

CREATIVE INDICES OF INDIGENOUS GOVERNANCE IN IBIBIOLAND SINCE 1900

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ABSTRACT: *The creative indices of Ibibio indigenous governmental system has not been the subject of serious social historical scholarship. Indigenous governmental system in Ibibioland has been subjected to various generalisation, misrepresentation, misinterpretation and distortion, especially from a Eurocentric (outside-in) filter. Under such filter and bias, Ibibio indigenous governance has often been viewed as lacking creativity. Various aspects of exceptional governance in Ibibioland have been considered as extic. While an Afrocentric (inside-out) filter accepts that organised political and governmental structures prevailed in Ibibioland, prior to the arrival of the Europeans, the study of indigenous creativity in governance and administration has not been given adequate attention. The use of Ekpo Anyokho, Ekpe, Ekpo Ekoong, Abon, Ekang and Akata represented creative elements employed for local governance, law, order, and social justice, across a wide representation of levels and institutions of government in Ibibioland. With the imposition of colonial rule in Ibibioland from 1885 onward, the Europeans retained aspects of such indices of governance consequent upon its effectiveness, efficiency and reliability. The paper argues that the indigenous creative indices of governance were reflected in the reliance of colonial agents on some machinery of indigenous governance. Consequently, change and continuity defined the indigenous governmental space in Ibibioland. The paper submits that while the changes were externally driven and almost unavoidable, aspects of continuity explain the creativity that percolated such indigenous governmental elements.*

KEYWORDS: creative indices, indigenous governance, Ibibio, land

INTRODUCTION

Many reasons have been given for the existence of secret societies in West Africa. One reason as advanced by Nkubo (2009) is that they helped to keep women to check since they are said to be deficient in real reverence to authority as could be gleaned by their attitudes towards their husbands and so the secret societies helped to keep them within bounds. A second reason is that the secret societies helped to instil fear and reverence to constituted authorities since they were believed to have originated from, or derived their authority from the supernatural world. Third, the secret societies were a medium of worshipping or showing respect to the ancestors, who were said to be still interested in the affairs of the world. In the course of showing reverence to the ancestors, the latter were often propitiated as well as called upon to bless the society of the living (Nkubo, 2009).

Since the elders and the overwhelming majority of men were members of the secret societies, in the pre-colonial times, the societies were governmental institutions par excellence. They operated

in co-operation with the family heads, councils of the elders, village heads, group heads and clan heads. The rules and actions of the secret societies were therefore those of civil authority. Every human institution has definite functions in the social system. such functions are often closely correlated with the integral structure of the institution as well as the experiences and needs of the community. Once an institution fails to fulfil its primary roles in the course of its existence (unless such functions are replaced by new ones) there would be structural disintegration and ultimate decay of the institution.

Conversely, an institution with definite set of social functions is bound to eco-exist and grow as integral part of the society. Before early contacts with the western ways of life, Ibibio communities had important institutions which played recognized roles with well-defined functions in the community and whose practical values have guaranteed their continuous existence as social systems within the community. Some of these institutions exercised functions covering judicial, moral and humanitarian spheres of the community's influence on the group. The institutions that had considerable influence in their respective spheres of operation are *Ekpo*, *Ekpe*, *Ekoon*, *Ekpo Anyokho*, *Abon*, *Ekan*, *Ekpri Akata* and others which have been mentioned elsewhere in this study.

Ekpo Anykho

Ekpo Anyokho existed in almost all the villages in Ibibio land in the pre-colonial days. Anaang have what they call *Ekpo*. The later does not appear to be as severe and stern in its operations as the *Ekpo Anyokho*. Ibibio mythologies indicate that *Ekpo* society must have originated from the belief widely held about life after death in the indigenous Ibibio communities. It was believed that there was another world inhabited by ghosts. Every ghost was a replica of a person who died in this world and transited into the underworld with the beauty and natural qualities it carried to the grave. The replica at that stage acquired super-human vital force and was known as *Ekpo* throughout Ibibio land and its environs. Life in the underworld is said to be so controlled that only form and order prevailed. To copy their very good government (of strict law, justice and severe penalties) a society had to be formed. Membership in the society was open only to males 'with hearts'. Only males would have the heart to commune with the ancestors and invite them to most of the festivals in world without fright (Ukut, nd).

In the indigenous community, *Ekpo* society functioned as part and parcel of every village political order. Women and slaves were precluded from membership and male persons who were non-members, suffered the same restrictions and penalties as slaves and women when order was invoked (Udo, 1983; 2001) Among the Iman, Ikono and Itiam Etoi clans, it was compulsory for all adult males to become members of *Ekpo Anyokho* cult. In these communities, *Ekpo Anyokho* could molest non-members. Like *Ekpe* and *Ekpo Ekoon* discussed below, *Ekpo Anyokho* had a sign or language, *Nwed Ekpo* which served as a mark of identification of members (Nkubo, 2009). The society was organized on the basis of the transcendent powers of the ancestors (Ekong, 2001). That is to say, *Ekpo Anyokho* personified or symbolized the ancestors who were deemed to have come back to earth during *Ekpo Anyokho* season, to regulate the affairs of living mortals. The wearer of *Ekpo Anyokho* mask, sincerely believed that he was the embodiment of a particular and behaved as such (Ekong, 2001, Ebong, 2008).

There are various grades or classes of *Ekpo Anyokho* namely: *Eka Ekpo* (mother ghost), *Akpan Ekpo* (first son), *Aboikpa Ekpo* (maiden ghost), *Ekoon Ekpo* (the warrior), *Ifed Ekpo* (the naked ghost), *Ikpe Ekpo* (the legislative and judicial authority), *Ekpo Ndok* (fun poker), *Inyoon Ekpo* (the

crippling or weakling), *Akpok adok akom* (the lizard; the famous roof climber), *Idion Ekpo* (assistant to the diviner), *Titia Ekpo* (Teacher Ghost) and so on. The ranks or grades of *Ekpo Anyokho*, however varies according to the locality (Nkubo, 2009, Uko, 2009).

Ekpo Anyokho normally operated between September and December of the year. It operated in a smaller degree during the *Etak isua* (small year), but in full swing during *Isua Utuak Ndok* (a big year) when all the shrines were renovated and sacrifices offered to the gods and ancestors. This idea gave a clue to the fact that the Ibibio people did not only have knowledge of science, philosophy, religion, politics, mathematics and government, they also practiced astrology and were able to determine *Etak isua* (a small year) and *Eka Isua* or *Isua Utuak Ndok* (the leap year).

The masquerades normally paraded the streets in four out of the eight days of the Ibibio week. They could be quite severe in their dealings with women and non-members. They were always armed with dangerous weapons including poisoned arrows and bows. They could be very severe with criminals and offenders against the laws and norms of the society. The condemned criminals were executed without fear or favour. For example, an *Ekpo* masquerade could destroy and burn down the house of the parents of a girl who becomes pregnant before being married and eventually fattened (Udo, 1983, Ekong, 2001; Ukpog, 2007, Udoh, 2009).

As a social control mechanism, *Ekpo Anyokho* ridiculed in songs, the deviants against the norms of the society. It also had words of praise for those people who performed heroic deeds in the interest of the society as a whole. Any law passed by the civil authority would also be handed over to *Ekpo Anyokho* for execution. *Ekpo Anyokho* also passed its own laws and also executed them.

Ekpo Play

Every village had *Afe Ekpo* (*Ekpo* society's lodge), which was out of bounds to non-members. Everything concerning their laws, codes, ceremonies and media of communication were stocked in the lodge under "top secret control". For instance, *Ekpo* society had its own mode of writing, *Nwed Ekpo*, understood only by members of the *Ekpo* cult. This practice is similar to what is known as *Nsibidi* in the case *Ekpe* society. Few days, before an important festival when the ancestor ghosts are to be invoked, fresh palm fronds (aye) are stretched symbolically across the roads as blocks to non-members into the *Ekpo* square. Women and non-initiates would have to procure enough of their necessities to cover the duration of the play within which they would be confined (Ukut, nd). *Ekpo* society members themselves would team up to clean and decorate their square and hall. They would also contribute to buy requirement like cocks, eggs, palm-wine, yam, charcoal, firewood, yellow chalk-of-grace (ufon), to mention a few. For at least one day before the festival, all members of *Ekpo* society quarantine themselves for purposes of purification and easy contact and communication with the 'ghosts'. In every village, they collect themselves in the square and crosscheck carefully one another, sing their secret signs and codes. This is to prevent infiltration. The most stringent checking is while entering their lodge. The non-members can sasily be spotted since he is likely not to know the method of entering the lodge. If such a person is discovered, he faces death penalty on the spot. Inside the lodge, members have to squat to sing and perform all the rituals and rites to evoke ancestors to come and partake in the festival. It is believed that those invited truly come out. That was the chance the society could direct the ghost to discipline any deviant person in the village (Nkubo 2009, Udoh 2009, Ukoh, 2009, Ukut, n.d).

The following morning, *Ekpo Anyokho* masquerades would storm the village. Each masque was supposed to represent a ghost with distinctive qualities and traits. A typical masque of high society

were a black horrible mask, painted his skin dense black with charcoal or soot fixed with oil or kerosene. He covered his head and torso with black raffia manes, green leaves and grass (*selaginella scnadens*). He tied a big bell, a sheathed machete, and a bunch of blackened narrow pieces of rag; bundles of *ekpund* (rattlers) adorn the waist and each ankle. His entire shape is so heavy leaving full his muscular limbs; with the machete sticking out like a strong tail and the manes responding to his smart movements, the masque looked like a lion. This may be why *Ekpo Anyokho* is otherwise called *amon* meaning lion (Ukut, n.d).

The whole society had two major groups, one for adults and the other for infants. Each had sub-groups according to duty, keeping almost the same laws codes and conduct. The slight difference came in their season of operation and their primary objectives. For example, *Ekpo Ndok* played exclusively for *Ndok* festival: a farewell festival for ancestral spirits held in the twelfth lunar month. The masquers tied no bell and comprised only members of the highest order.

In the adults' group the masquers are black from head to toe. Their black wooden masks were often large and carved to the surrealistic nature of ghosts. The fearsome faces were conventionally described by indigenes as "pretty". Ancient tribal marks like *Nkor* (a geometric mark in high relief) were found on the temples and forehead of almost every black mask. A ridge crossed the forehead representing a prestige fringe of *Idion*, a much higher male cult in the society. From size and structure, the masks depicted the super-human power of *Ekpo*; some had up to six faces and were horned, while some had up to and above seven faces; some were horned, while some carried skulls (Ukut, n.d).

One type of adults' mask, *Nkubia*- named after the wood from which it was carved- was believed to be so full of aggressive vital force that it possesses any wearer into a crazy and wild mood. *Nkubia* masque was therefore controlled with a long, strong rope from behind. He was also denied the use of *utigha* (bow) and *idan* (arrows) but was given an axe and 'calmed; with a living cock hung down his neck.

Every *Ekpo Anyokho* had an eloquent conductor *Akwa Ekpo* who wore no mask but carried a particular wood-based rectangular basket of his charms, rituals and images. He directed troops of masquers. Just as a commander in the battlefield, *Akwa Ekpo* ordered masquers to shoot or not, to take cover, change direction, or to pursue. He also warned the public to steer clear from their path. This impact of his commands and warnings heightened with an unfamiliar rattle of large wooden dumb-bell-shaped rattler.

The music was from a twin drum. One drum must be of very deep tone and one drummer played both in a fast and loud tempo keeping the rhythm very similar to that of a battlefield. But members of the society understood the talking of the drums. The masquers danced to the rhythm and expressions of the drums. As they jested, danced, or somersaulted to the beatings, the bells and rattlers they wore added more flavour to the music. Other members sang in groups as other danced (Ukut, n.d).

Songs of the adult and those of the infants were not very different. But in appearance, masquers in the infants group were very beautiful. Their masks were more idealistic than realistic and surrealistic. All types of ancient indigenous hairdos and skin designs were on such masks till today. Red, green and white take the place of black as colour of the face. Red dominated perhaps because

it was the colour, which people used in dabbing their skins for beauty. The masks were exotic ones with structural accessories of flat scrolls with mirrors, or anything, which added more beauty to the masks. In place of green leaves, this group used designed and very colourful cloths pieces, white or black natural manes from rams, and coloured raffia. And rather than use offensive weapons; they carried handkerchiefs, fans, mirrors, baby doll or slate. They depicted in their group – male and female, young and old, and all walks of life (Uko, 2009; Ukut, nd). These Ekpo songs are open for further research in order to record and expose their significance- mythical, religious or otherwise. Also comparison should be drawn from the *Ifa* poetry of the Yoruba.

Ekpo society was a powerful instrument of the indigenous government before it lost its ground in mid-twentieth century when European missionaries condemned and proscribed it. But it had definite functions and played definite roles in the socio-political system and it survived particularly on the western parts of the state. In its present form, the society exists only for recreational and aesthetic values and perhaps as a respected relict of the indigenous social and political institution in the cultural life of Ibibio people.

Ekpe

Ekpe which means leopard in English had its origin among the Ejagham in the Cameroons. It spread from there to the Cross River, Abia and Akwa Ibom States. Inyang (2009) argued that the Ekpe Secret Society “exist in almost village in Ibibioland but is most powerful in the riverine communities including the Ibiono area”. This seems to be an overstatement as evidence gleaned from field work revealed otherwise. Most of the informants corroborate that it was rather the Ekpo Anyoko that “existed in almost every villages in Ibibioland”. Not Ekpe. However, it is obvious that Ekpe society quite dominated the riverine communities such Ibiono Ibom, Itu, Uruan and Oron. There were twelve grades of Ekpe among which are: *idem Ikwo*, *Mboko*, *Mboko-mboko*, *Mbakara*, *Ebunko*, *Nyamkpe*, *Oku Akama*, *Okpoho Ekpe*, *Nkanda*.

The initiation fees into the various grades of *Ekpe* were high generally. In Calabar, it cost as much as £200 -£300 for a person to be initiated into all the grades of Ekpe, at a time when a higher elementary teacher was earning £36 per annum, in say, 1950. Among the Ibiono, the entrance fees to the first grade amounted to some £8 (Talbot, 1926). Among the Uruan, the fee for joining the first grade was 40 brass rods (£1) and 700 rods £17/10/- for the highest grade (Ukpong, 2005). It is clear, therefore, that poor people could not afford to be members of *Ekpe*, let alone aspiring to the highest grade. It was prestigious to be a member of *Ekpe* as it was an elitist society or cult.

The activities of *Ekpe* resemble those of the bush leopard which lives on animals' flesh only. In the pre-colonial era, the *Ekpe* secret society was notorious for its brutality, killing without mercy as need arose. Anybody who resisted an envoy of the *Ekpe* or failed to carry out its order was ruthlessly executed. Inyang (2009) mentioned the case of certain European missionaries named Rev. Cruikshank and W.B. Taylor who employed the services of *Ekpe* to enforce law and order in the Ibiono area during the colonial epoch. *Ekpe* had/has a colourful raffia suit, beautifully adorned. The period, April to June was generally *Ekpe* season, which was introduced by beating of the society's drum and the roaming of the 'leopard', which resembled the sound of a live leopard. A non-member up till this day does not know the secret of the sound.

Since a leopard lives only on animals flesh, *Ekpe* checked the movement of stray animals during the planting season. *Ekpe* captured any stray animal. The owner redeemed it by the payment of some fines, which according to Inyang (2009) were usually doubled as Ekpe was reputed to be the

only animal that eats with two hands. So all fines associated with the violation of Ekpe laws were usually in twos. In other words, two chickens, two goats, two bottles of ufofop and two bottles of schnapps etc. The essence was to serve as a deterrent for people to protect their domestic animals from straying into and destroying other people's crops. *Ekpe* thus played the role of a modern compound master of a Local Government Council (Inyang, 2009).

An *Ekpe* member could place its insignia on his property, thus warning trespassers to steer clear of such property. Any offender incurred the wrath of *Ekpe*. The penalty could be as heavy as requiring the offender or his dependants to be initiated into a grade of *Ekpe*. *Ekpe* made laws and executed them. Any law passed by the civil authority could become the law of *Ekpe*, for speedy and effective execution. An offender against the law became an offender of *Ekpe*. *Ekpe* settled all cases except those of murder, witchcraft and sorcery. It could also execute an offender condemned to death by beheading him at one stroke of the machete or tying him to a stake and removing his lower jaw.

In the pre-colonial times, *Ekpe* was a symbol of good government, equity and justice. Judgment was given without fear or favour because it was devoid of bribery and corruption. It was strongly believed that any member of *Ekpe* who was biased in his judgment or accepted bribes, would be killed by the ancestors of *Ekpe* (Abalogu, 1978). Redress through *Ekpe* was open to members and non-members were equally binding on all parties. The person seeking redress paid a summons fees in cash to the *Ekpe* society. According to Inyang (2009), the judicial trial was characterized by the principle of *audi alteram partem* (hearing the other side of the story); that is to say hearing the evidence from both parties just as in a civil suit. Judgment was given accordingly.

Ekpe collected debts on behalf of a creditor. The debtor was confined to his house and was not allowed to go out or come in until he paid the debt. It could therefore be deduced that the society was distinctly a cult as well as club and religious observances enter largely into its rituals. Its functions and significance can mainly be categorised into three namely: social, political and religious.

Social Functions

In its social functions, it affords a form of relaxation and recreation both the initiates who take part in the drumming and dancing and the non-initiates who watch excitedly; clap and sometimes take part in the general dancing and festivities that go along with *Ekpe* play, whenever it is thrown open to all and sundry. Among *Ekpe* communities of the middle and northern Cross River, women are forbidden from taking part in the songs, dance, or the secret ceremonies of the society. Old women may join the society but would not be initiated into its secrets.

Again, whenever a member of the community does something worthy and outstanding, he might be initiated into the cult as a mark of appreciation for his contributions to the progress of the community at large. This confers some honour and social status and distinction to the individuals concerned. Even non-members of the community could be so honoured. When this is the case, however, the individuals are superficially initiated as a mark of social distinction and no more. They are never initiated into the secrecy and religious aspects of the cult (Bassey, n.d).

Political Functions

Before the advent of the British and organized common government in Nigeria, the political authority of the cult was supreme. It acted as and was virtually the government of the day. Its rules and regulations were laws, which could not be flagrantly flouted without serious repercussions. The penalty of death was imposed on anyone who resisted an envoy of the society or on a non-member who witnessed however, unwillingly, any of its secret rites. The Rev. Hope Waddell mentioned the case of a man who was denounced by his own father and was publicly executed (Bassey, n.d). Two minor chiefs, charged with “intruding into Ekpe ‘affairs’, beyond the degree they had purchased’ were put to death at the same time” (Inyang, 2009, Udoh, 2009; Bassey, n.d).

The society was particularly used for the recovery of debts, especially from an outsider. After the payment of a fee by the creditor, the members of the local lodge, *Efe Ekpe* would instruct the debtor to pay up, and if this were not done at once, *Efe Ekpe* would wreck his house or belongings and seize any of his property. In other words, *Eyefri Ekpe* meaning it would ‘blow Ekpe’ on his compound. By this action, the debtor and his family would be confined to the house and no one would dare have anything to do with them or afford them the slightest help (Bassey, n.d).

Ekpe plays an important part in moral and social security of its members. If a member was morally or physically assaulted by another member or a non-member of *Ekpe*, the offended person could ‘invoke’ the name of *Ekpe* society to prevent further harassment by the assailants. He may carry out his protective threat as follows: “*Ado die? K’unson anyen aba! Akpe mana andomo, Ekpe aya ata ebote mfo*”. This translates – What? Stop assaulting me! If you continue, Ekpe will fine you a goat (or any reasonable fine in cash or kind). If a deviant or an offender escaped from one community to seek refuge in another, such a person would be extradited and sent back to the community where he committed the crime because *Ekpe* was a fraternity. Thus, the political authority of *Ekpe* was felt in every nook and cranny of the place, as its jurisdiction appeared unlimited. In local affairs, *Ekpe* society was effectively used in the problem of tax collection and levies for traditional community development (Bassey, n.d).

Qualification for Admission

Admission into the various grades and orders depended and still depends on a number of factors among which are the following: nobility of birth, general comportment, good behaviour, affluence and the ability to keep secrets. In the recent past, it was the general tendency that all sons of royal birth should be initiated into *Ekpe* cult being, as it were, the governing body in the society, so that they could be up-to-date with events within and outside the community and also be in a position to help the household.

For instance, in an emergency when there was the senior order of the *Ekpe* play going on, non-initiates would remain behind closed doors in their houses, and until the ban was lifted, could not go to the stream, market or farm. In such a situation, royal households that had initiated members in the senior orders would not suffer since they were entitled to free movement to cater for the day-to-day necessities (Inyang, 2009; Nkubo, 2009; Udoh, 2009 and Bassey, n.d). It is most interesting to note that for the above stated reason, women who were from royal households were superficially initiated so that they could set about their businesses even when *Ekpe* ban was on. But their cases, they had to give a warning signal that they were about to pass so that the “mystical”. *Ekpe* masquerade, which a woman must never see, should go into hiding and make

way for the woman initiated to go on her business. If however, Ekpe refused to quit the place, the female initiate had to hold on until she was given the chance to go (Williams, 2007).

It is believed that if any initiate divulged the secrets of the society, such an initiate must die within a short space of time. So, to avoid such sudden death and the giving off of the Ekpe secrets, which were very jealously guarded, flippant fellows were never welcomed or initiated into the cult (Bassey, n.d).

Ekpo Ekoon

According to Akpan (1974), this society originated from the village of Ntak Inyang in Ntak Inyang in Itam clan of Itu Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State. It spread from there to Oku Iboku, Ayadehe, Ibiono Ibom, and Nkwot in Ini Local Government Area; Ediene and Edem Iyere in Ikono Local Government Area. All these areas were in the former Itu District from which have been carved out Itu, Ikono, Ini and Ibiono Ibom Local Government Areas. The *Ekpo Ekoon* had the *Eka Ekpo* (mother ghost) and the *Ayara* (male) masquerade, which run errands for the mother ghost. The *Ayara* masquerade was visible to ordinary human beings including children and women. It spoke in a strange voice, which was easily discernable. The *Eka Ekpo* and its masquerade the *Ayara* were deemed to have come out of the spirit world to regulate the affairs of living mortals. Its season of operations was July of August or September of every year (Inyang, 2009).

During the *Ekpo Ekoon* seasons, there must be absolute peace, harmony and concord in the villages where the society operated. Husbands must not beat their wives; the wives must not quarrel with their co-wives and husbands; children must not be deliberately flogged or cursed by anybody including their parents, food must be cooked and the entire family fed in time since the lighting of fires or pounding of *foofoo*, pepper, crayfish or any food item with mortar and pestle in the night constituted an offence, deemed to have disturbed the peace and tranquillity of the *Eka Ekpo*. Traders must not return late from the market lest, their footsteps could throw dust into the eyes of the *Eka Ekpo* who should be free to move about free from dust. An offender was liable to punishment involving the fine of a goat, a cock, a dog and so on, as well as drinks as the case may be (Akpan, 1974; Inyang, 2009).

The *Ekpo Ekoon* like its counterpart the Ekpe also enforced the decisions of the village authority. It could collect an approved levy from individuals as well as punish those who refuse to turn out for community work. During its reason of operation, it could execute condemned criminals such as murderers, witches, wizards and sorcerers. It could make a law preventing the harvesting of fruits such *eben* (pears), till the proper time. A member of the society could place an *aye* (a leaf of an unopened young oil palm frond), which is the insignia of the society, on his property; warning would-be trespassers to steer clear of such property.

Ekpo Ekoon also has its religious or ritual functions. On a certain night in the month of March or April of the year, after fire had been set onto the cleared farmland in preparation for cultivation, the society would sing in a vigorous voice calling on the earth deity, the gods and ancestors, to bless the cleared and burnt farmland and the world of the living. Thereafter, it disappeared until its season of operation in July to about September of the year. According to Inyang (2009), *Ekpo Ekoon* served as the Chief Judge and its season corresponded with the end of the cultivation season. The royal father argued that *Akan nto mma*, which is food shortages that usually followed the end of cultivation of crops in the farms could bring about misunderstanding and quarrel in households. Where this happened, *Ekoon* would visit such a household and place *mbiam ekoon*, a sort of

injunction, imposing fines on such offenders or violators of peace in the village. It was only when such imposed fines which could be in form of domestic animals such as goats, fowls, drinks, and cash were fully paid to the *Ekoon* that *mbiam ekoon* would be removed. It was only then that such culprits would regain their freedom. *Ekpo Ekoon* was harsh in its dealing with violators of the law prohibiting the disturbance of the peace of the society during the end of cultivation season. *Ekpo Ekoon* still holds its majestic and mystical sway in some villages in the areas enumerated above.

Abon

Abon normally featured towards the end of the year particularly during *Usuuk udia* (New Yam Festival). It featured sometimes in March-April, to mark the end of the season for other secret societies. *Abon* was a branch or sister of *Ekpe* but it had no masquerade. However, like *Ekpe*, it had a typical music which was an enchanting as it was enthralling. According to Inyang, *Abon* usually heralded the *ntem* (farmland clearing) process of the farming season (Antia, 2005, Inyang, 2009, Uko, 2009, Ukpong, 2007).

Unlike *Ekpe*, it dealt with cases of murder, sorcery and witchcraft. Its main governmental role appeared to have been the elimination of condemned criminals such as condemned wizards, witches, murderers, sorcerers. Like *Ekpe*, *Abon* also collected debts, and enforced law of the civil authority. It also arrested strayed animals. Inyang (2009) added that *Abon* was effectively used to prohibit the plucking of unripe fruits. *Abon*, like other secret societies, had its entertainment aspect. Members staged *Abon* play to honour their dead members. They also staged the play on all festive occasions and at the end of the year to mark the old year and the ushering in of the New Year (Antia, 2005; Ukpong, 2007; Inyang, 2009). Worthy of note is the fact that the New Year festival was more elaborately observed in the pre-colonial days than is the case today.

Ekan

This was a society principally made up of elderly people. To a large extent, *Ekan* was staged for at least one week before *ekpene ikot* (a section of the bush of the village community, earmarked for cultivation in a particular year) was cleared for cultivation. Anybody who cleared the bush before the normal seasonal sacrifice was offered to the earth deity, the gods and the ancestors was guilty of a grave offence and so incurred the wrath of *Ekan* and was punished accordingly. *Ekan* cult must stage its play on the day of sacrifice to the gods and ancestors, calling on the spiritual entities to grant fertility to, and bless the living. Child born on that day or day the father was initiated into *Ekan* cult could be called *Ekan*. There are some people bearing this name as their second, third or surnames as the case may be (Ukpong, 2007).

Akata

Akata was part of the political and social systems and was sometimes called *Ekpri Akata*, *Ekpa mma*, *Akpan Akananwan* or *Anwanidit* in Oron area. Until about 1987, this society was still operating on a much reduced scale in parts of Ibibioland. It is either dormant or completely dead nowadays. In its heydays, *Ekpri Akata* played the role of a news medium or radio station. But unlike a modern radio station, it could go around the community particularly at night, dishing out information or beaming its news items to living mortals. Unlike most other secret societies, it had no masquerade (Akpan, 1974; Antia, 2005).

It mirrored or broadcast all the crimes, deviant behaviour or offences committed against the society of living mortals. It claimed to have come to this mundane world from the supernatural world of

the dead. It claimed to be all-seeing and all-knowing. Nobody dared to question its authenticity in providing information to the public. Indeed, *Ekpři Akata* played the role of a modern press par excellence. Sometimes, it was jokingly called *Akpan Akananwan* (the first son of an old woman). On being so called, *Ekpři Akata* would jokingly respond by calling the person *Udo Akanaden* (the second son of an old man). Everybody loved to hear the voice of *Ekpři Akata*, which was disguised with the use of a strange instrument to ensure its anonymity (Talbot, 1926; Akpan, 1974; Udo, 1983; Antia, 2005).

Ekpři Akata was principally a society of the youths, operating mainly in the night. It had a central meeting place, fenced off from the view of the living men. Members entered its arena through devious routes, to disguise their identity. It operated in the dry season as the end of the year. People went to the central square to hear the latest newsbeat, gist and gossips.

However, members of *Ekpři Akata* could also patrol the streets at night at a time people were relaxing or preparing to go to bed. *Ekpři Akata* brought all the offences committed during the previous years to limelight. *Ekpři Akata* first brought the pregnancy of an unmarried girl, a very abominable offence, in the pre-colonial days, to light. It mentioned by name, the girl who had committed abortion and the name of her paramour. It warned both of them to refrain from such practice in future. It mentioned the name of another person who had stolen someone's property and informed the owner of the property where it was located (Antia, 2005; Inyang, 2009).

Ostensibly, *Ekpři Akata* had a legal immunity but it was not completely so. Any member of *Ekpři Akat*, who gave wrong information to the public, was severely punished when he returned to the world of the dead. And do in the words of Ukpong (2007, 131), "*Ekpři Akata* checked and rechecked and crosschecked its news items for authenticity". That is to say, the news items were subjected to a thorough process of edition, production and direction as is the case in broadcasting in the contemporary mass media.

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing on the creative indices of Ibibio indigenous governmental system, it is clear that in pre-colonial days, Ibibio society embraced and fully appreciated the political system that was operational. Udo (2000) argued that if a society operated without the existence of secret societies, that society was not good for human existence. It was not all secret societies that were destructive. Secret societies existed for security reasons. There were many types and kinds of secret societies. Obviously, the civilization achieved by any society is a consequence of the knowledge and vision of the secret societies of that society. The lower secret societies like Ekpo that existed amongst the Ibibio were cultural and had political underpinning. Other cultural indices like abre and iban ison were so pleasant to keep the ball rolling and made sure that they had a way of relaxation and pleased themselves and had the capacity to give their membership hidden orientations that were not known to the peripheral members.

As could be gathered from the foregoing, law and order was better maintained in the indigenous society that is the case nowadays. This was predicated upon the fundamental features of the Ibibio indigenous political culture which is the main focus of this work.

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