

The Death and Resurrection of Ñáñigos

Jorge Camacho

Professor

University of South Carolina, Columbia

Cuban. Resident of the United States

According to historians, the first Ñáñigo *juego* was established in Havana in the 1830s, at the height of the profitable slave trade. It modeled itself on the myth of the sacred fish, Tanze, that a woman called Sikán found one morning when she went down to the river. Her priests explained to her that Abasi (God) had been reincarnated in that fish, and that having it in their possession would make the tribe stronger.¹ In Havana, the Ñáñigos, who were mostly of Carabalí descent, took this myth as their founding cornerstone and promised not to reveal it to anyone. Notwithstanding, in 1857, a mulatto by the name of Andrés Petit, from the village of Guanabacoa, sold the secret for 30 pieces of gold to whites who were creating their own *juego* because black Ñáñigos would not accept them.

Until the middle of the twentieth century, Andrés Petit was considered by most to be a traitor, a sort of Judas who sold out his brethren for 30 pieces of gold. Yet, ever since the publication by anthropologist Lydia Cabrera of *El Monte* (1954), and particularly *La sociedad secreta abakuá narrada por viejos adeptos* (1959), the reputation of Andrés Petit has taken a significant turn: he went from being a traitor to a savior of that society.

Informants told the Cuban anthropologist that Petit had realized that the only way for Ñáñigos to survive mid nineteenth-century police attacks on them would be to necessarily include whites among their ranks. This explains why he sold them the secret, became their *padrino* (religious sponsor), and even used the money they paid to buy the freedom of other enslaved Ñáñigos. Lydia Cabrera cites in her book many anecdotes in which Petit seems to be very intelligent, was a devout Catholic and polyglot, and had supernatural powers. It seemed that the Ñáñigos should be eternally grateful to him. According to one of the informants:

“Andrés Petit was a traitor; he sold the *Ekue* to the whites! You must have heard this a thousand times. Traitor...What a foolish thing to call him. Just say no. Andrés Petit was not a traitor. Andrés Petit did not keep one bit of those thirty ounces of gold he asked of them to do their bidding, to make them part of the group, *Akanarán Efó Okóbio Mukarará*.”²

Cabrera adds that it was Petit who introduced the Christian crucifix into the Ñáñigo altar, and goes on to suggest that by allowing whites to join this society, it was the very first



Masked Abakuá dancer known as Idem or Ndem

time that anyone attempted to bridge the two cultures, creating a sort of interracial brotherhood that defied colonial laws. All this was suggested by Cabrera's 'informants,' the very same people who spoke to her in the first per-

son, and told her stories about their lives, and what they had heard from their brothers, their *cofrades*. This new way of seeing Petit is even more surprising when we consider that nine years earlier, Lydia Cabrera had published an

article in *Orígenes* containing a contrary view that Petit had sold the secret to the whites, and that it was because of this “treacherous act that whites could become *Ñáñigos*.” One informant told Cabrera that Petit explained that it was because of their “*moropo* [head] that whites had to be admitted, so that *Ñáñiguism* could survive in Cuba.” Those who first joined were *gente de arriba* [people from the top], “military and religious men,” titled people and Cuban aristocrats.³ This story, or at the very least, what we know about Petit’s life, is immensely important for understanding the way in which Cuban society today is changing its perception of the *Ñáñigos* and their religion.

Why is it so important? Because if we judge Petit according to these reports, he would be a quintessential Cuban, being a mulatto, Catholic, *Ñáñigo*, *kimbisa* and abolitionist is a perfect emblem for ethnic and religious symbolism in the nineteenth century. In other words, the greatest personification of what Ortiz called “transculturation.” In fact, in his book *Los bailes y el teatro de los negros* (1951), Ortiz speaks of Petit as a great reformer, as the architect of an “ingenious synchrony” of Congo and Catholic elements.⁴ Ortiz does not make reference to the *Ñáñigos*, but rather to the *regla Kimbisa* that Petit also founded. The problem with that is that Petit is intimately tied to legend and popular knowledge, which might explain why there is research interest in him now, after so many years of being ignored. Why is this the case, when Ortiz’s theory has been the most important factor for understanding Cuba’s racial and cultural mix, at least since the middle of the twentieth century?

The answer to this question can be found in a series of factors that converged all at one time, and others that contradict the Cuban Revolution’s racial rhetoric. On the one hand, Petit was much too religious

for Cuba’s revolutionaries; on the other, his appearance cast doubt on the emancipatory narrative that Cuban historiography has repeated *ad nauseum*—that both groups unproblematically joined forces during the wars for independence (1868-1898). This narrative is based on the writing of José Martí and the teleology of the “one hundred-year struggle.” Yet, Martí criticized the *Ñáñigos* for being a “secret” and “terrible” organization. His April 1, 1893 article in *Patria* recycled old colonial fears while it also markedly celebrated Tomás Surí, a seventy-year old African. Surí had “abandoned some brothers who still preferred the drum,”⁵ wanted to educate himself and contribute to the revolutionary cause with his most beloved possessions—his sons—because he too had fought in the previous war, and if they “[didn’t] do what [he] did, then [those] three [were] not [his] sons.”⁶

In a previous article for this very publication, I analyzed Martí’s chronicle and said that in it we could read the dual rhetoric of “debt” and “fear” these types of associations inspired in the Cuban Revolutionary Party (PRC).⁷ “Fear” because Martí, like all other intellectuals at the end of the nineteenth century, distanced himself from the “tremendous secret order of Africans, with [their] bylaws,” a “mysterious, dangerous and terrible” order. “Debt” because the Delegate used this opportunity to commit blacks to fighting for Cuba, for which reason he reproduces a letter he had supposedly received from the order’s “venerable director,” Juan Pascual, who confirmed that from that moment on the organization would donate funds to help fill the independence war coffer.⁸ Martí went on to say that blacks had been “the only ones to have won their freedom along with the revolution.”⁹ This allowed me to conclude that Martí’s rhetoric of debt is guided by the following objectives:

1) To unite white and black Cubans, thus erasing any ill feelings one group might have had towards the other.

2) To get blacks to once again fight for the independence of Cuba, even though they had already received their definitive freedom from the Spanish government in 1886, and shouldn't have to fight again.

3) To assure whites of the "goodness" of blacks, and that they would not violently rise up against them after the war, and

4) To challenge the Autonomist Party's right to claim the "liberation" of the slaves in 1886, when in reality this credit belonged to the Mambi soldiers, according to Martí and other independence supporters who rose up in 1868.

Despite the fact that Martí used this rhetoric to promote his political agenda, he does not mention that slaves were not given their freedom in 1868, and that racism among the rebel leadership continued. So, Martí remains silent about both things, and not only in his piece on "the secret order of Africans." He also omits the story of the Aponte rebellion of slaves and freemen, and about others who rose up way before Cuban fighters fought the Spaniards for their freedom. Like it or not, all this amounts to a manipulation of history and the voices he includes in his texts. More importantly, in his chronicle about the African order, Martí accepts Surí and his friends on two conditions: that they abandon the "drum" and learn to read, and that they come out in favor of a war against the Spanish government. What more could he want? What else could he ask of them?

This rhetoric would reappear many years later in Cuba. It serves only the political interests of those in power, or those who re to wield it. It is not recognition for the rights of the Abakuá religion, association or culture. In another issue of *ISLAS*, Miguel Cabrera Peña, upon reading this very same Martí

chronicle, asked himself: "Could the Abakuá be a dangerous and terrible organization, and also have a venerable director?"¹⁰ My answer is 'yes,' so long as the order agreed to educate itself, contribute funds to the PRC, and come out against Spain.

By the end of the nineteenth century, *Ñáñigos* were not simply considered a criminal organization, but also a political one, since many of them were accused of conspiring against the government, and sent to prison in Ceuta. Of course, such accusations can always be fabricated, and serve as another way to publically denigrate them, and get rid of people the State considered to be undesirable. This is not Cabrera Peña's opinion. When he speaks of the "debt" to which Martí gets them to commit, he is guided by Aline Helg's views: that one of this rhetoric's objectives is to eliminate "any obligation to pay reparations for their ill treatment in the past."¹¹ Cabrera finds no evidence to support this thesis, but the problem is that this rhetoric of "debt" is not limited to this goal only. It is symbolic and works more like a sort of blackmail (a harsh word, but I can find no other) or honor argument with which to get them to commit. Perhaps Martí's own personality can help us understand this. He was greatly influenced by Spain's historical preoccupation with honor, the Golden Age; he was a poet and idealist, and saw this "debt" almost as an agreement among gentlemen. However, I agree with Cabrera when he says that "the concept of debt that was taken on by blacks predated Martí."¹² This is exactly what I said in my article, when I mentioned Calixto García Iñiguez, Manuel Sanguily, and the Juan Bellido de Luna's allegory, in 1875. Helg does not express this, and limits herself to a very superficial analysis of Martí.

I also agree with Cabrera when he says that Martí saw in education a necessary and valid good, or as he called it, a way to "open

the way to upward mobility.”¹³ Nevertheless, I still believe that in calling the Abakuá order “terrible,” criticizing its religion, and indirectly criticizing blacks for wanting to perpetuate illiteracy among Cubans, Martí was speaking from a position of cultural superiority. Judging by his chronicle, for Martí and so many others, it was necessary to avoid Africans imposing their religion on whites, which is why they had to accept *criollo* cultural forms. Cabrera accepts Martí’s lack of knowledge about the subject, and tries to defend him by saying that in that era (1893) “there was no literature about the Abakuá nor about African culture, in general.”¹⁴ On the contrary, though, Martí wrote this chronicle at one of the most heightened moments of institutional repression against the *Ñáñigos*, and during a publicity campaign supported by a number of intellectuals, among them Bachiller y Morales. In 1876, the Governor General of Cuba prohibited *Ñáñigo compar-sas*, and police agent Trujillo y Monegas wrote a report that was published in Havana with the title *Los ñáñigos, su historia, sus prácticas, su lenguaje con el facsimile de los sellos que usa cada uno de los juegos o agrupaciones* (1882). Surely Martí knew of or had read those reports, and was not unaware of the “danger” they symbolized. The Abakuá’s bad reputation continued for all of the nineteenth century, and even increased at the beginning of the twentieth, which explains why Andrés Petit is nothing more than a ghost in all those police reports. This changes only when Lydia Cabrera publishes *La sociedad secreta abakuá*. So why assume that Martí could have done it earlier? In the prologue to her book, Lydia Cabrera tells us something that other researchers who studied that organization have not, that she was not interested in their “criminal but rather religious character, and even more so in the poetics we thought to have seen in their materials.”¹⁵ This explains why there needed to

be a new way to interpret this association, and the mulatto from Guanabacoa was the perfect vehicle through which to achieve this. It could be no other way for those who thought that Andrés Cristo de los Dolores Petit was the veritable personification of “God on the Earth.”¹⁶

The demonization of the Abakuá continued in Cuba during the Revolution’s first forty years. This changed only in the 1990s. The Cuban government became more open to religions, Pope John Paul visited Cuba, and the Catholic Church began to play a more active role in society. In this context, Afro-Cuban religions also reaped benefits, so much so that between 1991 and 2008, more than 38 books on Santería were published in Cuba. This coincides with the period during which Andrés Petit’s reevaluation begins, and a first book about his life, *Andrés Quimbisa* (2001), by María del Carmen Muzio, is published. It follows the footsteps of this famous Havana resident from the Guanabacoa neighborhood, and discovers that the person about whom Lydia Cabrera’s informants spoke really existed. Yet, some facts don’t jibe with what they said.

To begin with, Petit’s will, which Muzio found after much searching in a number of Havana churches, reveals he was illiterate, could not even sign his name, died at the age of 48, and was buried in the habit of a Dominican friar. According to Rafael Roche Monteagudo’s transcription, in his book *La policía y los misterios en Cuba* (1908), in which there is a certain Andrés Netit (a possible typo), and that despite the fact history had completely blamed him for his “treacherous” act, “it was not only the *bakokó efor* who was responsible for the admission of whites, but also the *efi ebritó*.”¹⁷ In other words, there was not only one *Ñáñigo* group that sponsored whites, but two. Andrés Petit was the *issué* for the *bakokó efor*. Nevertheless, Muzio

still believes in the centrality of Petit in this story, and emphasizes his importance for the later development of Cuban culture, because “not everyone had Petit’s future vision that Cuba was making enormous strides towards a great degree of not only racial but also cultural miscegenation.”¹⁸

A worrisome thing about this type of interpretation is not the incongruences or the little evidence we have to help us clarify what this man’s role in the passing of the Abakuá secret to the whites entailed. Most worrisome of all is thinking Petit did this because he had a “vision” of the future, and not understanding that there were forces greater than human ones behind this process of syncretism in Cuba, and that white society was trying to ‘normativize’ and assimilate blacks into Cuba’s hegemonic, white and Catholic culture. Excerpts from a document/testimony called *El Sayón de Santo Domingo*, which Muzio includes in his book, are quite revealing along these lines. It explains the reasons for the creation of the *regla Kimbisa*, “whose primary purpose was (and still is) to help those who lived trapped in the millennial practices they inherited from Africa to free them of those dark practices and ideas. . . [and adapt them] to the newly emerging, evolutionary condition of the spiritual progress they were making at that time.”

“Christian Catholicism catechized and converted the entire race of slaves and free-men, but it was never able to rid them of their African religions [for which reason Petit] decided to establish a religious institution that could include, join and harmonize Christian morality, [because] this new religion was created so that those able to understand it be drawn to it, [and] conserve the most essential, useful and best aspects of African religions in a human, more acceptable and more civilized form.”¹⁹

Anyone who reads these paragraphs and is familiar with the traditional forms of sub-

jugation to which different ethnic minorities were subjected in Spanish America will notice that syncretism is lauded because it offers one way of leaving in the past practices usually condemned for being “dark” or “savage,” and reforming them so they “evolve” according to “the spiritual progress that was dawning for them.” Thus, the creation of the *regla Kimbisa* did not come about in a desire for brotherhood or for creating something new and different from what the conquerors had brought from Europe, but rather because it was the only way to “harmonize Christian morality” with whatever was “essential, useful and best” about the African religions. The blend would be more “human” and definitively “civilized.” This was the path that many reformers and thinkers followed from the nineteenth and into the mid-twentieth century in Cuba. In practice, it resulted in a way of slowly diluting the rights and traditions of blacks within a powerful, white cultural framework.

If this indeed was how Petit’s *regla* was “founded”—and we remember that Ortiz praised it in his book—we would have to admit that he was motivated by a markedly Eurocentric view of culture whose clearest expression could be found in colonial law—the condemnation of whites, and the imposition of the Castilian language and Catholic religion on the island. We must recall that during the colonial period the State urged and forced slaves to assimilate to the Catholic religion’s precepts. It also indoctrinated them by using the “catechism for *bozal* [recently imported] blacks” and even the decree of April 4, 1888, which forced all African *cabildos* to become Catholic brotherhoods, to avoid blacks being able to conspire against the Spanish government. Muzio ignores this issue and supports the integrationist view of Petit created by Lydia Cabrera’s Ortizian ethnography. His interpretation owes more to Cabrera’s book than to the one that had prevailed till the

nineties. In fact, in 1982, ethnographer Enrique Sosa was still claiming that *Ñáñigos* and communist ideology did not go well together, which is why he called Andrés Petit a “*ñáñigo*, *brujero*, *santero*, *cristiano*, and *milagrero*.”²⁰ It is no wonder that Sosa, who that year had won the Casa de las Américas prize, said:

“As happened with the *curros*, the *ñáñigos* suffered and will suffer earthshaking shocks so long as social development, which in socialism’s case is accelerated, is imposed on them. Hence the urgency, the immediate need to exhaustively research them before the complete disappearance of **anachronic “secret societies” in a communist society that should, on the other hand, take advantage of their great wealth as a constitutive element of our national history and culture** (emphasis mine).”²¹

What else could Sosa say? At the triumph of the Revolution, when the State declared itself to be socialist, all religions were condemned. The records of the Party’s First Congress made special mention of this. According to Sosa, of course, there was a desire to “investigate” the *Ñáñigos*, but their association had no place in the island’s present or future. It belonged to an earlier time and was an anachronism, which justified the State’s “assault” on it, just like colonial authorities had done earlier. In other words, *Ñáñigos* were the purview of the Ministry of the Interior (MININT), but not a reliable or integratable “element” of revolutionary society. This explains why in his book Sosa frequently cites Aristedes Sotomayor’s article “Las intenciones secretas del abakuá” (1972), which was published in the journal *Moncada*, in which many old-fashioned, stereotypical arguments are repeated. According to Sotomayor:

“More than 90% of youth who have joined the sect have criminal backgrounds or are being sought by the authorities. They are the sort who solve their problems in a *macho* way, and seek the opportunity to make ‘histo-

ry’ (via bloody acts) and later ‘take an oath.’ If they do not become incarcerated they are not considered proven men. They engage in blackmail to discredit *ekobios* [brothers]. . . and also use effeminate men and their ‘braggart’ women to create scandals about a particular ‘member,’ and thus damage his manly prestige. Another strategy often employed by the Abakuá mafia is to make an aggression of many against one person.”²²

This extremely prejudiced description of the Abakuá was part of the campaign the government waged against them and all other religions. It was also part of a policy for eradicating words of African origin from popular speech, for example: the personal referent “*asere*” that is so commonly used among Cubans, which is of Abakuá origin. According to writer Ena Lucía Portela, in her book *El viejo, el asesino, y otros cuentos* (1999), this word was held as vulgar. Portela writes that “in primary school, where I studied, we children were entirely prohibited from using it, since, according to the teacher, in the African jungle the word in question meant “a group of stinky monkeys.”²³ Nevertheless, this campaign to impose a negative and anti-social view of *Ñáñigos* contradicts new studies that emphasize Petit’s transcultural and integrationist work, and the Abakuás’ commitment to the nation’s liberation project. In this new context, there is no talk of blood; what is emphasized are their ties of mutual aid, their active role in the struggle for Cuba’s independence, and their participation alongside the government at Playa Girón. Once again, the problem is in the fact that there is very little or no evidence of this participation, as is the case with Petit, as well. Everything we know comes from the testimony of the old men and sympathizers to whom the ethnographers and historians turn.

For example, it has been said that when the eight medical students were shot by the

Spanish government on November 27th, 1871, a group of *Ñáñigos* tried to forcefully rescue the students, which got them executed. This story had resurfaced before, but had already been rejected due to lack of evidence. In his book *El fusilamiento de los estudiantes* (1971), Luis Felipe le Roy y Gálvez confirmed that the night the students were killed, the Spanish went out to the street and killed five blacks at different places throughout the city: “This massacre of five blacks has been the object of much speculation... [and] brought about the invention of a very novel version of these events, one that says that there was an uprising of sworn *Ñáñigos* that day, according to some, or of loyal slaves, according to others, who wanted to forcefully rescue the eight students who were going to die.”²⁴ The aforementioned article by Cabrera Peña points to this thesis when it makes references to the “heroic character of the Abakuá” and mentions the shooting of the medical students.²⁵ María del Carmen Muzio does the same thing when she cites Ley Roy and adds that “this legend grows even more beautiful” when we hear the *Ñáñigo* testimonies that confirm that one of the medical students was an Abakuá, which justified that his brothers rise up to rescue them.²⁶ If this story is true, adds Muzio, “the student who was shot certainly had to belong to the first *juego* of whites that Petit established, which was the only one in existence that year.”²⁷ In a country where everything is subordinated to politics, it is clear that a reevaluation of the Abakuá’s secret society has to involve the participation of revolutionaries. This type of story may allow their struggle to “earn” the government’s recognition.

As I showed earlier, this is not a new process. Martí had already used it in his article for *Patria*. Alejo Carpentier had done the same for Haitian blacks in *El reino de este mundo* (1949); Miguel Barnet in *Biografía de un cimarrón* (1955); and Gutiérrez Alea in *La últi-*

ma cena (1976). All of them did something different with religion: they made it an instrument of liberation, a weapon against the colonial (or neocolonial) State, which is why this rhetoric lost its political worth at a time when blacks became free or the Cuban Revolution triumphed. According to Sosa, the *Ñáñigos* and all other religions, including the Afro-Cuban ones, were an “anachronism.” So, what do we need democracy for? What do we need religion for? It really doesn’t matter if this participation by *Ñáñigos* against the Spanish government or invading troops at Playa Girón has not been documented, or belongs only to the oral tradition of groups that have traditionally been marginalized, even during the Revolution, and aspire, as would anyone else, to be heard and recognized by their government. Neither does it matter that religion and free association are the inalienable right of each and every human being regardless the kind of government that controls the country. No. For Muzio, as for many others in Cuba, “the presence of the Abakuá at different, important historical events **has earned a perspective different** from the one that frightened police agents like Trujillo Monagas promoted. There is not only talk of the Abakuá trying to rescue the students in 1871, but also that after the *Guerra Chica* Maceo received an Abakuá escort, or that the leaders who supplied Havana’s and Matanza’s rebel forces were Abakuás. Moreover, as part of our more recent history, 95% of the Matanzas battalion that fought at Playa Girón in 1961 was Abakuá (emphasis mine).”²⁸

In other words, what is important now is to reveal a curriculum that confirms the position the Abakuás have with the Party on behalf of the Nation and Revolution. Consequently, a need for documents to prove these deeds is now irrelevant because as researcher Jesús Guancho says, “a fundamental source for the study of Cuba’s current syncretic religions

is their oral tradition, which today is as valid and valuable as an important historic document.”²⁹ Is this a case of naivety, political manipulation, or a legitimate desire on the part of researchers to recover heretofore repressed voices from the nation’s history? As happens in the case of Andrés Petit and José Martí, I am afraid that the answer to that question will depend on a question of faith, and on who of-

fers the repost. Those who accept only documentary evidence to validate a historical fact will consider that there is no reason whatsoever to take the word of a few clever old men; those who, like Guanche, Muzio, and Cabrera, believe the opposite, will have no problem adorning portraits of Martí and Maceo with a note saying ‘they too were ñáñigos.’

Notes:

- 1- There are various versions of this myth. For more about its meaning and different versions, see Lydia Cabrera, *La sociedad secreta abakuá narrada por viejos adeptos*. Miami: Ediciones CR, 1970.
- 2- Cabrera, Lydia. Op. cit., 53.
- 3- Idem, “La ceiba y la sociedad secreta abakuá.” *Orígenes. Revista de Arte y Literatura* 7:25 (1950): 17.
- 4- Ortiz, Fernando. *Los bailes y el teatro de los negros*. (La Habana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1983): 330.
- 5- Martí, José. *Obras Completas* V. (La Habana: Ciencias Sociales, 1963-1975): 324.
- 6- Ibid, 325.
- 7- “El miedo y la deuda en las crónicas de Patria de José Martí.” *ISLAS* 2: 9 (2008): 34-46.
- 8- Martí, José. Loc. cit., 324.
- 9- Ibid, 325.
- 10- Cabrera Peña, Miguel. “José Martí y el futuro de los negros.” *ISLAS* 5: 16 (2010): 29.
- 11- Ibid, 22.
- 12- Ibid.
- 13- Ibid, 27.
- 14- Ibid, 29.
- 15- Cabrera, Lydia. Op. cit., 11.
- 16- Ibid, 30.
- 17- Muzio, María del Carmen. *Andrés Quimbisa*. (La Habana: Ediciones Unión, 2001): 61.
- 18- Ibid, 66.
- 19- Ibid, 95-97 passim.
- 20- Sosa Rodríguez, Enrique. *Los ñáñigos*. (La Habana: Casa de las Américas, 1982): 144.
- 21- Ibid, 15.
- 22- Ibid, 324.
- 23- Portela, Ena Lucía. *(El viejo, el asesino, yo y otros cuentos)*. Florida: Stockcero, 2009): 39.
- 24- Le Roy y Gálvez, Luis Felipe. *El fusilamiento de los estudiantes*. (La Habana: Ed. Ciencias sociales, 1971): 139-40.
- 25- Cabrera Peña, Miguel. Op. cit., 27.
- 26- Muzio, María del Carmen, Op. cit, 70.
- 27- Ibid, 71.
- 28- Ibid, 73.
- 29- Guanche, Jesús. *Procesos etnoculturales cubanos*. (La Habana: Letras cubanas, 1983): 16.