

The Process of Making and the Importance of the Ekpo Mask

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RÉSUMÉ

Ekpo est une association traditionnelle des Ibibio du Sud-Est du Nigéria. Il s'agit d'une société qui est en relation avec les ancêtres et qui les représente pour leur assurer l'obéissance des gens. Les membres de cette société portent des masques qui représentent ces ancêtres. L'article décrit les processus de fabrication de ces masques, relate les rituels qui assurent leur efficacité et en analyse les fonctions. Le masque est essentiel à l'association parce qu'il est le lieu rituel de rencontre avec les ancêtres et permet aux lois ancestrales d'être renforcées.

Ekpo is one of the traditional associations¹ of the Ibibio of southeastern Nigeria, which until colonial rule had made its impact felt by the people, performed the functions of the government of the land. So powerful was Ekpo even under colonial administration that Rev. Hodgett (1927) screamed that "There still exists... a powerful society known as the Ekpo Society. It is a Secret Society and with it are associated devilish rites and ceremonies. It is a society which is still silently but powerfully wielding a tremendous influence over the lives of the unsophisticated heathens. Its word is law and its commands with all the sacrosanctity that surrounds its members dare not be disobeyed." In the 1950s Eva Stuart Watt (1951: 23) could still write, "although the presence of the British government has to

¹ In my article "The Functions of the Ekpo Society of the Ibibio of Nigeria," *African Studies Review* (1984) (in press), I argued strongly that Ekpo was (and is) not a secret society and then justified my preference for calling it a traditional association.

some extent checked their gross outrages, yet this order Ekpo still exerts considerable power.” As late as 1983, 23 years after Nigeria became independent, Ekpo remains a very powerful institution and its members often take laws into their own hands.² People are afraid of Ekpo and in the villages they dare not disobey Ekpo laws because of the grave consequences that would follow such disobedience. People are heavily fined or severely beaten for disobeying Ekpo laws. In yesteryears certain violations carried death penalty.

Ekpo association relies on masks to enforce its orders and the masks are the most sacred of all the Ekpo paraphernalia. This paper describes the making of the Ekpo mask as a process, the religious rites associated with the making of the mask, and the significance of the mask to the Ekpo association.

This paper is the result of a field work carried out in the summer of 1983. Although this writer had earlier studied and written on Ekpo, the particular aspect discussed in this paper never occurred to him until he recently read Messenger's (1975) work on the Annang carver. The reading of the essay forced the writer back to the field to investigate the process of carving the Ekpo mask and the rites involved. As an indigene of Ibibio, the writer had himself prepared and used the mask for Ekpo Ntok Eyen (Ekpo for young boys) which does not require much effort and the process involved in the mask making for Ekpo for adults. Besides, this kind of mask is prepared from a kind of wild fern in the area. During the field work, however, it was quite clear that there was a lot about the making of the mask that the writer did not know about. For example, from the start to the finish, there are rites that are religiously and meticulously performed in order for the final product – the mask – to be habitable by the spirits of the ancestor. Furthermore, it was discovered that the making of a mask is a long and tedious process that passes through stages. Before getting into all this, however, it is important first to establish the origin of the Ekpo association;

² The *Sunday Chronicle* (Calabar) of 23 Octobre 1983 carries a story of how Ekpo masquerades stormed a church and beat up the members, destroying property and leaving a number of people wounded. The reason for this attack was that the preacher had said some obnoxious things about the association. The following day, as reported by the *Nigeria Chronicle* (Calabar) of 24 October 1983, Ekpo masquerades stormed the premises of the Queen of Apostles Seminary, Afaha Obong in Abak Local Government Area, and the result was that a 13-year old student had one of his eyes shot with an arrow.

the association of Ekpo with the ancestors largely accounts for the religious rites that we shall describe in subsequent pages.

THE ORIGIN OF THE EKPO ASSOCIATION

Webster (1968) has noted that in several parts of the world especially in Africa and Melanesia, a puberty institution would grow into an association exercising police functions, "ruling by terror it inspires," using religious mysteries as instruments of social control, and imposing stiff penalties of fines or death for violations of their rules. In the particular case of Ekpo, the way it functioned in precolonial and early colonial times but much less so today suggests that its origin is similar to that suggested by Webster. It seems that Ekpo arose out of the necessity for communities to get a means of enforcing their norms and of getting people to conform. They needed an agent of social control of a nature and type which once its presence or approach was announced, the offending individual or party would immediately sit up.

Ekpo in the Ibibio language means "ghost" and all ancestors are ghosts. Ancestors are the invisible rulers of their communities. As observed by Mair (1974: 210), the spirit of dead ancestors, particularly house heads, are very much involved in the activities of their living descendants, and are believed also to control their fortunes, afflict those who ignore to give them offerings or violate the norms of kinship. As the individual spirit "steers" its owner through life, so the ancestors spirits "steer" their descendants as a body, and the rise and fall of a house's fortunes are attributed to them. It is a general belief that ancestors are vested with mystical power and authority. Although dead, they still retain a functional role in the world of the living, rewarding obedience and punishing filial impiety. African kingroups are often referred to as communities of both the living and the dead (Kopytoff, 1971: 129). Because of the special position of the ancestors (*ikan*) in the community, men decided to establish the Ekpo association, that is, masked ghosts or ancestors, and to enforce norms on their behalf.

Ekpo members disguise by carved wooden masks, raffia capes, and other accoutrements impersonate the ancestors and other dead members of the Ekpo association. The disguised members are in the paper referred to as the Ekpo masquerades or simply as *ekpo* (masked ghost). The masquerade paints his hands and legs with charcoal; holds a matchet, a bow and arrows, and sometimes a gun. The mask instills fear and terror in the noninitiates, women and children. Women are barred from membership in Ekpo. Lieber

(1971: 56) has noted that "this in turn has considerable cathartic effect and hence a tranquillizing influence on the performance of the rituals" that the Ekpo members constantly perform.

The general belief is that disobedience to ancestors causes infertility of husband and wife, the death of children, the birth of only female children, sickness, accidents and many other misfortunes. This belief serves to remind us that the relation of African ancestors to the living kinsmen is both punitive and benevolent and also at times capricious. One ensures ancestral benevolence through obedience by way of propitiation and sacrifice; neglect or filial impiety incurs punishment. Not surprisingly, Ekpo exacts obedience and compliance from both members and nonmembers in the name of the ancestors. One obeys because if he did not he would be punished by *ikan*. The ability of Ekpo to exact obedience from men and women alike also stems from the violent way in which Ekpo masquerades impersonating the ancestors are licensed to behave. In precolonial and even in colonial times, *ekpo* could descend with irresistible force upon any individual or group bold enough to disobey Ekpo orders.

Ekpo supposedly live in certain sacred forests or groves set aside for them. Since Ekpo is graded, each grade has a forest where its *ekpo* reside. In other words, these forests are inhabited by the spirits of the ancestors and other dead Ekpo members. Non-Ekpo members can enter such forests but they are out of bounds to women. In those days a woman caught inside any of the forests was summarily dealt with. Thus, the ability of Ekpo to enforce compliance derived partly from the violent and severe nature of its punishment or penalty and partly from the tremendous influence which *ikan* are believed to exert upon human affairs. The crucial importance of not offending the *ikan* is always made abundantly clear to new initiates. Since the elders are the intermediaries between the living and the ancestors, the young initiates must remain obedient to them (elders), who normally dominate the political, religious and economic role of Ekpo, and they are very close to the *ikan*.

Since the ancestors or *ikan* are immaterial beings the masks become the medium through which they (ancestors) are able to take material form and communicate with the living. No wonder, then, the making of the mask takes a highly religious process (to be discussed later). The process must be religiously followed otherwise somebody could be punished for filial impiety. For example, the wearer of the mask can fall down during acrobatic shows, can get hurt or even the mask maker can fall sick, lose his customers and then fold up.

THE MAKING OF THE MASK

The making of the mask is a very sacred affair. The information presented by Messenger (1975: 111-114) carries the impression that anybody can make any kind of Ekpo mask. This is obviously not the case. Ekpo is ranked from Ekpo Ntok Eyen to the highest level which may be Ekong Ekpo, Ama Ama Ekpo, or Ayara (the ranking varies from place to place). Members of a particular rank must make and possess only the masks associated with their rank. For example, nonmembers of the rank of Ekpo Nyoho, Ayara, Iyun, Ekong Ekpo, Inan Ekpo and so on cannot make and possess let alone wear the masks of these ranks. Ekpo operates at village level and members of Ekpo in Village A can dance, eat and drink with Ekpo members in Village B during initiations and other occasions but they cannot share in the initiation fees. At the village level each extended family is in charge of a particular rank of Ekpo and each rank has its own kind of mask. The masks represent offices, their function continuing from one generation to another and without any interruption. If the person in charge of a particular rank of Ekpo and its masks dies, some other person from the same extended family is picked to take his office. Or in the absence of some other person from the same extended family, somebody from the village takes over. This assures continuity. This is very similar to the way the Poro masks of Liberia are arranged and kept (Walter, 1969). It is, however, important to note that on Ekpo parade day (*nyogo ekpo* and *udat ekpo*) young boys who are non-Ekpo members are allowed to mask themselves as children (daughters and sons) of Ete and Eka Ekpo (father and mother of Ekpo). This is the only type of mask that anybody can make; it is not made to resemble the mask of any of the ranks of Ekpo: the face simply depicts a boy or a girl. The process of mask making described below is that of the special ranks of Ekpo. A number of masks can be made without going to a carver and this type of mask consists of raffia only. However, Ekpo ranks like Ayara must of necessity have what they call *iso ekpo* (the face of *ekpo*) which must be carved by an expert. In order to demonstrate the entire process from start to finish, we describe the making of Ekpo mask with *iso*.

The starting point is for the would-be owner of the mask to approach a carver who will make the *iso ekpo* for him. Each carver has his reputation and the amount of money one is willing to pay determines the carver he picks, since the higher the reputation the higher the amount of money charged. Having picked his carver, the mask buyer settles the price, which is usually settled after a hard bargain and the face measurement of the buyer is

taken. Of course, the customer must describe, in meticulous detail, how he wants the mask to look like, and the carver must carve it to the specifications given. Apart from the fee that the customer pays to the carver, he in addition must give him (the carver) a bottle of *ufofop* (a kind of gin brewed from palm wine), and a cock. These will be used for the sacrifice to the ancestors who will inhabit the mask as well as consulting *ndem uso* or *obot uso* (the spirit that protects carvers). It is also a way of saying “thank you” to the *obot uso* and the ancestors for bringing a customer to the carver. This leads us to what *ndem uso* or *obot uso* is.

The Ibibio are monotheistic worshipping an all-powerful deity (Abasi) who rules over the physical universe, other supernatural entities of lesser stature, and humankind itself. This deity is of gigantic proportions, invisible to human eyes, and inhabits the sky and earth, signifying its omnipotence. The deity is assisted by a multitude of spirits (*ndem*), who act as intermediaries between him and humans; they are viewed as his helpers, or assistants, or messengers, rather than as deities in their own right. These spirits possess normal human male and female bodies and are visible only to religious specialists in a state of possession. They carry out certain tasks for Abasi and inhabit shrines (*iso idem*) where prayers are sacrifices are rendered; these sacrifices are passed on to Abasi, who in turn sends power (*odudu*) for the desired ends – if the supplicants merit it. The ancestors work with the spirits to present the case of their lineage to Abasi. Ancestors therefore serve as intermediaries between their lineage members and the spirits. *Obot uso* is one of the spirits serving Abasi and it controls carving and thus protects carvers (*mme oso uso*). Any carver who wants to continue in it must constantly sacrifice to this spirit in order to be assured of its blessings.

Of significance is the fact that most of the carvers this writer talked to are either illiterates or people who never completed primary education. Most of the carvers are located in Ikot Ekpene and Aback, both Annang areas. Regardless of where they are found in Ibibio, they have a familiar story to tell and that is, that they were born with carving as their occupation. Six of those interviewed narrated how at a very tender age they have taught carving in dreams and how they also started carving in the real world when they were real young; they never served any apprenticeship. There are others who having been convined (through dreams) that they are carvers by birth serve an apprenticeship. There is a very strong belief among them that any person who was not selected in the other life to be a carver will not be a successful one, no matter the length of training and how hard the person may try.

Certainly carving deals with the making of images of ancestors and since there is a spirit that selects and teaches people carving it deserves to be honoured with a shrine. Thus at a corner of the carver's room is a shrine (*iso uso*) where he makes sacrifices to the spirit of carving, *obot uso*. From each customer, as already noted, the carver collects *ufofop* and a cock (*ekiko unen*) with which he offers sacrifices to *obot uso*, thanking it for its generosity for picking him as a carver and for bringing him customers. The carver cannot deny the ancestors their proper recognition at this point. In making the sacrifice to the *obot uso*, the carver invites the ancestors to join in and then thanks them for liaising with the spirit to make things so good for him. At the same time he may appeal to the ancestors, deity (Abasi) for protection, prosperity, success in his trade, and longevity for himself and his household. He may then call on the ancestors, spirits and Abasi to avenge his enemies and he will then pour a cupful of palm wine or some quantity of *ufofop* before the *iso uso* shrine. He then cuts the head of the cock and sprinkles the blood on the *iso uso* shrine. He does not do this daily but must to it as regularly as possible; at least he must remember the spirit and ancestors each time he drinks *ufofop* or palm wine by pouring libation and calling on them to come and drink. Also during his prayer, the carver will not forget to ask that he be guided in his carving to carve to specification and that the ancestor represented by the *iso ekpo* should be pleased to inhabit it and once the mask is put on, the wearer should be possessed by the spirit of the ancestor and should act true to character.

Having booked an order for the *iso ekpo*, the customer next meets the person reputed for making the raffia custome (*nkono* or *mbobo*) that will go with the *iso ekpo*. The maker of *nkono* will tell him how much raffia (depending on the height and size of the customer) will be needed. The customer will either produce it from raffia palm (if he has them) or buy it. The quantity required is not such that one person can produce in a week. This reminds this writer of how members of his age grade (Esop Ntok Eyin) were paid in the 1950s to produce raffia from palm fronds (*ekpin ukot*) for the purpose of making *nkono*.

Producing raffia from *ekpin ukot* is a very laborious job and this must be done in such a way that women do not see it. Thus the work of producing raffia is done away from home, in Efe Ekpo, a bush house where Ekpo members drink together and discuss matters affecting Ekpo. The place is out of bounds to women. For the period it takes to produce the raffia, palm fronds (*ekpin*) as well as *oton* leaves are displayed at the entrances leading to the Efe Ekpo and this is a warning to all females to stay away

from the area. In precolonial and even early colonial Ibibio, any woman strayed into such a place was beheaded instantly; but today she would be fined very heavily.

Before the production of the raffia begins, the owner must pour libation, inviting the ancestors to be present and that when the mask is completed the particular ancestor represented by it should be happy to inhabit it. He further prays that when the mask is put on, the ancestor should possess the masker. He then pours the palm wine or *ufofop* on the ground and work now starts. The next stage is for him to carry the raffia to a person who will dye it black. Here again he pays money and in the process of dying there is a libation calling on the ancestors to drink and be happy that their son is an Ekpo member and has been dutiful enough to decide to make a mask that will represent the identity of an ancestor (whose name is here mentioned). The ancestors are called upon to protect the person and his family and be rewarded with all kinds of good things for his filial piety.

At this point the owner of the mask must have gone back to the carver to collect his *iso ekpo* and if the carver is not also a painter, he will have to carry it to a painter who will paint it real black. From here the *iso ekpo* reaches the person who will then prepare the raffia costume or *nkono*. By the time the process is completed the person may have spent close to 100 or even more. A mask can last for more than 20 years if it is properly cared for. When the process is finally completed, there must be performed a sacrifice, usually by the head (*obon*) of that Ekpo rank, and each time the mask is to be worn there must be some libation performed by the wearer, calling on the ancestor represented by the mask and others to guide the wearer, take him out and bring him back safely.

Once a year, Ekpo members decide to bring to this planet dead Ekpo members. This practice is known as *udat ekpo*. The way they do this is by going to the sacred forest or grove set aside for that rank of Ekpo and after hours of drumming and acrobatics, some Ekpo members will mask themselves impersonating their ancestors and other dead Ekpo members. For about three months *ekpo* will stay on this planet and certain days of the week will be reserved for *ekpo*. On such days women and male nonmembers must stay indoors or be attacked with bows and arrows; they are often mercilessly beaten and sometimes machetted. It is better for women to be escorted by Ekpo members when going out. In years gone by, membership in the association was absolutely essential for purposes of status in the community. Even today people still pay the required fees to become

nominal members in order to avoid embarrassments. The meticulous observance of the rites in the process of making the mask reminds one of the distinction made by Durkheim between the sacred and the profane. We briefly revisit this distinction as it applies to the Ekpo mask.

THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE

According to Durkheim, the sacred concerns those things men set apart – such as deities, rites, religious beliefs, or anything socially defined as meriting special religious treatment. The sacred thing is par excellence that which should not be touched by the profane and cannot be touched with impunity. Thus, the prime importance of the sacred lies in its special distinction from the profane. One notes that there are thousands of masks worn by the Ibibio. But those worn by the Ekpo members (and such like associations) are sacred and are treated as such by the people. They are specially set aside from other ordinary masks. It however must be noted that Durkheim's distinction between the sacred and the profane is not synonymous with good and evil. Certainly, there are "sacred" objects essentially evil in their conceived relation to man and society, and there are "profane" objects acceptable and obviously useful to both man and society. In the words of Emile Durkheim (1915: 27):

The division of the world into two domains, the one containing all that is sacred, the other all that is profane, is the distinctive trait of religious thought; the beliefs, myths, dogmas, and legends are either representations or systems of representations which express the nature of sacred things, the virtues and powers which are attributed to them, or their relations with each other and with profane things. But, by sacred things, one must not understand simply those personal beings which are called gods or spirits; a rock, a tree, a spring, a pebble, a piece of wood, a house – in words, anything – can be sacred. A rite can have this character, in fact, the rite does not exist which does not have it to a certain degree.

Naturally, sacred things are by way of dignity and power superior to profane things, as can be demonstrated in their relation to man himself. Man depends on them, immolating himself in one degree or other. His relation to the sacred may be at one time that of awe, of love, or even of measureless dread, while at another it may be one of ease and pleasure. Man does not always find himself in a state of absolute inferiority before his gods, for he often jokes with and about them, and he may flog the fetish which has caused him some misfortune. But in all this, the superiority of sacred things is sacrosanct (Nisbet 1966; 1974). Thus members of Ekpo constantly make

sacrifices and also pour libations to the masks, which when worn become ancestral spirits. They make certain observances, like not allowing the father of twins to touch the masks, lest the ancestors represented by the masks become angry. Any such filial impiety is punished by the ancestors.

Durkheim makes it abundantly clear that the distinction between the sacred and the profane is absolute. "In all the history of human thought there exists no other example of two categories of things so profoundly differentiated or so radically opposed to one another. The traditional opposition of good and bad is nothing beside this; for the good and the bad are only two opposed species of the same class, namely morals, just as sickness and health are two different aspects of the same order of facts, life, while the sacred and the profane have always and everywhere been conceived by the human mind as two distinct classes, two worlds between which there is nothing common" (Durkheim 1915: 38-39).

This passage highlights the division between the sacred and the profane. It must, however, be noted that things and beings can pass from one sphere to the other. For example, purification rites, as in the case of imitation or eucharistic ceremonies, provide the means through which a person or thing passes from the profane state to the sacred. This is clearly the situation in the case of the sacred masks. These masks are bought from makers and all through the process of the making of the masks, there are all kinds of purification rites; the rites are designed to turn the masks from profane objects to sacred ones and therefore fit for ancestral habitation.

On the other hand, the passage from the sacred state to the profane is usually the result of an erosion of values or the dislodging of deities and entities by the appearance of new manifestations of the sacred or from the spread of skepticism (Nisbet 1974: 174). This appears to have been the case with Ekpo when in the early part of this century some Christian converts gave their masks to be burned, as a sign that they had abandoned the old way.

Finally, the concept of "purification rites" underscores the importance of the Ekpo sacred masks. Masks are found everywhere in the area but the difference between the ordinary masks found everywhere and those used by the Ekpo members lies in the fact that one is considered sacred and the other profane. The masks are specially ordered from the makers and they must meet certain specifications. The rites associated with the process of the mask making supposedly transform them from the realm of the profane to that of the sacred; they are now endowed with certain supernatural powers

and are fit for ancestral habitation. These masks when put on represent ancestral spirits, and members of the association claim to act in the name of the ancestors.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE MASKS TO THE EKPO ASSOCIATION

Whether the ancestral spirits inhabit the masks or not is absolutely immaterial; what is important is the use of the masks, their importance to the Ekpo association. As already pointed out, Ekpo members exact obedience and compliance from people in the name of the ancestors. The ancestors must appear and live on this planet for certain periods of time each year. During such occasions the ancestral spirits must make themselves visible and the masks provide the medium for this visibility. The masks which cover both the face and body of the wearer are hidden away from women; they are the most sacred of the Ekpo regalia. The masks are worn during *udat ekpo* and *uyono ekpo* as well as during important events, such as stopping village quarrels or fights, catching, trying, condemning, punishing or even executing social criminals; intensifying the holiday spirit of great occasions; promoting fertility of the fields and bountiful harvest; cultivating public sentiments, regulating hygiene, building roads, bridges, sacred houses, etc., and at the death of important members. On all such occasions the masks make it possible for the ancestral spirits to become visible.

Ekpo is a kind of invisible government and Ekpo masquerades represent agents from an invisible realm intervening in ordinary life at moments of crisis of solemnity, even carrying out certain administrative functions. Ekpo members normally meet in secret to formulate their policy but intervene in the civil order by means of masks. The masks present different faces and also bear many functions; they are understood to represent images of ancestral spirits but they are generally employed as ceremonial leaders, messengers, police, judges, and are treated as living gods. Just like in the case of the Poro of Liberia, “the atmosphere of fright inspired by certain masks (is) based on their cultural significance – their meaning in the tradition – and the emotional reaction (amount) to nothing less than a terror by convention” (Walter 1969: 91). The effect of the terror has the tendency “to make the power of the mask unilateral and free of reciprocal influence, in stark contrast to the limited powers of every public official” (Walter 1969: 91). A chief in the visible, secular realm experiences reciprocal controls and limitations imposed upon his elders and public

opinion, but the masquerades are not to be challenged or influenced by ordinary folks. What Kenneth Little (1973: 264) has said about the Poro is quite germane here, namely, that the terrifying effect of the spirits represented by the masquerades derive largely from the violent way in which the individuals impersonating them are licensed to behave. Such an Ekpo party of masked officials descend with irresistible force upon any community rash enough to ignore the association's dictates.

As an invisible government and dissociating itself from the social relations of life, systematic terrorism is made possible. By attributing their acts to the work of spirits, the masquerades are absolved from ordinary responsibility for those acts, but they are not absolved from the responsibility to the highest orders of the association. As masquerades representing ancestral spirits, they are not bound by the ordinary connections of family, clan, or civil hierarchy. The masquerades are able to enforce the rules impartially. Disorders and controversies in the secular realm almost always invite the masked intervention of a spirit, and any issue critical enough could attract the intervention of Ekpo Ndem Isong, a group made up of all extended family heads, constituting the highest village court. In the past all of them were members of the Ekpo association. They constituted (and in some cases still constitute) the judiciary while Ekpo acted (and still acts) as the executive branch of the government.

In precolonial and even in early colonial days the boundaries of social behavior were maintained by the stipulated functions of the rank of Ekpo and in its representative masks, and by the terror they inspired. This was done in the absence of formal laws or declaration of policy. Those charged with the responsibility for maintaining the boundary were themselves kept in bounds by their peers. In accord with the spirit, the masqueraders could not rely on his discretion; his interpretation of the situation was very much determined by the traditional concept of what a particular mask represented. Any attempt to act out of character would make the masquerader liable to severe and final punishment at the hands of Ekpo members. It was (and is) a most serious offence not to behave according to the stereotype of each of the Ekpo ranks. For example, there is a rank known as Ayara (the brave) and this is certainly the wildest of them all. It is very destructive and wherever it goes there must be a trail of destruction behind it. Not to behave this way would lead to a fine (of a goat and drinks) to the masquerader.

As masquerades, the masqueraders have no control over the violence and terror of their actions; they are completely dissociated from their social identities and attributed to the spirits that they represent. By the same token

he is dissociated from the same day-to-day activities of the association. Since the person is masked he can commit acts of violence against his kinsmen, ven though such acts are taboo on the basis of the rules of public life. Ekpo creates relationships and obligations that are dissociated from the ties of kinship and neighborhood. For example, when a boy is initiated into Ekpo Ntok Eyen he is warned that he must be willing and ready to flock his sisters is they disobey the curfew on Ekpo Ntok Eyen days. In the final analysis, therefore, the mask is an indispensable instrument for the Ekpo association.

CONCLUSION

It may not be an exaggeration to say that without the mask there will be no Ekpo. The mask is the very essence of the association. The people are fully aware of it and thus dramatize it by the rites associated with the making of the mask. The people stubbornly believe that the ancestor represented by the mask possesses the wearer of the mask; but this is not the issue, since the point is supraempirical. The process the mask making and reverence with which it is handle testifies to its sacrosanctity.

The masks are prepared to correspond to their stereotyped and mythical images that represent ancestral devices for dissociating their acts carried out as agents of Ekpo from their individual roles in public life. This makes it possible for a humble, benevolent gentleman to become a violent, terroristic masquerader. Masks carry in them real emotional force that can and do inspire expected patterns of behavior. Masks enable the wearers to commit acts of violence against people, even members of their families. The Ekpo association establishes relationships and obligations that have no regard for kinship ties. The wearer must carry out his duties without favoritism.

Finally, in precolonial and early colonial Ibibio, the Ekpo association assumed various roles including political and the maintenance of law and order. To successfully carry out these functions, Ekpo members resorted to the use of masks; here too, success depended on their ability to represent and reinforce belief in and fear of the supernatural beings, ancestral spirits and deity thay both symbolized traditional values and in themselves possessed power to punish those whose behavior deviated from traditionally sanctioned norms. The masks both in the past and in the present represent the medium through which ancestors are able to take material form and communicate with men.

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