

The People Behind Their Masks  
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In the heart of the Himalayan region, a rhythmic chanting lulls a procession into a steady gait; golden faces float among hordes of followers, venerating their patron deity. The crowd approaches a new temple and begins to celebrate its debut with blood sacrifice and alcoholic drink. Across the world in a forest village of Africa, a dancer, adorned by a vibrant costume and mask, embodies a supernatural being. The dancer is led into a funeral masquerade and moves to the percussion of organic instruments. These two ceremonies are vastly important to their individual cultures and include the honoring of respected figures. The Mask of Bhairava from Nepal and the Mukenga Mask from the Democratic Republic of the Congo are both elements of dramatic displays of spiritual belief and societal affairs.

The Mask of Bhairava portrays the Hindu God, Bhairava, who is a reincarnation of Shiva, the central Hindu god's violent side, and the town of Varnasi's local guardian, who promotes abstinence from sin.<sup>1</sup> Bhairava is celebrated in the five-day Indra Jatra festival in the Katmandu valley. The mask's exterior of gilt copper repoussé almost makes it luminous as its three prominent eyes draw in the viewer with their ominous expression.<sup>2</sup> The face's large fanged mouth gapes open to receive blood sacrifice and dispense gifts of beer. The climax of the ceremony is when the believers receive the beer, a blessing that they believe will bring them favor throughout the following year. This mask and ceremony reflect the balance of love, fear, and gratitude of Hindu people toward their gods as well as their core religious value of morality.

The Mukenga Mask's organic composure of raffia, wood, cowrie shells, beads, feathers, and goat hair as well as its elephant-derived shape create its exotic look and powerful appearance.<sup>3</sup> Elephants are commonly used as a symbol of power and strength for obvious reasons, but also as a symbol of wealth and resources; the African people have been using elephants for an eternity and for a wide array of reasons from food to transportation.<sup>4</sup> This mask was used at the funerals of prestigious leaders, and the white of the cowrie shells are symbolic of death, mourning, and economic wealth.<sup>5</sup> These masks, worn in festive and extravagant funeral ceremonies by many dancers in vivid costumes, reveal the Kuba people's respect for their elite class. The red parrot feathers at the end of the hanging trunk-like appendage are a symbol of the eagle-feathered chief, who would have been the only one allowed to wear this headpiece.<sup>6</sup> The faces of these masks were generally made of elephant skin before 1880, referring to the wealth of the region as a result of the ivory trade.<sup>7</sup> The funeral ceremony of the Kuba people not only portrays their social dynamics and culture of respect, but it reveals the ties between their economics and class system.

The true aspirations along with the political and social structures of these societies are revealed through the masks' ornate ceremonial displays. The Mask of Bhairava reflects the ways in which the Hindu people admire and appreciate their protector as well as how they value morality and abstinence from sin. In contrast, The Mukenga Mask reveals the Kuba people's veneration of their cultural superiors and regard for their financial success. While both masks support the continued well-being of their culture and include the veneration of a specific figure in their ceremony, the Mask of Bhairava supports continued security and moral goodness, while the Mukenga Mask refers to the achievement of material gain and the respect of social hierarchy. This combination of passionate ceremony and aesthetic brilliance truly communicates these societies' cultures and bonds, deeming words irrelevant.

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<sup>1</sup> Corinna Wessels-Mevissen, "Innovation and Continuity: A New Temple for Kala Bhairava at Adichunchanagiri, Karnataka," *Marg: A Magazine of the Arts* 60, no. 3 (March 2009): 44.

<sup>2</sup> Anne R. Bromberg, *The Arts of India, Southeast Asia, and the Himalayas at the Dallas Museum of Art* (Dallas: Dallas Museum of Art, 2013), 197.

<sup>3</sup> Roslyn Walker, *The Arts of Africa at the Dallas Museum of Art* (Dallas: Dallas Museum of Art, 2009), 188.

<sup>4</sup> Doran Ross, *Elephant: The Animal and its Ivory in African Culture* (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1992), 60-81.

<sup>5</sup> Allison Hughes, "Identity: Status," *School Arts* (September 2005): 42.

<sup>6</sup> David Binkley and Patricia Darish, *Kuba* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 2009), 121.

<sup>7</sup> Judith Perani and Norma Wolff, *Cloth, Dress and Art Patronage in Africa* (New York: Bloomsbury, 1999), 95.