

More than Fabric Motifs: Changed Meaning of Nsibidi on the Efik *Ukara* Cloth

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Abstract: *Among the Ejagham people of the Cross River, extending from the Cameroon to Nigeria's Cross River State, the ukara cloth and nsibidi visual signs are very critical aspects of history, religion and general cultural worldviews. While the ukara cloth is prominent among initiates of the Ejagham's many Leopard Societies, the nsibidi is a visual language, unspoken but forming the main body of motifs on the ukara fabric design. As a traditional African written language peculiar to the Ejagham peoples, Carlson (2003: 225) has suggested that nsibidi can "adapt to new historical circumstances and culture" when transmitted to non-Ejagham societies. Using evidence from fieldwork in villages in five local government areas where Efik clans are located in Cross River State, this study sort to find out if the meanings of key nsibidi signs have changed or adapted when transmitted into a non-Ejagham cultural space in Calabar. The study found out that the transmission from the Ejagham culture to that of the Efik has brought on adaptations and changes in the meaning of nsibidi. And, that through its use in the design of the ukara fabric of the Ekpe society, nsibidi has maintained its relevance among the Efik for many centuries because of its ability to adapt to new social and cultural situations, while remaining true to its original identity.*

Keywords: *Ejagham, Calabar, Efik, ukara cloth, nsibidi, visual language, cultural space, change,*

1. Introduction

Nigeria's Cross River State is one of 36 states. It is situated southeast of the country and shares boarder with Cameroon, close to the Atlantic Ocean. The state derives its name from Cross River, a river that traverses Cross River and Akwa Ibom states and empties into the Atlantic Ocean from its rise in the Cameroon Mountain. According to Röshenthaler (1996:10), Cross River "curves from the Cameroon grasslands to the Atlantic ocean". Geographically, the river is usually divided into the 'upper Cross River' and 'lower Cross River'. While the lower Cross River includes the whole of Akwa Ibom State, Calabar, Odukpani, and Akamkpa local government areas in Cross River State, the upper Cross River consists of Obubra, Ikom, Ogoja, Obudu and Ugep. Along with ethnic groups that flow across to the Cameroon, these Nigerian ethnicities are called the Ejagham group, whose "territory is concentrated within the large southwest bend of the Cross River" (Röshenthaler 1996:10). According to estimates, the Ejagham language is spoken by about 70,000 speakers in Nigeria (*Languages of the World* 2010).

Efik, Qua and Efut are the three ethnic groups in Calabar, the southernmost part of Cross River State, near the Atlantic Ocean. Of the three ethnicities, the Qua are Ejagham. With a population of about 1.2 million, Calabar is also the capital city of Cross River state. Whereas each of the three ethnic groups in Calabar has

its own different language, they nonetheless share certain cultural patterns such as occupation, food, dressing, architecture, arts, crafts and rich cultural enactments like masquerading – of which the *Ekpe* is the most prominent. The Ekpe masquerade is owned and enacted by a cult of the same name among the Efik. While literature suggests that the Ekpe institution diffused from Ejagham to Efik land, it appears that the *ukara* cloth (the Ekpe's official fabric) with its *nsibidi* designs, came along in the diffusion.

2. Statement of the Problem

Carlson writes that *nsibidi* should not be apprehended as a static thing of the past. Rather, *nsibidi* needs to be seen to provide an intellectual tradition that has "relevance today" and can "adapt to new historical circumstances and culture" (2003: 225). Therefore, if as Carlson insists, the *nsibidi* can change meaning as it adapts to new cultural contexts, is there evidence to suggest that its transmission from the Ejagham culture to that of the Efik has brought on adaptations and changes in meaning? Using evidence from fieldwork in seven clans of the Efik, this study sort to find out if the meanings of key *nsibidi* signs have changed or adapted when transmitted into a non-Ejagham cultural space in Calabar.

3. Methodology

In terms of methodology, the authors had personal interviews with initiates, elders, priests and shrine attendants of the Ekpe society using enlarged and tabulated *nsibidi* visuals to which respondents offered the contemporary meanings associated with particular *nsibidi* signs among the Efik. To get the broadest view, the authors went to villages in Odukpani, Calabar Municipality, Calabar South, Akpabuyo and Bakassi (five local government areas of Cross River State where Efik clans are located), collated and harmonized the responses in a tabular form. Since most of the respondents are not literate in the (written) English language, the Efik language was used in most personal interviews and the authors recorded interviewees' responses. The results of this visual survey among the Efik of Calabar were then tabulated and compared to that encountered by Carlson (2003) among the Bakor-Ejagham people.

4. *Ekpe*, *Nsibidi* and *Ukara* among the Efik of Calabar

While 'Ekpe' is the name of a masquerade among the Efik of Calabar, the term is also the name of the leopard and of the traditional sacred institution that owns the masque. The Ekpe (sometimes called Mgbe) society is also called the 'leopard' society because the Ekpe masquerade is a visual cultural reference to a leopard – its costume, makeup and props define it as such. The link between the Ejagham peoples, the Ekpe society and the leopard goes back in time. Koloss (1985) narrates a story that links the fear of the leopard to Ejagham people in 1904. At the time the Ejagham and their neighbours rebelled and the German colonial administration had to resettle the population into larger villages, for easier control. However, much social tension prevailed among the people, which resulted in witchcraft accusations in which many suspected witches were murdered. Coincidentally, at the same time witches were said to be killing people, man-eating leopards were also mauling people in the communities. The killer leopards were not deemed culpable. Rather, the communities interpreted the fearsome man-eating leopard as the witches' preferred form. It does seem, as Marwick (1965) suggests, that witchcraft accusations are indices of social tension and accusing others of witchcraft enables accusers to sever relationships with the accused, using real or imagined episodes. In this case the leopard and the fear of it has remained among the Ejagham generally and has been appropriated as part of the corporate ambience of the Ekpe cult. The Ekpe society is the most renowned traditional institution in Efik history not just because of its spiritual or cultic functions but also for the fact that the institution was a pre-colonial police and judiciary system. The Ekpe was vested with the powers of policing and bringing justice to the Efik kingdom. In a Personal Interview (2011) with Chief Edem Okon, a

long standing initiate of Ekpe, he made it very clear: "In the olden days before the white man came into contact with the Efik people, Ekpe was government. Ekpe was in control of everything. The white man even used Ekpe to organize and push people to attend church services. Nothing was possible in Efik society without Ekpe". In essence, the Ekpe society was *the* law before the advent of colonialism and western democracy. Today, however the Ekpe cult is still strong among the Efik. But it has no function within the postcolonial democratic frameworks of governance. Membership is still very strong and masquerading and other cultic performances are very visible in the society.

One of the most prominent paraphernalia of the Ekpe society is the *ukara* cloth, a fabric that is used by members of the cult. As the official and traditional apparel of the Ekpe society, the *ukara* is a blue and white fabric inscribed with two dimensional motifs called *nsibidi* (it is called *nsibiri* among the Ejagham). While initiates wear the *ukara* fabric as a wrapper, the cloth may also become a wall hanging of sort in the personal spaces of individual initiates or at a venue for the cult's activities. *Nsibidi* motifs also form a good part of the visuality of the Ekpe masquerade's costume.

While scholars have written about the Ejagham generally (Thompson 1974, Kubik 1986, Onor 1994, Rösenthaller 1996, and Ojong 2008), the most comprehensive work done about the *nsibidi* is Amanda Carlson's *Nsibidi, Gender, and Literacy: the Art of the Bakor-Ejagham, Cross River State* (2003). Carlson's extensive fieldwork among the Bakor Ejagham people dealt with funerary sculptures, monoliths, masquerades, body and calabash decorations employing *nsibidi* motifs in the broader context of sign-use. To Carlson, *nsibidi* is performance, object and graphic communication. Based on her interactions with producers of *ukara* cloth in Aro Chukwu (Abia State) and merchants in Calabar who sell the fabric, the author insists that the *ukara* cloth is both a trade good and a contemporary channel for transmitting *nsibidi*.

In another light, Carlson underscores the fact that unlike men's use of it, Ejagham women use *nsibidi* visual forms without "overt emphasis on secrecy or the mediation of power" (216). As women paint both their bodies and that of ancestral representations like monoliths, they "are actively involved in a discourse that creates meaning in relation to the body, one of the most potent and powerful symbols within Ejagham culture" (217). Thus, as an African writing system, *nsibidi*, be it on the body, fabric or other cultural spaces "provides a language that is not dependent on verbal communication" as "it allowed for linkages between the numerous peoples of the Cross River region" (217).

Whereas the term *nsibidi* is popularly known as the visual motifs or writings on Ejagham cultural artifacts like the Ikom monoliths, the *ukara* cloth and as body decorations among the Efiks, it is also the name of a special team of seven virgin young men (members of the Ekpe society) who are sent to make arrests for serious crimes that usually attract the death penalty. On this trip the *nsibidi* are masked with multicolour body painting. Pre-outing preparations take 7 days in the forest until they become 'spiritual' entities. Only second sons (and never first sons) of initiates are permitted to become *nsibidi*. A first son must go into hiding when *nsibidi* is passing, else the *nsibidi* will literally extract flesh from his body. While on an arrest mission, the *nsibidi* boys do not talk but hold fresh palm fronds in their mouths and can only make a humming sound. They come topless and wear only a skirt made from palm fronds also. As far as the Efik tradition goes, it is forbidden for women to gaze upon the *nsibidi* except women that are initiates of the Ekpe (Chief Edem Okon, *Personal Interview*). At the end of the assignment, the *nsibidi* must go back into the forest to be debriefed and neutralised before it becomes safe for them to re-enter the society. As a distinguishing feature of the broad Ejagham cultural group spread across Nigeria and Cameroon (Thompson, 1974), the *nsibidi* motifs inscribed in the *ukara* textile's surface function as both ideograms and pictograms (Onor, 1994, Kubik, 1986). In fact, Ojong (2008) has compared the Ejagham *nsibidi* to the Egyptian hieroglyphics. To the Efik people, the pictographic and ideographic *nsibidi* is in fact a 'language' rather than a mere system of motifs. Chief Edem Okon puts it succinctly:

Whereas the *ukara* cloth produced today are on white fabric, the olden days types were made on thicker brownish calico. The scripts on the *ukara* cloth are *nsibidi*. But *nsibidi* is not limited to the symbols on the *ukara* cloth. *Nsibidi* is more than that. *Nsibidi* includes a whole range of verbal and non-verbal sign

systems, including body movement, eye language, drawing in the air, or on the floor with the feet and many more. It is with the *nsibidi* that initiates talk among themselves and with the Ekpe. Right under the nose of non-initiates, an initiate can hold a conversation with the Ekpe using only eye movements. *Nsibidi* is the language of Ekpe and *nsibidi* is Ekpe.

Nsibidi sign system is used among initiates of the Ekpe society in Efik land to communicate with one another and with the Ekpe. While individuals may inscribe it as tattoos or on walls at home or the cult's spaces, the ukara cloth, which is the official apparel of the Ekpe society, is the most prominent surface on which *nsibidi* is utilized and circulated among the Efik of Calabar. Members of the Ekpe society tie the cloth during the cult's activities and meetings. Larger versions of the ukara fabric are sometimes hung on one wall of the leopard society's meeting place as backdrop for ritual and other social occasions to which only initiates are in attendance.

The ukara is dyed only in indigo and *nsibidi* signs are embedded on the fabric by stitching and tie-dyeing the fabric. After dyeing, the stitches and ties are removed to reveal the white designs that appear against the deep blue background. The production process is essentially a resist dyeing method which, as Boser (1985) notes, may be the oldest method of producing non-woven patterns on dyed fabric. The finished ukara cloth is a patchwork of signs that uniformly cover the surface of the fabric. Besides functioning as a symbol of membership in the Leopard Society the ukara cloth acts as a summary of the Ekpe cult, its social reputation and its principles. There are several *nsibidi* signs such as leopard, snake, turtle, birds etc that appear on ukara cloths and may signify multiple levels of meaning beyond the representation of the actual subject (see Figures 2 and 3). However, there may be deeper more esoteric meanings associated with some symbols that may only be known to certain category of initiates. According to Elder Etok from Calabar municipality, a member of the cult, ukara cloth serves several functions to the members of the Ekpe society including the following:

1. Ukara cloth is used by Ekpe members of sufficient rank and wealth, and these men are its designers.
2. Most ukara cloths are custom-made for specific individuals or ritual uses. A good many are personalized these days with their owner's names "written" in one corner.
3. Patterns are drawn from the Ukara cloth by Ekpe society members, incorporating both common Ekpe designs and symbols with personal meanings for the prospective owner. (*Personal Interview, 2011*)

In a Personal Interview with Mr. Nsa Efangha, a native of Nsidung and an initiate of the Ekpe Society, he reveals that while there is a newer form of ukara produced on white cotton fabric, there was an older version that was made of very thick calico (Plates 1 and 2). This older version is difficult to come by these days and is available only in the Ekpe cult's shrine and other spaces belonging to the confraternity.



Plate 1: An older form of ukara cloth made with calico fabric, which is brownish.



Plate 2: Contemporary ukara cloth made with white cotton fabric. Notice the better clarity and fidelity of lines and forms.






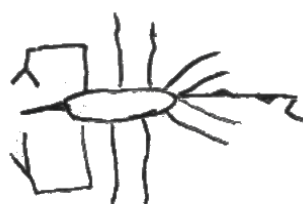
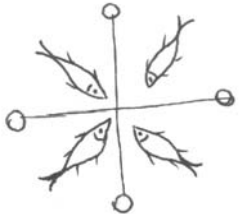

Figure 1: Map loosely indicating the Ejagham territory, from where the Ekpe and *nsibidi* are thought to diffuse to the Efik who live in Calabar,

Figure 2: Some *Nsibidi* Symbols from the Ejagham people

<i>Nsibidi</i>	Meaning	<i>Nsibidi</i>	Meaning
	Dead friend/relative		Pregnant woman
	Captive		Harlot
	Stranger		Snake
	Sexual intercourse		Palaver, Court case

Source: Adapted from Carlson 2003.

Figure 3: Some *Nsibidi* Symbols from the Efik people of Calabar

<i>Nsibidi</i>	Names	Meaning
	Ekpe (<i>Usime-Ekpe</i>)	Indicating the Ekpe's strength and potential for anger and violence against anything when provoked.
	Uden	This is a harmless object of peace. It goes around pecking at food.
	Ubok	This outspread palm is a representation of the pioneers of the Ekpe society, as well as departed prominent members. It is for remembering important personages such as King James Eyo Honesty from Creek Town.
	Nkongho Inua Akpa (Crab)	This crustacean stays in the river and only comes out when the river is calm. It reflects the Ekpe's ability to adapt to its environment, and to be calm and peaceful, in response to the immediate environment.
	Okposong Eto	The Efik being a riverside people, the fish is a prominent symbol. The image indicates four fishes coming to the centre from the proverbial 4 corners of the earth. It shows Ekpe's centrality in the affairs of man.
	Ufok Ekpe (Ekpe's house)	This set of concentric rectangles represents the inner house of the Ekpe, which initiates are under oath not to reveal.

5. Results

Figure 2 shows some *nsibidi* symbols identified by Carlson (2003) among the Ejagham people, while Figure 3 shows that from the Efik of Calabar. In Figure 2 the images are a lot simpler, and made up of lines in an alphabetic sort of way. In Figure 3, however, the images are much more developed, in a pictographic way. Whereas the Ejagham symbols are grossly abstracted, restricting understanding to the "enlightened" or initiates, those of the Efik are much less so, providing easier insights into the meanings of the symbols for

everyday people. However, there are also highly complex *nsibidi* signs known only to initiates. While Efik *nsibidi* is generally visually elaborate, those from the Ejagham are very simplified forms. The meaning of the symbols also contributes to the differential in both forms of *nsibidi*. The Ejagham versions are straight meanings representing a word or phrase (Figure 2). In contrast, however, the *nsibidi* of the Efik of Calabar have elaborate and narrative meanings (Figure 2). On another note, most of the Efik *nsibidi* are reproduced in indigo colour, while the Ejagham versions are often represented in neat, black lines. Thus, in terms of scripting or reproduction, the Ejagham *nsibidi* may be faster, as against most of the Efik versions that need more creative efforts in drawing and colour application.

6. Conclusion

If, as literature suggests, the Ekpe and its cultural nuances like the *nsibidi* writing system evolved from the Ejagham and diffused elsewhere to neighboring peoples like the Efik of Calabar, then data from this study seems to support the view. For, the Efik of Calabar are a much smaller culture residing south of Ejagham territory, making it most probable for the Ekpe and *nsibidi* to diffuse through processes like inter-marriages, migrations, trade and cultural cooperation generally. However, whereas the *nsibidi* may have diffused from the Ejagham to the Efik of Calabar, Figures 2 and 3 suggest that *nsibidi* tradition has not been static but has adapted to historical circumstances of the newer culture. As the differences in visual representation, style of rendering and development of meaning in Figures 2 and 3 show, *nsibidi* can and does change meaning as it adapts to new cultural contexts. Therefore, it is evident that the transmission from the Ejagham culture to that of the Efik has brought on adaptations and changes in the meaning of *nsibidi*. Through its use in the design of the ukara fabric of the Ekpe society, *nsibidi* has maintained its relevance among the Efik for many centuries because of its ability to adapt to new social and cultural situations, while remaining true to its original identity.

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