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The Cultural Value of Nsibidi in the Contemporary Era

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ABSTRACT

This paper takes a critical look at the cultural values of Nsibidi and its related writings. It perceives Nsibidi as an Ekpe tool for socio-cultural communication amongst the practitioners of the Elge society. The culture of Nsibidi is practiced in Nigeria, Africa and beyond. The paper has some recommendation and conclusion.

Keywords: Cultural values, Nsibidi, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Culture is a belief system of the total way of life of a person, group of people or society. However, culture is viewed differently by scholars yet, its basic tenets are the same. Anthropologists see culture as all the features of man's social life which he did not acquire biologically. Writers like [1], [2], [3] have viewed culture as a complete whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of the society. Because acquired but not in born. Most at times what human beings do affect them either negatively or positively.

Nsibidi according to [4] as a form of communication, has been a focus of inquiry for observers and students of Cross River cultures from early colonial period (mirror contributions include, [3], [2], [4] [5], [6], [7],[8], [9], [10], [11], [12 and [13] etc.

Nsibidi is generally thought to have originated among the Ejagham people of the northern, Cross River region, in large part because colonial investigators found the greatest number and variety of signs among them [7].

While historian [7], in his critical review of the literature on Nsibidi, described its functions more broadly to include “identity label, public notice, private warning, declaration of taboo (and) amorous messages, reckoning of goods and money, and method of keeping records and decorations [7] a former Qua paramount ruler at Calabar once told the art historian Robert Porris Thompson, that one kind of traditional writing all know and used, the other is sacred-both are Nsibidi [5]. Considered broadly in the context of such pan-regional groups as the leopard society, Nsibidi could also transcend potentially divisive ethnic and caustic boundaries [3]. Indeed historian O.E Uya observed twenty years ago that the unifying influence of Nsibidi within the Cross River is no longer debatable [8].

Accordingly when a person has just been received into membership, he parades the streets exhibiting on his body the mystic signs of the leopard society chalked there in several colours [9]. [3] believe that the name Nisibidi was derived from the Ejagham and Boki word Nchibbi, which is defined as to turn and meeting respectively, and this has taken to its of the meaning of agility of mind, and therefore carrying or double meaning [3]. Moreso, Calson having worked amongst the Bakor Ejagham in the northern Cross River State, explained that there Nsibidi literacy is negotiated along gender lines. And when women do have access to it, they use Nsibidi differently than men [8].

THE RELEVANCE OF THE CULTURE OF NSIBIDI

This was used in the past and the present for identification of different families within the Alok society, Cross River, Nigeria and Cuba. Even Cameroon have and practice prestigious Nsibidi sign writing or communication. Signs on the road, woods or stones were inscribe with Nsibidi Facial marks and body tattoo were also freely inscribe using this Nsibidi). Nsibidi is a sign communication that is not meant for all. It meant for a group of people or person who belongs to a particular cult like the Ekpe society, chief Sylvernus Akong (aka Orlando, the chief of Alok a village in Ikom L.G.A in Cross River State) has this to say concerning Nsibidi.

According to Sylvernus Akong, Nsibidi was discovered by a woman at Cameroon who subsequently started using the signs/writing to design her calabashes but through time, her husband took over the art. As the Bantu's came, they discovered the art and exposed it on the monoliths (stones) in the course of their continuous migration. The writing or Nsibidi symbols on the monoliths represent facial marks of ethnic groups such as the TIV, Igala, Nupe, Idoma, Efik, Ibibios in Nigeria etc. According to chief Akong the Nsibidi writing features issues as marriages, love, disagreement, bravery, fertility, peace etc. All these took place as the Bantus were migrating in for greener pastures or a better place for them to settle.

However, slaves from Nigerian-Cameroon border-land area carried the Nsibidi tradition to Cuba via trans-Atlantic slave trade many slaves were collected in Ridel area (Cameroon). The supply of slaves came in part from the hinter-land and from various Nsibidi using communities. In Cuba, African men formed the Leopard society known as Ekpe. Today, the Cuban practice Ekpe and use the sign language freely known as Nsibidi. It was even confirmed when a team of Cuban came to Alok and exhibited the imaginable culture just as it is practiced in Alok and other Ekpe related societies. Therefore, the uniformity cannot be overemphasized. The team also had the opportunity to see the original Myamangbe (Ekpe) stone for the very first time.

EKPE AND THE SIGN COMMUNICATION IN NSIBIDI

The Ekpe and the Nsibidi sign communication work hand in hand, the one compliments the other Nyangmangbe Ekpe, mgbe the art of Nsibidi collection memory. As it is most often called in different African societies, represent one and the same thing: societies even in Nigeria, refer to the union as the leopard society. The implication is that people who engage in it are very powerful people it may not be in the physical strength but that, they are cunning and wise in actions and thoughts. Nsibidi writing could be likened to shorthand writing which demands wisdom. People in this Ekpe, union apply this Nsibidi writing extensively in their numerous communication, within and outside.

The Ekpe society is an exclusively male secret society, women could only be invited to observe at some stage, but they are not expected to participate. It is an administrative cult of a governing body whose duty is to formulate laws, co-ordinate and make sure people perform their roles as expected of them in the society. They use sign language in their communication and are primarily talented in the interpretation of Nsibidi writing. The full knowledge of Nsibidi is an indication of a true Nyangmangbe member, because during their occasional display or social outing, one is expected to exhibit such talents. Some time, people who wear mask (Ekpo), to play and dance use Nsibidi signs to notify their presence in a place, so a smaller masquerade will be very careful. The inscription is mostly done on the ground for people who understand the signs. Ignorant of the sign is no excuse. The signs could be negative or positive. But most often than not the signs are always a negative one to scare away smaller masquerade in operation. This does happen during festival era.

The original Ekpe/Mgbe/Nyangmangbe stone is found only at the Alok "open air museum" through-out the world, it is made up of seven layers or stratas representing the seven families that were responsible for the enactment of laws in the Alok society. Nevertheless there are various names ascribed to this leopard society depending upon the dialect or language. For instance, the Bakor of which Alok belong, use the term Nyangbe or Nyangmangbe. The Etung and Boki people in the same Cross River State uses the term Mgbe. Other Ejagham speaking group also use the term Ngbe. Efiks and people of Arochukwu of south Eastern Nigeria, call the famous male leopard society, Ekpe.

THE ART OF NSIBIDI AND COLLABORATIVE MEMORY

Artist in the contemporary era have been making use of the writing of Nsibidi in their respective designs of clothes (Fabrics), shoes and caps. The society is enhanced through this design since people are now fashion conscious than ever Nsibidi speaks a universal language to those who understand the writing.

Sometimes, Nsibidi could be displayed outwardly by the practitioners in the open square for spectators to view the artistic skills of the prestigious leopard society. The hands, fingers, head and legs are used for communication. The communication is basically through signs and symbols. However, the similarities of Nsibidi symbols and signs and the fact that all the practitioners must understand the demonstrations enhances the collectivity of memories in the society. Nsibidi writing is linked to art because some writers like [6] opined that art refers to both the process and the products of human skills applied to any activity that meets the standards of preferred form or beauty in a particular society Nanda, argue is in term of how it functions as a form of symbolic communication in society. The art of Nisbidi can be seen as communicating direct meaning. Analyzing art, [3] pointed out that art is derived from a Latin word Ars” meaning creation. It is as old as man. The early man for instance, practiced art by pointing animals on caves walls. Through those paintings they showed their occupation as farmers and animal hunters. According to [6] the relationship between collective memory and society’s legitimization is best evidenced by the typical attempt of nationalist movements to create a master commemorative narrative that legitimized their aspirations for a shared destiny by emphasizing a common past for its members. [11] a Durkheimian sociologist, who wrote on the topic of collective memory, proposes that commemoration and rituals are on form of collective remembering which support a moral self-definition and helps consolidate memories of important events. The present for Halbwachs is a mental frame wherein people reconstruct their past. The past in reconstructed with regard to the concerns and needs of the present. [12] state that collective memory is made up of partial continuity as well as new readings of the past in terms of the present.

Moreso, [13] suggested that collective memory has both cumulative and presents aspects, and history includes both continuity and change. Every society needs a tradition to which succeeding generation can aspire and in which the belief and sentiments of each generation are embedded. If collective memory cannot outline social change [13] noted that, social solidarity, continuity and coherence will be end angered.

RECOMMENDATION

It is the opinion of the researcher that if the following measures are carefully observed, the cultural value of Nsibidi will be greatly harden to the benefit of the society at large.

- Nsibidi as a form of sign communication can be adopted by the government as a special form of communication for all.
- If the culture of Nsibidi is examined critically, much more designs will be created especially for designers of clothes, shoes and bags.
- The exclusively male leopard society known by some African societies as Ekpe, mgbe and Nyangmangbe, that makes use of Nsibidi communication could be upgraded so it does not die a natural death.
- The art of Nsibidi is one of our rich cultural heritage that must be protected by all and sundry. It makes us to our the past to understand the present and predict the Nsibidi which is a form of writing and communication just like any other art work enhances and sustain collective memories.

CONCLUSION

The cultural value of Nsibidi cannot be overemphasized especially in this contemporary era. If form of writings and communication have been effectively used by the Mgbe union, known as the male leopard society. The criteria for one to belong to the male leopard society is just a perfect understanding of the sign communication. This sign communication can be adopted by all in the society.

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