

A10 Austin American-Statesman Thursday, April 13, 1989

Tragedy on the border

Experts differ on voodoo as motivation for killings

By Jim Phillips and Morgan Montalvo
Austin American-Statesman Staff

The brutal slayings of 12 people in Mexico have several similarities to Caribbean voodoo, but most experts contacted Wednesday said they do not think the killers were followers of any cult.

The killers may have borrowed aspects from various religions or cults, and may have been influenced by movies and television shows about witchcraft, several experts said. They said they do not know of a single group in which human sacrifices have been documented as part of their rituals.

However, one cult expert said he is convinced the slayings are the work of followers of a Cuban group called Abakua. Like many Caribbean religions, Abakua is based on African religious beliefs but includes a mix of Catholicism.

Abakua has a small following in the United States, particularly among Cuban refugees in the Miami area. It has a religious reputation for human sacrifices.

Police in Mexico and the United States are searching for Abakua de Jesus Constantino, a Cuban believed to be the leader of the group of Mexican drug smugglers accused of the slayings on a ranch west of Matamoros, Mexico.

Tom Wedge, a Columbus, Ohio, author who has written a book on cults and gives seminars to law enforcement organizations on recognizing cult members, said the rituals described in the Matamoros killings follow Abakua rites. He said the types of mutilations, and the tattoos on a suspect that were shown to reporters Wednesday, convinced him that at least the leader of the group was an Abakua follower.

Wedge said he is aware of only one killing in the United States that he attributes to the Abakua, but would not say where the killing occurred.

Other experts disputed Wedge's opinion, saying there was no evidence that Abakua followers participate in human sacrifice.

Wedge said that members of the cult wear distinctive tattoos, which

resemble chalices emitting lightning bolts, arrows, winged faces of Christ, likenesses of Saint Barbara, or facial tattoos similar to those displayed by Hispanic gangs in the Southwest.

Some tattoos, he said, denote the specific role played in the religion; by the wearer, others denote sexual preferences.

Abakua, Wedge said, are a male-only group, many of whom are initiated into the religion as children.

Texas authorities, however, say a Brownsville village used as a voodoo pretense linked to Constantino and she is being sought in the killings.

The police referred to an affidavit by officials investigating the Matamoros murders are called Negandja, sacred items into which a victim's blood is spilled, Wedge said. Other sacred items which may be placed in the Negandja are human hands, heads, animal remains and bones.

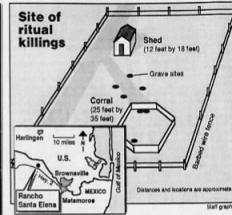
Drugs play a central role in the belief of the "daddy," an evil side of Abakua, said Wedge. He said rites are conducted immediately before illegal transactions are carried out to ensure good fortune.

The practitioners worship a pantheon of gods, including "Chango," an omnipotent, chief deity. Chango is represented as a dark, scowling figure positioned on a fiery throne who, in Abakua dogma, usually is associated with Saint Barbara, or Saint Barbara, the 16th Century Roman Catholic patron saint of miners.

He said part of the cult's rituals include the supposed "capture" of spirits in liquid-filled vessels. Believers frequently perform their acts near graveyards, where spirits are more easily encountered, and other steel heads and other body parts from graves, he said.

In Miami, police officials said they are aware of Abakua and have had a number of grave robberies by people who are, usually, seeking skulls. But they said they have had no ritual murders that have been tied to Cuban religions or cults.

"We don't have anything as extreme as what you had" in Mexico, said Detective Pat Diaz. "The only



Describing what he termed worse tale, he said, "In Cuba, when Abakua had their annual retreat, people were told you should not leave your children out, because they would take them for sacrifices."

Roque also said a number of Cuban-American drug smugglers are involved in some form of Cuban religion, and often use rituals to seek protection during an operation.

"Usually they have the ritual prior to the (smuggling) incident, or have a celebration after," he said. One recent killing of a Miami-area drug dealer led to the discovery of \$4,000 in an altar at the man's house, which was explained as "gesture of gratitude to the spirit," Roque said.

Roque and others said that Abakua was little known outside the Cuban culture, and said it was often confused with Palo Monte or Santeria, both of which have similarities, including the sacrificing of animals.

Officials involved with the investigation, including Texas Attorney General Jim Mattox, told the killings in Santeria, which is more widely known than Abakua.

However, experts agreed that Santeria followers have never been known to participate in human sacrifice.

Wade Davis, the author of two non-fiction books on voodoo, including one that was made into the fictional film, *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, said, "I think what we're seeing here... is a rather desperate, macho and quite despicable distortion of somebody's sick fantasy of what a religion is."

"Very few of us would have thought of this as anything but an aberration," said Davis, who said he was not involved in the movie, which he described as "very unfortunate" and said it "perpetuated the stereotypes" about voodoo.

David Brown, an expert in African religions at the Smithsonian Institution, agreed that the killings probably were the work of someone who had distorted religious beliefs.

He compared the killings to the murders committed by Charles Manson, but said that if Manson had killed his victims in a cross-Christianity for the killings.

"The idea of using a religion for your purposes does not link the religion to that person's purposes," Brown said.

Authorities believe that items found at the ranch may link the killings of 12 people in Mexico to a cult or to voodoo.

Detective Oscar Roque of the homicide division said another Cuban religion, Palo Monte, uses human remains such as skulls in rituals, but said the only group in which human sacrifices have been

alleged is Abakua.

Roque stressed that the allegations are unproven.

A Cuban-American, Roque said the Abakua, which is also called a fraternal organization, was considered dangerous.

Dillard's **SPRING SALE**

STOREWIDE SAVINGS
Our biggest sale event of the spring season!

Colorful spring pumps from Joyce at big savings
SALE 34.99

Overlapping "leaves" of color teamed with black patent or white give these airy pumps extra versatility. All leather uppers with a silver of wedge heel. Women's sizes, reg. 48.00, sale 34.99.

Dillard's **SPRING SALE**

STOREWIDE SAVINGS
Our biggest sale event of the spring season!

Swift savings on Reebok running shoes for men
SALE 26.99

Rugged Activity running shoes have leather trimmed, white nylon uppers. Padded collar and moile and shock resistant soles for comfort and support. White with navy, reg. 35.00, sale 26.99.