



Mask with goitre

Not on display

Title/Description: Mask with goitre

Object Type: Mask

Materials: Pigment, Wood

Measurements: h. 353 x w. 176 x d. 185 mm

Accession Number: 595

Historic Period: 20th century

Production Place: Africa, Nigeria

Cultural Group: Idoma

Credit Line: Purchased with support from Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1974

This mask depicts a woman afflicted with *goitre*, a neck swelling often caused by overactive thyroid glands, that can be cured with medicine or sometimes surgery. In Idoma land, such an affliction, especially on a woman, is likely treated by *alejину*, the cult of healing and fertility.

The majority of figure carvings by Idoma carvers — except those used as toys or as protection from evil — are the direct influence of *anlejину*, the benevolent spirit invoked to cure afflictions, bring about good luck and guarantee fertility. [1] Typically presided over by male priests, *alejину* cults — on account of its focus on healing and fertility — are populated by adult women, who are traditionally exempted from regulatory societies and ancestral cults in Idoma country.

Alejину is a derivative of *al jannah*, the Arabic word for “heaven” or “paradise” which has likely been absorbed into Idoma beliefs, via migration and settlement from northern Nigeria. Idoma peoples occupy the “transition zone” between the Niger-Benue Confluence and the Lower Niger-Benue Valley in what today is Nigeria’s middle belt region. [2] This transitory region is further influenced by two major factors: ethno-religiosity and ecology. The former is due to the dominance of Hausa-Fulani in the predominantly Muslim north, and the Yorubas and Igbos nations in the predominantly Christian south. The latter is defined by the dry savanna and tropical forests, two of the major ecoregions of West Africa.

These rich combinations of different forms of belief and practice “characterised the diversity of Idoma art as a whole.” [3] Examples of such cultural transference/diversity include the belief in *mammy wata* (water mother) that is common to coastal West Africa, the absorption of Bori cult from

the Hausas, and the cult of nature spirits called *alejinu*. [4] While Idoma masks made in the late 19th century are conditioned with oil, the majority of those made in the 20th century are treated with white kaolin [5] or grounshells [6] or cheap, commercial paint.

On this mask the white face is browned by dirt accretion, faded paint or a combination of both. The identical scarifications on the left and right temple are twinned by identical scarifications on the left and right flanks of the neck swellings. Rather than being cicatrices with possibly esoteric meanings, the closely lined holes that run from one side of the neck, over the head and down the other side of the neck are likely for fastening the mask to the face during performances.

Sabo Kpade, April 2023

[1] Roy Sieber, *Sculpture of Northern Nigeria*. (New York: Museum of Primitive Art, 1961), p.10.

[2] Kasfir (year...)

[3] Sidney L. Kasfir, "Anjenu: Sculpture for Idoma Water Spirits." *African Arts* 15, no. 4 (1982). p.51. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3335811>.

[4] Kasfir (1982), p.47.

[5] Kasfir (1989), p.47.

[6] Kasfir (1982), p.52.

TO-BE-REPLACED-WITH-A-GAP

The Idoma, living in the Niger-Benue angle, north of the Ibo, produce masks in a distinctive style, often having vertical rows of keloid scarification marks. *Aribo* goitre masks like this one, though not common among the Idoma, appear to have been made in the district of Okobi, to judge by the similarity to works by a famous carver named Ochai.

Sieber (quoted in Neyt, 1985: 146) affirms that such masks refer to women afflicted with goitre; in the past they could have had a medical or religious function, but now they seem to be for entertainment. Other forms of deformity and disease, such as yaws and gangosa, its tertiary form, are found represented in *ekpo* masks among the Annang Ibibio of Ikot Ekpene.

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. 163.

Further Reading

Kasfir, Sidney L. "Anjenu: Sculpture for Idoma Water Spirits." *African Arts* 15, no. 4 (1982): 47-92. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3335811>.

Kasfir, Sidney L. "Remembering Ojiji: Portrait of an Idoma Artist." *African Arts* 22, no. 4 (1989): 44-87. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3336660>.

Sieber, Roy, and New York (N.Y.). Museum of Primitive Art. *Sculpture of Northern Nigeria*. New York: Museum of Primitive Art, 1961.

Provenance

Purchased by the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia from Kamer & Cie S. A., Paris in 1974, out of funds provided by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury.
