

Lengua y ritos del Palo Monte Mayombe: Dioses cubanos y sus fuentes africanas. JESÚS FUENTES GUERRA & ARMIN SCHWEGLER. Madrid: Iberoamericana; Frankfurt am Main: Vervuert, 2005. 258 pp. (Paper € 24)

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This book's main purpose is to demonstrate that the vast majority of words in the ritual language of a well-known Afro-Cuban cult, Palo Monte, or Regla Congo, can be traced lexically to Kikongo. This "lingua sacra" consists of salutations to deities, their names, liturgical songs, and invocations of gods and supernatural powers.

Jésus Fuentes Guerra and Armin Schwegler conducted their research in Cuba's central province where Palo Monte is well represented. The Paleros do not form a group in any strict sense, but are recruited as individuals, and they are predominantly men. They come from diverse social backgrounds, often do not know each other, and are highly mixed ethnically. The loose structure of membership is not a product of recent developments but has been characteristic of cult life since the nineteenth century or perhaps earlier. The relations between practitioners are dyadic, as are the "pacts" between the believers and the powers worshiped. The book is based on recorded spoken text, interviews, and observations of rites.

The term "lingua sacra" rightly suggests that this is a rather restricted linguistic code, in some ways comparable to church Latin in contemporary Christianity. The degrees of competence in this sacred code vary greatly. Some ritual experts can recite long prayers in "African speech" without difficulty, while others have to restrict themselves to popular Spanish, punctuated by some "Congolese" expressions or interspersed with "bozal," the parlance that used to be current among slaves. Fuentes Guerra and Schwegler noticed catchwords derived from Portuguese and Amerindian languages, and even phrases from Muslim perorations. In fact, they point out in a footnote, the term "glossolalia" characterizes many ritual utterances. They add that most speakers switch codes readily. Nevertheless, they suggest that the command of Kikongo among Paleros is considerably greater than scholars have allowed thus far. Some informants, they claim, can keep up conversations or monologues that are shot through with "Africanisms." It is not clear, however, whether these monologues are any different from the inspired utterances in the "gift of tongues."

Fuentes Guerra and Schwegler have a highly specific cradle of culture in mind, demarcating a strip some 50 kilometers wide, known as "Mayombe," as the African home ground of the cult. They first stress that the geographical isolation of the area promoted its cultural singularity. They then go on to suggest that large numbers of slaves imported in Cuba in earlier centuries originated from this area. According to them, the roots of the "Palo Monte Mayombe," a branch of the Regla Congo, can thus be found in this relatively small area. A model as simple as this can hardly account for the turbulent cultural and demographic history of the area. Slave traders and their agents foraged deeply into the interior to get hold of the desired quantity of human merchandise. It seems improbable that Mayombe would have remained exempt from these tribulations; the region's isolation should not be taken for granted. Anthropologists who conducted research in the lower Congo and neighboring Angola tend to stress the cultural unity of the Bantu-speaking world, and most scholars are wary of studies that focus on small, bounded units without reference to the larger region and to the historical processes that have helped to shape it.

The book is more successful in explaining in what ways the sacred language has been preserved over an impressively long period. Although communal rituals that might familiarize a public with this "lingua sacra" appear to be absent in Palo Monte, divinatory sessions are held almost daily. The names of the deities and sacred objects and the recurrent phrases of invocation are made common knowledge through songs that resound through the three wards in the town where most adepts live. The obligation incumbent on the adepts to stage ceremonies for the powers they call upon creates opportunities to make the speech repertoire more readily available. The competence may vary, and the words spoken may often be indistinct, glossed over, or unduly accelerated, but a command of the sacred idiom is nevertheless a way of gaining prestige and a sign of belonging to this network of male devotees. Verbal contests are popular as forms of recreation.

One of our concerns with this book is that the authors prefer to zoom in on the language spoken by the Palo Monte devotees as if it were a linguistic isolate. Yet their own data demonstrate that contacts between Palo Monte adepts and devotees of other Afro-Cuban cults such as Santería are frequent, and that these groups of believers share a worldview. Ritual experts of Santería may refer a client to a Palo Monte specialist for treatment. On the other hand, Fuentes Guerra and Schwegler stress that Paleros are not familiar with "santero" ritual practice and the worship of Christian saints linked to Santería.

In their presentation of the sacred texts, Fuentes Guerra and Schwegler employ elaborate grammatical schemata to gain a better semantic understanding. Such efforts raise problems other than the purely linguistic ones. When emotionally charged notions are concerned, as is the case with the names of ambiguous and dangerous powers, people of the Lower Congo may

use all sorts of verbal associations, puns, and wordplay to shield the numinous from the commonplace (MacGaffey 1986:13-14). May we not assume that Paleros have often operated in the same way, disclosing and obscuring interpretations?

On the relationship with evil, the authors are quick to point out similarities between the Palo Monte and the Bakongo, though Cuba's Palo Monte practice and thought seem to have developed in a specific direction. They refer to old and new sources on the Lower Kongo, and to anthropological studies on Cuba by contemporaries. Comparing the data from the African sources with the information supplied by practitioners of Palo Monte, the differences are obvious. Paleros identify with devils (p. 175) and present their activities as maleficent (p. 47): in order to help, treat, or heal a client, the ritual expert has to kill a third person in an "exchange of lives." This pact with an evil power cannot be regarded as a mere continuity with Bakongo ways of relating to the supernatural. From MacGaffey's work, to name but one anthropologist, one gets the notion that religious specialists strive for a much more two-sided, balanced relationship.

Illness and misfortune draw clients towards the cult, so restorative rites have to be performed. Unfortunately, the rites announced in the book's title are not discussed, nor do we hear about concrete cases dealt with by the cheerful-looking Paleros photographed by Schwegler and Fuentes Guerra. Although understandably, black magic is mostly kept secret, rites to defend or protect clients are not necessarily kept occult to the same extent. More information about both language use and forms of ritual contact would have been welcome.

REFERENCE

MACGAFFEY, WYATT, 1986. *Religion and Society in Central Africa: The Bakongo of Lower Zaire*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.