

# MASKS

Masks are a particularly important art form in Liberia and function in a wide variety of roles. Some are called upon to settle disputes and judge cases, some teach moral lessons or correct behavior and some serve to entertain. In virtually every case masks also have strong religious and spiritual connotations, and the beliefs associated with them influence their creation, appearance, performance and the response of the community toward them.

Though traditional religious and cosmological views are by no means uniform throughout the country, there are certain widely shared concepts which help shape attitudes and beliefs about masks. Fundamentally, the world is thought of as being filled with a vast number of differentiated and personalized supernatural beings, which remain unseen by ordinary people, yet affect them in a multitude of ways. These spirits inhabit streams and rivers, rocks, hills, forests and trees, from which they control nature and intervene in the affairs of men.

The spirits share many things in common with mankind, including human emotions and desires. Frequently they have strong desires for material things and wish to live and participate in the human world in a tangible form. Himmelheber (1964) has written at length about such beliefs among the Dan pointing out that only by entering into the world of men can the spirits satisfy their craving for companionship, solicitude, food, drink, music, physical beauty and personal adornment. They expect to obtain satisfaction of these needs in return for the assistance they render to their human benefactors.

Like men, spirits are also concerned with power, status and identity. Thus, interaction between man and the spirits, like communication between men, is not random. Each must know the powers, nature and the name of the other. When a spirit wishes to establish a relationship with the human world, it comes to a man in a dream and reveals to him the powers and the name that it possesses as well as the material form it wishes to take.

Spirits may choose a number of ways in which to be embodied and activated including sculpted images and non-figurative accumulations of magical elements. Beliefs seem to differ considerably about whether the spirits are permanently present in such objects, or if their presence is manifest only when summoned; however, the latter seems to be the dominant view.

In any case, one of the most common forms through which the spirits enter the human world among the peoples of eastern Liberia is through masks. Among the Dan and Kran, a spirit is said to come to a man through a dream or vision, revealing itself, and instructing the man to go and make a costume and commission a mask to be carved. Then the man is to dance and perform in a particular fashion in order that the spirit may make its presence felt through the agency of the man in costume. Thus, each mask is a separate being, and despite attempts by scholars to classify and categorize them according to type, each is an identifiable, individualized personality with its own name, character traits and personality.

The most important visual aspect of masking is

that the mask face and costume show the features associated with the particular spirit. Spirits have their own aesthetic ideals which may or may not conform to human senses of beauty. Some seek to deliberately awe, impress or terrify, and others to amuse. In a sense, the form of the mask, dictated by the spirit, interpreted by the person to whom it appears and implemented by the carver, is a type of aesthetic contract. Some spirits choose specifically dehumanized features while others seek embodiment in idealized representations of human beauty. Moreover, it must be kept in mind that the costume which always accompanies the mask in performance (and is only rarely seen in museums) is also specifically designed to augment the features of the face.

The placation and subsequent good will of the spirit is dependent upon its acceptance of the mask and costume and since they are expected to express its individual personality, it is no wonder that there is such great stylistic variance among Kran and Dan masks. The need to distinguish the special powers of each mask is also frequently demonstrated by the addition of numerous powerful and magical objects including horns, teeth, leather talismans, and so forth.

Throughout Liberia the personification of the spirits and their distinctiveness is also reflected in attitudes toward spirit names. The name is of great importance since, as in much of traditional Africa, there is a strong equation of name and the power to control. As with human names, there are many restrictions and beliefs associated with the names of spirits including name avoidance and the use of both praise names and plural names for individuals. This is particularly the case with major spirits which must never be directly referred to in public and are usually spoken about obliquely.

When a spirit is manifested in the form of a mask, it normally has several names. Because of the secrecy attached to the names, very little is known about the special qualities they possess or the criteria by which they are chosen.

Usually the personal name of the spirit is known only to its human benefactor or to the heads of the particular society with which it is associated. Sometimes masks take human names. This is especially true of masks thought to possess great beauty, which often share the names of beautiful women. Occasionally there is a praise name which is fairly widely known and may even be publicly spoken in the community in which the mask appears. Such names often refer to some characteristic or power of the mask or to some aspect of its appearance or performance pattern, and it is not unusual for masks to have several praise names of this type. In addition, there are also generic names establishing a mask as part of a particular category of spirits.

The masked spirits participate in a wide range of roles in the social life of the community. The particular ways in which they function often differ significantly within particular ethnic groups, however, and there are also marked differences between the ways masks are used in different geographical areas of the country. Broadly speaking, it may be helpful to think of the country as being divided into three principal areas in terms of the way masks function within the political and social life of local communities.

Among the Dan, Kran and Mano, for example, the multitude of tutelary spirits has been incorporated into the political and social organization in such a way that they play critical roles in dispute settlement. Under normal circumstances civil disputes are settled by the local town chief or headman who is assisted by a council of elders in formulating

laws and judging cases. At times, however, disputes occur which threaten the entire fabric of social life in the community. This is particularly the case if the disputes occur between members of different families or patrilineages. In the event that such disputes cannot be resolved, there is a danger that one of the patrilineages may choose to leave the village and move elsewhere.

Such a decision not only threatens the application of law in the town but the very economic and social viability of the town itself. Thus it is often both convenient and expedient to enlist the assistance of the masked spirits to settle disputes, or more particularly, to apply rules and potentially unpopular decisions, especially when corporal punishment is likely or the threat of such punishment is essential to ensure that a rule be applied.

In the process of enforcing rules, the masked spirits must punish, or be able to make fully credible a threat to punish, all wrong-doers regardless of family allegiance, age, or social status and thereby establish their credibility, impartiality and flexibility as a rulemaking and enforcing entity. Since the mask is conceived of as a spirit, there is no person to blame and no recrimination or retaliation within the community.

The works of George Harley (1941, 1950) describe in detail the roles of particular masks in settling a wide range of disputes either through public judgment of cases or more frequently by publicly applying rules, collecting fines, and physically punishing those who violated religious rules. But the masks also serve as agents of social control in more subtle ways. They may be called upon to validate the actions of the elders as when Kola nuts are cast before certain masks to ascertain through divination whether or not the spirits concur with the decisions of the council. Masks may also be

attributed with the power to discover anti-social behavior. The *Gbasa* witch driving society of the Mano, to cite a single example, uses a mask in seeking out witches and driving them from the community.

Many masks which superficially appear to be merely entertainers also teach moral lessons. The *Kao Gle* mask of the Dan and Kran exemplifies this, teaching correct behavior by doing the opposite of what is socially acceptable. The mask is said to represent the diana monkey. Like other "monkey" masks widespread in West Africa, it is associated with disorder and chaos. Its performance is wild and destructive. Normally it is the first mask to make an appearance for a ceremony and by its vigorous dance and the sticks it hurls, it creates a "ritual space" both figuratively and literally. It illustrates how the unfettered individual is a destructive force in the community and that only socialization and ritual create and reinforce the necessary order in human life.

While spirits often come to individuals to establish a relationship, once entered into, the association is frequently enlarged to include families, local groups, such as villages, or craft associations. The basic nature of the relationship is tutelary. The spirit protects its human benefactors from human enemies and from the powers of the unseen world including those of other spirits attached to rival groups or individuals. Once established, the association often continues in the same family for many generations. Upon the death of the individual with whom the spirit originally established the relationship, the spirit may appear to another family member to reaffirm the covenant. Thus, it is a common practice for masks to be retired temporarily after the death of an owner and kept by a guardian until such time as another individual

has a dream in which the spirit instructs him to take up the mask and perform with it.

When relationships prove particularly effective and the powers of the spirits are widely recognized, a particular mask's function may change. It may be enhanced and enlarged and it may assume greater responsibilities. Conversely, if the relationship with the spirit weakens the social functions and importance of the mask may similarly decline. Actually, masks are seldom "down graded" in any formal sense; rather, they are simply not called upon as frequently to participate in community life or roles they filled in the past may be assigned to other masks.

Among the Kru and Grebo, masks play a far less significant role in terms of social control than they do among the Kran, Dan and Mano. Indeed the number of masks among the Kru and Grebo is very small and most are said to have been imported from their northern neighbors. The reasons for this are suggested in part by differences in social organization.

The Kru and Grebo have a much more highly developed system of age grades which serve as a principal organizing feature of social and political life, and many of the functions of dispute settlement and social integration performed by the masks in the Kran and Dan regions are handled by the age grades among the Kru and Grebo.

Where masks are found among the Grebo, they are associated with the warriors' age grade, and public appearances are most frequent at the funeral ceremonies of members or former members of that age grade. In addition, the masks are said to have been worn into battle by leading warriors as well as in the dance performances which preceded and followed battles.

Often the masks are not worn over the face but rather are attached to basketry structures worn on

top of the head. Significantly, unlike neighboring peoples the Grebo often make little effort to conceal the identity of the person wearing the mask.

The purpose of the masks seems to have been primarily to create an impressive and awesome aura in order to inspire the warriors and to terrify the enemy at the same time. Though little detail is known about the significance of Grebo masks, it appears that they were conceived of more as symbolic of the spiritual forces garnered behind the warriors than as the actual embodiment of the spirits.

While visual imagery and spirit manifestation played a critical role in the traditional political and social structures in much of northeastern Liberia, the use of masks in dispute settlement and direct social control was clearly of secondary importance in the western portion of the country. There the dominant principles of social organization centered within the Poro and Sande societies. These societies—the Poro for men and the Sande for women—are found among the Kpelle, Mano, Loma, Bandi, Kissi, Dei, Vai, Gola, Belle and Mende, as well as among related groups in Sierra Leone. They are the primary agency through which young men and women are socialized into the community.

The activities of the societies take place within the confines of their respective enclosures, apart from non-members. The principal occasions when the public is permitted to see the activities of these societies center around the opening and closing of their respective bush schools, and one of the principal purposes underlying these events is to demonstrate the power and importance of the societies.

According to a Gola myth of the origin of Poro as recorded by d'Azevedo (1973:129), women originally controlled all communal relations between mankind and the ancestors and spirit tutelaries.

Following a disastrous war, however, in which women revealed their husbands' plans to their enemies, the men decided to take control from the women and to find a special instrument of power of their own. They searched the forests until they came across an awesome being. This being was captured and certain men were assigned the task of subduing and tending it. This strange creature is the "Great Thing," the central spirit of the Poro, whose appearance is so frightening that no women are allowed to look at it. Its terrifying voice is heard, however, and when it roams, all non-initiates must hide and refrain from looking upon it.

Among most groups which have the Poro society, including the Gola, Vai, Dei and Kpelle, this central spirit is never seen but only heard, raging to be set free among the uninitiated. The fear that the men will release the being instills a willingness to submit to the control of the society.

The Mende do have a non-wooden mask known as *Gbini* which does manifest the Poro's tutelary and the Bandi, Loma and Kissi also have a large wooden mask called *Landai* which personifies this same being. It is interesting to note that the two mask types, the *Gbini* and the *Landai*, bear no formal resemblance to one another though they represent the same myth and spiritual entity. The *Gbini* is made of leather and fur while the *Landai* is a massive horizontal wooden mask with huge teeth stained red, signifying the blood of the initiates which it devours. A large crown of toucan feathers together with a bulky raffia costume helps to create a totally inhuman, monstrous and terrifying impression.

Both the *Gbini* and the *Landai* normally are surrounded by attendants who strike the spirit with brooms and emphasize the role of the Poro in controlling the fearsome creatures. The public appearances of both the *Gbini* and the *Landai* in their

respective areas seem designed in large measure to terrify non-initiates and impress all in attendance with the power of the society and its tutelary spirits. Nowhere in western Liberia do masks have any role in publicly judging cases, settling disputes or directly maintaining social control in the way they do farther east.

The fact that masks are not an integral part of social organization where the Poro is found can most clearly be seen among the Liberian Kpelle where there are no traditional public masks at all. In other Poro areas, however, and especially among the Vai, Dei and Gola and Mende there are a number of masks—mostly non-wooden—which are indirectly related to the Poro and which appear as entertainers at a variety of public events. Masks such as the *Gbetu*, *Yavi*, *Nafali* and *Jobai* are all said to be bush spirits, each under the control of a different organization, or *Gbonji*, of young members of the Poro.

They are said to be subsidiary spirits which enhance the ceremonies of men and symbolically demonstrate the role of the "Great Thing" which must be rigorously controlled by the men of the Poro to restrain it from doing harm to the community. The masks also serve as emblems of male strength and supremacy when they appear publicly performing acrobatic feats and vigorous dances creating an atmosphere of intense excitement. All of these masks are accompanied by musicians and other attendants. The attendants constantly encircle the spirit lest it escape. They also emphasize the role of the spirits as wild beings which must be beaten, whipped, cajoled and stroked in order to control them. Among the Mende the *Goboi* and *Gbini* are also splashed periodically with water to "cool" their violent behavior.

These masks also have additional functions of a subsidiary nature. The *Jobai*, for example, is often

said to be controlled by a paramount chief and to appear at his behest. The implication in this case is that the *Jobai* represents the spiritual forces which assist the chief since it is assumed that all persons in positions of power and authority have spiritual forces behind them giving them support. Thus, in a sense, the mask serves to validate the secular authority of the chief.

Broadly speaking, all of the masks in this western region serve to promote unity and cohesiveness within a village, though they may do so in a variety of ways. Performance competitions between the masks of different villages foster such unity. Within a town, masks teach social values much as they do in eastern Liberia. The *Nafali* may act as a thief, snatching what it desires from women and non-initiates, pointing up the expected patterns of social behavior through its deviation from the norms. Similarly, the *Kokpa* is regarded as an entertainer, and ostensibly the jokes, insults and ridicule it directs against onlookers is purely one of enter-

tainment. In reality, however, it plays a much more serious role because in many respects the young men who perform with the mask reverse the channels of authority by judging the elders and leaders of the community. Under normal circumstances it would be a gross impertinence to criticize such people or to expose publicly any misconduct. Under the guise of the *Kokpa*, however, such criticism becomes a gentle social corrective against which it would be unthinkable to retaliate in any way.

This brief essay by no means exhausts the range of roles played by masks in traditional Liberian life, nor has it even attempted to outline the vast array of forms which masks have taken. The religious beliefs and the concepts which underlie the use of masks are complex and varied, but it is hoped that this survey might reflect some of the richness of that heritage and an appreciation for the importance of masks and the underlying reasons for their gravity and significance in Liberian life.