

# Playful Performers

April 9–December 12, 2004

*Playful Performers* celebrates the ingenuity of African children as they explore, through playful activity, the world of masquerade performance. The aesthetic power and mystery of masquerade inspire children as young as five years of age to imitate adult masked dancers or to create their own masks, costumes and dances that they perform to the delight of youngsters and adults alike. This exhibition highlights the rich diversity of childhood masquerades in Africa and the importance of play as a means by which African children acquire the skills that are necessary for participation in the highly creative world of adult masquerade.

The exhibition is based on research undertaken by Simon Ottenberg and David Binkley in the preparation of *Playful Performers: African Children's Masquerades*, which is to be published in fall 2004 by Transaction Publishers, Rutgers. This brochure is written by David Binkley and Allyson Purpura



Boys strike martial art poses.  
Kuba peoples, Democratic Republic of the Congo

Photograph by David Binkley and Patricia Darish, 1981  
These Congolese boys are initiating the martial arts poses made famous throughout the world by Bruce Lee.

## **Exploring the World of Play**

Childhood play is universal. It is during play that children are the most creative and free to express themselves. Creative play provides opportunities for children to try out new ideas and develop their individual skills and interests with other children and adults without paying a penalty for mistakes. Indeed, it is through play that children respond to, experiment with and re-define the adult world.

Children are keen observers. But they do not simply mimic or imitate adult activity by rote. They often playfully employ caricature or satire to poke fun at adult roles and behavior as they become adept at increasingly complex social and verbal skills. As they mature, children explore and come to more fully understand the world around them and discover their particular abilities and uniqueness in the process. In turn, it is often during play that parents begin to recognize a child's special abilities.

Play also shapes a child's identity as a girl or boy. From an early age, children are encouraged to gravitate to and participate in activities associated with adult gendered roles and responsibilities. In Africa, while not all play activities are specifically gendered, play for girls tends to be associated with female roles in the household, such as child rearing or food preparation, while play for boys is associated with male cultural roles such as hunting, fishing, building or masked dancing.



Children's mask ensemble  
Igbo peoples, Nsuka, Nigeria  
Photograph by Herbert S. Cole, 1972

While some children create masks on their own, masking is more often a group activity. These Igbo boys have taken cloth, fiber and sticks to create masks and formed a masked ensemble.

## **Masquerade and Imagination**

Masquerades are dramatic and compelling events performed throughout western and central Africa, in both rural and urban settings. While festive and entertaining, masquerades also play a critical role in the aesthetic expression of a community's history, culture and identity. Masked dancers, disguised as animals, spirits, ancestors or ordinary human beings, enact well-known legends and stories and celebrate important community events. Masquerades are frequently part of religious ceremonies, such as those relating to initiation and funerals. Humorous masquerades that poke fun at individuals and groups are also common. At the same time, masquerades address important contemporary issues such as those relating to health, education and the prevention of HIV/AIDS.

The very nature of African masquerade—encompassing a disguise of the human face, elaborate costuming, choreography and musical accompaniment—imbues the

performance with aesthetic power, drama and mystery that appeals to adults and children alike.

Children imitate and invent masks and costumes as they make masquerade an important part of their own culture of play. Like their adult counterparts, children look upon masquerade performance as an ensemble requiring the skills of singers, dancers, musicians and directors. Even children who choose not to create or wear masks still perform vital roles. They help organize masked performances, accompany others in song, dance, play music or are simply part of an eager audience.

Recent research has shown that children's masquerades are far more prevalent than originally thought—that children perform masquerades for their own local communities and, in some cases, for important national festivals as well. While children's masquerade is predominantly a boys' activity, there are some significant instances where girls participate.

African children's masquerades may occur at any time but tend to take place before, during or after certain adult rituals. While children's masked dances may be impromptu events requiring no special occasions, they may also be tied to holidays such as Ramadan, Christmas or Easter. In urban areas, such as Ougadougou and Bissau, children's masquerade troupes often traverse ethnic and religious lines, creating a new sense of belonging and empowerment for participants.

## **The World of Childhood Masquerade**

Children's masking takes a variety of forms and impulses in their creation. In some communities, such as among the Kuba or Ibo peoples, there exists established adult masquerade traditions with an elaborate hierarchy of masks. Children may imitate masks they see at funerals or on other occasions years before they will be allowed to participate in initiation rituals.

In other communities, children are given important, though limited roles in adult masquerade performances. In Yoruba and Dogon societies, for example, masking

becomes a training ground for children as parents and other adult members of the masking associations help children acquire the necessary skills and experience that will allow the children to mature into successful adult performers.

There are still other masking traditions, such as the Dodo children's masquerade performance in Burkina Faso and Mali or Carnival in Guinea Bissau, that are masquerades invented entirely by children and are independent from adults and their activities. Indeed, the diversity and range of masquerades explored in this exhibition testify to African children's inventive spirit and impulse to play—and to the sheer power of masquerade as an enduring part of African expressive culture.



Children's *sagiri* leaf masks  
Dogon peoples, Tireli, Mali

Photograph by Walter E.A. van Beek, 1998

Children's leaf masquerade sets the stage and is an essential part of an adult masquerade that marks the change of seasons. Young boys are thought to be less domesticated and more "bushlike" than adults and, therefore, represent the world of the bush and wildness. If the leaf masquerade is not performed, there can be no *buro*—sacrifices at shrines before the onset of the rainy season and the beginning of cultivation.

## **Dogon peoples, Mali**

For Dogon peoples in southern Mali, boys' interest in masquerading is intense. At funerals, young boys go through all of the motions of male adult masqueraders without actually masking and are praised by their fathers and older brothers. They also often assist masked adult dancers at memorial services. As boys get older, they intently practice dance movements and begin to wear masks similar to adult ones. At other times, they appear at adult rites in their own unique full body leaf masks and costumes called *sagiri*. Indeed, though frolicking and lighthearted, the involvement of children's masquerades in certain adult rituals is essential. For instance, if the children's *sagiri* is not performed, there will be no *buro*—no rite of the New Year when sacrifices are made at shrines so that cultivation may begin.



Ancient Mother and child masqueraders  
Uzairue peoples, Jattu, Nigeria  
Photograph by Jean Borgatti, 1973

Okakgbe are daytime masquerades that are performed during annual festivals at the time of the new yam harvest in August, at the end of the traditional year or to honor local village tutelary deities. They may also appear at funeral and second burial ceremonies, especially for members of the Okakgbe dance troupe.

### **Okpella peoples, Nigeria**

The Okakgbe are daytime masquerades performed by the Okpella peoples of Nigeria.

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The Okakgbe masquerade ensemble consists of five or six figures clad in cloth appliqué and a bush monster costumed in assembled forest materials. Ancient Mother (Odogo) is the senior character in the dance ensemble. Her costume, which is similar to the other dancers, has a very elaborate headdress complete with several cloth figures described as her children. Ancient Mother always performs in the company of a dancing child called Little One (Okeke). In contrast to the positive attributes of wisdom, wealth and beauty of the Ancient Mother and her child is the masked figure Ida. Ida's snaggletoothed head and jutting horns are modeled in gum, beeswax or clay over a basketry or wooden core and a dried raffia costume. The dance performance symbolizes the contrast between connotations of ideal human beauty and material wealth versus male aggression and strength. They also express the complementarity of opposites: male/female, ugly/beautiful and hot/cool.



Members of a Dodo group prepare for their performance.  
Dylua peoples, Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso  
Photograph by Rene Bravmann, 1972

### **Dodo masquerade, Burkina Faso**

The Dodo masquerade originated among the Muslim Hausa peoples of northern Nigeria, but today it is performed by children in cities and villages throughout the Western Savannah, particularly in Burkina Faso, Côte D'Ivoire and Mali.

Dodo is performed during the month of Ramadan. On the night of the full moon, Dodo masquerade troupes—consisting of a principle singer, a chorus, dancers, drummers and other masked creatures—travel from house to house, singing and dancing in return for gifts of money. The “classic” Dodo mask is made from a dried gourd with horns

fashioned from palm stalks and is painted white; older boys paint their bodies in elaborate patterns of white stripes and dots.

The masquerade is based on a Hausa tale of a hunter who is turned into a monster and banished to the forest for breaking a promise to his friend, the Emir. While a basic narrative structure remains, the masquerade's songs, dances and lyrics have changed. Once performed only in family courtyards, Dodo masquerades have become more public events and now include a greater number of girls as unmasked accompanists.

In Ougadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso, the boys in the Dodo troupes come from diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds. Indeed, the Dodo masquerade has been characterized by local residents as a cultural event that encourages cooperation and solidarity among the neighborhood youth, while providing individual performers with the opportunity to strive for personal excellence.

Government recognition of Dodo's popularity and social benefits resulted in the sponsorship of an annual competition for Dodo masqueraders. The Ougadougou government awards prizes for the best performances and masks and encourages the creation of new mask forms. Government interest in Dodo is reminiscent of what occurs in the Bissau carnival, where child masking serves the government's interests in promoting social and political solidarity, pride in cultural heritage and tourism.



Bissau, Guinea-Bissau  
Photograph by Harriet McGuire, 1995  
Boys cover a clay model with papier-mâché before painting the mask with bright colors.

## **Carnival, Guinea-Bissau**

Carnival in the capital of Guinea-Bissau is an annual pre-Lenten event that lasts a number of days and includes the participation of boys and girls of all ages. A lively procession of grimacing ghouls, popular television and cartoon characters, political caricatures, and allegorical representations of government-sponsored social reforms, Carnival has come to be one of the most colorful and complex spectacles of contemporary African popular culture. Introduced to the region by Portuguese Catholic missionaries in the 1950s, carnivalesque festivals on the eve of All Soul's Day are also known to have taken place in the "creole" towns of Guinea-Bissau in the late 1890s. There is also a degree of influence drawn from carnivals in Brazil, Portugal, Cuba, Goa and elsewhere in Africa. Children are also inspired by foreign videos, movies, posters, magazines and from well-known Bissau newspaper cartoon characters. Mask forms change over time, reflecting the most current cultural and political trends.

The Bissau Carnival is one of a series of large-scale festival events that have sprung up in African cities in recent years, albeit with a stronger emphasis on children than most of them. Over the years, the government's assumption of control over carnival performances has influenced the nature of children's masking and the kinds of masks that children create. Organized mask-making endeavors allow boys from different ethnic backgrounds and neighborhoods in Bissau to come together in a single, competitive endeavor. In recent years, the Bissau government has encouraged the creation of the innovative and elaborate masks that incorporate syringes, condoms, national flags or composite male-female characters representing multiple ethnic groups because they help promote government-initiated social reforms (vaccination campaigns, HIV/AIDS awareness, national pride, multiculturalism and gender equality).



Child's interpretation of a Mukenga mask  
Kuba peoples, Democratic Republic of the Congo  
Photograph by David Binkley and Patricia Darish, 1982  
This child's interpretation of a Mukenga mask was inspired by the appearance of an adult mask at a funeral performance several days earlier. Most Kuba children's masks are imitations of adult forms observed at community masquerades.

### **Kuba peoples, Democratic Republic of the Congo**

In Kuba society, masquerade figures perform most often at funerals of initiated men on the day the body of the deceased is buried. Shortly after a funeral masquerade is held, children may perform their own masquerades in imitation of the adult masks to the enjoyment of other children and adults. While the appearance of adult masquerades is controlled by a men's initiation society and membership into the society is only through initiation, Kuba men allow children to experiment with masking and masquerade. On

occasion, Kuba men will help their children construct masks and costumes. As boys will eventually become members of men's masquerading groups, there is a somewhat relaxed attitude toward the boys copying men's masks and maquerades.



Yoruba peoples, Nigeria

Photograph by Margaret Thompson Drewal, 1986

Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art

African children are encouraged to imitate the gestures and dances of adult masquerades. A young Egungun performer is dancing for an even younger member of the audience.

## **Yoruba peoples, Nigeria**

In the Yoruba society of Nigeria, where skills in masquerade performance are highly valued, adult masquerade festivals serve as a training ground for the next generation of

masked dancers. During festivals, boys' masking may take place at any time: before a festival begins, shortly before the adult masqueraders appear or at the festival's conclusion. Boys may be organized into troupes or a single masquerader may perform. When masquerading boys are quite young, they are likely to be guided by their fathers, mothers or other older relatives.

### **Egungun**

Egungun festivals are associated with the ancestors. Young boys eagerly take part in adult Egungun masquerades. Boys practice intensely and then perform in troupes going from house to house to perform for gifts of coins, bananas, plantains and yams. For children, masquerading may seem like play and a way to learn performance skills. These activities nevertheless, do introduce children to the spiritual side of Yoruba life. The Yoruba do not practice a single adolescent initiation that socially differentiates boys from men. Instead, boys are gradually accepted into an adult Yoruba masking society, which is usually associated with a specific god or *orisha*, through masquerading and other activities.

### **Gelede**

Gelede is a major Yoruba festival that honors women and their powers. It involves numerous adult male masqueraders and frequently includes children masqueraders as well. The youngest boys perform first. The four- and five-year-olds use discarded or borrowed masks that they hold to their faces with their hands. This performance may be followed by teenage masqueraders who move more skillful and then by adult performers. During the performance, an adult coach who may be watching from the sidelines may on occasion rush forward to correct a mistake.



Fancy Dress masquerade  
Fante peoples, Elmina, Ghana  
Photograph by Doran H. Ross, 1976

### **Fante peoples, Ghana**

Fancy Dress is a European-inspired masquerade performed by members of a voluntary association among Fante peoples in coastal Ghana. Membership is open to all males who wish to perform, can pay the annual dues and can make or acquire a mask and costume. Masked performances take place annually at Easter, Christmas and New Year's and occasionally during more tradition-based festivals, such as the installation of a chief or the funeral of a member of the dance troupe.

Young boys, who are the children of association members, join their fathers and other male relatives in masked performances. Both children and adult performers wear masks made from wire screen that has been molded to fit the face and painted to obscure the performer's features. The colors and styles of costume are chosen by each masking group. The addition of a hat, gloves or other garments makes each costume unique.

The style of Fancy Dress costumes, dance movements and the brass band accompaniment are all borrowed from 18th- and 19th-century European prototypes. The masquerades may have been introduced by the Dutch who captured Elmina Castle in 1637. Other possible sources for this masquerade are the Italian masked comedies that had spread all over Europe by the 18th century or the Caribbean Carnival that may have been brought back to Liberia and Sierra Leone with returned slaves or West Indian troops. Individual masquerade characters are also borrowed from European models. They include a variety of human types, such as the Old Man, the Ship Captain and the Stilt Dancer, or animals, such as the cow, goat, turkey and duck.



Christmas Day Children's Masquerade  
Igbo peoples, Ndiawa, Arondizuogu, Nigeria  
Photograph by Eli Bentor, 1987

Groups of boys with one or two masqueraders play bamboo slit gongs and iron gongs and dance on Christmas Day, while an older boy acts as a leader and collects money and sweets. Girls form similar dance groups exhibiting more elaborate dance movements, but do not wear masks.

## **Behind the Mask**

Masking creates an air of illusion, which supports the imaginative life of children and adults alike. It offers infinite possibility for play. The child masker, like his adult counterpart, must represent or act out, through his mask, costume, body movement, gesture and voice, the various human, animal or spirit creatures he wishes to portray in the masquerade performance. By observing adult masquerades, children begin to develop their skills in imaginatively representing beings that are male or female, flamboyant and youthful, solemn and elderly, benign or dangerous.

As they plan and perform masquerades, children acquire important skills and experiences. The masks and costumes they create and the dancing and musical routines they develop help to prepare youth for initiation rituals into adult masking societies or for later adult masquerade activities and rituals. In many African cultures, secrecy adds to the

aura of power that surrounds ritual and religious life. Children quickly become aware that adult masking groups hold secrets. Children's masking becomes a way for children to play at secrecy as well.

Performing in a masquerade is very special and not to be forgotten. Nigerian artist Chika Okeke remembers,

*On my very first outing, I was excited and nervous all at once. I was nervous about being able to impress my audience by dancing very well, and excited about finding out what it would feel like to be behind the mask, to be the masquerade . . .*

(“At the Threshold: Childhood Masking in Umuoji and Umahia,” in *Playful Performers: African Children’s Masquerade*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, Rutgers, Fall 2004).

Children who participate in masquerades develop a strong sense of cooperation with their peers. Masquerade is a joyful experience. The excitement and pleasure a child derives from membership in a masquerade troupe often carries over into adult life. The masquerades explored in this exhibition testify to African children’s inventive spirit and impulse to play and to the sheer power of masquerade as an enduring part of African expressive culture.

## **Suggested Reading**

### **Children's Masquerades**

Literature on children's masks and masquerades can be found in a myriad of published and unpublished sources. This exhibition is based on research conducted by Simon Ottenberg and David Binkley while preparing *Playful Performers: African Children's Masquerades*, a publication that focuses on urban and rural masquerades in West and Central Africa. The publication, which has an extensive bibliography, will be published by Transaction Publishers—Rutgers University in fall 2004

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