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Ekpe Fraternity as a Political and Social Machinery for Security and Development in Old Calabar

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ABSTRACT

Since the inception of mankind, politics has posed a paramount challenge, constituting the art or science of governance and profoundly influencing the development of societies. This perennial issue revolves around the prudent and astute formulation and implementation of measures to advance the public welfare of nations, persisting indefinitely unless sincere governance prevails. Human nature, inherently characterized by selfishness, greed, and covetousness, has endured across civilizations, thwarting efforts to transcend these inherent traits. Consequently, humanity seeks various means to alleviate these afflictions, resorting to coercion, deception, hypocrisy, and even malevolent forces in desperate attempts to address societal challenges. Religion, encompassing Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and others, has been wielded by individuals to subjugate nations into compliance, with rulers often invoking divine origins to assert control, while clandestine societies emerge for similar ends. This study aims to critically examine the role of the Ekpe fraternity as a political and social apparatus

in fostering peace and development in Old Calabar. Employing an interdisciplinary approach to historical analysis, the research draws upon diverse disciplines for data collection. Ultimately, the investigation unveils the myriad strategies employed by the Ekpe fraternity to uphold security and development in Old Calabar, shedding light on the challenges encountered in fulfilling these functions.

Keywords: Old Calabar; Ekpe Fraternity; Security; Development.

INTRODUCTION

For centuries, the Calabar people have been known for their organisation of Ekpe as a political machine, known to the Europeans as “Egbo” (Noah, 2005). In the words of H. M. Waddell, “the want of a bond of union among the different families and supreme authority to enforce peace and order between equals and rivals and ensure development in society became apparent, and the Ekpe institution was adopted (Nair, 1977). The nucleus of Ekpe, Nyana-Nyaku, which has now developed into the Ekpe fraternity, was a secret cult among the Iboku people before they entered present-day Nigeria. As society evolved, governmental powers, especially judicial decisions and political action, were distributed among overlapping associations, or, in another context, the coordination of political action in government was achieved through societies. The role of the ekpe fraternity in this area affords an instance of control and cohesion of this kind from the late seventeenth century to the nineteenth century.

ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION OF EKPE FRATERNITY.

Exact information on the dates and development of the Ekpe traditional institution in the Cross River area has been difficult for researchers to determine because of a lack of evidence. Latham (1973) proposed that the Ekpe society of the Efik of Old Calabar was likely established around 1720. A more accurate estimate suggests that the founding of Ekpe occurred during the mid-eighteenth century. The Ekpe, originating from the Cross River interior, has existed for a significant period of time (Basse & Ekpo, 2019). The Ekpe civilization undoubtedly started in the Cross River area. The contentious issue is determining the precise section of the Cross River region where the civilization formed. Noah argues that Ekpe was born in the Ekoi nation. Hackett (2013) provided comprehensive research stating that the Qua of Calabar originated from the Usak Edet area to the southeast of the current Cameroon line with the Ekpe cult. The secret of the Ekpe cult spread to Calabar via the Qua, who belong to the Ejagham or Ekoi ethnic group. Anwana (2002) found abundant evidence supporting the Ejagham/Ekoi roots of the Ekpe culture. He said that Ekpe emerged as a unifying influence among the Ejagham community in the fifteenth century. The symbolic phrases or language used in welcoming or addressing the Ekpe assembly are of Ejagham origin. All Ekpe incantations and salutations begin with the words Oje! Oje! Mgbe or Ekpe, or Oje Bari Ekpe!, is an Ejagham phrase. A segment of the Ejagham chieftain acknowledges that the word “Oje! Oje! Bari” translates to “Order! Order!” Some interpret “Come and ‘eat’, Mgbe” as “Order! Order!” There may be a solution to every dilemma using Mgbe. An Ekpe title of Eyamba or Iyamba is said to be from the Ejagham language, combining the terms Eya and Aya, which indicate “open,” with Mba, which means “way” or “road.” Eyamba is an Ejagham term that means a leader who guides people in life or acts as a pathfinder (Miller, 2015).

Carlson (2003) argues against the belief that the Ekpe society originated from the Ejagham/Ekoi people. He points out that the existing Ekpe lodges belong to groups such as Ekpe Efik Iboku, Ekpe Efut, Ekpe Itako, Ekpe Usak Edet, and others, and not to the Ekoi, Bantus, Abakpa, or Qua.” Akak traces the historical antecedents of the Ekpe society to the secret Ekpe institution known as Nyana-Yaku. According to the author, when the

Efik left Uruan for their present settlements, they came into contact with the Efuts, from whom they acquired something very similar to their own Nyana-Yaku. One Efut man, Archibong Ekondo, from Usak Edet, Akak insists, bought and sold the secrets of five small Ekpe grades to the Efik at Creek Town during the reign of Eyo Ema Atai and his wife Mutaka. These five small grades were Mkpe, Ebonko, Mbakara, Mboko and Mboko-Mboko. Ekpe, Akak contends, was already an equivalent of Efik Nyana-Yaku, which finally evolved into Mkpe society. Thus, Ekpe is a secret society or fraternity: is of Efik origin, starting first in the form of Nyana-Nyaku or Mkpe before being evolved into its present form through Efik's early contact with the Efut couple. The fact that present Ekpe cult was originally known by the Efik as Nyana-Yaku and not as Ekpe, cannot in anywhere rule out the people's claim to its originality. The change in name merely follows new developments in the process of evolution (Offiong & Ansa, 2013, p 43).

THE NATURE AND STRUCTURE OF THE EKPE TRADITIONAL SOCIETY

The Ekpe Society was an association in the form of organized corporate groups. Ekpe (leopard) was said to be a mysterious and invisible being inhabiting the forest that could not be seen by the uninitiated. It had certain secret rituals whose performance could only be conducted by members of the fraternity (Aye, 1967). The society possessed a plot of land known as Ikot Ekpe (in Eefik), where members don costumes and observe ceremonies safe from the intrusion of the uninitiated, who never dare enter the precincts (Simmons, 1958). The Ekpe was indeed propitiated for the good of the entire community. Everyone in the community could only hear its roaring because it was a mysterious being. Since it could not be seen, it had a physical representative, a masquerade called Okum Mgbe (Ejagham), Idem Ikwo (Efik), or Idim Ekpe (Oron) (Oqua, 2016). The masquerade, in the words of Simmons (1958), reflected: "The society's costumed figure, Idem Ikwo, wears a belt tied to his hip and carries a whip; the tinkling of the bell announces his approach to all the uninitiated, who flee from him if they desire to escape being whipped. He is always accompanied by members of the society to the society's bush, where he takes off his costume." In the right hand of the Ekpe Masquerade, he carried a staff, while in his left was a bunch of leaves and across his forehead, a feather was stuck. This, Aye (1967) contends, was the physical or visible representation of society. The philosophical basis of the Ekpe traditional institution is expressed by Anwana (2002), who averred that: "Ekpe institution found expression with those ritual acts which enabled man to empathize physically and come to terms with those forces which posed fears and threatened his very existence. In a bid to empathize, however, man evolved drama since he wanted to introduce some elements of impersonation (sole play) into life as a means of propitiating the gods and therefore perpetuate his compulsive needs, in sanctity and security in world which threatened annihilation from all directions" (Agazue, 2013, p. 7).

The Ekpe cult was reserved for males, mostly freeborns. Membership in the Ekpe society was exclusive to women's participation. An Ekpe chieftain, however, could be allowed to initiate any of his daughters into Ekpe society but such initiation was usually "honorary and cosmetic" (Offiong, 2019)

EKPE FRATERNITY AS A POLITICAL AND SOCIAL MACHINERY FOR SECURITY AND DEVELOPMENT IN OLD CALABAR

To the Efik Ekpe, often known to the early Europeans as Egbo, is a secret society, a sort of freemasonry, originally said to have been introduced in Calabar by Usak Edet, a segment of the Ekoi people (Savage, 1985). It was reformed and adapted to satisfy the political, social, economic and religious needs of the Calabar people. The date of its

introduction is uncertain, but it seems to have been known in Old Calabar as early as the seventeenth century (Aye, 1967). Ekpe is an Efik word for ‘Leopard’ and is said to be a mysterious and invisible being inhabiting the forest that cannot be seen by the uninitiated. It has some taboo rituals that only the fraternity's members are capable of performing (Edem, 2018). It is represented by “idem Ikwo”, a masquerade dressed in 'Esik, a multi-coloured costume, and dignified with other traditional accoutrements. Around his waist is tied a bell that must toll occasionally to announce his approach; in his right hand is a staff; in his left a bunch of leaves; and across his forehead a feather is stuck. This is the visible representation of society (Hackett, 2013).

Originally, the Ekpe fraternity was for religious purposes but as the Calabar community became complicated owing to the new wealth that the early trade with Europeans brought, it was quickly adapted to fulfil other economic and civil functions (Fenton, 2012). It proved to be the source of supreme authority in all Efik towns, and its institutions provided, in the past, the highest court whose verdicts transcended all else (Aye, 1967). Ekpe could condemn a whole town to a heavy fine and be promptly paid; it could punish offenders and forgive; even kings and Obongs could never esdape Ekpe laws and edicts. Its authority was sacrosanct and above challenge.

In fuel, King Eyo Honesty II in the nineteenth century said that a member of the Ekpe fraternity was a kind of “freemason” (Ekong, 2011) Among the members of the highest grades was the knowledge of “*nsibidi*,” a sacred writing known only to them. *Ekpe* membership was open to all men, women and children who wished to be initiated into its mysteries, whether they were members of the nobility, a freeman or slaves when slavery existed, though not all were privileged or rich enough to get its highest grades (Aye, 1967). The members of the fraternity frequently split the fees paid by those initiating them. The supreme ruler in the fraternity held the tenth title of *Eyamba* (*Andikara Ekpe*) or “the rulers of *Ekpe*, and his authority remained unchallenged. The title of *Eyamba* is held for life and can only be passed on to another after the holder’s death.

Ekpe titles could be sold to non-Efik people who wished to hold them. People of consequence from other countries could purchase *Ekpe* honours and authority in order to introduce them to their own countrymen, and in this way, the buyers could become founders of new branches. Such places were able to enter the Ekpe confederation with Calabar as the head (Mensah, 2015). Indeed, it was *Ekpe* authority as a political machine that so closely knit all Efik towns together, because each member found in the fraternity an instrument that rendered him “absolutely sovereign” in his own house and property, “and united the forces of all against any common enemy, whether external aggression, or servile disorder.” *Ekpe* institutions penetrated into all the towns and villages in Calabar because these places desired to improve their political, social and economic circumstances by coming into trade associations with Efik towns of the past centuries (Sparks, 2009). It was a law that kings and the Obong of Calabar must be holders of important *Ekpe* titles, though not all could hold the *Eyamba* (Gilman, 2012). Thus, we can see from the past history of Old Calabar that not every king or *Edidem* held it.

Evidently, during the pre-colonial era, *Ekpe* functions were many and varied. Apart from promulgating and enforcing laws, its courts judged important cases and recovered debts, especially bad ones. In May 1785, a certain Sam Ambo carried an *Ekpe* drum with *nsibidi*’ inscribed on it to one Dick Ephraim, a debtor to Captain Morgan, an English ship’s captain trading with Old Calabar (Kuyk, 2003). Apparently, Captain Morgan must have presented his case to a member of the fraternity, who immediately had to summon the debtor to appear before the Ekpe court for the said debt and pay it at once. The carrying of ‘*nsibidi*’ inscribed on the drum indicated the urgency of the case, which must be attended to without delay (Hales, 2015). Besides these, *Ekpe* had to enforce trade

boycotts and these proved very effective and serious. The illegal bombardment of Old Town in 1855 by a British warship made it imperative that *Ekpe* retaliate by imposing a ban on the Guinea Company, a British trading firm at Adiabo. Thus, trade with the company ceased immediately and it had to close down. Also, when a serious quarrel broke out between Ambo and Ibitam Houses in Creek Town in 1852, it was Okpoho (Brass) *Ekpe* that effectively handled the situation (Waddell 1970).

Suffice it to say that, every aspect of Calabar life was permeated by *Ekpe*, whether political, social, economic or religious: the Efik swore by *Ekpe*, promised by it and consulted it on difficult matters. The fraternity had a great part to play in the dealings of Calabar with foreign countries. The 'trust' system of trade prevalent in Old Calabar between European and Calabar traders made it necessary for some of the former to seek initiation into the- fraternity for the security of their trade, because its membership would automatically entitle them to the civil rights of the Calabar people and would help in recovering their debts more easily.

Although the *Ekpe* fraternity in many respects had made itself notorious in the past centuries on account of its occasional human sacrifices at the funeral obsequies of great men, yet it was not without its humanitarian aspects. The fraternity helped the Calabar society by curbing some of the blind desires of the wealthy and restraining their opposition of the weak and the poor, because the poor had every right to take his case to the *Ekpe* council in order to exact the justice due to him. It gave the Calabar people something to worry about. It kept them alive and energetic throughout the centuries of the fraternity's active life, because there were many *Ekpe* lessons to learn and facts to commit to memory before promotion from one grade to the next was due (Okokon, 2008). It kept each of the fraternity striving to ascend the *Ekpe* ladder in order to obtain the privileges due to the next grades so that he could better his social and political status and gain recognition in the community; in this way he had to be as civil and law abiding as the fraternity's regulation prescribed. It was to all intents and purposes, a one party system in which all members strove hard not only to enjoy the society's full honours and distinctions but to contribute to the proper functioning of its machinery. It gave the society its cohesion and bound all Efik communities together under its supreme authority whose mysteries were only known to the initiates. Its benefits were not enjoyed by the members alone; a non-member had every right to hire a member of some *Ekpe* rank to plead his case before the Assembly, especially in such cases as those involving the recovery of debt (Aye, 1967).

Ekpe fraternity was not a stagnant organization because it was undergoing its own evolution with the lapse of years. At first women were excluded from the guild, but about the nineteenth century its membership was open to them, though they were not privilege to obtain admittance into its higher grades. And as years passed by certain forces, both internal and external, conspired to compel the fraternity to modernize some of its inhuman rules of conduct. Christianity had entered Old Calabar in 1846, and had been one of these external moral forces that had its mark on the evolution of *Ekpe* concept of ethics (Aye, 1967). On February 15, 1850, there was a general proclamation of *Ekpe* law in Old Calabar abolishing human sacrifices during funeral obsequies of men of rank. As it is always the case with human societies, disobedience inevitably occurred. About the middle of 1850 another *Ekpe* law was promulgated forbidding holding markets on Sundays, and this was promptly obeyed by all. It was *Ekpe* law also that put an end to the practice of witch hunting by means of *esere* beans (Fenton, 2012).

Ekpe could boycott, that is, it could place an offending persons or group of persons under an interdict which effectively prevented any other person trading or having any other dealings with the offender, e.g. against Adiabo and Obutong local communities which they erred, or against supercargo and his vessel the diary of Antera Duke of 26

October, 1786, noted that, “Ekpe men said that Sam Ambo and George Cobhom had blown Ekpe on Captain Fairweather, so all our family were damn angry about that blow” (Aye, 1967, p. 77). That meant Captain Fairweather’s vessel was placed under an interdict to prevent any commercial dealings with the captain.

Ekpe could restrict people’s movements and confine them to their own quarters by hoisting the yellow flag of Okpoho (Brass) Ekpe – a very useful power in case of civil disturbances, and was used, for example to stop the affray between Ibitam and Ambo wards in Creek Town in 1852. Ekpe authority could seal the offender’s property by placing its mark on it and thereby preventing its being used by anybody until the mark had been removed. However, with the impact of the British colonial administration late in nineteenth century, *Ekpe* was stripped of its power and authority. *Ekpe* court which was the be-all and the end-all of Calabar judicial and political system in the past collapsed at once. From the inception of the Old Rivers protectorate in 1891 that recognized Duke Town as the political and administrative capital of the new power structure, the dominance of *Ekpe* gradually came to an end, and everybody began to look up to the alien political structure as the only hope of the future.

Native or customary court, magistrate’s court, high or Supreme Court, all came to replace *Ekpe* authority. “Today, *Ekpe* is merely an honourable society in which the ancient cults are strongly represented” (Akpanika, 2020). Yet, even today, “*Ekpe* Membership still gives the final stamp of dignity and authority to a man of birth and wealth”. All the *Etubom*, chiefs and important Efik elders still identify themselves in *Ekpe* cults. *Ekpe* grades have been improved, modernized and increased to enable them go round to those who still identify themselves in its mysteries and as in ancient times the higher grades of the fraternity are still reserved for citizens who have the royal blood in their veins (Aye, 1967). New members still offer themselves for initiation into this important cultural “enclave”, Christians and non-Christians, except those who have refused to join it out of personal or Christian convictions.

CONCLUSION

Many writers referenced in this work have critically examined the formation, spread, and influence of the Ekpe fraternity among the elite in Calabar. Anwana (2002) extensively defines how the Ekpe cult evolved into a single-party system that any ruler in Calabar must be a member of. Ekpe fraternity's widespread presence in Calabar's cities and villages is undeniable and has been supported by various authorities in the sector. Yet, only a small number of academics have found it important to explore the significance of the Ekpe brotherhood in promoting peace and development in the specific region. Akak (1982) and Aye (1967) briefly discussed this topic, but the work of Ekpe brotherhood has significantly contributed to maintaining peace and fostering progress in the field of research.

Ekpe was first used for religious reasons, but it transitioned to serve commercial and civic functions as the Old Calabar society evolved due to increased riches from early commerce with Europeans. The institution served as the ultimate source of power in all Calabar towns, establishing the highest court whose decisions surpassed all others in the past..

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