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## Case study

Songs of an initiation club in West Africa and its Caribbean Diaspora

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Within human memory, the main institution federating the West African settlements and trade networks of the Cross River basin and surrounding uplands has been the Ékpè “leopard” initiation society (Ruel 1969; Northrup 1978; Röschenhaler 2011). Developing within an extremely decentralized, multilingual environment, Ékpè elaborated a symbolic system of gestures, body-masks, and other visual and rhythmic signs which were also substantially transmitted to western Cuba during the Spanish slave labor economy of the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries as Abakuá (Dayrell 1910; Leib & Romano 1984; Miller 2009). Verbal texts of Ékpè/Abakuá performance are expressed in auxiliary linguistic codes that reflect the cult’s historical development even while remaining semantically opaque; meanwhile, they are pragmatically meaningful to modern participants in the ritual context.

Cuban scholar Lydia Cabrera (1988) pioneered the study of verbal texts of Cuba’s three major African source groups: Yorùbá (Lukumí), Kongo, and Abakuá (1957, 1984, 1988). Our project continues this work in West Africa with the documentation and interpretation of Ékpè song performances through audio and video recordings, which are then transcribed and rendered with tone marks by a professional linguist (Miller & Òkôn 2020). Based in Calabar, Nigeria, since 2004, this project engages current initiates by documenting their ceremonial songs to analyze their literal, poetic, and esoteric meanings. Our goal is to characterize these oral productions both as sources of reconstructed history and as mnemonics of esthetic and practical action. Theoretically, the project uses audiovisual evidence to contribute to awareness of a centuries-old African cultural diaspora, first diffused throughout the Cross River basin and subsequently in the Caribbean.

In Calabar, Ékpè activists embraced this project to promote their heritage and its diaspora and organized in 2007 an association of lodges from various ethnic communities, called Calabar Mgbè.<sup>1</sup> This association sent a delegation to Paris in 2007 to perform with a group of Cuban

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Abakuá at a festival sponsored by the Musée Quai Branly. This event was video-recorded, and the performers from Cuba and Nigeria were very observant and curious about the performances of their counterparts. Two results from this exchange were released: an essay by Miller about this cultural summit—the first-ever staged interaction between Ékpè and Abakuá—published in 2015 as “Separated by the Slave Trade: Nigerians and Cubans Reunite through a Shared Cultural Practice.” Second, the Cuban participants composed and recorded an album (*Ecobio Enyenison* 2009), including songs and rhythms they learned from the Nigerians, fused with their own and arranged in a jazz context. One of the messages of this recording is that centuries-old ritual rhythms and chants have contributed to the development of jazz performance in the US, continuing the creative work of “Chano” Pozo, who brought Abakuá rhythms and chants into his compositions with Dizzy Gillespie in 1947–1948 in New York City (Miller 2000).

### Methodology

The recording of Abakuá texts began in Havana in the early 1900s when RCA Victor recorded songs like “Achui Bongó” (africano), composed by Alberto Villalón and performed by the duo Regino López and Adolfo Colombo with guitar [Victor B-13786, 1913] (Discography of American Historical Recordings 2025). Commencing a long history of recording Abakuá ritual phrases within the context of popular music, the texts are intentionally opaque, untranslated, yet intelligible to Cuban initiates and used by them to document their activities. Cognizant of the extensive Cuban discography, Miller was curious if Ékpè songs in Calabar served a similar purpose. Arriving in 2004, Miller requested singers of Ékpè songs to transcribe their lyrics; he also video-recorded songs performed in ceremonial contexts in both Nigeria and Cameroon. In Calabar, most songs were in the Èfìk language as well as Ékpè linguistic codes, Èfìk being the lingua franca of the entire region in recent generations. To professionally document and analyze the song texts, Miller teamed up with trained linguist Professor Margaret Òkôn, who adjusted the transcriptions, provided literal translations, and also marked the corresponding tones. To our knowledge, this is the first linguistic analysis of Ékpè songs ever published.

But Miller had documented Ékpè songs in several languages while traveling throughout the region. They include Kúò (“Kwa”), Èjághám, Ọrón, Boki, Lokaa, and BàLóndó. Through many frustrated attempts at transcribing and translating the songs in these languages, it became clear that very few contemporary speakers of these languages know how to write their speech, while very few Ékpè specialists understand deeply the meanings of the songs and their contexts, even if they claimed otherwise. Professor Òkôn found that the inability of speakers to write their languages is

the bane of most Cross River languages, which have been depressed and suffocated by the English, Èfìk, and Ìbibìò languages and, thus, are without robust speakers. A good number of them are in grave danger of extinction. Òkôn and Noah (2021) reported that, at present, almost no indigenous Nigerian speaks Èfùt (a variant of BàLóndó of Cameroon), which is said to be the original language of the Ékpè society (known as “Mgbè” in Èfùt language). Therefore, their research on Èfùt required learning from a BàLóndó Cameroonian who has lived in Nigeria for much of his adult life due largely to his maternal lineage in Cross River State. Nonetheless, vestiges of the Èfùt language and culture survive in libation rituals and in Ékpè songs, but they continue to be influenced by the languages of the neighboring cultures.

Regarding Èfìk Ékpè songs, progress was made thanks to an Ékpè song specialist raised in a family of traditional musicians in rural Creek Town, an epicenter of Ékpè activity outside the city of Calabar: Chief Eyoma E. Edet masterfully reviewed the entire list of songs and brought clarity to their texts and meanings. Miller, it turns out, had been recording songs from several students of Chief Edet, yet none guided the researcher to their teacher! Nevertheless, Chief Edet’s corrections enabled the publication “Ékpè ‘Leopard’ Association Songs from the Cross River Region” by Miller and Òkôn (International Journal of Languages and Communication, 2020, v7: 86–121). The results of this research indeed found some resonance with Cuban popular song texts, specifically pertaining to both phrases and rhythms expressed in rumba and Abakuá song performances.

### Examples

Much of the video documentation from this research has been uploaded to Miller’s YouTube channel, where many knowledgeable listeners from West Africa have responded with enthusiasm but with little analysis. The following is a list of some of the video recordings and what they inform us about the Ékpè tradition.

Although Ékpè is by and large a cult for males from “royal” lineages, women who know the culture well may be initiated because they contribute to the performance of song and dance. In Calabar, Miller recorded Madam Ekoyo Basse, who hailed from a Usaghadet (Isangele) community in Cameroon and was initiated into Ékpè in a Calabar lodge because of her extraordinary singing and dancing skills:

“Ékpè Songs in Calabar.” In Calabar, Madam Ekoyo Basse, an initiate of Èfé Ékpè Èfùt Abua, sings Ékpè songs at the home of Obong Ékpè Mr. E. Ekpenyong Eyo, Mboko-Mboko of Èfé Ékpè Éyò Èmà, who accompanied her. Ekpenyong Eyo had participated in the Ékpè and Abakuá performance in Paris, 2007. Ékpè auxiliary codes and Èfìk language. 23:01 minutes in length.<sup>2</sup>

The initiation of women coincides with gender as expressed in Ékpè performance, where the most popular body-mask figures represent the “mother” figure of this cult, with accompanying songs of her role:

“Ékpè song, rural Calabar.” In the Èfìk language, the song says: “Èbònkó is the mother of all Ékpè.” Ifako-Òkóyòng, Odukpani Local Government Area (LGA). Òkóyòng is a community in the Calabar region that migrated from Òkóyòng, near Mamfe, Cameroon, in the 1800s. Recorded in February 2012. 2:54 minutes in length.<sup>3</sup>

Research in Calabar also revealed that musicians of “traditional” or “cultural” music had recorded Ékpè songs starting in the decade of the 1970s (seven decades after the first Cuban recordings). In the Cuban colony, if Abakuá was criminalized, musician members could avoid censorship while recording ritual languages in popular music contexts, because only they understood the codes. Meanwhile, in Nigeria, Ékpè practice had been publicly submerged due to British colonial and missionary administrations since the late 1800s; the few Ékpè recordings made after independence in 1960 were achieved, therefore, as acts of resistance to assimilation into British culture and remain as rare examples:

“Nyamkpe preamble and song by Ekpe Ita of Calabar.” Obon Music: Eyet Burstic Kingsley Basse. Ekpe Ita and His Ima Edi Obio Group. 1979. Anodisc Records. ALPS 1051. Stereo. A subsidiary of Anochie, the Anochie Foundation Ltd, 1–3 Pound Road, PO Box 980, Aba, Nigeria. C. Control Èfìk Cultural Music. Ékpè auxiliary codes and Èfìk language. 06:35 minutes in length.<sup>4</sup>

The following are further examples of video recordings produced through fieldwork in Nigeria:

“Ékpè songs in Efut Abua community, Calabar South, Cross River State, Nigeria.” Recorded in April 2013. The Muri Munene (paramount ruler) of Èfùt people of Calabar supported Dr. Miller’s quest to record Ékpè songs in Èfùt (BàLóndó) language. Because the Èfùt language had been largely lost through assimilation into Èfìk culture, the Munene invited a community member from the BàLóndó region of Cameroon who sang BàLóndó songs in with the support of Èfùt percussionists and Ékpè members. This event was held in the Efe Ékpè Èfùt Abua (Ékpè hall of Èfùt Abua). 21:27 minutes in length.<sup>5</sup>

An analysis by a BàLóndó (Òrókò) speaker reported that, in fact, none of the Calabar participants understood the language of the BàLóndó singer,

so they could not repeat the chorus; therefore, the lead singer began to sing simple phrases that were not Ékpè songs. This example demonstrates a desire for “ethnic nationalism” within a Nigerian context but without results.

“Mr Ekpenyong Itu Ekpenyong.” Ekpenyong Itu Ekpenyong and friends perform Ékpè music in Big Qua, Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria. Ékpè auxiliary codes and Kùò (“Kwa”) language. Recorded by Alex Jomaron and Ivor Miller, 2010. 06:59 minutes in length.<sup>6</sup>

Miller requested an analysis of these songs from the performers, who were unable to transcribe any song and seemed to have been improvising on the spot. This indicates that Ékpè song performance incorporates spontaneous song production during informal sessions.

The following three songs from Nigerian fieldwork have not received any analysis from the performers so far, even after several requests by the researchers:

“Etara community Mgbè—Song.” Recorded in March 2011. During Miller’s first visit to the rural Etara community, Ikom LGA, the Ékpè members assemble inside the Ékpè hall, with titleholders at the high table with an *ùkàrá* cloth to their backs. A member performs Nsìbidì gestures to communicate with the participants as they sing in the Èjaghám language. 04:10 minutes in length.<sup>7</sup>

“Big Qua Town Ékpè masks and song.” Recorded in Calabar Municipality, December 2005. Kùò (“Kwa”) language. 03:23 minutes in length.<sup>8</sup>

“Ebongo Dibó in Big Qua Town, Nigeria.” Recorded inside the Ocham Mgbè (Ékpè hall) of Big Qua Town community, Calabar Municipality, where musicians play while the Ìsim Ékpè (“leopard tail”) dancers and Ekòmò boys (“drum holders”) prepare for the procession. An elder (the Ndidem of the Quas) instructs a young man how to dance with bow and arrow in his hands. Then the chiefs lead the Èbòngó mask procession through the town square. Recorded by Ivor Miller, December 25, 2010, Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria. 06:06 minutes in length.<sup>9</sup>

The following two songs from Nigerian fieldwork have not yet been incorporated into the study of Miller and Òkôn:

“Ékpè songs in Owai community.” Owai community, Akampka LGA, Cross River State. New Yam Festival, October 2012. The first four minutes were in the dark, thus photographs from Owai are placed there. At 4:28 a local elder begins to sing, with an accompanist. A local

guide Michael Joseph Mbe interprets the songs after they are performed. 14:29 minutes in length.<sup>10</sup>

“Ékpè music, Èbònkó rhythm” Recorded in Calabar, Nigeria June 2019, directed by Dr. Kenneth Bilby. Ékpè music is indigenous to south-eastern Nigeria and South West Cameroon, a centuries long practice. Ékpè was the system of community justice of the region and has elaborate initiation rites for neophytes, who are traditionally from royal lineages. 11:52 minutes in length.<sup>11</sup>

This example was recorded in the US, where Cameroonian migrants organized an Ékpè club:

“Ékpè USA music rehearsal” August 2011. A rehearsal of Ékpè songs by Ékpè USA, a group of Ékpè titleholders from Cameroon residing in Maryland, led by Seseku Ojong Orok and including Sesekus Mbe Tazi, Joseph Mbu, and Mr. Mforkem M. Asam-Eyong. Seseku Joe Mbu describes Ékpè songs as proverbs recited with percussion and melodies. He translates the first song. 7:49 minutes in length.<sup>12</sup>

This example was recorded by Mr. Opubo Braide at BraideO!’s Sound Lab., Calabar, Nigeria:

“Calabar Rhythm and Songs—Ebonko.” August 2017. These songs were transcribed and translated in the video clip. Ékpè auxiliary codes and Èfìk language. 10:29 minutes in length.<sup>13</sup>

This video demonstrates the use of typical percussion of the Calabar region:

“Ékpè drums presentation—Cross River Nigeria.” Recorded 2010, by Alex Jomaron and Ivor Miller. Two professional musicians explain the use of the basic drums and gongs of the Calabar region. 06:03 minutes in length.<sup>14</sup>

## Conclusions

Even if many of the songs recorded in languages other than Èfìk were not transcribed, this research method reveals the nature of Ékpè song performance. In fact, not all participants in the music performance understand the texts they are singing. This is relevant to the Cuban tradition, where only leading specialists understand the texts they perform.

It’s striking to observe that the phenomenon of partial intelligibility of song texts is not limited to Cuba but is widespread in the Nigerian examples. Presumably, some of the translation difficulties encountered in

present-day Nigeria result from a century of cultural imperialism at the hands of successive missionaries, colonialists, and nationalist elites, so it’s likely that intelligibility was much greater in Nigeria several generations in the past. To that extent, Nigerian Ékpè is becoming more similar to Cuban Abakuá, as its artistic corpus becomes encapsulated and detached from the context of spoken languages. However, this transatlantic parallelism of textual recession is not observed to nearly the same degree in the other major diasporan tradition with Nigerian and Cuban representatives, namely, Yorùbá Òrìṣà and Lukumí Ocha: semantic opacity is widely observed in Lukumí songs and chants but much less so in the Nigerian counterpart. This contrast of intelligibility has multiple explanations.

### Esoterism

Participation in Ékpè/Abakuá is scrupulously graded and restricted to initiates, whereas knowledge of Òrìṣà/Ocha is more dispersed across the general population. In both cases, the operative concept of “secrecy” is a prohibition on the “public” display of information without authority, but the contrast remains that access to initiatory information is more restricted in Ékpè.

### Auxiliary coding

Ékpè grew in and adapted to a far more multilingual, ethnically diverse population than was the case for Òrìṣà; thus, Ékpè relies inherently on nonlinguistic representations like the Nsibìdì figures and symbolic gestures.

### Segregated oracy

Throughout the twentieth century, standardization of and mass literacy in local languages were generally blocked in the Ékpè zone by a host of political and economic factors, in contrast to the early success of written Yorùbá.

## Notes

- 1 Calabar Mgbè, <https://www.afrocubaweb.com/abakwa/calabarmgbe.htm>.
- 2 Ékpè Songs in Calabar, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dbp0sWkDddk>.
- 3 Ékpè song, rural Calabar, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cmV4O\\_o-bHQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cmV4O_o-bHQ).
- 4 Nyamkpe preamble and song by Ékpè Ita of Calabar, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bR0fx9-JDGQ>.
- 5 Ékpè songs in Efut Abua community, Calabar South, Cross River State, Nigeria, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XedzMJyB7s8>.
- 6 Mr Ekpenyong Itu Ekpenyong, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AQFbHC08Gyg>.

- 7 Etara community Mgbè, “Song,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8iXR0MICy4M>.
- 8 Big Qua Town Ékpè masks and song, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CLUSoonikII>.
- 9 Ebongo Dibó in Big Qua Town, Nigeria, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XVr3wuy29GM>.
- 10 Ékpè songs in Owai community/ Cantos del Ékpè en la comunidad de Owai, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lCHlwe8zaO8>.
- 11 Ékpè music, Èbònkó rhythm, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zjxcF5GTPT8>.
- 12 Ékpè USA music rehearsal (2), [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G\\_2QNE8KJvc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G_2QNE8KJvc).
- 13 Calabar Rhythm and Songs – Ebonko <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eVtobMqTZTU>.
- 14 Ékpè drums presentation—Cross River Nigeria, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8g2YpbGQAZQ>.

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