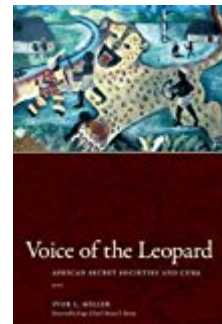




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## Transatlantic Connections: African Secret Societies in Cuba

In *Voice of the Leopard*, Ivor L. Miller examines the history of Abakuá, a secret or initiate based religious society formed in Cuba, through the lens of the Ékpè Leopard Society of West Africa's Cross River basin (a region today encompassing Nigeria and Cameroon). Employing a self-described "historical anthropological" approach, based largely on oral narratives and insider status as an Ékpè initiate, and arguing that the Abakuá were a direct extension of the Ékpè, Miller's purpose is twofold: to demonstrate African cultural transmissions and survivals in the Americas and to emphasize the centrality of Abakuá in the larger narrative of Cuban history.

Building largely on the foundational works of Cuban scholars Fernando Ortiz and Lydia Cabrera, Miller details the creation, development, and eventual repression of Abakuá in Cuba. While many Africans, both slave and free, arriving to Cuba before the nineteenth century either possessed a knowledge of Ékpè or were members of this society, it was not until the appearance in Havana of royal officials from Africa that Ékpè followers in Cuba were formally allowed to organize around the religious

identity they now called Abakuá. Composed mostly of "free urban black workers" but also including slaves, the initial members modeled their organization after the *cabildos de nación*, black mutual aid societies grouped according to nationalities and prevalent in Cuba during this period.

Eventually, Africans practicing Abakuá recognized the need to carry on their ethno-cultural traditions and in 1836 decided to include black creoles resulting in the creation of the first official Abakuá lodge. Subsequent development of Abakuá in Cuba would continue over the next three decades with at least nineteen new lodges formed, mostly in Havana but also as far east as Matanzas. One fascinating component of Abakuá's expansion—the creation by an official Abakuá titleholder of an all-white lodge—made it one of the first integrated institutions in Cuba. Notably, Miller argues that since this development was entirely an adaptation to circumstances in Cuba, principally the need to secure greater support and numbers, Abakuá members began to move away from focusing on African ethnic identifications "to pre-

servicing the moral and spiritual foundations of Ékpè” (p. 10). The impact of this development, however, was mitigated as Cuban officials, responding to the threat white Abakuá groups presented to colonial authority, initiated a series of repressive measures that culminated in making Abakuá illegal. Miller concludes the story of the Abakuá in the nineteenth century by noting (somewhat vaguely) that after 1875 “Abakuá members became scapegoats, accused of committing heinous acts” (p. 139). This resulted in many practitioners either being exiled to Spanish penal colonies or choosing to migrate to places outside of Cuba, including the United States.[1]

By chronicling the creation, expansion, and subsequent creolization of Abakuá, as well as threats to its development at the end of colonial rule, in the first half of *Voice of the Leopard*, Miller ably reconstructs the story of Ékpè and its Cuban iteration, Abakuá, in the nineteenth century. It is only when Miller attempts to expand the dimensions concerning the role of Abakuá in Cuban history that *Voice of the Leopard* comes up short. Much of this is a result of the dual methodology that provokes two principle concerns and ultimately marks this work as uneven: Miller’s use of sources and his engagement with current scholarship. Regarding sources, Miller’s status as an Ékpè initiate does grant him unprecedented access to the internal records of this “secret” society, but also inevitably imparts a degree of bias that forces the reader to trust Miller’s assertion that “although I am obliged not to reveal these teachings, they have allowed me to grasp the essential elements in the story, as well as to reduce speculation” (p. 31). As for Miller’s engagement with current scholarship, despite the large importance attached to Abakuá in Cuban history, Miller fails to include many works critical to this period, which renders his analysis evidentially superficial and at times unsupported.[2]

Three important examples serve to illustrate this last point. In chapter 2, Miller, through a discussion of black artisans, *cofradías* (Catholic brotherhoods), and other institutions important to the free black and slave communities of Havana, argues “that Africans and black creoles established Abakuá as a force of liberation and an alternative to authoritarian models of society” (p. 68). Yet by conflating potential Abakuá participation with documented evidence of larger African groups, among them the Yoruba and Kongo, Miller never clearly distinguishes the particular and specific connections between these groups and Abakuá. In fact, in two of the more influential events in Cuban history that Miller discusses—the Aponte rebellion in 1812 and the La Escalera conspiracy in 1844, both large scale movements involving African and creole

free blacks and slaves—Miller is only able to conclude that the first rebellion included “possible Abakuá and Ékpè participation,” while in the case of 1844 Miller leaves the reader with “among the accused that year was an Abakuá title-holder” (pp. 88, 85). Rightly, these two events are seen as forces of liberation, less certain are how Abakuá directly shaped and contributed to these movements. The lack of substantive proof for this aspect of Miller’s argument can be partially rationalized by the inherent limitations of the historical record, but Miller’s failure to engage two of the more authoritative works on this subject, Matt D. Childs’s *The 1812 Aponte Rebellion in Cuba and the Struggle against Atlantic Slavery* (2006) and Robert L. Paquette’s *Sugar Is Made with Blood: The Conspiracy of La Escalera and the Conflict between Empires over Slavery in Cuba* (1988)—the first of which would have significantly contributed to Miller’s analysis as it lists the particular African ethnicity of those punished in the Aponte rebellion—cannot.[3]

In chapters 4 and 5, Miller’s discussion of Abakuá white lodges is also problematic as it overextends Abakuá importance with the argument that “the success of Abakuá’s integration became a model that others followed, most famously nationalists such as José Martí, the ‘apostle of Cuban independence’” (p. 177). Yet the justification for this intriguing assertion rests on an “anecdote” of a riot in 1871. Here, the cited account of Abakuá members ranges from a letter by a participant that describes “some black men” to three secondary oral accounts told to Miller that respectively state “several dead” whose names were not released, “but it is said most of them were Abakuá” as proof of Abakuá involvement (pp. 120,121). And while it is true that Martí acknowledged this incident in a poem, it is never made clear that either Martí knew that some of these men were possibly Abakuá or that this influenced his notion of a raceless Cuba.[4]

One last problem with Miller’s attempts to incorporate Abakuá into the larger context of Cuban history is found in the discussion of the War of Independence and another important revolutionary figure, General Antonio Maceo. Beginning in chapter 6, Miller connects the Abakuá contribution to the Cuban independence army of 1895 based solely on the fact that because the army was largely comprised of Africans and their descendents, “many of them would have been devotees of Palo Monte,” an African derived religion distinct from Abakuá yet sharing similar symbols and rituals (p. 146). However, when pressed beyond generalizations linking West African cultural influence designed to imply Abakuá contributions, Miller is at pains to document more than four

actual Abakuá members of the independence army. The association of Maceo with Abakuá rests on similar shaky ground. Using accounts from the same three sources that describe Martí's association with Abakuá, Miller explains that in 1890 during a trip to Havana by Maceo, several Abakuá members provided an informal (unbeknownst to Maceo) security detail. While this event may hold importance in Abakuá lore, the suggestion that this was a "key role" in the independence movement and "integral to the official narrative of the birth of the Cuban nation" leaves both the association and assertion without substantial support (pp. 178, 149).

Miller's work is more successful in his discussion of Abakuá when he adopts an anthropological approach. This is most clearly demonstrated in his analysis of the rituals, symbols, and characteristics that were imparted by the Cross River Africans to Abakuá and with which the latter group contributed to Cuban artistic culture. Beginning in chapter 5 with a comparative analysis of African and Cuban music, Miller notes how the Abakuá created new instruments—clave sticks—to structure traditional timeline patterns within particular songs, a combination that is the basis for some of Cuba's most identifiable music, including rumba and son.

The three appendices also merit consideration as they similarly reflect the positive gains realized under Miller's anthropological framework. The sources comprising the bulk of his evidence, namely, substantial personal interviews with members of each community, are effectively used here to justify the Ékpè-Abakuá connections. In the first, Miller provides a list of twenty-two Abakuá lodges formed on the eve of emancipation and up through the advent of the Cuban Republic. In addition to providing interpretations of the ethnic and cultural connections within each lodge to their African sources, this list represents a near complete accounting of all Abakuá lodges formed in Cuba up to 1917. Miller's second appendix compares Ékpè and Abakuá ritual costumes to identify symbolisms shared by both societies. Similarities include the ritual use of hemp among both groups to represent the importance of the forest in their cosmology as well as a particular checked pattern of cloth that both used to evoke the important symbol of the leopard. Miller's discussion of Abakuá chants in his final appendix further highlights the importance of oral history to the study of Abakuá, a community that relies heavily on oral narratives within ritual performances. Recognizing that traditional accounts were not only biased but also fundamentally lacking in critical insight necessary to understand an initiate society, Miller translates various phrases used

over the course of this work to demonstrate the complex connections found in the oral tradition of Abakuá.

What makes Miller's work relevant beyond Cuban and African scholarship is the emphasis on the transatlantic context that linking the two societies suggests and the continual influence these connections can have on contemporary cultures (an argument made all the more remarkable by the fact that previous communication between the groups has been limited for almost two hundred years). Miller contributes to discussions of the African diaspora by chronicling a 2004 meeting of Ékpè and Abakuá members where the shared ritual performances that marked this encounter allowed both groups to recognize essential elements that, according to Miller, had the effect of confirming respective "local histories through the practice of their counterparts" (p. 35). For Miller, the notion that what Cuban Abakuá has to say to African Ékpè represents multidirectional and even circular cultural currents that, while based on a long heritage, remain vibrant today.

Although Miller often fails to substantiate some of the larger claims regarding Abakuá influence in Cuban history, there is still much to admire about *Voice of the Leopard*. Miller has painstakingly and with great dedication and care conducted extensive fieldwork chronicling the oral narratives critical to understanding two interconnected societies spanning the Atlantic. Moreover, he has done this in a way to suggest renewed attention to the continuous and reciprocal nature of the African diaspora. Ultimately, this is what distinguishes Miller's work.

#### Notes

[1]. A more specific account of official Cuban attempts at repressing African identifications and practices during the early national period can be found in Alejandra Bronfman, *Measures of Equality: Social Science, Citizenship, and Race in Cuba, 1902-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

[2]. In contrast is J. Lorand Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005) where both Matory's bias and ethnographical observations, stemming from secret informants, are successfully grounded by multiple other sources.

[3]. It should be noted that Miller does include Childs's work on Aponte in his index, but never cites it to the best of this reviewer's knowledge, while with Paque-

tte, in this section, Miller only makes a brief and general reference to his work in a single footnote.

[4]. Another work omitted by Miller, Lillian Guerra, *The Myth of Jose Martí: Conflicting Nationalisms in*

*Early Twentieth-Century Cuba* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005) would have permitted a broader context for how competing groups used Martí and his image in the understanding of nationalism.

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