

# Aesthetics and Sagaciousness in the Giant Mask at the University of Benin – A Dissection

Franklyn Egwali

Department of Fine And Applied Arts University of Benin, Benin City.

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## ABSTRACT

All over the world today, there is monumental degeneration and degradation of everything that hold human together for a better society. There is moral, economic, social and even political bankruptcy. There also exist natural disaster like the catastrophic earthquake – tsunami, great flash flood, hurricane and other natural disasters that have occurred and continue to occur claiming so many lives in recent times. In all these, catalysms, ruinations and great calamities, can humans be of assistance? Can we fix our seemingly titanic and mounting challenges? This paper seeks to analytically establish and affirm the cause of these problems and proffer a way out.

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## Introduction

Since the inception of the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Benin in 1979, the department has continuously produced highly resourceful and ingenious students. These students in turn have continuously demonstrated exceptional skills in their creativity and adroitness. One of the sculptures in the Department currently attracting scholarly attention and recognition is that executed by Adegbile, a graduate of sculpture section.

This iconic 7ft (2.2m) sculpture is now mounted in the department. It is made of calcium carbonate fibreglass, rods, metals and silicon siliant, and was executed in 2011. This brilliant and inventive sculpture is unique in so many ways. It is original, the form is matchless and it is about the biggest in any university in Nigeria. Another reason why this sculpture is significant is what it represents, illustrates and symbolizes – it illustrates grace from God in solving mankind's unending problems.

## Significance of Some African Popular Masks

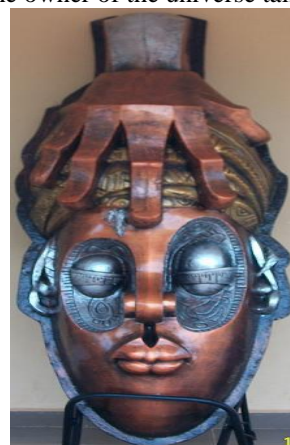
In traditional African society, there is the prevalence of mask tradition. This is very apparent in most southern part of Nigeria where masquerade and festivities depicting masquerade performances are very common and popular. It is very essential to note that most of these masquerades come with masks on their heads. These traditional masks have their own culturally rooted significances. They represent powerful animal frequently venerated in the society, some represent a dead Oba or queen mother whose activities while alive contributed immensely to the development and economic expansion of the community. A classical and popular example is the Idia mask of Great Benin Kingdom. This iconic mask which is also known as FESTAC mask has been used by so many organizations in Africa for so many things – logo, backdrop for a television station, key-holders, textile motifs, ceramic designs, etc.

Therefore, traditional African masks are executed or created with high doses of visual sensibilities and aphorisms.

The *GRACE MASK* in University of Benin is absolutely making scholarly waves not only because of its aesthetic appreciation, expressions and perceptiveness but as a result of what it represents and symbolize.

## The Grace Mask – Its Symbolism - An Examination

The *GRACE MASK* in University of Benin has come to represent the only panacea to so many failed and disappointing occurrences in various parts of Africa and indeed the world. This 7ft (2.2m) fibreglass sculpture is saying since the society, group of well meaning individuals have failed, let the owner of the universe take over.



**The Grace Mask Executed: 2011 Location: University of Benin, Material: Fibreglass Size: 7ft (2.2m) Sculptor: Adediran Gbile Sunday.**

For example, on the 25th of November 2011, different tribal people in Southern Sudan in Africa have been fighting themselves. The problem? Their tribesmen were busy stealing their cow which is their only means of livelihood as each cow now costs \$1,000USD. As these tribal and various ethnic groups began to fight themselves, it quickly snowballed to various cities, according to Al Jazeera Broadcasting Network of 1st December, 2011, BBC World of 3rd December, 2011 and CNN World Report of 25th December,

Tele:

E-mail address: [onv.aysha@gmail.com](mailto:onv.aysha@gmail.com)

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2011. People started to flee into neighbouring countries and forest. Today, more than ten thousand people which is made up of mostly women and children have been killed or disappeared without a trace. Now the people of Southern Sudan are beckoning on the United Nations for assistance, but will the assistance be forthcoming? Or they urgently need the Grace of God? Why will brothers kill brothers over the alarming increase of theft of cow?

On the other hand, in Nigeria, a daredevil group has just sprung up to wreck havoc on the entire populace of Northern Nigerian cities. They bomb churches, marketplaces, banks and police stations. They call themselves Boko Haram. What is their grudge? They oppose western education, religion, philosophy and ideology. On Christmas day, 25th December, 2011, while the Christians were having their worship in a church in Abuja, they went there to bomb them. At the end of their act, more than 50 people according to NTA – Nigerian Television Authority of 25th December, 2011 were confirmed dead, while more than 150 others were either maimed or seriously injured and are recuperating in the National Hospital, Abuja. This terrorist group has vowed to make life unbearable for Christians in Northern Nigeria. For now, the Federal Government of Nigeria has failed to arrest this ugly situation. The country therefore needs the GRACE of GOD, indeed the HAND of God to survive and continue to live as one indivisible entity.

On the other hand, on the 11th of March 2011 in Tokyo, Japan, suddenly the ground started to rock violently. The sea, rivers, buses, cars, trucks, trees, houses, tall and small buildings started to tumble and collapse like a pack of cards. The sea went up to 10 meters carrying along with it anything on its track. At the end, Japanese nuclear reactor collapsed, thereby sending radiation to the atmosphere and the surrounding land, 40 miles radius. The Federal Government of Japan, the people and other well meaning problem solving individuals became helpless, hopeless and rattled. At the last count, more than 35,000 people – men, women, children and the elderly lost their lives or just disappeared without a trace. The only solution to this nature of catastrophe is God's GRACE – the Hand of God which this mask symbolizes.

If the world's great economies could collapse and tumble, if their many years of experience, expertise, great wisdom and knowledge could not deliver them from their economic quagmire, then what will happen to far lesser and developing economies like Nigeria? Which means as the economy of developing nations like that of Nigeria experiences earthquakes and great tsunamis, the masses – the common man is in great disaster and misfortune as prices of all goods and services have all skyrocketed.

As if this hardship is not enough, the Federal Government of Nigeria on 1st of January 2012 suddenly increased the pump price of fuel from N65 (sixty five naira) a litre to N150 (one hundred and fifty naira) a litre. The Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC), Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), Nigerian Bar Association (NBA), Nigerian Medical Association (NMA) and other organized labour have been on rampage. Youths on their own in various parts of the country have all gone on rampage trying to force government to back down. After seven days of strike by the NLC (Nigeria Labour Congress), the price of fuel was reduced to N97 a liter. Today, goods and services have further skyrocketed beyond the reach of the common man. Will government listen to the people? Will there be a further complete breakdown of law

and order? Will Nigeria survive? And will the GRACE of God touch us? Only time will tell.

### **The Mask – The Grace of God: An Explanation**

This 2.10m (7ft) sculpture mounted at the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Ekenwan Campus of University of Benin is an icon of a mask. This is as a result of the intricate and adroit style, concept and size of the sculpture. This style and concept as posited by Robin (2004), Russell (2005) and Egwali (2003) is what place the art form as being quintessential amongst the committee of iconic sculptures. In the same vein, West (2006), Bowen (2005) and Egwali (2006) supported this theory as they all asserted that the concept of a work of art is absolutely important to the general outcome of the work itself. Another angle to this iconic sculpture is the general projection and recession put in place by the sculptor, Gbile. All these projections and recessions according to Walberg (2005), Gardener (2005) and Hugh Honour (2006) are all attention seekers. They are like the mouth piece of the sculpture as they become poignantly expressive, energetic, striking and forceful.

Another significant aspect that should not to be overlooked in this visual pontification is the quality of texture. Texture as asserted by Egonwa (2005), Bridgmans (2005) and Lucie-Smith (2003) occasionally become essentially indicative of where the sculpture is emerging from. This iconic mask possesses very significant and expressive African motifs. These motifs have acted as textures on the headgear of the mask. Aside this, it also became a visual accoutrement to the art form. This nature of visual accoutrement could also be taken to mean visual aphorisms as maintained by Duke (2003), Hopkins (2005) and Paul (2007). And by extension influences the general configuration and construction of the piece of sculpture. Kosetenevich (2006), Caroline (2003) and Egwali (2007) also affirmed and confirmed that texturised sculptures directly or indirectly affects the visual aesthetics of form in an art piece.

### **Inherent Significance of the forms that Make up the Grace Mask**

This 7ft (2.10m) size mask is made up of various parts. These include the Head that is covered by the headgear, Mouth, Ear and Earrings, the Eyes, the Textured Cheek and the Hand of God on the head of the mask.

#### **Head**



#### **The Grace Mask – The Head.**

The head which is fascinatingly covered by the headgear (gele) symbolizes patient, clear-headed women. As a result of this, she has combined it with outstanding positive qualities – she is resourceful, dependable, always forgiving, blissful, creative and a pleasure to associate with.



**Mouth****The Grace Mask – The Expressive Mouth.**

Her voluptuous mouth encapsulates everything and anything that has something to do with insight, foresight, discernment and sagacity. She is thus an illuminating example to other women. She is not a gossip neither is she a busybody in other people's matter.

**Ear****The Grace Mask – The Expressive Ear.**

She hates hearing sad news even from those that hate her. Her earring dangles with positive and delightful activities.

**Texturized Eye Socke****The Grace Mask – The Texturized Eye Socket.**

The mask texturised eye socket although generously emphasizing African sensibilities, aphorism and motifs, we can also savour the fact that life is not always rosy and smooth. It is a construction of up and down, low and high. These textures are etched to prepare us for challenges that life and living presents. At the end, according to the artist, when we overcome these challenges, we are relaunched into a higher realm of both spiritual and economic consciousness.

**Eyes****The Grace Mask – The Inquisitive Eyes.**

It is the penetrating, striking, discerning and intelligent eyes of a mother ready and willing to help a nation in whatever ways. It is the eyes that believe in equity, fairness, impartiality, and integrity of the human being. It is the eyes that see or stand for justice, rectitude, reasonableness and fair-mindedness to all regardless of our influence or affluence.

**The Hand on the Head****The Grace Mask – The Hand of God.**

In the words of the artist – regardless of the intractableness of contemporary life, despite the intimidating predicament mankind is experiencing in contemporary time, all over the world, we need the Hand of God to making it work. We need the urgent attention and grace of the former and sustainer of the universe – GOD. That is what the rugged, forceful, vigorous and energetic hand represents, evokes and personify.

**Conclusion**

As we embrace the New Year with great equanimity and sanguinity, most people are anticipating wonderful and prosperous years ahead, where most of our aspirations will be realized and materialized. But what have people found as they embrace the New Year 2012? As mentioned above, the fuel subsidy removal in Nigeria from N65 per litre to N97 per litre has continued to wreck havoc on the entire citizens of Nigeria. Since civil society groups declared strikes against the Federal Government, all government agencies, establishments like hospitals, ministries, courts, banks, airports, have all been forced to close down, meanwhile billions are lost. Where have all these left the masses – impoverishment, misery and further impecuniousness? This is where the GRACE from God is urgently needed.

Just recently, it was reported again that heavy fighting in Southern Sudan between tribesmen over the looting and rapping of women.

At the end, more than fifteen thousand have been killed. Why? Over the issue of stealing of cow. Some few days ago, scientists predicted that there is going to be more earthquakes, tsunamis, extreme temperature all over the world in 2012. This has sent shockwaves all over the world. Some have started to panic as world conditions continue to degenerate, deteriorate and depreciate in morality, economy and other human endeavours, can man fix his daunting challenges? Can humans solve all these horrendous catastrophes? The unnecessary bloodletting all over the world – suicide bombers, assassins, drug-related violence especially in Mexico, organized robbers, the increasing rate of philodiles and rapist especially in Uganda, South Africa and most Latin America countries; the only direct, tangible and reasonable answer to all these vices is the GRACE and Hand of God which this 2.10m mask represents and illustrates.

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