

# MERTON D. SIMPSON GALLERY

## TRIBAL AND MODERN ARTS



*Bakongo fetish*  
Congo/Zaire, 18th century  
Wood, nails, and mirror  
4 feet 11 inches

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## first word

### Masks and Modernities

by Charles Gore

Masquerade and masking traditions in Africa have been an iconic subject of African art studies throughout the twentieth century and often have served to underline historical continuities with a precolonial past. At the beginning of the twentieth century such artifacts were a key aspect of African, and especially West African, traditions of visual (and performance) practice that became entwined with a new modernist avant garde developing in Paris. These European artists were seeking new modes of representation that challenged the naturalistic conventions of mainstream art. They looked at African art that could be found in museums, such as the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadero founded in 1878 (now the Musée de l'Homme) as well as in curio shops, and found parallels, if not inspiration, in the rendering of form with their own projects.

Such was their interest that it is perhaps unsurprising that one of the seminal paintings of this new rendering of modernity, *Les Femmes d'Alger*, completed by Picasso in 1907, featured mask-like visual conventions in one of the women's heads. Compositionally it drew on an exoticized image from the French photographer Fortier's body of work taken in West Africa. Within its shallow picture space, the women's angular forms echo both Etruscan and some West African visual conventions and herald the emergence of Cubism as a full-fledged art movement.

This engagement with African masking traditions by modernist artists from all continents continued in diverse ways throughout the twentieth century and to the present day, developed to a range of modernist intentions and within various art movements. In the slip-page within Western ideas of personhood between resemblance and masking, these modernist conventions became one element in the iconographic tactics of modernist portraiture and its modes of representing the individual. (In the European history of ideas it is well established that notions of the self are derived from Greek and Roman theater.)

However, different positionings were taken up by artists within these art movements, and this had a particular relevance for artists of

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*African Arts* (ISSN 0001-9933 print, 1937-2108 online; ISBN 978-0-9793578-6-2) is published quarterly by the University of California, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1310, in spring, summer, autumn, and winter. For editorial information and advertising rates, write *African Arts*, The J.S. Coleman African Studies Center, University of California, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1310. Phone: 310-825-1218. Fax: 310-206-2250. Email: [afriartsedit@international.ucla.edu](mailto:afriartsedit@international.ucla.edu) (editorial); [afriartsads@international.ucla.edu](mailto:afriartsads@international.ucla.edu) (advertising). **The opinions of contributors and advertisers are not necessarily those of African Arts.**

**Subscription information:** *African Arts* is distributed by The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 02142. Subscription and address changes should be addressed to MIT Press Journals, 238 Main Street, Cambridge, MA 02142-1407. Phone: 617-253-2889, US and Canada 800-207-8354. Fax: 617-577-1545. Email: [journals-orders@mit.edu](mailto:journals-orders@mit.edu). For fastest service and more information, subscribe online using our secure server at <http://mitpressjournals.org/aa>. **Subscription rates:** print and electronic, Individuals \$78.00, Institutions \$154.00; electronic only, Individuals \$70.00, Institutions \$137.00. Canadians add 5% GST. Outside the U.S. and Canada add \$23.00 for postage and handling for print edition. Prices subject to change without notice.

**Single issues:** Current issues are \$20.00. Back issue rates: Individuals \$22.00; institutions \$44.00. Canadians add 5% GST. Outside the U.S. and Canada add \$5.00 per issue for postage and handling. Prices subject to change without notice.

**POSTMASTER:** Send address changes to *African Arts*, MIT Press Journals, 238 Main Street, Cambridge, MA 02142-1407. Periodicals postage paid at Boston, MA and at additional post offices.

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 Printed in Hong Kong.

(continued from page 1)

African descent, no more so than in the reclamation of African art by African American artists during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. This also featured in the later collage work of Romare Bearden during the 1960s–70s and in the work of diasporic artists such as Wilfredo Lam within the surrealist movement of the 1930s–40s. Such issues also appear subsequently in the 1980s New York art scene in the work of Jean-Michel Basquiat and the work of artists such as Ras Ishi Butcher in Barbados during the 1990s.

Within Africa, masquerade and its cultural repertoires were appropriated in the development of various regional modernist art movements. Most notably, Senghor's project of École de Dakar from 1960 drew on the ideas of Negritude, where a generalized iconography of mask was prominent in presenting a modernism based on the assertion of a common Pan-African heritage. This was rejected by a following generation of Senegalese artists such as Issa Samb, who ostensibly opposed state patronage and used materials at hand to engage with local audiences through installations and performance, which featured masks among other ready-made objects.

In contrast, in Nigeria the specificities of local visual traditions were investigated by modernist artists such as Ben Enonowu, who in some works evoked his personal experiences of Igbo masquerade through a naturalistic style. This was developed by the Natural Synthesis movement, the Nigerian artists who emerged in the late 1950s and who looked to appropriate a range of localized visual traditions to replace the prior iconography of colonial and colonized modernist art. Artists such as Uche Okeke, Bruce Onobrakpeya, and others drew on a variety of visual forms, including diverse local practices of masquerade.

In Britain in the 1970s a generation of British-born artists of both Caribbean and African descent, such as Keith Piper and Eddie Chambers, overtly challenged the exclusionary institutional regimes operating in the British exhibition and gallery circuits. In establishing their own positionings within this modernist artworld, they visually referenced African art traditions such as mask that were autonomous to the canon of Western art. Another British artist to emerge at this time was Sokari Douglas Camp, born in Buguma in the Delta region of southern Nigeria, who welds iron sculptures which inflect her memories of life experienced in London and Nigeria. A key iconographic theme is the making of masquerade sculptures that often represent and evoke the specific Ekine masquerades of her hometown, but she also creates sculptures that draw on masquerade traditions found elsewhere in Nigeria. As a Buguma woman, her making of Ekine sculptures transgresses the gendered roles of women constrained as spectators and not creators of Ekine masquerade. She explores her responses to the gendered contradictions involved in these creative transgressions. Another artist who has gained an international profile over the past few years is Romuald Hazoumé, who has created masks out of the detritus of plastic jerry cans used by ordinary people to transport kerosene and water to their homes in the Republic of Benin. His mask artworks offer their own distinctive and characteristic personality traits that infuse their formal compositions and simultaneously reference masking as concrete localized traditions of ideas and practices as well as to that Western encounter when European conceptual paradigms of art shifted away from modes of naturalistic representation.

This cursory thumbnail sketch of various trajectories and their positionings in relation to African arts flags up an encounter shaped hegemonically by Western assumptions,







Lagos. Fancy Dress Ball.

(opposite)

1 The Great Hunter (native play). Lagos Nigeria. Collo-photo postcard, published by Raphael Tuck and sons, No.194. Collection of Charles Gore.

(left)

2 Fancy Dress Ball. Lagos, Nigeria. Postcard, publisher unknown, collection of Charles Gore.

(below)

3 Danses masques a Zagnanado, Dahomey. Postcard, published by Missions Africaines, 150 Cours Gambetta, Lyons. Collection of Charles Gore.

expectations, and agendas. Masks captured the European modernist sensibility. However, Picasso, Braque, Nolde, Kirchner, and other avant garde artists who worked during the heyday of the colonial scramble for Africa did not contest the ideologies that underpinned that expansion, ideologies that offered Darwinian-derived evolutionist hierarchies applied to societies and cultures within supposedly scientific (or rather pseudo-scientific) schemata of racialized difference. These schemata placed European societies at the pinnacle and noncentralized African (and Oceanic) communities at the bottom end of the scale and so in need of civilizing. Avant garde artists drew on the assumptions of raw energy and physicality embodied in the concept of “primitivism”, used to represent such African communities in order to critique the alienated and superficial world of the European bourgeoisie, along with the clichéd visual conventions that defined their arts of (supposed) “civilization”. On the other hand, it was these same artists who radically recognized the creative dimensions in African artifacts and pioneered an attention to their aesthetic and visual capabilities, even if still construed within Western art categories, however modernist. It also needs to be noted that African American artists of the Harlem Renaissance offered sites of resistance within these early modernist discourses.

However, it was African art studies that pioneered the “ethnographic” turn of going to the originating circumstances of production, distribution, and consumption of African art traditions to study both the formal properties of artifacts as well as the local social and cultural contexts that shaped these ideas and practices, and no more so than in relation to masquerade. Prior to this, masquerade and its performance had exercised the imagination of both missionaries and colonial administrators. For the former, it provided a prior, rival metaphysical world shaping male and female ways of being that proved difficult to undermine, while for the latter, its organization as

a secret association and its trans-community networks offered modes of resistance difficult to monitor and respond to. Interestingly, many parallels were made by such individuals between masquerade and European institutions, whether modes of schooling, military organization, the judiciary, or even, especially, as “native plays,” in order to emphasize the creative and aesthetic components of masquerades’ display, performance, and drama.

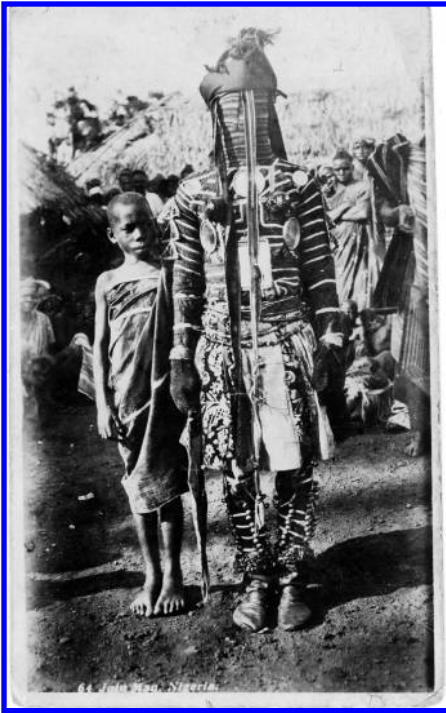
Although field collections were carried out in Africa by metropole museums as standard practice throughout the twentieth century, it was William Bascom in the US and William Fagg in the UK who helped enable the ethnographic turn to in-depth investigation of local contexts, with a key emphasis on learning and understanding local categories of visual practice, irrespective of their compatibility or lack to those developed out of Western art histories. This also provided a springboard for interdisciplinary approaches and cross-cultural comparisons both within Africa and between continents in ways that have enriched the wider discipline of art history per se. Publication of *The Artist in Tribal Society* (1961),

edited by Marian Smith based on a symposium held by the Royal Anthropological institute in the United Kingdom, and *The Traditional Artist in African Societies* (1973) edited by Warren L. D’Azevedo based on a 1965 conference at Lake Tahoe in the US, blazed the pathway for a new focus on art and the individuals who created it in Africa.

Such was the success of this ethnographic turn, especially in African art studies in America, that it is beyond my scope to enumerate all the pioneers who developed these new approaches and paradigms. One only has to look at back issues of *African Arts* itself to discern many of these trailblazers. I single out one example out of many other excellent studies, simply because of the particular kinds of cross-cultural pleasure it has given me over the years: Leon Siroto’s article “Gon: A Mask Used in Competition for Leadership among the Bakwele” (from a seminal collection of essays, *African Art and Leadership*, edited by Douglas Fraser and Herbert Cole, published in 1972) which offers a historical trajectory of the developments and transformations of one masking tradition found in the Gabon.



MISSIONS AFRICAINES, 150, COURS GAMBETTA, LYON.  
DAHOMÉY - Danses masquées à Zagnanado.



In brief, it traces how a particular masquerade was utilized to kill domesticated animals for a major festival held to encourage communal solidarity, despite these animals being primarily reserved for gift exchange to procure spouses for the young single male members of the lineage. This masquerade was constructed as a wild being from the forest that ran amok on its brief visit to the village during the festivities, killing all animals in its path as part of its innate disposition. This meant that no blame could be attributed to any member of the community for the death of the slaughtered animals that then provided the fresh meat to share out and enhance the communal festival. The dramatic artifice of masquerade avoided provoking disputes, if not fission, of the lineage by disgruntled younger male members whose wherewithal to gain a spouse had been jeopardized.

As Leon Siroto notes, over time this masquerade performance was exploited by war leaders, who began to utilize it as a vehicle for assassinating rival war leaders with whom they were in dispute and whose villages they sought to conquer. Now the masquerade visited rival villages to search out and kill their war leaders, similarly without incurring blame and so avoiding an all-out war of revenge by the community of the assassinated leader. Reading, or misreading, it with hindsight, the game strategy deployed by war leaders in the festival and the use of the marauding masquerade seem to me to invite intriguing but productive cross-cultural comparison with the conflict strategies of the cold war between the US and the Soviet Union of the 1950s–60s.

Notwithstanding this observation, the study of Gon masquerade reflects many of the research concerns developed at that time. The performative characteristics of masquerade lent itself to a research focus on its roles within the community and its contributions to the making of that wider, gendered community. This ethnographic turn constructed, in the main, paradigms that productively explained masquerade in terms of functionalist analysis of its social organization and shared cultural systems of meaning (with the emphasis on social organization or cultural world views reflecting British or American dispositions of researchers passed down from the anthropological traditions of Malinowski and Boas respectively). This history of research from the 1960s onwards detached masquerade from its prior Western associations with the Primitivist avant garde movements of Western art and allowed it to be evaluated on its own terms, as composed of sophisticated configurations of art forms with complex traditions and trajectories of ideas and practices. These took account of both concerns for its formal properties and the development of style in terms of local ideas and categories, as well as its cultural and social contexts along a whole range of axes that include modes of social and extra-social identity; the making, transforming, and legitimating of political power; and participating in a wider social world through the dramatic performances and aesthetic play that helped construct that world.

During the late 1980s, when I used to travel eastwards from Benin City in Nigeria during the festive seasons (the days after Christmas, at Easter, and during the new yam harvest time), squashed in interstate shared taxis, I was always struck by the sheer numbers and diversity of masquerades one would see performing along the roadside or at a distance in the village squares. As the taxi sped by with complete disregard for road conditions and safety, these

sights offered the briefest of glimpses into new cultural worlds beyond those I had grown familiar with in Edo state. They flagged the resilience of masquerade in modern Nigeria, and were art repertoires that could be studied at some later date, hopefully by local Nigerian art historians—indeed, the Nigerian universities have a long and honorable record of sending out their students to study and produce dissertations on local art traditions as part of degree requirements.

However, by the late 1990s, after a decade-long cycle of economic depression, southern Nigeria presented a markedly different cultural landscape. The phenomenal rise of Pentecostalism occurred during this period, with its successes at mass conversion and its dynamic if vitriolic crusades against indigenous practices classed as paganism or idol worship, including masquerade performance. Such has been the success of these movements that, while waiting in the Nigerian consulate in London for a visa in 2005, I met a woman who organized regular retreats for devout British Christians to stay at a Nigerian Pentecostal retreat in the heart of Lagos to give them solace and succor from the unremitting pressures of a British secular world. Masquerade is still present in southern Nigeria, if in some locales less visible.

However, the paradigms developed in African art studies for masquerade, at least for Nigeria where much of the earlier research was carried out, merit scrutiny, as its localized relationships to the wider community have shifted in these changing circumstances. Rather than a mode for representing and constituting community, it is now often a site for contestation between differing local factions with incommensurate agendas and competing claims to modernity—such as by Pentecostals compared with masquerading youth. At the same time federal (and national) state-sponsored cultural performances broker particular kinds





of political relationships to these various bureaucratic tiers of the Nigerian nation-state. Furthermore, in the development of cultural heritage and tourism, new globalized sites for these cultural repertoires and art forms have opened up despite the campaigns of the Pentecostal movement to relegate them to a pagan past, such as the annual Ifa festival at Badagry (where masquerades also perform) creating a forum for local, regional, and diasporic agendas.

This special issue is based on a workshop, held at the African Studies Association of the United Kingdom conference in 2006, that focused on masquerade in the twenty-first century. The British authors' approaches have been shaped by the work and teaching of Emeritus Professor John Picton (SOAS), a consulting editor of this journal, who has written extensively on masquerade among the Ebara people in Nigeria, emphasizing that masquerade brings together a configuration of the visual, textual, and performative. Thematically, this special issue considers a range of masquerade practice across southern Nigeria and its western border to explore ongoing innovation and change in the making of local modernities. The rise of Pentecostal Christian (and new Islamization) movements in Nigeria has marginalized many masking traditions as bound up with a pagan past. Despite the ending of some traditions of masquerade as a consequence of these religious movements, this displacement has created new and diverse possibilities, so that masquerade remains a vital medium of creativity and performance that offers counter-narratives of modernity, locality, and the translocal. The close regional

proximity of many of the essays is intended to highlight a multi-sited approach to an ethnography of masquerade that can be extended beyond the framing of Nigeria. Although much of its practice takes place within small-scale communities, this spatialized unit of analysis cannot account for its developments and transformations within the twenty-first century. Moreover, although masquerade inhabits its own artworld, the encounter with masquerade by African modernist artists can only be fully understood by understanding both artworlds.

This is perhaps exemplified in a recent show titled "Masques: Rituels et Contemporains," held in the summer of 2007 by the Jean-Paul Blachère Foundation at Apt, France. In an industrial-sized warehouse exhibiting space, an inner circle of masks lent from the Tervuren museum in Belgium faced outwards to the four walls, where ten African artists had been invited to offer their creative responses to these masks—masks as artifacts with formal visual properties as well as the configurations of ideas and practices to which they point (<http://www.fondationblachere.org/pop-expo08/mask/index.html>). As John Picton notes in his commentary ("Made in Africa") in the *Africa Remix* catalog (2005),

These modernities do not represent a complete break with the past, sometimes because they initiate documentation of that past, sometimes because that past is celebrated in new visual media, sometimes because the past provides formal and intellectual resources which inform new developments, and sometimes because the *inher- itance of the past simply maintains its relevance providing its own interpretation of those develop- ments*" (my italics)

and no more so than with and in response to masks and masquerade.

*CHARLES GORE has carried out extensive research in Edo state and elsewhere in southern Nigeria since 1986 from a grass roots perspective. He was consultant for the BBC film Artist Unknown and published a monograph, Art, Performance and Ritual in Benin City, in 2007. cg2@soas.ac.uk*

(opposite top–bottom)

**4** Juju Man. Postcard, No.64, publisher unknown. Collection Charles Gore.

**5** Photograph. No. 35213, Information Division, Ministry of Information and Research, Nigeria. Collection of Charles Gore.

(this page)

**6** A Juju priest and servant, Old Calabar. Postcard, publisher unknown. Collection of Charles Gore.



#### STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP

Statement of Ownership, Management, and Circulation (All Periodicals Publications Except Requester Publications)

1. Publication Title: African Arts
2. Publication No.: 0001-9933
3. Filing Date: 10/01/2008
4. Issue Frequency: quarterly: spring, summer, autumn, winter
5. Number of Issues Published Annually: four
6. Annual Subscription Price: \$78/Ind; \$154/Inst
7. Complete Mailing Address of Known Office of Publication: The MIT Press Journals, 238 Main Street Suite 500, Cambridge, Middlesex, MA 02142-1046, Contact Person: Abbie Hiscox, Tel.: 617 452 3765
8. Complete Mailing Address of Headquarters or General Business Office of Publisher: UCLA James S Coleman African Studies Center, 10363 Bunche Hall, Box 951310, University California Los Angeles, Los Angeles CA 90095-1310
9. Full Names and Complete Mailing Addresses of Publisher, Editor and Managing Editor:  
 Publisher: UCLA James S Coleman African Studies Center, 10363 Bunche Hall, Box 951310, University California Los Angeles, Los Angeles CA 90095-1310  
 Editor: Marla C Berns, Steven Nelson, Allen F Roberts, Mary Nooter Roberts, Doran H Ross, UCLA James S Coleman African Studies Center, 10363 Bunche Hall, Box 951310, University California Los Angeles, Los Angeles CA 90095-1310  
 Managing Editor: none
10. Owner: Regents of the University of California, 1111 Franklin Street, Oakland CA 94607-5200
11. Known Bondholders, Mortgagees, and Other Security Holders Owning or Holding 1 Percent or More of Total Amount of Bonds, Mortgages, or Other Securities: None.
12. The purpose, function and nonprofit status of this organization and the exempt status for federal income tax purposes has not changed during preceding 12 months.
13. Publication title: African Arts
14. Issue date for circulation data: Summer 2008, 41:2
15. Extent and Nature of Circulation:  
 Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months/No. copies of single issue published nearest to filing date:  
 A. Total number of copies – 2500 / 2500  
 B. Paid Circulation (By Mail and Outside the Mail)  
 (1) Mailed Outside-County Paid Subscriptions Stated on PS Form 3541 – 1092 / 111  
 (2) Mailed In-County Paid Subscriptions Stated on PS Form 3541 – 0/0  
 (3) Paid Distribution Outside the Mails Including Sales Through Dealers and Carriers, Street Vendors, Counter Sales, and Other Paid Distribution Outside USPS – 422 / 415  
 (4) Paid Distribution by Other Classes of Mail Through the USPS – 3 / 0  
 C. Total Paid Distribution – 1517 / 1526  
 D. Free or Nominal Rate Distribution (By Mail and Outside the Mail)  
 (1) Free or Nominal Rate Outside-County Copies included on PS Form 3541 – 35 / 39  
 (2) Free or Nominal Rate In-County Copies included on PS Form 3541 – 0/0  
 (3) Free or Nominal Rate Copies Mailed at Other Classes through the USPS – 294 / 294  
 (4) Free or Nominal Rate Distribution Outside the Mail – 3 / 0  
 E. Total Free or Nominal Rate Distribution – 332 / 333  
 F. Total Distribution – 1849 / 1859  
 G. Copies Not Distributed – 651 / 641  
 H. Total – 2500 / 2500  
 I. Percent Paid – 82% / 82%
16. Publication of Statement of Ownership: If the publication is a general publication, publication of this statement is required. Will be printed in the Autumn 2008, 41:3 issue of this publication.
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