

The Moving Finger: A Rhetorical, Grammatological and Afrinographic Exploration of  
Nsibidi in Nigeria and Cameroon

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This dissertation titled  
The Moving Finger: A Rhetorical, Grammatological and Afrinographic Exploration of  
Nsibidi in Nigeria and Cameroon

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## ABSTRACT

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The Moving Finger: A Rhetorical, Grammatological and Afrinographic Exploration of Nsibidi in Nigeria and Cameroon

Director of Dissertation: John W. Smith

The debate involving the origins, nature and utilization of Nsibidi has raged since the earliest years of the twentieth century. Western scholars in the fields of archeology, anthropology, linguistics and other areas of study have offered differing insights to the collective body of information now known as Nsibidi Studies. Three central questions, using communication studies as a disciplinary frame, allowed me to probe deeply into Nsibidi to see if it could be reframed and reimagined as visual rhetoric, visual nommo and actual writing. I first wanted to know what is Nsibidi? Next, how does this system work? Lastly, I wanted to discern who created and used Nsibidi? It was at this point that I had to also investigate so-called African secret societies.

Nsibidi is a system consisting mainly of gestures, tattoos, symbols, signs and other markings. It is possible that Nsibidi is one of the oldest organized systems of nonverbal human communication, dating back to at least 2000 C.E. As such, I believe it is time to explore in far more detail the ways in which communication studies scholarship can explore its rhetorical and grammatological potential. I spent three months in southeast Nigeria and southwestern Cameroon conducting fieldwork, which includes my investiture into the ancient West Africa so-called secret society known as Ekpe/Mgbe. My method of exploration was initially ethnography, but I ultimately utilized a

significantly newer, fresher and less stigmatized approach called Afronography. I prefer spelling this method as Afrinography.

I ultimately concluded that Nsibidi can be understood as visual rhetoric and visual nommo. Whether or not the system is truly actual writing as defined by Western scholarship is debatable. Further examination is possible on all three issues.

## DEDICATION

*To all Afrikan Ancestors, both known and unknown. Be you Continental, Caribbean, Carolina or carried elsewhere, you suffered through the Great Maafa for me. Know that I remember you, I mourn you, I thank you and I love you.*

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### **The Prolegomenon**

Nsibidi is likely one of the oldest organized systems of nonverbal human communication. As a system, it may well date back no less than 4000 years. Western scholars have debated what they believed to be Nsibidi's origins and usages for over a century. Colonial administrators and researchers in fields such as archeology, anthropology, linguistics, and others have formed a body of knowledge on this system known today as Nsibidi Studies. I posit that communication scholarship can assist researchers in the West when exploring fresh approaches to unearthing Nsibidi's intellectual potential. Three central questions, using communication studies as a disciplinary standpoint, allowed me to unpack and probe deeply into Nsibidi to see if it could be reframed and reimagined as visual rhetoric, visual nommo and actual writing. I first wanted to know what is Nsibidi? Next, how does this system work? Lastly, I wanted to discern who created and used Nsibidi? Nsibidi is a system consisting mainly of gestures, tattoos, symbols, signs and other markings. I spent three months living in southeastern Nigeria and Cameroon examining Nsibidi and I learned several things about Nsibidi. My goal is to now share that knowledge. If it is one of the oldest organized systems of nonverbal human communication, Nsibidi should be of great importance those of us who study communication forms. The significance of my dissertation is that it is the first to explore how communication studies scholarship can integrate at least some of Nsibidi's unknown rhetorical and grammatological potential.

This is a narrative written based on what I uncovered while spending three months living in Nigeria and Cameroon. It was the great South African leader Steven Biko who wrote, “I write what I like” in 1969.<sup>1</sup> I take this a step further by insisting that I write how I like. The use of “first-person” voice is intentional and I believe essential to this particular account. This is my account of what I learned while engaging Nsibidi and those that utilize the system. It is a measure of how I see and share the information I unearth.

Three disparate events, scattered over three of the most important episodes of my life, have brought me to this moment. I consider myself a communication scholar, Africologist and Africanist. I have dedicated the better part of the last twenty years studying the people and cultures of West Africa. This includes earning a bachelor’s and master’s that each focused on African topics. Beyond my coursework, I have had the distinct honor and pleasure to spend time on the African continent on five different occasions. Writing a dissertation on Nsibidi is something I have wanted to do since 2002. It is been a long and winding road, and I want to take a moment to explain how I have arrived to where I am now undertaking this task.

Since my college days as a history student at Fisk University, I have had a strong interest in examining African culture. Leaving New York City to attend Fisk is probably the single most important, life-changing event in my life up to this point. It was at Fisk that I first discovered Ghana, Nigeria, the Gambia, South Africa, Kenya, Malawi and Tanzania. My daily interaction with all of the African students on that historic campus created a long-term cultural love affair that continues to this day. Even though I was

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<sup>1</sup> Steven Biko, *I Write What I Like: Selected Writings*, (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2002).

raised in New York City, my interaction with continental Africans had been somewhat limited prior to my arrival in Nashville. During my grade and junior high school years, there were plenty of Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Jamaicans and Trinidadians in my area of the South Bronx, but no continental Africans that I can remember. My high school, which was located in a northern section of the Bronx, had large numbers of Italian, Jewish, British, German, Croatian, Polish, Russian and other Eastern European ethnic groups. All of this made it possible for me to become accustomed to constant levels of intercultural interaction with groups beyond the African-American community. Still, after watching the reruns of Alex Haley's groundbreaking television series *Roots*, I became curious about Africa and the ethnic origins of the people around me. Nearly every family that I knew on 176th Street and Courtland Avenue not only watched the entire series, but was also mesmerized with newfound notions of wanting to trace their ancestry back to "the Motherland." By the time I got to Nashville for college many years later, I was "all in" on not only wanting to get to know most of the African students on campus, I also knew that one day I had to visit Africa.

The next moment came when I earned my M.A. in History at North Carolina Central University (NCCU). NCCU provided me my first opportunity to visit West Africa through a study abroad program offered by the African and African-American history faculty at Temple University, in Philadelphia. By dawn of the twenty-first century, I had spent substantial time in West Africa three times, including the Temple program, the United States Department of State Graduate Internship Program and the Fulbright Student Program. It was during my time with the Department of State and Fulbright programs in Ghana that I first met, and got to work closely with, Nicholas

Robertson. Nick was the then-director of the United States Information Services (USIS) office at Embassy Accra. Long an ardent admirer of all things Nigerian, Nick was the first scholar I had encountered to that point who pushed me to think about expanding the confines of my research in western Africa to more fully include Nigeria. My academic background covered the former British colonial West Africa, but admittedly, the vast majority of my work centered solely on Ghana, and its previous incarnation as the old Gold Coast Colony. The cities of Accra and Kumasi, as well as the beautiful Cape Coast region enthralled me, so there was very little reason to alter course. However, Nick was relentless. By 2002, I had begun for the first time to think about potential research projects in Nigeria, especially those that would cover aspects of Igbo culture. The Igbo, Efik and Efut played an important role in the creation of Gullah and Geechee culture in South Carolina. My interest in Black Low Country culture dates back to my days in junior high school; I spent many summers in Georgetown and Charleston Counties visiting my father's relatives, while hearing endless stories told by the elders regarding what it meant to be a "Gullah/Geechee." I knew that many of the Gullah and Geechee words my relatives used had a direct linguistic link to Nigeria, as the scholarship of Lorenzo Dow Turner suggested as early as the 1940s.<sup>2</sup> Nick, as usual, was right and I knew it was time to expand my African horizons and move beyond an almost singular focus on Ghana.

Not only was I now ready to fully embrace and experience other nations in western Africa, I also had a sudden, powerful urge to visit other regions of the continent. During the summer of 2003, a second Fulbright allowed me to spend time in southern

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<sup>2</sup>See Lorenzo Dow Turner, *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect*, (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 2002).

Africa with a group of scholars gathered from across the nation. There are many Nigerians living in South Africa and Botswana. My encounters with them during the months of July and August only solidified the path that I was now following. Nick was still working with USIS, as he began to think about his possible retirement from diplomatic service. He was planning to undertake a business venture in Nigeria and we met up at the African Studies Association conference meeting in 2003. I knew a year earlier that if I was going to do research in Nigeria it would be on the Igbo and their relationship to a system of written communication known as Nsibidi, found throughout their ancestral land of Imo State. I came across information on Nsibidi several years earlier when several American students who studied West Africa asked me if Africans had ever developed their own independent systems of writing. When I was not able to fully answer their question, I began to research this topic and I knew if I studied Nsibidi further the work would likely contain a grammatological component. Grammatology is the study of writing systems. From 1999-through 2003, I read all I could about Nsibidi, and every other system of written communication in Africa, that I could locate. In 2009, I was given the opportunity to work with a group of Nigerian scholars in Georgia who were attempting to take a group of American students to Nigeria, as part of a study abroad experience in the heart of Igboland. While the American students took classes from African instructors, I was afforded the opportunity to teach a group of African students about the Gullah/Geechee and other aspects of African-American life and culture.

My encounters with many of the history and international studies faculty at Imo State University not only ushered in the third moment, it also confirmed my belief that



Nsibidi deserved a far more in-depth treatment that it had received up to that point. This was especially true after one particular member showed me an Nsibidi engraving on a set of stones just outside of Owerri. I found it interesting that no one, despite so much long-standing evidence, had attempted to concretely prove that this particular system had the requisite elements needed to be classified in the West as an *actual* system of writing. I knew that in coming years this would be part of what I would want to examine, if given a chance, at the doctoral level. When I applied to the School of Communication Studies at Ohio University in 2011, I believed that this would be the project that had the most potential for an outstanding dissertation. All of this brings me to today.

Despite an abundance of Western scholarship on Nsibidi, there are still so many questions surrounding the system. My primary goal involved spending the 2014-15 academic year unraveling some of the rhetorical and grammatological potential that surrounds Nsibidi. I believe that Nsibidi's possibilities can be best brought to light by communication scholarship. This endeavor would center on three research questions; each could serve as a window through which I could reframe and reimagine Nsibidi. The first involved determining, as a system, what was Nsibidi? Second, how does Nsibidi work as a system? Thirdly, could I reinterpret Nsibidi as a form of what communication scholars would construe as visual rhetoric and/or visual nommo? In seeking to explore the grammatological elements of Nsibidi, I have again furthered the field of communication since this type of investigation is part of the discipline. Since very little has been done in these areas by communication researchers, I do hope to spark greater interest in the field. I especially want to encourage those who might want to study written communication in regions such as the southeastern Nigeria and southwestern

Cameroon. There is great potential here for research that is not only fresh, but also offers illuminating insights on the human experience in relation to how we communicate. Such possible revelations might be quite startling!

### **Three New Horizons for Communication Studies: Grammatological, Visual Rhetoric and Visual Nommo**

My research lies at the intersection between communication studies, African history and Africology. I decided to segment this work into three components. Nsibidi is a system consisting mainly of gestures, tattoos, symbols, signs and other markings utilized by various organizations found mainly throughout Nigeria and Cameroon. I spent three months living in southeast Nigeria and southwestern Cameroon conducting fieldwork, which included my investiture into the ancient West Africa so-called “secret society” known as Ekpe/Mgbe. After undergoing the rigorous initiation process necessary to become an official member of Ekpe/Mgbe, I quickly realized that the organization was not so much a secret society as it was a *knowledge society*. This is how I will refer to Ekpe/Mgbe from this point forward. There is another important part of my work that I should explain now. My method of research exploration was initially ethnography, but I ultimately utilized a significantly newer and less stigmatized approach called Afronography. I prefer spelling this method as Afrinography because if a method claims to keep the experiences and perspectives of African people at its core, then I believe that “Afri” is closer to this than using “Afro.” There is no such place as “Afroland.” If my work is intended to connect readers to things African, I think it wisest to just use the Afri-prefix. I discuss Afrinography in more detail during chapter three. My three research questions were initially straightforward in an attempt to allow me to

access and understand Nsibidi, even as I probed beyond these questions for deeper meanings and perspectives of the system.

### **Three Central Questions**

The debate involving the origins, nature and utilization of Nsibidi has raged since the earliest years of the twentieth century. Western scholars in the fields of archeology, anthropology, linguistics and other areas of study have offered differing insights to the collective body of information now known as Nsibidi Studies. Three central questions, using communication studies as a disciplinary frame, allowed me to probe deeply into Nsibidi to see if it could be reframed and reimagined as visual rhetoric, visual nommo and actual writing. I first wanted to know what is Nsibidi? Next, how does this system work? Lastly, I wanted to discern who created and used Nsibidi? It was at this point that I had to also investigate so-called African secret societies. Initially, I erroneously believed that the grammatological portion of this dissertation was its most important aspect. As my work progressed, I came to understand that the visual rhetoric and visual nommo components each held significant prominence and academic promise, but perhaps in different ways. Although I could not conclusively prove that Nsibidi meets the Western definition of what would be classified as actual writing, I am laying down what I think is the first official gauntlet by an American scholar in this arena. For future communication scholars and others, the grammatological portion of this work means to satisfy the two things, both of which begin with the letter “s.” It is a starting point and signpost for those in coming days who might want to investigate aspects of true writing in at least Nigeria and Cameroon. Despite my unsuccessful initial attempt to uncover and clearly document these traits in Nsibidi, I believe that researchers of the African

experience must forge again in this area and continue to reveal probable truths about writing systems on that continent. I am opening up the official discussion on Nsibidi as actual writing in the Western academy, and as I sound the clarion call, I additionally point to the most likely direction scholars ought to look: Cross River State, Calabar, Ekpe, Mgbe, the Efik, the Efut and the Qua. From this vantage, such intellectuals can move forward to explore other information-laden horizons in West Africa and beyond. Next, I want to explain why I think the study of Nsibidi by communication scholars is vital subject matter for our field and to areas such as African history and African studies.

### **Africa and Written Systems of Communication**

Africa! I have said since 2002, in large part because of all the erroneous preconceived notions we have all learned through television, films and magazine articles, the single hardest subject to teach in the Western academy is African history. Few places can conjure up such a wide range of positive and negative mental images. The African continent is often imagined by those living in the West as a place of mystery and darkness. My research as a communication scholar, Africanist and Africologist has taught me that too frequently Westerners associate Africa with the untrue, and deleterious, imagery cited by communication theorist Molefi Asante. According to Asante (2007), “In the West the ignorance of Africa is palpable, like a monster that invades our brains with disbelief, deception, and disinterest” (p. 13). We are unaware and uninformed of Africa’s true past. Several other writers have offered equally insightful commentary on this subject. This includes famed Nigerian scholar Chinua Achebe in his article, *An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness*. Achebe (1998) concluded that framing Africa as a type of “other world” is common in the literature and

imagery produced in the West (p. 251). This perspective of “otherness” often depicts Africa as a backwards, uncivilized space. Miles Bredin (2012) references an eighteenth century Scottish explorer, James Bruce, who once described Africa “as a place of unimaginable brutality and intrigue” (p. 12). This is the problem condensed and encapsulated; this false belief that Africa, and Africans, possess a nominal, barely discernable past or “story.” Although specious, this too-often accepted narrative is, in my opinion, directly linked to another similarly inaccurate belief about Africa.

When we learn to view Africa as “Other” it then becomes easier, perhaps even natural, to believe that the continent has not followed the “normal” path toward “progress” and “advancement.” In the Africa as Other account, some thought Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and even many of the indigene of this hemisphere, moved from orality to writing. Only Africa was left behind in this intellectual revolution. This mode of thinking on Africa could be, through over five centuries of modification, the intellectual wellspring of what Asante (2005) has called “anti-Africanism.”<sup>3</sup> I view it as a “canon of Afrikanity” and something quite similar to “Orientalism” as expressed by Said.<sup>4</sup> Western scholarship on the origins of written communication, definable in the academy as “actual writing,” once told us, in the work by Geoffrey Sampson, Peter T. Daniels and William Bright, that writing evolved from scripts found in the ancient Near East, East Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, Central America and Europe.<sup>5</sup> The recent work of the last ten years on writing, such as the scholarship of anthropologist Fallou

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<sup>3</sup> Asante addressed the various manifestations of “anti-Africanism” in the introduction to yet another seminal work in 2005. Molefi K. Asante, *Encyclopedia of Black Studies* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York City: Vintage, 1978).

<sup>5</sup> Daniels edited the first book written in English that included all of the known “true” writing systems from ancient times to the 1990s. Peter T. Daniels and William Bright, *The World's Writing Systems* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1996). Geoffrey Sampson, *Writing Systems: A Linguistic Introduction* (Stanford: Stanford University, 1990).

Ngom and cultural historian Alik Shahadah, has slowly moved away from this likely false interpretation.<sup>6</sup> I believe that there is still so much unknown about written communication in places like southern Nigeria and Cameroon, particularly the systems that predate European colonial contact. During my time in Nigeria, I began to understand all of the written elements of Nsibidi as what I refer to as *Nsibidi-written*. Since it may well possess all of the requisite Western essentials to qualify as actual writing, as I believe, there is also what I would call *Nsibidi-writing*. Found predominately throughout southeastern Nigeria and southwestern Cameroon, Nsibidi-written is a form of mostly nonverbal communication utilized by other members of local ethnic groups such as the Efik, Efut, Qua and Igbo. There are likely dozens of ethnic communities that use it as well. This was the grammatological portion of this work. I posit that for all of these groups Nsibidi has become an important *communicative system*. As such, I believe that the system is imaginable and reimaginable by communication studies scholarship as *communicative visual rhetoric and communicative visual nommo*. In addition, communication research in general should explore the grammatological possibilities beyond my discoveries. In my opinion, there needs to be a conclusive answer as to whether or not Nsibidi contains the elements of what the Western academy defines as actual writing. In the first two instances of the above, Nsibidi could also be something culturally unique to the Lower Niger River Basin.

Beyond its potential to act as an intervention and correction to the still lingering paradigm on Africa, and the history of “proto-writing” versus phonetic, I additionally

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<sup>6</sup> Fallou Ngom, *Oral and Written Expressions of African Cultures* (Durham: Carolina Academic, 2009). Alik Shahadah has produced award-winning documentaries such as *Motherland* that discuss the history of writing in Africa.

seek to expand the current limits of “new rhetorics” and call for the greater incorporation of non-traditional forms. I believe Nsibidi is in fact an African rhetoric. In relation to this point, I have also reframed Nsibidi as a nommo that written communication makes visual. I used scholarship that involves disciplines and areas such as communication, visual rhetoric, semiotics, memory, agency, African history and African Studies. At the very least Nsibidi is important to the overall field of communication and communication studies in particular because I think it may well be one of the world’s oldest organized systems of its kind.

Although positioned in the field of communication, I strongly suspect that this project can inform the disciplines of sociology, psychology, economics and political science too. Systems like Nsibidi conceivably have substantial contributions to add to the collective of global human knowledge when we use them as a lens to make sense of everyday life in Nigeria, Cameroon and elsewhere. Nsibidi has piqued the curiosity of Westerners for over a century. An attempt by a communication researcher to examine and reframe Nsibidi is likely to generate a high level of interest in academic circles. The historic and intellectual significance of such a project are potentially quite substantial.

### **Revelations While in Cross River State**

Three critically important facts forced themselves upon me in the opening weeks of my research in Cross River State, Nigeria. The first involved my quickly discovering that it is nearly impossible to document accurate information about Nsibidi, in any form, without initiation in the ancient Ekpe/Mgbe knowledge society. The second fact was that “Nsibidi” consists of a complex body of gestures and written communication. I only wanted to focus on the written elements of the system, which at first may have appeared

somewhat odd to several of my participants. My work was solely an “Nsibidi work,” which made it differ greatly from so many of the other recent projects by Westerners in Calabar, the major city of Cross River State. There will be much more on this point later. This brings me to my third realization while in Nigeria. It is extremely difficult to understand written communication systems without understanding its creators. Often, anybody of written communication, be they true lettering or symbols, is molded by those who invent such systems.

Ekpe/Mgbe is likely one of Africa’s oldest so-called knowledge societies. Ekpe/Mgbe is in fact a knowledge-based order, where initiates share older and newer information about life. Reportedly accumulated for millennia, most of this wisdom is not available to non-initiates. However, it appears that there some certain, specific information about Nsibidi is now sharable with outsiders. The knowledge societies that hold pertinent information about Nsibidi have intentionally kept this information from the outside world.

The suggestion persists that Nsibidi probably played a pivotal role in trade, the adjudication of legal matters and in the various religious ceremonies of those ethnic groups that use it as communication or in other respects. It is reasonable to infer that as knowledge formed, groups such as the Efik, Efut, Qua and Igbo, who have lived for centuries in close proximity to the eastern branch of the Niger River Basin in today’s southeastern Nigeria and southwestern Cameroon, may have sought to create their own independent written communication, including types of scripts and lettering. After my discussion with various Nsibidi practitioners in Cross River State, I now firmly believe that the Efik probably first created Nsibidi, with the system then spreading to Ejagham



and Qua communities. Each was in need of a method of communicating that could also assist with saving information not meant for the general African public. At this point, this is mere speculation because Nsibidi has a past still shrouded in the unknown. Recent Western scholarship doubts that Nsibidi is in fact an actual writing-system.<sup>7</sup> I believe that there is in fact credible evidence, both written and oral, that suggests Nsibidi is far more than merely a system of pictography.

Ultimately, after I returned from Cross River State I radically altered the title, although all of the above certainly still remained true. Once I began the process of officially learning Nsibidi from a group of dedicated practitioners and other Nigerian local intellectuals, it occurred to me that the human hand, and its ability for writing and movement, was of special importance. This made me think about an old poem written by Omar Khayyam. Khayyam was Persian scientist and philosopher who wrote the following, “The moving finger writes and having writ moves on. Nor all thy piety nor wit shall lure it back to cancel half a line. Nor all thy tears wash out a word of it.” Although brief, I have long believed that there is such great power in this piece. The title of Khayyam’s poem is, *The Moving Finger*. In very instant that I first beheld one of the Nsibidi signs, which embodies a human hand near what could be perceived as a writing implement, in early November of 2014, I thought about Khayyam. It was at this moment when I decided to change my title so that it would include the words “the moving finger.” Here is a photograph of the Nsibidi symbol known as “the hand”:

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<sup>7</sup> In 2007, Christopher J. Slogar undertook dissertation research on Nsibidi. Christopher Slogar, Early Ceramics from Calabar: Toward a History of Nsibidi, *African Arts*, 40(1), 19. In this article, Slogar refers to Nsibidi as a “graphic system” and a “pool of symbols” (p. 19). However, Slogar does mention Nsibidi “may” have phonetic and logographic elements, although he did not seek to discover what they might entail.



Figure 1. The Nsibidi symbol for the human hand.

### **Communication Scholarship and Nsibidi**

Some may ask why should communication scholarship invest time and energy into projects that investigate systems such as Nsibidi? Why is this project important? As I stated earlier in this work, Nsibidi is very likely one of the human family's oldest organized bodies of nonverbal communication. It has a documented history that dates back at least to 2,000 BC, according to the Nigerian Commission on Museums and Monuments in Alok Community. I had the opportunity to visit the famed Alok Monoliths back in late December of 2014. There are over thirty known "monolith" sites, and it is rumored that dozens more are covered by dense rainforest growth. I do not conceptualize these age-old stone artifacts as monoliths, but instead as what they are far more akin to which is stele. The difference being that stele, unlike the usual monolith, contains writing and tells onlookers a story using written communication of some sort. Some Nigerian researchers have even referred these objects as "stone books," which I

also believe is a more accurate description than monolith. I will show several photographs of these steles later in this work.

If Nsibidi is indeed among the first organized systems of nonverbal communication, both in written and other forms, this alone should make it of historic importance to both communication and communication studies scholarship. In addition, I would like to offer a compelling quote from Ayele Bekerie (1997), author of the book *Ethiopic, An African Writing System: Its History and Principles*.<sup>8</sup> Bekerie (1997) wrote:

Writing Systems are components of knowledge systems. By definition, they are philosophical because they assist in synthesizing ideas, thoughts, and deeds through the use of signs, symbols or other pictorial renderings. Specifically, writing is a means by which people record, objectify, and organize their activities and thoughts through images and graphs. It could be argued that the study of writing systems may provide a new approach to knowledge creations, organizations, and disseminations. Writing Systems are, indeed, rich sources of human intellectual activities, such as history, philosophy, social order, psychology, and aesthetics. (p.15).

Writing, be it Western in form or indigenous, is about knowledge production and retention. In addition, writing is central to culture, embodying notions of “self” and “other.” Nsibidi probably assisted the groups that use it to define, and redefine, themselves and all of the other dozens of ethnic groups in their vicinity. When we study writing, we study one of the most important forms of human communication. In the case of Nsibidi, and any other forms of written communication in West Africa, the

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<sup>8</sup> Ayele Bekerie is a Temple University graduate and assistant professor of African Studies at Cornell University.

possibilities for new intellectual insights for our field are highly probable. Eugene C. Black (1964) offers a fascinating quote from Albert Einstein:

Man tries to make for himself in the fashion that suits him best a simplified and intelligible picture of the world; he then tries to some extent to substitute this cosmos of his for the world of experience, and thus overcome it. This is what the painter, the poet, the speculative philosopher and the natural scientist do, each in his own fashion. (p. 718).

I believe this is also what the Nsibidi writer and reader does; Nsibidi has long helped Niger River societies render an “intelligible picture of the world” in their struggle as humans to “overcome,” reshape, render and make familiar their reality.

Additionally, Ghelawdewos Araia (2004) wrote an online article entitled, *The Magnificence of African Written Culture and Why We Must Adopt Geez Fidel for Ethiopian Languages*, for the Institute of Development and Education for Africa, Inc. Araia (2004) wrote:

This paper will discuss and critically examine the magnificence of African writing systems and demystify the mythology of the non-existence of written cultures in Africa. It will also candidly present, by way of suggestion and not imposition, that spoken Ethiopian languages consider the adoption of Geez Fidel (alphabet) in lieu of Latin. The Eurocentric perspective pertaining to African languages that they are merely spoken and that Africans don't have scripts to document their history and culture is a preliminary judgment without historical precedent.

Unfortunately, many African scholars who were unable to appreciate the

unrivaled genius of African invention of alphabets internalize this Eurocentric stereotype. (p. 1).

As a communication scholar of African-descent interested in grammatology, written communication and visual communication in West Africa, I believe that communication studies researchers should view actual systems of writing, and all other forms of written communication in Africa, as meaning-making, reality-rendering new spaces from which to draw knowledge about human experiences. Further, I feel an obligation to help “mark” and correct the record on the topic of writing on that continent. I believe there are still many people, both inside and outside of the academy, who still think Africa has no independent tradition of true writing to claim as its own. Often, it appears that Western scholars feel the need to redefine, or stretch notions, of areas such as writing so that they can include Africa. Part of my project was to discover if Nsibidi can stand on its merits for inclusion as *true* writing as defined by the West. Professorial attempts to investigate and define Nsibidi date back to the first decade of the last century.

### **A Definition of Terms**

I will be using the words “writing,” “lettering” and “script(s)” interchangeably. Prominent grammatologists and semioticians Peter T. Daniels and William Bright (1996) define each as synonyms.<sup>9</sup> A script is writing; a self-contained unit of an alphabet. Equally synonymous are the terms “actual writing and “true writing.” Here, I am referring to what Western scholarship would define as writing or script. The academy makes clear distinctions between scripts and “pictograms.” A pictogram is an idea

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<sup>9</sup> See Daniels’ opening section on Abbreviations, Conventions and Definitions. Peter T. Daniels and William Bright, *The World’s Writing Systems* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1996).

expressed by a picture.<sup>10</sup> “Pictography” is a series of pictograms. Phonetics refers to the sounds found in a particular set of scripts.<sup>11</sup> Pictograms often lack a phonetic element and this is one reason why they do not qualify as actual writing in the West. Only scripts communicate sounds. “Grammatology” is the study of writing systems, and their accompanying scripts; I discuss this in further detail later in this chapter. One semiotician, Eugene Gorny, described “semiotics” as “a science of signs and/or sign systems.”<sup>12</sup> By littoral, I am narrowing my physical region of study to the coastal border between southeastern Nigeria and southwestern Cameroon. It is in this part of western Africa where we find the “eastern Niger River Basin,” as opposed to the western branch in Senegambia. Next, I will move to investigate a central question that must be addressed in more detail: What is the Western definition of “actual” or “true” writing?

### **Writing It Right: A Western Perspective**

It would be somewhat difficult to continue discussing this topic without a clear definition of what, precisely, constitutes “writing” in the Western academy. I will be drawing on the work of several scholars considered experts in the field of grammatology, semiotics and other forms of written communication. My goal was to locate and discuss the specific elements required by academicians for written systems of communication to be considered as true writing. I want to also touch on another important point related to the topic here. The Western academy since the 1920s has made a concerted effort to remove discussions about ancient KMT or Kemet (“Egypt”) from the rest of the “Black

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<sup>10</sup> Daniels believes that pictography is not writing because they lack what he refers to as “specific linguistic forms.”

<sup>11</sup> There is some excellent discussion on phonetics and the International Phonetic Alphabet by Daniels on page 5.

<sup>12</sup> Eugene Gorny also posed the important question, “Who establishes the difference between signs and non-signs?” <http://www.zhurnal.ru/staff/gorny/english/semiotic.htm>

Africa.”<sup>13</sup> I have to mention this because when we examine the works of the Ivan Van Sertima (1985), Molefi Asante (1990), Cheikh Anta Diop (1991), John Henrik Clarke (1991) and Yosef ben-Jochannan (1996) it is clear that Kemet, and the script they created, Metu Neter (“Hieroglyphics”), originated in the African interior.<sup>14</sup> However, the heated “debate” still rages in the West regarding whether or not Metu Neter is a product of the Africa mind. It is because of this that I am excluding ancient Kemet from my analysis of actual writing on the African continent. At this point, I want to begin my discussion on what qualifies in the Western academy as actual writing.

The study of writing systems, referred to as grammatology, has occurred since at least the last two thousand years according to linguist Peter T. Daniels.<sup>15</sup> Noted Western grammatologists include Walter J. Ong, Eric Havelock, Jack Goody and Friedrich Kittler. Daniels (1996) wrote that the history of the study of writing began, “From the earliest times, in Mesopotamia and in Classical Greece...” (p. 5). Centuries later, “the European Renaissance interest in the study of early Greek and Latin manuscripts” furthered the study. As, “Explorers brought back both antiquities and contemporary manuscripts bearing writing in exotic scripts” scholars in Europe knew “colonial administrators needed to understand their subject’s texts and to publish their own edicts in native languages.” As time progressed, European “scholars began to devote entire books to writing systems” by the end of the nineteenth century (p. 6). Daniels also tells us that

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<sup>13</sup> There are several excellent works on this subject. I suggest a Cheikh Anta Diop classic in its 30<sup>th</sup> printing. Cheikh Anta Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1989).

<sup>14</sup> Yosef ben-Jochannan spent the better part of thirty years challenging Euro-centric notions of a “white Egypt.” One his most important books dealing with this subject was written to “expose Europeanized African history.” Yosef ben-Jochannan, *Black Man of the Nile and His Family* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1996).

<sup>15</sup> Peter T. Daniels and William Bright. *The World’s Writings Systems* (New York: Oxford University, 1996).

Karl Faulmann wrote the first of these works, in 1880. In 1883, Isaac Taylor had written a book entitled *The Alphabet*. Taylor was the first Western scholar to create the categories that define “legitimate” writing systems. Writing from a so-called “scientific perspective,” Taylor divided writing system into the categories of logographic, syllabic and alphabetic. He moved the academy beyond the old classical definitions of writing as a two-category division: picture-writing and phonetics. The more recent work in the area of grammatology took place after 1945. Ignace J. Gelb (1952), and Harald Haarmann (1990) who attempted to bridge the gap between writing and consciousness, wrote two of the most seminal works during this period. Any examination of writing, or grammatology, must include clear, precise definitions of what writing, in the West, entails. I will start with a series of recent email conversations I had with noted semioticians and grammatologists Mark Van Stone, Peter T. Daniels, Geoffrey Sampson and Fallou Ngom. At this point, I want to examine the definitions offered by Van Stone, Daniels and Ngom, while exploring Sampson’s words in the next chapter.

Mark Van Stone is a Professor of Art History and former Guggenheim Fellow, as well as the author of *2012: Science and Prophecy of the Ancient Maya*.<sup>16</sup> Van Stone has spent the last thirty years studying Maya hieroglyphs in Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Belize. During his tenure with the Guggenheim program, Van Stone spent over a year studying and photographing manuscripts and inscriptions from Europe and the Islamic world. His work has also taken him to Southeast Asia and Japan. In our

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<sup>16</sup> Mark Van Stone is a professor, author, speaker and Maya expert. He teaches at Southwestern College, CA. Van Stone has written two books that examine grammology, semiotics and epigraphy in Mexico and Central America.

Mark Van Stone, *2012: Science and Prophecy of the Ancient Maya* (Mexico City: Tlacaoel Press, 2010) and *Reading the Maya Glyphs* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2005).



email conversation, Van Stone informed me that he believes that writing has extremely specific elements that must be met.

I initially asked Van Stone two questions. First, in precise terms, “what is writing?” Van Stone replied, “Excellent question. I define ‘Memory Aid’ or ‘proto writing’ as signs that are not a complete record of the information it is mapped from. It needs a knowledgeable ‘medicine man’ or someone like that to fill in the missing info. For example, in many Christian liturgical books, they will write ‘Our Father’ or, formerly, ‘Pater Noster’ where they want the priest to say the Lord’s Prayer. Without knowing the whole prayer, the reader would never be able to reconstruct the whole liturgy. Likewise with ‘R. I. P.’ and ‘q.v.’... In other words, sometimes even a ‘complete’ writing system is not complete. But liturgical books like those of the Na-Khi (Naxi) of southern China, or the Midewiwin birchbark books of the Ojibway, or the ‘year-count’ painted skins of the Sioux, or the rock-engravings in Botswana, are not ‘writing’ because the interpreters who can fill in the missing info are long gone.”<sup>17</sup> The second question was, “What distinguishes a set of symbols from an actual system of writing?” Van Stone answered by stating “a ‘writing system’ completely encodes whole passages of information (almost always encoding spoken language), and all you need to know is the language and the encoding system to be able to read it fully. Or mostly fully.”<sup>18</sup> Each of these answers offers fascinating insights in how the West defines writing. In the case of Nsibidi, part of my work was directly answered in Van Stone’s definition of writing. The “interpreters” he mentioned are alive and well, and several will be actively participating in my study. One of my next steps will be to locate where and

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<sup>17</sup> (M. Van Stone, personal communication, June 3, 2014).

<sup>18</sup> (M. Van Stone, personal communication, June 3, 2014).

how Nsibidi is “encoded” in the spoken languages of Igboid and Annang people. Van Stone offer an excellent starting point, but we need to go further.

Peter T. Daniels is among the most prominent living grammatologists; he specializes in typology. Daniels co-edited the massive groundbreaking book, *The World's Writing Systems*.<sup>19</sup> This was the first work written in English to document and detail all of the world's known scripts, both past and present. I will be examining and discussing this book in far greater detail in the next chapter. Daniels, educated at the University of Chicago and Cornell, has written numerous pieces on scripts in Europe, Asia and the Americas.

I initially asked Peter T. Daniels three questions, including his definition of true writing. He responded, “Writing is a system of more or less permanent marks used to represent an utterance in such a way that it can be recovered more or less exactly without the intervention of the utterer.”<sup>20</sup> Daniels’ understanding of actual writing seems harmonious with that offered by Van stone. Daniels also informed me that he does not believe actual writing in West Africa pre-dates the 1840s and a somewhat well-known written system known as Vai. When I asked about the possibility of an independently created West African system of actual writing, he replied, “Vai, certainly. Tuchscherer believes that the other West African scripts may have been ‘stimulus diffused’ because Vai warriors were mercenaries all over the place, but they exhibit considerable differences from it and among themselves.”<sup>21</sup> I asked Daniels what he knew of Nsibidi.

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<sup>19</sup> Peter T. Daniels & William Bright, *The World's Writing Systems* (New York: Oxford University, 1996).

<sup>20</sup> (P. T. Daniels, personal communication, July 22, 2014).

<sup>21</sup> (P. T. Daniels, personal communication, July 23, 2014). Vai is discussed at some length in the Daniels and Bright book.

His response was, “Of Nsibidi, nothing.”<sup>22</sup> Daniels and Van Stone have laid the foundation for my definition of what writing is according to the standards of the West. Next, I will begin to consider the recent scholarship of Senegalese linguist and grammarologist Fallou Ngom.

### **Writing New Horizons: Fallou Ngom**

Fallou Ngom has spent the last twenty years studying language, both written and spoken in western and eastern Africa. His areas of interest cover “the interactions between African languages and non-African languages, the Africanization of Islam, and Ajami literatures of West African languages written in Arabic script.”<sup>23</sup> Ngom’s biography page on the Boston University website states, “He hopes to help train the first generation of American scholars to have direct access into the wealth of knowledge still buried in West African Ajami literatures, and the historical, cultural, and religious heritage that has found expression in this manner.”<sup>24</sup> This page also tells us that, “Another fascinating area of Dr. Ngom’s work is language analysis in asylum cases, a sub-field of the new field of forensic linguistics. His work in this field addresses the intricacies of using knowledge of varied West African languages and dialects to evaluate the claims of migrants applying for asylum and determine if the person is actually from the country that he or she claims.” Among numerous other journals, Ngom has published pieces for the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, *Language Variation and Change* and the

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<sup>22</sup> (P. T. Daniels, personal communication, July 23, 2014).

<sup>23</sup> Boston University website, Faculty Profiles, <http://www.bu.edu/anthrop/people/faculty/f-ngom/Site>

<sup>24</sup> Boston University website, Faculty Profiles, <http://www.bu.edu/anthrop/people/faculty/f-ngom/Site>

*African Studies Review*.<sup>25</sup> As the current Director of the African Language Program, Fallou Ngom has earned four degrees that involve the study of language, as well as receiving other advanced training in this area.<sup>26</sup> The languages that Ngom can speak, read and write in include French, English, Wolof, Mandinka, Pulaar, Arabic, Portuguese Creole, Sereer, Jóola (Fofñi), Spanish, Mankagne and Latin.

I believe that Ngom (2009) was correct when he wrote that when it comes to Western-based examinations of writing in Africa “the need for further studies of this largely neglected terrain of human knowledge that is at the heart of knowledge production about Africa and the world” (p. 1). Like Ngom, and his study of Ajami, I believe that once we discover the potential phonetic and logographic aspects of Nsibidi, a unique window into African thought might open.<sup>27</sup> Many here-to-fore unknown local communicative, linguistic, historical, cultural, economic and political perspectives could then be unearthed. In a series of recent email communications with Ngom, I had the opportunity to ask him for his definition of what writing entails, and for his thoughts on the history of writing in Africa. My first question involved Ngom offering a clear definition of writing and he responded, “In my view, writing is a system that enables human beings to put spoken words, which convey thoughts and emotions, into

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<sup>25</sup> Boston University website, Faculty Profiles, <http://www.bu.edu/anthrop/people/faculty/f-ngom/Site>

<sup>26</sup> Ngom has a Ph.D. in French Linguistics, from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; an M.A. in French Linguistics, from the University of Montana; an Maîtrise d’anglais Grammaire et Linguistique, from the Université Gaston Berger de Saint-Louis (Senegal); a Licence d’anglais Grammaire et Linguistique, from the Université Gaston Berger de Saint-Louis (Senegal) and a DEUG d’anglais Université Gaston Berger de Saint-Louis (Senegal).

<sup>27</sup> Ajami is an interesting chapter in the saga of writing in Africa. This system is clearly not independent of non-African influences, but marks a good step in the direction of research for further semiotic and grammological scholarship in Africa.

recognizable meaningful signs and symbols in a speech community.”<sup>28</sup> This is reminiscent of what we learned from the other linguists Van Stone and Daniels. Ngom added, “Writing fixates and immortalizes spoken words for members of a given community and allows for the intergenerational transmission of thoughts and emotions of all sorts.”<sup>29</sup> The definition found in Daniels (1996) is nearly identical in its sentiment.

Next, in an effort to ensure that I was at least somewhat correct in my assertion that the narrative on written communication and writing in West Africa likely contains gaps, and even outright errors, I asked Ngom for his thoughts on this subject. I first asked about West Africa’s role in the history of writing and he replied, “The history of writing in West Africa is varied. There are Arabic-based, Latin-based, and non-Arabic-based or Latin-based writing systems, including the Vai, Bamum script, Edo colour-based system, and others.”<sup>30</sup> Although Ngom did not specifically mention Nsibidi, he was fully aware of its existence. When it comes to writing in West Africa, and a general awareness of this subject, Ngom stated systems such as Nsibidi “remain unknown or understudied.” Ngom believes, “It is difficult to date with precision the advent of writing in West Africa, but the evidence suggests that people have been putting spoken words and thoughts into writing before colonization and Islamization, though both events generated new media of writings as elsewhere around the world.” On this, and several other points on writing in West Africa, Ngom and I are in totally agreement. I then asked Ngom if he believed the world has an accurate understanding of Africa's role in the history of written communication. He answered, “No. The general tendency is the erroneous treatment of

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<sup>28</sup> (F. Ngom, personal communication, July 30, 2014).

<sup>29</sup> (F. Ngom, personal communication, July 30, 2014).

<sup>30</sup> (F. Ngom, personal communication, August 1, 2014).

Africa as ‘an illiterate continent’ and the over-celebration of the ‘orality’ of the continent to suggest that it is devoid of writing traditions.”<sup>31</sup> Ngom then added something as powerful as it is dead on when he wrote, “I call this enduring trend rooted in the Arab-centric and Euro-centric schools of thoughts as the *linguistic paradox* in academia that remains unchallenged.”<sup>32</sup> A “linguistic paradox” that still remains “unchallenged.” That is precisely what it is! The paradox lies in the belief that in a place as old and large as Africa, only a few true independent true writing forms exist. I believe, like Ngom, that the Western academy, even in 2014, struggles with the idea that ethnic groups such as the Efik, Efut and Qua could have invented an independent, pre-colonial system of true writing. Nsibidi, formed long before the European colonial moment, almost certainly owes nothing to Europe, Asia, the Near East or elsewhere. It may be able to stand on its own merits for inclusion among the listings of the world’s scripts. Perhaps Nsibidi, and other scripts in West Africa, already meet the definition of actual writing in the West. “Perhaps” is such an important word here because it appears from the record very few have every attempted to locate these possibilities.

### **Amanda Carlson and Nsibidi Studies**

In chapter 2, I detail the recent research on Nsibidi undertaken by art historian Amanda B. Carlson (2003). I found her work to be extremely sound, although we may disagree on certain elements of Nsibidi’s past. It seems obvious that Carlson seeks to “expand” the current definitions on “writing.” In one moment she wrote, “Nsibiri, a system of communication grounded in art and ritual, expands Western concepts of writing” (p. 220). However, just a few pages before we were told, “The monoliths are

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<sup>31</sup> (F. Ngom, personal communication, August 1, 2014).

<sup>32</sup> (F. Ngom, personal communication, August 1, 2014).

linked to previous funerary traditions among the Ejagham. It is clear that graphic symbols (possibly writing systems) have been featured in these traditions. (p. 169).” The “graphic system” under discussion was Nsibidi. No western scholar, at this point, can conclusively state what Nsibidi truly is, or is not. That includes whether or not the system is graphic or script. The idea of having to expand the definition of writing is problematic because it yet again places Africa outside of the “normal developments” of the rest of the world. Communication scholars, such as grammatologists and semioticians, will have to refine writing to include “poor, backwards Africa.” This might be necessary. There may well be a type of scripting that is purely *African* in its nature. An “African Alphabet,” or “Afrikan Alphabet,” as Zimbabwean writer Saki Mafundikwa suggests, may well be a reality. I believe it is far too early to assert such claims because so little has been researched, or fully understood, about written communication in places like Nigeria and Cameroon by scholars from the West.

### **Communicative Artifact: Nsibidi as Visual Rhetoric**

Beyond being a possible form of actual writing, I have wondered how Nsibidi might inform and enrich our understanding of visual rhetoric? Communication theory tells us that not every visual object can be understood as visual rhetoric. Visual rhetoric involves a visual object, like Nsibidi, as a “communicative artifact,” or a type of “symbol,” which can communicate to us. I conceptualize Nsibidi as a powerful example of visual rhetoric; a dynamic visual rhetoric capable of transmitting, receiving and storing knowledge. As a system, Nsibidi may very well be, literally, visual rhetoric as epistemology. I am using the definition of visual rhetoric offered by communication theorist Sonya K. Foss (2011). Foss’ research speaks to the important linkages that exist

between “the visual symbol,” Nsibidi in my case, and “its impact on [a] culture,” such as the Efik, Efut and Qua (p. 303). Communication scholar Kenneth L. Smith (2005) wrote that there must be the “presence of three characteristics” for an object to qualify as visual rhetoric.<sup>33</sup> He stated, “The image must be symbolic, involve human intervention, and be presented to an audience for the purpose of communicating with that audience.” I believe that Nsibidi, as a system of written communication, meets all three of these requirements. As a visual rhetorical construction, Nsibidi speaks to the everyday lives of Africans. A communication studies lens can likely tell the world much about the daily hopes, struggles and communicative practices of the communities that learned and used Nsibidi. Another of my major research question entails seeing if communication scholarship can locate the much-discussed concept of an “African aesthetic” in Nsibidi. This relates to something that Asante (1990) referred to as the “inside place” (p. 5).

As I begin to try to imagine Nsibidi as visual rhetoric, this process pushed me to recall the notion of the inside place. The Efik, Efut, and Qua use Nsibidi in the Calabar region, which is a specific place. I have wondered how that physical environment influenced the human conditions of those who lived there, as well as any potential interpretation of social phenomena from that region by outsiders. Asante tells us that, “All knowledge results from an occasion of encounter in place” (p. 5). This holds true for those *examined* and the *examiner* according to Asante. If Nsibidi is to be understood as visual rhetoric, I agree with Asante when he added Western scholars must “put African ideals and values at the center of inquiry.” One of my goals was to ascertain if Nsibidi demonstrates any values or ideas that could be perceived as “African.” If Nsibidi is

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<sup>33</sup> Kenneth Louis Smith, *Handbook of Visual Communication* (New York: Routledge, 2005).



understood as visual rhetoric I believe it can contain uniquely African paradigms, motifs, codes, ideals and values. I refer to Asante (1990) again when he defined something African as being a composite. This is important because no Western scholar who has examined Nsibidi has situated the system in this manner. There is probably a case for Nsibidi to be viewed as cultural container encasing the social, religious and political values of the Efik, Efut, Qua and Igbo and other groups. Here, I am imagining and reimagining Nsibidi as an abstraction, much like Asante's Africa being a composite of many things.

In terms of a visual rhetoric, this is a project that will seek to identify conceptions of what Welsh-Asante (1994) called the "African aesthetic." Of the seven possible types of African aesthetics, the one most closely examined in this study is "epic memory." Welsh-Asante described epic memory as "the idea that the art contains the historic memory that allows the artist and audience to participate in the same celebration or pathos." I already know that several Western scholars have described Nsibidi as a type of art. Researchers such as Robert Thompson (1974), Andy Nasisse (1987), Christopher Slogar (2007) and have explored its artistic aspects. This work pushed known understandings a bit further because it is an attempt to identify potential elements of memory situated within Nsibidi. Besides being merely decorative, Nsibidi speaks to the preservation of stories, myths, fables or important historic episodes. This project will try to mine Nsibidi for concepts that relate to epic memory so that these insights can potentially shed light on the development of the cultural phenomenon found in the Niger River Basin. Along these lines, it was interesting to see whose "presence" was located in Nsibidi, as well as whose stories were preserved. It appears that Nsibidi was a written

system of communication generally used by elites. I agree with the words of communication scholars Lester C. Olson, Cara A. Finnegan and Diana S. Hope (2008) when they wrote, “If we wish fully to understand the role of rhetorical communication in the United States, we should open ourselves to the multiple and marvelous ways that rhetoric can be made visual” (p. 1). This applies not only to this nation, but also to Nigeria and Cameroon. These authors also tell us visual rhetoric can be used for “performing and seeing, remembering and memorializing, confronting and positioning” (p. 7). This seems to equate with the description of epic memory by Welsh-Asante. Further examinations need undertaking that involve investigating whose memory and presence was enshrined in Nsibidi.

Olson (2008) asked the question, “Who is authorized to perform the symbolic actions being viewed or conducted?” (p. 7). I believe that this is an excellent vantage from which to explore Nsibidi as a source of visual rhetoric. The scholarship of David Zarefsky and Cara A. Finnegan opens the way for an examination of the rhetorical study of historical events and the historical study of rhetorical events.

The rhetorical study of an historical event, such as the development and usage of Nsibidi, has the potential to offer several new insights on how a text can be interpreted and reinterpreted as visual rhetoric. Cara A. Finnegan wrote, “one uses the critical tools cultivated by one’s rhetorical sensibility to understand history itself, conceiving of people, events, and situations as rhetorical problems for which responses must be continually formulated, reformulated, and negotiated.”<sup>34</sup> I conceive of Nsibidi as a type

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<sup>34</sup> Cara A. Finnegan published a chapter in the Charles A. Hill and Marguerite Helmers edited book *Defining Visual Rhetorics* (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004). Finnegan contributed chapter 9 Doing Rhetorical History of the Visual: The Photograph and the Archive.

of visual rhetorical text. Again, this is a new perspective on Nsibidi. As a form of communication, and text, Nsibidi has for millennia acted on the lives and cultures of the Efik, Efut, and Qua and in turn has been acted on. It would be highly improbable that any study of this particular system could avoid the prospect of being, on some level, at least a partial rhetorical study of historical events. As I spent time among these communities, I sought to use Afrinography as a method of inquiry to uncover how they use their critical tools and rhetorical sensibilities to conceive of themselves, and others with Nsibidi. This conception of the “self” through time and place is just another way of saying “history.” Further, when we begin to say “others” in relation to an “us,” we create a “history” of “them.” It is not unlikely that there were historical moments that can be conceived of, or re-conceived, as rhetorical problems that Efik, Efut, and Qua used Nsibidi to help alleviate. I will discuss the importance of using Afrinography to examine these potential cultural phenomena in greater detail in the third chapter. This current also operates in the other direction.

An accurate historical account of Nsibidi’s past could make it possible to construct important new rhetorical portraits of people and place. The historical study of Nsibidi, as a rhetorical event, is of great importance. David Zarefsky (1998) writes that rhetorical discourse that influences history helps to uncover and illuminate aspects of a culture. This can allow a scholar to locate critical patterns in a society such as what Finnegan (2004) describes as “rhetorical trajectory” (p. 200). She cites the example of “studying the history of terms relevant to particular instances of rhetorical discourse” in an “attempt to uncover the history or the production of a text or [to] look for patterns in

discourse” (p. 200). The text, in this case, whose history, production and patterns of discourse are under examination, and re-imagination, is Nsibidi. Additionally, it might be possible to construct and envision Nsibidi as a visual nommo.

### **Nsibidi as Visual Nommo/Nommo-Made-Visual**

Marimba Ani offered one of the best descriptions of nommo, and its inherent cultural power, in her groundbreaking book, *Yurugu: An African-centered Critique of European Cultural Thought and Behavior*. The word, Yurugu, taken from the same Dogon creation story, explains the origin of nommo. Ani explores nommo through a similar Swahili principle known as asili, or the “DNA of culture.”<sup>35</sup> Asili is cultural development, it is a “pattern” that offers a people “direction.” Ani wrote that asili “allows us [African people] to interpret patterns of collective thought and behavior” (p.13). Along these lines Sheena Howard, in her 2011 *Journal of Black Studies* article titled, *Manifestations of Nommo: Afrocentric Analysis of President Barack Obama*, wrote, “Nommo goes beyond the mere use of words, phrases, or linguistic conventions; it also signifies the generating and sustaining powers of language that inform every facet of African American life” (p. 739). Geneva Smitherman (1986) and Janice D. Hamlet (1998) tell us that nommo is the “life force” that African-descended communities use to “not only to actualize life but also to give people a mastery over things.” Melbourne S. Cummings and Abhik Roy (2002) believed nommo influenced nearly every aspect of the African psyche “including interpersonal, group, public, or mass communication events in which African culture and experiences are fused” (p. 63).

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<sup>35</sup> Marimba Ani, *Yurugu: An African-centered Critique of European Cultural Thought and Behavior* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2009).

There are other ways through which nommo can be interpreted and imagined when we examine the culture of the African.

Benjamin Bates, Windy Y. Lawrence and Mark Cervenka, each of whom has attempted to broaden work in intercultural communication and Africology begun by Asante, have theorized on the potential possibilities of a “visual nommo,” based on an understanding of verbal nommo.<sup>36</sup> These authors remind us that Asante was the first scholar in the Western academy to theorize about verbal nommo and its important connection to Africoid language and culture. Bates, Lawrence and Cervenka conceptualized a visual version of nommo. They wrote, “In essence, visual nommo is the expression of the word through African uses of sight, texture, color, irony, metaphor, narrative, and other visual strategies. African visual rhetoric, in sum, often manifests several characteristics of visual nommo” (p. 279). I believe that Nsibidi contains visual strategies that can be construed as visual nommo when imagined (re-imagined) as such. Jacques Derrida offered movement in yet another direction in relation to Nsibidi as visual nommo, and perhaps something I refer to as *nommo-made-visual*.

Jacques Derrida (1998) discussed the “visual nature of writing as grapheme” in his famous book, *Of Grammatology*, and I believe this rivals how Nsibidi might be constructed as a nommo-made-visual. As one of the West’s first foremost grammatologists, Derrida wrote that there was a difference between a “text” and “discourse.” He imagined the interplay of the two as one where “discourse signifies” a “present, living, conscious representation of a text within the experience of the person

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<sup>36</sup> Dr. Benjamin Bates, Dr. Windy Y. Lawrence and Dr. Mark Cervenka, “Redrawing Afrocentrism: Visual Nommo in George H. Ben Johnson’s Editorial Cartoons,” *The Howard University Journal of Communications*, 19, 277-29.

who writes, or reads it” (p. 113). When we examine Nsibidi and understand it as a visual nommo text, I believe that it can be interpreted as a nommo-made-visual because it is probably the present, living conscious representation of those who create and use it. For me, this sounds remarkably like what Asante (2005) stated when he wrote, “In African culture, naming is also an area in which the concept of nommo or the power of the word is ever present” (p. 380). Further Asante added, “Once a person names it, it moves into existence. The power of nommo through naming creates life. In addition, without naming, life would be static.” (p. 380). Nommo-made-visual is the calling into written form the living consciousness of a people. I see a connection between Asante’s nommo and Derrida’s text/discourse relationship. The discourse calls forth a “present, living, conscious representation” that could be reimagined as nommo. I saw a “present, living, conscious representation” in the Niger River Basin culture that can be identified within the system.

In review of Chapter 1, I have outlined my work and offered the rationale for why I believe that there needs to be further discourse by communication studies researchers on Nsibidi. The creation of Nsibidi Studies began during the early years of the last century. A plethora of Western colonial officials and scholars from disciplines such as anthropology, linguistics, archeology and other fields in the academy have added to the body of knowledge on this subject. In my opinion Nsibidi is important to the field of communication because the system is likely one of the oldest organized bodies of human nonverbal communication. I used three central questions to open up new research windows through which I reframed and reimagined Nsibidi. The initial question was: what is Nsibidi? Next, I asked: how does Nsibidi work as system? My final question was

intended to shed light on the makers of Nsibidi. I wanted to probe into the question of who created and used the system. Using communication studies as my intellectual lens, I interpreted Nsibidi as visual rhetoric, visual nommo and actual writing. I spent three months conducting fieldwork in Nigeria and Cameroon, while I using Afrinography to investigate my work. By employing communication studies scholarship and Afrinography, I was able to interrogate unexplored facets of Nsibidi's rhetorical and grammatological possibilities. In addition, I also discussed how I have wanted to undertake this sort of work since the early 2000s. My time teaching in Nigeria back in 2009 played a pivotal role in pushing me forward to this moment.

In the next chapter, I will discuss the previous literature, both published and unpublished, on Nsibidi. I will trace the "Nsibidi Debate" from its earliest colonial moments during the dawn of the last century, to the most recent scholarship produced during the last decade by Licia Clifton-James, Amanda B. Carlson and Christopher J. Slogar. This includes dialogue that explores how scholars outside and within the field of communication have situated and defined Nsibidi.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

In this chapter, I investigate much of the previous scholarship that examined Nsibidi. The specific debate surrounding Nsibidi as true writing appears to date back at least over a century ago and comprises a wide variety of scholarship and academic perspectives. Past researchers interested in any aspect of Nsibidi are a diverse group: they include professional and amateur scholars who were missionaries, colonial explorers, artists, archaeologists, anthropologists and historians. Some Western scholars have also used research questions akin to my wanting to uncover what Nsibidi was as a system, as well as how it works. There have also been previous attempts to explore who created Nsibidi and who has used it. My communication background afforded me a fresh, new approach to studying Nsibidi, as very little communication scholarship has been used to investigate the system in any of these three ways. Although there has been a plethora of books and articles written on Nsibidi in the last decade, the vast majority defines it ideographic symbols or art, and not actual writing. We can collectively call this body of work Nsibidi Studies.

The rationale of this study lies in the possibility that Nsibidi is one of the oldest organized systems of nonverbal human communication, dating back to at least 2000 C.E. As such, the significance of my dissertation is that it is the first to explore the ways in which communication studies scholarship can interrogate Nsibidi's unknown rhetorical and grammatological potential. I could not locate any previous scholarship attempting to imagine, or reimagine, Nsibidi as visual rhetoric or visual nommo. It also appears that there is some level of agreement that Nsibidi may contain sound to symbol aspects that would qualify it as true writing in the Western academy. Despite this possibility, none of



the scholars I read seemed to have actively sought to identify what those elements entail. However, what is available offers Western scholars some interesting perspectives on Nsibidi in relation to its past and connection to the culture of communities living in Cross River State and Calabar.

### **Living There: Southeastern Nigeria and Southwestern Cameroon**

Calabar is a city located in Cross River, one of Nigeria's thirty-six states. Cross River State lies in the southeastern corner of the country, in close proximity to the border with Cameroon. The ancient local inhabitants, such as the Efik, called the area Akwa Akpa. Calabar is the meeting point for several large tributaries. These include the Great Kwa and Cross River Creeks. Calabar has an estimated population of approximately 300,000 people and has an area space comprising about 230 square miles.



Figure 1. Map of the southern border between Nigeria and Cameroon. From Come to Nigeria *website*: <https://vc4africa.biz/ventures/come-to-nigeria-magazine/>

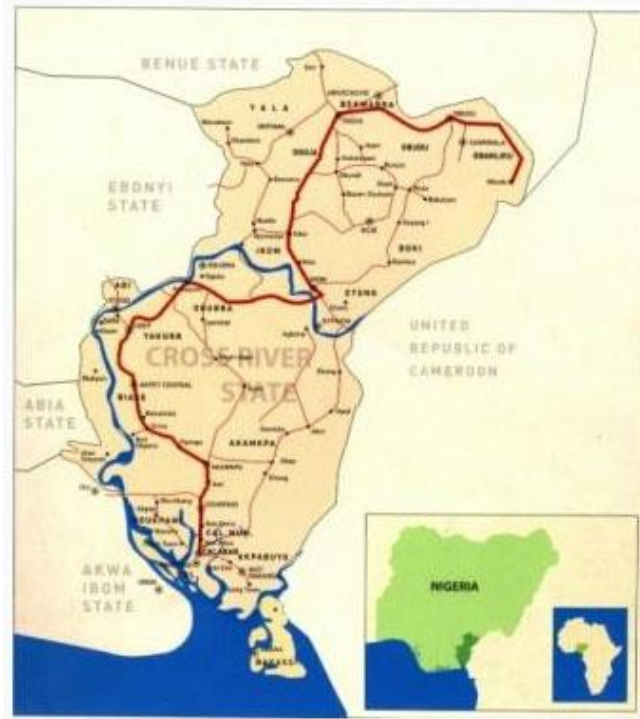


Figure 3. Map of Cross River State.

From Come to Nigeria website: <https://vc4africa.biz/ventures/come-to-nigeria-magazine/>



Figure 4. Map of all 36 Nigerian states.

From Come to Nigeria website: <https://vc4africa.biz/ventures/come-to-nigeria-magazine/>

As a state, Cross River was created during the turbulent political decade of 1970s. Besides Calabar, some of the other cities are Akamkpa, Ikon, Obubra, Odukpani, Ogoja, Okundi, Ugep, Obudu, Obanliku and Akpabuyo. The highly popular *Come to Nigeria* website tells us that Cross River State has been given the nickname “The People’s Paradise.”<sup>37</sup> *Come to Nigeria* (2014) also says:

Cross River State was created out of the old South Eastern State of Nigeria in 1976 before Akwa Ibom State was later carved out of it in 1987. Cross Rivers state, named after the river called Cross River (Oyono), which passes through the state. Located on Nigeria’s southeastern frontier, the Cross River landscape descends precipitously from the Oban Obudu rugged foothills (1000 2000m) of the Cameroun Mountains on the east, into the Cross River Plains (30m) to the west, and down to the Bight of Bonny coastal plains to the south, Coastal mangrove wetlands interlaced with creeks, virgin rainforest on the Oban Obudu hills, montane parkland on the Obudu Plateau, and derived Savannah on the Cross River Plain, are all parts of the Cross River State vegetation and scenery. (p. 1).

There are approximately 3 million people in Cross Rivers State, with the majority being of Efik, Efut, Qua and Ejagham ancestry.<sup>38</sup> Also found in large numbers are the Igbo. One of my primary objectives while living in this region was to become familiar with the cultures of the Efik, Efut, Qua and Igbo. The first three communities were new to me and there was much to learn about their language, foodways, religion, music and other cultural aspects. I had long examined Igbo culture for several years previously, so my level of immediate comfort in those communities was much greater. Before I fully

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<sup>37</sup> Come to Nigeria. (2014, September). Retrieved from <http://www.cometonigeria.com/>

<sup>38</sup> Come to Nigeria. (2014, September). Retrieved from <http://www.cometonigeria.com/>

delve into my literature review, I wanted to discuss something I refer to as “the commission of omission.”

### **Commissions and Omissions: A Commission of Omission**

I will start with a quote from Asante (1990) that I believe reinforces the argument I am about to introduce, as I believe it sheds light on the commission of omission.

Asante attended the 1998 African Studies Association conference, held in the city of Chicago. He was stunned, as he read the program, to see that there were no panels focused on ancient Kemet’s connection to the rest of Africa. It is at this point that Asante asked “how can you have hundreds of scholars participating in an intellectual conference on Africa and no one discusses ancient Egypt and Nubia?” (p. 6). There is an extremely telling narrative when we examine the more recent research of the scholars who have produced the modern seminal works in semiotics and grammatology. In decades past, it was acceptable to tell the world that Africa had no story, no record of achievement. This type of erroneous critique fell out of vogue during the post-1950s. What I believe happens today is equally as insidious. A newer method to avoid admitting African achievements is by simply omitting their mention. I believe that in some cases this “omission” is based on “commission.” I will expound on this by citing a personal example in a similar vein to the one offered by Asante.

Initially, this commission of omission tendency occurred to me back in the earliest years of the previous decade. At that point, I was among a handful of scholars examining the influence of the camera on West African societies from an African

perspective.<sup>39</sup> There had been tons of articles, books and documentaries centered on European usage of the camera in Africa, but the record on African use of a sophisticated, complex Western technology was just coming in focus. What I found was that the archivists and historians who knew that West Africans were purchasing cameras as early as at least the 1870s just decided to leave that information out of their research. It never made the official record. Either consciously, or unconsciously, such scholars likely believed that this was not a perspective that held any value. As I examine some of the more recent research on Nsibidi, in my opinion, once again this commission of omission rears its ugly head. The commission of omission can likely operate on many planes of thought and action. The next case in point brings us to the research of prominent linguists Daniels and Bright. I found that an in-depth study of their most significant piece of scholarship was as fascinating as it was perplexing.

### **The Commission of Omission: A History of Writing**

Peter T. Daniels and William Bright (1996) have edited what is widely regarded as the single most comprehensive work in English that details the global history of writing. The title of this opus, *The World's Writing Systems*, alone speaks volumes. Daniels and Bright attempted to gather the scholars who have made the most significant contributions to the history of writing and their book literally details the use of “all scripts officially used throughout the world, as well as their historical antecedents.” We are told on the back jacket that, “No comparable work in English exists.” The book is a massive work consisting of over 900 pages of information on the history of writing. The editors

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<sup>39</sup> After spending nearly a year living in West Africa on a Fulbright, I had written a series of articles for public consumption on commercial black photography in Ghana. Kevin Hales, A Matter of Record: Black Photography in Ghana, *American Visions*, January, 1999, 22-25.

were able to convince seventy-nine scholars from around the world to contribute to this volume. In the preface, we find the editor's rationale for putting this work together. Daniels and Bright wrote, "Why a book on the world's writing systems? There have been several surveys of the world's languages, attempts by individual scholars to cover all of the languages of the world as well as collaborative volumes and series by specialists on individual languages and families."<sup>40</sup>

Organized into thirteen parts, the book includes detailed information on not only particular writing systems, but also their chronology and region of origin. The editors tell us on page 35 that, "The scripts described in Part II are the oldest known: those of the ancient Near East." On the next page they wrote, "Next oldest is the script of China." We are then informed that "the root of the single tree of all scripts that serve the rest of the world is the Canaanite." In reading the work of Daniels and Bright, we do not have to move beyond the very beginning of this work to understand that close to eighty of the best-known Western semioticians and grammatologists likely doubt that Africa has ever created any of her own *ancient* independent scripts or letters. If I am to believe these Western scholars, actual writing is a relatively new activity for West Africa, including the eastern Niger River Basin. Right from the outset, West Africa is not part of the discussion as the editors march around the world highlighting various scripts in this groundbreaking book. A check of the book's chapters and index is extremely informative as well.

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<sup>40</sup> Peter T. Daniels and William Bright (Eds.), *The World's Writing Systems* (New York: Oxford, 1996). See Preface and pp. 3-80.

A perusal of this book's index shows readers that "Africa" was mentioned in at least eight places.<sup>41</sup> From here, I moved to the places in the book that dealt with the continent. The first instances do not deal directly with independent scripts; instead they focus on the influence of outside grammatological forces on writing in Africa. When we examine page 583, Africa is discussed in the second full paragraph, under the heading "Unsophisticated grammatogenies."<sup>42</sup> Section 54, which begins on page 593, is the only chapter that deals directly with writing in Africa. The author of this section was John Victor Singler.<sup>43</sup> It appears that Singler believes the earliest script is that could be viewed as independently created is the Vai system.<sup>44</sup> He cites sixteen scripts in West Africa, including the Vai, but wrote "the others [were] all created in the twentieth century" (p. 593). In other words, the oldest script in West Africa dates back only about two centuries, unlike other parts of the world where writing began over three thousand years ago. I wonder how Singler, who is now deceased, would account for the difference?

The other fifteen scripts cited from West Africa all have outside influences that assisted in their creation according to this source.<sup>45</sup> On page 689, John Bendor-Samuel discussed Africa and writing.<sup>46</sup> Bendor-Samuel wrote, "At the beginning of the colonial

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<sup>41</sup> The index lists mentions of Africa on pages 88, 112, 580, 583, 593-598, 689, 743 and 778.

<sup>42</sup> See page 583, middle of the page. I found the use of the word "unsophisticated" as telling.

<sup>43</sup> John Victor Singler is a Professor of Linguistics at New York University. Singler is part of the African Linguistics School and teaches linguistic theory courses, as well as syntax, phonology, semantics, language contact and field methods.

<sup>44</sup> The Vai system only dates back to the 1830s. Singler relied on the scholarship of David Dalby from the 1960s. Dalby wrote three articles on scripts in West Africa.

<sup>45</sup> An example of this is when Singler discussed the N'ko system. This script was developed after 1945 and was influenced by Islamic culture. Even Vai is suspect to Singler. Its creator, Momolu Duwalu Bukele, claims to have invented the script after dreaming of it. Singler writes that Bukele, likely aware of Arabic, Roman and Cherokee scripts, probably incorporated some of their elements. See the top of page 594.

<sup>46</sup> John Bendor-Samuel was an Oxford University-trained linguist and the Executive Director of the Summer Institute of Linguistics in the United Kingdom. He spent substantial time living in West Africa. John Bendor-Samuel, *The Niger-Congo Languages: A Classification and Description of Africa's Largest Language Family* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1989).

era, very few Africa languages had developed a written form” (p. 689). He ends this section on page 690, where he actually brings southern Nigeria into his analysis. In one single sentence, Bendor-Samuel tells us that there “the standard Roman symbol still prevails.” Curiously, there is not a single mention of Nsibidi here, or anywhere else in this voluminous work. There is a question that must be asked: How can any prominent professionally trained linguist enter into a discussion about writing in Africa in general, and West Africa more specifically, and not at least reference Nsibidi once? In addition, it has long been believed that Nsibidi is far older than a mere two centuries. In my opinion, this is a case of the commission of omission. We could “write” this off as an anomaly, however, Geoffrey Sampson, another of the more prominent linguists of the West, also appears to omit Africa in general, and West Africa in particular, as a source of older independent script.

Geoffrey Sampson (1985) wrote another of the most influential books on the subject of writing entitled *Writing Systems*. In this work, Sampson, described by his peers as a “maverick,” believes all writing derives from one common source in the Middle East.<sup>47</sup> Sampson wrote that “Archaic Sumerian script” is the “ancestor” of ancient and modern writing. He defined writing as “a first approximation, as: to communicate relatively specific ideas by means of permanent, visible marks” (p. 26). Further Sampson added, “Just what makes a physical medium of communication explicit enough to describe as writing is admittedly very hard to say.” Sampson believes that not only is writing communicating specific ideas but that it also “communicates ideas in a *conventional* manner.” Like Daniels and Bright, Sampson excludes West Africa from the

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<sup>47</sup> Geoffrey Sampson, *Writing Systems: A Linguistic Introduction*, (Stanford: Stanford University, 1990).



conversation on older independent writing and scripts. He discusses in detail the history of writing in the Middle East, Mediterranean world of Greece and Rome, the Korean Peninsula, China and Japan. In a book containing ten chapters, and nearly 240 pages, Sampson at no point references Africa as a source of possible scripts or writing. There is not one instance of Africa mentioned in the index. Again, I must emphasize that this book is considered by scholars in the West as one of the most important sources for understanding history of writing. After reading Sampson, I am left asking two questions: First, why no mention of the very “Cradle of Human Civilization?” In addition, is there an ancient role Nsibidi could have played in the story of actual human writing? It is here that I wanted to introduce another term that I use called “marking the record.”

### **Marking the Record: The Gaps and Gulfs of the Commission of Omissions**

Before any “record” can be “corrected,” scholars must make an effort first mark the record. By mark, I mean there must be an attempt to “see” the gaps in narratives and then attempt to fill in. I find it extremely hard to believe that all of the above linguists and so many other scholars that study writing, put together volumes of work on the global history of that subject and all just happen to omit Nsibidi by mistake. Africa is the world’s second largest continent, with a population approaching one billion people.<sup>48</sup> The continent is widely regarded as the birthplace of the human family. To me, it makes sense for at least one or two of the above linguists to postulate that some type of age-old writing could have originated in such a primordial space as the eastern Niger River region. Perhaps even more importantly, how is it possible to ignore Africa, including its entire western region, in such discussions? I believe that this is some of the strongest

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<sup>48</sup> World Population Review. (2014). Retrieved from <http://worldpopulationreview.com/continents/africa-population/>

evidence possible relating to my theory of the commission of omission. Before I go any further, I want to offer some interesting definitions of the words commission and omission.

### **The Sin of Academic Commission of Omission?**

What does the word “commission” mean? One excellent definition tells us that commission is “authority granted for a particular action or function.”<sup>49</sup> Another good definition states that it involves “a group of people who have been given the official job of finding information about something or controlling something.”<sup>50</sup> Commission is a powerful word, with many powerful meanings. As scholars, we wield so much power in relation to the knowledge that we are attempting to create. We are a group of people who have the ability to uncover, share and control information. The Western scholar does have an authority that is been granted by a college, university, museum, cultural center or some other academic entity or institution. The actions or functions that we undertake, or do not undertake, can have grave consequences for the people and places that we study. Scholars act by the power of commission. When we use this authority in connection with the ability to omit information, I consider it a misuse of that influence. The privilege bound up in the power of commission can lead any researcher into acts omission. I would like to turn to definitions of the word omission.

According to one dictionary source, omission is “something left out, not done, or neglected: an important omission in a report.”<sup>51</sup> Another definition is “the act of

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<sup>49</sup> Commission. (2014) In Dictionary.com. Retrieved from //www.dictionary.com/commission

<sup>50</sup> Commission. (2014) In Merriam-Webster.com. Retrieved from //www.merriam-webster.com/commission

<sup>51</sup> Omission. (2014) In Dictionary.com. Retrieved from //www.dictionary.com /omission

omitting.”<sup>52</sup> What I found interesting while researching this word is that omission as an action, because in not doing something we have taken an action. It reminded me of what I learned during my first year in communication studies. When someone decides not to communicate, they are in fact communicating. Another definition of omission is “apathy toward or neglect of duty.”<sup>53</sup> In this last definition, the words “neglect of duty” caught my attention. When a scholar is conducting research and comes across pertinent information that is unrelated to their subject is there a “duty” to discuss, in some form or fashion, this pertinent but unrelated information? What are the “duties” of a scholar in relation to sharing knowledge he or she uncovers, even inadvertently? I believe that several members in the academy have likely come across information that would provide substantial evidence that Africans have created independent systems of actual writing in every region of the continent. If I had to offer an educated guess, it could be a case where this information has simply been left out of the record. The commission of omission operates on another level too.

In the combined works of Daniels, Bright and Sampson, and nearly eighty other top scholars in the field of grammatology and semiotics, not one researcher tells us that West Africa has its own pre-colonial systems of true writing. The answer for me is relatively simple: The commission of omission is in operation here. I find it difficult to believe that none of these scholars came across information about actual writing systems in Africa before the 1840s; it is far more probable in my opinion that they simply chose to ignore and omit information. There is a larger, an extremely important, point at work when tracing and documenting the history of writing around the world. The Western

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<sup>52</sup> Omission. (2014). In Merriam-Webster.com. Retrieved from //www.merriam-webster.com/ommission

<sup>53</sup> Omission. (2014). In Merriam-Webster.com. Retrieved from //www.merriam-webster.com/ommission

academy has long believed that writing is one of *the* most important demonstrations of “civilization.” Further, its advent heralds the beginning of *true* “history.” If West Africans never invented their own independent scripts until as late as the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, what does this say about the region and her people? Peter T. Daniels (1997) wrote, “Humankind is defined by language; but civilization is defined by writing. Writing made historical records possible and writing was the basis for the urban societies of the Old World” (p. 184). He also believes, “All humans speak; only humans in civilizations write.” Today’s scholars do not have to directly degrade Africa, or any other place, because it might be far easier to simply just ignore and omit information. It reminds me of what happened when the last cartoon version of a Tarzan movie was produced and released by Walt Disney Studios.

### **Omitted Africa: The Invisible People, Disney and the Commission of Omission**

During the summer of 1999, Disney Studios released the feature animation *Tarzan*, based on the legendary novels *Tarzan of the Apes*, written by Edgar Rice Burroughs.<sup>54</sup> Disney wrestled mightily with the African imagery of the preceding films in that series. Critics of the earlier films believed that the studio had an obligation to “update” the movie’s depictions of the Africans living in the local towns and villages where *Tarzan* was taking place. What Disney discovered was that making a Tarzan movie during the decades of 1930s through 1950s was a radically different venture compared to the 1990s.

Tarzan was supposedly taking place in Africa, so it makes sense that the film would contain imagery of African communities. However, Disney could not decide on

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<sup>54</sup> Edgar Rice Burroughs wrote twenty-four adventure novels featuring the Tarzan character between 1912 and 1965.

how they should, or could, portray modern depictions of Africans. When consensus was not possible, those in power at the studio decided to use the commission of omission. In the end, the movie featured no representations of African people, even though the entire film took place on the African continent. To some it was a case of simple “no harm, no foul.” Disney had the power, authority and ability to not do something, in this case not include any Black representations in their movie. The studio left out (ignored) all of the possible positive images of Black people because it could. The commission of omission is having the authority and power to leave out important, factual information from a record. Next, I want to examine the early literature on Nsibidi, which began during the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **The First Perspective: The Meaning and the Example, 1900-1920**

It appears from an examination of the record of research on Nsibidi that the initial focus by Westerners was to “visually” document the script. The first Europeans who saw the system offered extensive written commentary on it. I call this point in time in the study of Nsibidi “meaning and example.”

The record credits T. D. Maxwell as the first known non-African to make official note of Nsibidi.<sup>55</sup> Maxwell was the British colonial official who opened the door for the West’s curiosity about, and formal study of, Nsibidi in 1905. Slogar tells us that this occurred do to, “A colonial government report” by Maxwell that included information on area life and culture. (p. 4). Maxwell actively tried to understand the culture of his African charges and “by his tact” eventually “won to a large degree the goodwill of the people.” Shortly afterward, “Accordingly when he was asked by His Excellency the

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<sup>55</sup> The research of Amanda B. Carlson (2003) and Christopher L. Slogar (2005) is discussed in detail later in this chapter.

High Commissioner to superintend the arrangements for an exhibition of native goods, he was able to include in it twenty-four Nsibidi signs that he had received from one of the chief women of the Henshaw family. These were published by command of the High Commissioner in the Government Civil List for the Protectorate in July, 1905.” It was during this time that Maxwell gave J.K. Macgregor (1909) “permission to use these signs.” Over the next several years, Macgregor and other Westerners such as Mansfield added new pertinent ethnographic evidence on Nsibidi’s workings.

J.K. Macgregor was probably the first colonial official to state that Nsibidi, in every regard, met the Western definition of actual writing. Macgregor (1909) wrote, “The use of nsibidi is that of ordinary writing. I have in my possession a copy of the record of a court case from a town of [Enyong] taken down in it, and every detail ... is most graphically described.”<sup>56</sup> This information has been part of the official record in Nsibidi Studies for well over a full century, yet it does not appear that anyone has attempted to study the court case mentioned by Macgregor in relation to Nsibidi’s potential as an actual script. We also know that historian Basil Amaeshi has discussed Nsibidi and views it as “a widely-used vehicle of communication” which he said included “record keeping.”<sup>57</sup> Here, another important point must be addressed: Does Nsibidi have a numerical aspect? Like most alphabet systems, number systems are also viewed as a marker of “high” or “advanced” culture.

Like Maxwell, Reverend J. K. Macgregor held a similar “evident desire to understand native modes of thought” Macgregor (p. 210). While working in eastern

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<sup>56</sup> J. Macgregor, *Man: The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol. 39, No. (January-June, 1909), pp. 209-219.

<sup>57</sup> J. Macgregor, *Man: The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol. 39, No. (January-June, 1909), pp. 209-219.

Nigeria as the principle of the Hope Waddell Training Institute in 1909, Macgregor penned an important ten-page article entitled *Some Notes on Nsibidi*.<sup>58</sup> Macgregor wrote, “Nsibidi is the native name for a writing used a little here in the Calabar District of the Eastern province of Southern Nigeria, but much more largely up the Cross River and inland from it on both banks. So far as I have been able to ascertain, it is unknown in the Central and Western Provinces except amongst the Ibo [sic] people.”<sup>59</sup> Cross River State, and the city of Calabar, are where I will be starting my fieldwork. This region of Nigeria and Cameroon is the meeting point for dozens of varying ethnic families, many of whom still use Nsibidi today.

Macgregor believed that elites in the Nigeria used the system as a method of secret communication when vital information needed to be shared. He called these users of Nsibidi “artisans” and “smiths.”<sup>60</sup> Macgregor tells us that, “The system of writing is really the property of a secret society, the nsibidi society, into which men are regularly initiated after undergoing a period of preparation. Some of the signs of the nsibidi are known to outsiders, but the vast majority are known only to the initiated. To the uninitiated they are mysterious and therefore magical, capable of doing harm because of the ‘medicile’ [sic] that many have been used in making them” (p. 211). Here, Macgregor views Nsibidi as both true writing and a magical set of symbols. He is placing the system into two of the categories that Nsibidi is most likely classified. It is also possible that the ethnic groups using Nsibidi early in the last century revealed

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<sup>58</sup> Macgregor was the principle at Hope Waddell from 1907 through 1943. Part of his work was to understand area cultures in hopes of better knowing his African pupils.

<sup>59</sup> J. Macgregor, *Man: The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol. 39, No. (January-June, 1909), pp. 209-219.

<sup>60</sup> See page 211.

knowledge about its functions to Macgregor, yet not to other Europeans living in the area at that time. I found it extremely interesting that Macgregor wrote, “That the existence of a script is unknown to Europeans must not, however, be taken as conclusive evidence that the script does not exist, for the natives have a strange but natural desire to hide as much as they can from the prying eyes of the European who has too often but learned what they held precious only to scoff at them” (p. 212).

I could interpret this to mean that perhaps many Europeans working in the eastern Niger River area were unaware of Nsibidi early on. Further evidence of this is found when Macgregor tells us, “For long it was not suspected that there was a native script in use in Calabar, as I shall for convenience call the whole of the part of the country in which nsibidi is known. The early missionaries maintained that they had no knowledge of writing. They knew the word nsibidi and applied it correctly enough to the cuts made on calabashes, native pianos, etc” (p. 212). Some of the European missionaries that saw Nsibidi likely only regarded it as “art.” In relation to the missionary’s understanding the potential semiotic elements of Nsibidi, Macgregor wrote, “Again they were aware that there was an elaborate system of acted signs by which people held communication, but they had not discovered that this language of signs had been reduced to writing”<sup>61</sup> (p. 213). When I first read the words “Nsibidi as ‘acted signs’” and “signs by which people held communication,” I immediately knew that this ancient system was relevant to communication scholarship. An acted sign speaks to both the “actor” or user and those “acted upon or the readers/viewers. For communication studies researcher, we can look

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<sup>61</sup> Nsibidi as an “acted sign” holds unlimited possibilities for communication scholarship in my opinion.



to performance, gaze (by users) obstructing the gaze (“*walling*,” as I like to call it, for non-users), privilege (secret societies, artisans, smiths and hidden knowledge).

### **The First Perspective Expands: The Growth of Nsibidi Studies**

There is part of the story missing here. How did Macgregor first learn of Nsibidi? Shortly before this exhibition, Macgregor (1909) wrote that he “in complete ignorance of Mr. Maxwell’s find” had by sheer coincidence “stumbled by accident on the fact that nsibidi existed.” Macgregor (1909) stated:

In a class I was teaching, a pupil deeply resented the statement that the civilization of the people in Nigeria was primitive because they had no writing. He declared that they had a writing called nsibidi. This happened in April 1905. As I was at the beginning of a new term, I set myself to find out all I could about nsibidi. People smiled when I asked for information and declared that they knew nothing about it. The reason for this is that in Efik nsibidi is used almost only to express love, and this term covers such a multitude of moist abominable signs that no self-respecting Efik person will confess that he knows anything, about the writing of it. The few specimens I got were grossly misinterpreted to me so as to tone down their meaning. Still from them it was possible to see that here we have a genuine product of the native civilization the origin of which is so old as to have become the subject of a *Marchen* [sic]. (p. 210).

Afterwards, Macgregor tells us that, “The signs have been gathered by me from various sources, especially from two boys from Abiriba called Onuaha and Ize Ikpe, and from a woman who one day came to my house selling work with Nsibidi on it, and when I began to tell her what it meant she told me what I could not make out and then offered to teach me more” (p. 210). This unnamed woman’s mother “had a school for the

teaching of this script” and allowed Macgregor to learn more about Nsibidi. It appears that Macgregor thought it was important to not only attempt to offer a brief history of it as written communication, but also went a step further by adding ninety-seven drawn visual representations.<sup>62</sup> Macgregor would inspire other European colonials to dig deeper into Nsibidi.

British District Commissioner Elphinstone Dayrell in 1910 and 1911 wrote the next two articles on Nsibidi. The first was *Some “Nsibidi” Signs*. A year later, he published *Further Notes on Nsibidi Signs With Their Meanings From the Ikom District, Southern District*.<sup>63</sup> Dayrell, like Macgregor, gives readers actual depictions of Nsibidi, even though this piece is relatively short, being only three pages in length. The majority of the information is on the meanings of fifty-five (55) “signs” Dayrell collected. Dayrell discussed what he termed “an explanation of the signs” (p. 113). Although it lacks a similar historical analysis when compared to the research of Maxwell or Macgregor, Dayrell must be mentioned because in his trying to explain what each of his signs might mean, the process of Igbo and Annang communities using a written system of communication for meaning-making could have far reaching implications. The meaning-making embedded in Nsibidi after centuries of use, through the eyes of the Igbo and Annang, is what can be interpreted (reinterpreted) as possible visual nommo or visual rhetoric. Dayrell wrote another piece on Nsibidi that connects to this point.

The Dayrell article from 1911 was a somewhat lengthy twenty pages. Dayrell (1911) wrote, “In studying Nsibidi in the Ikom District of Southern Nigeria it will be

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<sup>62</sup> Macgregor inserts visual depictions of Nsibidi on pages 211 through 212. Pages 215, 217 and 219 are comprised solely of his physical renditions of Nsibidi.

<sup>63</sup> J. Macgregor, *Man: The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol. 39, No. (January-June, 1909), pp. 209-219.

found that there are several different kinds. The various societies which “play,” or use performance to act out a type of drama watched by public audiences, Nsibidi have many of their own particular signs, which strangers belonging to another society would not understand. There are, however, a large number of signs common to all the societies...” (p. 521). Dayrell tells us that there are at least two types of Nsibidi that deal with the issues of gazing and walling. Some of the scripts are intended for the general public and others are not. Macgregor also discussed how Igbo secret societies used the system to block the gaze of some ethnic groups, but Dayrell expands this by adding discourse on how Nsibidi-sharing by different groups interculturally influenced various ethnic communities. These particular scripts “were common to all societies.” Dayrell informs us, much like Macgregor that, “The men who understand Nsibidi are very reticent about giving any information on the subject...” and, again like Macgregor, he learned to decipher the script only with the assistance of “natives whom I have known several years” (p. 522). Further, he wrote, “When the signs are being explained the men are most particular that no other natives should be near for fear they might tell other people. The young men are also afraid that they might be fined or punished by the chiefs of the society if they were found giving information to strangers” (p. 522). Unlike Macgregor, Dayrell was first to inform us that, “In the Ikom District women are not allowed to know Nsibidi” (p. 522). Although there may even be scripts that highlight this fact in the system in this district, other areas did not prohibit women from learning or using Nsibidi.

In Ikom District sharing scripts with outsiders or women, was often a breach of “Nsibidi laws” according to Dayrell (p. 521). Violators were made “to pay goats or gin” as a fine. In addition, the article is the first to discuss what Dayrell refers to as “a secret

pantomimic code by which they can communicate with one another. It is acting in dumb show, the fingers, hands, and both arms being used, also the head” in connection with Nsibidi. The system may have physical gestures of communication that complement the written. The next important academic piece of scholarship on Nsibidi was truly different and written at nearly the same time as Dayrell. In a somewhat strange twist of fate, it would be nearly fifty years after it was penned that the article became part of the public record.

M.D.W. Jeffreys wrote a “correction” to the *Man* 1910 article by Dayrell. I found this correction, and the accompanying “editor’s note” at the bottom of the page, enlightening. By 1928, it appears that the colonial administration had taken some interest in Nsibidi. Jeffreys wrote that Dayrell’s first article “was sent to me by the Nigerian Government for comments...” (p. 155). It is here that Jeffrey explains how he initially “came across Nsibidi” in 1919 in Cross Rivers. The six paragraph-long correction piece was an attempt by Jeffreys to ensure that several of the scripts were spelled improperly. At this time Jeffreys was at Witwatersrand University in Johannesburg, South Africa. This is likely one of the earliest instances of a Western-educated Ph.D. offering written commentary on any aspect of Nsibidi. Equally compelling is the note by the editor that directs readers to find “Much more information about nsibidi writing...” in the work of P. A. Talbot.

### **Nsibidi Begins to Cast a Longer Shadow: Percy Amaury Talbot**

Percy Amaury Talbot wrote at least three books on the people and cultures of the eastern Niger River branch. In 1912, he published *In the Shadow of the Bush*, which

likely includes the first mention of Nsibidi in a book from the West.<sup>64</sup> An examination of the table of contents shows in the appendices section the system appears under the heading “G” and “Nsibidi Signs,” page 447.<sup>65</sup> The first time Talbot discussed Nsibidi in any detail occurred on page 30, in chapter 3 on traditional religion. Like Macgregor and Dayrell, Talbot was able to examine first-hand the “Nsibidi Clubs,” which were often comprised of Calabar area elites. Talbot described Nsibidi as a set of “images” at this point, although he will later use the term “sign,” like Macgregor and Dayrell, later in the book. Nsibidi next appears on page 39, as part of the chapter on the Egbo [sic]. Talbot asserts that Nsibidi was a “primitive secret writing much used in this part of the world” (p. 39). As with the case when earlier Westerners wanted to learn the systems scripts, Talbot ran into the same social and cultural obstacles encountered by Maxwell, Macgregor and Dayrell. Talbot wrote, “On another occasion a prominent member of the ‘Egbo [sic],’ who had the reputation of knowing more ‘Nsibidi’... than any man alive, was asked to give me a little help in the study of the script. He refused point blank, though a good remuneration had been offered for his services” (p. 39). This person “refused to give any further information, and soon after went away” (p. 39). The social power of Igbo and Annang secret societies seemed a constant, formidable barrier for any outsider who wanted to learn about the system. It is probably that many viewed the Africans who breached this rule as a danger to the entire societal order. Since the people of the eastern Niger River region believed Nsibidi was off limits to strangers for centuries, or perhaps even longer, “Giving” it to outsiders was problematic. When we examine the *Appendix G Nsibidi Signs* section, beginning on page 447, Talbot has

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<sup>64</sup> Percy Amaury Talbot, *In the Shadow of the Bush*, (Kessinger: London, 1912).

<sup>65</sup> See page 10.

including fourteen pages of scripts and their various meanings. It seems that this is more of a listing than an attempt at a detailed analysis.

### **The Second Perspective: Nsibidi in Western Linguist Studies**

After World War II, several researchers in the West produced scholarship on Nsibidi in relation to Cross River culture and the ethnic group known as the Ejagham. Carlson (2005, p. 67) tells us that many, “Scholars believe that nsibiri originated among the Ejagham, who use it more extensively than any other group in the region.” Some, including me, would challenge the assertion that the Ejagham have used the system more than the Igbo and several other ethnic groups.

In 1967 David Darby wrote, “A Survey of the Indigenous Scripts of Liberia and Sierra Leone: Vai, will Mende, Loma, Kpelle and Bassa.” The next year, he added, “The Indigenous Scripts of West Africa and Surinam: Their Inspiration and Design.” Finally, in 1969, Darby published a third consecutive article on writing in western Africa entitled, “Further Indigenous Scripts of West Africa: Manding, Wolof and Fula Alphabets and Yoruba ‘Holy’ Writing.” During the 1980s, Darby would offer his thoughts on Nsibidi. In his, *Africa and the Written Word* (1986), it is clear that Nsibidi is again not viewed as actual Western writing. Much like all of the previous scholarship, Darby (1967) likens the system to pictograms and ideograms. He wrote, “One of the most remarkable examples of the use of graphic symbols in Africa is the complex system of pictograms and ideograms known as Nsibidi (or Nsibiri), used traditionally in the Cross River-area of southeast Nigeria” (p. 26). For Darby (1967), Nsibidi is merely “the use of graphic symbols to represent objects and ideas, and to encapsulate magical and religious values”

(p. 28). In my opinion, the next major works to deal directly with Nsibidi appeared during the 1970s.

### **The Third Perspective: Nsibidi Studies in Art History and Archaeology**

Art historian Robert Ferris Thompson (1974, 1978 and 1983) offers the next significant mentions of Nsibidi, including his 1974 book titled, *African Art in Motion*, the 1978 Yale Alumni magazine article “Black Ideographic Writing: Calabar to Cuba” and the 1983 book *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*. On page 177, Thompson’s (1974) first inclusion of Nsibidi is under *subsection b*, and he describes it as an “ancient script” and form of “traditional writing.” I agree with Thompson when he tells us that Nsibidi is a system of written communication “predating Western penetration” (p. 180). Where we may differ is that Thompson is not attempting to locate any logographic aspects, nor does he seem to perceive of it as Western writing. His description is one of viewing Nsibidi as “sacred signs.” Thompson tells us that “the use of the signs is grammatical” and serve as a type of “call and response” (p. 180). This could be construed as evidence of Nsibidi being visual nommo. Thompson’s focus is on Nsibidi in relation to Ejagham masking, dance and called and response forms. Like much of the previous scholarship, there was not an actual attempt here to prove that Nsibidi may contain some of those elements that could redefine it as actual writing, visual rhetoric or visual nommo.

From the 1980s through the late 1990s, interest in Nsibidi, and writing in West Africa in general, generated a slew of new, imaginative scholarship, although none of it outright defined Nsibidi as Western-styled writing. Kenneth F. Campbell (1988) wrote his dissertation in 1981 on an aspect of Cross River region culture involving “skin-

covered heads.”<sup>66</sup> Campbell mentions Nsibidi, although he never categorized it as true writing.

There were foreign scholars who took an interest in Nsibidi Studies during this time. Simon Battestini wrote the “Bibliographie Analytique des Systemes Africains d’Ecriture” in 1990; the “Reading Signs of Identity and Alterity: History, Semiotics and a Nigerian Case” in 1991; “Ecriture et Texte” in 1997; and presented a paper on Nsibidi at a symposium in Washington D.C. in 1997. Ute M. Rosenthaler (1993) added “Die Kunst der Frauen: Zur Komplementarität von Nacktheit und Maskierung bei den Ejagham im Siidwesten Kameruns” to the body of Nsibidi research. He also wrote two public art history articles for *African Arts Magazine* in 1998 that dealt with the Ejagham. The articles were, “Honoring Ejagham Women” and “Women’s Masquerade Issue. Reply to Carlson’s Commentary.” In none of these works did Battestini or Rosenthaler locate Nsibidi as actual writing, visual rhetoric or visual nommo.

Art historian Amanda B. Carlson (2003) wrote a dissertation entitled *Nsibiri, Gender, and Literacy: The Art of the Bakor-Ejagham (Cross River State, Nigeria)*.<sup>67</sup> Her spelling of Nsibidi is one of four main variations used by both African and Western scholars.<sup>68</sup> Carlson clearly situates Nsibidi early on in her project as what she terms a “graphic writing system” and “art” in the preface.<sup>69</sup> Additionally, Carlson states that her work is “art historical and archeological” (p. 6). The first paragraph of her abstract describes Nsibidi as a system of written communication that “consists of pictographs and

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<sup>66</sup> Campbell, Kenneth F. “A Survey of Skin-Covered Heads From the Cross River Region of West Africa.” Ph.D. dissertation (Linacre College, Oxford), 1981.

<sup>67</sup> Amanda Beth Carlson was a Ph.D. student at Indiana University.

<sup>68</sup> The three most common spellings are Nsibidi, Nsibiri, Nchibiddi and Nchibiddy.

<sup>69</sup> See pages 6 and 7.



ideographs” (p. 15). Carlson’s goal was to “analyze Bakor art and ritual in terms of nsibiri” (p. 15). Therefore, unlike my rhetorical and grammatological frames for investigating Nsibidi, Carlson instead sought to “explore systems of communication and the role of art in the construction, organization and dissemination of knowledge” as she took “an approach that stresses the intellectual sophistication of African art” (p. 15).

My scholarship did touch with Carlson’s in one notable way. I agree with her when she wrote, “Western beliefs often present literature as the highest form of writing and as an indicator of ‘civilization.’ African systems of writing, which rarely develop a literature in the Western sense, are often perceived as less developed. Similarly, scholars often suggest that societies with literature are more complex, justified by their ability to record histories” (p. 11). Further, we are also in intellectual step when Carlson added that, “This approach builds upon models of development that place Western culture and Western forms of literacy in a privileged position” (p. 11). Along these lines, we are also in agreement that, “scholars often suggest that societies with literature are more complex, justified by their ability to record histories” (p.11).

Carlson claims her project “debunks the myth of Africa as a continent without writing and acknowledges the achievements of uniquely African systems of communication” (p. 4). While I applaud and respect that first sentence, the second line is somewhat troubling, and this is where we diverge. It appears Carlson places Africa in a position of being out-of-step with the other continents in terms of the ability to create an actual system of writing akin to societies elsewhere. I certainly believe that Nsibidi must contain elements that are “uniquely African,” but it is also just as possible that it shares characteristics with Greek, Arabic, Chinese and Maya scripts. Her goal was to create a

“model for understanding nsibiri” that “must reflect a large continuum of communicative devices, which expands beyond many Western notions of writing” (p. 75). While I agree with Carlson on that the fact that, “In general, the debates over what constitutes a writing system are vastly unresolved,” we do have some level of consensus in the West on what constitutes writing.<sup>70</sup> I also differ from Carlson on the very important point of “stretching for Africa.” Carlson believes that it is possible to “stretch” or expand the common Western definition of writing so that it can “fit” Africa, while I am not sure if this is even necessary in the case of Nsibidi. Carlson envisions a method of “defining an African writing system” because she thinks, “It is necessary to develop a definition of writing from the African perspective” (p. 13). I am not disagreeing with this statement. However, my project was an attempt to see if Nsibidi can stand on its own merits as Western writing without any need to expand the rules that every other continent, except Africa, has met.

The dissertation *Daughters of Seclusion*, by Nse Imeh (2009), was an interesting piece that dealt with Nsibidi as an art and aesthetic. Imeh stated, “The objective of my research is to isolate a visual aesthetic that is specific to Ibibio in Cross River cultures. I am interested in the connections between mbopo ritual in larger conceptions of aesthetics, artistry, and literacy in Ibibio providences” (p. 3). Further, we are informed, “My project is cross-disciplined, fusing West African women’s studies in art history” (p. 3). Although Nsibidi is mentioned throughout Imeh’s project, we know that the focus here is on “the connection between beauty, power, and corpulence” (p. 5). Again, this project was rooted in the scholarship of art history and at no point deals with communication

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<sup>70</sup> See Page 76.

scholarship. Although there is one point where Imeh and I do agree concerning Nsibidi when he wrote that his “dissertation is concerned with unearthing important concepts that have been overlooked or misread by former scholars” on the life and culture of the people of Calabar (p. 8).

### **Nsibidi as Ritual and Performance in Art History**

Jordan A Fenton wrote his 2012 dissertation, *Take It to the Streets: Performing Ekpe/Mgbe Power in Contemporary Calabar, Nigeria* for the University of Florida.

Fenton examined, “The story of the recent permutations of the art of the Ekpe/Mgbe society in the city of Calabar, capital of Cross River State, Nigeria” as he investigated “how so called ‘traditional’ culture or more correctly, long-standing modes of cultural expression, are not only thriving in urban environments today but are also still relevant for members who use the society to negotiate the contemporary lifestyle in which they live” (p. 17). Fenton (2012) tells us that:

In this dissertation, I argue that the Ekpe/Mgbe society in Calabar is a socio-political, financial, and cultural infrastructure for its members. I contend that in framing Ekpe/Mgbe as infrastructure, the ability of the society to become more public through the claiming of space during performance is absolutely critical for its contemporary relevance in Calabar. The dissertation further demonstrates that one facet of Ekpe/Mgbe’s vitality in contemporary Calabar is the ability of the society to be economically relevant both as a source of revenue for members and as a mechanism to demonstrate status, wealth, and power through performative display. (p. 17).

This is yet another project rooted in the scholarship of art history. Fenton’s focus was on notions of performance in Calabar. Although he made mention of Nsibidi, it is in

relation to the system as a ritual. A detailed look at Fenton's dissertation in regards to Nsibidi begins with his Chapter 4, *The More you Look, the Less you See: the Multiplicity of Meaning in Ukara Nsibidi*, on page 51. Nsibidi was also discussed as "performance" in Chapter 5. He details how "Calabar has influenced the transmission, meaning, and demonstration of the society's imaged and performed esoteric knowledge system known as nsibidi" (51). Fenton believes "the privatization of nsibidi teaching has led to an expanded informal economy that defines its transmission and further fuels the multiple verbal explanations of a given nsibidi motif" (p. 51).

Further, Fenton (2012) "examines nsibidi depicted on ukara cloth" as he "provides one of the first in-depth investigations of the performed version" (p. 51). Beyond Nsibidi being a written communication, even if I reimagined it as visual rhetoric, Fenton believes that "In Ekpe/Mgbe performance and ritual contexts, the imaged version is meaningless if one cannot demonstrate its knowledge through the medium of performance" (p. 51). Fenton's next chapter "investigates the ways in which the performed version of Ekpe/Mgbe nsibidi is a mechanism for the demonstration of power and knowledge" (p. 52). It is at this point that he mentions a term I found particularly interesting because I had never heard of it previous to this point: "gestured art." Fenton links this idea of gestured art to performed versions of Nsibidi within the context cultural and social context of the "urban experience of Calabar." For Fenton, "Members have thus taken performed Nsibidi to the streets not only to demonstrate their knowledge, but also to advertise their abilities to interested members." Fenton also drew a connection between "performed nsibidi" and the "deep play" of Clifford Geertz. Nsibidi as "gestured art" is included on pages 191-192, 242 and 246.

Sophie Sanders in 2013 also included Nsibidi in her dissertation, *Spirited Pattern and Decoration in Contemporary Black Atlantic Art*, at Temple University. In the first paragraph of her abstract we read, “This dissertation investigates aesthetics of African design and decoration in the work of major contemporary artists of African descent who address heritage, history, and life experience. My project focuses on the work of three representative contemporary artists, African American artists Kehinde Wiley and Nick Cave, and Ghanaian artist El Anatsui. Their work represents practices and tendencies among a much broader group of painters and sculptors who employ elaborate textures and designs to express drama and emotion throughout the Black Atlantic world” (p. 3). Sanders (2013) argument is “that extensive patterning, embellishment, and ornamentation are employed by many contemporary artists of African descent as a strategy for reinterpreting the art historical canon and addressing critical social issues, such as war, devastation of the earth’s environment, and lack of essential resources for survival in many parts of the world. Many artworks also present historical revisions that reflect the experience of Black peoples who were brought to the Americas through the transatlantic slave trade, lived under colonial rule, or witnessed aspects of post-colonial struggle” (p. 3). This is yet again one of the several recent Western examinations of Nsibidi that places the system in the context of art history.

Licia E. Clifton-James in 2013 wrote her master’s thesis, *Making the Connection: J.B. Murray and the Scripts and Forms of Africa*, for the University of Missouri-Kansas City in Art history. Clifton-James (2013) tells us her work here is about “African and African America artists” that using “Nsibidi and other African and Afro-Caribbean syllabaries in their works of art” (p. 3). Although Clifton-James (2013) wrote, “Through

a thorough investigation of the history of the scripts and forms of Africa and the writing systems that developed in the Americas from those African scripts, the diasporic path that African traditions took in the Americas, will be explored,” this is another work rooted in the scholarship of art history” (p. 3). It is clear that Clifton-James did not attempt to locate Nsibidi’s potential logographic possibilities. She is calling the system a “script,” but not defining it by traditional Western standards. Instead, Clifton-James defines Nsibidi as “signs” that are part of “African syllabaries” (p. 12). Even though she tells readers that, on some levels, these syllabaries might be superior scripts and alphabets, we again have a case where a Western scholar is calling for an expansion in the definition of writing.

Clifton-James (2013) stated, “A Westerner’s closest comparison would be that of the alphabet, but in these instances the figure displayed holds much more information than a simple figure that helps to form a word or thought” (p. 12). She also tells us that, “Nsibidi was not the only syllabary used in Africa. Other systems of syllabaries were used in other regions of Africa, for example, the Bwende Cloth Mannequin Reliquary” (p. 12). From pages 12 through 26, Clifton-James discussed Nsibidi, but at no point does it appear she is actually spent time Cross River or the city of Calabar. Most of her discussion appears centered on what she refers to as “a history of writing in the Americas” and exploring the mystical aspects of so-called “syllabaries” in Nigeria.

#### **The Fourth Perspective: Nsibidi as Graphic, Sign or Ideographic System**

Gerhard Kubik wrote the 1986 article, *African Graphic Systems With Particular Reference to the Benue-Congo ‘Bantu’ Languages Zone*. Like other Western scholars, Kubik wants to expand the definition of writing in an effort to include West African

forms like Nsibidi. In this interpretation Nsibidi is a writing system that visually represents *ideas*, which is another way of calling the system “graphic” or “ideographic.” Kubik appears to call for these systems to be included as actual writing.

In 2004, Ned Sublette covered Nsibidi’s importance to New World African societies in his book, *Cuba and its Music: From the First Drums to the Mambo*. Sublette tells us that despite attempts to destroy every aspect of indigenous culture carried by West Africans to the islands of the Caribbean, South America and Central America, Nsibidi survived the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade. Enslaved Africans in places like Brazil, Guyana, Cuba and the Dominican Republic today still use variations of the system as forms of written and artistic expression. In Cuba, Nsibidi transformed into a written system called “Anaforuana” (p. 195). Sublette tells us, “In the port districts of Havana and Matanzas province” Nsibidi survived thanks to a secret African society for men called Abakua (p. 190). Its members were popularly, if pejoratively called *nanigos*, a term that has fallen into disuse, though the society itself still thrives” (p. 190). We are also told, “Abukua descends from the Egbo [sic] (or Ekpe) Leopard society, a society that functioned as a kind of government in the Old Calabar region, a semi-Bantu territory that today is divided between western Cameroon and southeastern Nigeria” (p. 195). Sublette (2004) wrote, “To the north, on dry land, the Ibo or Igbo nation spread out. The Ibo presence was contained in the marshes and swamps” while other groups from the Niger River Basin such as “the people of the Ejagham (or Ijaw, or Ijo) civilization” also inhabited the island (p.191). Some of the enslaved West Africans from Calabar and eastern Niger River region, collectively known as the “Carabali,” formed religious societies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that help to maintain ancient cultural

ties from West Africa including aspects of “ancestor worship” and a belief in the traditional spiritual deities from the continent. Sublette (2004) informs us that “Egbo [sic] society in Africa” embraced a powerful knowledge society which after centuries of existence began, “probably evolving as a check on the power of individual family lineages” (p. 193). Reaching back to use the scholarship of Talbot (1912), he then wrote, “The whole country is honeycombed with secret society, among which the Egbo Club is the most powerful. Before the coming of the ‘white man’ this institution ruled the land, and even now it has more influence in many ways than government itself, and has caused endless difficulty to administrators” (p.193).

Through the Niger River Abukua, or knowledge society, groups in Cuba such as the Efik, Efut and Igbo were able to preserve their cultural “rich repertoire of tales, songs, dress, implements, and drums” as well as “maintaining languages of their own, known only to initiates” (p. 185). Although the Abukua secret society may have only been able to continue “a small shard of this vast repertoire,” it is of great importance to the history of writing in West Africa. Nsibidi’s role in the “sacred pictographic system” known as Anaforuana, discussed on page 195 by Sublette, is best understood and described as akin to *mother and child*. The physical makeup of one created the other. Sublette also wrote “of course, it is writing as a magical power secret, not as a universal means of communication of all kinds of ideas and records”. Sublette does not view Nsibidi (or likely its closely associated offspring Anaforuana) as a form of actual Western writing. Another interesting note offered by Sublette is that the Abakua in Cuba did not allow women to use Anaforuana. In chapter 14, *A Secret Language for Men Only*, Sublette wrote in great detail about how the Abakua secret societies of the Igbo in Cuba



interpreted gender, as a measure of who could, or could not, become a member of these organizations.

### **In-between Art and Ideograph: Nsibidi as Artistic and Graphic Expression**

An additional piece on Nsibidi produced during this time was by another art historian, Rachel Malcolm-Woods (2005). Malcolm-Woods' dissertation, *Igbo Talking Signs in Antebellum Virginia: Religion, Ancestors and the Aesthetics of Freedom*, primarily focuses on the Igbo presence in pre-Civil War Virginia. These "Igbo Americans" used various Nsibidi "talking signs," as they are described by Malcolm-Woods, on cemetery stones in Amherst County. Malcolm-Woods also makes the claim that enslaved Igbo, and their descendants, left Nsibidi engravings on a number of stone blocks used in the canals their exploited labor built. Like Carlson, Malcolm-Woods seems to want to classify Nsibidi as something other than true writing. There is no mention of visual rhetoric or visual nommo.

Christopher L. Slogar (2005 and 2007) has written two well-researched pieces in recent years on Nsibidi that I consider of paramount importance. His first was a dissertation titled, *Iconography and Continuity in West Africa: Calabar Terracottas and the Arts of the Cross River Region of Nigeria/Cameroon*. Situated within Art history and archaeology, Slogar's scholarship is central to nearly any project on the topic of Nsibidi Studies that I can imagine. The first chapter began with Slogar (2005) writing, "Since the early 1990s, archaeological investigations organized by the University of Maryland Department of Art History and Archaeology and the Nigerian National Commission for Museums and Monuments, have yielded a large number of terracotta objects and other artifacts in and around the town of Calabar, Cross River State, in southeastern Nigeria"

(p. 1). Next, we are informed that, “Their decoration includes geometric designs such as concentric circles, spirals, lozenges, cruciforms, arcs, angles, and interlaces, among many others. Of course, such designs are not are not unique to the Calabar area, they are in fact universal, but what is striking about them in the present context is their great numbers, their variety, the ways in which they are combined, and the great care taken to delineate them clearly, using consistent techniques” (p. 1).

Slogar’s (2005) tells us immediately that, “This dissertation is an art historical study of a group of these decorated Calabar terracottas, most of which were found a few miles outside of Calabar municipal limits and which date to the period ca. 1000-1450 A.D. I have sought to discern meaning in them by incorporating an ethnoarchaeological approach into my art historical analysis, that is, I use information gathered from living cultures of the present and recent past to help shed light on the more distant past known through archaeology” (p. 2). Both Slogar and Carlson share my use of ethnography to explore the cultures of Calabar; however, unlike my project neither is using communication scholarship.

Considered together, the various geometric motifs used in decorating the terracottas constitute an iconography markedly similar to the ideographic script generally referred to as nsibidi in written sources (the nsibiri of the Ejagham and neighboring groups). Nsibidi, comprised of various discrete signs including arcs, angles, cruciforms, circles, spirals, lozenges, and interlaces, among many others, is indigenous to the Cross River region. While its usage has declined significantly since first discussed in Western sources in the early twentieth century, it is still maintained within certain institutions. Nsibidi is a polyvalent sign system having performative (i.e. mimed) and graphic

components (i.e. written signs), while certain objects may also be considered Nsibidi. (p. 3).

What I found most striking was the use of the words “polyvalent sign system.” Slogar offered a definition that includes everything except calling any of the so-called “signs” a script at this point. I agree with Slogar when he stated, “The history of nsibidi remains subject to speculation” (p. 5). Slogar and I similarly understand how Western scholarship has historically denied so-called “Black Africa” her rightful place in the history of written human communication. Slogar (2005) tells us, “In short, there is now physical evidence that nsibidi was already a sophisticated phenomenon fifteen hundred years ago! This is remarkable in light of what is currently known about indigenous scripts in sub-Saharan Africa and, therefore, these objects further (and strongly) refute the idea that Africans had no writing until the arrival of Europeans” (p. 6).

For me, the above passage is communicating two different messages; I am in agreement with one but not the other. It was heartening to read that Slogar believes that there is a need to refute the lie that “Black” Africans do not have independent writing systems. I agree that Nsibidi is indeed an important written system because it offers a living, historical rebuttal to the narrative on scripts in places like Nigeria and Cameroon. However, Slogar and I greatly differ in regards to the precise nature of Nsibidi. He seems to dismiss at this time, almost out of hand, that there exists the possibility of this particular system containing the actual elements needed to qualify as writing from a Western perspective. It was equally disheartening to read, “But nsibidi is not equivalent to Western scripts. It is neither standardized nor alphabetic, and there is apparently no grammar that governs its usage. Thus, the meaning of a particular sign may change by

location as well as one's level of initiation in a group that uses it" (p. 6). It is here that Slogar and I find ourselves at intellectual, grammatological and semiotic loggerheads. Informed by a number of academic and community sources in the Niger River Basin, I already know that Nsibidi has long possessed a grammar that informs and controls how it can be used.

I found it odd that Slogar, after definitively stating Nsibidi was not a script, then wrote "in terms of published research, what is known about the specifics of interpretation of nsibidi signs, i.e. 'reading' them, is made problematic because of their polyvalent nature and the secrecy surrounding their meaning, as used by men's associations in particular" (p. 7). I view this as an admission that the Western academy cannot say with any real certainty that Nsibidi is not a script. No one has all the answers. This is one of the things that makes my project so compelling, and perhaps in some senses, even groundbreaking. It is highly likely that no one outside of the Niger River Basin has yet been able to understand and define which particular Nsibidi signs also act as scripts and as part of an alphabet. Much like Slogar, I was struck by Carlson's use of the phrase "Nsibidi literacy." Although both Carlson and Slogar are clear that they are not attempting to redefine Nsibidi as a form of so-called "primitive writing," it is equally clear that they are committing another faux pas when it comes to the study of African-descended communities. It is part of what I discussed in the previous chapter as the Canon of Africanity. Slogar wrote, "Thus, nsibidi as a symbolic system should be considered on its own terms, however inadequately they may be currently understood by outsiders, and not as a 'primitive' form of writing defined in the Western sense" (p. 7). Once again, there were parts of this passage that I agree with and disagree.

Again, my argument is not that they may come a time when Nsibidi, once it has been fully and completely explored for all of its potential and possible grammatological elements, may indeed stand on its own terms as a unique, African source of indigenous written communication that may not qualify as Western writing. My argument is that I believe it is far too early to offer conclusive definitions of what the system is, and is not, because the world outside of southeastern Nigeria and southwestern Cameroon knows far too little about Nsibidi offer any final concrete analysis. At this point, I do not believe anyone, including Darby, Carlson, Slogar or myself, can say whether Nsibidi is actual writing or not. The record here is still vastly incomplete. This part of the story of Nsibidi has been marked, but no one has truly made a correction in this area. We are back to a point I addressed in previous paragraphs because this is another instance where knowledge is “stretched” as to include Africa. Just like with Carlson, Slogar seems to suggest a redefining of writing because independent systems such as Nsibidi lack elements found in nearly every other culture where there are systems of true scripting.

I want to state for the record that I am not suggesting any modern scholar intentionally intends to overtly denigrate African people or culture. What I am saying is that there is an inference of possible African “exceptionalism” that smacks of inferiority and the old notion that the continent is just “different.” *African Arts*, a prominent scholarly journal, published an article by Slogar in 2007. In this piece, Slogar again initially tells readers that Nsibidi is not true writing. He refers to Nsibidi as a “graphic system” (p. 18). Slogar (2007) goes further by adding, “Considered one of the indigenous African scripts, nsibidi records, transmits, and conceals various kinds of information using a wide, fluid vocabulary of geometric and naturalistic signs placed on

objects including calabashes, brassware, textiles, masquerade paraphernalia, and wood sculpture, and on surfaces including the ground, the walls of buildings, and even human skin. Yet little is known of the history of nsibidi prior to the early twentieth century, when it caught the attention of colonial officials” (p. 19). The admission that “little is known” regarding “the history” of a script before European colonial arrival is telling. This is yet another instance where there is an honest acknowledgement that few scholars truly know of the principal details about Nsibidi’s past, or how the system fully operates. Yet, Slogar goes on to write, “However, nsibidi should not be likened to the contents of a printed book passed from hand to hand, but viewed as a pool of symbols having different meanings and different contexts of use in time and space.” It is far too early to make such conclusive statements. The door is still wide open on the Nsibidi Debate.

Tolagbe Ogunleye in 2006 wrote an excellent article for the *Journal of Black Studies*, Àrokò, Mmomomme Twe, Nsibidi, Ogede, and Tusona: Africanisms in Florida’s Self-Emancipated Africans’ Resistance to Enslavement and War Stratagems. Ogunleye’s (2006) focus in this piece was to examine how the formerly enslaved began “using discrete African art forms, traditions, and sensibilities in their modes of communications, rituals, subsistence strategies, and battle plans to prosper and achieve and sustain their freedom and autonomy” (p. 396). We are told, “This article reconstructs the ways cultural forms and practices, such as nsibidi, tusona or sona (ideographic writing systems), and mmomomme twe and ogede (incantations), functioned in these self-emancipated Africans’ stratagems to escape from Spanish, British, and American plantations” (p. 398). For Ogunleye, like Carlson and Slogar, Nsibidi is just “ideographic” and not logographic. It appears that the topic of the transmission of

continental African scripts to the New World is a fairly popular topic at some institutions in the West. Intended to scrutinize the “cultural links and expand the boundaries of attention and theoretical assumptions heretofore accepted by demonstrating that Africans living autonomously in Florida were well-informed pan-African cultural strategists who knowledgeably and methodically selected or adapted traditional African cultural practices and art forms from the various ethnic groups in their midst and, based on those styles, strengths, accouterments, and applicability to function as weaponry [and] vital mediums of communications” Ogunleye is not attempting to reimagine Nsibidi rhetorically or in terms of semiotics (p. 398). Further, Ogunleye did not include information on any first-hand ethnographic study of the life and culture of Calabar, or any other part of the eastern Niger River region.

An interesting recent addition to Nsibidi Studies was written by Maik Nwosu in 2010. *In the Name of the Sign: The Nsibidi Script as the Language and Literature of the Crossroads*, written for the journal *Semiotica* introduced what I thought was a compelling new way to interpret the ancient system. Nwosu (2010) tells us that he is undertaking “a semiotic and literary approach” to the study of Nsibidi as a means of understanding “the language of the crossroads” (p. 285). The most intriguing thing that I found here was Nwosu (2010) has carefully delineated the two main “routes” that the study of Nsibidi has taken to this point. Nwosu (2010) wrote, “The study of Nsibidi, one of Africa’s native writing systems, has mainly taken two routes, the taxonomic, which is concerned with the classification of nsibidi signs, and the genealogical, which attempts to resolve the question of where and how nsibidi originated. This essay undertakes a semiotic and literary analysis of nsibidi as an influential language of the crossroads. In modern

Nigerian literature, for instance, the poetics of ‘nsibidi’ may be said to include a weighty concern with cosmologies or trajectories of origin and the representation or renewal of an existential drama rooted in a myth of the crossroads” (p.285).

The “crossroads” discussed by Nwosu has meaning on several levels including the physical, intercultural and meta-physical. Nwosu (2010) believes, “This sense of nsibidi as a cultural phenomenon at the crossroads of not only southeastern Nigeria, but of the world...” (p. 292). On the spiritual level, “The other theory about the origin of nsibidi also positions it as a language of the crossroads or the conjunction of the human and the non-human world.” There is an instance where Nwosu and I meet on the subject of Nsibidi; he also believes that the script is woefully independent of anything European or Near Eastern. He tells us, “While some of these scripts, such as the Ethiopic script, go back thousands of years, others are relatively recent. Nsibidi, which does not rely on either the Arabic or the Latin script, is believed to have evolved before the sixteenth century, that is, before the arrival of Europeans in southeastern Nigeria” (p. 285). Part of this sentence is interesting because it demonstrates that Nwosu does not believe Nsibidi is an ancient script, but rather something of recent introduction. This is yet another clear demonstration of the confusion that currently surrounds the system in Western scholarship even as recently as just four years ago. Despite this, Nwosu and I also agree that Nsibidi, as an intercultural construction, undoubtedly assisted in galvanizing the formation of Niger River Basin ethnic identity. Nwosu (2010) wrote, “In the instances relating to the histories of nsibidi, the ‘historical’ view of the world can also be interpreted as parabolic, a naming of the sign that projects distinctive identity as well as gestures towards inter-cultural relations at the same time. These narratives and claims



suggest the origin of nsibidi as a plural phenomenon at the crossroads of connected histories” (p. 292).

### **Nsibidi Studies in Communication Scholarship: A Communication Expression**

Three other recent doctoral dissertations with lesser connections to my work, including one by a communication scholar, featured information on Nsibidi. The first of these was by Robin Renee Sanders in 2010 at Robert Morris University.<sup>71</sup> Sanders wrote *A Phenomenology of Uli as a Communication Expression in Four Nigerian Villages: Exploring its Motifs, Practitioners, and Endangerment*. She earned her Doctor of Science in Information Systems and Communications and discussed one of the many systems of written communication inspired by Nsibidi over the past several centuries. Uli, generally regarded as an offshoot of Nsibidi, is considered a rich, newer form of Niger River art. Sanders (2010) tells us in her abstract, “Uli is known as an artistic cultural practice of the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria. This practice involves painting motifs on the body and walls” (p. 4). Because Sanders (2010) believes “Uli is disappearing in many Igbo villages, but should be preserved as it communicates important cultural meanings,” she and I would be in agreement concerning Nsibidi (p. 4). Much like Uli, fewer and fewer residents of Calabar and other parts of the Niger River Basin are using Nsibidi. I liked one of the questions that Sanders asks regarding Uli from the perspective of a communication scholar. She wants to know, “How can we recognize and define Uli as a communication form?” (p. 4). Sanders decided to use phenomenology, as she “explored the life-world experiences” of “four Nigerian villages”

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<sup>71</sup> Robin Renee Sanders is also in the field of communication. This is important to note because there appears to be very few communication scholars who have investigated and written about Nsibidi. Sanders also worked with the famous communication theorist Rex Crawley. During the 1970s she earned two degrees from Ohio University.

in southeastern Nigeria (p. 4). Sanders (2010) investigated “the lived experiences of Uli practitioners” in her attempt to discover “where Uli fits into Igbo life” and “what the motifs communicate,” as well as “why Uli should be viewed as a communication medium” (p. 19).

Sanders, much like Carlson, Malcolm-Woods, Clifton-James and Slogar, appears to redefine Uli, and would likely consider its parent form Nsibidi, as a type of written communication other than writing. In this case, Sanders views the Uli system as a “communication expression.” She wrote, “Results indicate Uli may need its own category in the communication field like other non-text, non-spoken cultural practices. This researcher determined that the field should include a discipline called communication expressions to better include non-text, non-spoken practices and consider these forms as one entity called a medium-message, because the message is not separated from the medium” (p. 4). I found this definition, by far, the most fascinating! If Nsibidi does not possess logographic capabilities, it may well fit into the intriguing category of a communication expression as suggested by Sanders. The problem here though is Nsibidi and Uli differ. Just because Uli lacks the elements of actual writing does not mean Nsibidi must as well. Although a project in communication, Sanders is not attempting to reimagine Nsibidi as visual rhetoric or visual nommo. Nor is there an effort to investigate the system using grammatology, visual rhetoric or visual nommo.

### **Three Overlooked Sources on Nsibidi and Writing in West Africa**

I also wanted to briefly discuss three often over looked works that I have pulled out of the above categories in my literature review so they could be discussed as this point. There are few Nsibidi Studies scholars in recent years that cite Edgar A.

Gregersen from 1977; B.W. Andah, R.N.S. Bodam and C.C. Chukuegbu from 1991; and Elizabeth Allo Isichei in 1997. Each of these three sources includes information that adds to the study of examining writing in Nigeria and West Africa.

Gregersen wrote the book *Language in Africa: An Introductory Survey* in 1977 and suggested that Nsibidi probably does have logographic elements. This takes us back to the words and beliefs of J.K. Macgregor. Macgregor believed that “The use of nsibidi is that of ordinary writing. I have in my possession a copy of the record of a court case from a town of [Enyong] taken down in it, and every detail ... is most graphically described” (Macgregor 1909, p. 212). The discussion by Gregersen on written language systems begins on page 174. Gregersen (1977) wrote, “African systems of writing not based on the Roman alphabet are few in number and normally limited use. But they are fascinating, not only in their own right, but also for the light that they could perhaps shed about the evolution of writing systems in general” (p. 174). He goes on to define actual writing as something that “involved visible marks of some sort used as arbitrary symbols to represent (at least some) linguistic elements in a productive way. It is not enough that a proverb can be ‘read’ off from object. In true writing, any and all normal utterances can be represented, even though certain features of the utterance may be systematically ignored.” (p. 175). The compelling information in this book for me was found on page 176, where the author first approaches Nsibidi. Gregersen (1977) informed us, “The nsibidi signs used by secret societies in various language groups in southern Nigeria, e.g. the Igbo, Efik, and Ekoi, have been considered by some to be of a similar pictographic nature, but others have maintained it is true writing, based on either a logographic or syllabary system. Although nsibidi signs were first discovered by T.D. Maxwell as early

as 1904, published accounts remain fragmentary and the available evidence seems insufficient to decide the matter one way or the other” (p. 176).

Gregersen, like many other Western scholars, also believes that writing is a relatively recent social and cultural phenomenon in West Africa. He wrote, “Two main divisions of writing traditions can be distinguished in Africa: (a) the north African scripts, all of which ultimately derivable Ancient Egypt (this would include Semitic [sic] and Greek scripts); (b) West African forms of recent development, which may be related, but would seem in large part an attempt to imitate Latin or Arabic writing” (p. 176).

Gregersen, like many of his latter-day colleagues, believes that the one West African script having the most potential for acceptance as actual West African writing was the Vai version. On page 187, he tells us, “The West African writing system that has received the most publicity is the Vai script, used in Liberia and Sierra Leone, apparently devised around 1833 by Momolu Duwalu Bukele” (p. 187). *Language in Africa* is a fantastic book that laid the groundwork for much of what was written about this subject twenty years afterwards. Any scholar studying Nsibidi and writing in Africa should read this book in my opinion.

The fantastic article titled, “Systems: The Case Study of Writing: An Introductory Essay,” written for inclusion in the *West African Journal of Archaeology* in 1991, is similarly an important touchstone for work on Nsibidi and other writing systems in West Africa. The authors were B.W. Andah, R.N.S. Bodam and C.C. Chukuegbu; each was at the highly-respected University of Ibadan in Nigeria at the time the article was published. These African scholars tell us, “As a communication system writing may be described as the communication of ideas by man making use of signs of symbols, that

are either etched on, called onto, draw on or inscribed on some concrete material (hard or soft) in such manner that they are visible to the human eye” (p. 104). They added, “Writing could be inscribed on metal woodshop projects, on paper or any surface, papyrus, stone, clay cloth etc. It qualifies as writing so long as it is visible or readable and conveys meanings and ideas to the reader” (p. 104). I found it extremely noteworthy when they offered, “In the case of Africa, especially South of the Sahara, however, a few scholars grudgingly and reluctantly, if at all, concede that African peoples could have invented writing on their own. Among the reasons for this are ethnocentrism, and the disastrous disruptive impact of the slave trade on African social groups resulting in cherished cultural traits, being shrouded in secrecy and suffering great distortions” (p. 105). A bit further on they added, “Writing was one such cultural feature to suffer. Inventors and custodians often saw virtue in surrounding the inventions with much secrecy. Nsibidi is a good example” (p. 105). It was also thought-provoking to read, “On West African writing systems generally, Western scholars often mention either directly or indirectly that they are not only recent, but that the inventions were made from observation of European writing. Underlining its use unfortunately is the erroneous notion that the black African was subhuman and not capable of inventing anything by himself” (p. 106). These three African archaeologists confront one of my central arguments head on. They go further when they added, “In addition, the same category of Western scholars have stressed writing as being such an important ingredient of civilization than one would think that whenever it was absent, real civilization in history did not exist and should be rolled out” (p. 106). We must be mindful that these words were the written just a little over twenty years ago. Although these African

archaeologists attempted to discuss the logographic elements of systems such as Vai, Oberi Okaime and Ifa, they did not undertake to include Nsibidi.

Elizabeth Allo Isichei in 1997 wrote the book, *A History of African Societies to 1870* and she additionally made interesting mentions of Nsibidi. On page 367, Isichei (1997) included a section on Nsibidi where she claimed people living in the Calabar region of southern Nigeria independently created it. Isichei (1997) wrote, “A number of scripts were invented in West Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the best-known of those being the Vai of Liberia and the Bamum of Cameroon. These were alphabetic, and clearly a response to the stimulus of Western forms of literacy. Nsibidi was a script found among a number of Cross River Peoples which owed nothing to foreign exemplars, each symbol is an ideogram, as in Chinese” (p. 367). We also read that, “Because each symbol represented a concept, it could be used between people speaking different languages; over 500 signs are recorded, and there is reason to believe that they were only a small part of the whole” (p. 367). What I found compelling here is that between the late 1990s and today, despite all of the scholarship on Nsibidi, there does not appear to be that many *new* signs that have been uncovered by recent Western scholarship. The number appears to be remarkably similar to that quoted by researchers from the early days of Nsibidi Studies.

In review of Chapter 2, I investigated much of the relevant previous scholarship on involving Nsibidi Studies. It is important to study Nsibidi because the system may be one of the oldest forms of nonverbal human communication. There have been dozens of book and articles written since 1900 that involve some aspect of Nsibidi. Previous attempts by Western researchers to explore Nsibidi as a system represent a wide variety

of disciplines and backgrounds. Colonial administrators, missionaries, explorers, artists, archeologists, anthropologists and historians introduced some of these works. In the field of communication, there has been scant research on what Nsibidi is and how the written parts it function. There is also a lack of scholarship from this academic perspective on who used Nsibidi in southern Nigeria and Cameroon. The use of communication scholarship may add new insights into how Nsibidi works. I believe that communication studies scholarship can offer the world fresh perspectives on Nsibidi. The work available from T.D. Maxwell, J.K. Macgregor and Percy Amaury Talbot, as well the excellent more recent additions from David Darby, Robert Ferris Thompson, Ivor Miller, Amada Carlson and Jordan Fenton have expanded what we know about some elements of Nsibidi, but several questions remain unanswered. The vast majority of this research has positioned the system as a type of West African art, pictography or ideogram, and not actual Western writing. None have posited that Nsibidi could be a form of visual rhetoric or visual nommo. The fields of art history and archeology have by far contributed the most information on what Nsibidi is as a system and how it operates. Up to this point, Nsibidi has mostly been understood as an important Lower Niger River region artistic form of cultural expression. My project moves in a different direction. I place Nsibidi under a communication studies lens for scrutiny as actual writing, visual rhetoric and visual nommo. There are points where my work meets with some of the previous scholarship, but no previous researcher has touched on all three of specific goals of my project.

In Chapter 3, I discuss my three-month fieldwork stay in Cross River State, Nigeria. During this time, I decided to switch my method of study from the older and far

more established ethnography to the fresher and less stigmatized Afrinography. It was at this moment that I began to work closely with scholars from the Nigerian National Commission for Monuments, and Museums and the Nigerian National Culture Center to set up my interviews. This was also the time when I was invited to officially initiate into my first African knowledge society. My approach to life in Nigeria was to be, as I like to say, open as possible to the possibilities.



## CHAPTER 3: METHODS

### Plan of Study and Timeline

My dissertation work contained a significant Afrinographic component. I undertook primary data collection, including conducting a series of over forty interviews. Nearly each day I had face-to-face interactions with my participants. Some were professors, engineers, shopkeepers, radio personalities, entrepreneurs, administrators, managers, members of knowledge societies, government officials, royalty and bankers. This group ranged from Western-trained elites to traditional intellectuals. My average day began at 6 a.m., at which point I left the hotel Success Villa, in Calabar North.<sup>72</sup> I mainly walked (“trekked” as the locals would refer to it) to meet my participants, although there were occasions where taxi and bus service was used. The scene was southeastern Nigeria and southwestern Cameroon, from mid-October 2014 through mid-January of 2015. The Nigerian city of Calabar, a place I have never visited prior to this project, acted as the “staging ground” from which I travelled throughout the eastern Niger River region.

As an interpretive Afrinographic researcher, I also spent time in a mix of small traditional towns and villages, as well as cities in southern Nigeria. These included Atakpa (Duke Town), Nsidung (Henshaw Town), Old Town (Obutong) and Obio Oko (Creek Town). I also spent time in the culturally rich capital city of Abuja, Akwa Ikom and the northern section of Cross River State. I also spent time at the Alok Monolith Museum in Alok Community where the oldest known Nsibidi inscriptions are located.

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<sup>72</sup> Success Villa is located at Number 19, Otop Abassi Street, IBB Way, Calabar. Mr. Itoro Akpan, the manager of Success Villa during my stay, agreed to be one of my research participants. He offered me several new, fascinating insights on the cultures of Cross River State, Calabar, in addition to Nsibidi and Ekpe/Mgbe.

My primary research partners and hosts were the Nigerian National Commission for Museums and Monuments, the Nigerian Cultural Center of Calabar, and the Department of Culture and Heritage. A third prominent, vital collaborator emerged approximately two weeks into my stay called the Center for Black and African Arts and Civilization (CBAAC). CBAAC is part of the Federal Ministry of Tourism, Culture and National Orientation, with branches in Ibadan, Abuja, Ile-Ife, Igbo Ukwu, Nassarawa, Sokoto and Calabar. Several professors and administrators at the University of Calabar (UNICAL), the National Library of Nigeria, and the Cross River State Library in Calabar were also instrumental in locating potential people for interview sessions. The Royal Palaces of the Ndidem of Calabar and the Obong of Calabar were instrumental partners. The Slave History Museum and the Nigerian National Library also deserve mention.

While in Cross River State, I worked on a weekly basis with traditional intellectuals such as Obong Ekpe Ekpenyong Bassey, who not only initiated me into Efe Efut Atu, Efut Ekondo in Calabar South (Henshaw Town) in October of 2014, but also served as my main Nsibidi and Ekpe/Mgbe teacher. Besides being a royal and master teacher of Nsibidi, Obong Ekpe Bassey held the title Obong Eponkó, or Ekpe Chief Information Officer of Culture. My Nsibidi and village “father” (the person who helps to manage the efe or shrine where I initiated) is named Chief Okon Etim Efanga. Chief Efanga was responsible for reinforcing many of the structured lessons I received from Obong Ekpe Bassey, as well as add new information on names and meanings of the colorful Ekpe costumes worn during ceremonies. Additionally, I met weekly with four representatives from the Cultural Center and CBAAC: Mr. Arikpo Gabriel, Mr. Okamoko Bassey Edet, Mr. Lebo Imoh, and Mr. Mike Bassey. Gabriel is the Head of Performing

Arts at the Cultural Center; it was during a meeting in mid-October with him and Mrs. Ador Carol, the Acting Head of the Cultural Center, that I agreed to undergo the Ekpe initiation ceremony in an effort to best understand Ekpe. It was at this point that Ador suggested that Gabriel and I begin to work together on this project.

The next day, Gabriel introduced me to Okamoto Bassey Edet. Edet is an internationally respected dancer and singer in residence at the Cultural Center with a long family affiliation in Nsibidi and Ekpe. Initially, Edet decided to teach me all of the Nsibidi that his father and brother had taught him, but he later thought it best to introduce me to Lebo Imoh, the CBAAC Liaison Director and Calabar Officer. Imoh is a well-known local scholar who had not only written on Nsibidi, but also spent time examining the ancient Nsibidi sites of the Alok. Okamoko then made contact with Efe Efut Atu to see if they would agree to allow a foreigner in their official ranks. Once we knew that it was possible, I spent nearly a week negotiating with the elders of Efe Efut Atu, with Okamoko acting as the main mediator, finalizing the details of the initiation process. By the end of the third week of October, I had undergone and successfully passed a series of secret rituals and gained entrance in the Ekpe Society. I will go into more detail in the next chapter, as I discuss my discoveries and findings regarding both Nsibidi and Ekpe/Mgbe.

Initially, I used ethnography as my “distance meter,” while Afrinography reminded me to keep African perspectives at the center of my research as I established a level of intimacy with my participates. By implementing a combination of older and newer research methods, such as the more established ethnography and innovative Afrinography, I was able to delve deeply in my attempts to understand the lives of my

participants and the scenes in which they are situated. There were moments when I needed distance and actively sought to “disappear” as a researcher. At other points my visibility served to demonstrate to certain participants and other members of communities that that I was “trying to get the story right.”

I believe that it is important to note that I have studied the evolution and movement of Nsibidi from the so-called Old World to this hemisphere. Much of this previous work helped to not only inform, but also clarify my understanding of Nsibidi in Nigeria. The partial preservation of Nsibidi’s past, and purposes, was possible in places where enslaved Africans from southern Nigeria and Cameroon were transported in large numbers. Historian Ivor Miller believes that nations such as Cuba, Suriname, Guyana and the Dominican Republic today have sizable African-descended communities who use modified versions of Nsibidi as communication in their spiritual practices, and overall daily lives. Western scholars who are interested in exploring Nsibidi as written communication should spend time in these places.

In the spring of 2013, I was awarded the Teaching Enhancement grant. For two months I conducted a series of in-depth interviews with participants from a wide-ranging spectrum of Hispaniola’s academic and non-academic circles. These included the traditional religious leaders of a West African and Caribbean Native American religious order just outside of Santo Domingo, in the Dominican Republic, called the Brotherhood of the Congos of the Holy Spirit. The Brotherhood serves the people of the Villa Mella-Mata Indians Community. The descendants of enslaved Africans from Igboland still use a version of Nsibidi in many of the community’s most important religious ceremonies. My interviews also included archivists and scholars at the Museo del Hombre

Dominicano, the Museum of the Cathedral, the Museum of the Dominican Family, the National Library of the Dominican Republic and the Universidad Autonoma De Santo. These interviews also featured members of knowledge societies on the island.

### **Names of the Primary Persons Interviewed**

Southern Nigeria has many active knowledge societies, which I will from this point forward refer to as *knowledge societies*. The membership of these organizations are usually drawn from prominent, successful individuals. They often occupy the highest positions of political, economic, cultural and social leadership and still play a pivotal role in controlling information about Nsibidi. I had the assistance of area scholars, businesspersons, celebrities, former students, religious leaders and musicians. My primary list includes: Ndubuisi Ikpeagha, David Ebio Kobo, Senator Liyel Imoke, Jerry Benson, Ador Carol, Arikpo Gabriel, Joel "Joe" King, Phillip Fotokun, Patrick Osagu, Liwhu Betiang, Apeh Columba, Andrew Esekong, Godwin C. S. Iwuchukwu, Otu Offiong, Okamoko Bassy Edet, Chief Maya Bassey, Lebo Imoh, Ekpenyong Bassey, Okon Etim Efanga, Eyamnzie Okpokam, Chris Nwamuo, Mfon Jumbo, Etok Jumbo, Ben Opeh Itang, Itoro Akpan, Edim Itakpo, Lawrence Etim, Maurice Etim Mkpang, Effanga Etim, Nsa Henshaw, Ekpenyong Nsa, Bassey Ita, Inyang Henshaw, Paul Nya, Sylvanus Ekoh Akong, Anthony Agboro Akong, Maxwell Chibuzor, Gabe Onah, Sunday Adaka, Ivor Miller and Bassey E. Bassey. Several others were involved, but in more secondary roles. Some of my co-creators were friends, while there were others who I had never met in person.

## **Selection of Primary Participants**

I believe that I occupied an odd outsider-insider status while living in my field. Having spent time in Owerri, but not Calabar, I had established some level of personal friendship with those I interacted with in 2009. Accordingly, I decided to select my first group of participants from a list of persons who I know personally from time previously spent in Nigeria. While teaching at Imo State University, I met and became acquainted with, many of the faculty in the Department of the Arts. One of the most important participants, Professor Ivor Miller, I happened upon by sheer chance. Ivor is one of the West's preeminent Caribbean scholars; he spent twenty years in Cuba documenting the transatlantic Ekpe/Mgbe cultural connections between the island and Cross River State.

Florence Umo, David Ebio Kobo, Jerry Benson, Sunday Adaka and Arikpo Gabriel were my cultural historians. Adaka was the recent director of the Nigerian National Museum branch in Calabar, but left that position early November and now teaches at the prestigious Nassarawa State University in the city of Keffi. Okamoko Bassy Edet, Ekpenyong Bassey, Okon Etim Efanga, Edim Itakpo, Lawrence Etim, Maurice Etim Mkpang, Effanga Etim, Nsa Henshaw, Ekpenyong Nsa, Bassey Ita, Inyang Henshaw, Maya Bassey, Paul Nya, Sylvanus Ekoh Akong and Anthony Agboro Akong are connected to the knowledge society scene, as well as having formal training on the topic of Nsibidi. Several of them even possessed some background information on the history of written communication in West Africa. Their backgrounds will be further discussed as I move through the next chapter.

My entrepreneurs included Itoro Akpan, Phillip Fotokun and Patrick Osagu. This list includes business leaders, as well as the fledgling economic middle class of Nigeria.

At the very least, each is either financially successful or they connections to such persons. This group allowed me to get in contact with several long time members of area knowledge societies. Since they are viewed by the community as “successful,” my group of entrepreneurs wield a substantial amount of societal power. Osagu operates local shop adjacent to the Success Villa Hotel. He plans to open a chain of such stores in the coming years. Osagu and Fotokun were able to convince the others to assist me with my research. My entry into the world of the financial elite, as well as the Nigerian and Cameroonian knowledge society scene was much easier because of their assistance.

Ador Carol, Joel "Joe" King, Ivor Miller, Andrew Esekong, Apeh Columba, Liwhu Betiang and Bassey E. Bassey were my central academic contacts in Cross River. Joe King provided me with help that was truly invaluable. King, the former director of theater arts, went out of his way to find me contacts in various academic disciplines throughout the University of Calabar (UNICAL). I met the overwhelming majority of the participants in this category thanks to King. At UNICAL I enlisted the aid of: Betiang, the current director of graduate studies; Esekong, the current director of undergraduate studies; and Iwuchukwu, the director of the communication studies program. Each of these contacts knew the city of Calabar very well. Several provided me with logistic support, as well as introduced me to other possible sources of information.

The Nigerian National Commission of Museums and Monuments, and the National Cultural Center in Calabar agreed to act as partners in my project. Sunday Adaka, the then Director of the National Museum, assisted with the process of teaching me firsthand the history of Calabar. He also directed me to some of the federal archives and records in Abuja, Port Harcourt, Lagos and other areas of Cross River State. The

National Museum was also one of the two sites where I often held my interviews. The Cultural Center was yet another important place where I conducted many interviews. Arikpo Gabriel was yet another invaluable resource because not only did he know a great deal about Ekpe and Nsibidi, but he allowed me to work with all of his staff members whenever I needed. This includes Gabriel and members of the Center using vehicles to escort me to several of the outlying villages and towns of Cross River State where I needed to use the archives and conduct interviews. This includes trips to Henshaw Town and Alok.

### **On Ethnography, Symbols and Texts: Clifford Geertz**

Although while in Calabar I ultimately shifted to the use of Afrinography over ethnography, I wanted to briefly reflect on the important research on culture and ethnography by Clifford Geertz (1977). I enjoyed Geertz's writings on culture, the use of symbols by humans and ethnography. What I believe is useful for my dissertation work are the cultural theoretical contributions that focus on how culture can be viewed as "a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and their attitudes toward life."<sup>73</sup> My Nsibidi project positions this system as that symbol with a historically transmitted pattern of meaning. I investigated whether or not this meaning, when constructed as visual rhetoric or visual nommo might be more clearly seen and understood, or might it be changed. Geertz tells us that, "culture is public" and not merely something occurring in our minds. Nsibidi is one of the strands of a cultural-web when placed on public spaces

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<sup>73</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1977).



like homes, shrines, market walls and fabrics. These are acts of culture made public. It was my goal, as Afrinographer, to untangle the meaning behind these public acts. Geertz also believed that culture surrounds our lives; it gives humans a “context” in which to orient themselves to the world.

Like Geertz (1977), I was once a firm believer in ethnography and the use of “thick description.” I know that Geertz viewed ethnography as an exercise in interpretation. This is a critical point for me, and all Western-trained communication researchers who use West Africa as a field. When I use words such as “reimagine” and “reconstruct” in relation to Nsibidi these might only be my interpretations. We can never truly know what any participant is thinking, or even really knows. I think Geertz is right when he tells us that ethnography is not a science. I have not called myself a “social scientist” since 2011 and my first course with Professor William K. Rawlins. My goal is to include and offer the best “interpretations” possible and available (or perhaps as Derrida suggested, best “interpret my interpretations”).

Nsibidi, as a “cultural practice,” is a “text” and Geertz (1997) offered me new perspectives on some possibilities as I moved in this direction while living in Calabar. By defining Nsibidi as a text, I may be able to see here to fore unknown uses and functions of the system. Geertz (1977) wrote, “The culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong” (p. 452). This made me wonder which ethnic group Nsibidi “properly belongs” to and as an “ensembled text” how has it has maintained its cultural relevance over such a long period. Participants such as Lawrence

Etim, Paul Nya, Effanga Etim and Nsa Henshaw helped me to add what I consider to be an amazing addition to the scholarship on Nsibidi in these two areas respectively.

### **Ethnography and the Africanist**

Ethnography is a potentially powerful research tool in nearly any space. At this point I am unsure if I have abandoned this approach permanently or not. At the very least, I plan to continue using Afrinography as a counterbalance for my work. However, I believe that ethnographic research has faced many of the demons it fostered during its earliest days and that Afrinography can borrow many of the better aspects inherent in ethnography. Dwight Conquergood (2013) tells us that, “No group of scholars are struggling more acutely and productively with the political tensions of research than ethnographers” (p. 179). This notion of a “crisis of representation” is a good thing because in my opinion it helps to foster a strong sense of reflectiveness that all scholars must be mindful to possess. The “deep epistemological, methodological and ethical self-questioning” discussed by Conquergood (2013) are constant reminders that there is no such thing as “objectivity,” or a “detached observer.” Much like Geertz, I looked forward to “being there” and I greatly appreciate Conquergood’s “return of the body” perspective. He believes that “Ethnography’s distinctive research method, participant-observation fieldwork, privileges the body as a site of knowing” (p. 180). Having had the opportunity to interact in person with several different ethnic communities in Nigeria and Cameroon afforded me the opportunity to encounter the “bodies” that I needed because they contain knowledge that I am looking to obtain. The Efik, Efut, Qua Igbo were my “site of knowing.” I believe that Conquergood (2013) was also correct when he wrote “the obligatory rite-of-passage for all ethnographers” is some sort of actual “fieldwork”

(p. 180). It is hard for me to imagine interpretive work that claims to investigate the life and culture of a people not containing some element of ethnographic research.

This is a primary difference between “the arm chair researcher” and the “open-air researcher.” I could never be satisfied as an armchair anything. We should consider the idea of “ethnographic rigor” when we think of our scholarship as interpretive. I believe that I am dealing with several of the categories that define “rigor” in terms of ethnography. The traditional measures of ethnographic work, such as “depth of commitment” (to your field) and “risks” (to bodily harm), definitely applied to my project. Late 2014 was an inopportune moment for any researcher to spend time on the border between Nigeria and Cameroon, but I had a firm commitment to those with whom I am partnered, as well as my research. Several concerned family members and friends questioned my visiting this part of West Africa at this time. Between the potential dangers posed by the Ebola virus and the radical group Boko Haram, there was undoubtedly some level of danger involved for an American scholar who was unfamiliar with the local terrain in Calabar. Honestly speaking, my level of concern varied according to which section of Calabar I had to walk through and the corresponding time of day. I have no doubt that my time trekking up and down the infamous “Goldie Street” of Calabar South was not one of the smartest things I have done in this life. However, when we decide to undertake work in any field, the element of danger is simply part and parcel of the work. It is the cost of doing the type of business in which we involve ourselves. This might be especially true for those of us who decide to select fields in the so-called “developing world.” I cannot imagine this ever changing for me because interpretive and ethnographic works are an important part of my life.

### **Planned Arrangements for Conducting the Interviews**

While in Cross River State, I was given permission to use the National Museum and Cultural Center facilities for my interviews. Others took place at local homes and at public communal spaces in some of the smaller villages surrounding both cities. I also had to at times arrange for other sites, such as hotels, library branches and on quiet streets as needed. Since I understand the importance of the consent process, I made sure that I used a mix of consent forms and video where participants agreed to interviews.

### **Participant Observation**

I used participant observation as a way to immerse myself into the culture of the communities I lived in. This is one of the most effective methods of gaining a genuine understanding about the people and texts I examined. Participant observation allowed me to move beyond what I had first perceived as surface interactions, as I sought to delve deeper into understanding how Nsibidi is constructed and imagined by society. There may have been aspects of Nsibidi and Ekpe/Mgbe that certain residents initially did not want me to know, but with the use of participant observation I was able to discern these moments. Living in Calabar for three months, I observed the cultures around me in close proximity, while also at times creating some level of real cultural distance. I had the opportunity to reside within the context of Efik, Qua, Efut, Ejagham, Igbo and Annang communal life. I took copious amounts of notes, even as I resisted the impulse to compare American cultural perspective with the West African perspective. It was here again that Afrinography proved to be a powerful research tool.

### **Participant Observation Tools: Using Field Journals**

The best method of checking for personal biases, while fully documenting potential patterns in the behavior of participants was by my using field journals. I made separate set of field journals for each city, town and villages I visited. In addition to writing notes, each night I sat for a few hours and wrote on my reflections of that day. This was is a good way to remember the people and places encountered during the course of my stay.

### **Questions and Themes**

I initially planned to utilize a broad interview protocol, but noticed that I was gradually asking more specific questions as the weeks went on. My questions often began as theme-related in the first four weeks of my time in the field. It was impractical to think that I could ask all of my participants to conceptualize Nsibidi as visual rhetoric or visual nommo. I came to understand that it might be wiser to ask a set of questions to begin with, and then move to the more specific queries. This seemed to be particularly effective once certain participants knew that I was an Ekpe initiate and was seeking to learn about Nsibidi in the greater context of the organization. Some of these questions were for all of my participants, while others are for specific types. My basic questions included: Name; Where are you from?; What do you know about Nsibidi?; and Who taught you about Nsibidi?; For my entrepreneurs, I had a more specific set of questions. They included: What is Ekpe/Mgbe?; Are you a member?; If yes, for how long? If no, why are you not?; Why did you join Ekpe/Mgbe?; How many members are there in the Society?; What is the role of Ekpe/Mgbe in Nigerian/Cameroonian culture?; Does membership improve business contacts?; What is Nsibidi?; What role does Nsibidi play

in society?; and How old do you believe Nsibidi is?. I asked the popular culture participants: What role does Nsibidi play in Nigerian and Cameroonian popular culture?; What role does Nsibidi play in in the lives of Nigerian and Cameroonian artists?; Does Nsibidi appear in Nigerian and Cameroonian movies, television shows and videos?; How does Nsibidi influence your work?; d Have you shown depictions of Nsibidi in your work?; and If yes, how? I video recorded all of my interviews, including the one done on air with Radio Nigeria.

### **Technical Tools for Field Work: Interviewing Tools**

My goal was to use a combination of photographic and video cameras, along with a voice recorder to document all of the audio and visual aspects of my project, including the interviews. Additionally, an iPad and iPhone also were extremely useful when I travelled. A stationary video camera, JVC brand with HD quality and an optical zoom lens capacity of 20x, came into play on multiple occasions, but especially when I recorded the public demonstrations of Nsibidi. In addition, I had a couple of small digital voice-recorders that were helpful in documenting what I learned in the “classrooms,” as well as in the other locations where interviews were held. My camera is a Canon XTi model, which I have used since 2011. In preparation for photographing many of the objects inscribed with Nsibidi found in Nigerian museums, I brought a wide assortment of camera lenses. My iPad and iPhone each contained powerful research applications such as Dragon Go and Dragon Dictation, which allows users to record audio files such as interviews and can assist immensely with transcription.

In many ways, the transcription process took the most time and energy, both while I was in Nigeria and once I returned to the United States. Conducting interviews

six days each week means that I accumulated hours of video and audio footage. I am still combing through the data in order to locate certain specific quotes that I will include in this work.

### **Data Analysis**

I literally analyzed parts of my data each night, as I sorted, categorized and cataloged it. I employed an issue-focused analysis which allowed me interpret specific issues from my participants. This also allowed me to code concepts as I made my categories. My goal was to spend at least a few hours each night coding, sorting and integrating my information. This worked very well for the entire three-month process, but it still left me with many hours of interviews that needed coding. I made especially sure to examine each of the interviews I did with my Nsibidi teachers each night before I slept or early the next morning. This helped to ensure that lessons remained fresh in my memory. I returned to the United States during the first week of January 2015 and have now spent a substantial amount of time interpreting and reinterpreting my collected records.

### **Ethnographic Influences: Stewart, Bowen and Visweswaran**

Although I elected to use Afrinography as my research method once I began speaking with participants in Cross River State, I believe there is still so much good information this fledgling approach can emulate from good ethnography. I would tell any scholar interested in Afrinography to read some of the better books and articles that discuss ethnographical research. Ethnography has great capacity for informing the Afrinographer. Three of these immediately come to mind because for me because they embody what it means to spend time in a field as an ethnographer, even as they explore

expanded ideas of fields and researchers. The books are Kathleen Stewart's *A Space on the Side of the Road*; Eleanor Smith Bowen's *Return to Laughter: An Anthropological Novel*; and Kamala Visweswaran's *Fictions of a Feminist Ethnography*. What stood out for me was the discussion on how *distance* and *intimacy* play out in our chosen scenes. Some researchers prefer some level of distance from their "subjects," while others, like myself, may seek more "field intimacy." Kathleen Stewart was an excellent example of intimacy without "going native" in my opinion.

Kathleen Stewart offered me a new perspective on examining what she called "cultural poetics" in an "other America." Stewart used ethnography to comment on notions of space and culture. The "ethnographic space," which she discussed on pages 39 and 40, immediately caught my attention. This is a work about people who do not ordinarily come into our "view." Some of her participants occupy a "place" which "comes into view when something happens to interrupt the ordinary flow of events" (p. 37). I believe that this accurately described my project because places like Calabar and the Niger River Basin region, as well as much of West Africa and Africa in general, do not come into our view unless something extraordinary happens and we are forced to be witnesses. I would place the creation of a unique system of written and nonverbal communication like Nsibidi in this category. Communication scholarship that seeks to explore written communication or nonverbal communication in West Africa is painfully missing in the field. I believe that Nsibidi occupies what Stewart describes as "a world in which there is more to things than meets the eye and people are marked by events and drawn out of themselves" (p. 37). I also think that Nsibidi as a form of human communication used by several different ethnic groups fits Stewart's description of "the



poetic mediation of meaning in forms” that perhaps could be viewed as “an end in itself” (p. 29). As a source of visual rhetoric and visual nommo, and even as actual writing, Nsibidi may offer of a look into what Stewart called the “‘Other’ world,” but perhaps best described as “the Other’s world” (p. 29). This is a world where Stewart believes meaning can be gained from a local scene if the researcher allowed it to “emerge in the form of local ways of *talkin’* and ways of *doin’* people” (p. 29). I was continuously mindful not to miss any of the local ways in which my participants engage in their perspectives on Nsibidi or even Ekpe. This means I always knew I had to attentively listen while documenting information with recordings and taking excellent notes.

*Return to Laughter: An Anthropological Novel*, by Eleanor Smith Bowen (whose real name is Laura Bohannan), on many levels is the opposite of Stewart’s book. Like me, Bowen selected Nigeria as her field of study. However she views herself as more of what I would refer to as an “old school” ethnographer. The belief in the “stoical” researcher, in my opinion, has always been mere fantasy. Admittedly, she does a wonderful job of tackling the idea of “isolation” head on. What I found intriguing about this book was Bowen’s personal descriptions of some of her participants. In an attempt to “accurately” describe those whose lives she was investigating, Bowen used terms that many, including me, would find objectionable, to say the least. It made me wonder if she did so because she was studying West Africans. As I read through the book I could not help but think of how some of the descriptions of African life and culture resembled something one might read in some nineteenth century British novel. In the preface, written by David Reisman, he tells us that Bowen struggled with her “sense of professional duty” and a “commitment to personal decency and friendship” with the

Nigerians she lived among” (p. 10). This is a battle between distance and intimacy Bowen had not expected to actually make friends with any of the West Africans she encountered, yet by merely being in the field it was likely inevitable. Reisman tells us that ethnography can often “illuminate the near-universal problem of those of us caught, at some time or other, and those who is not? [sic], between his own culture’s values and those of another” (p. 10). This is undoubtedly part of the so-called “inner experience of fieldwork” (p. 16).

Bowen, in her descriptions of the Nigerians around her, may be either unconsciously, or perhaps consciously, letting her readers know how she views West African life and culture. There were points where although the portrayals may be “accurate,” use of the harsh terms to describe her African participants came into play. Bowen repeatedly tells us that she has to remain “patient” with Nigerians. She seems obsessed with the idea that, “The Englishman abroad maintains his traditions tenaciously; he drills them into his servants” (p.13). Bowen was also fond of describing many of the Nigerian men she encountered as “her boys” (p. 14.). There were times when Bowen had some difficulty being able to identify some of her participants by their faces. In an effort to discern these people she “looked intently for identifying signs: that man was very thin; that one was lame; that one was reddish; that one almost purple-black” (p. 15). For her, it appeared reading this book that all Nigerians looked alike. It was also amusing to me to read her referring to “English coffee” as being a good thing. Anyone who knows anything about the African continent knows that coffee is originally from East Africa.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Oromo people in Ethiopia are credited with introducing coffee to non-Africans, although Ethiopians from the Hadar area are said to have known of it before the Oromo. Talk About Coffee. (2014, September). Retrieved from <http://www.talkaboutcoffee.com/history.html>

Bowen routinely describes African food as “bad,” and the African chicken as “scrawny” (p. 31). She also admits to ignoring objections to her interactions with some of her participants, as well as being openly rude to them. In many ways was my “anti-guide” to my interactions with my Nigerian collaborators. I think the worst moment appeared on page 92, when Bowen described a participant named “Ihugh” as a “stupid bruiser” and someone who “lies.” She also seems to feel that Africans are attempting to somehow deceive and take advantage of her.

Kamala Visweswaran, author of *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*, was interesting because it introduced me to the idea of a “feminist ethnography.” It struck me that if ethnography had been unkind to the “female perspective,” perhaps a work like that written by Bowen could assist Africanists in the making of an “African-centered ethnography.” This of course has happened, and I will explore the notion of “Afronography” later in this chapter. Ethnography that addresses “questions of power and representation,” will likely always gain my attention. Visweswaran wonders if even the “newly emergent experimental ethnography” of the past thirty years has done enough to include “feminist theories of language and subjectivity” (p. 74). She also warned of “the ‘disaffections, ruptures, and incomprehensions’ that mark fieldwork.” I expected that since I am not an “insider” in any of the communities I study that I will encounter each of those three issues in my field. Visweswaran offers excellent discussion about how “postmodern ethnography” differs greatly from its predecessor, born of Western anthropology. Postmodern ethnography, highlighted by a “call for dialogical or multiple voice text,” has many good virtues (p. 75). It allowed not only women, but also the

voices of the subjugated, ignored and invisible in places like West Africa to enter into academic places and spaces once forbidden.

Chapter 4 in the book, *Refusing the Subject*, was quite intriguing! It was here that Visweswaran offered some excellent advice for any researcher in the field who may encounter participants do not want to be part of your study. Reading this chapter offered me great insight on how to deal with people living in Calabar, or any surrounding area, who may seek a form of “resistance” to my presence in their community. Visweswaran tells the story of a woman who refused to speak with her, so the author decided to make that refusal part of the narrative. I learned that, “lies, secrets and silence” could be attempts by community members to resist the power of non-members. It reminded me of what some of the earliest Western outsiders encountered when they tried to discern the history of Nsibidi from Nigerian participants. Those Nigerians may well have offered erroneous information (lies) and kept silent about what they knew of the system. Nsibidi was a secret maintained by those it “belonged” to at that time. In my attempts to create new descriptions that fit Nsibidi and its users, some participants may resist my “naming.” Visweswaran asked the important question, “What identity do I construct for my so-called subjects?” I have chosen not to use pseudonyms for “real” people that I encounter. I believe that Visweswaran made an excellent point when she wrote “naming” can produce what we perceive to be “authenticity” (p. 61). I intend to ask each person who offers me information about Nsibidi for the use of their first name, if they refuse to agree to allow me to use this, I will not. However, I will make every attempt to see if this is agreeable. If authenticity is actually possible in a foreign field, then I believe that a researcher should seek to utilize, whenever possible, the actual names of their co-

creators. Code names, for me, convey a sense of falseness in the field. This could help my project convey a greater sense of not only me “being there,” but it might also help my readers feel like they are “there.” The idea of “being there” has always been a central component of my scholarship and continued with this project.

### **Ethnography and Communication Studies**

Communication scholar Rahul Mitra (2010) wrote, *Doing Ethnography, Being an Ethnographer: The Autoethnographic Research Process and I* to analyze “formalized social scientific frameworks that seek to map out the real world and social actions in an objective fashion” (p. 1). Although this article is about autoethnography, and I do not believe in the supposed “scientific method” being applied to the lives of people, Mitra I believe was correct in stating that scholars must be ever mindful of “doing” and “being.” While I did not intend to “go native” in my field, I also think detachment is equally problematic. If ethnography is built upon a foundation of “description, analysis and interpretation of data gathered in fieldwork,” perhaps the best, most effective path of achieving those goals is to view a field as a “spectrum.” On this line, the needle of “involvement or invisibility” is in motion, sliding left, right, up or down as needed. Standing on either extreme throughout the course of a study may limit the researcher’s ability to know their co-creators or field as deeply as might be possible. Seth Kahn (2011), who studies rhetoric and teaches ethnography at West Chester University wrote “ethnography really high lights and emphasizes human relationships: between participants and researchers; between writers and readers of ethnographic narratives/ reports; between students and teachers in classrooms” (p. 176). Kahn and I also agree that, “Ethnographic writing, when it works well, does no, in fact cannot, follow a

conventional formula for essays. It requires you to experiment with style, voice, structure, and purpose in ways you probably haven't before" (p. 176). Visualizing Nsibidi in new ways as rhetoric and nommo may call for me to abandon established norms and create terms, and perspectives, that explain the system on its own terms.

### **The Molefi Asante Experiment: An Afrinography Project**

I have decided to utilize Afronography as a method of exploring Cross River State, but I spell it as Afrinography in my effort to ensure that the method is more fully connected to Africa and African communities. Molefi Asante (2005) describes Afronography as "a method of recording and writing the African experience" (p. 75). He further wrote, "As a method of ascertaining the condition or state of an event, person, or text related to African people, Afronography projects both an ethical and evaluative dimension." For me, I find the evaluative dimension of this method to have great value for this particular project. Asante tells us that, "The evaluative dimension allows the Afronographer to discern the usefulness of an event, person, or text in the search for truth" (p. 75). Afronography is about understanding *positionalities*. As a method, it is about "establishing the nature and extent of social, critical and cultural positionalities by employing such terms as dislocations, distortions, implications, blurs, distances, omissions, and misidentifications within the context of ethics and evaluation creates opportunities for stating more clearly and precisely the role of Africans in a given situation" (p. 75). Asante believes that the Afronographer "seeks to determine what it is to know something." This method privileges the people studied. Thus, "The Afronographer" must "demonstrate that the African narrative can be understood within the context of any given situation so long as the African is not deprived as the

subject” (p. 75). One goal of my dissertation was to make sure that wider audiences can understand my *African narrative*, taking place within the context of the Efik, Efut, Qua and Igbo.

Asante describes the role of this method in more detail when he tells us, “The Afronographer seeks to discover, argue, analyze, prove, challenge, described, justified, or clarify some situation” (p. 76). Each of the above words played important roles for me in Cross River State. This project forced me to uncover new details regarding Nsibidi that required long hours of having to argue, analyze, prove, challenge, justify and certainly clarify details of the system and its role in the communities that continue to use it. This method allowed me to create some level of closeness, of “intimacy,” with my communities. “Being there” may indicate a physical presence, but I also wanted to “*be there*” as a living, breathing member of a community, as I delved into the lives and society of my participants. I did not plan to seek some supposed sustained invisibility, but instead wanted my participants to know that I am present. I was corporeal (co-real) and, for a time, in their space, their world. Afronography also “seeks to dispel myths, construct valid identity, and readjust typification.” The part that intrigued me the most was when Asante added, “Thus the aim is for scholars to have better judgment by using methods that include face-to-face approaches, total awareness, surrogacy, and empathy to arrive at conclusions” (p. 76). So in essence, “Afronography allows the researcher” an opportunity “to discover in time, place, religion, environment, myths, taboos, customs, habits, and behaviors a measure of what is true from the standpoint of the African as subject, in a given situation” (p. 76).

At first, I used Afrinography in unison with ethnography. Asante is clear when he tells us, “Afrinography is therefore not a system designed to replace Eurocentric analysis for the sake of replacement, but rather a method that seeks to elicit the positionalities, ideas, themes, and information that have always escaped Eurocentric analysis in which Africans are marginalized” (p. 76). It appears that the main difference between the two methods is that “Afrinography begins from a different place...” (p. 76). To go further we can also note that, “Ethnography was developed as a Eurocentric way of acquiring information about people other than Europeans” while “Afrinography is a method of gaining access to information about Africans from the standpoint of African culture itself” (p. 76). The communication scholar who decides to utilize Afrinography must understand, “A key factor in being a researcher in the contemporary world has to do with appreciating the centrality of human agency” (p. 76). I believe that this is such an important point, especially in regards to studying human communication in Africa, perhaps particularly in West Africa because that region has such an incredibly diverse number of ethnic families. My project on Nsibidi is about West African agency in the creation of an independent form of written communication that likely has influenced every aspect of human development. Of course, much like any researcher “all things are not within the purview of the Afrinographer” (p. 76). The goal is “to be able to discover, through direct methods over a period of time, some particular answers to human problems” (p. 76). I agree with Asante when he wrote that Afrinography’s primary goal must be to “cope with the persistent distortion of the African presence in the world.” Afrinography is about “finding ways to make sense out of unexamined types, stereotypes, and repetitive actions and forms in ordinary life” (p. 77). In addition, Afrinography



“dispels myths, helps to construct valid identity, readjusts types” as it creates “usable knowledge” that assists in the making of “face-to-face, empathetic, holistic, and surrogate consciousness” (p.77). Afrinography fostered the level of intimacy and contact I needed during several points. I address this in detail in the next chapter.

This was my first attempt to consciously incorporate Afrinography into a research project. Since it seems that I can minimize any potential intellectual tensions using it alongside ethnography, I employed Afrinography as a lens to evaluate Nsibidi as visual rhetoric and visual nommo. I am an ardent believer in critical paradigms. Knowledge, what we *know* and think we *know*, is often produced through reflection. For me, all Western epistemology is subject to critical reflection and reinterpretation. Afrinography is about these types of challenges to the *knowledge* of the West and allows me to contest the supposed norms, customs and popular beliefs held by the Western academy in relation to the history of written communication in West Africa. This type of scholarship helped me mark and repair the “distortions” mentioned by Asante. Afrinography helped me cast light on power imbalances and hidden ideologies.

In review of Chapter 3, I spent three months undertaking field work in Cross River State, Nigeria. From October of 2014 through January of 2015 I had daily interactions with a group of participants who represented a wide range of occupations and levels of education. I interviewed many of these participants in my attempt to learn how Nsibidi functions and who uses it. Some of these include professors, engineers, radio personalities, shopkeepers, government officials, managers, bankers, members of royal families and Ekpe/Mgbe initiates. In the West, the organization known as Ekpe/Mgbe is often described as a “secret society.” Following my investiture into Ekpe, I began to

conceive of it as more accurately being a knowledge society, albeit one with secrets. During my time in Nigeria, I visited a series of traditional towns and villages such as Atakpa (Duke Town), Nsidung (Henshaw Town), Old Town (Obutong) and Obio Oko (Creek Town). In addition, I travelled to the capital city of Abuja, Akwa Ikom and the northern section of Cross River State. Since my work was always meant to include an important collaborative aspect, I had several research partners and hosts. These would include the Nigerian National Commission for Museums and Monuments, the Nigerian Cultural Center of Calabar, and the Department of Culture and Heritage. Shortly after my arrival, the Center for Black and African Arts and Civilization (CBAAC) emerged as another prominent partner. CBAAC is part of the Federal Ministry of Tourism, Culture and National Orientation. As my stay in Nigeria progressed, I built other vital relationships with professors and administrators at the University of Calabar (UNICAL), the National Library of Nigeria, the Cross River State Library in Calabar, the Slave History Museum and the Nigerian National Library.

It was during my interactions with several of my participants that I began to notice that the word “ethnographer” appeared to create some level of distance and possible distrust. It was at this point that I began to solely describe myself as an Afrinographer and my work as Afrinography. Afrinography is my spelling of Molefi Asante’s Afronography, which has far less of a historical stigma attached to it because it is a newer method.

In Chapter 4, I discuss at some length my discoveries about the culture of Cross River State. I will also offer observations on Nsibidi only an initiate of the ancient Ekpe/Mgbe society can access. Having spent time learning Nsibidi from a group of

outstanding teachers at the University of Calabar, Henshaw Town, Duke Town and several other locations, I am now in a position to share certain portions of this information in hopes of outsiders gaining a clearer understanding of Nsibidi.

## **CHAPTER 4: DISCOVERIES AND OBSERVATIONS FROM CROSS RIVER STATE**

### **Understanding Nsibidi and Ekpe/Mgbe**

There is a stunning lack of scholarship on nonverbal communication in countries like Nigeria and Cameroon. As a communication scholar, I am examining a written system of nonverbal communication in the context of African society and culture. The wedding of communication studies with African history and African studies is rare intellectual ground. I hope that this type of work will be far more common in coming years. This is foremost an Nsibidi project that reimagines the system as visual communication. My three central questions are thematized in this chapter around the data I collected through a series of interviews. The information gleaned from interviews with Bassey E. Bassey, Okamoko Edet and Sylvanus Ekoh Akong were the three that I believe offered me the best evidence that Nsibidi can be reframed as visual rhetoric and visual nommo. I also think Nsibidi might evidence of a unique African-styled form of intercultural communication. In relation to my grammatological goals as a communication scholar, I thought there may be evidence of sound to symbol or counting capability in Nsibidi and although I failed in my first attempt to discover these traits, I wanted to sound the official call in the Western academy for scholars to begin the search for these possible capacities. One of the things that makes my work different from others is that it is intended to be a sort of Nsibidi “how to” manual. I offer important discussion on what a foreign scholar might encounter in their quest to initiate into Ekpe/Mgbe in order to examine Nsibidi.

Although I do explore and define Ekpe/Mgbe using both African and Western scholars later in this chapter, the primary focus of my dissertation research was not, and is not, Ekpe or Mgbe. Instead, my goal was to examine what I conceive of as the first cultural off-spring of both institutions, Nsibidi. For those interested in learning more about Ekpe/Mgbe, I suggest reading Randy Sparks, *The Two Princes of Calabar: An Eighteenth-Century Atlantic Odyssey* (Harvard University Press, 2009) and Ugo Nwokeji, *The Slave Trade and Culture in the Bight of Biafra: An African Society in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge University Press, 2010). I would also add Adiele Eberechukwu Afigbo, “Peoples of the Cross River Valley and Eastern Delta” in Obaro Ikime (ed.), *Groundwork in Nigerian History* (Ibadan, 1980, p. 61 and Uchegbulam N. Abalogu, “Ekpe Society in Arochukwu and Bende,” *Nigeria Magazine*, 126/127 (1978), pp. 78-97, as well as Paul Lovejoy and David Richardson, “Trust, Pawnship and Atlantic History: The Institutional Foundations of the Old Calabar Slave Trade,” *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 104, No. 2 (Apr., 1999); p. 349 [333-355]. In recent years, Western researchers like Ivor Miller have led the charge to investigate both Nsibidi and Ekpe/Mgbe.

Credited with exploring Ekpe/Mgbe in ways that no previous Western scholar had imagined, Dr. Ivor wrote his groundbreaking book on transatlantic cultural connections between Cuba and Calabar, *The Voice of the Leopard*. Miller tells us that the, “Ekpe system of communication known as nsibidi, which consists of signs and symbols that are expressed through recitation, playing instruments, gestures, or drawn images” has long been under scrutiny of Western scholarship. (p. 13). Thanks to Miller’s work, I can also use the terms Ekpe and Mgbe interchangeably or in conjunction with each other.

Generally, I will only use Ekpe, although at times I will use the term “Ekpe/Mgbe” since they are interchangeable. So that we are clear, *Ekpe* is the Efik naming of their traditional “knowledge society,” while the Qua refer to the same system *Mgbe*. I will continue to refer to the so-called “secret societies” of West Africa as *knowledge societies*. In the previous chapters, I explained how other Western scholars have redefined such groups. For me, and what I learned during my time in southern Nigeria, my description best encapsulates these organizations. I assert that knowledge societies such as Ekpe and Mgbe are as integral a part of West African culture as any other social or cultural institution. Once this enlightenment occurred, it changed the entire course of my research in Cross River State.

It was here, during my Afrinographic stay, where I came to understand that I had made a tremendous miscalculation. Initially, I was unsure whether I truly needed to initiate into Ekpe society. This delusion came to a screeching halt just days after spending time in that region. Since I already knew that my research goal was not primarily concerned with Ekpe, but instead Nsibidi, I only blindly, singularly wanted to learn as much about Nsibidi as written communication as possible in my three months. It was only after arriving in Calabar that I quickly realized the *real* study of Nsibidi, in any form, was nearly impossible without at least some cursory understanding of Ekpe and Mgbe society. Truth told, it takes far more than that to even vaguely glimpse what this magnificent, ancient system truly entails. As slowly as a creeping sunrise, it dawned on me that to understand the writing I had to understand the minds of the writers. Nsibidi is predicated on Ekpe, and vice versa. After three weeks of living in Calabar, what I perceived as the full realization shone like a lightning bolt across the African sky. Not

only is Ekpe hidden away from many prying outside eyes, but also needs a radical re-imagination of its many cultural, political and musical aspects. If all of its communication forms are inseparable from each other, even the Ekpe initiate must come to know the *entire* system in some meaningful fashion. The only way this is possible is by officially joining the ranks of Ekpe/Mgbe and spending time in the efe or osam with the area's master teachers. Those who lack this membership attribute are quite likely only speculating about Ekpe or Nsibidi.<sup>75</sup> Many in this crowd are operating from rumor, the Internet and poor second-hand sources.

Ekpe actually has a name that best describes those that fit into the category of the uninitiated, *okpo*. An *okpo* is non-member, an outsider. Some of my traditional intellectual partners defined the word as literally meaning, “you do not belong, “those who do not know” or “those who cannot ‘see.’” See in the sense that they can perceive the world in an accurate way. Perhaps the best method of defining the term *Okpo Ekpe* is not only someone who does not know, but also within Efik culture someone perceived as a “traitor” because they participated in the sharing of hidden knowledge with foreigners. This is likely to occur when Efik community members see Westerners interviewing a local. The perception can quickly spread that the participants are not only being interviewed, but also sharing and revealing important secrets about Nsibidi and Ekpe. What I thought was a good example of this will be discussed shortly in this chapter when I examine a very interesting book written by Saki Mafundikwa, *African Alphabets: The Story of Writing in Africa*. At this point, I also want to mention that merely because a Western scholar becomes an initiate that is no guarantee that they will have access to

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<sup>75</sup> The word efe is the Efik name for the Ekpe shrine. Osam is the Qua name for the same structure in Mgbe.

accurate information about either Ekpe or Nsibidi. I touched on this during Chapter 2 when I examined some of the earliest twentieth century Western scholars who attempted to document the signs and symbols of the system. The opposite of the okpo is *Aban Ekpe*. If someone were to question my inclusion, I would tell them I am Aban Ekpe. Aban Ekpe can “see” the *true* reality of the world around them and can force their will on it. Reality bends to the whims of those who can see and know the environment according to Ekpe traditions.

Members usually meet in the *efe* or *osam*. Both sites are of significant cultural, economic and religious value to local societies. The Qua usually refer to their meeting sites as the *osam* and the Efik to theirs as the *efe*. Under no circumstance can a non-initiate enter the *efe* or *osam*. Equally forbidden are all women. Even the esteemed “Queen Mother” of the Qua, a powerful ruler in her own right, is not allowed entry. In ancient times, the penal for breaches of this rule could be death. These *efe* or *osam* can vary in size and in age. Outwardly, they are often rather plain-looking building, even though some of the wealthiest and most prominent members of local society are among the ranks of the organizations. My initiation took place at one of the newer *efe* known as, Efe Efut Atu, Efe Ekondo. My *efe* is located in Calabar South. This photograph is a good representation of a standard *efe* or *osam*:





Figure 5. Photo of an osam taken in Cross River State, Nigeria.

Every efe and osam will feature outer signage describing the nature of the building. The signage can vary in size and color. These images demonstrate the typical outside signage for these structures:



Figure 6. Photo of the outside signage from Efe Ekpe Atu at Efut Ekondo, in Calabar South, Nigeria.



Figure 7. Photo from a different angle of the outside signage from Efe Ekpe Atu at Efut Ekondo, in Calabar South, Nigeria.



Figure 8. Photo of Osam Mgbe Mfam Akin Ayen taken in Cross River State, Nigeria.

As an Ekpe initiate, I am not at liberty to discuss the interior of the efe or osam. These meeting places are sacred sites and only Aban Ekpe can enter. What I can tell you is that each has its own unique inside arrangement where Nsibidi-written plays an enormous role. I was struck by how incredibly beautiful so many of the efe and osam are in the Calabar area. The exterior is meant for the non-member, while the often-colorful interior was created to be enjoyed by just a few. Next, I want to discuss certain aspects of what an initiation may entail. From the Western perspective, the process can appear ominous and chaotic. However, there is a method to the Ekpe/Mgbe initiate-intake madness.

### **The Initiation Process**

I want to first state for the record that the initiation process needed for Ekpe/Mgbe membership and to learn Nsibidi can vary. If I had to guess, I would say that the length, intensity and activities will depend upon how serious you appear to be as a potential member. Every action you take is scrutinized by the efe or osam membership. Some may ask locals you know around the city for their input on your character. If you are lodging at a hotel, its staff might be asked what sort of person are you. Most Ekpe/Mgbe members take their inclusion extremely seriously and will do everything they can to exclude those they feel might harm the group. I can remember being told several times that membership is revocable; there are an abundance of stories about the defrocked being literally stripped naked of their official Ekpe/Mgbe garments in the streets. In my case, the initiation process was agreed upon with the considerable assistance of the Nigerian Cultural Center in Calabar. I will now explain this momentous occurrence in some detail.

For communication studies researchers and other who want to study Nsibidi in any in-depth manner, a formal initiation into Ekpe/Mgbe must take place. Cross River State is the best location to undergo the process. I say this because this region of Nigeria appears to have a large and well-respected number of members. Additionally, many of the most prestigious efe and osam such as Iyamba, Esabo and Mfam are in Cross River State. There will be some initiates who believe that the older and more prominent efe and osam are found near this city, so attempting to gain membership at such sites can substantially enhance the Western researcher's level of respect among some of his fellow initiates. I was very happy with meeting and interacting with my brothers at Efut Ekondo. It is a fantastic place from which any foreign scholar can learn about Nsibidi and Ekpe, while being nurtured in an often uplifting intellectual atmosphere. I highly recommend this particular efe as a starting point for those seeking to do work on any aspect of the system. My initiation included the performing of several sacred duties. I should note that none of the incantations are recited in anything other than an African language. If a foreigner does not understand the incantations, a member of the efe or osam will translate the words into a language that is understandable. The most common languages that are utilized in the ceremonies in Calabar would be Efik, Efut and Qua. The sacred duties that every initiate must perform demonstrates their seriousness to Ekpe/Mgbe. In my instance, they would lead to my primary goal. The purpose of my joining Ekpe was to learn from the inside about Nsibidi and how it works. I did not initially know that not only was I to become a learner of the system, but also one of its guardians.



Figure 9. Photo of me while undergoing the opening of an Ekpe initiation process in Calabar, Nigeria.



Figure 10. Photo of me minutes after finishing the first stage of the Ekpe initiation process in Calabar, Nigeria.



Figure 11. Photo of me while undergoing the opening of an Ekpe initiation process in Calabar, Nigeria. Sitting next to fellow Ekpe initiate and participant Okamoko Edet.

The Western scholar who might be a Christian, Muslim, Jewish or a member of another faith, I should take a moment to discuss the religious aspect of Ekpe/Mgbe. Some of my participants were worried that my involvement with Ekpe would include elements of what they perceived to be “devil-inspired” sacrifices to would be false gods. This is one of the major reasons why the organized Christian church in Nigeria has been adamant about discouraging Ekpe membership since 1960. Modern Nigeria, including Calabar, holds to the belief that Ekpe and Mgbe are cultural and spiritual relics of the past. Most of the prominent business, political, and cultural members do their best to downplay their involvement in the society. There was one instance where I was with several high profile members of Ekpe discussing Nsibidi and I wanted the group to sit down in a local restaurant. We had just come from an event that required the wearing of our Ekpe traditional garments, so I thought it would be interesting to let the public see us having a meal together as brothers. My idea was quickly dismissed and I was told that there might be church members in the area who would come and cause trouble if they saw us.

It appeared to me that in today’s Nigeria, Ekpe initiates attend their cultural events, but do not stray far off that path. I remember another time, on Christmas Day, when I was recording one of the Ekpe performers in an area about ten minutes outside of the city of Calabar. While I was taping the performance, a large group of younger Nigerians gathered behind me. I was struck by the fact that they were mocking and laughing at the Ekpe performance. Several could be overheard saying that Ekpe was “stupid” and “backwards.” There were several children in that group and none of them appeared fearful of Ekpe. This is interesting because a century ago it would have been

the exact opposite reaction from everyone in that group. For a considerably long time, the very mention of Ekpe/Mgbe would strike fear into the hearts of all nonmembers. Oddly enough, it also seemed to me that foreign Ekpe initiates received much more respect from area locals than most indigenous members. For the foreign scholar seeking to know Nsibidi, this sort of privilege can be important cover and will assist in your being given access to the system. I will briefly discuss one of the “challenges” that my efe required me to undergo before I would be admitted to membership.

My initiation began with members of my efe reciting various incantations of significant power. These incantations bond the would-be initiate to the society. The initiate sits quietly until called upon. After the incantations are completed, the initiate is then told that there are certain sacred duties that must be performed. I have permission to discuss one of these possible duties. Again, the efe or osam can alter these duties according to their own whims and the perceived seriousness of potential members. It would not surprise me that very few initiations are exactly identical, especially in the case of foreigners. In my own case, one of the most important duties but I had to perform required my not bathing for an extended period of time. Three of my research collaborators from the National Cultural Center in Calabar, Okamoko Edet, Arikpo Gabriel and Lebo Imoh handled all of the negotiating. They did a superb job because they were able to get my first duty reduced to only one week of non-bathing. It was clear to me that many of the Ekpe members wanted a far greater length of time, perhaps even as long as two weeks. In essence, not only did I have to avoid bathing, but also letting any water touch my body for seven full days. I was allowed to drink of course, but I had to be careful and avoid any rain showers. If I violated this sacred duty of not allowing

water to touch my body, I would have to repeat the entire process all over again until I was able to go for seven days. There is a reason why some Ekpe initiates, in particular foreigners, are asked to perform this specific ritual. Unfortunately, I cannot share the rationale behind the thought process here with non-initiates. Although it may sound like something simple, when someone decides not to bathe in a place like Nigeria during the months of October and November, they will soon find that a tremendous amount of foul body odor will accumulate. Although I used deodorant, it had a minimal affect. During this week, I was still interacting with many of my other participants. They knew something was going on because not only did I reek of muskiness, but some of the Nsibidi signs that were drawn on my body during my initiation were still visible due to my not being able to wash them off.

The efe or osam arranges your entire initiation process, including its ending. I had to spend time with the elders of Henshaw Town in Calabar. Henshaw Town is a village where several of my participants knew Ekpe members. There were certain days where I had to return to Henshaw and learn from the elders, as well as my master teacher Obong Ekpe Epenyong Bassey. It was during these times that I learned about Nsibidi and how many people living in this part of town used the system. In the more rural areas of Calabar, Nsibidi is still a powerful cultural force. Unlike the Metropolitan areas, villagers still understand the importance of Nsibidi and openly practice using it on a fairly regular basis. I was also happy to see that there were dozens of children being quite literally “raised up” in Ekpe and Nsibidi. The villagers can initiate children at very early ages. This way, over the course of several decades these initiates obtain a truly deep understanding of every aspect of what Nsibidi entails. Western scholars who spend time



in the city of Calabar learning Nsibidi must also remember that the outlying areas, the small towns and villages beyond the bright lights of some of the main urban streets, offer researchers the chance to interact on a daily basis with communities have actually living Nsibidi in their everyday lives. I found my interaction with the people of Henshaw Town quite thrilling! Henshaw is an impoverished community, so researchers from places like Europe, Australia, and the United States should be prepared to encounter dirt roads, bouts of malaria, frequent flooding from heavy rains, a sustained lack of electricity in other potential hardships. For me, although each of the above were setbacks at times, the support and open hearts of my participants in Henshaw more than made up for any shortcomings.

The ritual will usually conclude with a series of incantations and oaths that an initiate must take. The Obong of my efe, Epenyong Bassey, included a dramatized “bath” performance to show the ancestors that I had been cleansed of all my “blindness” and could now be made ready to understand my world anew. It appeared to me that this is akin to what ancient Africans underwent in KMT when they joined their versions of what today would be described as “masonry.” I was allowed to take a photo of the water that cleansed and cleared my mind, body and soul. The beginning of my initiation process took place at Efe Efut Atu, but it ended in Henshaw Town. During the concluding ceremony, I had to stand in the village in a public space while incantations were conducted. I was then lead by Epenyong to special hidden site behind the homes of the villagers. No one was allowed to witness what occurred, but thankfully I was given permission to set up a video recording of these events. After a series of further

incantations and oaths that lasted over ten minutes, I was born in Ekpe and became worthy to know Nsibidi.



Figure 12. Photo of the sacred oboti leaf in water. This is a typical important item used during an Ekpe initiation.

### **Ekpe/Mgbe: Playing Ekpe**

I want to take a moment to explain the term “playing Ekpe.” Western researchers studying Nsibidi will likely hear this phrase at some point during their time in Cross River State. These photographs show various Ekpe members playing Ekpe:



Figure 13. Photo of an Ekpe masked spirit.



Figure 14. Photo of an Ekpe masked spirit.



Figure 15. Photo of an Ekpe masked spirit.



Figure 16. Photo of an Ekpe masked spirit.



Figure 17. Photo of an Ekpe masked spirit.

Ekpe/Mgbe members dress up in colorful outfits and put on performances that include the use of Nsibidi in written and gesture form. I found myself completely captivated watching all of the Ekpe demonstrations that I was privy to witness. The annual celebratory Ekpe event held at the Royal Palace of the Obong of Calabar afforded me the opportunity to conduct several insightful interviews, while I also had an opportunity to more fully document of performers playing Ekpe.



Figure 18. Photo of an Ekpe masked spirit offering me the sacred oboti leaf at a public Ekpe/Mgbe ceremony in December of 2014.



Figure 19. Photo of my bidák made at the Nigerian National Cultural Center in Calabar.

The Obong is the traditional ruler of the area for Efik communities and the Ndidem is the Qua equivalent for all of their United Clans. These two leaders are of special importance to Western scholars because there is a long history of the men in these roles assisting foreigners in their attempts to learn Nsibidi. Both rulers sit on a council that is comprised all of the prominent local traditional leaders of Cross River State. The Obong hosts a festive gathering of Ekpe/Mgbe initiates each December. The event that I attended was held at his palace in Tinapa. It is during this occasion that several of the

intrinsic Ekpe/Mgbe manifestations literally are masked beneath veils of colorful dances and other performances. This in large part explains why scholars in fields related to dance and art forms undertook so much of the previous Western scholarship on Ekpe. These breathtaking performances last the better part of five hours. Since they are open to the public, the gatherings can be quite large in number. If I had to guess there were no less than one thousand attendees at the event I witnessed. Some were initiates, but the overwhelming majorities clearly were not. I knew this because initiates have to don certain outfits according to their rank in the organization. This garment must include the wearing of a type of royal hand-woven crown-hat combination known in that region as a *bidák*. A complete outfit includes the *mbinbintia* (white long shirt) and *usobo* (wrapper joined or sewn together). The *okpono* (necktie) addable if desired.

Of the many descriptions of Ekpe/Mgbe that I have read and heard, the most accurate for me come from Miller and his first master teacher, Bassey Effiong Bassey. Bassey, known affectionately as “Engineer Bassey” in Cross River State because he spent decades in that profession, has a long personal history with Nsibidi and Ekpe/Mgbe.<sup>76</sup> In November 2014, Bassey gave me signed copies of his books gratis in an attempt to assist in my process of learning what Nsibidi encompasses. His book, *Ekpe Efik: A Yahweh of Moses* offered what I considered one of the sharper, well-defined descriptions of Ekpe/Mgbe. Bassey informs us in the preface of this book that, “Ekpe is a secret school of learning about life” (p. 4). He goes on to add that Ekpe is, “a drama of life and death” that is at times staged publicly (p. 11). Bassey refers to the nonverbal elements of Ekpe

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<sup>76</sup> Bassey was a professional civil engineer, with three earned degrees from Western universities. He is also the author of several of the most important and respected books and articles on Ekpe/Mgbe, as well as Nsibidi.

Bassey’s family involvement in Ekpe society spans back to at least the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

as *Nsibidi Ekpe* throughout this book. We are told that one of the reasons for the initiation ceremony is that some members are fearful of secret knowledge “falling into the ears of the profane to be voiced and passed on it ignorance” (p. 12). For Bassey, “Ekpe is a teaching about universal truth uniquely expressed to suit environment and circumstance. It is an esoteric to for the study of man from the time when naught was present except Ekpe...” (p. 22).

In his writings, Ivor Miller has described Ekpe as being an, “initiation society” (p. 5). He has also written that Ekpe consist of a body of, “mainly procedural, ritual knowledge, taught incrementally in stages, as numbers rise in status to become community leaders” (p. 5). Nigerian scholar Edet Ekpo wrote one of the most important books on the history of the Qua ethnic group. Thankfully, an extremely kind area scholar by the name of Oron Okon gave me a free copy of Ekpo’s now Nigerian classic, *The Quas: A Historical Perspective and Belief Systems*.

Okon was as gracious as anyone I had met during my time in Cross River State and provided the link to an equally kind Christian pastor named Nsa Eyo. Pastor Eyo was the first person to attempt to arrange a meeting between one of the most important paramount rulers in Calabar, the Ndidem, and I. Because of his kindness, I was not only able to meet the Ndidem, also had the opportunity to learn from him and one of his sons, Prince Oqua Etim Ika Oqua. The back cover of Ekpo’s book states that its goal was to demonstrate to the world, “The contributions of the Qua in the development of writing...” He covered Ekpe in detail in chapter, as he discussed the importance of what he termed “traditional plays.” Ekpo wrote, “Traditional plays are of very great significance to the Quas. They play prominent rules in their belief system. It is believed

among them that traditional plays accompanied by masquerades are harbingers of good fortune” (p. 76). The masquerade is another name for Ekpe.

Ekpo also tells us that, “these plays can be broadly classed into two groups those for entertainment and relaxation as well as those that form part of the traditional rites for particular events” (p. 76). The main season each year for “Ekpe playing” is from October to January. In his book, *Calabar: The Land of Carnivals*, Bassey wrote, “That was the period traditionally reserved for traditional instructions given out by the talking drum” (p. 17). He also referred to this as a time of “great joy and culture.”

Ekpe was the integral part of the formalized system of carnival in Calabar. Chief E.U. Aye described Ekpe as, “a sort of freemasonry” in his book, *The Efik People* (p.70). Ayu offers one of the more conventional definitions of the word “Ekpe,” as he translates it into the Efik language. He, and many others in in Nsibidi studies, has written that Ekpe is one of the local words for leopard. Has long been viewed in this part of the world as one of the most dangerous animals found in the rainforest. This is why initiates often wear outfits that have the patterns of the leopard’s spots, and why many outsiders commonly referred to Ekpe as the “Leopard Society.”

This author also writes that, “Originally Ekpe was for religious purposes, but as Old Calabar community became complicated owing to the new wealth which the early trade with Europeans brought it was quickly adopted to fulfil other economic and social functions. It proved to be the source of supreme authority in all Efik towns, and its institution provided, in the past, the highest court whose verdicts transcended all else” (p. 70). We know from Ayu that Ekpe could, “take life and could give it; it could condemn a whole town to heavy fine and was promptly paid; it could punish offenders and could



forgive; even the king or Etinyin or Obong never escape Ekpe laws and edicts. Its authority was sacrosanct and was above challenge” (p. 71). We also know from Ekpo that, “The supreme ruler of Ekpe held the tenth title of Eyamba” (p. 71). Eyamba was the undisputed ruler of all Ekpe members. The Eyamba title, “is held for life and can only pass on to another on the demise of its holder” (p. 71). I strongly believe that the most accurate understanding of both Ekpe and Nsibidi is still found in the possession of the traditional area scholars in Calabar, and in the greater Cross River region.

### **The Central Questions and Interviews**

The three central questions used to thematize my interviews are the following: What is Nsibidi? How does Nsibidi work? Who uses Nsibidi? Over the course of my three months Nigeria and Cameroon, I conducted over forty interviews. Of those, I decided that three best answered my central questions. The three interviews by Bassey E. Bassey, Okamoko Edet and Ekpe Epenyong Bassey offered me the best evidence that Nsibidi can be reframed as visual rhetoric and visual nommo. I began these four interviews by asking each participant my first central question.

### **Obong Ekpe Bassey E. Bassey: Interview Date: 12\16\2014**

Question 1: What is Nsibidi? While speaking with well-known Ekpe/Mgbe leader Engineer Bassey E. Bassey, I asked him for his thoughts on Nsibidi. Bassey responded, “Nsibidi is knowledge. It is an important part of Ekpe. Nsibidi is part of ancient wisdom known throughout the world. It is a world wisdom. The connection is not by or through spoken word. It is through signs and symbols, Nsibidi. Spoken word itself is trying to represent the spiritual, but with a loss of definition.” I then suggested that a sign can recover this “loss of definition” and Bassey replied, “Yes.” What Bassey meant by loss

of definition took me back to the work of communication scholars Lester C. Olson, Cara Finnegan and Diana S. Hope (2008). Nsibidi, when understood as a visual rhetoric, is “confronting and positioning” the very meaning of meaning and reality, even as it repositions how its users communicate. For Nsibidi users, their written communication has the capacity to more fully encapsulate the message being sent. The system possesses the ability to transmit meanings and cues that contain an almost “living presence” according to what I was told. Bassey told me that spoken words limit the human mind and ability to communicate. By writing Nsibidi symbols and sign all of the lost “power” that inherent in verbalization can be “recovered.” It is here that Nsibidi may have the capacity to store the memories and histories that Olson, Finnegan and Hope discussed in my Chapter 1. I also mentioned the work of David Zarafsky (1998) in my opening chapter. Zarafsky tells us that there is a relationship between the production of a text and how these texts uncover and illuminate the culture of a community. I posit that very writing of each Nsibidi sign and symbol, and potentially script, is the production of cultural text. Bound up in this we find the very spirit and presence of people. Nsibidi is about the writing of presence into reality. The system strives to offer a more complete method of communicating than the mere sending of a message. Nsibidi is unique because the symbols convey spiritual and mental energies as communication forms. The energy begins in the brain, moves through the soul to the spirit and finds final expression in the human hand.

I asked Bassey about the role of the hand. Bassey went go to state, “When a sign is made, anybody who is aware knows what it means. They know the sign. They will understand. The hand makes the sign. The hand makes it possible.” If nommo does

contain the “life force” that scholars such as Geneva Smitherman, Janice Hamlet and Molefi Asante believe, Bassey and others in Nigeria and Cameroon have convinced me that the written forms of Nsibidi must possess at least the same energy. This is why I now reframe and reimagine the system as visual rhetoric and visual nommo. I also now believe that as visual nommo because Nsibidi-written represents all of the attributes discussed by communication researcher Sheena Howard (2011) discusses. Nsibidi in its own fashion must sustain its power to influence are language and life.

Question 2: How does Nsibidi work? We then moved to my second question. I wanted Bassey to tell me about how Nsibidi works as a system. Bassey told me, “Nsibidi is part of a universal system of knowledge. In the Bible, they talk about the armor of God. Nsibidi is a part of that armor. Nsibidi tells a story.” He later told me that in Ekpe, the spirit is understood as being something different than the soul. Bassey was taught that the spirit existed on a higher spiritual plane. As I listened to him, it seemed to me that part of how Nsibidi works is in its power to bring that spirit out and etch it onto stone, skin, wood or other medium. The realization dawned that Nsibidi was as much about communication between human partners as it was about some type of internal esoteric communication users were having with themselves. The text is Nsibidi and the discourse can often be between the soul, mind and spirit. The symbols and signs allow for the expression of one’s own internal spiritual workings.

Question 3: Who uses Nsibidi? I asked Engineer Bassey about Nsibidi-users. He replied, “Nsibidi is used by teachers. It is an important part of Ekpe and Ekpe is the key to life. If you want to know Ekpe you must know Nsibidi.” Bassey added, “It is learned in stages. Like going to school. You must go through the process with Ekpe and

Nsibidi.” I interpreted this as Bassey making sure that as newer and foreign initiate I knew of the important connection between Nsibidi and Ekpe. Again, if you are foreign researcher the initiation process may be the most important tool that we can acquire in route to uncovering and exploring Nsibidi. Bassey, stressed to me the importance of knowing the gestures as well as the actual written symbols because he believed that the gestures will also a type of written communication. This became clearer to me as I watched members use gestures. Quite often, they would literally take one finger and make a motion that was extremely similar to someone writing with a pen or pencil. For some Nsibidi-users, the hand and the fingers are writing implements. Although I have not studied Asian or Middle Eastern systems of written communication in great detail, I have never heard of a system there that includes this type of “gesture-writing.” In my opinion, this is probably something unique to the Efik, Efut and Qua cultural experience in southeastern Nigeria and southwestern Cameroon. The finger and hand, as tools to be used to create written communication, is an area of investigation in communication studies that deserves far more attention. I will once again mention the communication work of Patricia A. Sullivan and Stephen R. Goldzwig (2004). These researchers opine at length about the need for our discipline to locate “fresh perspectives” for the study of rhetoric in this millennium. I concur, and offer Nsibidi as such a space. In connection with the study of the local ethnic populations of Cross River State, the multicultural and complicated world that both Sullivan and Goldzwig want more scholars in rhetorical studies to access is possible in places like Nigeria and Cameroon. Nsibidi as a “site” from which Western scholarship can offer rhetoricians new approaches to old themes such as nommo and visual rhetoric in my opinion are numerous.

Another interesting aspect that wanted to explore with Bassey involved knowing something about Nsibidi's age. He told me the system is "As old as God." It was at this point that he went further and stated, "Nsibidi began with God. And as long as God exists Nsibidi will exist." This made perfect sense to me because I have been told several times by Ekpe members that the society itself has always existed because God has always existed.

**Aban Ekpe Okamoko Edet: Interview Date: 11\5\2014**

Question 1: What is Nsibidi? I began by asking Edet for his definition of Nsibidi. He began by saying, "Nsibidi is culture. People all over the world know the Efik because of our culture. Nsibidi is the keeper of our culture, of who we are in this world. We know we are known in Nigeria because of Ekpe and Nsibidi. Nsibidi is the spirit of the people here in Calabar. If you understand Nsibidi then you understand our culture." When I asked about how old he believed Nsibidi is Edet replied "As old as the world itself. God lives and so does Nsibidi."

Question 2: How does Nsibidi work? I asked Edet to give me an understanding of how Nsibidi works as a system of communication. He told me, "There are different forms of Nsibidi. Nsibidi can be what you wear what you do. Nsibidi can be drumming, dancing, writing, moving or looking. It works by letting those around you who are also initiates in on a secret. You can spend an entire day never talking and still tell other initiates everything you want them to know. Nsibidi allows you to speak without words. You can talk and your lips never move. Here in Calabar we use it to send messages that sometimes for initiates and sometimes for others. This is why Nsibidi is important to us in Calabar. It is how we communicate when we need to. My father was a master of

Nsibidi, and I have learned it all of my life.” I wanted to know from Edet why some signs were made for initiates only and others for the public. Edet said, “Well, there were times when they wanted to talk to the community. They were certain times when people needed to be warned to stay indoors because they were spirits could harm you. When the Ekpe masquerade led to warn people to stay indoors, they needed a way to speak to everyone. This is what my father told me. So some of the signs were met for initiates and some were meant to tell people things they needed to know as warnings.” I found this fascinating because Edet offered me great insight into how Nsibidi has both a public and private role as a system of nonverbal communication. When certain symbols and signs are displayed on public spaces such as walls and on the ground they are meant to be not only warnings, but also can communicate other important messages such as dates and times of important events. These events could be the death of important local leaders or signify approaching important cultural programs that may be of significance to certain ethnic groups. It is here that we find that notion of “epic memory that scholars such as Asante-Welch and Ben Bates discuss and part of verbalized nommo. It is apparent to me that when we reposition Nsibidi as a type of visual nommo it also contains aspects of epic memory and memory.

Question 3: Who uses Nsibidi? Next, I wanted to know who Edet believes uses Nsibidi. He then went on to say, “Nsibidi is a royal presentation. It is a sign, a language. Nsibidi is the language of royalty, of the powerful. There was a time that only a rich man could be a part of Ekpe. Today there was a difference between joining in the city and joining in the rural areas. Today there are young boys who are initiates in every city. This would not have been true years ago. During my father’s time you had to be a

wealthy person, you had to be somebody in that community. Those were the men who use to use Nsibidi to tell what they wanted to tell. Today in the city like Calabar, there are all of these young boys and they use it. They may want to talk to each other and not have outsiders know what they are talking about. Initiates can want to talk but not share what they are talking about because you are not an initiate.

Each time we spoke about Nsibidi-users, Edet made a clear distinction between who used to use it and the current users. This took me back to the scholarship of Barry Brummett (2003) and the connection he drew between rhetoric, ideas of influence and the usage of nonverbal signs in an attempt to influence other people. Nsibidi, as a type of African rhetoric and nonverbal communication that utilizes signs and symbols, has the ability to offer prudent warnings to communities when necessary. The system is also long been linked to those people in a region such as Calabar who possessed considerable cultural influence. Edet often told me that Nsibidi was so most important tool of communication used by the initiates of Ekpe and to be a member of Ekpe one often has to have influence in the area. In the case of a foreigner like me, it is automatically assumed that I have influence and power, and perhaps even access to wealth because I am from the West. My becoming a member in a relatively short span of time demonstrates that there were several people in my efe who saw at least some benefit in me joining the organization. The same would be true for all of the Westerners who have joined Ekpe/Mgbe since the early 2000's, including Ivor Miller and Jordan Fenton. We literally in embody influence and are living personifications of Brummett's "idea of influence" by being Americans who have an interest in Nsibidi and Ekpe.

**Chief and Curator Sylvanus Ekoh Akong: Interview Date: 12\31\2014**

Question 1: What is Nsibidi? When I traveled from Calabar up to Alok

Community with a group of scholars from the cultural center on New Year's Eve, I had the opportunity to interact with one of the foremost scholars in Nsibidi Studies. His name is Chief Sylvanus Ekoh Akong and he is the long-standing curator of the Alok Museum, which is a branch of the Nigerian National Museum system. Akong has studied Nsibidi all of his life and is a respected member of Ekpe. He and his son, Prince Anthony A. Acube Akong, have worked alongside nearly every Western scholar who has attempted to study Nsibidi in Nigeria for the past fifteen years. They may be no one more knowledgeable on the subject of Nsibidi than Akong, so I could not wait to ask him to define Nsibidi. Akong told me, "Nsibidi is fundamental in Ekpe society. Nsibidi is the hand and it is the face. We use Nsibidi to tell the story of life. Nsibidi is communication that is special and it is special because it was invented in this region. We invented Nsibidi. We know it and we know how to use it better than anybody. It is a special kind of communication. Nsibidi communicates knowledge, that is what it is knowledge." This brings me back to my mention earlier back in Chapter 1 of Derrida (1998) and his discussion of the visual nature of writing and his concept of the grapheme. If Derrida is correct in *Of Grammatology*, when he makes his argument that there was an interplay between "texts" and "discourse" that could highlight the consciousness of a people when we examine their use of written symbols and signs, I believe that this is where we can we frame Nsibidi as a type of not only visual and visual rhetoric, but also as a nommo-made-visual. The "knowledge" contained within Nsibidi as a body, and even perhaps even in each individual sign and symbol, is Derrida's living consciousness at play. Ekpe infuses Nsibidi with a living consciousness that expresses itself as a form of written spirituality.



This living consciousness is on display whenever two more Nsibidi-users use the system. Nsibidi has such a special role for initiates and non-initiates because it expresses the very consciousness of groups such as the Efik, Efut, Qua and even the Igbo. The system itself represents these groups individually and collectively. Nsibidi, as a form of written communication might well be both a text and a discourse. The designation between these two may depend on the moment a given sign or symbol is used and the interpretation of the receiver.

Question 2: How does Nsibidi work? I knew from the outset that very few researchers would be able to offer me any better insight into how Nsibidi works than Akong. As we walked around the Alok Monolith site for several hours, he explained this concept to me. Akong told me, “Nsibidi works in many ways because it has many different functions.” Since he already knew that my interest was focused on the written aspects of Nsibidi Akong wanted me to know, “Nsibidi gives all Ekpe initiates the power to communicate over a short or long distances. You can write down any simple and ask the initiated what it means and they will know. Ekpe is a brotherhood that maintains information that the uninitiated cannot understand. Nsibidi allows the group to maintain control of this information and to share with members. That is what the Nsibidi is. If I point at my neck and make a certain gesture or write a certain sign that is Nsibidi. The whole thing is about communication and who controls communication. It does not matter which initiate is making a sign, we are all connected by Nsibidi.” Akong then asked me if any of my teachers in Calabar told me that Nsibidi was often referred to as “river.” Several groups were sharing this river, and each can take all the water they needed from it by using their own pots. After listening to Akong say this, I mentioned that my master

teacher, Obong Bassey Epenyong, had told me about the river analogy and Nsibidi. I began to think about how Nsibidi works as a kind of visual rhetoric that processed the capacity to help with the integration and assimilation differing cultural groups such as the Efik, Efut and Qua.

Each of these groups are important parts of Ekpe society and use Nsibidi as a tool of mutual communication. These really struck me when I participated in my first Ekpe/Mgbe and I noticed how each individual cultural community seemed so proud to be a part of the society, yet at the same time wanted the public to know that although they were in the river they had their own in hand. What I mean by this is that the Efut were still proudly Efut. The Qua may be the original creators of Nsibidi, but still use their own spoken language to call “Ekpe” by the name “Mgbe.” They also use their tongue to refer to the holy collective meeting place an osam instead of efe. Very little has been written about this, but I believe that for communication scholars the language differences to describe the same types of cultural phenomena are important to examine and discuss. This is how Nsibidi works in my opinion. As a system of communication, it is readily shareable and at the same time still allows for individuality among cultures. This might be expecting uniquely African feature.

Question 3: Who uses Nsibidi? Initially it seemed odd asking Akong who uses Nsibidi because I knew he was among this number. Additionally, I was walking around a cultural site dedicated to Nsibidi and Nsibidi-users. Still, I asked the question and Akong replied, “Anyone who is an Ekpe initiate Nsibidi. All of enjoying using Nsibidi and I am trying to keep it alive upon the young people in of Alok.” Akong told me that there would be times when I would encounter men who would not members, but would pose as such.

These people would know a few Nsibidi gestures, signs and symbols at best. I wanted to know more about these “fakers” and why would anyone even bother to pretend to be an Ekpe/Mgbe member and know Nsibidi. Akong said, “If you know Nsibidi you can pretend that you are a big man. People may believe that you are important and even think that you are rich.” It struck me as interesting that showing non-initiates that you have at least some knowledge of Nsibidi can bring social prestige to a person. It also reminded me that I had been told of the “Nsibidi duels” that often occurred when prominent members of Ekpe/Mgbe met in a public space. The person who knew more signs and symbols, be it written or gestured-writing, won the contest. I was told that these “battles” were often very important to the wealthier, more established initiates. I believe that Nsibidi serves not only as a form of communication that demonstrates the mastery of body of nonverbal knowledge, but also communicates economic and professional superiority. The more Nsibidi you know, and can show, elevates your position up the social ladder in Cross River State. All of this is rather complex and I believe that one of the best methods for Western researchers to grasp Nsibidi is by breaking the entire system down into more easily digestible fragments.

**A Redefinition: Nsibidi as *Nsibidis***

Nsibidi is a communicative information system, and as such there are what I describe as *Nsibidi-forms*. It was after my first encounter with Miller at University of Calabar (UNICAL) that I first began to perceive of the idea of *Nsibidis*. Miller agreed to an interview and as we sat outside near his office, he began to teach me about how the various methods of the system express themselves. My goal was to capture the meaning and capacities of Nsibidi through the usage of communication scholarship. As

Miller spoke, I became further convinced that the clearest way to understand what he described as a “communication art” was to break it down into a series of various what I refer to as “*communicative systems*.” I now conceive of the *Nsibidis* or *Nsibidie* as a rubric that forms an intellectual umbrella that includes Nsibidi-drumming, Nsibidi-dance, Nsibidi-politics, Nsibidi-art, Nsibidi-gesture, Nsibidi-government, Nsibidi-music and Nsibidi-play. Several other categories are possible when we reimagine this system in new ways, and avoid “bundling” all of the cultural elements together when the goal might be only to examine certain singular aspects. Perhaps two of the more important categories for communication scholars might be what I have defined as *Nsibidi-writing* and *Nsibidi-written*. I do believe that Nsibidi at some point contained an aspect of sound to symbol representation that would make its inclusion as a form of so-called actual writing possible. I view it as *Nsibidi-script* as opposed to *Nsibidi-inscriptions*. When we view Nsibidi as a graphic or symbol system, each would fall under what I would call Nsibidi-written grouping. I will be going into much further detail later in this chapter on this point.

I believe that this method of categorization will prove useful for foreign scholars attempting to grasp Nsibidi; especially those who do not choose to undergo a rigorous series of initiation rites and rituals for religious or other personal reasons. The formal study of a system as old and complex as Nsibidi requires the foreign researcher to have an awareness of the rich layers that each comprise this unique body of information. I believe that when the Cross River scholar says “Nsibidi,” outsiders generally interpret that as simply the written communication characteristic. When we look back on the whole body of Western research on this subject, this is apparent. Recently, certainly

since the groundbreaking scholarship of the 1970s, with the contributions of Thompson being at the top of this list, the focus has become far more inclusive. All of Nsibidi's aspects are under outside scrutiny in a more balanced manner now. In my opinion, this is a move in the right direction. As a researcher interested in nonverbal systems of communication, all of Nsibidi components are important and deserving of study. However, my goal is investigate and reimagine it as actual writing, visual rhetoric and visual nommo for this project.

### **My Impressions: Other Conversations with Participants in Cross River State**

During my three-month odyssey in Cross River State, I was fortunate enough to have encountered a rich body of participants who fall into two basic, distinctive categories: the Western educated scholar and the traditional intellectual. The traditional intellectuals that I collaborated with generally did not have access to a formal education. However, each was able to offer me meaningful insight on Nsibidi's past and possible future. I want to begin with some of the conversations I had with Mr. Jerry Benson and Mr. Patrick Osagu. I will begin with Benson, one of the head librarians, curators and researchers at the National Library of Nigeria, Calabar Branch. Benson, who received his college education at the University of Calabar, was among the very first participants with a formal academic background who attempted to offer me an understanding of Nsibidi, and the history of the Ekpe society as its creator.

It was fortunate for me that the National Library of Nigeria in Calabar was only approximately two blocks from the hotel where I lived. In the opening days of my research this allowed me to see Benson nearly every day, if needed. Benson, a researcher of the highest Calabar by anyone's standard, would pull various books and articles from

the shelves of the library each day and I was stopped by to read the materials he collected. Benson also agree to a series of interviews where we discuss what I was attempting to cobble together. Before I had any agreement in place with my coming Ekpe teachers, Benson was the first local scholar who not only opened up information to me, but agreed to discuss the more important areas of local culture with me.

It was from Jerry that I learned about the importance of the Calabar Carnival to the state and all of the coming Nsibidi public demonstrations that would take place from December to January. I am aware that even those who have knowledge of West Africa may have never heard of this particular celebration, since it is a recent invention. The event has been around less than a decade and was created by one of the most innovative and intelligent governors that Cross River State ever had an office. The celebration happens annually in late December and has become a tremendous economic boost for tourism petroleum. At this point, I knew that my use of Afronography as a research method would come in very handy with Benson. Being an older, mature married man, I presumed that Benson would be able to handle some closer level of contact when compared to some of my younger participants. I was able to build what I would like to define as a friendship with Benson, and along the way learned an incredible amount of information about the culture of Calabar. In the interview that we did on October 23, 2014 at 12:47 PM, Benson wanted me to know that it was very important that I witnessed the Carnival because it was one of the most important modern day conveyors of not only area culture, but of Nsibidi. Benson was correct in his assumption I was able to document several of the floats and uniforms that contained and featured Nsibidi in some form or fashion.

During this same interview, Benson informed me that the State Library of Calabar was within walking distance of the National Library site. This turned out to be very important information because one of the librarians at the state library was able to locate several pertinent pieces of information about Nsibidi that I went on to include in my work. Fortunately, Benson worked at the facility where recent grant money provided for the purchase of several new computers and a modern computer lab on the ground floor of the building. Benson also wanted me to know that his library had a huge generator that could operate in the event of long-term power outages. As I videoed the wooden carousels where visitors could leisurely sit and spent hours reading local newspapers, or books they found interesting, my ethnographic I knew that this would be a perfect location from which I could create some level of distance with subjects who entered this facility. This library site attracted a wide swath of Nigerians, including: area university students, professionals who work at the nearby cultural center, artists, foreign residents and researchers staying at any of the numerous hotels within easy walking distance, city workers who like to read during their lunch hour or area traditional intellectuals who enjoy being able to read new information on a daily basis with others came into the building to use the computer lab so that they could navigate the Internet.

In one of the things I enjoyed most about visiting and spending time at this library with Benson, was being able to not only overtly eavesdrop (hear) conversations about the culture of Calabar, but I was able to then asked questions from those who sat for hours reading through materials. This was a good source of accurate information because this type of site naturally attracts people I would describe as intelligent, and certainly literate. I found it quite amusing that several of them could not discern why any Western scholar

would have need to study something as “non-Christian” and archaic, and they are opinion, as Nsibidi. The Christian church in this part of Nigeria has had centuries to attack Ekpe/Mgbe, and all of its forms of communication. It seemed to me that this was particularly true of both Nsibidi-written and Nsibidi-writing. Along with all of the colorful, powerful Ekpe Plays, Nsibidi possess the capacity, with its beautiful, intricate lines, to attract attention. I think as a system of nonverbal and written communication, it also likely the reminds Nigerians that they have a cultural past that predates the British and Portuguese. Many of the prominent African and European Christian preachers have openly attacked the system. Nsibidi, since some of the symbols do allegedly contain “mystical” properties, is the writing of “the devil.” Some of the participants I encountered at this branch of the library were deeply involved in the Christian church. Being so was not an uncommon social phenomenon in Calabar.

Another excellent place that allowed me to meet ordinary Nigerians during my time in Calabar was not far from where I lived. Patrick Osagu is the the owner of a small shop that sits adjacent to the hotel where I set up and left my equipment. Osagu and I met early into my arrival to Calabar. During my first night there I was in a bit hungry and not one have to order room service due to the expense, so instead I decided to walk around the neighborhood to see if they were in the area stores record purchase food. Immediately upon leaving the gated grounds of the Africa Villa Hotel, I noticed Osagu moving bread around on the shelves of his shop. This was a perfect Afronography moment because I immediately began to wonder about ideas of distance and intimacy. I know Osagu, but it was clear that his shop might be an excellent choice for site where I could meet everyday Africans and ask questions about Nsibidi and other issues regarding



Efik, Qua and Efut culture. I needed to be close enough to the owner of the shop to ask his customers questions, but because of the physical proximity of my hotel I wondered about how intelligent it would be to make Osagu a friend. The closeness in this instance was not only an emotional version, but also, literally, physical. Being so close to where I would be living for part of the time, Osagu would have easy access to me, day or night. It also was obvious that he would be able to monitor my comings and goings to and from my residence because the entrance to the shop was only about four feet from the gate where patrons exited or entered Success Villa.

Although not currently a member of the Ekpe society, it was amazing to see how much about the culture, and even Nsibidi, Osagu knew. I later found out that Osagu, this charming personality, had many customers who were prominent members of Ekpe and he was able to pick up scraps of information over the years and formulate them in a way that revealed certain hidden truths. The more time I spent with Osagu and his family the more I began understand how intelligent this man was, despite the fact that he did not have much by way of university education. Osagu did attend what would be the American equivalent of a technical school, but that was the full extent of his learning beyond high school. There were times when I was actually not only intrigued by how much Osagu knew about my so-called secret societies interworking, but also felt dismay during certain moments

Osagu has been married to his wife Peace Osagu for fourteen years. Peace, a devout Christian woman, was one of the first residents to openly frown on my decision to learn Nsibidi and become a member of Ekpe/Mgbe. Peace, like so many other religious Nigerians, thought that my initiating into Ekpe meant that one day I would have to give

my soul to the secret evil “gods” initially hidden by Society as not to frighten foreigners. Peace takes her three daughters to a nearby church on Sunday, and during weekly functions when required. I observed that her daughters attended nearly every function I heard about at the church during my three months. Like their mother and so many other participants, they were true believers in their gospel. I found it funny that there were several times when Peace asked me questions when I returned at night about Ekpe and what I had learned on that particular day. I initially took this as a sign of curiosity, but quickly came to discover that she was simply trying to size up the satanic information I had acquired hours earlier. This eventually became my research routine; I would trek home, exhausted as night began to fall. Before going into my room, I would stop by the shop and see the Osagu Family. Depending on who was available to speak with, I learned to slide back and forth between being extremely close; perhaps best described as intimate, or pushing myself into the background of this scene and attempting as much non-visibility as possible.

As I stated earlier, many of the local customers of the Osagus were members of the Nigerian middle to upper class. These men proudly purchased whatever goods were needed for their wives to prepare daily meals for the family. Since the shop was located directly across a small street, Otop Abasi Road, where one of the Nigerian Police Force Central Command units set, it was not uncommon for me to encounter some of the department’s administrative upper echelon detectives and administrators. Some were uniformed and others plain-clothed. The vast majority of this group was not only pleasant, but also often downright kind. The Nigerian police have a negative international reputation, but I must say that of the ten or so officers that I got to spend

time with in Calabar, each did everything possible to make my time in the city easier and more informative. They were excellent respondents when I had questions about Nsibidi and I believe that they answered my questions legitimately. Osagu allowed me free reign to not only speak with his family members and friends, but in addition anyone who came to the shop and agreed to be interviewed. Patrick was also the person who took me to not only see but understand the Calabar Carnival. We went to this event and spent several hours watching each cultural group pass by, as he explained the significance of the symbols we witnessed.

### **New Approaches: Nsibidi Reimagined as Rhetoric**

Earlier in this chapter I mentioned the work of communication theorists, Patricia A. Sullivan and Stephen R. Goldzwig, I began to reposition Nsibidi into a wider context of a visual rhetoric. Their made me to recall reading what renowned Ohio University communication theorist Raymie McKerrow wrote about what he imagined the study of rhetoric would, or could, look like this in this century. It also made me rethink the attributes that collectively make up the notion of a “Western rhetorical canon.” If there is a Western rhetorical canon, it is quite likely that there is an African version. I then began to wonder where Nsibidi would fit in such a possible body of information. Again, if Nsibidi is a river of knowledge as a system of written communication, one containing sharable sign and symbols that the finger or pen create, and these signs and symbols connect the Nsibidi-user to a spiritual plane, there may be something uniquely “African” in this particular approach to written communication. I take what McKerrow, and several of the authors in this book, are offering as a possibility. I believe that there is indeed a “diverse world” full of varying types of rhetorics, and among them Nsibidi could be

situated. As the editors state, scholars in the West need to find “vehicles” that allow for what they call “the bridging of the ‘old’ and ‘new’ rhetorics in acknowledgment of conditions in a postmodern world” (p. 9). If I am to believe rhetorician Michael Calvin McGee, my attempt here to, “make discourses from scripts and pieces of evidence” is valid. I am also fascinated by the question posed in the preface of this book regarding “what it means to study rhetoric in an increasingly diverse world.” Sullivan and Goldzwig discuss the work of Sonja Foss and Eileen Berlin Ray in their edited work, *Theorizing Communication from Marginalized Perspectives*. Much like Foss and Ray, part of my work involves, “an appreciation for different theorizing and methods that expand our explanatory lenses” (p. 10). It is here that I begin the process of the reinterpretation of Nsibidi as a type of not only visual rhetoric, but also a potential form of visual nommo.

In the edited volume, *Afrocentric Visions: Studies in Culture and Communication*, John W. Smith wrote, “Our reality is a product of our symbol-making, symbol-using, and symbol-misusing behavior. Each of us only experiences a tiny sliver of reality, and our whole overall picture is but a construct of our symbol systems. In fact, all of our social behavior is grounded in symbolism” (p. 107). Smith further added, “It is through language resulting from our human symbol-making capacity that human action occurs and our perceptions of the world around us are most affected” (p. 107). Nsibidi, as a symbol of human communication for the Efik, Qua Efut, Igbo and various other ethnic communities, I believe helped to bring into greater clarity that tiny sliver of reality mentioned by Smith. I also want to mention that as I watched the various Nsibidi performances in Cross River State, I was struck by the obvious “call and response” power

inherent in this nonverbal system of communication. For communication scholars, a truly paradoxical system of symbol and audience is apparent. The notion of a nonverbal type of call and response is a unique, new communication landscape. Although in the case of Nsibidi, I believe that communication research will discover that just like there are Nsibidis, the *Nsibidi audience experience* is layered and multiple. There are “audiences” when initiates play Ekpe, which means there is a public performance where initiates employ Nsibidi.

My research was greatly influenced by the scholarship of theorists Kent A. Ono and John M. Sloop. Ono and Sloop believe that rhetoricians should not, “limit our attention to such documents available to the widest possible audience,” as we overlook “important text that gird and influenced local cultures first, and affect, through the sheer number of local communities, cultures at large” (p. 2). On many levels, Nsibidi is the perfect text for researchers in my field to study because of this multiple audience factor. There are both public and private demonstrations of the system. This means that Nsibidi intentionally fosters communication among different types of audiences depending upon a given purpose and situation. There were times that the initiates are using it to directly communicate messages to the non-initiated, and at other moments the demonstration is only met as a communication among those who understand its meaning. Again, the important part here is the intent. Since it may well be among the oldest human organized system of nonverbal communication, Nsibidi as rhetorical text fits the above description of often not being open to the widest audience, be it Western or local African, at least in the public sense of this idea.

Another striking aspect about Nsibidi is its widespread public use, despite the fact

that is supposed to be a system in of communication considered mostly reserved for members of an initiated knowledge society. It only took a few days for me to notice that the public demonstrations of the system can be found, quite literally, in nearly every area of Calabar. The first day that I entered the grounds of the Nigerian National Cultural Center, I found it interesting that there was a huge metal statue at its entrance in the form of a local drummer. This statue had three different faces near its base. Each face had a different Nsibidi inscription placed in the middle of its forehead. It was immediately apparent to me that these particular inscriptions were meant for public consumption. The same is likely for one of the larger roundabouts found on the thoroughfare in Calabar known as “Highway.” The roundabout that I am discussing here is the one covered in various kinds of Nsibidi symbols that sit below a huge spherical sign. In terms of audience, Nsibidi is on everything from ordinary bracelets to area bridges. I have included photographs below:



Figure 20. Photo of me pointing out the newer public Nsibidi inscriptions found at the Calabar Round-A-Bout on Calabar Highway.



Figure 21. Photo of the newer public Nsibidi inscriptions found at the Calabar Round-A-Bout on Calabar Highway.



Figure 22. Photo of me pointing out the newer public Nsibidi inscriptions found at the Calabar Round-A-Bout on Calabar Highway.

One of my proudest moments during my three months in Calabar occurred when I noticed a series of dirty, neglected Nsibidi symbols and inscriptions found on one of the

small bridges near my hotel. Previously, I had walked by this site several times and not noticed any of the Nsibidi it displayed. Oddly enough, on the very day that I thought to walk down and inspect the bridge closely because of what I thought might be Nsibidi placed on it, an old man at one of my favorite area stores, Jumbo Shop, was looking at several wooden bracelets being sold by an area mobile vendor. I noticed that each bracelet had what I believed were Nsibidi inscriptions, and perhaps potential actual scripts. After purchasing one of the bracelets, I showed it to several of my Nsibidi teachers. Each believed that it did contain some type of older, perhaps regional form of the system. Here are some photographs of what I now call the Nsibidi Bridge:



Figure 23. Photo of me on what I called the “Nsibidi Bridge” on Bogobiri Street in Calabar. Another public display of Nsibidi.



Figure 24. Photo of me on what I called the “Nsibidi Bridge” on Bogobiri Street in Calabar. Another public display of Nsibidi.





Figure 25. Photo of me on what I called the “Nsibidi Bridge” on Bogobiri in Calabar. Another public display of Nsibidi.



Figure 26. Photo of three inscriptions on “Nsibidi Bridge.” From Calabar, Nigeria.

### **Writing and Race: Nsibidi and Grammatological Studies**

Beyond wanting to open up the conversation in communication studies involving the exploration of new rhetorics in new places like Nigeria and Cameroon, I also hope to spark the flame that ignites a new wave of Western interest in uncovering and documenting the possible grammatological aspects of Nsibidi. As I have written earlier

in this work, that will involve foreign researchers joining Ekpe/Mgbe. In this section, I have included the work of one recent scholar who, as I did, attempted such an exploration. Like me, Saki Mufundikwa failed in this grammatological attempt, although for much different reasons. In my own case, Obong Epenyong told me that as a new initiate, such information would not be made able to me. I found it fascinating that he did not deny that Nsibidi may have the capacities I detailed to him in November of 2014 that would make it a form of actual writing. Epenyong wanted me to know that as I “grew” in Ekpe, there would be an opportunity for me to further revisit and investigate this topic in coming years.

In the spirit of this, I now sound the official call from the halls of the Western academy. We know that Nsibidi is an ancient body of nonverbal written communication. What is not nearly as clear is the full range of scripts or potential “lettering” included in the system. I do not believe that there is any scholar either in Africa or outside the continent who could answer this question without spending significant time in Cross River State and becoming a member of Ekpe/Mgbe. Adding another problematic layer to this examination is that I now believe that there once could have been a clear body of true lettering that was part of what I call Nsibidi-writing.

It is not hard to understand why some scholars may reason that I am once again positioning the West as an institution that West Africans should model their own cultural norms towards. I am walking a very fine line here and I fully acknowledge such. Again, I want to be clear, my goal is not to “push” or repackage Nsibidi as something that the West will come running to recognize as something “legitimate” and deserving of its praise and recognition. This is not the case! Instead, I am optimistic that Nsibidi can be

evaluated for which traits it just simply possesses. In other words, whatever is there is there, or whatever is not there simply is not. As a communication scholar, I believe that it is important that the world fully understands Nsibidi. Perhaps the best way to explain why I believe so is by examining an often-overlooked article written by the esteemed chronicler of the black experience worldwide, Henry Louis Gates of Harvard University. Gates (1992) has written so many important books and articles on black life and culture that sometimes some of his earlier work can get lost in the intellectual shuffle. In his edited volume entitled, *Race, Writing and Difference*, Gates made what I consider one of the most powerful and poignant arguments for why the study of grammatology in any part of Africa should be important to scholars in the field of communication studies. If a researcher in communication wants to offer a strong argument as to why studying Nsibidi for its grammatological elements is necessary, they should start with this book.

Henry Louis Gates did an incredible job of tracing the historical origins of why so many people today believe that Africa only possesses orature as a means of transmitting its most important narrative as opposed to actual writing. Gates persuasively argues that notions of “race” and which societies can, and cannot, claim a legacy of writing and literacy are at the very heart of the construction of white supremacy. As a part of the discussion, Gates explains that Europeans needed to create a belief in the “natural differences” that exist between cultures in Europe as opposed to places like Nigeria. Gates contended that by the 1850s, “ideas of irresistible racial differences were commonly held” (p. 3). By this point, Gates believes European scholars have begun to use what he defined as a “scientific application” when studying which ethnic groups had what could be defined as “literature.” The Enlightenment and the Renaissance, according

to Gates, had helped forge the idea that literature was a fundamental creation of a truly civilized ethnic group. There was a growing belief that not only were there natural differences between the so-called “races,” but that this difference could be attributed to the capacity to create writing. Systems of writing were one of the most important yardsticks when used to define who was, or was not, viewed as “advanced,” or “backwards.” This is why I believe my project, and others, should address the subject of actual writing in developing spaces such as Nigeria. This idea of a “primacy of language” in the form of writing is essential when Western scholars are attempting to reconstruct the African past in the most accurate light possible. I contend that Western scholarship has intentionally overlooked, ignored or simply misrepresented what elements systems of written communication such as Nsibidi currently contain, or once contained. Some of this is likely attributable to the fact that they have been very few researchers who have studied Nsibidi with a formal background the study of communication, semiotics or grammatology. The rest, in my opinion, goes back to the commission of omission.

Perhaps one of the most important methods of constructing the African as cultural and social “Other,” is to deny that group the intellectual capacity to create actual writing. Gates alluded to this when he wrote, “Why was the creative writing of the African of such importance to the eighteenth century debate over slavery? I can briefly outline one thesis: after Rene Descartes, *reason* was privileged, or valorized, above all other human characteristics. Writing, especially after the printing press became so widespread, was taken to be the *visible* sign of reason” (p. 5). Then Gates supported his theory with, “Blacks were ‘reasonable,’ and hence ‘men,’ if, and only if, they demonstrated mastery

of ‘arts and sciences,’ the eighteenth century’s formula for writing” (p. 5). He also highlighted that, “Writing, many Europeans argued, stood alone among the fine arts at the most salient repository of ‘genius,’ the visible sign of reason itself” (p. 5-7). The logic proceeded as, “writing, although secondary to reason, is nevertheless the medium of reason’s expression” (p. 7). Thus, “...we know *reason* by its writing, by its representations. Such representation could assume spoken or written form” (p. 7). Gates believes that, “while several superb scholars gave priority to the *spoken* as the privileged of the pair, most Europeans privileged *writing* in their writings about Africans, at least as the principal measure of the African’s humanity, their capacity for progress, their very place in the great chain of being” (p. 7).

Gates also struck upon another extremely important thread that connects the European denial of African’s intellectual capacity to create actual writing systems. As I have already noted in the opening chapter, some of the most prominent philosophers and writers of the West, including Hegel, Hume and Kant, believed that there was a self-evident correlation between being “black” and the lacking of intelligence. According to Gates, it was Hegel that who convinced the world that, “Africans had no history, because they had developed no systems of writing” (p. 11). This was a truly intriguing argument offered by Gates. Gates wrote that, “In judging civilizations, Hegel’s strictures with respect to the absence of written history presumed a critical role for memory, a collective, cultural memory. Metaphors of the childlike nature of the slaves, of the masked, puppet-like personality of the black, all shared this assumption about the absence of memory” (p. 11). The “childlike” African not only lacked a true history, but also the very ability to document the possibility of such a narrative. Gates added, “Without writing, no

repeatable signs of the workings of reason, of mind, could exist. Without memory or mind, no history could exist. Without history, no humanity, as defined consistently from Vico to Hegel, could exist” (p. 11). The Efik, Efut, Qua, Igbo and others of the Lower Niger River Basin were lost in time and rational space. I began to also think about this point beyond the historical aspect. In terms of the human capability to create knowledge systems that embody multiple levels of communication, including the ability to create an organized body of symbols that share sounds, as well as ideas or metaphors, might equally the note intelligence, or the lack thereof. If we accept uncritically that the cultures of Cross River State did not create actual system of writing, this might be construed as Western scholars not believing that those societies were intellectually equal to other cultures that did create so-called true writing systems. Hume, Gates tells us, believed that writing, above all else, “was the ultimate sign of difference between animal and human” (p. 12). Gates used the phrase “black signifiers” throughout this text (p. 13). For those communication scholars interested in “call and response,” as well as visual forms of nommo, that could be a bevy of potential projects bound up when we examine Nsibidi, and it is Ekpe creators, as sign and signifier. At this point I want to move into the potential actual writing aspect of Nsibidi.

### **Nsibidi as Inscription and Script**

I am not the only recent scholar who has wondered if Nsibidi possesses the features of an actual system of writing. The preface of Saki Mufundikwa’s *African Alphabets: The Story of Writing in Afrika*, written by Maurice Tadadjeu, Professor of African Languages and Linguistics at Yaounde University, “Many authors, with a varying emphasis on particular aspects, have told me the story of African writing

systems” (p. 10). He added, “Nevertheless, the study of old African language writing systems, devised by genuine African inventors, should become a required discipline in linguistics departments throughout African universities.” Tadadjeu’s logic is in intellectual alignment with Gates and evidence of this is when he wrote, “Linguists in general, and developers of African language writing systems in particular, stand to reap the fruits of this enduring research” (p. 10). This is another work that any future Western scholar who is exploring Nsibidi for its grammatological possibilities should read.

Saki Mufundikwa is a self-described “graphic designer and design educator,” who uses designs to “communicate ideas and messages” (p. 15). In his Author’s Introduction I found, “Words on a screen can be given emphasis that was not possible before on paper . Type can be used more expressively than ever before. Among the most expressive of graphic symbols of those created by Africans” (p 15). I found the sentence particularly compelling because Mufundikwa makes a clear case for more work in Africa that involves the area of communication. He then tells us that his rationale for writing the book was, “to provide an introduction to information in uncharted places about Afrikan alphabets” (p. 16). This gets pushed further as I read, “Afrika’s deserts, rainforests, and savannas are rich with information yet to be discovered; so much research is waiting to be done. Afrikan alphabets are a way of expressing ideas, systems of thought, thought processes, cultural imperatives, aesthetic preferences, and spirit” (p. 16). Mufundikwa could not be any clearer or more correct in making such an assertion. Added to this was, “Afrikan alphabets are one of the most important keys to help unlock what has been hidden from so many for so long...” which is “the intelligence and ingenuity of African peoples” (p. 16).

In relation to the area of grammatology, Mufundikwa offered equally direct commentary. It appears that not only was he attempting to prod future scholars into studying written communication in Africa, but he additionally offered support to those of us currently doing such work. Further into his introduction he wrote, “Before we go much further, especially for the growing number of grammatologists out there, let me clear up any confusion that might be caused by the title I chose for this book: *Afrikan Alphabets*. This book deals with the pictographs, ideograms, and scripts, mostly syllabaries, which were devised and designed by Africans” (p. 16). I suppose that this sort of sentence or two might be needed as a way of addressing scholars who study writing in other parts of the world who may wonder why Africa? I, like Mufundikwa, would respond by saying perhaps the better question is why not Africa? In a similar vein, Mufundikwa decided that he would offer a redefinition of the term “alphabet.” He wrote, “The European colonizers claimed Afrikan territory with impunity and thereby created new historical realities for the colonized. I have taken a cue from them and claimed the word *alphabet*; so for the title of this book, all writing systems become alphabets, hence, *Afrikan Alphabets*” (p. 17). Mufundikwa did an outstanding job, in my opinion, in delineating the history of writing systems and writing throughout the continent. According to him, “Afrikan alphabets are products of over more than 5000 years of activity” (p. 17). In an area like Calabar, Nsibidi, as a type of written communication or *Mufundikwa alphabet* was one of the “many tools that has have given Africans a means to maintain their cultures, arts, and religions” (p. 17).

Mufundikwa and I followed a somewhat similar ethnographic path up to a certain point. We each decided that the best method of the understanding Nsibidi was to spend



time in Calabar. Further, like Mufundikwa I also had plans to meet with members of the Ekpe society. We also both visited the National Museum, situated in Calabar. Much like Mufundikwa, I was given the history of the city as one of the major ports in the story of the Maafa, better known as the transatlantic slave trade. Mufundikwa, in his discussion with the locals of Calabar, wanted to understand Ekpe tradition and how that related to Nsibidi. Nsibidi-written has been “exposed” on some levels, but the bulk of its written aspect, veiled behind the curtain of the process of initiation, is largely still intact.

Mufundikwa described this “veil of secrecy” on page 104 when he acknowledged that it “still keeps visitors from finding out everything about this language.” He also understood that numerous ethnic groups in the Cross River region used Nsibidi, including the Efik, Ejagham, Ibibio and Igbo. His background on Ekpe/Mgbe also informed him that, “The Ekpe secret societies are based on Ekpe, a mysterious spirit who lives in the forest and is supposed to preside at the ceremonies of the Society. Only males can join, boys being initiated about the age of puberty.” (p. 104).

It is at this point in the book that I believe Mufundikwa may have hit upon something that is very important for those of us who want to study Nsibidi-written and “Nsibidi as writing,” or what I call Nsibidi-writing. Mufundikwa wrote, “What is truly remarkable about the Nsibidi alphabet is that each Ekpe lodge in Calabar and its environs has its own collation of symbols that combine with or replace older ones. The Nsibidi alphabet is therefore open. Some symbols are left behind, while others, either new or modified from the old, are created to accommodate contemporary expressions” (p.104). He then added, “The only permanence is the script itself” (p.105). He also tells us,

“Nsibidi is still in use today and it is still secret; as a result, researching Nsibidi script turned out to be as elusive and mysterious as the writing system itself” (p. 105).

I fully agreed with Mufundikwa’s conclusion that it truly is nearly impossible for any non-Ekpe initiate to accurately study Nsibidi. Although groups like the Ejagham have shared some elements of what symbols in writing entails, the group that most likely has the oldest and most accurate information about the system, the Efik, are generally unlikely to disclose anything to those they perceive as foreigners. What this means is all Western scholars who were hoping to study the written aspects of Nsibidi should know up front that they will be required to join Ekpe/Mgbe; it is not probable that there will be any exceptions to this rule. The initiation process can be difficult because it is an attempt to weed out those who might be tempted to expose this body of written communication. Although most in the Western or African academy might not consider this a true “scholarly work,” *African Alphabets* is a book that should be read and studied by any scholar seeking to better understand not only written communication in Africa, but also actual writing and symbol systems on that continent.

### **More on Nsibidi and Visual Nommo**

I theorize that Nsibidi was, and probably still is, about communication and control. In my opinion, it is a least two-tiered form of social control. The first level is about control and communication of the public space, hence the need for lettering and symbols that could be read by everyone in the region. The other level can entail the need to control those men deemed the dangerous Ekpe/Mgbe as a political entity. Nsibidi, as an extension of Ekpe/Mgbe, was a communicative visual rhetoric with a likely strong social control element embodied in it. If I believe Bassey when he wrote, “Language is

the vehicle for the promotion of [a] culture of inclusiveness” and that “To the African, language is much more than audio communication...” than perhaps such theories are plausible (p. 57). Bassegy greatly informed my research while in Cross River State because he reaffirmed my belief about all of Nsibidi’s nonverbal components of communication, including, “... sign language conveyed by dance forms, color, paraphernalia, signs and wonders are important because within them are stored value information not commonly available” (p. 58).

Nsibidi, as a communicative visual rhetoric, used, and continues to use, many types of media or medium. Nsibidi is what Brummett, and many other communication theorists, refer to as “a channel of communication” (p. 8). During my first week in Calabar, as I walked around the Nigerian National Cultural Center, I photographed and took video of all of the public displays of Nsibidi that are found in the city, or those I believed to be such. One of the most noticeable of these were the huge, colored inscriptions I found on the walls outside of the Cultural Center itself. These walls, which were located near one of the most heavily trafficked major streets in this part of the city, were undoubtedly in the opinion of someone, a great place to convey messages through Nsibidi. Mediums for Nsibidi-written as a visual rhetoric can include iron gates, bridges, animal skins, walls of homes, the outside and inside of religious sites, rocks and various other kinds of surfaces. Another important medium would be part of the human body itself. During certain important ceremonial gatherings, the practitioners of Nsibidi will paint important symbols and inscriptions on the bodies of selected individuals. This is what occurred during my initiation ceremony, one of the prominent Ekpe members painted a series of symbols on my back, ankles and across both of my legs. These

paintings allow me to prove to future members that I may encounter, since they are photographed from every possible angle, that I am indeed a member of the society and should be treated accordingly.

African scholar Edet Ekpo also appeared to conceptualize Nsibidi as, in my opinion, visual rhetoric. When we again examine he wrote in *The Qua's: A Historical Perspective and Belief System*, Edet described Nsibidi in the following way, "It is this dexterity and being very learned in the arts that give rise to the belief that the Nsibidi, the sacred traditional writings of which mention has been made derive their origin from among the Nnim officers" (p. 60). He added, "They became taught to eminent as well as elder statesmen in the affairs of their community to arm them properly for the challenges of governance. These writings also came to be taught to the elders of other cult institutions like the Mgbe" (p. 60). For Edet, Nsibidi, understood as visual rhetoric, expanded, "And it was mostly through the Mgbe medium that the knowledge of Nsibidi spread with Qua civilization to other neighboring tribes" (p. 60). Mgbe, the Qua and Ejagham version of the Efik and Efut Ekpe, hint that Ekpe/Mgbe might be construed not only as needing mediums to transmit the message is, but potentially as being the actual medium in itself. Ekpe/Mgbe, as visual rhetoric and communicative visual rhetoric, are possibly, at certain times, the message and the message carrier simultaneously. This is an astonishing type of human communication. In other words, the message is the medium, and the medium is the message.

In Edet's definition of Mgbe, we find obvious examples of Brummett's definition of how rhetoric works. The system uses Nsibidi to organize communities and create good governance of all members of that society. Without the ability to communicate,

such would have been impossible for the dozens of different groups living near the Niger River and outlying branches. Ekpe/Mgbe, as a society was important, but without the advent of Nsibidi it would have been useless as an organization. I envision Ekpe/Mgbe as the torso of the cultural body, while the arms and legs, that which is able to move and grasp the landscape around it, being Nsibidi. And speaking of landscapes, this is the type of new scholarly terrain that I hope to continue to explore for years to come. I believe that Nsibidi is not only visual rhetoric, but further examination of the system is likely to assist communication scholars in pushing the boundaries of discovering and investigating unexplored forms of rhetoric. In relation to this point, I believe researchers in communication studies should actively begin the reimagining of Nsibidi in other new forms, including visual nommo.

Communication scholarship, beginning with that of Molefi Asante, has long examined the power inherent in the verbalization of words. Asante introduced the African concept of nommo to the wider-Western academy in the 1980s and 1990s in a series of groundbreaking books that explored his far-reaching theory of Afrocentricity. Asante, and many other scholars in communication, have offered the world a powerfully passionate understanding of what nommo entails, and how people of African descent around the globe express it. As my interest in Nsibidi has grown the past two years, so has my perspective on nommo. I fully believe that Asante and others were correct in their analysis and explanation of nommo, however I have pushed the boundaries of it to include the possible of its power being placed in the written letter, word and writing.

As a researcher with two decades of experience in West Africa, including Nigeria, I was intrigued by a course offered at Ohio University in Communication Studies being

taught by John W. Smith during the fall of 2014. The class, titled *Black Rhetorical Styles*, featured a syllabus richly packed with a wonderful collection of Black rhetoricians offering takes on a wide range of political and cultural vantages. In my opinion, authors Ben Bates, Windy Y. Lawrence & Mark Cervenka wrote one of the better, more creative articles, “Redrawing Afrocentrism: Visual Nommo in George H. Ben Johnson's Editorial Cartoons.” The title alone immediately caught my attention and began the process of me re-thinking the unique cultural possibilities intrinsic to, and in, nommo. It stuck me that perhaps communication scholarship could investigate *spoken nommo* and *written nommo*, or as the authors of the article defined it, visual nommo. I happily read the article several times over the course of the next two days. Each reading further enforced my belief that I was on the right track.

I have already discussed in some detail the notion of nommo as delineated by scholars such as Molefi Asante and Marimba Ani. As I begin my discussion on visual nommo, I want to state for the record that what I am doing is making an addition to the current scholarship in this area. Visual rhetoric is a somewhat new area of study for communication researchers and theorists. Like other areas in the field of communication, there was room for growth and new ideas as the field expands to include new boundaries of inquiry. I believe that all of the power that is presumed to be part of the verbal, standard Nomo is likely also found in visual forms, which would include writing and lettering. I believe that writing and lettering are types of visual rhetorics and visual nommo. The human family, in various parts of the world, has long understood that there is great power in the form of writing some type of symbol or alphabet on the medium. In addition, even beyond this, the moving finger can use gesture as a form of writing. In

relation to Nsibidi, there are practitioners of the system who told me that they agree with my assertion that there may well be equal power in writing as in speaking. This again is new ground in the field of communication studies, so I had to use the sources available in order to make my argument as substantial as possible. At this point, I want to look back at the article written by Bates, et al as to what constitutes visual nommo.

Bates and his co-authors tell us early on, “This article first defines and conceptualizes nommo and some of its manifestations to expand this definition to include a space for visual nommo” (p. 277). With all three of the authors being in the field of communication, I found it inspirational that they would take a concept as old as nommo and attempt to redefine its boundaries in relation to how scholars in our field study cultural phenomena. As I read further I encountered this group of scholars were presenting , “An analysis of the rhetorical significance of Johnson’s use of five visual “manifestations of nommo, including indirection, visual depictions of African history, repetition of images, the depiction of visual symbols of mythication, and stylin, is provided to ground an Afrocentric visual rhetoric” (p. 277). In my case, I was drawn immediately to their focus on “depictions of African history, repetition of images and the depiction of visual symbols of mythication.” Nsibidi, if reimagined as visual rhetoric, appears to fit all three of these categories in my opinion. In lieu of Johnson’s cartoons, I inserted Nsibidi as the subject of study using this lens. The three authors also tell us, “African American communication is often examined within Eurocentric frames, with concepts derived from a European tradition to study European communication in a course of development that (implicitly) has valued only Europeans” (p. 278).” I would also add, “African American intellectualism remains subordinated within the communication

discipline, which institutionally refuses to acknowledge the importance of non-White ways of knowing ...” (p. 278). Bates et al, go further by writing that would like to see “African American communication and culture” in alignment with methods and studies that do not obscure the voices and experiences of Black communities. They decry the use of “Eurocentric paradigms” and call for new modes of exploration into the values of African-descended people (p. 278). Bates et al, hoped to use this article to, “...argue that current conceptions of Afrocentrism should be expanded to open a space for Afrocentric visual rhetorics, which have been historically used by African Americans to disrupt European power structures. Specifically, we define and conceptualize nommo in order to offer a definition of visual nommo and its manifestations” (p. 278). I also want to use Nsibidi as an African tool of disrupting Western power structures that have the ability to define ideas such as communication, rhetoric and writing.

On page 280, Bates wrote, “African visual tradition, however, a tradition that has historically served a similar function, has been largely ignored. Although manifestations of nommo can be found in any area of life, the vocabulary scholars have used to label various manifestations tend to prefer the oral.” I am hoping to add several terms to this lexicon that embrace written communication.

Nsibidi as visual nommo, in my opinion, could take any of the forms articulated by Bates. Spending time in Calabar allowed me to witness firsthand not only what the Nsibidi practitioners were using the system for, but also how the readers of it, those who knew at least some of the meanings behind the script and symbols, understood what was being communicated. I have permission from my main Nsibidi teacher, Epenyong Bassey, to discuss several of the symbols I would categorize under all three of prominent



“manifestations of nommo,” listed by Batea at el: the visual depictions of African history, repetition of images and the depiction of visual symbols of mythication. The Ukara Cloth is a usually bluish piece of material that only men can wear once they have earned the title Obong Ekpe. Obong Ekpe is translated in Efik as the “king maker,” because only he can introduce others to this title and station within Ekpe society. The Ukara Cloth, literally covered in a series of millennia old Nsibidi symbols, usually depicts vital information about life, success and knowledge about the inner self. This garment is usually only worn during the most special, important of occasions during the year. Ukara Below is an example of Ukara Cloth:



Figure 27. Photo of the sacred Ukara Cloth, which contains more public displays of Nsibidi.



Figure 28. Photo of the sacred Ukara Cloth, which contains more public displays of Nsibidi.

Ukara features a series of animals and symbols that are repeated in succession the width of the entire cloth. Each of the symbols plays an important role in the history and culture of not only Nigeria and Cameroon, but across much of West and Central Africa. Since each of these animals is found throughout this region of the continent, it was not uncommon for the societies who lived in close proximity to each to find not only beauty in these creatures, but also certain specific attributes that should be emulated by humans. For the practitioners of Nsibidi, the lizard became an important animal to study because whenever the residents of the lower Niger River area would build homes they noticed that the very first “occupants” to take up residence in the structures were lizards. From this came the Ekpe saying and proverb, “A man should always remember, the first person who lives in his home is the lizard.” This part of the cloth reminds even the king that despite all of the time, energy and expenses that go into producing a home, a small, ugly nonhuman reptile will occupy the residence first. It does not matter your money or social status, this simple being will take pleasure in having your home as its own, at least for a while. There is nothing even a king or king maker can do to alter this truth; they must

live with this knowledge and be humbled by it. This message, worn in public by area rulers is one of the *public Nsibidi*, so its message and meaning is meant to be understood by all.

Another important animal often depicted in and through Nsibidi is the leopard. In southern Nigeria, the lion has competition as the would-be king of the rainforests. In Nsibidi, the leopard is the equal to any other animal in the region in terms of intelligence, strength, ability to adapt to situations and hunting prowess. This is one reason why the organization is called “the Leopard Society.” Ethnic groups such as the Efik, Efut and Qua were amazed by this big cat’s ability to not only hunt incredibly large, strong prey, but also its cunning which allows it to escape enemies by climbing trees. I was told that the leopard can even lift large carcasses it is killed up into the tree with it. The leopard can also run at high rate of speed, travel alone and out jump many other animals. Neither rain nor bodies of water such as rivers bother it, as the leopard is an excellent swimmer. This makes the leopard unique among many of the larger members of the feline family. Ekpe members examined in great detail every creature they came across in their environment. When I examined different versions of the Ukara Cloth, I noticed that the leopard will always not only featured, but prominently so as the only animal that was given a nearly human face. It is also the only among them that is actually “looking out” at its audience and smiling. The leopard reminds the king, and the community, that the ability to adapt to one situation fearlessly is important trait for humans to emulate. I can reimagine the Ukara Cloth as a *nommo made visual*. We can see that the images on the cloth represent the elements of visual depictions of African history, repetition of images and depiction of visual symbols of mythication that constitute any definition of nommo.

Nsibidi represented on Ukara textiles features many animals that have close association with water. This is not by coincidence, but instead intellectual design. With the exception of the fish, the other animals with a direct connection to water all have the capacity to spend time on land, prominent among these would be the turtle and the snake. As visual nommo, each has a long history among the cultures that predominate Cross River State. They also meet both the African history and repetition aspects used to define nommo. Each of these animals has long been part of the mythology associated with spirituality and the reason. You can find the images of these creatures nearly everywhere. Not only on cloth, but also on walls, doors, musical instruments, shrines, homes, bridges and even on tapestries meant for indoor areas like kitchens, bedrooms and bathrooms. Bates wrote, “Visual rhetoric also possesses a type of rhythm that works to express truth through repetition and accentuation, as is done by the rhythmic lines painted in Henri Matisse’s ‘Jazz’ (Roth, 1990), as well as forms of call and response that occur when visual rhetors respond to one another (Yancey, 2004).” I think this also helps to redefine Nsibidi as visual rhetoric because many of the symbols are placed in patterns where they repeat and are accentuated by thicker or thinner lines. Some lines even have color, so that they can serve as warnings to the public.

In review of Chapter 4, I discussed the startling lack of scholarship on nonverbal and written systems of communication in countries like Nigeria and Cameroon. My work is in communication studies, but also sits at the intersection of African history and African studies. Few scholars attempt to navigate this intellectual landscape. I hope to foster more of this kind of research in coming years. This work reframes and reimagines Nsibidi as visual rhetoric and visual nommo. My three central questions were thematized

in this chapter around the data I collected through a series of interviews in Nigeria. The part of what I heard from Bassey E. Bassey, Okamoko Edet and Sylvanus Ekoh Akong gave me several new perspectives on recasting Nsibidi utilizing communication frameworks. I additionally call for more grammatological examinations of the system as I still believe there may be evidence of sound to symbol or counting capability in Nsibidi. I have located two works by Henry Louis Gates and Saki Mufundikwa that should be read by any scholar constructing an argument focusing on the significance of actual writing in Africa. Each can be of great assistance in future books and articles on this subject. My attempt to document this failed, but I am calling for others in the West to enter this arena of communication. This chapter also features what might be viewed as perhaps the first Nsibidi “how to” manual. I offer important advice on why any foreign researcher in Nigeria and Cameroon studying Nsibidi must arrange to initiate into Ekpe/Mgbe. In addition to this, I discuss in some detail what the initiation process entails. I included the steps I underwent in an effort to shed light on what could be requested of others from places like the United States, Europe, Australia and Canada.

In Chapter 5, I will offer my thoughts on the strengths, weaknesses and limitations of this work. This coverage will include what I believe was done well and what could have been done better. I will reiterate my initial rationale for wanting to research this topic and why I believe each of my components, as well as my physical site for data collection could be of significant importance to researchers in communication and communication studies in coming years.

## **CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

### **An Overview**

In Chapter 1, I discussed my belief that Nsibidi is likely one of the oldest organized systems of nonverbal human communication. Nsibidi As a system, it may well date back no less than 4000 years. Western scholars in Nsibidi Studies have debated the supposed origins and uses of the system since the early years of the twentieth century. Colonial administrators and researchers in fields such as archeology, anthropology, linguistics, and others have investigated Nsibidi using a broad range of academic perspectives. I posit on page 1 that communication scholarship will allow Western researchers fresh approaches to uncovering Nsibidi's rhetorical and grammatological potential. Three central questions, using communication studies as a disciplinary standpoint, allowed me to unpack and investigate Nsibidi to see if it could be reframed and reimagined as visual rhetoric, visual nommo and actual writing. I first wanted to know what is Nsibidi? Next, how does this system work? Lastly, I wanted to discern who uses Nsibidi? As a system of communication, Nsibidi consists of a series of gestures, tattoos, symbols, signs and other markings.

I spent three months living in southeastern Nigeria and Cameroon, while exploring Nsibidi utilizing Afrinography as my method of study. Now, it is time I share what I learned; much of my information has rarely appeared in Western works, including coverage of an initiation process into the ancient knowledge society known as Ekpe. If it is one of the oldest organized systems of nonverbal human communication, then communication scholars should study Nsibidi. The primary significance of my dissertation is that it is the first to explore how communication studies scholarship can

integrate at least some of Nsibidi's unknown rhetorical and grammatological potential. If communication researchers are looking to locate and examine new intellectual horizons for their work, I suggest that systems of written communication such as Nsibidi offer fertile new ground and vast potential.

My narrative account is written with a strong "first-person" voice. This is intentional and I believe essential to my relating of this particular account to wider audiences. During my time living in Cross River State, I witnessed some amazing displays of Nsibidi in its written and gestured forms. In the end, this is my understanding of what I saw, heard and learned from a range of Nsibidi teachers.

On page 1, I began the discussion of the three events that led me to undertake this particular work. Although my academic background was primarily in history, I now consider myself a communication scholar, Africologist and Africanist. I have spent fifteen years researching the lives and cultures of communities in West Africa. My formal education includes a bachelor's and master's with specializations in African history. In addition to my coursework, I have had spent time on the African continent via Fulbright, the United States Bureau of African Affairs and other programs on five different occasions. I have long wanted to write a dissertation on Nsibidi and this project has roots that date back to 2002. It was during the fall of 2010 that I applied to Ohio University's College of Communication Studies. For the past four years, I have built this work step-by-step and have even spent two summers in the Caribbean and Central America collecting information on Nsibidi from sources in this hemisphere. All of this led me to spending October of 2014 through early January of 2015 living in several cities, towns and villages throughout southeastern Nigeria and southwestern Cameroon

furthering my data collection. I visited numerous cultural and archival sites in these places in my effort to explore and understand Nsibidi.

In Chapter 2, I put together what I feel is a solid, in-depth investigation and historical context of the relevant previous scholarship on involving Nsibidi Studies. Again, I suggest that it is important for communication studies scholars to interrogate Nsibidi because the system may be one of the oldest forms of nonverbal human communication. There have been dozens of book and articles written over the past century that cover various aspects of Nsibidi. The prior coverage by Western researchers to explore Nsibidi as a system represented broad swath of disciplines and backgrounds. There were colonial administrators, missionaries, explorers, artists, archeologists, anthropologists and historians and introduced significant work in this area. However, the field of communication has lagged behind understanding what Nsibidi is and how it works. There is also a lack of scholarship from the field of communication on who uses Nsibidi. On page 38, I used visual maps to show where Cross River State and the city of Calabar are located on the map. I explore notions of writing and writing systems in Nigeria on page 42. This includes my study of the work produced by grammatologists Peter T. Daniels and William Bright (1996), as well as Geoffrey Sampson (1985). The use of communication scholarship may add new insights into how Nsibidi works. Then discuss how I believe that communication studies scholarship can offer the world fresh perspectives on Nsibidi and make what I think are vital new additions on the record of written communication in Nigeria and Cameroon. Page 48 brought me to my coverage of the older work of T.D. Maxwell, J.K. Macgregor and Percy Amaury Talbot, and other outstanding recent source additions from David Darby, Robert Ferris Thompson, Ivor



Miller, Amada Carlson and Jordan Fenton. Each of these newer scholars have expanded what we know about Nsibidi, although several questions remain unanswered.

The vast majority of Western research has framed Nsibidi as West African art, pictography or ideogram, and not actual Western writing. None have situated Nsibidi as potentially a new form of visual rhetoric or visual nommo. The fields of art history and archeology have contributed the most information on what Nsibidi is as a system and how it operates. Generally, Nsibidi is understood as an important Lower Niger River region artistic form of cultural expression in the West. My project, rooted in my three central questions, offers a different perspective on Nsibidi. I scrutinized the system by utilizing a communication studies lens, as I sought to reframe it as visual rhetoric, visual nommo and possibly actual writing. There are points where my work is in agreement with previous research, but no previous scholarship has attempted to reimagine Nsibidi as visual rhetoric or visual nommo.

By pages 51- 74, I had decided to categorize the four major ways many previous Western researchers appeared to study Nsibidi. I understood the first method of examining Nsibidi as something I called *Meaning and the Example*, which place during the years 1900-1920. The next perspective is called *Nsibidi in Western Linguist Studies*. The third perspective was *Nsibidi Studies in Art History and Archaeology*, while the fourth became *Nsibidi as Graphic, Sign or Ideographic System* .

Chapter 3 is my methods section and on page 86, I laid out and explained my plan of study and timeline during my three months in Nigeria and Cameroon. Since my dissertation work contained a significant Afrinographic component, I had to undertake primary data collection in Cross River State. The sites included Atakpa (Duke Town),

Nsidung (Henshaw Town), Old Town (Obutong) and Obio Oko (Creek Town). I also spent time in the culturally rich capital city of Abuja, Akwa Ikom and the northern section of Cross River State. In December, I travelled to the Alok Monolith Museum in Alok Community where the oldest known Nsibidi inscriptions are located. I conducted a series of over forty interviews with various Nsibidi users who were member of the well-known African “secret society” Ekpe/Mgbe. After initiating into this organization, I decided to describe it, and others that are similar, as “knowledge societies.” Page 83 delineates the places I visited and the names of many area participants who I spoke and worked with in Calabar and elsewhere. As I stated on page 85, nearly each day I had face-to-face interactions with my participants and I slowly became aware of their aversion to my using the term ethnography. It was at this point that I began applying Afrinography as the only lens. Participants were professors, engineers, shopkeepers, radio personalities, entrepreneurs, administrators, managers, members of knowledge societies, government officials, royalty and bankers, as I discussed on pages 86-87. This group ranged from Western-trained elites to traditional intellectuals. I also provide information on time at the hotel Success Villa, in Calabar North, which was my “staging ground” as I travelled throughout the eastern Niger River region.

Ethnography and the Africanist are covered on page 90. I still believe that ethnography is a powerful and viable research tool many spaces. It is probable that I will not completely abandon this approach, but I am leery about its effectiveness in some African-descended communities. At the very least, I plan to continue using Afrinography as a counterbalance to ethnography. I included information on how ethnographic research has faced many its historical demons. This was important discussion because it

may come a time where I attempt to combine ethnography and Afrinography. Since Afrinography is so new, perhaps I can borrow many of the better aspects inherent in ethnography. I enjoyed reading the honest critique of ethnography offered by scholars such as Dwight Conquergood (2013). Conquergood no punches in his Doral examination of ethnography's past and its potential for future work.

By Chapter 4, I have moved into my detailed coverage of life in Cross River State and the city of Calabar. When we look at page 106, I began my discussion of many of the discoveries and observations I took from living in that region. In relation to the many interviews I conducted, there were three individuals who gave me some of the most insightful revelations about how Nsibidi functions and what the system entails. The information gained from in-depth discussions with Bassey E. Bassey, Okamoko Edet and Sylvanus Ekoh Akong allowed me to attack all three of my central questions head on. These three individuals provided some of the best evidence that Nsibidi can be reframed as visual rhetoric and visual nommo, although they claim to not know much about the system's potential in terms of grammatology. It is also at this point, that I introduced the notion of this work being a type of "how-to" manual for foreign researchers who hope to initiate into Ekpe society and then investigate Nsibidi.

On pages 109 through 110, include not only written information, but actual photographs detailing the most sacred of physical spaces for many members of Ekpe/Mgbe, the osam and efe. Although I am not allowed to share any details about the interiors of these structures, I do highlight what they may look like outwardly by my inclusion of photographs showing some of the signage for these buildings. This is also an uncommon occurrence in Western literature regarding Nsibidi. On page 112, I outline

the knowledge society initiation process in hopes that Western scholars in coming years had access to information prior to their arrival in Calabar. This information is intended to act as a guide for any non-African researcher seeking to learn about Nsibidi, or any other system of written communication, that requires membership in a knowledge society. This was perhaps the most difficult section to pen. I had to be extremely careful not to “expose” the entire process to not initiates, while at the same time offering hopeful future members substantial insight into the process.

I introduced the phrase “playing Ekpe” on page 119. This is an important term because in order to fully understand Nsibidi you have to become an Ekpe initiate. Every initiate must at some point play Ekpe. Playing Ekpe can involve the darning of colorful outfits and the performing of Nsibidi using gestures and motions. I decided to include five photographs that depict some of the incredible outfits worn by members playing Ekpe.

Page 122 describes my meeting and admiration for the well-respected local scholar of Calabar, Bassey Effiong Bassey. Bassey (2012) has written several books on Ekpe and Nsibidi that played a role in reshaping the history of written communication in Nigeria. I wanted to include no less than one of his works because I believe is important to include the scholarship of local voices in this dissertation.

I decided to use my three central questions, which I asked during every interview, as the theme through which I will explore Nsibidi as visual nommo and visual rhetoric by page 31. Again, I elected to take the three interviews and use the responses as a means to investigate Nsibidi. I wanted to know what the system was, how it worked and who used it. For nearly the next ten pages, I reframe and reimagine Nsibidi as a new landscape

were it could be viewed as visual rhetoric and a kind of visual nommo ripe with spiritual energy and authority.

My stumbling across a dilapidated bridge not far from my hotel on the fringes of Calabar South was one of the most important moments during my time in Nigeria. I discussed this discovery and included several photographs of the written Nsibidi on this branch on page 145. I also decided to show photographs of another public display of the system from a roundabout that travelers use on the main highway to and from the city.

Pages 146 through 155 features what I believe are the cornerstones that any communication scholar can use as they are put together an argument for the importance of studying writing and written communication in spaces such as Nigeria and Cameroon. On these pages I highlight one of the “forgotten” articles written decades ago by a young Henry Louis Gates on the importance of cultures creating actual systems of writing. Gates makes a persuasive argument that Western societies have long viewed the creation of true systems of writing as one of the most important avenues by which any culture can demonstrate its intellectual prowess. I agree with his main contention that without such a system, Western culture has a long history of depicting such people and communities as “backwards.” I also mentioned the interesting scholarship of the lesser-known Saki Mufundikwa. I think that reading his work is also important because it believes as I do that Nsibidi likely does contain elements of actual writing, although this has never been conclusively proven. We both spent time in Calabar attempting to uncover this potential and we both failed. However, I do not believe that the this case is closed. Mufundikwa offers some very intriguing information on systems of written communication in Nigeria and throughout the African continent. Very few people in the Western Academy has ever

heard of this scholar, but I believe that his work is not only interesting, but groundbreaking.

I decided to include information on how humanity has long believed that the written word contains great power. On pages 157 through 161, I invoke this by discussing some of the major global religions narratives on creation and written language. I did this in an effort to show that the visual nommo, or a nommo-made-visual, as suggested by a communication scholar Ben Bates was possible when we reimagine Nsibidi. I think that several of my interviewees, in particular the three that I used in the thematized portion of this work, were saying as much. Nsibidi is a form of written communication that its users believe directly channels the power of the creator itself. The system is as spiritual as it is mundane. Nsibidi allows its users to access not only spiritual energy that exists on the human frame, but also taps the full potential of the power within the human spirit. Nsibidi is easily reimaged as visual nommo and a nommo-made-visual. It is the power of God and the human spirit put down onto material objects.

Beyond the responses from my participants, I believe that examinations of Nsibidi displayed on Ukara cloth additionally show that the system can be reframed as visual nommo and normal-made-visual. I carry this discussion from pages 164 through 167. Included are images of one of the most important Ukara types.

## Strengths and Limitations



Figure 29. Photo of me with two to other Ekpe/Mgbe initiates, including my master teacher Obong Ekpe Epenyong Bassey.



Figure 30. Photo of several Ekpe/Mgbe members attending an event held at the royal palace of the Obong of Calabar.

I believe that there are several strengths and two limitations to the work I attempted in this dissertation. I want to begin with the limitations. The first and most obvious involved time and the second was a lack of adequate financial resources. Although these two obstacles at often proved problematic, I did my best to confront and overcome each.

Nearly all of my recent counterparts from Western institutions were able to spend far more time in Cross River State working on their Ekpe and Nsibidi research than I. Amanda Carlson, Christopher Slogar and Jordan Fenton literally spent years amassing their doctoral data. I believe that three months was an excellent starting point to begin research on Nsibidi in Nigeria and Cameroon, however since it is such a complex area of study to undertake, I could have used more time spent in the field. The major problem is that many of the Nsibidi practitioners who possess good information on the system, or know where such people are found, live in scattered cities, towns and villages throughout southern Nigeria and Cameroon. At least another year of research would be the minimal amount of time needed to observe and record all of the people and places necessary to broaden this project in a way that I would feel sufficient. Another part of my struggle was that I did not have the requisite financial support that would sustain the level of travel needed to improve this work on many levels.

I also needed to spend far more time in Nigeria's major museum collections located in Lagos, Abuja and Port Harcourt. Although I was able to spend time in Abuja, future projects will compel me to have at least several months of research in more major cities. This limitation became apparent as I spent more time with regional scholars working at the Cultural Center and National Museum in Calabar. My research



collaborators working with CBAAC told me of the organization's many branches found throughout Nigeria that contain archives which may have proven beneficial to my dissertation's focus. The head office of CBAAC is in Lagos, and there are at least five other branches spread throughout every region of the nation. It would have been helpful to have had the opportunity to travel to the cities of Ibadan, Ile-Ife, Nassarawa and Abuja, in order to access those specific CBAAC archives. The Federal Ministry of Tourism, Culture and National Orientation has collected records on the history and culture of Nigeria for nearly forty years, and most of these can only be found at these sites.

Along the similar travel lines, I had intended to travel to Owerri and spend considerable time looking through the archives at Imo State University. This institution has a research center dedicated to the study of Igbo culture. I believe that this site has several unique pieces of archival material that could have helped me create a more accurate account concerning Nsibidi's past. Additionally, this Center likely also houses information about other forms of written communication in central and southern Nigeria overlooked by Western scholarship until now.

The next limitation I would like to discuss involved a lack of financial resources. The funding I received from the Scripps College of Communication was used to purchase my round-trip airfare to Nigeria, and partially cover some of my housing expenses. Due to the increasing threat of dangerous area religious militants such as Boko Haram, I was unaware that what I had planned to spend on housing would be woefully inadequate. Originally, I intended to stay in a series of relatively low-cost residential sites. Once I understood the full magnitude of the potential for harm, being an outsider, my participants in southern Nigeria suggested that I upgrade my accommodation and

consider spending time in a higher-end hotel. This meant that my budget for the trip greatly increased. By the time I realized this, it was too late to apply for any of the major funding possibilities such as Fulbright, NEH, or the Ford Foundation. I had to manage with a combination of whatever was given to my cause by Ohio University and my own personal finances. Luckily, a prominent benefactor in the field of communication studies stepped forward at the last minute and agreed to help finance my work. Still, even with this added assistance I had nowhere near the requisite funds needed to travel throughout Nigeria and Cameroon.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

I have said repeatedly throughout all five chapters that I hope to convince other communication scholars to begin to work in places like Nigeria and Cameroon. In particular, those in communication studies because I think our branch in this field of study may have some of the better tools for devising projects that investigate written forms of communication in such a culturally complex location. In my opinion, there is a great need for more focus on written systems of communication. This seemed to be the area with the least amount of research in communication and communication studies. There is at least some work that has been done on nommo and call and response. Africa is the second-largest landmass on the planet, with over fifty individual countries to choose from for research. Surely, one of them is suitable as a place to undertake some type of communication work.

I also hope to stimulate more discussion regarding the Western definition of writing, even as I call for the academics of the West to interrogate Nsibidi for its possible grammatological potential. Again, I want to be clear that I am not in disagreement that

systems such as Nsibidi may represent something truly unique and African. My point is that before scholars begin to classify any system of written communication in any part of Africa we should be sure that it has been fully explored and understood as such. If it is determined that there are these uniquely African forms of written communication, there may be the need to call for a redefinition of what is, or is not, writing. I fully understand the arguments of some of my recent predecessors in Nsibidi Studies, including Carlson and Fenton. However, before we make statements that appear to be absolute, there is much more work to be done on this specific subject.

For those scholars who study rhetoric, visual rhetoric and nommo, inside and outside the field of communication, my work has implications for your future research. Nsibidi is that new landscape and horizon that you have only dreamt of finding. The potential here for projects is quite likely inexhaustible. Especially for those researchers who want projects that involve a type of rhetoric that is not European, Middle Eastern or Asian in scope. When I think about all of the popular Afrocentric intellectuals, stretching the confines of nommo from merely the verbal to include forms that are written has vast untapped potential. Each year numerous articles and books are published on the “power of nommo.” This has occurred for the course of the past thirty-five years. Nommo has been discussed in the context of disciplines such as history, African-American studies, American studies, Africana studies, sociology, psychology and literature. Yet, the power of nommo in written form has barely been scratched by the literature in the fields above. Scholars in religious studies should also take a look at this concept.

## Final Thoughts and Revelations



Figure 31. Photo of me with four of my most important research partners in Nigeria. From right to left, Mike, Arikpo, Okamoko, myself and Lebo.

There is one final thought I would like to end this work with because I believe it is important on many levels. On my final full day in Calabar, during the first week of January, 2015, I decided to have one last meal with all of my primary participants and co-creators from the Cultural Center. On a few occasions, we had eaten meals at one of the small restaurants situated near the side gate entrance. As we were laughing and enjoying powerful full, bitter leaf soup and Fanta beverages, I noticed that all of my colleagues had an onlooker on their face. Being the Ever-curious individual that I am, I found it necessary to ask what was going on. It was at this point that the esteemed Okamoto wanted me to know something he thought was very important. Even though I only spent three months in the Cross River State area, this group wanted me to know that they are ongoing joke about my acquiring a year's worth of knowledge on Nsibidi and Ekpe/Mgbe was more than jest. It was at this point that Gabriel chimed in. He wanted me to know that although I had spent far less time than some of my contemporaries, there

were certain communities and peoples who want to make sure I had access to information that others had not been given.

Okamoto and Lebo then told me that being African-American made a substantial difference in how many of my participants felt about, and related to my presence. Admittedly, I was quite stunned and his news! I had no idea that this dynamic was taking place with anyone I encountered. In fact, I presume that the exact opposite was in effect. Having long spent time in Africa, I understand the current ongoing implications associated with centuries of colonization and the European brainwashing of the African mind. I have seen firsthand how some Africans will cater to people of European descent, while totally ignoring those who are perceived to be of African origin. This was a revelation that I had never anticipated! Is this important for scholars in the future who might want to spend time in Cross River State and Calabar? I would suspect so. No scholar can predict their interactions with unfamiliar participants. All we can do is show up and do the work. If our particular social, cultural or ethnic backgrounds can make this task easier and more accurate, then there was no need for apologies in my opinion. Nevertheless, I do believe that we should be aware when and if this dynamic is occurring. I cannot state whether or not had I known it would have changed my actions or feelings toward any participant or place. Awareness is an important research skill to hone. I might even go as far to say that “field awareness” is vital to not only one’s possible survival in a foreign field, but also as a gauge of what sort of actual interaction is taking place between scholar than any participant or co-creator.

In conclusion, I would again like to call for researchers in communication and communication studies to contemplate and undertake work on the African continent.

There are plethora of potential projects to explore in places like Nigeria and Cameroon. Systems of written communication are numerous and may provide new insights on older communication frames such as rhetoric, visual rhetoric nommo. Scholars have an obligation to broaden the field of communication studies. This includes incorporating new methods, such as Afrinography, through which we can better know and understand the cultural and social phenomena found in non-Western spaces. The study of Nsibidi, as well as other written systems of knowledge in Nigeria and Cameroon, are fertile ground for all of what I stated above. As our field grows, we as intellectuals grow. When we refuse growth, we stagnant and the discipline suffers. This then in turn will likely negatively influence the institutions we serve. Our society, students and communities can only deteriorate in such a scenario. I believe that the academician must stand as the vanguard against such a possibility. Communication studies must and will deepen its appreciation for scholarship in non-traditional places and spaces. I intend to be part of the movement of my field in this direction.

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