We are not the only people who have had an opportunity to return to cultures that we knew a quarter of a century ago, to assess changes of one sort or another. Indeed our ability to return on a regular basis to research sites today is unprecedented, given changes in the technology of travel and communication, although political instability and outbreaks of violence have militated against it.
In my case, I never intended not to return to Nigeria but aging parents, young children, and difficult politics all contributed to my reluctance to put myself into a situation where I would be cut off from my family. I also couldn't imagine “dropping in” for a few weeks. To go back meant going back to continue or extend research and that demanded an infrastructure.
By 2002, my parents were “late,” the children had graduated from college, the political situation in Nigeria had stabilized somewhat, and Fulbright kindly provided me with an infrastructure – supporting me with a grant for lecturing and research.
Thus, in September of that year, I returned to Nigeria after a 23-year absence, though I had remained in psychological touch with my experience, frozen as it was in the 1970s. My program involved teaching at the University of Benin and extending a research project on social change and aesthetic preference among the Okpella of Edo North.
There’s no question that I went into serious culture shock on arriving back in Nigeria after so many years. Growth had been exponential with all the attendant problems. Lagos had always been overwhelming, but Benin City had been rather a sleepy little place. My initial impression was of appalling squalor – red mud, streets filled with hawkers and lined by market women, makeshift shops, and smouldering piles of plastic-based trash – more like the Lagos I remembered than Benin.
The roads were woefully inadequate, worse than they were in the 1970s, often unpaved or cratered with pot-holes so deep you could drown in them in the rainy season—a season that never seems to end in Benin City. Furthermore, the city was now crowded with vehicles impelled by impatient drivers who simply crossed the median strip to move along the clear, but ‘wrong,’ side of the road to get where they were going.
New cars were beginning to reappear on the roads, but most people’s incomes forced them to settle for “new to Nigeria” cars. “Pure water” is available in bottles and sachets, making boiling and filtering a thing of the past.
Satellite dishes perch on rooftops or in yards in the village like visiting aliens, the finishing touch to the house built by a wealthy son or daughter who lives in Abuja, Lagos or, more often, overseas. “Houses for lizards,” my friend calls them, because they stand empty waiting for their owners to return.

http://camerooned.blogspot.com/2008/02/cosendai-adventist-university.html
Nigeria exports crude oil but imports fuel today because its refineries are in disrepair. Unemployment is rampant. The education system is failing. I was out on strike for 6 of the 9 months I was supposed to be teaching—and this has been an annual occurrence for 10 to 15 years. Libraries had few books.
At the same time, there are cell phones -- making possible a level of communication not universal but previously impossible within Nigeria; and cyber cafes give one internet access even in small cities like Auchi—near the site of my research.

http://mccoy.lib.siu.edu/jmccall/otherafricas/
all accessed July 29, 2008
New houses built in the late 70s for Stonehill quarry management, one of which was let to me for a month or so in 1979 during my survey research.

Equipment that I relied on in the 1970s – a new VW beetle, 35 mm. slr cameras to take b&w photographs and color slides, darkroom paraphernalia, a super8 movie camera, portable typewriter, reel-to-reel tape recorder, a stack of aerograms for communication with the outside world, have given way…
to a clapped out VW Passat that probably had 300,000 miles on it before it was exported to Nigeria to be sold as a “fairly used” car, digital cameras and recorder, a laptop and a scanner. Except for the car, which provided me with camouflage and anxiety in equal parts, these represent significant improvements when it comes to data collection.
Reeling from culture shock produced by Benin, I made my way north to the Okpella, one of many small but distinct groups of people who live north of Benin City. They speak an Edo-related language like the people of Benin, having migrated from Benin by the 18th century, or possibly earlier, according to their orthodox history. Okpella visual culture, as we know it from the 20th century, however, owes more to the small scale cultures surrounding it than to the Benin court. The Okpella have three masquerade traditions.
a social masquerade introduced circa 1930 from east of the Niger river,
an eclectic group of masquerades of diverse origin woven into an annual festival of all souls that took its present form some time after the turn of the century,
and an independent and allegedly ancient masquerade of woven raffia.
My project in 2003 was to continue research on aesthetic preference in Okpella, focusing on the masks you see on the screen - the commemorative mask for women described as beautiful in Okpella and the festival herald’s mask described as grotesque, both of which appear in Olimi, or the Festival of All Souls. When I began research on the history of Okpella masquerades and the definition of aesthetic concepts in the early 1970s, I was unable to engage people in informal discussion regarding the nature of their preferences for masquerades being performed, what it was about the sculpted mask (since the face of the masquerade “names” or identifies the work for the audience) that was more or less appealing.
However, when I returned to Nigeria in 1979, I was able to tap into a reservoir of local perception through survey research. At this time, I oriented the question to address choice at the point of commission, focusing preference on the artist as much as on the work itself. Directing approval or criticism towards the maker of the object loosened peoples’ tongues, since in Okpella, art is defined as something made by an artist or atsona, and it placed choice where it belonged, that is, in the process of commissioning and acquiring a new mask. The 1979 survey was administered to a random sample of Okpella households with some four hundred individuals of different ages and both genders from 70 compounds and nine villages participating. The m
2003 Survey: 139 people were interviewed, approximately 25% were drawn from the original sample along with an additional 6 percent, some substitutes for deceased relatives but mostly youths under the age of 20. For example, in Lawrence Ajanaku’s household, Aliu’s son Mike asked to be interviewed as a substitute for his deceased father, and Lawrence’s daughter Omo added a youthful opinion. The others were all part of the original sample.

Questionnaire: Some additional social information was collected or re-collected from each respondent (age, religion, education, travel, access to media).

My intentions in 2003 were to carry out a panel study, reinterviewing 25 percent of my original sample and doing a small group of new interviews, mostly young people, to provide a current youthful perspective.
In the panel study, I focused on that part of the survey questionnaire that had been devoted to paired comparisons of masks in the categories beautiful and grotesque, both Okpella examples and a second set of examples from other African cultures, originally used to see if consistent criteria were applied cross-culturally. Results from the 1979 survey demonstrated that not only did Okpella have a well-defined aesthetic, but that it was widely shared—with relatively little variation at the normative level across age and gender. With the passage of 23 years, I was interested in seeing if those norms still held. Thus, this paper is both a preliminary discussion of my new findings as well as a discussion of my impressions upon returning to the field.
In the early 1970s, Okpella was at the end of the paved road from Auchi, but today finds itself on a main road that stretches from Abuja, the capitol city, to Lagos, the main commercial center – this road having opened up in the late 1970s.
Besides this major change in circumstances, other observable differences in people’s lives include national electricity, available now in Okpella, if unreliably; widely available video or videodisc players and films of all sorts to play on them; televisions that without satellite dishes receive Edo State television and some stations from the northern Igbo area; and much greater travel experience, particularly among the old to visit children in Lagos or Abuja, compared to the experience of similarly aged people in 1979.
Although in many ways the education system fails to deliver as good a product as in previous years, many more children are in school and many more are moving through post-secondary institutions. Language, too, has changed with many more English terms interpolated into the local language and with much greater reliance on broken English for casual communication among the educated. Except for major languages like Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa, vernacular languages are no longer taught in school. Thus writing and reading the vernacular is a skill that is being lost, and the orthography varies with the author.
A greater understanding of what people should have in relation to Nigeria’s resources and what they actually have (and have lost) has soured people’s attitudes, making them less willing to expend time and energy without economic recompense or even undertake the traditional gestures of hospitality, sharing drink or kola when an outsider visits.
Most people in Okpella in 1973 and in 2003 identified themselves as Christian or Muslim. Since 1973, however, Islam has become a much stronger force, with mosques apparent in all communities. Fundamentalist Christianity has also made significant inroads into the major denominations.
Note the substitution of a photograph in 2003 for the ‘traditional’ memorial effigy on the roof of a deceased titled elder’s house.

All of these changes have profound consequences for what might be described as ‘traditional’ culture, the historic title systems and the masquerade festivals — from a photograph (on the left) being substituted for a “traditional” memorial effigy on the rooftop after the death of a Titled Elder (shown on the right)
to allowing historic shrines to deteriorate so drastically that imagery once restricted to an entitled group is now fully visible…

The changing relationship of the masquerades to the community as a whole, too, must be addressed. This is not a new preoccupation – since in the 1960s and 1970s we art historians all thought we were involved in “salvage” documentation. However, in Okpella, despite a general fluctuation of elaboration in performance over the years, the base of support for the traditional forms seems to have diminished as born-again Christians and more conservative Muslims do not want to take part, even as spectators at the public celebrations.
Masquerades are falling out of use as well as into disrepair as the example on the screen illustrates because fewer people are willing to allocate the resources to refurbish costumes in the face of economic constraints – and the masquerade society itself cannot cope financially with all the demands, as wage-earning children often refuse to support their parents in these endeavors.
To return to the actual research project for 2003: The masks that were the focus were the commemorative masks for women described as beautiful (osomhotse) in Okpella and the mask of the All Soul’s Festival Herald (and servant of the Dead Fathers) described as grotesque (ulishi).
Okpella Beautiful Masks (1979)

Analysis of the 1979 data indicated that the ideal Okpella beautiful mask was a white or brightly colored mask, usually feminine in appearance, used (again, ideally) to commemorate a deceased woman of importance. The carvings incorporate symbols of legitimate authority and indicate wealth and status. At a metaphoric level of interpretation (when performance is considered), they suggest the accomplishment of a difficult task with perfect composure. Okpella people use a term that they translate as beautiful to describe it. That term, osomhotse, connotes happiness and contentment (lack of suffering); completeness or fulfillment in terms of function (goodness); a perfection of physical form as well as appropriateness of form (well-made) and embellishment or imaginatively rendered decoration (better than good). A comparison of most and least preferred masks in the beautiful categories suggests that value is placed on clearly defined basic forms, carved and painted for maximum visibility, on symmetry, on surface ornamentation, and on the elaboration of the basic form with a superstructure or complex coiffure. A figural superstructure adorns Okpella’s most preferred mask. It is large enough to provide the mask with an aura of seniority, authority, and costliness, but not large enough to make the mask difficult to dance. The least liked Okpella masks tend to be coarser and more powerful sculptures than those more admired. In addition, they are almost completely lacking in decorative detail: the texturing of the surface of head and coiffure, the carefully raised and delineated features, and the more delicately incised and painted scarification patterns.
Preferences for masks from other African cultures reflected a consistent set of criteria applied to the forms, although the preferred African masks differed stylistically from the typical Okpella examples. Among the African masks, Okpellans most preferred a Yoruba Gelede mask with an elaborate figural superstructure showing a chief riding a horse. Okpella commentary indicated that this mask's appeal stems from the careful delineation of the eyes with whites whitened, the visibility of the browline which is both carved and painted, and the superstructure and its imagery which recalls the line "a chief, a chief who rides a horse" sung in the context of Okpella title taking. A Chokwe "beautiful maiden" mask also attracted Okpella notice. This mask resembles more closely their own commemorative masks in its overall conception of form and decoration. The features, browline, and scarification patterns are elegantly rendered in relief against a smooth and shining surface. The knotted fibre coiffure provides an interesting variation in texture, contrasting with the hard smoothness of the wood. The least liked non-Okpella mask, a Lwalwa mask, differs sharply from the admired masks and Okpella prototypes in its cubistic angularity, in proportion, in the placement of features, and in the absence of decorative detail. Its highly sculptural quality interferes with its readability as an image; its radical proportions make it unbeautiful in Okpella eyes.
Given the changes that have occurred in Okpella between 1979 and 2003, there was remarkable consistency across peoples' likes and dislikes for beautiful masks in own culture and African Culture categories in the 1979 and the 2003 data -- with the two most preferred masks simply switching places, and the least preferred mask maintaining its status without question.
However, a Dan mask that had fallen into a mid-range in terms of preference in 1979 assumed a position as one much less preferred -- a place where it seems to belong in many ways in terms of Okpella’s critical focus. There is little decorative detail, the dark color makes it difficult to “read,” and the open and pronounced mouth gives it a somewhat aggressive character not in keeping with Okpella’s canonical imagery. (It does have a fine, naturalistic modeling of the facial features and a fiber coiffure that were admired in 1979.) Stephen Isah, an Okpella carver, who had shown a preference for the Dan mask as a young man in 1979 but not when reinterviewed in 2003 commented quite disdainfully that it looked to him like a dead person, hence his rejection. (transcript 2003).
Okpella’s festival herald uses a contrasting mask that is described as ulishi which translates as grotesque or fearsome. Ulishi combines ideas of ugliness, frightfulness, and humor -- and is considered an antonym for osomhotse or beautiful. It embraces in its meanings the radical distortion of form or a configuration confusing to the eye. There was less consensus in the preferences expressed for masks in the grotesque categories than for those considered beautiful, that is, the percentage spread between most and least liked masks was not as great, and in many instances, almost as many people liked as disliked each grotesque mask -- suggesting there are more ways to transgress the canon than to achieve it, more ways for images to be a “good” grotesque than to be “beautiful” in Okpella eyes. (ftnote:Ibibio example). Nonetheless, a comparison of most and least liked images suggests that Okpella people appreciate not only the ambiguity created by the application of an overall surface pattern to the carving but also the more complex interplay of surface pattern with three-dimensional form.
In assessing the less familiar African imagery, they selected masks with key characteristics expressive of the herald's character--notably animal attributes or humorously distorted forms.
The least liked Okpella grotesques in 1979 lacked sculptural definition or displayed random and haphazard decorative schemes that reflected the ravages of time. The best liked masks had abrus seeds carefully applied in linear patterns and mirrors symmetrically placed. One represented a warthog, departing from the generic herald form described earlier, adding the fillip of novelty to the expression of animal aggression.
The best liked non-Okpella masks evidenced relatively simple but clearly rendered forms, animal attributes, sufficient decorative detail to provide some textural variation of the surface, and darkness of color. The least liked masks were highly sculptural, anthropomorphic images, seemingly less expressive of herald character than those more preferred.
One of the most intriguing changes in the preference patterns for Okpella Herald masks was the shift of #26 (Atogido-Iddo) from one of the least preferred to one of the most preferred. This is a mask that is no longer in the repertoire, having been sold out of the community after 1974 (ftnote ), and is particularly amorphous in both form and decoration. At this point I can only hazard a guess that its very lack of form suggests a level of power (and lack of control by humans) that speaks to the Okpella on an emotional level rather than a more purely formal or aesthetic level. Feeling for this mask may also be linked to a nostalgic feeling for the past, for a “simpler” time (since the past is always “simpler” than the present) when the festival was a little less controversial or fraught with tension than it is today (or seemed to be in 2003-2004). In expressing a preference for this mask, they referred to old things on the face, specifically cowries (an old form of currency), the raffia wrapped around the topknot (suggestive of traditional shrines and the ancestral religion), and noted that the face inspired fear -- making it appropriate.
With regard to the mask that remained in favor between 1979 and 2003, people spoke of the controlled pattern of mirrors and seeds on the face and the seniority suggested by white hair and beard -- although in 2003 one could no longer actually see the face when the masquerade appeared because of the accumulation of medicine on and around the head.
Looking at the African grotesque masks, more interesting than what remains at the top or has moved to the top (since these fit the criteria that emerged from the formal analysis) is the movement of certain masks to the bottom of the pile, most notably the Igbira masks, the prototypes for Okpella’s festival herald historically, and the Teke mask, a flat, round face mask that is elaborately designed (usually described in Okpella as “written upon.”) I can only hypothesize, based on a formal comparison, that the two least preferred masks in 2003, no longer satisfy people’s idea of the Festival Herald’s character, that they are either too ‘old-fashioned’ or too bland. Certainly, the two most preferred display animal characteristics in a dramatic way appropriate to the Festival Herald’s flamboyant and mercurial character.
Okpella comments refine our understanding of the choices made and the underlying aesthetic of beautiful and grotesque. These comments did not differ significantly across the own and other culture images or the two time periods. With respect to beautiful masks, comments centered on the general beauty of the masks—incorporating the term "osomhotse" with all it implies, on the faces in particular, on figural superstructure or coiffure, and on scarification patterns. However, appreciation was expressed as well for a number of individual features—eyes, nose, mouth, teeth, ears, neck, forehead, and eyebrows—and for applied decoration like earrings or headtie. Some more articulate individuals provided greater detail. It is not just the head, but the way it is carved, its roundness, its shining surface. It is not just the coiffure, but the textured quality of the surface which differentiates hair from face. Particularly revealing of aesthetic focus where beauty is concerned were comments on the human, and specifically the feminine quality of the image, on the smoothness of the face; on the brightness of the image—and here a term is used which incorporates notions of clarity and visibility and which translates variously as bright, white, neat, or clean; on the quality of the decoration or imagination shown in rendering the forms; on the balance of the work as a whole, its straightness, symmetry and regularity.
With respect to grotesque images, a wide range of comments assessed the skill and imagination of the carver. Attention focused on the horns of the non-Okpella masks and on the decoration of Okpella masks with abrus seeds, mirrors, and cowry shells. Particularly revealing of the aesthetic of the grotesque were the comments on the animal nature of the masks, on masculine features—lower jaw, chin, and beard (as opposed to comments on the forehead and neck which occur especially in the context of "beauty"), on blackness, and on roughness. Again, more articulate observers provide us with greater insight than do the more general commentators. Not only are horns appreciated, but the elegant curve of the horns. Not only is applied decoration noted, but the specific placement of the decorative elements and the patterns which they create. Observers evaluate as well the composition of the designs as a whole and their relative complexity.
Although directed towards a particular image, certain statements add to our understanding of the formal appreciation of sculpted images or help nuance the conception of the grotesque in Okpella. The Bamum bushcow mask elicited praise for the clarity of its forms and features. Comments on an Ibibi mask depicting a face ravaged by disease and depravity stress the underlying element of humor in the grotesque notable cross-culturally. Observations on the "comic" mouth and bent nose of the mask coupled with the broad grins of respondents confronted with this image make it clear that its potential for expressing certain aspects of the herald's personality were grasped immediately. The answers to a series of verbal questions centering on appropriate imagery for beautiful and grotesque masks provided converging evidence. (footnote)
To summarize, the people of Okpella describe as beautiful or grotesque masks with particular visual characteristics. These masks provide the key to identifying masquerade characters which communicate a range of values to their audience in the context of well-defined roles. Comments linked to choices for masks suggest general criteria for "good" art as well as specific criteria for objects in the categories "beautiful" and "grotesque." General criteria relate to the appropriateness of the image, the skill of the artist, the clarity of the forms and the quality of the decorative detail. Indeed, interest in decorative detail supercedes interest in form, not surprising since form tends to be dictated by convention and creativity assessed in refinements. Corroborating this is the answer to a direct question which clearly indicates a higher value placed on decoration. Specific criteria relate to the values expressed by a beautiful or grotesque image. Most important for "beauty" are clarity and symmetry expressed by descriptors "ofuase" in Okpella that translates as neat, clean, bright, or white and "osheshe" that translates as balanced or straight. Most important for grotesque is the quality of ambiguity created through the combination of human and animal forms or through the relationship of surface decoration with three-dimensional form expressed most overtly in the use of mirrors as a decorative device. The combination of human and animal in a single image creates a visual tension for the Okpella audience because human and animal represent realms that are distinct and incompatible, if complementary, in Okpella thought. Mirrors contribute to the generally frightening aura of the masks because in addition to confusing the eye by catching and reflecting light, they carry connotations of clairvoyance and awesome spiritual power.
By way of a post-script, I would like to note that statistics, certainly for me as an art historian, are not an end in themselves. They must be interpreted in the context of cultural information. In many ways, this study is still in its infancy, for there are many ways of looking at the statistics and then considering them within the cultural framework. There will certainly be other ways to look at the information that I have gathered. To facilitate this, I am in the process of depositing my data with the Institute for Quantitative Social Science at Harvard University so that it will be available to other researchers for analysis. I look forward to learning from the analysis of other scholars, as well as through continuing to work on the data from my own point of view, to understand how and why changes have occurred both at the group level and at individual levels, and, through applying other statistical processes to the data, to interpret the different dimensions along which peoples’ choices are made.
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