

AnOther

The Astonishing Artistry and Aesthetics of African Masking

Charlotte Jansen

March 17, 2016



Masking is one of the oldest and most widespread cultural practices in the world. Whether at ancient Greek bacchanalia and Roman saturnia, at rituals and ceremonies in Igbo and Edo cultures in western Africa, masks have been used, paradoxically, to evoke the inner spiritual self and to communicate with animals, nature or supernatural beings. New York native and photographer Phyllis Galembo has a deep interest in costuming and masking in different cultures around the world: prior to her book, *Maske* – the result of more than five years dedicated to photographing participants at contemporary ritual masking, or masquerade events in western and central Africa and the Caribbean – she published books on masquerade in the US, on ancient voodoo and ritual clothing.

AnOther



Galembo's book, *Maske* – originally released in 2010 and back in print under the Aperture imprint by popular demand – brings together an updated selection of more than 100 of Galembo's photographs, organized by country, and interspersed with personal accounts from the artist, that elucidates the practice of masking as it exists now, and the people and environments that make them happen. It is a really remarkable work: much of it is original research that provides unprecedented documentation, a dazzling insight into the craftsmanship, customs, and beliefs of these communities.

"It wasn't easy – my assistants tell me, never forget how hard it was!" Galembo reveals over the phone. A western woman travelling alone, the photographer was able to find and get to the masquerades with the help local assistants. As she writes in the book,

AnOther

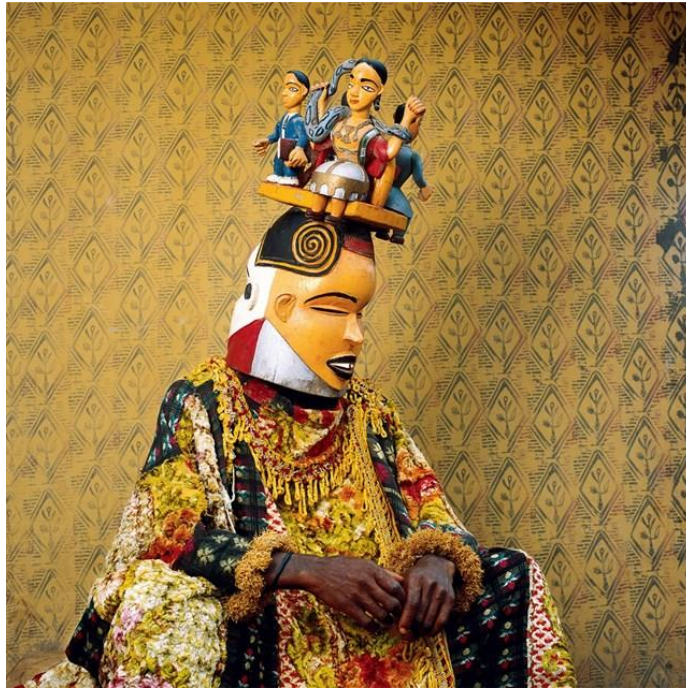
negotiations with village chiefs for permission to shoot photographs could take hours in blistering heat – and gin and cash were a prerequisite in Kaoma, Zambia.



Physical access was often a challenge too – at the time, there were few paved roads to the isolated location Galembo needed to reach in Burkina Faso to shoot animal and spirit masquerades there. Her unrelenting perseverance and patience is palpable in the resulting photographs. “Sometimes you had to wait for a *really* long time for a masquerade to appear.”

The incredible artistry and aesthetics of the costumes is consistently astounding throughout the book. The richness in texture, colour and pattern makes each costume entirely unique – and even more striking when Galembo highlights the materials used to make these costumes, ranging from lizard excrement to burlap sacks, plastic bags and cardboard.

AnOther



It's easy to understand how the masquerade could bewitch when used to full effect in ceremonies, not only to entertain, but also to frighten. As colourful and jubilant some masks appear to be, there is a deliberately ominous side to the aesthetic concealment. Among the most haunting images in the book are Galembo's photographs of masquerades in the Cross River region of Nigeria. The Ekpo and Ekpe figures, for example, are intended to terrify onlookers: they represent ghosts, returned from the underworld.

In Galembo's celebratory and revelatory exploration, the colonial gaze of anthropology is vanquished: Galembo's treatment offers so many different prisms through which to view these masks. The photographer's purpose is – as curator and art historian Chika Okeke-Agulu, himself a 'maske' as a child in Nigeria, points out in the book's introduction – in part, to preserve these far-flung and fast-fading traditions. It's a wistful feeling that accumulates as you leaf through the book's sumptuous pages. While the traditions may be edging towards extinction, as Galembo's celebratory and revelatory work suggests, the cultures and histories they come from are as actively diverse and complex as the vision of the masquerades themselves.

STEVEN
KASHER
GALLERY

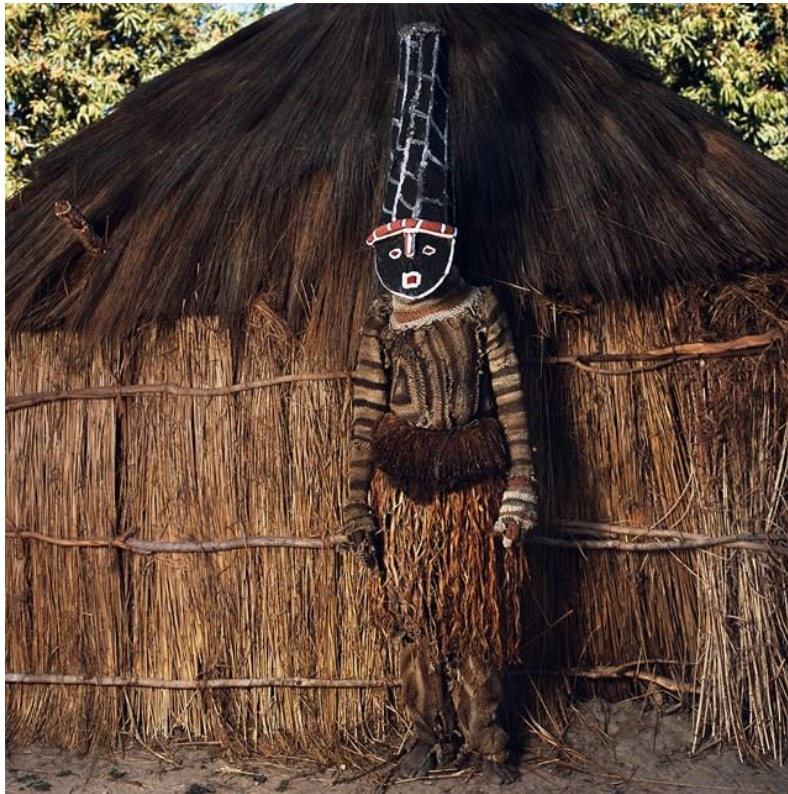
AnOther^{ARTS}



Panther Masquerade, Samaga Village, Burkina Faso, 2006 *Photography by Phyllis Galembo, courtesy of Aperture, 2016*

STEVEN
KASHER
GALLERY

AnOther



Kambweti (Walks with Sticks) Likishi Masquerade, Kaoma, Zambia, 2007 *Photography by Phyllis Galembo, courtesy of Aperture, 2016*