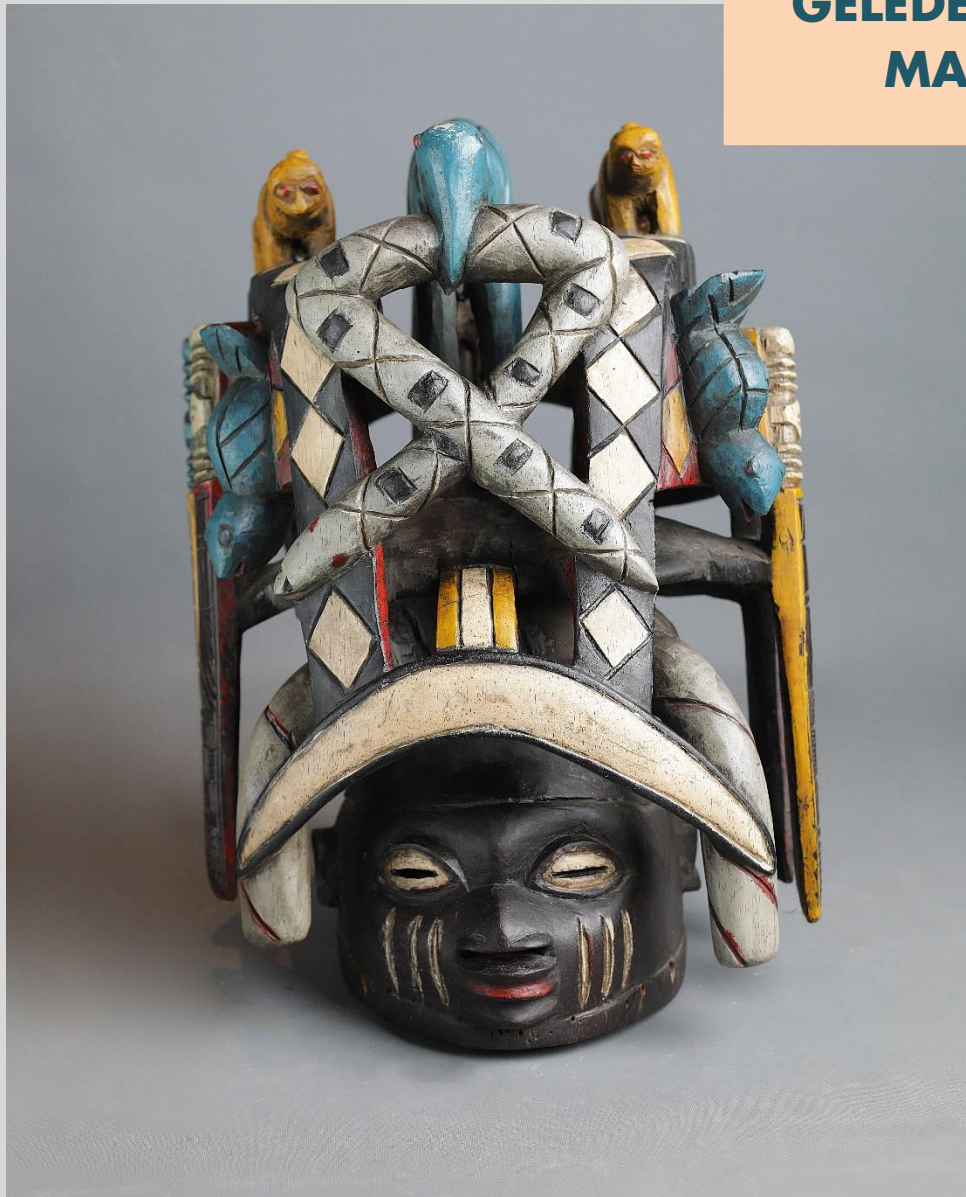




# Artwork Information Sheet

# 16

## GELEDE HEAD MASK



*Gelede Head Mask*, Wood & pigment, 52cm x 38cm x 20cm, © Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art, Pan-Atlantic University

## INTRODUCTION

Culture and tradition are deeply rooted in Africa and are passed down from generation to generation. Although much of Africa has experienced Western influence, different cultures and traditions have been practiced and preserved for future generations. Masking is an important part of the culture in many African countries, including Ghana, Togo, Sierra Leone, and Congo. It is a customary practice among the Yorubas, Igbos, Hausas, and Urhobos, among others, in Nigeria. The Gelede head mask is a colourful assemblage from Nigeria's southwestern region that draws the attention of onlookers and is accompanied by music and dance.

## ABOUT GELEDE

*Gelede* is a masking festival that originates from the Yoruba people in Western Nigeria. It is a traditional Yoruba concept that has evolved into a traditional form of musical performance. Its influence spreads beyond West Africa's Yoruba communities to Latin America, parts of Europe, Australia, and many other black communities around the world (Olatunji and Koenane 2016, 43).

*There are those who think it originated from the old Oyo through the instrumentality of a Nupe man nicknamed Gbarada for his mesmerizing performance at music and dance concerts in honour of an ancient Ruler of Oyo in one oral tradition, or Orisa Olomowewe (Deity of little children) in another oral tradition. The good thing, however, is that it has since spread to all parts of Yoruba land and since the event of the slave trade in Africa, has spread to numerous parts of the globe and especially Latin America (Olatunji and Koenane 2016, 45).*

*Gelede* is celebrated “to pay tribute to the primordial mother “Iyà Nlà” and to the role women play in the process of social organization and development of Yoruba society” (UNESCO - Oral heritage of *Gelede*, 2021). *Gelede* celebrates womanhood and motherhood. People who seek fertility partake in the festival as a way of appeasing and seeking the

attention of the Gods. *Gelede* head masks commonly depict women and are worn on the head with a scarf covering the wearer's face. Even though it represents women, it is worn by men of all ages. The *Gelede* festival is celebrated in a public place like the village square where everyone can gather to watch the spectacle. It is popular knowledge that *Gelede* is attributed to femininity,

*Some even give the etymology of the concept creatively to mean a combination of ge (to pet, adorn or care), ele (carefulness, or as a Creole adaptation of the French elle which became part of urban language in many Yoruba cities till today) and de (to relax), such that the combination will be something like “adorn carefully to appease her or adore the lady carefully to mollify her” (Olatunji and Koenane 2016, 48).*

Every year, the *Gelede* festival is held for a variety of reasons. It could be commemorated at the start of each farming season, after harvest, during droughts, or epidemics (UNESCO - Oral heritage of *Gelede*, 2021). There are two parts of the *Gelede* ceremony: a night concert and a daytime dance. Performances are planned for the evening concert.

*They begin with a night ceremony known as “Efe”. A series of masked dancers culminate in the appearance of Oro Efe, “the Voice of Efe”—an elaborately attired masker who moves through the crowd singing and dancing. His elaborate headdress is covered with images of power both spiritual and physical—leopard, snakes and knives evoking the iron and war god Ogun and birds signaling the sacred powers of women (Drewal, n.d.).*

The daytime dance takes place the next day at noon. The masked dancers appear here, their feet adorned with the noisy “shekere anklets,” which rattle following the movement of the legs. The dancers are usually trained from an early age. They learn to move to the rhythm of the drums and the flute's sound (Drewal, n.d.). Through their performance and play, the dancers mimic a member of the audience, admonishing bad and encouraging good social behaviours. The singers and drummers are the first to

appear, followed by the masked dancers. During the ceremony, the younger maskers perform first, with their teachers cheering them on, while the older maskers perform later. This method of bringing out the younger maskers first heightens the anticipation of spectators who are looking forward to seeing the older maskers perform (Drewal, n.d.).

## GELEDE HEAD MASK



**Figure 1. Gelede Head Mask**, Wood & Pigment, 52cm x 38cm x 20cm, © Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art.

The *Gelede* mask is a fusion of many motifs, creatures and colours. In figure 1, some birds are visible on the head mask in blue and yellow colours. The face of the mask has eyes in oval shapes while the nose and lips appear as medium-sized lines. The red line could imply lipstick or a tongue sticking out between the lips. The face is painted black with white scarifications on both sides of the face. Two arches rest directly above the mask's face. The arch behind appears to be semicircular, with red stripes that adorn its ash colour. The white bow, which is more noticeable, is shaped like a crescent moon. An attached extension of black parallel pillars decorated with white linearly arranged diamond patterns stretches above the crescent. Over these black parallel pillars, a snake folds itself into a loose knot or an overlapping fabric. The diagonal patterns run right

to the top of the mask. Three birds rest on the top of this formation of the snake and the black parallel pillars. The overall balance of the gear on the mask's head could be attributed to the current order of the universe. The birds represent a messenger of the mothers while the serpent is a symbol of power (Drewal, n.d.).



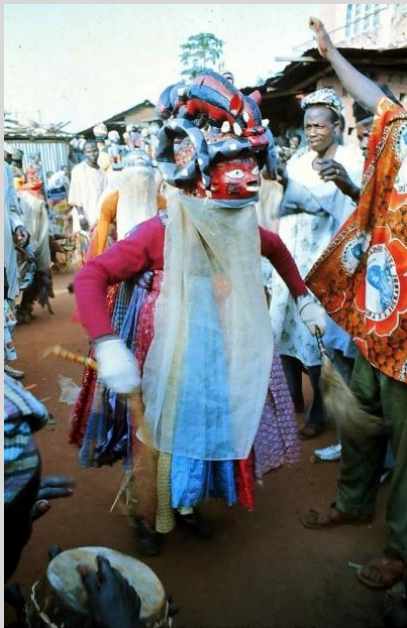
**Figure 2. Gelede Mask (side view)**, wood, 52cm x 38cm x 20cm, © Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art.

In figure 2, the side view of the *Gelede* mask is visible. The head is adorned with a masquerade attire coloured black, white, blue, red and yellow. On the head of the mask, there are numerous linear patterns in the form of diagonal, vertical, and horizontal lines as well as birds and a snake. These same creatures are seen from the frontal view of the mask in the portrait. Both the blue and white creatures, which may be birds, seem to have a part of the snake in their mouths.

*Many Gelede masks depict animals that serve as metaphors for human actions and attributes as well as illustrations of popular proverbs and songs that often accompany the mask's appearance. Animals in devouring motifs are an important means of conveying*



the concept of competing forces in social as well as spiritual realms. (Drewal, n.d.)



**Figure 3. Gelede with metaphoric animal images.** Digital image. IOWA- Art & Life in Africa Egbado-Yoruba, [Nigeria](#), 1978. Photo by H.J. Drewal and M.T. Drewal. Submitted by Henry Drewal. Accessed March 23, 2021. <https://africa.uima.uiowa.edu/topic-essays/show/13?start=13>

In figure 3, a masked dancer in full action and regalia can be seen. All the characteristics of the mask, previously mentioned are visible here. The warthog creature in this image also has a snake in its mouth just as the ones discussed earlier. The assemblage of the *Gelede* mask is indeed filled with several motifs of varying colours. It is, without a doubt, an intriguing composition.



**Figure 4. Gelede Head Mask (back view),** wood, 52cm x 38cm x 20cm, ©Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art.

Figure 4 shows the back view of the *Gelede* mask. The yellow creatures' hinds are noticeable as they stand on the diagonally patterned structure. The white figure with a snake in mouth and the multi-patterned rectangles which make up part of the masking attire all amount to the interesting assemblage that is the *Gelede* head mask. *Gelede* masks are not always rendered in this way. Some take on the brown shades of the skin and have elaborate African hairstyles while others have fashionable head ties around their heads. The masks are carved from wood and designed with colorful pigments.

## CONCLUSION

The history of Benin's ivory salt cellars shows the kingdom's first interaction with Europeans and the effect of that contact on trade in the Benin Kingdom. The careful composition of the Oba and his palace guards in this Ivory saltcellar gives credence to the ivory carvings as exquisite items of Benin heritage and culture. The Benin people's culture has a great deal of complexity, substance, and meaning which they embed in their works to highlight the creativity and skill of the Benin Ivory carvers.

## REFERENCES

Adejumo, Ade. 2013. "Satire as Protest in an Indigenous Festival: The case of Efe." *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention* 43-50.

Clarke, Christa. 2006. *The Art of Africa; A Resource for Educators*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Cyril-Mary Pius Olatunji & Mojalefa Lehlohonolo Johannes Koenane. 2016. "Philosophical Ruminations on Gelede: An Ultra-Spectacle Performance." *International Journal of Philosophy of Culture and Axiology* 43-52.

Drewal, Henry. n.d. *Yoruba Gelede Masquerade - Art & Life in Africa*. Accessed March 23, 2021. <https://africa.uima.uiowa.edu/topic-essays/show/13?start=1>.

Musediq Lawal & Irhue Young. 2019. "Exposition of Sustaining Values of Efe and Gelede Spectacles in Contemporary Yoruba Communities." *African Journal of Social Sciences* 101-117.

n.d. UNESCO - Oral heritage of Gelede. Accessed March 23, 2021. <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/oral-heritage-of-gelede-00002>.