

Bremer, Frederika. The Homes of the New World; Impressions of America. Translated by Mary Howitt, 2 vols. New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1853, vol. 2, pp. 379-383

*In this selection Swedish writer Frederika Bremer provides us with a detailed description of her impressions of the Havana cabildo houses she visited in 1851 after spending a year in the United States. Travel accounts, like all sources, have their strengths and weaknesses, as well as biases and honest observations. While Bremer sought to exoticize and portray the cabildo houses as locations of savage dancing and pagan religious practices, her observations also provide key insights into the social and cultural world of Africans in Havana when read carefully. From her selection we learn that the cabildos were concentrated in one part of Havana outside the city walls where they often controlled the streets on festival days. We are also provided a glimpse into the cabildos' hierarchical leadership structure of Kings and Queens as well as their fundraising activities as Bremer had to pay an entrance fee to attend a dance.*

I was, in reality, going to tell you of a visit which I and my two American gentlemen had made to the *Cabildos de Negros*, or to the assemblies of the free negroes of the city. It was not possible for me to go alone. These two gentlemen offered to escort me, and Mr. C., who spoke Spanish like a native, undertook to obtain admission for us, although the free negroes, in general, do not admit of the whites in their society, nor are they by any means so patient or so much under restraint as in the United States.

As these clubs generally meet in the afternoons and evenings of the Sunday, we set off in the afternoon to the street in which the *cabildos* are situated, for they occupy a whole street near one of the toll-gates of the city. The whole street swarmed with negroes, some decked out with ribbons and bells, some dancing, others standing in groups here and there. There prevailed a wild but not rude sort of lawlessness, and on all hands, near and afar off, was heard the gay, measured beat of the African drum. Round the gates of the different halls were collected groups of white people, most of them evidently sailors, who were endeavoring to get sight of what was passing inside; but a couple of negroes, stationed at each with sticks in their hands, kept the entrance closed with good-tempered determination, and did not allow the doors to open beyond half way.

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By some means, however, Mr. C. succeeded in getting his head within the door of the Luccomées' *Cabildo*, and then requested permission for *la Signora* to enter. Some negro heads peeped out, and when they saw my white bonnet and veil, and the flowers which I wore--for I adorn myself more with flowers here than in Sweden--they looked kind, and granted permission *per la Signora*, and the gentlemen also who accompanied her were allowed to enter; but the door was immediately closed to various others who wished to thrust in after us.

Chairs were offered to us not far from the door; we were presented to the queen and the king of the assembly, who made demonstrations of good-will, and we were then left to look about us in quiet.

The room was tolerably large, and might contain about one hundred persons. On the wall just opposite to us was painted a crown, and a throne with a canopy over it. There stood the seats of the king and queen. The customary dancing was going forward in front of this seat. One woman danced alone, under a canopy supported by four people. Her dancing must have given great delight--though it was not very different from that of the negro ladies

which I have already described--for all kinds of handkerchiefs were hanging about her, and a hat, even, had been placed upon her head. The women danced on this occasion with each other, and the men with the men; some struck the doors and benches with sticks, others rattled gourds filled with stones, and the drums thundered with deafening power. They were apparently endeavoring to make as much noise as possible. While this was going on, a figure was seen advancing with a scarlet hat upon his head, and with a great number of glittering strings of beads round his neck, arms, and body, which was naked to the waist, from which hung scarlet skirts. This figure, before which the people parted to each side approached me, bowing all the time, and as he did so the [p. 381] whole upper portion of his body seemed to move in snake-like folds. Still making these serpentine movements, he stood before me with extended hands, I being not at all certain whether he was inviting me to dance, or what was the meaning of his apparently friendly grimaces, and his great, black, outstretched hands. At length he uttered, with other words, "*per la bonita!*" and I comprehended that all his bowings and bedizenment were intended as a compliment to me, and I made my reply by shaking one of the black hands, and placing within it a silver coin, after which we exchanged friendly gestures, and my friend made a serpentine retreat, and began to dance on his own account, receiving great applause from the by-standers. A great number of negroes were sitting on the benches, many of whose countenances were earnest, and remarkably agreeable. The Luccomées have, in general, beautiful oval countenances, good foreheads and noses, well-formed mouths, and the most beautiful teeth. They look less good-humored and gay than the other negro tribes, but have evidently more character and intelligence. The nation is regarded as rich, in consequence of the great prizes which it has won in the lottery, and this wealth it is said to apply to a good use--the purchasing the freedom of slaves of this tribe.

These cabildoes are governed, as I have already said, by queens, one or two, who decide upon the amusements, give tone to the society, and determine its extension. They possess the right of electing a king, who manages the pecuniary affairs of the society, and who has under him a secretary and master of the ceremonies. The latter presented me with a small printed card, which gave admission to the "*Gabildo de Señora Santa Barbara de la nacion Lucumi Alagua.*"\*\*

The Luccommée nation, like other African tribes, Gangas, Congoes, &c., are divided into many subordinate tribes, with their various cognomens, and their various places of meeting [footnote in original text].

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After this, and when we had made a little offering to the treasury of the society, we took our departure, in order to visit other cabildoes. And in all cases they were so polite as to give free access to *la Signora, la bonita*, and her companions. I do not know whether this politeness is to be attributed to the negro character, or to the Spanish influence upon it, but am inclined to believe the latter.

I was received in the *Cabildo de Gangas* by the two queens, two young and very pretty black girls, dressed in perfectly good French taste, in pink gauze dresses, and beautiful bouquets of artificial roses in their bosoms and their hair: they both smoked cigarettes. They took me kindly each by the hand, seated me between them and continued to smoke with Spanish gravity. One of them had the very loveliest eyes imaginable, both in form and expression. On the wall opposite to us was a large and well-painted leopard, probably the symbol of the nation. There were also some Catholic pictures and symbols

in the hall. I here saw a whole group of women moving in a kind of dance, like galvanized frogs, but with slower action, bowing and twisting their bodies and all their joints without any meaning or purpose that I could discover. It seemed to be the expression of some kind of animal satisfaction; it had also the appearance as if they were seeking for something in the dark. And the poor benighted people may be said to be still seeking--their true life's joy, their life beyond that of Nature.

They seem, however, to have approached nearer to this in the States of North America. I thought of that nocturnal camp-meeting in the forest, by the light of the fire-altars, and of the melodious hymns which sounded from the camp of the negroes!

I saw in another *Cabildo de Gargas* that same irregular, serpentine dance, danced in circles and rows both by men and women around one another. I saw again, also, [p. 383] in a *Cabildo de Congos*, the Congo dance, as I had seen it in the bohea at St. Amelia, and another which seemed to be a mixture of the Spanish-Creole dance, Yuca and Congo dance. There is considerably more animation in the latter dances than in the former, as well as more art and poetical feeling. The symbol painted upon the wall of this room was a sun with a human face. Here also were several Christian symbols and pictures. But even here, also, the Christianized and truly Christian Africans retain somewhat of the superstition and idolatry of their native land. The Congo and Ganga nations seem to me born of a more careless temperament, and have a more animal appearance than the Luccomées.

I visited two other cabildoes, but did not find any new features of interest, and, finally, I was heartily wearied by the noise, and the rattling, and the bustle, and the dust, and the chaotic disorder in the dancing, and in the movements of their assemblies. I longed for pure air and clear water, and, to gratify my longing, Mr. F. drove me in his volante to Havana harbor.