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The Kingdom of Kongo and Palo Mayombe: Reflections on an African-American Religion

John Thornton

Historical scholarship on Afro-Cuban religions has long recognized that one of its salient characteristics is the union of African (Yoruba) gods with Catholic Saints. But in so doing, it has usually considered the Cuban Catholic church as the source of the saints and the syncretism to be the result of the worshippers hiding worship of the gods behind the saints. This article argues that the source of the saints was more likely to be from Catholics from the Kingdom of Kongo which had been Catholic for 300 years and had made its own form of Christianity in the interim.

Modern day Afro-Cuban religion is a syncretic mixture of African religious traditions with Christianity, often characterized by the matching of African deities (particularly those from the Yoruba of today's Nigeria) with Christian saints. The combination of saints and African deities is also found in Brazil and Haiti, and thus represents one arm of a complex problem in religious history. In popular representation and often in scholarly analysis, the syncretism is presented as the result of African religious resistance to Christian evangelism, the efforts of the colonial Catholic church to convert slaves, and the Christian elements presented as 'hiding behind the saints' or a way to continue African worship and avoid clerical persecution.¹

This approach ignores, however, an important aspect of the history of Cuba, and that is that thousands upon thousands of the slaves who entered the country during the height of its slave trade from 1760 to 1860 came from the Catholic Central African Kingdom of Kongo, where a local interpretation of Catholicism that included the cult of the saints had been followed for almost 300 years before the wave of imports for Cuba's sugar mills. The Regla de Congo, or more popularly Palo Monte (or Palo Mayombe) was the specific manifestation of the Kongo brand of Afro-Christianity

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in Cuba, and its history clearly reveals that it was the Kongoleses who brought Catholicism to Afro-Cuban life as much as, or even more than, the institutional Cuban Catholic church.

Most scholars of Palo Monte have not taken adequate consideration of Kongo's Christian background, often focusing instead on anthropological descriptions of non-Christian aspects of today's Kongo religion. Even when Kongo's history has been cited, its contribution to the Christian identity of those who were brought to Cuba has been underestimated because some of the modern scholarship on Kongo by writers such as Georges Balandier in the 1960s, or more recently James Sweet, argues that Christianity there was either weak, insincere, or in steep decline at the time of the intensive slave trade to Cuba in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century.² For many, the often hostile comments of visiting missionaries in Kongo, especially the Italian Capuchins who wrote voluminously about their time there (1645–1830), has reinforced this view by highlighting elements of Kongo's Catholic faith they felt were incompatible with their Counter-Reformation version of Christianity.³ Similarly, a number of historians have seen Kongo's Christianity as being dependent on these foreign missionaries, and contend that the absence of these missionaries after 1750 led to the religion passing into a distant background.⁴ Thus, important statements about Kongo influences in Afro-Cuban religion, such as those of Robert Farris Thompson, barely acknowledge an early period of Christianity and feel comfortable in putting it aside.⁵ This has led Erwan Dianteill, a leading current expert in Afro-Cuban religion, to deny that Kongo's Christianity had any significant role in the formation of Palo.⁶ Many studies of contemporary Palo Monte, like Todd Ochoa's careful work, simply cite and use modern anthropological accounts to understand the Kongo background.⁷

In fact, Kongo was as much a Catholic country in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as it had been in earlier times, even when it had few European missionaries, because it had developed a self-sustaining church, albeit one that sometimes displeased visiting missionaries with its local forms and interpretations of the faith. It was this faith, as practiced in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that influenced the Christian component of Afro-Cuban religion.⁸

The antiquity of the catholic church in the Kingdom of Kongo

Christianity was accepted in Kongo at the very beginning of contact between it and Europe. The Portuguese navigator Diogo Cão exchanged hostages with Kongo when he reached the shores of the kingdom in 1483, and after some further negotiations, King Nzinga a Nkuwu accepted baptism as João I in 1491. What made this conversion important, though, was that when Nzinga, a Nkuwu, became a Christian he was not surrendering to Portugal or facing conquest. Instead, João and even more so his son and successor, Afonso Mvemba, a Nzinga (1509–1542), embraced the faith wholeheartedly and moved very quickly to make it their own. Not only did Afonso institutionalize the church, creating a countrywide network of schools, providing it with financing and integrating it into the structure of the kingdom, but he also worked

with Portuguese advisors and Kongolese students who studied in Europe to integrate it into Kongo's own religious tradition.⁹

Much like the Roman Empire in ancient times or the Frankish or Gothic kings of the early Middle Ages, Kongo's Christianity combined what it received from the older Christian lands with local religious ideas and customs. From the time of João onward but especially under Afonso, Kongo sent students to Europe and then had them found schools when they returned so that the intellectual and philosophical basis for the new faith was truly integrated into its African base. European priests and missionaries had an input into the education, but on the whole, the mass of education, which had reached the entire country by 1530, was in the hands Kongo's own elite.¹⁰

Kongo's religious elite, educated in Kongo and drawn from the highest ranks of the nobility, was literate and learned in European culture. They were called variously as schoolmasters (*mestres d'escola*), chapel boys or other titles, but they remained as a central and ongoing part of Kongo's religious life.¹¹ The development of this self-sustaining class of teachers and religious leaders meant that foreign clergy were not the primary force sustaining beliefs in the Christian faith. Instead, wrangles between Kongo, Rome and Portugal over organizational structure, funding, and control of personnel left Kongo unable to have its locally educated, politically loyal religious elite ordained as priests in sufficient numbers to perform the sacraments required by the Church on a regular basis. In a series of compromises worked out in the seventeenth century, Kongo adopted the unusual strategy of using Italian Capuchin missionaries, presumed to be neutral in the disputes between Kongo and Portugal, for sacramental duties in lieu of parish priests appointed by the bishops (the secular clergy).¹² Thus, while the bishops occasionally did send vicars to Kongo and even some parish priests to perform sacraments, Capuchins (whose normal function was teaching and perfecting religious life), ended up performing thousands of baptisms, marriages and confessions to the point that these duties became their primary task.

The Capuchins, while accepting this role, also continued their task of reforming the existing tradition in line with the Counter-Reformation, and wrote long and critical accounts of Kongo's religious life. From a historiographical perspective, the literally thousands of pages of testimony left by Capuchins between 1645 when they came and about 1720 when their writing dropped off dramatically has been the basis for most of what is known about Kongo's social history, religious life and even its political history. It has also informed scholarship on how Kongo's Christian identity impacted the tens and tens of thousands of Kongolese slaves who came to the Americas. Capuchin criticism is the basis for most scholarly claims that Kongo had not genuinely embraced Christianity, although the same Capuchin accounts require us to acknowledge that the Kongolese, high born and low, enthusiastically thought of themselves as Christian.

These foreign priests with their ideas for reform were only necessary, in fact, because Kongolese of all classes and education were sufficiently wedded to Catholic doctrine that they accepted that partaking in at least some of the sacraments was essential to their religious life. They also accepted without hesitation that only properly ordained

Catholic priests could perform the sacraments. This explains why, in spite of their differences with Capuchins, other priests, and the bishops of Congo and Angola, the country never simply broke with Rome, ordained the schoolmasters as priests and created their own church, even when presented with a Calvinist alternative by the Dutch during the period of their alliance (1622–1648). An even more radical possibility opened up in 1704–1706 when D. Beatriz Kimpa Vita, a young noblewoman, claimed to have been possessed by Saint Anthony. Armed with Divine authority, she created holy orders and sent out ambassadors to spread her faith. But here, too, the ruling king, Pedro IV, ordered her burned as a heretic and witch rather than taking up an opportunity to naturalize the faith and take full control over its institutions.¹³

Catholic Kongo 1760–1860

All the observers, both lay and clerical, who wrote about Kongo from 1760 to 1860, agreed that the Kongolese took great pride in their Christian identity. This was not just the elite but ordinary people all over the country, as we see in the lengthy assessment of the Portuguese secular priest Rafael Castello de Vide in 1781–1788. He had no doubt that he was in a Christian country, since people everywhere showed knowledge of the faith and they received the priests with great enthusiasm, kneeling before them and receiving him as if he were ‘the King of Heaven’.¹⁴ He also saw that many Kongolese wore crucifixes, and most of the major settlements had a large crucifix in an open square which served as a church.¹⁵ Writing about his stay in the 1790s, the Italian Capuchin Raimondo da Dicomano believed that the Kongolese ‘wish to be and esteem being Christians and are more honored than those who are not, who they disparagingly call heathens’.¹⁶ Pietro Paulo da Bene, the last Italian Capuchin to visit Kongo (for 14 months in 1819–1820) said that the Kongolese ‘gloried in professing the Catholic religion’.¹⁷

The testimony was the same for later periods, after the Capuchins had left, when a group of secular priests from Angola began arriving in 1854.¹⁸ Francisco de Salles Gusmão, who visited Kongo in 1856, noted that ‘these people pay great veneration and respect to the Catholic Religion’ and that ‘almost all the blacks of this part of the interior wear the image of Jesus Christ our Lord on their chests’, and moreover that there are crosses to be found in ‘all their villages’.¹⁹

While the priests perceived what they considered weaknesses and inadequacies in the practice of Kongo’s Christians, on the whole, they did not think them a sign of failure. Castello de Vide was generous, writing that ‘even though they had some vices, they never left the cult of the true God, and their superstitions are better attributed to their rusticity than any fault in their faith’, thinking that this rusticity was the result of a lack of priests.²⁰ Da Dicomano, whose assessment of Kongo’s general state was far more somber, was nevertheless sure that they believed in the Christian God whom they called ‘Zambi Ambungo’ (*Nzambi a Mpungu*), the Kikongo name for God that had been in use since the sixteenth century. They knew that he was ‘Almighty, creator of Heaven and earth, judge of the living and the dead, who rewards the good

and punishes the wicked' and they also believed in 'Amoana Zambi Ambungo' (*omwan'a Nzambi a Mpungu* or God the son) as they called Jesus Christ and believed that he was present in the Eucharist, though they generally did not take Communion.²¹

Just as the visitors believed that the Kongolese recognized God and Jesus, they thought them good enough Catholics to accept the cult of the saints. They recognized Mary, and according to Castello de Vide, it was a well-established custom to sing 'Hail Mary' when traveling or in crossing dangerous rivers.²² In addition to a reverence for the Virgin Mary, they were also fond of Saint Francis and especially of Saint Anthony. Saint Barbara was also well known and was evoked in thunderstorms, which abounded in Kongo's rainy season.²³ The priests of Castello de Vide's mission took images and pictures of the saints with them, and these gifts were much appreciated, especially in places where local images of the saints had become old and worn out, as they noted in the first church they encountered in Mbamba 1780, and found that the people had an old image of a saint.²⁴

In the eighteenth century, Kongolese artists created remarkable crucifixes with an African Jesus on the cross, identifiably Kongolese, which were widely made and distributed. Alongside these images of Jesus, they also made a number of statues of Saint Anthony, less identifiably African, but clearly part of the Christian spiritual inventory of the Kongo church.²⁵ The Kongolese also had a repertoire of hymns and songs of their own. At Christmas, 1780, when Castelo de Vide had just arrived in Kongo, he was moved to tears to see the people sitting up all night singing 'praises to the Lord in their own language'.²⁶

This commitment to Christianity was not the work of the European clergy, whose numbers shrank considerably in the eighteenth century, but the continuing educational efforts of the lay teachers and schoolmasters. Writing in 1762, the Italian Capuchin Rosario dal Parco noted the role of the teachers in maintaining Christianity in the absence of priests. After noting that 'this king is Catholic with all his people', dal Parco went on to observe that 'all these princes have many teachers (*più maestri*) who know Portuguese and are able to teach Christian doctrine in the language of Congo, such that when a priest arrives in their lands, he finds the people instructed in the mysteries of our Holy Faith'.²⁷ Castello de Vide confirmed this role, for when he worked in Kongo in the 1780s, there had been no ordained priest visit for a long time; in some of their missions, the Portuguese priests met whole regions of the country that had not seen a priest in 30 years, and only knew about them from tradition, yet for all that were adequately instructed so that he felt secure in baptizing and giving sacraments.²⁸ As in the past, being a schoolmaster was a mark of nobility, and noble ranks were often also ranks in the church, as was the ruler of Mbanza Quinta who was a 'mestre de Igreja' and could read and write in Portuguese well.²⁹ Likewise, at Comma, the ruler was held to be a 'Captain of the Church' as well as holding other titles.³⁰ Da Dicomano, who had a more negative assessment of Kongo than his Portuguese predecessor, still noted that the schoolmasters, in this case assisted by an old woman, led the regular reciting of the Litany of the Madonna in São Salvador.³¹

While the Capuchins of the mid- to late-seventeenth century documented the nature of spiritual life in Christian Kongo, primarily its divergences from their ideas

of proper Christianity, the later witnesses were not as diligent or attentive to detail. Nevertheless, the later visitors often complained about the local form of the faith, assuring us that the basic nature of the religious system had not changed. The primary concern for the use of *zinkisi* (personal charms) remained important, and nineteenth-century priests routinely distributed religious objects and they were treated the same way as the traditional images were; indeed, it was not uncommon for priests to make a direct substitution of one for the other. Thus, Castelo de Vide, substituting the *iteke* (another term for a charm) with rosaries or Veronicas (religious medals), claimed that the *iteke* were 'not signs of Christians but heathens', perhaps intending to cleanse an otherwise acceptable form of religious practice of its 'diabolic' component.³² Thousands of these medals were imported into Kongo and kept by people, as evidenced by the recently excavated cemetery at Kindoki, near the site of the old Mbanza Nsundi, which contained religious medals buried among the dead in the period between about 1750 and 1830.³³

The Capuchin da Bene complained that Kongolese made houses dedicated to 'Quitche' and worshipped them.³⁴ Like the Capuchins, Castello de Vide denounced the *kimpasi*, a special congregation that sought to heal social discord through the action of spiritual forces. In one instance, reflecting the general ideas of local religious manifestations as the work of the Devil, he asked if they followed the Devil. When the congregants replied that they did not, he asked them 'why do his work'? Major Antonio Castro, a secular official who visited Kongo in 1845, had relatively little to say about its religion, but did note that it was a 'ridiculous mixture of fetishism and Catholicism' and gave as an example people wearing a crucifix as well as 'quitexis' and 'quinkixis'.³⁵

Centuries of Capuchin denunciations had left at least some mark on Kongo's practice. The idea that *iteke* and witchcraft might be connected in the minds of Kongo authorities is revealed by the account of another Portuguese traveler, Alfredo de Sarmiento, who also visited São Salvador in 1856. Sarmiento contended that the king of Kongo had banned all 'idols' in the country, and he saw none while he was there, a point that he considered unusual in light of his experience in other parts of Angola. That the ban was not particularly effective is attested by the fact that the German traveler Adolf Bastian who traveled the same area at almost exactly the same time had no trouble finding *iteke* during his voyage.³⁶

Castello de Vide was displeased with some social customs that were not strictly speaking religious or spiritual, such as circumcision, dancing, drinking and injustice concerning the slave trade.³⁷ He was unsure whether the well-established custom of dancing for priests when they came to visit was a suitable religious activity. His ambiguity was based on his perception that Kongolese dancing was improperly sensuous, but he appears to have approved of a 'sangamento', or war dance, that he witnessed, since the people told him it was to fight the Devil, who had kept priests from coming to Kongo for so many years.³⁸

Castello de Vide hoped that he could teach them a more orthodox belief and spent much of his time trying to do so.³⁹ The problem, however, was not simply ignorance, as da Dicomano's experience a decade later reveals. When he tried to correct the schoolmasters' understanding of Church law or practice, they refused to take guidance

from him or allow him to teach anything that was contrary to their established customs. In fact, when he tried to teach religious reform, he was actively blocked, and people told him that ‘schoolmasters and old slaves should instruct the missionaries, and I was told many times that I was not well instructed when I tried to correct these prejudices’.⁴⁰

As earlier, the European priests’ primary task was sacramental, and their educational work less significant. Baptism, in particular, was in high demand, though penance was also popular.⁴¹ Baptism was also a sacrament that was relatively easy to perform, given that the instruction necessary was already done. Large groups could be baptized together, unlike, for example, penance which required considerable time or the Last Rites that were effectively impossible, given the shortage of clergy. Capuchins typically performed tens of thousands of baptisms during their stays in the country: a Capuchin survey of baptisms in the 1756–1758 by the prefect Rosario dal Parco found that the priests had performed 20,000 baptisms, 5000 confessions and gave 3000 people communion in that period over a limited area.⁴² Castello de Vide paints a vivid picture of the constant demand for baptism: huge crowds bearing children came around them, not just when they stopped for some days in a village or town, but even as they traveled along the roads. When they stopped, they sometimes had to take precaution that the press of the crowd would not suffocate some small child.⁴³ Da Dicomano was equally impressed by the crowds of people who thronged the roads when he traveled who insisted that he baptize their children. In fact, he felt that if he refused the baptism, in order to teach a more orthodox religion first, they would threaten him and perhaps, he thought, even kill him.⁴⁴ The priests continued to baptize thousands: for example, Luigi Maria d’ Assisi, another Italian Capuchin, baptized 27,000 people during one year in Kongo (1813–1814), and confessed some 6000 mostly around the capital and along the route he took to come and go there.⁴⁵ Even though the last of the Capuchins, da Bene, refused to baptize the children of people he believed were living polygamously, he still considered his own haul of baptisms to be his great fruit.⁴⁶

The enthusiasm for baptism continued after the last Capuchin left. Francisco das Necessidades, a secular priest from Angola who visited Kongo for 15 months in 1843–1845, claimed in his report to have performed 106,064 baptisms and to have heard 455 confessions, numbers which can only be explained by his baptizing the huge backlog of unbaptized people created by the two decade long absence of clergy in Kongo.⁴⁷ The Angolan canon priest José Tavares da Costa e Moura, who visited São Salvador for several months in 1856 as the slave trade drew to a close, wrote of them, ‘it is incredible the number of natives who come all day, at whatever hour, rushing to receive holy baptism and assist in Mass’.⁴⁸ In the same year, the secular Francisco de Salles Gusmão wrote ‘Everywhere, the inhabitants flood us to receive the Holy Sacrament of Baptism’.⁴⁹ Zacharias da Cruz, who went to Kongo in 1858 accompanied by two priests, also witnessed the enthusiasm for baptism that had always characterized Kongo. The priests, traveling quickly, did not have time to baptize many people, and what baptismal work they did do was only at the villages along the roads, but still they were constantly made conscious of the overwhelming demand for sacramental services.⁵⁰

The Kongolese did not partake of the other sacraments regularly: some elites did get married, but by and large, marriage did not figure much in the culture which was not committed to monogamy. With an acute shortage of priests at all times, the Last Rites was not a part of the religious life of the Kongolese, but the elites were very much inclined to be buried with church rites. For this reason, nobles who died were often kept unburied and preserved by various means of mummification until a priest came to bury them.⁵¹

Kongo Christians in Cuba

Kongo Christians were central to the establishment of Palo Mayombe in Cuba, and in fact, Kongo's Christianity was central to the religious matrix in which it was embedded. There can be little doubt that very many of the Africans who came to Cuba were, in fact, Christians of long standing. Central Africans were a substantial portion of the Cuban slave trade, and shipping records reveal that almost a third of all imports from Africa originated in West Central Africa, more than any other region. Central Africans were particularly prominent in the first arrivals of the wave of new Africans in the 1760s when they made up over 40% of the entries, and again in the last decade of the 1790s, increasing to over 40% in 1800–1810, and finally peaking at nearly three quarters of the last wave of arrivals in the 1850s.⁵²

Of course, not all this multitude of West Central Africans were Christian or from the Kingdom of Kongo. In Cuban records, African-born people were typically identified by ethnicity, but the ethnic label 'Congo' encompassed the whole of sub-Equatorial Africa (the Bantu-speaking peoples), so a second more specific name was frequently added. Thus, Congos ranged from the 'Congo Macua' from Mozambique to the 'Congo Mondongo' (Kimbundu speaking, some of whom would be Christian from Portuguese Angola) and 'Congo Loango' (Kikongo speaking, but not the kingdom of Kongo and probably not Christian) of West Central Africa; those from the Kingdom of Kongo were typically called 'Congos Reales'.⁵³

A precise breakdown of the population by the finer designations, however, is not possible, but also perhaps not necessary, for numbers alone clearly did not establish religious traditions. The Lucumí nation, for example, which included, but was not exclusively Yoruba, made up only about 16% of the imports into Cuba, but their religious impact far outweighed their limited numbers in forming the Regla Lucumí, the root of Santería. Thus, even if they numbered considerably less than the totality of Congos, the Congo Reales were disproportionately respected and formed something of a leadership group among the Congos, and indeed of the whole African-descended population.

The differential impact of various nations in forming Afro-Cuban religion was created by the way social and religious life of Afro-Cubans was organized. People of African descent throughout the early history of the Atlantic world usually had some sort of ethnic solidarity with others who spoke the same or related languages and shared cultural customs, and from early times had formal or informal organizations that reflected their 'nation'.⁵⁴ When the North American visitor Robert Jameson

wrote of life in Havana as he witnessed it in 1820, he attested to national groups as being profoundly important, as each 'tribe' held meetings on Sundays and holidays, and moreover, every 'tribe has its own king'.⁵⁵

Leadership within that larger 'nation', most visibly manifested by the kings, was typically organized by small groups of elites among them. For much of Cuban history, this sort of ethnically specific elite leadership was conducted through church-sponsored *cofradías* (lay brotherhoods), but starting in the eighteenth century, the cultural leaders were increasingly drawn from another organization, the *cabildos de nación*.⁵⁶ The *cabildos de nación* were most notable in the region of Havana and Matanzas; elsewhere in Cuba, especially rural areas, religious systems with African roots were more often found in communities of runaways.⁵⁷ The *cabildos de nación* were organized and directed by free people for entertainment and mutual aid, and had less formal affiliation with the church than the *cofradías* and represented African-born people.⁵⁸ Because the *cabildos de nación* were less under church control, it was from within them and not the *cofradías* that the distinctive Afro-Cuban religions emerged.⁵⁹ Thus, the Regla de Lucumí or Santería came out of the Lucumí (Yoruba) *cabildos*; and the Regla de Congo or Palo Monte from the Congo ones. In 1755, the bishop of Havana, José Agustín Morell de Santa Cruz, enumerated 21 such *cabildos* in Havana, of which five were organized by Congos; there was one dedicated to Congos Loangos,⁶⁰ and a second to Congos Mondongo, and the other three with no specific subdivision.⁶¹

As more and more Africans arrived in Cuba with the sugar boom, the number of *cabildos de nación* expanded dramatically. Cuban historian Carmen Barcia compiled a list of 109 *cabildos* in nineteenth-century Havana, and we should not assume it is complete, for there were no systematic counts of them and they only appear in records when they had disputes or were implicated in disorders.⁶² It is quite likely that many such organizations flourished for a few years and disappeared, while their membership switched to other *cabildos*. Their records are usually long gone, but those whose records have survived, often seized by authorities or given as evidence in disputes, show that they did register with the authorities, had official recognition, and petitioned for permission to appear in public ceremonies and celebrations.

What made the *cabildos de nación* important was not the number of members they had, for most had restrictive qualifications, voting rights and eligibility for leadership, which made their membership fairly small. Rather, it was that they had an important leadership role among the rank and file Africans of their nation. Often, their core was composed of African-born people who had obtained freedom and some wealth or property; sometimes, it also included the children of African-born individuals who continued to identify with their parents' nation.

While the *cabildos* were primarily mutual aid and social groups, they also exercised leadership through elected kings and queens of their nations. The kings of various nations were not entirely fictive leaders. As kings were often associated with *cabildos* (if not always so), the leaders and their organizations were also used by the colonial government as a means of local social control, and were thus closely monitored by the police.⁶³ Within this function, *cabildo* leaders acting as kings were also given a

certain responsibility to police their own members so, for example, as early as 1813, the king or capataze of a *cabildo* was fined for minor crimes committed by his members.⁶⁴

Congo leadership

Among the kings, those of Congo were particularly influential, and for that reason, they were able not only to continue the Christianity of their homeland, but also to proselytize others of related Congo nations and even of other nations. In 1807, for example, Monfundu Siliman, the king of the Congo nation, released a public statement in Havana, printed as a pamphlet and addressed to all the other nations (listed by name) denouncing Napoleon's conquest of Spain. The rhetoric of the text implied that he was also claiming a superior position over other nations.⁶⁵ Siliman's pronouncement was supported by the authorities who appear to have considered him a superior figure among the various nations. Though the documentation does not prove it, it is likely that part of the prestige and leadership the authorities accorded the Congo nation derived from their Christianity.

The most visible social and cultural activities of slaves were not so much religious, but rather dances, often held on holidays and weekends. When Swedish traveler Frederika Bremer visited the plantation of a certain Mr Chantain in 1851, she witnessed a dance which took place following the 'baptism of a little Negro child'.⁶⁶ This particular dance, which had some 40–50 participants, included representative of several African groups, 'Congos, Mandingos, Luccomees, Caraballis', so that 'each tribe [*stamm*] was different from the others'. The dance she saw and described in detail was decidedly secular, and there is no indication that a *cabildo* played any role in it.⁶⁷

While the dance Bremer saw at the single plantation of Mr Chantrain involved multiple nations, and most plantations had slaves from various places, the French doctor Henri Dumont believed that the Congos were considered indispensable in the sugar mills to lead social gatherings of all nations, and their 'songs and dances and the sound of the drums as well as many words of Congo origin have been naturalized'.⁶⁸ In addition to general dances in the country, there were also ones that were ethnically specific, gathering co-nationals from multiple estates. Bremer visited a specifically Congo dance which was also secular in nature, and she admired the skill of its leader, Carlo Congo, as did some passers-by.⁶⁹

While country dances might have been organized by ad hoc groups, in Havana, the *cabildos* played a crucial role in organizing group social life. Bremer gave no hint as to who organized the country dances she witnessed, but when she visited Havana, on 20 April 1851, she was taken by a long standing and Spanish-speaking North American resident, Mr Coninck, to a number of *cabildo* houses representing the Ganga, Lucumi and Congo nations, where she also witnessed dances not unlike those she had seen in the country.⁷⁰

The importance of Congos in the country dances was repeated in the city, and among the Congos, it was those from the Kingdom of Kongo, the Congos Reales, who were the dominant group within the larger nation. Esteban Pichardo, whose dictionary of Cuban colloquialisms was published in 1836, described the Congos reales

‘the best’, among the other Congos.⁷¹ Within the Congos Reales of Havana, it was the Cabildo de Congos Reales de Santo Rey Melchior that was the most prominent, and perhaps the ultimate founder of what would become Palo Mayombe.

The Congos Reales de Santo Rey Melchior may have been among the three *cabildos* that Morell identified as ‘Congo’ without a further regional distinction in 1755. A large dossier on a lengthy dispute over property and leadership demonstrates its continuous existence as an already well-established *cabildo* from at least 1780 to the end of the dispute in 1836. Subsequent documentation cannot prove a continuous existence following 1836, but it does attest to a *cabildo* with the same name in 1847; and a set of interlocking disputes and common membership confirm that Santo Rey Melchior led Congos Reales between 1865 and 1871. They appear again in official records as having continuous existence from 1882 to 1886, just as *cabildos* were being driven underground by the government.⁷² The folklorist and anthropologist Fernando Ortiz visited a dance of the Congos Reales de Santo Rey Melchior even as late as 1948.⁷³

That Santo Rey Melchior represented former subjects of the Kingdom of Kongo is proved by the testimony: in the 1780 dispute, three ‘castas’ within it were called Musolongo, Congo (or sometimes Mosisongo) and Mumbata-Musonso (or sometimes Bumbata-Musonso).⁷⁴ These three subdivisions correspond to the three dialects of Kikongo as spoken in 1680, and the same dialects are currently spoken in the territory of the former Kingdom of Kongo in today’s Angola.⁷⁵ They were also associated roughly with political divisions within Kongo at the time as described by the Capuchin missionary Cherubino da Savona.⁷⁶ The Musolongo represented the Principality of Soyo, the Mosisongo (Mwisikongo), the citizens of the capital of São Salvador and its related provinces, while the Mumbatas were connected to the Duchy of Mbata and its southern neighbor Sonso, which emerged as a regional power in the 1760s and beyond.

The Congos Reales de Santo Rey Melchior were quite rich and presumably influential because of their wealth, and property disputes emerged within it; in 1780–1792, the Musolongos claimed supremacy through the patronage of their wealthy captain, Josef Antonio Galvez.⁷⁷ The split never healed, and the Musolongos broke away and formed their own *cabildo* (but still under the general designation of Santo Rey Melchior) in 1806, and continued to wrestle over shared property and space through 1836.⁷⁸

Although it was headquartered in Havana, the Congo Reales had rural branches, for in the dispute within the Congo Reales de Santo Rey Melchior in 1805 that split the Musolongos off, members from the country had to travel to the city to attend to elections or were represented as absentees.⁷⁹ Thus, a *cabildo* could wield influence over quite a wide area and have a dispersed membership, and it would not be impossible that the Congo dance Bremer witnessed in the country had been organized by rural members the Congos Reales de Santo Rey Melchior.

One of the key *cabildo* properties that members of the Cabildo Santo Rey Melchior fought over was the *terreno* or dancing space where they held their ‘gatherings and dances (*renuions y bailes*)’. Indeed, these functions seem to have been the primary public activity of the *cabildos*, and absorbed a considerable amount of their

funding. Thus, performing publicly on Feast days was a fundamental part of the role of a Congo Real Cabildo (which did not mention Santo Rey Melchor), and probably accounted for its insolvency in 1850.⁸⁰

We cannot say whether the early Congo kings, like Siliman Mofundi in 1807, were from the Santo Rey Melchior *cabildo* or not, but we do know that Santo Rey Melchior would become dominant over all African nations within greater Havana. In 1882, Mateo Hernandez was the *capataz* (captain) of the Congo Reales de Santo Rey Melchior, since it was described as the ‘first and principal’ *cabildo* of Congos Reales. In this capacity, he handled a complaint from a member of a Mina (Ewe-Fon ethnicity of today’s Benin) *cabildo* about its failure to pay for her cure as it should do for all its ‘vassals.’⁸¹ Hernandez also held the title of King Melchior, which was an honorary position he was given in the annual celebration of Dia de los Reyes (Epiphany).⁸² A few years later in 1886, a member of the Congo Reales of Santo Rey Melchior was the Principal Captain of the ‘Five Nations of Africans’ (*Morenas Africanas*), an association of Kongo and non-Kongo ethnicities, and wished to establish a new Cabildo of Congo Reales in Matanzas dedicated to Our Lady of Mercies.⁸³

Religious life of the Cabildos

Recent research in Cuban archives and among field workers in contemporary Cuba makes it clear that the *cabildos de nación* were the root of the Afro-Cuban religions that appeared in Havana in the twentieth century and are now well known. After more than a century of domination of the cultural lives of Afro-Cubans, the Cuban authorities began violently suppressing the *cabildos de nación*, alleging criminality and wishing to purge their country of perceived barbaric practices of its African-descended element. The membership of the *cabildos* therefore went underground and emerged as ‘casas de santos’ the form in which modern Afro-Cuban religion manifested itself.⁸⁴

Precisely how the *cabildos* eventually created the modern Afro-Cuban religions is difficult to assess. Contemporary records of the *cabildos*, voluminous as they are, are about their organization, membership and disputes; they tell very little about their religious life. Indeed, the absence of this information from the record is revealing – for the official church clearly took little interest in evangelizing slaves, and even less in suppressing African religious traditions, which were practiced quite openly. In 1755, Bishop Morrell tried to provide religious instruction through the *cabildos de nación* by assigning priests to them, but there is little evidence of any serious follow-up.⁸⁵

As already noted, the widespread idea among practitioners of Afro-Cuban religions and many of the scholars who describe them is that what Christian elements they possessed were created as a screen to protect their original African religions from persecution, or ‘hiding behind the saints’. While this sort of camouflage may well have played a role during the period of persecution following the suppression of the *cabildos de nación*, and thus entered into modern oral tradition about the origin of the *casas de santo*, it is clear that the syncretism started long before this.

It is also clear that before the late nineteenth-century persecution, the church took very little interest in the religious life of slaves. The Inquisition, by which non-Christian religious practices were occasionally persecuted in Iberian America, was not functioning in the period of the sugar boom either, and so there was room for the open practice of African religious beliefs.⁸⁶ Jameson, for example, commented that in Cuba, in 1820, when he witnessed religious gatherings, he felt that for Afro-Cubans, 'his *fetishe* is often laid aside for a *relique*',⁸⁷ so transparent was the African base that underlay their activities. When Nepomucena Prieto, leader of a Lucumí *cabildo* was arrested and the goods of his *cabildo* were inventoried in 1835, he gave an explanation for their use in the cult of the Yoruba god Shango without much concern, and the investigators, while seeing them as objects of witchcraft also did not add any religious charges to the secular ones that cost him his life.⁸⁸ In the thousands of pages of documentation on Cuban slave revolts in the nineteenth century (the vast majority of documentation beyond inventories and other property records), precious little attention is paid to the religious components of their lives. Political authorities were concerned about 'witchcraft' and moved to investigate and punish it, especially in the 1840s, but only as it was linked specifically to attacks on authorities, masters or drivers and among slaves, and not against non-Christian elements on their own.⁸⁹ This sort of witchcraft would have been punished even in non-Christian parts of Africa.

The open practice of non-Christian elements in the life of *cabildos* is further revealed by Bremer, whose visit to the *cabildos* of Havana gives us an eyewitness account that hints at religious practice in 1851. She noted in particular that while Christian religious symbols were found in all of them, she also felt that they included a good deal of non-Christian content, as she wrote upon commenting on the Congo *cabildo* that 'even here the Christianized and truly Christian [*kristnade och verkligan kristna*] Africans retain something of the superstition and idolatry [*vantro och afgudabilder*] of their native land'.⁹⁰ Although she visited others as well, she did not see anything in them remarkable enough to record in detail.⁹¹

Not only did the church refrain from suppressing African religious elements, it did very little to teach religious knowledge, even in the *cabildos* in urban areas, aside from sporadic enthusiasms such as Bishop Morrell's.⁹² Rather, priests were far more interested in performing sacraments, for which they received payments, than in teaching catechism. Abiel Abbot, a New England-born minister who visited Cuba in 1828, described the practice of relative infrequent mass baptisms in plantations, as the priests, who received payments for conducting baptisms, could thus be more economical in their services.⁹³ In this way, they resembled the European ordained clergy in Kongo.

Fernando Ortiz and Lydia Cabrera on the religious life of Congos

Our understanding of the religious situation in the nineteenth century is unfortunately incomplete and sketchy, and it is only in the early twentieth century through the research of Fernando Ortiz and Lydia Cabrera that one gets a clearer idea of the religious life of the *casas de santos* which succeeded the *cabildos* as the center for

Afro-Cuban religious life around Havana. It was precisely in the era of the suppression of *cabildos* when Ortiz' career began, in fact as a part of the apparatus of suppression. Thus, the first attempts to describe religious life of *cabildos* corresponded to a period when the authorities took an interest in this aspect of slave life, the Church having taken little interest before.

Ortiz's work was careful and methodical, but it was from the work of Cabrera, who initially served as Ortiz's assistant, that we have solid data on the last years before the suppression and the best insight into the process of the formation of Palo. Her data have special weight because she carefully recorded the exact words of her informants, either in 'bozal' (Spanish as spoken by Africans and their descendants), or in the African languages, whose phonology she represents quite faithfully.⁹⁴

The role of Congo Reales in forming Palo Mayombe is highlighted by the linguistic research that both Cabrera and Ortiz conducted. At an uncertain time, but probably in the 1920s, Ortiz obtained a vocabulary of words and phrases from someone he called Puyo, one which he considered important enough to type into his notes on two more separate occasions, and which is clearly Kikongo.⁹⁵ Cabrera also collected texts and vocabularies, and their analysis by Armin Schwegler and Jesús Fuentes Guerra confirms that the African language of Palo was indeed Kikongo both in vocabulary and, in some texts in grammar, and not another Bantu language from West Central Africa or Mozambique or a mixture of Bantu languages, as earlier scholars had concluded.⁹⁶ Furthermore, the grammar and pronunciation (as represented in the orthography in Cuba) point to the southern (proper to the Kingdom of Kongo) rather than the northern dialects (Kingdom of Loango and its hinterland) of Kikongo.⁹⁷

Of the Kikongo-speaking people, it is also clear that it was those of the Congo Reales, from the Kingdom of Kongo itself, which led the way. Later research reveals the specificity of the claims: Fernando Ortiz' informants spoke of a local Kikongo name 'Congo-Angunga' (Kongo of the bell, from the church bells in São Salvador) as an alternate name for 'Congo Reales'.⁹⁸ Another old Congo slave spoke of 'Congos Entotera', which referred to Kongo dia Ntotela, using a Kikongo term employed in Kongo for the Kingdom.⁹⁹

Cabrera's research reinforces the documentary evidence that reveals how important the Congo Reales were in forming Afro-Cuban religions as they developed in the last years of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Copying from 'one of the sources that I have', Cabrera wrote that the Congos Reales were from 'the true Congo de Totila, the same Congo with the King and Queen, a Court, vassals and all order and respect'.¹⁰⁰ Cabrera's informants were aware of coming from a Christian area, a notable example being a conversation she had with 'a person of Congo descent who called himself Magabú', in 1944. He determinedly told her, 'Jesus Christ, in ancient times, was in Congo . . . yes, sir! In Congo itself. And there was a church and many Christian Congos. This is really true'.¹⁰¹ The idea that Christ was Kongolese, of course, had been popularized in Kongo by Beatriz Kimpa Vita in 1704–1706, and the representation of Jesus as a Kongo in the popular iconography of Christianity in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Kongo art makes such statements more comprehensible.¹⁰²

As her informants had it, the Congo Reales had a very solid reputation among Afro-Cubans beyond their formal authority attested in documents granted by the Spanish government, albeit more for their elaborate ceremonial and dances than for their piety. According to one of Cabrera's informants 'who was present in the decade of the [18]70s' Congos Reales marched first in a parade by nations on festival days.¹⁰³ Heriberto, Cabrera said, lamented the closing of the *cabildos* and spoke of this wonderful time: 'Those fiestas of the Congo Reales! God bless my Nkula (*nkulu*, old person or ancestor) who is in Glory!'¹⁰⁴ To Makindó, who traveled all over Cuba to greet other Kongos, Mbanza Kongo, the capital of the kingdom of Kongo was to them what Ile Ife was to the Lucumís.¹⁰⁵ Another of her Lucumí informants said Congos were 'very civilized and had in their *cabildos* a court ceremony, a kingdom (*reinado*)'.¹⁰⁶

That Kongo prestige impressed even Lucumís is revealed in the story of Nino Cardenas, one of Cabrera's best informants. Cardenas, a very old man by around 1940, was actually born in Cuba of a Lucumí mother, and not surprisingly, she and her co-nationals wanted him to join their *cabildo* and learn their language. However, he maintained that since the age of 13 'my natural inclination drew me to seek out the Congos'.¹⁰⁷

Among scholars of Afro-Cuban religions and often among Cubans themselves, Palo is widely regarded vaguely a deficient religious system. It is frequently reviled as a form of primitive magic, if not witchcraft and perhaps a 'black art' compared with Santería.¹⁰⁸ For that reason, perhaps, those wishing to work witchcraft often sought out Palo practitioners willing to share Kongo witchcraft lore. But what is missing in this equation is the fact that the cult of the dead, and witchcraft lore were those components of Palo Mayombe that 'looked' African.

What would count as 'African' in Palo Monte was not, of course, its Christian content, which disappeared into the general Christian identity of Cubans and was lost to all but those with the historical texts to guide them. Rather, it was the specific elements of Kongo religion that did not look Christian or were described in Kikongo words, and thus the sort of elements that the Capuchins denounced in Kongo itself. The frequent use that one meets in Cabrera's texts of *nkisi* is most striking, for it confirms the importance of this transcendent spiritual term on both sides of the Atlantic. Drawing on a number of occurrences in her informants' testimony, Cabrera glossed 'nkisi' in a variety of ways in her compilation of a Congo vocabulary. For example, she defined 'Poder sobrenatural' as 'Nkisi. Nkiso' and continues to observe, 'and by extension the receptacle or object in which the spirit is fixed or the soul of a dead person of whom he, Padre Nganga, is his master', thus conforming exactly to the transformation of the word for 'holy' in the nineteenth century.¹⁰⁹

It is also clear that Kongolese carried belief in the imminence of ancestors to Cuba. The dead were usually called 'mfumbi' in both Cabrera and Ortiz' texts from the Kikongo word *mvumbi* meaning 'corpse'; in a good number of places, the term is also used to mean spirit.¹¹⁰ Another of Cabrera's informants, named Hernández, 'of an illustrious lineage of santeros and paleros' presented other details; either before or after the child's church baptism, he or she would be presented to a *nganga* who would give him the name of a *Mfumbi*, that is, a dead person or an ancestor.¹¹¹ In

Kongo, namesaking parents and grandparents was a common naming pattern, so this custom makes sense.¹¹²

In Kongo, missionaries often denounced practices that were performed by non-ordained priests (*nganga*), especially associated with life cycle events such as the emergence of the first tooth, although the Kongo church appears to have had no objections and the practices were commonplace.¹¹³ Cabrera's various accounts of baptism among her Congo informants reveal how the older Kongo Catholic practices and those of non-Catholic origin coexisted in Cuba as they had in Kongo. An unnamed 'palero' told Cabrera that when 'Sambia [Nzambi] sends a child into the world' following a Catholic baptism, they gather seven 'nganguleiros' in order to baptize him or her 'in the style of the country', during which time they swore on his head (*le juraran la cabeza*) and 'vow (*jurán*) kisi malongo' (perhaps 'holy lessons?').¹¹⁴ The ceremony was carried out in the woods, and on carrying the child back, they sang a song 'Nganga la musí, nganga la musí' which would seem to mean 'nganga of the country',¹¹⁵ Hernández described the ceremony mostly in grammatical (and thus probably native) Kikongo.¹¹⁶

Thus, the 'African' elements in Kongo Christianity were separated out from its Christian parts, and what appeared as central to Palo was relatively poor and simple, since so much of its more elaborate essence was manifested as Christianity. Kongolese, who as Christians of long standing, accepted the church without much question, knew appropriate prayers and gestures (such as making the sign of the cross) attended church services, baptized their children, prayed and engaged in other liturgical activities that would not stand out. It would be easy to see these activities as simply the result of their being converted by priests in Cuba, or perhaps even to coercive measures adopted by colonial authorities to both convert the Africans and suppress their original religious ideas. This aspect made it easy for even the most diligent researchers to fail to understand that African religions also included Kongo Christianity. Ortiz, for example, after witnessing ceremonies of the Congo Reales Cabildo of Santo Rey Melchor in 1948 and describing in detail the layout of the building with its images of saints and other Christian decorations, various dances and religious processions, wrote in his field notes, 'nothing African in this'.¹¹⁷

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Notes

- [1] Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1983), pp. 17–8; see also *Face of the Gods: Art and Altars of Africa and African America* (New York: Prestel, 1993). For Cuba in particular, see David H. Brown, *Santería Enthroned: Art, Ritual and Innovation in an Afro-Cuban Religion* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 34 (with ample references to earlier visions).
- [2] Georges Balandier, *Daily Life in the Kingdom of the Kongo* (New York: Allen and Unwin, 1968 [French Version, Paris, 1965]) and James Sweet, *Recreating Africa: Culture, Kinship and Religion in the African-Portuguese World, 1441–1770* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).
- [3] Ann Hilton, *The Kingdom of Kongo* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), for the role of the Capuchins in discovering problems with Kongo's Christianity. John Thornton, 'The Kingdom of Kongo and the Counter-Reformation', *Social Sciences and Missions* 26 (2013): 40–58 contextualizes their role and their problems with Kongo's Christianity.
- [4] Adrian Hastings, *The Church in Africa, 1450–1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); this position is often implicit in the many histories written by clerical historians such as Jean Cuvelier, Louis Jadin, François Bontinck, Teobaldo Filesi, Carlo Toso and Graziano Saccardo, whose work has presented modern editions of the classical work of the Capuchin missionaries, commentaries and at times regional histories, such as Saccardo, *Congo e Angola con la storia del missionari Capuccini*, Vol. 3 (Venice: Curia Provinciale dei Cappuccini, 1982–1983). For both a position of dependence on missionaries and a recognition of local education, Louis Jadin, 'Les survivances chrétiennes au Congo au XIXe siècle', *Études d'histoire africaine* 1 (1970): 137–85.
- [5] It is not mentioned at all in his seminal work, Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit* in the nearly 100-page section dealing with Kongo and its influence in Vodou, nor in *Face of the Gods*.
- [6] Erwan Dianteill, 'Kongo à Cuba: Transformations d'une religion africaine', *Archives de Sciences Sociales de Religion* 117 (2002): 59–80.
- [7] Todd Ochoa, *Society of the Dead: Quita Manaquita and Palo Praise in Cuba* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), pp. 8–10. Wyatt MacGaffey's work, especially *Religion and Society in Central Africa: The BaKongo of Lower Zaire* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1986) is a favorite.
- [8] Thiago Sapede, *Muana Congo, Muana Nzambi a Mpungu: Poder e Catolicismo no reino do Congo pós-restauração (1769–1795)* (São Paulo: Alameda, 2014) is the first book length study of Christianity in the later period of Kongo's history.
- [9] John Thornton, 'Afro-Christian Syncretism in the Kingdom of Kongo', *Journal of African History* 54 (2013): 53–77.
- [10] Thornton, 'Afro-Christian Syncretism'.
- [11] Sapede, *Muana Congo*, pp. 248–57.
- [12] Thornton, 'Afro-Christian Syncretism', for the details of the struggle, but a perspective that sees the Capuchin mission as central to Kongo Christianity, see Saccardo, *Congo e Angola*.
- [13] John Thornton, *The Kongolese Saint Anthony: D Beatriz Kimpa Vita and the Antonian Movement, 1684–1706* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
- [14] Rafael Castello de Vide, 'Viagem ao Congo', *Academia das Ciências de Lisboa*, MS Vermelho 396, pp. 32–4, 183–5 (transcription by Arlindo Carreira, 2007 at <http://www.arlindo-correia.com/161007.html>) which marks the pagination of the original MS.
- [15] Castello de Vide, 'Viagem ao Congo', pp. 110–4.
- [16] Raimondo da Dicomano, 'Informazione' (1798), pp. 1–2. The text exists in both the Italian original and a Portuguese translation made at the same time. For an edition of both, see the transcription of Arlindo Carreira, 2010 (<http://www.arlindo-correia.com/121208.html>).
- [17] 'Il Stato in cui si trova il Regno di Congo', September 22, 1820, in Teobaldo Filesi, 'L'epilogo della 'Missio Antiqua' dei cappuccini nel regno de Congo (1800–1835)', *Euntes Docete* 23 (1970), pp. 433–4.

- [18] Among the first was Domingos Pereira da Silva Sardinha in 1854, who, according to King Henrique II of Kongo, had performed his duties of administering the sacraments with ‘all the necessary prudence’, Henrique II to Vicar General of Angola, December 14, 1855, *Boletim Oficial de Angola*, 540 (1856).
- [19] Biblioteca d’Ajuda, Lisbon, Códice 54/XIII/32 n° 9, Francisco de Salles Gusmão to the King, October 27, 1856.
- [20] Castello de Vide, ‘Viagem ao Congo’, pp. 110–4.
- [21] da Dicomano, ‘Informazione’, pp. 1–7 (of manuscript).
- [22] Castello de Vide, ‘Viagem’, pp. 39, 69, 276.
- [23] Castello de Vide, ‘Viagem’, p. 217 (thanks to Thiago Sapede for this reference).
- [24] Castello de Vide, ‘Viagem’, pp. 32–4, 1835.
- [25] For a thorough study of these religious artefacts and their meaning, see Cécile Fromont, *The Art of Conversion: Christian Visual Culture in the Kingdom of Kongo* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).
- [26] Castello de Vide, ‘Viagem’, p. 78.
- [27] APF Congo 5, fols. 298–298^v (Rosario dal Parco) ‘Informazione 1760’ A French translation is found in Louis Jadin, ‘Aperçu de la situation du Congo, et rite d’élection des rois en 1775, d’après le P. Cherubino da Savona, missionnaire de 1759 à 1774’, *Bulletin de l’Institut Historique Belge de Rome* 35 (1963): 347–419 (marking foliation of original MS).
- [28] Castello de Vide, ‘Viagem’, pp. 180–4.
- [29] Castello de Vide, ‘Viagem’, p. 53.
- [30] Castello de Vide, ‘Viagem’, pp. 63–4; see also 87 for another noble as Captain of Church; 136 crowds at Mapinda.
- [31] da Dicomano, ‘Informazione’, pp. 1–7.
- [32] Castello de Vide, ‘Viagem’, p. 196.
- [33] Bernard Clist et alia, ‘The Elusive Archeology of Kongo Urbanism, the Case of Kindoki, Mbanza Nsundi (Lower Congo, DRC)’, *African Archaeological Review* 32 (2014) 369–412 and Charlotte Verhaeghe, ‘Funeraire rituel en het Kongo Konigrijk: De betekenis van de schelpen glaskralen en de begraafplaats van Kindoki, Mbanza Nsundi, Neder-Kongo’ (MA thesis, University of Ghent, 2014), pp. 44–50.
- [34] ‘Il Stato in cui si trova il Regno di Congo’, September 22, 1820, in Filesi, ‘Epilogo’, pp. 433–4.
- [35] ‘O Congo em 1845: Roteiro da viagem ao Reino de Congo por Major A. J. Castro . . .’, *Boletim de Sociedade de Geographia de Lisboa II series*, 2 (1880), pp. 53–67. The orthographic irregularity reflects the actual pronunciation of these terms in the São Salvador region (the Sansala dialect).
- [36] Alfredo de Sarmiento, *Os sertões d’Africa (Apontamentos do viagem)* (Lisbon: Artur da Silva, 1880), p. 49 and Adolf Bastian, *Ein Besuch in San Salvador: Der Hauptstadt des Königreichs Congo* (Bremen: Heinrich Strack, 1859), pp. 61–2.
- [37] Castello de Vide, ‘Viagem’, pp. 102–3 and da Firenze, ‘Relazione’, pp. 420–1.
- [38] Castello de Vide, ‘Viagem’, p. 137.
- [39] Castello de Vide, ‘Viagem’, pp. 180–4.
- [40] da Dicomano, ‘Informazione’, pp. 1–7.
- [41] Castello de Vide, ‘Viagem’, pp. 32–4; da Dicomano, ‘Informazione’, pp. 1–7; Zanobio Maria da Firenze, ‘Relazione della Stato in cui si trovassi autalmente il Regno di Congo . . . 1814’, July 10, 1816, in Filesi, ‘Epilogo’, pp. 420–1.
- [42] Archivio ‘De Propaganda Fide’ (Rome) Acta 1758, ff 213–9, no. 16, Relazione di Rosario dal Parco, July 31, 1758. These large numbers were not simply priests catching up on people who had not been baptized for a long time, as personnel staffing and statistics are found from 1752 onward; but the priests did not cover the whole country every year, so many priests would baptize babies all under age two or three.
- [43] Castello de Vide, ‘Viagem’, pp. 63–4; see also 87 for another noble as Captain of Church; 136 crowds at Mapinda.

- [44] da Dicomano, 'Informazione', pp. 1–7.
- [45] da Firenze, 'Relazione', pp. 420–1.
- [46] 'Il Stato in cui si trova il Regno di Congo', September 22, 1820, in Filesi, 'Epilogo', pp. 433–4.
- [47] Francisco das Necessidades, Report, March 15, 1845, in Arquivo do Arcebispado de Angola, Correspondência de Congo, 1845–1892, cited in François Bontinck, 'Notes complémentaire sur Dom Nicolau Agua Rosada e Sardonia', *African Historical Studies* 2 (1969): 105, n. 6. Unfortunately, no researchers have been allowed to work in this section of the archive for many years and so the actual text is not available.
- [48] Report of November 13, 1856 in António Brásio, 'Monumenta Missionalia Africana', *Portugal em Africa* 50 (1952), pp. 114–7.
- [49] Biblioteca d'Ajuda, Lisbon 54/XIII/32 n° 9, Francisco de Salles Gusmão to the King, de Outubro de 27, 1856.
- [50] Da Cruz, entry of October 8 and 25 on the problems of baptizing people.
- [51] da Dicomano, 'Informazione', is the first to describe this process; for more detail see Bastian, *Besuch*.
- [52] David Eltis, *An Atlas of the Transatlantic Slave Trade*.
- [53] For a recent discussion of names and nomenclature, see Jesús Guanche, *Africanía y etnicidad en Cuba (los componentes étnicos africanos y sus múltiples demoninaciones)* (Havana: Editoria de Ciencias Sociales, 2008). As we shall see, a number of other subdivisions also derived from the kingdom like the Musolongos, Batas and others.
- [54] John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Formation of the Atlantic World, 1400–1800*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), for Cuba in particular, Matt Childs, 'Recreating African Identities in Cuba', in *The Black Urban Atlantic in the Era of the Slave Trade*, eds. Jorge Cañizares-Esquerria, Matt Childs, and James Sidbury (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), pp. 85–100.
- [55] Robert Jameson, *Letters from Havana in the Year 1820...* (London: John Miller, 1821), pp. 20–2 (from letter II).
- [56] Fernando Ortiz, *Hampa Afro-Cubana. Los Negros Brujos* (Havana: Liberia de F. Fé, 1906), pp. 81–5; and further developed in 'Los Cabildos Afrocubanos', in *Ensayos Etnograficos*, eds. Miguel Barnet and Angel Fernández (Havana: Editoriales Sociales, 1984 [originally published 1921]), pp. 12–34; for a more recent statement based on more research, Matt Childs, *The 1812 Aponte Rebellion and the Struggle Against Atlantic Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), pp. 209–45 and María del Carmen Barcia Zequeira, Andrés Rodríguez Reyes, and Milagros Niebla Delgado, *Del cabildo de "nación" a la casa de santo* (Havana: Fundación Fernando Ortiz, 2012).
- [57] For example, the now famous community of Pindar del Rio, see Natalia Bolívar Arostegui, *Ta Makuende Yaya y las Reglas de Palo Monte: Mayombe, brillumba, kimbisa, shamalongo* (Havana: Ediciones UNION, 1998).
- [58] Childs, *Aponte Rebellion*, pp. 209–12; Jane Landers, 'Catholic Conspirators: Religious Rebels in Nineteenth Century Cuba', *Slavery and Abolition* 36 (2015): 495–520.
- [59] Brown, *Santería Enthroned*, pp. 62–112; María del Carmen Barcia, *Los ilustres apellidos: Negros en la Habana colonial* (Havana: Oficina del Historiador de la Ciudad, 2008), pp. 45–151; Barcia, Rodríguez Reyes, and Niebla Delgado, *Del Cabildo* which carefully demolishes the earlier theses of Fernando Ortiz and others that the *cabildos* grew out of the brotherhoods.
- [60] This group must have split or been replaced by another, for a property dispute in the Congos Loangos relates to their foundation in 1776, Archivo Nacional de Cuba (ANC) Escribanía Valerio-Ramirez (VR) legajo 698, no. 10.205.
- [61] Barcia, *Iustres Apellidos*, pp. 45–151.
- [62] Barcia, *Ilustres Apellidos*.
- [63] del Carmen Barcia Zequeira, Rodríguez Reyes, and Niebla Delgado, *Del cabildo*, pp. 12–9.

- [64] Fernando Ortiz, 'Los Cabildos Afrocubanos', in *Ensayos Etnograficos*, eds. Miguel Barnet and Angel Fernández (Havana: Ediciones Ciencias Sociales, 1984 [originally published 1921]), p. 13, citing documents in *El Curioso Americano*, 1899, p. 73.
- [65] *Proclama que en un cabildo de negros congos de la ciudad de La Habana, pronunció por su Presidente Rey Siliman Mofundi Siliman ...* (Havana: np, 1808); for the claim of superiority, drawn from an ambiguous statement that he was 'more black than you others', see Brown, *Santería Enthroned*, pp. 25–7 and 311, footnotes 4 and 6. For political context, see Ada Ferrer, *Freedom's Mirror: Cuba and Haiti in the Age of Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 247–9.
- [66] Fredrika Bremer, *Hemmen i den Nya Världen*, 2nd ed., Vol. 3 (Stockholm: Tidens förläg, 1854), p. 142 (English translation as *The Homes of the New World: Impressions of America*, Vol. 2 (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1853), p. 322) Her host's name is given in the original and obscured in the translation as 'C—'.
- [67] Bremer, *Hemmen*, Vol. 3, pp. 146–8 (*Homes* Vol. 2, pp. 325–8).
- [68] Henri Dumont, *Antropología y patología comparadas de los Negros escalvos, 1876*, trans. Israel Castellanos (Havana: Molina, 1922), p. 38.
- [69] Bremer, *Hemmen*, Vol. 3, pp. 172–4 (*Homes* Vol. 2, pp. 348–9).
- [70] Bremer, *Hemmen*, Vol. 3, p. 213 (*Homes* Vol. 2, p. 383).
- [71] Esteban Pichardo, *Diccionario provincial de voces Cubanas* (Matanzas: Imprenta de la Real Marina, 1836), p. 72. Musundi may refer to Kongo's northern province of Nsundi, though the match is not exact since the nasal 'n' is not incorporated into it, *musundi* might also mean 'excellent', as the Virgin Mary was called 'Musundi Madia' in the Kongo catechism meaning exactly this.
- [72] It is possible that Bremer attended the dance of another Cabildo of Congos Reales, who were in the process of declaring their insolvency in 1851, ANC Escrabanía Joaquin Trujillo (JT) leg 84, no. 12, 1851; for a 1867 dispute, see the property case involving them in ANC VR leg. 393, no. 5875; other mentions of cabildos of this name including the group from 1865–1871 in Carmen Barcia, *Ilustres apellidos*, p. 408. For the 1880s mentions, see Archivo Historico de la Provincia de Matanzas (henceforward AHPM), Religiones Africanas, leg 1, no. 30, July 7, 1882; no. 65, January 9, 1898 and no. 31, July 31, 1886.
- [73] Fondo Fernando Ortiz, Institute de Linguistica y Literatura, Havana, 5.
- [74] ANC Escibanía d'Daumas (ED) leg 917, no. 6. (foliation uncertain, very deteriorated document).
- [75] António de Oliveira de Cadornega, *História das guerras angolanas (1680–81)*, eds. Matias de Delgado and da Cunha, Vol. 3 (Lisbon: Agência Geral do Ultramar, 1940–1942, reprinted 1972), p. 3, 193. In July 2011, I drove through all three dialect zones, confirmed some of the differences by hearing them spoken and by speaking with people about these differences. My thanks to Father Gabriele Bortolami, OFM Cap for driving, interacting with people, impromptu language updates and occasional lessons in the etiquette of dialect use in northern Angola.
- [76] Cherubino da Savona, 'Breve ragguaglio del Congo ...', fols. 41v–44v, published with original foliation marked in Carlo Toso, ed., 'Relazioni inedite di P. Cherubino Cassinis da Savona sul 'Regno del Congo e sue Missioni', *L'Italia Francescana* 45 (1974): 135–214. The foliation of the original is also marked in the French translation, found in Jadin, 'Aperçu de la situation au Congo ...'
- [77] ANC ED, leg 494, no. 1, fols 96–97. This text was included in papers dealing with another dispute in 1827–1828 and in 1832–1836.
- [78] ANC ED, leg 548, no. 11, fol. 9–9v; José Pacheco, January 21, 1806; ANC ED, leg. 660, no. 8, fols. 1–4; Pedro José Santa Cruz (a request for its own capataz) 1806; for the later dispute ANC ED leg 494, no. 1.
- [79] ANC ED, leg 660, no. 8, fol. 4.
- [80] ANC JT, leg. 84, no. 13 *passim*, 1851.

- [81] AHPM, *Religiones Africanas*, leg 1, no. 30, July 7, 1882.
- [82] AHPM, *Religiones Africanas*, leg 1, no. 65, January 9, 1898.
- [83] AHPM, *Religiones Africanas*, leg 1, no. 31, July 31, 1886.
- [84] Brown, *Santería Enthroned*, pp. 55–61 and Barcia Zequeira, Rodríguez Reyes, and Delgado, *Cabildo de nación*.
- [85] Childs, *Aponte Rebellion*, p. 112 and ‘Identity’, p. 91.
- [86] Consider the temporal range of inquisition cases cited in Tania Chappi, *Demonios en La Habana: Episodios de la Inquisición en Cuba* (Havana: Oficina del Historiador de la Ciudad, 2001). For an example of the sort of persecution the Inquisition could do, and the sort of information that can be obtained from their records, see James Sweet’s study of slave religious life in Brazil, *Recreating Africa*.
- [87] Jameson, *Letters*, pp. 20–2.
- [88] See the transcript of his interview published in Henry Lovejoy, ‘Old Oyo Influences on the Transformation of Lucumí Identity in Colonial Cuba’ (PhD diss., UCLA, 2012), pp. 230–46.
- [89] Aisha Finch, *Rethinking Slave Rebellion in Cuba: La Escalera and the Insurgencias of 1841–44* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 2015), pp. 199–220. Finch attributes most of the activities in these cases to the non-Christian part of Kongo religion, or an early form of Palo Mayombe; see also Miguel Sabater, ‘La conspiración de La Escalera: Otra vuelta de la tuerca’, *Boletín del Archivo Nacional* 12 (2000): 23–33 (with quotations from trial records).
- [90] Bremer, *Hemmen*, Vol. 3, p. 213 (*Homes* Vol. 2, p. 383).
- [91] Bremer, *Hemmen*, Vol. 3, pp. 211–3 (*Homes* Vol. 2, pp. 379–83).
- [92] Cabrera, *Reglas de Congo*, p. 26, citing late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sources.
- [93] Abiel Abbott, *Letters Written in the Interior of Cuba . . .* (Boston, MA: Bowles and Dearborn, 1829), pp. 15–7.
- [94] Cabrera did not employ any orthography of contemporary Kikongo in her day, but it is not at all difficult to recognize her ear for that language, which she did not speak, and most quotations she provided are readily intelligible.
- [95] Institute de Linguística y Literatura, Havana, Fondo Fernando Ortiz, 5. This list, written in a different hand than Ortiz’, one that was shakier with large letters, on fragile aged paper (perhaps school paper) was, I believe, compiled by a literate person who was a native speaker of the language, based on his use of Kikongo grammatical forms (use of verb conjugations and class concords in particular).
- [96] Armin Schwegler, ‘On the (Sensational) Survival of Kikongo in Twentieth Century Cuba’, *Journal of Pidgin and Creole Languages* 15 (2000): 159–65; Jesús Fuentes Guerra, *La Regla de Palo Monte: Un acercamiento a la Bantuidad Cubana* (Havana: Iberoamericana Vervuert, 2012) (neither Schwegler nor Fuentes Guerra had access to Puyo’s vocabulary in Ortiz’ documentation, the contention of its identity with Kikongo is my own). It seems likely that both Cabrera’s and Ortiz’ vocabularies were collected probably from old native speakers, who entered Cuba at the end of the slave trade.
- [97] For example, the class marker *ki* in the southern dialect is *-ci* in the north; use of ‘l’ versus ‘d’ would be another difference. The northern dialect is well attested in dictionaries of the French mission to Loango and Kakongo in the 1770s, compared with seventeenth- and nineteenth-century dictionaries of the southern dialects. I have also heard these differences myself in Angola.
- [98] Fernando Ortiz, *Hampa Afro-Cubana. Los Negros Esclavos* (Havana: Bimestre Habana, 1916), pp. 25, 32 (clearly, testimony from the same informant).
- [99] Ortiz, *Negros Esclavos*, p. 34. The term ‘Totila’, clearly derived from the Kikongo *ntotela* meaning ‘king’. The word is first attested in the Kikongo dictionary of 1648, as meaning ‘King’. In 1901, King Pedro VI of Kongo, writing in Kikongo, styled himself ‘Ntinu Ntotela NeKongo’ Archives of the Baptist Missionary Society (Regents’ Park College, Oxford) A 124 (both *ntinu* and *ntotela* can be glossed as ‘king’).

- [100] Cabrera, *Reglas de Congo*, p. 15.
- [101] Cabrera, *Reglas de Congo*, p. 109. Cabrera, for her part, then told him of Nzinga a Nkuwu's baptism in 1491, presumably from one of the historical accounts she had read.
- [102] On the assertions of Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita, see Thornton, *Kongolesse Saint Anthony*; on the representation of Christ as an Kongolesse, Fromont, *Art of Conversion*.
- [103] Cabrera, *Reglas de Congo*, p. 93.
- [104] Cabrera, *Reglas de Congo*, p. 58.
- [105] Cabrera, *Reglas de Congo*, p. 59.
- [106] Cabrera, *Reglas de Congo*, p. 14.
- [107] Cabrera, *Reglas de Congo*, p. 19.
- [108] The problem was apparent to Lydia Cabrera in her study of Palo, *El Regla de Congo: Palo Monte Mayombe* (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1979), pp. 120–30, as one can see from the defensive tone of her informants, probably speaking with her post-1960 experience (this is not seen as a problem in her earlier publication, *El Monte* (Havana, 1954)).
- [109] Cabrera, *Vocabulario*, p. 123.
- [110] Cabrera, *Monte*, pp. 119–23 *passim* (here, often used in the context of witchcraft); *Reglas de Congo*, pp. 24–5. In W. Holman Bentley, *Dictionary and Grammar of the Kongo Language* (London: Kegan Paul, 1887), p. 361, which relates to the Kinsansala dialect (the most likely associated with Christianity) in the 1880s, *mvumbi* meant simply the corpse of a dead person; in the 1648 dictionary 'spirits' was rendered as 'mioio mia mvumbi' (or souls of corpses).
- [111] Cabrera, *Reglas de Congo*, p. 24. In Kikongo, *mvumbi* means a corpse, the lifeless remains of a dead person, and the name of an ancestor would usually have been *nkulu*, though this usage would still make sense in Kikongo.
- [112] See John Thornton, 'Central African Names and African American Naming Patterns,' *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Series, 50 (1993): 727–42.
- [113] The denunciation of the first tooth ceremony is only attested in the general complaints of the Capuchins in the 1650s, written by Serafino da Cortona.
- [114] 'Kisi malongo' appears to be 'nkisi malongo'. A more likely way to say 'the teaching of nkisi' would be 'malongo ma nkisi', so the word order puzzles me. However, word order in Kikongo is flexible and should the speaker wish to emphasize the teaching spiritual part, it might be feasible to use this order.
- [115] Cabrera, *Reglas de Congo*, p. 24. My translation of the phrase 'nganga la musu' assumes that the speaker has only partial command of Kikongo grammar and would be 'nganga a mu nsi' The same informant used the term kisi malongo, and perhaps as a Cuban-born person was not secure in the language.
- [116] Cabrera, *Regla de Congo*, p. 23.
- [117] Institute de Linguistica y Literatura, Havana, Fondo Fernando Ortiz, 5.