

## ***Nsibidi*: Indigenous African Inscription**

An ancient system of artistic symbols, *nsibidi* (also referred to as *nsibiri*, *nchibiddi* or *nchibiddy*) debunks the notion that information dissemination in precolonial Africa was accomplished only through oral traditional channels. Being Africa's oldest scripted form behind hieroglyphics, *nsibidi* has been used to document history, celebrate the people's heritage, instruct values, reinforce communication, deliberate on key issues and resolve conflicts.

Though it is indigenous to peoples occupying the southeastern region of modern Nigeria, *nsibidi* is more commonly associated with the Ejagham people of northern Cross River State and southwestern Cameroon, from where it is believed to have spread to surrounding ethnic groups like the Ibibios, Efiks and Igbos, influencing their art forms and undergoing notable transformation in the process. Among the Igbos, for instance, *uri* or *uli* graphic design is often cited as an offshoot of *nsibidi*. Essentially, while *nsibidi* does not correspond to any single spoken language, it has dismantled linguistic barriers that would otherwise prevent communication between various ethnic nationalities, thus facilitating interaction between the groups.

In its basic form *nsibidi* relies on abstract and pictographic signs. More specifically, it comprises representations of words and morphemes (logography) as well as representations of ideas and concepts (ideography), which form an extensive vocabulary storehouse. There are thousands of *nsibidi* signs covering a range of topics and emotions, including romance, warfare, sacred secrets and rites, social institutions, gender relations, family structures and legal hierarchies. In addition to delineating the human condition, *nsibidi* serves as a pathway to understanding the linguistic patterns of cultures that have developed and utilized the model.

Though there is no agreed or confirmed agreement on its source and meaning, *nsibidi* is believed to be several centuries old. Its icons have been found on excavated pottery, ceramic artefacts and headrests dating back to periods ranging between 400 and 1400 CE in the Calabar area of Cross River State. They also appear on walls and buildings, calabashes, swords, brassware, textiles, masquerade costumes, wood and bronze carvings and on human skin as tattoo designs. Interestingly, *nsibidi* imprints have also been etched on the ground as a means of prompt

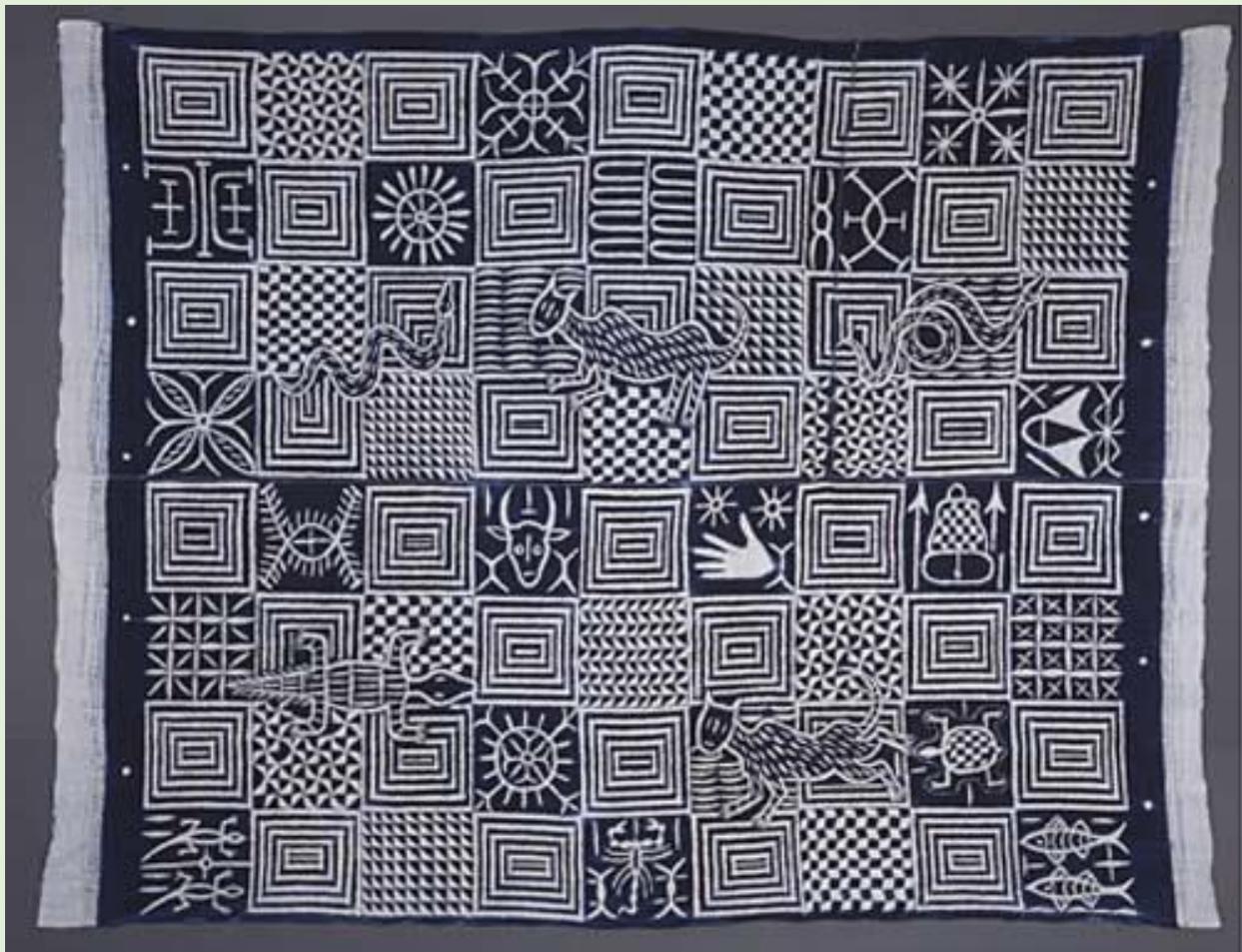
information dissemination, and have sometimes been outlined through symbolic gestures depicted aerially.

One origin theory curiously claims that nsibidi was devised and taught to respective peoples by baboons (see Macgregor, "Some Notes on Nsibidi"). Another school of thought traces its meaning to the Ekoid languages (a range of dialects like Ekajuk and Ejagham spoken mainly in southeastern Nigeria and adjacent Cameroonian regions) where it purportedly means "cruel letter." The latter is a direct reference to the strict and "cruel" policies adopted by secret societies that customarily had profound knowledge of the practice. Researchers have been particularly adamant about the initial and primary use of nsibidi by members of the *Ekpe* (leopard) secret society (also known as *Ngbe* or *Egbo*), which exists among the Ekois, Efiks, Annangs, Ibibios and Igbos, and in neighboring communities. Wielding extensive political and commercial influence, the leopard society held legislative, judicial and executive powers prior to colonization. Studies show that its members possessed and guarded deeper understanding of nsibidi even though the general public utilized its motifs to various degrees. The nsibidi-layered *Ukara* cloth of the *Ekpe* society, for instance, signals the wealth, influence and power of titled men and post-menopausal women. Sometimes tied around the waist as a wrapper, large pieces of the cloth are also used to decorate society meeting rooms on special occasions. Nsibidi visuals that typically appear on the cloth include abstract geometric and organic shapes, as well as more recognizable images like that of the leopard, its claws, the crocodile, the lizard, drums, gongs, staffs, feathers and manilla currency, all of which allude to wealth, authority and beauty.

Once taught in schools, nsibidi has experienced significant decline in appreciation and use resulting from the colonial emphasis on Western education and Christian conversation. However, efforts are being made by pro-African scholars to revive information and knowledge of the medium. Today, secret society members are conspicuously among surviving nsibidi-literates and cryptographers, and continue to ensure that this expressive, pictorial mode is preserved in modern society. Just as several African cultural and artistic paradigms were transported to the New World via the transatlantic slave trade, nsibidi was also carried to Cuba and Haiti where it has survived and evolved into *anaforuana* and *veve* iconic representations.

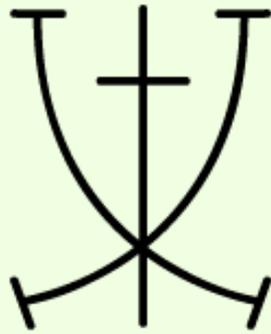
Nsibidi remains inspirational to the works of contemporary Nigerian artists. Victor Ekpuk is one of the leading exponents of the technique as a resource for creativity. His passionate interest in nsibidi is constantly portrayed in his narrative, medley-type creations, which rely heavily on patterns sourced directly from this spectacular language art.

-- Philip U. Effiong

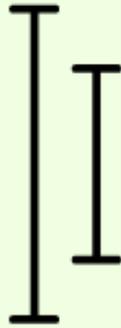


The *Ukara* cloth of the *Ekpe* society covered in nsibidi graphics

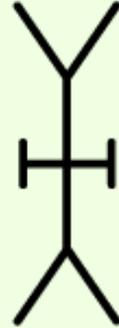
Source: "Nsibidi." *Inscribing Meaning*. Smithsonian National Museum of African Art. N.d. Web. 3 Sep. 2014. <<http://africa.si.edu/exhibits/inscribing/nsibidi.html>>.



'War'



'Child'



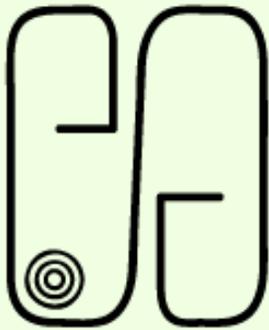
'Ézè'



'Tree'



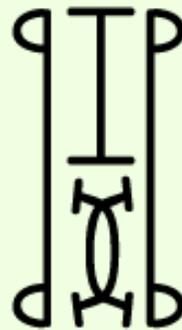
'Root'



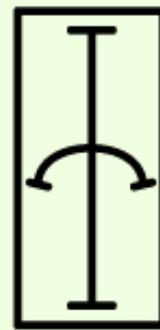
'Music'



'Snake'



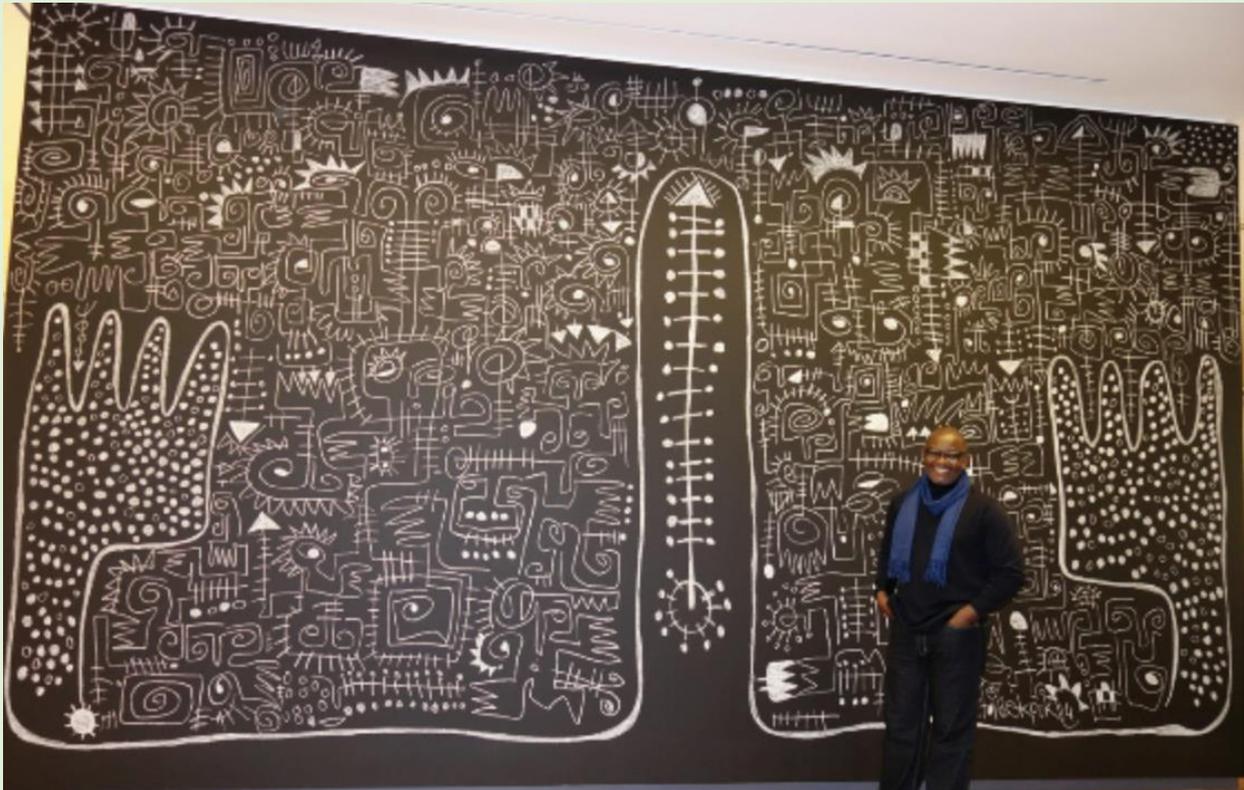
'Country'



'Bank'

#### Sample Nsibidi Characters and Meaning

Source: "Nsibidi Writings." *Trip Down Memory Lane*. 8 Jun. 2013. Web. 23 Aug. 2014. <<http://kwekudee-tripdownmemorylane.blogspot.com/2013/06/ekoi-ejagham-people-originators-of.html>>.



**Victor Ekpuk and one of his works at the Krannert Art Museum and Kinkead Pavilion, Champaign, Illinois, USA, 2014. The influence of nsibidi on his style is prominent.**

Source: "Source: Behind the Scenes: Ukara Cloth." *Toghal*. 22 Jul. 2014. Web. 8 Sep. 2014. <<http://toghal.com/2014/07/behind-the-scenes-ukara-cloth>>.



**Amasu Village, Arochukwu, Imo State, 1989  
Meeting of *Ekpe* members at the society lodge with giant *Ukara* cloth hanging as backdrop**

Source: "Negotiation of the Secret Society Cloth: An Exploration of Ukara." *Turchin Center for the Visual Arts. Appalachian State University*. 2014. Web. 7 Sep. 2014. <<http://tcva.org/exhibitions/892>>.

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