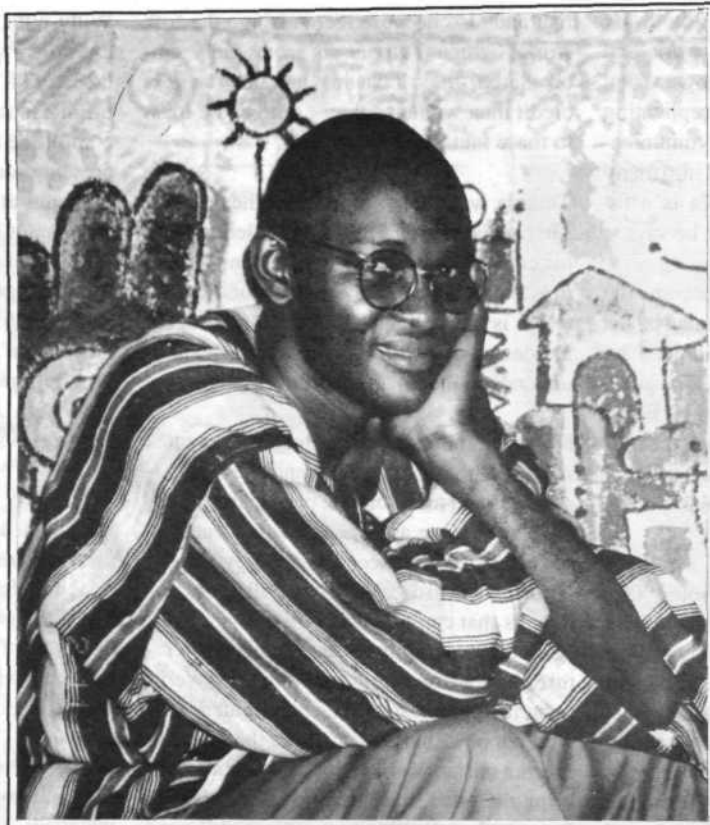




# My SOURCES

Victor Ekpuk Painter/Illustrator

**M**y love for the exotic ethnic art forms has been the reason for my seeking to express myself through the traditional art forms of the African peoples, especially those of my immediate environment in Nigeria: the Ibibio, Yoruba and Igbo traditions.

form of sacred communication among the male cult societies of the Efiks, Ibibios and Arochukwu peoples in south eastern part of Nigeria. This pictographic writing was devised to overcome the problem of communication among the different dialectical groups. Nsibidi was not only written, sometimes it was acted out and thus became a form of unspoken language with body movements.

Among the numerous male cult societies that practised Nsibidi, the Ekpe society had an extensive use of Nsibidi symbols in the form of body painting, drawing on the sand, arrangements of objects and textile design, e.g. ukara cloth, a special batik print dyed with indigo with numerous signs and symbols.

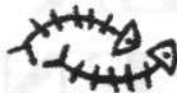
Ekpe society is not the highest and the most powerful of the societies in Ibibioland, but its

***I seek to arrive at a universal language that still retains the essence of the ritual communication of the ancient symbols and signs while I use them to interpret my present reality.***

The art of pictographic writing known among the Ibibio people as **Nsibidi** holds much fascination and inspiration for me.

Nsibidi was practised long before the white man came to the shores of Africa with his kind of writing. It was generally used as a

The Ibibio people did not limit Nsibidi to secret cults alone, sometimes it was secularised to meet social and economic needs. It served as a form of label identification, public notices, declaration of taboos, amorous messages, record keeping and decorations.



influence is felt more because of its elitist and judicial functions in the clans. Its authority was used to knot the Ibibio clans together, Ekpe is personified as a wise old deity whose power and influence are all embracing hence the symbol of circle (○) features most prominently as Nsibidi symbol in this society. Manila (U) is also used as symbol of wealth

in the Ekpe cult, it is the 'rarity' and closeness of the manila as an instrument of commerce that is being transposed on Ekpe. The zoomorphic symbols like that of a leopard

[] suggest authority with the society. Among the people of the forest areas east of the Niger, the leopard is regarded as the fiercest of the land animals hence it is much feared.

The meaning of the symbols on the body of the Ekpe initiates as well as on the ukara cloth worn by the initiates are secretly guarded and taught only to the initiates, they are also used as code signs known only to the initiates. The information that I am giving in this essay is just a tip of the iceberg because ultimately most of the core meanings are concealed. Other male societies like the Ekpo, Ekong and Idiong also engage in the art of Nsibidi as instrument of sacred communication. Among the female societies the graphic symbols are not necessarily Nsibidi. Theirs are used as cosmetic decoration on their bodies as well on murals. Some of the symbols are dots [, circles [, linear patterns []

and triangular pattern [].

My interest with drawing using the ethnic art form started way back at the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University), Ile-Ife, Nigeria. There I was made to appreciate first of all the rich artistic heritage I have as an African. I was made to see art through the eyes of the traditional African where all the world was seen as living and inspired by divinity. The rivers, trees and stones were believed to possess spirits. Hence the reverence and sacredness that was bestowed on nature and the art that could help communicate with it. With this attitude to life, it is no wonder the art of writing was not done for its own sake but for the specific purpose for which it was meant; to serve mostly divinity. This also probably explains why Nsibidi could not be secularised to a greater extent.

At Ife, part of the curriculum of the Fine Art department was for the student to extract the most he could from the traditional and blend them with whatever form of contemporary experience he has. So



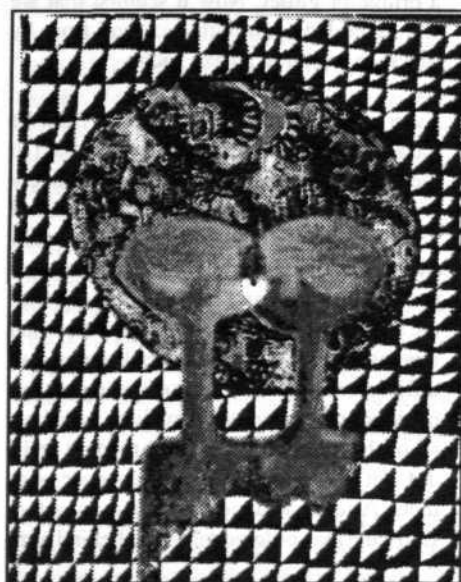
while I use them to interpret my present reality.

Through my experiments I have been able to arrive at some personal symbols like: fish bones [] to mean decay, sun [] to

mean life and hope, house [] to mean state of consciousness, the moon [] to mean night, moon with sun [] to mean eclipse.

The paintings and drawings at **Windsongs**, my recent solo exhibition, show a lot of these elements. I hope to keep forging ahead with this idiom to become more aware of the possible potentials of this art form. I see this as my own way of keeping the idea of the ancient sacred art alive. My forms and colours are simplified, sometimes not necessarily to appeal to a wider audience, but rather because that is how I wish to express myself. We are all at different levels of consciousness and this affects our attitude to our environment, this goes to show why I cannot please everybody with my art, and why I do not even try. I prefer to stay focused and express myself the way I wish

to at any particular point in time. The idea of bending to mass appeal could be dangerous to those artists who wish expand their creative horizon. Ultimately, I believe artists like other people have their drive in life: Money or truth.



Above: *Scape goat*, mixed media, 1995

Below: *Now we see eye to eye*, mixed media, 1995