

Dancing ^{in the} Moonlight

Zara Masks of Burkina Faso



Harn Museum of Art, University of Florida



Figure 3

Dancing in the Moonlight *Zara Masks of Burkina Faso*

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Introduction

White masks, also called *Lo Gbe* (pronounced Lō gbay) dance on certain moonlit Saturday nights during the dry season to honor a deceased member of a given Zara community in and around the city of Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso. Ideally, organizers mount white mask dances only for the most elderly and distinguished individuals who bravely defended the weak, spoke kindly and righteously, gave to the poor, and endeavored to improve their communities. The dances occur one to three times a year in those communities that possess white masks. Throughout the night, black and white *Lo Gbe* leap, spin, twirl, and dart about in ways that enliven the masks (Figure 3). These dramatic productions involving at least a dozen masks last all night, beginning around 10 p.m. and ending around 4:30 a.m.

Zara Muslims created *Lo Gbe* as a result of their conversion to Islam and as a response to daytime masks owned and danced by non-Muslim Bobo people.¹ This was a deliberate decision calling for a unique visual aesthetic tailored to moonlight.

Why Dance White Masks?

Bobo peoples (indigenous to western Burkina Faso and part of southern Mali) are widely considered to have always been open to outsiders. So when Zara Muslims first arrived in the Bobo region from the Niger Valley area, likely in the 16th century, non-Muslim Bobos welcomed them. Zara Muslims settled in their villages and merged with Bobos to varying degrees.² When trading became dangerous and difficult in the 17th and 18th centuries, many Zaras joined Bobos in their agricultural work, stopped practicing Islam, and danced Bobo daytime masks. But by the 18th and 19th centuries, an influx of new immigrants caused Islam to appear less a religion of strangers, and more an indigenous one. Zaras, in particular, began to convert to Islam in the late 19th century. As Zara Muslims gained positions of prestige in the region, conversions to Islam gained momentum in the 1920s. With the rise of Islam in the city, Zaras formed a community eager to have its own masks—a shared tradition—so they designed white masks to distinguish themselves as Zara Muslims.

Lo Gbe drew on existing principles of Bobo masquerade costume and practice, but was created as a unique Zara Muslim form.³ Distinct though it is, this new shared Zara Muslim tradition honors the historical relationship with regional Bobo families by adopting the performance of danced masks.⁴ Moreover, by creating an informal committee of elders that handles decision making, dancing in a funerary context, and emulating Bobo customs on the dance floor, Zaras have based white masks on Bobo daytime mask practices, thereby expressing their historical and ongoing alliance with Bobo families.

Why Only Under Moonlight?

The defining feature of white masks is that they dance only at night while the overwhelming majority of masks in the Bobo-Dioulasso region emerge only during daylight hours. White mask practice is structured by the faith of its Muslim practitioners. Muslim prayer, one of the pillars of Islam, takes place five times a day. The first prayer is usually between 4 and 5 a.m., the last between 7 and 8 p.m. Dancing at nighttime offers an extended period free from the obligations of prayer. The Zara elder, Lamine Sanou, a former dancer and counselor to the head of *Lo Gbe*, has explained, “there is nothing ‘condemnable’ about white masks. However, when it comes time to pray, you leave the white masks and pray. Prayer comes first.”⁵ Indeed, Zaras begin to prepare for a *Lo Gbe* dance right after the day’s last prayer, and the dance ends definitively at, or preferably before, its first call to prayer.

Participants cultivate nighttime’s visual obscurity at *Lo Gbe* dances by minimizing artificial light in favor of moonlight. White masks dance in areas removed from streetlights, while nearby residents extinguish exterior lights. The dances take place on a Saturday night close to a full moon, taking advantage of the soft, diffuse light that casts faint shadows throughout the neighborhood. Moonlight provides adequate ambient light and an appropriately eerie atmosphere for the enigmatic white masks.

What is the White Mask Aesthetic?

The unique design of Zara white masks take advantage of the conditions of nighttime performance. At night, even under bright moonlight, the visual perception of color, contrast and fine detail are diminished, while sensitivity to light and peripheral vision are sharpened with optical adaptation. Motion detection in such a situation ranges from degraded to fair. White masks embrace these conditions; turning the visual obscurity of a moonlit night into a strength.

The masks are comprised of snug-fitting, black and white cotton bodysuits that envelop the dancer from head to ankle (leaving holes for the hands and feet). The dancer is physically sewn into the mask so that its leotard-like fit emphasizes the body and creates clean lines, particularly of the torso and legs, maximizing legibility for nighttime viewing. The white mask ensemble completely covers the dancer’s body even while revealing its form. Thus, *Lo Gbe* emphasizes both the transformative power of the mask and the human presence behind it.

Under moonlight, the world appears almost black and white.⁶ And *Lo Gbe*’s black and white palette offers higher contrast than would chromatic hues. It boosts visibility, setting the mask apart from the darkness, yet preserving its enigmatic nature, resulting in an ephemeral appearance (back cover). The mask is clearly visible, but not fully exposed. What a viewer apprehends does not satisfy curiosity. The tension between what is seen and what is not seen lends mystery to white mask practice. At night, white masks are alluring, even sublime.

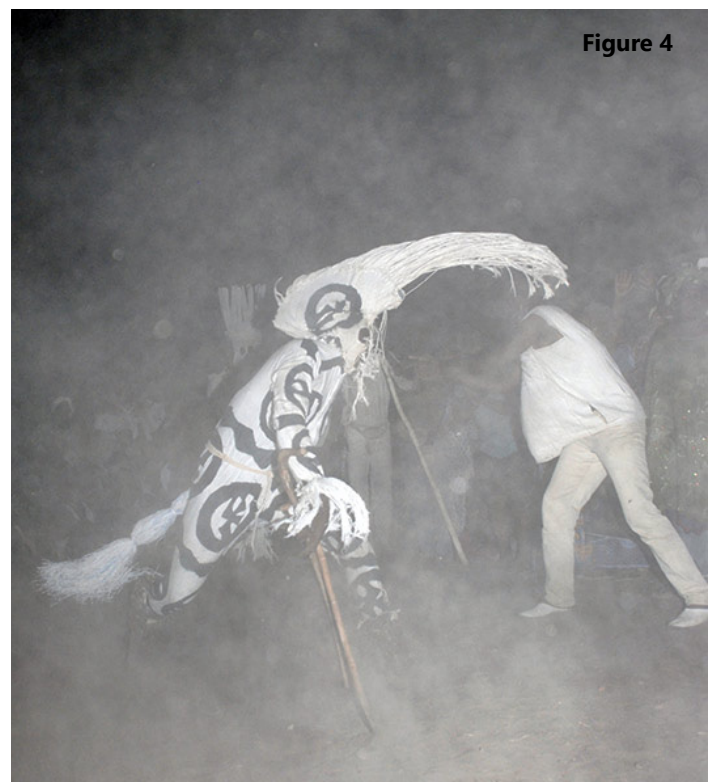


Figure 4

Reinterpretation of existing forms and variety of patterning are crucial to white mask practice. Mask makers continually invent clever new compositions, most often using black applique on white cloth, producing unique ensembles, each with its own identity. Audiences appreciate and judge the faithfulness of *Lo Gbe* against standard forms, but also eagerly anticipate and critique the beauty and originality of masks with new designs. This offers mask makers the opportunity to show off their creativity and makes for a compelling group of masks.

For Sya district's current premier white mask maker Gaoussou Sanou, no part of the design is superfluous. His white mask creations are known for their refined, graphic motifs. When designing new versions of *Lo Gbe* with unique patterns, he contends that clarity is second only to beauty (Figure 2). Most often, he produces a shape or cluster of shapes and repeats the pattern throughout the body and headpiece of the mask. Using negative space effectively, he crafts an uncluttered composition. Certainly from a distance, lit only by moonlight, it is almost impossible to visually distinguish anything beyond the mask's silhouette and pattern. Thus masks with unique designs disrupt expectations, demonstrate creative virtuosity, and potentially surprise and thrill viewers.

In addition to the material ingenuity of mask makers like Gaoussou Sanou, dancers (who are not publicly identified by their given names) animate the masks in interactive performances that fully engage the senses. Every step and every flinch registers visually and aurally through the mask's fringe and ankle rattles. In dance, a white mask's gestures can stir up enough dust to impair vision even further. And yet the mask's high contrast, black and white designs stand out from the surrounding darkness and crowd so that even through a billowing dust cloud, the mask's silhouette and movement are clear (Figure 4).

Notes

- 1 Zaras are also called "Bobo-Dioulas" (also written "Bobo-Julas" or "Bobo-Dyulas"). Both terms have been used to designate ethnicity, occupation, and religious affiliation.
- 2 For a complete account of this history, see Binger (1892), Sidibé (1927), Ciré Ba (1930), Le Moal (1980), Bobo: MA-DA-RE (1984), Diamitani (1983), Diallo (1990), and Sanou, B. D. (1994), Kouanda (1995), "Bâtisson Ensembles" (1996), Roth (1996), Saul (1997), Wilks (2000), Fourchard (2001), Fauré and Labazée (2002), "Société Civile" (2007), Traoré (2007), Saul (2013), and raoré (2013).
- 3 *Lo Gbe* began as a children's toy that, as more Muslim families allied with one another and the practice expanded, cemented bonds between those families. At the point of mass conversions to Islam, Zara leaders turned it into a serious, adult funerary practice—but one that still cultivates the interest and skills of young boys.

The culmination of most white masks' dances highlight the movement of the head. Every *Lo Gbe* head is exaggerated and embellished, most often by a mohawk-like crest, reminiscent of a rooster's comb, which adds up to ten inches of height to the masked figure. Occasionally it will be studded with an abundance of cowry shells. Most often, sixteen to twenty inches of white cotton fringe flows from the edge of the crest which, when the mask is at rest, droops and reads visually as hair (Figure 1).

Additional fringe dangles from the dancer's wrists and clattering metal noisemakers are wrapped around the ankles. All of these elements work in concert to visually enhance movement. Unencumbered by the bulk and weight of wooden headpieces, white masks animate the fringe through a tour de force rotation of the neck in a series of circular motions linked by twists or through a rapid head-banging gesture, and accentuated by its rattles clattering out their own complementary rhythm. The mask's movements cause its cotton fringe to whirl and flutter, defy gravity, and enhance the dancer's gestures (front over). As the pinnacle of the dance and a crucial point of competition between masks, it rarely fails to captivate the audience's attention.

For these spectacular *Lo Gbe* performances, audiences are not limited to Muslims. While Zaras might be in the majority, in urban Bobo-Dioulasso, audience members come from a variety of backgrounds and countries. And Zaras devised their white masks to accommodate that fact. Like Bobo masquerades, *Lo Gbe* dances are community-wide and public. Bobo friends and family are particularly zealous supporters, which involves them in the discourse concerning the practice, reaffirms their centuries-long alliance, and helps make performances robust and meaningful.

- 4 Indeed, so historically intertwined are they, that today locals use the term "Zara" primarily to denote a Muslim identity with especially close ties to Bobos peoples and secondarily to identify those Bobos who have become Muslims. "Zara" is also widely used to identify those Bobos who have become Muslims.
- 5 Interview with the author, 27 May 2008.
- 6 The human optical system cannot detect color under the viewing conditions of *Lo Gbe*. A moonlit night is a "mesopic" visual regime. It is characterized by a decrease in color discrimination, spatial resolution, and contrast acuity, but an increase in sensitivity to light and peripheral vision. Motion detection and velocity perception are also compromised.

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Dancing in the Moonlight

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Cover

Ligueraboli dancing so its headpiece's
fringe extends dramatically
Made by Gaoussou Sanou
Wolokoto village *Lo Gbe* performing in Bama,
Burkina Faso
2014

Figure 1

Ligueraboli hamming it up for the camera
Made by Gaoussou Sanou
Bolomakoté district *Lo Gbe* performing in
Tounouma district, Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso
2009

Figure 2

Tiébolikoloyiri posing for a photograph
Made by Gaoussou Sanou
Sya district, Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso
2009

Figure 3

Family of *Tiébolikoloyiris* dancing together with
Bolofourou (far left)
Made by Gaoussou Sanou
Sya district, Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso
2009

Figure 4

Tieboli stirring up the dance floor
Satiri, Burkina Faso
2009

Back Cover

Gyinna-Gyinna leaping on its staff
Sya district, Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso
2009

All photos by Lisa Homann



Figure 1



Figure 2

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