

“The Symbolic Mask: Coded Communication through Ritual Performance Arts in the Cross River Region and its Atlantic Diaspora.”

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How can images help us understand the cultural history of Africa and its legacy in the Caribbean, resulting from the largest forced migration in human history? The symbols used by the Cross River region’s Ékpè ‘leopard’ society are commonly found throughout West Africa’s forest belt: leopard-skins, chief caps & walking-sticks, body-mask performance, yet Ékpè culture assembles them in specific ways, making possible the study of this institution’s dissemination throughout this region, and then into the Caribbean. When Ékpè was established is unknown, but ceramic pots made 500 years ago were discovered in Calabar with designs used in the Ñsìbìdì ‘codes’ of Ékpè culture (Slogar 2007).

In the Cross River region, archaeology is still rudimentary and comparative linguistics has not advanced far beyond colonial compilations like Goldie (1874) and early modern studies like Crabb (1965), leaving historians only with reports of early European merchants and missionaries (cf. Miller 2017). Alternatively, a comparative analysis of symbols in indigenous performance evidences their stability amidst local variations and adaptations. Such constancy is attributed to indigenous “sumptuary laws” reinforcing social hierarchies through restrictions on symbolic gestures, dress, and masking costumes. Ékpè symbols can often decode Cuban cognates (i.e., the Ñkàndà mask), but sometimes, as predicted by Herskovits (1948: 1), the Cuban icon can decode an African source object (i.e., the Cuban Sése Eribó decodes the famous skin-covered masks of the Cross River region).

Symbols presented:

- Architecture (Ékpè halls);
- Staffs or scepters (Mmònyò with bàsonkò plumed-rod);
- Body-masks (Ñyàmkpè, with bàsonkò plumed-rod; Ñkàndà, with Ùkàrà cloth; Èbònkó with bright cloth; Funerary, with black & white colors);
- Initiation signs (chalk marks, blindfolds);
- Maternal symbols (calabash/ ceramic pot);
- Skin-covered masks with vertical plumes;
- Drum styles (‘wedge and ring’);
- Ékpè canoes;
- Ékpè stones (basalts, from uncarved to Akwanshi-style monoliths);
- Ékpè shirt styles (derived from late Victorian British “boiled shirts”);
- Drum/ rattle to guide body-mask performance;
- War masks with machetes;
- Nigerian-Cuban performance using inherited symbols.

Timeline:

1600: Portuguese traders in Río del Rey (Usaghadet/Isangele), source region of Ékpè.

1800: Creation of first Ékpè lodge in Cuba, called Efi Ebutón after the Òbútòng community of Calabar.

2000: Nigerian Ékpè and Cuban Abakuá meet in New York City, using historically related performance codes of the Ékpè institution.

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Film:

Abakuá. 1962. Bernabé Hernández, film director. Victor Herrera, conjunto director. Filmed in the Teatro Nacional, Havana. 16:58 minutes.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Py5KwcwQAtI>