Moninkim: A Symbiotic Performance of Ritual, Music, and Dance by the Ejagham People of Nigeria and Cameroon

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Moninkim: A Symbiotic Performance of Ritual, Music, and Dance by the Ejagham People of Nigeria and Cameroon

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Abstract. Among the Ejagham of southeastern Nigeria and Southwestern Cameroon, the performance of the *nkim* or *moninkim* ritual marks the passage of a young girl to womanhood. This transition begins when the girl—moninkim—is secluded from the general community and placed in the *nju nkim* (fattening house or fattening room) where she is pampered, instructed in the Ejagham values, and taught how to dance the nkim dance. This article discusses the ways in which ritual, music, and dance interplay to construct a holistic art form, and examines how moninkim dance performance serves as a hermeneutic site for illuminating the Ejagham culture.

[T]he value of a piece of music as music is inseparable from its value as an expression of human experience.
—John Blacking[1]

Ritual, music, and dance embody valuable aspects of a people's culture that need to be decoded and fully appreciated. But in order to decipher rituals it is important to have some knowledge and understanding of the various related domains of a culture (Turner 2008; Aborampah 1999; Monts 1984; Nketia 1955). This need for an in-depth understanding of a culture through its rituals initially gave impetus to my investigation into the moninkim, a women's ritual, music, and dance genre of the Ejagham people of Nigeria and Cameroon.

Nkim ritual (or moninkim, as the rite is often called)[2] is a process by which a young girl or moninkim prepares for marriage. Nkim is a space in time—a school—where and when the girl learns valuable traditions of her people:

etiquette and laws, morals and customs, how to make traditional artisanal crafts, how to design, write, and interpret *nsibidi*—a system of symbols—as well as how to sing and communicate via nonverbal body movements in dance.[3] This ritualistic component aside, what is it about this women's activity that uses dance to articulate, construct, and sometimes reconstruct the aesthetic qualities and cultural values of the Ejagham people and, by extension, provides a socially appealing performance?

Scholarship on moninkim ritual and dance has focused on socio-anthropological (Pemunta 2009; Röschenthaler 1996) and medical (Oe 2009) perspectives, although there is also a historical mention in Tangban (2008). Unlike the preceding works, this article is unique in that it discusses the interplay between ritual, music, and dance in constructing a holistic art form within the complex Ejagham cultural milieu. Examining various aesthetic facets of Nkim ritual, in particular the Ejagham conceptions of beauty, I explore how music and dance are used to construct the female body. By engaging Ejagham oral accounts, I seek to discover indigenous codes for reading the female body and in understanding why so much attention is paid to it in Ejagham culture. I argue that in dance (movement and gestures) and dance discourse, the Ejagham people express and articulate significant social identities, social relations, and cultural values. Since nkim ritual is intrinsically linked with music and dance, analysis of some of these elements will elucidate ways in which body movements in dance serve as a medium for communication as well as for expressing Ejagham cultural ideas and meanings. In addition, this study demonstrates how dance motifs change during performance and who incites the level of intensity that drives the performance to its peak. Hence, women's activities and participation in Nkim ritual create a transformative space where advocacy, agency, identity, and social critique thrive. Finally, I examine the degree to which nkim ritual and dance provide a hermeneutic site for illuminating Ejagham culture.

In light of the general socio-cultural orientation of this ritual, my study lends itself to context-derived interpretations as well as the "cultural frame of reference from which they are derived" (Oyewùmí 1997:xv). Accordingly, this study's methodology resonates with what Oyewùmí calls "a cultural, context-dependent interpretation of social reality" (ibid.:xvi), which she contends should be the aim of research endeavors. However, given the multilayered and multifaceted themes embedded in nkim ritual, music, and dance, a more eclectic method of investigation is called for one which includes narrative, emic, inductive, and reflective ethnographic approaches.

I conducted this study in two major phases of field research. While my first and follow-up fieldwork in 2006 and 2010 were among the Ejagham people of Nigeria, the second in 2009 focused on the Ejagham of Cameroon. These two phases were supplemented by my observations of performances by dance groups

in the Cross River State Cultural Center in Calabar, Nigeria in 2006 and 2010. My research was not without setbacks.

One of the challenges I faced researching moninkim in Nigeria was that very few Ejagham cultural communities or "units" (fewer than 40 percent) engage in nkim ritual and ceremonies in contemporary times. Reasons for this situation include insufficient parental financial resources to pay for an indispensable facet of this ritual—nju nkim (fattening house or fattening room) for their daughters. In addition, there has been unremitting pressure on the Ejagham from modern Western cultural influences and urbanization. Colonial European and African urban cultures aggressively pressure most African cultures to change their traditions, and many Ejagham cultural practices fall prey to the influences of these external forces. Furthermore, most young girls themselves are not willing to interrupt school or work in order to spend from six to twenty-four months, depending on their parents' wealth, in the fattening house, inadvertently sparing their parents this cost. Nevertheless, the Ejagham people have upheld much of their cultural identity inherent in nkim ritual, music, and dance, while at the same time embracing transformations that enable the genre to be performed and appreciated in contemporary society. Ejagham traditionalists and preservationists also treasure nkim ritual as an important archetype for indigenous knowledge—maintaining traditional values, teaching traditional wisdom and family ethics—all of which strengthen the fabric of the community and enhance as well as buttress social cohesion.

Geographical Location and Brief Ethnography of the Ejagham People

Once a united pre-colonial state, the Ejagham people today find themselves in the two African countries of Nigeria and Cameroon, a compartmentalization imposed on them by colonialism. This division continued even after Nigeria gained independence in 1960. In the plebiscite of 1961, sections of the Ejagham and Banyange peoples decided to remain part of Cameroon. The divide has forced the Ejagham people to live in two separate countries with diverse sociopolitical structures and official languages.[4] It has likewise engendered significant socio-cultural inconveniences. Nonetheless, because the former Ejagham nation is situated at the outer regions of these two countries around the Cross River basin areas, the people, although divided, are still able to interact with each other. They have also retained their common ethnic language as well as certain aspects of their cultural heritage, including the moninkim ritual (*monekim* or *monikim* in some areas of Cameroon).

Located in the southeastern tropical forest regions, the Ejagham (also known as the Ekoi or Qua people), with a population of about 173,550,[5] inhabit the

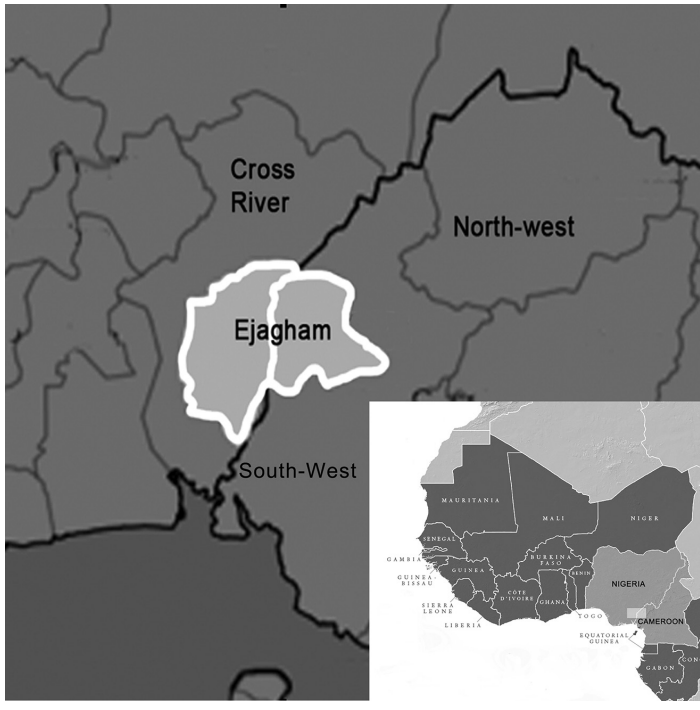


Figure 1. Map showing the Ejagham nation in Nigeria and Cameroon. The inserted map of West Africa indicates the countries Nigeria and Cameroon, where the Ejagham people are located

southeastern area of Nigeria, which extends further east into southwestern Cameroon. There are about sixty-eight Ejagham towns (subgroups) in the southwestern part of the Republic of Cameroon, an area that stretches up to Nchang near Manfe and includes the Ekwe and Keaka peoples of Mamfe. In Nigeria, Ejagham "refers to the Qua of Calabar, Akpabuyo and Odukpani; the Ejagham of Akamkpa; the Etung; the Ofutop, Nde, Nselle, Abanyum, Nnam, Akparabong, Balep, (Oban), and, Bendeghe Afi of Ikom; the Nkim, Nkum and Ekajuk of Ogoja in Cross River State" (Tangban 2008:1). Linguistically, these peoples speak the Ejagham or Ekoi language, one of the Ekoid (subgroup) languages classified under the Benue-Congo category of languages of the Niger-Congo dialect cluster (Greenberg 1966:8–9; Tangban 2008:5–6).

Inhabiting the tropical forest regions of southwest Africa, the Ejagham people's main occupation is farming.[6] They live in politically decentralized villages with various clans under the leadership of a chief called Ntoon,[7] who also

holds a ritual office.[8] Social activities revolve around men's (*Mgbe* or *Ngbe*)[9] and women's (*Njom Ekpa*[10] and Nkim) societies or clubs, and life-cycle ceremonies. The activities of these societies were appreciated and respected by all in the community. As one of my collaborators, Martin Atim Ogar, explained, in pre-colonial Ejagham, the males neither held nor executed absolute power within the community as many people may presume today. At the top of the socio-political structure was also the female ruler, *Ntuinkaye (Ntunkai*), who took care of the traditional affairs of women in the community. Power was shared within the society and this enabled rituals to be enacted and sustained.

Research on the Igbo west of the River Niger in Nigeria corroborates a similar socio-political phenomenon/structure among pre-colonial Ogbaru people (Ozah 2010 and 2008; Bastian 2002; Okonjo 1976; Allen 1976).[11] This socio-political structure seems to be common in some pre-colonial cultural groups of southeastern Nigeria, indicating a social system with strong collaborative affinity between men and women, an aspect that is evident in nkim ritual and dance as well.

An Adventure into New Ethnographic Terrains

Growing up in Cross River State, I had the privilege of seeing moninkim dance performed on various occasions, including the traditional outing ceremonial performance as well as more staged entertainment contexts. Even so, it was not until I embarked on this study that I became fascinated with the richness of the Ejagham tradition embodied in this ritual, music, and dance.

To begin my research, I enlisted the assistance of knowledgeable informants/guides from the geo-cultural area. These interlocutors provided me with the vital information I required during the course of my research. When the need arose, they directed me to the right source collaborators and even facilitated my access to other key custodians of the Ejagham tradition. These informants/guides included Sister Janet Ogar, HHCJ, Philip Abang, Martin Atim Ogar, and Victor Osaji.[12]

Sister Janet Ogar, HHCJ, was my first portal of entry into the rural life of the Ejagham people. She introduced me to her mother, Mrs. Francesca Mbey Onwo—an important resource person—who resides in the small Ejagham village of Ojor in the Cross River State of Nigeria. At our first meeting, in November 2006, Francesca Onwo immediately made the essential local arrangements for me to meet and convey my research intentions to the elders. She briefly explained to me the intricacies of the Ojor tradition and advised that:

> First and foremost, you would have to meet and obtain the permission and blessing of the village head, Chief Paulinus Ogar. You must know that good strangers who come in peace should not hide or do things through the 'back door.' Furthermore,

> meeting the chief guarantees your safety and will pave the way and facilitate your working with anyone in the village. (Personal conversation, November 2006.)

As we made our way to the chief's residence, Mrs. Onwo stopped and greeted neighbors and introduced me to any curious person(s) who wanted to know from whence I came and why I was in Ojor village. She also used the opportunity to invite some of the women to her house to perform for me. These behaviors demonstrate a typical African communal ethos.

Chief Paulinus Ogar was very welcoming when we arrived at his home. Mrs. Onwo's son-in-law introduced me to the chief as their daughter's friend who "seeks knowledge and wants to write about our moninkim tradition." Following what seemed to me a very long introduction, the chief addressed me saying, "My daughter, you are welcome. Your intentions are good and honorable, and we will help you as much as we can. Know that you are safe in our land" (personal communication, November 2006). He offered us some kola nuts and soft drinks.[13] Why kola nuts? Offering and sharing kola nut, which is believed to bring life, is a significant traditional symbol of peaceful fellowship observed by most cultures of southern Nigerian. It is a symbol of welcome and a formal signal for the beginning of any important meeting. Incidentally, because of the strong affiliation between kola nuts and peace/communion, enemies do not share and/or eat kola nuts together (Opata 1989; Achebe 1958).

After expressing our gratitude to the chief and his elders/counselors at the end of our visit, we left the chief's presence and returned to Francesca Onwo's house where three young women, Akon Moses, Stella Raymond, and Pearlking Okon, were waiting for us. Since it was already dusk, we agreed that I should return to Ojor village after two days as this would give Mrs. Onwo enough time to organize a performance of moninkim dance as well as allow me more time to engage in further conversations and conduct interviews about this genre with the women. Ethnographic data accessed from our conversations and from the moninkim performance in Ojor will substantially enrich my discussions of the genre in a later part of this article.

Having researched the nkim ritual of the Ejagham people of Nigeria, and after much dialogue with my collaborators, I realized that any investigation of the Nkim tradition within Nigeria alone would be incomplete without a study of the tradition among the Ejagham people of Cameroon. As such, I returned to the field in the summer of 2009 and met with my collaborators, Philip Abang and Victor Osaji at Ikom Town.[14] Both men were conversant with Ekok Town in Cameroon and Victor spoke French as well, a necessary language for us to get through the border without having to find interpreters.[15] Philip, who had gathered some information about the condition of the roads, decided to solicit help from his friend Martin Atim Ogar, who lives in Ikom. Martin agreed to accompany us to the point where we would no longer be able to use Philip's

car. He would then return to Ikom with the car while we would proceed on our journey using any available local means of transportation. As it turned out, this was a most propitious decision.

On July 29, 2009, we—Philip, Martin, Victor, and I—set out early in the morning on our journey. We arrived at Ekok Town at about noon and drove to the house of Chief (Knight) Lawrence Atem Etta, a traditional ruler in Ekok Town. He called a few elders[16] and asked that we all meet at the house of Ntufam Dickson N. Nfone, the oldest man in the village, then about eighty-five years old. When we were all seated, Chief Etta asked me to say some prayers.[17] His request corroborates the discourse on the religiousness of Africans in general and the Ejagham in particular. It recalls Mbiti (1991:10), who notes that religion is "by far the richest part of the African heritage." Religion permeates every facet of African life to the extent that most, if not all, activities begin with prayers that solicit the guidance of God, the Supreme Being, and of the ancestors. After the prayers, Martin Atim Ogar, who spoke on my behalf, formally introduced me to the elders and briefly explained my mission, which he said I would elaborate on while asking questions.[18]

Although I will discuss some rich insights from our conversations later, suffice it to say here that meeting these elders legitimized some of the characteristics of the genre that I was already familiar with. For instance, it deepened my comprehension of the meaning of moninkim as ritual, music, and dance in both Nigeria and Cameroon. Furthermore, the elders drew my attention to the fact that there is a close bond between this ritual and dance genre and the Mgbe or Ekpe society—the men's Leopard cult or club—which will become more evident later in this article. In addition to providing the preceding valuable information, the Ekok elders recommended that we visit another village called Babong. The people of Babong, Ntufam Dickson N. Nfone explained,[19] still perform the moninkim ritual and dance in a manner closest to its original form. In other words, in Babong we were guaranteed to find a moninkim tradition and performance that still embodied the continuity of Ejagham practices almost in their entirety. Their enthusiasm to continue the journey and the joy apparent in the faces and voices of my team assured me we were about to undertake an adventure into new ethnographic terrains.

Babong is a village in Eyumojock Subdivision Council Area in Manyu Division of Southwest Province (Region) of Cameroon. It is located in the densely forested region about 207 miles (334 kilometers) northwest of Yaoundé, the capital city of the Republic of Cameroon. The people of Babong are an agrarian society, and from my experience during my research, very hospitable.

We arrived at Babong at about 8:05 p.m.[20] and made our way to the residence of Chief Ntui Tanyi Moses, the traditional village head and a retired senior nursing superintendent. After explaining the purpose of my trip, the chief called a

few elders (men and women) with whom we had a long discussion. We agreed that I pay a fee to compensate the women and interviewees who would perform, answer questions, and explain the ritual and dance to me. The next morning, the elders, young women, and my team gathered in the house of the chief for discussions on the nkim ritual and dance tradition. This was followed in the afternoon by a performance that lasted for about an hour.

The Nkim Ritual: The Nju Nkim (Fattening House)

The nkim institution, like the male Mgbe/Ekpe (Leopard club), is the preserve of the Ejagham elite and freeborn. Nkim is a way by which the Ejagham people honor their daughters, encouraging them to pass through this rite of transition because the institution is believed "to be the repository of gendered knowledge and feminine personhood" (Pemunta 2009). *Moni* means child or citizen; Nkim (literally, circumcision) refers to an Ejagham women's club. These terms convey the importance of moninkim (child of circumcision), who, after appropriate training, is initiated into the society: the club of womanhood.

There are two periods in a girl's life when she can participate in the nkim rite of passage: either at puberty, nkim *ebebe* or *ebube* (childhood nikm), or after the birth of her first child, nkim *agut* or *awoud* (adult nkim). The rite includes three different but closely related phases, which in his study of rituals Arnold van Gennep (1960) identifies as separation, transition, and incorporation.[21] The nkim rite consists of two main parts: The nju nkim and the *nkim efabing*, that is, the outing or coming out ceremony (see Figure 2, below). The rites of separation and transition occur intrinsically when the moninkim enters the nju nkim. The

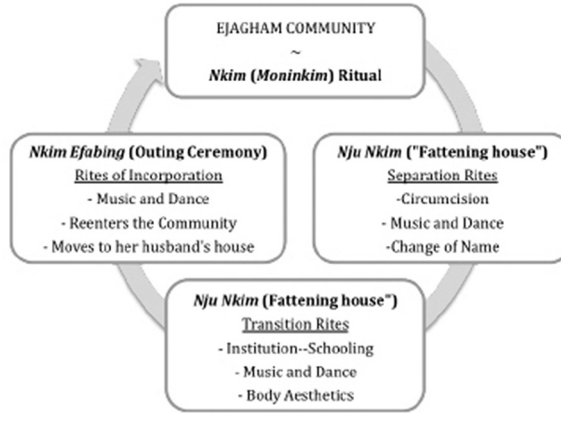


Figure 2. The Three Main Rites of the Nkim Ritual

rite of incorporation (nkim efabing) follows the preceding rites. My discussion will focus mainly on nkim agut.

Typically, the nkim rite begins with a period of seclusion.[22] This first stage of separation is important because it consists of symbolic behavior that indicates extrication from the past and all the characteristics of the early stage of life. The separation and seclusion is required to get the girl's total attention as she learns about the intricacies of the new life she is about to enter and encounter.

To initiate this phase of separation and seclusion, the girl's parents reserve a fattening house or fattening room[23] for their daughter in their compound or in the compound of a close relative. Within the confines of this locale, the girl passes through several series of rites of separation followed by rites of transition including clitoridectomy, which occurs a few days after entering the house, especially if this procedure had not been done earlier. Clitoridectomy is the surgical (partial or complete) removal of the female clitoris.

Today, the practice of clitoridectomy[24] is highly criticized, particularly by the West, which abhors and condemns the practice as barbaric. Yet, research confirms that the practice is known to many cultures of the world. As James and Robertson note, "Clitoridectomy also has a history of being practiced in Western countries as well as in parts of Africa. In France, it began to be promoted as a cure for female homoeroticism as early as the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries" (2002:10).

Historically, therefore, clitoridectomy is not exclusively an African social practice. It was known in Asia, in some Western societies, as well as in the United States, where it was used for pediatric genital surgeries (James and Robertson 2002). Given recent protests against the practice, particularly by Western non-governmental organizations (see Pemunta 2009), I decided to ask the women in Babong for their opinion regarding the issue as well as the relevance of female circumcision in the Ejagham nation. The approach I used was conversational, with open-ended questions aimed at teasing out answers and even allowing the women to argue among themselves. The answers I received were imbued with deep symbolic and ontological meanings.

The general consensus was that first, the cutting and shedding of blood, which flows on the ground during circumcision, is a symbolic link with mother earth, a covenant that binds the moninkim to her community, including ancestors.[25] Second, it is a symbol of transition from girlhood to womanhood, a sign of women's power among members who have successfully passed through the pains and rigors of the fattening house. Third, female circumcision is analogous to male circumcision, which likewise is based on health considerations. They sometimes regard it as a way of curtailing promiscuity among young women.

Clitoridectomy, therefore, has a threefold significance in Ejagham society: covenant, transition and social status, in addition to health and moral values;

these, according to the women, could not be anything but beneficial to the girls. Some of the women trivialized the entire issue of clitoridectomy, insisting that the moninkim ritual in modern times emphasizes learning Ejagham culture and the holistic development of the girl rather than female circumcision, or female cutting. Others explained that actual female circumcision is rarely done today. Instead, a symbolic small cut is made on the upper thigh of the female body to signify circumcision.[26]

All the same, it is after this rite of circumcision that the young girl becomes a child of circumcision—a moninkim—and her transition period and rites begin. Let me add here that despite the fact that the practice of circumcision is so overtly discussed today, it is seldom practiced in many cultures in southern Nigeria and Cameroon. To be noted, also, clitoris surgery is still an accepted practice on medical grounds in the Western world, as demonstrated by the recent situation of the South African athlete, Caster Semenya.[27]

Clitoridectomy, like circumcision for boys, is not simply performed in isolation. It is often part of an initiation ceremony, a ritual or rite of passage for girls, in this case, the moninkim. Because of the significance of this rite in the life of the girl, she is secluded from the community, including her family, and only a few immediate relatives are allowed to interact with her during her stay in the nju nkim.[28] There is need for the neophyte to be out of the mundane or daily routine of life's activities for a period of time so that she can learn the cultural norms and be adequately prepared and vested in the cult, social life, or position that she will assume.[29] Martina Löw identifies this territorial delineation: "Spaces are produced to mark off a secure intimate sphere. Our own bodies or the bodies of our reference group are safeguarded from others by the production of closed arrangements" (2006:123). Isolation is imperative to the moninkim for tangible reasons, including facilitating healing from the wounds of her circumcision, education, fattening, enhancing her appearance (both physically and mentally), and preparing her for her new socio-marital status. Once her wounds are healed, she begins to learn how to perform the nkim dance.

Music and dance are significant avenues of learning in the fattening house. Dance instructors teach the maiden how to use her body in dance to articulate Ejagham cultural meanings. From the master drummer, she learns drum signals and how to interpret the drum surrogate language during dance performances. Through dance, the moninkim is taught how to enact stories dealing with social life, including marriage. She learns different dance motifs that comprise the Nkim dance as well as the Mgbe/Ekpe song-dance, which I will discuss later in this article. Throughout her stay in the fattening house, the moninkim practices daily with her dance instructors as she perfects all the dance motifs she is expected to perform at her outing ceremony—her graduation—to mark the end of her seclusion.

Table 1. New Names given to a Moninkim in the "Fattening House" (Babong, Cameroon 2009)

Name (Ejagham)	English Translation of name
1. *Nkage agut kan tin aka ke eben*	I have these rings for money not because I can dance.
2. *Nsub ayak nti abkw iban*	The young girl gets money, the man is envious.
3. *Ngon otunican ofra amaramat*	You see a light but can't touch the flame (Meaning that you see a woman but you can't touch her because she belongs to another).

Also, as part of the separation rite while in the nju nkim, the moninkim is given a new name she bears until she leaves her seclusion. Benedicta Oben,[30] one of the women present during my visit to Babong, provided me with some examples of these names, as shown in Table 1.

Benedicta quickly added that the girl assumed her original name on the day she left the fattening room. I was curious and asked Benedicta the reason for this. In response, she explained that when the maiden initially enters the fattening house, she leaves the world of the common people and joins an elite group. In this new locus, she is given a new name, an important sign of separation from the world. When she finishes her training and is incorporated back into the world, she returns to the name that the world knows, albeit sometimes she is called her special elite name among her peers and moninkim associates (*Abone-okim*).

During the entire period of her confinement, the moninkim does not interact or associate very much with her close family. Instead, she is placed under the rule and protection of Mgbe, the men's leopard cult, the most powerful society of the Ejagham nation.[31] The duration of her stay in the fattening house varies from six months to two years, contingent primarily on the economic resources of her parents. Having discussed some rites of separation, I now examine some of the salient rites of transition that often interlace with the rites of separation in the course of the moninkim's seclusion.

The Nju Nkim as Institution and Coding the Ejagham Body

The nju nkim or fattening house, the isolated abode of the moninkim, is also an institution that serves as an extended "educational workshop where maidens received training on their future roles as wives and mothers" (Tangban 2008:10). Here the most experienced wives and mothers come together to train and prepare the girl for life in her community as she transits to womanhood. From these knowledgeable matrons, the moninkim unassumingly and dutifully learn Ejagham etiquette and how to be a successful and responsible adult. These

instructors even teach, or rather re-teach, such daily basics as how to sit, walk, and talk in the presence of other people.

In the private space of the fattening house, the novice is pampered and treated to sumptuous meals; she drinks a lot of water and gets plenty of sleep. The moninkim receives body massages three times daily to stimulate good blood circulation. To ensure proper digestion, because she consumes so much food, she takes traditional medicines made from leaves and herbs. Her maids wait on her while her instructors ensure that the moninkim abides by the regulations of the fattening house. With this special care, she is expected to gain much weight and to look alluring, a testament to her parents' generosity for her upkeep. The fattening of the young woman not only suggests the wealth of her parents but is also a visible sign to their future son-in-law and his family that her family is capable of taking good care of their daughter, and, therefore, her prospective husband and his family ought to do likewise when the maiden is in his family's home.[32] The Ejagham and their neighbors, such as the Ibibio and Efik in the same Cross River basin, cherish plumpness and regard a full-figured female body as a sign of beauty. The Ejagham, in addition, view plumpness as an indication of good living.

To enhance her beauty, local cosmetics are daily daubed on the ritual body of the moninkim. These cosmetics include *ekue* or *ekoi* (camwood), which gives her skin a soft, smooth, and delicate appearance, *oboma* (a sweet-smelling fruit) to perfume her body, and *ofem* (white chalk) to decorate her body with straight and spiral lines called *okpoita*. According to one of my informants, Margaret Abhe (of Babong), these lines have significant meanings. In fact, she continued, they form part of the nsibidi (also *nsibiri*)[33] vocabulary, a language of the "spirit world," as understood and used only by the Mgbe and Nkim societies.[34] Lydia Njong, who was standing next to Margaret, interjected that just as each age-grade (or age set) of Mgbe society has its own nsibidi signs, so do the moninkim, and some of these signs are similar to those utilized by the Mgbe society. A moninkim often writes these signs on the walls of her room to keep track of the gifts given to her during the period of seclusion as well as to document important events in the village, particularly those that interest her.[35] In her study of the Ejagham people, Ute Röschenthaler (1996:48) observed a similar occurrence:

> Nsibiri exists in a written form too, and is mainly used in this way by women. Female initiates learn much of the nsibiri writing, including some mimes for the sign language. In former times, initiates painted their faces and the walls of their rooms with nsibiri signs. They also decorated large calabashes with nsibiri, which were used to collect graduation presents from the spectator for the initiate's parents.

Tangban noted this concept of decorating the body of the girl with meaningful signs: "Nsibidi signs were engraved on the faces and bodies of women and on objects including *akpere* (gourd dishes) and walls" (2008:40). Interestingly,

no pressure on my part could persuade these women to divulge the meanings of some of these signs to me; this knowledge, I was told, is reserved for members of their society alone. Their withholding of this information made it difficult for me to differentiate how many of the nsibidi signs are in use today as communication and which ones are simply for decoration. In contrast, the women of Ojor village, Nigeria, told me that though these signs may have had meanings in the past, they are presently merely decorative in nature. In spite of these varied opinions, the general impression, especially among the women in Babong, is that today some of these nsibidi signs are communicative in nature.

The moninkim ritual body arts are thus symbolic statements in which decoration transmits messages about the Ejagham nation. Her body becomes a virtual model of the society, aesthetically communicating customs and role relationships from individual to individual (Brain 1979; Thompson 2008). Accordingly, the moninkim's body can be perceived as a script from which inherent characteristics of the Ejagham cultural codes are read. The young woman not only has the nsibidi signs on her body as script and decoration, but she is also taught how to write and interpret these signs as well as other Ejagham art traditions.

As part of the fattening house structured schedule, the moninkim receives extensive education. She is schooled in various socio-cultural activities and

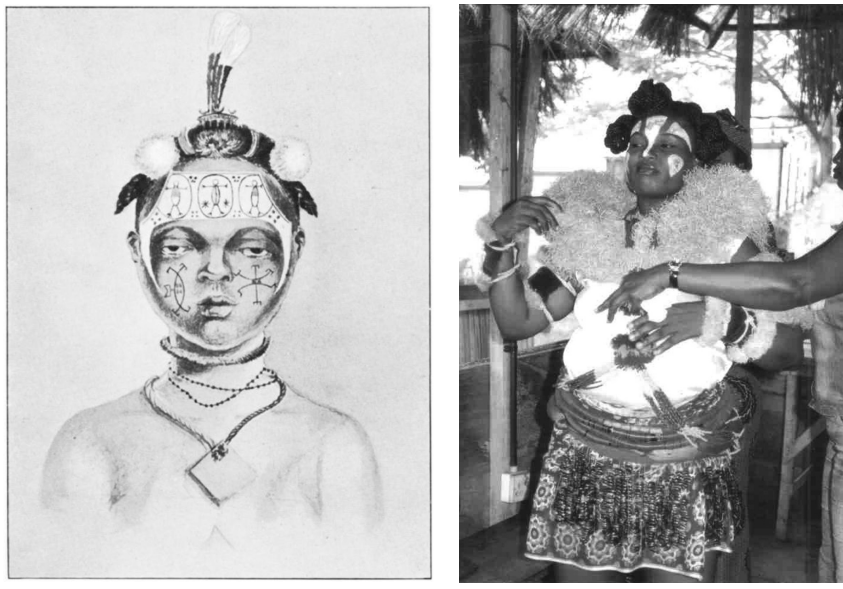


Figure 3. The drawing on the left (3a) shows nsibiri signs on the face of an Ekoi Girl in "Fattening-House" costume (Talbot 110:648). To the right (3b) is a picture of a moninkim dancer (Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria 2006)

domestic home economics, including household chores. The moninkim, according to Margaret Abhe, receives numerous instructions on hygiene and how to take care of her body, her matrimonial home, how to behave in the community, as well as how to respect her husband and her in-laws.[36] Most of these activities she already knows from chores that she did as a child under the guidance of her parents. Nonetheless, it is significant that in the fattening house, she is trained to do these things not from a child's perspective, but, rather, from that of a married woman, a mother who will be expected to take care of herself in spite of her busy life's activities. Foremost in this schooling and acquisition of indigenous knowledge is the inculcation of the Ejagham laws and the ideologies of fertility, sex, and sexuality. To enhance and maintain her physical and mental health, the moninkim plays games and recreational activities with her friends.

The concept of nkim, with particular attention to the protected space of the fattening house, provides opportunities for the reconfiguration of the body and a reaffirmation of culture, cultural norms, and agency that engender and embody the essence of a mature Ejagham woman. By the time the moninkim is ready to leave the fattening house, she is expected to be well vested in her knowledge of the norms of the Ejagham nation, a mistress of nsibidi signs, and able to sing and dance to all the songs taught to her during her stay in the fattening room, especially the Mgbe/Ekpe and Nkim songs. Additionally, she is expected to imbue in her future children with all the good morals that she learned during this period.

Nkim Efabing (Final Outing Ceremony) and the Moninkim Dancing Body

The separation and transition stages are followed by the final rite of incorporation. The moninkim's stay in the fattening house concludes with a confirmation from her educators that the maiden is ready to take up her new role in society. The nkim *efabing*, or final outing ceremony, which symbolizes her reentry into the community, is marked by great festivity performed in a public space in the village—the playground or village square—with family and friends, and indeed the entire community, in participation. Customarily located in the center of the village, the playground is large enough to accommodate all the members of a village as well as visitors during social events and performances.

On this outing day, as Margaret Abhe told me in conversation, children are sent throughout the village by the moninkim's family to disseminate the message that moninkim *seben erieye* (the moninkim is dancing today). It is during this feasting that the moninkim formally exits her private sphere and enters the communal public space exhibiting her beautiful and noble self to the people of her community for the first time after her period of isolation.

The outing ceremony officially begins when the moninkim leaves her nju nkim for the Ntufam's (village head) house to seek his blessings. Here, the elders conduct a rite of prayer with the Ntufam presiding. The props for this rite include *ntub ebangha* (kola dry leaves), *ncham* (dry corn leaves), *oku abi* (oil), and *nyam nsung* (deer meat). An elder places the dry ncham (corn leaves) first on the left palm of the moninkim's hand while prayers are said for the dead; then on her right palm while prayers are said for the living. Such prayers engage the spirits of the living as well as those of the ancestors. To gain a peek into her future, an elder uses two ntub ebangha (kola leaves). One of the leaves is held smooth side facing up, and the other, smooth side down. Both leaves are then left to fall on the ground. If the smooth sides of both leaves fall facing up or down, it is not considered a good omen. If, however, one smooth side falls facing up and the other down, it is deemed a good sign and all is well.[37]

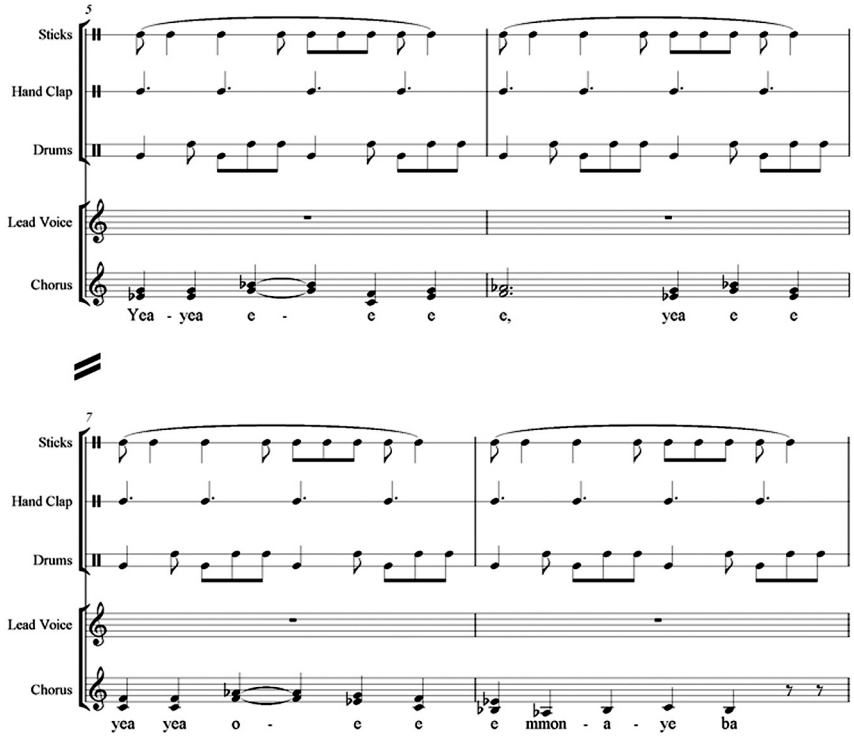
From the Ntufam's house, the moninkim makes two more stops: one to greet her father and his age-grade and the second to pay homage to the women of her community. The moninkim then moves to the Mgbe/Ekpe lodge where she dances out into the community, beautifully dressed, bejeweled with ornaments and bedecked with nsibidi signs and other spiral and linear decorations as she performs a medley of song-dances taught to her in the fattening house.

Dance, as aesthetics and a means of communication (Williams 2004, Cowan 1990, Hanna 1987), is an essential component of the nkim ritual. According to Carl G. Jung (1953) the art of dancing is the art of moving the body in a rhythmical way, usually to music, to express an emotion or idea, to narrate a story or simply to take delight in the movement itself. In addition, dance may even have been the first means of communication. Jung defines dance not only as rhythmic body movement but also as a communicative action that expresses emotions and ideas and even narrates a society's anecdotes. Since dance pervades the quotidian life of most Africans, it is not surprising that it is an indispensable part of rituals in virtually all African communities, given its apparent appeal to what Jung calls the collective unconscious. Catherine Acholonu (1985), in discussing the role of Nigerian dancers in drama, expands on this statement and suggests that the cultural dances of any African community are often representations of their collective view of life, their ethos, borne out from their folklore, memories, fears, and aspirations. As Acholonu affirms, "dancers demonstrate feelings that are buried in the collective unconscious, through ritual enactment, the dancers and the audience partake in an experience which is at once mythical and real, religious and secular" (34). This assertion is incarnated in the nkim ritual.

All of the arts learned by the maiden during months of isolation in the fattening room are demonstrated and expressed in dance at her outing ceremony. However, while dance is an important avenue through which those arts are demonstrated, the moninkim's ritual body is the main vehicle by which the meanings

of this nonverbal art form is articulated. The dance body is grounded on her firm yet relaxed feet that provide "the primary *locus* of metrical articulation" (Agawu 2006). Multiple rhythmic patterns are present in the various movements of the different parts of the moninkim's dance body. Whereas the arms provide a sense of flow as they slightly yet gracefully swing back and forth, moving to the main pulse of the music, the shoulders sometimes move in another correlation, and the legs yet another. All these blend effectively to form a unified dance whole.

In Babong and elsewhere that I researched, vocal and instrumental ensembles accompanied the moninkim during dance. The vocal ensemble, which demonstrated a strong gendered role divide, was comprised mainly of women. The singing technique was predominantly call-and-response between the lead-singer and the chorus, who often responded a third or fourth above or beneath the melodic line set by the lead singer. The ensuing chorus section heard (see Musical Example 1, below) was a freely harmonized improvisation that utilized both text and vocables. The transcription below, from a performance in Babong, shows a composite of the resultant rhythms heard in the piece. Drum variations,



Musical Example 1. Transcription of the chorus part of the Mgbe/Ekpe song (Babong, Cameroon 2009)

specifically those by the lead drummer as well as the part of the lead singer, have not been scored since they are consistently modified throughout the piece.

Characteristically, the song texts are simple but articulate the main theme performed by the moninkim. Below are some examples of nkim songs and chorus that I recorded during my field research in Ojor, Calabar, and Babong.

The first example from Ojor demonstrates how submissive the moninkim is to her instructor in the fattening house. She seeks the consent of her matron, whom, out of respect, she calls mother, even before dancing.

Song from Ojor (Cross River States, Nigeria)

Mama nyin, mama nyin o-o-o, a-re oud ebenkpa
Our mother, our mother o-o-o, permit us to dance first

Earlier in this article, I addressed the significance of circumcision and body aesthetics in the nkim ritual. The example below from Etung accentuates that discourse. The first verse of the song begins by acknowledging *Ayamba*, as the deity of circumcision, and indicates that the deities (and ancestors) have accepted the sacrifice of the moninkim. This line affirms that circumcision is not only sacred it is a sacrifice. Verse three corroborates my discourses of the significance of body aesthetics and dance in nkim ritual. The young woman's body and beauty in dance are compared to *bitchit*, the beautiful, smart, and attractive sunbird with floral colors, and her dance, like this beautiful sunbird, is described in the lyrics as "light, vibrant, full of honor, and incomparable" to any other dance of the land.

Song from Etung (performed by the Cross River State Cultural Center, Calabar)

Ayamba mmoni nyom e-e
Ayamba, the deity of circumcision
Njom Akam ebaghe
The deities/ancestors have accepted the sacrifice (of circumcision)
Ndise e-e-e Ndise—e (twice)
Beautiful image, beautiful image (Moninkim)
Chorus: *Abayen Ndise*
Come and see this beautiful image
Bitchit akibobin abin-ano; Akacha-e, Yangererere (twice)
The beautiful, smart, and attractive sunbird is about to dance; it dances with a special flare: light, vibrant, full of honor, and incomparable.

In the last example from Babong, the young woman demonstrates her possible emotions, pain, and reactions should her marriage go wrong. She bemoans this poor situation in song and begs to be allowed to return to her family.

Song from Babong (Cameroon)

Ebai ebibum o-o-o, areme mbop nkure
My marriage is bad o-o-o, allow me to pack and go

The instrumental ensemble that accompanied the songs and dance consisted of drums played by men while women mainly played rattles and/or pairs of sticks. The ensemble included single-headed open-ended barrel drums: an *okam* lead drum (sometimes referred to as the big drum, not because of its size but because of its function as a lead drum) as well as the relatively high-pitched *ekpiri* (small drum), both of which are played with hands only; *akacha* (a pair of basket rattles); and *akpak* or *ajak* (a pair of flat sticks).[38] The polyrhythmic soundscape created by the instruments of this ensemble were augmented by the additional rhythmic jingles of the ornaments worn by the moninkim. These included the *okpono nwun* (small waist bells) and *agut* (spiral brass leg rings) that adorned her waist and legs respectively and jingled as she danced, rendering the rhythmic and sonic structure of the music even more dense.

In a typical nkim dance performance, such as those I witnessed, the drummer began to play free but pulsated drum strokes, often used to signal that the performance was about to commence. As these drum strokes became more metrically articulated (in the dance mode, according to Nketia's taxonomy of modes of drumming [1963]), the lead-singer intoned the song for a particular dance motif while the women playing the akpak and akacha joined in the chorus as they responded to the calls of the lead-singer. This now-established instrumental and vocal music then ushered in the moninkim dancers, who with their bodies "talked" the dance (Stone 2000), that is, narrated the texts of the songs with their body movements in dance. The dance steps and performance changed according to the theme of the song.

Characteristically, nkim ritual dances feature a medley of dance motifs that enact diverse subject matter and social issues. It is through dance, as Chernoff (1979:143) explains, "that the music and its context are brought together. . . . And dancing gives the rhythms a visible and physical form." In flexible and willowy body movements, the nkim song-dance recounts a story or an event germane to the moninkim, including the pride of being circumcised, caring for her body, dancing, and even marital disputes.

Although moninkim are taught the same choreographed dance patterns, each woman brings to bear her individual persona in the dance. Even when several moninkim danced together to a particular choreographed dance pattern, I observed many individual variations in the execution of the established movements. The audience responded accordingly with ululations and exclamations to the entire group of dancing moninkim as well as to an individual moninkim. When the dancers completed reading/enacting the text inherent in a particular dance, they proceeded toward the drummers, where they performed a short concluding motif in front of them: wiggling their shoulders and torsos and thereafter kicking slightly toward the lead drum, cueing the drummers to stop. When there were more than two moninkim dancing, as was the case in Ojor village in Nigeria, the lead moninkim dancer performed this concluding motif alone.

There are no stringent rules as to the sequence of dance motifs to be performed. However, in Babong, the moninkim performance, such as the one I witnessed, customarily closed with the Mgbe/Ekpe song-dance, one that indexes the social formations and spirituality associated with the leopard cult. This motif began with the two moninkim performing a shuffling foot movement: forward, short, and slow left-right followed by sideward movements to the left, then to right. It was a stylized version of the left-right step of ordinary walking. Both dancers then danced slightly apart from each other. Now at two opposite angles, each moninkim pulled out a handkerchief that was hidden at the side of her body and fixed it behind her waist akin to a tail—a metaphor for the leopard's tail. Having dressed themselves like the Ekpe masquerade,[39] they danced toward each other, to the middle of the dance space, raising their arms above their heads. Suddenly, their dance demeanor changed; they swiveled around, jumped slightly into the air and landed on one leg as they impersonated the Ekpe masquerade. Instantly, the crowd became elated and began to shout, with some women even entering the dance space and seemingly sweeping the ground with their fingers (see Figure 4, below).

Figure 4. The Mgbe/Ekpe song-dance by two moninkim (Bobong, Cameroon 2009). Notice the white handkerchief (tail) dangling from the first moninkim's waist and a darker one from the second moninkim's waist

At this point, the moninkim ran to the seated chiefs and greeted them in the Mgbe/Ekpe way, as I describe below. Then, with faster dance steps, they returned to the drummers and greeted them. Back in their dance space, the moninkim performed backward dance movements simulating a leopard taking aim at his prey. A slower, majestic movement followed that involved the dancers moving their hips back and forth akin to a leopard contentedly wagging its tail.

After a few minutes of this performance, the Mgbe chief, Ndep Christopher Agbor,[40] walked into the dance space. He stood before the musicians, who stopped playing, raising his staff and muttering a few words, then called out "*Ye bari!*" (Special greetings), to which the musicians shouted affirmation in unison: "*Owa!*" He lowered his staff and turned to faced the moninkim; the musicians started playing again as he danced toward the two dancing moninkim. He placed gifts of money on the foreheads of the young women and they greeted him in the Mgbe way by gracefully raising their arms (at about a thirty-degree angle from the trunk of their bodies) and patting both sides of their body (just below their armpits) with their little fans held in their right hands. Then, they blew a short gust of air at the chief, who replied to this nonverbal gesture with a shout:

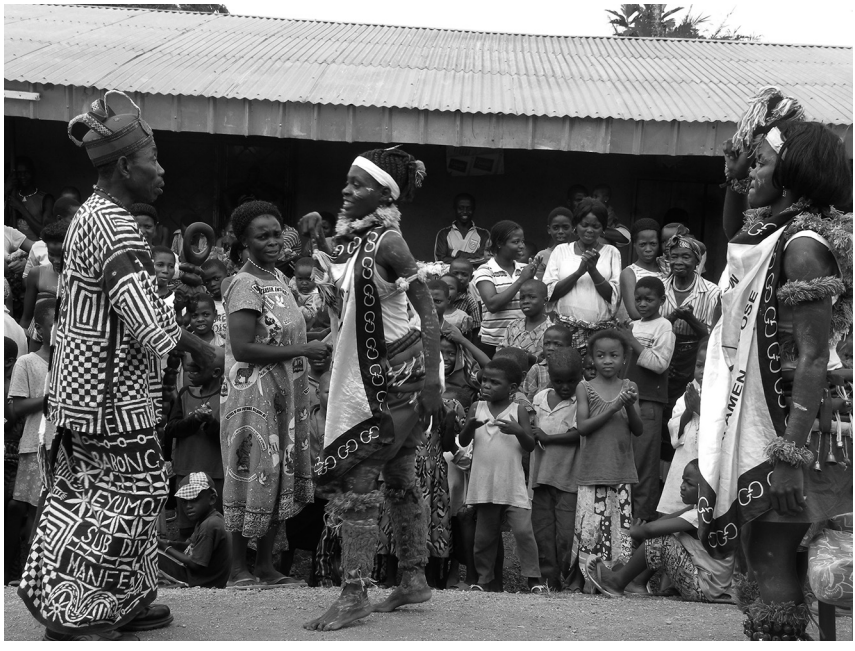


Figure 5. The Moninkim greeting the Mgbe chief, Ndep Christopher Agbor, who is seen here wearing the Mgbe/Ekpe attire with nsibidi writings (Babong, Cameroon 2009)

"*Chaa!*" All three (the two moninkim and the *Mgbe* chief) then danced gracefully in shuffling slow left-right foot movements toward the musicians. About four feet from the musicians, the trio stopped on the chief's cue at which point he spoke to the musicians, who now stopped playing and affirmed the greetings of the chief by responding in unison: "*Owa!*" After this short rite, the lead singer intoned a song accompanied by the instruments, while the trio danced further toward the musicians. When they were about two feet from the musicians, the chief once more stopped, raised, and then lowered his staff, thus signaling a formal end to the singing and drumming.

Normally, at the end of the Ekpe/Mgbe song-dance performance, the moninkim is given a staff, a symbol of authority and a new social status as an Mgbe princess. In principle, this rite signaled the end of the outing performance in the village square. The lead singer proceeded to intone a last song, and as the moninkim began to dance, her husband's age-mates entered the dance space and carried her shoulder high amid gun salutes to her marital home. Their relatives and friends would follow them, and the feasting would continue deep into the night in the compound of her marital home, thus bringing the outing ceremony or rite of incorporation to a formal close.

The entire nkim ritual dance might last more than two hours. In this type of oral tradition, the length of the moninkim's performance is contingent upon audience appreciation and acclamation but even more so when her matrons and instructors think that the moninkim has demonstrated all the necessary dance skills that she was taught in the fattening house.

The core characteristic of moninkim dance movement is its close interaction with the music. As expected, the instrumental ensemble provided accompaniment for the dancing, but the dance steps did not strictly follow the drum rhythms. Instead, the moninkim's dance steps often articulated the rhythmic nuances of the song texts while they added new and varied rhythmic patterns with their hips and shoulders. The master drummer marked out and accentuated the moninkim's dance steps as the other instruments added varied rhythmic patterns. What I observed, therefore, was an amalgamation of dance, instrumental, and song rhythms, which formed a polyrhythmic texture grounded on an ostinato pattern.

In contrast to most dances from this geo-cultural area, where the master drummer is responsible for prompting the level of intensity that drives the performance to its peak, in this genre, the moninkim plays that role by dancing specific steps to particular songs, calling for an ensuing response of ululation and shouts of praise from the chorus and audience. For example, in the Ekpe song-dance, the audience responded with shouts, ululation, and clearing of the ground with their hands as soon as the moninkim changed her steps to those of the Ekpe masquerade. Interestingly, the drumming barely changed; neither did

the rhythmic patterns of the rattles and pairs of sticks. What was perceptible was the creation of tension via the increasing volume of the accompanying instruments. After the peak moment, the volume of the instruments decreased as the music gradually came to an end.

The outing ceremony or rite of incorporation completed, the moninkim retakes her given name and joins the elite group of women of the village. She takes her place in society as a well-trained woman who is able to manage her family's affairs as well as to assume control of her own life.

Moninkim in Contemporary Times

Although many of the practices of the nkim ritual are still in place, the introduction of Western cultures and urbanization in Nigeria and Cameroon has resulted in some changes to the nkim rites. For instance, the practice of entering the fattening room and the pride of gaining weight is still functionally present, but since the Western ideal of feminine beauty is a slim body, most moninkim quickly shed their added pounds after their outing ceremony. Some of the women told me that despite the fact that they respect the Ejagham tradition, they also have to adhere to the sands of time or they risk losing their fiancés and husbands to competing slimmer girls within the society.

The Ejagham people regard the moninkim institution as an autonomous society, and membership is restricted only to circumcised girls who, strictly speaking, are the only people allowed to perform the nkim dance. As I mentioned earlier, traditional Ejagham society has encouraged circumcision for various reasons. But in present-day Nigeria and Cameroon, and with increasing pressure from Europe and the United States, the circumcision of girls is strongly discouraged. These young women are thus caught up in a kind of culture conflict, between traditional and modern exigencies. On the one hand, within the Ejagham communities the women proudly identify themselves as having passed through the rigors of nkim rites; on the other hand, particularly outside the Ejagham milieu, they are ever more reluctant to accept that reality. This ambiguity is further augmented as moninkim is increasingly diverging from its ritual ambiance toward a more entertainment character. Young girls, including school children, perform the moninkim dance to entertain audiences at social events, as I observed in Calabar, Cross River State, in 2010.[41] These entertainers, most often full-bodied young girls beautifully adorned with moninkim outfits, have never passed through the Nkim rite of passage. Within this entertainment locus, moninkim no longer faithfully follow tradition.

Body decorations and costumes of the moninkim are changing as well. Previously, the face of the moninkim was adorned with complex nsibidi signs that conveyed specific meanings, intelligible by the Mgbe and Nkim societies.

Regrettably, this custom is becoming essentially extinct. As the dance increases its presence in the entertainment domain, the practice and utilization of nsibidi signs have been replaced by the use of simple facial decorations comprising spiral and dotted abstract motifs that have fundamentally lost all cultural meaning except to enhance beauty.

The moninkim's costumes have also undergone some modifications. Today, the monikim's performance dress is made of *ntogboefo* (a simple blouse or camisole) and a wrapper tied from the waist to just above the knee or shorts (as in Babong) under a broad belt of beads, dried seeds, and small bells. Despite all these changes, the moninkim's body is still painted with native cosmetics of golden-red camwood (*ekue*) and white chalk (*ofem*), her legs and hands partially covered with decorated leggings and armlets, while beads, raffia, and ornaments prettify her waist, neck, and hair. In rare cases, one might find a moninkim wearing *agut* (spiral rings worn around the legs) while dancing. The reason for this scarcity, according to Akon Moses, is that "the agut is very heavy and it takes a long time to put on. Moreover, in Ojor town, placing the agut on the legs [of the moninkim] can be done only by Anthony Ambor because this duty belongs to his family lineage and it is not always easy to enlist his services" (personal communication, Akon Moses, 2006).[42]

Furthermore, I noticed some preferences in the choice of song-dances performed in the different areas I researched. In the Cross River State Cultural Center in Calabar, where the dancers are mainly entertainers, their dance movements emphasized and showed off their full body and beauty. More attention was placed on the spiral facial decoration, which resembled some of the nsibidi signs on the face of an Ejagham woman of 1924 (see Figure 3a). In Ojor, the moninkim additionally performed a song-dance with sexual themes that involved suggestively rolling and thrusting their pelvises brusquely backward and forward. During this particular performance, one of the moninkim danced toward me, inviting me to dance with her, an invitation, which I accepted. In Babong, the moninkim song-dances displayed more socio-cultural themes. Thus, from these three Ejagham areas, the various facets of the Nkim ritual, music, and dance are all revealed.

Closing Thoughts

Rituals are indispensable in most African traditional cultures. In the course of ritual performance, "dance and music embody memory and perseverance and, in the end, inspire and support survival" (Daniel 2005:5). Although, the dance aspect of nkim ritual is often unequivocal, my research into this tradition in Nigeria and Cameroon demonstrates a complex and symbiotic genre of ritual, music, and dance, whose value is "inseparable from its value as an expression of

human experience" (Blacking 1969:34) in the Ejagham worldview. The nju nkim represents a locale for the young women's instruction and for the beautification of their bodies. It is the ideal space for the moninkim to receive an education in preparation for her new role in society as wife, mother, and role model, as well as loyal and dedicated Ejagham citizen. Once within the realm of this secure sphere, the Moninkim makes it her space with her individualized symbolic drawings on the walls of her room.

The moninkim, through participating in the Nkim rite, asserts to all in her village as well as the entire Ejagham society that she is now a woman, ready for married life, that she is poised and prepared to assume her role in Ejagham society, and that she is part of one of the powerful cults in Ejagham land. The basic principle of the nkim dance still remains the celebration of life, which includes the accentuation and expression of the femininity of Ejagham women as well as the attraction and admiration of, most often, her future husband. The time and effort put into preparing the woman for marriage underscore the importance that the Ejagham people accord to the institutions of marriage (*ebae*) and family life. Moreover, it demonstrates the invaluable role and power of women in the Ejagham marriage system. As can be inferred, nkim ritual has many significant socio-cultural advantages. The Ejagham insist that the education the girl receives during this rite of passage plays a dominant role in maintaining understanding and peace in the family home, thus minimizing marital/family quarrels and curtailing divorce. As Enang Oe (2009:41) notes, through rituals like Moninkim, "autochthonous culture is preserved and passed from generation to generation, along with valuable knowledge of social history, language and behavior," and I would add, cultural arts and gender discourses. Through rituals, Oe continues, "traditional values and wisdom are shared between generations and families, which strengthen the fabric of the community, enhancing social cohesion and support systems" (ibid?)

Nkim ritual, music, and dance may well be regarded as key documents of aesthetic history. They are nonverbal formulations of beauty, arts, and ethics. The dance, traditionally performed in a ritual setting, primarily highlights the sacredness of the body and its role in marriage and childbearing, all of which are fundamental to the Nkim rite of passage. Rituals such as moninkim are instruments of moral edification, decorum, and entertainment thus fusing the sacred and the profane.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to all the artists, musicians, dancers, and people of Ojor, Ekok, and Babong, as well as the Cross River State Cultural Center Dance Troupe, Calabar, who generously shared their cultural information, indigenous knowledge, and talents, and who allowed me into their space, thus making my research a success. This study could have been extremely difficult without the

help of my collaborators Philip Abang, Martin Ogar, Victor Osaji, and Sister Janet Ogar, HHCJ. My special thanks also to Chief (Knight) Lawrence Atem Etta and the people of Ekok, and to Chief Ntui Tanyi Moses and his family for providing me with accommodation, and to the people of Babong for their hospitality. To all Ejagham people, I say, *oyim ka oti; oyim kpe eajih* (thank you very much).

I am grateful to George W. K. Dor for reading this article and to Ayo Stephen Oluranti for editing and advising on my transcriptions. I am indebted to my mother, Madam Rose U. Odey and my sister, Mrs. Francesca Bissong, for doing the necessary groundwork that often facilitated my movements during fieldwork. Finally, I wish to express my sincere gratitude to the reviewers for their time, meticulous attention to detail, and invaluable recommendations for the revision of this article.

Notes

1. See Blacking 1969:34.

2. I will be using both terms, *nkim* and *moninkim*, interchangeably throughout the article. Note that due to Ejagham dialectical variants, the term moninkim is also sometimes spelled: monikim, monekim, mmoninkim.

3. For similar education among Sande initiates of Sierra Leone, see James and Robertson 2002 and Monts 1984. For Bunda women, see MacCormack 1975.

4. While the Ejagham people in Nigeria speak Ejagham and English, those in Cameroon speak Ejagham, English, and sometimes French.

5. Also, see http://www.peoplegroups.org; http://www.joshuaproject.net/people-profile.php?peo3=11728&rog3=CM. Accessed April 12, 2012.

6. The Ejaghams cultivate tree crops including cocoa, palms (*mbi*), bush mangoes (*nseng*) and food crops including yams (*eyu*), sugarcane (*erum*), plantain (*egome*), and bananas (*asuri*).

7. The Ntoon is responsible for the ritual activities of the community while various societies of elders and age-grade associations of young men perform political functions. A council of elders governs each village.

8. According to Martin Atim Ogar, one of my collaborators and interlocutors, the Ejagham were a kingdom ruled by the Atuiatui with village heads called Ntufam (in Etung). He proceeded to explain the Ntufam (chieftaincy) institution by relating that there are two types of Ntufam: the first and simpler kind based on elders governing, or gerontocracy (Ntufam), and the second, a more complex priest-king type, Ntufam-Emang, who "has the power to evoke the gods" (personal interview with Martin Atim Ogar in Ikom in July 2009. See also Tangban 2008:64.)

9. The *Mgbe,* also *Ngbe* (leopard cult), is a secret society for adult men of high reputation among the Ejagham people. This society is the most powerful of its kind in Ejagham land. The Mgbe secret club's counterpart among the Efiks of Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria, is called Ekpe.

10. A married women's club that is translated as the python club.

11. Omojola 2012 also notes a similar phenomenon among the Yorùbá people of Nigeria.

12. Sister Janet Ogar, HHCJ, is a Sister of the Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus (HHCJ); Philip Abang, a director of education as well as LACA coordinator for Ikom Local Government Area, Cross River State; Martin Atim Ogar, a retired chief administration manager of Cocoa, Agbokim, Etung Local Government Area, Cross River State; Victor Osaji, a Cocoa farmer. These were the job status/positions of the persons mentioned above as of 2009 when I went back to the field.

13. Usually, native brewed alcoholic drinks like palm wine or gin are offered on occasions such as the above. My guess is that we were offered soft drinks because of the presence of two religious women in the group. Nonetheless, the men and a few elderly women were offered alcoholic drinks.

14. Ikom in Cross River State, Nigeria, is a border town with Ekok in Cameroon.

15. There are two main languages used for communication in the Republic of Cameroon, namely, French and English. It is not uncommon, therefore, to meet French-speaking law enforce-

ment agents in the Cameroonian borders or within the republic when moving from one town or city to another.

16. The group of elders (men and women) were knowledgeable custodians of Nkim ritual and Ejagham culture. They included Ntufam Raymon Ojong (78), Asam Fedinan Ashu (61), Alice Ejoga Ntui (who was head of the women, 72), Cecilia Ojong Ofo-Ayan (72), Maria Ajan Ayom, who brought some of the pictures she took during her own Nkim outing ceremony, (70), Theresa Ntui (70), Sara Ntui (73), and Easter Asuh and Alice Ekone, who also showed us pictures of their Moninkim days in the 1950s and 1960s, respectively.

17. Chief Lawrence is a knight in the Catholic Church. This may explain why he asked me to pray instead of an elder in our midst. This also demonstrates the reconcilability of Christianity and Traditional African Religion among this people.

18. I had earlier encountered this occurrence in Ojor town when Mrs. Francesca Onwo and her household spoke on my behalf in the presence of Chief Paulinus Ogar. As in Ejagham land, so was it in Ogbaruland, which I also researched. This trend is known to other African cultures including the Ewe of Ghana.

19. Conversation with Ntufam Dickson Nfone Nfone in Ekok, Cameroon, on July 29, 2009. He spoke in Pidgin, which I translated into English above.

20. Martin, who in the initial plan was supposed to drive Philip's car back to Nigeria, insisted on continuing the journey with the rest of us to Babong. For this second part of our journey, we used four motorbike riders: Enyong Moses Ndep transported Philip Abang, Asam Felix Enyong conveyed Martin Atim Ogar, Etta Akwo Solomon carried Victor Osaji, and Borice Bissong transported the author. These young men were very skilled riders and knew how to navigate the bad roads well.

21. The categorization of the different rites of passage into separation, transition, and incorporation remains Van Gennep's seminal contribution to the study of rituals. See Van Gennep 1960:10–11.

22. The age range for this rite differs from village to village. Sometimes the girl can be about fifteen years old when she is engaged. That means that she would be seventeen to eighteen years old or more by the time she is ready to get married.

23. I use both terms interchangably in this article.

24. Clitoridectomy should not be confused with infibulation, which is practiced by some African cultures. Female infibulation, also called "pharaonic circumcision" is the suturing together of the vulva after the total or partial removal of the labia minora, labia majora, and clitoris, leaving a small opening for the flow of urine and menstrual blood. This is different from clitoridectomy, also referred to as "female circumcision," which is the total or partial surgical removal of the clitoris.

25. The significance of blood in rites of passage is common in many African cultures. For example, Mbiti notes that "circumcision blood is like making a covenant, or solemn pact between the individual and the people" (Mbiti 1991:96–103; 1999:120).

26. Nwaokpoh (1979) notes other alternatives, among the Igbo and Ibibio in particular, where the maiden had gone through clitoridectomy at a very early age but without seclusion. In such circumstances, the maiden is expected to experience some physical discomfort by wearing heavy but precious foot rings (*Nja*) throughout her seclusion period or else undergo cicatrization.

27. In the recent past, the South African athlete Caster Semenya was forced to undergo a partial removal of her clitoris and the removal of her gonads, demonstrating that clitoridectomy is still practiced in the Western world on medical grounds. Read more on this story in the *New York Times* http://nyti.ms/1hk1bnW.

28. On the discussion of isolation during rites of passage see also James and Robertson 2002.

29. This kind of seclusion is comparable to the spiritual retreats Christians make in preparation for a major feast or period of the liturgical calendar or before making vows or holy orders. A much closer connection or comparison is when a young woman is being prepared for religious life. The young woman wanting to be a religious sister begins by participating in a short retreat and proceeds to the novitiate—a two-year period of seclusion, of which the first year is canonically mandatory. In the novitiate, the novice learns about the rules and norms of the order or congrega-

tion into which the novice is becoming a member (see also Nwaopkoh 1979). The anthropologist Carol MacCormack (1975) also observed this phenomenon of isolation among Bundu women during initiation rites of the Sande secret society.

30. Benedicta Oben was the president of National Women Affairs at the time of my research in Babong, 2009.

31. Most men in the Ejagham nation, especially first sons, are often members of the Mgbe/Ekpe secret society, whose future bride or brides pass through the Moninkim rite. It is not surprising, then, that the Mgbe cult protects the Moninkim during her stay in the "fattening house." The Mgbe assume this responsibility also because they maintain order and peace in the Ejagham nation as a whole.

32. The marriage system among the Ejagham is centered on broad rules of exogamy with mainly patrilocal residence.

33. *Nsibidi* is an ideographic writing system of communication involving signs, gestures, and the movement of different parts of the body.

34. Interview with the Margaret Abhe (the local leader of the women) and a group of women in Babong, Cameroon, July 2009.

35. Interview with Lydia Njong and a group of women in Babong, Cameroon, July 2009.

36. Interview with Margaret Abhe and a group of women in Babong, Cameroon, July 2009.

37. The women in Babong related the details of this prayer rite to me during my research in 2009.

38. An *akpak* is about twelve inches long and three inches wide. When struck together, they produce a woody clanging sound adding to the rhythmic structure of music.

39. In place of a handkerchief, the Ekpe masquerade usually has a bell dangling from the back of his waist to symbolize a tail. This bell rings as the masquerade moves. Also, it is not uncommon for Ekpe masquerades to wear long tail-like costumes suspended from the backs of their waists.

40. Ndep Christopher Agbor (66 years old) was the chief of culture and head of the Mgbe/Ekpe society in Babong in 2009 when I conducted my research.

41. The Cross River State Cultural Center, Calabar, has a group of girls who perform the Moninkim dance for entertainment. I first observed this group in 2006.

42. Personal communication with Akon Moses in Ojor, Cross River State, Nigeria, 2006.

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