

The Ritual Solidarity of Masked Processions in Calabar, Cameroon, and Cuba

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African “art” makes little sense in a glass box on a museum plinth, but can be understood only in its social context of use, as Bob Thompson taught us in *African Art in Motion* (1974: xii). Wherever we encounter public processions of African body-masks, the performance displays “open secrets” of ritual (procedural) knowledge transmitted among initiates, as Wándé Abimbólá (1973: 43) observed regarding the Ifá cult.¹ In each context recorded in this paper, the rituals of masked performance are expressed in different ideological categories, depending on the status of the respective subaltern groups within the political economy that rules their territories. The first case is the Ékpè “leopard” society for community justice in Calabar, Nigeria; the second is the historically related Abakua society for mutual aid in Havana, Cuba; the third is the Jengu “water spirit” society for healing in Kribi, Cameroon.

Despite their differences, the fact of neocolonial subjection invests the masked ritual of each group with the energy of resistance and the project of autonomy. All three share inherited concepts of “community,” defined through a tripartite relationship with the living, their ancestors, and the land they control (or in the Cuban case, the lands of their African ancestors), which are the focus of ritual processions. Rituals are magical acts expressed with performance combining speech and gesture in cathartic sequences, as we have learned from anthropologists Malinowski (1948), van Gennep (1960), Turner (1969), and Tambiah (1990).

There is ample historical and comparative evidence that Cuban Abakua represents a development of the leopard society of the Cross River basin, including Èfìk Ékpè as the most identifiable of several sources but not excluding other contributions, whether from Igbo, Èjaghám, or populations of coastal Cameroon (“Òròkò”).² While there is less evidence for direct historic links between Kribi and Cuba, the Kribi example is relevant as another observable development of generic Cross River basin culture under conditions of displacement and dispossession in plantations separating labor from land. Calabar Ékpè was shaped by capitalist modernization in a different way, as a culture of middlemen, and the performance was accordingly enriched by economic

surplus throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in contrast to the lean conditions of Caribbean deportees and coastal Cameroonian proletarians. In the twentieth century and beyond, carnival events of all three regions have either displaced, complemented, or challenged a heritage of ritual processions.

RITUAL PROCESSIONS IN THE CALABAR REGION

In Calabar and its Cross River hinterlands, masked processions generally express continuity in a royal lineage; by incorporating descendants of community founders, they reinforce rituals of belonging. During rites of initiation or investiture, libations and prayers invoke ancestors, followed by a procession through the communal lineage territory to announce the elevated status of participants. Likewise, annual harvest rites to thank ancestors and deities feature processions to enhance the renewal of ties among the tripartite community. In the Calabar hinterlands, a custodian of heritage articulated the purpose of ritual processions; Dr. I.U. Ìnyàng, the Okúkú (High Priest) of Ùtìt Óbíó Clan and the Paramount Ruler of Ìbìyònd-Ìbòm,³ reported:

Almost all our cultural festivals culminate in a procession. There is impact in numbers and it creates awareness, to link one's action to the mystical consciousness of the event. During our New Yam festival, we lead a delegation to the shrine, perform rites to greet, thank, and inspire the spirit, the goddess, to do more than it had the previous year. The purpose is to ignite the mystical connection to the occasion, to empower what you are doing by tuning yourself into the Supreme source of knowledge and wisdom. Once we merge in a group, the impact is greater than in a solo pilgrimage to the shrine.⁴

Dr. Ìnyàng's view of processions show a marked contrast to most carnival events, which are often innovative and competitive. Instead, ritual processions emphasize unity in an initiation group and display conservative attitudes toward inherited regal symbols. This becomes clear when reviewing an historical description of a procession with contemporary members of the group, who readily identify the symbols. In 1846 in Calabar, Presbyterian missionary Hope Waddell described a procession of the Ékpè “leopard” society organized by his host, a royal merchant of Creek Town known by the British as Eyo Honesty II.⁵

The day I visited Eyo ... I was privileged to witness a grand and rare Egbo [Ékpè] ceremonial.... It was a public display of Egbo [Ékpè] grandeur, and all the townspeople were allowed to come forth and

witness it ... even the women, especially excluded on other occasions ... were now spectators, and filled the gates of their respective yards (Waddell 1863: 265).

The leader of an Èfìk lineage, Eyo Honesty II had organized a procession with Èbònkó, the “mother” of Ékpè, whose dances are enjoyed by the entire community. While women rarely participate in Ékpè events, Èbònkó is an exception, as I witnessed in a joyful procession of Èbònkó masks accompanied by the mothers of the community in 2012 (Fig. 1). Waddell continued:

Egbo [Ékpè] runners, disguised with black masks ... scoured the street in all directions, wielding each, however, only a long rod ... They kept the centre of the street clear, confining the populace to the covered way on each side (Waddell 1863: 265).

The “runners” were Ékpè Ìdém Ìkwòṛ “messenger” masks with long staffs that clear the road (Fig. 2), while the noninitiated public was cordoned off with palm frond barriers (see Fig. 5). Waddell thought this a “disguise,” but in fact these masks “reveal” the presence of initiated ancestors. Ékpè initiations establish neophytes as *èyénisòng* (“children of the land”) who have a voice in community matters, while the masks with “a long rod” reject nonmembers, who cannot or refuse to consecrate their relationship to the ancestors and the land. More characters appeared:

Then came forth from the Palaver House [Ékpè hall] two others without masks ... Each held a long narrow Egbo [Ékpè] drum in his hands at arm's length, and ... pointed it significantly up or down every street. Then the people, in whatever direction they pointed, set up a yell of acclamation (Waddell 1863: 265–66).

Contemporary local specialists identify the figures with “long narrow” Ékpè drums as “*èkòṃò* boys,” who interact with the Ìsim Ékpè (“leopard tail”) in a dance of procreation (Fig. 3). As these are symbols of “rebirth,” people ululated with joy. The procession intensified:



(counterclockwise from top)

1 Èbònkó mask accompanied by exuberant community mothers and their families during the “second burial” of an Ékpè titleholder. The mask holds an antique inherited brass-capped staff in one hand and a plume of red parrot feathers in the other, with tiny bells around the ankles. Ifako-Okòyòng village, Odukpani L.G.A., Cross River State, Nigeria, February 22, 2012. Photo: Ivor Miller

2 Four Ìdém Ìkwòṛ masks holding long staffs and leaves accompany an Èbònkó mask during a procession with percussionists from the Ékpè hall of New Obùtòng community in the background, known as the Èfè Ékpè Àsibòng Èkòndò. The *Newbouldia laevis* trees behind them on the lodge patio are the source of the leaves. The masks have four ostrich feathers attached to a “hat” behind their heads, and a single hawk feather across their foreheads. Their bodies are covered in woven black raffia netting, their chests sporting a “mane” of dyed woven raffia with coded designs. Calabar Municipality, Cross River State, Nigeria, 2011. Photo: Ivor Miller

3 Èkòṃò boys holding drums (far left) with three Ìsim Ékpè dancers holding bows and arrows, with tiny bells around their calves (at center), leading a procession of Èbònkó Ékpè masks (right) to send off the spirit of a deceased lineage leader. Bayside, Calabar South, Cross River State, Nigeria, 1976. Archives of Adam E. Eyamba, used with permission. Photo: Effiom E. Effiwatt



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(counterclockwise from top)
4 Anyán Isim Ékpè (“long tail leopard”) dancer. With tiny bells around the calves, a peacock feather and other plumes extending from the head, a parrot feather in the mouth, a bow and arrow in hand, an appendage representing the tail of the “mystic leopard,” he is the firstborn son of a royal lineage. Éfé Ékpè Efút Ifako, Creek Town, 1976.
 Photo: Archives of Etim Ika; used with permission

5 Procession of an “Ékpè house” covered with ritual *ùkàrà* cloth displaying codes. To protect it from outsiders, initiates surround the house, which emits a resounding “Voice,” making it in effect an “acoustic mask.” Those with caps are titled members, those without caps are ordinary members. At far left, the *nikóng* (iron gong) and drums mark time. Watt market roundabout, Calabar South, Cross River State, Nigeria, 1976. Archives of Adam E. Eyamba, used with permission.
 Photo: Effiom E. Effiwat

6 Men and masks await the Queen Mother in front of the Ékpè hall; many hold sticks upright with colorful decorations meant to attract the “mystic leopard.” Agoi-Ibami, Yakurr L.G.A., Cross River State, Nigeria, 2010.
 Photo: Ivor Miller

wears the long tail Ékpè with a regal necklace, demonstrating his right to occupy the throne.⁶ A red parrot feather held in his mouth signifies the duty of discretion for initiates.⁷ Then processional music began:

A band of musicians then appeared ... and ... tiny white bells, which a man had wreathed in hundreds round his legs, and kept tinkling by incessant stamping. This was but a prelude to the big Egbo [Ékpè] drum which, deep and sonorous, uttered its mysterious sounds. These varied in number and force, and, as they varied, the king's uncle, Otutu Honesty, gave forth certain intimations in a loud voice (Waddell 1863: 266).

Isim Ékpè wear tiny bells around their calves, as do Èbònkó body-masks (Figs. 3–4). The “deep” sounds of the mystic Voice of Ékpè represent the authorization of initiated ancestors. As a titled elder, Otu Honesty's response to the Voice confirmed the presence of living initiates who continue inherited rites, thus informing the ancestors of their assumption of responsibility to defend the lineage.⁸ The procession then reached its climax:



[O]ut rushed two others similarly dressed, with bows and arrows and immense caudal [“tail”] appendages trimmed with silk and ribbons. These they whisked from side to side ... and in whatever direction they pointed their bows and arrows, the people expressed their delight and admiration (Waddell 1863: 266).

The two with bows, arrows, and an appendage are Anyán Isim Ékpè (“long tail leopard”), whose dance is reserved for the first-born sons of a lineage. Onlookers exclaimed with delight at the arrows representing “rebirth,” or the reincarnation of important ancestors (Bassey 2001: 96–98). In Figure 4, a royal scion



A solemn procession came forth; first walked the sheepskins with masks, then the drums and feathers, after them the bows and arrows with tails, followed by King Eyo and the musicians, and lastly Egbo [Ékpè] himself, concealed, as befitted a supernatural being, in an ark, covered with fine cloths, and carried on their shoulders by chief men. From it issued continuous deep bass tones, of the trumpet kind (Waddell 1863: 266).⁹

This procession with a cloth-covered “ark” signals the investiture of a new lodge leader, thus reactivating Ékpè as community police, implying the reign of peace in the land. In Calabar 130 years later, the same procession was performed by Ékpè members who surrounded an “ark” covered with ritual *ùkàrà* cloth (Fig. 5).¹⁰ Young men lead with palm leaf barriers to keep noninitiates away, followed by percussionists.

A comparison of Waddell's description with contemporary processions in Ékpè-practicing communities of the Calabar region demonstrates that Ékpè codes are shared throughout the region with local variations: in urban Calabar, at the demise of an *Ìyámbà* (lodge leader), Ékpè “escapes” from the lodge, so the funerary rites include the collective hunt, capture, and return of the mystic leopard to the Ékpè hall in a grand procession, as Waddell described.¹¹ But to the north in the rural Agoi-Ibami community of Yakurr L.G.A., the mystic leopard escapes every seven years and is returned through efforts of the entire community.¹² This seven-year cycle concludes with a series of processions that



(clockwise from top left)
7 The Queen Mother of the Idut (rainbow) society holds a staff of authority and a palm frond plate of offerings in front of an Ékpè hall. The band of kaolin chalk across her eyes symbolizes “mystic vision,” while a red parrot feather in her hair signals active ritual energy. Her body is marked with white, yellow, and red chalk. The dyed red raffia ankle band and necklace are protective devices. Agoi-Ibami, Yakurr L.G.A., Cross River State, Nigeria, 2010.
 Photo: Ivor Miller

8 Procession of the Abakuá lodge Betóngó Naróko with Èbònkó-styled masks partially visible at right. The goat-skin covered staffs and drums with plumed rods represent tideholders. Los Pocitos neighborhood, Havana, 2002.
 Photo: Ivor Miller

9 M. Puente
Fiesta de ñáñigos (1878)
 Oil on canvas; 32.5 cm x 55.5 cm
 National Museum of Cuba
 On January 6, Three Kings' Day, a Carabalí *cabildo* marches through Havana with an Èbònkó-styled Ékpè mask. A tideholder carries a staff of authority, percussionists play drums and rattles, while a man with red feather in his hair holds a small drum to guide the mask. The mask greets a mother with child as a sign of solidarity within the community.
 Photo: Ivor Miller; used with permission of El Museo de Bellas Artes, Havana

locals describe as a carnival, which it is in the classic sense, because it culminates on Communion Day or Maundy Thursday, the day before Good Friday leading to Easter.¹³ The final week involves





processions with sections of the entire village, including Ékpè body-masks, a troupe of singers, groups of children with invented instruments (bamboo “rifles,” decorated long sticks tipped with flowers), all enticing Ékpè back into the village (Fig. 6).¹⁴

The processions of Agoi-Ibami illustrate a fundamental myth of the Ékpè institution, that women first discovered the Voice, which was captured by men. Royal women of the Idut (rainbow) association in Agoi-Ibami are key to “capturing” the mystic leopard, but only after various groups of men attempt but fail to do so.¹⁵ As I witnessed on a Wednesday in 2010, the Iyambà of the lodge led an Ékpè procession carrying an empty bowl of woven palm fronds. The next day, Maundy Thursday, the same procession circled the community three times, then awaited the Queen

Mother of the Idut “rainbow” society (Fig. 6). Arriving with edible offerings in the bowl, the Queen Mother led the procession to deposit it in a stream (Fig. 7). All then rushed to the lodge at the top of a hill, where hundreds gathered. The entrance to the lodge was blocked with planks, but when the crowd began to chant “*nkári Ékpè*” (“tricks of Ékpè”), as well as “*utuk Ékpè*” (“deception of Ékpè”), the mystic Voice miraculously resounded from inside the hall.¹⁶ In response the entire community emitted an astonishing roar. In front of the lodge, each titleholder stood one by one upon ritual stones to chant their rank, and then entered. The cycle was complete: the ancestors and gods of the land appealed, the community purified, Ékpè was reactivated to proclaim the autonomy of the community and its land.

HAVANA CARNIVAL INCORPORATES ABAKUÁ MASKED PROCESSIONS

Two centuries ago in Havana, Cuba, forced migrants from the Calabar region founded the Abakuá mutual-aid society to recreate their royal lineage practices. Abakuá processions exhibit protocols of the Ékpè “leopard” society, demonstrating both a kindred conservative attitude towards initiation symbols and continuity with West African concepts of “community” as incorporating living initiates, their ancestors, and the land they control (or in this case, are ritually connected to).¹⁷ Abakuá founders named Cuban lodges after lineages and territories of the Calabar region, thus claiming them as “overseas departments” of the named African source group. In one example, the Havana



10 The Gavilán *comparsa* “carnival group,” Havana, Cuba
Postcard, Habana: Comparsa de Carnaval, Carnival Season, ca. 1922
Havana: Edición Jordi
9 cm x 14 cm
The Wolfsonian—Florida International University, Miami Beach, Florida,
The Vicki Gold Levi Collection, XC2002.11.4.98
Photo: Lynton Gardiner

11 Percussionists of the *Componedores de batea comparsa* in procession, wearing characteristic dark blue shirts. Left to right are instruments called *bombo* (marching bass drum), *salidor* (time-keeper conga drum), *tres golpes* (accompanying conga drum) as well as a *campana* (cow bell). René Crespo, the Mokongo titleholder of the Efóri Bumá lodge, was music director in this period, decade of 1980.
Photo: Archives of Ivor Miller, photographer unknown



12 Elio Beltrán (Cuba)
Memories del Carnaval (2010)
Acrylic on canvas, 122 cm x 91.4 cm
Beltrán’s painting depicts an Abakuá *íreme* “mask,” styled after the Ebónkó mask of Calabar, that he witnessed during a 1938 carnival procession past cheering crowds in Old Havana.
Photo: Elio Beltrán

13 *February Fiestas in Havana 1937*. At center, an Abakuá *íreme* “mask” is styled after the Ebónkó mask of Calabar, with a smaller one at left. The two white women in Spanish dress viewing from a high balcony evoke the Catholic colonial period when the Spanish General received African *cabildos* from his balcony. Original promotional poster by Cuban artist Mario Carreño, issued by the Tourism Department of Havana Municipality.
Photo: courtesy Library of Congress

[The wash-tub menders] performed in February 1908 during pre-Lenten carnival celebrations.²⁴ The Alacrán was directed by members of the lodge Usagaré Sangirimoto Efó, founded in 1869 and linked to Usagaré in Cameroon.²⁵ The Gavilán included members of the Ebión Efó lodge, founded in 1882 (Fig. 10).²⁶ The *Componedores* was directed by Roberto Villa “El fino” from 1974 onwards.²⁷ A member of the lodge Usagaré Mutángá Efó, founded in 1868 and linked to Usagaré, Cameroon, Villa reports deep ties between the African heritage of a barrio and its *comparsa*:

lodge Betongo Naróko, founded in 1843, identifies its sources in Usagaré (Isangele) in South West Cameroon (Fig. 8).¹⁸

Abakuá legends evoke ritual processions in Calabar: “The ... inhabitants of Calabar, founded the Abakuá society ... They paraded the skin of the Sacred Fish found by Sikanékue” (Cabrera 2020: 45).¹⁹ An 1882 publication describes Abakuá rites as an initiation and a procession: “The oath-taking completed, the procession exits ...” (“*Concluido el juramento se saca la procesión ...*”) (Trujillo y Monagas 1882: 367). After initiations, contemporary Abakuá members carry consecrated drums and staffs in processions (Fig. 8). Another Abakuá phrase teaches respect for ritual processions: “Remove your hat, the procession is coming” (“*Ita musón para nandubia, que abara ea Enlluqué. Dice: Quitense el sombrero, que ahí viene la procesión.*”) (Roche 1925: 84).²⁰

In nineteenth-century Havana, Abakuá processions were practiced within Carabalí *cabildos* (“nation groups”), as depicted in an 1878 painting from Havana of a Carabalí *cabildo* in procession with an Ebónkó-styled Ékpè mask (Fig. 9) (Orovio 2005: 9; Ortiz 1921/1984: 30).²¹ Until 1884 in Havana, each Three King’s Day (January 6), the Captain General of Cuba authorized processions of African *cabildos*; after respectfully visiting each other, each *cabildo* would greet the Captain General at his palace.²²

When authorities banned the *cabildos* and Abakuá lodges, Abakuá processions were surreptitiously evoked in Havana carnival performances. For example, in 1908 members of former African *cabildos* organized the first documented Havana *comparsas* (“carnival troupes”).²³ Because both carnival groups and Abakuá lodges existed in the same barrios, Abakuá members were consistently directors of *comparsas* and their music ensembles, as well as a majority of the percussionists.

Among the earliest documented Havana *comparsas*, the Alacrán [Scorpion], the Gavilán [Hawk] and the *Componedores de batea*





My father danced in the first procession of the Compondores. The *comparsa* theme imitated the habits of the many Lukumí [ethnic Yorùbá] women who lived in this neighborhood. When the *comparsa* passed by their homes, these Lukumí would speak in their language and pour water in the streets to “cool the road” as they passed. My father always took me to see the *comparsas*; when we saw the Compondores, he told me, “This is OUR *comparsa*.”²⁸

Villa’s family history reflects the scenario of all early Havana *comparsas*: each created a theme to demonstrate knowledge of their African sources. The Compondores’ theme included Lukumí language, while the Abakuá musicians evoked their own

processions in the performance (Fig. 11). During research, participants recounted long lists of Abakuá members in each Havana *comparsa*, revealing hidden aspects of carnival.²⁹ But images of Abakuá *ireme* (masks)—styled after the Èbònkó mask of Calabar—became publicly associated with carnival through local promotional posters and paintings. Painter Elio Beltrán portrayed an Abakuá *ireme* in a 1938 carnival procession in Old Havana (Fig. 12). A poster for the 1937 carnival features two Abakuá *iremes*, evoking initiated ancestors in this government sponsored tourist event (Fig. 13). In English, the poster announces that carnival will revive “the gaiety and splendor of Havana’s glamorous past,” a phrase that simultaneously erases the suffering of slavery and racism while advertising the music and masks of African-descended communities.

Havana’s self-organized carnival groups were frequently coopted by authorities for tourist initiatives; in 1937 the Havana mayor’s office sponsored carnival as an international tourist spectacle.³⁰ Attempting to present a hybrid nation, they replaced the ethnic name of the Lukumí *comparsa* with *Bolleras*, a Spanish term for *àkàrà*, a popular snack in West Africa and Cuba (Orovio 2005: 45–46; Anderson 2011: 10–11).³¹ While elites removed the Lukumí reference, participants pushed back by expressing Abakuá codes in the music of the *Bolleras comparsa*, by playing the rhythm of the *obi-apá* (“one hit”) Abakuá drum on the “*salidor*” conga drum.³² Percussionist Armando Valdés “Loquillo” explains:

In Abakuá rites the *obi-apá* rhythm has a low tone, but on the [carnival] conga drum it has a high tone; the elders did this intentionally so as not to profane, to be different from the rite, yet initiates would understand its source, because the rhythm is the same.³³

Furthermore, the iron gong of Abakuá rites is implicit in the cow bell of Havana carnival music.³⁴

Many Abakuá musicians have used *comparsas* as platforms for presenting music derived from African-based lineages.³⁵ Examples include popular music innovators like Ignacio Piñero (1888–1969), director of the *Barracón comparsa* in 1937.³⁶ A member of the lodge Efòri Komó, founded in 1840 with sources in Usagaré, Cameroon, Piñero created the son group Septeto Nacional in 1927.³⁷ His composition “*Los cantares del abacua*” (the

14 Abakuá percussionists of the Alacrán *comparsa* wearing straw hats to represent sugar cane cutters. Santos Ramírez II plays the *bombo* (large drum). Behind him is Miguel-Ángel Plasencia of the lodge Ikanfioró; next to him is José Pluma León “El Pluma,” of the lodge Betongó Naróko (with white towel in mouth). Havana, Cuba, 1980. Archives of Miguel-Ángel Plasencia-Romero.
Photo: unknown



15 The group of “Pello el Afrokan” plays the Mozambique rhythm on Cuban television. Most are Abakuá musicians. Front row (l–r): Leo (Efòri Komó lodge member), Gilberto Izquierdo (Efó Kondó lodge titleholder), Jorge Pozo Sanyu “El jabao” (Munandibá Efó lodge titleholder). Havana, Cuba, 1965. Archives of Yunisy Izquierdo.
Photo: unknown



16 Batanga carnival participants in clothes made for this “Mayi 2012” event. The banner announces the 96th anniversary of this event to commemorate earlier deportation and encourage present unity. Kribi, South Province, Cameroon, May 2012.
Photo: Georges G. Dimwemwe Mabele

17 “Deportation to Bakoko.” Women’s group with fists defiantly raised against colonial abuse while commemorating deportation in 1914, Batanga carnival, Kribi, South Province, Cameroon, May 2012.
Photo: Georges G. Dimwemwe Mabele

18 The Ekongolo mask represents a deity evoked by initiates who manipulate the mask when attempting to solve important issues. Ekongolo is played during the funerals of distinguished personalities, and the Mayi commemoration. Bongahélé village in Grand Batanga, South Province, Cameroon, 2020.
Photo: Georges G. Dimwemwe Mabele Archives



abakuá chanters) evokes the victory of Carabali heritage through the line, “When the *bonkó* drum sounds everybody is moved.”³⁸

Another innovator was Luciano Pozo “Chano” (1915–1948), member of the lodge Èkue Munánga Efó, founded in 1871, with sources in Usagaré, Cameroon. Promoters who saw Pozo’s performances in Havana *comparsas* launched his career through radio and recordings.³⁹ In New York City in 1947, Pozo recorded the first known Abakuá ceremonial on vinyl, then through collaborations with Dizzy Gillespie infused US jazz music with codes from Abakuá and other African-derived lineages, opening a path followed by percussionists in the United States.⁴⁰

Santos Ramírez “El niño” (1903–1975) was Iyámba of the lodge Usagaré Sangirimoto Efó.⁴¹ In 1938, he reorganized the Alacrán *comparsa* and composed its theme song “*Tumbando caña*” (cutting cane).⁴² A family tradition, Ramírez’s son Santos Ramírez II became the *comparsa* director, and later Santos Ramírez III became the general director, while his sister was artistic director.⁴³ In 1980 an Alacrán procession featured Santos Ramírez II playing the *bombo* (“large drum”), while all the musicians wore straw hats representing sugar cane cutters (Fig. 14).⁴⁴

Pedro Izquierdo “Pello el Afrokan” (1933–2000) was the most renowned Abakuá *comparsa* musician of his generation, who named the Mozambique rhythm he created after the African homeland of his enslaved grandmother.⁴⁵ “Pello” and his two

brothers were Abakuá initiates, as were most band members (Miller 2009: 165). In 1964, while directing the *comparsa* of the Construction Labor Union, “Pello” released the Mozambique rhythm; its popularity led to a world tour in 1965 (Fig. 15).⁴⁶ Footage from Paris shows “Pello” leading *comparsa* style processions through a town square, in effect projecting his African family lineage globally.⁴⁷





19 Ritual *bolq* “canoe” float with raffia skirt during the Batanga commemoration, followed by a representation of a ship used for deportation. Fabric on the canoe side reads: “Kribi 1914–1916, 14 février 1916–9 mai 1916, Fête commémorative Batanga” (Batanga commemorative festival). At the canoe prow an elder represents a ritual specialist who holds a red-dyed raffia whisk while addressing the ancestors and *mengu* with coded words, then lowers offerings for them in the sea. Kribi, South Province, Cameroon, May 2012.

Photo: Georges G. Dimwemwe Mabele

20 Batanga float with a *jengu* maiden and attendants. The float is covered with paintings of a whale and dolphins as messengers of the spirits, and a mermaid to represent the *mengu*, known in Pidgin as Mami Wata. Batanga carnival, Kribi, South Province, Cameroon, May 2012.

Photo: Georges G. Dimwemwe Mabele

As previously discussed, Abakuá lodge names identify African royal lineages and territories, as evidenced in Abakuá private manuscripts created since the 1800s (for details on these manuscripts, see Miller 2017). One manuscript documents “Batanga: Dealer (of petty merchandise and ivory)” —which is corroborated by the diary of Thomas Hutchinson, a British visitor to Batanga (present Kribi) in the late 1850s (Cabrera 2020: 76).⁴⁸ Another documents the historical figure “Batanga Mbéré, ‘king of Mukandá land in Africa.’”⁴⁹ In Cameroon, Batanga oral tradition identifies Mbedi as an ancestor whose first son Tanga founded Ba-Tanga (people of Tanga) centuries ago.⁵⁰ Because Abakuá members belong to lodges representing African source territories, they eventually become themselves important ancestors of the group; their processions therefore have the same objective as the ritual processions of Calabar, Kribi and adjoining territories.⁵¹

BATANGA UNITY THROUGH CARNIVAL IN KIRIBI, CAMEROON

In South Cameroon, each Batanga village organizes annual processions following rites to communicate with water spirits called *jengu* (pl. *mengu* or *miengu*) that are integral to their communities (Ardener 1956: 93). Since 1916, this practice has been magnified with a carnival event in urban Kribi wherein three Batanga communities express their unity as inhabitants of coastal lands.⁵² This event commemorates the 1914 deportation of Batanga populations during battles between German and French forces, when the French military shipped them to South West Cameroon to work on plantations. In 1916 groups of survivors returned to Kribi, where a procession celebrated their return and commemorated the dead.⁵³ Photographs from the 2012 event show a banner announcing its 96th

anniversary (Fig. 16); a group of women in dresses cut from one cloth to signal unity, with fists raised in defiance of outside aggression (Fig. 17); their banner reads “Deportation to Bakoko,” in the Littoral Region, Cameroon. As seen in Figures 16–17 and 19–22, participants wear fabric depicting deportation on two ships.

The festival begins with collective rites in each village. In one village, an Ekongolo mask performance summons the local deity to strengthen the community (Fig. 18).⁵⁴ Other villages conduct *jengu* rites by sending ritual canoes to sea to communicate with the ancestors and *mengu*. On May 9 the traditional ruler of Kribi leads the unified festival.⁵⁵ A ritual *bolq* (“canoe”) is performed, followed by a float representing a deportation ship (Fig. 19).⁵⁶ Behind this, a float features a living representative of a *jengu* maiden with attendants (Figs. 20–22).

In present-day Cameroon, the beaches of Kribi are famous tourist destinations under threat from corporate real estate interests. The Batanga festival therefore has renewed meanings as participants collectively resist invisibility and displacement.⁵⁷



CONCLUSIONS: WHERE PROCESSIONS AND CARNIVALS MEET

In Calabar, Hope Waddell’s 1846 description of an Ékpè “leopard” society procession was recognizable to contemporary initiates, demonstrating stability in this representative practice of royal lineages. In 2004, with the inauguration of a state-sponsored carnival, it was logical that processions of Ékpè groups were highlighted.⁵⁸ But in later years, the participation of local groups was gradually sidelined by the recreation of a Trinidad-style carnival. In one example, the same body-mask form described by Waddell and seen in recent processions (Fig. 2), was represented by a lifeless Ékpè mask statue on a 2012 carnival float, as if in a museum (Fig. 23).

Dismayed with the increasing displacement of Calabar masking heritage by government sponsored events, B.E. Bassey urges Calabar residents to appreciate the intrinsic value of their own indigenous creativity. His monograph celebrates the historic carnivalesque tendencies of Calabar residents:

I wrote *Calabar: Land of Carnivals* (2011) because I knew the carnivals of Brazil and Cuba would be gotten from here. Calabar was a land of carnivals because there was no time you come to Calabar that you won’t find a ceremony going on, an initiation, a marriage, a burial. Everything is turned into theatre and you don’t need an invitation, because every weekend something must happen: the drumming must go on, which means there is food to be eaten, there is enjoyment, so come! It is a wonderful place! Even death became a ceremony because there were usually two factions, the side of the women and the side of the men and they would be quarreling, and at the same time singing about it, and then they stopped; food and drinks were served, and they start again and put it into dance. There was no fighting, but an entertainment.⁵⁹

Bassey describes a practice of collective rites leading into processions. Locals recall a 1959 celebration for Mrs. Nkoyo Isikalu, the first Éfík woman lawyer called to the bar, wherein women of Calabar welcomed her with what locals describe as “carnival procession.”⁶⁰ Historically in Calabar, Christmas was when locals performed masks around the town, either of an initiation group or of their own design. But by 2008, local mask performances

(clockwise from top left)

21 A float decorated with palm fronds and coconuts, symbols of fertility and collective sharing, features three attendants of the *jengu* surrounding her dugout canoe. Batanga carnival, Kribi, South Province, Cameroon, May 2012. Photo: Georges G. Dimwemwe Mabele

22 With coral fans on the head, the *jengu* maiden lays in a dugout canoe holding a fan, implying that her radiant power should be appeased. Batanga carnival, Kribi, South Province, Cameroon, May 2012. Photo: Georges G. Dimwemwe Mabele

23 Ékpè Idém Ikwòw mask statue stands motionless on carnival float, strangely reminiscent of an out of context museum display. Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria, 2012. Photo: Ivor Miller photo



were displaced by the government-sponsored Carnival, billed as “Africa’s Biggest Street Party.” According to one report,

[A] masquerade walked into the [carnival] arena. He looked like the odd man there and soon attracted the anger of security men who shouted at him to express their disapproval at his appearance; for masquerades had their day on the 27th and this day was 28th (Ighodaro 2008).

Such clashes with the government and corporate sponsored carnival has led to debates about its hinderance of processions of initiation masks to express solidarity with ancestors and collective land.

This review of processions in three historically and culturally

related groups of the circum-Atlantic emphasizes how Africans and their descendants have used mobile actions to strengthen their communities, comprising the living, their ancestors, and traditional lands. Even when enslaved or deported for plantation labor, they have continued to represent family and cult lineages. In Havana, carnival events have been disrupted and transformed since the 1960s through the turbulent political situation of the island, yet some traditional *comparsas* continue through family lineages.⁶¹ In Calabar and Cameroon, given the increasing struggle for land resources, one would expect to witness even more pronounced expressions of lineage unity, overtly or covertly, through processions, festivals, and carnivals in the century to come.

Notes

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1 Malcolm Ruel (1969: 231) described a similar phenomenon for the Ngbé (Ékpe) practice of Mamfe, Cameroon.

2 A recent study of Cuban Abakuá expressions found “nonaccidental resemblances to 218 lexical items existing in four clusters of Benue-Kwa (Niger-Congo) languages of the Cross River region,” including Ifiké, Igbo, Ejághám, and Orókó (Manfredi 2020: 367).

3 Ibónkú-Ibóm is located in the palm oil belt of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

4 H.R.M. Okúkiá (Dr.) Imé Udósúró Inyang, interview with author, Útí Ibónkú, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, 2019.

5 From the Àdàk-Úkò ward, Eyo Honesty II was a titled member of the Èfè Èkpe Ibókú in Creek Town. His Èfè name was Eyo Eyo Nsa (Oku 1989: 107).

6 Interpretation by Engineer B.E. Bassey, interview with author, Calabar, Nigeria, 2014. This prince later died. Muri “[C]lan head” Cobham Antigha Edet 4th (1926–2012) of Èfè Ifako Clan, Creek Town, Odukpani L.G.A.

7 Other references to red parrot feathers and Ísím Èkpe are found in Miller (2009: plate 25) as well as Jacobs and Tamungang (2021).

8 In both Calabar and Cuba, “the mystic Voice is a symbol of political authority in an autonomous community” (Miller 2009: 55).

9 In this passage, Waddell claimed that the procession left the lodge to the forest to release Èkpe into the bush. But the opposite is standard procedure: Èkpe is ceremonially captured in the bush and brought to the lodge on grand occasions. (Etim Ika, personal communication with author, Calabar, Nigeria, 2005. Mr. Ika, officially known as Ekpenyong Cobham Antigha, is Obong-Ebónkó of Èfít Ifako Clan, Creek Town, Odukpani L.G.A.)

10 “Ark” was Waddell’s term, but locals refer to this as a “house.” This cloth-covered structure has been referred to as an “acoustic mask” (Aranzadi 2020). Local participants described this 1976 event as the last major Èkpe procession to include representatives of Èfik Houses of both Creek Town and Calabar, as well as many Èfít lodges.

11 The historic landowners of Calabar are the Èfik, Èfít, and Qua communities. The two former groups had been while Ibónkú, while the Quas do not; instead, the Ntwe (Língbe head) serves this role.

12 The Agoi-Ibami community has recently accelerated this cycle to four years, responding to the loss of heritage practices in the face of attacks from local churches and the migration of local youth to the cities. In South West Cameroon, the Korup community also maintains a festival every seven years (Inyang 2013: 74).

13 In the Agoi-Ibami community, Èkpe is known as Ikpé. Every seven years, the three Èkpe lodges of Agoi-Ibami community rotate to lead the rites of enticing Èkpe.

14 Thanks to Tata Ikip, Iyámá of Bikibiki Ward, Ugep for bringing me to this event in Agoi-Ibami, as well as our host there, Honorable Alparna Arekam Andong, former Vice Chair of Yakurr L.G.A.

15 Idut (“rainbow”) association members reported to the author that for several weeks prior to the final event, Èkpe members are obliged to offer them delicious foods (bush meat, yam, palm wine), to assure their support in this process.

16 “Nkírí Èkpe” is Èfik language, while “*utuk* Èkpe” is in the language of Agoi-Ibami community.

17 A drawing of an early Abakuá procession, compared with a photograph of a ritual procession in Calabar from 1959, shows similar formations and symbols (Cabrera 2020: 80, Figures 30A, 30B).

18 Isangele is the French erroneous interpretation of the local name, rendered variously as Usagaré/Usak-Edet/Usagahdet. (Cabrera 2020: xvii, 234, 358, 383, 403 n15).

19 “*Ápapa brikamo iyá beromo*: ... (Iyá: mother, the Divine Fish; Beromo: procession, of the river). Folklorist Lydia Cabrera documented over twenty-one references to Abakuá processions in this volume.

20 Another reference to an Abakuá ritual processions is: “*Firo mocotero samba caríongo*, “*Yo vengo con mi procesión por la calle y no me meto con nadie*” (“I come from the street with my procession and don’t bother anyone”) (Roche 1925: 146). Abakuá specialists understand the phrase to use these terms: Siro, “the family”; *mokotero*, “alone”; *Sambuka*, “initiation sign”; *tríongo*, “bank of the river”.

21 *Carabali* refers to captives brought from the Calabar region.

22 Authorities disbanded the *cabildos* in 1884 in their quest to assimilate Africans during the ongoing Wars of Independence.

23 Regarding the merging of African *cabildo* processions with the February carnival celebrations, see Miller (2009: 161–63). Dr. Rogelio Martínez Furú discusses the merging of “black” and “white” carnival practices in the documentary *El Alacrán* (The Scorpion), 1999, Gloria Rolando, director. Habana: TV Latina/Imágenes del Caribe, 20 minutes.

24 A *batea* is a wooden wash tub. In the show of the Compondores *comparsa*, an elderly Lucumi initiate lamented that the wash tub was broken, and a repair man fixed it as the community danced to rumba music. Roberto Villa-Garabalosa “El fino” (b. 1924), interview with author, Havana, 1998.

25 The Alacrán was originally from the barrio of Jesús María. From 1937 onward, Santos Ramírez, the Iyámá of Usagaré Sangrimto Èfó, reorganized and directed the Alacrán in the Cerro neighborhood, while his descendants successively replaced him in both the lodge and *comparsa* (Miller 2009: 162, 283 n73).

26 The Gavilán, like Ebión Èfó, was organized in the San Lázaro neighborhood. “The members of Ebión Èfó, of San Lázaro” (Roche 1925: 68). “The Isé of Mukarará, the Marquis of Indarte founded ... Ebión Èfó, in the barrio of San Lázaro” (Cabrera 1977: 1). Ebión Èfó is in the lineage of White Abakuá members established by Andrés Petit in 1862. See the “Ebión Èfó” and “Okóbío Mukarará” entries (Cabrera 2020: 398).

27 The Compondores *de batea* were organized in the barrio of Cayo Hueso, a neighborhood officially

recognized in 1912. Armando Valdés-Hernández “Loquillo,” interview with author, Havana, 2020.

28 Roberto Villa-Garabalosa “El fino” (b. 1924), interview with author, Havana, 1998.

29 The oral narratives gathered by the author regarding the history of Abakuá initiates who have participated in Havana carnival groups are abundant and would require a long essay for adequate documentation.

30 Havana carnival was suspended during World War I, then held in only 1916 and 1927 (Orovio 2005: 13; Anderson 2011: 27).

31 Cabrera wrote: “*Akara: pan, pan de maíz. Akara: bollo*” (Bread, corn bread; fritter) (Cabrera 1957: 42). In West Africa: “*akára*, an oily cake made from beans ground and fried” (Abraham 1958: 41). *Akara* are fritters of black-eyed peas, a.k.a. cowpeas (*Vigna unguiculata*), which are not beans but called such in Nigerian Pidgin (Victor Manfredi, personal communication, 2021). Historian Emilio Roig de Leuchsenring wrote: “One of the most interesting *comparsas* of 1937 was that of the Bolleras because of its reflection of ... the old Lucumi fritter vendors who, in the streets and plazas of Havana, used to cook and vend their products to passerby’s during the carnival” (Leuchsenring 1957, trans. in Anderson 2011: 230). The Bolleras *comparsa* was from the barrio of Los Sitios, Havana.

32 “Román” Díaz, personal communication, 2005; Miller 2009: 163. The *saldor* drum carries a counter beat, over which the *quinto* drum improvises. “Pello el Afrokán” explains the names of *comparsa* instruments in *Congas por barrios* (1988). La Habana: Areito – LD 4471.

33 Armando Valdés-Hernández “Loquillo,” interview with author, Havana, 2020. Mr. Valdés (b. 1943) is a lifelong participant in Havana rumbas and *comparsas*. While *comparsa* music is a genre, each traditional *comparsa* has its own variation, and with songs praising the qualities of their music.

34 The *nkóng* (iron gong) of Calabar was reproduced by Cuban Abakuá as the *ekón*, which is represented in Havana carnival music with a cowbell.

35 An audio example of the *comparsa*’s presence in *comparsa* contexts is “*Cajón Abakuá*” this recording starts with rumba, moves into Abakuá (4:20), and ends with a *comparsa* theme (5:00). *Caravana cubana del alma. “Cajón Abakuá” (guangancó abakuá)*. Lázaro Galarraga, voice. Guests: Pancho Quinto and Rolo Martínez. Warner Music 49043-2-1, 2002.

36 “The Commission agrees to pay Luis de J. Martínez and Ignacio Piñero the sum of 400.00 pesos to organize the *comparsa* ‘the Gopiros’ [b. 1924], Folk] and the sum of 450.00 for the preparation of the *comparsa* ‘the Barracón’ [the Barracks].” (*Las comparsas populares* 1937: 31). “The *comparsa* El Barracón was directed by Ignacio Piñero in the neighborhood of Pueblo Nuevo in 1937” (Oropesa 2017: 43).

37 Piñero became known as “the poet of the son” through his compositions, around 200 in total.

38 “*En cuanto suena el Bonkó, todo el mundo se emociona*.” Discussed in Miller (2009: 168–69). “*Los cantares del Abakuá*,” written by Ignacio Piñero. *Marta Teresa Vera y Rafael Zaqueira: El legendario dúo de la trova cubana*. Recorded in 1923. Historical Recordings 1916–1924. Tumbao TCD 090. The consecrated bonkó drum is used in ritual processions.

39 “Chano” Pozo of the lodge Munángo Èfó played the *quinto* [lead drum] in the Barracón and other *comparsas* (Oropesa 2017: 44). His colleague Roberto

Villa “El fino” recalled: “Chano” played in the *comparsa* La Mexicana, and where [radio station owner] Amado Trinidad saw him, dancing and playing a drum at the same time. Amado sent for Chano and this is where he emerges as a public figure. I was a dancer in La Mexicana, along with my brother and sister.” Roberto Villa-Garabalosa “El fino,” personal communication, 1998.

40 “*Abusi*,” by Chano Pozo, was recorded in 1947 in New York City. *Chano Pozo: el tambor de Cuba, vida y música del legendario cubano*. Booklet and three-CD set by Jordi Pujol. Barcelona: Tumbao Cuban Classics, 2001.

41 Santos Euligio Ramírez Arango (1903–1975). (www.ecured.cu/El_Alac%C3%A1n). “Santo Ramirez ‘El niño’ was Isunéque; his brother Domingo ‘El patón’ was Iyámá. Santo’s sons, Santo Jr. and Domingo, were Isunéque and Iyámá respectively. Bernardo Ramirez, son of Domingo, was Nasako, and the father of my wife Elsa.” Miguel-Ángel Plascencia-Romero, personal communication, 2019.

42 The song “*Tumbando caña*” (cutting cane) became globally popular (Miller 2009: 162–63, 284 n76, 77, 78). In 1936, Ramirez organized the Sexteto Afro-Cubano, where he was lead singer (Blanco 1992: 72–73). Ramirez also composed the classic rumba “*Llora como yo lloro*” (“Cry like I cry”).

43 Armando Valdés-Hernández “Loquillo,” personal communication, 2020. “Members of the Alacrán, Ekerewé dominated The Alacrán” (Orovio 2005: 32).

44 His full name was Santos José Ramírez Ugarte (d. 2000).

45 The grandmother of Pedro Izquierdo Padrón “Pello el Afrokán” was Makua, an ethnic community of Mozambique. As told by Rogelio Martínez-Furú to the author (Miller 2005: 34–35). Arsenio Rodríguez evoked this African identity in his composition “*Yo soy Macua!*” (“I am Makua”) (son role). Orquesta Casino de la Playa. Recorded in Havana, 1937–1940. Tumbao TCD 054.

46 Ernesto Sto-Rodríguez “El zambo,” interview with author, Havana, 2011.

47 Cf. “*El Gran Music Hall de Cuba en París* (1965)” on YouTube. The “Gran Music Hall of Cuba” included many leading music groups that toured France, Germany, Poland, Moscow, and Leningrad (Roberto Pascual Leal Sáez “Pallilo,” interview with author, Havana, 2009. “Pallilo” was a percussionist with the troupe of “Pello el Afrokán”).

48 Hutchinson (1861: 224) wrote about “the single spot of Batanga alone, yielding about forty tons of ivory per year.”

49 From the treaty of the lodge Itiá Mukandá Èfó. “*Maestro Okobio*” (Cabrera 2020: 158, also 245, 270).

50 Mbédi was an ancestor of several littoral groups, according to Edwin Ardener (1956: 19). “Since their first contact with Westerners, the Nkòhò as well as the Ndà, the Npùkò, and the Ntàngà, although having more or less distinct origins, were mixed together under the name ‘Batànga’” (Dimwemwe 2015).

51 Ardener (1956: 24) discusses cultural affinities among inhabitants of coastal Cameroon and into Calabar, resulting from centuries of trade exchanges. In another example, “the traditions of the Duala-Limba group have very close affinities” (Ardener 1956: 21). Among these affinities, “The belief in water spirits is reported from the Duala, Limba, Oló, Bodiman, Mongo, Isuwi, Kpe, Wovea, and Tanga, as well as from neighbouring tribes, such as the Bakoko and Mabea” (Ardener 1956: 93).

52 “Batanga land is organized in three head chieftaincies (officially Second-degree chiefs): Batanga North or Batanga *ngòng* with their paramount Chief; Batanga *Ilohò* (centre) with their paramount Chief; Batanga *Dihèdu* (South) with their paramount Chief.” Georges Mabele ma Dimwemwe, interviews with author, Lobé Town, South Cameroon, June 1–7, 2021.

53 In 1916, the first group of returnees arrived in Kribi on February 14, the second arrived on May 9, the latter chosen for the date of the commemorative festival. See discussion of the Batanga deportation in Schulte-Varendorf (2011: 86–87). Thanks to Anne Spier-Mazor.

54 A photograph from 1895–1903 depicts Ekongolo masks in Nyasoso, Cameroon. Bass Mission archives,

reference E-30.51.005. These early forms are quite different than the contemporary versions.

55 Kribi is home of the Batanga Lohové chieftaincy.

56 The canoe used in the festival is called *bòpò* *bò ntindi* (“the land canoe”).

57 While each Batanga village sponsors its own rites, the unified Kribi festival is sponsored by community members, as well as private and public companies, and is included in the tourist calendar of the Kribi city administration.

58 As governor of Cross River State from 1999–2007, Donald Duke developed tourism through the creation of an international carnival party, principally by emulating the carnival spectacles of Trinidad and Brazil (cf. Carlson 2010). The author participated in Èkpè processions during the Calabar carnival events of 2004 and 2005.

59 Engineer B.E. Bassey, interview with author, Calabar, Nigeria, 2014.

60 Duke (2009: 309, 309). Thanks to Professor Nyong.

61 Havana carnival was suspended from 1968–1970 to commemorate the death of Ernesto Guevara “Che” and support the sugar cane harvest of 1970. Traditionally held in February, carnival was shifted to July 26 in 1970 to celebrate an important date for Fidel Castro’s rise to power. In the decade of 1990, carnival was suspended or greatly diminished for lack of funds. In 2003, Santos Ramírez García, the grandson and namesake of the original director of the Alacrán *comparsa*, was director of this 170-person ensemble. The group continues to perform despite economic hardships (Bauza 2003).

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