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African Mask Display in Context

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Exhibition and Education; The Senufo Kponyungo Mask

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While Western art has historically been negotiated and consumed primarily through stationary visual presentation, African art as a genre characteristically possesses functionality beyond decorative display. One such example is the African mask; a single art object which contributes to a greater multi-media performance put on by influential local institutions. In many cases, Western exhibition of the mask has developed a kind of tunnel vision as it pertains to static display, highlighting it purely as a decorative object when it is not; mounting a mask on the wall or behind glass is counterintuitive to its full multimedia presentation and societal function. This utilitarian quality can be lost in displaying the object as static, neutral and symbolic without taking appropriate lengths to place it in context.

If we examine the museum space in terms of its educational function, art objects serve to contribute to a narrative about their respective culture and history. When consciously displayed, the mask is an exemplary object with which to work in education on African culture in the west. However masquerade is by no means definable by the mask alone. The practice of masquerade is deeply connected with the greater community; mask societies are comprised of community members and are utilized in the realm of governance, politics, and cultural identity formation. In order for masque societies to earn this power within their community, they employ performative displays and embody esoteric qualities that capture the fascination and respect of non-initiate spectators. Unfortunately, the typical viewer at a Western exhibition of an African Mask is not likely to walk away with an understanding of these integral qualities.

On the subject of the role of curator in art exhibition, Dutch writer and curator Charles Esche says, “I think we should admit to a real creative implicit in this term...curator... now we’re involved in production and the creation of contexts and opportunities all of which have a creative element...a curator has a position” (O’Neill, 2012). For African art separated from its artist and functional context, the curator holds the greatest agency in constructing their perceived meaning and narrative. Simply to fix a mask on a wall amongst other regionally undiscerned African work, or other “world” work, takes a position that highlights a museum’s ability to acquire foreign rarities, as opposed to doing justice to the pieces themselves.

The “Firespitter” helmet mask of the Poro men’s society, from the Senufo region in Cote D’ivoire, is perhaps one of the most recognizable examples of masks from West Africa commonly decontextualized in Museum settings. However, if a display strategy were utilized which prioritized laying a proper contextual framework for the object, the Firespitter mask could illuminate fundamental aspects of Senufo culture and be fully appreciated for its dynamic artistic qualities.

In Senufo society, individuals negotiate cultural identity through “a complex network of over thirty language and dialect groups, including at least six distinct artisan groups intermingled with farming groups.” (Richter, 1980). By far the largest in population is the Senari language cluster, subdivided into nine closely related dialects and other artisanal groups (Glaze, 1981). Given the nuances in aesthetics and terminology utilized by the Poro societies of these different cultural sub-divisions, I will focus on the practices of the Senari and their Firespitter mask.

Senufo Poro associations serve as a strong socializing force in the community, which is typical of masking societies in West Africa. Poro involves a seven year initiation process through which males are socialized and educated to embody masculine traits and carry out male societal responsibilities. Individuals go through initiation in order to be considered a functional adult within one's village, acting both as a learner and educator as they and their age group progresses through the system (Glaze, 1981). In Poro, great significance is placed on respect for elders and a value of hard physical labor exerted in agricultural work, or work done for the betterment of one's village (Forester, 1993).

Beyond socialization, Poro plays an important role in an efficient and sophisticated social organization of the village. Through prescription to multiple Poro associations, individual lineages are connected and guarded against social fragmentation (Forester, 1993). Members cannot be initiated into the same Poro society as a relative, encouraging cooperation that bridges separate lineages. Cultural exchange naturally develops through transmission of esoteric and aesthetic knowledge bestowed upon initiates by elders outside of their own lineage. Goods and currency are circulated through this system as well, elders collecting dues from initiates and redistributing wealth based on relative need. This functions to prevent social domination of one group over the others.

Masquerade is utilized by the Senufo to mark and negotiate social achievement throughout one's lifecycle. By far the most significant rituals are the funerary rites, functioning to appease the dead and protect the living. The funerary ritual ensures the continuation of societal integration among village lineages and spiritual entities such as

bush spirits and deities (Glaze, 1981). For the Senari, the Firespitter helmet mask is referred to as *Kponyungo* (Ka-pon-yu-go) and is understood as an embodiment of Poro itself. Kponyungo oversees this transition from the living to the dead, serving as an escort into another world. In order to ensure that the dead are not left angry or dissatisfied with relatives and his community, certain ritual protocols must be met. Failure to do so positions the dead as a threat to the living community.

For high ranking members of society such as chiefs and elders, funeral rites are a large in scale and meticulously organized social event involving multiple associations of Poro, reflecting the intentional interconnectedness of lineage groups. At such funerals, each society's Firespitter masquerader will perform, each differentiated by the unique stylistic quality of their respective helmet masks. The more diverse and numerous the masqueraders are, the more rich and dynamic a performance will be. A performance that projects beauty and pride is the only way to keep both the living and dead at ease.

On the day of burial, initiates will retrieve the *Kponyungo* mask and other masquerade materials from a secure storage space; the objects are seen as extremely spiritually charged and must be handled with care. The accompanying body suit to the Firespitter mask is composed of either strips of raffia or a cloth. The helmet masks have a visceral aesthetic presence, iconographically derived from various fearsome and noble creatures such a bush cow, crocodile, and antelope. Each of the Poro societies with which the deceased was affiliated will send a representative to perform at the funeral, each bringing with him his own drum ensemble. These ensembles will carry

multiple percussive instruments such as iron bells, xylophones, and drums. (Glaze, 1981).

The body of the deceased is wrapped in a great number of cloths, ritualistically gifted by those who he knew best in life. The outermost layer of cloth bears colorful and vivid patterns, making for a beautiful and prideful display. The body is then carried to a central point in the village where the nexus of masqueraders from different occupational groups will perform. Each group will perform in an order that reflects their position to the deceased, with a conclusion by their own Poro's Firespitter.

To usher the dead safely into the next realm, the masqueraders, marked and lead by the percussion ensemble, will dance in a circular formation around the wrapped body. The masquerader most closely associated with the deceased will hold a small drum, systematically kneeling and pounding it as he advances toward the body with a surmounting pace set by the percussion. His final motion is to kneel directly over the corpse and place his drum over its chest. Upon striking the drum, Kponyungo separates the body from its "shadow", ensuring peaceful passage onto the next plane of existence.

Considering all of the elements present in and instrumental to the masquerade performance, certainly there must be tools beyond mask itself which can be utilized in display to convey the culturally significant and dynamic function of the Kponyungo Mask. If curatorial methods are limited by a purely-decorative consideration of art object, perhaps it is time, instead, for the curatorial community to examine African mask display through the lens of the performance itself. In order to allow for a meaningful interaction between artwork and viewer, the space which the Kponyungo mask inhabits should be as immersive as possible; employing music, video, and representation of

accompanying art objects to the mask's performance. Inserting the mask into a multi-sensory space intentionally designed to reference Senufo culture, as opposed to a neutral and non-referential space, would better situate viewers into the Kponyungo performance, maximizing its educational potency. An ideal setting to emulate would be the funeral of a chief, as the event is ripe for interpretive possibilities and contextualizes the mask within the broader Senufo social milieu.

The first measure to take would be to display the mask fixed on top of a mannequin dressed in the accompanying Kponyungo costume. Beyond being an engaging visual element in and of itself, the addition of the full costume helps the viewer make the connection that the object is used in performance and is not purely decorative. Because art objects would be liberated from their posts on the wall, the traditional wall-mounted plaque would no longer be a logical method of providing written information about the artwork. Instead, literature in the form of pamphlets or a downloadable smartphone application would be ideal, as they can be carried throughout the exhibition. This text would speak of Kponyungo's role in ushering the dead onto the next plane, elaborating on the importance of continuity of life to the Senufo. It also would speak to the socialization function and value system of the Poro men's society, providing context to the cultural significance Masquerade holds. The full mask display would be flanked by two or more other Firespitter masks, this unit converging around a mock corpse wrapped in colorful cloth, as is their choreography in practice. The stylistic variation between masks would be noted in literature and used to introduce the occupational and ethnolinguistic societal organization present in Senufo villages as well as Poro's role in unifying these various lineages. Close to the central fixture would be a display of

instruments utilized in the drum ensemble, provided reading specifying what each instrument is and how it contributes structurally to Kponyungo's performance. A recording of the funerary ensemble could play aloud in the gallery space, or access to headphones would function as well. For the exhibition, the entirety of the space's dimensions should be utilized as opposed to just the flat surface of a singular wall. Entities should be set up throughout an open space, allowing for movement of viewers throughout. The wall space, instead could be utilized to display large scale photos of the masquerade process, further simulating the performance environment.

Future measures could become even more enhanced by embracing Virtual Reality technology into museum display. Already we've seen a prototype for google glass, a pair of glasses able to project imagery in three dimensions onto the world around us. With such technology, supplemental information and additional imagery could appear alongside physically exhibited objects, making the museum space an almost unrivaled site for cultural education.

The Firespitter mask is a beacon of Senufo culture and an excellent example of the masquerade arts. Through the measures discussed in this essay, its display could instill in the viewer an understanding of masquerade as an institution and genre, leaving them a bit more knowledgeable of a rich culture beyond their own; a rare and valuable experience in a society breaking out of its Eurocentric shell. Abbreviating the mask's unique qualities through unthoughtful display does a disservice to the object as well as the viewer. Without taking lengths to honor the mask's performative and societal function, the constructed narrative communicates the object as simply a "treasure of Africa"; an object whose provided context is simply that it is rare and the Western world

has managed to acquire it. If we are to honor the tradition of Masquerade and the cultures from which it originates, in display we must place the object in *their* context, not our own.

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