

**ORIGINAL ARTICLE**

**The Social Significance and Implications of the Ekpe Shrine in Calabar, Nigeria**

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**Abstract**

A shrine is a building or place that is hallowed, venerated or deeply respected. It is generally associated with divinities or deities where sacrifices or offerings are made to them. Their devotees often meet there, interact with each other and consult with the priests of the divinities. There is an element of mystery and awe associated with every shrine. Non devotees have little or no business at a shrine, while the devotees themselves have to be very careful and observe various laws while a shrine. Shrines are common in Calabar, and its environs in Nigeria. There is virtually none, dedicated to the Supreme Being, rather they are dedicated to local, deities and secret cults, where a lot of social activities are performed. One of such cult is the Ekpe society shrine which has both social and religious aspects and implications. This paper examines the social significance and implications of the Ekpe shrines in Calabar, and suggests ways in which they could be utilized for the benefit of the community today.

**Keywords:** Ekpe, Shrine, Calabar, Nigeria.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Calabar is said to be located in the Oil Rivers region in the southeastern corner of modern day Nigeria. The town lies approximately 30 miles inland from the Atlantic Ocean, nestled on a narrow ridge in the deltaic zone of the Cross, Calabar, and Great Kwa Rivers (Rosalind, 1988). The name Calabar is thought to come from the Portuguese word *calabarra*, meaning “the bar is silent,” and perhaps describing the calm waters of the town’s anchorage (20). The majority of its inhabitants are Efik, an ethnic group closely related to the surrounding Ibibio peoples. There are also small minorities of Efut and Qua, but the majority speaks Efik, a language classified under the Benue-Congo branch of the Niger-Congo family (Joseph, 1970).

Calabar’s role in the Atlantic slave trade influenced its social, political, economic and cultural organization and development throughout the seventeenth,

eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries. By the late 18th century, Calabar had been transformed from a fishing village into a cosmopolitan, trans-national, trans-cultural trading port nearing the peak of its regional power and influence (Lovejoy, 2014).

The record of this period, including the events surrounding Duke Ephraim's death can be found in the diary of Antera Duke (c. 1730 – c. 1809), also known by his Efik name, Ntiero Edem Efiom. Antera kept his 10,510-word diary, written in trade English, from 1785 until 1788 (Burnard, 2010). His writings, though sporadic and at times frustratingly vague, give the historian a valuable account of Calabar's sociopolitical, religious, and economic life. He was a prominent merchant; the ward head of the Ntiero family, a wealthy and influential lineage from Duke Town; and a high-ranking member of Ekpe, a secret "leopard society" that served as the Efik's primary religious, sociopolitical and economic institution.

The transformation of the religio-cultural institution of Ekpe into a political institution provided the Efik with the nearest thing they had to a centralized authority (Burnard, 2010). The Ekpe society of Old Calabar seems to have emerged, or at least transformed into its political form, during the 18th century, most likely due to the spread of trade with Europeans in slaves and, later, palm oil. The Ekpe society shrine has both social and religious aspects as well as implications. This paper examines the social significance and implications of the Ekpe shrines in Calabar, and suggests ways in which they could be utilized for the benefit of the community today.

## **WHAT IS A SHRINE?**

According to Kirkpatrick (1983), a shrine is a building or a place that is hallowed, venerated or deeply respected. It is generally associated with divinities or deities where sacrifices or offerings are made to them. Their devotees often meet there, interact with each other and consult with the priests of the divinities.

There is an element of mystery and awe associated with every shrine. Non devotees have little or no business at the shrine, while devotees have to be very careful and observe various laws while approaching a shrine.

## **COMPONENTS AND CONSTITUENTS OF A SHRINE**

Shrines are as varied as there are various divinities. Some shrines are located in sheds or buildings, while others are in the open. An example of a shrine that is located in a building is the Ekpe shrine which is the focus of this work. Most shrines often have images or objects which represent the deity it belongs to. There is often a secluded space with or without a slab where offerings and sacrifices are often made to the deity. There are priests, priestesses and attendants who minister to the deities and the devotees.

Some other objects are often found at shrines, and they are used in the performance of the various rites and activities that take place at the shrine. These include palm kernels, cowries, pieces of elephant tusks, kolanuts and some animals. In addition, there

are pieces of cloth of various colours there. The colours are red, black, white, yellow. The Ekpe shrine is not exception as it has some of these objects, but it is difficult to accurately determine the exact components within it (Ekpo, 1978). This is because the interior of the shrine is open only to the Ekpe initiates, and they are bound under oath not to reveal the secrets to non initiates. Nevertheless, non initiates are allowed to visit the premises of the shrine and to hang around there, especially during festive or social occasions when a lot of activities take place at the shrine.

## BACKGROUND OF THE EKPE SOCIETY

In the process of looking at the Ekpe shrine, it is necessary to have some idea of the society that is behind it, and to also identify the divine element or deity that owns it. An account claimed that the Ekpe society is secret cult that was purchased by the Efiks of Nigeria, from one Asibong Ekondo and his wife during the reign of King Eyo Ema Atai of Creek Town in South Eastern Nigeria (Silkin, 1957; Offiong 2011; Offiong 2016).

The Ekpe society had become, by the time Antera Duke began his diary in 1785, the Efik's primary socio-political institution. Historians recognize the advent and rapid rise of Ekpe as a direct result of a need for a new and effective mechanism of sociopolitical control in the complex economic environment created by the Atlantic slave trade. Sparks argues that the sociopolitical changes stemming from the rise of the slave trade were mirrored by a shift towards increased centralization of authority over the trade and Efik society as a whole. Behrendt, Latham and Northrup suggest that one of Ekpe's main roles was to alleviate tensions arising from increased economic competition and to stabilize the business environment by creating an effective system of dispute settlement and debt enforcement (Silkin, 1957). Lovejoy (2014) note that Ekpe served to "support and protect commercial exchange" and to stimulate the growth of the pawnship/credit system that allowed the slave trade to thrive.

*Ekpe* through its development developed into a quasi-governmental institution, the society's foundations were decidedly religious. *Ekpe* is the word for "Leopard" in both Efik and Ibibio, the society's name derived from the common belief that the "invisible forest spirit" worshiped by the society took the form of leopard in its interactions with humans. Only initiates of the cult could see the fearsome Ekpe and perform the "esoteric ritual ceremonies" necessary to control and placate the spirit, many of which took the form of masquerades.

*Idem Ikwo*, a masquerade known as a "messenger" or "runner" and dressed in a hooded raffia and cloth costume, represented *Ekpe* in the majority of these ceremonies. The runners, bells fastened to their backs and ankles and carrying long whips, would patrol the town and terrorize non-initiates, including women, children, poorer freemen, and slaves. The most elaborate public ceremonies involved the ritual

capture of *Ekpe*, who would be hidden in a container, carried through town by the society's high-ranking members, and eventually released back into the forest. Each ward had an *Ekpe* palaver house, a "large, low shed with a thatched roof supported by giant mangrove posts" and one enclosed end where the society's secret ceremonies were performed (Goddard, and Monday, 1981).

According to Aye (1967), *Ekpe* was initially a religious cult performing mainly religious duties and fulfilling or meeting the religious needs of the people. This means it had some divine, mystical and religious element behind it, along with supernatural powers.

*Ekpe* is made up of various grades, and has secrets which are known only to initiates (Akak 1982). Entrance fees increased for each grade; therefore, the men who belonged to the highest grade and exercised authority over the *Ekpe* and the local communities of Old Calabar were by default its wealthiest inhabitants. During the period covered by Antera Duke's diary, there were four to five grades in the society, although there would be as many as ten by the mid-19th century. It is further believed that it originated as a secret cult known as 'NyanaYaku' having at its head the civil authority of the tribe in the person of the King or Obong (Hart 1964).

This religious aspect of *Ekpe* is confirmed by Hart (1964) as quoted by Monday Noah (1980), that "*Ekpe* functioned as a religious cult and from this religious awe, and dread, it became easy to convert it into an effective instrument of government" (p. 31). Reverend Hope Waddell expressed similar views when he wrote that "*Egbe* (sic) is a secret association under the patronage of a supernatural being of that name..." (p. 30). It is this religious element in *Ekpe* that makes the *Ekpe* shrine to rank as a religious shrine. Later on, it started to fulfill other economic, social and civil functions (Aye 1967). The shrine plays a vital part in these functions, it is the centre, pivot or melting point of most of these functions.

It should be noted that the *Ekpe* society and shrines are not limited to the Efiks alone, but other nearby tribes and communities also own their brand of *Ekpe*. These people include the Efiks, Quas and the Ekois. Due to these, the various indigenous tribes and communities Calabar, namely the Efiks, Quas and the Efuts, have their *Ekpe* shrines which are located at strategic sections of their communities in Calabar. The secrets of *Ekpe* are kept within the shed, and only initiates allowed within especially during important occasions.

## **THE SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE EKPE SHRINES**

The *Ekpe* society, as a religious and secret society which performs social, economic and other civil functions, is greatly involved in social activities in Calabar (Miller, 2000). The centres or bases of these activities are the shrines. The shrines serve as meeting points for *Ekpe* initiates especially during festive occasions. They gather there to interact with each other, exchange ideas, views and other useful things.

They relax there and get to know other initiates. They manage and tend to the shrines, as only the initiates are allowed to enter the inner section. In these ways, the shrines bring the Ekpe initiates together.

Secondly, the shrines are the places of initiation and inducting of new members. When potential new members have fulfilled all requirements and paid all the dues required for initiation, they gather at the shrine with the Ekpe elders who will perform the initiation. Friends and relatives also gather at the shrine to witness the occasion, though they are not allowed to enter inside the shrine. This gathering for initiation provides the opportunity for the old and new members to meet, socialize and interact with each other.

Thirdly, closely related to this is the fact that certain rites are performed at the shrines during the installation and coronation ceremonies of a new traditional ruler like the paramount ruler of the Efiks – the obong of Calabar. The enthronements are done before the Ekpe shrine along with necessary traditional rites. During these ceremonies, Ekpe masquerades will be performing, entertaining and adding colour to the occasion (Itakpo 1988).

The installation ceremonies are highly socially significant because the installed king will preside over and direct the society and thereby enhance the continued socio-cultural existence of the community. Ekpe therefore indirectly plays a part in this perpetuation of the societal existence by being involved in the installation ceremonies.

Fourthly, the shrine is like a home or headquarters of the Ekpe. It is vital to the existence of the cult because most of its sacred relics are placed there. Without the shrines, Ekpe society may not exist or function effectively. This means that the shrine catalyses and enhances the social functions of Ekpe which are stated above. Without the shrine, Ekpe might not be able to perform these roles nor exist at all.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

From the foregoing, it can be seen that the Ekpe shrines rank fully as religious shrines, yet their functions extend beyond religious into social aspects of life. These roles date back to the past when the Ekpe was in charge of the political and governmental authority in Efik land. In that time and context, it affected everybody including foreigners. Relics of these past functions of Ekpe in the social sphere have remained till today, especially among the traditional ceremonies such as coronations, chieftaincy awards and others which are incomplete without the necessary rites at the Ekpe shrines.

In view of the foregoing, it is hereby recommended that encouragements and support should be given to communities to maintain, modernize and beautify their Ekpe shrines, so as to make them to become tourist attractions.

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