I'd like to come into this conversation by commenting on how human and animal imagery are combined to create an image that may be read as ‘monstrous’ or ‘grotesque’ or ‘powerful’ or ‘numinous’ or some combination of these – and how distinctive some Yoruba and Edo imagery is in this regard relative to the way this is accomplished in many other sub-Saharan African cultures. The use of snakes, crocodiles, or mudfish emerging from the nostrils of a human face makes a shocking image, all the more so because the human aspect is maintained. In many masquerades that combine human and animal features, the anthropomorphizing element is the often recognizable human figure of the mask carrier; the animal feature is the mask or headdress—however it takes shape, as a stylized animal, composite animal or face with such animal attributes as horns. Despite the transformation of the human porter into a personified spirit, the anthropomorphism tempers our response as does the internal logic of a character developed by costume, movement, and music/text.[1] It's the disruption of the humanity by the addition of the snakes/crocodiles/mudfish that is so disturbing. Similarly, and I refer to my own field research here among the Okpella [2], an Edo speaking people living north of Benin City in southern Nigeria, the Elders’ masquerade binds together things that don't belong together, like snakes and noses, thus exploiting a visual and intellectual dissonance for expressive purposes.

Not snakes and noses, but ‘mother’ and ‘monster’ are united in the Okpella Elders’ masquerade.[3] This masquerade is the result of a commission made in the 1930s from a foreign artist, an immigrant Igbo. He took the headdress and costume of a recognizable senior female character with old, flat breasts that show she has nurtured many children and a ‘load of children’ on her head (figure 1) along with the face of another known masquerade figure, a bush monster (figure 2), supplementing these with embroidered panels suspended from the brim of the headdress. The combination --

shown in figures 3 and 4 -- remains visually and socially dramatic, and the appearance of the Elders’ Mask represents the climax or visual high point of daylight celebratory dancing marking the successful ritual purification of the village for the new year.[4] Though not originating with an Okpella artist, the mask was named by Okpella elders. They called it Efofe -- “The More You Look, The More You Have To Look. You will Never Fully Understand It, So You Must Keep Looking At It.” The name communicates the visual tension created by the combining things that don’t go together, at least not in the same figure, and that is what renders this image so compelling to the Okpella audience. Nor were the elders of Okpella hesitant about recounting the history of this
form. They did not see their commissioning work from outside the community as anything but a strategy to bring something new and original into play.

This creates an interesting segue into the issues of cultural borrowing, originality, authenticity – issues variously defined by different interest groups at different points in time during the past 100 years and that have marked the attitudes surrounding the study of African art. A reading of the work by art historians concerned with these issues[5] brings to mind the idea of center and periphery, an economic model that has been applied to art in the context of modernism: artists from the center (Europe) were able to appropriate forms from the periphery, the rest of the world, and transform them to fundamentally change the direction of European art—without impugning their sense of originality. The direction of movement, however, was one-way. Any non-Western artist whose creations were believed to be the result of appropriations from Western sources was deemed a mimic with a colonized mind. This is not only a central issue in the discourse that has developed around the history of particular modernism(s) and post-modernism(s) in African art but one that continues to plague a dispassionate consideration of cultural exchange between sub-Saharan African cultures and cultures linked to the Mediterranean basin and beyond, and located in a more remote past.

Thus Akin Ogundiran decries the suggestion that Yoruba [recognizing that this is a 19th century colonial construct in itself] artists from Ife and Owo in particular incorporated into their work visual information that not only may have come from elsewhere but also may be seen to be important over a long period of time. I would agree with Suzanne Blier that it’s a mark of the cosmopolitan nature of a culture to incorporate new ideas into their visual culture for their own expressive purposes. At the same time, I would agree with Akin Ogundiran on the importance of understanding the Yoruba discourse – in this case linked to ‘animalia,’ – not that this was ever questioned. I use the example of Okpella’s Elders’ masquerade to underscore both the ideas of disrupting humanity with animal imagery for dramatic expression and the human capacity for incorporating strong, but foreign, imagery into a culture’s visual vocabulary without threatening its originality. That problematic idea is ours.

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2003 by a Fulbright-Hays Teaching and Research Fellowship and the University of Benin, Benin City.


[4] L-R All photographs by Jean M. Borgatti. (Fig. 1) 'Mother' Masquerade (Odogu) with child partner from Okakagbe Ensemble. Masks and costumes made by Lawrence Ajanaku of Ogiriga-Okpella, 1973. Photographed in Jattu-Uzairue, 1973. Slide 73.06.24. (Fig. 2) Bush Monster Masquerade (Idu). Made by Idawo prior to 1962. Photographed in Azukhala-Ekperi, November 1972. Slide 72.36.27. (Fig. 3) Elders' masquerade, Okpella. Photographed in Ogiriga-Okpella, 1972. Slide 72.18.21. (Fig. 4) Elders’ masquerade, Okpella. Photographed in Iddo-Okpella, 1973. Slide 73.23.31.