

Kalabari: A Study in Synthetic Ideal-type*

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INTRODUCTION

From men to gods, from aesthetics to art, from textile design to ancestral screens, from the living to the dead, Kalabari idea of perfection is the collage, the composite, the blend. In Kalabari culture, the provocative, the excitable, the lovable, the acceptable or the ideal does not stand apart at the hill top nor dwells in the valley, but adheres at the conjunction of the extremes. This concept of the ideal type principally derives from predilection to borrowing, transformation and reinterpretation of 'foreign elements.' This paper is not concerned with Kalabari ability to borrow and adapt, but to show where in their evaluation system they locate the beautiful, the dangerous, the powerful, and the exceptional. My investigations have shown that the position in the evaluation spectrum that indicate excellence, danger or power are often points that are embodiments of differing categories¹. The admixture category, not the pure, is what is held up to be the high point.

This paper differs from the "cultural authentication" work done by Erekosima and Eicher (1981, 1995). These scholars asked and answered the question, "How do Kalabari integrate foreign artifacts into their culture or make them distinctively Kalabari?" They outlined the process from selection to eventual 'authentication' of the foreign (meaning from outside or from an earlier generation) artifacts. Here we are concerned with a different theme. Ours is dealing with what kind of artifact, ideology or ideas often show up as the ideal-type. The ideal-type in Kalabari is often a composite of many types. It is instructive to mention that the variegated nature of the Kalabari ideal-types is closely connected to the 'cultural

¹ I am a Kalabari scholar who grew up in Abonnema, one of the three major communities of Kalabari. I visit Kalabari homeland regularly. I participate in their activities and attend their ceremonies, not as an outsider and temporary observer, but as an insider. Like Witherspoon (1977: 6-7), I would say I "never took field notes, never recorded a song or a prayer, never photographed a ceremony ... and never had an interview with an 'informant.' What I know about Kalabari culture comes from my heart and my head, not from my file cabinet or my field journal." Writing about Kalabari "has taught me that anything you cannot remember without writing down is something you do not know or understand well enough to use effectively." This fact of my being an interested and concerned native has enabled me to see Kalabari culture differently and perhaps more deeply than scholars who came in from outside. In fact I tend to focus on areas of the culture that it is difficult for a foreigner or unconcerned native to grasp. My research tends to focus on the role and nature of ideas, abstract/subterranean concepts, world view and strategic management practice in the Kalabari life and culture.

authentication' practice studied by Erekosima and Eicher. Cultural authentication is the mechanism by which the composite ideal type is constituted or created.

In what follows we provide an ethnographic context for understanding the culture we are analyzing. We then illustrate what we have called 'synthetic ideal' with examples from many facets of the culture, so that the reader can sufficiently understand the wide spread nature of the phenomenon the paper is dealing with. Finally, we attempt to provide an explanation for the cultural preference for 'synthetic ideal' by asking and answering the question: "Why do the Kalabari show a bias for the composite or prefer to create their identity by drawing elements from many sources?"²

1. SETTING

Kalabari, an Eastern Ijo group in Rivers State, Nigeria, are spread over several islands in the delta of the Niger River. They number about one million. For over four centuries, starting from the fifteenth century to early twentieth century, they were one of the most important merchant groups in the transatlantic trade on the western African coast, participating in the exchange of slaves or produce of the African forest for European manufactured goods. Critical to their involvement in the internal and overseas trades was the canoe house system. The canoe house (*wari*) was the most characteristic political and social institution of the Eastern Niger Delta states in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It was not a lineage or descent group; rather it was, as Gwilym I. Jones (1963: 55) puts it, "a compact and well organized trading and fighting corporation, capable of manning and maintaining a war canoe." Similarly, in 1913 the canoe house was defined by the British protectorate administration as "a number of persons grouped together for the purposes of trade and subject by native law and custom to the control, authority, and rule of a chief known as the head of the house"(Alagoa 1964: 15).

The canoe house was made up of a man and his household, extended family members, trading assistants, slaves and servants. Because of the need to maintain adequate labor supply for their burgeoning trade and because of the definition of wealth as the number of persons in a canoe house, leaders of the houses absorbed a great number of non-Kalabari into their houses. Every member who was not born Kalabari was carefully assimilated. On arrival each new member's head was shaved, given a new Kalabari name and a ritual bath in salt-water river to cleanse the person and signify the absorption into the new family. The adoptee was also given a ritual meal and handed over to a woman in the house to serve as his mother. From this moment the new member had all the rights and privileges as all other naturally-born members of the house. If he was enterprising and loyal to the new home he could rise to the leadership of the house at the death of the patriarch.

² Perhaps, it is germane to state that the focus of this paper is primarily ethnographic and does not make an attempt to address current theoretical issues of ethnicity and culture.

Indeed, the basis of membership in Kalabari society was not confined to common descent and kinship but took into account residence and general acceptance of the political and cultural leadership of the *house*. The society was also very competitive and fluid. Robin Horton, an English social anthropologist, has this to say in comparing Kalabari culture with that of the Tallensi of Ghana.

“Kalabari society, whether in its village or in its city-state variant, encourages aggressive individualism and personal achievement. If the emphasis in Taleland is on ‘fitting in,’ in Kalabari it is on ‘getting up’”(Horton 1983: 54).

2.1 RELIGION

Partly because of their trading contacts, Kalabari have for centuries used foreign artifacts as media to express their cultural beliefs and to reconstruct their identities in their creative adaptation to pressures they faced as a competitive, open, commercial society. Their name, Kalabari, is a shortened form of *Perebo-kalakeibari*, meaning, “let the well-endowed lend me a little.” They appear to have lived fully to the meaning of their name. Kalabari believe that spoken words have ‘certain measure of control over situations they refer to.’ Like spirits, people “stay and come in their names.” There is an intimate link between a name and its referent: the meaning and expectations that are in one *ipso facto* applies to the other (Horton 1965: 8-9). The primary focus of this paper is not about Kalabari borrowing and copying of cultural artifacts, nor on the foreign origin of their major artifacts, but to understand their preference for artifacts, concepts or ideas that are of a composite nature. We find in various aspects of Kalabari culture that power, danger, excellence or mediocrity is attributable to conjunctive elements, to the amalgam. Let us take the example of genius or the moron. In Kalabari, extreme intelligence or stupidity is attributed to the water-spirits (*owuamaba’pu*), one of the three categories of gods in the traditional culture. A closer examination reveals that water-spirits as a category is an amalgam of the features of the other categories of gods.

There are two main epistemological categories in Kalabari world view. There is *oju* (body) representing material objects. *Teme* (spirit) is the other, and is immaterial. *Teme* cannot be seen, touched or heard by an ordinary person. Spirits are defined as incapable of direct observation, but by reference to their effects. Spirits also differ from bodies in another crucial respect. They can be in two places at the same time – they are anywhere and everywhere. Bodies, on the other hand, are confined to a space-and time-quadrant at any one time. Finally, spirits are unobservable entities that underlie the visible and tangible everyday world. There are three categories of religious objects, which are defined with different combination of the attributes of spirits and bodies. There are ancestors (*duein*), village heroes (*oru*, the head of them all is *Owamekaso*) and water-spirits (*owu*). Ancestors and village heroes exist in spirit, but water-people have *both bodies and*

spirits and live at definite localities. Kalabari believe that ordinary folk can see, hear and smell water-people if the person meets them in the mangrove forest. These three forces have varying relations with the observable world. Particularly, the water-people are defined as the source of all creative and destructive forces in the human individual, they are “the forces underpinning all that lies beyond the confines of the established social order” (Horton 1993: 217).

National ideology of the Kalabari as reflected in their choice of national god and goddess also show this tendency to go for the collage or admixture. At first glance one may note that the Kalabari national ideology is that of peace as their goddess, *Owamekaso*, is billed as a spirit of peace and trade, opposed to war and bloodshed. But careful observation and with an eye for Kalabari insatiable appetite for the composite will reveal a subsidiary war god *Okpolodo* and the military institution of *peri* (Alagoa 1972: 144) lurking at the corner. *Owamekaso* is herself a product of human and spiritual elements. She and other goddess-sisters are a product of a man who inadvertently slept with a spirit being. A wife-murderer named Ambolo, escaping from justice left his village in a canoe and headed for the ocean. He came to “a little house built entirely of leaves” somewhere in the ocean. “There he met a woman and her daughter. The woman’s name was Orunyingi [Mother of the gods] and her daughter’s name was Awo. When they welcomed him and went into the ante room, the visitor sat himself on the stool on which Awo was sitting. The effect of this was that the young girl became pregnant” (Tasie 1977: 12). *Owamekaso* (Akaso for short) was one of the seven children that resulted from this one time ‘union’ of man and spirit.

Akaso is believed to have brought prosperity to Kalabari in the nineteenth century and she is credited with outlawing homicide within Kalabari territory. Herself showing love for the variegated, the composite, claimed for her exclusive use all plates and textiles with floral designs. Thus, in pre-twentieth century time any Kalabari person that came into possession of such plates and textiles surrendered it to her shrine because they were taboo for use by anyone other than herself (Talbot 1932: 77). Why did *Owamekaso* elevate such items to a restricted class, making them appear imbued with certain esoteric power?

Reptiles with *genigeni* (‘elaborately patterned and multicolored’) bodies, called *oru nama*, are regarded as sacred and powerful. They are python (*odum*), tortoise (*ikaki*), bullfrog (*ngu*), agama lizard (*ologboinboin*), skink (*osomonimoni*), gecko (*waribulo*) and monitor (*awakiba*). These animals with variegated bodies are considered associated with the *oru* and water spirits because they stand out as ‘surprising’ and ‘fearful’ by contrast to other animals. Relief patterns resembling the skins of *orunama* are often added to the surface of Kalabari sculptures to empower them. *Owamekaso*, in her own display of the penchant for the variegated pattern, adorned cloth bearing the images of the *orunama* to accomplish magical feats (Horton 1965: 31-32).

Over and above the *Owamekaso*, *oru*, water-people and ancestors, Kalabari conceive of a supreme being. It is conceived as composite force, a combination of creative/destructive force and destiny. Kalabari supreme being is a dual

configuration. It is both *tamuno* (the female creative modality) and *so* (the directive modality, the one who orders the created outcome, the neuter or male counterpart). Put differently, the *tamuno* part is concerned with creation, existence and destruction. *So* is concerned with destiny and behavior of people, groups and things.

The *so* represent the fixed point in men's dealing with the supreme being and the *tamuno* is the fluid point. Let me explain this. The individual is believed to have a two-part personality. The component parts of this personality act as separate persons. One is conscious, the other is unconscious. The unconscious part (the immaterial, the soul) before the birth of the person decides the destiny (*so*³ or *fiyeteboye*), the life course of the whole person on earth. Before a person is born the soul of the person goes before *tamuno* and speaks the entire course of the life of the individual it is going to inhabit. The other (the conscious, the physical being) only works out its fortunes on earth. The conscious part is aggressive, rivalrous, competitive and desires to excel. The unconscious, depending on what was spoken before *tamuno*, may be amiable, noncompetitive and destined for failure, or alternatively cantankerous, competitive and destined for success. If a person does not like the course of his life on earth he goes to a diviner to change his *so* or *fiyeteboye*. The process of changing destiny is called *bibibari* (altering or nullifying the spoken word, recanting). The person visits a diviner to let *tamuno* (the fluid concept, the part capable of effecting change) know that the person will like to change how he wants to live his life course on earth. Once the change of destiny is effected the new *so* (which becomes a new point of fixity) determines the whole future course of the person.

By examining Kalabari explanatory system we can also throw more light on the static and dynamic characterizations of the supreme being. For Kalabari, explanation is based on the use of the idea of unobservable underlying reality of gods to make sense of the contingencies of every day existence. The vast diversity of everyday experience is interpreted in terms of ancestors, founding heroes and water-spirits. These are the forces at work behind observed events. Failures, sickness, fortunes and misfortunes are causally linked to a wide range of social conditions via the gods. Kalabari use the interpretative scheme of the three basic forces to transcend the limited vision of cause and effect relationships provided by common sense. This use of the spiritual forces to transcend common sense observation comes with the belief or bias that the spiritualistic model can explain any event. No event is attributable to fortune. For instance, if a bird flew across a Kalabari man's canoe from the right to the left on his way to the market and he subsequently suffered a poor demand for his wares, he would attribute the poor sales to the bird's flight. He would say that a medicine man or an angry competitor sent the bird. He would not think of coincidence or the probability of an event

³ Note that *So* refers both to the second person of the duality and the destiny of human beings. Destiny is *so* because it is a 'program' put in place for the individual by the second person of the duality (*So*). The context of usage in this paper makes it clear which of the two senses is referred to at any point.

happening. In his conceptual scheme an event either happens or it does not. The probabilities of events are either zero or one. He does not ponder or accept the chances of any thing happening. Similarly, there is no concept of randomness, meaning an event is completely unpredictable or the event cannot be explained. He does not believe that there are events his spiritualistic theoretical model can not explain. Not to have an explanation for the Kalabari merchant means there is no causality.

However, this is not to say that Kalabari provide endless series of explanation for any event, and this is where we gain another insight into the characterization of *so* as the ‘fixed-quantity portion’ of the supreme being. Unlike the concept of randomness that recognizes the limit of explanation when there is no specific cause or when there is no observable pattern to an event, Kalabari reach the ‘limit of explanation’ when they can identify distinctive feature in the broad pattern of events. When a Kalabari person identifies a whole sequence of failures or successes he is likely to turn to the concept of destiny, *so* or *fieteboye* which had laid down his entire life course. If a canoe house loses its manager to early death the members will attribute it to a particular spirit. If another manager dies a diviner may still attribute it to the anger of the same spirit or to another. But if the members see a pattern of untimely deaths, or for that matter disasters, failures or successes, they will trace the sequence of misfortune or luck to house destiny, (*wari teme so*) which laid down the pattern for the house and also controls the evolution of the house’s history. They will conclude that the *wari teme so* did not provide for the longevity of life of house leaders and that neither diviners nor house members can change this fact. To change the fact is to change the destiny by a process called *bibibari*. The house members will consult a diviner to let *tamuno* know that the house will like to change how it will live its life course on earth. Once the change of destiny is effected the new *so* determines the whole future course of events for that house and becomes the new ultimate explanation for the house character and fortunes. So we see that the ultimate explanation is provided by the concept of *so*. When this is brought into an explanation it means no better explanation can be provided.

2.2. SCULPTURE AND THE CONCEPT OF BEAUTY

Kalabari create and use woodcarving for mainly spiritual purposes strictly as ritual instruments. There are three types of woodcarving. Carvings are either kept in dimly lit shrines where they are referred to as *oru fubara* (forehead of the spirit) or at family meeting-places (*ikpu*) where they are referred to as *duein fubara* (forehead of the dead or ancestral screens). Woodcarving are also created as headpieces of masquerades. All the three types of woodcarving or sculpture share one thing in common in the sense that they are seen as means of control, “point of contact for otherwise free-moving spiritual entities.” (Horton 1965: 8, Barley 1988: 21). Ancestral screens are the rarest today and politically most evocative. Ancestral

screens are “substitutes for the decayed body of the deceased, notably his forehead wherein the *teme* of the dead man resided. They are also a channel of communication by which the *teme* may pass to the living” (Barley 1988: 21). Ancestral screens are the most public of Kalabari sculptures. Generally, carvings are kept in dimly lit room, away from public gaze and contact, but the ancestral screens which are memorials to deceased house heads and deemed the ‘spiritual capitals’ of the political units (canoe houses) are often not preserved from public gaze and contact. *Duein fubara* serve a political function in the traditional Kalabari house. After the death of a house leader, the person who does the first offering to the screen establishes legitimacy to his leadership and puts off all rival claims. The third way ancestral screens differ from the other two is remarkable in our ongoing analysis. “Kalabari sculpture rarely shows figures arranged in meaningful groupings such as this [ancestral screen]. Normally, individual figures are carved and placed in shrines in ad hoc fashion. The frame of the screen, however, defines a self-contained space within which meaningful relationships are depicted” (Barley 1988: 23). *Duein fubara* is not one piece, but several pieces put together. Such frames tend to tell the story of the achievements and power of the deceased house head. The screens by their more careful and purposeful arrangement bring into relief their composite nature. *Duein fubara* are the only Kalabari sculpture that are not made from one piece, they are a *composite construction*. “The many pieces of wood that constitute them are jointed, nailed, tied with raffia, stapled and pegged” (Barley 1988: 23).

At every twist and turn of the culture the converging point is often the defining reality. There is a popular story about perfection of beauty in Kalabari folklore. Once upon a time a princess sent the word out that she was looking for a bridegroom. The only requirement was that the candidate be the most handsome man in the whole world. Every tribe, culture and clime sent their best to her father’s palace. None was good enough for her, either they were too short or tall, fat or thin or too this or that or not appropriately attired. The contest went on for years, until a half-man (*angapakiribo*) of the spirit realm heard about it. He decided to contest. He came to the land of the living and borrowed the best body parts and dresses he could get. As soon as the princess set eyes on him, she fell in love with him. After the wedding ceremonies, he took her to his stop-over abode in the physical world. Not long after he arrived, all his lenders came to claim their wares and he was left bare, incomplete. The princess became very sad and realized the folly of her search for the most perfect, attractive man in the world. Once again, we see that the idea of perfect beauty is linked with a creature that was a conglomerate, admixture of several borrowed parts.

2.3. ENCULTURATION

A feature of Kalabari ultimate test of enculturation is the participants' capability to handle two opposing character traits. This test involves a masked dancer successfully pointing to over 30 sites of shrine as he is being directed via a drum language, which is an extraction from the tone patterns of the Kalabari language. This 'formidable feat of memory and concentration' is subsumed within 'an overarching ethic of effortless stylistic elegance.' (Horton 1965, Barley 1988: 15). Success brings fame and recognition as a "complete Kalabari man." While failure not only brings shame and dishonor to the dancer and his family, but also possibly suicide. Participants in the pointing ordeal are being tested for a particular ideal the Kalabari community holds very dear – *the Kalabari aristocratic ideal*. A man imbued with the Kalabari aristocratic ideal is to bring off his most important achievement with extreme nonchalance.

Robin Horton (1965: 179-180) captured and analyzed this ideal when he wrote: For Kalabari, the aristocratic ideal has three main components. First of these is what they call *asa*. This is a word almost impossible to translate by a single English equivalent. Perhaps one can come to something near it with a cluster of words– i.e., 'stylishness', 'flamboyance', 'youthfulness', 'good living', 'dash.' Now Kalabari have an almost ruthless respect for wealth and power. But it is, at the same time, a highly conditional respect. Above all, the qualities expressed by the word *asa* should never be jettisoned in the pursuit of these goals.... Whatever he does a man should always live with style and grace.

A second component of the ideal is the quality referred to in the Kalabari proverb *agbo karo tre sugbe kara [omu kuro tereme suba kara]* – "war comes before knife [spear] is whetted." This proverb is sometimes used to rebuke people for unpreparedness. But I have several times heard people use it complacently, if not approvingly, of their national character. What is implied in these contexts is an admiration for nonchalant achievement, for the man who brings off his successes without any appearance of concern....

A third component of the ideal is the quality referred to as *bu nimi* – "knowing oneself." This implies self-control, balance, restraint, decorum and dignity.'

Kalabari hold the view that a person must in all circumstances show balance and self control, nonchalantly breezing and bluffing his or her way through very serious test of his or her social standing, yet passing it faultlessly all the same (Horton 1965: 181). This character trait is taught and emphasized in a million subtle and not-so-subtle ways. The *Igbo* masquerade, which is an embodiment of all the three components of the national character, is a popular and beloved masquerade in Kalabari. Once again the ideal Kalabari man is a person who can simultaneously hold fire and water in his bosom, so to speak.

2.4 TEXTILES

Among Kalabari textile the ‘cut thread’ or ‘pulled thread’ clothes (*peletebite* and *fimatebite*) is seen as the most valued and prized creative adaptation of foreign artifacts. Kalabari would take imported Madras cotton cloth from India, lift and cut some of the threads or lift certain weft threads with needle and pull them out to create patterns and designs drawn from their environment. These redesigned clothes are said to be unique to the Kalabari. *Peletebite and fimatebite*, which are distinctly Kalabari, represent the best example of the people’s ability to “ingest and transform the alien by a process of reinterpretation (Barley 1988: 6).” Eicher and Erekosima (1981) have described the process of acquisition of artifacts and making them a part of the Kalabari culture as “cultural authentication.” The redesign of an imported woven gingham and Madras cotton into a prestige Kalabari cloth is said to “represent preeminently for all Kalabari the women’s creative imposition of a refined aesthetic symbolism – as link to the sublime experience – upon one material prize from the men’s commercial exploit. The cloth serves to communicate the harmony of the Kalabari world view by linking cultural ethos, women, men and artifacts” (Eicher and Erekosima 1981: 51). Once again, the object that stands out as the confluence of different cultural ideas or values is held up as the best, the most culturally authentic. Nigel Barley, a British anthropologist, aptly captured this penchant when he wrote “the Kalabari have developed their own identity and determinedly created for themselves an ethnicity from elements drawn from many sources. Part of the genius of Kalabari culture consists of its ability to ingest and transform the alien by a process of reinterpretation” (Barley 1988: 6).

3. SEARCH FOR EXPLANATION OF KALABARI IDEAL-TYPE

Why do the Kalabari show a bias for the composite or prefer to create their identity by drawing elements from many sources? There are two differing levels to the answers. First, what perspective can we bring in order to understand what is it that they are doing in the context of their overall culture? Second why do they do what they do? We can easily posit that Kalabari’s ability to “ingest and transform the alien by a process of reinterpretation” derives from their long history of trading with both European and African societies. In this sense the ideas about composite, the authentication process, the drive towards the middle have as their main function to impose system on an inherently chaotic experience. As a society which served as an intermediary between European and African cultures and absorbed an incredible number of foreigners into itself, it faced enormous pressure both on the boundaries and margin of its body politic and from within. Kalabari therefore imposed order by continually modifying, enriching and bringing into the core through a process of selection only those pressures which promoted stability or harmony with its world view. In this way the pressures were harnessed and changes were controlled to the

effect that there was no revolutionary displacement of core values and artifacts by foreign elements. This line of argument suggests that the drive and preference for the composite served as the organizing principle of dealing with pressures for change and adaptation.

The trading-influence perspective does not take us very far in understanding the Kalabari historical appetite for the composite. Kalabari, threatened at its boundaries, pressed at every ingress and exit of the body politic, may well have responded by guarding itself against 'pollution danger'. After all, Bonny in the Eastern Niger Delta in a similar situation responded by 'sealing' off exits and entrances into its body politic. Bonny which was also a trading nation felt similar pressures at the boundaries of its ethnicity and responded with a decree against foreigners speaking its (Ibani) language. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, at the height of Bonny's participation in the transatlantic trade there were a great number of Igbo who were in Bonny either as traders, servants, or slaves in transition. Bonny felt threatened by Igbo population and decreed that all foreigners should not speak Ibani and that Igbo tongue should become the commercial language. The reasoning was that Bonny citizens could then use Ibani as secret language to keep vital information away from foreigners (Igbo) and competing merchants. The result was that by the beginning of the twentieth century Bonny had almost lost its native tongue.

Kalabari took a different route. Its leaders decreed that every person within its territory must speak Kalabari and forsake his or her language, and took drastic measures to enforce this rule. A resident of any Kalabari town who could not speak the Kalabari tongue with the proper accent was executed by *koroni-ogbo*, an agency charged with enforcing this rule. As we can see Kalabari was interested in absorbing all foreigners. Bonny tried to keep them out. So I may suggest that ready acceptance of foreign artifacts by Kalabari may well indicate that they were not hard pressed to preserve the political and cultural unity of their society. So it is not trade *per se* that explains the love for the composite, but the type of response to the pressures exerted by trade on the society. The trade explanation is also inadequate in another sense. It looks only at the pressures from outside and does not fully consider how Kalabari thought and communication systems facilitated or inhibited the adoption of foreign artifacts. It also does not consider how the explanatory and communication system influenced the transfer of artifacts at the periphery of the society into the core of the culture by mixing with what has been brought forward from the past.

Our understanding of Kalabari predilection for the composite will be enhanced if we understand the basic nature of its communication system. In Kalabari there are two sets of explanatory categories: the causative (logical, consecutive, sequential, and cause and effect) and attributive (non-causal correlation, drawing of parallel phenomena together, symbolism and metaphorical association) which constitute the knowledge frame of the culture. In Kalabari, the dominant of the two is not the logical component, but the analogical component where parallels, metaphors and symbolism are the real means of communication. The West uses mainly the logical

and when anything does not fit within the logical, because it has a dichotomous frame of reference, it calls the misfit illogical. It is rational or irrational, logical or illogical. This is coming philosophically all the way back from Aristotle, Plato and Socrates and the concept of the “excluded middle.” What Kalabari will do when something does not fit into the framework of the logical or causal is that they will transfer it not to an irrational-only option but to a non-logical option. The non-logical that they apply is the analogical. The analogical *ipso facto* is often a metaphorical system, a system of parallels.⁴

The second quality of the Kalabari communication and explanatory systems is that it operates in frames of desirable or undesirable. It is not a valuational frame of reference, it is not an abstract, objective, concrete phenomena level. It is a level of favorable/unfavorable, desirable/undesirable. It is in the area of affect. Logic does not deal with affect, but deals with sequence, what caused what, which came before the other. When a Kalabari person meets a phenomenon and he is able to control it because of the causality he does not have to eject to the next system. But when he meets an abnormal event, that which is not seating within the causative, logical frame of reference, it becomes necessary to deal with it within the intelligence framework of oddity. The question now is not so much what caused it - because it is not what he is dealing with. He is dealing with “Am I ready to accept it or not, what is its impact on me,” the whole dimension of affect. What the Kalabari system uses to communicate its own affects is basically symbolic, metaphorical usage.

The symbolic is distinctive from sign usage, which is writing. Writing is sign usage and whatever that represents is a fixed quantity. While in the symbolic usage whatever symbol represents includes both the fixed quantity and the connotations. So when two people look at ‘A’ they both agree that it is a symbol at some core level of what it is, and then diverge in their added interpretation to what it is addressing. That is why symbolic usage is not adequate, not enough to transfer information from one year to another because it carries connotation. But it is also the vehicle of creative adaptation, allowing those who come into the system as it proceeds to bring in their own immediacy of response according to the time and place that they are observing that which is being carried from before. So at the time that they are meeting it, they are bringing the core of what has been agreed upon from the past, and also their modulations of that reality as per their own time and space. Writing changed this by specifying exactly what is the component and keeping it permanently locked in there to be nothing more. ‘A’ to the exclusion of ‘B’, there is nothing else it is going to be except ‘A,’ if it is written. So in the logical frame supported by writing, a culture accumulates exact unchangeable items and it remains relatively the same always, everywhere all the time.

We have the composite, collage character of Kalabari artifacts because innovations must be processed in the symbolism of the communication and explanatory systems. When a Kalabari person receives an artifact or idea from the

⁴ Much of the analysis in the preceding paragraph has derived from discussions with Dr. Tonye Victor Erekosima, a Kalabari scholar specializing in cultural studies.

outside or from an earlier generation he reworks it to take account of the immediacy of its relevance to his current environment or needs. So for any artifact there is the core which represents the accepted idea or the base and then there are the rings around the core which represent the present and previous reworking and accretion on the core over the ages. Basically, you have the core, a center in which there is an agreement and a periphery in which there need not be agreement. This transformation of artifacts – at the differing levels and times of adaptation to make them part of the contemporary receiving culture is not consciously organized by any formal institution. For most of the people the changes and the adaptations are imperceptible at any moment, as they do not occur in leaps and bounds. The changes are incremental for any contemporary generation, and the incorporation and adaptation process “derives from the traditional cultural values as a whole, not idiosyncratic fancy or the prestige of foreign example” (Eicher and Erekosima 1981: 51)

For the fact that the changes are apparently incremental and are harmonized with the ethos and values of the culture, when Kalabari people are asked why do you prefer cultural objects that are predominantly of a composite nature, they give an answer that puzzles the uninformed observer. The stock answer is “that is the way our forefathers had it”, suggesting that the preference and artifacts are all ancient. But as our analysis has shown above they are not doing what their forefathers did. We have here a culture that is always in the frame of core-periphery. The core is what their fathers did in response to the challenge their fathers faced, and produced positive outcomes, for which reasons it is being retained. Only that which has proved valuable to the environment is retained and carried forward. If such item came in 1918 and they are in 1999 dealing with the same environment they will of course transfer what was valuable in that environment in 1918 to 1999 situation, to see if it continues to be valid. However, the ingenuity of the Kalabari order is that along side the transfer is the periphery of the individuals identifying and making a decision; how much of this 1918 element is pertinent to my solution. This is the way Kalabari have survived every variety of environments with flexibility. They will bring only those things which have proven valuable. They bring all of that to the present situation. When they check out their heritage solutions vis-à-vis their present situation, they start discarding those that are not pertinent and start looking for what in their own intelligence is applicable to the current situation. At any given moment they are telling you what the fathers did, and all that is to provide legitimacy for the current decision. It does not in any way interfere with them applying their own intelligence for addressing the moment.

In sum, what the Kalabari predilection for the composite shows is their continuous incorporation of items from the periphery into the core of their symbolic system. They are continually oiling their vehicle of creative adaptation, allowing those who came into the system as it proceeds to bring in their own immediacy of response into the cultural heritage.

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