

## Configurations of The African Mask: Forms, Functions and the Transcendental

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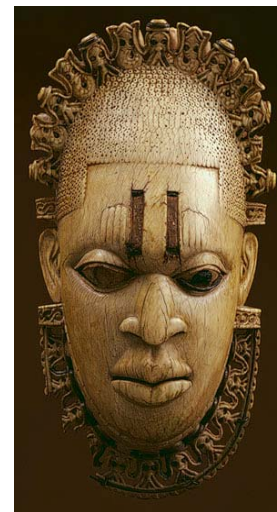
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### Abstract

This paper discusses forms, functions and the phenomenon of the transcendental as configurations of the African mask. In the discourse, it has been argued that stylistic nuances determined by cultural beliefs of the producing community and the individual vision of the artist give rise to forms, which have variously been described as grotesque, refined, abstract and realistic. The paper insists that in appreciating the African mask, its physical properties are essential and help to a large extent to explain their meaning and significance. A relationship, therefore, exists between the exterior forms and the inner contents and meaning within a cultural context. Beyond the superficial elements, the study acknowledges the problem of apprehending the transcendental reality of African mask in the spiritual context and suggests that the cultural sources of the transcendental potentialities, being what the people hold as beliefs should engage scholars. The paper opines that it may be better to lower scientific guards and to adopt African cultural principles, values and belief systems. It is only in this intrinsic sociological context that the supernatural potentialities inherent in African masks can be appreciated. The final submission is that the phenomenal spirituality ascribed to African masks lies within a triangulated framework boarded by form, function and the performative context. To extend the relevance of masks as treasured cultural objects in an age of globalization, the paper calls for the consideration of not only the 'scientific', but also cultural logic to be able to appreciate the supernatural potentialities that may be inherent in African masks.

**Key words:** African masks; Forms; Functions; Transcendental reality

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**Figure 1**  
The "Festac" symbol, a 16<sup>th</sup> Century ivory hipmask from Benin  
Source: Ekpo Eyo's *Masterpieces of Nigerian Art*. (©The Trustees of the British Museum)

### INTRODUCTION

The appeal of the mask is enormous in aesthetic and utilitarian terms in various aspects of the arts – performing, visual and literary. In the dramatic arts, the mask remains a seasoned tool for characterization and a functional costume in all dramatic genres. Many playwrights have harnessed the functions of the mask in reinforcing characters for specific roles in plays. In the visual arts, the mask has been a medium of plastic and graphic expression and communication through the ages. The Benin pectoral mask at the British Museum, which served as a symbol for the African Festival of Arts and

Culture (FESTAC) in Lagos, 1977 is an eloquent example (See Plate I above). The literary artist may express his appreciation of the mask by exploring its metaphor, symbolism and idiom within cultural contexts. Behind the aesthetic and functional relevance of the mask lies the spiritual value which is barely understood; that which transcends the ordinary. This paper discusses African mask forms and functions as determinants of spiritual potency, be it perceived or actual.

## 1. THE MASK FORM AND FUNCTIONS

As a cultural object, the mask is a device mostly worn on the face or the head together with costumes which cover all or parts of the body. Masks may also be worn on other parts of the body as in the case of the brass or ivory pectoral masks of Benin. In some cases, uniforms or costumes, eyeglasses and hoods can act as “masks” for their ability to disguise the user and presenting a new personality. As an essential characteristic, the mask disguises the identity of the wearer and establishes another. Masks enable actors to shift identity while playing multiple roles (Brockett, 1978, p. 32). Masks assume different forms to serve different functions. The face mask is worn on the face; the attachment mask is worn on the body, clipped on the apparel or hung on walls, doorposts and similar places; while the headdress is worn on the head. References to mask in this discussion alternate between these three major types, while the word “form” refers to *materials* and *styles* employed for mask-production. African masks are made from wood, bronze, brass, copper, ivory, terracotta, glazed pottery, leather, raffia and textiles. They are often decorated with cowry shells, horns, cloth, coloured beads, bone, feathers, paper, animal skins and vegetable fibre. However, many African masks are made of wood, perhaps because trees are in plentiful supply in the forest belt where most masks are produced. Ebony Africa (*Diospyros crassiflora*), Mahogany (*Swientania macrophylla*), Camwood (*Pterocarpus echinora*), Walnut Africa (*Jovoa trichiliodes*), Iroko (*Chlorophora exelsia*), Mangroove (*Rhizophora mangles*) provide hardwood, while Rubber (*Funtinmina elastica*), Alstonia (*Astonia congensis*), Obeche (*Triplochiton sheroxylon*), Gmelina (*Gmelina arborea*) and numerous other varieties provide softwood.

It has been argued that the differences in wood lead to several forms and styles in African masks. Gillon, who identifies the rough abstract and the smooth realistic styles, maintains that the styles are as a result of the type of wood used for production. He argues that the abstract is made from hardwood varieties which do not allow for easy manipulation thus resulting in rough finishing, while the realistic ones are made from soft woods which allow for smooth finishing (Gillon, 1979, p.72). Gillon’s view regarding stylistic variations is contestable because there are cases where artists use hard wood to achieve smooth finishing. From a different front, Eyo identifies two forms

of masks – the grotesque and the refined. The style it takes, he says, is determined by the purpose the mask is designed to serve (Eyo, 1977, p.194). Without going into details of formal varieties and nomenclature, it is apparent from the works of Gillon and Eyo that there are stylistic nuances which give rise to grotesque, refined, abstract and realistic mask forms.

Beyond these stylistic variations, it would appear that there are two other major influencing forces on the African mask form: “The traditional style that is dictated by the cultural beliefs of the producing community”, and “the individual vision of the carver”.

Within the earlier cited broad classes and the major influencing factors, African masks assume many subdivisions. Those following the lineaments of reality, for instance, take-on anthropomorphic and theriomorphic forms. On the other hand, abstractions are based on mechanomorphic and geometrical configurations, which can be angular, curved, oval, circular, cylindrical or a combination of these. Contrasts are created using abrupt projections and recessions, including the texture and pigment of production materials. The vertical wooden plank masks of the Bwa tribe in the South of Burkina Faso exemplify the use of geometry and symmetry in mask designs. Rhythmic play of form and space integrate into rich and often elaborate designs, which convey either awful or awesome effects. Some masks have multiple faces, while others are animated, such as those with ingenious movable jaws hinged to the main mask, reminiscent of puppets.

Wooden masks are finished with dyes and pigments created from leaves, roots, seeds, tree bark and earth sources. Occasionally, they are smoked to achieve burnt colouration or splashed with sacrificial blood to increase their spiritual potencies. Recently, masks have been finished with enamel and emulsion paints, which provide wide colour varieties and enable detailed graphic finishing.

Some masks are rendered to capture such abstract qualities as social status, nobility, beauty, courage, mischief and humour during performance. Exaggerated and stylized features, carved or painted, help to express these abstract values. In a keen way, materials and styles constitute the form (and relate to the functions) of an African mask.

The mask is often associated with functions ranging from aesthetic, religious, social and economic to therapeutic. It is difficult to assert which is the most important among the numerous functions, but it would appear that its aesthetic value, especially under contemporary usage is overriding. It may have been the aesthetic value of masks that gave inspiration to Cubist painters early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Spearheaded by Pablo Picasso, Henry Matisse, George Braque and Andre Derains, the movement emerged to embrace the conceptual elements of African carvings, particularly mask forms. The influence of the African mask manifests

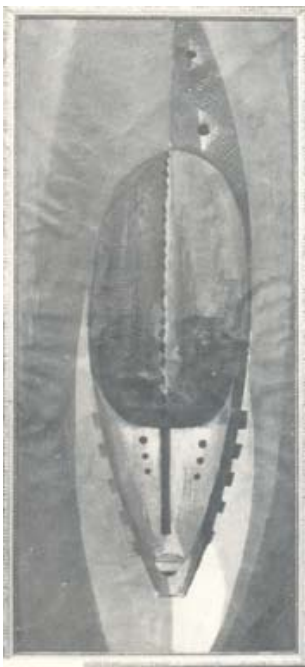
in Picasso's painting 'Les Femmes d'Alger' (O.J.), which he began in 1907 well after his attention was drawn to African Negro sculpture in 1906 (Read, 1979, p. 68). The faces of the two figures on the right of the painting, one crouching, and the other standing are reminiscent of African masks (Figure 1).



**Figure 2**  
**Pablo Picasso's Les Femmes d'Alger (1906)**  
Source: Herbert Read's Concise History of Painting

Other paintings by Picasso possibly influenced by African masks include: *The Women in Yellow* (1907), *Dancer* (1907), *Friendship* (1908), *Head* (1908) and *Woman's Head* (1909). Similarly, works by Henry Matisse, George Braque, Max Jacob, Louis Marcoussis to mention a few also bear traits of influence from African mask sculptures. Basically, Cubists collected African Arts, particularly masks to develop their own style and refresh the tired tradition of representative painting in European arts ( Eyo, 1977, p.4 ).

Contemporary African artists and collectors have also explored the aesthetic value of masks. Chuks Anyanwu and Nsikak Essien in their respective mask paintings, (but in identical styles) reduce popular African mask forms to varieties of superimposed basic geometric shapes, to achieve at some points a continuous flow of symmetrical patterns in space. (Figure 3 a & b)



**Figure 3a**  
**Chuks Anyanwu's The Mask (1982)**  
Source: National Gallery of Nigerian Arts



**Figure 3b**  
**Nsikak Essien's The Mask (1989)**  
Source: National Gallery of Nigerian Arts

Countless connoisseurs swoop into galleries and museums across the globe to appreciate African mask forms, and it is difficult to explain the rising level of the

African mask as the nucleus of attraction of a dancing figure. ( Figure 4)



**Figure 4**  
**Ben Enwonwu's Agbogho Mmuo (1952)**  
Source: National Gallery of Nigerian Art's Brochure

Countless connoisseurs swoop into galleries and museums across the globe to appreciate African mask forms, and it is difficult to explain the rising level of appreciation of masks given what it represents in African cosmology - ancestral spirits, secret cults and deities; a world of mystery and threat. They summon up ideas of death and horror, which they not only represent but can bring about. Even with this background, masks are embraced as artistic expressions with deep aesthetic value. In Gillon's assessment, connoisseurs seem to have developed cannons for appreciating the mask:

Its physical properties, that is the proportional relationship and qualities of its component parts, the meaning and significance of its forms and the psychological relationship between its exterior forms and inner content and meaning (Gillon, 1979, p.72-73).

From this, the total expressive qualities of a mask derive both from exterior forms, its meaning and functions within a cultural context. There exist, however, in each society indices for judging aesthetic appeal in masks like other art forms. In the Ibibio context for instance, the response to the mask as an aesthetic object tends to rest on its physical properties and the functions to which it is applied. The Ibibio man understands the aesthetic values in masks but he embraces them with caution, knowing the vagaries of functions to which the mask can be applied. As the audience follows the masker around the town, the mask serves to heighten the atmosphere of alarm, suspense and excitement (Ebong, 1991, p.260).

Contemporary aesthetic functions of masks may be overriding, but the utilitarian and the spiritual values, particularly among Africans cannot be overlooked. It may be true that "Europeans" interest in African masks exposed the art form to the aesthetic appetite of a wider audience. But, unfortunately, this has also prescribed strange procedures for appreciating African masks. The

consequence is that connoisseurs now tend to admire the bold designs and abstract patterns of African masks through "European" eyes. Masks are appreciated as exhibits on museum walls, cut-off from their cultural and spiritual contexts—which is not *how* they were designed to be viewed.

Quite often, African masks function in religious and social events to represent the spirits of ancestors or to control the good and evil forces in the community. They come to life, possessed by spirits in the performance of dance, and are enhanced by both the music and atmosphere of the occasion. Some combine human and animal features, possibly, to indicate the unity between man and his natural environment. This bond with nature is of great importance to the African and, through the ages, masks have always been used to express this relationship.

In spiritual terms, masks function to effect magico-religious transformations. The *Encyclopedia of World Art* elaborates on this:

While a woman's magico- religious power is enhanced by nakedness, a man on the other hand increases his own possibilities by hiding his face and concealing his body... When he puts on a mask, he ceases to be himself, at least he seemingly if not actually becomes another... a man knows himself as a man precisely by changing himself into something other than himself. By wearing masks he becomes what he is resolved to be... (1976, p. 520)

By developing spiritual powers, humans attempt to create a sense of security, a hope of surviving in a world in which uncertainty is ever-present. In a transcendently organized society, man is sure that spiritual forces unseen are always at work. And, it is within this transcendental context that the African mask finds its most prodigious functions.

## 2. MASKS AND THE TRANSCENDENTAL

Many scholars have deliberated on the potency of masks, especially in African traditions ( Layiwola, 2000; Lewis, 1974; Cazeneuve, 1972 ). The deliberations are based on actual performances where mask-donning performers assume supernatural roles. *Ekpo* performances of the Ibibios and *Gelede* of the Yorubas, ( both in Nigeria ) are proven cases where masks induce transcendent activities. Still, spiritual claims attributed to masks and mask-using performances have been swiftly dismissed as a façade and a notional departure from the traditional role of the mask. While skeptics have room for critical differentiation, it must be noted that some masks, through their users, actually exude unusual "spiritual" tendencies. How can one explain an instance where an *Ekpo* masker, using *Nkubia* or *Anyam* mask, instantly enters into a state of frenzy upon donning the mask or an instance where a man using *Gelede* mask begins the process of mediation between the living and the dead and goes into rituals of cleansing? The issue that should engage scholars

should really be the cultural sources of the transcendental potentialities that is, what the people hold as beliefs. Understanding the spiritual empowerment of masks may not be completely impossible as Lewis (1974, p. 4) explains: Supernatural forces ascribed to them (objects) is as a result of the fact that no man has yet found the natural explanation to these forces, that is why they remain supernatural.

To unravel the mystery of the African mask, it may be necessary to locate it within a triangulated framework, bordered by form, function and the context or performance. Beginning with the form, it is a popular conception in African cosmology that supernatural powers dwell in all organic and inorganic matters. And, therefore, masks contain the spirit powers of whatever material is used to produce them. From the scientific viewpoint, it is possible that some trees from which masks are carved contain intoxicating properties which when inhaled could intoxicate the system and produce dizziness afterwards. For instance, dust particles from Mimosops tree (*Mimosops elengi*) are known to contain volatile substances that smart the respiratory tract and can cause dizziness when inhaled in excess. Similarly, Fertility Plant (*Niwbouldia leavis*) also harbours intoxicating properties. The issue regarding the possibility of chemical properties in wood to propel a user to a spiritual state is not so certain. For, at a scientific level, chemical properties of exposed wood or any organic matter change and deteriorate with time. Thus, the intoxicating potential of organic substances is time-bound. After a few years, the chemicals are impotent. Yet, masks remain spiritually intoxicating after dozens of years.

There are such substances as Marijuana (*Cannabis sativa*), cocaine and Opium (*Papaver somniferum*) that are known to contain intoxicants, which some maskers may use before performances. Still, these substances do not transform users into spiritual beings, but rather leave them in a state of agitation, restlessness, and sometimes hallucinations.

In a cultural perspective, some trees are known in some African traditions to acquire spiritual potency from constant sacrifices made at their base, maybe in village squares, shrines, sacred streams or forests. Following the tradition of mask production and usage, it would really appear that spirit powers are believed to reside in specific kinds of woods (like *Nkubia* and *Anyam* in *Ibibio*). The truth may not be certain but materials from such woods have been reported by indigenous users to exude certain cryptic powers and hypersensitivity that may have negative effects on users. These powers are considered a volatile, active force that is surrounded by various taboos and restrictions for the protection of those handling them. Clearly, if African people do not believe that spirits do reside in these wooden materials, the rituals, petitions,

supplications and offerings made to them would be unnecessary and meaningless.

In many African cultures, it is believed that the spiritual potency of woods used for mask carvings are transferable to the user who, on acquisition of these powers begins to exude magical qualities and are esteemed as agents for the accomplishing of supernatural acts. But, even if masks and their production materials were not inherently potent in spiritual terms, the psychology of mask-usage may also induce the user to assume different personalities. At the end of the day, whether (or not) the masquerade's ritual transformation is achieved through chemical or psychological inducement is quite irrelevant. What is vital is that upon donning a mask, the wearer becomes a partner of the character she or he is impersonating. The masker undergoes a psychic change and, as in a trance, assumes a spirit character depicted by the mask. Layiwola deliberates further on the masker and his assumed personality in the context of *Gelede* performance of the Yorubas:

A man, hitherto a young fledgling in the community, attains the status of a god or an ancestor under the mask. Women and children and households, including the peers of his mother kneel before him for benediction and prayers ... He becomes a persona, a numinous invocation with a transient personality. He lasts only for the duration of the enactment. At that instance, the unknown is domesticated and brought to the realms of the living (Layiwola, 2000, p.3).

The personality of the actor gives the mask its kinetic quality but that personality takes on an added metaphysical dimension. He dares in his role by playing the god, the deity or the demon. In losing his own personality, the masked dancer surrenders his will and destiny to some other external force. As Cazeneuve's opines:

To wear a mask is something very different from a game. It is among the most serious and weighty acts in the world: a direct and immediate contact, and even an intimate participation, with the being of the invisible world, from whom one expects vital favours. The individuality of the actor gives place momentarily to that of the spirit which he represents; or rather they are fused together. (Cazeneuve, 1972, p.45)

While we may debate the sources of supernatural powers attributed to African masks, it must be opined that 'scientific' procedures may not resolve it. In explicating the spiritual volatility of African masks, especially in performance, it would be difficult to anchor discussions on 'objective' scientific circumstances. It is clear that cultural logic may not always be the same as 'scientific' logic. It is therefore more fruitful to anchor on intrinsic social and cultural circumstances. For, many stories of spiritual potency of masks sound outrageous and would crumble under 'scientific' scrutiny, yet many narrated and documented experiences are real to the people that believe them.

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## CONCLUSION

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In apprehending the reality of African masks in the spiritual context, it may be better to lower scientific guards and to adopt African cultural principles, values and belief systems. It is only in this intrinsic sociological context that we can appreciate the supernatural potentialities inherent in African masks. As much as metaphysics, parapsychology, witchcraft and other elements of spiritism are said to be “real”, so much can also be ascribed to the transcendence of the African mask. Whatever the case, the mask’s role in art, society and religion has endured, just as its forms will continue to inspire local and global cultural producers. In functional terms, the mask’s economic potentialities will be widely explored particularly in tourism and entertainment circles. What is still not certain is whether the spiritual value of masks with its unexplainable facets will continue to have a ritual place in a society that is increasingly inclined towards the global. To find wider relevance to this treasured cultural object in an age of globalization, much adaptation is required, particularly in deciphering and deploying its complex spiritual configuration.

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