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To Dance the Spirit: African Masks in Motion

The mask is one of the most important ritual objects created by most African societies. It is a central feature of many lively ritual performances where a person wearing a full-body costume and wooden mask becomes alive in dance with the spirit that is being honored by the rite. To most Westerners, however, an African mask is simply a cultural artifact, perched under a hot light on a pedestal or stand, enclosed in a small, protective cube of glass. The carving may be admired for its fine craftsmanship, its imposing presence, or even its exotic appeal. Looking at African masks, a viewer may try to imagine how the mask would feel on the wearer's face, or perhaps attempt to understand the minds of such artists as Picasso and Brancusi whose creative responses were fired by "tribal" objects such as these.

Although this sort of imaginative exercise provides the viewer with some personal insights into the nature of an African carved form, it reveals very little about the meaning of the mask in its original cultural context. For, to those in

At ef: the mask and headdress is from the Mano or the Libera
Belonging to Nyas, the mask above was used for judgment (collected by George Harle
Liberia)
Peabody Museum, Harvard University, F. P. Orchard photographs
whose society it properly belongs, the mask is not regarded as a work of art, nor even necessarily as a product of human hands. Rather, the mask is considered to be one element in an elaborate costume with multiple attachments representing a powerful spirit. The mask is thought to be created either directly by a spirit or through a spirit's visitation of a carver in a dream.

Ritual objects, like works of art, are forms of visual communication but in order to understand the message that is being communicated one must first know something about the culture in which the object was created. It is only through full knowledge of a mask's original context that meaningful transcultural appreciation can occur. Prior to serious field research on African society and material culture, the masks of Africa were examined out of their ethnographic milieu through a distorting glass of preconceptions. Masks were generally seen as having static religious or "fetishistic" meanings, and their grotesque features were often thought to reflect the putative "primitiveness" of their creators.

Anthropological field research has helped to eliminate some of these misconceptions. African masks are no longer thought of as static, but on the contrary are seen as dynamic objects: both in their movement through space, during performance, and in their movement through history.

Masks and Social Control

George W. Harley, a medical missionary and amateur anthropologist in northeast Liberia from 1926 to 1960, made one of the earliest contributions toward clarifying our understanding of African masks. During his nearly thirty-five years in northeast Liberia, Harley collected over a thousand masks of various styles from the different ethnic groups of the region, and took copious ethnographic notes that explain some of the masks' functions and meaning in daily and ritual life.

From Harley's research on the social organization and material life of the peoples of northeast Liberia, we learn that masks were central to political, social, and religious affairs. In his study entitled Masks as Agents of Social Control, Harley reported that among the Mano and Dan ethnic groups of Liberia carved wooden masks were fully integrated into a hierarchical system of government that controlled law, warfare, communal work, the organization of ritual, and particularly the education of young men and women. He showed how the masks were used by the sacred ruling structure to disguise persons who exercised authority and to legitimate certain claims to power.

In the relatively small and tightly knit communities of rural Liberia in the 1920s to 1940s, the settlement of disputes concerning land rights between towns and the adjudication of community affairs (including marriage payments, quarrels, and acts of violence) had to be settled by members of the community. The masks provided anonymity to lawmakers and arbiters by concealing these other-
wise recognizable individuals behind a carved visage thought to represent a powerful ancestor or dangerous forest spirit. The disguise, which also included a costume made of cloth and raffia fibers, allowed the wearer of the mask to wield tremendous authority, render decisive judgment, and inflict harsh punishment without necessarily suffering the contempt of the village community or the anger of the wrongdoer’s relatives.

Harley also uncovered an important link between masks and secrecy. He showed that masks were connected with the secret powers of the forest; he demonstrated the extent to which masks were used in rituals associated with the mysteries of human maturation; and, most importantly, he reported on the extensive use of masks in secret society affairs.

Among the Mano and some neighboring cultural groups, masks and masking are particularly prominent in the Poro society. The Poro is a male secret society with powerful functions and wide-ranging influence. Leaders of the Poro control the initiation of boys. In forest camps, the boys are circumcised and marked with scars, said to be teeth marks of a mythic forest spirit who swallows them and gives

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This mask is associated with fertility. It is worn to assist the mother in cases of difficult labor (collected by George Harley in Liberia).

Peabody Museum, Harvard University. Photo by Berger photograph.
them rebirth as men. During a period lasting as long as four years, the youths are trained in farming, hunting, and building homes. They are educated in local history, cultural values, and esoteric or "secret" knowledge. Above all the youths are encouraged by the terrifying atmosphere of the camp—with its strict leaders and powerful masks—to be loyal to the men’s society for the rest of their adult lives.

For the peoples of northeast Liberia, the world can be said to be divided into two distinct domains: village and forest. Masks are associated with the forest, and are thought to be the materialization of dangerous forest spirits. By bringing into the organized realm of the village the obscure and unknown power of the forest beyond, one could say that masked personages function to bridge the distance between these two contrasting domains. Masks link the living and the spirit world.

Masks and Performance

Following in the footsteps of George Harley’s pathbreaking research on masks and masking, two German anthropologists, Hans Himmelheber and Eberhard Fischer, have furthered our understanding of masked rituals through their extensive field research among the Dan ethnic group on the Liberia Côté d’Ivoire border. Reflecting a current trend in the anthropological study of ritual, Fischer and Himmelheber have stressed the performative or “staged” aspect of the masked rituals of the Dan. Implicit in their research is the notion that both aesthetics and histrionics are as intrinsic to “masquerades” as the regulation of societal affairs. Masked rituals are not merely, as Harley noted, public enactments of social control, but are also performative events where the aesthetics of mask and costume, the performer’s expertise in dance or skill in bodily movement, are judged critically by the viewers—perfection in these matters being thought crucial to the success of the ritual.

Thus, although the masks and “masquerades” of the Dan may be associated to a large extent with the powers of potent forest spirits, and may serve to maintain communal order by instilling fear and propagating a certain respect, the ritual enactments also function to entertain the public and to celebrate creativity. In masked performances, therefore, there is a blurred line dividing the “serious business” of ritual from the expressive elements of drama and play.

In research on African art in Western scholarship, the performative element in African aesthetics was first developed systematically by the Yale art historian Robert Farris Thompson in his book African Art in Motion. In this seminal work, Thompson argued that the arts of Africa ought to be studied in motion, that is, as the arts are used in dance and in performance. He stressed that African aesthetic experience is constituted through multiple media—music, dance, and the plastic arts—and that the study or exhibition of African art removed from its ethno-
graphic setting may be misleading since it displays the object out of its kinetic milieu. From Thompson’s research on African art, one learns that when viewing the masks of Africa in the artificial atmosphere of an exhibit hall case, one must imagine the mask in action, as the masked face of a dancing figure appears and reappears from behind the swirl of a cloth or fiber costume that spins to the rhythm of a master drummer’s beat.

Masks and Time

Motion, of course, can be either spatial or temporal. In performance, masks swirl through space: in history, masks move through time. While Thompson, together with Fischer and Himmelheber and others, have elucidated the ways in which the arts of Africa spin in space, little has been said about how African arts span time.

The masks of the Dan and their neighbors provide a splendid example in which history has significantly influenced the function and meaning of carved masks. In Harley’s publications, which report on masks and masking in northeast Liberia during the late 1920s to 1940s, there is a tremendous emphasis on the use of masks for judgment and the control of warfare. By the 1950s, when Himmelheber first arrived among the Dan on the Liberia-Côte d’Ivoire border, the masks appear to be used far more for entertainment and less for serious judicial arbitration and peacemaking.

Over the decades that span the research, conditions in this region of West Africa have changed dramatically. Throughout this period, the central government sought—with varying degrees of success—to break the power of secret societies and abolish warfare. Alterations in the nature and functioning of these various institutions were drastic. Increased opportunities for young men to earn cash, both on rubber plantations and in the capital, took able men away from the village and disrupted the patterns of communal life. In the recent past, changes have accelerated even more.

Masks also function like individuals within biographical time. Like an individual, a mask changes through time, as it is created, matures, gains power, and eventually perishes. Biographical time intersects collective time. Thus, when warfare is abolished, masks that were once associated with war may take on new and different functions. For instance, when peace is enforced largely through government directives, masks associated with warfare no longer serve to control war. The individual history of a mask, then, is intertwined within the collective history of masking which, in turn, is shaped by larger historical events.

The need to incorporate biographical time into the interpretation of Liberian masks is most evident in the attempts by Western scholars to develop a typology
This is an elephant mask associated with warfare (collected by George Harley in Liberia). Peabody Museum, Harvard University. Hilde Burger photograph.

of the masks. Overwhelmed by the great number of different mask styles, researchers on the arts of northeast Liberia have sought to create order out of this variety by classifying the masks according to form and function.

When classifying the function of the masks of northeast Liberia, there is an immediate problem, however, for a mask may change function through time. P.J.L. Vandenhouck was one of the first to observe that because the power of a mask derives largely from its owner’s status, a mask may be elevated or demoted in rank and function as it changes hands. A mask originally carved to perform as entertainer might eventually serve a more important role, such as judge or peacemaker. On the other hand, a mask initially intended to stop war may be demoted to a lesser function.

To capture the “fluidity” of mask functions, Fischer and Himmelheber have concentrated on classifying masked performances rather than masks alone. Their typology takes account of the performative context: costume, headdress, colors, dance movement, and characteristic behavior of the masked figure. This last aspect of their typology, they stress, cannot fit the dynamic of reality, but it does indicate possible associations between form and function.

Masks and The Spirit of History

Because masks, like people, exist in history we must turn our attention increasingly to the movement of masks through time and to the role of masks in shaping
historical consciousness. Individual masks, we have already noted, change meaning and function as they move through history, but the institution of masking as a whole provides continuity with earlier generations and former times. Though history may toil to alter a mask's function and meaning as it changes hands, the mask's frozen face forever remains the same. Like its arrested gaze, which is suggestive of its immutability, masks fix social reality by representing continuity with the past.4

One interpretation of ritual is that rites present people with a vision of their culture and their history. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz, for example, has written that the function of ritual is largely interpretive, and that in ritual enactments people tell a story about themselves to themselves.5 By symbolizing the remembered past, masks tell a story about bygone days and the way things used to be.

During the 1920s and 1930s, under strict government directives to disband traditional judgment councils and abolish the use of powerful masks, Harley reports that an important Mano judge named Gbana continued to use an old mask carved for his grandfather during the mid-nineteenth century. In an atmosphere of rapid change, with the central government of Liberia taking on greater and greater administrative control, Gbana persisted to wrestle for power, to make laws or decrees, and to enforce justice with his powerful old mask. By using this relic from his people's past, was Gbana simply invoking the power of a forest spirit? Was he not also invoking the power of history, and the spirit of an earlier era represented by the mask?

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Notes

3. Vandenhouwe, P.J.L. Classification stylistique de masque Dan et Guere de la Côte d'Ivoire. v.4. Leiden, Brill, Mamedelinge
van vet Rijkmuseum voor Volkenkunde, 1948.