

Ijo (Africa, Nigeria, West Africa region)
Memorial Screen, Late 19th century
Wood, raffia, pigment
H.37½ x W.28 x D.9¾ inches
The John R. Van Derlip Fund, 74.22

Theme

The importance of family relationships unites all human society. Among the Ijo people of Nigeria, deceased ancestors remain involved in family affairs and decisions. This memorial screen provides a dwelling place for the spirit of an important ancestor.

Background

The Ijo people live on the delta of the Niger River in the West African country of Nigeria. They inhabit the eastern part of this huge delta, which dominates the coast of Nigeria, creating a salty tidal swamp. The Kalabari are a subgroup of the Ijo peoples, related by both language and culture, yet maintaining a distinct culture of their own.

A fishing and trading people, the Kalabari have been known as traders of salt, fish, and palm oil. They were also active as middlemen in the slave trade. In the past, they depended heavily on their water environment, as is evident in their religion and art. Their most important and prestigious institution was the Ekine Society, a male social group whose function was to invoke the help of the water spirits that presided over the delta's creeks and inlets. This society also played an important role in the social organization of the Kalabari and the funerary rituals of leading tribesmen.

Traditional Kalabari society consisted of small village communities made up of complex family, or lineage, groups of varying sizes. Members of a lineage lived together as a unit, holding land and electing a head or chief. Beginning in the late 15th century, in response to European contact, the Kalabari turned from a fishing to a trading economy dependent on European trade. Undergoing a number of changes in social structure, Kalabari lineage groups developed into "houses" which were trading organizations involved in both export and import. A house consisted of an elected head and a membership that grew by adopting men and women of different origins into the lineage as sons and daughters. Houses were bound by common economic interests as well as by ties of kinship, and their members felt the same sense of obligation to each other as members of traditional kinship groups did. Gradually an atmosphere of intense competition between houses and within individual groups became part of Kalabari society. Certain families acquired great wealth and economic power, comparable to the merchant princes of Europe.

Kalabari society was not only competitive but also very fluid, and success came to individuals as a result of achievement. While house heads held great power, they were dependent on their followers and needed to perform well in order to maintain their position. Theoretically, anyone could rise to the top through hard work and entrepreneurial skills.

When an important member of a trading house died, relatives commissioned an artist to produce an elaborate memorial screen called a *duein fobara* (doo-en fo-bah-rah) or "forehead of the dead." According to traditional Kalabari religious belief, every person has a spirit, or *teme* (teh-meh), the

invisible vital force of life. The immortal spirit resided in the forehead, and after death the memorial screen became the spirit's home. Within a *duein*, the spirit of an ancestor lived on and remained active in the affairs of the community, looking after its family, attending celebrations, and commanding respect from its descendants.

Traditionally, a screen was constructed a year or two after the death of the person whom it represented. When completed, the screen was placed in an inner room of the trading house, behind an altar of three mud pillars. Following elaborate consecration and installation rituals, food and drink were brought to the shrine every eight days by the head of the deceased's household. Every seventh year, a goat was sacrificed and its blood sprinkled in front of the screen.

Memorial screens were made to honor the spirits of the most important citizens—the Kalabari chiefs and the heads of trading houses. A screen also served to protect a house, to proclaim its importance and power, and to reinforce a sense of continuity between past and present house leaders.

Memorial Screen

This 19th-century memorial screen made of wood and raffia pays homage to the powerful spirit of a leading Kalabari citizen. The deceased appears as the large central figure, flanked by two smaller figures who probably represent his kinsmen-followers. His large size emphasizes his importance.

The memorial screen is constructed with a standard set of elements common to all the Kalabari screens. The three figures are carved in relief from odumdum wood, chosen because of its allegorical association with orderly human social life. No attempt was made to produce an individual portrait, for the Kalabari recognized an ancestral representation by the accessories rather than the features. Thus, the chief is shown wearing his Ekine Society headdress, which indicates his identity and prestige; the objects, now lost, that were once in his and his followers' hands were attributes of leadership such as a canoe paddle, a tusk, a speaker's staff, a fan, or a fly whisk. Originally, the figures would have had cloth skirts around their waists. On some screens, the identity of the house is indicated by initials carved on the frame. The letters marked on the top and sides of this frame are not clearly identifiable. The pegs above the screen probably supported a row of small heads that symbolized the great number of dependents and followers this chief had. Typical of Kalabari figurative art, the figures are abstract, symmetrical, and frontal. The dotted lines painted on their torsos represent the backbone, and reinforce the human quality of the ancestors, who continue to be involved personally with their descendants.

Style and Technique

The memorial screen is an exceptional form of construction in African art. Other forms of ancestral sculpture commonly portray a single figure carved in the round from a single piece of wood. The memorial screen figures, however, are groups of figures suggesting meaningful relationships. They typically consist of three frontal wooden figures. Rather than portraying a naturalistic image, the artist concentrates on key features, reducing the various anatomical parts to stylized geometric components: large ovoid heads, eyes, and mouth; flat, square torsos; outstretched arms with hands cupped to hold objects. These features are not individual characteristics, but rather, conform to a conventional representation or a recognized cultural norm. Components such as heads, bodies, appendages, and accoutrements are individually carved, and the parts are then assembled in a construction on a framed rectangular screen. The many pieces of wood are attached by being

nailed, jointed, tied with raffia, stapled, and pegged.

The development of this unique form remains unexplained, although it may reflect the hierarchical structure of Kalabari society itself. This can be seen in the arrangement of the figures according to rank, with the most important figure carved larger in size and placed prominently in the center of the composition. It is flanked by the smaller, dependent figures, which reinforce the deceased leader's importance. In addition, the division of the screen into vertical columns, the window-like shapes flanking the larger head, (which originally held mirrors), and the repeated geometric shapes and border patterns also serve to convey the strict order of society. Thus, the sculptural form itself suggests the essence of the Kalabari social structure, emphasizing the importance of the head of the house in assuring the prosperity of the trading house even after his death.

Artist

Although the memorial screen is not signed, the artist was probably not unknown at the time it was made. Because of the variety of techniques involved in fabricating such an elaborate memorial, it is likely that one family specialized in the production of screens and maintained their monopoly by transmitting the skills of the craft from generation to generation. Clearly, the carver's primary objective was to provide a service for the community rather than to express an individual creative vision.

Suggested Questions

1. Who do you think is the most important figure here? Why?
2. If the largest figure is a chief or leader, who do you think the other figures might be? Why are they smaller? Do you think all the members of the society had memorial screens made in their honor or only the most powerful and important people?
3. What parts of this sculpture look wooden? Raffia is used to tie various components together. **Explain that raffia is a fiber produced from the leaves of a palm tree found in many parts of Africa.** Where do you see raffia? The empty square spaces to the left and right of the chief's head held mirrors at one time. Would mirrors have been easily available to the Kalabari people? How might they have acquired them in the late 19th century? Why would they want to use them? (*No right answer—for decoration, to incorporate European objects, etc.*)
4. There are little dots on each figure. They stand for a certain bony part of our bodies—can you guess what? **Have the children feel their spines.** Why do you think these bones are represented as dots?
5. Can you find designs on this sculpture? Are they made with geometric or organic shapes? Does the artist use vertical, horizontal, or diagonal lines? Where are they?
6. Do you think these faces were meant to be portraits? Why do they look alike? How would the relatives recognize their ancestor, the chief? (*Symbols such as the crown and the possessions he once held in his hands.*)
7. One term to describe these figures is “stylized.” While there are no individual

characteristics, the artist exaggerated certain features to suggest similar characteristics of the Kalabari people. In what way does the artist carve his figures to conform to a recognized cultural norm? Discuss stylization.

8. What does this screen tell us about the values of the Kalabari people? What is important to them?
 - the relationship between family members
 - the prominence and power of this family in the community
 - the importance of the head of the family
 - the continuity between past and present house leaders

(All of the above are correct)
9. Does each of the figures here represent a particular individual or the role of that individual? Why do you think so? **(Explain the missing accessories representing leadership that would have been in the hands of the figures.)**
10. If you wished to be recognized not by your face but by what you wore and the objects you held, what would you wear and hold?
11. This screen was made to honor dead ancestors or relatives. How do we honor our dead today? Do you have any memorials of deceased family members in your home?
12. The relatives of the ancestor honored in the screen left food and offerings in front of it several times a year. Why would they do that? What do some Americans do to honor the graves of their dead?
13. How is this representation of a Kalabari family system different from the representation of an English family shown in the Millais painting?
14. If you wanted to represent your family in art, how would you do it—in sculpture, painting, collage, photography? What family characteristics would you emphasize? Would you include any family possessions? Would you include both living and dead relatives?

Bibliography

Barley, Nigel. *Foreheads of the Dead: An Anthropological View of Kalabari Ancestral Screens*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988.

Ravenhill, Philip L. and Roslyn A. Walker. *Kalabari Ancestral Screens: Levels of Meaning*. Washington, D.C. Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988.