

## Cut & Drawn:

# TEXTILE WORK FROM NIGERIA

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*The Kalabari artist, though unschooled, is conceptually and graphically oriented.*

The cloth called *pelete bite* and *fimata bite* which the Kalabari women of Nigeria transform from imported, commercially manufactured cloth to a special Kalabari product was the focus of a world premiere exhibition at the Goldstein Gallery of the University of Minnesota in May, 1982.

The artists achieve intricate designs without a pattern or draft on the commercially-produced cloth by using a needle to lift threads and a razor blade or penknife to cut them. When the threads are pulled out a new design shows on the cloth.

The Kalabari people live in the delta of the Niger River, in the Rivers State of Nigeria. As riverine people their traditional life has centered on trading and fishing. The capital of the state is Port Harcourt, a bustling city focussed on the oil industry. Many Kalabari (along with people of other ethnic groups) reside there to earn a livelihood from government jobs as civil servants or politicians, as professionals in medicine, law, and education, as service workers, tradesmen, or as common laborers. Attention always turns to home villages, however. Those who reside in Port Harcourt during the work week, travel weekends to nearby Kalabari towns of Buguma, Abonnema, Bakana, Tombia, and other small settlements which they identify as "home." During these weekends, *pelete bite* and *fimata bite* wrappers are worn for special occasions by men, women, and children.

*Pelete bite* and *fimata bite* involve the same processes of cutting and removing existing threads to create a new design. *Pelete bite* motives have both warp and weft-threads cut and portions removed, while *fimata bite* designs result in only

striped designs, for some weft threads are cut and pulled out completely. Artists who cut cloth can manufacture either type. Since the *fimata bite* designs have little variation (other than width of stripe) we will focus on *pelete bite*, which has intricately-cut motives.

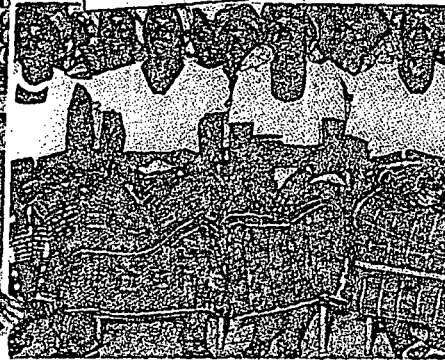
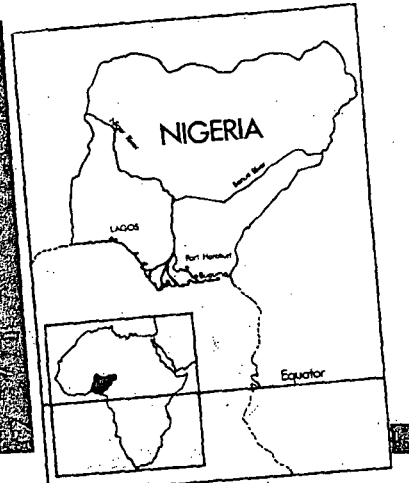
Certain striped, plaid, or checked cloths are designated as appropriate to cut and used more frequently than others. These preferred cloths have technical characteristics that aid the woman in cutting the motif. The fabric must have a high thread count to allow threads to be removed without substantially weakening the cloth. Small-scale stripes, checks, and plaids are also necessary because removal of only a few threads allows design by subtraction to be easily achieved. Finally the color sequencing of the warp threads is important. Lighter, brighter colors are removed which leave the darker areas more prominent.

Ordinarily each of the pattern cloths has a specific name; frequently that of the first trader (traditionally a man) who introduced it into the Kalabari market. This practice accounts for the named cloths such as *kieni*, *ouwnari*, *oruwari*, *anababa*, *okpominuolu*. However, some names are epigrammatic: such as *ngeritubo* (an only child), *golminji* (gold-flecked, literally, "gold water"), *ikaki mgbe* (tortoise shell), and *amasiri* (tiger's paws).

### THE TOOLS AND THE CLOTH

The imported tools used for making *pelete bite*, a needle and a cutting blade (either penknife or razor), are commonly available in local markets and are inexpensive. Similarly, the imported

(Left) Fulani Fubara, textile artist, displaying *pelete bite* cloth commissioned for a recent exhibition. (Below) A group of women wearing *pelete bite* wrappers. Photos: Joanne B. Eicher.



cotton fabrics are readily available, but not inexpensive, depending on such factors as quality of the fabric and whether purchased in a competitive urban market of Port Harcourt or in a local village market where prices are higher. The tightly woven, machine-made checked, striped, or plaid cotton fabrics (usually referred to as "gingham" and "madras" in English) are called *injiri*. The darker checked, striped, and plaid examples of cloth are called *krukubite* ("black" or "dark" cloth). Kalabari men and women prefer *injiri* and *krukubite* over printed cloth for wrappers, even when uncut. These highly desirable fabrics become even more prized after a Kalabari woman imposes additional design elements on them.

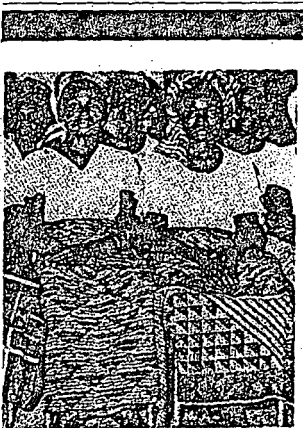
The technique for cutting the cloth is generally the same. The woman lifts one or several threads, depending on the color sequencing, with a needle and severs the thread or threads with her cutting instrument. If she uses a razor blade, she ties it with heavy string to the needle so as not to lose it. Some women cut and pull threads for one motif at a time. Still others cut a section of a cloth and then pull the threads for the section or have someone else pull them.

#### THE MOTIVES

The motives cut on the patron's cloth can be either requested, specifically by the patron or selected by the woman as appropriate for the cloth. Although certain motives are traditionally cut on certain cloths, new motives can be created. Generally inspiration for the motives comes from shapes of objects or creatures found in Kalabari culture and habitat. These motives can be grouped into categories. Motives drawn from the physical environment with Kalabari names are *amybo* (millipede), *odum ikelekele* (python), *sangolo* (fish gill); from the masquerade: *alu* (triangle shapes in a masquerade veil), *igbiri* (rattles); or from the household: *etere* (mat or rectangle-faced carpet), *sibi dalaye* (comb or literally rake for the hair). Other motives appear European in origin but have Kalabari names, for example, *abili* (checkerboard surface or "draughts"), and *ikoli* (chain). Still others carry English names such as "cross," "wineglass"—or a hybrid-term of English and Kalabari—"glass *etemi*" (meaning wineglass tail or the shape of its bottom part).

#### HIERARCHY OF CLOTH

*Pelete bite* is not a homogeneous commodity. Machine-made copies have entered the market in the past three or four years. Manufacturers have copied the old patterns and thus a hierarchy of types has evolved which includes both hand-cut and machine-made copies.



Needle and pin knife used as instruments for cutting "pelete bite" (1980). Photo: Joanna S. Elcher

At the top of the hierarchy are three cloth patterns which appear to have existed well over a hundred years: *amasiri*, *ikaki mybe* and *igodoye moru* (*igodoye omuuru*). The artists agree that these three are the most frequently purchased by their patrons for cutting. These three cloths often have particular motives cut on them because of the characteristics of each cloth regarding pattern and color. The cloth called *amasiri* is one of the most difficult to cut because it is a tightly woven, tiny indigo and white plaid. The design called *etere*, meaning "mat," is often cut on *amasiri*. *Etere* motif describes the rectangles produced from interlacing strands in a handwoven mat. These rectangles are sometimes cut as a maza. The cloth called *ikaki mybe* is an indigo and white checked cloth that has a variety of designs cut on it most usually geometric and symmetrical. The cloth called *igodoye moru* is a sombre indigo, red, and white cloth of narrow stripes which usually has asymmetrical designs cut on it. However, some designs in themselves are symmetrical but are placed asymmetrically on a cloth.

In the middle of the hierarchy are all the other cloths hand-cut by the women. A variety of cloth patterns exist and a variety of motives are cut on them. A core of known motives is shared by the artists, but in addition either new designs emerge or modifications of old ones, as a woman becomes inspired by a specific cloth and its pattern and colors.

At the bottom of the hierarchy are the imported machine-made cloths which provide competition to the hand-cut ones. These cloths are referred to by the Kalabari as "machine-cut" or "English-cut." The most frequently purchased machine-cut cloth is the copy of *simate bite*. Machine-cut *simate bite* looks very similar to hand-cut *simate bite*. Machine-made copies of *pelete bite* have originated by manufacturers replicating some designs of traditional *pelete bite* cloth patterns. They have very regular repeat and float threads on the reverse which makes the cloth heavier than hand-cut ones. Customers generally favor the hand-cut *pelete bite* because of its appearance and lighter weight. However, innovation has also emerged in regard to the imitation *pelete bite*. Women use scissors to cut

off the float threads on the back of the cloth and thus give the machine-cut cloth more of an authentic appearance and hand.

An important but frequently overlooked element of textile arts, however, is their underlying economic viability. If the economic underpinnings of Kalabari textiles are weak, prospects for continuing production of this art form may be bleak.

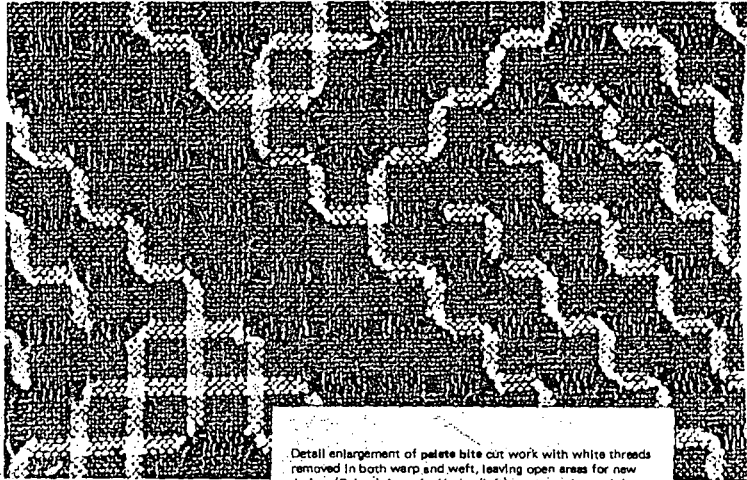
#### ECONOMIC CHARACTERISTICS

One of the major determinants of the economic viability of Kalabari textiles is the demand for the finished cloth. Our investigation has revealed that there is an excess demand for the hand-cut *pelete bite* and *simate bite* cloth. Virtually all of the producers had a backlog of unfilled orders and customers usually had to wait several months before receiving their finished cloth. As a consequence of this excess demand, the producers also did not experience the seasonal fluctuations in demand that face most other textile producers in Africa. The vast majority of the cloth is produced in response to specific orders and consequently, in these cases, no inventory of unsold finished cloth is generated. A few producers might speculate on occasion with a two-yard man's wrapper, but rarely will they do so on the standard eight-yard lengths.

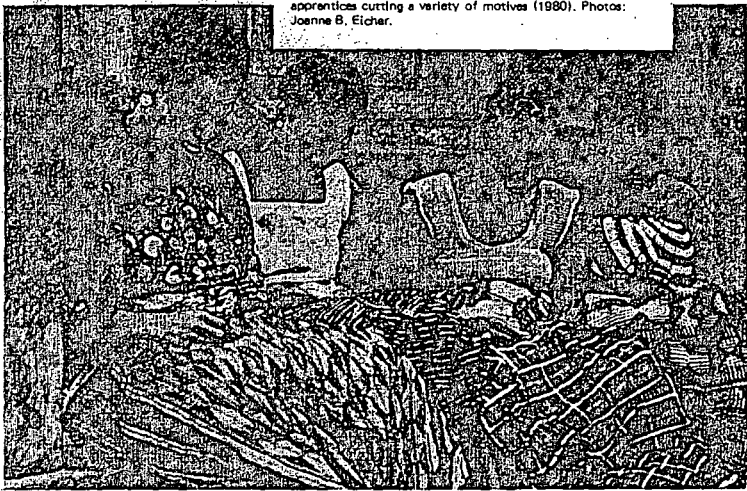
*Pelete bite* and *simate bite*, as noted above, are not homogeneous commodities, and these differences are reflected in the market prices. The hand-cut cloth is uniformly higher priced than the imported, machine-cut substitutes. Among the hand-cut products, the three *pelete bite* cloth patterns at the top of the hierarchy (i.e., *amasiri*, *ikaki mybe* and *igodoye omuuru*) command a premium price. The *simate bite* cloth prices are lower than all the hand-cut *pelete bite* patterns.

The inputs on the supply side also are important determinants of economic viability of Kalabari cloth production. Labor is the major input, followed by material and capital.

The fixed capital requirements of the Kalabari textile producers are rather modest. The needles cost five Kobo (US\$0.09) each and only two are required to produce eight yards of cloth. Razor



Detail enlargement of *pelete bite* cut work with white threads removed in both warp and weft, leaving open areas for new design. (Below) Amonia Akoko (left) master artist, and three apprentices cutting a variety of motives (1980). Photos: Joanne B. Eicher.



blades are fifteen Kobo (US\$.27) each in Buguma and approximately ten are needed for eight yards of cloth. Consequently, the fixed capital cost per yard of finished cloth amounts to only twenty Kobo (US\$.36). Working capital (i.e., the cash, accounts receivable, and inventories), on the other hand, is often a more important capital cost element for small textile producers than is fixed capital. For Kalabari textile producers, however, even the working capital requirements appear modest. Most customers bring their own cloth, so material inventories or cash to pay input suppliers are not needed. Moreover, few sales are made on credit and indeed some producers are even able to require a fifty percent advance for their labor! Finished goods inventories, as noted previously, are minimal.

Material inputs are important only in those instances when the customer does not provide the producer with cloth fabric. In such cases, the imported cotton fabrics are expensive.

The most important input in all cases, however, is labor. The bulk of the labor is provided by the entrepreneur herself and to a lesser extent by apprentices. Hired labor is virtually non-existent.

The production of Kalabari cloth is a labor-intensive activity. It can take cutters over a month, for example, to produce eight yards of the *amasiri* design of *pelete bite*. Complete data on the actual time required to produce various types of Kalabari cloth are unfortunately not available. The *amasiri* and other more complicated designs take about twice as long to produce as the more standard *pelete bite* designs. A skillful producer can cut

standard *pelete bite* at a rate of four yards per week, but can cut *amasiri* type designs at a rate of only two yards per week. A less skillful artisan, however, may be able to cut one yard of *amasiri* per week even working "full time." "Full time" appears to be around thirty hours per week.

The crucial economic issue is whether or not the return to the entrepreneur or enterprise is sufficient to ensure that the activities are economically viable. Once again the paucity of data make it difficult to provide a definitive answer. Nevertheless, we have sufficient preliminary evidence to frame some tentative conclusions. For those producers who only only cut on cloth brought to them by their customers, for example, it appears that the labor charge per yard for the *amasiri* design, for example, is approximately N7 (US\$12.60). If a producer can cut two yards of *amasiri* design per week, she would earn N14 per week (US\$25.00). For those producers of the *amasiri* design that purchase their cloth inputs, the return for a similarly skilled artisan, would appear to be somewhat higher, from N15 (US\$28.00) to N18 (US\$32.40) per week. The "hidden," working capital required to purchase the cloth input, however, would reduce the size of the return somewhat.

How do these returns compare with the other types of activities in Nigeria and elsewhere? In Nigeria, the return from the cutting of Kalabari cloth appears to exceed that generated by other women's activities. For example, producers of *kasa*

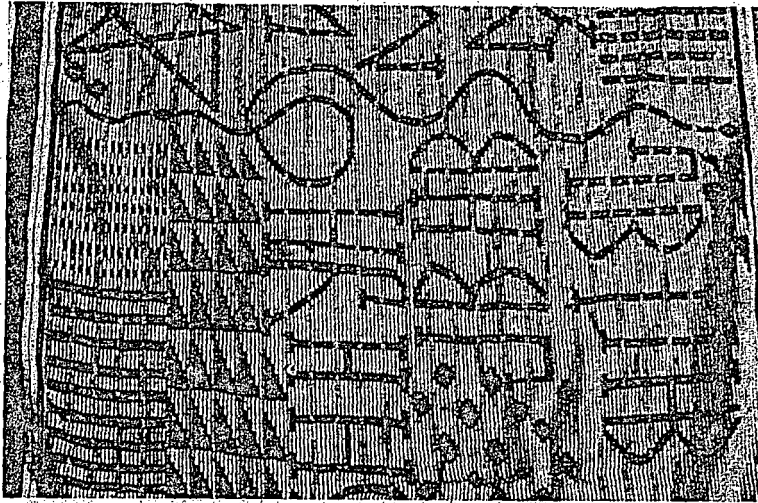
(racks for drying fish) earn only N7 (US\$12.60) per week. Nevertheless, the return was below the 1982 urban minimum wage of N37 (US\$66.00) per week. Thus, our preliminary finding is that the return from cutting Kalabari cloth is high compared with the alternative income earning opportunities for women in the area, but is below the earnings that could be generated in the "formal" sector.

From our sample of thirty entrepreneurs, the majority of entrepreneurs were young, with two-thirds less than thirty-five years old and three were less than fifteen years old. Not surprisingly, most of them were relatively new to the activity. Slightly less than half had less than five years experience in the business. The majority of the entrepreneurs learned how to cut cloth from friends or relatives, while some paid to apprentice under a teacher/producer, and others were self-taught. The cutting of Kalabari cloth, while an old art, appears to be a dynamic, growing activity in the area.

#### CULTURAL AUTHENTICATION

We will analyze the innovativeness of the *pelete bite* artist in regard to our concept of "cultural authentication," or assimilation. In another article concerning *pelete bite* we identified four successive stages in the cultural authentication of a foreign artifact by a recipient culture. These stages—selection, characterization, incorporation,

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Historic cloth from John Bull compound in Buguma, believed to have been cut in 1880. Photo: Joanne B. Eicher.

and transformation—represent the sequence of responses necessary for assimilation. They contrast with the kinds of change that reflect rejection of foreign artifacts or passive borrowing.

The first stage, *selection*, is illustrated by the fabrics chosen by Kalabari women for cutting. *Injiri* is preferred generally for wear as wrappers by Kalabari men and women. Cloths with the technical requirements of high thread count, small-scale woven patterns and specified color sequencing are mandatory. These factors illustrate that selection is a *perceptual* process.

The women cut motives that stem from their familiar world. The process of applying names to ameliorate the strangeness of an unfamiliar artifact is encompassed by the stage of *characterization*, an essentially symbolic process. Names for the patterns of cloth and motives cut are an example of such symbols. These motives are abstract concepts of form or shape, such as *amgbo* (separated millipede); *odum ikelekele* (sinuous snake); *sangolo* (serrated fish gill) or *alu* (triangle shapes in masquerade veil).

The Kalabari artists have developed a symbol of common identity for clan members by using drawnwork designs to distinguish the gingham and madras of their own group from that of others who use this cloth. The cut cloth represents *incorporation* in Kalabari society. The innovation of cutting motives gave the Kalabari a cloth that is uniquely their own and probably accounts for the fact that they do not use the elaborate machine-embroidered commercial madras and gingham cloths that are more consistently favored, for instance, by the Igbo, Ikwerre, Nembe and other

neighboring groups. For example, the Igbo men and women who also use madras extensively, often call the cloth "george." But they have not imposed on the madras or "george" the same kind of proprietary "stamp" as the Kalabari have done by "cutting" another design into the cloth.

Design by subtraction in needlework is a relatively rare textile art form around the world as contrasted to design by addition (as in the case of embroidery or needlepoint). In this textile art, the Kalabari women have displayed amazing ingenuity in the creation of intricate motives. The mental process of creating motives abstracted from the surrounding environment onto a textile is one aspect of innovation which transforms the imported cloth into a truly Kalabari cloth. The names of objects used to identify particular designs then, actually represent a set of abstract forms which include such geometric shapes as the rectangle, the square, triangle, and circle and can be presented as serrated, clustered, checkerboard, or undulating arrangements.

All these forms have been abstracted from nature by way of plants or animals, or their own indigenous artifacts, and then from imported modern items. The Kalabari artist, though unschooled, is conceptually and graphically oriented. The *pelate bite* designs therefore represent, above everything else, the complex visual forms perceived by the artists.

Kalabari artists have also contributed to the new organizational structure of an "open" society in which apprentices do not necessarily come to them on the basis of traditional relationships such as daughters, sisters, or relatives by marriage.

Instead, the criteria of ability, interest, industry, and teachability appear to be the ones that have been applied in selecting their proteges, thus spreading through the population of women and especially younger generations values of personal achievement.

#### References:

- Paper presented to African Studies Council Spring Symposium, "Dress and Textiles in Africa and the Diaspora," May 6, 1982, University of Minnesota.
- For further elaboration see the catalogue by Joanne Bubolz Eicher and Tony Victor Erekosima with Otto Charles Thieme, *Pelate Bite: Kalabari Cut-Thread Cloth*, Goldstein Gallery, University of Minnesota, St. Paul MN, 1982, 32 pages, 4 b/w illustrations. \$5.00 postage paid from Textiles and Clothing Dept., University of Minnesota, St. Paul MN 55108.
- The concept of cultural authentication was introduced in Tony Victor Erekosima's "The Tartans of Buguma Women: Cultural Authentication," a paper presented to the African Studies Association Annual Meetings, Los Angeles CA, October 31, 1979 and expanded in Tony Victor Erekosima and Joanne Bubolz Eicher, "Kalabari Cut-Thread and Pulled-Thread Cloth," *African Arts*, Vol. XIV, No. 2, February, 1981, pages 48-52.
- Carl Liedholm, "The Economics of African Dress and Textile Arts," *African Arts*, Vol. XV, No. 3, May, 1982, pages 71-74.