

## The Dynamics of Graphics in Ibibio Traditional Art

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### Abstract

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From a modernist perspective, it may be difficult to ascribe graphics to any form of traditional African art. This could be due to the embrace of western values by Africans, and of modernity on the one hand, and the overwhelming negative influence of westernization on the diverse African cultural practices, on the other hand. However, many elements of the traditional art forms are imbued with icons and symbols which expressions may be viewed as graphical in nature. This paper looks into the dynamics of graphics in the art of the traditional Ibibio society of Nigeria and attempts to appraise form and content. It is aimed at investigating the various symbolic applications in Ibibio traditional art forms and to establish the degree of graphics interface with these art forms. The paper expounds the term graphics, identifies, and relates it to, salient properties of graphics in the art products of the traditional Ibibio society. It also examines the manner in which societal norms and social institutions are fundamental to the art forms proportionate to the communicative indices. The methodology for this study includes in situ study, formalism, iconographic studies and library research. The paper concludes that graphics is a crucial index in the arts of the traditional Ibibio society of Nigeria and, indeed, Africa.

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**Keywords:** Graphic symbols, traditional art forms, traditional Ibibio society

### Introduction

If a meaningful understanding and appreciation of the creative objectification of a people is desired and is to be achieved, a correct interpretation of the intention of the artist for his work is necessary. A genuine effort to interpret accurately the art of any people necessitates an understanding of the society from which the works of art emanate, that is, a study of the prevalent cultural practices of that society. Ebeigbe, Sweet U. (2004).

The study of the graphic content of the art of the Ibibio people of Nigeria is an exercise aimed at unearthing the salient qualities and explicit content of the art of these people. This exercise goes ahead to set straight the erroneous notions about the art of the Ibibio people of Nigeria and, of course, African art. Experientially, and from a holistic viewpoint, Africa's cultural vista, vis-à-vis Ibibio traditional belief system, is seriously wearing away as a direct consequence of the embrace of western values, and of modernity. As a corollary, this *modernity*, or globalisation, or westernization, has an overwhelming influence on different cultures, and acts as a threat to the diverse African cultural practices, including art. Characterised by Western aesthetics and conventions, African art works, vis-à-vis graphics, have been described as lacking in cultural identity. This, according to Shen, Woolley, & Prior (2006), aims at destroying cultural diversity in the process by ignoring cultural identities.

From the modernist viewpoint expressed above, it may be difficult to ascribe graphics to any form of traditional African art because the contemporary understanding of the term has lost the original antecedent fact. For instance, in trying to define graphics today, the word is profoundly linked with the electronic media: it may, inter alia, be referred to as "any computer device or programme that makes a computer capable of displaying and manipulating pictures, as well as the images themselves" (Gooch, 2008), or "visual communication, information and persuasion using print and electronic media" (Warner, 2009).

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However, from a traditional standpoint, graphics are visual images or designs executed on some surface, such as a wall, canvas, screen, paper, stone or other germane surface, to illustrate, inform, educate or entertain.

In the past few decades graphic design has gone through series of technological and conceptual advancements and drastic changes, which is why the contemporary allusion of graphics to the computer is not in any way incongruous. Conversely, the primary classification of the term graphics implies the presentation of information in the form of diagrams and illustrations instead of as words or numbers. Historically, discoveries made in 1991 of symbolic geometric designs from Blombos Cave on the southern coast of Africa, in the form of engraved ochre plaques, and early discoveries of geometric design in this cave which date back about 75 B.C., Henshilwood (2011) notes, clearly justify the existence of graphic elements in African art. A cursory look at any piece of African art would reveal myriads of graphic indices (plate 1), based on the latter assumption or definition.



Plate 1. Graphic indices in African art

Series of studies on African symbols and icons have been undertaken by several researchers in different aspects of African studies like formalism, symbolism, semiotics and iconography. Some researchers have indicated interest in the use of a variety of African symbols and icons while others have demonstrated the use of these symbols as foundations that affect communication through time. Preliminary studies reveal that there has not been enough research on the inputs of graphics to African arts, and it appears no research on the subject has been conducted in the art of the traditional Ibibio society. On the bases of these, therefore, it becomes significant to carry out this study to see if there has been, and to what extent there have been, the entrenchment of graphic elements in the art of the traditional Ibibio people of Nigeria. The study also seeks to investigate the various symbolic applications in Ibibio traditional art forms in order to establish the degree of graphics interface therein.

### **Traditional Ibibio Arts**

Traditional Ibibio art practitioners are usually unconnected to any artistic/designers' group or association. The practice is not classified into groups with regard to which generation they belong, or the methodical connections and disparities, within their practice. But, it is much more rewarding to view the art landscape from a panoramic perspective of the various creative modes of expression. Each practitioner or group of practitioners engages in a sole venture or adventure. In any case, they are all open to an incredible exploration of local and universal ideas, whether formal, informal or semi-formal, and are set to exhibit their works to both local and international audiences. As well, some of these independent artists "create works that show evidence of experimentation, of research, and an openness that seek to break the barriers of cultural stagnation through the combination of emotional and intellectual acuity" (Hughes, n.d.). Thus, artists and other creative individuals can take full advantage of some salient graphical values and apply same in the creation of contemporary art forms.

### **Graphics in Traditional Ibibio Arts**

The principal categorization of the word graphics implies the presentation of information in the form of diagrams and illustrations instead of as words or numbers. It can also be classified as the art and profession of selecting and arranging visual elements such as typography, images, symbols, and colours – to convey a message to an audience. This is where Ibibio traditional art forms and, indeed, African art fit in squarely, because they are imbued with icons and symbols which expressions are principally graphical in nature. The production of Ibibio traditional art was often predicated upon the need of the tradition or custom of the people, such as rites of passage, coronations and seasonal festivals.

This art is not only directional but purposive, and ranges from two-dimensional designs to three-dimensional art forms. These find expressions in sculpture, textile designs, pottery and painting; in most, if not all of these, *Nsibidi* plays a significant role. *Nsibidi* is a complex of sacred/secret writings made up of signs and symbols (figs. 1 & 2). Of the thousands of this “ancient script which existed before the coming of the Europeans” (Kalu, 1978:77), only about 500 have been recorded. Isichei (1997) observes that they were once taught in schools to children. Most of the motifs used in the decorative arts of the Ibibio people are derived from *Nsibidi* graphical symbols. Ekwere (2000) in Okpu (2015) observes that some of them are from cosmic elements, numerical units and animal sources. Thus, many of the art forms evidenced in Ibibio traditional art milieu have allusion to the graphic symbols of *Nsibidi*. They are, as well, conceptually inspired for use in traditional art forms such as carvings, sculptures, painting, pottery and textiles, which all possess graphic indices.



Fig. 1. Early *nsibidi* symbols: (b). simply described as “Nsibidi Name Written” by Elphinstone Dayrell in 1911.

Source: [nsibidi.wikia.com/wiki/Nsibidi](http://nsibidi.wikia.com/wiki/Nsibidi)

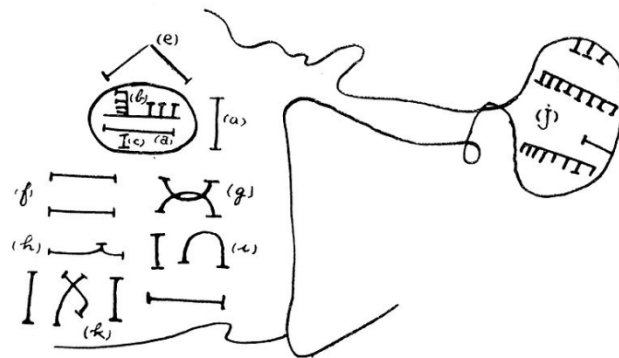


Fig. 2. The *Ikpe* (judgement) from Enyong written in *Nsibidi* as recorded by J. K. Macgregor. Source:

[nsibidi.wikia.com/wiki/Nsibidi](http://nsibidi.wikia.com/wiki/Nsibidi)

Sampson (2017) observes that “animal figures, plants and crops, celestial objects, domestic utensils, farm implements and musical instruments (which form the subject of *Nsibidi* writing) are graphically rendered, and become the central themes for the decorative arts, and body adornment”. These symbols (figs. 3 – 28) are, eventually, adopted and adapted for other artistic (and non-artistic) essences as well.



Fig. 3. *Ekara* (circles)

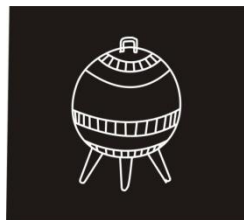


Fig. 4. *Esio-ukwak* (brass pot)

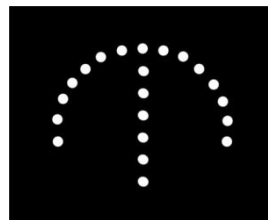


Fig. 5. *Ntöi-nyai* (beauty spots)



Fig. 6. *Ibit* (talking drum)

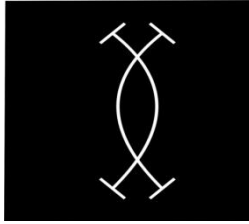


Fig. 7. Ima  
(love)

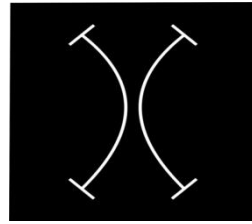


Fig. 8. Utök  
(quarrel)

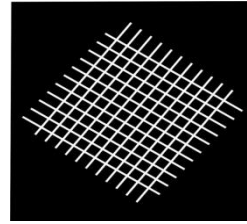


Fig. 9. Ukeng  
(sieve)

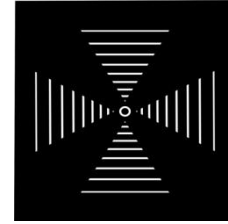


Fig. 10. Ufim-idem  
(fan)

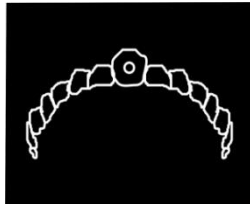


Fig. 11. Nnuk okukim-  
erong (ram's horn)



Fig. 12. Nsibidi  
(sign language)

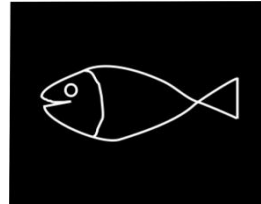


Fig. 13. Iyak  
(fish)

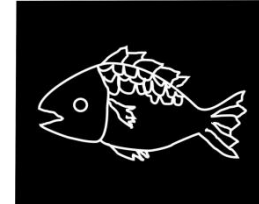


Fig. 14. Iyak ikpök  
(scaly fish)

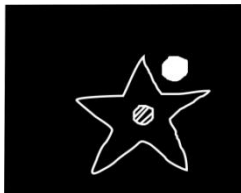


Fig. 15. Ntantaofiong  
(star)



Fig. 16. Uvaak ofiong  
(half moon)

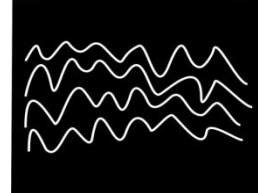


Fig. 17. Mbufit  
(wave)



Fig. 28. Isörö  
(squatting)

Figs. 3 – 18: Some Nsibidi symbols (excerpts from Nsentip, 2008:65 – 67)

*Nsibidi* graphical symbols are not limited to the few shown above. In fact and, indeed, this set of writing is as dynamic and copious as any writing or language. Other forms of early *Nsibidi* symbols include these shown below (fig. 19 – 26).



Fig. 19. Nkong  
(leaf)



Fig. 20. Okpobo  
(manila)



Fig. 21. Utai  
(alligator)

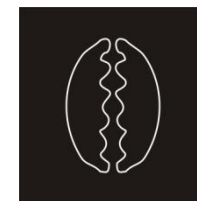


Fig. 22. Mbamba  
(cowrie)



Fig. 23. Ejök Utuekpe  
(web)



Fig. 24. Ekikö-unen  
(rooster)



Fig. 25. Esang  
(walking-stick)

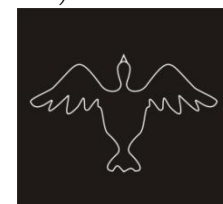


Fig. 26. Inuen-mba  
(bird in flight)

Figs. 19 – 26. Some Nsibidi symbols

Source: Dr. A. John Sampson's *Graphic Visuals Library*

*Graphic Elements in Painting:* The paintings produced in the context of the Ibibio traditional art assumes a different dimension from what is obtainable in the contemporary art practice. They are majorly decorative arts – body adornment, wall decoration and line drawings. Accordingly, these decorative arts are “graphic renditions typically of animal, floral, geometric and abstract motifs” (Sampson, 2017). The central idea in this art practice revolves round a symbolic use of graphic elements, specifically, line, texture and colour.

The engagement of pictorial ingredients is dramatic, but they all are meant to graphically illumine the cognisant or subliminal which these art forms portray. The basic materials or mediums used in painting among the people are pigments such as *ndom* (white clay), *akukin* (dark-coloured plant sap), *iduot* (brick-red pigment) and other concoctions. There are two distinct types of pigments for body adornment – those for a temporary adornment and those for a permanent prettification. In terms of medium and ground (surface), the pigments range from white clay (*ndom*) to plant sap/latex, or a combination of roots and herbs. The surfaces on which these paintings are customarily executed are walls and the human skin, with *ndom* (plate 1) or plant saps such as *okukin* (black indelible ink) trailed using a splint known as *ndukepat* (plate 3). Ochigbo (2004) submits that in the traditional body painting among the Ibibio, the colours used in executing this art are obtained from certain plants such as *okukin*. However, *ndom*, *nsang* (soft reddish/orange/yellow stone) and *iduot* (red/pink pigment) are also used in the traditional body decoration, especially during festivals and rituals; other pigments may also be brought into play. There are, as well, indications of graphic renditions on funerary shrines called *nwommo*.



Plate 2. Graphic expressions on an Ibibio maiden:  
The use of *nsibidi* symbols in facial prettification and in costumes.



Plate 3. *Body Decoration*; Linocut; 24 x 30 cm;  
Akaninyene Sampson, 2004.  
Source: Dr. A. John Sampson's Graphic Visuals Library



Plate 4. *All Fingers Are Not Equal*  
Victor Ekpuk (medium/size/date not supplied)  
Source: [http://www.victorekpuk.com/events/Pages/Inscribing\\_Meanings.html](http://www.victorekpuk.com/events/Pages/Inscribing_Meanings.html)

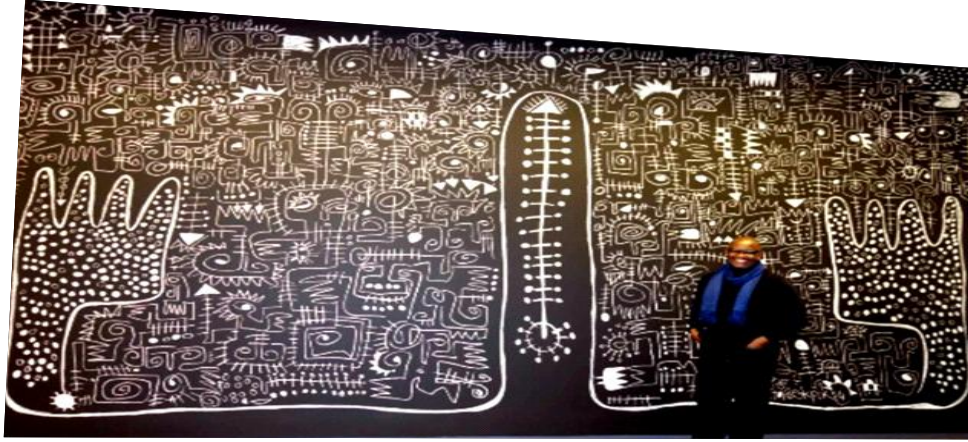


Plate 3. A visual narrative with explicit demonstration of the *Nsibidi* graphic symbols by Ekpuk, Victor  
 Source: [http://www.victorekpuk.com/events/Pages/Inscribing\\_Meanings.html](http://www.victorekpuk.com/events/Pages/Inscribing_Meanings.html)

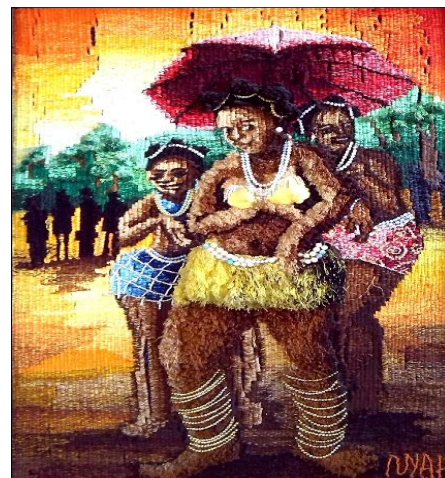
### Graphics in the Textile Art

The practice of textiles in the Ibibio arts milieu incorporates a vast measure of graphic indices in its fabrication. From weaving and knitting to ornamentation, myriads of graphic symbols are embedded therein. The development and sustenance of textile art practice among the Ibibio people, inter alia, was to implant in the people commendable attitudes and discipline. The establishment of diverse cultural and socio-political institutions such as *Ekpo*, *Ekpe*, *Ekong*, *Idiong*, *Ebre*, *Mbopo* (or *Nkugbo*) and *Akata* determined some of the motifs and designs used in fabrication and prettification. The goals and dynamics of this practice in the contemporary setting have changed, and have become much more diverse and free because of the need of the times. This, as with any African creative work, is a direct manifestation of the contingent ambience within this very setting. Because culture is dynamic and prone to manipulation and change, these creative designs produced currently by the Ibibio textile artists are but a “fabric of the cosmopolitan melting pot, a protean of its past, a reality of its present and a determinant of its future” (Hughes, n.d.). Some of the textile decorative motifs predominant in Ibibio land are developed from the *nsibidi* symbols.

Thus, many artisans in the practice of textile art in Ibibio land are conceptually inspired by the traditional and cosmic symbols and forms (mentioned earlier) such as sun, moon, stars, motifs, carvings, traditional implements and sculptures. They create works through the observation and interpretation of forms, structures and activities within their immediate environment. Animal figures, plants and crops, celestial objects, domestic utensils, farm implements, musical instruments, shapes and abstract forms, become the central themes and motifs for the textile design and production (plates 4 & 5).



(a) Textile design



(b) Tufted textile art

Plate 4. : Expressions of graphics in Ibibio textile art

(a). Artist: Lovician Udoh; Source: Gallery of VAT, Cross River State University of Technology, Nigeria.

(b). Artist: Dorcas Udoh; Source: Department of Fine and Industrial Arts Gallery, University of Uyo, Nigeria.



Plate 5. Ukad Ekpe: a piece of textile for use by the *Ekepe* masquerade  
 Artist: Asuquo Akpabio  
 Source: *Stone Age Gallery, Uyo, Nigeria*



Plate 6. *Mkpoto* Ceremonial Huts furniture  
 Note the geometric decorative patterns on fabric (arrowed)  
 Source: (Photograph by *Okpo Ita*)

*Graphics in the Sculptural Art:* The sculptural art of the Ibibio people are mainly wood carvings and clay/mud images. Many of these carvings and the modelled decorative arts often reflect the *Ekepe* mask – a probable corollary of the great influence and control the *Ekepe* society exercises over almost all aspects of Ibibio life. There are also wooden puppetry figures and pockets of earthen sculptures ascribed to funerary activities which are generally scattered within the shrine or hut. Both these and the wood carvings are typically embellished with *Nsibidi* graphic symbols – by incision, embossment or painting (plates 4 & 5).



Plate 4. Ibibio mask: medium: wood;      Plate 5. Ibibio puppet; wood;

*(artist/size/date not supplied)*

*(artist/size/date not supplied)*

*(Note the use of geometric shapes in the rendition of the forms)*

*Source: <http://www.busaccagallery.com>*

*Graphics in Pottery:* The traditional Ibibio pottery exhibits elaborate graphics in both the design and decoration. Intricate graphic design elements and simple motifs of crocodiles, lizards, cowries, *Nsibidi* symbols, family totems and dots, are the objects of pottery decoration among the Ibibio people (Bassey, 2004). Lines and shapes are also in predominant use (figs. 27 & 28). These are usually created by cutting into, or by creating an embossment on, the surface of the ware; some form of decorative painting may sometimes be introduced using such pigments as *okukin* or *nsang* (a piece of soft stone with a blend of yellow and orange or brown colour) and other colorants. (plate 7).



Plate 6. A potter with her wares      *Source: [www.alamystockphoto.com](http://www.alamystockphoto.com)*





Plate 7. A decorated, perforated pot.  
(Initially used for divination)  
Source: A. John Sampson's gallery

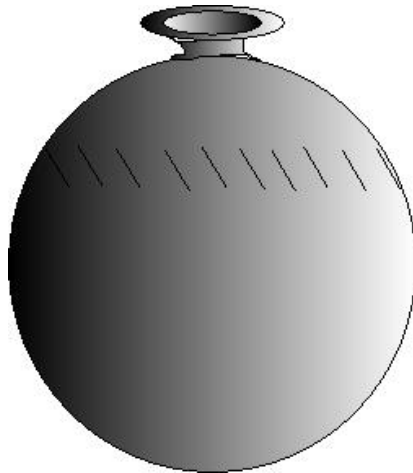


Fig. 27. *Abang idim*  
(Pot for *fetching* water)



Fig. 28. *Abang itie*  
(Pot for *storing* water)

### **Conclusion**

Graphic elements are imbued in almost all facets of the traditional art of the Ibibio people of Nigeria. Paintings, in contrast to contemporary art practice, are mainly decorative arts such as body adornment, wall decoration and line drawings, in the context of the Ibibio traditional art. The vital initiative in painting is a symbolic use of graphic elements, specifically, line, texture and colour. In the fabrication of textiles which range from weaving and knitting to ornamentation, myriads of graphic symbols have been employed. The sculptures, which are modelled clay/mud and wood carvings, are typically embellished by incising, embossing or painting. The pottery bears intricate graphic design elements and simple motifs which are usually created by cutting into, or by embossing on, the surface of the ware, or by some form of decorative painting. The study has investigated the various symbolic applications in Ibibio traditional art forms in order to establish the degree of graphics interface therein. From the context and content of the arts of the Ibibio people of Nigeria, it becomes most appropriate to deduce that the art of this people, whether two-dimensional or three-dimensional, is imbued with definite elements of graphics, particularly, as it embraces a generous use of *nsibidi* symbols. Thus, graphics is a crucial index in the art of the traditional Ibibio society of Nigeria.

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