

Separated by the Slave Trade: Nigerians and Cubans reunite through a shared cultural practice¹

- Ivor L. Miller

Introduction

Throughout the twentieth century, scholars have debated the roles of West African cultural systems in the formation of societies in the Western Hemisphere. Many distinct models have been presented, some emphasizing 'absolute innovation' after a complete break with cultural systems in African source regions, others taking a romantic view of continuities despite a gauntlet of obstacles. Generalizations are hazardous, thanks to the wide variety of experiences during the period of the Atlantic slave trade; Africans left different regions, at different times, and entered vastly different colonial situations. This essay looks at a very specific African institution — the *Ékpè* leopard society — from a well-defined source region — the Cross River region of Nigeria and Cameroun, and its historically related Caribbean counterpart — the *Abakuá* society of Havana and Matanzas Cuba. Here I am not interested in proving either continuity or innovation, since living cultural practices are reinterpreted with each generation under any circumstances. The perspectives of culture bearers from either side of a trans-Atlantic tradition are rarely heard in the literature about their practices. Instead, we often read the work of anthropologists who come back from the field and write from their particular theoretical position.

This essay centres upon the views of leaders from both societies who have participated in recent meetings to display their traditions to each other in order to find common ground, whether in the confirmation of a shared symbolic vocabulary (called *Nsibidi* in West Africa) that includes a system of gestures, body masks, percussion ensembles, chants in a ritual language, geometric signs, and auditory vibrations from within an inner sanctum. Because they are responsible for the maintenance of these systems, and have

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privileged access to information about their history and codes, their views should be of great interest to scholars.

Africans founded the *Abakuá* society in colonial Cuba in the 1800s. Today there are some 150 lodges and 20,000 members in the port cities of Matanzas and Havana. Since 2001, *Abakuá* leaders have participated in a series of meetings with representatives of their major source institution, the *Ékpè* (leopard) society of Nigeria and Cameroon. Since *Abakuá* and *Ékpè* do not speak the same colonial languages (Spanish and English), they have been communicating through the performance of *Nsibidi*. The process of these performances, including the selection of chants, body masks, and percussion, has presented new data useful in mapping the cultural history of this trans-Atlantic continuum.

Background

Decades ago, Cuban specialists foresaw the possibility of this unprecedented trans-Atlantic dialogue in what I am calling the '*Ékpè-Abakuá* continuum'.² Sixty years ago when concluding an essay about *Abakuá* performance as ritual theatre, Don Fernando Ortiz wrote,

All evidence points to the remote antiquity of these esoteric afro-occidental fraternities. Undoubtedly, the detailed study of its Afro-Cuban survivals could partially rectify the ignorance, until now not dissipated, about the liturgical functions of the secret African fraternities . . . The scientific study of these secret fraternities of black provenance existing in America, particularly in Cuba, will without doubt help to better understand their African predecessors.³

Ortiz underscored the value of comparative research, but he may not have imagined the extent of the intimate involvement of *Abakuá* and *Ékpè* leaders themselves in the current process; the interest in communication is being generated by culture bearers on both sides who seek insight into the practices and symbols of their counterparts.

Additionally, after a lifetime studying the *Abakuá*, the eminent Cuban folklorist Lydia Cabrera pondered how future Africanists might use the data she had gathered. She refers to the African founders of *Abakuá* in Cuba as "Carabalí," since many embarked from the port city of Calabar:

In a 1948 essay, North American anthropologist Melville Herskovits observed that since the study of cultural elements taught by Africans to members of American societies can help scholars better understand their African source regions, a trans-Atlantic dialogue can only be a win-win situation.

Ortiz was also comparing ancient Greek ritual to *Ékpè* and *Abakuá*, thus the term "afro-occidental." "Todo lleva a pensar en la remota antigüedad de esas esotéricas fraternidades afrooccidentales. Indudablemente, el estudio minucioso de sus supervivencias afrocubanas podrá suplir en parte el desconocimiento, hasta ahora no disipado, del funcionamiento litúrgico de las secretas fraternidades africanas . . . El estudio científico de esas secretas fraternidades de troncalidad negra existentes en América, particularmente en Cuba, ayudará sin duda a la mejor comprensión de sus antecesoras de las naciones y tribus africanas." (Ortiz 1950: 101).

Is it possible that the traditional narratives, the liturgy and the language conserved by the descendants of Carabalí in Cuba — the only slave society in which has developed this type of society emanated from the distant *Ékpè* — will be of interest to the study of the old societies that survive along the [African] coast, that are said to be threatened to the point of disappearing? Who knows if what has been lost there from foreign influences is still conserved in Cuba.⁴

Cabrera's questions illuminate two overarching questions discussed below by the culture bearers: to what extent do the immense narratives of *Abakuá* bear relation to the history of *Ékpè* in Africa, and to what extent does *Abakuá* retain ideas and teachings from there?

The recent 'summit meetings' between Nigerians and Cubans are drawing attention to a little known aspect of African-centred internationalism, since members of both groups are representatives of an indigenous government that emerged hundreds of years ago in the Calabar region of Nigeria and Cameroun. The Nigerian *Ékpè* (leopard), and the Cuban *Abakuá* both are hierarchically graded, with emblematic masked dance performance. The leaders of both groups believe their exchanges will strengthen both communities.

Before these meetings, neither the Nigerians nor the Cubans could confirm the existence of the other. The process began in 2000 when the Nigerians recognized words from their own language in a Cuban chant that identifies the port city of Calabar, Nigeria, as a source for *Abakuá*.⁵ Specifically, the first Cuban lodge, Efi Kebutón, was named after Obutong, an Efik community in Calabar. With each meeting, as culture bearers on each side are studying the performance styles and language of the others, the communication has become more specific and therefore understood by a wider audience of initiates. As news of these encounters is being diffused on both sides of the Atlantic — through word-of-mouth, radio, television, the internet, newspapers, and scholarly literature — a cultural movement is developing as members of both groups organize themselves for future encounters.⁶ This

⁴ "¿Será posible que los relatos de tradiciones, la liturgia y el lenguaje que los descendientes de carabalíes conservaron en Cuba — único país esclavista en que este tipo de sociedad emanada de la lejana Ékpè se ha desarrollado, ofrecieran algún interés al estudio de las viejas sociedades que sobreviven en la Costa, ya amenazadas, según nos dicen de desaparecer? ¿Quién sabe si lo que se ha perdido allí por influencias extracas aún se conserva en Cuba. Y también pensamos en algún futuro escudricador de nuestras cosas, interesado por estos apuntes, que armándose de paciencia y con mayores facilidades para penetrar en el interior de la Potencia, cuyo acceso está vedado a las mujeres, continúe en terreno poco explotado y rico aún, las búsquedas iniciadas a principios de siglo por el sociólogo español Don Rafael Salillas, en un artículo inconcluso publicado en Madrid, y luego por Don Fernando Ortiz." (Cabrera 1988: 10).

⁵ A transcription of this chant published in Miller (2000) was the source for the Nigerians. This process is reviewed in Miller (2005).

⁶ These items include: An Afropop Worldwide radio program "Voice of the Leopard" (available on the internet); televised interviews with the Cubans (2004), and with the author in Calabar (2004, 2005, 2008), several newspapers articles in Calabar and Cuba, the monograph "Voice of the Leopard" (2009). The webpage Afrocubaweb.com has posted some of the newspaper articles, and some information about general process.

essay documents the unfolding process from the perspectives of several participating culture bearers.

2001 Brooklyn, New York

In 2001, the first meeting between *Ékpè* and *Abakuá* occurred in New York City, when each group brought their masquerades, percussion and songs, and displayed them for the other.⁷ The leader of the Cuban group was Mr. 'Román' Díaz, a professional percussionist from Havana, living in New York City since 1999. Díaz used inherited ritual chants to greet their *Èfik* hosts and to present the Cubans as linked to Calabar people through initiation lineages that have been continuous since their founding by Africans in Cuba. A man of few words, Mr. Díaz described his impressions of this encounter:

The first impression came when we participated in the first encounter with the *Èfiks* in 2001 in Brooklyn. We assimilated the experience after the event by watching a video of our performance, when we saw that the *Èfiks* were able to recognize some of our words that came from their sources. And this gave us more security.

In other words, the Cubans selected materials from their inherited narratives to perform for Cross River peoples. Since the event was video-recorded, they were able to analyse the responses of their *Èfik* counterparts to their phrases, music, and dance, a method of comparative research.

2003 Michigan

Two years later, the organizers of the same *Èfik* National Association received another Cuban contingent at their annual meeting. 'Román' Díaz again participated, along with Mr. Ángel Guerrero, a master *Abakuá* chanter who had recently migrated from Havana. Díaz reported:

Later in Michigan, we had the possibility of going with the maestro Ángel Guerrero, and the emotion was shared, since he is erudite in this material. While watching the *Èfik* performances, he could recognize all the liturgy that he has studied in Cuba through their dances, songs, as well as the comportment and treatment by the collective group of *Èfiks* in this event.

Both Cubans were moved by their interactions with the *Èfik* community, from their hospitable reception and private meeting with the *Obong* of Calabar, to the performances of traditional culture.⁸

2004 Calabar

Resulting from these encounters, in 2004, two Cuban *Abakuá* musicians travelled to Calabar, Nigeria to participate in the International *Ékpè* festival, at the invitation of the Governor of Cross River State. After observing their performances, one *Ékpè* leader, Engineer B.E. Bassey, wrote:

The spontaneous reactions of the Cubans to *Ékpè*/Mgbè music, dance forms, acclamations and others, proved beyond doubt to the Cubans and *Ékpè*/Mgbè exponents that *Abakuá* and *Ékpè*/Mgbè are sister organizations with the same root. All are employing the same techniques to bring man into conscious contact with his psyche and enable him to know himself.⁹

If the Nigerians recognized the Cubans through their interactions with *Ékpè*, the Cubans were equally moved. Reflecting upon his performances in Calabar, 'Román' Díaz told me:

The experience of being in Calabar was quite emotional, since the encounter with the land of an entire history known through the liturgy of the society or institution to which we belong, known as the *Abakuá*, gave us a sense of security, and filled us with respect towards all those persons who had made possible the survival of our institution, our religion, our lodges, however one might phrase it, through the onslaught of the years, based upon veracious acts conserved through the liturgy. Being in Calabar was also very emotional from the cultural point of view, of having the opportunity to visit these sacred places.

By "onslaught of the years," Díaz refers to the long history of oppression suffered by *Abakuá* in the colonial, republican, and revolutionary periods of Cuban history. As a political institution, a 'state within a state', *Abakuá* has by and large not been viewed kindly by the national authorities.¹⁰ The experience of interacting with African counterparts in a celebratory event outside of the Cuban context no doubt contributed to some of the excitement from the Cubans.

As witness to the performance of the Cubans at the Calabar Cultural Centre, I was struck by the dramatic response of the public to the chanting and dancing of 'Román', and the lead drumming of Vicente Sánchez (for a detailed description, see Miller 2009). About this palpable connection with the Calabar people, Román remarked:

⁹ Citation from Eng. Bassey's foreword to Miller (2009: xix).

¹⁰ To name three examples, from the colonial, republican, and socialist periods, Cf. Trujillo y Monagas, D. José. 1882. *Los criminales de Cuba y D. José Trujillo: narración de los servicios prestados en el cuerpo de policía de La Habana*. Barcelona: Establecimiento Tipográfico de Fidel Giro; Roche y Monteagudo, Rafael. 1908. *La policía y sus misterios en Cuba; adicionada con 'La policía judicial', procedimientos, formularios, leyes, reglamentos, ordenanzas y disposiciones que conciernen a los cuerpos de seguridad pública*. Primera edición. La Habana: Imprenta 'La prueba'; "La sociedad secreta Abakuó (c6cigos)." 1969. *Revista Jurídica Militar*. Ministerio de las FAR. Vol. 1. Pps. 13-24.

⁷ The events leading up to this encounter are described in Miller (2005).

⁸ See Guerrero (2007) for his reflections upon this event.

Being in Calabar, regarding the connection, I can't say that we searched this connection, as in: 'Ok, let's find the connection.' No. The connection was that through the previous years of study, through the entire liturgy that is the fundamental base of our information, we knew that this connection existed. Now, the act of being a participant filled us with satisfaction, and filled us with admiration and respect towards all those persons who had jealously guarded this information through the ritual, and by respecting sacred words or sacred acts, so that we have been able, through this language or liturgy, to be recognized by our brothers in Calabar.

Responses of *Ékpè* leaders to the Cubans in Calabar

For those present at the Cuban performance in Calabar, the experience had an immediate and lasting effect. Chief *Ékpènyong* Eyo Honesty Eyo II, an *Ékpè* title-holder in the Efe *Ékpè* Eyo Ema, commented upon the influence of the Cubans in Calabar:

I participated in the 2004 International *Ékpè* Festival when the Cuban *Abakuá* arrived. I hold them in a very high esteem; we thought that since their forefathers were taken to that place and died, we thought that was the end of the Cubans. My impression is that we should bring them again to Calabar; let people know that their great-great-grand-children are still existing. When the *Abakuá* sing their *Ékpè*, they start calling upon different owners of *Ékpè* here in Africa, and it has a very high meaning for me. When their forefathers left, the impression is that they disappeared forever, but now we know that they still have the *Ékpè* society in them, they hold that *Ékpè*, they did not forget it in spite of their torture. The message is that we here should educate our people, that those brothers who were taken away for slavery, that their children are still alive, and we should respect them, honour them, and be happy to see them.

The myriad obstacles facing *Ékpè* members in contemporary south-eastern Nigeria are such that the example of Cuban *Abakuá* is helping locals to reassess their practice and its values. Chief Ekon E. Imona, the Secretary of the Big Qua Clan Mgbè (*Ékpè*), describes how Cuban *Abakuá* has affected his own inherited practice of Mgbè:

At one time in my life, I did not associate myself with Mgbè, even though I was a title-holder. But the advent of the coming of the Cubans into Calabar for the International *Ékpè* festival in 2004 awakened a revival in my life. I asked myself: if the Cubans, who were taken from the soil of Africa to where they are today, could sustain Mgbè for over 200 years, why should we in Calabar allow Mgbè to die? There are a lot of things fighting Mgbè, wanting it to die, for instance the Churches around us here, they say Mgbè is 'fetish', and they preach against Mgbè. But if people who left here centuries ago, were able to keep Mgbè for so long, and they are still

wanting it to exist, then there is something in Mgbè.

The Cuban example of faith in the value of inherited traditions with sources in the Calabar region is remarkable for the contemporary *Ékpè*, who are struggling with the legacy of British colonization that dismantled the power of jurisprudence that *Ékpè* embodied in the pre-colonial period.

Nigerian *Ékpè* organize for the Paris encounter

The 2004 visit of the Cubans to Calabar was well-documented on the internet. This resource drew the attention of 'culture brokers' in Paris, who arranged for an invitation through the prestigious Musée Quai Branly for representatives of *Ékpè* and *Abakuá* to meet onstage for a series of performances in 2007.¹¹ To prepare for this event, Calabar *Ékpè* leaders wisely created a multi-ethnic group in order to reflect the diversity of *Ékpè* traditions in the region, countering the dangerous 'ethnic nationalism' that has been used to divide historically related peoples.¹² The creation of Calabar Mgbè is a wonderful example of how the trans-Atlantic dialogue is useful in the local contexts of *Ékpè* in Nigeria. Precisely because the Cuban 'treaties' (mythic-histories) describe the creation of *Abakuá* through the contributions of each ethnic group in the Calabar region, the Cuban presence has helped local leaders insist on contemporary regional solidarity. Chief Ekon E. Imona, the President of Calabar Mgbè, explains:

Ékpè in fact is an important vehicle to maintain peace in the region, and we have formed the Calabar Mgbè association in order to bring all *Ékpè* groups together. Since the *Èfiks*, the *Efuts*, and the *Quas* are always fighting each other, we felt that we could use *Ékpè* to bring unity between these groups. The birth of Calabar Mgbè is meant to unite these three ethnic groups in Calabar, because we have everything in common through *Ékpè*. And the rules in Mgbè, the laws, what happens in Qua land happens the same way in *Èfik* and *Efut* land. Forming this association is a means of bringing in peace which the Church cannot give us.

If on the one hand *Ékpè* represents for the Cubans a source for their practice, on the other hand, the Cubans represent for the Nigerians a proof of the value of their ancestral traditions. The *Iyamba* of Efe *Ékpè* Eyo Ema, Bassey Ekpo Bassey has recognized the potential of *Ékpè* — in an international perspective — as a political tool that can help mend divisions in the society. He spoke about the formation of Calabar Mgbè to foster international communication and regional peace:

¹¹ Special thanks to Alex Jomaron for his vision and efforts to make this event happen.

¹² For details, see Okwudiba Nnoli (*Ethnic politics in Nigeria*. Enugu, Nigeria: Fourth Dimension publishers, 1978).

Members of the Eyo Ema lodge invited the lodges of other ethnic areas, among the Èfik, Efut, Okonyong, Qua, and Umon, to join us in the formation of Calabar Mgbè in 2007. Until then, there was an altogether unacceptable situation in Calabar. The various ethnic areas were at daggers drawn against each other, and there was a real danger that the place might descend into episodic and miasmic violence, such as we have in the Niger Delta.

Ékpè was the culture of choice because it is practiced in each of these principalities or ethnic areas, where *Ékpè* is central to the traditional governance; *Ékpè* is the law, so to speak. Outside of the modern state system, *Ékpè* is the only social form that has authority and can organize. So we chose *Ékpè* and went to work with it.

If *Ékpè* was the traditional government in the Calabar region, it is now certainly not the official one. The contemporary power of *Ékpè* is in the cultural realm, where it is central to local identity. Calabar Mgbè was formed to represent the region culturally, as Iyamba B.E. Bassey continues to explain:

The real attraction for the participating lodges was an opportunity to share in the organization of the International *Ékpè* Festival which we had initiated in 2002 at the Eyo Ema lodge. We were ready to share it, in order to enlarge it, make it truly international, and place it at the disposal of the work of unity. The international *Ékpè* festival is now organized by the aggregate of *Ékpè* lodges of the Èfik, Efut, Okonyong, Qua, and Umon.

The festival became international in 2004 with the participation of Cuban *Abakuá*. Before that, we had the participation of Cameroon *Ékpè* members, but there was never a formalized participation from Cameroon; instead, members of the *Ékpè* society who were autochthonous to Cameroon, and who happened to be around, participated.

Ékpè has several provenances; there are many kinds of influences upon the Èfik *Ékpè*, from Balondo, Ekoi (Ejagham), Igbo, Qua, etc. We have these in the incantations, in the chants, even in the masquerades, to the extent that even royal British tradition is incorporated into *Ékpè*. So reaching out in the format of Calabar Mgbè affords us an opportunity of making direct contact with the sources of some of these influences that have made our *Ékpè* very eclectic.

Ékpè is called by different names in different places. By and large, it translates as leopard or lion. What puts all these leopard societies together is the centrality of the deity called Mboko. That is our Mother. Like the Great Mother Goddesses of other civilizations — Anat in Canaan, Inana in Sumeria, Ishtar in Babylon, Aphrodite in Greece, Isis in Egypt — in *Ékpè* communities, Mboko is our Mother.

Ékpè, to the extent that it expresses the sovereignty of a community, is for that reason rather isolate, and doesn't lend itself to corporation with *Ékpè* from other places. The only thing that made a difference to that kind of

attitude in ancient times was the activity of Èfik traders, who took *Ékpè* wherever they went, and they were able to plant *Ékpè* in sundry places, and there was for that reason, some kind of flow in the culture. What we are doing now goes beyond the ambience created by trade. By bringing *Ékpè* from sundry places together, we reveal ourselves to each other, learn from each other, and we find that what comes out in terms of entertainment value, at least, is quite enchanting.

To prepare for the staged encounter with Cuban *Abakuá* in Paris, Calabar Mgbè selected an all-star group of performers. The members included chiefs and *abanékpè* (first-level initiates) who could drum, dance, sing, and perform *Nsibidi*, the esoteric form of *Ékpè* communication using gestures, percussion, and visual symbols. Bassey continues:

The process of selecting the participants was very interesting. Everybody in Calabar Mgbè is technically competent in *Ékpè* matters, everybody is a chanter, the young people are all drummers; you have people practicing *Nsibidi* from the point of view of where they come from, even while certain *Nsibidi* forms are general. So it was quite interesting to put all these things together, to draw from all the participating ethnic groups with their differences, and then to wield them into a team that could perform together.

Participants reflecting upon the Paris encounters

In December of 2007 at the Musée Quai Branly in Paris, there were five staged performances, one of them recorded professionally. With only two days of rehearsal, no script, and no previous communication among the two groups, the events were exploratory and spontaneous. Among the Cubans, Angel Guerrero, a title-holder from the Itiá Mukandá Efó lodge, reflects:

The encounter in Paris was very well organized and important. Aside from the informal encounter in 2001 with the Èfik National Association in Brooklyn, this was the first time that officially, members of both Cuban *Abakuá* and Nigerian *Ékpè* participated together in an activity of such magnitude in a place as important as the Musée Quai Branly of Paris. This was the first time in nearly 200 years that Cuban *Abakuá* and the representatives of their African ancestors had the possibility of sharing the same stage; this event had global repercussions as the first stage in a long path to follow in the process of reunification of both cultures.

Our *Abakuá* music is a consequence of that music played in Calabar, of course it has suffered rhythmic transformations, but the encounter in Paris demonstrated that we could play together, and more importantly it proved that the legacy left by the first arrivals from Calabar who created and developed Cuban *Abakuá*, was genuine and authentic.

Guerrero's assessment demonstrates several complementary agendas in the process of communication with Calabar: to confirm the Calabar sources for Abakua traditions, to articulate the desire for increased contact, and to express the grandeur of *Ékpè* and *Abakuá* for the contemporary Cuban leadership.

Another Cuban performer, Pedro Martinez, an *abanékue* (first-level initiate) of the Ekuertonkó lodge in Havana, reflects upon his learning process and conclusions while in Paris:

The experience in Paris with the Calabar Mgbè was quite moving, since there were so many similar things, and so many similar energies to those of the *Abakuá* ceremonies in Cuba. Also, we had many very positive interactions before the concerts. I went several times to the Calabar Mgbè dressing-room to observe their drums, how they were constructed; the conversations with them, and their reactions to our comportment towards them, was very beautiful. I had many moments with the Iyamba of Okoyong, and we had a good spiritual connection. We communicated through signs, energies, he through *Ékpè* symbols, and I through *Abakuá* symbols. And I had a very good connection with others in Calabar Mgbè.

It was an historical meeting, because we came from *there*, and from there came the *Abakuá* religion that we profess in Cuba, that we have always tried to maintain by following the roots left by our ancestors many years ago. I feel very content to be part of this wonderful project.

By saying: "we came from there," Pedro signals how powerfully the Carabalí migrants affected the social identity of many Cuban communities into the present. The multi-layered interests of the Cubans in the Calabar group, from their social protocol, to their material culture, to the energy they emanated while performing indicate how meaningful this encounter was. Pedro continues:

During these concerts there were many powerful moments when my hair stood on end, because — apart from the fact that were trying to represent what we do in Cuba, and they what they do in Calabar — for a concert it was quite close to ceremony, and we shared many beautiful moments of unity at the finale of each concert when we joined them to play together.

It was a unique experience, being the first time I had the opportunity to play with an African group like this, interacting with them on stage, playing their instruments; it was good, truly a very emotional experience.

Regarding their manner of playing and dancing, we share many things in common. Cuba is a place where people are always trying to update by using new ideas, adapting to the conditions of the time. In Calabar, I think that things were better conserved as they were in the past. For example in Cuba the dances are more virtuosic, using more stylistic movements, more exaggerated, with a wide repertory of movements that a soloist uses. Also,

in the *Abakuá* we have influences from many other African cultures that arrived to Cuba. The African Íreme [body mask], according to what I saw, dances more with movements like those of a cabildo [nation-group], like a procession or a march on Three King's Day, quite distinct from that of a soloist as such.

Pedro observed the overall feeling of communion and joy in the group experience, while explaining differences in terms of adaptation to different social contexts. His idea that the Calabar *Ékpè* perform like a 'nation-group' of the Cuban colonial period suggests that he sees the *Ékpè* performance as representing a past from which the *Abakuá* has transformed. In what follows, he uses several *Abauká* terms that are derived from Èfik, the lingua franca of the Calabar region:

Regarding their masquerade costume, it's not far from ours at all! It has the same 'nkanika' [bell]; its 'ita muson' [hat disc] is a little bigger, but it seems to represent the same idea, the same message. About the music, I repeat that in Cuba there is a very large rhythmic repertory, but it was very easy to intertwine our two rhythmic traditions. Although their 'erikunde' [rattles] use a rhythmic pattern that we could not easily follow, the drums are indeed very similar, in terms of their sound, as well as construction. One distinction in the music is that the 'biankomeko' [drum ensemble] in Cuba has a larger solo drum, while the *Ékpè* solo drum was small. But in general I saw much similarity, as well as a very good connection between the Nigerians and us. I think that it was easier for us to learn their songs, than for them to learn ours. Also that it was harder for them to incorporate themselves to our playing, because of the complexity of our rhythms, of our language, and also because the manner in which we chant *Abakuá* is much more melodic and varied, while their melodies were repetitive. Even so, it's not too far from our tradition.

Whereas all the Cubans in Paris were professional musicians, the Calabar troupe, with two exceptions, were not professional performers. This factor affected the performances, and was observed by Pedro:

I think that for Calabar Mgbè it was surprising to have left their land to participate in the Paris encounter. I think that they would have demonstrated many more details of their culture, like the gestures [*Nsibidi*] that speak through signs, but they were not very relaxed onstage. We Cubans are religious but at the same time we are artists, and we have one way of practising the religion away from the stage, and another way onstage. I think the next time they will feel much more comfortable and be freer. For example Bassey Jr., the son of the Iyamba of Ekoretonko, is a person with professional experience onstage; he helped out a lot, and there was a good connection with him too.

I think that for us the encounter was even more moving, because the *Abakuá* didn't come from Cuba, it came from Calabar. For us the impact

was stronger, but since we are artists, we know how to control this emotion more than they who have not travelled as much; some had left Calabar for the first time. Myself, I was observing all the time, checking each one of them, their instruments, how they moved on the stage, how they sang, and developed their expression.

A fascinating aspect of Pedro's testimony is his awareness of the historic role the Cubans were playing. Communication with West African *Ékpè* has been a dream for many *Abakuá* leaders (as I learned from them over the years), yet the opportunity to travel was absent. This understanding forms part of the sensitivity of the Cubans towards their Calabar counterparts.

One of the common themes in the reflections of members of both groups, was their impression of the correct social protocol, of greeting, of respect, of acknowledgement, and communication through signs. Chief *Ékpènyong É. Ekpo*, the *Obong-Iyamba* of Okoyong, mentions this aspect:

I am very happy about Paris, because of the way the Cubans mixed themselves with us. Very very happy! Even in the hotel and in the theatre, how they mix with us made me very happy! Some of them do not 'hear' English, very few of them speak English well, that was the only difficulty we had with them. But how they performed their *Ékpè*, I was shocked to see people who had left Africa or Nigeria for years, but yet they were still maintaining that culture. I was very happy. One very slight difference from their own *Ékpè* and our own here, is that we use raffia [netting for the Idem Ikwo masquerade], but they use cloth for their masquerade. I believe they could not get raffia where they live. From the drums, if you see the drums that they make by themselves, you will know that they are from here in Africa. I was happy to see those things. Even how they perform their dancing, singing, drumming, the rhythm of their drumming I was happy about it. Even up to the time we came back here, the socialism between ourselves and the Cubans shows that we have another set of relatives elsewhere. If you listen to most of the songs of the Cubans, you will hear our language. For instance, when they pronounce 'Mboko' [an *Ékpè* grade], though they don't pronounce it as we do, you will know that it is Mboko that they are singing. They mentioned the titles Obong Iyamba, they mentioned Dibo, they mentioned some of our villages here, like Obutong, and Usaghade.

Another member of Calabar Mgbè, Chief Hayford Solomon Edet is a leader of Mgbè ceremonies in Qua-Ejagham communities of Calabar Municipality. He led many songs in the Paris performances. Since the term *Abakuá* likely derives from the 'Àbàkpà' (or Qua-Ejagham) community of Calabar, Chief Edet has no hesitation in claiming the Cuban *Abakuá* as part of his own community:

Every Qua Ejagham community we have here [in Calabar] has a counterpart in the Cameroons, because people migrated from there to here. We know that the Cuban *Abakuá* are Qua people, they are

Abakpa people. They are our own kith and kin, our brethren who travelled out from us. Everything that hovers in *Abakuá*, you can see the replica here. Particularly the *Nsibidi* signs, which we have here.

I recognized a lot our own traditions in what the Cubans did. In Calabar, in the Idagha [title-taking] time, in the early hours of the morning the young people will go out with the masquerade and inform the people in the community that something will happen. Christmas time, they also play, they perform with the masquerades, particularly there will be one drum used to talk to the masquerade when playing. The Cubans did this on stage in Paris. My impression is that we are waiting to receive them in Calabar any day, because we know that they are our brothers and sisters, and that they came from us.

The *Ékpè* and *Abakuá* musical structures are similar, both in the rhythms expressed, and in the approach to performance. Both begin with a vocal statement that introduces the performers, demonstrates their status, then greets the celestial bodies, the present members, and finally enters into the content of the song. Chief Edet comments upon this:

I noticed that the Cuban singing pattern is similar, when they start singing, there is a prelude, you don't just start singing straight in Mgbè. It's not permitted. You first do the chorusing, you sing a prelude before you start singing the actual song. When the masquerade recognizes you and greets you here, at the end we raise our shoulders in appreciation, they did that too! And our masquerades carry a staff to show their status, the Cuban masks also used staffs. And they still maintain their Ebongo masquerade with a straight head, erect. Their culture is very similar. They have a different approach to the use of the bell, but it's still a bell. I say Thank God for the Cubans, thank God they have maintained the culture they have brought from here, it's good!

We also noticed that when we merged and danced together at the show finale in Paris, their beats merged with ours, and they played very similar rhythms. During the finale of the last Paris show, we really felt the unity, it was a hallmark event. We were touched, and sharing that unity and fellowship again, there was so much affection and love, we felt that these are our people, and that there is a need to reunite.

I am interested in continuing to perform with the Cubans in festivals, because we need to propagate Mgbè, we want people to realize that Mgbè is a pillar in the world, that it has crossed the ocean, it is everywhere, and we want people to realize too that it can unite people very much, and we want to hold that unity and keep it for generations to come. Many of our people were taken to far away, and they still can come back and we can continue, so that nobody feels badly about what happened in the past.

We are looking forward to that reunion with the Cubans one day, we have been praying for it. Others were selling our people, but the Quas did not run slave markets. Our people could be sent on an errand and captured, they were captured on their farms, or captured while fishing at sea. But we thank God that the Quas and Ejaghams did not engage in the slave trade. But we know that we lost quite a large chunk of our people. Those who did that, they know who they are, but we are looking forward to uniting with our Cuban family, that is the truth about it!

Chief Edet brings up the issue that the encounters with Cuban *Abakuá* will lead to reflections about Calabar history and the involvement of local leaders in the slave trade. Edet is quick to disassociate Qua ancestors from the mercantile aspect of *Ékpè*'s trans-Atlantic sojourn, an historical problem that is not fully settled.¹³

From an Efut community in Creek Town, Etim Ika is initiated into all the masquerade clubs of the *Ẹfik* Kingdom. He is highly trained in the inner-workings of *Ékpè*:

Ever since we got to Paris, we joined the Cuban *Abakuá*, and they received us very well first with drinks, then with gifts, as it should be. We give thanks to the Cuban brothers, whose ancestors were taken away from us by the slave trade. In Paris we went to perform our own traditional *Ékpè*, and the Cubans also came with their own *Ékpè*, their own tradition. The way they played it was very nice, we loved it, and we danced together with them, and they danced together with us because they like the way we play our *Ékpè*. We shared the same hotel, the same dining table, we mixed up, and we enjoyed everything together, and we were very happy. By the grace of God, we will share together again, Enshalla.

No matter that their masquerade was not like ours, the way they play, sing, and chant, convinced us that they really know something about *Ékpè*, because their chanting showed us that they were from this part of the country. They chanted in their own language, for example: "Ebonko Enyenisong", meaning "Ebonko from *Ẹfikland*" in *Ẹfik*, so these things made us understand that they are not novices in what they are doing, no matter that they don't chant as we do, but they gave us the impression that they are from here, because they chanted: "Efut Ibonda Enyenisong," a place here in Calabar. Maybe some of them are from Efut Ibonda. And the rest of them might have joined together to keep up this *Ékpè* in the way that

they feel that it is good to maintain the culture of the Cross River region, where they come from.

The way they dance, no matter that they do not dance as we dance, but we recognize what they do as part of our own. Their drums are the same that we have in Calabar, no matter that the rhythmic patterns are not the same, but when they play we dance together with them very well.

Many Calabar Mgbè members emphasized their happiness in sharing their culture onstage with Cuban counterparts. Some comments about the distinctions in music and body mask performance, while too general for use in comparative analysis, demonstrate that all the participants are engaged in a process of critical dialogue, and comprehend its relevance for contemporary identity.

Inameti Orok Edet is a professional musician who played with the Calabar Cultural Centre ensemble for eight years. During the Paris encounter he played the lead 'talking' drum, and seems to have enjoyed the challenge to his talents provided by the Cubans:

I felt very comfortable in Paris with the Cubans, who received us as friends and brothers. I appreciate them, for their drumming, and for their singing. They sang two types of music that I liked and I tried to memorize. Even till now I'm singing them here for myself. If someone asked me what the song means, I could not tell them, but I like it very much. Even if I don't know the meaning, their singing is very fine. Their drumming is different from ours, so I tried to learn from them, and even today I try to imitate the way they were drumming. If I had two months with them, I could learn it well.

I felt very good in Paris, the experience was very challenging; I had to work hard to meet up with the Cubans. They were challenging me, so now I am training my own voice to improve. The man with dread-locks [Pedrito], he make me vex, that's why I drum very hard these days, to do my best. I like challenges, because they make me grow, and I want to learn more. By the time we left Paris, we made friends with the Cubans.

I have worked professionally at the Calabar Cultural Centre for several years, and I can play 26 out of the 36 Nigerian cultural dances. I have had many good teachers, and I have surpassed them. I am very confident of myself, but in Paris, the Cubans made me sweat.

But when it came to the masquerades, the Cubans could not surpass us, we 'xed' them out. Nigeria has so many masquerade styles, and our *Ékpè* is very colourful.

¹³ Regarding Chief Edet's comment, historian David Northrup (2009 pers. com.) responded: "I think the Qua gentleman could be correct, if, by selling slaves, he means selling them directly to Europeans. As you know, the *Ẹfik* were quite successful in monopolizing that part of the business along the Cross River Estuary. If he wishes to assert that the Qua had no subordinate role in the slave trade, I fear the weight of evidence stands against him."

The sheer pleasure in meeting worthy competitors in an aesthetic 'battle' was part of Inameti's experience. Even the last comment about how the Calabar masquerades were more beautiful than those of Cuba is playful, in that 'they may have won over me in drumming, but we also won in masking.'

Ekpo Ekeng is the Chairman of the Youth Leaders of the Èfik Kingdom. He joined the Calabar Mgbè team in Paris, to sing, play the *nkong* 'gong', and dance:

Being in Paris with Calabar Mgbè was a wonderful experience; it was the first time I traveled abroad. The people of Paris were so caring, they were happy for the tradition of *Ékpè*, and *Ékpè* was exposed to the international world there.

We did not know how to differentiate between the Cubans and Nigerians, because we interacted from the beginning to the end . . . In fact they felt like coming back to Nigeria. Some of them felt like they were Nigerians who were robbed of their own home, so they were supposed to go along with us. In fact we exchanged some gifts, and we promised to meet again. We are expecting to receive them in Nigeria because we know they are our brothers.

Some Cubans perceived the Nigerians as playing an ancient form of *Ékpè*; at the same time, some *Ékpè* perceived the Cubans as representing their past by evoking places in Calabar through chanting and performance style. Ekpo Ekeng continues:

At the early stage of our program in Paris, we saw that it was an ancient *Ékpè* that they were playing, but as interaction went on day by day, we understood them very well. And what they were playing, we picked it up and understood it was the same *Ékpè* that we were playing, the rhythms the sounds, the signs of *Ékpè*, everything was the same; so we really understood and know that they were from Calabar, they were from Èfik, Efut, Qua, and Umon; because whatever they did in their *Ékpè* was a reflection of our *Ékpè*. Even though we modernize it in an English way, if you look at it very well, you will see that it's the same thing. The costumes they used, though some of them were small [i.e., did not have the large raffia chest piece the *Ékpè* mask has], but they were the same masquerades of our modern *Ékpè*. So we find it accommodating, and we really believe that they are our brothers.

Responses of leaders in Calabar

Apart from the potential to use *Ékpè* and *Abakuá* performance for comparative analysis bearing upon historical relationships, the existence of a trans-Atlantic relationship is inspiring many Calabar leaders to think practically about their traditions in a global context. Since state and federal politicians in Nigeria have presented a festival-based tourism as an important project, *Ékpè* leaders are presenting the celebratory aspects of their traditions as ideal for festivals. The former Governor of Cross River State, Donald Duke,

organized annual carnival celebrations during his tenure, an idea that has been followed in various parts of the country. Bassey Ekpo Bassey, the organizer of the International *Ékpè* Festival, and the Iyamba of *Efe Ékpè Eyo Ema*, presented the idea of the *Ékpè-Abakuá* continuum to a Nigerian tourism bureau, emphasizing the interests in Americans of African descent in participating:

The aspect of *Ékpè* that concerns me is the culture. Because as a people we need self-identity. Black people in the Americas and Europe understand this much more than we do. Because people tend to look at them as not having any form of identity except that from the bush. So when they see a cultural form like *Ékpè*, they tend to cling to it, because it is self-identity for them; it is also proof that they did not come from the bush. Because *Ékpè* is a very high cultural form; it is religious, it embodies traditional philosophy, there are colourful celebratory aspects. So for them, *Ékpè* is proof that they had their own civilization.

The first form of writing in sub-Saharan Africa is *Nsibidi*, which came from *Ékpè*, and survives in our *ukara* cloth and our inner temples. We have our own civilization, and as you study civilizations in ancient Egypt, China, Mesopotamia, Greece, etc., we also have our own civilization, which is embodied in *Ékpè*. So if you throw that away under the onslaught of Christianity, what is left? What is it that points to the fact that you have roots comparable to those of other peoples: white people, yellow people, and so forth. Because they look at Black people in the Americas, who answer to English names, practice the Christian religion, and wear European clothes.

So the Cubans, who for over 200 years have clung onto this *Ékpè* cultural form, practiced it and deepened it, their hearts will bleed, if they come back here and see that Christianity has wiped *Ékpè* out from the base. In fact, people could then look at what they are presenting in Cuba as a fake, as something with no origins! As a people, there is no greater embodiment of our culture than *Ékpè*, which was and is a highly developed cultural form.¹⁴

Bassey exemplifies how *Ékpè* leaders are inserting the new awareness about *Abakuá* into a contemporary dialogue about tourism, in the hopes of sustaining international festivals centered upon *Ékpè*.¹⁵

In Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Iberedem Fred Eno Essien built upon the momentum of the *Ékpè-Abakuá* encounters by organizing a group called Efe Nkomo Ibom (shrine of the great drum) in his own community. He identified the impact of Cuban *Abakuá* in local efforts to celebrate cultural history and achieve peace:

¹⁴ Etubom Bassey (2005).

¹⁵ Several other groups have responded with tourism projects that incorporate the *Ékpè-Abakuá* theme, particularly from Akwa Ibom State.

I have been on a crusade for the revival of our culture: As a tourism consultant, I have always been in favour of indigenous culture, which could be restructured and uplifted, projected to a stage that it would attract international interest, and bring in the benefits that are expected of a highly competitive tourism business. In Nigeria much of what we see these days are cultures grown from external influences, and in this part of the world — Akwa Ibom and Cross River States and into the Cameroons — one very outstanding indigenous cultural wealth that we have is the *Ékpè* society. But over time, interest in *Ékpè* has waned perhaps due to strong Christian religious influence and deep political manoeuvres of state, and so much has happened, they have cast aspersions upon the dignity, quality, and content of *Ékpè* that a lot of people have literally 'gone to church blindly', and have doubted the validity of holding on to that which is unequivocally theirs. This has not done well for us, because today, we have serious societal problems — we know that this would not have been so if *Ékpè* principles still held sway today.

Such problems as rape, robbery, murders, and general vandalism committed mostly by youths who are not properly in control because of low moral values. These are very worrying, and government today makes a lot of noise, uses a lot of money without getting expected results, and I know that because of the Christian religion, because of the manoeuvres of government, the elders who have an answer to these problems stand aside, they don't want to interfere, and things grow worse everyday. *Ékpè* is an instrument which is comfortable for use by the elders in controlling social problems. So one has always thought, 'can there ever be a way that these people could be empowered, energized into doing what we know they could do to put society back on track?' It has been a very difficult question to answer, and very little has been done about it, so *Ékpè* has been relegated to just the celebratory aspect of our cultural wealth that you see in local festivals, such as tourist events superficially enacted. It's a far cry from the deep philosophies manifested visible in the grandiose funerals exhibited by the monarchy of the passage of a king. It's very depressing to the psyche and dignity of our people.

We want to use the clear example from Cuba of the success of *Ékpè* as a societal block-building equipment, that could be used to put things in proper perspective, give full attention to worrisome issues from an all-encompassing strategy of nation-building at the rudimentary stage. When you want to treat society, you use moral issues; once the youth know that there are mechanisms of control in place, well established by our forebearers, then the capacity to control them is established. Cuba has shown us that what we believed in is alive and applicable today to solve problems. Cuba has shown us that we are not wrong about what we thought of our forebearers. Cuba has shown us that besides the Christian religion, there is a complementary alternative, because there is no conflict between *Ékpè* and Christianity. So these are two instruments that could be used together, with clear definition of areas of control. In fact the Native

Administration through the hierarchy of chiefdom, would be given a clear responsibility and therefore be seen as partners with government in controlling society for a balanced development.

Therefore our dream of working together for the emancipation of our people through the use of indigenous cultural policies will come to bear, now that we know that *we are not alone*. We are ever so happy and grateful to the Cuban *Abakuá* for bringing us back to our senses. Clearly the message is: 'Hey, you had it, we have it, it worked for us, we don't see why it won't work for you.' So we're going to embrace this resurgence, we are looking forward to a revival of our cultural systems through the leadership and moral principles of *Ékpè*. And we think that the development of an international platform linking three large groups: Cuban *Abakuá*, Calabar Mgbè (of Cross River State), and Efe Nkomo Ibom (of Akwa Ibom State) will generate that level of structure that we need to do things here.

We are ready to build an Afro-Cuban Friendship Forum, with a center in Akwa Ibom State. We want to see a situation where *Ékpè* lodges will be restructured to reflect the fact that we have satellite shrines in other areas of the world. I think that this center could be a rallying point for all peoples of the world of *ibibiò* extraction and *Ékpè* lineage who want to come together.

We say in *Ékpè*: 'Àbàsi ikpaha, Afo ukpaha.' God will not die/ you will not die'. *Ékpè* is immortal.

How the myriad projects envisioned by *Ékpè* leaders progress remains to be seen; the important thing is that the trans-Atlantic dialogue is creating a renaissance, as Fred Essien put it, by opening up possibilities for educational, artistic, and economic production.

***Ékpè* leaders reassess the role of women in their practice**

One of those possibilities has been a reassessment of the role of women in *Ékpè* practice. Being a society for males, in some communities women of royal lineages do become members but without access to the inner workings of the society. Since women have become very prominent in the many Christian denominations in southern Nigeria, *Ékpè* leaders are recognizing that for survival in the present requires their reassessment of the role of women in *Ékpè*. Chief Imona opines:

If I had my way, we should modify Mgbè to bring in women, because they are the people sustaining the Churches today. Women have been made Bishops, and because of that people are going to church. But here, we are keeping Mgbè secrets away from women, and they are the mothers, they are the first teachers of the child, and the first teacher calling the child to say, 'look, my friend, that Mgbè you are going to is not good', and the child will follow the mother's advice.

I can remember even my wife when I was chanting in Mgbè, we say: 'Mbanma nsin owó, nsin ndi to', (meaning: I have reached the peak of Mgbè, I have initiated people, and also my own children into Mgbè), and my wife would say: 'go to orphanage, and look for the children you will carry and give', because they believe that when you say: 'Mbanma nsin owó', you are offering a child as a sacrifice to *Ékpè*. With this situation, if we have a way of bringing in women into Mgbè, you will see that nothing will happen to Mgbè in the near future.

Public Response from the Calabar Diaspora

Unexpected enthusiasm for the *Ékpè-Abakuá* encounters has been expressed by Cross River and Cuban people who have seen the performances, or who observed videos of them on the internet. Video footage posted on YouTube from the encounters in 2001, 2004, and 2007 has been receiving commentary in Èfik, English, *Abakuá* and Spanish, from viewers around the world. For example, some of the Paris footage received this message from an Èfik woman in England:

This is my beautiful culture on display in Paris!

'Ndito Èfik! Sese *Ékpè* nyin ko ke Paris, ye ake Cuba!'

Èfik children! Look at our *Ékpè* in Paris, and the Cuban one!

'Mmong ikemekendi sebe ndito eka! Yak ima odu ye kpukpru ebiet nyini tiede.'

Water can't separate brothers! Let love dwell with us, wherever we are.

I love my Èfik culture, and it's wonderful to see that slavery, distance, and time can't change a wonderful people and culture! 'Abasi Sosong-o!' God thank-you!¹⁶

Spontaneous enthusiasm by enthusiasts demonstrates that these initiation societies are markers for the identity of the general population.

Asymmetrical access to information

The Cuban participants in the encounters with Nigerian *Ékpè* have so far been those living in the USA and in Europe. While we attempted to include *Abakuá* leaders living in Cuba, the difficulties of raising funding for such events in Nigeria, compounded with the difficulties of getting exit visas for some Cubans, has limited the pool of participants. The process has been further handicapped by the severe restrictions in communications, because those on the island have limited if no access to the internet and email. Not surprisingly,

the lacuna in communications has resulted in some confusion among some *Abakuá* in Cuba who hear only rumours. Responding to this problem, Angel Guerrero, who lives in the USA but is well known to most *Abakuá* in Cuba, speaks about the effects of the unequal dissemination of information:

Every historical processes has had followers and detractors, in this specific case I believe that ignorance and misinformation have played a fundamental role, because many in Cuba have not had direct access to news about this process and perhaps have viewed it with suspicion; it is also possible that some with bad intentions have conspired to confuse some *ekobios* [brothers], but none of these disputes along the way can impede a process as beautiful, healthy, and noble as this, that brings two related communities together. This is an irreversible process for the benefit of we Cuban *Abakuá* and the members of the *Ékpè* society of Nigeria.

Eboémio Abasi bomé (thanks to the Supreme Being).

Cubans respond with a CD Project

Both Nigerians and Cubans are responding with creative projects that document and disseminate information about this process. After the 2004 event in Calabar, Etubom Bassey Ekpo Bassey and others made a documentary video program about the Festival while highlighting the Cuban participation. The Cuban participants in the Paris event who live in New York City are extending the conversation by recording a series of musical compositions with messages in the *Abakuá* language, in one case using the melody from a song performed by *Ékpè* in Paris. Like other performances in Caribbean popular culture, this project has multiple intentions: on the one hand the ritual phrases are directed to a large community of *Ékpè* and *Abakuá* members, on the other the jazz and funk inspired arrangements make the work accessible to a global community of Cuban music lovers.¹⁷

This trans-Atlantic dialogue began with a chant — in 2001 with "Okobio Enyenison" — has been sustained by the subsequent exchange of chants between both groups, and is now being extended through the creation of new chants based upon inherited materials. This process is consistent with the use of song in many West African contexts to record history.¹⁸

When I asked 'Román' Díaz to probe his experiences in Calabar and in Paris, he told me: "This conversation is a little difficult for me, because the acts speak for themselves . . . maybe I could create a poem where I could give you an explanation . . ." In fact, Roman's poetic response to the contemporary *Ékpè*, and to the corpus of *Abakuá* sacred texts, are an integral part of this CD project.

Pedro Martínez described this project and his vision for the future of this dialog:

¹⁶ Vicky Otu, who lives in London and Nigeria, wrote this message in September 2008. She responded to my request by supplying translations of the Èfik phrases. (Otu 2008, pers. com.). See also <www.youtube.com/watch?v=i1udYdZXEs&feature=related>

¹⁷ Cf Miller (2000) for a discussion of the multiple intentions of Caribbean performance.

¹⁸ Herskovits (1967 vol. 2: 321).

In response to our meeting with the Calabar Mgbè, we are recording a CD of innovative *Abakuá* music, and incorporating one of their melodies into our music.

Thanks to this encounter and others that will come, I think that our two cultures will consolidate, will unite. I think that in Africa, *Ékpè* will become more united. Even within Cuba itself, the *Abakuá* will become much more united, because now there is a lot of competition between lodges, regarding questions of knowledge or jealousy. I think that the process of creating products, a book, a CD, with information about *Abakuá* and its links with Calabar, will go a long way toward uniting Cuba with Africa, as well as help to further unite the different lodges in Cuba.

There are many people in Cuba who don't know that *Ékpè* is practiced in Africa today, or even that the sources of our *Abakuá* came from Calabar. Many young men don't know how it was born or from where, so this is a very good teaching. This knowledge gives us a lot of confidence, and it's a process. This kind of information cannot be channeled very quickly in Cuba. I can't say that tomorrow if the *Iyamba* of *Éfik* Obutong from Calabar visits Cuba that he would be allowed inside the 'butáme' [*Abakuá* temple]; this is a process that will not take months, nor a year, but I think it can and will occur. The process is one of ingesting all this information, so that the Cubans can interiorize, understand and accept all these changes.

This type of process has already commenced with another trans-Atlantic Diaspora in Cuba, that of the Yoruba *Ifá* divination system, a process that was activated when the *Ooni* of Ife made an official visit to Cuba in 1987.¹⁹ The process ahead for the *Abakuá* is admittedly more difficult, since historically in Cuba, the Yoruba system has been stereotyped as 'more civilized', while the *Abakuá* have been stereotyped as criminals in many periods, partly because their high degree of organization and solidarity has been perceived as threatening by political leaders. This local problem partly explains why Cuban *Abakuá* have welcomed contact with Nigerian counterparts who offer historical legitimacy for their institution.

Angel Guerrero adds that the current CD project, like the event in Paris, could not have been possible without the long history of *Abakuá* artistic and ritual production in Cuba, particularly the history of recordings by the most stellar rumba groups of the island, as well as the most recent CD *Ibiono* — an *Abakuá* word meaning music with swing — performed by several *Abakuá* ritual chanters:

The CD of *Abakuá* music that we are now creating with pride and professionalism is a consequence of the encounter in Paris that we all benefited from, the Cubans and Nigerians alike, since it allowed us to further consolidate our relations, and learn that many of the words and

chants used in our contemporary rites in Cuba are understood by our Nigerian brothers and vice versus, due to their common sources.

Ibiono [recorded in 2001] was an important part of this process of rapprochement with our African counterparts. This CD, being the first recorded in Cuba exclusively with *Abakuá* music and with a duration of more than 50 minutes, together with the contributions made by rumba groups like *Los muñequitos de Matanzas*, by *AfroCuba* of Matanzas, and by *Yoruba Andabo*, among others, opened the path in this process of cultural communication between communities separated by the miserable condition of slavery imposed by the European colonizers.²⁰ As clearly expressed by our Nigerian brothers in Paris, by listening to the *Ibiono* CD they learned that their culture, far from disappearing with those enslaved, had been well rooted in Cuba through the *Abakuá* society.

Conclusions

One of several trans-Atlantic African Diasporas, the *Ékpè-Abakuá* continuum with sources in the Cross River region of Nigeria and Cameroon has only recently received scholarly attention. Unlike the Yoruba-Nago Diaspora between West Africa and Brazil, there is so far no evidence of a historically continuous dialogue between *Ékpè* and *Abakuá* communities.²¹ Instead, representatives of each group met for the first time in New York City in a performance context, a process ignited by the Nigerian interpretation of a Cuban chant that was recorded by professional musicians. It is instructive that in the 1950s, Cuban scholar Fernando Ortiz had correctly interpreted the same Cuban chant as identifying the Calabar community of Obutong, anticipating the same interpretation by Nigerian *Ékpè* in 2000, leading to the *Ékpè-Abakuá* encounters described here.²² This essay documents and analyzes the reflections of Nigerian and Cuban participants in the incrementally dramatic series of encounters in the USA, Nigeria, and France, emphasizing the desire of all to build bridges across the Atlantic. This essay necessarily corrects the record in response to the mistaken view by recent scholars who argue that the process of dialogue within the *Ékpè-Abakuá* continuum is "politically dubious."²³ To the contrary, this process is an

²⁰ Cf. Guerrero (2008) for his reflections upon the process of creating *Ibiono* and its importance in the historiography of Cuban popular music.

²¹ For an overview of this historical dialogue, see Matory (2005).

²² Ortiz (1955: 254) wrote that the Cuban pronunciation of: "*Efin Butyn* or *Efiquebutyn* . . . in the pure language of the efik should be pronounced *Efik Obutyn*. . . *Obutyn* was in Efik the name of a great region of Calabar . . . and also of its ancient capital, today called Old Town by the English."

"... el nombre de *Efin Butyn* o *Efiquebutyn*. Así se pronuncia y escribe en Cuba; pero en pura lengua de los efik debiera decirse *Efik Obutyn*, o sea de los *Obutyn* de Efik. . . *Obutyn* era en efik el nombre de una gran región del Calabar, que comprendía la cuarta parte del país, y también el de su antigua ciudad capital, hoy llamada por los ingleses Old Town" (Ortiz 1955: 254).

²³ Routon (2005: 371). "More recent scholarly efforts . . . take it for granted that initiates have a patently obvious interest in re-connecting with their putative transatlantic roots. These efforts suggest that the *Abakuá*'s presumed nostalgia and desire to re-unite with their 'African' counterparts should be supported by scholars who can authenticate these transatlantic identifications. These kinds of joint

historical imperative according to *Abakuá* leaders, whose communities have been under siege throughout Cuban history as “obstacles to the progress of the nation,” or as “criminal elements”. What foreign scholars think about this problem is of little concern to the *Ékpè* and *Abakuá* participants, who have historically rejected the views expressed in the literature about their institutions as inaccurate and hostile. Instead, the example of Ortiz demonstrates that scholarship about trans-Atlantic communities will attain descriptive accuracy only when shared with the leadership of the groups being studied. Both Ortiz and his colleague Lydia Cabrera had earlier envisioned the use of their documentation of *Abakuá* for future comparisons with their African sources. In this essay, culture bearers who organized themselves for the series of performances with their trans-Atlantic counterparts reflect upon the process and its meanings. In the aftermath of a series of performances in Paris, *Ékpè* and *Abakuá* members are engaged in a series of creative activities, including the reorientation of their institutions to grapple with contemporary social problems, and the exploration of their cultural history through cultural festivals and commercial recordings. Thanks to the unprecedented openness from both *Ékpè* and *Abakuá* in discussing usually hidden facets of their traditions, scholars of the African Diaspora have rare opportunities to assess their historical relationship.

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scholarly-native projects are not only marred by a number of theoretical conundrums but are also politically tendentious . . .” (Routon 2005: 376)

Anthropologist Kenneth Routon (2005: 371) recently challenged the trans-Atlantic dialog documented in this essay by asking: “Do they reflect a genuine desire of the Cuban *Abakuá* to reconnect with their purported cultural origins? . . . Could this be a case in which scholarly projects, such as the current vogue of research on transnational identities, overshadow the real interests of the groups they claim to have the ethnographic authority to represent?” The statements by *Abakuá* leaders in this essay are meant to dispel Routon’s confusion in this matter.

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