KALABARI MASQUERADE AND THE GAZE: IDENTITY AND SPECTATORSHIP IN THE
SCULPTURES OF SOKARI DOUGLASS CAMP

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by
Logan Alexandra Griffith
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ALABARI MASQUERADE AND THE GAZE: IDENTITY AND SPECTATORSHIP IN THE
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Logan Alexandra Griffith, Candidate for the Master of Arts Degree
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ABSTRACT

Kalabari masquerade performances are centered around a core male performer, who disguises himself by wearing an intricate costume. The costume propels the dancer into the mystical spiritual realm, where through the effectiveness of his performance he is believed to temporarily be possessed by a higher spirit. The single performer, however, cannot attain this state without the help of audience members. These audience members are composed of mostly female witnesses, who critically examine the dancer and determine his worth in the performance. Multidimensional relationships sustain the masquerade tradition and the role of women is vital to its survival. They are the ultimate beholders of power with their scrutinious gaze. Identity and spectatorship lie at the core of the masquerade, and the two aspects are examined thoroughly throughout this research. By examining one particular artist, Sokari Douglas Camp, the importance of identity and its transformation in the masquerade performance can be more fully expressed.
The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Science, have examined a thesis titled “Kalabari Masquerade and the Gaze: Identity and Spectatorship in the Sculptures of Sokari Douglas Camp” presented by candidate for the Master of Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

Supervisory Committee

Maude Wahlman, Ph.D., Committee Chair
Department of Art and Art History

Cristina Albu, Ph.D.
Department of Art and Art History

Burton Dunbar, Ph.D.
Department of Art and Art History
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The African Kalabari masquerade performance is an old tradition steeped in religious doctrine and spiritual beliefs. Identified by its elaborate costumes, enthusiastic crowds of onlookers, and skilled dancers, the masquerade appears to be a colorful festival centered around the trained performer who stimulates the crowd both physically and emotionally. Members of the Kalabari, or cultural insiders, however, are aware of the underlying dynamic taking place, and the critical effects of the relationship between performer and audience. Audience spectators composed of mostly female Kalabari society members establish the guiding force in the performance, which determines the dancer’s fate.

This masquerade custom is said to have originated from a woman who witnessed water spirits dancing next to a river. As she approached the water alone, the spirits revealed themselves to her, intentionally presenting her with their methodical choreography. She went back to her village and told all what she had seen, and the tradition began.1 Ironically, since the beginning, the performers have always been male, trained in private associations composed of several generations of Kalabari men. The male performer transforms himself into various multi-sexed deities by disguising his face with an intricate mask. E. Tonkin describes this ritual masking as a “concentrated

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means of articulating power.” He is considered a powerful spiritual force, at some times even dangerous. Outwardly, the male performer seems to be the most powerful character in the performance. The women in this tradition, however, hold a subtler but imperative role of power. Women are not allowed to participate, create the intricate masks and costumes, or become a part of these dance societies. While men produce the masquerade performance, women make up the audience that critically examines, judges, and decides the efficacy of skill of the male performer. Though the tradition is only practiced by men, it is the authority of feminine scrutiny which determines the value of their performance.

Sokari Douglas Camp is a contemporary African Diasporan artist living in London who is fascinated by the Kalabari masquerade and the female gaze, and uses the subject in her monumental steel sculptures. Born in Buguma, one of three principal cities comprising Kalabari civilization, and raised by a European anthropologist, Camp at once absorbed the cultural practices of her heritage as both member and tangential witness. During her youth she was sent to Europe to pursue her education. Over the years, she paid frequent visits back to her home in Nigeria, where she learned both Western and African art practices. As a result, she developed a double consciousness of the traditions and practices of the Kalabari, and of living in the West. Exploring her heritage from these two subsequent perspectives define her search for identity, articulated in the visual language imparted by her sizeable sculptures.

Due to personal issues, Camp’s mother entrusted her eldest daughter to take care of the young Sokari. Not long after, Sokari’s sister died during child birth and left

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Sokari in the hands of the husband she left behind, the European anthropologist Robin Horton. As she was raised by Horton, Camp learned to view her own culture of the Kalabari from both an insider and an outsider’s perspective. By relocating to London to attend college, she was free to make art and probe the interworkings of Kalabari traditions brought about by an exclusively male secret society, as well as to assess the role of woman as strict observer. Sokari’s sculptures present an anthropological study of Kalabari culture, gender roles, and the dynamics of insider and outsider status reflecting the artist’s own societal position. In doing so, she unveils African female spectatorship and power by objectifying the male masquerader and presenting him to a critical Kalabari audience.

Camp’s interest in the Kalabari masquerade tradition, in particular the role of female spectators, combined with her anthropological upbringing, lead to her own unique interpretation of the performance. Her works reveal the multifaceted dynamics of Kalabari tradition and spectatorship, including the significant relationship between insider and outsider. The male participants and the female audience members take on both roles of insider and outsider. The men are inside the performance and outside the council of public expectation and scrutiny, while the women are outside the masquerade but inside the powerful congregation of spectators. They are separated and united simultaneously, as the push and pull and interaction between masculinity and femininity create the masquerade.

Additionally, there is another dualism occurring that involves the viewpoint of cultural insiders and outsiders. Cultural outsiders view the performance as one not acculturated to the Kalabari, and generally see only the outer surface of what is
occurring during the performance. The cultural insider, however, is familiar with the
interworkings of the masquerade ritual, and are aware of the important role the female
gaze plays. Though the outsider is not inherently familiar with the requirements of the
traditional, they may pick up on details the habitual insider may overlook. As one both
inside and outside of her own native culture, Camp utilizes her unique perspective to
examine the gaze, gender roles and identity.

The prime Kalabari traditions set the tone in Camp’s work, defining her subject
matter and remain the ultimate inspiration for her steel compositions. An
understanding of Kalabari history, culture, and values is therefore essential in order to
adequately analyze the culturally specific works by Sokari Douglas Camp. Chapter two
begins with a synopsis of Kalabari history and community structure, investigating
cultural and personal values in order to gain insight of the Kalabari worldview, customs
and beliefs. Chapter three describes the specific gender roles and life cycles of Kalabari
men and women, exploring gender relations, expectations, and societal positions, and
relates them to the manifestation of the feminine gaze. Chapter four delves into Sokari
Douglas Camp’s personal background, experiences, and dual cultural consciousness as
an artist belonging to the African diaspora. Finally, Chapter five takes a closer look at
specific works by the artist, illustrating the masquerade and female gaze dynamic.

My goal for this particular research project is to examine closely the artist’s
cultural heritage from which she gains much inspiration for her steel sculptures, to gain
an understanding of what values she retains. Her works present a personal
interpretation of Kalabari culture in its current state of modernization, commenting on
gender, social, and political roles. I will also closely examine the dynamics of
spectatorship in Kalabari masquerade, to investigate the feminine perspective, which concerns Camp and is asserted in her sculptures.

The methodologies I will be using begin with an historical assessment of the artist’s cultural background using anthropological resources. I use this method in order to gain an understanding of the specific importance of rituals, roles, and worldviews in everyday Kalabari life, and to explain why the artist felt compelled to create representations of these ceremonies. I will also utilize gender studies to assess the feminine viewpoint in traditional festivals. Semiotic theory is used to investigate gender identities and roles in the masquerade through the masking of the male performer.

Traditional African art is immersed in its culture and daily life, and is not separated as it can be in the West. Therefore, a thorough study of Kalabari culture, history, and traditions is pivotal in understanding the performative art of masquerade, and how Sokari uses the tradition as a subject in her work to examine feminine spectatorship. Sokari’s dual awareness has allowed her to view both Nigerian and Western cultures from an external perspective, culminating in monumental steel sculptures representing personal interpretations of gender, spectatorship, and society.
CHAPTER 2

KALABARI CULTURAL BACKGROUND AND TRADITIONS

History, Economy and Cultural Backbone

The Kalabari cultural region (Figures 1 and 2) is composed of twenty-two islands and three towns along with several smaller villages in the eastern Niger Delta, in the south eastern part of Nigeria. The three towns are Abonnema, Bakana, and Buguma; the birthplace of the artist. The first and foremost Kalabari settlement was a city-state called Elem Kalabari, otherwise known as “New Calabar.” Preceding the formation of this prevalent city-state, Kalabari were composed of several small fishing villages. Kalabari’s chief involvement in long distance trading of palm oil to the hinterlands of Nigeria aided in transforming them from a group of small villages to a strong city-state beginning in the eighteenth century. New Calabar, therefore, was already in place before the trans Atlantic trade began. At the end of the nineteenth century the large city-state experienced a civil war, consequently breaking into the three present towns mentioned above.

They speak a language called Ijo, however they have developed their own dialect and culture separate from the Ijo-speaking group of peoples. This distinction is deduced from three specific reasons: they comprise a relatively small population, estimated at less than one million as compared to the total Nigerian population of ninety million, they retain a multifarious political system, and an aggressive trading

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4 Wariboko, 68.
industry. Maintaining this uncompromising trade market demanded wealth, power, and force, thus generating a massive change in the community structure, cultivating what is known as the Canoe Housing system.

The development of the canoe housing system, or wari, in the seventeenth century facilitated the progression of long distance trade with the hinterlands of North Nigeria, to trans coastal trade with the West. Experienced traders, supplies, ports and other essentials were already in position in the Niger Delta, cultivating a smooth transition to international trade. Whereas previous community subdivisions were composed of certain lineages or family ties, the canoe system in the Niger Delta comprised a well-organized group of traders and fighters capable of manning a war canoe. This new system greatly differed from traditional African societies, which were centered on lineage. Replacing the old chief who was chosen as a result of his status as the eldest man in the village, the new chief substituted age and royal lineage for wealth and trading skills. He owned the land on which the village presided and could provide for its people. Highly experienced in trade, he generated a significant income in which he rendered power, as well as from his own extensive familial household made up of both blood relations and adoptive members. Increasing membership in his house became the main objective in launching his own wari. “Canoe houses” subsisted on

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7 Nimi Wariboko, “A Theory of the Canoe House Corporation,” African Economic History 26 (1998): 142. A large war canoe held up to eighty fighters. The canoe house head was required to both fill the war canoe with enough people and equip them with provisions and weapons, a costly endeavor.
8 Alagoa, “The Development of Institutions in the States of the Eastern Niger Delta,” 271. Chief is a term used loosely to describe the leader of the canoe house. There could be many canoe houses in one area, however each community would have one king to which the entire community was under his authority. He was known as the amanyanabo.
continuous and dynamic expansion, constantly integrating new members and trading products for payment in order to build up the wealth and population of the community.⁹

The *wari* was further subdivided into various households composed of domestic families including a man, his wife or wives, children, servants, slaves, relatives and dependents. Households could be poor or wealthy, large or small. Like the *wari* itself, the individual household systems also were to remain dynamic, otherwise they would crumble, and remaining members of the fallen group would be absorbed into another more successful household.¹⁰ When a household grew to a certain point, with the permission of the chief, the head of that household could detach from its primary canoe house, called an *opuwari*, to start a new canoe house called a *kalawari*, or a subsidiary of the main house.¹¹ From this point, the new canoe house would continue to expand where more *kalawaris* would be formed and the dynamic cycle of growth would continue.

In addition to economic success, the canoe house served as a unified group where members were bound to each other. Wealthy members of the canoe house were responsible for the poor and ensuring they were looked after. Each member played several roles simultaneously within the society including family member, guardian, employee, and partner.¹² If a member experienced a quarrel with another *wari*, his canoe house would protect and defend him. The social structure determined which members became masquerade performers and which would be audience spectators.

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Each group required the other in order to create an effective masquerade. The performer was just one aspect of the complicated ritual made important by the watchful gaze of surrounding Kalabari. Sokari explores this cultural dynamic in her engaging sculptures by drawing the viewer in as an essential part of the work, inviting them to experience the cultural tradition as a member, not just a witness. A tightly knit community skilled in the competitive trade market, fully equipped with a self-sacrificial fighting squad, the Kalabari canoe housing system propelled the society into the depths of European trade in the late 1700s, forever altering their cultural structure.

**Kalabari World View**

The Kalabari maintain a strong cultural household system as well as stanch set of beliefs in which their cultural practices, including the masquerade, are derived. They view the world as having four specific levels of existence that function in accordance with each other to maintain the energetic flow of life, death, and the spirit realm. Masquerades are created to appease these spirits, and to maintain the balance between the realms. The first level is called *tomi kiri*, which interpreted is 'the place of the people.' This level includes the visible, corporeal bodies including humans, animals and vegetables that inhabit a physical world. The majority of man's experiences take place in *tomi kiri*, where he is influenced by spirits and ancestors that exist in their own respective realm. After death in the physical space, humans become ancestors who watch over their living family, transitioning to the next level of existence.

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The second level is called teme, the spirit world, which can signify either a specific spirit or a particular state of being. Ancestors dwell within this realm, where it exists in conjunction with the physical world, but largely remains hidden from view. The two higher levels of existence differ in function from the physical and spiritual worlds. The first is that which controls the destiny of the individual, the lineage, and the village community. Respectively, they are called tamuno (individual destiny), polo teme so (lineage destiny), and ama teme so (village destiny). The last level of reality belongs to that of opu tamuno, the creator of the entire world, which determines the destiny of the whole world.

Spirits can inhabit a variety of places, objects, or even people, as well as the sky or ground, and can be in more than one place at a time. Each person, animal, plant and object possess their own individual spirit, and are in an unremitting involvement with them. It is the spirit which ultimately drives the physical being it is attached to, and no want or desire can be fulfilled without the support of the spirit. Everything is created through the fusion of a spirit with a physical body, and consequently all things are destroyed by their separation. This separation is termed fite and describes any object or person who has detached from its spirit, including someone who has died, a pot that has broken, and eyes that have gone blind. The fate of every physical object, and living being, therefore, is dependent on its spirit.

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14 Horton, 200.
15 Horton, 199. Spirits can sometimes appear to people in order to draw them to their wants, and diviners can enact certain rituals that can help reveal the spirits to them. However, to the average man this world is mostly invisible.
16 Horton, 206. The tamuno not only is the destiny of the individual, it is also the personal creator who merged man’s body and spirit. Tamuno controls the life and death of the individual. This creation aspect is devoid from the polo teme so and the ama teme so levels.
There are three types of spirits that inhabit teme: ancestors (duen), village heroes (am’oru), and water people (owumapu). These spirits exist alongside spirits who are bonded to particular objects and beings, however they lack this physical association. In addition, they hold more power than those tied to materialism, and use the latter to effect tomi kiri. Ancestors are the severed spirits of individuals who once lived in the physical realm, and are believed to chase desires similar to those they had when they were alive. The ancestors watch over and control the fortunes of their specific lineages, and expect to be looked after themselves in return. Ancestors have the ability to punish or reward members of their lineage, depending on the amount of respect or lack thereof, and the compliance of kinship norms.

Similar in nature, village heroes were also believed to have originally lived in the physical world, however they were thought to originate from far off places, often non-Kalabari. Upon entering the Kalabari community, the village heroes introduced new laws and customs that became chief characteristics of Kalabari identity, maintained even through today. Whereas ancestors control only the fate of their own lineage, village heroes are responsible for the fortune of the entire village. Water spirits differ in derivation from that of ancestors and village heroes, and have never lived among humans. They are thought to have villages of their own beneath the water, boasting beautiful corals, cloths, and precious metals. They can appear to people from the physical world in human form or as a python. Water spirits created the creeks, swamps, and rivers, and are responsible for their maintenance, as well as weather and fishing.

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17 Horton, 200.
18 Horton, 200. The head of the house is said to be in closest relations with the ancestors, and holds responsibility for the spirits appeasement.
19 Horton, 201.
They are associated with invention and creation, wealth and power, as well as deviancy and the inability to fulfill domestic roles. Though the water spirits are worshipped and feared, men are what make the spirits important by sustaining a certain control over them to maintain equilibrium. Enacting certain rites and behaviors towards particular spirits is man’s manipulation of their supernatural powers to produce favorable outcomes. An excess of ceremonies and personal submission to the gods gives them more power over men, as well as the ability to yield severe chastisement.20

Also important within the spirit realm are the relationships between the three types of spirit: relations between heroes and water people, ancestors and heroes, and ancestors and water people. Each type of ethereal relationship is represented in various festivals or ceremonies, central to Kalabari culture. The spirits and the relationship between each are ultimately responsible for everything that occurs in a Kalabari village and a villager’s life, and rituals are important to appease these spirits. A villager can enact a ritual to influence the spirits in a particular way, to produce a favorable outcome. Balancing respect, worship, and control is important to keep the spirits in a malleable position, advantageous to humans.

Elaborately fashioned funerals reflecting the earthly power, wealth, and accomplishment of the deceased, as well as his or her lineage, would transition living community members to the spiritual world to assume their role as ancestors (Figures 3 and 4). There are four types of funerals in Kalabari culture: young adult, elder, chief, and king (amanyanabo), which require certain life accomplishments in order to be awarded such a send off. A staple of the funeral is the construction of ede’s, or dressed

20 Horton, 204.
beds, which are prestigious elements of Kalabari funerals that receive the body and allow mourners to pay their respects (Figure 5).\textsuperscript{21} Traditionally, several rooms would be created, however today one is the norm. Often times they are garnished with all the decorative textiles in a lineage reserve, publically displaying their wealth. The conversion of many Kalabari to Christianity has altered the decoration of the \textit{ede} in some cases, where in lieu of traditional Indian textiles and \textit{pelite bite}, white fabrics and lace would be used.\textsuperscript{22}

When an important member of Kalabari society dies, in addition to an \textit{ede}, a traditional \textit{duein fubara} screen would be created (Figure 6). \textit{Duein} refers to the ancestor spirits, and \textit{fubara} means forehead. According to the Kalabari, an individual’s immortal spirit resides in the forehead during their lifetime. When a person dies their spirit leaves the forehead in search of a new place to inhabit, and the \textit{fubara} becomes that place. The screen commemorates the achievements of the ancestor, and allows the members of a house to revere the ancestral spirit, as well as to some degree the ability to control it.\textsuperscript{23} With the firm establishment of Christianity in the Niger Delta near the end of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, production of \textit{fubara} screens has considerably decreased.\textsuperscript{24}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{21}Joanne B. Eicher and Tonye V. Erekosima, “Kalabari Funerals: Celebration and Display,” \textit{African Arts} 21 (1987), 87.
  \item \textsuperscript{22}Joanne B. Eicher, “Indian Textiles in Kalabari Funerals,” \textit{Asian Art and Culture} 9 (1996): 75. \textit{Pelete Bite} is a particular type of cut cloth signature of the Kalabari people. It is created by cutting white threads from plaid \textit{injiri} cloth, that they procure through trade from India, to form new patterns.
  \item \textsuperscript{23}Minneapolis Institute of Arts, “Duein Fubara (Memorial Screen),” \textit{Arts Connected} (1998), \url{http://www.artsconnected.org/resource/93729/duein-fubara-memorial-screen}, accessed November 2012.
  \item \textsuperscript{24}Raymond F. Hopkins, “Christianity and Sociopolitical Change in Sub-Saharan Africa,” \textit{Social Forces} 44, no. 4 (1966), 557.
\end{itemize}
Sculpture

The art of sculpture in Kalabari culture is more functional than expressive. The main forms of this art practice are spirit idols and *fubara* screens. Wood is the preferred medium, and only men are allowed to make sculptures. The process of creation is ritualistic in nature. *Fubara* screens and ancestral sculptures are believed to be tools by which humans can ground and control the spirits. Physical contact with these objects is incredibly calculated. For example, a person pointing their body towards the sculpture and looking directly at the object can have enormous consequences, including spirit transferral and, for pregnant women, their children can develop similar features to the ancestor or spirit. The sculptors are required to undergo purification rights to begin carving, in order to create relevant artworks. These subsequent art forms are intimately linked to religion and masquerade traditions, where rituals and sacrifices are performed to appease the spirit and maintain a balance between humans and spirits.

Masquerade

Kalabari masquerades are important cultural festivals that carry immense significance in Kalabari daily life, as well as in collective and personal identity (Figures 7 and 8). Kalabari legend credits a woman named Ekineba as the first person to witness the water spirits. One day as she traveled to the river, she witnessed the performance of the masquerade near the bank. Upon her return to the community, she told them of

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27 Horton, 9.
what she had seen and taught them how to perform the masquerades or “plays” she had learned. Today the Ekine society, named after their founder, continues this masquerade tradition. However, the guild sustains a strict male-only membership, and only men are allowed to wear masks and perform. Since the very beginning of the introduction of masquerade into Kalabari tradition men have taken over the practice, eliminating women completely from performing.

Art practices in Kalabari culture are reserved for men, while women are designated child bearers and family caregivers, and are not allowed to participate as active performers in the masquerade (Figure 9). The female-founded tradition has cultivated the formation of several secret societies consisting of male performers who thoroughly practice their performances and learn the art of masquerade. In private, the men dress in elaborate outfits made of flashy fabrics that are sewn around their bodies, and large, extravagant headdresses (or masks) are placed on their heads, obscuring their personal identity (Figure 10). The mask is the essential component to the masquerade, as Kalabari believe the head to be sacred, where intelligence, destiny, and the individual’s spirit reside. To change their figure, they place pillows on their stomachs and large phalluses on their backsides. The effect is a two-sexed figure, having a pregnant belly and an erection. They are transformed from mere men into ambiguously gendered gods.

Through the ritual process of masking, the performer conceals his own personal identity in order to take on the identity of a particular spirit or ancestor.29 His newly

acquired spiritual identity is multidimensional, containing multiple roles. Ottenberg lists the different ways the public view the water spirit masquerader as:

“(1) a water spirit, (2) a particular water spirit, (3) a symbol of the ancestor who introduced this spirit into the community, and (4) a symbol of all ancestors who have played this spirit before the present performance.”

By taking on various identities, he also assumes multiple responsibilities in order to uphold viewer, as well as spiritual, expectations. If the performer is successful, he is believed to actually be possessed by the specific god he is embodying, transfigured into an omnipotent and intimidating figure. Some of these gods are said to be quite aggressive or dangerous, eliciting both fear and excitement from the audience.

The masquerade tradition consists of several performances acted out over seventeen year cycles, beginning with the masquerade devoted to Alagba. Their purpose is to invoke various water spirits, to honor and appease them, maintaining the balance between spirits and people and thus bringing peace to the community. Performers and community leaders can also ask the spirits for such things as protection and liberation from evil spirits signified by bad luck or a string of unfortunate events.

The chief masquerades are performed during the dry season between the months of November and May, with three performances total conducted per year in a seventeen-

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31 Horton, “The Kalabari “Ekine” Society: A Borderland of Religion and Art,” 99. In some instances this aggression can be severe, where the possessed masquerader wields a machete, threatening members of the crowd.
year time frame.32 Dressed in elaborate costumes with large headdresses made of reeds and feathers covering their faces, the performers must carry out specific dances in accordance to the rhythm of the drums being played. This drum “talk” communicates to the performer which shrines of heroes and royal ancestors to point to, invoking their presence.33 In addition, the dancer's main requirement is to maintain an imaginative, fantastical environment, one that will engage the public in an otherworldly experience. If he fails to successfully perform the masquerade and follow instructions from the drum talk, he could potentially be disgraced by the female dominated audience, stripped of his costume, and would face public humiliation. Kalabari women, in this case, hold a higher power than the male performer as they are given the major responsibility of judging the performance and the dancer's ability to successfully invoke the spirit realm.

As the economy, politics, and society of Kalabari have changed due to Western influence, the masquerade has acquired Western motifs into its traditional style. Mirrors, feather dusters, and top hats were used to supplement the ornate regalia, and in so doing have been acculturated into symbols of Kalabari identity.34 Feathers are important in Kalabari masquerade costumes to emphasize the performer's movement, creating an elaborate ensemble, as well as to utilize the specific powers attributed to them, like the clairvoyance characteristic of the gray parrot.35 Camp uses these same materials in her sculptures to accurately portray a Kalabari masquerade costume.

34 Schildkrout, “Steel Masquerade”, 5.
35 Schildkrout, 6.
As described in this chapter, the Kalabari maintain the history and traditions of their culture today, supplemented by modern influences, including Western materials in the masquerade costumes. In addition, all aspects of their customs have distinct requirements for each gender, and they have set out specific roles for men and women to follow. In the community, each member has a specific duty required of them, dependent on their gender and age. In the masquerade tradition, man and woman are divided into performer and spectator. The male performers are responsible for opening the spirit realm with specific choreography, which must be executed perfectly to achieve this goal. Women dominate the audience and become both spectator and judge, determining the outcome of the performance and the success of the male dancer. The next chapter will offer a detailed examination of these roles and expectations.
CHAPTER 3
GENDER ROLES AND LIFE CYCLES

Kalabari have a distinct community structure, incorporating economy into familial households, and a strong foundation in traditional beliefs and cultural practices, including the intricate creation and performance of masquerades. Camp was raised as part of the Kalabari community (Figures 11 and 12), but also was taught how to observe her own native culture from an outsider’s perspective. This afforded her a unique position to understand and interpret the rituals of Kalbari culture and how all the different aspects of the culture work together to create a complex masquerade tradition. By observing both the culture as a whole and the individual roles of the members, Sokari applied her knowledge to her sculptures, creating multidimensional works that evoke both the human and the spiritual, male and female, dominance and submission.

Another social system central to Kalabari life is that which determines the individual roles members play within the community. This system bases its classification on both age group and gender, each role having specific attributes and expectations. Generally categorized are five stages of the chronological life cycle. The first stage is called awome, including those from birth to fifteen years, asawo is sixteen to forty, opuawaso is forty and above, alapu are chiefs, and duein are the ancestors.¹

The ancestor phase is included in the life cycle because Kalabari believe that the cycle cannot be complete unless an individual becomes an ancestor in the spirit realm. However, the person must have lived well in Kalabari terms in order to enter the next

realm. Living well, according to the Kalabari, means the person honored their canoe house, married and had children, and was financially successful. If they had fulfilled these prerequisites, the deceased member’s family will produce an exceedingly elaborate funeral for the community, measuring the degree of success of the deceased and his or her wari, and the family’s intention to stage a proper send off for their loved one. In Kalabari life, therefore, a funeral is a more important ceremony than a marriage, as it celebrates multiple successes.

Each phase of the life cycle has a specific focus in the development of the community member. The general break down of life cycles discussed above applies more directly to males. A more thorough analysis of the life cycles of women is presented further along in this chapter. In the first stage of awome, boys are taught the fundamentals of their culture and are familiarized with their environment. Religious beliefs and folklore are taught, and the entire village takes part in their individual education, as the outcome of the child’s behavior and successes reflect the entire community. They are encouraged to build kinship ties with members of the community and are responsible for various household chores. By the time the boy reaches the end of the awome period, he often has five or more years experience assisting his father in the family trade. Learning respect and abiding by strict duties govern the first cycle of development, cultivating a strong foundation of integrity and good character.

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3 Catherine Daly, "Male and Female Artistry in Kalabari Dress," African Arts 19, no. 3 (1986): 48. For important ceremonies like the Kalabari funeral and wedding, men and women wear elaborate, colorful outfits that reflect their social and economic standing so their status is conveyed appropriately to the many family members that attend these big events.
The primary objective during the initial period is the acquisition of what Robin Horton terms the “Kalabari aristocratic ideal.”

Though the warri household as a community thrives on being dynamic, on the individual level, expectations for men remain specific and relatively unchanging. This character development occurs in three parts. The first part consists of stylishness, youthfulness, and grace. Kalabari value wealth and power, but it is conditional, and the individual must balance flamboyance with decorum in order to achieve respect. Preserving a nonchalant attitude to success makes up the second and third parts of the aristocratic ideal. At an early age Kalabari boys are taught duty and self-control, and are expected to begin their development into respected Kalabari men, attaining wealth and success to bring esteem to his community.

In the second stage of asawo boys have officially become adult men, and are responsible for themselves, their success, and their marriage and family life. Critical to this stage of development is the participation in masquerade and dancing circles within the village. In order for boys to become “complete Kalabari men” they must learn the drum language and be proficient in dances associated with the masquerade. Near the end of this phase men are expected to have achieved a superior character and strong ties with the entire community, to defend the compound as needed and maintain cultural identity, setting an example for boys in the awome stage. They are expected to uphold their political responsibilities and help with community service, including tasks that require hard labor. In facilitating their careers, men are expected to uphold style, dignity, and grace, and never to compromise these three factors for any personal

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5 Wariboko, “Counterfoil Choices in the Kalabari Life Cycle.”
objective, in order to preserve their aristocratic status. Men in this cycle of maturity develop their status within the community, pave the way for their successes and respectability, and take on the role of protector and laborer, serving the needs of their wari.

The next life stage is opusawo, where men have attained their respectability, and are looked to for wisdom and advice. They act as advisory members to the chief and king of the compound, attending political meetings and helping to settle debates between houses. In this stage they are expected to play an even bigger role in the character development of Kalabari boys into respectable men, guiding those younger than themselves to become representatives of the achievement and success of the community. They are very knowledgeable of religious practices, beliefs, and folklore, and some assume roles of priests in their canoe houses. Considered elders, they are tremendously respected, and have much authority.

Alapu consists of the chieftaincy phase, where men take on leadership roles with the canoe housing system, and assert their power and authority as extremely respected individuals. Not all men will achieve this stage, as it takes great wealth and military force to attain such a role. In addition, most chiefs have multiple wives, creating an expansive family. Amanyanabos and chiefs can assume their positions in a few different ways. The first way is through lineage, inheriting the throne from a family member, the second is through public election, and the third is through the ruling chief creating a new position for the individual due to his vast wealth and support of the community.7

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6 Wariboko, "Counterfoil Choices."
7 Wariboko, "Counterfoil Choices."
In this stage it is pivotal to sustain a prevalent aristocratic character, as the chief is veritably the singular representative of the whole society. He is responsible for the mandatory expansion of the canoe houses, as well as economic success. His ability to provide for his community and ensure their wealth and accomplishments is awarded with high honor and authority. If he is unable to provide these essentials, he may be dishonored by his community and removed from office. In the physical realm, the ascension into Chiefdom is the highest honor a Kalabari man can achieve.

The last cycle of life for a Kalabari is that of duein, where through his death he crosses into the spiritual realm and becomes an ancestor. In this role, ancestors represent the strength of the community they left behind, and are revered as powerful beings. Ancestors pay close attention to the adherence of village norms, and award or punish lineage members dependent on their success or failure to maintain cultural identity and respect. Just as in the alapu phase, not every member becomes an ancestor, and his transformation into this role is conditional. Some of these stipulations include dying after fifty years of age, passing away naturally and not as a result of an accident or unpredictable event, having a renowned aristocratic character, and being buried in his home village. Those who die in abnormal circumstances are believed to bring disgrace to the warì, are denied an elaborate funeral. They are spiritually severed from the lineage so that the living members are no longer tied to them. Achieving ancestor status is the greatest honor a Kalabari can achieve, leading an immortal life in the spirit realm.

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8 Wariboko, "Counterfoil Choices."
9 Eicher, “Kalabari Funderals: Celebration and Display,” 38.
Phases of Iria

Whereas the life cycle of men is built on sociopolitical growth, the phases of life for women are broken into stages of socio-physical development, based on their level of maturity into womanhood.\textsuperscript{10} Degrees of accomplishment and success differ according to gender, and the categorization of the life cycle is further broken down for women into phases of \textit{iria}. The stages of a woman’s life cycle, or \textit{iria}, are determined by her physical maturity, and development into a fertile woman (Figures 13, 14 and 15). Therefore, the phases are unique to each woman and are not divided into specific age groups like that of men. Traditionally, the phases were \textit{bite pakiri iwain}, \textit{ikuta de}, \textit{konju fina}, \textit{bite sara} and \textit{iria bo}; however, typically today, the phases have been combined and reduced to just \textit{bite sara} and \textit{iria bo} as more modern Western influences have been incorporated into the culture.\textsuperscript{11} The process of \textit{iria} begins in late childhood, usually with the start of a woman’s menses cycle, and spans to the birth of her first child. Motherhood and caring for the family continue to be pivotal factors in the success of a Kalabari woman.

Though the traditional first three phases of female development are no longer practiced regularly, they are still represented during special rituals and ceremonies, and are important to assess in order to understand fully modern Kalabari principles regarding standard female character. \textit{Bite Pakiri Iwain} signified the beginning of a woman’s menstruation cycle and thus her transition from adolescent to childbearing woman. In addition to the typical Kalabari early childhood where boys and girls learn

\textsuperscript{10} Michelman and Eicher, “Dress and Gender in Kalabari Women’s Societies,” 124.
\textsuperscript{11} Catherine M. Daly, \textit{Kalabari Female Appearance and the Tradition of Iria}, University Microfilms International (1989), 47.
cultural traditions and expectations, as well as begin the development of an aristocratic character, the young girl has household duties consisting of cleaning, cooking, and caring for younger siblings.

At each phase of female development, the girl would experience a short seclusion period, followed by special ceremonies making public her physical and social maturity. In addition, her wardrobe would change in order to accentuate her sexuality. With her physical maturity publicly established, ensuing phases of *iria* were set in motion, bringing her closer to female adulthood, and setting the foundation for her feminine ideal character.

*Ikuta De* indicated another stage of her physical development in which her body filled out, and her sexuality became prevalent. Her virginity was a valued asset and was closely guarded by her parents, and she was discouraged from sexual activity that would damage her integrity as well as brideprice. At this time she began to receive many male suitors and negotiations of marriage would commence. When a match was made and an engagement confirmed, the young woman entered the next stage called *Konju Fina*. Here, she was well on her way to becoming socially accepted as an adult woman, and several ceremonies and seclusion periods occurred at this stage in preparation for her wedding. The culmination of these three progressive periods indicated the end of her physical growth from child to woman, and lead to the next phase of development- her social status and cultivation of feminine success in Kalabari terms.

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12 Daly, *Kalabari Female Appearance and the Tradition of Iria*, 54.
In order to reach adulthood, Kalabari women must achieve certain standards to move on to the next stage of social maturity, known as *bite sara*. Here, women have completed the various ceremonies and traditional practices associated with betrothal, are married, and usually are in the process of bearing a child. Her accomplishment as a wife and fertile mother facilitates her credentials as a contributing member to her immediate family as well as her *wari*. At this time her dress changed in accordance with her social achievement, concealing more of her body that was previously exposed during her adolescent phases. In addition, the wrappers and blouses are gathered in a particular way to indicate a pregnant belly, simultaneously denoting her success and ideal feminine form.

Her final stage of development, *iria bo*, takes place after the birth of her first child. She undergoes several seclusion periods before and after the birth, sometimes lasting up to three months, concluding with public “coming out” ceremonies indicating her newly acquired social status. A plump female body is highly regarded in Kalabari society, suggesting health, fertility, and wealth. Her dress is yet again modified, and she now wears knee length wrappers and many coral beads. At this final stage, she is expected to be skilled in dance, and performs barefoot during the *iria bo* celebrations. She is now a well-established adult woman, contributing her part to the Kalabari aristocratic ideal by successfully achieving the traditional criteria of womanhood.

In all cases dress is a pivotal factor in the developmental stages of men and especially women, indicating physical maturity for women and age for men, social establishment and success. Additionally, dress is utilized as a visual display of wealth,

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13 Daly, *Kalabari Female Appearance and the Tradition of Iria*, 61.
14 Michelman and Eicher, "Dress and Gender in Kalabari Women’s Societies," 124.
achieved both individually and through family. At each level of the male and female life cycles, ceremonies are preformed focusing on the individual’s status and development as a native Kalabari. They are judged and criticized at every occasion during this process, whereby elder members of the society determine their success or failure in achieving social and physical maturity. As is made evident in the above analysis, life cycles for men and women in Kalabari society are vastly different, and the cultivation of identity maintains diverse standards between the sexes.

Though modernity has brought with it a strong Western influence that has notably affected Kalabari culture, traditions are strongly held, and the prototypes for male and female character ideals remain highly esteemed goals in the establishment of identity. Sokari’s sculptures serve to preserve these traditions in timeless figures, while also illustrating the visible affects of modernity, and the fluidity with which the tradition absorbs newer influences. In addition, her works explore the complicated nature of gender roles in Kalabari society and practices. Further evidence of the diverse gender roles in Kalabari society can be discerned by looking at the secret societies of dance composed of exclusively male or female members, facilitating non-lineage based group bonding and collective identity.

**Ekine and Eremne-Ogbo Secret Societies**

The central component of Kalabari culture and tradition is the practice of dance and the masquerade. Males and females are expected to not only learn the drum language which guides specific learned moves, they are expected to excel in this practice, as it publicly shows their Kalabari identity, character development, and successful growth. The masquerade represents the gods, spirits, village heroes,
ancestors, and all things supernatural as well as traditionally held beliefs.\textsuperscript{15}

Additionally, the masquerade tradition demonstrates the complex, multifaceted dichotomization of gender roles, spectatorship, and power in cultural life. In essence, the masquerade represents all the important Kalabari identifying markers, moral values, and world-view in a singular presentation of physical and mental skill.

The tradition was founded by a woman whom the water spirits had secretly revealed their specific dances to. In turn, the practice was taken over by Kalabari men who named their organization after their female founder, Ekineba.\textsuperscript{16} The Ekine Sekiapu society, though central to Kalabari culture and identity, continues to keep values and practices exclusively between members of the group. Two components comprise the masquerade practice: religion and art. The origins of the masquerade elicit the ritualistic nature of the dance, calling upon revered water spirits, deities, and ancestors to honor them, as well as ask for favors. In this respect the masquerade is regarded dangerous because of the possessive power of the spirits over their human representatives. Equally fundamental to the masquerade is its physical component, as in the importance of appearance, dress, and composure in Kalabari society. Male performers are critically examined and judged during their dance, and can either obtain praise and rewards or be publically humiliated, cut down, and stripped of their costume by an enraged audience, a disgrace so serious to incite suicide.\textsuperscript{17} The production of masquerade is a serious one, and its male performers must meet specific standards.

\textsuperscript{17} Horton, 98.
requiring extensive practice and guidance from the older, more seasoned members of Ekine.

Each Kalabari village contains its own Ekine society, separate from those of neighboring communities. These organizations independently plan, rehearse, and perform the more than thirty different masquerades that take place over a seventeen-year cycle. Only the most skilled members of the Ekine are allowed to perform the focal masquerades, invoking the dominant spirits and gods. In order to rise to the highest level in the Ekine and attain prestige as a masquerader, a lower member must pass a trial testing his dancing skills and knowledge of the drum language. Upon successful completion, he would be initiated into the seniority of the group. However, if he failed he would be ejected from the whole Ekine society. Performers dress in elaborate costumes that are sewn around their bodies for a perfect fit with brightly colored fabrics, feathers, beads, and other items, purely for decoration. The key element of the masquerade is the hand carved mask that represents a particular spirit and calls for their presence in the performance. If the execution of performance, elaborate dress, and accurately carved mask are pleasing to the spirit they invoke, that spirit could potentially possess the masker, thus completing a successful masquerade.

Though men have claimed the masquerade under their jurisdiction, women have nevertheless created their own dance societies exclusive to women. The 1970s oil boom sparked a growing interest in female-based social organizations, as women became more involved in economy, boosting their careers and becoming successful, individual businesswomen. They facilitated non-kinship based relationships, which acted as a resource for women to exhibit their financial and social power separate from
the traditional intercommunity domestic sector. One of these societies is called *eremne-ogbo*, which is the prevalent female society that has facilitated the contemporary need for women to establish public acknowledgement of their successes, while also fulfilling the traditional practices of *iria bo*. Here they show off expensive outfits, participate in traditional Kalabari dance practice, and bond with other successful women from various compounds.

The economic collapse in the 1990s affected both men and women, decreasing income and thus limiting the ornamental extent of dress and costume. Newly found feminine economic power did not affect women’s role in the male masquerade performance, and they are still restricted in direct participation. Secret societies, however, remain active components of Kalabari society and define the complex gender roles associated with their culture.

Spirits, men, women, and performers are connected in a complex stream of relations within the masquerade, each serving a specific purpose, contributing to the cultural preservation of tradition and identity. Simon Ottenberg describes these interactions as occurring between two societies: the social community and the masquerade, which interacts “mask-to-face rather than face-to-face”. The two societies retain opposing qualities and values, and engage with one another in this contrast. He states:

“The secular society of everyday life has created a second cultural group with its own forms which then interact with

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18 Michelman and Eicher, “Dress and Gender in Kalabari Women’s Societies,” 123.
19 Michelman and Eicher, 122.
the first in opposing fashion, with the masqueraders as the apparent subordinate group in ritual context.”

The secular society is the audience and the subordinate is the masquerader, who is passive to viewer judgment. Their interaction cultivates a dream-like space of fantasy and imagination. In creating this imaginative reality, the individual identity of the performer is considered symbolically dead, and reborn into a spirit.

Though the audience members truly believe in the spirits and gods invoked in the masquerade as well as their presence, they are simultaneously conscious of the fact that the performer is also a man. His human existence, however, is superseded by his spiritual possession, propelling the audience and masker into the overlapping spirit and human reality made manifest during the masquerade performance. This situation reveals the traditional Kalabari conviction that the two worlds exist in conjunction with one another.

Comparatively, male and female interactions relate to audience and masker engagement in their similar insider vs. outsider and participant vs. bystander oppositions. In order to maintain the push and pull of interrelated opposing forces, a strong social distance is kept that runs in accordance with mutually exclusive, effectual communication between the disparate groups. The act of masking re-conveys social communication from secular to sacred. After dressing, the masquerader is transformed from a human man into a powerful god, who is present in the human

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21 Ottenberg, 158.
22 Ottenberg, 159.
23 Ottenberg, 160.
world. Interacting with the transformed deity is not only symbolic, but is believed to be a real, physical experience. The separation between the masker and the audience parallels the separation of masculine and feminine. The tension between distance and communication is evident in gender roles, expectations, and respective male and female aristocratic ideals, and is further enacted in the dichotomic nature of the masquerade.

Supplementing the oppositional engagement in both situations is aversion and affiliation: maintaining the distinct gender roles and designations, instilling feelings of separateness and identification, and creating space between the masker and audience through deep-seated emotive reactions. The dynamics of these interactions, designated generally as submissive vs. dominant and aversion vs. affiliation, though seemingly clear-cut social positions are actually quite complex. The distribution of power between the sexes, as well as between the audience and masker, are made evident in how the gaze plays a relevant part in these relationships.

Spectatorship in the masquerade is a twofold component relegating power and obscuring explicit typecast notions of acquiescence and authority. In the masquerade, the ordinary act of looking is complicated by the lack of mutual eye contact. The performer’s face is enveloped by a mask, enhancing his power in the spirit realm and at the same time objectifying himself to the critical eyes of the audience. Viewers are able to freely gaze upon the masker, void of confrontation and usual modes of self-control, gaining power and dominance over their visual subject, and subsequently enhancing the fantasy factor of the ceremony.

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24 Ottenberg, 163.
25 Ottenberg, 164.
Concomitantly, the masker is sometimes able to peer out of his mask, gazing upon the audience in the same one-sided, stimulative action. However, this is not common, and if he is able to see to the outside his vision is limited, as the masquerade is achieved through spiritual guidance and emotional responses rather than sight. He is powerful as one possessed by a spirit, arousing expressive reactions from the audience, however he is also dependent on outside clan members to guide him through the performance. In addition, the audience determines the outcome of his presentation, and whether or not he was successful.

Women are forbidden to perform in the masquerade or join the exclusively male secret dance society that is responsible for these productions. However, they still play a pivotal role in this tradition through their powerful gaze as the ultimate providers of judgment and criticism, social acceptance or rejection. The masquerade is rendered obsolete without the public participation of women, as the masquerade is generated as a result from relations between witness and spectacle, male and female, and insider and outsider. The play between these cultural contrasts is what produces and maintains the masquerade tradition in Kalabari culture.

Women form the audience of outsiders, where their ceremonial roles mimic that of their domestic responsibilities.26 Closely examining the masquerade performers, encouraging or reprimanding their behavior is a ceremonial manifestation of motherhood, feminine authority, and wisdom. They provide support or punishment based on the actions of the single male performer. Though performance of

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masquerades is restricted to men, women still play a crucial role in its production, revealing Kalabari identity, gender roles, and female acquisition of power.

The Kalabari host a collective gender construction that designates specific economic, financial, domestic, and administrative roles to a particular sex. Male and female life cycles differ in their definition of success and maturity. Where men mature based on a scale of age and economic success, women rise to adulthood through physical development, marriage, and childbearing as indicated by the male and female phases of growth. Though Modernity and Western influence have facilitated the movement of women into some male economic sectors like trading and fishing, traditional gender positions are still highly regarded, and are expected to be sustained even if a woman gains economic success. Women are generally associated with submission, and men with dominance as they are regarded in their respective gendered life cycles and aristocratic ideals. However, in the masquerade ritual these roles are reversed. Relegated to outsider, incapable of practicing the male dominated tradition, women nevertheless transformed their passive position into that of authority and power by taking on the role of judge. Male masqueraders are subjected to the omnipresent female gaze, in whom they must please or otherwise be rejected and publicly humiliated.

Contemporary artist Sokari Douglas Camp was raised in this culture, and experienced first hand the specific traditions, gendered life phases and expectations of the Kalabari. Fascinated by her own heritage as well as Western cultures, Camp chose to use the subject matter in her art. The result are works reflecting gender identity}

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from multiple perspectives including Kalabari, Westerner, and woman. The following chapter will examine the artist more closely by taking a look at her history and upbringing, and how she came to be an artist. By breaking cultural norms and taking on a practice traditionally reserved for men, Sokari unveils the often-overlooked powerful feminine component of Kalabari culture and tradition.
Sokari Douglas Camp is a contemporary Nigerian artist living and working in London, England. Her monumental steel sculptures embody Kalabari character ideals, values, practices, beliefs, and politics through multiple cultural and social perspectives. As a native Nigerian, she reveals insider knowledge of Kalabari gender roles, hierarchy and beliefs. Identifying herself as a woman both Kalabari and Western, she is simultaneously an outsider, unable to participate in the masquerade performance and forbidden membership to the exclusively male secret societies. Her position offers a unique perspective of Kalabari masquerade, gender roles, and spectatorship. She is at once a Kalabari woman relegated to the audience, observing and critiquing the male masquerade, and on the other hand she is cultivating an anthropological observation of this practice, applying two distinct modes of spectatorship. In order to grasp the nature of her dual perspectives, an analysis of her origins and upbringing is necessary to envisage the bridge between closeness and distance with her native culture.

The artist was born in the large Kalabari compound known as Buguma, Nigeria in 1958. Her father was chief of their wari, and subsequently had a large family. Her mother, like many modern Kalabari women, sought her own economic success and traded palm oil. At the tender age of three, Sokari left her mother, who was sick, to live with one of her elder sisters and her English anthropologist husband, Robin Horton. Typical of all young girls in Buguma, Sokari participated in the duties and expectations of the first phase of iria, assisting in the care of younger children, serving meals and beverages, and various cleaning chores. When Sokari’s sister died in childbirth a short
time later, Horton petitioned the wari to keep the young Sokari under his charge, and his excellent relations with the Kalabari facilitated his guardianship. From that point they stuck together, learning from each other and developing a familial bond.

Remaining a member of the family even after the death of his wife, Horton continued extensive interaction with the Kalabari, writing and talking about their culture, traditions, and beliefs. At a young age, Sokari was exposed to both a Kalabari existence with particular expectations, beliefs and traditions, as well as an observational interpretation of these practices.

Sokari developed a significant interest in art at an early age, drawing images in the sand and working with her hands. Horton himself came from a family of artists, however, he was discouraged from taking up the practice himself, and so he opted to become a university lecturer instead. His love of art afforded the opportunity for Sokari to adopt the practice, and he constantly gave her art supplies, including paints, to cultivate her artistic growth. Sporty in her youth, she constantly participated in physical activities. However, she abandoned a serious pursuance in sports as a profession, as in Kalabari culture, after age thirty, an athlete’s career is deemed finished. Art was a contending interest for her, and so she decided to pursue it through further education.

Camp describes her adolescent self as an “airmail” child, constantly shipped back and forth from England for her education, to Nigeria to spend time with her family and native culture.¹ She briefly attended the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland from 1979-1980. From there she went to the Central School of Art and Design at St.

Martins in London, England where she received her BA Honors in Sculpture. During 1983-86 she attended the Royal College of Art in London, where she earned her MA in Sculpture. The constant fluctuation of residence further aided her development of a double consciousness of Western and Kalabari cultures. She acquired two distinct ways of looking at her own culture: from the perspective of an insider belonging to a specific Kalabari canoe house, and from the point of view of an outsider looking in on a separate culture. Both views affected her later work and the subsequent multi-dimensional subject matter expressed in her sculptures.

Due to her move to England as she began her higher education, Sokari developed a Western identity along with her Kalabari heritage. She identifies herself as both Nigerian and British, but feels outside both cultures, a position she enjoys, as she is able to benefit from both associations. In Nigeria women are limited in their participation in masquerades and sculpture, especially working with wood and steel, as their femininity is believed to disrupt the flow of certain rituals and practices. Now living in the West, Sokari is able to utilize these mediums more freely, as well as to take on a more dominant role in the Kalabari masquerade as creator of masquerade sculptures. She still is not allowed to participate as a direct performer or create masks while in Nigeria. Her work merges African tradition with Western art practices, industrializing African figural sculpture, and imbuing the composition with modern, political, and personal significance. Her sculptures embody both an insider and an outsider’s viewpoint of Nigerian culture, politics, and current social issues, as she takes on the roles of both native Kalabari and Westerner.

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Sokari’s frequent visits to Nigeria, as she pursued her education in England, afforded her several opportunities to work with significant Nigerian artists whose impact greatly informed her artistic practice. She studied with the Yoruba sculptor, Lamidi Fakeye, the choreographer Peggy Harper, as well as the Austrian sculptor Suzanne Wenger from the Oshogbo school (Figures 16, 17 and 18).³ Observing their methods, she furthered her study of sculpture and movement, greatly influencing her work. Sokari manipulates both positive and negative space in her sculptures to form an impressive skeletal form. Mimicking Kalabari textile patterns in the lacing of steel, the artist not only recreates traditional wrappers, but also structures the figure in a three dimensional shape with this openwork material.

Growing up during the post-independence period in Nigeria brought with it many benefits as well as devastations. The oil boom in the Niger Delta that occurred in the early 1970s greatly boosted economy, if only for a short time. Camp describes experiencing this “Nigerian Renaissance,” where several talented artists, including Suzanne Wenger and Lamidi Fakeye, emerged and began teaching and hosting workshops.⁴ Here, she absorbed the teachings of several important artists and incorporated what she learned into her artistic practice.

The excitement of a flourishing economy, and increased arts programs, was countered by the growing violence occurring as a result of foreign oil companies exploiting the land.⁵ The oil boom in turn produced devastating outcomes including

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⁵ Toyin Falola, Colonialism and Violence in Nigeria (Indiana University Press: 2009), 176.
civil wars, government corruption, and violent protests. In addition, the foreign traders and large, industrial companies acutely changed the people and environment of the Delta. Sokari was greatly affected by these incidents and their irrevocable by-products, encouraging her to utilize the violence as a subject matter in her work to communicate internationally the reality of Nigeria.

Early on in her career, Sokari became fascinated with a kinetic element in her work. She attributes the fascination to an encounter with a Yoruba priestess named Amonia Hosfall. Amonia spoke to her about the performative element in traditional masquerade, and its intent to be looked upon with both fear and excitement. The meeting, along with her own experience of Kalabari festivals, encouraged Camp to make her works about movement and space—fundamental elements of the masquerade performance. To create a sense of liveliness, she utilizes parts purchased at local motor shops or old toys. Through the use of these electric devices, she provides her work with actual movement to engage the viewer, just as an audience member would be engaged in a masquerade performance.

In addition to kineticism, Sokari frequently used wood in her sculptures at the beginning of her practice. Since the death of her father in 1984, however, she began to primarily use steel, a decision for which she cannot pin point the exact reason. In addition to the steel structure of her works, she adds other mediums including acrylic paint, acetate, plastic, fabric, and feathers. Working with steel and being an artist in general is an exclusively male domain in Kalabari culture, as art is regarded spiritual,
and only men are believed to be spiritually equipped to take on the important role. Through her residence in the West, however, Sokari is able to work with a material and subject previously forbidden to her by separating herself from Kalabari scrutiny.

Camp was also afforded the rare opportunity to observe the practices of a male masquerade society, where she learned invaluable information on the enigmatic process leading up to the performances. The Okolokurukuru is a group of fifteen young men from the Niger Delta, specifically Buguma, the same compound where Sokari is from, who perform masquerades. They are not members of the Ekine Sekiapu society, and are less secretive than the elder performers. However, particularly successful masquerades performed by group members (those where the player is taken over by the god who then controls their movement and behavior) are sometimes rewarded by invitations to join the Sekiapu.

The group allowed Sokari to intimately observe their practices of constructing the masks, and dressing in the full regalia pre-masquerade performance, an unprecedented experience for a Kalabari woman. In doing so, she crossed the boundaries and traditional gender roles of her heritage, as she was able to examine, interpret, and ultimately participate, whereas in traditional Buguma she would have only been able to watch. She sought to study the transformation of these young men into gods through the masquerade and performance. The opportunity to study the Okolokurukuru provided Sokari with vital behind the scenes information needed to attain explicit visual and conceptual knowledge of the festival so important in her heritage, as well as to construct her own interpretations of the masquerade.9

Sokari’s fascination with the masquerade has brought her to an inevitable complication caused by the limitations of gender in Kalabari culture. Though she was able to study the masquerade closely, she was still kept at a distance as one not directly included in the dance association.\(^\text{10}\) She is able to observe, like that of an audience member and as an anthropologist, but because she is a woman she cannot participate in the actual performance of her study as a dancer. Her personal explanation of the masquerade illustrates the tradition from a female’s point of view by revealing the position of the audience and the responsibilities they must uphold. She also includes several other dualisms that present multiple perspectives.

In a July 2013 interview, she described her artistic process as ironically similar to the masking tradition. She wears a mask to cover her nose as she cuts the metal, goggles to protect her eyes, and a head scarf to cover her hair, all of which obscure her identity.\(^\text{11}\) In essence, she becomes both subject and spectator, participant and outside observer. At the center of the exploration is the importance of the gaze and looking. Here, she is able to take a lead role as a woman and a Kalabari. Spectatorship lies at the center of the masquerade as well as the study of the dance, and women dominate this realm within the culture. Though Camp has been able to inspect the male secret societies, she remains outside of membership. In this state she cannot fully expose the male role of masker and the particular practices the Ekine society keep private. As a result of being raised by an anthropologist, Camp is able to use her resultant strong observational skills to present a complicated subject. Her practice parallels the gender

\(^{11}\) Sokari Douglas Camp, Interview with the artist, July 2013.
roles set in Kalabari culture, as she observes and emulates the male masquerade participants.

Sokari Douglas Camp’s upbringing had a crucial impact on her art, and defined how she approached her subject matter as an adult artist. Living simultaneously in three worlds: Nigeria, her birth place and source of heritage, the West where she was sent for her education, and the anthropological based household of her brother in law Robin Horton, fostered a unique understanding to Kalabari culture and tradition. She states: “the interesting part of my life is equating what I know, what I was born with, and what I have learned, and try to find a path between it. Having been brought up by this anthropologist, I had the opportunity to study my own culture and take part in it.”

As a member of the African diaspora with a binary cultural consciousness, she can observe her own culture from afar and at the same time know inherently Kalabari values and practices, allowing her a larger scope to interpret Kalabari subject matter.

Living in London, she has the freedom to break from a conventional Kalabari feminine position by working in a traditional man’s medium, and exploring themes of Kalabari rituals previously forbidden to her as a woman. By working with steel and tackling subjects of violence and masquerade, she enters this male dominated world, and offers a female interpretation. The importance of masquerade and funerary ceremonies in Kalabari tradition is reflected in her works. Church Ede in particular represents a personal reflection on the death of her own father and illustrates the elaborate death ede essential to a Kalabari’s transition into the realm of the ancestors.

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12 Camp, 2013 Interview.
Sokari’s monumental sculptures impart a contemporary viewpoint of Kalabari culture from the inside. In doing so she shares her heritage with an international public, allowing for a deeper understanding of Kalabari life. Merging Kalabari and Western traditions, her work exhibits a dual nature as she exposes both insider and outsider viewpoints. As a social and political protest artist, her sculptures possess a confronting nature, stark in their messages.

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CHAPTER 5

WORKS

Disembodied African masks float, eternally stagnant on gallery walls, communicating an eerie stolidity. Lacking bodies, they remain immobile artifacts affixed to designated walls. Often times, this is the way in which galleries and museums display such items, however, masquerades were not intended to be viewed in this manner. They were created as living, moving performances that evoke fear and excitement in the audience. Sokari Douglas Camp sought to complete the figure by adding a body to more accurately construct what a masquerade would look like. The results are monumental sculptural compositions presented fluidly to portray the specific dances attributed to each masquerade figure.

Camp’s sculptures reveal a dualistic anthropological assessment of African culture from both an insider and an outsider’s viewpoint, paralleling gender roles in Kalabari culture. Traditionally, Kalabari men were the sole producers of the pivotal masquerade ceremony, both crafting the elaborate costumes and performing in the ritual, while women were seemingly confined to audience members. However, Camp, as an insider of Kalabari culture, reveals the ultimate power and fate of the masquerade is held in the hands of women in the form of spectatorship. The male masquerade is subjected to the authoritative feminine gaze, where women decide whether the performance is successful and thus praised, or unsuccessful, initiating mass chaotic

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denunciation, and public humiliation of the performer. In the successive pages, we will take a look at specific works by Camp, and how she presents this subject matter.

*Alali Aru* (Figure 20) presents a complete look at the masquerade tradition, including the performer and spectators. Here, the dynamics of gender roles, insider and outsider positions, and spectatorship are fully explored. At the center of the composition is a large boat with several ores on either side. The tall canopy surrounding the sides represent the decorative elements of an actual festival boat. Standing at the head of the boat is a masquerader in full costume, including an elaborate headdress covering his facial features, who moves his feet in the rhythm of the dance. Outside of the vessel stand four women dressed in traditional wrappers representing the audience. They direct their attention to the masquerader on the boat, and respond to his presence and performance. In addition, Camp has added motors to both the boat and the female characters, creating a simulation of rowing and clapping. Assimilated from steel, wood, and motors, the entire composition draws in the viewer as if he or she were part of the scene taking place.

The fact that the spectators are all women shows the feminine dominance of the audience population. In the actual festival, the crowd is composed mostly of women. Here, they are physically separated from the boat and the masquerader, indicating the exclusivity of the secret male dance societies, as well as paralleling the specific gender roles and expectations indicative of Kalabari culture. They are cut off from being participants and are relegated to the shoreline to watch. Though they seem to be prohibited from participation, their reactions and judgments determine the fate of the subjected masquerader. The women outnumber the single male masquerader, and
focus their attention entirely on him. He is the subject of the spectacle, and must work to impress the audience. Here, we can see the relationship between vulnerability and gender. *Alali Aru* is a well rounded example of the gender dynamics taking place within the masquerade tradition.

* Spirits in Steel: The Art of the Kalabari Masquerade exhibition of 1999, based on the 1995 exhibition *Play and Display: Steel Masquerades from Head to Toe*, at the American Museum of Natural History, is a good example of the ethnographic interest in Camp’s work. It exhibits thirteen life-size wood and steel sculptures of Kalabari masquerades inspired from Sokari’s personal experience of Kalabari water spirit masquerades in Buguma, Nigeria. They represent how Kalabari traditions have adapted to contemporaneity and urbanization by the incorporation of modern materials, as well as how long-established practices have remained. By taking the mask off the wall and giving him a body, Camp has created a fresh way of observing the masquerade, adding depth, symbolism, and a closer form of interaction between the sculpture and the viewer.

*Big Alagba and Sekibo*, part of the *Spirits in Steel* exhibition, are two sculptures that together give a realistic look into the masquerade tradition (Figure 21). *Big Alagba* is exorbitantly decorated, wearing a light colored skirt, bangles on her ankles, and a large cloak on her back with tendrils of material enveloping her body. She wears a ceremonial cloth containing drawn images of animals and symbols called an *Alu Bete blue*, and holds paddles in her hands to bang her ankles. The most elaborate piece of her ensemble is her enormous headdress, which contains feathers, mirrors, Christmas

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tree balls, and tinsel. The headdress is so large that the sculpture’s body appears childlike beneath it. Alagba is a female god, and the masquerader must effectively disguise his sex during the entire performance. The elaborate regalia and hefty headdress make this feat difficult for the dancer, and in addition he must follow the drum language successfully in order to complete the dance. The goddess represents glamour and uncertainty, creating an exciting, unpredictable performance.

In using steel as a medium, the figures take on an additional symbolic quality of cultural and personal influence. Camp would have been forbidden to use the material in her native culture, and as a result in using it she shows the effect of cultural influences on tradition. Elaborate laced cloaks, patterned skirts and decorative accents are permanently carved into the figures, becoming a part of their bodies. Various Western elements are interspersed in the ensemble including brightly colored feather dusters and top hats, representing multiculturalism and how the West has influenced Kalabari culture. Though outside inspiration is apparent from materials and objects used, traditional elements including the enormous headdress and the seriousness of the interplay between spiritual realms remain engraved in the figures, demonstrating the importance of tradition in Kalabari culture, and how the masquerade has remained a significant ritual even today.

Accompanying the masquerade figure is Sekibo, a representative of the male dance society. Dressed in a patterned skirt, Victorian nightshirt and top hat, Sekibo leads the masquerader through the streets as he dances, as well as maintains the distance between him and the audience. Camp explains that his purpose is to calm the
intensity of the other masquerade figures in the exhibition.\textsuperscript{6} He symbolizes the link between men and the masquerade, as well as the transformative quality of the tradition. In addition, he is the middle man between the audience and the spiritual world.

Here we can see the separation of feminine and masculine. The audience is divided from the divine masquerade and must rely on the male dancer in order to make a connection or communicate. The masquerader is shielded from the audience, as he represents the merging of the human and spiritual realms. \textit{Sekibo} also works as a buffer to monitor human and divine contact. Though the manifestation of the goddess is a divine entity, humans hold power over her still, epitomized by the power of female spectatorship in the outcome of the masquerade performance.

Camp has also created several single masquerade figures that have been exhibited internationally. \textit{Naked Big Fish} (Figure 22) is one such figure, and represents several dualisms, demonstrating the ever-present ambiguity associated with the masquerade. His headdress is composed of a large yellow fish with the body of a shark, a long mouth with teeth, and fins that resemble wings of a plane. Camp describes the figure as a creature combining a crocodile, a shark, and a dolphin into one body.\textsuperscript{7} The figure has a tail which the artist has tied to his waist, resembling an erection on the back of his body. Camp has also affixed a rounded shape to his belly, emulating a seven-month pregnant stomach. The masquerade is sexually ambiguous, enhancing the uncertainty, the unknown, and the otherworldly qualities related to the masquerade.

Another single masquerade figure is \textit{Bird Masquerade with Long Tail (Piko Piko Come and Hug Me)} (Figure 23). Here the figure is completely covered in openwork

\textsuperscript{6} Jul 2013 - \url{http://www.sokari.co.uk/projects/big-alagba-sekibo/}.
\textsuperscript{7} Jul 2013 - \url{http://www.sokari.co.uk/projects/naked-big-fish/}.
weaved colored metal resembling a large patterned cloak obscuring the face, head, and extremities. Wide sleeves and a long skirt conceal arms and legs in a blue, lace-like material. A large, straight, box-shaped addition is tethered to the figure’s backside, complicating it’s human form. The sculpture wears a small headdress composed of red painted metal that comes to a pointed shape at the top of the head, adorned with a tassel. In each hand holds red palm stem brooms used in the dance performance. The only human feature visible are bare feet, ornamented with bulky bangles. The uncertainty of the figure’s form add to the ambiguous, spiritual qualities of the tradition, as well as emphasize the division between viewer and subject.

*Otobo Hippo Masquerade* (Figure 24) is full of liveliness. The costume incorporates several different textures and materials that create an organic, fluid movement even in the figure’s stillness. A cloak ripples in the air from the dancer’s body, as the feet take the next step into a progressive dance move. The sculpture holds reeds and has palm stems affixed to the headdress, typical of a traditional water spirit mask. The mask worn contains large eyes and mouth, confronting and intimidating the viewer. The figure also holds a sword, creating an even more threatening persona. *Otobo* is one of the more aggressive masquerades, and the spirit’s unpredictability is more heightened, as at any moment he could turn violent.

*Flying Fish with Bubbles* (Figure 25) presents another type of masquerade, subtler than the aggressive counterparts. The figure wears layers of cloths containing different patterns, including the stripes of the under skirt, and the spots on the outer garments. Sleeves are fitted to the figure’s arms, but they extend past the length of normal human arms, obscuring the hands. A solid mask rests on the sculpture’s chest
and shoulders, similar to that of medieval armor. The sides of the headdress are adorned with multicolored feather dusters, while a pink bird figure sits atop the head. Identity is suppressed and the human form is altered to create an otherworldly form, divine in nature.

Each masquerade figure faces the viewer with strong, confrontational intensity, eliciting emotional responses similar to those of Kalabari audience members experiencing an actual masquerade performance (Figure 26). On a deeper level, however, the figure is subjected to the judging eyes of the viewer, exposed to their scrutiny. The figure that is at first glance considered strong and challenging is vulnerable to the powerful spectators, those viewing the sculpture. Fluid but immobile, the masquerader must stand eternally bound to his audience and their accompanying gazes.

Michelle Wallace describes the stereotypical attributes of power and weakness as resulting from the gaze dynamic, and the reality of this complication. She describes how having a voice and visibility have been thought to lead to power whereas silence and invisibility have lead to disempowerment.\(^8\) In reality, however, this typecast could not be further from the truth here. Though the voice and being visible are superficially associated with power, silence and invisibility are equally cunning methods of achieving power. The masquerade tradition and Camp’s sculptures present both of these dynamics. Physically, the masquerader is large, adorned with flamboyant ornaments and enormous headdresses, and his movement is spacious and unanticipated. He is loud and clearly visible, and possesses the general qualities of power. The audience is

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invisible and unidentified, as well as numerous, obstinate, and social. It is their internal judgments and inquiring gaze which gives them power over the subjected masquerader, in whom they approve or disapprove. An example of a rejected masquerader is imparted by Camp’s work *Alagba in Limbo*.

*Alagba in Limbo* (Figures 27 and 28) illustrates how Sokari integrates her own personal interpretations and artistic view in her sculptures reflecting Kalabari culture. A group of life-size figures of male members of the Sekiapu hold up an Alagba masquerader in an undignified manner. His clothes are strewn about, revealing his nakedness beneath his costume. If a player fails to successfully perform the complicated choreography of the masquerade, he may be humiliated by public undressing executed by the angry spectators. Here, the Alagba performer is ungraciously lifted up, revealing sexual organs, and the man playing the female character. His identity has been compromised, and thus the performer has lost his chance of becoming a god.9 The men holding him are notably discomforted, as they turn their faces away from the masker and begin to either weep or cry. Their emotional responses position them in a state of limbo, uneasiness and distress prevail in the composition. Sokari describes the work as a reflection on the political and social state in contemporary Kalabari culture, where in the 1990s Nigerians in the Delta were executed without trial. The overarching message is the dishonored masquerade, interpreted as the abandonment of the gods, revealing only mere men pretending to be gods.10

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In the sculptural composition, the viewer can observe the negative outcomes of an unsuccessful masquerade, and the power of the spectator. The specific performer displeased the audience to such a degree that he was exposed and humiliated. His weakness and vulnerability are discourteously displayed before the viewer, who continues to scrutinize his failure. The extent of power stemming from feminine spectatorship is made apparent in the shamed figure, and the emotional responses of fear and intimidation find a new source.

In addition to examining the male performer from a feminine, outsider’s perspective, Camp has also explored the masquerade internally, evident in her own self-portrait. *Londoneer* (Figure 29) presents a Kalabari woman dressed in a traditional wrapper ensemble complete with head covering. The material is patterned with stars and moons, and is dense despite its openwork frame. She has thick hair surrounding an invisible head, supplementing her stoic ambiguity. The figure has been affected by European culture, indicated by the shopping bag and purse she carries in her arms. Living in London but maintaining a strong Kalabari background, the artist illustrates her own multi-cultural self-identification in the sculpture.¹¹

Forbidden from participating in her native culture’s traditional performances because she is a woman, she had been relegated to the sidelines, forever the observer and never the performer.¹² Here, she positions herself as the object of spectacle rather than spectator. This is her closest attempt in exploring from an internal perspective the masquerade. As an artist, she puts on a mask and depicts her own masquerade as an

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individual holding a double consciousness of two distinct cultures. Both outsider and insider, *Londoneer* opens up the artist’s personal identity to a spectating public.

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CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

The Kalabari masquerade festival is a fascinating cultural indicator of widespread religious beliefs and social gender attributes. Considered a man's medium, the masquerade performances are gender exclusive, eliminating women from the production. Male dancers dress in elaborate trans-gender ensembles, aspiring to be transformed into the divine. Powerful in appearance, the male performer elicits fear and excitement from his audience. At the core of Kalabari religion, spirits and gods are powerful forces living in another dimension with the ability to interfere in the human world. However austere they may seem, these spirits are manipulated by their human connections to serve personal purposes. Paralleling this interplay is the masquerade tradition itself.

The masquerade seems to be a male dominated tradition, prominent and celebrated within the culture. What one does not consider often, however, is the powerful role women play in this custom. Relegated to outsider, unable to participate in the performances, women make up the audience of spectators that closely examine the male performers. Women judge the dancers, imbuing them with praise, fame, and power, or stripping them of honor if the performer displeases them. Though separated from the actual performances, women make up the most important part of the masquerade.

Complicated gender roles and expectations are evident in the masquerade tradition, and parallel the same issues that occur in multi-cultural identification. Women are inside the Kalabari culture, identified as members and raised believing
specific religious doctrines, but they are simultaneously outside some of the roles that have been reserved for men. In the same way, diasporic identity creates a multiple cultural perspectives. Sokari Douglas Camp maintains such an identity, as one bonded to both her Nigerian culture and her Western affiliations. She holds a dual consciousness of cultures, giving her the ability to examine her Nigerian culture from both an insider and an outsider’s perspective.

Camp imbues her monumental steel sculptures with hybrid qualities reflecting her own dual nature. Being a woman limited her exploration into predominately masculine disciplines, such as welding and masquerade, within her home in Buguma, Nigeria. However, relocating to London cultivated the development of her Western identity, and granted her the freedom to take on these traditionally male roles, and the boldness to protest political unrest. Considering herself both Kalabari and Westerner, but coincidently feeling outside of both, Sokari is able to explore an outsider’s view of both cultural components, combining both emic and etic perspectives into a hybrid mode of reflection and perusal.

At the center of both gender dynamics in Kalabari masquerade and multi-cultural identification is the feminine gaze. Female spectators determine the fate of the male masquerade performers. In addition, the female diasporic gaze is able to probe the masquerade tradition from both an insider’s perspective as one inherently connected to the culture, and an outsider’s perspective as one influenced by Western culture. This paper has provided a close examination of Kalabari beliefs and socially accepted gender identities by explicating religious practices and the ongoing practice of gender life cycles. Focusing on one particular African Diasporan artist, Sokari Douglas
Camp, I was able to explore further the importance of feminine spectatorship in the masquerade tradition from multiple perspectives. Camp is able to study her own native culture from both viewpoints, and executes her findings in the form of monumental steel sculptures. Her works open up new views of an old culture steeped in tradition.
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Figure 2: Map of the Niger Delta, <http://ndwgnews.blogspot.com/p/national.html>.
Figure 3: Group of mourners elaborately dressed to reflect the socioeconomic status of the deceased and his/her wari, and to send the loved one to the next world in style. Nov 2012 <http://www.onlinenigeria.com/festivals/>.

Figure 4: Dancers at the funeral ceremonies. They celebrate because death was viewed as a joining with the ancestors, so the deceased must have a good send off to be welcomed into the afterlife, and also so that as an appeased ancestor, he will look after his family. Nov 2012 <http://www.onlinenigeria.com/festivals/>.
Figure 5: Church Ede, Sokari Douglas Camp, 1984. An ede tributed to the death of her father. Aside from materials used, Church Ede represents what a real Kalabari ede would resemble. March 2014 <http://archive.newmuseum.org/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/4175>.

Figure 6: <http://africa.si.edu/exhibits/resonance/57.html>. Duein Fubara, Late 19th-early 20th century, Kalabari, attributed to the Pokia family atelier of Ifoko, wood, wicker, pigment, iron, museum purchase George S. Frierson, Jr. 22
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Figure 18: <http://www.naijablog.co.uk/2009/04/rip-peggy-harper.html>. Peggy Harper, 1969, Toluoruwa, Delta State. Her greatest known protegy was Peter Badejo.

Figure 19: Church Ede, 1984 steel, cloth, marine varnish, automotive paint, motors, New Museum, New York Nov 2012 <http://africa.si.edu/exhibits/insightspopup96-35-1.html>.
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Figure 22: Naked Big Fish, 1998, Steel, 220cm high, Pavilion Galleries, Brighton. Jan 2014 <http://www.sokari.co.uk/projects/naked-big-fish/>.

Figure 24: Otobo (Hippo) Masquerade, 1995, The British Museum, London. Nov 2012 <http://people.tribe.net/3770a460-e1de-4b95-9208-6faba122bb6c/photos/f9ed6b5d-e4d4-4e4a-8e71-067e0b6a9773>.

Figure 26: Actual Alagba masquerade, elders leading Alagba into city center. The fabric with blood indicates a sacrifice has been made to appease the god for which they are performing this masquerade. Nov 2012 <http://www.modernghana.com/ghanahome/photos/event_album.asp?parent_id=18227&action=view>.

Figure 27: Alagba in Limbo, 1996, wood, steel, feathers, mirrors, 218 x 187 x 187cm, Afrika Museum Collection, the Netherlands. <http://galerie-herrmann.com/arts/douglas/Alagba_Limbo.htm>.
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VITA

Logan Alexandra Griffith is a candidate for the Master of Arts, Art History, with a focus on contemporary performance art. Her qualifying paper is titled Kalabari Masquerade and the Gaze: Identity and Spectatorship in the Sculptures of Sokari Douglass Camp. She received her Bachelor of Arts-Art History from Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK in 2010.

She was the graduate gallery assistant to the UMKC Gallery of Art for two and a half years while fulfilling masters’ work. In addition, she interned at the Nelson Atkins Museum of Art’s photography department and worked as a volunteer at the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art. She is currently considering procuring her doctorate, in which she plans to further her expertise on contemporary African and African Diasporan art.

933B SE 3rd Street, Lee’s Summit, MO 64063
405.880.0895
logan_chermack77@yahoo.com