



The decline of Ekpe masquerade amongst the Efik speakers

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Masquerade traditions amongst the Efik speakers in Nigeria, is an interesting theme for discussion in art history. The scope of this paper is to direct attention to that aspect of Efik culture that is deeply rooted in the masquerade traditions and the importance of the masquerade's cult. This paper examines specifically the Ekpe masquerade, their duties, their regalia, art, symbol and performance. The paper intends to bring awareness and fill any existing gap. The methodology applied in this research is qualitative, which includes oral interviews, analytical; using intrinsic and contextual methods, internet resource materials and literature. Efik culture follows the general patterns of masquerading traditions in African societies. The traditional masquerades are seen, as ancestors and revered as intermediaries to God. The masquerades traditionally are regarded as custodians of history, religion, tradition, myths, norms and values. Their subjects see them as deities; to wade off the ills within individuals and community's at large, unity is established within communities, rules and regulations are adhered to. The dread of been sanctioned by a masquerade cult, culturally is an abomination in tradition and attracts sanctions. Difficult matters arising and sensitive disputes are settled by masquerade cults in the Efik land, the culture and its ideals are reinstated. Their performance brings alive the cultural values of the societies / communities.

INTRODUCTION

According to Onuh (2017) in the world statistics there are fifteen prominent cults, the first one is the Pirate confraternity, established by Wole Soyinkain Ibadan Nigeria in 1952 known as (National Association of seadogs). The second is Free Masons which emerged from western culture in the 16th and 17th century with about six million members, which draw their structure from Egyptian mysticism, Masons were originally Egyptian fraternity of builders with Imhotep as their founder. The third is the World Egyptian Rite Masons (WERM), they use the 97 degree steps of progression, founded in 1717, they promote perfection of inner being and members are purportedly heads of countries and construction establishments. The fourth is the *Osirica*, fraternity of the adorers of *Osiris*. The fifth is the *Desteni*, they shave their hair, drink hydrogen peroxide, preach forgiveness of Adolf Hitler and eradication of human beings, a modern E-cult and members are recruited through the internet. The sixth is *Abakua*, a Cuban rendition of *Ekpe* cult of cross river state of Nigeria, the leopard society, transported from Africa to Cuba; secrecy is the trait of the cult. The seventh is the *Okonko* equivalent of a stronger *Ekpe* cult in the Igbo community, eight is the Ekpe cult, the leopard cult, and a male masquerade cult of the *Efik*, in cross river state of Nigeria, followed by Doomsday cult (prediction of total destruction of planet earth), then the Afrikaner Brotherhood originated during the apartheid for the interest of Afrikaans in south Africa) followed by the Neegee society (cannibalistic, feed on humans) followed by the Sande all female cult of Liberia. Then theporo cult

(masquerade cult sierra Leone) fourteen is the Enkankar cult, a 20th century cult and the fifteenth is the Ogboni fraternity has a strong affiliation to royalty Onuh (2017).

BRIEF HISTORY OF EFIK ETHNIC GROUP

Cross Rivers State with the capital as Calabar is made up of ethnic groups like the Efiks, Quas, Efuts, and Okoyongs. The period of Efik settlement in the area would be around 1400A.D and founded by Barbot's Duke Aphrom's ancestor, while some people there still answer white Duke or just Duke, Oku (1989). Efik ethnic group is located primarily in southern Nigeria, actual origin unknown but due to remote and immediate causes of war and various differences, this created migration up the river Mbiabo. Some Efik people chose to settle in towns like Creek town, Duke town and Henshaw town. According to 2006 Nigerian census the Efik made up 2% of the nation's population. According to Yellow-Duke (2016), Efiks are made up of six families and each family has its own masquerade. Their language is predominantly spoken within the Calabar municipality, Calabar south, Odukpani, Akpabuyo and Bakassi local government areas, Trip down memory lane (2016). According to Project (2016), reports that, Efik has a total population of 634, 000.

History records that entire Efik leader and his entire village of Obutong were captured by the British slave traders and taken to their final destination, Havana in Cuba. The Efik chief founded the Abakua group society in Havana in 1830s. The first Abakua group is named after 'Obutong' an Efik town in Calabar (Trip down memory lane, 2016). Their Religion includes Christianity and traditional Efik religion. Their traditional outfit for men consists of a wrapper and loose shirt top with

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cap and a walking stick and a piece of cloth draped over the shoulder and the women's traditional outfit consists of a flowing gown with elaborate gathers.

This paper contends for the need to revisit the role of Ekpe masquerade in the 21st century Efik culture. It concludes by asking the question if the role of Ekpe masquerade can be resuscitated again. This study employs a historical approach to ascertain the origin, period, population and cultural background of the Efik people. Data for the study were obtained from interviews, analysis, video clips from internet and available literature on Ekpe masquerade cult. In carrying out this research brief historical background of Efik, the position of the cult worldwide, the cult itself, analysis of the Ekpe masquerade before and after independence was looked into.

The author addresses the probably reasons for the decline of the dictatorial grip and judicial power of Ekpe masquerade cult over the people of Efik. It concludes by suggesting that culture is the sum total of a man which includes language, dance, musical instruments, music, costume, food, geographical location, arts and crafts, religion, beliefs, architecture, occupation, myths, norms, values and physical appearance (physique), change any aspect of a culture and the culture will assume a new form. No culture is static, culture evolves any culture that is static will die, but the essential part of a culture should and can be integrated back into the modernized culture to keep the past alive.

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. 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) 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. 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. The influence of the Christian Missionary fast supersedes that of Egbo' (Oku, 1989).

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 (E.A.Udoh, 1971). The most distinguished and highest of the entire masquerade in Calabar is the Ekpe masquerade. Its members are only men and are played on special occasion (<http://kwekudee-tripdownmemor>: retrieved 20th September 2017). Ekpe Efik was used as a government instrument in Bakassi in exercising authority for more than 200 years ago (E.O.Efiong-Fuller, 1996).

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 (<https://en...m.wikipedia.org/w>, 2016). Other masquerades include Nnabo, Ekomo and a host of others. In a personal interview with (Yellow-Duke, 2016) 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.

Observations shows from the testament of Beecroft (Oku, 1989) and Rev Hope Wadell (E.A.Udoh, 1971), and (Yellow-Duke, 2016) 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.

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. 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.

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 (<https://afrocubaweb.com/at>, 2016).

The Obong as the paramount ruler is traditionally the head of Ekpe (Egbo) or leopard society (<https://www.britanica.com/1>, 2016), 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 writer probably now understands why all over Nigeria, in respective of ethnic group when children see masquerades probably because Calabar has the best crop of Nigerian masquerades they start singing thus:

Song:

Ojuju Calabar o yoyo mama

Translate

Masquerade of Calabar welcome or can also mean fearful mama

EFIK SECRET WRITING

Nsibidi is used by the Ekpe secret leopard society as a means of transmitting Ekpe symbolism, and it is an ancient Nigerian numbers (<http://kwekudee-tripdownmemor>: retrieved 20th September 2017). In Africa generally we have a rich language heritage and secret writings coded for cult's information. Purposely within cults or known to groups of ethnic affiliations. Some examples include Egyptian hieroglyphics, the Dogon people of Malicoded signs, and the Yoruba Obatala signs used in the temple, the Yoruba Aroko can be used in sending message to an individual (Eluyemi, 1987) just as the Nsibidi language. Among the Yoruba it has been observed that ideographs were and are still in use to convey ideas and special messages (Eluyemi, 1987).

The Efik language dates back to 4000 and 5000BC, the language is as old as the Ikom monoliths which dates back to AD170 and they started a form of secret writing known as 'Nsibidi' (Trip down memory lane, 2016). Nsibidi is only one amongst the pre-colonial indigenous

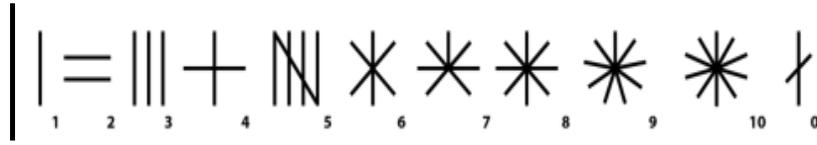


Figure 1 Ancient Nigerian Numbers Nsibidi (Source: <http://www.gophoto.it>)

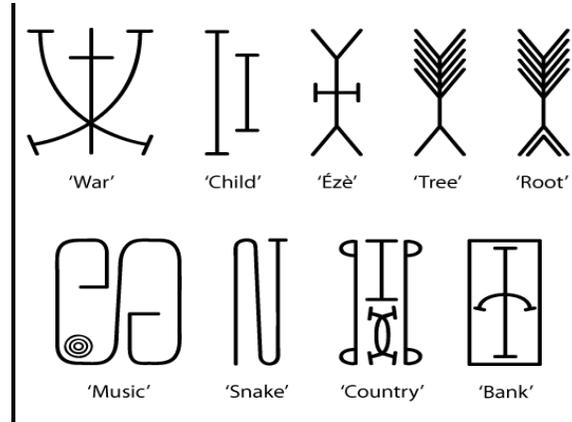


Figure II Nsibidi Symbols (Source: <http://www.gophoto.it>)



Figure III Ukaracloth (Figure III) and Nsibidi (Figure II) writing (Source: <http://www.mcser.org>)



Figure IV EKPE MASQUERADES, (Source: <http://www.gophoto.it>)



Figure V Ekpe masquerade (<http://www.gophoto.it>)

writing systems of south east Nigeria .Europeans discovered the secret society writing in1905 (Chinenye, 2017). There are thousands of Nsibidi symbols of which over 500 have been recorded. It is primarily used by Ekpe Leopard secret cult also known as Ngbe or Egbowhich is found in Cross River State among the Ekoi, Efik, Igbo people (<http://kwekudee-tripdownmemor>: retrieved 20th September 2017) and non-verbal systems, including body movements, eye language, drawing in the air, or on floor with the feet and many more. The age of the secret writing can also be compared to Nok sculpture found in the north of Nigeria that marked the end of the Stone Age and beginning of Iron Age, which dates back to 500 B.C.

It is with Nsibidi that the initiates talk amongst themselves and the Ekpe. The pictographic and ideographic Nsibidi is in fact a language rather than mere systems of motifs. Nsibidi includes a whole range of verbal expression. Nsibidiwas transferred via slave trade to Cuba, where it developed into the Anaforuana and Veve symbols (<http://kwekudee-tripdownmemor>: retrieved 20th September 2017). King Eyo Nsa Honesty II of Greek town, Calabar created the Efik language orthography in 1812 (<http://kwekudee-tripdownmemor>: retrieved 20th September 2017). Thus as an African writing system Nsibidi on any arts and craft, fibers or cultural shrines serves as a form of language for communication within the initiates/devotees. It is a visual artistic expression of symbols, made up of unit motifs designs to form a language expression (motifs).

Prominent Paraphernalia of Ekpe Society

The Ukara cloth (Figure III) is a fabric that is used by members of the cult. This is an official and traditional apparel of the Ekpe society. The Ukara is a blue and white fabric inscribed with two dimensional motifs called Nsibidi (Figure II). While initiates wear the Ukara fabric and the cloth may also become a wall hanging. Ukara cloth is dyed only in indigo. There are several Nsibidi signs such as leopards, snake, turtle, birds etc. and many signify multiple meanings (Figure II) beyond the representation. Most clothes are custom made for specific individuals or ritual uses (<http://kwekudee-tripdownmemor>; retrieved 20th September 2017).

EKPE MASQUERADE ATTIRE/ANALYSIS

Ekpe masquerades (Figure IV &V) are normally beautifully clad in creative, distinct colorful costumes, with predominant colors like red, black, yellow and white. Upper part of masquerade looks bigger because of the chested padding, with long peacock feathers and porcupine quills from four to eight on the tip of the headdress mask, with padded feet, a padded bangle like wrist bands and a long stick on the right hand and on the left hand, they always carry a bunch of Ojikirisi leaves. Ekpe masquerade moves gracefully, with intricate, delicate, Smart, stylish movements. The color usage is balanced, costume is well coordinated, and the visual expression created is unique and beautiful to watch. The Ekpe masquerade cultural/ tradition and mythology are the machine that creates the Ekpe masquerade amongst the Efik people. The Ekpe is sometimes called Mgbe or Leopard society (<http://kwekudee-tripdownmemor>: retrieved 20th September 2017). Ekpe masquerade is a visual cultural reference, initiated and designed to represent a leopard, its costume, makeup and props is designed to represent and define such.

THE CHALLENGES OF EKPE MASQUERADE CULT

Ekpe cult was the means of transporting and implementing cultural norms in the Efik society. It is used in conveying the values, myths, norms of spiritual processes. The idea /concepts of the Efik beliefs rest solely on the performance of Ekpe cult. Nobody has the right then to challenge the authority of the cult, their words carry power. From the artistic, ritualistic, unique, performance of the most distinguished Ekpe masquerade of the leopard cult to the sacred use of Nsibidi. The intricate and stylish movements of the masquerade with its well put together costume, putting into consideration the elements of design rates the masquerade as an artistic cultural expression. The Ekpe masquerade cult however diminish since independence to just a social status.

Scenario 1: Religious Challenge

The attitude of the Efik people towards indigenous religion/tradition and culture changed gradually. Educational exposure, foreign culture, technology, introduction of Christianity; all these affected the performance of Ekpe (leopard) masquerade cult. Any country colonized by foreigners always suffer from remnants of the foreign culture which the researcher coined 'lonism' (Folabalogun) if the remnants in the

colonized culture is not properly managed by the colonized, it can break or mare their culture.

Scenario 2: Democracy/independence Challenge

African continent witnessed a lot of changes right from 1830s, from the introduction of Christianity and Islam to the amalgamation of African in 1884. To the British punitive expedition of Bini kingdom in 1887, to colonization of Nigeria in 1960. Ekpe cult also lost its political power of administration and seal of authority round about the time when independence/democracy was ushered into Nigeria. The government took over the day to day running of affairs of the people. The Ekpe cult lost its executive, judiciary and administrative power. Power changed hands from the distinguished Ekpe cult to the democratized government of the day in Nigeria.

Scenario 3: Cultural Challenge

Modernization, Eurocentric ideologies, European legacy, cultural interference, de –emphasis of traditional values, norms, beliefs, and religion are some key factors that affected the performance of Ekpe cults, the cult lost its dictatorial grip on the masses.

Scenario 4: The Literature Challenge

The prestigious historical account and documentation of the most distinguished and most honored Ekpe masquerade forms a gap in literature. No detailed documentation of historical, artistic and cultural performance or events of the Ekpe masquerade for posterity.

Scenario 4: The Judiciary challenge

The people of the land does not take cases to Ekpe cult for settlement again and Ekpe does not issue degrees or carry out degrees because of the establishment of courts and the availability of the learned profession, producing lawyers for modern courts, people can disregard the laws of Ekpe cult now, even if it were given without any sanction.

The implication of this paper is that the Ekpe masquerade cult is an important aspect of the Efik traditional ways of life and cultural history of the Efiks; it is part and parcel of their artistic cultural expression. The cult reflected their norms, costume, custom, values, myths, beliefs, religion and language which form the foundation of any culture and these are all embedded in the performance expression of the Ekpe leopard cult and the members. Change is unavoidable in every culture and its constant; any culture that is static will die, since culture evolves. The important aspect of a tradition can be married into the new creating uniqueness. Eulogy tells stories of our past achievements into present expectations and it is not uncommon to find families, individuals and communities/villages with theirs. It is therefore very interesting, creative, Nigerian, expressive, cultural and artistic to end this discourse with the Calabar eulogy.

Calabar:

Daughter of the Cross River and Calabar River
 Granddaughter of the Atlantic
 My Fatherland
 Home of the Efiks
 The Qua and Coqua
 The Efut
 The Okoyong
 Home of all Nigerians
 Hostess to the World
 Always accommodating

Never repulsive
 By nature endowed with beauty
 Half land
 Half water
 Most ancient
 Most modern
 Most backward
 Most progressive
 Most rigid
 Most tender
 Proud
 But not arrogant
 Now in the forefront
 Now in the rear
 Most slandered
 Most extolled
 Most coveted
 Most beloved
 Well predestined
 Always religious
 “Abasi do! Her sigh of hope
 Cleanest
 Filthiest
 Affectionately nicknamed
 CANAAN CALABAR (E.O.Efiong-Fuller, 1996)

RECOMMENDATIONS

Firstly, The Ekpe masquerade cult for example can be co-opted into the arm of the customary law court of the Efiks, like we have Sharia courts in some part of the country

Secondly, members can be co-opted as candidates into state police force, state civil defense corps or state peace ambassadors, or tagged local Ekpe masquerade vigilante group, the dread of sanctions from the cult, will help in bringing sanity to lawless people in the polity.

Lastly, the Status of Ekpe masquerade cult should be updated back to its former position by giving them some state assignments to foresee. The National Institute for Cultural Orientation (NICO), National Council for Arts and Culture (NCAC), should also intensify efforts to revive, propagate, uplift and promote the cultural expression of Ekpe masquerade of the people of Efik speakers.

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