CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Kongo Graphic Writing is a study of structured visual expression among the Bakongo people in Central Africa and their descendants in Cuba. The book is built around the central argument 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. These systems are used to organize daily life, enable interactions between humans and the natural and spiritual worlds, and preserve and transmit cosmological and cosmogonical belief systems.

The systematic modes of graphic expression documented among the Bakongo over the past few centuries represent the culmination of multiple advancements in communication. The first step in this development chain was the initial use of visual signs as code, a step made possible by a conceptual leap that allowed the attribution of culturally relevant meaning to a set of abstract and pictographic representations. The early signs and symbols were modeled in distinct geometric, pictographic form and were later assigned more nuanced contextual meanings when used for specific functions, thus becoming the primary source for the gradual establishment of a Kongo graphic repertoire and the subsequent development of a mechanism for fluent visual narrative. Although the timeline of and driving forces behind the development from an initial inventory of signs to today's complex graphic writing systems may never be fully known, the ancient iconic carvings and paintings documented at numerous sites in the forests and savanna of Central Africa suggest both a long history and a central role for graphic writing in the cultural and social organization of the Bantu settlers, and the tradition's survival and adaptability in the face of historical, sociopolitical, and cultural challenges speak to its strength and importance.

Given their central role in developing, documenting, preserving, and transmitting the core beliefs, values, and traditions of people, understanding the development and use of graphic writing systems offers insights into Kongo religious structures, traditional knowledge, pharmacopeias, and verbal and oral histories. More specifically, as a vehicle for historical analysis, graphic writing systems permit us to recognize and trace the very foundation of Kongo culture. With this as our ultimate goal, in the following chapters we will explore the cosmology, cosmogony, and moral philosophy that have informed the use and meaning of graphic writing among the

Bakongo over time and will explore in detail the traditions that shape the systematic use of this system. We will see that these traditions demonstrate an undeniable continuity between contemporary graphic writing systems used in Central Africa and those used in Cuba and between these systems and millennia-old rupestrian art found in Angola and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The Bakongo examine the powerful and central role that graphic communication has played in transmitting cultural knowledge, values, and beliefs from generation to generation, thus preserving cultural, social, and spiritual identity throughout periods of extreme disruption.

In Chapter 2, "The Atlantic Passage: The Spread of Kongo Belief in Africa and to the Americas," we provide the basic historical context for the development of Kongo graphic writing systems. A brief description of the physical and cultural history of the Bakongo is offered, with a focus on the population movements and conditions that led to the formation and survival of Kongo cultural practices and beliefs and their evolution over time and through periods of upheaval, such as colonialism and independence, the slave trade, and emancipation.

In Chapter 3, "The Process of Meaning Making: The Kongo Universe," we introduce the basic cosmology that underlies Kongo culture. Here we discuss the religious context within which the Bakongo and their descendants live and investigate the manner in which they contextualize and interpret the world around them. Weaving together strands of past and present beliefs in Central Africa and Cuba and demonstrating the intertwined histories and parallel development of these two cultures, we discuss Kongo myths of origin, the spiritual role accorded the ancestors, the powers attributed to and characteristics of natural and cosmic forces, and the choreographed interactions between man and God at all stages of the life cycle.

In Chapter 4, "Afro-Atlantic Graphic Writing: Bidimbu, Bisinsu, and Firmas," we examine the ways in which the cosmological and cosmogonical underpinnings explored in Chapter 3 both inform and are expressed by two-dimensional components of graphic writing systems. Known as *bidimbu* or *bisinsu* in Central Africa and *firmas* in Cuba, the written symbols used by the Bakongo function foremost as a means by which to record religious exegesis, guide and shape religious praxis, and embody spiritual and cultural principles. They provide community members a means by which to understand and engage the world and to communicate with one another and with ancestral and spiritual forces. Beginning with ancient rupestrian art (some known, some never previously documented), in this chapter we trace the development of graphic writing in Central Africa, its involuntary transplantation to the new world, and the ongoing role it plays in Bakongo and Bakongo-descended religion and culture on both sides of the Atlantic. Rich with multilayered meanings and used for lay purposes (such as conveying messages between hunters and demarcating productive agricultural sites) as well as religious ones in Central Africa, graphic writing in Cuba disappeared from the secular world while flourishing in the sacred realm and became what is today an exceedingly complex and fiercely pro-

tected language that requires many years for mastery. In addition to tracing the development of graphic writing forms and exploring the range of their uses, in Chapter 4 we delve deeply into the meanings embedded in such forms and details as the manner in which the belief systems set forth in the first chapter are integrated into and expressed through the numerous examples provided.

In Chapter 5, "Beyond the Scripture: Physical Forms of Graphic Writing," we look beyond conventional understandings of writing to explore the roles played by physical objects and oral traditions. We argue that these multi- and nondimensional modes of communication, by overlapping and reexpressing the beliefs and meanings conveyed by written symbols, allow the practitioners to both know and communicate their cultural and individual identities. We explore the concurrent diversity and constancy evidenced in *minkisi*, or *prendas* in Cuba—sacred objects built to contain spiritual forces and command their attendant powers—as well as the *mambos* and other ritual words used to activate and engage these spirits and transmit cultural and religious teachings. We examine numerous examples of these objects—some in contemporary usage—with their various physical features, construction materials, and other visual elements "read" to illustrate the intentional precision and richness of meaning conveyed through their design. While continuing to trace the close connections between the forms manifest in Central Africa and those in Cuba, in Chapter 5 we also argue that it is this integration of a full range of visual and oral communicative techniques that both defines and is made possible by graphic writing systems.

This book grows out of several decades of involvement in Kongo-based graphic writing systems. My earliest work on the topic was personal. Growing up inside the Afro-Cuban Palo Monte religion, I attempted to organize the meanings and uses of the signs and symbols I learned during my early religious education. Learning how to use graphic forms is a fundamental requirement for all members of the religion. One's level of proficiency is related to the hierarchy within the religion. It is assumed that a higher level requires more knowledge and fluency in the use of graphic communication. In the early 1970s I created a notebook with a growing graphic vocabulary that helped me practice and teach other members of the religion how to create basic meanings using written signs. I learned that the graphic writing used by Palo Monte priests (*paleros*) involves more than just symbols and includes a variety of signs and actions that are systematically organized into a coherent process of signifying. I soon sought to expand my understanding of this process beyond its uses within the borders of Cuban culture. My curiosity raised many questions, such as how a tradition based in African beliefs and practices came to occupy a prominent place in the religious mosaic of Cuba. What specific historical and cultural conditions existed to allow this process to develop and survive in Cuba? What role did graphic communication play within the colonial setting and for the people oppressed by that system? Would it be possible to trace the African sources present within contemporary Cuban graphic writing and to understand the

process that led from one to the other? Spending two years, from 1986 to 1988, in Angola with the Cuban army gave me an opportunity to witness practices and hear about beliefs not dissimilar to those with which I was raised and further piqued my interest in gaining a fuller understanding of the connections between the traditions practiced continents apart.

When I returned to Cuba from Angola in 1988, I began to study art history at Havana University. As part of my early coursework, I read a chapter from Robert Farris Thompson's *Flash of the Spirit*, published four years earlier. I immediately recognized the chapter's importance for my future research interest. I found the chapter "The Sign of the Four Moments of the Sun: Kongo Art and Religion in the Americas" to be a brilliant unification of the Kongo graphic writing tradition in Cuba with its counterpart in Central Africa. I read the chapter many times during the next few weeks, feeling that this was what I wanted to do—it was an essay I wished I had written. I still do. Its comparison across primary sources and close visual analysis of the process of making meaning in both Central Africa and the Caribbean resonated deeply with material from my studies and from my own personal experiences in Afro-Cuban religion. It made me view such experiences in a new way. This first encounter with Thompson's work—exemplified by this chapter that achieves a successful balance of interpretative insight and theoretical sophistication, deeply rooted in Kongo material culture—has come back to me frequently over the years as I have deepened my studies, conducted my own research, and developed classes for new students of the subject. Thompson's scholarship remains a cornerstone of the literature across those fields in which he is a pioneer, and his work, as well as the training I received from him as my doctoral adviser, continues to inspire and inform my own work, including this book, which attempts, among other goals, to answer my own early questions about my religious upbringing.

EXISTING LITERATURE

As we will explore in detail in subsequent chapters of this book, graphic writing among the Kongo is not an imitation of speech and its meaning is not phonocentric, that is, dependent on interpretation of specific sounds. It is a system of communication that is not derived from, but that interfaces with, multiple forms of meaning notation, including symbols, pictographs, ideograms, morphemograms, and logographs, as well as more complex three-dimensional figures, gestures, and actions. A classic example of the adage that a sum is greater than its parts, Kongo graphic writing is best understood systemically rather than through a cataloging of the meanings underlying distinct, alphabetic signs. Integrating belief systems with cosmogonical structure, Kongo graphic writing serves a recording, storytelling, and constructive role and goes far beyond picture theory, in which specific symbols or images serve as direct representation of concepts and speakable meanings. Theories based on linguistic paradigms rooted in Western traditions will not lead to an understanding of Kongo graphic writing systems;

nor will they assist in the examination of the continuity between such writing systems in Central Africa and the Kongo diaspora.

Given the breadth of usage meaning and form of graphic writing systems among the Bakongo, multiple and diverse strands of scholarship contribute to our understanding. However, little academic work exists that examines forms of graphic communication in Central Africa or the Caribbean in great depth or in a social context. Historian Giovanni Antonio da Montecuccolo Cavazzi in 1687 documented detailed descriptions and images of Kongo daily life and religious practice, and missionaries and ethnographers Karl Laman, Joseph van Wing, and Efraim Andersson documented vast amounts of information on the cultures and religions they encountered while living in Central Africa. These reports, however, like other travel accounts and missionary writings emerging out of early European contact with the region, were informative but did not focus on or even appreciate the forms and uses of graphic expression and, as Wyatt MacGaffey notes, reflected their authors' status as observers rather than practitioners or academics.[1] Indeed, many of the earliest studies of writing in Africa furthered the idea that African people are without writing. Value was attributed only to writing that conformed to classic Western print culture, that is, writing built from a single alphabet and resulting in the publication of books and other literary endeavors, and no effort was made to understand African forms of graphic expression on their own terms. Other publications on the subject, including those by prominent explorers David Livingstone and Henry Morton Stanley, were written in the nineteenth-century colonial context, and their portrayal of Africans as cultureless and uncivilized was consistent with the political and religious aims of the day. Like the other so-called benefits of a civilizing European colonial regime, the introduction of the "technology" of writing was believed to be the result of Western influence.

Early scholarship on African writing focused mainly on northern Africa, including Egyptian hieroglyphics, generally examined as part of a Western discourse on antiquity, Christian examples such as the Coptic religious texts in Egypt and Ethiopia, and Islamic writing among the Berbers in Morocco and Andalusia, Spain. Other African sub-Saharan writings, such as Vaï in West Africa, Mum script in Cameroon, and the Nsibidi script of the Efik and Ekoï in Cameroon and Nigeria, received less attention.[2]

Exceptions to this general lack of attention include Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's work on African cultural references, which influenced the work of C. G. Jung, particularly the latter's glossary of signs, but ignored culturally specific constructed meanings and described African graphic expression as lacking consciousness.[3] Publications by H. Jensen, J. H. Greenberg, J. DeFrancis, D. Dalby, and C. Geertz reviewed and catalogued certain examples of African writing in encyclopedic fashion and reinforced the idea of a universality of writing in which Africa is represented in a manner that lacks both historical and geographic contextualization.[4] Monographic publications of more culturally specific case studies have been made by scholars including K. F.

Campbell, J. K. MacGregor, G. Meurant, Cheikh Anta Diop, Théophile Obenga, Michele Leiris, and Gerhard Kubik. Although these works did attempt to explore in more depth the social and cultural contexts in which African writing emerged, they continued to struggle with the idea that history could be preserved without a standardized alphabetic system and failed to move beyond the political and social legacy of the Western understanding of language and writing in which narratives are understandable only within a defined and bounded realm of language. Also emerging from an understanding of writing limited by Western conventions are demands for permanency and readability. The failure to attribute value to transient expressions that are not permanently memorialized in material form prevented scholars from taking into account a wider range of graphic expression that includes other forms of knowledge notation and nonverbal mechanisms such as gesture, ephemeral performances, and music and can be used to establish ideas, record memories, and document facts during a period of rapid and uncontrollable changes.

Linguists Simon Battestini, David Dalby, Joseph Greenberg, and Théophile Obenga have written generally on graphic traditions in Africa, and musicologist and linguist Gerhard Kubik has documented the uses and forms of Sona writing among the Bachokwe people of eastern Angola. Of these, Simon Battestini has been most successful at combating the misconception that African peoples do not have writing traditions, particularly in *African Writing and Text*, where he introduces a new definition of writing, examines numerous Western linguistic and semiotic texts, and points out their limitations and ideological constraints. However, even Battestini and other scholars of African writing seeking to promote a more complete view of writing in sub-Saharan Africa continue to focus primarily on the idea of two-dimensional writing instead of the larger rubric of conceptual expression that graphic writing systems encompass. Milestone works by Obenga and Battestini, while partially successful, are limited by the use of the same Western theoretical linguistic paradigms that insist on understanding writing merely as recorded language. These studies continue to overemphasize the classification of graphic markers and attempt to impose a fundamentally alphabetic structure on more complex modes of graphic writing.

Among the few scholars who viewed African graphic expression more holistically, Marcel Griaule's detailed epistemological case study on the Dogon culture in West Africa in the early 1960s focused on oral and graphic accounts such as mythologies and examined the insights such accounts can provide into material culture, visual expression, societal organization, and cultural principles. Griaule's synthesis of Dogon cosmogony and religion and his view that verbal history constitutes a key component of a cultural foundation rooted in cosmogony that is in turn expressed through a variety of graphic notations have important implications for the study of other cultural groups and have informed some of the methodology underlying this book.[5] Griaule explores specific references to such history and belief systems that are embedded in Dogon linguistic traits and persuasively argues that

graphic expression and oral accounts related to cosmogony are a vital component of the foundation of cultural principles such as memory and other forms through which knowledge is conveyed, such as wall paintings and decorative motifs. As discussed in Chapter 4, Griaule also recognizes the continuity of graphic symbols over time and has produced a groundbreaking compendium of rupestrian signs and symbols in *Le renard pâle* (The Pale Fox), which Griaule published in collaboration with G. Dieterlen. Griaule's work successfully counters the Western demands for permanency and readability and breaks new ground in part because of the extensive fieldwork on which it is based and its use of a multidisciplinary methodology.

Although they are generally not studied in the context of writing despite their role in complex systems of graphic communication, three-dimensional art forms in Central Africa have been documented and examined in traditional African art history texts, including those by Cheikh Anta Diop, Monni Adams, Muhammad Ali Kahn, Louis Brenner, Donald Jackson, Gaston Maspéro, David Dalby, Victor Y. Mudimbe, Jacques Fédry, Joseph Greenberg, Georges Meurant, and William Warburton. Many of these texts contain conventional, speculative, and idealistic interpretations of the object, but they provide little insight into the social and spiritual context of art and do not discuss the manner in which such objects are used in conjunction with other forms of visual art or graphic expression. As Wyatt MacGaffey argues in *Custom and Government in the Lower Congo* and *Astonishment and Power*, the consideration of Kongo material culture across disciplines has generally been done in one of two ways.[6] The first is derived from the nineteenth-century disciplines of anthropology and ethnography, which although distinct fields at the time, studied the same objects and "reduce[d] the totality of the phenomenon to an aspect selected for its consonance with a particular Western institution."[7] Characterizing a second approach, one still favored by many museums and private collections, MacGaffey asserts that general Western assumptions and associations with the notion of primitivism align to endeavor to produce a theatrical visual pleasure, such as through "an object haphazardly selected as representative of a given *nkisi* and subsequently labeled 'fetish' in a museum collection."[8]

Scholars who have studied and defined graphic expression more broadly than as a collection of traditional objects or conventional visible marks and have considered the societal role of both two- and three-dimensional visual forms include Costa Petridis, Zoe Strother, Evan M. Maurer, Allen F. Roberts, and Mary Nooter Roberts, particularly through their studies of how forms of graphic expression are used in divinatory strategies as a mechanism for the visible notation of the divinatory records. Such work has expanded the definition of graphic expression to include systems of signs, numerology, forms of religious exegesis, rites of passage, initiations, and kinetic and sonic events such as ephemeral masquerades. This more expansive definition allows one to understand complex graphic expression as distinct from a system that merely functions to record language. Maurer and Roberts's arguments are presented in *Tabwa: The Rising of a New Moon: A Century of Tabwa*

Art, where they explore the social, political, economic, and religious historical context, the cosmology, the specific geographic and ecological environment, and the cultural function of Tabwa art.[9] Also making a substantial contribution to the field of visual communication in African art is the work by Mary Nooter Roberts among the Luba people in Central Africa. Like Allen Roberts, Mary Roberts endeavors to create a methodological framework to facilitate a better understanding of graphic expression and the epistemological implications of the African notion of art. Both scholars define and categorize graphic expressions in specific cultural and religious practices such as divinatory and initiation rites and explore the relationships between power and form and between changes in form and changes in society.[10]

A number of other scholars from a variety of disciplines have been similarly interested in the religious and other cultural practices of the Kongo and related cultural groups and have contributed to an understanding of some of the components of graphic writing systems, although they did not study the subject practices in this light. Anthropologist Wyatt MacGaffey conducted extensive fieldwork in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and has published numerous pieces on Central African history and culture, focusing on social and political organizations and the history and formation of religious practices. Among MacGaffey's most significant contributions is his work on the Kikongo language and its influence on and reflection of cultural and religious beliefs. Other writers, including Bronislaw Malinowski, Pierre Verger, Fernando Ortiz, Lydia Cabrera, Argeliers León, Roger Bastide, Yeda Pessoa de Castro, Jan Vansina, and John Thornton, have also touched upon certain of the more visible religious practices. Farther afield, but interesting in its attention to ritual practices, the work of Luc de Heusch and Victor Turner uses traditional anthropological and ethnographic methodologies like those used by Daniel Biebuyck, Rik Ceyssens, Filip De Boeck, Renaat Devisch, Dunja Hersak, and Pierre Petit to explore conflict, social drama, and the formation of political and social institutions among the Kongo and Ndembu people in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Zambia.[11] In particular, de Heusch's and Turner's studies of social relationships and development of a framework from which to understand how knowledge is created and exchanged in a large sociopolitical context provide a useful foundation for the study of the development and spread of graphic writing systems and the meanings embedded therein.

The two scholars who delved into Kongo religious and cultural communication systems in the most depth are linguist Clémentine Faïk-Nzuji, in *Arts africains: Signes et symboles*, and African art historian Robert Farris Thompson, in *The Four Moments of the Sun*, and it is from their work that this book most directly follows. Faïk-Nzuji introduces the notion of *bidimbu* as a mode of expression and graphic tradition in Central and West Africa, critiques the concept of symbol in the context of African culture and language, and attempts to explain the semantic complexity of the tradition through the exploration of basic linguistics. Robert Farris Thompson explains the use of basic Kongo graphic writing while exploring the

implications of the development of this tradition across forms of visual expression in the Bakongo world in Central Africa and its extension in the diaspora of the Americas. In his work on African art and culture in the diaspora, Thompson not only recognizes the direct links between the aesthetic of the black Americas and artistic expression and visual style on the African continent and provides substantial examples of graphic expression and sources of interaction within religious, philosophical, artistic, and historiographic contexts but also is the first scholar to study written symbols, body signs, and religious or artistic objects as components of a single cultural system. This inclusive theory, and its focus on connections over divisions, has broad implications for the field of African art history and has inspired and guided the approach taken in this work. The systematic exploration of the meanings and uses of these communicative forms in this book builds on the foundation laid by Faïk-Nzuji and Thompson and aims, particularly through its incorporation of new primary source material, to both broaden and deepen the study of Central African graphic writing and to present a fully developed theory of graphic writing systems applicable to sub-Saharan African culture that does not otherwise exist. It also owes a great debt to the extensive and detailed writing on Kongo cosmology and cosmogony, as well as the use of graphic writing and other forms of visual communication in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Angola by philosopher, linguist, and Kongo priest Kimbandende Kia Bunseki Fu-Kiau.

Complementing the detailed and groundbreaking work presented by Thompson and Faïk-Nzuji is more recent work, such as the collection of essays contained in *Inscribing Meaning: Writing and Graphic Systems in African Art*, edited by Christine Kreamer and Sarah Adams (2007), that explores the range and depth of graphic expression in Africa in a more thorough and thoughtful way than most prior scholarship. This exceptional, comprehensive, and informative volume examines African graphic traditions and their influence on other forms of visual practices such as contemporary art and aims to challenge popular misperceptions that do not recognize Africa's contributions to the global history of writing. The collection of essays in *Inscribing Meaning* offers the most up-to-date information on systems of recording language and creating and communicating meaning in multiple African cultures. Contributions from leading scholars, including art historians, anthropologists, and literary theorists such as Mary Nooter Roberts, Simon Battestini, Elizabeth Harney, Christine M. Kreamer, and Raymond A. Silverman, examine the way African cultures convey meaning through graphic practices. In sections such as "Inscribing the Body," "Sacred Scripts," "Inscribing Power/Writing Politics," "Circumscribing Space," and "Word Play," essay topics range from a historical survey of writing throughout Africa ("Recording, Communicating, and Making Visible: A History of Writing and Systems of Graphic Symbolism in Africa" by Konrad Tuchsherer) to detailed studies of specific forms such as Bamana mud cloths ("Cloth as Amulet" by Sarah Brett-Smith) or Nsibidi scripts in the Cross River region ("Nsibidi: Old and New Scripts" by

Amanda Carlson) to discussions of language as used in contemporary African art ("Word Play: Text and Image in Contemporary African Art" by Elizabeth Harney). Drawing on a range of disciplines and methodologies, the *Inscribing Meaning* authors as a whole succeed in facilitating a discussion on specific features of African graphic traditions while not losing sight of the broader communicative role played by such graphic forms, a role rooted in cultural specificity, history, and local knowledge.

In its focus on graphic writing systems and religious practices in Cuba as well as Central Africa, this book follows most closely from classic texts on Afro-Cuban culture, including those by Lydia Cabrera, Argeliers León, and Fernando Ortiz, who was the first author to recognize that Africans and African descendants in Cuba shared a recognizable culture. Prior to Ortiz, certain folklorists and anthropologists denied any historic and cultural continuity between African traditions and Afro-Cuban religions and cultures and argued that the Afro-Cuban religions have their own unique and independent genesis.[12] Particularly prevalent in the early twentieth century, such arguments were often surrounded by and integrated into larger debates about national identity and the intelligence and humanity of African descendants in Cuba.

Fernando Ortiz was the first scholar to write about Afro-Cuban culture with some sense of excitement and an attempt at academic rigor, and he explicitly recognized the African contributions to the construction of Cuban culture. Ortiz, a lawyer by profession, was a scholar who drew his methodology from that of criminal anthropology, publishing several books that had a profound impact on the discourse surrounding identity and understanding of developing culture in Cuba as well as more broadly in the Americas. Ortiz's principal argument was that Africans and African descendants underwent a complex sociocultural process of exchange, negotiation, and reshaping of cultural traits that Ortiz termed *transculturation*.[13] As Bronislaw Malinowski described it, for Ortiz, transculturation "was an exchange of important factors"[14] that began to be recognized as a form of public identity (African, Spanish, Chinese) in which the culture of African as well as European descendants is subordinated to an imposed state structure in which nationalism and individuals' identity as citizen subjects are prized. Malinowski went on to argue that the amalgamation of multiple cultural components into a nation was motivated and determined by forces including "the new habitat as well as the old traits of both cultures, the interplay of economic factors peculiar to the New World as well as a new social organization of labor, capital, and enterprise."[15] Ortiz's work on the tension between popular, civil, and national culture dominated by Spanish cultural forms was and remains a model for other scholars examining the relationship between the idea and use of visual language and the organizing and imagining of sociopolitical practices.[16] Ortiz's work, particularly his 1975 book *Los negros esclavos*, was also groundbreaking insofar as it provided an analysis of causality, distinguished the multiple ethnicities that constitute Cuban cultural identity, and discussed, through refer-

ences to the work of historian Hubert Aimes, the cultural distribution of the slaves brought to Cuba.[17]

Although containing satisfactory descriptions and inventories of signs and symbols used during Kongo-, Ejagham-, and Efik-based religious practices in Cuba, the publications *Reglas de Congo* and *Anaforuana* by Lydia Cabrera and "De paleros y firmas se trata"[18] by Argeliers León exemplify the suppression of indigenous Afro-Cuban historiography and graphic tradition by circumventing traditional sources of Afro-Cuban knowledge and omitting the contextual information necessary to understand the use of such symbols in the religion and culture of the island. Lacking a clear understanding of the cultural legacy and specificity of meaning of the graphic writing rooted in Kongo culture, these works fail to address the elements of communication codified and conditioned by social history and to answer questions about the origin of the graphic writing and the transmission of meaning in the diaspora. More recent work by American scholars including Stephan Palmie and David H. Brown also examine Afro-Cuban culture, but focus on the impact of history and politics on the shaping of African traditions in the diaspora and do not engage with broader Cuban culture and the diverse ethnocultural strands that compose it. Palmie and Brown do not examine the nature of art and visual strategies found among African descendants in Cuba and critically omit discussion of the key role played by language and graphic communication in religious practices.

Despite the work of Ortiz, Cabrera, León, Palmie, and Brown, there continues to be a 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. This implicit denial of the continuity of African historiographical tradition is seated in a deep conviction that Africans in the continent and their descendants in the Americas were "empty hand[ed] and empty head[ed]," without culture and writing.[19] This book seeks not only to fully disprove any lingering doubts about the richness of culture in and beyond Central Africa but also to fill the void between those studying only Africa and those studying only the diaspora by demonstrating the fundamental and rich continuity between the two. Although substantial scholarship has explored subjects tangentially related to the graphic writing systems examined in this book, as far as I know this is the first work that traces the full history and development of Kongo graphic writing systems. This book attempts to examine these systems in their complex religious and social context and recognizes the integrated and consistent manner in which they are used in Central Africa and Cuba. By discussing in detail multiple examples of works across several related graphic traditions, focusing on both the particular context in which such traditions are created and used and evaluating their common semantic proprieties, aesthetic principles, and representational purposes, this text seeks to offer a more comprehensive understanding of cultural diffusion and exchange and of the formation of collective memory and identity than existing scholarship.

While Thompson and others have succeeded in expanding the study of African influences, I seek to enhance and extend their contributions by temporarily renarrowing the field so as to more closely examine a single category of visual traditions. By focusing on Kongo graphic writing systems I aim to provide an in-depth look at the way one culture understands and expresses meaning over time and across the space of two continents—a framework for more effective study of other cultures and types of graphic communication.

METHODOLOGY

To address the gaps in the existing literature on Kongo graphic writing systems, I have conducted field research in Angola and Cuba. Over the past decade, I have worked directly with residents of Mbanza Kongo, the former capital of the Kongo Kingdom in northern Angola, including local priests Alfonso Seke, Paulino Dulandula, Joan Paulino Polar, Mayifwila Rafael Rivals, Ntinu Nzaku Nevunda, Nsenga Alabertina, Pedro Savão, and Francisco Lusolo. My research has included work with village chiefs, the local ethnographer and museum director, local historians, and members of the state and city governments. Field research data were obtained through interviews with these and other individuals and through personal observation of religious practices and daily use of graphic communication techniques in the town of Mbanza Kongo and in the surrounding villages as well as through extensive documentation of rupestrian sites containing rock paintings and carvings discussed in Chapter 4. I also traveled across the border into the Democratic Republic of the Congo to explore a series of caves in the region and was able to observe historical evidence of graphic writing in local cemeteries and on fragments of pottery found in the area.

In addition to working with religious figures, community leaders, and Bakongo elders in Angola, I have worked extensively with Afro-Cuban priests of Palo Monte for most of my childhood and adult life. In Havana, I worked closely with Osvaldo Fresneda Bachiller, a respected palero in the El Cotorro district. With him I came to deeply know the religion and learned to both create and interpret an enormous range of graphic communication. I have also studied with Francisco de Armas, a palero from Matanzas. Finally, I have been working closely with Felipe Garcia Villamil for the past decade. Garcia Villamil is a Cuban palero as well as a priest of Abakua, an Afro-Cuban religion developed predominantly from the southern Nigeria culture of Cameroon, and Ocha (Lukumi), an Afro-Cuban religion with roots among the Yoruba of Nigeria and Benin. Garcia Villamil now resides in the United States and remains actively involved in the Afro-Cuban religious communities of New York City and Los Angeles. More generally, I have worked with multiple paleros and Palo Monte groups in New Jersey and Miami. I am enormously indebted to the individuals in both Angola and Cuba who have taken the time to work with me and have trusted me

with their recollections of, experiences in, and insights into their respective traditions.

As is true to a certain degree for any scholar and researcher working with cross-cultural material and conducting fieldwork, my own cultural and religious background has influenced the manner in which I have compiled and interpreted the source material for this book. Because I grew up within Palo Monte, I have had unique access to paleros and other members of the Afro-Cuban religious community, and my experience working with them has been affected by this in several ways. My shared knowledge of this tradition has facilitated immediate discussion with senior paleros and equipped me with the religious and social tools necessary to navigate the hierarchy of knowledge and power within the religion. In my dual role as a practitioner and scholar, I am cognizant of both the advantages and dangers associated with the subjectivity of the former. As a result, I have sought to balance these identities, maintaining a focus on gathering information about the development of Palo Monte, on issues of temporality and on local and regional variations in practice, and have consistently probed and questioned, unwilling to accept assumptions or take matters on faith.

In a similar vein, my personal background and experience have had an impact on the manner in which I have been able to establish relationships with, develop access to, and engender the trust of Bakongo groups and religious authorities in northern Angola. As a veteran of the Cuban army's extensive involvement in Angola's civil war, I have, generally speaking, encountered enormous gratitude for my service among both the local population and individuals in positions of power, although in certain remote, rural areas in northern Angola that were once strongholds of the principal rebel group against which Cuba fought (UNITA), the opposite has been true. On a practical level, appreciation by and trust of government officials have proven a double-edged sword, in some cases facilitating access—at least logistically—and in others engendering further suspicion regarding my motives. As a more general matter, I have not found that my military experiences have come into discussions with local religious and cultural authorities or influenced the degree to which individuals have been willing to share information with me. What has likely had a more significant impact, as on my work on Palo Monte, is my own religious and cultural background. The ability to share similar stories, proverbs, music, and rituals with Bakongo practitioners as well as a common foundation of reason and logic has enabled me to frame questions and elicit answers in an effective manner.