



UKARA

Ritual Cloth of the Ekpe Secret Society

HOOD MUSEUM OF ART, DARTMOUTH COLLEGE



INTRODUCTION

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Ukara: Ritual Cloth of the Ekpe Society features the *ukara* cloth, a composite signifier of authority, prestige, sacrality, difference, and social mobility in the Ekpe secret society in the Cross River basin encompassing southeastern Nigeria and parts of Cameroon. The exhibition explores the long-standing cultural practice the cloth represents as well as the artistic process involved in its creation. Made of plain cotton, the *ukara* is transformed into a ritual object when *nsibidi* symbols are inscribed onto it through indigo dyeing. *Nsibidi* is a body of ideographic, abstract, and gestural signs deployed by Ekpe society as a form of encoded communication. The signs encapsulate human relationships at personal, communal, and cross-cultural levels. Though encoded, *nsibidi* signs are recognizable to a broad public; still, few understand the signs' deeply guarded meanings.

This richly symbolic cloth, along with *nsibidi*, has contributed to the distribution of Ekpe among the Ejagham, Igbo, Efik, Ibibio, and other cultural groups in the Cross River basin. Hung as a backdrop in Ekpe lodges, large-scale *ukara*, imbued with transcendental aura, sacralize the interior spaces. Worn as personal wrappers during initiations and at social events, many of which are public spectacles, *ukara* distinguish Ekpe members. Covering, concealing, and protecting their bodies, the cloth is a physical metaphor for ideological secrecy that Ekpe society carefully constructs and guards. Thus, the *ukara* cloth represents the tension between concealment and revelation that is central to the structure of Ekpe society, where knowledge equals power.

In the historical past, the Ekpe secret society was an all-male group with religious, social, economic, political, and judicial power. Because of their appropriation, exclusive use, and understanding of *nsibidi* symbols, Ekpe members were thought to have access to the spiritual realm and were, therefore, empowered to make societal rules and enforce social norms. As a governing institution across different communities and ethnicities throughout the Cross River region, Ekpe created cohesion that was crucial to the maintenance of inter- and intra-cultural relationships and social identity in and around Old Calabar, the trading center of the Cross River region. The secrecy of the society allowed it to maintain much of its authority. While such authority is largely diminished today, Ekpe membership is still prestigious and the society continues to be a unifying force in the Cross River basin.

The origins of the *ukara* cloth, *nsibidi* symbols, and Ekpe society are contested. Given the multicultural nature of Old Calabar, it is likely that there were external influences on the development of these ritualized objects, graphic signs, and society in general. The Ejagham people of the northern Cross River region and neighboring western Cameroon are generally credited by early colonial administrators, missionaries, and anthropologists as the source of *nsibidi* because they found a larger number and variety of the signs among the Ejagham than among other groups.¹ Yet the fluidity of peoples and cultures in the Cross River basin, limited record-keeping, and the furtiveness of Ekpe society obscure the origins of the society, its language, rituals, and objects.

Although used exclusively by members of Ekpe, *ukara* cloth is produced by a sub-group in one of the villages that comprise the Ezillo community in present-day Ebonyi State in the Igbo area. The process of creating the cloth is arduous and elaborate. Ekpe members request certain *nsibidi* designs

of personal or communal significance. Each *ukara* is highly individualized and clearly produced to be worn by a specific Ekpe person or to mark a specific Ekpe lodge. The Aro people of Arochukwu were, historically, the middlemen during the slave trade era and the succeeding palm produce trade, as well as part of the Ekpe network. They continue to act as middlemen, taking Ekpe members' requests to the Ezillo creators and transporting the indigo-dyed *ukara* back to patrons around the Cross River basin today. The design process is left to the discretion of the Ezillo creators, who are not members of Ekpe and, therefore, do not know the *nsibidi* meanings. After completing a drawn design, these artists sew the white cloths with raffia thread so that parts of the cloth (in the pattern of the *nsibidi* symbols represented) will not be exposed to the dye. The cloth is then dipped in indigo dye and hung to dry. When the threads are cut, the *nsibidi* designs stand out, white against a deep blue background.

Laden with layers of meaning, the white symbols on the dyed-blue background are arranged in a grid, giving the cloths an orderly, symmetrical quality that is often reinforced by repeated patterns. The symbols may convey meaning either singularly or in groups, and each sign may be figurative, geometric, or abstract, or may represent a physical object, concept, or narrative. Individual symbols may also have multiple meanings, rendering context crucial and interpretation inevitable in "reading" them. The contrast of the white cloth against the superimposed indigo dye creates a clear, gridded visual ordering of figure and ground that is often broken when symbols extend beyond the boundaries of their squares. Given the ability to disrupt or, perhaps, recreate the visual structure of the cloths, *nsibidi* figural motifs are imbued with a particular visual power that highlights their importance in Ekpe society. On the *ukara* cloth, they appear to transcend the

grid structure that regulates the various motifs and to occupy more space than their dimensions require. Interestingly, the already-abstracted marks rarely, if ever, cross into the spaces of other symbols, perhaps because the abstract forms themselves demand recognition of their complex, poly-semantic symbolism.

We are grateful to the two scholars whose contributions to this publication afford a fuller and much richer context for understanding *ukara*, *nsibidi*, and the Ekpe secret society. Professor Eli Bontor of Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina, provides a history of the *ukara* cloth, piecing together contingent information drawn from nearly thirty years of fieldwork in southeastern Nigeria. Dr. Jordan Fenton of Ferris State University explains in great detail the use of *nsibidi* in Ekpe activities, further grounding the significance of *ukara*. Both art historians draw on their own rigorous scholarship as well as intimate knowledge of Ekpe, as members of the society themselves, in their essays and in shaping the contours of this exhibition. We are also indebted to Dr. Bontor for availing us of his rich collection, from which the selections of *ukara* textiles on view were made. In addition, Dr. Bontor, and Dr. Fenton to a lesser extent, provided field photographs of Ekpe-related activities and the process of producing *ukara*, which are included in the exhibition.

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A HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDING OF UKARA CLOTH

Eli Bentor

Ukara is an indigo-dyed cloth used exclusively by members of the Ekpe secret society in the multi-ethnic Cross River region of southeastern Nigeria and nearby parts of Cameroon. The main use of the cloth is as a wrapper tied around the hips, while a particularly large *ukara* cloth is used as a backdrop in the Ekpe meetinghouse (see facing page). The cloth is only manufactured by residents of one village-group in Ebonyi State to the north of the Ekpe region, an area where Ekpe does not exist. Beyond their aesthetic appeal, *ukara* cloths present a number of interesting issues for study. How can we research an art form used by members of a society who are sworn to secrecy? How can a cloth that carries symbols (called *nsibidi*) known only to members of Ekpe be manufactured by people who are not privy to the society's esoteric knowledge? What I propose here is that by finding clues to the history of the cloth, we can begin to answer these questions.

Due to the lack of extant objects from earlier periods and limited early documentary evidence, the historical study of African art is fraught with methodological problems. Until recently, African art has been largely studied in an ahistorical manner.¹ Historical studies of precolonial African art tend to focus on court art of highly centralized groups such as the Empire of Benin or the Kingdoms of the Kuba where the legitimacy of rulers often derives from their ability to recall historical precedents. The history of African societies that lacked centralized authorities and dynastic rules is particularly difficult to study.² Early European sources are also largely limited to

the coastal areas of Africa.³ Europeans did not visit the region where *ukara* is produced, as well as much of the region where Ekpe society exists (with the exception of Calabar), until the early twentieth century. The historical study of African art is also biased toward durable objects in bronze or terracotta, and is particularly difficult when attempting to study textiles because of their ephemeral nature. Textiles such as *ukara* that are used regularly in ceremonies are not likely to survive for more than a few decades in the tropical climate of southern Nigeria.

Indigo dyeing has a long history in Africa and beyond. Some of the earliest evidence for the use of indigo comes from ancient Egypt, where pieces of indigo-dyed linen were found in tombs dating as early as the Old Kingdom of the third millennium BCE.⁴ The long global history of indigo teaches us that indigo dyeing is a complex process requiring expertise and professional specialization. In many cases, it was kept as a trade secret. In Africa, this knowledge has often been restricted to specific ethnic groups.

The earliest West African examples are from the burial caves of the Bandiagara escarpment in Mali, where ancient Tellem textiles dated starting from the eleventh and twelfth centuries have been found.⁵ Indigo dyeing is widespread in West Africa, with several complexes including the woven and dyed cloth of the Guinea Coast, the highly patterned *adire* of southwestern Nigeria, and the single-color dyed fabrics of northern Nigeria and Niger.⁶

It is impossible to date the origin of *ukara*-making with precision. The earliest reference to a special Ekpe cloth dates to 1786, when the Calabar merchant Antera Duke recorded having dressed up with an Ekpe cloth for a burial ceremony.⁷ However, it is impossible to tell if this cloth was locally produced or imported. While there are photographs of Ekpe

members dating back to the later nineteenth century, none show an *ukara*. The earliest clear evidence of Ekpe *ukara* is a comment by M. D. W. Jeffreys, a colonial officer, who in 1919 mentioned coming across “Ukara cloth . . . made by the Ibos [which] was a white spotted with blue and was the uniform of the Ekpe Society.”⁸

To gain a better understanding of the history of *ukara* cloth, three aspects need explication: Ekpe society and their use of *nsibidi*, the Aro people and their network of settlements, and the history of population movement in the north-east Igbo area.

As a secret society, Ekpe played an important role in the development of networks of trust that facilitated trade in this complex multi-ethnic region that includes Efik, Ibibio, Igbo, and the many groups along and east of the Cross River. European traders in Calabar attested to the existence of Ekpe beginning in the seventeenth century. Its origin may be in the middle Cross River area, where it is known as *ngbe*, the local word for leopard (hence, in the literature Ekpe is often called “the leopard society”).⁹ From the middle Cross River, Ekpe spread into the upper Cross River and into Cameroon,¹⁰ Calabar,¹¹ and parts of the Igbo area of modern-day Abia State.¹²

Within each community, Ekpe participated in the running of the society and had important judicial functions. These functions are still in effect, although today some members join Ekpe more as a marker of influence and prestige than for its esoteric religious roles. The society is graded into seven or nine levels depending on locality. In the past, each grade required a separate and costly initiation, so moving through the Ekpe system was a long process signifying growing maturity for men. Only members of the highest grade of Ekpe were entitled to wear *ukara* during various social functions. Today initiation is usually done in two steps and all members may wear



Fig. 1. Mgballa Ekpe with Ekpe members, Arochukwu, southeastern Nigeria. Photo by Eli Bentor.

ukara. In some places, including Arochukwu, where I do my research, there is a parallel society for women called *lyamba*. *lyamba* members do not use *ukara* cloth.

At the center of each village (or sometimes a segment of a village) is an Ekpe lodge (Mgballa Ekpe) consisting of a semi-open veranda and an inner room (fig. 1). When the society gathers at the Mgballa, a whirring or droning low-tone sound, considered the most secretive aspect of Ekpe, emerges from the inner room and a very large, specially made *ukara* with bold designs is hung on the wall separating the two parts.

Ukara is designed on a grid using three types of motifs: geometric patterns, often represented in every other square, giving an overall pattern to the cloth; figurative designs such as a leopard, crocodile, masquerader, python, or lizard; and abstract designs conveying specific meanings. All of these designs belong to the precolonial writing system known as

nsibidi. Today, these are secret signs used as a means of communication among members of Ekpe. They are also drawn on the chests of members who form a guard of honor at the head of processions, and carved on objects used in the Ekpe lodge. Within Ekpe, *nsibidi* are not limited to graphic signs; they also include a complex repertoire of gestures. While today *nsibidi* signs are restricted in their use to Ekpe society, their appearance on early non-Ekpe-related masks and utilitarian objects, as well as evidence collected by early ethnographers, suggests that they have not always been as secretive.¹³

Since *ukara* cloth is used exclusively by members of Ekpe society and includes the secretive *nsibidi*, it is surprising that those who make the cloth are not familiar with its esoteric meanings. All *ukara* cloths are made in one village of Ezillo, a village-group between Enugu and Abakaliki. There is no Ekpe society in this area and the meanings of *nsibidi* signs are unknown. To explain how a cloth with such specific significance in one area is actually made some hundred miles away, we need to introduce the Aro people.

The Arochukwu village-group not far from the Cross River was established as a result of the coming together of several Igbo, Ibibio, and Cross River ethnic elements to fight a war, probably in the late seventeenth century. Using their heterogeneity as a resource and the power of their oracle, the famous *ibiniukpabi* (or Long-Juju), the Aro established a wide network of long-distance trade throughout a vast area from the Niger to the Benue and into Cameroon east of the Cross River. With the emergence of the transatlantic slave trade, the Aro specialized in supplying enslaved people for the market, exchanging them for imported goods with the coastal communities of Calabar and the Niger Delta.¹⁴

With the passing of the slave trade and the emergence of the “legitimate trade” in the early nineteenth century, the Aro

converted their slave-recruiting mechanism into a network of settlements throughout the region. Among those are relatively small Aro settlements in the northeastern part of Igboland where *ukara* are made. While some Aro farm for a living, many continue to trade. The Aro of the diaspora maintain strong ties with their home town of Arochukwu. Among those ties is the continued importance of membership in Ekpe society. To become an Ekpe member, a resident of a settlement has to be initiated in his parent village in Arochukwu.

The last piece of the puzzle is the presence of small pockets of pre-Igbo people in northeastern Igboland. The Igbo people only expanded into this area, now part of Ebonyi State, within the last two or three hundred years, forming several distinct groups including the Izzi, Ezza, Ngbo, and Ikwo. As they moved in, they mostly displaced an existing population of speakers of Benue languages who are related to the Idoma people to the north.¹⁵ Those who remained behind were known in colonial sources as Orri, although they now prefer to be called by the names of the different communities they occupy, such as Ezambo, Ntezi, and Ezillo. Today, while they often speak Igbo and have a second Igbo name, they maintain a strong sense of separate identity. They have also preserved the specialized knowledge of indigo dyeing that they share with other Benue speakers, including the producers of the famous Jukun cloth of Benue and Taraba States. Ezillo dyers still use locally produced strip-woven cotton cloth made in Agala in southern Idomaland to create a simple indigo-dyed cloth with bold designs primarily used as a burial shroud. They also dye yarn used to weave towels and masquerade costumes.

The involvement of Aro traders together with the technique and division of labor along gendered lines in the manufacturing of *ukara* are clues to the unravelling of its history.



Fig. 2. Ezillo man drawing a grid pattern to be filled with the required *nsibidi* designs. Photo by Eli Bentor.

Even today, Aro settlers in the area act as contractors in the *ukara* business. Until several years ago, producing indigo cloth and yarn was a cottage industry in Ezillo, often engaging entire families and compounds. All known examples of *ukara* bearing *nsibidi* signs are produced on industrially made cloth. An Aro agent buys this cloth from one of the major markets in the region and gives it to an Ezillo man to design. The Ezillo man draws a grid pattern and fills it with the required *nsibidi* designs (fig. 2). The designed cloth is then returned to the contractor, who will give it to a man who specializes in sewing the cloth. Sewing is done with raffia using a large needle. Each pattern is created by squeezing one area and sewing it with raffia fiber using a large needle, while leaving the adjacent area unsewn (fig. 3). This is the most labor-intensive part of the process and often takes weeks to complete. The Aro contractor pays for the work and gives the



Fig. 3. Omabe Eze sewing an *ukara*. Photo by Eli Bentor.

cloth to Ezillo women for dyeing. The dyeing is done in large earthen pots filled with water into which fermented indigo and alkaline potash are added. The dyer rubs the cloth between her thumbs and allows it to dry and oxidize to produce a beautiful blue color (fig. 4). This process is repeated a number of times to get a deep color. Because the raffia does not entirely seal the sewn parts, some indigo bleeds into the cloth, creating a much-coveted effect. The last step is to cut the raffia stitches to reveal the entire cloth. This step is often left to Ezillo young people and is not gender specific.

The Aro contractor then pays for the labor and sells the finished cloth to Ekpe members. Some pieces are generic, with an assortment of *nsibidi* designs with no special features. Those are sometimes available in the market and in Calabar chieftaincy stores. An Ekpe member can also commission an *ukara* with specific designs or inscriptions in mind. The con-



Fig. 4. *Ukara* being dyed in a pot; rubbing the cloth to produce deeper color. Photo by Eli Bantor.

tractor instructs the designer on the specific motifs required, often providing him with drawings of such designs.

An elaborate example of a commissioned *ukara* in the present exhibition (fig. 5, next page) was produced in 1972 for Mazi Okereke Agbam, an elder in Agbagwu village of Arochukwu, through the agency of Mazi James Agasi, the most active Aro contractor of *ukara* cloth. It includes Agbam's full name and address on both margins and a date (May 1972). However, a mistake in the design process resulted in the date and the masquerader being drawn in reverse. Such an error is understandable, as it is difficult to discern the designed patterns on an undyed monochromatic cloth squeezed by the sewing process. While the date in mirror writing probably did not disqualify the cloth from ceremonial use, the fact that the masquerader (lower center) is shown with a staff in his left rather than the required right hand did. Holding the staff is a

form of gestural *nsibidi* that must be done with the right hand. Such an incorrect image would have been the butt of jokes by fellow Ekpe members, so it was rejected.¹⁶

Key to the production of *ukara* are the specific techniques used to create the *nsibidi* designs by manipulating the cloth with raffia threads prior to dyeing, as well as the enshrined division of labor. The technique and division of labor are different from those used to produce the famous Yoruba *adire* cloth, where women have almost complete control of the production. It also differs from the northern Nigerian complex known for dark indigo solid-color textiles, where men are responsible for the entire process including dyeing in buried pots.¹⁷ In the Benue Valley complex and its extension into northeastern Igboland, men do the design and sewing while women do the dyeing. In all three complexes, the specific division of labor is embedded in deeply held notions of gender identity and thus is not likely to have emerged recently.¹⁸ The best-known products of the Benue complex are the *ndop*, or the so-called Bamenda or Bamun-cloth woven and dyed by the Jukun people of the Taraba and Benue states of Nigeria. The sew-dye technique and division of labor are identical to that of *ukara*, although they lack the grid arrangement.

Thus, circumstantial evidence suggests that *ukara* cloth resulted from the meeting of the Ezillo dyers with the Ekpe complex through the agency of the Aro traders living near Ezillo. The Ezillo provided the knowledge of indigo dyeing. The Ekpe complex provided the demand for prestigious cloth with *nsibidi* signs. The Aro, as traders throughout the region with a presence in the Ebonyi area and a close association with Ekpe society, provided the link between the producers and consumers of the cloth.

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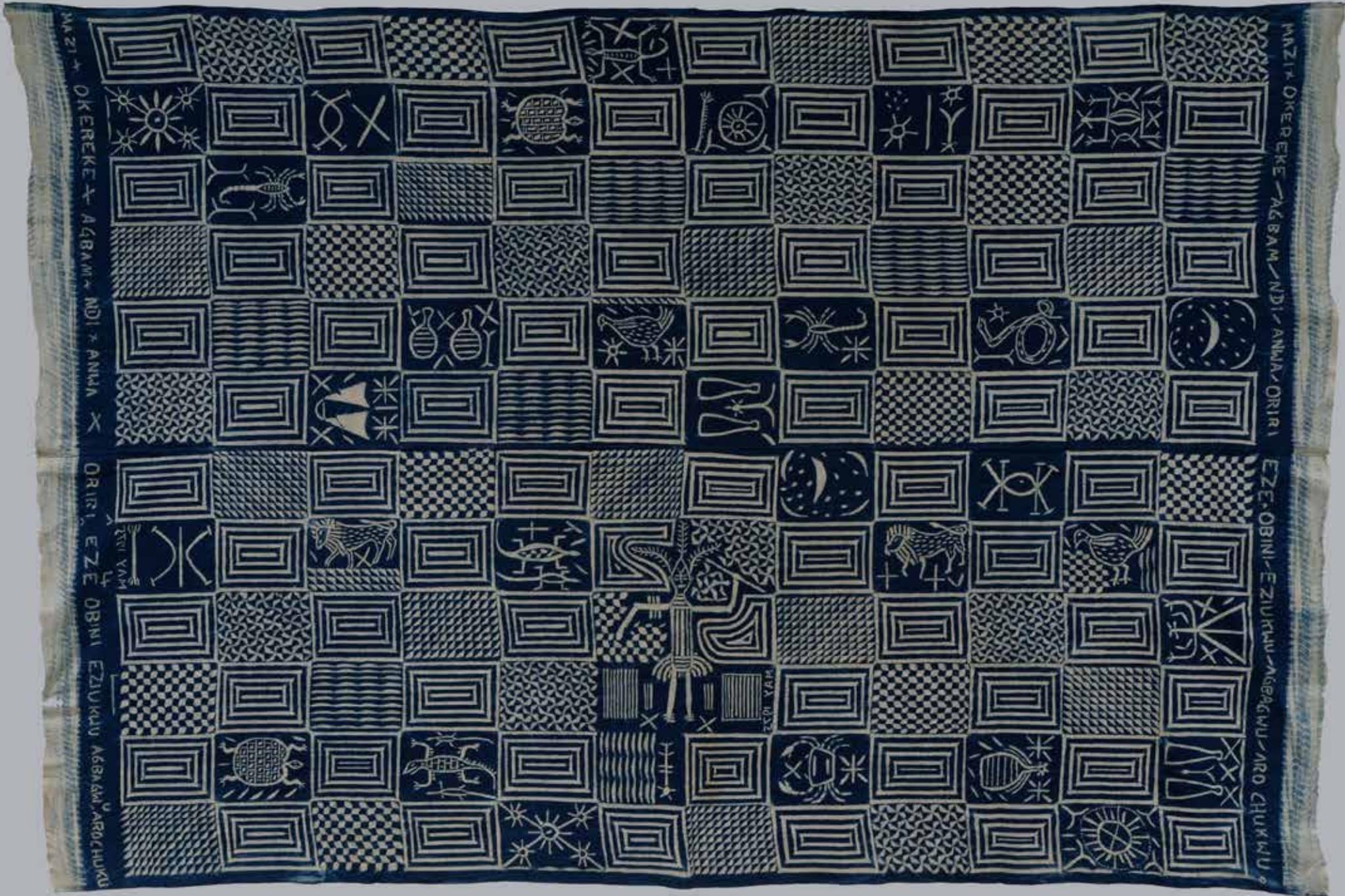


Fig. 5. Ukara made for Mazi Okereke Agbam, 1972. Photo by Jeffrey Nintzel.

KNOWLEDGE IN MOTION: READING AND PERFORMING *UKARA NSIBIDI*

Jordan A. Fenton

On a June afternoon in 2009, I distinctively recall my adoptive Nigerian father, with whom I was living at the time, Ntoe Patrick Inok Oquagbor V, monarch of the Qua-Ejagham peoples of the Nkonib clan in the city of Calabar, southeastern Nigeria, calling his sons and me to his front porch. In his hand was his crisply folded *ukara* wrapper. As we met him, he carefully unfolded and handed it to his eldest son to securely hang the cloth horizontally from his porch burglary spindles. As his son hung the textile, our excitement was palpable, for we were going to receive a lesson in the esoteric body of knowledge depicted on *ukara*. As my adoptive father and one of my master teachers, Ntoe had an important lesson in mind for me that day.

He started by using his staff of office, a walking stick, to point at individual *ukara* motifs and perform their meanings without speaking. I had my notebook ready and began to record the experience carefully as a good field researcher and ethnographer tends to do, but my note-taking was abruptly cut short. Ntoe sternly reprimanded me for writing notes during instruction by saying, "Put that notebook away!" Although fully understanding my impulse to document everything as a researcher, the point was that the body of knowledge and art form known as *nsibidi*, of the Ekpe and Mgbé secret society, as depicted on the *ukara* cloth, should only be learned verbally and through the medium of performance. He further stated, "Write this down afterword, use your mind to remember."

As a great teacher, he taught me a critical lesson that day beyond just the material: that the way in which the Western world has written about and documented *nsibidi* produces a misunderstanding by freezing it in time, thus undermining its performed dynamism and continually changing nature. In other words, recording *ukara nsibidi* as merely a text of signs and their meanings makes it everything it is not—static. This essay endeavors to present *ukara nsibidi* in motion by discussing the meaning of *ukara* motifs and their connections to Ekpe/Mgbé ritual in order to begin to understand its complex, performed, and kinetic nature. Before exploring performed *nsibidi*, however, a brief introduction to *nsibidi*, Ekpe/Mgbé society, *ukara*, and their historical significance is needed.

In discussing the meaning of *ukara nsibidi* and the performed version of the Ekpe/Mgbé esoteric knowledge system, I am in no way revealing secrets or breaching my own initiation oaths. In fact, according to my Ekpe/Mgbé teachers, the verbal interpretations are not carefully guarded secrets as the literature suggests. However, I cannot discuss certain motifs, especially those related to the ancestors, nor can I disclose the step-by-step formulas of performed *nsibidi*. Members have authorized me to explain the general nature of the performance, although I am forbidden to articulate how to perform a given sign or sequence of signs. The following discussion is a result of my own initiations into the Ekpe/Mgbé society and lengthy apprenticeships into the visual and performed versions of *nsibidi* during fieldwork I conducted between 2008 and 2010 and in 2014.

Nsibidi is an indigenous language, art form, and knowledge system of the Cross River region in southeastern Nigeria and west Cameroon. It is essentially a multimedia art form as it can be drawn on many surfaces, used to adorn the body, carved into sculpture, verbalized or spoken, and performed.

Throughout its known history, two versions can be identified: those signs used in the public domain and those restricted to secret masquerade institutions.¹ In both systems, *nsibidi* appears to take on a pictographic quality. However, reducing *nsibidi* to mere pictographic characters belies their role as complex signifiers, when in fact most motifs communicate information beyond a single word or idea. Indeed, local masquerade institutions not unlike the Ekpe or the Mgbe society are well known for their use of *nsibidi* today.²

Ekpe (as it is known among the Efik and Efut peoples) or Mgbe (the Qua-Ejagham version) is the longest-standing political institution and masquerade society known to Calabar and the peoples located in the hinterland of the Cross River region. As an exclusive men's association, it is a highly stratified political, social, and religious institution concerned with ancestral veneration of past members. The historical importance of Ekpe/Mgbe is well noted in the literature due to its role during the transatlantic slave and palm oil trading days at Calabar. Beginning approximately in 1650 and waning in the nineteenth century, slave and produce trading at Calabar was negotiated and governed by the Ekpe society. The Efik people became the middlemen to European maritime traders, and some argue that by the early 1700s, those Efik traders purchased Mgbe from their neighbors and reorganized it into Ekpe to manage international commerce.³ The Efik built a 30,000-square-mile commercial zone that linked wider trading routes extending south to the Cross River estuary and upriver to include Ibibio districts, Arochukwu, Umon, and routes linking to the Cameroon grasslands.⁴ The glue that cemented this trading network together was Ekpe, in which membership was available at a price. The Efik sold the reorganized Ekpe society upriver, prohibiting hinterland communities from participation in the lucrative trade without literally buying into their version.



Fig. 6. Interior of courtyard wall surrounding the Ekpe Asibong Ekondo lodge featuring Ekpe/Mgbe *nsibidi* animal motifs as decoration, Calabar, December 5, 2009. Photo by Jordan A. Fenton.

In other words, most argue that not only were Calabar Ekpe titles considered more prestigious than hinterland versions, but also that the entire trade system relied on a professional network of trust united by membership in the Efik version of Ekpe.⁵

The Cross River region, home to many diverse cultures and languages, was thus united under the Ekpe lodge. Performed Ekpe *nsibidi* quite possibly became a means of communication that further amalgamated a fragmented region, providing a way for migrant traders to communicate their membership status and right to trade in the absence of a common language. In fact, *ukara nsibidi* depict the information that Ekpe/Mgbe members also perform to each other.

There are levels of membership and many branches of positions and titles, each informing the broader *nsibidi* matrix.

Ekpe/Mgbe membership requires initiation, and further advancement to leadership roles involves the cultivation of *nsibidi* knowledge. There are two genres of *nsibidi* in Ekpe/Mgbe: the imaged and the performed. The former is depicted on indigo stitch-resist cloth known as *ukara*, the primary symbol of the society; illustrated and drawn on initiates' bodies, lodge walls (fig. 6), and pillars; incorporated into Ekpe/Mgbe chieftaincy dress (fig. 7); and woven into raffia masquerade costumes (fig. 8). The latter genre is a non-spoken performance of the institution's philosophy and rituals as illustrated on the *ukara*. Both genres inform each other: the imaged version, especially those motifs featured on *ukara*, teaches initiates the basis of the performed version.

The verbal explanations of specific *ukara* motifs can vary tremendously. Indeed, most motifs are subject to a multiplicity of interpretations, while some vary only slightly, and a limited few have consistent meanings.⁶ For example, the motif predominantly featured on most *ukara* consists of a series of concentric rectangles with a horizontal line in the middle of the motif (fig. 9).⁷ The rectangle alternately represents the Ekpe/Mgbe lodge with the all-important pillar in the center, the sanctuary of the lodge, a box protecting the secrets of the society that signifies mystic power, or the top of the Ekpe/Mgbe table where members eat during rituals. The horizontal line variously represents the cane or whip, a grave or coffin, a barrier guarding the entrance into the sacred Mboko branch (the most mystical and ancestral aspect of the society), 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.

These multiple explanations allow members to use the motif as a springboard during instruction. Ekpe/Mgbe masters thus use motifs to infer and teach ideas beyond the symbols'



Fig. 7. Chief Ekpenyong Bassey Nsa posing by the Ekpe pillar inside an Ekpe lodge with his *ukara* wrapper after his installation in the office of title holder, December 31, 2009. His chieftaincy dress and the pillar feature many *nsibidi* motifs. Photo by Jordan A. Fenton.



Fig. 8. *Nsibidi* motifs woven into the raffia mane of an Mgbe masquerade costume (Abon Ogbe), performing during a chieftaincy installation at Nkonib, Calabar, June 7, 2008. Photo by Jordan A. Fenton.



Fig. 9. Detail of *ukara* cloth featuring a number of repeating rectangle motifs. Photo by Jeffrey Nintzel.

pictographic meanings. The interpretive lens is contextually based on the teacher's and/or learner's ritual experience. In other words, the highly personalized educational narrative is always rooted in ritual procedures and activities. The main objective and theme of the lesson pertains to the society's philosophy and ritual practice. For members, the *ukara* is thus didactic and used as the society's textbook for interested neophytes.

Another example of this is the tortoise motif, always depicted from a bird's-eye view emphasizing its carapace (fig. 10). The motif is interpreted variously as *Nkanda* (a branch and masquerade) occupying the bush, a sign for the deceased that 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. In the *Ikom* area, in the Cross River hinterland, the motif was explained as the shell of a turtle used to call the mystical aspects of the society. In general, most members made use of the motif to reference the various 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 from generations of human imagination about animal qualities and embedded within the philosophy of *Ekpe/Mgbe*. The tortoise is characterized by longevity, wisdom, unhurried movement, prudence, and cleverness. Such ideas translate as traits and behavioral properties that a member should strive to possess. For example, the idea of longevity denotes the vitality of the ancestors and the authority of *Ekpe/Mgbe* elders in general, while slowness of movement and wisdom are qualities of the elders. Younger members must respect and learn from the elders in order

to cultivate their own knowledge. Levelheadedness, mental agility, and creativity—further qualities attributed to the tortoise—can be applied in many areas of the society, including proper conduct, the acquisition of knowledge, the arts, and the ability to perform *nsibidi*. The verbal interpretations mean nothing, however, if one cannot “activate” his Ekpe/Mgbe knowledge through the medium of performance during ritual.

Most scholarship has emphasized performed *nsibidi* as merely a gestured art form used to determine one’s level of membership or as a jest during ritual.⁸ However, demonstrating one’s stage of initiation and enacting a playful jest are only minor parts of the larger field that performed *nsibidi* covers; the performance of *nsibidi* also allows Ekpe/Mgbe members of different communities to communicate with one another. 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 performing 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. Performed *nsibidi* in this context is usually straightforward, whereas in a jest between members, the kinetic signs may incorporate a more wit or indirect quality. The only rule to the performed genre of *nsibidi* is that the performance must be clear. The recipient of the question must be able to understand what is being asked and then reply correctly. The complexity of this knowledge system and art form increases as attention turns to the primary application of performed *nsibidi* in Calabar today: performed competitions.

In certain Ekpe/Mgbe ritual contexts such as the installation of a titleholder, the death of a chief or ruler, and other



Fig. 10. Detail of tortoise motif from *ukara*. Photo by Jeffrey Nintzel.

official gatherings, sanctioned *nsibidi* competitions are formally administered. In these competitions, masters are given the opportunity to advertise their skill and test their *nsibidi* acuity against other members. These arenas are competitive forums for demonstrating *nsibidi* knowledge since everything in Ekpe/Mgbe ritual—its meaning, protocol, instruments, consumption of food and drink, masquerades, branches, the seen and the unseen—can be performed.

During competitions, all members except the *nsibidi* performer remain seated. The performer demonstrates the *nsibidi* protocols that allow him to take center stage. He will then dance, display his agility, and most importantly, ask each seated member to challenge him. Seated members will thus try to “fumble” the central performer in order to prove who possesses greater fluency and mastery. The performer’s turn ends when he either successfully completes all challenges or is defeated. During performed competition, *nsibidi* takes on

its most sophisticated, complex, and artful dimension as spins, rotations, elegant footwork, and dexterity, flawlessly interwoven with *nsibidi*, are key elements for the demonstration of *nsibidi* acumen. In other words, performances must be beautifully executed. In fact, official performed *nsibidi* competition is the most anticipated aspect of Ekpe/Mgbe ritual in Calabar today. It becomes a forum to learn and to put acquired knowledge to the test.

Using the body as a canvas, initiates competitively convey ritual experience, philosophy, and secret lore. Recall that everything inside and outside the society, literally and figuratively, tangibly and intangibly, is fair game for manipulation in the performed *nsibidi* field. A *nsibidi* performance can be broken down into discrete elements that may be abbreviated or re-ordered to misdirect the responder, who must complete the sequence or, at least, demonstrate comprehension of the basic premise of the entire display. There are a number of ways to enact the knowledge of a given masquerade, ritual procedure, or ancestral aspect of the society through *nsibidi*. For example, one technique can be performed with a single sign configured some twenty different ways according to the actor's individual style and dexterity (fig. 11). Another method can include an entire sequence of signs. Still another mode can take the form of call-and-response between two competitors, repeating multiple times until the inquiry is complete. There is no limit to the number of ways an Ekpe/Mgbe concept can be performed with *nsibidi*. In competition, members must keenly interpret the performed signs and respond correctly.

Ekpe/Mgbe *nsibidi* knowledge is taught and studied through ritual, performance of *nsibidi* symbols, and private *ukara* instructional sessions. Because of the multivalent aspect of *nsibidi*, the esoteric language of Ekpe/Mgbe is best under-



Fig. 11. Entufam Edet manipulates staffs as walking aids during his *nsibidi* performance, Okoyong, LGA, March 20, 2010. Photo by Jordan A. Fenton.

stood through its performed version, rather than through its imaged manifestation on *ukara* cloth. In fact, most verbal interpretations of Ekpe/Mgbe *nsibidi* encoded in *ukara* are just the tip of the iceberg. Only through performed *nsibidi* may a member rightfully demonstrate and advertise his knowledge and agency during ritual. For this reason, members are constantly practicing and creating new performances and gestures in order to keep their knowledge fresh. The real vitality and power of Ekpe/Mgbe *nsibidi* comes from understanding it in motion. *Nsibidi* performed thus teaches Western observers how an esoteric knowledge and language system is indeed an ever-changing body of art.

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NOTES

Introduction (pp. 2–3)

1. Early ethnographers and colonial officers such as T. D. Maxwell, Alfred Mansfeld, J. K. Macgregor, Elphinstone Dayrell, and P. A. Talbot attempted to collate *nsibidi* forms and their meanings during interviews conducted with native informants. See, for example, Mansfeld, *Urwald-Dokumente* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1908); Dayrell, "Some 'Nsibidi' Signs," *Man* 67 (1910): 113–14; Dayrell, "Further Notes on 'Nsibidi' Signs with Their Meanings from Ikom District, Southern Nigeria," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 41 (1911): 521–43; and Macgregor, "Some Notes on Nsibidi," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 39 (1909): 209–19.

A Historical Understanding of *Ukara* Cloth (pp. 5–11)

1. S. L. Kasfir, "One Tribe, One Style? Paradigms in the Historiography of African Art," *History in Africa* 11 (1984): 163–93.
2. R. Horton, "Stateless Societies in the History of West Africa," in J. F. A. Ajayi and M. Crowder, eds., *History of West Africa* (London: Longman, 1971).
3. C. B. Steiner, "Travel Engravings and the Construction of the Primitive," in E. Barkan and R. Bush, eds., *Prehistories of the Future: The Primitivist Project and the Culture of Modernism* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1995).
4. J. Balfour-Paul, *Indigo* (London: British Museum Press, 1998), 13–14.
5. R. Bolland, *Tellem Textiles: Archaeological Finds from Burial Caves in Mali's Bandiagara Cliff* (Amsterdam: Tropenmuseum, 1991).
6. See C. E. Kriger, *Cloth in West African History* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006); and Musée du tapis et des arts textiles de Clermont-Ferrand, *Indigo: les routes de l'Afrique bleue* (Aix-en-Provence: Edisud, 2006). To complete the story, slaves from Guinea Coast were in high demand in Jamaica and the low country of South Carolina thanks to their familiarity with cotton farming and indigo dyeing. When cotton and indigo are put together, the result is all-American blue jeans (although the history of denim, or jeans, is complicated).
7. S. D. Behrendt, A. Duke, A. J. H. Latham, and D. A. Northrup, *The Diary of Antera Duke, an Eighteenth-Century African Slave Trader* (New York: Oxford University Press, with the assistance of the International African Institute, 2010), 191.
8. M. D. W. Jeffreys, Anthropological Library, Owerri, Enugu, National Archive: 1 (1928).

9. See C. D. Forde and International African Institute, *Yako Studies* (London: Published for the International African Institute by the Oxford University Press, 1964), 158–60; and M. J. Ruel, *Leopards and Leaders: Constitutional Politics among a Cross River People* (London: Tavistock, 1967), 216–58.
10. U. M. Röschenhaler, *Purchasing Culture: The Dissemination of Associations in the Cross River Region of Cameroon and Nigeria* (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 2011), 99–157.
11. G. I. Jones, "The Political Organization of Old Calabar," in C. D. Forde, ed., *Efik Traders of Old Calabar, Containing the Diary of Antera Duke, an Efik Slave-Trading Chief of the Eighteenth Century, Together with an Ethnographic Sketch and Notes, by D. Simmons, and an Essay on the Political Organization of Old Calabar, by G. I. Jones* (London and New York: Published for the International African Institute by Oxford University Press, 1956), 135–48.
12. U. N. Abalogu, "Ekpe Society in Arochuku and Bende," *Nigeria Magazine* 126–27 (1978): 78–79.
13. See, for example, A. Mansfeld, *Urwald-Dokumente: vier Jahre unter den Crossflussnegern Kameruns* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1908); J. K. Macgregor, "Some Notes on Nsibidi," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 39 (1909): 209–19; and P. A. Talbot, *In the Shadow of the Bush* (London: W. Heinemann, 1912), 304–9 and appendix G.
14. G. I. Jones, "Who are the Aro?," *Nigerian Field* 8, no. 3 (1939): 100–3. See also E. Bendor, "'Remember Three Feet Deep': Masks and the Exculpation of/from Death in Aro Masquerade," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 24, no. 4 (1994): 323–38.
15. S. Ottenberg, *Farmers and Townspeople in a Changing Nigeria: Abakaliki during Colonial Times (1905–1960)* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 2005), 9. Although Ottenberg refers to these non-Igbo ethnic elements as "Cross River peoples," he indicates that they "originated in the Benue Valley a region to the north" but resided in the area long before the arrival of the Igbo.
16. Mazi James Agasi, personal communication with the author, 1998.
17. C. E. Kriger, *Cloth in West African History* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 125–34.
18. For the northern complex, Heidi Nast has argued that in the past, women, especially those affiliated with the Royal court of Kanu, had control over indigo dyeing and that this has changed as a result of the Jihad movements of the early nineteenth century. H. J. Nast, "Women, Royalty, and Indigo-Dyeing in Northern Nigeria, circa 1500 to 1807," in A. Walthall, ed., *Servants of the Dynasty: Palace Women in World History* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 232–61. Her evidence is not entirely convincing, but even if that is the case, Kanu dyeing pots have been a male domain for at least two hundred years.

Knowledge in Motion (pp. 13–19)

An earlier and longer version of this essay was presented in 2013 at Appalachian State University during the African Art Symposium: Symbol and Surface, organized by Eli Bentor, whom I would like to thank for his insightful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

1. In a number of early twentieth-century sources, colonial writers attempted to document a wide variety of *nsibidi* signs. See, for example, J. K. Macgregor, "Some Notes on Nsibidi," *Journal of Royal Anthropological Institute* 39 (1909): 209–19; Alfred Mansfeld, *Urwald-Dokumente* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1908); and Percy Amaury Talbot, *In the Shadow of the Bush* (London: Heinemann, 1912). These are important sources that document a plethora of signs and in some cases their meanings; in my reading, however, these sources erroneously collapse the distinction between the public and restrictive aspects of *nsibidi*.
2. The label "leopard society" is often used collectively to describe the Ekpe, the Mgbe, and the Egbo (a popular label used by colonial writers) versions, and other variants found in the Cross River region. However, I consider this label clumsy and counterproductive because of its generalizing tone: it not only completely misrepresents the institution's core as a leopard spirit-worshipping society (as suggested in the literature), but also barely scratches the surface of its philosophy.
3. For more on Ekpe's role during the trading days at Old Calabar, see G. I. Jones, "The Political Organization of Old Calabar," in Daryll Forde, ed., *Efik Traders of Old Calabar* (London: Oxford University Press, 1956); Kannan K. Nair, *Politics and Society in South Eastern Nigeria* (London: Frank Cass, 1972); A. J. H. Latham, *Old Calabar 1600–1891* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973); and David Northrup, *Trade Without Rulers: Pre-colonial Economic Development in South-Eastern Nigeria* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978).
4. Stephen Behrendt, A. J. Latham, and David Northrup, *The Diary of Antera Duke, an Eighteenth-Century African Slave Trader* (London: Oxford University Press, 2010), chapter 4.
5. Nair, *Politics and Society in South Eastern Nigeria*, 19; Latham, *Old Calabar*, 39; and Simon Ottenberg and Linda Knudsen, "Leopard Society Masquerades: Symbolism and Diffusion," *African Arts* 18, no. 2 (1985): 38.
6. During fieldwork investigation, I gathered many complete and partial explanations of *ukara* and specific motifs by a wide range of Ekpe 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-Ejagham interpretations near Ikom, in the middle of the Cross River region. See Jordan A. Fenton, "Take It to the Streets: Performing Ekpe/Mgbe Power in Contemporary Calabar, Nigeria," Ph.D. diss. (University of Florida, Gainesville, 2012), chapter 4.
7. 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.
8. Malcom Ruel, Robert Farris Thompson, U. N. Abalogu, and Amanda Carlson are the only scholars to my knowledge who provide detailed discussion of performed *nsibidi*. Ruel describes performed *nsibidi* from Cameroon and interprets it as a symbolic mechanism underscoring the secret nature of the society. (Ruel, *Leopards and Leaders: Constitutional Politics among a Cross River People* [London: Tavistock Publications, 1969], 231–32.) In Thompson's investigations, performed *nsibidi* is described as "action writing" and/or "artistic combat." (Thompson, *African Art in Motion: Icon and Act* [Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974], 180–81, and *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* [New York: Random House, 1983], 228.) Abalogu presents a brief description of some performed Okonko (Ekpe in Igbo) *nsibidi* from Arochukwu. (Abalogu, "Ekpe Society in Arochukwu and Bende," *Nigeria Magazine* 126/127 [1978]: 92.) And more recently, Carlson investigated performed *nsibidi* through the lens of gender. (Carlson, "Nsibidi, Gender, and Literacy: The Art of the Bakor-Ejagham [Cross River State, Nigeria]," Ph.D. diss. [Indiana University, 2003].)

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Igbo people, Nigeria, giant *ukara* used as a backdrop at an Ekpe lodge, about early 2000s, cotton, indigo dye, 233 x 78 in. Collection of Eli Bentor.

Igbo people, Nigeria, large, generic, well-executed *ukara*, about mid-1980s, cotton, indigo dye, 101 x 62 in. Collection of Eli Bentor.

Igbo people, Nigeria, large *ukara* designed by Omabe Eze (Muta Bu Ike), about mid-1980s, cotton, indigo dye, 90 x 66 in. Collection of Eli Bentor.

Igbo people, Nigeria, Mazi Okereke Agbam of Arochukwu's personalized *ukara*, 1972, cotton, indigo dye, 97.5 x 71 in. Collection of Eli Bentor.

Igbo people, Nigeria, small *ukara* with very fine design and Omu Aro symbol, about mid-1980s, cotton, indigo dye, 65.5 x 33 in. Collection of Eli Bentor. (See front cover.)

Ekpenyong Basse Nsa, Ebonko masquerade ensemble, 2010, multiple media, general size when costume is on form: 5 ft. x 29 in. The Samuel P.Horn Museum of Art, University of Florida, Gainesville. Museum purchase with funds from the Caroline Julier and James To Richardson Acquisition Fund; 2010.68.1.

Calabar, Nigeria, Ekpe chief's attire ensemble, 2010, multiple media, approx. 5 ft. 6 in. The Samuel P.Horn Museum of Art, University of Florida, Gainesville. Museum purchase with funds from the Caroline Julier and James To Richardson Acquisition Fund.

Also included in the exhibition: large-format photographs and a looped photomontage of Ekpe members in ceremonial and ritual contexts; a looped photomontage of the creation process of *ukara* cloth; an *ukara* drawing example; *ukara* sewn examples (pre- and post-dye); examples of the indigo balls and raffia used in the creation process of *ukara* cloth.



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Designed by Christina Nadeau
Printed by [TK]

Cover: Small *ukara* with very fine design and Omu Aro symbol.
Photo by Jeffrey Nintzel. Detail on back.
Page 4: Giant *ukara* used as a backdrop at an Ekpe lodge.
Photo by Jeffrey Nintzel.

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