

“Calabar Mgbè”
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The first Cuban Ékpè initiate of Calabar



At the Èfé Ékpè Èfût Ifako in Creek Town (Óbiókò), in Odukpani Local Government Area, Cross River State, Nigeria, during the first known initiation of a Cuban national, who happens to be a woman.

In the Cross River region of Nigeria and Cameroon, the Ékpè ‘leopard’ society is often described as an initiation club for males, but some women may be privileged to join. In the Èfìk, Èfût, and Kwa communities of the port city of Calabar, the first daughter and the wife of an Ọbóng Ékpè (a title-holder) are normally initiated, so that they may be present if an Ékpè group arrives to greet the Chief in his home, or to bury him after death. Women are initiated outside the lodge on the patio grounds; they are not brought inside the hall nor taught any details of the lodge’s internal matters. They wear a Ntàng Ñkàndà (peacock feather) as a sign of their membership. In the above photo, Mrs. Jennifer Torriente-Miller, married to Dr. Ivor Miller, has just been initiated as ábànékpè ‘admitted into Ékpè’. Mrs. Torriente-Miller, from Cojímar, East Havana, Cuba, arrived for the first time to Calabar in August, 2014.

Those with special talents may also be given membership into Ékpè, for example great drummers and singers, so that they will energize the meetings. For example Madam Ekoyo Bassey of Èfût Abua community in Calabar was initiated into their lodge, because she is an excellent singer and dancer of Ékpè.



In Calabar, Madam Ekoyo Bassey, an initiate of Èfé Èkpè Èfùt Abua, dances to Èkpè music (left, 2014) and leads Èkpè songs (right, 2008). Accompanying her is Òbòng Èkpè Mr. E. Ekpenyong Eyo, Ìbòkò-Ìbòkò of Èfé Èkpè Èyò Èmà.

It is taboo to initiate women as Èkpè title-holders. Nevertheless, in all Calabar communities when a leading Èkpè member dies, the mystic Èkpè runs from the hall into the bush, and can only return through the supplications of a post-menopausal royal woman. In Kwa Clans, this woman is designated as Ntoe Ninkae ‘Chief Lady’; she is the counterpart to the Ntoe, or Clan Head.

Throughout the Cross River region, women have historically maintained social power through their own clubs. In Èfìk-speaking communities Iban Ísòng — literally ‘women of the earth’ — was a graded initiation society by and for women that served to protect their rights. There were also water-spirit societies where women held primary positions in supplicating the goddesses. Among Èfìk and Èfùt communities, the local water deity was generally known as Ndèm. In Úrúán and Órón, she was known as Atakpo. All these terms are relevant to Cuban Abakuá, where the Efí, Efó and Orú lineages have chants to Ndèm, as well as Natácho, remembered as ancient deities from Calabar.

Since the second half of the nineteenth century, Èkpè culture has gradually been eroded throughout West Africa, having lost its judicial powers to the colonial authorities and then to the Nigerian government, as well as being constantly attacked by the self-proclaimed Christian churches, especially the Pentecostals. Because of this, some Èkpè leaders feel that this institution might be salvaged if women were meaningfully incorporated, because they are a majority in the churches. How Èkpè culture will evolve to adapt to contemporary conditions remains to be seen.



Four steps in the initiation: barefoot and blindfolded; marked on legs and arms with white and red chalk; blindfold removed, then the Ntàng Ñkàndà (peacock feather) placed on the head as a symbol of initiation into Ñkàndà grade.





Ídèm Ékpè (Íreme in Cuba) entering the Èfé Ékpè Èfút Ifako with its back first, as is the custom. Note the palm fronds above the entrance and the blue Ùkára cloth (with Ékpè symbols) to the right.



Mbóng Ékpès Charles Offiong-Obo, Dr. Ivor Miller, and Etim Ika (Ọbóng Èbònkó), with àbànékpè Jennifer Torriente-Miller

Research and photos by Dr. Ivor Miller (Mbàkàrà del Èfé Ékpè Éyò Émà – Ékórétònkó), Senior Lecturer, Department of History, the University of Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria.