

## **International and Comparative**

*Kongo Graphic Writing and Other Narratives of the Sign.* By BÁRBARO MARTÍNEZ-RUIZ. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013. Photographs. Illustrations. Maps. Tables. Notes. Bibliography. Index. vii, 228 pp. Cloth, \$75.00.

Based upon decades of research on several continents and in many languages, this is the first study of precolonial Bakongo thought that includes Caribbean developments such as the Palo Mayombe initiation system founded in Cuba from the 1500s onward. The author argues “that multiple, varied communication tools, including written symbols, religious objects, oral traditions, and body language, have consistently been integrated by the Bakongo into structured systems of graphic writing” (p. 1). The complex has deep historical roots, “the earliest evidence” for which “is found in multiple archaeological sites around the border between Angola and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, an area that covers close to two hundred kilometers” (p. 50). Although these sites have not been dated, the author finds evidence for their antiquity by comparing the signs in many cave sites in the region of Mbanza Kongo, the early capital city of the Bakongo people, as well as those brought by enslaved Bakongo migrants to the Caribbean, where they are still used.

Additionally, the author finds “undeniable continuity between contemporary graphic writing systems used in Central Africa and those used in Cuba and between these systems and millennia-old rupestrian [cave] art found in Angola and the Democratic

Republic of the Congo" (p. 2). This claim builds upon the research classics of Fernando Ortiz and Lydia Cabrera, the latter of whom in particular "openly emphasized her aim of recovering the memory of Africans and their contributions" (p. 121). Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz estimates that between 4,000 and 5,000 graphic signs are used in Cuban Kongo initiation systems (p. 125). Several charts in his text compare and examine the Bakongo signs in Central Africa and in Cuba, finding continuity but also creativity in the Kongo-based traditions of the Caribbean. For instance, he argues that *firmas* (signatures) in Cuba reflect Kongo knowledge and beliefs imported from Central Africa during three centuries of migration; meanwhile, "the complex manner in which firmas are now constructed, employed, and understood demonstrate high levels of creativity and cultural adaptation" (p. 147).

This project is a riposte to the theory-laden claim by North American scholars that the plantation system destroyed African heritage. While studies like Sidney Mintz and Richard Price's *The Birth of African-American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective* (1992), Richard Price's "The Miracle of Creolization: A Retrospective" (2001), and Stephan Palmié's *The Cooking of History: How Not to Study Afro-Cuban Religion* (2013) undertook no research on the African continent, Martínez-Ruiz documents Central African foundations of Cuban Palo and finds more continuity. To accomplish this, he joins historiography, art history, and linguistics with participant observation in Bakongo and Cuban Kongo initiation schools, concluding that "to study Kongo cosmogony at the highest level, one must be a member of an initiation society" (p. 118). Of course such arduous research is intellectually risky, but the book's rich and plausible findings would not have been possible in any other way. Indeed, Martínez-Ruiz's project was not merely academic: he is an African descendant raised in Havana within the "Afro-Cuban Palo Monte religion," in which "learning how to use graphic forms is a fundamental requirement for all members" (p. 3). Having kept a notebook of graphic signs for personal study, he was motivated to trace "the African sources present within contemporary Cuban graphic writing" (p. 3). His firsthand observations of Central African culture began when he traveled to Angola as part of the Cuban military expedition from 1986 to 1988. Then as an art history student at the University of Havana, he was inspired by Robert Farris Thompson's discussion of "Kongo art and religion in the Americas" in *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (1983), and he completed his doctorate on Kongo graphics with Thompson at Yale University (p. 4). His unique experience as a native ethnographer is far from the standard perspective of colonial anthropology and the armchair literary skepticism of postmodern critics.

For all these reasons, this book is foundational for any project to revitalize transatlantic study of black cultures, as it overcomes the "disconnect between Africanists focused on the study of cultural, artistic, and linguistic practices in Africa and scholars studying traditions in the African diaspora without sufficient reference to the agency of African cultural history" (p. 11). The study's significance is not limited to Central Africa, because as the author notes, other sub-Saharan regions developed parallel graphic writing systems, such as the Nsibidi codes of the Cross River region of Nigeria and Cameroon, many of which continued to develop after the Middle Passage (p. 192). The

**Book Reviews / International and Comparative**

403

work is also refreshingly accessible to nonacademic readers, although the large number of terms in Kikongo and Spanish will prove daunting in the absence of a glossary and other linguistic apparatus. It is well worth the attention of all professional and popular students of African and African American cultural history, religion, philosophy, cultural anthropology, and art history.

IVOR L. MILLER, University of Calabar

DOI 10.1215/00182168-3484798