



Window Space

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Ehiko Odeh

The Duality of Life and Death

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It all started with a mask.

Ehiko Odeh, fresh from graduation, is a multidisciplinary artist born in Lagos, Nigeria. Odeh now resides in Toronto and has finally had time to decompress after four years at OCAD University. Upon further reflection, one of Odeh's biggest goals was reading up on the history of her people, the Idoma people, which is when she came upon the mask: a Janus headdress.

These masks, also called *ungulali*, are traditionally carved from wood, and sometimes combined with other materials to create two-headed faces that

represent both the masculine and feminine. Their faces are carved around their features, darkened so that the outlines of eyes, lips, and other unique detailing stick out against the paler faces. Every mask is adorned with its own set of scarifications, growths and/or other details that line their cheeks or stretch out from the top of the mask.

When Odeh first saw this Janus headdress, it intrigued her, not only due to its look but its use that particularly compelled her. These masks were a critical part of the Idoma peoples' festivals and funerals, a way for the living to practice their spirituality no matter the occasion.

At first look, Odeh's *The Duality of Life and Death* is simply commemorating a snapshot into the past, but it's more than that. Centring a piece around a Janus headdress seems more than fitting for the time we're in, a time of death, of sickness, and of isolation — *The Duality of Life and Death* is a reminder for us that through community we can connect to our loved ones, especially those in the beyond.

Odeh had never really investigated the history of her people or their practices until she found herself as a first year in OCADU, finally claiming the label of artist and stepping into her own.

Those same years she spent expanding her artistic profile and adjusting to post-secondary life, Odeh grew more and more interested in the home she had left behind and the people whose land her family called their own. It was through seeing a Janus headdress in a book gifted by her father, *The Spirit's Image*¹, that she felt the urge to depict this mask.

Unlike the projects she'd done in school, *The Duality of Life and Death* was created on a whim, without the use of the professional tools she had spent years mastering. She took instead to various paints — acrylics, interior paint, and gouache — to build the background and with the help of oil pastels helped bring a distinct and warm portrait of communion, celebration, and ritual amongst the Idoma.

Upon two large canvases stapled together, various strokes of greens, pinks, yellows, oranges, and browns make up the Benue River, which Benue Sate — the land of the Idoma people — is named after. Framing painting and peeking out under the waves

¹ *The Spirit's Image: The African Masking Tradition - Evolving Continuity* is a 1992 book by Esther A. Dagan. This book documents the various ways African ethnic and Indigenous groups craft masks and their significance.

of the river are the agriculture the Benue is known for, with the various green and yellow hues of grass, trees, and leaves.

Lying at the center of *The Duality of Life and Death* is a blue sphere that calls back to Odeh's past painting *transcending blu*. It is on this spot where the ancestors, Odeh's ancestors, the Janus headdress, and the living meet. Smoking firewood sits in front of the living as they commune by the mask, with the dead lining up to the other side of the mask. The Janus headdress, the link between life and death, is the biggest figure of the painting, with feathery strokes the same brown, black, and white of the mask making up the tail end of the mask into a skirt of sorts. The mask's face is lined with white, with intricate lines mimicking the carvings of a traditional Janus headdress, with a visible set of eyes and mouths for each side of the face, as well as various traditional motifs and matching sets of growths protruding from its head.

On the surface, *The Duality of Life and Death* is simply a look at the past — but for Odeh, it's also a reminder of her present life, and her continuation.

The Idoma, like various other people across the continent of Africa, now finds itself majorly subscribing to Christianity, and Odeh is no exception, as she was raised a Catholic Christian. But after her move to Toronto, the rigidity of Christianity didn't

connect to her as it had before, so through her readings into her ancestry, Odeh opened herself to the values and practices her people practiced pre-colonization.

Although she's an hours-long plane trip away from her home, she's never felt more connected to her ancestors and their practices, being so far from home has also inspired her to plant roots within this new, unfamiliar soil.

It's only within the past year or so that she's found community with like-minded artists and people, as well as delved into a spiritual practice that is beyond what she was taught growing up. This support, care, and love Odeh has found with friends have also helped shape *The Duality of Life and Death* and encapsulates the warmth she finds in her community.

It's both an ode to the past, to those who created the masks Odeh has read about in history books gifted by her father, as well as an embodiment of what she believes today. *The Duality of Life and Death* is inspired by the Aje Alekwu festival², a yearly event (the date depending on the region) where the Idoma come together to celebrate, worship, and offer sacrifices in the names of their ancestors.

² "Benue Cultural Festivals." I Am Benue. <http://www.iambenue.com/benue-state/culture/benue-cultural-festivals/>.

In this context, the Janus headdress is used as ancestors' veneration. They serve as a link between the ancestors, the divine, and humanity. As Odeh leans more into her spirituality, away from what was taught initially, and further into what the people long before her practiced, it only seemed natural to explore this festival through art.

The Duality of Life and Death serves both as an idea, a reality, and a reminder of what community can be, of what honouring the dead and connecting the living can mean. It can mean warm golden yellow skies, huddling around a specially carved mask, and an ode to the past, but it can also mean looking at this painting in person, or sharing it with friends via text, and musing what can community, what can honouring your relationships with loved ones both alive and not, what we can carry from the past to help make our present better.

-Adele Lukusa

RESOURCES ON JANUS MASKS & HEADDRESSES

There are very few direct sources that speak about the Idoma peoples' Janus headdress unless they were previously selling them or showcasing them, but here are a few listings I used to better visualize, describe, and understand the Janus headdress:

1. [Amyas Naegle, Glass-eyed Janus Idoma Headdress](#)
 - a. “Exceptional Janus-faced headdress from the Idoma people of Nigeria’s Benue State. Blackened, half-circle rims encompass glass eyes on each side; other facial features including nostrils, lips and eyebrows are darkened for emphasis against the whitened faces. Each face bears unique facial scarification; cheek cicatrices are carved and painted dark. Unique and rare piece.”
2. [Christa’s, Idoma Headdress](#)
 - a. This beautiful headdress shaped like a ‘Janus Figure’ with two opposite faces comes from the Cross River Region Culture Idoma in Nigeria. The term simulates ambivalent symbols of life and fertility and also of death and sacrifice. Janus or multi-headed headdresses like this are used during entertainment festivities and funerals by the Oglinye society of the Idoma people. In Africa janus (two-faced) masks express male / female duality and the “two as one” idea.
3. [Diomedea, Idoma Janus type...](#)
 - a. Idoma Janus type dance headdress, known as "ungulali" after the flute that announces it, performs at major funerals and for entertainments. Birds encircle the crown. They are an ambivalent symbol, associated with life and fertility but also sacrifice and death. Country of Origin: Nigeria. Culture: Idoma. Date/Period: 20th C. Place of Origin: Benue river valley,. Material Size: Wood, human hair.

4. [Heritage Images, Ungulali headdress](#)

- a. Multiple faced "ungulali" headdress, surmounted by a cluster of birds, an ambivalent symbol of life and fertility but also of death and sacrifice. Carved by the great sculptor Ochai of Otobi, who died in 1949. Country of Origin: Nigeria. Culture: Idoma. Date/Period: 20th C. Place of Origin: Niger / Benue confluence. Material Size: Wood.

5. [African Arts Gallery, Idoma Mask](#)

- a. The Idoma settled at the confluence of Benué and Niger. There are 500,000 farmers and traders in their 500,000. The neighbourhood and thus the influences of the Igbo, those of the Cross River and gala ethnic groups have generated stylistic borrowings and great tribal similarities. The royal lineage members of their society *Oglinye*, glorifying *cadrage*, use masks and crests during funerals and Festivities. They also produce fertility statues with bleached faces and exhibiting incised teeth. Janiform crests are usually displayed at the funerals of notables. Members of the male society Kwompten, meanwhile, used statues named *goemai* as part of healing rituals. Borrowed from the Igbo of the Cross River, these crest masks also relate to the masquerades of warriors. A double rattan strap around a flared base ensures the stability of this crest mask topped with a depleted face, embodying a spirit of water, *anjenu*, with growths on which the engraved motifs have a low polychromy. The scarification that shares the forehead is typical of the Idoma, as well as the protruding scars of the temples.