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The Sekiapu and Governance: *How the Dance Society Maintained Law and Order*

By Kosisochukwu Nzeribe

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The Sekiapu and Governance: How the Dance Society Maintained Law and Order

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Among the Kalabari people of the Niger Delta, the Sekiapu (also called the Ekine Society) stands as one of the most important cultural institutions linking artistry with authority. Often described as a “dance society,” the Sekiapu is far more than performance. Historically, it functioned as an agency of governance: enforcing laws, preserving moral order, mediating disputes, and protecting community values.



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01

Origins and Cultural Role of the Sekiapu

The Sekiapu is one of the central masquerade and performance institutions in Kalabari society. Its origins are connected to Kalabari cosmology, where music, dance, and spirit invocation were intertwined with political and social life. Members of the society are custodians of masked spirits known as owu (masquerades), which are believed to embody ancestral forces.

While described publicly as a “dance society,” its true function historically revolved around:

Regulating behavior through ritual sanctions,

Offering entertainment during festivals and funerals.

The Sekiapu was therefore both a cultural and judicial institution.

Kalabari people traditionally believe that the Sekiapu operates with the backing of ancestral spirits. Because masquerades are considered to be “spirits in human form,” their pronouncements carry weight and cannot be easily ignored. This sacred aura gave Sekiapu a unique power to:

Discourage theft, impudence, or violence,

The masquerade’s public appearance often signaled that a breach of social norms had occurred and needed correction.

02

Enforcing Communal Values

The Sekiapu reinforced key Kalabari values such as respect for elders, peaceful coexistence, and adherence to communal responsibilities. For example, during festivals, masquerades would publicly shame or mock those known for irresponsible acts. This kind of social satire, delivered through dance and music, served as a strong deterrent to misbehavior.

03

The Sekiapu and Social Regulation

Kalabari governance traditionally operated through the Amanyenabo (king), the Council of Chiefs, and the various War Canoe Houses. However, the Sekiapu served as an unofficial “fourth arm” of governance, ensuring that laws established by chiefs were respected.

Confiscation of property (rare, but symbolic)

These sanctions were seen as spiritually backed and were highly effective.

04

Regulating Public Conduct

During community gatherings especially funerals, canoe regattas, or the annual Sekiapu festival, masquerades policed the crowd. They ensured:

Their presence made people behave because “no one wanted to be singled out by a spirit.”

05

Dispute Settlement and Mediation

The Sekiapu often acted as mediators in disputes between individuals, families, or War Canoe Houses. Their spiritual authority made them ideal for settling issues such as:

Misconduct within the Sekiapu itself and because they operated as a collective, they were considered neutral and less susceptible to bribery.

06

Public Hearings

When disputes escalated, the Sekiapu might hold a public hearing, during which:

2. Elders and experienced members deliberate
4. Ritual cleansing or reconciliation follows. This process ensured transparency and restored communal harmony.

The Sekiapu communicated laws and values not only through enforcement but through artistry. Songs, chants, and dances carried moral lessons. For example:

Dances depicted the consequences of taboo-breaking

Masquerade dramatizations retold historical events involving justice.

This artistic approach made governance a communal, participatory process.

Also, one of the most effective tools of the Sekiapu was public ridicule. Through humorous songs, the society could expose a person's wrongdoing without naming them directly. Everyone understood the message. This form of "artistic punishment" encouraged self-correction and avoided physical violence.

07

Guardians of Festivals and Sacred Sites

The Sekiapu protected shrines, marketplaces, and festival routes. During the arrival of European traders in the 19th century, the Sekiapu was among the groups responsible for:

Ensuring foreigners respected Kalabari customs

Enforcing ritual restrictions. They maintained security and protected the community.

On the waterways, Sekiapu members sometimes accompanied War Canoe Houses to maintain discipline during trade expeditions or conflict resolution missions.

Colonial Disruption

British colonial rule weakened the authority of indigenous institutions. Missionaries discouraged masquerade practices, calling them “pagan.” Colonial courts replaced traditional justice systems, and the Sekiapu lost much of its legal power.

Despite this, the Sekiapu survived as a cultural institution. Today, it remains:

A custodian of Kalabari music and masquerade tradition

A reminder of traditional governance structures.

The Sekiapu publicly viewed as a dance society was, in truth, a powerful instrument of governance in historic Kalabari society. Through ritual authority, performance-based sanctions, dispute mediation, and cultural instruction, the society maintained law and order in ways that were effective, respected, and spiritually legitimate. Its survival today, despite the pressures of colonialism and modernization, speaks to the deep-rooted value placed on culture, tradition, and collective responsibility in the Kalabari world.

The Sekiapu remains a symbol of how art, spirituality, and governance can merge to sustain social harmony.

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