Aponte's Legacy in Cuban Popular Culture

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"Am I the head of Aponte hanging from the Chávez bridge?"

-Rogelio Martínez Fúrel (Cimarrón 12)

Aponte's "conspiracy" was a watershed moment in the evolution of cubanidad,—such is the forthright view of poet and scholar Rogelio Martínez Fúrel, referring to the impact of anticolonial struggles on modern Cuban national consciousness. In 1812, Spanish authorities publicly displayed Aponte's severed head to terrorize a restive populace into submission; they also erased evidence of Aponte's activism, including the documents he created to inform his community about liberation struggles of earlier times and places. Fernando Ortiz cited similar violent executions by Spanish authorities to remind that, "This was the exemplary punishment, of death and infamy, imposed by the authorities of the Indies on those who rebelled against the order of Imperial Spain." Like other histories of resistance to European occupation across the Western Hemisphere, the complex reality of the Aponte phenomenon in Cuba is neither fully remembered nor totally forgotten, dropped from official archives but upheld in popular culture. Here I address the role of non-state archives, both written and retold by Aponte's inheritors: members of African-descended ritual lineages as well as literate artisans residing in the port regions of Havana and Matanzas.

Current legends of Aponte's movement claim that it was organized in parallel among Africans, creoles and foreign nationals, it adopted West African cultural forms like a ritual oath of secrecy and that it compiled a library of books and manuscripts on earlier liberation struggles and that Aponte himself headed a Lukumf cabildo. In evaluating these reports, historians are frustrated by gaps in the official archives, but the status of documented "truth" is less important than the impact of Aponte's myth. Reflecting upon the persistence of the legend of Robin Hood even though the underlying events and personalities can no longer be witnessed to the birth of the society, and the original source of its drums. The sun's rays, a universal sign of "hope," also signify sonic waves of the "mystic Voice" in Abakú ceremonies.

Slippery Symbols

Large gaps in the official archives and academic histories of the Aponte episode are filled with private archives created by anonymous Cubans to maintain and disseminate collective memory. Not focused on chronology, these narratives instead invoke ritual lineages described as Carabali-Abakú, Lukumf-Yorùbá, Kongo, and so on. These sources—elucidated with their West African context—reflect the insurrectionary network of Aponte and his colleagues, epitomized by the multi-ethnic Abakú mutual-aid society that operated below the colonial radar in the early 1800s.

One prominent example is a mythic scene of Abakú's origin in West Africa, where the sun rises over a landscape divided by a river, both sides inhabited by a distinct ethnic community (see fig. 1). Based on an original drawing by "an African" in Havana and published by Roche in 1925, variations of this image are often reproduced by Abakú members in their homes and lodges. Roche reported that an eighty-six-year-old "native" drew it to depict the foundation of Abakú in Calabar; he also included brief explanations of the symbols (La policía y sus misterios 99-101; Miller, Voice of the Leopard 48). Structural similarities are often pointed out between this image and the official seal of Cuba, supporting claims for the impact of Carabali people and Abakú solidarity in Cuban nationalism, and providing concrete evidence for an autonomous, popular historiography.

The Cuban national seal was created in 1849 as a collage of symbols (fig. 2). A Royal Palm tree grows between two mountains; the sun is reflected over a calm sea with land on either side. The tree represents the island's indigenous inhabitants, since its materials were used to build their dwellings. In Lukumf and Kongo traditions, the Royal Palm is a natural lightning rod representing the deities as Changó and Siete Rayos respectively. Cabrera wrote, "[El] Cuba Changó es [is born in the palm tree]" (El monte 73). In Abakú mythology, the palm was a sentient witness to the birth of the society, and the original source of its drums. The sun's rays, a universal sign of "hope," also signify sonic waves of the "mystic Voice" in Abakú ceremonies. The water between two lands may be the Bay of Havana, but for the Abakú it also represents the river dividing the E'fí and E'fó ethnic communities of Calabar.
In the Abakuá scene (fig. 1), the river is a “gandó,” a symbol drawn to show movement from one place to another, in this case the energy from the ancestors below the water igniting the sun as metaphor for the mystic Voice heard in initiation rites. Similarly for Abakuá, the laurel of leaves around the seal evokes the leaves held by an Ireme mask to ritually purify the dance space and participants.

Resonance between the myth of Abakuá’s birth in Africa and founding symbols of the Cuban nation show a slippage between official State history and alternative versions maintained within African-derived initiation systems, part of “the Caribbean’s ‘other’ history” celebrated by Cuban writer Benítez-Rojo “written starting from the palenque and the maroon” (The Repeating Island 254). The connection finds support in documentary evidence: an 1839 police report identified a black militia member who had participated in Aponte’s movement as a founding member of an Abakuá lodge, while other police files link Aponte’s associates and Abakuá founders to the same social sectors: Freemasons, black and mulatto militiamen, cabildo members, free black artisans, and slaves.

Incomplete Archives

State authorities create their own versions of important events by restricting or purging contrary information from official files. Examples include distinct versions of The Holy Bible: Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, not to mention unauthorized compilations including chapters deemed apocryphal. To take a more homely example from the southern United States in the mid-1800s, African-Americans taught distilling to their white owners who used this knowledge to become wealthy distillers of whiskey. One historian observed, “Though their owners tended to value their slaves’ distilling prowess, they rarely documented how the slaves made such fine spirits” (Risen 16). Such top-down erasures also challenge historians of Aponte’s era, as James Sweet has remarked:

While Brazil and St. Domingue along with Jamaica, Cuba, and parts of the US South might be more accurately understood as African societies in the years leading up to 1820, we are still left with the formidable challenge of how to demonstrate processes of intra African acculturation and exchange, especially given the consistent erasure of Africans from the European colonial archives. (154)

Official archives are manipulated, yet alternative versions can be sought. For at least a few generations after a particular event, oral tradition remains a viable witness. Academic historians implicitly trust written sources and treat oral ones with suspicion, whereas both types need to be independently verified. Neither oral nor written data are immune to romantic and manipulative inventions of a convenient past, but these can be vetted by philological comparison (known in humanistic studies as textual criticism, and then applied by Darwin as phylogeny) to sort out archaisms from innovations. Unconscious facts are more probative for historical purposes than facts that are accessible to conscious manipulation, as

Franz Boas recognized:

It would seem that the essential difference between linguistic phenomena and other ethno-medicinal phenomena is, that linguistic classifications never rise into consciousness, while in other ethno-medicinal phenomena, although the same unconscious origin prevails, these often rise into consciousness, and thus give rise to secondary reasoning and to reinterpretations. (67)

Such reinterpretations, “generally obscure the real history of the development of ideas” (71). As a statistical matter, the stronger the historical “signal” transmitted through the widest range of independent variants, the more likely that it actually occurred.

Critiquing José Luciano Franco

Since Aponte’s execution in 1812, the content of his papers has become a subject of great controversy, since they were “lost” after the trial. Authorities classified other information from his trial for over 150 years, until 1963, when Cuban historian José Luciano Franco (Havana, 1891-1989) wrote La conspiración de José Aponte de 1812. Franco’s publication, based upon research in the National Archives as well as conversations with illustrious descendants of Aponte’s movement, made several claims that have been questioned by later historians working predominantly in the archives. In one example, David Brown wrote:

José Luciano Franco reports that Aponte led the famous Lucumi “cabildo” called Changó-Tedum, was a member of the “Ogboni society,” and was a priest of Changó. It remains unclear how Franco arrived at such conclusions. (Brown 312 note 18)

After exhaustive archival research for a dissertation on Aponte’s movement, Matt Childs concluded:

If Aponte was a member of the cabildo Changó-Tedum or any other cabildo for that matter, it never entered the court record during his more than twenty hours of testimony. . . . Further, neither Aponte’s name nor the cabildo Changó-Tedum could be found among the cabildo records detailing more than fifty societies that operated at the time of the rebellion. . . . Nonetheless, this does not mean that Aponte had no knowledge of or associations with cabildos. (1812 Aponte Rebellion in Cuba, 144-45)

Cuban historian María del Carmen Barcia questioned Luciano’s findings for lack of archival documentation:

According to the prestigious historian José Luciano Franco, who must have received this information from oral sources, Aponte . . . was the captain of a cabildo, in this case of the Lucumi Changó-Terdum. This information has been repeated without greater analysis for forty years, and therefore merits revision. José Antonio was the grandson of Joaquín Aponte, captain of the soldiers of the Battalion of Free Mulattos of Havana, who was a creole and a master bricklayer . . . . His father, Nicolás, was a second generation creole, therefore he himself was a third generation creole. This circumstance evidently conspires against the thesis that he was the captain of a Havana cabildo, since although we have encountered creoles in these societies, their participation was illegal and often questioned, and they could not be elected for
positions as directors in these societies. If one understands that the election for these positions of responsibility were confirmed by the colonial authorities, for whom the cabildos were forms of sociability in which only Africans could compete and that were ruled by strict laws, it seems doubtful that Aponte could have been captain of a society of this type in the first decade of the nineteenth century. Much more believable would be his performance in religious functions that would have been hidden from the eyes of non-initiates. (164)13

How a historian could discount a potential act based on its illegality boggles the mind, since illegal acts pervade the history of the Americas! Nevertheless, Childs found evidence of a creole elected as leader of an African cabildo: in 1803 in Havana, creole Juan Echevarría, became second captain of the cabildo Karabali Induri ("The Defects of being a Black Creole" 109–10). Childs discovered other such examples, indicating the existence of creole leaders of cabildos who were not documented in the courts because their status went unchallenged (Childs, Personal interview). That the bulk of evidence found solely in the official archives does not support some details of Franco’s findings is not surprising. What alternatives then exist for evaluating Franco’s claims?

One could start with the career of Franco, a Cuban creole from a humble background who, after working as a teenage tobacco roller and a dockworker, was trained in historical method by Emilio Roig de Leuchsenring, the official Historian of the City of Havana, and by Joaquín Llaverías, the Director of the National Archive. From the 1930s steadily onwards, Franco published important works based on archival research as well as oral tradition within African-descended communities. From the 1950s onwards, he published foundational texts on the African slave trade, slave rebellions, and a three-volume biography of General Antonio Maceo of the Mambí rebel army. In 1937, when Ortiz created the Society for Afro-Cuban Studies, Franco and Lino D’ou were among six "Vocales" or Advisory Members (Estudios Afro cubanos 9).

Conversations with Lino D’ou were fundamental to Franco during research about Aponte’s conspiracy of 1812, and the Abakuá participation within it. Lino D’ou (1871–1939) was a writer, a member of the national House of Representatives (1909–12), a Freemason, as well as a member of the Abakuá lodge Bakoko El6. In the final War of Independence (1895–98), D’ou was the "jefe de despacho" of General José Maceo, holding the rank of Lieutenant Colonel of the Mambí army, making him the Abakuá member with the highest rank in the rebel army.16

Scholarly tradition of Franco’s era may explain the failure to cite oral sources. Although indexes are mandatory in English non-fiction publications, they are absent from many Spanish publications. Other twentieth century Cuban scholars of African-derived heritage also failed to cite their oral sources, with rare exceptions. While Ortiz has been taken to task for this habit, a review of publications by Lydia Cabrera and Argeliers León shows the same tendency. One possibility is that anonymous sources (in essence, unlettered community members) may have requested anonymity. In Cuba of this era, to be a culture-bearing “informant” divulging community secrets for publication was viewed negatively by orthodox community members; because these communities had experienced generations of police surveillance, “to inform” was to be “a rat,” as in Mafia parlance, or “a goat” in Abakuá speech. Whatever the case, Franco’s lack of citations is not in itself evidence that he invented a fictive account.

The cabildo Changó Tedún

The arrival of Africans into the mid-nineteenth century and their internal activities were necessarily undocumented and obscure, especially following the 1817 Anglo-Spanish agreement that prohibited the slave trade in Spanish colonies, just as Cuban planters increased the illegal trade (Aimes 171; Knight 78).

In a slave colony, any collective action led by Africans and their descendants was illegal, therefore all autonomous groups of Africans were illegal until authorities deemed otherwise. Consequently, the entire process of cultural transmission from Africa to the Caribbean through collective rites was illegal. Would a contemporary scholar seriously argue that it did not happen? Instead, the debate around Franco’s claims could be used to question the methods of professional historians who rely “fetischistically” on documents, while lacking rigorous methods of conducting oral histories with members of the communities they study. In another example from the former Soviet Union, the context of cold war Bulgaria is at least marginally reconstructible today. Yet a recent debate around the veracity of documents created by communist Bulgaria’s State Security demonstrates that even “the most important repository of the institutional memory of the former regime” cannot be taken at face value (Kenarov). If the contents of recent documents are unreliable, even more so those created by authorities in overseas posts of European colonial regimes during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Nevertheless, we literates seem predisposed to trust the printed word, resulting in the reigning naiveté about written sources by professional historians.

Regarding the absence of the cabildo Changó-Tedun in the Cuban cabildo records, African forced migrants created cabildo groups using indigenous names, but colonial authorities later registered them under Catholic names. Franco’s narrative used the internal Lukumí name for the cabildo in Aponte’s movement, while colonial authorities documented it as the Cabildo Lucumí Sociedad Santa Bárbara. Among fifteen documented Lukumí cabildos in colonial Havana, four were named Santa Bárbara, while one of these was located on San Nicolás Street, referred to by Ortiz as “[The temple of the old cabildo of Santa Bárbara or ‘Changó Tedún’ that was on San Nicolás Street]" (Los instrumentos 116). In 1820, this group was registered at #302 San Nicolás street as the “Cabildo Lucumí Sociedad Santa Bárbara. Sociedad de protección mutua y recreo del culto africano Lucumí” (Cabildo Lucumí Saint Barbara Society. Mutual aid and recreation of African Lukumí worship). (Barcla
Ivor Miller

414–17. A 1910 report of the same cabildo lists its members, many of whom were identified by their lineage descendants as Ifá diviners (babalawos) connected to the cabildo Changó Tedún. Supplemented by details from lineage descendants, the cabildo list provides a fuller picture of generational continuity and social networks between Ifá diviners, batá drummers and Abakuá lodges historically related to Changó Tedún, as follows.

In 1910 the “Cabildo Lucumi Sociedad Santa Bárbara” president was listed as Isidro Sandrina, known within Lukumí lineages as a babalúo.20 The cabildo Treasurer was Bernabé Menocal, also a babalúo, who was an advisor to Cuban President Gerardo Machado y Morales, who ruled from 1925–1933.21 Bernabé Menocal initiated Miguel Fébles (1910–1986), an Ifá specialist who initiated others in Colombia, Mexico, Panama, Puerto Rico, the United States, and Venezuela, thus guiding the global expansion of Cuban Ifá practice.22 During his foundational research into Lukumí lineages, David Brown learned that:

The African godfathers of Tata Gaitán and Bernabé Menocal were close colleagues of Adechina [Adésfna], and these two men continued those fundamental connections in their collaborative ritual work after Adechina’s death. (70)

West African-born babalúo Adésfna (d. 1905) was a link between Changó Tedún and an Abakuá lineage, as discussed ahead.

Among the “Vocales” or Advisory Members of the cabildo were Eulogio Rodríguez, Silvestre Erice, and Quintín García. Eulogio Rodríguez was a babalúo known popularly as “Tata Gaitán,” who seems to have initiated President Machado into Ifá.23 Silvestre Erice was “the famous Lucumi priest ‘Papá’ Silvestre Erice, considered the last Lukumí pontiff” (el último pontífice Lucumi) upon his death at more than eighty years of age, about 1915.24 Quintín García (d. 1921), a babalúo, was son of Atándá (1799–1876), an African-born sculptor who created batá drums, as documented by Ortiz:

In Cuba the “bata” sounded for the first time in a Lucumi “cabildo” called Alakisa, meaning “gravelly” [in essence, “rough” or “refus”] [in essence, “garbage”], on Egido Street in Havana... around 1830, the African “mild” Añafá came to an agreement with Atándá, who in Africa had been an “agbegue” or sculptor... Atándá also knew how to build drums, so the two friends constructed and consecrated a set of hourglass-shaped “bata” drums, “baptizing” them with the name Añafá, meaning “born from” or “son of Añá.” The first true set of sacred “bata” in Cuba was thus consecrated to Añá. (Los instrumentos 315–6).

Cabrera wrote that “the [cabildo] Changó Teddún, (Cabildo of Santa Bárbara)” was also known as “Arakisa,” as she learned from “Bangoché, José de Calazán Herrera, one of my most competent informants” (El monte 24–25 nota 1, 73).26 Oral tradition of the second half of the twentieth century therefore links Changó Tedún with batá drumming, as one would expect since the relation between Sàngó and batá emerged from Òyó-Ilé in present-day Nigeria. What’s interesting and innovative is that tradition also links Changó Tedún with the Carabalí-derived Abakuá society, because “Tata Gaitán” Quintín García, and many other babalawos were members.27 García held the Nkandemo title of the Abarakó Taiba lodge of Regla.28

Quintín García’s son Quintín Lecón “Tin” was a babalúo with important political connections.29 In the 1940s, he created an association of babalawos called “Sons of Saint Francis,” that was sponsored by Cuba’s President Carlos Prío Socarrás.30 Ortiz received an invitation from “the President of the Advisory Board and Treasurer of that association, the highly reputed babalúo Mr. Quintín Lecón y Lombillo,” to attend a ceremony for “the formal placing of the first stone of their meeting hall, temple and school, that they will raise in Regla with their own resources and the donation of $20,000 by the President of the Republic, Dr. Carlos Prío.”31 Ortiz wrote:

The ceremony, in which I participated on June 23, 1951, began with an ecclesiastical blessing in Latin by his Eminence the Cuban Cardinal Manuel Artime, Archbishop of Havana; after he left, the rites continued in Lukumí of the “rule of Oricha,” celebrated by three Cuban “babalawos” directed by their senior leader, the octogenarian “obé” Mr. J. Asunción Villalonga, who recited a “moyuba” to the ancestors and poured “omitutu” over the stone.32 To conclude, in the reverent general silence and without song or dance, three “chukuró” played the impressive mortuary rhythms of “Egun” on their sacred “sika” drums. (Los instrumentos 193–95).

This remarkable story suggests inter-generational continuity through initiation rites within a context of national political figures, a narrative necessarily submerged within ritual secrecy.33

An important factor in conducting oral history is the position of the interviewer in relation to knowledgeable interviewees: if perceived as part of the community, the information will likely be more detailed and accurate. But if the interviewer is perceived as part of a more powerful group historically antagonistic to the community being “investigated,” there will be obstacles and dead ends. The same Havana babalúo Quintín Lecón “Tin” refused to speak to scholar Ortiz for this reason:

“This refused to help Fernando Ortiz for over twenty years because of Ortiz’s early slandering of the Africans and their culture. Ortiz called the Africans thieves and savages with nothing worthwhile to contribute to Cuban culture. Even though Ortiz reversed his opinions as time went on, his first positions left Tin ever distrustful of his real motives.” (Mason 269, note 210)

Exemplary here is the work of John Mason, an African-American community historian, descended from a Cuban family, who is a leader within Lukumí lineages of New York City; for decades, he has traveled to Matanzas and Havana to learn from Lukumí elders. In 1986, Mason interviewed “Tin,” who he referred to as Euleoterio Quintín Lecón Lombillo (1917–1999).34 The elder babalúo told him:
The Society of Santa Bárbara was the oldest cabildo in Havana. The African name was Sângô Tê Dún. It was in the first decades of the 18th century that it really became organized. All the Yorùbá belonged there, Athândi, Adéshíni, Iśá Lóbi, and “Datu” Guízn all belonged there, yet there were also other Africans who were not Yorùbá, but they were all dealing with the oríṣá here in Cuba. Some were from Guinea; some were from the Kongo and Angola. They all tried to raise money so that they could help to liberate their brothers who were slaves. (152–4)

Mason’s success in learning from “Títu” is extraordinary, given his fame for not discussing Lukumí heritage with others, even within his own community. Mason’s persistence, as well as his position as a knowledgeable initiate with an international perspective on Lukumí indigenous history was crucial to this interview. If Mason learned that the autonomous group Changó Têdún was established in the 1700s from a descendant of this group, yet colonial documents report the foundation in 1820, the disparity indicates the existence of an undocumented underground society that survived under the radar. Such a phenomenon would not be unusual in Cuban history: during the last War of Independence, national hero José Martí wrote to a colleague: “En silencio ha tenido que ser” (“It had to be done in silence”), a strategy and a phrase known by all astute Cubans.

The submerged history of African-derived lineages within the social labyrinth of Havana was alluded to by Benítez-Rojo when he wrote:
The runaway slave’s impact on the big city is already being studied ... the extremely complex and difficult architecture of secret routes, trenches, traps, caves, breathing holes, and underground rivers that constitute the “rhizome” of the Caribbean psyche. (The Repeating Island 254–5).

Throughout my field research in Havana and Matanzas from 1992 onwards, several contemporary leaders of Ifá and Abakú spoke to me of the cabildo Changó Têdún with reverence, signaling the impact of the legend of this lineage through the 1960s. From Òyó, Nigeria, Professor Wândê Abimbóila interpreted Sângô têdún as “Sângô piled up edún, edún being the “thunder stones” he uses to punish wrong doers (Abimbóila, Personal interview). This cabildo name is an oríṣá “praise name” meaning that “Sângô has so many stones from punishing wrongdoers.” From the Òrìṣá Sângô’s origins in the old Òyó empire of West Africa, Sângô continues to be evoked as “deity of justice,” as he would have been in Aponte’s era.

Abakú-Lukumí Solidarity

The multi-ethnic collaboration that characterized Aponte’s movement is surprising to those following colonial myths about African “tribal conflicts” perpetuated in Cuba. For example, in his classic study of Cuban music, Alejo Carpentier reported the unfortunate idea that, “... the bloody clashes between Abakú lodges in the nineteenth century reflected intertribal rivalries back in Africa” (225). Colonial authorities encouraged Africans to create cabildos precisely to reify ethnic distinctions. In Cuba, people from diverse parts of the African continent created inclusive groups with flexible identities. Children documented a tendency to create cabildos under wide umbrella terms, then as the population of a single ethnic group increased, they would become independent to form a separate cabildo.39

Far from the myths of “tribal conflicts,” Havana’s official historian, Emilio Roig de Leuchsenring, used eye-witness reports from the 1800s to describe a “pan-African” moment during the January 6th Día de Reyes celebrations in Havana:

It seemed that all of Africa appeared in the streets of Havana: the Arará and the Carabalí, the Gangó and the Lukumí, the Mandingos and the Guizeos ... How many outbursts and displays of satisfaction upon the meeting of fathers and sons, husbands and wives, separated during the rest of the year! How many joyful reunions of “cabildos”[shipmates].40

For a short time, the “boasles” and “ladinos” [African-born and Spanish-speaking], the blacks of different African regions and countries mixed together as if all were family and constituted a single race. (“Recuerdos de antaño” 466)41

These tendencies for multi-ethnic solidarity were also reflected by Abakú specialists who recounted a history of Lukumí-Carabalí interaction bearing directly upon Aponte’s legacy. In the mid-1800s in Regla, the birthplace of Abakú in Cuba, a lodge called Abarako Taiba was founded. Normally, lodges of that era were sponsored by Carabalí cabildos or by an existing lodge, but in this case, contemporary lodge leaders claim that Abarako was created with the participation of Ifá diviners and Changó initiates, all members of the cabildo Changó Têdún.42 Supporting this idea, the patron saint of Abarako Taiba is San Francisco, a Catholic avatar of Orula, deity of divination and babalawos, according to associations made between Lukumí Orixás and Catholic saints in the colonial period.43 An Abakú specialist in Havana reported:

In the 1960s, Abakú elders said that thirteen babalawos founded Abarako Taiba, and that Adechina directed the rites. This makes sense, because lodges in the nineteenth century had thirteen titled leaders. Demetrio Vidal, who died in 1949, was the third Yamba of Abarako Taiba. His sons Amado and Francisco “Pancho” were also members of Abarako Taiba, and they spoke about this. (Abakú anónimo)44

Adésíni was an African-born babalawo (fig. 3). In the process of adaptation to Cuba, Ifá Odú (“chapters”) acknowledged parallel African traditions, so that the Odú called “Oturá Òfé” refers to Abakú titles.45 In another example, the Odú called “Oturá Adákol” (also “Oturá Òfún”) speaks of Ayelojín, daughter of Ochún (divinity of the rivers) whose story parallels that of Sikan, the mythic Calabar princess who founded Abakú. Multiple ties between Carabalí and Lukumí traditions were forged in the early 1800s through the multi-ethnic organizing of Aponte’s era, but not documented until the 1950s by Cabrera, who observed the tendency of Abakú initiates to be devotees of Changó.

Changó is a Lukumí (Yoruba) orisha, perhaps the most popular of the orishas in Cuba. Naturally, he plays no role in the Abakú society, but many Abakú are great devotees of Changó, or “sons” of Changó as well as of Akanaran (La lengua sagrada de los Nativos, 120).46...
"Akanán," an Abakuá term for “mother,” means here “an Abakuá lodge.” In the same period, Ortiz referred to "a Yoruba ‘bálala’, who is also ‘abakú’” (Los instrumentos 344).49 Other evidence for Carabalí-Lukumí solidarity was presented by Rogelio Martínez-Fure, who in the 1970s wrote about African descendants in Matanzas city:

My principal informant, Pedro Pablo Calle, reported that his grandfather Anselmo had ‘a room that ate’, and although he called them Ogun, he insisted that they were inherited from his ancestors (which may indicate the existence of a Yoruba-Carabalí syncretism from the 1800s). (Martínez-Fure, Diálogos imaginarios 170)48

Paralleling the story of the Abarakó Taiba lodge of Regla, Martínez-Fure also reported the creation of a cabildo using symbolic numbers. In Matanzas city, the cabildo iyésa modu San Juan Batista was founded on the 24th of June of 1845.

by fourteen babalúayos ... and seven osainistas (óloán). ... The number of founders, twenty-one people in total, corresponded to the “mark” or symbolic number of Ogun, god of metals, the forest, and blacksmithing, who together with Oshún ... goddess of the rivers and springs, would govern the new cabildo. (Martínez-Fure, Diálogos imaginarios 151)49

Martínez Furé states that this phenomenon, could serve as grounds for research about the foundation of other colonial cabildos. The fact that babalúayos and osainistas (óloán) were founders and that a symbolic number of the patron deity was employed, was a singular act not seen before in studies about other cabildos. (Diálogos imaginarios 151-2, notes)50

Members of different ethnic cabildos and lodges used common symbolic elements, specific numbers, colors, or myths of female founders, to self-organize in solidarity.

Abarakó lodge leaders report that African-born babalúayos Adésfna (c. 1816-1905)—one of the first Mokóngö title-holder of this lodge (fig. 3).51 When the Abarakó Taibá lodge marched in procession through Regla in the early twentieth century, they would stop to pay tribute at the home of Josefina Herrera “Pepa” (d. 1947), Adésfna’s daughter (Gómez, Personal interview). “Pepa” directed one of two Regla cabildos that led annual processions with bátá drumming on Yemaya’s day in September. A leader of báta culture, Trinidad Torregrosa, remembered meeting Ortiz through “Pepa” in Regla:

The musicians of that time, Pablo Roche, the famous Akiapkwa, known as the best bátá drummer, Aguedo Hinojosa, Jesús Pérez and I knew Ortiz through Josefina Herrera, Pepa or Echubú in Lukumí, an elder Santería priest in Regla. Echubú was the daughter of one of the first Lukumí in Cuba. He was known as Adechina in Ocha and he was a babalúayo. (36)

The “Yoruba-Carabalí syncretism” pondered by Martínez-Fure was evident in the activities of the Regla cabildo, where most of the bátá players—like the aforementioned Pablo Roche and Jesús Pérez—were also Abakuá members, and where the Abarakó lodge paid tribute. Because of their popularity, the Regla cabildo processions were described as “national events,” until their last performance in 1961.

These mutually supporting traditions were sustained by ritualized relationships that emerged from the early 1800s involving Carabalí-Lukumí ties within the cabildo Changó Tedún, the Abarakó Taibá lodge, and the Yemaya cabildo in the town of Regla.52 Ortiz documented the work of founding bátá drummers Atandá and Afiábí in the Yemaya cabildo founded by Adésfna:

Both No Filomeno García and No Juan and No Abarakó Taibá are also attributed as founders of a Lukumí cabildo in Regla, the Yemaya Cabildo, together with the great African babalúay Ojo Remigio [Herrera, aka Adechina (Adésfna)], father of the octogenarian and popular santera “Pepa,” or “Echubú,” who, although blind, crippled, and nearly invalid, continued as its director until her death [in 1947]. Afiábí and Atandá made and consecrated a second set of “bátás” for this Regla “cabildo,” naming it Atandá after one of them. (Los instrumentos 316)

Because Aponte’s Rebellion was based upon multi-ethnic solidarity, and because the cabildo Changó Tedún may have been present but undocumented in 1812, the unusual story of the foundation and the practices of the Abarakó Taibá lodge can be considered part of Aponte’s legacy in popular culture.

Obutong Lodge

The deeper one digs into Havana society of the early 1800s, the multi-ethnic nature of the city looms large, therefore Aponte’s movement would have necessarily organized across ethnicity. The formation of the Abakuá society provides a good example. In its West African homeland, the Ekpe “leopard” society was a multi-ethnic institution that linked diverse communities along trade routes by providing a common coded culture, jargon and protocol for communities speaking various languages. Reflecting this, the documented history of Cuba’s Ekpe variant, called Abakuá, shows multi-ethnic collaboration in the foundation of the first lodges, as Cabrera presented:

An elder Abakuá outlined the genealogy of Abakuá lodges—“powers,” “lands,” “parties” or “teams”—that emerged in the first third of the last [19th] century this way: “The foundation of Abakuá in Cuba, Appapa (Efi) authorized Efik Butún, who in turn authorized Efik Kondó, Efik Nuñamé, Efik Akamaró, Efik Kunkúnta, Efik Eguéjereu and Efik Enyéyínú; they also authorized Efik Isán, Efik Kondó, Efór Ooró, Efór Nukó, Efór Búma, Efór Aaraóon. These are the seven brothers or lineages of the two founding lodges, Efi and Efi. (El monte 196)53

From Efi and Efi cabildos emerged the first lodge for the creole offspring of Calabar migrants, as Cabrera reported:

The first lodge, Appapa Efi, was comprised of “creoles” [miembros de Cabo]... And it was established here as it was in Calabar: Efi (Efi) initiated the Efi. Efi could then call themselves Appapa Efik. (This was the first lodge born in Cuba, sponsored by the Efi in Regla, called Efik Butún Efí Aroró). (Cabrera, El monte 50)54
If Efik Butón, the first creole lodge emerged in the 1830s as is commonly reported, Carabali lodges were already functioning in Havana to establish it. Cabrera provides examples through Abakúa phrases she documented in La lengua sagrada de los Nachos:

1. Bongori Makambé Efik: A reference to the oldest tribe, Apapa Efik Eko, that initiated the others, recognized by Efik as the "the predecessor who gave Ekue to the rest of the Carabali." (123)³⁵
2. Chitubé akaran Efik Butón: Who is the Mother of Efik Butón? Efik Butón Anaméritontú. (135)³⁶
3. Efik Butón: Efik lodge, 'lineage' affiliated with Efik. The Efik Butón lodges were born in Cuba. The Efik were African and the Efik were creole. (145)

These narratives refer to early Carabali lodges existing in Cuba before the foundation of the first lodge for creoles in the 1830s. The undocumented underground activities of Calabali groups from the late 1700s onwards provide indirect evidence for Franco's claim of Abakúa presence in Aponte's rebellion.

Andrés Petit (1850s)

Responding to the brutality of Spanish colonists towards African-centered liberation movements like Aponte’s “conspiracy” (1812) and La Escalera (1844), the descendants of lineages involved in both movements increased multi-ethnic solidarity, represented clearly by what Ortiz called “the reformation of Petit” (Los instrumentos 70–71). In Havana in the late 1850s, Andrés Petit, the Isue of the Bakokó Efó lodge, began to organize the sons of society elites, who were phenotypically “white” men, to create the Akanarán Efó lodge. Andrés Petit was a free mulatto and lay member of the Catholic Church, as well as a founder of La Regla de Kimbisa, a practice fusing elements from Cuban-Kongo, Catholic, and Espiritismo traditions that he established in Havana as an early form of liberation theology (Miller, Voice of the Leopard 105).³⁷ Because Abakúa lodges were becoming popular in Havana and Matanzas, creoles of all backgrounds participating in an emerging national identity wanted to join them. Petit brought in the scions of elite Cuban families to defend the Abakúa from colonial attacks, as well as to purchase the liberty of enslaved brothers with their initiation fees. In the 1950s in Havana, Cuban journalist Manuel Cuellar-Vizcaino, a leader of the Afro-Cuban group Club Atenas, reported that, "the initiation of the white Abakúa had two aims: the liberty of slaves and the liberty of Cuba."³⁸ Supporting this idea, Cabrera wrote:

Petit consecrated the first lodge of white through patriotic zeal, because its founders were youth from good families, students, who had been accused of conspiring against Spain (La Regla Kimbisa 1)³⁹.

Petit’s legacy through the Akanarán Efó lodge and its extensive lineage led him to be called a “foerger of the Cuban nation” (Mosquera 256; Moliner 14–15). Because Petit’s strategic inclusion follows the logic of Aponte’s networking, it may be considered part of Aponte’s legacy in popular culture.

Abakúa Manuscripts

"Aponte taught us the necessity of having a library."
—Anonymous Abakúa, Personal interview.

If colonial authorities disappeared the books and self-created manuscripts Aponte used to teach his community about liberation struggles, they could not stop the tradition of “self-curated manuscripts” created within communities linked to Aponte’s movement. When and how this tradition began is unknown, since it was under the radar in a colony that censored the press and used martial law to keep workers and slaves ignorant. There is evidence that by the 1860s, manuscripts were created within the Abakúa lineage established by Andrés Petit to document the knowledge of African culture bearers as well as their contributions to Cuban social history. Created and curated exclusively within initiation lineages, these books promote Cuban “Carabali” heritage by illustrating the ritual knowledge of African-born leaders both in Africa and in Cuba. Because they promote awareness of the cultural victories of African leadership, they may be considered part of Aponte’s legacy.

An Abakúa manuscript in a private archive, dated from 1877, has survived by being repeatedly copied by generations of owners. A page therein documents that Plácido (1809–1844), considered one of the first African descended poet of Cuba, was an Abakúa member. The manuscript owner reported that Andrés Petit, the Isue of Bakokó Efó in Havana, initiated Plácido in 1839–40 (Miller, “The Relationship” 191). This of course is unofficial history; most Cubans know that by 1844, Diego Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés known as “Plácido,” was implicated in La Escalera Conspiracy and executed by colonial authorities. A recent study reports: “The historiography of La Escalera has long made Plácido, the renowned mulatto poet, synonymous with the leadership of the 1844 movement” (Finch 19). The Abakúa manuscript that documented Plácido’s Abakúa membership may be considered part of Aponte’s legacy, because Aponte created manuscripts to educate his community.

Another Abakúa manuscript contains a “map of Orú territory” documenting the diverse composition of a third Abakúa lineage called Orú, that includes the ethnic designations of Barondo, Efi, Efó, Ekonó, Ibibio, Isuana, Usagari and more into a single group (fig. 4). This map illustrates a “mythic geography” supported by Abakúa phrases describing the multi-ethnic foundation of the society in West Africa. Such diversity was characteristic of Carabali cabildos since their creation in Havana in the early 1700s, the earliest on record being the cabildo Carabali Isique, documented in Havana in 1717 (Barcia 395).

The “map of Orú territory” is especially interesting because police records implicate this lineage in connection to Aponte’s movement and its aftermath. In 1839 in Havana, a police raid discovered members of the Loyal Black Battalions,
of Freemason-like societies, and of Abakúa lodges in the process of organizing an Abakúa lodge called Orá Apapa (Deschamps, “Margarito Blanco”). Among them were participants in Aponte’s Rebellion of 1812. Abakúa signatures confiscated in the 1839 police raid show common elements with Abakúa signs used in the twentieth century, as well as with West African Ndibidi signs from lodges in Calabar and its hinterlands. Franco reproduced “a conventional sign used as a signature by the Abakúa,” found by colonial authorities among the papers of Aponte’s colleague Clemente Chacón (“La conspiración” 179). Franco’s report indicates that in Havana, either West African Ekpè was operating in Carabali cabildos by 1812, or Abakúa lodges for creoles had been established decades before the generally accepted date of 1836 (Corcova and Bolivar 244). Supporting this, in 1824 in the barrio of Jesús María, authorities apprehended two groups of Black Curros—that is, Spanish-descended blacks—who were using Carabali styled masks in a group called Orú Pápa, whose director was a member of Havana’s Black Battalion (Deschamps, “Los negros curros” 38, 40; Miller, Voice of the Leopard 80). Deschamps wrote:

The name of the group or cabildo Orú Pápa is of a Carabali origin and its foundation in the year 1824, with all the characteristics that we have outlined, alters in our judgment, the date that we have for the foundation of the Abakúa (“Los negros curros” 40).

Deschamp’s findings challenge us to rethink Abakúa’s foundation. Either the five documented Carabali cabildos in 1755 in Havana would have included Ekpè members from West Africa who created the signs found among the papers of Aponte’s Rebellion. Or, by 1812, Abakúa lodges for creoles were already operating. Given the decades of repression that followed the execution of Aponte and his colleagues, these Abakúa lodges were forced underground until the 1830s, when it was safer to declare them as “operational.”

Notes
1 Dedicated to Carlos Gómez, babalawo, as well as Jíánhà of Abakúa Talibó in Havana (íbáyé), and to Eubom Bassey Erkpo Bassey, Jíánhà of Efe Êkpè Eyo Ema, Ebokotokon community, in Calabar (íbáyé). For help during research in Cuba, special thanks to Fernando Arias-Pérez (Nasak6 of Obanye Sese Kondo); Reinaldo Brito del Valle (Obonekue “facultado” of Uriab6n Em; Andres Chac6n-Franquiz “Pogolotti” (1933-2001, Abas6ngo of Ekoriatan Oru); Jose de la Fuente, Ruben Gonzalez. Hernández-Santana “Abebe OshUn,” (1947-2012); Rogelio Martinez-Fure; Ernesto Soto (Isunekue Babalawo, Or6 Papa is of a Carabali origin and its foundation by 1812, or Abakúa lodges for creoles had been established decades before the generally accepted date of 1836 (Corcova and Bolivar 244). Supporting this, in 1824 in the barrio of Jesús María, authorities apprehended two groups of Black Curros—that is, Spanish-descended blacks—who were using Carabali styled masks in a group called Oró Pápa, whose director was a member of Havana’s Black Battalion (Deschamps, “Los negros curros” 38, 40; Miller, Voice of the Leopard 80). Deschamps wrote:

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como capataz de un cabildo habanero, pues aunque hemos encontrado criollos en estas sociedades su participación era ilegal y bastante cuestionada y no podían ser elegidos para los cargos de dirección en estas sociedades. Si se tiene en cuenta que la elección para estas responsabilidades era conferida por las autoridades coloniales, para las cuales los criollos eran formas de sociedades que sólo competían a los africanos y se regían por leyes estrictas, resulta poco verosímil que Aponge hubiese podido ser capataz de una sociedad de este tipo en la primera década del siglo XIX, mucho más creíble es su desempeño en funciones religiosas que debían permanecer occultas a los ojos de los no iniciados" (Barcia 164).

16 See Franco, "La conspiración" 186. See also Cabrera-Peña (35) and Helg (150).

17 See De la Fuente (38).

18 Moore, Davis and Witmer, Marcuzzi, and Villepastour have all questioned Ortiz's tendency not to

19 Barcia (414-17) lista quince Lucumi Cabildos del siglo XIX en La Habana, entre ellos cuatro con

20 "Sandrina lived in the barrio de la Timba in Vedado; her Ifa sign was Otura Oguna. Miguel Fabels often mentioned him to me. He was the Ifa padrino of the mother of one of my Ifa godchildren." (Cabrera-Suárez, Personal interview). "Sandrina vivió en el barrio de la Timba en Vedado. Miguel Fabels me hablaba de él; su signo de Ifa era Otura Oguna. Era el padrino de Ifa de uno de mis ahijados de Ifa" (Cabrera-Suárez, Personal interview).

21 "Bernabe Menocal was probably initiated ... in the 1870s," and died around 1927 (Brown 323, note 66). Bernabe's Ifa sign was "Baba Eyobe" (Cabrera-Suárez, Personal interview). "Sandrina vivió en el barrio de la Timba in Vedado. Miguel Fabels me hablaba de él; su signo de Ifa era Otura Oguna. Era el padrino de Ifa de uno de mis ahijados de Ifa" (Cabrera-Suárez, Personal interview).

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23 Brown (88-92); Cabrera-Suárez, Personal interview.

24 "Eulogio Rodríguez (Tata Gaitán)" (Brown 69). "Some babalawos ... distanced themselves from Tata Gaitán, because they believed he had initiated Cuba's brutal dictator, Gerardo Machado, into Ifá" (Brown 290).

25 "Tata Gaitán was probably initiated ... in the early 1880s." (Brown 323, note 60). "Tata Gaitán—

26 "Bangoche, José de Calasán Herrera, uno de mis más competentes informantes". (Cabrera, Los instrumentos, vol. 2, pp. 116).

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event with the caption: "Cuban president Carlos Prio Socarrás presenting reported forty-thousand-peso check to Quintín Lecón Lombillo (Otra Pura Adakino), founder of the Asociación Los Hijos de San Francisco de Asís" (Brown 85). Brown did not cite Ortiz’s Los instrumentos references to this event, thus the discrepancy in the amount of the donation.

23 "Asunción Villalonga, the son of the Yoruba Francisco Villalonga Ifa Bi, was born about 1858 and was initiated into Ifa about 1878" (Brown 32, note 66). "Asunción Villalonga (1853)" (Brown 82).

24 Mason (152–54) published two death dates for Quintín Lecon: 1991 and 1999, and confirmed for the author that 1999 was correct (Mason, Personal interview).

25 The author visited Quintín Lecón’s home in San Miguel de Padrón in 1995 with babaláwos Frank Cabrera-Suárez in an attempt to learn details of the history of Cuban Ifá. Quintín greeted us, but he was not interested in speaking about his cultural heritage.

26 "En silencio ha tenido que ser, y como indirectamente, porque hay cosas que para logradas han de andar ocultas, y de proclamarse en lo que son, levantan dificultades demasiado reacias g alcanzar sobre ellas el fin" (Carta de José Martí a Manuel Mercado, Campamento de Dos Ríos, 18 de mayo de 1895).

27 "En cuanto a los coches sangrientos registrados entre ‘potencias’ fátagas en el siglo XIX, Vivó sostiene que eran reflejo de viejas luchas intertribales del África" (Carpentier 225).

28 "Spanish authorities sought to separate the African and Cuban-born populations and, therefore, discouraged Creole participation in ‘cabildos’. In the same vein of preventing a broad racial identity, government officials encouraged the formation of ‘cabildos’ because they emphasized distinct African ethnicities. Despite official discouragement and even limited political rights, some Creoles joined cabildos and continued to identify with the nation of their parents and ancestors" (Childs, Aponte Rebellion 99).

29 "In the 1780s a dispute surfaced with the Lucumí cabildo between the diverse ethnicities that claimed membership. . . . One member recalled that ‘the cabildo was erected by the Lucumí nations, specifically the Nangas and the Barbas” (Childs, Aponte Rebellion 216).

30 "El África entera parecía verse en las calles de la Habana: los arará y los macahull, los gangó y los lucumi, los mungando y los guinos. . . . ¡Cuántas efusiones y muestras de satisfacción al encontrarse padres e hijos, esposes y esposos, separados durante el resto del año! ¿Cuántos transportes de alegría al reunirse de nuevo los caballos! Durante unos momentos se mezclaban rumberos y ladinos, negros de las distintas regiones y corazas del África, como si todos fuesen hermanos y formasen una sola raza" (Roig de Leuchsenring, Recuerdos de antaño 466).

31 "Efi Abarako Taiba" (Ortiz, Los instrumentos 29). This lodge is also known as Abarako Nkantóbia.

32 Publicly, lodge leaders claim Abarako Taiba was founded in 1864 by Efi Abarako Eta (“first”), but internally, the story is that Abarako Taiba had Lukumí founders, and was later recognized by Efi Abarako Eta (Gómez, Personal interview).

33 "Orola (Orimbila, Orimbilla), dios de la adivinación"; "Orola (San Francisco de Asís)" (Martínez-Furé, Díalogos imaginarios 153; 156). Information about San Francisco and Abarako from Anonymous Abarako (Personal interview). An Abarako elder whose grandfather was the Mokongó of Abarako Taiba, reported, “Los Hijos de San Francisco de Asís era una sociedad de babalawos que fueron los fundadores de Abarako Taiba (con 13 babalawos)” (Miller, "Encuentro con Reinaldo Britto" 3).


45 As taught by Miguel Febles to his apprentice Frank Cabrera-Suárez “Obehe”. This process is called ‘intra African acculturation and exchange’ by Sweet (154) and as ‘horizontal integration’ by Miller (“Pathways to peace”).

46 “Chargó es un orisha ‘lucumi’ (Yoruba), quizás en Cuba el más popular de los orishas. Naturalmente, no juega ningún papel en el culto Abakú, pero muchos fátagos son grandes devotos de Changó, ‘hijos’ suyos a la par que de Akanarán” (Cabrera, La sociedad secreta 120).

47 "un ‘babalawo' yoruba, quien además es ‘abakú'" (Ortiz, Los instrumentos 344).

48 “[MI] informante principal, Pedro Pablo Calle, sostiene que su abuelo Anselmo tenía ‘hiernos que comían’, y aunque él los llama ‘Ogun’ insisten en que eran heredados de sus antepasados (lo que pudiera indicar la existencia de un sincretismo yoruba-carabalí desde el siglo XIX)” (Martínez-Furé, Díalogos imaginarios 170).

49 “El cabildo iyesa modu San Juan Batista . . . fue fundado el 24 de junio de 1845 en la ciudad de Matanzas por catorce babalawos . . . y siete osainistas (osósan). . . . El número de los fundadores, veintitrés personas en total, correspondía a la marca o número simbólico de Ogun” (Martínez-Furé, Díalogos imaginarios 151).

50 "Es interesante este dato, ya que puede servir de pista en las investigaciones sobre la fundación de otros cabildos coloniales. Que sean babalawos y osainistas (osósan) sus fundadores y que emplearan el número simbólico del dios que sería patrono es un hecho singular que no hemos visto consignado en los estudios realizados sobre otros cabildos" (Martínez-Furé, Díalogos imaginarios 151-2; note 23).

51 "El tercer ‘cabildo’ fue fundado en 1845 en la ciudad de Matanzas por catorce babalawos y siete osainistas (osósan) sus fundadores y que emplearan el número simbólico de Ogun” (Martínez-Furé, Díalogos imaginarios 151-2; note 23).

52 Ortiz noted a distinctive feature of the Abarako lodge, signaling its unique traditions: “We have added that in its rites. This seems to be the only lodge to do so today” (Ortiz Los instrumentos 260). Cabrera also referred to this double ekón (La lengua sagrada 166).


54 "La primera Potencia, toda de etereán (nota: ‘De Africanos nativos del Calabar’) era Apapa Efor. Y aquí se hizo como allá en el Calabar. Efin, (efín) le dio el ser a Efi. A Efi, que entonces pudo llamarle Apapa Efor. (Efin es el mismo Efín ‘Abakú’ suyo, el primer juego que nació en Cuba, apadrinado por los ‘Efi’, en Regla) (Cabrera, La sociedad secreta 50).

55 “Bongó Ofi akamambamba Efi. Akamambamba derives from ‘okambo’, meaning ‘old.’”

56 “‘Akanarán ‘mother’. Anameruton was the lodge of Africans that founded the lodge Efi Búnún in Havana in the 1800s” (Anonymous Abarako, Personal interview).

57 Petit founded La Regla Kimbisa del Santo Cristo del Buen Viaje, cf. Cabrera (La Regla Kimbisa), see also Bóivar and González (50).
“La iniciación de fÁtigos blancos tuvo dos fines: la libertad de esclavos y la libertad de Cuba.” (Télès 2).

“Permiso consagré el primer juego de blancos por fervor patriótico porque los fundadores de éste, eran jóvenes de buenas familias, estudiantes, que habían sido acusados de conspirar contra España” (Cabrera, La Regla Kimbisa 1).

Contemporary lodge leaders told the author that the Orú Apapa lodge was founded in 1848, a sign that the waves of suppression following the 1839 police investigation forced Abakúa leaders underground for a decade.

“Aunque históricamente la primera sociedad abakúa se funda en 1836, hay antecedentes de que antes de esa fecha los fÁtigos se mantuvieran unidos. Así se demuestra al estudiar la conocida como Conspiración de Aponte de 1812” (Cros and Bolívar 244).

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Figures

Fig. 1. Usugare

Fig. 2. Escudo cubano

Fig. 3. Adesina

Fig. 4. Tierra Oru
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SUBSCRIPTION AND SUBMISSION POLICIES:
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