

# **Spirits of the Dead: Palo Mayombe, a Mixture of African and Catholic Beliefs, Stirs Controversy**

Maya Kremen

*The Herald News*

October 17, 2002

Copyright [North Jersey Media Group](#)

When the spirit of the dead possesses Indio, he is not himself. He struts around the room, pelvis thrust forward, emitting a strangled, throaty cry. He drinks straight from a bottle of pepper-flavored rum and spits out a mouthful, making the air sting like tear gas. Then he calls Alisa Johnson up from the circle.

She stands, shuts her eyes and waits. Indio hovers over her, gripping a machete. The room is quiet enough to hear him inhale, and the light from his cigar tip flashes over and over, like a firefly in the dark. His manner is gentle and loving as he runs the blade along her sides, her hips, her legs. Afterward, unscathed, she walks back to her seat as someone else walks forward, ready to offer himself.

The smoke is thick as night, and it's been eight hours since anyone has eaten, but none of the 17 people in this overheated basement is going anywhere. They all have their reasons for staying, including a belief that Indio's knife will help heal them. Johnson has been searching all her life for her true ancestors. Ytala Silva wants the pain in her liver to go away. Maria Antonetti can't sleep at night. Julio Hernandez, a big, soft-spoken man with a tattoo on his belly, has tried voodoo and Santería and church, but this is a little more authentic than anything he's done before.

They put up with the cigar smoke, the lingering smell of pepper rum and perpetual fees to practice their religion: a set of traditions called Palo Mayombe. Born when slaves were brought from Central Africa to Cuba, Brazil and the Dominican Republic, Palo is practiced in places with high concentrations of immigrants from those countries. In New Jersey, its epicenter is in towns like Jersey City, Union City and Newark. According to local practitioners, a significant number also practice in Passaic and Paterson, though no one could say exactly how many.

Palo's spirits have mostly African names, but practitioners gathered in Hernandez's Belleville basement chanted the Lord's prayer in Spanish, over and over, like an incantation. Like its Afro-Caribbean cousin, Santería, it is a marriage of African and Catholic beliefs, says Peter Savasteno, a Montclair State religion anthropologist. But Palo also has a darker side.

For anywhere from several hundred to several thousand dollars, Palo priests, called Paleros, serve as consultants to dead spirits, who they believe have the power to do almost anything the Paleros bid them to do. For quick results, Paleros use human bones and skulls to call upon the spirits represented by them. Because they deal in actual human remains, both the spirits and the Paleros are thought to have superhuman strength.

"Everyone wants to be a Mayombe," says Hernandez. "You can kill someone in 24 hours."

Recently, Palo has gained a higher visibility than devotees would like. Over the past three months, Newark police have arrested four practitioners for pillaging graves for ceremonial bones. Each faces 10 years in jail, and Newark Assistant Prosecutor Dean Maglione says the investigation may spread to other counties. This week, Newark prosecutors contacted the New Jersey Attorney General to see if a statewide investigation is in order.

A statute currently before the New Jersey Assembly would make possession of stolen bones a crime even if police don't prove theft.

"Some people say that we should spend police money working on the living rather than the dead," Maglione said. "But I'd like to shake Palo Mayombe up a little bit so that they're not stealing bones or stealing people's money through shoddy practices."

Hernandez is nervous. He has been contacted by Belleville police, who said they were planning to investigate a report that he was operating an illegal business in his home today or Friday.

In a closed-off space adjacent to his basement, he keeps a roomful of large stone pots called "prendas," which contain sticks, machetes, wooden crosses and other objects. Atop some sat human skulls and other bones. Scrawled on the wall was a symbol similar to the one Hernandez has tattooed on his stomach, this particular Palo house's insignia. Most prendas represent both an African spirit and a Catholic saint. After initiation ceremonies, called "scratchings" - during which Paleros cut new members with knives - they were filled with blood-stained gauze. Each prenda was draped with a chain, to keep the spirits from escaping.

Although Hernandez has receipts showing he bought his skulls from a legitimate warehouse that provides human bones to film students and medical researchers, the arrests in Newark unnerved him. He says he knows people who rob graves in Jersey City and Newark. A skull can sell for \$5,000 on the street, he says, and an unbaptized skull can command even more. He has moved all of his prendas into storage, and painted over some of the symbols on the wall.

"It's a witchhunt," he maintains. "They're after witches, but in this case witches are Paleros."

He is quick to differentiate between what he calls "Primero Sambia," God first, and "Ndoki," the religion's negative path.

But Palo's real problem may not be the "dark side," on which outsiders tend to focus, but the fact that Palo doesn't have a central hierarchy. The word Palo means "branch" in Spanish; "Mayombe" means "mysteries of the spirits" in Congo. In a sense, Palo is a mystery - a fluid group of practices that lend themselves to individual interpretations.

"There is no pope, there is no official doctrine," said Savasteno. "It's not about the practices themselves, it's about the intentions of the people doing them."

Palo has its detractors even among people who practice other African-based religions. A Paterson botanica owner calls it "the dark side of Santería," saying she doesn't even want to know if any of her customers practice Palo.

"I know people from Palo who practice good, but a lot of people from Santería don't want to be associated with Palo because it's evil," says Felix Mota, a voodoo practitioner in Passaic who owns a store that sells candles, elixirs and supplies used in Palo ceremonies. Palo is growing, he says; lately, he can't keep up with the demand for the Palo book he stocks. Although Passaic police say they have not investigated any grave-robbing cases, Mota says he knows several practitioners who use stolen bones.

Even some practitioners acknowledge the religion's dark side, saying those who come to it sometimes come out of desperation.

"Palo can be used for good, and it can be used for evil," Hernandez says. "It's easy to cross over."

\* \* \*

Hernandez lights a cigar and surveys the basement room proprietarily. He is the high priest here. As some of the believers pass him, they call him "Padrino," Spanish for godfather.

Recently, a student at Eastside High School, where Hernandez works as a guard, spotted his tattoo - a circle bisected by outward-pointing arrows - and asked if he was in a gang. Laughing, Hernandez told them, "You should join my gang, and become a king," meaning Palo and its perceived powers.

"There's a saying in (Hispanic) culture, 'If your shoes are being tightened, go to a soothsayer,'" says Mirna Ramos, one of Hernandez's spiritual godchildren. "You can be raised Roman Catholic, but you go to that other person if you need help."

Most of the people in the room say they came to Palo as a last resort, and decided to stay.

David Santiago tried many paths in life, but shunned the religion that his father, an avid Pentecostal minister, taught him when he was growing up in Paterson. He dealt drugs, slept near the train tracks and became a 5-percenter, a member of a Muslim sect, classified by law enforcement officials as a violent gang. He found Hernandez while seeking help for a simple problem, a twisted ankle.

One day he limped into Eastside, where he, like Hernandez, works as a guard. That night he went to Hernandez's basement, where Hernandez said a "mambo," or spell, in a mix of Congo and Cuban slang, then slaughtered a chicken, rubbing the blood on Santiago's leg. The leg felt better, Santiago said, but he was most impressed with Hernandez's care .

"My father's never been there for me; he tries to impose his views on me," said Santiago, adding that his father calls Palo "devil stuff." He pointed to Hernandez: "I feel like he's my real father - right there."

Hernandez, who is relatively new to Palo, says people have asked him to use spells to harm others, but he ignores such requests, choosing to address more mundane problems like immigration snarls, diseases and injuries.

Dire problems require him to kill a four-legged animal - usually a goat - for which he charges about \$100, he says. For immigration problems, he wraps an individual's INS documents, a paper inscribed with the lawyers' names and other relevant documents around a prenda, a vessel representing Sarabonda, Palo's chief spirit, who Hernandez says "owns the courts and owns technology." Then he'll say a mambo and slaughter a chicken, dripping its blood into the pot as an offering.

But for Alisa Johnson, a vivacious, dark-skinned Passaic woman, Hernandez says he merely served as a counselor. Johnson had been ousted numerous times from her adoptive parents' house. She experimented with drugs. She bounced from man to man, church to church. None did anything for her, she says - church least of all.

"They tell you you die and you go to sleep; you mean to say that's all there is?" she found herself asking. When she met Hernandez through a neighbor, she felt a connection to him, she says, and thought he could bring her closer to her ancestors.

Johnson can remember wanting to talk to the dead, even as a little girl. The first time was at her grandmother's funeral, when she was 6. She describes standing in front of the coffin and seeing her dead grandmother open her eyes.

"She looked at me and said, 'Baby, you did good,'" recalls Johnson, who lives in Passaic with her three daughters. "A lot of times after that, I would think I was crazy. I would see things."

After a few sessions in the basement temple, Johnson came to rely on Hernandez, calling him whenever a problem arose. She called when the UPS truck she was driving overturned on the highway, and when she twisted her ankle getting out of bed in the morning. She came to believe she had a family working for her, including African ancestors she never knew about.

Recently, Johnson asked Hernandez if she should quit her UPS job. He consulted the spirits, throwing cowrie shells on the basement floor and reading their pattern to determine the answer - which was yes. Johnson went on unemployment and began spending more time with her daughters. She credits Hernandez with bringing her close to her present family and her African roots, even though it was Palo that helped make her unemployed. But Hernandez claims he was mining for her true intentions like a therapist.

"She had to make her own way," said Hernandez. "I couldn't help her. She just had to listen to the spirits."

\* \* \*

A few weeks after the basement ceremony, Hernandez's spiritual godchildren gathered in Belleville for one of the "family meetings" they have been holding every Monday night. They all

expressed their loyalty to him in the face of his prediction that, "it was foretold that police were going to come and arrest me."

The things that elude outsiders about Palo are precisely what draw people from different denominations to Hernandez's basement. Some come to experience spirit possession, some to be "cleansed" by a rooster in front of a cauldron of bones. But most come simply because it is a place where they are not preached to, and where, sometimes, for a small fee, they can find what eludes them in church.

"I was baptized and the whole nine," said Johnson, whose spirit sometimes takes on the form of a dancing Congolese woman. "You knew exactly what was going to happen: Easter, Palm Sunday... with (Palo) you can never predict."

People in the room spoke recalled how, just a few weeks earlier, in this place, Indio spit red pepper rum, walked on all fours and drank honey from the bottle. When the spirit left him, he stood upright before a shy, older woman in a billowing white dress and looked her up and down.

"You're so beautiful," he told her. "You've got to put on your high heels and dance."