SOME NOTES ON *NSIBIDI.*

By The Rev. J. K. Macgregor, B.D.

Nsibidi is the native name for a writing used a little here in the Calabar District of the Eastern province of Southern Nigeria, but much more largely up the Cross River and inland from it on both banks. So far as I have been able to ascertain, it is unknown in the Central and Western Provinces exceps amongst the Ibo people. If the Bini and the Yoruba have a writing, and I feel certain that they have, it seems to be different from *nsibidi.* This originated amongst the great Ibo tribe which is said to number 4,000,000 people and to cover about one-third of the Protectorate. They are a great artisan tribe, and their smiths are to be met in every village in this part of the country, and wherever a smith goes he carries with him the knowledge of *nsibidi.* The system of writing is really the property of a secret society, the *nsibidi* society, into which men are regularly initiated after undergoing a period of preparation. Some of the signs of the *nsibidi* are known to outsiders, but the vast majority are known only to the initiated. To the uninitiated they are mysterious and therefore magical, capable of doing harm because of the "medicine" that may have been used in making them. I have tried to find out from fellow-missionaries of other Societies in various parts of Kamerun whether it is known to the people there. They are unaware of its existence there, and as the tribes in Kamerun seem to have a Bantu connexion, it is quite probable that it does not exist. The Rev. Melvin Fraser, of the American Presbyterian Mission, assures me that it is quite unknown amongst the Bulu and Fang peoples amongst whom that Society works. Indeed the only other script that I have heard of is the famous one of King Nyoga.[1] That the existence of a script is unknown to Europeans must not, however, be taken as conclusive evidence that the script does not exist, for the natives have a strange but natural desire to hide as much as they can from the prying eyes of the European who has too often but learned what they held precious only to scoff at them.

For long it was not suspected that there was a native script in use in Calabar, as I shall for convenience call the whole of the part of the country in which *nsibidi* is known. The early missionaries maintained that they had no knowledge of writing. They knew the word *nsibidi*[2] and applied it correctly enough to the cuts

[1] In Mausfeld's *Urwald-Dokumente* (Berlin, October, 1908), which I have only just seen, is some reference to this writing. There are two plates of signs (Tafel IV, V, Verzierungen der Kalabassen), but the reference in the text is slight (*cf.* also Abbildung 29). Dr. Mausfeld found this writing amongst the Eksi people who live north-east of Calabar, both in British and German territory.

[2] Mr. Goldie in his great Dictionary of the Efik language derives *nsibidi* from an Efik verb "*sibi*," to cut. "*Sibi*," however, means to slice and not to make the cuts referred to.

made on calabashes, native pianos, etc, unaware that many of these signs had significance. Again they were aware that there was an elaborate system of acted signs by which people held communication, but they had not discovered that this language of signs had been reduced to writing. The discovery of *nsibidi* was made by T. D. Maxwell, Esq., whilst acting as District Commissioner in Calabar in 1904. By his evident desire to understand native modes of thought and by his tact, he won to a large degree the goodwill of the people. Accordingly when he was asked by His Excellency the High Commissioner to superintend the arrangements for an exhibition of native goods, he was able to include in it twenty-four *nsbidi* signs that he had received from one of the chief women of the Henshaw family. These were published by command of the High Commissioner in the Government Civil List for the Protectorate in July, 1905. Mr. Maxwell has very kindly given me permission to use these signs.

Meanwhile in complete ignorance of Mr. Maxwell's find, I had stumbled by accident on the fact that *nsibidi* existed. In a class I was teaching, a pupil deeply resented the statement that the civilisation of the people in Nigeria was primitive because they had no writing. He declared that they had a writing called *nsibidi*. This happened in April, 1905. As I was at the beginning of a new term, I set myself to find out all I could about *nsibidi*. People smiled when I asked for information and declared that they knew nothing about it. The reason for this is that in Efik *nsibidi* is used almost only to express love, and this term covers such a multitude of most abominable sins that no self-respecting Efik person will confess that he knows anything about the writing of it. The few specimens I got were grossly misinterpreted to me so as to tone down their meaning. Still from them it was possible to see that here we have a genuine product of the native civilisation the origin of which is so old as to have become the subject of a *Märchen*. It does not show any trace of Egyptian influence. For one thing, by 4000 B.C. the Egyptian script had already begun to develop an alphabet, and had *nsibidi* been influenced by Egyptian hieroglyphics there would surely have been some traces of an alphabet in it. So far I have found none. I do not think that there has been any development towards an alphabet, nor, had it been left to itself, would there ever have been any such development.

The signs have been gathered by me from various sources, especially from two boys from Abiriba called Onuaha and Ize Ikpe, and from a woman who one day came to my house selling work with *nsibidi* on it, and when I began to tell her what it meant she told me what I could not make out and then offered to teach me more. Her mother, she said, had had a school for the teaching of this script. It was from the Abiriba boys that I obtained the story of the first *nsibidi* which I give below. In as many cases as possible I have checked the interpretation of signs by bringing them to several people, but this has only been the case with a very few. Where so few people will own to a knowledge of *nsibidi* to obtain and to check are equally difficult. Owing to this practical impossibility of verification I give the meanings with all due reserve. It is but fair to state that all the

interpretations given by Onuaha and Ize Ikpe that I have been able to check have been supported by the natives to whom they were submitted, and every one of those I send has been scrutinised by them. Even from the limited number of signs which I have collected several things are noticeable.

1. The same sign stands for different things, *e.g.*, the sign  may be "a man" who is an onlooker or a messenger, "a pillow," "a tree" that supports the roof of a house, or "the house" itself. Sometimes, as in the last of these cases, this multiplication of meaning is easily explained, *e.g.*,  is "a whip," "a man with a whip," and also "a runner in an Ekpe play," because they carried whips. It is of course used in this last sense only when the Ekpe sign is written with it or attached to the figure-group in which it occurs. 
2. The same thing is expressed by different signs. In this case there is always a subtle shade of meaning in the difference. This is most noteworthy in the case of signs representing men. Many separate acts or states of mind are thus represented.
3. There is no order of writing. A sign may be horizontal or vertical or oblique as suits the convenience of the writer. The consequence of this is that all the signs in a collection have to be interpreted before the meaning is plain.

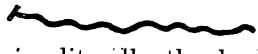
How did this script originate? It is evidently a picture-writing of considerable age, for already there is a certain amount of conventionality about some of the signs, *e.g.*  which means a man who makes trouble between two people. The native tradition of its origin is that it comes from the Uguakima section of the Ibo tribe. The Uguakima dwell between Ikorana on the Cross River and Uwet on the Calabar River, and seem to be the people known amongst the Efik people as the Uyanga. By them it was taught to the people round about. The way in which the Uguakima say that they learned *nsibidi* is this. In the forests of their country live many large baboons called *idiok*. If a man is staying in the bush all night and makes a big fire to warm himself or to frighten away wild animals, the *idiok* will come down from the trees and sit round the fire just like men. When the *idiok* did this, all men were frightened and ran away, but the Uguakima were not frightened. Thus there sprang up a friendship between the *idiok* and the Uguakima. After a time the *idiok* began to write signs on the ground which the Uguakima did not understand. At last it was seen that when an *idiok* traced a sign on the ground and then acted in pantomime, the sign on the ground meant the act performed. These signs the Uguakima called *nsibidi* which is derived from an Ibo word *sibidi*, meaning to play, for they had learned these things through the playing of the *idiok*.[1] To the signs thus learned from the *idiok* many pictures of common

[1] "To play" in the native use has a much wider meaning than in English. It stands for all the shades of meaning from sport to drama. Because the dramas, as we may call the native dances, are religious, it has also the sense of to bewitch. Because the beat of the heart is regular as the beat of a drum, it is also applied to the beating of the heart.

objects have been added, *e.g.*, those for comb, calabash of money, etc. Besides *nsibidi*, the Uguakima also learned from the *idiok* much medicine, so that they are the wisest witchdoctors in the country.

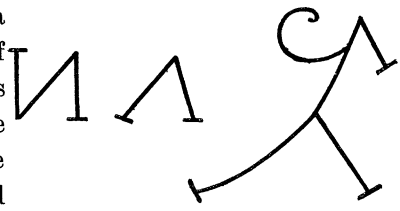
The use of *nsibidi* is that of ordinary writing. I have in my possession a copy of the record of a court case from a town on the Enion Creek taken down in it, and every detail, except the evidence, is most graphically described,—the parties in the case, the witnesses, the dilemma of the chief who tried it, his sending out messengers to call other chiefs to help him, the finding of the court and the joy of the successful litigants and of their friends are all told by the use of a few strokes. It is also employed for purposes of communication. I have not actually seen an *nsibidi* letter. One which came into my possession as such turned out on examination to be merely a number of signs with no intelligible connection, but from what I have seen of it I see no reason to doubt the very common statement that it is used for this purpose. A wide-spread use is to give public notice or private warning of anything,—to forbid people to go on a certain road, an *nsibidi* sign, far more powerful than any constable, is made on the ground: to warn a friend that he is to be seized, the sign of a rope is chalked where he cannot fail to see it, and he at once flees: to convey the wishes of a chief to all who may come to visit him, signs are set on the walls of his house. At first I thought there could be no old records of *nsibidi*. All the signs that I have seen have been made on the ground, or in chalk, on the walls of houses, or burned on calabashes, etc., as an ornament. Some time ago, however, the woman to whom I referred above as one of my informants told me that her grandmother had sewn many signs on cloth and these her mother taught in her school. This cloth she would not on any account let me see as she said it was too frail, but she made a copy of it for me on paper and gave me the copy with the interpretation. The signs, except in rare instances, are not connected with each other, and the whole was more of the nature of an aid to memory for the teacher than a record of anything. The age of this cloth must be at least sixty years and it is the oldest specimen of *nsibidi* of which I have heard.

As regards the nature of the writing, it is pictographic pure and simple. Is a man a stranger who has no place in a town, then he is represented as standing on only one foot. Does he hold up his hand in the air to make signs, then five lines representing his five fingers are drawn. Is money referred to, then a picture of native rods is drawn. Only once have I had a sign interpreted by an abstract term;  was said to mean "a bad habit," but the rarity of the abstract idea in native thought made me suspicious, and now I learn that it means a man who has a bad habit, any bad habit, which he practises.

So far I have discovered the signs for very few animals. The sign  for the *idiok* is the same as one of the signs for a man. The sign for the snake  aptly illustrates the native name for the snake, *uruk-iket*, *i.e.*, literally the bush-rope. I include in my lists the signs for the butterfly, the leopard-spider, the snail and the fish-hawk. It is more than

probable that there are signs for most of the common animals, though I have not yet come across them.

Already the effect of Europe is being felt on *nsibidi*, and it is urgent that as speedily as possible the collection of the signs should be completed. It came as a painful surprise to me one day when Onuaha brought me this sign and told me that a boy of his own name had given him it that day (I was in Umon at the time) and said that it was the *nsibidi* for Onuaha. The first two signs are corruptions of the English capital letters N and A whilst the third sign is distinctly reminiscent of more than one *nsibidi* character.[1]



Description of Figures 1–98.

MARRIAGE AND HOME LIFE. (Figs. 1–2*a*.)

1 and 2. Married love (2, with pillow).
3. Married love with pillows for head and feet—a sign of wealth.
4. Married love with pillow.
5. Quarrel between husband and wife. This is indicated by the pillow being between them. (Mr. Maxwell.)
6. Violent quarrel between husband and wife. (Mr. Maxwell.)
7. One who causes a disturbance between husband and wife. (Mr. Maxwell.)
8. A woman with six children and her husband ; a pillow is between them.
9. Two wives with their children (*a*), of one man (*b*), with the roof-tree of the house in which they live (*c*). The tree is put for the whole house.
10. A house (*a*) in which are three women and a man. The dots have no meaning.
11. Two women with many children in the house with their husband.
12. Two women on each side of a house. One on each side has a child.
13. A woman with child. (General sign.)
14. The same. If a man writes this sign on the ground, it means that his own wife is with child.
15. Palaver, the general term, by no means confined to marriage palavers.
16. A woman who does not want her husband any more.
17. A woman who wishes to put away her husband.
17A. Mr. Maxwell gives this sign = embracing. I have not been able to get his interpretation corroborated.
18. A harlot.
19. Two women who live in the same house have palaver every time they meet. A third woman is entering by the door.
20. A man (*a*) who comes to a woman who has a husband and asks her to live with him.

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[1] Since writing the above I have had handed to me a paper with several new *nsibidi* signs and headed "*Nsipbri Obiaebe.*" *Nsipbri* is simply a form of *nsibidi*, but Obia="a practiser." The phrase thus means "the play of the practisers of Ebe"—Ebe is one of the names given to the people who live in the north of Uwet whom I have called Uguakima in the course of my paper.

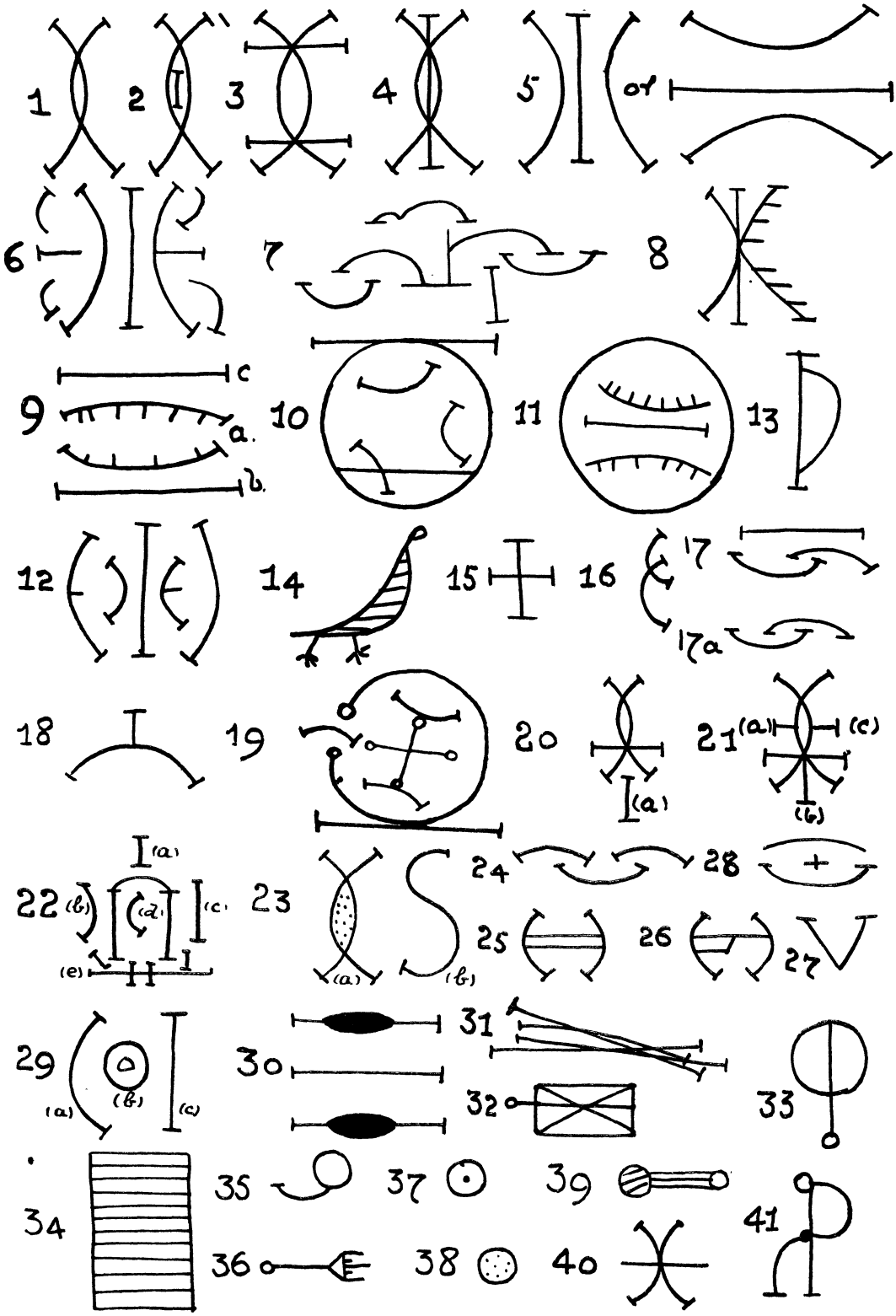
21. (*a*), (*b*), and (*c*) are three men who sought the same married woman, and quarrelled because of her. (I do not see anything in the written sign to indicate that they quarrelled. On the other hand, if the palaver sign ✠ were there, it would mean simply that trouble came of it, without indicating what that trouble was.)
22. (*a*) is a man who committed adultery with a woman (*b*), who now lives apart from her husband (*c*). According to native law, the guilty man has to pay compensation for what he has done to the woman's family and to (*b*) her husband. (*d*) is the money paid, the curved sign inside showing that it was paid on account of a woman. (*e*) are the parties to whom the money was paid.
23. A man and a woman were "friends." The man wished to leave her, but she would not agree. One day when she was at the farm he wrote this sign all over the house, and took his departure. (*a*) means that he curses her, saying that she has "craw-craw." (*b*) means that he has gone to another town.
24. Love without agreement. (Mr. Maxwell.)
25. Heart with true love. (Mr. Maxwell.)
26. Heart without true love. (Mr. Maxwell.)
27. Inconstant heart. (Mr. Maxwell.)
28. Two persons agree in love.
29. In war it is a common practice for the enemies of a town to hide near the place where the women bathe, and shoot them. It is a great disgrace for a man to lose his wife in this way, and men "curse" him by writing this sign on the ground, or by saying, "Where were you when you killed your wife?" (*a*) is a woman who goes to bathe in the river at a ford (*b*), while her husband (*c*) watches to see that no one shoots her.

COMMON ARTICLES OF THE HOUSE. (Figs. 30–44.)

30. Juju hung over a door or on the road to a house to keep danger—especially evil spirits—from the house. Sacrifices of fowls and goats are offered to it.
31. Firewood.
32, 33. Looking glasses. (Also used for a man with a looking glass.) (Mr. Maxwell.)
34. A native mat, used as a bed.
35. A gourd for a drinking cup.
36. Native comb. (Mr. Maxwell.)
37. Toilet soap. (Mr. Maxwell.)
38. Basin and water. (Mr. Maxwell.)
39. Calabash with 400 *chittims* inside it. A *chittim* is a copper wire worth one-twentieth of a rod. Such calabashes have hinges of three strings. (Mr. Maxwell.)
40. Slaves.
41. Fire.
42. A house on fire. Two people are inside. A man outside has a rope to draw them out.
43. Disturbance. (Mr. Maxwell.)
44. A man who has many children in his house thinks that he has more children than anyone else in the town. He writes this sign as a challenge to other men. It means that he will tie with a rope (*a*) anyone who says he has more children than he. The double sign for palaver shows that he will make a big affair of it.

PUBLIC LIFE IN TOWN. (Figs. 45–74.)

45. Sitting stick with men on it.
46. The same, with a messenger speaking to men. (Mr. Maxwell.)
47. A society with their fighting staff. (Mr. Maxwell.)
48. Trading. (? forked roads with a rod—native money—over them.)
49. A man with his wrists tied.
50. (*a*) is a man who is to be sold as a slave, and whose hands are tied in front. (*b*) is the person taking him to the slave market.

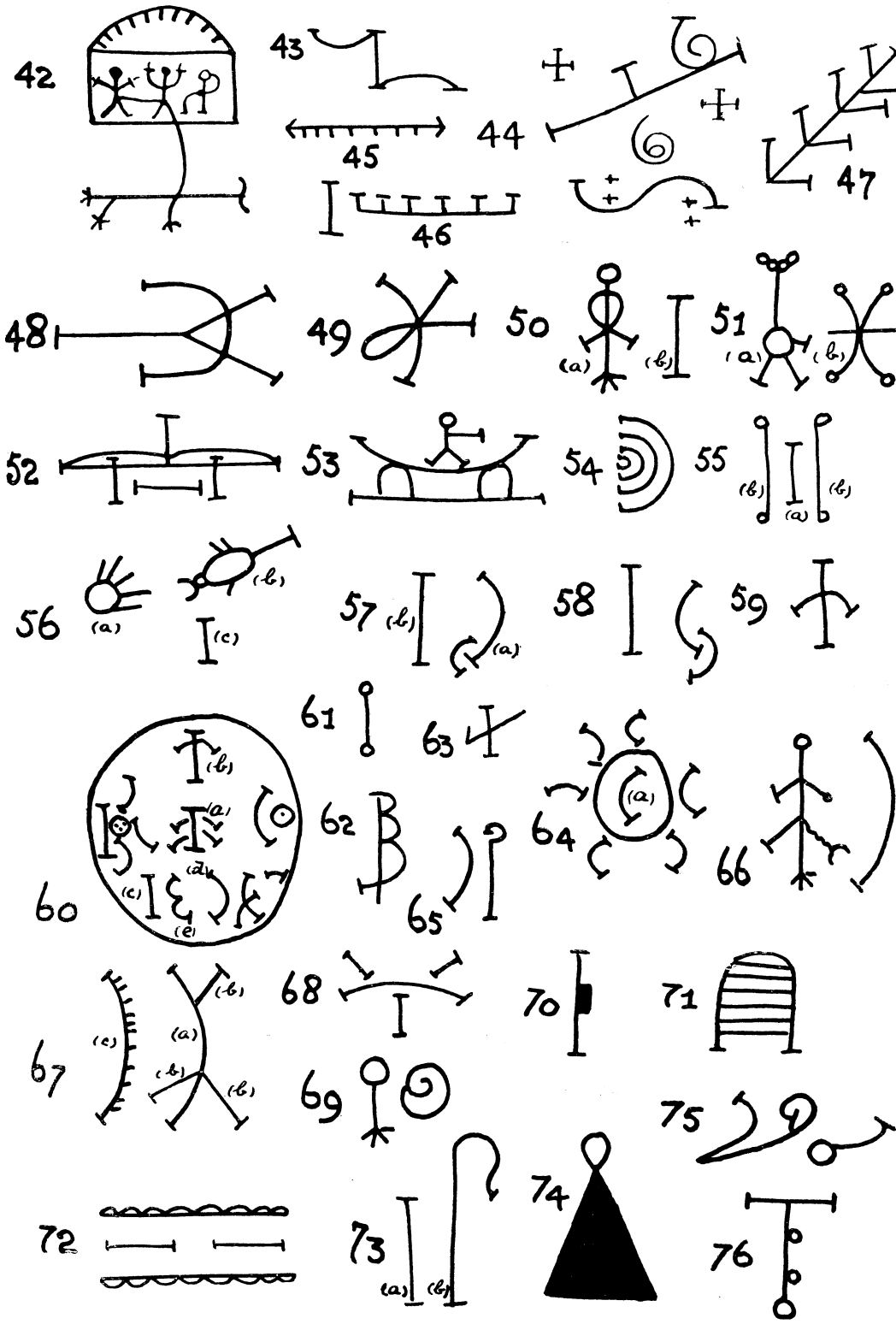


FIGS. 1–41.

51. (*a*) = slaves; (*b*) = free born. To write this before a man means that you are free born and he is a slave.
52. Two persons fixed to a post by leg-irons. (Mr. Maxwell.)
53. A man locked in prison.
54. "Plenty" money, *i.e.*, native rods.
55. (*a*) is a man praising his country. (*b*) is the praise he gives.
56. (*a*) begged something from (*b*), who agreed to give it, but afterwards drew back his hand. (*c*) is a bystander who saw the whole affair.
57–60 are parts of a story.
    57. (*a*) is a beggar who borrows some money (*b*).
    58. He receives something, and turns to go.
    59. He goes along the road carrying the rod (native money = 3*d.*) which he has received.
    60. He comes to the market. (*a*) is the noise of the people as they buy and sell. (*b*) is the hero of this tale. (*c*) is the hero again. He has come to a woman (*d*), and is bargaining with her. She will not agree to his prices, and "curses him a thief" (*e*).
61. A javelin.
62. A man holding a shield.
63. A man on the look out for a message. (Mr. Maxwell.)
64. (*a*) had all these people—"brothers and sisters"—who work for him and will not allow him to do anything. He lives happy till they all die. When they are dead, one of his companions comes to laugh at him and so (*a*) writes this sign on the ground. It means, "I am lonely and must not be mocked."
65. A solitary man.
66. A man who stands by himself and has no friends.
67. (*a*) is a man who is without companions, (*b*) are three men who curse him, (*c*) means that he shows them he had many slaves who are now dead. Had they been alive (*b*) would not have dared to curse him so.
68. A sick man who is being visited by three friends.
69. "If your friend is in trouble and you hear that they are coming with a rope to tie him, make this sign on the ground and even though you do not speak a word he will know how to escape." (Literal translation.)
70. A whip, also a man who has a whip. When placed with the *ekpe* sign = an *egbo* or *ekpe* runner.
71. A door.
72. Main road with two persons on it. (Mr. Maxwell.)
73. (*a*) is a chief of Abariba. When he is installed in office, he is given a stick of office, (*b*) which is tied with iron. It is strange that in cases where a man—always an old man—and his stick are represented, the stick is uniformly much bigger than the man. In actual life it is usually long enough to come up to his shoulder.
74. A "tiger-leather" is the usual native name for a leopard's skin. When a man possesses one, he is considered a real big man!

SICKNESSES. (Figs. 75–86.)

75. Dysentery.
76. Elephantiasis.
77. Wound with a plaster of herbs on it.
78. A man who has been drowned.
79. Another sign for the same.
80. Small-pox.
81. A man (*a*) with a wound or ulcer (*b*) on his leg. (*c*) comes to dress it, but when he sees its size and nature he hides his face. (*d*) is a calabash of water brought to wash the wound.
82. Leprosy. It represents a stick held by two hands. Among the Uguakima a man who



FIGS. 42–76.

never takes off his clothes and never goes naked will be stopped by the people who hold their sticks so and move their hands up and down the stick—now the right hand above, now the left hand. This action means, "Are you a leper that you never take off your clothes?" Lepers and those ill with small-pox are not allowed to stay in the towns.

83. Menstruation. A woman is not allowed to cook food for her husband till one week after menstruation.

84. A poisonous snake killed  snake.

 = knife with which it was killed.

 is the usual sign for poison.

85. Drunkenness (really a drunk man being taken home by his friends).

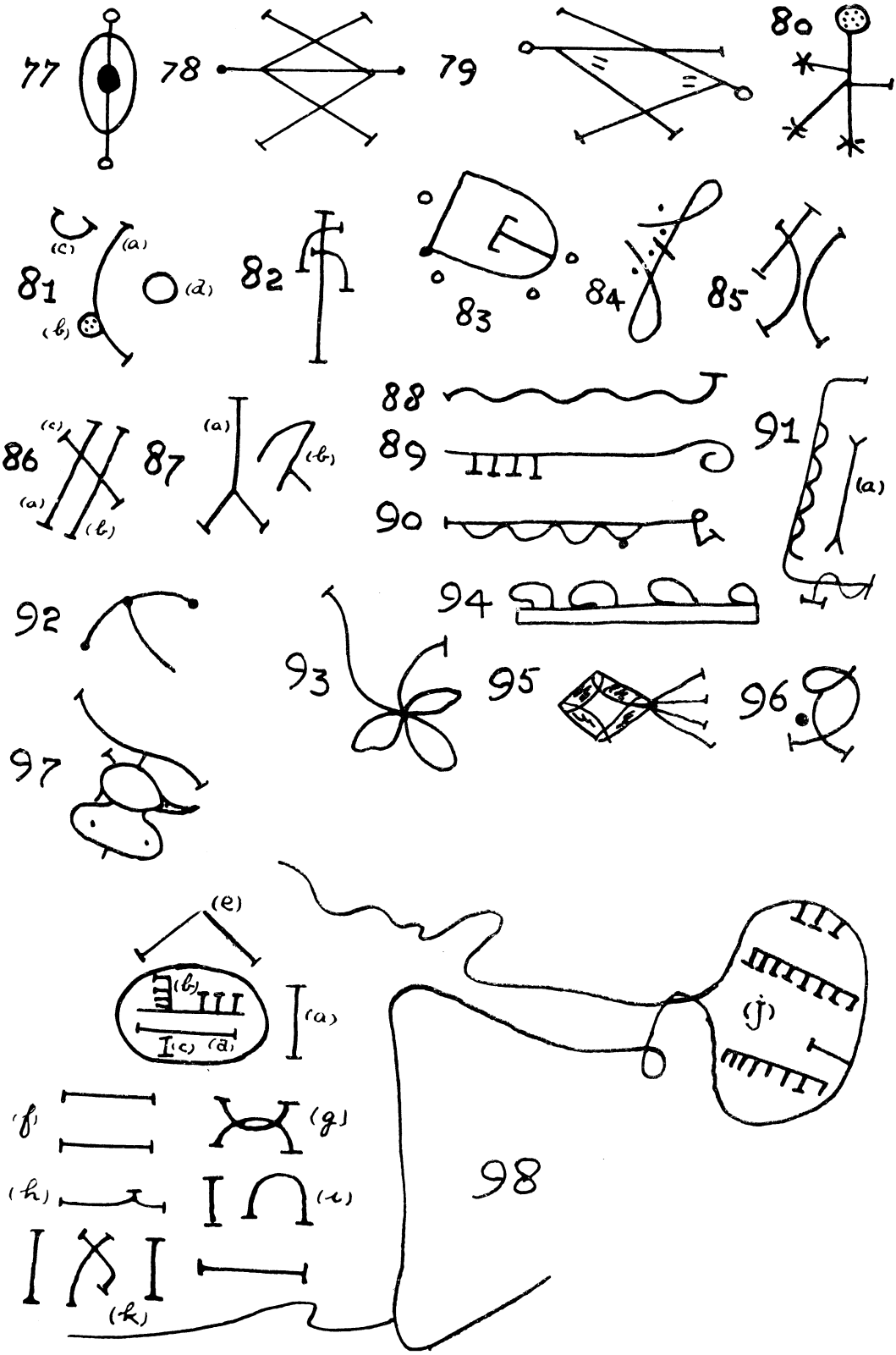
86. Ayikha is the native name for this disease. I do not know its technical equivalent. The full meaning of the sign is—(*a*) is a woman who has ayikha, (*b*) is a man who used to visit her. A friend, learning the condition of the woman, will warn the man not to visit her by writing this sign on the ground. The disease is contagious, but it is not syphilis.

SOME ADDITIONAL SIGNS—UNCLASSIFIED. (Figs. 87-98.)

87. (*a*)—a man hanged by a rope (*b*).
88. Snake.
89. Water-snake.
90. A snake said to be very poisonous. A medicine is made from it by the Akuna-Akuna people, to enable a man to steal without being detected.
91. (*a*) a man sees this large snake and touches it with a stick which he takes to Abia-idiöñ, who tells whether it is a sign of good or bad fortune.
92. Poisoned bow and arrow used in hunting elephants. The Inokuns used them in fighting against the troops sent against them by the British Government at the time of the Aro expedition.
93. The butterfly.
94. Four snails.
95. Bird called itnew (fish hawk) and its feathers. A feather of itnew, powder, wad of a gun used to be sent from one tribe to another as a challenge to war. To accept the gift was to declare war.
96. Spider called *mkpanutue* (? Spider's web.)
97. *Utue ekpe*—leopard spider. A yellow and black striped spider found in the bush. It is said to be poisonous, but I have often handled it with impunity.

A NSIBIDI RECORD FROM ENION.

98. The record is of an Ikpe or judgment case. (*a*) The court was held under a tree as is the custom, (*b*) the parties in the case, (*c*) the chief who judged it, (*d*) his staff (these are enclosed in a circle), (*e*) is a man whispering into the ear of another just outside the circle of those concerned, (*f*) denotes all the members of the party who won the case. Two of them (*g*) are embracing, (*h*) is a man who holds a cloth between his finger and thumbs as a sign of contempt. He does not care for the words spoken. The lines round and twisting mean that the case was a difficult one which the people of the town could not judge for themselves. So they sent to the surrounding towns to call the wise men from them and the case was tried by them (*j*) and decided; (*k*) denotes that the case was one of adultery or No. 20.



FIGS. 77–98.