

Ékpè ‘leopard’ society in Africa and the Americas: influence and values of an ancient tradition

Ivor Miller and Mathew Ojong

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Abstract

The Ékpè (‘leopard’) society represents an ancient African institution that had provided the supreme functions of governance in the communal societies of the forest regions of the Cross-River basin and the hilly terrain to the east. With the colonial intervention in the late nineteenth century, the emergence of modern individualism and western political systems has tended to ignore the important roles which Ékpè played in the past, leading in some cases to its condemnation as a primitive institution that should be forgotten in light of monotheism. This essay discusses the origins of Ékpè, its symbolism, its values, its gender dynamics, its dispersal within Africa and the Americas, with the intent to demonstrate its relevance to contemporary community relations in all regions where Ékpè tradition has been sustained, such as Cameroon, Cuba, Equatorial Guinea, Nigeria and, most recently, the USA.

Keywords: Abakuá; African diaspora; Cross River region; Cuba; Ékpè ‘leopard’ society; traditional community police.

Origins of Ékpè in African Societies

Ékpè is an ancient African institution incorporating art forms and performance styles of dance, music and esoteric knowledge. Its origins remain obscure over centuries of its existence, but it is nonetheless acknowledged to be an invention of communities inhabiting the forest region of West and Central Africa. The controlling and integrative qualities of Ékpè provided security and solidarity to migrating groups from the earliest times of their dispersals through the forested and riverine areas. Ékpè had four major roles in pre-colonial life: first, the

conferment of full citizenship – holding a title in Ékpè accorded one the status of full citizen with rights to make decisions having implications for the entire community, much like the respect accorded to the *toga virilis* in ancient Rome. Ékpè was also the no-nonsense community police, with the power to discipline and, as a measure of punishment, to confiscate the property of a community member who disobeyed the law. And Ékpè provided entertainment, with dances, music and body-mask performance, for members. Finally, Ékpè was a school for esoteric teachings regarding the human life as a cyclic process of regeneration, with the eventual reincarnation of that being.

Ékpè, in its literal translation, means ‘the leopard’, an animal conceived by traditional Africans throughout the forest belt to be a symbol of strength, tenacity, agility and vitality. These virtues were considered necessary for any well-organized society that aspired to order, peace and stability. But why the leopard of all animals? Used as a symbol of royalty and leadership in many parts of Africa, within the Cross River region the leopard has become the personification of the Ékpè society itself. Generally within African perceptions of the mysterious, the leopard is a ‘sacred’ animal that is active in the night when ordinary humans are dormant. The reverence accorded to the leopard seems justifiable to the native since it is corroborated by the fact that this animal is at the top of the food chain, devouring all others while remaining secure, stable and un-subdued (cf. Rosevear 1974: 441, 446).

Historians and anthropologists have speculated that the sources of the Ékpè society are from the Nigerian-Cameroon border area, inhabited largely by groups of peoples speaking Bantu-related languages such as Kéákà, Balondo, Éjághám, Badundu, Etung and so on (cf. Talbot 1912; Thompson 1983; Leib and Romano 1984; Nicklin 1991; Onor 1994; Tangban 1982, 2003). These communities were geographically contiguous, already clustered before the balkanization of the region by German, British and French administrations into the separate entities of present-day Nigeria and Cameroon. Before then, all was ‘the forest region’. Within these affiliated territories, Ékpè was a widespread form of governance used primarily to institute regional authority, as well as to ensure justice, peace and commerce in communities where centralized kingdoms were rare.

Ékpè symbolism: the body-mask

The Ékpè institution is represented in public displays as a body-mask, accompanied by a group of singers, drummers and a spectrum of activities by other actors. For example, in the region of Ikom-urban and Etung, jesters and demonstrators of Nsìbidì signs often accompany the procession to enhance the performance.

Ékpè body-masks perform two functions: one to ensure anonymity and the other as a symbol of power, of its unchallengeability. The aspect of anonymity is considered sacred. Because the justice meted out can be harsh, the identity of the mask carrier must be concealed to avoid recriminations by those affected.

Another role of the body-mask is signified by the bell carried on its waist to announce its presence, a symbol of the openness of Ékpè authority. The 'leopard' society does not operate surreptitiously, but in the open. The enduring principle is that, as a system of justice, Ékpè does not have to hide itself. No opposition to it is possible because decisions by the council of elders are final. Those who attempt to oppose Ékpè sanctions will be fined heavily, to the extent of losing their land in extreme cases, thus alienating them from the community. For example, in 1850 in Calabar, the Reverend Anderson inquired of the 'king' what would happen to anyone who broke an Ékpè law: 'He assured me that it is so strong a law that no man can break it. Wishing to know the penalty, I asked if Egbo [Ékpè] would kill him?'¹ The reply was, "He will chop him down to nothing"; that is, he will forfeit to Egbo [Ékpè] all that he possesses' (Marwick 1897, p. 237).

Ékpè and gender

Ékpè did not represent a small faction of people, but the community itself acting as adjudicator, since its decisions affected the entire community (Toyo 2011). Nevertheless, Ékpè was a male-dominated dance group and social institution. An Ékpè chief preferred to initiate his first son, or any of his sons, into Ékpè, as a status symbol to complement his position in society. In the lower Cross River region – particularly among the Èfik, Èfùùt, Eket, Ìbìbìò, Qua-Éjaghám and Úrúán – women were completely excluded from participation. An Ékpè chieftain, however, could be allowed to initiate any of his daughters into Ékpè society, but this initiation was usually honorary and cosmetic. In practice, this act granted them access to the Ékpè playground (i.e., the patio of an Ékpè lodge) and association with its members without fear of intimidation. Similarly, in the upper Cross River region of Ikom, Etung and Okuni, women were excluded, except for older women past menopause, who were allowed to participate in the entertainment activities inside the Ékpè temple.

In the northern Cross River region of Ogoja, Boki and Obanliku, women have greater participation inside the lodge itself, for example among the Balegete. Among the Upper Banyang and the Bangwa in Cameroon every Mfor Mbgè (lodge leader) designates one of his daughters to serve as the Manyang Arong (female member) who participates in the lodge to assist her father.²

There were also some intrinsic and symbolic aspects of Ékpè ceremony in the Calabar region that required the intervention of elderly women of high status in the society. For instance, the ceremony of the replacement of a deceased Paramount Ruler or ‘king’ with a new one was usually accompanied by the invocation of the ancestors by such a woman – ideally the oldest woman of the community who is an Ékpè initiate – without whom the rites cannot be completed (cf. Talbot 1915, p. 193). Ékpè tradition holds that, while the king is dead, esoterically his soul lives on and the next king must inherit that soul. To make that possible, a woman of high recognition in the society, sometimes with the right connection to the royal house, was required to perform a particular role in the obsequies. On the one hand, this is explained by reference to a mythological female founder of Ékpè, without whom the society would not exist. On the other hand, women past menopause and who no longer have sexual intercourse are considered to be spiritually potent.

Women too had their own associations that excluded men except in rare cases, in keeping with a generalized pattern of separate-but-parallel gendered spheres of social life. Among the Éjághám, the Ekpa society was prominent in defining the authority of women. In the early twentieth century, Talbot noted that ‘[t]he women’s society, Ekkpa...is the same as the one called “Oóm” at Big Kwa town...this society is thought so powerful as to take for women the place of the men’s Egbo [Ékpè]’ (1912, p. 225). The medicines used were thought to be ‘strong enough to kill a man, and can ward off sickness – especially small-pox– from family or town.’ Ekpa still functions as a cleansing ritual against diseases and anti-social behaviour in villages of the northern Cross River region.³ The potency of such women’s societies was general in the Cross River region, particularly the Nimm society of Éjághám peoples, the Ebere and Iban Isong of the Ìbibiòs and the Ndèm in Calabar (cf. Talbot 1915: 7, 189–91).

Community dispersals within Africa

Over the centuries, the Ékpè institution has spread throughout vast geographical and cultural terrains that are among the most diverse linguistically and ethnically in the world (cf. Ottenberg & Knudsen 1985; Röschenhaler 2011). In the face of such complexity, a shared institution like Ékpè functioned to integrate communities, as well as to consolidate relationships among peoples. These functions were significant in communities historically known to be autonomous principalities, stateless, without centralized governments, devoid of standing armies or a systematized judiciary. In this context, Ékpè society provided an authoritative framework to regulate social interaction above the level of the extended family group. Copious

evidence demonstrates that, in communities throughout the Cross River region, Ékpè sanctions historically regulated traditional institutions with clan and village councils (Talbot 1912; Onor 1994; Tangban 2008).

The Ékpè institution spread progressively beyond the Cross River basin into many other African societies. A case in point is its spread into the Batanga region of coastal southern Cameroon (near Gabon), as well as into Fontem and further into the Grassfields region of west Cameroon.⁴ According to anthropologist Fongot Kinni:

There was Ékpè influence among the Bamenda Fondoms derived from the Mamfe region. It is referred to by many names: the Bali Chamba call it Ngumba; the Nso call it Nwerong; the Kom and Bafut call it Kwifor Mintu, or “the Fon of the night”; in Bali Ngonga they sing the phrase: “Nyampe Nyampe” [which is consistent with the reference to an Ékpè grade called Nyàmkpè in the Cross River region]. (Kinni 2010)

The belief of many people in the Cross River region is that Ékpè – an institution originating from peoples speaking Bantu-related languages – must also have spread along with the eastward and southward movements of populations speaking so-called Bantu languages. Exploration of this issue requires more collaborative research work among scholars of African cultural history.

In the late nineteenth century, people with knowledge of Ékpè from both the Cross River region and from Cuba were transported to Malabo, Equatorial Guinea, as political exiles and plantation labourers. On this island, they gathered to institute a genre of Ékpè called Bonko, consistent with the name of an Ékpè grade called ‘Èbòngó’ or ‘Èbònkó’ found in both West Africa and Cuba where it still functions (Aranzadi 2009, 2010; Miller 2009).⁵

Between societies that absorbed the Ékpè culture and those that did not, the difference was striking, in that those who used Ékpè as a system of governance were noted to maintain cordial relations in contrast to the frequency of internal conflicts that characterizes societies lacking Ékpè authority and values.

In 1853 in Old Calabar, the Reverend Anderson witnessed the use of Ékpè to end a conflict between two principalities: ‘Heard Egbo’s [Ékpè’s] voice in town early this morning, and about seven o’clock saw Creek Town Egbo [Ékpè] coming down the river. A stop has been put to the war between the Henshaw and Archibong families, and both parties have been bound over to keep the peace. I hear that a fine was inflicted for yesterday’s contumacy’ (Marwick 1897, p. 277). That is, the mystic Voice of Ékpè was used to proclaim the end of the conflict,

then an Ékpè delegation was sent by canoe to confirm the peace through a meeting of leaders of both communities.

In contemporary Cross River State, the functions of Ékpè in Éjàghám-speaking regions exemplify its stabilizing effects, as conflicts and communal clashes among kinsmen are known to be minimal in communities maintaining the traditions of Ékpè. In contrast, conflicts are rife among communities without Ékpè, for example: Mbembe against the Nta; Mbembe against Abakiliki Ígbo-speaking groups; Ekajuk of Ogoja against Mbube; some areas of Boki against Mbube; the Obudu against the Tivs. These groups are all known to be in constant dispute, often over land rights.⁶ In Oron, Ékpè songs praise the authority of Ékpè leaders in settling inter-communal disputes with the knowledge that it was unchallengeable. The small drum carried throughout the village before the Ékpè masquerade appears is the symbolic harbinger of Ékpè authority; when it appears all activity stops, as in a call to order by the police in a modern court.

Because Ékpè is useful for defining an autonomous community as well as solving land-rights disputes, Ékpè lodges spread to some Íbìbìò and Banyang areas in the early 1900s (cf. Ruel 1969, p. 216).⁷ In Calabar, Henshaw town received Ékpè from Óbùtòng in the 1990s (Chief Archibong Eso 2011).⁸ The use of Ékpè sanctions in protecting land rights and resolving issues of forest exploitation was reported recently in Cameroon, where, '[i]n a number of cases, villages have closed their forest to loggers or conservationists using emblems of the *Male* or *Ékpè* cult associations' (Sharpe 2005, p. 167 fn).

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Cross River peoples with knowledge of Ékpè were transported through the infamous trans-Atlantic slave trade to the western hemisphere, where they re-created this institution in the 1800s in Havana, Cuba.

The diasporan experience through the slave trade

From the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, the development of trans-Atlantic trade and commerce resulted in the massive circulation of people and cultures between Africa, Europe and the Americas. The outcome of the trans-Atlantic trade was the massive forced migration of enslaved Africans, who carried their values and cultural traits to these new horizons. There they asserted on arrival at their different destinations, in order to consolidate their community identities and solidarity using traditional methods of recognizing authority. Their success was obviously dependent on the circumstances of their new environment.

Enslaved persons embarked from the Cape Coast, the Slave Coast (Lagos, Benin, Bonny, Calabar), the Cameroons and other African ports, each bringing with them the distinctive values and characteristics

of their original communities. Their hold on their original cultures sustained them in difficult times, despite the misconceptions of their captors and colonial administrators. Ékpè people were self-organized, and communicated in a language that was not understood by their masters; thus they were conceived of as threatening. Confronted with this fear that they were using Ékpè authority as a vehicle for instigating rebellion, their colonial masters denied Africans in diaspora the practice of their indigenous cultures and religions. The ties of unity, the struggle against alienation and having a voice in the community – the necessity of asserting self and community – were strong factors that encouraged the survival of Ékpè in the diaspora. Despite the fact that the white colonizers labelled it as an outgrowth of African cultism, witchcraft and even magic, Africans in Cuba were tenacious in assuring the continuity of Ékpè; they continued to consolidate themselves through mobilizing kin groups along with others with similar linguistic affiliations and cultural backgrounds from Africa.

This trend was prevalent throughout the Americas, particularly in Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Haiti, Trinidad and Venezuela, where the cultural practices of the Yorùbá, Hausa, Ígbo, Èfik and Éjàghám (Nigeria), Fanti, Ashanti, Ewe (Ghana), Balondo, Bakoko, Batanga, and Éjàghám (Cameroons) speaking peoples were distinctive and well pronounced.

The most outstanding example for Cross River peoples is the relationship with Cuba, where from the 1800s Ékpè was re-created with the influence of counterpart communities from the Cross River region. In its Cuban version, Ékpè is called Abakuá, after the Cross River term Àbàkpà, an Èfik term for the Qua-Éjàghám communities of Calabar.⁹ The similarity of Ékpè attributes in Cuba and West Africa is demonstrated by the prevalence of common values, languages, body-masks, functions and related activities by which Ékpè is identified (Ayorinde 2011). There is a common language used by initiates whose vocabulary and performance of incantations derives from an admixture of languages in areas associated with Ékpè – Balondo, Batanga, Éjàghám, Èfik, Ìbibìò, Arochuku Ígbos, as well as other source languages in Cameroon and Nigeria. All of these were factors in the reconstruction of Ékpè in Cuba (Cabrera 1988; Manfredi 2004; Miller 2009). But equally important is the mystical aspect of the leopard's voice and the use of signs and symbols (Nsibidi) in communication and teachings. Despite these similarities, some variations in Abakuá practices result from adaptations to the Cuban environment, while others reflect the diversity of Ékpè cultural displays originating in the Cross River region.

Research is reasserting the relevance of Abakuá practice as a hybrid of the collective aspirations of the different Ékpè communities in Africa that regrouped in the Caribbean to regenerate it. For example,

the Cubans use the title names of *Ìyámbà*, *Mosongo*, *Mokongo*, *Mbàkàrà*, *Èbònkó*, *Nasako*, *Mbókò*, *Morúa*, as well as lodge names like *Òbútòng*, *Èkórètònkó*, *Umon*, *Oban*, *Mutanga*, *Etongo* and so on, which are recurring themes of their African versions. *Èkpè* in Africa has continued to be the reference from which *Abakuá* derives its authority and by which it sustains its linkages to African sources.

Introspective values inside *Èkpè* and their universality

The *Èkpè* institution has certain inherent mores, values and decorum that are universally cognizable among its members, distinguishing them from non-initiates. Although other initiation clubs in the Cross River region – like *Òbòn*, *Àkàtà*, *Mfam* – also have cherished values, the esoteric nature of *Èkpè* emphasizes discretion and mutual respect. *Èkpè* teachings also insist on identifying attributes of status, personality, integrity, recognition and acceptance within the immediate community of a member and beyond.

Èkpè has an auxiliary language of its own that is expressed during displays and initiation ceremonies. The vocabularies are derived from an admixture of local languages whose codes have been altered so that they are unintelligible to non-initiates (cf. Miller 2000: 167, 2005: 27; Ruel 1969: 231, 245).

The rhythmic expressions of music, of songs, and the histrionic dance gestures during *Èkpè* displays carry with them both entertainment and admonitions against disorder that cumulatively embellish the performances. The song texts themselves carry coded messages (*Nsibidi*) that members are challenged to unravel; where members are ignorant of innuendos embedded in the performances, they may be subjected to fines that are realized in the form of cash, drinks, animals and consumables. By this process of regulation, members are challenged to sharpen their minds, be more attentive and committed to the values of *Èkpè* or else face the penalties.

These values are further extended through the hierarchical arrangement of the organization with gradations and positions of authority aimed towards the stability of society and the rule of law. The *Ìyámbà*, as the administrative head of an *Èkpè* community, is no exception to the rule. Many *Èkpè* songs reflect his revered position; even so, he himself is not exonerated from being faulted for wrongdoing, showing that, '*Èkpè* is no respecter of persons'.

Èkpè songs convey messages of the virtues expected of its members in different grades, as well as associated with their status, as in these songs for *Ìyámbà* in the *Èfik* language:

- *Èwòt èmà èmén èsók Ìyámbà*.¹⁰ 'After a hunt, you take the animal to *Ìyámbà*.' In the past, any 'sacred' animal – a leopard, manatee,

elephant – killed by a hunter must be brought to the highest leader of the land.

- *Ìyámbà édió! Ìyámbà édió! ikómké kóm Ékpè!*¹¹ 'Ìyámbà came into the hall! He does not even greet Ékpè!' The message is that even Ìyámbà must be fined for a transgression. The implication is that the concept of rule of law was operative within African communities before the process of colonization.
- *Ìyámbà ókpòòng itàm émén ésáng.*¹² Ìyámbà is criticized for not being well attired in that, while carrying a walking stick into the Ékpè hall, he did not wear his hat to complement the stick, which is a neglect insult to the gathering.
- *Àdiàhá Óbóng Ékpè óbung ésáng Nyàmkpè àyà ùwá yá.* 'The first daughter of an Ékpè chief breaks the walking staff of Nyàmkpè.'¹³ She has committed an abomination. Members of the royal family and those in the highest echelons of the society were expected to be exemplary in their behaviour, and train their first-born sons and daughters into Ékpè values.

Ékpè commensality and potlatch also provided a social safety net of redistribution whereby the wealthier members of a community would recycle wealth into the community through buying titles as well as providing occasions for entertainment (food, music and dance), amusements and community gatherings. The celebrations also provided an occasion for re-enacting the cultural values and social norms of the community.

Ékpè was the major instrument of dispensing justice acting through age-grade connections and community institutions, where membership afforded opportunities to rise to the higher echelons of the community, qualifying members to adjudicate in village and clan affairs.

The principles and philosophies of Ékpè practices and public displays were embedded in a perceived connectivity between the visible aspects of living things, which are empirical in nature, and the spiritual or the metaphysical. There was a continuity in which members of a community – through inheritances, myths of origin and ancestry – were linked to their forefathers, who had a responsibility to initiate them *ab initio*. Membership of Ékpè was a highly prized acquisition originally reserved for indigenes of the particular community. But, with the expansion of a monetized economy and the growth of a merchant class, non-indigenes of a community who acquired wealth were in some cases granted entry upon the payment of substantial fees. Wherever Ékpè spread in Africa, members bought titles to elevate themselves to positions of recognition. In many cases, wealthy and well-behaved 'slaves' (i.e., unrelated economic and juridical dependents) were absorbed into the families of their owners to the extent that they were treated as full-fledged members. This was more pronounced among male slaves who acquired wealth and power

through trading, to the extent that their masters could trust their children into marriage with them. At this point, a wealthy slave could either be admitted into Ékpè, where possibly he could buy his way into a position of authority, or through the daughter of his master, who is now his wife, be made to inherit a position in Ékpè. This was one way that a formerly enslaved person could change status. This trend was most visible among the Èfik, Èjàghám and Qua-Èjàghám communities of the lower Cross River region, where formerly enslaved males could take titles and positions of authority within Ékpè that effectively negated their slave backgrounds. They could hold high titles by purchase or by the benevolence of masters whom they had enriched. There are, however, key positions in the hierarchy of Ékpè such as Obong-Ìyám̀bà ('prime minister'), Ntui-Ribo or Obong-Nyám̀kpè ('father of Ékpè') and some others that are reserved exclusively for descendants of the founding fathers of that community.

The generous disposition to incorporate non-indigenes into Ékpè, coupled with its spread through social and trade interactions, enhanced the assimilation of other communities into the brotherhood of Ékpè. As such, Ékpè, though expressive of cultural aspects of specific communities, by and large allows an interface for cross-cultural relations and the transfer of values. Thus the possession of Ékpè can solidify an ethnic identity, while simultaneously consolidating cross-cultural identities among different ethnic communities, without discrimination on the basis of skin colour, tribe, race or religion. All members are inseparably one. Members who were accepted into this society were usually received and treated with respect by the brotherhood wherever they found themselves within other Ékpè communities.

Traditionalism versus modernism

Ékpè tradition has always been receptive to new ideas and elaborations. In the ancient past, Ékpè evolved gradually as it was adopted from community to community. From the late 1400s, as Asian and European cloth, feathers, bells and so on entered the coastal ports of West Africa, they were quickly incorporated into Ékpè practice.

In the 1840s in the port city of Old Calabar, Èfik kings invited Presbyterian missionaries into their communities, then used Ékpè as an instrument to coerce people to attend church. The objective was literacy for the children, in order that they could keep books and increase trading capabilities. For example, from 1849 to 1853 in Duke Town, Calabar, the first place of worship for Christians was the Ékpè house (town hall), and the Ékpè bell was used to call people to church on Sunday (cf. Marwick 1897, pp. 212, 281). Because Ékpè was recognized as a stabilizing force for community discipline and justice, the churches soon became a permanent facet of life in Calabar.

Today, confronted with new developments, *viz.* colonial laws, global communications, the internet and other such attributes of modernity, Ékpè continually adapts to new demands. The result of such transformations has in some respects impacted negatively on its ancient practices of collective decision-making, leading to the devaluation of some of its appurtenances. On the other hand, its positive impacts continue to be rewarding in terms of aggregating cultures, adjudicating land disputes, developing friendships across borders and encouraging cross-cultural interfaces.

Because the functions and philosophies of traditional institutions such as Ékpè are generally misconstrued, Ékpè is usually understood and appreciated only for its aesthetic value. Government agencies connected with the promotion of tourism around the world have tended to reduce it to superficial elements, using its displays as mere ornaments of folklore and tourism. This practice poses a challenge to enlightened leaders of traditional institutions, who are committed to developing literature that unveils some of its teachings in order to educate the general public. In Nigeria, for instance, there is a growing corpus of literature on traditional institutions and religions, notably Professor Wándé Abimbólá's *Ifá, An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus* (1976). Engineer Bassey E. Bassey's *Ékpè Èfik: A Theosophical Perspective* (2001 [1998]) clarifies issues against attacks on Ékpè from the church pulpits in Calabar; Dr Asuquo O. Anwana's *Ékpè Imperium in South-Eastern Nigeria, 1600–1900* (2009) treats the general disposition of Ékpè and its functionality. And, in the Caribbean, major works of Cross River cultural history have been compiled by Don Fernando Ortiz (1950, 1951, 1952–5) and Lydia Cabrera (1958, 1969, 1975, 1988). These various efforts are revitalized by the research of Dr Ivor Miller who has attempted to illuminate comparative themes between the culture of Abakuá in the Americas and the Ékpè of Africa. We hope that, as the literature on the subject expands, there will be a greater understanding and appreciation of this ancient institution and its use to humankind as a vehicle for community justice.

Reassertion of Ékpè values in the global perspective

The comparative analysis of Ékpè practices in Nigeria, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea and Cuba has demonstrated that all derive from common sources, with minor variations in response to influences and environment. Such diversities were usually accepted as a healthy development, as long as the basic teachings and judicial aspects were consistent. Truly, there is only one Ékpè, which fact negates the commonly ascribed nomenclatures such as 'Ékpè Èfik', 'Íkóm Ékpè', 'Balondo Ékpè', 'Èfúüt Ékpè', 'Cuban Abakuá' and so on, as many have attempted to establish such separations. This explains why a

member initiated in any lodge at any location is universally acknowledged and granted full honours accorded to his rank wherever Ékpè exists. This gesture accentuates Ékpè's value as an organ of promoting solidarities, peace and unity. As Professor Eskor Toyo (2011) has stated. 'Ékpè has a certain universality. Once you are an Ékpè man, they admit you as part of themselves. It doesn't matter which Ékpè community you are from. Ékpè is one.'

The immediate concern for the revitalization of Ékpè hinges upon a reassessment of its values of integrity and its utility as a traditional instrument of governance in contemporary circumstances. The basic tenets shared by Ékpè members anywhere in the world should be utilized to establish a common focus and a unity of purpose.

After a series of preliminary discussions, we propose an international meeting of Ékpè leaders and scholars, aimed at raising awareness of Ékpè values in the general public and among scholars, in order that people cease regarding it as an exotic or primitive institution that should be forgotten, because the truth, justice and integrity which it promotes are not primitive. We have identified the following goals for this meeting:

1. To provide an international forum for dialogue and education about communal values that obliterates racial and ethnic biases.
2. To create linkages between historically and ethnically related international communities.
3. To re-institutionalize Ékpè values within diverse communities.
4. To create a database for knowledge through literature, photography, audio-visual recordings and art forms of ancient cultures. This would aid in the preservation of the embodiments of African arts, aesthetics, traditional medicines and metaphysics.
5. To stimulate the consciousness of youths on the values of their historic communities with a view to instilling self-pride in community values and identities.
6. To authenticate the cultural history of neglected African communities through documentation and research work, including the translation and publication of Cuban works in Spanish on Ékpè history, particularly for the benefit of communities in West and Central Africa.
7. To foster international cooperation and peaceful coexistence through revitalizing the philosophies and practices of Ékpè.

Conclusions

From antiquity, Ékpè culture has had a significant impact on the lives of many West African communities where the institution existed. Because of its hermetic nature and the exclusivity of its deeper

meanings to Africans, much of this impact has remained invisible to outsiders, and thus is absent from the existing literature. The comparative structure of Ékpè (Abakuá) in Cuba highlights a need for further understanding of its essence and *raison d'être* in an international context. The point is further emphasized by the misunderstanding of Ékpè in Cuba where it has been demeaned and labelled negatively, perhaps because of the peculiarities of its African sources as well as the lack of comparative references in the Cuban literature for consolidating its existence. The tendency to criticize and even incarcerate its members is the outcome of platitudes and images created about the institution during the colonial period, as well as of the natural anxiety of any national state at the perceived autonomy of any social sub-grouping. However, the extensive documentation in Cuba is gradually illuminating the positive aspects drawn from Cross River history in Nigeria, Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea. The identification of similar themes and practices is leading to a better understanding of both Abakuá and Ékpè. The concern remains for the re-evaluation of Ékpè, first, as an important ancient practice and, second, as the repository of community values, wisdom and justice, which can still play an important role in repairing some of the anomic effects of modern economic and political individualism.

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Notes

1. British writers visiting the region referred to Ékpè as Egbo, confusing the Ékpó society of many Ibibiò communities with the Ékpè of other communities (Talbot 1969 [1926]. 3, p. 780, Goldie 1901 [1890] p. 30). Such confusion, like that between Kalabari of the Niger Delta and Old Calabar of the Cross River region, has been termed 'errorism' by Victor Manfredi (2004).
2. Miller learned about Ékpè in Balegete, Obanliku L.G.A., Nigeria, during a visit there in 2010 (thanks to Louis Nkonyu Aneshie of Okwa II, tour guide). He learned about the Manyang Arong of the Banyang in Manyu Division and the Bangwa of Fontem in December 2011 during Ékpè events in each place (thanks to 'Sisiku Mbe Tazi' of Fontem). Röschenthaler (2011, pp. 134, 139) referred to "Manyangalaw" (female title) for Ekpe in the Upper Balong region of Cameroon.

3. Miller interviewed Ekpa society leaders in Bashu Okpambe village of Boki L.G.A., Cross River State, Nigeria, in February 2012. Thanks to Louis Nkonyu Aneshie for guidance.
4. Miller learned about this issue in Batanga communities of south-western Cameroon in February 2011. Some Batanga groups reportedly left this region in the nineteenth century, to migrate with their Ékpè practice into southern Cameroon. Ékpè was brought into Fontem in the 1920s by Fontem Asonganyi, as purchased from Banyang communities ('Mbe Tazi' 2011).
5. The Éjághám speakers call the grade 'Èbòngó', while Èfik speakers call it 'Èbònkó'. Both terms are also used in Cuba.
6. The prevalence of these land disputes has been observed by Ntufam (Dr) Mathew Ojong to characterize most non-Ékpè areas in the upper Cross River region.
7. There is confusion on this issue both in the literature and in the oral tradition, because a village that has the basics of Ékpè can continue to acquire additional grades later. Chief Udoifo (2010 pers. com.) of Ikot Mbuk Idoro Village, in Ibiono-Ibom L.G.A. reported to Miller during his visit there that his village received Ékpè in 1908. The date of 1908 was confirmed for this village by the Paramount Ruler of Ibiono-Ibom (Inyang 2011). There are some 230 villages in the Ibiono clan and only some have Ékpè.
8. The purchase of Ékpè by Henshaw Town resolved an issue of autonomy that had been pending since a conflict between Duke Town (Atakpa) and Henshaw Town (Ansa) in 1875 (cf. Marwick 1897, pp. 534–537).
9. The term Àbàkpà is also used to refer to migrant communities of Hausa in Nigeria and the Cameroons, but the use of the term in this essay is related to the Quas, who have strong Ékpè traditions, in distinction to the Hausas.
10. Audio-recording by Ivor Miller of Chief Ékpènyong Ékpènyong Ekpo, in Akamkpa Okoyong. Thanks to Professor Margaret Okon (Department of Linguistics, University of Calabar) for providing tone markers for these songs' phrases.
11. Audio-recording by Ivor Miller of Ekpo Ekeng, in Calabar, as well as of Inameti Edet, in Calabar.
12. Audio-recording by Ivor Miller of Chief Ékpènyong Ékpènyong Ekpo, in Akampa Okoyong.
13. Audio-recording by Ivor Miller of Ekpo Ekeng, in Calabar, as well as of Etubom B. E. Bassey, in Calabar.

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IVOR MILLER is a Senior Fellow (2011–12) at the National Museum of African Art, Washington D.C. He was a Fulbright Scholar to Nigeria (2009–11) based in the Department of History, University of Calabar. He is also a Research Fellow in the African Studies Center, Boston University.

ADDRESS: African Studies Center, School of Social Work (SSW), 232 Bay State Rd, Boston, MA, USA.

Email: imiller@bu.edu

MATHEW OJONG is a Senior Research Fellow and Coordinator of Graduate Programs in the Institute of Policy Studies and Administration at the University of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria. He holds the highest Èkpè title of Ntúfàm Ìyámbà among the Èjaghám-speaking people of the Upper Cross River region in Nigeria and extending into Cameroon.

ADDRESS: Institute of Policy Studies and Administration, University of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria. Mobile phone number: +234-8030-978716.