

NON VERBAL CODES OF *EKA-EKPO* AND *ABOIKPA-EKPO* AND THE AKWA IBOM CONCEPT OF FEMININISM

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Abstract

One of the unique features of the indigenous African theatre is the unification of physical attributes with the spiritual to situate the unconscious but attainable human nature, which appears vague on gender. A greater part of such expressions are indicated in the sign system of the Akwa Ibom people in their performances. This study examines the communications in the nonverbal codes of Eka-ekpo and Aboikpa-ekpo and Akwa Ibom conception of femininity in these masquerades. It uses qualitative research method and bases the theoretical framework on mythological criticism. Findings show that Ekpo masquerades are shaped in real human categories. Each category embodies some cultural ideas that require insight to unravel. Eka-ekpo is coded as the earth's mother, the great mother, the custodian of life and the harbinger of death. Aboikpa-ekpo is coded as the paragon of beauty, the indeterminate, firmness of nature and the ripening of womanhood. Findings further show that suppleness, coquetry, bodily-adornment and docility are femininity in Eka-ekpo and Aboikpa-ekpo. The paper concludes that the ethical values that help the African society to grapple with the ups and downs of their society are predominantly warped in mysteries through signs and symbols, which may not be deciphered by the audience. The secularisation of a performance like Ekpo, may be the tool to project creativity and mindset in the designs, thereby promoting Akwa Ibom State for the innovative ability to redefine gender role and peculiarities in the society, which is quite instrumental in social character and attitudinal reorientation in the current social dispensation.

Keywords: Nonverbal, codes, Concept, Femininism.

Introduction

The configuration of persons into class with peculiarities in Ekpo performance of the Akwa Ibom people has reflected a fundamental truth about women. Besides the specific conception of their nature within the confines of Akwa Ibom State, the regular arrangement of each kind of Ekpo seems to draw from the universal conception of humankind to the specific application of their attitudes based on the outlook of the surrounding. This view presents Ekpo performance as a social entity that gathers its philosophy, appearance and activity from the cultural conviction of a people. Left for Edem (2012: p76), "Ekpo symbolises the continuing existence of people who had physically died but still live in the spirit world, from where they occasionally return as messengers of Abasi Ibom to influence the course of human activities, for good or for bad." Based on the view

above, there is an indication that the nature and activities of Ekpo in Akwa Ibom State are spiritual configurations for mortals to activate towards the well being of the society.

The union of the spiritual and the physical in Ekpo system is further coded in the various human classes its masquerades are appropriated into. According to Etim (2019:65-66)

The modern society portrayal of Ekpo like *Aboikpa-ekpo* does not appear terrifying; *ekpo ntoeyen* is mild to behold, *Ekpo-ndok* is an all whimsical idiot; *Ekong-ekpo* and *Atita-ekpo* are gentlemen completely, *Eka-ekpo* is a grotesque piece but *Ekpo-nyogo* seems to command the awful eerie charm that spell-bounds the audience of ekpo performance.

Based on this categorisation, a unique thing is noticeable in the bearing of *Eka-ekpo* and *Aboikpa-ekpo*, who are the feminine counterparts of all the listed ekpos. This uniqueness redefines them with distinctive natural codes in appreciation, gesture and symbolism resplendent of the Akwa Ibom conception of “the woman”. This conception tilts to the femininity in the human nature, which appears global even among men.

When a man does something in rather docile manners, the remark is often slammed in statements such as; “she does his things woman-woman”, “can’t you do something as a man?”, “You, do that thing as if you have bones in you, woman!”. In the same vein, when a woman accomplishes her task or is known for agility, smartness and quickness of mind, expressions such as these are used to describe her: “That one doesn’t waste time on her assignment; she does her things like a man.”, “You are always harsh like a man.” All these expressions denote femininity from feminine. Therefore, femininity denotes the core woman-like carriage or bearing in being, in handling activity and in personal representation. This is remarkable in Karl Jung’s archetypal analysis of the “woman”. To this effect, Guerin, Labor and Morgan (1966: p120) identify archetypal woman in the Great Mother who is good and connected to fecundity; the Terrible Mother who is the source of destruction; and the Soul-mate who is the beautiful, docile and agreeable aspect of womanhood which sexual energy, peace and war for possession and unspoiled beauty reside. These attributes are advertently communicated in the two female masquerades of Ekpo performance of the Akwa Ibom people through signs.

This study aims at identifying the various factors incorporated as nonverbal codes in the appearance, activities and gestures displayed by these two masquerades together with the factors in them that denote femininity in human nature

Theoretical Framework

This paper is based on the tenets of mythological criticism. The theory is linked to the speculation of Carl Jung, who clones his psychology pedigree on the ideas of Sigmund Freud. Although Jung has decried some of Freud’s claims, there is still a unified conception of human life, experience and reflection of different stages of life. The tenet of the theory is purely the representation of the human collective unconscious that remains the same in the current human nature as a transcendent factor of human course. according to Jung (1974:p 838) myth criticism “is purely a biological orientation (which) can explain a good deal about man in general..., able to reduce every human

individual to a member of the species Homo Sapiens, since its range is limited to what is transmitted through heredity or derived from other sources". This idea views a performance as a creative construct which is capable of recapturing the basic human nature as conceived across the globe or as known by a particular kind. "It is no more than a potentiality handed down to us from primordial times in the specific form of mnemonic images or inherited in the anatomical structure of the brain" (Jung, 1974: PP 844-845). It focuses on connecting the contemporary human nature alongside their dispositions to their original form acknowledged across cultures.

Carl Jung identifies mythical factors such as water in the sea and river: sun, rising sun and setting sun; colour, circle, the anime; archetypal woman, the terrible woman and the soul-mate; wind, ship, garden, desert, creation, immortality and hero archetypes, which deepens the knowledge of mythocracy in a given society. Thus, as Guerin, Labor and Morgan (1966; p118) put it, "myth is, in the general sense, universal ... and certain images that recur in the myths of people widely separated in time and have tend to have a common meaning." The feminine attributes that are same across the universe establish the motion of archetypes, while "the myth critic is concerned to seek out those mysterious artefacts built into certain literary (performance) form which elicit, with almost uncanny force, dramatic and universal human reactions (Guerin *et al*, 1966: p 119).

Relating this theory to the position of the paper, there are certain fundamental attributes that are built into the Ekpo categories. The *Eka-ekpo* who is the mother figure possesses a universal attribute and quality that depict the collectively acknowledged nature of women in the society. The same thing is applicable to *Aboikpa-ekpo*, which is a mythological portrayal of the feminine features of a maiden in the society. This will explain the various nonverbal indices on the body, attitude and the general feminine dispositions along with the general feminine dispositions taken to be a set of femininity in the women.

Ekpo Performance

Ekpo is an open concept in Akwa Ibom State, denoting many ideas. Among the Annang, a poor person may be called "*ekpo*". Such expression can be seen in statements like: *akpogo ankuenge k'ubok, nlide ekpo* (money has finished in my hand, now I am poor). Expression like *Ekpo akpa anyin ikpaga utong* (the ghost is dead in the eye; it is not in the ear), intone that ekpo is a spectre, a spirit, or the soul of a dead person. "*Ekpo* is the same thing as *Egungun* of the Yoruba people... *Mmuo* of the Kalabari and Ikwerre people" (Umoh and Ekpo, 2025: p13). According to Etim (2019 :p58), among the Akwa Ibom people "ekpo could denote impoverishment, a name of a person, stupidity, mystery and so on depending on the accent. "However, as a cultural performance, *Ekpo* in Akwa Ibom denotes spirit of the people who have died, the ancestor" (Ekanem, 2016: p93). The old, the young, men and women pass on in Akwa Ibom state, making ekpo performance to embody categories of the human beings. To Ebong (1992: P 93). "Ekpo is a yearly festival to gods of the land to bring forth good harvest and socio-biological fertility.

Ekpo performance is categorized into the different natural human groups. This may be the reason Ebong 1995 cited in Edem (2012: p 46) conceives of Ekpo, among others as:

...Categories of spirits and cosmological forces in various existential planes that become 'incarnate' in theatrical forms as masquerades. However, the dramas are cast on periodic

‘incarnation’ of the community tutelary spirit and cosmo-mythological ‘guardians’ in various forms and sizes, with a background accompaniment of appropriate chant, rites and music, support by professional cantors, ritual experts and component traditional orchestras. These traditional scenes exhibited the virtues and ideals of vestal innocence, premarital chastity, love, devotion, loyalty, respect and industry.

Within these categorisations, the subjectivity of the *Ekpo* masquerade is implied. *Eka-ekpo* and *Aboikpa-ekpo* take the central stage of the feminine ghosts.

Eka-ekpo: The masquerade, *Eka-ekpo*, is a fusion of two Ibibio morphemes: ‘Eka’ (mother or largeness if viewed from *ekamba* perspective) and Ekpo (spirit). *Eka-ekpo* is named based on the mask being large. Eka in this sense means gargantuan, huge or large. That means, the size of the masquerades determines the “ekanness” of its nomenclature, *eka*.

Put differently, *Eka-ekpo* in the general notion is the mother of all ghosts. This situates *Eka-ekpo* as the fertility goddess. It is somewhat close to Diana of Ephesus with numerous breasts. According to Woodrow (1960: p 11), “Diana had been worship as the goddess of virginity and motherhood from primitive times! She was said to represent the generative powers of nature and so was pictured with many breasts. According Ronaberge and Martins (2010: p 388), “breast is linked biologically, etymologically, psychically and symbolically with the life giving force”. Such portrayal codes Diana as the fountain or nurturer of life” (Etim, 2019: p 96). *Eka-ekpo* is the mother of spirit, the custodian of the female powers and the embodiment of the feminine energy.

Eka-ekpo has a strong semblance with the Eastern Yin, the female counterpart of Yang. According to Munro (1971: p 32), Yin were the thing of darkness and confusion- female Individuals and the damp earth running with rivers.... (When) the vital force of earth, the Yin rises up, the grass and trees begin to put forth leaves.” Yin is the earth’s mother or mother of the earth. This indicates, the mother of all lives. *Eka-ekpo* is the mother or mother of the earth. This indicates, the mother of all lives. *Eka-ekpo* is the mother of all lives. According to Etim (2019: p 95):

All over the communities of Ibibbo land, *Eka-ekpo* invokes the aura of a mother. It is revered as the first Ekpo who gives birth to other Ekpos. Its costumes in a community like Ikpe-Annang include a giant mask in which many other masks are designed. Such persona is associated with fertility gods; not only in Ibibio kingdom or Nigeria communities. Fertility gods seem to have a specific biological symbol of sexuality. As initially mentioned, *Eka-ekpo* is so addressed based on its outlook with which the messages encoded in its nature and social obligations are centred.

Eka-ekpo in Akwa Ibom cosmology is a symbolic representation of femaleness than womanhood. Femaleness, according to Ewrierhoma (2002: p16), is “the variation in the degree of gender or sensitivity (noticeable in women) that exists from culture to culture, while Ogunbenro (2009: p274) conceives of womanhood as “the society’s perceptions of the female sex on a level ... and its allied conditions owing to the expectations.” Womanhood is an attainment as a woman. *Eka-ekpo* masquerade is a replica of gender sensitivity that encodes femaleness and showcases the societal expectations for a typical African woman. She is the Queen mother.

Aboikpa-ekpo: Aboikpa is the maiden ghost. Her role and activity are quite like that of Eka-ekpo but she operates more like a maiden in-love and a stimulant of sexuality. She is not actually linked to earth mother or the birth-giver phenomenon. In the description of the archetypal woman, Guerin, Labor and Morgan (1966: p120) distinguish both personalities this way:

the great mother, good mother, Earth Mother; associated with birth, warmth, protection, fertility, growth, abundance and the unconscious. (Further more), the terrible mother, the witch, the sorceress, siren- associated with fear, danger, and death, while the *Aboikpa* is the soul-mate: the princess or beautiful lady- incarnation of inspiration and spiritual fulfilment.

This implies that *Aboikpa-ekpo* is a seductive ghost who clings to others in a seductive act. According to Etim (2019: p 98), “*Aboikpa ekpo* has its all-round accoutrement woven as a coquette. It has a beautiful face, buxom buttock, a heaving breast, painted fingers and seductive coated lips for which the ingenuity of performing implies the ability of the bearer to display this feminine quality in the manner of a coquette”. To this effect, *Aboikpa Ekpo* must necessarily appear younger, prettier and seductive.

Nonverbal Codes in Performances.

Nonverbal codes are signs used in disseminating pieces of information in a performance. According to Umoh (2021: p269), “what a sign points to lies in the mind but if what the mind conceives is equally deciphered by another, the sign has succeeded as a cultural symbol to represent an idea”. It is a symbolic mark deployed in a performance to reflect a conventional idea. They are conventional codes of a people used to express their deeper emotions. According to Akpan (1987: p 53) “They are conventional signs in that they can be interpreted properly only by knowing their socially determined meanings. “As Akwang (2006: p 83) posits, “codes produce messages or meaning which are far more stable within several communicative context”. To Stam *et al* (1992:p30), nonverbal code is itself a system to access, “a system of differences and correspondences which remain constant across of message”. This means, nonverbal codes are “Culturally derived signs that have been assigned meanings that are understood by inhabitants of a given society” (Whitmore, 2008: P 8-9). Nonverbal codes are secret information designed in performance, in this content, *Eka ekpo* is both a social and a spiritual enactment in Akwa Ibom State. Though there are variations, based on the community performing it. That notwithstanding, there are fundamental nonverbal codes designed on the *Eka Ekpo*, which help in unveiling some religious, cultural and social significance of its status in the society that performs it the society. Some of these nonverbal codes are discussed bellowed.

***Eka Efud /Mkpufang* (Fat Buttocks and a Cleft)**



Plate1: *Eka-isong* (the Earth Mother)

Eka-ekpo is naturally entwined with a large pair of buttocks and a conspicuous in-between divide. In Annang dialect, for instance, the fat buttocks are called *eka-efod*, which literary denotes mother of buttocks, yet the expression still denotes “the large-buttocks”. Nonetheless, in a way, *eka-efud* is called *eka-isong* (large earth/ mother of earth), and *eka-isong* is simply slammed on the huge base-drum of an orchestra. This metaphor, *eka-isong*, is usually used to describe the *Eka-ekpo*. The formal meaning is that Eka Ekpo is the Earth Mother. In the views of Guerin *et al*, (1966: p119) “moon and earth tend to be associated with female or mother principle; passing of time and life”. However, from the eco-feminist perspective, Eaton (2008:p25) writes that:

The joining of ecological and feminist perspectives provides an alternative lens from which to see the disturbing historical connection between the women and nature... by noting that within the matrix of causes of the ecological crisis is the connection between the exploitation of the earth and the misogynist definition and treatment of women. These distortions have influenced deeply the religion experience.

The earth mother is portrayed in many ways in different society in Akwa Ibom State, within ekpo society, its large buttocks is connected to the earth. The largeness of the buttocks emphasised over the body of the Eka-ekpo herself, communicates the Earth Mother. The passage in-between the buttocks connote motherhood as the path to life; but in the ordinary referent, it is viewed as the tunnel through which other ekpos are birthed.

Iso-ekpo (The Mask).



Plate 2: Face with Faces

Eka-ekpo mask is a gargantuan one, capturing the first denotation, “eka” meaning “great” mighty or huge. Although eka primarily means mother; the combination of this variance of eka referent justifies eka (mother) as the great and the mother of all. Thus the mother of mankind, the origin of life and the cord that mankind emanate from is large.

Mkatatat: (Carpet Grass)



Plate3: The Dead’s Bed

This is another symbolic design found on *Eka-ekpo* and others. *Mkpetatat* is grass used to lay a dead human. It is acknowledged in Akwa Ibom State as “the bed of the dead”. According to Akpan (2024: p 154), “*Mkpatatat* is the bed *Eka-ekpo* lies on. Ekpo is a dead personage. They use *Mkpatatat* to lay the remains of the dead”. This communicates that *Eka-ekpo* is an immortal personality represented by a mortal one.

Utiga (Bow and Arrows)



Plate5: Weapon for Self-defence (Ahirika, 2026)

Eka ekpo is a dual personage. She is an immortal being performed by a mortal one. This attests to one of her personalities as being divine. The divine aspect is compassionate, benevolent and secure. The other aspect is that she is human enrap in a spur of spiritual invocation. The human aspect can be threatened, provoked or compelled to destroy. The *utiga* is for self defence.

Eyei: (Palm-frond)



Plate6: With Palm-frond, *Eka-ekpo* is Sacred (Ahirika, 2026)

This is the virgin-palm leave plucked, spread and fastened on the body of the masquerade. It is primarily used to instil boundary and limitation to social processes in Akwa Ibom community. In the *Eka-ekpo*, the *eyei* symbolises legality, a restricted personality and a sacred entity.

Nonverbal codes in *Aboikpa-ekpo*

Aboikpa-ekpo is a new masquerade crafted into the ekpo categorisation. Virtually all ekpo sects in all Akwa Ibom communities have *Akpan-ekpo* (first-born spirit), *Eka-ekpo* (mother of spirit), *Atitia-ekpo* (teacher-spirit), *Inyoon-ekpo* (the cripple spirit), *Idaad-ekpo* (the mad/violent spirit) in various nomenclatures such as *Ekp-nyogo* (the violent ghost), *Ataat-ekpo* (the wasp ghost) and its variances as *Aka-ndong*, *Nyama* (carpet grass), *Akama-ikpo* (the rope bearer), *Ekpo-ntokegen* (the children ghost) and so on. These personalities have their distinct primordial outlook, rites and signified. Being that ekpo in patriarchal society, femaleness is not categorized. The *Aboikpa-ekpo* is a new craft dully incorporated as an aspect of secularization. It is a maiden ghost. Its gait, disposition, dance and paraphernalia are practically the expressions of the maiden's mind. It also embodies a gamut of signifiers. Some are expatiated below.

***Mkpuk-eba* (Firm Breast)**



Plate 7: Maidenhood Permanence (Ahirika, 2026)

Aboikpa-ekpo, as the name implies, is a maiden. It is always costumed with a pair of firm breasts. The firm breast is the undertone of the maiden's mindset of always wanting to be young especially in matters of sexuality. This firm breast may be enclosed by a piece of cloth but a representational pair of protruding mounds is certain.

***Kuto-Kuto Iso* (Colourful Face).**



Plate 8: Adorned/Colourful Visage (Ahirika, 2026)

Aboikpa-ekpo mask is beautified with pleasant colours. Apart from the objective appeal induced by the usually warm and bright colours, there is a subjective signified that (a woman's) beauty is in the eyes of the beholder. It suggests that each maiden possesses a specific thing of beauty, and that appeal of a woman is in colouration; not specified; not static.

***Ikpat-Ngwot-Enen* (Wanton-gait/Uncertainty Abidance)**



Plate9: Uncertain Destination (Ahirika, 2026)

The wanton gait, though seduction intoned, embodies some message about Akwa Ibom girls. The gait is conceived as “dancing life about”. According to Ebewo (2005 p127) the wanton gait of the *Aboikpa-ekpo* depicts “nnek ejo” (to dance the sun). The expression is often associated to youths (maiden) who demonstrate a careless and non-challant attitude to life”. The expression denotes the contemporary damsels as indeterminate and unpredictable in view of where to finally abide as a mother.

Nkwa-isin: (Beaded/Girdled Waist)



Plate 10: *Isin* (Waist), Pivot of fecundity (Ahirika, 2026)

The beaded or girdled waist communicates maidenhood as the period of live regeneration. On the other hand, the waist is seen as the centre in which life, rebirth and energy of aliveness resides. It also communicates fecundity.

Femininity in Eka-ekpo and Aboikpa-ekpo

Femininity is more read as an act than being. It is a marginal attitude resulting from additional or reduction of attitude, which makes a thing temperate but not subservient, docile but not weak, and approachable but not gullible. It is a quality developed to suit a purpose, and a lifestyle acquired for a moderation in life. According to collinsdictionary.com, “femininity means the qualities that are considered to be typical of women.” This does not suggest being a woman. Thus, in the view of Bressler (2013: p123-124), femininity is a set of quality which both men and women can possess.

In the *Ekpo* masquerades, *Eka-ekpo* and *Aboikpa-ekpo* are orchestrated to exhibit peculiarities denoting the Akwa Ibom conception of femininity. In Haralambos, Holborn and Heald (2008: pp 137-138) these peculiarities are tight to “being more emotional, less able to be detached, impersonal and rational”. Some of these qualities are discussed below:

The Huge Buttocks: A unique feature that makes an idea more feminine in the Akwa Ibom philosophy is the hugeness of the thing. This justifies the myth, “*akpon; asana; ajaiya*” which literally translate its fair and beautiful because it is big. As such the Akwa Ibom considers a huge woman as “*uman*” (the quality of being a female/or depth of femaleness). It is the female “*umanness*” of the female that is its femininity.

Suppleness/Coquetry: Another aspect of femininity in *Eka-ekpo* and *Aboikpa-ekpo* is the suppleness of their body. In Annang cosmology, a man who is supple may be lambasted with

expression such as “*Che nanga ase alongo-ntong nt’ibaa*”, which is transliterated as: see as he coquettes as a woman. Akwa Ibom people conceive anything supple as feminine.

Docility: This expression denotes the quality of being soft and tender but Akwa Ibom especially Ibibio and Annang merge it with being gullible. *Eke-ekpo* and *Aboikpa-ekpo* display this attitude reflecting that a woman who is docile is appreciable. Thus connotes that soft-peddalling is not being gullible. Docility is feminine in Akwa Ibom philosophy.

Adornment: *Aboikpa-ekpo* adorns herself completely. This is purely the makeup proficiency. As Umoh (2021: p110), puts, “the services of a makeup artists are required from the planning stage to the performance date”. In the Akwa Ibom conception of their society, self-adornment is feminine. When a man adorns himself too much, such man is downgraded as being feminine. Thus, painting of fingers, fixing of hair, wearing of pancakes, putting on bangles and applying eye-pencil on the eye are considered feminine in the Akwa Ibom social order.

Conclusion

The paper has discussed nonverbal communication as a unique tool for social reordering through traditional theatre performance using *Eke-ekpo* and *Aboikpa-ekpo* as examples. It also identifies the nonverbal codes in them and expatiates on the Akwa Ibom conception of femininity in the attitudes of these masquerades, eliciting that the categorisation of Ekpo performance in Akwa Ibom State is a direct re-presentation of the human personalities from both physical and spiritual view. The physical outlook of the woman is captured in her outlook and body features but her feminine attributes are unconscious attitudes such as largeness, coquetry, suppleness, and body adornment. These outlook and attitudes are equally seen in men, indicating the very reason many men lose their self-respect or women elevated above men in certain issues of gender value. Femininity, on the other hand, is not a negative attitude in a woman; to men in Akwa Ibom State, it has a negative connotation. Men are men-like while women are women-like. Femininity is a natural attribute in a specific gender but acquired in the other. Each gender is unique when the natural attitudes are maintained. In the *ekpo* masquerade, *Eke-ekpo* and *Aboikpa-ekpo* bring these to bear in nonverbal codes through their subtle performances.

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