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THE TRANSFORMATION OF MEN INTO MASQUERADES AND INDIAN MADRAS INTO MASQUERADE CLOTH IN BUGUMA, NIGERIA

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INTRODUCTION

The Kalabari Ijo people of the Niger Delta area of southeastern Nigeria use a group of dark indigo-blue cloths with white patterning to cover the faces of masquerade performers. Subsumed under the name of alubite (masquerade cloth) are at least three distinct types: 1) ukara cloth, an indigo-resist of imported muslin, stitched and dyed by Igbo craftsmen, 2) alubite cloth, a gauze-weave, also an indigo-resist, but of unknown provenance, and 3) pelete bite, an Indian madras from which threads are cut and pulled by Kalabari women to form a new pattern.

The first two types of cloth apparently come from non-Kalabari sources. The third, pelete bite, transforms dark blue and white imported madras, using local technology, into a patterned masquerade cloth for which there is a cultural demand. We focus on this transformation, examining particular types of Indian madras considered appropriate for this adaptation and the ways that these cloths are altered (i.e., cut and pulled), their relationship in color and design to ukara and to the other alubite cloths, and the significance of the triangular motif, alu, for depicting water spirits in masquerade performances.

KALABARI IJO SETTLEMENTS AND TEXTILE TRADE IN THE NIGER DELTA

The Kalabari Ijo people reside in over thirty towns and villages nestled on bits of land in the riverain estuaries of the southern Niger River delta. Living in an environment that forms a transition between land and sea, many relied in the past on fishing as the primary source of livelihood, while others, acting as middlemen for trade--formerly in slaves and later, in palm oil--between inland Igbo-speaking peoples upstream and Europeans on the coast, amassed tremendous wealth.

Their environment amid myriad streams and mangrove swamps also supported an elaborate religious system which in the past included the honoring of various water deities and ancestor spirits, on whose good-will the well-being of the Kalabari people was believed to depend. While most Kalabari men and women presently subscribe to some form of Christianity, masquerade performances that depict the water spirits and sacrifices to the ancestors continue as an important part of Kalabari cultural life. One reason why these practices are so important has to do with the particular history and organization of Kalabari society.

In part because of their status of trading middlemen and the nature of trade during the 17th-19th centuries (Dike 1956), large families, centered on trade, emerged as the principal form of social organization in Kalabari towns and villages (Horton 1975). These family houses were in tremendous competition for not only for trade, but for local prestige and political authority. Membership in a house was in effect "open" to men with extraordinary intelligence and abilities, including former slaves. Membership depended as much on cultural knowledge as on blood ties which included knowing the spoken and the drum language and on exemplary masquerade performance and costuming (Horton 1960). Rather than emphasizing descent from a common apical ancestor to convey a sense of unity, the Kalabari have tended to emphasize their common cultural background, e.g., through their performance of their own special masquerades which distinguish them from their neighbors to the north, the Igbo, and from smaller ethnic groups in the delta area--e.g., the Ibani and the Nembe--who do not practice the same cultural traditions.

Thus masquerade performance and transformation of cloth are vital to Kalabari identity. This identity is reinforced by cloth use although the Kalabari do not weave or dye cloth themselves. Rather because of their position as prosperous traders, the Kalabari obtained textiles from many foreign sources (Adams [1823] 1966). Nonetheless, these imported cloths are transformed and used in various ways to make them distinctly Kalabari.

The process whereby textiles and other forms of material culture obtained outside of the Kalabari area are transformed into uniquely Kalabari objects has been called "cultural authentication" by Erekosima and Eicher (1981). In the case of the blue and white masquerade cloths discussed here, textiles obtained through trade have been transformed either through spiritual associations or in physical form to produce cloths appropriate for making men into water spirit (owu) masquerades, the most common form of masquerade display in the Kalabari Ijo region (Horton 1960).

Ekineba, the Ekine Society, and Kalabari Masquerades

According to legend, masquerades were introduced to the Kalabari people by a female deity, Ekineba, who taught men the dance steps and songs of particular water spirits (Horton 1975). Individuals belonging to the men's Ekine Society (Horton 1963), founded in her name, are responsible for organizing an extensive cycle of water spirit masquerade performances which takes place over several years. In the past, Ekine Society members' responsibilities included jural and religious functions, although these have been somewhat attenuated in modern Kalabari life where state government officials and Christian belief prevails. Nonetheless, Ekine Society members enjoy considerable local authority, a role which is reinforced through their control of masquerade performance which depicts various water spirits, an important part of Kalabari social life.

Water spirits are associated with the python (Horton 1960), the highest ranking water spirit deity according to traditional Kalabari religion. It is the

triangular depiction of the scales of the python's skin in the alubite cloth that reminds viewers of this water spirit's presence.¹ This association also relates to the myth of the goddess Ekineba's final departure for the water spirit world:

Then she sat down and wrapped alu cloth about her face. By this time it was evening. A storm started to come up: the Water People were on their way. She told the townspeople to bring out their drums and play their drums and play them. Then they began to sing:

Wife of the chief priest of Ojoma
She has tied a strange cloth.
One who has no alu will not dance in Ekine
(Horton 1975:35).

Thus the Igbo stitch-resist indigo-dyed ukara cloth used by Kalabari Ekine Society members, covered with geometric shapes which have their own meanings in Igbo society (Cole and Aniakor 1984), has its own distinctive associations in Kalabari society. The triangles, alu, depicted on ukara cloth refer to Ekineba, the python's skin, and other water deities, whom Ekine Society members represent in masquerade performances. Dark blue and white geometrically patterned (alubite) cloths, then, are an integral part of their costumes.

The importance of masquerades and of geometrically patterned blue and white cloth in identifying water spirit representations is also reflected in ancestral shrine sculpture (duein fubara) where ancestors are dressed as masqueraders replete with bits of alubite cloth on their foreheads (Barley 1988). While Kalabari communities may have general masquerades owned by "everyone" (meaning the community-at-large), individual houses vie as well to introduce new masquerades whose costumes, songs, and dances are "owned" by them, thus adding to the reputation of the house. Horton (1960:32) suggests that the depiction of particular ancestors as water spirit masquerades on a house's ancestral shrine screen refers to an ancestor's introduction or superlative performance of these masquerades.

The expression of cultural knowledge through masquerade performance works to consolidate a group--in this case, a house--through its distinctive association of a merged ancestral and water spirit identity. The importance of a shared but distinctive cultural knowledge and identity--both

¹Cf. Drewal's (1986) description of Ijebu (Yoruba) masquerades that have been influenced by Ijo masquerade styles. One such Ijebu masquerade type, igodo, incorporates depiction of pythons and crocodiles into their headdresses. Drewal (1986:37) writes:

The surface, brightly colored triangular patterning in red, silver, and green, creates shimmering variegated textures that are meant to convey the distinctive quality of reptilian skin.

While the color scheme differs from the blue and white patterns depicted on Kalabari alubite cloth, the triangular motif prevails.

for the entire community and for individual houses is associated with particular stories and representations of water spirits. All types of alubite masquerade cloth, including the production of dark blue and white pelete bite cloths appear integral to the costuming of each masquerade dancer.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF MADRAS TEXTILES TO MASQUERADE CLOTHS

Before madras cloths are cut into the various patterns characteristic of pelete bite cloth, the appropriately colored and striped or checked madras must be obtained. In a photographic study of 213 pelete bite conducted in 1985, Renne found that particular pattern motifs tended to be associated with certain types of madras cloth (1985b). Some of these associations may be explained by the warp and weft striping of the madras; checked cloths lend themselves to geometric designs such as alternating blocks, diamonds, or triangles (*alu*), while warp striped madras may be cut with less rigidly geometric patterns.

Cloth colors are also important--plain blue and white madras (given the name of *ikaki mgbe*--tortoise bones--by Kalabari women) or blue and white madras with tiny yellow (*amasiri*--tiger's paw) or with red stripes (*igodoye moru*) are particularly favored. In fact, the *alu* masquerade triangle pattern is mostly found on the prestigious *amasiri* madras cloth (Eicher et al. 1982:17). Of the twenty-two handcut pelete bite cloths documented with patterns identified as *alu*, ten were cut on *amasiri* cloth. And, of the total of thirty-six handcut *amasiri* cloths documented, almost one-third incorporated triangle motifs into their design. Although the association of *amasiri* cloth specifically with masquerader costume has not been directly examined, it would seem possible that part of the reason these blue and white madras cloths are cut with *alu* masquerade motifs is because of their association with the face coverings of masqueraders.

Blue and white plaid to alubite

The process whereby dark blue and white madras textiles are transformed into pelete bite covered with geometric patterns has been previously discussed by Eicher and Erekosima (1982) and Erekosima and Eicher (1981) and will only be briefly described here. Essentially, selected white warp and sometimes weft threads are removed from the textile by first lifting the selected thread or threads with a needle and then cutting them with a razor blade or knife. The cut threads are then pulled from the cloth leaving a dark, gauzy motif consisting of the remaining dark threads. Kalabari women perform this process without a pattern although the madras plaid tends to serve as design grid. On some cloths, particularly the type called *ikaki mgbe* but also *amasiri* madras cloths, the checked centerfield may be divided up into smaller squares or rectangles which are then filled with different geometric motifs. This configuration of design layout resembles that of the Igbo *ukara* cloth which is similarly divided into smaller rectangles which are filled with various motifs.

In general, designs motifs cut in pelete bite depict objects in the natural world, as well as those made by hand or machine and often those used in masquerade performance. The most common named motifs include alternating square patterns called abili (referring to the game of "draughts" or "checkers" because of the checkerboard design), diamonds patterns called etere (referring to the design found in indigenous matting), and triangles called alu (referring to the design of masquerade triangles). Other motifs refer to objects such as chains (ikoli) and broken plates (okoloba igila) or to fish gills (sangolo) and cowrie shells (otobo). Some motifs which refer to masquerade performance or to water spirits such as igbiri (masquerade leg rattles) and okiaka (shark's teeth) consist of grouped triangles; these patterns may be differently named, with some people referring to these patterns by the individual motif, alu triangle, as well as by the composite name.

While the depiction of triangular patterns on blue and white madras cloth would seem to be the logical choice for pelete bite cloth used for masquerade, the extent to which this is done remains undocumented. Presently, available data on the use of pelete bite and other alubite cloth comes largely from photographic documentation of the owu masquerade performances themselves.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF MEN INTO MASQUERADES

The cycle of water-spirit masquerades may presently be performed over several years, depending on the number of masquerades to be danced each year, and the wherewithal of the community and individual families to muster the necessary personnel and materials. Every year, one to three different masquerades appear in the main square of Kalabari towns or villages where they dance and perform short skits, often depicting legends about the particular deity. Thus the masquerade Mgbula, a water spirit doctor who is depicted as ugly, deaf, and paranoid may be shown fighting with local fisherwomen as part of a play performed in the Kalabari community of Degema (Horton 1960:31).

Prior to the commencement of the cycle, Ekine society members and men from the various families participating in the performances amass the necessary cloths and headdresses. These materials are stored in Ekine or family meeting houses until the performance. Because of the considerable prestige associated with these masquerades, much care is taken in preparing these material manifestations of the water spirits.

On the opening day of the cycle, Ekine Society members take a canoe to a special part of the creek known as the Beach of the Water People to make a sacrifice to the water spirits and to encourage their presence at the subsequent performances. After these opening rites, the men return to the village or town singing Ekine songs and soon after, the masquerade performances begin.

Ekine Society masqueraders and masqueraders from the various houses are then prepared through prayers and libations and through the careful preparation of headdresses which are given final painted touches and

cloths which are sewn in place (Horton 1960:30). After a masquerade performer emerges in public, he leaves an offering at the shrine of the deity Ekineba, the patroness of the masquerade, praying for success in the upcoming performances.

During the cycle, masqueraders representing specific water-spirits make their appearance individually. However at the end of the cycle, the entire group of masquerades come out together in a final, two-day performance known as Owu-arosun (Parade of the Water Sprits). Afterwards, the masqueraders retire to a special beach called Owusara after they remove their headdresses. They enter the water as a way of sending the water spirits back to their domain and returning men dancers to the everyday world of humans.

Alubite Cloths Used in Masquerade Performances

In masquerade performances documented by Eicher and Erekosima in Buguma over the past fourteen years, several masquerades have incorporated different types of alubite cloth into facial coverings and headdresses. For example, during the 1991 owu masquerade cycle, the masquerade Alagba used the alubite cloth ukara as a face covering. Two prominent masquerade figures from the owu play called Krimani, which is the name of a small weasel-type animal, are elephant and monkey, both of whom use peletebite as a type of alubite for their face coverings.²

While alubite cloth clearly plays a significant role of the transformation of men into water-spirit masquerades, it remains to be seen whether these blue and white geometrically patterned cloths may be used interchangeably or whether the different types of alubite cloths are hierarchically distinguished or associated with particular masquerades. Aside from further research on these cloths in the Kalabari Ijo area, additional information about the origins and uses of alubite cloths elsewhere in southern Nigeria may contribute to our knowledge of these cloths.

DISCUSSION

One of the alubite cloths, ukara, for example, is produced by Igbo people to the northeast of the Niger delta area. These raffia-stitched, indigo resist-dyed cloths are known to be designed by men in the villages of Abiriba, Aro Chukwu, and Ohafia, who draw the motifs upon a wide commercially woven cotton cloth (Cole and Aniakor 1984:59). The cloths are then transported to Nkalagu, a town near Enugu, for sewing by older women and young men and for dyeing by men. The cloths are then transported back to Igbo towns and villages to the south. Ukara cloth is used by the Ekoi and Efik in Ekpe (Leopard) Society functions (Cole and Aniakor 1984:59; Nicklin and Salmon 1988). The cloths are used for display "backdrops," for funerals and as wrappers for important men chiefs. The motifs called nsibidi are geometric,

² An example of the sheer, wax-resist alubite is seen very clearly in a video produced by Eicher from the 1991 Owuarusun titled "Textile Trade and Masquerade Among the Kalabari of Nigeria."

anthropomorphic, and zoomorphic, and are used to decorate the cloths as part of a symbol system used by the Ekpe Society. The zoomorphic images are representations of indigenous deities. The ukara cloth is a sacred cloth among the Igbo (Cole and Aniakor 1984:61) although they are apparently not used in Igbo masquerade costume. However a type of indigo resist-dyed cloth, similar to ukara is used as part of masquerade costume in the Middle Cross Rivers area (Nicklin and Salmons 1988).³

In the Kalabari Ijo town of Buguma, at least one ukara cloth was owned by the Ekine Society, a men's society in the town that serves as similar function in Kalabari society as the Ekpe society serves in Igboland. Indeed, the first time Renne saw an ukara cloth was when it was being flown as a flag to indicate that an Ekine Society meeting for dispute settlement (Renne, 1985a) was in process. In 1984, Eicher saw two ukara cloths used as a wari (War Canoe House) flag during the Centenary celebrations. The Kalabari call ukara cloths alubite, i.e., masquerade cloth, possibly because the blue-and-white geometrically patterned cloth is to cover the masquerader's face and also because it resembles the description of the cloth described in the Ekineba myth (Horton 1975:36).

Tariah (1982:11) gives a rather functionalist explanation of why alubite cloths are used to cover dancers' faces, namely that the "perforated cloth allow[s] air to pass in order to keep the masquerader from overheating." Although both the gauze-weave cloth and pelete bite perform this function, it seems more likely that it is the particular configuration of colors and patterning that would support the use of particular cloths, for perforated cloth can come in many colors and pelete bite is made from red and burgundy madras as well as indigo.

Pelete bite cloth is also cited by Tariah (1982:11) as used as masquerade face cover cloths (Tariah 1982:11). The one pelete bite cloth used for masquerade shown to Renne, by a small boy who used it to practice masquerade, was a dark blue and white cloth. While the open work of pelete bite has a similar aerating effect of the gauze-weave alubite, the colors and patterning on pelete bite more directly relates it to masquerade performance. The alu triangular motif found on alubite more obviously supports the connection of a motif depicting the python. One old pelete bite now in the collection of the Fowler Museum of Cultural History at UCLA depicts the free-hand design of the "sinuous python," odum ikelekele. One is struck, when looking at some of the very old ukara cloths at the visual similarity, not only in types of motifs, but in the division of design fields as well as in the appearance of the python motif. The latter is not contained within a

³ Another type of stitch-resist indigo-dyed cloth called ndop is used by the Bamileke masqueraders of Cameroon as skirts, associating dancers both with chieftaincy and the spirit world.

smaller block but rather appears floating "over" the surface of the other motifs.⁴

Aside from the classification of the dark blue and white ukara and some types of pelete bite as alubite cloth and their identical use in masquerade as face covers, there is another similarity in the use of ukara and pelete bite cloths that is worth mentioning. Dark blue and white pelete bite is most commonly used in funerals. During the extensive funeral displays for which the Kalabari have gained renown (Eicher and Erekosima, 1987), men and women wear pelete bite wrappers during certain parts of the ritual. Ukara cloths are also associated with funeral displays in Igbo society, however, their use appears to be restricted to men holding high titles in the Ekpe (Leopard) Society. Nonetheless, their use in funerals reinforces the other-worldly associations made with these cloths.

CONCLUSION

Through their use in masquerade performances subsumed under the term alubite, there would seem to be a connection between the dark blue and white pelete bite produced by Kalabari women and ukara cloths produced by Igbo men. However, whether there is a historical connection between these two cloths, with the desire for ukara cloth perhaps influencing the production of certain types of pelete bite, or vice-versa, remains to be seen. One possible avenue for investigation might involve a historical study of the material connections between the Kalabari men's Ekine Society and the Igbo men's Ekpe Society, both of which use ukara cloths in their rituals. Further, the association of the three types of alubite mentioned initially in this essay with particular masquerades requires additional research. By uncovering the connections between cloth types, production processes, and ritual uses, questions about why specific textiles might be considered culturally appropriate candidates for particular transformations may be better understood.

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⁴ There is another type of cloth also classified as alubite that is used by the Kalabari in masquerade. Woven in a single strip in a type of gauze or leno weave and then either stamped or stencilled with wax (or starch) and indigo-dyed, the provenance of the cloth Renne examined is unknown. The long fringes were finished in long braids that were then tie-dyed as were the two extreme ends of the woven cloth. A similar cloth called *omada* is handwoven and dyed by Okpella (Edo-speaking) women (Borgatti 1983:22); Lamb and Holmes (1980:235-236) mention a similar cloth from Eruhun, a village in the Urhogo-speaking area near Okpella. The Okpella and Eruhun cloths which come from an area north of the delta, however, are stitched with raffia thread, rather than resist-printed like the Kalabari cloth used as alubite, and it is not clear how or whether these cloths are related.

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