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Peer reviewed

**Voice of the Leopard: African Secret Societies and Cuba** by Ivor Miller.  
Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2009. 364 pp. ISBN 978-1-934110-83-6

*Voice of the Leopard: African Secret Societies and Cuba* by Ivor Miller is a rich collection of unpublished oral accounts, archival notes, interviews, and visual materials that shows the connection between culture, migration, and political mobilization. By linking historical accounts and contemporary performances of the mutual aid secret societies in Cuba, also known as *Abakuá*, to existing practices of the *Ékpè*, or Leopard secret societies in the Cross River basin of Nigeria and Cameroon, the author highlights the role of cultural beliefs in shaping social and political action. The book's main argument is twofold: first, that black history did not begin with slavery, and second, that *Abakuá* and *Ékpè* practices are forms of history as well as political expressions that adapt and enrich themselves through encounters with other cultural ideas. In Africa and in Cuba, *Abakuá* and *Ékpè* speak in unison about fundamental beliefs such as mutual aid, autonomy, hierarchy among members, secrecy, and political awareness.

The book is divided into three main parts. The first part focuses on the history of enslavement and the arrival of the *Ékpè* members in the Caribbean. The second part presents the evolution and dispersion of *Ékpè*, reinvented as *Abakuá* in Cuba with an emphasis on strategic resistance against the Spanish empire. The last section tells the story of *Ékpè* and *Abakuá*'s reunion in Nigeria after many centuries of independent growth.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, regional trade networks and membership in Leopard societies regulated the life of autonomous communities in the Cross River basin of Nigeria and Cameroon. Through trade with European merchants, the Leopard societies quickly established settlements in key strategic areas of the basin, created small mercantile republics, and became a dominant network for interethnic communication. As an organizing system of trade practices and cultural beliefs, *Ékpè* incorporated a variety of languages, music, costumes, and dances of this region. However, while international trade helped extend the networks of *Ékpè*

members, it also weakened the secret society. As the demand for slaves increased, competition intensified among *Ékpè* involved in Afro-European trade and some of them were enslaved by rival members and carried to the Caribbean.

Once in Cuba, *Ékpè* was renamed *Abakuá*, which subsequently became an “active force in resistance movements throughout Caribbean history” (p. 7). Like their ancestors in Africa, secret *Abakuá* communities in Cuba extended their social networks by recruiting members from different racial groups. Originally restricted to slaves born in Africa and brought to Cuba, *Abakuá*’s lodges later offered membership to Europeans, American Indians and Asians. This strategy of adaption in light of political and social realities in Havana highlights *Abakuá*’s determination to collectively transform oppressive colonial institutions and to promote solidarity as one of the founding ideals of the nation-state of Cuba. Despite attempts to repress *Abakuá* by sending its members to exile throughout Spanish colonial territories, Cuba remained the “Voice” of the Leopard.

The entrepreneurial spirit of *Abakuá* consolidated its autonomy through the production of artists who used music to record social and historical practices of the Leopard society. In Havana as elsewhere in the Americas, *Abakuá* “created an alternative by teaching initiated creoles of all heritages the language, rites, music, and dances of their lineage, thereby assimilating them into a Calabarí ethnic identity through ritual kinship” (pp. 118). After evolving separately over the centuries, *Abakuá* and the *Ékpè* Leopard societies were reunited for the first time at the Cultural Center of Calabar Nigeria in 2004.

Miller’s account of the social and political history of the Leopard society sheds light on Cuban politics and the ways in which the people of African descent continually transform it. The author does an excellent job of documenting and situating cultural narratives within the matrix of

broader colonial practices. The fact that the author is also a member of *Abakuá* society allows him to build valuable relationships and access archives of oral epics.

Despite the many positive contributions of the book, the methodology disappoints readers in search of objectivity. Miller briefly states that he uses multiple methods of verification of testimonies but he fails to indicate which ones he used. His personal involvement with *Abakuá* explains the absence of critique throughout the book. “After being initiated in Calabar and charged with being an ambassador,” Miller writes, “my relationship to *Abakuá* shifted, as I was able to offer information to its leadership, who in turn sent messages to Calabar through me...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, my emphasis). Accordingly, the book is limited to a thick description of the practices of people involved in the secret society. This choice of participants makes the work vulnerable to criticism based on objectivity especially because “in Cuba *Abakuá* as in West Africa *Ékpè*, ‘there are things that [the elders] should prefer never articulate clearly,’ not even to initiates” (p. 30). Secrets and politics in historical perspectives rarely reduce speculation; rather, they serve as fertile ground for conspiracy theories and misinformation. The role of the author as an active participant in *Abakuá* and as the ambassador of its history adds to the subjectivity of the book but also reduces its objectivity.

Notwithstanding the rewards of the participant observation methods that might have been used to describe *Abakuá*, the omission of a theoretical core in the study of culture and migration limits the scope of the book. Concurring with the author that, “one cannot function without theory, but if that is all one has, one cannot function,” (p. 31) this statement is also true for practice qua practice. This theoretical vacuum in the book limits its relevance in post-colonial and democratizing polities in which civil society constantly challenges the notion that secrecy is

of value and strong hierarchical relationships relevant to modern politics. Despite its historical underpinnings, *Voice of the Leopard's* limited theoretical appeal undermines its interdisciplinary premise. For instance, the book does not comment on previous work on Leopard societies in West Africa. While the juxtaposition of culture and politics is stated in the book, the absence of a theoretical framework makes this work less appealing to political scientists.

The author provides a useful glossary of terms and appendixes with information about the chronological evolution of *Abakuá's* lodges in Cuba and their ritualized practices. However, much information is buried in lengthy endnotes, which represent about fifty percent of the book. This organizational aspect leaves the reader with a sense of loss, especially because the space could have been used to comment on the evolution of the *Ékpè* consciousness in post-colonial Nigeria and Cameroon.

Without such a comparison, it is difficult to know whether the institutional and colonial environment of Cuba explains the political metamorphoses of *Abakuá*, or whether such changes could be credited to the strategic use of the secret society's teachings and rules only. The transformative political role attributed to *Abakuá* in Cuban and Nigerian societies is hard to assess without the testimonials of non-*Abakuá* members who might have witnessed the impact of the secret society's political activism in Cuba. Despite its limitations, the book is a good read for its archival notes.

### **Reviewer**

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Because Miller's book does not consider previous work on the manifold representations of African Leopard Societies and narratives, I suggest the following readings focusing on Africa:  
Joset, Paul. *Les Sociétés Secrètes des Hommes-Léopards en Afrique Noire*. Paris: Payot, 1955; Lindskog, Birger. *African Leopard Men*. Uppsala: Human Leopard Societies, 1954; and Beatty, Kenneth. *Human Leopards: An Account of the Trials of Human Leopards Before the Special Commission Court. With a Note on Sierra Leone, Past and Present*. London: H. Rees, 1915.