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***ESPIRITISMO* IN THE PUERTO RICAN COMMUNITY A New World Recreation With the Elements of Kongo Ancestor Worship**

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RATIONALE

Throughout the African world, traditional communities have retained the practice of venerating the spirit of the ancestors. Additionally, while weathering the onslaught of enslavement and colonization, Africans and their descendants have continued to venerate their ancestors and African gods throughout the diaspora. There is significant information available on the African-based religions developed in Brazil, Cuba, Santo Domingo, Haiti, Trinidad, Jamaica, Suriname, and the United States. One of the diaspora locations that has been little studied by scholars regarding African religious continuities has been Puerto Rico.

This article seeks to examine and trace ancestor worship—*espiritismo*—in the Puerto Rican community as a probable legacy of African cultural traditions with specific focus on the African Kongo cultures brought to the island by enslaved Africans. The Kongo cultures being addressed use the definition of historian Robert Farris Thompson set forth in his book *Flash of the Spirit* (1984):

The slavers of the early 1500's first applied the name "Kongo" solely to the Bakongo people. Then gradually they used the name to designate any person brought from the west coast of Central Africa to America. . . . The meanings of "Kongo" and "Angola" over the span of the Atlantic trade reflect the expansion of European slave trafficking into the heart of Kongo and Kongo-related societies

during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. Thousands of persons were abducted from this culturally rich area. (pp. 103-104)

The records of the Spaniards during the 19th century maintained a listing of enslaved Africans brought to Puerto Rico, indicating the ethnic groups of origin. *Los Registros Central de Esclavos* maintained by the Spaniards from 1859 to 1872 in the collection of *Los Archivos Nacional de Puerto Rico* have a significant list of entries identifying that the enslaved Africans they transported were from the following locations and/or ethnic groups. The entries are confusing in that there are varied spellings for what appears to be the same ethnic group and/or location. What is clear is that the captured Africans brought to Puerto Rico during the 19th century have a predominance of Kongo ethnic groups. Some of the names recorded include the following: *Longo, Congo, Lingongo, Linga, Lambe, Liguelo, and Dingongo*, which are similar to the names of groups identified by anthropologist Gonzalo Aguirre Beltran as groups originating from the area located within the northern and southern areas of Zaire from Nyanga to Dande.

Los Kongos ocupaban las tierras situadas al norte y al sur del Zaire, desde el Nyanga hasta el Dande. El territorio al norte del Zaire fu, conocido por los geógrafos antiguos con el nombre de Reino de Bramas y en seguida con el de Reino de Loango. En su costa se establecieron factorías desde los últimos años del siglo XVII: en Cabinda por los portugueses, en Loango por los franceses y en Banana por los ingleses. [The Kongos occupied the area situated at the north and south of Zaire, from the Nyanga to the Dande. The territory at the north of Zaire was known by the ancient geographers by the name of the Kingdom of Bramas and soon after as the Kingdom of Loango. On this coast were established factories from the later part of the XVII century: in Cabinda by the Portuguese, in Loango by the French and Banana by the English]. (Beltran, 1989, p. 139)

It is the premise of this article that the influence of the African from the Kongo area in the later phase of the slave trade in Puerto Rico significantly influenced the beliefs of earlier arrivals, with their prevailing belief in ancestor worship.

BACKGROUND

In Puerto Rico, as in other plantation societies, Africans brought their sacred world views to the Americas, accommodating them to the horrific conditions of enslavement and oppression. What is today Puerto Rico was originally called Borinquen by the Arawaks—often called Tainos—the native inhabitants. Their ancestry has been traced from 4000 B.C. to the area of the Amazon and Orinoco rivers in South America and from 1000 B.C. to the islands of the Caribbean (Rouse, 1992).

The Arawaks were one of the native groups that Columbus encountered on his voyage when he accidentally landed in the West Indies thinking he had reached Asia. On his second voyage in search of Asia, he sighted the island in 1493 that he called San Juan Bautista, which was later renamed Puerto Rico. Confirming the dominance of conquest, Columbus quickly renamed the islands he encountered and conquered in the name of Spain. He proceeded to ignore the names the native people had given them, instead using the names of Roman Catholic saints in an attempt to impose Christianity in the New World.

The process of bestowing new names went along with “taking possession of” those parts of the world he deemed suitable for Spanish ownership, showing the royal banners, erecting various crosses and pronouncing certain oaths and pledges. If this was presumption, it had an honored heritage: it was Adam who was charged by his Creator with the task of naming “every living creature,” including the product of his own rib, in the course of establishing “dominion over” them. . . . Colon—Columbus—went on to assign no fewer than sixty-two other names on the geography of the islands—capes, points, mountains, ports—with a blithe assurance suggesting that in his (and Europe’s) perception the act of name-giving was in some sense a talisman of conquest, a rite that changed raw neutral stretches of far-off earth into extensions of Europe. (Sale, 1990, p. 93)

Carrying the history of war, expulsion of the Moors and Jews from Spain, and the notion of Christian White supremacy into the New World, Columbus viewed the native populations as subordinates and objects of conquest. Historian Kirkpatrick Sale (1990) provides the following quote from the journal of Columbus, noting

his immediate feeling of dominance over the Arawaks: "It appeared to me that these people were very poor in everything." Then he proceeded to add, "They ought to be good servants and of good intelligence." Making certain to stress the inferiority that he imposed on the Tainos, he further added the following:

I believe that they would easily be made Christians, because it seemed to me that they had no religion. Our Lord pleasing, I will carry off six of them at my departure to Your Highnesses, in order that they may learn to speak. (p. 97)

Columbus chose to ignore the complex beliefs of the Arawaks, who, similar to those in some African cultures, worshipped the ancestors and the forces of nature. Historian Loida Figueroa Mercado (1972) describes the sacred beliefs of the Arawaks:

Religion played a prominent role in Arawak life. The death ceremonies are another proof of the religious feeling of the people. They believed in life after death although as many other peoples, this life did not differ much to life on earth. Due to this belief they placed food in the tombs, as well as the weapons and personal effects of the deceased. . . . As with all people intimately linked with Nature, the Arawaks made a cult of the earth, rain and sun; sources of fertility without which life could not exist. (p. 46)

According to scholar Jan Carew (1992), the results of the Holy Inquisition with its desire to cleanse Spanish blood led to the irrational expulsion of Moors and Jews from Spain in 1492, the same year of Columbus's first voyage. It was only 8 months after the fall of Granada that "Columbus landed on the beaches of the Taino land of Guanahani" (p. 5). It was this history of destruction that was carried into the New World.

The persecution of Moors and Jews, therefore, and their tragic and inhuman expulsion gave added momentum to the process of decivilization and the institutionalization of racism in Christian Spain after the *Reconquista*. And this peculiarly European phenomenon of manicheistic racism (White against Black and brown) wove itself into the fabric of Christianity and remains embedded there to this day (Carew, 1992, p. 6).

In the short period of approximately 60 years, the native populations of what is today Puerto Rico were virtually annihilated by Spanish colonizers who enslaved the natives in the abusive systems of *repartimiento* and *encomienda*. In the name of God and greed for gold, the Spanish colonizers forced Christianity on the native populations while they proceeded to take their lands, exploit the natural resources, and decimate the population. Historian Lyle N. McAlister (1984) notes that the Spaniards found sufficient gold dust and nuggets in Santo Domingo, Cuba, and Puerto Rico to replace Portugal as the supplier of gold to Europe (p. 94).

In need of free labor to continue the exploitation of the gold mines and later the sugar, tobacco, and coffee plantations, the colonizers first turned to Spain to enslave poor Whites and then turned to Africa for a larger amount of people to labor (Williams, 1970, p. 95). The need for labor to exploit the gold mines was so intense that enslaved Africans from Santo Domingo, Puerto Rico, and Cuba were sent to Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, Nueva Granada, and Venezuela (Franco, 1979, p. 35).

Although the Portuguese and then the Spanish had a long history of profitable equitable trade with West Africa dating back to the 14th century, they proceeded to look to the continent for free labor due to the decreasing native population. The Portuguese captured Ceuta in 1415 in North Africa then proceeded with their exploration to the West Coast of Africa. "In 1435 they reached Senegal, in 1443 Cape Bojador, in 1446 Sierra Leone" (Williams, 1970, p. 13). The African historian Basil Davidson (1980) notes that it was only 9 years after the first voyage of Columbus that the Spanish developed orders to import enslavement of Africans.

By as early as 1501, only nine years after the first voyage of Columbus, the Spanish throne had issued its initial proclamation on laws for the export of slaves to America: mainly, as yet, to the island of Hispaniola, which later became Haiti and San Domingo. These slaves were white—whether from Spain or from North Africa—more often than black; for the black slaves, it was early found, were turbulent and hard to tame. . . . And in 1510 there came the beginning of the African slave trade in its massive and special form: royal orders were given for the transport first of fifty and then two hundred slaves for sale in the Indies. Throughout the years that

followed it was to be the searing brand of this trade that it would consider its victims not as servants or domestic slaves who deserved respect in spite of their servile condition, but as chattel slaves, commodities that could and should be sold at whim or will. (Davidson, 1980, p. 63)

ENSLAVEMENT OF AFRICANS IN PUERTO RICO

Historical documents affirm that free Africans and their mulatto descendants were part of the conquering voyages to the New World. The first enslaved Africans were brought to Puerto Rico in 1510, and authorization was granted by Spain in 1513.

At the beginning they were brought to serve the colonists. By experience the sending of <ladino> slaves, that is, civilized slaves, which was the first intention of the Kings stopped, because contrary to what they expected, instead of <civilising> the natives, what they did was incite them. There was great resistance to introducing Ladino Negroes, or Bozales (recently imported) as the White immigration was preferred, especially in Puerto Rico. Since the Puerto Rican colonists were poor, they were always clamoring for the free introduction of slaves, something which Spain would not agree to do at that time, and therefore the case resulted that the Negro trafficker there did not do too much business and preferred to go to other countries where he could get rid of his cargo with greater ease. (Mercado, 1972, p. 249)

Throughout the history of enslavement, the fear of rebellions by Africans threatened the Spaniards. By 1514, Africans in the Caribbean outnumbered Whites, who lived in fear of both the native and African populations. In fear of the partnerships developed by Africans and natives seeking their liberation, Cardenal Cisneros in 1516 wrote the following to the Spanish royal crown:

. . . porque [los negros] se conforman mucho con los indios para hacer males e danos como en los tiempos pasados se ha visto por experiencia e por evitar los susodicho nuestra merced e voluntad es suspender dichas licencias [. . . because (Blacks) find compatibility with natives and joined forces to do wrong. We have seen this occur

in the past and in order to avoid future occurrence we ask for the voluntary suspension of licenses (licenses to enslave Africans)]. (Marrero, 1974, 11:205)

By 1518, slavery had already become part of the economic framework contributing to the monopoly of Spanish rule in the West Indies. The royal system of control over the selling of enslaved Africans was distributed to wealthy merchants and mariners through the process of *asiento*—a royal permit—establishing the conditions of sale (Davidson, 1980, p. 66).

The most sought after market of the slave trafficking nations was Spain, and the licenses and *asientos* given by the discovering nation were disputed by France, Portugal, Holland and England. The licenses were not given free either, therefore Spain also made money on the African deal. (Mercado, 1972, p. 249)

AFRICAN RELIGIONS: TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE AMERICAS

African religions in Cuba and Brazil have been extensively studied by scholars due to the millions of enslaved Africans brought to these countries and the success of their descendants in maintaining degrees of varied traditional practices. In Puerto Rico, due to the significantly smaller numbers (in the range of 80,000), scholars have shown little interest in documenting the African belief systems that have been maintained by African descendants. However, the study of African religions in Puerto Rico is important because, like Cuba and Brazil, the island was one of the last to abolish enslavement. This suggests that like Cuba and Brazil, the New World transformation of traditional African religions has survived. Slavery was abolished in Puerto Rico in 1873, in Cuba in 1880, and in Brazil in 1888.

The island colonies—Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Spanish part of Hispaniola—were a backwater of the Spanish empire up to the middle of the eighteenth century. They had few settlers of any kind, and their slave populations were a small part of the total. Comparatively

large numbers were free settlers of partial African descent. Given the fact that the slave trade to these islands had been gradual over several centuries, both the slave populations and the free black populations probably attained natural growth by the mid-eighteenth century. The mulatto population certainly did. Then, beginning in Cuba in the 1760's and in Puerto Rico somewhat later, these islands finally entered the South Atlantic System and developed a plantation sector worked largely by newly-imported slaves from Africa. (Curtin, 1990, p. 39)

The scholar Francisco Scarano (1984) attributes this to the notion that planters in Puerto Rico preferred to purchase enslaved Africans for their sugar plantations instead of using the large free population on the island, because they were better workers: "There is every reason to believe that the planters would have employed free workers instead of slaves if the cost and work discipline of the former matched that of the enslaved blacks" (p. 65).

What is clear is that by the mid-19th century, planters equated the success of their sugar plantations with the work of enslaved Africans from the continent. Going against the move for abolition of slavery by the British and other countries, the Spanish continued the illegal importation of enslaved Africans. Davidson (1980) attests to the continuity of the enslavement of Africans in the following statement:

Even when some years later the trade was abolished by the French, it continued to the Spanish colonies and to Brazil, being promoted by many tough and vigorous operators. It would seem that no fewer than one million slaves were put ashore in Cuba in the years between 1791 and 1840. (p. 91)

The increased African population in Puerto Rico rose during the same period and, according to Scarano (1984), expanded considerably: "The slave population grew . . . from 18,616 persons in 1815 to 31,874 in 1828, and to 41,818 in 1834" (p. 65). Scholars generally agree that the total number of enslaved Africans brought to Puerto Rico over the three centuries of enslavement can be estimated between 70,000 to 80,000.

Although a small number compared to the numbers of enslaved Africans in Cuba and Brazil, the infusion of *negros bozales*—Africans direct from the continent—late in the enslavement process probably reinvigorated the memory of earlier enslaved populations introducing African traditional beliefs and practices. The rather extensive documentation of the African ethnic groups and their religions brought to Brazil, Cuba, Haiti, Trinidad have provided scholars with fertile ground for research. The scant information available on the ethnic groups brought to Puerto Rico—and their religions—has limited research in Puerto Rico. Scholars have generally focused on the contributions of Africans to the plantation economy, tending to exclude their cultural life.

Another factor in the dearth of research is the desire of Puerto Ricans to “Whiten” the population of Puerto Rico by ignoring its African legacy. Mercado (1972) addresses the silent racism that permeates the desire to exclude or ignore the contributions of Africans in the formation of the racial and cultural identity of Puerto Rico.

Since the Negro element has not received its true importance and since both the Whites and the Negroes have the confessed or unconfessed intention of lessening it and trying to appear like a White nation—or one in the process of becoming white . . . (p. 247)

African contributions present in all aspects of Puerto Rican life are generally not highlighted by Puerto Rican society. The lack of attention tends to blur racial and cultural lines, establishing an uneasy silence regarding the cultural African practices that are an integral part of the Puerto Rican identity.

In language, crafts, music, religion, entertainment, superstitions, cooking, in the arts of herbs and healing in short in all the thousand and one things which constitute the cultural web of a people, the influence of the Negroes is present. It is a shame, as we have said before, that due to the prejudice of the Whites, the constant rejections in small things (the smaller they are, the more painful) the Puerto Rican Negro consciously or unconsciously wishes to erase or disguise his unique traits in order to appear culturally White. (Mercado, 1972, p. 260)

This brief article explores one of the belief systems of Puerto Rico that can be traced to its African origins. Ancestor worship within Puerto Rican culture is one of the persistent cultural practices that continues to infuse an African world view into the larger Puerto Rican community. This article explores the legacy of espiritismo as one of the lasting cultural contributions of the varied African ethnic groups brought to Puerto Rico.

Although this article focuses on the influence of the Kongos, it must be understood that the transformation of African traditions in a new context under oppressive conditions was influenced by the Native and European elements present. "Modern Caribbean cultures grew from many roots—Taino and Carib, European, and African. The mixture and fusion of different cultural traditions is a complicated process, and in some cases it is difficult to isolate specific contributions" (Alegria, 1990, p. 15).

ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE

Scholar Andres Isidoro Perez y Mena (1991) provides another perspective in his study *Speaking With the Dead—Development of Afro-Latin Religion Among Puerto Ricans in the United States—A Study into the Interpenetration of Civilizations in the New World*. He indicates that "Spiritualism was born in the United States in 1848, the year three young sisters from Hydesville, New York claimed they were able to communicate with the dead by means of wall rapping." Furthermore, he states that "Spiritualism spread to Europe, specially to England and France, where it soon enjoyed the patronage of many exalted personages, such as Queen Victoria, Napoleon III, Marconi and Conan Doyle" (p. xiii).

Defining *spiritualism* as "mostly concerned with a medium's psychic powers and his or her ability to communicate with the dead for the benefit of her clients, for a price," Perez y Mena (1991) differentiates between spiritualism and *spiritism*. He indicates that

Spiritism is an actual movement, where a group of people get together in a temple-like setting for the purpose of communal healing, counseling and communication with higher spirits to obtain guidance

and illumination as well as enlightenment of intranquil or dark spirits. (p. xiv)

Perez y Mena (1991) attributes the spread of spiritism to Allan Kardec's—whose actual name is Hippolyte Leon Denizard Rivail—philosophy as a mixture of spiritualism and Kardec's view of progressive incarnations developed during the 1950s. Kardec's books *The Book of Spirits* and *The Gospel According to Spiritism (El Evangelio)* have become popular texts for mediums, have been translated into several languages, and are used throughout the Spanish-speaking global community (p. xiv).

Perez y Mena (1991) briefly acknowledges that ancestor worship has African roots in the tradition of the Yorubas of West Africa and questions whether practitioners understand the historical continuity.

Although this kind of spirit communication is actually a form of ancestor worship that combines ancient African Yoruba beliefs, Spanish and Puerto Rican forms of Catholic worship and French Spiritism, neither the congregation nor the mediums he studied have any real knowledge of the historical background of their Spiritist Center. (p. 1)

The spiritist center, he notes, “was in actuality . . . far from followers of Kardec's Spiritism.” Perez y Mena defines the practice as a combination of *Cuban Santería* (syncretism of Roman Catholicism and Yorubaland practices as practiced in Cuba) and aspects of Kardec's spiritism.

Acknowledging that there exists a synthesis of Afro-Puerto Rican ancestor worship, Cuban Santería, and French Kardecian spiritism in the United States, Perez y Mena (1991) attests that it “does not exist in Puerto Rico.” He provides no historical information on the composition of African ethnic groups that have contributed to the formation of the Afro-Puerto Rican cosmology, which he defines as “Afro-Puerto Rican ancestor worship.”

Perez y Mena (1991) fails to define the differences that developed in the varied African-based practices of ancestor worship in the Americas by enslaved Africans. He assumes that all the traditions are the same when he notes that “Puerto Ricans distance

themselves from other Hispanics, especially Cubans, who practice forms of Afro-Latin religions in the United States." In an interview I conducted with the first Afro-Cuban *babalawo*—high priest in the Yoruba-based Santería religion—in New York City, Pancho Mora noted that his first clients were Puerto Ricans who felt an affinity to this Yoruba-based religion because of racial and cultural similarities. Perez y Mena is justifiably baffled when he questions the contradistinctive and often seemingly contradictory manner in which Puerto Ricans describe their belief in the spirits of the dead distinguishing themselves from believers in the Afro-Cuban system of Santería. He does not consider the possibility that the form of ancestor worship of Afro-Puerto Ricans took a different form because it was culturally grounded in a tradition other than that of the Yorubas, whose beliefs are at the foundation of Cuban Santería.

Spiritualism, the belief in ancestor spirits, does not necessarily include the worship of the ancestor spirits manifested in the *Orishas*—gods and goddesses—of the Yorubas. Spiritualists—mediums—in the Puerto Rican context can worship ancestor spirits (family members and other spirits of historical affinity) and be possessed by them without reference to the African gods or goddesses of the nature manifested in the Yoruba pantheon.

This article presents the perspective that the particular ethnic groups brought to the Caribbean and their success in having their beliefs dominate over other African cultural groups determined the form of traditional African practices recreated in the New World. In the case of Puerto Rico, the predominance of enslaved Africans from the Kongo region in the late-19th century into Puerto Rico suggests that their beliefs may have prevailed.

DIVINE PRACTICES

The presence of these African religions in the New World is an unexpected consequence of the slave trade. The slaves were brought to various countries in the Americas and the Antilles, coming from various different regions of Africa along the West Coast, between Senegambia and Angola. They also came from the opposite shore:

Madagascar. . . . As a result, there came to the New World a mixture of captives who spoke various languages and had different customs and religions" (Verger, 1993, p. 235).

In Cuba and Brazil, the dominance of Yoruba ethnic groups reformed and transformed the belief in the Orishas, African gods of the Yoruba pantheon.

In Cuba, the Santeria corresponds roughly to Voodoo. And the slaves who were long ago carried off to Cuba came for the most part from West Africa; the majority, however, came not from Dahomey but from Yorubaland. Afro-Cubans who come from Yorubaland are called in Cuba *Lucumi* or *Nago*. (Jahn, 1989, p. 62)

The pattern of incorporating gods from other cultural groups had already been established in West Africa, and it is logical that it would have continued in the Americas. The historian Melville J. Herskovits (1958) states,

If one tribe is conquered by another, it therefore follows that the gods of the conquerors are more powerful than those of the conquered, and all considerations dictate that the deities of this folk be added to the less powerful gods already worshipped. (p. 72)

In Haiti, the predominance of ethnic groups of the *Fon* traditional communities recreated the spirits and African gods—*Luas*—in the belief system of *Vaudou*. Written in many different ways, *Vaudou*, *Vaudoux*, *Voodoo*, the historian Janheinz Jahn (1989) notes the following:

The reason why it was the religious conceptions of Dahomey in particular that came to prevail in Haiti is apparent from a London report of 1789 which tells us that ten to twelve thousand slaves were exported yearly from the kingdom of Dahomey. (p. 29)

Over the four centuries of enslavement, the varied diffusion of African traditional cultural elements that evolved in the communities of Africans and their descendants varied in form, although there was maintained a common thread in belief in ancestor spirits

and varying rituals and ceremonies in tribute to the African gods and goddesses that survived the Middle Passage. According to Herskovits (1958), the geographical locations helped determine the degree that African religions survived:

The reason for the distinctiveness of its customs, and for the degree to which particular kinds of Africanisms not found elsewhere have been preserved, is to be found in its historical background and the kind of European culture to which Negroes of the region had to accommodate themselves. (p. 245)

The flexibility of thought inherent in African religions provided the important element necessary for their survival in new settings. In describing the Fon of Dahomey, the historian P. Mercier (1976) notes the importance of the fluidity of thought that continues to the present:

It is in this environment of fluidity and diversity of thought that the Fon lived in the past and still, to some extent, live today. There is no question of attempting to reconstruct an earlier system of myths possessing a completely satisfactory unity, more particularly since there are not really a number of cosmologies; there is, rather, a common conception widely diversified in its details, and modified in varying degrees among the different groups by a number of influences. In the remarkably vigorous thought of the Fon nothing is rigid. (p. 216)

Enslaved Africans brought to the New World their knowledge of spiritual and secular practices grounded in the forces of nature and ancestor worship. Africans carried their knowledge of their cultural philosophies, and their priests and priestesses brought the sagacity of divine intelligence.

AFRICAN ANCESTRAL WORLD VIEW

Ancestors are viewed as intermediaries between the supreme being and man. These spirits in the African context function as liaisons between the divine and secular worlds.

Among the spiritual beings who are believed to help people in their approach to God are divinities, some spirits especially those of former national leaders and heroes, and those of the dead who are still remembered in the family. When people make prayers, sacrifices and offerings, they sometimes address members of their families who died recently. (Mbiti, 1975, p. 62)

In Africa, the role of the ancestors was similar, although practices varied in the diversity of ethnic cultural groups of West Africa. The common belief in the active role of ancestor spirits and gods in the daily life of the community developed a similar understanding of the role of spirits in the universe. The polytheistic belief system held in common by the varied cultural groups developed an inclusive complex system in Africa that allowed for the borrowing and incorporation of gods from other groups. Furthermore, the process of intertribal conquests added gods and spirits to the varied cultural groups, developing a multilayered dimensional-thinking process geared to understanding the cyclical process of dealing with the spiritual and secular worlds. "The world view of West Africans recognized the diversity of remote ancestors (gods) and ancestors of direct family lineage as spirits who ' . . . look after the concerns of their descendants moving on the plane of the living' " (Herskovits, 1958, p. 71).

According to John S. Mbiti (1975), the intricate system reflects the relationship between the supreme being, lesser gods, spirits, and human beings. Mbiti notes that spirits have a commonality: "Therefore they have certain characteristics in common, just as peoples of different nationalities or races have common characteristics as well as differences" (p. 65). Mbiti divides the spirit world in the following categories: (a) Level 1, spirits; (b) Level 2, nature spirits and human spirits; and (c) Level 3, sky spirits-earth spirits-long dead (ghosts)-recently dead (living dead). The spirits functioning as intermediaries are referred to in human terms because these invisible forces are believed to respond in human ways, possessing divine intelligence that has direct influence on the lives of the living. According to Mbiti, "They are spoken of in human terms as if they can be pleased, offended, informed, interested" (p. 69). It is understood by the community that health, prosperity, and a

balanced relationship between the spiritual and secular world require a positive affinity with the spirits.

To maintain harmony in the self, it is necessary to be on good terms with one's entire social and spiritual world. This requires appropriate actions such as reverence to one's parents, kin, and ancestral spirits, observance of cultic obligations, maintenance of social relationships and respect for natural forces. (Zuesse, 1979, p. 178)

To gain the favorable influence of the spirits, practitioners learn and perform the intricate sacred rituals that attract their favor. Through divination, dreams, and spirit possession, the desires of the spirits are communicated to the living. There are varied underlying beliefs in the varied African cultural groups that worship the spirit world.

A wide range of thought about spirits can be found in African religions: in some places the subject is ghosts or ancestral spirits; in other places it is the attribution of spiritual life to rocks and trees; elsewhere it is the idea of "the earth goddess." (Thomson, 1994, p. 91)

Fundamental to the worship of spirits and ancestors is the social memory that is perpetuated and maintained by the cultural group. It helps define family and community, placing the cultural group in the time clock of history. Scholars John Pemberton III and Funso S. Ofolayan (1996) explain the importance of ancestor worship in the lives of Africans:

The relationship between remembrance and social identity is nowhere more vividly conveyed than in the concept of "ancestor." Previous generations exist not only in the remembrance of the living. Ancestors have their own peculiar existence and are present among the living. A Yoruba proverb states: "To die is to become deified; no one venerates a living person." (p. 25)

In the African context, ancestors are always present influencing the lives of the living. They form an integral part of the way that Africans conceptualize their lives. Scholar Daryll Forde (1976)

explains the scope of their reach into the lives of their descendants and how they are worshipped.

Ancestors are appealed to and thanked for good crops, fertility, plenty, and all manner of good fortune and success. The desire to be remembered and given tendance is attributed to them, and they may themselves cause harm and sickness to descendants who neglect them. . . . Ancestors may be approached and propitiated or thanked by means of offerings and prayer . . . objects such as beads which have once been in their possession; but they can also be constrained by medicine or the properties of matter. (Krige & Krige, 1976, p. 62)

The belief in ancestors has continued to thrive in Puerto Rico and other African diaspora communities, creating New World identities, families, and communities. Evident in the communities of *marrones*—runaways—the recreation of the philosophical-cosmological-sociological world view was part of the transformation of Africans in the diaspora. Scholar Herbert S. Klein (1986) notes the following:

From Puerto Rico to southern Brazil and the coastal Peruvian plantations, slaves organized themselves into family-based households. These households would define the social and cultural organization of the emerging Afro-American culture and socialize the children to these beliefs and behavior. (p. 168)

Historian Ricardo Alegria (1990), in his *Notas Sobre la Proce-dencia Cultural de los Esclavos Negros de Puerto Rico Durante la Segunda Mitad del Siglo XVI*, refers to a rebellion by the *Jelofes* of Senegal that occurred in Puerto Rico in 1527, indicating that the Spaniards requested the crown not to allow the entrance of this ethnic group to the island. According to historian Guillermo A. Baralt (1981), in the case of Puerto Rico there is still more investigation required to document the innumerable acts of rebellions and individual conspiracies and practices of marronage. In his study *Esclavos Rebeldes Conspiraciones y Sublevaciones Esclavos en Puerto Rico (1795-1873)*, he documents the use of religious celebrations by enslaved Africans to organize their rebellions. Africans used

Catholic saints festivals—which they transformed and identified with African gods—to camouflage their conspiracies, indicating that their religious beliefs continued to be a central part of their lives.

ANCESTORS TRAVEL TO THE NEW WORLD

As the wide range of African gods stepped off the slave ships in the bodies of enslaved Africans, so did the ancestors. Adapting to the horrific conditions, Africans in the New World transformed, recreated, and adapted their traditional religions to their new environments and social conditions of the Americas.

The divine intelligence brought to the Americas by enslaved Africans mingled with native and European traditions, developing a diversity of New World African spiritual religious traditions. Although there continues to be a lack of agreement among scholars regarding the numbers of enslaved Africans brought to the Americas, the range is on the low end 13 million and on the high end 200 million. The varied ethnic groups brought to the Americas, therefore, had to adapt their beliefs to each other, other oppressed groups, and their European oppressors, transforming their traditional cultures.

To insist that only those elements of slave culture were African which remained largely unchanged from the African past is to misinterpret the nature of culture itself. Culture is not a fixed condition but a process: the product of interaction between the past and present. Its toughness and resiliency are determined not by a culture's ability to withstand change, which indeed may be a sign of stagnation not life, but by its ability to react creatively and responsively to the realities of a new situation. (Levine, 1977, p. 5)

Thompson (1984) reflects on the diversity of African world views that took hold in the Americas, explaining how their historical legacy was able to forge new visions in the New World.

These civilizations not only were impressive for their urban density, refinement, and complexity, but were empowered with an inner

momentum of conviction and poise that sent them spiraling out into the world, overcoming accidents of class, status, and political oppression. The rise, development and achievement of Yoruba, Kongo, Fon, Mande, and Ejagham art and philosophy fused with new elements overseas, shaping and defining the black Atlantic visual tradition. To portray not only the originating impulses of these different black civilizations but some sense of the special inner drive and confidence that has kept them going—that showered the northeast of Brazil with famous beads and emblems and gowns of the Yoruba and Dahomey; that fundamentally enriched the culture of North America with profound and sophisticated Kongo-and Angola-influenced herbalism, mental healing and funeral traditions among black people of the Old Deep American South and so on. (p. xiv)

In the Americas, African religions with their history of adaptation in Africa became aggressive systems of resistance, affirmation, and a visionary cultural process of identity. Using passive and aggressive actions, Africans were able to define their world, rejecting the oppressive world view of Europeans.

LOS KONGOS: AFRICA AND THE AMERICAS

Thompson (1984) attests to the unifying philosophy of the Kongos continued in the Americas.

Africans from Kongo and Angola shared fundamental beliefs and languages. When they met on the plantations and in the cities of the western hemisphere, they fostered their heritage. Kongo civilization and art were not obliterated in the New World: they resurfaced in the coming together, here and there, of numerous slaves from Kongo and Angola. (p. 104)

The identities of African nations were affirmed in the Americas in the secret societies, *cabildos* (social clubs organized along nationality or occupational lines), and *cofradías* (religious brotherhoods and sisterhoods) formed often under the rubric of the Catholic church. The church with its hierarchy of gods and religious societies, unlike the Protestant church in the English-speaking

colonies, provided a cover for Africans to continue their African New World religious practices (Klein, 1986, p. 185).

The expansive kingdom of the Kongo dates back to the 12th century. As previously noted, the Portuguese Diogo Cao reached the Kongo in 1482. The amicable relationship forged among the *Manicongos* and Portuguese, according to Beltrán (1989), did not immediately establish the Europeans in authority. The Portuguese over time developed a mutually beneficial friendship solidified when the Europeans in 1570 helped to reinstate *Nzinga* as king, in a fight against the *Ngalas* (p. 139)

Beltrán's (1989) research indicates that the area located south of Zaire that extends to the river Dande was identified as the kingdom of the *Esi-Kongo*, whose capital *Mbazi a Ekongo* was baptized with the name of San Salvador by the Portuguese. The following provinces—*ducados*—according to Beltrán were part of this kingdom: Bamba, Songo, Sundi, Pango, Bata, and Pemba. They were identified as *Ki-Kongo*-speaking groups categorized as part of the *Ba-Kongo* tribal group (p. 139).

The importance of understanding the breakout of territories and groups for this article is that it confirms the points of origin of many of the enslaved Africans brought to Puerto Rico, as noted in the documents of the Spaniards. Although Beltrán's (1989) research is focused on the groups that were brought to Mexico, the fact that shipments were in the domain of the same European colonizers indicates that they are speaking about the same group. Beltrán further elaborates that the province of Songo extends from the area south of Zaire to the river Mbirji (today Ambrizi) along the coast and is home to the *Bashi-Longos* or *Musorongos*—*Mwesi-Longos*—and entered Mexico under the name *Longos*, the same name given by the Spaniards to the enslaved Africans entering Puerto Rico, captured by the English who had established factories of enslavement in the zone.

Alegría's (1990) documentation indicates that it is not until the 16th century that historical documents name the specific ethnic groups that are brought to Puerto Rico. In the documents of Martín de Azéytuno and his wife, Isabel de Castellanos, were found the

records of the sugar plantation San Miguel de las Palmas owned by them in the area of the Rivera of *Bayamon*, as well as the records of the sugar plantation La Trinidad by the river Toa owned by Alonso Pérez Martel and his wife, Leonor Troche Ponce de León. According to the records, Las Palmas de Bayamon had 55 enslaved Africans, La Trinidad had 47. The records note that there were enslaved Africans from the *Manicongos* living on both sugar plantations. In Bayamón lived Pedro and Catalina Manicongo, and in the Toa plantation, Pedro Manicongo. As in other plantation communities, enslaved Africans were identified by the enforced Christian names as well as names from the geographic or cultural areas from which they were taken. African descendants born on the island were called *criollos* and often carried this designation as a last name, for example, Maria Criolla, Andresillo Criollo.

Beltrán (1989) indicates that the importation of enslaved Africans into Mexico in the 17th century was from ethnic groups in the Congo and Angola regions, which are similar to the ethnic groups identified in the two plantations in Puerto Rico. The ethnic groups listed in the documents include the *Bramas*, *Zapes*, *Biafaeras*, *Jelofes*, *Mandingas*, *Terranovas (Novas)*, *Biohos*, *Aradas (Aradas, Are-das)*, *Banol*, *Malguetas*, *Bobos*, *Dembo*, and *Manicongos*, among others. Scholars Jalil Sued Badillo and Angel López Cantos (1986) have identified the presence of approximately 30 ethnic groups in Puerto Rico during the 16th century that concur with the documents from the plantations, noting that during the later period of the slave trade, the Africans were brought primarily from the regions of the Congo and Angola. Fearing the rebellion of slaves following the rebellion of the Jelofes, there was a conscious effort by the Europeans to separate nationalities to prevent further outbreaks, explaining the diversity of ethnic groups found in the plantations.

Although there is limited information, what is available does provide insight into the African world views brought into Puerto Rico from West Africa. The evidence affirms that the first enslaved Africans came from Cabo Verde, including the Senegambia and Guinea (*Bramas*, *Biafaras*, *Nalus*, *Jelofes*, *Banoles*, *Mandingas*, *Zapes*, *Terranova*, *Biohos*, and others) (Alegria, 1990, p. 20).

ANCESTORS IN THE KONGO COSMOLOGY

Thompson (1984) confirms that Kongo traditions are present in the Americas in varied forms including ancestor worship, language and herbalism. The central role of the ancestors in the cosmology of the Kongos, like *espiritismo*, focuses on spirits and ancestors. The spirits are ultimately the expression of the power of the supreme being. Scholar John M. Janzen (1994) describes the role of spirits and ancestors in Africa:

The worldview that inspires cults of affliction includes, as an axiom, the idea that ancestral shades and spirits, ultimately expressions of the power of God, may influence or intervene in human affairs. The shades may be either direct and identifiable lineal ancestors or more generic human spirits. Other spirits of the Central, East, and Southern African pantheon may include more distant nature spirits, hero spirits, or alien spirits that affect human events in many ways. Old as well as new knowledge tends to be related to the shade and spirits forces, as events are interpreted and adversities dealt with. Thus, in recent decades, there has been a tendency for lineal ancestors to be supplanted by more generalized spirit forces in cults of affliction, as common social problems occur, increasingly, outside the domestic community. (p. 167)

ESPIRITISMO IN THE PUERTO RICAN COMMUNITY

The forced Christianity imposed by the Catholic church forced African religions to go underground, actively subverting European oppression. Legal documents indicate that Ladinos and Africans were frequently persecuted for practicing black magic and witchcraft. Badillo and Cantos (1986) cite legal records of the Spanish government and Catholic church reactions and fears concerning the persistence of African belief systems, calling them *hechiceros* and *brujos*. Noting the need for further study on the origins of African-based religions in Puerto Rico, it is important to recognize their cultural revolutionary role in maintaining an African consciousness.

La lucha religiosa pues, fue, real y violenta. El africano, como antes lo había hecho el indio, no rindió su conciencia tan

campechanamente. . . . Y al resistir, demostró, que el cimarrón no era solamente el que huía sino también el que se quedaba [The religious struggle was real and violent. The African, as had previously been done by the Indian, did not surrender their consciousness. . . . And through resistance demonstrated that the maroon was not solely the one who escaped, but also the one who remained]. (Badillo & Cantos, 1986, p. 153)

Espiritismo in the Puerto Rican community serves a similar function as in the Kongo region in Africa. The ancestor spirits protect believers helping to establish a balance in the lives of believers.

El principio y el fundamento de las protecciones y los guías está orientado al conocimiento de lo humano. Nos preparan para las batallas y nos protegen en la guerra. [The principal and fundamental role of protector spirits and spirit guides is to orient the consciousness of human beings. The spirits protect humans for the challenges and conflicts of daily life]. (Rosado, 1992, p. 128)

Artist practitioner Angel Suárez Rosado (1992) discusses the role of espiritismo in the Puerto Rican community as follows:

No obstante, no hay que olvidar que el Espiritismo es un sistema popular de creencias practicado por muchas familias puertorriqueñas. Y que además en él se expresa, como idea central, la posible comunicación e interacción del alma, viva o muerta [Spiritualism is a popular system of belief in many Puerto Rican families. It is expressed in the central communication and interaction between the living and the dead]. (p. 125)

Acknowledging the influences of Native and European spirits, Rosado addresses the constant presence of the spirits of *Madamas* and *Kongos* that particularly identify the African presence. The Kongo spirits have knowledge of planting, harvesting, medicinal herbs, and divine intelligence. When the Kongo spirits manifest in spiritual sessions, they are generally older men and women who identify themselves as Africans from the Kongo. Generally, the spirits manifest as wise elders, keepers of knowledge, and historical legacy, sharing messages of ancient healing remedies.

Kongos en Puerto Rico . . . , conocen el trabajo de las siembras, las cosechas. Son estos personajes donde habita la zaga caribeña y se hace presente nuestra novela como pueblo [Kongos in Puerto Rico . . . , know the work of planting and harvesting. It is in these personalities that the personality of the Caribbean is present as a community]. (Rosado, 1992, p. 125)

The Madama spirits know the secrets of curing negative energy and attracting positive energy. When they manifest in spiritual session, they are elder women of sacred knowledge. Dressed in gingham colors or white cotton, they tend to manifest as heavy-set women wearing large skirts with their heads covered with a scarf. Bearers of medicinal and psychological healing secrets, this spirit, like the Kongo image, is constant in the spiritual sessions in espiritismo.

The spirits communicate through the possession of a medium who is generally the central figure in a circle of mediums seated around a table, covered with a white tablecloth—*mesa blanca*—to attract superior spirits. The use of white clay or white in Kongo cultures is an important ingredient in successfully performing rituals as it is in the Americas among African descendants.

La mesa blanca es el nombre familiar que se le da a los altares caseiros en la tradición espiritista. Es un espacio que se establece en una mesa sencilla. . . . Todas las actividades curaciones y discursos, se llevan a cabo alrededor de la mesa blanca [White table is the popular name given to the altar in the worship of the ancestors. It is a space that is created on a simple ordinary table. . . . All of the curative and discussions take place around the white table]. (Rosado, 1992, p. 126)

The spiritual sessions—*mesa blanca*—generally have a large round bowl filled with cool water placed at the center of the table. In the Kongo tradition, the importance of water and round shape refers to the circular cosmograph dividing the secular and spirit world. Thompson (1984) indicates that the top of the Kongo cosmogram indicates the realm of god and the bottom that of the dead and water in between. Generally, the bowl of cool water has a Christian cross of Christ crucified lying across the top.

The cross, it seems, functioned as a camouflage, protecting the meaning of the cross in its Kongo cultural context. Thompson (1984) explains it as follows:

This Kongo "sign of the cross" has nothing to do with the crucifixion of the Son of God, yet its meaning overlaps the Christian vision. Traditional Bakongo believed in a Supreme Deity, Nzambi Mpungu, and they had their own notions of the indestructibility of the soul: Bakongo believe and hold it true that man's life has no end, that it constitutes a cycle. The sun, in its rising and setting, is a sign of this cycle, and death is merely a transition in the process of change. (p. 108)

The cross, as used in spiritualism, acknowledges the supreme being as well as the continuity of life after death. It is the point of transition as the session invites the spirits to join the living and the living to enter the spirit world. It speaks to a mastery, a divine skill of communicating with the dead, and the cross establishes the boundaries of both worlds.

In the New World spiritual session, the water becomes a conduit for the attraction of positive spirits to manifest and assist their journey back to the spirit world, understanding the circular journey that is the meaning of life. Similar to its Kongo origins, espiritismo acknowledges that one never dies, that the spirit continues and will return incarnated.

The importance of medicinal herbal healing and the use of herbal magical preparations to protect practitioners in the system of espiritismo is similar to that of the Bakongos. Called *Nkisi* in the Bakongo communities of Africa in Puerto Rico, they become spiritual-medicinal healing remedies. *Nkisi* is defined as "the name of the thing we use to help a person when that person is sick and from which we obtain health; the name refers to leaves as medicines combined together" (Thompson, 1984, p. 117). In Puerto Rico in Black communities like Loiza Aldea, the realm of the "*espiritistas* (diviners and spiritual healers) use herbs as well as a variety of psycho-spiritual techniques for healing on many levels" (Benedetti, 1989, p. 57).

Researcher María Dolores Hajosy Benedetti (1989) identified an *espiritista* in Loíza Aldea who was an initiate in the *palo monte—palo mayombé* tradition. *Palo monte* and *palo mayombé* are words used to describe the religion of the Bantu-speaking people of the African Congolese civilization (p. 58).

The historical *baquine*—wake and burial ceremony—for Black children in Puerto Rico also resonates with the respect for the innocence of spirit. The children were covered in white cloth in respect for the purity of their spirit. For the wake, food and libation were always present in homage to the spirit. The songs sung to the spirit in the *baquine* that helped in the transition of the spirit resonates in the *Kikongo*'s tradition of giving voice and energy to the voyage of the spirit.

The importance of water in attending the ancestors is also witnessed in the setting up of a *Bovéda*—personal ancestor table—in the homes of the Puerto Rican community. Glasses of water are set on a small table and are dedicated to spirits who have made their transition into the heavens. Each glass is dedicated to protector spirits, which include Kongo ancestors. The ancestor table in the homes is an indication that the spirits have a constant presence in the lives of practitioners.

The role of the spirits in communicating to a client the reasons for their difficulties in Puerto Rico is consistent with the process used in the African continent. The medium, using a series of prayers that can be equated to chants, begins to slowly attract the spirit energy, which then proceeds to speak, prescribing remedies often in “tongue,” a form of African-influenced language. The spirit when in possession of the medium then diagnoses the problem, and remedies are prescribed. The following statement by Janzen (1994) describing the role of spirits in Africa reflects the similar process of spirit worship in the Puerto Rican community.

The demonstrable presence of spirits is not automatic and pervasive in rituals of affliction. The character and role of spirits is more like a hypothesis in which relationship to concrete events in individuals' lives needs to be established. An important dimension of all rituals of affliction is therefore the intellectual, or analytical and

diagnostic, function of evaluating the nature of life and the reasons of misfortune. (p. 167)

Espiritismo in the Puerto Rican community functions in a similar way. The spiritualist, with the assistance of spiritual guides, develops hypotheses and diagnoses and applies intellectual spiritual knowledge to solve the misfortunes of the practitioner.

CONCLUSION

The omnipresence of the spirits provides mediums the ability to communicate between the living and the dead. Understanding that life is a continuous cycle, their role in the community is one of facilitator of divine knowledge and sagacity similar to their African origins. The ultimate objective is to live in a healthy, balanced life. As in Africa—KiKongo community—the purity, strength, and force of the spirit world is brought into balance in a calm and cool manner. The prevailing pan-Bantu concept that invites the notion “to become cool or cool down” ultimately is the objective of the medium in healing her client by facilitating access to the spirit world.

Espiritismo as practiced in Puerto Rican communities, rooted in the legacy of the varied Kongo cultures, is centralized on the worship of the ancestors. Through the use of spiritual divination, healing medicines, and preparations, practitioners seek balance and health in their lives. Ultimately, it is a balanced life that connects the spiritual and secular worlds in a harmonious cycle that “cools” the environment, eliminating negative spirit energy.

Greater research and comparisons are required to fully understand the African influences and practices that have emerged from the diverse African ethnic groups that were brought to Puerto Rico. The need to identify more documents, compare the medicinal plants, the hand movements, and divine lessons of the spirits will help in guiding future studies, providing further insight into the Kongo traditions of the Puerto Rican community.

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