

Nsibidi: An Artistic Expression and Communicative System in South Eastern Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper attempts to discuss the origin of a communicative system (Nsibidi) which was prevalent in the pre-colonial period in the south eastern (presently, made up of Cross River, Akwa Ibom and Ebonyi states) Nigeria. The main focus is on its development, types, uses, discontinuity and ways of revival and prospects for modern usage; such as the use of Nsibidi symbols by theatre artists in the decoration of their stages when acting traditional plays, for body adornment in dance drama and for special effect on stage acting. Nsibidi is a pictographic artistic expression used in the pre-colonial era for different purposes, but because it was tagged as a secretive cult means of communication especially by the missionaries, many people avoided the usage, which is contrary to the present day ideology. However, the application of this pictographic expression by visual artists is still very low. The interpretation of the symbols are not part of this discussion. The researcher is of the opinion that it is time for this artistic communicative system be revised for modern use by visual and performing artists in addition to the use of Uli signs application

1. Introduction

The South Eastern state of Nigeria was created by the Federal Military Government on May 27th, 1967 from the former eastern region. It was later renamed Cross-River state in 1976 (Abasiattai 1987:47). It occupies an area of about 28, 585 square kilometers. The Northern part of the state is mainly woodland savanna, while the southern part is within the tropical rain forest zone and the coastal zone (the riverine area) where people are mainly fishermen (Akpan 1987:132). It should be noted that Akwa Ibom State was created from the Cross River State in August 27, 1987.

The south Eastern state has common boundary with Benue State in the North, in the Western side with Anambra, Imo and Rivers State. On the Eastern side, it is bordered by the Cameroon Republic while the Atlantic Coastline provides the natural boundary to the south.

The major ethnic groups are the Ibibio, Annang and Efik. Although the Ibibio language has a slight dialectical difference from Annang and Efik, they normally understand one another. The Northern part, also consisting of a fairly large number of ethnic groups, is generally referred to as Ekoi. They include the Ejagham, Bekwarra, Bette, Bokyi, Agwagwune, Bahumono, Yakurr, Agbo and the Mbembe. Their languages, ritual, religion, songs and proverbs are distinct from those of Ibibio, Annang and Efik.

In Calabar municipality, other groups live within the Efiks such as: the Oua and the Efuk (Ejagham group) and Ekajuk, Nkum and Mbabe. Other minority groups are Okobo, Yala and Ukele.

There are other major ethnic groups that fringe the state – Ijo from the south-west, the Igbo from the West, Tiv to the North, Idoma to the North West. Definitely, all of them had contacts with the Cross River people in one way or the other, example, through trade, inter-marriages, cultural, social, political and economic activities. This must have been responsible for the transmission of cultural norms within the different major, minor and international ethnic groups, in which Nsibidi, means of communication is a part. A symbol, according to Cambridge Advancer's Learner's Dictionary (2003) is a shape or object which is used to present something else, quality or idea. Symbols are associated with many countries, states, cultures and communities. Hence, some artists may use some particular symbols that one cannot decode, such as Picasso's Guernica of 1937 which was based on Spanish civil war killing about 900 unarmed civilians, portraying the agony and atrocities of war (Leedham:2009. N.p.). The art language he used to speak about the war and injustices perpetrated against the defenseless people are mainly symbols. Obiora Udechukwu, Uche Okeke, Cyril Aniakor and other artists from University of Nigeria, Art School, Nsukka use Uli symbols to create their works which can be disseminated by those who understand them.

2. Origin of Nsibidi

Nsibidi is referred to by Macgregor (1909:209) as "the native name for writing, used in then Calabar

district of the eastern province of southern Nigeria, more largely up the cross river and the inland". Macgregor further stated that the system of writing was practically the property of a secret society which men of age are initiated after undergoing a period of preparation. He agrees that some of these signs are known to the common people in the environment, although the vast majority are only known to the initiates. Macgregor was a Presbyterian missionary deployed to teach in Hope Waddel Training Institute, Calabar.

Kalu (1978:77) believes that Nsibidi is an ancient script, which existed before the coming of the Europeans. There are many assertions on the origin of Nsibidi. Yet it is clear that Nsibidi was used by the Igbo speaking people in Afikpo area, Calabar, including the inland (Akwa Ibom). Again Talbot's iconoclastic work in 1912 entitled "In the shadow of the bush" argued frankly that it was the Ekoi who originated Nsibidi. That is why he (Talbot) found a greater variety among the Ekoi than other tribes. That Nsibidi is a corrupt form of Nchibbidi which is derived from the verb "Nchibbi" to turn. And in usage, the word refers to agility of mind and therefore, cunning or double meaning.

Udofia and Inyang (1987:75) postulate that the people of Cross River invented a picture writing called Nsibidi in order to overcome the difficulties in communication in government establishments, trade and diplomacy. Udofia and Inyang also support the view that Nsibidi is used throughout Calabar, beyond Igbo-land and even extended to some areas of Cameroon before the coming of the Europeans. Also Dryrell (1911) who closely studied where the "Tattooed people" alleged to have invented the script came from recognized that some were Efik, while others came from various parts of Ikom, Obubra, Ekoi, Afikpo, Agwagwune, Bende and Edda. Nsibidi to a large extent is pictographic, thus, different social clubs devised their own symbols which they used over the years, although, certain signs became conventional. The above statement was also re-established by Ecoma (2007:107) who quoted Eyo (2005) "provides invaluable evidence that the Calabar terracotta have roots extending more than one thousand years into the past. The motifs and designs echoed the iconography of Nsibidi system of recording, hiding and transmitting knowledge employed by men and women of various associations such as Ekpe, Ngbe etc"

Another major problem is the belief of the people, that Nsibidi is the masquerade that kills. It is so because a particular masquerade comes out that period to reveal all evil doers of theft, adultery, fornication, killings etc. to the public, who are later tried and punished. It became clear that any evil committed in the dark is revealed in the day time, people became scared of the unknown. So during the interview for this research, the people were still skeptical to say anything about the "Nsibidi", for fear of disclosing their secrets. Most initiates do not want to interpret the signs/symbols for fear of being reported to the chief of Ekpe, Ekpo or Ekong.

However, Ikwemesi (1996:54) has already made it clear that "Nigeria is a multicultural country with different ethnic groups, has made it very difficult for any researcher from another ethnic group to get information". There are a lot of problems in the studying of Nsibidi but with an intelligent interpreter and a little understanding of the language a lot of facts were derived from the respondents.

The trusts of this paper therefore are to examine the:

- Nsibidi forms and types
- Uses and discontinuity
- Revival and prospects for future use

3. Nsibidi forms and types

Many Nsibidi symbols have been categorized into forms and types by different authorities, such as Macgregor (1909), Dryrell (1911), Umuoetuk (1985) and Edeke (1995). It should be noted that only those who can decode these symbols are able to understand their meanings. However, there are distinct forms and types relating to love affairs, articles in the house, sicknesses, public life, cults, decorations and judgement of court cases. Some of the body decorative motifs predominant in Ibibio land are derived either from cosmic element, numerical units and animal sources (Ekwere 2000:27). Here are some of the notable symbols of Nsibidi that are expressive of artistic design elements. The symbols below are compiled from Macgregor (1909) Dryrell (1911) Edeke (1995) Ekwere (2000) publications.

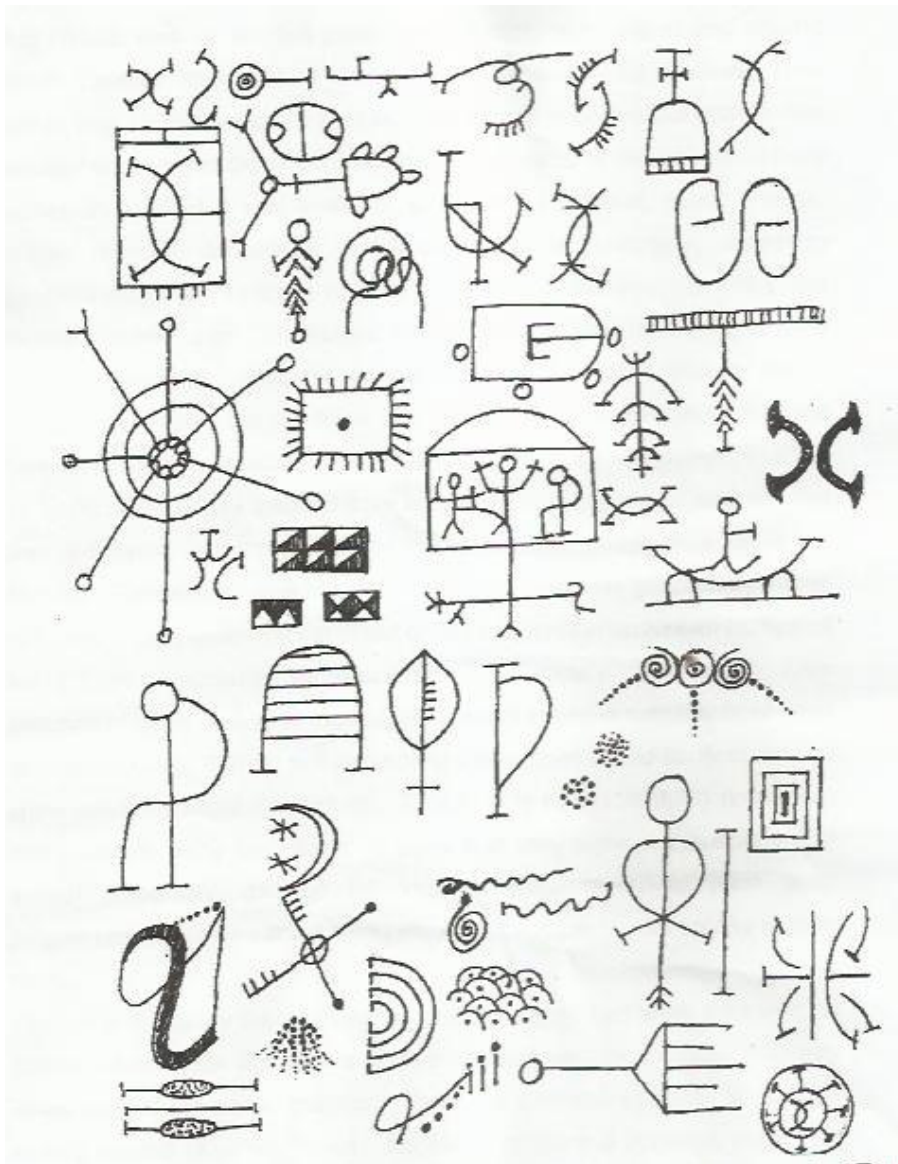


Fig 1: Nsibidi symbols compiled by the writer

4. Uses and discontinuity

Kalu (1978:84), Umoetuk (1985:40) and Ubom (1987:75) agreed that Nsibidi was an ancient pictographic writing used within and around South Eastern State before the coming of the colonial masters. They stated that Nsibidi was not restricted to secret societies but that it was secularized to meet the economic and social needs of the people. Ubom further stated that it was used for identification of label, public notices, private warning, declaration of taboos, amorous messages, reckoning goods and money, keeping records and body decoration. In 1904, the district commissioner T.D. Maxwell Esq. discovered that Nsibidi signs were used as decorative symbols on calabashes and native pianos during exhibition of native goods. Most Nsibidi symbols are also used for their body adornment as enumerated by Umoetuk (1985:40-49).

Its discontinuity resulted from the arrival of the missionaries who felt that their existence was threatened by this strange language they could not decode. The missionaries stressed that it was seriously guarded by secret cult, hence men were reticent about giving information on Nsibidi for fear of being fined or punished by the chiefs of the society. The people were accused of using Nsibidi to express love which covered a multitude of most abominable sins; that no self-respecting Efik person would confess that he knew anything about the writing. That is why Kalu (1978:83) noted that many people deny knowledge of it, so that they were not suspected of sexual immorality, as the missionaries were ready to pass such judgements since they entertained low opinion of the sexual probity of their hosts.

It is in history that the hieroglyphics of Egypt that were inscribed on stones which later became a source of religious and political authority developed in the same manner. The Li of Chinese symbols of pictorial writing started likewise. “Even the Maya of Central America made the same observation about the moon, stars and the sun and made their calendar. Mesopotamia also developed their own, known as cuneiform, although made use of lesser pictorial representation” (Adeseye and Ibagere, 1999:98). Yet, unfortunately for Nigeria, Nsibidi could not be developed because of its secrecy and immoral interpretation.

The researcher believes that secrecy is part of life hence the many different languages and dialects within cultural areas. Abamwa (2003:53-54) noted that symbols are used in Urhobo land for different situation to satisfy different motives in the south western part of Nigeria and that some of the symbols convey more than one meaning. Erukanure (2003:23) supported Abamwa by stating that “the history of these symbols, their source, development and economic importance illustrate the very essence of the values attached to their uses. After all, there are secret codes even within verbal communication. The Police, Army, navy and other secret services have secret codes which they use in cases of danger, help or privacy. It is the same way the people guarded their means of communication not to be exposed to strangers or non-initiates. For instance, the Ifa sacred writing of the Yoruba is a system as old as the race. Bogunmbe (1995:VIII) presented a standard table of Odu Ifa which indicates each of the 256 :Odus: or chapters of Ifa sacred teachings. Presently, it has been developed into binary base and into a scientific system. Why should Nsibidi case be different? Even if in its pictographic form it represents pregnancy, divorce, love affairs, illicit relationship, is it worse than the pornographic films being sold and watched in the western world? It is necessary to revise Nsibidi for a contemporary modern artistic use.

5. Revival and prospects for future use

The researcher is of the view that in this new millennium, people should see and look at Nsibidi as another medium of artistic communication system that can be used by the visual and performing artists. According to Okpu (1995:22-24) “Nsibidi, should no longer be seen as belonging to members of a selected society as recent studies on Nsibidi has shown. It can be elaborated and developed as a complex set of pictograms and ideograms as in Chinese writing”. This in turn will help to develop an indigenous writing that can be used to teach children in Nigeria from the primary school level instead of the use of French language. The secret services, police, army, Navy can also make use of it as an added secret code used as signals and also for danger.

Nsibidi is another form of pictographic expression that can be developed successfully by visual artists in all specialization areas. Nsibidi symbols are elements of designing, and if well synchronized, they form very interesting patterns and forms for any art work. Although some few artists have started using Nsibidi in their works (e.g. Wilfred Ukpong, El Anatsui, Ekpuk Victor, Lis Willis, Ekwere Soni, Ekanem Johnson, Violet Ita and late Okpu Eze), yet many artists are yet to be exposed to it as in the case of Uli. Presently not more than 5% of the artists in school of Art, Uyo, work on Nsibidi because of fear of the unknown and again condemnation of it as satanic, evil and devilish by the churches.

There are so many designs and motifs sold in our Nigeria Markets that we do not know how they were developed, their meanings and their inclinations. Yet we buy and use them as far as they are able to meet up with our aesthetic appreciation. Designs and motifs can also be developed in the same way with Nsibidi using our traditional methods and techniques such as tie-dye background with imposition of the motifs with tritik, batik, kokobelow and prints on blouses, bubu, gowns, tops and trousers. One can use these motifs on sewn gowns and shirts with the embroidery techniques. Some of the designs below are formulated using some of the Nsibidi symbols. They can be superimposed on a tie dye or batik background (see the garment on page 14) designed by the researcher.



Fig 2: Designs with Nsibidi symbols by the researcher



Fig 3: Nsibidi symbols on tie dye background

Theatre artists can also make use of these symbols in the decoration of their stages especially when acting traditional plays. The use of Nsibidi in body adornment is very relevant to mime in modern acting, dance drama and for some special effect on stage acting. Today we have safety signs, traffic signals, churches and religious signs. There are signs or symbols of the spirits – wind, fire, thunder, astrology and statistic representation.

The exponent of Uli signs, professor Uche Okeke, projected, promoted and propagated it as an artistic medium of communication, which is used greatly by University of Nigeria, Nsukka Art school students. Uli has given the art works from Nsukka art school a peculiar characteristic used to identify their works. The researcher believes that if Uli and Nsibidism are well integrated on fabrics and other visual art forms, they could be used as identification for the Nigerian artists or an individual as a Nigerian in any part of the world.

6. Conclusion

This paper has discussed the historical origin of a communicative system in the pre-colonial period in the south eastern (presently made up of Cross river, Akwa Ibom and Ebonyi states) Nigeria. The paper focused on its development, types, uses, discontinuity and ways of revival and prospects for modern usage.

The researcher noted that some artists have taken the bull by the horns to experiment with these pictographic forms in their subject matters and themes. Nevertheless, the percentage of the artists involved is still very low. There are a lot of these artistic expressions to be explored in Nsibidi by the various artists, especially in this changing modern world.

The writer is of the view that society of Nigerian Artists (S.N.A) and other artistic bodies should endeavour to organize seminar, conferences and art workshops to educate the public about our artifacts, lost cultures and the importance and functions of such communicative system. These will help to uphold our cultural art works or artifacts that are going into extinction. Papers presented should be published for documentation in the museums, art galleries or ministries of arts and cultures. Art works from the workshops should be exhibited and documented in catalogues for preservation and for posterity.

Other researchers should also look into their communities to check for such communicative systems becoming obsolete for their appraisal and promotion. Nsibidi symbols can be developed and incorporated into the Nigerian primary school curriculum. If French can be taught and learnt at the primary and secondary school levels in Nigeria, Nsibidi will be easier and faster to learn by the kids as it is more relevant to the cultural environment of the children.

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Biography

Dr Oghale Omojuwonvie Okpu hails from Isoko North Local Government Area of Delta State, Nigeria. She is a prolific and creative textile designer and a weaver since 1983. An Art Historian and Art critic since 2006. She is presently a senior lecturer and a former Head of Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria 2006/2007 academic session. She attended Auchi Polytechnic, Auchi and had O.N.D Fine Art 1977, she obtained B.A. Hons degree (First Class (Hons) in Fine and Industrial Arts, University of Benin 1983, MFA degree in textile in 1992 from University of Nigeria, Nsukka and finally had a Ph.D degree in Art History in 2006 from Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria. She has many group exhibitions and paper publications to her credit. She is married with two children.

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