstained from eating okra, even though he liked it very much—he compensated by gulping yucca spiced with peeled and roasted peanut, which is a typical dish of the Kongo—, and could not approach and much less serve his nganga, if in his barrio, not far from his home, there was a wire. The force that acted in his cauldron, the spirit of the dead person for whom he was the medium, would have dragged him to the cemetery. For the same reason, he does not feel any compulsion, because of family or friendship ties, to attend a burial; he does not expose himself to the risk that there, at the burial, he would be ambushed by the dangerous twelve hours of the day.

[181] Obviously, there are some ngangas and amulets that need to eat more frequently than others, as it is stated for example, that it is necessary to properly feed Levanta Cuerpo, a force that is carried and enclosed in a he-goat horn, a precious and irreplaceable talisman for the bandits, players, and politicians. Levanta Cuerpo, which its owner must always carry in the pocket of his pants, has the virtue of moving and being alarmed when threatened by a danger. As it happens with all the amulets that are manufactured for a man, Levanta Cuerpo cannot be touched by a woman, and if the man has contact with any woman, he would carefully remove the amulet and put it in a safe place.

The ngangulero does not have to cook for his Ngangas and Nkitas, contrary to what the orichas does for his Orichas. With aguardiente and rooster, they have enough.
In the countryside, the bones of the rooster habitually used for sacrifice are taken out to be buried very often under a ceiba tree.

The *ngangas* do not drink water. They would lose their initiative. Water cools down, and it is not convenient for the *mayombero* that his *Wanga* goes cold, and it is not wise either to let it get used to receiving a lot of blood. The *ngangas* that are *judías* must be kept separated and under a shelter, never inside the house.¹²⁹ Women cannot approach them and children much less. Nor should people talk to them a lot. When a sorcerer needs them, he goes where they are and says to them: “Let so-and-so burst within so many days.” He sets the day of the victim’s death. “I deliver him to you! He is yours, finish him off soon.” He sprays alcohol on it, sets it on fire so that the spirit, furious, can go do the harm he orders it to do.

“They are traitorous. More susceptible than the Santos, if one day you cannot feed it blood and it will drink your blood instead.”

- How?

“Well something bad happens to you. A disturbance happens on your path, somebody stabs you… or a bullet gets lost and kills you, a tram runs you over or a guagua,¹³⁰ and so the *nganga* drank your blood!”¹³¹

Speaking on one occasion with one of my elder informants about the value of blood in maintaining the vigor of the *prendas* and their temperaments, he told me:

“What the fierce *ngangas* truly like is Christian blood…, but since they cannot be given such blood, they are tricked and that thirst has to relent.”

It was about the *prendas judías*, in which, as the reader already knows, live the souls of murderers, suicides—and the most beloved—the souls of those who have died at the garrotte.
Anyway, we touched a point that could not then be approached without wounding the dignity and provoking the animated protest of the adept of an African Rule, especially the Lucumí Rule. Did the African Sovereigns and amulets demand human sacrifices?

[182] Touching this theme was very delicate, and in my first investigations, as soon as I slipped in the question about the supposed sacrifices of children in the past that the police denounced and the press published, there would be a silence that I would hurry to break. Insisting on the desire of the ngangas judías who demanded menga of a muana nene, I made, more than once, an unforgivable mistake of tact. Two or three elders interpreted my curiosity as a proof that I was complicit in the idea that “the white people have to harm the black people and to accuse them that they kill children over the nganga or that they take out the children’s heart for medicine.”

Time has managed to fully do away with a whole slanderous belief, the result, naturally, of the ignorance of white people. However, there is no doubt that “the bad ngangas, bad like that Chavandinga that almost wiped off the crew of Jorrín, would like to have a sip of Christian blood,” according to what that elder told me.

“And it is true that they ask for it and they drink it. But, watch out… it is not that they seize a person like a rooster, they cut his skin and spill his blood on the nkiso. The dead finds a way to drink the blood of the palero in the way that you have been told.”

There was no shortage of people who believed and frightened children about the Negro witches who stole them in order to kill them and eat them.

The truthful T. told me, and also Ciriaco, who warns me against “the mayomberas judías, because the women have their heart harder than the men when they say that their heart is hard.” He also said that anyone who manages one of those Wangas that does not get baptized, does not receive any blessed water from the Catholic Church, from Nso Nsambia—Pangalán Boko—from
Good Saturday or from the first rains of May, which makes them _cristianas_ and benevolent. One day they would demand from the _palero_ “the blood of a little angel.” But even though the _palero_ might be an evil person, to avoid trouble with the justice, if he knows, he would never give it blood and there will be no danger. The _nganga_ will never get to taste the blood, except in those exceptional cases in which the criminal instinct of a degenerate or an unbalanced subject are compounded by an insane fanaticism.

“If the _mayordomo judío_ catches child blood,” P.M. warns, “it is because it is very easy to _kwíkinrikia_, to _bondá_, to kill a defenseless creature.”

It is clear that sorcery, as Fernando Ortiz said in his first book, _Los Negros Brujos_, “is a magnificent breeding ground for the criminal microbe.”

The same criterion, expressed in other words, can be seen in the declarations, opinions, and observations of many of my illiterate Teachers. The fearsome _ngangulero judío_ is, in reality, an assassin if, believing that he is compelled or dominated by the diabolic spirit of his _Wanga_—[183] easily deceived!—he does not react against the possibility of sacrificing a child. If he gives in, it is more by wickedness, to satisfy his wicked instincts, than in order to please the _nganga_.

Miguel maintains emphatically, like Saint Thomas Aquina, whom he admires very much because Miguel is a _kimbiseró_, and who certainly did not doubt the reality of witchcraft nor of the direct intervention of the Prince of Darkness in the works of the necromancer, “that _Lungambé_, the Devil, is the one who gives power to the _mayombero judío_ and that with his inspiration, he accomplishes all his evil acts.” His _ngangas_ can only operate in criminal works.

“Many are sorcerers, are _ndokis_, because they are assassins,” another informant told us.

But what can a sorcerer do whose _prenda_ asks him for a supplement of human blood?
We finally found out. One of the providential tricks to avoid a child sacrifice, the most common trick that is used with these ngangas of lurián bansa Kadiempembe, of hell and the Devil, and let it be known in passing, with the “mixed” ones which also ask for the blood of a child, and the most exposed child could be the child of the sorcerer himself, is the following:

“If the nganga asks that you give him your youngest child, or he falls in love with the moana luke, the child of your neighbor, who comes to the house (that is why girls have no business going into the room of the nganga), and each time he demands more and more that you give him the blood, make a contract with him in which you pledge to keep your word and the nganga pledges to keep his word. But, it is important to be careful, because things can get complicated if he suspects an alibi. You tell him categorically: I will give you a little Christian, or whichever child you want, but before that you come on the nkombo head and after you mount it, you must swear to me as I swear to you, that before that you will eat what I will give you to eat. With this promise, he already got excited. Since you do not mention that you will give him first the child, he thinks that it is a rooster or a goat, or any other type of food, he accepts and swears happily. Then you put a metal file, an iron ball, or a piece of hard metal over the cauldron. Not that spirit, nor anybody else, is able to eat a metal file or an iron ball even though his frame has the teeth of a nsao. You order him: Eat this! You swore to me! Ah! You don’t eat it? Of course not! Legal contract. Well, the sorcerer is no longer obliged to give his son or the son of the neighbor because the spirit has not fulfilled his part of the contract. If he did not eat the iron, he cannot eat the child. There is no bisikanda.”

This very interesting and useful secret revelation coincides and is confirmed in the following information that we obtained from a padre nganga who tells us how to make a nganga judía for oneself:
“Go to the cemetery, to a tomb with a friend of confidence, four candles, gun powder, and a sheet. There the person who is going to do the invocation is covered with the sheet, speaks, explains what he wants, and he swears, lying down on the ground, on the stomach or on the back. Once he has sworn, he puts on a stone seven mounds of gun powder to ask to the dead he has gone to fetch if he is willing to go home with him. He lights up the gun powder, and if all the gun powder mounds are blown up, it means that the dead says yes, that he agrees. Then the man takes with him that spirit—which will live in a cauldron or a pot. He puts a peseta at the bottom of the container and some soil of the tomb in which is buried the dead with which he has made a pact. With a sharp knife or razor blade, he and his companion make a few cuts on their chests and on their backs, and they drip the blood from both on the nganga so that the dead can drink it. That is how one makes a nganga for oneself.

“You can take soil only from a tomb—the soil of the “fiua” with whom you made the pact—to avoid confusion, because if there are several dead, maybe one wants to work and the other does not, and they do not agree. This pact is make only with one dead, and this dead is your slave; but since he obeys your orders, you will have to please him when he desires or asks you for something. For example, if he asks you for a child, a son that you have. If this happens, you cannot say no, even if it is your own son. In this case, get a steel metal file and tell the dead: I will meet your wish, but before that I want to be able to break with my hands this file in less than four days. If you can help me do that, I will give you the child, and the child will be yours. If you cannot do that, you will not be able to take the child away. The spirit comes to the head of his ngombe, and since he cannot break the file, he cannot claim or take with him the child either.”

(About this ngangulero, those who knew him said that he knew as much as the other ngangulero, Secundino Angarica, who could make a cauldron dance on the tip of a knife.)
The previous explanation of the *nfumo sanga*, insistent that there should not be any confusion between the *Mayombe cristiano* and the *Mayombe judío*, is not far removed from the explanation that was given to me on this thorny issue by other *paleros*. Preventing, then, that the *nganga* compels one to commit the infanticide that is imputed to the sorcerers, depends on the cleverness that the *paleros* display.

A year or two years before I abandoned Cuba, I heard about a *nganga* that a notable *taita* in the sweet province of Pinar de Río had inherited from his African ancestors. That man was not a wicked man, I was told. His *prenda* did not “eat,” there was no need to sacrifice to it, to “feed it.” But every fifty years, it was necessary to offer it the blood of a child who did not necessarily have to be white. On the contrary, the victim had to belong to the same family as the *ngangatare* and be nine months old. And recently this *taita*, being at the head of a large group of offspring [185] and with the consent of all and for the good of all, secretly had sacrificed a great-grandson to the *nganga*!

Because of their sorcery, the Haitian Negroes were feared by the people in Cuba. About three decades ago, on a plantation in Camagüey, a Haitian Negro sacrificed two sons to his *Wanga* because the *Wanga* had demanded them in order to restore the health to some customer or the relative of the very same mothers who had accepted to deliver their sons to him. Gallito was the name of this sorcerer, who fascinated people and was influential among them. He was denounced to the Rural Guard, but one of his Negroes, because of the terror that Gallito generated in him, said that he was the culprit and the supposed truthfulness of his confession and crime—which he had not committed—was confirmed when the bodies of sacrificed sons were exhumed where he had indicated. Gallito was not punished by the criminal justice system. The fervent and cursed innocent man was the one who was sentenced to death.
Some prendas require, for their constitution, the sacrifice of a woman, but the immolation of the victim is not done in the logical form that one would think: the padre nganga holding the woman as if she were an animal and, knife in hand, letting her bleed.

“No. You take advantage of the fact that women are careless and usually throw in the trash the sanitary pads that have been soaked with the blood of their menstruation. The mayombero collects one of these pads soaked with blood and washes it with the prenda. The prenda then begins to suck the woman’s blood until the woman dries up and dies. As a payment for this lifestyle, whatever the gangulero asks for, the nganga gives it to him. This particular type of nganga, which is made only of bad palos, sticks, with Siete Rayos and Centella—it belongs to the Path of Cobayende and Campo Santo—is very capricious and can be a pain in the neck, for instance when it insists that it be taken out for a walk to the cemetery where one can run into the police or whatever other inconvenient person.”

It is clear that the sorcerer does not do these human sacrifices physically. But, as it happens, he consents to them. Or, how many victims of his lightness in making pacts with the dead cannot avoid their fate?

“P.B. did not have the fortune of seeing any of his sons grow. And not because they were abikús, traveling spirits, who are born to be on Earth for only a short time and then die again. P.B.’s wife will despair each time that one of her sons would die, but the husband never shed a tear. He knew that his prenda—a very strong one—carried them all away. People murmured that he had promised them to his nkiso, when he still had none, to deliver all the children that he would have. That is how the poor nkento came to give birth for kumangongo, for the cemetery. Many people promise the same thing to their nganga, believing that these offerings of treats could be fixed later. But one should not have illusions: even though the dark spirit of the worst
katukemba or dead is the slave of the mayombero judío who buys it at the tomb, the day eventually arrives when it gets out of control.” “And the worse of these tratos judíos or judío [186] pacts,” says Basilio, a gravedigger, “is that the dead believes that he is still alive and he wants to meddle in everything; he becomes so possessive and jealous of the mayombero that he does not separate from him for a minute and he goes with him toe to toe and one day he consumes him.”

A fumbi of monganga or of a Chinese suicide, got a grudge against the wife of Jacobino, who played Palo with this Teacher and another Negro called Pío, a companion of Jacobino.

“That dead took advantage of the fact that the mayombero who could put up with him was not there, simbio" Pío, and having mounted him, he went into the hut where the Negro woman, who was mamboti, pretty, was putting out clothes to dry. He raped her, he then dragged her on the ground, and, biting and hitting her, he almost killed her. And how responsible was Pío for what he did… if he was not who he was?”

These ngangas judías causes many problems!

However, another informant who, because of his nganga, had spent a long time in nso-Sarabanda, in the jail, told us: “The ngangas judías do not live well in the city. They work better in the countryside; they belong to anabuto, the bush. There are many churches here. They have to wait for the convenient time to surprise the person they are going to fuck up. They cannot hear the name of God mentioned; if they see another espíritu cristiano or a Christian spirit coming, they get frightened and they hide.”

In fact, when in a play of Mayombe judío the spirit possesses a ngombe, instead of pronouncing the ritual formula “with the permission of Nsambia Mpungu,” it is necessary to say “with the permission of the permission,” because the name of God cannot be pronounced.
One of my elder women acquaintances, a daughter or granddaughter of Lucumí, saw one night at the exit of the bridge of Lisa, in Marianao, a strange half-human form that at the same time was like a cat with the back full of quills. Terrified, she screamed, “Holy Lord of Hosts!,” and that apparition shrank suddenly and crawled away rapidly, reduced to a shadow, along the side of the road. These souls of the people who in life were delinquents, souls that before being sold to the mayordomo are on death row through the garrette, are so alarmed by a cross that the presence in a Nso Nganga judío of an initiate of Mayombe cristiano or Ocha Rule who wears around the neck a crucifix or the medal of a Saint, prevents the sorcerer from doing his work. It is known that only at certain hours and during determined days—Good Fridays are the most appropriate—can a brujo judío do his conjures and cast his spells; to avoid that his nfumbis meet entities that may slow their work or simply neutralize them.

T.M., accompanying a woman friend to the temple of some paleros he did not know, had to leave at the request of the mayordomo-nganga. Naturally, the padre nganga had around his head a black head scarf. “They were burning fula to get the work started and the fula will not explode.” That is, the fumbi was not going out to fulfill the orders of the sorcerer.

[187] Preoccupied, he asked if among those who were present inside or outside the room, there was someone who had a protection, a medal, a crucifix, or a scapular. Nobody declared having a protection that so dramatically frustrated the spirit of that house, and once again they lit the gun powder without getting a better result. “The thing was not working.” Finally, T.M. realized and declared that she was wearing, pinned to her shirt, a medal of Saint Luis Gonzaga, blessed moreover, by the priest of her parish. She was asked to leave, which she was pleased to do, because she understood that she was in the house of the Devil, and immediately the gun powder exploded and the kindamba was able to go out.
In the same token, in another play, the presence of M., who, as a good *kimbiser*o, always wore a crucifix—his *Samiánpiri*—which, like all the crucifixes of the Rule founded by Andrés Petit, carry on the reverse side, in the center of the cross, a cavity that is filled with the soil of the *Fundamento* of the sect, caused a frightening confusion in the *ngomes*.

“When I entered,” says Miguel, “they would desperately crawl on the ground, howl, shake, and furiously back off.”

These evil spirits who cannot hear the name of God, “you don’t spoil them. You speak badly to them, you curse them.”

Our beloved Calazán, who would frustrate the will of one of his *ngangas*—“which was not as *judía* as the other I had in Cidra, in the house of a *kuamo*,”—when preparing some mortal gun powder mounds—*mpolos*—to cripple a rival, would abuse the *nganga* with actions and words. That is what you do when they do not obey. A companion surprised him in this task, in the middle of a fury, berating the *fuiri* who lived in a very heavy cauldron and using the least reverent language one could imagine:

“Son of a gun, you must do whatever I order you to do. You cannot do more than I can do, s***! What? You don’t like the black rag, *cundango*? Well, that is why I cover you with a rag that is blacker than the skin of the whore of a mother who mistakenly brought you to life, who never knew who your father was. And now, instead of *malafu*, bastard, I will give you alcohol, and instead of *fula*, I will give you fire so that you can burn, damned pig, may *Tambarini Ndiambiro*, may the Devil take you away!”

Calazán poured half a bottle of methanol on the *nganga* and set it on fire. After burning a while all the dark and thick mixture of various materials deposited in the cauldron, he covered it
with the black cloth that seemed to frustrate the spirit that lived there and put a heavy stone on top of it… in order to crush it.

I learned that he punished it that way for fourteen days.

The *mayombero judío* does not go easy when his *nganga* refuses to obey him. “Or it is a slacker.”

[188] If, despite having responded through the *fula*, that it was ready to fulfill whatever order given, it does keep its word, he turns it over, he gives it a good spanking with the royal palm broom, and he leaves it that way for as long as he judges convenient: “Until you do what I ordered you to do, I won’t turn you up nor will you stand up.”

Other *mayomberos* used to punish the *ngangas* by submerging them in a river for seven or twenty-one days.

It would not be astonishing, given what has been said, without taking into account the difference that exists between the *Mayombe cristiano* and the *Mayombe judío*, that in Cuba the magic of the Kongo continues to be unjustly judged negatively, without distinctions and as if among the *Mayombe cristiano* there exists none able be called *Mbundu yelo*, to have a *Ntima bunta*, a good heart. “And in Cuba it is as it was in the Kongo. There the malevolent sorcerer was punished; the benevolent sorcerer was respected. All loved him and sought him out.”

It should be kept in mind that contrary to what is known as black magic, represented by this malevolent sorcerer that our people call *judío*, and more correctly, *ndoki*, rises the *cristiano*, the *moana Sambia Ntu*, who practices the benevolent magic, the magic that heals and defends, respects its dead and acknowledges *Insambi*, the Creator, above all things.

As it should be, from time to time, the *npangue nkisi*, all who call themselves *yákara moana mpangián lukanda nfinda ntoto*,134 celebrate their *ngangas* and *nkisos*. 
We have seen that—“the initiations, the feasts for the dead are serious ceremonies of prayers and songs, nothing more.”

Some of my informants greatly emphasized the solemnity that reigned in the rites of the Kongo Rule. But this does not mean that in the Nso Nganga there is, by any means, no dance or joy.

“There would the dead not dance? One does kisonga kiá ngola for them, their party, and plays the drum for them so that they can dance. They put on the big wasángara, the dead and the mpangui sama.”

An elder woman slave in Trinidad told me, with enthusiasm, about this festivity, of eating and dancing that is celebrated—“whenever possible”—once a year for the exclusive rejoicing of the Nganga.

“The sweet feast when nganga údia—eats. This day is big, people don’t kudilanga—work. You play drum, all the caravel and the kiyumba with it dance happily.”

*Agüé día tambó*  
*To mundo baila*  

*Lo chiquito y grande*  
*To mundo baila.*

[189]  

J.L. tells us: “That day the Elder of the house does dances, the *nfumo nkento*, with all the *ahijados* and the other friends, relatives for the same branch of the nganga, who come to celebrate her. The *padre*, the other *taitas*, the *madrinas*, the *mayordomos* and the children mount and dance inside the room. The people, the drums, the *mula*, the *cachimbo*, and the *caja* are outside. The *padre nganga* dances with the shinbone of the dead—the *kisengue*—and the *grama* in hand, the handkerchief or the cap put on because he dances mounted by his *nganga*. So that
our *nganga* can get up and dance”—that is, the *mayombero* who lies *simbaò* on the ground—we need to praise it, caress it, sing to it a lot to convince it.

¡lé! ¿po qué po qué María Sukende  Why, oh María Sukende, 
no quié bailar?  don’t you want to dance?
¿Po qué María Sukende  Why, María Sukende, 
No quié bailar?  Why don’t you want to dance?
*Tu baila poquito María*  Dance a little, María 
*Tu sabe bailá*  You know how to dance 
*Tú menea tu pie poquito*  Move your foot a little 
*Tú sabe bailá*  You know how to dance 
*Tú menea tu cuepo*  Shake your body 
*María Sukende tú sabe bailá*  María Sukende, you know how to dance 
*¡Baila bonito María Sukende!*  You dance well, María Sukende!

Not until sundown did the *nganguleros* go to dance outside the house, in the “*chapeao.*” Our *nganga* did not dance just like that. Only if she had some war at hand. When she danced, people sang:

¡Eh1! Mariata na má Nguruba na má  Eh, Mariata only, Nguruba only
¿Cuál Palo baila má que Mariata?  What Palo dances more than Mariata?

It was to see who would dare to come dance at our drum. A challenge. We were determined to see who would throw down who, and many times, that is why we threw to the *nganga* all these festivities during which you tried to take away the *nganga* of your opponent.”

“In the *ingenio,*” Nino in his turn tells us, “when people threw feasts for the *prenda,* in came the drums. You heard:
From the neighboring *ingenios* the heads and the *ahijados* came and we would sing to them:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spanish</th>
<th>English</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Agüé día tambó tu viene bailá”</td>
<td>Today, day of the drum, you come to dance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Va Palo que é curro”</td>
<td>Palo is happening</td>
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<tr>
<td>“To mundo bailá”</td>
<td>All dance</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Lo grande lo chico”</td>
<td>The great and the small</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Agüé día tambó to mundo bailá”</td>
<td>Today, day of the drum, all dance</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Tu sé cura Bolondrón”</td>
<td>You know how to heal Bolondrón</td>
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<tr>
<td>“¡To mundo a bailá!”</td>
<td>All dance!</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Tú sé cheche la Güira”</td>
<td>You know how to lift up La Güira</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Tú viene a baila”</td>
<td>You come to dance</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Tú sé curro San Lorenzo”</td>
<td>You know how to heal San Lorenzo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“¡Ah caramba! y tu viene a bailá”</td>
<td>Oh, damn! And you come to dance</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Tú sé Palo Jicarita”</td>
<td>You know Palo Jicarita</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Viene bailá”</td>
<td>You come to dance</td>
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<td>“Tú sé Palo la Gloire”</td>
<td>You know Palo la Gloire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Tú viene bailá”</td>
<td>You come to dance</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Tó mundo baila, etc. etc.”</td>
<td>All dance, etc. Etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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[190] ¡Lé Nana wé maningalá

*To Nana, we dance*

*Eh Nana yo maningalá*

*To Nana, I dance*

*Bóngolo kimbóngolo kimbóngolo*

*Bóngolo kimbóngolo kimbóngolo*

*Maningalá lé Nana yo!*

*I dance to Nana!*

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Those who did not have enough strength did not dare enter the house of the opponent to take away his prenda or a makuto. You had to defend them. The toughest, the ones who had the most powerful dead, entered the nso and would walk out with the nganga without anything happening to them.

I remember Dominga Caballo de Centella, a woman mayombera tough as a male ndoki, who arrived at our drum feast mounted, in trance, with a mpaka in hand, singing:

_Si tu Ngnaga como yo_  Yes, I can eat your nganga  
_Nganga como yo_  I eat ngangas  
_Nganga la de allí_  For that nganga over there  
_Baila mi tambó._  My drum dances.

Then Dominga Morejón, Siete Rayos, my kuamo padrino nganga, answered her:

[191]  _Grúaté cual Nganga como yo_  Dare to find out how I eat ngangas  
  _Grúaté venga cantá aquí._”  Dare to come sing here.”

That Dominga Caballo de Centella was notable, I found out through another behavior of hers. “Her slips were never undone, and her work was very clean. When the matoko, the husband of one of her companions had her companion half abandoned, Dominga tied him up on her behalf in such a way that the man would no longer separate from the woman. What did she do? Very simple: she advised her that she beat some of her urine with two chicken eggs during the night, fry them, and feed him the eggs.”

“When it was time for the mfumbi to say goodbye…

_¡Ay Cielo! ¡Ay Cielo!_  Oh Heaven! Oh Heaven!
_Cielo toca mano con cielo_  Heaven, touch the heaven with the hand
_Que ya me voy, ceja de monte_  That I am about to leave, for the forest

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Cielo toca la mano  The hand touches heaven
Me voy pa la Case Grande  I am leaving for la Casa Grande
Mundo se va hata año venidero  The people are leaving until next year
Si tú me ñama yo responde  If you call me, I will respond
Mundo se va  The people are leaving
Se acabó Mayimbe Ngóngo  Mayimbe Ngóngo is over
Mayimbe é Diablo s’acabó  Mayimbe and the Devil are over
Kiaku Kuaku Kiángana Kiángana  Kiaku Kuaku Kiángana Kiángana
que Amaniké  that Amaniké
Válgame Dio se va Tumberoña  God knows that Tumberoña is leaving
Tiempo cuarema Ngóngoro fue  During Lent Ngóngoro went
a la Nfinda  to the forest
S’acabó, yo kiaku kia  It is over; I, your brother,
Me voy pa la loma.  I am going to the hill.

All the children took the prenda to dance with it.

Hasta el año que viene  Until next year
Yo no juega mi mundo  I will not play with my people
Kuenda Kokoro  Go Kokoro
Kuenda Matende  Go Matende
Kuenda Kindé  Go Kindé
Hasta el año que viene  Until next year
Yo no juega Mayombe...  I will not play Mayombe...
Always giving the word to those who, stranger to a justified distrust due to the misunderstanding [192] or mockery of the white people, had the generosity, honestly and without any zeal to proselytize, to expose me to their ideas and to their vision of the cosmos, life, and death, to guide me into their religions inseparable form magic, we will hear them to conclude these notes, evoke some eminent padres ngangas and madres ngangas, already deceased, but who continued to protect them.

It is a constant in the religiosity of the Cuban Negroes that they managed to keep intact, despite a long process of acculturation, despite their integration into the life of the white people, a devotion to their dead—“who protect us, who, if we ever offend a Saint, will intercede for us”—so profoundly African. I know that there are mayomberos in exile. Many. Only once did I speak to one of them. I do not know if during the time when many santeros and paleros ran away from Cuba in row boats, defying death, and the santeros bringing with them their sacred stones, if the mayomberos were able to take with them their ngangas and nkisis…

What would people here in the United States have thought of some refugees who carried with them a bag with a pot or a cauldron containing soil, human bones, or maybe a skull? Some—and I know the case of a babalawo who in Cuba was the owner of ngangas—left their ngangas there, under the care of the ntatando or of the nkento kuakidilamuno, of the padrino or the madrina, who did not want or were not able to leave.

But a nganga can be made in any place. “Wherever there are trees, stones, rivers, dead, and spirits.”

If one does not inherit it, if one does not receive it, we have already been told how to make a prenda, how in a cemetery the mayombero takes possession of the spirit of a deceased man or woman. We will not repeat what is described in detail in my book El Monte.
But the poor exiled *mayombero* will not have, here in Miami or in New York, the luck of those who have got their *prendas* from a *taita* who passed away without heirs and this *fwa* chooses them, sometimes without knowing them. Let us see what could happen in Cuba.

When the *bichilingos* or *vitilingos*, the *soyanga*, the bugs, begin to enter in big numbers in the pole planted in the compound of the old forest magician, it is to let him know that his end is near. The continuous appearance of crawling things in the residence of the *mayombero* is interpreted as a sign of his approaching death. This happens if the spirit has not warned him in dreams that he prepare himself to depart because he has finished his mission in this world and “his elders are waiting for him on the other side.” Dreaming about a dead relative or a friend who takes us to the woods is a sign that leads us to review our life: it reminds us we are the children of the Earth, and that the time has come for Her to take accounts, and we must begin to prepare for the big trip.

If a *mayordomo* who shared in the care of the *nganga* with the departing *mayombero* inherited the *nganga* at the death of the *mayombero* because the *mayombero* had no *ahijados* or relatives, this elder would bury his *prenda*, as it was the custom in such cases, on a hill at the time of prayer. So did many *nganguleros* who had died without passing on to anybody the forces enclosed in their *prendas*.

“Sometimes, the *prenda* that a few days before closing his eyes the *padre* himself buries at the time of the Hail Mary or at dawn, remains buried there the time that is necessary for this *padre*, after death, to appear to a person of his choice and to tell that person that he gives that person his *prenda* and the person should go get the *prenda*. The individual who receives this communication, whether it is a son of Santo or a daughter of *prenda*, goes out with another person who must be a *padre* to dig up the *prenda*. The dead owner of the cauldron comes to
touch the person’s head. He is recognized as the heir of the nganga and he takes the place of the deceased padre who has appeared to him.”

“My prenda was given to me in dreams by a dead who was unknown to me,” Catalino tells me. “He told me where it was, he explained to me when I had to go get it, because it was very far, buried in a monte: he told me that I had to introduce myself, so that he could accompany me, to a mayombero skinner in the locality of Alacranes, whom I did not know either. I had never seen him in my life! I was dreaming, but everything was so clear and precise in the dream! The Negro who spoke to me was a dark-brown Negro, with broad shoulders and a scar on his forehead. When I woke up, well, I did not know what to believe about all that! But I went on the day that the dead had indicated to me to Alacranes, to the house of the skinner, and everything was true. I swear to you. There I was initiated and, and we went to the monte; we dug and found the nkiso, the cauldron, right there where the dead had told me it was.”

F., a neighbor in Pogolotti, a serious man, reserved and gifted with an enviable faith, could have been the owner of an extraordinary Wanga. During one stage of his life, he was looking throughout the whole province of Santa Clara for a mulatto who had offended him, with the firm purpose of killing him wherever he found him. Going through Topes de Collantes, he asked to spend the night at the place of an old and miserable one-armed man whom he met in that desolate mountain range, living in a mud hut.

He gave the old man some coffee, tobacco, and other tidbits he was carrying in his jolongo. At the break of dawn, the old man wakes him up, points to the magic cauldron in a corner of the hut and asks him to draw from the cauldron the first thing he finds. The hand of F. tumbled against a small black bundle, and he took it. The old man ordered him to introduce the
bundle in a bowl that he filled with water and he said to him: “Ask the thing whatever you want to know.”

That bundle begins to swell and to acquire slowly the form of a black hand. He understands that this hand submerged in water is the one that is missing from the old man. The hand recovers life; answers his questions, affirmatively by moving the index finger up and down, and negatively by closing the fingers. You will not kill the man you are looking for, but you will do him good; he foretells a quiet future for him. When he finishes asking his questions, the severed hand shakes F.’s hand. He removes it from the bowl and puts it back in the cauldron.

I am alone and within two years I know that I will die. I would leave you my Wanga if before that time you come to get it, the old one-armed man told him.

F. did not manage to return in time to Topes de Collantes.

“Eulogio Miranda, a calash driver, spent some time in solitary confinement as punishment in the ingenio. He was a bútua, a Kongo at heart. At the door of the cabin, when the Negroes were getting ready to go to sleep, Eulogio would see a Negro that nobody else was seeing. It was a fuá ka fuá, an apparition. When he completed his punishment and was returning to the city, the dead gave him a nkindi. That is how he referred to his protection: the size of a peseta, it had the power of a nkisi. This means that a punishment was his salvation.”

Many are the pots or cauldrons that, buried by their owners for a long time now under a pool tree or any “strong tree,” are seen at certain hours walking through the forest, through a sugarcane field, at the exit of a residential area, or crossing a road, “for they get out from under the earth at noon and at midnight to walk a little or to take some fresh air.”

Who, knowing our countryside, has not heard someone who, with all the serious demeanor of the world, claims to have seen a cauldron walking through a clearing, or a ball of
fire, or in such or such place came across a stick doll, a chincherekú or a nkondo, that continued on its way while he caught his breath and pretended to be totally indifferent? Well, these chance encounters are not always without danger: even though it will “only harm” the person that the sorcerer designated, but we certainly run the risk that the chicherekú would like us and could stick to us by sympathy, or that, since they are sardonic, they would want to have some fun by frightening us. In general, it is reassuring to know that “the bad things” only attack the subjects against which they are directed.

The dryness of a plot of land or the loss of a harvest can be attributed to the burial of one of these Wangas.

Shortly before I abandoned Cuba, in a plantation that bordered an ingenio in Matanzas, people found a buried cauldron that contained the bones of a child. When the Negroes were mistreated, their prendas made the plots of land sick. Other slaves, more practical, did not make the plot of land or the cattle sick. In the 19th century, to get revenge on a bad master or the overseer, they resorted to poison. In the rough collectivity of Camagüey, more than once, a whole family died dañada, spoiled, poisoned.

It would take us a lot of space to reproduce all the stories that our informants told us about all those great nganguleros who have left an immortal name in the oral history of Palo Mayombe Monte.

It is worth speaking separately about the taita nganga, búka or bafumo, the healer of the Kongo Rule, and this we will do, God willing.

“They Kongo,” Capetillo told me, “today would put to shame the doctors! They even cured leprosy. Yes, sir, I can testify to that; I saw them work; they cured it.” In all parts, we heard people talk with admiration about the Kongo Negro sorcerer, who had stopped counting
the years. Each ahijado or ahijada weaves a legend around his or her mambi-mambi. Each plantation, each collectivity had its own magnificent Ngangulero, sharing his prestige with the Awó and the Olorisha, and on them are piled miracles that, with bated breath, people say their successors are no longer able to accomplish.

“Gone are people like Cirilo Aldama, the one who, whenever he arrived at a party, to introduce himself and honor his prenda, would proclaim: I, Cirilo Aldama, am a Chakumbe Caracol la Mar Tesia Tesia nunca cae María Ndumbaka Waraki Lánga ke alulendo moana Nkisi. After God, you may count on me! And you had to count on him for all big things.”

Among the names of the servants of prenda, perros, dogs, or caballos, horses that Baró named, let us remember the name of Gando Cueva.

“Gando Cueva,” says another mayombero who did not know Baró and who always speaks with the greatest admiration about the sorcerers of Matanzas, “was an African slave. His master was a Basque. Gando Cueva, gosh, a sorcerer as there no longer exist! You know, that business of healing with palos and herbs and sending the bilongo and many other things, of course, they continue to be done every day; but to do what that Negro used to do… that, no way! Believe me! Gando Cueva, every time he felt like it, he would become invisible. He would tell his friends: at such and such an hour, go to the café and you will see me naked among the people. And, in fact, he would appear to them like Adam in Paradise and he would disappear again. Just imagine that Negro butt naked, and so black, seated on a table between an elegant lady and a very serious gentleman, or, at other times, in dark skin, strolling in the park among the white people, with the young ladies of good families!” To make oneself invisible was an art that many other sorcerers knew very well. “Like Gando Cueva, there was one sorcerer back around 1895, also in Matanzas, who used to stone the Civil Guard. They would chase him, but the Negro
always vanished. He stoned the Fire Department, set it on fire, and ran away without anybody seeing him. When the war against Spain was over, he himself told the story; he communicated the secret… and lost the grace. More than four things are not known because they are not told. They cannot be told. Secrets are kept. What is told is lost.” (Indiscretion is the defect of the Creoles.)

“Back around 1906, San Kundiambo was on the run a short distance from Jovellanos, [196] in Dos Hermanos. The police saw him and ran after him. They were chasing him because he had attempted to violate a girl of high society.

One day at noon, we were at home, in the backyard. In front, there was a small sugarcane plantation and some burrs, and there appeared San Kundiambo. The guard shot at him and the Negro disappeared. He was going toward Fermina and the guard did a thorough search of the area. Nothing! Lost… Fifteen days later, he let himself be seen and disappeared again. That is how San Kundiambo made Jovellanos tremble.”

The miraculous and old prayer of the Just Judge is very much appreciated by sorcerers and criminals, and they say that San Kundiambo, through the power of the prayer, used to perform this practice of showing oneself to the police and immediately disappearing and escaping from their siege. “But there is a way of making oneself invisible. You tightly tie up a black cat. You put it in a new cauldron filled with water and you put it to boil. You firmly cover the cauldron because the cat struggles and wants to run away. As the water boils, the cat’s bones come off. You put them on a table and in front of you, you put a mirror. You take the bones one at a time and you put them between your teeth until one of the bones cannot be seen in the mirror. That is how that bone renders invisible the person who possesses it.”
Baltasar Bakú Sarabanda was able to send objects to their destination through the air. This is one of the other faculties of the sorcerers.

“When Baltasar Bakú showed up in a locality, all the people there would wonder what he could possibly had gone there for, and they would run to receive him. On one occasion, in Bemba, Jovellanos, in the sight of many people, this famous sorcerer, the owner of a Ndoki Infierno, at the railroad station, threw on the rails the heavy sack of flour that he was carrying, and this, light like paper, disappeared over the railroad. “It goes wherever it is sent,” Baltasar Bakú explained, “when I arrive, it will be waiting for me. And that is how it was.” He made himself invisible, and maybe, like other illustrious sorcerers, could have been able to transform himself into an animal, which, as we have already pointed out, was a grace that the Kongo had: my grandmother used to tell us that over there in her land, there were sorcerers who turned themselves into tigers; over here, the brujos judíos covert themselves into mbomas, into bats, into black butterflies. For these, they did ceremonies. I cannot tell you about them because I do not know them.”

People remember that Andrés Petit had a baton that made him invisible, and there was a white man of high society who also knew how to render himself invisible, some elders told me: no less than Don Miguel Aldama! We were told that Aldama’s descendants “relied for all their business on the sorcery of Guinea.”

I knew none of these things when Doña Silva Alfonso y Aldama, Countess of Manzzoni, was still alive, and I was not able to tell her the things people said about her illustrious and forgotten defunct grandfather. Domingo del Monte certainly did not know those things, but his protected disciple Manzano would have known them.
What means does the sorcerer use to make himself invisible? “With palos, feathers of some birds, and tomb soil.” But, as always, the most secure thing to do was to ask an elder. Calazán told me the following: “If I tell you the true way of rendering oneself invisible if you wanted to make yourself invisible, you would not do what needs to be done… this is a secret that must be kept, and I, with all my courage, I do not dare do it. Leave it like that. I will tell you about it another day.”

After a few years, I received from another elder the following hair-raising statement, maybe the same one that Calazán hid from me: “To make yourself invisible, you have to get a cadaver. You suck the fat and the water from the cadaver. That water and that fat, you rub it well all over your body.” Fortunately, there are other formulas and means that are much more accessible.

Any Negro elder could be one of those extraordinary sorcerers: who knows? The old male beggar or the old female you would meet casually on the street and who so many times would approach strangers to reveal to them a mystery or help them solve the problem that tormented them or to save their lives plain and simple. “Go straight to the hospital, your intestine is going to burst,” a stranger whispers in the ear of a placero137 in the market. Before a week, the man is taken to the hospital and is operated on, and, in effect, he has a hernia.

A carpenter with many customers, very eager to “lift himself up,” to educate himself, a big reader of magazines and whatever printed material fell into his hands, told me, privately, the following: “I felt worse with every passing day. I could hardly walk, and because I lived through it, I can tell you the story, because, otherwise I would have continued like before, not believing in sorcery. Since that time, I believe, and laugh at whomever says that sorcery is not true. I was riding a horse with my foot swollen and nobody could heal me. How painful! I would spend
nights without being able to sleep, and a Negro elder was coming on foot on the road. We crossed each other, and, as I stopped the horse, he tells me: ‘Oh, you stepped on something bad!’ I was about to continue on my way, but he tells me: ‘Don’t waste time; right here, I will take it out for you.’ I, tired of using so much ointment, so much medication, answered him: ‘Well elder, heal me.’ But I did not believe; I don’t know what idea I had to pay attention to that dirty and talkative old man. The old man took a small knife from the pocket of his pants and a handkerchief; he holds my leg, speaks to it and with the knife and, just like that, he slashes me! From the cut rushes a little monster like a lizard, a macao, I don’t know what that thing was, so dirty, so ugly! He showed it to me, and it was moving its legs! On my cut, he put some herbs that he collected right there; without disinfecting the wound or doing anything else, he bandaged it with the colored handkerchief, and never again, hear me well, never again have I had any pain in my leg. The swelling disappeared immediately and now not even the scar remains. The old man was right. I was able to verify who had put the spell on me in my workshop. The man who had put the spell on me had mistakenly thought that I was courting his wife.”

[198]  I had no intention to refute the truthfulness of this confession. I do not think I have ever wounded the dignity of a palero or a santero by doubting the value of a walona or an iché ayé; the harm-causing power of those bilongs that are prepared with some of the many crushed bugs that later recover their form in the body of the person who steps on them or breathes them in the air, in the smoke of a cigarette or a tobacco joint. All of them have effects. But the worst of the sorceries, “the one with the most guarantee and speed,” is the one that is ingested, dissolved in a drink, preferably in coffee: “the one of the ndiambo that enters through the mouth and that allows the victims no time to defend themselves.” So then, besides the fatal and inscrutable influence given to the drink by the spirits that are invoked and intervene directly in their
preparation, the *bilongo* has as a respectable foundation, the reality of a poison. Such *bilongos*, at all times, have caused havoc among the people, and, in some occasions, have managed to find their way into the home of someone in the higher levels of society.

There is no doubt, and this was confirmed to me by the devotees of the Lucumí Rule, that the magic of the Kongo was the one that worked more quickly, “the one that had results overnight,” and that, to gain time, even they, on occasions, for “personal business,” consulted a *mayombero*. The Omó Orishas, the children of Santo, did not hide their admiration for the *mayombero*, nor did the *moana nganga* hide their admiration for the Omó Orishas, who distinguished themselves by their ability like the one exhibited by that *iylocha* Bernalda Secades, a neighbor of the Lucumí Makói, the story of which was told to me by a *padre nganga*:

“Bernalda was holding an open party with the people of Unión de Reyes. It was raining, and look, those elders were strong, Kongo and Lucumí! The rain turned into a deluge, and it was not going to spoil her party. She went into the street and, with a white plate on her head, said: If truly truly I am Bernalda Secades and my *Ocha* is good, Olodumare, water will not pass. She went with her plate up to Calle Real and it did not rain again all the time the party lasted.” ("Mayombero and Ocha appreciate each other.") The power of a *santera* is on the same level as the power of a *mayombera*. That is why the female *kiyumba*, the female skull, is very much appreciated. People remember the skull of Siete Sayas, of Mariana Sotomayor, of Lucerito, and of so many others… In the opinion of many, the Kongo, and today their descendants, excel at the preparation of spells that are made through powders, *malembo mpolo*, and of eggs of mayimbe, caiman, and Guinea chicken, but any type of egg will do.

They are infallible for the perverse purposes of the sorcerer as it is known, the ones for which they use chickens on Good Friday. They are submerged in vinegar with Guinea pepper,
they are taken out, and inside is put the name of the person who is the object of the spell and they are buried in the cemetery. They are kept there for three days. They are lined with a black cloth, solidly sewn. The spirit, commandeered by the sorcerer, asks for the eggs and a candle. The [199] candle is glued with the wax to the head of the ngombe, and when the spirit leaves, the candle is cut in the middle with a knife. The mayombero goes by night to a crossroad and there he says: As I break this egg, I wreck X, and he breaks the eggs and the candle. Within twenty-four hours, the spell takes effect. The customer returns to the house of the mayombero:

\[
\text{Ahí tá cosa mbrumá tá} \quad \text{There, the thing is wrecked}
\]
\[
\text{Que cosa mbrumá tá} \quad \text{It is indeed wrecked}
\]

and offers a rooster to the Nganga. Some eggs are thrown at house doors, others on street corners and crossroads. They are prepared in a variety of ways… Some are “charged” with powder of cemetery soil, vulture feather, woodworm, termite, wasp hive, the queen of fire ants, the powder of a skeleton phalange, a kongoma or tibia bone or jawbone. We will only limit ourselves to noting how R.S. stuffs them for a “ruin.”

“I leave the egg white, I put some pica pica root, some scrape of guave, ayúa, Guinea root, cemetery soil, bone powder, crystal salt, crushed charcoal; a trace soil of the person that I am going to destroy, or ashes from a piece of clothing belonging to the person; sulfur, dragonfly, the sting of a scorpion, and a widow spider. That egg is broken against his door. As soon as the egg breaks, the moruba that it contains, and which is very bad, spreads! And Satan is already at work.” And it is even worse if, while the name of the victim is pronounced, these eggs are thrown into the sea.

An egg that is light is suspicious.
Marcelina, a woman rebel of the 1895 war, who specifically sold eggs, had heard a Kongo say that in his land the sorcerers used to “lay eggs.” But it does not look as if in Cuba they competed with the hens. The effectiveness of these eggs worked out by the magician is confirmed, through personal experience, by a woman who was abandoned by her lover, a Spanish, who left for Spain. Her comadre and confidante, told the following story:

“The sorcerer that my comadre went to consult in the Rule passed three eggs over her body. He made two dolls. One that represented her and which he kept. Another one that he called Nkamo, this he tied to a portion of liane with twenty-one knots. In a toy boat he also put some small tubes and bags. She does not know what was inside. He put one doll in the ship and he said that this boat was going to get the man. He sent her with the boat to the Malecón, to the Castillo de la Punta, and there she put it in the water. There were waves, and she saw the small boat fight with the swell and it went sailing, straight, into the deep, deep sea until she could no longer see it. After a few months, the Spanish man came back, and very much in love!”

The individuals named Andrés el Congo, Jacinto Vera, Antonio Galiano, Polledo, [200] Oviedo, Caravallo, Elías el Chino, Samá, Ma Severina Conga, Ma Susana, Cristina Baró, Diaga, Juan Herrera, Kivú, Ñúngá Ñúngá, “saw miracles done and they did them. They gathered together their people at dawn, and in front of whomever wanted to witness it, they would plant a coconut tree. They would make it grow, through the virtues of certain mambos, in a few hours, and in the afternoon, they would drink the water from the coco that they had planted in the morning.” And they used to do the same with bananas and other fruits. That mystery was one of the favorite demonstrations of the great Paleros. I was invited to witness the same miracle in the locality of Mantilla, where, it is said, for more than thirty years a Taita Nganga performed it. Mantanzas did not have the monopoly of those great miracle-workers that the adepts of both
Rules, the Lucumí Rule and the Kongo Rule, used to tell us about with so much admiration. The yakaras and the okoris were admirable, but the women did not stay behind: santeras o paleras. (”In fact, the female sorcerers are worse than the male sorcerers!”)

The exploits of Ma Luciana, from Pinal del Río, were told to us by an ahijado of hers:

“Ma Luciana, the fiery Ma Luciana! I was a child. Ma Luciana loved me. Each night, she usually gave me a pitcher full of sweet water or of guarapo. She was our neighbor in the residential area. I used to go, before bedtime, to ask for my sweet water and the blessing. One Friday, the door was ajar. I heard a moan. I tiptoed in. There was the gossipy woman, down low, in the dark, in a corner of the room where she had her things, since she slept with her nganga, and everything else in the dark. The door also ajar. I looked and I saw Ma Luciana who was moaning, naked and with her whole body covered with bugs. Scorpions, manca-perros, spiders, centipedes and gandocuevas, worms and more worms, and all those little monsters stinging her and crawling all over her. That is why she was moaning and wiggling, naked, on the ground. If you had seen that spread of bugs! There were in the thousands. I did not emit any sound. I watched the whole thing and left quietly. At home, I did not open my mouth. That old woman, like all the old people of nations, had a genie of devils. She was tough and fond of hitting people. She used to hit all the boys, and did not care, because at that time, it was not like now, when you are afraid to give a slap to a bad-mannered little devil, he scolds you if necessary, and the boy takes you to the courthouse, and the judge sentences you. I mean, the judges sentence the father who wants to educate his son well. The following day, as if nothing had happened, I went to get my sweet water.

- Good morning, Ma Luciana, blessing!

She answered me with rage, with the face of a wild animal, very upset.
- Good morning.
And, after a while, furious.
- Miguelito, didn’t you spy on me?
- No, Ma’m.
- Miguelito, you are a liar!
- No, Ma’m, Ma Luciana.
- Ah! Where one is born, there is born a man and there will die a man. Kête, kéte.
And then she took her hand to her apron and took out a handful of coins.
- Go get some sweet. No, wait, come here. And she got two small pitchers that she called Marta and Melona, and a belt, and she made me drink the water of God and the water of the Devil. When she ended the ceremony, she took me by the arm and took me home. She said to my father: Now you have a son. I prepared him. My own angel asked me to prepare him. I think that this is why, because I did not say anything to anybody and she knew that I had seen her naked turning over with the bugs, she taught me something afterwards and she protected my body that very same day. The protection helped me because Coromina does not enter into me. And how that old woman could heal! With nothing and in a moment. That is how, when I was told that the physician was going to cut off the leg of Fausto, my cousin, I went to see my cousin. Well, this, Ma Luciana can heal it immediately! This is erysipelas. Bring me a candle of three cents and three orange leaves. No more? No more. And I get the candle. Fausto, answer me three times: erysipelas. I make a cross over the leg with the candle. What do I cut? Erysipelas. What do I cut? Erysipelas. What do I cut? Erysipelas. And I prayed three times the prayer that the old woman had taught me. It is a prayer that one learns by heart on Good Friday, a miraculous prayer, and it is taught to somebody one wants to benefit; but only on Good Friday. It cannot be on any other
ordinary day. It is taught on that day to three people no more for all of one’s life. I have already taught it to two people. I could teach it to you also, but, since we are not on Good Friday, you have to wait. This that I am telling you, there is Fausto to contradict it, if he can. It was at six o’clock in the afternoon, and at ten o’clock in the evening, there was no need to cut off his leg.

Ma Luciana got tired of living. She died at the age of one hundred and six years. She died when she wanted. I saw her standing up to a tail of cloud that destroyed four houses of tobacco. Only by talking to it, she cut the whirlwind in two. Without a machete! The wind was taking away the seven starched smocks she was wearing, and there she was talking and talking. Changó turned over the table, grumbled, and it left with its whirlwind cut. She saved some tobacco for my father, who loved her very much.

She was so warm that she killed her own son; yes, because those Africans are very faithful to their things. The son, Abraham, took the money from a sale and bet it on his rooster. Ma Luciana, crying:

- Why are you crying?

- I am crying for Abraham, who is already dead. You say he is alive and I know he is dead.

[202] Ma Luciana said clearly that she did not want a son who was a thief. She threw her Fumbi on him. Ah, Luciana Farías, how great she was! I always count on her.

This story reminds us of the story of the famous Paula Kandanboare, the mother of Víctor Alfonso, more benevolent than Ma Luciana.

“Víctor did one of his things. He was a thief of chickens and roosters. Paula warned him:

- Victor, I will soon have the justice here.

Víctor, accused, was being sought, and the guard went to see Paula.
- How are you, old lady? Hail Mary! We have been looking for your son for days now, and we have not found him… Please, old lady, tell us where he is.

- I don’t know.

And Victor was right there, listening. The guards said goodbye. The following day, the old woman declared in the neighborhood:

- Right now, I am going to turn in Victor to the guard, and he will not be arrested. And she said to Victor:

- Mark in your bad head that you are my son; now let’s go.

She took him to the police station. She saw the police chief, whose name was Próspero Pérez and introduced to him Víctor, who did not dare raise up his head.

- I bring him to you. This you see here is Víctor Alfonso, my son. Do with him as you like, but just don’t kill him… Don’t kill him, hear me?

- Look, old lady, let him come when the court summons him. Now you may go back home.

The conduct of Ña Paula so pleased Próspero Pérez (and the whole locality), that they were never summoned.

Shortly after that, when Paula Kandemboare gave her party, she laid Víctor on the ground and walked over his body. She said, speaking to the nganga and everybody hearing her:

- If I again see my son appear before the justice, you kill me and kill him.

Overnight, Víctor was converted into an honest man.”

“Ah! Ma Luciana Farías,” my informant continues, “she was great. I always count on her, because, thanks to her, I am still here, conversing with you and smoking this American cigarette that you give me.
“I started living with María Armenteros. I was a big boy, starting to grow a moustache, and she has already lived her life. A full blown woman. I had a good girlfriend, a good girl, and María told me: Do you have a girlfriend? Yes. What is her name? María Luisa Núñez. I did not plan to break up with my girlfriend because I had this other one. One was sane, clean, and the other a lived woman, joyful, with many beds in her history. One day, I left my girlfriend’s house, went back home, and shortly after that, her sister comes to tell me that María Luisa had burned herself. The whole body, except the face. Her face, poor thing, was like the face of a Virgin of Charity of El Cobre, and her body was like charcoal. I did not suspect María Armenteros. I continued with her. Twenty days passed. Then a month. What a bad heart! And hearts like those fill the world. I slept in her house. I got up late; there was nothing to do. Stay, Miguel; I prepared lunch for you. A bacaloa stew that you said you love. Lunch. That meal goes down into my stomach like lead. Some cold sweat, the mouth full of water, and finally I throw up a ball that evaporated on the ground and left nothing but a shadow. I told the story to Ma Luciana. Hum! The spell did not catch on. She had prepared my body. The protections that the elders made were true. And once more María. Stay for lunch, Miguel; I have some very good pastas. Through the mouth dies the fish.

“I don’t know… but I go to the kitchen, I remove the cauldron’s lid with a spoon, and inside I see a centipede. And inspiration came to me. I called María. Ah! You put on a red dress and sat below the blossoming pine tree and watched the cadaver of María Luisa pass! Because of you, she burned herself; you threw trash at her, María Armenteros, but I am the one who will soon see parade the cadaver of your mother and your brother and of yourself, assassin! Your cadaver, María Armenteros, I have to see it! And before I killed her right there, because that was my idea, to kill her with a knife from her own kitchen, I left, running like a mad man, and ran
into a Negro that Ma Luciana had sent to get me. The old lady, who already knew what people were doing to me, that they were shooting at me to kill me, was watching over me. And luckily, the spell was not entering into me; I vomited it immediately. Súalo, súalo, she told me. To kill with your own hand, no. Not that way. You also will tie a red kerchief around the neck to see the cadaver of María Armentero. And that is how it happened, just as she had announced it. First I saw the burial of her brother, who had been sent to clear a plot of land, and while he was cutting anamú, sweating, the rain fell on him and he got a chest congestion. After that, the burial of her mother, who died from a heart condition, suffocating. And, finally, the burial of María. And I saw it pass while I stood under the blossoming pine tree, the same place from which María Armenteros watched the cadaver of María Luisa pass. And I did not do anything. With God’s grace, everything happened as Ma Luciana had said.

“Ma Luciana Fariñas did not know how to read or write, nor add or subtract, but nobody could cheat her. A man called Pedro Lara used to buy tobacco for her, and since the old people could only understand whole numbers, peso fuerte, peseta fuerte, seven reales fuertes, etc. Pedro Lara thought that he had deceived her. He took the money, seventy matules at $1.75 equal one peso fuerte. The old woman opened her mazurka; the numbers did not add up. She sent for Pedro Lara: the money is not complete. The time of stupid people is over. Look, old lady, so much plus so much equals so much. You don’t know how to calculate. Well, let’s leave it there; but I will [204] be the last person you ever cheat. Pedro did not like the sound of that one. With these old, complicated, Negros, one never knows… and the story of the shock of Abraham, and the shock that she healed horses with a few words murmured between her teeth, and the eyes of the old woman, and what she may have or may not have, Pedro came back with the rest of the money. That’s good, but you will not play with me; I will give you a proof. And from there, Lara passes
by the hardware of the collectivity. Look, Lara, your horse. He gets off the horse, lifts its leg to see its hoof, and the horse, which was stud, kicks him hard.”

And what would we say about Lincheta, also from Pinal del Río like Ma Luciana? She was exceptional, judging from the following story.

“Lincheta has such power that, when during the times of Bokú and for the crime of the little girl Zoila, started the abuse of that stupidity of going around burning and molesting sorcerers, the rural guard, which he called Mókua puto, was looking for Lincheta to search his hut, the old man used to flood a lagoon that one had to cross to go see him and his hut would remain cut off until it pleased him or the rural guard team forgot him. When Lincheta wanted it, it rained or it stopped raining. One Thursday, Lincheta was already bored with all that when the rural guard team came. That same day, early, Lincheta had said to my father: I don’t want anybody this way; the justice will come and take me away. And so it was. The Rural came: Let’s go, sorcerer Lincheta, the sorcerer of the lagoon! Make it swell right now so that we can believe in you.

- What? How will I make the lagoon swell if I am not God?

The Rural seizes everything that the old man had there, they put it in a bag, and Lincheta carries the bag. The nganga, the palos, he carries everything. In the residential area, the people peek out to see the sorcerer come out with the Wangas, between the two guards, commenting: Look Lincheta, gosh, to let your prendas be taken! What are they for then? Lincheta, man, one can no longer believe in anybody! Well, the old man arrives at the locality, at the jail. They lock him up. The day of the trial arrived. The courthouse could not accommodate all the people. Judge Camacho says to him: Old man, you have been a good man (other people who tell me the story of this man say that he was “somewhat delinquent” and had to respond to the police for
theft), maybe, Lincheta, you are a veteran, you served the nation and you oblige me to punish you. Why have you not put all this aside, knowing that the law punishes these aberrations?

- What are you talking about?

- About these fetishes that are no longer used. People out there say that you heal with fetishes. I am talking to you about all these things you have in the bag.

- Your honor, I am an African. I have no wife, I have no child, I have nothing, nothing, nothing. Now, a Negro woman comes. She asks me to baptize her son, and I baptize her little [205] Negro, and I have nothing to give him. I plant pumpkin; I make sweets, he comes, I give him some, and he goes away happy. Because of these pumpkins, I slept on the ground last night.

  Look to see if these are fetishes!

  They open the bag, and what had Lincheta done? He had turned the Wangas into pumpkins. There were only pumpkins. Absolutely. After the trial, seven days playing palo without anybody bothering him! And they never again bothered him.

  Seven days before he died, Lincheta announced his death.”

  The devotees of the Lucumi devotion maintain that a good Babalawo or Tata Nganga will know exactly the day he will die. The story of a babalawo at the end of the 19th century, who had a coffin in his bedroom, placed on top of one of those huge colonial cupboards, which could not fit in the new houses, reached me through several means. Enjoying perfect health, he had people take it down because he was going to die that very same day at six o’clock in the afternoon, “as in fact he died.”

  Viviano Pinillo, another babalawo, also apparently healthy and doing well, gave away, a week before he died, his “Santos,” necklaces, “tools,” and sold a plot of land he had and gave the money to his wife. This happened not that long ago.
“Lincheta gathered all his ahijados, gave them all his makutos, elements of Fundamento, he gave me mine, and said goodbye to all of us.”

“One time, another sorcerer, Eligio Marquetti, this one was a Creole Negro, to test his nganga, sent a blow to Lincheta. He hit one of his hands; he could not move his fingers; he could not take his food to his mouth. Lincheta comes to the realization, he verifies where the hit was coming from. Sixto Mesa was present; it was Sixto who told the story. He thinks that he will get me. Sixto, take that palo out of there. Sixto, get me my mortar. Sixto, bring me a painted pumpkin. Sixto, bring me a frog. And the old man makes his gun powders. At the stroke of noon, sharp, do you believe that he sent out a messenger with the bilongo? No, he stood in the doorway of the hut. He spoke in his language… he put the gun powder in his good hand and blew it away. At midnight, Eligio has a pain in the tip of his big toe; his foot swells rapidly and he screams. At noon of the following day, his groin felt like a frog. At midnight, the frog disappeared and went down to the feet, and at noon it would go back to the groin. Finally, appear the ahijados of Eligio with their mayordomo to speak with Lincheta. Ah, Tata Eligio is about to die; he is in so much pain. Tell Eligio that I am a Kongo Luanda, more of a padre than he is. Tell him that he should first untie my hand, and I will untie his foot. That very same afternoon, Lincheta had his hand free of pain. But Eligio still had the frog jumping from his groin to his toe. The mayordomo came once more.

- Eligio wants you to go there.

- No, wait until the pain goes away, until tomorrow.

The following day, Lincheta went to see Eligio. He started to sing, the Palo threw him down, and thus mounted, Lincheta sucked Eligio’s big toe and removed the frog that he had sent him. Diego Lincheta was among the great. In Vrillumba we have to call him.”

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This duel of sorceries, triggered by such a cheap and extemporaneous aggression occurs very frequently: that is how the mayomberos test their ngangas, and doing harm to each other, they measure their power, in the present as well as in the past. At times, the war is a declared war. At other times, as in the case of Lincheta and Eligio, el mochazo,” the hit, or el brujazo, or the spell, is a surprise attack. It is not uncommon for two brujos, getting along perfectly and knowing that the harm will stop the moment one of them wins or their contest is a tie, to experiment in their own bodies the power of their respective Wembas.

“The old T.P. was held by a caravel several days without speaking. When it was his turn to hit, he asked to drink a glass of water. To prepare this water, he had caught a frog that he had made swallow a small prenda, and he had put the frog in a cauldron for twenty-one days, taking very good care of it all that time. Then he killed the frog, skinned it, and lined the prenda that he had made the frog swallow with the frog’s skin and put the prenda in the glass of water. As soon as that water touched the stomach of the sorcerer, he lost consciousness and he remained near death for several days, until he came back to life. And they are so conceited and so much in love with their powers.”

If we trust the story of Laureano Herrera, mayombero and politician with a colorful life, his Padrino, of Lucumí descendence but a ngangulero of the strongest, tops all the sorcerers of his time… and of the country. Laureano was witness, in 1906, to the following:

“As is the custom, the ahijados keep their makutos and cauldrons in the house of the padrino. They would take the ngangas, they would test them, and, if they worked, my old man would keep them, he would range them with his own Fundamento. I have witnessed the apparition of balongas, cauldrons, pots, makutos, without anybody bringing them there; that’s how good they were. A certain Ta Rafael was also a strong sorcerer in the region. He came to the
house of my padrino, upset, fuming and saying he had been waiting for his nganga and that his nganga was not appearing. My padrino, to teach him a lesson, sent me to get a knife, and asked all those present to sharpen it on a stone. When the knife had been sharpened and could cut a hair in the air, he said to Ta Rafael: Look and see if it cuts. Rafael passed his finger over the knife with care. Yes, it cuts. My old man tells him: but let’s see if it’s true that it cuts. And, with strength, he passed the knife through his tongue and his arms, with strength, hard! Then he threw it on the ground. Bah, this knife does not cut! Want to see if it cuts now, Rafael? But Ta Rafael [207] did not dare do the same. Another time, in one of those challenges with Ta Rafael, he asked for a new, very long rope to be brought to him; oh, maybe ten meters long, I would say. On each end, he tied two knots. Now it is time to cut it. Bring me my knife and a candle. He cuts longwise. Now this rope needs to be put back together. Rafael, put it back together! Ta Rafael tries to put the rope back together, and the rope breaks apart. No way; Ta Rafael could not do it. Out of breath, he tries again. He ties, pushes, it breaks. He cannot do it! No? Well, give it to me! He puts it around his waist inside his pants, says his prayer in Kikongo, and immediately he takes out the rope, all put back together. That rope was without end; and he says to Ta Rafael and to the men: see if it is put back together. Pull strongly. All the men pulled on the rope and it did not break. Three times, in front of everybody, he embarrassed Ta Rafael.

A gúiro, a brain. He hides the brain against the ground and says to a Negro. Bring it to me. He says to those present: weigh the brain. Is it heavy? It does not weigh anything. He puts it on the ground. You, Ta Rafael, who are a strong man, God in heaven and you on earth. Bring me that brain. Gosh, it is impossible to lift the brain! I can’t! That day, Ta Rafael acknowledged the old man as mfumo nbángala and he stopped playing games with him. Then the Prenda of Ta
Rafael came home, he asked him for fourteen pesos and told him *mbungo mayoyo tāta kilungo ndundu mbaka*, you must count on me!

He had me under his belt. He loved me and used to scold me. You know that the last sugarcane to be cut is the spring sugarcane. You know that there are winter sugarcane, summer sugarcane, and spring sugarcane. The sugarcane matures around March, at the end of the milling season. But there came one rainy year, and it rained a lot in April. The spring sugarcane remained for the following year. And you must know that in the sugarcane plantations, one of the sprouting canes is left for replanting. This sugarcane brings out small shoots. I, sophisticated, instead of eating the sprouting sugarcane would eat the good one, the one that was prohibited but which was the best. The old man entered the sugarcane plantation and saw the peeled sugarcane. He calls me: Laureano, I have seen disturbances in the spring sugarcane. Eat the sprouting sugarcane, damn it! The spring sugarcane that we are going to cut next year is much intermingled, you are spoiling it, and it dries up, much of it shrinks. The first days, I obeyed him. The sugarcane plantation of the sprouting sugarcane was very far from the hut and it was not good. I returned to the spring sugarcane and the old man scolded me once more. And again I stole sugarcane. I knew very well the entrance and exit of the sugarcane plantation, since I had prepared it with the other Negroes. I went in at noon to steal my sugarcane, and when I wanted to get out of there, it was impossible. I spent the whole day, lost among the sugarcanes. The whole day and the whole night. The following day in the afternoon, people came to get me. When I arrived at the hut, I was asked, where have you been? I lowered my head. I fell asleep expecting to be spanked. In the morning, the old man tells his wife: Rosalía, bring me the *nkuto*, the flask [208] with the scorpions. Rosalía brings that shining flask, filled, black with scorpions, and he takes out a handful of living scorpions, he puts them on his chest: You see, Laureanito? They
don’t sting. Whoever was not in the sugarcane plantation eating spring sugarcanes can pick them up like me, you will see it. He called up several Negroes; the Negroes put their hands in the can and the scorpions did not sting them. It is your turn, Laureano. My God! Why did I put my hand in that flask, in that swarm of scorpions? I remained speechless. My tongue could no longer fit in my mouth. After this test came the swearings.”

To demonstrate his innocence to the padre nganga and to the Elders of the praise house, a moana, unjustly accused of having taken some money from the praise house, requests to be tested by being given a poison. The brujo prepares a drink; the man swallows it up to the last drop, “which he vomits immediately and which would had killed him if he had not been innocent.” This old man, like all the others, resolved his issues through sorcery: “He sent me,” Laureano continues, “to cut a trail on the limits of his property, which bordered the property of a certain Aniceto, who also was a mayombero. I went, and, since I was on our land, I made a square furrow with the plow. While I was doing this, Aniceto saw me and he sent me some bad words. This land is mine; what are you doing here on my border?

- The old man Germán sent me.

- Well, I don’t feel like letting you cut here. Not even Siete Rayos would be of help to you.

Aniceto threw frogs and snakes through his mouth. He threatened me. Julián, the carriage driver, went to tell my padrino what was happening and returned with him.

- Aniceto, watch out, this is my border!

- No, old man, your border is here.

- Well, tell me, it is here? Now we are going to know the truth of the truth. He pulls a segment of pine. Aniceto brings a segment of pine. The old man sticks it into the ground.
- This is my border; remove it from there!

Aniceto struggled to remove it. Nothing; the stick was firm. The old man said that he should try using the cows, since he was getting old and had no strength. They found the cows… Nothing could remove the stick from there. Finally, Aniceto agreed with my padrino that this was not his border.”

Of course, this Aniceto was not the unforgettable Aniceto Abreu of Villa Clara, the much celebrated Bejuco, a great diviner and healer, with clients all over the Island, counting high military people, politicians, rich Spanish merchants, and landowners.

This particular Aniceto Abreu, who died in 1922, there seems to be no doubt that he was [209] gifted with extraordinary psychic powers. It is the opinion of skeptical people who could not be easily impressed. They said that he was for sure a sacred adviser, inspired but prudent, padrino and sorcerer of a president of Cuba who, at the end of his life, did not listen to him when, pushed by the many partisan people that the country had, headed an insurrection whose failure Bejuco had foretold with insistence. His prediction, unfortunately, came to pass, and the General and the magician never met again. The legends of our people claim that all their presidents had a brujo or an espiritista who helped them in the background. Of course, they had on their sides black people. For instance, General Menocal had a mayari and another president had an anacleto, and all these sacred advisers were ready to give their lives for these presidents.

Aniceto Abreu, of Villaclara, a descendant of Lucumi, left, not only among the humble people, but also among the rich white people who had experienced the effects of his medicines and amulets and who had availed themselves of his counsels, the memory of a rare intuition or an unquestionable clairvoyance. “Bejuco,” as he was called, has passed into oral history as an influential person in the politics of that period and in the government of General José Miguel
Gómez, who was loved by the whole population of Cuba. Bejuco had a farm in Artemisa and there he venerated his Orishas and received with hospitality his many friends and people who came to consult him. He was like the Lucumí Okújí, Ta Pablo Alfonso, his master, and the famous Adechina, his friend, one of the great Santeros of that epoch, genuine guardians of the Lucumí, the Yoruba religion.

But Bejuco was not ignorant about the secrets of the magic of the Kongo, and “he worked” in both camps.

One woman protegée of his, of a distinguished Cuban lineage, told us the following:

“When Aniceto needed some hard-to-find ingredient to do a medicine or a work, he laid down and went to sleep at will. He would wake up after a while with the herb or the object that he needed in his hand. How could he do this? I don’t know, but I have witnessed this strange phenomenon more than once. I would sit next to the old man, observing him and watching him sleep. The things would appear in his hand in the most natural and incomprehensible way.

“Aniceto was born in my grandfather’s ingenio; therefore, during all his life, he was our most faithful and important friend. When my father ran from home to go join the war for independence, Aniceto took care of my mother, my brother, and he protected them until my father returned. They had no other protection but his, and this, as you know, despite the fact that our family was big and rich. He loved me madly. I had the satisfaction of assisting him in his last moments, and I confess that, after my parents, the person I loved the most in my life was the old Negro Aniceto.”

Phenomena of telekinesis like the one described to us by this friend, who closely knew Bejuco—she was very irritated that I impolitely called him Bejuco—I did not have the luck to witness them in the santeros and nganguleros that I knew. However, no less astonishing is the
phenomenon that, in the 1940s, one of my elder Havana diviners did let me witness. This woman, one afternoon that I went to visit her in order to take notes on the Lucumí sayings that she had learned when she was a child, assured me that whenever she felt like it, nobody dared pass in front of her house. Responding to a doubtful smile that apparently I could not hide, she invited me to come back early the following day. I went back around two o’clock in the afternoon and I asked my driver, who stayed waiting for me in the car on the side of the house where the elder woman lived, to come back for me at exactly half past three o’clock. The spectacle that the elder woman offered me from two o’clock in the afternoon until seven o’clock in the evening, at which time I determined that it was time for me to leave, could not have been, really, more strange. I sat in the doorway of her house, and she, even though conversing with me from time to time, continued in her chores without paying much attention to me.

“Now, sit down there and watch to see if anybody crosses here in front.”

Effectively, nobody passed in front of the door. A simple coincidence? The truth is that all the passers-by, maybe receiving some suggestion from a distance and as if obeying an order, three or four meters before arriving at her door, will change course, go back on their steps, or, hesitating for a moment, would cross to the opposite sidewalk. My driver did not return at half past three o’clock, as I had asked him to do. He later told me, when I went to look for him, around the corner where I had left him, apologizing and still drowsy, that he had fallen into a deep sleep. I have no doubt, I have no other explanation, that this woman was able to make herself be obeyed mentally: a young boy who was coming, running at all speed on the sidewalk, stopped so suddenly that I could not help but laugh. He continued his run, but in the opposite direction.
With these notes, we have not exhausted the rich material that were reserved by the cautious, reprehensible, and always active Kongo Rule for a woman who was simply curious about the spiritual world of the Negroes of Cuba, or for the university student of what the ethnographers have called “primitive” religions—replacing the pejorative term used to mean “savages”—like these African religions, the Yoruba religion and the Bantu religion, that, without deep alterations, are kept alive on our lost Island, and which also have crossed the sea in order now in Florida, in New York, or in California, to win adherents among the white Spanish-speaking populations of these cities and among the African Americans, who had not been able to preserve their cultural heritage.

There are Cuban santeros and paleros in Venezuela, Puerto Rico, Santo Domingo, Mexico, and, despite the increasing number of impostors and of charlatans who, in this exile world pregnant with hopes, are insatiable exploiters of the naïveté or the impatience of those who expect from the African Divinities or from the magic the quick fulfilment of their wishes or their return to the native land, there are also practitioners who are sincere, who respect their faith and who endeavor to stick to the rules established by their elders. They are the traditionalists who know their practices very well.

In the ilé of a iyalocha in Miami, very proper, the people there drink only cheketé, as it should be, on the eve of the feast of Santa Barbara or Changó, on the 3rd of December.

Magic, integrated with religion, has always been important. In our people, who were profoundly influenced by the beliefs and practices of the Africans, magic and religion have coexisted from the very beginning. For our people, magic is a necessity; and perhaps it is also a necessity for all the peoples of the world, even the most developed.
As we have said at the beginning of these pages, the world had assigned to the Kongo the role of witches, and, unfairly, only the role of those witches who, motivated by criminal intentions or the lowest passions, control malefic forces and perverse spirits that cause misfortunes, diseases, and death. In so doing, the world has forgotten or ignored the fact that there are witches who practice a magic intended to do good, to protect from evil spirits and harmful energies, to heal and to save those who have fallen victims to the wretched sorcerers.

“Mayombe was good in Guinea.”

And so are the mayomberos cristianos, the “Christian” mayomberos, who choose to do good, who reject and condemn the ndoki, the wretched witches whom Nsambi, God, will not forgive in the afterlife.

Miami, 1975-76
In Cuba, the Yoruba have always been called Lucumi. My oldest informants were not familiar with the word Yoruba.

“Guini in Africa,” the elders would say. That is how the West Coast of Africa was called.

A Slaver’s Log Book or 20 Years Residence in Africa. Captain Canot was the pseudonym of Théophilus Conneau. (Avon Books, 1977.)


Jenkins, who describes in his Yankee Traveller the horrific scene of slavery, concurs with the opinion that in Cuba the abuses visited on the slaves “were not as insufferable as in the West Indies.”

Travels in North America during the Year 1834-1835. A Visit to Cuba.

Praise given to Don José de la Luz Caballero by Dr. Ramón Zambrana. Havana, 1866.

It is not only the rural Kongo who were branded as lazy. “In Havana”—writes Captain Alexander in the first quarter of the 19th century—“the rich families have a big number of useless and lazy slaves”—they did not have much to do. “As lazy as their masters, ten times more idle than their masters, they drink, they gamble and they are the murderers of the city.” He adds that many slaves do to their masters whatever they please.

Those Loango,” I was told, “came from the upper part of the Congo, and from the lower part of a very big river came the Angola, who spoke Portuguese, like the Ngunga.”

The militias of Negroes and Browns were initially created in the 17th century in Havana and other parts of Cuba. These militias, as S. Klein writes in an interesting book, Slavery in the Americas: A Comparative Study of Virginia and Cuba, developed an exemplary esprit de corps and performed remarkably well, despite the little time that they had to train. They presented, this author insists, “an unusual and frank democratic pattern,” and achieved great results.

Don Raphael del Castillo y Sucre, praising the conduct of the Negroes who valiantly defended Havana when, on the 6th of June 1762, Admiral Pocock showed up in front of Morro with thirty-two boats and frigates, and there were in place only four thousand soldiers and sailors and one thousand five hundred Negro militia men, said in a sermon pronounced on during the ceremony of the rehabilitation of the flags of the battalions of the men of colors, that he would not mind mixing the blood that run through his veins with the blood of those courageous men. Due to the conspiracy of Negroes instigated by the English Consul David Turnbull, which failed (in 1844) thanks to the report of a slave woman, and which, a year before, a sergeant of the Negro battalion of Matanzas had joined, General O’Donnell lost confidence in the Negroes, and the Militias of Negroes and Browns, were disbanded, after two centuries of existence. These militias were revived in 1854. General Concha, in his Memoir, on page 160 of chapter XII, says: “The colored race has been and still is favorable to Spain. In 1868, my main informant Bamboché, who does not have a tinge of anti-Spanish sentiment in him, was a volunteer combatant in the Battalion of Colored Loyalists.

In the Diario de la Marina de Habana of the 7th of January 1899 (year 60, Number 6), we read the following curious report on the news from Spain:

“Among the Palace guards, appointed yesterday morning by the Infantry Regiment of San Fernando, there were four Negro soldiers from Cuba. Her Majesty the Queen called them up and gave them sums of money as gifts.”
The year 1847 starts the importation of Chinese to Cuba. They came with an eight-year contract to work in the plantations: they were given food, clothes (two sets of clothing per year) and four or six pesos every month. In China, the proposition seemed brilliant to the poor Chinese who accepted a contract for eight years, during which they would practically become slaves, even though they were not considered as such officially. The first shipment of Chinese that arrived on the Island, with the support of the Development Council, in an English clipper sailing from Amoy, comprised of five hundred seventy-one “yellow pieces.” The Negroes, during those years, were expensive, and the rumor was that their price would go up to one thousand pesos a head; a Chinese, on the other hand, was one hundred fifty pesos. This business, less lucrative than the slave trade, but lucrative nonetheless, was in the philanthropic hands of the English and the Yankees. Chinese woman were not brought. The Chinese men got together with the Negro women, the mulatto women and the white women of the lower classes. The objections to the importation of the Chinese were many, and for some time, it was suspended. Some land owners considered them inferior to the Negroes, less resilient, and slow to acclimate. They were also seen as revengeful and cruel. They would kill, poison, set fire to the sugar plantations, because among them there were some bad ones, “ear-clipped,” sold by the Chinese government to the human traffickers for having committed a crime in their country, which punished lawbreakers by mutilating them. Another defect is that they too often committed suicide, and could be carriers of diseases: trachoma, malaria and the terrible Asian cholera. But, despite all that, they produced good results, “admirable,” writes Murray, “for mechanical labors,” and, in 1861, there were 34,834 Chinese in Cuba, and their number continued to rise. In his book To Cuba and Back, Richard Dana, Jr., has left us an image of this legal trade through the description of a visit to the market of Chinese in el Cerro in 1859, a mere eight years after the establishment of this trade.

“It is a place that is well-known and open to all visitors. The building has a beautiful front and there are two guards at the door. We move from a central courtyard to another one inside, and there, on a gravel floor, there are, squatting, a double line of Chinese with their head shaved with the exception of a lock of hair on the top of the head—the pony tail—and wearing wide blue and yellow Chinese outfits. The salesman, calm, astute, like a heartless man, speaking English as if it were his own language, comes with me; calls out to the Chinese and all stand on their feet, in double line; we pass among them, guided by a foreman armed with a short and flexible whip, like the one used by the foremen of the plantations. The salesman does not hesitate to tell me what the terms of the contract are, since this trade is not illegal. The importer receives $340 for each Chinese. The buyer agrees to pay four pesos each month to each Chinese, feed him, house him, give him two sets of clothing each year, and in exchange of which he will receive service for eight years. The contract is made before a magistrate and two originals are made, one in Chinese and one in Spanish. The Chinese keeps one copy, and his buyer keeps the other copy.” The Chinese did not look sickly to him, although some complained about discomfort in the eyes, and he has no doubt that one had leprosy.

Besides having read it, I heard it said that the Chinese were considered to be more intelligent than the Negroes, and more skilled. The “contracted,” who were also slaves, had the right to complain to the Trustee in the case of abuse or of non fulfillment of the terms of the contracts; they also had the right to one day of rest. They were well fed: twelve ounces of meat, two and a quarter pounds of rice, sweet potatoes and yam, which would be a banquet for the current slaves of Cuba, and maybe would be in the future for the slaves of the rest of the world. At the end of their contract, that is, after they were free, the Chinese, active and thrifty, usually became merchants: traveling salesmen. Every Cuban of a certain age has in mind the image of the Chinese carrying a sugar cane across his shoulders, with some baskets hanging from a cord on both ends of the sugar cane, full of vegetables, and years later, porcelain puppies that rang, but that the skill of the carrier saved from breaking. Many worked in the cigarette factories and in family homes—they were good cooks—and later they tended to invest their savings by setting a laundry and ironing facility, opening a grocery store, a fruit store where they made the famous and delicious “Chinese balls,” that people could eat at any time... They also sold silk, fabric, perfumes, fans, cabinets, laces, sandalwood boxes, in the family homes all over Havana, in El Cerro and in El Tulipán, and I remember the visit, every fifteen days, of the man whose clients were the residents of the Calzada de Galiano.

“Chinese, what are you selling,
I want to buy,
Ah, tell me what you are selling!
To hear you call out:
- I am selling shoes for the lady,
Shoes for the gentleman...”

The Chinese businesses, that at one time imported beautiful pieces of porcelain, that today would be very expensive, were concentrated in Havana on Zanja Street and Dragones Street, and flourished until 1959. Because of its Chinese
theater, its opium, its scandalous movie theater called “Shangai,” and its shops, Zanja Street was the favorite place for tourists to visit.

In other words, present in Cuba since the first quarter of the nineteen century, the Chinese were characters who enjoyed much sympathy and who are difficult to remove from the life of the Cuban people. Their way of pronouncing the Spanish language, the stories that were told about them, truthful stories as well as invented stories, brought laughter to many generations of Cubans. Who does not know the story of the owner of a bording house and the scandalized client who found a big dead fly in the bowl of white rice that he was about to eat? The client: “How disgusting! Look here, look, Chinese! What is this?” The Chinese: “That is a fly, it is meat, food, but people do not want to eat it…”

Their generosity toward the beautiful mulato women was well known. They are, moreover, the originators of the great institution of the Charade…

14 This index card is dated 1928. Our informant claimed that she had arrived in Cuba during the administration of General Someruelos (1799-1812), which seemed impossible to us. But, according to her granddaughter, the identity papers verifying her age had confirmed that she was past the age of one hundred fifteen years.

15 Bando de Buen Gobierno, 1799. “I remind those of you who buy Bozal Negroes the obligation that you have to instruct them without delay in the Principles of our Catholic Religion. I decree that if you do not provide them with such instruction within two years so that they may receive the Holy Sacrament of Baptism, and if, in fact, they do not receive the Baptism within that time, you shall be required to sell them through the tasación and you shall be required to pay a fine of six ducados…” This recommendation is renewed in subsequent Bandos.

16 The mayomberos refer to the mediums as “dogs.”


18 History, from the early days on, tells us about the devotion of the Catholized Negro who, logically established parallels between the Orishas and the Saints of the Church. Olo dumare, Sambu, Abasi were seen as equivalent to the Catholic God, and Kadianpembe as equivalent to the Devil. Toward the ends of the 16th century, freed slaves, zapes, those who, in the entries of the Protocol Archives of Havana, transcribed by Marí Teresa de Rojas, appear in the company of Anchica, Engola, Arará, Bañol, Biofra, Biocha, Brun, Calabari, Kongo, Wolof, Mandinga, Mimigola, Mozambique, Nalú, Mozambo, Zambo, found the Sacred Society [Cofradía] of Our Lady of Remedies [Nuestra Señora de los Remedios]. The Second Parochial Church was, originally, “a hermitage that, in the 17th century, a group of Negroes [negros horros] consecrated to the glory of the Divine Paraclete [el divino Paracltito], and a freed brown man sacrificed himself, worked hard, and asked for alms [limosna], for the construction of the sanctuary that would become the Church of Christ of Health. In the monastery of the hermits of Our Lord Saint Augustine, the Sacred Society of Santa Catalina Mártir was for the browns and the Sacred Society of El Espríritu Santo in the church of the same name, the Brotherhood of San Benito de Palermo and the Brotherhood of Santa Ifégenia in the church of Santo Cristo del Buen Viaje were for the blacks. When we started our research on the African contribution to the ethnic and cultural composition of the Cuban people, the animated cult of Santa Ifégenia had not died out among the old Negro woman in Havana. Nor did the official cult in Havana—almost without influence in the countryside—force the Negros to give up or even to deviate from their own beliefs. These beliefs, in their essence, did not change at any moment during the contact with the Spanish. In Cuba, the Negros were able to keep their personality stable.

19 Not all observers saw things the same way. The first thing that impressed Dr. Wurdermann in the churches in Cuba was “the perfect equality that prevails in them. Close to the altar, there were some shabbily dressed Negro women, with baskets in hand, and behind them some well-dressed ladies were lost in their devotions. Then several Negroes and mulattos, of various classes and quality of dress, came in. There was a lady with her uniformed footmen kneeling down behind her, which indicated that the lady was of a high class. Next to her came to sit down a

an old, decrepit Negro woman, dressed in a calico dress and a shawl over her head and shoulders, and next to her, two young ladies knelt down on a small rug that their little slaves, who happily exhibited their colorful uniforms, spread on the floor, and to save their white uniform pants, the little slaves pulled a rug that had been lying in one corner. The gentleman and his servant knelt side by side, the red jacket with its golden decorations, his heavy boots, the enormous silver spurs ringing at every turn, contrast strangely with the simple clothes of the first.”
The whole congregation is no more than one hundred people, of which one third is made of Negro women, the rest ten gentlemen, four children and women who have lived the better part of their lives.

He observes that “in general—in the church of Santa Clara in Havana—“devotion is deeper in the Negroes, and believes that the display of humility, the attention with which the service is followed would be helpful if imitated by those sects that attribute to themselves a purer form of religious worship.”

One could see these priest in Guanabacoa, Sir James Alexander affirms, in their habits, attending a cock fight and betting in the company of a Negro.

Report of the Bishop of Mayna to Pope Pius VII. Archives of the Nunciature of Madrid. Taken from Religion and Politics in Cuba in the 19th Century by Miguel Figueroa y Miranda.

Chapter VII of the Real Cédula e Instrucción Circular a Indias of the 31st of May of 1789, concerning the education, treatment and employment of slaves.

“Marriage of slaves. The owners of slaves should avoid illicit relationships between the two sexes, and should instead encourage marriage, without prohibiting their slaves from marrying the slaves of other owners. In such a case, if the plantations are so distant that the spouses could not fulfill their marital duty, the wife should follow her husband and the husband’s owner should buy the wife, paying a fair price as set by experts named by the parties, or by a third party named by the court in case of a dispute. If the owner of the husband does not agree to the purchase, he would have the same recourse as that accorded to the owner of the wife.”

Toward the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century, more men than women arrived annually in Cuba. Women constitute only one third of the slaves. Turnbull, the intriguing English consul, writes that John William Becker, one of the magnates of the legendary town of Trinidad de Cuba, had in his ranch near Cienfuegos, seven hundred Negro slaves and among them not a single woman!

The hands of this iron cross extended for about two feet above the slave’s head, to make it impossible for the slave to run through the forests.

The slaves were tied to four pikes, and it is said that this punishment was customary, or they were tied to a ladder or they were suspended by the arms and legs [l’hamac], or by one hand [la brimballe].

“The fate of the Negroes on the Island of Cuba is less at the mercy of the miserly and cruel white masters than it was the case in Santo Domingo, or than is the case, in our own days, in Louisiana” (Étienne Michel Massé, Paris, 1825). And Pierre de Vaissière, in Saint Domingue, 1629-1789 (Ed. Perrin, 1909), about the mistreatment and iniquities that were inflicted there on the slaves warns: “There is perhaps a pronounced tendency to exaggerate the suffering of the slaves in Santo Domingo and the Antilles and to generalize the mistreatments of which some slaves had been victims.” The same criterion can be applied to Cuba.

Later on, we intend to publish the notes we have taken on what my old informants remember about the bad slave owners and the good ones. It is very probable—since the capacity that human beings have to do evil is obvious, and sometimes it seems that this is the only sure thing—that there were slave owners who were natural-born criminals, like the one, called Machado, whom Madden writes about, who, for three hours whipped one of his slaves until the slave died.

However, an American, J.W. Steele (Cuban Sketches. New York, 1883), says that he saw Negroes with iron collars with spikes intended to prevent the slaves from sleeping! None of my old informants who were born and lived on plantations heard about such collars.

About the population of Cuba, Murray writes in 1855 that “the authorities want, of course, to spread the idea that there are more whites than blacks. When I asked one of the government officers who ought to know it, he told me that there were 500,000 whites and 450,000 blacks. However, as I continued my investigation in a more secure place, I found out that there are 600,000 slaves, 200,000 freed slaves and only 500,000 whites, which means that there are eight people of color for every five white people.”

The guilty slave is whipped for nine days straight.
The Negroes, especially the Kongo, believed that dressing children prevented them from growing up. This idea must have caught on to the white mothers of the village.

The Negroes did other kinds of work on the plantation: guards or talanqueros—gate keepers, as we would say—who stood at the gates of the farms and plantations, cart drivers, strokers, temporary farm workers, drivers, house hands in the plantation house, and cooks.

However, those hatreds were mitigated by time and community living.

Overcome by an act of magic.


In 1812, during the reign of General Someruelos, the slaves assassinated whites and burned sugar-cane plantations in Camagüey and in the East. The leader of that insurrection, a free Negro, intelligent, José Antonio Aponte, managed to agitate the slave populations in Havana, and in the East in Holguín and Bayamo, with the intention of attacking whites in mass. In Havana the landowners united to defend themselves, and with them, the loyal Negroes, and they spoiled the insurgency plans. In Camagüey, they killed the fathers of the patriots of the decade of the 1960s, Agüero, Betancourt, Varona. This insurrection ended in the death of Aponte and a companion in the gallows and the exhibition of their heads to the people of Havana. In Port-au-Prince, the most involved Negroes, about one hundred of them, were flogged publicly.

In 1838, under the reign of General Espeleta, precisely during the festivities of January 6th [Día de Reyes], in Manacas, a plantation located in Trinidad and belonging to Juan Batista Armenteros, a few slaves rebelled. Helped by the slaves from other plantations, they burned sugar fields and assassinated white people. They were arrested and punished. These Negroes who rebelled in Trinidad were involved in a conspiracy that was brewing in the city in which it was said that some white people were involved. There were also small uprisings in Sancti Spiritus. In 1825, there was another rebellion in Matanzas, in the plantation belonging to Don Rafael de Cárdenas. The Countess of Merlin has told about the heroic deeds of the slaves who defended Cárdenas, and those of faithful José, whom she personally met during her stay in Havana in 1840.

According to other reports, the slave discloses the conspiracy to her mistress, and this one relates to her husband the confessions of her loyal Negro slave.

He was born in 1809 in Havana (8th book of the foundlings of the Cuna House), “a child who looks white.” Father: the brown quadroon Diego Ferrer Matoso, a native of Havana, hairdresser to the aristocracy, “with his own carriage and a house with a hallway.” Mother: Concepción Vázquez, a dancer, a native of Burgos. Plácido’s grandmother manages to get Matoso to take the child out the Cuna House so that she can have him with her. First letters: in the school of the Master dean of school education in Cuba, Dr. Pedro del Sol. He finishes his education in D. Francisco Banderan’s school for people of color. He studies drawing with Escobar. Forced to abandon his studies, at age sixteen, he becomes an apprentice in hairdressing. By 1834, he is already known for his poems, writes Morales. Settled in Matanzas, he published in “La Aurora,” goes to Trinidad in 1842, the year in which he marries the ingenious brown, María Gila, and there, he is arrested, accused of conspiring against the whites. Found not guilty, a free man, he returns to Matanzas.

He never showed any hatred toward white people, according to his biographer, Don Sebastián Alfredo Morales.

When Don Pepe learned about the charges, he was in Paris, where he was undergoing medical treatment; he then traveled to Havana, defended himself vigourously and was acquitted.

Plácido could pass for white, like many Cubans in the past and in the present. It was also said that he was the fruit of the love of a mulatto slave woman and an influential prelate. Is it Bishop Espada, as the sharp tongues allege?

If Plácido’s threat is true, then Plácido’s threat suggests that the poet must have known that according to a certain African belief, witches and the souls of deceased people have as vehicles owls and bats.
Also, Don Sebastián Alfredo Morales, in the preface of the *Poesías completas de Plácido* (Havana 1886), states that, four months before being executed, Plácido said to the District Attorney: “I, Sir, will have no remorse at my moment of agony, but you, Sir, yes. And I predict that after my death, my ghost will haunt you in the form of an owl.”

Morales is the resourceful author of the legend recounting the extraordinary courage of disgraced Plácido (who, after receiving the first shot, which did not kill him, asks for mercy), his impassivity before death, reciting poems on his way to the gallows. He saved his manuscripts and managed to publish them in 1885, twenty-one years after Plácido had been executed.

Of mature age, in their forties. “Jamonas.”

The prohibition of slavery worsened the fate of the slaves in the boats and increased the danger that threatened their lives during the crossing. Because it was impossible to escape from the English and hide the proof of their crime, the Spanish traders threw all human cargo overboard, into the sea.

It was said that the Africans taken from the coast believed that white people were buying them in order to eat them.

Sometimes, due to an epidemic that might break out on board, the sick were thrown to the sea. The same might happen because if there was not enough food or even for other reasons. The loss could be substantial. On one occasion, of the two hundred slaves a French vessel was transporting, it lost one hundred forty-eight.

Could these sophisticated hairdos that the old informants were referring to be the ones that Massé saw? They said the many older African women, relieved from work—like the children, who, in Cuba, did not do anything until they were eight years of age—, spent their time fixing the hair of the women of the plantation, “doing in their hair some very beautiful combinations of many small braids.”

Like the one that I keep, dateless, which must be from the beginning of the century: “For Monday, the eighteen of this month, at the usual time, in barrack no. 10, will be for sale one hundred ten Bo zal Mandinga Negros of both sexes, who have been brought from Charleston by the American frigate *Pierce Manning* and its captain, Captain John Pratt, at the consignation of Don Cristóbal Durán.

Ophthalmia—the dreaded purulent ophthalmia—was one of the diseases, with dysentery and scurvy, that the slaves contracted during the crossing.

*Due South, or Cuba Past and Present.* Boston and New York: Riverside Press, 1888.

Ancestors, grandparents, or the dead.

Majá.

The name “pilongos” is used to refer to the inhabitants of Villaclara [los villaclareños] who were baptized in the Iglesia Mayor, a church that was demolished during the administration of General Gerardo Machado and under the governorship of Dr. Roberto Méndez Peña. General Machado was very displeased with the demolition of the church, because he believed in conserving in Cuba all the historical monuments; he saved from demolition the Convent of Santa Clara in Havana.

Thomas Jefferson (1807): “In case of war with Spain, Cuba might add itself to our Confederation.”

John Quincy Adams (1823) to the Ambassador of Spain: “It is scarcely possible to resist the conviction that annexation of Cuba to our Federal Republic will be indispensable to the continuance and integrity of the Union itself.”

Today, we are astonished to read, for instance, these words of President Madison: “Not that we desire Cuba for itself, but we are afraid some European power might make a fulcrum of that position against the United States.” The designs of the U.S. politics are more indecipherable than those of Divine Providence! Who would have imagined that one day the Island would be given to those who have sworn to bury it!
However, around the middle of the 19th century, in many villages in the interior of Matanzas, like Limonar, the burial of a Negro, child or adult, cost “six pesos and five reales,” and seven pesos the burial of white people.

The Cabildo de los Mina was around the middle of the eighteenth century in the barrio Jesús María, in Havana. Its members were not known for their intelligence. Murray wrote about them: “There is a chapter called Mina Popó, also of the Western coast, stupid, lazy, and without any personal character. They were highly crafty and hypocritical, but not at all stupid, rectified Calazán. It was said that they were more inclined than other Africans to suffer from nostalgia, and that is why they frequently committed suicide.

Beginning in 1800, about 15,000 slaves were sent from Mozambique to the New World each year.

A broker.

This dance of the makua is reminiscent of a sort of lancers that Don L. Murieles observed in 1890 in Santa Clara. Standing in two lines, in front of one another, the men, separated from the women, performed movements and figures at the rhythm of the drums. The men walked toward the women and as they met, they would clap their hands and walk back. This dance took place in the house of the Kongo cabildo in Santa Clara, on the day of the Caridad del Cobre, whom they venerated.

The kinfuīte: “To play it, the Kongo, seated, put it between his legs, the pants rolled up and close at hand he had a calabash to wet his hands. And it was not a harp: it was a small barrel with a patch. In the middle of the patch, there was a small hole through which was introduced a twine to which was attached a piece of a reed. This reed was rubbed like the yin of the sacred drum of the Abakuá. The kinfuīte was played from ten o’clock at night until the sun came up.”

Ant

Other famous colonies inhabited by Carabali, Lucumi, and creoles were those that were on the streets of Jesús María, Vives, Alcantarilla, Suárez, San Nicolás, Puerta Cerrada, Aguila, and Rivillagigedo. Renowned were the colonies of Los Hoyos, between Diaria and Puerta Cerrada, and the Calzada de Vives, the Kongo colony of Carretones.

There are many foreigners who have left a record of this cordiality observed in the relationships between whites and Negroes in Cuba, and which explains why the Cuban Negro is an individual who smiles, is friendly and is free from grudge, in stark contrast with the bitter Negro in the United States of America. Jameson emphasizes that “the free Negroes who live in the country differ in little from the whites of the land, with whom they maintain perfect relationships. They work together in the same endeavor and they have leisure time together.” However, there was a time when there was something that deeply humiliated the free and honest Negroes, and it was that they could not bear arms or go into the street at night without lamp. Many enfranchised Negroes with money and a good reputation refrained from going out of their houses after the Hail Mary bells had rung.


“If on the occasion of the death of an infant a dance is held as has been the custom of the people of lower classes, increasing disorder to the extreme of leaving the cadaver exposed for some days in order to continue in the same reprehensible entertainment, the owner of the house where such dance is held will be fined six ducats.”

Olúlu, full of pride and referring to his Lucumi ancestors, tells me: “It was the cinarrones, the runaway slaves, who could not take the dogs because they were escaping to Ilé Yansa (to the country of the dead) in order to return to their land.” To Africa where they were reborn. The belief in reincarnation (for example, the abikú), was not alien to my best teachers because the old Lucumi held this belief. Bremer also gives an account of the suicide of eleven Lucumi who, through this means, escaped slavery.

“They were found hanging from the big and horizontal branches of a guásima tree. Each one had tied to himself a gourd containing his lunch, since they believed that whoever dies here will soon resurrect in his country. That is why many slaves deposited on the body of the suicide the headcherchief or the head covering that they themselves liked.
most, with they conviction that the suicide would carry it, along with their greetings, to their loved ones in the Mother Land. The body of a suicide is always covered with hundreds of these souvenirs.”

67 And they were right. When the Europeans occupied Nigeria, this place was a far cry from the state of barbarism found in other African regions.

68 In Africa they were farmers and traded in ivory, iron, and human merchandise. However, among certain slave traders, they had the reputation of being lazy.

69 “As they paraded, they sang: Let’s see what the Mandinga with gangá is going to come up with.”

70 A Lucumi ritual that is performed at dawn to receive the aché, the force of the first ray of the sun and give thanks to Olo'dumare. People drink hot dengué, that, from the center of the circle, the Oloricha distributes to those attending the ceremony, which is very beautiful when it is celebrated in the countryside.

71 From the Gold Coast, from Togo to Dahomey. The name Arará, for my informants, included all of Dahomey.

72 On a 1968 map of Cuba I found the following information: “The Nañígos are alive and well. There are plays in the capital, in Matanzas and in Pinar del Río (when I say the capital, I refer to Regla and Guanabacoa). There are many young people involved in this matter, and those who now are old and were once those young people that the elders used to censure, repeat what they used to tell them: that the young people destroy Nañiguism, because Nañiguism is not prettiness. But the young people need to protect themselves and feel secure in this fraternity, in leadership as much as in mandatory military service. They protect themselves, and those who get initiated, if they conduct themselves seriously and courageously, are their friends. They are the ones who spent three years in Camagüey and lived in the hell of the UMAP with its torture quarter, which turned out worse than the Foreign Legion, into which were introduced, in order to mix and humiliata them, young people who were not integrated, Catholic or not, homosexuals, marijuana users, common convicts, lesbians, animals. Among them terrible things happened, like cutting off with a machete the head of a murderer coming from Castillo del Príncipe, where he had the reputation of a serial killer. This was done by an eighteen-year-old boy, without experience, who, motivated by the shame and humiliation he had inflicted on him, swore to himself that he would kill him when that man made fun of him rudely and shouted at him that he could only kill him if he were asleep. The act happened quickly and surprised everybody. He sharpened the machete in front of his companions, and went where the man was sleeping, he called him until he was awake and then hacked him with all his strength. Afterwards, he went to the Guards Station, turned in the weapon and reported the incident. Because of the very bad background of the deceased, nicknamed El Tigre (The Tiger), he was acquitted. A very different case was the case of a young Abakuá who rebelled against one of the lieutenants who was most cruel to the recruits and killed him. He also was very young. He was condemned to death by a firing squad. He requested to direct the execution, he refused to be blindfolded, and when he was asked what his last wish was, he asked that the squad leader come close. When the leader came close, he spat on his face. He raised his hands and made a cross, the cross of the Nañígos, and gave the order to fire. And that is how he died. I could tell you the stories of young people of fifteen to twenty years of age.”

Later on, I learned again that the Nañígos did not resign themselves to having lost their freedom and that this was the reason why “they filled the prisons.”

Calazán and other elders talk about a Carabalí called Juan Ventaur, “executor of all the Carabalís, who used to give him their documents and money so that he could administer them, could read, write, count, everything, and owned many slaves. His grandson, Juan Cerdá, who studied at the University, lived in a big house in Prado y Genios. His servants were Spanish. He used to go to the Louvre to play Bacarat with the authorities, and the authorities, between drinks gave him a document to sign… that from the University went on to clean the commoners out of the Regla, the Rule.”

74 These well-off enfranchised slaves were well known to the travelers who wrote about the former Pearl of the Caribbeans. We will cite only one: “We have seen Africans who have accumulated considerable fortunes after being freed and who in turn bought many slaves.” J.G.F. Wurdermann, author of Notes on Cuba, was a good observer who, unlike Madden, Turnbull, Mursell, and many others, judged with impartiality the issues that concerned Cuba.
In the lepers, so much feared as well as pitied, our people have always seen a gleam of saintliness. “In a leper dwells Saint Lazarus.” A Kongo woman used to say that this disease had spread because of the evil heart of a woman who, during her worst moment, had verbally offended a leper.

I did not see food but money distributed to the poor on “the day of the poor.” Food and bread were given out anytime a poor person came to ask for them. And each house had its clients who came each day for the leftovers.

These amounts seem ridiculous to us today. They were not so ridiculous in the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century, they represented good financial assistance. I know from confidential papers and from conversations with trusted persons that the amount that Philalethes mentions was in no way a “standard” amount, and that the financial allocations, in each case, increased and did so … quietly. Some day, I hope to be able to talk about the generosity, especially the silent generosity, of many Cubans.

That is the title that the U.S. physician, Dr. R. Gibbs, gave to his book in 1860.

I know an unbearable Cuban woman who told a U.S. man: “Our culture is European, our lack of culture is American.”


Voyage à la Havane. 1840.

According to the author of A Narrative Tour of North America with and Excursion to Havana, London, 1834, the streets of Havana were “as bad as the Spanish laws, dirty, narrow, and so full of holes that all the carriages would fall in them if it were not for the horse-drawn carriage, that somewhat brings to mind the English cabriolet, with its immense wheels. But many of the houses are very beautiful and sturdily built, more luxurious, elegant, and comfortable than could be imagined from the outside.”

The difference that exists between Mayombe Critiano, Christian Mayombe, and Mayombe Judío, Jewish Mayombe, is the same that in Brazil is established between Kindamba and Umbanda. Harmful or black magic corresponds to Kindamba and beneficient or white magic corresponds to Umbanda.

An Oloricha, if a son of Obatalá, cannot, in principle, own a nganga. If he wears the ileke or collar of Obatalá, he cannot light up gun powder in the proximity of any symbol or the stone of Obatalá. It is a sacrilege to burn fula or gun powder wherever the Orichanla is.

Nkuyo is the name some mayomberos give to an equivalent spirit, with the functions of Eleguá.

The name given to the force that dominates the Taita Nganga.

“Choya Wéngue” is put through a shawl on the shoulders of a mboma or a ŋánka (a majá or a jubó), the same as Iyá Yemayá and Afreketé—the Yemayá of the arará (of Aladá) is the way of Lukankansa—the Devil—, a very bad Santa.” By “way,” we must understand aspect, avatar, “tendency.” The term “avatar” is valid in both Rules. Thus in the Lucumi Rule, an Oricha can present himself, like some Obatalá, “angry,” in his warrior aspect, fear-inspiring in some moment or circumstance of his life. Ochún, the goddess of love, can present herself as a serious woman, old or poor, who practices sorcery, such as when she is Ochún Kolé. “Way” is also understood as the earth or the locality where an Oricha lived, through which he passed or where he was venerated: “Changó of Nupe, of Oyó.” “Ayé through the Lucumi way and Agróniga through Dajomi; Nanábulukú through the sabalú way,” etc.

To mount the mpungu: to possess the body of an individual. The same as “to mount an Oricha.”

Another informant referred to the Principal of a Nso Nganga as the Mukua Dibata.

Child, adept, or client of the brujo, the sorcerer.
Many famous mayomberos and santeros of both genders do carry the name Baro, as well as Alfonso, Hernández, Jorrín, Herrera, Aldama, Cárdenas, Pedrso, etc.

92 “Gajo” is what the mayomberos call the cauldron or magical recipient in which, with elements taken from the sorcerer’s Fundamento, Tronco, or Nganga, a nganga is made for “a son.” In the words of a Taita: “Gajo means that in my nganga, one has been initiated and that my prenda created a shelter for him; that he was born of my prenda. With it, he will begin to do good for humanity, to benefit humanity. The shelter that I gave him, I put it at the bottom of the cauldron; I make, rayos, cuts, on his forehead, his chest, and his arms. A dog holds a candle and gun powder is burned in the hand of a ngombe so that a fumbi can descend on him. There is a washbowl with water and herbs to wash his wounds and for him to drink.” So that “a fumbi can descend on him” means so that “he can go into a trance.” Rayar the chest, the forehead, and the arms means to make incisions with a knife.

The children of a nganga receive names that the spirit gives them. The fathers and mothers of a nganga are usually called by the name of their prendas.

94 Your spirit (the power that assists the mayombero) could not know, it made a mistake.

95 How I can overcome, tie up the sorcerer—Ndoki—who harms you.

96 Trunk or foundation. The nganga that engenders other ngangas.

97 Murumba, sorcery or witchcraft. Kindambazo or kimbambazo, to bewitch, to cause harm. Some mayomberos also say kandagazo. Walonampolo, “witchcraft in gun powder.”

98 Mbua, dog.

99 Kasiwa, woman; kasiro, man. “It means that these like quarrels, they fight. Kasiro is also the spider, who threw his thread and fell into the sea. That is why the mambo says: kasiro threw thread and fell into the sea. My Kasiro, you can’t jump over the sea. Anything that might be attempted against a protected of a mayombero or against the mayombero himself, is neutralized by his power.

100 Syndicate.

101 Fathers.

102 Which one could it be, the epidemic of 1831 or the one of 1850? It must be the epidemic of 1850, which killed thousands of Negroes.

103 Talanquera or tranquera, entrance door in the outer fence of a ranch.

104 See Yemayá y Ochún, by Lydia Cabrera.

105 During the Middle-Ages, it was believed that menstrual blood, because it was subtle, was the worst of all venoms.

106 Simba. To displace the spirit of the individual and take possession of his body. The expression “to be simbao” means to be in trance.

107 Ndundu, say if there are bad and dirty people; throw them out because we are going to partake in a ceremony, the cemetery is in festivity. Ndundu is a guard.

108 “Llega y pon” [Arrive and put], because whoever felt like it pitched his or her hovel there without being bothered. “Pon si puedes” [Put if you can], because one had to contend with the neighbors who did not look kindly on the intrusion of a stranger on their properties, and “Por mis timbales” [By my kettledrum], because one has stood firm in this group of thatched huts and has built one’s own hut. “Pan y timba” [Bread and game], because it is said that the people filled themselves with bread and guava sweet.
The botelleros were those who, without doing any work, lived on the money of the State.

Those who surround the politician, flatter him, and serve him in whatever is needed.

There is no bigger exaggeration about the misery of the people than the communist propaganda that preceded the turning of the Island over to the Russians.

The mayombero dances with the nganga.

“In Kikongo, the mirror is called lumuine and muene. Vititi, mensu or vichichi is to see witchcraft. Mesu is eye. To see the witchcraft, the herb that is needed to heal or to do whatever else needs to be done. One lumuini that is on top of the nganga in a goat horn is called vititi mensu, to record, to see what is happening and what will happen.”

To make it possible for an individual to not see the harm that is being committed against him or her—robbery, infidelity, abuse of any type—it is a common practice in Mayombe to draw a crow with candle wax on a mirror while pronouncing the name of the individual, and if necessary, an individual of one’s own house.

Cemetery. It is also called fifth floor, kariempembe, pungún sawa, lirio plaza, nso fuiri, kumanso fundi, chamalonga.

The sixteen shells that the olorichas and ilyalochas use in the forecasts. Dilogún, sixteen in Lucumi or Yoruba. Meridilogún is the name given to this divination system which is not the only one used in the Lucumi Rule.


Cemetery

In trance

Keep in mind that some people pronounce ngüeyes.

Other names that are given in this language to the madrina are: ngundi nganga, nsumbo, nkentokua dilanga, nwuan, yaya, ngundiyaya, and yari yari.

In some Nsos, when a messenger is sent to the finda, the forest, with the rooster that had been taken from the moanas and the coins that are to be gifted to the forest, a matari, a stone, is put in his mouth as a safeguard and it is taken out only when he returns. It is only then that “the nganga urria,” that the nganga eats. Afterwards, the songs begin and the fwas, the spirits, are introduced.

“There are some who disfigure their faces on falling. They dig their noses into the ground like pigs. Others ask for blades to cut their tongues or their noses. Juan, if he is engaged in battle, asks for a knife, cuts his lip and spits the blood on the plate. He said to a woman: Tomorrow, you’ll cry. The following day, her daughter was burned. The yimbis who are impulsive are handled with machetes. They need to be restrained. When Centella Monte Oscuro arrives, he is given blows in the arms, and the following day, no scars can be observed. The blood is sprinkled over the Prenda.”

The cemetery. The other world.

A dog prenda [prenda de perro, mboa] is built with a dog that is provoked and taunted until it is made to go mad [rabiar]. When it is furious, its head, the four paws, the heart are removed and the tip of the tail is cut off. All types of harmful insects are put in the cauldron. “Without a dog, the mayombero does not follow a trace. This animal, which is very noble, makes it possible for the spell [brujería] to go straight and reach, without deviating, where it is supposed to go.”

An allusion to the incompatibility between the Lucumí practice and the practices of witchcraft or sorcery [hechicería].
Epicrater engulifer.

“Kadiampembe, the Devil, walks a lot through the banana fields.”

However, about the city mayombero who have ngangas in their houses, we have been told that “they cannot sleep in a bed but on the ground and close to the prenda.”

Omnibus.

In this very same way also acts “the Angel that one has in the head when it has not been fed and it is hungry,” according to what the adepts of the Rule of Ocha believe.

Crocodile.

Possessed

Adepts, of both genders.

Another synonym for caravel, comrade, brother of the Nganga, initiate.

This referred to a ngangulero who was from Bolondrón, a locality of the province of Mantanzas. La Güira, Jicarita, and San Lorenzo are other localities of the same province.

A salesman.

In the house of God, the Devil does not enter, warns a saying and sings the ngangulero, meaning by this that his power is superior to that of any adversary.

Slowly. Little by little.

“Bejuco used to tell his friends the story of his teacher and padrino Okuji, Ta Pablo Alfonso, who, when he was at the ingenio Majagua, they brought to him another sorcerer, who was very bad, so that he could heal him. He refused to treat him. You will lose your life, Okuji, they warned him. I don’t care! Ta Pablo prepared himself to die. He distributed his prendas and died, the victim of that ndoki, that sorcerer, whom he had refused to heal.”
GLOSSARY OF KIKONGO TERMS

bakala: men, husbands

bakento: women, wives

baleki: young people, beginners

bamama: mothers

bambuta: elders

bana: children

bandoki: sorcerers, witches

bankita: the dead

bankulu: ancestors

bantu: people, humanity

bansimba: twins

batata: fathers

bayaya: elders

bilanga: fields, plantations

bilongo: medicine, medication, treatment

biyisi: bones
biyimbi: magical powers
buimi: stinginess, avarice
dia di nsona: day of rest, holiday
diamba: hemp
diambu, diambo: happening, concern
dilala: orange
fumu: tobacco

Kalunga: the sea, mystery, the mysterious dead
kanda: family, clan
kiadi: sadness
kiaku: your, yours
kilanga: field, plantation
kimpa: new
kindoki: sorcery (of the harming kind)
kinganga: knowledge, mastery; priesthood
kinoni: ant
kiosi: cold
kisengele, kisengedi: ax

Kisimbi: the Spirit of the Water

kitalatala: mirror

kiyisi: bone

kubuta: to give birth

kudia: to eat

kudiata: to walk, to step on

kufula: to blow

kufua: to die

kugonda: to kill

kuilu: river

kukanga: to tie, to lock up, to close, to bound

kukina: to dance

kukomba: to clean

kuku: kitchen

kukubula: to shake up

kukuenda: to go, to walk
**kukutula**: to untie, to open, to free

**kuleka**: to sleep

**kulemba**: to implore, to appease

**kulonga**: to teach

**kumata**: to climb, to mount

**kumbi**: pigeon, dove

**kumi**: the number ten (10)

**kumona**: to see

**kuna**: at, in

**kuna mfinda**: in the forest

**kuna nzо**: in the house

**kusamba**: to pray

**kusonika**: to write

**kusukula**: to wash

**kutala**: to look

**kutambula**: to receive

**kutonda**: to thank, to give thanks
kutu, kuto: ear

kutunga: to build

kuwa: to listen, to hear

kuyimbila: to sing

kuyela: to grow up; to mature

lelu: today

longa: plate

loso: rice

lufua: death

lulemu: tongue

lulendo: pride

luse: face

maba: palm trees

mabaya: wood, plank

mabele: breasts

madeso: beans

madioko: cassava, yuca
makata: testicles

makutu, makuto: ears

malafu: wine, liquor

malala: oranges

malembe, malembi: slow, slowly

malonga: plates

malu: feet

mama: mother

mambi: evil, harm

mambo: happenings, concerns

mamboti: good

mandefu: bear

masa: water

masa ma Nzambi: holy water

masango, masangu: corn

matadi: stones

matako, matakui: buttocks
matiti: herbs
matoko: young men
mbanza: town
mbasi: tomorrow
mbele, mbedi: knife
mbi: bad; ugly
mbisi: meat, animal
mboma: boa, python
mbombo: nose
mbote, mboti: good; beautiful, pretty
mbua: dog
mbuetete: star, stars
mbundu: heart
mbumba: cat
mbuta: elder
menga: blood
meno: teeth
meso, mesu: eyes

mfinda: forest, wilderness

mfumu: chief

mfuta: bush, woods

miansi: roots

miese: stars

mika: hair (on animals or the human body, except the head)

mindele: white people

moko: hands

mongo: mountain

mosi: the number one (1)

moyo: soul, feeling

mpaka: horn

mpakasa: elephant

mpangi: blood relative in one’s extended family or clan; brother or sister in this broader sense

mpasi: pain, birth pangs

mpemba: chalk
**mpembe**: white; white chalk

**mpese, mpesi**: cockroach

**mpimpa**: night, darkness

**mpu**: hat

**mpuku**: rat

**mpungi**: horn

**mpungu**: protection, supernatural power

**mputa**: cut, wound

**muana**: child

**muana nzo**: child of the house

**Muene, Mueni**: He sees, She sees

**muinda**: light, lamp

**mundele**: white person

**munu**: I, me

**mvu**: year

**mvula**: rain

**nbongo**: money
*nbundu*: heart

*ndambo, ndambu*: piece, portion, part

*ndinga*: voice, language

*ndoki*: sorcerer

*ndombe*: black

*ndumba*: a single woman

*ndundu*: albino

*ngandu, ngando*: crocodile

*nganga*: hearer, priest

*ngembo*: bat

*ngo*: leopard

*ngola*: eel

*ngolo*: power, energy, force, strength

*ngoma*: drum

*ngombe, ngombi*: cow

*ngonda*: moon, menstruation

*ngonda miese*: moon light, high moon
nguba: peanut

ngudi: mother

Nguidi: I listen, I hear; I listened, I heard

ngulu: pig

ngunga: bell, bell sound

ngunza: seer

nianga: mature, elder

nioka: snake, serpent

nitu: body

nkai: entelope, deer

nkento: woman, wife

nki?: what?

nki diambu?: what? (what matter?, what reason?)

nkisi: medicine, supernatural power

nkombo: goat

nkosi: lion

nkulu: ancestor
nkumbu: name

nkundi: friend

nkunga: song

nkuni: wood, fire wood

nkusu: fence

nkutu: sack

nleki: small, young; younger sibling

nlele: fabric, clothes

nlembo: fingers, prohibitions

nlongi: teacher

nlongo: prohibition

nsi: land, country

nsimba: twin

nsinga: thread, cord, rope

nsongo: spirit

nsoni: shame

nsualu, nsualo: fast, quickly
**nsuki:** hair

**nsusu:** chicken, rooster

**ntambu:** trap

**ntangu:** sun, time, rhythm

**nti:** tree

**ntima:** heart, feeling

**Ntondele, Ntondedi:** I give thanks; Thank you!

**ntoto:** earth; land, country

**ntu:** head

**ntulu:** chest

**nua:** mouth

**Nzambi:** God

**nzau:** crocodile

**nzila:** path

**nzimbu:** money

**nzo:** house

**nzo nganga:** praise house, sanctuary
nzungu: pot, cauldron
sasi: bullet
sodi: plantation
tadi: stone
tanu: the number five (5)
tatu: the number three (3)
tata: father
tiya: fire
toko: young man
tufi: excrement, trash
tutu: rat
vita: war, struggle
ya: the number four (4)
yakala: man, husbad
yandi: he, she; him, her
yaya: elder; older sibling
yela: mature
**yemba**: funeral

**yembe**: pigeon

**yimbi**: spirit, medium

**zina**: name

**zita**: knot

**zodi**: the number two (2)

**zulu**: sky, space, heavens; heaven
TRANSLATION RIGHTS

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