

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

A STUDY IN CONTRASTS

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TRIBAL ARTS GALLERY TWO

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Albert Gordon — Leonard Kahan



LENDERS TO THE EXHIBITION: Mr. and Mrs. F. Feigell, Mr. and Mrs. E. Foley, Drs. L. and B. Jacobson, Ms. A. Kleiman, Mr. R. Safirstein, Ms. L. Thomas, Dr. and Mrs. S. Unter, Mr. and Mrs. H. Woodruff.

ESSAY BY SUZANNE PRESTON BLIER

PHOTOGRAPHS: 1,4,6,7 - Johan Elbers; 2,3,5,8 - Leonard Kahan

African art, like the ceremonies and rituals in which it is employed often functions and relates on several different levels. Such multidimensionality appears also to characterize the African tonal languages, folklore, music, drama, and other forms of intellectualization. In the art, one potentially valuable way to identify the levels of meaning is to examine its symbolism with respect to each *milieu* in the African world and cosmos, i.e. the realm of man and society, the realm of the ancestors, and the realm of the spirits and deities. This particular choice of levels of conceptualization is based on the observation that much of African intellectualization—whether the form is philosophy, science, or art — is focused on the makeup and functioning of these realms.

Thus, for example, when a particular sculpture which is thought to be primarily concerned with one conceptual level — say that of man and his status or perhaps his social control—is carefully investigated, its symbolism can usually be understood to deal not only with this realm, but also with both that of the ancestors and that of the spirits and deities. Similarly, the various motifs on a work of art, may simultaneously have several different meanings or interpretations reflecting their different human, ancestor and spirit orientations.

This essay gives a view of the “Beauty” and “Beast” masking traditions as expressions encompassing several levels of conceptualization. The exhibition, which brings together for the first time the Beauty and Beast mask forms as complementary polarities helps to illustrate this point of view in a compelling manner.

Beauty and the Beast is one of the most important masquerade themes in south-eastern Nigeria. It appears among such Lower Niger groups as the Ibo, Ibibio, Ijo, Ogoni, Idoma, Igala and Igbira, as well as among many peoples living near the Cross River such as the Ejagham, Keaka, Banyang and Yako among others. The theme of Beauty and the Beast is suggested by the contrast of two masquerade types depicting beautiful naturalistic humans (usually but not always female) on the one hand, and aggressive (predominantly masculine) grotesque or monster-like figures on the other. These “Beauty” and “Beast” “images”, both of which are danced by men, sometimes appear together in the same performance, but usually they are danced at different times, each having a separate and distinct relationship with the audience.

We have only to look at the numerous masks illustrated and on display to grasp some idea of the great contrast be-



1. IBO EKPE "BEAUTY" HEADDRESS.

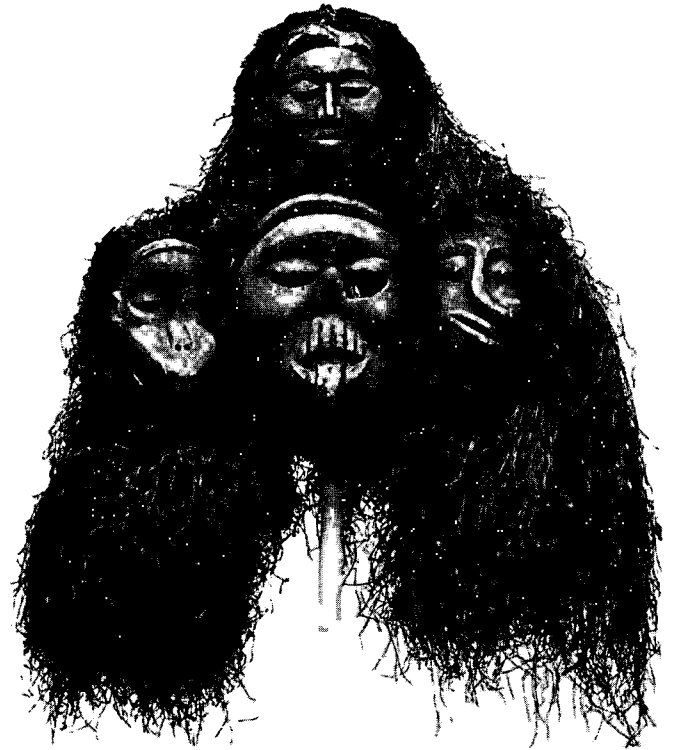
tween these two masquerade types. The "Beauty" masks and headdresses (fig. 1, 4, 6, 7), for example, have clearly defined naturalistic human features and usually a pale or light colored flesh tone. Their hair is typically very elaborate and is indicated by large three-part curl cluster crests (see fig. 6), tall horn-like braids, short hair clumps, and occasionally stained head patterns. Mirrors, colorful ribbons, pompoms, combs, dolls, and other bright objects are often added to the coiffures of the female "Beauties". Animal models, masculine hats, and male hairstyles, on the other hand, are used to indicate that a particular "Beauty" mask is male. On the "Beauty" masks of both sexes, ethnic marks are often prominent, and bright paint is used to accentuate the facial features and to represent various symbols such as *Nsibidi* designs (see fig. 4) indicating societal ideals like peace, love, and corporate harmony.

The "Beast" masks and headdresses (fig. 2, 3, 5, 8) have clearly a very different appearance. These headdresses are usually dark brown or black and are of four types, depicting (1) darkened skulls; (2) ugly deformed humans with off-center, protruding, twisted or excess mouths, eyes, noses and ears (fig. 8); (3) diseased humans with lumps, sores, split tongues, flapped (blind) eyes, and twisted or eaten away lips and noses (fig. 5) (symptoms of yaws, leprosy

and the like); and (4) dangerous composite animal monsters (fig. 3) with real or carved fangs, horns, massive jaws and beaks.

In addition to these two clearly differentiated "Beauty" and "Beast" headdress types, we also find masks and headdresses which combine both the "Beauty" and "Beast" in the same image (fig. 2). In the performance, these masks usually take on one of these attributes more strongly than the other.

The "Beauty" and "Beast" costumes, equipment and actions further emphasize the differences between the two mask types. "Beauty" dancers usually wear bright colored garments (such as the stunning one on display) made of native textile or imported European fabric. These rich costumes are often carefully decorated to represent the beautiful painted body patterns of the young maidens leaving *Nkpu* (the fattening house) ready for marriage. The "Beauty" dance equipment consists typically of fans (used sometimes to "cool" the "Beasts"), mirrors, beads, cloth bundles, flashlights, umbrellas and other bright beauty, status and "cooling" objects. In their performances, the "Beauty" maskers similarly show primarily beautiful,



2. IBIBIO. EKPO "BEAST" MASK.

graceful and cool attributes, and members of the community look forward to their arrival. Their dances, which require considerable practice and skill, include either slow graceful movements (such as those of *Nkpu*) or consist of fast and intricate body vibrations. Similarly, their mime depicts such peaceful scenes as women making up their faces (with the aid of mirrors) or working in the field or around [their] drums.

The "Beasts" evoke an opposite image in their costumes, equipment and actions. They wear rough, dark colored bulky suits of dirty rags or natural fiber. These costumes — an example of which is also on display — are often covered with powerful medicines and overlapping shaggy rows of seeds, wood chips, or other noise-making objects. Similarly contrasted, we see that the "Beast" equipment includes typically "hot" (rather than "cool") objects and consists of whips, spears, knives, machetes, guns, bows and arrows and other dangerous weapons — all symbolizing the "Beasts'" imminent and potential threat. The appearance of the "Beasts" is generally feared by the community since they are wayward, destructive and in all respects dangerous. These "images" have no set dance pattern, but instead either rush or lumber threatening through the village with heavy treading steps and poised



3. IBO. MMO "BEAST" MASK.

weapons ready to destroy property and to harm people in their way. Often the "Beasts" must be restrained by ropes or chains to prevent them from causing serious harm. Balogun has observed (1969, p. 436) that the Aba (Ibo) "Beasts" ". . . were so terrifying and so aggressive that people would often scatter and start running on hearing (their) drums.

The visual polarity which is expressed between the "Beauty" and "Beast" masks, costumes, equipment and actions, is further suggested by their names. "Beauty" masks are often called traditional female praise names such as "breath of wind" and "honey", or names referring to high status and wealth. "Beast" masks, on the other hand, have names indicating their physical strength, evilness or violence. "Strong", "evil spirit", "vampire", "tough", and "leopard among leopards" are typical.

Such explicitly antithetical treatment of the "Beauty" and "Beast" masquerades suggests to us much about their significance and meaning with reference to the first level of conceptualization, i.e. that concerning man and society. Thus, for example, we see that the "Beauties'" many features suggest wealth, status, enterprise, culture, social



4. IBO. MMO. "BEAUTY" HEADRESS.

harmony, peace, and similar societal ideals. The various "Beast" masquerades, on the other hand, connote such clearly opposed characteristics as hot headedness, nature (rather than culture), lack of enterprise, and other traits potentially detrimental to society.

The "Beauty" and "Beast" colors and mask aesthetics point up similar antithetical values which have important meanings with respect to man and society. Thus the "bright" white color of the "Beauty" masks is seen to be associated with such positive concepts as wealth, life, light, purity, eldership, children, beauty, goodness, peace, weakness, and social cohesion (concepts derived it seems from the linking of white with the ancestors). The "Beauties'" attractive mask aesthetics likewise are associated with values such as goodness, effectiveness, usefulness, propriety, status and order. In contrast, the dark colors of the "Beast" masks generally suggest power, war, death, violence, sickness, evilness, sterility, ugliness and impurity. Similarly, the "Beasts'" distorted and diseased features are often thought to reflect chaos, disorder, impotence, mental aberration, crime, alienation and religious impurity.

Another aspect concerning man and society which is

important to our understanding of the Beauty and Beast theme is the ownership of these masquerades by powerful mens' societies which traditionally were both the primary avenues for status achievement (a feature of "Beauties") and the main source of social control (a problem associated with "Beasts"). These mens' societies are of basically three types: (1) aricentral associations such as *Mmo* (Ibo), *Egu* (Ibo and Igála), *Ekpe* (Ibo), *Ekpo* (Ibibio) and *Ekú* (Igbira); (2) natufe spirit societies such as *Ngbe* and *Ekpe* (Cross River groups); and societies such as *Ekine* and *Owu* dedicated to the waterspirits. The occasions during which the "Beauty" and "Beast" masquerades are performed by these societies include primarily initiations, funerals, agricultural celebrations, and periodic ceremonies to commemorate important village events or to restore the community's health and fertility.

On the level of the ancestors the "Beauty" and "Beast" masks have an equally important significance. In the first place, many of them are thought to depict ancestral ghosts who are visiting the earth from their home in the underworld. Among the Ibibio, for example, *Ekpo* (ancestor or ghost) dancers wearing "Beauty" masks called *mfon ekpo* (good ghost) portray the ancestors of good character or deceased children too young to have been evil. Ancestors

of bad character, on the other hand, which include murderers, sorcerers, poisoners, paupers without kin, stealers of sacred objects and others who died by disfiguring diseases, suicide, violence and similar unnatural causes, are depicted in grotesque *Ekpo* "Beast" masks known as *idiokk ekpo* (evil ghost). Similarly, the *Mmo* (ghost) masks of the Ibo were worn by dancers purporting to be the returned deceased. The "Beauty" *Mmo* dancers portrayed the good, important ghosts (*ndichie*) and often appeared at funerals to comfort the family and friends of the deceased. The *Mmo* "Beasts" on the other hand, recall the *agbara*, the spirits of social outcasts who died unnatural or violent deaths.

On this ancestral level of meaning many of the "Beauty" and "Beast" masquerade features take on a new dimension. The "bright" white color of the "Beauty" mask, for example, is seen as the color of the ancestors. Similarly, the thin pinched nose, which is typical of many *Mmo* and *Ekpo* "Beauty" masks, is thought to produce the high pitched ancestral sounds these "Beauty" dancers emit. In addition, the richness of the "Beauty" costumes, the "coolness" and status of the "Beauty" objects, and the stateliness of the "Beauty" dances, evoke the characteristics of the good important ancestors these dancers portray. Be-

cause these are the ghosts of men who led good productive lives — who in the after life will work for the benefit of their families — it is natural that they would be honored rather than feared in their performances.

The features of the "Beast" masquerades, on the other hand, suggest primarily the unnatural ways these evil ghosts have died (i.e. via disfiguring disease, violence, etc.). The fact that the bodies of the evil dead were not allowed burial is also suggested in the prominence of skulls on the "Beast" masks, as it is with "Beast" names such as "evil bush", which refers to the place where the unburied bodies of social outcasts are thrown. The rough grotesque features, dangerous weapons, and violent actions of the "Beasts" suggest further the evil ghosts who perpetually cause destruction in revenge for the terribleness of their plight of never being able to reincarnate on earth. Indeed, among the Ibibio, these evil ancestral "Beasts" were thought to be the cause of much of the sickness and accidents of their descendants and townsmen.

The third important realm with which the Beauty and Beast symbolism concerns itself is that of the spirits and deities. In nearly all cases, the Beauty and Beast related



5. IBIBIO. EKPO "BEAST" MASK.

ceremonies and rituals are intimately tied with a spirit or god. Often in fact, the health, fertility (both crop and human), well-being, and very continuation of the society has its basis in the spirit or deity-honoring ceremonies with which these maskers are connected. The timing of these ceremonies — at planting and harvest, or whenever there is a great need, such as during epidemics, droughts, or other disasters — suggests clearly the significance of Beauty and Beast on this level.

The association of these Beauty and Beast "images" with the spirit realm is also seen in their use as agents of deities such as *Ale*, the Ibo earth and fertility goddess and supreme judge of man's morality. In their role as *Ale*'s assistants, the Ibo *Mmo* "images" employed ridicule, property destruction, corporal punishment, threat of disfiguring disease, impotence, as well as death and denial of burial to show the dissatisfaction of *Ale* with individuals who broke her laws.

The diseased, deathly, and violent mask features, dangerous actions, harmful weapons, and dark rough costumes of the "Beasts" suggest, therefore, the physical punishment, poverty, sterility and even death which can

result from religious impropriety. Thus on the level of the spirits and deities, the seemingly erratic destruction in the "Beast" performances can be seen as intentional and indeed as having great purpose in maintaining religious prescriptions and in assuring the societies' well-being. Likewise, the "Beauties' " pronounced female sexuality, which is prominently portrayed in their masks, dances, and *Nkpu* costumes, suggests the fertility and abundance which is commensurate with proper religious observance. The "bright" light colors of these "Beauty" masks and costumes, which evoke ideas such as purity, fertility, children and health, give further support to this interpretation.

In sum, the various characteristics of the Beauty and Beast dancers have several different meanings according to the level of conceptualization in which they are understood. On the level of man and society, the attractive "Beauty" features suggest the positive benefits to society of the combined valuation of corporateness, coolness, peacefulness, and personal enterprise. The "Beast" characteristics, on the other hand, point to the potentially detrimental traits of hot headedness, unrulyness, lack of enterprise, lack of constraint, and over aggression. Thus the "Beauty" and "Beast" masquerade symbolism concerns itself clearly with human situations and problems.



6. IBO. MMO "BEAUTY" HEADDRESS.



7. IBO. OKOROSIA "BEAUTY" MASK.

The ancestral symbolism of the "Beauty" and "Beast" maskers is also clear. On this level the "Beauties'" white color, thin noses, swaying movements, as well as their high status costumes and accouterments are meant to call to mind the important ancestors which these maskers portray. The features of the "Beast" dancers, on the other hand, suggest the manners in which the evil ghosts have died, as well as the dangerous and destructive nature of these beings themselves.

On the level of the spirits and deities this differentiated symbolism is continued still further with the "Beasts" both evoking the effects of religious impurity and serving to punish those committing such acts. The "Beauties", on the other hand, particularly in their greatly emphasized sexuality, suggest the fertility, health and well-being which can accrue an individual or community with proper observance of religious precepts.

Multiplicity of meaning, therefore, clearly characterizes the Beauty and Beast masquerades of south-eastern Nigeria. It would also appear to be an important feature in the arts of other African peoples. In this essay, rather than choosing to emphasize one or another of these mean-

ings or levels, I have maintained that each one must be taken into consideration in order to reveal the full complexity, richness and power of the art.

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8. IBIBIO. EKPO "BEAST" MASK.

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* See Blier (1976) for a more extensive bibliography.