
Title of Object

Hornbill Mask

Photo of Object (optional)



Object Information

Artist: Unknown

Culture: Dogon

Date of Object: Early 20th century

Country: Mali

Accession Number: 95.1

File Created: 4/12/2016

Material/Medium: Wood

Author of File: Kara ZumBahlen

Department: Art of Africa

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Tour Themes

Women, Animals/Birds, Stories/Storytelling, Spirituality/Sacred, Funerary/Afterlife, Gender Roles, Ritual/Ceremony

Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

1. Take a moment to look at the Hornbill Mask from a couple different viewpoints. What impresses you about the form?
 2. What kind of role do women play in Dogon society? What do you see that makes you say that?
 3. What modern religions place prohibitions against women's involvement in ritual?
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Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)

The mask is carved from a single piece of wood. No pigment is apparent although it was probably painted when first used.

The mask is a combination form; on the bottom is a stylized representation of the hornbill bird's head and on the top is a woman holding a calabash or container on her head.

Typical of Dogon art, the mask is composed of long tubular and conical forms, balanced in its composition.

Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)

The Dogon are a cultural group who live in southern Mali, in the Bandiagara cliffs. Their population numbers 250,000 to 300,000, and they have around 700 villages. They are thought to have migrated to Mali in the 1300s.

The Dogon have a long-lived masquerade tradition, honoring male and female powers as well as those living entities in their environment (plant and animal). Only men are allowed to perform in masks. In this mask form, we have a female power and the hornbill bird honored. The Dogon have two important masking ceremonies. First, the *sigi* (or *sigui*) ceremony is held once every 60 years, and all men from age 59 to the youngest toddlers take part in the ceremony, arranged in age groups and dressed in costumes—but not masks. The *sigi* represents all the generations that have flourished in the Dogon. Second, the *dama* ceremony is held once every 4 or so years, or at the death of an important elder. The masks in the *dama* perform in honor of the deceased and to put the spirits of the dead finally to rest. The masks that take part in the *dama* are wood masks, such as our Hornbill Mask. Women are not allowed to take part in the masquerade performances, which is a common prohibition throughout African cultures; some feel that the connection to death and exposure to spirits may impact women's fertility—which is key to the survival of the people and thus safeguarded.

Only men perform in all the masquerade ceremonies as part of the Awa dance society, but one woman, the *Yasigine*, is associated with the dance society and honored in a mask—of which this hornbill mask is a version. The mask performs in the *dama*.

STORY: This is the legend of how one woman, *Yasigine*, came to be honored with this mask form. Now the name "*Yasigine*" translates to "sister of the masks." The original *Yasigine* was an independent woman of the first people of the Dogon, who had wandered away from her village, suddenly coming upon a group of supernatural beings who were dancing, covered in red fibers from the hibiscus that disguised their identities. *Yasigine* had startled them so, that they fled from her, leaving their costumes behind. *Yasigine* then took the costumes, dressing up in one herself, then went back to her village and greatly frightened the men there. After the men recovered from their shock, they took away the costumes from *Yasigine*, to assert their authority. They decided to imitate the supernatural beings, with dances and masks made for their own masquerade society, but to acknowledge her discovery, the men decided that *Yasigine* would be the only woman allowed to be part of the masquerade society. Even though she is prohibited from wearing the masks and dancing, she has a supporting role to play, bringing the performers water or beer in her calabash or container, and mourning them when they fall. At the end of her own life, she was dressed in skirts and bracelets, made from the sacred red fibers, and was the only woman actually honored in the *dama* ceremony, indicating her importance.

The Dogon decided after she died, that each generation needed a "*Yasigine*," so there is a special ceremony to appoint a woman of the village to fill that supporting role in the masquerade society. Typically, this is a woman who was born during the sixty-year *sigi* ceremony and displays unusual independent social behavior. A woman who is sterile or cannot have male offspring may also be named

as a “Yasigine,” as they are thought to have broken some prohibition and perhaps were possessed by spirits.

According to the observers, the Yasigine is honored through a “visually pleasing and calm” dance. As a woman, one of Yasigine’s duties would also have been to sow seeds and harvest crops. The hornbill is a bird that scratches at the earth to find seeds, and through that motion, mimics the women who scratch the earth to plant the seeds.

Current Mia Label Information (optional)

Very long ago, according to Dogon mythology, a woman stumbled across a group of masked supernatural beings. Startled, they fled and left behind their masks and costumes, which the woman brought to her village. The men grew jealous, stole the masks from her, and made masking an exclusively male prerogative. The woman, called Yasigine (“sister of the masks”), is remembered by this type of mask—that’s her on top—representing the hornbill, whose picking of grains and stirring of dust is mimicked by the dancer during his performance.

Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)

Information on Dogon masquerade traditions exists in many online sources. Here are just a few, with good visuals:

From Art and Life in Africa:

<https://africa.uima.uiowa.edu/media/photos/show/4179?back=home%2FSearchForm%3FSearch%3Dyasigine>

From Barbier Mueller collection:

<http://www.barbier-mueller.ch/collections/afrique/masques-africains/article/mask-with-a-female-figure?lang=en>

The Bandiagara Cliffs in southern Mali are a UNESCO heritage site. A short video, showing the environment, is included at UNESCO:

<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/516/>

An article posted on African Arts, 1989:

<https://www.amherst.edu/system/files/media/1922/Masks%2520and%2520Mythology%2520among%2520the%2520Dogon.pdf>