

Abakuá Communities in Florida

Members of the Cuban Brotherhood in Exile

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The Abakuá mutual-aid society of Cuba, re-created in the 1830s from several local variants of the Ékpè leopard society of West Africa's Cross River basin, is a richly detailed example of African cultural transmission to the Americas. Since the late nineteenth century, many Abakuá members have lived in Florida as part of the larger Cuban exile community. While focusing on the Florida experience, this essay discusses Abakuá historically, since there exist structural relationships between its lodges, as well as spiritual connections among its membership that extend from West Africa to the Western Hemisphere.

Abakuá leaders who migrated from Cuba have regrouped in exile and maintained their identity as Abakuá, but due to their strict protocol they did not sponsor lodges outside of Cuba. Therefore the Abakuá communities in Florida gather for commemorative celebrations but do not perform initiations, which are performed only in their home lodges in Cuba. Due to renewed communication with African counterparts through a series of meetings in the United States, Europe, and Africa since 2001, Abakuá activities—including rumbas and commemorative social gatherings—have intensified in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Meanwhile, vibrant expressions of Abakuá practice have been produced by Cuban artists in Florida through representational paintings that depict Abakuá as integral to a Cuban national identity.

Ékpè Migrations, Abakuá Foundations

The Abakuá mutual-aid society established by Africans in Regla, Havana, in the 1830s was derived principally from the male “leopard societies” of the Cross River region of southeastern Nigeria and southwestern Cameroon. Calabar, the main port city of this region, is the homeland of three distinct communities, known as Àbàkpà (Qua-Èjaghám), Èfùt, and Èfik, who call their society



Figure 16.1. *Untitled*. By S. Rivero, New York, 1984. Paper and pen, 8.5 x 11 inches. This drawing of an Abakuá initiation in Cuba depicts an Íreme body-mask, rooster in one hand and herbs in the other, "cleansing" the neophyte while his sponsor stands behind. The tree is marked with a sign that authorizes the action. Abakuá in Florida remember Cuban initiations but do not perform them. Archives of Luis Fernández-Pelón, Miami. Photo by Ivor Miller, 1994. Used with permission.

Ékpè and Ngbè (or Mgbè), after the Èfik and Éjághám terms for “leopard.”¹ Although Cross River peoples migrated to many parts of the Western Hemisphere during the transatlantic slave trade, it was only in Cuba that they succeeded in re-creating Ékpè, as far as is currently known.

Ékpè was established in Cuba because among the thousands of Cross River people there were included knowledgeable specialists instrumental in organizing their people through the transmission of traditional knowledge. Another important element was the conducive tropical environment with mangrove estuaries similar to that of Calabar. In Calabar, Chief Bassey Efiog Bassey explains,

If you want to plant an Ékpè in some place, there must be an Obong Ékpè [a titleholder] with authority, who is versed in the procedure. In colonial Cuba, it was possible, because some of the people who went were Obong Ékpès who were forcibly taken away. When they got there they knew exactly what to do to plant it. There is the belief that if you don’t have the authority, if you don’t know the procedure inside out, it will lead to death, or you will lose your senses. So people don’t want to do it.

The Cuban leaders have maintained their Ékpè (i.e., Abakuá) in their homeland, but they have never authorized any member to establish a lodge outside of Cuba. The same is true for contemporary Nigerian Ékpè leaders, who to date have not authorized any lodge to be created outside of Africa.

In West Africa, as in Cuba, the societies are organized through local lodges each with a hierarchy of grades having distinct functions. Because of the obvious historic and conceptual links between Ékpè and Abakuá, I refer to both as variants of an Ékpè-Abakuá continuum that exists in the contemporary regions of Nigeria, Cameroon, and Cuba, all places where lodges are organized, although some of their members live outside these regions, including the United States.

As a diaspora practice, Abakuá maintains many facets of the Ékpè practice of West Africa from two centuries ago. Abakuá leaders transmit inherited historical information by performing it as “ritual-theater” during ceremonies. All of the roughly 150 lodges in Cuba have traditions of coded language and ritual performance that refer back to West African origins. Cuban Abakuá leaders look to the Calabar region with reverence as a historical source and a holy place. For example, Abakuá have created many maps that indicate specific places and events in the foundation of their institution in Africa (see fig. 1.5). Abakuá phrases also refer to African foundations: “Echitube akambamba, Èfik Obuton?” asks, “How was the first lodge created in Africa?”² The Èfik Obuton lodge of Cuba was named after Òbútòng, an Èfik community in Calabar with a strong Ékpè tradition. This phrase evokes African founding principles in the

present. Even with this orthodox sentiment, Abakuá leaders acknowledge adaptive innovations in Cuba throughout their history.

Abakuá initiations are performed exclusively in Cuba. Those members who live in Florida therefore look to Cuba as a source; their activities celebrate foundational moments in Abakuá history, specifically the anniversaries of their particular lodges. This is because in Florida there are no lodges nor initiations. Throughout the Ékpè-Abakuá continuum exists a generalized protocol that new lodges may be established only with the sponsorship of a "mother" lodge, while initiations may only be conducted by specific titleholders working in concert. This protocol has led to the containment of lodges within the specific geographical regions of Nigeria, Cameroon, and Cuba. Nigerian members living in the United States have wanted to establish lodges there, but leaders in West Africa have not yet sanctioned it.³ Cuban members in Florida also have tried to establish lodges there, but leaders in Cuba have not sanctioned it. In an exceptional case, in the late 1990s several lodge leaders from Cameroon who migrated to the United States began the process of creating a lodge in the Washington, D.C., area in order to pass their authority on to their children also living in the United States. Because this project is ongoing, it will be dealt with in a future publication.⁴ The general reluctance to authorize lodges outside of Africa and Cuba is meant to protect the institution by preventing new lodges from acting autonomously outside the jurisdiction of the mother lodges. Though this strict protocol remains, modern communications (letters, telephones, websites, e-mail, and air travel) are being used to bring Ékpè and Abakuá members into greater awareness of each other. This new development is reflected in recent cultural expressions of Abakuá in Florida by Abakuá leaders, as well as by their allies working in the arts.

Abakuá Jurisprudence and Exile to Florida

Abakuá members reached Florida from Cuba after their ancestors had initially migrated from West Africa, where Ékpè was a "traditional police" under the authority of the council of chiefs of an autonomous community. Their decrees were announced publicly and their verdicts executed by specific Ékpè grades with representative body-masks (i.e., a uniform that covers the entire body to mask the identity of the bearer). In colonial Cuba, Abakuá leadership maintained the prestige of Ékpè through the autonomy of each lodge and the rigorous selection of its members. Because the primary allegiance of an Abakuá member was to his lodge and its lineage, Abakuá held jurisdiction over its members, a position that conflicted with agendas of the Spanish government. As a result, Abakuá has been demonized by various colonial and state administrations through much of its history.⁵ But other narratives maintained by Abakuá leaders represent Abakuá as being "tan Cubano como moros y cristianos"



Figure 16.2. Ritual activity in a Havana Abakuá temple. Untitled. Acrylic paint on wood. At the center of the lodge altar is a Sese Eribó drum with four plumes issuing from the top. *Left to right*: a short man with white animal horn around his shoulder, rooster in one hand and herbs in the other, represents the title of Nasakó, the medicine man; the Íreme body-mask holds a short staff and a broom for “cleansing” the temple space; a man kneels with a ceramic jar on his head during the process of his receiving a title; an Abakuá leader representing the title Enkríkamo holds a drum with plume to guide the Íreme’s actions. Archives of Luis Fernández-Pelón, Miami. Photo by Ivor Miller, 1994.

(as Cuban as black beans and rice). These Abakuá narratives are persistent because they coincide with the widespread Cuban ideology that “A Cuban is more than mulatto, black, or white,” as famously articulated by José Martí, “the apostle of Cuban Independence,” in the late nineteenth century.⁶ The deep ties existing between Cuban creoles that transcended race and class were sustained in many cases through membership in Abakuá, whose members by the 1860s included eligible males of any heritage, making them the first Cuban institution whose leadership reflected the ethnic diversity of the island, long before the creation of the Cuban Republic (see fig. 16.2).⁷ At the onset of the Cuban Wars of Independence (1868), those suspected by colonial authorities of being rebels were sent into exile in Spanish Africa (Chafarinas Islands, Ceuta, Fernando Po [today Bioko], and other sites); among them were Abakuá. To evade possible deportation, many Abakuá members fled to Florida as part

of a larger Cuban community, creating social networks and cultural imprints that exist to the present.

Confronting Misconceptions

Misconceptions and misinformation of African-derived institutions—the rule during the slave trade and colonial period—persist into the present, and Abakuá is no exception. Being a self-organized African-derived institution unauthorized by colonial authorities, Abakuá was misconceived as a criminal organization. Later reports about Abakuá creating lodges in Florida were simply erroneous. Both errors were documented in twentieth-century literature to the extent that they became accepted as fact.

To outsiders, all African-derived traditions were “black culture,” without awareness of distinctions between communities. Abakuá were commonly referred to as *ñáñigos* (*nyanyigos*), a term likely derived from the *nyanya* raffia chest piece worn on many Ékpè and Abakuá body-masks. Distinct African-derived practices were lumped together as *ñáñigo* by outsiders, but colonial authorities also associated *ñáñigos* with crime. Abakuá members have therefore since the early twentieth century rejected this term, using instead “Abakuá,” a term likely derived from the Àbàkpà (Qua-Éjaghám) people of Calabar. The general confusion about *ñáñigo* persists in the literature about Abakuá in Florida.

From the 1860s to the present, exiled Abakuá members have regrouped in foreign lands. Because of this, some scholars have argued that new Abakuá lodges were re-created in the Cuban diaspora, including Florida. There is little evidence for this. The collective and hierarchical nature of Ékpè in the Cross River region, a structure firmly reproduced in Cuban Abakuá, prohibited the informal foundation of new lodges.⁸ Certainly, exiled Abakuá gathered to share their music, dance, and chanting, but initiations seem not to have been performed, nor were lodges created. Abanékues (initiates) who gathered in exile would not have the authority to form a lodge, nor could they perform ceremonies, since there would have been no sponsoring lodge or group of titleholders to direct the rites.⁹

Abakuá lore recounts how African ancestors designed a collective that could act only in concert. This practice underscores the profundity of the transfer of Ékpè to Cuba, since this could only have been achieved through the collective action of authorized titleholders and their supporters. Even today, Abakuá is the only African-derived institution in Cuba to maintain both a collective identity and a decision-making process affecting the entire membership.

The collective procedure required for the creation of the first Abakuá group is repeated throughout the Cuban literature.¹⁰ This includes the payment of

fees, the consecration by a sponsoring lodge, and the presence of other lodges acting as witnesses; these are basic to the transmission of Abakuá authority.

Abakuá members have been present in Florida since the late nineteenth century, yet to date there is little evidence of Abakuá ceremonies for establishing a chapter being performed there. The earliest known reference to Abakuá in the United States was written by Raimundo Cabrera, who described the arrival of his passenger ship from Havana to Key West in 1892: "Just as the boat came close to the shore, one saw the multitude that filled the wharf and heard the special whistles that came from it, to which were answered others of the same modulation from the passengers who occupied the prow. I realized the meaning of these whistles! They are tobacco rollers from Havana who recognized and greeted one another. This greeting of *ñāñigo* origin was imported to the *yankee* city."¹¹ Abakuá greetings normally consist of coded handshakes and phrases, but on special occasions whistles were used. For example, a dignitary of the Havana lodge Biabanga was said to have "substituted his oral chant for the notes of the *pito* (reed flute) . . . in the *beromo* or procession."¹²

Migration

In 1886, with the foundation of the cigar-making company town of Ybor City outside Tampa, many Havana cigar workers migrated there, making it the largest Cuban settlement in the United States. Many male tobacco rollers, but certainly not all, were Abakuá members, as described by Gerardo Pazos "El Chino Mokóngo," a third-generation Abakuá of Spanish descent. From Havana, he told me about his family members who escaped persecution by migrating to Key West and Tampa in the late nineteenth century:¹³

My grandfather Juan Pazos (1864–1951) was born in the barrio of Jesús María, the son of a Spaniard. He was *obonékue* [initiate] of the lodge Itá Baróko Efó [meaning "the first ceremony of Efó"].

Many Cuban tobacco rollers went to Tampa, Florida, and stayed there, including my grandfather's brother, who was a member of the lodge Ekori Efó. They left during the persecution of the Abakuá by the Spaniards, and later by the Cuban government. Many left in schooners to Florida, because those captured were sent to Fernando Pó, Ceuta and Chafarinas. I knew several elder men of color sent there who told me their stories. They were very tough prisons and many Abakuá who were deported there died.

My grandfather's brother lived in Tampa, and he never told me that they "planted" [initiated] in Florida. No Abakuá elder ever told me that they "planted" there.

While there are written histories of Cuban tobacco rollers in Florida, there is no history of Abakuá in Florida, precisely because there has been no Abakuá ritual activity in Florida. Likewise, many narratives of Abakuá in Spanish West African penal colonies where Cubans were imprisoned have been lost because they were not tied to the foundation of new lodges; when the colonial wars were over, the populations dispersed, often returning to Cuba. Cubans have come to Florida since the late nineteenth century to the present due to political, economic, and personal reasons. The recollections of Cuban Abakuá regarding Florida remain vivid because of that region's proximity to Cuba and the continual communications between family members.

Confusion in the Published Literature

Abakuá leaders report that even though Abakuá leaders lived in Florida, they could not conduct ceremonies, because there were no lodges there with the knowledgeable personnel and ritual objects. Nevertheless, a series of scholarly essays have claimed that Abakuá lodges existed in Florida.

For example, in 2001 Cuban scholar Enrique Sosa argued for the "certainty of the existence of *ñáñigos*" in Key West in the late nineteenth century among exiled tobacco workers.¹⁴ Sosa uncritically cited an earlier scholar who wrote: "Imported from Cuba, *Ñáñigo* appeared in Key West as a religious, fraternal and mutual-aid sect among blacks in the period 1880–90. The last *Ñáñigo* street dance occurred on the island in 1923."¹⁵ For her evidence, this scholar cited Stetson Kennedy's 1940 WPA report:

A Nanigo [*sic*] group was organized in Key West, and enjoyed its greatest popularity between 1880 and 1890. They gave street dances from time to time, and dance-parties on New Year's. . . . In 1923 the last Nanigo street dance to be held in Key West was performed "for fun" by Cuban young people, attired in make-shift costumes.

Leader of the Nanigos in Key West was a man named Ganda, a small "tough" Cuban mulatto. . . . Ganda conceived the idea of making elaborate Nanigo costumes, head-dresses, *bongós* (drums), and other equipment, teaching young Cubans in Key West the Nanigo dances, and then joining his company with a carnival of some sort. . . . He finished the costumes and other equipment, but died in 1922.¹⁶

While Kennedy did not give evidence for the foundation of Abakuá lodges there—he merely described costumes and recreational dances—later authors cited his work as evidence. In Havana, Gerardo Pazos "El Chino Mokongo" explained that Kennedy's description was not that of an Abakuá rite: "It is not possible even that they left in *berómo* [procession], without *planting* [a ceremony]. It is possible that *comparsas* [carnival troupes] paraded around with

representations of Abakuá with similar costumes and rhythms, but this is not Abakuá ceremony.”¹⁷ To perform an Abakuá procession requires the authorization of lodge leaders as well as access to their ritual objects. Any expression of Abakuá in Florida would only be in remembrance of Cuban ceremonials, in themselves a remembrance of Cross River Ékpè events.

Kennedy reported to me that he spoke little Spanish at the time of research and had no proof of the society existing in Key West.¹⁸ Instead, he gathered recollections among exiled Cubans about the society as it existed in Cuba.¹⁹ Nevertheless, Kennedy’s work inspired later scholars as well as an official Florida guidebook that appears to be based upon his work:

From Cuba . . . the Latin-Americans of Ybor City and Tampa have imported their own customs and traditions which survive mostly in annual festivals. The Cubans found good political use for voodoo beliefs brought by slaves from Africa to the West Indies and there called *Carabali Apapa Abacua* [voodoo being used generically for “African spirituality”]. Prior to the Spanish-American War [Cuban Wars of Independence], Cuban nationalists joined the cult in order to hold secret revolutionary meetings, and it then received the Spanish name, *Nanigo* [an Éfik-derived term]. In 1882, *Los Criminales de Cuba*, published in Havana by Trujillo Monaga, described Cuban Nanigo societies as fraternal orders engaged in petty politics. Initiation ceremonies were elaborate, with street dances of voodoo origin. Under the concealment of the dances, political enemies were slain [a confused reference to carnival]; in time the dance came to signify impending murder, and the societies were outlawed by the Cuban Government [could be either a reference to Abakuá, outlawed in 1875; to King’s Day processions, outlawed in 1884; or to carnival processions, outlawed in 1912]. When the cigar workers migrated from Cuba to Key West and later to Tampa, societies of “notorious Nanigoes,” as they were branded by Latin opposition papers, were organized in these two cities. The Nanigo in Key West eventually became a social society that staged a Christmas street dance. . . . the last of the street dances was held in 1923.²⁰

Nanigo, like *voodoo*, is simply a buzzword for unassimilated black people. The claim of “societies of ‘notorious *Nanigoes*’” was partially inspired by depictions of carnival dance with body-masks by Key West artist Mario Sánchez (b. 1908 in Key West) (fig. 16.3). Such depictions were misconstrued as evidence for Abakuá ritual activity, when in fact they merely represented popular dances like rumba and carnival groups. (Sánchez’s work will be discussed in a later section.)

Historian Louis A. Pérez Jr.—coauthor of *Tampa Cigar Workers* and author of several histories of Cubans in the United States—reported to me: “I have



Figure 16.3. *Manungo's Backyard Rhumba*, Key West, 1919, by Mario Sánchez (b. 1908, Key West). This image depicts a Cuban-style Cuban rumba, which includes three Abakuá masquerades. Used with permission of Nance Frank, Gallery on Greene.

not come across any Abakuá references in Tampa during the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries.”²¹ Anthropologist Susan Greenbaum wrote *More Than Black: Afro-Cubans in Tampa*, a study involving the mutual-aid and Cuban independence group the Club Martí-Maceo in Tampa. She wrote to me that during her fifteen years of research, “Nanigos were the subject of hushed and infrequent references. There could have been an active Abakuá underground here, but I never heard of it.”²²

Nevertheless, Cuban scholar Sosa argued for the existence of Abakuá lodges in Florida by referring to an essay by José Martí (1893) titled “Una orden secreta de africanos” (A secret order of Africans) that described exile Tomás Surí in Key West. Sosa argued that Martí referred here to the Abakuá (without mentioning them by name).²³ Martí wrote that Surí belonged to “a tremendous secret order of Africans . . . a mysterious, dangerous, terrible secret order,” but described an order of Africans where members rejected use of a drum, wanting instead to create a school.²⁴ This could not have been an Abakuá lodge, however, because without the consecrated drums there can be no lodge.²⁵ Martí may have referred to a group akin to Masons whose members included Abakuá, but his message is ambiguous.

In turn, Sosa's erroneous essay was cited uncritically by Ishemo, who wrote: "José Martí appreciated the patriotism and the financial contribution to the war effort made by the Abakuá cigar workers in Key West, Florida. He relates his visit to a *ñāñigo famba* (a sacred room in the temple) and described it as 'a room which is decorated with the flag of the revolution.'"²⁶

None of the sources cited confirm this statement. The "secret society of Africans" as described by Martí required that the holder of the "third grade" be able to read. This cannot be Abakuá; grades are not numbered, and there is no such requirement.

Most recently, a scholar wrote that "*Potencias* [Abakuá lodges] were also established in the United States in the nineteenth century by Afro-Cuban migrant workers in Florida."²⁷ An attempt to verify the source of the citation proved that it too was a misquote.²⁸

Evoking Abakuá in Miami

Among the significant cultural achievements related to Abakuá in Miami were the publications of Lydia Cabrera (1900–1991), who did extensive research in Havana and Matanzas from the 1930s to the 1950s. Her publications are the most relevant for the history of Abakuá, as well as other African-derived institutions such as Lukumí and Palo Monte. Cabrera left Cuba in the 1960s to settle in Miami, where she published a series of volumes documenting oral narratives of the African-derived traditions of Cuba, including monumental studies of Abakuá drawn esoteric signs (1975) and language (1988), each about five hundred pages, without which the study of Abakuá would be nearly impossible.

In 1994, in Miami, I met Luis Fernández-Pelón "El Pelón," a titled Abakuá member who was recommended by my teachers in Havana (fig. 16.4). Regarding Abakuá activities in Miami, he told me: "Here in Miami there are ceiba [kapok] and palm trees, but since the most important thing—the *fundamento*—[an object with ritual authority] is in Cuba, no Abakuá group can be consecrated here. I have met with all the Abakuá who live here and we have had celebrations with my *biankomó* [drum ensemble], but no consecrations."²⁹ Unlike the sacred objects of other Cuban religions of African descent, those of Abakuá are thought not to have left the island.

Nevertheless, in 1998 the "birth" of the first Abakuá group in the United States was announced in Miami.³⁰ It was named Efi Kebúton Ekuente Mesoro, a reference to Efik Obúton, the first lodge established in Cuba in the 1830s, itself named after Òbútòng, a community in Calabar. The event took place on January 6, considered the anniversary of Abakuá's foundation in Cuba.

The would-be Miami founders sent a letter to Abakuá leaders in Havana, announcing their existence.³¹ The Abakuá leaders I spoke with in Havana

Figure 16.4. Luis Fernández-Pelón, Miami, 1994. Fernández was both a babaláwo (Ifá diviner) and an Abakuá titleholder. He wears a *collar de maso* (large necklace) for Ifá while holding an Abakuá Íreme doll. The doll has a skirt with colors of the Cuban flag. Photo by Ivor Miller.



unanimously considered it a profanation: the “birthing” of an Abakuá group without a sponsor is not valid. Additionally, they observed that many of these same Miami leaders had been previously suspended from their Cuban groups for disobedience, and hence had no authority to act.

Gerardo Pazos “El Chino Mokóngo,” who was also a babaláwo (Yorùbá Ifá diviner), told me:

It is not possible that a lodge was created in Miami, because no Cuban there has the authority or knowledge to perform the required transmissions. Whoever would create a lodge in Miami would have to come to Cuba and carry a *fundamento* [sacred object] from there. It is not the same with the Yorùbá religion [which does travel]. We cannot predict the future, but until now there is no Abakuá in Miami or anywhere in the USA who has sufficient knowledge to create a new *tierra* [lodge]. In this moment, September 27, 2001, there is no Abakuá in the USA who knows enough of the [ritual] language required to make the transmissions. Because I, Gerardo Pazos, Mokóngo of Kamaroró, do not know anyone with enough knowledge to create a lodge.

According to Cuban lore, Abakuá lodges were established in Havana and Matanzas by knowledgeable Cross River Ékpè leaders who had the authority to do so. Since Ékpè leaders could not return to Africa, they moved forward and created. But Abakuá members living outside of Cuba can return to consult with their elders to seek possible authorization to establish new lodges. “El Chino Mokóngo” continued:

Those Abakuá who have migrated to the USA do not have the knowledge to create a Potency [lodge] there, because this process requires many men with knowledge and because these ceremonies are very profound. In addition, when a Potency is created, one must pay the *derecho* [fee] of one rooster to all the existing Potencies in order to be recognized by them. If a *juego* [lodge] is born in Havana, it must pay this fee to the other *juegos* in Havana. If it is born in Matanzas, then to the others in Matanzas. The *juego* they tried to create in Miami had no godfather [sponsor], and furthermore, it did not have the knowledgeable men to found it. It cannot exist.

“El Chino Mokóngo’s” statement reflects not only his personal views but the protocol followed by all Abakuá leaders on the island.

Ifá in Cuban Miami

To appreciate the containment of Abakuá lodges to particular port cities of western Cuba—in spite of the global travels of its members as well as the desire of some to establish lodges abroad—it is instructive to note a parallel movement in the Yorùbá-centered Cuban practice of Ifá, noting that its reestablishment is a simpler process. Like Abakuá, Ifá is thought to have been established in Cuba in the first half of the nineteenth century.³² Before the 1959 Revolution, the estimated two hundred babaláwos in Cuba all knew each other.³³ By the 1990s, leading Cuban babaláwos gave me estimates of ten thousand to describe their numbers, and neophytes were arriving from throughout the Americas, Europe, and elsewhere to receive Ifá consecrations and travel home with them.

In 1978, highly specialized Ifá ceremonies performed in Miami were geared to reproduce there the foundation of Ifá in Cuba some 150 years earlier.³⁴ The ceremonies were led by Nigerian babaláwo Ifayemi Elégbùibon Awise (chief Ifá priest) of Oşogbo, who traveled to Miami for the occasion.³⁵ Two of the participating Cuban babaláwo were also Abakuá leaders, Luis Fernández-Pelón, who was initiated as a babaláwo in Nigeria, and José-Miguel Gómez, both of whom are cited in this study.³⁶ This Ifá reestablishment ceremony was led by one babaláwo, while Abakuá consecrations involve scores of initiated men acting

in concert, in addition to the required tributes paid to the existing lodges in Cuba.

José-Miguel Gomez was an Abakuá leader who ran for the political office of councilman in Sweetwater, Florida, in 1991. Gómez was the Mokóngo of his lodge Ebión Efó from 1926 to 2003, Mokóngo being one of the four leaders of an Abakuá lodge. Gómez lived to be the eldest holder of this title in his generation.³⁷ He was also a babaláwo, as well as a leader of Cuban-Kongo practice: Padre Enkiza Plaza Lirio Mama Chola, Templo #12, Santo Cristo del Buen Viaje.³⁸ Gómez left several unpublished essays about Abakuá history in Cuba and Africa. He thus exemplified Abakuá activity in Florida: he did not create a lodge or lead ceremonies, even though he was a master; instead, he studied the Cuban past and African mythology while passing it on to fellow initiates.

Abakuá Activity in Miami, Twenty-First Century

Abakuá activities in Miami in the first decade of the twenty-first century have been ignited by recent face-to-face encounters between Abakuá members and their Nigerian and Cameroonian counterparts in the United States. These encounters began in 2001 when an Abakuá performance troupe participated in the Èfik National Association of USA meeting in Brooklyn, New York. In 2003, two Abakuá leaders traveled to Michigan to meet the Obong (Paramount Ruler) of Calabar during another Èfik National Association meeting. In 2004, two Abakuá musicians traveled to Calabar, Nigeria, to participate in the annual International Ékpè Festival. In 2007, an Ékpè troupe from Calabar and an Abakuá troupe performed together onstage in Paris for five concerts celebrating their common traditions. Then in 2009, those Abakuá living in the United States who went to Paris produced a CD recording that fused music and ritual phrases from both groups. Called *Ecobio Enyenison*, "Our Brothers from Africa," it also included the participation of a Cuban artist named José Orbein, whose painting appears on the jacket (fig. 16.5), and an Abakuá singer named Ángel Guerrero, both based in Miami. All of this activity has energized Abakuá communities in Miami, where Guerrero has also acted as an entrepreneur by sharing information about African Ékpè with his ritual brothers and organizing them in cultural events that have been advertised on the internet and recorded in video programs.

The first cultural event in Miami was billed as an "Abakuá fiesta" (party or feast) to ensure that it was not misinterpreted as an initiation ritual (fig. 16.6). It was held on February 8, 2009, in a private home with a large patio to accommodate the drumming, dancing, and food preparations where hundreds gathered. A second party was held on August 2, 2009, to celebrate Guerrero's birthday. After these general events for the entire community, members of particular Cuban lodges living in Miami began to celebrate the anniversary

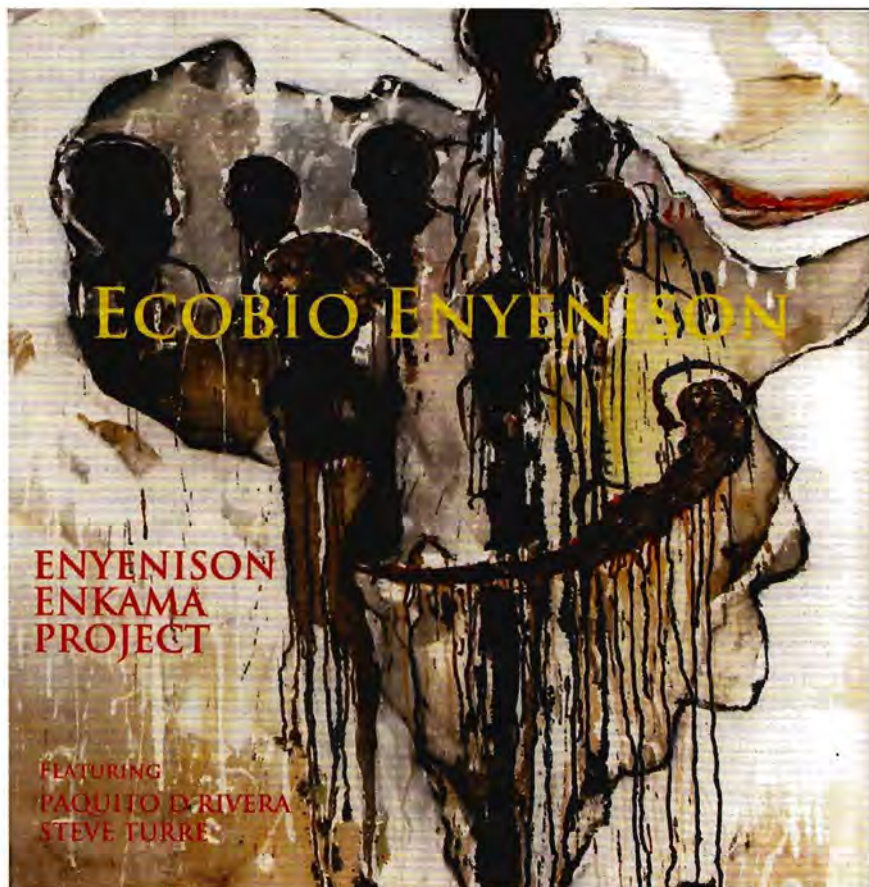


Figure 16.5. *Ecobio Enyenison* CD cover. Painting by José Orbein for the U.S.-produced Cuban Abakuá recording by the Enyenison Enkama Project, 2009. The cover illustration depicts the African continent as sacred space with seven title-holders in profile as archetypes. Below the second “o” of *Ecobio* is Nasakó, the medicine man and prophet who wears a sea sponge like a hat as part of his paraphernalia.

of their lodge’s foundation. On February 24, 2010, the members of the lodge Ítiá Mukandá Efó gathered with friends to celebrate the anniversary of their founding in 1947 in Havana.³⁹

On January 2 and 3, 2010, in Miami, members of two Havana lodges from the same lineage, Efori Enkomon (founded 1840) and Ékue Munyanga Efó (founded 1871), celebrated a feast to adore the La Virgen de la Caridad (the Virgin of Charity), the patron saint of the Munyánga lodge and also of the Cuban nation (fig. 16.7). This saint is popularly understood as a dimension of Ochún, the Lukumí/Yorùbá goddess of fertility, who for Abakuá also represents Sikán, their Sacred Mother.⁴⁰ This date was chosen for being a weekend near January 6, known as “Abakuá day,” the anniversary of the colonial-era Three King’s Day processions wherein African “nation-groups” would perform their traditional dances and greet the governor general in Havana. This day was chosen



Figure 16.6. "Primer encuentro artistico de Abakuá en La Florida." The poster advertises "The first artistic gathering of Abakuá in Florida." Poster by José Orbein, Miami, 2009.

to found the Abakuá society in Cuba because they were able to use the mass celebration as a cover for their own activities. On September 14 and 15, 2010, members of the Havana lodge Amiabon (founded in 1867) gathered, apparently for their own anniversary (fig. 16.7). The most recent feast was "Abakuá day" on January 8, 2011, in Miami at a private home (fig. 16.8).

These activities have been meaningful to Abakuá on either side of the "Rum Curtain." Ángel Guerrero (2011) reported that Abakuá had little opportunity to communicate across the Gulf Stream from the 1960s to the 1980s: "Because of the rupture in communications between those who left and those who stayed, many members willing to send money to help their lodges in Cuba were impeded. Also, many Abakuá lodges performed ceremonies without knowing



DIA DEL ABACUA

Musica, Danza y Artes Plasticas

ENERO 2 2:00 pm - 8:00 pm

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Ph. 786.226.2963

Ph. 786.370.8185

anabiaca02@yahoo.com

pepe@eltonboy.com

Left: Figure 16.7. "Ireme Eribangando; Abakuá Day." Poster by José Orbein, Miami, January 2-3, 2010. The Ireme body-mask represented in the poster performs to "open the way" for the others in processions. The image suggests that all are welcome to follow in the procession.

Below: Figure 16.8. "Abakuá Day." Poster by José Orbein, Miami, January 8, 2011. At the upper left is a portrait of Andrés Petit, revered by most Abakuá for making it an integrated institution that reflected the makeup of Cuban society.



VEN Y CELEBRA EL DIA DEL ABAKUA



SABADO 8 DE ENERO
2011
MIAMI FLORIDA

2914 NW 22 COURT
MIAMI
FLORIDA
33142

COMIENZA 12:00
TERMINA ?



that some of their brothers in exile had passed away." In Cuba, as in West Africa, when a lodge member dies, all lodge activities are suspended until the proper rites are enacted. In the United States since the first decade of the twenty-first century, Guerrero reports:

Now with mobile phones, faxes and internet we receive news instantly. Experience has taught me that the links between Abakuá members obliges one to see the condition of exile in a specific way. Our solidarity makes us think about how we can help our brothers so that they have a more dignified life, because in essence this is part of the oath we made upon initiation in the society Ekoría Enyene Abakuá [full name of the Abakuá]. Through all the gatherings so far here in Miami our greatest achievement has been to gather and unite all those brothers who had been divorced from their lodges in Cuba, so that now they are actively supporting their lodges. Thanks to Abasí [Supreme Being] this achievement has already benefited many lodges in Havana and Matanzas. Today we are stronger than ever, because "In Unity, Strength!"

Abakuá gatherings in Miami were inspired by the recent communication with African Ékpè members; contact with Africans confirmed that their inherited lore really did come from African masters. In other words, instead of simply assimilating into the values and systems of North America and forgetting their past, many Abakuá have opted to accept responsibility for their oaths of solidarity, thus renewing ties with their Cuban lodge members. Instead of an abstract or nostalgic relationship to African Ékpè and Cuban lodges, Abakuá in Miami are emerging as actors in an international movement within the Ékpè–Abakuá continuum of exchanging ideas, and of reassessing the values of their inherited traditions for the identity of their communities.

Depictions of Abakuá by Artists in Florida

From the late nineteenth century to the present in Cuba, there has existed an artistic tradition of using Abakuá themes in music, theater, and painting as a symbol of the Cuban nation itself. This tradition has continued among Cuban artists living in Florida today.

Mario Sánchez (1908–2005) is an early example of an artist working in Key West who documented carnivalesque popular dances in the early twentieth century. Because he depicted various styles of body-mask performance, including Abakuá Íreme and Puerto Rican Vejigantes, some scholars interpreted this as evidence for Abakuá rites occurring in Key West.⁴¹ Sánchez was more likely exploring issues of identity and cultural performance, as did other artists mentioned in this essay. Artists have been creating images of Íreme for numerous purposes, none of which provide evidence for Abakuá ritual activity in

Florida. Instead they are examples of artists honoring their Cuban traditions, their memories of Cuban identity, and so on. The next three artists (discussed below) are not Abakuá members, yet as males from the western part of the island where Abakuá is practiced, they understand its important role in Cuban history and identity and incorporate Abakuá motifs in their work. Some have gone further to study the literature, especially that of Lydia Cabrera.

In addition to promoting Abakuá events artistically, José Orbein (b. 1951) has painted many series depicting esoteric aspects of Abakuá tradition. Living in Miami, Orbein was born and raised in the Cayo Hueso neighborhood of Havana, a barrio named in homage to the exiled Cubans living in Key West who supported the independence movement against Spain in the nineteenth century.⁴² Orbein wrote: "Now living in Miami, I'm using influences of the Abakuá in my canvases. I'm a strong believer of the society who was raised admiring and respecting all the Efori Enkomon ekobios [brothers] of my neighborhood Cayo Hueso in La Habana, that includes some of my family and close friends. My ancestors came from the Calabar region in Africa; I know this because my grandmother used to keep a log of the lineage of my family dating back to enslavement."⁴³

The ties of Calabar and Abakuá to Orbein's family and community have generally inspired his creative process, but his collaborations in Miami with Abakuá singer Ángel Guerrero have led to a series of Abakuá themes with specific imagery and titles based upon deep knowledge. For example, Orbein's *Obonekue Arabensuao* (fig. 16.9), painted in Miami in 2008, depicts an Obonekue neophyte undergoing initiation with the *arabensuao* mystic circle drawn on the head.⁴⁴

Another work, *Enkiko Nasakó Murina* (2009), refers to the presence of the rooster during the initiation process (*ekiko* is "rooster" in the Èfik language of Calabar). In southwest Cameroon, Nasakó is remembered as a prophet from the region of Ùsàghàdè where Ékpè was legendarily founded centuries ago.⁴⁵ The painting depicts five neophytes blindfolded during initiation, with a rooster, next to a sacred *ceiba* (kapok) tree with three dimensional thorns. The painting *Iyamba Quiñongo* (2010) represents the Iyamba (a lodge leader) and his signs of ritual authority. This work demonstrates that Orbein is also informed by the publications of Lydia Cabrera, in this case *Anaforuana* (1975), about the ritual signatures of the society. Whereas Iyamba is the title for a lodge leader in the Calabar region, *Kinyongo* is derived from the Èfik phrase *ke enyong*, meaning "in the sky," which could be interpreted as "Iyamba has powers from the sky" or "Iyamba is the highest."

Orbein was also a promoter of the Abakuá feasts organized by Guerrero in Miami from 2009 to the present, through creating poster advertisements. His poster for the 2009 event presents the Abakuá phrase "Akamanyére crucoro umbarain tete ayeripondo," meaning "welcome all as a great family," while



Figure 16.9. *Obonekue Arabensuao*. By José Orbein, Miami, 2008. 20 x 32 inches. Acrylic and charcoal over cardboard. The painting depicts a neophyte during an Abakuá initiation with a handkerchief across the eyes and esoteric signs drawn on the body. The arrows pointing downward indicate initiation. Used with permission.

announcing “the First artistic gathering of Abakuá in Florida” (fig. 16.6). The map identifying the location of the feast is a sign that these activities promote education about Abakuá practice as a community-wide event, instead of being a “secret, hidden” one that in the past may have aroused suspicion among non-members. The process of communicating with West African counterparts is fueling desire for a wider public understanding, so that the ongoing public performances already mentioned will be popularized as relevant to all in the transatlantic African diaspora, as well as the Cuban diaspora. The 2010 poster displays the “Íreme Eribangandó,” a body-mask used to lead processions during initiation ceremonies, implying that “Abakuá is moving forward” (fig. 16.7). The use of the colors and star of the Cuban flag are another statement that Abakuá is “as Cuban as black beans and rice.” Participants have reported that in Cuba, the use of a Cuban flag on an Íreme could lead to conflicts with the authorities, a reminder that Abakuá jurisprudence has acted independently from the colonial Spanish and Cuban state since its foundation. The 2011 poster celebrates the legacy of nineteenth-century Abakuá leader Andrés Petit through his portrait (fig. 16.8). In the 1850s–60s Petit led the successful process of initiating the first white Abakuá members, thus ensuring that Abakuá would be open to all eligible males of any heritage.⁴⁶

Painter Elio Beltrán (b. 1929) was born and raised in Regla, a small industrial town on the Bay of Havana where Abakuá was founded in the 1830s. Still a vital center for African-derived community traditions, Regla is home to scores of active Abakuá lodges. From his home in Florida, Beltrán wrote: “I grew up registering dream-like images in my mind during my childhood years. Images that many years later would emerge as oil paintings to help me to ease my pain of separation from the very dear surroundings and people that I loved in Cuba.” A series of paintings reflect the impact of an Abakuá Íreme (body-mask) performance on the young artist. *Asustados Intrusos*, or “Scared Intruders” (1981), depicts “three scared kids hiding and secretly watching an Abakuá initiation in the early 1940’s behind the tall grass at the edge of a cliff in the night.”⁴⁷ I believe it was the Otán Efó brotherhood of the Abakuá on the outskirts of my hometown Regla.⁴⁸ I was one of the three boys overlooking the scene of the celebration on the site at the entrance to what was known then as *El callejón del Sapo*.” A second painting, *Ceremonia Secreta* (1987), depicts the same event from 180 degrees (fig. 16.10). These paintings are remarkable for depicting how a hermetic club became famous among non-initiates who were awed by the communal rites.

A third painting, *Memories del Carnaval* (2010, not illustrated here), reconstructs the night scene of a Carnival celebration in an Old Havana neighborhood circa 1938–40. It shows how elements of African-derived traditions (an Abakuá mask, a batá drum, a conga drummer with the *camisa rumbera* [fluffy



Figure 16.10. *Ceremonia Secreta* (Secret Ceremony). By Elio Beltrán, 1978. Oil on canvas, 48 × 36 inches. The painting illustrates the childhood memories of the painter who witnessed Abakuá rites in the town of Regla, near Havana. While Abakuá members play drums and íremes dance at the bottom, three children observe through the grass above. Used with permission.

sleeves] of early rumba players) were fused in the citywide celebrations. In all of these works, one senses the profound impact of an Abakuá mask performance on the young viewer, as well as the identification of Abakuá as part of the national culture.

Beltrán's corpus recalls the reaction of Spanish poet García Lorca to an Abakuá performance during his visit to Cuba in 1929–30. About it, Lydia Cabrera wrote, "I do not forget the terror that the *íreme* instilled in Federico García Lorca, nor the delirious poetic description he made for me the day after witnessing a *plante* [ceremony]. If a Diaghilev had been born on this island, surely he would have made the *diablitos* [*íreme*] of the *ñáñigos* parade through the theaters of Europe."⁴⁹ While Beltrán has worked primarily from his memories and in isolation, other painters have consulted with Abakuá members during their creative process.

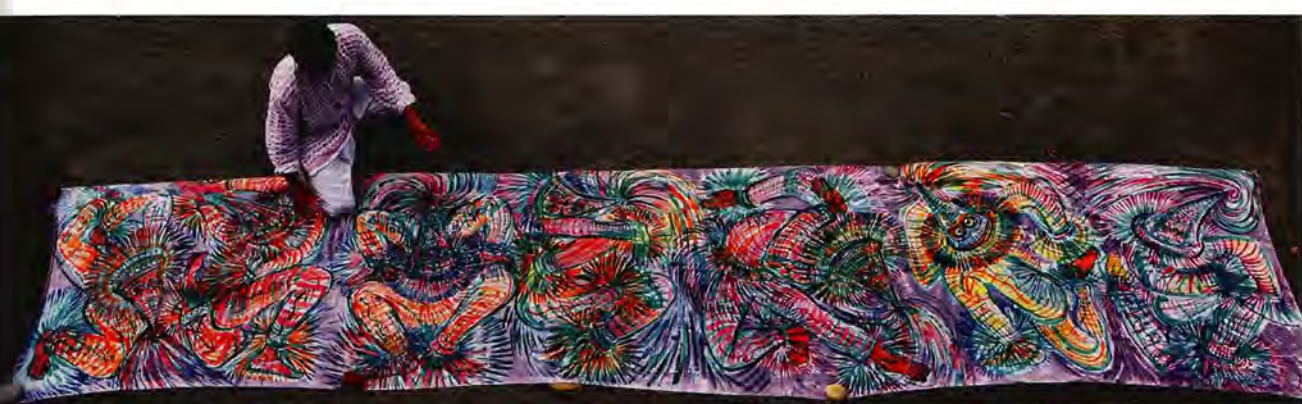


Figure 16.11. *Abacud Saree I*. By Leandro Soto, 2007. Indian ink on silk saree. 21 × 4 feet. A long silk saree is used as a canvas to depict Abakuá masquerades in motion. A detail of the work is in figure 3.3.

A multidisciplinary visual/installation and performance artist, Leandro Soto (b. 1956) was a leading figure in Cuban art in the 1980s and among the first artists in his generation to explore Afro-Cuban themes. Based in Miami since the 1990s, Soto began to work with Abakuá imagery in the first decade of the twenty-first century after learning about the Kachina body-masks of Hopi people of the American Southwest. He created a series of video-installation-performance pieces with Abakuá imagery that presented the artist as an Abakuá mask—here a symbol of Cuba itself—who encounters a kindred tradition in North America.⁵⁰ Soto's Abakuá series generally celebrates motion through Abakuá body-masks and coded symbolism imagery (fig. 16.11; see detail in fig. 3.3). During this process, Soto conversed extensively with Ángel Guerrero, studied Lydia Cabrera's publications, and also reproduced nineteenth-century Abakuá signatures for Miller's book on Abakuá history, *The Voice of the Leopard* (2009).

Conclusions

It is remarkable that the Abakuá cultural movement has been able to expand from ritual secrecy in Havana and Matanzas onto the global stage of performance in the process of communicating meaningfully with African practitioners of Ékpè—the source tradition from which it was separated some two hundred years ago. As with other cases of oral transmission across long time and space intervals, such as the Vedic and Homeric poems, the Abakuá example combines intensive artistic discipline with a ritualized guild framework. As the present moment of history is witnessing the reconnection of the two ends of this vast diasporal arc, the impact of this encounter on the local communities of practitioners is fascinating to observe. At the same time, the public nature of the new encounter is eliciting unprecedented openness to scholarly access,

which promises to enrich the description of each of the local traditions that were heretofore so closely guarded from outside view. This chapter documents the participation of Abakuá members in Florida in this process, as well as their allies in the arts who honor and celebrate Abakuá as part of an overall Cuban national identity. Eventually, the global Ékpè-Abakuá network may develop its own organic scholarship from within, such has happened already to an extent with the Yorùbá-Lukumí tradition.

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Notes

1. The leopard society has many names depending on the local language, including Nyàmkpè (in Cameroon), Bònkó (in Equatorial Guinea), Òkònkò (in Igbo), and Abakuá (in Cuba). Most West African communities also recognize the term Ékpè, since the Èfik influence in the region was widespread in the nineteenth century.

2. Roche y Monteagudo, *La policía y sus misterios en Cuba*, 27. All translations from Spanish to English are by the author.

3. Since the first Ékpè-Abakuá meeting in Brooklyn, New York, in 2001, I have discussed this issue with many Ékpè titleholders from the Calabar and Cameroon region now living in the United States.

4. The group who call themselves "Ékpè USA" is led by "Sisiku" E. Ojong Orok, "Sesekou" Joseph Mbu, "Sesekou" Solomon Egbe, and "Sisiku" Mbe Tazi, among others. Because of their authority as Ékpè leaders in their villages in Cameroon, they have been able to establish at least one lodge, cautiously following the protocols of this institution.

5. An 1882 publication on "The Criminals of Cuba" began a chapter on the "Nyányigos" by stating: "The police have worked hard to eradicate the nyányigos" (Trujillo, *Los criminales de Cuba*, 360). A 1901 publication on Spanish penal colonies stated: "Finally, the nyányigo was conceived of as a dangerous being, shown clearly by the mass deportations during the last period of our dominion, that accumulated a large number of nyányigos in Ceuta, in Cádiz, and in the Castle of Figueras" (Salillas, "Los ñañigos en Ceuta," 339).

In 1925 a study of the history of Regla, the birthplace of Abakuá in Cuba, had a chapter called "Criminality and Nyanyagismo in Regla" (Duque, *Historia de Regla*, 125–27). A 1930 publication in Cuba asked rhetorically if Abakuá was related to "abominable crimes": "In Cuba, are witchcraft and nyánigism religious practices or black magic? . . . Is it true that they shelter organizations dedicated to the most abominable crimes?" (Martín, *Ecué, changó y yemayá*, 7). This contextualization of Abakuá continues into the present. In 2011 in Havana a monograph was published with the title "The Abakuá Society and the Stigma of Criminality" (Pérez-Martínez y Torres-Zayas).

6. Martí, "Mi Raza"; Martí, *Our America*, 313.

7. The Havana lodge Bakokó Efó, mentioned above, was specifically responsible for organizing the entry of European descendants into the Abakuá society (cf. I. Miller, *Voice of the Leopard*).

8. For details see I. Miller, *Voice of the Leopard*, 137–39.

9. In Calabar and nineteenth-century Cuba, *Abánékpè* was an *Ékpè* term for first-level initiate. Cuban Abakuá use the variant terms *abanékue* and *obonékue*.

10. An 1881 source refers to the payment of fees to create Cuba's first lodge, a process consistent with Cross River and later Cuban practice. Rodríguez, *Reseña histórica de los ñáñigos de Cuba*, 5–6.

11. R. Cabrera, *Cartas a Govín*, 3–4. R. Cabrera was the father of the eminent Cuban folklorist Lydia Cabrera.

12. F. Ortiz, *Los instrumentos de la música afrocubana*, 5301. Ortiz wrote that the reed "gave some notes in an aphonic form so that the multitude would respond in chorus with his chants." Ibid., 309.

13. Kennedy reported: "Nanigo came to Florida for various reasons. There were naturally some Nanigos among the Cubans who immigrated first to Key West and later to Tampa, seeking employment in the cigar factories and other industries. Others were revolutionary patriots seeking refuge from the tyranny of Spain." "Ñáñigos in Florida," 154–55.

14. "Lo que extraemos de su lectura [de Kennedy y Wells] nos lleva a la certeza de la existencia de ñáñigos [en Key West]." Sosa, "Ñáñigos en Key West, 165.

15. Wells, *Forgotten Legacy*, 48.

16. Kennedy, "Ñáñigos in Florida," 155.

17. Interviews with Gerardo "El Chino" Pazos, in Havana.

18. Telephone conversation with Stetson Kennedy, April 2002. Kennedy referred to his lack of fluency in Spanish. Describing research among a Cuban family in Tampa, he wrote: "When the cooking is over and the meal placed on the table, there is a sudden burst of very rapid and excited Spanish which I am unable to understand" ("All He's Living For," 21). In a letter to the author, Kennedy (2002) wrote: "I do not know much about *naniguismo* beyond what I have read in Dr. Fernando Ortiz's *Los Negros Brujos* . . . and my own article." In his next letter, Kennedy (2002) wrote: "I do not now recall the contents of my *nanigo* article, or whether it even implied that there might have been nanigo organizations in Florida. I suspect that it would be difficult to prove either that there had been, or had not been."

19. "Recent folklore recording expeditions conducted by the Florida Work Projects Administration of the Library of Congress located a number of people in Key West and Tampa, besides those already mentioned, who undoubtedly have an initiate's knowledge of *Nanigo*, obtained both in Cuba and locally. . . . But because of their extreme poverty, they refuse absolutely to perform without some pecuniary remuneration—which unfortunately was unavailable to the WPA expeditions" (Kennedy, "Ñáñigos in Florida," 155). If Abakuá groups did exist in Florida, they would have performed ceremonies, aspects of them public, to which WPA researchers could have gone. Lacking such groups, there was only "fragmentary mention" of a masked dancer and a bongó. I did locate testimonies of

Cubans and Spaniards who had lived in Cuba, Key West, and Tampa, conducted in Ybor City and Tampa in the late 1930s. The Federal Writers' Project Papers housed in the University of North Carolina Library at Chapel Hill contain descriptions of cigar workers born in Havana and living in Florida; none of them refer to the Abakuá.

20. *Florida: A Guide*, 133.

21. Historian Louis A. Pérez Jr., letter to the author, 2004.

22. E-mail to the author from Professor Greenbaum, 2003.

23. Sosa, "Ñānigos en Key West," 166–67.

24. Martí, "Una orden secreta de africanos," 324; Muzio, *Andrés Quimbisa*, 71–72; Sosa, "Ñānigos en Key West," 167; Ishemo, "From Africa to Cuba," 256. Jesús Cruz (personal communication, 2000), Ekuenyon of the Ordán Efi lodge in Matanzas told me that he had heard that Tomás Suri was Abakuá but that his lodge name was not known. After reading Sosa's essay, Cruz responded that nothing in this article proves that Abakuá conducted ceremonies in Florida, nor are such activities known about by Abakuá leadership in Cuba.

25. In spite of the errors in this essay, Sosa should be praised for his support of Abakuá culture in Cuba in the early 1980s in the form of his book (*Los Ñānigos*), since it was an unpopular theme in the political sphere at the time.

26. Ishemo, "From Africa to Cuba," 268. Ishemo falsely cited Muzio (*Andrés Quimbisa*, 71) and Helg (*Our Rightful Share*, 87); there is no mention in either of Martí, a Fambá, or a flag. Ishemo also cited Sosa ("Ñānigos en Key West," 167–68), who in turn cites Martí ("Una orden secreta de africanos"), but Martí made no mention of Abakuá. Martí wrote of a secret society of Cuban "Africans," who had given up the drum in order to learn to read—a non sequitur—and whose reunions took place in a "bannered hall . . . the hall whose parties were adorned with the banner of the revolution" ("*sala embanderada* . . . la sala que adorna sus fiestas con la bandera de la revolución") ("Una orden secreta de africanos," 324). Sosa imagined that Martí wrote of an Abakuá group in Key West. Ishemo's piece is riddled with the uncritical repetition of errors, and poor translations.

27. Ayorinde, "Ékpè in Cuba," 141.

28. Ayorinde quoted Brandon ("The Dead Sell Memories," 108). Brandon (2011 personal communication) confirmed that he made no such claim and that this was a misquote.

29. Luis "el Pelón" died in 1997 in Miami; his body was carried to Havana to receive Abakuá ceremonies and burial. Ceiba (Kapok, or White Silk Cotton Trees) are "venerated and revered in forests zones of Nigeria. It is a fetish tree and sacrifices for the release of people captured and detained in the world of witches and wizards ready for the kill are performed at the base of this large tree" ("Nature Trail Tree List," 3).

30. Cf. I. Miller, "Obras de fundación: La Sociedad Abakuá."

31. I was shown a copy of this letter in the office of Mr. Ángel Freyre "Chibiri," president of the Abakuá Bureau (la Organización para la Unidad Abakuá), in Regla in 2000.

32. Cf. D. H. Brown, *Santería Enthroned*, 78; Ortiz reported the founding of Yorùbá-derived Batá drums in Havana in the 1830s (*Los instrumentos de la música afrocubana*, 315–16).

33. "There are said to be about two hundred true babaláwo in Havana, and most of them have been drawn to the large cities where they can earn more money." Bascom, "Two Forms of Afro-Cuban Divination," 171.

34. The ceremony performed was the creation in Miami of the first Olofies, a ritual vessel possessed only by high-ranking babaláwo. A 1978 Miami newspaper article reporting on the event stated that the first Olofies were made by Yorùbá babaláwos in Havana more than "200 years" before. Archives of Luis Fernández-Pelón.

35. Thanks to Mr. Nath Mayo Adediran (2005 personal communication), for the cor-

rect title and spelling. For a detailed report on this process see D. H. Brown, *Santería Enthroned*, 93–95.

36. From a Miami newspaper article published in 1978, in the archives of Luis Fernández-Pelón. There I saw and videotaped a photograph of Luis Fernández and two other Cubans in Oşogbo, Nigeria, in 1978, taken during their initiation as babaláwos there. I also saw a photograph of Ifayemi Elégbùibon dedicated “To my godson José-Miguel Gómez” (Caballero, 2005 personal communication).

37. David Brown reported that Gómez was initiated into the Lukumí Ocha system in 1929 (*Santería Enthroned*, 160). This is consistent with the early Cuban tradition that eligible males should be initiated into Abakuá and Palo Mayombe *before* entering the Lukumí tradition. One interpretation of this tradition is that the “Carabali” (from Calabar) and Central African “Kongo” people arrived to Cuba and other American regions *before* the Yoruba/Lukumí.

38. David Brown reports that Gómez was “the first Cuban-born babaláwo to have made Ifá in the United States” (*Santería Enthroned*, 325 n. 92). The Cuban-Kongo lineage called Santo Cristo del Buen Viaje was organized by Andrés Petit in the mid-1800s (cf. Cabrera, *La Regla Kimbisa del Santo Cristo del Buen Viaje*).

39. In this era in Cuba, February 24 was a national holiday—thus a day free from work—to celebrate the “El grito de Baire” (the Cry of Baire), the commencement of the final war of independence in 1895 by the Cuban rebels against Spain. Being a carnival day in the 1890s, this date was chosen to start a rebellion under the cover of a mass celebration.

40. See chapter 17 in this volume on Lucumí crowns.

41. Sánchez created “Manungo’s Diablito Dancers” in the 1930s to depict Sánchez’s memories of the “ñāñigo street dance” in 1919. Some scholars thought that this was an *Abakuá* performance, but in fact the body-masks were Puerto Rican Vejigantes, not Abakuá. The work represents a street jam session with a bongo player, a trumpet player, and two body-masquerades, in the context of carnival. I. Miller, *Voice of the Leopard*.

42. Louis Pérez (2006 personal communication); Orovio, *El carnaval babanero*, 85. The name Key West is an English gloss upon the earlier Spanish name, Cayo Hueso. The Cuban communities of Cayo Hueso in Florida actively countered the Spanish regime. Le Roy y Gálvez, *A cien años del 71*, 58; Foner, *Antonio Maceo*, 120; Montejo-Arrechea, *Sociedades negras en Cuba*, 104.

43. E-mail message from José Orbein to the author, September 2007.

44. Cabrera documented a version of this term: “Biorasa: círculo que se dibuja en la cabeza del neófito para ser iniciado.” *La Lengua Sagrada de los Ñañigos*, 112.

45. The BoNasakó family, meaning “the family of Nasakó,” presently lives in Ngamoki within the Ekama community of Ngolo-speaking people of the Rumpi Hills in Cameroon. Thanks to Mr. Nasakó Besingi of Mundemba, as well as Mr. Kebulu Felix of Limbe and their extended families, Cameroon, the author attended BoNasakó family reunions in Ngololand in February 2011 and March 2012.

46. For details see chapter 4 of I. Miller, *Voice of the Leopard*, 103–18.

47. Chapter 2 of Beltrán’s autobiography *Back to Cuba* tells this story.

48. Otán Efó was founded around 1909 in Regla. Lydia Cabrera wrote: “Otán Efor . . . of Regla. Ancient Potency.” *La Lengua Sagrada de los Ñañigos*, 465.

49. Cabrera, “La Ceiba y la sociedad secreta Abakuá,” 35; Cabrera, *El Monte*, 217.

50. Cf. I. Miller, “Abakuá: The Signs of Power.” Soto titled these performance pieces *Efi Visiting the Desert* (after the Èfik people of Calabar who helped create Cuban Abakuá) and *Kachlreme*, a fusion of the Hopi Katchina and the Cuban Ìreme body-mask. See the artist’s gallery at <http://www.leandrosoto.com/kachlreme-efi-visiting-the-desert.html>.

Africa in Florida

Five Hundred Years of African Presence in the Sunshine State



Edited by Amanda B. Carlson and Robin Poynor

Foreword by Michael Gannon



A Florida Quincentennial Book

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