Cuban Abakuá Chants: Examining New Linguistic and Historical Evidence for the African Diaspora
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Abstract: The Cuban Abakuá society—derived from the Efik Ekpe and Ejagham N‘gbe societies of southeastern Nigeria and southwestern Cameroon—was founded in Havana in the 1830s by captured leaders of Cross River villages. This paper examines the process by which West African Ekpe members were able to understand contemporary Cuban Abakuá chants, and indicates how these texts may be used as historical documents. This methodology involves first recording and interpreting Abakuá chants with Cuban elders, and then interpreting these same chants with the aid of West African Efik speakers. The correlation of data in these chants with those in documents created by Europeans and Africans from the eighteenth to twentieth centuries indicates a vocabulary that includes many geographic and ethnic names and an occasional historical figure. These examples may lead to a reevaluation of the extent to which African identity and culture were transmitted during the trans-Atlantic diaspora. Abakuá intellectuals have used commercial recordings to extol their history and ritual lineages. Evidence indicates that Cuban Abakuá identity is based on detailed knowledge of ritual lineages stemming from specific locations in their homelands, and not upon a vague notion of an African “national” or “ethnic” identity. The persistence of the Abakuá society contradicts the official construction of a Cuban national identity.

Résumé: La communauté cubaine Abakuá—descendante des communautés Efik Ekpé et Ejagham N‘gbe du Sud Est du Nigéria et du Sud Ouest du Cameroun—a été fondée à la Havane dans les années 1830 par des leaders capturés des villages de Cross River. Cet essai examine le processus par lequel les membres de la communauté Ekpé d'Afrique de l'Ouest ont été capables de comprendre les chants de la communauté Abakuá moderne de Cuba, et montre comment ces textes pourraient être utilisés comme documents historiques. La méthodologie utilisée a consisté en un premier temps à enregistrer et interpréter les chants Abakuá avec les...
anciens de la communauté cubaine, puis à interpréter les mêmes chants avec les membres de la communauté Éfik d’Afrique de l’Ouest. La corrélation entre les éléments de ces chants et ceux des documents produits par les Européens et les Africains entre le dix-huitième et le vingtième siècle aboutit à un glossaire comportant beaucoup de noms géographiques et ethniques, et occasionnellement, des personnalités historiques. Ces exemples pourraient mener à une réévaluation de l’étendue de la transmission de l’identité et de la culture africaines lors de la diaspora trans-Atlantique. Les intellectuels de la communauté Abakúa ont jusqu’à présent utilisé des enregistrements commerciaux pour mettre en valeur leur histoire et les origines de leurs rituels. Il est possible de démontrer que l’identité Abakúa cubaine est basée sur une connaissance détaillée de l’origine des rituels provenant de locations spécifiques dans leurs pays d’origine, et non sur la notion vague d’une identité “ethnique” ou “nationale” africaine. La persistance de la communauté Abakúa constitue une résistance à la construction officielle d’une identité nationale cubaine.

Scholarship is usually its own reward, but in rare cases, it can produce other remarkable results. After my publication of samples of Abakuá phrases from a commercially recorded album (Miller 2000), Nigerian members of the Cross River Ékpé society living in the United States informed me that they had recognized these texts as part of their own history. Éfik people in the U.S. had learned about the Cuban Abakuá and were actively searching for contact with its members. The Web site www.efik.com had references to Cuban tourist literature on the Abakuá in Spanish; our communication led to what was perhaps the first meeting between both groups. The privilege of examining this material with both Cuban Abakuá and Éfik Ékpé members has provoked me to grapple with questions of using oral history materials as evidence for rethinking the African diaspora in the Caribbean.

A specific example can illustrate this interpretive process. The phrase “Okobio Enyenisón, awana bekura mendo/ Nünkue Itia Ooro Kánde Efi Kebutón/ Ōò Ókue” is part of an Abakuá chant memorializing the actions of Éfik and Efut leaders who helped found the society. Abakuá leaders interpret this phrase as: “Our African brothers, from the sacred place / came to Havana, and in Regia founded Éfik Ebutón / we salute the Ekue drum.” Orok Edem (2001), an Éfik scholar residing in the U.S., equates “Éfi Kebutón,” the name of Cuba’s first Abakuá group, with “Obutong,” an Èfik town in the Cross River region. He interprets many Abakuá terms as deriving from Abákpa, an Èfik term for the Qua settlement in Calabar, originally formed by migrants from the Ejagham-speaking area to the north.

After connecting with Edem, I was invited to facilitate an exchange between a group of Cuban Abakuá and West African Ékpé at the Éfik
National Association meeting in New York in 2001. In preparation for this event, I introduced Asuquo Ukpong, an Efik Èkpè member, to several Abakú músicians at a local cabaret performance. As they played, Ukpong enthusiastically identified many possible relationships to Efik culture in the form of dance and musical instruments. During an Abakú chant, he danced toward the Cuban músicians; then, as the lead drummer stepped forward, Ukpong gestured symbolically with his eyes and hands. A Cuban Abakú dancer joined them, also using a vocabulary of gestures dense with symbolism. This was perhaps the first time that Èkpè and Abakú músicians had met in a performance context, and their ability to communicate through movement contrasted with the divisions between them created by Spanish and English, their respective colonial languages.

A week later, a group of Abakú attended the Efik National Association meeting. A man in an “Idem Èkpè” costume visually very similar to that of the Cubans danced to the accompaniment of a large ensemble of músicians and chanters. Goldie (1964:116–117) translates Idem, an Efik term, as “a representative of Egbo [Èkpè] who runs about the town.” Essien (1986:9) translated Idem as “masquerade” in Òbìbìò.

As the Cubans prepared to perform, they realized that their “Ireme” costume—Ireme being a term derived from Efik pronunciation of “idem Èfi”—lacked the ananyonga (ritual waist sash) as well as the nkànika bells placed over it (see Goldie 1964:214). They explained that an Ìreme cannot function without these, together with herbs and a staff in the hands. As Èkpè masquerades are nearly identical to those of Abakú, these items could be lent by the Efik. This lending of ritual objects occurred in a matter-of-fact fashion, a further indication of cultural similarity between the two areas.

Similar use of nkànika bells has been recorded on both sides of the Atlantic. While in the Cross River region in 1847, the Rev. H. M. Waddell (1863:354) described two Èkpè masked dancers wearing bells: “Two Egbo [Èkpè] runners in their harlequin costume entered the town to clear the streets. Their bells, dangling at their waists, gave notice of their approach.” In the streets of Havana, a late-nineteenth-century description of the Three King’s Day processions notes the Abakú “covered in coarse hoods... so large and bulky that their sides[,] arms[,] and legs appeared like simple appendages.... They marched slowly... behind the dancers, who did not cease, in their startling convulsions, from shaking the many bells they carried bound to their waists” (Meza 1891; cited in Ortiz 1960:12).

In contemporary New York, the Cubans danced in procession with the Èfik elders; their set of four biankòmo drums—Èkòmo is drum in Èfik (Goldie 1964:73)—were clearly designed and played in the same style as those of the Èfik.4 The Ìreme greatly impressed the Èfik by greeting their elders with specific gestures and cleansing them ritually with a branch of herbs. The lead singer performed a long enkame (chant) in Cuban Èfik composed for this event, and the Èfik responded with great enthusiasm. In Èfik, the
African Studies Review

Abakuá *enkame* is *okama*, meaning "to call people to attention, to begin, to declare" (Orok Edem, personal communication, 2001). As a result of this and later encounters, plans are in the making for further exchanges in West Africa and Cuba.\(^5\)

Mutual recognition between the Ékpè and Abakuá provokes many questions about West African cultural continuities in the Caribbean, as well as the implications of this knowledge for present-day West Africans. Both groups are currently struggling to use their traditional practices in order to respond to contemporary issues. That both Ékpè and Abakuá perceive themselves in the other’s language and ritual practice points to the vitality of oral history and performance as sources for new evidence in the African diaspora.

A practice derived from the Èfik people’s Ékpè societies as well as the Èjagham people’s Ìgbè societies of southeastern Nigeria and southwestern Cameroon, the Abakuá was founded in Havana in the 1830s by captured leaders of Cross River villages. In the ensuing 170 years, this multiethnic mutual aid society has expanded to become a distinguishing feature of Cuban cultural identity. Ceremonies consist of drum, dance, and chanting activities using the esoteric Abakuá language. Cuban scholars have long thought that the Abakuá language "is based principally on proverbs or maxims in which Èfik terms predominate" (Deschamps 1967:39).

For the past ten years I have worked with leaders of these traditions to document and interpret their history. In the past, knowledge of these chants has been restricted to members of the Abakuá, but recently, portions have been included in commercial recordings cited in this essay.

The enthusiastic and knowledgeable response of an Èfik scholar to these Cuban chants has opened tremendous possibilities for interpretation. After 170 years of separation, we would not expect literal meanings derived from West African languages to correspond neatly to Cuban Abakuá, which is a ritual language. When interpreting Abakuá chants even into Spanish, one encounters a multiplicity of meanings, since Abakuá expressions are poetic and rich in metaphor. All elders who interpreted passages to me made use of the vocabularies of their inherited manuscripts as well as their powers of deduction, based on the use of the passage during a particular sequence of ritual action. That Abakuá practices are collective yet maintained within a ritual hierarchy has served to keep translations of passages within certain boundaries; in other words, unstudied interpretations would be challenged by learned elders. In this intellectual tradition, possible variations add to the richness as Abakuá masters explore and interpret their own history. In another example, Abímbólá (1976:15–16) described the collective reinforcement of orthodoxy in oracle poetry among Ìfà diviners in West Africa.

One of the first difficulties of translation has to do with the transcrip-
tion of spoken phrases into words. For instance, in the above example
("Okobio Enyenisôn, awana bekura mendo/ Nûnkue Itia Ororo Kânde Effi
Kebûtôn/ Oo Êkue"), what I had written as Êfik Olbutong was interpreted by
Orok Edem as Êfik Olbutong, indicating that in Cuban usage, Cross River
terms may be joined or resegmented, making them additionally difficult to
interpret. I generally determined the word breaks in the Cuban texts
according to instructions by Abakuá elders, who did most of the interpreta­tions into Spanish. When in doubt, I referred to published Abakuá vocabu­laries. In fact, I reviewed many such vocabularies with Abakuá elders. In
some instances, I intentionally do not translate some terms fully, because to
do so would articulate obscure passages designed to hide information to
noninitiates. Abakuá leaders would not approve translation of these partic­ular phrases.

Further complicating translation is the fact that Cross River Êkpê and
Ngbé each seem to have an "initiation dialect" which is derived from local
languages whose codes have been switched so that they are unintelligible
to a noninitiate (see Miller 2000; Ruel 1969:231, 245). The fact that we can
make some sense of Abakuá through Êkpê and Êfik terms suggests a direc­
tion for further linguistic study.

In what follows, I document how Abakuá leaders use these chants to
express their cultural history. I begin by presenting a transcribed Abakuá
chant, followed by an English translation of the Spanish phrases and terms
used by Abakuá leaders to interpret them. After this, I document transla­
tions into Êfik or another Cross River language by Orok Edem, Joseph
Edem, and Callixtus Ita, all native speakers; by Bruce Connell, an author­
ity on the languages of the Cross River region; and from published sources,
mainly the Rev. Hugh Goldie's 1862 Dictionary of the Êfik Language, the stan­
dard work. Because these multilayered interpretations are hard to read, I
used a graphical device to identify terms in the text that correspond to West
African terms. For example: anything in Goldie or another published
source is placed in square brackets [ ], and anything identified by O. Edem,
J. Edem, Ita, or Connell is placed in angle brackets < >. Where both kinds
of sources identify an item, then both kinds of brackets are used. Immedi­
ately under the Cuban interpretation, each bracketed expression gets its
translation with a citation. My own comments on the interpretation, if any,
follow this. As an example, I begin with the already mentioned chant.

**First Chant**

Okobio <[Enyenisôn]>, awana <bekura> mendo/ <[Nûnkue Itia]

Our African brothers, from the sacred place/ came to Havana, and in
Regla founded Effi Ebutôn/ we salute the Êkue drum.
In Abakuá:
Okobio = brother
Enyenisón = Africa
Awana Bekura mendo = sacred place where the society originated
Awana Bekura Mendó, or Bakura Efúr (formerly Bekura) was
the most important locality of the Efúr (Cabrera 1958:79).
Núnkue = Havana
Itia = land
Ororo = center (of a river)
Itia Ororo Kände = name for Regla, Havana
Efú Kebutón = first Abakuá group
Ekue = sacred drum.

Line 1: Okobio <[Enyenisón]>, awana <bekura> mendo

[Enyenisón] E-yeñ̃'ísóñen = child of the soil, a native, a free man;
ata eyen ísóñen = free by both parents (Goldie 1964: 97). In
local usage then, eyenísón would refer specifically to Efúk peo-
ple (see Eyo 1986:75).
<Enyenisón> enyenísón = son of the soil, meaning "we are owners
of the land" (O. Edem, personal communication, 2001)
<bekura> "Bekura is a village east of Usaghade, adjacent to or
part of Ekondo Titi. This is Londo (Balondo) country" (Con-
nell, personal communication, 2002).

Line 2: <[Núnkue] [Itia] [Ororo] [Kände] [Efú Kebutón]>.

You cannot push that stone farther than the Efúk Obutong.

This entire phrase in Efúk would be <Núnkue Itia ororo kände
Efú Kebutón>, a standard Efúk boast meaning "We are stronger
than anyone else" (O. Edem, personal communication, 2001).

[Núnk] Nuk = to push; to push aside or away (Goldie 1964:234)
[itia] I'-ti-at = a stone (Goldie 1964:139)
[ororo] O'-ru = that (Goldie 1964:256)
[kände] U'-kan = superiority; mastery (Goldie 1964:312)
[Efú Kebutón] Ob'-u-toñi = Old Town, a village situated a short
distance above Duke Town (Goldie 1964:360)
<Efú Kebutón> = Obutong, an Efúk town near Duke Town (O.
Edem, personal communication, 2001)

It should be noted that Oṣùk Edem's translation, above, does not coincide
with Cuban interpretations, which hold Núnkue and Ororó to be place
names (see Cabrera 1958:73). Edem's interpretation is plausible, however,
Cuban Abakuá Chants

because southern Nigerian initiation jargons commonly use proverbs, such as the above, as a form of figurative speech (see Green 1958).

Line 3: Oo <[Ékue]>

[Ékue] Ékpé = leopard (Goldie 1964:74). Hence the name of this institution is literally “leopard men.”

ÉK'pe = the Egbo [Ékpé] institution as a whole, comprising all the grades (Goldie 1964:74)

(Ortiz [1955:208] wrote: “In Cuba the word ékpé was converted to ékue because the constant phoneme kp of the Efik language cannot be well pronounced or written in European languages.” See also Simmons [1956:66]. In both the Cross River region and Cuba, Ékpé/Ékue is also the name of the unseen drum that “roars” to authorize ritual action (see Waddell 1863: 265–66)).

Within this example are many Cuban terms that translate directly into Efik and whose meanings overlap. Even where the meanings are very different—as in the Abakuá phrase “Nunkue... kande”—the phrase would be intelligible in context by an Efik speaker. This indicates the possibilities of Abakuá for gaining insight into trans-Atlantic history.

The process of interpretation documented by this article began in earnest when Orok Edem equated Cuba’s first Abakuá group, “Efik Ebutón,” with “Obutong,” an Efik town that was part of Calabar in southeastern Nigeria. Leaders of this town and their retainers were captured by British ships and transported to the Caribbean, an incident well documented in written sources. The battle of 1767, known as the “Massacre of Old Calabar,” was the climax of a power struggle between the neighboring Old Town (a.k.a. Obutong) and Duke Town (a.k.a. New Town) over foreign trade (see Simmons 1956:67–68). Duke Town leaders made a secret pact with captains of British slave ships anchored in the Old Calabar river. These captains, in turn invited Obutong leaders aboard their vessels, ostensibly to mediate the dispute. Once on board, three brothers of the Obutong chief Ephraim Robin John were held captive, and an estimated three hundred townspeople were slaughtered. One brother, released to the Duke Town leaders, was beheaded, and the other two, along with several of their retinue, were sold as slaves in the West Indies (Williams 1897:535–38; Clarkson 1968 [1808]:505–10).

The rivalry among Efik settlements on the Calabar River lasted several years (see Northrup 1978:37; Lovejoy & Richardson 1999:246); events such as the one described above brought a large enough number of Ékpé leaders into slavery for them to establish Abakuá in Havana. “Grandy King George” [Ephraim Robin John] described the loss of four of his sons “gone already with [captain] Jackson and I don’t want any more of them carried of
by any other vessel" (Williams 1897:544). Connell (personal communication, 2002) points out that “this is a rare documented claim of Efik actually being sent to the West Indies [no doubt there were more]. The time gap between this incident, 1767, and the assumed founding of Abakuá, 1836, is nearly sixty years, which suggests that the sons of Ephraim Robin John were presumably not involved.” In fact, the Robin John brothers were sold in Dominica, escaped, were reenslaved in Virginia, then traveled to Bristol, where they became enmeshed in a legal battle over their status, and eventually returned to Calabar (Paley 2002; Sparks 2002).

Meanwhile, hundreds of Africans who embarked in Calabar were transported on British ships directly to Havana. For example, in 1762 the Nancy disembarked 425 at Barbados and Havana; in 1763 the Indian Queen disembarked 496 at Kingston and Havana; in 1785 the Quixote disembarked 290 at Trinidad and Havana; in 1804 the Mary Ellen disembarked 375 in Havana. There, in spite of linguistic and ethnic diversity, they would have been known generally as “Calabari.” In the mid-eighteenth century, five Calabari cabildos (nation groups) existed in Havana (Marrero 1980:158–60); generally, these groups were known to include Ekpe members and acted as incubators for the emerging Abakuá. The historian José L. Franco (1974:179) reports that during the attempted rebellion in 1812 led by the free black José Antonio Aponte, authorities in Havana discovered a document in Aponte’s possession signed with an Abakuá symbol. These factors raise the possibility that early models of the Abakuá society were developed in the late eighteenth century.

Efik historians have known the point of departure, but not the final destination. Cuban Abakuá documented the language and place names but, until now, they had no way to corroborate this with information from African sources. Thus Edem’s interpretation strengthens the remarkable story of a complex secret society being recreated under conditions of slavery. This feat was facilitated by the proximity of Ekpe leaders and their intimate circle, all of whom were brought to Havana, a cosmopolitan city containing many Cross River people in a large free black population.

The mutually reinforcing present-day Efik and Abakuá interpretations of historical acts allows us to create a connected account of events leading to the refounding of an African institution in the Caribbean. This continuous narrative—which contradicts other interpretations that describe the Middle Passage as a historical discontinuity—was assembled through years of fieldwork and document study on both sides of the Atlantic and subsequent collaboration between academic and traditional intellectuals. One of the myths of slavery in the Americas is that African cultural traditions were destroyed. The Abakuá example suggests that the lived reality was considerably more complicated than that.

Months after communicating with Orok Edem, I learned that Fernando Ortiz, a leading scholar of African influence in Cuba, had nearly fifty years earlier correctly traced the origin of the term “Efik Obutón.” Ortiz
Oral History and Performance-Oriented Research Methods

Since African-derived traditions in the Americas depend largely on oral transmission, oral methodologies are vital to scholarship. From the early nineteenth century onward, Abakúa have passed manuscripts of their own texts from elders to selected neophytes, who have then memorized and recited them in various performance contexts. The secrecy surrounding these texts is evidence of the society’s continued control over information. I have been fortunate to work with Abakúa leaders who distinguish texts containing historical data from those with spiritual allusions. Without access to at least some of these historical passages, with their richly detailed insights into cultural transmission and transformation, we can hardly fathom the meaning of Abakúa to the West African diaspora.

By recording oral testimonies, scholars create historical documents of the memories and accounts of the people they interview. The audio recorded document may be examined in much the same way that a written document is examined, making oral history a type of historiography. All historical research is based on documents, none of which can be taken at face value. The student must ask: Who made them, why, for what audience; what information did they have available to them; what was their purpose in creating these documents?

In establishing this oral history, I was greatly aided by a variation of an Afro-Cuban performance technique known as controversia, which is similar to forms of “signifying” in North America and other regions in the African diaspora. Cubans use many terms to describe musical variants of call-and-response interactions. Ortiz (1981:54) wrote: “The congos often employ, among other responsorial chants, those in Cuba called de puya, makagua or
managua, in which two alternating soloists chant, sustaining a controversy. Chants of ‘counterpoint,’ of ‘challenge, [are offered by] payadores [singers who perform improvised musical dialogues]. At times the chorus meddles with the phrases of the chanting gallos [soloists] to stimulate the performance.” “Between one ceremony and another in their rites,” wrote Ortiz (1981:75), the Abakuá “entertain themselves publicly to the rhythms of their orchestra, chanting inúas or bífumas, which they also call décimas, or verses of challenge, aphorism, or history.” In Efik, the literal meaning of inúa is mouth; figuratively it can mean boastful and is related to the word eneminúa, which is a flatterer (Aye 1991:56).

In Abakuá ritual performance, lead singers compete with each other to demonstrate musical skill as well as knowledge of historical texts. When I learned a passage and its translation, I would take it to various Abakuá leaders. I found that in reciting their own versions, some sages would offer insights into the material by extending the text or by giving more complex interpretations, while also demonstrating mastery of the form.

### Abakuá Chant Their History

After the Êkpé–Abakuá encounter, I visited an Abakuá leader in Havana. Interested that West African Êkpé had interpreted Cuban texts, and in the spirit of controversia, he gave me the following chant containing what he believed to be the names of Efik founders of the society in Cuba. This chant, one of hundreds in contemporary practice commemorating the transmission of West and Central West African traditions, is performed before initiation ceremonies in remembrance of Efik leaders considered founders of the group Êkpé Êbutón in Cuba.

#### Second Chant


- Ékue came to the land of the whites,
- or
- Êkpé that walks around in the land of the ghosts,
  (“Walking is used in a boastful context” [O. Edem, personal communication, 2001]),
  or
- Êkpé walks in the village of ghosts.

[asanga] ásáñá = walking (in Ibibio) (Essien 1990:147)
[asanga] I′-sañ = a walk; a journey; a trip; a voyage” (Goldie 1964:135)
(asanga) asaña = to move, in whatever manner (Goldie 1964:264)

(Each of these translations coincides with the interpretation by many Abakúa elders of asanga as walking [see Cabrera 1958:55]).

[epó] Ėkpó = ghost, spirit" (Aye 1991:32)
<abia> = village, town (if one interprets this word as obio in Efik)

**Line 2:** Endafia awereké [Abasi] [obon] Efí.

*We give thanks to God and to the Efik rulers.*

[Abasi] A-bas'-i = the Supreme Being, God" (Goldie 1964:2)
[obon] À-boñ' = a chief; one having authority; a principal ruler; a king (Goldie 1964:3)
<obon> obong = king in Efik (O. Edem, personal communication, 2001)

**Line 3:** <Afotan konomi Ėkue Enyemilla>.

*I am from the land of Enyiña.*

<Afotan konomi Ėkue Enyemilla> Afotang okonomi Ėkpe enye mi da = A boastful phrase identifying the source of the speaker's particular kind of Ėkpè" (O. Edem personal communication, 2001).

**Line 4:** Jura [Natakua].

*I was consecrated in the land of Natakúa.*

[Natakua] A-tak'-pa = Duke Town, the largest town in Calabar (Goldie 1964:355)

Not only do Abakúa say they have Efik roots, but many key Abakúa words are also slightly transformed from words still used in the Calabar region (Sosa 1982:395–414). For example, *Abakuá* itself is likely *Abákpá,* an Efik term for the Ejagham people (Simmons 1956:66 n.1a). This makes sense, because according to Abakúa mythology, Ejagham participated in originating the society. Abakuá translate *Ekoi as power,* this also makes sense, because Africanists also identify the word as an Efik term for the Ejagham people. Monina (ritual brother) is an Ejagham term for friend (O. Edem, personal communication, 2001). The term *Uyo,* the "Voice" of Ėkue (Ortiz 1955:233), may derive from the Êbibi ãyó (voice) (Essien 1986:10). The Cuban phrase “Abasi amá” (Ortiz 1954:83) is a contemporary name in
Abakua was established by the 1830s when Ekpe members from the Calabar region initiated the first “creoles” (Cuban-born blacks). As each new group begat another, ritual lineages were created which, in many cases, continue to the present. Efik Ebuton is generally agreed to have been established in 1836 by Apapa Efí. Since Efí Ebuton eventually disappeared, its progeny, Efik Abakua, established in 1845, is considered the oldest group of “tierra Efí” (Efí land) in Cuba today. The Efut lineage in Abakua commenced when Apapa Efó (with Efí Ebuton and others as witnesses) established Efori Nkomón in 1840.

The group Efori Nkomón still functions in Havana. The lineage of “tierra Orú” (Orú land) is believed to have commenced when Orú Apapa was established, probably in 1848, in Guanabacoa, across the Havana harbor. Orú is likely Oron, a Cross River ethnic group.

Efí, Efó, and Orú are the three major “ethnic” lineages which structure the contemporary Abakua society. Of course, genetic ancestry from one of these groups is not a requirement for initiation. One is invited to join after demonstrating moral preparedness by being a “a good friend, a good father, a good brother, a good husband and a good son.” Once initiated, members learn the ritual genealogy of their group in order to assume and extol the mythic “ethnic” lineage they now participate in. Just as many contemporary Cubans are able to trace their family genealogy to specific African ancestors, Abakua intellectuals can recite the ritual-kinship genealogies of their own group in detail, including their connection to the Efí, Efut, or Orú founders of the society in specific regions of the Cross River basin. These genealogies are often recited during ceremonies.

Although there has been little systematic research on the genealogies of Cuban families, many individuals have been interested in locating their ancestors. For example, the folklorist Rogelio Martínez-Furé told me (personal communication, June 2002) that Pello “el Afrikan,” creator of the Mozambique rhythm in the 1970s, chose this name because he knew his
grandmother was Makua, a Bantu group from Mozambique. Members of the Arará cabildos (nation groups) of Perico and Joveanos, Matanzas, can trace their ancestry to the Republic of Benin. The Calle family of Matanzas city, who conserve the Brikamo tradition, know they are the descendants of Calabarí. Martínez-Furé’s great-great grandmother Mamá Incarnación (1831–1937) was the daughter of a Mandinga [i.e., Malinke]. In a recent recording, “Román” Díaz (Yoruba Andabo, 1997) arranges traditional material to reflect upon the role of his own groups’ ritual lineage within Abakúa mythic history and records the following chant.

Third Chant


In Abakúa:
Umóni Apapá = a Cross River territory. It is the name of Díaz’s group in Havana, also called Ékuéri Tongó Ápapa Umóni, and from an Efí lineage.

[Umóni] Umon (a.k.a Boson) = an island in the Cross River estuary thirty miles north of Old Calabar (see Northrup 2000: 9, 19). In his diary from 1785–87, the Old Calabar trader Antera Duke referred to Umon (he called it Boostam) as the location of a slave market (Forde 1956:39). According to Connell (personal communication, 2002), “the Umon have now largely switched to Èfik, though at least until recently their own language was still in use.”


In Havana, Ékuéri Tongó was founded by Èkueri Tené.

The Cuban Abakúa group Ékuéri Tongó Ápapa Umóni was founded in Havana in 1848 by African-born Èkpu. Historically, this group represents a parallel Cuban Èfik lineage to that commenced with Èfik Ebuton in the 1830s.

[Ékuéri tongó] ‘Ekuritonko’ and ‘Ikot Inunko’ = indigenous names for Creek Town, Calabar (Jones 1956:119, 121; Simmons 1956: 72 n. 45)
[Ékuéri tongó] O-kuri-tuñ-ko = Creek Town, the second largest town in Calabar” (Goldie 1964:361; see also Goldie 1890:11; Waddell 1863:309)
Even though members of the Abakuá group Ápapa Umoní may not know the identities of specific Efik ancestors, they do have ritual-kinship with others in their ritual-lineage, a relationship mythically recreated during ceremony through music, dance, and chanting performed in commemoration of the transmission of Ékpè from the Efut to the Éfik in the Cross River region, and then from Calabar to Cuba. Both Ékpè and Abakuá leaders appreciate the importance of ancestral memory for maintaining social cohesion. On both sides of the Atlantic, Africans have steadfastly maintained their identities as a form of resistance against political domination. The similarity of experiences helps to explain why both groups recognize one another after nearly two centuries of separation. Earlier notions of African “retentions” (atavisms) in the Americas reflected a belief that African-derived practices and identities would fade away with time. Abakuá activities indicate, however, that these are productive cultural practices sought out and studied by contemporary peoples because they meet important needs in the present.

In sum, the ability of Ékpè and Abakuá members to recognize each other through cultural performance indicates a historical relationship that now has become significant to people of African heritage on both sides of the Atlantic. The establishment of a common history is an international connection that gives both groups new status as representatives of a valuable and ancient cultural tradition. Because both groups are marginal in their respective nations, their contemporary exchanges may include mutual support for identity construction, a deeper understanding of mutual mythic history, economic exchanges, as well as greater cultural and political recognition within West Africa and Cuba.

Abakuá Chants in Commercial Recordings Generate Historical Data

Ceremonial rites are arenas for competitive chanting where reputations are earned for performance style and knowledge of the ceremonial corpus. In African-derived religions of Cuba, lead chanters convey who they are, from which African places and peoples their rites derive, and what ceremony is occurring inside the Fambá (temple) where the Ékue drum is sounded unseen in a place called Fó Ékue. In Calabar, “Efamba [consists of] a secret display of Ekpe artifacts” in a temple (Bassey 2001:22). In Efik, “Efe Ékpè” is an “Ekpe shed” (Aye 1991:27), or “the Ékpè cult house where only the initiates gather” (O. Edem, personal communication, 2001), or an Ékpè meeting house (according to Goldie [1964:68], Ḗfä is a shed and Ḗfēkpe is “a palaver house”).

During the course of chanting, dancers and drummers converse through vocabularies of gesture and rhythm. All of this unfolds from the doorway of the Fambá outward. In Abakuá plantes (ceremonies), la valla (a
human corridor of call-and-response chanting and dancing in the temple’s patio) is part of the Efik contribution. Cuban mythology holds that both Morúa Yúaśa (the lead chanter) and the biankomé drums became part of the society when the Efik were initiated in precolonial West Africa. In la valla, singers with ibione (swing) display their knowledge of tratados (mythic histories) to the public. On these occasions, lead chanters engage in controversias. One by one, chanters attempt to dominate the action by starting with well-known chants that inspire the chorus and dancers; then they move into complex liturgical passages that are difficult or impossible for other chanters to follow or respond to. Tratados are the bases for extended conversations among Abakú intellectuals. In this chanted discourse, the leader must demonstrate linguistic dexterity beyond the comprehension of less knowledgeable competitors.

Commercial and anthropological recordings lack ceremonial competition among lead chanters, but Abakú musicians use codes to demonstrate their knowledge as well as to discourse on Abakú history. In the early 1960s a series of recordings by the Department of Folklore in Havana (Musica afrocubana 1993) documented “national folklore” with “traditional” instruments and language. An analysis of the Abakú recording reveals that the lead chanter, Victor Herrera, used the occasion to evoke the history of his own group and its lineage. Performed in the structure of a rompimiento (a ceremony in which the sacred Ékue begins to sound), the chant is ended by Herrera before the moment when the drum would sound. The importance of this recording is that Herrera—by playing with, yet respecting, the boundaries of secret liturgy—was able to perform Abakú ritual music in a secular context and was still able to maintain his reputation among Abakú. Herrera’s performance of “Encame” has been celebrated by contemporary Abakú musicians.

**Fourth Chant**

Using rhetorical phrases to commence a ceremonial performance, Herrera begins by gaining the attention of the chorus:

**Line 1: <Jeyey baribá ben[kamá] — Wa!>**

Attention, I will speak — We are ready! Spoken as one enters a crowd of Ékpé people and wants to call everybody’s attention, or a call to order before business or a speech could begin. Wa! here confirms this kind of identification, because after the salutation or call to order all present would answer: Utua” (O. Edem, personal communication, 2001).
<benkama> be nkama (likely) (Connell, personal communication, 2002)
be = tell a story in Londo (= 'Efut?') and other Bantu/Bantoid languages in the area (cf. *ṭibīṭọ ḥo*= speak, tell)
n-kama = I declare
[kamá] kámá = "share in the play by displaying your knowledge of its secrets as an initiate or member" (Aye 1991: 61)

Herrera then salutes a leading figure in Abakua mythology, and then each category of the Abakua hierarchy:

**Line 2:** *<EFIMÉREMO> <ENKRUKORO> <IĪÀ>, ABSI ARÖMINÀN, <ASÈRÉ> OBÒN, INDIOBÒN, ETENYEBÒN, <OBONÉKUE>.*

In Abakua:
EFIMÉREMO = IYÀMBA (mythologically, the first initiate, a.k.a. "Efí Méremo Obón Iyamba")
enkrükoro = union
iīà = the land
ABASI = God
asèrè = I salute
obòn = king
indiobòn = second initiation grade (índia = birth; obon= king)
etenyebòn = another initiation grade
obonékue = low level initiates.

Orok Edem identified this as a complete Êfik phrase in which someone is singing the praises of Efiom Edem, a particular Iyamba. According to Edem (personal communication, 2001), "This is a common Êfik manner of speaking, especially during funeral obsequies, for example: 'so and so, the greatest of all men, the owner of all farmlands, the man who decides when rain falls or not, etc.'"

*<EFIMÉREMO> Efiom Edem O = name of a particular Iyamba
<ENKRUKORO IĪÀ> Okut Ukot = stone
<ABASI ARÖMINÀN, ASÈRÈ> Abasi Orok Inang – àsè!
asè = an affirmation; exploits or achievements: "the act of proclaiming achievements publicly, .... a poetic eulogy in praise of a king or any famous person" (Aye 1991:8)
<OBÒN> = Obong – àsè!
<INDIOBÒN> = Edi obong – àsè!
<ETENYEBÒN> = Ete obong – àsè!
<OBONÉKUE> = Obong Èkpè (Èkpè ruler)
In the following passages Herrera claims his legitimacy to speak by presenting himself as a leader of the group Isín Efó, which belongs to a ritual lineage.
begat in 1840 in Havana by Efut founders. According to Cuban mythology, Isun was the capital of Efó (Efut) territory in Usagaré—called Usakadet, Usahadet, Bakasi, or Backasey in various nineteenth-century maps (see Goldie 1964:361)—and is the place where Ekpè was founded. Herrera chants:


Isun Efó is under the same sky (Enseniyén) as Bekuraméndó (an alternative name for Usagaré).

<Isín> Isong = land

Isong Efut = Efut land (O. Edem, personal communication, 2001)

[Isín] l'-soñ = the earth, “as distinguished from enyọñ, the heavens” (Goldie 1964:598)

<enseniyén> enyene nyin = belongs to us

Thus, isong enyene nyin = the land belongs to us (O. Edem, personal communication, 2001)

[enseniyén] En'-yqii = the heavens, the firmament, the lift, the sky (Goldie 1964:79). This translation resonates directly with Abakua usage.

[enseniyén] Nsaninyai = a place name within Ekoi, “on the east bank of the Cross river” (Goldie 1964:357). According to Connell (personal communication, 2002), “this would be on the Calabar side of the river. One meaning of nsan is “red earth” (presumably laterite); inyañ is river.

Abakua leaders translated Isún as face, as well as capitae in other words, “a place where important ceremonies were performed.” One Abakua elder told me: “Isun is any kind of face: of the sun, the moon, of a table, etc.” The Cuban scholar Lydia Cabrera (1988:252) wrote that “Isún [is] the face of Sikán”; the latter is a name for the mythological female founder of Abakua. In the Cross River region, Sikan is a goddess of water; “iso esikan” is the shrine for the goddess (O. Edem, personal communication, 2001). The metaphorical relationship between a face and an altar are found throughout West Africa; according to Thompson (1993:28), “Yoruba and other Kwa-language groups in West Africa (Fon, Igbo, Edo, Ijaw) define their traditional altars as the ‘face’ or ‘countenance’ or ‘forehead’ of the gods.” Talbot (1923: 178–79) wrote that among the Ibibiö, west of Calabar, an initiation into the Ekong society was followed by a sacrifice made to a sacred location called “Isu Abassi, i.e., the Face of the God.” Goldie wrote that in Calabar, a shrine made in the entrance yard of every home was called isu Abas—“the face or presence of Abasi” (I'-ṣu = the face, the countenance”; i-ṣu A-baṣi = “the little round mound, as an altar... before which prayer was wont to be made to Abasi” (1890:42; 1964 [1862]: 137–38).
Cuban Abakuá Chants

Line 4: Isún kanomá táfia [úkano] bekonsí / abaireme táfia serendé 
eniwé <akanarán>.

Isún participated in the first ceremony performed under the 
sacred tree / we were born from the same mother.

In Abakuá:
Úkano bekonsí = ceiba tree 
abaireme = the ireme 
eniwé = born from 
akanarán = mother (fig. “powerful ancestor”)

[úkano] úkánà = the African oil bean tree (Aye 1991:139) 
<akanarán> akani ernen = old man, or ancestor (Connell, personal 
communication, 2002)
a-kan’-ni = old; aged; ancient 
φ-ren = male; ãwan = a woman” (Goldie 1964: 7, 80)

It makes sense that what Abakuá metaphorically refer to as “mother” would 
also mean “ancestor.”

A later commercial recording—“Enyenisón Enkama Africa habla” (Africa 
Speaks) by Yoruba Andabo (1993)—reconstructs coherent liturgical 
chants, surpassing in this regard the supposedly more authentic “folklore” 
recordings in situ. A translation of the Èfik version of this title would be 
“the sons of the land speak” (Ekama = declares, speaks) (O. Edem person­ 
al communication, 2001). This composition is based on the tratako of 
Empégó, recited during the consecration of his drum. Empégó was key to 
the founding of Èkpè during the original ceremony in Usagaré: with his 
magic chalk he drew symbols that authorized the ritual actions of others. 
After a standard invocation, “Román” Díaz introduces his topic:

Fifth Chant

Line 1: [Batánga] Laminyán?

Where did Empégó go to find his magic chalk?

Batánga derives from a title of the dignitary Morúa Yuánsa: “Batánga 
Morúa,” meaning “one who chants a lot” (“canta mucho”). Cabrera 
(1988:102) documented Batánga as congo, one of several Cuban interpre­ 
tations indicating Bantu influence from the Cameroons region. Nicklin 
(1991:11) reported that the Efut and Batánga are part of the same ethno­ 
linguistic group in southwest Cameroon. According to Austen and Derrick
(1999:14), Batanga is one of several Sawa Bantu speaking communities in the Wouri Estuary region of Cameroon. This possible connection—if not occurring previously in West Africa—was enabled later in Cuba by the estimated thirty to forty thousand enslaved people carried from this region by British, Dutch, and American vessels from 1752 to 1807 (Austen & Derrick 1999:18).

**Line 2:** Ekokó <[ibiono]> muna tánze.

With his chalk, Empego consecrated the skin (ekokó) of the divine drum (muna).

In this phrase *ibiono* (music) is used as one of several metaphors for the drum.

[ibiono] I-bi-qn'-q = a town of Ibibio (Goldie 1964:358)

Since according to legend Abakua drum music was a contribution of the Efik—and since Efik people lived in Ibibio territory before settling in the Calabar region (see Latham 1973:9)—this association makes sense.

<ibiono> mbiono = congregation (O. Edem, personal communication, 2001)

Since well-performed music tends to draw a congregation about the players, this interpretation is possible.

m'-bi-o-Č = people, collectively" (Goldie 1964:172)

**Line 3:** <[Akam]a nyére Orú>.

We will speak of Orú.

In Abakua:
akamanyére = come forward; an evocation.
[Akam] A-kam = prayer to God (Goldie 1964:6)
<Akama nyére>
ekama = to call; yere = to answer, ør
Ete akam enye oro = prayer is good

According to Orok Edem (personal communication, 2001), this is uttered after an elder pours the libation, *akam*, when greeting the Obong Ekpe.

**Line 4:** Obonékue efión [enkíko], obonékue efión <bongó> / <Orú Bibí> urabá kinyongo / Êkue baróri.
Initiates were cleansed; rooster blood was given to the bongó drum / Orú Bíbi was consecrated / the Èkue was powerful.

In Abakuá:
oboněkue = initiate
efion = blood
enkiko = rooster
Bibi = Ìbibò, an ethnic-linguistic term
barori = strong

[enkiko] Êkiko-unen = he cock, the male of the domestic fowl (Goldie 1964:72)
<bongó> Bongó èküe = Mbongo Ekomo Èkpe (Ekomo = drum) (O. Edem, personal communication, 2001)
<bongó> ebonko = the fifth grade of Èkpe in Calabar; also the chief of the four lower grades (Connell, personal communication)

<Orú Bíbi> Orön = a town, a people, and a language; Bíbi = Ìbibò: a people and a language.
The Oron pronunciation of Ìbibò is Ìbibì. Both groups are found on the west bank of the Cross River (Connell, personal communication, 2002).


Morúá chanted when the Eribó drum was consecrated in Orú.

In Abakuá:
índia = birth
Makanika = nkanika (bells)
Aya gasígama = I will be loyal till death (an oath)
akamá Eribó
Kamá = word, to speak.
Kamá ribó= speak through the Eribó [drum]” (Cabrera 1958:82).

[Morúá] Mu'ru-a = “The name of an officer possessed by the three highest grades in Ègbo [Èkpe], who goes as a mourner to the funeral of any one who dies free of these grades, and... and howls” (Goldie 1964:196).

[Morúá] Muruá = one of the degrees of Èkpe cult; during the coronation of an Òboñ, the Muruá and Idem Ikwó are the first to start the coronation celebrations (Aye 1991:86).
The next passage segues from a discussion of West African mythology to that of a ritual lineage established in Cuba in 1840.


The alliance between the groups Munyanga Efó, Efóri Nkomón, Isu Efó, Ita Amananyuáo was authorized through symbols drawn by Empegó.

These groups are from the same Efó lineage begat in Havana in 1840 with the founding of Efóri Nkomón.

In Abakuá:

efóri = herbal arts
nkomón = drum
efóri nkomón = powerful drum (see Cabrera 1958: 38)
obonsíro = family
awarariansa = alliance
engómo = chalk used to authorize consecrations

<Munyanga Efó> Me Uyanga Efot = people of Uyanga, a town in the Cross River Basin” (O. Edem, personal communication, 2001)

<Efóri nkomón> Efri = to blow; ekomo = drum.
"Used to introduce a sanction, for example, to stop the missionaries from preaching or forbidding anyone to do business with them” (O. Edem, personal communication, 2001).

For example, in a 1788 diary entry Antera Duke wrote: “I took 2 Ekpe drums and blew to forbid any men to sleep in the houses” (cited in Forde 1956:64).

[Efóri] Efri = to blow with the mouth, to breathe (Goldie 1964:106)

The interpretation of the Efik efrí as to blow or sound the drum of authority, and the Cuban efóri as herbal arts (literally, witchcraft), is admittedly tenuous. Abakuá mythology tells that Efóri was a people and place in Usagáre where the original ceremonial herbs were gathered.

<nkomón> e-kóm-ó = short drum, the Egbo (Ekpë) drum (Goldie 1964:73; Aye 1991:30)

<Eforisún sankóbio Ita Amananyuáo> Efe usun esan ke obio ita
amanyuao = phrase describing an incident in which the people of Yuanga first went into a town of Ita (O. Edem, personal communication, 2001)
<obonsiro Êkue awarariana engómo> Obon iso Êkpê awawari ansa ekomo = a special Êkpê was then brought out (O. Edem, personal communication, 2001). In other words, Edem identifies this as an entire phrase in Êfik, using the appropriate hyperbolic language.

Line 7: Erendió <Isun Efó>, ebongó Efóri Nkomón.

The group Isán Efó was born from that of Efóri Nkomón or, literal meaning, Isun Efó was born through the Bongo drum of Efóri Nkomón.

<Isun Efó> = Efóri land (O. Edem, personal communication, 2001)

Using a ceremonial call and response structured with polyrhythmic percussion, Díaz extolled Abakúa mythology and contemporary ritual lineages. By demonstrating knowledge without revealing intimate ritual procedure, Díaz added a new dimension to the Abakúa presence in Cuban popular music.

Another arrangement by Díaz, “Enyenísón Enkama 2” (Yoruba Andabo 1997), continues his explorations into Abakúa mythology. Abakúa leadership believe that the Efó (Efut) founded the society in West Africa; the Êfik were believed to have joined the society later. While Cuban narratives relate Efut origins, several West African narratives claim Ejagham origins for Êkpê, which was eventually transmitted to the Êfik through Usak Edet (Usagaré). Talbot (1912:37) wrote that the Ejagham “claim to have originated the whole idea” of Êkpê; later “Efut in the South Cameroons, started a similar society,” while still later “the Efiks of Calabar ... founded the Ekkpe Club.” Latham (1973:36) wrote that circa 1750, “one of the first Efik settlers at Creek Town ... is said to have bought the Ekpe secrets from ... a man from Usak Edet.” According to Jones (1956:123), “In addition to [the] Efik communities there were resident in the Old Calabar area two distinct and older elements, the Efut and the Qua [Ejagham].” The Efik received Ékpê from “the neighboring Qua[,] who said they brought it with them from the Eko [Ejagham] homeland” (Jones 1956:136; 1963:19).

By reexamining the tratados, Díaz highlights the role of Êfi ancestors in the history of Cross River Êkpê, in effect offering a revision of the West African mythology. Since Díaz is a leading member of an Abakúa group derived from Êfi traditions, this arrangement is no simple exercise, but part of an extended conversation about the role of West African ethnicity in Êkpê/Abakúa and Cuban history. In this recording, Díaz identifies himself as a leader of his group whose role is that of Monî Bonkó, the player of
the ceremonial Efik bonkó drum. Connell (personal communication, 2002) identifies “Monf Bonko” as possibly derived from Muní, a term for an Efut chief in Calabar; it has also been identified as “the exalted position of Ebunko, vice-chairman of Ekpe” (Latham 1973:39).24

This composition is meant to convey that in West Africa, the Efi knew about the “secret” of the sacred “Fish Tanze” before it was caught by the Efó. Furthermore, without the Efik contributions (in the form of music, instruments, masquerade ensembles, and specific ritual leaders), the society would not function as it does today. The message is: “Peace and unity; we are family, let’s get along as equals.” In other words, the Efó should not feel superior because of the legend that they founded the society.

After greeting the chorus, Díaz begins:

**Sixth Chant**

**Line 1: <Abasi menguáme enkrukoro>**.

We are united with the blessings of God,
or,God watches over all.

In Efik,
guáme = kpeme = watch (over)
enkrúkoro = kpukpuru = all

**Line 2: <Enkrukoro <enyéne> Abakuá, [itiá] [Fondó], itiá kanima aséré, itiá ororó kánde, itiá nünkue>**.

We are united in Abakuá. I salute the Abakuá of Matanzas, of Cárdenas, of Regla, of Havana.
(cf. Thompson 1983: 250)

In Abakuá:
enkrukoro = group
itiá = land of

<Enkrukoro enyéné Abakuá> Kpukpuru enyene Êkpé = All belong to Êkpé
<iTiá fondó> Itie/ iitiat ifondo = Place of Ifondo
<iTiá kanima aséré> Itie/ iitiat nkanima = Place of nkanima
<iTiá ororó kánde> Itie/ iitiat nkanda = Place of nkanda
<iTiá nünkue> Itie/ iitiat nuk Êkpé=nuku = Place of Êkpé

“ITie Êkpé is buried at the entrance to each Êkpé house. ITie is the position of authority in Êkpé cosmology; it depends on
the character uttering the words, and in what context the words are being used" (O Edem, personal communication, 2001).

<enyene> Enyene = has, own (O. Edem, personal communication, 2001), i.e., “All own Abakuá.”

[enyene] ienyene = possession (Goldie 1964:569)

[itiá] itiá = stone; itie = place.

The “stone” theme resonates powerfully with Êkpè/Ngbé practice; an Ngbe foundation stone is placed at the base of the central pillar of the Ngbe lodge in Ejagham settlements (Nicklin 1991:4). According to Talbot (1969 [1926]:347), “The Etia Ngbe, the Efik Itiatt Ekkpe, is the principal symbol belonging to the secret society.... It represents not only the ancestors who have been members but also the tutelary spirit of the club.”

[Fondó] I-fon-do’ = a small village near Duke Town” (Goldie:358)

Because Cuban Abakuá were recreating Êkpè in Cuba, it makes sense that they would rename “Matanzas” with a Cross River place name.

Line 3: Erendión <ekoria Abakuá> enyenísón eriero bonsíro kinyóngo <baróko> nansáo.

Let us remember that Abakuá was born in Africa during the original ceremony.

In Abakuá:
bonsíro = family
kinyóngo = initiated
baróko = ceremony
baróko nansáo = a founding ceremony

<ekoria Abakuá> ekori = the territory of
The meaning of the phrase “ekori enyne Abakuá” is “the whole world belongs to Abakuá,” i.e., a boast (O.Edem, personal communication, 2001). Ekorio enyne Abakuá is the complete title of the Cuban society.

<baróko> mboróko = an idém that comes out when the king dies” (O. Edem, personal communication, 2001)

Line 4: Okobio Enyenisón, Awanabekura Mendo/ Nümkue Itia Ororo Kánde Êfik Ebutón/ Oo Ékue.
Our African brothers, from the sacred place/ came to Havana, and in Regla founded Efik Ebuton/ we salute the Èkue drum.

In reciting the passage "Okobio enyenisón," Díaz recounts the founding of Èfik Ebuton in Havana by Èfik leaders. He comments in this way upon a still existing rivalry among the members of Èfó and Èfi ritual lineages in Cuba over who was the first to "own" the secret in West Africa. The fact that the Èfi were the first to found a group in Cuba raises the question: How could the Èfik have the authority to create the first group if it is indeed the Èfó who "own" the fundamental secret? Díaz then returns to West Africa to investigate Èkpè history:

Line 5: <{Obáne}>, <Èkue Èfi okobio Obáne>.

I come to represent the Èfik territory of Obáne.

<Obáne> = an Ejaghham region north east of Calabar; the hills there are referred to as the Oban hills (Connell, personal communication).

[Obáne] O'-báñ = a town of Òkoi" (Goldie 1964:360).

There may not be a contradiction here in that Oban is known as an Ejaghham region in West Africa, while in Cuba, Obáne is considered an Èfik region (see Cabrera 1958:73). Connell (personal communication, 2002) wrote: "I have the impression from Talbot that Oban was heavily influenced by Èfik and its proximity to Calabar even in the nineteenth century."

<Èkue Èfì okobio Obáne> Èkpè Èfik ke obio Abana = Èkpè in the town of Abana (Oban is in the hills, Abana is by the sea" (O. Edem, personal communication, 2001).
A-ban 'a = the point called East Head, at the entrance of the Calabar river (Goldie 1964:353)

Line 6: Endó kairán <kokoriko>/ <akanawán> entéme taróroko.

In a river of Obane, a being was sent from the "land of the phantoms."

In Abakúá:
kokoriko = a worm (reference to death)
akanawán = a masquerade costume (representing ancestors)
taróroko = a toad (a code for the divine fish, who made a loud sound resembling that of a toad)

In the private manuscript of inherited tratados in which I saw the passage,
"from the land of the phantoms" was translated as "from the land of the whites." In Abakúa ceremony, white chalk used for funeral ceremonies is equated with death. According to one Abakúa leader, the color metaphor means that the divine Fish was sent by the ancestors ("the land of the ghosts") to unite the tribes.

<kokorikó> = cock crow (in Efik) (Ita, personal communication, 2003)
<akanawán> = old woman (O. Edem, personal communication, 2001)
This makes sense in Abakúa mysticism, where the spirit of Sikán, founding woman, is present in the dance of some Iremes.


How is it that the Êkue is from Efí [Obáne Embemóró], but the Efó—represented by Iyamba—have possession of it?\(^{25}\)

According to Orok Edem (personal communication, 2001) the entire phrase means "Obioko—Creek Town—has agreed that mboko belongs to Eyamba."

Mboko = a type of idèm, a stage of membership in Êkpè (O. Edem, personal communication, 2001)
[Ubioko] Obio Oko = Creek Town (Simmons 1956:3)

Cuban Abakúa interpret Obioku as a spring of water important to their mythology. Creek Town was so named because it is surrounded by creeks.

Line 8: <[Ekóon] kríbia ekóon endibó>

A title of the ekón, used to "bring the voice." According to Abakúa mythology, this metal idiophonic bell is sacred to the Efik.

[ekón] ãkóñi = a funnel-shaped musical instrument made of iron and beaten in play (Aye 1991:107)
<Ekóon kríbia ekóon endibó> Ekong akiriba ekong dibo = a song in Calabar" (O. Edem, personal communication, 2001)

Line 9: <Kamanyéré enkrúkoro, ireme ayeremi>.

Let us speak of union, our ancestors guide us.

<Kamanyéré enkrúkoro, ireme ayeremi> Akama nyére kpukpurú, idèm enyene mi = all call and respond, I own idém. "When one enters an Êkpè gathering," said Orok Edem (personal commun-
cation, 2001), "one must demonstrate membership. For example, if I travel to Bakassi and witness Ékpê being played as a stranger, the only way I would be recognized as an initiate is to kama/ jere."

Edem’s interpretation coincides with those by Cuban Abakuá leaders of the same phrase. Both give insight into the role of Ékpê/ Ñgbê in West Africa and Abakuá in Cuba, where initiates enjoy a common bond while traveling away from their home to other regions where Ékpê/ Ñgbê/ Abakuá reside. The society serves as a form of protection as well as a club for aesthetic pleasure; as Fitzgerald Marriot (1899:23) observed over one hundred years ago: "All members of the [Ékpê] society can travel without danger." Based on his research in Cameroon, Ruel wrote:

Ngbe functions basically as an esoteric club, a highly elaborate one but one which caters primarily for the entertainment and common enjoyment of its members. This fact should be stressed, for the political functions of Ngbe derive as much from its bringing together the leading members of a community in these general activities as from its formal constitution as such. [In Calabar, Ékpê became] the means by which otherwise independent communities could act jointly in matters affecting their common interest. . . . Away from Calabar the common possession of Ekpe lodges by different communities was politically important rather as a means by which individual rights could be transferred from one community to another, so that a person passing between communities was given some protection. (Ruel 1969: 231, 254-55)

So too in Cuba, Abakuá initiates traveling to and from Havana and Matanzas will "call and respond" to demonstrate membership, enabling their participation in Abakuá gatherings in regions not their own. By evoking the ritual lineage of their particular group through chanted passages, initiates provide evidence for their legitimate acquisition of sacred authority.

Conclusion

Despite separation for two centuries, highly different contexts, and different colonial languages, the similar functions of Ékpê/ Ñgbê and Abakuá and the training of its members has made it possible for initiates on both sides of the Atlantic to recognize their relationship.

Recent recordings of Abakuá materials by Cuban groups—notably Grupo AfroCuba (1998), Los Muñequitos de Matanzas (1994, 1995), Yoruba Andabo (1993, 1997), and the album Ibiono (2001)—convey several overarching messages: We are a people with our own history and traditions; we have intimate contact with the divine; our ancestors were royal personages who did great works; do not belittle our history or achievements; there is strength in unity.
By interpreting Cuban Abakuá chants through extended collaborative efforts with Abakuá leaders, I learned how these were used to comment upon the history of this institution, its West African origins, and its reestablishment in Cuba. By working with Èfik speakers who identified many Abakuá terms as part of their own language and history, as well as researching Abakuá terms in published sources, I was able to determine that many are derived from Cross River languages. Many Abakuá chants reveal West African place names and ritual lineages founded by West Africans in Cuba. Little of this information is found in written sources, making Abakuá chants useful to historians in gaining new perspectives on the Cross River Èkpe society and providing a rare example of organized cultural transmission from West Africa to the Caribbean.

The historical memory of Africa among the Cuban population contradicts state-supported notions of Cuban identities which proclaim them "mestizo," a new identity based on a blend of cultures which erases ties to an African homeland. The Cuban intellectual Alejo Carpentier (1989:130) described mestizaje as he saw it in Cuba: "Popular dance of the early nineteenth century was the melting pot where—in the heat of rhythmic inventiveness of the blacks—Andalusian songs, boleros and staged tonadilla ballads...and the French contradanza merged to create new forms. These orchestras...were the creators of a mestizo music, from which all the pure African roots—regarding melody and percussive ritual rhythms—had been excluded." That is, the term mestizo excludes any direct strains of African, European, or Asian forms or identities. To be mestizo is within the national project; to be resistant to mixing is to be outside of it.

My own research has found that many West African identities in Cuba are not limited to family genealogy but are also directly linked to religious practice. These are based on ritual kinship, not necessarily corresponding to family lineage from identifiable African "tribes." I am not suggesting that initiates can trace their genealogical inheritance back to the places mentioned in their chants. I am suggesting, however, that they know the history of their lineages and that there were founding members who could make such connections. The perpetuation of these lineages and the ethnic markers they memorialize is in itself a form of resistance.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Bruce Connell, Jill Cutler, C. Daniel Dawson, Cristóbal Díaz-Ayala, Joseph Edem, Orok Edem, David Eltis, Angel Guerrero, Callixtus E. Ita, Chester King, Jane Landers, Maria-Teresa Linares, Victor Manfredi, Rogelio Martínez-Furé, María-Elena Mendiola, Robin Moore, Pablo Pacheco-López, Ruth Paley, Helen Tanner, Robert Farris Thompson, several Abakuá leaders who wish to remain anonymous, as well as all Èfik scholars and Èkpe members who aided my research. I am also grateful for the help I received from the late Antonio Benítez-Rojo.
I thank the Cuba Exchange Program Fellowship for Study in Cuba, Johns Hopkins University (2000), the Centro de investigación y desarrollo de la cultura cubana “Juan Marinello” in Havana (2000–2002), and the Copeland Fellowship at Amherst College (2001–2002) for generously supporting my research. Earlier versions of this article were presented at the African Studies Association annual meeting, Houston 2001, and in 2002 at DePaul University, Columbia University, the Graduate Center at CUNY, the University of Louisville, and Amherst College.

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Cuban Abakuá Chants  55


Notes

1. The following is a list of Cuban Abakuá ritual lineages, including those mentioned in this essay. All Cuban place names refer to Havana and its outlying regions.

   **Efik** lineages:
   - Ekueri Tené (presumably from Creek Town, Calabar) established Ekueri Tongó (1848, Havana).
   - Apapa Efì (from Africa) established Efik Ebutong (1856, Regla).
   - Efik Ebutong established Efik Abakuá (1845).

   **Efut** lineages:
   - Apapa Efì (from Africa) established Efori Nkomón (1840, Havana).
   - Efori Nkomón established Munyánga Efó (1871, Havana); Isun Éfó (1938, Havana); and Ista Amariyaó (1940, Marianao).

   **Orú** lineage:
   - An unknown group of Africans established Orú Apapa (c. 1848, Guanabacoa).
   - Orú Ápapa established Orú Abakuá Akondomina Mefe (1877, Guanabacoa).
   - Orú Abakuá established Orú Bibi (1834, Guanabacoa).

2. I thank Samuel Eyo, the association president. In preparation, Asuquo Ukpong, director of information of the Efik Association, helped organize a program (on July 18) with Diabel Faye, host of the “*Rhythm and News*” show at WBAI, Pacifica radio in New York, about the upcoming Efik meeting and the Cuban cultural connection. On it, Chief Joseph Edem, an Efut leader, Asuquo Ukpong, C. Daniel Dawson (an African diaspora specialist), Diabel Faye, and I discussed issues regarding Efik/Ngbe culture and its diaspora.

3. On July 28, at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. The Cuban participants were Frank Bell; Ogduardo “Román” Díaz, Moníi Bonkò of Ápapa Umóní Efì; José “Pepe” Hernández, Iise of Efóri Nandiba Mosongo; David Oquendo; Vicente Sánchez, Obomókù of Ápapa Umóní Efì.

4. In a similar study, Gerhard Kubik (1979:21–23,51) traced “Angolan” and Yorubá traits in Brazil using a variety of evidence such as rhythmic structures, singing styles, related vocabulary, instrument construction, and methods of handling instruments.
5. On July 26, 2003, I met with the Obong—Paramount Ruler—of Calabar and his retinue in Detroit, Michigan, during the Obong's first visit to the U.S. With me were two Cuban Abakua leaders: "Román" Díaz and Angel Guerrero. His Majesty Edidem Professor Nta Elijah Henshaw VI invited us to Calabar for a cultural exchange.

6. Joseph Edem is Obong Nkanda (the highest Ekpe title) from Efut Ekondo in Calabar. Callixtus Ita, a retired pharmaceutical chemist, is a full member of Ekpe through a Creek Town lodge.

7. I have replaced the umlaut (two dots over a vowel) as used by Goldie in the old Efik orthography with the subdot, as used in the current official orthography for Efik, as well as Igbo and Yorùbá (cf. Essien ca. 1982; Essien 1985).

8. Lovejoy and Richardson (1999:341–42, 351, 353) is my source for identifying Ephraim Robin John and "Grandy King George" as the same person.

9. Eltis et al. (2000). The voyages are numbered 75899 (Nancy), 17552 (Indian Queen), 83268 (Quixote), 82646 (Mary Ellen).

10. Contemporary Abakúa leaders told me that the purpose of creating these manuscripts was to preserve oral traditions of the African founders, so that Creole (those born in Cuba) initiates, whose first language may not have been from the Cross River Basin, could learn them more readily.

11. See Velez (2000:159–60) on the subject of controversy in Cuban Lukumi chanting. In Suriname, the Prices (1991:8) noticed the "fundamental dialogic pattern" of Saramaka performance: "A closely related feature... is role switching between (temporary) soloist and other participants. For example, song/dance/drum 'plays' are characterized by the emergence of a succession of individual soloists, each of whom briefly enjoys center stage and then yields to another."

12. My criteria for selecting which Abakúa leaders to work with were part of a complex process. Only by many years of attending ceremonies, and studying Abakúa history with a descendant of an Ekpe member from the Calabar region—someone widely regarded by Abakua leaders as knowledgeable, although he was not Abakúa—could I begin to understand who was a well-informed elder. Then Abakúa members who supported my project guided me to those leaders considered masters of the lore and guardians of the manuscripts passed on from the nineteenth century.

13. Creating a literal translation in Efik of the texts I present here proved to be a complex task. Language contact has been a factor on the Nigeria–Cameroon borderland "at least 500 years, and perhaps longer" (Connell 2001:52,56). After reviewing the Abakúa texts in this essay, Connell (personal communication, 2002) wrote that "there appears to be a lot of non-Efik (probably a mix of Efut or Londo, Ejagham, and some Spanish) that would need to be identified." Another phase of translation—currently in process—entails a thorough investigation including literal translations from the Efik and other Cross River languages as well as input from Efik and Efut members of the society in West Africa.

14. This chant and its translation were documented in the manuscripts of the late José de Jesús "Chuchu" Capaz (one of twentieth-century Cuba's renowned Abakúa leaders). A version of this passage was recorded by the Muñequisitos de Matanzas (1994).

15. The term Eko is in fact used indiscriminately. Talbot (1912:153) wrote that
"Ejagharn" is the name by which the Ekoi call themselves. The word Ekoi itself is Efik. Jones (1963:21) later wrote: "One group of Kwa was a subtribe of the Ejagham Ekoi which, with another tribal fragment the Efut [Efot], were the original inhabitants of Old Calabar." Writing of the middle and upper Cross River peoples of southeastern Nigeria and southwestern Cameroon, Andah (1990:27) observed that "the name Ekoi used to denote most of these people is an Efik word used to describe indiscriminately all people up river from their own lands. These so-called 'Ekoi' groups like the Boki are clearly distinguishable from one another." Contemporary Ejagharn are considered part of the Ekoi language cluster, including approximately eighty-five thousand speakers in the upper Cross River basin (cf. Grabb 1965).

16. In Cuban mythology, Apapa Umoni represents a spring of water in a river of Efik, a place important to the founding of the Ekpe society. In Abakua umon is a place name as well as a term for water. Goldie (1964:193) defined m'on as water, river, or sea. The sacred Fish Tanze appeared from the river; thus all Abakua myths point to this element as a divine source.

17. "In Calabar, ejamba means 'a display of articles of Ekpe.' Usually among the Efut and Ejagham Ekpe, this display would take place in the forest, but the Efik urbanized it by placing them in a temple" (J. Edem, personal communication, 2003).

18. Both planté and valla are Spanish terms. Orok Edem translated "to plant" (perform a ceremony) in Efik as ntuak nda wuk: planter = wuk, ntuak nda = to plant. During a land dispute, one person may plant a palm branch, a symbol of Ekpe, into the ground to claim it. The contender would then be forced to deal with the matter through the Ekpe society. Goldie (1964:567) also translated wuk as plant. Many African-based concepts are described with Spanish terms in Cuba. Valla translates into English as arena or cockpit, the place where cocks meet to fight. Because the lead singers are known as gallos (cocks).


20. Usaghade is the contemporary ethnonym which also serves as a term for the language. "The Efik term is Usakedet, while in official Cameroon parlance the areas goes by the name Isangele" (Connell 2001:72). Other variants are Usakadit, Usarade, and Usakere (Nicklin 1991:8). As a result of Portuguese contact in the early 1500s, the region "has historically been referred to as Rio del Rey" (Connell 2001:53). The Efut "migrated from the Cameroons" (Latham 1973:5). Simmons (1956:4) wrote: "When the Efik first settled at Creek Town they found a small village of Efut settlers living in the immediate vicinity. The Efut had originally migrated from the southern Cameroons area."


22. Most versions of Abakua mythology hold that during founding of Ekpe in Usagaré, the "secret" was received by Usagaré, Eforsün, and Bakokó, three major Efó territories. Much later, representatives from Afiana (Orú), Efó, Efóri, and Efí participated in a ceremony in Usagaré, where the "secret" was transmitted from the Efó to others. Orok Edem (personal communication, 2001) commented: "The Usak Edet people would tell you they sold it to the Efiks." Therefore, the legend of Usagaré origins is reinforced in both Cross River and Cuban variants.
23. During his investigation into this mythology, Nicklin (1991:10) questioned leaders of the Bateka village in Usak Edet, who indicated that the sister of the founder of their village had “landed a fish which started vibrating and making the voice of the leopard,” leading to the founding of the “leopard spirit cult, which they call Butamu” (Cuban Abakuá refer to their temples as butame). “Bateka people are adamant that they ‘never bought Butamu from any person’, and that they are the true originators of the leopard spirit cult… All Isangele elders emphatically deny that the Ejagharn were the originators of Ekpe, and many say that while some Ejagharn groups purchased it from Isangele, others purchased it from the Efik who in turn acquired it from Isangele” (Nicklin 1991:10,11). In other words, the collective memory of village leaders in Usak Edet supports that of Cuban Abakuá: that the epicenter of the mythology is based there, and that a later transfer of ritual power to the Efik was made.

24. Often in the Cuban literature bonko is an Efik term, whereas bongo is an Efut or Ejagham term. For example, Cabrera (1958:61) wrote: “Bonko: the sacred drum of the Efik ([Bongo] Ekue, that of the Ef or).” This distinction is not reflected in the Cross River literature: In 1778 Efik leader “Grandy King George” of Old Town wrote the phrase “blowed abuncko” to mean that the Ekpe drum had been sounded to declare a new law (Williams 1897:544); Talbot (1912:41) documented “ebu nko” (ebonko) as an Úgbé grade [Ejagham].

25. In most Cuban interpretations, “Iyamba is king of the Ef or” (Cabrera 1958:95).