The Cross River, which begins in the Cameroon mountains and rolls west and then south toward the Nigerian coast, has provided a fertile climate for ritual systems and masquerades that has been amplified in part due to centuries of intense trade in agricultural products, foreign goods, and humans (Fig. 1). Prior to road travel, the Cross River acted like an umbilical cord connecting hinterland to coastline. Trade along the river sparked a chain reaction that allowed art forms to leap across ethnic, national, and international boundaries, feeding ritual associations that defy geographic and ethnic divisions. While the male ritual association Ékpè/Mgbè (the Leopard Society) is the best-known example of this, there is a vast nexus of performance traditions in which masquerades—including those by women—are abundant. In this article, I will consider patterns of concealing and revealing the female body in masquerades, rituals, and spectacles of pageantry. Through a variety of seemingly different case studies from Cross River and its diaspora, told in three acts, I will analyze how the gendered body is inscribed with meaning in ritual systems where knowledge and secrecy are highly valued and authority can be either asserted or transgressed.

Act I: Africa is based upon original research on women’s masquerades that completely conceal the female body, performed by the Bakor-Ejagham and their neighbors in the middle Cross River region. I explain these masquerades in light of a spectrum of women’s performance traditions, possibly understood as masquerade, that reveal the female dancer’s identity, or much more in the case of ritual nudity. Act 2: Caribbean follows the flow of the transatlantic slave trade to Cuba, where the Abakuá (the Cuban equivalent of the Leopard Society) reformulates Cross River traditions with new gendered meanings within a confraternity of hypermasculinity and where there is no longer a dual-gendered ritual system. Because women in Cuba are noticeably absent from Abakuá ritual, which involves inscription of the silenced female body, it was left to noninitiates such as the female printmaker Belkis Ayón (1967–1999) to respond to Abakuá through her own ritual act of reinscribing. Act 3: The Return Ticket considers how the diaspora returns to Africa with the importation of Trinidadian Carnival. In Calabar Carnival, “the biggest street party in Africa,” female performers display elaborate costumes and skin within an expanded landscape of pageantry and masquerade. So, from Cross River to the Caribbean and back again, I will trace rituals that invoke flesh and spirit and rely upon either revealing or concealing the female body.

In this article, “in the flesh” refers to the physical and symbolic use of the female body/skin within performance traditions that allow individuals to engage “in the spirit,” or to access resources in the less-visible world. In addition to exploring how flesh and spirit are significant in “traditional” ritual practice, I also consider the layered meanings of flesh and spirit associated with church doctrines related to human attempts to achieve divine redemption or the joining of spirit and flesh in the process of becoming transformed and born again (within increasingly popular charismatic church movements). In light of the many meanings associated with flesh and spirit, I consider how women and masks are used to navigate and shape complex systems of power through ritual acts and bodily knowledge within local and global frameworks.

**ACT I: AFRICA**

The gendered body, whether it is concealed within a masquerade costume or adorned and displayed, is an important component of Cross River art and ritual. Moreover, there are many instance in the Cross River region whereby signs (writing) are drawn upon...
the body—a more often than not the female body—or a representation of the body. For example, older women decorate the bodies of young moninkim—girls who have undergone ritual seclusion and circumcision. With beautifully designed skin and elaborate coiffures, they emerge from the “fattening house” physically and psychologically transformed into young women (prepared for marriage) and they dance (Fig. 2). Similarly, postmenopausal women paint over incised lines on the “body” of the Bakor stone monoliths (circa seventeenth century or earlier) before the stones are ritually fed with pounded yam and palm oil at the New Yam Festival (Fig. 3). The act of reinscribing the stone’s surface, like painting the body, is part of a ritual that enables the community to connect with ancestors. Elaborate coiffures and designs also appear upon the faces of skin-covered masks. Considering that skulls, a body part collected long ago by warrior societies, were a likely inspiration for these carved wooden masks covered in animal skin, the body is clearly entwined in many layers of meaning in Cross River art.

The relationship between women and masking was the topic of a 1998 special issue of African Arts (edited by Sidney Kasfir and Pamela Franco) that presented a wide-ranging set of articles based in Africa and the diaspora, including an article about Ejagham women’s masquerades that is relevant to my discussion. That issue of African Arts was shaped by several questions: What constitutes a masquerade? How are men’s and women’s masquerades different? And what does it mean to conceal or reveal one’s identity within a masquerade? Those essays demonstrated how shifting our focus away from men’s masquerades allows us to ask different types of questions. In that same volume, Pamela Franco (1998) presents a fascinating discussion about the history of female dress in Caribbean Carnival, which inspired me to think about the female body (dressed and undressed) in the Cross River region of Nigeria. While the study of African masquerades has been significantly shaped by research on male masquerade traditions that involve the full concealment of the performer’s identity, coupled with an implied transformation of identity, my analysis is based upon the premise that the concept of masquerade should not be narrowly defined and that research on women’s traditions is essential for a comprehensive understanding of performance in the Cross River region and beyond.

In the middle Cross River region, women perform masquerades in full-body costumes in addition to other types of masquerades with “open face,” states of complete undress, and/or the “full reveal”

---

1 Today most people utilize road transportation, but fishing and travel by boat are still part of life along the Cross River. Art, ideas, and people have moved up and down this river for centuries. The Afi River, as seen here, extends northward from the Cross River, where it curves toward Cameroon. This area is referred to by scholars as “the middle Cross River region.” Bakor village of Ogomogom, Ikom LGA, Cross River State, 1997.

2a–b As part of a coming-of-age ceremony, moninkim emerge from ritual seclusion with designs painted on their faces. On the left, Victoria Nfam wears her moninkim attire on a market day in the village of Njemetop (Bakor, Nselle clan), 1997. On the right, a moninkim from Ogomogom village (Bakor, Nnam clan) dances for the community. Unlike moninkim of the past who wore elaborate coiffures, moninkim in recent times are often on break from school where hair must be cropped short.
of genitalia. The decision to conceal or reveal the body while dancing involves more than a decision about what to wear or not wear. Rather, these ritual strategies are part of a broader culture of bodily knowledge in which women are active participants in controlling the meaning of the female body.

Images of women dancing with pots, metal trunks, feathered plumes, sculptures, and masks upon their heads throughout the Cross River region are plentiful, but these women's performances are seldom recognized as "masquerades." A 1957 Nigeria Magazine article, "Efik Dances," notes the popularity of women's dances in Calabar. An elaborate photospread of traditional dances at the dawn of independence reflects a popular trope that associates traditional female dances with the nation, which continues into the present. In one image, a Qua-Ejagham women, whose face is revealed, carries a wooden sculpted headdress that is called a "dance aid of unknown purpose" (Fig. 4). The article stops short of calling it a masquerade.

In dances like the Abang, the leading dancer carries a framework on her head. From this hang several silk scarves and headkerchiefs. In it are planted carved objects and religious or cult symbols. This gives her the appearance of a masquerade ("Efik Dances" 1957: 163–64).

What differentiates a masquerade from other types of performance depends upon not only the time and place, but more importantly on who is making the designation and why. The concept of masquerade is brought into being through many acts of naming. A Nigerian (male) scholar, whose friendship and humor I always appreciate, likes to joke around about my research on women's masquerades as "that woman thing," insinuating that it exists in the margins. Unsurprisingly, women's performances are often part of a broader gender discourse in academia and beyond. This article is part of an effort to shift that discourse and to write women's bodies away from the margins.

Among the Bakor, who live between Ikom and Ogoja along the Aya River, which connects to the Cross River to the south, women perform Agot masquerades with their bodies completely concealed under long, billowing cloth gowns and carved wooden headdresses (Figs. 5–6). These dance groups provide women with a form of entertainment, camaraderie, and opportunities for public ritual expression. They are not devoid of spiritual power and should not be written off as "mere" entertainment. Agot masquerades perform at funerals, New Yam festivals, and other celebrations. Membership may be linked to an age-grade or it may be open to anyone who is deemed socially respectable. In some villages you can become a member if your mother was a member; otherwise, you pay an initiation fee. The masquerade includes a female character and a male character, both performed by women. Carved wooden headdresses, or cap masks, are strapped to the top of the performers' heads (Fig. 7) with ties that attach to the body. The cloth costume covers the face and body with only the women's hands and feet showing.

3a–b Women painting a Bakor stone monolith (left) in preparation for the New Yam Festival in the village of Emangebe (Nnam clan, Ikom LGA). Children stand around a painted monolith (right). They are part of the procession bringing yam to "feed" the monoliths and to honor the ancestors during the festival, which occurs in Alok on September 15th every year when families begin to consume the newest crop of yams. Photos: Left: A. Carlson 1994; Right, Ivor Miller 2014
In the Agot performances, attendants carry a metal trunk with the name of the group painted on it, and one masquerader (the female character) carries an imported white baby doll (see Fig. 6). The doll is a unique element because you would never see such a thing in a men’s masquerade, where the dancer might carry a skull, a machete, or ritual insignia of some sort. In other contexts, women tend to dance with fans and mirrors. The doll may have been incorporated early on as a novel element signifying the specialness of this being a woman’s dance. However, there is reason to believe that this element comes from the association between women’s masquerades and Mami Wata, the female water spirit who appears throughout Africa and the diaspora (Drewal 2008), but who takes on aspects of preexisting local women’s cults.

The Agot group in the village of Alok incorporates symbols often associated with Mami Wata. They call their group Ano, which means “beauty,” and the attendant to the masquerades carries a basket of imported, commercial items that are often associated with Mami Wata—powder, a mirror, medicated soap, bleaching cream, toothbrush and toothpaste, lipstick, and eyeliner. Mami Wata even appears on an Agot mask as a beautiful woman with a fish tail. However, Ute Röschenthaler found that Ejagham women in Nigeria and Cameroon who use sculptures and masks with the iconic Mami Wata imagery (a beautiful woman with flowing long hair and a snake draped over her shoulders) do not recognize the image as Mami Wata but rather as an ancestress. Similarly, the Bakor do not see this masquerade or the doll as being in any way related to Mami Wata and explained that the doll is an example of a healthy child, which results from healthy eating.

The ability to properly feed one’s family through successful agricultural practices is reflected in the names of Agot masquerades. Agriculture in this area has a very clear division of labor based upon gender, and Agot masquerades reflect a concern over women’s crops. Akpu, which means “fermented cassava,” is a dance group that celebrates the introduction of cassava, which revolutionized women’s ability to feed their families. Members of the dance association begin with a demonstration that reenacts women toiling in the fields, discovering a cassava root, and bringing the food product back to the village, which results in the prosperity of the community. Then, the masquerades enter as if to celebrate women’s contributions to the whole of society.

In Ebanimbim, where there are two Agot groups, the junior group is called Ntekonokpo (“big red pepper”), which reflects a crop that was important at the time of this group’s formation. Pepper is traditionally considered a woman’s crop, but in the 1990s, when the price of pepper skyrocketed, it was transformed into a men’s crop, which caused a lot of controversy. While women may not have been able to maintain control of this crop, they had a ritual voice to protest the infringement upon established standards of gendered realms.

Agot masquerades sometimes include songs that critique male behavior. In the verse below a chorus of Agot women sing about men’s roles as fathers and their obligation to provide for their children.

Life
Emanuel
Emanuel feeds his children
Emanuel feeds his children fat
Fathers feed your children like Emanuel
Emanuel feeds his children however from other people's sweat
Emanuel reaps where he has not sown
Fathers do not allow your kids to starve
Fathers do not feed your kids like Emanuel

These performances offer women an opportunity to articulate their concerns and to form bonds of solidarity around women's issues; they are not purely for entertainment. As this example shows, a song can even be used to pass judgment on a particular person in the community.

The history of how Agot masquerades came into existence offers clues about why Bakor women were able to access the type of masquerade that is more frequently performed by men. Bakor elders at the end of the twentieth century were adamant that they remembered women's masquerades that their mothers and grandmothers had performed, which are no longer danced. These elders may be referring to women's performance traditions that predated the use of masks or they could be referring to Ekpa masquerades, which will be discussed below. Historian Simon Majuk, who is from the Bakor Ekajuk clan, remembers a time in the 1970s when women asked men for the right to wear masquerades, for which they had to pay some money. Speculating on how this occurred, Majuk suggested that they may have seen a women's masquerade somewhere else or it could have come through a growing awareness of women's potential. Similarly, Meg Agibe (a local politician) has many memories of Agot from this same period. She remembers watching Agot perform in the village of Alok (Nnam clan) and recalls that the masquerade was purchased from the Ekajuk. She still remembers how well organized the women were, how exciting it was when they performed back then, and speculates that it came about because women felt that if men could portray female characters, why couldn't women carry a masquerade? That same sense of excitement around these women's performances continues today.

Another factor that may have inspired women to develop a masquerade in the 1970s was a renewed interest in traditional culture. After the Biafran War (1967–1970) had turned peoples' lives upside down, masquerades, which had been destroyed or forgotten during the war, needed to be rebuilt or reinvented. In the process of reunifying the country, masquerades enabled modern identities that repositioned ethnicity within a new political landscape. Government sponsorship in the 1970s, fueled by naira spilling out of oil wells, was also a motivating factor to begin new masquerade traditions. There were many regional masquerade competitions leading up to the big international event in Lagos, FESTAC '77. Around this time, Ibil village had sent their women's masquerade to a similar festival in Calabar and won the competition. Years later this continues to be a point of pride for the community.

Agot may also have been influenced by other examples of women's masquerades in the vicinity. To the west of the Bakor Ekajuk clan, on the other side of the Cross River, is an Igbo ethnic group known as Izzi where women had been instructed by their local oracle in 1977 to perform the men's masquerade Ogbodo Enyi (Weston 1984: 157–59). The close proximity of these two women's masquerades suggests that one may have influenced the other, but it's difficult to know in which direction the influence flowed.

Photographer Phyllis Galembo is known for her images of masquerades from many parts of the world. In 2004, she did a photo shoot of masquerades from the Cross River region, which included Agot women's masquerades. The headdress on the far right depicts a woman holding a snake, an iconic image of Mami Wata that is depicted in art forms from many parts of Africa and the diaspora.
While the Bakor women did not directly usurp a preexisting masquerade from men like the Izzi, they may have borrowed elements from men's performances. Agot masquerades could belong to a group of masquerades that stemmed from the Ikem masquerades with male/female characters documented by Nicklin and Salmons (1988). Elsewhere in this issue, Jordan Fenton discusses the Okpon-Ibuto maskerade (“Mr. and Mrs. Big Head”), which is a contemporary version of the male/female couple portrayed as a satire of husband-and-wife relationships. Since Agot fits within the broader genre of masquerades that explore male/female relationships, it's worth noting that women omit the female stereotypes that male performances in Calabar rely upon to depict male/female relationships. A broader understanding of these “couples” in masquerades throughout the region in connection with warrior dances and their association with skin-covered masks and skulls deserves further consideration.

Another women's masquerade, Egbede, appears among the Boki to the east of the Bakor. Keith Nicklin explains that “Egebe played a central role in the affairs of women, and took control of the fattening-house girls” (1974: 15). Nicklin, who was interested in mapping stylistic traits in skin-covered masks, remarks that the cap mask is usually the head of a women with a tall coiffure, but he does not provide further contextual information. I documented an Egbede mask in the Boki village of Nsodop in 2000 that was similar to Agot in that the women sing songs advising other women to plant cassava to end hunger (Fig. 8). The Egbede photographed by Nicklin has a gown like an Agot costume, which covers the head. In Nsodop, the gown costume went only to the neck and the face was covered by a white veil that the dancer could peek through. I was told that sometimes they dance it "..."
 isolation to one area. She writes, "Boki as a fluke, similar to the Izzi women’s masquerade, which was called Eruru, which features a Janus mask incorporating both male and female faces. The female leaders made a point to tell me that "man follows woman." Ute Röschenthaler regards women’s masquerades among the Bokyi as a fluke, similar to the Izzi women’s masquerade, which was isolated to one area. She writes, Among the Boky [Boki] of the Cross River area, Keith Nicklin describes a mask of the Egenghe [sic Egbege] women’s association which is danced by a woman whose body and face are completely veiled in cloth (1975 [sic 1974]: 15). Sometimes, too, women may create a masked dance in response to a topical event, but it does not develop into a permanent institution (Röschenthaler 1998: 92). The assumption that women’s masquerades are not permanent is probably wrong. Considering that women continue to dance Agot and Egbede today and that these masquerades are at least fifty years old, it’s difficult to think of them as "temporary." And if you allow for a more flexible definition of masquerade, the larger picture suggests that these are not isolated events. Along with the numerous examples of women performing masquerades in the more conventional manner (bodies fully concealed), women are also performing similar rituals whereby their bodies are revealed. In nearby Ikom and east into Cameroon, Ekpa Njom performs a masquerade in which the woman’s face is not concealed as in Agot. Instead, a woman dances with an elaborately carved headdress mask that sits on top of her head, fastened with strings and scarves, allowing her face to be seen. In Efaya, at Etung-Ejagham village near Ikom, women danced with a mask that includes an image of Mami Wata combined with a box structure (Fig. 9), which was first introduced in the 1940s (Röschenthaler 2008: 280). I was told that the primary function of Ekpa-Njom was to perform at the burial of a chief, and all the female members come from the “royal family” (i.e., their ancestors had not been slaves). However, they also displayed the objects they used for divination. In part of their dance they use walking sticks to portray oars as if they were paddling a canoe across a river to carry a deceased chief home. I assumed that this is a reference to a male Leopard Society ritual, emphasizing the interrelatedness of women’s and men’s ritual activity in a dual-gendered ritual system. While the Bakor do not perform the Ekpa-Njom masquerade, they do practice Ekpa’s nighttime performance, which is characterized by singing and dancing naked in the night, divination and the mandatory exclusion of men. Through Ekpa, women gain the power to heal and to foresee the future. Similar associations exist throughout the region. While they do not use a costume or a mask, it has been suggested that the guise of night or the transformation associated with the power of the naked female body may constitute another form of masquerade (Kasfir 1998). When men attempt to interfere with Ekpa business, which men are forbidden to witness, it can be quite dangerous. In isolated cases, women have been known to lift their wrappers, bend over, and reveal their genitals. According to many Ejagham, this can be lethal to men, causing impotency. Or, as described by Talbot (1912), the man’s “vital powers” shrivel up. At a ceremony in 1998, I joined the Ekpa women at a spot in front of the Presbyterian Church at Nde Three Corners. The church may have been built at that location as a way to discourage Ekpa. But these women were undeterred by this or by the village chief, who politely reminded them to disperse early so as not to disturb Sunday services. The nighttime ritual gathered strength with prolonged dancing and drinking around a fire. The women spoke in confusing code. When they say to speak, they mean that everyone should be silent—reminiscent of the theme of speech and silence that reverberates throughout many Cross River rituals. The night of Ekpa culminated with some women entering a state of possession that continued through to dawn. These were special women who had heard the voice of Nlim (a spirit). The communal energy created by all of the women was necessary to enable the possession to happen. As other women began to ready the church for Sunday service, a possessed Ekpa woman ran uncontrollably through the church—an awkward moment that highlighted how the two institutions have different perceptions of spirit and flesh! The assumption that women’s masquerades are not permanent is probably wrong. Considering that women continue to dance Agot and Egbede today and that these masquerades are at least fifty years old, it’s difficult to think of them as "temporary." And if you allow for a more flexible definition of masquerade, the larger picture suggests that these are not isolated events. Along with the numerous examples of women performing masquerades in the more conventional manner (bodies fully concealed), women are also performing similar rituals whereby their bodies are revealed. In nearby Ikom and east into Cameroon, Ekpa Njom performs a masquerade in which the woman’s face is not concealed as in Agot. Instead, a woman dances with an elaborately carved headdress mask that sits on top of her head, fastened with strings and scarves, allowing her face to be seen. In Efaya, at Etung-Ejagham village near Ikom, women danced with a mask that includes an image of Mami Wata combined with a box structure (Fig. 9), which was first introduced in the 1940s (Röschenthaler 2008: 280). I was told that the primary function of Ekpa-Njom was to perform at the burial of a chief, and all the female members come from the “royal family” (i.e., their ancestors had not been slaves). However, they also displayed the objects they used for divination. In part of their dance they use walking sticks to portray oars as if they were paddling a canoe across a river to carry a deceased chief home. I assumed that this is a reference to a male Leopard Society ritual, emphasizing the interrelatedness of women’s and men’s ritual activity in a dual-gendered ritual system. While the Bakor do not perform the Ekpa-Njom masquerade, they do practice Ekpa’s nighttime performance, which is characterized by singing and dancing naked in the night, divination and the mandatory exclusion of men. Through Ekpa, women gain the power to heal and to foresee the future. Similar associations exist throughout the region. While they do not use a costume or a mask, it has been suggested that the guise of night or the transformation associated with the power of the naked female body may constitute another form of masquerade (Kasfir 1998). When men attempt to interfere with Ekpa business, which men are forbidden to witness, it can be quite dangerous. In isolated cases, women have been known to lift their wrappers, bend over, and reveal their genitals. According to many Ejagham, this can be lethal to men, causing impotency. Or, as described by Talbot (1912), the man’s “vital powers” shrivel up. At a ceremony in 1998, I joined the Ekpa women at a spot in front of the Presbyterian Church at Nde Three Corners. The church may have been built at that location as a way to discourage Ekpa. But these women were undeterred by this or by the village chief, who politely reminded them to disperse early so as not to disturb Sunday services. The nighttime ritual gathered strength with prolonged dancing and drinking around a fire. The women spoke in confusing code. When they say to speak, they mean that everyone should be silent—reminiscent of the theme of speech and silence that reverberates throughout many Cross River rituals. The night of Ekpa culminated with some women entering a state of possession that continued through to dawn. These were special women who had heard the voice of Nlim (a spirit). The communal energy created by all of the women was necessary to enable the possession to happen. As other women began to ready the church for Sunday service, a possessed Ekpa woman ran uncontrollably through the church—an awkward moment that highlighted how the two institutions have different perceptions of spirit and flesh!
I understood this to be a transgressive act toward an institution that has historically been at odds with indigenous religious beliefs, gender concepts, women's spheres of influence, and Ekpa. Other Ekpa performances include clear acts of intervention for the betterment of the community or for women. Around 1985, the women of an Nde village danced for a woman who could not conceive a child. She eventually became pregnant and had a healthy baby. In 1996, they danced because someone had prophesied a series of accidents, some of which had already occurred. Around the same time in Calabar, Ekpa came out to protest a proposal to move the location of Watt market. In 1997 in the town of Ikom, Ekpa came out after the controversial murder of the wife of a wealthy businessman; it was rumored that domestic violence may have been involved.

In addition to these local acts, there are several well-documented cases during the twentieth century of women organizing and dancing in states of undress as part of a reaction to the pressures of colonial and missionary influence upon women's realms: the 1925 Nwaobiala movement, the 1929 Aba “women’s war,” the Anlu uprisings of 1958–1959 in Cameroon, among other, smaller protests (see Ekpo 1995, Bastian 2001, Mba 1982, Wipper 1985, Paddock and Falola 2017). These ritual strategies that empower women and extend their ability to mobilize may have contributed to women feeling emboldened to acquire masquerades of their own, to utilize flesh and spirit as they saw best.

This regional glimpse into women’s ritual performances that involve masks contains details specific to local histories, but it also suggests that scope of women and masking is more complex. And what can we learn about women and masking from the diaspora? How do masks and concepts of gender travel when people from the hinterland area of the Cross River are carried overseas as slaves? In the next section, I look at Cross River culture in Cuba, not to elaborate on women's masquerades and ritual performance—there are none—but to ask the question, “Why don't women's rituals travel to Cuba?” Sometimes when you travel, what you leave behind is even more important than what you bring.

**ACT 2: THE CARIBBEAN**

Robert Farris Thompson, who did groundbreaking work in both the Cross River and Cuba, explains that women's associations “did not survive the shock of the Middle Passage” (1983: 236). However, the much better organized male association Ékpè/Mgbè (Leopard Society) not only survived the journey to Cuba but developed into a systematic “orthodoxy” of practice through chants, rituals, and masquerades that continue today in a form that is easily recognizable to anyone familiar with the Cross River region (Brown 2003, 8)

8 This woman's face is partially concealed with a white veil, unlike Bakor Agot masquerades where the costume goes all the way up over the head. Egbede women's masquerade in the Boki village of Nsodop, Ikom LGA, Cross River State, Nigeria, 2000.

Miller and Bassey 2009). This continuity was supported in Cuba by the practice of keeping slaves of similar ethnicities (or “nations”) together, leading to the eventual formation of cabildos, or mutual aid societies. The Abakuá is a mutual aid society that was created in the 1830s and thrived in the port cities of Havana and Matanzas. Unlike in the Cross River region, where men’s power does not exist without women, in Cuba women’s ritual is not present in relation to the Abakuá. Instead, the symbolic use of the female body and the feminine spirit becomes even more important within the embodied nature of ritual knowledge in Cuba.

As Abakuá developed in Cuba, it maintained an astonishing adherence to titles and masquerades that were sustained through slavery and colonialism even as masquerades were restricted and forced underground, or rather into courtyards and inner sanctums. Abakuá masquerade are known as Íreme (Figs. 10–11). As in Africa, the masquerade most often publicly
displayed is Ebongo, mother of the leopard spirit. It also shares the name of a women’s association in Cameroon in the vicinity of the area considered to be the birthplace of the Leopard Society. In this sense, women’s ritual presence travels to Cuba symbolically even if women’s performances associations did not.

The meanings associated with myths of origin for the Leopard Society and its masquerades in Africa reinforces the idea that their secret knowledge incorporates women’s power at the same time it must distance women from that knowledge. The origin of the Leopard Society is commonly said to have come when a woman went to the river to collect water in her calabash. She accidentally scooped up a fish that roared like a leopard; she had discovered a secret, which was taken away by men. In Cuba, the woman is known as Sikán. In some myths she is sacrificed and her skin attached to a drum, signifying the importance of harnessing female power. Themes of femininity and silence take on new dimensions in Cuba; the drum that was meant to be read and not heard is said to be the incarnation of Sikán (Thompson 1983: 237).

In Africa, where men’s associations such as the Leopard Society utilize the symbolic power of the female body, there is a ritual system where women also have agency over the symbolism associated with the female body in ritual performances. The same is not true in Cuba. Even though there is no female component of Abakú in Cuba, the female artist Belkis Ayón (1967–1999) produced many prints that respond to the iconography of this male institution, which had become increasingly visible in Cuban culture.12 Ayón was part of a contemporary generation of female artists (Ana Mendita, Magdalena Campos-Pons, among others) whose work contributed to a broader feminist movement in light of racial politics in Cuba and in the United States. The scale and scope of her in-depth response to the iconography of Abakú rituals involving bodily forms is astounding given her relatively short career, which was cut short by suicide. Her loss was tragic, but she left behind a rich body of graphic work that speaks to so many

Sin título numero 3 (1996)
Collograph (26.3” x 36.6”)
The Farber Collection, New York
Estate of Belkis Ayon, Havana, Cuba
Photo: José A. Figueroa courtesy of the Estate of Belkis Ayon, Havana, Cuba

Belkis Ayón Manso produced many prints based upon the iconography of the Abakú in Cuba. The white figure represents Sikán. Ayón emphasizes the relationship between Sikán and the sacred drum of the Abakuá, which is meant to be seen and not heard. Instead, sacred signs are written upon the head of the drum just as they appear upon Sikán’s head in this image. In Cuba, feathered plumes adorn the drum, whereas in Africa, feathered plumes adorn the headdresses worn by women in masquerades. Ayón’s work is a wonderfully rich exploration of female power in relation to the attempts of men to control that power. While it is deeply entrenched in the ritual language of the Abakuá, her work also speaks to broader themes about the human condition.
issues about gender within the ritual of inscribing and reinscribing the female body, even identifying with Sikán. Ayón explained,

I incorporate into my work personalities like the Leopard Man, a figure identified with imposing power and aggression—a “macho” who sacrificed Sikan, the woman who discovered the secret [of Abakuá] and dies at the hands of the men at the altar so that the secret would remain among them and not disappear. The secret consisted of a voice, the SACRED VOICE, produced by the Fish discovered by Sikan coming back from the river. The Fish of the sacred voice was finally transmitted to the skin of a goat, a skin which vibrated on the sacred drum EKUEE … The image of Sikan is evident in all these works because she, like me, lived and lives through me in a restlessness looking insistently for a way out (Ayón 2014: 769).

In Ayón’s prints, Sikan appears as a white figure with no mouth. In *Untitled* (1996; Fig. 12), Sikan is alive and carrying an initiate, surrounded by plumes that are references to women’s masquerades and power in Africa. Where women have been removed from rituals, their bodies have been consumed by the male Abakuá use of symbolism. But for Ayón, Sikan was not a martyr—she was a transgressor, much like the artist herself. And, the artist’s steadfast study and representation of Abakuá rituals was seen as scandalous in that she had “symbolically marched into an Abakuá ceremony” (Lamazares 2010: 114). Lamazares writes, “In Cuba, Abakuá restrictions were stricter than in Africa or elsewhere. Inserting herself into a space that was all male, she assertively, powerfully, and boldly made a statement to the exclusive all-male social and religious sphere” (2010: 115). While she has been accused of revealing the secrets of the Abakuá, this is part of the myth of women who trespass and must be punished. Ayón uses aesthetic strategies to take control of the symbolism associated with the female body and is inherently critical of male behavior. She deeply understood the need to express bodily knowledge from a female perspective.

Although outside the scope of this article, there is more to be written about inscribing and performing the male body, such as how Abakuá initiates have signs (*firmas*) drawn on their bodies as a means of transformation. Tattoos representing an Íreme masquerade (Fig. 13), that leave a permanent mark on the Abakuá body, deserve further research. Moreover, it’s important to note that the symbolic currency of Abakuá masquerades reaches far beyond the ritual association. There is a long history of appearing in public festivals in Cuba—Carnival as well as more contemporary folkloric performances. In a new twist, these masquerades—which represent a connection to Africa that is no longer part of living memory in Cuba—physically returned to Africa in 2005 to attend Calabar Carnival, where they were dancing along a path, which meant retracing steps that have been inscribed and now reinscribed within history.

13 Fermin Diaz at the Havana Biennale standing in Victor Ekpuk’s installation *Meditations on Memory* (2015), which incorporated references to the art and ritual of the Leopard Society in eastern Nigeria in dialogue with the Abakuá culture of Cuba. Diaz, who worked for the Biennale as an assistant helping artists install their work, was drawn to Ekpuk’s installation because he is a member of the Abakua and has an Íreme masquerade tattoo on his back. Havana, Cuba, 2015
ACT 3: THE RETURN TICKET

Calabar Carnival, which began in 2004 and is billed as “the biggest street party in Africa,” is unique among the many international festivals modeled after Carnival in Trinidad and Tobago (T&T) in that it appears in a city without a Caribbean diaspora or even prior Caribbean influences. I have previously written about how African-influenced Caribbean culture returns to Africa on a “return ticket,” with the first leg of the journey being the transatlantic slave trade, when enslaved Africans departed Calabar for the Caribbean, an historic tie integral to the identity of the event (Carlson 2010). While masquerade traditions returned to Africa in their Caribbean form, traditional African masquerades have been absent from Calabar Carnival except for the one-time appearance, in 2005, of Nigerian Êkpé masquerade (Ebongo) dancing alongside their Cuban visitors, who led the Carnival procession with their Abakuá masquerade (Ebonko). This historic “reunion” was orchestrated by Ivor Miller, who discusses this meeting in detail in the epilogue of his book Voice of the Leopard (2009). The resemblances between these two masquerades amazed Nigerian audiences and cemented the connection between Cross River culture and the Caribbean. Since that time, the Leopard Society has held a separate “international” masquerade festival, usually around the same time as Calabar Carnival, but does not participate in the official state-sanctioned event.

During Carnival a great deal of attention is placed on the female body, and local “women’s dances” mix with coordinated group dances fashioned after Carnival in T&T or Brazil. Local moninkim-style dances, associated with woman’s ritual seclusion in the “fattening house,” show up at Carnival every year in each of the five major bands that compete. Moninkim-style dance is recognizable because of the distinctive hip movements as well as the designs painted on the dancers’ skin, fancy coiffures, and bared midriffs. While even the traditional-looking costumes have been tailored specifically for Carnival (Fig. 14), the dance has merged with hip-hop inspired dance forms, featuring significantly more athletic, fierce, transgressive women (Fig. 15).

To some extent Carnival places women in the spotlight, where they are left to navigate multiple images of womanhood: modern, traditional, and Christian. In the early years of Calabar Carnival, the attire of international Carnivals—beads and bikinis—was seldom seen. While Calabar Carnival is still a conservative event...
compared to other international Carnivals, the female dress code has become more daring with the importation of costumes from abroad (Fig. 16). This has become a widely debated topic that has produced strong responses amplified by social media in the digital age. Part of the annual “coverage” includes risqué (indecent) pictures of women at Calabar Carnival; however, many of the pictures are appropriated via the internet from Carnivals in other parts of the world where individuals can stretch the limits of undress far wider than is acceptable in Africa. This war of images reflects conflicting views of Carnival among many religious institutions that are opposed to the event and once cried foul when Carnival fell on a Sunday. It’s already a problem that it draws thousands of people away from the church in the weeks leading up to Christmas. Nonetheless, the Pentecostal penchant for music, spectacle, and combining spirit and flesh in order to be born again could also be said to have primed the environment for Carnival. And, most participants in Carnival are active Christians who see no conflict between their faith and their penchant for taking to the streets to dance.

15 Moninkim-style dances at Calabar Carnival in 2013 reflect a new type of “maiden dance” that stems from popular music and dance culture. On the left, the band Passion Four performed a stunning tribute to Nigerian musician Fela Kuti, whose stage acts famously incorporated female dancers who merged traditional and modern female identities. Above, female dancers from the band Master Blaster (that year’s winner), wear costumes that pay homage to the “maiden dances” of the past with futuristic styling. The choreography reflected influences by Janet Jackson in its athletic and precise style, which is quite different from graceful elegance of maiden dances. Photos: Jess Durkin for Amanda Carlson
Unlike the unique Cuban/Nigerian reunion in 2005 when masquerades lead the procession, Calabar Carnival is typically led by dignitaries such as the state governor and his wife, Nollywood celebrities, and the Carnival Queen (Fig. 17), who is crowned after winning an elaborate beauty pageant in the days leading up to Carnival. The Carnival Queen rides atop a float in a formal gown along with the expected trappings of a beauty queen—a beautiful smile, precise make-up, a sash, and a crown. The queen is a creation of the Calabar Carnival Queen Pageant (CCQ), which is orchestrated by the First Lady—the governor’s wife. The pageant works in dialogue with that umbrella of traditional gender symbolism and the importance of traditional dance forms at the same time that it reflects global attitudes about women’s bodies. Contestants perform traditional dances, such as moninkim, before trading in waist beads for beaded gowns (Fig. 18).

Anthropologist Juliet Gilbert, who attended the two-week CCQ training camp, which she likens to the ritual seclusion of the moninkim tradition, emphasizes how the pageant blends traditional and Pentecostal identities. This blending of world views is nothing like the tension between Ekpa and the church or the cultural conflicts regarding women’s roles that fueled women’s mass protest movements of the twentieth century. Gilbert explains, pageants such as CCQ are not only replacing more “traditional” gendered initiations marking new life stages but are also sites in which new Christian subjects can be actively molded outside the church. Above all, beauty queens articulate changing ideas of feminine respectability in Christian Nigeria, where the creation of a “third femininity” means that “small girls” are able to gain some authority in society without (yet) being married … pageantry has become a means for Nigerians to counter the insecurities that pervade their livelihoods: the queen becomes hope for the nation (2015: 517).
In the spectacle of Carnival, women adapt to a new ritual space where they must navigate complex systems of power as they perform new subjectivities. While the meaning of the female body remains central in ritual contexts that ultimately maintain male systems of authority, women perform in flesh and in spirit to physically and psychologically transform. From this global journey we can conclude that more travels than just the mask. Regardless of what they are wearing, women are clearly dancing in response to where they are going and not solely where they have been. And to understand this we need a more dynamic view of masquerades.