

## Liminality and Performance in African Masquerades

Walter E.A. van Beek

### Introduction: African masks

This article examines the performance characteristics of masks in Africa, in particular the many ways in which they function as the core of liminality in many African cultures. The term “liminality” originated with Arnold van Gennep and took its present meaning in Victor Turner’s study of African initiation; building on that classic foundation I attempt to show that mask rituals – with male initiation at its core – show a specific set of liminal elements pertaining to a peculiar and characteristic performative structure, a configuration of liminalities that characterizes an African masquerade.<sup>1</sup> Turner has written much about the male initiations, but did not elaborate on the mask performances that often accompany them, even the Ndembu ones, and still less about the masks themselves. This is a gap I intend to fill with this essay.

First, a few definitions. For many the concept of African masks may conjure up the image of a strange and exotic work of art that one places in front of the face or over the head, an object that one encounters in a museum. By

---

**Walter E.A. van Beek** is a Dutch cultural anthropologist with a long career behind him. After working at Utrecht University, he became a professor of religious anthropology at Tilburg University. Now emeritus, he is a senior researcher at the Centre for African Studies at Leiden University. He has conducted extensive field research among the Kapsiki/Higi of North Cameroon and north-eastern Nigeria, as well as among the Dogon of Mali. He has published extensively on both groups. One of his recent projects involves recording and preserving the cultural heritage of the Dogon, with a particular focus on interpreting a major song cycle, which has resulted in three monographs. Another project was undertaken with a colleague from the world of ethnographic museums, on African masks, resulting in *Masquerades in African Society: Gender, Power, and Identity* (Oxford: Currey, 2023). This article is a follow-up on that book.

<sup>1</sup> The research and theory presented here were developed with Harrie Leyten, who died in 2023, and with whom I wrote the book from which this article is an offshoot (Van Beek & Leyten 2023). Whereas the book explores the question why only a small part of Africa houses masquerades, a question also breached in Van Beek 2024, this article zooms in on the dynamics of liminality in masking.

itself, the combination of strangeness and visual appeal of these headpieces would be enough to call them liminal, and their resting place in the museum only underscores this. But Africans have a broader, more holistic, definition of a mask than just the headpiece: what they call a “mask” is the entire appearance, consisting of the costume, the decorations, the objects held in the hands and of course the headpiece. This inclusive definition applies to all African cultures, and often one has to add a specific dance routine and drum rhythm, plus, of course, an invisible dancer. Basically, it is the costume which defines the appearance as a mask; the head piece specifies which particular mask. Crucial to all masks is that the dancer’s head is indeed covered, because the essence of masking is to make the dancer unrecognizable, so a head covering is indispensable; if the dancer’s face is visible, the mask is considered “naked”. The point is that in a mask performance, one does not put on a mask, one *becomes* a mask, and this is true of just about every mask tradition in Africa. The fact that the dancer himself is invisible and transformed into something completely different, offers a vista of nested liminalities we will explore here.

The mask is a part – even the centerpiece – of a masquerade or mask ritual. Both terms are used here as synonyms, because for our purposes the distinction between them, one in principle a religious act (a ritual) and the other more of a secular performance (masquerades), is not overly relevant. Such a distinction is not very germane in African cultures, where both form very much a continuum – if they can be distinguished at all. Mask rituals or masquerades are defined as any ritual or performance that includes one or more masks, and in the many forms of rituals on the continent, they are surprisingly easy to identify, since masquerades stand out in any local ritual repertoire. Masks are always central to the rituals in which they appear; in many ways, the mask *is* the ritual, for two reasons: their visual appeal and the centrality of performance.

Basically, these rituals are part of the indigenous religion of each specific group, part of its local culture. Not every African culture has masks – in fact, in most of the continent there are no masks to be found – and in the cultures that do have them, masks only appear in certain types of rituals. Masks occur in male initiation rituals – their core function –, in rituals for rulers, in funerals and in events that celebrate group identity. Crucially, these are predominantly male rituals, for in marriage rituals and ceremonies around birth or female initiation, masks are conspicuously absent; the same goes for rites for agriculture or rain. This means that masks function mainly in rites of masculine passage and thus are strongly gendered. Performing with masks is defined as a typically male activity, and we will see that masks do indeed separate the genders – which in these African village societies are only two, male and female.

The rule is clear: men dance as masks, even if the masks portray women. For women, on the other hand, masks are completely out of bounds, dangerous and a threat to their fertility. Menopausal women may have an easier relationship with masks, and in some cases young women may be initiated into masks, and then the taboos do not hold for them, but for the bulk of the women masks form the big taboo. In one particular area in Africa (Liberia, Sierra Leone) women do own masks and dance with them, but these are of a completely different nature (Van Beek & Leyten 2023, p. 201 ff), and the male masks in these societies are still taboo for them.



Fig. 1: Secret societies have to advertise their existence. The mask of the *kurosi* society of the Bamenda on show. Photo: Michel Huet, Bamenda, Cameroon, 1995.

At the socio–political level, in many parts of Africa masks form the core of a type of organization called secret society, power association or initiation society; the three terms point at the three core functions of these voluntary organizations. Often it is such a secret society that has the right to make and wear masks, and that manages the masquerades.<sup>2</sup> Masks and secret societies thus go hand in hand, a combination that evokes all the old stereotypes about the “Dark Continent”: masked figures dancing in the dark forest, to the fierce rhythms of distant drums, performing “unspeakable” rites hidden from outsiders. We will see that reality is somewhat more mundane and understandable, but spectacularly colorful anyway; and “unspeakable” has a different, but very distinct meaning in masking.

### **The Masquerade**

What does a masquerade or mask ritual look like? The central role of the masked figure makes the actual liturgy quite standard. What a mask “does” is remarkably straightforward: it comes on stage, dances and leaves again, solo or in group. The ritual has a long build-up, often as part of a ritual calendar, and for any village is a huge event. Out of sight of the women, the men prepare the costumes and carve the headpieces and especially the young men practice the dance routines, while the women on their side make all the preparations for brewing beer, until finally the elders of the village or secret society decide on a date. Or, if an important man in the village organizes the event, he announces it. In any case, masquerades form the highlights of the village, since whatever their ritual significance mask performances are celebrations, times of joy and conviviality; we will come back to this kind of liminality later.

Mask performances can take different forms. The most common are the appearance of a single mask, followed by other types of masks, each with its own dance, songs and music; as for the singing, the masks themselves are usually sung to, by attendants, village elders or the men in the public.<sup>3</sup> Or the masks come out as a group, sometimes a family of masks, in other cases a large group. Overall, the masks are silent performers, enveloped in an overwhelming soundscape of drums, shouts and screams, noise that comes from those who accompany and watch the dancers.

---

<sup>2</sup> For an exposé on these organizations see Van Beek & Leyten 2023, Chapter 5.

<sup>3</sup> See Reed 2003 for an elaborate analysis of music in mask performances among the Dan.



Fig. 2: The village of Tireli watching the performances of the masks; the masks that already have danced are seated in front, waiting their next turn. Photo: Walter van Beek, Tireli, Mali 2008.

My first example zooms in on a collective mask dance. In the area of the Dogon, the Malian culture in which I work, many villages are built against a steep slope, which forms a natural grandstand for the audience. In flat environments, the audience positions itself around the square, or on the flat roofs of houses, allowing people to watch the performance in the village square from afar. Distance to the dancing site reflects a neat division in the audience itself, a notion elaborated on later. In the Dogon mask performance, the initiated men stand in front, eager boys between them, just behind the drummers. To one side, a group of older people listens to the village speaker call aloud in the mask language – quite a few mask cultures have a secret language taught during mask initiation – and call for the “good heads” to appear and be admired. Specific drum rhythms invite the masks, setting off the anticipation. As the sun is lower in the sky, cries and animal howls sound from above and a line of indigo-clad elders descend into the public square. Finally, the masks come running down into the dance area at some speed. The drums now go full throttle, the leading iron double bell ringing above the din. “Welcome, welcome,” cries the speaker, and all the masks circle the dancing place as a group; because they represent animals, their collective movement gives the idea that the bush has finally merged with the village.

After the collective entry, the mask types dance individually: the storks, the monkeys, the gazelles, various species of antelope, and the strangers such as the Muslim marabout, the Mossi or the Samo, as well as the young girl, the shaman, and – yes – the occasional European. This captivating spectacle of constantly moving “animals” keeps the audience enthralled, with the men shouting admonitions in the mask language, little boys darting everywhere, while the women stand at the back, at the very back when they are young and with child. Such a performance lasts about two hours; the masks have to leave when the sun sets. Sort by sort they disappear, running away unceremoniously. Finally, as dusk falls, a few initiated women sweep the borders of the dancing square: the ritual is over.



Fig. 3: Several types of masks together, one hyena at the back, an antelope in front, plus four wading birds. Photo Walter van Beek, Tireli, Mali, 2000.

### Representation and liminality: The Magritte effect

Most performances, whether theatrical or not, tend to stage a story, not necessarily with a plot, but at least based on a recognizable story or situation. Masks do not, because what appears on stage is an apparition, whose performance tells no tale but instead offers a presence. The question is, presence of what? In the case described above, we saw animal masks come on stage, but in fact the external reference is not that clear. The masquerade is a stage with players who are an enigma.<sup>4</sup>



Fig. 4: A similarly enigmatic mask, unexplained. The *bedu* mask of the Darivin. Photo Karel Arnout, Ivory Coast, 1994.

---

<sup>4</sup> Napier (1998) calls this an empirical dilemma.

Observers tend to ask about the meaning of the ritual, but the participants themselves show no inclination to exegesis. As many scholars have noted, Africans rarely explain their masquerades as such. For them, a mask which appears requires no explanation, nor does the ritual as such. Jonathan Z. Smith characterized ritual as “paying attention,”<sup>5</sup> and this is what mask rituals do in extremis: they pay attention, but to what exactly remains a puzzle. A *raison d’être* for the whole ritual can be given: the boys need to be made into mature men, the dead need a proper burial, justice needs to be done or order restored. But the question of why in this way is not asked. On the Limba of Sierra Leone, William Hart wrote: “About the meaning of the whole performance, my Limba informants had nothing to say. It was marvelous, that was as far as they would go.”<sup>6</sup> Hart was clearly baffled by this lack of explanation, which even extended to the word for the masquerade itself: *gbendekolo*. Nobody knew what it meant – and no one cared.

Essentially, the African view of masks is not as a code – and therefore not as a symbolic representation of anything else – because the basic idea is that when one looks at a mask, one sees a mask.<sup>7</sup> John Picton remarks: “As for the question, ‘What kind of being are they’, the only answer that makes any sense is surprisingly simple: masked performers are what they are! They cannot be reduced to something other than what they are!”<sup>8</sup> This seems tautological, but it is not: for them, a mask is an appearance *sui generis*, of its own kind, not necessarily representing anything or anyone else. Among the Dii, a group in northern Cameroon, a standard riddle is whether the mask represents a spirit or a man. The correct answer is that it is neither: “The lower half is a man like an animal, but the top part is a spirit.”<sup>9</sup> One could just as easily answer that it is both, but the Dii choice is that it is neither, thus again a category of its own. This particular Dii mask covers only the upper body and the legs are naked; in some performances, the dancer’s genitals must be visible to prove that he is a man, a circumcised man and therefore qualified to dance. Masks can thus never be identical to what they portray, they constantly shift from human to alien: they are liminality incorporated. For this phenomenon, Jean-Pierre Warnier coined the fortuitous expression of the “Magritte effect”<sup>10</sup>: the

---

<sup>5</sup> Smith 1987: 25.

<sup>6</sup> Schechner 1988: 64, 67.

<sup>7</sup> Anthony Forge: “In primitive art, art objects are rarely representations *of* anything, rather they seem to be *about* relationships.” Forge 1973: xviii; italics in original.

<sup>8</sup> Picton 2022: 10.

<sup>9</sup> Muller 2001: 61.

<sup>10</sup> Warnier 2007: 6-13, cited in Mohan & Douny 2021: 15. In the early 1920’s the French surrealist René Magritte produced a painting of a pipe with on the painting the text “*Ceci n’est pas une pipe*” (This is not a pipe). He called this work “*Trabison des*

masked apparition mixes the thing and its representation, finding both its essence and its source of power in precisely this semantic confusion. So a mask is a “be-thing,” a liminal appearance that is a class apart, neither a normal “being,” nor an object, neither really an animal nor in fact a spirit, and certainly not a human being.



Fig. 5: The mask called *geg*, of the Dìi of North Cameroon. Photo Jean-Claude Muller, Cameroon, 1992.

---

*images*” (Treason of the images): the representation is not the same as the object. The painting became world famous.

### Crossing boundaries

Masks may be *sui generis*, but that does not mean there are no interpretive connotations. A ubiquitous association of masks is with the wilderness, the bush. As we saw in the Dogon masquerade, many of the masks represent animals, such as antelopes, monkeys, hares, bush buffaloes or birds, as well as predators, such as crocodiles, leopards and even the occasional lion. Characteristically, these are wild animals; domestic animals hardly are represented in masking. The point is that the masks are “of the bush” – be-things of the bush – and the opposition between wilderness and village informs the basic worldview behind the masquerades.<sup>11</sup> Wilderness is often seen as rich, endless, wise, fertile and powerful, but at the same time dangerous, unknown, threatening and deadly. The wilderness from which the masks stem is both threatening and essential to survival, an inherent ambivalence to which the masks testify with great force. In itself, the notion of “bush” is already ambiguous. Masks are “of the wilderness,” but the exact nature of that bush varies greatly. The dry Sahelian environment of the Dogon is a far cry from the undulating green mountains in volcanic western Cameroon, or from the bush in the rainforest.<sup>12</sup> So the notion of the bush is less an ecological term than a cognitive distinction: the masks are from the uncontrolled environment.

As Mary Douglas has shown,<sup>13</sup> crossing boundaries between worlds generates power, and this is what masks routinely do, they cross the border between village and wilderness. Borders also are dangerous, and control of this power has to be earned, usually through pain: boys’ initiations often are full of flogging, whipping and drawing blood, sometimes inflicted by the elders, sometimes by the masks themselves. Pain highlights the notion of strangeness and the particular power of the masks stems from what Richard Fardon calls “therioanthropy,” the blending of animal and human features, a crucial aspect of many masks.<sup>14</sup> This is why the masks never really look like animals, for they represent liminalized bush beings, a human-animal mix. Ultimately a mask is an otherworldly apparition with a human being inside, playacting, so any association with the otherworld must remain flexible. For the Baule masks Alain-Michel Boyer calls it *présentif*: masks “presentify” the otherworld,<sup>15</sup> implying that the otherworld is not so much represented as it is made present

---

<sup>11</sup> Schildkrout 1989. I use both terms, wilderness and bush, as synonyms.

<sup>12</sup> Turner 1969

<sup>13</sup> Douglas 1966, 1973.

<sup>14</sup> Fardon & Stelzig 2005; Fardon 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Boyer 2008, 65. This notion stems from studies of Greek sculpture.

in the mind, so presentified; people think of these otherworld associations in vague terms.



Fig. 6: The mask called *thenqu ya lukumbi* of the Pende, commissioned for the mukanda ceremony of chief Mukunzu. The headpiece represents a mix between a roan antelope and a human being, but not reducible to either of them. Photo Zoë Strother, Ndjindji, DRC, 1987.

Masks in Africa do not usually presentify gods or deities. Occasionally, leaf masks such as among the Bobo of Burkina Faso get close to the divine,<sup>16</sup> and also some association with the sun and the moon may be mentioned, as in the Kongo region,<sup>17</sup> but these are exceptions. If spirits form the second major association, this link remains vague too, for these are "... ambiguous spirits of no precise nature"<sup>18</sup> or "... middle- and lower-level spirits in the hierarchy of belief."<sup>19</sup> This kind of, say, spiritual middle management is conceived in many forms, but often as spirits of the bush, underscoring the wilderness referent. Spirits are thought to have much in common with people, "such as emotions and desires, and often want to participate in the world as tangible beings,"<sup>20</sup> so this link to the bush is slightly humanized.

The third association is with ancestors, highly relevant beings in Africa, but less important for masks than one might expect. In rare cases a specific ancestor or someone recently deceased is associated with the performing mask, but then the attribution tends to be made after the performance.<sup>21</sup> Throughout, the link between masks and ancestors remains vague; rather, masks and their rituals are routinely referred to as "things of the ancestors," a indistinct but general notion that imbues the rituals with the authority of the otherworld and of age but does not explain much about the masks themselves. Victor Turner wrestled with this ancestor connection in his research of the Ndembu of Zambia. The terms for masks and ancestors were almost identical, but with very diverging explanations, so Turner called it "a problem that perplexes and divides Ndembu quite as much as it does the anthropologist,"<sup>22</sup> at least when the anthropologist asked them about it. Throughout, spirit, death and bush are close neighbours: a notion from West Cameroon holds that at death the human spirit enters the bush, unites with a bush spirit and they together return in the form of a mask.<sup>23</sup>

The fourth association is that also people are presentified in masks, usually personages in the typical village scene – such as the beautiful girl (also danced by a man), the old man, or the diviner.<sup>24</sup> Often strangers are hinted at, which is understandable given that masks come from elsewhere, from beyond the village: neighbouring groups, former enemies, figures of power including

---

<sup>16</sup> Le Moal 1980: 245, Coquet 1995; Bobo and Bwa are very close.

<sup>17</sup> Grand-Dufay 2013: 100.

<sup>18</sup> Bentor 1994: 332. See also Colley 2011 on this issue.

<sup>19</sup> Kasfir 1988: 6

<sup>20</sup> Siegmann 1980: 11.

<sup>21</sup> For instance among the Igbo (Njoku 2020: 187).

<sup>22</sup> Turner 1969: 241-243.

<sup>23</sup> Personal communication Michael Rowlands.

<sup>24</sup> Bouttiaux & Roberts 2009.

Muslim marabouts, and Europeans; also the slave raiders of the past come on stage, since mask performances have a long memory.



Fig. 7: The nearest to presentifying deity: the leaf masks of the Bobo. Photo Christopher Roy, Burkina Faso, 2005.

On a cognitive level the masks present a conceptual layer between heaven and earth, such as the bush and its spirits – meaning that the relation between man and mask is not vertical but horizontal. Masks stem from the edges of human existence, where the village morphs into the bush, the living into the dead, and the kinsman into the stranger. As be-things from the margin of the lived world, they bridge the border between the human world and the bushy otherworld, or the realm of the dead; this otherworld-at-the-side is not just a neighbor, it is decidedly different and powerful, a kind of horizontal transcendence, always clothed in convincing liminality.

### Liminal times and places

Time to zoom in on the performance characteristics of mask rituals. Masquerades are obvious examples of the blending of theatre and ritual, a vista opened by Turner and Schechner.<sup>25</sup> Any masquerade has a long build-up, for this ritual demands a theatrical setting, and before the masks hit the stage, much has already happened. A village square is demarcated with a central dancing area and large rim for the public. Crucial is that masks require coulisses, since they have to be completely dressed before showing themselves to the public. A half-dressed mask is not a mask at all – a proper mask has to remain unrecognizable –, and any damage to the mask headpiece or costume must be repaired out of sight of the audience. So, the ritual place has a backstage and a frontstage: curtains may be absent, but the dressing room is not. Many such spaces are liminal only for the occasion and are not recognizable as such in normal daily life, structured and marked out just for the event. But as be-things from the wilderness, masks are hard to contain and may roam the streets of the village, thus enhancing their show of raw bush power. For the Pende of DRC, Zoe Strother remarks, “Masks are matchless in their ability to transform the most banal of public spaces into an oneiric world outside of time, where the normal rules no longer apply.”<sup>26</sup> So masks not only perform in liminal time and space; they create them.

Liminal times call for liminal behavior. Audiences in any performance should know how to behave, and being a participating spectator demands some insider knowledge. In Western culture, the theatrical performance ends with a final curtain call, when under applause the players reveal themselves as just other humans, no longer bound by their role in the play; the slain have risen again, the villain is lauded, and the king is just an actor. This *demasqué* marks the transformation of the liminal into the normal. This is absent in mask performances: no curtain call, no applause, and certainly no *demasqué*. The point is that the masks are considered “real” in a way the actors never can be: Masks are supposed to be real denizens of the otherworld, who never reveal their humanity, and remain be-things over there, in the bush.

---

<sup>25</sup> Schechner & Turner 1985, Turner 1985.

<sup>26</sup> Strother 2008: 19.

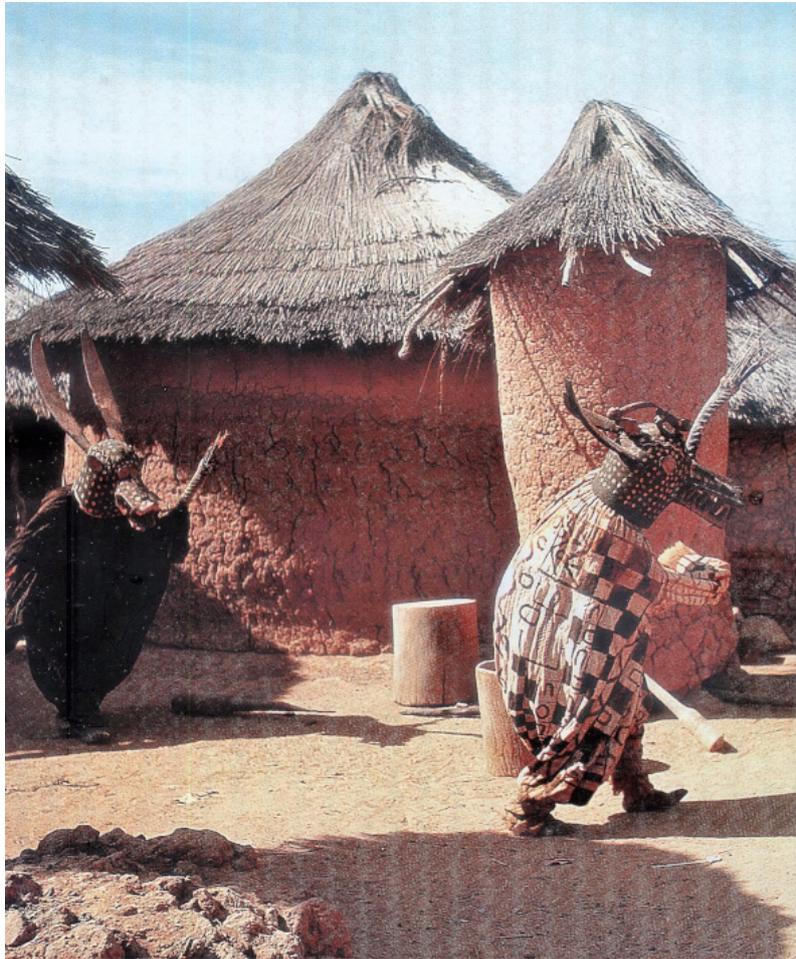


Fig. 8: Arrival of the *ponyugo* masks for the funeral of a secret society member of the Senoufo. Photo Michel Huet, Tyongofolokaba, Ivory Coast, c. 1950.

Moreover, mask performances involve a double layer of concealment. Not just the dancer is concealed, also the audience is divided into those “who know” and “those who do not know” – often the initiated men versus the uninitiated women and children. Small children may well believe that spirits from the bush are cavorting on the village square, impressed by the intimidating apparitions. Older boys, nearer initiation age, dart between the masks, showing off their lack of fear; elders are quick to reprimand them with lashes of their canes, which the nimble youngsters easily dodge. Women usually are very much aware of the charade, yet they are never allowed to show their inside knowledge. They have to “behave,” showing all the respect, awe, and even fear that mask performances are expected to generate, but they are

seldom fooled. Polly Richards reports on the Dogon women who watch the mask dances, that they not only are perfectly aware who is dancing with what mask, but also take great joy in the performance. An older woman told her about her son who danced: "He is the best dancer. When I see him dance, I am very proud. He has been well nourished with breast milk, he is very robust."<sup>27</sup> But such remarks will only be made in private, discreetly when no men are present.

Across Africa, the women have good reasons to comply. At a deeper level the masquerade retains a strong a taboo for them, for even if the women would know exactly who is dancing as a particular mask, they are still genuinely scared, frightened by its intimidating presence and careful to guard their own main asset, their fertility; the point is that masks are a threat to that very fertility. For instance, they will surely never touch a mask, nor even a part of it. In "my" Dogon village a bundle of red fibers laid alongside the path to a waterhole. Since these fibers form the essence of the mask costume, a woman asked me to remove it, for she could not pass this close, nor touch the fibers herself to remove them. Even parts of masks never are just objects, they are always loaded with meaning and dangerous for womanhood.

The men in the audience have a different relation with the mask. Of course, they also know who is dancing a particular mask, but they communicate with them in public through coded signs. Thus, they address the masks in the initiation language, showing themselves to be insiders, to which the masks respond with dancing or animal cries. Men are informed spectators, for they have been a mask also, and perhaps even taught the current dancers, just as they have whipped them as novitiates when they entered the bush camp. And yet they too are ambivalent about the masks, for as familiar as these apparitions are for them, they are still masks, still exude power and otherness, still presentify the otherworld and are not to be belittled; these be-things have to be addressed in the proper fashion, never mentioning any real names, just using the mask language – in short, strictly following "mask protocol." The men know, so they behave, communicating in liminal language.

This contrast between parts of the audience means that masks accentuate the genders, since they stipulate and thus magnify the distinction between men and women. As many observers have noted, on the face of it mask rituals seem to redefine women as gullible ignoramuses, weak and fearful, with no recourse against the onslaught of the powerful be-things, in contrast with the men who not only are immune to the threat from the otherworld but even control these powers. This redefinition of gender, played out over and again, led a lot of

---

<sup>27</sup> Richards 2022: 280

commentators to argue that women are subordinated to the masks. My take on this issue is the opposite, however. Without doubt the surface message of the mask performances is one of male domination, but the underlying dynamic is that in those areas where masks occur, the village societies show a rather weak social position for the men vis à vis the women, for a variety of reasons.<sup>28</sup> In the mask zones women are dominant in agriculture and are well guarded by their close kinsmen who are never far away, including after marriage. Crucially, these are fiercely pro-natal societies in which human fertility is paramount, so women are supremely important for what really counts, progeny. It is this attitude that provides a solid basis for the male recognition of the power of femininity, which is the hidden transcript of the mask rituals. Symbolically, the masquerades gird up a feeble male social position against a strong social position for women. Regardless, whatever one's interpretation in terms of gender, clearly the masks performance is an arena among genders.<sup>29</sup>

The masquerades may involve an arena, but they are also feasts: "We should not forget how joyful and playful they are for those involved."<sup>30</sup> African cultures have many feasts, and when masks tend to perform in general celebrations, they add to the spirit of the festivities.<sup>31</sup> As John Lewis expressed it in his overview of the anthropological performance paradigm, "All human cultural worlds are made livable partly through this contrast between special events and everyday life."<sup>32</sup> Feasts are liminal times and as such more than just fun, and large mask festivals develop their own political and economic rationale. But with a masquerade it is not just the humans who celebrate since the otherworld joins in as well, so the human feast receives an accolade from the inhabitants of the invisible world: mystery comes to the party. Other feasts often center around a communal meal, but masks are not humans, and their

---

<sup>28</sup> In the societies where masks function, one sees that the men have few ways of controlling their women, so masks come in handy. This hinges on the strength of the descent group and the kind of bonding between males, plus the presence or absence of cattle husbandry. For an elaborate analysis of the ecological conditions for this strong position of women, see Van Beek 2024.

<sup>29</sup> This view is elaborated in Van Beek & Leyten 2023, in Chapter 7 on Gender. The observation is that masks occur in societies where women occupy an inherently strong position in society, indeed through their fertility. Masquerades can then be construed as a ritual means of men to gain ascendancy over a womanhood they do not control, and for the duration of the ritual even acquire a virtualized fertility that inevitably falls short of the female one. Important is that the societies which do house masquerades, are situated in specific ecological zones in which women shoulder the bulk of agricultural labour.

<sup>30</sup> Ottenberg & Binkley 2006: 8.

<sup>31</sup> An example are the New Yam festivals of the Igbo, Cole & Aniakor 1984.

<sup>32</sup> Lewis 2013: 5

otherness shows in that they do not eat or drink – nor speak for that matter. As the heart of the party, masks transform the public feast into a visual spectacle wrapped around an enigma, for at the core of the feast resides a “deep secret.”



Fig. 9: Young Dogon women with children watch the mask ritual from far up the hillside. Photo Walter van Beek, Amani, Mali 2000.

### **Unveiling the secret**

Masks cannot be understood without recognizing the importance and dynamics of secrecy. We saw the women pretending in public not to know that masks are costumed men, and that pretense is what underlies the whole masquerade: it is a public secret, one that everybody knows but no one talks about. The essence of the secret is not hidden knowledge, but the right to speaking about it, to instruct others on it, and to decide who can be in and who out of the secret: “Secrecy is orchestrated disclosure.”<sup>33</sup> This notion is clearest in the initiation of boys, the core activity of masks, for in all initiations that do feature masks, one rite stands out, the unveiling of the mask. Not all boys’ initiations in Africa include masks – the majority does not – but wherever masks figure in these rites of passage, the initiation starts with a “revelation.”

---

<sup>33</sup> Taussig 1999.

As an example may serve the boys' initiation among the Bobo of Burkina Faso. When the ritual starts, the boys are snatched up from their mother's home, and after being flogged severely by masks, are escorted to the initiation camp. The first item on the agenda is a mask that posts itself before them, completely decked out in leaves and unrecognizable in form. The initiation monitor then asks the frightened novices, "What is this?" The boys have been instructed to answer this question with "Death." After all initiands have said this out loud, the mask comes near and in complete silence takes off its leafy head-covering. Thereby, he shows himself to be nothing else but just a man, in fact someone from their own village. They all know him well, he is respected in the village, a kinsman in fact. They all must call out his name – his normal, proper name – using the correct kinship term. This is the crucial revelation: someone is inside the mask, someone like them, even family.

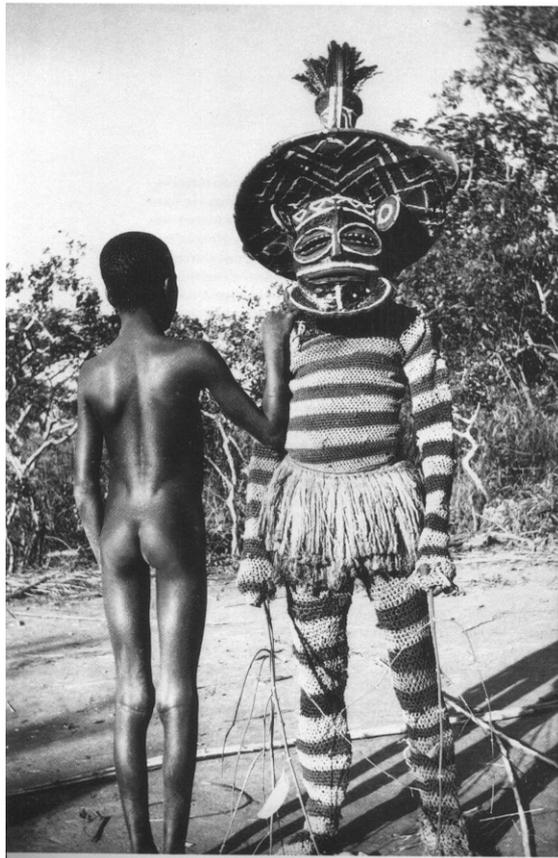


Fig. 10: After the revelation, the mask has become familiar; here a young Chokwe initiand speaks with his initiation mask. Photo E.P. Marchall, Chokwe, Angola, 1949.

This is the essence of any initiation that figures masks, the unveiling of a ritual secret, and therein mask initiation differs from other ritual and theatrical performances. With this revelation they are initiated, really on the inside of the secret. That means that not only they know there is a man inside – which they have at least suspected for long – but that they have a right to know it. Immediately with this revelation, the absolute need for secrecy is drummed into them: they are instructed never to reveal this secret, never to tell anyone and surely not any woman; their first lesson is to be silent, like a mask. Later they will become masks themselves, a process which will take most of their initiation time. In the case of the Bobo the symbolic nature of this revelation resurfaces later, during the second phase of their protracted initiation period, which lasts no less than fifteen years. A few years after this first unveiling, they witness the same unveiling of a mask clothed in fiber costume and a fiber top; that “revelation” cannot come as a surprise any longer, but still it has to be done. The secret is not about information, but about legitimate disclosure. For the initiands the new challenge is to keep this secret. That is their way of coming of age, enabling them later to dance as masks before an admiring audience, in a feast that will celebrate their adulthood. In initiation, the feast is at the end of their bush period, which may last from some weeks to months, but the coming out of the boys is always the crowning feast. At their first return to the village after initiation they are not yet masks for they return to the village as adult men, but at later occasions, and surely with the next instalment of initiation, they will indeed have to dance as masks, exactly what they have trained for in the initiation camp.

This logic of secrecy holds for initiations done per village but also for those into the ranks of a secret society: revelation of a human dancer, plus swearing silence. In secret societies the boys also enter a different world, for they become members of a structured group that is founded on exactly these dynamics of secrecy, a group with leader, with ranks in which they can rise. In short, they are entering a pathway of life-long secrecy, reinforced by many occasions where masks will perform just for the society’s members.

### **Preparations**

What does it mean to dance as a mask? Performing as a mask always presents a physical challenge, for it is handicap dancing: both the costume and the headpiece hinder the very movements one has to make. Also, all masks have their head covered; sometimes the headpiece offers a good vision, but often the sight is poor, and the masker has trouble overlooking the dancing ground; masks that perform single need an assistant who accompanies and steers

them.<sup>34</sup> Some masks are inherently difficult to dance, such as stilt masks or the extremely heavy ones, and some are easier, but the audience appreciates this dance-with-handicap. The way the Dogon tree mask swings its 5-meter-high headpiece, the intricate small steps of the stilt mask, or the way the huge *ijele* contraption of the Yoruba moves gracefully despite its bulk, they all delight the admiring audience.

Because mask dancing is inherently challenging, it has to be learned, practiced repeatedly, with elders monitoring whether the dance steps and routines are correct, whether the rhythm is followed, instructing the initiands what drum sequence belongs to what type of mask, and how to respond to the calls of spectators. Mask dancing requires great skill, which all initiands must acquire to a certain level. The pathway into mask dancing starts well before the actual initiation. For instance, small Dogon boys make their own mini-masks out of a cardboard box, or the interior of sorghum stalks, just for fun. They fabricate little stumps to exercise dancing on stilts, they tap on stones or hollowed locks to become familiar with the drum rhythms, and most of all they practice their moves at the end of each public dance.

In the falling dusk the boys go through the steps of the mask dance, turning and jumping with great agility and gusto. For instance, at the end of each funeral all the boys of the village move onto the dancing square that just has witnessed extensive dancing of all villagers; as soon as the women and girls have left, groups of boys go through the dancing routines of each of the several masks, first the dance steps all the masks must make, then those routines particular to each of the mask types. Since funeral dances are much more frequent than mask rituals in Dogon, this provides the boys with a long road into dancing expertise.

In the period leading to a mask festival this practicing intensifies. Important in Dogon masking is that all initiands make their own headpiece, either plaited or carved from wood. That in itself is an important route towards apprenticeship, but not everyone is equally skilled. A good number seek help from a local smith, often the village carver, and a few order their headpiece from such specialist. Either way, all must make their own costumes: they cultivate the plants for the fibers, harvest them, extract the fibers, taint them and braid them into a costume. Both carving and braiding makes for a high level of familiarity with the mask: the mask is theirs in many ways. In other cultures, the headpieces may be made by specialists, which renders the relation between initiand and his mask less intimate.

---

<sup>34</sup> See for instance figure 10.

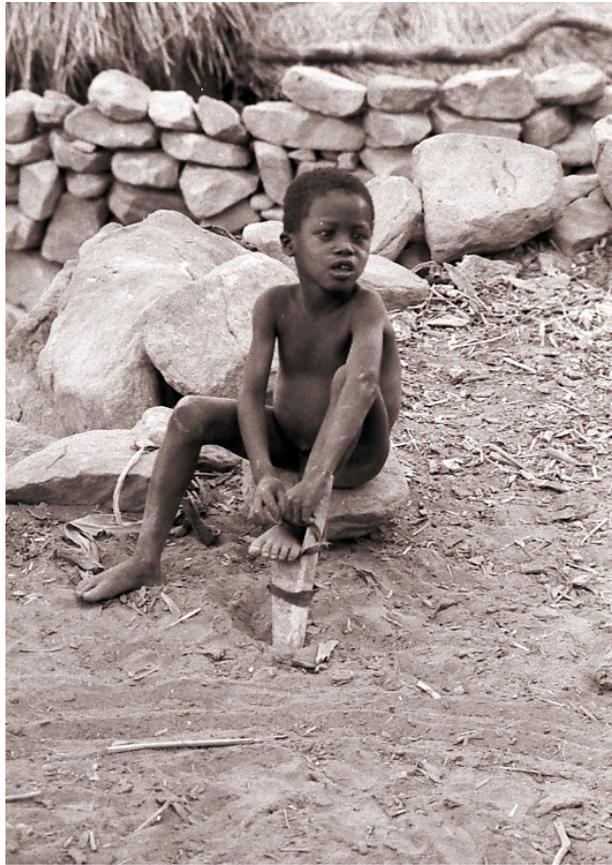


Fig. 11: A Dogon boy takes its first steps to dancing with stilts. Photo Walter van Beek, Tireli 1989.

Each village has a spot out of sight of women, where the youngsters who will dance for the first time in the mask ritual, the *dama*, gather after dusk in a concealed spot of the village to go through all the moves. Most use no headpieces, but boys who want to wear difficult masks, such as the *kanaga*, the tree, or the stilt mask, which demand strenuous dances, wear newly carved, unpainted headpieces to accustom themselves. It also gives such a dancer the opportunity for refining the carved headpiece itself, which he continuously alters during the practice, by chopping away some wood, or adjusting the mouth-rod and the bands that hold the top over his head. Since there are no drums, elders strike the ground with a stick to learn the dancers to keep the rhythm. Just before the first public appearance, the elders have a dry run of the masks this way, now with drums, and shower the dancers with advice. By this time all headpieces are painted, though the costume, made of dyed and braided fibers, is not worn yet.



Fig. 12: Preparing the headpiece: A top representing the first woman who found the mask, is painted black with boiled seeds of acacia pods. Photo Polly Richards, Idieli 2010.

The main points the elders insist on are the proper movements, both for the general dances, and for the routines which vary from mask to mask: keep with the drum, watch the other masks and line up with what they do. Among the difficult masks, the *kanaga* (a mask with a double cross) has to make a complicated, sinuous movement to have its horns sweep through the soil, turning up some dust, but not too much. All bystanders comment on that dance; since this is a mask in which a youngster can stand out, it is very popular, with more practitioners than dancers who are really good at it, one might say. A lot of time is spent on instructing them, since they too should line up in a proper fashion and not take up too much time for their own show. Commentaries on

the headpieces themselves are rare; the bulk of the coaching is on the performance. Masking, mask ritual and masquerade, however one may call it, is first and for all a performance, a difficult one, a crucial one, and one that is continuously evaluated, but anyway a performance that must be done.

In many cultures in Africa, young non-initiated boys are not just preparing for their adult shows, they have their own mask dances among themselves as well. In their book on boys' masquerades in Africa, Ottenberg and Binkley highlight the many instances where boys play with masks well before their initiation.<sup>35</sup> These mimetic dances can form a trajectory into the "real thing" or simply be an emulation of the adult form, but they also appear independently of adult ceremonies. In Dogon culture it is the young boys who are in charge of a special form of masking with costumes-*cum*-headpieces made only of leaves, called "old hyena." These masks figure in the yearly sacrificial festival, the *buoro*, as an integral part of the ritual proceedings. In all probability, they are the older form of masking, relegated to a secondary ritual position at the appearance of the fiber masks, and thus became reserved for young children.<sup>36</sup> But boys masks are much more than "Gesunkenes Kulturgut", for also in West African city life mask dancing by boys also developed into an independent form of masking that functions well in a modernizing society. So for boys this "old trick of mankind,"<sup>37</sup> – as masks have been called – seems to be waiting to be reinvented, and African boys continue to do so. The ease with which children mask shows how deep-rooted masking can be in these cultures and how much it is a pleasurable cultural focus.

### Anonymous excellence

Finally comes the day of the public appearance. That public can be just the members of a secret society – some African masks never are seen by women at all – but usually the audience consists of the whole village plus a fair number of curious spectators from neighboring settlements. Now the new initiand has to show what he is cut from: he has to perform, thus to show that he has learned it all correctly. But the young man has a double agenda, so faces a complex challenge: he has to participate according to expectations despite the challenging costume, but also he wants to excel. The audience has to be wooed with a performance following their expectations, so with "felicitous

---

<sup>35</sup> Ottenberg & Binckley 2006

<sup>36</sup> Van Beek 2006

<sup>37</sup> Roberts 1980

performativity.”<sup>38</sup> Ritual performance is judged, because the village audience does not just expect a mask dance, it wants to see a good one.

The performers themselves, the maskers, often are the younger men since these warm costumes and heavy headpieces demand great vigor. When dancing as a mask, these young men are “inside” the ritual in a very bodily way, and their perspective on what is happening is different from anyone else. A dancer has learned, exercised, and internalized his movements, sometimes inventing new variations himself, and during the dance he lets his body take over. Listening and responding to the music, he moves almost automatically and thus becomes the be-thing he is supposed to be. He just has put on the thick costume with the heavy headpiece, has come out in the sweltering heat of the afternoon while seeing little of his surroundings. Dancing at full force, he keeps a roving eye on the accompanying attendant or the dancer in front of him, with a keen ear for the rhythm of the drums. The demands of the costumes and headpieces, the driving rhythm of the drums, the constant exhortations of the elders in the ritual language, the yelling colleague-masks – all come together in his motion as a newly embodied persona. His very exertions identify him with the liminal setting, aided by the long preparations and his extensive practicing of the dancing skills. Thus, his “culturally in-skilled embodied schemas”<sup>39</sup> converge in a crowning moment of glorious liminality.

Then comes his second challenge, excelling. In African village societies the youth have few options to stand out among their peers; there is little difference in wealth, a type of agriculture which everybody masters, and a material culture that is widely shared. Mask dancing is one of the few arenas in which one can excel, and this is one of the reasons for the youth to hold on to this tradition, so the more difficult the mask the better. This masquerade gives him the chance to distinguish himself, but it presents him with a paradox: he is now a mask, and as such should not be recognizable for onlookers. He has internalized the secret, sworn to uphold it against outsiders, yet now he not only aspires to be a proper mask, but also one that is noticed, he wants to be the best dancer, the most convincing mask.

He knows that one part of the audience is in on the secret, the old men who shout to him in the mask language, those who taught him the dance plus the rules for secrecy. In many cases they have already judged him, they know his dancing skills, and in some cases they have already pronounced between them who is the best dancer. The picture above gives the assembly of elders

---

<sup>38</sup> Steward & Strathern 2014: 93

<sup>39</sup> Vásquez 2011: 318; Steward & Strathern 2014: 119.

in the village of Amani, discussing just that. Some dancers even have painted a number on the headpiece, indicating their rank in the praise list of dancers.<sup>40</sup>



Fig. 13: A *zamble* mask of the Guro, helped by his assistant, competes for the title of the best dancer. Photo Annemarie Bouttiaux, Guro, Ivory Coast, 1997.

But the other part of the audience, even more relevant for the young man, presents him with a dilemma: the women and particularly the girls. Public masquerades may seem to define women as “they-who-do-not-know,” but the presence of women and girls at the back of the mass of spectators, is absolutely essential. Dancing is completely pointless without women. “Without women, the dance has no sweetness,” the Baule informants informed Susan Vogel.<sup>41</sup> The masker may have to content himself with the mask’s inherent anonymity,

---

<sup>40</sup> See figure 198, p. 281, in Richards 2022: a *kanaga* which is second best of the village of Ireli in 1999.

<sup>41</sup> Vogel 1997.

and as such strive for an adequate performance, but he realizes that in this public event he occupies a peculiar place. As Simon Ottenberg pointed out,<sup>42</sup> he is the one who is truly absent: he is not in the audience, nor is he among the initiated men, so he is very absent. On the other hand, as mask he is extremely present, if only for the insiders. Anonymity is a severe handicap for anyone one wants to stand out, but the mask dancer is inevitably restricted to excel in an anonymized performance! If he wants to shine, the only way he can do this is by dancing extremely well, for he is not allowed to add too much new routines to the dance; after all, this is a ritual, and has to be done correctly, even if he is allowed some minor variations which are usually appreciated. So deep down he has to count on his identity to be known, his steps and body language to be recognizable by the female onlookers. African villages being the glass houses that they are, indeed he usually can count on the secret not to hold, and he may well hope that the other gender will puncture his anonymity and project their appreciation of the dance onto him. Well, it seems that he is seldom disappointed in this quest, for his anonymous excellence will be secretly attributed to him.

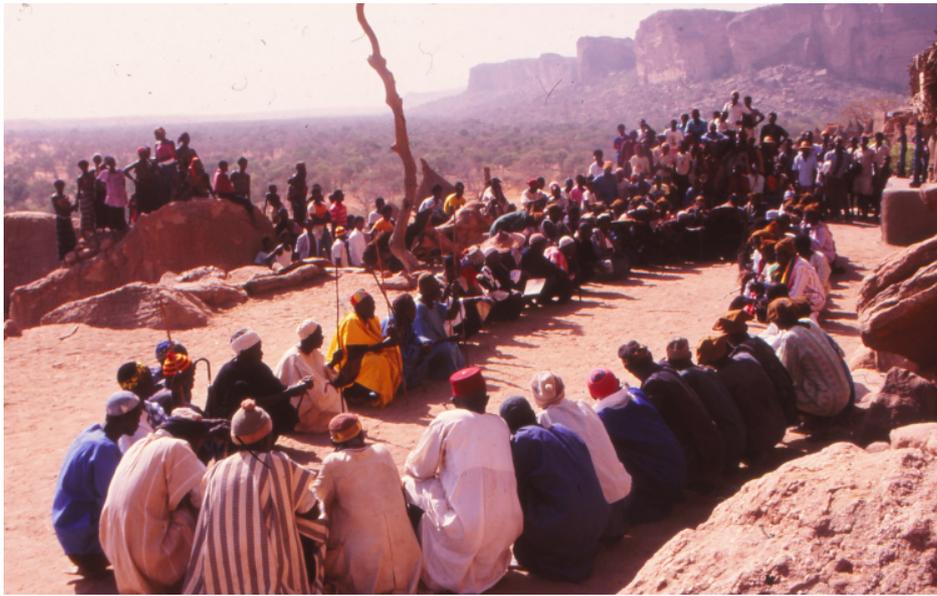


Fig. 14: The public evaluates the performance: Dogon elders discussing which dancer has been the best. Photo: Walter van Beek. Amani, Mali. 1989.

---

<sup>42</sup> Ottenberg 1982

Like all public performances, masquerades are always judged. As indicated, the title best dancer may already have been awarded before the public appearances, but it is the performance at the public event that counts. During the dance the public may already voice its appreciation, but being a ritual this has to follow rather strict protocol; in fact only the initiated men can do so, and in the proper ways. In many cases, like in Dogon, this happens through the ritual initiation language, in exhortations, and shouts by the men. Drummers may also indicate their appreciation through the intensity of their play. Women will refrain from public display of appreciation, though they may very well do so after the dance, even at length, if they are among themselves.<sup>43</sup> Performances with masks may last only a few hours, but they will be reviewed, talked about and commented upon for long afterwards, and thus provide a way in which the liminal times keep influencing the daily world that comes after them. Liminal events change the world in many ways, especially through discourse.

### **Ephemerality**

All liminalities are ephemeral and in principle transient, and just as feasts pass, so do all masquerades. This holds not just for the performances, but also for the costumes, most of which exist for a short time only; surprisingly enough it holds even for sculpted headpieces. The latter are carefully guarded in Western collections and museums, but in Africa itself are considered transient. Masks made of leaves last only a few days, they wither and then are left in the bush where they stemmed from,<sup>44</sup> and the same holds for costumes made of plaited fibers.<sup>45</sup> Basically, both costumes and headpieces have to be new for each major mask ritual; carved headpieces may be used for a later instalment, but then have to be repainted, as with the Bamana, where the initiands must wash the existing sculpted pieces, and repaint them for their coming-out ceremony.<sup>46</sup> So even elaborately carved headpieces serve only for one season, to be abandoned after use. As a rule, headpieces are used for just one mask festival, and a new masking ritual demands new costumes and new tops. Though some masks should be retained for specific rituals – or for tourism –, the bulk is discarded; even the large carved Angolan disk-headpieces<sup>47</sup> or elaborate

---

<sup>43</sup> See Richards 2022: 280-283.

<sup>44</sup> For instance among the Bobo of Burkina Faso, see Le Moal 1980, 2008.

<sup>45</sup> As among the Niger Delta Urhobo, who give the masks back to the river, Foss 2003: 133.

<sup>46</sup> Colleyn 2002a, 2002b; Jespers 2011.

<sup>47</sup> Kraemer 2010: 15.

Luntu face coverings,<sup>48</sup> all are left in the bush or explicitly burned after the initiation. Also, the magnificent Chewa huge basketry contraptions, representing an inordinate amount of work, go up in flames after the initiation, everything has to return to nature or to evaporate in smoke. In northwestern Ghana, the acolytes must chop the headpiece to pieces, burn the wood, mix the ashes into water and drink the mixture, thus acquiring the proper “speaking skills” over the masks, a lasting embodiment of the performance.<sup>49</sup> The outside form is ephemeral; what remains is the experience – and the secret.

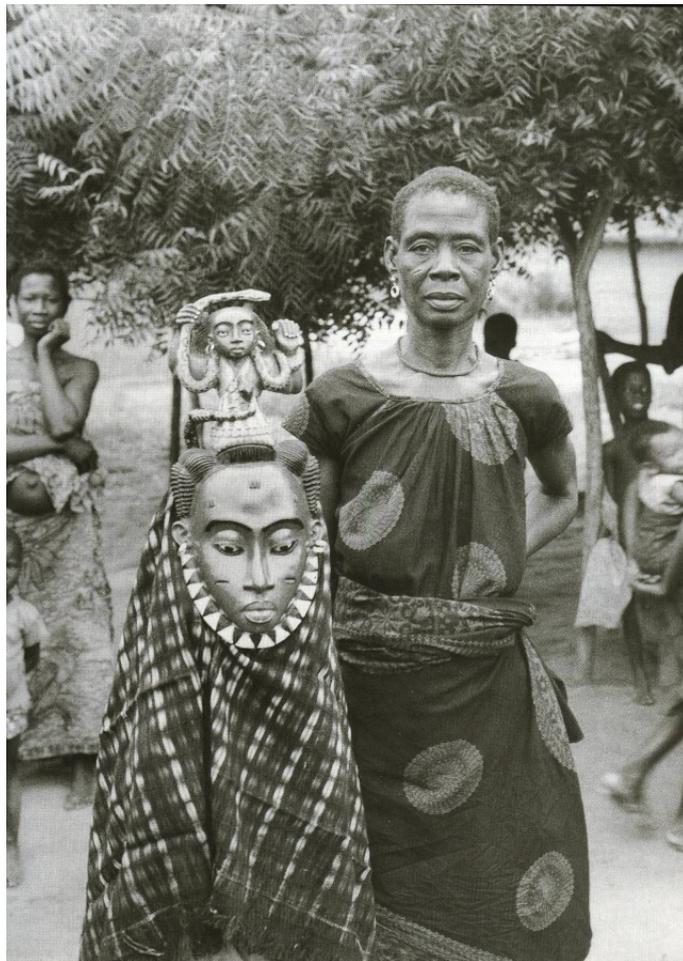


Fig. 15; A Baule woman and the mask that represents herself. Photo Susan Mullin Vogel, Baule, Ivory Coast, 1972.

---

<sup>48</sup> Petridis 2003: 140.

<sup>49</sup> Poppi 2013: 193.

However, there are exceptions to this rule, as with the Yoruba where both the costume and the headpiece of the famous *gelede* mask are not discarded. The costume consists of a rich woman's dress, which the dancer loans from his sister, mother or girlfriend. They want it back, but the masquerade aimed at honouring womanhood anyway. However, also here the elaborate headpiece has to be refurbished every year, but these days the old one is sold, especially since the *gelede* has become UNESCO cultural heritage. A fundamental exception is found in the one area in Africa where women are closely linked to masks. Portrait headpieces of the Baule are often made or commissioned by the husband. He dances with it, which clearly pictures his wife, while she walks beside him, in full view as the original inspiration. Such a top is tightly linked to her and will be discarded only at her death; but a lifetime is almost an eternity for a headpiece.<sup>50</sup>

Performances are an ephemeral art form, and the very act of abandoning and especially destroying these power objects underscores their liminality. Nowadays mask tops are increasingly sold to tourists, another way of abandonment.<sup>51</sup> When whisked away to European show cases, the headpieces do rest inside a liminality of a different kind. Their function in the rituals is behind them, their original bush connection severed, and in their new setting completely foreign meanings are attributed to them: they are now orphaned liminality. So liminal acts are done with liminal objects, fleeting experiences rely on ephemeral things, and the very ephemerality enhances their ritual value.

## Conclusion

In this article we have followed African masks as an expression of liminality and found them to be "liminality incorporated." Prima facie this is rather unsurprising, since masquerades in the African setting function for a considerable part in the very sphere for which Victor Turner coined the term liminality, viz. the initiation of boys. Masks find their most poignant expression as instruments of the transformation of boys into men during the betwixt and between state of the initiation period, but they are much more than a costume party in a bush camp, and I discern three levels of liminality in mask performances.

Time and place are dominant in liminality and form the first level of liminality. Masks exist only for the duration of the performance and have power only if they perform at the right time and place: they need the enabling

---

<sup>50</sup> The brass Senufo headpiece is one top that will remain forever. Personal information Till Förster.

<sup>51</sup> Strother 2008: 55. The same holds for the Dogon, Van Beek 2022.

confines of their ritual, of the village, and of the ideology surrounding them. In their pursuit for anonymous excellence, their dancers may explore the limits of their performability, but they must behave according to strict rules, which exist only in this “time-out-of time” and on the dancing spot. Their dancing place is just as fleeting as their performance, unrecognizable in normal times but highly charged during the dance. At that time and on that place their behavioral rules are different from the normal social ones – the very characteristic of liminality Turner stressed – but the fleeting structure of that time and place is unchallenged, if only for the duration of the ritual. Not only do the masks form a *sui generis* category of be-things, but they also function only in a place and time *sui generis*. This liminality holds for most rituals; the next two levels are specific for masquerades.

The second level of liminality stems from border crossings. There are as many boundaries as there are different worlds, and the types of liminality depend on what worlds they connect. Borders create differences, and crossing boundaries exudes power, which is precisely what masks routinely do, and I discern three of them. The first border masks cross is between the human world and the bush, and in linking these two, masks accrue an existence of their own, with their own agency, their own mythical framework, and above all their own organization. Secret societies can and do exist without masks, but by far most of them exist by virtue of masking, and above all, of the mask’s public secret. Because of the power attributed to the bush of which they form the most evident emanation, in those areas on the continent where masking occurs, local power dynamics are closely linked with the control of masks and masking societies.

The second border masks cross is between this world and the spiritual one, either bush spirits or ancestors, in fact between the world of the living and the realm of death. Both for the living and the dead, masks are agents of change who direct crucial transitions in male life, initiation, chieftainship. These liminal be-things guide the rites of masculine passage, from boy to adult male, to elder – through the ranks of the secret society – and finally into the next existence, ancestor.

The third relevant border is between the genders, and this one they highlight: rarely is the difference between male and female as clearly stipulated as in mask performances. As I argued earlier, on the face of it this could be read as male domination, but at a deeper level these mask rituals balance the scales of society, emphasizing the interdependence of man and woman in a deeply pro-natal society.

The power produced by these three border crossings comes at a cost since, as indicated, each crossing involves risks and dangers, and demands

strenuous exertion. After all, the bush is a place of unknown powers, never under control, and whoever deals with its denizens runs severe risks, while deep ambivalence reigns in the relation with the vertical otherworld anyway. During initiation this is brought home to the boys through whippings, ordeals and humiliation, as part of a pathway of pain that is meant to school them for adulthood. Whippings or other painful tests are seen as discipline and as a means to steel their character but also serve as tool to disorient them by accentuating the break from the gentle motherly care at home, thus drumming into the boys the liminality of their life in the initiation camp. The transition from boyhood to adult masculinity is shown to be a violent one, with a concomitant oppositional relation to women. Also, this painful pathway should accentuate the joy of coming home as new adults, in the great feast that celebrates their reintegration in society.

The third level of liminality lies in the Magritte effect, in the fact that masks never are, and even never can be, what they seem to portray: they are an essential paradox. The two sides of any mask, one presentifying the otherworld, the other a youngster doing his very best inside a difficult costume, are in principle incommensurable. Both realities, the audience who sees an otherworldly presence, and the embodied exertions of the dancer, never merge. The first reality is an audience regaling themselves on an out-of-this-world spectacle, suspending their disbelief and reacting appropriately, while being genuinely impressed, even frightened, by this otherworldly presence. The second one depends on a voluntary transformation of a young man into a dancer, his willingness to be hidden, to settle with anonymity, and on his trust in the correct behavior of his target audience to overtly respect this shield of secrecy while still appreciating his anonymous excellence.

As “metaphors in action,”<sup>52</sup> masks embody a paradox, and since they are what may be called a moving paradox, they can express other paradoxes of human life. Thus, they can address the sensitive relations between the genders in society, they have the leeway to ridicule power holders and incoming strangers, they can laud women and celebrate motherhood, they may serve as diviners and proclaim the verdicts of an unofficial court, all in societies where such functions have not received a clear structuring nor is based upon any observable consensus. As liminal be-things they fill in the voids of disputed authority, but their main occupation, their core business, is to make sure that a new generation comes of age, that the society remains fruitful and fertile; so they essentially facilitate those changes that ensure that the society will not

---

<sup>52</sup> Tonkin 1979: 241-242

change, at least not fundamentally. Liminality of masks leads to dynamics of societal continuity through the generations.



Fig. 16: The beauty of liminality on show. Two tree masks of the Dogon in their spectacular setting. Photo Walter van Beek, Tireli, Mali, 2008.

So now we have filled in a central piece of the liminal times Victor Turner analyzed so convincingly, the masks themselves. Their multiple, layered liminality underscores, highlights, and even celebrates the huge contribution liminality makes to a livable “normalcy,” and the larger the difference between the liminal element and the daily routine is, the larger their contribution to societal functioning seems to be. With “normalcy” I do not mean social structure, but the dynamic interplay between legitimate expectations and normative judgments of lived experience. As Szakolczai and Thomassen argue (2019) major rites – such as masquerades – are not just ritual expressions of

social structure, but also may question a range of societal norms; their aim is not to freeze society, but to energize it, to reinvigorate a stale state by producing paradoxes: they hallow a male supremacy that does not exist, and they even ritually appropriate the one mastery men never can have, fertility. Both the relationship with the bush, as the fons et origo of food and energy, and with the collective womanhood as the source of the next generation, are stipulated in colorful male performances that stage a masculine mastery of both, while the very ephemerality of these rituals-cum-objects recognizes that these fundamental factors are way beyond their span of control. Thus, the various interdependencies within these societies are shown in transcripts hidden in spectacular liminalities, with a constant mix of entertainment and threat, of appreciation and danger.

As performances go, the masquerade has some special features that address issues in performance studies. First, the constant interplay between masks and audience. Divided into important categories such as initiated versus non-initiated, male versus female, and those-in-the-know versus ignoramuses, this is not only a structured audience but also an informed one, who through their own lived experiences with masks make essential contributions to the performance as a whole. The mask audience is a co-performing one, who play their scripted role because of deeply embedded cultural reasons. They are even allowed individual expressions on stage, with the few initiated women roaming between the masks, or old men going after the rabbit masks mimicking a hunter – Dogon masquerades offer quite a few examples. Other masquerades are completely in honour of some people inside the audience, celebrating a mother of many or a man of ample means, as Yoruba examples show. Such cultural performances, as Schechner (2002) calls them, integrate performer and audience into a total experience that is co-created, since their aim is, indeed, to revitalize and reinvigorate the whole of society. This exemplifies the intentionality of performances, as Beeman argues (2002), because the ritual – it is still a ritual! – must be done, done well, and done convincingly, to achieve its implicit goal.

Finally, mask performances address the question of the balance between the players and the play in an unexpected and productive fashion. In Western theatrical settings, playing a role in a well-scripted play honors the playwright and the production, but the apotheosis comes at the curtain call with the applause washing over the players, who by now are recognizable individuals; and often well-known ones at that. In masquerades, as said, there is no *demasqué*, and the performers stay not only anonymous – officially at least – but the merging between dancer and mask is never relinquished: the be-things on stage remain *sui generis*, return to the bush where they stemmed from, and are

expected to retain their interest in the community: they keep “existing”. In masks one can keep believing, so this merger of the real and the imaginary keeps influencing the daily life as part of the lived “normalcy.”

Thus, in mask performances we encounter integrated performances with imagined permanent players, based on a complex layered liminality, in fact the epitome of Turner’s concept. For such a combination one needs, in all probability, a close-knit society not only with clearly demarcated social positions, but also one with clear dividing lines within the community, between the genders, between age groupings, between insiders and outsiders, subgroupings that are in dynamic interaction, and in which the individual finds a circumscribed but flexible niche. Our western society has long said farewell to this kind of close knit, self-sufficient society, and such a multileveled liminality is no longer within reach. But the notion of symbolic hidden transcripts to strengthen the notion of normalcy is an available option, and so is the binding force of periodic and intense liminality. Also, in our perennial quest for personal identity, for our so-called “true self,” we may well take a cue from the fundamental in-between identity of the masks and their performers who strive for anonymous excellence, and settle for a more relational identity; and yes, may the best dancer win.

## References

- Beeman, William O. 2002. Performance theory in an anthropology program. In Nathan Stucky and Cynthia Wimmer (eds.) *Teaching performance studies*, Southern Illinois University Press, 85-98.
- Bentor, Eli. 1994. *Aro Ikeji festival: Toward a historical interpretation of a masquerade festival*. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.
- Bouttiaux, Anne-Marie, and Allen F. Roberts. 2009. Guro masked performers: Sculpted bodies serving spirits and people. *African Arts* 42, 2: 56-67.
- Boyer, Alain-Michel. 2008. *Les Baule*. Milan: 5 Continents Editions.
- Cole, Herbert M. and C.C. Anakior. 1984. *Igbo arts: community and cosmos*. Berkeley: Museum of Cultural History.
- Colleyn, Jean-Paul. 2011. Les masques et le rapport à l’invisible. In Paul Marathan (ed.) *Arts d’Afrique. Voir l’invisible*. Bordeaux: Musée d’Aquitaine, 19-22.
- Colleyn, Jean-Paul. 2002a. Le Ci-Wara. In Jean-Paul Colleyn (ed.) *Bamana. Un art et un savoir-vivre au Mali*. Gent: Snoeck-Ducaju, 201-235.
- Colleyn, Jean-Paul. 2002b. Le Kòmò. In Jean-Paul Colleyn (ed.) *Bamana. Un art et un savoir-vivre au Mali*. Gent: Snoeck-Ducaju, 175-184.

- Coquet, Michèle. 1995. Des dieux sans visage. De la morphologie des masques de feuilles bwaba (Burkina Faso). In Luc de Heusch (ed.) *Objects, signs of Africa*. Gent: Snoeck-Ducaju and Son, 21-35.
- Douglas, Mary. 1973. *Natural symbols. Explorations in cosmology*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Douglas, Mary. 1966. *Purity and danger. An analysis of notions of pollution and taboo*. New York: Penguin.
- Fardon, Richard. 2007. *Fusions: masquerades and thought style east of the Niger-Benue confluence, West Africa*. London: Saffron Books.
- Fardon, Richard, and Christine Stelzig. 2005. *Column to volume. Formal innovation in Chamba statuary*. London: Saffron Books.
- Forge, Anthony. 1973. Introduction. In Anthony Forge (ed.) *Primitive art and society*. London: Oxford University Press: xiii-xxii.
- Foss, Perkins. 2003. Eravwe: An ephemeral Urhobo water spirit masquerade. In Frank Herreman (ed.) *Material differences; art and identity in Africa*. New York: Museum of African Art, 132-135.
- Grand-Dufay, Charlotte. 2013. The Vuvi and their masks. A little-known Gabonese culture. *Tribal Arts* 67: 93-105.
- Israel, Paolo. 2014. *In step with the times: Mapiko masquerades of Mozambique*. Athens OH: Ohio University Press.
- Jespers, Philippe. 2011. Les masques du Komo, figure hybrides comme microcosme. In Paul Marathan (ed.) *Arts d'Afrique. Voir l'invisible*. Bordeaux: Musée d'Aquitaine, 33-39.
- Kasfir, Sidney L. (ed.). 1998. *West African masks and cultural systems*. Tervuren: Musée Royal d'Afrique.
- Kraemer, Christine M. 2010. Impermanent by design: The ephemeral in Africa's tradition-based arts. *African Arts* 43, 1, 14-27.
- Le Moal, Guy. 1980. *Les Bobo. Nature et fonction des masques*. Paris: Orstom.
- Le Moal, Guy. 2008. *Masques Bobo. Vie, formes et couleurs*. Paris: IRD, Biro.
- Lewis, John L. 2013. *The anthropology of cultural performance*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mohan, Urmila and Laurence Douny (eds). 2021. *The material subject. Rethinking objects and bodies in motion*. London: Routledge.
- Muller, Jean-Claude. 2001. Inside, outside, and inside out: Masks, rulers, and gender among the Diï and their neighbors. *African Arts* 34, 1: 58-71+95-96.
- Napier, A. David. 1988. Masks and metaphysics: an empirical dilemma. In Sidney L. Kasfir (ed.) *West African masks and cultural systems*. Tervuren: Musée Royal d'Afrique, 231-240.
- Njoku, Raphael C. 2020. *West African masking traditions and diaspora masquerade carnivals: History, memory, and transnationalism*. University of Rochester Press.
- Ottenberg, Simon. 1982. Illusion, communication and psychology in West African masquerades. *Ethos* 10, 2: 149-185.
- Ottenberg, Simon, and David A. Binkley. 2006. Introduction: An overview. In Simon Ottenberg and David Binkley (eds.). *Playful performers. African children's masquerades*. New Brunswick: Transaction publishers, 1-46.
- Petridis, Constantijn. 2003. Among the Luntu and neighboring peoples of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Angola. In Frank Herreman (ed.)

- Material differences; art and identity in Africa*. New York: Museum of African Art, 136-141.
- Picton, John. 2022. Introduction. In Polly Richards (ed.) *Dogon masks in motion*. Glienecke: Galda Verlag, 1-12.
- Poppi, Césaire. 2013. The trail of Sigma. Masks and technologies of power in North-Western Ghana. In Anne-Marie Bouttiaux (ed.) *La dynamique des masques en Afrique occidentale*. Tervuren: Musée Royale de l'Afrique Centrale, 181-196.
- Reed, David B. 2003. *Dan Ge performance. Masks and music in contemporary Côte d'Ivoire*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Richards, Polly. 2022. *Dogon masks in motion*. Glienecke: Galda Verlag.
- Roberts, Allen F. 1980. Tabwa masks: an old trick of the human race. *African Arts* 23, 2: 36-47+101-103.
- Schechner, Richard. 2002. Foreword: Fundamentals of performance studies. In Nathan Stucky and Cynthia Wimmer (eds.) *Teaching performance studies*. Southern Illinois University Press, ix-xv.
- Schechner, Richard. 1988. *Performance theory*. New York: Routledge.
- Schechner, Richard, and Victor Turner. 1985. *Between theater and anthropology*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Schildkrout, Enid (ed.) 1989. *Wild spirits, strong medicine. African art and the wilderness*. New York: Center for African Art.
- Siegmann, William C. 1980. *Spirit manifestation and the Poro society*. Bern: Peter Lang.
- Smith, Jonathan Z. 1987. *To take place: towards theory in ritual*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Steward, Pamela J. and Andrew J. Strathern. 2014. *Ritual: Key concepts in religion*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Strother, Zoe S. 2008. *Pende*. Milan: Cinq Continents.
- Strother, Zoe S. 1998. *Inventing masks: Agency and history in the art of the Central Pende*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Szakolczai, Árpád, and Bjørn Thomassen. 2019. *From anthropology to social theory: Rethinking the social sciences*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Taussig, Michael. 1999. *Defacement: Public secrecy and the labor of the negative*. Stanford University Press.
- Tonkin, Elizabeth. 1979. Masks and power. *Man* 14 (2), 237-248.
- Turner, Victor W. 1985. *On the edge of the bush. Anthropology as experience*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Turner, Victor W. 1969. *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Van Beek, Walter E.A. 2024. Masks versus cattle: the ecology of an African art form. *Human Ecology* 52, 4: 85-865.
- Van Beek, Walter E.A. 2022. Masks in the tourist bubble. In Polly Richards (ed.) *Dogon masks in motion*. Glienecke: Galda Verlag, 196-115.
- Van Beek, Walter E.A. 2006. Boys and masks among the Dogon. In Simon Ottenberg and David A. Binckley (eds.) *Playful performers. African children's masquerades*. New Brunswick & London: Transaction Publishers, 67-88.
- Van Beek, Walter E.A., and Harry Leyten. 2023. *Masquerades in African society: Gender, power, and identity*. Oxford: Currey, Boydell and Brewer.

- Vásquez, Gabriel. 2011. *More than belief. A materialist theory of religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Vogel, Susan. 1997. *Baule. African art, western eyes*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Warnier, Jean-Pierre. 2007. *The pot-king. The body and technologies of power*. Leiden: Brill.



*This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike International 4.0 License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>; or, (b) send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 2nd Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA*