



## LANGUAGE

*Essential to any understanding any nation and its culture, language is intricately involved with Cuban history and identity. Because of its colonial past, Spanish is the principal and official language of the island, but that does not mean that it was the only language spoken. Enslaved Africans brought to the island spoke languages that are still used in Cuba today, although in religious or ritual contexts, not as vernacular languages.*

*In what follows, three of these languages will be examined: Spanish, Lucumí, and Abakuá. Spanish in Cuba has absorbed many words from the latter two, and it is in Spanish usage where these African languages, quite transformed, can be heard in Cuban conversations.*

*The rich history of these three languages and their interrelationships have helped ground one of the richest literary traditions of Latin America and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. If scholars such as Esteban Pichardo (nineteenth century), Fernando Ortiz (twentieth century), and Sergio Valdés Bernal (twenty-first century) have made major contributions to the study of Cuban Spanish, Cubans outside the island as well as its great writers such as José Martí, Alejo Carpentier, José Lezama, Nicolás Guillén, Guillermo Cabrera Infante, and Severo Sarduy have delighted readers around the world by using their highly original use of language in works of extraordinary imagination. In their hands, language is memory, creation, celebration, Cuban culture speaking.*

### LANGUAGE: ABAKUÁ IN CUBA AND ITS INFLUENCE ON SPANISH USAGE

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*A language used exclusively for ceremonial purposes by members of the Abakuá Society.*

People from a variety of distinct ethnic groups of the Cross River region of southeastern Nigeria and western Cameroon were taken as slaves to the Caribbean region from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries. Because the port from which many departed was called Old Calabar, many of them became known as *Calabari* (and later in Cuba, *Carabalí*, reversing the *l*

and *r*), the same way that various Yorùbá subgroups became known collectively as the *Lukumí*, and various Central African Bantu groups became known as the *Congo*. One way to understand the transformation of many distinct but culturally related peoples into the Cuban *Carabalí* is to examine the sources for their best known cultural expression, the Abakuá initiation society and its language.

Abakuá was modeled upon the Ékpè leopard societies of the Calabar region, illustrated by the thousands of ritual Abakuá phrases based upon Ékpè codes, as documented by the Cuban folklorist Lydia Cabrera (1899–1991). The influence of Spanish is minimal, found primarily in the plural endings of words. Abakuá is an esoteric language used exclusively for ceremonial purposes that contains a mixture of various initiation dialects (called *argots* by some scholars) of the Cross River region, specifically derived from Ékpè practice.

*This entry includes the following articles:*

LANGUAGE: ABAKUÁ IN CUBA AND ITS INFLUENCE ON SPANISH USAGE

LANGUAGE: LUCUMÍ

LANGUAGE: SPANISH

#### ■ See also

Faith: Abakuá Society

Music: Afro-Cuban Religious Influence on Cuban Popular Music

The Poetry of Nicolás Guillén

Many West African guilds—including those for *bàtá* and *dùndún* drummers (called *Àyàn*), or the titled elders in the *Ìgbo* kingdom of *Nrì*—had initiation languages unknown to non-initiates. In Cuba, many key Abakuá terms and phrases are slightly transformed from words still used in the Calabar region, where *Èfik-Ìbìbìò* was the *lingua franca* for many distinct language communities that also practiced local variants of *Èkpè*. The evidence implies that many aspects of Abakuá language preceded the Middle Passage and, therefore, were not created by the historical process of transformation in the Caribbean known as creolization.

For example, *Ekório Enyéne Abakuá*, the name of the society in Cuba, is interpreted as “a group founded by a sacred mother that is called Abakuá.” This phrase is understood by speakers of *Qua-Èjaghám* in Calabar as *Ekoea Nyen Àbàkpà* (the forest is the mother of the *Àbàkpà* community), a meaning appreciated by Abakuá leaders. The Abakuá word *íreme* (spirit dancer) derives from the *Èfik idèm*; *Èkue* (sacred drum) derives from the *Èfik èkpè* (leopard).

In nineteenth-century Matanzas, Abakuá members spoke a language called *Suáma* (*Ìsú-Amá*), a variant of *Ìgbo*. Never central to Abakuá practice, and in modern times only a memory, *Suáma* was displaced by *Brikamo* Carabalí, Abakuá’s standard ritual language. *Brikamo* is held to be the language of the *Usagaré* (or *Ùsàghàdè*) community, the legendary founders of *Èkpè* in the estuary zone of the present-day Cameroon-Nigeria border. Abakuá say the phrase “*Manyón brikamo manyón usagaré*” to indicate that *Brikamo* is authentic because it comes from *Ùsàghàdè*. The lack of linguistic studies in this region limits outsiders’ knowledge, but to the north, in the city of *Ikom*, *Brika mmo* means “this one is good (or authentic),” in the *Nkómè* language. Because *Ùsàghàdè* was recognized as a source for *Èkpè* teachings in the Cross River region, as the society spread regionally, so did its ritual language.

Abakuá source texts—the epic narrative of the society’s creation in West Africa—were written in manuscript form in the nineteenth century and taught piecemeal in apprenticeship with masters. The performance of Abakuá language is a key element to leadership in the society. Members constantly test each other’s knowledge by conversing in Abakuá, responding to one phrase with another to take the discussion further until a gap is left that the less knowledgeable person cannot fill.

The Abakuá language has influenced Cuban popular speech, as in the word *chébere* (*chévere*), which is used popularly to mean “valiant, wonderful, excellent” after *Má’ chébere*, a title of the Abakuá dignitary *Mokóngo*. The Abakuá terms *ekóbio* and *monína* (both meaning “ritual brother”) are used as standard greetings among urban Cuban males. *Asére* (greetings) derives from the *Èfik esiere* (good evening). Abakuá-inspired street lingo has been recorded in popular music, as in the song “*Los Sitio’ Asere*” (Salutation to Los Sitios), which refers to a Havana barrio that is home to several Abakuá groups.

In addition, Abakuá sayings and moral codes have been translated into Spanish. For example, *Mútián keréké wasán korókó iruál Oreja no puede pasar cabeza* (The ear cannot surpass the head) means, in effect, that youth cannot surpass the knowledge of an elder.

The ability of scholars to understand the influence of languages from the Cross River region on the Abakuá ritual language is greatly limited by the lack of research on Cross River languages themselves. Although the Cross River is one of the most diverse linguistic regions in the world, *Èfik* remains the only language to have a large dictionary, and many languages of the hinterlands have no native-speaking linguists working on them. Another issue is that historically most of the formally trained linguists working in the region were educated in Christian settings where they were trained to shy away from analyzing terms related to ancient ritual practices. Yet in the Caribbean these practices were used to organize communities during the colonial period, so understanding them is key to understanding the formative period of African presence in the Americas.

Another key issue is the tonal nature of *Èfik* and other Cross River languages. Because Abakuá is not a mother tongue, but rather a set of codes learned after adolescence, the two tones of *Èfik*, for example, have been lost in Cuban pronunciation. Without such knowledge and the use of diacritics to indicate tones in writing, Roman spellings of *Èfik* words are either ambiguous (out of context) or meaningless. One would be unable to distinguish the *Èkpè* and Abakuá chieftaincy title *Mbàkàrà* and the *Èfik* term *Mbàkàrá*, meaning “those who govern,” popularly used to mean “white man.” Or to distinguish *úyò* (voice) from *úyó* (biscuit). Or the term for the *Èkpè* leopard club of the Cross River region from the term for the *Èkpè* religious ritual among neighboring *Ìgbos*. Or in *Èjaghám*, *nsí* (earth) from *nsí* (fish). Diacritics have not yet become standard in *Èfik* publications, and more research is required toward this end.

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