

## Finding Identity with Cultural Protected Areas: The Vevé of Afá Palma Soriano, Cuba

**Maria Ayub**, Program of Landscape Architecture, College of Architecture and the Arts,  
Florida International University, Miami, FL; ayubmaria@gmail.com

Migration, economic dislocation, and a sense of generational discontinuity are a few stimuli that provoke intense feelings of loss, absence, and yearning, conditions that heritage projects attempt to assuage by recovering memories and traditions presumed emblematic of a group's desired continuity. — *James Abrams*

The migration of people from Haiti to the easternmost region of Cuba, from the time of the Haitian Revolution (1791–1803) onwards, and namely to the provinces of Guantanamo and Santiago de Cuba, has to be understood not just from the social and economic point of view, but also from the contribution of a distinct culture that practices a religion long misunderstood in the Americas and other parts of the world.

Vodou, a religion practiced in the old kingdom of Dahomey (today, southern Benin) in western Africa, is an animistic religion with a pantheon of gods and divinities that serve the believers with an oracle and a set of organized rituals and celebrations—all part of a practice that is complex in its theology. This religion was brought to the New World with the slave trade at the time of the colonization of the Americas. It is widely practiced in Haiti, and came to Cuba with the migration of Haitian labor in the 20th century, before the Cuban Revolution. In Cuban Vodou, the use of the spectacle of fire, the blade and point of a weapon, and use of violent animals like the *jabalí* or wild boar, complements what was already established in African Vodou, such as the dances around a bonfire, levitation, the play of machetes, and use of daggers (James et al. 1999). The act of the trance is probably the most misunderstood aspect about this religion, arousing many misconceptions. The interdictions that are part of this religion also play an important part in how believers conduct themselves in their natural and social environment.

The Vodou practiced in Cuba has gone through an evolution or change due to certain events in the history of the Haitian presence, and the political environment in Cuba during the Republican period.

It was during the 1930s and 1940s, a period which saw the end of the Machado dictatorship, and which encompassed the first dictatorship of Batista, that an alliance between this president and the Communist party produced a law passed for the sugar-growing sector in which a case was made for the repatriation of Haitians, many of whom had been on the island for a long period of time. This led to a situation where many Haitians went into hiding since there were those that wanted to stay due to their familiarity with their adopted place, and who would get protection from the landowner, who benefited from paying low wages while exploiting a migrant population. The government used its army, and, with the help of Haitian government functionaries and shipping magnates, captured Haitians, and with a bounty paid for each one (James et al. 1999).

Subsequently, Haitians went into hiding in the mountains, and the landowners used them to clear vast areas for cultivation later on. This state of instability allowed Haitians to build, while hiding, their own villages where they would practice Vodou after working (and not receiving pay in currency, but by a token system). These villages turned into settlements later on, with names like Barrancas, Thompson, Pílon del Cauto, La Palmita, and La Cidra, among others (James et al. 1999).

After the period of repatriation ended, the government recognized Haitian settlements and landowners sought to keep the Haitian population in the area. (It was not until the 1959 Cuban revolution that the Cuban government recognized the migrant population in the island as persons eligible for citizenship). Some landowners granted *conucos*, small pieces of land with a dwelling, to induce some to stay (Figure 1; James et al. 1999).

With the passing of time, the Haitian community made its way side by side with mainstream society, although not without problems of discrimination and lack of empowerment, along with other new issues regarding minority populations—ills facing a young Cuban society transforming itself from a colony into nationhood. It is in this context that the Haitian community slowly began to grow and manifest itself as a cultural entity in that region of the island.

The present need for a communal place that serves the population of Haitian descendants is what gave rise to the ecocultural project of the *Vevé* of Afá. This ecocultural project in the city of Palma Soriano, in the province of Santiago de Cuba (Figure 2), deals with the restoration of a site at the confluence of the Cauto and Yarayabo rivers (Figure 3). To the practitioners of the Vodou religion in eastern Cuba, this site is sacred since the confluence symbolizes the male and female counterparts of nature in the consummation of the act of creation.

The project at this site has been designated as a protected area under the Ministry of Culture in Cuba, and the lessons acquired from this endeavor will benefit other parts of the island suffering from acute development problems due to lack of economic incentives and alternatives for sustainable growth. It also clearly points out the connection between social justice and ecological wholeness under a new worldview whose ethico-religious traditions are becoming more important in an ever-changing world influenced by rapid social changes and limited resources (Engel 1985).

The project consist of two elements, one functional and one symbolic. The functional element consists of communal living, with housing and public facilities for visitation and gathering, and a community garden. The symbolic one is the restoration of

Figure 1. A *conuco*. Courtesy of Taller Experimental ENNEGRO.





Figure 2. Map of Cuba showing the location of the city of Palma Soriano. Courtesy of Oriente de Cuba-Andalucia, 2002.

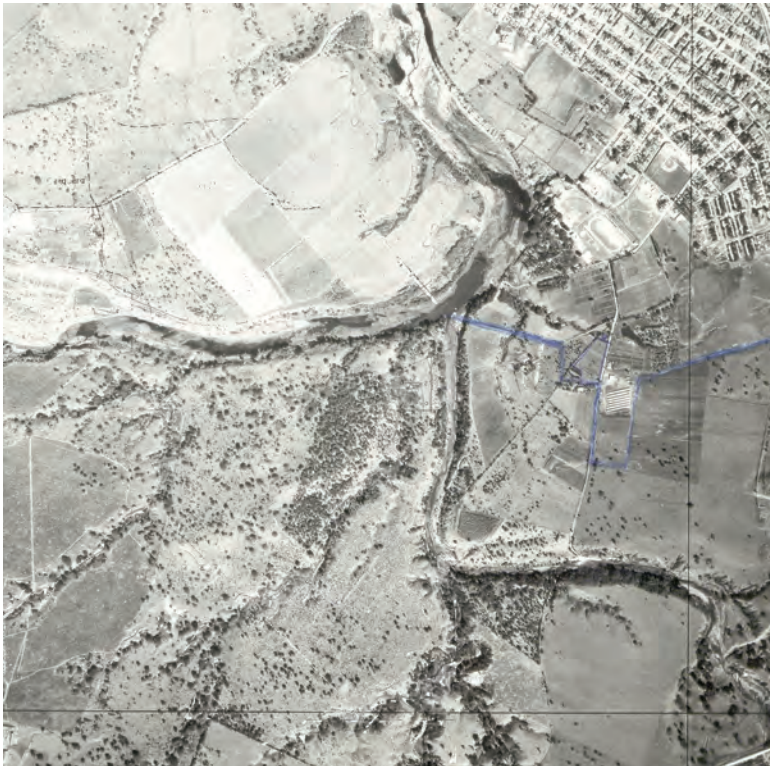


Figure 3. Russian aerial photograph, ca. 1970, showing Palma Soriano and the confluence of the Yarayabo and El Cauto rivers. Courtesy of University of Oriente, Santiago de Cuba.

the site at the confluence of the two rivers, Yarayabo and El Cauto. The latter is the longest river in Cuba (87 mi, or 140 km) and crosses five provinces.

The project originated from a group of artists called Taller Experimental ENNEGRO, which is part of the Hermanos Saiz Organization, whose mission is to promote vanguard movements in the arts in the island. The initial concept of the *Vevé* of Afá, which means “signature of nature” or “imprint,” was to develop a mosaic with plant material over approximately two-thirds of the site that will look like a design when viewed from above. In the practice of Vodou, the *vevés* are drawings done on the ground to attract a divinity to the place of worship in a ceremonial ritual (Figure 4). They are usually made with flour, coffee grounds, or some other available loose material.

The site appears to be a former pastureland for the grazing of cattle that has been fallow for a long period of time; natural succession has been slow and difficult due to drought conditions in the island. It needs to be pointed out that deforestation since the beginning of the colonization of the island has changed patterns of rainfall and regional climate in general. The total acreage given to the project is 90 hectares (approximately 223 acres).

Due to the difficulty and limitations in realizing the “planted mosaic” concept on the site, the work for my thesis, on which this paper is based, focuses on how to “translate” the initial design proposed by Taller Experimental ENNEGRO, who are practitioners of Vodou, into something that is more viable for them to develop physically. The original rendering or design was used as a mandala or graphic representation to extract elements that are important to the Vodou religion, thereby establishing associations of the graphic with actual landscape elements.

It was proposed in the thesis project to restore the *entire* area with the process of natural succession by introducing a nurse crop, in this case the guava tree, *Psidium guajava*, to encourage succession. This tree is able to grow easily in grasslands and facilitates the growth of native species of plants to the area. The most economical way of establishing this nurse crop is through the grazing of cattle on the site, and providing them with guavas to consume. Seed dispersal will be attained through the cattle fecal matter. Supervision on the site for the containment of the guava tree species and eradication of exotic species is extremely important for achieving a balanced restoration (Fourth Annual Puerto Rico Forestry Conference 1999).

In addition to the goal of achieving a climax plant community for most of the site, other



Figure 4. Camilo Fis showing a rendering of the *vevé*. Courtesy of J.M. Menendez.

aspects were considered, like the public areas for rituals and ceremonies, and the premises for the priest, or *hougan*. These had to be designed adhering to their religious sensibilities and customs.

For these areas, some universal landscape elements and concepts were considered for the design to appeal not just to the religious practitioners of Vodou, but to the visiting public as well. For example, an element like a water well, at the center of the site, was proposed to celebrate the cleansing rituals. The ceremonial places were assigned particular areas for their symbolic reference, and a shrine using wattle as a construction technique was used to illustrate traditional methods of construction. Motifs for inspiration were taken from traditional priest tunics, musical instruments, and representations of deities.

Overall, the main goal of the thesis project was to propose a simpler solution achievable in an environment of great economic limitations, while emphasizing the cyclical process of nature recovering from a former agricultural land use. The city of Palma Soriano (population 126,000) lacks spaces for green areas and parks, and this project will serve as a place for reflection upon the natural environment for residents and visitors alike.

The importance of the project proposed by Taller Experimental ENNEGRO relies on the proper handling of aspects of religious significance that exalt the animistic and pantheistic qualities of the Vodou religion for the public to understand. This will clear up erroneous ideas and misconceptions that only serve to isolate and debase beliefs while demeaning cultural and religious understanding.

## **References**

- Abrams, James, 1994. Lost frames of reference: Sightings of history and memory in Pennsylvania's documentary landscape. In *Conserving Culture: A New Discourse on Heritage*, Mary Hufford, ed. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 78–93.
- Engel, J. Ronald. 1985. Promoting the development and adoption of environmental ethics. *The George Wright Forum* 4:2, 13–35. On-line [www.georgewright.org/042engel.html](http://www.georgewright.org/042engel.html).
- Fourth Annual Puerto Rico Forestry Conference. 1999. San Juan, Puerto Rico. On-line at [http://members.aol.com/tropbosq/conf\\_toc.htm](http://members.aol.com/tropbosq/conf_toc.htm).
- James, Joel, José Millet, and Alexis Alarcon. 1992. *El Vodú En Cuba*. Santo Domingo: CEDEE.