

Introduction: The Mask, Masking, and Masquerade Arts in Africa²

Herbert M. Cole

Clearly the mask, masking, and masquerade are interlocking aspects of one of Africa's most significant artistic phenomena. A physical object of specific materials, shape, and size, the *mask* is normally designed to cover the face or head. *Masking* is the active presence of one or more fully costumed character(s). *Masquerades* are important events involving varied masked dancers, musicians, and their audiences. Each character, its attributes, songs, and dances, has many meanings usually expressed in no other manner.

Of all the varied arts of Africa wrought in gold, ivory, brass, terracotta, and other materials, especially wood and fiber, it is the mask that is preeminent. Masks are known from all cultures and continents, but those of Africa come to mind first for many people.

Masking History and Myth

How did African masking originate? Were animal skins and heads (Fig. 1) first used to embody, and then to deceive, sought-after prey and/or to placate their spirits? We cannot know, despite the logic that suggests ancient hunting and its rituals as early motivations for such transforming disguises. The earliest recorded arts of Africa—the rock paintings of the Tassili-N-Ajjer and nearby sites of the Hoggar, now in the middle of the vast Sahara Desert—show masks and masquerades (Figs. 2,3). These date back a mere four or five millennia, in all likelihood tens of thousands of years later than mankind's invention of such transformations. The images of masks and dances in the Sahara—painted when the area, which is now dry and deserted, supported numerous peoples—are well developed and quite similar to those recorded elsewhere in Africa far more recently. In fact the true origins of masked dances are so historically remote as to be impossible to recover except by undocumentable guesswork.

Mythology on the origins of masking, on the other hand, survives. Many such myths collected in different parts of Africa share a single and rather puzzling theme: that *women* first had the secrets of masks. Sometimes, too, women are said to have been the first masked dancers, after which the masks and their rituals were taken over entirely by men, who then normally excluded women from all such rites except as onlookers. So run the myths of Dogon, Senufo, Baule, Kuba, Igbo, and other people. Distributed widely in Africa (and elsewhere in the world as well), this recurrent myth seems to reflect male fears of female powers, especially women's reproductive capacities. Joseph Campbell believes that women were instrumental in developing cultivation and settled agriculture, which won them both magico-religious and social advantage whereupon "the complex of matriarchy took form" (1959:32).³ Fearing themselves to be superfluous and inferior, it would seem, men avenged this awesome feminine power by forming secret associations and taking control of cults, some of which used masks. This hypothesis answers by no means all questions about the origin of masks, but it does provide a rationale for the apparent "takeover" by men of some female pre-



FIGURE 1. Bushman painting of men wearing animal skins and heads; Drakensberg. Drawn by Charlene Miller after Willcox 1965.

rogatives, masking among them. The myths generally speak of some sort of mistake by women to explain their exclusion from masking ritual and to account for it as an exclusively male activity.

In regard to the history of masking, we must also note that masquerades have long been and continue to be subject to change. Some of the masks discussed below may not still exist in Africa; most do. Masquerades are probably Africa's most resilient art form, continually evolving to meet new needs. In some areas, too, urban masquerades have sprung up, based in part on earlier forms yet reflecting modern social realities and employing plastic, aluminum, and other new products. Masking is sufficiently deeply embedded in African cultures for us to predict with some certainty that it will continue with vitality—and more changes—in the years to come.

Art and Form in Masking

The arts of transformation in Africa range along a continuum from slight modifications of a visible face and body to wholesale alteration of the human form through its enclosure in a "costume" of nonhuman character. Our concern here, of course, is with these latter, spirit-associated transformations which cancel or obliterate the wearer's personality, even his humanity, by superimposing a wholly new form. The change is often into another human character—a pretty girl, old man, mother, hunter, or stranger—but something essential has happened; this being is also a *spirit*. Its visible face—the mask—is inanimate, with immobile features. This *is* and *is not* a human being. So transformed, the new being is saying: "I am not myself." Ambivalence and ambiguity exist in the presence of maskers, who are often behaviorally ambiguous, for example, being both playful and serious. The creative and playfully executed Igbo mask in Plate 1 is a case in point. Called "God's Power," *Ikechi*, it is among the hundreds of serious masks that come out each year during the rainy season to promote the growth of staple crops. It also behaves equivocally, chasing and mildly harassing people and at the same time providing entertainment for many, even most of those chased. "Child of Diviner," *Nwa Dibia* (Fig. 4), is a character in another Igbo masquerade who points up this ambiguity even more dramatically. His serious role is to lure a leopard masker from the bush, that he may be killed, so that "safety may overcome terror." Yet the hunch-backed "Diviner" is also a buffoon who wears tattered clothing, has a large hernia (considered amusing), and playfully pursues women in the audience with funny sexual pantomime. "Diviner" is a spirit masker and simultaneously a clown.

Masking arts may also quite drastically *alter* human forms. Under a disguise the bodily armature can be bulked out to nonhuman shapes and sizes with hoops or pads; it may be armless and extended upward on a frame or pole, its face amplified with exaggerated quasi-human, zoomorphic, or bizarre features (Fig. 5). Appearance and behavior are also extraordinary, otherworldly. The being glides, walks on or spits fire, speaks in a foreign or nonsensical tongue. The masker neither talks nor acts like a true human and, as he careens wildly through the village, seems to be outside human laws.

Mask-carvers and costume-makers (only occasionally the same person) have over the centuries evolved thousands of imaginative spirit beings, invoking many disparate materials in creative and striking ensembles. The overwhelming majority of masks are wood, carved



FIGURE 2. Painting of a mask; Tassili; Sefar, Algeria. Drawn by Charlene Miller after Lajoux 1963.

FIGURE 3. Rock painting of masqueraders; Tassili; Tin Tazariff, Algeria. Drawn by Charlene Miller after Lajoux 1963.

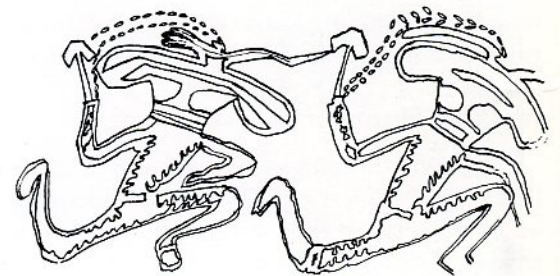




FIGURE 4. Igbo Ekeleke masker, "Child of Diviner" (*Nwa Dibia*), performing in Agwa, Nigeria. Photo: Herbert M. Cole, 1983.

FIGURE 5. Kaka (Mbem group), leopard society members dancing in painted net costumes before (or after) the hunt; Cameroon. Photo: Paul Gebauer, 1930s.

by professional carvers or blacksmiths who normally serve long apprenticeships learning their skills by studying, copying, and improving upon the corpus of locally admired mask types and forms. Other materials are also used for making masks, and quite a number are composite, multimedia constructions. Often, too, the substances used to make or decorate masks have local symbolic values and thus contribute to the "message-system" of a masquerade. These valued materials—skins, cloth, beads, fiber, metal, and so forth—will be identified in the chapters to follow.

Masquerading is the province of males of all ages, and artists themselves are also participants in these activities. Elaborate performances must, of course, be organized, choreographed, and rehearsed by members of the masking cults. In some cases artists even dance masks, or masked characters are named for them. Carvers, tailors, and other mask-makers may become quite famous locally, and their names have occasionally become well-known to the world beyond. Scholars of the Yoruba, for example, have been recognizing specific artists for years in an effort to take the "anonymity" out of African art—a laudable pursuit. From the view of most African peoples, on the other hand, such emphasis on a carver's individuality is misplaced. Africans are most concerned with the entire costumed character, including its dances and songs, not just the mask or headpiece. Many people besides the professional carver are involved in successful masked theater. In many cases, too, nonprofessional cult members carve masks or headdresses or fabricate costumes from cloth or vegetal fibers.

Masks in an exhibition or a book, of course, are situated far from their original cultural settings. Yet they can still be appreciated as independent sculptures or, in the case of fully costumed maskers, displayed on mannequins, as assemblages of different materials: wood, fiber, cloth, mirrors, rattles, plus objects held in the hand(s). In Africa masks are genuine "mobiles," never fixed in place like an Alexander Calder sculpture. Shapes, textures, colors, and patterns of varied masking ensembles move within a kaleidoscope of balances and oppositions of motion and speed, activating the visual field in which they appear. What once appeared simple emerges as complex. Thus masks can be seen as works of art both within and outside their parent cultures. Nevertheless, appreciation is enhanced when cultural



backgrounds and meanings are understood.

It is worthwhile to set forth some of the principles underlying the forms and styles of masks and headpieces. First, nearly all African sculptors work with an *idea* when carving rather than re-creating the face of a particular individual. This idea is a local convention—the expected form—of a particular character's mask. Thus the heads and facial features (and costumes) of masks are strongly conventionalized to conform with a culturally specific ideal for any given character. In formal terms these conventions include simplification, distortion, and exaggeration. The idea behind some characters requires the artist to combine several creatures in the same carving: antelope, bird, warthog, and human. Explicit animal masks too are often distorted; they conform to the accepted *convention* for an antelope or elephant rather than imitating exact natural forms. In most cases this is because the intention is to represent a *spirit* rather than a real antelope or a flesh-and-blood Mrs. Jones. Portraiture in the sense Americans and Europeans know it is therefore almost entirely absent. A few masks, it is true, are locally designated as representations of Mrs. Jones, but she will be recognized from her facial markings or favorite hairstyle rather than subtle physiognomic details and idiosyncrasies. If African sculptors wanted to make highly naturalistic, fleshy, and realistic masks, they most certainly would have done so. Usually they chose not to.

It follows that various locally autonomous groups of people came to appreciate, expect, and request specific forms for masks of characters well known to them. Such forms have often existed for many generations, many perhaps for centuries. While every mask is different from its antecedents because it is newly carved, those of one type (generally under one organizing cult) are often only variations upon the "memory image" of that type and are thus similar to other examples. A series of masks of one type share many characteristics of form—size, face/eye/ear/mouth shape, decorative details, color, weight, and other, more subtle details. When all of these traits are added together, we speak of *style*.

The existence of a style does not in the least nullify the creative artist as innovator. An exceptional individual indeed may have established the style we know or effected a change from the one previously accepted, in form and/or subject matter. Changes in mask types (i.e., characters) have in fact been numerous in the last several decades, reflecting the impact of colonialism and other imported ideas. Recent masks are executed in new or changed styles, but most show marked continuity with those of the past. What is clear, however, is that most African sculptors have not attempted to change—in any abrupt or radical way—the form or style they first learned. This is one reason why African art is conservative—its styles tend to change rather slowly.

Masks from one village generally share the same style, even if they are intended to represent different characters or come from different masking cults. Neighboring village styles encompass slight variations (if carved by different sculptors), those of an entire people (language and culture group) reflect still more differences. When looked at from a distance, the collective styles of one ethnic group are generally distinct from those of neighbors speaking a different language, even though the styles are often mixed on the borders and therefore confusing. Masks illustrated in the following pages will make these notes

on form and style clearer. What must be kept in mind is the fundamental idea behind every mask: it embodies a spirit.

Spirits Made Tangible

The dramatic art of African masking brings the essentially mysterious world of nature and the supernatural into the known and more predictable community of humans. Many African belief systems require men (very rarely women) to materialize spirits by impersonating them so that these spirits may act upon the human realm and, equally, so that people may respond to—thank, placate, entertain—the forces upon which life depends. Regardless of mask or costume type or style, the artistic transformations that create “spirit dancers” (maskers) are a major unifying force among the myriad arts of sub-Saharan Africa, from the western savanna and forests to the East African coast. A number of cultures, however, make marginal use of masks, and some have none at all.⁴

Spirit transformations are complex phenomena, especially when compared to the minor and vestigial roles played by masks and masking in the modern Western world. Western masks, although they hint at a banished sacred era since they appear at holidays—holy days—Halloween and Mardi Gras, for example, are largely playful and secular today, mere disguises. Rarely are they taken very seriously. To this day in much of Africa, however, spirit impersonation is highly serious despite industrialization, bureaucratic government, Christianity, Islam, school education, modern medicine, and the like. Masqueraders certainly entertain African people still, as they have done in the past. In contrast to those in the West, however, African spirit dancers may also intervene forcefully and mysteriously in human affairs, redirecting social action, punishing wrongdoers, educating the young, or helping to raise a man to a higher status by dramatizing timeless moral and ethical values. Not all African masks have powerful and “heavy” spiritual roles. In fact they range along a continuum from these to more lighthearted beings whose primary purpose is entertainment. In the 1980s maskers may no longer have the legal sanction to execute people and burn houses, yet in many places they are still highly regarded and everywhere they still have the power to affect the quality of life.

A subject that has not yet received the attention it deserves is masking by uninitiated children. This is found nearly everywhere adult masking is important and is a crucial aspect of youthful male socialization. Young boys create many masks from leaves, gourds, and other things (Figs. 6,7), though rarely from the same materials used for adult masks—for these are proscribed. They mimic their seniors, singing songs, dancing, and chasing girls and still younger boys. They learn to organize themselves, create rules, hold mock rituals, and identify their own leaders in a kind of “preschool” that anticipates later, more formal education and masking during and/or after their initiations. These children’s masquerades, like their adult counterparts, are seriously undertaken and at the same time provide boys and the larger community a lighthearted release from mundane concerns. In part because of this early playing at masks that are not considered true spirits, boys are prepared for the rigorous disciplines and ordeals of their initiations into serious masking and for the adult social roles they will soon assume.⁵

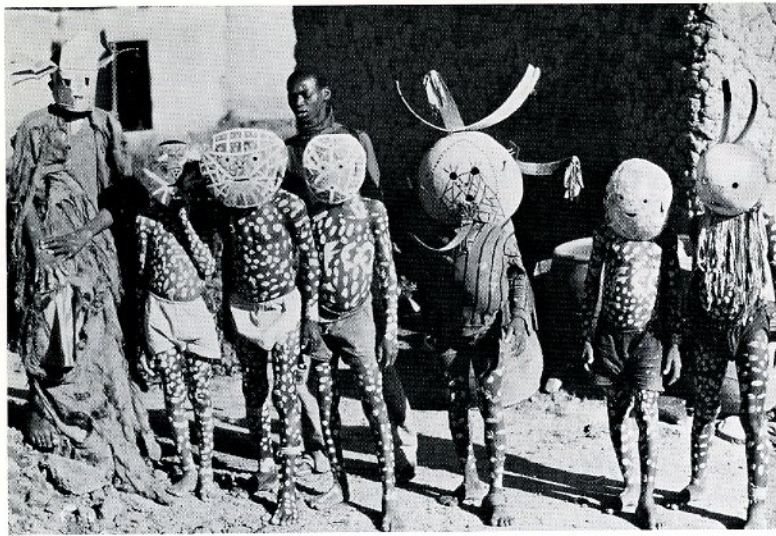


FIGURE 6. Dyula children prepared for their masked *dodo* dance at Ramadan in Bobo Dioulasso, Bourkina Fasso. Photo: René A. Bravmann, 1972.

Most African languages do not have a word which translates accurately as “mask”: BaKwele say *buoobkuk* (“face of the forest spirit”); Igbo say *isi mmuo* (“head spirit”); Lega say *lukuwakongo* (“death gathers in”); Jukun say *bakindo* to indicate a broad supernatural category including the high god, ancestors, forest or bush creatures, and other spirits both visible and tangible as well as invisible.⁶ For most Africans, the word or name associated with a “mask” both evokes and incarnates the living personage. Kalabari Ijaw say, for example, “The spirits stay and come in their names” (Horton 1965:10). In English, however, we interpose an extra word—“mask”—suggesting that by means of mask and costume a spirit is *represented*. This is not the African attitude. For villagers a real and often powerful spirit being is now embodied and made manifest, ready to act, to inspire awe and fear, to stimulate laughter, reverence, or revulsion. With appropriate costuming and ritual preparation to cancel out the human wearer’s personality, a spirit being is *created*. For us of the Western world who are not prone to accept incarnation, it is perhaps incomprehensible that Africans *do* believe in the spirits they have created, but it is nonetheless true.⁷ The masker, the wearer who is now “ridden” or imbued by the spirit, also believes in his own new and altered state. His personal character and behavior are modified, fused with those of the spirit he creates and becomes. Human individuality is lifted from him. He is not himself. There are occasions in some cultures when the mask wearer becomes truly possessed by spirits, and thus disassociated from his normal personality and being. People cannot and do not remain unmoved by these and other spirit forces when they roam the community. Thus our neutral, inanimate, material noun “mask” is quite inadequate for this meta-human force, this incarnation now at large.

A host of creatures, forces, and characters appear as masks for a short time. One may be an agile antelope spirit, another a threatening, lumbering bush buffalo or elephant, a benign water spirit, or a dead ancestor returned temporarily to the village. The myriad personalities of the world of mankind are supplemented by masked beings who are really concepts (the Igbo character “Power of God,” above [Pl. 1]) or feared and revered powers of nature—e.g., life-giving rain or a threatening and destructive composite bush creature. These spirit-ideas return only temporarily to the village. It is important that

FIGURE 7. Igbo male children, one wearing "play-*Okoroshi*" mask of materials (leaves and grasses) different from those of adult masks; Agwa, Nigeria. Photo: Herbert M. Cole, 1983.



masquerades are *not* present during most of the year. Transience is one of the characteristics of masking; the spirits are here for a week or a month but absent for the next several. When the spirits have gone, only then do their masks assume a more static, material form, and still they are sacred. Sometimes they must be ritually put to sleep, whereupon they can be treated as objects to be wrapped carefully and stored away for future revitalization. A few masks accumulate such strong spiritual charges that they become too dangerous for a man to wear. This is the case with certain "night society" masks among the Bangwa (Brain and Pollock 1971:131) and a few law-making and judging masks among the Mano of Liberia (Harley in Sieber 1962:10). In these cases masks are "power objects" and, in effect, strong deities. The point is that "masks," for African peoples, are not carvings exhibited in museums or living rooms. This kind of display is unthinkable to African people. Their appreciation of masquerades follows from their heritage, in which full-fledged spirit personalities have long held decisive roles in village affairs.

It follows that spirit manifestations must be defined as total beings; their faces are but one, albeit critical, element of the total character. Cloth and raffia costumes with attached decorations—often musical—headpiece elements, jewelry, medicinal amulets, rattling anklets, hand-held flywhisks, and weapons all also help to form a spirit. Crucial, too, are gestures and dance steps, songs or guttural utterances, and not infrequently special attendants who direct the spirits or act as their foils. Thus masquerades are usually composites of materials and more ephemeral artistic media such as dance, music, and verbal elements.

These varied arts are invoked to establish the credibility of an illusion—a drama separated from everyday life in time and space. Such a theatrical setting in turn promotes the spiritual and social efficacy of a masked protagonist and its performance (Pl. 2). The mask and costume arrest or fix a spirit and establish its presence; they create an image of a transcendent being. Thus, partially to counteract the Western tendency to isolate the "mask" both as an exhibition object and as a concept, we include contextual photographs for most of the culture-groups surveyed in the following chapters. A full costume fleshes out the otherworldly image by altering the human wearer's shape, extending it into space, and by adding unusual, often

unexpected materials. Rattles or bells remove the character from normal humanity, their sounds dovetailing with or in counterpoint to a separate musical ensemble that serves to create a special mood, releasing dance movements and gestures uncommon in daily life, if not wholly strange. An environment is thus established in which dramatic activity can unfold. Varied arts combine to separate a spirit character (or indeed a whole troupe of them) and its behavior from the real, workaday world, to spotlight and dramatize the new being, and to make forceful its actions and its messages to the audience.

Audiences and Levels of Understanding

There can be no spirit being nor performance, of course, if no audience is present to see and appreciate the character(s) which, in turn, keeps the audience enthralled. Some extremely powerful masked spirits forbid the *physical* presence of all but a few elder male supporters, but a significant "audience" is nevertheless nearby listening behind closed doors to their thunderous orders and judgments. In all cases the masking arena requires a willing suspension of disbelief, for spirits are now abroad. Audiences, like masked spirits, are pluralistic, varying from intimidated children to elders who know all the secrets, having seen masquerades for two or three generations. The anonymity of mask wearers and the secrecy of all the attendant rituals are often dramatized by male organizations sponsoring them, and women (and other noninitiates) are particularly sanctioned against this knowledge. This may also be true of most males when a masker embodies a force particularly powerful in social and political regulation. Yet women are the willing supporters of many masked spirits, sometimes helping to fashion costumes, even lending items from their own wardrobes. Among the Igbo and several other West African peoples, some postmenopausal women are inducted into male masking cults, where they serve as "mothers" of the ancestral maskers (the "collective incarnate dead"; Henderson 1972:351). Most women probably know much more about masquerades than they, or their men, will admit, even to the point of being able to identify sons, nephews, or brothers under concealing costumes. They will reveal this knowledge to other women only. And as the chapters to follow indicate, maskers' identities are by no means always concealed. In a few cases the wearer may even unmask himself in public view, but normally such unveiling calls for severe sanctions.⁸

Men and women alike know that a human being moves beneath the cloth or raffia, yet they believe in the spirit character. In part this is because performers and audience in Africa interact in a manner quite different from our "staged" dramas with their real and psychic distances between actors and the more-or-less passive listeners (proscenium arch and fixed audience seats are among the separating devices). Closer American analogies might be less restrained popular performances such as rock concerts or, even better, certain rural church services in the South which invoke and depend upon audience interaction. *The Holy Ghost People*, a film, shows worshipers speaking in tongues, possessed, and handling poisonous snakes without being hurt. Such rituals are for their participants quite similar to African masquerades, primarily it seems, because life-changing spiritual power is involved. In Africa, as in some Western church rituals, spirit dance and drama are integral to life, not an or-

nament to it nor a diversion from it. The masked play is serious, as church is for some. People in the African masquerade audience are *moved*; often they are physically moved about within the fluid “stage” of the village square; a few are whipped or otherwise abused, perhaps by being named and criticized for socially or politically deviant behavior. Members of an audience are thus vital if sometimes reluctant participants in the drama. The spirit is *part* of this local African world, while simultaneously being *apart* from it. Something “other” is present that normally does not live in this world. It exists to intervene in human affairs or, at least, for the purpose of reflecting, extending, or altering human concerns.

Masked Spirits as Mediators

Masked spirits are often mediators between two or more opposing classes or realms: culture and nature (village and bush), mankind and the supernatural, men and women, initiated and uninitiated, leaders and followers, life and death. In these mediating roles, masked spirits occupy a *liminal* place and take on attributes of either or both of the opposing groups/realms/ideas. Thus a masked being partakes of god and man alike, yet is actually neither; it is in-between. A masker is deputized by leaders or unseen gods, but being a tangible creature fabricated by men’s imaginations and hands, again it is neither a human leader nor a real god. “I am not myself.” It represents the wild and unruly powers of nature and the bush but appears in the village square and actually has predictable characteristics—one of which may be unpredictability. Some strong Igbo masking spirits of the *Mgbedike*-type (“Time of the Brave”; Fig. 8) are good examples. They wear enormous snaggle-toothed masks and



FIGURE 8. Igbo masker of the *Mgbedike* (“Time of the Brave”) type with elder attendants; near Awka, Nigeria. Photo: G. I. Jones, ca 1935.



FIGURE 9. Yoruba *Egun* ancestral maskers; Oyo area, Nigeria. Photo: William Bascom, 1950s(?).

rough costumes hung with seedpods and studded with porcupine quills; they are often restrained with ropes by their attendants so as to forestall violence against persons and the destruction of property.

Hence the mystery. Spirit characters vibrate between opposing forces and transcend them. The structural integrity of these binary oppositions, moreover, is in part defined by spirits who separate the two while simultaneously bringing them together. Ultimately, it seems, the mediator bridges the gulf between opposites and creates of them a kind of spiritual, conceptual, and cosmic unity. Many specific masking situations can be cited to exemplify this role of spirit as mediator and, finally, unifier.

“Ancestral” maskers bring the “incarnate dead” into the realm of the living, linking these worlds and showing them to be one. The land of the dead, for example, is an extension of the very earth from which the living take their harvest. Ancestors help control the productivity of the fields and therefore the wealth of living family members. When ancestors return as splendidly attired maskers (Fig. 9), the richness of both human and spirit worlds is implied; the dead are thanked and fed while the living are entertained and reassured that dead fathers and mothers still protect, guide, and nurture them.

Initiated and uninitiated Chokwe, Yaka, and Pende men—during their respective *nkanda* (or *mukanda*) initiation rituals (see below)—are in part defined and given meaning by spirit maskers. An initiated male, as spirit (a masker), abducts boys from their mothers, terrifying both. A masked beast spirit may seem to “swallow” the initiates, while others will instruct the boys, bring them food, and perform other duties. Later in this “bush school,” initiates learn that maskers are really men whose secrets about spirits and masks are a means of maintaining the subservient positions of women and children. At the end of the cycle, the same initiates, now men, become the masked spirits that perform before mothers, other people, and younger siblings as part of the young men’s reentry into the community as adults. Those who know the secrets of masks are *men*. Masked spirits have helped to educate these youths, to lead them out of boyhood into the adult world. Here, as always, the spirit characters are real forces, genuinely fearful and/or mysterious, while to initiation leaders they are at the same time a serious bluff, a game

played by these village men at the expense of women and the uninitiated.

Thus many masked spirits mediate between the unknown, obscure, wild world of nature and the known, organized, civilized realm of the village. Baule and Dan masked dances make clear the opposition and interaction of bush and village realms. Both are present in performances inasmuch as maskers appear from the bush wearing raw plant costumes and woven cloth, yet their dancing takes place in the village; furthermore, some maskers are strongly humanoid (village) while others are distinctly fierce and beastly (bush), yet each wears components of the "opposite" realms.

Okoroshi, an Igbo water-spirit masquerade of southeastern Nigeria, shows masks as mediators between women and men and between the ascribed beauty of the former and the ugliness of the latter. Thus light-colored, delicately featured masks represent women (Pl. 2), while dark ones with twisted and exaggerated features are considered male (Pl. 1). In the month of *Okoroshi* dancing, only a few feminine masks appear, playing off against many dozen dark ones; yet when the entire cast of masked characters—as many as 100—are reviewed one by one, the simple white/black opposition breaks down. Actually the maskers form a continuum, with a number being quite neutral, or in-between, partaking of both worlds (Fig. 10). As a whole, this masquerade seems to be saying that life is comprised of good *and* evil, that nothing is wholly beautiful nor totally ugly. Grays are in reality more characteristic of people and events than the polar extremes of white and black. The masking cult is exclusively male; yet it dramatizes the need for cooperation and unity between men and women, as well as their separate identities and roles. *Okoroshi* maskers hold a mirror up to life, celebrate it, reorganize it, portray it as harsh, laugh at it, and then disappear to allow the New Yam Festival to take place. They dance at the height of the rainy season, encourage the crops to grow, and prepare for the harvest. *Okoroshi* masquerades touch upon many aspects of Igbo village life while creating playful breaks from the toil of the daily round (Cole and Aniakor 1984).

This masquerade, like most others, communicates a multitude of simultaneous and overlapping messages. The masking arts are to life what poetry is to prose: compressed, intensified, symbolic, and metaphorical. World views and basic human values are acted out in striking visual forms at once entertaining, spiritually powerful, and crucial to the continuity and equilibrium of life.

Masking Arts in Specific African Cultures

The cultures selected for specific treatment in the chapters following represent a fair sampling of varied African peoples in terms of sociopolitical organization, ecology, religion, and world view. Yoruba and Cameroon societies are politically centralized, while the Baule, Mende, Dan and We, and others are decentralized. Chokwe, Bamana, Pende, and Yaka, having strong chiefs, fall between those extremes. Even where there are chiefs or kings, however, political authority is typically concentrated among councils of elder males and religious specialists. Ecologies range from the dry savannas of Bamana and Voltaic peoples to the rolling grasslands of Cameroon and the humid tropical rain forest of the Yoruba, Pende, and Lega. The Bidjogo live on islands and have a world view and masks reflecting this

FIGURE 10. Igbo *Okoroshi* Amara masker, "Paddle," a character considered both a foolish virgin and a wise elder; Mgbala Agwa, Nigeria. Photo: Herbert M. Cole, 1982.



aquatic setting. Nearly all peoples surveyed here are primarily agriculturalists. Indeed it is rare to find any masks at all among pastoral or nomadic people, and none are discussed here.

Religious values among each of these peoples include belief in a remote, largely unapproachable "high god" or creator and a strong reliance upon both tutelary deities associated with aspects of nature and varied other spirits. Men often dance masquerades that personify natural forces. The power accorded ancestors in most parts of tropical Africa stresses the unbroken links between the living, the dead, and the yet-to-be born, and masking often reiterates this theme as masked spirits visit the human community during festivals in honor of the ancestors, as if the dead "reincarnate" for these events. Witchcraft and other "magical" practices prevail, and blood-sacrifice is important in most areas as a means of maintaining correct relationships between people and their deities. Masks embodying spirits are frequently given such offerings. Initiations are formalized in most areas, especially for men, and several of the cultures discussed below (Yaka, Pende, Chokwe) share variants of a prevailing initiatory institution called *nkanda* or *mukanda*. Women's initiations are normally less formal, yet among the Mende (and contiguous peoples) an important female "bush school" exists and, with it, the unusual phenomenon of women's masquerading.

Our survey covers a lot of geography but in a discontinuous manner. We begin with the Bamana and Voltaic peoples of the Western Sudan, then move south to the Bidjogo of the Bissagos Islands of the Atlantic coast, then to the forested inland regions of the Guinea Coast (i.e., Mende, Dan/We, Baule, Yoruba, and Northern Edo). Selected West African masking cultures are discussed first, and then we proceed eastward to Cameroon, the meeting place of the two great language-families of tropical Africa, the Niger and Congo groups. The vast drainage system of the River Zaïre (formerly the Congo) is next encountered (Chokwe, Yaka, Pende, Lega), and then we jump a considerable distance to the east, concluding with the Makonde of Mozambique. The order of this geographic perambulation is somewhat arbitrary, as is the choice of cultures to be discussed. The latter depends in large measure on mask collections in the Museum of Cultural History with which previous publications have not dealt. Our intention is to provide a reasonably broad yet focused overview, a survey which does justice to the diversity of mask forms and functions from several sub-Saharan African cultures.

Among the Bamana peoples we encounter extensive creation mythologies that help to account for masks and their relationship with essential economic pursuits, namely agriculture and work of blacksmiths, who are carvers and ritual specialists. The use of masks as "power objects" is demonstrated in the Bamana section. They, and the Voltaic peoples to their south, employ masks in funerary rites designed to maintain the continuity of life, also a dimension of masking among many peoples discussed subsequently. The Bidjogo of the Bissagos Islands continue this theme, for example, while dramatizing in mask iconography the importance of two contrasting realms: the sea (shark masks) and the land (bovine headdresses). Bidjogo masking, like most, also concerns the transition rites—initiations—of boys passing into responsible adulthood. Mende masquerades focus on the ideals and unusual masking activities of women, while the Dan have a hierarchy of mask roles from enter-

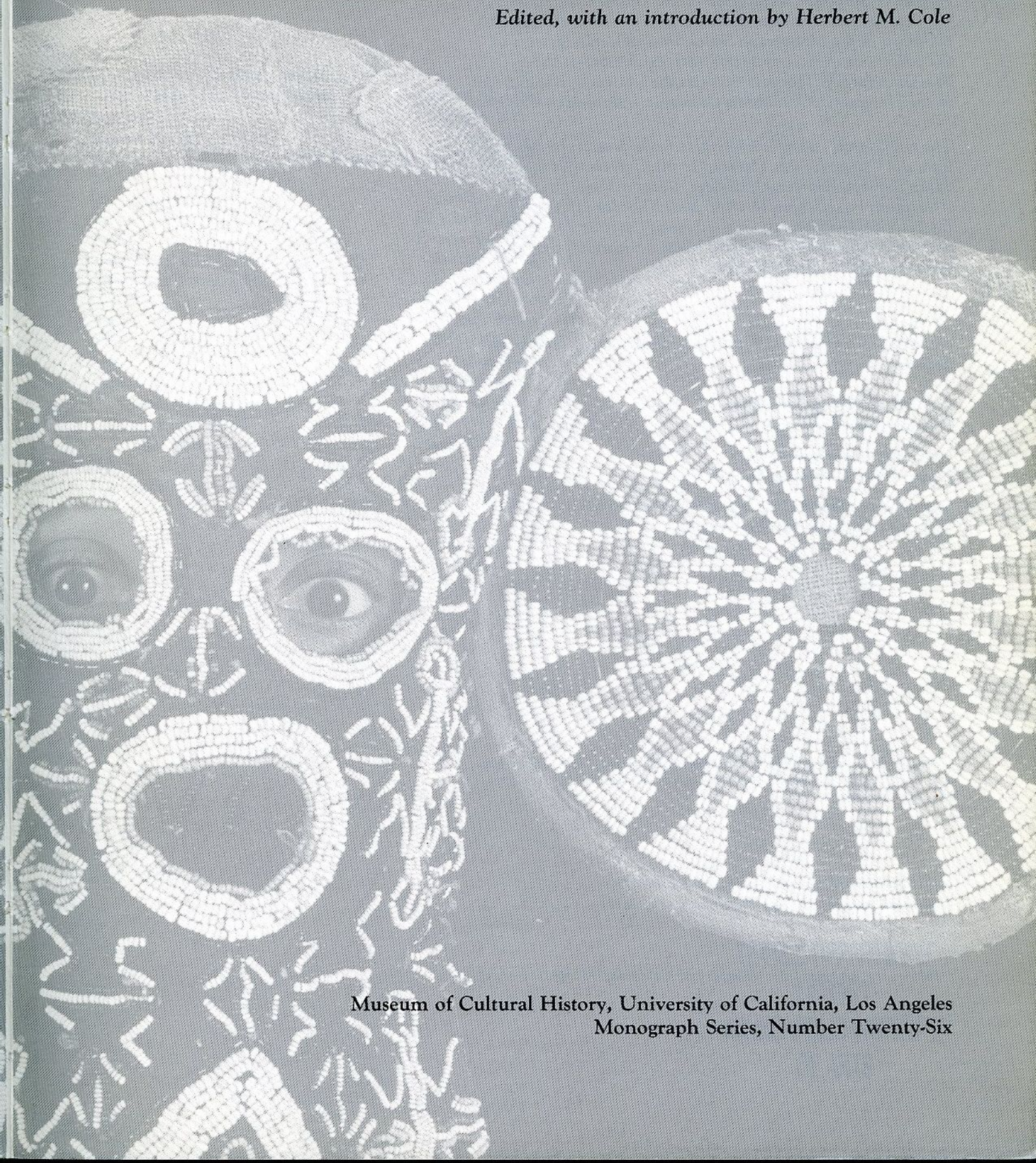
tainment to policing and judging deities. A leitmotif of this study, that African masks often incarnate powerful spirit presences, is especially manifest in Dan masks at the upper end of this hierarchy. Baule masking stresses the interaction of men and women, bush and village, chaos and civilization—a world view also shared by other peoples discussed, e.g., the Dan and We and the Igbo, as mentioned above. Yoruba masking cults reveal the centrality of ancestors in maintaining cultural balance (*Egungun*), the importance of honoring women's powers (*Gelede*), and the need for young men to shoulder the burden of cultural transmission (*Epa*). Masks and masquerades in Cameroon are deputized by kings and their councils to inculcate and enforce laws and behavioral norms, and to entertain as well. Cameroon, Northern Edo, and many other masquerades discussed below also appear at important annual agricultural festivals—especially those “first fruit” rituals which encourage and celebrate large harvests the spirits themselves have helped to provide.

Moral and other educational instructions of male initiation societies are found in Chokwe, Yaka, and Pende masquerades, which often include satirical plays that hold a mirror up to life, especially as it should *not* be conducted. Some of these peoples' masks also have important duties in regulating behavior; as such they are extensions of chiefly authority. Lega masks—in contrast to most of those discussed here—are seldom worn to cover the head or face; rather, most are display emblems that stress the values, traits, and teachings of the higher initiatory grades of the men's society. Makonde masks, like most others, provide entertainment through the mirroring of life situations, and their primary context seems to be—again like many—to dramatize the crucial rite of passage that is undergone when children become adults; maskers often embody ancestors who are present to witness these events.

This thumbnail sketch of some of the specific masking situations to be encountered below points up the high valuation placed on this form of ritual and artistic activity in many parts of the continent. Masking clearly occupies a critical place in the life-sustaining activities of millions of African people. As we stated at the outset, masks and masquerades are among Africa's most cherished and compelling artistic phenomena.

I Am Not Myself: The Art of African Masquerade

Edited, with an introduction by Herbert M. Cole



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