Angel Guerrero

Interview and transcription
By Nolan Warden

*An Interview with Angel Guerrero, Member of the Afro-Cuban Abakuá Society**

To many people, Angel Guerrero Vecino is known only as a mild-mannered software salesman from Chicago. Sadly, it is unlikely that his business associates and clients are aware of the deep cultural traditions that he carries with him from his homeland of Cuba. As a member of the Abakuá society — a secretive Afro-Cuban religion and brotherhood with origins in the Calabar region of Nigeria — Angel's knowledge of liturgical chants and rituals might shock those who know him only from his "day job." He carried this cultural and musical legacy with him when he emmigrated to the U.S. in 2002. After some time in Lansing, Michigan, Angel moved to Chicago where he now resides. His deep knowledge of the ancient Abakuá society and language has given him the chance to participate in conferences at Harvard, Northwestern University, DePaul University, and Columbia College, among other institutions. He was also involved in the production of the CD Ibiono (2001, Caribe Productions), the first commercial recording entirely of Abakuá music. Recently, I sat down with Angel to talk about his thoughts on Abakuá, his role in the creation of Ibiono, and his changing relationship with Afro-Cuban culture in the U.S.

WPR: *Angel, could you tell me a little about what the Abakuá society means to you?*

Guerrero: I belong to the Abakuá society because, for me, it's like a big family. Many times I've received help from the Abakuá society. For example, when I was in Cuba and won the visa lottery to leave the country — because you know it's very expensive to leave Cuba even when you can do it legally — the Abakuá people, my ecobios, brought me the money for the paperwork. When I got to the United States the first place I went was to the house of an ecobio in Miami. That's what I mean by family. Anywhere I go I meet Abakuá people — in Boston, New York, New Jersey — I meet Abakuá people and we help each other out.

WPR: *You use the word ecobio to refer to other Abakuá members. How is that different from asere [sometimes spelled acere] which is used in Cuba among guys talking to each other on the street?*

Guerrero: Ecobio is "brother," someone who has a link to you through the religion. Asere is "friend."

WPR: *In the past, people used the word ñañigo to refer to Abakuá members. What do you think of that word?*

Guerrero: Ñañigo is a disrespectful word. Many people used it to discriminate against the Abakuá society. We are not ñañigos, we are Abakuá, you know? And also, the name of the [masked Abakua] dancer is ireme, but people used to call it diablo [devil]. The devil [laughter]!? So that was the way they used to talk about Abakuá and say "these people are very bad, they kill people." But, we are Abakuá.

WPR: *Some people talk about Abakuá as a "fraternal society," but others call it a religion. Which do you think is more accurate, or is it both?*

Guerrero: Both. For me it's both. It's a religion, of course, but it's a brotherhood also. I never try to separate one side from the other. They go together, the religion and the fraternity, the friendship, the relationships.

WPR: *Tell me about the CD you made called Ibiono. My understanding is that this is the first commercial recording consisting entirely of Abakuá music. Is that true?*

Guerrero: Yeah, I think so. There are some other recordings — Chano Pozo, Mongo Santamaria — but this is the first one that is completely Abakuá music. The recording was the idea of Dagoberto González, a musician with Pablo Milanés. He did a similar project on Yoruba music with Abbilona so, he told me he wanted to do something similar with Abakuá. So I went to some Abakuá that I knew; good musicians and good people. I talked to everybody about this work and they all told me "you are the guy to do it." You know, the Abakuá is a secret society and many people are scared to talk about it, to sing [in public]. But I know what I'm saying and what I'm singing. It's not a problem — it's just music. You can go to the plante [building where Abakuá ceremonies take place] and hear the music, no? But, I had to explain it to people in the right way. Right now, in the Abakuá society, things are different than in the past. Many years ago, you could go to the plante and hear an entire hour of tratados [long sung treatises]. Right now, you go to any Abakuá party and the people just want to play ñongo [a popular batá drum rhythm], to play music and dance, but they're not able to do a long conversation [in Abakuá]. So, many people thought it would be a good idea to do this so that the young people could learn to sing, you know? Ibiono was also an opportunity for the Abakuá people, though. For example, if you're not Abakuá or if you're outside of Cuba, the only way you can hear Abakuá music is to get the CD of Los Muñequitos, AfroCuba de Matanzas, or Yoruba Andabo. If they play nine rumbas, only one will be some Abakuá thing. With Ibiono, the whole thing is Abakuá and it's also the first time we've used the Abakuá instruments. Because you know the rumba groups play with a tambor [lit: drum; meaning tumbadoras or conga drums]. In this case the whole thing was with the Abakuá instruments. That was the idea behind Ibiono.

WPR: *Since it was made in Havana, is this more of a representation of the Havana style of playing? If it was made in Matanzas, would it sound different?*

Guerrero: Yes, it's a different sound so on the first track ["Bacoco"] we play the efo music in Matanzas style then, in the second part, we play Havana style.

WPR: *You mentioned that Abakuá is a secret society, but here is at least some of the music recorded on a CD. You also mentioned that anyone can go to a plante and hear the music. How much of the society is still secret these days?*

Guerrero: Well, it's not a secret to go to the plante and hear the music. What's secret is the ceremony we do in the church [plante or ceremonial house]. So it's not a secret for everybody. You can go to the Abakuá party and hear the music, it's okay. You can even see people get initiated and all of that ceremony before we go inside the church. So, the music is no secret. Ibiono is even in Cuban music like salsa, people say "ibiono, ibiono."

WPR: *What does that mean?*

Guerrero: It means to play with groove, you know? To play good and not loose the clave! When everybody's singing to the music, that's ibiono. But, this word is also used in popular music when people say "ibiono, ibiono." It's origin is in Abakuá.

WPR: *The connection between Afro-Cuban religious music and popular music is often unnoticed by those who are unfamiliar with the religions. Could you tell me how you see Abakuá represented in popular music?*

Guerrero: Well, for me when you listen to son, and rumba, it's Abakuá music. The clave, the tambores, the rhythms, it's almost the same. For example, in many rumba songs they take Abakuá words. The famous rumba "guaguanco amana amana berio" [from the song "Mañana"] comes from the Abakuá words "amana amana umbario." It's Abakuá, but the people in the rumba say "guaguanco amana amana berio" without knowing the meaning. It's the same with the song "pa' 'lla tumbadores, pa' 'lla" which is used in rumba and carnaval. That comes from Abakuá, but it's "illa llumba o, illa." But now, many times you go to the plante and the Abakuá people say "pa' 'lla tumbadores, pa' 'lla." In the Abakuá party!

WPR: *Oh, so it got reversed!*

Guerrero: It's reversed. It's supposed to be "illa, llumba o, illa." There are many mistakes. Even the drumming has changed. For example, in Matanzas, the drumming is slower than in Havana. In Havana, the Abakuá music is too fast. It's terrible, the music right now. It's terrible to sing, it's terrible to dance.

WPR: *Why do you think it's so much faster in Havana? Has it changed, or was it always like that?*

Guerrero: You know, it's a big question. All Cuban music is getting faster – in timba [popular Cuban dance music] it's the same way. In the Yoruba music right now, people don't play it like 20 years ago. Even here in Chicago – people play for San Lázaro, Obatalá, and Aggayú – you'd think it would be slower because it's for the elder Orishas [Yoruba deities], but it's very fast. It's the same in the Abakuá music, but it's better to play slowly so you have more space to sing, you know? In Matanzas they play the ekon [bell] slowly and the music slowly – you can sing. These problems can be fixed, but people need to go to the elders and learn. Here it's different – you can listen to recordings in your house, you have internet. In Cuba, you go to the [Abakuá] party and that's the only way to learn to sing.

WPR: *In Son music there is sometimes a bongó technique that rubs a finger across the drumhead to get a moaning sound. I read somewhere that this technique comes from the Abakuá drum called bonkó enchemiya. Is that so?*

Guerrero: Yeah, yeah, many people use that [technique] in Abakuá. It's the same. Bonkó and bongó – it's coming from the Abakuá word. It went to the popular music and they changed the word: bongó. It comes from bonkó.

WPR: *I'd like to talk to you a little bit about your activities in Chicago. Right now there seems to be a growing need in Chicago for people who can perform religious ceremonies, people who have a deep connection with Afro-Cuban culture in general. In Cuba you only practiced Abakuá, but now you are beginning to be involved in other religious practices. Is your relationship with other Afro-Cuban religions changing or getting stronger since you moved here?*

Guerrero: Yeah, it's very strange. In Cuba, I never sang Yoruba music, never. But, right now in the United States, I'm singing the cajón pa' muerto [ceremonies for the dead], the Yoruba music, and Palo. It's beautiful right now, far away from my country I can do many things I never did in Cuba. It's interesting, yeah. Every time I think about it, it's a... it's cool. Maybe this year I'll get santo [get initiated in Santería], but right now I'm only Abakuá. In the end, I think the Abakuá... for me it's good. I'm proud to be Abakuá. ▼

**The final, edited version of this article was approved by Mr. Guerrero. Abakuá is also sometimes spelled "Abacuá" or "Abakwa."*

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