

Ecorie Abakuá, an Instructive and Demystifying Book

Pedro A. Cubas Hernández
Historian, professor and essayist
Cuban. Resident of Brazil

I have a *santero* friend and another who's Abakua
that are better men and friends than many
who are nothing and make out that they're a lot.

“Soy todo”[I am everything] (E. Machado — J. Formell, *Van Van*)

CD: *Ay Dios, Ampárame* (1995)

...*Ekue, Ekue, Chaviaca Mokongo Ma' chévere*

“Appapas del Calabar”(J. Formell) CD: *Llegó Van Van* (1999)

It is really nice to read a book that constantly makes you vibrate because it makes you hear Cuban Afro-religious music and goes to your feet with every page you turn as gingerly as usual. In the decade of the 1990s, Cuba found itself in a socioeconomic but not cultural crisis. That decade was filled with musical productions such as the work of the *Van Van* (with Mayito Rivera's style and voice), who I cite here as emblematic, and they reveal only a small bit of the values held by our Abakuas.

These *Van Van* hits, and other groups and soloists in the field of popular dance music who garnered attention from their radio, television and live concert fans, coincided with the publication of literature about Afro-inspired religions in Cuba, e.g., *Los orishas en Cuba* (Havana: Ediciones Unión, 1990), by Natalia Bolívar, the best example from that period.

Other, pre-1959 books were reprinted by Cuba's most important publishing houses, among them *¡Oh, mío, Yemayá!! Cuentos y cantos negros* (Havana: Ciencias Sociales, 1992), by Rómulo Lachatañeré; *El Monte* (Havana: Letras Cubanas, 1993), by Lydia Cabrera; and *Los negros brujos* (Havana: Ciencias Sociales, 1995), by Fernando Ortiz. This last one refers to the Abakuas (called “*ñáñigos*”) and other practitioners of the Afro-Cuban religion (then called “*brujos*” [witches]).

In addition, a number of Senior Theses and Masters' Theses on the subject were written at the Schools of Social Communication and Philosophy, History and Sociology, at the University of Havana. This is the context out of which came *Ecorie Abakuá. Cuatro ensayos sobre los ñáñigos cubanos* (Havana: Ediciones UNIÓN, 1994), by Tato Quiñones.

If we were to ask about Serafín Quiñones in Cuban intellectual circles, very few would know what to answer; but if asked about Tato Quiñones (using his pen name, or perhaps his pseudonym), then anyone would be able to answer us quite quickly. Born in Havana, in 1942, where he studied and worked to earn a living, every since he was a young man, this man's life experiences as a social subject include a stint in the service, as a university student at "La Colina," as history professor, journalist (magazine founder, director and contributor) and clergyman.

His stories "Al final del terraplén, el sol" [At the Embankment's End, the Sun] (David Prize, 1970; ICL-UNEAC, 1971) and *A pie de obra* [Right At the Site] (Ediciones Unión, 1990) reveal his skill as a narrator. His work as a scriptwriter for the Cuban Institute of Radio and Television (ICRT) is well known. Yet, he should also be valued as a researcher. His book of essays on the Abakwas is evidence of this.

Ecorie Abakuá contains four, short essays (the last one, particularly) written in a language perfectly understandable for any reader truly interested in the subject of Afro-inspired religions in Cuba. The author chose the specific number of texts because it was so difficult to publish books of more than 50 pages with any speed at that time. This explains why it was frequently edited to reduce its size.

As a lover of the best and brightest of Latin American literature, Tato chose for his brief introduction something by Jorge Luis Borges about Fray Bartolomé de las Casas's request to King Charles V of Spain to promote the African slave trade, so Africans could replace "Indians" in the workforce. Because of this, Borges wrote: "We owe infinite deeds to this philanthropist's curious twist of thought." In using this Borgesian affirmation,

Tato emphasized that the colonialist, Atlantic commerce (known as slave trading), whose promoters profited from the lives of inhabitants of sub-Saharan Africa, is the historical antecedent that explains the magnitude of the suffering endured by the non-white population in modern and contemporary America. His essays only deal with one, specific case: the Cuban one.

• The first essay, "Los 'íremes' o 'diablitos' de los ñañigos cubanos," refers to a masked dancing figure that is one of Abakuá's representations in the popular imagination, and has become a very much appreciated, Cuban cultural symbol: it is labeled 'low art,' or 'folklore.' Tato goes beyond this generalized, stereotyped view and shows there are four *íremes* [masked dancers] (Eribangandó, Enkanima, Aberiñán and Anamanguín), and offers a detailed explanation of their private and public functions; for rituals and for having just fun. In addition, Tato explains under what circumstances each of them appear at the different *plantas* (Abakuá celebrations). Since these celebrations were officially prohibited by the mid-nineteenth century, they continued taking place underground.

• "The Sikán legend: the origin of the Abakuá myth" is the second essay. Tato explains the rise of the Abakuá initiation rites as being related to the history of Princess Sikán of the Efó nation finding a sacred fish. The Efó were at war with the Efik: the river fish is said to have appeared and divided their territories. The event had consequences for both warring kingdoms and the story has survived for generations via oral tradition. Tato took into account Fernando Valdés Diviño's version (*Ekueñón de una potencia abakuá habanera en el siglo XIX*), but also consulted notebooks or "treatises" belonging to Abakuá members. This made it possible for him to lo-

quaciously and clearly reproduce information he extracted from two such different sources about the mythical construction of the Abakuá phenomenon.

• “Andrés Petit and the Abakuá ‘Reform’ is the third essay in the book. Above all, it presents Andrés Facundo Cristo de los Dolores Petit, nicknamed “El Caballero de Color” [The Black Gentleman] (see picture), who managed to incorporate into his personality “the result of Cuban result of the intermingling of African mythologies and theogonies, and Catholic Christian imagery.” Evidently, he imbued Abakuá rites with this eclecticism by using the image of the crucified Christ, one of Christendom’s icons. It would seem that Tato does not give much credence to the version of the conversation in Rome between Petit and His Holiness Pope Pius IX, but he does highlight the fact that Petit promoted the creation of the first Abakuá society, in 1863, for white men only. It would be difficult during the colonial era to find any public association that did not take into account skin color (never mind social class). Tato borrowed the term “Abakuá reform” (“a Protestant reform of *ñañiguismo*) from Fernando Ortiz. This process was marked by bloody events involving whites and non-whites until both Abakuá factions arrived at a consensus around 1872. Tato believes that it is from this point forward “the Reform became consolidated” and groupings that included whites rapidly increased in number during the last third of the nineteenth century.” As evidence of this proliferation, he includes a small sampling of emblems representing Abakuá’s Four Powers, associations or games created by white people during the second half of that century.

• *Asere se escribe con ese* [Asere is Written with an S] is the last text. It functions as an epilogue to situate the Abakuá legacy in time

and space in contemporary, Cuban, daily life. He shared his thoughts about the real origin and meaning of the word *asere*, which for a long time has been considered a vulgar word used by culturally low people with criminal tendencies, due to their marginal origins. After having studied controversial criteria about the word, criticizing articles in the Cuban press, citing specialized dictionaries on Cuban language and music, as well as examining popular, Cuban music (*danzón* and *son*) and spaces where neighborhood festivities took place (Los Sitios Asere, in Brewery La Tropical’s gardens for 50 years), Tato sees them as being used between two men in an intimate friendship, who are companions and comrades. He even included fragments from now defunct Jesús Díaz’s novel *Las iniciales de la tierra* (Havana: Letras Cubanas, 1987) and a poem by Nicolás Guillén, and then ended with the song lyrics by Eloy Machado (*Asere digo yo*). In addition, he acknowledged the linguistic contribution of *carabalí* [Calabar] culture to Cuban Spanish.

In sum, the basic premise the author defends in *Ecorie Abakuá* is noteworthy and clarifies some points that had not yet been elucidated:

1. *Ñañiguismo* is a unique ethnological phenomenon that is found only in Cuba.
2. During colonial times, there were no *cabildos de nación* [private brotherhoods] for *ñañigos*, only for “carabalíes.” There are the direct antecedents of today’s Abakuá groups.
3. Since the nineteenth century, Abakuá association memberships were available only to people born in Cuba, because the colonial law prohibited non-white *criollos* (slaves and freemen) from joining *cabildos de nación*.
4. The basic membership of Abakuá associations are dockyard, cigar factory, and slaughterhouse workers, as well as workers

doing other sorts of essential work, the kind that simple people would do. This explains why Tato dedicated this book to a longshoreman, carpenter, mechanic and sugar worker who were quite loved and respected by the *ecobios* [lodge brothers].

5. After the abolition of slavery (1886), poor whites, blacks and mulattoes—who were the mainstay of Abakuá associations' membership—took gradual steps towards eradicating the racism that had been induced by the power elite's coloniality. This is another reason the Abakuá "reform" was important.

6. The Abakuá "reform" promoted by Petit destroyed the racist myth of *ñāñiguismo* as

a "black thing," because it became something shared by Cubans of all kinds, thus contributing to the eventual formation and integration of the nation.

7. The use of the term *asere* is not new in Cuba. It can be found in literature and music, as well as in our unflagging orality.

This experimental book is useful if one wants to respectfully approach the Abakuá world unfettered by prejudices about its potential marginality or criminality. That way, one can appreciate it as the purely Cuban, cultural phenomenon it is, in all of its richness and diversity.