



Dance mask for the Ekpo society

Not on display

Title/Description: Dance mask for the Ekpo society

Born: 1850 - 1950

Object Type: Mask

Materials: Wood

Measurements: h. 254 x w. 170 x d. 105 mm

Accession Number: 237

Historic Period: 19th Century - Late, 20th Century - Early

Production Place: Africa, Nigeria

Cultural Group: Ibibio

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

The Ekpo society is, or was, the principal men's secret society among the Ibibio-speaking peoples, who believe that at death a person's bodily soul (*ekpo*), which is immortal, either transmigrates to the land beneath the earth to await reincarnation, or turns into an evil ghost as the result of a wicked life. The Ekpo festival is held during October after the yam harvest, and masked society members dance in special groves, impersonating the return of the ancestral spirits to the land of the living.

The Ekpo title gives a man high social status and political authority; the holder must have passed through at least two junior grades and be wealthy enough to bear the expense of membership. The organisation is decentralised; every village has its own lodge. The society is believed to protect the community by magical and religious means; like so many secret societies it provides funerals for its members (see Messenger, 1973: 101-27 for details).

Idiok ekpo masks such as this one are to instil fear and respect, and represent evil ghosts. The masker speaks jargon, shakes his arms and shoulders, and frightens women and non-members, sometimes beating or even killing them. Among the recognised signs of an *idiok ekpo* mask are that it is painted black, brown or blue which are 'evil' colours; the raphia fringe is dyed black; and it may have an animal instead of a human face (e.g., cow, goat or antelope). This has goat's horns which have been partly broken off; also a bulging forehead and wide thick-lipped mouth. The costume formerly attached to it would have consisted of raphia fringes, cloaks and skirts ending at the knees to allow the masker's arms and legs free movement.

Messenger (1973), describing the making of *ekpo* masks, says that a mask, if cared for properly, will last for twenty years, but it must be repainted and re-oiled every year and kept hung where termites cannot reach it. Most members own their masks, but some may borrow or rent one for the '*ekpo* season'. If he has a run of misfortune, he may change his mask, perhaps going to a different carver; while if things go well, he will stay with the same design. The highest rank in Ekpo appears to be the *Idiong*, a select group whose titular membership is made manifest in the form of *idiong* rings or crowns — though not in this mask.

This mask is from the eastern Ibibio and is in the typical Ibibio style, although showing some originality in the 'compression' which seems to be applied from top to bottom, as though in a press.

Margaret Carey, 1997

Entry taken from *Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection, Vol. 2: Pacific, African and Native North American Art*, edited by Steven Hooper (Yale University Press, 1997) p. 160.

Provenance

Formerly in the possession of Sydney Burney.

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from K. J. Hewett in 1949.

Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.
