AN ALL TOO PRESENT ABSENCE: FERNANDO ORTIZ'S
WORK ON ABAKUÁ IN ITS SOCIOCULTURAL CONTEXT

“Regla 1836-1996. To the Africans who founded the secret society Abacua in this town in 1836. Buro Abacua 5. 1. 97.” Thus reads a bronze plaque near the old *embarcadero* of the town of Regla, an incorporated *municipio* of Ciudad de la Habana situated on the eastern shores of the bay of Havana. Once a small fishing village, by 1836 Regla had begun to turn into an important warehouse district, a part of the capital city’s rapidly developing industrial harbor complex. It was also a site where newly landed African slaves awaited transport to the plantation regions of Havana and Matanzas provinces and received treatment for injury, disease, and dehydration at hospitals built for protecting slaveowners’ investments.¹ According to both oral history and documentary evidence, it was there and then that members of the *cabildo de la nación carabalí bricamó á papa efi*, a voluntary association of Africans organized along “ethnic” lines,² sold a body of esoteric knowledge to a group of young creole slaves from Havana. We do not know the details of the transaction, but the institution it engendered – the first chapter of a male initiatory sodality known as abakuá – would soon begin to play an important role within the complex social world that had emerged at the points where Havana’s internal economy intersected the global market.

Gaining a foothold first in Havana’s largely black working-class neighborhoods near the harbor, and capitalizing on the fluctuations in the demand for labor in various local industries, abakuá titleholders soon began to maneuver themselves into powerful positions as labor contractors, controlling access to employment at city wharves, foundries, tobacco factories, marketplaces, and slaughterhouses. Combining mystically sanctioned ritual authority with the power to grant access to, or withhold, steady labor, they built up tightly organized political structures among the members of their *potencias* or *tierras*

1. On the history of Regla see Duque (1925) and Gomez Luaces (n.d.).

2. On the institution of the *cabildos de nación* see Ortiz (1921), Palmié (1993), and Childs (2003).

(as individual abakuá chapters are known). These cult associations became visible to the uninitiated not only in lavishly exotic public ceremonies that recalled the discovery in a mythical Africa of the secret of a mystical voice belonging to a being or force known as *ecue*³ and celebrated an ideal of agonistic manhood, virile elegance, and fraternal solidarity. Their presence also became palpable in the form of relations of patronage and clientelism at the various worksites abakuá had come to control. As a saying popular in the first half of the twentieth century went, at least at the dockside of Havana's extensive harbor, abakuá initiates decided "who would eat and who would not" (Martínez Bordon 1971:38). When the colonial government outlawed the association as seditious and criminal in 1876, perhaps as many as fifty individual chapters of abakuá were operating in Havana, Regla, and Guanabacoa, where they repeatedly clashed with the police in violent confrontations over the control of neighborhoods and sources of employment.

By then, however, the terms *abakuá* or *los ñáñigos*⁴ no longer merely designated a type of secret society of African origin that had somehow established itself on Cuban soil. In the Cuban public sphere, these terms had also grown synonymous with violence, delinquency, transgression, and primitivity. What emerged around the concrete social fact of abakuá during the last third of the nineteenth century was a richly overdetermined, and densely intertextual discursive formation connoting not just exoticism, oppositional modes of organization, and atavistic criminality, but a material threat to the health of the colony and, later, that of the fledgling nation. Early publicists, persecutors, and prosecutors of abakuá were captivated by it not simply as a novel instance of an African institution thriving on Caribbean soil. Much of their hand-wringing and fierce rhetoric calling for abakuá's suppression was occasioned by the presence of whites in abakuá *potencias* – a fact that, for many of them, raised the alarming prospect of the "Africanization" of Cuba that José Antonio Saco had warned against as early as the 1840s in his famous plea against the slave trade. The deliberate adoption of African forms of identification and cultural practice by those socially classified as "white" deeply troubled Cuban scholars and social reformers, who were already concerned that Cuba had not just a racially diverse population, but a racially mixed one, whose members seemed to carry within their persons the biological incarnation of disparate histories and locations. These bodies served as synecdoches for cultural forms of African origin that were regarded as inimical to civilized modernity, and

3. Produced by an eponymous friction drum in the inner sanctum of abakuá meeting houses (see Ortiz 1952-55:203-59).

4. Particularly in nineteenth-century sources the association is typically referred to as *los ñáñigos*. Contemporary members of abakuá nowadays regard the term as derogatory and offensive, and prefer to call themselves and each other *ocobios* (i.e. "brothers") or *ecoria ñene abakuá* ("men born over the drum skin," i.e. into abakuá).

whose erasure – at least in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – appeared to be the only guarantee of national progress. How disturbing then, was the realization that patent indices of “Africanness” had become detached from their black “source populations,” and diffused through the larger citizenry of the Cuban republic in a seemingly uncontrollable fashion!

Right from the start, the published accounts of abakuá that began to proliferate in the last third of the nineteenth century, thus, served far more than merely descriptive purposes, and it is perhaps fair to say that this literature tells us less about abakuá itself than about the preoccupations and concerns of colonial social reformers and peripheral nationalist thinkers who constructed and instrumentalized images of abakuá as “proof” for what they felt was Cuba’s lagging modernization and civilizational progress. Although police records on the activities of rapidly multiplying abakuá chapters in Havana’s *barrios* near the harbor appear as early as 1839,⁵ it was not until the 1880s that an official account of their origin, as well as visual images of their masked dancers (which soon came to typify the association in the mind of the Cuban elite) appeared in print format.⁶ Among these were a report filed by the then Spanish governor, Alejandro Rodríguez Arias,⁷ and almost immediately reissued in brochure format (Anonymous 1882), as well as a memoir of the criminological achievements of Havana’s chief of police, José Trujillo y Monagas, prepared by his adjutant Carlos Urrutia y Blanco (1882). No less importantly, in 1881, the Basque artist and long-time Cuban resident, Victor Patricio Landaluze, published his album of genre depictions of Cuban *tipos y costumbres* which featured a lithograph of one of his many depictions of *íremes*, together with an article on “El ñáñigo” by *costumbrista* writer Enrique Fernández Carillo (Landaluze 1881).⁸ Other efforts include Manuel Perez Beato’s (1893) publication of the internal rules of the famous nineteenth-century Havana *potencia* Akanarán Efó (also known as Ocobio Efó Mukarará), the first abakuá chapter composed of socially white members; the Spanish penologist Rafael Salillas’s (1901) documentation of the existence of an abakuá chapter formed by Cubans deported to the Spanish *presidio* of Ceuta, North Africa during the second Cuban war of independence; the bizarre racist monograph *La brujería y el ñáñiguismo en Cuba desde el punto de vista*

5. See Deschamps Chapeaux (1964) for a summary of the crucial document (Archivo Nacional de Cuba, Havana, Comisión Militar, legajo 23 expediente 1). The nineteenth-century documentary record on abakuá’s activities still awaits extensive scrutiny.

6. The following is by no means meant as a bibliography. It merely aims to illustrate the discursive context within which Ortiz’s work on abakuá took shape.

7. Archivo Nacional de Cuba, Asuntos Políticos, legajo 76 expediente 56.

8. This image has been reproduced countless times ever since. See Brown (2003) for a sophisticated treatment of the history and iconography of representations of abakuá circulating in the Cuban public sphere.

médico-legal by the forensic scientist Israel Castellanos (1916); a long chapter on the subject in the police commissioner Rafael Roche Monteagudo's (1925) monumental but highly idiosyncratic compendium of Cuban crime, *La policia y sus misterios*; and a no less peculiar book-length treatment of Afro-Cuban religion by the journalist Juan Luis Martín (1930). Common to all of these volumes were speculations on the origins of abakuá, discussions of its internal organization, and (in however garbled a form) its mythology, ritual practices, esoteric language, and pictographic writing system.

While the historical and ethnographic value of several of the texts mentioned above is dubious (at best), and can often only be established by reading them against the grain, it nevertheless is important to emphasize here just simply how much of what we, today, know about the history of abakuá, we owe to the Cuban police, whose raids of lodges and arrests of initiates produced not only ample documentation, but many artifacts. Seized from lodges during such raids to be used as incriminating evidence, and subsequently placed in Havana's Museum of Legal Medicine and other institutions or private collections, these decontextualized objects initially served as little more than forensic signifiers of the intractable presence of abakuá, or testaments to Cuba's moral and civilizational "backwardness" (see Palmié 2002, Bronfman 2004). And yet it may well have been precisely such artefacts that initially helped inspire the young lawyer Fernando Ortiz's project of a "criminal anthropology," conceived in the spirit of Cesare Lombroso's positivistic forensic science, of the urban underworld characteristic of, and specific to, Cuba.⁹ For during his student days in Madrid, Ortiz had seen costumes of abakuá's masked dancers (*íreme*), drums, and ceremonial staffs of office (*itones*) that had been confiscated by the colonial Cuban police and shipped off to Spain, where they were on exhibit in the library of Madrid's Museo de Ultramar.¹⁰

As Ortiz would later recall, at the beginning of the twentieth century, and despite the nominal inclusion of Afro-Cubans (many of whom had fought in the wars of independence against Spain) in the Cuban national project, willful neglect of their cultural and historical contributions was the order of the day (Ortiz 1939, 1944). Initially, Ortiz, too, was committed to producing scholarship on Afro-Cuban religious formations in order to help eradicate them. Yet his early attempts to isolate African "racial atavisms" so as to subject them to

9. As Ortiz himself put it in 1917, given that the newly founded Cuban republic rested on social foundations formed in the course of nearly four hundred years of colonial domination and embraced a population of racially heterogeneous origin, the study of abakuá might well be expected to enhance the scope of "contemporary criminal anthropology and sociology, based as they still almost exclusively are on observations concerning white delinquents" (Ortiz 1973:21).

10. See Ortiz (1939:86). On the object exhibited in Madrid, see Roche Monteagudo (1925:63).

concerted efforts at legal and social “reform” had an unanticipated and deeply ironic outcome: they unwittingly led to precisely those ethnographic investigations that eventually brought him to repudiate the idea of a “racial criminology” (Bremer 1993), motivated him to write a searing critique of the very concept of race (Ortiz 1946), and certainly paved the way for his famous formulation of a theory of the historical dialectics of cultural change and dynamism that in 1940 he subsumed under the neologism of *transculturación*. Along with other Latin American and Caribbean thinkers of his time (such as the Brazilian Gilberto Freyre or the Mexican José de Vasconcelos), Ortiz came to appreciate, and aimed to conceptualize, a novel vision not only of New World nationhood, but also of cultural being and becoming. Far from marking an indelible historical stain and lasting hindrance to civilizational progress, heterogeneity – and hybridity – would come to typify what Ortiz would call the “cauldron” of Cuba; and far from being perceived as incongruous with the idea of “modernity,” African “tradition,” for him was to play an essential part in the process out of which future versions of the *ajiaco cubano* – the ever-transforming cultural “stew” that was Cuba – would emerge (Ortiz 1940a,b, see Palmié 1998).

Although nineteenth-century Cuban observers generally agreed on abakuá's African origin, it was not until the 1920s that Ortiz (1986:14) first suggested that abakuá represented a New World version of the so-called leopard societies, well known by then under names such as *ekpe* or *ngbe* in the British missionary and colonial literature on Old Calabar, a major entrepot of the slave (and later palm oil) trade in the Cross River region on the border between what today is southeastern Nigeria and Cameroon (see Nair 1972, Latham 1973, and Northrup 1978). Different from some of his contemporaries (such as, for example Herskovits 1941), for Ortiz, such attributions of origins and the tracing of a genealogy of abakuá were not merely of academic interest, nor were they designed to vindicate the cultural “past” of a socially excluded and politically disenfranchised minority. They also served in assessing its promise as cultural patrimony for all Cubans. And it is not surprising that Ortiz's writings were to inspire artists like Alejo Carpentier, Ernesto Lecuona, and Wifredo Lam who, by the 1930s, had begun to incorporate abakuá-related themes and images into their oeuvre, thus generating an entirely new set of representations of abakuá – ones that (in line with contemporary European romantic primitivism) now celebrated the virtues of its African authenticity as an antidote to the alienating cultural productions emerging under the auspices of U.S. capital, under whose neocolonial rule many of these artists and intellectuals keenly smarted.¹¹ None of this meant that police persecution of aba-

11. See Kutzinski (1993), Matibag (1996), Moore (1997), and Brown (2003). As Moore (1997:203) writes, by 1923 composer Amadeo Roldán, along with Carpentier, had started attending abakuá ceremonies as well as those of the Afro-Cuban religious formation *regla de ocha*, “where he hand-transcribed melodic and rhythmic fragments later used in com-

kuá (or Afro-Cuban religions in general) ceased. It did not. But Ortiz's efforts at representing their practices as cultural productions forming an integral part of a uniquely Cuban national cultural project have had a lasting, though at times ironic, impact. By the early 1960s, the newly founded revolutionary Conjunto Folklórico Nacional thus began to incorporate theatrical imitations of aspects of abakuá ritual into its repertoire (Hagedorn 2001, Brown 2003), and cheaply manufactured images of *íremes* now count among the tourist kitsch on sale in the departure lounge of Havana's José Martí international airport. Most importantly, however, the Buro Provincial de Abakuá – a kind of directorium of confederated *potencias* – has been allowed to inscribe its own memory at the dockside of Regla, the place where the association likely originated more than 170 years ago.

As María del Rosario Díaz recounts in the essay to which we are appending this note of contextualization, by 1950 Ortiz himself returned to the topic of abakuá (which had likely sparked his first interest in matters Afro-Cuban), and began to publish on his – by then – more than thirty years of active, but intermittent, ethnographic fieldwork on abakuá. He therefore used such materials as illustrations or case studies in his musicological monographs, but also penned a series of essays (in the classic sense of the word) on aspects of abakuá, such as for example his comparison of abakuá ritual to the Eleusinian mystery (Ortiz 1950a, b, 1951). As the reader will have seen, it is at this point that the archival documents uncovered by Díaz begin to speak to a different, far more prosaic, yet no less intriguing mystery: the absence of a completed manuscript. Sadly, Ortiz's failing health may have prevented the culmination of what had been a lifelong pursuit: to make good on his repeated promises to turn the thirty-five thick folders of notes he had accumulated on the subject over the course of his long scholarly career into a book.¹² But perhaps it did not. Would a man of his stature have answered the American Caribbeanist Vera Rubin's query about the manuscript of a book on abakuá as affirmatively as he did had such a manuscript not, in fact, existed? Chances are we will never know. By the time María del Rosario Díaz, the archivist responsible for cataloguing don Fernando's personal papers in Havana's Instituto de Literatura y Lingüística, last revisited the Collection Fernando Ortiz in search for the manuscript in the spring of 1999, it was not to be found. Looking over her shoulder as she opened box after box of folders, one of the authors of this article could not help but marvel at the mystery of an all too present absence.

positions.” Contemporary visual artists who have incorporated abakuá themes and ritual imagery include the late Ana Mendieta (1948–85), Belkis Ayón (1967–99), and Juan Boza (1941–91).

12. The corpus of materials on *ñáñigos* (Instituto de Literatura y Lingüística José Antonio Portuondo, Havana, Fernando Ortiz Collection, carpetas 351–86), in fact, is larger than those on any other subject in Ortiz's truly vast personal archive.

In 1958 Ortiz's sister-in-law, Lydia Cabrera, published what for a quarter-century would remain the single monograph on abakuá untainted by the racism of her early twentieth-century precursors (Cabrera 1958). Cabrera conducted her fieldwork in a fashion very different from Ortiz, and her goals were, as she herself repeatedly made clear, worlds apart from the analytical rigor and scholarly detachment of don Fernando. In 1966 the young Cuban ethnographer Rafaél López Valdés, then part of the short-lived Instituto de Etnología y Folklore, published what, to this day, remains a milestone essay which finally clarified the manner in which abakuá had long exerted crucial economic functions in monopolizing access to the labor market at Havana's dockside (López Valdés 1966). Yet it was not until 1982 that the historian Enrique Sosa Rodríguez published his Casa de las Américas prize winning monograph *Los ñáñigos* (Sosa 1982) in which he admitted having used Fernando Ortiz's personal archives, but gave no reference that would allow us to trace any materials he may have culled from them. Don Fernando had died in 1969, and his library, archive, and personal papers soon after embarked on a remarkable and complicated journey that would, by the early 1980s, end in their being divided between the Instituto de Literatura y Lingüística (which received his scholarly papers) and the Biblioteca Nacional José Martí (where the bulk of his correspondence is stored nowadays). Since Sosa died a few years ago, it is now no longer possible to speak to the last person who may have seen the manuscript to whose existence Ortiz's correspondence with Rubin is such eloquent testimony. As Jorge Luis Borges (2004:161), one of Ortiz's contemporaries, wrote, "In the course of time there was one day that closed the last eyes that had looked on Christ." Perhaps it is only befitting the spirit of abakuá that what remains of don Fernando's lifelong endeavors to uncover it ethnographically is now a mystery, too.

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