

Religion and Spirituality - Afro-Latin Religions

A Residual Note on Weeping

Ayón's Nlloro

by **Adrian Emmanuel Hernandez** | Jan 25, 2021

Winter 2021, *Volume XX*, *Number 2*

One of the last things I remember doing on the Harvard campus before quarantine was to hurry down a narrow and winding staircase to the underground levels of the Fine Arts Library. I had recently learned about a Black Cuban artist named Belkis Ayón Manso. The religious tenor of her artwork struck me so much that I rushed to check out this heavy, annotated catalogue of her collagraphs before the doors closed shut indefinitely.

Nkame, the title of the oversized tome, is still at home with me. The many images of Ayón's collagraphs—ink prints pressed out of textured plates—on its glossy pages remain my guide and teacher. They not only teach me how to study the Afro-Cuban religion that inspires their content, but also guide me through my own mourning in a world seemingly determined to let the lives of so many fall away.

In Carabalí Bricamo, language of the Abakuá—the Afro-Cuban religious brotherhood that inspired Ayón's artwork—nkame means “eulogy,” “prayer,” “speech” or “salutation.” What to make of such a wide range of definitions for the title of the catalogue became a first lesson: abundance of precision, which I cherish as both an academic and editor, may result in a dearth of meaning. There is no such dearth in the language, stories and practices of the Abakuá, much

less in how Ayón portrays them across scores and scores of collagraphs spanning two decades of almost uninterrupted activity.

Abakuá juegos, potencias or barocos—as groups are variously called—were established in the capital city of Havana as early as the late 1830s. At first, they remained an all-Black men’s mutual aid society, but by the time the Spanish colonial government officially outlawed them in 1875 they had already begun initiating non-Black Cuban men in the cities of Havana, Matanzas and Cárdenas, using those initiation fees to pay for the freedom of enslaved members. For most of their history since then, the Abakuá have been regarded as criminal subjects by subsequent Cuban governments. Tato Quiñones notes in his 2014 *Asere núncue itιά ecobio enyene abacúa* that during the Cuban War of Independence (1895-1898), they were forced to care in secret for the dead bodies of ritual brothers who had been killed as political prisoners, performing mourning rituals under the cover of night. Their supportive if not leading role in anticolonial struggle notwithstanding, the Abakuá were not officially recognized by the Cuban Communist Party until 1996. And yet, for most of their almost 200-year existence, their religious practices have been resources for cultural production.

References to the Abakuá abound in Cuban music, dance, literature and plastic arts. The earliest known literary and cinematic references—the short story “Manga-mocha: cuento ñáñigo” (1880), the novels *Sofía* (1891) and *La familia Unzúazu* (1901), and the film *La hija del policía o en poder de los ñáñigos* (1917)—shared in the stereotypes of racial blackness as criminal that organized Latin American ethnography at the time. Wifredo Lam’s untitled oil painting from 1943, Rolando López Dirube’s 1957 mural installation in the Hotel Havana Riviera, Bernabé Hernández’s 1962 recorded stage performance *Abakuá* and Rafael Queneditt’s 1979 installation *Mural Abakuá* continued to approach the practices of the Abakuá as objects for artistic study albeit with different sensibilities than those at the turn of the century.

Out of this gendered history of religious practice and artistic study—dominated almost exclusively by men—Ayón began her own journey with the Abakuá. The religious brotherhood initiates only heterosexual, cisgender men—that is, men assigned male at birth. And still, two

women aside from Ayón dedicated significant time and energy to studying the religious brotherhood: singer María Teresa Vera (1895-1965) and ethnographer Lydia Cabrera (1899-1991). In fact, in an interview with Inés Anselmi, Ayón remembers encountering the Abakuá for the first time in two chapters from Cabrera's *El monte* (1954), a 600-page reference book on Afro-Cuban religions. While getting her B.A. in engraving from the Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA), Ayón gained firsthand experience when two college professors who were Abakuá members themselves—El Goyo (Gregorio Hernández Ríos) and Tato (Serafín) Quiñones—brought the already accomplished and somewhat knowledgeable student to public portions of Abakuá gatherings.

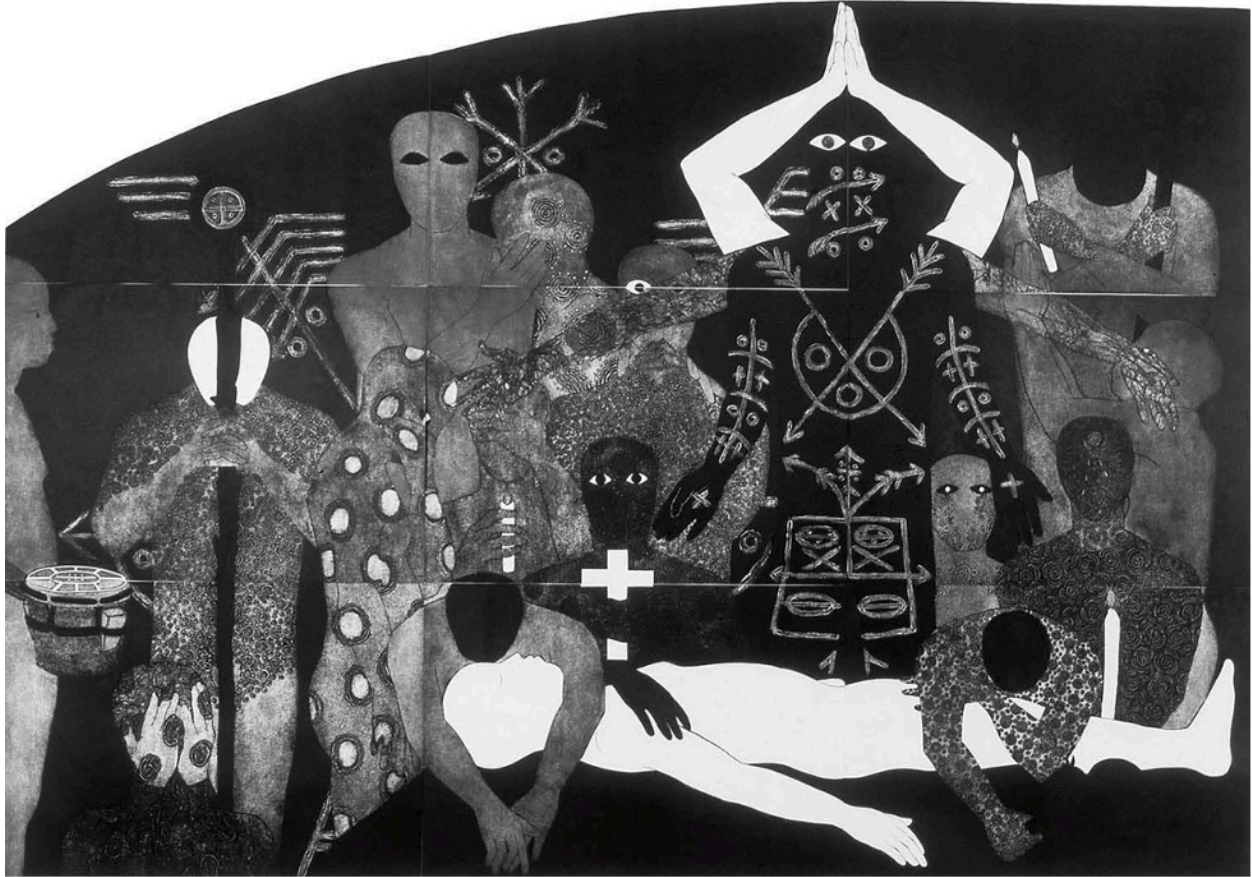
Her 1991 graduation exhibition, *Recuerdo Sagrado*, featured five large-form monochrome collagraphs with explicit references to the Abakuá: *Nlloro*, *Mokongo*, *La familia*, *Ya estamos aquí*, *Sikán* and a second version of *La cena*—first made in 1988 in vibrant golds, sea green, fuchsia and other colors. Although just 24 years old at the time of the graduation exhibition, Ayón had by then developed the content and form that would characterize her artistic style until her death by self-inflicted gunshot wound just four months shy of her 33rd birthday.

Mokongo is the title for representatives of military power among the Abakuá (Cabrera, *La lengua sagrada de los ñañigos*, 1988). They consider the first *Mokongo* to have been a chief of Èfik from the Cross River region of what is now southeastern Nigeria and southwestern Cameroon who swore to keep the mysteries of the religion secret when they became vulnerable to outsiders. *Sikán* in turn, is the title for the only feminine representative recognized as such among the Abakuá as well as the name of a central abject figure in the etiology of Abakuá practice.

Sikán was a princess who, as the story goes, first found the supreme divine force of Abasí in the form of a river fish, mistakenly carrying it away in a hollowed gourd. At the request of her father, *Iyamba*, she hid the fish in a cave. According to one version of the story, *Sikán* was put to death in punishment for having divulged the whereabouts of the fish to her Èfik lover, *Mokongo*—a version that can be cited to keep women from pursuing initiation. According to another version,

Sikán was sacrificed because the animal died and her physical proximity to it made her the next closest living being to the supreme divine force—a version that can be cited to claim both the centrality of women in Abakuá practice from which they are otherwise barred and of a more general femininity otherwise disavowed in or altogether foreclosed from Abakuá practice.

Regardless, the story goes on to explain that through the work of a diviner and divine medic named Nasakó, Sikán's body became part of the first ritual objects of the Abakuá. Although the figures that populate Ayón's collagraphs are oftentimes just silhouettes with only the most minimal of facial features, the resemblance between Ayón's large almond-shaped eyes and those of Sikán is striking enough to wonder what in the Black artist's own life in 1980s and 90s Cuba produced such attachment to and identification with this abject princess so as to appear consistently throughout her extensive catalogue.



Nlloro. Belkis Ayón Manso. 1991.

Ayón's interest in religious language, practices and stories, however, was neither tradition-specific nor faithful to any tradition's orthodox understanding of itself. The Black Cuban artist drew as much from Christian imagery as from that of the Abakuá. For example, the downward slope of the top left corner of Nlloro suggests that the 63-square-foot collagraph can be mounted in a room with a vaulted ceiling, such as a side altar room in the bay of a cathedral; or that it can be installed as a side panel of a medieval triptych in the style of Russian iconography with which Ayón would have been familiar given the Soviet Union's cultural influence on Cuba. Meanwhile, Nlloro's white cross and lit candles—objects that may very well be found in a Catholic novena offering prayers on behalf of the recently deceased—are held by figures covered in etches called *anaforuanas* or "symbols, magical traces, remembrances or evocations" of divine forces for the Abakuá. But none of the etches in Nlloro correspond to any

known symbols. This non-correspondence is part of a technique of concealment even in exposure that Ayón develops in her artistic study of the Abakuá.

Nlloro, which means “cry” or “weeping,” takes its title from the same Abakuá mourning practices that inspire the collagraph’s content. The two-fold mourning practices of nlloro take place after the body of the ritual brother has been buried. The first half involves physical weeping over the death of the recently deceased. The second half involves festive drumming and dancing in celebration of the continued relationship that the spirit of the ritual brother will have with the surviving members of the religious brotherhood albeit in different material forms.

Two differences to note between the nlloro of the Abakuá and Ayón’s Nlloro: the festive dancing in the former is “missing” from the latter and the body of the deceased brother, which is already buried in the former, is present as a white silhouette over which two figures drape themselves in the latter. In other words, while the nlloro of the Abakuá takes place in the absence of the particular body the death of which is the occasion for their gathering, Ayón’s Nlloro insists on keeping that body present and intact.

Ayón did not strictly follow the Abakuá mourning practices of nlloro even though she had seen them firsthand and read about them in ethnographic records. She had attended the public portions of these mourning practices at least once while taking classes at ISA. And in addition to her lifelong study of Cabrera’s El monte, Ayón also owned a personal copy of Enrique Sosa Rodríguez’s 1982 *Los ñañigos*. According to Cristina Vives’ 2010 essay, “Belkis Ayón. Su propia voz,” an Abakuá nkame that Ayón marked up in Sosa Rodríguez’s book is recited by members at the tomb of their deceased brethren:

No te acuerdes en tu sueño

De ninguno de tus hermanos

Que lloran tu ausencia.

Of course, Ayón need not have adhered to any fantasy of ethnographic fidelity. But if we are to consider her technique of concealment even in exposure as cultivated out of a sense of respect for the religious brotherhood's own secrecy and/or desire to circumvent it, then a set of questions arises: What do we learn from Ayón's trained focus on the weeping half of Nlloro? What lessons abide in this melancholic insistence on keeping the lost body present and intact? Towards what does Ayón direct our theoretical eye?

I confess that I have not yet found satisfactory answers to these questions. They have lingered with me over the past year, marked not only by continued outcry in defense of Black lives in the midst of a global pandemic, but also by injunctions to find joy, make joy and practice joy in the midst of so much pain and sorrow. I suspect these questions will stay with me a little longer. Yes, Ayón's technique of concealment even in exposure finds historical precedent in the wit and force of those practitioners and scholars who have guarded Black religions from demonization and criminalization, from further theft and harm. But Ayón also does something else with Nlloro that I take as a timely reminder. Ayón's Nlloro reminds me not to rush to celebration but when possible to tarry with loss, even and especially when loss is understood not as an end but as a transformation.

It is no coincidence that the Abakuá refer to themselves and to each other as ekorie enyene abacué—that is, brothers of the Abakuá woman. The loss of Sikán—that story without which Abakuá practices have no foundation—is what transforms strangers into mourning brothers. As we let go of loved ones who have died and even parts of ourselves that have died by drawing them in, into our memory, and as we distribute that memory across the many objects that remind us of them—a favorite shirt, an old meeting place, a photograph—we are transformed. Indeed, we are made up by the losses we bear. How our past and present losses will continue to transform us remains to be seen, but we need not tarry with them alone. Actually, we don't. I don't. Ayón and her Nlloro remain my guide and teacher.

Adrián Emmanuel Hernández-Acosta is a doctoral candidate in the Committee on the Study of Religion at Harvard University. He is the assistant managing editor for *Transforming Anthropology*, the flagship journal of the Association of Black Anthropologists.

emh834@mail.harvard.edu.