

Camejo, María Francisca

(late eighteenth century–c. 1833),

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Free black creole of the Lucumí nation, and leader of the famous Mutual Aid Society of the Lucumí Nation of Santa Bárbara, remembered among modern-day practitioners of Cuban Santería as Sàngó tè dún.

Little documentation exists for María Francisca Camejo, and from birth she could have been enslaved or free. The name “Camejo” was common throughout Spain’s empire, and to this day remains popular in the tobacco-growing region of the Piñar del Rio region in western Cuba. Since the eighteenth century, if not earlier, this family engaged in tobacco production for the royal monopoly based at the factory in Havana. By the 1790s a branch of this family residing and trading tobacco in the capital city likely owned María Francisca as a domestic slave. Camejo identified as Lucumí, but baptism records from the early nineteenth century indicate she identified as a “black creole” (*morena criolla*). Like so many people of African descent in the Americas, her heritage remains unknown, but this complex identity suggests she was born in Cuba, and had ancestry from Yorùbá speakers originating from the Bight of Benin hinterland.

After the start of the slave uprising on St. Domingue in 1791, Camejo married JUAN NEPOMUCENO PRIETO, who was a soldier in Havana’s Battalion of Loyal Blacks. As a military wife, Camejo acquired status and autonomy. Over time she was able to escape bondage through a legal system of self-purchase (*coartación*). This process allowed slaves to make down payments and pay off the debt upon themselves in instalments. During their transition toward freedom in a militarized society, Prieto and Camejo participated in *cabildos de nación*, which was a legally sanctioned mutual-aid society and ubiquitous in Cuba’s urban centers. Generally, more women than men participated in these socio-religious institutions, and their numerical superiority meant that they often influenced the selection and election of *cabildo* leaders. Between 1817 and 1835 Prieto became the recognized head of the famous Mutual Aid Society of the Lucumí Nation of Santa Bárbara, aka Sàngó tè dún. Alongside her husband, Camejo stood at the top of the ritual hierarchy. She likely administered schedules, kept track of the ritual family, organized purchases, received deliveries, booked musicians, prepared sacrificial offerings, directed ritual sequences, and controlled the organization’s finances.

Camejo was married to Prieto for more than thirty-five years. They did not have any heirs, although they raised a large religious family through ritual descent involving a combination of secret initiations into the Lucumí religion and Catholic baptisms. Camejo died around the time of Cuba’s cholera epidemic which decimated the island’s population in about 1833.

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