

SOCIO-EDUCATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE *EKPU*: ANCESTOR FIGURES OF ORON

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Abstract

This study is based on published sources and archival materials. It maintains that the effect of European missionary influence in the 19th and 20th centuries on Oron *Ekpu* ancestral figures was to create limited edition of the genre by removing the necessary cultural conditions for their continued existence as cult objects. Apart from those destroyed by environmental agencies, some of the carvings were burnt to secure spiritual salvation of converts to Christianity. The remaining pieces of the *Ekpu* figures were housed in national museums as symbol of national unity and record in word which served educationally as aid to social memory. Through art exhibitions and publications, the potential monetary and educational values of the carvings increased and have become symbol of African nation-building. The Oron *Ekpu* figures is today an important topic taught through out Nigerian Universities in a general study course: The Nigerian peoples and culture. Internationally, the *Ekpu* figures are now regarded as *object d'art*, part of the cultural heritage of the world.

The Oron people, comprising the Idua, Okobo, Effiat-Mbo, Ebughu, Enwang and Oro Ukapbang were traditionally, a farming and fishing people living on the west bank of the estuary of the Cross River. During the 20th century, missionary activity, colonialism and modern communications precipitated an era of rapid socio-economic change, but many Oron people still reside in villages pursuing traditional fishing and farming occupations. Presently, Oron has been split into five local government areas for administrative convenience but the mother Oron Local Government is still known to the outside world for its museum of antiquities.

The archaeological record of Oron is virtually unknown. Nicklin and Flaming (1980) have however noted that the clay core of a copper alloy casting accidentally discovered by labourers at a site of Urue Ntak Idim yielded a 17th century date. Noah (1980), following a creation of less informed European visitors, missionaries, traders, anthropologists and administrators, attempted to impose a pan-Ibibio origin on Oron but Oron people believe they are direct descendants of the autochthonous inhabitants of this coastal and riverine region of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria having migrated from Usak Edet in the present Cameroon (Uya, 1984)

In 1947, Kenneth Marray, Nigeria's first surveyor and later, Director of Antiquities published the first detailed description of the *Ekpu* figures of Oron. It was about this time too that he initiated efforts to secure their preservation.

The Oron name *Ekpu* means ancestor or ancestral spirit. Each *Ekpu* figure is a monoxylous pole-carving of a hard forest timber such as camwood *pferocarpus soyayii* (Oron-Ukpa) or *Coula edulis* (Oron-Oko). Generally, *Ekpu* figures are about one meter high; depicting deceased Oron elders. They are shown with beards and headgear and most of them bear emblems of lineage authority in both hands. The *Ekpu* corpus has no known representation of women (see figure 1)

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Figure 1: Oron Ekpu Figure

Several authors described the *Ekpu* figure as art objects. Commenting upon their austere and dignified appearance, Fagg (1968) for example, noted that Oron ancestor figures are "surely the most deeply impressive of all African styles" with a "rhythmical composition of sculptural volumes. Elsewhere, he noted that, the *Ekpu* figures is hardly surpassed by any one elsewhere (Fagg, 1965)".

The ancestor figures have been subject of numerous scholarly articles, African art catalogue, a documentary film and a novel by Akadu (1983). The *Ekpu* figures have also served as sacred objects of their original owners; as museum specimens following the building of two successive museums in Oron; as victim of the illicit international art traffic particularly during the Nigerian civil war 1967-1970; as symbol of Nigerian unity and as firewood.

Following centuries of commercial activity in the Bight of Benin and Biafra, based initially upon slave trade and in mid 19th century upon "legitimate" trade in palm oil, Britain in 1914 proclaimed the colony and protectorate of Nigeria. During the early part of the 20th century, the Primitive Methodist Missionary Society established several stations "in and around the Oron – country". Deliberate effort was made by the Primitive Methodist Missionaries to undermine the traditional belief system and eradicate what they saw as "heathen" practices of the Oron people. This explains perhaps why little is known about the *Ekpu* figures as religious objects since their production and use died out in the early 20th century because European visitors and residents in Oron were either opposed to or not interested in the existence of *Ekpu cult*. What socio-educational significance does *Ekpu* figure serve in Nigeria in particular and in the world generally? This paper attempts to answer this question.

Socio Educational Significance of the Ekpu Figures

In Oron, when people die, their spirit, although invisible, are believed to continue to move among the living. They may appear to the living in dreams and visions and communicate with them. They are still considered as part of the family from which they just departed. Accordingly, they are believed to continue to take interest in the affairs of the family and to protect its members. They expect the living members of the family to remember and revere them. This explains why, at the beginning of most family or community functions, libations are poured to them, invoking their guidance, support, protection and intercession.

In the past, when a man died and before his ceremonial burial, accomplished *Ekpu* sculpture was made to represent him, the size and elaborateness of which depended on his importance and wealth. The *Ekpu* was placed alongside other-sculptures of the same type, against the back wall of *Obio* (village meeting shed). Each *Ekpuk* (extended family) had its own ancestor figures. It was believed that the spirit of the dead man resided in the *Ekpu* figure. It was in the *Obio* where his statue figure was kept that his spirit could be conveniently approached, but it was not itself worshiped (see figure II)



Figure 2: Obio (village meeting shed)

Indeed and as aptly noted by Murray (1947a), it was a symbol of the deceased and became a thing of great holiness, interference with which might be resented by the ancestral spirits.

Twice a year, during the planting season and at harvest, sacrifices of food and wine were made to the *Ekpu* figures. This was done so that the ancestors might intervene with the great god, *Abasi*, to ensure farming success, human health and fertility. The *Obio* where the *Ekpu* figures were stored were kept in good repairs. As important old carvings were destroyed by termites or rotted away, new carvings were made to replace them. And so, in the old days according to Murray (1947b) "the art lived".

Nsugbe (1961) a former curator at the Oron museum, saw the *Ekpu* figures as monuments to the dead, occupied by the spirits of the ancestors which they represent. Since the deceased person for whom an *Ekpu* figure was carved had formerly headed a lineage group, the carving was in fact a perpetuation of the lineage rights and claims as were vested in the elder when he was alive. Socially, because lineage rights and identity were preserved by the *Ekpu* figures, they served educationally as an aid to social memory and therefore as records in wood which underpinned the authority of living family, village and lineage heads.

Collection of the Ekpu Figures and Building of the Oron Museum.

As noted earlier, by the 1940s, the Oron Ekpu cult had been in decline for decades primarily because of missionary activities in the area. Consequently, most of the carvings had either disintegrated or been badly damaged by neglect. No new ones were being made because some Christian churches in Oron encouraged their converts to destroy the carvings.

Despite the fact that the people of Oron appeared no longer to be interested in the material preservation of the *Ekpu* figures, they were suspicious and resentful of Murray's interest in the *Ekpu* figures. A fascinating insight into the attitudes of Oron elders at that time is provided in *The Ancestor*,

a novel by Akadu (1983):

Government said these carvings were so valuable to the whole Black Nation that no body should keep a single "stick" at home. So we became scared. I thought of an idea. They would have to go to the swamps. It was there I buried the sixteen wooden carvings (p56).

However, Murray (1946) reported that the Oron Traditional Rulers Council had decided on behalf of some of Oron people that the carvings should be preserved in a museum "if government will build one in Oron". Credit goes to council of Traditional Rulers of Oron for their foresight in demanding museum to preserve their cultural art objects, which now serve educationally as records in wood and aid in social memory.

It is important to note here also that although by this time, the colonial authorities were no longer hostile to the study and preservation of certain aspects of indigenous African culture, they were parsimonious in the provision of funds for institutions such as museum, The Nigerian Antiquities services, later renamed, the Department of Antiquities, was founded in 1943, but for the first ten years, this organization was understaffed; being run solely by K.C, Murray together with the archaeologist Bernard Fagg and a mere handful of junior personnel (Nicklin & Flagming, 1980). Akadu (1983) correctly noted that Murray gave priority to the plight of the Oron *Ekpu* figures, and in 1944 conducted an extensive survey of the Oron area and listed some 1,296 carvings. He eventually collected over 500 of the *Ekpu* figures to which number a further hundred were subsequently added by being brought to museum or collected by the department's staff. They were housed in an earth building with a thatched roof made available by the district officer for Oron (Nicklin, 1977).

According to Jones (1984), most of the Nigerian "antiquities" have been procured for the national collections by purchase or gift, but in the case of the *Ekpu* figures, they were given on loan to the museum by the heads of different families, which owned them. The owners maintained the right to have regular access to the carvings and conduct customary ritual procedures. But in practice, once they had been handed over to the Department of Antiquities, no such contact persisted. This goes a long way to show the generous and friendly disposition of Oron people, especially to visitors and residents in the area.

Throughout the 1940's and 1950's, Murray produced publications and held exhibitions aimed at bringing the *Ekpu* figures to public, scholarly and administrative attention both in Nigeria and Britain. This was done so that steps could be taken to save the art objects from destruction. During this period too, Britain found it politically expedient to stage exhibitions of the art of its colonies. Accordingly, Oron *Ekpu* figures were exhibited in Lagos in 1946 and in London in 1949 and 1951 (Murray, 1947a; Murray, 1952). Although plans for a permanent museum at Oron were prepared in 1949, building was delayed for many years. Murray was in fact criticized by the colonial authorities for collecting so many *Ekpu* figures. It was however not until the eve of Nigeria's independence in 1959 that the *Ekpu* figures were finally housed in modern museum facilities at Oron (Nicklin, 1981).

Thefts of the *Ekpu* Figures.

Murray's fear for the safety of the *Ekpu* carvings as aptly noted by Akadu (1983) was justified; for in 1958, the temporary museum building at Oron had been broken into and up to thirty of the *Ekpu* figures were stolen. The carvings were smuggled out of Nigeria and offered for sale to private collectors and museums in Europe and the United States of America. With the aid of Interpol, an African dealer was eventually arrested in Lagos, charged to court, found guilty of receiving stolen property and given prison sentence. Some of the carvings were later recovered probably because "the Oron sculptural style" noted Fagg (1965) had become "more widely known in the most regrettable of ways". Some, however went "underground:" and had not been seen since.

The Civil War Era,

During the Nigerian Civil war period, 1967-70; Oron lay within the Biafran enclave, and the

museum located at a strategic waterside position was occupied by Biafran troops. Concrete gun emplacements were built and mines laid within the museum premises. After the liberation of Calabar in October 1968 by the Federal troops, the Oron museum was heavily bombed. However, despite severe damage done to the museum buildings, the collection of the *Ekpu* carvings remained largely intact. With the aid of some staff, the *Ekpu* collections were evacuated by Biafran authorities and were housed temporarily at Government College, Umuahia. Following the final capitulation of Biafra, the Federal troops turned the college grounds into a refugee camp. It was during this time that many of the *Ekpu* carvings were used as firewood. Others were looted by traders and thieves who came in on the heels of the Federal troops. It is known that at least one European dealer present at that period bought over some of the carvings. The number of carvings remaining from the original collection was 116, representing a loss of about 546 including some of the best carvings; although some fine specimens had been preserved at Lagos and Jos museums. Fortunately, the bulk of the archival and photographic records had survived the holocaust; having been lodged at the Lagos museum.

Nigeria's First Museum of Unity

Reconstruction work at the old site of the Oron Museum began in 1971. The aim, according to Nicklin (1971), was to build a museum more national in outlook than the previous one. Nevertheless, the bulk of the remaining *Ekpu* collection formed an important focus for the enlarged exhibitions which provided an introduction to the art and material culture of the entire Cross River region (Uya, 1980). The Department of Antiquities, which became known as the National Commission for Museum and Monuments in 1977, embraced the country's policy of national integration under the slogan "diversity within unity". Consequently, the official opening of one of Nigeria's first "museums of unity" - the National Museum, Oron - took place in April 1977 (Nicklin, 1978). Unfortunately, Kenneth Murray who first conceived the idea of a museum in Oron had died in a ghastly motor accident five years earlier. However, not long before he died, he wrote:

... Any Oron Ekpu figure which does appear abroad must have been stolen and smuggled out from Nigeria and it is most probable that it can be identified among photographs in Nigeria of over 640 of the Ekpu carvings which were in the Oron museum (Murray, 1971:13).

Value Conversion of the Ekpu Figures

The Ekpu figures provide us with a vivid example of a series of artifact value conversion, usually in the upward direction (see figure III)

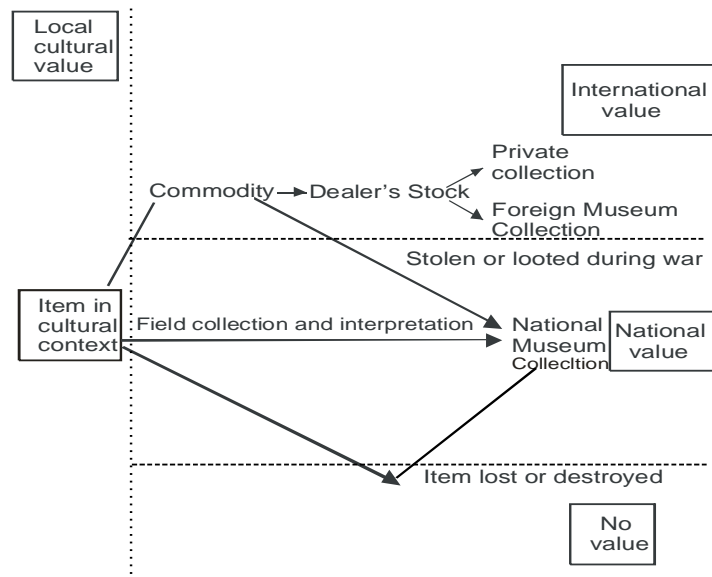


Figure III: Conversion of the Value of Ekpu Figures

The scenario in figure III closely reflects Thompson (1979) model of conversion of 'junk' into collectable and value item as described in his *Rubbish theory*, and the observations of Jones (1984) with particular reference to the art of Eastern Nigeria. Jones wrote:

For when all is said and done, a work of art must ultimately be judged by its visual effect, its appeal must be universal and regardless of its age, its function, its maker or what other people have to say about it. Once these social criteria take over, it becomes a valuable, an antique, and whether it remains a work of art is debatable. Its worth is no longer enhanced by purely aesthetic considerations but its age, its rarity and its market value, and this increases every time it changes hands (P.33)

Indeed, the *Ekpu* figures are now regarded internationally as *object d'art*, part of the cultural heritage of the world. The potential monetary value of the remaining carvings also increased as they changed hands and assumed new socio-educational values.

Summary and Conclusion

We stated that the effect of European influence in the 19th and 20th centuries on Oron *Ekpu* sculpture was to create a limited edition of the genre, simply by removing the necessary cultural conditions for their continued existence as art objects. The majority of the *Ekpu* figures were either destroyed by environmental agencies or were burnt in order to secure the spiritual salvation of converts to Christianity. Some pieces of the carvings were stolen and smuggled out of Nigeria and were sold to private collectors and Museums in Europe and the United States of America. Those pieces recovered were eventually returned to a rehabilitated national Museum, Oron with National Commission for Museum and Monument as their effective owner. Through the process of publications and exhibitions, the educational and monetary values of the *Ekpu* figures increased while any remaining spiritual value was lost.

Apart from serving educationally as aid to social memory and therefore record in wood which initially underpinned the authority of family, village and lineage heads, the *Ekpu* figures is now used as symbol of national unity and is regarded internationally as *objects d'arts*, part of the cultural heritage of the world. The *Ekpu* figures is today an important topic taught through out Nigerian Universities, in a General Study Course - The Nigerian People and Culture.

K.C. Murray may have been seen by many as a product of British colonial history. But in the view of this author, he cannot be seen as a person working in direct political interest of the British colonialism. Indeed, he, like other individuals including colonial administrators such as P .A. Talbort, who took considerable interest in indigenous cultures even to the extent that their effectiveness as administrators was sometimes compromised, was something of an embarrassment to government. Murray may have been tolerated with reluctance by the colonial authorities, and certainly reluctantly supported. In the end, government was forced to take the proper ethical and practical stand in relation to preserving still-surviving aspects of our pre-colonial cultures.

Nobody was probably more aware of the role of scholarly publication in increasing the collectability and hence, monetary value of traditional Nigerian art object than Murray. He did not publish a great deal, though his knowledge about the subject was immense. He may have been compelled, however, to publish and exhibit examples of Oron art objects so as to convince the authorities of the day of the desirability of building a Museum to house them.

Recommendations

1) It is strongly recommended that ethnographic field studies of different ethnic

nationalities in Nigeria and elsewhere in other parts of Africa which are still extant be published. This may be done not necessarily by Museum personnel, but by Africans such as the Late novelist, Etim Akaduh who based his story upon *Ekpu* figures that went missing in the olden days.

- 2) Painters and sculptors should also create contemporary interpretations of the ancient images of their ancestors for the benefit of school children who now flock to national Museums nationwide to glimpse at aspects of the life of their forbears. If profound mistakes, advertently or otherwise, had been made in the past, it is to these people that we must now look up for vision. This is because if no "stick" of the Oron Ekpu sculpture had survived into modern period, the vision of Oron forbears could only have been narrower.

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