

Global Trade and Cultural Authentication: The Kalabari of the Niger Delta edited by

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This is a study of cultural authentication. This is a process whereby cultural artefacts (especially dresses or textiles) are selected from another group, adopted, physically transformed, and incorporated into the local cultural life in ways that cohere with local worldview and symbolic systems. This book pulls together cultural authentication, fashion and global trade to tell the story of the incorporation of the Kalabari-Ijo (Niger Delta, Nigeria) into the Atlantic world and British imperial domination. Kalabari simultaneously resisted and affirmed such incorporation through their artistic ingenuity; they exhibited an openness to what is outside the limits of their cultures, while resisting foreign elements in their community by culturally authenticating them.

The concept of cultural authentication was introduced into the fields of anthropology, cultural studies, and textiles studies by Tonye Erekosima in 1979 and further developed by him and his lifelong intellectual partner, the eminent scholar Joanne Eicher, in 1981. The concept evolved from their study of the Kalabari (xi–xii). This book, however, is a deeper study into the cultural authenticating processes in Kalabari life as framed and energised by global trade. This framing is important because it not only shows how the Kalabari people incorporated global influences into their culture, but also signifies the important place they occupied in the Atlantic world. Eicher and her collaborators astutely combine cultural authentication and the history of global trade to offer readers an insight into the life, ethos and history of the Kalabari. Their book challenges the scholarly understanding of art (especially textile arts), demonstrating how textiles were used to construct gender, political and group identities.

The book has 22 chapters that are divided into four parts. Part I, which contains nine chapters, places the Kalabari in their geographic, cultural and historical settings. It provides research on the place of textiles in their everyday life and rituals and lays out the theorisation and practices of cultural authentication. ‘Although similar to bricolage, cultural authentication more importantly stresses agency involved through creative transformation’ (1). Part II of the book comprises eight chapters collectively tell the story of how the Kalabari for centuries imported textiles, jewellery and headgears to create their dress. The book defines dress comprehensively to mean ‘all body supplements and body modification’, going beyond garments (109). The Kalabari examples used to illustrate dressing focus on dressing for the public as against the private and secretive selves (109). The four chapters in Part III focus on the role of dress in rituals, especially in ritual concerning births and funerals. ‘Kalabari rituals feature dress and textiles as pivotal in birth through death celebrations; families bond when a child is born or a family member dies’ (219). Part IV, which contains only one chapter, ‘concentrates on how culturally authenticated dress and rituals from Kalabari heritage and life in Nigeria, stemming from their global trade history, continue as vital in the diaspora’ (261).

Contributors to these book are experts in Kalabari studies and their careful descriptions of their ethnographic observations reveal a deep knowledge of the worldview of

the people they studied. Many of their book's chapters highlight an inner solidarity between arts and social ontology. This is demonstrated, for instance, by this description of a Kalabari dance by Susan O. Michelman and Eicher in Chapter 12: 'Periodically, each dancer turns and gives greetings to an adjacent dancer by touching his left hand to the other's right and his right to the other's left. Dancers repeat this movement in succession down the row of dancers, moving forward in a slow snakelike manner. There is no random dance; each performs prescribed and similar movements, concentrating on individual skill. Although they dance as a group, individual displays allow each dancer to show his particular ability' (146).

This description fits what I named elsewhere as 'agonistic communitarianism', an ideology of co-belonging and competition in Kalabari (see Wariboko, *The Split Time*, 2022). Agonistic communitarianism is an attitude and a position that speaks, on the one hand, to the intense and relentless struggle of individualism with the weight of communitarianism, and, on the other, to the struggle of communitarianism against the fires of individualism that threaten to melt and erode the established structures of the community. This book reveals the ideology of social matrix as the hidden paradigm of arts in Kalabari.

Indeed, *Global Trade and Cultural Authentication* is a rich, well-researched book, theoretically astute, and offers a magisterial account of the imbrication of dress with Kalabari culture and history. It offers a vibrant portrayal of the creativity of the Kalabari-Ijo people. For a people whose environment did not present them with hard wood, stones, metals and marble to serve as a means of exhibiting and preserving their artistic creations, the predominant portal through which they splendidly demonstrated, differentiated and declared their artistic creativity were clothes, dresses or fabrics. This book is, however, not limited to recording the creativity of making and using clothes; it goes further to demonstrate the integral connections that existed between aesthetics and social experiences of the Kalabari. It also provides brilliant accounts of the political, economic and historical contexts that not only induced their creativity, but also how the quest for creativity and pursuit of excellence in the production of cultural artefacts conditioned the whole community. Overall, this book is a study of the relationship between human creativity and the social-cultural contexts within which it arises and is sustained, and the impact of (textile) creativity on these social-cultural contexts.

The major weakness of this book is that it hardly offers new information or knowledge to scholars who are conversant with the literature in Kalabari studies. Indeed, almost all chapters have been published before. This is not to detract from the care and ingenuity expressed by Eicher in putting this volume together. It gives a much-needed boost to Kalabari (or Niger Delta) studies.

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