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HOUSES OF WORSHIP

Resting Without Peace

By William McGowan

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Newark, N.J.

On Halloween, the tenements at the corner of Central Avenue and Norfolk Street lacked jack-o'-lanterns, cardboard skeletons and other ghostly iconography. But they didn't need Halloween decorations to be scary.

The police say that, until recently, one of them housed a basement temple devoted to Palo Mayombe, a secretive Afro-Cuban cult believed to be linked to recent grave robberies in the area. Authorities think they have the skulls and bones to prove it.

Scholars consider Palo a "magico-spiritual tradition" with West African roots. It took shape in the New World among slaves in 19th-century Cuba. According to one slave account, Palo was "the Congo man's revenge against his master." Many plantation owners were terrified of it.

Raul Canizares, a former University of South Florida instructor, is a palero, or Palo priest. He says that Palo believes in "a clear and long-standing battle between absolute good and absolute evil, the tension between the two being the energy that propels existence." Experts not of the faith say that Palo is "simply evil."

The cult includes a hierarchy of spirits, including a major god called Sambi, a host of demigods, and menial spirits, some with ragged or even comic emanations. Humans can access those spirits for practical assistance in the affairs of daily life (e.g., business, love, health).

Unlike its close relative, Santería, which stops at animal sacrifice, Palo believes that dead humans can also help connect believers to the spiritual realm. Paleros, says Mr. Canizares, believe that "the body has a right to be resurrected as a religious aid." In the mythology of Palo, he says, "there is nothing wrong with asking a skeleton to work with you."

Central to Palo ritual is an iron cauldron referred to as a *nganga* or *prenda*. The repository of all palero power, these pots are sometimes passed from generation to generation. They hold sacred Palo icons, such as sticks from

sacred shrubs, rocks, dirt from graves, the bloody remains from animal sacrifices, bugs, lizards -- and, not least, human bones.

Skulls are the most prized form of human remains put into the nganga. Effort is made to leave at least three-quarters of the skull exposed, to enhance the visual effect for adherents at services. The nganga is the home to the spirit of a particular Palo god as well as the spirit of the dead person whose remains are "fed to the nganga."

Which brings us to grave robbing, or "so-called grave robbing," as paleros like Mr. Canizares refer to it, objecting to Western judgmentalism. Palo doctrine insists that those who take remains from graves perform elaborate "permission rituals." The dead are to be left alone if they say no. A palero can gauge skeletal interest by sprinkling liquor on a grave and listening for a rumbling sound -- i.e., "yes." Other permission rituals involve nailing an animal's tongue to a tree so the spirit can speak through it.

Not all skeletons are created equal: The more evil or powerful a person was in life, and the more violent the death, the better. This makes criminals and corrupt politicians especially appealing, along with murder victims and suicides. The longer a person has been dead, the better, too. An infant's full skeleton is also highly prized for its power.

With its high concentration of Cuban immigrants, northern New Jersey has become a Palo hotbed. In 1999, Kearny, N.J., police charged a Palo priest and several followers with the theft of the remains of an infant dead for 83 years. Workers at the cemetery had found machetes in trees, and animal tongues.

Newark seems to be the favorite target now. One case involved the theft of Leonard Perna, a tavern owner dead for 13 years before robbers broke into his crypt in 1999. According to his son, Michael, Perna may have been targeted by Palo robbers who thought he was related to a mobster named Perna and thus a source of extra mojo. One man was indicted, but connections to a Palo conspiracy remained elusive until an informant led police to a religious-items store, or botanica, while a ritual was in progress in August of this year. Inside the pots were three skulls and body parts from five corpses. Police charged the store owner with burglary, theft and conspiracy.

Just a month ago, Newark police raided the scruffy tenement at Central and Norfolk. Inside a basement worship room, 10-gallon Palo pots held at least two sets of human remains, including two skulls. Leonard Perna may have been found: A ring thought to be his, as well as a matchbook with his date of birth and date on death written on it, was found on the premises. The other bones may belong to a juvenile. This, police say, raises the prospect of an unreported grave robbery or even a murder.

The scene inside the worship room, says Newark Detective Donald Stabile, was ghastly. Animal parts were arranged on altars around the room. The

basement "had an odor that you keep with you -- like your first DOA." Charged with receiving stolen property and desecrating human remains were Eddie Figueroa, 56, and Eddie Jr., 35. According to police, the younger Figueroa admitted that he was a palero; the older one simply blamed others unknown to him for putting remains in the vessels without his knowledge. Both men made bail.

"Most members of my family are no longer planning to be buried," says Leonard Perna's son. "We will be cremated." As for the mobster Perna's "family," police don't know whether they are upset about having their dead apparently targeted by grave robbers. But if HBO ever plans a joint episode of "Six Feet Under" and the "The Sopranos," this would be the storyline to follow.

Mr. McGowan is the author of "Coloring the News."

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