

INTERVIEW

Interview with Ivor Miller by Jeremy Brecher and Jill Cutler¹ (extract)

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Ivor Miller (IM): I first arrived in Havana in December 1990 to study dance with the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional de Cuba (CFN) for a two-week January workshop, but this occurred just when the Soviet Union had disintegrated. This not only shocked the economy, but coincided with changing official attitudes towards religion, which resulted in the Conjunto instructors being more comfortable with talking openly about their spiritual practices because all of them were participants. They invited me and others to join them: “There’s a ceremony tonight, want to come?” “Sure!” The CFN was my springboard into the community ceremonial activities of Havana. Later, Rogelio Martínez-Furé, a co-founder of the CFN, became a mentor, specifically because I was working on the oral history of one of his close friends, Jesús Pérez, a leading batá drummer and co-founder of the CFN.

The creation of the CFN three years after the emergence of the Cuban revolution is a dramatic example of the vast changes in the society. For the Conjunto to feature the cultural and spiritual expressions of descendants of the enslaved was a huge accomplishment. And through the members of the CFN, I began to learn about the communities of primarily (but not exclusively) working class Cubans, who participated in communal practices with potlatch type ceremonies of ritual healing through dancing, eating and drinking during events energized through elaborate percussion performed by highly skilled ensembles. This was incredibly moving.

Eventually, when I was able to visit West Africa and understand some of the sources of these practices, that was also incredibly moving. One of the profound aspects of being in Calabar, Nigeria, was that the founding communities (known as Efik, Efut and Qua) had not been displaced from their territories through the

colonial process, which was very unusual along the coast of Africa. Many African communities had been displaced for plantations, as was prevalent in South-West Cameroon, but not so in Calabar. I was always moved when witnessing local lineage heads performing libations to their ancestors in shrines that were hundreds of years old, an act meant to alert the ancestors of the proceeding ceremony as an invitation for their participation. This relationship to the land produces a totally different psychology than in “settler nations” where indigenous peoples are displaced, while settlers who have no meaningful relationships with the land buy, sell, and swap lands for their property values.

Among the overall lessons I’ve learned in an urban space like Havana was how cultural practices were developed over generations by people in lineages who had been enslaved but eventually freed themselves to create spiritual practices that include anyone from anywhere in the world who comes with openness and respect. In this way, the Cubans of Havana and Matanzas—which are the regions I know best—curated a system of healing based upon the coexistence of all humans, no matter their cultural background or economic class. To my mind, this is truly revolutionary, and it’s always in danger of being erased, for the difficult situation Cubans have faced in the last sixty six years, for the commercialization of their spiritual practices by hustlers, and for the lack of research into its values, which are still by and large existing underground or under the radar. I’ve learned from several of my Cuban teachers, most especially Dr. Rogelio Martínez-Furú, that books and essays should be in service of liberating readers, and one should take time to get the story right, or to tell the most complete version of that story as possible. This approach is of course completely opposite to that of most aspiring professors working in institutions of higher learning, whose publications tend to be rushed to meet institutional deadlines and to highlight the brilliance of the authors and their theories so as to rise up the tenure ladder. Often these works are filled with jargon and not written for the benefit of lay readers and therefore have a short-lived readership before passing into obscurity.

Jeremy Brecher (JB): Tell us about working with “Román” Díaz and others in lecture demonstrations, and why you work with musicians from the cultures that you study.

IM: I met “Román” in 1995 in his home in Havana, so we’ve known each other for 30 years. In 2002, while a Copeland Fellow at Amherst College, I raised funds to invite him and colleagues to perform Abakuá songs and dances, in the context of my presentation on the trans-Atlantic history of this practice. He arrived with several percussionists and “Pupy” Insua, one of Cuba’s greatest rumba dancers, who performed an ancestral Íreme “mask” dance, to the elation of those present.

The lecture-demonstration format is both fun and instructive, on how a scholar might better work with culture bearers of a tradition. For the audience, it's also much more exciting to see the real artists perform their heritage practices, instead of showing a photo or video, because the artists convey the sentiments and feelings of the practice in a way that a video cannot.

Then, in 2003, while a visiting professor at DePaul University in Chicago, I organized a symposium called "Building Bridges in the African Diaspora: Using Living Culture as New Evidence for Historical Ties."² We invited representatives of West African communities residing in Chicago, namely Yorùbá-speakers, Ìgbo speakers, who in turn brought their coalitions, so the event had hundreds of participants, quite unusual for an academic discussion. We raised money throughout the city of Chicago as well as at the university, so that "Román" and his troupe could join us from New York.

I remember Victor Manfredi, who came and gave a talk, and was provoking the Ìgbo community participants intentionally, because they have collectively identified with the Jews, and consider themselves the Jews of Nigeria. It was fascinating to watch Victor who, in his typically humble way, sat on a chair onstage and simply talked in a conversational tone and then members of the Ìgbo community started to stand up and respond to him. Victor's method of communicating with culture bearers and getting information from them about their thoughts was a fascinating way of delivering a presentation so as to learn from your audience!

JB: In your lecture-demonstrations, what was happening between you and "Román" Díaz?

IM: "Román" has been consistently generous in supporting my presentations about the cultural practices of his community, so we've given performances at many universities. The lecture-demonstrations are a way of presenting scholarly information in a performance context, that students find pleasing. It's also my way of helping the musicians have a paycheck, as well as an opportunity for me to learn from their perspectives on the material presented.

We were invited to the University of Missouri in April of 2024 for the conference *Afro-Cuban Legacies: Visual arts, Literature, Theater, Music and Religion*. I was invited to give a keynote and recited a very unusual script in a prayer format, which I intend as the preface to my study on the *batá* drum tradition. I start with an homage to Homer's opening line: "O muse, let me tell the story . . ." and continue by evoking major themes in the history of the drums and their social contexts, including police repression and confiscation, and how the community members called upon the deities to protect them and their heritage. After a particular deity is evoked, "Román" then performs a praise song to this entity. This preface informs readers about the topics in the book, in a way culturally appropriate for

this tradition. We had performed this material in a Congregational Church in Old Lyme, CT. on June 10, 2023, with the full ensemble of three *batá* drums, the maestro Lázaro Galarraga on lead voice, and a chorus with two dancers.

But in Missouri, we did the recitation and songs with “Román” as soloist playing a *chekeré* gourd. I think this performance format is a wonderful way to convey to an audience what the drum means for the custodians of this tradition.

JB: Please continue with your thoughts on the collaborations with “Román” and other culture bearers.

IM: I enjoy the lecture demonstrations as collaborations with culture bearers, because it’s important for my own learning process. To start, this is an opportunity for me to share my ideas for the presentation with the artists like “Román,” who in turn offers valuable feedback on both what to avoid saying, as well as what to emphasize. Therefore, the Cuban musicians I work with are colleagues and teachers. “Román” is special in this category, and it’s an honor to have this kind of relationship with someone from a totally different cultural background. I get to learn through working with them, and we have meaningful fun while creating a performance.

On that note, recently, when presenting work on West African and Cuban research to scholars at Cambridge University in the UK, a colleague asked the speakers, including myself, if we ever worry that our research would contaminate or transform the cultures under study. And my immediate response was: “I hope it does!” My intention is to be an ally who promotes understanding of the cultures and helps make them stronger, and my method has always been to share information from West Africa with the Cubans, and vice versa. In other words, we have created a wide-ranging-grassroots think tank, and exchange information so that we all become stronger in knowledge and awareness.

JB: The thing that’s so essential to your work is that it’s not necessarily the normal way people do things; I think the traditional academic and scholarly approach is “they are the natives, and we’re going to go study them to get information.” There are numerous ways in which your whole approach differs greatly from that. Among the most obvious ways is that they are very much involved, in a variety of ways, in shaping what you do, in shaping the questions you ask, in reviewing what you do afterwards and saying: “No, you got this wrong,” so that they are as much guiding you as you are guiding them. That is my impression.

IM: Yes! When one goes to a place like Cuba for cultural research, it becomes very clear that while visitors may intend to study the “natives,” they’re clearly studying us too! This is also true in Nigeria, where locals have an uncanny ability

to psych others out and intuit their intentions, which is probably an historically necessary predisposition after their communities were enslaved and colonized. In both Cuba and Nigeria, I've met people with exceptional abilities to read people and their intentions very well. But even *more* so inside the collective spiritual practices where the gods also have a say what happens. In other words, a Cuban insider might have a reading of me just by looking at me, but these insights could be confirmed through the oracle. In a place like Havana, it's impossible to feel that one could simply go in there and study a person or group of people within a collective practice, because the researcher immediately becomes immersed in a collective experience, which is ultimately based upon call and response, the prominent structure of the island's popular music, and therefore deeply embedded in the society. To every statement comes a response and the relationships become dialectical.

JB: Maybe just take an example or two of people who have been very important sources, so to speak, in your research. But your way of dealing with them goes way beyond treating them as sources. So, how does the process work? Let's say if you hear of a person and want to go interview them, how do you approach these encounters?

IM: When I started going to Nigeria, which was funded by a series of different grants, my proposals always stated that I want to go there to learn something. Yet in Fulbright meetings, for example, I often found that others intended to go there to teach people! I remember one young woman who went to teach literacy to Nigerians, yet she had no idea that Nigerians have their own inherited forms of literacy, for example the body-masks or masquerades of the Ékpè "leopard" society are a form a literacy taught only to initiates. Of course she meant literacy in the Roman Alphabet, but I was struck by the lack of awareness or depth of knowledge about West African societies among some researchers.

My idea has always been that I'm going there to learn something, and this helps explain why I've been received well. In Calabar, I met many young students from Europe especially working with NGOs with intentions to "save the forest," "save the animals," "save democracy," and noticed that most did not last long, because they had entered a world that they didn't control (not to mention that most Africans I've discussed this issue with consider NGOs as organizations involved in spying on locals). A researcher is a visitor who is not in charge, so in my case, I had to lose my rigid sense of time, which eventually became quite flexible in Cuba and Nigeria. By entering Calabar, Nigeria, and being initiated into a collective practice like Ékpè and receiving a position within it, I understood clearly that I'm not in control of anything, but that I had a unique opportunity to learn through conversations with mentors and by observing the action and participating when I was instructed or invited to.

One of my great mentors was “Engineer” Bassey Effiong Bassey (1930-2021), author of *Efik Ekpe*, the only monograph by a titleholder of this practice about its concepts and history. I had learned about him while a research fellow at the Schomburg Center in New York (1999-2000), when I attended a meeting of the Efik National Association at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, where an elder gave me a copy of Bassey’s book, which I later found in the Schomburg collection. I began to write letters to Bassey about Abakuá, with questions about Ékpè society, to which he consistently responded. And when I arrived to Calabar in 2004, we established an apprentice-mentor relationship until he passed away at 91. Our method was usually for me to bring a list of examples from the Abakuá tradition, to learn if he could recognize any of the language or ritual action, and his responses led to many insights into parallels between both groups, in their concepts, practices, language use and ideas about the afterlife. Much of this learning is reflected in my *Voice of the Leopard* and our translation of Lydia Cabrera’s *La lengua sagrada de los ñáñigos* as *The Sacred Language of the Abakuá*, which has an etymology by linguist Victor Manfredi, based upon a scientific analysis of Abakuá terms through their Cross River sources.

As a Methodist, Bassey wrote his book to explain to church elders that missionaries had brought nothing new to West Africa, because he claimed that Ékpè practice embodies all the fundamental teachings of the Bible plus more. Of course, this was not well received by his church community, but he did his best to teach them. This reminds me that after many years in Nigeria I learned that the most important factor in understanding contemporary Nigerian politics is what church a politician belongs to. Less important is what “tribe” or language group.

Why did Bassey write this book? As a member of the elite, he had been trained in Britain. One must also understand that Nigeria never had wars of independence against Britain, therefore many Nigerians carefully study British heritage and the British monarchy, even with admiration. As a student in London, Bassey attended a Methodist church, and he told me that after service the entire congregation formed a line to shake the minister’s hand. But when it was Bassey’s turn, the minister didn’t want to shake his hand, meaning that Bassey experienced first-hand British institutionalized racism. After receiving his degree, Bassey returned to Nigeria to become the Commissioner of Water, an elevated post, and started to explore his own heritage, which as a youth in Calabar he had learned nothing about.

Bassey was quite unusual in Calabar because he exhibited no ethnic chauvinism; this is extremely rare in the region because the Efiks are the historical elites who consider themselves lords of all the other “bush” communities around them. I even collected an Ékpè song with the lyrics: “In the old days the people of Èfik acted like the British.”³ Bassey taught me that the Ékpè system of Calabar was comprised of many ideas that were absorbed from neighboring ethnic communities

that they integrated, because they had the finances through trade with Europeans. And many of these ideas were exported to Cuba with the enslaved people of the Cross River region.

I once told Bassey: "I'd like to work on your biography because you're so interesting." And he chuckled and said: "That sounds great, but which lifetime would you write about?" Bassey went on to tell me about the mysticism of Calabar heritage and the West African beliefs about reincarnation, which I had no easy way of understanding. So, I had the experience of listening to somebody whom I didn't really understand for years, who often repeated that the only way one could understand this mysticism is to experience it. That was fascinating to me and coincided with attitudes of specialists within the initiation practices I knew from Cuba. The value of this experience is really that I had to suspend judgment, because at the time I was unable to understand the narrative, but these experiences were among the profound aspects of living in West Africa.

In sum, I witnessed over and over again from mentors in West Africa and in Cuba a predisposition to see or interpret the world spiritually or through spiritual signs. And this approach is definitely intertwined with the political struggles of the Haitian Revolution and the Cuban wars of independence, wherein Africans and their descendants fought with machetes against armies with superior weapons, but their ritual practices gave them a superior faith in their mission that was key to their victories. And in the Cuban case, when the rebels against Spain who were not Africans witnessed this phenomenon, many so-called "white" Cubans began to adopt the African-derived rituals as part of a national cultural practice forged in the wars of independence.

JB: One of the things that's striking to me about your work and the way you do things, is the historical dimension to the way you approach things. Which is very different from the idea of a native culture which had a fixed character, which then the colonialists came in and destroyed, leaving nothing. In your work there's a much more evolving historical understanding of what's going on, what people are about and what they're doing.

IM: What I'm now understanding, because I've studied the songs of Ékpè practice, and thanks to reading Eric Hobsbawm, is that because there was no industrialization of this part of Nigeria, the songs may well be centuries old, because there was not a break in their performance even during colonization. But when I travel outside of the region where the Efik language is the lingua franca, most of the folks with whom we recorded songs didn't know how to write them down, because they are losing dexterity in their languages. I did this work in collaboration with a linguist, Professor Margaret Okon, who confirmed this problem. People of the

Cross River region are losing their natural environments as well as their languages. Ékpè had lost its legal power as a judicial group because British law came in. But if I were to visit a typical village head today and ask him: "Have you lost your language? Have you lost your power?," the response would likely be "no." Because no one likes to admit their loss of power or relevance. Therefore, we learned about this phenomenon through the inability of singers to write or analyze the songs in their languages, because these issues are difficult to speak about openly.

Collective cultural practices are hard to change and they change very slowly. For example, many royal lineages of southeast Nigeria have elephant tusks horns that are blown on important occasions and have been passed on for generations. Yet there are no elephants still living in these regions, with rare exceptions. Nor do leopards still live in the region, yet the Ékpè 'leopard' society still functions, but in a totally different context than centuries ago. In the past, a local hunter who killed a leopard and presented the intact carcass to the paramount of his community would automatically receive a title, for example in the Ékpè society. But since there are no longer leopards and Nigerians now live in a cash economy, contemporary Cross Riverians who bring cash to the community are those to receive traditional titles. Without knowing the economic history, one cannot really understand the present.

JB: One of the underlying themes in a lot of what you do is continuity and breaking continuity and what is possible to do in terms of healing those breaks. I remember the Ékpè and Abakuá summit meeting you helped organize in Brooklyn, to bring together these different groups who shared a common heritage at a deep level. To me that was emblematic of what you are actually doing.

IM: Well, there's always breaks and continuity in any practice, but as long as there's some kind of information available, like an elder who can recount, or a recording, or a manuscript with important texts, a practice can actually be revived or recharged in the present. The encounter between Ékpè and Abakuá groups in Brooklyn happened in 2001 as a result of the text of an Abakuá chant that I had published, and that an Efik speaker living in NYC had identified and was able to translate meaningfully. The chant had been recorded by "Román" Díaz with the rumba group Yoruba Andabo in Havana in 1997, and as "Román" was living in NYC by 1999, he agreed to organize an Abakuá ensemble to perform at the Efik meeting, as I had received an invitation to do this. I learned later that in the 1950s, scholar Fernando Ortiz had documented said chant with a correct interpretation, but the chant, as part of the living Abakuá practice, was recited in ceremonies as a way of thanking the Africans who brought the cultural information to Cuba and founded the Abakuá tradition.

This meeting commenced a process of trans-Atlantic research that continues twenty-five years later with no sign of abating. Because the research has become important to Abakuá groups in Cuba, and to Ékpè communities in West Africa, and because much of the information is available online, there are now many different groups studying this diaspora practice on their own.

JB: My recollection is that the Efiks found you; you didn't find them.

IM: Yes, that's what happened. And this is another benefit of sharing information online, so that people I've never met can access publications, videos, photos and share it with others. By circumnavigating firewalls and academic cliques, I've been able to communicate directly with culture bearers, who are my mentors and guides.

JB: There also seems to be a dialectic between the very strong sense of the importance of identity and the cultural identities of the various people that you're working with on the one hand, and at the same time, a recognition that they've always been involved with cultural mixing and connections across ethnic, state, and geographic boundaries, and that this is also a very important part of what you're dealing with and what you're trying to support. That is, you're looking at individual cultures and the people trying to preserve them. But at the same time also seeing links and mixing among them and doing what you can to make it possible for people to preserve and rediscover their own cultures, but you go further into something that goes across the practices to make wider connections.

IM. Yes! Thinking about this from a perspective of being in Cuba, it's possible to talk about Yorùbá or Congo ethnic heritage, or Spanish heritage, but this is not the full picture, which comes from understanding the interactions between them, which is among Fernando Ortiz's great contributions to Cuban sociology. All the cultural legacies in Cuba have been mixed and, in some cases even reinforce each other despite inequalities between the oppression of the Spanish slave owners and the enslaved from Africa. There's always been a process of give and take. Ortiz wrote: "*Cubanness* is not found only in the result but also in the complex process of its formation, both disintegrative and integrative, in the elements involved in its action, in the environment in which it operates, and in the vicissitudes of its journey."⁴ And through this process, the Africans created what I call "cultural diplomacy" through recognizing in the Spanish church traditions, concepts that they also had in their practices. By observing that a Saint dressed in white and red whose hagiography told a story of lightning, the Yorùbá-speakers would quickly identify this with Sàngó, the thunder god of Òyó. This recognition expresses a security and confidence in one's own practices, even in the condition

of enslavement, to the point where in the African-derived ritual practices of Cuba, the Catholic church became an avatar of many of the African deities! And this is how Africans and their descendants adapted and created a method of co-existing even with their oppressors. As I learned from the Cuban initiates, each of the groups arriving to the island brought some kind of contribution, an idea embedded in their culture, which was integrated into the process of creating what Ortiz called *cubanidad* or “Cubanness.”

For example, in the initiation practices of Cuba, race is not very important, if it's even considered. If the gods have chosen a person, who then decides to undergo initiation to make a pact with the deities and the elders, that person becomes an insider. Therefore, the oracle surpasses class and race in terms of authorizing inclusion. This is also “cultural diplomacy,” and it's a very, very different way of thinking about human co-existence than what the European colonists and the North American imperialists brought to the planet.

Of course, in Cuba, as in any former slave society, racism is deeply embedded in the institutions and their representatives. But the Cuban people have responded by creating and maintaining underground ritual practices that serve to elevate the worth of exploited humans and diminish the arrogance of elites to equalize all participants as “children of the gods.” This reality brings me back to the anthropological idea of ‘studying people’ from above or from a hierarchical platform. That might work for the first five minutes, but after this, the anthropologist also becomes studied by the locals, who always control the information shared with their visitor.

I've learned that the references to “tribes” are all colonial categories because the colonists came to divide and conquer, which means first to classify people according to some preconceived criteria and then impose pseudo-military chain of command. So, if the natives had a collective council, the colonists would set that aside and instead select a compliant male “chief” who agreed to be their liaison who, in turn, would become the tax collector. In this way, the colonial administrations would also try to ignore or dismantle existing large-scale political connections between local groups, which had been previously established either by ritual alliances or through intermarriages and networks of markets where all groups would interact and transact their livelihoods either weekly or monthly across vast areas. Of course, many of the sidelined institutions were organized by women.

And in the modern state, these recently invented “tribal” categories were reified, to the point where we are told of “tribalism in Africa,” which is not historical, but a modern phenomenon. It is now “real,” because people take it deadly seriously, but it is not nearly as “traditional” as claimed. This problem has beguiled many people working in the Caribbean who have pondered African sources, because many categories, for example “Bantu” are colonial creations.⁵

JB: This leads to a reduction, as in the question: “What tribe did your people come from?”

IM: For example, the Efiks of Calabar love to say: “I am of blue blood,” of course taking this idea straight from the British monarchy. Scholars know that this is all fiction (or ‘fictive kinship’)—for being selective and ignoring inconvenient ancestors—, but the Efiks are dead serious about this idea even if their grandmother might have come from another ethnic group. My mentor Bassey explained that through centuries of co-existence, the three major founding groups of Calabar (Efik, Efut, Qua) are all interrelated, but they continue to invest a Paramount for each group. Bassey told me that he once suggested in a general meeting that, in recognition of the common ancestry of all Calabar people, they should simply select one Paramount for all three groups; he reported that they wanted to run him out of town as a consequence! Part of this situation reverts to the Federal and State administrations, which allot funding to ethnic groups based upon their population size, so few would be willing to blend into another group.

Jill Cutler (JC): One thing that occurred to me when I was in Cuba was that there’s something about the guest-host relationship, and how does that factor in for a researcher? You may come to Cuba seeking to support local customs, but people have been coming to Havana for centuries, and at some level you’re just another traveler. You’re also there to be exploited by the locals, and how do you overcome that? Or what do you do in that situation?

IM: Well, this is true. As one Cuban told me, when people see you and other foreigners walking down the road, what they see is a big money sign on your chest. And that’s one reality of the situation. But of course, not all Cubans think like that, not by any means. It’s natural that people expecting money from foreign visitors would imagine that all are wealthy, so one must learn to respond by explaining: “Actually, I’m unemployed or I don’t have a lot of money . . .” But I must say that negotiating with the hustlers of Havana prepared me very well for surviving in Nigeria, which is even more difficult in this regard, because there are no state structures to keep people out of poverty, on the contrary!

That said, one must know how to choose good company too. If you hang out with the wrong people, trouble will come. So, a lot of this is intuitive. I must also say that when I’m interacting with Cubans in their communities, and particularly in the marginal communities of Havana, the little cash that one can share is really appreciated; it goes a long way. When one buys a chicken, a whole family feeds. And definitely, it’s a responsibility to bring funding to the table because locals have few other alternatives, and like all relationships, this one is reciprocal. If you want something, you’ve got to give.

JC: I actually have a question about scholarship and the role of other people's scholarship in your work. You are a scholar who mostly learns from the people that you're studying, but there's also a formal training that you have and how did you get it and what is it and what did you do with it?

IM: Well, my dad was a scientist, and his method of thinking had an influence on me even though I'm deeply involved in the arts, because in my research I'm always thinking comparatively, which is a form of scientific inquiry. I'm looking at data from both sides of the Atlantic and comparing them to understand how and why they are similar or different.

And I've been blessed with several good colleagues and mentors who read my work and help me improve it. I think I've left some helpful information that demonstrates examples of cultural continuity despite the slave trade and the plantation system. And I've been successful in bringing my results to good university presses, where others must reckon with it. Also, the creation of my collection at the Amherst College library was a great success so that the archive lives on and can be shared by all who are interested.⁶

JB: Just in terms of what you do—it's not going to solve all of the problems and overcome alienation, in some cosmic way—but it does seem like, what you actually do when you work, as far as connecting and re-discovering people's roots, the issue of alienation is addressed in some way.

IM: We presented in March 2023 our translation of Lydia Cabrera's *Abakuá* study through the Cameroon Ministry of Arts & Culture, which my colleague Raphael Ayuk of Cameroon helped us organize, and funded through the NEH Scholarly Editions grant we were awarded. Cameroonian participants came from many rural regions where *Ékpè* practice is their heritage, and two Cuban *Abakuá* came with us ("Román" Díaz and Angel Guerrero). As a result, the Cameroonians set up two WhatsApp groups, one that has *Ékpè* and *Abakuá* members from Nigeria, Cameroon and Cuba, and another for members of the BoNasako community of SW Cameroon, so that they can organize themselves to project their heritage. Members of these chats continue to exchange information from Cuba, Cameroon, Nigeria, and I find it meaningful to participate in this kind of community building, which is happening without any funding. The Africans especially are promoting this heritage despite ongoing civil wars (the "Ambazonia" movement in Cameroon), the constant low-level violence of everyday life in Nigeria, and the marginal position of both regions vis-à-vis the political elites of their nations.

I think you're quite right. This is totally about community building, as well as a form of activism that seeks to collectively salvage the knowledge and wisdom of past generations, which is in turn a method for fighting the alienation of a

colonized people. So, one could say that I found a solution to my own sense of alienation by joining these groups of cultural activists who are fighting their own alienation.



Ivor Miller and Rogelio Martínez Furé in dialogue during Rogelio's
“Maka” event on July 7, 2013, UNEAC, Havana.

Photograph: Jennifer Torriente

Notes

¹ Interview conducted in West Cornwall, CT., on April 4, 2025.

² The papers of this symposium were edited by Ivor Miller and published in *Contours: A Journal of the African Diaspora*, 2, 2 (2004)."

³ In Miller and Òkôn, we include the following quote (104) from Bassey Efiog Bassey Calabar: "[T]he people of *Calabar*, male and female, were brought up to feel that there is no place like Calabar. To an indigene the only [other] town that is not 'bush' is London."

⁴ Fernando Ortiz, "Los factores humanos de la cubanidad," cited in Rogelio Martínez-Furé, *Palenque y mambisa*.

⁵ See critique of "Bantu" in Miller, "Review."

⁶ <https://archivesspace.amherst.edu/repositories/2/resources/166> & <https://archivesspace.amherst.edu/repositories/2/resources/422>

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