

The Bríkamo

The bríkamo¹ (*brícma*, *brícám*, or *brícamo*) have been known in Cuba since the colonial period. According to Fernando Ortiz,² in the "Papel Periodico de La Habana of 16 august 1792, there is a reference to a slave from the nacion *carabalí brícma*", and is supposed to be "the same as the Brícamo". By the first half of the 19th century, Pichardo³ noted exactly the origin of this ethnic group, situating it in Calabar, the southern region of Nigeria.

At times, in the Parte Económica of the *Diario de la Habana* there appears advertisements for the sale of slaves with references such as the following: " For sale: a negro *carabalí brícám*, of around 26 years of age, dock worker [...]." (Wednesday, 9 July 1834.)

In the same publication, in the section dedicated to fugitive slaves, we read: "On the 16th of the current year a negro named José María escaped, *carabalí brícám*, known in his land by the name Efiom [...]." (Thursday 18 September 1834.)

References also appear in documents of old cabildos of Havana, such as those which refer to "the Maloja house, number 149 willed by the negro Simón Carro in 1871 to the favor of the *Nación and Cabildo Carabalí Brícamo San José*. This cabildo never submitted to the laws of associations and its duration (if indeed it existed) was extralegal".⁴

¹Sadly we have not yet found this designation in any ethnografic or lingiustic map of West Africa, only in the Cuban bibliography. we hope the research realized in Nigerian lands will fill this gap in the near future.

²Fernando Ortiz. *Los negros esclavos*. La Habana, Revista Bimestre Cubana, 1916, p. 30.

³Esteban Pichardo. *Diccionario provincial casi razonado de voces y frases cubanas*. La Habana, Ed. de Ciencias Sociales, 1976, p. 103.

⁴Fernando Ortiz. *Los cabildos afrocubanos*. La Habana, Imprenta y Papeleria La Universal, 1921, pp. 25-26.

In the city of Matanzas, the Bríkamo captives were also sufficiently numerous to be able to form a cabildo. Through the years information has been collected among some members of the Calle family, descendants of the founders of the cabildo bríkamo, who have preserved in this city the last cultural survivals brought by this ethnic group from the coast of West Africa. It is hoped that the great interest of these notes results in that, before the bibliographic scarcity of the topic, a little light is shed on the Bríkamo influences in Cuba, and over all, about its relation to another manifestation - in this case a very important one - of traditional Cuban life, originating in the colonial period: the secret society of Abakuá.

Of the habits and customs of the Bríkamo Matancero

The bríkamo cabildo of Matanzas was located at Velarde, no. 199, between Compostela and San Carlos, in the Simpson neighborhood. This was the house of Anselmo Calle and his wife Joaquina Domínguez. Francisco Calle, father of Anselmo, was "carabalí legitimo" or, "de nación", that is, born in Africa.

Later the cabildo moved to a new location, Daoíz no. 215, between Compostela and San Carlos, according to other informants.⁵

⁵*This information from Bárbara Calle and Francisco Reyes (Matanzas, January, 1965) are confirmed -with slight variations- by documentary sources: "according to documents of the Archivo Histórico Provincial of the city of Matanzas, the cabildo carabalí of the Niño Jesús was on the calle Velarde from 1860 to 1866 and later at Daoíz nos. 147 and 217 since 1870. Its heads or "capataces" were Francisco Cayo [sic] from 1864 to 1878 and José Vega from 1878 to 1890. (Israel Moliner Castañeda. "Matanzas: los bailes congos". Revolución y Cultura. [La Habana], no. 50, octubre, 1976, p. 58.)*

The cabildo was called Cabildo Carabalí bríkamo or Cabildo bríkamo suama.⁶ Drums (*bonkó*) were played generally on Saturdays and Sundays, although their principal festival (day of the Niño Perdido) was celebrated the second Sunday of January, a movable date on the catholic calendar which commemorates the flight of the Holy Family from Egypt. They worshipped the baby Jesus, because "el Niño Jesús is Elegbá".⁷

To organize the fiesta, each member of the cabildo contributed money, food and drink, and others who were not members could also contribute.

Several days before the event, the lithograph of the Niño Jesús was brought to the church, where "mass was said", and the day of the festival it was brought via procession back to the cabildo, dancing and singing through the streets.

Two or three days before the festival the toques started.

In the main room of the house an altar was made from a table covered by an altar cloth or a white sheet, on top of which was placed the picture of the baby Jesus, candles, vases or jars with flowers and "herbs": paraíso [chinaberry] (*Melia azederach*, Lin),⁸ albahaca [basil] (*Ocimum basilicum*, Lin),⁹ escoba amarga [congress grass] (*Parthenium hysterophorus*,

⁶According to Amaury Talbot, the "Ozuzu-Uzuama are one of the clans of the sub-tribe Alensaw of the Ibó" (*The Peoples of Southern Nigeria*. London, Oxford University Press, 1926, t. II, p. 4), which would confirm the Nigerian origin of this group and its location in the south of the country.

⁷The central picture of all ceremonies was a lithograph of the Niño de Atocha, a catholic representation of Jesus during his infancy. In Cuban santería, of Yoruban origin, this saint is sincretized with Elegbá, keeper of pathways and crossroads for believers.

⁸Juan Tomás Roig. *Diccionario botánico de nombres vulgares cubanos*. La Habana, Ed. del Consejo Nacional de Universidades, 1965, t. II, p. 758.

⁹*Ibid.*, t. I, p. 76.

L.),¹⁰ etc. When they danced, they took up these herbs to "dar rama".¹¹

In front of the altar were placed offerings of green plantains, peanuts, herrings, goats, jutías,¹² and other "ritual things of the Abakuá religion".¹³ After "putting" these "things of the saint" a stew is made from them which is eaten by those present.

This custom of eating part of the offerings which are placed for the saint is common within the popular religions of Cuba.

Among the Abakuá the ritual feasts are:

Elaborated with offerings which the neophyte should contribute, —sugar cane, peanuts, ginger, plantains, ñame, etc.— indispensable tributes which accompany the oaths or consecrations of the obonékues and indiobónes, who, in a common and universal characteristic, are presented by a padrino, by a member of the mystic brotherhood. These communion foods, as is known, are celebrated not only in Abakuá but also in other Reglas — of Ocha and Palo Mayómbe. In Abakuá they symbolize the bundle of firewood that the neophyte places among the tributes.¹⁴

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, t. I, p. 385.

¹¹ *Dar Rama*: To pass, for a prophylactic reason —of "cleanliness" or purification— the boughs of certain plants, those to which are attributed special properties, over the body of people and the altar, at the time of dancing to the ritual music.

¹² *Jutía*: A Cuban rodent (*Capromys pilorides*).

¹³ In reality Abakuá is not a religion, as the informant states, but rather a secret society, and is one of the most interesting cultural phenomena in Cuban ethnography. It is a type of brotherhood exclusively for men whose origins are of the southern regions of Nigeria, principally in the Calabar.

¹⁴ Lydia Cabrera. *La sociedad secreta Abakuá*. La Habana, Ed. C. R., 1959, p. 20.

Before the celebration ends, the picture of the saint is taken again, with the same toques and dances, and is taken around the block consisting of Daoíz, Compostela, San Carlos and Velarde. One or two people will carry the picture of the baby Jesus. Then it is put away until next year.

Thus ends the festival, as in other cabildos in which at the end of the celebration busts or pictures of the saints are taken through the streets of cities or towns.

In the Bríkamo festivals a "gallo o chivo" (chicken or goat) was killed—ritually sacrificed—according to the economic conditions of the group. And they were killed only by men, women were not allowed to.¹⁵ But the food was cooked by women.

The animals "were given to eat"¹⁶ of the picture: their blood was poured over it. It was also offered sweets, candies, sugar cane, etc. "The most important at the festivals were the boys", for whom were made special *comelatas*.¹⁷

Everything indicates that, besides the picture, certain sacred pieces also "ate", since according to one informant, "the day before the public celebrations started. The saints they worshipped and the baby Jesus were fed". But he regrets not being able to "have the luck to see the other things

¹⁵A taboo exists which prohibits women from sacrificing the animals offered to the gods, considering them ritually "impure" due to menstruation. This taboo is preserved in many regions of the world and in the most varied states of socio-economic development.

¹⁶*Dar de comer*: Perform propitiatory sacrifices of certain animals whose blood is poured over objects of the cult to transmit to them the "sacred" efluvio which it emanates. This idealist conception is shared by all the archaic religions and persists in some of these-called "great religions".

¹⁷Boys are objects of special festivals in some popular Cuban religions; they are offered fruits, sweets, candies, and food ("comelatas"). These festivals are related to old cults of fertility and ancestors.

that they worshipped", because "these old people were very reserved about their affairs".¹⁸

Old informant told Lydia Cabrera that:

Naberebé Tácho Ndibó was the Santo Mayor of the Brikamos. His idol, of wood, was placed in the middle of the Tácho and Natácho, two smaller statuettes, Tácho on the left and Natácho on the right.¹⁹

And that "Tácho y Natácho are his subalterns. Like his sacristans".²⁰

However, my principal informant, Pedro Pablo Calle, states that his grandmother Anselmo had "hierros which ate" and although he calls them Ogún he insists that they were inherited from his ancestors²¹ (which could indicate the existence of a Yorubá-Carabalí syncretism since the 19th century. The "hierros" were several, but only one remains—of his great-grandfather Francisco— in the form of the head of an ice pick or mountain climber (?). The grandfather had it

¹⁸*The reserve in religious matters of the Africans toward their creole children is proverbial. All the children informants of "negros de nación" regret that they did not learn more about the cults of their ancestors, because "the elders" prohibited them from participating in them, since they believed the creoles to be "unserious and did not respect anything". "When they went to do their things, they sent us their children out so that we couldn't listen." "At times I hid nearby to listen without them seeing me."*

¹⁹*Lydia Cabrera, Op. cit., 1959, p. 93.*

²⁰*Ibid.,*

²¹*Without any doubt the most development and organization of the religious system of the Yoruba made it so that it would serve as a model for other cults of African origin that were reorganized in Cuba, after their dislocation caused by the captivity in the Americas and the colonial system. Proof of this lies in the fact that when other groups want to define their gods they use the orisha as a reference point: Sarabanda is the Ogún of the Congo; Mase is the Oshún of the Arará, etc.*

on the ground, in a corner, next to the pot and the rest of the hierros".

"There was a brotherhood like that of the Abakuá"; "The elders spoke in Carabalí, which is very similar to the language of the Ñañigos"; "Everything closely resembled ñañiguismo."²² The foods are similar: peanuts, aguardiente...the elders told me that the Abakuá came from there". But "the tradition of the secret,"²³ if they had it, was possessed by the elders, because in my time it no longer existed".

Without any doubt there are intimate connections between the Bríkamo and the Abakuá. References are constantly made to Bríkamo historic, musical, dance and linguistic traditions in this secret society.

According to an elder informant of Lydia Cabrera:

There were many tribes, many whose spoke distinct languages; dialects such as Suáma, Olúago, Briche, Isieke, Bibí, Otá or Otamo, Oru or Oro, Oroón, which the Taitas spoke at that time. But that same thing happened with the Carabalí which happened with the Lucumí... together, without differentiating one nation from another, they were called Carabalí or Bríkamos.²⁴

Another states:

Appapa Ekoi Nitabayúmba, their primitive lords [of Ekue, the sacred drum]. The inhabitants of the

²²*Pedro Pablo Calle, Matanzas, 1967. Ortiz states a similar criteria in this respect when he writes that the "Bríkamos influenced ñañiguismo". (Glosario de afronegrismos. La Habana, Impr. El Siglo xx, 1924, p. 66.)*

²³*As in all secret societies, the center of the Abakuá cult lies in the adoration of an esoteric principal, "the secret", only known by initiates, which constitutes the nexus the sister of all of the members of the brotherhood.*

²⁴*Lydia Cabrera. Op. cit., 1959, p. 63.*

Efor territory, those of the Usagará, of the Bekura Mendó, Bríkamos, and Appapas Ekoi (Appapas Grandes) are the same people. For those who say Appapa Karabalí Bríkamo Iyá berómo: the inhabitants of the Calabar (Bríkamos) of the Iyá, the Divine Fish; and Iyá also means Mother. Berómo; those who founded our religion, those who carried in procession the sacred Skin of the Fish, origin of our cult.²⁵

About Bríkamo and Abakuá music:

The elders tell that there were types of *ñañigo* orchestras. One was of those from the land of the Bríkamo and another was of those called Apapá. The Bríkamo orchestra was of only three drums, somewhat larger than today's, and each one was played by two *itón* or rough sticks. We do not know how they were strung. The Apapá orchestra was of four drums, and is still in use today, whereas that of the Bríkamo has fallen into disuse. But this tradition is little known and many deny it.²⁶

According to an old Abakuá pamphlet from Havana, Kamambeí is an "íreme"²⁷ witch from the land of the Bríkamo". He also supports the tradition that Nyogoró was the Bríkamo name of the "diablito who went in the procession of the Efó and who brought the secrets of the religion to the Efik".²⁸

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Fernando Ortiz. *Los instrumentos de la música afrocubana*. La Habana, Publicaciones de la Dirección de Cultura, 1796, vol IV, 1954, p. 15

²⁷ Íreme: Costumed dancer who represents a mythic "supernatural" entity, which is considered to be the spirit of an ancestor or founder of the secret society. They are commonly called "diablitos" but have nothing to do with the malevolent entities of Christianity and other religions.

²⁸ Lydia Cabrera. *Op. cit.* 1959, p. 61.

Although Fernando Ortiz wrote that the *Isuama* (or *Suama*) language was "frequent among the ñáñigos of Matanzas",²⁹ according to Lydia Cabrera: "The *Suama* dialect was spoken frequently, but even moreso, the Latin of the ñáñigos, is naturally that of the *Bríkamo eñene Efor*".³⁰

Of the musical instruments of the Matancero Bríkamo

By the middle of the 19th century, Esteban Pichardo, writing in his well-known dictionary of the *Bríkamo*, mentioned some musical instruments as characteristic of the ethnic group:

"-*Bríkamo*: The person native of their region in the *Carabalí*. They use in their festivals harmonic instruments of wood and drums."³¹

A century later, these same instruments continue as the fundamental base of *Bríkamo* music in Cuba. "I knew of *Oro* in Matanzas up until a few years ago. Their *cabildo* where they played their three little drums and with sticks on an instrument which consisted of a log supported by two feet of a friend, was much visited."³²

Recently, my informants have confirmed the previous citation, in which the instrumental groups in the Matanzas *Bríkamo cabildo* consisted of:

A *fotuto*: Made from a shell of those called *cobo* (*Strombus gugas*) in which a whole is made at the base of the spiral. It is played to "simulate the *fundamento* of the *Abakuá*", the bellowing of the sacred drum *Ékue*, used by this secret Cuban society. The *fotuto* was blown by various individuals in turn.

²⁹ Fernando Ortiz. *Los instrumentos...*, vol. IV, p. 19.

³⁰ Lydia Cabrera. *Op. cit.*, 1959, p. 69.

³¹ Esteban Pichardo. *Op. cit.*, p. 103.

³² Lydia Cabrera. *Op. cit.*, 1959, pp. 70-71.

We are thus unable to explain a contradiction in one of Fernando Ortiz's books in which he states:

[...] the afrocubans have not used the *fotuto* in their popular ritual dances, even if to roar through it, as with *bungas* or *botijuelas*. Nor have we heard it in the *chambelonas*, so noisy and with such extravagant instruments [...],³³

and yet later, in the same book, he writes:

{...} Nevertheless, it seems that the Carabalís used in Cuba a *fotuto* or a *sea shell*. For some forty years in one of the *comparsas*, one Bernardino (a) *El Ñato* was distinguished for his artistry of playing a *cobo* in the Carabalí style, which they called a "horn" ("cuerno").³⁴

The use of the *cobo* as a musical instrument "has been and is frequent"³⁵ in Cuban folklore. Beside the Matanzas *Brikamo* it was used by some Congo groups to accompany the *baile de yuka*, also according to Mr. Ortiz: "Other times in Las Villas we have heard , also according to Mr. Ortiz: "Other times in Las Villas we have heard *yuka* played with a *caracol* or *fotuto*."³⁶ The instrument was also used to make the music of the *fotuteros*,³⁷ groups of blacks and mulattos who went out on December 25th, at midnight, carrying multicolored lanterns with the most varied fruits and animals and illuminated by candlelight, while they played a single refrain and stomped the ground with their feet to the rhythm of the *cobos* or *fotutos* which were blown non-stop. The *fotutos* were very popular in Sancti Spíritus, from the end of the 19th century to around 1920.

³³ Fernando Ortiz. *Los instrumentos...*, vol V, 1955, p. 323.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 316.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, vol. IV, p. 190.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, vol. V, p. 317-318; and Honorio Muñoz. "Los fotutos". *La Gaceta de Cuba (La Habana)*, no. 135, agosto, 1975, pp. 8-11.

Cobos were also used, together with other types of drums and wind instruments, to make the music of the parrandas de Camajuaní,³⁸ in this same province, and were also used in the *tajonas orientales*".³⁹

Presently the cobos are used, together with *baccinesi* and *drums*, to accompany the Cuban dances of Haitian origin performed in the festivities called *Bande Rara*,⁴⁰ very popular in the bateys and the Eastern provinces of Cuba and are celebrated during *Semana Santa*. They have the name *lambi*.

The marimbula or *pianito*: The Bríkamo of Matanzas also used to interpret their music a table which they called the *piano* and which was made of six keys made of bars of wood frames. According to Lydia Cabrera's informants:

Even in the last *cabildo Bríkamo-Oro* that they had in Matanzas, with the elder Agustín Kakanda as head, they played an instrument which resembled a cot. A stick crossed over two saw-horses, on which two little sticks were struck: Kán-Kán-Kán: Kún-Kán-Kún Kán Kán... and also they played the *ekón*.⁴¹

In my investigations I have been able to learn that "they split the bars in two parts and put them on the table and searched for the combination of notes, to make a *piano*". It sounded "identical to the pianos of today". It was played with two sticks on the part which projected out from the

³⁸ René Batista Moreno. "Grandes combates y fieras broncas entre sapos y chivos de Camajuaní". *Signos (Santa Clara)*, año 3, no. 3, mayo-agosto, 1972, p. 125.

³⁹ Fernando Ortiz. *Los instrumentos...*, vol. IV, p. 109.

⁴⁰ Alberto Pedro. "La semana santa haitiano-cubana". *Etnología y Folklore (La Haban)*, no. 4, 1967, p. 56; and Jaun Enrique Rodríguez Valle. "Apuntes sobre un grupo de danzas haitianas en la provincia de Camagüey". *Signos (Santa Clara)*, mayo-diciembre, 1975, pp. 53 and 58.

⁴¹ Lydia Cabrera. *Op. cit.*, 1959, pp. 47-50.

"piano". Depending on the length of the pieces of wood, the sound was made.

The *pianito* was played by two standing players in front of the keys and two little sticks in their hands. Each one played three keys. Tuning was achieved by gently pulling each key and setting it at distinct lengths. It made six different pitches.⁴²

Tambores: Three drums or tambores were used, of staves, open, nailed, and unimembranophones. One of our informants⁴³ tells us that when he was a child he saw an older type of drum. "There were three, made of one trunk", whole, with a skin nailed and slightly barrel-shaped, which "the elders" used, but after they died, the drums were "no longer seen". This indicates that there were possibly sacred drums which disappeared with the decline of the *cabildo*. Perhaps during the so called "Guerra del 12" with its resulting persecution of the cults of African origin, and especially in Matanzas, where the elder blacks still talk of the religious repression of which they were victims. Continuing their celebrations they used drums "modern, of staves and heat (for tuning), to "simulate" the toques of the originals. Perhaps this explains why other informants - relatively younger than Pedro Pablo Calle, born in 1900-although being of the house, have never seen drums "being fed".

Campana: The same as the *ekón* of the *Abakuá* and the *agogo* of the Cuban *Iyesá*; an instrument made of two planes of triangular metal fused on two sides and forming on the third a lenticular cavity. It is played with a stick, while held by the handle with the other hand.

Maruguitas: "The drummer of the *caja* (or principal drum) uses a pair of *maruguitas* on his wrists", made from two

⁴²Francisco Reyes, *Matanzas*, 1974.

⁴³Pedro Pablo Calle, *Matanzas*, 1967.

small dried güiras (*Crescentia cujete*, L.)⁴⁴ with small *percutientes* inside, tied with two ropes or pieces of leather. This instrument is called *nkembi a moko* by the Cuban groups descended from the Bantú and are also used in the style of rumba called *columbia*.

Another informant tells me of other musical instruments used by the Matanzas Bríkamo which vary slightly from those cited above:

They played three drums, such as the *congas*, nailed and tuned by heating by the fire; on a metal bar (a bed rail) was used as a *campana*, ringing it with a stick; and they made a *pianito*. They placed jute bags over a table, on top of which they placed six pieces of wood which made six different notes. These keys were tied to each other and to the feet of the table with hemp [...].⁴⁵

This description coincides in many respects with that offered by Fernando Ortiz when he wrote that the Bríkamo drums were "three, of a structure similar to ñáñigo drums", but they were not

Of wedges but rather nailed and heated by fire, like *congas*. They were played with bare hands, like the *bonkó enchemiyá* of the ñáñigos [...]. It is possible that these three *tambores clavados* similar to the Bantú, came directly from Africa, since the Bríkamo are tribes from the semibantú region between Nigeria and the Congo.⁴⁶

A third informant,⁴⁷ in this case a niece of the last "dueña del cabildo", tells us: "two drums were used, a cajón⁴⁸ and

⁴⁴ Juan Tomás Roig. *Op. cit.*, t. I, p. 492.

⁴⁵ Francisco Reyes, *Matanzas*, January 1965.

⁴⁶ Fernando Ortiz. *Los instrumentos...*, vol. III, 1952, pp. 386-387.

⁴⁷ Bárbara Calle, *Matanzas*, January, 1965.

a *marímbula*,⁴⁹ made of two bedrails and eight wooden crossbars. The bedrails rested on four piles of jute sack, which made at times the feet of the musical instruments.

These diverse opinions confirm for us that since the beginnings of the 20th century the Matanzas Brikamo had lost something of the orthodox construction of their musical instruments, or at least their form tended to be more and more free.

In conclusion we can state that two or three drums were used, open, nailed and unimembranophones (which could be from a single log or of staves), a marimba, a piece of metal (*ekón* or bedrail), a fotuto made of a caracol shell, two maruguitas and, at times, a cajón.

Of the songs and rhythms

Brikamo songs have an antifonal structure. Their texts are in

This language, Spanish, or a mixture of the two. They are danced "dando rama" before the altar and traveling in procession through the streets. We have been able to collect some examples:

1. Solista: Aea aea

⁴⁸ According to Ortiz, "it must be kept in mind that a cajón is an occasional substitute for a tambor litúrgico. With the cajón, or cajones, the blacks play vodú and also Lucumí and Congo and whatever other drum music, when they lack the traditional skin drums". (*Los instrumentos...*, vol. III, p. 148.)

⁴⁹ In Cuba, there is frequent confusion between the names *marímbula* and *marimba*. The informant erroneously designates as a *marímbula* the instrument known as *marimba*, and made with wooden keys played by two sticks. In the work cited by Amaury Talbot (t. III, p. 811), there is a photograph of an *Ibó* xylophone very similar to the *pianito* of the Brikamo described by this informant. The true *marímbula* is made of a wooden box with metal tongues in front of a resonance hole, which are plucked. They were very popular in the old "conjuntos de son" .

La Virgen María y el Niño Jesús.

- Coro: *Aea aea*
La Virgen María y el Niño Jesús.
2. Solista: *Sú ganga sú eié*
Coro: *Sú ganga sú eié*
3. Solista: *Aé aé sún gangan sú*
Sún gangan sú
María Cañamazo
y el Niño Jesús.
Coro: *Sún ganga sú*
sún ganga sú
María Cañamazo
y el Niño Jesús.
4. Solista: *Chanchan bembe erimo tá*
ée erimo tá
Coro: *Chanchan bembe erimo tá*
Solista: *Ee erimo tá*
Coro: *Chanchan bembe erimo tá*
5. Solista: *Mucho Muchacho.*
Coro: *Saya.*
Solista: *Muchacho Muchacho.*
Coro: *Saya.*
Solista: *Mucho Muchacho.*
Coro: *Saya.*
Solista: *Muchacho Muchacho.*
Coro: *Saya.*
6. Solista: *Móila*
móila ayáyá
móila
móila ayáyá
móila
Coro: *Móila*
móila ayáyá

móila
móila ayáyá
móila

7. Solista: *Ee bera*
yo no bera
un beraguá

Coro: *Bera*
yo no bera
un beraguá

The informant⁵⁰ who provided us with the texts of these songs also gave us this other example –which, we are told, is used by both groups– to prove to us the similarity which exists between the music of the Brikamo and the Abakuá.

8. Solista: *Manakankubia*
Seré aseré
Coro: *Manakankubia.*
Solista: *Seré aseré.*
Coro: *Manakankubia.*
Solista: *Komo indiabakuá.*
Coro: *Manakankubia.*
Solista: *Seré aseré.*
Coro: *Manakankubia.*
Solista: *Sere.*
Coro: *Manakankubia.*
Solista: *Aseré aseré.*
Coro: *Manakankubia.*
Solista: *Bríkamo.*
Coro: *Manakankubia.*
Solista: *Suama.*
Coro: *Manakankubia.*

This song confirms without doubt the deep connection between the two groups.

⁵⁰ *Francisco Reyes, Matanzas, 1965.*

As we can estimate, the melodic lines of the Bríkamo songs are very simple and primary; they are limited in reality to a highly rhythmic refrain for accompanying the dance, repeated many times.

As for rhythms, we are informed that there was only one, with which they accompanied all songs, but it was "very lively, like the Abakuá marches".

Bríkamo dance

The participants in the festivals danced in loose pairs. Women and men made the same steps and movements, with boughs of albahaca and other herbs in their hands. The dance was "the same as Abakuá, identical. The only difference is that the dancers were not costumed",⁵¹ like the íreme; they didn't use special suits. "And the rhythm is very similar. While they danced, they *shook*⁵² the branches over the altar and all the people present."⁵³ "when the danced in front of the altar, they took herbs from it, each pair going to the altar in succession. They paid many respects to the saint."⁵⁴ They kneeled, stood, saluted again, made movements, but always directed to the picture of the saint."⁵⁵

All the informants insisted on the similarity of the Bríkamo dance with that of the íreme of the Abakuá, with the difference that it was done in pairs and without the special costuming such as the *akanawán* or *saco* of the "diablitos". They are also similar in that the dancers take the branches of herbs from the altar, generally basil, and with them make all their movements and "daban rama".

⁵¹ Pedro Pablo Calle, *Matanzas*, 1967.

⁵² *Sacudían*, (*shook*) to "cleanse of bad influences", purifying and immunizing against influences considered nefarious.

⁵³ Pedro Pablo Calle, *Matanzas*, 1967.

⁵⁴ "Hacían mucha venia: To pay respects to".

⁵⁵ Pedro Pablo Calle, *Matanzas*, 1967.

Decline of the Cabildo

When the elders, the children of Africans, passed away, the cabildo disintegrated. The picture of the Baby Jesus and the "piezas" passed into the possession of various families (Antonia Calle, then Inés Mesa, and finally Yeya Calle), who kept them in their private homes and only took them out for processions, singing and dancing, but without performing (!) —we are told— the ceremonies that existed in the old locale of Daoíz no. 215.

Offerings were made to the picture and it was used in processions up until the 1950's (I was able to see these processions when I was about 10 years old ,c. 1947—, formed by dozens of descendants of the former members of the cabildo, and people in general, the majority of the dock workers, bricklayers, housewives, cobblers, housekeepers, etc.)

The Calle family of Matanzas was who principally preserved and directed this tradition. Their most notable organizers were Yeya, Amadita, and others, all *negros criollos*.

The cabildo, or what is left of it, stopped going out around 1953, with the death of Yeya, the heart of the celebrations. An elderly woman with a spirit of extraordinary vitality and youthfulness, she preserved the picture and the "piezas" until her death. Afterward, the "piezas" were lost, but the picture still exists.

In 1974, after more than two decades without celebrating their festivals, the Bríkamo of Matanzas returned to their music and dancing, "dando rama" and showing that these cultural traditions brought to Cuba from Southern Nigeria had not died.

Throughout the colonial period and while slavery was legal, the cabildos were the center of the social life of the

African captives, and the institution which permitted a certain economic survival, at the same time providing an opportunity to reconstruct and continue some of their cultural traditions in Cuba.

After abolition, the cabildos became mutual aid societies, but continued their function of utmost importance for the liberated slaves and their Creole children, formally free, but discriminated against both socially and economically. In a hostile environment which opposed them and impeded their full integration into Cuban life, the cabildos (the people continued calling them this, despite the fact that it was no longer the exact name for them after the abolition of slavery and the Spanish government had prohibited this type of institution), they continued as meeting places for singing, dancing, paying tribute to ancestral gods, and with the social solidarity "of their own", receive a little economic support in case of sickness or death.

The pseudo-republic did not fundamentally alter the lives of the elder Africans and their Creole offspring. The precarious economy, the few possibilities of access to modern education and the neglect of the fatalist bourgeois toward these traditionally exploited sectors, combined to allow the old cabildos continue supplying an important social function. As the elders "de nación", the conservators of the orthodox traditions, passed away, their Cuban offspring continued celebrating the festivals and ceremonies, but these began a process of transculturation with other African elements, plus the Hispanic ones present in Cuba.

In the case of the Bríkamo of Matanzas, the ritual ceased to be the fundamental, and the fiesta (singing, dancing, "comelatas") emerged into the foreground, which permitted the expansion of a gregarious spirit and a certain economic solidarity.

The extent to which Cuban society was transforming as a whole, these changes were undermining the *raison d'être* of the *cabildo*, until it became defunct in the 1950s.

Nevertheless, the apparent rebirth in 1974 of the traditions of *Bríkamo* origins in Matanzas, is no more than the death rattle of cultural forms one step away from their final dissolution in the great stream of "lo cubano nacional". This process was accelerated by the profound socio-economic transformations which took place since the triumph of the revolution.

The Matanzas *Bríkamo*, with their roots in the Calabar, but developed and Cubanized during the colonial period and the pseudorepublic, is being extinguished by old age and by the obsolescence of its social function in contemporary Cuba for the sectors which preserve it, because it corresponds to historical periods and lifestyles already passed.