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A VIEW OF WEST AFRICAN MASKS

Abstract: The mask in West Africa is viewed as a sign with three aspects: expression, content and meaning. Expression is the part of the sign realized in some material. Content is the aspect of the sign which contains the signified concept. Meaning can be defined as a process, as an act relating the signifier to the concept signified. Meaning is shaped in religious practice. The mask as a complex sign plays a significant role in rituals. In religious practice the mask appears as a medium between the world of the living and the ancestors of whom the community expects assistance and protection. The mask has an important religious function in the West-Africa but also a significant social role, as community established closer links during the preparation and conduction of collective rites.

Key words: mask, language, sign, expression, content, meaning, noetic field, fonction, rituals, metonymic, metaphoric, sense, West Africa

I

Masks were created in answer to man's deepest needs to overcome the limits that the nature imposed on him. Putting a mask on his face, man could move him closer to the world of the ancestors and gods from whom he expected help and protection. In the West-African communities analyzed (Kovach 1996:1-223) the mask was viewed as a *sign*.

Pierre Guiraud defined the sign as a stimulus, perceptible matter whose mental image is related in our mind to the image of another stimulus that the mind is supposed to call forth in order to communicate (Giro 1975: 26). The mask is a complex sign consisting of a number of simple signs. All complex and simple signs make up the language of the mask, for this term, as Lotman has pointed out, "can be used to denote any system serving the purposes of communication between two or more individuals. Every language uses certain signs which make up its *vocabulary* and has certain rules for combining signs. Since human cognition is actually linguistic cognition, all kinds of models based on that cognition (including art) can be defined as secondary languages" (Lotman, 1976:38-41).

Man sees the universe as chaotic infinity beyond his cognitive abilities. Human knowledge of the universe therefore consists of imposing order on this chaos and reducing the infinite to the finite more suited to man's abilities. Signs help man to model his universe according to his own capacity (Skiljan 1985:13). The mask is viewed here as a *sign* consisting of three aspects: *expression*, *content*, and *meaning*. *Expression* is the part of the sign realized in some material. *Content* is the aspect of the sign which contains the signified concept. *Meaning* can be defined as a process, as an act relating the signifier to the concept signified (p. 8, p. 87).

Every act of communication is dual. There is a *sender* (who initiates the expressive action) on the one hand and the *recipient* (who interprets the product of the expressive action) on the other. The expressive action conveys the message and has two aspects. On the one hand there is the action or the product of the action, and on the other there is the message that the sender encodes and recipient decodes (Leech 1983:20).

The greatest problem in analyzing the meaning of a mask is that you can hardly fathom the meaning intended by the sender. Through the third dimension of the sign, as Dubravko Skiljan says, the participant in the process of signification projects his own attitude towards the relation between the sign and the concept signified. This relation depends on previous individual experience of signs, meanings, and the universe outside the sign, as well as social experience realized as tradition, and the social nature of the human being (Skiljan 1985: 71). Socially and historically determined components of individual experience make up an ideological filter that performs the necessary reduction of the reflection of phenomenon outside the sign into a sign, thus giving the sign its meaning. That is why the message of the sign, which are at least seemingly unambiguous on the content plane, can have different meanings (p. 75).

An important condition for understanding the mask lies in the fact that people convey information by combining verbal and non-verbal means. A message can be conveyed through any of a number of different communication channels and combined with other messages by means of a great number of associations (p. 66).

The mask as a complex sign represents a model of the signified phenomenon, because the sign does not reflect all features of the phenomenon, but only some of them. Interpretation of the meaning of certain simple signs on the mask varies within a community. Mishel Voltz pointed out that the study of the mask as a sign that consists of a number of decipherable common elements cannot encompass the entire dimension of meaning because each community uses and interprets a number of shapes and symbols, commonly used in a part of the Volta River basin, according to its needs and occasions. The sign remains secret and its meaning is known to the initiated and the group that uses it (Voltz 1980: 73).

The analysis of animal images, geometric symbols, and colours entails differentiating between the metonymic (sign) and metaphoric (symbol) connection between these images and the culture analysed. Important sources in such analysis are the mythology and religious practice within which the sign is realized. Whether a concrete signum should be considered a sign or a symbol depends on how it is used. Signs do not occur as isolated entities, they act within a certain cultural context. A sign conveys information only when it is combined with other signs and symbols from the same context. In attempts to determine a noetic field, metaphoric (symbolic) and metonymic (sign) relations sometimes cannot be separated, so that metaphoric senselessness makes metonymic sense only when the code is transferred from the symbol to the sign.

A comparative analysis of images of animals, geometric symbols, and colours, shows that some elements are characteristic of certain communities only, while others are shared by several nations. The number of symbols reveals a variety of theories about cosmogony in African nations. The analysis of simple signs on some masks shows that the mask has become the group emblem in some communities. Totemic images, and through them masks, have become the basis for the identification, distinguishing and recognition of a community.

The third aspect of the mask-meaning- can be viewed as a process, as an act linking the signifier to the signified concept. The process is located in religious practice and takes place on two planes, or in two contexts. One is religious and the other is social.

II

The mask in West Africa appears in the rites of passage in which transition from one social status to another is brought about by magic and declared. The mask has an important function in initiation and burial ceremonies (Kovach 1988:15-28).

Initiation rituals have several stages, whose function is to promote the initiated person from his initial role through an appropriate ritual procedure. Through initiation rites of promotion the initiated individual becomes an uncommon person living in an uncommon time. In the next stage, bans on movement, food and eating are imposed on the initiated individual. For ordinary people, the initiated person in this stage is "contaminated by sanctity" and therefore unclean for the other members of the community. It is in this stage that the initiated learn the secret of the mask. It functions as the medium through which, by special magical procedures, communication is established between the world of the living and that of their ancestors, expected to protect the community from bad influences. This relationship is established through several communication channels: dance, mask, and secret language. Two functions of the rites can be distinguished in the initiations performed in the West-African communities analyzed. The magical-religious function, present in all stages of the ritual performance, is manifest, whereas the social function is latent, since community cohesion is more intense during the preparations for initiation and afterwards.

In the religious practice of West-African nations the burial ceremony has several stages. It is believed that the soul-spirit is separate from the body of the deceased, which is contaminated, as are all

the relatives of the deceased. Members of the community wish to join the soul of the deceased with the souls of his ancestors by certain magical procedures. They perform a series of magical actions in order to protect themselves from the body of the deceased, believed to be unclean. The mask is an important element of the burial rites of West-African nations. It can capture the life force released from a dying man or an animal. The mask has the function of a power which directs the movement of spiritual powers scattered around the world. It traps them in order to prevent them from wandering about. If the life force, released at the moment of dying, were allowed to roam, it would disturb the living and their order. Captured in the mask, it is placed under control, gathered only to be redistributed again to the benefit of the community.

The mask appears in the second stage of the burial ceremony, when communication between the world of the living and that of the dead is established in the house of the deceased, in the border-line zone. The mask, the secret language spoken during the ritual, music, dances and the offering, are the media through which community members communicate with ancestors. The aim of the ritual is to join the soul of the deceased with the ancestors. Purifying rituals in which the mask appears dispel evil powers from the home of the deceased so that positive energy can be directed through the mask and the sacrificed animal from the ancestors to the members of the family of the deceased. African society attaches great importance to burial rites because it is believed that the deceased can harm the community unless all the rituals are performed.

In West Africa, collective memorial services for ancestors are performed. Collective ceremonies are organized in honour of mythical ancestors and collective memorial services performed for the members of the community who died in a certain period. The Dogons organize collective ceremonies dedicated to mythical ancestors once in sixty years (Sigi) (Griaule 1983:166-227, Imperato 1971:28-33, 68). These rituals have two levels: religious and social. Through various magical procedures, members of the community wish to establish a relation between the world of the living on the one hand and the mythical ancestors and deceased members of the community on the other, the community expecting help and protection from the latter. The mask, libation, and the secret Sigi language are the media through which communication among the community, the mythical ancestor, and the deceased members of the community is established. The Sigi holiday has a latent social function, for during the preparations of the holiday, and afterwards, the community is highly cohesive.

Some agrarian nations (the Bambara) (Imperato 1975:62-72) collectively mark the beginning and end of the agricultural season. The rituals symbolically revive the legend of the mythical ancestor Thy Wara (Imperato 1970: 8-13, 71-80) who taught people how to cultivate the land. Masks and dances in these rituals mediated between the people and agricultural deities, from whom people expected protection. Apart from manifest magical-religious elements, the ritual has social functions, too. If the crops were abundant, members of the community would not have to leave the land and the territory inhabited by the community.

Masks had an important social function in West-African communities. Religious and political organizations in Africa assembled around the sacred mask that became the basis of the cult of a metaphoric divinity. The mask helped strengthen local political authorities through secret societies. Beside magical-religious functions, secret societies had an important social function. In West Africa they became a kind of forest schools where community members studied the history, mythology, and ethical rules of the community. The secrets of masks were revealed to the initiated during initiation rites, on condition that they kept the secret from the rest of the community.

Secret societies were in charge of the holidays important for the community. During their preparation and celebration, intertribal conflicts were halted by the presentation of the mask that had a communicative function. The Guere and the Ouobe have masks that function as judges, masks that mark war and the cessation of it, and masks that regulate relations within the community. Age and hierarchical position in the community are indicated by the colour and clothes worn by the masked person. Masks greatly contributed to the strengthening of the local political authorities through secret societies (Harley

1941: 3-39) .The mask protected the authority of a secret society and maintained the existing system of social relations.

The analysis of the available corpus shows that the mask is still used in the rituals of the Dogon (Sigi and Dama) and in dances held for tourists (Lane 1988: 66-69, 92) . In modern Nigeria (Harper 1970: 48-53), the mask becomes an important element of carnivals, thus leaving the second ritual stage behind and becoming a folklore element free of certain taboos attached to it in the previous stage.

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