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Douglas Fraser

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ERRATA

ix Figure 44. Nigeria, Yoruba *Ogboni* object. Brass.
H. 25 cm. British Museum.

xi Flamm *should be* Flam.

xii *Last sentence should read:* Publication of this catalog
was supported by the Institute for the Arts, Rice
University.

pp. 5-6 *Text references to Fig. 1 and Fig. 2 are interchanged.*

p. 13 D.F. *wrote the section ending at the top of the page.*

p. 65 *Captions for Figures 40 and 41 are interchanged.*

p. 84 *Paeques should be* Pacques.

Cover after M. Griaule, *Dieu d'eau: conversations avec Ogotemméli*,
Paris, 2nd edition, 1955. Illustration opposite page 121.

Rear Cover adapted from M. Griaule and G. Dieterlen, "The Dogon,"
in *African Worlds*, edited by D. Forde. London, 1954, Figure 1. For an
analysis of these motifs, see the section entitled "Spiral/Checkerboard."

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CREATIVE/DESTRUCTIVE

The Yoruba greatly fear, yet also revere the witches (or *aje*) within their society. In many other African groups, witches were hunted out and destroyed. But with the Yoruba, because of the *aje*'s dual functions, this does not occur. "...The *aje* aren't really sorcerers," say the Yoruba, "they're great mothers, angry mothers and without their goodwill, life itself will stop, the society will suffocate" (Beier 1966, p.6). Since the *aje* have the capability to do good deeds as well as bad, and since all women are potential witches, the Yoruba realize that it would be not only impossible but also detrimental for society to be rid of them.

The *Gelede* society (restricted to the western Yoruba) functions to placate the *aje*, and their goddess Yemoja, in the hope that they will use their abilities to the benefit rather than detriment of society. In fact, the three "riches of the world", long life, increased prosperity, and children are the themes of most *Gelede* songs (Harper 1970, p.77). One cult member states: "as I already have three children there is really no reason why I won't die tomorrow. But as I'm a member of the *Gelede* society, the witches protect me" (Beier 1966, p.3).

The great queen of witches, Yemoja, goddess of the rivers and sea, symbolizes the dual characters and powers of the *aje*. Yemoja, whose name is the contraction of *yeye omo eja*, "mother of fishes" (Lucas 1948, p. 97 and Ellis 1894, p. 44) or *yeye aiye*, "mother earth" (Dennett 1910, p.100), is the offspring of the union of heaven and earth, *i.e.* Obatala and Odudua. She represents both the wealth of the seas and fertility, since nothing exists without water. It is significant that the Yoruba women, the potential *aje*, are responsible for providing water and that they are helped in this task by Yemoja. For in olden times, when there was drought, water was thought to burst forth from her breasts as she turned while sleeping (Verger 1954, p.186). It is possible that the dance movements used in the masked *Gelede* celebrations were originally interpretations of the gentle waves and agitated waters which she was thought to represent. This is the case with *Gelede* dances in Brasil (Verger 1954, p.186).

Yemoja's maternal symbolism rests not only with her role as goddess of the rich seas and her ability to produce rain, but also as mother of the other Yoruba *orisha* (gods). In Brasil, Yemoja is thought to be the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception (Verger 1954, p.186). In traditional Yoruba legend, her passion and offspring were considerably different. According to myth, she married her brother, Aganju (god of wilderness), and bore him a son named Orungan (the space between the sky and earth, *i.e.* air) (Ellis 1894,

p.44). Orungan fell in love with Yemoja, his mother, and when she refused to listen to his passion, first he ravished her, then tried to console and lure her with the prospect of two husbands. Shocked, Yemoja stumbled, fell to the ground, and her body began to swell "in a fearful manner." Soon water gushed from her breasts, and her stomach burst open.

The fearfully swollen Yemoja, as depicted in the last part of this myth, corresponds to certain of the masked and costumed images portrayed in the *Gelede* dances. One masked figure is described as "corpulent beyond imagination, a woman moving weighted down with fat at the breasts, the hips and at the buttocks" (Thompson 1971, p.14/4). In the dances, the masked *aje* impersonators wear large artificial breasts as well as buttock padding to imitate the girth. The cult name, *Gelede*, "like a ponderous walk of fat," (Thompson 1971, p.14/4) is also in keeping with Yemoja's image. Fatness, it should be noted, is the outward manifestation of the Yoruba ideal of good health, fertility and wealth.

Yemoja's swollen belly contained not only the waters which were to make up her domain, but fifteen of the most powerful Yoruba *orisha* as well. These include the dangerous and frightening Shango (thunder and mischief), Shapona (small pox), and Ogun (iron and war) as well as the beneficial Orisha Oko (agriculture), Oshasi (hunters), and Aje Shaluga (wealth), in addition to Orun (sun), Oshu (moon), and others (Ellis 1894, p.45). In total, they are connected with all the occupations of the traditional Yoruba: fishing, hunting, planting (marriage), germination (conception), harvest (pregnancy), putrefication (death) and storing (birth) (Dennett 1910, pp. 190-218). Thus, it is clear that Yemoja is responsible for both the most positive and the most negative forces that created (and now play a part in) Yoruba life. According to tradition, the holy city of Ife was built in commemoration of the event on the spot where Yemoja's body burst open (Ellis 1894, p.45).

Of Yemoja's children, Shapona, Shango, and Ogun are the ones most closely associated with the *aje*. The cruel and hostile natures of these three gods is thought to stem from their evil births. In fact, some Yoruba believe Yemoja's act instigated incest (and witchcraft?) by making them available to women prone to evil (Morton-Williams 1960, p.5). It is significant that the *aje* use iron, smallpox, and mischief as their means of destruction. But while the *aje* use these god-associated weapons to the detriment of society, they have also assumed certain controls over the malice these evil gods can do. It is said that Shango himself cannot function without the permission of the mothers (Beier 1966, p.6).

The *aje* also play a prominent role in divination, the installation of kings, and even in the Oro society, whose special prerogative is the execution of societal evil-doers including witches. It can be said then that the witches' abilities lie not only in doing evil (or good) acts, but in preventing others from doing them as well.

The *Gelede* ceremonies and masked dances, which are intended to assuage the *aje*, are held at various times throughout the year in the event of a catastrophe such as sickness, or for social events such as house-buildings or funerals (Thompson 1971, 14/5). The most important, however, is the yearly festival often coinciding with the annual feast of Odudua, the feminine goddess of creation (Beier 1966, p.8). This annual celebration is organized into basically two parts. The most important dance always takes place at night when the great mask Efe comes out. Efe, the symbol of masculinity, represents the male descendants of Yemoja and has the power to calm the witches as well as neutralize their malice. It is he who calls the *aje* to attend the dances. Unlike other masks which are worn by young men, Efe must be worn by an elder in the cult. As an elder, he has the duty, when masked as Efe, to point out those who have acted in ways detrimental to society. Efe can predict someone's doom and is thought to have the power to make it come true (Thompson 1971, 14/5). Balancing the power and masculinity of Efe is Tetede, which represents beautiful womanhood, a theme known to please the witches.

The masks of the following day also have a didactic function. But these, like the masks of the previous night, are also meant to entertain Yemoja and the rest of society. The carved images on the masks represent two themes: one the evil practices of the witches (and *orisha* whose weapons they employ); the other, the works of the beneficial gods and the ways of life which withstand the witches malignant activities (Harper 1970, p.90). Depictions suggestive of traditional values and occupations which please the *aje* are contrasted with those of a foreign, non-Yoruba nature.

Accordingly, the themes that Beier saw represented at Sakete and that Fagg saw depicted at Pobe (cited in Beier 1966, p.20) can be viewed as representing either good and traditional things, or those that are evil or foreign. These two classifications suggest the dual nature of the witches themselves, their goddess Yemoja and her children. Good, beneficial and traditional subjects include: a bald man; a deceased cult member; a servant; a woman coming home from market; a man with a Yoruba hat; and a water carrier for the *orisha*. Some negative images are: four men fighting with guns; a Catholic priest; a Shango priest; a seducer of women; a Hausa with his hands on his head; and four machetes. Phallic and other startling themes having a high shock and entertainment value are seen particularly at funerals, where they are intended to help the bereaved forget

their sorrow. These scenes may at one time have been suggestive of witches who are thought to sit naked and dance in a lewd fashion (Parrinder 1949, p.168).

Animals are popular *Gelede* themes as well, and can be equally divided according to their nature. Some represent images from fable, such as the bird eating the pineapple or the turtle, who is the diviner in the animal world. Especially indicative of good are the python representation which appear rather frequently in the masks. The python is sacred to the Fon as well as the western Yoruba and symbolizes the ancestors, and, by extension since the ancestors can be reborn in children, fecundity. "In many cases a man who meets a python will salute it by kissing the ground, calling it 'my father' because it is thought to be an ancestor asking its blessing" (Parrinder 1949, p.51).

Some animals, however, represent evil. This is particularly true when several animals appear together. In this manner, they may be suggestive of evil nature overpowering good. In Pobe, it is said that in the scene which shows the wart hog imprisoning the snake, the wart hog represents the spirit of evil because it needed to prove that the physical superiority of a mammal can manifest itself on the symbol of fecundity (Bernolles 1966, p.32). It is perhaps in this light that mask themes depicting animals fighting each other or an animal devouring a member of another species can be viewed.

In summary, the *Gelede* cult concerns itself with the two opposing forces of creativity and destruction. The *aje*, whom the cult dances are aimed at pleasing, have the power to kill, cause sickness, and prevent the birth of babies. On the other hand, the *aje* are called "our mothers" and are able to help the Yoruba to have long life, children, and wealth. Yemoja, the queen of witches also symbolizes the dichotomy of positive and negative forces. This is particularly manifested in her children who include both the most destructive and the most beneficial of Yoruba gods. The images portrayed on the masks worn in the *Gelede* celebrations likewise can be divided into two opposing categories: good and evil, or traditional and non-traditional. Thus by positive and negative reinforcement of customary Yoruba values, as well as through flattery of the *aje*, the *Gelede* society hopes to secure the social well-being and traditions of the Yoruba people.

S.B.

The philosophical concepts that created *Gelede* are documented in the masks. The virtues of composure and reason that prevail in the head establish a moderating force in the evaluation of the traditional and contemporary social scenes depicted in the superstructure. Images of patience, social order, morality, and positive innovations, as well as those of criticism of unacceptable elements, reflect a cult whose philosophy seeks equilibrium and rational change rather than imbalance and upheaval. This appeal to the all-powerful mothers constitutes the essence of the "ultimate spectacle" known as *Gelede*.

H.D.

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

The Ibo, a southeastern Nigerian group numbering about five million people, comprise over two hundred fragmented and autonomous village units. Throughout the Ibo region, the mask, which is worn in association with agricultural celebrations, second burials, initiation and title-taking, is one of the most important art forms. For the Ibo (as well as other southeastern Nigerian groups), one of the most widespread mask and headdress themes is "Beauty and the Beast." This theme is indicated in two complementary face types representing a beautiful female spirit on the one hand, and an aggressive animal spirit on the other.

Although there is considerable variety in both the "Beauty" and "Beast" mask styles, certain generalizations may be made about the characteristics of each (Figs. 64-66). "Beauty" masks depict marked feminine traits. These masks are relatively smooth, delicate, symmetrical, small in size, and refined, with features which are primarily thin and sharp. They are painted in light colors and decorated with ornamentation and hair styles peculiar to women. The nose is long and narrow because "a beautiful woman would have a nose like that" (S. Ottenberg, unpublished fieldnotes, quoted in Odita 1971, p.115). It may also represent the traditional thin *mmuo* nose which is responsible for the squeaking sounds these spirits emit.

The costumes of the "Beauty" masks are, in most cases, quite elaborately decorated, in keeping with the idea that many of the spirits are thought to be departed virgins who were "passing through" the *Nkpu* (fattening house) in preparation for marriage (Basden 1921, p.236). The bold, colorful patterns suggest the varied female body designs which are particularly decorative at this period in a girl's life. Other masks and costumes are

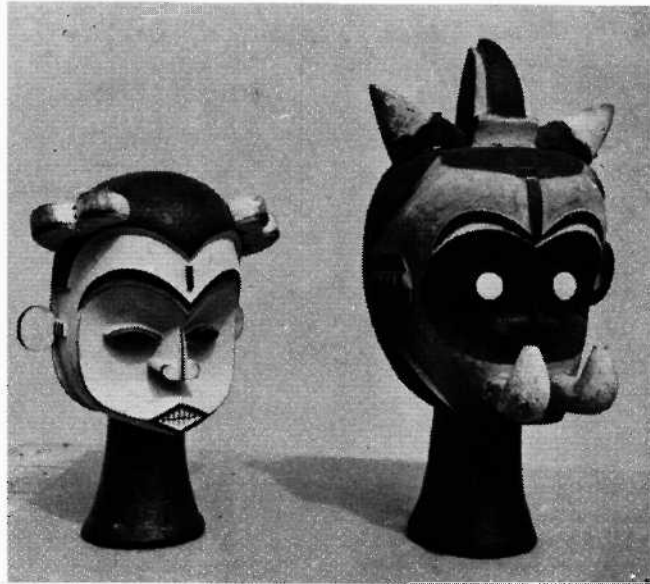


Fig. 64. Ibo *Ekpe* masks

created to portray the mothers of the maidens, with the appropriate hairstyles and decorations.

The “Beast” masks are in stylistic opposition to the masks representing “Beauty” spirits. For they are often composites, and incorporate on the one hand, animal elements, and on the other, anti-aesthetic motifs such as distortion, twisting and crookedness. The features of the “Beast” masks are in accordance with the brutality, force, strength and violence of the spirits which these masks represent. Often motifs of the animal world are combined with human elements such as combs, knives, medicine pots and *ichi* markings (scarification) (Odita 1971, p.152).

The large, gruesome, blood red fangs protruding from many “Beast” masks are particularly indicative of animalistic violence and power. They are said to symbolize the leopard. Force is also suggested by the clusters of enlarged horns found on many of these masks. Enormous tongues and mouths also express violence, as does the *ichi* scarification (derived from panther claws) covering the nose and forehead. Likewise, furrowed foreheads and intense facial expressions illicit fear. All these frightening elements can either be carved into the mask, or the real object can be secured onto the mask’s surface by means of a thick black gum.

Features which do not seem to be derived from animals, but which add to the overall gruesomeness, are also characteristic of "Beast" masks. These "ugly" motifs intentionally complement the idealized features of the "Beauty" masks. Some of these elements include tubular eyes, puffed cheeks, crooked noses and mouths, improperly placed ears, roughness, awkwardness, and heaviness. The costumes used are appropriate for the image. In the Okorosia masquerade, for example, the masks are worn with old, heavy, locally woven cloth (Odita 1971, p.148).

The personae in the Ibo masquerades are differentiated not only in general categories of Beautiful and Ugly, but also in their names, special apparel, music, and dance routines (Cole 1969, p.38). The names of "Beauty" masks include: proud woman, clear water, gorgeously dressed, honey, mid-day haze, seabird (one who travels all about, i.e. harlot), maiden spirit, white egret, rainbow neck (referring to the rolls of fat on the neck considered desirable), beautiful dance, beautiful mother, breath of wind, and beauty as delicate as a young calf (Odita 1971, p.149; Cole 1969, p.38; Starkweather 1968, opp. p.97; and Boston 1960, p.60). "Beast" masks have equally diverse names. Some of these are: rough old man, doctor, vampire, thunder, oracle, D. C. (district clerk), pot for (evil) medicine, sharp hook, poison snake, bone eater, lion, elephant, male spirit, irritating plant, and leopard among leopards (Odita 1971, p.149 and 161; Boston 1960, p.59; Cole 1969, p.38 and Starkweather 1968, p.113).

The dances performed by the various mask wearers are distinctive and are modified according to the roles they play. In some masquerades, parody is used to copy and exaggerate the female dancing style, or to show women in typical activities such as "...cutting the bush, arguing over boundaries, or begging snuff from their mothers" (Boston 1960, p.60). In several dances young girls are shown admiring themselves (Jones 1939, p.33) or making up their faces (Odita 1971, p.172). Other "Beauty" spirits such as the *Agboho-mmuo* hardly dance at all, but instead, walk around delicately, holding their waists because they are so conscious of their beauty (Odita 1976, p.149).

The dance steps of the "Beast" spirits dramatize a different set of values "...based on physical prowess, masculine vigour, and determination" (Boston 1960, p.58). Every movement is deliberate, forceful, for the most part angular, and emphasized by the heavy costumes which are worn. Potent medicines of the lineage are attached to the costumes in order to strengthen the dancers' legs. The dances are often competitive, not only for the mask wearers, but also for the lineage spirits as well. At some point in most masquerades, the Male/Ugly dancers make a circuit through the village, with their arms outstretched, terrorizing the spectators.



Fig. 65. Ibo *Okorosia* mask



Fig. 66. Ibo *Okorosia* mask

Colors, in addition to the dance movements and mask features, point up the sharp contrasts between the concepts of "Beauty" and "Beast." "Beauty" masks are generally white, a color that symbolizes weakness, inexpressiveness, beneficial ancestors, clarity, life, wealth, beauty, goodness and purity for the Ibo. Black on the other hand, is the dominant color of the "Beast" masks and is characteristic of things which are thought to be expressive, lively, strong, harmful, sterile, obscure, ugly, sick, evil, and impure (Cole 1968, p.148). The necessity for both good and bad, beautiful and ugly, is indicated by the following words from an invocation to the ancestral spirits: "The black and white cocks, the strength and weakness of our society, the complementary nature of our existence are in attendance."

Other colors used on the masks also have meaning for the Ibo. Yellow, which sometimes replaces white in the "Beauty" masks, suggests peace, coolness, brightness, prestige and pride, while red, which is used so expressively on the "Beast" masks, is associated with fighting, terror, death, power, heat, blood, sacrifice (both good and bad), defilement and danger (Cole 1968, p.148). However, more fundamental than the differences in meaning of these four widely used colors is "...the opposition between light

and dark. . . In moral, utilitarian, and aesthetic senses light things are good while dark things are bad" (Cole 1968, p.147).

Why, then, is the Beauty and the Beast theme so important with the Ibo of southeastern Nigeria. For the juxtaposition of elements, seems to indicate the opposition of various segments within the society. The answer appears to lie, in part, with the rather unique political systems of most of these groups. Here, not only is a powerful centralized authority lacking, but also the belief in equality for free men is so strong as to preclude any man having real political power (Horton 1972, pp.80-104). With the exception of the statebuilding Jukun and Igala and some Benin-influenced northern Ibo or western Ijo (Alagoa 1972, pp.276-284), nearly all the groups in this area are virtually leaderless.

In the fragmented villages which made up the various Ibo groups, either the age-grade or the title association (according to the group) made up primarily, if not exclusively of elders, held ultimate control in most matters (Murdock 1959, p.249). An age-group of young men in their thirties or forties, or junior title associations, carried out and enforced the elders' decisions (Ottenberg 1971, p.10). The use of stratified grades and title societies, each with a certain amount of power, provided a substantial base from which the younger and less wealthy men could, as a group, manifest disapproval of their elders. This unifying force was not present, to any great extent, in societies where power was lineage derived, because these youths were diffused in the various lineages to which they belonged, and, since the power of the elders was often closely associated with ancestral beliefs.

Since the graded title associations (such as those of the Aba and Bende Ibo) were tied with increased prestige and power, and because titles were open to all free Ibo men who could acquire enough wealth to belong, one of the major Ibo preoccupations evolved around earning increasing amounts of wealth and competing for higher positions (Cole 1968, p.11). In groups where power was held by age grades (such as the Ijo, Afikpo and eastern Ibo), there was also considerable rivalry and competition and sometimes even hostility between the different age groups (Ottenberg 1971, p.68). In earlier times this competition among villages, societies (title or age) and individuals was expressed in wrestling and warfare. Today the Afikpo Ibo "juniors" demonstrate these feelings in satirical *Okumkpa* plays (Ottenberg 1971, p.68). In these plays, put on by the lower age grades, young men wearing "beast-like" masks act out, with exaggerated gestures, the misbehavior of their seniors. "It is as if they are saying that the elders being portrayed are ugly, deviating and foolish" (Ottenberg 1972, p.111). In this way, the Afikpo youth make public their hostilities toward the elder, more powerful group and call to the

attention of the older grades particular needs of the community which require attention.

In a similar way, in the Kalabari Ijo villages, young adults are thought of as "hot-faced," unreflective, bold, quarrelsome, and bodily strong, while their elders are defined as "cool," reflective, cautious, and bodily weak (Horton 1972, p.101). Both Kalabari groups, however, are thought of as indispensable and complementary. This is symbolized in one sitting opposite the other in the village assembly (Horton 1972, p.101). The different responsibilities of each group demonstrate this still further. The young adult group is charged with the labor for public works, most of the active warfare, initiating fights and the expression of disapproval of village matters. Elder Kalabari, on the other hand, are the war advisors and the village moderators and mediators. The *Ibibio Ekpo* (meaning "ancestor") societies and the very similar *Ekoi Ekkpe* societies functioned in a like way with the young men "resembling the vigilantes of the old West" carrying out the edicts for the benefit of the group as a whole (Sieber and Rubin 1968, p.88).

Among these groups, the appearance of the Beauty and the Beast together may represent the contrast of these two characteristic types. The Anang *Ibibio*, for example, employ the *mfon* ("beautiful"; "good") masks to represent a deceased person who had led a "good" moral life, and the *idiok* ("ugly", "evil") masks for one who was notable for evil deeds (Messenger 1973, p.121). With the Anang as with the other groups, an ideal type of "Beauty," who represents good living, balance, restraint and dignity, as expressed in womanly features, is compared with an individual who is without these qualities or who may have forgotten them in his pursuit of wealth and power associated with grade competition or title-taking (Horton 1966, p.179).

The theme of Beauty and the Beast thus seems to point up a conflict between those with status and power and others who seek these things. Since the holders of a high title are required to exhibit a particular "exemplary" behavior (Shelton 1971, p.16), perhaps the masked "Beauty" personae, with their delicate feminine parody dances (Orita 1971, p.172) are meant to show affectations of "titled" demeanor as contrasted with the characterizations and behavior of lower titled or more youthful individuals. For, the values of the latter, based on "...physical prowess, masculine vigor and determination" (Boston 1960, p.5) are indicated in the forceful dance steps of the "Beast" masqueraders.

Thus we see that in these very competitive societies where power and status were not acquired through genealogies, but rather through individual self assertion, the differences between the "haves" (those who had achieved high title grades) and the "have nots" (those lacking in wealth who could belong to only the lower title societies) must have been cause for considerable conflict and hostility. In a similar way, in groups where age

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