

TAKE IT TO THE STREETS: PERFORMING EKPE/MGBE POWER IN CONTEMPORARY  
CALABAR, NIGERIA

By

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To the Nigerian families who made this possible—the family of Ntoe Patrick Inok Oquagbor V,  
the family of Mbong Atu Ausaji, and the family of Ekpenyong Bassey Nsa

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The Ekpe/Mgbe society is the most renowned cultural institution of the Cross River region (southeastern Nigeria and west Cameroon). The society was the governing body for many communities of the region, even into the colonial era. In Calabar, it was not only a regulating society, but was also modified in order to manage the transatlantic slave and oil trades during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Despite Ekpe/Mgbe's well-documented history, recent scholars disregard its place in contemporary Calabar as merely recreational. This dissertation argues otherwise by exploring how, why, and for what purposes Ekpe/Mgbe art and performance were appropriated during Calabar's recent period of urbanization and continues to be into the present.

The story of the recent permutations of the art of the Ekpe/Mgbe society in the city of Calabar, capital of Cross River State, Nigeria, demonstrates how so-called "traditional" culture or more correctly, long-standing modes of cultural expression, are not only thriving in urban environments today, but are also still relevant for members who use the society to negotiate the contemporary lifestyle in which they live. In this dissertation, I argue that the Ekpe/Mgbe society in Calabar is a socio-political, financial, and cultural infrastructure for its members. I contend that in framing Ekpe/Mgbe as infrastructure, the ability of the society to become more public

through the claiming of space during performance is absolutely critical for its contemporary relevance in Calabar.

In order to grapple with why the Ekpe/Mgbe society is still relevant beyond the level of heritage and how it thrives in the urban experience of Calabar, I examine its ritual, masquerade performance, and knowledge system. Ekpe/Mgbe ritual and masquerade performances are important evidence for this study since they have morphed into cosmopolitan spectacles packed with layers of meaning about contemporary life. The society's esoteric language *nsibidi*, an imaged and performed knowledge system, has also become more urban in the way it is learned and transmitted in private and in public. I, therefore, demonstrate that Ekpe/Mgbe ritual, masquerade performance, and *nsibidi* are being taken to the streets in new and innovative ways.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

The story of the recent permutations of the art of the Ekpe/Mgbe society in the city of Calabar, capital of Cross River State, Nigeria, demonstrates how so called “traditional” culture or more correctly, long-standing modes of cultural expression, are not only thriving in urban environments today but are also still relevant for members who use the society to negotiate the contemporary lifestyle in which they live. In this dissertation, I argue that the Ekpe/Mgbe society in Calabar is a socio-political, financial, and cultural infrastructure for its members. I contend that in framing Ekpe/Mgbe as infrastructure, the ability of the society to become more public through the claiming of space during performance is absolutely critical for its contemporary relevance in Calabar. The dissertation further demonstrates that one facet of Ekpe/Mgbe’s vitality in contemporary Calabar is the ability of the society to be economically relevant both as a source of revenue for members and as a mechanism to demonstrate status, wealth, and power through performative display.

In order to grapple with why the Ekpe/Mgbe society is still relevant beyond the level of heritage and how it thrives in the rapidly modernizing urban environment of Calabar, I examine its ritual, performance, and knowledge system. Ekpe/Mgbe ritual and masquerade performances are important evidence for this study because they have morphed into cosmopolitan spectacles packed with layers of meaning about contemporary life. The society’s esoteric language *nsibidi*, an imaged and performed knowledge system, has also become more urban in the way it is learned and transmitted in private and in public. Thus, I demonstrate that Ekpe/Mgbe ritual, masquerade performance, and *nsibidi* are being taken to the streets in ways that have never been done before. Although this dissertation is mostly concerned with Ekpe/Mgbe in contemporary Calabar, understanding how the society changed during the transatlantic slave trade, the early

Christian missionary period, and the colonialism era lays the foundation for its continued vitality in the present.

A fundamental point I am trying to make in this work is how the importance of money and space, in my opinion, are underrepresented in the field of African art. In stressing the importance of space, this examination favors an approach from the perspective of performance rather than the more traditional object-based analysis. Although I depart from strictly investigating objects, I treat Ekpe/Mgbe performances as if they are objects in motion. In addition to my focus on space and performance, the broader objectives of this dissertation are to construct a contemporary history of a given masquerade culture, examine the social workings of masquerade and knowledge systems in an urban society, analyze the adaptability of visual culture, and provide yet another example that deconstructs the myth conjured by the Western world that longer-standing forms of African art are stuck in the past, unchanging, or in any way static traditions.

### **African Art History and the “Traditional”/Modern Dichotomy**

Art historians investigating long-standing forms of African art have long grappled with the limiting labels the West developed under the guise of cultural supremacy during Enlightenment, Romanticism, Imperialism, and colonialism. During these historical periods and intellectual movements, African art, like most non-Western art and culture, was labeled as exotic, heathen, “primitive,” and incapable of change. More recently, the term “tradition” has replaced the more derogatory label “primitive,” and although more palatable, the term still misconstrues long-standing art forms into something they are not. The notion of “traditional” African arts or society is a completely fabricated and erroneous conception that the West cannot seem to shake from its Victorian past (Kasfir 1992: 41). The terminology that classifies African art is thus a thorny issue that scholars have attempted to deconstruct early on in the formation of the discipline.

The early literature that fueled investigation of change in the African “traditional” arts was rooted in stylistic investigation. In the pioneering exhibition catalogue *Sculpture of Black Africa: The Paul Tishman Collection*, Roy Sieber and Arnold Rubin moved beyond broad and typical labeling conventions of the 1950s and 1960s. They structured their stylistic investigation of African art geographically, and organized their exhibition on the “principle that styles are not totally discrete entities, but rather that contacts between groups, migrations of peoples, wars, and trade routes contributed to the extension of artistic tradition” (Sieber and Rubin 1968: 12).

Rene Bravmann’s *Open Frontiers* expanded upon this approach. Bravmann made use of the Cercle de Bondoukou and west central Ghana and the grasslands of Cameroon to demonstrate the “openness” of African culture. His emphasis shifted to investigating how trade routes and market systems impacted art and culture. According to Bravmann, “local, regional, interregional, and even international trade networks have touched virtually all cultures in Black Africa and have had a direct effect upon the material culture and the arts of these societies” (Bravmann 1973: 13). These observations enabled Bravmann to challenge the notion that African art does not embody change and that cultures are isolated and discrete units. Additionally, Bravmann pointed to the lack of historical analysis in scholarship. He states, “the facts of history for shorter periods of time cannot, however be ignored, and Africa has been characterized by a degree of historical dynamism which must be dealt with” (ibid., 10).

During the 1980s, Sidney Kasfir’s essay, *One Tribe, One Style* continued the discourse concerning stylistic investigation. She notes that scholarship characterizing the dynamics of styles and genres has been successful. However at the same time, it lacks an historical dimension. Kasfir’s goal was to construct a history of Idoma art and in working towards this she soon realized that stylistic approaches alone could not meet this end. Kasfir realized that in order

to achieve an historical model, in her words, “it is necessary to move beyond style per se as the main vehicle for investigation, since in most instances the evidence for stylistic change will not exist over such long time spans” (Kasfir 1984: 186). She further states, “one alternative is to concentrate upon the introduction, diffusion, and demise or survival of particular institutions which are directly symbolized by concrete forms such as sculpture or regalia of office” (ibid.).

In the final years of the decade, Paula Girshick Ben-Amos and Monni Adams summarized the field of African visual arts by addressing the historiography from both anthropological and art historical perspectives (Ben-Amos 1989 and Adams 1989). Ben-Amos notes that anthropological studies have primarily focused on context, while Adams addresses the popular style and object-based art historical approach. Adams foreshadows not only more in-depth studies on change and innovation in long-standing forms of African art to come, but also that younger generations of artists will engage in more “international idioms” (Adams 1989: 85-86). These important early works along with others forged the path for more recent scholarship on long-standing African art forms to move beyond style and to explore histories of exchange, global and local interaction, multi-disciplinary approaches, and the ways in which “traditional” art continues to embody change. However, with the rise of interest in “contemporary” African art during the late 1980s, the field started not only to divide but once again to be plagued by issues of terminology.

Many younger generations of African art scholars shifted their attention from so-called “traditional” to “contemporary” African art. The shift sparked heated debate in the discipline’s primary journal *African Arts*. Fredrick Lamp led the discourse with a cutting “first word” exploring the lack of fieldwork in Africa with comments like “[t]hey [those investigating contemporary arts] want to spend more time in discourse and less time in fieldwork—perhaps

two or three months, in which they fit the data into their preconceived ideas” (Lamp 1999: 9). Lamp’s essay led to a flurry of responses by a number of scholars.<sup>1</sup> The conflict of interest between the emerging subfield of “contemporary” art and the so-called “traditional” arts is rooted to these early debates.

Such discourse and methodological difference has resulted in the field of African art history currently split into a troubling dichotomy: “traditional” or “classical” is found on the left side, while the labels of “modern” or “contemporary” occupies the right side of the division (Bentor 2005). The so-called “traditional” or “classical” category includes masquerade, shrines, figural sculpture, textiles, ritual-based art forms, and many more. Non-specialists or non-enthusiasts generally understand these art forms as unchanging, static, frozen in time, and not parallel to those so-called “contemporary” arts. However, every student of African art understands that the so-called “traditional” African arts are anything but static and frozen in time. On the contrary, this realm of art is fluid, dynamically changes through time and space, and reflects contemporary consciousness, politics, ideas, and trends. On the other side of the equation, “modern or contemporary” denotes those artists responding to or involved in approaching art from a more Western perspective, one that includes Western media and studio-based or academically trained artists. In addition, the division has also led to another myth that so-called “traditional” art is only situated in rural environments while “contemporary” art occupies urban centers.

The division has led some to investigate the semantics of labels and develop new systems of classification. Susan Vogel’s challenging exhibition and catalogue, *Africa Explores: 20<sup>th</sup> Century African Art*, addressed a broad range of contemporary African visual representations to

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<sup>1</sup> See “replies to Lamps first word” (1999).

propose the categories of Traditional, New Functional, Urban, International, and Extinct (Vogel 1991). John Picton responded by commenting that the use of the label tradition is still problematic even though he agreed with Vogel's definition. Picton further argued that Vogel's proposed categories suggest some problematic dichotomies: Africa/Europe, traditional/contemporary, craft/art, and functional/aesthetic (Picton 1992). More recently, Eli Bentor has offered that African art forms be categorized as rural or urban and further organized into the time periods of pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial in order to move beyond the traditional and contemporary dualism (Bentor 2005). At the fifteenth Triennial symposium on African art in 2011, during a discussion on issues of terminology, the late Ivan Karp stated that the term "traditional" is the crutch limiting the field of African art today and suggested the terms traditional-based and contemporary-based. Only few have turned focused attention on how the two subfields are in dialogue with each other (Hassan 1999 and Kreamer 2009).

Meanwhile, since the mid 1980s, in lieu of developing new terminology and categorical constructions, scholars interested in African visual arts have sought to deconstruct the notion of "tradition" and its limiting temporal connotation through demonstrating historical dimension and contemporaneity with in-depth analysis. A brief list includes John Nunley's research on the integration of Ode-lay masquerade in Freetown, Sierra Leone (Nunley 1987), Mary Jo Arnoldi's investigation of Malian masquerade theater (Arnoldi 1995), Z. S. Strother's analysis of masquerade in Democratic Republic of Congo (Strother 1998), Victoria Rovine's work on the changing markets of *bogolan* in Mali and in the wider fashion world (Rovine 2008), Martha Anderson and Philip Peek's study of the cultural matrix of the Niger Delta (Anderson and Peek 2002), Thomas Seligman and Kristyne Loughran examination of Tuareg art and culture (Seligman and Loughran 2006), Sidney Kasfir's inquiry into the demise and survival of Idoma

(Nigeria) and Maasai (Kenya) warrior hood art and practices during the colonial period (Kasfir 2007), Steven Nelson's exploration of the dynamic history of Chadian and Cameroonian Mousgoum architecture (Nelson 2007), and more recently, Peter Probst's probe into the confluence between Yoruba heritage, Osun Osogbo, and modernism (Probst 2011).

This dissertation follows the above body of work to demonstrate further that the arts of the so-called "traditional" are involved in the same discourse of modernity that so-called "modern or contemporary" artists are often known to be engaged in. In my opinion, little difference exists between these constructed categories. It is important to note that Artists and their work have not forged this divide; it is a result of scholarly discourse. The major difference, however, is the intended market and audience. The investigation of Ekpe/Mgbe as infrastructure and its continued relevance in Calabar, Nigeria, is presented to reveal how local forms of expression are indeed thriving in urban environments. In fact, urban Calabar and the wider rural cultural matrix of the Cross River region provide a perfect study area for investigating how longer forms of artistic expression have for long engaged with the forces of modernity.

### **Cross River Art and Culture**

The Cross River region, encompassing southeastern Nigeria and West Cameroon, is home to many diverse but linguistically related peoples (Fig. 1-1). The Ejagham,<sup>2</sup> Efik, Ibibio, Yakurr, Bokyi, Ekajuk, Anyang, Banyang, and Widekum are often the most recognized peoples of the region. These peoples relied on local cultural and political institutions for governance. Since migration into their present locations, the peoples have long been engaged in constant historical and cultural interaction. Even though the region is ripe for studies addressing artistic

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<sup>2</sup> Formerly known as Ekoi

and cultural change over time, since the formation of African art history as a discipline in 1957, the region has not attracted much scholarly attention until recently.

The work of the late Kenneth Murray, the founder of Nigeria's Antiquities Service in 1943, the late G. I. Jones, the late Keith Nicklin, and Jill Salmons, foremost scholars of Cross River art, paved the way for future scholarship. My own work draws on the foundation laid by previous scholars. A significant wave of publications appeared during the late 1970s and 1980s. In an important article, "No Condition is Permanent," Nicklin summarized the region, its art forms, and institutions as involved in continuous stages of cultural dialogue (Nicklin 1983). Published a year later, but written much earlier, following the popular emphasis of object-oriented analyses of style, Jones collapsed individual ethnic styles of Eastern Nigerian art into geographical zones (Jones 1984). Accepting this model, others developed a scheme for understanding sculptural styles by further breaking them down into subdivisions based on ethnic styles and geographical locality (Wittmer and Arnett 1978: 55-85, Nicklin 1979: 59, and Campbell 1983). Nicklin and Salmons shifted from an object-based approach to a stylistic examination focusing on context and interaction (Nicklin and Salmons 1984). Meanwhile, despite the preoccupation with style, investigation into archeology (Ekpo 1984 and Eyo 1999), men's associations, especially Ekpe/Mgbe (Ruel 1969, Ekpo 1978, Abalogu 1978, Thompson 1974 and 1983, Harris 1984, Koloss 1984 and 2008, Leib and Romano 1984, Ottenberg and Knudsen 1985, and Nicklin 1991), and *nsibidi* (Thompson 1978 and 1983) started to take shape.

The second wave of scholars conducting fieldwork on Cross River art and culture shifted analysis to recent trends in the field: gender, tourism, histories of exchange, cultural interaction, and how longer-standing artistic expression of the Cross River embodies change. Anthropologist Ute Rösenthaler examines Cameroonian Ejagham women's institutions and their art

(Röschenthaler 1998). On the Nigerian side of the region, Amanda Carlson adds to the understanding of gender in her investigation of Bakor-Ejagham women's institutions and female versions of *nsibidi*. In the middle Cross River region of Nigeria, Gitti Salami's analysis of the Leboku festival demonstrates that recent Yakurr ritual is a construction of envisioned tourism and a production of locality on an imagined international stage. Further using the Leboku festival, Salami interrogates the "traditional/modern" dichotomy to argue that kingship-based art is in no way "traditional" since it simultaneously is an orchestration of the local and the global (Salami 2008a and 2008b).

Others have addressed the history of artistic and cultural exchange in the Cross River region. In investigating masquerade trajectory and exchange in southeastern Nigeria, Bentor argues that two essential analytical strategies are needed: a history of how stylistic distribution progressed and a shift of analysis from "imposed categories of style" to local genres of masking. In his study of the flow and interaction of masking genres between the Cross River region and the Niger Delta, Bentor suggests a regional identity can be formulated when masquerade genres and types are understood through the historical interactions that shaped such masking genres into the various configurations throughout many different communities in southeastern Nigeria (Bentor 2002).

Along the same lines, but on the other side of the region, Röschenthaler charts the selling and buying of cultural associations and masquerade societies from the seventeenth century to 2001. In documenting the history of purchase dissemination, Röschenthaler demonstrates the pivotal role of cultural associations and the importance of intellectual property in stabilizing a noncentralized region (Röschenthaler 2006 and 2011). Rosalinde Wilcox's examination of dissemination and interaction suggests a shared artistic and cultural history along the coasts of

Cameroon and Nigeria and beyond (2002: 55). Particularly, Wilcox focuses on cultural exchange between the coastal lagoons, the Niger Delta, and the Wouri estuary. The diffusion of culture is approached in two ways: canoe trade and migration. Wilcox examines three separate Duala artistic genres: canoe paddles, horizontal masks, and body masquerades. The Duala—inhabiting the area of the Mungo, Wouri, and Dibamba Rivers, are also concentrated in the port city of Douala—were the middlemen in European trade, which resulted in far reaching cultural exchange that fueled artistic appropriation between the Niger Delta and Cross River groups (ibid., 44).

Early studies of Cross River art and culture followed the wider discipline's preoccupation with style, resulting in static modes of analysis. Building on the foundation of the early authorities, in the last 30 years, recent scholarship that investigates rural Cross River art and culture has invigorated the field with new modes of analysis. Such work demonstrates these peoples' inherent capacity to appropriate continually in the face of change. In addition to studies examining art and culture, larger historical sketches of the region have been offered (Abasiattai 1990 and Jaja et al 1990). Along with migration and trade, long before and after the arrival of Europeans, at the center of the above scholarly investigations of artistic, cultural, and historical flows that define the histories of exchange, purchase, and interaction among the Cross River peoples, a major impetus was the crucial port city of Calabar.

### **Calabar**

The city of Calabar is home to the Efik, the Efut, and the Qua-Ejagham peoples who inhabited the city as early as the beginning of the fifteenth century. However, continued archeological excavation in Calabar unearthed a body of terracotta fragments, vessels, and figures that suggest a much longer history of occupation dating back to the fifth century CE (Slogar 2005 and 2007 and Eyo and Slogar 2008). Located in the most southeastern point of

Nigeria, the port city of Calabar occupies the left bank of the Calabar River some 30 miles from the estuary where a number of rivers flow into the Gulf of Guinea.

### **Pre-Colonial Calabar**

The location and geography of Calabar led to early Portuguese visits starting in 1472 (Efiong-Fuller 1996: 1). About 200 years later, Calabar rose as a major early West African commercial port engaged in the transatlantic slave trade with Europe. The port city of Calabar has thus a long and layered history. During the pre-colonial era, the accounts of European explorers, traders, missionaries, and the diary of Efik slave trader Antera Duke, provide the earliest documentation of Calabar (Told 1785, Holman 1840, King 1844, Hutchinson 1858, Waddell 1863, Goldie 1890, Kingsley 1899, Williams 1897, Forde 1956, Behrendt, Latham, and Northrup 2010). Most scholarly investigation, conducted by historians, addresses pre-colonial Calabar and its role in the transatlantic slave and subsequent oil trades (Aye 1967, Nair 1972, Latham 1973, Northrup 1978, Ume 1980, Forde 1956, Jones 1963[2000], n.a. 1986a, and Behrendt, Latham, and Northrup 2010). In the vast historiography of precolonial Calabar, all sources devote many pages to the central role of the Ekpe/Mgbe society in the early commercial success of Calabar.<sup>3</sup> Calabar, the slave and oil trade, and the Efiks' appropriation of Ekpe as a means to negotiate international commerce thus merit attention.

Significant trade at Old Calabar<sup>4</sup> did not begin until the early eighteenth century (Behrendt, Latham, and Northrup 2010: 48). The slave trade at Old Calabar started in approximately 1650 and declined around 1838, leading to the exportation of about 275,000

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<sup>3</sup> In the early literature, the society was referred to by its pidgin name Egbo.

<sup>4</sup> Europeans probably coined the term "Old Calabar" in order to distinguish the town from the Kalabari River (for more see Nair 1972: 1-2).

slaves, ranking Calabar as the fifth highest port in total slave exports. The palm oil trade then rose as the chief source of overseas trading in the 1820s.

At the time of the slave trade, the Efik inhabited the coastal areas of Calabar, which was segmented into different towns: Duke Town, Old Town, Creek Town, and the Guinea Company Towns. Each town or ward was composed of extended family units, which split into different wards through the centuries. For example, in Duke town, Efiom Ekpo lineage split into the Henshaw, Ntiero, Duke, and Eyamba wards, and in the nineteenth century, Duke Town witnessed the development of the Archibong ward (Behrendt, Latham, and Northrup 2010: 16). Each principal family competed for trade with Europeans, sometimes resulting in violent confrontations.<sup>5</sup> Wards were led by family heads, who acquired great wealth and status in Efik society, as well as prominence in the newly created Ekpe institution.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Efik obtained Ekpe and modified it in order to facilitate the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Ekpe minimized tension among competing Efik merchants. Because political rivalry existed in Old Calabar, Ekpe was able to exert control over political leaders and therefore played an important role in political equilibrium. According to Jones, “no free-born man in Old Calabar, however rich and powerful, could afford not to be a member of Egbo and thereby submit to its control; nor could he exercise authority except through the society and as a member of its highest grade” (Jones 1956: 144-145). For the Ejagham in the hinterlands and those in the Calabar area, prior to and during the slave trade, Mgbe served as the socio-political and religious vehicle even into the period of European and colonial intervention. The coastal Efiks did not have an institution that could negotiate their

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<sup>5</sup> For example, a battle between the Dukes and Henshaws led to the establishment of Henshaw Town in the mid-eighteenth century. In another instance, the bloody massacre at Old Town between 1805-1809 greatly strengthened Duke Town and Creek Town’s position in the trade (see Behrendt, Latham, and Northrup 2010: chapter one).

changing needs. Once the Efik did obtain Ekpe, their version was, like that of others, political and judicial, but it also endured modification in order to handle the changing patterns of commercial, social, and religious life at Calabar brought about by European presence. One major change to Ekpe during the mid-eighteenth century was the enforcement of the collection of debts, facilitating trust and fair exchange between Efik traders and European captains. Another was the fining and sanctioning<sup>6</sup> of those who violated trade policies.

Europeans lived on their ships, and all trading was done by credit. The supercargoes would unload commodities to those Efik traders considered trustworthy. The ships then waited for up to a year sometimes while the trader obtained enough slaves and palm oil for the goods credited. The entire trade credit system depended on Ekpe as the only legal means for recovering debt (Jones 1956: 124 and 141). According to British traveler James Holman:

when a person cannot obtain his due from a debtor the aggrieved party applies to the Duke (Ephraim) for the Egbo drums: if the Duke accedes to the request the Egbo assembly immediately meets and the drums are beat about the town... . If the complaint be just the Egbo is sent to an offending party to warn him of his delinquency and to demand reparation, after which announcement no one dares move out of the house inhabited by the culprit until the affair is settled, and if it is not soon arranged the house is pulled down about the ears in which case the loss of a few heads frequently follows... . Capt. Burrell of the ship *Heywood* of Liverpool held the rank of Yampai and he found it exceedingly to his advantage as it enabled him to recover all the debts due to him by the natives” (Holman 1840[1792]: 392-393).

The passage is quite revealing as it demonstrates the rapidity with which Ekpe reprimanded offenders and how forcefully Ekpe chastised if necessary. Equally as interesting, the passage reveals that European captains found it advantageous to become members of the organization (Nair 1972: 17-18).

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<sup>6</sup> Jones discusses seven ways Ekpe sanctioned offenders (see 1956: 142-142).

Indeed, the influence of Ekpe was essential to the success of the Efik slave and palm oil trading networks. As many argue, once the Efik obtained Mgbe and modified it into Ekpe, their version was resold to communities upriver, enabling inland peoples to become credit worthy in the Efik system (Nair 1972: 19, Latham 1973: 39 and Ottenberg and Knudsen 1985: 38), which in turn unified a fragmented region. The Efik built a 30,000 square mile commercial zone that linked to even wider trading routes. The three year extracts from 1785-1788 of the diary of Duke Antera, a prominent Efik merchant, coupled with European traveler records, establish that the Efik became powerful middlemen as early as 1720 and that later in the 1780s, their trading network extended south to the Cross River estuary and upriver to include Ibibio districts, Arochukwu, Umon, and routes linking to the Cameroon grasslands (Behrendt, Latham, and Northrup 2010: chapter 4). Through the trading eras, especially during the transatlantic slave traffic, the Efik relied heavily on the Ekpe institution to manage their changing needs. The pre-colonial literature demonstrates how vital and malleable the Ekpe society was not only for commercial success but also for managing European presence until the eventual British colonial encounter.

### **Colonial Calabar**

The authority and role of Ekpe/Mgbe was drastically decreased during the colonial period. Missionaries and colonial officials continued efforts to stamp out local forms of religiosity and governance as attempted during the pre-colonial days. Ironically, however, the early colonial era also produced informative ethnographic sketches on Cross River peoples, art, and culture. On the Cameroon side of the region, Alfred Mansfeld documented many aspects of Ejagham art and culture (Mansfeld 1908). In Nigeria, Charles Partridge, a district commissioner, described masquerade societies and their art forms in some detail (Partridge

1905). John Parkinson provided a lengthy discussion on the Efik Ekpe and the Ejagam Mgbe society lodge (Parkinson 1907).

The most extensive account was offered by P. A. Talbot, British colonial Administrator, who worked primarily among the Ejagham of the Oban district, but also documented a number of other communities as well (Talbot 1912 and 1926). Talbot's drawings, photographs, and lucid descriptions of Ejagham architecture, Mgbe and other masquerade societies, *nsibidi*, folk tales, stone work, body decoration, religion, and general world-view are invaluable sources for any serious study about the Cross River region. Important to the current study, Talbot wrote that the Cross River region is "honeycombed with secret societies" (Talbot 1912: 37). This early characterization suggests that communities were separate but relied on similar organizations for local governance. At the same time, Talbot acknowledged that Ekpe/Mgbe was evolving differently in Calabar than in the rural north, which he described as practically unchanged (*ibid.*). This dissertation further builds on Talbot's early claim in that I provide a contemporary study of how the recent history and development of Calabar has shaped its masquerade culture into something quite different from the rural hinterland versions.

Despite the ethnographies, scholarship investigating Calabar art and culture from the colonial era is almost nonexistent. Most scholarly attention to colonial Calabar addresses political change (Afigbo 1972 and n.a. 1986), the city's general decline, and the decaying effects of colonialism on Calabar (Udo 1967, Nwaka 1976 and 1986). In an article on the city, published in *Nigeria Magazine* in 1956, during the waning days of colonial rule, the vitality of Calabar culture is discussed and vibrantly illustrated as alive and well. Most attention is given to the continued existence of Efik Ekpe and the Efik marriage custom (n.a. 1956). On the other hand, based on fieldwork conducted in 1958-1959, anthropologist Warren Morrill asserted that Ekpe

had seriously declined due to the conditions of urban life in Calabar (Morrill 1961: 231). In Warren's analysis of how the Efik and Igbo populations adapted to the changing conditions of Calabar, he concluded that they successfully negotiated the urban environment through involvement in "voluntary organizations," "market and tribal unions," "sport clubs," and "church groups" (ibid.). Warren's investigation serves as the foundation for my argument that frames Ekpe/Mgbe as an infrastructural support system for members. Although Warren's interests lay in non-cultural forms of urban sustainability, by comparing his research to the argument I present in this dissertation, I see a discernable pattern emerging. From the late 1950s to the first quarter of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, local peoples have continued to negotiate the changing conditions of life in Calabar through participation in communal and/or cultural associations.

### **Post-Colonial Calabar**

Shortly after Nigerian independence in 1960, the steady decline of Calabar witnessed during the colonial days quickly came to an end. The city's urbanization intensified when it became the capital of Nigeria's South Eastern State in 1967, the same year the Biafran civil war started. According to Ayo Olukoju, "it was the civil war and the forced migration of people into Eastern Nigeria that accounted for the rapid urbanization of the region compared to the pre-war situation" (Olukoju 2004: 35). After Calabar became the capital, and during the oil boom of the 1970s, the city witnessed a massive influx of migrants, resulting in citywide building and revitalization (ibid.). Also during the 1970s, Calabar was interacting more closely with larger cities like Lagos (O'Connor 1983: 260). Within a decade of being made the capital city of the state, Calabar transformed into an administrative, political, and commercial center (Hackett 1989: 25 and Inyang et al 1980: 24).

The population of Calabar in 1977 was estimated at about a quarter of a million (Ekanem 1980: 26). Both Nigerian Census reports of 1991 and 2006 indicate a population just under

400,000. In fact, the reports suggest a slight decrease in population from the 1990s to the early 2000s. However, most Calabarians disregard those numbers and estimate that today's population is about three million. In either case, within the forty-year span that brings us into the twenty-first century, Calabar has continued to develop as a highly modernized urban center. Today it features highways, shopping malls, Western-style grocery stores, fast food restaurants, a small marina amusement park, a free trade zone, and an athletic stadium and sports complex that recently hosted the U-17 World Cup in 2009 (Fig. 1-2). The current populace represents a growing multi-ethnic assortment of peoples: local (Efik, Efut, and Qua), and non-local Nigerians, and international.

Considering the historical depth of the city and its vast precolonial historiography, it is surprising to note an even greater absence of scholarship addressing Calabar and/or its art and culture from the independence and post-colonial eras. After the pattern of urbanization during the late 1960s and 1970s, Calabar witnessed not only tremendous growth and development, but also saw many local publications that characterize the city. Growing tensions between church groups and cultural associations lead to a conference hosted at Calabar's College of Technology in 1975, resulting in a published report debating the place of long-standing culture in a modernizing city (n.a. 1975). Other sources highlighted the general growth and development of Calabar (n.a. 1986b) and the way in which culture is a useful mechanism in nation-state building (Unoh 1986). Another source explored Calabar's environment, population, urban planning, and agriculture and fishing industries since the Biafra conflict (Inyand et al 1980). Yet another published seminar investigated the potentials of an export-processing zone (n.a. 1992).

Meanwhile, as local publications addressed the changing conditions of Calabar, written and published discourse fueled ethnic tension. The important local Efik historian, E. U. Aye

writes that “in the Cross River State today, everything is married to ethnic politics: whether in employment, promotion in service, award of contracts or scholarships, admissions into places of learning, distribution of projects and amenities and what not” (Aye 1980: 1). These politics have also extended to locally-written history. Ute Röschenhaler has shown that the local historiography in Calabar is elusive, often seen as a ploy for power as authors or scholars write history on their own ethnic groups to better position their own ethnicities in ongoing conflicts over land ownership, origin, hegemony, and history (Röschenhaler 2002).

Rosalind Hackett offers the most comprehensive examination of contemporary Calabar. Her book, *Religion in Calabar*, is an historical and contemporary study of the religious pluralism of the city (Hackett 1989). Hackett’s major contribution is mapping out the complex contemporary Christian, Pentecostal, Evangelical, and spiritual churches scene while charting their schisms and permutations. Despite Hackett’s important study, few other scholars have seemingly been concerned with Calabar’s cultural scene.

Ivor Miller’s work explores how Ekpe/Mgbe culture was recreated in colonial Cuba as a result of the transatlantic slave trade. Although his interest is based in pre-colonial and colonial history, his work also documents the contemporary cultural aspects of the versions of Ekpe/Mgbe in Calabar and the wider Cross River region (Miller 2004 and 2009). While Amanda Carlson has worked on rural Mgbe and *nsibidi* from the middle Cross River region (Carlson 2003), she has recently turned her attention to the city to offer an investigation of the recently expanded tourism project Carnival Calabar (Carlson 2010). Despite these important works, however, the contemporary art and culture of Calabar is yet to be written. My investigation into the contemporary arts of Ekpe/Mgbe seeks to address the glaring dearth of literature on post-colonial Calabar. Before discussing the conceptual framework that structures my approach to

analyzing the forces of urban modernity on a particular cultural association in order to argue Ekpe/Mgbe as infrastructure, some discussion of what Ekpe/Mgbe and *nsibidi* are required.

### **Ekpe/Mgbe and *Nsibidi***

Ekpe/Mgbe is mostly an all-male hierarchically organized society involved in ancestral veneration in which initiation is crucial for the attainment of membership. More recently in Calabar, wives of chiefs are initiated as honorary members but do not participate in lodge ritual. All initiation and ritual activities usually occur at the Efe Ekpe (Ekpe lodge) or Osam Mgbe (house of Mgbe). Each lodge is autonomous and wields considerable local power. In Calabar today—as in the past, each Efe Ekpe or Osam Mgbe manifests its influence over the community through a number of rituals and ceremonies mostly in the form of initiations and funerals. Nowadays, lodges manufacture elaborate public performances involving a number of members and masquerades for greater affect.

The label “leopard society” is often used generally to characterize Ekpe, Mgbe, and other variants found in the Cross River region into a nice, neat genre. However, I consider this label clumsy, awkward, and counterproductive because of its generalizing tone: it not only completely misrepresents the institution’s core, but also barely scratches the surface of the society (see chapter 5 for full discussion). In order to move beyond the problematic construction of “leopard society,” in this dissertation, the different linguistic terms Ekpe/Mgbe are used together to include all groups that make use of the society in Calabar: the Efik, the Efut, and the Qua. In other words, this dissertation endeavors to favor the local names and locality by using Ekpe/Mgbe when data reflects all three groups. Mgbe will be used to designate Qua evidence,

while Ekpe denotes Efik and Efut findings.<sup>7</sup> A larger ethnographic sketch of the Efik, the Efut and the Qua peoples is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

Ekpe/Mgbe was once the governing institution for many communities of the Cross River region. Generally, the society administered the political, the judicial, and the executive powers of the community. However, the governing duties of the society depended on the local needs of the particular community. An example is how the Efik changed Ekpe during the transatlantic slave trade.

More recently, most have discussed the diminishing influence of the society. However, I have observed during fieldwork investigation that in the rural areas of Akamkpa, Ugep, and Bechei, Ekpe/Mgbe is still the local means of government. In those cases, authority is vested in the hands of the titleholders or members holding the highest ranks where they take on the roles of judge and jury during communal trials.

In Calabar, I have also observed that the society is still socio-politically relevant. The head of the lodge, known as the *Iyamba* (in Efik) or *Se Dibo* (in Ekin, the Qua language) is the highest-ranking member. Thus the authority of the entire lodge resides with him. In rural Ejagham communities such as those located in Akamkpa, the clan head and the *Iyamba* are separate positions, occupied by two different men. However, the Akamkpa clan head is still a member of Mgbe, but he does not hold a position of power in that lodge. Yet for the Qua, the offices of clan head and *Se Dibo* are occupied by the same person. According to Qua local leaders and the wider community, local politics operate more smoothly since the two separate governing entities that characterize the rural Ejagham are collapsed into one in the Qua system.

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<sup>7</sup> Outside of Calabar, among other Ejagham peoples, the names Mgbe and Ngbe are used. Other versions of the society are found among the Igbo (in Arochukwu, Bende, Abam, Abriba, and Ohafia) and are locally known as Okonko.

This is one reason why Mgbe is still politically relevant at the local level in Calabar. The Efut also have a similar local political structure to that of the Qua. Another reason why Ekpe/Mgbe is still locally powerful resides in its authority to administer land rights and ownership. In Efik, Efut, and Qua communities, the rights to own and build on land requires permission from Ekpe/Mgbe.

Another important facet of Ekpe/Mgbe is its religiosity. While the discussion of Ekpe/Mgbe as religion is beyond the scope of this study, it is important to note the society's ancestral veneration practices. Most documentation on Ekpe/Mgbe stresses its religious dimension. However, I argue that the society's secrecy and restriction of membership has led to the misunderstanding that the society worships a bush or leopard-like spirit. For example, certain ritual situations require the sounding of the voice of the society. The voice is a roaring-like sound that emanates from the inner chamber of the society lodge. It is known as Mboko or the mystical Ekpe/Mgbe. Non-initiates fear this element and speculate as to what they think makes the roar, and thus fanciful stories have been created due to its secrecy. The Mboko or mystical Ekpe/Mgbe is closely linked to the ancestral veneration practices that define the religious aspect of the society.

At the time of my work, all members and ritual practices stressed the inherent connection between living members and deceased members. Pouring libation or verbally chanting to the ancestors of the society calls forth the dead's presence to aid, help, protect, and guide living members during ritual and everyday life. Most members deeply believe in the power of ancestors to mediate and intervene in the actions of the living. Given the gerontocratic structure of Ekpe/Mgbe, ancestors and usually elderly members hold the highest seats of authority. I therefore follow Igor Kopytoff's argument that ancestors and living elders belong to the same

conceptual category (Kopytoff 1997). Indeed, since ritual, rules, and regulations of Ekpe/Mgbe favor the elders, the stress of ancestral veneration can be seen as an extension of bolstering the authority of the elders. In order for members to understand the Mboko and its ancestral connection to the society, initiation into the society and the subsequent acquisition of knowledge is crucial. Acquiring Ekpe/Mgbe knowledge forms the foundation for the ways in which members begin to understand all aspects of the society—whether political, religious, or mystical.

After membership is attained, an initiate may pass through a number of subsequent initiations for further advancement. The acquisition of esoteric knowledge (*nsibidi*) is conceptualized as a form of initiation even if not transmitted during formal ritual. It becomes the responsibility of the member to acquire knowledge on his own. The knowledge is the basis for philosophy that explains the institution's connection to the ancestors, the bush, and aquatic realms and is central for continued advancement. The body of knowledge, known as *nsibidi*, is manifested in an imaged and performed language that informs all ritual, performative, philosophical, and ancestral aspects of the society. Most literature on *nsibidi* favors the imaged version, which falls under the more general category once used by the wider public than that of the restrictive Ekpe/Mgbe variety. In Carlson's important examination of *nsibidi* as literacy among the Bakor-Ejagham, she also offers a thorough literature review (Carlson 2003: 30-44).

Most literature on Calabar Ekpe/Mgbe has favored the Efik version due to its role during the transatlantic slave trade. Scholars and writers have thus explored the origin of the society, how the Efik obtained it, its role during the slave trade, and its hierarchical structure. The question as to when and how the Efik obtained Mgbe and modified it into Ekpe, and how their updated version served as a trade facilitator that was then used and diffused throughout the Calabar region and continued upriver and beyond is an interesting and ongoing discourse (see

Talbot 1912: 37, Hart 1964, Aye 1967: 70-73, Latham 1973: 35-39, Abalogu 1978: 78-79, Ekpo 1978: 74, Northrup 1978: 108-110, Ottenberg and Knudsen 1985: 37 and 94, Nciklin 1991: 7-15, Bentor 2002, Koloss 2008: 63, Anwana 2009, and Behrendt, Latham and Northrup 2010: 27-36 and chapter 4).

The origin of Mgbe/Ekpe in Calabar is uncertain and disputes still rage today. The Qua maintain that they brought Mgbe at the time of their migration from Cameroon during the fifteenth century to the sixteenth century. According to Efik oral history and European accounts, Ekpe was most likely established among the Efik between 1720 and 1729 (Behrendt, Latham, and Northrup 2010: 32). Some Efik claim that they brought Ekpe to Calabar from their old settlement west of the Cross River, but others believe the Efik acquired it from an Efut people, who occupied Isangele or Usak Edet along the Rio del Rey in southwest Cameroon (Nicklin 1991: 7-13).

The debate concerning the origin of Efik Ekpe has become quite complex and has turned into a discussion about when different branches were introduced into Calabar. According to historian A. J. Latham, drawing from A.K. Hart's report on the dispute over the Obongship of Calabar in 1964, Asibong Ekondo came from Usak Edet and sold eight branches of Ekpe to Esien Ekpe Oku near the mid-eighteenth century (Latham 1973: 36). However, Hart dismisses the story as merely an allegory and suggests that Esien Ekpe Oku was never an owner of Ekpe and that Asibong Ekondo was not Efut, but rather Efik (1964: 64-65, 67-68). A local Efik historian, chief Ita Bassey, who is completing a book on Asibong Ekondo's explorations, claims that Ekondo brought Nyambe, a five step institution, back from his travels to Kongo and gave it to Eyo Ema II as a gift, who in turn gave Esien Ekpe Oku custody of it. The Efik then transformed Nyambe into Nyamkpe. Latham corroborates that Nyamkpe and Okpoho, the brass

branch, were the two highest levels of Ekpe (Latham 1973: 39). However, Efik elders and chiefs of Ekpe, who I interviewed, are absolutely certain that the first branches of Ekpe were Mkpe, Mboko, Mboko-Mboko, Mbakara, and Ebongo. Later, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Nyamkpe, Oku akama, Okpoho and Nkanda were added to Ekpe. In 1828, Holman documented five branches and “Yampai as the fifth step, while in 1846-1847, Reverend Hope Waddell noted ten branches of Ekpe (Holman 1828 and Waddell 1863). Some scholars suggest that this documentation between the 1820s and 1850s records Ekpe’s growth and expansion as a result of increased trade earnings (Behrendt, Latham, and Northrup 2010: 33). Today, Efik chiefs and elders estimate the addition of Okpoho and Oku akama to sometime during the eighteenth century, while the Nkanda branch was founded in 1821 (Oku 1989: 65-66).

On the other hand, the Qua maintain that their titles and branches have not changed since their migration from Cameroon. At the top of Qua organization are Dibo (Nyamkpe), Isua Dibo, Nkanda, Etoke (Okpoho), and Oka akama. Interestingly, the five higher grades of Qua Mgbe contain the four subsequent or secondary Efik titles that were added later. Or, to be fair, most of the first five Efik titles: Mboko, Mboko-Mboko, Mbakara, and Ebongo are the secondary titles in Qua Mgbe. Whether or not this indicates that one group obtained the other’s secondary titles, which in turn became their primary and whether later the primary branches were obtained only to become the secondary is uncertain.

Although an historical construction of branches and levels is beyond the scope of this investigation, I offer a list of titles/branches compiled from previous sources and my own fieldwork investigation among Efik lodges (see appendix A). However helpful such lists are for documenting the organization of Ekpe, what becomes obscured is the purpose of the branches and levels within the larger structure of the society. Since most attention has emphasized Efik

Ekpe, I offer a discussion of Qua Mgbe levels, branches, and titles to understand the nature of the society's structure better.

Qua Mgbe is divided into four levels: Abon Ogbe, Dibo Nkanda, Asain Dibo, and Nyema Mgbe. Once a member has reached the fourth level, the initiate is designated as a chief and is appointed to one of 25 senior or junior titles (see appendix B). These 25 positions serve as the backbone for Qua Mgbe operations and organization. For the most part, each title is a representation of a specific domain of the society, each with its own masquerade and set of knowledge that explains its meaning and philosophy. Hence, a given title represents a branch of the institution.

In Qua Mgbe, the lowest level, Abon Ogbe, is the primary level, which grants the initiate a basic level of membership that allows access into the Osam Mgbe or lodge during ritual. It is an entry level intended for young boys, typically those under the age of five. Abon Ogbe is not a required level of initiation and may be used when boys are deemed not ready for full initiation.

The second level, Dibo Nkanda, endows the initiate to full membership. He may now start the process of learning the secret knowledge associated with Mgbe. Upon initiation into Dibo Nkanda the member may wear *ukara* cloth—the chief insignia of membership. However, members of Abon Ogbe or Dibo Nkanda are not permitted to wear shoes, a wristwatch, or elaborate dress inside the lodge. Also women, usually the wives of the Nyema mgbe, can be initiated into this level in Calabar.

The third level, Asain Dibo, is the prerequisite for chieftaincy. Members are initiated into this level with the understanding that they will be advancing into the fourth and highest grade. Asian Dibo is not required for elevation into chieftaincy, however. The benefit of this level permits initiates to wear shoes inside the lodge.

The Nyema Mgbe or chiefs of Mgbe is the highest and most prestigious level in Qua Mgbe. Initiation into this grade indicates the highest level of rank, and these individuals are allowed to wear chieftaincy caps and shoes and to carry walking sticks within the lodge. These items of dress also visually distinguish the chiefs from lesser members, since the cap and walking stick serve as the primary symbols of Mgbe chieftaincy, leadership, and hierarchy. Admittance into Nyema Mgbe is very costly and is acknowledged by an elaborate day-long celebration discussed in chapter three. Once the chief has obtained his title, he may choose to replace his current position with another he wishes to hold when the office becomes vacant. Additionally, according to Qua regulation, one cannot become a village head or clan-based official without being initiated into this rank.

Ekpe/Mgbe/Ngbe organization, levels of initiation, and titles or branches are different from region to region. Hans-Joachim Koloss's recent ethnography of the Ejagham peoples in Kembong, Cameroon, allowed me to make a comparison between rural and urban Mgbe structure and organization. For example, the Qua Mgbe stratification is not the case in the version of Mgbe Koloss investigated in rural Kembong (Koloss 2008: 64-75). Additionally, no "master" list of grades/levels/branches can be compiled. Only local circumstance can explain individual lodge organization.<sup>8</sup> A review of the Ekpe/Mgbe/Ngbe literature has led me to conclude that the notion of the society as a universal Cross River association should be completely dismissed. In fact, such comparisons attest to the fact that the society has evolved differently from group to group and of course from area to area.

Besides the attention to origin and organization, sociologist Daniel Offiong offers an historical sketch of the changing nature of Ekpe from the pre-colonial days through the post-

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<sup>8</sup> I would like to thank Eli Bantor for this comment during a series of email exchanges with me about individual lodge history and grade/level/branch organization. Email correspondence with Eli Bantor, April 5-12, 2011.

colonial period (Offiong 1989). Despite the art historians and anthropologists who have focused on the artistic aspects of rural Ekpe/Mgbe/Ngbe (Ruel 1969, Ekpo 1978, Abalogu 1978, Thompson 1974 and 1983, Leib and Romano 1984, Ottenberg and Knudsen 1985, Koloss 2008, Nicklin 1991, Bentor 1994, and Carlson 2003), the art and performance of the Calabar versions has eluded scholarly attention. This dissertation sets out not only to fill the present void in literature on post-colonial Calabar, but also discuss the ways in which the urban environment has shaped the artistic vitality of the Ekpe/Mgbe society.

### **Conceptual Framework**

I argue that in contemporary Calabar, Ekpe/Mgbe is an economic, cultural, and political infrastructural support system for its members. My argument is informed by Abdoumalig Simone's notion of people as infrastructure in which he investigates how residents in Johannesburg, South Africa, are engaged in economic collaboration to negotiate the challenges of urban sustainability (Simone 2008). Fundamental to my argument is how the society and its members have transformed the institution to reflect the changing nature of the urban city in which it now thrives. To demonstrate its cosmopolitan character, I turn attention to how Ekpe/Mgbe ritual, performance, and gestured *nsibidi* have become more public than in the past. I further argue that the relevance of Ekpe/Mgbe today stems from its ability to claim space successfully through the medium of performance. Central to my argument of Ekpe/Mgbe as infrastructure are thus performance, urban influence, and power.

Approaching Ekpe/Mgbe ritual, masquerade, and *nsibidi* from the perspective of performance is the backbone of my analysis. Early on in the development of the field of African art history, Herbert Cole proposed an analytical shift to approach African art as process rather than form (Cole 1969a). Six years later, in the catalogue *African Art in Motion*, Robert Farris Thompson expanded the discursive field for examining African arts from the perspective of

performance (Thompson 1974). Since Thompson's seminal work, performance based analyses of African visual culture have significantly grown (Nunley 1987, Drewal 1992, Arnoldi 1995, Harding 2002, Reed 2003, Gott 2008, Salami 2008a, and McNaughton 2008). Performance based methodologies have become second nature for approaching the complex layered meanings embedded in multi-media forms of expression. Due to the performance field's wide range of possibilities, performance theorist Richard Schechner includes everything from the everyday to the sacred—play, sports, theater, dance, social drama, ceremonies, and rituals (Schechner 2003). The complex nature of performance is noted by Margret Drewal, "Africa performance is a primary site for the production of knowledge, where philosophy is enacted, and where multiple and often simultaneous discourses are employed" (Drewal 1991: 1-2). In analyzing Ekpe/Mgbe ritual, masquerade, and gestured *nsibidi* through the lens of performance, I too am interested in the multidimensional layers of meaning packed into a single performance. My interest in analyzing Ekpe/Mgbe from a performance paradigm stems from the ways in which the urban experience of Calabar has transformed the once private rituals into nuanced public forums where members enact power, rekindle connections with their ancestors, engage in local political discourse, endeavor to sustain themselves, and embrace their cultural heritage.

My attempt to analyze the changing permutations of performance in an urban locality owes much to John Nunley's investigation of Ode-lay masquerade in Freetown, Sierra Leone. According to Nunley, Ode-lay masking troupes are so indicative of urban Freetown that the youth take them to the streets to compete for public recognition through the medium of performance (Nunley 1987). For Ode-lay members, these performances have become battles for space and mechanism for asserting youth power in the urban environment of Freetown. The Ode-

lay case resonates with the ways in which Ekpe/Mgbe members are exploring the potentialities of ritual, masquerade, and *nsibidi* to claim space during performance in Calabar.

The recent special issue of *Africa Today* on visual experience in urban Africa also influences my analysis. In the introduction, guest editor Joanna Grabski states, "...urban elements are crucial to constructing the visual..." and the "...urban experience is predicated on and contoured by visual experience" (Garbski 2008: vii). In the same special issue, Suzanne Gott explores the inherent interrelationship between urban and visual experience in her examination of Kumasi funeral processions. Gott demonstrates that in Kumasi long-standing forms of expression are contemporary exhibitions of cosmopolitanism (Gott 2008). The correlation between urban experience and visual experience and vice versa informs the dynamic relationship between Ekpe/Mgbe and Calabar.

Another facet of Ekpe/Mgbe as infrastructure is its ability to serve as a financial crutch for members. Today, all Ekpe/Mgbe activities—initiation, performance, and transmission of knowledge, to name a few—are enveloped in financial transaction. In arguing that "money matters," Jane Guyer has shown that societal change closely follows the history of financial change in West Africa (Guyer 1995). Indeed, many have discussed Ekpe/Mgbe's close relationship to commerce, especially during the period of the transatlantic slave trade (Nair 1972, Latham 1973, Northrup 1978, Behrendt, Latham, and Northrup 2010, and Röschenthaler 2011). However, most investigations of Ekpe/Mgbe, as well as other contemporary versions of long-standing genres of African art operating during the post-colonial period, fail to address the importance of money. Victoria Rovine, on the other hand, has shown that in urban Bamako, Mali, *bogolan* cloth has taken on a completely new financial configuration that separate it from its rural version. In her words, "Bogolan exemplifies the ways in which Bamako's artists and

entrepreneurs produce and modify ‘tradition’ to operate effectively in the economic and political climate of a large urban center” (Rovine 2008: 3). This dissertation follows Rovine in order to emphasize the monetary side of Ekpe/Mgbe for two reasons: to further deconstruct the “traditional”/modern construction and to assert that the society’s financial relevance is an extension of its vitality and power in the urban experience.

The ability of Ekpe/Mgbe to demonstrate power effectively is critical for understanding the society’s continued vitality in Calabar. Fundamental to my understanding of power is W. Arens and Ivan Karp’s notion of it as a multilayered idea and phenomenon (Arens and Karp 1989). Indeed, Ekpe/Mgbe power encapsulates the political, the religious, the economic, and the social all at once. For example, local political authority resides in the office of lodge head or chief of the society. The ancestral aspects of the society are an extension of religious power. Also, power is further found in the acquisition of *nsibidi* knowledge, which then allows the member to profit from that knowledge through its demonstration and performance. What is significant for understanding Ekpe/Mgbe power is that performance activates it in all contexts. I therefore draw from Alfred Gell’s approach investigating the social activation of art to include the element of performance as the major means in Ekpe/Mgbe’s ability to affect agency in Calabar today (Gell 1998).

My framework also employs “thick” ethnographic description, which Clifford Geertz has referred to as a semiotic or interpretive analysis of culture (Geertz 1973). This approach is best equipped to capture the complexity of culture, in the words of Geertz,

“[a]s interworked systems of construable signs (what, ignoring provincial usages, I would call symbols), culture is not a power, something to which social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed; it is a context, something within which they can be intelligibly—that is, thickly—described” (ibid., 14).

My ethnographic data is thus “thickly” described and analyzed in the following pages in order to contextualize how Ekpe/Mgbe performances embody power and the urban experience.

### **Ethnographic Approach**

This investigation is based on about 15 months of fieldwork conducted mostly in Calabar. I also made a number of trips into the Cross River hinterland to establish a case for urban/rural comparison and contrast. Specifically, from 2009-2010, I completed 12 months of fieldwork. The experience built upon two previous trips to Calabar during the summer months of 2008 and 2009 during which I studied the Ejagham and Nigerian Pidgin languages. Most of my time in Calabar was spent closely studying the six prominent masquerade societies of Calabar and the *nsibidi* knowledge system and language. The Ekpe/Mgbe society and its *nsibidi* commanded most of my attention. Although I spent time investigating Ekpe/Mgbe in the middle Cross River, my knowledge about the society in the hinterland is limited in comparison to the Calabar verions.

Fieldwork into men’s “secret” associations proved difficult at first, but after being accepted by the six societies with the honor of initiation into each, investigation became much easier. My fascination with the idea of ethnography and initiation stems from a number of works I read as an undergraduate student (Biebuyck 1973, Binkley 1987a, and McNaughton 1988). Those works inspired my enthusiasm not only to research restricted masquerade societies and indigenous knowledge systems, but also cultivated my interests in the dynamics of initiation.

I started my journey of initiation in 2008, during my language studies and preliminary investigations into masquerade, when I was invited to be initiated into the Qua Mgbe Nkonib (Ikot Ansa) lodge at the level of Nkanda. I would like to thank HRH Patrick Inok Oquagbor, clan head and shrine head of the Nkonib and the Mgbe lodge for the honor of initiation, support, adopting me as his son and later also taking in Sara, my wife, as his daughter as well as and providing his own roof as my home in 2009. Following the initial initiation, when I returned a

year later in 2009, I was conferred with an Mgbe title, isung Mbakara, and continued further initiations into the depths of the society. My initiation and subsequent initiations were explained as necessary if I were to inquire about and publish on Ekpe/Mgbe and its *nsibidi*. Ekpe/Mgbe initiation and being taken in as a son to Ntoe Oqua also led to some of my initiations into the other thriving masquerade societies of Calabar. Initiation was also one of the major reasons for my success in studying the arts of the other restrictive societies. The Mgbe initiations, status as son of Ntoe Oqua, and wide respect he had in Calabar marked me as a trusted outside inquirer. In fact, as I was told much later—at the end of my fieldwork experiences, my real initiation took place when elders interviewed me to determine if I was worthy and trustworthy enough for initiation rather than my actual ritual initiation.

After the initiation, members were much more receptive to my questions and inquiries. Both secret and non-secret information was openly taught and shared with me. In fact, I am rather surprised how many “secrets” were taught to me, most likely a reflection of my status as Ntoe Oqua’s son. Some aspects of what I was taught and witnessed during informal or more formal contexts, I can never discuss, while others I am very free to write about and include in this dissertation. In all my initiations, I took oaths to the ancestors, as all do during initiation to bind one’s word to the will of the ancestors. During informal or more formal interviews, I was annoyingly careful to ask repeatedly, “can I write that?” However, most of the time, members and elders would forewarn me that what I was about to see or hear was sensitive and for my ears or eyes only. To protect the members who want and must remain anonymous, I withhold their identities. For example, as a member, I cannot reveal under any circumstance the identities of masqueraders, even though a number of non-members are well aware. Only retired masqueraders can be identified.

During fieldwork investigation I made use of the following methods: direct observation and documentation, formal and informal interviews, and analysis of archival material. During the entire period of fieldwork, I observed, documented, and participated in a number of performances. I documented these through photography and video and used these visual materials to analyze masqueraders choreography, costume, ritualized space, and the integration of the participants and the audience. As an initiated member, I was almost completely unrestricted in my photographic and video coverage of events. Documented events included secret society gatherings and performances, ritual performances, agricultural festivals, funerals, initiations, and communal meetings and gatherings. Elders and communal leaders also granted me access to their own personal and communal audio, video, and photographic documentation of masquerades and have graciously offered me the privilege to use this material. All photographic and video footage were aids used during interviews, discussion, and when my teachers instructed me about the knowledge of the society. I was also graciously permitted to investigate the archive of the local newspaper, *The Nigerian Chronicle*.

Formal and informal interviews and surveys were conducted with a broad spectrum of members, performers, spectators, artists (mask makers), and community members. Interviews with spectators and non-members added a non-initiated perspective to masquerade spectacles and ritual activity. I was further careful to interview and survey elders, the middle-aged and youths of both genders to gain a complete understanding of the social functions of Ekpe/Mgbe and masquerade culture within this changing urban center.

My initiation was absolutely crucial in the documentation process and later in constructing my argument that in urban Calabar, Ekpe/Mgbe is a contemporary economic, cultural, and political infrastructural support system for members. In spite of the fact that I

cannot reveal some of the things I observed and participated in, initiation allowed me to witness, document, and discuss the “behind the door” temperament and transactions that inform how members economically and politically gain from Ekpe/Mgbe. In this way, I fully embrace writing myself into the ethnographic accounts included in this dissertation.

### **Structure and Chapter Summaries**

Following this introductory chapter, I explore in Chapter 2, “Confrontations of Space: the Ekpe/Mgbe society and Christianity in Contemporary Calabar,” how Ekpe/Mgbe space was contested by early missionaries and continues to be challenged by the increasingly Christian population of recent decades. At the center of the discussion are the Ekpe/Mgbe lodge as an architectural entity and a ritual space, and the stone of the society, the physical markers of sacred space during ritual. The chapter demonstrates how recent Christian demonizing rhetoric aimed at long-standing forms of culture has led Ekpe/Mgbe members to challenge and dispute the markers of space as well as other ancestral practices of the society among themselves.

Chapter 3, “Claiming Space through Public Spectacle: the Contemporary Installation of an Ekpe/Mgbe Chief” demonstrates how members come together at the level of performance to take the debate about the place of so-called “traditional” culture in Calabar to the streets. By thoroughly describing the contemporary Ekpe/Mgbe chieftaincy conferment rite, I present how it has morphed into an elaborate cosmopolitan public spectacle rather than a closed secret event it was in the past. I argue that the recently expanded Ekpe/Mgbe chieftaincy spectacle has become a calculated attempt of the society to assert its wealth and power, and a means to reclaim space forcefully through the medium of performance.

Chapter 4, “The More you Look, the Less you See: the Multiplicity of Meaning in *Ukara Nsibidi*” and Chapter 5, “Performed *Nsibidi* as “Deep Play” and the Changing Arenas for Challenging Knowledge” turn attention to the ways in which the urban experience of Calabar has

influenced the transmission, meaning, and demonstration of the society's imaged and performed esoteric knowledge system known as *nsibidi*. Chapter 4 investigates how the privatization of *nsibidi* teaching has led to an expanded informal economy that defines its transmission and further fuels the multiple verbal explanations of a given *nsibidi* motif. While Chapter 4 examines *nsibidi* depicted on *ukara* cloth, Chapter 5 provides one of the first in-depth investigations of the performed version. In Ekpe/Mgbe performance and ritual contexts, the imaged version is meaningless if one cannot demonstrate its knowledge through the medium of performance. Chapter 5 thus investigates the ways in which the performed version of Ekpe/Mgbe *nsibidi* is a mechanism for the demonstration of power and knowledge. Particularly, I discuss the phenomenon of performed *nsibidi* and the arenas in which the gestured art is manifested in contemporary Calabar. The urban experience of Calabar has transformed the performed version and its arenas into more public and even transgressive affairs. Members have thus taken performed *nsibidi* to the streets not only to demonstrate their knowledge, but also to advertise their abilities to interested members. I therefore argue that performed *nsibidi* is an example of what Clifford Geertz calls "deep play."

Chapter 6, "From Local to Global: the Ekpe/Mgbe Nyoro masquerade competition," brings together the ideas of space, ostentatious display, public performance, and *nsibidi* knowledge. I examine how the recently expanded masquerade competition known as The Botanical Garden Nyoro is a multi-faceted state-funded but locally produced modern display of culture staged during Calabar's tourist season. In addition to documenting the layered politics of the event, I demonstrate how the arena is not only a major display of Ekpe/Mgbe heritage and power, but it is also a financial source of sustainability for Ekpe/Mgbe masqueraders, who showcase their performance and *nsibidi* knowledge to compete for large cash prizes on a global stage. The case

concludes my argument framing Ekpe/Mgbe as an infrastructural support system for members to negotiate the urban experience of Calabar and that its continued vitality is dependent on the society's ability to successfully claim space through the medium of performance.

Figures

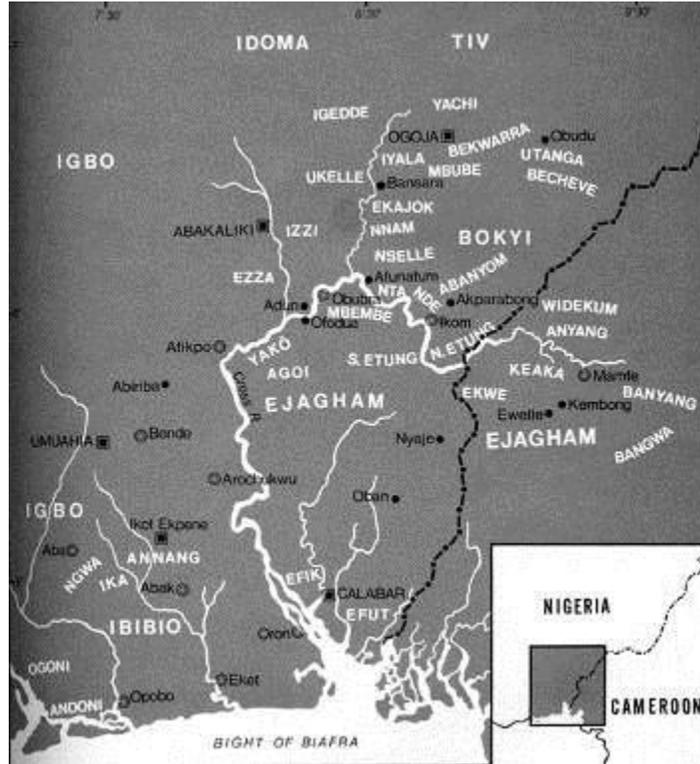


Figure 1-1. Map of Cross River region. Source: Nicklin and Salmons, “Cross River Art Styles.”



Figure 1-2. Approaching Mary Slessor Junction, Calabar, May 19, 2008. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton

## CHAPTER 2 CONFRONTATIONS OF SPACE: THE EKPE/MGBE SOCIETY AND CHRISTIANITY IN CONTEMPORARY CALABAR

Secret societies or power associations in Africa, either agential or coming-of-age, exert influence over the community in a number of ways. One primary method is the demonstration of agency through the control of space. Society lodges or meeting houses and the realm of the bush are common examples. The well-known Poro societies and the Komo associations from West Africa or the Mukanda initiation institutions from Central Africa all make use of spatial prohibitions during meetings, performance, initiation, and ritual. Ekpe/Mgbe is no different in this regard. During important periods, non-initiates or even low ranking initiates are prohibited from entering space that has been declared open only to members of certain levels. Only through initiation can non-members free themselves from such spatial exclusion. Further, in most of these societies, an inextricable link to the wilderness informs their most secret or mystical force from which they draw their power. The wilderness connection, which reinforces their ability to administer spatial separation, is often expressed through various art forms, whether static or performative (Anderson and Kreamer 1989: 33).

In rural areas of Africa, the village/wilderness dualism accounts for the separation of everyday space from the dangerous and unpredictable realms of the bush (*ibid.*, 29-30). However, the urban nature of Calabar complicates this model. The village/wilderness dichotomy in the city dissolves into one physical space. Everyday life and societies like Ekpe/Mgbe operate and sometimes compete with one another for the same social space. This chapter delves into the spatial confrontations between the Ekpe/Mgbe society and Christianity. Particularly, I investigate how Ekpe/Mgbe lodges, markers of spiritual space, and the pouring of libations are contested by the modern nature of the city of Calabar coupled with the recent intensification of Christian ideology starting in the 1970s and continuing into the present.

The chapter starts with a lengthy discussion about the markers of Ekpe/Mgbe space. The society lodge and stone of Ekpe/Mgbe are the most fundamental symbols of the society. They are not only physical demarcations of space, but they also operate on the mystical and spiritual plane. Attention then turns to how early missionaries contested the authority of Ekpe through challenging its space. The strategy employed by the early missionaries provides the conceptual framework for understanding how Christians continue to challenge Ekpe/Mgbe in contemporary Calabar. Today, Ekpe/Mgbe is contested in media outlets and during Christian services through demonizing rhetoric. Debates have raged about the place of local culture in a city like Calabar. The chapter ends by demonstrating how these external disputes are now debated among members within lodges. The markers of space I opened with are the center of such argumentation. In some cases, the pouring of libation has been discontinued, stones of Ekpe/Mgbe have been removed, and in an extraordinary instance, one lodge was set afire.

By presenting how members currently debate art forms and practices that relate to Ekpe/Mgbe's spiritual aspects and that once defined the society spatially, I demonstrate that in Calabar, Ekpe/Mgbe ritual space is not one-dimensional. It contains a myriad of configurations that collectively define, negotiate, and apply the doctrines of the society as individuals see fit to their own understandings, interpretations, and meanings.

### **The House of Ekpe and Mgbe**

The Ekpe or Mgbe lodge is the center of the society (Fig. 2-1). Most meetings, activities, and rituals take place in this structure. The Efik and Efut refer to the building as Efe Ekpe while the Qua call it Osam Mgbe. Both loosely translate to shed or house of Ekpe/Mgbe. For the Ejagham, the community's autonomy is dependent upon having its own Osam Mgbe. In the

words of a Qua Mgbe chief, “Every Qua clan by definition must have the Mgbe shrine, a totem and adjoining villages.”<sup>1</sup> In 1912, Talbot observed the following about the Mgbe lodge in Oban:

The importance of the society is obvious even to the most careless visitor to any land where it has gained a foothold, for the Club house is the principal building in every town. Even the smallest village has its Egbo shed, and when a town decides to migrate the first thing done, so soon as the fresh sight is cleared, before even new farms are “cut,” or the land divided up, is to fix the position of the Club house. A small shed, called Ekpa Ntan (the house without walls) is erected to mark the spot where the Egbo house is to stand (Talbot 1912: 39).<sup>2</sup>

Once the site is chosen for the lodge, the rest of the community can be established. With the location of the Mgbe lodge determined, the rest of the community is constructed. Libation and sacrifices are administered before construction may begin. The chief’s house is built first, then the compounds for the rest of the community follow (ibid). After the dwelling structures are complete, the construction of the lodge commences. In the old days, the building process was a community-wide project (ibid., 265). In fact, women applied mud to the walls of the society house, which then they decorated (ibid). In 1846, Rev. Hope Waddell documented one of the earliest descriptions of an Efik Ekpe lodge in Creek Town:

At the head of the street stood the “Palaver House,” or Town Hall, a large, low shed, with its end to the street and quite open in front. Several immense posts of solid mangrove supported the ridge-pole. A broad seat of hard-beated clay ran down the two sides; the further end was closed by a recess for Egbo mysteries; in front was the great Egbo drum, fixed to the frame, to be beaten only on occasions of public importance; and before it were two upright pentagonal stones, “pillars of remembrance,” of basaltic appearance, which had been brought originally from the Cam[e]roon country. On both these and the drum was the blood of sacrifices (Waddell 1863[1970]: 250).

In Oban, Talbot recorded a lodge not unlike the Creek Town example. It too was an open front structure crowned by an overhanging roof supported by a series of posts. An Isinn tree was

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with chief (Hon.) Hayford S. Edet, Nba Odoso (village head) and secretary of the Qua Constituted Assembly of Clans, June 15, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Talbot also collected a local myth entitled “How all the Stars Came” from Okun Asere of Mfamosing that explains the establishment of a Mgbe house (see 1912: 349-355).

planted directly in front of the lodge (Talbot 1912: 265-266). However, it should be noted that Talbot documented a number of differences between Ejagham Mgbe lodges from community to community.

The diversity of Ekpe/Mgbe lodge architecture is also apparent from other early 20<sup>th</sup> century sources. The Ekpe/Mgbe sheds were described by others as rectangular two room structures with mud brick walls and sheltered by v-shaped roofs supported by a number of columns (Partridge 1905: 208 and Parkinson 1907: 262). Today, the Efe Ekpe and Osam Mgbe are still rectangular two room buildings. I, like Talbot, observed tremendous stylistic variation from community to community. In addition, today the lodge is made of cinderblock and cement. Tin sheets are used for roofing.

The renovation and expansion of lodges is an important recent trend in Calabar, and when the integrity of the lodge becomes suspect, it is completely rebuilt, usually three to four times larger than the original. In contrast to the general decline of the society in rural areas, in Calabar, the society thrives. Recent attempts to enlarge and expand the lodge demonstrate not only the vitality of the society in Calabar, but also indicates that members are attempting to update their structure to match the changing and rapidly expanding nature of the city. A specific case will be discussed.

#### *Location, location, location*

Traditionally, the Ekpe/Mgbe lodge is situated at a prominent location within the community. In fact, Talbot provides a diagram of a typical Ejagham community layout (1912: 266). In the plan, the Mgbe lodge is situated in the center of the community flanked by two rows of houses. Talbot mentions that the space in front of the lodge, where performances were

enacted, was left vacant (*ibid.*). Clearly, the diagram illustrates that entire communities were once configured so that the society lodge, its space for masquerade, and activity were central.

Today, in rural areas, the lodge is still located at a prominent location in relation to the village. For example, in the village of Becehi at Umon, the Ekpe lodge was built prominently in an area just beyond the central area of the community, near the fringe, where the bush and village meet (Fig. 2-2). In Becehi, buildings constructed after the lodge for housing purposes were erected so that the Ekpe lodge remains as the central focus of the community. In fact, the space immediately in front of the lodge, used as the dance arena for Ekpe masquerade and performance, has been intentionally left vacant because not only is it space for the society, but it also marks the center of the community. Upon entering the community from the beach after walking along a footpath, the traditional way to access this village, the first visible marker is the open space and the Ekpe lodge. The placement of the lodge in the center of the community is not unlike the orientation of an Ejagham lodge located in the Akamkpa LGA (Local Government Area). Indeed, approaching the village from the road, the Mgbe lodge is located in the back of the community (Fig. 2-3). A vast open dirt and grass space is situated in front of the lodge, marking the center of the community. Houses occupy the land to the left and right of the lodge and extend outward to the entrance of the village. Comparing the Bechei and Akamkpa village layouts reveal striking similarity to the plan Talbot illustrated in which the society lodge was the center of the community. However, this traditional scheme has changed, especially in Calabar. Recently, due to urbanization and population increase, housing and small-scale commercial structures have disrupted the more traditional and prominent location of the lodge.

In Calabar, differentiating lodge structures from housing compounds and commercial buildings has become difficult. For example, it is common to pass by an Ekpe/Mgbe house

without even recognizing it as such. The open space once reserved for performance has been entirely lost in some cases. In other words, since Calabar's recent pattern of urbanization rooted in the 1970s, it is common for everyday housing structures to encroach on the society's space. Some lodges in Calabar, however, have made the effort to reclaim their space. The Efe Asibong Ekondo, for example, has recently constructed a compound wall that encompasses both the lodge and the performance space situated in front (Fig. 2-4). Such cases in Calabar demonstrate recent strategies members employ in order to protect the integrity of a societies' space. While the lodge remains the most critical marker of the society's sacred space, other objects and art forms also serve this function.

### **Further Markers of Ekpe/Mgbe Space**

In addition to costly compound construction, some more long-standing devices are still used to safeguard the environment of the society. In front of most lodges, a pair of trees stand: one palm and one *oboti* tree, whose leaves are used to demarcate impassable boundaries for the society. Another device to demarcate space is the hanging of one of the societies' primary symbols, the *ukara* textile, across the façade of the lodge during ritual (see chapter 4 for more through discussion). Yet another symbol hung in front of the *ukara* cloth during ritual is an accumulation of *Oboti* leaves and palm frond.<sup>3</sup> The symbol indicates to members and non-members that the mystical voice and spiritual essence of the society is within the lodge. While these elements should be understood as warnings to non-members, they are minor in comparison to the Efik Itiat Ekpe or Qua Isu Dibo also known as the stone of Ekpe or Mgbe. For the Efik and Qua, the stone generally refers to the spirits of the society. In fact, the Itiat Ekpe and Isu Dibo is

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<sup>3</sup> There are two types of palm frond: young and old. The younger variety has a yellowish color and is thought to be more spiritually potent. Therefore, only yellowish palm frond is used for this purpose. Among the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria, young palm fronds are also considered sacred and used as a boundary or warning (see Doris 2011: 87).

not only the most important spiritual and mystical agent of the society, but it is also understood as a sacred marker of space since in most cases, the stone is permanently located in front of the lodge. These markers can be understood as indexes of Ekpe/Mgbe power. Anthropologist Alfred Gell has argued that such art forms affect social agency through a complex relationship mediated by the maker/artist, spiritual entity, and recipient/consumer (Gell 1998).

*Itiat Ekpe, the pillar, and Isu Dibo*

Before discussing Calabar examples, I address stones documented in other areas of the region. Throughout the Cross River region, the stone, although quite diverse in style and use, is a principle feature of most Ekpe, Mgbe, and Ngbe versions. In Cameroon, for example, Alfred Mansfeld photographed a stone of Ngbe and posited it as the “most important part” of the lodge (1908: 218). Some years later, in the 1950s and 1960s, Malcolm Ruel conducted work among the Banyang in Cameroon. He provides not only a drawing, but also thoroughly describes the “stone of Ngbe.” In his words:

The ‘stone of Ngbe’ is usually placed in front of the central pole-support in the *aca* or meeting house of its owner; when formally set out, a variety of objects cover or surround it, including: an inverted satchel forming a kind of ‘head’ on which are fixed a collection of feathers, twisted copper or brass rods of the type that was formerly used as currency, two chains with padlocks holding the stone to the ground, a tortoise-shell, decorated calabashes, certain seeds, a white cloth around the ‘waist’ of the stone in which is fixed a knife, and so on (1969: 222).

Ruel further describes the objects as “emblematic reference[s]” to the levels of membership, ritual, and summarizes the entire stone as a sort of “charter” of the society (ibid). Additionally, Ruel discusses the stone as a critical component of the acquisition and establishment of a lodge (ibid., 221).

During the 1980s, 2004, and 2005, Hans-Joachim Koloss, a German anthropologist, conducted fieldwork among an Ejagham peoples in Kembong, a city located south of the Banyang. Koloss photographed a “stone of Mgbe” or *eteh* Mgbe in 1980 (2008: 71). The

example is quite similar to Ruel's drawing and description. The version in Kembong is not only fixed to a central pillar, but it is large and vertical in shape and various elements are attached to it. According to Koloss, the stone is the rightful possession of a leader of Mgbe and "is the most important object in the sphere of Mgbe" (ibid., 74). As Koloss reports, however, since the 1980s, no leader of Mgbe owns a stone since acquisition costs are high, and the possession of such a powerful object has led to an overwhelming fear of a short life span (ibid). Although Koloss records that the stone is not used during Mgbe ceremony and ritual, annual sacrifices are made there in the name of the ancestors (ibid).

John Parkinson, writing in 1907, provided a lucid description and drawing of a stone of Ekpe or Mgbe in southeast Nigeria:

This is a very conventionalised human figure. The head is represented by a feather cap, the arms by two feathers standing out from either side, the body is a cylindrical piece of wood, coloured white and yellow in broad horizontal stripes. At the base of the body is a slightly hollowed horseshoe-shaped dish, while the lower edge is tied round with a "sash" of some white material, with dingy rosettes dangling on either side. Immediately above the dish are three flattened pieces of bronze or brass, hooked at the ends, and on either side run up brass rods, bent into curves like those assumed by a worm or snake. It is, of course, impossible to obtain full details of these things, all of which doubtless have their own meanings, concerned with the religion which one cannot but suppose was the fundamental element in Egbo, whatever it may be now (1907: 263).

Parkinson did not indicate the location of the stone or what was characterized as wood as he so richly described. He claimed that all Efik Ekpe and Ejagham Mgbe lodges and their stones are "identical in all essential particulars" (ibid., 262). The scale of the stone was also not mentioned. Despite being made of wood and lack of measurements, the placement against a pillar, plethora of attached objects, and adornments bear not an "identical" appearance, but an interesting likeness to Cameroonian examples discussed by Ruel and Koloss.

A stone of Mgbe that I documented in the old city of Ikom (approximately four and a half hours north of Calabar by car) is not unlike the versions recorded by Ruel, Koloss, and

Parkinson. The stone of Mgbe is the property of the Bendeghe Etung-Ejagham lodge (Fig. 2-5). It is the most stylized human representation I have ever seen. The stone features a human head with eyes, nose, and an open mouth. Triangular forms suggest arms. A painted leopard shown in twisted perspective decorates the “body.” Metal chains are attached to the abstract arms and freely dangle to the floor. The central pillar stands immediately behind the stone. A painted snake embellishes the pillar and appears to slither upward. The bottom half of the snake’s body is obscured by the head of the stone. The variety of large-scale stones documented from Cameroon and Ikom, despite Parkinson’s case, however, are not typical in the lower Cross River region.

In southeastern Nigeria during the early twentieth century, Talbot recorded some interesting information about Mgbe stones and other varieties from southern and central Ejagham communities. Similar to other scholars and writers, Talbot noted that the “Etai Ngbe,” the most important element of the Egbo house, is not only anthropomorphic in nature—donning a hat-like element on its crown—but also stands before the second pillar of the society lodge (1912: 40, 141, and 265 and 1926: 782). However, not all Talbot’s examples were fixed to a central pillar. Other styles beyond the cylindrical variety were also documented. A precisely cut rectangular Mgbe stone from Mkpott was described and photographed (1912: 172 and 219). It too was adorned with a hat-like feature and was not attached to a pillar, but located outside the lodge, near the entrance. Another example from Ndebbiji was drawn and briefly described (1926: 782). Like the others, it too was short, anthropomorphic, and placed before a central wooden pillar. However, Talbot’s observations went beyond the Mgbe variety to include a number of different types of stones either placed in front of the lodge or at other types of shrines.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> An interesting example is the small shrine at the entrance of a compound dedicated to Obassi Nsi, an earth goddess and principle Ejagham deity recorded by Talbot (1912: 16). The shrine consisted of a tree, carved anthropomorphic

In most of Talbot's observations about Mgbe stones, those for Nimm (the Ejagham earth deity and female society) were also mentioned. For example, he reported the importance of determining the location of Nimm stones and the "Etaï Ngbe" during a critical ceremony for the establishment of a new community (ibid., 262-263). According to Talbot, in some communities, the Nimm stone was of a comparable size or even sometimes larger than the "Etaï Ngbe," while in other communities, the earth deity variety was small and egg shaped. In fact, Talbot mentions that the Nimm stones were understood as the "eggs" of the deity, which promoted fertility and concealed medicine (1912: 96 and 219). Together, the Mgbe and Nimm stones, in the words of Talbot:

are the symbols of the male and female tutelary jujus of the club, and it is before these that all sacrifices are offered and prayers made to them and to the Idemm, the spirits of the ancestors who had been members of the club (1926: 782-784).

Talbot's findings reveal that both stones were frequently placed in front of the Mgbe lodge and seem to be intimately connected. Moreover, Talbot importantly concluded that among the Ejagham different cultural associations, secret societies, ancestral veneration practices, and the honoring of nature deities are difficult to separate and "all blend inextricably in a complicated ritual" (Talbot 1912: 14). Among the Efik and Qua, it seems that at many levels, the amalgamation of Ekpe/Mgbe and Ndem/Nimm is still the case today. In fact, the Efik Ekpe pillar and Itiat Ekpe and the Qua Isu Dibo still express the intimate connection, mostly through symbolism. The snake decorating some pillars, for example, is a dual symbol for Ndem/Nimm and Ekpe/Mgbe.

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post, and a stone that received sacrifices (see Talbot 1912: 21 for drawing). Yet another example discussed by Talbot was a stone used as a "charm" by releasing its spirit (ibid., 161). Clearly, at the time of Talbot's observations, the Ejagham made use of a number of stones for different spiritual and religious purposes. It is interesting to compare the stones recorded by Talbot, Parkinson and the Ekpe/Mgbe stones still found in Calabar today to the well-known stone monoliths discussed by Philip Allison and those attributed to the Bakor-Ejagham in the middle Cross River region since those are too anthropomorphic, cylindrical, and possibly represent ancestors or spiritual entities (for a discussion see Allison 1968 and Carlson 2003: 145-149).

Despite clear descriptive accounts, an anthropomorphic suggestion, their importance for establishing a new community, and the connection between Ekpe/Mgbe and Ndem/Nimm, little has been understood about these intriguing stones. Documentation from Calabar reveals that the stone of Ekpe/Mgbe is not only a multi-layered art form, but also spiritual and mystical in nature. Differences between Efik and Qua versions require discussion.

The Efik and Efut Itiat Ekpe is a sculpted cylindrical stone decorated with a series of white and red-orange bands (Fig. 2-6). I observed, however, several variations. Some lodges feature long basalt versions, while others have qualities of entirely different igneous rock without painted circular decoration (Fig. 2-7). During initiation into some Efik lodges, neophytes are told to stand on the essential stone during their oath. In addition, during ritual, not only are libations poured over such stones, but they also receive other forms of sacrifice. The stone is also said to receive a number of separate sacrifices throughout the year. According to Bassey E. Bassey, an Ekpe titleholder, “Itiat Ekpe and Ekpe are inseparables. It is the store house of Ekpe and it[s] secret abode. Without it Ekpe is barren and sedentary” (1998: 101). Other Efik members explained to me that a lodge cannot exist without the stone. It is the repository for the spirit of deceased members, an icon of ancestral potency, and a facilitator of communication between living and deceased members. In short, it is the power of the society. In contrast to the findings of Ruel, Koloss, Parkinson, and Talbot, the Efik Itiat Ekpe I documented were never discussed as human-like, nor were they attached to a pillar. They were located outside, usually found in an area some feet away from the front of the lodge.

The Efik Efe Ekpe or Ekpe houses that I observed usually featured an elaborately decorated wooden pillar. In the Efut Atu lodge, I documented a pillar with a snake, crocodile, tortoise, and fowl carved in high relief. The animals are also elaborately painted. In an Efik lodge

at Creek Town, the central pillar was made of masonry instead of wood (Fig. 2-8). It did not feature carved animal designs, but a number of evenly spaced white bands encircle from the bottom to the top.<sup>5</sup> Both the animals and bands symbolize a number of ideas, including the connection between Ekpe and Ndem. In most Efik and Efut lodges, the pillar was located in the exact center of the lodge interior. According to an Efut Ekpe chief, the pillar is critical to the society; it not only relates to the ancestors, but is also the architectural element that supports the lodge. The pillar is interpreted as a testament to the importance of the ancestors, those past members responsible for the establishment of the society. In other words, the pillar is not only a practical support, but serves as a spiritual device as well.

Unlike the Efik, Qua Mgbe lodges do not feature a decorated central pillar. Only an Isu Dibo is present. The examples I documented were worked basalt, cylindrical in form, and measuring approximately two feet high by 5 inches in width (Fig. 2-9 and 2-10). Qua versions are almost identical to those recorded by Talbot. Not unlike the Efik version, Qua Isu Dibo receives sacrifices. It is also decorated with white and red-orange bands from bottom to top. The stone is adorned with a “cap” and is firmly planted into the ground near the entrance of the lodge.

The general shape and cap-like element, according to Qua members, connote an anthropomorphism. The stone dons a cap to differentiate its status in the spiritual realm from lesser-deceased members—not unlike living Mgbe chiefs, who earn the right to wear hats once they become titleholders. In fact, during the initiation at which a member receives a title, thus

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<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, an Itiat Ekpe was placed at the bottom of the stone pillar; the lodge featured two stones of Ekpe, one inside and the other outside. Some shrine heads buy and collect important elements of the society in order to enhance the prestige of their lodge. The example of the Iboku lodge at Creek town demonstrates this idea; the Iyamba or lodge head, chief Efiok Ekpenyong Nsa, is known as quite the Ekpe collector. He is one of the most senior chiefs in all of Calabar in terms of when he took his title, and prides himself on a well-furnished lodge along with a comprehensive knowledge to explain and properly use those objects.

becoming a chief of the society, a goat is slaughtered and its blood is poured over the Isu Dibo. The sacrifice symbolizes the chief's initiation into the mystical depths of the lodge. Additionally, during ritual, the Isu Dibo or Mgbe stone regulates the rules of the society. For example, lesser members are not entitled to enter the lodge with hats or shoes—a right reserved for the chiefs. The Isu Dibo, located at the entrance into the lodge thus serves as a warning and reminder to younger members who have not poured blood upon the stone.

Mgbe chief Emmanuel Edem informed me that the Isu Dibo “holds or carries” all the different titles and masquerades of the society. He further indicated that it has an intimate connection not only to the bush but also to the *abasonko*, a feathered plume attached to the Dibo masquerade, the most fierce and spiritual masquerade of the entire society.<sup>6</sup> Mgbe members also use another phrase to explain the stone, Ekpo Dibo, meaning ghost of Dibo.<sup>7</sup> A chief discussed with me how the Isu Dibo or Ekpo Dibo protects members during ritual by curbing dangerous energies away from the lodge. Further, the stone serves as a warning to non-members.<sup>8</sup> Those stubborn enough to breach the space of Mgbe subject themselves to the “haunting” of the Isu Dibo or Ekpe Dibo. As the story goes, the ancestral energies of the stone travel to the offender's stomach and mystically “sounds or talks” within their belly. A painful death then follows. In sum, the Qua, not unlike the Efik, understand the stone as a potent spiritual presence for the society.

Clearly, the above analysis demonstrates the presence of regional styles of the stones of Ekpe, Mgbe, and Ngbe throughout the Cross River region. It is interesting to note that in and

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<sup>6</sup> Interview with chief Emmanuel Edem, March 8, 2010. Other Qua and Efik members confirmed the connection. See chapter 5 for a further discussion about the feathered plume and its importance to the Efik Nyamkpe and Qua Dibo masquerades.

<sup>7</sup> Interviews with Entufam Hayford S. Edet, March 29, 2010 and Prince Okoro Edim Ntoe, April 25, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with chief Joe Edet, April 21, 2010.

around the region of Calabar, the stones are smaller and less obvious. Is it possible, but highly unlikely, that the Calabar style is recent and reflects a calculated attempt by members to hide their stones from the growing pressures brought about by Christianity during the mid nineteenth century? Unfortunately, with lack of evidence, such enquiries remain hypothetical. Nevertheless, the introduction of Christianity had a great influence on the Ekpe society. Missionaries discouraged indigenous aspects of life and culture, laws were passed against long-standing practices, and once ultimate, the power of Ekpe, slowly faded. Accounts from Calabar during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and middle 20<sup>th</sup> centuries reveal a common interest by European missionaries to stamp out the influence and practices of the Ekpe society (see Waddell 1863[1970], Goldie 1890, and McFarlan 1946[1957]). The following section demonstrates how early missionaries contested the space of Ekpe/Mgbe in order to undermine its mystical and political position in Old Calabar.

### **Christianity and Ekpe: Early Confrontation**

The arrival of the Scottish Presbyterian Mission in 1846, led by Waddell, decidedly changed the religious landscape of Calabar. Prior to this, Calabar had already witnessed great economic change. Outlawed in 1807, the traffic of human beings slowly faded and gave way to the growth of an oil and produce trade that had been initiated some 60 years prior to the abolishment of slave trading (for more see Behrendt, Latham, and Northrup 2010: 81-101). In fact, during the waning days of the slave trade, Efik merchants were already securing alternative plans for financial sustainability. Two influential Efik traders and Ekpe chiefs, King Eyo Honesty II of Creek Town and King Eyamba V of Duke Town, wrote letters to British authorities requesting for a means to grow cotton, coffee, and sugarcane, and to cultivate Western education and to foster an awareness of Christianity. In the words of King Eyamba V,

“teach book proper, and make all men saby<sup>9</sup> God like white man, and then we go on for same fashion” (Aye 2000: 155-158). Four years after writing those requests, Old Calabar witnessed the coming of missionaries, who brought with them not only a new religious ideology but also seeds for great societal change.

Most chiefs were reluctant to allow Europeans to settle in Calabar. It was King Eyo who promoted the importance of building schools and the accepting of Western education despite those who opposed (Aye 2009: 66). Some argue that King Eyo was a political strategist and opportunist who supported the mission in order to extend his control over the rest of the Efik towns in Calabar (Ume 1980: 157 and Offiong 1989: 59).

Supported by the agenda of King Eyo, mission stations were established in both Creek Town and Duke Town. The inaugural sermons, preached by Waddell in English and translated into Efik by King Eyo, were held in the king’s courtyard (Aye 2009: 70-71). In 1850, four years after the arrival of the missionaries, a church was built in Creek Town, which became the mission’s headquarters and was publicly consecrated in 1855. The mission was gaining significant ground at Old Calabar. In 1851, 200 converts were recorded, while in 1875, that number grew to over 1,670 (Ume 1980: 165). Despite this success, however, from the beginning, Christianity challenged and contested both Ekpe practice and ideology as well as the leadership of the elite merchant class. Those powerful and wealthy men all belonged to Ekpe, which, of course, was the mechanism that reinforced and maintained their prominent positions at Old Calabar.

Missionaries infringed on the space of Ekpe in a number of ways. Not only were the day-to-day operations of the institution contested but the physical space of the society was also

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<sup>9</sup> Saby or sabi is a pidgin verb that translates to English as “to know.”

challenged. Sunday sermons quickly posed a problem for Ekpe programing. At that time, the Efik embraced an eight-day calendar. The last day of the Efik week was strictly set aside for Ekpe performance and rites. On many occasions, Christian sermons coincided with the day of Ekpe. In fact, the first Christian sermon in Calabar was scheduled on an Ekpe day, but Waddell successfully appealed to King Eyo that Ekpe be postponed “for the sake of God’s holy day” (Waddell 1863[1970]: 275). However, since Ekpe still commanded tremendous authority, in the year 1847, Sunday missionary preaching was forced to yield to Ekpe ceremony. (Ibid., 355). By 1848, the mission was successful in claiming Sunday as an official day reserved for Christian preaching. Waddell, again, relied on King Eyo, who officially condemned the presence of any masquerades performing on “God’s day” (ibid., 376).

Ekpe quickly lost ground to the many spatial battles waged by the mission. Preaching was an early impetus for the missions’ success. The sermons were propagandistic forums that painted Efik practices such as polygamy, the sacrifice of slaves at the death of a prominent man, twin sacrifice, witchcraft trials, worship of sacred images, use of herbalist medicines, and Ekpe forms of prayer through goat and chicken blood as superstitious and heathen.<sup>10</sup> In a brasher attempt to challenge Ekpe space in 1849, a missionary by the name of Samuel Edgerley stormed into an Ekpe lodge and desecrated the society’s sacred drum.

Meanwhile, since the mission station’s establishment, it had served as an asylum for violators of Ekpe law. History sources and Missionary accounts are packed with cases as to when the mission challenged the authority of Ekpe by harboring slaves, thieves, non-members during

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<sup>10</sup> The agenda of the sermons proved successful to the mission when, the sacrifice of a goat or as the missionary’s termed, an Ekpe form of “prayer,” was abolished in 1853 (Goldie 1890: 170).

performance, twin mothers, women<sup>11</sup>, and those accused of witchcraft (Aye 1967: 132, McFarlan 1946[1957]: 38, Abasiattai 1990: 218, and Waddell 1863[1970]: 374-375, 399, 403, 505-506, 511, and 580). Prior to the mission, Ekpe had no boundaries when summoning, seeking out, and punishing offenders. Because Ekpe members could not claim those they deemed guilty from the sanctuary of mission stations, the space the society once governed freely was no longer entirely under their authority.

Despite the later success of the missionaries, initially, Ekpe proved too difficult to undermine, however. Missionaries quickly changed their approach. According to E. U. Aye, an Efik historian:

The early missionaries did not like Ekpe authority over the people, because Ekpe laws were in many respects contrary to Christian teachings. At first they thought of breaking down the authority of Ekpe and perhaps to entrench Christianity in its place, but when they found the invulnerability of Ekpe power and its sanctity in Efik culture they decided, with the support of the supercargos, to seek for its support in their religious and social reforms. It was in 1850 that this support finally came, and Ekpe edicts were promulgated against these social institutions (Aye 2000: 164-165).

Under the authority of Ekpe, the edict outlawed the killing of twins, human sacrifice, and witchcraft trials among other things (Offiong 1989: 60). With help from King Eyo, the mission had successfully manipulated Ekpe to their favor. The Edict of 1850 would soon completely nullify the power of Ekpe.

From 1850 to 1855, the Ekpe society and King Eyo were puppets that safeguarded missionary agenda.<sup>12</sup> However, tension was building between Ekpe and the Mission. In 1854,

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<sup>11</sup> From the start, the mission was interested in improving the rights and status of women in Calabar. For a thorough discussion see Hackett 1989: 65-67.

<sup>12</sup> Shortly after the edict of 1850 was made official, the mission was eager to extend its authority beyond Calabar. The law was used against an inland village called Ebunda in Waddell's text, some eight miles from Creek Town. The community was rumored to be in violation of the human sacrifice ban during the funeral for a "big man." After unsuccessful attempts of Christians to stop human sacrifice with the "word of God," Calabar Ekpe was called upon

Edgerley again took aggressive action by entering, violating, and taking sculptures for himself from an Ndem shrine. Outraged by Edgerley's disruption of sacred space, the community attempted to mobilize against the mission, but Waddell called on King Eyo to suppress the uprising (Ume 1980: 162). For the egregious actions committed by the missionary, Waddell was sentenced to "prostrate before Eyo" (Offiong 1989: 61). A year after Edgerley's iconoclastic act, tension reached a climax when the British Navy bombarded and completely destroyed Old Town, which had violated the human sacrifice clause, even though the edict of 1850 did not officially apply to Old Town.<sup>13</sup>

In response to the bombing and continued violation of Ekpe space, the society contested the mission by disrupting meetings and the Sabbath (Aye 1967: 132). Ekpe quickly became a local means of protest. In 1856, in an attempt to rid Calabar of the missionaries altogether, Duke Ephraim of Duke Town "blew" Ekpe or proclaimed Ekpe law against the mission house. In those days, "blowing" Ekpe was the society's primary means to enforce law and claim space. The mission house was therefore completely severed from the community and the missionaries were ordered to leave at once (Waddell 1863[1970]: 580). However, the proclamation of Ekpe law was rendered futile when British council intervened and sided with the mission. In the words of Waddell, "Duke Ephraim and his chiefs said not a word in reply, and took off the ban before night" (ibid., 581). The removal of the injunction marked not only the end of Ekpe's protesting

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and eventually forced the village to submit to their authority by means of a blockade, which severed the community from its trading networks and emptied their local market (see Waddell 1863[1970]: 444-449).

<sup>13</sup> The edict did not apply to Old Town since their leader and signatory, Willie Tom, was absent during the legislation hearings of 1850 (Offiong 1989: 61).

and supreme authority, but also its submission to an outside power, foreshadowing the establishment of the colonial government.<sup>14</sup>

The first confrontations between Ekpe and the Evangelical mission at Old Calabar are crucial for understanding more recent religious discourse in contemporary Calabar. With the rise of religious pluralism in Calabar, recent religious orientations, particularly those related to Christianity, make use of tactics similar to those that precolonial missionaries employed in order to render long-standing practice in a demonic light. Along with demonizing language used by Christians to contest local culture, I will demonstrate that religious disputes have begun to infiltrate Ekpe/Mgbe lodges. Members now openly engage in dialogue about aspects of Ekpe/Mgbe that are not acceptable in light of Christianity. Because of such disputes, Ekpe/Mgbe markers of space have become internally contested.

### **More Recent Confrontation and the Rhetoric of Demonization**

Beginning in the 1880s, religious pluralism started to take root in Calabar.<sup>15</sup> During the colonial, Independence, and Biafran civil war (1967-1970) periods, Calabar witnessed the steady growth of a number of religious developments whether indigenous or exogenous (i.e. mainline church missions, Pentecostal, Evangelical, the Spirit Movement, and local appropriations). However, in the 1970s, following the war and during the oil boom, Christian forms of religion in Calabar experienced an unparalleled revival and period of growth.<sup>16</sup> In the 1980s and even today,

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<sup>14</sup> The ban of 1878 administered by British Consul David Hopkins was the decisive blow to the authority of Ekpe. It consisted of fifteen articles enforcing the agenda of the missionaries and European residents. Article five was the most damaging to Ekpe since it outlawed the rituals and practices of the society: "There shall be no worshipping of rituals or sacrifices made to supposed Gods, nor Devil making (connected with burial) or making offerings to the spirits of deceased persons" (Nair 1972: 178).

<sup>15</sup> For more see Abasiattai 1990: chapter 13 and Hackett 1989: 75-82 and chapter 3.

<sup>16</sup> According to Rosalind Hackett, twenty-two new religious organizations were created or were brought to Calabar during the 1970s. Of those twenty-two, twelve were indigenous. Additionally, since the 1970s, the mainline or orthodox churches (Presbyterian and Roman Catholic) have declined and given way to Pentecostal churches (Hackett 1989: 119 and 136).

Pentecostalism flourishes because it rejects the “‘superstition,’ ‘ritualism,’ and ‘cultism’ (i.e. the restrictions of an esoteric cult)” that defined spiritual churches of the previous decade (Hackett 1989: 148). Dubbed the “city of church industry” by local press, the prominence of Christianity in Calabar is well recognized (ibid., 1). This has led to public outcries against the place of longer-standing forms of culture, especially in light of the recent Pentecostal fervor.

Birgit Meyer demonstrates that in Ghana, twentieth century missionaries demonized and persecuted local religion so much that subsequent generations still conceptualize non-Christian religiosity through the image of the devil or Satan (Meyer 1999). The Ghanaian case resonates with those of preceding generations in Calabar, who were born into families that adamantly clung to the idea of condemning local culture, for example Ekpe and Mgbe, to that of a satanic cult. These comparisons and other general disputes about the place of local culture, or long-standing practices, are found in local media outlets and addressed during church services or congregational activities. Both forms of discourse challenge the vitality and authority of the Ekpe/Mgbe society not unlike the precolonial preaching and agenda of the early missionaries. I argue that such contestation is a contemporary challenge to the space of Ekpe/Mgbe.

### **Local Newspaper Disputes**

Calabar’s local newspaper, *Nigerian Chronicle*, is riddled with such clashes from the 1970s to the present.<sup>17</sup> Simply glancing at some of the poignant headlines through the decades

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<sup>17</sup> The discourse about the place of so called “traditional” culture in contemporary Calabar started to appear in local newspapers during the 1970s when, at the national level, Nigeria promoted cultural revival, especially for FESTAC ’77 (see Apter 1994). The published account of a seminar held at the College of Technology, Calabar in April 1975, further sheds light into the Calabar debate about the topic of cultural revival and general attitude towards it. Contributors were cultural board officers or Christian clerics. Most support the notion of cultural revival as an outward expression and means of maintaining identity. However, secret societies were heavily condemned. For example, in the paper by Rev. (Dr.) Brian Usanga, membership in secret masquerade societies was deemed unacceptable for church members since most ceremonies are contrary to Christian doctrines and morals, while libation was tolerated as long as persons call upon “God, the Supreme Being as they pour (n.a. 1975: 22 and 25). More recently, these old disputes are being rehashed as Calabarians continue to use the media to debate whether local culture is usable for their international tourism industry (for a discussion on tourism and Calabar see chapter 6 of this dissertation).

informs any conversant or cursory reader on the subject: “Christians, Ekpe Cult Men Clash (Umondak 1974), “Misleading Views on Ekpe Society” (Akpan 1974) “Church Attitudes to Culture” (Udofia 1975), “Cultural Revival: a Return to Heathenism (Udoh 1976), “Is it Right to Pour Libation?” (Akpan 1976), “Christians Told to Detest Secret Society” (n.a. 1979), “Cultural Degradation: Educated Elites are Greatest Offenders” (Aje 1980), “Need for Cultural and Social Revival” (Akpama 1993), “Menace of Secret Cults” (Atem 1994), “Imoke’s War Against Cultism: the Nakedness of a Nation” (Nwabueze 2009), and “The War Against Cultism” (Okim 2010). These headlines present only a fraction of the larger debate about the place of local culture in a modern city as read in the newspaper. A more thorough list and discussion of article content is beyond the scope of this chapter.

Deeper analysis of the *Nigerian Chronicle* reveals that in the 1970s and 1980s, the discourse was, more or less, equally weighted. Those against cultural revival and the preservation of local tradition were clearly influenced by Calabar’s intensifying Christian ideology during the 1970s and 1980s. However, during the late 1980s and into the 1990s and the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the discourse turned one-sided, heavily favoring the more fundamental Christian/Pentecostal/Evangelical perspective. Also during this time, the rhetoric of “cultism” started to appear.

Today, the phrase “Cultism” denotes any secret society. The use of the word “Cult” originally characterized violent student fraternities that flourished on Nigerian college campuses during the 1980s. According to the *Nigerian Chronicle*, their activities such as blood oath, murder, and corruption were attributed to Satan (Okoroafor 1990 and Stephens 1994). However, although I cannot provide the exact date, as early as 2000, the term “Cultism” became synonymous with local culture. In an article titled “Cultism: What is it?,” Clement James informs

readers “how to recognize a cultist.” James is purposefully vague as he states that cultists have a particular mode of greeting, sign language, and distinctive verbal language (James 2009: 16). Most long-standing forms of culture in Calabar, namely Ekpe/Mgbe, employ these elements to determine membership.

In another recent newspaper article, Ugoji Nwabueze discusses how “cults” impede democracy while he applauds the government’s public denouncement of such groups. Nwabueze is not vague about who is labeled as cult: “fraternities, shrines and secret societies/cult groups” are written out in the article as if to insite debate (Nwabueze 2009). In an interview with Nwabueze, secret societies and “cults” were described as the same with minor difference. According to Nwabueze, Ekpe/Mgbe is certainly a secret society that should be entirely illegal. He further stated that if a member holds a political office, according to Nigerian law, Ekpe membership must be renounced.<sup>18</sup> Such interpretations are widespread. I administered a survey during fieldwork in Calabar in 2010, asking random people their opinion as to whether local culture is a cult or not; only about 20% indicated that Ekpe/Mgbe was indeed a cult. In light of the evidence, it seems that the educated elite and governmental officials, armed with Christian ideology, are responsible for the recent folding up local culture and placing it into the envelope of “cultism.”<sup>19</sup> This demonization of local culture is further fueled during Christian worship.

### **Preaching against Ekpe/Mgbe**

Most members of Ekpe/Mgbe and even non-members explained to me that church officials: priests, pastors, deacons, and spiritual leaders, openly rebuke local culture during homily, sermons, and individual consultation. In my view, the veil of secrecy that defines the

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<sup>18</sup> Interview with Ugoji Nwabueze, April 2, 2010.

<sup>19</sup> Hackett reports that newspaper circulation is low in Calabar and daily papers are mostly delivered to and consumed by those associated with government offices, commercial businesses, and educational institutions (Hackett 1989: 293).

institution along with its rights of access only to men, has been a point of contention within the rhetoric of demonization and the recent developing discourse of “cultism.” Ekpe/Mgbe thus becomes an easy target for churchgoers. A great deal of this Christian rhetoric revolves around the issue of gender.

Sunday Adaka, curator of the National Commissions for Museums and Monuments in Calabar, argues that the purpose of secret societies, like Ekpe, is to oppress women and keep local power in the hands of men.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, in Calabar, even though women are initiated into Ekpe/Mgbe, female membership does not grant them access to any knowledge or leadership within the society. Women have thus sought out other forms of membership in order gain voice.<sup>21</sup> Church membership is one such arena where women can aspire to positions of leadership. As pastors and deacons, women empower themselves by openly demonizing and speaking negatively against societies like Ekpe/Mgbe.<sup>22</sup> In this way, under the veil of Christianity and the media, non-members, women, and even children publicly contest a long-standing Ekpe/Mgbe taboo: under no circumstance can non-members discuss Ekpe/Mgbe.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Personal communication with Sunday Adaka, February 17, 2010.

<sup>21</sup> In an article on Calabar, featured in *Nigeria Magazine* and published in 1956, the changing position of women’s rights and status in Calabar is addressed. The article states, “[t]he position now is that women have great influence over their men—an influence said to be greater even than that exercised by the Yoruba and Ibo women.” The article further indicates that women in Calabar had developed their own societies and mutual aide groups “which, though social, cultural or religious in their overt purpose, now wield considerable wider powers in the town.” The article argues that the initial impetus for “partial emancipation” was the work of early missionaries (n.a. 1956: 84-89).

<sup>22</sup> Interview with chief Imona, October 8, 2009 and informal discussion with Note Patrick Inok Oquagbor V and Mbong Atu Assagi from 2008-2010.

<sup>23</sup> Until about the 1950s or 1960s, Ekpe/Mgbe norms were closely followed according to elders of the society. Non-members were never aloud to utter a whisper about the society or even be in the same vicinity during performance. These rules and regulations resonate to the influence Komo commands in Mande communities in Mali (See McNaughton 1979: 22).

## Reactions and Implications

As a result of the rhetoric of “cultism” as published in local newspapers, and the demonization that occurs during Christian worship aimed at local cultural institutions like Ekpe/Mgbe, members have become frustrated. When members are asked about such agenda, usually “ignorance” is their first explanation.<sup>24</sup> Others, enraged by the condemning nature of the term “cultism,” ask me in return: “you have been fully initiated, do you see anything demonic or satanic in there (referring to the lodge)?”<sup>25</sup> One response to such contestation was the founding of Calabar Mgbe in the late 1990s—an institution that provides cross-ethnic unity and a common voice for Ekpe/Mgbe affairs. Another plan is to organize public conferences/forums to educate non-members about the erroneous allegations that the society is a satanic cult. Other members discuss the need for the society to become more inclusive and permit initiated women to enter the lodge. Yet another member, Bassey E. Bassey, who was initiated later in life, wrote a book about Ekpe. To my knowledge, his book, *Ekpe Efik: A Theosophical Perspective*, is the first and only attempt by an indigenous member to write about the society. Bassey not only discusses some inner teachings of the society, but he also addresses how its religious and philosophical applications apply to other religions like Christianity (Bassey 1998). However important these rebuttals are, Ekpe/Mgbe is losing the written and verbal debates.<sup>26</sup>

I argue that such battles waged by the pen or by the mouth of non-members are calculated attempts to marginalize Ekpe/Mgbe. Such contestations are construed as spatial challenges to the society, affronts that were not possible until the unraveling of the society’s power with the

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<sup>24</sup> Interviews with chief Lawrence Nyong Akiba, and chief Dennis Edet, February 22, 2010 and interview with chief Imona October 8, 2009.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with chief Francis Edet, February 22, 2010.

<sup>26</sup> Even recently, the anthropologist Ute Rösenthaler labels Ekpe/Mgbe as a “cult agency” (Rösenthaler 2011).

introduction of the various modernities such as Christianity and printed newspapers. These affronts have further fractured the unity of given lodges. Since members are for the most part staunch Christians, some have started to question certain elements and practices of the society. Thus, contemporary Christian worldview has inspired and fueled a debate among members. In the center of the debate is the pouring of libation and the stone of Ekpe/Mgbe.

### **Internal Debates in Qua Mgbe Lodges Today**

Several debates are currently being waged within Mgbe lodges in Calabar. These include the pouring of libations, the stone, and the public claiming of space through performances, I will address two of these in this chapter.

#### **To Pour or Not to Pour**

Perhaps the most contentious issue under debate is the act of pouring libations. Libation pouring during performance is one of many strategies members make use of to voice themselves publicly. In such performances, discussed in the next chapter, the act of pouring to the ancestors, calling on them to protect and to guide the living members during performance, is multifold: an offering, a point of remembrance, an honoring gesture, a form of request for protection, and a device to position members in debates about modernity, local politics, and religiosity. The pouring of libation officially commences ritual activity and may occur during performance at random times when knowledgeable members deem it worthy, especially as a public street procession passes the house of a deceased titleholder. The procession stops to pour and chant in honor of the deceased (Fig. 2-11). The act is an ultimate form of respect for deceased members, but also a poignant reminder to those who contest the practice.

As a devout Christian, Ndidem (Dr.) Thomas I.I. Oqua III, grand patriarch of the Qua nation has condemned the pouring of libation and advises only verbal chanting in honor of the ancestors without pouring spirits. In spite of the fact that the Ndidem's authority does not extend

past his own clan, the title of Ndidemship makes him the official spokesperson and advisor to the entire Qua nation. Keep in mind, each clan is autonomous with its own clan head conceptualized as the monarch, who rules his territory with absolute authority, which is granted through the authority of Mgbe. The issue of pouring libation and the current “advised” banning by the Paramount ruler is a delicate case. The controversy about pouring libation has only been exacerbated by the Ndidem’s recommendation.

In Qua communities, libation pouring has thus become quite controversial. When clan heads and titleholders choose to pour or not to pour, they in fact enter into a political and spiritual discourse. Argumentation commonly follows either decision. When members do or do not pour, especially in public, they knowingly enter a heated local discourse through the medium of Mgbe performance. The act of pouring not only illustrates a lodge’s position on the matter, but it also makes a larger comment about indigenous belief and the ways a foreign worldview brought with missionization has encroached, closely followed by the fallout of colonialization. During Ekpe/Mgbe performance, members make use of a seemingly innocuous act of pouring drinks on the earth or on a stone as a potent statement, ushering the actors into an argument in the public arena and participation in local conversations about change and contemporary religious discourse.

Controversy arose in the wider Qua community when Ntoe Patrick Inok Oquabor V was crowned clan head of Nkonib (Ikot Ansa) in 2008. The newly coronated monarch chose to pour libation to Nimm, the Qua tutelary earth goddess deity, much to the chagrin of the wider community. In fact, during an interview with an elder Mgbe member and honorary chief from a neighboring clan, the integrity and knowledge of the clan head has been in question since he poured libation to Nimm. The elder further stated that he would never support or participate in

Nkonib events since, from his perspective, the young clan head “did not know what he was doing” by evoking such spirits.<sup>27</sup> Clearly, the elder Mgbe member supports the banning of libation pouring and condemns Nimm as a “cult.”

More recently, in Nkonib, the pouring of libation had global implication. The Calabar Free Trade Zone, also known as the export-processing zone or foreign-trade zone, commenced the building of its own jetty. In order for the construction to begin, Ntoe Oquabor V had to grant consent officially since the project was located on his land. Permission was offered through the pouring of libation to cleanse the waterfront where the jetty was to be built. The event was featured on the front page of the *Nigerian Chronicle*. The article stated that Ntoe Oquabor V, his fellow chiefs, and family heads performed the rite “costumed in *Qua* traditional attires” (Ekpenyong 2010: 1). Ntoe Oquabor V used the forum to state that investors “should not fail to recognize the host community by engaging their unemployed sons and daughters in any of their projects...” (ibid., 2). The clan head used the public arena strategically to link together libation pouring, modernity and its disenchantment, and global trade under the veil of “tradition.”

A dispute about libation pouring erupted in the Big Qua clan, during a planning committee meeting for the organization of the 7<sup>th</sup> anniversary coronation ceremony of Ndidem Oqua III. Prior to the dispute, members of the committee and the gathered community were discussing the ethnic tensions between themselves (the Qua) and their Efik neighbors. As always, land ownership took center stage. Several complaints about how the Efik pour libation on Qua land were voiced. The Qua maintain that they are the landholders of Calabar while much to their frustration, the Efik also claim ownership. The argument was made that the Qua should demonstrate their landownership by *officially* pouring libation and calling upon the ancestors for

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<sup>27</sup> Interview with Entufam Orok Etim Okon, May 24, 2010.

guidance in the matter. Recall that many clans still pour libation even though the Ndidem discourages the practice. The use of the word *officially* was political in nature. The committee curbed the debate until it resurfaced when the meeting was about to adjourn. A Christian prayer is always offered at the conclusion of the assembly. The penalty for being late to a committee meeting is leading the closing prayer. When the most tardy attendee was called upon to pray, he thunderously voiced: “give me a bottle of spirits and I will pray the right way.” Some smiled, others clapped, most let out a chuckle.<sup>28</sup> Instead of leading a Christian prayer, the elder offered a timely and revealing critique. Certainly political intention fueled the discourse that day in voicing their disagreement with Ndidem’s stance on the matter. The meeting was intended to plan for the celebration of the paramount ruler’s seven years as grand patriarch of the Qua nation. Instead, the meeting became a forum for addressing politics, religion, and libation pouring. Such debate and disagreement extends as well to the stone of Mgbe.

### **Disputing the Stone of Mgbe**

During my investigation of the stone of Mgbe, I became aware that not all Qua lodges feature *the* supposedly most critical element of the society. An interview with the paramount ruler of the Quas, Ndidem Oqua III, gave me insight into not an external debate between Mgbe members and Christian-influenced thinkers, but an internal issue enveloped in heated local discourse. After asking why his lodge at Big Qua did not have an Isu Dibo planted near the lodge entrance, Ndidem informed me that he had removed it. Ndidem explained that those types of symbols are “fetish”<sup>29</sup> and require painstaking annual rituals in the form of libation pouring and

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<sup>28</sup> My notes from the Central Planning Committee (CPC) meeting for the planning of the 7<sup>th</sup> anniversary coronation of Ndidem (Dr.) Thomas I.I. Oqua III, March 10, 2010.

<sup>29</sup> Missionaries, colonial officers, and European travelers used the term “fetish” when they encountered any type of art form or object in Africa they did not care to understand. It is no surprise, but unfortunate, that the term is used in Calabar to demean objects like the stone of Mgbe. The accounts written by Calabar missionaries and colonial officers are littered with the term. No doubt, it was everyday language while preaching the lessons of Christianity.

slaughtering of animals. If not properly administered, the spirits of Mgbe can become destructive. Ndidem cited an example: if a certain quality of blood, meat, yam, and such is not properly sacrificed, the spirit will not only kill the priest, but also harm other members, and perhaps the larger community. Ndidem stated, “such symbolism is not good in the modern age, because of what it demands—through rituals, which pertain to the existence of that symbol.” The monarch further posited, “the urban nature of the Quas is very dangerous to such a lifestyle.” Ndidem concluded that research he conducted informed his decision, and that the Bible was his main source.<sup>30</sup>

Of the five Qua lodges in which I documented Mgbe ritual and performance, Big Qua and Ikpai Owom featured no Isu Dibo, while Ikot Ansa (Nkonib), Akim, and the two Kasuk lodges prominently displayed the stone. Obviously, not all Qua clans embrace the Ndidem’s interpretation of Isu Dibo. Each Qua clan is autonomous, and the real authority of the Ndidem does not extend past his own clan. The Ndidem’s view is only taken as counsel. Therefore, clan heads decide either to follow the religious direction of the paramount ruler, or to continue the longer-standing practice of featuring the stone and administering its rituals. The common argument for the latter is a matter of embracing ancestral veneration. Some believe that a lodge without a stone is simply not a real house of Mgbe and is stripped of its ancestral and mystical powers. In either case, the clan and its monarch unavoidably take a side and enter into the heated debate by choosing to keep the stone in place or to remove it.

Indeed, the dispute is quite visually palpable. Lodges do not attempt to hide their position in the matter. Instead, the stones of those who maintain them are clearly visible from afar. The

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“Fetish” should be understood as a derogatory term that denotes something superstitious, superficial, and exotic. (For the history of the term, see McClusky 2002).

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Ndidem (Dr.) Thomas Ika Ika Oqua III, Grand Patriarch of the Qua Nation, November 17, 2009.

decision reveals yet another example of how so called “traditional” African art and ritual are enmeshed in and change with contemporary life. In other words, the debate surrounding the stone reflects long-standing belief and issues of locality, while at the same time reflecting contemporary religious and current socio-political awareness. In fact, a close reading of the stone demonstrates how a given long-standing ritualistic aspect of Mgbe is critically used to engage in discourse about modernity and its malcontents (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993). However, there is another layer to such disputes once the examination turns attention to the politics of a particular lodge.

The Stone or Isu Dibo at Nkonib (Ikot Ansa) is anchored into the ground in front of the lodge by a metal chain attached to the foundation of the structure (refer to Fig. 2-10). Such a precaution is not normally taken. However, because the Ekpe/Mgbe and Christianity debate has spilled over into individual lodges, members openly argue and take sides about what aspects of ritual practice are acceptable. Although the clan head and his elder titleholders make the decision to display the stone, all members of a particular lodge are not always on the same page. Those who strongly disagree once went as far as trying to remove it! Such an act is deemed absolutely intolerable by the society. The offending members were never caught since the blasphemous act was committed at night. Members of the Nkonib lodge have their suspicions as to who was responsible since it is known which side of the argument each side embraces. But without evidence, a member cannot be summonsed before the titleholders for disciplinary action. Therefore, another strategy was employed; the stone was anchored into the ground, making all future attempts impossible.

Such debates and normally unthinkable actions demonstrate the depth of the larger religious debate raging in Calabar today. The fact that members challenge their leaders in an

effort to rid their own lodges of their stones of Mgbe—the source of all ancestral power and mystical barrier of the society—speaks volumes about the complexities within a particular lodge as well as the kinds of discourse and intervention Ekpe/Mgbe ritual and performance affects. Yet there is another layer to the stone and lodge of Nkonib.

### **The Burning of a Lodge**

After having left Calabar in July 2009, I returned to the city for a yearlong stay some two months later. During the time I was away, the local external and internal debates about the stone of Mgbe at the Nkonib clan (Ikot Ansa), had reached a dangerous climax. Someone or a group of persons had set fire to the Nkonib lodge. The house of Mgbe was in disrepair and completely out of commission. The fire also heavily damaged the stone of Mgbe. The story told to me by members of the lodge was that the culprits had thrown lit materials into the lodge from an open window at around two or three in the morning. Once the fire started, members living nearby had sprung out of bed to try to save the structure. My attempt to collect the “truth” was futile. The members of the lodge were shocked, but the community was just as astonished. The space of Mgbe had been violated, and the uneasiness of the community was palpable. In former days, an action against Mgbe/Ekpe, especially one of this magnitude, would have certainly resulted in the offenders being put to death.

The catalyst for the burning of the shrine was the contradictory attitudes of Mgbe and Christianity on what the stone symbolizes and means. Most members adamantly stated that the act was promulgated by Christians trying to rid their community of Mgbe. However, a few titleholders suggested that a neighboring clan with which Nkonib was engaged in a land dispute could have been responsible for the arson. Nobody was willing even to state the possibility that the lodge’s own members could have been responsible. Most were baffled by the incident and labeled it an egregious attack against Mgbe/Ekpe. In such cases, judging from the aftermath, the

stone seems to have been a principal target, along with the rest of the lodge. The damage to the stone forced the lodge head to remove and hide it. Regardless of who set fire to the stone and lodge, the space of Mgbe was challenged in an unthinkable manner. The leadership of the lodge responded swiftly with a calculated attempt to reclaim the contested space posed by Christians, its own members, and those involved in the land dispute.

The clan head and Mgbe lodge head, Se Dibo, Ntoe Oquabor V, stated that the burning of the shrine, although an attack on Mgbe, was an opportunity for the members and clan to renovate and enlarge the lodge. Due to the growing nature of the Ekpe/Mgbe society in Calabar, most lodges are too small these days. Nkonib, like many other clans, required a larger lodge for the recent influx of membership. Nkonib's clan head organized, with support from fellow titleholders, an ambitious building project. The blue print for the design was about much more than just expanding the size of the physical structure. It was a statement about Mgbe's vitality. "If they burn it down, we will build it even larger," stated Ntoe Oquabor V.

The new shrine (Fig. 2-12), a modern marvel in comparison to the older version, is not only about three times the size of the previous structure, but it includes a bathroom, toilet, shower, plumbing, electrical outlets, lights, generator, a number of ceiling fans, locking windows, and a locking metal compound gate.

Once construction was complete, members orchestrated a public rededication ceremony on November 7, 2009. A few clan heads from other Qua clans added to the "regality" by their participation, which further marked the importance of the rite. The rebuilding of the lodge, coupled with a large public ceremony, which included the presence of a number of important Qua leaders, not only sanctified the new structure, but was also a poignant rebuttal to those responsible for the burning of the lodge.

The day before the dedication libation was poured in a public manner to the ancestors while members stood in front of their newly renovated lodge. The offering, along with the performance, was not only intended for the ancestors of course, but it was a strategic tactic to make a public statement in an ongoing battle for space in Calabar.

### **Taking it to the Streets**

The burning of the Nkonib Mgbe lodge is an extreme example of how serious the spatial battle between the long-standing cultural practices of the region and the more recent Christian ideology that has challenged it in Calabar. Christian demonization of Mgbe and the rhetoric in which it is referred to as “cultism” serve as the impetus for public protest against the more spiritual aspects of Ekpe/Mgbe. Not only are non-members encouraged to think this way, but even members are challenged to reconsider these aspects of the society.

This chapter problematizes the tendency Westerners have claimed that so called “traditional” shrines and society meeting lodges are solely facilitators of the divine or that they are even spiritually relevant to everyone participating in the ritual space (Hackett 1996: 166). Markers of Ekpe/Mgbe space, for example, once served as barriers that protected the spiritual and physical integrity of the society. Recently, some markers have been removed, contested, and debated. While some lodges respond to the debate by keeping such markers in place, others have removed them. Disputes among members about the stones of Ekpe/Mgbe and pouring of libation demonstrate the changing nature of the society. Society members today are the minority, and they are not as politically strong as they were in precolonial days. Thus, the Ekpe/Mgbe society is losing ground to the Christian inspired written and verbal slander.

Ekpe/Mgbe members, for the most part, are speechless in the public arena because they are simply outnumbered. I argue in the next chapter that members take to the streets to reclaim space and to voice their frustrations through the medium of elaborate public performance.

Ekpe/Mgbe ritual and performance has thus become more public than it was in the past. Even though some members discourage practices such as the pouring of libation, no member, to my knowledge, defines Ekpe/Mgbe as a “cult” or satanic group. On the contrary, all members value the vitality of the society and its cultural aspects. Masquerade performance, initiation, and title taking are aspects of the society that members strongly encourage. Ritual space has thus extended beyond the lodge itself into the streets. It is a calculated push back against the rhetoric that attempts to demonize Mgbe. Recent public performance is a medium through which members are able to voice their positions within the heated contemporary discourse.

Figures



Figure 2-1. Akim Mgbe Lodge, Akim Town, Calabar, 2009. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 2-2. Ekpe lodge, Bechei village, Umon, Jan. 30, 2010. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 2-3. Ejagham Mgbe Lodge, Akamkpa LGA, Jan. 9, 2010. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 2-4. Interior of compound wall of Efe Ekpe Asibong Ekondo, Calabar, Dec. 5, 2009.  
Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 2-5. Stone of Mgbe from Bendeghe Etung-Ejagham lodge, Ikom, Middle Cross River, Oct. 17, 2009. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 2-6. Stone of Ekpe from Efe Ekpe Iboku, Creek Town, Dec. 30, 2009. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 2-7. Stone of Ekpe from Efe Ekpe Asibong Ekondo, Calabar, Dec. 5, 2009. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 2-8. Newly conferred chief Ekpenyong Bassey Nsa standing next to stone pillar supporting the Efe Ekpe Iboku, Creek Town, Dec. 30, 2009. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton

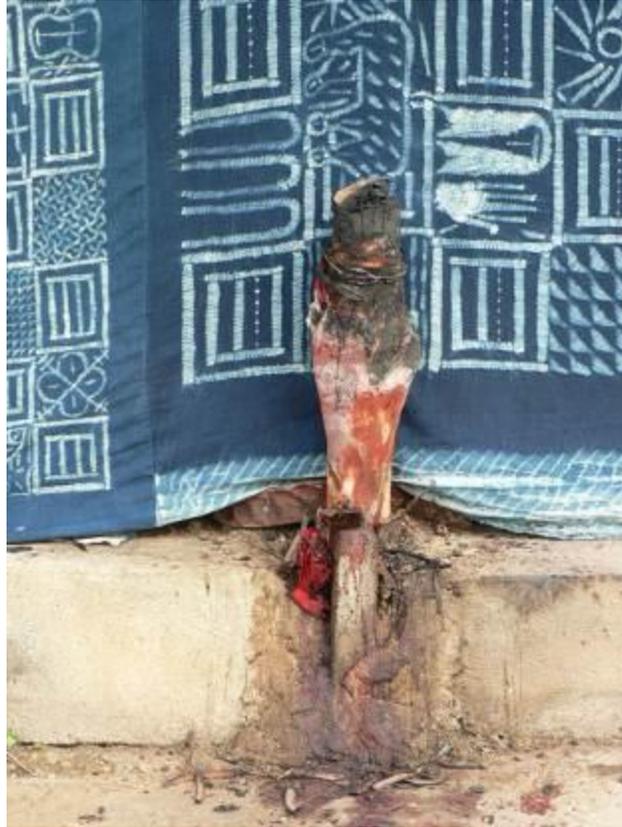


Figure 2-9. Stone of Mgbe from the Nkonib (Ikot Ansa) lodge, Calabar, June 27, 2008.  
Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 2-10. Stone of Mgbe from the Kasuk lodge, Calabar, Jul. 18, 2009. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 2-11. Mgbе street performance stops to pour libation, during chieftaincy conferment ceremony, Nkonib, Calabar, May 31, 2008. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 2-12. Expanded and renovated Nkonib Mgbe lodge, Calabar, June 3, 2010. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton

### CHAPTER 3

#### CLAIMING SPACE THROUGH PUBLIC SPECTACLE: THE CONTEMPORARY INSTALLATION OF AN EKPE/MGBE CHIEF

The previous chapter demonstrates how Christian ideology openly contests the ancestral practices, mystical aspects, and sacred space of Ekpe/Mgbe. As a result, even the members themselves have increasingly started to question libation pouring and the place of the stones of Ekpe/Mgbe in contemporary Calabar. Recent external discourse and internal debates among members—about the place of long-standing practices and rites—coincide with Calabar’s recent pattern of urbanization during the 1970s and 1980s. During those decades, Pentecostal and Evangelical influence flourished in the midst of urban growth and development. However, Ekpe/Mgbe has not faded in these changing contexts, but thrives today. In spite of members questioning the ancestral and mystical aspects of the organization, they are all united in the effort to preserve the heritage of the society through performative display. Members have thus taken the argument to the streets in an effort to push back against the forces that challenge their society.

This chapter demonstrates that Ekpe/Mgbe chieftaincy conferment rites in Calabar have developed into elaborate public spectacles rather than the closed and secret events of the past. The expanding nature of Ekpe/Mgbe performance reflects Calabar’s recent pattern of urbanization. I present a detailed case to the ways in which the Ekpe/Mgbe chieftaincy installation has changed into an extravagant public cultural display to argue that the recently expanded spectacle has become a calculated outlet for the society not only to assert their wealth and power but also to reclaim space through performance.

As Calabar was changing in the 1970s and 1980s, the acquisition of chieftaincy titles became a major means for individuals to demonstrate local prestige and power. In an interview with Muri J. B. Anating Edem VI, an Efut clan head, about the importance of chieftaincy in

Calabar, I was informed that “in the 1970s and 1980s, if you did not take a title, no one took you seriously.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the acquisition of a chieftaincy title is absolutely necessary for an individual to increase status and power at the local level. There are three categories of chieftaincy rank in Calabar: honorary, community, and those belonging to Ekpe/Mgbe. The first two titles are forms of recognition for communal service. The Ekpe/Mgbe chieftaincy title is not only the highest form of chieftaincy rank available in Calabar, but it is also the most prestigious type and hardest to obtain. However, as Christianity grew in influence during the 1970s and 1980s, the business of assigning Ekpe/Mgbe titles started to succumb to greed.

Members informed me that prior to the 1960s, the number of Ekpe/Mgbe chiefs of a individual lodge could be counted on one hand. In fact, in the past, Ekpe/Mgbe titles were strictly hereditary, especially those of superior status. Titles were passed from father to son upon the father’s death but only when the son procured enough money and resources to take his father’s vacant title (Hart 1964: 54-56). During the 1970s and 1980s, many sons of titled chiefs were becoming born again Christians and openly refused their hereditary right.<sup>2</sup> Ekpe/Mgbe titles were thus sold outside the immediate family and even in some cases outside of the family altogether. For these reasons, Simon Ottenberg and Linda Knudsen, based on work conducted in Calabar during the mid 1970s, concluded that the Ekpe/Mgbe society in Calabar “is mainly a social and status society” (Ottenberg and Knudsen 1985: 40). The business of selling and buying titles still continues today. Nowadays, it is common for a given lodge to have over twenty titleholders.

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Muri J. B. Anating Edem VI, February 27, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> A. K. Hart reports that by the 1960s, “only a few have refused to join owing to their personal Christian convictions” (Hart 1964: 54). The number of those refusing Ekpe/Mgbe membership significantly increased during the Pentecostal and Evangelical boom of the 1970s and 1980s.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Ekpe/Mgbe titles turned into purchasable commodities. The change brought about a new economy in which prices increased, and explains why Ekpe/Mgbe titles are an expensive endeavor today. Since the business of Ekpe/Mgbe titles became more about status than the pursuit of esoteric knowledge, conferment celebrations have become more public. In fact, members informed me that before the 1980s, Ekpe/Mgbe chieftaincy conferment was a private affair and not a public display like today. The installation took place at the lodge and members remained for seven days in order to carry out important rites and teach the honoree the society's esoteric knowledge. The older initiation format has changed considerably.

Most elders estimate that the nature of installation, which had been a private matter, morphed into what can be seen as a public spectacle during the 1980s. The public event was initially a pure and simple display of status. While the demonstration of status is still a major aim, I argue that Ekpe/Mgbe chieftaincy spectacle has become an urban means for members not only to demonstrate status, but also to preserve the cultural heritage, authority, and autonomy of the society by the forceful reclaiming of space. The case of Ekpe/Mgbe chieftaincy spectacle follows Suzanne Gott's argument that urban performance is a highly visible orchestration of cosmopolitanism that matches the city's local and global environment (Gott 2007).

### **Framing Ekpe/Mgbe Chieftaincy as Spectacle**

At the time of the slave and oil trades, from the sixteenth into the twentieth century, Ekpe was an exclusive institution and although its initiations were private, the society demonstrated its wealth and power through public performance. As early as 1846, Hope Waddell documented the importance of public Ekpe ritual (1863[1970]: 265-266). The account emphasizes it as "a public display of Egbo [Ekpe] grandeur, and all the townspeople were allowed to come forth and witness it" (ibid, 265). Waddell's description, not unlike accounts of public Ekpe and Mgbe displays of today, highlights the use of a plethora of performers, masqueraders, and visual

stimuli: foreign silk cloth, ribbon of all sorts, and exotic feathers. However, most public performances were funerary rites for “big men” of the society. A photograph from the Claude Macdonald catalogue,<sup>3</sup> in my opinion, captures an Ekpe funerary rite for a lodge head at Old Calabar c. 1895 (Fig. 3-1). The photograph captures the public grandeur of the event, the large crowds it attracted, and the extravagant dress of the performers. However, Other Ekpe rituals, masquerades, and initiations were either staged at night, and if held during the day, only members could participate. In the past, the only public part of an initiation was a short stroll around town in order to announce one’s new status to the rest of the community. The point is that in the past, Ekpe ritual was restricted to members and if a public performance was staged, it was not only a demonstration of status and wealth, but also an organized production of space.

Today, elaborate public funeral rites are still performed. However, since the 1980s, the advancement of a member to the rank of chief of Ekpe/Mgbe (in Efik: Obong Ekpe and in Ekin, the Qua language: Ntoe Mgbe) has taken on an even more public character. The conferment of an Ekpe/Mgbe chief is now pronounced by a day packed full of ritual, ceremony, and public street procession, which I condense into the term spectacle.

My use of the term spectacle stems from scholars investigating the pluralistic nature of art and culture among the Yoruba of southwest Nigeria. To demonstrate the overlapping and inclusive nature of Yoruba performance, Margaret Drewal employs the terms spectacle, ritual, festival, play, and improvisation interchangeably (Drewal 1992: 12-13). Babatunde Lawal makes use of the term spectacle to reveal how the social, religious, and aesthetic intermingle during Gelede festival (Lawal 1996). And more recently, Probst interprets the highly visual, communal, and commercial Osun Osobgo festival as a spectacle of heritage (Probst 2011: 102). Following

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<sup>3</sup> The photograph is from the Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution

these scholars, I interpret the Ekpe/Mgbe spectacle in Calabar not unlike a painting containing three separate, but interrelated planes. In the foreground of Ekpe/Mgbe spectacle are elements of festival, play, and improvisation. The religious, political, social, and economic elements are embedded the middle ground. And finally, the backbone of the spectacle is the common interest among all members in preserving Ekpe/Mgbe cultural heritage.

In the following analysis, I divided the Ekpe/Mgbe chieftaincy spectacle into five phases: preparation, oath and initial assembly, installation, declaration, and reception. Within these phases, the structural elements that crystallize the agency of the spectacle are hierarchy, variation, and repetition as addressed by Herbert Cole in his examination of Ghanaian festival as art (Cole 1975).

Indeed, not unlike Asante royal festival, Ekpe/Mgbe spectacle reinforces status through difference and redundancy. For example, an aspect of success of the Ekpe/Mgbe spectacle is determined by innovation and invention. Zoe Strother demonstrates that “invention and reinvention” are critical components to the success of masquerade (1995). Ekpe/Mgbe performance also follows this rule of thumb. Members consciously try to outdo past spectacles since status and agency are ultimately judged by performative progression. This comes in the form of individual agency, superior masquerading, performative organization, dress, and participation. Redundancy is another important element for the demonstration of success and thus power. However, the notion of redundancy is not meant to be understood as static and unchanging. Redundant aspects of spectacle also follow the principle of variety. Abundance of food and drink are the most reoccurring aspects of Ekpe/Mgbe spectacle. Yet the amounts provided, cost, and how many courses vary tremendously from spectacle to spectacle.

The consumption of food and drink are essential throughout all phases, excluding the declaration. Elliott Leib and Renee Romano have emphasized the “play,” “cook,” “drink,” and “chop” aspects of Mgbe ritual (Leib and Romano 1984). Drinking and eating abundantly is an important ritualized act that Ekpe/Mgbe provides its members. The seemingly superficial activity of eating and drinking copiously have led some to conclude that today Ekpe/Mgbe is merely a recreational and status seeking/honorable society (Leib and Romano 1984: 57 and Hart 1964: 54). However, the propensity to prepare lavish feasts and provide seemingly endless drink actually bolsters the economic, religious, and political functions of the society. Thus during Ekpe/Mgbe activities, the abundance of food and drink reinforces the elite status of its members, which establishes their local political standing through extravagant economic display. Because all Ekpe/Mgbe activities have mystical connections, such magnificent presentations of wealth may also be construed to bolster Mgbe’s secrecy and religiosity as well. The notions of hierarchy and variation serve as the foundation for understanding which recent Idagha Ekpe/Mgbe spectacle is simultaneously well structured yet highly adaptable for maximum affect.

### **The Contemporary Ekpe/Mgbe Chieftaincy Spectacle**

The following account is based on documentation and participation in eleven Ekpe/Mgbe conferment spectacles, one of which was my own installation to the office of Ntoe Mgbe. The narrative focuses on one particular spectacle, the Idagha Mgbe of Boniface Okon Effiom on December 12, 2009, of the Qua Nkonib (Ikot Ansa) lodge. However, in order to discuss the nuances of meaning and diversity from spectacle to spectacle, I supplement the account with images and details documented from other Ekpe/Mgbe chieftaincy events. I privilege the installation of Effiom only because I completely documented and video taped the event from start to finish.

## **Preparation**

The Ekpe/Mgbe conferment spectacle manifests itself to the general public in a one-day event. However, the tedious process of becoming a chief of Ekpe/Mgbe involves permission, negotiation, and planning. Procuring the financial funds and resources is a long and costly endeavor. Some spectacles may cost up to \$4,000! The expense only covers the actual one-day event; more is expended prior to the spectacle. Acquiring the necessary funds can easily span more than half of a lifetime in Calabar today. Once the candidate is financially ready, he must present his portfolio to the head of the lodge, known as the Iyamba in Efik or Se Dibo in Ekin, the Qua language. The Iyamba/Se Dibo deliberates with his fellow chiefs for weeks or even months on the matter. The candidate supplies drink for their meetings. By the time the decision either to accept or to deny the candidate's formal request has been made, much money has already been spent. If permission from the Iyamba/Se Dibo and chiefs is granted, further requirements and demands are given to the candidate, usually in a typed document (see appendix C). For the Qua, long before the Idagha Mgbe spectacle takes place, an official gathering is required in order for the candidate to announce to the rest of the lodge his intention. At that assembly the date is set for the chieftaincy installation.

Effiom's pronouncement gathering was held on November 6, 2009. Ntoe Patrick Inok Oquagbor V, clan head and Se Dibo of Nkonib (Ntoe hereafter), officially started the meeting by pouring libation (both gin and palm wine) in order to honor, venerate, and call the ancestors. The offering was performed immediately in front of the lodge for the entire community to witness. Although this is an official gathering, it is informal, therefore the *ukara* cloth, the society's chief symbol, is not hung in front of the lodge as it is in more formal contexts. After the pouring of libation, members entered the lodge. Following proper protocol, Effiom announced his intention by supplying drink in the form of beer, mineral (Fanta, Coke, and Sprite), malt, and spirits to the

chiefs and fellow members for their enjoyment. The mood was not completely frivolous but easy and lighthearted as members drank, enjoyed, and discussed among themselves. Drumming, singing, and dancing were lively. This gathering was the first since the rebuilding of the Nkonib lodge after it was set afire (see chapter 1), so members were eager to christen the expanded space with performance. As always, the important Dibo performance featuring *nsibidi* challenge took center stage (discussed in chapter 5). The informal gathering ended when the Se Dibo and Atoe (plural of Ntoe) Mgbe announced their satisfaction with the drinks provided by announcing the date of Boniface's installation to the rest of the lodge: December 12, 2009. With the date officially set, the candidate had about two months to complete all logistics for organizing a successful event.

Much more work goes into planning an Ekpe/Mgbe chieftaincy spectacle than securing the monetary funds, drink, and foodstuff. All aspects are absolutely critical for ensuring not only the success of the event, but also the reputation of the candidate and his lodge. The candidate's status and the legitimacy of his soon-to-be title are demonstrated by the close attention to planning during the preparation phase. Much more is at stake than merely performative accomplishment. This is why members stress that the preparation phase is the most important in the entire process.

Everything is planned and accounted for during the preparation phase. Banquet tents and canopies are rented and erected at the house of the celebrant for the reception phase of the spectacle. Tables and plastic chairs are also rented for guests to eat and drink comfortably during the reception. All foodstuffs are bought and stockpiled for the event. Professional photographers and videographers are commissioned to document the entire event. Official letters of invitation are sent to fellow Qua Mgbe lodges, the paramount ruler, Calabar Mgbe if the candidate is a

member, and to other titleholders and lodges whose presence is important to the candidate (Fig. 3-2). Each letter is typed and hand delivered. Knowledge of the procedure and what accompanies the letter is absolutely critical. If the letter is not pinned at the top with an *oboti* leaf—a universal sign of Ekpe/Mgbe, and accompanied by two bottles of hot drink (in this case gin), the receiver will not only disregard the invitation, but gossip will also quickly spread to fellow members and lodges that the candidate and his lodge does not know Ekpe/Mgbe—a serious accusation. An anecdote illustrates this point.

I arrived early to the weekly Calabar Mgbe meeting one Wednesday in 2009. As I approached the back room of the president's compound by walking down a narrow hallway where the meetings were usually held, I could hear a loud discussion in Efik already brewing. I quickly recognized the voices of the boisterous chiefs. I chuckled to myself reflecting on how any gathering of titleholders usually sparks argumentation or Ekpe/Mgbe gossip. As I entered the room, I saw the chiefs I had heard as well as other familiar faces. I greeted them and in return they greeted me as I sat. The heavy banter continued in Efik. And as always, chiefs led the discussion while lesser members mostly listened. The president, Chief Imona, knowing very well that I studied Ejagham and did not understand Efik, filled me in on the discussion using English (I was always so grateful to him for that). Chief Imona informed me that they were discussing how an Idagha candidate and his respective lodge sent Calabar Mgbe a letter of invitation without two hot drinks. The president and fellow officers were outraged. I could see the gravity of the situation in their faces as they stared at me intensely, waiting for me to respond. I did not normally join in during gossip or argumentation, but as a chief, I was expected to chime in when called upon, and this was certainly one of those times as they continued to stare at me waiting for my response. I said, "They don't know." Immediately the chiefs acknowledged my response as

they stated, “That’s what we said.” They then carried on to critique the lodge further for not understanding Ekpe/Mgbe protocol. The conversation ended when all agreed that Calabar Mgbe would not attend unless properly invited. Apparently, some days later, the lodge got wind of their wrongdoing and sent drinks.

The point is that in a single gathering of members, the authority of an entire lodge was called into question and heavily criticized for not following or knowing protocol, which boils down to Ekpe/Mgbe knowledge. Even more important, since Calabar Mgbe is comprised of members from Efik, Efut, and Qua lodges of Calabar and from neighboring Local Government Areas (and all were present that night), in a single night and in the following days, the ineptitude of the lodge was the subject of gossip throughout Calabar and beyond. The power and credibility of that lodge took a huge hit that night.

In addition to reception rentals, foodstuff, and letters of invitation, candidates expend great effort and resources to ensure a successful performance through negotiating the best artistic elements for their event. Everything from the organization of performance, the number of participants, the number of masquerades, the masquerade performers, masquerade costumes, drummers, and the dress of the candidate make an impact on the success and power of the event. All of those aspects are thoroughly preplanned during the preparation phase. For example, an important prearranged visual aspect of the spectacle is the ceremonial ensemble of the celebrant (Fig. 3-3). While the ensemble will be described below during the declaration phase discussion, here I focus on the procuring of the ensemble. Candidates carefully rent or commission the dress to aid in their elevation of status as the ensemble references abundance of wealth, power, and title taking. In this way, the Idgaha ensemble resonates with what Patricia Darish has termed “dressing for success” in the context of initiation ritual (Darish 1990). Some candidates rent

second hand from chiefs, while others rent second hand from local artists; still others commission new ensembles according to their concepts of taste and fashion. However, commissioning a new ensemble is costly and thus more infrequent since renting is less expensive. In 2009, new chieftaincy ensembles could cost up to \$500. The ensemble is only worn by the celebrant, which visually differentiates him from the rest of the members and community. Further, it is only worn on the day of the event. After, if rented, it will be returned or, if commissioned, it will become a family heirloom passed on to a son or even possibly rented out to others in the future.

The candidate is also responsible for hiring members to masquerade, drum, and sing if their lodge members are not to fulfill those roles. Or if the candidate wants the best mask costumes, masqueraders, and drumming and singing troupes, and if he is willing to pay for them, he will seek out the most skillful. Arrangements and price are negotiated. Masquerade costumes will be rented if the candidate deems their lodge's are too old and worn. Every single visual aspect of the multi-media spectacle becomes an important ingredient for the event's affect. For this reason, affluent candidates hire the most beautiful and recently made costumes from well-recognized mask makers.

I recall another weekly Calabar Mgbe meeting in 2009 to which I arrived early. The discussion conducted before that meeting sheds light on the business of renting mask costumes and performers. When I arrived at the compound that evening, a Qua Mgbe candidate from the Kasuk lodge, whose title was going to be conferred in the coming weeks, was meeting with Chief Imona, the president of Calabar Mgbe, to ask his opinion of the most renowned Ekpe/Mgbe mask masker in Calabar. The candidate wanted the most beautiful masks for his performance. Chief Imona referred the candidate to Ekpenyong Bassey Nsa, a well-known Efik

artist, who was called and promptly arrived to discuss the business of rental. After about a half hour of *beeding* (price negotiation), it turned out that the prices were too high for the chief-to-be. Bassey would only rent his mask costumes if his students were hired to masquerade in them too. The candidate wanted only to rent the costumes and to provide his own performers. I learned later from Bassey that he prefers to rent out his costumes only when his students wear them. His reasoning is twofold: he wants his students to benefit financially, and his reputation is also on the line. If inferior masqueraders were to wear his costumes, members would recognize Bassey's work. But instead of his renowned students performing his masks, performers with less skill would be perceived to belong to Bassey's coterie. Well aware of this, Bassey was protecting his good name and stature as a master artist.

Another recent part of the preparation phase is the arrangement and selection of things for the gift bags distributed to chiefs in attendance on the day of the conferment. Goodie bags usually contain a carton of Cabin Biscuits, a can of corned beef, a greeting stick carved from teak wood, and sometimes a more personal memento marking the special day. For example, Effiom also stuffed his bags with a personalized notepad. The cover of the pad featured his name, date of the conferment of his title, and a picture of Effiom fully decked out in his chieftaincy ensemble (Fig. 3-4). These notepads were also handed out to lesser members and to those invited to his reception. Such souvenirs are calculated attempts to advertise and disseminate newly acquired status throughout Calabar. In fact, many chiefs purchase space in local newspapers to publicize their title advancement. The media pronouncements is often a picture of the new chief in his special ensemble standing next to Ekpe/Mgbe masquerades with the caption, "conferment of Ekpe title." The earliest examples I documented were from the 1970s. While chiefs still make use of this outlet, it is not used today to the same degree it was during the 1970s and 1980s.

The final preparations is lodge upkeep in which the candidate, through the authority of the lodge head, makes proper arrangements. A member is paid to cut the grass, to prune the Iroko tree in front of the lodge and to trim overgrown vegetation in the precinct, and to clean and sweep the lodge interior. Dishes, flatware, and glasses are washed and neatly stacked on the tables. And, if the lodge has electrical capabilities (i.e. lights and fans), gasoline is obtained for the generator. If the lodge does not have a generator, one is rented or borrowed from a chief or from a fellow member.

The preparation phase, marked by careful planning, financial transactions, and negotiations, sets stage for the success or failure of all the following components of the spectacle.

### **Oath and Initial Assembly**

Early in the morning around dawn, on the day of Effiom's spectacle, the lodge was unlocked, opened, re-swept, and dishware was once again cleaned. Final lodge preparations were tended to, and lastly, the space of the society was demarcated. Two Nkonib lodge *ukara* banners (both consisting of four individual pieces sewn together) were hung before the interior entrance into the inner shrine and exterior entrance. Although, the *ukara* banner deters non-initiates from approaching the lodge by establishing Ekpe/Mgbe space, it does not act alone, but in tandem with an even more important symbol. An accumulation of *oboti* leaves and yellow palm frond are bunched together and tied above the entryway to declare the presence of the mystical Mgbe (Fig. 3-5). Members and non-members alike interpret this symbol as the actual sacred warning either to approach with respect or to keep at a safe distance.

There is much variation in how space is demarcated from lodge to lodge. At the Qua Kasuk lodge, *ukara* is less emphasized as a marker of space. Instead a yellow palm frond fence-like structure was erected on the edge of the property of the lodge. A number of *oboti* leaf

bunches, all with small pieces of red cloth attached, were hung on the palm frond fence-like barrier. An *ukara* wrapper was hung vertically on the inside of the entryway into the lodge. In Calabar South, at the Efut Atu lodge, I documented no *ukara* demarcating the entryway during the conferment of an Ekpe title. Rather a bunch of *oboti* leaves hung from the top of the doorway and yellow palm frond was hung vertically behind the accumulation. In Creek town, at the Efe (shed) Efik Iboku, again I documented no *ukara* blocking the entryway, but a bunch of *oboti* leaves were hung from the ceiling above the stairs leading to the entryway. At the top of the doorway into the lodge, a yellow palm frond was hung vertically. In all cases, however, an *ukara* was always hung inside the lodge blocking the entryway into the inner chamber. In Ikom, during a funeral ceremony of a member, a long *ukara* banner was hung outside the entrance with no trace of an *oboti* bunch of leaves. While a closer reading of the *ukara* is the subject of the next chapter, these examples demonstrate how space is demarcated differently from lodge to lodge and, of course, region to region.

All the above preparations were attended to hours before the initiation of Effiom began. The spectacle started around 8 a.m. when the Ntoe (the lodge head), chiefs (titleholders), lesser members, and the celebrant gathered for the oath. (Usually this phase started at 6 a.m.). All members were lined up in front of the lodge on public display. During the oath, Effiom mounted a stone located in front of the lodge.<sup>4</sup> However, Nkonib's stone was paved over some years back. Therefore, Effiom stood upon the place where the symbolic stone was said to be located. Ntoe stood before him. The titleholders formed an irregular semicircle behind. Lesser members stood to the right. And as always, all hats were removed as a sign of respect as libation was about to be

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<sup>4</sup> The stone referred to here is a separate stone and should not be confused with the "stone of Ekpe/Mgbe/Ngbe" discussed in the previous chapter.

poured. Ntoe's son held a bottle of imported gin and a tumbler. Gin was poured into the glass and handed to Ntoe. When Ntoe was given the libation, he took a step back.

Ntoe followed Mgbe protocol to call members to attention. In a hard voice, he shouted, "yap Barrio! Barrio! Barrio!" With the attention of fellow members and the wider community starting to gather, he then addressed the Atoe Mgbe (titleholders) and the candidate for the about five minutes. It was a personal and jovial address about Effiom becoming a "big man"—chief of Mgbe. The mood became more serious as Ntoe then addressed the oath: that whatever Effiom is to see inside the inner chamber, it is never to be discussed to those not worthy. It goes without saying that the deceased members of Mgbe, the ancestors, carry out punishment if a member were to talk of the inner shrine. To bind the candidate's oath with the will of the ancestors, libation was poured over his feet (Fig. 3-6). The act as well as two subsequent pours, this time on the ground, calls the presence of the ancestors to the ritual and to witness the oath. Since gin is considered a "hot" offering, palm wine was then poured to "cool" the ancestors. Ntoe then initiated an incantation to seal the offerings. Both drinks were sampled by Ntoe to ensure that a good and clean drink was offered to the ancestors. Before handing his father a gulp of gin, Ntoe's son, following Ekpe/Mgbe protocol, sampled the gin before to avoid being accused of giving an elder a poisoned or "charmed" drink. The oath had a twofold connotation: it served as a mechanism of check and balance the soon to-be-chief, and it was a public stance in favor of pouring libation in the external and internal debates surrounding the pouring of libation in Calabar as discussed in the previous chapter.

Immediately following the oath, the goat supplied by the candidate was slaughtered and brought to where the elder women of the community prepared and cooked Mgbe food. This should not be understood as merely a domestic related role, but it can be seen as an important

and powerful responsibility. Today, members discuss that in the past, poisoned or “charmed” food and drink provided by fellow members in Ekpe/Mgbe ritual was a reality, and it is still an anxiety today. This is why members share all food, are served from the same pot, drink from the same glass (not the case so much today), and closely watch the member distributing the food—such a task is always given to a trustworthy and respected member. The most trusted the elder are charged with the responsibility of cooking for Mgbe. Additionally, the women who cook are usually elderly, always supervised by the Queen mothers of the community.<sup>5</sup> In this way, women are granted tremendous power over Ekpe/Mgbe in their efforts to prepare food for ritual and ceremony.

When the oath was complete, members entered the lodge and took seats according to their levels and ranks. The seating reflects the hierarchical nature of the organization. At the head table, against the far back wall of the lodge, the lodge head sat in the middle with the eldest Ntoe Mgbe to his right and village heads to his left. The stature of these “biggest of big men” is literally elevated as the table and chairs rest on a raised slab of concrete and figuratively elevated, since their seats place them closest to the entrance into the inner chamber of the lodge (Fig. 3-7). To the left of the head table, the rest of the chiefs of Mgbe sat at tables along the side of the lodge. The lesser members and drummers sat at humble wooden benches to the right of the head table, also against the wall (Fig. 3-8). Directly across from the head table sat chiefs-in-waiting. The middle of the lodge was purposely left vacant. This space is the all-important arena for demonstration and for *nsibidi* challenge (see chapter 5).

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<sup>5</sup> These women are also usually members of the Ohom society, the female counterpart to the Ekpe/Mgbe society in Calabar.

Most lodge interiors in Calabar are rectangular. Most lodges enforce a similar seating arrangement with subtle difference.<sup>6</sup> At Nkonib, the Ntoe prefers that chiefs sit in order according to the seniority of their Idagha installation date. Other lodges value the rank of titles, and that determines the arrangement. Still other lodges are not as specific, and seats for chiefs are taken on a first come, first served basis. In all cases, the Iyamba/Se Dibo and highest-ranking titleholders sit at the head table. When foreign Iyambas/Se Dibos visit a lodge, they are given the privilege to sit at the high table even though it is not their own shrine.<sup>7</sup> In this case, the seating arrangement may shift constantly as members come and go. Clearly, space and seating arrangement are especially important for the establishment of prestige and hierarchy.

Returning to Effiom's spectacle, as members settled into their seats, drummers began to loosen their instruments. Crates of Star, Gulder, Guinness stout, Malta, Coke, Schweppes, Fanta and the like were carried into the lodge. Bottles were individually taken out and placed on the head table. Younger members also carried in boxes of Cabin Biscuit and corned beef. Ntoe gave directives to members of where and how to place things on his table. A brother of Ntoe, an Ntoe Mgbe himself, started to distribute glasses and drinks of choice to fellow chiefs. The mood was light; younger members teased each other, sang, and moved their bodies to the rhythms of the drums while seated awaiting their beverages. Some younger members sat silently: learning and soaking in what they could. Chiefs talked among themselves, discussed unrelated business on

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<sup>6</sup> For example, at the Qua Kasuk lodge, the tables and chairs reserved for chiefs are placed along the sides of the structure and the lesser members sit in the middle against the wall where the entrance is located. At the Efut Asibong Ekondo lodge, only chiefs are permitted to sit in the main room where the head table is located. Lesser members and drummers sit in a separate adjacent room. A low wall and a couple of steps separate the spaces. In most cases in Calabar, the head table is located on the back wall of the lodge and raised by a slab of concrete, lesser members sit only at benches, and the space in the middle of the lodge is strictly left for display.

<sup>7</sup> I recall an initiation at Asibong Ekondo, Calabar, May 26, 2010, when a foreign Iyamba from Okoyong humbly entered the lodge and took a seat not at the head table. As the ritual progressed, some chiefs informed the Iyamba of Ekondo of the situation. He immediately stopped the ceremony to honor the visiting Iyamba with a seat at the head table. When the Okoyong Iyamba was asked by the Ekondo lodge head why he didn't say anything, he claimed it didn't matter. I suspect he was testing the knowledge of the lodge since he quickly took the seat offered to him.

their mobile phones, cracked jokes with one other, also started to sing and to feel the drum rhythms as they slowly moved to the beat while seated. Still other chiefs sat quietly intently watching the action unfold. As all engaged in their various duties or activities, eyes rapidly scanned the entire interior of the lodge, shifting from member to member, in the hopes of catching a dialogue of performed *nsibidi* of Ekpe/Mgbe knowledge. While the setup continued, the drummers took it upon themselves to elevate the energy of the ritual. The beating changed to the Dibo rhythm, the most intense and lively of all Ekpe/Mgbe beats.

The increased tempo jolted Ntoe as he sprang from his seat and moved towards the middle of the dance arena and claimed performative space. While younger members continued to jostle about carrying out tasks, and chiefs were still getting settled, Ntoe started to dance and display the Dibo masquerade sequence (discussed in chapter 5). This was intended to be an informal educational display for younger members to observe and to learn.<sup>8</sup> An excited atmosphere immediately manifested. After Ntoe finished his didactic performance, newcomers were then initiated into the entry ranks of the society. Chalk was drawn on the novices' bodies, a peacock feather was placed in a white band tied around the head of each, and an incantation is shouted to seal their initiation.

The assembly continued with another round of drinks and a course of food. The lunch that day followed Ekpe/Mgbe protocol: fried plantain served with palm oil and salt, bush meat (antelope), and roasted fish. And as always, chiefs were served large portions first. Small portions of what remained was distributed to lesser members. After lunch was finished members

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<sup>8</sup> Later, a Ntoe Mgbe informed me that Ntoe has a specific way he prefers his lodge to display the Dibo *nsibidi* sequence so he used the opportunity to demonstrate it to the lodge. Ntoe prefers a clear delineation and organization of the various series of the signs of the Dibo *nsibidi*. Interview with Chief Joe Edet, April 21, 2010.

left the lodge to rest. All returned a couple of hours later for the conferment of the title, street performance, and reception.

While Nkonib and other Qua lodges administer the oath and initial assembly in the morning hours, others conduct the rite the night before the installation date. The Qua Kasuk and Efik Iboku (Creek Town) lodges are examples. Both of these lodges prefer to hold the oath and assembly late at night until early morning (running from about 11pm-3am). Regardless of time frame, both day and night gatherings consist of an oath, drumming, singing, dancing, eating, and drinking (Fig. 3-9).

### **Installation**

The actual conferment of Effiom's Mgbe title commenced around 2pm when all members returned to the lodge after the short break. The initiation phase started when Effiom marched from his father's house to the lodge. During this segment, the candidate is escorted by elder members and is usually wrapped entirely in cloth to conceal his ceremonial dress (Fig. 5-10). Since the candidate is not yet a chief, his bowler hat and ceremonial staff are carried for him. Once Effiom was escorted inside the lodge, he took a seat and remained there silently until called upon. At this stage, the candidate must not engage in conversation. He only sits silently, contemplating his impending conferment. Meanwhile, late arrivals were trickling into the lodge. The drummers and singers were warming the atmosphere with merriment. Drinks are often served to chiefs while the candidate is awaiting installation. However, since Effiom's imitation was running late, drinks were not served until after.

Effiom's installation began when most titleholders were present. Elder titleholders called forth Effiom and led him beyond the lodge interior *ukara* barrier that blocked the entrance into inner sanctum. Behind the curtain, *nsibidi* is drawn with chalk on the face of the candidate (nowadays optional). Admittance into the inner room also signifies that the candidate is

becoming physically and conceptually closer to the mystical Mgbe. The candidate is informed that the level of titleholder permits him to seek out all secrets and esoteric knowledge of the society. Effiom was then led back to the main hall and brought before the lodge head's table for title conferment.

When Ntoe formally addressed Effiom in front of his peers, with the entire lodge as witness, the lodge head officially installed Effiom to the office of Mgbe titleholder. This was done. The lodge head then literally dressed Effiom for his new status by completing the chieftaincy ensemble: crowning Effiom with a bowler hat and equipping him with a long ceremonial staff while verbally pronouncing his title of Ntoe Mafina, Effiom was now a titled chief (Fig. 3-11). The lodge head finished the rite by chanting Mgbe and then gestured to chief Effiom to address the assembly with his own Mgbe chant. This was an important moment since only chiefs are permitted to chant Mgbe. In other words, this was the first time chief Effiom pronounced himself as a chief through the incantation. In most cases, anxiety overcomes the newly crowned chief. Elder titleholders eagerly listen and are quick to tease lightheartedly if the honoree blunders. Chief Effiom started his chant well by running down the list of titles, but erred by not calling his own title! Elder chiefs amusingly reprimanded chief Effiom as they shouted "Mafina! Mafina!" Ntoe corrected him and motioned for chief Effiom to resolve his mistake. After correcting himself, the entire lodge erupted with laughter and celebrated with applause.

The reaction towards chief Effiom's error was not entirely frivolous, however. Such hazing has serious meaning. Elder chiefs look forward to the first chant in order to demonstrate knowledge and power over the honoree. In fact, during most conferment of Ekpe/Mgbe titles that I witnessed, elder chiefs found fault even if they detected the most minor slip-up. The reproach is well-timed: at the very moment the honoree professes his new status, the poignant reminder

simultaneously humbles him. It is an ultimate reference to his standing in relation to the seniority and tenure of the elder chiefs.

After the conferment, chief Effiom, fellow chiefs, and lesser members filed outside for pictures. While the hired photographer was busy at work, the hired videographer also filmed the members posing (Fig. 3-12). Posed photography and videography have recently become a staple of chieftaincy installation. Both serve as proof for the honoree and mark the participation of fellow members. Video recordings as well as photographs are also statements of status and power. Photographs are developed or digitally printed for the honoree and prominently hung in his parlor for visitors to admire. At the conclusion of the lengthy photography session, members worked their way back into the lodge.

Once members resettled into the lodge, the mystical Mgbe made its presence known. Announcing the presence of the mystical Mgbe engendered a ritual atmosphere to manifest once again (after the picture taking session created a lighter hearted mood). The voicing of the most secret and sacred aspect of the society is intended for both members and for the wider community. With all members seated—and with chief Effiom taking his rightful place among the other chiefs, a gong was repeatedly sounded to call forth the Mboko, the mystical roar that arises from the Nib Osam or inner shrine located in depths of the lodge. Mboko is sounded during chieftaincy installations to provide the final stamp of approval. A title cannot be awarded unless Mboko confirms. After Mboko thunders at will, she then calls upon each chief, who carefully listen to her words and respond.<sup>9</sup> Chiefs typically respond by indicating they are content and satisfied with the ritual environment and end the dialogue with Mboko with an

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<sup>9</sup> Members characterize Mboko or the mystical Ekpe/Mgbe as feminine in nature. For the Qua, Mboko is sometimes referred to as the mother of Mgbe. Mboko is also an Ekpe/Mgbe title, which is also conceptualized as feminine. Both Ekpe and Mgbe members informed me that the abundance of food and drink is meant to satisfy the Mboko/mystical voice. Additionally, ritual facilitates an implied sexual dialogue between the Mboko, the chiefs, and the overwhelming supply of foodstuff.

incantation of the Mgbe titles. At Nkonib, the Mboko calls the chiefs in order of seniority, thus expounding on the set seating arrangement of chiefs according to date of title conferment.

Following the sounding of the mystical Mgbe, chief Effiom's installation phase concluded with another bountiful presentation of food and drink. Chief Effiom provided yam, bush cow, coconut, goat, rice, and sugarcane. Lesser members carried pots of food into the lodge one after the other. Huge portions were served to the chiefs before lesser members received more humble rations. Due to the abundant amount of food provided at these installations, a more recent trend is that chiefs stockpile extra servings in large thermos containers. The containers are brought home for family consumption. The Nkonib lodge is well known for its over-supply of food (Fig. 5-13). Chief Effiom's food was abundant that day, so much so that it was not prepared on time, and the whole spectacle was delayed. After the food was finally exhausted, the lodge prepared for the next phase.

The installation phase at other Efik, Efut, and Qua lodges, and even previous installations I participated in and documented at Nkonib, proceeded completely differently from chief Effiom's. In fact, the eleven Idagha spectacles I participated in and documented (from 2008-2010) were drastically different from each other. The flow, organization, and the amounts and types of food are never the same from spectacle to spectacle. In some Efik and Efut cases, the candidate is escorted to the lodge with a procession of masquerades, members, and drummers in lieu of Nkonib's more muted approach. In other cases, the voicing of the mystical Mgbe happens before the actual installation. I have even witnessed the calling of the mystical Mgbe during the night oath and initial assembly held the day before the spectacle. At Nkonib, it was rare that the mystical Mgbe's presence was sounded *after* the installation of chief Effiom. The lodge head was busy modifying the ritual structure due to factors of time that day. Ultimately, the Iyamba or

Se Dibo (lodge head), the supposedly most knowledgeable agent of Ekpe/Mgbe, controls the course of the spectacle. He constantly adjusts and alters the ritual format according to a multitude of factors to ensure smooth operation. Ekpe/Mgbe ritual provides another example to Margaret Drewal's argument that ritual is a fluidly temporal performance shaped by repetition with difference and improvisation (Drewal 1992). Regardless of variety, in all Efik, Efut, and Qua cases, however, the installation phase comes to an end when food and drink is exhausted.

### **Declaration**

The fourth phase publicly announces and celebrates the newly acquired status of the honoree to rank of Ekpe/Mgbe chief. The declaration takes on the form of an elaborate public street procession. This event as a calculated "ostentatious display" of power and wealth (Fenton 2011). Indeed, the status of the candidate and his lodge's power are demonstrated through a multi-media display of elaborate dress, music, and energizing dance. In order for the procession to establish power by successfully claiming space, the elements of wealth, status, and beauty must be effectively coupled with performative organization between members and masqueraders. In other words, an overall performative cohesion must materialize among all the separate media for the procession to claim space effectively.

Chief Effiom's declaration flamboyantly displayed the wealth and status of his lodge to the rest of the community. However, before the street procession started, an official photograph was taken of chief Effiom in his chieftaincy ensemble posing with four Mgbe masqueraders (Fig. 5-14). The documentation of the new chief with the masqueraders records the accomplishment, and it has become compulsory.<sup>10</sup> During the Qua Mgbe conferment street procession, only the

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<sup>10</sup> The staged photograph of the celebrant and masqueraders rented for the declaration phase demonstrate his chiefly status within the society. The photograph also validates, on an abstract level, that the society masquerades are now an extension of the new chief's authority.

Abon Ogbe usually appear. Abon Ogbe translates as “small or junior masquerades.” The costumes for these are made of raffia fibers and are Mgbe’s most general and basic type of masquerade. Once chief Effiom’s important photograph was taken with the masquerades, he and his procession headed for the main road.

Chief Effiom occupied the central position in the front of the procession. Fellow chiefs were situated to his right and left. Lesser members filed behind. The drummers were located in the back of the procession. All sang and danced to the rhythm of the drums. Meanwhile, the Abon Ogbe danced and dashed in all directions, forming a kind of barrier between the members and the audience.

Chief Effiom’s ceremonial dress placed him in the limelight. His regalia included a red umbrella, highlighting his English bowler and a beaded collar fitted over a black velvet vest featuring embroidered stylized beaded European crowns. Underneath the vest Effiom wore a white cotton T-shirt. A baldric-like form made of plastic beads was fixed across his chest. In his left hand he carried a long metal ceremonial staff. He wore an *ukara* wrapper neatly tied around his waist. Yarn wristlets, armllets, and anklets completed his ensemble (refer to Fig. 3-3).

Ceremonial dress varies tremendously today. For example, some elements may be omitted, while colors and types of fabrics are matters of personal preference. In lieu of an *ukara* wrapper, other celebrants may fashion damask wrappers (Fig. 5-15). Another popular element that is not necessarily required is a loosely cascading scarf called Okpomkpom. It can be made of *ukara* or factory woven fabrics.<sup>11</sup>

In the procession, situated to the right and left of chief Effiom, already titled chiefs were likewise ostentatiously dressed (Fig. 3-16). Instead of wearing the ritual paraphernalia designated

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<sup>11</sup> The ensemble described here is typical of Ekpe/Mgbe and honorary chieftaincy ceremonial installation regalia and the groom’s outfit during ‘traditional’ marriages in Calabar.

for the newly initiated title holders, their dress reflected the latest chieftaincy fashions: local and imported caps and commercially produced adjustable walking sticks, which symbolize their titles, damask and wax wrappers, and white or colorful linen, cotton factory woven long shirts, some featuring eyelet embroidery, locally known as lace, which became popular in Calabar during the early 1990s, replacing white rayon, linen, cotton, and multicolored velvet shirts, fashionable in Calabar two decades ago.<sup>12</sup>

Since they are expected to separate themselves from lesser members through the medium of dress, chiefs must dress beautifully and must constantly invent and change their styles.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, chiefs carefully consider their ensembles to be complete compositions. The Okpomkpom, believed to be an appropriation of the European tie,<sup>14</sup> is carefully selected to unite the white or colorful shirt to the wrapper; the scarf can be of silk, rayon, damask, wax-print, and other fabrics. Beaded hats and shoes, made by local artists, complete the ensemble. Elaborate beadwork embroidery on imported velvet fabric visually connects the headwear to the footwear. In fact, chiefs often commission matching motifs for their hats and shoes—not only for visual harmony and neatness, but also for a specific occasion.

Today, the latest fashions are purchased from one of three chieftaincy attire stores found in Calabar (Fig. 5-17).<sup>15</sup> The ceremonial regalia and chieftaincy dress worn by Mgbe/Ekpe

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<sup>12</sup> For a history on lace in Nigeria see Barabara Plankensteiner and Nath Mayo Adediran (eds.), *African Lace: a History of Trade, Creativity and Fashion in Nigeria*, 2011.

<sup>13</sup> Dress and textiles have long been associated with wealth and status in Nigeria. For example, A. E. Afigbo has addressed the relationship between commerce and textile art in southern Nigeria (Afigbo 1998: 15-16).

<sup>14</sup> Interview with chief Ita Bassey, April 6, 2010.

<sup>15</sup> According to local history, the first store was established around 1960 by late chief Kama Iro. Since the 70s, Igbo, Rivers, and Akwa Ibom fashions have funneled into these stores. The stores operate not unlike the earlier Efik trading networks as the shop owners network with their Lagos locations and Igbo middlemen, who travel outside Nigeria to obtain special commissions and new styles. Today, any textile or fashion may be ordered and imported within days.

titleholders recall the styles worn during the slave and oil trades mixed with English influences as well as more recent innovations. Today's ostentatious dress reflects the wealth and power that the society once generated during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The slave trade and the emergence of the palm oil trade flooded Calabar with material wealth. The imports during the eighteenth century were European and Indian textiles, bars and rods of iron and copper, small arms, muskets, gunpowder, knives, castor hats, beads, pewter ware (dishes, plates), basins, household goods, liquor, bells, salt, butter, sugar, hand mirrors, and hardware (for a complete list see Alpern 1995). Efik merchants also started to solicit for personal items such as dressing gowns, sliver canes, writing paper, and a range of other trade goods. Additionally, merchants were requesting that their names be engraved on everything (Behrendt, Latham, and Northrup 2010: 56).

During the eighteenth century, textiles became important as a chart of goods received by Antera Duke from a sale of 50 slaves to Caption John Potter on July 31, 1769-January 10, 1770, illustrates (see Behrendt, Latham, and Northrup 2010: 63). The list reveals over 2,000 yards of cloth exchanged in one transaction: two-thirds Manchester and one-third Indian cottons. The list includes a tremendous variety of fabrics: damask, "Guinea," defined as a narrow blue and white striped or checked cotton cloth, "long cloth," which was a cotton fabric of various qualities, "calico," described as a white, blue printed cloth, and as the most sought after textile in the eighteenth century, "chintz," known as a course or fine cotton cloth block-print with floral and many other designs, and many more fabrics consisting of linens, silks, and velvets. All were vital commodities during the slave trade. In fact, imported textiles made up over 40 percent of any parcel of goods received for slaves during in the second half of the eighteenth century (ibid., 55).

Efik traders not only exchanged these exotic textiles within their inland trading network, but also adorned themselves with the latest incoming fashions. According to G. I. Jones, “apart from extravagant consumption and display, there were few outlets for the employment of this new wealth, which was, moreover, very unevenly distributed” (Jones 1956: 123-124). Efik family heads documented in the correspondence and trading lists during the slave trade were powerful, affluent, and important members of the Ekpe society. The incoming wealth and prestigious materials were channeled into the artistic aspects of the society, making their outing displays quite extravagant and markers of status and prestige. Efik and European records confirm an interest in “dressing to impress.” Antera Duke wrote in 1786 that during funeral activities for his father, Ekpe members headed toward a meeting in “long cloth and Egbo cloth and hatt and jacket and every fine thing” (Behrendt, Latham, and Northrup 2010: 190). Writing in 1828, Holman described Ekpe runners followed by “half a dozen subordinate personages fantastically dressed, each carrying either a sword or stick” (Holman 1840: 394).

A few years later, in 1846, Hope Waddell described the regal arrival of King Eyo Honesty aboard his vessel, who was “in native dress, which except a white beaver hat, consisted of a few yards of broad fancy silk round his loins, descending to the ankles. Strings of beads on neck and arms formed his ornaments. Two boys attended him, one carrying his gold snuff-box, in a handsome native bag hung round his neck, the other a pair of pistols and a sword slung over his shoulder” (Waddell 1863[1970]: 242). The foreign silk wrapper and strands of beads were replaced with the elegant styles of the Victorian fashions by the end of the nineteenth century. The earlier syncretic local styles shaped during the slave trade were again changing. This time English attire became status symbols, worn during official and ceremonial occasions (n.a. 1986a: 86).

In fact, elements of elite dress were sold and purchased in local stores as early as 1890. Photographs from the Eliot Elisofon Archives, dating from 1890-1900, illustrate the kinds of products sold at stores in Old Calabar (Fig. 3-18 and 3-19). Close examination of the photographs reveals imported European walking sticks, textiles, hats, and other imported elements fancied by Ekpe titleholders. Imported elements of dress have long been sold at local stores and appropriated by the society in order to visualize the status and prestige of the society.

Chief Effiom's procession not only extravagantly displayed wealth and status with dress, but also effectively claimed space through the media of masquerade and performance. The recent public procession format has morphed into a mechanism where Ekpe/Mgbe members not only assert their power and political agency, but also demonstrate the cultural aspects of the society to the wider community. The procession lasted for roughly two hours. During this time, traffic was completely stopped as members and masquerades cleared a path on the road for the marching procession (Fig. 3-20). In addition to controlling traffic and at various instances, Abon Ogbe unpredictably rushed from the procession to chase away and beat non-initiates (Fig. 3-21). As the masquerades forcibly demonstrated power, members chanted, sang, and danced to their drummers' beats as they established their authority over the community. The entire non-initiated community gave way to the Mgbe spectacle. If respect is not given or if a car horn sounds for example, an Abon Ogbe humiliates the offender either by beating him or by jumping and trampling upon his car hood (Fig. 3-22). In the performances I witnessed, the community rarely voiced annoyance or disapproval, even though the processions usually took place during rush hour traffic.

It is astounding to see the community completely yield to these performances in light of the growing tension between Ekpe/Mgbe and various Christian groups in Calabar. In conjunction

with the street performance and adding to the controversial activities of Ekpe/Mgbe, titled elders at various times lead the procession down side roads to pour libations and conduct sacrifice (Fig. 3-23). These ritual activities honor deceased members, and because of their ritual connection, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, it has recently been contested not only by Christian non-members, but also by Christian members. These tensions have led members to argue and quarrel with each other about which practices and elements should be censored. However, such argumentation between members is not taken to the streets. If the lodge head or senior chiefs decide to pour in public, those members against the act do not publicly challenge the authority of their elders. Some lodges perform regularly, pour libations, and emphasize the long-standing religious aspects of Ekpe/Mgbe, while others use lodge events only to stress socio-economic prestige and to strengthen localized political authority.

The Qua Nkonib lodge often uses these forums to assert their position by pouring libation. However, since chief Effiom's spectacle was running late it was getting dark, no libation was poured during the street procession. Instead, the entire procession stopped in front of a number of deceased members' houses and chanted Mgbe. When members were content with their public display of wealth, power, and space, they made way to the reception party held at the celebrant's house.

Chief Effiom's street procession effectively claimed space that day. The performance's multi-media interface synergized into a chaotic, yet unified, whole. The "eye candy" of the dress was balanced only by the eloquence of the songs sung and the steady, deep drum rhythms, which in turn energized masqueraders to a frenzied but controlled state. All was held together by the loosely scripted performance structure.

Efik and Efut Ekpe declaration format is similar to the Qua structure. One difference is that the Efik and the Efut usually make use of only two of the raffia fiber body-net masquerades. Although they are quite similar to the Qua versions, the Efik and Efut refer to them as Atat Ekpe and Idem Ikwo Ekpe. A major difference during Efik and Efut chieftaincy declarations is the appearance of the Ebonko masquerade (Fig. 3-24). The Qua normally restrict this mask genre to rites for the lodge head. According to members, Ebonko symbolizes the feminine and regal qualities of Mgbe/Ekpe through the use of cloth, in contrast to the raffia used for aggressive masks. Artists have the most freedom in creating this costume; the only rule is that Ebonko must visually overwhelm its audience, making this mask the most diverse in its manifestation. Shiny and reflective materials have long been incorporated into the design, which manipulates the sun's rays as they reflect off costume into the viewer's gaze, overpowering their visual senses.

Ebonko dances in a calm and majestic manner near the celebrant and fellow chiefs. Ebonko's dance steps are more straight and feminine in nature in contrast to violent and hostile movements of the more masculine raffia fiber masks. Comparison between the passive choreography of Ebonko and the aggressiveness of the general raffia masks can be compared to the delineation of gender inferred by Yoruba male and female Gelede masquerade dance (Drewal and Drewal 1990: 140). In both cases, gender difference is suggested by men's appropriation of female attributes through the medium of dance. In the case of Ebonko, the act suggests the feminine nature of the society, the mystical Ekpe/Mgbe, and the overall dependence of Ekpe/Mgbe men on women. Non-members tend to like the Ebonko display for its beauty and nonthreatening qualities. Ebonko thus helps to foster audience interest and participation. In fact, I argue that the mask costumes and Ebonko's choreography is meant to tie together the multi-media nature of Ekpe/Mgbe spectacle.

In addition to the cohesive role of the larger performance structure, the elements of chieftaincy dress, and the masquerade costume and choreography further integrated the different media together at a symbolic level. The dress and performance of both the celebrant (Fig. 3-3 and 3-15), raffia mask types (Fig. 3-14 and 3-20), and the Ebonko costume (Fig. 3-24) reveal related iconographical references to the lion, notions of status, authority, leadership, respect, and the learned esoteric knowledge known as *nsibidi*. For example, according to members, the dress of the celebrant, the costume of Ebonko, and that of the raffia variety, as well as their dance movements, all reference the lion. Tufts of yarn, cloth, and raffia above the elbow, on the wrist, and at the ankle symbolize the physical qualities of the lion. The pronounced raffia mane around the chest of the masqueraders is a more direct symbolic suggestion. The aggressive and confrontational nature of the raffia maskers' performance references the menacing capabilities of the lion and the uncertain and dangerous realms of the bush. Through cloth, the Ebonko suggests the regal side of the lion and nurturing role of the mystical Ekpe/Mgbe. The Ebonko is thus a vibrant visual and symbolic link to the dress of the celebrant. The honoree's ceremonial regalia encapsulate the wealth, grandeur, and significance of chiefly rank. In public, an elder might establish his authority over the raffia mask variety by stopping the masker in mid-stride to demonstrate his mastery over the performer through the use of gestured *nsibidi*. Such acts establish elder members as dominant and controlling, while the masker becomes subservient. And finally, *nsibidi* motifs are depicted in both the celebrant's regalia and on the raffia masquerade costume. Collectively, the performance and visual references communicate and reinforce a nuanced reading of gender, status, and power.

The success of the procession at the performative and symbolic level facilitates the all-important interactions that take place between Mgbe and the rest of the community. Returning to

Chief Effiom's spectacle, the normal everyday flows of Nkonib were suddenly brought to a sudden halt as Mgbe aggressively took to the streets. Masquerades and members beat those who opposed. The moving procession was successfully demarcated as spatially off limits to non-members. The community's mutual space—main roads and side streets—quickly became the temporary territory of Mgbe alone. Most acquiesced to the authority of the society and simply enjoyed the glamor of the event. However, in order for the performance to succeed, the society must put its reputation on the line since every spectacle is subject to the possibility of failure. Not unlike Ekpe/Mgbe performance, religious rites conducted by priest-chiefs in Ugep (middle Cross River) are also more public today as they too take to the streets (Salami 2008a and 2008b)). Ode-lay masquerade troupes in Freetown, Sierra Leone, provide another case. In analysing Ode-lay masquerade, John Nunley argues, performers must achieve a "heightened experience" by exposing themselves to danger. Nunley states, "[t]aking the masquerade to the streets provides the necessary susceptibility" (Nunley 1987: 189). The same is true for Ekpe/Mgbe. In order to claim space effectively and to provide a forum to push back against those who condemn Ekpe/Mgbe culture, the society must expose itself to the dangers of the public. In this way, streets can take on an unpredictable and volatile characteristic. All artistic and performative elements must be in place and properly cooperating for the procession to negotiate the challenges of the streets (Fig. 3-25). Chief Effiom's procession demonstrated all that was necessary as the visual and performative effectively merged into a unified whole.

The success chief Effiom's procession produced is not always the outcome of Ekpe/Mgbe chieftaincy declarations, however. Recall the anecdote about the Qua Kasuk candidate who unsuccessfully attempted to negotiate for the highest quality Ekpe/Mgbe masquerade costumes. His unwillingness to pay for the best performers foreshadowed the failure of his declaration. Not

only were his masquerade costumes outdated and unflattering (Fig. 3-26), the performative cohesion was nonexistent. Members openly laughed at his masqueraders and voiced their frustrations with the lack of organization. Because of lack of organization, the procession did not move as a unified whole. At times members were confused and unaware of the procession's intended direction. Frustration built to the point of argumentation among members.

The organization was so bad in the beginning that members were unaware of which side of the street was to be cleared as a path. The general audience also became more and more frustrated. Aggression soon manifested from the audience's anxiety. A number of taxi motorcyclists grew tired of waiting for the procession to direct traffic properly and decided to take matters into their own hands. A few tried to negotiate the traffic jam by speeding by the procession and cutting it off. Members quickly realized what was happening and aggressively stopped the motorcyclists who were encroaching on the society's space. Tension between members and motorcyclists almost resulted in a brawl. The angry moods of both members and non-members presented a very dangerous situation. Chiefs became aware of the problem and cooler heads eventually prevailed. However, in order for the chiefs to calm the angry motorcyclists, they had to plea with the non-members for patience. But the damage had already been done.

The procession was unable to successfully claim space. The display was so pitiful that members were ashamed of the performance and started to talk among themselves about the failure. As a result, not only was the status of the candidate and the authority of the lodge in question, but the general public also witnessed a complete breakdown in the lodge's ability to engender social agency. Because the procession was a burden to the community, the procession achieved the exact opposite of its intended goal. In one poorly orchestrated procession, not only

was kasuk Mgbe unable to claim space, but the space of the procession was undermined by non-members. The enactment damaged the reputation of the candidate and his lodge. The leadership that day failed to coordinate the variety of media into a unified whole. Only at the end of the declaration did the procession start to affect agency, but by that time, it was too late. The procession mustered what dignity it could and marched onwards towards the reception.

### **Reception**

The beginning of the evening celebration marks the end of the declaration phase. Members and masqueraders head toward the celebrant's compound where party canopies distinguish the setting (Fig. 3-27). These rented tents spatially differentiate between those who can comfortably celebrate and those who must watch from a distance. The initiated, their families, and invited guests all sit under canopies while younger people gather simply to watch members and their families as they eat, drink, and dance. The Ekpe/Mgbe tent is centrally located so that all can easily gaze upon the men as they enjoy. In some cases, the chiefs and the honoree eat inside the celebrant's house, while lesser members enjoy outside at a designated Ekpe/Mgbe tent. During some receptions I participated in and documented, depending on the interest and energy of knowledgeable Ekpe/Mgbe chiefs and members, formal *nsibidi* challenges frequently occurred (see chapter 5), giving non-members a rare glimpse into the restricted aspects of the society. In this way, the gathered community is entertained while final food preparations are completed.

This last phase includes yet again another large feast, reinforcing once again the abundance of food and drink. Such abundance symbolically reinforces and summarizes Ekpe/Mgbe's localized political autonomy and economic hierarchy over the rest of the community. The celebrant is once again demonstrating his wealth and power by serving his guests and the community. Typically, at the reception pounded yam and goat stew are served.

Members are given most of the food and drink, but family members and invited guests also consume copious amounts. Members and non-members alike relax, eat, drink, and informally discuss with each other for the rest of the evening. The reception is intended for non-members to witness a completely different side of the society. For the rest of the evening, the restrictive boundaries that usually define the society are lifted. Non-members thus temporarily relish in the benefit of the society showing a public face.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In the literature, information on Ekpe/Mgbe initiation ritual is sparse, making diachronic or urban/rural comparison difficult. Despite the general lack of documentation, two accounts detail how initiations into higher ranks of the society are private affairs. On the Cameroonian side of the Cross River region, in the rural village of Babong, Leib and Romano documented a rare initiation into a prestigious rank of Mgbe in the mid 1970s (Leib and Romano 1984: 51-52). According to the account, the initiation lasted for an entire week and was restricted to the lodge. On the final day of the ritual, the deceased member for whom the candidate succeeded was honored in the form of a number of funerary ritual proceedings in which a short public procession was conducted in a “ponderous” manner (ibid., 52). Mgbe initiation is also discussed in Hans-Joachim Koloss’s recent ethnography of an Ejagham peoples in Kembong, Cameroon. Koloss documents that in Kembong, initiation into the higher ranks of Mgbe is also mostly a private affair. Initiation lasts for five days and takes place in the sacred grove (Koloss 2008: 66-68). Not unlike Lieb and Romano’s findings, in Kembong, public Mgbe procession and masquerade performance only occurs during funerary rites (for a complete descriptive account see Koloss 2008: 78-104). This brief urban/rural comparison demonstrates that with the information available, in the last 40 years, urban Ekpe/Mgbe has changed into something quite different from its rural versions.

Despite these major differences, funerary rites have for long and still are Ekpe/Mgbe's chief means for reasserting authority in those communities where the society is present in the Cross River region. However, tensions between Ekpe/Mgbe and Christianity and the cosmopolitan environment of the city have altered this structure in Calabar. What has resulted in Calabar is more public attempts to interact with the wider community in order to claim space forcefully. Photographs taken by Eliot Elisofon in 1959 in Big Qua Town, Calabar, before Calabar's recent pattern of urbanization in the 1970s and 1980s, verify that Ekpe/Mgbe masquerade performance was a more restricted event at that time (Fig. 3-28).<sup>16</sup>

This chapter has shown that the members of Ekpe/Mgbe and the urban environment transformed the chieftaincy conferment into an elaborate public spectacle. According to Mgbe chief and village head Francis E. Iso, "before the 1980s, Idagha chieftaincy was nothing like what it is today!"<sup>17</sup> What started out as a purely status seeking display in the 1980s, has become a carefully orchestrated statement about the society's religious, political, cultural, and economic vitality. In her investigation of strike parades in Philadelphia, Susan Davis comes to the conclusion that street parades are "ways of acting on the world and ways of trying to convince others of the rightness of a particular program to change or defend ways of life" (Davis 1985:

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<sup>16</sup> In 1959, Eliot Elisofon, *Life* photographer, traveled to and photographed Nigeria's people, art, and culture for an upcoming issue of *Life International* celebrating Nigerian Independence on October 1, 1960 (for story see n.a. 1960). His itinerary stated that in Calabar he was to photograph Efik dances. Instead, Qua Mgbe masquerades and other cultural dances in Big Qua Town were photographed. No information as to why the change in itinerary took place is mentioned. Further, there is no mention detailing if the Qua Mgbe masquerades and members photographed were staged or actual performances. I suspect from closer examination of the photographs that they were staged. In either case, the fact that very few non-members are seen around or even watching the masqueraders is significant. Members have informed me that prior to the 1960s, non-members were not allowed to walk freely about or gaze at Mgbe masquerades during certain contexts. The photograph provides proof that Mgbe performances before the 1970s and were not intended to interact with the public. The itinerary is part of the Eliot Elisofon Manuscript Collection, EEPA 1973-001, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with chief Esinjo Francis E. Iso, March 30, 2010.

114). Indeed, for Ekpe/Mgbe members, the street has in a similar way become an arena for performative discourse about change and the preservation of culture.

The ability to claim space successfully during performance, in my opinion, is one of the critical reasons to why Ekpe/Mgbe still thrives in Calabar. As Ekpe society lodges are becoming overgrown by residence and commercial development, the shrines are no longer situated at prominent locations they once held. Ekpe/Mgbe restrictive space is being violated. Therefore, the societies have literally taken to the streets in ways they have never done before. In Calabar's rapidly changing milieu, older masquerade societies have become less idle and more public in order to challenge the growing accusations put forth by Pentecostal groups. In 1970s and 1980s, the toughest political and financial decades in Calabar, masquerade associations started to prominently reinforce their place in society through the medium of elaborate street performance to reinforce their agency. In the urban environment of Calabar, space has become a critical component for the success of masquerade performance.

The cosmopolitan environment of Calabar continues to fuel and to inspire new ways for Ekpe/Mgbe members to claim space successfully and to demonstrate power. The business-like mentality of hiring photographers, videographers, and renting canopies, and chairs, and, for that matter, even the reception phase itself, are all recent innovations that have given the performance a cosmopolitan touch. Yet performance structure, initiation, and ritual are not the only facets of Ekpe/Mgbe that have been cultivated by cosmopolitanism. *Nsibidi*, the imaged and performed esoteric language and knowledge system that defines the institution's teachings and philosophy, once taught as part and parcel of the old now outdated system of initiation, is also being taken to the streets by members. However, before discussing the public face of performed *nsibidi*, the

imaged version and recently developed informal economy surrounding its teaching and transmission merits discussion.

## Figures



Figure 3-1. "Kroo Boy. Play." From Macdonald Calabar Photograph album (c. 1895). EEPA 1996-019-0070, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution.

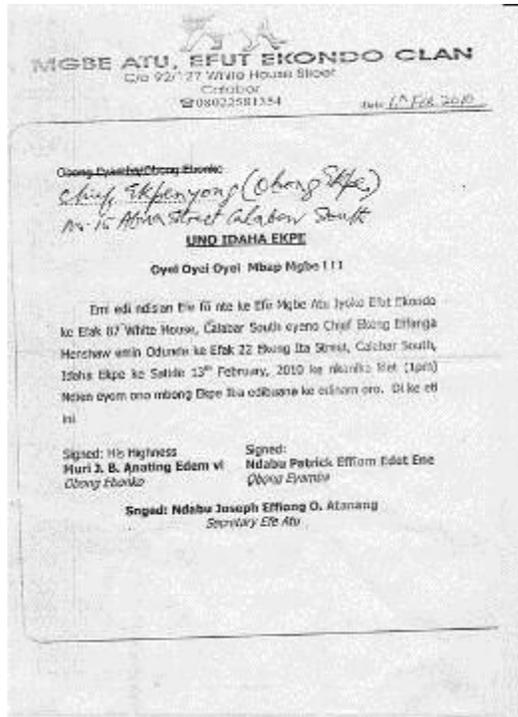


Figure 3-2. Letter of invitation to chieftaincy conferment ceremony at the Efut Efe Ekpe at Atu, Calabar South, Calabar. Published with permission.



Figure 3-3. Celebrant Ntoe Mgbe (chief) Boniface Okon Effiom in regalia, Nkonib, Calabar, Dec. 12, 2009. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton

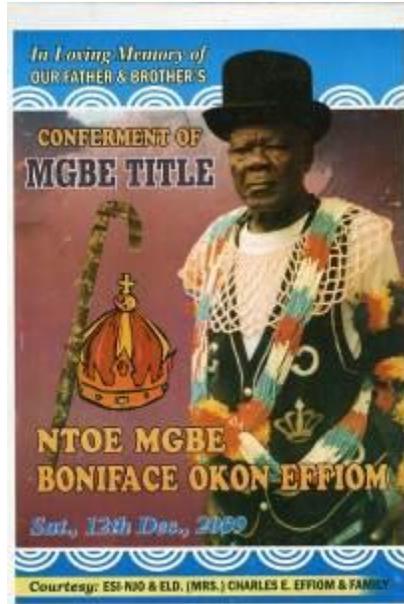


Figure 3-4. Cover of personalized gift note pad distributed on behalf of Chief Effiom during his chieftaincy ceremony, Nkonib, Calabar, Dec. 12, 2009.



Figure 3-5. Nkonib (Ikot Ansa) Mgbé lodge entrance blocked by hanging *ukara* banner, Calabar, May 23, 2008. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 3-6. Celebrant Effiom taking oath to ancestors, Nkonib, Calabar, Dec. 12, 2009.  
Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 3-7. Mgbe chiefs prominently seated at tables, Nkonib lodge, Calabar, June 6, 2008.  
Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 3-8. Lesser members seated at humble bench, Nkonib Mgbe lodge, June 6, 2008. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 3-9. Members divide a prepared fish and bush meant as part of celebrant Effiom's morning feast, Nkonib, Calabar, Dec. 12, 2009. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 3-10. Celebrant Esinjo Lawrence Nyong Akiba escorted to lodge by Mgbe chiefs, Nkonib, Calabar, June 6, 2008. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 3-11. Ntoe Patrick Inok Oquagbor V, head of the Mgbe Nkonib lodge, bestows Effiom with the chieftaincy title isung Mafina, Nkonib, Calabar, Dec. 12, 2009. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 3-12. Chief Effiom and fellow Mgbе chiefs and members pose for professional photographs, Nkonib, Calabar, Dec. 12, 2009. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 3-13. Typical amount of food and drink at Nkonib Mgbе lodge during conferment rituals, Calabar, June 20, 2008. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 3-14. Chief Effiom posing with Abon Ogbe masquerades for professional photograph, Nkonib, Calabar, Dec. 12, 2009. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 3-15. Mgbé chieftaincy regalia of chief Francois Edet, Nkonib, Calabar, June 26, 2008. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 3-16. Chiefs dressed in latest fashions, Nkonib, Calabar, June 20, 2008. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 3-17. AG Best Traditional attire chieftaincy store at Watts market, Calabar South, Calabar, Sept. 25, 2009. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 3-18. "Shops at Old Calabar," Nigerain Photographic Album (c. 1890-1900), EEPA 2000-003-0127, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution.



Figure 3-19. "Cliff House Shop, Old Calabar," Nigerain Photographic Album (c. 1895-1900), EEPA 2000-003-0128, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution.



Figure 3-20. Abon Ogbe clearing way for Mgbe procession during declaration phase, Nkonib, Calabar, June 20, 2008. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 3-21. Abon Ogbe chasing non-initiated during declaration phase, Nkonib, Calabar, June 20, 2008. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 3-22. Abon Ogbe trampling on car hood during declaration phase, Nkonib, Calabar, June 20, 2008. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 3-23. Chiefs stop street procession to pour libation to ancestors during Esinjo Lawrence Nyong Akika declaration, Nkonib, Calabar, June 6, 2008. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 3-24. Efonko masquerade by master artist Ekpenyong Bassey Nsa, Calabar, Oct. 14, 2009. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 3-25. Successful declaration performance of Esinjo Lawrence Nyong Akika declaration, Nkonib, Calabar, June 6, 2008. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 3-26. Unflattering and worn Abon Ogbe during Mgbe chieftaincy conferment street procession, Kasuk, Calabar, July 18, 2009. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 3-27. Canopies set up for celebrants reception, Nkonib, Calabar, June 20, 2008.  
Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 3-28. Ejagham Ekpe [Mgbe] society leopard dancers, Big Qua Town, Calabar,  
Photography by Eliot Elisofon, 1959. EEPA 1996-019-0070, Eliot Elisofon  
Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution.

CHAPTER 4  
“THE MORE YOU LOOK, THE LESS YOU SEE:” THE MULTIPLICITY OF MEANING IN  
UKARA NSIBIDI

On a mild December Saturday in Calabar, despite the early morning hour, the Osam Mgbe (Mgbe lodge) at Nkonib (Ikot Ansa) roars with drum rhythms and excited noises. Non-members passing by and those who come to watch see only an *ukara* cloth banner blocking the entrance to the lodge, a curtain utilized to conceal the activities unfolding within. Inside the lodge, the head custodian of the shrine sits as a queue of seekers stand before him awaiting initiation. Ntoe Patrick Inok Oquagbor V, also clan head of the community, draws *nsibidi* with chalk on the body of each initiate (Fig. 4-1) and places a peacock feather in the white cloth headband of each. He yells: “Yap, Yap, Barrio! Barrio! Barrio! Ogbe! Nkanda-Dibo!” The young men have just been initiated into Nkanda. As full members of the society they now may begin their long journey into the knowledge of Ekpe/Mgbe.

The encoded knowledge of the Ekpe/Mgbe in the *ukara* cloth, the primary symbol of the society, is the focus of this examination. This chapter explores the content and instruction associated with *nsibidi* encoded on *ukara* cloth, its multiplicity of meaning and the influence the urban experience of Calabar has had on its transmission. This chapter supports “*nsibidi* literacy” or *nsibidi* knowledge varies according to age, gender, locality, membership, and initiation level as recorded by Amanda Carlson in the middle Cross River (2003). In addition to Carlson’s factors, this essay seeks to add historical and recent contexts and individual ritual experience also shapes how knowledge is ultimately understood and transmitted. In approaching the multiplicity of meaning in *ukara nsibidi*, my analysis is informed by Kwesi Yankah’s argument that context is crucial for deciphering how users of Akan proverbs mold them to serve their needs (1985). In this way, I follow Clifford Geertz advice to move beyond “signs as a means of communication,

code to be deciphered, to a consideration of them as modes of thought, idiom to be interpreted” in order to “determine the meaning of things for the life that surrounds them” (1983: 120).

Ekpe/Mgbe *Nsibidi* knowledge is taught and studied through ritual, performance of the script, and private *ukara* instructional sessions. By discussing *ukara nsibidi* teachings, I shift away from the popular emphasis on the “doing of secrecy” (Bellman 1984: 17) in order to unravel the ways in which meaning is made in esoteric knowledge systems. I further posit that contemporary urbanization has fueled the multiplicity of meanings. By addressing the verbal interpretations of *ukara*, I am in no way revealing secrets of the society or breaching my own initiation oaths. Informed by my fieldwork experiences (attending and participating in ritual, performances, and instructional sessions) and my Ekpe/Mgbe teachers, most verbal interpretations are not the carefully guarded aspects of *nsibidi*; rather the step-by-step formulas of performed *nsibidi* are the true secret. Only through performed *nsibidi* may a member rightfully demonstrate his knowledge and agency.

For example, when someone not recognized by local members passes through the *ukara* barrier that blocks the entrance to the lodge, the person will be asked through gesture if he is indeed a member of the society. The member will respond by gesturing the proper series of signs that indicate his rank in the society. If a member were to verbally indicate his membership in lieu of the performed version, he would be violently removed from the lodge and severely fined. In other words, most verbal interpretations of Ekpe/Mgbe *nsibidi* encoded in *ukara* are just the tip of the iceberg. In ritual and ceremonial contexts, verbal explanations are only useful as a corrective measure. This does not mean that oral interpretation of *ukara* motifs is insignificant. On the contrary, the verbal explanations bridge the gap between understanding performed *nsibidi* in relation to spiritual and ritualistic applications of this knowledge during ritual. However, when

readings of individual *ukara* motifs directly shed light on certain aspects of the society's deepest esoteric principles, the members and chiefs who entrusted me with this knowledge do not permit me discuss them, and will I refrain from doing so. Before discussing instruction and meaning of *ukara*, an awareness of both the restrictive and public versions of *nsibidi* are required.

### ***Nsibidi (or Nsibiri) and Ukara***

*Nsibidi* is an imaged and performed semiotic language system distinctive to the Cross River region of southeastern Nigeria and Western Cameroon. As a multimedia art form it may be produced on the ground, the body, walls, monoliths, cloth, masks, or costume, or it may be performed through gesture. The origins of *nsibidi* are unclear and may never be known.<sup>1</sup> Most attribute origin of the language to the Ejagham (Talbot 1912: 305, Thompson 1983: 227, Campbell 1983: 34, Carlson 2007: 146, and others). My recent fieldwork investigation in Calabar supports this assertion, since the Efik did not commonly use the public variety of *nsibidi* as their Ejagham neighbors did. However, usage alone cannot determine origin; more likely, I speculate that an earlier form of the present manifestation of *nsibidi* probably arrived in the Cross River region as a result of the Bantu migrations and continued to develop through time and space. The historical depth of *nsibidi* is suggested by archeological evidence from the Calabar region, its prehistory possible dating back as early as the fifth century CE (see Slogar 2005 and 2007).

Early ceramic art forms unearthed in the region feature geometric and highly ornate decorative motifs stylistically similar to the *nsibidi* collected by colonial officials during the early twentieth century and to motifs still in use today. There are two genres of *nsibidi*: those

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<sup>1</sup> Talbot documented that *nsibidi* is derived from the Ejagham word *nchibbi*, defined as “to turn,” denoting “agility of the mind, and therefore of cunning or double meaning” (1912: 305). Another definition is provided by Thompson. According to his informant, the word *nsibidi* means “cruel letters” in the Ejagham language (1983: 227).

signs used in the public domain and those restricted to institutions and masquerade societies. The motifs of the public variety communicate ideas pertaining to social relations and material culture, although today they are not used to the same degree as in the past. Public *nsibidi* was mainly used as decoration on housing compounds, on calabashes and as permanent (tattoo) and temporary bodily inscription.<sup>2</sup> Despite a decline in the use of *nsibidi* in everyday life, artists such as Obiora Udechukwu, Uche Edochie, A. Omotayo (Tayo) Adenaike, and Victor Ekpuk are presenting *nsibidi* within the public domain once again—even though the Western art world is not readily assessable to most Cross Riverians, the work is still publicly exhibited (see Carlson 2007: 149-153 and Kreamer and Purpura 2007: 230-236).<sup>3</sup> These recent uses of the language and knowledge system challenge the problematic categories of “true *nsibidi*” and “pseudo *nsibidi*” since such constructions undermine the inherent ability of *nsibidi* to change and adapt to new contexts (Campbell 1983). The *Axari Hotel Stairway* from 2008 (Fig. 4-2) in the foyer of the Axari Hotel in Calabar problematizes such categorical constructions since it combines new ideas fused with longer-standing ideologies. The artist, Okpoke Ekong Okon, created a densely intellectual conceptualization of *nsibidi* by interweaving abstractions of signs into a continuous stairway banister made of galvanized steel rods framing metal sheets further embellished with openwork. Triangles, circles, checkered patterns, squares, lizards, arches, spiral openwork and many more abstractions of *nsibidi* are recognizable in his sculpture.

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<sup>2</sup> The first published documentation on *nsibidi* is attributed to colonial writers: see Macgregor 1909, Dayrell 1909 and 1911, and Talbot 1912. Macgregor and Dayrell discuss *nsibidi* as merely pictographic and decorative. Important to this study, Macgregor recognized early on that “the same sign stands for different things” (1909: 211). In my reading of his statement and examples provided by him, his idea of multiple meaning in a given sign is between public and restricted contexts. Talbot on the other hand, inquired about Mgbe *nsibidi*, but was denied access (1912: 39). Amanda Carlson provides a review of this literature (2003: 30-34).

<sup>3</sup> The *Inscribing Meaning* project (exhibition and catalogue) provides an excellent deconstruction to the “traditional” and “modern” dichotomy currently present in African art studies today as text and inscriptions of long-standing practices are juxtaposed with artists involved in international art markets and arenas (see Kreamer et al 2007).

Okpoko's use of *nsibidi* further questions past attempts at categorization. The stairway was commissioned by the owner of Axari Hotel, who is an Ekpe titleholder. The artist received specific instructions to use *nsibidi* but not to abuse it. Okpoko explained how he approached his selection with great trepidation, careful not to offend Ekpe/Mgbe custodians. Although Okpoko was initiated into Mgbe as a boy, he was never interested in learning the Ekpe/Mgbe meanings. Not unlike artists previously mentioned, the abstracted motifs Okpoko uses are a combination of the scripts' public meanings mixed with his own imagination.<sup>4</sup> The lizard motif, for example, is included as a decorative element; however, had he known that it was a reference to, among other things, the Efik and Efut Ekpe Nyamkpe and Qua Mgbe Dibo, the fiercest and most mystical masquerade of the society, Okpoko might have opted for another motif.

*Nsibidi* has always changed through time and space. Context becomes important for deciphering *nsibidi*. In certain contexts it must be defined by its ephemeral nature. Early in the twentieth century, P. A. Talbot, a British colonial official, observed an example of the ephemeral nature of *nsibidi* transmitted on split palm stems as a communicative device (1912: 309). The recent use by contemporary artists, private uses such as Talbot's example, its inherent ephemeral quality, and the following discussion on the multiplicity of meanings of *ukara nsibidi* demonstrate how critical context is for understanding *nsibidi*, and thus further problematizing labels such as "true or pseudo." In addition to its more recent and ephemeral uses, *nsibidi* was also used for more permanent purposes.

*Nsibidi* was employed by leaders and the courts as a form of record keeping.<sup>5</sup> However, O. U. Kalu asks whether such instances "were contemporary creations inspired by the white

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with Okpoko Ekong Okon, May 20, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> J.K. Macgregor and Talbot recorded a number of trials and stories (see 1909: 218-219 and 1912: 306, 453-461).

man's inquiry" or were indeed long-standing procedures (1980: 86). Today in Calabar, *nsibidi* mostly operates in the context of men's masquerade societies.<sup>6</sup> Ekpe/Mgbe is known to utilize the most extensive performed repertoire and corpus of *nsibidi*. The imaged version of *nsibidi* is frequently illustrated during Ekpe/Mgbe gatherings in a variety of ways: lodge decoration (Fig. 4-3), woven into the raffia masquerade costumes (Fig. 4-4), objects and elements manipulated, held, and worn. The *ukara* cloth is the most well known article of clothing illustrating *nsibidi* (Fig 4-5).

*Ukara*—the primary symbol of Ekpe/Mgbe membership—is made today from factory woven cotton. The brilliant white *nsibidi* motifs emerge from the process of stitch-resist after motifs are threaded with raffia, which is cut out after the cloth has been thoroughly dyed in indigo pits or cauldrons.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, *ukara* is made outside the Cross River region among neighboring peoples. Eli Bentor traces *ukara* production to the eighteenth century when Aro middlemen used their trade networks to introduce Ekpe *nsibidi* to Ezillo dyers located in northeastern Igboland, where the textile is ultimately designed, sewn, and dyed (2008b).

The right to wear *ukara* is exclusive to Ekpe/Mgbe membership. The textile is visualized in three contexts: tied around the waist “wrapper-style” during formal ritual (Fig. 4-6), draped on the outside and inside of lodges, (Fig. 4-7 and 4-8), and used for decoration of certain Mkpoto, a canopy for the dead (Fig. 4-9). In the instance of adorning the body, *ukara* becomes a protective and even challenging charm-like garment in the minds of both members and non-members.

Bystanders often regard members outfitted in *ukara* with extreme apprehension despite a façade

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<sup>6</sup> I have documented *nsibidi* used by the following men's associations: Ekpe/Mgbe, Akata, Obon, and Nnabo. Most of these masking societies make use of performed *nsibidi* to demonstrate knowledge and rank. Although not documented, elders informed me that Ndem (the old Efik tutelary water deity) priests still make use of *nsibidi*. I have been unable to document if Ohom (a Qua women's society in Calabar) utilizes *nsibidi*.

<sup>7</sup> Recently, a wax-print version of *ukara* has become a popular variation as it costs about one-third of the stitch-resist variety.

of indifference on their part as they quietly and calmly avoid close encounter by walking in an opposite direction or reroute their path. In a similar capacity, *ukara* draped across the entrance into the lodge and another inside, which blocks the inner sanctum of the structure (Qua: *Nib Osam*), spatially demarcate levels of initiation and access to the society's more mystical and esoteric aspects. However, the banners do not act alone but work in tandem with carefully tied bunches of *oboti* leaves and yellowish palm frond sculptures loosely suspended over the *ukara* directly above the doors both on the exterior and interior. In both cases, *ukara* either concealing the lower body or lodge gateways—in the context of Ekpe/Mgbe performance and ritual—operate not unlike the Yoruba sculptural construct infused with power known as *ààlè*. The Yoruba example acts as a powerful visual warning curbing the temptation to challenge and transgressive behavior (Doris 2005). In this way, the spaces *ukara* conceal or protect—coupled with the mysterious and restricted nature of Ekpe/Mgbe ritual and initiation—affects a powerful influence over members and non-members alike.

### **Secrecy as Restriction**

Ekpe/Mgbe was once *the* government throughout the region and still remains a powerful player in local politics. The society maintains authority through its autonomy, which according to Georg Simmel, is the essence of a secret society (1950: 361). The sovereignty of Ekpe/Mgbe is a product of both its history and restricted rights of access into its esoteric knowledge. Simmel argues that ownership of a secret grants the possessor “an exceptional position” in relationship to those excluded from it, even though the content may be inconsequential (1906: 464-465). My examination follows Howard Morphy in that it subscribes to the notion that the control of knowledge through restriction and initiation establishes power, while it rejects the veil of secrecy as the major factor in the creation of power (1991: 77 and 96). Today, in teaching *ukara* knowledge, locally understood as an initiation in itself, power is thus mediated through the

process of transmission of knowledge since a form of monetary benefit exchange is involved and the “ownership” of the secret or interpretation of a given motif varies from source to source, as I will soon demonstrate. Simmel’s claim that ownership alone mediates power is problematic since, it is what you can prove, not what you claim to know that matters. The *nsibidi* knowledge encoded in *ukara* also subscribes to this cliché since verbal meaning and interpretation mean nothing if one cannot demonstrate knowledge through the performed *nsibidi* version. The exchange of knowledge, from teacher to student, is thus the discourse of power. Ekpe/Mgbe members refer to this process as an initiation. Beyond the knowledge encoded in *ukara*, the cloth alone can mediate power as it serves as a twofold symbol of initiation and restriction.

Access to *ukara* knowledge and teachings are best understood through three types of restrictive boundaries: spatial, social, and spiritual (cf. Roberts 1993: 141-143). *Ukara* that adorns the body and lodge can be understood as spatially restricting knowledge for both members and non-members alike. The *ukara* banner blocking the entrance into the lodge’s inner shrine, for example, cannot be crossed by members not initiated into the proper stage; the less privileged are left to imagine what lies beyond the cloth barrier. The second boundary not only socially transforms an Ekpe/Mgbe member into an entirely different social class, but also the process of initiation makes him into an insider. Initiation may also restrict the member to further spatial limitations or it may free them, depending on the rank and level granted. Initiations are important gateways for the continued acquisition of knowledge, which unlock the possibility for seeking the final and most restricted level of knowledge: the spiritual and ancestral teachings. This last phase of knowledge can take a lifetime to acquire. Access to this field of knowledge is first granted by passing through advanced and restrictive informal types of initiation. The knowledge is then elucidated during instructional teachings.

### **Initiation and Instruction: “The More You Look, the Less You See”**

Respect and modesty are the foundation of Ekpe/Mgbe teachings. Once initiated, members are instructed to enter the house of Ekpe/Mgbe with their eyes open and mouths shut and although they might not realize it, this begins the learning process. Typically, newly initiated members join the society without any prior understanding or frame of reference. Much of what unfolds inside the lodge before, during, and even after ritual activities relates to the large body of knowledge Ekpe/Mgbe *nsibidi* encompasses—everything from cleaning, hanging the *ukara* banner, food and table preparations, distribution of drink, eating and drinking, and even the initiations themselves. Indeed, everything tangible and intangible within a given Ekpe/Mgbe context—meetings, performance, and ritual—can be seen as teaching aids that can elucidate through instruction.”<sup>8</sup> However, often only the most modest and respectful young members gain the knowledge of *nsibidi* since their interest in learning and their proper conduct during gatherings inspire senior members to take them under their wings. An Ekpe song alludes to this point:

*Okpo okoñ eto ama obo ete nkpo ifoñke mmo mua*  
Mynah had said that it is not good to be boastful<sup>9</sup>

In Calabar today, young members gain insight into teachings and deeper knowledge through the master/apprentice system. Although it is not always the case today, most elderly members state that a younger member’s primary instructor is usually his father.<sup>10</sup> Since the

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<sup>8</sup> B. E. Bassey discusses the fact Ekpe masquerades themselves tell stories and are thus didactic (1998: 157).

<sup>9</sup> According to Ekpe members the mynah is a woodpecker and once upon a time, the mynah’s father’s friend died. To prepare for the burial, a friend bought an inferior type of casket. The mynah mocked him for this, and started to boast that when his father dies, he will buy the most excellent type, but years later, when it came time, the mynah was unable to buy because he did not have enough money. In an effort to make a quality casket, the mynah gathered the best materials and tested the quality of the wood before construction, but when he returned from his task, his father was already buried. The story demonstrates the dangers of being boastful!

<sup>10</sup> A prospective member, whose father is not involved in Ekpe/Mgbe and does not have the money to support initiation cost may earn the respect of a current title holder, who would likely initiate and train him in exchange for

acquisition of Ekpe/Mgbe knowledge is an expensive endeavor, most neophytes do not have the funds necessary to support the demands of teachers. Typically, a master of Ekpe/Mgbe requires two bottles of spirits and ‘gift’ per instructional session. Each lesson is understood as an initiation in itself. If proper payment has not been given after a lesson, the instructor may utter the common expression, “drop something for chalk.” This collapses the idea of ritual initiation into instruction. Chalk and payment are the basic requirements for initiation into any level of Ekpe/Mgbe. The phrase further explains that initiation is meaningless without proper instruction. The chalk is used to draw *nisibidi* on the initiate during initiation. Those marks are not explained nor is the initiation ritual itself explained. It becomes the responsibility of the initiate himself to understand what is not explained during formal ritual. Ekpe/Mgbe is a system that favors the elder and titleholders who are seen as the keepers of knowledge and the youth must acquiescence to their authority in order to acquire their wisdom.

The Ekpe member and recent titleholder of the society, Chief Ekpenyong Bassey Nsa informed me that during *nisibidi* instruction his father, the late chief Bassey Ekpenyong Nsa, repeatedly uttered the phrase, “the more you look, the less you see.”<sup>11</sup> In context the expression refers to the importance of student’s actively seeking his teacher to ask about the meanings of what he has observed and participated in during rituals, ceremonies, and performances. Members who do not understand the depth of *nisibidi* will see only the façade of Ekpe/Mgbe unfold before

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informal labor. For example, if a boy or teenager is interested in being initiated into Ekpe/Mgbe, he will seek out the admiration of an esteemed chief, who will “interview” the prospective member through a series of jobs that could last up to a year before the chief agrees to initiate him. However, this can place the youth in a dangerous position since fatherly protection during rituals and ceremonies shields the ignorant younger member from possible spiritual harm and financial disaster. Any actions or mistakes members make inside the lodge or during performance are taken seriously and usually end with a heavy fine or in some rare cases, a flogging with the cane of Ekpe/Mgbe. These hard lessons begin the long learning process, which favors knowledgeable members, who, in most cases, financially benefit from the mistakes of the inexperienced. Such errors are ordinarily avoided when fathers, grandfathers, or even uncles guide neophytes.

<sup>11</sup>Interview with chief Ekpenyong Bassey Nsa, March 16, 2010.

their eyes, while those who are truly interested will closely examine happening. The member will later ask their teacher for elucidation of what they observed during ritual and performance. Moreover, the phrase is closely related to the initiation process and the instruction that results from proper mentorship. In other words, if you do not seek out a proper teacher, “you don’t know and you are blind.” This was often performed as a gestured *nsibidi* (by wiping their eyes with their hands) during my own instruction to accentuate the forewarning.

For the Efik, Efut, and Qua lodges in Calabar, membership begins after one’s initiation into Nkanda,<sup>12</sup> permitting the newly initiated to enter into higher levels. The basic level of initiation is a requirement for further advancement. Numerous levels of informal initiation after Nkanda unfold during the course of an initiate’s journey into upper echelons of the society. Depending on the interests of the initiate and because of the influence of the urban experience of Calabar, advancement or initiation into further ranks can be achieved rather quickly today. In spite of rapid advance in status, it was explained to me by members that the acquisition of knowledge spans the life of a seeker. There are differences in the processes whereby members are initiated and how they attain the deeper teachings in the Mgbe/Ekpe systems of the Qua, Efik, and Efut.

The first stage of initiation into Qua Mgbe begins at Abon Ogbe (small masquerades), although full membership is only reached after initiation into Nkanda. Two more levels of initiation follow Nkanda. Asian is optional, while induction into the last, Nyema Mgbe, bestows

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<sup>12</sup> In Calabar, wives and daughters of chiefs may be initiated into the society. They are initiated into the Nkanda level. However, they are not permitted to enter the lodge or seek out any Ekpe/Mgbe knowledge. One of the major benefits of initiation frees them from the harassment of the society’s masquerades. This does not mean that women do not possess the *nsibidi* knowledge of Ekpe/Mgbe. In fact, elders and chiefs informed me that Ndem (the Efik water deity) priestess’ know imaged and performed Ekpe/Mgbe *nsibidi*. One of my Mgbe teachers explained how he was taught Ekpe/Mgbe *nsibidi* by an Efik Ndem priestess. The issue of gender and *nsibidi* is an interesting topic beyond the scope of this essay. For a discussion on *nsibidi* and gender among the Bakor-Ejagham from the middle Cross River see Carlson 2003.

a title upon the initiate. With the title, one is recognized as a chief of the society. During the course of initiation into the various levels, the initiated seek out the meanings and interpretations of his initiations from his teachers. Also, interest in masquerading opens the door for further learning of *nisbidi*.

The Quas have a separate branch of Mgbe referred to as Ikpa Dibo. It is responsible for training younger members in the art of masquerading and in the use and meaning of *nisbidi*. Only the masters and most respected titleholders are officers of this branch.<sup>13</sup> Today, however, senior members informed me that Ikpa Dibo is fading because of the influence of the privatization of teaching. In today's climate, rather than depending on the group instruction of Ikpa Dibo, younger members are simply finding teachers on their own through the tutelage of their own fathers if they will teach them or from other chiefs or members. It should be noted that even when Ikpa Dibo was the primary method of training, private tutoring was probably already practiced, although not to the extent as today. Ikpa Dibo offered a respected and trustworthy source to the deeper teachings of Mgbe. Established teachers claim that creditable teachers are highly pursued nowadays since deception is common.

While the Qua, at one time, had Ikpa Dibo to facilitate instruction, the Efik and Efut, on the other hand, never had special branches of Ekpe responsible for teaching their members. They have instead always made use of the master/apprentice system. For these groups, full membership starts with initiation into Nkanda, followed by a much later entrance into the Efamba. After that there will be further initiations into the various masquerades and the sacred Ikot Ekpe ritual (dragging Ekpe from the bush to the shrine). It is this sequence that grants access

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<sup>13</sup> If request to become a member of this branch is given, the requirements of initiation into Ikpa Dibo are substantial: a large fish, cartons of drink (including spirits), two bottles of palm oil, two bunches of plantain, and crayfish as well as a 'gift' for the officers.

into the deeper teachings of Ekpe. During the course of the initiations, the neophyte seeks out the knowledge of his teacher in order to comprehend the various levels of initiation and to understand the *nsibidi* that applies to each. *Nsibidi* is the system that serves as the foundation for all Ekpe knowledge, and most of these understandings are seen in the Efamba.

The Efamba is also referred to as *ufok* Ekpe (house of Ekpe). Metaphorically it designates the inner chamber within a Ekpe lodge. Many masters refer to this exclusive room as the “museum of Ekpe.” There are three types of Efamba: *oyok ufok mme obong* (complete house for chief: paramount rulers, and clan and village heads), *ada-Idagha ufok Ekpe* (someone who holds titles in house of Ekpe), and *akparawa odude ufok Ekpe* (young man who entered house of Ekpe). These rooms are furnished with important objects that visualize the history and teachings of Ekpe during the funerary celebration of deeply initiated members of Ekpe.

The first Efamba is the most important and complete since it is only created for a paramount ruler or a clan and village head when his life is being honored.<sup>14</sup> Typically, this room is produced one year after the ruler’s death when the chief-in-waiting is ready to take the deceased’s place as the new paramount ruler or clan/village head and has acquired the necessary funds in order to recognize the deceased with proper honors. This room presents the *ukara* in three-dimensional form as all the imaged signs represented on the *ukara* textile come to life in a carefully organized array of objects and dramatic presentations of the deep aspects of Ekpe. Chiefs of Ekpe who have not entered before may do so only with the permission of the Iyamba or lodge head, who walks the initiates through the room, providing little to no explanation about the plethora of objects and assemblages. Upon entrance, members are overwhelmed with the number of objects and installations they encounter. In my Efamba experience, I was in the

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<sup>14</sup> I entered this type of Efamba in Calabar South in November 2009.

company of eight other initiates. The Iyamba explained only the names of the objects and assemblages, but encouraged the newly initiated to seek out his wisdom to fully comprehend the display. The other two versions of the Efamba include fewer objects and assemblages, these allude to the more foundational esoteric aspects of Ekpe.

In the Qua, Efik, and Efut versions of Ekpe/Mgbe, access to a deeper, more esoteric understanding can only be attained through the various types of initiations and the wisdom of a teacher. Any initiate may see, but to truly look and to *know*, the initiate must seek the knowledge of Ekpe/Mgbe through a reciprocal interaction with a wiser member. An Iyamba told me, “it is something (the process of instruction between teacher and learner) for mutual benefit.”<sup>15</sup>

### **Interpretations of *Ukara*: The Flexible Nature of Spoken *Nsibidi***

The verbal explanations of specific *ukara* motifs can vary tremendously. During fieldwork investigation and my apprenticeships, which follow the process of how an indigenous member would be taught *nsibidi*, I came to understand that motifs have a multiplicity of verbal interpretation, while others differ only slightly, and surprisingly a very limited few have consistent explanation. While I present a number of examples, more were documented than what appears in this text. My lessons involved ten interpretations from members of high rank within the Ekpe/Mgbe society. Five of those interpretations were informed by my specific Ekpe/Mgbe teachers, who are all widely regarded as masters of Ekpe/Mgbe knowledge and *nsibidi* in Calabar. Additionally, beyond the ten interpretations, I gathered many partial explanations of specific motifs by a wide-range of members of diverse ages, ranks, and ethnic identities. Since Calabar was historically occupied by the Qua-Ejagham, the Efik, and the Efut peoples, interpretations were informed by members of all three groups. Additionally, I obtained Etung-

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<sup>15</sup> Interview with Obong Iyamba, (Chief) Prince Efiok Ekpenyong Nsa, February 23, 2010.

Ejagham interpretations near Ikom, in the middle of the Cross River region. The following analysis emphasizes my field investigations in Calabar, along with comparison to *ukara* interpretations from other scholars and writers working in other areas at different times in the Cross River region.<sup>16</sup>

During formal instruction, *nsibidi* was taught to me using an *ukara* purchased with the help of one of my teachers in 2009 (Fig. 4-10) from a local dealer in Calabar. However, when all motifs on my cloth were taught, members usually brought out their own *ukara* as further learning aids since most wrapper-sized (roughly 4' by 6') versions have different motifs imaged from cloth to cloth.

Lessons would begin once the top corners of the *ukara* were securely knotted to any stationary feature, leaving the textile to loosely hang. Usually, the cloth was tied to the interior window burglary bars, a typical feature in most Calabar homes. My instructors normally contemplated the cloth for some time, and if he was a chief of Ekpe/Mgbe, he would manipulate his staff of office, which functioned as a symbol of his status and authority but served as a pointer as well as a mechanism for emphasizing gestured explanation.

The motif predominantly featured on most *ukara* is characterized by a series of repeating rectangles inside one another with a horizontal line placed in the middle of the motif (Fig. 4-11). More recent *ukara* typically depict two rectangles, sometimes with two horizontal lines inside the second rectangle, while older versions often have up to five rectangles with one central horizontal line. Discussion with members reveals that this combination of motifs has a variety of meanings. The rectangle may represent the Ekpe/Mgbe lodge with its the important pillar in the

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<sup>16</sup> The specific identities of my teachers will be withheld not because they wish anonymity as some want to be recognized, but for the integrity of the apprenticeship system. Interested readers could bypass payment and undermine the monetary benefit of teaching. If asked about the source of their knowledge, the member must name their teacher, therefore, if I reveal the masters who taught me, I would be inadvertently giving readers free lessons at the expense of my teachers.

center, the inner chamber of the lodge, a box protecting the secrets of the society that signifies mystic power, or the top of the Ekpe/Mgbe table. The horizontal line might represent the cane or whip, a grave or coffin, a barrier guarding the entrance into the Mboko grade, the house of the tortoise, or the carpet of the society. Each of these interpretations relates to the tangible and intangible aspects of the society. The table and cane reading, for instance, suggests a multitude of ideas pertaining to ritual and initiation, esoteric and spiritual aspects, and the philosophical foundations for the graded structure of the society.

Some instructors referred to the motif as the “table of Ekpe/Mgbe,” but other names/descriptions were used, especially if the teacher was explaining it as a mystical barrier. These multiple explanations allow members to engage in “deep instruction” about the teachings of Ekpe/Mgbe.<sup>17</sup> My use of “deep instruction” is meant to describe how motifs can be explanatory starting points that facilitate more penetrating elucidation of visible and invisible aspects that the motif alludes to, coupled with the teacher’s knowledge. In other words, the motif acts as a springboard during instruction. In the example of Ekpe/Mgbe masters using motifs to teach ideas they infer, beyond their pictographic nature, the interpretive lens is contextual—rooted in ritual procedure and activity, performed *nsibidi*, and spiritual/ancestral relevance. In the process, the narrative is highly personalized and framed from the teacher’s experience and knowledge base. What is important for the learner is the main objective and theme of the lesson. Specific motifs should be understood as talking points for teaching the material and immaterial aspects of the society.

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<sup>17</sup> The phrase “deep instruction” is an appropriation of Bellman’s notion of “deep talk.” Taken from Liberian English, the idiom refers to the overall idea or theme of a story rather than the actual details of an account. In the context of secrecy, “deep talk” reflects how privileged information is revealed through interpretive strategies, while at the same time, still concealed from those unable to understand the intended meaning (1984: 54).

For example, the “table of Ekpe/Mgbe” designation allows the teacher to explain the hierarchy of and advancement in the society. During any function inside the lodge, the Iyamba (Efik and Efut) or Se Dibo (Qua)—both known as the head of the lodge—and other titleholders sit behind a table, which usually is placed on a raised slab of concrete near the back wall of the lodge opposite the entrance. Only titleholders have the right to sit in such prime locations in the shrine. The luxury of having a table at which to eat and drink is a privilege from which lesser members are restricted. The lower status of lesser members is demonstrated by their being seated off to the left on a humble wooden bench. The entire seating arrangement suggests the levels of initiation and hierarchical nature of the society.

Further elucidation of the “table of Ekpe/Mgbe” motif explains the importance of the items placed on the table during ritual and ceremony. The central horizontal line symbolizes the all-important cane—held by the most serious and sacred masquerades during performance—which must be placed on the table in order for any gathering to be official. Additionally, the complete table setting must include the gong, spirits, drinks, and food placed on a large plantain leaf (Fig. 4-12). Each has individual meanings pertaining to spiritual and ancestral application as well as being part of the formal procedures for official activity. For example, the gong is used to call Mboko or the voice of Ekpe/Mgbe, a mystical roar that emanates from the inner chamber of the shrine. The gong can thus be used to teach that the Mboko is the most mystical and spiritual aspect of the society. In lieu of the table and cane interpretation, the central line may be understood as the central pillar in the shrine, in which case the teacher will discuss the other ancestral aspects of the society. The concentric rectangle motif has been documented by Simon Battestini to symbolize, in his words, “the labyrinthine access to knowledge and to the temple,

the secret path towards the kernel” (2000: 150). I was informed that the concentric square motif refers to stages of knowledge, levels of initiation, and the different areas of the lodge.

Another concentric rectangular motif appears on the *ukara*; instead of one or two central lines, this representation features a solid and dotted line in the center of the rectangle (Fig. 4-13). Members may read this motif as the box containing the objects of the Nkanda masquerade display held by accompanying performers, the basket of Nkanda, a mystical box concealing secrets, a coffin, land, or a machete used to kill a snake. The outer rectangle of the motif can be interpreted as the table. In reading the motif as the “box of Nkanda,” the teacher discusses how the dots represent the weapons carried by Nkanda performers that capture stubborn non-members who have not heeded the announcement that Nkanda, a dangerous and vicious masquerade, is about to appear. The motif can refer to the entire Nkanda branch history, masquerade, and performance.

The triangular checkerboard motif, consisting of interlocking white and blue repeating triangles (Fig. 4-14) is explained as connected to the Qua Mgbe Mabu branch, the *ukara* cloth itself, the palm fond used to indicate boundaries that non-members are not to pass, the canoe of Nkanda, or the winds of Nkanda. The latter is the most common interpretation in Calabar, and the most philosophical. Titleholders and members alike explain this reading as the foundational concept of the branch itself and the starting point of the Nkanda masquerade as it begins to manifest itself and travel between the realms of the land, the air, and the water, which explains that Nkanda is understood as a three phase phenomenon. The idea is that Nkanda allows Ekpe/Mgbe to be everywhere at once and explains how it has scaled the ocean and established the society in other areas of the world, and will continue to do so.<sup>18</sup> The motif is described as an

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<sup>18</sup> One such example often referred to today is Cuban Abakuá. For a history of the establishment of Ekpe/Mgbe in Cuba see Miller 2009.

abstract representation of the fluctuating energies produced from the peacock feathers that adorn the Nkanda masquerade as they shake during performance, which explains how it transcends different realms in space and time. In this way, there is an important aesthetic attachment to the mask as the peacock feather is locally known to bring pleasure to the eye. One Ekpe member told me, “Ekpe is all about beauty and all beauty comes from the water.”<sup>19</sup> Perhaps the statement alludes to the introduction of the peacock feather as a result of sea or river commerce. The following Efik Ekpe song reinforces this point:

*Ediye Nkanda-e-ediye  
Nkanda ofiom odok obot akama enyin ese mmoñ (x2)*

Beautiful peacock feather  
Crocodile comes out from the water and turns to look (x2)

The Nkanda branch in Calabar was founded by Eyo Asibong, who later became King Archibong II of the Efik in 1859 (Oku 1989: 65-66).<sup>20</sup> It is possible, that the Efik created the “winds of Nkanda” interpretation during this time or soon after. The interpretation may have possibly disseminated throughout Calabar due to the Efik influence over the lower region of the Cross River complex during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries while middlemen during the slave and oil trade. Non-Efik members state that the Efik version of Nkanda is their “claim to fame.”

Scholars investigating other communities in the Cross River region and Igbo areas have written that the triangular checker board and darkened triangle motif represents leopard’s claws and a general reference to power (Carlson 2003: 77 and 2007: 146, Cole and Aniakor 1984: 61, Leib and Romano 1984: 54, Thompson 1974: 180-181 and 1983: 245, 247, and Battestini 2000: 150); however, in Calabar and Ikom, it was never explained to me in this way. It is interesting to

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<sup>19</sup> Interview with anonymous member, date withheld.

<sup>20</sup> After a battle with Okpodom Etak Ukim in 1821, Eyo Asibong, who was noted swordsman and warrior, attained the paraphernalia of the Nkanda branch as a trophy of war. Perhaps, this explains the Efik connotation of the overall idea of the warrior nature of the Nkanda branch and its more aggressive masquerade display (see Oku 1989: 65-77).

note that once scholars recorded the motif as a reference to leopard characteristics and power, it became “fact,” and was rerecorded throughout the years. Or, is it possible that this is an interpretation given to non-initiated researchers?<sup>21</sup>

The brass branch, known as Okpoho, was incorporated into Efik Ekpe in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and is depicted on the *ukara* in a variety of ways: one or a series of elongated arch-like forms (Fig. 4-15), two semicircles with their openings facing outward separated by a central line, interlocking semicircles, and a single semicircle or arch form. These motifs may also be interpreted as the brass or copper rods (Efik: *okpoho okuk*) used as currency before and during the trans-Atlantic slave trade.<sup>22</sup> Yet another depiction on the *ukara* is in the form of a small circle or armband, which represents the coveted *okpoho* used during the Okpoho performance display. Battestini notes that representations of copper and iron bars denote wealth, fines, initiation cost, and notions of secure and honest commerce (2000: 149). My recent findings reveal a similar idea relating to power and money. The motif is regularly interpreted in relation to the Okpoho branch or the now outdated currency that was once used at a time when Efik Ekpe dominated Calabar financially and politically during the slave trading years. However, unlike the consistent reference to power documented in Calabar, in Ikom, an elder interpreted the elongated arch as the portal of the Mgbe lodge. Perhaps the interpretation relating to power and old currency I documented in Calabar is temporally consistent to the time Battestini collected information (1979-1983) since it recalls the time when Ekpe/Mgbe reigned supremely.

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<sup>21</sup> I would like to thank Amanda Carlson for this comment. Personal communication, July 11, 2011.

<sup>22</sup> There is some dispute of the history of copper rods in the Cross River. Jones maintains that copper rods and manilas were imported from Western Europe, while noting that an iron currency preceded them (1958: 48). In contrast, Latham argues that a brass and copper currency system was firmly in place before the arrival of Europeans (1971).

The Ekpe/Mgbe Okpoho motif is also the most common sign represented by those not members of the society. Recall the two genres of *nsibidi* defined earlier, those used in public domain and those for restrictive organizations. Even though the same motifs are used in both realms, Ekpe/Mgbe *nsibidi* interpretations are completely different and also carry multiple meanings for members as well. This does not mean that all signs were once used in both domains, but the motifs that were shared carry different connotations entirely. For instance, the most frequently discussed general type of *nsibidi* in the literature is two interconnecting semicircles. The above paragraph shows that this relates to a specific branch, currency, power, and an entryway in Ekpe/Mgbe contexts, but among the public, it represents love, unity, the union between man and women, marriage, and if the two semicircles are not intersecting, the meaning becomes disunity, hatred, divorce, and betrayal (Dayrell 1911, Campbell 1983, Thompson 1983: 244, and Carlson 2003). Still, there are even more meanings attached to the non-interconnecting semicircles motif in the context of Ekpe/Mgbe. An Mgbe elder and chief noted that the motif speaks to how a member secretly turns his back on his wife to go to an Mgbe ritual. The elder used the motif to teach me how a member must not tell his wife that he is going to play Mgbe, especially at night, as it can draw suspicion and unwarranted inquiries.

*Ukara* motifs and their assorted interpretations reveal that Ekpe/Mgbe *nsibidi* is not merely a pictographic, ideographic, symbolic or iconic system as the literature suggests, but is didactic at its very core and motifs do not represent words or ideas but embody lessons about the material and immaterial aspects of the institution. The polyvalent nature of *nsibidi* has been suggested in the literature, importantly noting difference of interpretation from the public and restrictive genres, and the crucial factors of age and level of initiation. In reading the motifs of Ekpe/Mgbe *nsibidi* represented on the *ukara*, verbal explanations are not static, but also

polyvalent. As such, animal motifs on the *ukara* do not represent the animal alone but much deeper concepts associated with them and their attachment to the society.

For example, the representation of what appears to be a lizard can also be identified as a chameleon or as a monitor lizard (Fig. 4-16). When explained as a lizard, the motif becomes a reference to the deceased connecting to the Oku akama branch, an aspect of Nyamkpe's choreography, an animal from the bush, from which Ekpe/Mgbe derives some of its power, and the animal that accepts the offerings of food sacrifice during rituals. Interpreted as the chameleon, the motif describes the nature of gestured *nsibidi*, just as the chameleon can change color, a sign may be performed in many ways. This interpretation also denotes that tricks and indirection are used to confuse and to protect the knowledge of performed *nsibidi*.<sup>23</sup> The interpretation concerning the monitor lizard was given by a Qua Chief who is also a master of Mgbe. He explained that this type of lizard connects to the Nkanda branch and masquerade display. This species of lizard is black and earth toned with dotted patterns on its back, which also reveals, in his understanding, the origin of *nsibidi* and the innate connection between Mgbe and nature. The narrative resonates, in some ways, with an oral account collected by Macgregor in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that tells the tale of how humans learned *nsibidi* from baboons (1909: 211).

Another animal motif, the tortoise, always depicted from a bird's-eye-view, directs emphasis to the carapace (Fig. 4-17). The motif is interpreted variously as Nkanda occupying the bush, a sign for the deceased, which relates to the Oku akama branch, the Qua Boriki branch, or an old warning sign hung in front of the Mgbe lodge that featured a tortoise shell tied to a cock.

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<sup>23</sup> Carlson documented tricks and indirection as an important aspect of performed *nsibidi* in the middle Cross River (2003: 84-87). The topic will be discussed in the following chapter.

In the Ikom area, the motif was explained as the shell of a turtle used to call the mystical Mgbe, in more general contexts as a town, or as a general reference to the many qualities of the tortoise.

The last interpretation allows a teacher of *nsibidi* to discuss many ideas of Ekpe/Mgbe with his pupil. The tortoise lives in the bush along with other animals represented on the *ukara*. These motifs are metaphors for the powers and abilities that the ancestors appropriated and embedded within the philosophy of Ekpe/Mgbe. The tortoise is an animal characterized by longevity, wisdom, unhurried movement, prudence, and cleverness. Such ideas translate as qualities and behavioral properties that a member should strive to live by. For example, the idea of longevity denotes the vitality of the ancestors and the authority of Ekpe/Mgbe in general, while slowness of movement and wisdom are qualities of the elders. Younger members are admonished to respect and to learn from the elders in order to cultivate their own knowledge. Level headedness, mental agility, and creativity—further qualities attributed to the tortoise—extend to many areas of the society, including proper conduct, the acquisition of knowledge, the arts, and the ability to perform *nsibidi*.

The design with two diagonal lines dividing a quatrefoil into four sections with small dashes inside each (Fig. 4-18) was articulated as the regalia worn by chieftaincy candidates during their formal initiations and public performances, the regalia of the Ebonko masquerade, the bow and arrow carried by the tailed Isim performer (Fig. 4-19) the mystical and spiritual aspects of the Mboko branch, or a member's heart and sword or staff of office. The last explanation speaks to pantomimed *nsibidi* challenges between members in both formal and informal settings. When members challenge each other in this way, it is not unlike someone testing another's ability to wield a sword. If successful, the sword impales the heart and death results. The motif thus speaks to the seriousness of *nsibidi* challenges and implies that

Ekpe/Mgbe chiefs “fight” with their staffs of office and wisdom both during challenges and as leaders of the community.

A similar sign is addressed in the seminal work, *Flash of the Spirit* 1983, in which Robert Farris Thompson traces a Cuban Abakuá sign featuring a quartered circle with four small circles in each quadrant to Nigerian motifs. The sign in Cuba, documented as early as 1839 and according to Thompson, has multiple meanings relating both to the Abakuá Mokongo title and mystic vision, along with other interpretations. The Cuban motif can be represented in a variety of forms. Instead of a circle, the motif can be rendered as a diamond-shape, a horn-form, or open and curving. Regardless of form, however, the four dots or circles separated by a bisecting cross must be in place to symbolize two sets of eyes. Thompson further states that the Nigerian motifs from Calabar and Oban relate to the Nkanda branch and also connects to the notion of the mystic vision. Particularly, the Nigerian motifs illustrated in Thompson’s discussion are a quadrant circle surmounted by a feather-like element from Calabar and from the Oban area, a circle divided into four quadrants by a cross (1983: 248-254).

In my apprenticeships and investigations, the Calabar motif described by Thompson was explained as a combination of the Nkanda branch and the Mboko branch since once one is initiated into the former, access to the latter may be grasped with time. The feather-form is a stylized peacock feather, the main symbol of the Nkanda branch. The quartered circle belongs to the Mboko branch and is an extremely esoteric and spiritual concept that relates to the ancestors. A completely different interpretation of the same motif was also offered: instead of a feather, a plume could be depicted, in this case, it relates to the Efik Nyamkpe or the Qua Dibo branch, which is spiritually connected to the Mboko branch. Although the notion of mystic vision was never mentioned, *nsibidi* and Ekpe/Mgbe insights can be shown to the living by the ancestors

through the medium of dreams.<sup>24</sup> Comparing the Cuban example and Thompson's Nigerian cases to my findings support the notion that the doctrines of indigenous knowledge systems carry multiple meanings and change through time and space, especially as *nsibidi* crossed the Atlantic and become *anaforuana*.<sup>25</sup> Another importance difference is that the Cuban version has abandoned the use of *ukara* cloth and has placed emphasis on the act of drawing the symbols rather than performing them.<sup>26</sup>

The assortment of motifs on the *ukara* cloth is not usually read as a narrative; rather each motif is interpreted separately from its neighbor's meaning. Of the ten complete interpretations I obtained, only one member explained individual motifs in relation to those that it borders as an interconnected network of teachings. Another member commented on how the *ukara* was mostly related to a specific title/masquerade, but he did not explain the motifs in relation to each other. Ultimately, a member's understanding of imaged *nsibidi* largely depends on who instructed him, his understanding of the ancestral, how diligently he pursued learning the language, and the context for which the motif was explained and experienced during ritual. In addition to context, the multiplicity of verbal meanings is also influenced by the urban experience of Calabar, which led to a collapse of the older method of instruction during ritual to a more private mode of transmission enveloped in financial transaction.

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<sup>24</sup> Thompson equates the dream encounter as a form of mystic vision (1983: 244). My teachers explained this phenomenon as not an image or a concept in the mind or imagination, but as Ekpe/Mgbe ancestors directly communicating, safeguarding, cautioning, guiding, and facilitating a dialogue with living members.

<sup>25</sup> See Cabrera for an extensive discussion of *anaforuana* (1975).

<sup>26</sup> Personal communication with Ivor Miller, February 16, 2010. Additionally, Miller provided an international Ekpe forum for Nigerian Ekpe members to meet Cuban Abakuá members during the Musée Quai Branly performance in Paris in 2007. Interviews with two Ekpe participants: Eyamba Ekpenyong E. Ekpo and Ekpenyong Bassey Nsa, June 2, 2010.

## The Creation of an Informal Economy

The exchange of Ekpe/Mgbe knowledge for monetary value is a well-understood norm.

An Ekpe/Mgbe maxim in Pidgin states:

Ekpe no get mother. No get brother. No get sister. Ekpe no sabi anybody.  
Ekpe go chop your body.  
Ekpe doesn't have a mother. Doesn't have a brother. Doesn't have a sister.  
Ekpe doesn't know anybody. Ekpe eats from you<sup>27</sup>

This all-encompassing adage is often stated to clear any confusion if someone—member or not—feels cheated or shortchanged by the institution. Typically, it is understood as a rule of thumb, uttered to remind everyone of Ekpe/Mgbe's unquestionable authority. As a last word, it can never be challenged. Wise members use it at the end of business transactions involving the institution to end all negotiation, leaving the society financially ahead. Up-and-coming members learn this lesson early as the result of a fine for misconduct or to teach them that Ekpe/Mgbe knowledge is not free. The maxim helps explain why master teachers limit lessons to only three motifs as they maximize their profits over an extended period of time. The learner's frustration will be curbed as the teacher states, "this thing is stage by stage."

Indeed, in Calabar, Ekpe/Mgbe *nsibidi* knowledge is a commodity. Hugh Urban suggests, "secrecy is best understood as a strategy for accumulating 'capital' ...." He further states, "...once it has been converted into this kind of valuable commodity, secret knowledge can serve as a source of 'symbolic capital' in Bourdieu's sense, as a form of status and power accumulated by social actors and recognized as 'legitimate' in a given social field" (1998: 219 and 221).

Favoring the term "restriction" in lieu of "secrecy"—as I demonstrate above—better explains

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<sup>27</sup>"Ekpe/Mgbe no get farm, no get market, Ekpe/Mgbe go chop person for body," "Ekpe go eat for your pocket," and "Ekpe eat person for body, Ekpe no get farm, market for body, we go eat you" are popular variants commonly used in Calabar. All are Nigerian Pidgin. Malcolm Ruel documented a similar phrase ("Ngbe is things to eat") among the Banyang in Cameroon (1969: 228).

how boundaries—the system of formal and informal initiation—safeguard the flow of knowledge and keep it a well-guarded commodity in the hands of those who know.

In Calabar, those members interested in tapping into this field of knowledge find themselves at the mercy of a recently expanded informal economy. The origin cannot be stated with any certainty, but by the time my fieldwork started in 2008, it was a well-established system. Although it may have existed in a simpler form early on, I argue that the informal economy surrounding the transmission of Ekpe/Mgbe teachings—seeking out apprenticeships when fatherly instruction is not available, ultimately replacing the old system of obtaining knowledge during initiation or in the Qua case, their Ikpa Dibo branch, now almost defunct—became the norm and steadily grew in tandem with Calabar’s recent pattern of urbanization, rooted in the late 1970s and ultimately taking shape in the late 1980s, which also coincides with the expansion of the chieftaincy installment spectacle discussed in the previous chapter.

The assertion is supported by recent interviews with elder members and chiefs, who often complain that lodges and their elder members had greater control over the dissemination of *nsibidi* knowledge in the past, especially before the 1980s. Others recall that in the past both verbal understandings and the performed versions were commonplace knowledge for all members since they were collectively transmitted during initiation. In the old system of initiation—climbing the hierarchy of ranks, all levels initiated through included collective *nsibidi* instruction inside the lodge. Today, initiation includes payment and admittance only into a previously restricted boundary. It is important to remember that in Calabar, initiation has been reduced to two levels. However, rights to acquire the more esoteric aspects are granted by informal initiations such as entrance into the Efik Efamba and a masquerade branch. The literature on the subject of *nsibidi* and initiation, grounded in primary fieldwork outside of

Calabar, documents that the old style of initiation and instruction still seems to be intact (Ruel 1969: 221, Leib and Romano 1984: 50-51, Carlson 2003: 77 and 132),<sup>28</sup> while in some areas instruction of *nsibidi* is a private matter, sought out by the interested (Abalogu 1978: 92 and Koloss 2008: 68).

The individual method of teaching, in contrast to the older collective practice, sustains the informal economy while further fueling the multiplicity of meanings in teaching individual *ukara* motifs. Most master teachers in Calabar argue that only a small number of members really *know nsibidi* nowadays. Such assertions tend to elevate the value of their own knowledge and, simultaneously, bolster its commodification further. The acquisition of knowledge, therefore, has become an expensive endeavor, restricting financially challenged members from obtaining it. In fact, most teachers reject any verbal explanation that is not their own, even if the interpretation is from a credible source. They dismiss the reading by stating, “they don’t know.” In a society in which agency is determined by knowing, the terse statement is employed to establish power with serious connotation, enticing the seeker to want to buy into their “correct” wisdom.

### **The Meaning of Multiplicity: Towards a Philosophy of Action**

This analysis raises the question whether the multiplicity of *ukara* readings has always been the norm, or a recent trend resulting from the creation of an informal economy, urbanization, or time. If knowledge was once collectively disseminated through the initiation process, I suspect that the privatization model likely inspired further multiplicity. However, without previous in-depth documentation on the subject, the answer is not so easily discerned. More than likely, members have always sought out private instruction to grasp the deeper

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<sup>28</sup> In fact, an Ejagham Mgbe elder and Entufam (chief) Agbor Ojong Okongor informed me that in the more rural Ikom, Mgbe/Ekpe knowledge (*nsibidi*, *ukara*, and the more esoteric spiritual aspects of the society) is taught collectively, in an open forum. The interested member will summon the chiefs and elders, buy food and drink, and provide a small “gift” (to be divided) as protocol. Interview, April 28, 2010.

meaning encoded in *ukara*. In addition to this, all Ekpe/Mgbe/Ngbe and similar institutions throughout the Cross River complex should never be presented as universal. They vary from lodge to lodge, from people to people, and from region to region. This is especially the case of *ukara* knowledge.

The case in Calabar is more complex since it is common practice for an Efik member to purchase instruction from a Qua member and vice versa. The “cross fertilization” of knowledge might shed light on the multiple *ukara* interpretations in Calabar today. When asked if the Qua, Efik, and Efut have different interpretations, some adamantly said no. Others answered yes. I suspect that each lodge, and even families within a given lodge, have always had varied readings of *ukara* motifs. Chief Bassey Ndem explained that “*nsibidi* had older principles that were lost with time and now it is an outward expression.” He went on to say, “its all about people’s understanding. *Ukara* is one truth, but many paths lead to it.”<sup>29</sup>

Elsewhere in African art studies, the notion of multiplicity of meaning is addressed by Herbert Cole and Doran Ross through the Akan verbal-visual nexus. The ability for images to stimulate varied interpretation and interpretation to in turn provoke varied visual representation, underscores the intellectual capacity and interconnectedness of words and images in the production of meaning (1977: 12). The example of reading Luba memory devices demonstrates how memory is dependent on local agenda and context and negotiated and recreated through the politics of “re/presentation and image/ination” (Roberts and Roberts 1996: 33-44). The variety of meanings produced by a single Mande Bird masquerade provides yet another case. Patrick McNaughton shows how individual artistic agency coupled with an array of multi-media elements in Mande bird masquerade events stimulate shared interpretations and provoke a

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<sup>29</sup> Interview with chief Bassey Ndem, May 30, 2010.

multiplicity of meanings from person to person based on individual interest, history, experience, and levels of knowledge at their disposal (2008). All these ideas can be used to inform how *ukara* motifs and their teachers produce varied meaning: 1) the depth of both the visual representations and verbal interpretations feed each other and reflect the intellectual complexity of Ekpe/Mgbe *nsibidi*, ritual, and philosophy, 2) the politics of the informal economy system is negotiated through an agenda of claiming authentic knowledge for greater profit, and 3) ritual and spiritual experiences are personal and manifest differently according to individual context.

Unpacking the content of *ukara* “deep instruction” in the context of contemporary Calabar demonstrates the impact the urban experience can have on an indigenous knowledge system. Verbal *ukara nsibidi* instruction is intended to complement a member’s understanding as he journeys into the philosophy of the society. However, it means nothing if one cannot “activate” his Ekpe/Mgbe knowledge through the medium of performance. Thus, discussion must shift from investigation of imaged motifs on the *ukara* to direct attention to the performed version of *nsibidi* in order to grasp not only the vitality of the knowledge system, but also how the urban experience has shaped its performative context.

## Figures



Figure 4-1. Ntoe Patrick Inok Oquagbor V initiates a new Mgbe member during ritual. Dec. 12, 2009, Nkonib lodge (Ikot Ansa), Calabar. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 4-2. The *Axari Hotel Stairway* in the foyer of the Axari Hotel in, Calabar, created by Okpoke Ekong Okon in 2008. Photographed in 2010 by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 4-3. Lodge decoration of a tree and lion or leopard. Ikom, Middle Cross River region.  
Photographed Oct. 17, 2009 by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 4-4. *Nsibidi* motifs woven into raffia mane of an Mgbe Abon Ogbe performing during a chieftaincy installation at Nkonib, Calabar, June 29, 2008. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 4-5. *Ukara nsibidi* cloth, c.1950. Photographed in 2011 by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 4-6. Ekpe titleholders wearing *ukara* "wrapper style" during Calabar Mgbe meeting on May 29, 2008. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 4-7. Ukara banner blocking entrance into Nkonib Mgbe lodge during ritual, Calabar, May 23, 2008. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 4-8. Ukara banner blocking the entrance into the inner chamber at the Efe Ekpe Atu, Calabar South, Calabar, Feb. 13, 2010. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 4-9. Mkpoto (canopy for the dead) honoring deceased Ekpe titleholder decorated with *ukara*, Calabar, Feb. 8, 2010. Photograph by Jordan Fenton



Figure 4-10. *Ukara nsibidi* used during my instructional sessions. Purchased from Watts market in Calabar South, Calabar in 2009. Photographed in 2010 by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 4-11. Detail of repeating rectangle motif from *ukara*. Photograph from Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 4-12. Table of Ekpe during ritual. Creek Town, Dec. 31, 2009. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 4-13. Detail of rectangle with dots and line motif from *ukara*. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 4-14. Detail of repeating triangle motif from *ukara*. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 4-15. Detail of Okpoho motif from *ukara*. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton

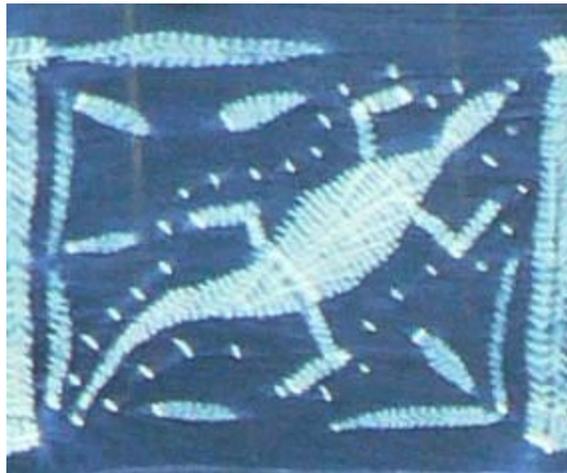


Figure 4-16. Detail of lizard motif from *ukara*. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 4-17. Detail of tortoise from *ukara*. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 4-18. Detail of two diagonal lines dividing a quatrefoil into four sections motif from *ukara*. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 4-19. Two Isim performers (long tail) during Mgbe performance at Nkonib, Calabar, Nov. 7, 2009. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton

CHAPTER 5  
PERFORMED *NSIBIDI* AS “DEEP PLAY” AND THE CHANGING ARENAS FOR  
CHALLENGING KNOWLEDGE

The previous chapter presented the phenomenon of *nsibidi* in two genres: restrictive and public. The restrictive genre in the context of Ekpe/Mgbe was further broken-down into two versions: imaged and performed. For members, the latter is more important since *nsibidi* knowledge is not demonstrated by word of mouth but only when it is performed. The former is mostly used during instruction to elucidate the society, its ritual, and philosophy, while also serving as the foundation for learning the performed version. Most members do not even define *nsibidi* in relation to the imaged version, but privilege the performed manifestation in their definitions. In their view, the imaged version is secondary if not tertiary to the performed.

This chapter provides an in-depth investigation into the phenomenon of performed *nsibidi* and discusses the arenas in which the gestured art is manifested. I will demonstrate that performed *nsibidi* and its challenge arenas are indexes of power that continue to change through time and space. I show that the context for performing *nsibidi* has become more public than in the past. Considering that performed *nsibidi* is being taken to the streets, I argue that the gestured art and the arenas in which it is performed are examples of what Clifford Geertz has termed “deep play” since *nsibidi* challenge is both a the quest of power and financial gain. In fact, the performed version of *nsibidi* motivates and serves as the foundation for the developing informal economy that surrounds the acquisition of Ekpe/Mgbe knowledge discussed in the previous chapter. I further argue that financial sustainability is the critical impetus for performed *nsibidi*'s continued vitality and public presence in contemporary Calabar. My discussion opens with a “thick” description of performed *nsibidi*, which is employed as a trope throughout the entire chapter in order to unpack the complex nature of the gestured art and its changing arenas.

### **A Contextual Account of *Nsibidi* Performed**

The following description is a public *nsibidi* display at the reception after the conferment of the highest honorary title (*Anta Denuo Ankiong*) at Okoyong, Odukpani Local Government Area (outside Calabar), Cross River State, Nigeria, in 2010.

The mood was joyous as family, friends, the community, and supporting cultural groups gathered to celebrate a special day: the conferment upon a few distinguished persons of *Anta Denuo Ankiong*, the most long-standing and highest honorary chieftaincy title of Okoyong, Odukpani LGA, a territory about one hour northwest of Calabar. After the official conferment of the titles, the audience dispersed from the main grounds. Invited guests and supporting cultural troupes worked their way to the house of the recipient for food, refreshments, entertainment, and further celebration. Guests and supporting performance troupes were provided with reserved seating areas. Each area featured a tent canopy. The Mgbe assigned area was strategically placed on a small hill, directly across from the house of the honoree, situated to the left of the compound entrance. Mgbe was given thus a central location. All other troupes and supporters were dispersed within the gated compound. As supporters of the honoree were settling into their respective assigned seats, drinks and food were distributed. A hired band entertained the crowd.

Once food and refreshments were consumed, members signaled that the band must yield to the drums of Mgbe. One elder gestured for the Dibo rhythm to commence (discussed below). For members, this rhythm has great affect. It is known to “ginger”<sup>1</sup> members into a heightened performance mode. Younger members<sup>2</sup> were especially excited as they realized not only was a *nsibidi* display about to begin, but that a true master was about to perform and teach: Entufam

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<sup>1</sup> Members, when describing their state of mind during performance, commonly use the term “ginger.” Being “gingered” implies not only a stimulation of the mind, but also an emotional charge brought about by the synergy between song, drum, dance, and performance.

<sup>2</sup> These members should not be understood as young in age, but rather underdeveloped in Mgbe/Ekpe Knowledge.

Hayford S. Edet. Until recently, Ikpa Dibo *nisibidi* displays were usually only performed inside the halls of the Osam Mgbe—the society lodge. Tonight, members and non-members alike were in for a rare treat: a public and masterful display of *nisibidi*. However, at this point, only members were fully aware of what was about to unfold.

Before Entufam Edet was ready to perform, as he later informed me, the spirit of Mgbe had to overwhelm him. He stood up to encourage the Dibo drum beat to intensify. Viciously motioning to the drummers to accelerate, he was beginning to feel the spirit, a sensation not easily defined or understood by those not deeply invested in the knowledge of Ekpe/Mgbe. When his spirit was charged, shoes were removed for better traction; his glasses, watch, and numerous cell phones were safely placed on the table since *nisibidi* displays are known to send accessories flying.

The excitement steadily increased. Younger members were eager to witness his display. Older members helped him “ginger” with verbal shouts and quick *nisibidi* gestures. I will never forget the thrilled look of anticipation a younger member expressed: his mouth ajar, eyes widened with excitement, but at the same time focused for careful study, as he was about to see a masterful display of knowledge that would later send him on a quest for comprehension. As a titled member yet foreign field researcher, I was not only struck by who was going to perform, but also by the palpable energy transmitted from member to member, singer to singer, and drummer to drummer. I quickly decided to abandon my video and photographic cameras in order to soak up the event with my own senses. Only at the end did I realize a picture or two should be taken.

The performance started with Entufam Edet following proper protocol by performing a crucial *nisibidi* sequence: securing a boundary by establishing two imaginary corners,

demarcating the boundaries of a lodge, concealing the inner caucus of the Osam Mgbe by performing the hanging of *ukara* cloth, and finally, by approaching the high table to ask for the Ekpe/Mgbe cane or *ikpa* (Fig. 5-1).<sup>3</sup> On approach, Entufam Edet carefully avoided touching the *ikpa*. The cane was lengthy and extended beyond the table. Therefore, Entufam Edet majestically spun around the cane to avoid touching it. During the maneuver, he performed the *nsibidi* of respect towards the titleholder seated centrally, at the middle of the table, usually the Iyamba or lodge head. He performed the sign of respect with a handkerchief folded over his hands, asking for the permission to begin his display. Once granted, the seated titleholder responded with *nsibidi* and picked up the *ikpa* on the table in front of him and threw it on the ground for the performer to officially begin his display.

After the *ikpa* hit the ground, the mood instantly changed for Dibo was coming. The act further “gingered” the performer, the observing members, and the musicians, and triggered the attention of the general audience (non-members). The rhythms of the drums intensified even more. The voices of the singers echoed throughout the entire compound. The members seated closest to the display arena were mentally refreshing their own knowledge of *nsibidi* as they were about to challenge Entufam Edet. Non-members were now drawing closer as they realized a chance to observe—and participate in—a rare public display of *nsibidi*. All, members and non-members alike, were now engaged. Members fed off each other’s excitement, chanting and beating in perfect harmony. A dialogue between members and non-members, usually established during public masquerade, was beginning to take shape. An artistic and performative synergy was materializing.

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<sup>3</sup> The Ekpe/Mgbe *ikpa* is a cane or whip made from a bone-spiked sting ray tail.

As the performance atmosphere escalated, Entufam Edet cautiously approached the *ikpa*, still on the ground, to cleanse the sacred instrument tenderly with his handkerchief.<sup>4</sup> He carefully synchronized his sweeping motions: left to right, allowing the handkerchief to purify the space in which the object lay ever so delicately without actually coming in contact with the whip. The hilt of the cane was treated first. Then, the shaft, and the tip were each cared for with the same gentleness, but not with the same meticulous care the handle had received.

Suddenly, Entufam Edet jumped away from the *ikpa* and ran ahead to block an individual walking into his performative space. The man was not wearing a wrapper tied around his waist, but was outfitted in an “up-and-down garment,”<sup>5</sup> signaling to the performer that a non-member was violating Mgbe’s space. When Entufam Edet reached the intruder, he stopped right before the man, leaving about an inch of space between their noses. As the man tried to walk around, Entufam Edet mirrored his actions in an effort to protect and block the intruder from the sacred space. The fierce stare by Entufam Edet let everyone know the implications of the unknown man’s actions. A beating was to ensue if the man was going to be stubborn. However, it was soon apparent that the man was not an intruder, but a member, who realized the severity of the situation he faced. He quickly showed the proper *nsibidi* that proved membership. Entufam now allowed him to pass and join his fellow members. He returned his attention back to the *ikpa*.<sup>6</sup>

Turning his focus again to the now cleansed object, Entufam Edets was soon to transform into Dibo; the *nsibidi* challenges would follow after. Entufam Edet was in full spirit as he

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<sup>4</sup> Nsibidi displays often take on theatrical expression as most masters define their abilities by artfully animating even the simplest aspects. The manner in which Entufam Edet meticulously and gracefully tiptoed around the *ikpa* during the cleaning process, for example, sets him apart from novice performers.

<sup>5</sup> An up and down is a commonly worn ensemble in Nigeria. It usually tailored from Dutch wax and other cloths and consists to matching pants and a long shirt.

<sup>6</sup> Because some Mgbe members were from Calabar and this event was in Okoyong, about an hour distance, many members were from different areas, so everyone did not know each other. Thus, all Mgbe/Ekpe protocols were closely observed.

flawlessly pantomimed the signs that represent the transformation. The clarity of putting on the masquerade body suit was performed in a serious, but playful manner. He added a shake and twist of his shoulders and adjusted his head to convey the discomfort when first donning the raffia body suit costume.

Once the imaginary suit was properly outfitted, the prowess of Dibo was demonstrated. The Dibo display is like the movements of a lion right before pouncing on its prey. Entufam Edet slowly stepped towards two titleholders seated in front of the drummers. He reached in their direction in one fluid, seamless motion. He raised his arms and stretched his hands outward, spreading his fingers like claws projecting from the paws. His eyes were intensely fixed on the drummers, which suggested that his transformation was almost complete. Once everyone was captured by the intensity of his stare, Entufam Edet carefully and effortlessly spun around on his tiptoes until he stood before the cane yet again. This time he picked it up ever so fastidiously, slowly wrapping his fingers one by one around the handle. Entufam Edet handled the *ikpa* like a lit stick of dynamite, cautiously raising it from the ground. Now firmly in Dibo's possession, the power of the *ikpa* took control. He explicitly suggested the elasticity of the *ikpa* by masterfully shaking the handle so that the end of the cane forcefully snapped up and down. The gesture was clearly aimed in the direction of the audience, suggesting the ultimate punishment for not yielding to Dibo. Finally, the transformation was complete when the principle *nsibidi* representing Dibo was performed in front of the high table. The centrally seated titleholder acted the part of the Iyamba. Pleased with the sequence Entufam Edet presented, the response was so subtle, so cryptic, that only those vested with the knowledge of *nsibidi* saw it. At last, Dibo was free.

Entufam Edet—now Dibo—was free to demonstrate his skill. Activated with a sudden jolt, Entufam Edet jumped backwards only to land on the balls of his feet. Effortlessly twisting, his toes commanded all the weight of his frame as he completed some three rotations. As he sent his body into a whirl, the all-important *ikpa* was fiercely held in his right hand, held above his shoulder, allowing the end of the whip to waver from its taunt tension. The threatening gesture was again a clear sign to non-members. All of a sudden, he snapped out of the twist and lunged forward as if to strike with the *ikpa*. He stopped for a brief half second, then moved to his left, to the right, and finally back to the center of his grassy arena.

Meanwhile, the drums thundered the beats of Dibo and the chorus of Dibo reverberated throughout the compound. His motions were in harmony with the drums: so fast, so vicious, and despite the menacing nature of the choreography, everyone was enamored with the beautiful performative dexterity and theatrics he demonstrated. Entufam Edet's effortless rotations, leaps, abrupt directional changes, and perfect posture were beautifully woven together with great affect. Members and non-members were saturated by his remarkable performative acumen. Entufam Edet eloquently approached the center table yet again. However this time, it signaled that the *nsibidi* challenges were about to begin.

The white handkerchief held in Entufam Edet's left hand was offered to the chief centrally seated at the main table. The titleholder accepted the offer of respect without challenge. Moving to the right, Entufam Edet offered every chief the kerchief with his left hand. Most accepted the gesture by responding with the proper sign and without challenge. Since most chiefs were from the same lodge, they were fully aware of each other's knowledge. After Entufam Edet completed honoring the chiefs at the high table, he proceeded to recognize the other titleholders present in order of seniority. Again he manipulated his handkerchief to respect them with the

gesture of recognition. The dance arena was completely surrounded by seated titleholders, forming a somewhat irregular rectangle with few open pockets. Those porous areas were becoming filled by non-members excitedly drawing closer.

Entufam Edet continued without challenge until he offered the kerchief to the third titleholder he approached after the table sequence. The chief denied the cloth sign of respect and responded with a slow upward turn of his head to his left. Entufam Edet carefully read the *nsibidi* and used his white cloth to cleanse the air in the direction the chief motioned towards only for the chief to turn his head and gaze to his upper right. Again, Entufam Edet thoroughly cleansed the space implied by the seated chief. The *nsibidi* arrangement continued as Entufam Edet cleansed in the direction of the sky, the ground, and then ran the kerchief over the shoulders and body of the challenging chief. He stepped back and oriented himself directly in front of the seated chief and with the second offer of the sign of respect, the seated chief accepted with the properly performed gestured reply. Entufam Edet smiled and with a quick twist of his body moved to the next chief to be given the sign of honor.

He then approached a chief sitting with an overemphasized upright posture. His shoulders were rolled back allowing his chest proudly to stick out. Before Entufam Edet could extend the sign of honor, the seated chief's right arm slowly rose from his side. He drew his hand towards his body and stopped it at his chest. At that moment his hand became stiff, his fingers tightly upright. The chief then contentedly gazed at his flat hand as if he were admiring himself. Entufam Edet stood, watching intently, careful not to miss any detail. Immediately following the seated chiefs' *nsibidi*, Entufam Edet responded theatrically in using his fingers as a comb and ran it slowly over the top of his head. Next, he mimicked female breasts by using his hands—while still holding the *ikpa* and kerchief—invisibly drawing cone-like shapes protruding from his

chest. After that display, he collected himself, stood firmly in front of the chief and gave the sign of respect. The seated chief responded with an excited sign of acceptance. Clearly, the challenging chief was excited by the knowledge displayed by the performer.

Entufam Edet continued to showcase his masterful footwork as he moved from chief to chief. Most of them simply received their signs of recognition and replied without confrontation. By this time, the excitement his display garnered from the audience was increasingly palpable.

He then approached the recipient of the honorary chieftaincy title, also an Ekpe titleholder everyone was celebrating that day. As Entufam Edet approached, the chief was slouched in his seat, head drooped as if ill, his leg bent in an awkward position. Without hesitation, Entufam Edet responded by purifying the sick chief with his handkerchief. He started with his shoulders, dramatically wiping away the illness by brushing it off into the air.

Unexpectedly, Entufam Edet abruptly spun and quickly darted off in the direction of the non-members. Apparently, the excitement of the performance drew some observers too close. Entufam Edet looked possessed as he aggressively advanced toward them, the *ikpa* held ready to strike. The intensity of his charge sent the group of culprits running as if for their lives. As he drew close, he snapped the whip towards them. The thunderous crack startled the audience and sent them fleeing beyond the compound walls. The warning was well taken. The offenders slowly returned, this time standing at a noticeably far, yet observable, distance. Their faces gleamed with delight since they had become a part of the performance by triggering the charge and escaping without serious consequence.

Entufam Edet returned to the chief drooping in his seat. He continued to attend to him with his handkerchief. He bent over to address the awkwardly positioned leg. Entufam Edet carefully straightened it back to a normal position and continued by gesturing a number of

*nsibidi*. Entufam eloquently rose up and stepped back and offered the sign of respect. The seated chief did not take it, but performed another sign. Entufam Edet shook his head and offered the sign of respect once again. There was a disagreement. Other members sent the honoree *nsibidi* warnings. Entufam Edet leaned towards the man, quickly cycled through the entire arrangement as if to educate, then offered the sign of honor once more, urging him to accept. The seated chief did not. Entufam Edet looked around and shrugged his shoulders. Another chief seated across the way ran his hands over his eyes, indicating the chief's blindness—a sign indicating Ekpe/Mgbe ignorance. Applied in this context, it is a serious sign with severe implication that all members and even non-members understand. Entufam Edet left the honoree and continued to give the sign of respect to the rest of the seated chiefs. The “blind” chief angrily rose from his seat and stormed off.

The performance continued without delay, and the opportunity to challenge was coming to an end. Entufam approached a known master. They both smiled as if to recognize each other's vast knowledge. He offered the kerchief while bending down very closely to the seated chief. They exchanged a series of signs obscured by their bodies. Then, the *ikpa* was exchanged for a walking stick, the chief's staff that symbolizes his title or office within the society. Entufam Edet drew back and offered the handkerchief to the seated chief, who dramatically accepted with a sharp nod. A few more chiefs were recognized and quickly accepted without challenge.

Entufam Edet continued to display his endurance by shuffling his feet, leaping, and as his feet hit the ground, majestically spinning. Meanwhile, the staff of office was now being manipulated as the *ikpa*. He showcased it at the ready by firmly holding it over his head. He then approached the drummers and offered each the sign of respect. The lesser members were

universally recognized as he dangled the kerchief in their general direction, moving it side to side.

Entufam Edet entered the middle of the arena once more. This time, he held up his staff. Two other chiefs jumped from their seats, majestically spun towards him and crossed staffs with him. The three marched around the dance arena in this manner, a demonstration that the elders were guiding, controlling, protecting, and preventing Dibo from harming the community (Fig 5-2). After their parade around the arena was complete, the three stopped at the main table to lay their crossed staffs before the centrally seated chief (Fig. 5-3). An outburst of excitement raged from the members. The drums and singing again intensified. The exhilaration influenced Entufam Edet to continue. He signaled for another staff, and once received, he crossed the two of them behind his neck and continued to flaunt his agile and nimble footwork. Dashing in one direction, then another, twirling his entire body some five times, he came to a dead stop. Bringing the staffs theatrically from behind his head and planted them into the ground before him. Members expressed their anticipation. Entufam Edet then slowly—as if he were an old man using the staffs as support—worked his way again to the central table (Fig. 5-4). He had just seamlessly woven together two different *nsibidi* sequences reflecting two different titles and masquerades! Just before he reached the main table, he performed a leaping spin only to land facing the centrally seated chief. The staffs were gently placed on the table. The display was complete. All Ekpe/Mgbe members rose and formed a procession and left the compound. In the front, chiefs held their staffs at their waists so that the bottoms faced the sky; behind lesser members sang; and located in the back, the drummers continued to beat away.

### **Towards Understanding Performed *Nsibidi***

The narrative above describes a rare and multifaceted example of performed *nsibidi*. Entufam Edet's performance is nuanced with many layers. First, it is an account describing

performed *nsibidi* by a known master with attention detailing the performer's theatrics and artistry. Next, it is a *public* Ikpa Dibo display. Such displays, in past decades, were typically only performed in ritual contexts within a lodge. Further, it was not youths looking for money at the end of the year, a context discussed later in this chapter, but a sanctioned Mgbe troupe composed mostly of elders and chiefs from Qua Mgbe lodges who traveled outside of Calabar in support of an honoree's new status. And, most important of all, it was a demonstration of individual power, knowledge, status, and agency packed with ancestral spirituality and transformation. The descriptive account contextualizes the following discussion and will be highlighted throughout the chapter to further elucidate the general nature of performed *nsibidi* and the many layers of meaning embedded in challenge arenas.

### **Performed *Nsibidi* in the Literature**

To this point scholarship on *nsibidi* has privileged the imaged version of *nsibidi*. To my knowledge, while many sources recognize the performed version of *nsibidi*, only four address it in detail.

Malcolm Ruel conducted a study on the political aspects of Ngbe among the Banyang of Cameroon in which he discusses *nsibidi* as Egbe, a gestured secret language "consisting of a series of signs having reference to the constitution of the association, including the stages of initiation, what has been learnt there, knowledge of the emblems of the association, knowledge of *ekat* (the lodge's inner chamber), and so on" (Ruel 1969: 231-232). He further provides a brief description of the format of a challenge:

Egbe is performed by two people as a kind of prolonged mime, usually when dancing. It takes the form of question and answer, each of the two testing the other's knowledge, and thus, implicitly, the stage that that person has reached in membership of the association. The first sign of the series is thus made by passing the right forefinger across the eyes and corresponds to the question "Have you seen Ngbe?" (i.e. "Are you a member?") The series then continues with more elaborate

gestures concerning what exactly the person has seen until one of them is shown to be superior and has vanquished the other (ibid: 232).

Despite referring to the act as a “charade,” Ruel importantly notes that performed *nsibidi* connects to the central symbol of Ngbe itself and “...serves to heighten the sense of esoteric knowledge which surrounds and defines it” (Ibid).

Robert Farris Thompson designates performed *nsibidi* as “action writing” and provides some examples from Cameroonian Ejagham members (1974: 180-181 and 1983: 228). He characterizes challenges as “artistic combat” performed by two members to determine knowledge and level of initiation (1974: 180-181).

While the verbal interpretations of *ukara nsibidi* are diverse, performed *nsibidi* is also diverse, but more or less universal since it is meant to be comprehended by members from completely different localities. This does not mean that performed versions do not vary. Part of acquiring the knowledge and learning is being able to understand the various manifestations of one sign (discussed below). Some of the signs Thompson presents seem out of context and challenge this idea. For example, the sign of love (hooking both fingers), hatred (“by opposing the backs of the hands, thumb down”), and speech (crossing of two staffs) are presented as signs to demonstrate how *nsibidi* is mimed between two members in the context of challenge (1974: 181). In Calabar, these signs would not be used in this way since they do not ask or answer a question pertaining to Ekpe/Mgbe ritual, spiritual, and/or philosophical knowledge. Further, the hooking of two fingers can mean something entirely different from love that does relate to questioning a members level and the crossing of staffs also takes on another meaning in the context of Ekpe/Mgbe. For example, in Entufam Edet’s display staffs were crossed multiple times, none of which meant speech. Love and speech can be gestured (by pointing to someone then oneself and hooking the index fingers against the chest; the latter by pressing the fingertips

together and touching them against the lips and extending the arm towards the individual signaled while opening the fingers), but are not necessarily Ekpe/Mgbe *nsibidi* in Calabar. They are general signs used in more general contexts. Most initiated and those not would comprehend the love and speech gesture I describe. A common gesture in Calabar used by all—not defined as *nsibidi*—of annoyance and warning is to extend one’s hand upright toward the pestering person. There are a number of signs used in Calabar of this variety. They can be used in the context of Ekpe/Mgbe between two men communicating, but not in the context of a challenge.

In a later publication, Thompson mentions that *nsibidi* challenges are invigorated with “pleasure and improvisation, the dark dimensions of *nsibidi*” (1983: 228). An important contribution is found in Thompson’s discussion of how masquerade performances are filled with *nsibidi* signs performed by a masquerader or members either as command, presentation of knowledge, or to accent critical moments during ritual (1974: 182-185).

U. N. Abalogu presents a brief description of some performed Okonko (Ekpe in Igbo) *nsibidi* signs from Arochukwu. Additionally, he noted the following about *nsibidi*: that access to particular grades or levels require “the code sign,” that *nsibidi* adepts are highly respected, *nsibidi* knowledge is costly, and learned over a long period of time from various sources (1978: 92). An interesting notion is introduced by Abalogu: “*nsibidi* is not confined to signs alone, it could be spoken such as a man describing himself as palm-branches which face different directions or everywhere (*Nkwu chere ihu aghara-adgara Aka*) is throwing a challenge which a master will understand and reply” (ibid., 94). However, in my investigations in the lower and middle Cross River, members adamantly denied the existence of a spoken version of this type.

Amanda Carlson provides an investigation of performed *nsibidi* through the lens of gender. The comparison of performed *nsibidi* between male Mgbe members and the female

Ekpa<sup>7</sup> society's version used during night ritual informs her argument that *nsibidi* is a mechanism to establish gendered restrictions of power and agency. Mgbe and Ekpa negotiate power and social praxis through their different uses, applications, and rules of restriction of *nsibidi* "literacy" or knowledge (2003). The recognition of the aesthetics of indirection, play, and trickery as an integral aspect of performed *nsibidi* is another important contribution (ibid., 84-85).

### **The Nature of Performed *Nsibidi*: Power through Play and Artistry**

However important these contributions are for understanding performed *nsibidi*, they achieve little in explaining its complex nature and artistic dimension. Conveying a complete understanding is of course impossible given its secrecy. While I am permitted to explain the verbal meanings of *nsibidi* imaged on *ukara*, as I did in the previous chapter, I am forbidden to articulate how to gesture a given sign or sequence of signs. With these constraints in mind, however, members have authorized me to explain the general nature of the performed version.

Initiates appropriate ritual experience in order to compose, ask, and reply in the gestured medium. However, performing, comprehending, and then answering requires cognition. Performing *nsibidi* is not a purely embodied process, but is dependent on conscious thought.<sup>8</sup> In the previous chapter, I made clear that all Ekpe/Mgbe *nsibidi* are mostly taken from ritual contexts. Everything inside of the lodge, literally and figuratively, is fair game for manipulation

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<sup>7</sup> Ekpa is an Ejagham all female healing and divination society that performs at night. The society is known as Ohom among the Qua, where it is used to combat "foreign and strange" spirits. In addition, Ohom women use their nakedness during night dances/ritual as a source of feminine power to challenge men's power and general mistreatment of women. Among the Qua, the Ohom night dance has not been performed for the last ten years.

<sup>8</sup> Anthropologists have demonstrated the value of embodiment theory in the study of ritual language or "action signs" (Csordas 1990 and Farnell 1999). Performed *nsibidi* can not be exclusively labeled as an embodied knowledge since a separation of the mind from the body is required in order to comprehend and grasp it. During certain performance contexts, however, performed *nsibidi* has the potential to exhibit embodied principles, especially if ancestral or spiritual intervention occurs. This requires a more indepth discussion beyond the scope of this dissertation.

in the performed *nsibidi* field. Additionally, a number of *nsibidi* signs that are not found in the lodge, but in the bush or waterly realms are also fair game. Performed Ekpe/Mgbe *nsibidi* is thus an allegory of the philosophy of the society and its performance contexts. An Efik Ekpe chief, Basse Ndem, explained to me, “*Nsibidi* is an allegorical narrative for adepts. *Nsibidi* properly applied is a meta-physical phenomenon.”<sup>9</sup>

Serious cognitive study of Ekpe/Mgbe philosophy and ritual is required even to begin to understand performed *nsibidi*. An Iyamba from Okoyong discusses that performed *nsibidi* cannot be separated from the pursuit and importance of mental cognition. In his words, “*nsibidi* is the importance of knowing: means you know Ekpe.” Simultaneously he demonstrated the sign to ask a member if he knows Ekpe/Mgbe by sharply drawing his index finger at a diagonal angle across his eyes.<sup>10</sup> Only when extensive knowledge is contextually based in ritual and philosophy through the mechanism of instruction and contemplation is the member able to approach the pluralistic nature of performed *nsibidi*.

Most masters agree that clarity is the foundational rule when performing *nsibidi*. Emphasis on clarity does not suggest that performed *nsibidi* is static or unchanging. Quite the contrary, performed *nsibidi* is dynamic, fluid, and changes according to individual style and performance dexterity. For example, there are a number of ways to ask through gesture what stage a member has attained or what knowledge base he currently holds. Of the numerous ways to inquire through performed *nsibidi*, one technique can be gestured with a single sign configured some twenty different ways according to the asker’s individual style or artistic flare. Another method can include an entire sequence of signs. Still another mode of asking one’s stage

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<sup>9</sup> Interview with chief Basse Ndem, May 30, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Iyamba Ekpenyong Ekpenyong Ekpo, June 2, 2010.

can take the form of ask and wait for response, repeating it multiple times until the initial inquiry is complete. In all these different modalities of performed *nsibidi*, the golden rule is clarity. I will use a *non-nsibidi* example to illustrate this point and shed light on the complex nature of the art form.

A door, for example, can be understood as both a barrier prohibiting admittance and/or a gateway into another space. In this mock example of *nsibidi*, I am asking through gesture if you have entered the room beyond the door. The only problem is that I can gesture the idea of a door in any number of possible configurations I manifest in my mind and then demonstrate through performance. The only rule is that my gestured articulation must be clear. Think about the limitless possibilities. One option may be to draw an outline of a rectangle with both index fingers and then imaginarily grab the location of where a door handle is located and turn it. Another might be simply to use the back of your hand to create an up and down motion indicating a barrier. Yet another can be simpler: a pointing gesture towards a door. Infinite examples are possible. In fact, I can even ask the question without even referencing a door in my gesticulation. Instead, by running my index finger over my eyes and then gesturing an object or idea located beyond the door, the same question is asked: have you entered that space? The recipient of the question must be able to understand what is being asked, and then reply correctly.

Performed *nsibidi* is truly infinite. A given Ekpe/Mgbe principle has a plethora of gestured variations that members must recognize. Due to its boundless possibilities, masters are few and far between. What defines a master is a member who has been initiated into the depths of the society, participated in ritual at all levels, had a generous teacher or two, is a diligent student, and truly knows the application of all Ekpe/Mgbe knowledge. Masters inspire change

and innovation as they invent different configurations to a given gestured idea or principle. This is where the idea of indirection comes into play. However, such trickery is not typically employed when asking an alleged member if he is indeed a member, but during challenge bouts, or what Thompson terms “artistic combat” (1974).

Most scholarship has emphasized performed *nsibidi* as a means for determining stage of membership. However, in the context of sanctioned challenge arenas, described at the opening of this chapter, a good number of participants are aware of each other’s standing. This was evident in the case of Entufam Edet’s display. Except for a few members present, most knew of his ability, and he in turn, knew of theirs. Entufam Edet did not necessarily use the forum to demonstrate his knowledge, or to prove his agency, but to advertise his breath of *nsibidi* knowledge to those interested in investing in it.<sup>11</sup> Entufam Edet’s masterful status was demonstrated by how he seamlessly collapsed *nsibidi* into a performative display, but at the same time, coherently separated gestured *nsibidi* from dancing, achieving the most important rule of clarity. Indirection and trickery become important tools in this process. Most have stated that the practice of indirection in performed *nsibidi* is only to conceal (Carlson 2003: 84). While this is half true, tricks are also employed to demonstrate one’s breadth of knowledge and artistic dexterity. In the words of an Etung-Ejagham chief, “*Nsibidi* is the tricks of the knowledge of Mgbe.”<sup>12</sup> Returning to Entufam Edet’s display, a member he did not know challenged him by performing a mirror completely out of context, which Entufam Edet recognized and properly answered. The challenging member, who endeavored to confuse the performer while also demonstrating his vast grasp of *nsibidi*, applied indirection.

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<sup>11</sup> I recall countless times during fieldwork investigation that after a masterful performance of *nsibidi*, the performer was approached by a number of members who were interested in purchasing his knowledge.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Entufam Assam Eba-Ekukatai, April 28, 2010.

In challenge arenas, masters are given the opportunity to market and test their *nsibidi* acuity against other members and experts. Therefore cunningness is used in order to confuse. Recall that everything in Ekpe/Mgbe can be appropriated for the performed *nsibidi* field. This includes the tangibles and intangibles in a performance and ritual context. Anything from eating and drinking during initiation to masquerade display and the act of initiation itself is at the disposal of a member, who turns those sometimes mundane or critical occurrences, which all have deep rooted ideas that explain the philosophy of the society, into performed *nsibidi*. Take the seemingly inconsequential activity of eating during ritual. Of course I cannot explain the actual *nsibidi* formula that allegorizes ritual eating. Instead, I will use another *non-nsibidi* for didactic purpose.

Think about the many contexts in which people commonly eat around the world. Generally—in more formal situations—some eat seated at a table with a set of flatware, a dish or two, a glass, and a napkin. In the context of performed *nsibidi*, one or all can be manipulated in a challenge arena to suggest the act of eating during ritual. I will make use of the napkin to make my point. A serviette is first set on the table beside the plate, then placed on the lap, used to clean messes from one's face and from the surrounding seating area, and then thrown in the trash at the conclusion of the meal. That becomes the template for the entire *nsibidi* formula, but instead of performing it in order, during challenge, a member can start in the middle or end of the sequence. The responder must then complete the sequence or at least, demonstrate comprehension of the basic premise. It gets more complicated, however.

If the challenger is a skilled *nsibidi* performer, in lieu of applying an obvious gesture of a napkin, indirection is used not only to complicate, but also demonstrate artistry. A handkerchief or leaf may be substituted for a gestured serviette. For example, a handkerchief being dangled by

holding its corners and then carefully placing it on a table or on the ground can symbolize a napkin. In either case, the performer must recognize what the asker is suggesting and then correctly reply to the question. The napkin example is not unlike the mirror *nsibidi* that was asked of Entufam Edet. The mirror is an element worn by a particular Ekpe/Mgbe masquerade. Entufam Edet successfully recognized its meaning and then responded with another *nsibidi* that allegorized the masquerade in question.

Entufam Edet confirmed his agency as a master of *nsibidi* that day. With his reputation on the line, he successfully completed all challenges hurled at him. The display was an index of his power with financial implication. The Mgbe discussion is not unique. For example, Patrick McNaughton examines an esoteric body of Mande knowledge from Mali and demonstrates that its “ultimate goal” is power and financial gain (McNaughton 1982: 501).<sup>13</sup> Indeed, performing *nsibidi* in public arenas is about power and money. However, along the breadth of knowledge Entufam Edet demonstrated that day, the theatrics and performance artistry were also important ingredients of the entire recipe. In challenge arenas, spins, rotations, elegant footwork or performance dexterity, flawlessly interwoven with *nsibidi*, are key elements for the demonstration of *nsibidi* acumen, and thus power. Recall that performed *nsibidi* is essentially an allegory of Ekpe/Mgbe ritual and philosophy. Therefore, in order to affect performance agency through the claiming of space during a sanctioned challenge arena, the Nyamkpe/Dibo principle must be convincingly allegorized so that a transformation takes place. Entufam Edet impeccably facilitated such a transformation through his performance ability. The transformation thus enabled the demonstration of his agency through *nsibidi* proficiency. Attention will turn to

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<sup>13</sup> Mande *daliluw*, or recipes of action, also share a number of other similarities to Ekpe/Mgbe performed *nsibidi*. While the former usually takes the form of a tangible concoction and the latter is gestured, both are used in combat or challenge to demonstrate agency, can be configured according to personal style, and depend on deep levels of knowledge (see McNaughton 1982 and 1988).

formal challenge arenas, Nyamkpe/Dibo, ancestral intervention, and how youths transgress such arenas for financial benefit.

### **Challenge Arenas**

In certain Ekpe/Mgbe ritual contexts, the installation of a titleholder, the death of a chief or ruler, and official gatherings, sanctioned *nsibidi* challenges are formally administered and informally offered. These displays transpire after the ritual has officially commenced by the pouring of libation or speaking verbal offerings to honor and call forth the ancestors. In every context, however, the Nyamkpe (Efik and Efut) or Dibo (Qua)<sup>14</sup> drum rhythm signals that *nsibidi* challenges may begin. Recall that during Entufam Edet's *nsibidi* performance, the Dibo rhythm was central to his display. Sanctioned challenges may only take place while this particular rhythm is played. This requires some explanation.

### **Nyamkpe and Dibo**

Nyamkpe or Dibo (Fig. 5-5) is the most important, sacred, and fierce masquerade of Ekpe/Mgbe. In Calabar, it is a masquerade usually only performed within the confines of the lodge during chieftaincy installation and at the death of a titled member.<sup>15</sup> There are few exceptions. Nyamkpe/Dibo can be publicly observed for a short duration at the final phase of the critical ritual performance that rejuvenates the mystical energies of the lodge during a rite that marks the transition of leadership from a deceased shrine head to his replacement. Another

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<sup>14</sup> There are various spellings of Nyamkpe/Dibo in the region as reflected in the literature: Ndibu (Talbot 1912), ema Nyankpe (Ruel 1969), Emanyankpe (Thompson 1974), Inyankpe (Abalogu 1978), Nyangbe or Nyangmangbe (Carlson 2003) and, Ema (Koloss 2008).

<sup>15</sup> I have experienced and documented five Nyamkpe performances.

public forum where Nyamkpe/Dibo performs is at events officially sanctioned by the lodge (Fig. 5-6).<sup>16</sup>

In my opinion, the Nyamkpe/Dibo has been presented in the literature as the “cover-boy” of the institution. I therefore argue that the mask has been over romanticized in literature as a leopard-like spirit, which is said to be appeased and worshiped for power (see Talbot 1912: 38, Jones 1956: 136, Latham 1973: 37, Thompson 1974: 182, Leib and Romano 1984: 48, Ottenberg and Knudsen 1985: 37-38, Nicklin 1991: 5 and 6, and Behrendt, Latham, and Northrup 2010: 31). This is how the erroneous label “leopard society” has developed, starting with Talbot (1912: 38) and being applied uncritically ever since. In reviewing the literature, most have translated Ekpe, Ngbe, and Mgbe as “leopard.” However, in Calabar and other areas of the Cross River complex, most members use “lion” or the notion of the “cat family” when explaining the name of the society. The appropriation of the lion was probably influenced by British contact. However, elders state that lions once inhabited the bush, while leopards were much more prevalent. Further, in Ikom, an Etung elder informed me in the Ejagham language that *ejaw* means “leopard,” while Mgbe refers to “lion.”<sup>17</sup> Mgbe/Ekpe is not a “leopard” society and should not be referred to as such; but it is an institution involved in ancestral veneration that developed its technologies from the realms of the bush and water to visualize its influence.<sup>18</sup> The

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<sup>16</sup> For example, on April 17, 2010, at the 7<sup>th</sup> coronation anniversary of His Royal Majesty Ndidem (Dr.) Thomas Ika Ika Oqua III, grand patriarch of the Qua nation, a public Dibo display was presented and performed in his honor. However, the lodge presenting Dibo was not from Calabar, but from Okoyong.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Entufam Agbor Ojong Okongor, April 28, 2010.

<sup>18</sup> Malcolm Ruel notes that the attribution of Ngbe as a leopard-like animal is emblematic and attributive (1969: 225). In fact, Ruel argues that the guise of Ngbe as a leopard is an “enacted symbol.” In his view, the real power of the society is its organized body of members. Their use of the ambiguous leopard is an enactment of deception to bolster the power of the society (Ibid., 247). He also discusses the problems of past writers suggesting the leopard-like creature as a religious symbol. Among the Banyang the ritual or supernatural element is found in the “blessing of the dead” or use of “medicines” (Ibid., 241). Hans-Joachim Koloss discusses how outsiders are intentionally misled concerning Mgbe and the notion of the leopard. He documents that there is absolutely no ritual connection to a leopard spirit. Instead, all offerings and prayers are directed towards God and the ancestors (2008: 77-78). I also

power of the society resides with the ancestors, who are called upon, consulted, and honored through the pouring of libation or verbal pronouncement. Elucidation of the Nyamkpe/Dibo mask and its *nsibidi* display demonstrates how power is manifested through the relationship between ancestors, living titleholders, and lesser members.

The Nyamkpe/Dibo masquerade is an aggressive, menacing terror which members are very cautious when performed. It is often likened to a warrior-like character. Tremendous calamity is released on the community if the institution does not properly control the mask. For these reasons, the mood is very serious during performance. If not guarded or restricted, Nyamkpe/Dibo will blaze through the community with limitless energy and strength, beating everyone in sight. It is said a non-member will die when beaten with the *ikpa* welded by Nyamkpe/Dibo if not immediately initiated into the society.

The appearance of Nyamkpe/Dibo is almost identical to the general or more frequently performed types of Ekpe/Mgbe masks. Recall from chapter three that among the Efik and Efut they are known as Idem Ikwo and Atad Ekpe and the Qua call them Abon Ogbe. They feature a tight fitting body-net costume with raffia mane, and wrist and ankle tufts. One or two eagle feathers are inserted in the forehead of the netted costume. A metal bell is tied round the waist and hangs on the buttocks of the performer. The front of the girdle or *mbobo* is composed of tightly tied bands of polyester fabric whose ends are elaborately knotted in the back forming a complex cascading tail that conceals the bell. Attached to the back of the neck is a flat tiered disc, triangular, curvilinear, or butterfly-like form made of cardboard and covered with fabric. The Efik and Efut refer to it as *itam ikot* and the Qua *isu ekor*. Today, the form varies tremendously and visually relates to a type of hat. In the past, it opened and closed, not unlike

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documented in Calabar that all offerings and sacrifices are intended for “God” and the ancestors of the society. The leopard or lion idea encompasses merely less than five percent of what Ekpe/Mgbe is holistically.

the way a butterfly manipulates its wings.<sup>19</sup> According to members, the *itam ikot* or *isu ekor* is decorative and meant to beautify. A number of ostrich feathers are inserted into the *itam ikot* or *isu ekor*. The masquerader always holds a wooden dance staff in his right hand and a bunch of *oboti* leaves in his left. The tuft of raffia sprouting from the top of the masquerader's head is known as the *etundu*. Usually, general Ekpe/Mgbe don a red *etundu*. This element differentiates all Ekpe/Mgbe masquerades and organizes them into specific spiritual categories. The performers' hands and feet are the only exposed body parts.

When ritual permits, the general types of Ekpe/Mgbe become Nyamkpe/Dibo through a three-part transformation. First, the ancestors are consulted through the pouring of libation. At this time, the activation of Nyamkpe/Dibo commences when the *abasonko*, a red-feathered plume, is spat upon with libation and tied to the top of the masker's head. The masker then arms itself with the *ikpa* in its right hand while *oboti* leaves remain in the left. The two—*abasonko* and *ikpa*—are some of the most sacred symbols in Ekpe/Mgbe. The *abasonko* is said to serve as an antenna to the ancestors, who, once libation is poured, take control of the masquerader to demonstrate their influence over the institution.<sup>20</sup> As a result, the titleholders demonstrate authority over Nyamkpe/Dibo through their ability to control and direct its power.

Before Nyamkpe/Dibo is free to unleash its incredible choreography, an important sequence of *nsibidi* must be properly applied. If the performer does not properly demonstrate the step-by-step progression of *nsibidi*, he will not only be fined, but humiliated and never permitted to dance Nyamkpe/Dibo again. Once the series of signs are properly performed, not unlike Entufam Edet's opening sequence, the masquerader presents himself to the Iyamba for approval.

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<sup>19</sup> Similarly, in Arochukwu in southeastern Nigeria, Eli Bendor notes that the element attached to the back of their Ekpe masquerader's costume references butterfly wings (Bendor 1994: 334).

<sup>20</sup> A number of scholars have addressed the transformational quality of African masquerade (see Ottenberg 1982, Cole 1985, Kasfir 1988, Piction 1990, and Nunley and McCarty 1999).

He stands directly in front of the table where the Iyamba is seated. The posture of the performer must be perfect: his left leg forward, knee slightly bent, while the right leg positioned under the performer also slightly bent at the knee, bearing most of his weight. He slowly draws his arms upward bringing his hands together. The *oboti* leaves in his left are placed slightly forward while the *ikpa* hilt in his right hand rests on the palm of the left; the shaft of the whip extends backwards over the right shoulder of the masker. The masquerader slowly brings his arms upward while lunging forward by placing all weight on the balls of his feet three times while simultaneously sounding his bell. If the Iyamba is satisfied with the entire sequence and honor of respect, he will accept with the proper *nsibidi* response. At the moment of approval, Nyamkpe/Dibo whips the *abasinko* upwards sending it forcefully backwards. Nyamkpe/Dibo is now free to display.

The Nyamkpe/Dibo dance is brief but intense. While the choreography is different from that in the *nsibidi* sequence, both contain references to the movements of the crocodile, the lizard, and the lion. The skill of the masker is demonstrated by his ability to weave together these different attributes seamlessly into a coherent whole. The manipulation of the *abasinko*, holding the *ikpa* in attack position, light and agile footwork, quick controlled charges, effortless body-rotations—all executed at lightning speed—symbolize the three animals and the all-encompassing power of Nyamkpe/Dibo. The climax of the choreography is reached when the performer enters a frenzied state—almost losing his balance and falling from overexertion, only to catch himself with a theatrical step at the last moment.

The moment Nyamkpe/Dibo recovers from his climax, the opportunity to display performance aptitude ends. The Nyamkpe/Dibo's recognition of titleholders, other gathered members of Nyamkpe/Dibo, and drummers proceeds next. The *nsibidi* of honor and respect—a

single two-hand gesture with *oboti* leaves and *ikpa* hilt while ringing the bell—is offered to each Ekpe/Mgbe chief. If many are present, the performer will stand in the center and collectively respect all titleholders following a more universal arrangement. Lesser members and drummers receive only a one-handed gesture. During this phase of the performance, the masquerader is free to question audience members (chief and lesser members) if they understand the meaning of what they just witnessed (the *nsibidi* of Nyamkpe/Dibo) and that all present are indeed initiates of this level. If unable to answer properly, the member is forcefully beaten with the *ikpa* and severely fined afterwards. The member is overcome with shame as a result of his “blindness”—a serious dishonor that will be the subject of gossip by members for years to come. If a “maiden” to the Nyamkpe/Dibo display, the masker uses the *ikpa* to induct the first-timer ruthlessly with an infectious thrash. After the greetings (and if any beatings were administered), Nyamkpe/Dibo is recharged with energy and, just as it is about to unleash its potential yet again, a senior titleholder or a couple hook or block the masquerader with their staffs of office and drag or direct the menace into the inner sanctum of the lodge. The display is over. Calmness sets in once again.

Strict taboos are observed during the Nyamkpe/Dibo display. The most important rules are that no one can breach the dance arena, challenge, or even stand when Nyamkpe/Dibo is performing. The performative space is the sole property of the masquerader. The performer is thus granted tremendous temporary power and influence: he can initiate *nsibidi* challenges with whom he wishes, can beat members for their failure to display proper knowledge, and can freely demonstrate his agency without interruption. The structure of the Nyamkpe/Dibo display transforms the performer into something not unlike what Victor Turner has described as a “liminal state,” “neither here nor there,” “betwixt and between” the hierarchical convention of

ritual (Turner 1969: 95).<sup>21</sup> This is an important aspect of Ekpe/Mgbe ritual structure that addresses status reversal and informs the nature of *nsibidi* demonstration.

To whom is the privileged opportunity given? Interestingly, the honor is bestowed to younger members ahead of their peers in ability and knowledge. It is important to mention that once a member becomes a titleholder or chief of the society, no longer are they supposed to masquerade, for that aspect of their journey has come to an end. The privilege to dance Nyamkpe/Dibo is an honor many initiates endeavor to experience. An Efik Ekpe song describes this idea:

*Nyamkpe ison Efik elsieh inun efene ewowobi etabi ese (x2)*

The Nyamkpe of the Efik is like a cooking salt, you should have a taste and see (x2)

However, not all dancers have the same performance skills and ability to climax, of course. Only those dexterous enough are permitted to perform Nyamkpe/Dibo. Excellent performers are recognized by elder masters and taught more for their efforts.

Fascinatingly, even though most of the Ekpe/Mgbe ritual structure favors elders since the society is a gerontocracy, the Nyamkpe/Dibo display is a temporary reversal of the very nature of the society's hierarchical ideology. Elders must yield to the agency of the younger member during the display. The younger member masking is between the rules and temporary free from

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<sup>21</sup> Turner first expanded upon Arnold van Gennep's notion of the "liminal phase" in *rites de passage* by discussing the sociocultural properties of the term in his seminal work, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (see 1967: 93-111). For Turner, "liminality or the "liminal *persona*" is an ambiguous, marginal, transitional, and altered state or being that characterizes initiates as they undergo status elevation in the context of ritual or life cycle rites of passage. He later revisited and expanded on the notion of liminality beyond Ndembu ritual to include examples from "complex societies" in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Further, in the second examination, he explored two types of liminality: in rituals of status elevation and in seasonal rituals, which are described as rituals of status reversal (1969: 167).

them as well.<sup>22</sup> Turner refers to ritual anti-structure as *communitas*. It is engendered by liminal phases. He states, “liminality implies that the high must experience what it is like to be low” (ibid., 94-97). Indeed, the liminal state produced by the Nyamkpe/Dibo display facilitates a structural reversal to reinforce two broad objectives: 1) through the medium of performance, all members, especially younger, have an opportunity to demonstrate agency, and 2) any members, again especially those young are free to challenge another member’s *nsibidi* knowledge regardless of age and rank. Both emphasize how Ekpe/Mgbe power, knowledge, and performed *nsibidi* are interwoven. The idea of equality among all members during *nsibidi* challenge arenas is critical. An Ekpe song addresses this point:

*Eyen ye eka edodo ndo ke obio mme okpo ebot mbet ibupke (x2)*

In the kingdom of the goats, a child and their mother can make love and it is not against the law (x2)

The song implies that no matter how many years a given member has in Ekpe, a younger member is free to challenge the *nsibidi* skill and knowledge of older members. The reversal produced by Nyamkpe/Dibo display stimulates members to show and challenge each other’s knowledge. The rules administered (by the chiefs [titleholders], elders, and younger members) are enforced by an ancestral presence.

The ancestral spirit(s) that attach(es) and influence(s) the Nyamkpe/Dibo performer is (are) wicked, troublesome, and extremely aggressive. The mask thus represents the darker and powerful side of the institution to members and non-members alike.<sup>23</sup> For members, Nyamkpe/Dibo is a repository for both governing and transgressive potential. In this way,

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<sup>22</sup> This reversal and resulting generational tension is not unlike what happens during Bamana puppetry displays documented by Mary Jo Arnoldi (see Arnoldi 1988 and 1995).

<sup>23</sup> Others also describe the dangerous nature of this masquerade in other areas of the Cross River complex (see Ruel 1969: 233-234, Thompson 1974: 182, and Koloss 2008: 66).

Nyamkpe/Dibo has a paradoxical nature: it must be controlled by elder members to avoid communal calamity, which bolsters the power of the members directing the mask, but at the same time, Nyamkpe/Dibo undermines the structure of the society by temporarily placing authority into the hands of the young members. Thus, Nyamkpe/Dibo is a reciprocal embodiment of knowledge as power. The argument can be made that the display—through the mediation of the ancestors—evens the *nsibidi* playing field not just for elders, but also for young members. Understanding the ideology of Nyamkpe/Dibo reinforces the fact that having vast amounts of Ekpe/Mgbe knowledge and *nsibidi* does not depend on age, title, or rank.

The Nyamkpe/Dibo display is one of the final didactic requirements for attaining a “PhD” in Ekpe/Mgbe knowledge, to borrow the analogy elders often used with me.<sup>24</sup> However, it is a powerful and rare display not intended for all. Most members I learned from often referenced their experience and involvement with Nyamkpe/Dibo as if to bolster their knowledge.<sup>25</sup> In the past, Nyamkpe/Dibo was reserved for few. Elders inform me that today because of modernization and urbanization of Calabar, more participate than in the past. It was once closely restricted since most members consider firmly grasping the Nyamkpe/Dibo display, its *nsibidi* sequence, and its spiritual and mystical connotation as being deeply vested in Ekpe/Mgbe. The knowledge of the Nyamkpe/Dibo display—rules during performance—including status reversal, drum rhythm, *nsibidi*, choreography, meaning, and ancestral influence—is the foundation for understanding all aspects of sanctioned *nsibidi* challenges.

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<sup>24</sup> Members often compare the acquisition of Ekpe/Mgbe knowledge and initiation to how schools and universities operate. At each grade and then level, different knowledge is learned, which becomes a prerequisite for progression into higher levels of education. The comparison was also noted by Ruel (1969: 243-244).

<sup>25</sup> Ruel spent about 20 months from 1953-1964 among the Banyang and never witnessed Nyankpe. He states, “I have never witnessed the appearance of Ema Nyankpe, which among Upper Banyang is an event more talked of than one that actually occurs” (1969: 234).

### **Informal and Formal or Sanctioned Challenge**

There are three conceptual fields of challenge: informal, formal, and lastly what will be called transgressive. Informal encounters happen at any time within Ekpe/Mgbe contexts and even in other social environments (Fig. 5-7). This type is usually brief, playful and meant as a non-verbal jest between members. For example, if two members meet on the street during a performance or even in public, the members might humor themselves by asking each other questions or confirming their own level of knowledge. Not all members define this category as a challenge, while some do.

The formal variety of *nsibidi* challenge follows the Nyamkpe/Dibo display protocol. There is no structured time during ritual when challenges of this type may unfold. They can occur before or after food and drink are distributed and consumed. Usually, they start after the first course of food and the first round of drinks are distributed. The order of events, when challenges start, number of food courses, and other such factors vary from lodge to lodge. Some lodges or Iyambas are stricter as to when *nsibidi* challenges may occur, while in others, it becomes the prerogative members and drummers to initiate.

Today, formal challenge occurs inside the lodge during ritual, society gathering, during Nyamkp/Dibo masquerade displays and in public after ritual or an Ekpe/Mgbe masquerade event (Fig. 5-8). Entufam Edet's display was an example of a public formal arena. In the formal variety, not unlike Entufam Edet's display, the Nyamkpe/Dibo rules are strictly administered. Such contexts may be better understood as sanctioned or official challenges. In fact, regardless of whether official challenges take place inside or outside the lodge, the rules remain the same: the Nyamkpe/Dibo drum rhythm is played, one performer occupies the performative space, while other members are seated, each of who challenge him upon being offered the *nsibidi* sign of respect.

In each of these arenas, it is common for arguments to erupt. Losing a challenge is shameful. Sometimes members try to salvage self-respect by arguing that their *nsibidi* was correct or their combatants' was incorrect. However, disagreement during sanctioned challenge is almost non-existent. If a member does dispute a challenge or acts inappropriately, the Iyamba acts as judge, and fines usually follow. The appeal and benefit to participate in an official challenge arena ensures fair play and a chance to witness unadulterated *nsibidi*. In fact, official *nsibidi* challenge is the most anticipated aspect of Ekpe/Mgbe ritual in Calabar today. It becomes a forum to learn and put acquired instruction to the test. The appropriation of the Nyamkpe/Dibo display during sanctioned challenge governs and protects the integrity of the arena. However, there is another facet during sanctioned challenge that informs how rules are administered. The performer establishes performative space through an invisible transformation into Nyamkpe/Dibo.

### **Non-masked Transformation during Formal Challenge**

During formal or sanctioned challenges inside and outside the lodge, the member interested in displaying his knowledge first asks permission from the Iyamba through gesture. If the Iyamba accepts, the member will usually arm himself with the *ikpa* and proceed to perform the Nyamkpe/Dibo *nsibidi* sequence. Recall that Entufam Edet followed this protocol in order to claim performative space. In fact, the sequence is absolutely necessary in order for anyone to claim performative space during ritual. Successful application of the sequence grants the right to display and subject oneself to *nsibidi* challenge during sanctioned contest (Fig. 5-9).

The *nsibidi* sequence “transforms” the performer into Nyamkpe/Dibo even though the dancer is not costumed. The “transformation” establishes a similar, but different set of rules to those of the actual masquerade display that are also strictly administered during contest. It is helpful to review the rules during the actual Nyamkpe/Dibo masked performance: the masked

performer may challenge anyone, no one can enter his performative space, and no one can even stand. During the sanctioned challenge a comparable set of rules is administered: the performance arena is sole property of the “transformed” performer, members should not stand, and instead of challenging those seated members, they in turn challenge the performer during sanctioned contest. Thus, the “transformed” performer subjects himself to challenge by all other members present (Fig 5-10). Remember that Entufam Edet did not challenge anyone, but was tested by seated members. The similarity between the two sets of rules grants the opportunity to demonstrate dancing skill and *nsibidi* knowledge. Most important, both modes enable all members—regardless of title, age, and rank—to challenge the performer freely. As with the actual Nyamkpe/Dibo masked performance, the sanctioned challenge arena also produces a liminal state where the normal gerontocratic rules of the society are suspended. In both cases, especially during sanctioned contest, the *nsibidi* sequence that “transforms” the performer is linked to the spiritual and ancestral aspects of the society. The ancestral intervention enforces the temporary egalitarian format. However, it is not just the “transformation” that engenders an ancestral intervention, but the Nyamkpe/Dibo drum rhythm.

Most members are clear that good percussion facilitates not only a performance to achieve a heightened state, but also the presence of the Ekpe/Mgbe spirit. Five instruments are used in Ekpe/Mgbe: a short, fat “male” drum (*ubarocama*), a long “female” drum (*ibit*), a small support drum (*ekpri ekomo*), a rattle (*nsak*), and a metal gong. The best drummers always operate the male and female versions. The male drum leads, starts and stops a particular rhythm, while the other instruments follow. The small drum supports the male and female drums. The rattles maintain the rhythm of the song. The gong sets the beat for the drums. Meanwhile, after the male drum starts the beat, it will leave the rhythm to serve as the talking drum. The female drum,

however, can also play this role. The male drum talks by mimicking the tonal qualities of the Efik and Ekin languages to direct, command, and embarrass. The male drum communicates with whoever is displaying, whether masked or not, to direct and command their movements. The male drummer can also call a member to display and to aid the performer to “go there,” “back,” “cool,” “faster,” “listen,” “beat,” and other more detailed directives. Good masquerading and dancing heavily depends on the performer hearing and picking the commands of the male drum.<sup>26</sup> In the words of a Qua Mgbe Chief and former Dibo masquerader, “the Ekpe spirit is the ancestors and comes when drumming and singing are sweet, and only when they are inspirational.”<sup>27</sup>

The Nyamkpe/Dibo drum rhythm is designed to achieve this end. The beat is hard, fast, and aggressive in nature. In all my Ekpe/Mgbe experiences, when the beatings change to the Nyamkpe/Dibo rhythm, it inspires members to dance and display. It is this drum beating that—along with other stimulants—facilitates a “transformed” state during sanctioned *nsibidi* challenge. The stimulating drum beatings that accompany Nyamkpe/Dibo performance has the power to send the performer into a heightened state at the hands of the spirit of Ekpe/Mgbe. Another Qua titleholder and former Dibo masquerader explains the transformational power that occurs when changing the rhythm of a low-ranking mask to the Dibo rhythm, the importance of drumming, and spirit intervention in masked and non-masked transformation. In his words:

The drumming of Abon Ogbe is feminine in nature. It doesn't direct you to act aggressive, to attack, to look for fault, to defend at home, to discipline people—and still you are performing. But the moment you change (and the spirit changes as soon as the beatings change) the spirit changes. Another spirit goes out, and the

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<sup>26</sup> The talking drum can also humiliate members, especially if a displayer does not know how to hear the directives. Only those able to hear the talking drum will understand the insult. If the male drum calls your name and the member does not respond, the drummer will call you stupid and blind. In the case of mistakes during masquerading or dancing, the male drum will hurl vicious insults about the member and his wife.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Chief Emmanuel Edem, May 28, 2010

highest spirit, with the element of seniority, possesses you. It now makes you feel kingly. How? You are now a superior masquerade to what you were a few minutes ago. When the symbols of the weaker spirit were removed, as with the Dibo spirit the beatings and the song and the performance change; and so you now know the rudiments of the rhythm. Not only that, but the accompanying thing—as in the respect, honor, and discipline, and performance—is *nsibidi*, which is different from the *nsibidi* of the junior Mgbe masquerades. The possession. You have been increased by spirit. You have been increased by performance. See? [he laughs and then continues] Mgbe is a very wonderful thing. Very wonderful. The performances, the dancing, is in the rhythm, is in the song... The drummer must be possessed with the spirit of Mgbe... The moment the drummer is wonderful [he excitedly claps his hands], the spirit descends. You can feel the inspiration. Everybody is eager to dance, is eager to demonstrate, is eager to learn and watch he who is demonstrating (the masquerade or the person representing the masquerade). I said there are two masquerades, but one at a time. One masquerade comes in full, one without the masquerade [costume]. That is a person.<sup>28</sup>

The passage is packed with information about Ekpe/Mgbe spiritual “transformation.” Spiritual or ancestral transformation during the Nyamkpe/Dibo masquerade has already been addressed.

Here, I am concerned with non-masked “transformation” and “possession.”

The use of the term “possession” in the above passage merits discussion. The notions of possession, trance, or possession trance do not easily apply to this context since the performer is not physically or psychologically changed or altered. The notion of spirit mediumship, according to John Beattie and John Middleton, “is normally a form of possession in which the person is conceived as serving as an intermediary between spirits and men” (1969)<sup>29</sup> better addresses the phenomenon, but is also still too limiting for this case. Instead, I will use the term spirit interlocutors to imply a dialogue between the performer and spirit(s) since there is no intermediary relationship in the non-masked transformation. Members explain the non-masked transformation phenomenon as experiencing “whispers” from the ancestors. The process of spirit

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<sup>28</sup> Interview with Entufam Hayford S. Edet, December 7, 2009.

<sup>29</sup> In the seminal work on African cases of spirit mediumship and spirit possession, Beattie and Middleton expand on Raymond Firth’s definitions of both while adding that possession may include both “real” and “assumed” trance (1969: xvii).

interlocutorship is closely linked to the inspiration affected from singers and most important, the drummers.<sup>30</sup>

The non-masked transformation facilitates an ancestral presence that governs the important business of *nsibidi* challenge during formal and sanctioned challenge. Sanctioned challenge arenas become professional forums for members to flaunt their *nsibidi* knowledge. These “monitored” arenas have a threefold connotation: the demonstration of agency during ritual, the marketing or advertising knowledge to interested consumers, and the safeguarding of performed *nsibidi*. However, more recently, youth members take *nsibidi* knowledge to the streets during the holiday period. The last arena, therefore, transgresses the threefold structural integrity of formal challenge governed by the ancestors and elder members.

### **Transgressive**

The transgressive variety unfolds during the end of the year on Christmas, Boxing Day, and New Years. In Calabar, the holiday season coincides with the Cross River State tourism agenda. However, despite this coincidence, Ekpe/Mgbe end of the year masking should not be linked with tourism.<sup>31</sup> According to members, long before European presence and the introduction of Christianity and its calendar, the Ekpe/Mgbe season was during last days of the waning year. During those days, Ekpe/Mgbe initiations, masquerade competitions (see chapter 6), and other important rites were commonly performed. At some point, and I was unable to

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<sup>30</sup> Non-masked transformation in Ekpe/Mgbe cannot be separated from dance, song, and drumming. Among the Yoruba, Margaret Drewal indicates that dance is always associated with possession trance (1986: 64, 66). Lawrence O. Arohunmolase includes not only dance, but also music and drama as integral aspects of achieving spirit possession during Yoruba Egba festival (2006).

<sup>31</sup> Ekpe/Mgbe maskers do seek out European tourists for money. Indeed, maqueraders will stop tourist and expect money, especially if the tourist wants a picture. For the masquerader to allow tourists to take a picture, a payment is strongly encouraged. In southeast Nigeria, end-of-the-year masking and Christmas have coincided for some time (see Balogun 1969 for an Igbo case). For cases beyond Nigeria investigating tourism and masquerade as a means for financial security, especially in Mali, see Richards 2005 and van Beek 2003 and 2006. Calabar tourism is discussed in Chapter 6.

determine exactly when, Christmas and New Year's became a time for youths to masquerade for the chance of making small money. Today, all sorts of masquerades come out during the entire holiday season, but the business of Ekpe/Mgbe masking on Christmas, Boxing Day, and New Years has turned into quite a profitable endeavor. Performed *nsibidi* in this context is central to the financial success of a given holiday Ekpe/Mgbe troupe.

Young Ekpe/Mgbe members organize themselves into troupes, usually consisting of neighborhood friends. Numbers vary from group to group. Usually a given troupe has from seven to fifteen members, with one or two masqueraders. Others support by singing and beating a single drum to "ginger" their maskers during performance.

Once assembled, troupes visit houses of chiefs to honor them with the masquerader(s) performing the *nsibidi* sign of respect. In return, chiefs challenge the masker with *nsibidi* and offer "gifts" according to ability (Fig. 5-11). Another type of *nsibidi* challenge that occurs in this arena is when different troupes meet in the streets. Crowds of people gather to witness the contest between each group's masquerade (Fig. 5-12). In both cases, elder members are angered by these troupes for a number of reasons: 1) elders claim only ten percent of the troupes actually know the *nsibidi* they are performing, 2) the youths are breaking a major taboo by performing *nsibidi* in public, especially when two different troupes meet, 3) troupes are now using cars and vans to cover more territory instead of moving by foot (Fig. 5-13), and 4) the integrity of *nsibidi* knowledge is undermined. I argue that this arena destabilizes the *nsibidi* informal economy that masters control and stimulate during formal or sanctioned challenge platforms. The transgressive arena offers youth members opportunities to make fast cash over three days. Therefore, according to members, most—but certainly not all—young members are no longer interested in learning *nsibidi* the proper way. Most prefer the easy and faster route to the longer

apprenticeship (discussed in the previous chapter) since the latter requires too much effort, time, and money. In addition to misusing *nsibidi*, these youth troupes also transgress the authority, power, and control of Ekpe/Mgbe chiefs. In fact, the very assembly of most of these troupes is a direct violation of Ekpe/Mgbe law.

Before the 1990s, young Ekpe/Mgbe members had to obtain permission from lodges in order to organize and perform masquerades legally during the holiday season. Even with these measures in place, during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, many violent confrontations between masquerades and the community are documented in the local newspapers.<sup>32</sup> I argue that since confrontation mostly occurred during the 1970s—coinciding with the intensification of Pentecostalism and Evangelicalism—and the 1980s—the poorest decade in Calabar’s recent history—Calabarians openly contested the authority young masqueraders demanded, thus forcing youths to resort to more violent ways of affecting agency and earning money. Violent confrontation pressured Ekpe/Mgbe chiefs, supported by the government, to outlaw youth Ekpe/Mgbe masquerade during the holiday season. The ban was lifted in the mid 1990s, and since then, younger members of Ekpe/Mgbe illegitimately organize themselves—without obtaining permission—into Ekpe/Mgbe troupes in the hope of making money.

As a result, during the holiday season, the authority and control Ekpe/Mgbe chiefs are supposed to administer is nonexistent these days. In previous decades, if a troupe illegally formed without lodge consent or if their masquerades did not respond with the correct *nsibidi* after being tested by the chief, the chief was to confiscate the mask(s), ending the troupe’s season. Members informed me that the last successful attempt to confiscate the mask of a troupe

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<sup>32</sup> Here is a list of articles that report Ekpe/Mgbe masquerade and others attack community members: “Ekpe Masquerades Attack Villagers” (n. a. 1976), “Take Barbarism out of Culture” (n. a. 1976), “Masquerades Mar Christmas in Calabar” (Umoren 1977), “The “Ekpo” Masquerade Chased Her into My Room” (n. a. 1979), “BEHAVE: Secret Societies, Masquerades Warned” (Akpan 1979), “Masqueraders Warned on Easter” (Edet 1989), and “Masqueraders Wreak Havoc in Ikot Ekpene” (n. a. 1990)

was in the early 1980s. Chiefs stopped seizing masks because it was becoming more and more dangerous for them to exercise the laws of the society. In fact, some of those violent confrontations recorded in the newspapers were between troupes and Ekpe/Mgbe chiefs trying to administer their rightful authority!<sup>33</sup> Ekpe/Mgbe holiday troupes are now growing in numbers. The increase in numbers fosters trepidation on the part of chiefs, who state that they fear these troupes so “gifts” are given to avoid conflict altogether. The question is how do these young members engender such a successful, temporary reversal of power, without a spiritual or ancestral base that is necessary to regulate formal or sanctioned arenas?

The behavior of the troupes—threatening violence, a disregard for elder authority, and performing *nsibidi* at will—is identical to that of the Nyamkpe/Dibo performance in which younger members temporarily, at the conceptual level, control Ekpe/Mgbe ritual. I therefore argue that during the holiday Ekpe/Mgbe season, young members successfully produce an anti-structure, what Turner refers to as *communitas*, by appropriating the liminal phase the Nyamkpe/Dibo display generates during formal ritual. In so doing, younger members are able to establish agency over chiefs. The growing participation of younger members also reinforces the arenas efficacy as a successful financial resource.

Ekpe/Mgbe holiday troupes generate anywhere between about \$700 to over \$1,500 for three days work. The money is then divided by the entire troupe, sometimes evenly, other times according to participation. In a country where financial opportunities are limited, the monetary yields younger Ekpe/Mgbe members achieve from the holiday masking season has become a profitable means of coping with the pressures of modernity.

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<sup>33</sup> One such case made the front page of the *Nigerian Chronicle* in 1976, “Row Over Ekpe Display Deepens: Etubom Manhandled” (Odiog 1976).

### **Performed *Nsibidi* as “Deep Play”**

Investigation into performed *nsibidi* and its long-standing and recently developed challenge arenas demonstrate the changing nature of esoteric knowledge systems. Specifically addressing the phenomena of gestures, Sally Ann Ness argues that when it migrates (either literally or figuratively) through time and space, “they create unexpected combinations, new valences, and alternative cultural meanings and experiences” (Noland and Ness 2008: X). This is certainly the case with performed *nsibidi*. Analysis of the formal and transgressive arenas demonstrates that in Calabar, performed *nsibidi* is becoming more visible in the public sphere. Prior to the public formal or sanctioned arena format, performed *nsibidi* was a more private affair, usually only unfolding within lodge contexts. In fact, a number of elder Ekpe/Mgbe chiefs informed me that before the 1960s, performed *nsibidi* and challenge were not as prevalent as it is today.<sup>34</sup> While performed *nsibidi* has long been associated with knowledge, power, and agency during ritual context, the prominence attributed to performed *nsibidi* challenge is recent. At the time of my research, arenas have become not only a means of advertising and promoting *nsibidi* knowledge as capital, but also a transgressive mechanism for youths in order to garner power and financial sustainability for themselves. I argue that these public arenas have fueled competition between members and thus greater change in the art form. Today, performed *nsibidi* cultivates heightened competition, invention, monetary benefit, and generational tension, expanding the definition of the gestural art to something much more than a spiritual pursuit and allegorical “play” of ritual and philosophy.

Clifford Geertz uses the notion “deep play” to characterize the complex self-reflexive nature of Balinese cockfights. For Geertz, on the surface, cockfights achieve nothing for the men

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<sup>34</sup> Interview with Muri J. B. Anating Edem VI, February 27, 2010.

who participate, yet simultaneously, they are serious arenas for the display of status, pride, dignity, honor, and financial power. Geertz argues that the function of cockfights is interpretive: “it is a Balinese reading of Balinese experience, a story they tell themselves about themselves” (Geertz 1973: 448). Like cockfights, performed *nsibidi* arenas are also essentially a game. At the same time, they are also potent expressions for the playing out of power, status, and money. Yet at the interpretive level, I follow Geertz to argue that performed *nsibidi* has a self-reflexive connotation. It not only symbolically tells the story of Ekpe/Mgbe ritual and philosophy but at the same time is an allegory of how members financially sustain themselves, a performance they enact about themselves, their Ekpe/Mgbe experience, and contemporary being.

In the next chapter, I present yet another Ekpe/Mgbe public performance where the ideas of space, performance, public display, status, and *nsibidi* knowledge converge on a global arena. It is meant to conclude my argument that not only is Ekpe/Mgbe still relevant because of its ability to claim space successfully during public performance, but that it is also a financial, social, and cultural infrastructural support system for members.

## Figures



Figure 5-1. Member wielding the *ikpa* during street performance, Nkonib (Ikot Ansa), Calabar, June 29, 2008. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 5-2. Fellow members cross staffs with Entufam Edet during his *nsibidi* performance, Okoyong, LGA, Mar. 20, 2010. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 5-3. Fellow members cross staffs over central table with Entufam Edet during his *nsibidi* performance, Okoyong, LGA, Mar. 20, 2010. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 5-4. Entufam Edet manipulates staffs as walking aids during his *nsibidi* performance, Okoyong, LGA, Mar. 20, 2010. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 5-5. Efik Nyamkpe masquerade during funerary rites for deceased Efut Paramount ruler, Calabar South, Calabar, Nov. 20, 2009. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 5-6. Nyamkpe/Dibo publicly performing at the 7<sup>th</sup> coronation anniversary of the Qua paramount ruler, Big Qua Town, Calabar, April 17, 2010. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 5-7. Chief of Ekpe informally performing *nsibidi*, Okoyong, LGA, Jan. 8, 2010.  
Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 5-8. Members staging a public sanctioned arena after chieftaincy conferment street procession, Kasuk, Calabar, July 11, 2009. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 5-9. Member performing proper *nsibidi* sequence to claim performative space during formal challenge arena, Calabar South, Calabar, Nov. 18, 2009. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 5-10. Seated chief challenges performing chief with *nsibidi* in a formal arena, Okoyong, LGA, Jan. 8, 2010. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 5-11. Chief challenges Ekpe youth troupe masquerader, Calabar South, Calabar, Dec. 25, 2009. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 5-12. Two Ekpe youth troupes meet on streets and prepare for *nsibidi* challenge, Calabar South, Calabar, Dec. 25, 2009. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 5-13. Ekpe youth troupe traveling by car, Calabar, Dec. 25, 2009. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton

## CHAPTER 6 FROM LOCAL TO GLOBAL: THE EKPE NYORO MASQUERADE COMPETITION

In the previous chapters, Ekpe/Mgbe ritual and *nsibidi* performance operated on the local level. In other words, they were locally produced and funded enactments by each lodge, its chiefs, and members. The state was not involved in any way. However, Cross River State began funding an Ekpe masquerade competition called Nyoro in 2005. This chapter will examine the implications.

In this chapter I pose the question, what happens to masquerade agency when the state provides funds for festival or masking venues under the guise of cultural revitalization, nation building, heritage, and tourism? Bess Reed provides a case in southeastern Nigeria in which local masquerade not only was modified, but also was repressed in order to fit the state agenda. At the 1993 Enugu State Mmanwu Festival, she reports, the state attempted to modernize and secularize rural Igbo masquerade by prohibiting the use of medicines—essentially restricting ancestral potency—in order to make it more palatable for urban and tourist spectatorship (Reed 2005: 57). Under the rhetoric of cultural revitalization and ambitions for developing tourism, local masquerade was stripped of its source of power—medicines (ibid.). More recently, Eli Bentor shows that in southeastern Nigeria national, state, and local politics continue to undermine the authority of local masquerade (Bentor 2008). Bentor demonstrates that local New Yam festivals, now featuring hired non-local masquerade troupes, have become arenas for political campaigns. Policemen are hired to prevent local masquerades from participation since they potentially threaten the authority of the organizing party. In the past, local masquerades were a central focus during these festivals. Bentor states, “[i]t is simply too dangerous to allow masqueraders to enter the arena and challenge authority when the purpose of the gathering is to demonstrate the patrons’ ability to deliver votes on election day” (ibid., 42). This chapter adds to the discussion

by providing a case in Calabar in which local masquerade institutions maintain autonomy in festivals sponsored by the nation-state and in spite of tourism driven agenda.

In this chapter, I demonstrate that the recently expanded Nyoro concludes my argument that today Ekpe/Mgbe is an infrastructural political, economic, and cultural support system for its members. I intend to demonstrate how masqueraders both benefit from the tourist-focused event and position themselves in such cosmopolitan displays of culture. I argue that both the fame and the cash prizes offer masqueraders an economic opportunity in an otherwise next to non-existent Nigerian economy for young people. I further reveal that the state-funded, but locally produced, Botanical Garden Nyoro has become a multi-layered event. On the surface local Ekpe cultural heritage is seen as a uniting force, modern, and thriving; but behind that façade, the event is a platform for the playing out of local politics and conflicts. My interpretation of these events is partly a response to Peter Probst's argument that heritage projects are not about a distant past, but are "malleable" profit seeking, memory constructing, and meaning-making contemporary productions (2011).

### **Nyoro**

The term Nyoro requires some discussion. The Qua Nyoro is a public display and one of the many funerary rites carried out for the head of a Mgbe lodge, who also assumes the position of clan head. While the Efik conduct a similar rite for their lodge heads, they refer to it as both Ikot Ekpe (Ekpe in the bush) and Nyoro Ekpe (Fig. 6-1).<sup>1</sup> In both cases, the rituals have serious functions that ensure the continuity of authority during the transition of leadership while a new lodge head is assuming office. It symbolizes the mystical Mboko, the most secret aspect of the

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<sup>1</sup> Although similarities and differences are discernible in the details of Qua Nyoro and Ikot Ekpe, they are not of importance to this discussion.

society, the esoteric voice that roars during official ritual gathering, is—on a spiritual level—embodied in the new lodge head (Bassey 1998: 97).

The Qua Nyoro and Efik Ikot Ekpe are public displays of wealth, authority, and power. Chapter three has already addressed how Ekpe/Mgbe performance has long been and continues to morph into even grander ostentatious displays of power in urban Calabar. The Nyoro at the center of this examination is not the traditional funerary rite discussed above. It is a state-funded display of local culture included as part of the recently expanded tourism season. The expanded Nyoro competition is similarly calculated to demonstrate wealth, status, power, and claim space.

There are only two larger-scale celebrations of Nyoro today—the state funded Botanical Garden event and the affair held during the week of programs celebrating the coronation anniversary of the Efik Paramount ruler, the Obong of Calabar. The Obong of Calabar's Nyoro is a long-standing locally produced event, not funded by the state. Since the inception of the larger state-funded Botanical Garden event in 2005, however, the Obong's Nyoro has also grown larger. Each has influenced the other. The state-funded Botanical Garden Nyoro is staged in conjunction with the Cross River State government tourism project. The Botanical Garden Nyoro has thus become a huge event, packed with multiple layers of meaning in contemporary Calabar. Members loosely define the Nyoro competition as “Ekpe/Mgbe display.” In other words, the Nyoro competition is a venue in which masqueraders can compete against each other in an officially sanctioned arena, ultimately judged for fame and celebrity, and awarded for their abilities.

While Ekpe and Mgbe have many masks, only the more general type competes during the Nyoro. Among the Efik these are known as Atat Ekpe and Idem Ikwo (Fig. 6-2), while the Qua refer to them collectively as Abon Ogbo. As discussed in chapter three, these masks are the

instruments that beat non-members for not yielding to the performative space of Ekpe and Mgbe during public performance. Recall that they consist of a tight-fitting body-net costume made from an organic fiber yielded from bark stripped from the branches of certain trees (Ekpo 1978: 73). Nylon, a more permanent material, is commonly used today. A raffia mane (fitted over the chest area), and wrist and ankle ruffs are attached to the costume. *Nsibidi* patterns are worked into the mane and into the ruffs on the wrists and ankles for beautification. The *etundu*, a short raffia tuft that extends from the top of the costume's head, crowns the costume. Ostrich feathers are inserted into a wing-like hat attached to the back of the neck.

Dressed in this manner, the masker carries in his left hand a bunch of *oboti* leaves, once used to cleanse the ill. As in the past, the *oboti* leaves are manipulated through a sequence of *nsibidi* gesture to respect the chiefs of the society during all performative contexts. In this way, masqueraders acquiesce to the authority of elder members. In the right hand, the masker manipulates a wooden dance staff used for balance.

The costume, mostly made of materials from the bush, refers to the lion. Indeed, during the competitive Nyoro, the choreography of the masquerader pantomimes a lion hunting its prey. Since Nyoro awards large cash sums to winning performers, the masqueraders are not merely demonstrating the dangerous and aggressive qualities of Ekpe to non-members, but are competing or “hunting” for money and fame.

### **The Competitive Nyoro in 2009**

During 2009, three Nyoro were held: at the 1<sup>st</sup> anniversary coronation festival of Edidem Ekpo Okon Abasi Otu V, the Obong of Calabar, paramount ruler of the Efik; at The Botanical Garden, Calabar, in conjunction with the Calabar Carnival, commonly referred to as the “zoo” venue; and at the Obutong community festival. I documented the Nyoro celebrating the Obong of Calabar and the Obutong Nyoro. I obtained a complete, locally produced video recording of

the Botanical Garden Nyoro. In the following analysis, I restrict myself to a discussion of the Obong of Calabar Nyoro and the Botanical Garden Nyoro; the Obutong Nyoro was deemed insignificant by veteran Ekpe masqueraders since the prizes were considered too small for their participation.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Obong of Calabar Nyoro**

The Nyoro for the anniversary coronation of the Efik paramount ruler, the Obong of Calabar, was held on December 19, 2009. It was the last day of a week that had been packed with events, including cultural displays, and the conferment of honorary chieftaincy titles. All events took place at the Palace of the Obong of Calabar. The grand and well-organized Nyoro lasted just over an hour and an half. A hired professional orator provided commentary. He spoke into a microphone; his voice projected from large, rented speakers. As an Ekpe member himself, he entertained the crowd with jokes, commentary, and maintained the flow of the event. The Nyoro started after a crowd gathered, much later than the official scheduled time.

The event started with a dynamic procession in which the masked competitors, Ekpe chiefs and supporting members began their parade from a nearby Efe Ekpe, the Ekpe lodge, some blocks from the palace. Once they reached the portal to the palace grounds, libation was poured followed by Ekpe incantation, officially honoring the ancestors and calling them forth to join in the celebration. The pouring of libation established that the event could finally begin, but also marked that the performance was an official Ekpe event.

In such performance events, chiefs of Ekpe or “big men,” always dress to impress. Wearing both local and imported hats, long shirts of various styles and fabricated with many

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<sup>2</sup> Well-established maskers still attended the less significant event, however, in order to study the newer, and perhaps up-and-coming competition carefully. Intereiw with Nyoro masqueraders, date withheld.

types of imported fabrics, fine wrappers knotted at the waist, and flashy shoes of all kinds. They carried manufactured walking sticks of tremendous variety. And, as always, they made their presence known. They formed another procession with younger members behind—the typical organizational format in Ekpe processional performances (Fig. 6-3). The chiefs had the attention of the gathered audience. They danced holding their staffs of office near their torsos, allowing the ends to point towards the sky, a reference to the ancestors. Their staffs, in motions synchronized with their individual dance styles, moved majestically up-and-down as the chiefs progressed toward the place designated for them beneath an awning attached to the palace. Their privileged seats looked over the grassy arena in which the Nyoro was to take place. The procession was not a subtle display. It was an elegant, yet boastful presentation of power that established the space as properly of the society. Onlookers, consisting of non-initiates who had gathered to observe the event, indulged themselves in excited shouting and dancing of their own. Non-members occupied the left and right sides of the arena. Some stood, while others sat in rented plastic chairs placed beneath canvas tent canopies. Still others, especially children, stood, jumping and constantly shifting their position to get better views.

The awning to which the “big men” were assigned and the areas designated for spectators bordered three sides of the rectangular dance arena. The twelve masked competitors, lined-up some 100 feet away from the seats of the “big men,” completed the rectangle. The rectangular dance arena not only delineates the performance space, but it also conceptually recalls the performance space inside the society lodge. Members and non-members alike thus respect this performative demarcation of space. It serves as a replication of the Ekpe lodge thus establishing that performers abide by rules that govern meetings held at the lodge.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> It is common knowledge for members that before any official activity taking place within or outside the lodge, the structure must be symbolized or evoked.

Once space was established by the chiefs' procession and the arrival of the masked competitors, the competition began. Twelve Efik Ekpe masqueraders competed that day. Each has about two to three minutes to display in this venue. An Ekpe member holding a pair of *ekput* (rattles) called each Ekpe masker in turn (Fig. 6-4). The designated "caller" is normally a more senior member who guides and stimulates the masker as he navigates the space and displays his way through the dance arena.

Each masquerade competitor is expected to adhere to the Nyoro performance protocol, which has five phases: 1) greet fellow competitors with the *nsibidi* sign of the leaf and when complete immediately form back into the line-up; 2) the performer then waits for the *ekput* handler or *murua* to summon him, at which point he is led to the Nkom Ekom Nkom (the "father" of Ekpe mask covered with plantain leaves) to give the *nsibidi* sign of honor with two hands, and nowadays the masker adds a bow; 3) after the plantain leaf mask is honored, the performer again returns to the line-up to await being called by the *ekput* handler, after which, he is free to demonstrate his dexterity at performance for a number of minutes; 4) he then honors and respects the chiefs and Obong of Calabar with the proper *nsibidi* sequence; and 5) when the masquerader nears his allotted duration of time, he performs the *nsibidi* sequence to signal to the judges that his performance is complete, thus ending the display.

During the display, the masquerader or knowledgeable agent intentionally infuses his choreography with improvisation as Margaret Drewal noted performers also do in a Yoruba context (Drewal 1992). All performative styles vary according to individual skills of the performer—his ability, strength, and flexibility. How they utilize their skills to motivate the audience is also important. Simon Ottenberg has observed in his analysis of Afikpo masquerade, the audience and the performer share an intimate interrelationship (Ottenberg 1973). In the

context of Nyoro, it is paramount that masqueraders understand how both to stimulate audience response and to harness that energy to inspire greater performative effect within themselves. A description of a standout performer that day at the Obong's palace illustrates these points.

One performer, the fifth to compete, was absolutely outstanding. Before his timed display, he demonstrated good sportsmanship by greeting each of his fellow competitors with a leaf of recognition. After the gesture he quickly moved back into his place in the line of maskers. As the *ekput* handler called him forth to begin, the masker immediately began to demonstrate his ability. Slowly stepping out of the line-up, he bent his upper body forward, assuming an attack or hunting position. Advancing, he bent even further, the raffia mane around his chest nearly parallel to the ground. Simultaneously, all six ostrich feathers attached to the back of his head pulsed as he shook his entire body. On seeing this difficult feat, the crowd erupted with excitement. Some stood, others shouted praise. Taking large strides into the performance space, he executed a number of full-body spins. As his last rotation finished, he crouched and quickly shuffled side-to-side bursts, similar to the movements of a lion pursuing its prey. Beginning with measured strides, he allowed his performance to build to a crescendo. He incited the crowd with his movements—an excited response and then a corresponding crescendo to thunderous involvement. Those who had remained seated, now stood up. All shouted with uncontrolled excitement. Ekpe members who stood behind the line of masked competitors shouted affirmations; throwing their arms in the air, some looked at each other with amazement. The performer's teacher, positioned behind the line of masqueraders, excitedly used his hands as a megaphone to shout directions and praise to his pupil. Even some chiefs shouted with excitement. The sounds of approval reverberated throughout the palace grounds. The energy from the crowd was so palpable that the hair on my arms stood straight up and goose bumps

overtook me as I videoed the event. The performer internalized that energy as a stimulus for further display.

Continuing to demonstrate his prowess as a performer, he tirelessly executed a set of crowd-pleasing feats. His stamina, strength, and flexibility formed the nucleus of both his structured and his improvised choreography. The rotations, large strides, aggressive lunges, and directional changes that followed his initial display and were seamlessly woven into a structured compositional whole. He achieved performative balance through his strength and flexibility. Active movement was bracketed by less vigorous movement, allowing slight intervals to materialize between the moves. This is best illustrated by his finishing move.

As his display came to an end, he performed a full-body spin. As he completed the rotation, he rose and stood tall. The move was accented when he grew even taller by placing all his weight on the tips of his toes and held that position of height for half a second (Fig. 6-5). Then lowering himself into a crouching position—knees and hands off the ground as if he were a lion about to attack—he suddenly sprang upward, bringing his body back into a standing position. He had finished his display. The *ekput* handler led him to the chiefs. A strict protocol of *nsibidi* must be gestured to properly end their performance, honor and respect the seated titleholders, and if interested, show their stage of knowledge. As the *ekput* handler led the masker, he himself turned to face the “big men,” and those who were selected as judges as if to present the performer with his stamp of approval.

The rest of the Nyoro followed this structure with performers demonstrating varying degrees of skill and knowledge. The *ekput* handlers called out the remaining performers until each had their chance to demonstrate their Ekpe masquerade ability.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> It should be emphasized that the *ekput* handlers also control the flow of the competition. Their role is critical. They will also communicate to the competitor when his allotted time has finished.

Once all competitors performed, the judges tally up their score sheets and three winners are announced, starting from third to first place. First place yielded N30,000 (\$200), equal to that of a Nigerian teacher's monthly wage. Second received N20,000 (just over \$130) and third N10,000 (just over \$60). As winners were called up, their lodge affiliation was announced, and the money was given to a representative from that lodge or their teacher. At this event, the first place money envelope was given to student of Ekpenyong Bassey Nsa, who collected the winnings for his masquerader and also received crowd recognition. Prizes were not great that day, and most competitors complained about the small yields. But they asserted that they had competed not for the money, but for the fame and as a warm-up run for the Botanical Garden venue. The awarding of prizes is a spectacle in itself, filled with crowd acknowledgement.

In spite of his crowd-pleasing, dynamic performance the fifth performer did not win for political reasons. The event was marked by corruption, but this is a subject to which I will return in a moment.

### **The Botanical Garden Nyoro**

The Nyoro at the Botanical Garden could be described as the Super Bowl of Ekpe Nyoro. It is the largest performance event of its kind. The Botanical Gardens Nyoro offers masqueraders not only the largest public stage on which to display their abilities and knowledge, but it also draws the toughest competition, and yields the biggest profitable prizes. For example, in 2006, Mkpang Boco took first place and received a brand new car—a Kia Picanto,<sup>5</sup> while second place yielded N500,000, roughly about \$3,330!

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<sup>5</sup> Mkpang Boco is a retired masquerader and since his retirement he teaches the art form. It is interesting to note that the masker who took third place at the Botanical Garden venue in 2009 was trained by Boco as well as by others. Boco was taught by the well-known Ekpe master (mask maker and performer), late chief Bassey Ekpenyong Nsa, nicknamed Caphenol. The son of Caphenol, Chief Ekpenyong Bassey Nsa, was a well-known Nyoro competitor who won several events at his local lodge. Chief Bassey has also retired from masking and carries on his father's legacy as a well-known mask maker and masquerade teacher. In 2009, his student took first place at the Obong's palace venue and second place at the Botanical Garden event. My fieldwork evidence indicates that most performers

The central location and vast grounds of the Botanical Gardens offered the organizers an even grander stage to showcase the vitality of Ekpe culture. In the words of Chief Bassey Ndem, one of three primary organizers of the event, “Nyoro is display of arrogance of Ekpe.”

The Nyoro venue at the Botanical Garden was on public grounds unlike the venue at the palace of the Obong already discussed. To claim space not normally property of Ekpe, a two-foot fence of yellow palm frond fixed to canes or branches inserted into the ground lined the entire boundary of the dance arena. The palm frond spatial boundaries thus restricted non-members from Ekpe’s performance arena, since the audience or non-members were seated in rented plastic chairs just beyond the palm frond barrier. Bunches of *oboti* leaves—the sign of the society and which are also held by some Ekpe maskers—were attached to the fence. The temporary barrier is not unlike the way in which Ekpe lodges demarcate their property (Fig. 6-6). The rectangular arena thus demarcated and symbolized the lodge. Within the arena, rectangular areas were further demarcated with palm frond fences to symbolize important areas within a lodge. Chiefs were seated at rented plastic tables and chairs situated within the fenced area on the perimeter of the arena. Behind them, a square palm frond shed was constructed to allow performers to rest out of view of the audience. However, kids climbed a nearby fence and peered into the structure to see the unmasked competitors. They revealed the performer’s identity to the crowd.

The 2009 Nyoro was a carefully planned, Ekpe-indulgent spectacle that lasted hours. In the first half of the event, the audience, numbering in the thousands, witnessed performances by a number of Ekpe masquerades that were different from those competing in the Nyoro. They also

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who place (first-third) in this large format Nyoro are traced back to Caphenol. Yet another student of Caphenol, late Effiok Eyo Nsa is known in local history as a prominent masquerader who won many large and small Nyoro competitions.

observed the official pouring of the libation and the arrival of both the Deputy Governor of Cross River State, and the Obong of Calabar.

The arrival of the Edidem Ekpo Okon Abasi Otu V, the paramount ruler of the Efik, or “biggest of big man,” was an event in itself. His entourage alone consisted of the Obong’s fashionable Mercedes Benz and Ford Explorer SUV filled with multiple guards dressed in long white shirts and wearing wrappers tied around their waists. Each held his paraphernalia of office. All the Ekpe chiefs made their way to the approaching entourage to receive the ruler properly. Forming a circle around the Obong’s Benz, the chiefs greeted the king while two Isim (costumed performers with long lion or leopard-like tails attached to a hoop worn around the waist) performed (Fig. 6-7). The chiefs, in a slow dancing manner, then led the Obong in procession to his seat. The crowd’s attention focused on the chiefs and Efik king as the numerous videographers struggled to capture footage of the Obong’s arrival. At one point, the swarm of press and free-lance photographers and videographers was so overwhelming that the orator stated:

Ladies and gentlemen, today’s occasion is what no one should miss; but let me ask the photographers to keep to one side please. My king you are welcome. All the photographers that are not from CRBC (Cross River Broadcasting Corporation) should give chance so that we make today’s occasion to be what we want. The CRBC Corporation is here to televise it. Life and people are watching what we are doing.<sup>6</sup>

The orator’s statement reinforced the organizer’s foremost goal: the dissemination of the visual documentation to a broad audience. The presence of state and national media corporations effectively taping the event was crucial and is reminiscent of Arjun Appadurai argument in which media is a critical tool in order to manifest a collective imagination of locality in a global world (Appadurai 1996). Indeed, the Botanical Garden event was to be disseminated to the entire

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<sup>6</sup> translation from Efik by Edem, January 2, 2010.

nation and even the larger world. This type of motivation and imagination also relates to the aspirations of the tourist promoted Yakurr *Leboku* festival from the middle Cross River region as documented by Gitti Salami (forthcoming).

After the arrival of the Obong of Calabar, the selected panel of judges—all Ekpe titleholders—were announced and introduced. Still more Ekpe masquerades, all different from those performing in the competition, entered the arena and performed. During most of these displays, the chiefs and members accompanied the masker as he approached the paramount ruler's canopy and then returned to the outskirts of the Nyoro arena. Each display was intended to demonstrate to the audience not only the beauty of Ekpe culture, but also the prominence of the chiefs and, of course the Obong of Calabar for whom these performances are usually performed during funerary contexts.

The judges announced the criteria for which the competitors would be evaluated: the beauty of the costume, the respect of the masquerader (i.e. the proper performed *nsibidi* of respect towards the chiefs), the individual performance of the competitor, and the respect of the allotted time for each masquerader. The pronouncement was made so that the filter of partiality or corruption was removed from the minds of the audience, even though most members and non-members alike would debate the results for some time after the event. With this announcement, the Nyoro competition finally began.

Seventeen competitors performed that day at the Botanical Garden. Each was given about three to five minutes to demonstrate his knowledge and his performance abilities. At the conclusion of the displays, the third, second, and first place winners were announced (in that order) and handed a stack of cold hard cash. First place awarded N100,000 (just over \$660),

second N75,000 (\$500), and third N50,000 (just over \$330). With the bestowing of the cash, the Botanical Garden Nyoro was over.

### **Training for the Nyoro: A Shift from Formality to the Performative**

The monetary benefits of larger Nyoro stimulate a serious hunger for the acquisition of Ekpe knowledge by the competing masqueraders. Therefore, Nyoro competitors train very hard in preparation for these events. Teachers are sought out for their wisdom in the various fields of knowledge that the Nyoro encompasses. A performer endeavors to master three major fields of knowledge as he trains for the competition: the protocol of Nyoro display, performed *nsibidi*, and dance steps or choreography. These three fields are considered separate but interrelated. For example, the protocol of Nyoro display contains knowledge of performed *nsibidi*, choreography, and the proper order in which the respect and honor is demonstrated.

These phases are not applied as a strict step-by-step formula, but are construed to be loose and malleable in structure. For example, in the 2009 Botanical Garden Nyoro, most performers changed the order of the phases and none gave the respect of honor to the plantain leaf masquerader, while it was compulsory in past Nyoro. Also, the proper *nsibidi* sequence was not universally performed at the end of a display when honoring the chiefs and when a paramount ruler is present, as in the case the Obong of Calabar. Some performed this phase at the opening of their display, others in the middle, and yet others, at the end. Some who discuss the Nyoro protocol expect certain phases performed at certain times. However, most performers in 2009, although they completed the required phase, did so in their own order. A common feature of each performer's act was the utilization downtime between various phases was completed to demonstrate their skill and knowledge in order to maximize allotted time.

Other fields of knowledge pertain to costume regulations administered and evaluated during the Nyoro. Judges evaluate the beauty of the mane and its size. During Nyoro, the smaller

sized mane is preferred since the larger, more cumbersome design, is an innovation of the younger generations. In this way, generational tension is discerned since the competitor is disqualified if the costume mane is not of the smaller variety, preferred by and common to the elders and chiefs when their fathers were the elders of the society.

The color of the *etundu*, the raffia tuft that extends from the top the masquerader's head, is yet another aspect of the costume that is evaluated. Red is the only acceptable color. If white or black is used, the masquerader is supposed to be immediately disqualified from the competition since the red *etundu* has great meaning in Ekpe, for it symbolizes the Nyamkpe/Dibo's *abasonko* (see chapter five). Members informed me that the disqualification will not be announced, the performer is still given his allotted time to perform, the judges will disregard the display, however.<sup>7</sup> Competitors are not usually mask makers. Therefore, costumes are rented from well-known masters to ensure beauty. The knowledge of mane size and *etundu* color should be understood by the competitor to avoid disqualification. If his teacher is also a mask maker, the body-net costume and raffia mane will be made according to custom, but also to fit the student according to the proportions of his body. A well-proportioned and fitting costume is seen as beautiful by elders.<sup>8</sup>

The fields of knowledge are vast, complex, interwoven, and changing. To acquire the necessary knowledge, some masqueraders have only one master teacher, while others have several. One performer, the masquerader who was awarded third place at the Botanical Garden venue, informed me that he had several mentors. Each is a master in a specific field of knowledge. Thus, Nyoro knowledge is obtained through private instruction not unlike how *ukara*

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with Nyoro masqueraders, dates withheld.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Nyoro masqueraders, dates withheld.

*nsibidi* knowledge is transmitted as discussed in chapter four. However, due to the growing nature of the Nyoro format and its appeal, over the years, members “talk anyhow” about the protocol and rules. As a result, some of the knowledge fields—protocol format and costume regulations—have become more public. In the past, few knew the knowledge. Those few constantly won because of it. Also in the past, judges never announced criteria, and when a performer was disqualified, he was never informed. Since 2000, most—but not all—performers understand what was once privy information as commonplace knowledge. Because of this, the Nyoro of today favors performance ability over protocol.<sup>9</sup>

Past Nyoro competitions have demonstrated performance dexterity, but it was not as critical as today. Of the seventeen performers competing during the Botanical Garden event, most demonstrated knowledge acuity, but a few did not. For these reasons, performers explain that competition is tougher and ultimately decided by the manner in which a performer’s style and skills—footsteps, spins, posture, pace, balance, strength, flexibility, speed, and technical aspects such as the height and level at which the dance staff is held during maneuvers and the ability to shake the ostrich feathers attached to the back of the head, to mention just a few—are flawless, fluid, and harmoniously woven into a unified whole. It is important not to forget that the stimulation of the audience and performing *nsibidi* are still other ingredients incorporated into a choreography that makes for a winning display. Bringing all these elements together is only achieved through diligent training.

Performers thus endeavor to train and refine their skills in new ways. Master instructors are sought after and are not only paid for their services, but also given a cut of the students’ winnings. Footsteps, spins and the like are practiced over and over again until perfection is

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<sup>9</sup> Interview with Nyoro masqueraders, dates withheld.

achieved. The competitor certainly does not just “show up,” but he carefully perfects his routine with the help of a mentor or two. Other new methods of training include the careful study of video recordings of previous Nyoro. The performer will sit with his teacher and painstakingly watch their previous attempts while mistakes, flaws, and mishaps are pointed out and the way to correct them are addressed. After observing their own footage and those of lesser performers, the winners of previous Nyoro are studied. The footwork and steps of past winners are learned through mimicry, ultimately appropriated and worked into the learner’s individual style. Even proven winners continue to study, using the old fashioned method along with video footage in order to perfect their moves and know the up-coming competitors. Nowadays, video footage is the primary training mechanism for teachers and performers.

Video recordings are also an impetus for the creation of new dance steps, motions, and styles. Innovation is often referred to by Nyoro masqueraders and senior members as the key to winning. It could be as simple as the way in which a performer turns, moves his head, brings up his leg, or, during a full-body rotation, the manner in which the leg is lifted and manipulated. These small innovations can completely invigorate and freshen choreography—meaning perhaps the difference between going home empty handed or cash in hand. In the words of a prominent Ekpe dance teacher, whose student took first place at the palace and second place at the Botanical Garden events, “you are trying to bring something that people will admire.”<sup>10</sup>

In this shift from protocol to performative, during Nyoro display, knowledge becomes highly aestheticized. The ability to demonstrate Ekpe knowledge alone is not enough these days, it must be artistically integrated into the performative whole. For example, the opening performance of *nsibidi* knowledge is artfully orchestrated to be first beautiful, and second

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with Ekpenyong Bassey Nsa, March 16, 2010.

informative. Analytically, this is not meant as a clear-cut polarization, but should be understood as each informing the other. Knowledge and the ability to beautifully demonstrate it overlap.

Knowledge and aesthetics again overlap in the Nyoro dance choreography. Since all performers liken the dance steps to those of a lion hunting in the bush, the connection to the bush is played out in the Nyoro dance. Recall the palm frond fence, the raffia mane on the costume, and how the judges scrutinize the size of the mane. The mane metaphorically connects the masquerade to a lion. The masker thus symbolizes an aggressive, fierce, and tangible aspect of the bush that is feared and used as an instrument of power. Similar to a lion stalking its prey in the bush, the masquerader stalks the audience in a more playful manner, yet with serious connotations, since libation was poured. Some aspects of the dance are slow, others calculated, still others lightening fast as if to mimic a lion hunting, lunging for and ultimately defeating its prey. The struggle between the lion and its prey is symbolized by the masquerader's full-body rotations. The dance is a demonstration of power, a metaphor addressed to non-members regarding the penalty for transgressing the society's space. As with most performances, layers of knowledge are communicated through the Nyoro dance choreography both to members and to non-members alike. However, it is the beauty of that knowledge that matters and that is evaluated in Nyoro performance. A common critique of a performer is, "he knows, but doesn't make it well." This seems to undermine the very knowledge claimed in performance context. Thus, knowledge acumen is demonstrated through artistry. The interweaving of knowledge and aesthetics has long been the case in Ekpe. However, with the inception of the recent expanded Nyoro event, large prizes have fueled greater competition, which in turn has exposed the guarded knowledge that once separated competitors, therefore placing emphasis on performance ability. Masqueraders are aware that performance dexterity and innovation lead to victory in the Nyoro

of today since most competitors are equally informed (for the most part) about protocol format and costume regulation. Performers attribute the shift from knowledge to performance ability to the recently expanded Nyoro event.

### **From Local to Global: The Production of the Botanical Garden Nyoro**

The history of Ekpe Nyoro competition is difficult to reconstruct. To my knowledge, the competitive Nyoro is unfortunately absent in the literature.<sup>11</sup> In the article “Calabar” in *Nigeria Magazine* from 1956, an illustration of a line-up of a number of Ekpe masqueraders is the earliest image of a competitive Nyoro ever depicted to my knowledge (n.a. 1956: 86).

Comparison between the masks in the 1956 photograph to the examples I documented reveals Nyoro costumes (the general Ekpe/Mgbe variety) have changed only minimally. The colors are not as brilliant, the raffia manes are smaller and less pronounced, and *nsibidi* motifs are not woven into the costume like they are today.

Members indicate competitive Nyoro as an “ancient” aspect of Efik Ekpe.<sup>12</sup> In other words, it was and still is an Efik expression of Ekpe. Previously competitive Nyoro were held at each Efik Efe Ekpe (Ekpe shed or lodge) near the end of the year. Since each Efik lodge was autonomous, each would host its own event. It was a competition in which only members of the lodge could participate. Any number of masqueraders could enter the competition, with the approval of the lodge, of course. The competition not only offered younger members an arena in which to demonstrate their performance dexterity and Ekpe knowledge freely, but it also provided a chance to win prestigious prizes given for a first place finish. In this way, trophies awarded for achieving first place fueled competitive incentive among members. The prizes of

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<sup>11</sup> Ivor Miller briefly discusses a 2004 Nyoro in which the Cuban counterpart to the Cross River Ekpe and Mgbe associations were brought together for a festival in Calabar (Miller 2009: 179).

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Iyamba (prince) Efiok Ekpenyong Nsa, February 23, 2010.

early Nyoro were *ukara* cloth (the exclusive textile worn by only members), Ekpe staffs, and good quality bells used for Ekpe masquerade costume.

Most members I interviewed discuss the Nyoro at Efe Ekpe Eyamba and Efe Ekpe Eyo Ema as prominent events that attracted crowds of people, most of whom were non-members. The competitive Nyoro of old were of interest for the rest of the community since they provided an opportunity to view Ekpe masqueraders without being harassed and chased, as is the case during more formal ritual and ceremonial contexts. As the more public events taking place in extravagant venues brought about general interest, the events grew and were overcrowded. Organizers of the recently expanded Nyoro indicate that the idea of a larger, urban, and more “modern” event in public venues started to take root in order to reflect the changing and growing city of Calabar.

The manufacture of the expanded Botanical Garden Nyoro of 2009 was set in motion by the interest by the Cross River State government in the promotion of international tourism. In the post-Nigerian-oil economy, Calabar has cultivated tourism as a plan for future sustainability. Since 2005, the Calabar Carnival, publicized by the state government as “the biggest street party in Africa,” an appropriation of a Trinidadian-styled carnival, has been carefully modeled into attempt at international tourism (Fig. 6-8). Amanda Carlson argues that the repackaging of a Caribbean carnival positions Calabar as a space “where globalization and diasporization overlap,” a backward migration of African culture from the Diaspora to Africa for the sole purpose of generating state and local capital (Carlson 2010: 45). Calabar Carnival as a state-funded, agenda-driven production of diaspora culture echoes an earlier Nigerian attempt to make use of festival for wider recognition. In a penetrating study on the Nigerian oil boom as an impetus for FESTAC ‘77 (the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture),

Andrew Apter convincingly argues that oil revenue fueled the rebirth of Nigeria “as the preeminent Pan-African nation” through the production and consumption of indigenous culture from Africa and beyond (Apter 2005: 14-15 and 50-51). The FESTAC and Calabar Carnival cases illustrate the ways in which festival is a successful medium for the manufacturing of culture as a consumable commodity.

John and Jean Comaroff have identified the trend of ethnicities and nation-states to corporatize identity and culture as a means capital (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009). Ethnicity, Inc., Nationality, Inc., Locality, Inc., and others are quickly emerging (Ibid., 138), and perhaps to characterize the Calabar Carnival, State. Inc. is quite appropriate. Indeed, the state government has branded Calabar and the Cross River State as the “Peoples Paradise of Nigeria,” as a get-away destination for the world over.<sup>13</sup> However, it is Trinidadian culture is heavily produced and consumed as the major focus during the tourist festival period in Calabar. Local masquerades and those of other Nigerian cultures are reduced to a parade-like appearance during the children’s carnival the day before the main event (Fig. 6-9). The only impressive event based on local culture that is officially aligned with the state run carnival appears during the Botanical Garden Nyoro, even though it is not annually staged. Within a tourist context the Botanical Garden Nyoro is critical as a state funded, but locally mediated and controlled display in the hands of Ekpe custodians.

The titleholders who organized the Nyoro were not only interested in showcasing the beauty and vitality of local culture, but were also determined to use the event to position Ekpe in the converging local/global space that the entire tourist season in Calabar is meant to produce.

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<sup>13</sup> The slogan is featured on Cross River license plates.

The official CRBC video of the Botanical Garden Nyoro, 2009, features an interview in English with an Ekpe titleholder who addresses the goals of the Nyoro. In his words:

Ekpe continues to be the most important institution in the culture that binds the people of Efik, Efut, and Qua communities of Calabar. ...I am a born again Christian. I am as good a Christian as any other person can be. And I am telling you that there is absolutely nothing anti-Christian in the Ekpe society.... The Obong of Calabar, Edidem Ekpo Okon Abasi Otu V is a Christian King... ..the Deputy Director of Cross River State... ..believes that it is important for us to continue to sustain the cultural heritage of our people. That is why they are here.... I want to thank all those who have come out here today.... I am telling you on good authority that there are foreigners who are here. There are people from other parts of the world who are amazed at what they have seen here today—the glamour, the colors, the splendor, the participation, the passion, the kingness of the competition. And the prominent citizens that have come out here bear a testimony to the fact that this is an institution that we must cherish, protect, improve, and uphold.

Clearly, the elders of Ekpe had both local and global agenda in mind during the planning and orchestration of the Botanical Garden Nyoro. Preaching unity among the Efik, Efut, and Qua peoples was central, as was the concerted effort to de-mystify the society, and to challenge the Christian populace who demonize Ekpe and other local masquerade associations (see chapter two). The effort to emphasize the role of the Ekpe festival in the larger narrative of the Calabar Carnival and demonstrate the interest foreign observers expressed was also of importance. However, these agenda—as a public message of cohesion, a push back against Christian rhetoric, a performance of locality produced and consumed by local and global audiences held in conjunction with the Calabar Carnival—should be read as the outward expressions of the Nyoro.

### **Politics and Masquerader Benefits**

A deeper layer of meaning is that this state funded Ekpe display is riddled with individual interests, identity conflicts, land ownership disputes, and judging partiality.

An effort to construct the recent history of the expanded Nyoro reveals individual ambition and interethnic politics as well. To modernize and urbanize the competitive Nyoro, the event was moved to the Cultural Center and then the Botanical Garden grounds. The venues

were chosen for their central and prime locations. Most date this change to 2000. While the Calabar Carnival did not take shape until 2005, members were already expanding the Nyoro. However, I was unable to obtain precise dates since most oral evidence is riddled with contradiction.

Some interlocutors state that the first large scale competitive Nyoro occurred in 1994, in conjunction with the International Ekpe Festival, organized by the late Iyamba and Etubom Bassey Ekpo Bassey. Ivor Miller (2005 and 2009) and Amanda Carlson (Carlson 2010) documented subsequent International Ekpe Festivals in 2004 and 2006 in which competitive Nyoro were scheduled both as part of larger festivals to cast a wider net of Ekpe and Mgbe awareness and cultural unity. Others position the expanded or modern Nyoro elsewhere. Chief Bassey Ndem, one of three organizers of the Botanical Garden event in 2009, informed me that a smaller version of the present Nyoro started in 2000 at the Cultural Center.<sup>14</sup> Both members and the government sponsored the event of 2000. It was later moved to the Botanical Garden in 2005. Large prizes did not start until the following year in 2006. Commenting on the 2009 Botanical Garden Nyoro, organizer Chief Ndem told me, “Nyoro, now a gathering of prominent Ekpe initiates have the opportunity to make statement of culture and solidarity and demonstrate the unity of all three (Efik, Efut, and Qua peoples).” He further indicated that for future events, he would like to expand to include Igbo and Cuban lodges.<sup>15</sup> The notion of unity was already promoted in the earlier International Ekpe festivals of 2004 and 2006 organized by late Etubom B. E. Bassey and Calabar Mgbe.<sup>16</sup> I interpret the alternate histories as a way of politicizing or an

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<sup>14</sup> Interview with chief Bassey Ndem, May 30, 2010.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidi*.

<sup>16</sup> Recall that Calabar Mgbe is institution comprised of various Ekpe and Mgbe members from Calabar and other areas of the Cross River region. The institution was founded in the late 1990s as an attempt to provide cross-ethnic unity and a common voice for Ekpe/Mgbe affairs in contemporary Nigeria.

effort to position oneself in a larger narrative of power. Individual power is attained in the claiming of ownership over the expanded Nyoro since the event is locally perceived as successful. In this way, individuals position themselves in a recent and developing history yet to be written.

The ability of Ekpe culture to promote the unity of Efik, Efut and Qua peoples was stressed at the Botanical Garden Nyoro. The unity was emphasized in three ways: during the pouring of libation, all three peoples were verbally recognized; all three groups were listed on the title screen as the organizers on the CRBC official video; and the judges represented all three identities. However, most locals understood this as merely a façade, and in reality, the event further severed the already deteriorating relationship between the Efik and Qua in which land ownership and the title of the paramount ruler of Calabar are still heavily disputed.

First, the focus was on the Obong of Calabar, the Efik paramount ruler. The absence of the Qua Paramount ruler was well noted. Next, the event was held on Qua land much to Qua chagrin.<sup>17</sup> In addition, an Efik chief poured libation on Qua territory. Libation pouring is strongly discouraged by the Qua paramount ruler, who prefers only verbally to offer respect and honor to the ancestors because of his devout Christian ideology (see chapter two). Even further, the sole Qua judge was from Kasuk, a clan that at that time was not in good standing within the large Qua nation due to a land dispute case with another Qua clan. Moreover, not one of seventeen masquerade competitors and only a handful of the many titleholders present were Qua. The entire event was orated in the Efik language despite a couple instances that called for English. Even though the lingua Franca of Calabar is Efik, English, or a Nigerian Pidgin English, the Qua

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<sup>17</sup> The Qua are quite angry that this government sponsored Nyoro takes place on their land. During interviews conducted at different times, Ivor Miller and I were told this by our Qua interlocutors. Personal communication with Ivor Miller, July 25 2011.

are well known for their attempts at continuing and preserving their language known as Ekin.<sup>18</sup> The pretension of unity was flimsy at best. The Botanical Garden Nyoro was consumed as an Efik display of Ekpe culture.

In addition to oral history, identity, land, and title conflicts, yet more politics were “performed” that day at the Botanical Gardens and other like venues. The last pertains to judging politics and partiality, which also extended to the event held at the palace of the Obong of Calabar. For months after a Nyoro competition, masquerade competitors, members, and non-members alike discuss, debate, and gossip about the winners selected by the judges. Keep in mind that not only does the audience know very well who wears a particular mask, but the judges, chiefs, and younger members are also well informed.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, hours before the competition begins, the competing masqueraders gather either in an Efe Ekpe (like at the Obong palace venue) or inside the palm frond house construction (at the Botanical Garden event) to be queued-up and assigned a number in which they will appear during the competition. This is done with the facial disguise of the mask removed, revealing the identity of the competitor to those present. Once numbers are assigned, the members present as well as the chiefs coordinating the allocation of numbers quickly relay what should be confidential information to the rest of the members and judges of the event once they arrive. Chiefs sit next to the judges and lobby for their lodge’s masker during the course of the event. Recall that each competitor is affiliated with a particular lodge, and that this lodge is announced if the masquerader wins. There is tremendous lodge competition in this way since heads and chiefs of lodges receive “cuts” of the winnings.

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<sup>18</sup>E. U. Aye, a local Efik Historian wrote in 1967, “The Quas and the Efiks are now a mingling race, constantly intermarrying and sharing together the cultures and the languages they had brought with them. But the Qua are somewhat conservative and still hold tenaciously to their own language which is only used among themselves for domestic communications” (Aye 1967: 40).

<sup>19</sup> Interviews with Nyoro masqueraders, dates withheld.

For example, at the palace venue, the outstanding performance described earlier was selected by the judges to place second. However, both that performer and the one awarded first place were from the same lodge. A dispute raged near the judges' table that three separate lodges should be recognized. In the end, the lodge of the chief who brought all the confusion was awarded third place.

At the Botanical Garden Nyoro, the first place finisher, an exceptionally tall masquerader, was not only known to be friends with the head judge, but they were also long time fellow members of an affiliate institution. A further example of partiality was observed again at the Botanical Garden Nyoro. The third place competitor was not disqualified for not having a red *etundu*, that raffia tuft located at the top of the masker's head. However, other competitors were disqualified for not following costume regulation. The individual ambition of members, lodges, and judging partiality plagues the expanded Nyoro every year, so much so that masqueraders always threaten nonparticipation, even though the large prizes dictate otherwise.

Ekpe masqueraders still enter the Nyoro despite biased judging for the chance at temporary financial sustainability. With a lack of jobs for youth in Nigeria, Nyoro masquerading has become a viable, but also competitive endeavor. Indeed, the large payoff and fame resulting from winning the Nyoro stimulated further competition and the once-guarded knowledge that separated competitors in the past was leaked. This has led to performance ability and innovation that determine winners in the Nyoro of today. Masqueraders thus train extremely hard, create their own innovate dance steps, and mimic those of proven winners for a chance at achieving financial security and celebrity on a cosmopolitan stage.

Masqueraders explained to me that competing for large cash prizes and fame on a global stage is an opportunity not only to achieve recognition, but also to improve their economic

condition.<sup>20</sup> These concerns resonate with what James Ferguson has suggested about modernity as perceived through African eyes. In his words, “modernity in this sense comes to appear as a standard of living, as *a status*, not a *telos*” (Ferguson 2006: 189).<sup>21</sup> From the perspective of the masquerade competitor, the chance of celebrity and financial security outweighs subjecting oneself to the frustrations of unfair judges. Placing first, second, or even third immediately places them into a different status and financial category.

The status that comes along with winning Nyoro manifests through unspoken signs of respect. Non-members are aware of who is underneath the masquerade costume. However, they cannot pronounce that knowledge while a member is in ear-shot for fear of being fined or an even worse consequence. Therefore, head nods from strangers or a market seller giving a past winner the lowest price without the hassle of negotiation become unspoken signs of affirmation. In market and other contexts, as winners pass by various stalls for example, gossip and stories break out among sellers and customers. In short, if non-members have an interest in Nyoro, recent competition results, debates of partiality, and reflections on favorite performers become mainstream gossip. Similarly, for members, strong and admirable deceased members are remembered for their success in Nyoro competition through oral stories recounted during both formal and informal gatherings. The legacy of respected past members is recalled through the manner in which they always won, uniquely displayed their knowledge, and performed during Nyoro. In addition to forging a legacy, winning Nyoro also broadens financial networks.

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<sup>20</sup> Interview with Nyoro masqueraders, dates withheld.

<sup>21</sup> Ferguson’s idea stems from a much longer critique of academic assumptions and alternative modernity in order to begin to approach modernity from an African perspective (for more see Ferguson 2006: chapter 7). This idea of modernity gives Africans voice and allows them to define it on their own terms, in lieu of the academic construction of alternative or multiple modernities, a rather Eurocentric idea that non-Western countries are involved in different sorts of modernities than the West.

Finishing in the top three of the Nyoro immediately places the masquerader in demand. Chiefs and members who organized locally funded Ekpe performance often seek out and hire the best masqueraders in order to separate their event from others held in the recent past. In the past, wearing the mask was not only a privilege, but it was seen as a chance to learn during Ekpe ritual and ceremony. Nowadays, since the 1980s, most Ekpe masqueraders are paid for their time in the mask during initiations, funerals, and other performance contexts. Another source of revenue is noted in younger up-and-coming Ekpe masqueraders paying for lessons and advice from proven winners. In other words, nowadays, winning the Nyoro opens the door to the Ekpe informal economy in that winners are paid for coaching and teaching and hired to masquerade during initiation and funeral contexts.

Beyond access to the Ekpe informal economy, the prize money helps the masquerader establish other financial pursuits elsewhere. Recall the winner of the brand new car in 2006. The car enabled him to start a taxi service in Calabar. However, he could not maintain the cost of keeping it running. The high price of gasoline forced him to sell the car and retire his taxi service.<sup>22</sup> On the façade, winning a brand new car in the 2006 Nyoro identified him with modernity. However, that position was paradoxically temporary. This case resonates with what Victoria Rovine has referred to as a “failed modernity”—an example where modernity is absent or just out of reach for many contemporary Africans (Rovine n.d.).

The winner of the 2009 Botanical Garden Nyoro invested his winnings in the form of a brand new refrigerator, gasoline for his compound’s generator, and bottled coke, beer, and water to embark on selling chilled drink out of his one-bedroom apartment. Some months later, it seemed the idea was starting to pay-off, but with ten other individuals selling “chilled” drink in

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<sup>22</sup> Interview with retired Nyoro masquerader, Mkpang Boco, January 5, 2010.

and around his block, it remains questionable how long his new business can be sustained. Nevertheless, besides these efforts of embarking on other economic pursuits, the most consistent pay-off for winning Nyoro is becoming a locally hired masquerader and teacher of Ekpe Nyoro knowledge.

However, with the cancelation of the 2010 Botanical Garden and Obong of Calabar's Nyoro venues, due to lack of state and local funding, the future of these expanded Nyoro is in question. While lack of funding was probably the main reason for cancelation, local Ekpe politics were also most likely at play. An interview I conducted with one of the most senior Efik Ekpe titleholders and lodge heads after the 2009 Nyoro was quite revealing. He was most displeased with not being invited to the event and informed me that a subsequent Botanical Garden Nyoro will never be held again.<sup>23</sup>

The Botanical Garden Nyoro is a multi-faceted state funded, but locally produced spectacle of cultural heritage where state and local politics converge. Organized as both a local and global display of cultural heritage, the Botanical Garden venue is packed with many layers of interpretation. On the global stage, both local and global audiences consume the event as an expression of local culture during the state mediated Diaspora-inspired tourist carnival project. However, to the member, the venue takes on a completely different set of ideas that relate to local politics, the ideas of power, financial sustainability, and as a demonstration of Ekpe/Mgbe cultural heritage. The organizers and chiefs employed the state funded forum to reassert Ekpe's autonomy and authority through the display of wealth and status, the occupation of non-Ekpe space, permitting CRBC to record and then televise the event, and by using a public arena to challenge the label "demonic cult" given by Christian critics. Yet another layer of meaning is

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<sup>23</sup> Interview with Iyamba (prince) Efiok Ekpenyong Nsa, March 21, 2010.

produced that undermines the unifying message that the event was meant to produce. Beyond the mere façade of preaching unity between the Efik, Efut, and Qua, the event is riddled with ethnic, lodge, and individual politicking. Caught in the middle of state tourism agenda, local identity politics, land disputes, the masquerade competitors position themselves within this multi-faceted arena by demonstrating an innovative version of the symbolic choreography of lion hunting in the bush as they compete for large cash prizes. The Botanical Garden Nyoro is thus a calculated attempt on a global stage for Ekpe/Mgbe to claim public space through the medium of ostentatious spectacle, while also serving its members as a political, economic, and cultural infrastructural support system.

## Figures



Figure 6-1. The Efik Ikot Ekpe is performed as part of the funeral rites for the Iyamba or Efik Ekpe lodge head. The rite involves the transporting of the mystical essence of Ekpe, captured from the bush the night before, back to the lodge, which escaped at the pronouncement of the death of the Iyamba. The mystical Mboko is secured in a wooden cage completely covered by an indigo stich-resist textile referred to as *ukara*—the primary symbol of the society. The Mboko or mystical voice roars during the entire public ritual. Calabar South, Calabar, Nov. 20, 2009. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 6-2. Atat Ekpe (left) and Idem Ikwo. Costumes created in Dec. 2009 by Ekpenyong Bassey Nsa and workshop. Calabar, Dec. 25, 2009. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 6-3. Chief procession during the Obong of Calabar's palace Nyoro. Calabar, Dec. 19, 2009. Photography by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 6-4. Idem Ikwo with standard size raffia chest mane (*nyanya*) being called by an *ekput* handler also referred to as *murua*. Calabar, Oct. 14, 2009. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 6-5. Fifth masquerade competitor executing his finishing move during the Obong of Calabar's palace Nyoro. Calabar, Dec. 12, 2009. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 6-6. Qua Kasuk Osam Mgbe demarcated with palm frond fence. Calabar, July 18, 2009. Photography by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 6-7. Efik Isim (long tail performer). Calabar, Oct. 14, 2009. Photography by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 6-8. Ekpe masquerade (from Akpabuyo LGA) during cultural parade. Calabar, Dec. 26, 2009. Photography by Jordan A. Fenton



Figure 6-9. "Masta Blasta" band during Carnival Calabar. Calabar, Dec. 27, 2009. Photograph by Jordan A. Fenton.

CHAPTER 7  
CONCLUSION: EKPE/MGBE AS INFRASTRUCTURE

This dissertation has shown that members of Ekpe/Mgbe altered their society to reflect the cosmopolitan character of its growing and developing city in which they operate. The impetus for change was Calabar's pattern of urbanization rooted to the 1970s and 1980s and even more recently, a state sponsored interest in tourism development. Ekpe/Mgbe's contemporary vitality in Calabar owes much to its earlier history during the pre-colonial era. In those days, the society was not only the government, but it also managed and negotiated the transatlantic slave and oils trades during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For members engaged in international commerce and even local and foreign politics, Ekpe/Mgbe was their support system. The wealth the society garnered through trade was channeled into the artistic and performative aspects of the society. Performances thus became ostentatious demonstrations of power. The power, wealth, and prestige pre-colonial Ekpe/Mgbe once wielded informs some of the ambitions and motivations contemporary members wish to express through contemporary performance. However, folding the recent cosmopolitan character of Ekpe/Mgbe ritual, performance, and the transmission and demonstration of *nsibidi* into an envelope of "tradition" alone undermines the very issues these changes are meant to engage with.

The public nature of Ekpe/Mgbe ritual, performance, arenas of *nsibidi* challenge, and masquerade competition, discussed in the previous chapters, are calculated attempts by members to push back against Christian demonizing rhetoric, dialogue about local politics, position oneself whether financially or politically, and demonstrate local autonomy, wealth, prestige, knowledge, and thus contemporary being. Indeed, today members are taking ritual, performance, and *nsibidi* to the streets in ways never done before in order to preserve the society's power and its relevance in contemporary Calabar. Crucial to Ekpe/Mgbe's relevance in Calabar today, as I

have argued, is the society's members or individual's ability to claim space through the medium of performance in its many contexts. Ritual, performance, *nsibidi* challenge arenas, and masquerade competition have therefore embraced the urban experience of Calabar to become more public and cosmopolitan in nature, allowing members to mold the society to fit within their changing political, economic, and cultural needs.

I have argued that in Calabar the Ekpe/Mgbe society is thus an infrastructural support system for its members. It offers them political, economic, spiritual, cultural, and recreational outlets within their urban lifestyle. However, it is for the individual member to decide which aspects or benefits they might explore. A chieftaincy conferment spectacle, discussed in Chapter 3, attracts a number of motivations for participation. Some of which are an arena to reconnect with the ancestors, enjoyment of food and drink with fellow friends, an opportunity to perform and advertise *nsibidi* knowledge, to forcefully take to the streets and establish power of the community, and to belong. Pushing aside individual interest, the recent changes to ritual structure, chieftaincy installation, *nsibidi* instruction, *nsibidi* challenge arenas, and masquerade competition offers every member the opportunity to politically, financially, spiritually, and/or culturally sustain themselves within the urban experience of Calabar.

The case of Ekpe/Mgbe's vitality in the metropolis of Calabar also adds to the lack of literature on so-called "traditional" culture *thriving* in the urban experience of Africa. Calabar Ekpe/Mgbe thus demonstrates that in African urban centers long-standing societies and their forms of expression thrive. In arguing Ekpe/Mgbe as political, economic, and cultural infrastructure, this dissertation adds a nuanced case to the literature that further problematizes the "traditional/contemporary" dichotomy. Most of what Ekpe/Mgbe members address through

performance today is wrapped up in efforts for the desire of financial sustainability and *contemporary* struggles for power that have both local and global implication.

APPENDIX A  
LIST OF EFIK EKPE TITLES/BRANCHES<sup>1</sup>

Original titles:

Obong Mkpe  
Obong Mboko  
    -isung Mboko  
Obong Mboko-Mboko  
    -isung Mboko-Mboko  
Obong Mbakara  
    -isung Mbakara  
Obong Ebonko  
    -isung Ebonko

Secondary titles:

Obong Nyamkpe  
    -isung Nyamkpe  
Obong Oku akama  
    -isung Oku akama  
Obong Okpoho  
    -isung Okpoho  
Obong Nkanda  
    -isung Nkanda

Tertiary titles:

Obong Murua  
Obong Murua-Okpoho  
Obong Isu

Obong Eyamba is head of Efik Ekpe shrine

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<sup>1</sup> This is a typical cast of titles in Efik and Efut lodges today. Obong denotes head of the branch or title; isung fulfills the role of assistant.

APPENDIX B  
LIST OF QUA MGBE LEVELS AND TITLES/BRANCHES

Senior Titles<sup>1</sup>

Se Dibo (Ntoe, father of all)

-isung Dibo

Isua Dibo

-isung Isua dibo

Ntoe Asian

-isung Asain

Ntoe Nkanda

-isung Nkanda

Ntoe Okpogho

-isung Okpogho

Ntoe Okuakama

-isung Okuakama

Ntoe Etoe

-isung Etoe

Ntoe Mabu

-isung Mabu

Junior Titles

Ntoe Ebongo

-isung Ebongo

Ntoe Otugantan

-isung Otugantan

Ntoe Machu Kumani

-isung Machi Kumani

Ntoe Nkenemor

-isung Nkenemor

Ntoe Aku

-isung Aku

Ntoe Mafina

-isung Mafina

Ntoe Matimbo

-isung Matimbo

Ntoe Mbakara

-isung Mbakara

Ntoe Mboko (mother of all)

-isung Mboko

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<sup>1</sup> This is a typical composition of titles/branches in Qua Mgbе lodges at the time of my research. The Ntoe title is the head of the domain for which their title operates and the isung, similar to the Efik meaning, acts as an assistance to the Ntoe.

Levels of Membership

1. Abon Ogbe
2. Dibo Nkanda
3. Asain Dibo
4. Nyema Mgbe

Non-titled Branches

Ikpa Dibo

Boriki

## APPENDIX C

### LIST OF REQUIREMENTS FOR ATTAINING THE RANK OF CHIEF OF EKPE/MGBE<sup>1</sup>

1. goat (*ebot*)
2. yam (*bia*)
3. fowl (*afia uman unen*)
4. hen (*ekiko unen*)
5. cartons of beer and soft drinks
6. hot drink/spirits (*okpasong mmin mbakara*)
7. palm wine (*mmin Efik*)
8. local gin (*ufufup*)
9. red chalk (*uto*)
10. white chalk (*ndom*)
11. negotiable fee paid to lodge chiefs
12. fish (*lyak eneng*)
13. bush meat (*nsat unam okoyo*)
14. pepper (*ntokan*)
15. salt (*idang*)
16. oil (*aran*)
17. native egg (*ata nsen unen*)
18. cabin biscuit
19. corned beef (*biter ebonko*)
20. ground nut (*mbansang*)

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<sup>1</sup> List is translated from Efik into English by chief Mesembe E. Edet. Quantities of provisions are determined by candidate's wealth and anticipated number of attendees.

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