



**INVENTION
AND TRADITION**
THE ART OF SOUTHEASTERN NIGERIA

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PRESTEL

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PREFACE

Dierk Dierking

I discovered my passion for tribal art shortly after I left school. It influenced my choice of career and it has been a part of my life ever since. If nothing else, it is the multitude of surprising and unexpected discoveries that keeps me committed to this school of art.

African art and tribal art in general offer, for those who are drawn to it, a range of outstanding works—sculptures, masks, architectural elements and finely crafted objects in everyday use—that cannot be found in any publication or catalogue raisonné. This is a remarkable state of affairs, and in marked contrast with many other art traditions.

Over the years, a succession of books on selected regions of Africa has been published and outstanding exhibitions staged. Often, however, knowledgeable readers and visitors have found themselves looking at the same objects which have frequently been shown before. Sadly, such practices can in no way do justice to the diversity of African art.

One of my prime concerns has always been to show the intrinsic wealth of expression and forms in African art. This was my the guiding principle, and served as the starting point and inspiration for this book.

With very few exceptions, the art of the southeastern part of Nigeria—the region lying approximately between the Benue River to the North and the coast in the South, bordered by the Niger River to the West and Cameroon to the East, has been largely disregarded by tribal art collectors and under-valued by the art market. And yet an incomparable variety of styles can be found here, ranging from abstractly expressive to naturalistic. One can only speculate on the reasons: whether it is a result of the colonial past, or the large number of objects made by the peoples who live here, or even the lack of interest exhibited by the art market over the years. At the same time, it leaves plenty of scope for this publication.

While gathering together the objects for this book, my prime concern was to present objects which are not generally known. At the same time, however, I also aimed to provide a complete overview of the art created in southeastern Nigeria. For this reason, and also not least in order to illustrate adequately the scholarly essay “Tradition and Invention” by Professor Herbert Cole, I have also included a number of objects which are already known and published.

Above all I should like to extend my grateful thanks to Herbert Cole, who has accompanied this project from the beginning with the necessary spirit of enquiry and commitment. As a layman (not an ethnologist) and a lover of tribal art, I have found our cooperation not only extremely informative but also a great enrichment to my love of African Art. I remember with gratitude our journeys together, and our visits to the collectors and curators.

Many thanks, too, to Tony Cragg for his enthusiasm and support. His private trust "Waldfrieden" will be holding an exhibition on the tribal art of Africa for the first time this spring, and will show a number of selected pieces from this publication.

I am equally grateful to my family, my friends and my loyal collectors and companions who have demonstrated their trust over the last years and who have been receptive to the distinctive art of this region. In no small measure it is thanks to their enthusiasm that this book has been made possible.

I hope that you will enjoy reading this book and looking at the objects it portrays. May it inspire you to discover a new perspective on the art of Africa.

FOREWORD

Tony Cragg

Western culture was greatly influenced during the nineteenth century by the discovery and introduction of ideas, beliefs, customs, and art of the many civilizations, cultures, and societies that had become known during the centuries of European exploration and colonization. At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, the accumulation of imports of all kinds began to have a direct effect on the culture of all major centers of commerce and culture in the West.

This influx of new ideas and forms into Europe and America was welcomed with open arms by many and became an integral part and characteristic of the Modern movement. The meeting of cultures has had an unimaginably profound effect on all cultures in the world — so much so that historians and sociologists are faced with the overwhelming task of analyzing the precise origins and influences that have affected virtually all aspects of our present culture.

Any change in form is always the result of a deeper change of attitude, belief, or understanding, and the acceptance and even assimilation of the many new cultural influences of that period contributed to the Modernist challenge to many long standing cultural traditions. From the point of view of the arts it could simply be stated that Western culture certainly looked and sounded very different thereafter. Sculptors and painters had long started to depart from the classical Greco-Roman ideals and traditions of their disciplines. Sculptors were no longer content just to copy natural forms and to make works for wealthy and powerful clients — church and state — who could afford to have themselves and their world view and values immortalized.

The power and vitality of African sculpture, whose forms and motives are grounded in very different cultural traditions and beliefs from those in the West, was one of the most significant and powerful influences on sculpture and sculptural form in the twentieth century. Its vitality derives from the fact that the sculptures play an integral role in the lives of their makers. For it to fulfil this role it needs to be highly evocative and expressive. These works often played a significant part in rituals and celebrations and as such are imbued with spiritual qualities. The richness of form and the variety of the works reflect not just the large number of regional cultures and peoples on the vast African continent, but also the vivid imagination of the artists and their highly emotional relationship with their spiritual environment.

Within the different categories and genres of works such as masks, votive figures, power objects, ceremonial objects, everyday artefacts, and symbols of status, the artists, who were by no means always designated as such, demonstrated a propensity for innovation and formal invention. Drawing their motifs from the rich African fauna and flora they developed great artistic skill and ability in translating their ideas into sculptures.

The expressiveness and formal richness of these works and their direct preoccupation with the forces of nature and a very different spiritual world had an enormous effect on European art and thought. In the search for a direct expressive art form, the connection between African art and Expressionism is evident. Freed in part from certain European traditions, artists and others became increasingly interested in the power and beauty of art that used a primary symbolic whose source lies in deeper spiritual and psychological responses and a closer relationship to nature. This influence was not just limited to figurative sculpture, as demonstrated in the works of many artists such as Picasso, Moore, Ernst, Giacometti, and Arp; in other ways it had wide implications for non-figurative sculpture as well. The fact that African sculpture is, for the main part, made of wood, carved out of trees, means that all the forms are worked out of a natural cylinder. Irrespective of how complicated the resulting sculpture may become, it is always accompanied by this geometric form. The historic step away from figurative sculpture was, in part, a result of the awareness of this relationship. For this reason, sculptors of apparently very different interests, such as Brancusi and Carl Andre, have shown great interest in African sculpture.

The history of art in the twentieth century and of European culture in general was so greatly influenced by African art that it is no longer possible to follow all its ramifications. From Art Brut through Pop Art up to the present, it has provided new form and content, a new visual language and iconography. Its expressive power and creative vitality is not just limited to art history and museums but is a vital force in the lives as well as the hearts and minds of contemporary society.

INTRODUCTION

“Tradition” is a term commonly used when describing or writing about the arts of Africa, while “invention” and related concepts are far less common, and some may even see them as antithetical to the subject. But it is clear that African people are equally adept at creative, imaginative invention. The fertile conceptions of artists have continuously enlivened both material and performative culture on the continent. We will see that tradition and invention, far from being opposites, are simultaneously present in the arts, and that indeed, there are many traditions of artistic invention on the continent.

This essay explores some of the many relationships among inventions and traditions in southeastern Nigerian arts, primarily over the past century, with emphasis on the works of art assembled here. At first the focus is on formal structures, conventions and stylizations, as well as notions of aesthetic quality, drawing upon both our ideas and those of the people who have made and used these objects. And in considering the makers’ formal values, invariably local ones, it is clear that artistry and formal sculptural solutions are almost never seen by Africa people as “masks on a wall” or frozen displays. Rather, we must also enter the worlds of action and meaning and thus the cultural vitality, the many uses of art in the lives and communities from which it springs. Realms of purpose, use, content, symbolic resonance and even history will be seen then as at least partial determinants of the shapes and forms of African art and thus critical to the very nature and understanding of the objects themselves.

PART I / A: THE AESTHETICS OF FORM

African artists in general and southeast Nigerian carvers in particular have rarely been motivated to render the human face, head and body in a fully naturalistic or realistic manner, which is to say, to make figures or masks look like living creatures. Exactly why this is true is open to speculation. Undoubtedly there are many cultural reasons¹; chief among them, perhaps, is the fact that most carvers have historically worked within conventionalized traditions of representation inherited from their masters. Artists of the first half of the twentieth century in Nigeria have for the most part been apprentices, whether formally or informally; they learned their craft from experienced carvers who studied with their own masters. If self-taught, their models were the conventionalized styles of objects they saw around them. Thus over time distinctive styles or modes of representation became “hardened” or somewhat fixed within certain geographical regions. Moreover, in some areas realistic portraits were forbidden as a violation against Earth, the deity². But ultimately it appears there was little inclination to copy or imitate life forms apart from the artist’s generic inclusion of the proper numbers and rough placement of limbs, facial features and other body parts. And in some cases, modes of representation included the license, even the mandate, to invent new forms.

Of course, it is not anatomical accuracy that draws us to the arts of Africa. Rather—like early twentieth-century artists (such as Picasso, Braque, Matisse, Kirchner, and Schmitt-Rotluff) who were strongly affected by African figures and masks that inspired them to create new styles never before seen in European art—we are attracted to the expressive *departures* from life forms and proportions in the art itself. While some view African representations as evidence of “spontaneous creativity,” in reality what we interpret as formal eloquence and artistry actually arises within local tradition as a reflection of historical continuity. And historical continuity, along with the innovations that keep a culture vital, is all about the perpetuation of purpose, meaning, and content in the lives of living people.

1

What was rarely true was the inability on the part of artists to carve naturalistic or realistic faces and bodies. This was well within their capabilities when they chose to do so.

2

This is the case among the Owerri Igbo in the institution of *mbari* house construction, where, if a portrait of a known person appeared, it had to be destroyed and redone before the *mbari* would be acceptable to the deity to whom it was dedicated. Only then could it be opened to the public.

“Tradition”—a key word here—means transmission over time, a handing down from generation to generation of something in words, practice, or style and form. In the case of Nigerian artists, whose inheritance of formal conventions (i.e., visual traditions) was pervasive, their interpretations of these conventions are rarely slavish or exact. The opportunity for some deviation from the norm thus ran alongside artists’ training in the forms, styles, and object types of their teachers. Without change and innovation, however incremental, we would not be able to discern “personal hands,” that is, styles of carving associated with specific indi-

vidual carvers. Though we may not know their names (often due to the simple failure on the part of field researchers to ask for artists' names), dozens and perhaps hundreds of personal styles can be recognized from this part of Nigeria³.

The stylistic details of both sculptures and masks — the focus of this essay — in our area are subject to the forces of tradition, yet the formal conventions of full human (or humanoid) sculptures reflect a larger degree of stylistic inertia and conservatism than those of masks. This is due to the identities of the beings represented by the sculptures as well as by their purposes and meanings, subjects more fully explored below. But it is clear that masking competitions, new mask commissions, the variety of masked beings or characters, as well as the existence of numerous masquerade organizations and rivalries among them have spawned greater change and variation and thus more invention in the mask corpus than in full figure carving. By contrast, sculptured figures generally serve more limited purposes and embody or symbolize fewer types of beings. This is true cross-culturally in the region, that is among different ethnic groups or peoples (often referred to as “tribes”⁴, e.g. Igbo, Ibibio, Idoma, etc.).

FORM AND STYLE CONVENTIONS IN FIGURAL CARVING

The formal stylistic differences among various southeastern Nigerian ethnic or language groups, including several Igbo and Ibibio subgroups, also address issues of identity, including political identity. Many of these peoples and subgroups, up to and beyond the peace imposed by British colonialism (the Pax Britannica) in the early twentieth century, had histories of distrust and even open hostility toward one another. Most groups strove to differentiate themselves from their neighbors, and a distinctive style of carving was one way to do so. In spite of this, there was often some borrowing of forms and styles across group or ethnic (and linguistic) lines. The Afikpo Igbo living close to the Cross River, for example, have a mask type they call “Ibibio,” that mimics mask forms of those downriver Ibibio “foreigners” about forty miles away who speak a language they do not understand. Some such masks were purchased in Ibibio country, while others were carved by Afikpo artists. Complicating these issues still further is the fact that some other Igbo peoples (in Ngwa) commissioned sculptures from Ibibio carvers, work that is nevertheless wholly Igbo. The discussion of “style geography” below will explore the complex subjects of borrowing and style interaction further; yet this is a subject still not well understood.

An ethnic, regional or subgroup style, or style tradition, can be identified by the fairly consistent use over time of a set of formal conventions. These include such

3 I have elsewhere (Cole 1969, 1982) inveighed against the Western penchant for focusing on the individuality of artists' personal styles, which I feel is over-emphasized in some writing on African art. At the same time I admit readily that individual styles are recognizable even as I continue to believe that local African peoples place little stock in such personal identities, especially in this region.

4 Use of the word “tribe” is problematic. Among the Igbo, for example, there are many groups that could be called “tribes”: the Ekpahia, Ngwa, Izzi, Oratta, among others, but outsiders (both within and outside Nigeria) also refer to all speakers of Igbo languages as members of the Igbo “tribe.” Likewise there are varied Ibibio, Idoma and other subgroups that could well be described as “tribes,” so it perhaps best to avoid using this ambiguous word.

elements as proportions, neck length, arm and leg positions and shapes, and especially the configurations of head and facial features. What is exaggerated or simplified? Are tool marks left visible or smoothed off? How are the eyes, nose, mouth, and ears treated, and the hands and feet? What substances or colored pigments, if any, are used in finishing the surfaces of the image? Few of these details imitate or represent actual bodies or features; rather, they are identifiable shapes, usually simplified from real life forms, which have become relatively fixed over time, thus establishing stylistic conventions repeated over and over. It is the regular combining and integration of such conventions from one carved figure to the next and over time, even though no two images are truly identical, that enables us to recognize and finally to define a particular style as specifically attributable to Ibibio, Tiv, or Urhobo people, or to various subgroups among the more populous Igbo.

The finest distinctions of style are the shapes and relationships repeated by an individual carver, recognizable because of his consistent use of specific conventions, shapes and motifs from one figure to another. Within that artist's oeuvre, too, nuances of style are sometimes recognizable from one life segment to the next: early, middle, and late periods, for example.

FIG. 1 Alusi figures assembled for the annual Eke (the main deity and market day) festival in Oreri, 1966.



It is clear that Nigerian artists have not set out to create representational carved wood copies based on a model, a human being standing before them, as European sculptors have often done. They are not concerned with imitative portraits of actual people of a specific age, or with precise body proportions or alignments or the subtle shapes and nuances of the “real” facial features of their friends and family members. These latter image types can be labeled *perceptual*, inasmuch as they are based on what an artist actually *perceives* when looking at his human model, which perception is then translated into the artist’s medium, whether wood or marble or clay. Traditional Nigerian artists, on the other hand, work from what is best called a *conceptual* or “memory image”: an idealized model held in the mind and body, based on a mixture of learned ideas and the visual conventions of what sculptured human forms “should” look like, and almost always based upon the way earlier artists in their communities rendered human forms. These conceptual images — without the blemishes, individuality, or signs of age we associate with actual people — are adopted and handed down over generations of artists, who may modify the styles they are taught to some extent, but are rarely inclined to develop radical modifications.

Most of the images set out for display in the Igbo community of Owerri (fig. 1) — in a kind of festival of images formerly held once a year — demonstrate the diagnostics of Onitsha/Awka regional Igbo style, as represented also in pl. 9 and 10. The fifth figure from the left, however, “wears” the carved uniform of a court messenger rendered in a “modern” style that departs strongly from the earlier prevailing style. This new style shows the impact of the British presence in Africa from the 1920s and 1930s through the 1950s. Yet we must also give credit to the creativity, that is, the inventiveness, of this carver, who was prompted for some reason to include the entire uniform and cap in his work. This is in direct contrast to earlier images, which, if “clothed” at all (apart from camwood and chalk pigmentation) were dressed in actual cloth wrappers added after the fact, although ivory armllets and anklets were often carved. The several images in that Owerri lineup probably represent three earlier generations of carvers. One of the Igbo figures in this book (pl. 12) has fragments of woven “clothing” around the head, neck, and waist — along with carved-in versions of elephant tusk bracelets and anklets.

Most of the Owerri figures are from the early twentieth century up to about 1935 or 1940, but a few were carved in the late nineteenth century, and the colonial messenger figure was likely created around 1945–1955. They were brought together in 1966 for this then-annual rite of renewal from their various “homes” — shrines in the compounds of the community’s major lineages. The images were ceremoniously embellished with wrappers and other clothing, and a few hats. Some had iron staffs placed nearby indicating titled status. The images were “fed” kola nut,



Plate 9 Igbo figure



Plate 10 Igbo figure



Plate 12 Igbo figure



Plate 112 Tiv figure



Plate 70 Ijo figure



Plate 113 Tiv figure

chalk and sacrificial blood, and asked in prayers to protect the people of Oteri and ensure their prosperity by making their yam and cassava farms, and their women, productive.

Most of the Nigerian figures in this book, regardless of origin or ethnic group, were carved standing in frontal positions, usually with arms disposed symmetrically to the sides, legs slightly apart. Arm treatments vary, but most arms are cut free of the torso. Virtually all figures have elongated necks, which can thus be identified as a *regional* convention rather than that of a specific ethnic group. Feet and hands are generalized and without detail. There is rarely any suggestion of a figure's age, other than gendered indications of adulthood. Smaller figures are sometimes considered "children" but usually they look much the same as the adults in that local style. Apart from one of the Tiv figures (pl. 112), which is quite naturalistic, other humanoid figures in this book can best be described as exemplifying a style of simplified and conventionalized naturalism. Some Ijo figures, in contrast, are quite abstract (pl. 70). Proportions vary, usually emphasizing a disproportionately large head on a long neck, and generic types of personal decoration (scarification, hairstyle, anklets, etc.) are incorporated into the carvings. The realistic naturalism of the Tiv figure — apart from its extended neck and enlarged head — is a departure from the prevailing stylization of most southeast Nigerian figures, and indeed from most other Tiv images. This is demonstrated as well by the fully articulated hands on this figure, with fingers and thumbs, and even fingernails, shown, and feet with toes, plus clear articulations at elbows and knees. The strong conventions of style in the other Tiv carving (pl. 113), such as the constrictions at the waist, knees, and ankles and the resultant swollen shapes between them, as well as the concave, heart-shaped face, are more typical of the figural styles of the region as a whole, and likely date from an earlier period.

Of course, part of the "effect" or aesthetic presence of figural sculptures is the nature of their surfaces; e.g., whether they bear tool marks, pigmentation, weathering, or a patina resulting from handling, or show the effects of a smoky storage situation or evidence of sacrificial offerings. It is rare for carved wood surfaces to be left wholly unadorned, and thus the natural weathered wood of the Oron figure is unusual (pl. 95); probably it was once embellished in some manner. Collectors of African art often favor a shiny patina indicative of significant wear and handling, or the application of oils or pigments, as in the more naturalistic of the two Tiv figures.⁵ The images illustrated here show a range of surfaces, from polychrome or red, orange, or yellow camwood and white clay treatment, as in some Igbo figures, to encrustations that suggest a buildup of libations or cosmetic pigments over time, to smoothly polished but unpigmented wood in other cases. The conditions under which an image was stored, moved around, made subject to sac-

5 Few Nigerian styles are truly abstract, although some Benue Valley artists — Chamba, Mumuye and others — worked in still more conventionalized, semi-abstract styles than those of our region.

rifice or “dressed” with cloth all affect the appearance of a sculpture when it is transferred to a European setting (and sometimes art dealers clean and polish wood surfaces to enhance salability).

If we focus on the heads and torsos of these figures, we see how different styles vary emphases, enabling us to place forms somewhere along a continuum from quite naturalistic to fairly schematic. Again, the dark Tiv sculpture represents the naturalistic end, while the Oron figure is far more schematic, even abstract. Were it not for the disproportionately large head and the aggressively large, open, toothy mouth, the Tiv would be quite realistic, a tendency reinforced in the slightly bent and smoothly modeled arms. The overall proportions of the other Tiv figure, on the other hand, are more true to life than those of the first, with its elongated neck and enlarged head.

The Oron figure evinces very strong conventions that approach abstraction. Its cubistic characteristics go well with its abstract dynamism. Aligned on a strong vertical axis, the figure invites one’s eye to move from the charged open space between the two spindly legs, upward over two horizontal ridges to the solid pear-shaped volume of the lower torso. The eye again encounters a lively spatial interaction between the arms and the unnaturally narrow upper torso. The powerful ovoid neck, echoing the solid lower torso, constricts at the shoulders and where it meets the larger spherical head (in the back view), itself capped, literally and visually, with a pie-shaped hat. The back view shows the powerfully compressed volumes of lower torso, neck and head rhythmically aligned vertically, spaced out and made more dynamic by the rectilinear spatial volumes formed by the thin legs and arms. Looking again from the front, all of the volumes are enlivened by several semi-circular relief patterns (some being weathered hand-held implements) on the large lower torso, and as well by the simple facial features framed within the brow line and the beard ridges along the jaws. The downward projecting cylinder beard picks up and reinforces the vertical rhythms of the entire figure, which is a tour de force: a play of solids and spaces, strong horizontals (shoulders and lower torso ridges) and details in relief. The weathered overall surface of the Oron figure contributes to its unity and impact. Nothing about this image evokes lifelike realism or naturalism. Rather, what seems evident here is the artist’s intention to create a visually interesting *sculpture*, not simply a human form. The figures comprising the Ijo screen, as well as the freestanding Ijo figure, also fall at the schematic end of the continuum. Most Ijo art has a squared-off quality and a vast simplification of facial features. In part because it is a screen that was placed against a wall, there is an overall flatness to the faces and bodies of the screen’s figures (pl. 77). The seated figures’ heads, and their features, are much enlarged proportionately. The attached arms and legs are tubular; the poses are stiff.



Plate 95 Oron figure



Plate 95 Oron figure



Plate 77 Ijo screen



Plate 19 Igbo figure detail

A schematic quality somewhat analogous to that of the Oron and Ijo sculptures is seen as well in the front view of one Igbo figure's head (pl. 19). This head appears to be a diamond-shaped volume, rather flat on its front between the ears and dominated by the deep grooves of extensive forehead *ichi* scarification (for the meaning of *ichi*, see pp. 31, 54, 56). Beneath the low brow ridge of simulated sculptured flesh appear two faint eye depressions beside a broad nose. Beneath that is a downward-projecting tab whose upper half shows an open oval mouth, and below, a tab-like beard. This schematic treatment of form is echoed in the cylindrical projection upward, atop the head, with an ovoid knob at its back. The very flat, simplified hands and curved, elbow-less arms recall the abstract leanings of the head. The carver of this figure worked in a distinctive, idiosyncratic personal style that partly conforms with the Awka-Onitsha Igbo sub-style while clearly departing from it.



Plate 20 Igbo figure



Plate 56 Igbo figure

Looking at three other Igbo figures, each exemplifying a regional sub-style, we again see some play between semi-abstractness and greater naturalism. The Owerri style (pl. 56) tends toward the schematic, manifest in the geometric handling of the small arms, the projecting tab ears, and the much-elongated neck, head and legs. Cross-patterned scarification radiating from the navel reinforces the rectilinear symmetry of the whole figure, on its vertical axis, which might appear to be rigid were it not for the bent knees. Both the Awka-Onitsha style female figure (pl. 20) and the northeastern (probably Izzi) style male and female figures (pl. 37, 38) show more naturalistic tendencies apart from their faces, which in both styles have quite simple conventions for eyes, noses, mouths and ears. Because they are correctly placed, these facial features do not seem as schematic as they are. Arms in both sub-styles are bent at the elbows (or curved and without elbows). The palms-up, extended-forward arms of the Awka-Onitsha style, seen in literally hundreds of figures from this heavily populated, shrine-dense region, are a true style-diagnostic, rarely varying from one figure to the next. Bodies in both sub-styles are again fairly naturalistic, if simplified, and those of the northeastern style have a muscled, fleshy quality less frequently seen in the Awka-Onitsha style.



Plate 37 Igbo figure



Plate 38 Igbo figure

Returning to our base concepts, tradition and invention, it is clear that in the realm of southeastern Nigerian figural sculpture, tradition has been a strong, prevailing force. The many hundreds of figures from the region in several styles demonstrate this clearly, for within each style or sub-style relatively little variation exists. We can postulate long traditions stretching back well over a hundred years. At the same time, invention has not been entirely absent even if its minor role has been confined to details — a hairstyle here or there an unusual ear or mouth, for example, or added elements of dress. And in considering the Oron figure — an

exception to the relative naturalism of the region — we must credit its artist with a successfully inventive and powerful version of this idiosyncratic figural style.

FORMAL VARIETY IN MASKS

If the carved figures from southeastern Nigeria conform fairly well to a limited number of recognizable, normally conservative types and styles, the same cannot be said of this region's masks, which exist in astonishing variety. Among the Igbo, for example, there is one fairly standard type of standing figure found in each of five or six styles. Among masks, on the other hand, dozens of types are known in ten or more style areas, and in all, literally hundreds of distinctive small faces, helmet masks, headdresses — some with elaborate superstructures, heads-on-necks, complex tableaux, and still other large and small mask forms that have never been satisfactorily catalogued or even described. Each is different from the next. New Igbo mask forms seem to come to light quite regularly! This is rather less so among the much smaller populations surrounding the Igbo, but still there are quite varied types and styles. It is here among masks that the idea of invention rings powerfully loud and clear: both innovation within persisting traditions and within newly organized masking groups that call for novel forms and types, some of which change quite rapidly as one age-grade succeeds another. Apart from the universal presence in primarily wooden African masks of human and/or animal facial features (or their combinations), there are few other constants in the region. In fact, this rather small geographic area has given the world one of the largest concentrations of diverse mask sizes, types, forms, and styles on the African continent. Masks range in size from small face 15 cm high to Igbo Ijele mask constructions almost five meters tall, more than two meters in diameter, and weighing as much as one hundred kilograms (fig. 2). The masks assembled here represent quite well the astonishing variations of southeastern Nigerian mask forms. While the best-known masks are carved wooden forms — doubtless because they are portable — there are also many styles and types of ephemeral and rather transient masks (and mask-costumes) of cloth, leaves, raffia, cord and other fibers, which are not being considered in this book. Among the wooden masks assembled here, however, there are several notable types or themes that are shared cross-culturally.

FIG. 2 An Ijele mask dancing at the second burial of a prominent Achalla man. Photograph by Elizabeth Etchepare, 1983.





Dierk Dierking, Herbert Cole

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