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Interpreting African Masks: The Harley Collection at the Peabody Museum

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Claude Lévi-Strauss remarks in his book, The Way of the Masks, that among all of the art forms in non-Western cultures the mask represents one of the most striking visual images and asserts the most powerful and affecting presence. “Upsetting the peace of everyday life,” writes Lévi-Strauss, “the masks’ primal message retains so much power that even today the prophylactic insulation of the showcases fails to muffle its communication” (1982:5).

The mask is truly a captivating visual form. When viewed out of its social setting and particularly behind the glass of an exhibit hall case, the mask’s wooden face seems to struggle to speak about its culture and its times. Even the most discerning viewer, however, can never understand the meaning of masks fully by just contemplating the fixed gaze of their self-expression. The voices of the sculpted faces, harmonizing in an exhibit hall like a chorus of chiseled chanters, must be understood not through the mouthpiece of our imagination alone, but through the retrieval of as full an historical and ethnographic setting as research can uncover.

Being unmusical about history and ethnography was a characteristic feature of the West’s initial interest in African visual arts. 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 get rid of some of these myths. African masks are no longer thought of as static, but on the contrary are seen as dynamic objects that must be examined in their cultural context: both in their movement through space during performance and in history through their movement in time.

Masks and social control

George W. Harley, a medical missionary in northeast Liberia from 1926 to 1960 and research associate in African anthropology at Harvard, 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 one thousand masks of various styles from the different ethnic groups of the region, and took copious ethnographic notes that explicate some of the masks’ functions and meaning in daily and ritual life.

From 1932 to 1948, many of the masks collected by Harley in Liberia were sold to the Peabody Museum. Today, the Harley collection of masks remains one of the Peabody Museum’s earliest, most comprehensive, and best documented collections on a single region of Africa. A representative sample of the nearly four-hundred Harley masks in the Peabody Museum’s permanent collection is on display in the current exhibition of Liberian arts at the Peabody, entitled To Dance the Spirit: Masks of Liberia.

When sold to the museum, some ethnographic information accompanied the masks — handwritten by Harley on beige shipping tags that were tied directly to the pieces. Most of the data concerning the objects, however, are found in two monographs written by Harley, Notes on the Poro in Liberia (1941) and Masks as Agents of Social Control in Northeast Liberia (1950) and an ethnographic survey of the region, Tribes of the Liberian Hinterland (1947), edited by Harley from material gathered by George Schwab, a Presbyterian missionary in the Cameroons, who led the Harvard African Expedition in Liberia during the first eight months of 1928.

From Harley and Schwab’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 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 (the leaders of which were known as the zo) 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

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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 — participants in all aspects of daily village life. The masks provided anonymity to lawmakers and arbiters by concealing these otherwise recognizable individuals behind a carved visage thought to represent a powerful ancestor or dangerous forest spirit. The disguise, which also included a full body 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.

Even when the viewers or participants in masked rituals and judgment ceremonies suspected the wearer’s identity — and often they probably did have an inclination as to who might be wearing the mask — the masking institution was structured in such a way that the wearer’s anonymity was respected and the “secret of the masks” was maintained. As Harley notes in *Masks as Agents of Social Control:*

At the very end of the [initiation] session the boys saw *Gbini ge* as a man dancing with a mask on his face but no costume to cover the rest of his body. [They] had seen this mask before as a fully costumed ‘spirit’ dancing in town and later presiding at the ritual of scarification in the Poro. Now [they were] permitted to see that the mask was worn by a man and was not a spirit from the forest. The boys may have already suspected this but no one dared talk about it. (1950:5)

Thus, the mask wearer’s anonymity was not based entirely on the participants’ ignorance, but rather rested on a shared understanding that the whole community — including women and uninitiated children who were not supposed to know any of the secrets of masking — maintain silence on these matters.

**Masks and secrecy**

In *Notes on the Poro in Liberia* and *Masks as Agents of Social Control*, Harley 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
Fire prevention mask worn by dancer who inspected women's cooking hearths for smoldering wood, Liberia. 37-77-50/2707.

Female style entertainment mask associated with initiation, Liberia. 37-77-50/2672.

camps, the boys are circumcised and marked with scars, said to be teeth marks of a mythic forest spirit who swallows them and gives 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 in initiation 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.

Research has shown that the Dan have no Poro organization, but they do use masks at rituals associated with their male circumcision camp. When Dan boys reach a certain age, they are taken from the village to an isolated camp in the forest. In the seclusion of the forest camp, the boys are circumcised and their status thus symbolically transformed from childhood to adulthood. During the period of initiation, wearers of graceful and fine-featured masks visit the village periodically to demand food for the young initiates.

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-Ivory Coast border. Over the years, they have carefully studied the function and meaning of masks in ritual, and have published their material in numerous articles and books, including their most recent work entitled The Arts of the Dan in West Africa (1984).

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 social 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, according to Fischer and Himmelheber, 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 their work, Fischer and Himmelheber have outlined the basic features of a masked performance. The arrival of a mask, they note, is a major event for a village community. It takes several days to prepare the festivities and gather people from remote fields. As the mask emerges from the forest, music announces its arrival to the crowds in the village square. The "masquerade" is a complex interactive performance involving the masked figure, its attendants, and the audience. In some examples offered by Fischer and Himmelheber, the mask may chase the audience with its hooked stick, impress them with its skillfully executed dance, or address them in an unintelligible voice that must be "interpreted" by one of the mask's attendants.

Rather than focus, as did Harley, on the collectivity and on the power of masks to subsume individual wills under the collective pressures of societal demands, Fischer and Himmelheber have focused primarily on the prominence of gifted individuals in Dan society. In recent interpretations of masks and masking, such as those by Fischer and Himmelheber as well as Monni Adams (1982), there is evidence to suggest that masked rituals are not so much "equalizing" events where individuality is melded by collective demands, but rather that they serve to heighten individual prestige and reward creativity — as men and women strive to gain renown for their skills in song, acrobatics, and dance.

In research on African art in Western scholarship, the performative element in African aesthetics was first developed systematically by the art historian Robert Farris Thompson in his book African Art in Motion (1974). 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 ethnographic 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.

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, has elucidated the ways in which the arts of Africa spin in space, little has actually 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-Ivory Coast border, and also more recently when his son Eberhard Fischer joined him, 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.

The institution of masking is affected by history or the passage of time in two different ways. On the one hand, there is the general past or collective time that comprises the history of events that shape the institution of masking as a whole. And, on the other, there is the significant past or biographical time that defines the individual meaning of a particular mask. When taken as an ensemble, the masks function within the collective time of society. Like society itself, the institution of masking is affected by changes brought about through shifting historical conditions. Thus, for instance, when peace is enforced largely through government directives, masks associated with warfare no longer serve to control war.

Masks, however, 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. 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 striking in the attempts by Western scholars to develop a typology 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. F. J. L. Vandenhouote (1948) 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. Thus, a mask originally carved to perform as an entertainer might eventually serve a more important role, such as a judge or peacemaker. On the other hand, a mask initially intended to stop war may be demoted to a different function.

In his research on the Mano and Dan, Harley recorded the function of a mask as it was given to him at the time of collection. His data, therefore, only provide information on the role of a mask at a particular historical moment. Although this sort of classification reveals far more than the purely stylistic ones that predate his field research on the function of masks, his typology is, in fact, a bit misleading.

In order to capture the "fluidity" of mask functions, Fischer and Himmelheber have concentrated on classifying masked performances rather than masks alone. Thus, their typology takes account of the performatice context: costume, headdress, colors, dance movement, and characteristic behavior of the masked figure. They have proposed eleven types of "masquerades" and suggested the ideal form of mask for each function. This last aspect of their typology, they stress, cannot fit the dynamic of reality, but it does indicate possible associations between form and function.

Because the role of individual masks can only be understood when viewed through time, one would need "life histories" of specific masks in order to document accurately their function in ritual and other affairs. This sort of information, however, is not readily available in the existing literature. Using Harley's data as a starting point for further research, more fieldwork in the same area may clarify the meaning of masks in history, and shed light on the changing functions of individual masks through time.

Masks and the spirit of history
As anthropologists turn their attention more and more to the dynamics of non-Western societies, we are becoming increasingly aware that the notion of changeless "primitive" cultures or the vision

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of a people without history — an image that typified earlier anthropological works — is highly unsatisfactory. In moving away from our focus on the static elements of "primitive" culture, and in our departure from analyzing strictly a timeless "ethnographic present," we are beginning to pay greater attention to a society's history and more especially to the ways in which individual lives are shaped and made meaningful by a people's own vision or interpretation of their past.

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 toll 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.

One interpretation of ritual is that rites present people with a vision of their culture and their history. 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. By symbolizing the remembered past, masks tell a story about bygone days and the way things used to be; one of the functions of masks is in the construction of people's meaningful past.

During the 1920s to 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 and to make laws or decrees and 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? Or was he not also invoking the power of history, and the spirit of an earlier era represented by the mask?

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