

The exhibition is curated by Corina Matamoros and assistant curator Sandra García Herrera, with support from the Belkis Ayón Estate.

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Cover image: *Sin título* (Sikán con chivo) (Untitled (Sikán with Goat)), 1993, © Belkis Ayón Estate. Courtesy of the Belkis Ayón Estate and David Castillo. Photo: Alejandro González

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Glossary

Abakuá

Magic and religious male-only secret society with esoteric and initiation rites. Founded in Havana, Cuba in 1836 and descending from the tribes and ritual traditions of West Africa.

Abasí

Supreme god of the Ibibios and the Efik people of the Calabar region. It also means position or representative post existing in current ñáñigo chapters of the Abakuá.

Anaforuana

Symbol, magical tracing, remembrance, evocation.

Calabar

Area in west Africa located between present-day Nigeria and Cameroon.

Collography

A printmaking method in which materials are glued to a solid layer, often made of cardboard or wood, to create a plate. This plate can then be inked and used to imprint another surface.

Efik

Tribe that inhabited the lower Calabar, on the Cross river, in the province of Calabar, Nigeria. They lived on the banks of the river and were hunters and warriors.

Efor

The tribe of Efor. The 'chosen tribe' in the Abakuá legend and owner of power. The tribe or nation to which Sikán belonged.

Ekwé

What is sacred and secret. A mythical and supernatural being worshipped by abanekues, and the drum with casing made of wood and of a slightly conical shape resting on three legs cut at the base. Each one of these legs represents one of the founding tribes of the Abakuá Society. Its precedents may be found in African Bantu tripod drums.

Itón

Sceptre, staff, cane. Generally made of a wood called majagua or Cuban bast. Thread of an Abakuá drum.

Nasakó

The fortune-teller. An integral figure in the Abakuá mythology, who initiates new members into the Abakuá.

Matriarchy

A system or society in which women hold positions of power or privilege and matriliney may be followed.

Matrix

The rigid substrate with assembled materials that is inked and used for printing.

Potencias

'Chapters' in English; they are the various groups making up the Abakuá and whose members are brothers according to the oath made to Tanze. A chapter is led by a group of leaders or rectors known as 'positions'. They are grouped into two great branches: Efo and Efi, corresponding to the Ekoi and Ibibio tribes, their ancient ancestors.

Sikán

Woman, women. The female protagonist in the Abakuá mythology. The woman who found the spirit of the supreme god Abasí who the Abakuá worship, materialised in a fish while collecting water in the river. The soul of this woman is present in the Yin, the cane producing the sound of the Ekwé, the sacred drum and worshipped object.

Tanze

Divine fish that, with Sikán, became the origin of the Abakuá brotherhood. A powerful spirit of an ancestor of the Efor-Ekoi. This spirit was incarnated inside a fish and swam in the sacred river of the Calabar, which has the shape of a Cross.

Belkis Ayón Sikán Illuminations



Modern Art Oxford

In the last year of her life Belkis Ayón was interviewed by the late Cuban journalist and writer Jaime Sarusky and shared insights into her artistic methods, style and exploration of the Abakuá mythology. Ayón's words reveal the significance of the Abakuá's society, iconography and rituals in shaping her own visual language. Extracts are reproduced here to accompany the exhibition Belkis Ayón: *Sikán Illuminations* at Modern Art Oxford.

Belkis Ayón interviewed by Jaime Sarusky, 4 February 1999

Jaime Sarusky: We are in front of *La cena* (The Supper), 1991. The piece is determinedly mysterious. I wouldn't hesitate to argue that there are many ways of interpreting it, but tell me its story.

Belkis Ayón: *La cena* was first shown in public in 1988 at the Servando Cabrera Gallery in Playa. I conceived it as a colour print, but once it was printed and exhibited, I wasn't satisfied with the result. I then focused on preparing it for my graduate thesis, and I altered it in 1991, making it black and white. The first figure, on the upper left, covers their face with their hands. The basic idea is based on the [Last] Supper...The meal is mainly among women, with the exception of two men.

JS: What mythological elements are present there?

BA: One of them is the background. It is made with *anaforuanas*, or 'signatures' – the cross, the circle, a cross within a circle, the symbology of the different branches that influenced the myth of these kinds of societies, or where it emerged as such, the Efik, Efor, and Orú Bibí. Another element I use is the scale – fish scales, the sacred fish. In the same way, I also use concentric circles, a little elongated, with several dots around them, the type of symbolism I have used to refer to the man with leopard skin. In addition, we can see figures that have a design suggesting a relationship to femininity.

JS: And the blindfold?

BA: When someone is in the process of being initiated and is going to enter the sacred room, the Fambá, they are blindfolded before entering. It's kind of like a ceremonial supper. There is a figure who is being initiated or will be initiated.

JS: Another figure has a snake around her neck...

BA: In Abakuá mythology, the snake is the animal sent by the tribe's diviner (Nasakó) to find out what happened in the river when the Tanze fish disappeared.

Then, Nasakó sends two snakes to see what happened. While returning, the snakes appear and surprise Sikán. Startled, she drops the gourd she was carrying on her head. That is why the snake is forever her companion. It can be threatening, protective, or simply company for her. Likewise, in concert with that idea, I also use the snake as a phallic element.

JS: Now, why the scales and the significance of the fish?

BA: The fish was the channel, the vehicle of the secret, or rather the being that held the secret within it. The secret was a voice.

JS: Here, there is no longer fish on the plate.

BA: No, not anymore, because this figure – the figure of the man with the black head – barged into the women's supper and ingested the fish. His plate is already empty, as are the small cups that each of the figures has to the side of the plate. The fish is the sacred being.

At this women's supper, two figures wear fish skin, in this way connecting the fate of the fish to the fate that Sikán is going to meet, or did meet.

It is assumed that women do not fulfill any particular role among the Abakuá, that they are separate from that world. It would be reasonable to see what she did as audaciousness, because she is transgressing what is taboo.

She is an outsider in the sense that she does not practice that religion. Nonetheless, she is inside it, deeply inside it, because it was a woman who discovered the secret. Somehow, out of that discovery she made, an entire story has emerged.

JS: What was the secret?

BA: The secret was the voice. According to the myth, catching the fish that possessed that voice meant that whoever attained it would have the richest and most prosperous tribe. It was power. In reality, the fish was the reincarnation of an old king who foretold such events.

JS: What about your characters' eyes?

BA: In fact, it is the eyes in my work that leave such an impression on people. They are intrigued by them because these eyes look at you very directly, so I don't believe you can hide; wherever you move, they are always looking at you, making you an accomplice in what you see. And above all, in the big pieces, you're practically at the same level, the same size; it's someone with whom you're spending time, in a way.

JS: Now, how did you garner knowledge of the Abakuá world?

BA: It was out of curiosity, the desire to reckon with something one has read, talked about, or seen for the first time. It is not something I'm used to seeing, so I feel attracted to it and begin to research, to look for information.

JS: Why did this material hit you so hard that you turned it into a topic, the subject of your artistic work?

BA: That interest surfaced when I studied engraving at San Alejandro. There were so many things that drew me to Afro-Cuban cultures: my love for the Saturday rumbas and whenever the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional had a season at the Mella Theater. The *UNESCO Courier* magazine as well. When I was in school, I was very interested in the magazine's issues that had to do with African culture. In my grandmother's house, there was a poster with some íreme dancers advertising the Folklórico's performances, and Sara Gómez's film *De cierta manera* (In a Certain Way), 1977.

It could also have been the fact that among my uncle's books, which I saw and leafed through all the time, he had a copy of *Los ñáñigos* by Enrique Sosa (1982), or some of the suggestions of my teachers at San Alejandro to read *La sociedad secreta Abakuá* (The Abakuá Secret Society), 1959 by Lydia Cabrera, and narrated by its old devotees, or *La diáspora africana en el nuevo mundo* (The African Diaspora in the New World), 1975. A little

bit of this and that. Or a catalogue my father gave me from a retrospective in Paris of [Wifredo] Lam's painting. I'm simplifying these things.

I discovered that there were no artists working on that theme at that time, but on others like *Santería*, voodoo, spiritism, and *Palo Monte*. I was also influenced by reading different mythical stories. It seemed so visual to me, as if it were happening right in front of me, with faces that would appear and disappear.

What's more, there is no figurative iconography, except, of course, for the signatures. I saw a possibility there. There was a whole world that I could create perfectly well, since I already knew the stories.

JS: Could it be said that your point of departure in your own creative process is this set of myths?

BA: It is not, no, because I don't think I always use the same symbols, forms, and signs. I use them when I want to refer specifically to a scene or detail that is, strictly speaking, mythological, even though maybe I will later flip it, wanting to say something else. But they are fixed elements in my work. Right now, I am integrating more personal details, but I still integrate the character of Sikán, the fish, the goat, scales, the snake.

I use collography because it seems to me the most appropriate technique to express what I want to. That's the main thing. Plus, it is the technique that allows me to work in large formats, which is what I prefer, and I like the fabrication process of the piece. I enjoy this process tremendously.

JS: This is one of the reasons why you continue to do collography. Would it be the same if you painted?

BA: No, it would not be the same. I just don't have it in my head to conceive of this as a painting...But, more than anything else, I consider myself a printmaker. And I don't plan to stop being one, for the time being.