



Anthropology Section - 2015

A49 Ritualistic Use of Human Skeletal Remains: Is It Forensically Significant?

Ashley Green*, 13858 Valleybrooke Lane, Orlando, FL 32826; John J. Schultz, PhD, University of Central Florida, Dept of Anthropology, 4000 Central Florida Boulevard, HPH 309, Orlando, FL 32816; and Jan C. Garavaglia, MD, District 9 ME, 2350 E Michigan Avenue, Orlando, FL 32806

After attending this presentation, attendees will have an increased understanding regarding the recognition of human skeletal remains and associated artifacts used within the rituals of Palo Mayombe, as well as of the determination of the forensic significance of these skeletal remains. This presentation will focus on at least six Palo Mayombe case studies in which human remains were recovered within the central Florida area in order to discuss criteria for recognizing these types of ritual remains.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by discussing the criteria used to recognize Palo Mayombe scenes with human skeletal remains. In addition, an overview of the common methods of procurement of human skeletal remains used by the practitioners for these rituals will be discussed.

Palo Mayombe, an Afro-Caribbean syncretic religion originating from the Bantu regions of the African Congo, is of particular interest to the forensic community as one of the main components of the religion is the use of human skeletal remains in ritual. Practitioners use human skeletal remains in order to communicate with the deceased and to harness the power of the dead to influence undertakings in the lives of the practitioners.^{1,2} The power of the deceased may be used for either benevolent or malevolent purposes, depending upon the will of the practitioner.^{1,3} Human skeletal remains are most commonly found contained within and in the immediate vicinity of the *nganga*, an iron cauldron containing specific objects chosen according to the spirit with whom they are associated, such as animal carcasses, graveyard soil, herbs, mercury, assorted metal objects, colored beads, feathers, blood, sticks (*palos*), and stones (*otanes*).^{1,3} The most common human skeletal elements found within the *nganga* include the skull, tibia, femur, ribs, and phalanges.³ Of particular significance is the presence of a tibia wrapped in black cloth, which is used as a scepter, or an animal horn, both of which are used by the priest (*palero*) to summon the spirits.¹ This aspect of ritual is especially important, as the forensic anthropologist will often be involved in determining forensic significance of the human skeletal remains discovered within this context.

The sacred space in which the *nganga* resides is often key in the identification of Palo ritual. Examples of these spaces will be detailed in the case studies presented. The space will contain elements of nature such as greenery, animal heads and skins, wooden branches, or stones, and will also be painted in the religious language of Palo, the *firma*, which are religious symbols, drawn within the space to signify intent to make contact with the spiritual realm.⁴ Oftentimes, there will also be pieces of metal, figurines, crosses, and other artifacts symbolic of the nature spirit (*Mpungo*) with whom the *palero* associates.^{1,3}

This presentation will focus on at least six Palo Mayombe cases that were discovered in central Florida. Crania, skulls, and post-cranial skeletal material were discovered within *ngangas*, yielding information useful to the forensic community in properly identifying archaeological and anatomical teaching specimens when discovered in this unique context. The cases from central Florida comprise different settings in which human skeletal remains were discovered and include a shed in the practitioner's backyard, a warehouse, and the disposal of a *nganga*, presumably upon the death of a *palero*, on the bank of a river. The most common sources of procurement for skeletal material used for Palo Mayombe include grave robbing, botanicas, and the legal purchase of anatomical specimens from anatomical supply companies through the internet. Associated artifacts and the presence of religious symbols will also aid in recognition of religious ritual. In two of the cases, forensic significance of the human skeletal remains was confirmed with documentation of the purchases that was provided by the practitioners (receipts and tags).

References:

1. Gonzalez-Whippler M. *Santeria: The religion*. 2nd ed. St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 1989.
2. Johnson SM. Dissertation. *Bones cry out: Palo Monte/Mayombe in Santiago de Cuba*. PhD Dissertation. Michigan State University. Ann Arbor, MI: 2012.
3. Canizares, BR. *The Book on Palo: Deities, Initiatory Rituals, and Ceremonies*. New York: Original Publications, 2002.
4. Dodson JE. *Sacred spaces and religious traditions in Oriente Cuba*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008.

Forensic, Palo Mayombe, Ritual