Ékpè 'Leopard' Association songs from the Cross River Region

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Abstract

For centuries, the *Ékpè* 'leopard' institution has been the vehicle for community justice in forest communities of the Cross River Basin in Nigeria and Cameroon. A regional culture, *Ékpè* is shared by many diverse linguistic communities. Our documentation and analysis of the content and contexts of songs performed by *Ékpè* members demonstrates that in spite of its geographic diversity, *Ékpè* culture has shared functions, aesthetics, ritual protocols and symbols, including a coded lingua franca called *Nsìbìdì*. *Ékpè* society songs are not secret and are performed in public displays as well as in the initiation and elevation of members. Here we translate from several original languages and begin to the task of poetic and social interpretation. Most songs collected were in *Èfịk*, the language of the coastal middlemen in the Atlantic trade. Some of the songs in the *Ékpè* corpus document historical events and commemorate historical figures. We hypothesize that the ritualized order in which the songs are performed, as well as their contents, may reflect the order of accumulation of *Ékpè* grades by the *Èfịks* from hinterland communities, particularly Usaghadet (or Usak-Edet, officially Isangele) in southwestern Cameroon. Through the trans-Atlantic slave trade, *Ékpè* culture was recreated in Cuba, where it is known as *Abakuá*.

Keywords: Ekpe songs, song performance, ritual protocols, Ekpe institution, Efik.

1. Introduction

In the context of rural communities with generations-long apprenticeship systems for performance artistry, music and dance expressions can offer insight into the history and values of their creators, as well as theie cosmological and philosophical views. In West Africa's Cross River region, such is the case with the Ékpè 'leopard' initiation society, whose esoteric symbols are intentionally camouflaged behind artistic expressions, which to a novice could appear to be mere entertainment.

For centuries, Ékpè was diffused along trade routes throughout the Cross River

region, where it played several important roles[1]: Membership conferred full citizenship rights in the community of initiation; depending on the level of title attained, it accorded enhanced political status in one's community; its sumptuary costumes evoked the type of reverence accorded to the 'toga virilis' in ancient Rome; Ékpè was the no-nonsense community police, with powers to discipline lawbreakers and even confiscate their property; Ékpè created rich entertainments with intricate dances, songs and body-mask performances by members.; finally, Ékpè was a school for esoteric teachings that revealed ideal stages in a person's life to achieve maturity within their community, as well as cognizance of the possibility of reincarnation.[2]

From 1846 onwards, Presbyterian missionaries who were invited to Calabar by Ékpè chiefs, convinced Ékpè title-holders to reform the society, for example by urging them to create and enforce Ékpè laws that prohibited markets on Sundays, as well as the killing of slaves for the burials of 'big men'.[3] From the 1890s-1960 under colonial rule, Ékpè's authority was diminished in urban areas like Calabar, but in the hinterlands it continues to fulfill some functions of governance. From the 1960s into the present, Nigerian churches, specifically Pentecostal, are attacking Ékpè and other once important initiation clubs as demonic or "satanic," to the point where several recent cases of Ékpè halls being destroyed by locals are on record.

We present the following Ékpè songs so that the enduring values of Ékpè can be understood from actual observation, through the trademark musical expressions of the group.

1.1 Background

Previous studies of the songs of initiation clubs include Green (1958), a collection of proverbial phrases sung during body-mask performance by the Ọ̀kọ̀nkọ̀ society, held to be an institution related to Ékpè among Ìgbo speakers in southeast Nigeria.[4] Udoka (1984) briefly describes Ekong warrior songs from southeast Nigeria. In southeast Angola, Kubik recorded songs of the Mukanda boys' initiation school, concluding that,

> Teaching and learning in the *mukanda* is largely based on the medium of song, reinforced by dance and other action patterns, though the meaning of the didactic songs is not always fully understood by the initiates (1971: 4).

In the absence of other sources, initiation songs can be used to offer historical insight. In the Cross River region, archaeological research is inadequate, despite some important

[1] Röschenthaler (2011).
[2] cf. Bassey (1998/2001); Miller & Ọ́jọ́ng (2012).
[3] Cf. Waddell (1963: 421-22; 438).
[4] Bentor (2002: 30-31) describes Okonko as a "related institution" to Ékpè, but with significant differences.

excavations by Professor Ekpo Eyo and his students (Eyo & Slogar 2008: 12). Likewise, few early written documents exist, despite scattered writings by merchants like Antera Duke (1780s). Later missionaries were not interested in local history.

Nigerian scholars contemplating these problems have indicated the value of local songs as historical data. Regarding Ịjọ (Ịzọn, "Ijaw") songs, Alagoa (1968: 16) writes that, "Song texts . . . are capable of supplying subtle insights, local colour and details beyond what archives and other forms of oral tradition can provide." Alagoa continues:

> The fact that songs are assessed within their society mainly as music constitutes one of its advantages as historical document. They contain information that is unlikely to be preserved in the direct historical traditions handed down formally or officially. . . . once songs have been made and preserved because of their musical appeal or the relevance of their content, they are more likely to survive the attempts of later generations to adapt them to contemporary taste or ideas than the formal traditions. Song texts and similar oral literary data may, accordingly, be said to have more of the 'neutral' or impartial qualities of the best archives. That is, that they were created for other purposes than to preserve history (Alagoa 1968: 3).

The possibility of treating songs as windows into the past is provocative. First one must acknowledge that the character and traditions of the peoples of southeastern Nigeria often conceive song performance as a source of entertainment to praise the sponsor of the event.[5] Nevertheless, there are songs that praise Èfịk historical figures like Eyo Nsa and his son Eyo Honesty (see song #8). It is possible that after their descdants promoted these songs, they have entered the general repertoire into the present.

While reviewing hundreds of Ékpè songs, we excluded many — particularly those from urban Calabar — as contemporary inventions improvised in the joy of the moment in ceremonial gatherings. The songs sampled here, by contrast, seem more likely to reflect old themes passed on through generations that evoke both the values of Ékpè and its historical development. Alagoa's observation that songs in the Niger Delta are characteristically simple in form, equally applies to Ékpè songs in the Cross River region:[6]

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[5] Recent examples were recordings in Calabar that praised incumbent Gov. Donald Duke [a Nnabo recording], and *Okop Unen Ike* ('All who hear will agree'), recorded in 2012 in praise of Arch. Bassey Ndem, a local businessman and title-holder.

[6] Nigerian historian K. Dike described the wide reach of the Niger Delta: "The Niger Delta occupies the greater part of this lowland belt and may be described as the region bounded by the Benin river on the west and the Cross river in the east, including the coastal area where the Cameroon mountains dip into the sea" (Dike 1956: 19). This songs of initiation societies in this culturally diverse area share formal elements.

> A song normally deals with a single theme and treats this in a brief, but arresting sentence or two. The solo singer states this theme once, sometimes twice, and the chorus repeats it. . . . Such prolonged performance is completely satisfying to a native audience. . . But the brevity of this element [the text] helps to make it easy for a chorus to learn quickly, and to preserve it in their memory for other occasions (Alagoa 1968: 3-4).

Similarly for songs of the Èfịks of Calabar, Erim wrote:

> A typical Èfịk song text deals with a single theme and treats it as briefly as possible. Indeed, an Èfịk singer states his theme once or twice with several refrains. In other words, the chorus repeats the theme which is often the central message (1990: 56).

In Cuba, Cross River peoples forcibly migrated through the trans-Atlantic slave trade, profoundly influenced Cuban popular music. Simple phrases are a rule in the rumba tradition — a communal form that informs other genres of dance music. Simple perhaps, but its meanings are pithy. The chorus may seem nonsensical to outsiders but understood by initiated participants. For example, the phrase: 'Guaguancó amana mana me dijo' is the chorus for a rumba-guaguancó.[7] Trained members of Abakuá (the Cuban variant of Ékpè) can parse this as a word game derived from a ritual phrase, 'Ekokórikó amana mana unbario', that refers to a ritually consecrated goatskin. Although rumba music is created for the enjoyment of the general population, leading rumba performers commonly reference initiation codes derived from African sources — among which Cross River traditions are prominent.

Whether in West Africa or its diaspora in the Caribbean, Alagoa's (1968: 4) observation is relevant: '[T]he amount of information to be obtained from song texts may not be large, but it is often of a type that would be absent from the official or formal traditions.'

To test the hypothesis that Ékpè practices have stable codes in spite of regional variation, we publish the following Ékpè songs in several languages. This hypothesis was presented by B.E. Bassey, whose book *Ékpè Èfịk* (1998/2001) draws parallels between the teachings of Ékpè and 'world religions' like Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam. Bassey observes that the function of Ékpè songs is to influence the psyche of initiates in order to enable their awareness of Ékpè teachings:

[7] "Repica bien el tambor." *Rapsodia Rumbera*, 1995, sung by Pedro Lugo Martínez "El Nené," member of the Orú Apapa lodge of Havana.

> During initiation, signs and symbols of appropriate colours are painted on designated areas of the bare-bodied neophyte as the drums accompanied by songs bring forth the music relevant to the grade into which the neophyte advances up the ladder of initiation. Music is Nsìbìdì [i.e., symbolic communication]. It aids evocation particularly when attended by dance forms and helps to leave a near permanent imprint on the psyche of the initiate such that aside of the password, his status could easily be observed as he enters a really active Ékpè Temple (Bassey 2001: 41).

Knowledge of Ékpè esoterics buttressed the authority of chiefs who, from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, policed piracy and inter-community conflict throughout the Old Calabar trading network that linked hundreds, if not thousands, of autonomous communities of southeast Nigeria and southwest Cameroon. Because the city-states of early Calabar lacked a centralized state with a standing army, the ability of locals to organize the massive trade flowing through the region baffled European observers, until American historian David Northrup presented his conclusions:

> The history of this region thus demonstrates the fallacy in the assumption that some form of large-scale state structure (empire, tribal-state, nation-state) must be associated with vigorous economic activity (Northrup 1978: 230).

Ékpè's decentralized system of governance appears to have served the functional equivalent of a state structure. Because of the Cross River's linguistic diversity, where from two dozen to 50 languages were spoken (depending on how one defines a lanauge), the Ékpè institution with its shared codes played a cohesive role. As trade expanded from the 1600s onwards, Calabar merchants who were Ékpè title-holders adjusted this institution to defend their interests in the emerging class society, thus distancing the institution from its original role as a community police with esoteric teachings. Starting in Calabar and diffusing into its hinterlands, Ékpè emerged as an institution dominated by merchant chiefs, mainly because surplus wealth from international trade was re-invested into taking titles in Ékpè and other initiation groups, as Ekong describes:

> The traditional methods of saving may also be regarded as intimately related to the re-investment of the individual's disposable surplus. For instance, a man who had successively good yam harvest may decide to be initiated into a secret society, or to take another wife, or to buy more farmland, oil palm groves or some more livestock. In either case his savings (disposable surplus) is re-invested because in taking membership of a secret society he does not only gain the prestige attached to such a society, but also gains its privileges the important one of which is the right to harvest palm fruits in the secret society's grove. Similarly, in taking a new wife, he invests in

additional labour while in buying more land or livestock he directly expands his factors of production (Ekong 1983/2001: 106).

With the advent of British colonialism in the 1890s, Calabar Ékpè title-holders were gradually forced to cede power to the new government. To symbolically demonstrate the power of the new regime, British authorities took over the leading Ékpè hall of the Efiks in Atakpa, converting it into a native court, while the Ékpè hall was relocated up the street.

While Ékpè another other traditional institution was displaced and humiliated by the British administration, research suggests that the surviving songs and performances of Ékpè are a living link to the past practice. This is possible through continuity in lineages of Ékpè title-holders and musicians, many of whom supported our collection of Ékpè songs, and the absence the industrialization of the Calabar region, which would have transformed the social structure. As Hobsbawm showed, the Industrial Revolution in Britain completely transformed the culture of the peasants, which abolished their early songs and dances, yet in southeastern Nigeria, there was continuity, despite the British program to bamboozal and demoralize any vestige of local dignity and integrity.

This exploration of Ékpè songs, therefore, intends to shed light on a centuries-old and still prominent institution that remains inadequately understood.

1.2 Methodology

Most of the songs published here were sung in Èfịk, but as noted others are in Éjághám, Kíọ̀n̄ (Ọ́kọ́yọ̀n̄), Lòkạ́ạ́ ("Yakurr"), and Ọ́rọ́ (Ọ́rọ́n). Since 2004, co-author Miller has collected Ékpè songs in Nigeria and Cameroon with help from Ékpè members. Ǹdábò' Etim Ika, an Ékpè specialist from Creek Town, helped transcribe many songs, and recorded others on his own initiative. Songs were also recorded in Havana Cuba, where an Ékpè variant has existed since the early 1800s (Miller 2009). For the Nigerian songs, co-author Professor Margaret Òkôn adjusted transcriptions, analyzed morphology, and marked tones. She accompanied Miller from Calabar to Ákámkpà-Ọ́kọ́yọ̀n̄ to elicit spoken versions of the texts, in cases where the sung version shows expressive distortion of the words and tones. Interpretations of the proverbial songs were obtained from various Ékpè intellectuals like Professor Eskor Toyo, himself a singer; Rear Admiral Ekpenyong Okpo, the Ìyámbà of an Èfịk lodge; Chief (Dr.) Emmanuel Nsan, a member of the council of the Obong of Calabar; and from Dr. Mathew Ọ́jọ́ng, who learned privileged knowledge as the Ntúfàm-Ìyámbà, the highest Ékpè title in the Éjághám-speaking area. Finally, an Ékpè song specialist who was raised in a family of traditional musicians and priests in Creek Town, Chief Eyoma E. Edet, reviewed the entire manuscript; we learned that many of the songs in Èfịk had been recorded in the field from his students, and Chief Edet made several corrections and clarified their contents.

The songs are cited in several levels of description:[8]

line 1 transcribed song text in original language, including lexical or phrasal tones as known.[9] In transcriptions, !=downstep; n̄=velar nasal. The sources of all songs — whether from living singers or audio recordings — are assigned unique abbreviations (e.g., [UB] for 'Umo, Bassey') that are appended in 'Song Sources'.

line 2 literal gloss of individual words and affixes, without punctuation.

line 3 idiomatic English translation, in single quotes.

After line 3 we note the source, and add other poetic and contextual explanations known to us.

1.3 Performance protocol

The Ékpè grade of M̀bọ́kọ̀ is represented by a resonant sound known as 'the Voice of Ékpè'. Whether in the port city of Calabar (comprising Èfịk, Èfût and "Kúọ̀", colonial spelling "Qua" sections) or in the Íkóm and Etung Éjághám-speaking areas in the middle Cross River region, M̀bọ́kọ̀ has no songs because M̀bọ́kọ̀ 'sings' for itself. When M̀bọ́kọ̀ sounds, all members must sit down, keep silent, and respond to its instructions. In Calabar, during an assembly in a lodge, the musicians often arrive first and warm-up by playing any song they like in any order, but once the chiefs appear, the *nkóng* 'iron gong' is placed upon the high table covered with plantain leaves. The chiefs then pour drinks to the ancestors, and M̀bọ́kọ̀ will sound. After title-holders greet M̀bọ́kọ̀, its resonating voice will instruct the group which rhythms to play. Each Ékpè rhythm is identified with a distinct initiation grade (also called a 'house' or 'branch'). In some lodges, songs are performed in the following sequence, which our presentation follows:

2. Èbònkó (symbolizes the 'universal mother')

3. Òkpòhò (poetically symbolizes 'a powerful king')

4. Ókùákàmà (represents the destructive forces in nature)

5. Ǹkàndà (symbolizes war, and poetically 'a war against ignorance')

[8] This is the standard practice in any literary text transribed by a philologist. Pierre Verger (1957) used the same model in his landmark study of Yorùbá chants: the original text, then word by word literal interpretation into a European language, and then a poetic interpretation.
[9] All songs also have a repetitive chorus, which is omitted here for space reasons.

6. Ǹyàm̀kpè (symbolizes discipline, as well as the transition from matter to spirit)

2. Èbònkó songs

In the Èfị̀k and Èfût Ékpè tradition, the Èbònkó grade is considered the repository of all Ékpè. Èbònkó is conceived of as the 'universal Mother' of Ékpè, and the Ọ́bọ́!n̄ Èbònkó (leader of Èbònkó) is charged with guiding the spiritual works of his lodge. The earliest known reference to the Èbònkó title is from 1773, when 'King George' of Old Town [Òbútòng, Calabar], who wrote that, "the New Town [Duke Town/ Àtákpà] people . . . has blowed abunko [Èbònkó] for no ship to go from my water to them nor any to cum from them to me."[10] In other words, Àtákpà Ékpè title-holders used Ékpè sanctions to block Òbútòng from trading with Europeans. In 1805 a European visitor in Creek Town went, "to see the king, and a chief and trader, Eyo Honesty, King of Ebongo [Èbònkó]."[11]

Èbònkó songs generally express happiness. Because women and children may participate, processions with Èbònkó rhythms and body-masks are celebrated by the entire community. Èbònkó is the only body-mask to move with grace. It uses flashy colors and mirrors, and is accompanied by other body-masks, called Ídèm Íkwọ̀ọ́, popularly known as 'the messengers'.

During the funerary rites of an important Ékpè title-holder, Èbònkó body-masks and rhythms are performed while carrying 'Ékpè from the bush'. In this event, Èbònkó is accompanied by Ànyán Ìsìm Èkpè 'long tailed Ékpè' players carrying bows and arrows, who perform a dance symbolizing the continuity of life.[12]

Ékpè songs also have a preamble, an introductory vocal statement with its own message, performed before the percussive ensemble plays. For instance, the first Èbònkó song of this study was recorded by the Ékpè Ita Group with the following two preambles:

1) Àmá é-ké-síné ìbá òwìrì-ké-ùsùk è-dí, ànàm àsíán ké ánwá Ǹ̀yàm̀kpè. [EI2b]

When you-past-tense-put on pants western-world pronoun-come, you-make display square Ǹyàm̀kpè.

'You wore trousers from the western world; you are coming to show off in Ǹyàm̀kpè square'.

During Ékpè ceremonies, one should tie a 'loin-cloth' around the waist. This gibe criticizes those who don't. In Calabar, those who attempt to wear trousers inside an Ékpè hall

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[10] Williams (1897: 544).

[11] Hallet (1964: 199); cf. Hart (1964: 56).

[12] Engr. Bassey (2015 pers. com.) reports that the dance of the Ìsìm Èkpè symbolizes the process of reincarnation of the spirit of the 'king' who has died. The role of Èbònkó dance is a local variant of a universal story, akin to Isis of Egyptian theosophy, where the Ídèm Íkw™© represent the messengers dispatched by Isis to search for her son Osiris (Bassey 1998/2001: 52).

will be fined; this is one of many protocols meant to defend local tradition against those imposed by the 'colonial masters'.

2) Ànáná úbọ̀k ùtòm, dí í-kà Pànyá; èkèrètè ń̄yéné ké úbók útòm! [EI2b]

you-lack hand work come let-us-go Pànyá; You-think I-have-not hand work?

You who lack a job, come let's go to Panyá; do you think I lack a job?

This song captures a conversation between two people: the first encourages the second to find work in Pànyá; the second rejects the invitation. In contemporary Calabar, the memory of those who left for Panyá (i.e., the island of Fernando Po, now Bioko) in the nineteenth century to find work on plantations remains strong; in fact, many were fugitives from slavery, and the work there was hard.[13] "Pànyá," from "España," refers to the former Spanish Guinea colony in some English varieties of Nigeria and Cameroun, as well as Cuban Spanish.[14] This preamble is also a pun that criticizes those who remain idle. After these preambles, the rhythm ensemble starts, and the following song begins:

3) Ń̄kákà Ékpè Éfìk, Ń̄kákà Ékpè Éfìk, ńdísé ọ́mọ́ yọ́họ́ ákàn ùrùà.[15] [EI2b][16]

I-went Ékpè Éfìk I-went Ékpè Éfìk spectacle he-filled more than market.

'When I attended an Ékpè Èfịk ceremony (celebration), the spectators I saw were

overwhelming – more than a community market crowd!' (Dr. Nsan)

Market days were great social arenas where farmers from dispersed villages of a region share ideas while trading goods. By comparison, on rare occasions such as the 'second burial' funerary rites of an Ìyámbà, the procession that carried 'Ékpè from the bush' could overtake a town, stopping all other movement and involving thousands of participants from surrounding communities. In Calabar in 1869, during the rites for King Archibong's brother,

[13] In December 1873 in Calabar, Rev. Anderson wrote: "I gave great offence to the authorities lately by not preventing some of those whom they claim as slaves from getting away to Fernando Po. I tell them that I cannot act as policeman or public informer for them — that all I can promise is that I shall take no active part in helping their slaves to run away from the country." (Marwick 1897: 516)

[14] Miller (2009: 128). The term Panyá for Fernando Po is also used in southwest Cameroon (Nebengu 1990: 77). A Cuban exile in Fernando Po documented the term as "Apaná' in the late nineteenth century (Valdés-Infante 1898: 68). In Cuba at the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries, Lukumí speakers rendered the term España as 'Epaña' (Cabrera 1996/ 1974: 242).

[15] Here the tones of Éfìk are High-Low to mark possession: 'the Ékpè of the Èfịk people'.

[16] Recorded by Ékpè Ita and his Ima Edi Obio Group, *Ase Traditional*, side A, 14:50-15:30.

an Èbònkó display was described by Rev. Anderson, who revealed his envy for Ékpè's popularity:

> The crowd itself, which could hardly be below 8,000, was to me a most interesting and affecting spectacle. Time after time I sighed out to those near me, 'Oh to have all these to preach to to-morrow!' (Marwick 1897: 465)

4) Èbònkó m̀fón èmànà. Èté àmá éyén, ábàn éyén ésíè Ékpè. [EI]; [EI2b].[17]
Èbònkó goodness birth father he-loves child he-initiates child his Ékpè.

'Èbònkó, blessed lineage. A father initiates only the child he loves into Ékpè.'

The initiation of a son (or daughter in some cases) into Ékpè by a father is a gesture of love and goodwill, because Ékpè membership is a status symbol. A 'free-born' person is automatically a citizen of his community, but if he is not an Ékpè member, he is not a significant citizen, because when the social elites meet, non-initiates are left out.[18]

5) Ḿmọ̀ óròò édí; èkédọ̀họ́ Mùtákà. [BD]; [BB2]; [EI2]; [NA]; [OOG]

they that they-come you-go tell Mùtákà.

'Those people have come; go and inform Mùtákà.'

"The invocation of Ékpè in Èfịk land is incomplete without reference to Mùtákà, an Èfût man. The Mbọ́rọ́kọ̀ player (Ékpè Ntot 'town crier'), who heralds Ékpè obsequies of an Ètúbòm (the head of an Èfịk House), recites the founders of Ékpè Èfịk Ìbókù thus:

Kpom, kpak, kpom (drum sounds, repeated with each line)

Ékpè Éyọ̀ Émà, Mbọ́rọ́kọ̀,

Ékpè Èsíén Ékpè, Mbọ́rọ́kọ̀,

Ékpè Mùtákà, Mbọ́rọ́kọ̀,

Ékpè Àsíbọ̀ng Èkòndò, Mbọ́rọ́kọ̀."[19] (Okpo)

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[17] The Èbònkó m̀fón èmànà song was recorded by Ékpè Ita and Ima Edi Obio Group, side A, 6:38-8:47.

[18] A 'free-born' is a person of royal lineage (Ekong 1983/2001: 8).

[19] cf. Simmons (1980: 84). "Bọ́rọ́kọ̀, n. one associated with Ékpè ceremony and who holds a staff, wears loin cloth, with chalk drawn on his body, and says some words of advice to people to the accompanimentof drums" (Aye 1991: 15).

This Mùtákà was related to the BàLóndó community of Ùsàghàdèt (Isangele) in Cameroon (the Èfịks refer to BàLóndós as Èfût).[20] In southwest Cameroon, Batanga are a clan of BàLóndó, while Mutanga is singular.[21] In Havana, Cuba in the 1860s, a lodge called Usagaré Mutánga Efó [i.e., Ùsàghàdèt Mùtákà Èfût] was created in his memory; it exists into the present. Of the other named Ékpè Èfịk founders, Èsíén Ékpè married an Èfût (BàLóndó) woman, the daughter of King Ambo of the Ndian region of Cameroon, also near Ùsàghàdèt; Àsíbọ̀ng Èkòndò had profound connections to Ùsàghàdèt through marriage or lineage (Eng. Bassey 2013 pers. com.).

This song and its variants place Èfịk Ékpè practice in an historical context wherein various community leaders contributed to the development of Ékpè through trade and diplomacy with neighboring groups, specifically those of Èfût (BàLóndó) heritage. In Cuba, Abakuá narratives claim that Ékpè was created by the Efó of Usagaré [Èfût of Ùsàghàdèt].[22]

6) Údún̄ [or 'úrún̄'] ómù, údún̄ ómù, údún̄ ómù; èènònù ònwì ọnyí? [TE]

'This country, this country, this country; is it not someone who owns it?'

Ọ́rọ́n language.

"I call this song the 'Ékpè anthem', because after all the chiefs had come to decide something, the authority of the community was invoked. Those people who owned the community were members of Ékpè, which was the authority of the community. In the past in this region, all free men, that is non-slaves, owned the country. And to plant the authority as co-owner of the country, your father admitted you into Ékpè." (Toyo).

"The song warns to those who boast unduly within the community, that their boastfulness is creating enemies. By this, people are advised to tread cautiously within the community to avoid incurring the wrath of others." (Ọ́jọ́ng)

7) Ḿbúkpó èdí-óóó, Èbònkó Éyọ̀ Émà ásàngà yè Ńdèm ọ́dọ̄k óbót! [EEE]
Ancestors join-us, Èbònkó Éyọ̀ Émà it-walks with Mermaid it-climbs hill!

Ancestors join us, Èbònkó Éyọ̀ Émà goes up the hill with the mermaid!

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[20] Hart (1964: para 177, 180).

[21] Chief E. Itoh, Paramount Ruler of the BàLóndó people, Ekondo Titi, Ndian Division, Southwest Cameroon (2004 pers. com.).

[22] Cabrera (1988: 518).

> The song invites the ancestors to join Ékpè and Ńdèm, because they are going together to the Ékpè hall. When an Ékpè masquerade is being prepared for performance, the ancestors and Ńdèm must be called to be informed and invited (Chief E.E. Edet 2015).

When delegations arrived by canoe for an Ékpè event, this song would be intoned as the travelers landed at the beach and proceeded to the host lodge. The idea is that Òdèm (the mermaid) was moving with the Ékpè in spirit. The phrase "Èbònkó Éyọ̀ Émà" can be sung by members of any lodge. It is used because Èfé Ékpè Éyọ̀ Émà houses the Èfé Àsábọ̀", or the Ńdèm shrine of Èfịk kingdom. This implies that, "Ékpè and Ńdèm move as one." (Ika).

"This song expresses spirituality relating to the movement of Ńdèm — the patron goddess of the Èfịks —with Ékpè. In addition, the word 'óbót' is used throughout the Cross River region to mean either 'up hill from the river'; 'government offices'; 'the abode of the early colonists'.[23] This is because the white men constructed their government quarters on the hills overlooking the rivers, and local elders would go there with Ékpè to negotiate." (Ọ́jọ́ng)

3. Òkpòhò

The Èfịk term Òkpòhò 'brass', refers to 'money', because from the 1600s, Portuguese merchants brought brass manillas to the Calabar region as a form of currency (Jones 1958). Because of this, the Òkpòhò Ékpè grade is popularly thought to represent wealth. But Ékpè specialists respond that this interpretation is simplistic. Instead, Òkpòhò is among the foundational Ékpè grades and represents a 'powerful and benevolent king', because in the past, the presentation of brass implied 'fire tested' and 'long lasting'. One became a revered leader only after passing through 'tests of fire', where one learned patience, calmness in the face of adversity, and generousity. Òkpòhò also signifies the natural creative process of building life. (Eng. Bassey 2014 pers. com.). The color yellow represents the Òkpòhò grade.

In 1852, Òkpòhò Ékpè grade was noted by Waddell during hostilities between two towns: "King Eyo [Honesty], hearing of it, hoisted the yellow flag of Brass Egbo [Ékpè] over his house, and sent out a strong band of Egbo [Ékpè] runners with their bells and whips, who soon dispersed the rioters."[24] By evoking the presence of Ékpè — the unchallengeable

[23] Throughout the Cross River region in Nigeria, the British constructed colonial government buildings on hills. "The Government Hill at Calabar, Itu, Uyo and Eket developed like the Mission Hills into self-contained architectural complexes consisting of administrative offices and residence, military and police barrakcs, hospital, recreation club and European cemetery" (Braide & Ekpo 1990): 145). In Calabar, "The Old Residency . . . was erected on the top of the consular Hill in 1884" (Adediran 1996: 9). In Ikom urban, colonial government buildings were also built on top of the hill. In Akwa Ibom State, Obot Akara "hill of the ruler" L.G.A. was named after a colonial customary court. (Nkoteto 2014).

[24] Waddell (1863: 507). cf. Edem (2011: 8); Hart (1964: 56, 65).

authority of the land — , and specifically the Òkpòhò grade that was held by King Éyọ̀, the 'powerful king' imposed peace on his community.

8) Òkpòhò éyèn Éyọ̀ éyèn Ìnyàn̄, m̀bàkárá ádá édí, m̀bàkárá ádá édí. [UB]
Brass-of child-of Éyọ̀ child-of Ìnyàn̄ whiteman[25] he-bring come.

'The brass belonging to Éyọ̀, a child of Ìnyà¿, was brought by the white man.'

In Èfịk, Ìnyàn̄ means 'river', and it is also a personal name, so the song has two interpretations:

> All the riverine areas of coastal Nigeria have water goddesses. Since the historical route to wealth was through European merchants who arrived by sea, this song is an appeal to the water goddess to increase their trading activities with white merchants, so that they can acquire more wealth (Ọ́jọ́ng).

Éyọ̀ Òsà (d. 1820) was a non-royal person in Creek Town who received a royal wife and an Ékpè title for his heroic defense of Èfịk commerce. His son, Éyọ̀ Honesty II (d. 1858), was also conferred with Ékpè status to legitimize both his free-born status and ability to rule, through the matrilineage of Ìnyàng Esien Ékpè Oku Atai, and to the annoyance of Éyọ̀ Émà Atai lineage in Otung and Cobham Town.[26] Honesty II became a wealthy trader and enriched Ékpè Èfịk Ìbókù by introducing the Òkpòhò grade.[27]

This example confirms Talbot's (1923: 82) observation that: "Perhaps the surest claim which a Nigerian pagan can make upon the remembrance of posterity is to found a new cult or invent some new play."

"The mother of Éyọ̀ Honesty II was Ìnyàn̄ Esien Ékpè Oku, and his pet name was 'Éyọ̀ éyèn Ìnyàn̄'. Thus the song should be translated as: 'The brass (wealth), belonging to Éyọ̀, son of Ìnyàn̄ Esien Ékpè, was brought by mercantile trade between Éyọ̀ with the white merchants.' Because Éyọ̀ Honesty brought this grade into Èfịk Ékpè, the grade is sometimes referred to as 'Òkpòhò éyèn Éyọ̀ Ìnyàn̄'."[28] (Okpo)

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[25] The term *M̀bàkárá* 'white man' is tonally distinct from *M̀bàkàrà*, the name of an Ékpè grade.

[26] The dates of Eyo Nsa and Eyo Honesty are from Aye (2009: 1), who refers to Hart (1964: 125) although Hart's genealogy has no dates attached.

[27] Thanks to Ètúbòm Essien Efiok (2010 pers. com.), and to Admiral Okpo (2013) for information regarding Eyo Honesty II.

[28] Eyo Honesty II's mother was Inyang Esien Ékpè Oku, whose father was Ètínyûn Esien Ékpè (Oku 1989: 107).

4. Ókù-ákàmà

Talbot noticed the specific rhythms of the Ókù-ákàmà grade while describing the burial process for an Ékpè title-holder in Calabar:

> Next morning . . . the announcement [was] made: 'Today Okuakama Egbo [Ékpè] is going to bush'. Again, warning bells were heard ringing and drums beating, but in a different manner from those played for other grades. In the afternoon Okuakama came back to the house of mourning and performed according to custom (1923: 166f.).

Engr. Bassey (2015 pers. com.) reported that in Calabar, all the titles of Ékpè grades are imported words. This grade is really called Aku-akama, but Aku is not an Èfịk word. But in Calabar this grade has become known as Oku-akama, because in Èfịk, Oku means 'priest', and akama 'to hold'. Therefore, locals interpret this as 'it is the priest who is in charge', or 'the title-holder holds the key', but this is folk etymology.

Before the division into sexes of life, hermaphrodites existed and could reproduce. This is what Oku-akama represents. He represents a magician who holds the secrets of creation. But because of this enormous power, he can be destructive. An esoteric view is that destruction is a nessesary and important process of growth.

In Èfịk history, when somebody transgressed the norms of society irrevocably, and Ékpè chiefs judged them as guilty, the Oku-akama mask with its attendants would be sent to destroy their compound, effectively banishing the person and his entire family from society. The dance of Oku-akama pantomimes an elephant accompanied by a baby elephant. Because of Ókù-ákàmà's size, it is useless to fight it. One can only run.

9) Ókù-ákàmà ḿmáhá ídó, ídó Ókù-ákàmà ífọ̀nké ọ̀fọ̀n. [EE]; [EE5]; [BB2]; [IE]

Ókù-ákàmà I-love not character character Ókù-ákàmà it-good not-at-all

'Ókù-ákàmà, I don't like your attitude.'

This is a boast that Ókù-ákàmà is a wild and intolerant destroyer, who used to demolish the palm thatch houses of persons who transgressed Ékpè laws.

"Every Ékpè grade has its functions in the service of the institution, e.g., discipline, entertainment, errands, enforcement, spiritual assignments, and so on. Ókù-ákàmà is a combat-ready grade that can destroy any object in its wake. This is why it is sung that, 'Ókù-ákàmà ífọ̀nké ídó, or 'Ókù-ákàmà is ruthless'." (Nsan 2013)

10) Mànkọ̀ọ̀n békéd déwé déwé tété òwúdnà–eee. [EE3]

I-was strong body day day father that died-emph

'Ékpè strengthened me the day my father died.'

Kíọ̄n language.

The song alludes to Ékpè burial rites that treat the deceased with great respect while intending to send the man's spirit to its proper place in the afterlife.

5. Ǹkàndà

The Ǹkàndà grade represents 'active intelligence', and the great esoteric teachings of Ékpè, to the point that for one to receive the Ǹkàndà title means that one has received 'all of Ékpè' (Eng. Bassey 2010 pers. com.).

Ǹkàndà is reported to have entered Èfịk Ékpè from the Tom Shotts community at the western mouth of the Cross River (cf. Waddell 1863 map), where it was known as a 'war deity'. The received tradition is that in 1821, an Èfịk prince known as Duke Ephraim conquered Tom Shotts, "assisted by some English seamen."[29] Èfịk librarian E.E. Oku portrayed Duke Ephraim in a heroic light: "When the people of Tom Shott (Efiat Islands) plundered a vessel and killed the Europeans, he [Great Duke Ephraim] destroyed their town and made them tributary to him."[30] "Tradition has it that it was during the fight in 1821 that 'Ǹkàndà' was introduced into Ékpè Èfịk Iboku by Éyọ̀ Àsíbọ̀ng Minika, who later became King Archibong II."[31] Oku reported that Duke Ephraim ordered Éyọ̀ Àsíbọ̀ng to launch the attack on Tom Shott:

> This was because Éyọ̀ Àsíbọ̀ng, whose mother Minika Udah came from Udah in Tom Shott, was the Èfịk sea-dog and war-lord and knew every part of that area. Employing all the military tactics known to him, Éyọ̀ Àsíbọ̀ng lured and killed the Pirate King and among the spoils of war taken back to Calabar with him, were all the paraphernalia of the Ǹkàndà. It was at this time that the 'Ǹkàndà Ékpè grade' was entrenched in Ékpè Èfịk Iboku and later used on royal, ceremonial and military occasions in Old Calabar. This grade of Ékpè is sometimes called 'Ǹkàndà Éyọ̀ Àsíbọ̀ng' after the prince who in later years became King Archibong II (Oku 1989: 15-16).[32]

[29] Crow (1830: 270-71). Latham (1973: 50) cited Crow (1830) on this point, while Behrendt & Graham (2003: 56) cite Oku (1989).
[30] Oku (1990: 23) quoted Adams (1822).
[31] Oku (1990: 23-24).
[32] See also Oku (1989: 65-66).

But upon analysis, Ékpè specialists respond that Ékpè grades cannot be captured in war; they must be received through lengthy diplomatic relationships. Engr. Bassey (2013 pers. com.) reported:

> The transfer of potency of an Ékpè grade from a community to another is a complicated and delicate assignment, because it involves a thorough understanding of the exoteric and esoteric workings of that grade. This process must not be rushed, otherwise the investors may reap confusion. A sponsor must be in control of governmental power, wealth and time to be able to see the investment through, meaning that there must be a team to go to the sellers and stay there for some time to learn. Or the sellers must come to stay with the purchasers for some time and teach them. That is why the simplistic narrative creates doubts.

Ǹkànḍà is known as a 'god of war' because its fast rhythms energize its players, including the Ǹkàndà body-mask with seven attendants who each carry a tool: a pair of buffalo horns; an Ékpọ̀ 'hoop' to capture a victim; a forked stick to hold the victim's neck; Okpoyong 'a heavy stick'; a Danish gun; a machete; and an empty basket for the victim's head. This fearsome play creates a public spectacle to demonstrate the capturing of victims who have been judged as defaulting on Ékpè laws, thus the phrase: Ówó í-mía-ghá àtá yè Ékpè í-dúng ǹtàghá úfọ̀k, 'nobody challenges Ékpè while living in a thatched house'. But in reality, all this equipment is not necessary to capture a victim, which can be done easily and openly by other means. Instead, Ékpè specialists claim that this play is entirely metaphorical.

On rare occasions during the funerary rites of an important title-holder, an Ǹkàndà House may be constructed to display the inner teachings of this grade; only a select few are allowed entry, and even fewer understand all that they see. Ékpè specialists conclude, however, that the Ǹkàndà dance is metaphorical for the ideal of 'killing ignorance'. The seven dancers holding instruments are dressed in white cloth, signifying spirituality. The Ǹkàndà House teaches self-discipline as a way to defeat the obstacles and enemies of progress in life. These aspects of Ǹkàndà cannot be captured during war; they must be taught by the owners to those who want to receive them only after the payment of fees and other diplomatic exchanges, and this takes time to accomplish. The boastful story of capturing Ǹkàndà from Tom Shotts in 1821 does not stand up to analysis.

Evidence shows diplomatic relations between Èfịk leaders and Tom Shotts as early as 1720, when Scottish merchant Alexander Horsburgh visited Tom Shotts and observed interactions with Èfịk merchants.[33] Sixty years later, in January 1786, Antera Duke reported

[33] Behrendt et al (2010: 19, 54).

sacrificing a goat with ‘King Tom Salt’ after resolving a disagreement related to Ékpè.[34] These negotiations suggest that the Ǹkàndà grade was received by Èfịks much earlier than 1821.

11) Òkpô Ǹkàndà ọ̀fọ̀n Ǹkàndà í-kúné-ké. [OT]

non-initiate Ǹkàndà cloth Ǹkàndà he-tie-not

‘A non-initiate may not wear the cloth of Ǹkàndà.’

Blue and white *ùkárá* cloth with Ǹsìbìdì signs, commonly known as “Ékpè cloth,” is worn by title-holders as a ‘wrapper’ around the legs. A reference to “Ékpè cloth” is found in Antera Duke’s diary from November 11, 1786.[35] This song refers to *ùkárá* as Ǹkàndà cloth since it is also used to cover the Ǹkàndà body-mask in Úrúán and Èfịkland.[36] Larger pieces are also hung on the walls of Ékpè halls as a banner. During the funerary rites for a lodge title-holder, a procession that brings ‘Ékpè comes from the bush’ in a mobile ‘cage’, *ùkárá* cloth is used to cover the ‘mystic leopard’.[37]

The cloth is highly prized and to wear it is an assertion of Ékpè status, so the wearers should expect to be challenged about their rank by other members through interrogation using Ǹsìbìdì signs. Those unable to defend their status inside the Ékpè hall may be stripped of this cloth.

6. Ǹyàm̀kpè

Ǹyàm̀kpè songs are the most abundant and frequently performed in Ékpè practice, perhaps because its rhythms are energetic, and those who perform its dance use complex Ǹsìbìdì signs to communicate with the seated chiefs. The earliest known reference to Ǹyàm̀kpè comes from the diary of Èfịk trader Antera Duke, who, “on February 8, 1786, . . . walked up to the palaver house in New Town and installed ‘Grandy Egbo’ (Grand Ékpè, Idem Nyamkpe) there, followed by drums and dancing all night.”[38] Ǹyàm̀kpè acted as the executive branch of Ékpè, that is, the community police. The occilating movement of its headgear represents a transition from the spiritual to the physical world, or vice versus.

In parts of Cameroon, Ǹyàm̀kpè is the name of the Ékpè society itself. In the 1920s,

[34] Behrendt et al (2010: 36, 181).
[35] Behrendt et al. (2010: 191).
[36] Bassey (1998/2001: 25).
[37] Bentor (1994: 325); Battestini (1997: 160).
[38] Behrendt et al. (2010: 236).

the British author of a colonial intelligence report wrote:

> Nyan̄kwe, some say, originated at Ayikan in the Kumba division; others say the Calabaries created the society. In the Mamfe Nya¿kwe societies the language used is Bakundu (Kumba division). ("Boki" 1926: 38-39)

Variants of the term are used in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea, and in the Cuban cities of Cárdenas, Havana, and Matanzas.[39]

The following are three preambles to Ǹyàm̀kpè songs:

12) Íkọ́ọ̀ ké Ékpè àmì ǹsá. [AC]

trouble in Ékpè I reject

'When there is trouble involving Ékpè, I won't get involved.'

"This song expresses the fear that community members have for Ékpè sanctions. 'If Ékpè is involved, I will stay clear to avoid trouble'." (Ọ́jọ́ng)

The text refers to an Ékpè "injunction on a property thereby preventing its use" (Ekong 1983/2001: 148). An equivalent prohibition has been described in the Cameroon Grassfields:

> In the past, when orders were being given for communal work, communal hunting, prohibitions on attending certain markets for fear of epidemics and the like, they were always given in the name of the regulatory society, not of the 'fon' [chief]. (Nkwi & Warnier 1982: 60)

The Ngwarong society of the Cameroon Grassfields had representative masquerade officers who:

> . . . are supposed to be ancestral spirits incarnate for special duties such as restoring the violated mores of the tribe by inflicting punishment upon the offenders. The punishments are either confiscation of property, whippings or execution of the malefactor. The theory is that the punishment is done by ancestral spirits. In this way the creation of a blood feud is avoided (Jeffreys 1962: 91).

[39] Northrup (1978: 218); Miller (2009); Aranzadi (2012). Ékpè society has various regional names. In Èfịk, Ékpè; in Bakor, 'Nyàmàngbè' or 'Nyàngbè'. The Efuts call it 'Mgbè'. In the Upper Cross region, "Nangbei" and "Nankbei" (Partridge 1905, 215). In the Mamfe region, "Ngbe or Nyangbe" (Mansfeld 1928, 26).

13a) Ékédì ké éyò ését Ìdùà ébìet m̀bàkárá. [EE2]
it-was in era past Ìdùà they-resemble whitemen

'In the old days the people of Ìdùà acted like the British.'

13b) Ékédì ké éyò ését, Èfịk ébìet m̀bàkárá. [IE]

it-was in era past Èfịk they-resemble whitemen

'In the old days the people of Èfịk acted like the British.'

In 1879, a political agent of the British named Joseph Henshaw (whose Èfịk name was Effanga Ekeng Ansa), established a trading base in the Ìdùà community in Ọ́rọ́n.[40] Ìdùà is therefore linked to Calabar, particularly Henshaw Town, and proud of its British traits. A colonial map identifies the Èfịk ports where British operated as "Duke Town (Calabar)," "Idua (Orron)" and "James Town" (Leonard 1906).

The second variant of this song, sung by the Èfịks, recognized that they wore English clothing, spoke English, accepted Christian religion and schools before their neighbors. B. E. Bassey describes the pride of Èfịk elites in their long British association:

> Although Calabar indigenous population comprised Èfịk, Qua and Èfût, it was the Èfịk that brought the Town into prominence through her spirit of enterprise . . . The Èfịks saw the advantage of her contact with European traders and proceeded to shut others from the benefits of trade and subsequently education . . . The advent of missionaries in 1846 further improved the horizon of Èfịk. Some aspects of British culture found accommodation amongst Èfịk. A typical example is the adoption of British type coronation which the other tribes adopted well over 100 years later . . . [T]he people of Calabar, male and female, were brought up to feel that there is no place like Calabar. To an indigene the only [other] town that is not 'bush' is London. (Bassey 2011: 1-5)

The following are Ǹyàm̀kpè songs:

14) Òkpó òkúkâ ésùk, Ǹyàm̀kpè ké ésùk ádá. [EE5]

[40] Talbot (1923: 292); Talbot (1926/1969 v. 1: 210); Oku (1989: 203).

Òkpó he-not-go beach Ǹyàm̀kpè on beach he-stands

'The non-initiate should not go to the beach; Ǹyàm̀kpè is standing there.'

In the past, when an Ékpè delegation from one riverside community visited another, the position of the Ǹyàm̀kpè body-mask positioned at the front of the boat forced non-initiates to leave the beach as the boat arrived. This song informs that there was a time when Ǹyàm̀kpè roamed the streets of Calabar in the daytime, whereas in the present this body-mask performs only in secluded areas and at night.

Starting in 1846, Presbyterian missionaries in the Calabar neighborhoods of Creek Town [Óbiókò] and Àtákpà observed that Àkwá Édérí, the eighth day of every market cycle, was also called 'Grand Ékpè day', when Ǹyàm̀kpè was played. Ǹyàm̀kpè's body-mask carries a whip in the right hand to mete out punishment to non-members who appear in public when Ékpè is in session, but as a British subject and not an indigene, Waddell was spared such punishment. In 1846 he merely observed:

> Grand Egbo [Ékpè] day' came round and was an idle day till afternoon, when the king's great bell was rung to intimate that 'Egbo done', and people might go to work or market . . . On our way from work to the beach, an Egbo runner [Ékpè body-mask] accoutered in very outré habiliments [eccentric attire] from head to foot, and masked, with a long whip in his hand, was rushing from place to place, and approached me, but suddenly turned and darted off in another direction (Waddell 1863: 258-59).

Every two months, Àkwá Édérí coincided with Christian Sunday, and the missionaries sought to subdue Ékpè's competing spectacle. Gradually, they convinced Ékpè title-holders to ban Ékpè altogether on Sunday. Later in 1846, Waddell suggested a conflict between Ékpè practice and the Christian Sunday:

> The first Sabbath was grand Egbo [Ékpè] day, and the king [Eyo Honesty II] proposed that we should defer the meeting, as only a few gentlemen could appear. On the contrary, I urged him to defer his Egbo [Ékpè] observances for the sake of God's holy day, and he did so. (Waddell 1863: 275).

By 1848, Waddell had convinced King Eyo Honesty to prohibit Ékpè practice on Sundays:

> The following Sabbath was 'Yampy [Ǹyàm̀kpè] Egbo day,' when Egbo runners [Ékpè body-masks] and bells had always ruled the town. Then first, Eyo forbade them running on God's day, forbade work and play also on Sabbath, and inspired the hope

> that we should soon get the Sunday market also abolished in Creek Town. (Waddell 1863: 376)

With the support of Ékpè sanctions, the missionaries transformed the calendar week in Calabar.[41] Consequently, 'grand Ékpè' day is no longer observed in Calabar. In the early 1900s in Calabar, Talbot reported a rare Ǹyàm̀kpè body-mask performance in the daytime as part of the 'second burial' funerary rites of a 'king':

> Next day the whole town was unsafe for non-members of Egbo [Ékpè]. Women and children stayed trembling within their houses, behind closed doors. The 'Nyamkpe Image ran through the town, bearing green leaves in its [left] hand, with which it proceeded to beat the sham coffin, which, silk-covered and weighted with plantain stem, was brought out for the purpose. (1923: 161)

At some point, probably in the late 1800s, the Èfịks ceased displaying the majority of their Ékpè masks in the daytime. The Ǹyàm̀kpè body-mask for example, appears at night (or on rare occasions in the daytime only in secluded places) and exclusively in the presence of initiates. The same is also true for the body-masks of the Ǹkàndà, Oku-akama, and Mbakara grades. In Èfịkland, the only Ékpè mask that continues to be displayed in public is Èbònkó, because it represents the female aspect of Ékpè; graceful and attractive, it is popular in the community. There appears to be no reference to this transformation in the historical literature, but one is tempted to think that because of the presence of colonial British administrators and their armies, Èfịks concealed these powerful masks to protect them. To the contrary, Engr. Bassey, an Èfịk Ékpè specialist who wrote a book on this topic, points to the excesses of accumulated wealth, to excessive feasting with alcohol, and to the inhuman treatment given to enslaved people, all resulting from the trans-Atlantic slave trade:[42]

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[41] cf. Edem (2011: 8-9).

[42] In his book, Bassey sees this transformation from 1825 onwards, when "The nobility . . . engaged much of their time on feasting, wining and dancing, particularly after materially-rewarding mercantile links were established with England" (Bassey 2001: 55).

"Throwing [Ékpè's] divine teaching and tenets to the wind, the initiates continued the practice of using their positions to debase the less privileged in society. Such inhumanities saw the birth of a whirlwind that brought no good, and soon, an avalanche put into motion currents of decadence that swallowed up the spiritualy of the fraternity. . . . The abuse of Ékpè power together with the excesses highlighted above . . . caused the loss of the intrinsic value of Ékpè and encouraged the growth of alternative value, the conversion of Ékpè into a commercial enterprise" (Bassey 2001: 56).

"The illusion of quick rewards led many including Ékpè initiates to abandon pious activities and the path to invest in oppression, parochialism and evil desire. Much attention and resources continue to be invested

To the northeast of Calabar, the hinterlands Ékpè title-holders from Okoyong onwards openly display Ǹyàm̀kpè and its Nsìbìdì, meanwhile hiding their inner meanings. What happened was, because the Èfịks were middlemen with the European traders, they became materialistic through wealth and power, but consequently lost awareness of the inner meanings or spirituality of Ékpè, as well as the Nsìbìdì that accompanies each grade. They promoted the superficial beauty of the masks, giving the impression that this was the main thing in Ékpè. They gave the display of masquerades an underserved position of respectability, thus promoting visual sense enjoyment. They hid the display of masquerades inside the Ékpè halls to give this an added value, because they could charge money to allow even initiates see it. This applies to all Ékpè grades, with the exception of Èbònkó, a grade whose display has no Nsìbìdì. Instead of creating an awareness of esoterics that inspires learning, the Èfịks promoted the exoteric, focusing on enjoyment and boasting.

The Èfịks emulated the Ǹyàm̀kpè display of neighboring Cross River communities but transformed this it by intentionally hiding its displays within their inner sanctums, in order to mystify it. As a consequence, initiates were forced to go through an additional ceremony to witness a display of the Ǹyàm̀kpè mask. In contrast, during Ékpè events in Calabar's hinterlands, the Ǹyàm̀kpè body-masks (or Ǹyàm̀kpè-like masks referred to by various names in distinct languages) continues to be performed publicly in the daylight.

Given the foregoing, the first version of the following song (14a) harks back to the time when Ǹyàm̀kpè freely roamed the streets of Calabar, while the second version (14b) seems to resist the missionaries' monotheistic views (Waddell 1863: 445). The third version (14c) comes from Cuban Abakuá.

15a) Kìèt ké ènyón̄; Ǹyàm̀kpè ké ísòn̄; Àbàsì édì ìbà. [AV]

one in sky/top Ǹyàm̀kpè on ground God he-is two

'One is in the heavens; Ǹyàm̀kpè is on earth; there are two Gods.'

15b) Ǹyàm̀kpè ké ísòn̄ Àbàsì ké ènyón̄. [BB]; [BB2]

Ǹyàm̀kpè on ground God in sky

'Ǹyàm̀kpè is on the earth, God is in the sky.'

in orgies of drinking, feasting and dancing, raids to plunder, immorality and sharing of booties. These led to the derailment of Ékpè from the path mapped out by good motives" (Bassey 2001: 131).

15c) Abasí nanúmbre Ékue itiá. [AF]

God in heaven, Ékue on the land

‘Dios en el cielo y Ékue en la tierra.’[43]

The idea of multiple gods of the sky, land, rivers and trees was profuse in southeastern Nigeria. It occurs in Éjághám folktales (Talbot 1912: 13, 44, 70-71) and a “typical Ìbìbìò libation” proceeds from *Àbàsì ényóng* ‘god/s of the sky’ to *Àbàsì ísòng* ‘gods of the land’ (Ettang 198?: 129). Reverend Waddell inquired, “. . . about the two gods [he] had heard some people speak of — God above, and God on earth. . . . But only a few admitted the existence of such traditions” (1863: 291). Locals would not teach Waddell about their customs, confident of his disapproval.

16) Éyén ábàn ékpè ámátàk k’íkọ̀t - àmì émì ḿbàndè Ǹyàm̀kpè mmọ́nyón̄ndí;

child initiate Ékpè he-waste in bush I-who I-initiate Ǹyàm̀kpè I come back;

èkọ̀mọ̀ mùsán̄gá ó-ó-ó ébọ̀ mì úyò. [BB2] [EI2b]

drum from Ùsàghàdèt emph they have taken my voice[44]

‘The son of an Ékpè initiate is lost in the forest - I who initiated into Ǹyàm̀kpè returned.’

Ǹyàm̀kpè is the last step in a full initiation. If one doesn’t have Ǹyàm̀kpè, one must leave the Ékpè area when the Ǹyàm̀kpè body-mask appears. Full initiation is encouraged; a father should initiate his children to protect them from certain perils and humiliations.

17) Ń kákà ńdíbrèé Ékpè ké Èfût Ésùk Òrók yè Ùsàghàdèt. [EE]

I-went to-play Ékpè in Èfût Ésùk Òrók and Ùsàghàdèt

‘I (an Èfịk man) went to play Ékpè with Èfût and Ùsàghàdèt (the Èfût of Ésùk Òrók).’

[43] In Cuba, other versions are: “Ndafia awereké Abasí Obón Efik: God in heaven and Obón Efik on earth” (Cabrera 1988: 386); Ndofia wereké Abasí Obón Efor: God in heaven, the Abakua on earth or the king of Efor on earth” (Cabrera 1988: 389).

[44] Mùsá¿gá is known by Calabar Ékpè leaders as an Èfût community close to Ùsàghàdèt (Isangele) in Cameroon. (Ètínyûn Thomas Bassey 2013).

The song implies that a great ceremony will happen and alludes to historical links of Ékpè practice between the Èfịks and Èfût of Calabar and the people of Ùsàghàdèt (Isangele), a group of three communities in the Bakassi peninsula of Cameroon. By analogy, the song informs that any Ékpè member is privileged to enter the Ékpè lodges of other communities, but on the condition that he has appropriate knowledge of relevant Nsìbìdì, and is able to pass the tests coded in Nsìbìdì.

18) Èwòt èmà èmén èsók Ìyámbà. [EE3]

you-kill you-finish you-take you-go give Ìyámbà

'When a hunter kills an important animal he is obliged to bring it to Ìyámbà.'

Any animal symbolizing leadership —a leopard, manatee or elephant — that was killed by a hunter was to be delivered intact to the paramount ruler of the land. Such a requirement was common in forest communities; failure could be disastrous, according to an example from 1901:

> [T]he Aro [Árụ̀] raided the country around Mbiabong, a point 15 to 20 miles southwest of Itu. The reason given for this onslaught was that the Ìbìbìò had killed a leopard but had failed to pay the tribute allegedly exacted traditionally by the Aro [Árụ̀] from neighbouring peoples (Afigbo 2005: 323).[45]

19) Ǹnyìn ìdí Ékpè. Ékpè Ékpè ófúk únàm, únàm ísífúkké Ékpè. [AC]

we we-are Ékpè leopard leopard he-cover animal animal it-usually-cover-not leopard

'We are the Leopard society. Only the leopard can devour another animal, but no other animal can devour a leopard. This signifies that Ékpè is the supreme institution of the community, that no other play can compete with Ékpè, or challenge its juridical aspects (Ika).

20) Nnánám ńsò ńkpọ̀ ńnọ̀ Àbàsì ọ́nọ́ọ̀ mì ówó? Ówó édí ínyéné. [TE]; [IE]; [OE2].

I-do-do what thing I-give God he-give me person person he-is wealth

'What must I do in order that God grants me the gift of people? People are wealth.'

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[45] Vansina wrote: "Among all peoples of the rainforests without exception, the leopard was a major emblem of political power and apparently always had been. Hence the disposition of the spoils of the leopard, from hunter to highest authority, is the best indicator of the political structure" (Vansina 1990: 104).

“These were communities that believed in man, not in wealth! This song speaks of communal systems, based upon the extended family including outsiders who marry in and join otherwise. Today there is mostly individualism. This song represents the kind of respect our ancients had for human beings. People brought wealth, so polygamy originated in the need for many children to work the land. My own great-great-grandfather Otoyo — who had four wives — had an unbelievable extent of land, and he did it by getting many people to fell the forest for him, in Ọ́rọ́n they call it ‘killing the forest’.” (Toyo)

21) Nà ábàn̄à áyénì kẹ́ lìmàn, M̀kpẹ̀ wọ́ọ̀ ǹńnààn. [IE2]; [IA]

you may-be-able have already money Ékpè you it-will-accept-not

‘You may have money but Ékpè may not accept you.’

In the Lòkạ́ạ́ (“Lokurr”) language.

“One can have all the money in the world and yet not be accepted. Why? Because your character will not allow Ékpè to accept you, because you may be inclined to reveal secrets” (Ikpi). This interpretation from the Yakurr region of the Middle Cross River indicates quite a different attitude towards initiation into Ékpè than that practiced by the nineteenth century Calabar merchant kings, who would initiate people in return for high fees. In Calabar, the practice was to initiate wealthy outsiders but teach them very little about Ékpè’s inner workings, because one cannot reveal what one doesn’t know.

22) Ékpédì ké éyò ńkpọ̄ng M̀gbè ásùà ǹdìsímé.

if-it-were in former days M̀gbè hate nonsense

‘In times past, Ékpè rejected fooling around.’

Tùtù ké éyò ḿfıı̄n M̀gbè ésìn ǹdìsímé. [TE]

up till now M̀gbè reject nonsense

‘Up till today, Ékpè rejects fooling around.’

Ékpè acted as the no-nonsense police of communities of the Cross River region. Ékpè members did not tolerate foolish or antisocial behavior.

7. Conclusion

Behind a simple façade, songs of the Ékpè initiation society carry sophisticated ideas that offer valuable perspectives on history, cosmology and art. The materials sampled here do not exhaust the many riches of the Cross River region pertaining to Ékpè. Our survey faced challenges of communication, access to remote localities and translation of coded messages. In some communities, Ékpè songs used multiple languages, e.g., one in Éjághám, another in Èfịk. Some texts used terms from two languages in one stanza. Prof. Ìwárà, a linguist who is also an Ékpè member, explained this as expressing a desire of the local singers to show that their knowledge transcends local boundaries. Some songs performed in a Bòkí forest village were traceable to Èfịk but proved incomprehensible to Èfịk-speakers when played back. Perhaps the Bòkí were imperfectly replicating Èfịk speech, or else they were wishfully mistaken as to the provenance of these particular texts.

Musical and dance styles also vary. In Èfịk and Ìbìbìò fishing communities, rhythmic and gestural expressions evoke the movements of water beings, but amongst Éjághám farmers and hunters, the corresponding motifs are decidedly more masculine and warlike.

When Ékpè is transmitted from one community to another, the institution—its paraphernalia of body-masks, chalk, flora, drums, grade system, songs, staffs, stones—is transferred as a whole, but each adopting community can infuse local cultural ingredients, either involuntarily or on purpose. In this way, Ékpè has been enriched wherever it goes. The receivers learn the songs of their sponsors in their source language and repeat them as such, but newly initiated members can also create similar songs in their own language, either via simple translation or by adding new content. The result is to infuse the Ékpè institution with local values and idioms. Such evolution has marked the spread of Ékpè in Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea and Nigeria in West Africa, as well as on the Caribbean Island of Cuba, where Ékpè was recreated in the nineteenth century as Abakuá for purposes of mutual-aid and self-identity. This process illustrates both the open-ended process of cultural growth and at the same time the role of inherited values in collective consciousness.

Glossary

Ànyán Ìsìm Èkpè, 'long tailed Ékpè', a costumed dancer in funerary rites.

Èbònkó, a grade representing the 'universal mother'.

Ídèm Íkwọ̀ọ́, a body-mask referred to as the 'messenger'.

Ìyámbà, the administrative head of an Ékpè community.

M̀bọ́kọ̀, 'the Voice of Ékpè'; a grade representing the process of creation.

Mḅọ́rókọ̀ (also known as Ékpè Ntot or 'town crier'), who heralds impending disasters, for

example the death of an Ọ́bọ́!n̄ (Ètúbòm, head of an Èfịk House) at the commencement of Ékpè obsequies, or the spread of influenza.

Òkpòhò, a grade represented by yellow; signifies the creative process in nature.

Ókùákàmà, a grade represents the destructive forces in nature.

Mùrúà, an Ékpè entertainer with two rattles who sings and dances without a face mask during funerary rites for title-holders.

Ǹkàndà, a grade representing the 'war against ignorance'. In other words, 'active intelligence'.

Nsìbìdì, a form of coded communication.

Ǹyàm̀kpè, a grade that represents discipline and policing, as well as the transition from matter to spirit.

Ùsàghàdèt. A community of three villages in Bakassi, near Ndian division in Cameroon. Known by locals as Ùsàk-Èdèt, and in Cuba as Usagaré. Its official, colonial name is Isangele.

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17. Edet, Chief Eyoma Edet. 2015. Isung Oku-Akama of Efe Ékpè Eyo Ema, Ekoretonko (Lower Cobham). Chief Edet is a traditional singer in Èfịk kingdom, who was raised by his grandfather, an Ékpè chief of the same lodge and musician, and his grandmother, a priestess of the Òdèm deity cult. His brother Mr. Asuquo Eyoma Edet helped with English translations.
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19. Efiok, Ètúbòm Essien E. 2009-2010. Ètúbòm Efiok is a great-grandson of King Eyo VIII, the Ọ́bọ́!n̄-Èbònkó of Èfé Ékpè Ìbókù, and Ètúbòm of King Eyo Nsa I, Efiom Ekpu dynasty of Àdàk-Úkò (Creek Town). Conversations with Miller in Creek Town.
20. Effiom, Chief Edet. 2015. Chief Effiom (b. 1954, Creek Town) is a complete traditional musician, who specializes in Murua Nyamkpe. Conversations in Calabar.
21. Egbo, Fidelis Abah. 2009-2010. Chief Abah (1957- September 2012), was the Óbòt Ôb©k™ of Bèchéí-Ùm¨n, Biase L.G.A. (Óbòt means 'Ọ́bọ́!n̄' in Bèchéí language). The titles Ôb©k™ and Ókù-ákàmà are held by his family. Óbòt Fidelis Egbo could speak the Ùm¨n, Bèchéí, Ìgbo, and Èfìk languages. Audio-recordings December 18, 2009. Video-recordings January 30. 2010.
22. Ekeng, Ekpo Bassey. 2008. From Henshaw Town (Úsìdùng) in Calabar, Ekeng is the Chairman of the Youth Leaders for the entire Èfịk Kingdom, capped by Edidem Nta Elijah Henshaw (the late ‰b©!¿ of Calabar).

23. Ékeng, H.H. Obong Edet N. 2011. Mkpoto Ìdùà IV Clan Head-elect of Ìdùà Clan, ‰r©n, Akwa Ibom State. January-February.
24. Ekpo, Chief Ékpènyong Ékpènyong. 2008. Chief Ekpo (1940 - August 20, 2013) was the Ọbọ́!n̄-Ìyámbà of ‰k©y™¿ in Ákámkpà-‰k©y™¿ village, Ódúkpání L.G.A. He spoke both Èfịk and Kí™¿, the language of ‰k©y™¿ people. His late father and elder brother were Ékpè specialists. Recordings on August 30, 2008 in Calabar. Revision of transcriptions on November 1, 2009 in Ákámkpà-‰k©y™¿.
25. Eso, Chief Eso Archibong. 2005-2012. Ọ́bọ́!n̄ Ìyámbà of Èfé Ékpè Àsíb™ng Èkòndò of Òbútòng.
26. Essien-Eyo, Dr. Ako. 2009-2012. Department of English, University of Calabar.
27. Eyo, Chief Effiom Ekpenyong. 2005-2008. Chief Eyo (d. 2011) was from Àdàk-Úkò ward of Creek Town and a descendant of Eyo Honesty II; he held a chieftaincy title in that House (Ibet Idem Ufok Eyo Honesty II). His Ékpè title was Ôb©k™-Ôb©k™ in Èfé Ékpè Éyọ̀ Émà.
28. Ika, Etim. 2005-2011. 'Údábò' (Village Head) Ika, whose official name is Ekpenyong Cobham Antigha, is Ìsúng-Èbònkó in Ékpè and the son of the Mùrí Cobham Antigha Edet 4th of Èfût Ifako Clan, Creek Town, Ódúkpání L.G.A.
29. Ikpi, Chief Eteng Tata. 2010. Ìyámbà of Lêb®lk®m BikoBiko, Ugep, Yakurr L.G.A. January 14.
30. Imona, Chief Ekon E. E. 2007-2009. Secretary to Ọsam M̀gbè, Big Qua Clan. Ntoe Eturi, Osam M̀gbè Big Qua Town. President, Calabar M̀gbè .
31. Itoh, Chief Esoh. 2004. Paramount ruler of the BàLóndó people of Cameroon. Conversations with co-author Miller in Ekondo Titi, southwest Cameroon, in August.
32. Ìwárà, Prof. Alexander. Department of Linguistics, University of Calabar. Professor Ìwárà is an Ékpè member through his father's lineage in Ugep.
33. Mbukpa, Mùrí Efiong E.O. IV. 2008. Clan Head, Èfût Abua East Kingdom, Calabar South L.G.A. Mùrí Mbukpa guided Miller to Arochuku to meet the Eze on March 16, to record Ékpè songs.
34. Nsan, High Chief (Dr.) Emmanuel. 2013. From Ifundo, Ákpábùyò, whose Ékpè is centered in Àtákpà. Chief Nsan is a member of the Ọ́bọ́!n̄ of Calabar's council. Dr. Nsan made corrections to the final manuscript.
35. Ọ́jọ́ng, (Dr.) Mathew. 2011-12. Ọ́jọ́ng (02-04-1943—18-12-2013) held the title of Ntúfàm-Ìyámbà, the highest Ékpè title among the Éjághám-speaking people of the Upper Cross River region in Nigeria and extending into Cameroon. He taught at the Institute of Policy and Administrative Studies, University of Calabar, Nigeria.
36. Okoro, Eze Vincent Ogbonaya. 2008. The Paramount Ruler of Arochukwu and his Ékpè council. Songs recorded on March 16.
37. Okpo, Ekpenyong I. 2013. Rear Admiral (rtd). Ọbọ́!n̄-Ìyámbà of Èfé Ékpè Éyọ̀ Émà Atai Ésịt ẹ́dẹ̀k. Admiral Okpo made corrections to the final manuscript.
38. Omini, Chief (Dr.) James Archibong. 2010. Ìyámbà of Ketabebe Ijom village, Ugep, Yakurr L.G.A

39. Osibe, Chief Okwa. 2009. M̀gbè title-holder in Okuni, of the Osam M̀gbè Emuro ('emuro' means 'end of town'); November 8. Okuni village in Íkóm L.G.A. Thanks to Ester Alobi (d. 2012) of the Calabar Cultural Center (a niece of O. Osibe).
40. Toyo, Professor Eskor. 2010-2012. Professor Emeritus of Economics, Department of Economics, University of Calabar; Ọ́bọ́!n̄ Ékpè from ‰r©n, Akwa Ibom State. Meetings at the Professor's home in Calabar South, in ‰r©n, in Yakurr L.G.A., and other regions in company of Ékpè members.
41. Umo, Bassey Bassey. 2008. A dance and drum specialist with the Calabar Cultural Center.

Audio Recordings

1. *Abasi Udo Ekoi: Nka Asian Ekporoko Iyakoko, Isong Èfịk Eburutu.* 2009. Uwem Edi-Imo & Sons Sound 'N' Production. Ika-Ika Oqwa Market, Calabar.
2. *Ékpè Ita and his Itembe Eburutu Cultural Group*. Side A: Asat Iba. 1. Edim Ukwo. 2. Ima Idighe Ino. Side B: Ékpè Offiong 1. Ékpè – Ékpè Ita Sisuaka. 2. Akata Nyok Ebika. M. Ita. Linco LSLP 002 (n.d., 1970's).
3. Ékpè Ita. *'Ase' – Traditional*. Vol. 1. Ima Edi Obio Group. Philips (Nigeria). LP 6361-109 (1975).
4. Ékpè Ita. 1976. *'Ase' – Traditional*. Vol. 2. Ima Edi Obio Group. Produced and directed by Chief Inyang Henshaw. Side A: 1. Ifot Ufok Etemi. 2. Ebe Fo Ke'Fon Ye Afo. 3. Isama Obobefok Uyaha. Side B: 1. Mbara Osono Edet. 2. Mbet Obop Eyen. 3. Eyen Akpa. Philips. Phonogram Ltd. Nigeria LP 6361-187 (1976).
5. Los Muñequitos de Matanzas. "Abakuá #3." *Guaguancó/ Columbia/ Yambú*. Recorded atEstudio Siboney, Santiago de Cuba, Nov. 15-17, 1983. Re-released by Qbadisc, 1994. QB9014.
6. *Nka Asian Mkparawa Eburutu: Cultural Group Calabar*. Director, Ètúbòm Asuquo Etim. Èkòndò Records ERLP 001, Calabar (1981).
7. *Okop Oninke* [Unenike] Group. *Ekedoho Mmutaka (Ékpè)*. Recorded by R. Ayoade. EMI Stereo. NEMI (LP) 0461A. Made in Nigeria (1976).
8. *Okop Unen Ike* ('All who hear will agree': Okob 'hear'; Unenike 'don't disagree', i.e., 'those who hear this music will be happy'). 2012. Director, Chief Edet Effiom. Recorded in Uyo.
9. *Okut Eyen Owo*. Effiom Bassey Asuquo and Ekpenyong Archibong, directors. CD, produced by Uwem Edi Imo and Sons, Calabar (2009).
10. "Repica bien el tambor." (Guaguancó rhythm) Compositor: D.R. *Rapsodia Rumbera*.
11. Grabación: Ernesto Gatel y Pedro Lugo Martínez 'El nené'. EGREM CD 0121, Havana, (1995).

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