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# Cuban Abakuá Chants: Examining New Linguistic and Historical Evidence for the African Diaspora

Ivor Miller

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**Abstract:** The Cuban Abakuá society—derived from the Èfik Ékpè and Ejagham Úgbè societies of southeastern Nigeria and southwestern Cameroon—was founded in Havana in the 1830s by captured leaders of Cross River villages. This paper examines the process by which West African Ékpè members were able to understand contemporary Cuban Abakuá chants, and indicates how these texts may be used as historical documents. This methodology involves first recording and interpreting Abakuá chants with Cuban elders, and then interpreting these same chants with the aid of West African Èfik speakers. The correlation of data in these chants with those in documents created by Europeans and Africans from the eighteenth to twentieth centuries indicates a vocabulary that includes many geographic and ethnic names and an occasional historical figure. These examples may lead to a reevaluation of the extent to which African identity and culture were transmitted during the trans-Atlantic diaspora. Abakuá intellectuals have used commercial recordings to extol their history and ritual lineages. Evidence indicates that Cuban Abakuá identity is based on detailed knowledge of ritual lineages stemming from specific locations in their homelands, and not upon a vague notion of an African “national” or “ethnic” identity. The persistence of the Abakuá society contradicts the official construction of a Cuban national identity.

**Résumé:** La communauté cubaine Abakuá—descendante des communautés Èfik Ékpè et Ejagham Úgbè du Sud Est du Nigéria et du Sud Ouest du Cameroun—a été fondée à la Havane dans les années 1830 par des leaders capturés des villages de Cross River. Cet essai examine le processus par lequel les membres de la communauté Ékpè d’Afrique de l’Ouest ont été capables de comprendre les chants de la communauté Abakuá moderne de Cuba, et montre comment ces textes pourraient être utilisés comme documents historiques. La méthodologie utilisée a consisté en un premier temps à enregistrer et interpréter les chants Abakuá avec les

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anciens de la communauté cubaine, puis à interpréter les mêmes chants avec les membres de la communauté Èfik d'Afrique de l'Ouest. La corrélation entre les éléments de ces chants et ceux des documents produits par les Européens et les Africains entre le dix-huitième et le vingtième siècle aboutit à un glossaire comprenant beaucoup de noms géographiques et ethniques, et occasionnellement, des personnalités historiques. Ces exemples pourraient mener à une réévaluation de l'étendue de la transmission de l'identité et de la culture africaines lors de la diaspora trans-Atlantique. Les intellectuels de la communauté Abakuá ont jusqu'à présent utilisé des enregistrements commerciaux pour mettre en valeur leur histoire et les origines de leurs rituels. Il est possible de démontrer que l'identité Abakuá cubaine est basée sur une connaissance détaillée de l'origine des rituels provenant de locations spécifiques dans leurs pays d'origine, et non sur la notion vague d'une identité "ethnique" ou "nationale" africaine. La persistance de la communauté Abakuá constitue une résistance à la construction officielle d'une identité nationale cubaine.

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SCHOLARSHIP IS USUALLY its own reward, but in rare cases, it can produce other remarkable results. After my publication of samples of Abakuá phrases from a commercially recorded album (Miller 2000), Nigerian members of the Cross River Ékpè society living in the United States informed me that they had recognized these texts as part of their own history. Èfik people in the U.S. had learned about the Cuban Abakuá and were actively searching for contact with its members. The Web site >www.efik.com< had references to Cuban tourist literature on the Abakuá in Spanish; our communication led to what was perhaps the first meeting between both groups. The privilege of examining this material with both Cuban Abakuá and Èfik Ékpè members has provoked me to grapple with questions of using oral history materials as evidence for rethinking the African diaspora in the Caribbean.

A specific example can illustrate this interpretive process. The phrase "Okobio Enyenisón, awana bekura mendo/ Núnkue Itia Ororo Kánde Efi Kebutón/ Oo Ékue" is part of an Abakuá chant memorializing the actions of Èfik and Efut leaders who helped found the society. Abakuá leaders interpret this phrase as: "Our African brothers, from the sacred place / came to Havana, and in Regla founded Efi Ebutón / we salute the Ékue drum." Orok Edem (2001), an Èfik scholar residing in the U.S., equates "Efi Kebutón," the name of Cuba's first Abakuá group, with "Obutong," an Èfik town in the Cross River region. He interprets many Abakuá terms as deriving from Àbàkpà, an Èfik term for the Qua settlement in Calabar, originally formed by migrants from the Ejagham-speaking area to the north.<sup>1</sup>

After connecting with Edem, I was invited to facilitate an exchange between a group of Cuban Abakuá and West African Ékpè at the Èfik

National Association meeting in New York in 2001.<sup>2</sup> In preparation for this event, I introduced Asuquo Ukpog, an Èfik Ékpè member, to several Abakuá musicians at a local cabaret performance. As they played, Ukpog enthusiastically identified many possible relationships to Èfik culture in the form of dance and musical instruments. During an Abakuá chant, he danced toward the Cuban musicians; then, as the lead drummer stepped forward, Ukpog gestured symbolically with his eyes and hands. A Cuban Abakuá dancer joined them, also using a vocabulary of gestures dense with symbolism. This was perhaps the first time that Ékpè and Abakuá members had met in a performance context, and their ability to communicate through movement contrasted with the divisions between them created by Spanish and English, their respective colonial languages.

A week later, a group of Abakuá attended the Èfik National Association meeting.<sup>3</sup> A man in an “*idèm Ékpè*” costume visually very similar to that of the Cubans danced to the accompaniment of a large ensemble of musicians and chanters. Goldie (1964:116–17) translates *idèm*, an Èfik term, as “a representative of Egbo [Ékpè] who runs about the town.” Essien (1986:9) translated *Ídèm* as “masquerade” in Ìbìbìò.

As the Cubans prepared to perform, they realized that their “*Íreme*” costume —*Íreme* being a term derived from Èfik pronunciation of “*idèm Efi*”—lacked the *ananyongá* (ritual waist sash) as well as the *nkaniká* bells placed over it (see Goldie 1964:214). They explained that an *Íreme* cannot function without these, together with herbs and a staff in the hands. As Ékpè masquerades are nearly identical to those of Abakuá, these items could be lent by the Èfik. This lending of ritual objects occurred in a matter-of-fact fashion, a further indication of cultural similarity between the two areas.

Similar use of *nkaniká* bells has been recorded on both sides of the Atlantic. While in the Cross River region in 1847, the Rev. H. M. Waddell (1863:354) described two Ékpè masked dancers wearing bells: “Two Egbo [Ékpè] runners in their harlequin costume entered the town to clear the streets. Their bells, dangling at their waists, gave notice of their approach.” In the streets of Havana, a late-nineteenth-century description of the Three King’s Day processions notes the Abakuá “covered in coarse hoods... so large and bulky that their sides[,] arms[,] and legs appeared like simple appendages.... They marched slowly... behind the dancers, who did not cease, in their startling convulsions, from shaking the many bells they carried bound to their waists” (Meza 1891; cited in Ortiz 1960:12).

In contemporary New York, the Cubans danced in procession with the Èfik elders; their set of four *biankomo* drums—*ekomo* is *drum* in Èfik (Goldie 1964:73)—were clearly designed and played in the same style as those of the Èfik.<sup>4</sup> The *Íreme* greatly impressed the Èfik by greeting their elders with specific gestures and cleansing them ritually with a branch of herbs. The lead singer performed a long *enkame* (chant) in Cuban Èfik composed for this event, and the Èfik responded with great enthusiasm. In Èfik, the

Abakuá *enkame* is *ekama*, meaning “to call people to attention, to begin, to declare” (Orok Edem, personal communication, 2001). As a result of this and later encounters, plans are in the making for further exchanges in West Africa and Cuba.<sup>5</sup>

Mutual recognition between the Ékpè and Abakuá provokes many questions about West African cultural continuities in the Caribbean, as well as the implications of this knowledge for present-day West Africans. Both groups are currently struggling to use their traditional practices in order to respond to contemporary issues. That both Ékpè and Abakuá perceive themselves in the other’s language and ritual practice points to the vitality of oral history and performance as sources for new evidence in the African diaspora.

A PRACTICE DERIVED from the Èfik people’s Ékpè societies as well as the Ejagham people’s Úgbè societies of southeastern Nigeria and southwestern Cameroon, the Abakuá was founded in Havana in the 1830s by captured leaders of Cross River villages. In the ensuing 170 years, this multiethnic mutual aid society has expanded to become a distinguishing feature of Cuban cultural identity. Ceremonies consist of drum, dance, and chanting activities using the esoteric Abakuá language. Cuban scholars have long thought that the Abakuá language “is based principally on proverbs or maxims in which Èfik terms predominate” (Deschamps 1967:39).

For the past ten years I have worked with leaders of these traditions to document and interpret their history. In the past, knowledge of these chants has been restricted to members of the Abakuá, but recently, portions have been included in commercial recordings cited in this essay.

The enthusiastic and knowledgeable response of an Èfik scholar to these Cuban chants has opened tremendous possibilities for interpretation. After 170 years of separation, we would not expect literal meanings derived from West African languages to correspond neatly to Cuban Abakuá, which is a ritual language. When interpreting Abakuá chants even into Spanish, one encounters a multiplicity of meanings, since Abakuá expressions are poetic and rich in metaphor. All elders who interpreted passages to me made use of the vocabularies of their inherited manuscripts as well as their powers of deduction, based on the use of the passage during a particular sequence of ritual action. That Abakuá practices are collective yet maintained within a ritual hierarchy has served to keep translations of passages within certain boundaries; in other words, unstudied interpretations would be challenged by learned elders. In this intellectual tradition, possible variations add to the richness as Abakuá masters explore and interpret their own history. In another example, Abímbólá (1976:15–16) described the collective reinforcement of orthodoxy in oracle poetry among Ifá diviners in West Africa.

One of the first difficulties of translation has to do with the transcrip-

tion of spoken phrases into words. For instance, in the above example (“Okobio Enyenisón, awana bekura mendo/ Núnkue Itia Ororo Kánde Efi Kebutón/ Oo Ékue”), what I had written as *Efi Kebutón* was interpreted by Orok Edem as *Èfik Obutong*, indicating that in Cuban usage, Cross River terms may be joined or resegmented, making them additionally difficult to interpret. I generally determined the word breaks in the Cuban texts according to instructions by Abakuá elders, who did most of the interpretations into Spanish. When in doubt, I referred to published Abakuá vocabularies. In fact, I reviewed many such vocabularies with Abakuá elders. In some instances, I intentionally do not translate some terms fully, because to do so would articulate obscure passages designed to hide information to noninitiates. Abakuá leaders would not approve translation of these particular phrases.

Further complicating translation is the fact that Cross River Ékpè and Úgbè each seem to have an “initiation dialect” which is derived from local languages whose codes have been switched so that they are unintelligible to a noninitiate (see Miller 2000; Ruel 1969:231, 245). The fact that we can make some sense of Abakuá through Ékpè and Èfik terms suggests a direction for further linguistic study.

In what follows, I document how Abakuá leaders use these chants to express their cultural history. I begin by presenting a transcribed Abakuá chant, followed by an English translation of the Spanish phrases and terms used by Abakuá leaders to interpret them. After this, I document translations into Èfik or another Cross River language by Orok Edem, Joseph Edem, and Callixtus Ita, all native speakers<sup>6</sup>; by Bruce Connell, an authority on the languages of the Cross River region; and from published sources, mainly the Rev. Hugh Goldie’s 1862 *Dictionary of the Efúk Language*, the standard work. Because these multilayered interpretations are hard to read, I used a graphical device to identify terms in the text that correspond to West African terms. For example: anything in Goldie or another published source is placed in square brackets [ ], and anything identified by O. Edem, J. Edem, Ita, or Connell is placed in angle brackets < >. Where both kinds of sources identify an item, then both kinds of brackets are used. Immediately under the Cuban interpretation, each bracketed expression gets its translation with a citation. My own comments on the interpretation, if any, follow this. As an example, I begin with the already mentioned chant.

### First Chant

Okobio <[Enyenisón]>, awana <bekura> mendo/ <[Núnk]ue [Itia]  
[Ororo] [Kánde] [Efi Kebutón]>/ Oo <[Ékue]>.

Our African brothers, from the sacred place/ came to Havana, and in  
Regla founded Efík Ebutón/ we salute the Ékue drum.

In Abakuá:

Okobio = brother

Enyenisón = Africa

awana bekura mendo = sacred place where the society originated

Awana Bekura Mendó, or Bakura Efor (formerly Bekura) was the most important locality of the Efor (Cabrera 1958:79).

Núnkue = Havana

Itia = land

Ororo = center (of a river)

Itia Ororo Kánde = name for Regla, Havana

Efi Kebutón = first Abakuá group

Ékue = sacred drum.

**Line 1: Okobio <[Enyenisón]>, awana <bekura> mendo**

[Enyenisón] Ẹ-yen'-i-sõn = child of the soil, a native, a free man; ata ẹyẹn isõn = free by both parents (Goldie 1964: 97).<sup>7</sup> In local usage then, *eyenison* would refer specifically to Èfik people (see Eyo 1986:75).

<Enyenisón> enyenison = son of the soil, meaning "we are owners of the land" (O. Edem, personal communication, 2001)

<bekura> "Bekura is a village east of Usaghade, adjacent to or part of Ekondo Titi. This is Londo (Balondo) country" (Connell, personal communication, 2002).

**Line 2: <[Núnk]ue [Itia] [Ororo] [Kánde] [Efi Kebutón]>.**

**You cannot push that stone farther than the Èfik Obutong.**

This entire phrase in Èfik would be <Núnkue Itia ororo kánde Èfik Ebuton>, a standard Èfik boast meaning "We are stronger than anyone else" (O. Edem, personal communication, 2001).

[Núnk] Nuk = to push; to push aside or away (Goldie 1964:234)

[itia] I'-ti-at = a stone (Goldie 1964:139)

[ororo] O'-rụ = that (Goldie 1964:256)

[kánde] U'-kan = superiority; mastery (Goldie 1964:312)

[Efi Kebutón] Qb'-u-tõn = Old Town, a village situated a short distance above Duke Town (Goldie 1964:360)

<Efi Kebutón> = Obutong, an Èfik town near Duke Town (O. Edem, personal communication, 2001)

It should be noted that Orak Edem's translation, above, does not coincide with Cuban interpretations, which hold Núnkue and Ororó to be place names (see Cabrera 1958:73). Edem's interpretation is plausible, however,

because southern Nigerian initiation jargons commonly use proverbs, such as the above, as a form of figurative speech (see Green 1958).

**Line 3: Oo <[Ékue]>**

[Ékue] Ékpè = leopard (Goldie 1964:74). Hence the name of this institution is literally “leopard men.”

Ek’-pe = the Egbo [Ékpè] institution as a whole, comprising all the grades (Goldie 1964:74)

(Ortiz [1955:208] wrote: “In Cuba the word *ékpe* was converted to *ékue* because the constant phoneme *kp* of the Èfik language cannot be well pronounced or written in European languages.” See also Simmons [1956:66]. In both the Cross River region and Cuba, Ékpè/Ékue is also the name of the unseen drum that “roars” to authorize ritual action [see Waddell 1863: 265–66]).

Within this example are many Cuban terms that translate directly into Èfik and whose meanings overlap. Even where the meanings are very different—as in the Abakuá phrase “Nunkue . . . kande”—the phrase would be intelligible in context by an Èfik speaker. This indicates the possibilities of Abakuá for gaining insight into trans-Atlantic history.

The process of interpretation documented by this article began in earnest when Orok Edem equated Cuba’s first Abakuá group, “Efik Ebutón,” with “Obutong,” an Èfik town that was part of Calabar in southeastern Nigeria. Leaders of this town and their retinues were captured by British ships and transported to the Caribbean, an incident well documented in written sources. The battle of 1767, known as the “Massacre of Old Calabar,” was the climax of a power struggle between the neighboring Old Town (a.k.a. Obutong) and Duke Town (a.k.a. New Town) over foreign trade (see Simmons 1956:67–68). Duke Town leaders made a secret pact with captains of British slave ships anchored in the Old Calabar river. These captains in turn invited Obutong leaders aboard their vessels, ostensibly to mediate the dispute. Once on board, three brothers of the Obutong chief Ephraim Robin John were held captive, and an estimated three hundred townspeople were slaughtered. One brother, released to the Duke Town leaders, was beheaded, and the other two, along with several of their retinue, were sold as slaves in the West Indies (Williams 1897:535–38; Clarkson 1968 [1808]:305–10).

The rivalry among Èfik settlements on the Calabar River lasted several years (see Northrup 1978:37; Lovejoy & Richardson 1999:346); events such as the one described above brought a large enough number of Ékpè leaders into slavery for them to establish Abakuá in Havana. “Grandy King George” [Ephraim Robin John] described the loss of four of his sons “gone allredy with [captain] Jackson and I don’t want any more of them caried of



by any other vausell" (Williams 1897:544).<sup>8</sup> Connell (personal communication, 2002) points out that "this is a rare documented claim of Èfik actually being sent to the West Indies [no doubt there were more]. The time gap between this incident, 1767, and the assumed founding of Abakuá, 1836, is nearly sixty years, which suggests that the sons of Ephraim Robin John were presumably not involved." In fact, the Robin John brothers were sold in Dominica, escaped, were reenslaved in Virginia, then traveled to Bristol, where they became enmeshed in a legal battle over their status, and eventually returned to Calabar (Paley 2002; Sparks 2002).

Meanwhile, hundreds of Africans who embarked in Calabar were transported on British ships directly to Havana. For example, in 1762 the *Nancy* disembarked 423 at Barbados and Havana; in 1763 the *Indian Queen* disembarked 496 at Kingston and Havana; in 1785 the *Quixote* disembarked 290 at Trinidad and Havana; in 1804 the *Mary Ellen* disembarked 375 in Havana.<sup>9</sup> There, in spite of linguistic and ethnic diversity, they would have been known generally as "Calabarí." In the mid-eighteenth century, five Calabarí *cabildos* (nation groups) existed in Havana (Marrero 1980:158–60); generally, these groups were known to include Ékpè members and acted as incubators for the emerging Abakuá. The historian José L. Franco (1974:179) reports that during the attempted rebellion in 1812 led by the free black José Antonio Aponte, authorities in Havana discovered a document in Aponte's possession signed with an Abakuá symbol. These factors raise the possibility that early models of the Abakuá society were developed in the late eighteenth century.

Èfik historians have known the point of departure, but not the final destination. Cuban Abakuá documented the language and place names but, until now, they had no way to corroborate this with information from African sources. Thus Edem's interpretation strengthens the remarkable story of a complex secret society being recreated under conditions of slavery. This feat was facilitated by the proximity of Ékpè leaders and their intimate circle, all of whom were brought to Havana, a cosmopolitan city containing many Cross River people in a large free black population.

The mutually reinforcing present-day Èfik and Abakuá interpretations of historical acts allows us to create a connected account of events leading to the refounding of an African institution in the Caribbean. This continuous narrative—which contradicts other interpretations that describe the Middle Passage as a historical discontinuity—was assembled through years of field work and document study on both sides of the Atlantic and subsequent collaboration between academic and traditional intellectuals. One of the myths of slavery in the Americas is that African cultural traditions were destroyed. The Abakuá example suggests that the lived reality was considerably more complicated than that.

Months after communicating with Orok Edem, I learned that Fernando Ortiz, a leading scholar of African influence in Cuba, had nearly fifty years earlier correctly traced the origin of the term "Efik Obutón." Ortiz

(1955:254) wrote that the Cuban pronunciation: “*Efi Butón* or *Efique-butón*... in the pure language of the Èfik should be pronounced *Efik Obutón*... *Obutón* was in Èfik the name of a great region of Calabar... and also of its ancient capital, today called Old Town by the English.” Ortiz’s primary concern was tracing African influence on Cuban society. To my knowledge, he never worked with Africans or traveled to Africa; he was interested in the Cuban nation, not a trans-Atlantic dialogue. While several of Ortiz’s works had been edited during the post-1958 Revolution and read by several Abakuá I met, the work in which he states the above—available only in a first edition—was very difficult to obtain in Cuba and thus not well known by Abakuá. Abakuá leaders had always known that the source for their institution was the Calabar region, but they had never had an opportunity to travel or to meet Èfik people. Only in contemporary, global New York City, “the Secret African City” (Thompson 1991) and “the first Caribbean city” (see James 1998:12), could Cuban Abakuá and West African Èkpè meet.

## Oral History and Performance-Oriented Research Methods

Since African-derived traditions in the Americas depend largely on oral transmission, oral methodologies are vital to scholarship. From the early nineteenth century onward, Abakuá have passed manuscripts of their own texts from elders to selected neophytes, who have then memorized and recited them in various performance contexts.<sup>10</sup> The secrecy surrounding these texts is evidence of the society’s continued control over information. I have been fortunate to work with Abakuá leaders who distinguish texts containing historical data from those with spiritual allusions. Without access to at least some of these historical passages, with their richly detailed insights into cultural transmission and transformation, we can hardly fathom the meaning of Abakuá to the West African diaspora.

By recording oral testimonies, scholars create historical documents of the memories and accounts of the people they interview. The audio recorded document may be examined in much the same way that a written document is examined, making oral history a type of historiography. All historical research is based on documents, none of which can be taken at face value. The student must ask: Who made them, why, for what audience; what information did they have available to them; what was their purpose in creating these documents?

In establishing this oral history, I was greatly aided by a variation of an Afro-Cuban performance technique known as *controversia*, which is similar to forms of “signifying” in North America and other regions in the African diaspora.<sup>11</sup> Cubans use many terms to describe musical variants of call-and-response interactions. Ortiz (1981:54) wrote: “The congos often employ, among other responsorial chants, those in Cuba called *de puya*, *makagua* or

*managua*, in which two alternating soloists chant, sustaining a controversy. Chants of ‘counterpoint,’ of ‘challenge, [are offered by] *payadores* [singers who perform improvised musical dialogues]. At times the chorus meddles with the phrases of the chanting *gallos* [soloists] to stimulate the performance.” “Between one ceremony and another in their rites,” wrote Ortiz (1981:75), the Abakuá “entertain themselves publicly to the rhythms of their orchestra, chanting *inúas* or *béfumas*, which they also call *decimas*, or verses of challenge, aphorism, or history.” In Èfik, the literal meaning of *inúa* is mouth; figuratively it can mean *boastful* and is related to the word *eneminua*, which is a flatterer (Aye 1991:56).

In Abakuá ritual performance, lead singers compete with each other to demonstrate musical skill as well as knowledge of historical texts. When I learned a passage and its translation, I would take it to various Abakuá leaders.<sup>12</sup> I found that in reciting their own versions, some sages would offer insights into the material by extending the text or by giving more complex interpretations, while also demonstrating mastery of the form.<sup>13</sup>

## Abakuá Chant Their History

After the Ékpè–Abakuá encounter, I visited an Abakuá leader in Havana. Interested that West African Ékpè had interpreted Cuban texts, and in the spirit of *controversia*, he gave me the following chant containing what he believed to be the names of Èfik founders of the society in Cuba. This chant, one of hundreds in contemporary practice commemorating the transmission of West and Central West African traditions, is performed before initiation ceremonies in remembrance of Èfik leaders considered founders of the group Èfik Ebutón in Cuba.<sup>14</sup>

### Second Chant

**Line 1: <Ékue [asanga] abiá [epó]> nípó.**

**Ékue came to the land of the whites,**

*or*

**Ékpè that walks around in the land of the ghosts,**

(“Walking is used in a boastful context” [O. Edem, personal communication, 2001]),

*or*

**Ékpè walks in the village of ghosts.**

[asanga] ásáñà = walking (in Ibibio) (Essien 1990:147)

[asanga] I'-sañ = a walk; a journey; a trip; a voyage” (Goldie 1964:135)

[asanga] asaña = to move, in whatever manner (Goldie 1964:264)

(Each of these translations coincides with the interpretation by many Abakuá elders of *asánga* as *walking* [see Cabrera 1958:55]).

[epó] Ékpó = ghost, spirit” (Aye 1991:32)

<abia> = village, town (if one interprets this word as *obio* in Èfik)

**Line 2: Endafia awereké [Abasí] <[obon]> Efi.**

**We give thanks to God and to the Èfik rulers.**

[Abasí] A-bas’-i = the Supreme Being, God” (Goldie 1964:2)

[obon] Ä-bõñ’ = a chief; one having authority; a principal ruler; a king (Goldie 1964:3)

<obon> obong = king in Èfik (O. Edem, personal communication, 2001)

**Line 3: <Afotán konomí Ékue Enyemilla>.**

**I am from the land of Enyemiyá.**

<Afotán konomí Ékue Enyemilla> Afotang okonomi Ékpè enye mi da = A boastful phrase identifying the source of the speaker’s particular kind of Ékpè” (O. Edem personal communication, 2001).

**Line 4: Jura [Natakuá].**

**I was consecrated in the land of Natakuá.**

[Natakuá] A-tak’-pa = Duke Town, the largest town in Calabar (Goldie 1964:355)

Not only do Abakuá *say* they have Èfik roots, but many key Abakuá words are also slightly transformed from words still used in the Calabar region (Sosa 1982:395–414). For example, *Abakuá* itself is likely *Àbàkpà*, an Èfik term for the Ejagham people (Simmons 1956:66 n.1a). This makes sense, because according to Abakuá mythology, Ejagham participated in originating the society. Abakuá translate *Ekoi* as *power*; this also makes sense, because Africanists also identify the word as an Èfik term for the Ejagham people.<sup>15</sup> *Monína* (ritual brother) is an Ejagham term for *friend* (O. Edem, personal communication, 2001). The term *Uyo*, the “Voice” of Ékue (Ortiz 1955:233), may derive from the Ìbibìdò *úyò* (voice) (Essien 1986:10). The Cuban phrase “Abasí amá” (Ortiz 1954:83) is a contemporary name in

Ìbìbìdò meaning “It is God who loves” (Essien 1986:45).

Information embedded in cultural performance styles, especially in regions with strong oral traditions, provides evidence of historical relationships. Correlating these sources with traditional historical documents, the majority of which were created by outsider observers, promotes understanding of the complex dynamics of the African diaspora. In a study similar to this one, for example, Richard Price (2001:54) found that in Suriname there were Saramaka “historians who behaved... rather like our own”; he suggests that “their collective vision of the Saramaka past could be fruitfully compared to more traditional records constructed by non-Saramaka.”

### **Abakuá Ritual Lineages**

Abakuá was established by the 1830s when Ékpè members from the Calabar region initiated the first “creoles” (Cuban-born blacks). As each new group begat another, ritual lineages were created which, in many cases, continue to the present. Èfik Ebuton is generally agreed to have been established in 1836 by Apapa Efí. Since Èfik Ebuton eventually disappeared, its progeny, Èfik Abakuá, established in 1845, is considered the oldest group of “tierra Efí” (Èfik land) in Cuba today. The Efut lineage in Abakuá commenced when Apapa Efó (with Èfik Ebuton and others as witnesses) established Efori Nkomón in 1840.

The group Efori Nkomón still functions in Havana. The lineage of “tierra Orú” (Orú land) is believed to have commenced when Orú Apapa was established, probably in 1848, in Guanabacoa, across the Havana harbor. Orú is likely Oron, a Cross River ethnic group.

Efí, Efó, and Orú are the three major “ethnic” lineages which structure the contemporary Abakuá society. Of course, genetic ancestry from one of these groups is not a requirement for initiation. One is invited to join after demonstrating moral preparedness by being a “a good friend, a good father, a good brother, a good husband and a good son.” Once initiated, members learn the ritual genealogy of their group in order to assume and extol the mythic “ethnic” lineage they now participate in. Just as many contemporary Cubans are able to trace their family genealogy to specific African ancestors, Abakuá intellectuals can recite the ritual-kinship genealogies of their own group in detail, including their connection to the Èfik, Efut, or Orú founders of the society in specific regions of the Cross River basin. These genealogies are often recited during ceremonies.

Although there has been little systematic research on the genealogies of Cuban families, many individuals have been interested in locating their ancestors. For example, the folklorist Rogelio Martínez-Furé told me (personal communication, June 2002) that Pello “el Afrikan,” creator of the Mozambique rhythm in the 1970s, chose this name because he knew his

grandmother was Makua, a Bantu group from Mozambique. Members of the Arará *cabildos* (nation groups) of Perico and Joveanos, Matanzas, can trace their ancestry to the Republic of Benin. The Calle family of Matanzas city, who conserve the Brikamo tradition, know they are the descendants of Calabari. Martínez-Furé's great-great grandmother Mamá Incarnación (1831–1937) was the daughter of a Mandinga [i.e., Malinke]. In a recent recording, “Román” Díaz (*Yoruba Andabo*, 1997) arranges traditional material to reflect upon the role of his own groups' ritual lineage within Abakuá mythic history and records the following chant.

### Third Chant

**Line 1: [Umóni] Apapá Efi Ékuéri Tongó Umóni.**

In Abakuá:

Umóni Apapá = a Cross River territory. It is the name of Díaz's group in Havana, also called Ékuéri Tongó Ápapa Umóni, and from an Efi lineage.

[Umóni] Umon (a.k.a Boson) = an island in the Cross River estuary thirty miles north of Old Calabar (see Northrup 2000: 9, 19). In his diary from 1785–87, the Old Calabar trader Antera Duke referred to Umon (he called it Boostam) as the location of a slave market (Forde 1956:39). According to Connell (personal communication, 2002), “the Umon have now largely switched to Èfik, though at least until recently their own language was still in use.”<sup>16</sup>

**Line 2: Bonkó [Ékuéri tongó] erendíó ekueri tené.**

**In Havana, Ékuéri Tongó was founded by Ekueri Tené.**

The Cuban Abakuá group Ékuéri Tongó Ápapa Umóni was founded in Havana in 1848 by African-born Ékpè. Historically, this group represents a parallel Cuban Èfik lineage to that commenced with Èfik Ebuton in the 1830s.

[Ékuéri tongó] ‘Ekuritonko’ and ‘Ikot Itunko’ = indigenous names for Creek Town, Calabar (Jones 1956:119, 121; Simmons 1956: 72 n. 45)

[Ékuéri tongó] O-kur-i-tuñ-ko = Creek Town, the second largest town in Calabar” (Goldie 1964:361; see also Goldie 1890:11; Waddell 1863:309)

Even though members of the Abakuá group Ápapa Umoní may not know the identities of specific Èfik ancestors, they do have ritual-kinship with others in their ritual-lineage, a relationship mythically recreated during ceremony through music, dance, and chanting performed in commemoration of the transmission of Ékpè from the Efut to the Èfik in the Cross River region, and then from Calabar to Cuba. Both Ékpè and Abakuá leaders appreciate the importance of ancestral memory for maintaining social cohesion. On both sides of the Atlantic, Africans have steadfastly maintained their identities as a form of resistance against political domination. The similarity of experiences helps to explain why both groups recognize one another after nearly two centuries of separation. Earlier notions of African “retentions” (atavisms) in the Americas reflected a belief that African-derived practices and identities would fade away with time. Abakuá activities indicate, however, that these are productive cultural practices sought out and studied by contemporary peoples because they meet important needs in the present.

In sum, the ability of Ékpè and Abakuá members to recognize each other through cultural performance indicates a historical relationship that now has become significant to people of African heritage on both sides of the Atlantic. The establishment of a common history is an international connection that gives both groups new status as representatives of a valuable and ancient cultural tradition. Because both groups are marginal in their respective nations, their contemporary exchanges may include mutual support for identity construction, a deeper understanding of mutual mythic history, economic exchanges, as well as greater cultural and political recognition within West Africa and Cuba.

### **Abakuá Chants in Commercial Recordings Generate Historical Data**

Ceremonial rites are arenas for competitive chanting where reputations are earned for performance style and knowledge of the ceremonial corpus. In African-derived religions of Cuba, lead chanters convey who they are, from which African places and peoples their rites derive, and what ceremony is occurring inside the *Fambá* (temple) where the Ékue drum is sounded unseen in a place called *Fé Ékue*. In Calabar, “Efamba [consists of] a secret display of Ekpe artifacts” in a temple (Bassey 2001:22).<sup>17</sup> In Èfik, “Efe Ékpè” is an “Ekpe shed” (Aye 1991:27), or “the Ékpè cult house where only the initiates gather” (O. Edem, personal communication, 2001), or an Ékpè meeting house (according to Goldie [1964:68], ‘*fe*’ is a shed and ‘*feikpe*’ is “a palaver house”).

During the course of chanting, dancers and drummers converse through vocabularies of gesture and rhythm. All of this unfolds from the doorway of the *Fambá* outward. In Abakuá *plantes* (ceremonies), *la valla* (a

human corridor of call-and-response chanting and dancing in the temple's patio) is part of the Èfik contribution.<sup>18</sup> Cuban mythology holds that both Moruá Yuánsa (the lead chanter) and the *biankomé* drums became part of the society when the Èfik were initiated in precolonial West Africa. In *la valla*, singers with *ibiono* (swing) display their knowledge of *tratados* (mythic histories) to the public. On these occasions, lead chanters engage in *controversias*. One by one, chanters attempt to dominate the action by starting with well-known chants that inspire the chorus and dancers; then they move into complex liturgical passages that are difficult or impossible for other chanters to follow or respond to. *Tratados* are the bases for extended conversations among Abakuá intellectuals. In this chanted discourse, the leader must demonstrate linguistic dexterity beyond the comprehension of less knowledgeable competitors.

Commercial and anthropological recordings lack ceremonial competition among lead chanters, but Abakuá musicians use codes to demonstrate their knowledge as well as to discourse on Abakuá history. In the early 1960s a series of recordings by the Department of Folklore in Havana (*Musica afrocubana* 1993) documented “national folklore” with “traditional” instruments and language. An analysis of the Abakuá recording reveals that the lead chanter, Victor Herrera, used the occasion to evoke the history of his own group and its lineage. Performed in the structure of a *rompimiento* (a ceremony in which the sacred Ékue begins to sound), the chant is ended by Herrera before the moment when the drum would sound. The importance of this recording is that Herrera—by playing with, yet respecting, the boundaries of secret liturgy—was able to perform Abakuá ritual music in a secular context and was still able to maintain his reputation among Abakuá. Herrera's performance of “Encame” has been celebrated by contemporary Abakuá musicians.

### Fourth Chant

Using rhetorical phrases to commence a ceremonial performance, Herrera begins by gaining the attention of the chorus:

**Line 1:** <Jeyey baribá ben[kamá] — Wa!>

**Attention, I will speak — We are ready!**<sup>19</sup>

<Jeyey baribá benkamá — Wa!> “ ‘Oye bari . . . ooo . . . ’ Spoken as one enters a crowd of Ékpè people and wants to call everybody's attention, or a call to order before business or a speech could begin. *Wa!* here confirms this kind of identification, because after the salutation or call to order all present would answer: *Uwa*” (O. Edem, personal communication, 2001).



<benkamá> be nkama (likely) (Connell, personal communication, 2002)

be = tell a story in Londo (= 'Efut?') and other Bantu/Bantoid languages in the area (cf. *Ìbìbìò*: *bo*= speak, tell)

n-kama = I declare

[kamá] kámá = "share in the play by displaying your knowledge of its secrets as an initiate or member" (Aye 1991: 61)

Herrera then salutes a leading figure in Abakuá mythology, and then each category of the Abakuá hierarchy:

**Line 2: <[Efiméremo]> <enkrúkoro> <[itiá]>, Abasí arominyán, <asére> obón, indiobón, etenyebón, <obonékue>.**

In Abakuá:

Efiméremo = Iyamba (mythologically, the first initiate, a.k.a. "Efí Méremo Obón Iyamba")

enkrúkoro = union

itiá = the land

Abasí = God

asére = I salute

obon = king

indiobón = second initiation grade (índia = birth; obon= king)

etenyebón = another initiation grade

obonékue = low level initiates.

Orok Edem identified this as a complete Èfik phrase in which someone is singing the praises of Efiom Edem, a particular Iyamba. According to Edem (personal communication, 2001), "This is a common Èfik manner of speaking, especially during funeral obsequies, for example: 'so and so, the greatest of all men, the owner of all farmlands, the man who decides when rain falls or not, etc.'"

<Efiméremo> Efiom Edem O = name of a particular Iyamba

<enkrúkoro itiá> Okut Ukot = stone

<Abasí arominyán, asére> Abasi Orok Inang – àsè!

àsè = an affirmation; exploits or achievements: "the act of proclaiming achievements publicly, . . . a poetic eulogy in praise of a king or any famous person" (Aye 1991:8)

<Obón> = Obong – àsè!

<indiobón> = Edi obong – àsè!

<etenyebón> = Ete obong – àsè!

<Obonékue> = Obong Ékpè (Ékpè ruler)

<Efiméremo> = “Efim Edem, who was Eyamba, the leader of Ékpè, as well as king of Duke Town in the late eighteenth–early nineteenth centuries” (Connell, personal communication).

Latham (1973:47–48) found that by 1805 Efim Edem (a.k.a. Duke Ephraim) was “by far the greatest trader” on the Cross River. “By 1828 Duke Ephraim was *Obong, Eyamba*, or *sole comey* recipient [collector of port duties/tariffs], and virtual monopolist of the external trade . . . . He was the most influential man in Efik history.” If this interpretation is correct, it is a rare reference in Abakuá to a known historical figure.

[Efiméremo] Efimeremé: “This Efik king received the first sacred drum skin from the Efor” or “Efiméremo Natakua: King ‘of the Akanarán Efik’” (Cabrera 1988:150–51). These Cuban interpretations support that of Connell, because *Natakua* = Atakpa, Duke Town in Calabar. *Akanaran* is likely “A-kan’-ê-ren” = an elder or an old man (Goldie 1964:7), that is, an authority.

<asére> = “a common greeting (*esiere* in Èfik, *asiere* in Ìbibìdò) used in the late afternoon/evening” (Connell, personal communication, 2002)

<asére> emesiere = greeting in the morning, good morning  
Kòm Abasi emesiere = thank God that you have seen the day,  
that you are able to wake up and see the day (Ita pesonal communication, 2003)

<enkrúkoró> kpukpuru = *all* in Èfik (Connell, personal communication). This coincides with *union*, the Abakuá interpretation.  
[itiá] Itié = place, seat; “Itie Ekpe, the place where Ekpe is kept” (Aye 1991:59). This may coincide with Cuban translations of *itiá* as *land*.

<itiá> “Itiat = stone; itie = place, but in Ékpè dialogue it means occupying a position in the hierarchy of Ékpè; Idaha = height, but in Ékpè context it refers to one’s standing in the Ékpè hierarchy” (O. Edem personal communication, 2001).

<obonékue> obon ngbe (possibly): a term used to group together the lower grades of Úgbè among the Ejagham; literally, children + Úgbè, the new initiates to the society (Connell 2004).

<obonékue> abanékpe = neophyte, a first level Ékpè initiate” (J. Edem, personal communication, 2003). This coincides with Cuban usage, in which *abanékue* has also been used since the nineteenth century (see Roche 1925:123).

In the following passages Herrera claims his legitimacy to speak by presenting himself as a leader of the group Isún Efó, which belongs to a ritual lineage

begat in 1840 in Havana by Efut founders. According to Cuban mythology, Isún was the capitol of Efó (Efut) territory in Usagaré—called Usakadet, Usahadet, Bakasi, or Backasey in various nineteenth-century maps (see Goldie 1964:361)—and is the place where Ékpè was founded.<sup>20</sup> Herrera chants:

**Line 3: <[Isún]> Efó, Isún <[enseniyén]>, bekuramendó.**

**Isún Efó is under the same sky (Enseniyén) as Bekuramendó (an alternative name for Usagaré).**

<Isún> Isong = land

isong Efut = Efut land (O. Edem, personal communication, 2001)

[Isún] I'-sõñ = the earth, "as distinguished from *enyõñ*, the heavens" (Goldie 1964:598)

<enseniyén> enyene nyin = belongs to us

Thus, isong enyene nyin = the land belongs to us (O. Edem, personal communication, 2001)

[enseniyén] En'-yõñ = the heavens, the firmament, the lift, the sky (Goldie 1964:79). This translation resonates directly with Abakuá usage.

[enseniyén] Nsañinyañ = a place name within Ekoi, "on the east bank of the Cross river" (Goldie 1964:357). According to Connell (personal communication, 2002), "this would be on the Calabar side of the river. One meaning of *nsañ* is "red earth" (presumably laterite); *inyañ* is *river*.

Abakuá leaders translated *Isún* as *face*, as well as *capital*: in other words, "a place where important ceremonies were performed." One Abakuá elder told me: "Isun is any kind of face: of the sun, the moon, of a table, etc." The Cuban scholar Lydia Cabrera (1988:252) wrote that "Isún [is] the face of Sikán"; the latter is a name for the mythological female founder of Abakuá. In the Cross River region, Sikan is a goddess of water; "iso esikan" is the shrine for the goddess (O. Edem, personal communication, 2001). The metaphorical relationship between a face and an altar are found throughout West Africa; according to Thompson (1993:28), "Yoruba and other Kwa-language groups in West Africa (Fon, Igbo, Edo, Ijaw) define their traditional altars as the 'face' or 'countenance' or 'forehead' of the gods." Talbot (1923: 178–79) wrote that among the Ìbìbìdò, west of Calabar, an initiation into the Ekong society was followed by a sacrifice made to a sacred location called "Isu Abassi, i.e., the Face of the God." Goldie wrote that in Calabar, a shrine made in the entrance yard of every home was called *isu Abasi*—"the face or presence of Abasi" (I'-sù = the face, the countenance"; i-sù A-basi-i = "the little round mound, as an altar... before which prayer was wont to be made to Abasi" (1890:42; 1964 [1862]: 137–38).

**Line 4: Isún kanomá táfia [úkano] bekonsí / abaíreme táfia serendé eniwé <akanarán>.**

**Isún participated in the first ceremony performed under the sacred tree / we were born from the same mother.**

In Abakuá:

Úkano bekonsí = ceiba tree

abaíreme = the íreme

eniwé = born from

akanarán = mother (fig. “powerful ancestor”)

[úkano] úkànà = the African oil bean tree (Aye 1991:139)

<akanarán> akani eren = old man, or ancestor (Connell, personal communication, 2002)

a-kan’-ni = old; aged; ancient

ê-ren = male; ñwan = a woman” (Goldie 1964: 7, 80)

It makes sense that what Abakuá metaphorically refer to as “mother” would also mean “ancestor.”

A later commercial recording—“Enyenisón Enkama *Africa habla*” (Africa Speaks) by Yoruba Andabo (1993)—reconstructs coherent liturgical chants, surpassing in this regard the supposedly more authentic “folklore” recordings in situ. A translation of the Éfik version of this title would be “the sons of the land speak” (Ekama = declares, speaks) (O. Edem personal communication, 2001). This composition is based on the *tratado* of Empegó, recited during the consecration of his drum. Empegó was key to the founding of Ékpè during the original ceremony in Usagaré: with his magic chalk he drew symbols that authorized the ritual actions of others. After a standard invocation, “Román” Díaz introduces his topic:

## Fifth Chant

**Line 1: [Batángá] Laminyán?**

**Where did Empegó go to find his magic chalk?**

*Batanga* derives from a title of the dignitary Moruá Yuánsa: “Batanga Moruá,” meaning “one who chants a lot” (“canta mucho”). Cabrera (1988:102) documented Batanga as *congo*, one of several Cuban interpretations indicating Bantu influence from the Cameroons region. Nicklin (1991:11) reported that the Efut and Batanga are part of the same ethno-linguistic group in southwest Cameroon. According to Austen and Derrick

(1999:14), Batanga is one of several Sawa Bantu speaking communities in the Wouri Estuary region of Cameroon. This possible connection—if not occurring previously in West Africa—was enabled later in Cuba by the estimated thirty to forty thousand enslaved people carried from this region by British, Dutch, and American vessels from 1752 to 1807 (Austen & Derrick 1999:18).

**Line 2: Ekokó <[ibióno]> muna tánze.**

**With his chalk, Empegó consecrated the skin (ekokó) of the divine drum (muna).**

In this phrase *ibióno* (music) is used as one of several metaphors for the drum.

[ibióno] I-bi-ɔn'-ɔ = a town of Ibibio (Goldie 1964:358)

Since according to legend Abakuá drum music was a contribution of the Èfik—and since Èfik people lived in Ìbibìò territory before settling in the Calabar region (see Latham 1973:9)—this association makes sense.

<ibióno> mbiono = congregation (O. Edem, personal communication, 2001)

Since well-performed music tends to draw a congregation about the players, this interpretation is possible.

m'-bi-o I = people, collectively" (Goldie 1964:172)

**Line 3: <[Akam]a nyére Orú.**

**We will speak of Orú.**

In Abakuá:

akamanyére = come forward; an evocation.

[Akam] A-kam = prayer to God (Goldie 1964:6)

<Akama nyére>

ekama = to call; yere = to answer, *or*

Ete akam enye oro = prayer is good

According to Orok Edem (personal communication, 2001), this is uttered after an elder pours the libation, *akam*, when greeting the Obong Ékpè.

**Line 4: Obonékue efión [enkíko], obonékue efión <bongó> / <Orú Bibí> urabá kinyóngo / Ékue barórí.**

**Initiates were cleansed; rooster blood was given to the bongó drum / Orú Bibí was consecrated / the Ékue was powerful.**

In Abakuá:

obonékue = initiate

efión = blood

enkíko = rooster

Bibí = Ìbìbìò, an ethnic-linguistic term

barorí = strong

[enkíko] Ekikọ-unen = he cock, the male of the domestic fowl (Goldie 1964:72)

<bongó> Bongó ékue = Mbongo Ekomo Ékpè (Ekomo = drum) (O. Edem, personal communication, 2001)

<bongó> ebonko = the fifth grade of Ékpè in Calabar; also the chief of the four lower grades (Connell, personal communication)

<Orú Bibí> Orọn = a town, a people, and a language ; Bibí = Ìbìbìò: a people and a language.

The Orọn pronunciation of Ìbìbìò is *Ibibi*. Both groups are found on the west bank of the Cross River (Connell, personal communication, 2002).

**Line 5: Índia Abakuá / Mekanika Aya gasígama / Erendió Yamba oré / Eriete [Moruá] Yeregúbia / [Akamá] Eribó.<sup>21</sup>**

**Moruá chanted when the Eribó drum was consecrated in Orú.**

In Abakuá:

índia = birth

Mekanika = nkanika (bells)

Aya gasígama = I will be loyal till death (an oath)

akamá Eribó

Kamá = word, to speak.

Kamá ribó= speak through the Eribó [drum]" (Cabrera 1958:82).

[Moruá] Mu'-ru-a = "The name of an officer possessed by the three highest grades in Egbo [Ékpè], who goes as a mourner to the funeral of any one who dies free of these grades, and... and howls" (Goldie 1964:196).

[Moruá] Mùrúa = one of the degrees of Ekpe cult; during the coronation of an Oboñ, the Murua and Idem Ikwo are the first to start the coronation celebrations (Aye 1991:86).

[akamá] enkame = to call (O. Edem, personal communication, 2001)

The next passage segues from a discussion of West African mythology to that of a ritual lineage established in Cuba in 1840.

**Line 6: <Munyánga Efó> <[Efóri] [nkomón]> / <Eforisún sankóbio Ita Amananyuáo> / <obonsíro Ékue awarariansa engómo>.**

**The alliance between the groups Munyánga Efó, Efori Nkomón, Isun Efó, Ita Amananyuáo was authorized through symbols drawn by Empegó.**

These groups are from the same Efó lineage begat in Havana in 1840 with the founding of Efóri Nkomón.

In Abakuá:

efóri = herbal arts

nkomón = drum

efóri nkomón = powerful drum (see Cabrera 1958: 38)

obonsíro = family

awarariansa = alliance

engómo = chalk used to authorize consecrations

<Munyánga Efó> Me Uyanga Efot = people of Uyanga, a town in the Cross River Basin" (O. Edem, personal communication, 2001)

<Efóri nkomón> Efri = to blow; ekomo = drum.

"Used to introduce a sanction, for example, to stop the missionaries from preaching or forbidding anyone to do business with them" (O. Edem, personal communication, 2001). For example, in a 1788 diary entry Antera Duke wrote: "I took 2 Ekpe drums and blew to forbid any men to sleep in the houses" (cited in Forde 1956:64).

[Efóri] Fri = to blow with the mouth, to breathe (Goldie 1964:106)

The interpretation of the Èfik *efri* as to blow or sound the drum of authority, and the Cuban *efori* as herbal arts (literally, witchcraft), is admittedly tenuous. Abakuá mythology tells that Efori was a people and place in Usagaré where the original ceremonial herbs were gathered.

[nkomón] e-kom-q = short drum, the Egbo (Ékpè) drum (Goldie 1964:73; Aye 1991:30)

<Eforisún sankóbio Ita Amananyuáo> Efe usun esan ke obio ita

amananyuao = phrase describing an incident in which the people of Yuanga first went into a town of Ita (O. Edem, personal communication, 2001)

<obonsíro Ékue awarariansa engómo> Obon iso Ékpè awawari ansa ekomo = a special Ékpè was then brought out (O. Edem, personal communication, 2001). In other words, Edem identifies this as an entire phrase in Èfik, using the appropriate hyperbolic language.

**Line 7: Erendió <Isun Efó>, ebongó Efóri Nkomón.**

**The group Isún Efó was born from that of Efóri Nkómon**  
or; literal meaning,

**Isun Efó was born through the Bongó drum of Efóri Nkomón.**

<Isun Efó> = Efot land (O. Edem, personal communication, 2001)

Using a ceremonial call and response structured with polyrhythmic percussion, Díaz extolled Abakuá mythology and contemporary ritual lineages. By demonstrating knowledge without revealing intimate ritual procedure, Díaz added a new dimension to the Abakuá presence in Cuban popular music.

Another arrangement by Díaz, “Enyenisón Enkama 2” (*Yoruba Andabo* 1997), continues his explorations into Abakuá mythology. Abakuá leadership believe that the Efó (Efut) founded the society in West Africa; the Èfik were believed to have joined the society later.<sup>22</sup> While Cuban narratives relate Efut origins, several West African narratives claim Ejagham origins for Ékpè, which was eventually transmitted to the Èfik through Usak Edet (Usagaré). Talbot (1912:37) wrote that the Ejagham “claim to have originated the whole idea” of Ékpè; later “Efut in the South Cameroons, started a similar society,” while still later “the Efiks of Calabar... founded the Ekkpe Club.” Latham (1973:36) wrote that circa 1750, “one of the first Efik settlers at Creek Town... is said to have bought the *Ekpe* secrets from... a man from Usak Edet.” According to Jones (1956:123), “In addition to [the] Efik communities there were resident in the Old Calabar area two distinct and older elements, the Efut and the Qua [Ejagham].” The Èfik received Ékpè from “the neighboring Qua[,] who said they brought it with them from the Ekoi [Ejagham] homeland” (Jones 1956:136; 1963:19).<sup>23</sup>

By reexamining the *tratados*, Díaz highlights the role of Efí ancestors in the history of Cross River Ékpè, in effect offering a revision of the West African mythology. Since Díaz is a leading member of an Abakuá group derived from Efí traditions, this arrangement is no simple exercise, but part of an extended conversation about the role of West African ethnicity in Ékpè/ Abakuá and Cuban history. In this recording, Díaz identifies himself as a leader of his group whose role is that of Moní Bonkó, the player of



the ceremonial Èfik *bonkó* drum. Connell (personal communication, 2002) identifies “Moní Bonkó” as possibly derived from *Muni*, a term for an Efut chief in Calabar; it has also been identified as “the exalted position of *Ebunko*, vice-chairman of *Ekpe*” (Latham 1973:39).<sup>24</sup>

This composition is meant to convey that in West Africa, the Efi knew about the “secret” of the sacred “Fish Tanze” before it was caught by the Efó. Furthermore, without the Èfik contributions (in the form of music, instruments, masquerade ensembles, and specific ritual leaders), the society would not function as it does today. The message is: “Peace and unity; we are family, let’s get along as equals.” In other words, the Efó should not feel superior because of the legend that they founded the society.

After greeting the chorus, Díaz begins:

### Sixth Chant

**Line 1: <Abasí menguáme enkrukoro>.**

**We are united with the blessings of God,**

*or*;

**God watches over all.**

In Èfik,

guáme = kpeme = watch (over)

enkrúkoro = kpukpuru = all

**Line 2: <Enkrúkoro <[enyéne]> Abakuá, [itiá] [Fondó], itiá kaníma asére, itiá ororó kánde, itiá núnkue>.**

**We are united in Abakuá. I salute the Abakuá of Matanzas, of Cárdenas, of Regla, of Havana.**

(cf. Thompson 1983: 250)

In Abakuá:

enkrúkoro = group

itiá = land of

<Enkrúkoro enyéne Abakuá> Kpukpuru enyene Ékpè = All belong to Ékpè

<Itiá fondó> Itie/ itiat ifondo = Place of Ifondo

<Itiá kanima asére> Itie/ itiat nkamina = Place of nkamina

<Itiá ororó kánde> Itie/ itiat nkanda = Place of nkanda

<Itiá núnkue> Itie/ itiat nuk Ékpè = nuke = Place of Ékpè

“Itiat Ékpè is buried at the entrance to each Ékpè house. *Itie* is the position of authority in Ékpè cosmology; it depends on

the character uttering the words, and in what context the words are being used” (O Edem, personal communication, 2001).

<enyéne> Enyéne = has, own (O. Edem, personal communication, 2001), i.e., “All own Abakuá.”

[enyéne] inyene = possession (Goldie 1964:569)

[itiá] itiat = stone; itie = place.

The “stone” theme resonates powerfully with Ékpè / Úgbè practice; an Ngbe foundation stone is placed at the base of the central pillar of the Ngbe lodge in Ejagham settlements (Nicklin 1991:4). According to Talbot (1969 [1926]:347), “The Etia Ngbe, the Efik Itiatt Ekkpe, is the principal symbol belonging to the secret society. . . . It represents not only the ancestors who have been members but also the tutelary spirit of the club.”

[Fondó] I-fon-do’ = a small village near Duke Town” (Goldie:358)

Because Cuban Abakuá were recreating Ékpè in Cuba, it makes sense that they would rename “Matanzas” with a Cross River place name.

**Line 3: Erendión <ekoria Abakuá> enyenisión eriéro bonsíro kinyóngo  
<baróko> nansáo.**

**Let us remember that Abakuá was born in Africa during the original ceremony.**

In Abakuá:

bonsíro = family

kinyóngo = initiated

baróko = ceremony

baróko nansáo = a founding ceremony

<ekoria Abakuá> ekori = the territory of

The meaning of the phrase “ekori enyene Abakuá” is “the whole world belongs to Abakuá,” i.e., a boast (O. Edem, personal communication, 2001). Ekorio enyene Abakuá is the complete title of the Cuban society.

<baróko> mborokò = an *ìdèm* that comes out when the king dies” (O. Edem, personal communication, 2001)

mboroko = an Ékpè grade (Ita, personal communication, 2003)

**Line 4: Okobio Enyenisión, Awanabekura Mendo/ Núnkue Itia Ororo  
Kánde Efik Ebutón/ Oo Ékue.**

**Our African brothers, from the sacred place/ came to Havana,  
and in Regla founded Èfik Ebutón/ we salute the Ékue drum.**

In reciting the passage “Okobio enyenísón,” Díaz recounts the founding of Èfik Ebuton in Havana by Èfik leaders. He comments in this way upon a still existing rivalry among the members of Efó and Efi ritual lineages in Cuba over who was the first to “own” the secret in West Africa. The fact that the Efi were the first to found a group in Cuba raises the question: How could the Èfik have the authority to create the first group if it is indeed the Efó who “own” the fundamental secret? Díaz then returns to West Africa to investigate Ékpè history:

**Line 5: <[Obáne]>, <Ékue Efi okobio Obáne>.**

**I come to represent the Èfik territory of Obáne.**

<Obáne> = an Ejagham region north east of Calabar; the hills there are referred to as the Oban hills (Connell, personal communication)

[Obáne] O'-bañ = a town of 'koi" (Goldie 1964:360).

There may not be a contradiction here in that Oban is known as an Ejagham region in West Africa, while in Cuba, Obáne is considered an Èfik region (see Cabrera 1958:73). Connell (personal communication, 2002) wrote: “I have the impression from Talbot that Oban was heavily influenced by Èfik and its proximity to Calabar even in the nineteenth century.”

<Ékue Efi okobio Obáne> Ékpè Èfik ke obio Abana = Ékpè in the town of Abana (Oban is in the hills, Abana is by the sea" (O. Edem, personal communication, 2001).

A-ban'-a = the point called East Head, at the entrance of the Calabar river (Goldie 1964:353)

**Line 6: Endó kairán <kokorikó>/ <akanawán> entéme taroróko.**

**In a river of Obane, a being was sent from the “land of the phantoms.”**

In Abakuá:

kokorikó = a worm (reference to death)

akanawán = a masquerade costume (representing ancestors)

taroróko = a toad (a code for the divine fish, who made a loud sound resembling that of a toad)

In the private manuscript of inherited *tratados* in which I saw the passage,

“from the land of the phantoms” was translated as “from the land of the whites.” In Abakuá ceremony, white chalk used for funeral ceremonies is equated with death. According to one Abakuá leader, the color metaphor means that the divine Fish was sent by the ancestors (“the land of the ghosts”) to unite the tribes.

<kokorikó> = cock crow (in Efik) (Ita, personal communication, 2003)  
 <akanawán> = old woman (O. Edem, personal communication, 2001)  
 This makes sense in Abakuá mysticism, where the spirit of Sikán, founding woman, is present in the dance of some Íremes.

**Line 7: <[Ubióko] Obáne Embemoró/ eroko embóko/ yene Iyámba.>**

**How is it that the Ékue is from Efi [Obáne Embemoró], but the Efó—represented by Iyámba—have possession of it?<sup>25</sup>**

According to Orok Edem (personal communication, 2001) the entire phrase means “Obioko—Creek Town—has agreed that mboko belongs to Eyamba.”

Mboko = a type of idèm, a stage of membership in Ékpè (O. Edem, personal communication, 2001)  
 [Ubióko] Obio Oko = Creek Town (Simmons 1956:3)

Cuban Abakuá interpret Obioku as a spring of water important to their mythology. Creek Town was so named because it is surrounded by creeks.

**Line 8: <[Ekón] kríbia ekón endibó>**

A title of the ekón, used to “bring the voice.” According to Abakuá mythology, this metal idiophonic bell is sacred to the Èfik.

[ekón] ñkón = a funnel-shaped musical instrument made of iron and beaten in play (Aye 1991:107)  
 <Ekón kríbia ekón endibó> Ekong akiriba ekong dibo = a song in Calabar” (O. Edem, personal communication, 2001)

**Line 9: <Kamanyére enkrúgoro, íreme ayeremí>.**

**Let us speak of union, our ancestors guide us.**

<Kamanyére enkrúgoro, íreme ayeremí> Akama nyére kpukpuru, idèm enyene mi = all call and respond, I own *idem*. “When one enters an Ékpè gathering,” said Orok Edem (personal communi-

cation, 2001), “one must demonstrate membership. For example, if I travel to Bakassi and witness Ékpè being played as a stranger, the only way I would be recognized as an initiate is to *kama/ yere*.”

Edem’s interpretation coincides with those by Cuban Abakuá leaders of the same phrase. Both give insight into the role of Ékpè/ Úgbè in West Africa and Abakuá in Cuba, where initiates enjoy a common bond while traveling away from their home to other regions where Ékpè/ Úgbè/ Abakuá reside. The society serves as a form of protection as well as a club for aesthetic pleasure; as Fitzgerald Marriot (1899:23) observed over one hundred years ago: “All members of the [Ékpè] society can travel without danger.” Based on his research in Cameroon, Ruel wrote:

Ngbe functions basically as an esoteric club, a highly elaborate one but one which caters primarily for the entertainment and common enjoyment of its members. This fact should be stressed, for the political functions of Ngbe derive as much from its bringing together the leading members of a community in these general activities as from its formal constitution as such. [In Calabar, Ékpè became] the means by which otherwise independent communities could act jointly in matters affecting their common interest. . . . Away from Calabar the common possession of Ekpe lodges by different communities was politically important rather as a means by which individual rights could be transferred from one community to another, so that a person passing between communities was given some protection. (Ruel 1969: 231, 254–55)

So too in Cuba, Abakuá initiates traveling to and from Havana and Matanzas will “call and respond” to demonstrate membership, enabling their participation in Abakuá gatherings in regions not their own. By evoking the ritual lineage of their particular group through chanted passages, initiates provide evidence for their legitimate acquisition of sacred authority.

## Conclusion

Despite separation for two centuries, highly different contexts, and different colonial languages, the similar functions of Ékpè/Úgbè and Abakuá and the training of its members has made it possible for initiates on both sides of the Atlantic to recognize their relationship.

Recent recordings of Abakuá materials by Cuban groups—notably Grupo AfroCuba (1998), Los Muñequitos de Matanzas (1994, 1995), Yoruba Andabo (1993, 1997), and the album *Ibiono* (2001)—convey several overarching messages: We are a people with our own history and traditions; we have intimate contact with the divine; our ancestors were royal personages who did great works; do not belittle our history or achievements; there is strength in unity.

By interpreting Cuban Abakuá chants through extended collaborative efforts with Abakuá leaders, I learned how these were used to comment upon the history of this institution, its West African origins, and its reestablishment in Cuba. By working with Èfik speakers who identified many Abakuá terms as part of their own language and history, as well as researching Abakuá terms in published sources, I was able to determine that many are derived from Cross River languages. Many Abakuá chants reveal West African place names and ritual lineages founded by West Africans in Cuba. Little of this information is found in written sources, making Abakuá chants useful to historians in gaining new perspectives on the Cross River Ékpè society and providing a rare example of organized cultural transmission from West Africa to the Caribbean.

The historical memory of Africa among the Cuban population contradicts state-supported notions of Cuban identities which proclaim them “mestizo,” a new identity based on a blend of cultures which erases ties to an African homeland. The Cuban intellectual Alejo Carpentier (1989:130) described *mestizaje* as he saw it in Cuba: “Popular dance of the early nineteenth century was the melting pot where—in the heat of rhythmic inventiveness of the blacks—Andalusian songs, boleros and staged tonadilla ballads . . . and the French contradanza merged to create new forms. These orchestras . . . were the creators of a mestizo music, from which all the pure African roots—regarding melody and percussive ritual rhythms—had been excluded.” That is, the term *mestizo* excludes any direct strains of African, European, or Asian forms or identities. To be *mestizo* is within the national project; to be resistant to mixing is to be outside of it.

My own research has found that many West African identities in Cuba are not limited to family genealogy but are also directly linked to religious practice. These are based on ritual kinship, not necessarily corresponding to family lineage from identifiable African “tribes.” I am not suggesting that initiates can trace their genealogical inheritance back to the places mentioned in their chants. I am suggesting, however, that they know the history of their lineages and that there were founding members who could make such connections. The perpetuation of these lineages and the ethnic markers they memorialize is in itself a form of resistance.

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## Notes

- The following is a list of Cuban Abakuá ritual lineages, including those mentioned in this essay. All Cuban place names refer to Havana and its outlying regions.  
Èfik lineages:  
Ekueri Tené (presumably from Creek Town, Calabar) established Ekueri Tongó (1848, Havana).  
Apapa Efí (from Africa) established Èfik Ebutong (1836, Regla).  
Èfik Ebutong established Èfik Abakuá (1845).  
Efut lineages:  
Apapa Efó (from Africa) established Efori Nkomón (1840, Havana).  
Efori Nkomón established Munyánga Efó (1871, Havana); Isun Efó (1938, Havana); and Ita Amanayúao (1940, Marianao).  
Orú lineage:  
An unknown group of Africans established Orú Apapa (c. 1848, Guanabacoa).  
Orú Ápapa established Orú Abakuá Akondomina Mefe (1877, Guanabacoa).  
Orú Abakuá established Orú Bibí (1934, Guanabacoa).
- I thank Samuel Eyo, the association president. In preparation, Asuquo Ukpog, director of information of the Èfik Association, helped organize a program (on July 18) with Diabel Faye, host of the “Rhythm and News” show at WBAI, Pacifica radio in New York, about the upcoming Èfik meeting and the Cuban cultural connection. On it, Chief Joseph Edem, an Efut leader, Asuquo Ukpog, C. Daniel Dawson (an African diaspora specialist), Diabel Faye, and I discussed issues regarding Èkpè/Úgbè culture and its diaspora.
- On July 28, at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. The Cuban participants were Frank Bell; Ogduardo “Román” Díaz, Moní Bonkó of Ápapa Umóni Efí; José “Pepe” Hernández, Ísue of Efóri Nandibá Mosóngo; David Oquendo; Vicente Sánchez, Obonékue of Ápapa Umóni Efí.
- In a similar study, Gerhard Kubik (1979:21–23,51) traced “Angolan” and Yorùbá traits in Brazil using a variety of evidence such as rhythmic structures, singing styles, related vocabulary, instrument construction, and methods of handling instruments.

5. On July 26, 2003, I met with the Obong—Paramount Ruler—of Calabar and his retinue in Detroit, Michigan, during the Obong's first visit to the U.S. With me were two Cuban Abakuá leaders: "Román" Díaz and Angel Guerrero. His Majesty Edidem Professor Nta Elijah Henshaw VI invited us to Calabar for a cultural exchange.
6. Joseph Edem is Obong Nkanda (the highest Ékpè title) from Efut Ekondo in Calabar. Callixtus Ita, a retired pharmaceutical chemist, is a full member of Ékpè through a Creek Town lodge.
7. I have replaced the umlaut (two dots over a vowel) as used by Goldie in the old Èfik orthography with the subdot, as used in the current official orthography for Èfik, as well as Ìgbo and Yorùbá (cf. Essien ca. 1982; Essien 1985).
8. Lovejoy and Richardson (1999:341–42, 351, 353) is my source for identifying Ephraim Robin John and "Grandy King George" as the same person.
9. Eltis et al. (2000). The voyages are numbered 75899 (*Nancy*), 17552 (*Indian Queen*), 83268 (*Quixote*), 82646 (*Mary Ellen*).
10. Contemporary Abakuá leaders told me that the purpose of creating these manuscripts was to preserve oral traditions of the African founders, so that Creole (those born in Cuba) initiates, whose first language may not have been from the Cross River Basin, could learn them more readily.
11. See Vélez (2000:159–60) on the subject of *controversia* in Cuban Lukumí chanting. In Suriname, the Prices (1991:8) noticed the "fundamental dialogic pattern" of Saramaka performance: "A closely related feature . . . is role switching between (temporary) soloist and other participants. For example, song/dance/drum 'plays' are characterized by the emergence of a succession of individual soloists, each of whom briefly enjoys center stage and then yields to another."
12. My criteria for selecting which Abakuá leaders to work with were part of a complex process. Only by many years of attending ceremonies, and studying Abakuá history with a descendant of an Ékpè member from the Calabar region—someone widely regarded by Abakuá leaders as knowledgeable, although he was not Abakuá—could I begin to understand who was a well-informed elder. Then Abakuá members who supported my project guided me to those leaders considered masters of the lore and guardians of the manuscripts passed on from the nineteenth century.
13. Creating a literal translation in Èfik of the texts I present here proved to be a complex task. Language contact has been a factor on the Nigeria–Cameroon borderland "at least 500 years, and perhaps longer" (Connell 2001:52,56). After reviewing the Abakuá texts in this essay, Connell (personal communication, 2002) wrote that "there appears to be a lot of non-Èfik (probably a mix of Efut or Londo, Ejagham, and some Spanish) that would need to be identified." Another phase of translation—currently in process—entails a thorough investigation including literal translations from the Èfik and other Cross River languages as well as input from Èfik and Efut members of the society in West Africa.
14. This chant and its translation were documented in the manuscripts of the late José de Jesús "Chuchu" Capaz (one of twentieth-century Cuba's renowned Abakuá leaders). A version of this passage was recorded by the Muñequitos de Matanzas (1994).
15. The term *Ekoì* is in fact used indiscriminately. Talbot (1912:153) wrote that

“‘Ejagham’ [is] the name by which the Ekoi call themselves. . . . The word Ekoi itself is Efik.” Jones (1963:21) later wrote: “One group of Kwa was a subtribe of the Ejagham Ekoi which, with another tribal fragment the Efut [Efot], were the original inhabitants of Old Calabar.” Writing of the middle and upper Cross River peoples of southeastern Nigeria and southwestern Cameroon, Andah (1990:27) observed that “the name *Ekoi* used to denote most of these people is an Efik word used to describe indiscriminately all people up river from their own lands. . . . These so-called ‘Ekoi’ groups like the Boki are clearly distinguishable from one another.” Contemporary Ejagham are considered part of the Ekoi language cluster, including approximately eighty-five thousand speakers in the upper Cross River basin (cf. Crabb 1965).

16. In Cuban mythology, Ápapa Umóni represents “a spring of water in a river of Efi,” a place important to the founding of the Ékpè society. In Abakuá *umon* is a place name as well as a term for *water*. Goldie (1964:193) defined *mōñ* as water, river, or sea. The sacred Fish Tanze appeared from the river; thus all Abakuá myths point to this element as a divine source.
17. “In Calabar, *efamba* means ‘a display of articles of Ékpè.’ Usually among the Efut and Ejagham Ékpè, this display would take place in the forest, but the Éfik urbanized it by placing them in a temple” (J. Edem, personal communication, 2003).
18. Both *plante* and *valla* are Spanish terms. Orok Edem translated “to plant” (perform a ceremony) in Éfik as *ntuak nda wuk*: planter = wuk; ntuak nda = to plant. During a land dispute, one person may plant a palm branch, a symbol of Ékpè, into the ground to claim it. The contender would then be forced to deal with the matter through the Ékpè society. Goldie (1964:567) also translated *wuk* as *plant*. Many African-based concepts are described with Spanish terms in Cuba. *Valla* translates into English as *arena* or *cockpit*, the place where cocks meet to fight, because the lead singers are known as *gallos* (cocks).
19. Cabrera (2000:145) gave a similar translation: ¡Jeyei! [attention!] Bara baribá benkamá [I am going to speak].
20. *Usaghade* is the contemporary ethnonym which also serves as a term for the language. “The Éfik term is Usakedet, while in official Cameroon parlance the areas goes by the name Isangele” (Connell 2001:72). Other variants are *Usahadit*, *Usarade*, and *Usakere* (Nicklin 1991:8). As a result of Portuguese contact in the early 1500s, the region “has historically been referred to as Rio del Rey” (Connell 2001:53).

The Efut “migrated from the Cameroons” (Latham 1973:5). Simmons (1956:4) wrote: “When the Efik first settled at Creek Town they found a small village of Efut settlers living in the immediate vicinity. The Efut had originally migrated from the southern Cameroons area.”

21. Cabrera (1988: 236) documented a version of this phrase.
22. Most versions of Abakuá mythology hold that during founding of Ékpè in Usagaré, the “secret” was received by Usagaré, Eforisún, and Bakokó, three major Efó territories. Much later, representatives from Afiana (Orú), Efó, Efóri, and Efi participated in a ceremony in Usagaré, where the “secret” was transmitted from the Efó to others. Orok Edem (personal communication, 2001) commented: “The Usak Edet people would tell you they sold it to the Éfiks.” Therefore, the legend of Usagaré origins is reinforced in both Cross River and Cuban variants.

23. During his investigation into this mythology, Nicklin (1991:10) questioned leaders of the Bateka village in Usak Edet, who indicated that the sister of the founder of their village had “landed a fish which started vibrating and making the voice of the leopard,” leading to the founding of the “leopard spirit cult, which they call Butamu” (Cuban Abakuá refer to their temples as *butame*). “Bateka people are adamant that they ‘never bought Butamu from any person’, and that they are the true originators of the leopard spirit cult. . . . All Isangele elders emphatically deny that the Ejagham were the originators of Ekpe, and many say that while some Ejagham groups purchased it from Isangele, others purchased it from the Efik who in turn acquired it from Isangele” (Nicklin 1991:10,11). In other words, the collective memory of village leaders in Usak Edet supports that of Cuban Abakuá: that the epicenter of the mythology is based there, and that a later transfer of ritual power to the Èfik was made.
24. Often in the Cuban literature *bonko* is an Èfik term, whereas *bongó* is an Efut or Ejagham term. For example, Cabrera (1958:61) wrote: “Bonkó: the sacred drum of the Efik ([Bongó] Ekue, that of the Efor).” This distinction is not reflected in the Cross River literature: In 1773 Èfik leader “Grandy King George” of Old Town wrote the phrase “blowed abuncko” to mean that the Ékpè drum had been sounded to declare a new law (Williams 1897:544); Talbot (1912:41) documented “ebu nko” (ebonko) as an Úgbè grade [Ejagham].
25. In most Cuban interpretations, “Iyamba is king of the Efor” (Cabrera 1958:95).