



## Physical Anthropology Section – 2005

### H23 Anatomy of a Cauldron: Sociocultural Contributions to Understanding a Forensic Case

Kerriann Marden, MA, ABD\*, and John W. Verano, PhD, Tulane University, Department of Anthropology, 1021 Audubon Street, New Orleans, LA 70118

The goal of this presentation is to offer a sociocultural perspective to the medicolegal investigation of ritual objects.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by demonstrating the use of ethnographic data in deconstructing the elements comprised in a *nganga*, or ritual cauldron, found in a suburban New Orleans setting. This research will aid investigators and anthropologists in understanding the purpose and meaning of these increasingly commonly discovered religious objects and origins of the human bones contained therein.

Santeria, a widespread religious practice originating in the Yoruba culture of Northern West Africa and Palo Mayombe (also called Palo Monte), which derives from Central African Congo, are often misinterpreted as constituting the same beliefs and practices, along with other religious traditions of Afro-Caribbean origin such as Haitian Voodoo, Obeah, and Brazilian Candomble. Each is a syncretism of indigenous African beliefs and the Catholicism of the Spanish colonial cultures, and although they share a similar symbolic structure, the belief systems are distinct. However, since Palo Mayombe is traditionally associated with “black work,” a practitioner of Santeria (*santero/a*) may also be indoctrinated into Palo Mayombe to perform more nefarious purposes for which Santeria offers little option<sup>(4)</sup>. Palo Mayombe rituals, then, can be adopted by the devotees of other religious traditions when harmful deeds are required.

The ritual life of Palo Mayombe is focused on an *nganga*, or cauldron, which serves as a receptacle for a spirit that will carry out supernatural work as bidden by the practitioner, or *palero*. The *nganga* typically contains sacred soil, iron implements, botanical specimens, animal bones and horn, feathers, stones, sticks, and other ritually significant items, arranged around a small collection of human bones, usually the skull and long bones<sup>(4)</sup>. Once the bones are introduced into the *nganga*, the spirit is propitiated with sacrifices and kept in the service of the *palero* by heavy iron chains and other iron objects to weight it from escape.

Cauldrons associated with Palo Mayombe religious practices have become increasingly common in forensic cases, reported first in the Florida and New York, and now in other areas of the nation as well<sup>(1, 2)</sup>. Police began discovering these cauldrons with some frequency after the 1980 Mariel boat lift, when 150,000 Cubans migrated to South Florida. With them came their culture, including their belief systems and the associated use of human bones<sup>(3)</sup>. The presence of human skeletal elements in the *nganga*, of course, brings their discovery under the purview of medicolegal death investigators and forensic anthropologists charged with analyzing the human remains and determining whether a crime has been committed.

The forensic significance of the *nganga* cannot be ignored. Police officers have encountered ceremonial sites in homes while conducting searches, serving warrants or other unrelated investigations, raising questions concerning the origins of the bones. Aside from possible grave desecration to obtain the necessary body parts, other criminal activities may be associated with Palo Mayombe as well. The religion has been associated with drug smugglers and other criminals who attempt to exploit its powers in the commission of criminal activity<sup>(3)</sup>. Furthermore, as the *nganga* must be ritually dismantled upon the death of the practitioner, it is also possible that skeletal components so utilized will be recovered outside of their overt ritual context<sup>(2)</sup>.

Because of the upsurge in cauldron recoveries in a forensic context, it is important to better understand the components of the material artifacts associated with these religious practices. The essentials of Santeria and Palo Mayombe have been well explicated in previous research contextualizing the religious practices within the greater cultural system<sup>(2)</sup>. This research will expand upon previous studies by examining the cauldrons and their component parts specifically, in order to be able to ‘read’ the motives of the practitioners, which in turn will allow a better understanding of the motives of the practitioners and the most likely origins of the bones. The number of cauldrons in the home, the type of bones contained within the *nganga* (bones of a child, of a murder victim, of a politician, etc), the kinds of faunal and botanical remains employed, and the other associated materials that comprise the cauldron can all convey useful information if interpreted correctly.

Incorporating forensic sources, sociocultural literature, and interviews with local practitioners, this research serves as a starting point for understanding the ritual significance of each component of a recovered cauldron, thereby discerning its purpose. This analysis may aid the forensic community in



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interpreting *ngangas*: to identify the source of the bones used therein, and reveal potentially valuable details that may indicate the motive, as expressed in the desired 'work' being performed, or the identity of the practitioner.

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- 1 Godoy A. and Martinez R. Synopsis of the Santeria Religion. *C.I.B. Yearly Report, 1995*, Miami-Dade County Florida Police Department C.I.B. Intelligence Review.
- 2 Pacenti J. Cop of the Occult: Miami detective specializes in religious-oriented crimes" *Sun Coast Times*, 15 Feb 1998.
- 3 Wetli CV and Martinez R (1981) "Forensic Sciences Aspects of Santeria, a Religious Cult of African Origin" *J Forensic Sci* 1981; 26(3):506-514. 4 Wetli CV and Martinez R. Brujeria: Manifestations of Palo Mayombe in South Florida" *The Journal of the Florida Medical Association*, Aug. 1983.

**Santeria, Sociocultural, Ritual**