

## The Origin of Ekpe Masquerade and the Nsibidi symbols in Southern Nigeria

Benson, Imaekop Etukudoh

Department of Arts and Humanity, University of Calabar. Nigeria

---

### ABSTRACT

Africa is home to around two thousand spoken languages. But verbal communication is not the only way they have interacted. Historically, written signs and symbols have also been used to communicate. Nsibidi is a system consisting mainly of gestures, tattoos, symbols, signs and other markings. It is possible that Nsibidi is one of the oldest organized systems of nonverbal human communication, dating back to at least 2000 C.E. As such, it will be appropriate to believe it is time to explore in far more detail the ways in which communication studies scholarship can explore its rhetorical and grammatological potential.

Keywords: Ekpe, Nsibidi, Southern Nigeria, and symbols.

---

### INTRODUCTION

Southern Nigeria was formed in 1900 by adding the territories of the Royal Niger Company to the territories of the Niger Coast Protectorate [1]. Lagos Colony was added to Southern Nigeria in 1906. Southern Nigeria merged with Northern Nigeria in 1914 to form the colony of Nigeria [2]. In 1939 Southern Nigeria was split up in Western Nigeria and Eastern Nigeria. Western Nigeria in its turn was split up in Western Nigeria and Mid Western Nigeria in 1963 [3]. All were abolished on 27 May 1967 by State Decree No. 14 of 1967 (Creation and Transitional Provisions), which restructured the Federation of Nigeria into 12 states [4].

Ekpe, also known as Mgbe (Ekoi language: leopard), is a Nigerian secret society flourishing chiefly among the Efiks of the Cross River State, the Ibibio, the Uruan and the Oron of Akwa Ibom State, Arochukwu and some other parts of Abia State, as well as in the diaspora, such as in Cuba and Brazil [5]. The society is still active at the beginning of the 21st century, now playing more of a ceremonial role. There are two distinct but related societies. The primary society is located in the Cross River, Arochukwu and Akwa Ibom areas of Nigeria, and the secondary society consists of members

from the Southern and Eastern Igbo groups of the same country [6]. It is a general belief amongst the Ibibios and Efiks, although hardly ever substantiated, that the members of the Ekpe society invented the Nsibidi [7]. Nsibidi (also known as nsibiri, nchibiddi or nchibiddy) is a system of symbols indigenous to what is now southeastern Nigeria that are apparently pictograms, though there have been suggestions that some are logograms or syllabograms [8]. The symbols are at least over 4,000 years old. Early forms appeared on excavated pottery as well as what are most likely ceramic stools and headrests from the Calabar region with a range of dates from at least 400 AD (and possibly earlier), to 1400 AD [9]. Nsibidi was used to decorate the skin, calabashes, sculptures, and clothing items, as well as to communicate messages on houses [10]. There are thousands of nsibidi symbols, of which over 500 have been recorded [11]. They were once taught in a school to children [12]. Many of the signs deal with love affairs; those that deal with warfare and the sacred are kept secret. Nsibidi is used on wall designs, calabashes, metals (such as bronze), leaves, swords, and tattoos [13]. It is primarily used by the Ekpe

leopard society (also known as Ngbe or Egbo), a secret society that is found across Cross River State among the Ekoi, Efik, Igbo people, and other nearby peoples.

Ekpe is a mysterious spirit who is supposed to live in the jungle and to preside at the ceremonies of the society [14]. Members of the Ekpe society are said to act as messengers of the ancestors (ikan) [15]. The economics of the society is based on paying tribute to the village ancestors. Only males can join, boys being initiated about the age of puberty [16]. Members are bound by oath of secrecy, and fees on entrance are payable. The Ekpe-men are ranked in seven or nine grades, for promotion to each of which fresh initiation ceremonies, fees and oaths are necessary [17]. The society combines a kind of freemasonry with political and law enforcing aims. For instance any member wronged in an Ekpe district, that is one dominated by the society, has only to address an Ekpe-man or beat the Ekpe drum in the Ekpe-house, or blow Ekpe as it is called, i.e., sound the Ekpe horn, before the hut of the wrong-doer, and the whole machinery of the society is put in force to see justice done [8]. Ekpe members always wear masks when performing their police duties, and although individuals may nonetheless be recognized, fear of retribution from the ikan stops people from accusing those members who may overstep their limits. Formerly the society earned a bad reputation due to what the British viewed as the barbarous customs that were intermingled with its rites [5].

#### **Ekpe Masquerade: How It All Began**

Extensive plantations lay in the hinterland of Efik territory both in Calabar and Creek Town. These plantations were worked by slave labor and the coastal community depended on them for their food supply [2]. From the 1850's, the plantations, notably Akpabuyo, became the strongholds of fugitives and runaway slaves who were trying to escape the atrocities of the Ekpe confraternity (Egbo). They began to bind themselves together by a covenant of blood for mutual protection and were thence known by

the name 'Blood Men' (NKA IYIP) [6]. King Achibong 1 and other free men in Duke also joined the Blood men for their own ends, the group achieved much strength to rival and defy the Egbo association [12]. The first clash between the two groups happened in 1851 due to the Ekpe dictators. Beecroft was of the view that: 'So rapid has been the advance of civilization in old Calabar that at present though retaining many of the old forms they (Egbos) have lost their old influence and no act of oppression can be committed through its agency without notice being has been thereof [3]. The influence of the Christian Missionary fast supersedes that of Egbo' [4]. Rev Hope Masterton Waddell in his book 'Twenty-nine Years in the West Indies and Central Africa' opined that, The towns of Calabar are, in fact a number of small republics, each with its own chief and council, united only by the Egbo confraternity [6]. The most distinguished and highest of the entire masquerade in Calabar is the Ekpe masquerade [1], Its members are only men and are played on special occasion. Ekpe Efik was used as a government instrument in Bakassi in exercising authority for more than 200 years ago [4]. Ekpe masquerade mimic the form of a lion or leopard moves. Members of the Ekpe society are said to act as messengers of the ancestors (ikan), members are bound by oaths of secrecy. Other masquerades include Nnabo, Ekomo and a host of others [7]. In a personal interview with [5], he asserts that, Efik people have a very rich masquerade tradition, that most masquerades are seen emerging from the river and before colonization/democracy Ekpe masquerade was in total control of social justice amongst the Efik people and is the most distinguished, important and well respected masquerade amongst the Efik people then and even today, his statement gingered this write up [7]. Observations shows from the testament of [6] and [7], that the Ekpe (Egbo) cult was a dreaded, traditionally strong, reverend, distinguished, secretive, respected, authoritative, artistically beautiful and the most expressive

confraternity amongst the Efik speakers of Nigeria in the past, before the interference of the colonialists, which left the effects of the colonial legacy in the culture to this day [8]. The masquerade traditions of the Efik people in Nigeria follows similar masquerade tradition pattern in Africa, masquerade symbolizes the celebration and return of ancestors, masquerades also comes out occasionally to give messages to their people from the spirit world [9]. The Efik people have different types of masquerade for different occasion or celebration, from coronation of the Obong (King of Calabar), to burial, Chieftaincy installation and other seasonal celebrations and ceremonies [9]. Nnabo is another important masquerade, but this write up is mainly concerned about Ekpe masquerade for now. The international Ekpe festival took place in Calabar in December 2004, organized by Ekpe local elders with the sponsorship of the governor's office of cross river state. The Ekpe masquerade festival is also celebrated amongst so many ethnic groups and the Cubans Abakua society, derived from Efik Ekpe and Ajagham Ngbe societies of south eastern Nigeria and south western Cameroon, founded in Havana in the 1830s by captured leaders of cross river villages [10]. The Obong as the paramount ruler is traditionally the head of Ekpe (Egbo) or leopard society, in the 21st century however Ekpe only plays a ceremonial role because of the impact of external influences which weakened the traditional foundation and social performance in the societies.

#### **The Relevance of Nsibidi Culture**

This was used in the past and the present for identification of different families within the Alok society, Cross River, Nigeria and Cuba [10]. Even Cameroon has and practice prestigious Nsibidi sign writing or communication [6]. 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 [2]. It meant for a group of people or person who belongs to

a particular cult like the Ekpe society. 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 [11]. 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 [12]. 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) [13]. 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 [14]. It was even confirmed when a team of cubian came to Alok and exhibited the imaginable culture just as it is practiced in Alok and other Ekpe related societies [15]. Therefore, the uniformity cannot be overemphasized. The team also had the opportunity to see the original Myamangbe (Ekpe) stone for the very first time [15].

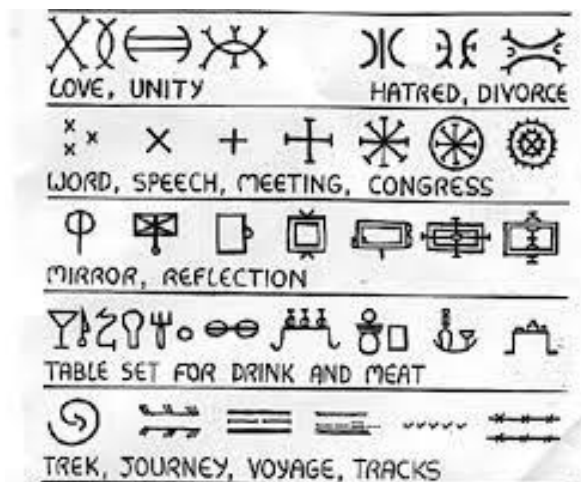
#### **Ekpe and the Sign Communication in Nsibidi**

The Ekpe and the Nsibidi sign communication work hand in hand, the one compliment the other Nyangmangbe Ekpe, mgbe the art of Nsibidi collection memory [16]. 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 [12]. 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

cunny and wise in actions and thoughts. Nsibidi writing could be likened to shorthand writing which demands wisdom [17]. People in this Ekpe, union apply this Nsibidi writing extensively in their numerous communications, within and outside.

The Ekpe society in 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 [5]. 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 [8]. The inscription is

mostly done on the ground for people who understand the signs [12]. 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 [17]. 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 [18]. 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 [19].



 pa/ba	 pe/be	 pi/bi	 po/bo	 pu/bu
 ka/ga	 ke/ge	 ki/gi	 ko/go	 ku/gu
 ta/da	 te/de	 ti/di	 to/do	 tu/du

Diagram showing some signs of ancient written language known as Nsibidi [2].

CONCLUSION

Long before the Europeans and what is today known as the western civilization came to West Africa, the Ekoi (Ejagham) people in present-day Nigeria had developed a unique form of ideographic writing called Nsibidi. Author Talbot who lived during the colonial times described it as "a kind of primitive secret writing"

which was communicated on "cut or painted on split palm stems". Strangely, Nsibidi and the Egyptian Hieroglyphics share some characters. Like the Hieroglyphics, Nsibidi was taught to select secret groups that exuded power and authority. They were largely in control of the arms of government, hence

its exclusivity. Among them is the Ekpe Leopard Secret Society. The Ekpe, still found in present-day Cross River, Akwa Ibom and Abia State, are often seen wearing particular clothing during formal events. This cloth is known as the Ukara

Ekpe. Despite these, arguments have arisen that rather than neglect our cultural roots, what Renaissance art is to Christians is what Nsibidi should be to Africans.

#### REFERENCES

1. (2016, September 20th). Retrieved from <http://afrocubaweb.com/at>.
2. (2016, September 20th). Retrieved from <http://kwekudee-tripdownmemor>.
3. (2016, September 20th). Retrieved from <https://en...m.wikipedia.org/w>.
4. (2016, September 20th). Retrieved from <https://www.britanica.com/1>.
5. (2017, January 2nd). Retrieved from <https://wwwfacebo.com/photo.php?ibid=102054172109010009&set=gm.916952475078576&type=3&theater>.
6. (2017, January retrieved 10th). Retrieved from [http://www.gophoto.it/view.php?=http://24media.tumblr\\_mohkleu30clr4c2pko3\\_400jpg](http://www.gophoto.it/view.php?=http://24media.tumblr_mohkleu30clr4c2pko3_400jpg).
7. (2017, January retrieved 10th). Retrieved from [http://www.mcser.org/images/stories2journal/mjss\\_may2012/babsonajibade\\_ester\\_ekpe.pdf](http://www.mcser.org/images/stories2journal/mjss_may2012/babsonajibade_ester_ekpe.pdf).
8. Basse, B. E. (2011). Calabar: The land of carnivals. Calabar: Computer Media and Data Services.
9. Basse, B. E. (2012). Ekpe Efik: The Yaweh of Moses. Calabar: Logical Operations Printing Press.
10. Bill Desowitz (2018). Black Panther': How Wakanda Got a Written Language IndieWire.
11. Chinenye. (2017, February 15th). Retrieved from <http://www.nairaland.com.chiner>.
12. Elechi, O. O. (2006). Doing Justice without the State: The Afikpo (Ehugbo) Nigeria Model. CRC Press. p. 98.
13. Hales, Kevin (2015). The Moving Finger: A Rhetorical, Grammatological and Afrinographic Exploration of Nsibidi in Nigeria and Cameroon. A dissertation presented to the faculty of the Scripps College of Communication of Ohio University: 15.
14. Hales, Kevin (2015). The Moving Finger: A Rhetorical, Grammatological and Afrinographic Exploration of Nsibidi in Nigeria and Cameroon. A dissertation presented to the faculty of the Scripps College of Communication of Ohio University: 15.
15. Lekan, O. S. (2017). The Cultural Value of Nsibidi in the Contemporary Era, Idosr Journal of Arts and Management 2(3): 1-7
16. Slogar, Christopher (2005). Eyo, Ekpo (ed.). Iconography and Continuity in West Africa: Calabar Terracottas and the Arts of the Cross River Region of Nigeria/Cameroon (PDF). University of Maryland. pp. 58-62.
17. Udoh, E. A. (1971). Report of Enquiry into Obong of Calabar Dispute. Volume 1