

Agency in artistry: comments on ‘Art and the individual in African masquerades’

Patrick McNaughton

Understanding masquerade performance is a difficult challenge because so many dimensions of expressive culture come together. There are questions of performer ambiguity and secret expertise, the confounding relationships between secular and spiritual, the many aspects of secrecy, and the involvement of higher powers. There is also the basic question of what a performance is supposed to accomplish, and the most fundamental issue of individual identity and agency.

The authors in this part issue consider several of these dimensions, with a primary focus on the roles of individuals. They build most positively on a long tradition of highly varied observation and exegesis that includes Ibn Battuta’s mid-fifteenth-century account of bird-costumed performers orating accomplishment and caution before the Emperor of Mali (see Levtzion and Hopkins 2000: 293), and the ‘Mumbo Jumbo’ bark masquerade that Mungo Park encountered suspended in a tree in 1795, which he said was a mysterious and fearsome instrument used to maintain order among wives in Mandingo families (Park 1799: 39–40).

These two accounts herald the difficulties in comprehending masquerade – it is not so easy to garner understanding from observation, and talking to people about what was seen and heard can invoke quagmires of interpretation from multiple entrenched perspectives, mercenary vested interests, and a variety of experiences that could border on the surrealistic because of the many ways in which ‘context’ can be disembodied and corrupted. Mungo Park used the word ‘bugbear’ to describe the masquerade he saw, perhaps because of its shape and its alleged use for intimidating wives. An archaic European application of the word was for a fearsome forest creature shaped like a bear, invoked to scare children who were told it might eat them.¹ Mungo Park’s account was far less riddled with bias than most early foreign travellers who wrote about the expressive cultures they encountered. And yet Park’s choice of this word entered the flow of obfuscation and misrepresentation so characteristic of the early descriptions by explorers, soldiers, administrators and missionaries. With their simple-minded assertions about gender roles and representations, belief and practice, foreigners spent literal centuries in self-induced darkness regarding the cultures they were experiencing (many chapters in Keim 2014 are relevant here). The perhaps innocent use of just one word – bugbear – speaks volumes on the understanding that was forfeit.

Twentieth-century scholarship on masks, masquerades and performance

By the mid-twentieth century, scholars were looking more closely at the social and spiritual contexts of masks and masquerades. They identified functions for

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¹See the definition at <<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/bugbear>>.

performances and meanings for performance characters and the component parts of their costumes. Basic dichotomies were asserted between sacred and secular. Sacred usually involved links to spiritual beings or powers, secret knowledge and restricted audience attendance, often requiring membership in an initiation association or secret society. Secular meant unrestricted public performances with an emphasis on entertainment. Scholars frequently reported a flow from sacred to secular, often in response to colonialism or Islam. All this represented a welcome advance. But, as Susan Elizabeth Gagliardi details in her introduction to this part issue, performance traditions were presented as homogeneous across ethnic groups, with standardized meanings and functions and little attention to the roles of individuals. Missing was an understanding or interest in the variation and diverse perspectives that are expressed within established traditions. Scholars needed to expand their inquiries of context in two seemingly opposite directions. First, they needed to look further out into society, beyond masks, performance accoutrements and performance events, so that the full effect of context on people's imaginations and actions could be understood. Second, they needed to look inside generalizations about expressive structures, to understand the experiences and intentions of actual participants.

As the mid-century decades passed, these changes of focus began to happen. Many scholars redefined the boundaries of context with growing sensitivity to nuance and complexity in considering performers, and expanded understandings of how deep we should go into the elements of society, culture and history that overtly or tacitly populate people's imagination and public discourse – the elements that give performance meaningful life.

In 2001, Karel Arnaut offered a quick account of recent developments in African performance studies (2001: 29–31). My account here includes some of the same scholars. Elizabeth Tonkin (1979) illuminated the vital connections between imagination and agency and showed how using masks can produce power for both users and viewers, in ways not always bounded by a society's precepts. Robert Farris Thompson (1974) linked masquerade performance aesthetics to society's crucial social, spiritual and philosophical ideas, embracing their vitality in articulated movement. Anita Glaze (1981) demonstrated the importance of casting a wide contextual net to comprehend the enriching force of art in life. Henry and Margaret Thompson Drewal (1983) examined the use of masquerade performances to engage and influence very powerful social and spiritual forces. Herbert Cole (1985) cogently summarized the state of our understanding, with an emphasis on the performance of spirit powers. Sylvia Boone (1986) considered the ways in which beauty embodied in masquerade actualizes principles of social and spiritual value in people's lives. Sidney Kasfir (1988) affirmed the role of performance in tangibly enacting social and spiritual beliefs, while also offering forums in which divergent social perspectives can engage their broader communities. John Picton (1990), in refreshingly meticulous fashion, examined how masks can be perceived by their users and what becomes of the identity of the performers who don them. Margaret Drewal (1992) used lived experience to disarm old notions of unchanging traditions and show performance's transformative ritual potential. Mary Jo Arnoldi (1995) depicted the social complexity and artistic sophistication of performances, while Zoe Strother (1998) showed how collaborative masquerade invention can be. And the conjunction of disciplines around masked performance and other forms of artistry was well illustrated in a

volume on the complexities of secrecy as a strategically deployed social instrument (Nooter 1993).

Studies of performance that did not feature masquerade also made crucial contributions. Warren d’Azevedo (1973) detailed the value of considering how specific individuals shape and enrich established performance traditions. Ivan Karp (1988) analysed the ways in which humour and satire at otherwise solemn performances offer penetrating glimpses into complex gender relations and social realities. In fine-grained research over some twenty years, Corinne A. Kratz (1994) examined the myriad and sometimes overlooked details that make performance an effective, valuable social vehicle.

In all of these studies, and in many more, we see George Harley’s (1950) model of masquerade performances as fixed affirmations of values and instruments of social control giving way to a far more complex and full-bodied view. While performance along its entire range from entertainment to sacred can certainly affirm and assert established values, it also offers the potential for transformation and contestation. In performance, people articulate their knowledge and skills – as sculptors, dancers, musicians, actors, orators and interpreters – in expressive events that can project a multitude of social positions, motivations and desires onto the dialogue and actions that shape communities and societies. At the core, in my view, is the notion that every instance of a ritual, ceremony, festival, puppet show or performance, no matter how scripted by its tradition of use, will also be shaped by its particular participants and the circumstances of its enactment, and it will have the potential to affect different people in different ways.

Fresh perspectives on individual participants and performance structures

Thus, the terrain of performance now looks complicated. We have learned that, while there are broadly accepted functions to masquerades, many performers and community members participate for additional reasons: for example, to discover themselves, expand their knowledge and skills, develop and present the public person they wish to become, extend their social networks, or help shape social landscapes. We have also learned that the meanings people create from what they see and hear at performances can be shared extensively by others in the audience while also being more personally interpreted because of divergent life experiences and aspirations. We realize that the authorship of masks and costumes, songs and dances can involve many people and be situated in interactive fields of skill sets and cultural knowledge. And we also understand that masquerade and most other forms of expressive culture can be influential enough to help shape history.

As the articles in this collection suggest, participants in a masquerade genre are now better understood as extending well beyond masquerade makers, musicians and dancers. We know that there are expanding circles of infrastructure, and subtle conceptualizations about such things as the ways in which women are fundamentally involved in performances ‘restricted’ to men. Secrecy is seen as very important but flexible and porous – not just a social fact but also a kind of currency, a resource that can be manipulated because of the activities that engender and sustain its restrictive dimensions. Engagement with forces and activities we

have trouble naming – such as spirits and supranatural practices – are now treated with growing sensitivity because we are learning to think less like hamstrung Cartesians and more like travellers on the roads of lived experience. Because of all this, a richer, more realistic and decidedly more meaningful exploration of mask and masquerade performance can be practised, and the four articles in this part issue are excellent examples of that.

The articles here examine very different kinds of performance, across a fluid spectrum of intent from powerfully spiritual to hilarious burlesque. The authors' concerns also differ, making them hard to compare. They share, however, the desire to examine how individual participants fit into performance structures and how that may affect performances and influence people's perceptions of them. The articles come together as a worthwhile collection because their differences emphasize the complexity and lack of uniformity that characterize West African masquerade performances. The authors are careful about detail and sensitive to nuance, and they present fresh perspectives for research on the ways in which individuals engage with their society to produce effective artistic expression.

In what follows, I summarize briefly my impressions of each author's article and then I discuss some of the ideas they all inspired in me.

Daniel Reed's focus on ontology is rich with the subtlety that Dan-speaking peoples themselves apply to the idea that masquerades and the dancers inside them lose their identity to spirits – that they are artworks that replace performers with potent beings. But the question of agency's location is both foregrounded and left ambiguous across several performance scenarios, and it is clear that Reed wants us to see that Dan speakers address the issue with subtlety and fluidity. The spirit's potency is manifest in fantastic performance feats. Exquisite skill in massively impressive movement is witnessed by audiences. But who is responsible for what viewers see – is it the spirit, the dancer, or the dancer infused with the spirit? The agency that accounts for spectacular performance is ambiguously distributed but officially accorded to the spirit, a gesture both humbling and marvelous. The sometimes almost unbelievable abilities of dancers are set aside, even as their abilities serve to measure the potency of netherworld beings, so that those beings are the centre of attention. That hard-earned but obfuscated agency is what audiences see. Behind the scenes, however, the dancers who will be inundated by spirits also possess another important form of agency: the knowledge and expertise they need to prepare for the spirits' arrival, in absolute privacy and with critical ritual procedures. These secret activities are scrupulously attended to, whatever the venue used for the performance. Thus secrecy and agency come together in this article in very revealing ways that seem simultaneously playful and tremendously serious. Reed shows us how Dan speakers manage the complex and seemingly contradictory ways in which people's creative abilities meld with spiritual power.

Lisa Homann examines artist André Sanou's invention of a portrait mask that inspired a controversial but much appreciated new mask genre. Here, the human condition is set before us. An artist's talent, imagination, out-of-the-box thinking, knowledge and nerve come to the fore, in this case because a living friend was inspired to honour a deceased friend in a new and innovative way. There is dialogue and disagreement among audiences, but many people like this new creation, and so more portrait masks are commissioned and a new tradition emerges. In the

end, this article presents a microcosm of how history unfolds. Such invention and accommodation have transpired across Africa for millennia, as new situations developed and new ideas emerged. In this case, photography inspired sculpture, but motivation, skill and entrepreneurship are also what produced the great empires and states of Africa, astonishing systems of long-distance commerce, and untold numbers of innovations in artistry. Examples include the origins of the antelope headdresses of the Mande Ci Wara association as accounted for by Pascal James Imperato (1970), and the development of youth association (*ton*) masquerade performances across much of West Africa's Mande-speaking regions, as chronicled by Mary Jo Arnoldi (1995). As described by Homann, André Sanou's portrait mask invention reminds us that history has always been fuelled by individuals interacting with one another as they engage in life's varied situations. Homann's focus on individual inspiration and the public dialogue it engenders shows a very different kind of creativity from that described by Reed.

Samuel Mark Anderson presents a performer (Siloh) who embodies in personality the essence of his own masquerade character (Gongoli) and who, through buffoonery and mockery, openly subverts the values normally associated with Mende spirit masquerades, to everyone's delight. The principles associated with performing spirits – nobility, danger, fearsomeness, secrecy, mystery – along with many broader Mende social values are all unsettled by frivolous, ribald, self-effacing performance strategies that include calculated disregard for the secrecy of the performer's identity. This subversion is itself a potent form of agency, and no doubt offers audiences many things to think about regarding their own desires, accomplishments and place in the social world. There is a hierarchy of patrons for Mende performing spirits. At the top are the largest and most powerful – the initiation associations of Sande and Poro – and their restrictions and responsibilities are the strongest. At the bottom are travelling performance troupes and itinerant individuals such as Siloh. Anderson says that innovations that can ultimately be institutionalized at the top occur in the middle of this spectrum, but the social dynamics across its entirety are elaborate and sometimes paradoxical. I find it heartening that a person such as Siloh could find a professional niche that so thoroughly suits his disposition, and is so well served by it. Great performers like this deserve attention, as individual artists whose knowledge, skills and experience are pronounced and need to be accounted for but who cannot be adequately understood without asking larger questions about the society in which they perform. Studies like this are important because, just like life, they illuminate the character of artistic and social structures that are grounded in group activity but are fuelled by what individuals bring to them. Anderson shows us how individuals can use their society's contexts of belief and artistic practice as conceptual material they manipulate to shape their careers, just as scholars such as Anthony Giddens (1979; 1984) and Michael Jackson (1989) might imagine. In my own research (McNaughton 2008), the virtuoso bird masquerader Sidi Ballo told me that is what he did, and it seems clear that paying attention to what individual artists do with what they are given can be a crucial fulcrum in understanding creativity in all of its artistic and social manifestations.

Susan Elizabeth Gagliardi presents a sensitive and practical examination of women's involvement with men's power associations. She expands the field of Anita Glaze's trail-blazing study of women and power recognized as Senufo

(1975), bringing fine-grained perception to discussions of gender in expressive culture and social life, and describing women's and men's roles as richly interactive, with intricate patterns of shared agency. She also builds on an innovative thesis written by John Akare Aden (2003) at Indiana University that demonstrates how power associations such as *Kòmò* are intricately intertwined with their communities. *Kòmò* is one of the most widespread and durable Mande power associations known collectively as *jow* (singular *jo*); these are fundamentally associated with Bamana and Maninka speakers but are also used by other groups in southern Mali, northern Côte d'Ivoire, and south-western Burkina Faso. Gagliardi's article shows that these organizations are not just the domain of men, and her work, along with that of the other scholars she cites, helps us balance the more obvious with the much less obvious but decidedly important roles that all genders play to produce a whole community, a whole institution, or a whole artistic practice. The article encourages, for example, a close examination of what are often considered by scholars as formal and informal social structures, suggesting that perhaps that distinction is too definite or arbitrary to be useful. This is a vital direction for research on many fronts, because, among other things, it seeks to rein in misleading generalizations too grounded in expectations and not grounded enough in careful inquiry. Gagliardi shows how agency can be distributed among people and how expressive practice is defined by the interaction of individuals, even when all of those individuals might not be obvious.

The goal of the 2014 Arts Council of the African Studies Association (ACASA) panel where shorter versions of these articles were presented was to glimpse the range of ideas and actions involving individuals in performances, from dancers' personalities being annulled by spirit entities to dancers, mask makers or mask subjects being openly recognized and celebrated. Given that mandate, we should not be surprised by the differences of perspective and approach that make comparing the different contributions difficult. If we think of performances as simply falling into such broad categories as public, secular and entertainment-oriented versus restricted, sacred and very serious in orientation, we miss the variation that breathes life into each tradition. These investigations indicate how important that variation is for understanding performance and its history. They are part of a broader movement that seeks to examine the specifics that make art meaningful to people beyond the older emphasis on generalizations.

Secrecy is a topic that weaves through these four analyses of different masquerade practices, though not always overtly, and in one case indirectly. Secrecy would be hard to avoid since the nature and possession of secrets are issues thick with nuance that we will never be done with. It saturates every sector of society: in the realms of gender, age grades, specialized professions such as blacksmithing or masonry, divination practices, herbal knowledge, sorcery, and the initiation associations such as *Kòmò* that are so often characterized as ultimate wielders of secret knowledge and expertise.

But we are learning that secrecy is far more than exclusive information or skill. It is also a genuine form of collateral, a resource that can be manipulated as tangibly as the materials used in sculpting or the rules that guide social action. Reed's article shows how rich the surface of secrecy can be, with people knowing but not stating the identity of dancers. Gagliardi shows how secrecy can be embedded so deeply in people's behaviour and sense of self that it is hard for researchers to even detect, and how it can also generate titillation, which should itself be considered a

resource that artists and initiation association leaders manipulate to punctuate ideas and encourage contemplation. Anderson examines how local concepts of secrecy can be shaped into vehicles of intense humour by playing with what audiences expect in a masquerade because of secrecy versus what they are sometimes shown. Homann shows that secrecy's opposite – full identity disclosure – can transform the way in which people think about their own artistic institutions, and how dashed expectations may engender controversy as well as humour. As scholarly debate evolves about what secrecy is, this part issue serves as source material to help refine our thinking.

Although the roles of individuals are quite different in the four articles gathered here, what is clear is the significance of individuals linked together in collective action (art world networks). It is instructive to note how the authors modify the ideas in Howard Becker's *Art Worlds* (2008 [1982]), where art's creation is pluralized and partly shaped by numerous types of involvement across a spectrum of people and realms – from the makers and sellers of artists' materials to the artists and their finished works, the sellers and buyers of those works, and the critics and historians who write about them. In Western art worlds, these participants are engaged in many different ways, often without even knowing one another, but they all contribute to artworks in their wider social and historical contexts. This is testimony to the significance of expanded context mentioned earlier.

The same is true in African expressive traditions. But often in these traditions there are networks of participants who are well known to one another and work together in collaborative creativity, as members of formal associations or participants in established institutions. This makes understanding the roles of individuals in groups crucial, and perhaps paradoxical: while the groups are absolutely important and invariably the arena in which individuals act, the characters and capacities of specific actors should not be glossed over or seen as equivalent. The four articles attest to this, and also to the need to consider a community's performance beliefs, performance types and specific instances of performances, so that generalizations are tempered by the circumstances participants experience. Performances and their institutional underpinnings are complex sources of information, authority and power, experienced differently by different people. It could not be otherwise, since every participant and every observer has different skill sets and abilities, collections of knowledge, and personal histories, motivations, personalities and goals. This helps explain why some performers are more effective, and more popular, than others (McNaughton 2008).

Individuals and groups

Here is where concern for both individuals and groups ceases to be paradoxical. Words and deeds, the contents of expressive actions, are not interpreted homogeneously by the people actors engage. Rather, those expressive contents in turn become resources for others who can rearticulate and transform meaning and intent according to their own knowledge, skills and motivations. Think of individuals and their particular qualities as lines in an irregular mesh, intersecting with many other lines, each one representing another individual and their own, different personal qualities and capabilities (for a useful graphic that is relevant here, see

Ingold 2006: 13). This helps us see that expressive actions are cast into the larger social flow with results that can be complex and fraught with contradiction, contestation, paradox, uncertainty, and no small measure of ambiguity. The attributes of the individual are important and consequential, but so are the attributes of everyone else involved.

We can and should single out and discuss individuals involved in expressive action, but then we must set them back into the flow of multiple actors. Each part contributes to the whole, but there are enough parts engaging with one another in multiple ways that the whole is a moving target, always in the process of becoming. Action theory as elaborated by such authors as Giddens (1979; 1984; cf. Jackson and Karp 1990; Karp 1986; Ortner 1984) makes this clear. Complex action theory – multiple actors engaging a kaleidoscope of people and group phenomena – helps the simultaneous importance of individuals and groups make sense. Drawing on Hobart (1990), Kratz (2000; see also 1994: especially 22–5) effectively presents complex action in the context of Okiek marriage. While complex action is not a specific focus of the four investigations, it is still importantly present.

Beyond the involvement of people, there is another dimension to networks of interaction and agency in African performance artistry, because we know that social geography extends beyond our physical, quotidian plane to include a potent spiritual landscape, a less visible space from whence beings and forces emerge to participate in masquerades and other human activities. The panel that gave rise to this part issue was not specifically assembled to examine the engagement of performances with spiritual entities. But the authors all consider or at least acknowledge that performance, even when secular and entertainment-oriented, butts up against the realm of less visible forces, and performers – no matter what their genre – are often tangled up in that realm as well. Frequently, West African performance traditions aimed at entertaining the public in secular contexts developed at least in part from traditions much more deeply engaged with forces and beings from the less visible world, and to some degree these forces and spirits are very often still involved. Even in the most secular performance environments, such as the well-known bird masquerade performances of Mali, performers are considered much more talented and entertaining when they are known to augment their theatrical abilities with power from the less visible world, or when they are known to have fruitful relationships with spirits. Some communities will not even hire bird masqueraders who depend on just their physical abilities, finding them less stimulating (McNaughton 2008). This engagement with forces or beings often permeates performance realms. Hunters' bards from Mali are frequently in league with spirits, and usually are capable of infusing their performances with energies grounded in the less visible world. Drummers and other musicians, even those who specialize in public, secular entertainment venues, are frequently involved with these forces. When the artist André Sanou invented his portrait mask (Homann, this issue), he did so knowing that his society's masking traditions were deeply embedded in the less visible world. The dancers Reed describes are inextricably involved in protocols of respect and sacrifice that allow them to perform in states of spirit possession. The Kòmò association Gagliardi discusses is as ripe with beings and powers as anything Africa has produced. And the Gongoli performer who is the subject of Anderson's article boldly satirizes the terrain of masked spirits. In the myriad

social-spiritual landscapes of West Africa it can be hard to avoid relationships with the less visible world. Even though the articles in this part issue do not focus on them, these relationships between spirit forces and performance captured my attention, resulting in the thoughts that follow.

There is a variety of local attitudes towards the less visible world. Some people do not consider its forces or beings to be real. Others do, but are not preoccupied by them. Many quite strongly affirm their existence, and may strike various types of mutually beneficial allegiances with them. Herbalists, spiritualists, visual artists, musicians and performers are very often in this latter group. There are also many people who dread these beings and forces, or talk as if they do. And some people think that you should not talk about them at all, or not talk about them to foreigners.

Generalizations are thus fraught with pitfalls. Scholars, however, have often made such generalizations, frequently from unproductive perspectives, for example by labelling the less visible world as unreal superstition, suspended disbelief, sympathetic magic or magical thinking. Over the last forty years, scholarly perspectives have grown more sophisticated. Authors such as Michael Jackson (1989; 1996) disarmed the question of what is real by illuminating the potency of lived experience and examining its relevance to matters of art and spirituality. Authors such as Tim Ingold (2006) turn on its head the veracity of Western perspectives on the scholarly category of animism that encompasses spirits and forces. More recently, scholars such as Ruy Blanes and Diana Espirito Santo (2014: 1–32) promote a focus on the importance of the tangible effects less visible forces and entities have in society and the intricate relationships they have with people and things.

Those effects and relationships are pronounced in performance, which is a virtual home away from home for forces and beings that can be brought in and out of visibility and made to be tangibly present by carefully designed artefacts and expressive acts, giving these ethereal presences high levels of social clout. Less visible entities, such as spirits, have attributes and capacities – helpfulness, knowledge, fearsomeness, healing power, the ability to give or do good things, or bad things. These capacities give spirits affect with people. When they are invited by art to engage human society, that affect is amplified by the aesthetic effect of sculpture, sound and dance, with results that are powerful. Audiences can be inspired to circumspection, ignited into action, healed. Performers can be inspired to stupendous dance arena feats they would not have imagined possible in their ordinary, everyday lives (McNaughton 2008).

We can surmise a very long and complex African history for this melding of the arts and less visible world. Ancient Saharan paintings show masks, costumes and dance – and quite possibly spirits – as early as 8,000 BCE. By the time scholars began writing about them, an astounding plethora of performance traditions were known across the continent. But very little is known about their multiple origin points or histories – how people developed, transformed and expanded them over time. The processes involved were surely impressive. People developed imaginative and powerful conceptions of the world because they are ingenious, and frequently behave in creative ways inspired by their life experiences. Inventiveness, resourcefulness and talent brought elaboration, solidity and poetic authenticity to their conceptualizations. The skills and knowledge they accrued through experimentation and experience became the ken they used to

articulate and accomplish social things where visible and less visible realms come together. We can say that agency shined most brightly as the social and spiritual were brought together in the charged space of performance.

Complexities of agency

Grand things can happen in that charged space, including the displacement of dancers' consciousness by spirits. In their new manifestation these beings engage a community – the other, vaporous world meets our quotidian world. But there is often more going on in this orchestrated melding of less visible and visible, and agency becomes a complicated issue. Where is it located? It can be centred in masks, costumes, other material accoutrements (including amulets), the specialists who make these things, the dancers who perform with them, and the forces drawn from less visible space that infuse them with more power. There are multiple possibilities, which vary by community and even by individual understanding, and which can include any combination or all of the above. Thus, in addition to spirit beings in fields of interaction and agency, considerations of complex action need to include multiple amuletic devices such as masks, costumes, activated packets of herbal and esoteric medicines, horns, fly-whisks, and even energy-charged musical instruments. This begins to resemble the kinds of scenario addressed by actor–network theory (see Latour 1996; 2005; Law 1992), in which objects, ideas and people interact on the same causal level and are equally capable of contributing to, maintaining or changing society or other elements in their field of interaction. It also resembles a growing branch of social science that accepts that objects and their material qualities can be – or can be made to be – animate, and, along with spirit beings, 'are active members of many societies' (Brown and Walker 2008: 297). Tim Ingold (2006) describes worlds like this in which animism prevails and objects have agency as dynamic, transformative, constantly in motion and endlessly reborn. That lines up well with how the world is lived in and experienced by many Mande-speaking people.

I can give an example, using the Mande counterpart to the Kòmò association Gagliardi discusses. In Mande artistry, agency emerges from many places. In their Kòmò association, whose large-mouthed horizontal masks now populate many museums, agency is possessed in abundance by the association branch leader, who is generally also a blacksmith clan member as well as being the wearer of the mask. There is also ample agency in the mask itself, and most definitely in the costume, which contains tremendous amuletic potency. Agency is also abundant in the set of sacred horns Kòmò leaders use, and the hugely powerful, complexly constructed objects called Boli that remain out of sight but serve as literal reservoirs of world-animating and world-changing energy that can be directed by the association leaders. Agency also resides in the fly-whisks many Kòmò dancers carry when they perform, and in other items audiences may or may not be aware of. Many of these objects, especially the mask and Boli, are carefully constructed assemblages of numerous amuletic instruments, usually known in detail only to the association leader who made them. As assemblages, they have been orchestrated to work together, often with a variety of specific goals, and it is the responsibility of their maker to manage them so that people are protected, and to keep them strong or growing stronger with a

programme of sacrifice involving applied organic materials. The goal of all these objects is to harness energy (*nyama*, the energy that animates the universe) and direct it to accomplish specific goals. But this energy is potent in the extreme and can go rogue and do horrendous harm without the very careful and hard-earned control of those who harness it. Expertise is required, and even then there is potential danger, along with the potential for great creativity and wonderful results. Many of the masks overflow with this energy to the point that they become living entities, with their own names and their own histories. Sometimes they even seem to conflate with the association leader who dances in them, so that the two are not entirely distinguishable (McNaughton 1979; 1988; 2001). And to complicate things, Kòmò leaders invariably possess their own array of amulets and power devices, their own ability to garner and harness the power of *nyama*, and their own expertise as herbal doctors, sorcerers and divination specialists. All this also goes into the mix of orchestrated, articulated power that produces agency.

In addition, wilderness spirits are intimately involved. Most Mande speakers say that agency abounds with spirit beings, and, depending on the character of the spirit, that agency can produce either fine, annoying or dreadful things. Activities of respect and sacrifice may conciliate them or enlist their help, and some people establish close and beneficial relationships with them. Kòmò leaders have a special, mutually beneficial bond with a wilderness spirit that can infuse its enormous potency into the mask and the performance (McNaughton 1979; 1988; 2001). So now we have a cornucopia of power sources and no predetermined formula for ascribing relative agency. The character and qualifications of the Kòmò leader, the character and capacities of the spirit, the ingredients and qualities of the mask and other items all vary, and so a definite degree of ambiguity prevails.

Reed's research suggests a very different kind of ambiguity around the question of agency, made all the more complicated by the often tacit awareness that a known person who is highly talented and carefully prepared performs within the masquerades and so is somehow a part of their instrumentality. In fact, the range of agency's location in artistic acts of affect and transformation is enormous across African societies, and is not easily pinpointed. That element of mystery is part of what makes artistic phenomena wondrous and wonderful. The affecting expression of performance art is not just its physical enactment, whether it is as enduring as a mask or as transient as a performance. The art is also the dialogue it inspires in viewers' imaginations and discussions. This is part of the beauty, the elegance, the inspiration, the efficacy, the potency and the radiance contained within creations of expressive culture. The mystery of less visible beings and powers – or their wonderful certainty, depending on who one talks to – is bound into the qualitative components that help art leave its mark. Art is bigger than its materiality, and one of the good things art writers do is help make that less visible largeness more apparent.

Back to individuals

Even if a community says that all the instrumentality in a masquerade or a performance resides with netherworld forces when spirits take control of people in the special performance space carved out of our quotidian world, the issue of

agency may not disappear entirely. The individuals who perform masquerades and become magnets for other forces are not selected randomly. Not every person would be inclined or equipped to let a foreign being in. Some people are visited by extraordinary forces in dreams whose contents may be readily comprehended or may need interpretation by divination experts. Other people experience contact as trauma that must be understood and overcome. Some just seem to know that they are predisposed to spiritual encounters. Others are born into clans (Mande blacksmiths, for example) whose birthright includes these kinds of sensitivity. And many people devote ample personal time and resources to learn about and train themselves for engagement with spirits and powers in the less visible world. This is prerequisite work for many masqueraders. It adds a certain kind of expertise to performance while compounding conceptualizations of agency.

These kinds of experiences and preparations also add an important sequential dimension to the agency involved in performance possession, because the activities that prime a person for possession may be established well before possession occurs. It is worth reading Paul Stoller's *Fusion of the Worlds* (1989) to see the kinds of dispositions, skills and motivations divination troupes in Niger bring to their profession, so that they are prepared for the moments when they are taken over by something outside themselves. It takes a certain bent of mind and an assortment of abilities to be an effective instrument for a spirit. It also takes no small amount of fortitude and motivation, as Stoller makes quite clear. Thus, even though the character and capacities of an individual can be swallowed up by an ethereal being, those qualities may be prominent among the reasons why that person is positioned to receive a netherworld force.

There are, to be sure, numerous instances in which widespread possession is a central part of a gathering's agenda, with all sorts of people expecting to enter a trance. Anyone who has seen such films as Jean Rouch's *Au pays des mages noirs* (1947), *L'initiation à la danse des possédés* (1948) or *Les magiciens de Wanzarbé* (1949), or, for that matter, David Byrne's film on Candomblé (*Ilé aiyé*, 2004 [1989]), or Maya Deren's *Divine Horsemen: the living gods of Haiti* (2005 [1985]), will imagine that large segments of the population are susceptible to erasure by a spirit or deity. I think that is true. But it is also true that not everyone chooses to undergo possession, whereas some people choose to enter it as part of their profession or avocation. This element of choice is where people's individual and social biographies play critical roles, and where their history with spirits becomes very interesting. A good but indirect example would be Seydou Camara, born into a blacksmith family in southern Mali's Wasulu region, who was a leader of a Kòmò association branch and also a renowned musician in the hunters' bard tradition. Seydou was born into a highly regarded blacksmiths' clan, strongly associated with spirits and the powers at large in the less visible world. He said that, long before he became a bard and performer, he had an encounter that caused him to run mad in the woods for years, entranced as the kidnap victim of a wilderness spirit.

Seydou's was not a singular experience. Many Mande people grow up knowing that potent spirits can haunt the wilderness and beguile travellers into straying from their destination and into captivity, or worse. But because Seydou was born a blacksmith, he was predisposed to dealing with the powers of that netherworld, both by the inheritance of his smith-clan birth and by his upbringing in an environment in which discourse about and engagement with spirits are not rare.

Seydou possessed a personality that could meet the adventures of spirit engagement with competence, and he was also one of the smartest, toughest people anyone could ever hope to meet. He was primed to be able to handle a spiritual being, and, although he did not enter trance when he performed the great hunters' epics, he believed firmly that he had received the ability to be a musician and performer of epic tales from the spirit that had kidnapped and entranced him. His professional expertise was inspired in the crucible of spirit possession. The rest of his extremely successful musical career was facilitated by the spirit that had possessed him, with whom he felt aligned and towards whom he felt, I think, a strong measure of blended affection, awe and confident camaraderie.

Certainly, not everyone has the fortitude, energy, knowledge and personal capacity to cope with the powers of a spirit in the way that Seydou did, and so clearly many of the people who choose to let themselves dissolve beneath the spirit power of a mask are self-selected. That means that, while it may not be obvious to outside observers, performers' personal identity and character matter very much indeed. It means by extension that personal biography is part of the relevant context of danced transformation, and therefore something to which we must pay attention.

There are degrees to all this transformative agency. The catalyst for Seydou Camara's profession and success was entranced captivity by a spirit, although his subsequent career was not grounded in possession. Other performers expect to be possessed as part of donning a masquerade and performing in it – and they undertake elaborate mental and supernatural preparations for it. But there are also ways in which masqueraders can be moved beyond themselves or beyond their expectations of themselves that do not exactly constitute trance, but may well mean that they are primed to accommodate future possession. A very early *African Arts* article by Armistead P. Rood (1969), a former Peace Corps volunteer, describes what happened to him inside a Bété mask. Suddenly, under the most adverse conditions of vision, burden and discomfort – eye holes not cut for him, costume of 40 pounds, straps that ripped into his shoulders, heat and sweat aplenty – he found to his delighted astonishment that he could do wondrous things within that mask and costume as he performed before the population of his host community.

Who knows for sure where agency lay as Rood danced the mask, but some of it was his. In Mande communities, singers often provide performers with an irresistible burst of energy from the words they sing, the melodic structure they use to frame the words, and the energy they emit and aim at the performers. Dancers and masqueraders suddenly find themselves accomplishing feats of strength and agility they believed beyond their abilities. This is shared call-and-response agency, and my colleague Kassim Kone² points out that it is viewed as the product of valuable aesthetic acumen, as well as a vehicle in an individual's personal development and a genuine asset in the production of a community's social life.

We know that individuals and their performance roles are tangled up in complex accumulations of culture that they also help shape. African art studies have come far from the days when art was held to merely reflect society. The

²Personal communication, 2005.

proactive potential of performance is just one example. The affective power of sculpture, costume, music and dance brought together is certainly noteworthy, and surely one of the reasons why masquerade has sustained and transformed itself across so many African cultures and in so many circumstances. That power is tremendously enhanced by engagement with spirits and the forces that emerge from the less visible world. The less visible world does not merely visit us. It is called or it comes of its own accord because of the activities of individuals or groups. And it is the character and qualifications of actual people who contribute to the form a performance takes and the outcomes it produces. A number of theoretical tools have been developed over the past half-century to help scholars understand art in society. But to understand what art actually accomplishes at any given moment, in any given situation, what really counts is a close look at the individuals who work together to make it and engage it. I think this collection of articles demonstrates that. They are part of a growing interest in individuals that I hope continues.

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