

Harn Museum of Art

Educator Resource

Symbolism & Ceremony in African Masquerades



HARN MUSEUM OF ART

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

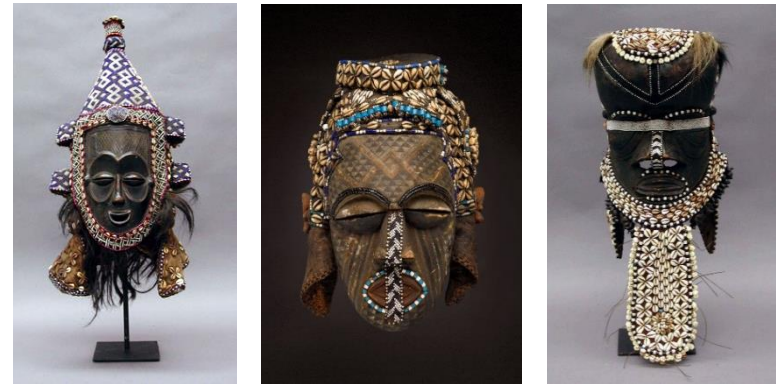
Elusive Spirits: African Masquerades

Masquerades transform human identity to something else, often an otherworld spirit. The Harn Museum of Art original exhibition, *Elusive Spirits: African Masquerades* examines the process of transformation through the materiality of the mask, and through multi-media components of performance.

When masks embody or manifest spirit beings, how does the human to spirit transformation occur? The exhibition interrogates human-spirit relationships, and how such relationships evolve as the elusive spirits appear, engage humans, and then disappear. It considers how the essence of the spirit is conveyed through phenomena, and how capturing that essence is the goal of the artists—the mask maker and performer—but also those who witness the performance.

In Africa today, masks continue to be relevant and evolving. Masks included in the exhibition range from the mid-20th century to the early 21st century and demonstrate the continuity of masking while pointing to new directions in masquerade production, use and meaning. The works are organized into groups of ethnically-related masks, also highlighting their distinct roles or themes. Some of these masks serve to ease transitions from life to death, or from childhood to adulthood. Others include juxtapositions of the human world with the otherworld, of ideal beauty with hideousness, and of health- or wealth-giving spirits with those who wreak havoc. Lastly, several masks embody status and prestige by using lavish materials, often imported. While secular, they transform the human body to something we may perceive as otherworldly.

Susan Cooksey, Ph.D.
Harn Museum Curator of African Art



SYMBOLISM & CEREMONY

This resource unit is offered as a complement to the exhibition, *Elusive Spirits*, with the intention to support classroom investigation by K-12 educators and their students. Selected objects are presented with a special focus on the ceremonies and symbols associated with each mask, along with corresponding images, maps, detailed background information and suggested discussion questions.

Through investigation of these works, students will become familiar with a variety of masquerade traditions from diverse groups of African peoples and gain an understanding of the vital connection between visual art and cultural expression.

Brandi Breslin
Harn Museum Coordinator for School Programs

Sande Masquerades



MENDE PEOPLES & SANDE SOCIETY

The Mende are a group of peoples that live primarily in Sierra Leone, along with a small population in Liberia. The Mende primarily live in traditional, rural villages and work as farmers of rice, yams, cocoa, peanuts and other crops. Children attend government schools, but are also educated through social organizations led by community leaders and elders. The *Poro* society for boys and the *Sande* society for girls teach community expectations and social values.

The Sande society is named for the spirit that is believed to protect and guide Mende women throughout their entire lives. Around the age of 13, girls participate in initiation rights – a formal process for learning the responsibilities of adulthood. During this time, Mende girls are taught to be hardworking and modest in their behavior. They also learn how to show respect and obedience toward elders.



CEREMONY

Sande society masquerades feature masked dancers, *soweï*, who perform during young women's initiation ceremonies. A dancer in a wooden helmet mask along with a costume of black raffia represents the embodiment of the Sande spirit as well as the beauty and behavior of an ideal young woman. The Sande masquerade is one of the few masking traditions in Africa that is designed and performed exclusively by women.

SYMBOLISM

The *soweï* helmet mask represents Mende ideals of feminine beauty and behavior. The downcast eyes represent dignity, modesty and an inner strength and spirituality. The small, closed mouth signifies a woman's humility and composure. The high forehead represents an intelligent and thoughtful nature. The neck rings suggest health and prosperity in addition to representing the rippled waves that form when the Sande spirit emerges from a sacred pool of water.

The elaborate and beautiful hairstyle of the mask represents not only a feminine ideal but also the importance of bonds among women within a community. An intricate hairstyle indicates that a woman must enlist the help of other women to dress her hair.



Muma "Unity," a mask carved in 1954 by Mustafa Ado Dassama dancing at Ngiyehun, Luawa, Kailahun. Photograph by Ruth Philips.

Mende people, Southern Sierra Leone
Helmet Mask (sowel)
 20th Century
 Wood, fiber
 Gift of Rod McGalliard
 1990.14.28

Additional Examples – Sande Society Masks



Vai people, Southern Sierra Leone
Helmet Mask (zogbe)
20th century
Wood
Gift of Rod McGalliard
1993.12.21



Mende people, Southern Sierra Leone
Helmet Mask (sowe)
20th century
Wood
Gift of Rod McGalliard
1990.14.30

Deangle Masquerade



DAN & MANO PEOPLES

The Dan and Mano peoples are two ethnic groups that have close ties and common cultural practices. Each group considers the other to be like “brothers.” They live in mountainous tropical rain forests and work primarily as farmers. The Dan peoples live in Northeastern Liberia and bordering areas of Côte d’Ivoire. Mano peoples live primarily in northern Liberia’s Nimba region and southern Guinea.

Like the Mende peoples in Sierra Leone, important social organizations influence education and everyday life. The *Poro* society for boys and the *Sande* society for girls teach essential skills and community values.



CEREMONY

The *deangle* masquerade is performed by Dan and Mano men as part of young boys’ initiation ceremonies by the society.

As part of an extended initiation camp in which boy *Poro*s have been separated from their families, the *deangle* mask brings them food prepared by their mothers in the village. In order to gather this food, *deangle* masks go into the village and beg for food. Because the masks are embodied by spirits, they need an interpreter to explain their utterances to the village women, and they comically ask for inedible things, pretending ignorance of human foods.

Although the mask embodies a female spirit, the costume is worn by a man whose movements imitate those of women and who speaks in a high-pitched voice.

SYMBOLISM

The *deangle* masquerade represents a cheerful, nurturing and beautiful woman. The face mask with smooth rounded features, narrow eyes and chiseled front teeth represents ideal feminine beauty. Along with the softly modeled, carved wooden face mask, *deangle* includes a costume with a tall, conical cap, handwoven shirt, and full skirt made of fibers that completely hides the male identity of the wearer. These attributes along with the masquerader’s actions and movements during performance represent the presence of a nurturing and joyful maternal figure.

The Harn Museum’s complete *deangle* masquerade costume was collected by the botanist, W.E. Manis in 1940, when it was purchased from the owner after it was worn in an initiation ceremony.



Mano people, Do River, Liberia

Masquerade (*deangle*)

c. 1940

Wood, fabric, fiber, metal, cowrie shells, feathers, vegetable dyes

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. W.E. Manis, S-77-22



Dan people, Liberia

Face mask (*deangle*)

20th century

Wood, cloth, cowrie shells, beads,
pigment

Museum purchase, funds provided by
Michael A. Singer, 2001.17

Kuba Masquerades



KUBA PEOPLES

The Kuba peoples live in the Democratic Republic of Congo in a central region nestled between fertile forest and the savannas bordering the Sankura, Lulua and Kasai rivers. The Kuba Kingdom traces its history to the year 1625, when founding king, Shyaam a-Mbul (“Shyaam the Great”) united several smaller chiefdoms of varying ethnic groups under his leadership. While the Kuba Kingdom holds no political authority in modern-day Democratic Republic of Congo, it is still presided over by a ceremonial king and regional chiefs. In this way, the Kuba peoples retain their ethnic identities with shared history, cultural traditions and social expectations.



Mwashambo



Ngady a Mwash



Bwom

CEREMONY

Kuba masquerades include three royal masks that appear in public ceremonies to affirm the rights and presence of the king within the community. During initiation rights for young men or at funerals celebrating and mourning the life of a family member, these masks appear and represent characters in the Kuba origin myth.

SYMBOLISM

All three masks, as well as many decorative items created by the Kuba people, are covered with a profusion of geometric patterns. These intricate patterns show how intelligent and civilized one is, as opposed to non-humans who cannot make such beautiful things.

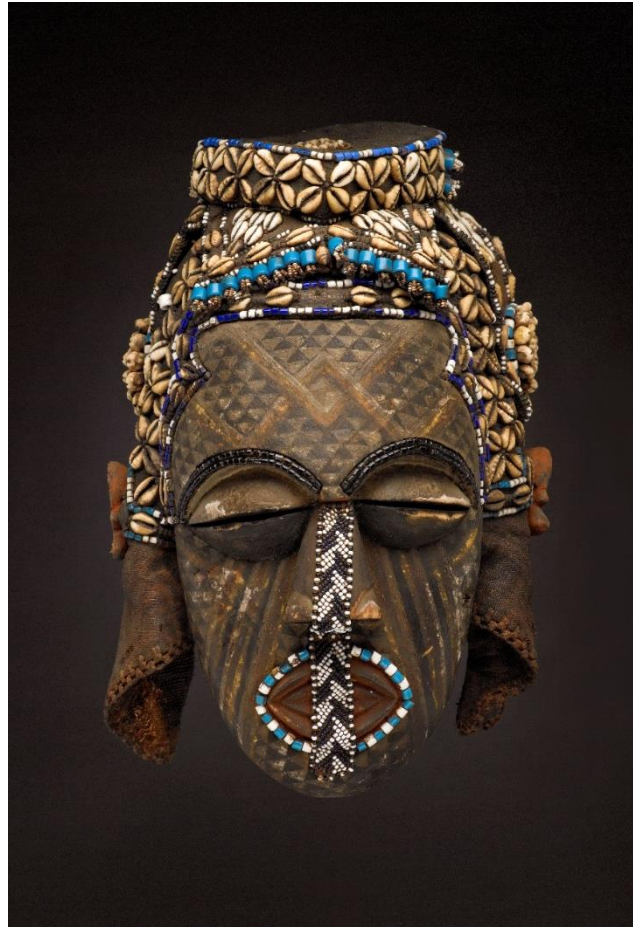
Mwashambo mask portrays the royal ancestor, *Woot*, who was also the first person brought into existence by a creative power. Much of this mask is covered with intricate beadwork in a variety of geometric patterns, animal hair forms a beard and cowrie shells decorate a raffia cloth collar. These elements combine to create a lavish display of royal authority.

Ngady a Mwash mask portrays *Woot*’s sister, *Mweel*, and represents women in general. This mask also features cowrie shells and seed beads in intricate patterns. The traces of red pigment, white beadwork, and tear streaks under the eyes signify her suffering, as one who mourns, and indicate her respect for the ancestors.

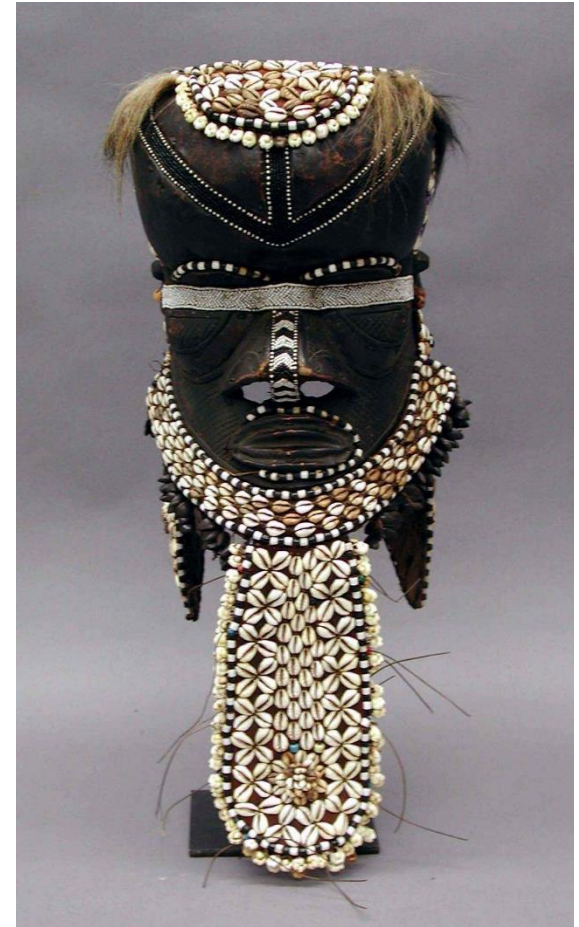
Bwom mask represents the common people and appears during initiation rights for young men. The pronounced forehead and broad nose are common features of *Bwom* masks, along with the cowrie shell collar and beard and the triangular seed bead patterns on the nose and forehead.



Lele and Kuba peoples
 Democratic Republic of Congo
Male Royal Ancestor Mask
(Mwashambo)
 20th century
 Wood, raffia, animal hair, glass beads,
 cowries
 Gift of Rod McGalliard
 2004.37.6



Kuba people
 Democratic Republic of Congo
Female Royal Ancestor Mask
(Ngady a Mwash)
 1920-1940
 Wood, animal hair, pigment, beads, cowries
 Gift of Rod McGalliard
 2004.37.4



Kuba people
 Democratic Republic of Congo
Male Royal Ancestor Mask (Bwoom)
 1939
 Wood, copper, raffia, beads, cowries
 Gift of Rod McGalliard
 2004.37.5

Chi wara Masquerade



BAMANA PEOPLES

The Bamana peoples are an ethnic group living in West Africa, primarily in the country of Mali. Many Bamana peoples live in cities, while other more traditional groups live in rural villages and practice subsistence farming and hunting as a way of life.

Traditional social organizations are an important part of Bamana culture and center around vocational groups such as farming, hunting, or other trades such as weaving, sculpting or pottery-making. These organizations serve to reinforce traditions and provide training for newer members and workers.



CEREMONY

The chi wara headdress is part of a masquerade performed by the Bamana Chi Wara society, which honors farmers. It represents the mythical hero, Chi Wara, a divine half man and half antelope being who first taught humans how to grow crops. Masquerades are performed during planting and harvest seasons to encourage farmers as they work in the fields and also to celebrate and praise their efforts in the village once the work is complete.

SYMBOLISM

In addition to referencing the antelope form, chi wara headdresses combine features of aardvarks (pronounced ears, elongated body and short legs) and pangolins (incised decoration resembling scales). These are all animals that, like farmers, dig the earth.

The long, graceful antelope horns are also carved to resemble stalks of grain, and the incised patterns on the body look like a groundnut – important sustaining crops for the Bamana peoples. The zig-zag patterns of the legs show him springing into action and may also reference an earlier chi wara tradition to represent the radiance of the sun. In performance, chi wara headdresses are combined with a full costume of dark raffia fibers that represents water. Combined, these visual forms reference the primary elemental forces of earth, sun and water.

Masquerades always feature two chi wara headdresses, one male and one female. The female chi wara is identified by the addition of a baby chi wara included on its back. The representation of both male and female honors the complementary roles of men and women in agricultural work while symbolizing the fertility of the earth through the essential pairing that creates life.



Bamana people, Central Mali

Headdress (chi wara)

Late 19th - 20th century

Wood, metal, cotton, grass and palm
fibers

Museum purchase, funds provided by the
Caroline Julier and James G. Richardson
Acquisition Fund

2007.12

Questions for Discussion

Describe

- What objects are represented? Are they represented realistically or in an abstract manner?
- What materials can you identify? Why do you think the artist chose these materials?
- What geometric designs do you recognize? What forms are repeated?
- How would you describe the expression shown on each mask?

Analyze

- Do you find any shapes or designs that remind you of something else?
- During performances, the body of the performer wearing the mask is usually completely covered. Why do you think the identity of the performer is kept secret?

Interpret

- How do the masks use symbols to communicate ideas?
- Why is it useful to represent ideas in an abstract form rather than realistically?

Compare

- Many African masquerades are used to teach lessons about traditions and cultural expectations. What are other ways to learn about these concepts?
- What traditions are important to you and your family? What images do you associate with these traditions? How do traditions change over time?

Judge

- What about the masks make them art?
- Why are transitions in life important to celebrate?
- Some of the masks represent ideal beauty. Do they represent your own idea of beauty?

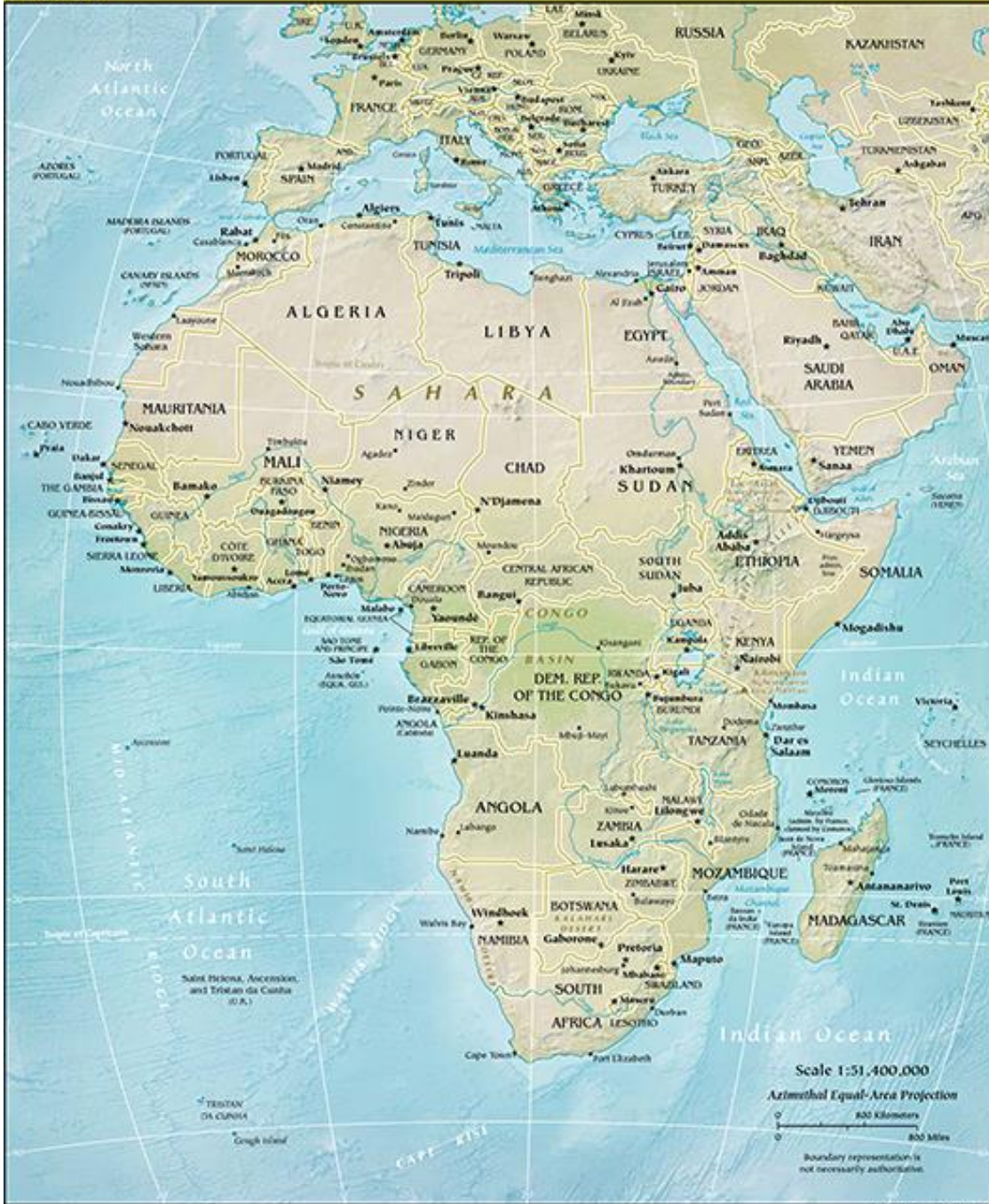
Imagine

- How might wearing this mask effect the way you move?
- Have you ever worn a mask? What was it like and why did you wear it?
- When a mask is being worn and performed, what do you think the audience focuses on?
- How might masks seem different in a museum than they are during a performance?

Pronunciation Guide

• Mende	MEN-deh
• Sande	SAHN-deh
• Deangle	de-AHN-gleh
• Sowe	so-WEH
• Kuba	Koo-bah
• <i>Mwashambo</i>	<i>m-WAH-sham-boy</i>
• <i>Ngady</i>	<i>n-Gah-dee</i>
• <i>Chi wara</i>	<i>chee-Wah-rah</i>

AFRICA



Physical Map of the World, January 2015



Physical map of the world, 2015.
From World Factbook, by United States, CIA.

Physical map of Africa, 2015.
From World Factbook, by United States, CIA.

References

- African Studies Center at Michigan State University. “Exploring Africa, Module 12: African Art.” <http://exploringafrica.matrix.msu.edu/>. June 2016
- Art and Life in Africa, University of Iowa. <https://africa.uima.uiowa.edu/>. June 2016
- Central Intelligence Agency, World Factbook. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/docs/refmaps.html>. June 2016
- Clark, Christa. “The Art of Africa: A Resource for Educators. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.” <http://www.metmuseum.org/-/media/Files/Learn/For%20Educators/Publications%20for%20Educators/The%20Art%20of%20Africa.pdf>. June 2016
- Finley, Carol. The Art of African Masks: Exploring Cultural Traditions. Lerner Publications Company, Minneapolis, 1999.
- Knappert, Jan. Kings, Gods & Spirits from African Mythology. Schocken Books, New York, 1986.
- Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History. <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/>. June 2016
- Pemberton, John. African Beaded Art: Power and Adornment. Smith College Museum of Art, 2008.
- Wikimedia Commons, Locator maps of countries of Africa. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Locator_maps_of_countries_of_Africa. June 2016