

## Counterfoil Choices in the Kalabari Life Cycle.

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### INTRODUCTION

Kalabari ethnic identity is under enormous pressure as a result of modernization and Western influences. One Kalabari response to their exposure to foreign values, styles, cultural artifacts and ways of life has been to select, incorporate, and transform borrowed values, styles, and artifacts to create a new combination or ensemble uniquely identified as Kalabari. This process of adaptation has been described as cultural authentication (Erekosima and Eicher 1981,1995; Eicher 1997). In their studies, Erekosima and Eicher have focused only on the use of a limited number of material artifacts (such as textiles) to create and maintain ethnic identity. Kalabari have created clothing that separates them from their neighbors, "for items assembled from their history and the range of their trading contacts resulted in distinctive appearance" (Eicher 1997:231).

Why the preference for distinctive appearance? Why are the Kalabari always tinkering with foreign artifacts in order to make themselves distinct from their Southern Nigerian neighbors? Why the deep preference for independence? The best answer Eicher and colleagues have found is: "Kalabari dress represented their independence of thought and action and their view of a tripartite cosmology of the water-people, community deities and ancestors" (Eicher1997:231; Erekosima 1989, Daly 1984). This explanation appears inadequate. By limiting their analyses to the easily observable somewhat static connection between dress and world view, they ignore the more intellectual, dynamic, and complex process involved in maintaining and passing to the next generation the core of Kalabari identity. Maintaining an ethnic identity is not a one-time affair, especially for an African traditional society that has to grapple with influences both from the West and from other nationalities within Nigeria. Dress and other aspects of the culture are often the visible representations of an invisible world view. One is, however, very far from the whole truth unless one explains how this link has been maintained from pre-colonial times until today in spite of all influences to the contrary.

This paper discusses the salient management tool or idea that Kalabari have used and are still using to ensure that their ethnic identity is maintained amidst the flux of changes from within and outside. This paper brings to the fore the philosophical principles which put into proper perspective the Kalabari struggle to maintain an identity and way of life, and to minimize European influences on their traditional and political beliefs (Dike 1956: 161). For lack of a better terminology, this identity management tool is termed counterfoil choice.

In most societies, there are two types of choices: ordinary and Hobson. In ordinary choice, the decision-maker chooses between A or B, which are alternatives to each other. Hobson's choice is between what is offered and nothing. Kalabari have a third variety wherein the

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freedom to choose is not limited as in Hobson's choice, but the result of the selection is similar to that of Hobson's choice. This is termed counterfoil choice. A is not an alternative to B; B is only a counterfoil to A. When A is offered, Kalabari offers its negative B to show the person where the decision should not go. The decision-maker is primed to choose A, the real "ticket" and shun the counterfoil. For instance, a father wanting to teach his child a lesson about success might give him two bowls. One contains garri (cassava derived flour), the other is empty. The child is asked to choose. The empty bowl is there to show that laziness comes with severe hunger and that life offers two bowls (prosperity/power or failure/disgrace). The child is advised to know the right bowl to choose. It is a counterfoil choice because no father wishes his son or daughter to choose the empty bowl. Kalabari have found this an effective way of teaching their youngsters.

The use of this management tool in Kalabari society parallels age-grade and political status. Thus, this essay shall proceed by examining the significance and role of counterfoil choice within Kalabari culture from the perspective of its relevance through the political life cycle. For the limited purposes here, the life cycle is divided into five stages: awome (birth to age 15), asawo (16 to 40), opuasawo (40 and above), alapu (chiefs) and duein (ancestors). Ancestor is considered a stage in the life cycle because a person's life is deemed incomplete if he or she does not become an ancestor after death. To be an ancestor a person must be in good standing before entering the next world.

This classification is not precise; the purpose is only to indicate phases. It is based mainly on the male life cycle. However, this paper will consider women in the category of iya (most lawful and expensive) wives when it is dealing with alapu because in traditional Kalabari society every chief must have one iya wife. Also, in terms of achievement women value iya marriage as much as men value chieftaincy titles. Third, the fact that this paper is focused mainly on age categories of men does not mean that counterfoil choice as relating to women is given short shrift. As a matter of fact, various examples of counterfoil choices are given which span the life cycle of women in the society. This paper limits its focus only to men's age categories because it is easier to handle five categories than handle 10 in short essay of this nature. Fourth, age is not the sole determinant of each category as personal wealth and achievement of an under-30 years can move a person to the rank of chiefs.

## 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, from the fifteenth century to the early twentieth, 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 extended family members, trading assistants, slaves, and servants. Because of the need to maintain an adequate labor supply for their burgeoning trade and because the definition of wealth was 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 was given a Kalabari name, his head was shaved and a ritual bath taken to cleanse the person and signify absorption into the new family. The adoptee also was 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 a male adoptee was enterprising and loyal to the new home, he could rise to leadership of the house at the death of the patriarch. 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, the 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'" (1983:54).

Partly because of their trading contacts, Kalabari have for centuries used foreign artifacts to express their cultural beliefs and to reconstruct their identities in a creative adaptation to pressures they faced as a competitive, open, commercial society which served as an intermediary between European and African cultures and absorbed an incredible number of foreigners into itself despite 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 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.

There are two main epistemological categories in the Kalabari world view. There is oju (body) representing material objects and Teme (spirit), the 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 spirit 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).

Traditional marriage in Kalabari society occur in three forms: *iya*, *igwa*, and *waribiobesime*. *Iya* is the most lawful and highest form of Kalabari marriages. In an *iya* marriage, divorce is not permitted and the offspring belong to the man's house. In *igwa* (a lesser form of marriage than the *iya*), the children belong to the woman's house and divorce is permitted. While an *igwa* marriage can be converted into *iya*, the reverse is not permissible. *Waribiobesime* is the marriage between members of the same house who are not blood relations.

#### DEFINITION OF COUNTERFOIL CHOICE

Choice is the act of selecting an alternative from a set of possible alternatives or avoiding the action entirely. The definition implies that the person making the choice has the freedom to decide voluntarily to choose between several alternatives. This freedom is severely limited in a Hobson's choice, where the choice is between what is offered and nothing. In counterfoil choice, the freedom to choose is not limited, but the result of the selection is similar to that of Hobson's choice. Although a person has the freedom to make the choice, s/he invariably ends up with the "this" of the "this or nothing" Hobson alternatives. In ordinary, plain choice, A and B are alternatives to each other. In counterfoil choice, A and B are not alternatives. B is only a counterfoil to A. When an option is offered, Kalabari put its negative to show the person where the decision or choice does not go. Whereas items A and B may be offered to the decision-maker, he or she is culturally primed to always choose A (the real "ticket") and shun B, which is a counterfoil of A, because A makes the most sense, is culturally deemed most rational. Note, item B is to alternative A what a counterfoil opera ticket is to the real ticket. Given the choice, a rational person desirous of seeing an opera performance will certainly pick the real ticket. For it is the ticket that is capable of achieving the desired goal.

Why offer two alternatives when only one of them can (should) be selected? In other words, why create a tension between elements of choice and elements of constraint? This and other questions are answered in the next session. The immediate task is to examine when and where counterfoil choices are offered in Kalabari society.

Often counterfoil choices are offered with dramatic effects, and are choreographed. Counterfoil choice dramas are enacted at the apex of ceremonies and rituals, at the point when the person undergoing the rite or ceremony is to be given a reward. The person is either told or persuaded by non-verbal communication to pick the "crown of glory" or its counterfoil.

In order to understand this phenomenon better, an illustration is presented of how Kalabari might dramatize the award of a degree to doctoral candidate. When the student has completed all the requirements there is just at the point when the examiners are to say "Congratulations, Dr. Smith, the candidate is offered a counterfoil choice: Choose the certificate or nullify the whole process and obliterate all your Ph.D. records. This is the drama: can s/he walk away from it all. The examiners want him or her to portray a certain Kalabari character,

"one that reflects an apparent demeanor of nonchalant leisureliness (*asa ti*) while remaining fully alert to one's responsibilities (*bu nimi*)" (Erekosima 1989: 376).

The point to note is that while the choice is presented to draw out from the student the subtlety of Kalabari character, there is the theoretical risk that the candidate may pick the counterfoil. The counterweight to that risk is that the candidate has been "schooled" and "advised" to choose the real ticket, the doctorate degree. Like a rational opera-goer, s/he would effortlessly pick the real ticket. The whole of his/her upbringing, his/her socialization and his/her commitment and perseverance have combined to bring him/her to the point where s/he is squarely on the path to making the right, expected choice.

It is germane at this juncture to use other illustrations to show more clearly when and where counterfoil choices are offered. The most dramatic and easily observable forms of counterfoil choices are offered in ceremonies (especially those of chieftaincy and wedding) and rituals marking major rites of passage. It also shows up in the commercial realm. One such appearance was the *aru-sein* ceremony at the height of the transatlantic legitimate commerce. During this time, when an apprentice-trader (apprentices were always young men) had completed his term, shown exceptional trading skills, impressive business etiquette, and demonstrated loyalty to his master, he would be launched by his boss as an independent trader. Some of the launching packages included trade goods, trade boats, financial capital, food, and other necessities. The launching of the prospective trader was society's economic accreditation and introduction of the young trader as an independent agent. The launching involved prayers and "commencement" speeches, at which time drinks were offered to ancestors and gods and the boss generously blessed the young man.

In most of the speeches the prospective independent entrepreneur was told that he now had the freedom to trade on his own, buy and sell with anyone he chose. He was also advised to personally negotiate his commercial transactions as he could not really rely on others to get him the best deals. Embedded in these counsels was a counterfoil choice test. On one hand, he was free to buy and sell with any suppliers in the hinterland who provided the produce of the African forest to coastal Kalabari merchants. On the other, he could not voluntarily trade with European merchants at the coast who exported African produce to Europe and also provided European manufactures to Kalabari merchants. He was permitted to only trade with the Europeans through his erstwhile master. Although he had been launched as an independent trader and told that he had the freedom to choose his business partners and to directly negotiate deals by himself, direct commercial contact with white traders was actually a counterfoil to the real choice of trading with Africans of the hinterland. If he were to deal directly with a white man without the approval of the chief of his house (likely his former boss) he could be severely punished, fined or even his business destroyed. He could only avoid such a repercussion if he had built up a sophisticated military machine to withstand that of the chief - a feat that was nearly impossible given that he was just beginning his career.

Also the advice given to him not to rely on others to negotiate deals for him contains an embedded counterfoil choice. With long-distance trade practices of the nineteenth century era determined by, among others, the lack of quick communications, it was impossible for any trader to personally negotiate all transactions when he had to rely on agents scattered over a large territory buying and selling to people of the hinterland. His personal involvement in all

business deals is a counterfoil to the real choice of building up reliable and trustworthy assistants and to replicating himself in order to expand his business.

On a more mundane level, counterfoil choices are also given in the daily course of life. Parents and elders use them as training devices to inculcate certain cultural values into their children and wards. An adult who is presented this type of choice at wedding or chieftaincy installation ceremonies recognizes it because of the training s/he has undergone as a child to recognize them and make proper decisions. No Kalabari person ever encounters for the first time counterfoil choices in aru-sein, chieftaincy, or marriage ceremonies. A question arises as to why this type of choice is offered? As the examples given below demonstrate, the choice is generally not given to test intelligence. It is not a Kalabari version of the famous intelligence quotient test. For lack of a better term, it can be described as a "culture wisdom quotient" test designed to test an individual's understanding of important cultural values and norms and their contextual applications. The Kalabari make daily choices in politics, economics and religion without resorting to the technique of counterfoil choices. They only resort to the device of counterfoil choices to transcend the limited capability of plain "either-or" choices when confronted with the need to probe for deep understanding of those values that they say define their national character and ethnic identity.

Counterfoil choices, although widespread and important as we will show below, are not as visible as other aspects of the culture like dressing. The researcher needs a solid understanding of the culture, the Kalabari national character, and patience in order to discern their occurrences in ceremonies, rituals and daily conversations. To make matters worse Kalabari do not have one word that fitly captures the phenomenon. These are four of the terminologies they use to describe the essence of the phenomenon. First, *krakrateye sele* - make the proper (right, wise, true) choice. Second, *mbi saki* - pick cannon ball. This term captures the counterfoil choice phenomenon of chieftaincy installation ceremonies. Another is *krakrateye miye* - do the right thing. Finally, *torugbeye miye* - do that which gains approval. These terms indicate, the "test taker" is being examined to discover if s/he is wise enough to make the right, culturally acceptable choices. Multiple alternatives (like bucket and basket or cannon ball and yam) are offered to create dramatic tension and to ensure that the selection of the proper object or response is not *fait accompli*<sup>2</sup>.

This section would not be complete unless we put in broad perspective the relation between counterfoil choices and other techniques Kalabari use to maintain, promote, and preserve their ethnic identity and national character. So far this author's investigations have shown that there is a quadrilateral system that is used to manage and to give meaning to Kalabari ethnic identity. Apart from counterfoil choices, which this paper is concerned with, the others are "aristocratic ideal," "concept of fairness" and "nyemoni." The Kalabari aristocratic ideal refers to a combination of stylishness, an admiration for nonchalant achievement, self-control, decorum, and dignity. Fairness in Kalabari is not a certain number to be reached nor is it nearness to a certain idealized benchmark. Fairness or equitable allocation is when each party to a distribution is happy. Fairness is not an equal distribution of resources, it is fair when each person likes his or her bundle of resources and would not be better off given the other person's share. It is fair when no one says (at least publicly) that his or her portion is worse than the other's. Each preferred his/her bundle. To fret and froth over resources is to show lack of self-

control, dignity, and decorum. What one receives in a distribution, like any other achievement, must be treated with same nonchalance. Nyemoni means 'covet your own.' It is considered unacceptable to envy, at least publicly, the bundle of another person. To the Kalabari, a person who does not envy what belongs to another person is one who is not greedy and does not worship or revere his/her possessions. Such a person is capable of treating his/her successes with nonchalant concern. The workings of the quadrilateral system are explained below.

#### LIFE CYCLE AND COUNTERFOIL CHOICE: AWOME (birth to age 15)

This group ranges from infancy to the fifteenth year. At this phase, the child is oriented to his/her immediate environment, taught the rudiments of the culture and encouraged to develop kinship ties within the house. By the time a boy is 15 years old, he may have at least five years of helping his father in the latter's productive ventures. The girl has matured into helping the mother clean the house, cook and earn supplementary income. During this phase, a child's social activities are mainly limited to immediate family or house circles.

Children at this phase learn the folklore and moral tales of the society in moonlit nights while at the same time having fun. The educational process is informal and largely self-instructional but it is a process that is overseen by every adult in the community, as the conduct of the child is monitored by all elders. "Acculturation in Kalabari is the responsibility of everyone in the society for the Kalabari believe that *Tubo iyibo iyi ama pirim* (parents bear a child for the community). Therefore, any disgrace a child brings reflects not only on its family but on the entire society" (Erekosima et al 1991:139).

A major goal of this phase of the child's development is the acquisition of a specific, preferred Kalabari character. Horton (1966:179-180) called this preferred character, "The Kalabari aristocratic ideal". This ideal has three parts to it. First there is *asa*, meaning stylishness and flamboyance, youthfulness, good living, grace and dash. According to Horton (1966), Kalabari has an almost ruthless respect for wealth and power but it is at the same time a highly conditional respect:

"a man who renounces the chasing and courtship of women, fine clothes, good food, dancing, conviviality, and other luxuries for the single-minded pursuit [for] money or power, a man who lives in dirty rags and drinks pure garri today so that he may be rich tomorrow; such a man is despised. Whatever he does a man should always live with a certain style and grace"(Horton 1966: 180).

The second component is:

"an admiration for nonchalant achievement, for a man brings off his successes without the appearance of concern. The final component is the quality referred to as *bu nimi* - knowing oneself. This implies self-control, balance, restraint, decorum and dignity"(Horton 1966).

Early in their lives, Kalabari children are given counterfoil choices in order to prepare them for the Kalabari aristocratic ideal. A child between eight and twelve seen publicly crying for food will be given palm oil by his/her mother after several attempts have been made to calm him/her down or to inform him/her that food is on the way. When the child is handed the palm oil s/he will be advised to rub it on his/her neck, walk round the house and swallow it, or keep quiet and wait for the food. It takes only a few moments for the child to realize that swallowing

the house is a counterfoil to the choice of keeping quiet and showing self-dignity in the face of adversity. The child learns that s/he has to resist his/her impulses and generally mortify the flesh so his/her Kalabariness can increase.

The child, if he is successful in life and latter comes to take a chieftaincy title (only men are installed as chiefs), will be asked questions about his ability to control his urges. Usually, at a chieftaincy ceremony the aspirant is asked if he is capable of resisting his libidinal impulses to promptly leave for community services when he hears a clarion call for action in the face of a new naked lover who is alone with him in the room. This question typically comes before the aspirant for the chieftaincy title is asked to make his choice between yam and cannon ball, another example of counterfoil choice described below.

A mother who suspects that her child is not behaving as a "wise Kalabari person" or behaving in a way she considers improper will present him/her with a bucket and a basket to fetch water from the well. The child has a choice between bucket and basket, but really s/he has only one choice since a basket, cannot hold liquid. The basket is the counterfoil to the bucket.

The Kalabari child is constantly given choices like this. When the male child is not with his mother, but spending time with his father and his father's peers, he may be tested in the area of drink. When Kalabari men sit down to talk and banter, they often share alcoholic beverages. The youngest in the group is usually given the responsibility of serving the drinks. The youngest is expected to serve himself last. Often by the time it comes to his turn what is left is only a small portion, just enough for him. He would be generously encouraged by the elders to drink it. Once again, the Kalabari child is not actually given a choice between taking the remainder or not. He will be severely rebuked if he drank the remainder. In Kalabari society, the last bits of drink in a bottle belong to the eldest in the group. When the male child is told to drink it, he is offered the counterfoil to determine his understanding of the culture. As much as he wanted to taste that drink, he has to offer it to the eldest who may then explicitly give him the permission to drink it. His restraint and good sense to ask for the permission, in the eyes of Kalabari, show his excellent upbringing. The child has brought off his achievements (sharing drinks with his father and his father's peers and also drinking the last bits of drinks in a bottle) with nonchalance, self-control and decorum. The child is also taught a similar lesson when he is invited to eat from the same plate as his father. His father may tell him that he can eat any of the fish and pieces of meat any time during the course of the meal, but the truth is that the choice is only available to the father. He can only wait for the father to pass some to him.

#### ASAWO OR YOUNG MEN (16 - 30 years)

At this phase, the child is considered fully matured and therefore exposed to the esoteric aspects of the culture. The child has grown up to take full responsibility for him/herself and to raise a family. S/he is particularly active in masquerade display clubs in order to learn how to dance and understand "drum language". It is important for the male child to be active in masquerade/dance club activities because for him to become a "complete Kalabari man" he has to understand drum language and dance very well. (Horton 1966). By the time the child reaches the upper limit of this age bracket, s/he has acquired the Kalabari national character and developed deep emotional ties to his community. The child is expected, therefore, not only to



defend the community in times of physical aggression against it, but also ensure that its ethnic identity is upheld.

Men in this category perform public duty and community service. The men in this category, as Erekosima (1989:125) puts it, "will generally operate as a loose corporate unit that undertakes burials for the community; extracts fines from those upon whom penalties have been imposed by the chiefs; and generally supervise tasks that need hard labor such as cutting the bush in the village agricultural plots. These are usually activities in the domain of community service". It is from this category that in precolonial times (pre Pax Britannica) soldiers were primarily recruited into the armies of the various canoe houses.

In 1879, Kalabari soldiers were faced with a counterfoil choice situation in a real war. In one of the battles during the Kalabari civil war of 1879 -1883, Chief Iyalla Yellow of the secessionist side gave his men a counterfoil choice. Iyalla, a lame general but deft at hand to hand battle, asked his men in the midst of a fierce battle to throw him at Chief Omekwe Horsfall, one of the foremost generals of the nationalist side. He said that if only he could get to Omekwe, he would kill Omekwe with his bare hands. Iyalla's men knew the difference between real choice and its counterfoil and, therefore, declined to catapult their commander as a human cannon ball.

Parents teach children the Kalabari aristocratic ideal, and often choose unexpected circumstances to teach their wards the high points of the ideal. There is a story of a father's attempt to find a job for his teenage son in Port Harcourt, the capital of Rivers State. As the story goes, on a beautiful day in the early 1980s, a Kalabari chief said to his unemployed son, "Follow me, I am taking you to Dr. Wigwe, the State commissioner [secretary] for education. Son, this morning I will introduce you to Wigwe and he will give you a job." The son walked a step or two behind the father. The old man, in his 70s, was tapping the ground with his cane in the fashion that says "I am a Kalabari chief and I am very important in this State." During the trip to Dr. Wigwe's office the father repeated several times, "Son, I am personally taking you to Dr. Wigwe who will give you a job in his ministry." Now inside the government secretariat, on their way to Wigwe's office, they met a female Kalabari receptionist who was a little surprised to see the chief, a long retired civil servant, in the government offices that morning. She politely asked him what had brought him and his son to the secretariat. The man proudly told her that he had come to see Wigwe for a job for his son with a high school diploma. Emphasizing, "today, Wigwe will give my son a job." The receptionist escorted them to Wigwe's lounge where all those waiting to see the commissioner rested. The old man filled the necessary forms and sat down to wait. He waited for hours, but his turn never came to see the "big man." When he thought he had waited long enough, he gracefully stood up and softly told his son, "Yewa so wari mu. Wigwe bem ori enete iyeribia bee, yariso ariete oreribia. Kalabarinabo amenebu ke sikiri kuroma kuromaa," meaning "Let us go home, if Wigwe says he cannot see me, I cannot see him either. A Kalabari person does not put himself/herself in an undignified (subordinate, inferior, demeaning) position." On this note, he tapped his walking stick on the rugged floor and left the lounge. On the way out of the secretariat he stopped at the office of the receptionist who asked him how his meeting with the commissioner went. He replied, "My daughter, I am going home. If Wigwe says he cannot see me I cannot see him either. A Kalabari person does not put himself in an undignified position." Kalabari say the lesson the father was impacting to

his son was that a Kalabari person should not renounce all dignity, style and grace in the pursuit of any goal. The guiding principle is bu nimi - "know yourself," know that you are a Kalabari person.

#### OPUSAWO ORIGINTLEMENI (orìgentlemenì) AND ELDERS (40 and above)

Opu-asawo constitute the advisory group for the chiefs (heads of canoe houses) and king in any community. In community-wide meetings, they with their chiefs represent their canoe houses and they offer partisan support to their individual house heads. In house gatherings an opuasawo will represent his segment of the house. They assist the king and chiefs in settling disputes and serve as the diplomatic emissaries. Opuasawo acts as the reference group to the asawo and bear the task of explicating esoteric knowledge of the culture to categories of those coming after them. It is usually from this group that you will find people with extensive knowledge of local history and various legends concerning Kalabari ethnic identity and heroic acts.

Except in certain worship and sacrifice services where specific priests are required, any member of this group may act as temporary spiritual leader of a house or community during public religious engagements. In their individual families they also act as priests. It is assumed that by their age they are less likely to make mistakes in rituals. Since Kalabari is a society that accords respect to its elders because of their age and "proximity" to the ancestors, if a man or woman lives to be an elder, he or she enjoys tremendous respect and exercises enormous authority. Yet in a sense, these elders are always on their toes. Kalabari remind elders in authority that they must constantly look out for counterfoil choices so as not to lose the respect and authority they enjoy. There is this popular saying, obogibo simeari wari obori kpogi bu iyiyia, meaning "in a house with an elder, a goat does not suffer the pains of parturition tied to a rope." The man or woman in authority has the choice to make an offender serve out his term of punishment, but the offender must not suffer unduly.

The point is that the choice to use one's authority to lead and punish is severely curtailed by a greater principle not to punish beyond decency, not to allow "bad things to happen in one's domain of authority." Just as they say to their gods who are also in authority position, Kalabari will say to an elder who crosses the line, "agu nsi owi baka kuma, en k"o karare sin en dugo k"o piri ba" - "when a spirit becomes too furious, people will tell him or her the wood s/he was carved from." Even when dealing with their gods, spirits and deities (who even enjoy greater authority compared to elders), Kalabari present a perpetual offer of counterfoil choice to the spirit beings. Kalabari say it is worship and reverence that increase the powers of a god, and this they say is in the nature of all spiritual contacts between them and their gods. So Kalabari gods who have been neglected can demand more attention by being more furious. Generally, every god has the choice to be furious and dangerous in order to get more attention or to elect to just abide with whatever reverence and attention it is fortunate enough to receive. If a god ever exercises the first option of being more dangerous and uncontrollable, Kalabari will say to it, agu nsi owi baka kuma, en k"o karare sin en dugo k"o piri ba - "when a spirit becomes too furious, people will tell him or her the wood s/he was carved from." If a Kalabari god becomes too demanding or more dangerous than useful, people can unanimously annul its power by

refusing to reverence it.

#### ALAPU AND IYA-WOMEN (chiefs and their most prized wives)

Chiefs are the leaders of the various canoe houses, which are the administrative units of the community. A man becomes a chief in one of three ways. He may inherit the post from father, uncle or brother. Members of the house may elect him to the post after the death of the ruling head, or he may be permitted by the ruling chief to create a new stool for himself in recognition of his wealth and support for the house. Usually a Kalabari chief is a man of wealth, able to provide military defense for his house and community. He is also a man of many wives, many of whom would be married according to iya (most lawful and expensive marriage in Kalabari) rites. The primary functions of a chief are to administer the house, grow the corporate wealth of the house and protect and promote the well-being of its members. If he does his duties well he enjoys the confidence of the house members and the high honor, authority, and privilege that usually pertain to the office. If he were to perform at sub-par level, he would not only lose respect, members of the house might remove him from office.

The application of counterfoil choices is no where more pronounced and dramatic than at the installation ceremony of a man taking a chieftaincy title. The ceremony involves the aspirant picking any one of two items placed before him: a yam and a cannon ball. Yam symbolizes a man's ability and commitment to feed his house members - all evidence of self-centered well being as against risk taking on the state's behalf. The yam is actually a counterfoil to establishing that the aspirant is willing to serve the community and the community can rely on him to defend it. It is not an item of choice, but rather represents the wrong side of choice. A cannon ball represents his capability and financial means to defend his community in wars, his commitment to the greater public good as distinct from his personal domain of authority, and his reliability. Usually, the cannon ball is selected - no one can become a state (se or ama) recognized chief without choosing the cannon ball. As soon as a man selects the cannon ball his house supporters will shout to high heavens his praises and those of his ancestors.

Much as men regard the chieftaincy title as the crowning glory of a Kalabari man's achievement, their female counterparts consider the iya marriage the apex of a woman's success - more so if she is an iya-marriage wife of a chief. Apart from child bearing and rearing, iya women are practically idle and carry themselves with a great deal of pride, behaving like the aristocratic ladies of Victorian England. They exercise a lot of influence in their husbands' houses, controlling servants, adopted children, and lesser wives of their husbands. They occupy an acknowledged superior position in the society, conferred on them by their husbands' wealth and their conspicuous idleness. In a society where everybody has to work much distinction is gained by conspicuous idleness, which is evidence of leisure.

An iya marriage is not complete until the bibife ceremony (literally "buying of mouth") is undertaken. Bibife signifies three things. First, it signifies a stage in a lawful or full marriage which gives the bride the right to eat in the husband's house. In the traditional Kalabari towns, a wife for whom the bibife has not been done can cook for her husband, but will have to take her meals and snacks to her parents' house or a house other than her husband's or his relatives' to eat. Second, bibife signifies the man's responsibility towards the wife and his capability and

willingness to feed her for the rest of her life. Finally, it signifies and crowns the new communion between the two families.

The *bibife* ceremony involves serving the bride with innumerable courses of food. At the appointed time, usually in the evening, the bride is taken to the bridegroom's home and presented with different varieties of food. She is given the choice to taste and even eat them, after a member of her family has examined the foods and certified that they have all been well prepared and contain all the right ingredients. To dramatize the fact that she has a choice to eat from all bowls of food placed before her, she will be given water to wash her mouth, next she is given water, soap and a hand towel to wash and clean her hands. Then a woman from her family takes items from each bowl and enticingly presents them to her to eat. The bride turns her face away from the direction of the enticing food. This offer and refusal ritual is repeated several times. On each occasion, the bride refuses the offer because she knows that the whole set of food belongs to her and the man who ordered their preparation is her husband. She equally knows that the choice to taste and eat is a counterfoil choice. She has the man, his wealth, and his promise to feed her for life, and she must bring off this success without any appearance of concern. She must carry herself with grace and style, self-control, restraint and dignity. Part of the aristocratic ideal is nonchalance in the face of a test and "knowing oneself" (*bu nimi*). The aroma of the foods and the incessant prodding to eat must be distracting to the bride, but all through the ceremony she maintains her sense of balance, dignity and self-control in order not to fall for the food, not to grab what is already hers.

As much as *bibife* is "distracting," it does not compare with the "distraction and drama" of parading the bride to the bridegroom's home. It is quite a spectacle to watch a Kalabari bride being escorted to the bridegroom's place. In the early hours of the evening, she is gorgeously dressed and taken to her groom's house with a gas lamp and many praise songs. Women supporters escorting her make jokes and do every thing to make her laugh. Single men who are watching from the sides as she is being paraded hurl insults and scoff at her. Some of them say they had slept with her and she is no good. They do not mean all that they say, the insults are all part of the fun of the evening designed to make her laugh or loose her temper. All through the evening, jeering, singing and praises, she keeps a tight upper lip. Although, she has the option to laugh or frown, it is not exercisable. Laughing, frowning, and verbal responses are only the counterfoil to the real choice of keeping a tight upper lip. Self-control, dignity, decorum and nonchalance are what is expected of a Kalabari woman in this counterfoil choice situation.

Before this fateful evening, during the period of courtship, the woman would also have been faced with several instances of counterfoil choice. When a Kalabari woman visits her prospective parents-in-law, she will be offered food and advised to eat. The proper thing for her to do is to reject the food and ask for water to drink. When the *bibife* ceremony has not been done, it is considered a serious breach of etiquette for a bride to eat in her prospective parents-in-law's house.

The lesson of the chieftaincy, *bibife* and the evening parade is also encoded in a Kalabari proverb about the chick and kite. Kalabari say the crying chick that is in the clutches of a flying kite is not saying that whatever is holding it should release it, the chick is only crying so that its owners would know the cause of its death. The poor chick, which in this case portrays a Kalabari character type, is not crying for choice between becoming the dinner for a hungry kite

and regaining his freedom. Freedom is not an alternative to the clutches of the kite. The chick knows that whatever is holding it is not going to voluntarily release it. Besides, if it were let go by the kite, it would crash to the ground and die. Given all this, freedom is not a choice it can make; such choice is only a counterfoil choice. Thus, it has to show self-control, balance and decorum in the face of crisis. Nonchalance in the face of crisis passes a message to his owners.

## ANCESTORS

Ancestors are presented as part of the Kalabari life cycle because life is deemed not to end with physical death, but continues in another form in the next world. "The idea of survival after death is essential to the theoretical model which Kalabari use to cope with the vicissitudes of every day life. The ancestors underpin the strength of the lineages, and punish those who contravene lineage norms. They and their actions account for many of the fortunes and misfortunes both of the lineage and of their individual members" (Horton 1970: 68). Death, especially for an elder, is therefore a horse he rides from mortality to immortality. Death is a means of emerging as a new ancestor to join the tripartite spiritual scheme of the community.

Thus every traditional Kalabari person looks forward to being "canonized" as an ancestor after physical death to enjoy the privilege of being offered food and drinks as a spirit in return for services for his or her relatives still alive, but not every person can become an ancestor just as not every man can become a chief. Conditions that qualify a person to become an ancestor include dying after age 50, burial in the hometown, not passing away in abnormal circumstances such as suicide, child birth, drowning, or death accompanied by sores or infectious diseases, general swelling of the body and elephantiasis. The person should not be known as a wizard or witch, be of integrity, honesty and supportive of house and community. These rules are not mere conditions that qualify a person for his or her place in the world beyond the grave, they go beyond that. If a person does not meet them before death, the person's corpse will suffer for it and the person will have brought disgrace to the living relatives. Horton wrote that "people who die in any of these ways [abnormal circumstances] are considered to have brought abomination to the community. They are wrapped in mats, and are buried as quickly as possible, without any coffin, in a special tract of mangrove reserved for the "bad dead." After burial, special priests purify the village. People who have died in this way are not normally called upon when lineage members invoke their ancestors. Indeed, the funeral rite performed for them has the effect of severing all ties between themselves and the living (Horton 1970:63).

Before riding the "horse of death" to the world of the ancestors, the dying person considers two final alternatives. He may choose to die lying supine or face-down. Kalabari say "ibo so fi, peni so fi," meaning face-down is death, face-up is death. Technically, a person may decide to face death in either of two ways. But like all other counterfoil choices, the freedom is deceptive. For if one were to die face-down, one would be declared a wizard or witch which automatically forecloses the chance of ever becoming an ancestor. A person who at death cannot look skywards to the creatrix (tamuno, the supreme being) to declare his or her innocence, but rather hides his or her face does not deserve to be an ancestor. Kalabari believe that only the taking of

human life by witchcraft and sorcery will precipitate the turning away of a dying person's face from tamuno.

The death of an iya woman provides another opportunity to choreograph counterfoil choice drama. When such a woman (assuming she qualifies to become an ancestor) dies, her husband and her father's houses will stage a mock battle for the corpse. Both sides have the choice of winning the battle and claiming the body for burial, but for the husband's side, winning is actually the wrong choice. The real choice is to succumb to the father's house. The customary practice is for the woman to be buried by her father's house. For Kalabari say, *meni febo igba fea*, "he who bought the body did not buy the bones."

## PIVOTAL ROLE OF COUNTERFOIL CHOICES

There are three principal elements or principles that define and give meaning to Kalabari ethnic identity. They are (i) the aristocratic ideal; (ii) the concept of fairness; and (iii) the philosophy of *nyemoni* ("covet your own"). Counterfoil choice is the linking mechanism between these elements. First the task of deciphering the link by examining the connection between the counterfoil choice and aristocratic ideal will be discussed.

Counterfoil choices are offered in rites and the daily course of life to teach and reinforce the three components of the aristocratic ideal. Counterfoil choices signify the Kalabari "carefree nonchalance in the face of serious threats to life" not only for the decision-maker, but also for the community or the administrator of the choices. Kalabari hold the view that a person in all circumstances must show balance and self control, nonchalantly breezing and bluffing his or her way through every serious test of his or her social standing, yet passing it faultlessly all the same (Horton, 1966: 181). The drama of counterfoil choices captures the essence of this view.

The series of counterfoil choices we have examined illustrate the essence of the aristocratic ideal: a Kalabari person does not fret over what is already his/her own. Concern or fret, mixed with a tinge of detachment, is only entertained while one is in the process of achieving or actualizing one's goals. Once a person obtains a goal, s/he needs not be aggressive, possessive or celebratory. Hence, Kalabari emphasize the need to show balance and judgment in matters like this and generally in the affairs of life. Kalabari say it is their learned ability to work the fine line between decency and dignity on one hand and recklessness and crudity on the other that distinguishes them from their neighbors. All this is summed up in the proverb, *kalatubo numua ebem o ebiriari. Ogbogibo ebiri kuma ebem o numute*, meaning, "when a child is mad they say he is recklessly exuberant but when a man is recklessly exuberant they say he is mad." A man who for the first time buys a Rolls Royce should comport himself as an aristocrat who has had such luxury for the whole of his life. The *nouveau riche* that suddenly buys the expensive car should show the graces and carriage of someone born into aristocratic families. The point is that what has been achieved should be treated with nonchalance while remaining alert to the responsibilities one has obtained.

Kalabari will say a person who fails to *asa ti*, show style and grace, under such a situation lacks the beloved Kalabari aristocratic ideal. Second, the inability to remain composed, to appear detached to a highly valuable material acquisition, to treat a big achievement as if it were an everyday occurrence, indicates that the person worships material possession. Those

who worship material things are regarded as greedy and do not covet what they own. The thinking is that a contented person is without greed and covets only those things that are personally owned.

The question that comes up at this point is that 'why will a culture that is competitive and fluid, with an almost ruthless respect for wealth and power, expect its members to covet what is only theirs?' The answer comes from the connection between the philosophy of nyemoni, the aristocratic ideal and the Kalabari concept of fairness. As shown below, it is the concept of fairness, that strengthens counterfoil choices, the aristocratic ideal, and the philosophy of nyemoni. Fairness in Kalabari is not a certain arithmetic number to be reached nor is it nearness to a certain idealized benchmark. Fairness or equitable allocation is when each party to a distribution is happy. Fairness is not equal distribution of resources, it is fair when each person likes his or her bundle of resources and would not be better off given the other person's share. It is fair when no one says (at least publicly) that his or her basket of consumption or endowment is worse than the other's. Each preferred his or her bundle. To fret and froth over resources is to show one's lack of self-control, dignity and decorum. What one receives in a distribution, like any other achievement, must be treated with same nonchalant leisureliness. Now this concept of fairness works because it is rooted in and adheres within the ambiance of the philosophy of nyemoni. It is considered unacceptable to envy, at least publicly, the consumption bundle of another person. In Kalabari thinking, a person who does not envy what belongs to another is person who is not greedy and does not worship or reverence possessions. Such a person is capable of treating successes with nonchalant concern. For example, the Kalabari would say Midas was a bad person, because he was so greedy that he jealously guarded his gold and ruined his life by turning everything he touched into gold. He broke the cardinal rule of nyemoni and lacked the finesse of nonchalant concern to achievements.

Perhaps, it is germane to ask how the system of counterfoil choices and the three elements (aristocratic ideal, the concept of fairness and nyemoni) relate to the trading culture of the Kalabari. Is this quadrilateral system a response to the needs and strategy of their trading environment? The issue is to what extent are the management tools Kalabari use to preserve their ethnic identity explainable by their mercantilist culture? I do not pretend to have the definitive answer to this question. Fuller answers must await another (comparative) study, however, a tentative answer might be the following.

While the connection between the four concepts of counterfoil choice, aristocratic ideal, fairness and nyemoni have been explored, the juxtaposition of the four elements and the fundamental driving force of Kalabari society, namely wealth accumulation and ruthless respect for wealth and power needs discussion. The connection will yield insight into how Kalabari managed income inequalities that arose during their four hundred years of involvement in the transatlantic trade. The concept of fairness as worked out in Kalabari society has another pillar of support. It is based on the recognition that certain individuals may enjoy one good more than another may and might have a relatively low utility if all are required to consume at the point of equality. The usefulness of this pillar is in the recognition that it allows the actual distribution of goods or resources to deviate from "perfect equality. This deviation, especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when Kalabari was involved in the transatlantic trade, held the possibility that income could be accumulated for productive use

and profits therefrom would trickle down to the less fortunate members of society. This conceptualization of equity or fairness was supportive of business. The definition of equity obviated the need for any desirable benchmark of equality and thus deflected any attack on the rich out of envy (Wariboko 1997: 78-80). Second, in keeping with the aristocratic ideal, the rich did not need to treat wealth as it were it was the be-all and end-all of life, yet were alert to the responsibilities of conserving and growing it.

The connection between the quadrilateral system and trade needs to be further stressed. This system, especially the fairness component, made it possible for the populace who do not benefit as much from the transatlantic trading boom as the elite chiefs to accept their fate in equanimity. The acceptance of one's fate was anchored on the cultural practice that those who were well to do provided for those who were less fortunate. All four components constituted a kind of ethics system that created support for the trading culture, legitimated the accumulation of wealth, and minimized, if not eliminated, direct confrontation between economic classes. This is not to say that there was a causal law linking these four phenomena to success in trading, but only to identify congruencies and relations between trading and wealth inequality on one hand and the values of society. The four components of the quadrilateral system played some kind of legitimizing functions in the arena of class relations. This argument implies that the Kalabari society (a trading culture) selected and promoted ideas which better corresponded to its needs, without saying that their origins are to be found in economic and social relations of the society.

Another aspect of the connection between the four elements and trading practice is rooted in the "mystery" Kalabari needed to maintain as group in terms of access to its European customers or suppliers. In precolonial times, the white man was still regarded with awe in Eastern Nigeria; Kalabari, and those who worked and traded with Europeans, shared part of that awe and mystique. There was business reason in maintaining a sense of superiority over their hinterland suppliers and buyers who they had occasionally suppressed with guns and cannons supplied by Europeans, and in differentiating their identity from those of their neighbors. There was the need to maintain a monopoly access to European merchants and to differentiate themselves from such groups as Bonny and Nembe-Brass (precolonial city-states in the Eastern Niger Delta) which had similar access. Eastern Niger Delta business people during the precolonial and colonial periods liked to carry themselves with a mysterious air of supremacy and devised elaborate schemes to maintain this as a psychological advantage. This is not to say Kalabari developed their aristocratic ideal in response to trade with Europeans. They were keen businessmen in their own right before the transatlantic trade. Talbot (1932:9) remarked early on that "they are people of great interest and intelligence, hard-headed, keen-witted, and born traders. Indeed one of the principal agents here, a man of worldwide experience stated that, in his opinion, the Kalabari could compete on at least equal terms with the Jew or Chinaman".

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the nature and role of counterfoil choice in Kalabari culture. The characteristic feature of counterfoil choice is that whenever A is offered, Kalabari put its



negative, B to show the person where the decision should not go. Actually, the two items are not alternatives, for "A," is the target item and B is only its counterfoil. The major results of this exploration are: counterfoil choices principally occur at major rites of passage where status changes are made, and are given in situations where it is necessary to force people to rethink their actions or behavior. When Kalabari offer counterfoil choices in their dramatic rites or in the ordinary course of life, they are not necessarily testing the intelligence of the participants or their attentiveness to the sequence of the rite or the immediate environment. The participants are being tested for a particular character trait the Kalabari community holds very dear - the Kalabari aristocratic ideal. People imbued with the Kalabari aristocratic ideal accept their important achievements with extreme nonchalance, picking their way through their prized choices in life as though they were merely incidental to their counterfoils. Counterfoil choices are offered to teach those qualities that Kalabari say define their national identity. Counterfoil choice is a dynamic tool developed to manage adaptation to change by an African culture facing enormous external influences. It was also geared towards maintaining a real or imagined sense of superiority in dealing with business clients. The Kalabari story is a story of a struggle to preserve and reconfigure ethnic identity in the face of modernization and the exigencies of a precolonial trading environment. Management of ethnic identity using counterfoil choices appears then to be a strategy for corporate action, in the sense of a group of people using their ethnic identity to ensure their survival as a distinct group and to differentiate them in a competitive marketplace. The Kalabari needed to set themselves apart from fellow groups of traders like the Bonny and Nembe-Brass in the Eastern Niger Delta. Whether in the time of gunboat diplomacy as in precolonial Nigeria or in today's computer age as in New York, the pursuit of profits have driven business people to carry themselves with some mysterious air of supremacy and devise elaborate schemes to maintain this for psychological advantage.

Together with three other related techniques (aristocratic ideal, Kalabari concept of fairness and nyemoni), Kalabari exploited every opportunity to set themselves apart from competitors, and suppliers (whom they then dominated militarily) and to create an internally cohesive society which could withstand the pressures of the enormous cultural contact created by the transatlantic trade. Kalabari have responded to their exposure to foreign values, ideas, ways of life and cultural artifacts by selecting, incorporating and transforming borrowed, values, ideas and artifacts to create a new combination (ensemble) uniquely identified as Kalabari. Previous studies of this process of adaptation concentrated on the use of a limited number of materials (such as dress) to create and maintain ethnic identity, arguing that the adaptation process is anchored to the society's world view. By focusing on the easily observable, static connection between artifacts (like dress) and world view, they ignored the more intellectual, dynamic and complex processes involved in sustaining and transferring the core of Kalabari identity from one generation to another. This paper has described and explained the salient management tools or ideas that Kalabari have used from the nineteenth century to the present to preserve their ethnic identity.

## Notes

1. The idea of this paper came to me during discussions with Justice A. G. Karibi-Whyte and Dr. Tonye Victor Erekosima in February 1998. The author had separately engaged them in discussions about the real meaning of the yam and cannon ball symbolism in Kalabari chieftaincy installation ceremony. From the talks, I was able to distill the idea of counterfoil choices in Kalabari culture. All errors in interpretation are mine, neither knew that a paper on counterfoil choices would come. I thank the anonymous reviewers and editors of this journal whose comments were very helpful in clarifying many areas of the essay.
2. The Kalabari practice of giving potential decision-makers a choice and 'inducing' them to choose the alternative that makes the 'most sense' is similar to the choice Moses placed before Israelites as recorded in Deuteronomy 30:19. "I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life..." Moses did not really make 'death' an option for the Israelites, it was only a counterfoil of the 'life ticket' and he thus carefully instructed them to choose life.

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