HYPERALLERGIC

# A Photographic Survey of Africa's Enduring Masquerade Traditions

By: Clare Voon April 21, 2016

From initiation rites to harvest festivals, many traditional African rituals require participants to don masks and elaborate costumes that transform their wearers into spirits, beasts, or ancestral beings. Many of these still flourish today, with performers covered head-to-toe in vibrant, patterned fabrics or garments woven from natural fibers, carrying myriad accessories, and peering out from small holes of sculptural masks. New York-based photographer Phyllis Galembo has spent two decades capturing this rich variety of masquerade costumes, traveling across western and central Africa as well as parts of Haiti to witness local rituals firsthand.

Over 100 of her photographs are now featured in Maske, a book published recently by Aperture; the title is derived from the Haitian Kreyòl word maské, which translates to "to wear a mask." Organized by country, Maske presents photographic surveys of events in Zambia, Benin, Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Burkina Faso, and Haiti, showing that locals young and old across the African continent and African diaspora still come together to explore the transformative power of full-body adornments — an enduring set of traditions that may surprise some.

"The connection between masking, religion, and socio-political processes of African societies is a direct one," art historian Chika Okeke-Agulu writes in an introduction. "Little wonder then, that the art has declined, given the undeniable pressures on 'traditional' modes of life. What is remarkable is that it has not declined more."

A pervasive nostalgia, Okeke-Agulu explains, has contributed to the survival of these masquerades, but they also continue because many societies have adapted the meanings of their performances to suit present day needs, at times integrating them into modern social, legal, or economic systems. Some communities have also introduced contemporary edits to costumes, replacing natural materials with synthetic ones.

Galembo's photographs celebrate the materiality of these garments, focusing on them as individual objects rather than as accessories for rituals. Rather than capturing anthropological scenes from events, she presents formal portraits of the involved and adorned characters, mostly framing individuals against neutral backgrounds such as a building's exterior, a tree trunk, or patterned wallpaper. In these settings, you can closely examine the range of materials incorporated into outfits, from the vividly colored raffia that form bulbous apparel to the papier-mâché pieces molded into animal-like props.

Providing some context to these costumes and rituals are Galembo's personal accounts of her experiences, which precede each chapter. Here, she lends insight into the persistence of masquerade traditions, touching upon their 21st-century updates. New "Makishi" characters who dance at initiation ceremonies in Zambia, for instance, have names such as "Honda," "Helicoptor," and "Airplane." In Benin, spirits of the Gelede societies' masquerades often carry around small figurines that provide education advice related to AIDS in addition to more timeless moral lessons.

In terms of the physical craft of these outfits, traditional carving has been superseded by skills such as collaging or embroidery, and wax printed fabrics at times replace the popular raffia skirts. Instead of the typical carved wooden animal headpieces, devil figures dancing in parades in Freetown, Sierra Leone, have also been known to wear taxidermy sent by US expatriates; some even adopt costumes inspired by

Western movie characters such as science fiction beasts, cowboys, Native Americans, and even dinosaurs. Displaying these 21st-century touches without drawing attention to them, Galembo's portraits suggest that rather than fading, these masquerade traditions will continue to thrive, evolving with and adapting to the times while maintaining remnants of their original histories.

Phyllis Galembo's Maske is available from Aperture.