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Ukara Cloth: *The Nsibidi-Adorned Fabric of the Ekpe Society*

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE
IMAGE

Igbo Ekpe members wearing Ukara inscribed with nsibidi. Arochukwu region, Igboland, 1989. Photo by Eli Bantor, 1989.

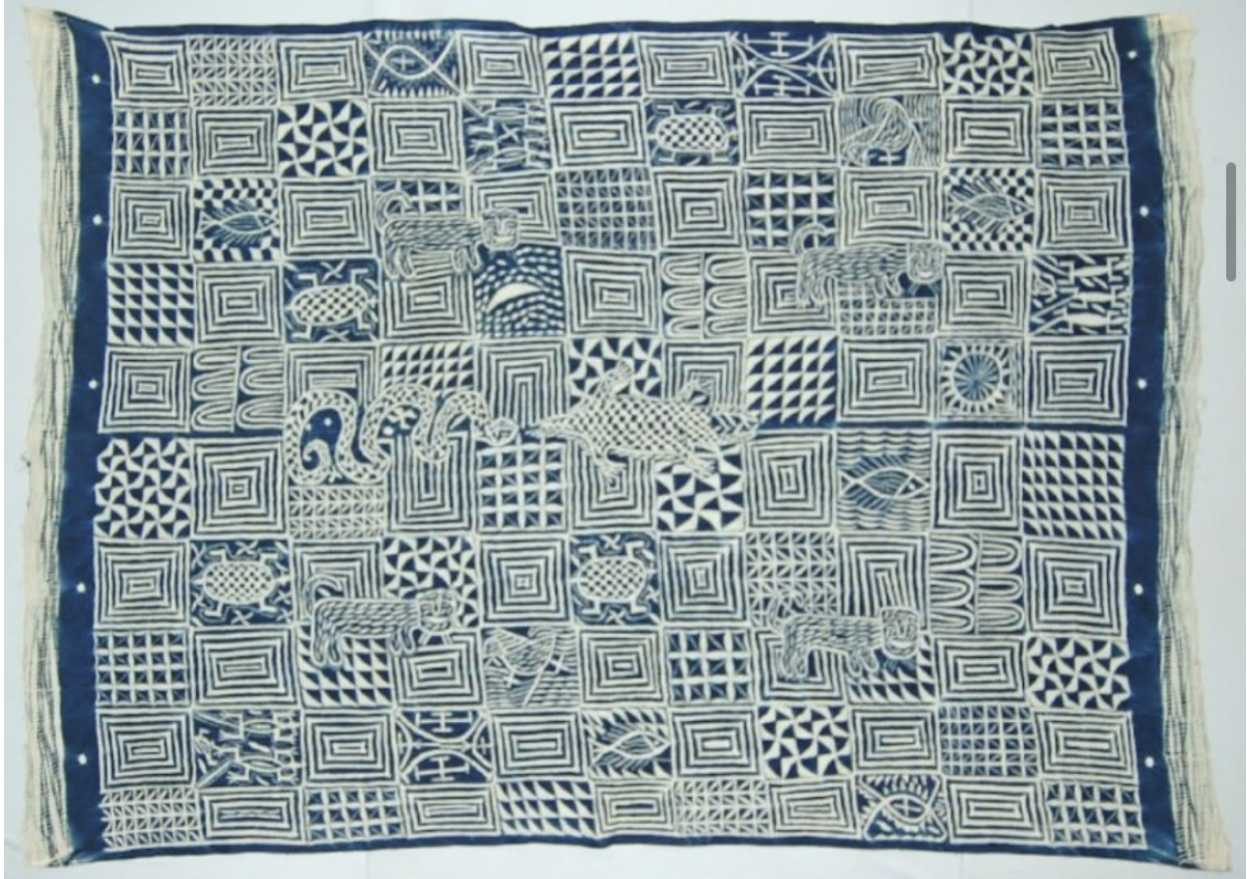
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UKARA CLOTH

Ukara Cloth: The Nsibidi-Adorned Fabric of the Ekpe Society

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Ukara cloth is a distinctive indigo-dyed textile adorned with nsibidi symbols, traditionally associated with the Ekpe society, a secretive socio-political and judicial institution found among the Cross River, Northeastern and Southeastern Igbo communities. Beyond being a fabric, Ukara cloth serves as a visual and cultural representation of status, knowledge, and power within these societies. The cloth is designed by the Igbo people, particularly those from Bende, Ohafia, Eda, and Arochukwu in present-day Abia State, before being dyed in the Ezilo region of Ebonyi State (Northeastern Igbo).



Ukara cloth, a sample sourced from Ezilo, Northeastern Igbo (present-day Ebonyi State) — British Museum.

01

Historical and Cultural Significance

Ukara cloth's history is intertwined with that of the Ekpe society, an institution that spread across the Cross River region, encompassing groups such as the Efik, Ibibio, and Cross River Igbo. While the exact origins of the cloth remain unclear, its prominence grew in the late 19th century, coinciding with the expansion of Ekpe influence and the increasing use of nsibidi symbols in ceremonial contexts.

Members of the Ekpe society wear ukara cloth as a status symbol, and it is also used to decorate Ekpe clubhouses (Ufu Ekpe). The designs, which include nsibidi symbols, communicate messages of power, wisdom, and societal hierarchy. Some of the symbols represent

proverbs, animals, human figures, and cosmological ideas, all of which are meaningful to the initiated members of Ekpe.

02

Production Process

The production of ukara cloth involves multiple steps, reflecting the collaborative nature of Igbo craftsmanship and trade networks:

1. **Designing the Cloth** – The detailed nsibidi symbols are first created by Igbo artisans, particularly in Bende, Ohafia, and Aro communities. These designs are carefully arranged to convey spiritual and social meanings.
2. **Resist-Dyeing in Ezilo, Ebonyi State** – After the designs are completed, the cloth is transported to the Ezilo region, known for its expertise in resist-dyeing techniques. The fabric is dyed using indigo, a natural plant-based dye that has been used for centuries in West African textile production.
3. **Distribution and Use** – Once dyed, the cloth is returned to its original communities, where it is worn by Ekpe members or displayed in meeting houses.

03

Symbolism of Nsibidi on Ukara Cloth

Nsibidi is an ancient ideographic writing system developed and used by the Ekpe society. On ukara cloth, nsibidi symbols serve various functions:

- **Status and Rank** – Certain symbols indicate a wearer’s rank within Ekpe society.
- **Philosophy and Proverbs** – Many of the symbols encode wisdom, history, and social values.
- **Spiritual Protection** – Some patterns are believed to carry mystical properties, offering protection to the wearer.

04

Colonial Impact and Preservation

During the colonial era, British officials sought to suppress indigenous secret societies like Ekpe, which impacted the production and use of ukara cloth. However, the fabric remained significant, and its production continued within clandestine circles. Today, ukara cloth is housed in major museums, including the British Museum, serving as a testament to the rich cultural heritage of the Igbo and Cross River peoples.

Ukara cloth stands as a powerful representation of Igbo artistic expression, spiritual knowledge, and social structure. Its complicated nsibidi symbols, combined with the unique indigo-dyeing process, highlight the deep-rooted traditions of the Ekpe society. While the cloth’s origins may remain uncertain, its legacy continues to thrive among Igbo communities and beyond.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chuka Odi

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 explores 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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