

Discover... **WEST AFRICAN MASKS AND CARVINGS**

Religious Beliefs of West Africa

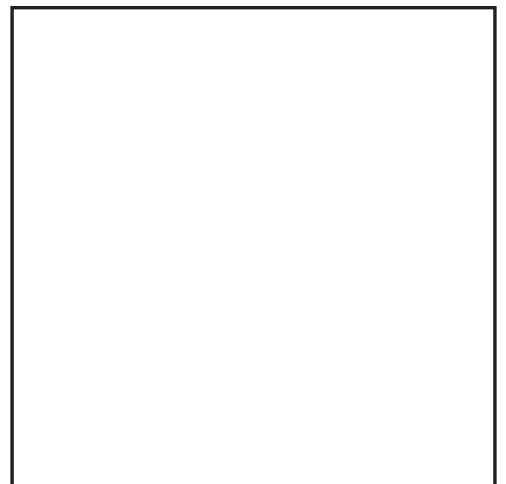
The majority of people in West Africa today are followers of Christianity or Islam. Most of the masks or figures for which West Africa is famous, however, were made for traditional religious practises. Many traditional West African religions centre on the belief in life after death and the belief that spirits of the deceased influence the living world. This influence is held not only over living relatives but also over the weather, crops, livestock, wild animals, and whole communities. It is, however, not only deceased ancestors who hold such influence but the gods who must also be appeased.

People hold rituals to intercede with the spirit world to avert ill fortune and encourage prosperity. Being sacred and powerful these rituals are not for everyone to know about but only for a few chosen men (and very occasionally women) who are initiated into one of the 'secret societies'.

▲ Kalabari Screen, Nigeria,
Ifawkaw, 1916.45.183

Members of these secret societies attempt to contact the gods and spirits of village ancestors through offerings, prayers, songs, dances and 'plays' known as masquerades. Elaborate shrines and statues made from metal, stone, or wood often play a part in such ceremonies. However, among the most common forms of ritual and religious art are the masks used in masquerades.

There are numerous masks and carvings from West Africa on display in the Pitt Rivers Museum. Most of them are from the coastal regions of Nigeria, Cameroon, and Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast). For their wearers, they were more than a facial or head covering. When complete they



would often include an elaborate costume with adornments and a headdress. In the same way, they were more than a simple disguise, as when the whole costume was worn the person beneath it ceased to exist, and the character of the mask came to life.

Mask Design and Decoration

Masks worn during masquerades are often linked to particular supernatural characters. They may also be associated with specific rituals performed at festivals, religious ceremonies, weddings, or funerals. The style and decoration of masks varies, depending not only on which character is being represented but also which area and cultural group it is from. However, because mask-makers are often happy to copy and share ideas, similarities may exist between the masks of different groups. For example, the design of the Ekoi three-faced mask from Nigeria spread along trade routes to Ibo and Ibibio peoples.

▲ Ekoi Helmet Mask, Nigeria, Cross River, 1942.4.9 B

Among the most striking and distinctive features of mask decoration are the keloids or scar-marks that are replicated in mask design. We can see from their mask design that amongst the Central Ijo of Nigeria many people had a raised vertical scar down the centre of their foreheads, a mark that they shared with the neighbouring Western Ibo. These marks can also be seen on the Idoma mask, where scars on the temples are clear, and on the Western Ibo mask.

Although often referred to as 'tribal' marks, keloids were primarily intended as marks of beauty or, in some cases, of social rank. They are less common today but survive on masks and figures. Such representations of scars should not be confused with those of simpler decorations; for example, the circles, crosses, and curved triangles that were painted on people and that are reproduced in many carvings.

▲ Kalabari-Ijo Mask, Southern Nigeria, 1916.45.101

▲ Idoma Mask, Central Nigeria, 1932.33.4

Colour is another distinctive feature of masks. In the Museum's displays a number of black and white masks stand out. Colour is often used to differentiate between positive and negative characteristics. A white mask may indicate positive qualities such as the world of spirits (death), purity, beneficence, and wealth. Such masks represent beautiful, serene, normally feminine characters. By contrast black may represent horrific, fierce, and masculine characters.

There are also examples of masks that are half black and half white, such as the Western Ibo mask. These represent characters in masquerades that were seen as existing between the 'spirit-world' and the 'real-world'. Due to their uncertain nature, such characters may be depicted as comical personalities.

▲ Ibo Mask, Nigeria, Awka,
1938.15.7

Mask Makers and Manufacture

Although West African masks may be made from a variety of materials (including cloth, raffia, leather and more recently plastic) the majority are carved from softwood. The process of carving and making masks for masquerades is ritualized, comprising a prescribed series of steps that have to be learned through years of apprenticeship. Woodcarvers choose their wood carefully, preferring to carve a green, moist wood with the right physical and spiritual qualities, the latter of which are determined through a private divination ritual and adjusted with an offering. The decoration stage is also ritualized; for example, nobody other than the maker could be present when the skin was put on to a wooden Ekoi mask.

▲ Awori Yoruba Mask, Nigeria,
Ota Village, 1965.8.8 B

References and further reading

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Blackmun Visonà, Monica et al, A History of Art in Africa, New York: Prentice Hall, (2001).

The objects featured in this **Introductory guide** can be found at the following locations:

Court (ground floor)

Case 13A Mask and Carving – West Africa

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