

FAITH: ABAKUÁ SOCIETY

Ivor Miller

An initiation club for men in Havana and Matanzas, derived from the Ékpè leopard society of West Africa.

Abakuá, known by its members as *Ekório Enyéne Abakuá* (a group founded by a sacred mother that is called Abakuá), is a Cuban mutual aid society for men, whose ceremonial activities occur exclusively in the port cities of Cárdenas, Havana, and Matanzas. Popularly referred to as African Masonry, Abakuá is structured through lodges, the first of which was created in 1836 by its African-born founders who migrated from the Cross River region of southeastern Nigeria and southwestern Cameroon. In the 2010s, there were more than 150 functioning lodges with more than 20,000 members. Although it is a secretive initiation society, Abakuá has been referred to unofficially as a national symbol of Cuba, due to the participation of its members in the development of Cuban music, arts, and identity.

In the Calabar region, the Ékpè leopard society was the regulatory institution, in which councils of free-born titled members established the common laws of their communities and regulated trade throughout the region. Abakuá practice, which includes a ritual language, body-mask traditions, collective organization, percussive music, cuisine, cosmology, and gender relations, is best understood in relation to its African sources. Although it was created in the context of a slave society, Abakuá is not a slave culture, as is often assumed. Instead, following the Ékpè model, it was created by free-born Africans as a vehicle for jurisprudence and artistry.

In colonial Cuba, the Spanish government divided migrating Africans ethnically by encouraging those in urban areas to form *cabildos* (nation-groups).

■ See also

Día de Reyes en la Habana (Víctor Patricio de Landaluze)

Food: Ritual Foods and Afro-Cuban Religious Traditions

Language: Abakuá in Cuba and its Influence on Spanish Usage

Music: Afro-Cuban Religious Influence on Cuban Popular Music

Race: Slavery in Cuba

La sentencia (Belkis Ayón)

These *cabildos* became important centers for the conservation of African languages and cultural practices. Carabalí peoples formed several *cabildos* by the 1750s, and titled members of the leopard societies were among them. The African-born Ékpè members were hesitant to initiate their Cuban-born sons, which explains why Abakuá was not established until the 1830s in Regla, a small town across the harbor from Havana.

Abakuá tradition has three lineages, the Efi, Efó, and Orú. Each is derived from an ethnic identity in the Cross River region, known today as Èfik, Èfúùt, and Úrúán. The term *Abakuá* memorialized the Àbàkpà people of Calabar, who call themselves the *Quas*. The first lodge was known as *Efi Butón*, after the Òbùtòng community in Calabar.

EARLY LODGE NAMES DOCUMENT CARABALÍ MIGRATION

As Carabalí organized themselves in western Cuba, they started using African names for areas of their environment. They renamed Havana *Núnkue*, interpreted into Èfik as *nung nkwé* (I have also not seen), meaning that Havana was a new place to them. They called Regla *ítíá ororó kándé*, interpreted into Èfik as *ítíat òyóyò Nkàndà* (the foundation of great Nkàndà); Nkàndà was a key Ékpè grade that was evoked during the foundational Abakuá ceremonies.

Abakuá lodges were created in western Cuba because many Cross River peoples lived there, but also because Calabar and Cuba shared a similar ecology. Both have estuary zones of mangrove swamps, manatees, crocodiles or alligators, and other fauna that have deep symbolism for Ékpè. Components missing in Cuba (e.g., leopards) were represented symbolically.

Throughout the nineteenth century, Cuban lodge names represented communities in the Calabar region, becoming indexes for source communities. For example, the Efi Abarakó Eta lodge founded in Regla in 1863 was likely named after the Calabar community called *Mbàràkòm*, a ward of Creek Town foundational to modern Èfik Ékpè history. Cuban data supports this interpretation, because *Mbarankonó abarakó* is an Abakuá phrase. An Abarakó lodge also exists in Matanzas. The Efi Mbemoró lodge, founded in 1846 in Havana, refers to a riverside community in the Calabar region. For example, *Mbemong* (by the river) is an Èfik settlement on the Great Kwa river, along the ancient trade route from Calabar to Oban and into Cameroun. The Havana lodge Ékuéri Tongó, established in 1848, refers to the Èfik community of Ékórétònkó. Another Havana lodge, Ekerewá Momí, founded in 1863, is clearly derived from *Ekeng Ewa*, a family name from Henshaw Town, Calabar, where in Èfik, *Ekerewá Momí* means “Ekerewá is here!” Such matter-of-fact interpretations of Abakuá lodge names were possible only through renewed contact with Calabar peoples.

According to Ékpè and Abakuá mythology, Ékpè was discovered or created in a fishing community in the estuaries of what is in modern times the Bakassi Peninsula, along the Cameroun-Nigeria border. Called *Usagaré* in Cuba and *Ùsàghàdè* (spelled on maps as *Usak-Edet* or *Isangele*) in Africa, this place is spoken of with reverence on both sides of the Atlantic.

The altar spaces in Abakuá lodges display objects that evoke Cross River cultural history. They often contain a seven-keyed lamellophone (*mbira* in Southern Africa) to represent the original music of Ùsàghàdè; in the Calabar region lamellophones were once common instruments. Abakuá altars also display the signature of their lodge, a magical sign—based upon the Nsibidi writing of the Cross River Ékpè practice—that is fully known only by the lodge leaders. Other common objects are the percussion instruments of Abakuá music, the *nkomo* drums (*ekomo* in Èfik), *ekón* metal gong (*nkong* in Èfik), and the two seed-filled rattles (*nsak* in Èfik), the forms of which are nearly identical to Cross River Ékpè instruments. Showing the Catholic influence in Cuba, each lodge has a representative Catholic saint upon its altar. Because Cross River Ékpè practice is directly linked to that of the water spirit societies of each community (called *Ndèm* among the Èfiks), the female saints are understood as cognates for the link between male Ékpè and female water powers.

ABAKUÁ BECOMES A UNIVERSAL INSTITUTION

Each generation of Abakuá leaders directed their lodge activities based upon their understanding of the teachings of the African founders, as well as upon the needs of the day. Whereas the African founders took decades to create a lodge for their own offspring, the Cuban Creoles decided that, in the face of the tremendous repression of African-derived institutions, they would best defend Abakuá by opening up their ranks to any qualified male, regardless of his ancestry. The first lodge of white males was created in 1863 by members of some of Cuba's elite families who, it was thought, could influence the dominant class perspective on this criminalized institution. The result was the universalizing of Abakuá, making it no longer the exclusive concern of African descendants, but of all communities in western Cuba.

The legendary founder of this movement was Andrés Petit (1830–1878), a leader in the Havana lodge named Bakokó Efó. In southwestern Cameroun, Bakoko is a Balondo-speaking group; migrants from there established a Bakoko settlement in Calabar. Petit was a free mulatto with strong ties to the Catholic Church and a leader of a Cuban-Kongo practice called *Kimbisa*, which he helped establish in Havana. Petit fused basic elements from the available initiation systems in Cuba to create spiritual practices without racial distinctions, so that all participants could coexist as spiritual family members, a radical move in a slave society. In 1857, Petit consecrated the objects

for a new Abakuá lodge; after six years of selecting and organizing its first members, he initiated them in 1863. According to legend, with initiation fees paid by the whites, Petit bought the freedom of many enslaved people. In the process, he and his colleagues transformed Cuban society. The anthropologist Fernando Ortiz (1881–1969) labeled his movement the Reform of Petit (Ortiz 1954, pp. 70–71), and as late as 1996, Petit was referred to as “forger of the Cuban nation” (Mosquera p. 256).

Thus, in 1863, the first lodge of whites, called *Okóbio Mukarará Efó* (white brothers of Efó), was established. In Cuba, *okobio* is interpreted as “brother”; in Èfik, as “it belongs to us” (figuratively, “brother”). In Balondo (Èfúùt), *mukara* is “white person.” Soon afterwards, many Chinese descendants also joined Abakuá, so lodge members came from African, American, Asian, and European backgrounds.

Why did the white brothers want to join? One reason is that as in Freemasonry, Abakuá emerged as a parallel tradition of underground cells whose members participated in the anticolonial struggle. As the first War of Cuban Independence began in 1868, all the rebel leaders from across the island were members of Freemasonry lodges. Many Abakuá members in the Havana-Matanzas region were also Freemasons and used both institutions for organizing rebel activities.

In Calabar, for very different reasons, several European merchants were initiated by Ékpè leaders in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In order to have the support of Ékpè councils while recouping fees from their local debtors, these whites paid high fees for membership but had no say in the actual functioning of Ékpè lodges and their ceremonial activities.

ABAKUÁ TITLES AND THEIR FUNCTIONS

No one has complete knowledge of Abakuá; initiation can be a lifetime process with many stages, each having rigorous protocols designed to safeguard knowledge of the society’s inner mechanisms. Information about Abakuá practice, history, and mythology is compartmentalized into the teachings of each title; therefore, titleholders have specialized knowledge pertaining to their own functions. This collective practice is taught in debates between masters and apprentices who study for years to learn the language and its many interpretations.

Most young men are initiated when they are between seven and twenty-one years of age, with exceptions. Traditionally, once a neophyte asked or agreed to be initiated, a process of inquiry about his character and moral behavior began that could take up to two years. The mother of the neophyte had the final word on whether her son was morally qualified to join. If the neophyte was accepted, he was known as *ndisime* (accepted for initiation); in Èfik, *nsidime* means “ignorant.” Initiations take place every few years, or whenever several *ndisimes* are ready.

Because Abakuá initiations proceed as ritual-theater enactments of African foundation myths, Ortiz likened them to ancient Greek tragedies (Ortiz 1950). Each ceremonial action is meant to recreate the birth of Ékpè in Ùsàghàdè, West Africa, wherein a mystic Voice was heard coming from the river, but no man could find it. The Voice, known as the epicenter of Ékpè and Abakuá practice, was captured only when a royal female known as Sikán (from Nsikan, an Ìbibìò name meaning “What is greater than God?”) filled her water pot at the river, and the sacred fish known as Tánze (from Tán sí, an Èjaghám name meaning “Lord Fish”) entered it, eventually becoming incorporated into Ékpè.

Using a specific step-by-step process, Abakuá initiations narrate their epic myths through descriptive chanting and gestures. At the center of the story is Nasako, the diviner who foresaw the coming of the Voice, then organized local leaders into an Ékpè lodge and gave them titles that memorialize their contributions. For example, Abakuá processions moving to and from a nearby river led by the masquerade dancer Eribangando are performances that narrate the first appearance of this mask to defend Sikán as she left the river with the Voice. In another example, when the yellow and white chalk are introduced in Abakuá rites, the story of the title *Moruá Engomo* is enacted to explain how one ancestor brought the coded chalk into Ékpè practice. The chalk is used to draw magical symbols, known as *anaforuana* or *gandó* in Cuba, that authorize all ritual actions, just as a signature authorizes a bank transaction.

But the Cuban signs comprise a huge corpus; Lydia Cabrera collected more than 500 examples in her 1975 book *Anaforuana*. Paralleling the Abakuá language, these signs show little influence from Spanish or the Roman alphabet; instead, they are derived from the Nsibidi codes of the Cross River region, a form of secret communication through signs drawn, gestured, or spoken that is part of Ékpè practice. As Percy Talbot documented in the early 1900s, the Èjaghám-speaking community of Oban had a complex system of Nsibidi signs that resembles those in Abakuá (Talbot).

Once initiated, the Abakuá neophyte is reborn as *abanékue* (or *obonékue*), in Èfik meaning “admitted into Ékpè.” *Abanékues* are highly regarded because they are the soldiers of Abakuá trained to carry on the tradition; if they excel, and a position opens when an elder titleholder dies, they may take it. Initiation in Abakuá is for life; as the Abakuá say, “what is written cannot be erased,” a reference to the chalk marks made on the bodies of initiates.

The three categories of Abakuá titles are Obón, Indiobón, and Etenyén obón. In Èfik, *obon* is “ruler” or “king,” whereas *Etinyin* is “our father”; therefore *Etiyin Obong* would be “our father who governs us.” *Indiobón* is likely derived from Nnian, the estuary

Abakuá initiation. An initiate wearing a blindfold participates in the 18-hour initiation ceremony. A man in front holds the ritual empegó drum, and behind the initiate is a representation of íreme, a spiritual figure from Abakuá. HÉCTOR DELGADO AND ROLANDO PUJOL



river in Cameroun where Ékpè was born, according to legend.

The following is a partial list of Abakuá titles, their functions, and West African sources:

Ìyámbà is the head of a lodge in both Cuba and West Africa. The word *Ìyámbà* is derived from Èjáhám, where *ayamba* means “open the way”; it is a directive, so if one wants to enter a compound, one could say *a mba* (make us open the way); *Ìyámbà* is plural (let us open the way). The *Ìyámbà Ékpè* title means “the Ékpè that clears the way.”

In Cuba, Íreme Anamanguí wears a black and white costume and is the only mask to work in the *nyóro* (funerary rites) where Nyámpe (Death) is a principal figure. In Calabar, the Nyámkpè mask functions in the burial rites of an Ékpè titleholder, where *nyóro* dances are performed. In Arochuku communities up the Cross River, an Ékpè mask with a black and white body suit performs the same function while visiting the corpse during funerals.

In Cuba, Ekuenyón is remembered as a hunter who brought all the fees to the *baroko* of Usagaré, but as a special fee, he brought a leopard whose skin was used to cover all the instruments. To begin the ceremonies of some Cuban lineages, Ekuenyón stands at the entrance of the hall to summon the Voice of the leopard, the resonant sound

that authorizes all ceremonial acts. In West Africa, a hunter who killed a leopard and brought the animal intact to his paramount ruler would receive an Ékpè title for his actions. In the Oron communities on the Cross River, Ékpényòng was the name of an Ékpè title. In Cuba, as Ekuenyón is preparing a ritual drink called *mokúba*, he is referred to as *Ekuenyón Bakasi*, likely after the Bakassi Peninsula where the Ûsaghàdè community is located.

In Cuba, Íreme Éribángandó is a masquerade dancer who leads the processions. Mythically, this mask cleared the path for the Èfúùt (Efó) princess who, after discovering the Voice in an African river, brought it back to her community. Along the way, she was blocked by a serpent and a crocodile, the guardians of the sacred waters. In southwestern Cameroon, crocodile is *gando*, so Cubans interpret Eribá as the name of the ancestor who helped the woman escape Gandó the crocodile.

In Cuba, Íreme Mbóko represents the sugarcane, which he carries in one hand and with which he strikes those who do not perform their tasks well. In Èfik and Ìbìbìò, *mbòkò* means “sugarcane.”

In Cuba, Íreme Nkóboro, referred to as the Abakuá police, is the masquerade performer who guards the Eribó (mother) drum in processions during initiations. In

Èfik communities, *Mkpokporo* (literally, skull) is the name of an Ùkwà war society mask that leads processions, guarding the female mask that comes afterwards.

- In Cuba, the Fambá titleholder guards the entrance to the temple (Fambá) so that only those authorized may enter. In West Africa, *éfámhá* is a hidden display of Ékpè artifacts, originally assembled in a sacred forest, but among Calabar lodges, they are displayed inside an Ékpè hall. Èfámhá is the highest form of teaching in Ékpè, when the esoterics are revealed to those titleholders who make the appropriate sacrifices.
- In Cuba, Mokóngo represents the jurisprudential aspect of Abakuá, as well as the military power to execute it. Mokóngo is a lodge leader mythically known for bravery, thus the famous term *Mokóngo Ma Chebere* (Mokóngo the valiant) that led to the Cuban popular phrase *qué Chébere* (how positive or wonderful). Among the Balondos (Èfúùt) of southwestern Cameroon, Mukóngo is an executive officer of the Ékpè society with a representative masquerade performance.
- In Cuba, Moní Bonkó is the custodian of the Bonkó Enchemiyá drum, an early Èfik sacred object. In West Africa, Ebonkó is the Sacred Mother of Ékpè, who ultimately represents the life-giving and healing powers of the drum. Among the Èfúùt (Èfó) people of Calabar and Cameroon, Muri is a title for the clan head; customarily, each Muri has the Ékpè title of Ebonkó, thus Muri Bonkó.
- In Cuba, there are two titles with the name Moruá, Moruá Eribó and Moruá Yuánsa, both of which are masters of the coded sign language of Abakuá, known as Nsibidi in Africa. In Cuban lore, Moruá Eribó brought the chalk used to write the signs that authorize all ritual actions. Moruá Yuánsa is custodian of the music. In West Africa Ékpè, Múruàs are chanters who carry wooden rattles (*ekpat*) and perform Nsibidi, most commonly during the burial rites for an important elder, an Obong Ékpè. In West Africa as in Cuba, there are two types of Múruàs, known as *Múruà Nyámkpè* and *Múruà Òkpòhò*.
- In some Cuban lodges, Mosóko represents the bamboo stick in the ceremony. In Calabar, the bamboo stick is an important symbol representing the authority to display Ékpè masquerades. The staffs of titleholders are often made of bamboo for this reason.

In Cuba, Mosóngo is a title with custody of the Voice of the Leopard. In West Africa, Mosóngo is an Èjaghám Ékpè title that is the equivalent of Íyámhá, the administrative head of a lodge. Among the Àbàkpa (Qua-Èjaghám) of Calabar, Mosóngo is a family name.

In Cuba, Nasakó is known as a diviner who learned from the oracle about the birth of Ékpè and organized those who became the first titleholders into the society. In West Africa, Nasakó was an ancestral god known by the Ngolo clan in Ndián Division in southwest Cameroon (and, by extension, the Oroko tribe) and exalted by the Ékpè society there. Moreover, the people of the Ngolo clan invoked the spirit of Nasakó whenever there was a serious problem in the land. There is also a traditional family lineage of Nasakó ancestry, called the *BoNasako* family (family of Nasakó).

NATIONAL AND POPULAR CULTURE

Having been well organized and kept underground in the colonial period, Abakuá was later celebrated as a culture of resistance in popular music. By the 1850s, Cuba's first national music, the *contradanza* and the related *danzón*, had titles and sonic elements that referred to Abakuá. During the Wars of Independence (1868–1898) popular theater also had many references to Abakuá masquerade performers as a symbol of *cubanía* (Cubanness). With the birth of the modern *son* with rumba sections in Havana in the 1910s, Abakuá codes and rhythms became essential to the genre. In the 1920s and 1930s, an artistic movement called *Afrocubanismo* emerged in Havana, seeking to define a national culture while drawing inspiration from the working-class cultures of African descendants.

Being anticolonial and endemic to Cuba, Abakuá became an important symbol for the *Afrocubanistas*, who included leading intellectuals such as Ortiz, Nicolás Guillén (1902–1989), Alejo Carpentier (1904–1980), and Lydia Cabrera (1900–1991); also participating were the composer Ernesto Lecuona (1895–1963) and the singer Rita Montaner (1900–1958), as well as the painter Wifredo Lam (1902–1982). All of them used Abakuá themes in their work as a key facet of Cuban identity.

Among the important musicians of Cuban popular music were Abakuá members Ignacio Piñeiro (1888–1969), a member of the Abakuá group Efori Nkomón, who founded the *son* group Septeto Nacional in 1927, and Chano Pozo (1915–1948), a member of the Munyánga Efo group, whose compositions and performances with jazz great Dizzy Gillespie in the late 1940s helped create the bebop genre and established Afro-Cuban jazz globally. Following this

legacy were the Abakuá musicians Julito Collazo (1935–2004), who migrated to the United States to play with Katherine Dunham's troupe in the 1950s, and Orlando (Puntilla) Ríos (1947–2008), who arrived in the 1980s. They among others extended the Abakuá musical impact on jazz music, setting the stage for unprecedented cultural exchanges between West African Ékpè and Cuban Abakuá members in the twenty-first century.

RECONNECTING THE ÉKPÈ-ABAKUÁ CONTINUUM

After recognizing Calabar place names and phrases in Abakuá chanting, leaders of the Èfik National Association in the United States invited a contingent of Abakuá to their national meeting in 2001 in New York City, where the two groups exchanged songs, percussion music, and masquerade ensemble performances. The matter-of-fact recognition through the performance of inherited traditions by both groups led to a series of further encounters that escalated the transatlantic communications to extraordinary levels. In 2003, the Obong (Paramount Ruler) of Calabar, while meeting with Cuban Abakuá in the United States, called them his children and invited them to Calabar. In 2004, at the invitation of Donald Duke, governor of Cross River State, two Cuban Abakuá traveled to Calabar, where they were able to confirm that Ékpè and Abakuá practices were mutually intelligible. In 2007, Ékpè and Abakuá met onstage in the Musée Quai Branly in Paris for four command performances. These events inspired the Abakuá leaders in Cuba to reevaluate their inherited phrases and ceremonial actions based upon new information from West Africa.

■ See also

Language: Lucumi

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FAITH: ARARÁ

Juan Mesa Díaz

A lesser-known religion related to the Ocha-Ifá and Vodou faiths that developed in Cuba.

Arará is an Afro-Cuban religion that combines elements of the Ocha-Ifá system as well as Vodou. While combining elements of both of these religions it still retains its own uniqueness. *Arará* is the umbrella term for people who were introduced into Cuba as slaves from the sixteenth into the nineteenth centuries. They came from the Ewé and Fon ethnic groups that were settled in Dahomey, West Africa, later known as the Republic of Benin. The term comes from a corruption of *Allada* (or Ardráh), a city-state that was conquered by the kingdom of Dahomey.

Along with Oyó and Benin, Dahomey rounded out the trio of cities on the west coast of Africa that were called the Brother Kingdoms, which served as the spiritual centers of the African religions that form the base of Arará. The Brother Kingdoms were founded by Oduduwa, the mythic ancestor of the Yoruba people, from the sacred city of Ilé Ifé in the ninth century. Oyó and Benin (to a lesser degree) became the centers for the Ocha-Ifá religion, while Dahomey was the center for Vodou.

Starting in the middle of the sixteenth century, absolute monarchy was the prevailing system in Dahomey. All the structures of power depended on the strictest obedience to the royal figure. The king