

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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TIM JUDAH

Hello, this is Tim Judah welcoming you to another edition of Arts and Africa

ACTUALITY - Sekiapu playing drums

TIM JUDAH

That was the sound of Sekiapu, a Nigerian Kalabari masquerade troupe currently performing in London.

ACTUALITY - Sculpture playing drums

TIM JUDAH

And that was a working sculpture of two masqueraders playing their drums made by the sculptress Sokari Douglas Camp. Sokari, who was born in Bugama, Rivers State, Nigeria was educated in Britain and is currently exhibiting her startling sculptures at the Africa Centre here in London. The main pieces are life-sized pieces made out of mild or thin steel. Some of them are so loosely structured that you can see right through them. Among the figures are excited ladies, the mechanised drummers that we've already heard and there's even a huge boat. The show is strong on its own but to complement it, Sokari has brought from her hometown of Bugama, fifteen Kalabari masqueraders to play at the exhibition. When I began talking to Sokari Douglas Camp she was busy crouched over a box of wires with an electrical screwdriver. I asked her what she was doing.

SOKARI DOUGLAS CAMP

(Laughs) I'm trying to find out why one of my machines won't work.

JUDAH

This is an electrical junction box attached to one of your sculptures, isn't it?

DOUGLAS CAMP

Yes, it is.

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JUDAH

Well what's the sculpture is is attached to?

DOUGLAS CAMP

Oh, the sculpture it is attached to is called Masquerade, or if you are Kalabari, it is called 'Ouu' and it's an 'Ouu' that jangles the feet up and down, and that is Igbirifarehand so he just jangles his feet up and down. He's got bells, actual metal bells, connected to his feet. The machine here is giving me a little bit of trouble. So I'm trying to fix it so that it plays from time to time.

JUDAH

After repairing this sculpture, I asked Sokari to describe to me the figures of the Kalabari ladies that she'd made.

DOUGLAS CAMP

Well, they're wearing cloth, in a Kalabari style fashion. They wear two cloths, one that goes down to the ankle and the other that stands just above the knee. So they have two cloths which makes them seem rather large and round. So my ladies are very, very large and they're taller than I am, about 5 feet 8", 6 feet tall. They're totally made out of steel, and these ladies normally wear white tops or blouses as some people call them. Some have got kind of ordinary looking blouses and others have got lacy tops. They wear sort of head-ties as well but my head-ties aren't as exciting as my sister's really. She's got an exhibition of head-ties in this same exhibition, just to show people how people from the Rivers State would wear head-ties.

JUDAH

Your ladies here look rather, angry or certainly excited, waving their arms about. Are they angry about something?

DOUGLAS CAMP

No, no! They're called 'excited women' actually. (Laughs) And they're excited about the masquerader - who seems as if he's crossing water in front of them in a huge boat - a 20 foot long boat.

JUDAH

Oh yes, let's go over to the boat shall we?
We're now standing in front of, well, a huge boat with a masquerader standing on the end there. But what's this boat called in fact?

DOUGLAS CAMP

It's called 'Alaliyaru' which means Festival boat.

JUDAH

It this the type of boat that's used for festivals in Rivers State?

DOUGLAS CAMP

Well, not quite, because this one actually doesn't float and it's made for being shown in galleries. It's a bit 'holey', really, because it's made in two halves so that I can get in and out of public spaces.

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JUDAH

Yes, but is this the type of boat that would be used - not this one that you've built?

DOUGLAS CAMP

No. Well, yes it is, but, of course it is not the type that would be used really because it's a piece of sculpture!

JUDAH

Well, fair enough. But I put it to Sokari that I found her art hard to place; in its style it was neither recognisably African nor European.

DOUGLAS CAMP

I'd call it my own art, really. I'm glad it's 'hard to place'. I should be. There's only one of me around, you know. (Laughter)

JUDAH

It's not really visibly African or European at all, is it?

DOUGLAS CAMP

No. It's contemporary Sokari! (laughs)

JUDAH

But do you think that reflects your own background?

DOUGLAS CAMP

Well, of course it reflects my own background. It reflects my own background because, it is actually depicting women in Kalabari attire or in Southern Nigerian attire. That's what it depicts. And the women that see these cloths recognize the cloths as 'ingeri' and other fabrics that they themselves wear.

JUDAH

Have you actually exhibited your sculptures in Nigeria?

DOUGLAS CAMP

No.

JUDAH

Why not?

DOUGLAS CAMP

Well, I haven't worked in Nigeria really, except for these last few weeks actually, getting this troupe of Sekiapu here. Otherwise I have never worked there, as an adult, anyway.

JUDAH

So most Kalabari haven't seen your sculptures. But the Kalabari that you've brought here to perform in and amongst these sculptures - what do they think of them?

4.

DOUGLAS CAMP

Well, they've been making jokes about the various pieces because the chief drummer is my uncle and they've been laughing at the drummers that I've made. They've been saying that that's a portrait of my uncle and my uncles's been sort of shunning them and saying that it's a portrait of one of them, you know, whoever accused him of being pieces of iron, you know. They keep on saying that the Masquerader is various members of the troupe who do play masquerade parts very similar to the ones I've made.

JUDAH

Now, are your sculptures actually for sale?

DOUGLAS CAMP

(giggles) Well yes they are for sale, but no-one buys them because they'r rather large. You can't put a 20 foot boat on your mantelpiece!

JUDAH

It was at this point that several of the masqueraders who had been watching our interview began, all at once I must add, to explain things to me in Kalabari. And then suddenly and gloriously, they burst into song.

ACTUALITY - masqueraders singing

JUDAH

They then continued their explanations and without Sokari to interpret I admit I would have been totally lost.

DOUGLAS CAMP

They want you to join their cult as well.

JUDAH

Ah. But first of all could you, before I join them, perhaps explain a bit? What was the song they sang and what were they explaining to me before that?

DOUGLAS CAMP

(Kalabari dialogue with troupe members) That's their secret cult. Their way of calling their ancestors. The way they shout like that is a way of accompanying masquerades. It's a way of making the event stronger and the atmosphere stronger.

JUDAH

What's the significance - the real important bit - of the Sekiapu cult?

DOUGLAS CAMP

The really important bit of it is that it's an all-male cult and they are practically a religious group, really, and they take care of historical aspects and mythological aspects of our culture. Without them the male society, you know, just wouldn't be as strong as it is

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in Kalabari. They are a war-like cult that are also religious and they are connected with spirits, so it's a spiritual cult. They are a very, very selective cult and they don't have disabled people in it. They don't have thieves or rapists or anybody like that in it and they are the only people who can call the gods in this manner. It's a very great honour to be part of their group.

JUDAH

Can any man - any Kalabari man - join the cult?

DOUGLAS CAMP

Almost any man. I think there's various sorts of things they check that you've got before you join.

JUDAH

Like what, for example?

DOUGLAS CAMP

(Laughs) I can't really say that on the radio!

JUDAH

It was at this point that I had a chance to ask Sekiapu's chief drummer, Tiger Amachree, exactly what he thought of being represented in a working sculpture.

TIGER AMACHREE (in Kalabari)

DOUGLAS CAMP

He says he likes it very much. He says it's turning his whole head and he's very excited about it.

JUDAH

He's pointing at the excited ladies now! What's he saying about them?

DOUGLAS CAMP

He says he understands them totally because when an 'Ouu' comes out, a masquerade comes out, the women come out. They are very excited and they cheer - so they know what it's all about. He's saying all the women, if this kind of event was really happening in our hometown, the women would come out in their best clothes like this and cheer like that. So he's very pleased that you know they have at least a little bit of company even though it's mild steel! (laughs) (Kalabari explanation) they said if only these things were taken back to Nigeria, people would know it was really true that things like this existed. Because you know, when they describe these things to people, they won't believe them in Nigeria.

JUDAH

What's he been saying?

DOUGLAS CAMP

He's been saying that I'm some sort of ... that I'm a bit like a spirit the way I manage to make these things and I said he shouldn't say that because he shouldn't wish something like that on me even though it is very complimentary. I like being a human being, basically!

JUDAH

The way it's organised, we've got the boat behind us, then we've got some chairs where some of the musicians of Sekiapu, are sitting with their drums in front of them, and then in front of them we have got the excited ladies. In fact in front of that there seems to be some people who've just come up off the street to have a look. Is this really like a little village setting in Kalabari?

DOUGLAS CAMP

It has turned into a little bit of a village setting, but it's only like this today because they are giving little concerts today and they'll be starting again at 7 o' clock. They're sitting in front of the boat with their drums, but normally they're prancing around the whole setting in their regalia, their best regalia, but, I don't know, we're working on it, we're working things!

JUDAH

In fact I mean it seems to be really rather creating the atmosphere well. Some of the musicians over there having a drink, I see a gin bottle, they're having a smoke, and the ladies are chatting - all that seems to be missing are a couple of hens sort of wandering around.

DOUGLAS CAMP

We have got some hens in the exhibition actually. We've got some chickens.

JUDAH

Oh, let's go and have a look at your chickens.

The sculptress, Sokari Douglas Camp taking me off to see her chickens. Well that's it from Arts and Africa for this week. And this is Tim Judah leaving you with the sound of the Sekiapu.

ACTUALITY - Sekiapu

N.B. All Kalabari words have been transcribed phonetically.