LESSON 13: NEGOTIATING GENDER
Portrayal of a Hunter: *Ere Egungun Olode*, Nigeria

Fig. 3.2
In this lesson students explore the use of *egungun* masks in rituals devoted to honoring ancestors, as practiced by Yoruba peoples from Nigeria and Benin. They discuss family rituals that celebrate their own ancestors, construct special dress ensembles to honor them, employ poetry as a way to memorialize loved ones, and discuss contrasts between cultures, as inspired by the experiences of Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka. Students will

- Consider traditions of respect and honor for elder relatives and ancestors and compare these to practices of the Yoruba peoples of Nigeria.
- Explore *egungun* masquerades of the Yoruba peoples of West Africa and its diasporas through discussion, artmaking activities, and creative writing.
- Use the writing of Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka to reflect on the challenges of growing up in two cultures.

Among the Yoruba peoples of southwestern Nigeria and southeastern Benin, ancestors are honored through *egungun* masquerades. *Egungun* masks may manifest recently deceased spirits who return to the world of the living to see their families before making the final journey into the spirit world. The masquerades are rich with satire and symbolism and honor the ancestors, or “living dead,” by continuing their traditions and celebrating family lineages. The masker is completely covered by the cloth ensemble he wears—and the manipulation of the cloth is key to the sense of theatre and dance it embodies. While the ensemble conceals, it also reveals a reality not otherwise observable—the presence and power of the “living dead” who can affect the affairs of the living.

Members of the masquerade group (always men) prepare in a sacred grove, often reciting prayers and attaching amulets so that they will be ready to receive ancestral spirits. “Its true power and purpose are activated only when a masker enters the costume, transformed into the presence and power of the ancestors in an Egungun ceremony” (Fitzgerald 1995, 55). Costumes (completely concealing the identity) of *egungun* dancers vary across regions; some are made entirely of grasses, most are made of fabric. Best known are the layered *egungun* ensembles of sumptuous, brightly colored, multi-textured panels (*fig. 3.4*). As the wearer walks in an exaggerated fashion and executes leaps and dances, the spectacular layers of cloth will rise, fall, and whirl about (*fig. 3.5*).
Masks or wooden headdresses complete the *egungun* ensemble. The two headdresses (figs. 3.2 and 3.3) in the *Negotiating Gender* section of the exhibition express concerns of gender and in particular, reflect the importance and power of hunting as a man’s profession. Both examples display the distinctive braided hairstyles of hunters. Representations of thunder axes, a pressure drum, monkey heads, and vials for storing powerful substances adorn the head of the larger headdress. These are symbolic references to the abilities of ancestors to protect the families of hunters and their children and to societal roles that are gender-based.

**About the Artist**

These *egungun* headdresses were made in Abeokuta, Nigeria, one in the nineteenth century, the other in the early twentieth century. The older mask (fig. 3.2) is attributed to Adugbologe, member of a renowned family of carvers. The Adugbologe family workshops in Abeokuta have become well-known for producing headdresses for the *egungun* society. As is typical in such workshops young woodcarvers, along with other descendents and lineage members, train under their fathers and thus continue family traditions.
1. Ancestors
The Yoruba respect and honor their ancestors as powerful beings who can influence the fate or fortunes of the living. Their ability to protect hunters—and especially their children—is alluded to by the representation of power symbols on the egungun mask. When a baby is born, people look at the newborn to find reminders of the personality or physical features of an ancestor.

Activity
Give students opportunities to discuss their deceased relatives. How are their lives remembered and celebrated? Was their death commemorated? If so, how? How do memories of the deceased influence students’ lives today? Does anything about the student remind their family of an ancestor? Have them talk about these connections.

2. Whirling Flashes of Color
There is no set design for egungun costumes, but typically they are made up of layers of fabric panels, colorful collages embellished with sequins, mirrors, ribbons, cowry shells, and amulets. Among the multi-layered, multi-colored, multi-textured patchwork, red is often the predominant color. Ancestors are honored with the brightest colors, most intricate appliqués, and the best velvets and brocades that the family can afford. These elements combine to display a static beauty when stationary, but when worn by a circling dancer the cloth panels flare out, the layers rise and fall, and the colors blur into a dizzying, spinning, moving storm of beauty and power.

Activity
Students can be inspired by egungun traditions to honor their own ancestors. They may cut a variety of fabric scraps into fairly uniform strips and attach the tops of the strips (sewing, gluing, stapling, or using Velcro) to an oversized shirt and sweatpants. Always begin by attaching the pieces at the bottom of rows and overlap succeeding rows above them. To get the feel of the movement of fabric without constructing a complete costume, they may also create overlapped strips to accent a sleeve or the front of a shirt, or down the side of a pants leg. Students can investigate the fabrics they will use: research how and where the textiles were made, arrange them by colors or patterns, decorate and embellish individual pieces to make them more valuable, and compose stories about the performance and/or the ancestor honored.
3. Making, Dancing, Seeing

Performance of an egungun masquerade is not the sole prerogative of the person dancing the mask and costume. It is a community event, a give-and-take among the maskers and those who join them, chase them, or try to run away from them. Sounds are heard emanating from the masquerade as well as from the drummers and other musicians and from the people viewing.

Activity

Consider the mask maker. Egungun masks are carved in workshops. According to scholar Christopher Slogar in his 2002 African Arts article, sometimes separate pieces carved in advance are added to the mask to accommodate the wishes of the client. Let students draw objects that show respect and then add and arrange them on outlines of masks that they have previously drawn.
LESSON 13: NEGOTIATING GENDER
Portrayal of a Hunter: *Ere Egungun Olode*, Nigeria

Consider the egungun masker. He is the manifestation on earth of the spirit of an ancestor. In performance his voice is that of a low rumble or high falsetto. The masker *is* and is *not* himself; he becomes the metaphorical bridge between the living and the dead. How might he feel? Women participate by singing oriki or “praise poems” (see Activity 4 in *Lesson 14: Negotiating Gender: Powerful Mother: Ere Gelede, Nigeria*).

Consider the viewers. They hear drums in the distance, they become aware of the songs and chants of many women. The sounds become louder and louder. Surrounded by the sounds, by friends and relatives moving about, and by multi-colored, whirling costumed images, they may feel excited, frightened, overwhelmed, or may have any number of other responses. How do your students think they might react? Can they recall seeing or participating in a performance that excited their senses as an egungun masquerade might affect a young Yoruba?

Students can write a poem from the perspective of a maker (as artist, writer, musician, etc.), a performer, or a viewer to or listener of a piece of art or performance.

4. Remembrances of *Egungun*

Activity

Wole Soyinka, the first African to win the Nobel Prize in Literature (1986), was born in Nigeria, of Yoruba heritage. His immediate family was Christian; his father was headmaster of the Christian school. In his autobiography, *Ake: The Years of Childhood* (1989), Soyinka explored the contrasts of living in the two worlds of the white Christian and the native Nigerian. On pages 31 and 32 he cites remembrances of egungun from his childhood and considers their many meanings (*Handout REMEMBRANCES OF EGUNGUN*) that you may share with your students.

Students may have experienced this coming together of two or more lifestyles, particularly if they have moved to a new home from a different region or country. Let them share these and discuss their reactions.

Activity

Older students should read the classic novel, *Things Fall Apart*, by Chinua Achebe, another acclaimed Nigerian writer. His account of European colonization in Africa tells the story from the point of view of a local youth and his fellow villagers caught between the two worlds.
Still another respected Nigerian writer, Emmanuel Obiechina, used the metaphor of the masquerade to comment on life in post-Independence Nigeria during the 1960s and 1970s. According to the book jacket of *Masksong for Our Times*, “…the masquerade speaks with the voice of an ancestral spirit, evoking the authority to say what everyone else avoids saying and the license to articulate hard, uncomfortable truths about society.” Obiechina’s poems in this collection include proverbs, chants, and prophecies as commentary on situations of modern times.

Fig. 3.5
This *egungun* masquerade honors a hunter/warrior family—note the distinctive hunter’s coiffure that descends to the left, surrounded by carved skulls of animals and birds. Both the mask shown in this photo and the mask featured in Figure 3.1 were carved in the workshop of Adugbologe of Abeokuta, Nigeria. Photographed by Margaret Thompson Drewal and Henry John Drewal in Abeokuta, Nigeria during the *egungun* festival, 1978.
Activity
The poem “Song of a Madman” can be adapted by your class, using similar short, repetitive lines to express feelings about a frustrating situation in their experience.

“Song of a Madman”
However fast yam runs goat will eat him
However fast goat runs tiger will eat him
However fast tiger runs man will eat him
However fast man runs earth will eat him
However fast earth runs something will eat him
However fast something runs something bigger will eat him
So, that’s how it is, something will eat him.
LESSON 13: NEGOTIATING GENDER
Portrayal of a Hunter: Ere Egungun Olode, Nigeria

Useful Readings

Achebe, Chinua
1959  Things Fall Apart.

Blackmun Visona, Monica, Robin Poyner, Herbert M. Cole, and Michael D. Harris, eds.
2001  A History of Art in Africa.

Cole, Herbert M., ed.
      Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History.

Drewal, Henry
1978  “The Arts of Egungun among the Yoruba Peoples.”
      African Arts 11 (3): 18, 19, 97, 98.

Fitzgerald, Mary Ann with Henry J. Drewal and Moyo Okediji
1995  “Transformation through Cloth: An Egungun Costume of the Yoruba.”

Obiechina, Emmanuel
2003  Masksong for Our Times.
      Trenton: Africa World Press, Inc.

Poyner, Robin

Schipper, Mineke
      Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, Inc.

Slogar, Christopher
2002  “Carved Ogboni Figures from Abeokuta, Nigeria.”

Schipper, Mineke
1991  Ake: The Years of Childhood.

Soyinka, Wole
1981  Ake: The Year of Childhood.
LESSON 13: NEGOTIATING GENDER
Portrayal of a Hunter: Ere Egungun Olode, Nigeria

Note to Teachers:
This lesson is part of the curricular materials developed to accompany the exhibition Intersections: World Arts, Local Lives. Although this and companion lessons are self-contained, each will be enhanced when used in conjunction with others in this resource. Addressing several lessons within each unit will facilitate the incorporation of the study of world arts and cultures into your curriculum.

The lesson is based on works in the third section of the exhibition called Art and Power. In this gallery works are introduced that serve to define and assert power. See “Unit Three—Art and Power” for an introductory statement on the unit, along with some provocative “Questions for Thought,” and suggestions that will inspire the students to relate the unit to their own lives.

Images of objects to be shown to students may be printed as handouts (from within each lesson), viewed online at the Intersections web link http://collections.fowler.ucla.edu, or downloaded from the curriculum page on our website.

In this unit the topics and lessons are

Lesson 12: Empowering Leaders: Leadership Art of the Cameroon Grassfields, Africa
Lesson 13: Negotiating Gender: Portrayal of a Hunter: Ere Egungun Olode, Nigeria
Lesson 14: Negotiating Gender: Powerful Mother: Ere Gelede, Nigeria
Lesson 15: Status and Prestige: To Make the Chief’s Words Sweet: A Counselor’s Staff, Ghana
Lesson 16: Status and Prestige: A Wall of Status and Prestige, Africa, Asia, and the Americas
Lesson 17: Harnessing Spirits: Pacific Northwest Arts, United States and Canada
Lesson 18: Harnessing Spirits: The Hornbill: Bird of Prophecy, Malaysia
Handout:
REMEMBRANCES OF EGUNGUN

From Ake: The Years of Childhood by Wole Soyinka (1989, 31–32)

As a young boy the famous Nigerian author Wole Soyinka was surprised upon learning that the family compound of his close friend Osiki had its own egungun masquerader. On hearing this, Wole recalled: “that the egúngún were spirits of the dead. They spoke in guttural voices and were to be feared even more than kidnappers. And yet I had noticed that many of them were also playful and would joke with children.” Curious, Wole asked Osiki if he was actually there when the egúngún emerged from the bottom of the earth.

Osiki explained: “Any of us can watch. As long as you are male of course. Women mustn’t come near.” He then related that there were “different kinds of egúngún: the dangerous ones with bad charms who could strike a man with epilepsy and worse, the violent ones who had to be restrained with powerful ropes, [those] with... magical tricks [who] would transform themselves into alligators, snakes, tigers and rams and turn back again into egúngún. Then there were the acrobats... able to tie up their limbs in any manner they pleased.”

“Can I come back as an egúngún if I die?” Wole asked Osiki.

“I don’t think so.... I’ve never heard of any Christian becoming an egungun.”

“Do they speak English in the egúngún world?”

“I don’t know. Our own egúngún doesn’t speak English,” said Osiki with a shrug.

Wole thought about the saintly images he’d seen: “The stained-glass windows behind the altar of St. Peter’s church displayed the figures of three white men, dressed in robes which were very clearly egúngún robes. Their faces were exposed, which was very unlike our own egúngún, but I felt that this was something peculiar to the country from which those white people came. After all, Osiki had explained that there were many different kinds of egúngún. I sought his opinion on the three figures only to have [my older sister] Tinu interrupt.”

“They are not egúngún.... Those are pictures of two missionaries and one of St. Peter himself.”

“Then why are they wearing dresses like egúngún?”

“They are Christians, not masqueraders. Just let Mama hear you.”

“They are dead aren’t they; They’ve become egúngún, that is why they are wearing those robes. Let’s ask Osiki.”

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