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The Ekpe House and the Evolution of Nsibidi: *Cultural Secrecy and Colonial Influence in Southeastern Nigeria*

By Chuka Odike

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The Ekpe House or Ulò Èkpè, is an anthropomorphic structure traditionally constructed for the funeral rites of Ekpe members in Abiriba, part of the Cross River Igbo cultural area in southeastern Nigeria. Photographed locally around 1970, this structure exemplifies the elaborate architectural and cultural expressions associated with the Ekpe society, also known as the Leopard Society.

The Ekpe society held significant social and political power in southeastern Nigeria, especially among the Efik and Igbo peoples. Central to its cultural practices was the use of nsibidi, a graphic writing and symbolic communication system that was integral to the society's rituals and governance. However, the prominence of nsibidi and Ekpe rituals faced a significant decline during the colonial era.

When Old Calabar (Calabar) became the British colonial administrative headquarters in southern Nigeria in 1885, the cultural dynamics shifted. Colonial authorities, missionaries, and settlers, such as those from the Church of Scotland Mission (established in Calabar in 1846), disrupted the traditional power structures. These external influences labeled indigenous practices as pagan or subversive, forcing local communities to obscure their traditions.

As Ogbu Kalu (1980) noted, nsibidi became a tool of cultural resistance, intentionally hidden to avoid colonial suppression and scrutiny. The secrecy surrounding nsibidi, particularly among men's groups like the Ekpe society, grew out of the need to preserve these

traditions from the encroachments of missionary and colonial enterprises. Over time, nsibidi evolved into a clandestine expression of cultural identity, embodying resilience in the face of external domination.

This interplay between cultural preservation and colonial interference highlights the transformative impact of colonialism on indigenous African traditions. The Ekpe House and the nsibidi writing system are emblematic of a vibrant cultural heritage that adapted to maintain its essence, despite external challenges.

Kalu, O. (1980). *Divided people of God: Church and politics in southeastern Nigeria, 1900-1966*. NOK Publishers.

Slogar, C. (2007). Early ceramics from Calabar, Nigeria: Towards a history of Nsibidi. *African Arts*, 40(1), 18-29.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chuka Odiike

I'm a dedicated civil engineer with a passion for infrastructure development and community empowerment. With a strong background in engineering, my work focuses on creating sustainable solutions for urban and rural development projects. Outside of my professional career, I'm deeply interested in Igbo history and culture. I actively explore ways to impact society by using historical lessons to inspire and educate others about the rich cultural heritage of the Igbo people, aiming to bridge tradition and modern development.



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