

Masquerade and Local Knowledge in Urban Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria

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From 2009-2010, I completed 12 months of fieldwork in Nigeria for my dissertation. This experience built upon two previous trips during the summer months of 2008 and 2009. During my time in Calabar, I studied six masquerade societies and a local writing system known as *nsibidi*—a secret pictographic and performed and gestured indigenous language primarily used today by the Ekpe/Mgbe secret society, popularly known as leopard societies. My research explores notions of secrecy, power, knowledge, and agency through the local use of masquerade performance, rituals, and *nsibidi* to begin to understand what role secret societies play in postcolonial Calabar.

There are six major masquerade societies comprised of numerous factions throughout Calabar, each major type has its own distinctive masquerades, musical rhythms, and age range. Three have deep rooted histories for the indigenous populations of Calabar, while the remaining three are more recent. Part of my research was to examine how the more recent masquerade societies developed and were influenced by the more historic examples. This was done by comparing ritual,



performance, and initiation structures as well as conducting a systematic evaluation of symbolic elements and iconography. The analysis reveals that these recent masquerade societies were shaped by local and regional forces and influence, while the ritual structure and iconography were influenced by the previous societies, however the meanings and



uses were re-contextualized.

Another part of my project was to learn *nsibidi* and understand its artistry, contemporary function, and larger meaning in contemporary Calabar. Having been initiated into Ekpe during my first trip in 2008, as I returned to Calabar during subsequent trips, I continued my initiation through the different levels of the society, which included the learning of esoteric lore and *nsibidi*. As my research progressed, I began to learn that meanings and interpretations are not fixed, but personal and different from elder to elder or member to member. I was careful to learn from known masters of *nsibidi* since knowledge depends on levels of initiation. Still to my surprise, explanations were individualized and in some cases completely different from one master to the next. However, once this script becomes performed by way of gesture during *nsibidi* challenges to

establish power in Ekpe rituals and ceremonies, the language becomes more unified, but still quite irregular as member constantly invent different gestures of existing signs in order to confuse their challengers to demonstrate their agency.

The broader aspects of my research resonate with the concerns related to the social workings of ‘traditional’ culture in urban settings, the processes of change and adaptability of visual culture, and the multiplicity of meanings of local knowledge.

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