

Lydia Cabrera. *Sacred Language of the Abakuá.* Edited and translated by Ivor L. Miller and P. González Gómes-Cásseres. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2020. 608 pp. \$45.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-4968-2949-8.

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This remarkable oeuvre is a translation of Lydia Cabrera's work *La lengua sagrada de los ñañigos* (1988), with commentary and supplementary material. It consists of a "lexicon" of 6,500 terms, chants and phrases taken down in the secret language of the Cuban Abakuá society, which Cabrera collected and translated from the 1940s, before the revolution after which she left Cuba for Miami. The editors explain that it was "a challenge" to make sense of Cabrera's Spanish translations and annotations of the entries in the secret Abakuá language (p. xxiv). They took much care to keep her style intact, with the help of Cabrera's original manuscript notes available in the Cuban Heritage Collection, University of Miami libraries, to avoid errors. Cabrera's translations were supplemented by the editors with additional ethnographic information in the text and in endnotes by decisions related to orthography and the alphabetical order. The translation of Cabrera's preface and the lexicon are preceded by an introduction by Ivor L. Miller, and followed by two appendices. The first, by Victor Manfredi, provides etymologies of 218 terms that are directly derived from, or have similarities with, vocabularies in the Cross River region. The second appendix, compiled by Miller, contains a list of Abakuá lodges or *cabildos* in Cuba. A bibliography related to the contributions

by the editors concludes the work. Referring to Cabrera's notes on possible titles for her book, the editors decided to drop the term *ñañigos* in the English version with its denigrating connotations in favor of the more neutral term "Abakuá." The editors conscientiously recorded their decisions regarding changes and wording.

The Sacred Language of the Abakuá is a continuation of Cabrera's earlier book, *La sociedad secreta Abakuá, narrada por viejos adeptos* (The Abakuá Secret Society, as narrated by elderly initiates), published in 1959, as Cabrera explains in her preface. Unlike this earlier book, which is a coherent narrative that summarizes what the elderly initiates told her about their understanding of the Abakuá society and its origins in the Cross River region of southwestern Cameroon and southeastern Nigeria, *The Sacred Language of the Abakuá* contains terms and phrases used by initiates in the society's secret language. Scholars have wondered how a Cuban woman had been able to get into the possession of the secret knowledge of a men's association. In particular, one initiate, Celestino Gaintán, a descendant of enslaved people from Carabali or Calabar, seems to have been willing to reveal his knowledge to her, probably in the hope to find in her an ally who could free the Abakuá from its subversive image created by the

colonial government. To protect him, she promised that she would publish these notes only after his death. It was her last publication, printed in Miami in 1988. After the revolution, she left Cuba with her female companion, and never returned there, probably because she did not like the revolution or because Abakuá was searching for her, following the publication of *La sociedad secreta Abakuá* in 1959.[1]

Lydia Cabrera (1899–1991), daughter of an elite family, was fascinated by the tales the family's servants of African origin told her. Early on, she developed an interest in their history and situation. Cabrera was very productive, wrote countless books on Afro-Cuban oral literature and culture. Her most well-known book, *El Monte*, translated into English as *The Forest* (1954), describes the use of plants from various West and Central African religious contexts in Cuba and also contains a section about Abakuá. The far too early deceased language scholar Elliot Klein had begun an edition of *El Monte* on the nature of these plants with the help of Afro-Cuban specialists, a task that had to remain unfinished. Before she published *The Sacred Language of the Abakuá*, Cabrera compiled a similar lexicon on Central African cult vocabularies in Cuba.

Her work has occasionally been criticized for blurring the line between fact and fiction. However, oral literature and performance of cultic practice always rely on the memories of their practitioners. Their expression and reproduction are based on interpretation, reenactment and employment of rhetorical skills. This is so in Africa and in Cuba, and also takes place when knowledge is transferred and narrated in books, as has been widely discussed by the “writing culture debate” in anthropology.[2] Surprising are rather the similarities that have been maintained in the Abakuá societies in Cuba and the corresponding cult associations, Ékpè, in the Cross River region, in the time frame of roughly two hundred centuries. *The Sacred Language of the Abakuá* highlights these

similarities. Such details cannot be invented but are testimony to a continuation and transfer of the cultural practice to distinct political contexts and purposes. Appendix 1 of this book, the work of Miller and Stephan Palmié on Abakuá in Cuba, and my own research on the history of Ékpè in the Cross River region, among the work of other scholars, have documented the materials allowing to establish these similarities.[3]

In the Cross River region, Ékpè has established a closely knit network of memberships that enabled the organization of secure trade for members, acted as a local court, and had important roles and rights at initiations, funerals, and other festivities of members, with both secret and public performances. A secret sign language ensured that traders from distant villages were recognizable as initiated members and able to reveal the position in Ékpè they had in their home village by demonstrating the details in the secret language. Hierarchies and roles in the institution were important. They were filled by titleholders whose families had acquired this title following the foundation of the association in their village. When this institution reached Cuba in the 1840s with enslaved people, including Ékpè members from the Calabar region, it was reenacted and adapted to the very different political, economic, social, and religious context. The titles and the performances of the masked dancers (there called *ireme*, a term derived from the Efik term *idem*, “face,” “image,” “mask”), the secret language and myth of the discovery of the cult by women—a widespread topos in African mythology—were carefully kept. The drum also plays an important part in both institutions (see also the work of Isabela de Aranzadi, *La mascara acústica en las sociedades secretas de África central y sus trayectorias atlánticas, en Guinea Ecuatorial (des)conocida* [2020], who researched the relationship in the Bight of Biafra between African and Cuban musical instruments).

Cabrera's lexicon contains terms and phrases in the secret language used by Abakuá titleholders

to refer to the society's history and cultic practice, and its adaptation to the sociopolitical context in Cuba, as well as Catholic terms that have been included into the repertoire. As there are a number of competing narratives in the Cross River region about some aspects of the history of Ékpè and its genealogies in the region, it would have been interesting to be informed which of these perspectives were narrated and institutionalized in Cuba. Abakuá became an institution that organized enslaved people from the Cross River region and later also other men. It also included aspects of self-help in a hierarchical social setting, in which most of the members were dockworkers. As Miller explains in his introduction, anything secret, such as Abakuá, was considered criminal in Cuba at the time and assumed to be working against the colonial government. This fact might have been an incentive for some members to reveal part of the knowledge of the society to Cabrera that she could help educate Cubans about the true objectives of Abakuá, and their forming part of Cuban national identity. These members, in turn, were risking to be expelled or persecuted by the lodge. Her opaque and "baroque style" could be another attempt at protecting her informants (p. xxiv).

This volume is a treasure chest for scholars interested in Afro-Cuban culture, but it does not reveal its content easily. It requires some kind of familiarity with the subject and should be studied together with Cabrera's *La sociedad secreta Abakuá*, which provides a broader context for understanding the lexicon entries. Miller and González Gómez-Cásseres's book is also richly illustrated by photographs, art work, and drawings, mostly collected by Miller. The editors chose not to publish Cabrera's photographs, most of which Abakuá members consider not meant for the public. Secrecy of the published materials remains an issue, but Miller explains in his introduction that phrases, chants, and illustrations are made available through publication but do not reveal the essentials of what Abakuá members regard as the ultimate secrets. The secret of how the friction

drum speaks is technically known but this is not the major concern of Abakuá. Important is what is communicated with it and the publication does not reveal this. It would have been interesting to get to know more about the nature of the secret Abakuá language that Cabrera has intuitively translated into Spanish. Most of the numerous cult associations in the Cross River region employ similar secret languages; some focus on replacing the meanings of particular terms in local languages, others are non-verbal languages, consisting of graphic and performed signs, and others on audible elements, such as drums and sounds. It would have been interesting to know whether the larger part of the entries in the lexicon are replacements of meanings that have taken place in Cuba so that non-members and the authorities could not understand them, as only 218 of 5,600 items were identified as being derived from local Cross River languages, including the names of the titles and geographical places. Despite all the care taken with the documentation and the commentary on the translation, it remains unclear according to which principal the references for the use of particular terms and contexts in the Cross River region have been quoted.

Notes

[1]. Edna Rodríguez-Manguel, introduction to *Lydia Cabrera and the Construction of an Afro-Cuban Cultural Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 1-24.

[2]. James Clifford and George Marcus, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

[3]. Ivor Miller, *Voice of the Leopard: African Secret Societies and Cuba* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009); Stephan Palmié, "A View from Itia Ororó Kande," *Social Anthropology* 14, no. 1 (2006): 99-118; and Ute Röschenhaler, *Purchasing Culture: The Dissemination of Associations in the Cross River Region of Cameroon and Nigeria* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2011).

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