

The Ékpè-Abakuá Continuum: Articulating Trans-Atlantic African Diaspora Heritage in Cuba and the Cross-River Region (Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea and Nigeria)¹

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Abstract: Building on nearly three decades of research in Cameroon, Cuba and Nigeria, Miller articulates an active Diaspora heritage between West Africa's Ékpè 'leopard' society for community justice and the Cuban Abakuá mutual-aid society. After describing a collective research methodology engaged with initiates of both groups, he articulates an overarching narrative of this trans-Atlantic civilization. Through an examination of the literature about them, he identifies historical biases towards these institutions that hinder a contemporary dialogue with State representatives in each location.

Keywords: Cuba, Nigeria, Cameroon, trans-Atlantic, African heritage, Ékpè, Abakuá, Èfik, Qua-Ejagham



Introduction

Despite overwhelming evidence for profound African cultural transmission to the Americas in modern history, there is yet to be a concerted effort to study and promote awareness of this phenomenon by national and international institutions in the nation-states most relevant: those of West Africa, the Caribbean and South America. This essay focuses on one richly detailed example, that of migrants from the Cross River region of West Africa who recreated one of their homeland

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institutions of governance in colonial Cuba. The Ékpè leopard society of West Africa's Cross River basin was the model for the Abakuá mutual-aid society of Cuba, as is evident through its material and intellectual culture such as dance-masks, temple designs, drum construction, and musical patterns.² Abakuá ritual language is expressed through thousands of chanted passages that identify source regions and events.³ Preliminary studies have shown that many phrases can be accurately translated at least in part by speakers of Èfík, the main pre-colonial *lingua franca* of the Cross River region.⁴

Perhaps the most important level of historical transmission is at a meta-level of social organization into autonomous lodges with well defined, multiple functionaries (or grades). Contemporary members of Ékpè and Abakuá are currently in a process of dialogue about the uses of their shared inherited traditions. This essay reviews some key themes concerning the cultural history of what I call “the Ékpè-Abakuá continuum.” After summarizing a collective research methodology that includes the interface between Ékpè and Abakuá specialists, I examine the literature about Ékpè in Africa and Abakuá in Cuba, because they indicate the historical biases towards these institutions that remain deeply embedded in the minds of contemporaries. Because our ultimate goal is to provoke institutional interest and support of this heritage amongst the political leadership of the contemporary nation-states of Cameroon, Cuba, Equatorial Guinea and Nigeria, I conclude with an analysis of how the prevailing ideologies and practices of each state is impacting this process.

A Trans-Atlantic Cross River Basin Diaspora

Recent scholarship on the trans-Atlantic African Diaspora has demonstrated profound cultural relationships based on continuities, or in some cases ‘dialogues’, between the citizens of American cities like Recife (Brazil), Havana (Cuba), Port of Spain (Trinidad) — and their West African source regions, largely Yorùbáland.⁵ My own book-length contribution, co-authored with Dr. ‘Wándé Abímbólá treated the Yorùbá Diaspora in the Americas, with emphasis on Cuba. The Yorùbá Diaspora is comparatively well documented. Drawing from foundational studies by Robert Farris Thompson, Keith Nicklin, Bassey E. Bassey, and others, my ongoing project examines the Cross River basin Diaspora, which is rarely written about in English and largely misunderstood in the literature in Spanish.

The leopard society of the Cross River basin is known variously as Ékpè, Ngbè, and Obè, after the local terms for ‘leopard,’⁶ hereafter simply Ékpè. Hundreds of Cross River settlements each possessed their own Ékpè lodge, a symbol of autonomy, where matters concerning local governance were settled in councils. Few details are known about Ékpè history, with the exception of the variant developed by the Èfík merchants of coastal Calabar. After contact with European

² Miller 2009.

³ Cabrera 1988 and 2020.

⁴ Miller 2005; and Manfredi 2020.

⁵ cf. Bascom 1980; Brandon 1993; Carvalho & Segato 1992; Matory 2005; Miller, 2003; and Warner-Lewis 1994.

⁶ Nicklin 1991.

merchants in the late 1600s, Èfìk-speaking traders along the Calabar River gradually transformed Ékpè from a communal police system into a vehicle to maintain their position as middlemen.⁷ As the demand for slaves by European and Euro-American planters grew (from the 1650s to the 1840s), Èfìk traders expanded their networks to include the entire Cross River basin, extending eastwards into present-day Cameroon and northwards to the Àrù ('Arochukwu') trading oligarchy,⁸ encompassing settlements where languages such as Bàlondó (Èfùt), Banyang, Éjàghám, and Ìbìbìò, Ìgbo, and Ọrọ̀n were (and still are) spoken. Many settlements in the expanding Èfìk trading empire may have already possessed forms of Ékpè, but the result, according to one Cross River historian, was an Èfìk Ékpè 'Imperium.'⁹ In this context, Ékpè served as a regional system that protected members who traveled throughout Ékpè territory.¹⁰ Being a widespread vehicle for inter-ethnic communication, Ékpè's ceremonial practices reflect a rich variety of regional languages, costumes, music and a system of communication through symbols (called *nsibidi*).

The port of Calabar is locally known as 'Àtákpà', an Èfìk term meaning 'real or big river'. The name Calabar emerged in the 1700s from the confusion of Dutch and British adventurers who learned that the Ịzọ̀n or "Ijaw"-speaking communities in the eastern Niger Delta called "Kalabari" had earlier migrated from the east; they then erroneously extended this term to the Cross river region. When cartographers documented these errors, the name Calabar became fixed.¹¹ During the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, many thousands of people migrated from southeastern Nigeria and southwestern Cameroon throughout the Americas, where they were known generally as "Calabari" or "Carabalí." Beginning in the early 1600s in Cartagena de Indias and Santo Domingo continuing through the later Carabalí presence in Florida, Louisiana, South Carolina, the Virgin Islands, Haiti, to the neighborhood of Calabar in San Salvador, Bahia, Brazil, to the Calabar High School in Kingston, Jamaica, to the 'Carabalí nation-groups' of both Santiago de Cuba and the Matanzas-Havana regions of colonial Cuba, Carabalí presence became nearly ubiquitous.¹²

On the island of Cuba, however, significant elements of Cross River influence in the form of oral historical narratives continue to be transmitted in apprenticeship systems. Many narratives memorializing Cross River places, ethnic terms, and philosophies are maintained by members of the Cuban Abakuá, a mutual aid society and religious order established in colonial Havana, Cuba, in the early 1800s by free male Africans and their descendants.¹³ Multiple sources of data demonstrate that Abakuá was derived principally from the "leopard societies" of the Àbàkpà (Qua Éjàghám), Bàlondó (Èfùt), Banyang, Èfìk, Ìgbo, Ọkọ̀yọ̀ng, Ùmọ̀n, Úrúán, and Ùsàghàdèt peoples of the Cross River basin.

The mythology of many Cross River communities with Ékpè describes the Èfùt of Ùsàghàdèt as the source of core elements of Ékpè. Learning it from Ùsàghàdèt, the Èfìks eventually

⁷ The Èfìk-speaking communities of Àtákpà, Óbíókò, and Uwet are primary examples.

⁸ Manfredi 2004: 239; and Nwokeji 2010.

⁹ Anwana 2009.

¹⁰ Ruel 1969: 254-55.

¹¹ Ejituwu 1998.

¹² Cf. Splendiani et al. 1997; Wheat 2011; Sáez 2008; Landers 1999; Hall 1992; Wood 1974; Oldendorp 1770; Oku 1989.

¹³ Trujillo 1882: 364; Miller 2000.

shared it with other groups including the southeastern Ìgbo.¹⁴ Following this pattern in Cuba, a representative group of Efó [Èfùt] sponsored the first Cuban lodge in the early 1800s, designating it as Efi [Èfik].¹⁵ In the creative process of adaptation to the Caribbean context, Cross River peoples followed clearly defined procedures from West Africa.

This first Cuban lodge was named Efi Kebutón, after a settlement in Calabar with strong links to the Ùsàghàdèt cultural source.¹⁶ Many subsequent Cuban lodges were named after Cross River settlements, each lodge belonging to a specific ethnic lineage — Efi, Efó, or Orú — which correspond to the Cross River Èfik, Èfùt, and Úrúán peoples. The entire Cuban system was called Abakuá, probably after the Àbàkpà (Qua Èjághám) settlement in Calabar.

In a society where humans were bought and sold as merchandise, Abakuá groups functioned as anti-slavery cells that maintained a firm sense of morality as well as trans-Atlantic history among their communities. Although dues were paid by members, one could not buy membership. Instead, candidates for initiation underwent long periods of probation in order to verify their moral character among family and community members. The resistance to money as a value for inclusion indicates how strong were the bonds of a collective identity that rejected outsiders. This attitude was reflected in a popular rumba song: “You can be Ocha, but not Abakuá.”¹⁷ Composed in the 1930s by an Abakuá musician, it refers to the Cuban tradition wherein a member of the Yorùbá-derived òrìsà community may be barred from joining the Abakuá. Among other meanings, this phrase reflects the inclusiveness of òrìsà traditions — making them more like a ‘religion’ —, in contrast to the exclusiveness of Abakuá — which was more descriptive of a prestige club with political uses.

The Abakuá disregard for money units as a condition for membership also recalls the rejection of European money by African villagers before and during the process of colonization. For example, in the early 20th century in what became Ogoja, Nigeria, a British District Officer attempted to inspire the aid of locals in building his headquarters: “and when I gave them money — as per my instructions — they flung it back at me with jeers.”¹⁸ More generally regarding southern Nigeria, Professor Alagoa observed: “The introduction of British currency in place of local units and methods of exchange . . . proved one of the most radical measures to be instituted by the colonial regime.”¹⁹

In each historical period, Abakuá leaders have expanded their networks by integrating membership: first emerging as a club exclusive to those born in Africa, Ékpè members participated in Carabalí ‘cabildos de nación’ from the 1750s onwards;²⁰ in the early 1800s, Abakuá created

¹⁴ cf. Röschenhaler 2011.

¹⁵ Cabrera 1958: 50.

¹⁶ In Calabar, the Òbútòng lodge is called Àsibòng Ekondo, after its founder. Àsibòng is an Èfùt name, while Òbútòng Ékpè has strong ties with that of Ùsàghàdèt; cf. Miller, 2009: 46.

¹⁷ “Tu puedes ser Ocha, pero ñaña no.” Composed by Horacio L’Astra in the 1930s. L’Astra was the Mokóngo title-holder of the lodge Endibo Efó of Guanabacoa; Pazos, 2002; personal communication. ‘ñaña’ is a reference to Abakuá.

¹⁸ Hives 1933: 149.

¹⁹ Alagoa 2002: 75.

²⁰ In Cuba and other parts of Latin America, African ‘cabildos de nación’ (‘nation-groups’) were self-organized communities of Africans and their descendants who came from similar regions in Africa and often spoke common languages.

separate lodges for their children; in the 1860s, Abakuá became 'universalized', i.e., opened to incorporate members from any background, when a lodge of phenotypically white men was established in Havana. In this case, a symbolic fee of 30 ounces of gold was delivered to the sponsoring lodge, used to buy the freedom of enslaved members.²¹



"Día de Reyes" by Federico Mialhe (c.1850)

From this moment onwards, lodges would include the descendants of Africans, Europeans, American Indians, and Asians, making Abakuá a foundational institution in the sense of reflecting the racial and ethnic make-up of the island. The ability of Abakuá initiation rites to create a sense of brotherhood amongst Cuban members of all heritages is implied in the phrase: "friendship is one thing, and the Abakuá another."²²

The incorporation of white men related to the colonial elite was a defensive strategy against persecution by authorities, some of whose male children were now members. The success of Abakuá's integration became a model that others followed, most famously nationalists like the mulatto General Antonio Maceo and the Spanish-descended writer José Martí, 'the apostle of Cuban independence'; in the 1870s and 1880s, each respectively envisioned an inclusive nation unhindered by racism.²³ In 1883, Martí wrote: "A man is more than white, black or mulatto. A Cuban is more than mulatto, black, or white."²⁴ In the same era, Abakuá themes become symbolic of the Cuban nation, as represented in publications and staged plays of the period by creole Cubans interested in independence from Spain.²⁵

The achievements of Abakuá leaders were challenged by colonial authorities who first banned the institution, and then exiled Abakuá members (as well as anarchists and other rebels) to penal colonies throughout Spain's African territories (1869-1898). By 1898, with the end of Spanish

²¹ Cabrera 1958: 53.

²² "La amistad a un lado y el 'ñáñigo' separado" Trujillo 1882: 370.

²³ Ferrer 1999: 133.

²⁴ Martí 1977: 313.

²⁵ Miller 2009: 154-155.

administration of the island, Abakuá continued to expand through new lodges in the urban areas of Havana and Matanzas. By 2010 there were an estimated 150 lodges in Cuba with more than 20,000 members, an impressive figure for a non-proselytizing institution.

Since 1991 to the present, I have conducted research with Abakuá members in Cuba and the USA, who generously responded to my curiosity with extensive narratives about their African sources. With this information in hand, since 2004, I have worked with Ékpè leaders in the Cross River region on the interpretation of the Cuban data.

Interactive Methodology

This little-known story was pieced together using oral narratives from Cuba, which are based upon manuscripts written in the nineteenth century in the Abakuá ritual language, with interpretations into Spanish. Unpublished, and intentionally maintained by Abakuá specialists in a piecemeal form, some of these narratives were exceptionally made available to the author for the purpose of documenting historical aspects of Abakuá's foundation.²⁶ These narratives were juxtaposed with (and in large part confirmed by) others in police records, colonial legal documents, and ethnographies by earlier Cuban scholars.²⁷ Some of this literature is well known by Abakuá specialists I worked with; I shared other portions with them and found their responses invaluable. Later comparative research in West Africa among Ékpè specialists provided details regarding the Cross River sources of Abakuá materials. Such collaborative research was possible thanks to the generous support of the Cuban descendants of Cross River peoples, especially the contemporary Abakuá specialists, and their West African counterparts.

In 2000, Nigerian Ékpè members living in the USA responded to an essay by this author to the effect that they recognized some Abakuá phrases therein as part of their own history.²⁸ Thus began an a triangular conversation — among specialists of the Cuban Abakuá, of the West African Ékpè institution, and myself — about the contours of these shared cultural practices and their implications for historiography.

This process has involved a series of meetings between Cuban Abakuá and West African Ékpè. The first occurred at the Èfìk National Association meeting in New York in 2001.²⁹ Several Èfìk specialists began to help interpret Cuban chants.³⁰ In 2003, two Cuban Abakuá specialists and I participated in the Èfìk National Association meeting in Michigan, where the Obong (Paramount Ruler) of the Èfìks personally invited us to Calabar, then followed-up with an official letter.³¹

In 2004 in Calabar, Ékpè titleholders of the lodge Èfé Ékpè Éyò Émà supported my work by initiating me into their group, bestowing upon me the title of Isún Mbàkàrà, designating me as

²⁶ Miller 2017b.

²⁷ Cabrera 1954, 1958, 1975, 1988; and Ortiz 1906, 1950, 1951-55.

²⁸ The phrases were published in Miller 2000. The responses of Ékpè members are published in Miller 2005.

²⁹ cf. Program Notes 2001.

³⁰ Miller 2005.

³¹ cf. Program Notes 2003.

their ambassador to the Cuban Abakuá.³² Several Ékpè specialists then helped interpret Cuban chants, aided with reference to published sources, mainly Rev. Hugh Goldie's 1862 *Dictionary of the Èfìk Language*, the standard work.³³

The process of trans-Atlantic research confirmed many connections between Ékpè and Abakuá. For example, the title Mbàkàrà is used in both in Nigeria and Cuba,³⁴ while the Ékpè lodge Éyò Émà, from the Ékórètònkó community, has a derivative lodge in Havana known as Ékuéritongó. The easy identification of these linguistic, ritual, and musical continuities has enabled my interactions with both groups.

On a second trip to Calabar, in December 2004, this author was accompanied by two Cuban Abakuá musicians living in the USA (Mr. 'Román' Díaz and Mr. Vicente Sánchez), who performed at the Third Annual International Ékpè Festival. They also interacted with Ékpè members both in their lodges and in performances at the Calabar Cultural Center that were televised in Nigeria. Following a proposal by various Ékpè leaders, our trip was funded by the Governor of Cross River State, Mr. Donald Duke, through the Cross River State Tourism Bureau, with the recognition that such historic encounters through musical performance are relevant to the development of international cultural tourism (following the examples of tourism in the 'slave forts' of Ghana, Senegal, and Sierra Leone, the national Vodun holiday in the Republic of Benin, the Oşogbo festival in Oşun state, Nigeria). The festival organizers, Ékpè leaders themselves, filmed and edited a documentary of this event for public dissemination, while privately meeting with the Abakuá to compare Ékpè language and concepts they may share.

In 2007, I facilitated a series of performances by Calabar Ékpè and Cuban Abakuá members in the Musée Quai Branly, Paris, with percussion, song and body-mask interactions that led to heightened awareness of the cultural continuity between both groups. Because Cubans living on the island at the time required exit visas, none were able to join us. Instead, the participants were Abakuá specialists living in Europe and the USA. In 2009, the US-based participants released a CD recording inspired by the encounter that fused Ékpè phrases and rhythms they learned from the Calabar Ékpè, with elements of Abakuá, Spanish, and jazz elements (*Ecobio Enyenison*, 2009). In 2010 in Calabar, I created a series of more than 30 radio shows on the history of Abakuá content in Cuban music, with a leading M.C., Mr. Ene Ita of the Cross River Broadcasting Corporation (CRBC). These were played on Calabar radio weekly for two years; some of these programs are now internet podcasts.³⁵

Performances by Ékpè and Abakuá specialists are an integral part of ongoing research, since the process through which Abakuá practitioners evaluate their own language in relation to that of Ékpè (and vice-versus) results in otherwise unobtainable interpretations.

Linguistically, the Cross River region is one of the most diverse areas of the world, yet only the Èfìk language of the coastal group that interacted with missionaries has a major dictionary.³⁶

³² Miller 2005b. Èfè Ékpè Éyò Émà is the first and foremost Ékpè lodge in the Èfìk communities of Calabar. Established by migrants from Creek Town in the early 1800s, it is also the shrine of the Ndem society of the Èfìks, where the Obong of Calabar is capped.

³³ Miller 2009.

³⁴ Latham 1973: 39; Cabrera 1988: 333.

³⁵ <http://cubacalabarradio.podbean.com/>. Thanks to Onel Mulet.

³⁶ cf. *An Index of Nigerian Languages* 1992.

Only through conversations with Èjághám-speakers in the hinterlands did we learn that the Abakuá term Babaraná, ‘Don’t pay attention’, is related to the term *gbá-bòrà*, ‘there is no problem’ of the Nkòmè language of Íkóm (Gbá-bòràné means ‘there is nothing now’; *now* being emphatic).³⁷

The ability of an African source group to interpret Caribbean chants after 200 years of separation is extraordinary. The mutually reinforcing present day Èkpè and Abakuá interpretations of historical acts enables a connected account of events leading to the formation of an African institution in the Caribbean.

With such an extraordinary case of cultural transmission during the process of enslavement, with the participation of living Èkpè and Abakuá specialists interested in communicating, one might anticipate a rush by leaders of universities, NGOs, foundations, and ministries of culture to support further research, festivals or the general promotion of this rare story. Unfortunately, this has not been the case. The rest of this essay seeks to understand why. First, a review of the literature on both sides of the Atlantic will illustrate the historical development of views towards Abakuá and Èkpè from the perspectives of state administrators in Cuba and Nigeria.

Review of the Literature: Cuba

From the first written reference in 1839 to the 1930s, the majority of studies on Abakuá — as virtually all ethnographic studies of Africans in the Americas — were written by police and criminologists, who considered it to be a criminal organization.³⁸ In the aftermath of the Haitian Revolution (1804), authorities feared the ability of Africans and their descendants to self-organize. Colonial documents of Abakuá activity originate in a police raid of an Abakuá meeting in 1839.³⁹ From this point onwards, the association with criminality has been continuous. Furthermore, after learning that the sons of Spanish elites had become members, authorities viewed Abakuá as a ‘corruption’ of its African sources, as well as a dangerous trend by creating alliances between white and Black members.⁴⁰

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Abakuá institution of Cuba was popularly known as ‘ñáñigo’ [nyanyígo], a term derived from the Cross River Èfik Èkpè term ‘nyanya’ that identifies the raffia chest piece worn by the society’s masquerade dancers.⁴¹ Because the term ‘ñáñigo’ was used indiscriminately by non-Abakuá to refer to any undesirable Black person, contemporary members reject this term as offensive. They prefer *Abakuá*, a term likely derived from Àbàkpà, used in Calabar to describe the Qua-Èjághám community. The history of literature on Abakuá is replete with condemning remarks about “ñáñigos”: An 1882 publication called *Los criminales de Cuba* [The Criminals of Cuba] began a chapter on the ‘Ñáñigos’ by stating: “The

³⁷ Mathew Ojong 2011: personal communication.

³⁸ Important exceptions are the studies of Abakuá music by classically trained Cuban musicians like Alejandro García Caturla and Amadeo Roldán in the 1920s and 1930s; cf. Carpentier 1985; Caturla 1929/1997; Caturla and Carpentier 1980.

³⁹ Deschamps 1964.

⁴⁰ Roche 1925: 113-116.

⁴¹ Cabrera 1988: 427.

police have worked hard to eradicate the ñáñigos."⁴² In the early twentieth century, Havana police captain Rafael Roche Monteagudo published three editions of *La policía y sus misterios en Cuba* [The Police and Their Mysteries in Cuba], a work that associated Abakuá with criminality.

A 1901 publication on Spanish penal colonies stated: "Finally, the ñáñigo was conceived of as a dangerous being, shown clearly by the mass deportations [from Cuba] during the last period of our dominion, that accumulated a large number of ñáñigos in Ceuta, in Cádiz, and in the Castle of Figueras."⁴³ A 1930 Cuban publication asked rhetorically if 'ñáñigos' were related to 'abominable crimes': "In Cuba, are witchcraft and ñáñiguism religious practices or black magic? . . . Is it true that they shelter organizations dedicated to the most abominable crimes?"⁴⁴

The Dean of Black Cuban studies, Fernando Ortiz, began his lifelong research after seeing an Abakuá masquerade in a colonial museum in Madrid; it had been confiscated during Havana police raids. Trained as a criminologist in the Lombrosian school, Ortiz's early works treated African-derived practices as deviant. His 1906 *Hampa afrocubana* [Afro-Cuban Underworld: The Black Sorcerers] describes and classifies African-derived practices in order to help eradicate them. As he matured, Ortiz changed his perspective considerably as he realized that African heritage was one of the foundations of Cuban society. His five volume masterpiece *Los instrumentos de la música afrocubana* [The Instruments of Afro-Cuban music] (1952-55), together with other works, like "El origen de la tragedia y los ñáñigos" [The origin of the tragedy of the ñáñigos] (1950), and *Los bailes y el teatro de los negros en el folklore de Cuba* [The Dances and Theater of the Blacks in the Folklore of Cuba] (1951) portray African-derived initiation systems as forms of ritual theater whose specific languages and codes — due to centuries of integration on the island — were bedrock to the creation of Cuban identity. Because the Cuban social elite had been trained in Western classical traditions, Ortiz equated the 'initiation mysteries' of African systems in Cuba with those of the ancient Greeks and Romans, so that their values could be more easily grasped. Ortiz's works have insightful sections about Abakuá ceremony as ritual theater, or Abakuá instruments as metaphors for elements of the sacred forest.

Invaluable documents on Abakuá practice and philosophy were written by Lydia Cabrera, who transcribed her conversations with Abakuá elders.⁴⁵ Cabrera's *El Monte* [The Forest] (1954), *La Sociedad secreta Abakuá: narrada por viejos adeptos* [The Abakuá Secret Society] (1958), *Anaforuana: Ritual y símbolos de la iniciación en la sociedad secreta Abakuá* [Rituals and symbols of initiation in the Abakuá secret society] (1975), and *La Lengua Sagrada de los Ñáñigos* [The Sacred Language of the Abakuá] (1988) are fundamental references to Abakuá rites, language, and symbols.

In her introduction, Cabrera wrote about her intentions to distance Abakuá culture from a criminological context:

Although this vocabulary is very far from being exhaustive, in spite of the fact that they filled the colonial prisons for decades, it is enough to demonstrate that the Abakuá language is not prison slang, in spite of the fact that its members filled the colonial prisons for decades. This

⁴² Trujillo 1882: 360.

⁴³ Salillas 1901: 339.

⁴⁴ Martín 1930: 7.

⁴⁵ Cabrera 1899 Havana — 1991 Miami.

vocabulary confirms those initiates who define their sacred speech as ‘a language to speak in the lodge about the sacred and about what happened in the past’. [i.e., in the mythic-historic African past].⁴⁶

Nevertheless, the association of Abakuá with anti-social behavior continues into the present, as evidenced by a 2011 Havana publication with the title: “The Abakuá society and the stigma of criminality.”⁴⁷

These works on Abakuá, as well as others by Sosa or Brown could be classified as either hostile or culturally sensitive in their approaches.⁴⁸ All of them share, however, a view of Abakuá as a Cuban phenomenon, with distant West African roots that have become irrelevant to Abakuá’s place in Cuban society. Typical of such views, Africa can only represent the pre-modern past, and contemporary Africans are not invited to participate. For example, a recent essay on Abakuá by a Cuban scholar claims that in the twenty-first century, the “project of the Cuban nation and of Cuban socialism in the XXI century” cannot be aided by, “an illusory return to ‘the African root’, (a ‘lost innocence’ that can only be recuperated by creating, here and now, the future).”⁴⁹ The biased tendency to disregard linguistic and other cultural data from African sources has long been an obstacle to historically grounded studies throughout the global African Diaspora. This trend among scholars was evident in the Frazier/ Herskovits debates from the 1940s. In the 1970s, Bajan historian and poet Edward Kamau Brathwaite used the term ‘creolization’ to describe a creative process fundamental to social life in the Anglophone Caribbean.⁵⁰ Later works by both Mintz and Price, separately and together, used this term to highlight ‘foundational’ moments and processes in the formation of African-American societies, with little thought to their possible African precedents.⁵¹ This ‘post-modern’ trend became the basis for much later work, including that of Scott, Gilroy, and Palmié, the latter who wrote about Cuban Abakuá activities on the island, yet ignored the literature from Africa, believing that narratives of ‘continuity’ potentially “render ‘invisible’” other narratives.⁵²

Abakuá Manuscripts: An Alternative Source

Asanga ibekondó Efori manyongo Ékue?: How is it that Ékue, being African, also resounds in Cuba?

Reply: *Erensuá asanga itia Mbonipó*: Because the Africans brought it to this

⁴⁶ Cabrera 1988; and Cabrera 2020: 5.

⁴⁷ Pérez-Martínez & Torres-Zayas 2011.

⁴⁸ Sosa 1982; and Brown 2003.

⁴⁹ “Para . . . refundar el proyecto de nación cubana y el socialismo cubano del siglo xxi . . . tampoco un ilusorio retorno a “la raíz africana” (una “inocencia perdida” que solo se recuperaría creando, aquí y ahora, el futuro).” Castillo 2008.

⁵⁰ Brathwaite 1971; 1974/1985.

⁵¹ As discussed in Lohse 2002.

⁵² Scott 1991; Gilroy 1992; and Palmié 1993, 2002, 2010.

white man's land.⁵³

The common assumption that Abakuá lore is based solely upon oral history is erroneous. Research in Cuba shows that inherited Abakuá narratives are maintained in manuscripts that seem to have originated in the mid-1800s to document the teachings of the African founders. The Abakuá narrative tradition intends to reproduce the original ritual phrases that Africans in Cuba taught to those they initiated. Therefore, the twentieth century materials recorded in detail by Lydia Cabrera — as in the example quoted above — promise to be close variants of those spoken in the early 1800s by Calabar migrants; only future comparative research with African sources can determine just how close.⁵⁴

Many Abakuá specialists have their own archives of such manuscripts, passages from which they share with those apprentices who demonstrate their ability and discipline to learn. Those young Abakuá members who prove to be faithful students may inherit manuscripts from their teachers. In Havana, one Abakuá elder whose father initiated him at four years of age in 1934 was an obedient and loyal student to many of his Abakuá elders. Consequently, these elders willed their manuscripts to him. When he died in 2018, his archive included a library of Abakuá manuscripts from various lineages, including detailed drawings of Cross River region body-masks that are no longer performed in Cuba.

Given the lack of information about the Cross River region during the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the inherited manuscripts of Cuban Abakuá specialists offer an unprecedented scholarly source, freed from the colonial misunderstandings and contemporary ethnic politics often imposed upon historical studies of the region. This information is useful for students of the cultural history of the Cross River region, precisely because there are no comparable documents from this part of Africa. An important outcome of future meetings between Ékpè and Abakuá masters, linguists and historians, would be their analysis of the content of these manuscripts.

Whereas the published literature on Abakua has been overwhelmingly concerned with the social aspects like 'crime' and 'neighborhood identity', Abakuá manuscripts are concerned with the Calabar region as an "*axis mundi*" for Carabalí-Americans; as a sacred homeland whose wise men and women produced philosophies with wisdom about communal living. The perspectives in these manuscripts make claims for trans-national Carabalí identities, alternatives to the imposition of bounded national and sociological identities by academic writers or by national governments.

Review of the Literature: West Africa

The early history of the Calabar region is vague because the only maps and reports from the 1500s-1700s were based upon fragmented observations by visiting merchants.⁵⁵ Substantive reports providing details about local culture appeared after the 1840s, when European missionaries and colonial officers began to reside in Calabar. In 1862, the Reverend Hugh Goldie published his *Èfik/English Dictionary* (over 600 pages); in 1863, the Reverend Hope Waddell published his memoirs,

⁵³ Cabrera 1988: 70; and Cabrera 2020: 54.

⁵⁴ Linguist Victor Manfredi has begun this through his "Cross River Etymologies," Manfredi 2020: 369-383.

⁵⁵ cf. Talbot 1926/1969 v. 1: 183-193; and Miller 2017.

Twenty-Nine Years in the West Indies and Central Africa (nearly 700 pages); in 1912, District Commissioner Percy Talbot published the first of his voluminous studies on social life in southeastern Nigeria. None of these writers learned much about the inner workings of the Ékpè institution, but Goldie and Waddell both expressed their prejudices towards it. The Presbyterians, influenced by the Enlightenment, were against slavery. By 1846 when the Presbyterians arrived to Calabar, the Ékpè society had been transformed by the wealthy Èfìk middlemen from an institution for community justice into an institution that also defended the interests of the wealthy chiefs who were slave owners and slave-traders. The Presbyterians sought to reform social relations in Calabar, and soon realized that Ékpè, as the collectively established law of the landowners, was a powerful obstacle to their agenda. The irony is that Ékpè leaders had originally invited the missionaries, hoping that they would educate their communities with skills useful for international trade in accounting and agriculture. They were severely disappointed when the missionaries sought religious conversion and social reformation, leading to the diminished autonomy of local elites.

Because the Ékpè institution was regionally widespread, its transformations in Calabar did not necessarily apply to the hinterland forest communities. Cross River specialist Keith Nicklin observed that studies of the history of southeast Nigeria have “tended to concentrate upon the coastal zone, especially the trading settlements of the Niger Delta and Calabar. Large groups like the Ìbìbìò, Éjághám, and Bokyi have been virtually ignored.”⁵⁶ Even some classic texts about the region, such as “the much quoted works of Amaury Talbot (1926) are in parts at best organized and educated guesswork.”⁵⁷ No missionary or colonist was a trained social scientist using a methodology of inquiry or a comparative method to understand the complex society around them. Instead, they came with a purpose and saw any hindrance to it as an enemy of ‘civilization’ (e.g. British norms). After Nigeria achieved self-rule in 1960, academic studies were published on Ékpè, buttressed by the Cuban literature by Ortiz and Cabrera on Abakuá. The pioneering work of Robert Farris Thompson (1974) identified Abakuá connections with the Éjághám Ngbè in Nigeria and Cameroon, thus opening the way for comparative trans-Atlantic studies of the region. Abakuá narratives claim ‘Ekoi’ as among the founders of Ékpè. In Africa, Ekoi was an Èfìk term for people of the forest hinterlands, including Éjághám and Boki. Following this lead, Thompson found that Ékpè/Ngbè was derived from Éjághám sources, then usurped by Èfìk middlemen during the trans-Atlantic trade.⁵⁸ Because Thompson learned from Éjághám leaders, he received their version of this process. This scenario is only part of a much longer story, since Ékpè may be thousands of years old, with centuries of transmissions and innovations that crisscross the region.

In the late twentieth-century — because state funding was allocated according to tribal demographics — Nigerian politics involved the struggle of distinct ‘tribal’ groups for political independence from their neighbours. This political balkanization was reflected in the tribalisation of local histories in academic publications. In the Calabar region, a side effect of this trend is that many communities claim ownership of Ékpè, diminishing its historical role as a regional institution.

Éjághám-speaking communities certainly played important roles in Ékpè history, yet my own research is finding that each ethnic settlement that received Ékpè (Èfìk, Èfùt, Éjághám, Ìgbo, Ìbìbìò, Ọkọyòng, and so on) in the distant past contributed to its practices. The result is the existence

⁵⁶ Nicklin 1984: 25.

⁵⁷ Esen 1982: 4.

⁵⁸ Thompson 1983.

of regional variants that all share a unifying principle (e.g. 'The Voice of the Leopard'); this view is supported by Cuban Abakuá traditions, as well as by historians in Calabar.⁵⁹

Significantly, in 1998, the first study of Ékpè written by an insider was published. Here, Engineer B.E. Bassey attempted to educate Christian elites of Calabar about those values of Ékpè teachings that were shared by 'world religions' like Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity. The esoteric aspects of Ékpè had never before been articulated in print. Bassey's treatise has proven to apply to the practice of Ékpè throughout the Cross River region as well as in Cuba.

This background in the published record on Ékpè and Abakuá in their regional contexts is instructive for how these institutions have been framed historically by elite outsiders (with the exception of Bassey). To appreciate the current difficulties in the scientific and trans-Atlantic study of these institutions, the task is to understand how the formation of the present nation-states of Nigeria and Cuba have influenced official biases vis-à-vis the ancestral traditions of their citizens, as discussed ahead.

In 2010 in South Africa, the African Union effected recognition of "the Diaspora as the Sixth Region of the African Union."⁶⁰ For several years now, UNESCO has promoted a "Slave Routes" project to raise awareness about the African Diaspora. Despite growing awareness about the cultural systems shared between the peoples of southeastern Nigeria, southwestern Cameroon and western Cuba, there is yet to be a serious program from either of these countries to understand, promote and educate the general population about this phenomenon. The reasons for this are complex, but clearly related to the European colonial subjugation of historic African identities under the guise of 'individualism', with the resulting regional and national politics that assert western 'modernity' as opposed to a perceived African 'primitivism'.

The Suppression of Indigenous Praxis: Nigeria

In Calabar, British interference in local affairs began in 1849 with the establishment of a British Consul on nearby Fernando Po (today Bioko). Backed by naval power, the Consul enforced the selection of British-friendly chiefs in Calabar, a process that continued throughout the colonial period (1885-1960). In the same decade, the arrival of Presbyterian missionaries began the process of eroding the judicial and executive powers of Ékpè lodges, particularly in the city of Calabar.⁶¹ These influences only increased: by 1856 the Court of Equity established a meeting-place in Calabar, while from 1884-1906 the British Consul (by 1890 called 'High Commissioner') was headquartered in Calabar, with the requisite prisons and other instruments of government. During this time the 'pacification' of the hinterlands by military expeditions was conducted.⁶² As a result, Professor Alagoa wrote:

⁵⁹ Anwana 2009.

⁶⁰ Uya 2013: 19.

⁶¹ Alagoa 2002: 71 wrote: "As of 1849 British authority on the coast had become formalized; no longer was it represented by a transient naval officer, but by a substantive consul. The institution of court of equity — on which the trading chiefs sat with the supercargoes to settle disputes — in all the ports of the Niger Delta provided the British one means to gradually subvert the sovereign legal authority of local rulers."

⁶² Talbot 1969 vol. 1: 203; 66-67, 68; 215-16.

It became clear to all Niger Delta communities that resistance by armed struggle was futile. Accordingly, individuals served their own interest, following the British colonizers into the Nigerian hinterland as interpreters, guides, and so forth. They thus adopted a strategy of survival through collaboration.⁶³

The local systems of authority were overwhelmed by the colonial system that promoted western cultural values. This process has continued into the present through the globalization of western ideas and products. Nevertheless, the destruction of communal values was never complete nor was there a total surrender, because many communities continued their inherited practices clandestinely, even while adapting them to current contexts. As such, today Ékpè continues its functions as a ‘traditional police’ in some rural areas, especially during conflicts over land ownership.⁶⁴

Further obstacles to the promotion of the ‘Cross River peoples’ history and their diasporas’ relate to the structure of the Nigerian State, which has historically tended to recognize the preeminence of three major ethnic groups (Hausa, Ìgbo, and Yorùbá) while ignoring the minority groups. This situation inherited from colonial administration has led to the curious phenomenon of Nigeria having few national heroes; instead, the process of ‘ethnic nationalism’ has created tribal heroes.⁶⁵

The Cross River region, with its profound linguistic diversity and small autonomous communities, is outside the mainstream channels of present-day power sharing. In addition, the indoctrination of the Christian elites in urban Calabar was such that they were rather suspicious of anything relating to the institutions of their ancestors, especially those still practiced by their community members. This is also true in Yorùbá urban centers, as Professor Olupona has articulated:

Evangelical Christianity’s desire to trump indigenous religious symbols and practices has effectively devolved into a declaration of hostility and war against indigenous traditions. As the cultured despisers of indigenous practices, these new Christian movements aim at doing away with any forms of local knowledge, language, and ethos, even when they do not have any apparent religious connection.⁶⁶

This national phenomenon is supported by the federal government’s sponsorship of travel for its employees who are Christians to visit Jerusalem and Rome, and for those who are Muslims to

⁶³ Alagoa 2002: 72.

⁶⁴ Miller and Ójónḡ 2012: 6.

⁶⁵ For many contemporary Nigerians, ‘ethnic nationalism’ seems to outweigh ‘nationalism’ and ‘patriotism.’ In a recent study of Yorùbá religion, Olupona 2012 wrote: “By nationalism, I refer not to the contemporary nation-state context (Nigeria) but to the Yorùbá nation as a cultural group with a homeland, a language, a religion, and a shared culture.”

⁶⁶ Olupona 2012.

visit Mecca, while ignoring those who practice A.T.R. (African Traditional Religions).⁶⁷ By contrast, the Republic of Benin has a national festival for Vodun tradition, inspired in part because of the Vodun heritage in Haiti. In Calabar, the contradictions of adoring external ideas while rejecting local ones are evident in the annual Carnival events, organized by the Cross River State Tourism Bureau, that emulate the brilliant costumes, music and competitions of Trinidad carnival, while largely ignoring local costumes of the people.⁶⁸

Professor Nyong — an Ékpè titleholder in Calabar — observes that the indigenous Calabar carnival traditions are ignored in the current state sponsored Carnival.⁶⁹ He recalled that in 1959, when the first Èfìk woman lawyer was called to the bar, she was welcomed with a carnival procession through the city, organized by the women of Calabar.⁷⁰ Many Calabar leaders like Nyong hope to see their ancestral traditions reflected in the state sponsored event, but the current trend has been otherwise.⁷¹

Meanwhile, traditional shrines in Nigeria have become pilgrimage sites for a global community of practitioners, either those inspired by historically related practices in the Americas resulting from the slave trade, or by recent migrants returning home. Ilesanmi wrote that pilgrims to the "Oshun and Arochukwu shrines . . . signify the attempt to affirm the possibility of encountering the divine within the geographical boundary of Nigeria and to demystify the privileged status that seems to have been ascribed to the birth places of the two so-called world religions in the country."⁷²

Nigeria is a huge and complex nation with many layers of urban and village experience. Nevertheless, it is clear that Nigerian political leadership continues to flounder under what musician Felá Kuti — one of the national heroes — called "coló mental" (colonial mentality), in which the myth of the inferiority of indigenous worldviews continues to elevate what is imported.

The Challenges of Cultural Dialogues with Africa: Cuba

In the Western Hemisphere, during the process of state formation, all national administrations — whether derived from British, Dutch, French, Portuguese or Spanish models — encouraged their citizens to assimilate into European-derived identities and values. These pressures attempted to make the African, Amer-Indian, or Asian sources of their citizens irrelevant, or at best trivialized

⁶⁷ cf. Abimbólá & Miller 1997: 199. Since the eleventh century, people from what is today Nigeria have been pilgrims to Mecca. Then, "In 1958 the Federal Government of Nigeria became involved in the hajj operations. Its concern at this stage was the welfare of some 21,000 Nigerian pilgrims of uncertain diplomatic status in the Sudan as well as another 20,000 West Africans, mostly Nigerians, who were facing deportation from Saudi Arabia" (Hanga 1999: 6). Then, "the Federal Government of Nigeria issued Decree No. 16 of 1975 establishing the first Nigerian Pilgrims Board to coordinate and control the annual pilgrimage to the holy land at the national level" (Hanga 1999: 8).

⁶⁸ cf. Carlson 2010. In addition to mimicking Trinidad 'Mas', the 2012 Carnival included a Brazilian troupe.

⁶⁹ Nyong 2012: personal communication.

⁷⁰ Her name was Mrs. Nkoyo Isikalu; cf. Duke 2009: 90.

⁷¹ Miller 2022: 52-53.

⁷² Ilesanmi 2001: 557.

as colorful folklore presentations for tourists. In Cuba, the French Republican ideal that all citizens should be ‘unified’ to avoid fragmentation was consolidated during the Wars of Independence (1868-1895) against Spain, when national heroes Antonio Maceo and José Martí proclaimed that all Cubans were ‘one’, no matter their race. This ideology was challenged in the first half of the twentieth century through the ‘Jim Crow’ segregationist policies promoted during the North American occupations.⁷³ Subsequently, the 1959 Revolution declared institutional racism illegal, reinforcing the idea that ‘all Cubans are one’. Dr. Johnnetta Cole wrote: “The revolutionary government encourages a form of nationalism that makes racial and ethnic bonds secondary to those based on shared culture, circumstance and interests,”⁷⁴ an ideology defined as *Républicanisme*, wherein each citizen is engaged in a direct relationship with the state, prohibiting the presence of an identity politics based on local, religious, or racial identification.⁷⁵ Immanuel Wallerstein wrote about the problem of citizenship within nation-states:

[C]itizenship as a concept had two logical consequences. It led states to emphasize and to predicate and insist on homogeneity as the only sound basis on which to justify the theoretical equality of all citizens. ...The organic quality of the nation... the key concept of which is that there should exist no intermediary bodies between the state and the individual. All individuals being equal, they have no public (or state-relevant) qualities other than that of being a citizen. Groups, however formed, no matter what their basis, do not have legal or moral standing as such.⁷⁶

In Cuba, the emphasis on assimilation into a national identity within an atheist state has resulted in pressure to diminish ‘minority’ identities, especially those classified as ‘religious.’ Thus Jewish, Catholic, and several Afro-Cuban systems including Abakuá were problematic, viewed as remnants of a past [i.e., ‘primitive’] system that had no relevance in the ‘scientific’ revolution. Unfortunately, the centuries-long tradition of white supremacy amongst Cuban leadership remained deep in the psyche of Cubans, so even as ‘minorities’ lost their rights for association, white elites remained in control. In the 1960s the Black Cuban associations like the Athenas Club (a group of Black professionals) were declared illegal, but curiously the several Spanish associations were not, and continue to exist.⁷⁷ As a consequence, African descendants in Cuba lost their major social organizations, leaving them few options, except to join Lukumi, Congo or Abakuá groups, ironically pushing them into the ancestral community systems that were understood as ‘religion’.

This Cuban predicament is, in reality, a consequence of European global colonization. The European Enlightenment introduced the tri-partition between magic, science, and religion.⁷⁸ In those terms, what is Ifá, what is Vodun, what is Ékpè? All three share elements of magic, science, and religion in different ways. Pierre Verger for example stressed the role of Ifá as a mnemonic

⁷³ Cole n.d: 5.

⁷⁴ Cole n.d.: 15.

⁷⁵ cf. Wikipedia “Republicanism.”

⁷⁶ Wallerstein 2003: 671.

⁷⁷ cf. Domínguez 1979: 8; Cole n.d.: 11, 20; De la Fuente 2001.

⁷⁸ Tambiah 1990.

botanical and pharmacological database (i.e., “science”) and also emphasized the absence of a skygod — or, where one is present, as in Ifè, its irrelevance to the whole — so even at best, Ifá cannot be merely defined as ‘religion’ without gross distortion.

In the Cuban Revolution, this island regime has been officially anti-religion (although restrictions were eased after 1992) and under siege by its neighboring militarist corporate state. But due to its history of plantation demography, Cuba is confronted with three very different non-literate African cultures (Kongo-Palo, Lukumi-Yoruba, and Abakuá) that are scarcely understood by anthropologists not to mention bureaucrats. All of these cultures have therefore been subjected to blunt functionalist reasoning and sorted out into component bits: one part is folklore for tourism, another part is religion, while others are superstition and criminal activity. No aspect of the African cultures are considered as ‘politics’, even though we know that in their origins all of these systems (in different ways) were community expressions with quasi- or para-state functions. Certainly, the most political of them all is Abakuá, being modeled on the Ékpè system of governance, so it is especially taboo.

Following the internal logic of this besieged, neo-absolutist republic, all the African sociocultural activity has been forced together into the sole ‘legitimate’ category of ‘religion’. Objectively, this results in escalating racism, even though ‘race’ is officially banned in any self-respecting neo-absolutist republic born of the Enlightenment.

In an unusual move, the Instituto de antropologia in Havana organized the historically first conference on Ékpè-Abakuá themes in Cuba, which held in May 2011. Unfortunately, no African representative of Ékpè was present, but Cuban intellectuals were clearly fascinated with the theme of Cuban Abakuá influence in Fernando Po — a Spanish possession with a penal colony — in the late nineteenth century during the wars of independence. They seemed less interested in the Cross River Ékpè traditions that had come to Cuba a century earlier. This proclivity to elevate the imprint of Cuban rebels in Africa during the struggle for nationalism, while ignoring Africa’s cultural influence earlier on, is easy to understand given the Cuban style of French *Républicanisme*, where nationalism trumps all.

Global divisions & US influence globally

Global divisions created during the Cold War have resulted in a deep gap of consciousness between capitalist Nigeria and communist Cuba, a gap earlier created by lack of bilingualism in Spanish and English in each nation. There exists a striking asymmetry between how deeply the ancestors of Nigerians influenced the formation of Cuban society — especially in the realm of popular culture — and how little Nigerians are aware of this influence. This becomes glaringly evident when compared to the profound influence of Afro-Americans — that is Blacks in the USA — on contemporary Nigerian culture through the Church, rap music, and television programs, as well as less recently (for an older generation) through the Pan-African discourse imbibed by Nigerian leaders like Nnamdi Azikiwe, who was educated in the USA.⁷⁹ Few in contemporary Nigeria

⁷⁹ Azikiwe studied at Lincoln University, as did Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana. Eskor Toyo (2011: 4) wrote: “From about 1940, after the return to Nigeria of two intellectuals who had studied in America, namely, Nnamdi Azikiwe and Eyo Ita, a new kind of agitation started. This was for self-rule or independence.”

realize that Cuba has much more to offer them than US-based discourses about ‘race relations’ and televised talk shows and stadium-wide evangelist productions. In Senegal and Congo, Cuban music is highly respected (Orquestra Baobab and Africando in Senegal; Franco in Congo).⁸⁰ It seems that in Nigeria, people are unaware of Cuban music because Nigerian highlife (somewhat like Ghana highlife) managed to lose many Cuban traces. Nigerians under 70 years old will likely not know what ‘cha-cha-cha’ is, but even Felá Kuti began his career with an Afro-Cuban inspired band. It seems that only a direct focus on the shared centuries-old cultural systems like Ifá divination and “the Ékpè- Abakuá continuum” can remedy this continental drift in consciousness.

Conclusions

The centuries old cultural systems of the forest region of the Cross River basin remain largely misunderstood in the literature, most prominently the Ékpè ‘leopard’ society that was used to govern thousands of autonomous communities. During the trans-Atlantic slave trade, hundreds of thousands of Cross River peoples were transported to the Americas, where they left deep cultural imprints, most recognizable in the Abakuá mutual-aid society of Cuba.

Using interactive research methods that involve Ékpè and Abakuá masters, the author has pieced together an overarching narrative of this civilization and its diaspora in Cameroon, Cuba, Equatorial Guinea, and Nigeria. Despite growing awareness of this phenomenon, there have as yet been no serious programs to support research or education to stimulate dialogue about this powerful example of African cultural assertiveness across time and space. To explain this absence of institutional support in Nigeria, the author reviews the marginal status of Cross River region within national politics, as well as the profound influence of western ‘modernity.’ In Cuba, the state rejects an ‘identity politics’ that would privilege a ‘race’ or ‘ethnic’ focus of its citizens. This position has been reinforced during the Revolution to counter the ‘multiculturalism’ and ‘affirmative action’ promoted in the USA, with the understanding that ‘all Cubans are one before the state’. Given the tendencies of each nation-state, the author (and his Ékpè and Abakuá colleagues) are circumnavigating nationalist politics by appealing to international bodies like UNESCO and CODESRIA for support.⁸¹

⁸⁰ The enthusiastic reception of the New York based ‘salsa’ group Fania All-Stars performance in Zaire in the 1970s is a good example (cf. *Soul Power*, the film documentary of this event). See also Shain 2018.

⁸¹ As a Fulbright Scholar to Nigeria (2009-2011), the author conducted research in Ékpè communities throughout southeastern Nigeria that resulted in an application through the Ministry of Culture in Abuja to UNESCO to promote Ékpè as ‘World Intangible Heritage.’

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