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Roles and Paraphernalia in Ekpe Efik Performance.

by

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Abstract

The Study of Ekpe Efik Masquerades shows a manifestation of different types of Ekpe in varying paraphernalia. Thus, Ekpe Efik masquerades are distinguished by their form and silhouette. In the past, they were engaged in carrying out different roles among which were socio-political, judicial and commercial roles. Presently, each distinctively costumed Ekpe is associated with some demonstrable character trait, which it is expected to dramatise during its performances. Through symbols and metaphors called *nsibidi*, Ekpe initiates understand the hidden meanings which point to the level of abstraction in which Ekpe masquerades function.

Introduction

Ekpe represents a forest spirit. The Ekpe fraternity is common among the Bantoid tribes straddling the equator from South Eastern Nigeria, Southern Cameroon and down the Atlantic Coast of Angola (Bassey 19-23). Bassey speculates that the fraternity may have originated in the Central African grassland and spread rapidly among the Bantoid tribes and along the routes of their migration (19-20). The fraternity uses secret writings called *Nsibidi* which are writings similar to ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs. According to Talbot, members were supposed to know the meanings of these writings and also of certain complicated movements, which were in conformity with these (447). Ekpe is a graded fraternity and is elitist in outlook. Admission is based on good character and other criteria as well as the ability to pay the required fees.

Those that were in the higher grades were exposed to more esoteric knowledge than those in the lower grades (Aye 73). The fraternity helped to make laws and settled disputes between wards and persons (Latham 40, Bassey 35). Bassey and Latham agree that even though distinctive costumes existed for the different Ekpe grades, the Ekpe Spirit is usually represented by a masquerade called *idem ikwo* which was generally clad in woven raffia cloth, quite distinguished and colourful. It is of interest to know that the external paraphernalia of this masquerade were more or less the same throughout the Ekpe Zone of Equatorial Africa (Bassey 19).

The origin of Ekpe among the Efik is shrouded in mystery. Originally, Ekpe evolved in Efik land as a secret cult having at its head the civil authority of the ethnic group in the person of the Edidem (King). Accordingly, modern Ekpe Efik was introduced by Essien Ekpe Oku, the grandson of Oku Atai in the middle of the 18th century AD. Essien Ekpe Oku is said to have bought the Ekpe secrets from Archibong Ekundo, a man from Usak Edet on the Cameroon side of Cross River

Estuary (Walker 136). This development was associated with the loss of effectiveness of the *Ndem* cult as an integrating force during the development of the slave trade.

Ndem Efik, a water god, was the tutelary deity of the Efik, and was very appropriate to the traditional Efik occupation of fishing. The *Ndem* priest had once been of great importance in Efik affairs (Waddel 314), however by 1805 he had lost much of his influence (Hallet 200). This was because the *Ndem* priest was debarred from trading while other Efik freemen could trade, grow wealthy, and build up retinues of slaves, the *Ndem* priest could not, until he was left with nothing but a cultic role in a ritual which had ceased to be very important (Latham 35). Furthermore, Latham explains that:

The development of Ekpe seems to have come about in those years of the mid eighteenth century in which the pattern of commerce at Old Calabar was changing as the Europeans began to give Efik traders credit, and the internal slave market developed. The introduction of Ekpe was an integral part of this process (37).

Nevertheless, it is generally accepted that the Efik obtained Ekpe through their Efut neighbours. It is believed that the process of acquiring Ekpe was a gradual one since this involved much financial, material and human sacrifices (Bassey 21).

Roles of Ekpe Efik

Ekpe had played many roles in Efik Society, prominent among which were socio-political, judicial and commercial roles. Up to the late 19th century, Ekpe was the acknowledged symbol of statehood. Its statutes and rights had to be defended even to the shedding of blood. Those with Ekpe rights and privileges could plunder, enslave and execute, at will, non-members of the fraternity (Bassey 33).

Socio-Political Role

Ekpe was used as an arm of government and saw to the task of law-making and enforcement. The laws were for the community as a whole. Latham's record of the Hart Report showed that Ekpe was open to all men, slave or freeborn, and that there were nine orders of membership. The first four grades in order of descent are *Nyamkpe*, *Okpoho*, *Okuakama*, and *Nkanda*, and were open to freemen. Beneath them were the remaining five other grades to which slaves could belong; these are in order of descent *Mboko*, *Mboko-Mboko*, *Mkpe*, *Mbakara* and *Edibo*. Each grade had its worshipful master or *Obong Ekpe* which tended to be associated with particular families (Latham 39). Above all nine grades was the vice-president of the fraternity called *Ebunko* and the president called *Eyamba* (Latham 141-142; Walker 136). The *Nyamkpe* order formed the main decision making council, and the *Okpoho* order implemented decisions.

Latham opines that it was Ekpe, which helped to integrate the large domestic slave population into the Efik society by giving them a share in the central organ of government. This united both freemen and slaves in a common organization through which they might meet each other socially, creating the bond of friendship and providing machinery to solve any disputes that might arise between them (40).

Up to the first quarter of the 19th century, Bassey records that only nobles were initiated into Ekpe. This enabled them to control the commoners and slaves and, as time passed, non-indigenes, slaves and some women from royal families were initiated into Ekpe (55).

Judicial Role

Ekpe was the final court of the land. In civil cases it was an appellate court but was the first and final court in cases concerning Ekpe, criminal matters and political issues (Bassey 35). Ekpe law was no respecter of persons and the punishment for breaking its important laws was often death. Bassey lists eleven serious offences which attracted the death penalty. They include; disclosure of inner secrets of Ekpe to unauthorized persons, proven cases of unauthorized indecent assault on females, proven cases of adultery, promiscuous sexual behaviours, Ekpe initiation carried out in a foreign land by an Efik, unauthorized sale of Ekpe, falsely claiming to be an initiate, initiation carried out by a non-adept, unauthorized entry into the inner chamber of Ekpe Lodge, armed robbery and piracy, and refusal of military service or desertion from such service (35). Defaulters were viewed as security risks.

In general, Ekpe was involved in and promoted noble ideals such as truth, order and discipline. Ekpe approval had to be sought for any serious business and appointments. Failure to seek such approval could be regarded as an attempt to test the resolve of Ekpe and was visited with severe reprisals (Bassey 37). Ekpe judgment was final and had to be accepted and respected. Those that flaunted Ekpe judgment were severely punished, fined and their property often destroyed.

Commercial Role

Ekpe had the powers to enforce the repayment of debts – an essential power in a community which adopted credit trading. According to Walker, it was Ekpe's ability to collect debts that made several European traders to join the fraternity, knowing fully well that credits given to Africans could be recovered (136). Parkinson therefore notes that this power to enforce the repayment of credit lay behind the spread of Ekpe among people further inland up the Cross River who, by joining Ekpe, made themselves credit-worthy in the eyes of the Efik, and therefore could avail themselves of Efik credit (264). Hallet adds that Ekpe also served as a chamber of commerce and club for the important men folk, where they might meet over a drink, or occasional banquet (203). In contemporary times, Ekpe has ceased to be the government. It merely performs social and religious functions

and has no more power to collect debt as in the olden days but is still used to resolve conflicts especially in land matters.

Ekpe Efik Paraphernalia

The Ekpe masquerade is called *Idem Ikwo*, or *Idem nyamkpe*. Other Ekpe Masquerades are seen occasionally either during the funeral of an Ekpe Chief or during conferment, coronation of the *Ndidem* (King) or his death. Among them are *Ebonko*, *Mudua*, *Atat* and *Nkanda*. It is widely believed that other Ekpe forms exist mystically and cannot be seen by non-initiates. The later notwithstanding there are some initiates that cannot see certain Ekpe forms. The important thing here is that mystical Ekpe are not costumed. The major differences between these masquerades are in the colours of their paraphernalia. A description of each of them is as follows:

Idem Ikwo

This masquerade dresses in a tight-fitting netted raffia overall called *esik*, which covers the torso, hands, up to the wrists and the legs down to the ankles. The usual colour of the *esik* is black. At the ankles, the masquerade wears thick, neatly cut, brush-like tufts of raffia called *ikpat enen*. This tuft has designs, with alternating colours of black, white and red. At the wrists is the same type of raffia tufts called *ita enen*.

On the shoulders, the masquerade has a very large circle of neatly cut tufted raffia called *nyanya ndam*, which, represent the mane of the lion (Bassey 107). The background colour could be black, white or red, but never green or yellow. Around the mane, spots of rectangular, square or circular areas containing some patterns or *nsibidi* (secret signs and writings) which is understood only by initiates can be seen. The head of the masquerade is covered with a black hood made of the same material as the *esik* with round holes for the eyes. Above the eyes, on the forehead, a white feather is fixed on the hood. Behind the head hangs a colourful hat with wide wings called *itam ekot*, with large puffy feathers attached—two to the left and two to the right. On the waist, the masquerade has a girdle of fine cloth. This cloth appears as a band in the front but arranged in beautiful folds at the back. This girdle is called *mbobo* and is a combination of white, red, green, yellow or blue. A large bell called *nkanika* hangs behind the waist. A wooden staff called *esang* is held in the right hand and a bunch of leaves called *oboti* is held in the left hand. (Plate 1).

The *Idem Ikwo* functions during social outing and for entertainment.

Idem Ebonko

Idem Ebonko paraphernalia differs from that of the *Idem Ikwo* in some important respects. According to Bassey, the overall is not made with woven raffia but of fine cloth which is heavily beaded and called *ofong nkwa*, usually of gold colour or shades of it. The *nyanya* is made of the same cloth material, highly decorated with patterns of *nsibidi* symbols and studded with small round mirrors. The hood is made with headed cloth and made into a vertical conical hat called *etundu*, which has a flattened tip and is studded with mirrors and tufts of colourful feathers.

The *itam ekot* carries short, brightly coloured feathered stuffs called *abasonko* in place of the strong feathers of the *Idem Ikwo*. The *ikpat enen* and *ita enen* are made of stuff cloth and decorated with *nsibidi* symbols. A beautifully carved staff is held in the right hand and *abasonko* in the left. *Ebonko* does not carry a bell (Bassey 76). (Plate 2).

Idem Nkanda

The *Idem Nkanda* is very much like the *Idem Ebonko* except that the *esit* is made with special *Ukara*, (Ekpe secret cloth embedded with different patterns). The *nyanya* is made of loose raffia of white background with mottles of red. The *ita enen* and *ikpat enen* are of raffia material like the *nyanya* and is similarly patterned. The head is covered with a hood made also with *Ukara* cloth and extends into a high conical hat called *etundu abasonko*, at the tip of which are fixed loose raffia intermingled with feathers. The masquerade carries a whip in the right hand instead of a staff, and *oboti* on the left (Bassey 71). This masquerade can only be seen during the funeral ceremony of an Ekpe Chief or *Ndidem* (king). It is usually guided and kept within a loop or ring-like cage to restrict its movement because of its wild character.

Idem Atat

Another type of Ekpe masquerade worth mentioning is the *Atat*. This Ekpe is associated with evil that is why it is always wild and dangerous. Ordinarily, *Atat* is black ant whose sting is quite painful. Likewise the paraphernalia of the *Idem Atat* is completely black. It does not carry the *esang* but uses a whip known as *isim ukpam* (special whip made from the tail of a skate) to keep the crowd under control during important ceremonies. *Atat Ekpe* wears all the paraphernalia of *Idem Ikwo* except that its colour is black, and the *mbobo* is only white. (Plates 3 and 4).

Mbudua

Another Ekpe masquerade is the *Mbudua*. This Ekpe is responsible for conveying messages, information and warning to people. It is also responsible for singing the praises of a deceased king or adept. *Mbudua* is not masked like the other *idem*. This is to enable it communicate verbally and also to sing. Its costume consists of *mkpin* (waist cloth) which covers the waist region, extended with *akasi*

(a farthingale). Around the waist are the *mbobo* (cloth girdle) in white, red and blue colours. Around the neck, the masquerade wears various kinds of beads namely: *anana ubók* (long beads that extend to the waist), *mkorikpo* (another set of beads woven like a cape), and *nkwa esit itong* (choker-like beads). To cover the shoulders is the *ekara itong* (a cape-like piece). Around the arms are *ekpaku* (arm bands) designed with beads and coloured wool. It wears the *bidak* (cap) and carries a decorated head dress made up of cloth and feathers. It carries the *ekput* (hand shakers) in both hands and wears the *mkipat etim* (jingles) on the legs. The upper body is bare.

Ekpe Masquerade Performance

The Ekpe masquerade does not dance in the classical sense. It does not move to the rhythm of the music provided by the drummers and singers. The masquerade makes a series of complicated stepping movements involving the legs, the staff, the leaves and the bell. Most of these movements are directed at Ekpe initiates. The movements are a system of body language that is well understood by Ekpe initiates, reminiscent of feline stalking movements (Bassey 50).

In performance, colours play very important roles in Ekpe initiation. Ritual may not proceed without them. Subsequently, certain assigned colour codes are used in different social contexts. At Christmas, for, example, Ekpe uses blue and white *mbobo*. During a king's coronation, however, the *mbobo* may change to include green and red and probably yellow. These colours have certain meanings among the initiates. Red represents the strength of the lion, which is the fraternity's totem. It is a very powerful colour, which stimulates and raises the pulse rate. Blue is serene and calming. It denotes the water environment of the Efik, and also their calm and friendly nature. Green generally is a symbol of nature, fertility and freshness. It balances the other colours and is restful. Yellow calls for caution because it represents confidence, optimism and friendliness but is at the same time very irrational. In the past yellow flags were hoisted to confine people to their quarters. Deeper esoteric meaning of Ekpe colours is only known to the cult's adepts. All other Ekpe paraphernalia are said to have esoteric meanings different from what is generally known. During Ekpe performances, colours and patterns communicate loudly what ordinary words would have called for extensive writing (Bassey 59).

The Character of Ekpe

Ekpe, like any other masquerade is a stock character in traditional theatre. In traditional African theatre, dramatists "are not interested in character analysis. They deal with stock characters that are usually not transformed in action" (Enekwe 158). But they "impersonate character roles before spectators in a clearly defined environment" (Amankulor 86). Every aspect of Ekpe paraphernalia projects the character of the Ekpe. There is no costume piece that does not carry its

own meaning; nothing is worn for its own sake. From the body netting to the bell, all have intrinsic cultural meaning. As Basseyy writes, "Ekpe paraphernalia are coded images" (64), and, "since Ekpe does not encourage voice language, reliance is on dance forms, *nsibidi*, colours, and sounds for the dissemination of information and training" (92).

The different masquerade forms are so costumed with colours and patterns to enhance their specific characters. For instance, *Idem Ekpe* is beautiful and performs during Christmas, entertains visitors, and performs during coronations. The *Idem Ebonko* is said to be a masquerade-women are allowed to sing along with. Thus, it is imbued with so-called "feminine" character traits – gentleness, softness, and pride. That is why the entire body is decorated with beads and mirrors. The *Idem Nkanda* is dressed in *Ukara*, (Ekpe secret cloth) which signifies it as the seat of wisdom (Basseyy 41). This Ekpe is only seen during the burial of a king or an adept. Finally, the *Atat Ekpe* is dressed in black to keep the crowd under control during burial ceremonies. In general, the Ekpe's exhibited character form is in relation to "the principles and consciousness relevant to the House when called into activity through appropriate drumming... symbols enable a lift in consciousness to be experienced" (Basseyy 73).

Ekpe Efik Masquerade paraphernalia functions properly because each masquerade's costume makes a statement that is relevant to the character of the Ekpe through its colours and patterns. Again, the masquerade is a messenger, represented as '*idem Ikwo*' who assumes the identity of the character it is representing. The Ekpe costume also permits and stimulates action because the silhouette allows appropriate movement patterns.

CONCLUSION

Ekpe Efik is an aspect of traditional African theatre whose paraphernalia are the significant keys to its fuller understanding and appreciation. As part of Efik cultural heritage, the Ekpe Efik is one of those institutions vested with political and transcendental powers. Among the Efik, major political decisions are taken by top grades of the Ekpe. Ekpe is also an institution for the sustenance of law and order. Though there are other masquerades, the Ekpe is distinguished because of its form and silhouette. In the final analysis, colours and patterns of the Ekpe paraphernalia have visual connotations or associations that signify the social, political and spiritual potency of the masquerade. It is through these associations, and their symbolic use that the most exciting and most deeply-felt reactions are achieved during Ekpe performances.

Through symbols and metaphors called *Nsibidi*, Ekpe initiates and adepts understand the hidden meanings which point to the level of socio-cultural abstraction in which the Ekpe functions. It is therefore this esoteric nature of the Ekpe that influences the design of its paraphernalia as well as its roles and characterization within its native cultural milieu.

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