

Recibido: 26/11/2019  
Aceptado: 20/02/2020

## BEAUTIFUL AND GROTESQUE: SIGNIFIERS OF MORALITY AND POWER IN OKPELLA MASKING TRADITIONS (NIGERIA)

*Bella y grotesca:  
Significantes de moralidad y poder en las tradiciones de la  
máscara okpella (Nigeria)*

Jean M. BORGATTI<sup>1</sup>  
Fitchburg Art Museum, Massachusetts (USA)  
*jborgatti@gmail.com*

### **Abstract**

Paired masks described as beautiful and grotesque express complementary values in several southern Nigerian art traditions. Beautiful masks represent humans, often women, and serve as metaphors for things associated with civilization and culture. Grotesque masks represent animals or men, and tend to be linked with notions of masculinity and nature. Analysis of masks falling into these categories provides us with a set of formal criteria for this imagery. Mask types that fall into this continuum are used by the Okpella, a northern Edo people living north of Benin City in southern Nigeria: a female character commemorating specific women of status and described as beautiful (*osombotse*), a more ambiguous character that serves as the festival herald and messenger of the Dead Fathers described as grotesque (*ulishi*), and a third masquerade that combines elements of both the beautiful and grotesque is described as fascinating (*efofe*). Why and how these forms communicate to their Okpella audience is the focus of this paper. It is based on qualitative research on the history and meaning of these masks carried out among the Okpella (1972-1974), survey research on aesthetic preference (1979) in which 400 individuals were interviewed, and with

---

1 PhD Art History. Professor and researcher at the University of Benin-Nigeria, Clark University, Boston University African Studies Center, and Fitchburg Art Museum ([www.fitchburgartmuseum.org](http://www.fitchburgartmuseum.org)).

a panel study (2003) in which 100 participants from the original sample were re-interviewed.

*Key words:* beautiful, grotesque, Africa, okpella, masquerade, aesthetics.

## Resumen

Las máscaras emparejadas descritas como ‘bellas’ y ‘grotescas’ expresan valores complementarios en varias tradiciones artísticas del sur de Nigeria. Las máscaras bellas representan a los humanos, frecuentemente mujeres, y se emplean como metáforas de aspectos asociados con la civilización y la cultura. Las máscaras grotescas representan animales u hombres, y suelen vincularse con nociones de masculinidad y de naturaleza. El análisis de las máscaras que entran en estas dos categorías proporciona un conjunto de criterios formales para comprender este imaginario. El grupo étnico Edo del norte que vive al norte de Ciudad de Benín en el sur de Nigeria, los *okpella*, usan máscaras de este tipo. Existe un personaje femenino descrito como bello (*osombotse*), un personaje más ambiguo descrito como grotesco (*ulishi*) y un tercero que combina elementos del bello y del grotesco y que se describe como fascinante (*efofe*). En este artículo nos interesamos en qué y cómo comunican estas formas con los *okpella*. Nuestro trabajo se apoya sobre una investigación cualitativa realizada entre los *okpella* (1972-1974), una encuesta sobre preferencia estética (1979) en la cual se entrevistó a 400 personas y un estudio (2003) en el cual se volvió a entrevistar a 100 personas de la muestra anterior.

*Palabras clave:* belleza, grotesco, África, okpella, mascarada, estética.

## 1. MASKING TRADITIONS<sup>2</sup>

Paired masquerades described as beautiful and grotesque express complementary values in several southern Nigerian art traditions.<sup>3</sup> Human, often female characters (denoted by their faces, figures, performance modes, and names) are considered beautiful and serve as metaphors for things associated with civilization and culture — humanity, goodness, social harmony, material wealth, intellect.<sup>4</sup> Grotesque masks

2 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Corpus Conference “Beautiful and Ugly” held in Lisbon in 2010.

3 Suzanne Blier, 1974, “Beauty and beast,” In Douglas Fraser, ed., *African art as philosophy*. NY, Interbook, 107-113.

4 For an illustration, see Ekpo Eyo, 1977, *Two thousand years of Nigerian art*. Lagos, Nigeria, Federal Department of Antiquities, p. 207 (Wooden face mask from Akwete, Ndoki Clan near Aba but probably made by an Ibibio carver).

take an animal or male form, and tend to be linked with notions of masculinity, evil, disruption, danger, physical force — things associated with nature, the unknown, the unpredictable. Analysis of masks falling into these categories provides us with a set of formal criteria for this imagery. Clearly articulated and symmetrical forms, smooth surfaces, light or bright colors, and elaborate or refined decoration characterize images considered beautiful. Ambiguity or asymmetry of form and decoration, distortion of form, features, or expression, animal attributes, rough surfaces, dark colors, and deep shadow characterize those considered ugly or grotesque.<sup>5</sup> It has been argued that these masks express the complementarity of opposites in the cultures that use them with the nuancing of the meaning varying across these groups. Moreover, they are rendered complex by intentional disruptions to remind us that life is not neatly divided into dichotomies.<sup>6</sup> Thus among the northern and central Igbo around Awka and Owerri, the beauty-beast dichotomy, their concert and alternating performances, suggest the opposition of various segments in society and the constant negotiation to achieve consensus in these historically egalitarian and small scale groups. Furthermore, the opposing but complementary qualities symbolized by these images — social harmony and intellect paired with the dynamic expression of energy, physical force and aggression — represent qualities necessary for survival, being most useful when tempered by an opposite. The visual forms differ in that among the northern Igbo, it is a dichotomy between female/human and male/animal that gives visual form to these ideas, and among the central Igbo the emphasis is on water spirits that are light, birdlike, dainty, feminine, and linked to cumulous clouds and gentle rain versus those that are dark, misshapen, lunging, masculine, and linked to thunderheads and storms.<sup>7</sup>

Among the Afikpo Igbo, in the Cross River area, the dialogue is between youth and age. Young men perform in masked plays that satirize the behavior of older members of the community, pointing out those who have misappropriated funds or behaved in ways either

---

5 For an illustration, see William Fagg, 1963, *Nigerian images*. New York, Praeger: plate 124 (Ibibio wooden mask for the Ekpo Society).

6 Herbert Cole, 2008, "(Igbo) masks and masquerades," In Monica Visona, Herbert Cole and Robin Poynor, eds., *A history of art in Africa*. New Jersey, Pearson/Prentice Hall, 297-302, text and illustrations.

7 Cole, "(Igbo) masks and masquerades," 297-299, text and illustrations.

immoral or foolish — kinds of commentary necessarily left unspoken in a social situation in which elders controlled most of the goods and resources as well as political power. Elders are represented by dark masculine masks and youth by white-faced female ones — but a wide variety of characters often wearing similar masks surrounds these opposing types.<sup>8</sup>

The meanings shift into something perhaps more relevant to the topic at hand as we move into the Ibibio area where beautiful, light-colored feminine masks personify “good ghosts” and grotesque dark masks, “bad ghosts.” Good ghosts represent those individuals generically who lived moral lives, thus earning the right to be reincarnated; bad ghosts represent immoral and unscrupulous individuals who are condemned after death to perpetual wandering. All souls return to their villages on an annual basis — the good ghosts in fine costumes and moving decorously; the bad ghosts wreaking havoc.<sup>9</sup>

In his study of Annang Ibibio carvers, anthropologist John Messenger discovered that grotesque masks (bad ghosts) are made more frequently than beautiful masks — simply because the grotesque is more interesting to carve. Beauty, with its low relief, even features, and great regularity was more restrictive and less interesting to create.<sup>10</sup> In the Ibibio context specifically (and among the Owerri Igbo, who are close neighbors), the ugly or grotesque takes on not only animal attributes and asymmetry, but manifestations of specific disfiguring diseases like paralysis, yaws, or leprosy, since these manifestations symbolize moral depravity just as youth and beauty suggest good character.

## 2. OKPELLA MASKING

Mask types that fall into this continuum, in some cases derived from Igbo forms though carrying culturally-specific meanings, are used as well by the Okpella, an Edo-speaking people living north of Benin City in southern

---

8 Simon Ottenberg, 1975, *Masked rituals of Afikpo*. Seattle, University of Washington Press, passim. See also Cole, “(Igbo) masks and masquerades, 300.

9 John Messenger, 1973, “The role of the carver in Anang society.” In Warren D’Azevedo, ed., *The traditional artist in African societies*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 101-127.

10 Messenger, “The role of the carver in Anang society”: 121-122.



Fig. 1. Dead Mother–Olimi Mamune (c.1935) from Afokpella community, owned by Iyeluwa Quarter congregation. Olimi Festival, March 19, 1973. Photo: Jean Borgatti (73.14.05).



Fig. 2. Messenger–Anogiri Odumi (c.1930?) from Afokpella community, owned by Iyeluwa Quarter congregation. Cultural display, May 6, 1972. Photo: Jean Borgatti (72.16.06)

Nigeria:<sup>11</sup> a female character [Figure 1] commemorating specific women of status and described as beautiful (*osombotse*); a more ambiguous character [Figure 2] that serves as the festival herald and messenger/servant of the Dead Fathers described as grotesque (*ulishi*); the Dead Father ‘himself’ [Figure 3] — a non-anthropomorphic masquerade necessarily contrasted in terms of gender, and described in terms of mystery and power; a masquerade ensemble made up of a line of cloth appliqué clad dancers [Figure 4] accompanied by a mythical bush monster [Figure 5]; and a fourth masquerade [Figures 6 and 7] that combines elements considered both beautiful and grotesque, and described as fascinating, specifically, “the more you look, the more you have to look; you will never fully understand it, therefore you must keep looking at it” or as “knock out” (*uzuabino*) — literally, “it bowls you over.”

11 Initial research among the Okpella (1971-1974) was funded in part by an NDEA Title VI Fellowship granted through UCLA, a UCLA Patent Fund Award, and the Altman Memorial Award, Museum of Cultural History (The Fowler), UCLA.



Fig. 3: “Dead Father” – Omeshe Ogene (c. 1970) dancing with Chief Felix Sado, Afokpella, Imiamune Quarter, Olimi Festival March 1973. Photo: Jean Borgatti (73.12.23).

What and how these forms communicate to their Okpella audience is the focus of this essay. It is a complex interpretation based on the literature of beautiful and grotesque masquerades in southeastern Nigeria as glossed above and as written about in a more detailed study by Dutch anthropologist Wilfried van Damme,<sup>12</sup> qualitative research on the history and meaning of these masks in Okpella between 1972 and 1974,<sup>13</sup> and on surveys of aesthetic preference conducted in 1979 and 2003.<sup>14</sup> The Okpella themselves

12 See Wilfried Van Damme, 1987, *A Comparative Analysis Concerning Beauty and Ugliness in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Gent, Rijksuniversiteit and 1996, *Beauty in Context: Towards an Anthropological Approach to Aesthetics*. Leiden, E.J. Brill.

13 Jean M. Borgatti, 1976, *The Festival as Art Event – Form and Iconography: Olimi Festival in Okpella Clan, Etsako Division, Midwest State, Nigeria*. PhD Diss., UCLA, and subsequent publications: 1976, “Okpella Masking Traditions.” *African Arts* IX, 4: 24-33; 1979, “Dead Mothers of Okpella.” *African Arts* XII, 4: 48-57; 1988, “Anogiri: Okpella’s Festival Herald.” In S. Kasfir, ed., *African Masquerades*, Tervuren (Belgium), Musee Royal de l’Afrique Centrale: 65-84; 2011, “Dead Fathers of Okpella.” In Marla Berns, Sidney Kasfir and Richard Fardon, eds., *Central Nigeria Unmasked: Arts of the Benue Valley*, Los Angeles, the Fowler at UCLA: 134-139.

14 The 1979 research was funded in part through the Social Science Research Council and the organization of the data and its initial analysis through a National Science Foundation grant 1981-1983; the 2003 research was funded through a Fulbright-Hays teaching and research grant. See Borgatti, 1982, “Ogiriga-Okpella masks: In Search of the parameters of beautiful and grotesque.” *Visual Communications*, 8/3: 28-40 and unpublished papers: 1985, “Good Art, Bad Art: The Beautiful and the Grotesque in Okpella Masking Traditions,” College Art Association Meetings/New Research; 1998, “Aesthetics and Social Change in Okpella,” Triennial Symposium on African Art (New Orleans); 2008, “Okpella Aesthetics and Social Change 1979/2003,” European Association of Social Anthropologists, Ljubljana-Slovenia.

are one of many small but distinct groups of people who live north of Benin City in southern Nigeria. That they speak Edo languages and trace their origins to Benin in their orthodox histories masks a greater complexity in their respective ethnic backgrounds. The end result is that cultural diversity is a hallmark of the region, and eclecticism characterizes the masquerades. To go into the history of each mask type, how it came to Okpella and how it relates to the masquerades of surrounding ethnic groups is just one of the many things that go beyond the scope of this essay, and that has been covered elsewhere.<sup>15</sup>

Three words that concern us are “beautiful,” “grotesque,” and “ugly.” The Cambridge Dictionary on-line defines beauty as the quality of being pleasing, especially to look at, or someone or something that gives great pleasure, especially by being looked at.<sup>16</sup> The term for beautiful in Okpella (*osomhotse*) shares these characteristics — for in Okpella, beauty connotes happiness and contentment (lack of suffering), completeness or fulfillment (in terms of function), a perfection of physical form as well as appropriateness of form (well-made), and, importantly, embellishment or decoration — something better than good, an ideal. For the Okpella, as in the English-speaking world, beauty (*otse*) is an attribute associated with things, animate or inanimate, and one may refer to a girl, the sky, a pot, a song or a dance as beautiful (*osomhotse*). The dictionary shows “ugly” as an antonym. Ugly is defined as unpleasant to look at; not attractive; with a secondary definition of threatening. Grotesque is defined as being strange and unpleasant, especially in a silly or slightly frightening way. In Okpella, the words for “ugly” (*oyemosue*) and “grotesque” (*ulishi*) are seen as antonyms for “beautiful” (*osomhotse*). *Oyemosue* (ugly) also carries the connotation of suffering. Thus, something marked by disease, broken by accident, or altered through wear, has suffered and is ugly. *Ulishi* in Okpella translates quite directly as grotesque, and the Okpella use the term to indicate the radically distorted forms of forest spirits with one eye or three heads, or the ambiguity inherent in the masks and performance of the Messenger/Heralds (Inogiri), masks decorated with

15 See Borgatti, *The Festival as Art Event – Form and Iconography: Olimi Festival in Okpella Clan, Eisako Division, Midwest State, Nigeria*, and subsequent publications: “Okpella Masking Traditions”; “Dead Mothers of Okpella”; “Anogiri: Okpella’s Festival Herald”; and “Dead Fathers of Okpella.”

16 This definition was taken from the dictionary when it was accessed in 2010. The current definition differs slightly: “having an attractive quality that gives pleasure to those who experience it or think about it.”



flashing mirrors confusing to the eye and whose performance is clown-like and brutish.

In Okpella, as in many sub-Saharan African cultures, all masquerades are personified spirits, referred to generally by the term *olimi*, translatable as “spirit,” “dead person,” or “being from the other world.” It is the term used generically for any masked figure, though it is specified by both a type name and a personal name. For example, the masks commemorating women (the ones referred to above as Dead Mothers) are called *olimi nikeke* (minor spirits) and identified by the name of the women commemorated, illustrated in Figures 1 and 8. The Messenger/Herald figures are called *Ilimi* (plural for spirits) and then categorized by type as *Inogiri* (plural form) with a personal name such as *Odumi*, meaning “lion” and reflecting its powerful nature, as in Figure 2. Masquerades commemorating men, the classic form, are referred to as *omeshe* because of visual and performance characteristics noted below, and then bear the name of the deceased individual they portray, as shown in Figure 3 where *Omeshe Ogene* is seen performing.



Fig. 4. Line of Okakagbe dancers from Fugar community (Avianwu people) Edo State performing at the Ubiaja (Ishan) Agricultural fair, February 1972. Photo: Jean Borgatti (72.03.35)



Fig 5. “Mythical Bush Monster” Idu from Azukhala community, Iviakpera Quarter (Ekperi people) Edo State, Otsa Festival, November 1972. Photo: Jean Borgatti (72.36.27)



In Okpella, all masquerades, because they are personified spirits, are categorically beautiful. Of the masquerades under consideration, the commemorative masquerades for women or Dead Mothers are considered actually beautiful in a physical sense, described with the word *osombohse*, and the Festival Herald, or Messenger/Servant of the Dead Fathers, is described as ugly or grotesque, described by the words *oyemosue* and *ulishi*. In Okpella, female and male masquerade forms are contrasted not only in terms of the beautiful (Dead Mothers) and ugly or grotesque (Messenger/Herald) but also as the beautiful (Dead Mothers) as opposed to the powerful (Dead Fathers).

The commemorative masquerade for men is non-anthropomorphic and described in terms of mystery and power. The dance is “hard” (*dua dua*) and “hot” — displaying the highest energy level of any of the daytime performed dances — and carries the praise name *onokaka*, something arduous.<sup>17</sup> The dancer changes the shape of the image, its direction, and its level while maintaining a constant rhythm pattern and a tempo measured at 240 beats per minute.<sup>18</sup> As noted previously, the Dead Father (*omeshe*) is unlike other Olimi festival masquerades in that it is not anthropomorphic. It is “the thing that walks leaving no footprints on the ground” (*Emi ni e kia eke ni ai me owe o*).<sup>19</sup> Descriptions liken it to a cloth carried by the wind<sup>20</sup> or to spirals of wind-blown dust, so-called dust devils.<sup>21</sup> Observers marvel that “It has no eyes, no hand or foot, yet leaps about when dancing.”<sup>22</sup> And never falls.”<sup>23</sup>

17 These are descriptions of *omeshe* that emerged from the survey on aesthetic preference carried out in Okpella in 1979. The numbers reference the respondent/questionnaire number. These are rough transliterations without phonetic or diacritical marks. This data is in the process of being archived as a dataverse with the Murray Archive at Harvard University.

18 I am indebted to Margaret Thompson Drewal (performance studies specialist) and ethnomusicologist Robert Witmer for viewing films and listening to music in order to help me appropriately describe both movement and sound.

19 Praise given to *omeshe* Alukpekpe by the Otaru of Afokpella, March 14, 1974 (Tape 7, Side II: 078-083). See <<http://www.ethnomusicology.amdigital.co.uk/>> Global Field Recordings.

20 018: The playing of *omeshe* is like the movement of the wind. The beating is hard. (*Abola o omeshe o ro le abi okiki olitsu a ra kpeli Ekpeli oa tuekilighi na le*).

21 02: I like it when *omeshe* is dancing like a ‘circling wind’ (dust devil). (I no *omeshe* oa bola abo okiki-olitsa ora ti mhe elue.)

22 169 *Omeshe* has no eyes, hands or feet. When it dances, it jumps up. (*Omeshe* oa zi kpalo. Oa zo we ali obo. Okhagbishimi oa fiala idane). 250 *Omeshe* is just a thing on the ground with no legs, hands or head that can be seen. (*Omeshe* onu liabie emi no la eka we agia me, awe, abo, ali ukhomi ogoli).

23 063 When *omeshe* comes to the playing ground, it is like a cloth carried by the wind; when dancing, it is like a wild animal. (Ini *Omeshe* obale olele o li abie ode na ru khasi ni

Each of these masquerades plays a role in the festival of all souls (Olimi) held annually in specific Okpella communities to remember the relatively recent dead, honor the ancestors collectively, and purify the community for the New Year. It should be emphasized that all Okpella people do not celebrate Olimi, especially in recent times, but there are festival congregations in the communities of Ogiriga, Afokpella, Iddo, and Ogute. Moreover, the situation concerning supporters of the festival continues to become more complex as Islam and evangelical Christianity with their embargo on animist forms continue to grow in popularity, and the ideology of cultural heritage assumes greater credence.

Where Olimi is celebrated, Dead Mothers and Dead Fathers commemorate individual deceased members of the community, men and women. A Dead Mother, like other southern Nigerian forms mentioned here and found among various Igbo and Ibibio groups, personifies “feminine cool” at one level, and when performance modes are considered — the changing of rhythm patterns several times in performance sequences that last just seconds, the ideal of accomplishing a difficult task with perfect composure. Dead Fathers do not take human form, and the dance is arduous in the extreme. The dance is “hot,” personifying male aggression and the dynamic expression of energy at one level. At a more abstract level, it symbolizes an ideal of achievement through individual effort. To some extent, the grotesque masked figure is an extension of the Dead Father, reinforcing the dichotomy of female/male, human/non-human; cool/hot — ramifications of “beauty” versus “beast.” Greater detail about the gender-based metaphors of Dead Fathers and Dead Mothers is beyond the scope of this essay, and they have been written about elsewhere.<sup>24</sup>

Going into the methodology employed to derive the criteria in Okpella for “beautiful” and “grotesque” as applied to the Dead Mother masquerade and the Festival Herald/Messenger is also beyond the scope of this essay. This too has been written about elsewhere.<sup>25</sup> These are mentioned because

---

apiapia o re. O kha bie ishimi o li abi elami). 132 (I like the way) omeshe does not fall down (when it dances). (I dede noa ya de). Similar sentiments were expressed on interview numbers 283 & 376.

24 See note 15, with particular reference to Borgatti, “Dead Mothers of Okpella.”

25 See Borgatti, 1980, “Anogiri or Olimi: Preference Patterns for Mask Types in Ogiriga-Okpella, Nigeria,” *Bashiru*, 11, 1: 34-46, and 1982, “Ogiriga-Okpella Masks: In Search of the Parameters of Beautiful and Grotesque.” *Visual Communications*, 8, 3: 28-40.



Fig 6: “Elders’ Masquerade” Efofe from Ogiriga community (Okpella people), Edo State. Cultural Display, May 11, 1972. Photo: Jean Borgatti (72.18.02)

they form part of the larger argument and background for interpreting another Okpella masquerade, the Elders’ masquerade Efofe, a name that may be translated as “Knock Out” in English [Figures 6 and 7]. However, this masquerade, part of the ancestral festival like the other three, derives from northern Igbo masquerades transplanted to Edo North in the 1930s.<sup>26</sup> The set of characters in the Okakagbe ensemble [Figures 4 and 5] draws on the beauty-beast dichotomy evident in the northern Igbo masquerades from which they derive — the Mwanu or maiden spirit masks and and Mbedike, a bush monster masquerade sponsored by the men’s masquerade association. Unlike the other Okpella masquerades under consideration, Okakagbe characters are not part of the ancestral festival. They are members of a social masquerade troupe that may be hired whenever there is need to provide entertainment, as at a funeral, an agricultural fair, to honor a visiting dignitary, or to celebrate winning a court case.

In the 1930s, the elders of one Okpella community sought out the artist Okeleke, who had brought the tradition to Edo north from Ibaji on the east bank of the Niger River, and commissioned from him a masquerade that would represent them in the annual ancestral festival. It was one of a series of innovative additions to the festival complex by individual congregations that sought to upstage or outdo the others.<sup>27</sup> Okeleke combined the costume

26 Jean M. Borgatti, 1979, *From the Hands of Lawrence Ajanaku*. Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, UCLA.

27 Borgatti, “Okpella Masking Traditions.”

and headdress of Ancient Mother from the Okakagbe ensemble with the face of the mythical bush monster, elaborating the figure with complementary embroidered panels suspended from the brim of the headdress [Figures 6 and 7].<sup>28</sup> The combination of Mother and Monster is visually and socially dramatic, and Knock Out's appearance represents the climax or visual high point of the daylight dancing held to celebrate the successful ritual purification of the village for the New Year. Though not created by the Okpella, the Okpella named this mask — and they called it Efofe — “The More You Look, The More You Have To Look. You will Never Fully Understand It, So You Must Keep Looking At It,” describing it alternatively as Uzuabino, meaning “it bowls you over.” In other words, it is a “Knock Out” — something superlative. The costume is elaborate and expensive appropriate for the masquerade sponsored by the elders. The Monster, King of the Bush, is an apt metaphor of leadership. The grotesque visage also references visually the idea of great supernatural power embodied by Okpella's elders — an idea made explicit in songs sung by the elders' night society during the ancestral festival in which the masquerade appears.<sup>29</sup> The configuration of children, as the stuffed cloth figures are called, indicates seniority and power along with their concomitant social responsibilities.



Fig 7. “Elders’ Masquerade” Efofe (c. 2003) from Ogiriga community (Okpella people), Edo State. Olimi Festival, April 6, 2003. Photo: Jean Borgatti (2003, Disc 6, DSC02321)

28 See also <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gC7SAup\\_RD4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gC7SAup_RD4)> for Efofe in performance.

29 Borgatti, *The Festival as Art Event – Form and Iconography: Olimi Festival in Okpella Clan, Etsako Division, Midwest State, Nigeria*, Appendix.

The visual analogy with Ancient Mother signifies that the elders of Okpella look after their villages with the diligence of mothers caring for their children, again a notion reinforced in song lyrics. It further suggests the great and mysterious power of female creativity that supports and surrounds the power of male leadership—an idea that finds expression in many sub-Saharan African cultures, among the Yoruba of SW Nigeria,<sup>30</sup> the Senufo of Ivory Coast,<sup>31</sup> and the Luba of the Democratic Republic of the Congo<sup>32</sup> to note just several examples.

To summarize briefly, the people of Okpella describe as “beautiful” or “grotesque” masks with particular visual characteristics. These masks (the basis of the survey on aesthetic preference) provide the key to identifying masquerade characters which communicate a range of values to their audience in the context of well-defined roles — expressing an adult feminine ideal to honor a woman of status and an idea of power and opportunity in the Messenger/Herald figure. Okakagbe costumed dancers fall into both of these aesthetic and gendered categories, consisting of a line of beautiful dancers with their bush monster foil. The Dead Father, non-anthropomorphic, stands a bit outside but clearly expresses abstractly the dynamic expression of energy associated with male activity.

### 3. SURVEY ON AESTHETIC PREFERENCE

In the survey on aesthetic preference that focused on the Dead Mother and the Messenger, comments linked to choices for masks suggest general

---

30 For example, John Pemberton notes that the pairing of the king and the mother in the masks of the Epa Festival affirms the vital relationship of male and female powers (p. 202) and in a much longer passage on royal architecture, he discusses the hidden, covert, reproductive powers of women that underlie the overt power of Yoruba kings (p. 210), 1989, “The Carvers of the Northeast.” In *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought*, Henry John Drewal and John Pemberton with Rowland Abiodun, New York, Center for African Art. Babatunde Lawal focuses on southeastern Yorubaland where the Gelede masquerade predominates, a masquerade celebrating the power of women and headed by a priestess. He notes that in Ketu, the priestess is so important that her opinion must be sought on important state and religious matters, and she plays an important role in the burial of a deceased king and the coronation of the new one. Babatunde Lawal, 1996, *The Gelede Spectacle: Art, Gender, and Social Harmony in an African Culture*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, *passim*, but particularly p. 82.

31 See Anita Glaze, 1975, “Woman Power and Art in a Senufo Village.” *African Arts* 8, 3: 24-29+64-68+90.

32 See Jack D. Flam, 1971, “The Symbolic Structure of Baluba Caryatid Stools.” *African Arts* 4, 2: 54-59+80.

criteria for “good” art as well as specific criteria for objects in the categories “beautiful” and “grotesque.” General criteria relate to the appropriateness of the image, the skill of the artist, the clarity of the forms and the quality of the decorative detail. Specific criteria relate to the values expressed by a beautiful or grotesque image. Most important for beauty are clarity and symmetry expressed by Okpella descriptors *ofuase* and *osbeshe*. *Ofuase* translates as neat, clean, bright, or white and *osbeshe* translates as balanced or straight. Most important for grotesque is the quality of ambiguity created through the combination of human and animal forms, deep shadow, and through the relationship of surface decoration with three-dimensional form expressed most overtly in the use of mirrors as a decorative device. The combination of human/mother and animal/monster in a single image creates a visual tension for the Okpella audience because humans and animals represent realms that are distinct and incompatible, if complementary, in Okpella thought. In the case of the Efofe, that combination is not only endlessly fascinating (the more you look, the more you have to look...) but evokes a sense of awesome power for the audience (You will never fully understand it).



Fig. 8. “Dead Mother” – Olimi Oriyekia (prior to 1973) owned by Kadiri Oboarekpe from New Iddo community. Olimi Festival, May 6, 1973. Photo: Jean Borgatti (73.23.24)



Fig. 9. “Messenger” Egibunu of Ogiriga community (prior to 1973), said to be carved by Shedetu Bekon and owned by the family of Lawrence Ajanaku. Cultural Display post Olimi Festival, April 6, 2003. Photo: Jean Borgatti (2003, Disc 5, DSC02263).



## REFERENCES

### Bibliography

- BLIER, Suzanne, 1974, "Beauty and beast." In Douglas Fraser, ed., *African art as philosophy*. NY, Interbook: 107-113.
- BORGATTI, Jean M., 1976, *The festival as art event – form and iconography: Olimi festival in Okpella Clan, Etsako Division, Midwest State, Nigeria*. PhD Diss., UCLA.
- BORGATTI, Jean M., 1976, "Okpella masking traditions." *African Arts*, IX, 4: 24-33.
- BORGATTI, Jean M., 1979, *From the hands of Lawrence Ajanaku*. Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, UCLA.
- BORGATTI, Jean M., 1979, "Dead mothers of Okpella." *African Arts*, XII, 4: 48-57.
- BORGATTI, Jean M., 1980. "Anogiri or olimi: preference patterns for mask types in Ogiriga-Okpella, Nigeria." *Bashiru*, 11, 1: 34-46.
- BORGATTI, Jean M., 1982, "Ogiriga-Okpella masks: in search of the parameters of beautiful and grotesque." *Visual Communications*, 8, 3: 28-40
- BORGATTI, Jean M., 1988, "Anogiri: Okpella's festival herald." In S. Kasfir, ed., *African masquerades*, Tervuren (Belgium), Musee Royal de l'Afrique Centrale: 65-84.
- BORGATTI, Jean M., 2011. "Dead fathers of Okpella." In Marla Berns, Sidney Kasfir and Richard Fardon, eds., *Central Nigeria unmasked: arts of the Benue Valley*, Los Angeles, the Fowler at UCLA: 134-139.
- COLE, Herbert, 2008, "(Igbo) masks and masquerades." In Monica Visona, Herbert Cole and Robin Poynor, eds. *A history of art in Africa*. New Jersey, Pearson/Prentice Hall: 297-302, text and illustrations.
- EYO, Ekpo, 1977, *Two thousand years of Nigerian art*. Lagos, Nigeria, Federal Department of Antiquities.
- FAGG, William, 1963, *Nigerian images*. New York, Praeger.
- FLAM, Jack D, 1971, "The symbolic structure of Baluba caryatid stools." *African Arts*, 4, 2: 54-59+80.
- GLAZE, Anita, 1975, "Woman power and art in a Senufo village" *African Arts*, 8, 3: 24-29+64-68+90.
- LAWAL, Babatunde, 1996, *The Gelede spectacle: art, gender, and social harmony in an African culture*, Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- MESENTER, John, 1973/1989, "The role of the carver in Anang society." In Warren D'Azevedo, ed., *The traditional artist in African societies*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press: 101-127.
- OTTENBERG, Simon, 2008, *Masked rituals of Afikpo*. Seattle, University of Washington Press: 1975.

- PEMBERTON, John, 1989, "The carvers of the Northeast." In *Yoruba: nine centuries of African art and thought*, Henry John Drewal and John Pemberton with Rowland Abiodun, New York, Center for African Art: 189-211.
- VAN DAMME, Wilfried, 1987, *A comparative analysis concerning beauty and ugliness in sub-Saharan Africa*. Gent, Rijksuniversiteit.
- VAN DAMME, Wilfried, 1996, *Beauty in context: towards an anthropological approach to aesthetics*. Leiden, E.J. Brill.

### Electronic Resources

- Cambridge Dictionary on-line* <<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/beautiful>> (accessed December 29, 2019)
- Efofe masquerade (Okpella, Ogiriga)* Youtube: <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gC7SAup\\_RD4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gC7SAup_RD4)> (accessed December 30, 2019)

### Unpublished Sources

- BORGATTI, Jean M., 1985, "Good art, bad art: the beautiful and the grotesque in Okpella masking traditions." College Art Association Meetings/New Research.
- BORGATTI, Jean M., 1998, "Aesthetics and social change in Okpella." Triennial Symposium on African Art (New Orleans).
- BORGATTI, Jean M., 2008, "Okpella aesthetics and social change 1979/2003." European Association of Social Anthropologists, Ljubljana-Slovenia.