

African masks assignment

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INTRODUCTION It has been said that art in Africa is the visible expression of the invisible.

With that in mind I will discuss and explain, with reference to the statement, the complex social role of the different types of masks used in traditional African societies. I will also explain the religious and political roles of these masks in the community. Through gathering information from books and electronic sources I will explain the context of ceremonial African masking and the basic characteristics thereof. I will do research on specific masks, their style and the purpose of their existence within their community. 2. 1 Historical background and information

Masks are time and again depicted as the classic art form of Africa. If you look at the history of African masks, you will find that African masks can be

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traced back to long before the Palaeolithic[1] times. African masks are being greatly hunted down by art lovers and collectors, as they are some of the most supreme art pieces in the art world today. The masks as it is normally seen in a western perspective, however, as a museum piece in a glass display case or hanging on a wall, is a single element artificially isolated from the context for which it was intended.

In these masks, originally created for different masking ceremonies of different tribes you will find different types of materials such as leather, metal, fabric, organic materials and various types of wood. One example of this is the Chi Wara antelope mask of the Bambara culture of Mali, It is used in rituals associated with planting and harvesting. During celebrations like this, initiation ceremonies, war preparation and troubled times you can find a chosen person or an initiated dancer wearing these masks.

The headpiece itself can have a range of greatly different significances depending on the precise local understanding of the spiritual agency involved in its performance. African masquerades are a highly complex and diverse range of cultural practices, few of which correspond closely to ideas associated with mask wearing in the West (African masks history and meaning, S. a. ; African art and architecture, 2001). Latest development and understanding of aesthetic principles, religious and ceremonial values, have brought about a grater insight into the ideas and moral values that African artists express in their art.

Art is the expression or the application of creative skill and imagination, especially through a visual medium such as painting or sculpture. In the

Oxford dictionary (2002: 607) you will find the meaning of the word invisible to be something unable to be seen, either by nature or because of concealed. If you relate that in contents to the statement that African art is the visible expression of the invisible, you can say that African art, especially the making of masks in Africa, is not created for the sake of art, but that the creation of these special handcrafted objects go beyond the formal qualities that meets the eye.

In this essay I am going to look at the Makishi Masquerades and the Transmission of knowledge among the Chokwe and related people together with the Pwo mask, the Bambara tribe of Mali and the Chi Wara antelope mask, and also at the role that the Holo mask plays in the Ngidi and Makanda initiation rites (African masks history and meaning, S. a. ; African art and architecture, 2001). 3. CONTEXT OF CEREMONIAL AFRICAN MASKING AND THE BASIC CHARACTERISTICS THEREOF 3. 1 The Makishi Masquerades among the Chokwe and related people The Chokwe are famous for art items produced to celebrate and legalize the royal court.

The art objects can include elaborately carved stools and chairs used as thrones. Most of the sculptures are portraits, which represent the royal ancestry. Staffs, sceptres, and spears are among other implements sculpted to celebrate the court. Chokwe origin can perhaps be traced to the Mbuti and Pygmies. Between 1600 and 1850 they were under extensive influence from the Lunda states and were centrally located in Angola. In the second half of the 19th century though, substantial improvement of the trade routes between the Chokwe homelands and the Angolan coast led to increased trade of ivory and rubber.

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Wealth acquired from this allowed the Chokwe kingdom to develop, eventually overtaking the Lunda states that had held sway over them for so long. Their success was short-lived, however, the effects of overexpansion, disease, and colonialism resulted in the fragmentation of Chokwe power (Van Wyk, Garratt & Stepan, 1998: 67). The Chokwe related people of Angola and the Democratic Republic of the Congo engage their ancestors to endow them with spiritual or supernatural support for various human activities.

If you look at male initiation in context, ancestral spirits may assume the form of masks to dramatize cosmological[2] principles and assist in transmitting knowledge through generations. The Chokwe people perform over one hundred types of masked masquerades called the Makishi. Makishi represents the spirits of the deceased individuals that return to the world of the living to guide, assist and protect the members of the community (Van Wyk, Garratt & Stepan, 1998: 67). Makishi often serve to authorize and validate social and political institutions, which are generally perceived as the domain of women.

The Makishi most often performed in combination with the mukanda initiation of girls, but they may also appear during annual confirmatory ceremonies. Makishi performances bring to mind the cosmological precepts of the Chokwe and related people. Principles of social and political organisation are presented publically through mukanda masquerades[3]. In these masquerades you will find male and female characters. One of the most important Makishi characters that you will find during initiation ceremonies represents the ideal woman that is called Pwo or Pwevo.

The short steps characterize Pwo dances and sensuous hip movements, which are emphasized by a bustle, tied around the hips, consisting of a bundle of cloth, strings and rattling objects. Pwo perform sexual behaviours by pretending to have intercourse with a mortar or with a figure that she may rapidly form from earth in the preformed space. These dances are a type of sexual education, presented openly to stress the fertility of this female ancestor. To highlight her supernatural attributes as an ancestral, Pwo sometimes dances on stilts or performs acrobatically skits.

In this masquerades a Pwo performer will wear the Pwo mask while holding a flywhisk and a rattle made form of tin can. The Pwo mask dancer dances with the women who clap and sings to musically accompany the performer. In the following paragraph I will explain the style and elements of the Pwo mask (Van Wyk, Garratt & Stepan, 1998: 67-68). 3. 2 Pwo Mask Figure 1: Unknown Artist, Pwo Mask, Wood Carving, patina and plant material, 9. 5" x 10" x 10", Private Collection, (Bastin, 1982: 91).

The Pwo mask is a semi stylized wooden facemask with eyes that are usually elliptical in shape. The facemask is the most common mask found in Africa. The mask covers the face and has holes on the side. The eyes are half-closed and swollen eyelids are prolonged down to the centre of the concave eye-sockets. Sometimes the eyes are spherical and have horizontal slits. Occasionally the forehead has a carved headband. The ears are curved or else semi-circular with the tragus shown. The traditional scarification is usually engraved, cut away, incrustated or carved in relief.

The Mask measures 9.5 inches tall x 10" wide x 10" deep and the use of wood with cam wood powder and plant fibre for hair can be seen in the Pwo Mask (Figure 1). The mask has well defined and expressive facial features as well as a wonderful worm patina to the wood. The facial scarification below the eyes also represents tears. This mask represents Chokwe ideals of feminine beauty. The idealized features, subtle contours and refined lines formally convey the elegance of a celebrated female ancestor.

The mask was not created by an artist, as it has no aesthetic value to the tribe as it is used for ceremonies and worship, but one can say that the mask was certainly created by an unknown Chokwe master craftsman (Bastin, 1982: 90).

3.3 The Ngidi and Makanda initiation rites

The Holo of the Democratic Republic of the Congo live in the Kizamba area. They occupy the region between the Suka-Mbundu Falls on the Kwango River. The Holo society is composed of a number of independent clans. One of the secret rites of passage of the Holo tribe is that Holo women undergo a ritual initiation called Ngidi, which parallels Mukanda.

Mukanda is the initiation ceremony of young boys. Ngidi brings together women of all ages, not only those who are pubescent. Apart from preparing young men and women for adult life, initiation institutes among the Holo operate as forces of social unity. (Van Wyk, Garratt & Stepan, 1998: 88). The initiation ceremony of the boys of the Holo tribe is called the Mukanda. The festivities that go with the Mukanda initiation ceremonies, like communal rejoicing and a great ritual dance, are held on the eve of the circumcision. The community dances until dawn.

A Holo masked is carved as a helmet to fit securely over a performers head. On the occasion of this rite of passage for the boys of the Holo tribe, the initiates' farewell feast, they are the centre of community. The Holo mask plays a huge role in the initiation of the boys. (Van Wyk, Garratt & Stepan, 1998: 67). 3. 4 Holo Mask The Holo mask seen in figure 2 is a wood carved helmet mask. A helmet mask is carved from one single piece of wood and is hollow to cover the whole face. It has carved out openings for the eyes, mouth and nose.

A dancer puts on this mask before dancing at the initiation ceremonies of the Holo tribe. His whole body is covered with natural oil to serve as protection against evil spirits. (Van Wyk, Garratt & Stepan, 1998: 67). [pic] Figure 2: Unknown Artist, Chi Wara antelope Mask, Wood Carving, plant material, horns, antelope skin, 9. 8" x 11" x 23. 5", Private Collection, (Van Wyk, Garratt & Stepan, 1998: 88). 3. 5 The Bambara tribe of Mali and the Chi Wara antelope Mask One of the largest ethnic and most dominant groups found mostly in the country of Mali is the Bambara culture.

The Bambara live in the middle valley of the Niger River. The majority of the people of this culture are farmers. The most important crop for them is millet, but sorghum and groundnuts are also of high value to them as this is produced in high quantities. Maize, cassava, tobacco, and numerous other vegetables are grown in private gardens as well. As agriculture is so important to the people of the Bambara tribe, one of the religious traditions is to worship the Chi Wara in rituals associated with planting and harvesting.

The Chi Wara was the Bambarian inventor of agriculture. Even though most Bambara declare to be Muslim, many people still follow their conventional beliefs in ancestor worship. The Bambara trust that the ancestral spirits may take on the forms of animals or even vegetables. In extraordinary ceremonies, the spirits are worshipped and presented with offerings of flour and water while the people taking part in this ceremony honours the Chi Wara through dancing while wearing the Chi Wara antelope mask as seen in Figure 3. pic] Figure 3: Unknown Artist, Chi Wara antelope Mask, Wood Carving, plant material, horns, antelope skin, 9. 8" x 11" x 10. 5", Private Collection (Chi Wara antelope mask. S. a.). The Chi Wara antelope mask is a semi- stylistic zoomorphic[4] headdress, representing a fusion of antelope and anteater, and is danced in pairs to also honour champion farmers in the Bambara tribe. The headdress is carved out of wood and covered with antelope skin. The Chi Wara antelope mask consists of representations of animal heads.

The oldest member of a family act as the “ negotiator” between the living and the dead (Bambara, S. a.). 4. CONCLUSION In Africa, art is not created for the sake of art. If you look at the different roles that art play in the different communities in Africa, you will find that the purpose of the art, especially the masks in Africa is created not by known artists, but by craftsmen. Also the style of their masks is not realistic but also not abstract. From an African point of view, works of art should be neither too rational nor conceptual.

This is because of the lack of aesthetic value from the masks to them. In the above research you find that art is not for the beauty of art but created for <https://assignbuster.com/african-masks-assignment/>

the use of ancestral worship. If you look at the reason for the initial creation of African art, you will find that the art was created for religious, political and social events of communities and tribes. Thus one can state that African art is the visible expression of the invisible as were visible reveres to the creative mask, and were invisible reveres to the spiritual and ancestral worship of the African people. . BIBLIOGROPHY African art and architecture. 2001. In: Microsoft Encarta encyclopaedia (Deluxe) 2001 [CD-ROM]. African masks history and meaning. S. a. [Online]. Available from: http://www.rebirth.co.za/African_masks_history_and_meaning.htm [Accessed: 03/04/2010]. Bambara. S. a. [Online]. Available from: <http://www.africaguide.com/culture/tribes/bambara.htm> [Accessed: 03/04/2010]. BASTIN, M. 1982. La sculpture Tshokwe. France: Main et Francoise Chaffin. Chi Wara antelope mask. S. a. [Online]. Available from: <http://www.controverscial.com/Antelo10.gif> [Accessed: 09/04/2010]. South African Concise Oxford Dictionary. 2002. Southern Africa: Oxford University Press. VAN WYK, G. , GARRATT, K. , STEPAN, P. 1998. Chokwe, art and initiation among Chokwe and related peoples. New York: Prestel-Verlag, Munich. WordWeb. 2004. [Online] Available from: <http://wordweb.info/> [Accessed: 28/03/2010]. ————— [1] Palaeolithic: The second part of the Stone Age beginning about 750, 00 to 500, 000 years BC and lasting until the end of the last ice age about 8, 500 years B.

C (WordWeb, 2004) [2] Cosmological: Pertaining to the branch of astronomy dealing with the origin and history and structure and dynamics of the universe (WordWeb, 2004). [3] Masquerade: A party of guests wearing costumes and masks (WordWeb, 2004). [4] Zoomorphic: The attribution of

animal forms or qualities to a god (WordWeb, 2004). ————— African
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