

***The Light Inside: Abakuá Society Arts and Cuban Cultural History.* By David H. Brown. (Washington and London, Smithsonian Books, 2003, xviii+286 p., black/white photographs, colour plates, index, ISBN 1-58834-123-2)**

Ronald Labelle

Volume 26, Number 2, 2004

Québec - Ethnologie du proche
Québec - Ethnology At Home

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/013763ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/013763ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Labelle, R. (2004). Review of [*The Light Inside: Abakuá Society Arts and Cuban Cultural History*. By David H. Brown. (Washington and London, Smithsonian Books, 2003, xviii+286 p., black/white photographs, colour plates, index, ISBN 1-58834-123-2)]. *Ethnologies*, 26(2), 337–341. <https://doi.org/10.7202/013763ar>

The Light Inside: Abakuá Society Arts and Cuban Cultural History. By David H. Brown. (Washington and London, Smithsonian Books, 2003, xviii+286 p., black/white photographs, colour plates, index, ISBN 1-58834-123-2)

Since Cuba became a major tourist destination in the 1990s, much has been written about society and culture on the island, but few serious studies have appeared. For that reason alone, the publication of *The Light Inside* is a welcome event. Among the various manifestations of Afro-Cuban culture, the *Sociedad Abakuá* is perhaps the most difficult to study because of the secret nature of some of its rites, and also because of its controversial history. Since the early part of the nineteenth century, the Abakuá Society has functioned as a kind of male fraternity, and although it has not been considered as a criminal organization since the mid-twentieth century, it is still viewed suspiciously both by the State and by the Cuban people in general, who either fear the brand of *brujería* [sorcery] practised by the adepts, or simply resent the commitments required from initiates.

David Brown takes a novel approach in his study. Rather than beginning with a general description of the Society and its practises, he adopts a micro approach, bringing the reader right into an Abakuá lodge in Havana, in order to begin working towards his goal of understanding the Abakuá through its art forms. His two principal informants are the late guardian of the lodge's objects, and the recent renovator of the objects. The study is both historical in that it observes the changes in Abakuá arts since the nineteenth century, and ethnographic in its detailed analysis of objects presently found in the lodges. The fieldwork carried out with Jesús Nasakó, the objects' renovator, is particularly relevant, because the informant was willing to explain the meanings he ascribed to the objects he modified.

The first part of the book is an in-depth study of "things Abakuá": banners, staffs, costumes, masks, drums and various altar objects, including a historical account of how the objects have been viewed at different times. The second part examines the "changing discourses" (8) surrounding Abakuá arts in Cuban society. Separating the two parts are 29 colour plates that beautifully illustrate Abakuá arts.

Readers who are mostly interested in the place occupied by Afro-Cuban culture in the dominant discourses in Cuban society as the country evolved from colonial to neo-colonial status and finally through

a Revolution in two phases (before and after the collapse of the Soviet Bloc) will no doubt be interested mainly in the second part of the book. The first part, in which entire chapters are devoted to topics such as the forms of drums used in Abakuá lodges and the types of costume worn by the *íreme* figure in Abakuá ceremonies, will be of particular interest to students of Afro-Cuban artistic practises. As the author states, "Previous treatments of Abakuá art and ritual have limited their interpretations to the level of generalized symbolic meanings" (4). David Brown's intricate ethnographic analysis of Abakuá objects intends to uncover the meanings of particular objects, and to frame these within the context of Cuban cultural history.

In order to arrive at a historical understanding of the Abakuá phenomenon, Brown dwells heavily on earlier studies, and in particular on the works of the two figures who are, arguably, the most important Cuban ethnographers of the twentieth century, Fernando Ortiz and Lydia Cabrera. The latter is a figure reminiscent of Carmen Roy and Helen Creighton in Canada, while the former, whose work spans a period going from the beginning of the century until the 1960s, contributed greatly to changing attitudes towards Afro-Cuban belief and culture. One of the lasting effects of the publication of *The Light Inside* will no doubt be the attention it will draw to the works of Ortiz and Cabrera, many of which have been re-edited in recent years in Cuba.

Unfortunately, David Brown's study will make for difficult reading for anyone who does not have a thorough prior knowledge of Afro-Cuban culture. Although the author begins with a chapter that situates the Abakuá within the African diaspora, he doesn't clearly explain how the society differs from other Afro-Cuban belief systems. (In order to understand the uniqueness of the Abakuá Society, I needed to refer to Fernando Ortiz's work entitled *Etnia y sociedad*.) A general introduction dealing with topics such as this would have been a great help to non-specialists of Afro-Cuban culture. It is also surprising that despite its detailed references, the book includes no glossary. In a book that refers constantly to a multitude of Abakuá concepts such as the *sese*, *ukara* and *obonekue*, and also to Afro-Cuban religious terms such as the *orisha* and the *babalawo*, a glossary would have been a useful reference tool. It would have been useful also to clearly define the fundamental concept of the *ñañigo* as a central figure in Abakuá Society rituals.

Despite these problems, David Brown's study provides us with an intimate and extremely detailed look at an aspect of Cuban cultural history. The phenomenon of syncretism, which is found not only among members of the Abakuá society but also among practitioners of *Santería* throughout the island, is examined by Brown using his method of ethnographic analysis centred on a study of sacred objects: their fabrication, alteration, materials, forms, motifs, and the place they occupy in the Abakuá lodges. While it is often written that Afro-Cuban religious practises acquired a syncretic character in order to take on Christian appearances and therefore avoid persecution at the hands of Spanish authorities, Brown demonstrates that the syncretism found in the Abakua Society has a deeper meaning. For example, he explains how the crucifix found on a staff as part of an Abakuá altar presents the dead Christ as an allegory for the role of *Sikán*, the daughter of the powerful *Mokongo* (89-93). In Abakuá mythology, *Sikán* was sacrificed after having captured the sacred fish-king *Obon Tanze*. The relationships between Christian and Abakuá symbols are intricate and Brown is successful in elucidating the syncretic processes involved.

Another of the book's contributions to the study of Cuban culture is in its exposé of the way in which the Cuban Revolution rehabilitated the Abakuá Society, considering all things Afro-Cuban as part of a national folklore and therefore worthy of study and of celebration. While Cuban oral tradition has retained stories of the *ñañigo* of the past as a diabolical figure who kidnapped babies and drank their blood, tourist boutiques now display miniature *ñañigo* figures as souvenirs of Cuban culture. The author also delves into the question of race relations, explaining how despite its African origins, the Abakuá Society became open to white and mulatto membership as early as the nineteenth century.

The Abakuá Society was founded in Havana, and has always been an urban phenomenon, with lodges situated in Old Havana, and in the outlying districts of Regla and Guanabacoa, as well as in the cities of Matanzas and Cardenas. Two museums devoted to Afro-Cuban culture are situated in Old Havana and Guanabacoa, and Brown devotes the final chapter to an analysis of the presentation of Abakuá and other Afro-Cuban artefacts in these post-revolutionary museums. Unfortunately, this chapter does not match the rigorous scholarship evident in the earlier ones because of the author's political opinions that influence his presentation of the material. Here, as in the section

on “folkloric modernity” in the previous chapter, Brown takes a negative view of the actions of the Cuban government in the field of culture in general. For example, he links the renaissance of Old Havana with “the manipulation of Cuban ‘culture’ as an international currency for the new millennium” (221).

Tourist developments in historic city centres in many countries provide us with examples of “the manipulation of culture” (examples such as New Orleans spring to mind). Cuba’s government has at least made efforts to preserve a degree of authenticity in the marketing of culture, something David Brown fails to recognize, though he grudgingly acknowledges that the new Casa de Africa in Old Havana presents the largest and best collection of historical AfroCubana in the world (222). Also, his detailed criticisms of the displays in the Guanabacoa museum must be read in light of an understanding that the museum in question, founded in the 1960s, has not yet benefited from an infusion of funds permitting extensive renovations and improvements, unlike the institutions of Old Havana.

Even more disconcerting is the author’s decision to end his study with a six-page analysis of a panoramic canvas by artist Pedro Alvarez. The artwork in question is interesting as an artistic view of Cuba’s national narrative, but Brown uses it to rant about the deplorable economic conditions on the island, where “doctors and administrators became cab drivers and school girls became prostitutes” during the 1990s (233). His comments on the economic conditions of the 1990s avoid any mention of the extremely punishing embargo imposed by the American government since the 1960s, an embargo that has been tightened repeatedly since the early 1990s. In fact, Brown completely ignores the role played by the United States in the economic crisis of the 1990s. As the Bush administration has now made travel to Cuba even more difficult for American citizens, we may question the author’s motives in the context of an ever more restrictive political climate in the U.S.

Despite problems encountered in the final chapters, *The Light Inside* is a book that eloquently reflects the link between belief and artefact, and between art and myth. It should be considered both as a major work of art history and as an important cultural history of the African diaspora. On the whole, David Brown takes a very objective view of a controversial topic, and his biased political views do not appear to interfere directly with the central focus of his study. He states at the

end that, as in the case of Fernando Ortiz and Lydia Cabrera before him, his informants did not allow him to take possession of the “secret” of the Abakuá, but he has certainly managed to dwell deeply enough into the topic to advance our knowledge about *el ñañiguismo* and “all things Abakuá”.

Ronald Labelle
 Université de Moncton
 Moncton

Spirit Wrestlers: Doukhobor Pioneers' Strategies for Living, CD-ROM. By Koozma Tarasoff. (Ottawa, Spirit Wrestlers Publishing, 2003. ISBN 1-896031-14-5, SWCD002. Developer: Imagitek, using Macromedia. Windows/Mac (Systems 9 & X) compatible)

Two years ago Koozma Tarasoff published a substantial book of the same title, reviewed earlier in *Ethnologies* (Vol. 25/2: 258-260); the CD-ROM supplement became available early this year. To access it, I use a Mac G3 PPC with 896 MB/RAM onboard; with systemfile and other large programs running, the CD-ROM performed without a hitch. It boots automatically on a Windows machine; to run on a Mac, one clicks on the CD icon, then on /open/.

Spirit Wrestlers opens with a musical theme and a neatly-animated introductory splash that lead into a greeting message and operating directions. All this is brief, clear and friendly in both tone and function. Contents include the full text of the book, with colophon and scholarly apparatus, with significant extensions: one-click operation serves to expand maps and photographs to full-screen size, then to return to the main text; though these, like the text, are not clippable — an inconvenience for scholarly use. As in Tarasoff's earlier *Plakun Trava* CD-ROM, the index is not interactive and one must exit it, open the chapter cited, then leaf to the page number.

Text appears on a standard 800x600-pixel screen, enabling simultaneous access to the desktop on most machines. Scrolling permits access to the large-type full page, making the text accessible even to those with limited eyesight. CD-ROM pages are laid out slightly differently from those in the book, and illustrations are marginal thumbnails, to permit almost identical book/CD-ROM page identity