



Fig. 3.6

Ere gelede headdress. Yoruba peoples, Nigeria. Wood, paint. Circa 1932. H: 24 cm. Fowler Museum at UCLA. Gift of the Wellcome Trust. X65.4742.

A graphic for Unit 3 featuring the word "Unit" in a yellow box and the number "3" in a large white font on a brown background.

LESSON 14: NEGOTIATING GENDER

Powerful Mother: *Ere Gelede*, Nigeria



Lesson Summary and Objectives

Through a study of *gelede* masquerades of the Yoruba peoples of Nigeria students explore art as a powerful medium for commentary on issues of concern to the community. Students will discuss gender roles among the Yoruba and in their own communities. Creative writing activities provide opportunities for students to compose praise poetry and to explore the expressiveness of proverbial speech. Students will

- Explore *gelede* masquerades of the Yoruba peoples of Nigeria and gain understanding of the power of art as it comments on social, political, and historical issues.
- Discuss the limits and freedoms of gender in both their own communities and in Africa. Students write homages to women they respect.
- Engage in creative writing activities to explore the power of proverbial speech, as related to masquerade traditions.
- Practice skills of visual literacy as they analyze *gelede* mask types.

Background Information

With *gelede* masquerades, the Yoruba pay tribute to “our mothers,” those who hold extraordinary powers to effect both the positive and negative. Along with their ability to give life, women are known to possess powers to end it—they can benefit their society, bringing fertility and prosperity, and conversely they can be harmful, causing disease, scarcity, and calamities. Yoruba acknowledge this dual power in song, dance, and poetry.

With elderly women leading the *gelede* society, both men and women are active participants. Although the masquerade was first danced by a woman, today the dancers are all men. The mask faces (**fig. 3.6 and 3.7**) are those of older women with serene and composed expressions.

The *gelede* association also addresses issues of topical importance. Many *gelede* masks have a carved superstructure depicting current events or signs of modernity, such as motorcycles or politicians. These anecdotal scenes emerging from the heads of “our mothers” elicit audience discussion. Such performances are still very common today, and the topics depicted may range from public health to political controversies.





Fig. 3.7

Eloi Lokossou (Republic of Benin,
 artist's dates unknown)
Ere gelede headdress Wood, paint.
 Circa 1900s. H: 55 cm.
 Fowler Museum at UCLA.
 Anonymous gift. X2006.5.1.

About the Artist

Eloi Lokossou is a prolific Yoruba artist who creates works for *gelede* in the south central Benin Republic. His *gelede* masks typically show the calm face of a woman surmounted by a statement about wealth, status, and modernity. On this contemporary mask (**fig. 3.7**) the serenity of a woman's face contrasts with the vitality and modernity of the superstructure. Others works by this artist depict traditional stories of the Yoruba peoples.

Curriculum Connections

1. Grouping *Gelede* Masks

African scholar Henry Drewal (1978, 18) places *gelede* masks into four categories:

- Those that recognize respected members of the society, such as hunters, warriors, drummers, market women, and particularly the powerful “mothers.”
- Those showing hierarchy, usually with several figural compositions or motifs of animals.
- Those that commemorate mythical events or people.
- Satirical masks making fun of a person or situation.

Activity

Students can design and draw a mask for one or more of the categories, making them appropriate for their own location and situations. What members of their community are respected enough to warrant a mask in their honor? How can they show the status of an important person or situation in a composition suitable for a mask? What events from their community would be worthy of commemoration in a mask? What situations or people can rightfully be satirized?

2. *Gelede* and Today’s World

Another purpose of the *gelede* association is to address issues of social relevance. Many *gelede* masks have a carved superstructure depicting current events; some are provocative such as those that address controversy about a new vaccine; others display signs of modernity, such as an airplane, a politician, or a motorcycle as in the mask in the *Art and Power* section of ***Intersections* (fig. 3.7)**. These anecdotal scenes elicit discussion among audience members.

Activity

After making a drawing of a placid, calm woman for the base of a mask, the student should design its superstructure around a social issue or current event (as mentioned above), but pertinent to the student’s world. These may include issues of ecology, education, and politics. How will the composed, cool, simply drawn face contrast with the busy, chaotic upper part of the mask?



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3. Gender Roles

The *gelede* honors powerful women—elders, ancestors, and deities. A Yoruba woman’s status traditionally has been based on her wealth and her reputation as a trader, rather than on her husband’s importance. Today in many parts of Africa the boundaries drawn between men’s and women’s roles and occupations are no longer absolute.

Activity

Do we retain perceived boundaries in our society? Have students divide a paper vertically into two columns and label them “male” and “female.” Call out a long list of professions, pausing only slightly after each example to give students just enough time to write it in the column that they associate with the occupation. (Your list may include teacher, principal, doctor, nurse, security guard, police officer, lawyer, judge, business executive, secretary, artist, musician, soldier, chef, waiter, writer, physicist, mail carrier, fire fighter, pilot, flight attendant, mayor, governor, president etc.) Discuss the responses. Do students believe that there are still traditional roles for men and women? Did their responses reflect tradition or their own experiences? They will undoubtedly find so many exceptions to the “convention,” that the validity of stereotypes will be put into question.

Activity

There have been many powerful women in the lives of students, some personally known to them and others playing roles in the larger society. Students can study important women in the fields of government, education, business, religion, and, perhaps most importantly, in their own families. Have students write an homage to one of these women.

Activity

Students may research the leadership roles played by powerful women in Africa, including the first elected woman president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia who was elected in 2006.

4. Praises and Proverbs

Gelede performances typically include male leaders singing and reciting proverbs, praise poems, riddles, and jokes that invoke the powers of “our mothers” and comment on actions of people in the community.

Activity

Praise poems, important in celebrations of the *gelede* association, are also sung or chanted by most other West African peoples. Praise poems may take many forms, but typically the person being praised is repeatedly named, not only by actual name, but by nicknames and descriptive substitutes for that name. The subject's family, community, position, deeds and occasionally misdeeds, and his or her ancestors may also be named. Rhyming is not important in a praise poem, but rhythm is, and the poem may take the form of a chant (often accompanied by drum beats), or a call-and-response form of song. You may structure original praise poems for your students with the above information, and suggest the number of lines, reminding students to repeat the subject's name or variation of the name.

Activity

Women are the subject of many Yoruba proverbs, some of which are quoted in Mineke Schipper's *Source of All Evil: African Proverbs and Sayings on Women* (1991, 37-41). These include 'Mother is gold, father is mirror,' meaning that a mirror is fragile and unreliable because it may break at any time. 'The child who bites the back of his mother will find no other willing to carry him.' 'One without a mother should never get a sore on his back' suggests that one's mother can be counted on to remedy a difficult situation. Students can find and interpret more proverbs of the Yoruba and of other peoples of Africa, and can collect proverbs familiar to them that relate to women.

A graphic for Unit 3. It features a large white number '3' on a dark orange square background. To the left of the '3' is a smaller orange square with the word 'Unit' in white. The entire graphic is framed by a decorative border of small white diamonds on an orange background.

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Useful Readings

Blackmun Visona, Monica, Robin Poyner, Herbert M. Cole, and Michael D. Harris, eds.

2001 *A History of Art in Africa*.

New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc.

Cole, Herbert M., ed.

1985 *I Am Not Myself: The Art of African Masquerade*.

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."

African Arts 28 (2): 55-57.

Obiechina, Emmanuel

2003 *Mask song for Our Times*.

Trenton: Africa World Press, Inc.

Poyner, Robin

2001 "The Yoruba and the Fon." In *A History of Art in Africa*, edited by Monica Blackmun

Visona, Robin Poyner, Herbert M. Cole, and Michael D. Harris, 228-273.

New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc.

Schipper, Mineke

1991 *Source of All Evil: African Proverbs and Sayings on Women*.

Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, Inc.

Slogar, Christopher

2002 "Carved Ogboni Figures from Abeokuta, Nigeria."

African Arts 35 (4): 14-27.



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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

