

# Palo Monte

by BEYOND ROOTS

Palo Monte religion was developed by slaves from Central Africa who were taken to Cuba during the colonial era. The word “palo” (“stick” in English) was applied to the religion in Cuba due to the use of wooden sticks in the preparation of altars, which were also called “la Nganga”, “el caldero”, or “la prenda”. Priests of Palo are known as “Paleros”, “Tatas (men)”, “Yayas (women)” or “Nganguleros”. Initiates are known as “ngueyos” or “pino nuevo”.



## The belief system in “Palo” resides in two pillars:

1. The belief in the natural powers, and the veneration of the spirits of its ancestors. Natural objects and especially sticks are considered to have strength often linked to the powers infused by spirits. These objects are the central object of magic rites of the Palo and its religious practice.
2. A number of spirits called “Mpungu” inhabit within Nganga. The Mpungu are well known in name and ritual, and are venerated as gods. They are powerful entities,



but located under the god Zambi.

The worship and practice of the Palo focuses on the altar or receptacle known as Nganga. It is a consecrated space full of sacred land, sticks, and other objects. Each Nganga is dedicated to a specific Nkisi spirit. This religious space is also inhabited by the spirit of a dead person (in rare cases, the direct ancestor of the owner of the object), which acts as a guide for all religious activities that relate to Nganga.

The methods of divination used in Palo Monte are several. A traditional method, called Vititi Mensu to "see or guess" is using the horn of a hallowed animal covered with a mirror.

People who start in this religion go through a ceremony where they make small incisions in the skin and drop a few drops of blood on the Nganga to create a bond with the spirit that inhabit it. This ceremony is called "scratching".





# Abakúa

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The term Abakúa was thought to refer to the Abakpa area in southeast Nigeria, where the society was active. The first Abakúa societies were established by Africans in the town of Regla, Havana, in 1836. However the main area of Abakúa societies is the district of Guanabacoa where Afro-Cuban culture is vibrant.

Abakúa members derive their belief systems and traditional practices from the Igbo, Efik, Efut, and Ibibio spirits that lived in the forest.



Members of this society came to be known as ñañigos, a word used to designate the street dancers of the society. The ñañigos, who were also called "diablitos (little devils)", were well known by the general population in Cuba through their participation in the Carnival on the Day of the Three Kings, when they dance through the streets wearing their ceremonial outfit, a multicolored checker-



board dress with a conical headpiece topped with tassels.

The oaths of loyalty to the Abakuá society's sacred objects, members, and secret knowledge taken by initiates are a lifelong pact which creates a sacred kinship among the members. The duties of an Abakuá member to his ritual brothers at times surpass even the responsibilities of friendship, and the phrase "Friendship is one thing, and the Abakuá another" is often heard. One of the oaths made during initiation is that one will not reveal the secrets of the Abakuá to non-members, which is why the Abakuá have remained hermetic for over 160 years. At the beginning only black people could be member of the Abakuá society but in nineteenth century they start allowing white and persons of mixed race to become members of this society.

Aside from its activities as a mutual aid society, the Abakuá performs rituals and ceremonies full of theatricality and drama which consists of drumming, dancing, and chanting activities using the secret Abakuá language. Knowledge of the chants are restricted to members of the Abakuá and they express their cultural history through their ceremonies. Other ceremonies such as initiations and funerals, are secret and take place in the sacred room of the Abakuá temple, called the famba.

