

## Balance of Power

### *Headdress (Igi Gèlèdé Oníjàkadi)*



**VISIT THE BMA**  
and see *Headdress*  
(*Igi Gèlèdé Oníjàkadi*)  
in the recently  
renovated galleries  
for African art.

Fagbite Asamu (Beninese, birthdate unknown–c. 1970) or Falola Edun (Beninese, 1900–c. 1940s). Detail, *Headdress (Igi Gèlèdé Oníjàkadi)*. Mid-20th century. Yoruba region, Benin. Wood and paint. 20<sup>9</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 16<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 11<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches. The Baltimore Museum of Art: Gift of Alan and Janet Wurtzbarger, BMA 1954.32

One wears red pants, the other wears blue. One looks forward, the other looks back. Despite their differences, these two long-armed, thick-necked wrestlers with enormous hands appear equally matched as they confront each other atop a headdress made of wood. Below, the face of a woman with wide-open eyes and a gentle smile appears unperturbed by the activity overhead. Her cheeks are marked with three scarification lines that identify her as one of the Yoruba people of Benin, West Africa.

A master carver named Fagbite Asamu or his son Falola Edun created this headdress for a man who danced at a springtime festival called Gèlèdé. The dancer wore the headdress like a helmet on top of his head and covered his face with a thin veil. He hid his entire body under layers of brightly colored strips of cloth that flew outward as he twirled around in the open marketplace. Metal anklets jingled or rattled while he danced in time to the intricate rhythm of the drums.

Many dancers perform at a Gèlèdé festival, wearing all kinds of spectacular headdresses. There are birds, snakes, and even men riding bicycles on top of dancers' heads. The opposing wrestlers on this headdress may remind the Yoruba people of their belief that life itself is a struggle to find balance between opposites: rain and drought, war and peace, good and evil, life and death. In order to keep the darker side of life at bay, they honor the Great Mother spirit with spectacular costumes, singing, drumming, and dance. If the Great Mother is pleased with the festivities, she will ward off danger, disease, and greed and reward the village with abundant food, healthy babies, and goodwill.

### CHALLENGE FOR STUDENTS

Google "Gelede headdress" and click on the Images tab to see a great variety of Gèlèdé masks featuring human figures, animals, and objects from everyday life built on top of a woman's face.

View a performance of Gèlèdé dancers on video. The portion with dancers begins at 1:28. <http://bit.ly/1PGp5a9>

See Gèlèdé dancers putting on their metal anklets and dancing in the marketplace. <http://bit.ly/1H3ljmK>

Draw or construct your own helmet mask with a sculpture that represents the idea of balance.

**PRINT THE IMAGE ON PAGE 2 FOR YOUR STUDENTS.**



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