



MASKS AND MUSIC, SPIRITS AND SPORTS: GUNYEGE IN PERFORMANCE

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"*Ta genoe taa!*" (Walk on the back of our little *ge*!) sing Dan' men and women, gathered in a tightly-packed circle behind the soccer goalpost at one end of the field in the Leon Robert Stadium in downtown Man, Côte d'Ivoire. Sweating in the late afternoon, dry season sun, smiling, moving side to side as they shift weight from one foot to the next in time with the drums, they sing on: "*Kwa ge nin bha!*" (It's *our ge* who is there!). The performers are raising energy for the *Gebian*—a race pitting human runners against masked spirits called *ge*ⁱⁱ. The musical ensemble behind the goalpost is neutral, being charged with animating the whole event and both teams' competitors. Each team also has its own musical group performing *ge* music and dance (*getan*) to invoke the spirits required for their own *ge* and human racers to succeed. The musical energy builds. The team from the village of Bigouin sends across the field a man blowing an animal horn trumpet (*tru*)—an instrument associated with mystical powers—to build up his team's courage and intensity. In support of the team from the Man neighborhood of Petit Gbapleu, a male spiritual specialist (*zumi*),ⁱⁱⁱ his skin painted in red and black dyes, runs aggressively around the field ringing a piercing bell, intent on intimidating everyone into believing that the *ge* from his team is unbeatable. Also playing a supportive role is *Sakpe*. A *ge* with a red mask ringed with green leaves, *Sakpe* is a type of police *ge* whose role is to ensure that performances of other *genu* are unfolding in an appropriate manner, according to longstanding Dan customs.

Finally, after a couple of hours, the performers having created a scintillating ambiance of sound and motion^{iv}, the *Gebian* officials blow their whistles, calling the competitors to their respective starting lines, and the hundreds of spectators in the stands raise their voices in cheer. In the first round, Petit Gbapleu sends a human runner to a starting line several meters away from the goalpost. As the runner takes his position, his team's *zumi* runs circles around him, ringing his bell, dancing and smiling, offering him spiritual protection and encouragement for the race. At another starting line several paces behind, in order to offer the human a slight handicap, Bigouin's *ge* readies himself for the race. The neutral *getan* ensemble behind the goalpost begins drumming and singing louder and quickens its already rapid-fire tempo as they sing "*A-o ge bha nongno-we*" (The *ge*'s *nongno*; *nongno* is a type of

bird that is easy to catch, which here serves as a metaphor for the human runner). The whistle blows again, and the racers are off. The human runner, given several meters lead, must run the entire length of the soccer field, circle around the goalpost at the far end, and return to the goalpost where the race began without being caught by the *ge*. If he is caught, the *ge*'s team wins that round; if he succeeds in eluding the spirit's grasp, then it's his team that earns a point.^v In round two, Petit Gbapleu's *ge* is pitted against one of the human runners from Bigouin, and the teams continue alternating in this way throughout the competition. After a pre-determined number of rounds, whichever team has the most points emerges as the victor in this traditional sport involving a type of *ge* called a "*gunyege*"^{vi} whose mask (*gewoedhe*) is one of several Dan masks featured in this catalog.

While the *gunyege*, or racing *ge*, is arguably the least sacred of all *genu* (plural), by definition, all *genu* are sacred. Functionally, all *genu* represent Dan social ideals by being the best at what they do. A *tankoe ge* (dance *ge*) must be the best dancer around. A *zu ge* (healing *ge*) must be the best at healing, divining, and solving sorcery conflicts.^{vii} And no human should be able to outrun a *gunyege*, who both manifests and represents social ideals by running faster than anyone else in the community.

And yet, humans sometimes do win a round of *gebian* competition. Being the least sacred *ge*, the *gunyege* is less omnipotent, less invincible and less authoritative than most other types of *ge*. The humiliation experienced by a *gunyege* and his team after losing a round would be inconceivable for more highly sacred *genu*. The authority of a *zu ge*, for instance, is challenged only at great risk and peril to anyone so bold as to question his role as the ultimate arbiter in sorcery-related conflicts. Similarly, while humans may borrow the flywhisk during *tankoe ge* performances, enter the circle and dance, they cannot and should not upstage the *ge*, whose lightning-quick feet, perfectly synchronized with the master drummer's solos, must demonstrate unmatched skill in dance. In this way, the *gunyege* represents a more human side of the concept and institution of *Ge*.^{viii}

Even the *gunyege*'s outfit is less extrahuman. Fundamental to the belief system associated with *Ge* is that a *ge* in performance is not representative of, but *is*, a manifest spirit. Reinforcing this belief, the outfit and mask of nearly every type of performing *ge* completely conceals the human skin of the human performer "behind the mask." The *gunyege*, by contrast, sometimes races in



fig.1
A gunyege positions himself for the start of the race during the Gebian competition at the Leon Robert Stadium in Man, Côte d'Ivoire, 1997.
Photo by Daniel B. Reed.



fig.2
A gunyege chases after a human runner during the Gebian competition at the Leon Robert Stadium in Man, Côte d'Ivoire, 1997.
Photo by Daniel B. Reed.

bare feet and catches human runners with his bare hands, both of which violate this otherwise general principle of *ge* performance.

In terms of its visual manifestation, one of Petit Gbapleu's *gunyegenu* was typical of this genre of *ge* at the end of the twentieth century. The mask itself was oval-shaped and stained dark brown. The round eyes, circled with white paint, identified the *gunyege* as a male mask. Bold white lines cut across the face above and below the eyes. A bright yellow cloth cape, draped over the performer's head and shoulders, was held in place by a rope string that attached the mask to the head, and contrasted sharply with a bright red, long-sleeved shirt. White cotton gloves covered the hands. A short skirt made from shredded plastic (in place of the traditional raffia) draped over red synthetic sweatpants with white stripes, and the feet were characteristically bare. Contrasting with many other types of *genu*, the *gunyege*'s outfit affords great mobility and agility while still being visually striking. Both Petit Gbapleu and Bigouin had a couple of *gunyegenu* at the *Gebian* event, and while small details such as the color of the mask varied, none strayed far from the description above.

The *gunyege* mask on the wall in the Lowe Museum thus represents but one component of a multi-faceted concept, and just one (albeit central) visual element of a richly multimedia performance. Many Dan hold that *genu* are spirits who originate in the forest environment surrounding human communities in the Dan homeland region in the mountains at the border between Côte d'Ivoire and Liberia. When these spirits appear among humans, all aspects of the performance—the songs, the rhythms, the dance steps; spoken words such as proverbs or other stylized speech; theatrical and gestural tendencies; and visual elements such as power objects, clothing, and, finally, the mask—are believed to be manifestations of that *ge* spirit. Extracted from its performative context, a *gunyege* mask can certainly be appreciated for its beauty, as it is representative of the Dan carving style that Vandenhoute called "idealized realism."^{ix} In the context of *Ge* performance, however, this mask is part of a multifaceted enactment of religious belief and social ideals that is central to many Dan peoples' notions of individual and community identity.



fig.3
A gonyege and a sakpe prepare for the Gebian competition at the Leon Robert Stadium in Man, Côte d'Ivoire, 1997.
Photo by Daniel B. Reed.



fig.4
Getan musicians from Petit Gbapleu raise energy for their gonyege (in yellow), while the ge sakpe looks on, in preparation for the Gebian competition at the Leon Robert Stadium in Man, Côte d'Ivoire, 1997.
Photo by Daniel B. Reed.

ⁱThe Dan, whose homeland straddles the border between Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire, are historically farmers, and many continue agricultural practices today. Some participate in agriculture as business—growing coffee, cacao, rice, and other crops for sale—while subsistence farming also remains common. Many Dan today, however, live in cities in the Dan region such as Man and Danane and work in the service economy, selling goods in urban markets or working in local businesses. A large Dan population also lives in the south of Côte d'Ivoire, working on plantations or carving out an urban existence in Abidjan. No recent census figures on Dan population are available, though the most recent estimate of 350,000 is surely low.

ⁱⁱThough *Ge* (or *Gle*, as among the western and southern Dan) has generally been translated in scholarly literature as “mask,” some of my consultants argued that this is an insufficient and inaccurate translation. That is, *Ge* is a multifaceted, complex phenomenon, one element of which is its physical manifestation in performance. Many (though not all) *Ge* performances involve a masked dancer, who wears a *gewoedhoe* (literally, face of the *ge*, or “mask”) as he performs. A healthy body of scholarly literature exists on *Ge*, most of it written by art historians and anthropologists. See, for example Fischer 1978; Fischer and Himmelheber 1984; Gba 1984, 1982; Harley 1950; Himmelheber 1965; Majima 1997; Tabmen 1971; Vandenhoute 1989; Reed 2004, 2003, 2001, 1999; Zemp 1993, 1971.

ⁱⁱⁱFor more on the *zumi*, see Reed 2003, pp. 82-86.

^{iv}While the mask is clearly central to the performance of those *genu* who have a visual manifestation (and not all do—see below), music is often no less important. For many types of *ge*, the medium that invites them from the spiritual realm (*gebo*) to the human realm is sound. Some *genu* in fact have no visual manifestation at all, but present themselves exclusively in the combination of certain musical sounds (Zemp 1993; Lifschitz 1988).

^vThe rules of the *Gebian* that are described here are those used in formalized settings such as official competitions held in stadiums. In Dan village contexts, *Gebian* rules are quite different, following much older customs associated with this traditional sport (see, for example, the catalog entry for item 65 in this catalog).

^{vi}While the term *gunyeye* is used widely in the published literature, my consultants called the category of racing *ge* “*biansoege*.” This difference might be attributable to the fact that much of the previous literature on Dan *ge* is based on research conducted in Liberia, in a different part of the Dan homeland region.

^{vii}See Reed 2003, especially chapter 4, “What is *Ge*?”, for more on the concept of *Ge* in Dan life.

^{viii}My Dan consultants generally considered *Ge* to have four facets: 1. a forest spirit, generally living in the spiritual realm *gebo*; 2. the particular form each forest spirit takes when among humans in performance; 3. the spiritual basis for the traditional education that young Dan receive in initiation; and 4. the enactment of that education, or proper behavior for adults in Dan society. In this article, I refer to individual spirits in lower case (*ge*) and the system of belief, education and behavior in upper case (*Ge*).

^{ix}See Vandenhoute 1989, p. 8.

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