

# Contemporary Artist Profile: Sokari Douglas Camp

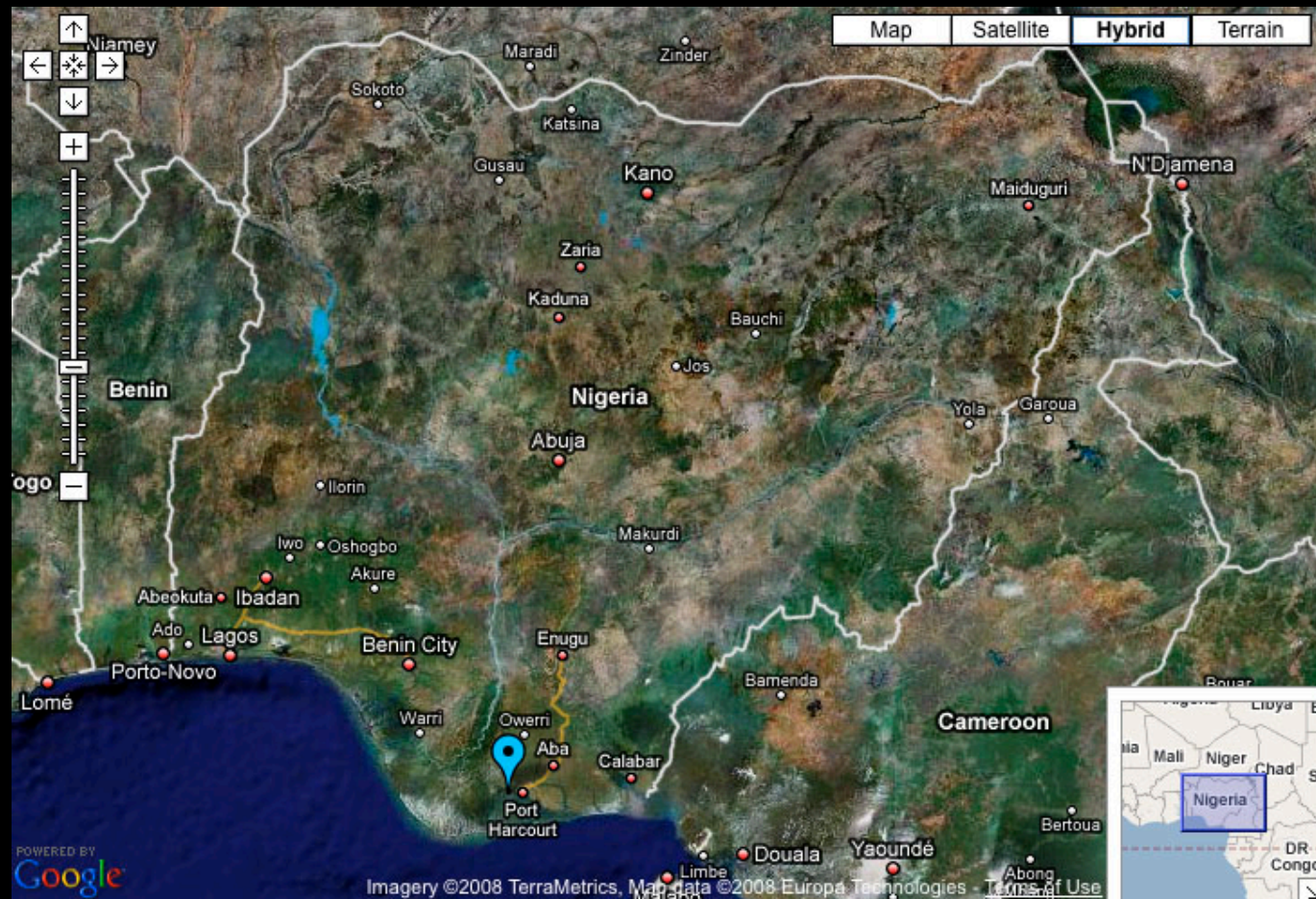


By Liz Walshak 2008

# Sokari Douglas Camp

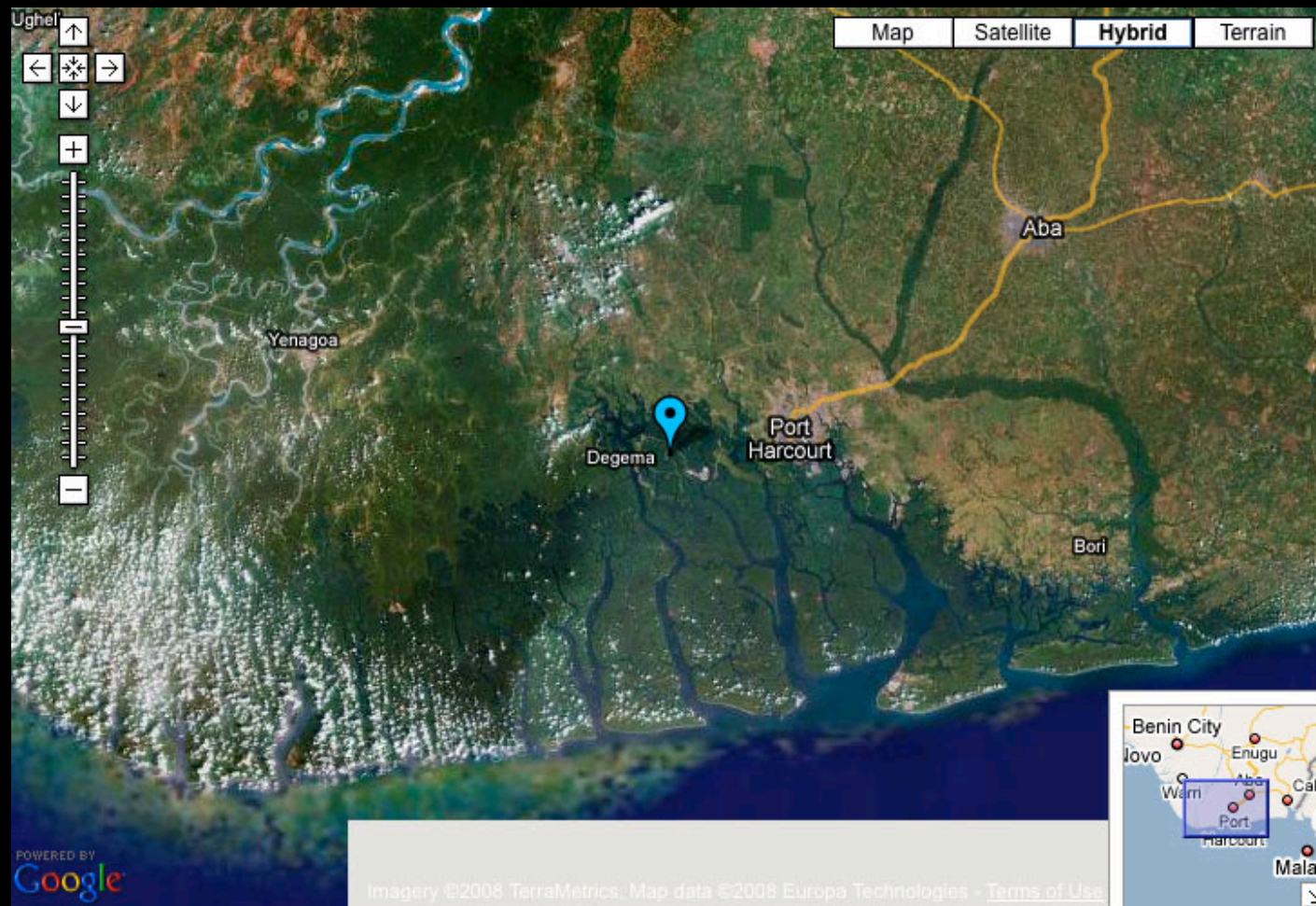
- Born in 1958 in Buguma, Nigeria.
- Raised Kalabari in Niger Delta Region.
- Education:
  - 1979-80 California College of Arts and Crafts, Oakland USA
  - 1980-83 Central School of Art and Design, London, BA (Hons)
  - 1983-86 Royal College of Art, London, MA Sculpture
- Currently resides and works in London, England.

## Kalabari, Nigeria



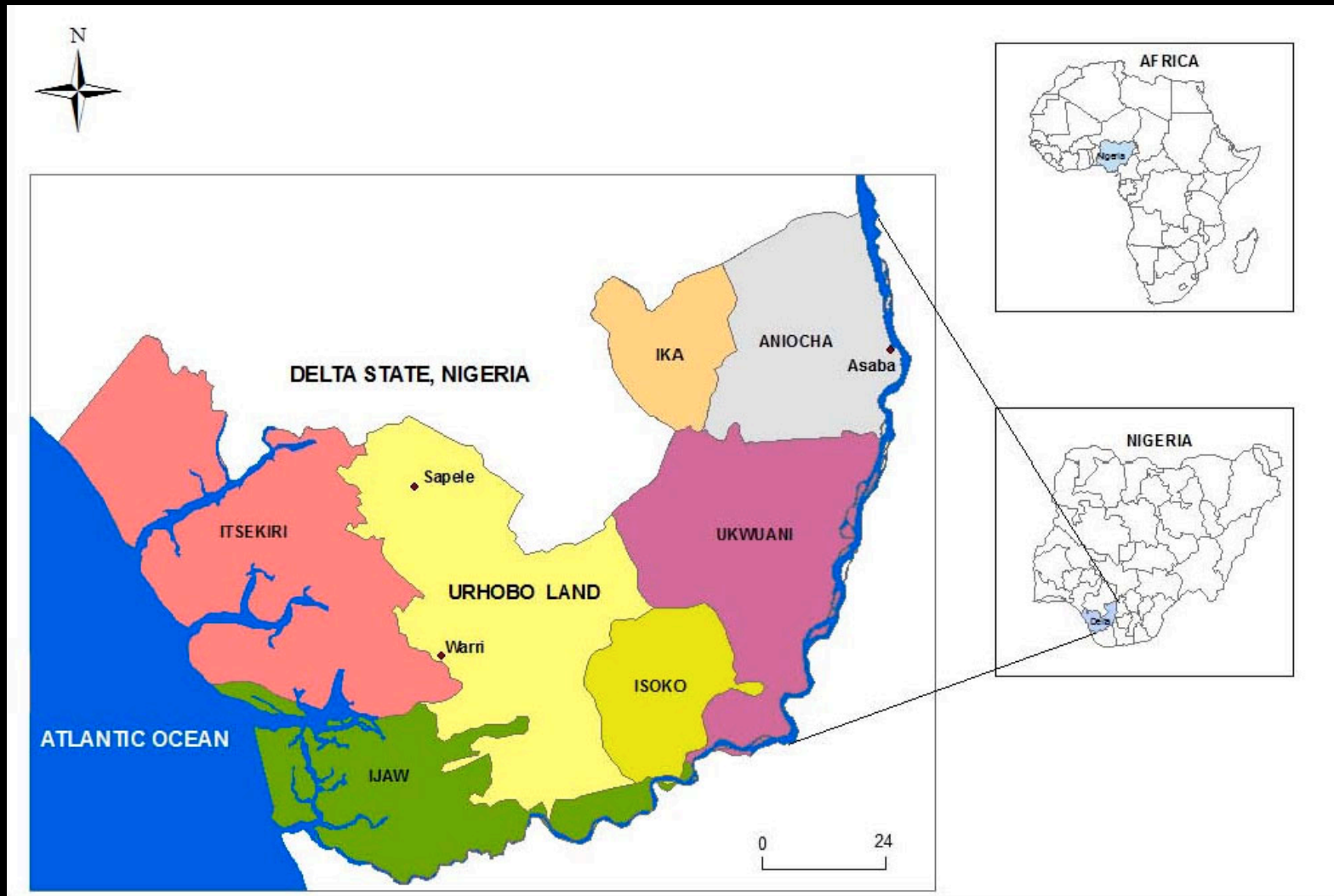
<http://www.maplandia.com/nigeria/rivers/asari-to/kalabari/>

## City of Kalabari, Niger Delta



<http://www.maplandia.com/nigeria/rivers/asari-to/kalabari/>

## Map of Delta State, Nigeria Showing Urhobo Land and Other Ethnic Nationalities



[http://www.waado.org/nigerdelta/Maps/delta\\_state/delta\\_state\\_ethnic.html](http://www.waado.org/nigerdelta/Maps/delta_state/delta_state_ethnic.html)

## Some Kalabari History

- The Kalabari are an Ijoid ethnic group located in the western Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Originally, they were known as the Awome.
- Language: Ijaw (Eastern form of Ijo)
- The Kalabari were formerly fishermen, traders of salt, fish, and palm oil. They live on a series of 23 islands in the delta of River Niger. Their cultural capital is the island city of Buguma (also where Sokari Douglas Camp was born).
- Kalabari became wealthy due to trade relations with Europeans.
- In the late 1800s, the British took political and economic control over the area that would be known as Nigeria.
- In 1960, independence was declared for Nigeria.
- Today, Port Harcourt is the major urban center of a local economy strongly linked to petroleum.

## Featured Piece



*Gelede From Top to Toe  
(1995)*

*Materials:  
Steel, wood and chicken  
wire.*

*Dimensions:  
186cm high*

*Exhibited in:  
Spirits in Steel : The Art of  
the Kalabari Masquerade  
(American Museum of  
Natural History, NY)  
Black Womanhood (Davis  
Museum at Wellesley  
College, MA)*



Naked Gelede (1998)  
Materials: Steel and  
chicken wire.  
Dimensions: 420cm x  
240cm x 40cm



Asoebi (2005)  
Materials: Steel and chicken  
wire.  
Dimensions: 420cm x  
240cm x 40cm  
On exhibition at the British  
Museum

## Form of her work

- Sokari uses Kalabari culture as her main inspiration for her sculptures, including traditions and aesthetics of masquerades, textiles, dances, and other ceremonies that she witnessed from direct experience.
- Her work oftentimes uses the figure as a main subject, and she dresses it with a sculpted costume, textiles, and organic materials.
- Steel is the primary material used in her sculptures.
- Some sculptures are kinetic.



Otobo (Hippo) Masquerade  
(1995)

Exhibited in: Spirits in Steel :  
The Art of the Kalabari  
Masquerade

Materials: Wood, steel and  
palm stem brooms.

Dimensions: 183cm high

"I began my work by observing how masks are put on to masqueraders, how the human form is changed, how men become gods when they perform . . . The way I remember seeing masks and masqueraders when they performed for my town is the masquerades are alive and frightening and beautiful when they move. Fear in masquerading is an important element for the observer. It adds to the play of the spirits. This element does not come across in a museum, because the mask is not moving and is usually in a glass box."

-- Sokari Douglas Camp

## Politics Behind Sokari's Work

- Sokari responds to the static presentation of African masks in Western museums as opposed to their lively context in their original culture.
- She aspires to contextualize the objects and display them with the figure and dress, sometimes with motion, as they were originally intended.
- Being a woman, her Kalabari background would not have allowed her to become a sculptor in her home land. Thus her work's political connotation relies heavily upon being situated in Western institutions.
- Her recent works are highly political, commenting on the effects of the oil industry on the Niger Delta, violence, diaspora, and other international issues.



Accessories (2005)  
Materials: Steel, wood  
Dimensions: 210cm x 170cm x 90cm



Container (2000)  
Exhibited in: Knots Of The Human Heart  
Materials: Plastic, glass, sand, gold leaf, acetate.  
Dimensions: 34cm x 12cm x 65cm



### Bus (2008)

A new monument to writer and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa, executed 11 years ago in Nigeria for his campaign against the devastation by oil companies of the Niger delta, was unveiled outside the Guardian's offices in central London on November 10, 2006. The "Living Memorial" is a sculpture in the form of a bus by the Nigerian-born artist Sokari Douglas Camp, and will tour the UK over the coming year.



[www.sokari.co.uk](http://www.sokari.co.uk)

## Bibliography and Links

1. Robert Goldwater Library Blog. *Podcast Interview With Sokari Douglas Camp*. "The Essential Art of African Textiles: Design Without End." October 14 2008. Audio file.

<http://goldwaterlibrary.typepad.com/rgl/2008/10/podcast-interview-with-sokari-douglas-camp.html>.

2. *Spirits in Steel: Sokari Douglas Camp*. American Museum of Natural History. 1998. <http://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/sokari/bio.html>.

3. Olson, Jim. *Black Womanhood: Images, Icons and Ideologies of the African Body*. Davis Museum and Cultural Center, Wellesley College, MA. September 17 2008.

[http://www.wellesley.edu/DavisMuseum/exhibitions/exhibitions\\_black\\_womanhood.html](http://www.wellesley.edu/DavisMuseum/exhibitions/exhibitions_black_womanhood.html)

4. Camp, Sokari Douglas. Artist's Website. 2008.  
[http://www.wellesley.edu/DavisMuseum/exhibitions/exhibitions\\_black\\_womanhood.html](http://www.wellesley.edu/DavisMuseum/exhibitions/exhibitions_black_womanhood.html)