

# NEW AFRICAN MASQUERADES

ARTISTIC INNOVATIONS  
AND COLLABORATIONS

## EDUCATOR'S GUIDE

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New Orleans Museum of Art



**New African Masquerades: Artistic Innovations and Collaborations** spotlights the work of four contemporary artists working in cities across West Africa: Chief Ekpenyong Bassey Nsa, Sheku “Goldenfinger” Fofanah, David Sanou, and Hervé Youmbi.

The first presentation of its kind, **New African Masquerades** offers a rare look into contemporary West African masquerade by contextualizing the works of individual artists within a range of social, economic, and religious practices and examining their networks of viewership and exchange.



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ON THE COVER A *Kimi* mask (headpiece carved by David Sanou in the studio of André Sanou) performing greetings, Bindougosso district, Bobo-Dioulasso, Photo: Lisa Homann.

ABOVE LEFT *Kimi* masquerade ensemble in honor of André Sanou’s *Qui Dit Mieux?*, 2022. (headpiece by David Sanou in the studio of André Sanou). Collection of the Fitchburg Art Museum, Photo by Sesthasak Boonchai.



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Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this exhibition do not necessarily represent those of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

# INTRODUCTION

This educator's guide complements the exhibition *New African Masquerades: Artistic Innovations and Collaborations* with the intention to support classroom investigation by K-12 educators and their students. Included with this guide are introductions to the four featured artists, classroom activities that encourage students to reflect on the artistic production and cultural use of masquerade in West Africa today, and guiding questions to encourage connections to students' lives, global masking traditions, and other collaborative art forms. Within this guide, educators will find resources including links to images and videos to support learning.



Installation view of *New African Masquerades*. Photo by Sesthasek Boonchai.

## ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

*New African Masquerades: Artistic Innovations and Collaborations* explores the vitality of masquerade arts in West Africa today. The exhibition features the stories of four distinguished masquerade artists: Hervé Youmbi (Cameroon), Chief Ekpenyong Bassey Nsa (Nigeria), David Sanou (Burkina Faso), and Sheku "Goldenfinger" Fofanah (Sierra Leone). Masquerade has long stood as the iconic African performance genre, yet the artists who create masquerades have often been unacknowledged and left out of discussions of contemporary art. *New African Masquerades* places the focus on individual creators rather than the more usual art historical assertion that African masks are static and represent the past history of entire cultures, allowing for a closer look at the nuanced and layered stories that individual artists and masquerades tell.

This close look at four masquerade artists, presented by an international team of scholars and artists, offers new ethical methodologies for acquiring and presenting African art and for working with living artists through a commission-based model. Eleven of the thirteen full-bodied masquerade ensembles presented in the exhibition were commissioned directly from featured artists. The artists were consulted throughout the development and installation of the exhibition. The works are accompanied by didactic labels and text panels, rich imagery, immersive video footage, and artist commentary. The exhibition makes clear that creativity in African masking is fundamentally contemporary, highly collaborative in nature, innately connected to global markets, and enjoys mobility throughout communities and diasporas.

### A NOTE ON LANGUAGE

The term **masquerade** is used to denote both the ensemble of "head" and "body" as well as the performance that takes place while wearing these components. The masquerades in *New African Masquerades: Artistic Innovations and Collaborations* are **contemporary**, meaning the works were created within the past decade and express the culture of today. While these artists respond to and incorporate ongoing traditions within their societies, they are not labeled "traditional" as that can indicate an immutability that undercuts the innovations and personal style that each of the featured artists bring to their art.



# WHAT IS CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN MASQUERADE?

Masquerade is a vibrant and dynamic contemporary **performance art** that blends sculpture, costume design, fiber arts, dance, music, audience participation, and even food and drink. Steeped in social customs particular to each locality, masquerade occasions include religious observances, joyful celebrations, political assertions, or communication with ancestors. Some take place in private, secretive settings while others are on the public stage of city streets and courtyards. Today's masquerade artists are professional working artists who constantly update the art form in response to local and global events and often in collaboration with patrons.

African Masquerade is a **collaborative art form** that includes the work of lead artists, specialized artisans, patrons, dancers, musicians, and audience members. A lead artist often works with the patron or commissioning group to create an overall design. The lead artist may then hire other specialists and artisans to complete the design. The masquerade is not complete until to some degree this 'performance' can also be encountered in museum display. Meaning, exhibitions are a space of 'performance' as well.

Masquerade artists adapt and **innovate** to show audiences something they have never seen before. They invent new genres, blend established ones, introduce new iconography, and refine existing aesthetics. Such continuous change and ingenuity epitomize the contemporary nature of masquerade.

Masquerade relies on **economic exchange** between the patron and the artist who must additionally rely on the availability of materials and the cost of hiring specialists and assistants to collaborate on the masquerade components. Contemporary West African masquerades may also involve payments or gifts from the audience.



Sheku "Goldenfinger" Fofanah parading with his Mami Wata devil during the Massaboni Ordehlay procession, Lunsar, Sierra Leone, December 26, 2022. Photo: Amanda M. Maples.

Masquerade is **mobile**. Each masquerade involves the physical motion of masquerade performers that may take place in one location as a dance-like performance or move through city streets. Some masquerades are performed in more than one location, expanding an artist's reputation and extending their creative contributions. Digital images and social media have allowed masquerades to travel widely within Africa and throughout the diaspora. Masquerade ensembles and components are also sometimes shipped and shared in new locations.

Masquerade artists are professionals, whose businesses rely on **economic exchange** and the availability of materials and services. Monetary exchange takes place between patrons and artists, artists and artisans, and performers and the public.

*How does the exchange of money and goods reflect professionalism in contemporary masquerade? How does the availability of materials inspire innovation in West African masquerade?*

New African Masquerades seeks to address **ethical concerns** of collecting and displaying cultural materials and to refute past museum methodologies that presented the sculptural elements of African masks as works by anonymous artists representative of entire cultures. Eleven of the thirteen masquerades included in the exhibition were commissioned for museum display and in consultation with the artists.

*What responsibility do researchers and museums have to provide cultural context for the presentation of masquerade to audiences? What responsibilities do they have to the artists? How can ethical collecting and display practices contribute to collective cultural knowledge?*



## LEARNING OBJECTIVES AND GUIDING QUESTIONS

Masquerade has a long history in many areas of West Africa, and it is constantly changing to reflect current concerns and events. Successful contemporary artists balance the expectations of maintaining customary forms and styles with their own artistic **creativity and innovation**.

For a masquerade to be fully realized, it must be performed. **Performances** may be public or private, celebratory or mournful, hold civic significance or honor a family member. Almost all masquerades are theatrical and involve movement and audience participation.

Masquerade involves **collaboration** among many people including artists, patrons, specialized artisans, organizers, performers, musicians and audience members.

*How do masquerade artists innovate and create fresh elements while ensuring that their works are appropriate and acceptable for the occasion?*

*How does the performative aspect of masquerade affect the material object? What considerations does this require of the artists?*

*How does collaboration affect masquerade? What are other examples of collaborative art?*



A pair of Kimi masks (headpiece carved by David Sanou in the studio of André Sanou) performing greetings with the lead griot Tchiedo playing his drum behind them, Bindougosso district, Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso.



# HERVÉ YOUMBI

Hervé Youmbi is a celebrated contemporary artist deeply influenced by Africa's complex history. He was born in 1973 in Bangui, Central African Republic, and raised in the industrial port city of Douala, Cameroon, where he is currently based. Youmbi's work explores issues of identity, power, and the legacy of colonialism through portraiture and hybrid masks. He is especially concerned with bridging the gap between traditional African rituals and global contemporary art and questioning what is considered "traditional" or "contemporary." His works are created in collaboration with beadworkers, carvers, and wigmakers in Cameroon and activated with the permission of key community members.

Youmbi's work has been included in numerous collections, including the Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art and the Menil Collection. As a featured artist and co-curator for *New African Masquerades* Youmbi continues to expand his influence on both the African and global art scenes. Additionally, the artist documents the travels and performances of each piece and includes some of this documentation in the gallery presentation (as seen below).

## DOUALA, CAMEROON

**VISAGES DES MASQUES (Faces of Masks)** is an ongoing project that Hervé Youmbi began in 2011 in which the artist consults and collaborates with masquerading societies of Cameroon's Grasslands (and beyond) to commission hybrid ensembles that combine tradition-based forms with something new. His masks are authenticated by ritual performance and available for purchase within the contemporary art market. Special arrangements are made among the artist, purchasing institution, and masquerade society to allow the ensemble to travel back to its place of origin for masquerade performances, and also be on view in galleries and museums around the world. Youmbi creates unique gallery installations that include the masquerade ensemble along with photographs and videos of the ritual activation as well as the crates used to ship them around the world. Youmbi's *Visage des Masques* series and methodology of collaboration underscores the delicate balance of artistic innovation while working within the established expectations of masquerading groups. Youmbi has commissioned, activated, and displayed nearly 20 hybrid masks using this collaborative method.



Hervé Youmbi (b. 1973), *VISAGES DE MASQUES IV - VII - IX*, multimedia installation, (detail) including: *Tso Scream Mask*, 2022, and *Single-Faced/Rhino Mask*, 2018 – 2019, Bamileké, western Grassfields, Cameroon, produced in the workshops of Alassane Mfouapou (carver), Nadine Chéwo and Marie Kouam (beaders), and Ngwa Kingsley Shu (tailor), and Frédéric Feudjeueck (wig maker). „Field Photographs,” shipping and customs documents, shipping crates. Photo by Sesthasek Boonchai





*"My work over the last ten years has taken the form of hybrid masks that challenge the clichés and categories to which masks from Africa have generally been confined. Addressing the question of new masks in Africa today is not just about the aesthetics and ethics of collaborations that govern the creation of new objects and living entities from Africa. It's also, and above all, a question of envisaging new ways of collecting and exhibiting them."*

—Hervé Youmbi

**Tso Scream Mask** from the *Visages des Masque* project combines formal elements from Tso masks of the Kuosi society of the Bamileke people that includes a hybrid reference to "Ghostface" from Wes Craven's horror films and Edward Munch's *The Scream* painting. The large circular discs attached to both sides and the long beaded panel reference the elephant in Bamileke masks. Youmbi's masquerade also features a crest with a stylized lizard, also common to Tso masks. Lizards hold symbolic value within the Kuosi society as messengers between the world of the living and beyond. The tunic, or boubou, incorporates textiles associated with leadership, including indigo-dyed Ndop fabric and Kuba raffia fibers. The horsetail whisk is an essential accessory for ritual performances, representing concepts of bravery and freedom.

The status of *Tso Scream Mask* as an art object shifts according to its context, whether performed in a ceremonial dance or installed in a gallery. Hervé Youmbi also blurs the role of contemporary artist, commissioning specialists to create parts of the work, arranging for an initiated Society member to perform the mask, and putting himself into the ethnographer's role of "participant observer" to film and photograph "his" work being danced.



*Tso Scream Mask and Tso Scream Leopard Mask at the Nka'a Kossie society succession ceremony at Fondati Chieftaincy, December 3, 2022, Photo by Hervé Youmbi*

### Predator Ku'ngang Mask

In collaboration with wigmaker (Frédéric Feudjeueck), beader (Mama Kouam Marie), and mask maker (Alassane Fouapon

The masquerade ensembles from Youmbi's *Visages des Masque* project essentially lead two lives – as ritual objects and as contemporary works of art. To that end, the artist offers two takes on the labels for the works. One resembles what may be found in an ethnographic museum and the other might be used in a contemporary art gallery.



### Predator Ku'ngang Mask, 2022

Bamileké, western Grassfields, Cameroon  
Hervé Youmbi (b. 1973) produced in the workshops of Alassane Mfouapon (carver), Frédéric Feudjeueck and David Kengné (coiffure), and Marie Kouam (beader)  
21<sup>st</sup> century  
Mixed media, (wood, glass beads, cowrie shell, human hair, pigment, cloth)  
Courtesy the artist and Axis Gallery, NY & NJ.

### Single Faced / Rhino Mask

In the Cameroon Grasslands, the secret society, Ku'ngang, oversees agriculture, fertility, spiritual purification, and the protection of villages. Ku'ngang mediates between the realms of the living and the dead, the visible and invisible, the human and the cosmos. During ceremonial events, Ku'ngang performers conventionally wear Yegué masks featuring horns that evoke the buffalo, one of the most powerful, intelligent, and vengeful animals in Africa. This mask instead honors the rhinoceros, known in Africa as "protector of the forest" because it is reputed to stamp out embers to stop fires. This accords with the Ku'ngang Society's concerns with environment and protection. Ku'ngang elders approved this mask as it satisfies the essential criteria of the Yégué mask, which is to have dreadlocks and an odd number of horns.



### Single-Faced/Rhino Mask, 2018 – 2019

Bamileké, western Grassfields, Cameroon  
Hervé Youmbi (b. 1973) produced in the workshops of Alassane Mfouapon (carver), Frédéric Feudjeueck (coiffure), and Marie Kouam (beader)  
21<sup>st</sup> century  
Mixed media (wood, glass beads, cowrie shell, human hair, cloth).  
Courtesy the artist and Axis Gallery, NY & NJ.





# CHIEF EKPENYONG BASSEY NSA



Two raffia Ekpe masquerades (Idem Ikwo) with Chief Ekpenyong Bassey Nsa during his Ekpe chieftaincy installation, Creek Town, Nigeria, December 31, 2009, Chief Ekpenyong Bassey Nsa, Photo by Jordan A. Fenton.

Born in 1973 in Calabar, Nigeria, Chief Ekpenyong Bassey Nsa is a renowned third-generation Efik artist specializing in the creation of masquerade ensembles, beadwork, chieftaincy attire, and funeral shrines. He learned his craft from his father, who is credited with modernizing masquerade ensembles for the Ekpe secret society. Ekpe is an elite men's social and political organization in southeastern Nigeria central to Efik culture and known for its rituals, masquerades, and ancestor veneration.

Chief Bassey Nsa's artistry is deeply tied to the Ekpe society and his father's legacy. Initiated into Ekpe at a young age, he was conferred with the Ekpe chieftaincy title, Obong Murua Okpoho, in 2009. His art is intertwined with family and tradition. He begins every work with a libation to his father, seeking guidance through dreams and prayer. A defining moment in Chief Bassey Nsa's life occurred shortly before his father's death when his father performed a libation ceremony, blessing him to carry on the Ekpe artistic legacy. His commissions extend throughout the Cross River region and internationally, including in European and American collections.

From his storefront in the city of Calabar, Nigeria, Chief Bassey Nsa offers masquerades for rent or for sale on a cost-based pricing structure. He scours markets to find the most appropriate yet economically sensible materials and plans months in advance to ensure that he will have the fabric and raffia needed for commissions. Chief Bassey Nsa is known for the quality of his work. Not only are his ensembles beautiful, they are also made to withstand four to eight years of hard use and can therefore fetch a higher price. Masquerade is a business for this professional artist, and his business acumen is as important as his creative innovation.





# CALABAR, NIGERIA

"You have to bring something new."

—Chief Bassey Nsa



Chief Ekpenyong Bassey Nsa working on Idem Ebonko commission for the Museum of Black Civilizations, Dakar, Senegal, 2024. Photo: Jordan A. Fenton.

## Idem Ikwo

Chief Bassey Nsa is celebrated for his masterful weaving and dying of raffia, a natural material extracted from palm fronds. These raffia masquerades are commissioned and performed by Ekpe society members within Calabar and the Cross River region of southeast Nigeria and western Cameroon. The components of the Idem Ikwo (see page 3) include a tight-fitting body garment, large raffia chest mane (*nyanya*), raffia arm tufts, raffia leg tufts, and a headdress that tapers into a conical form known as the *etundu* in Efik. The back of the headdress is accentuated with a back cap (*itam ikot*), in which ostrich feathers are inserted. A large metal bell is secured around the waist and covered by white polyester cloth that is elaborately tied and folded. Here, the chest mane includes an *nsibidi* motif woven into the *nyanya* that reads "Oku Akam" or "destroyer."

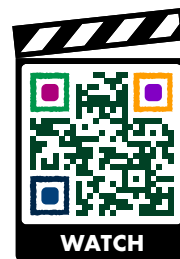
The masquerade is performed in a processional format, moving up and down busy streets and forcing traffic to give way. During these outings, the masqueraders dart and spin while clanging the large metal bell tied around their waists to announce their arrival.

## Afia Awan

This entertainment-based masquerade is often commissioned for marriage celebrations and local and state festivals, making it a popular masquerade for clients to rent. It is a fairly new genre and allows for flexibility and innovation in form and materials. Chief Bassey Nsa's *Afia Awan*—which translates loosely as "a fair-skinned woman"—includes an innovative addition based on a new market find. Chief Bassey Nsa affixed large, prefabricated sequined accoutrements to the red and brown chest mane and arm and wrist and ankle cuffs. These components are worn over a nylon bodysuit with tufted polyester. The red, white, and black color scheme demonstrates the artist's color theory—two boldly competing colors tempered by a contrasting hue—which has largely contributed to his financial success.



Chief Ekpenyong Bassey Nsa, Nigerian (Efik), born 1973, lives and works in Calabar, *Afia Awan Masquerade Ensemble*, 2022, Imported "sample" cloth, imported polyester, imported sequin trim, imported adhesive sequin, foam, rubber cement, and nylon, Commissioned by New Orleans Museum of Art, Françoise Billion Richardson Fund, 2022.85.a-h, Photo by Sesthasak Boonchai





# DAVID SANOU



Kimi Mask performing greetings in Bindougosso district, Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso, May 3, 2022 (headpiece carved by David Sanou in the studio of André Sanou). Photo by Sethasek Boonchai.



David Sanou in the studio of André Sanou, Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso, April 23, 2018. Photo: Lisa Homann.

*"I unleashed my creative genius at my father's big funeral. It's my creative genius that did this."*

—David Sanou

David Sanou is a third-generation master sculptor based in Bobo-Dioulasso. The artist began carving at the age of thirteen as an apprentice in his father's studio. He progressed from objects like canes and small figures to more complex works, including mask headpieces and chairs. He took over his father's studio in 2009. In addition to headpieces of long-established masquerade genres, Sanou creates new forms, such as a "Compromise Kimi" headpiece, which tempers the dramatic naturalism of photo masks.

Historically, blacksmiths carved mask headpieces in this region. Today, David Sanou (who is not a blacksmith) receives more high-status commissions from elite patrons and more commissions overall, than any other sculptor in the region. Due to the reputation of André's studio and the high quality of its work, David Sanou has a virtual corner on the market.



Photo Mask honoring Papa Bala dancing in Sya district, Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso, April 6, 2008 (headpiece from the studio of André Sanou). Photo: Lisa Homann.



# BOBO-DIOULASSO, BURKINA FASO

In the Bobo-Dioulasso area, masquerades perform for initiations, harvest celebrations, installations of chiefs, national festivals, the honoring of visiting dignitaries, and occasionally on invitation—but their presence at annual funeral celebrations is the most extravagant.

Kimi masquerades evoke hornbill birds, which in legend revealed the first mask with a wood headpiece to a man. They are recognizable by their long curving beaks, brightly-painted superstructures, and long fibrous bodies. Their abstract nature offers creative freedom with numerous opportunities for creative innovation.

In line with the artist's wishes, the ensembles here give the impression of circular movement. In performance, the dancer rapidly spins about the central performance area, encircled by cheering audiences. The brightly-dyed, bushy fibers of its body whirl out, churning up dust, excitement, and admiration.

## David Sanou's Kimi Masquerade Ensemble in Honor of André Sanou's 'Qui Dit Mieux?'

The top of this wooden headpiece depicts two antelopes in profile: one grazing above and another alert below. The iconography is based on a headpiece by the artist's father, André Sanou, created in 1998 for Tounouma district. Because the elder artist found it so skillful, he wrote "Qui Dit Mieux?" (Who Can Do Better?) on both sides of the work. David Sanou said it was so popular that "when people saw it, they'd gleefully call out, 'Who Can Do Better is coming! Who Can Do Better is coming!'" André Sanou expressed pride in his artwork and home district with "Qui Dit Mieux?" In this ensemble, his son also demonstrates great respect for his father, his district, and the masquerade form itself.



Photo Mask honoring Papa Bala dancing in Sya district, Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso, April 6, 2008 (headpiece from the studio of André Sanou). Photo: Lisa Homann.



Compromise Kimi Mask honoring André Sanou in Tounouma district, Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso, May 3, 2015 (headpiece by David Sanou in the studio of André Sanou). Photo: Lisa Homann.

**Memorial Photo Masks** are a masquerade form originated by André Sanou in 1996. In this naturalistic style, the headpiece is carved to closely resemble a deceased loved one. In the *Photo Masquerade Ensemble in Honor of André Sanou*, (see page 10) David Sanou carved the headpiece based on a photograph of his father, who passed away in 2015. It celebrates André as chief hunter or *Dozoba*. The figure wears a hunter's cap covered with amulets and animal claws.

## Compromise Kimi

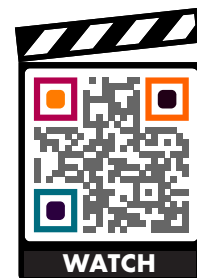
Because representing a person naturalistically in masquerade is unacceptable to some clients, Photo Masks have been banned in certain areas of Burkina Faso. This spurred David Sanou to experiment with a new "compromise" genre of masquerade. It incorporates the abstraction of the bird-

like Kimi with the naturalism of honorific Photo masquerades. The Compromise Kimi headpieces include symbolic pictorial elements that serve to honor the individual without using a direct likeness.

The "Compromise" Kimi genre allows for clients to combine personalized iconography and some human-like features with the form and abstract style of the Kimi genre. It showcases the artist's ability to creatively innovate while honoring the significant histories of established masquerade genres—an approach that makes David Sanou a successful masquerade artist and business owner.



Kimi masquerade ensemble in honor of André Sanou's *Qui Dit Mieux?*, 2022. (headpiece by David Sanou in the studio of André Sanou). Collection of the Fitchburg Art Museum. Photo by Sesthasek Boonchai.





# SHEKU “GOLDENFINGER” FOFANAH

*“My artwork serves as a cohesive force, because it helps to bring people together.”*

—Sheku “Goldenfinger” Fofanah

Born in Freetown, Sierra Leone, in 1976, Sheku “Goldenfinger” Fofanah is known for his intricate and innovative designs. Based in the Fourah Bay community of Freetown, Fofanah is the resident *kotu* (builder/artist) for the Gladiators Power Ordehlay Society (co-founded by his father) and contributes to other societies such as Tourist Ojeh and Omo Jessah Hunting. Fofanah was introduced to masquerade arts by his father, Mohamed Alié Fofanah, and began creating masquerade ensembles for Gladiators Power at the age of thirteen. By age sixteen he had surpassed his father’s skills to become lead *kotu*. His work is considered highly professional and he is widely renowned for his design skills.

Fofanah’s work spans various masquerade genres, including Jollay, Ordehlay, and Hunting, and his designs are sought after in Sierra Leone, The Gambia, and internationally in Australia, Canada, and the UK, illustrating how masquerades serve not only as performative art forms but also as symbols of societies growing and connecting to one another, in the diaspora the home societies in Sierra Leone. Beyond his artistic creations, Fofanah is committed to mentoring younger generations. He trains apprentices and involves local children in the production of masquerade ensembles, ensuring the tradition’s vitality. His influence extends across Sierra Leone and internationally, where he is regarded as the leading artist in his field.



Sheku “Goldenfinger” Fofanah, Sierra Leonean, born 1976, lives and works in Freetown  
Apprentices: Bobo “Borbor” Newland and Mohamed “Mello” Leigh, Freetown, Sierra Leone  
Face Mask Carvers: Sheku Kante and Morlai Thullah Makeni, Sierra Leone

Woman Tote Man Masquerade Ensemble for the Ordehlay Society, 2022

Wood, paint, faux fur, cowrie shells, gourds, beads, sequins, ribbons, wire, cardboard

Commissioned by the Fitchburg Art Museum, 2021.249, Photo by Mary Degnan.

The masquerade ensembles from Sierra Leone featured in *New African Masquerades* are of the entertainment or social variety and are not part of a major secret society.

Membership is open to men and women of all religious and ethnic orientations. They are typically seen during festival season and on major public holidays or celebrations. These are urban performances that mostly take place in city streets.

## Ordehlay Society Masquerade

Ordehlay was invented by young migrants experiencing socio-economic difficulties common to urban life, who joined masquerade societies for the financial support and camaraderie. These ensembles come out on holidays in Sierra Leone—Christmas, Boxing Day (the day after Christmas), New Year’s, and Independence Day (April 27)—and on similar celebratory occasions in the diaspora. Up to twenty Ordehlay “devils,” as they are called locally, parade through the streets of Freetown on a holiday, each representing a neighborhood-based cultural group or ‘society’ who compete to have the most impressive ensemble.



# FREETOWN, SIERRA LEONE



Sheku "Goldenfinger" Fofanah, born 1976, with Abdulai "Dezo" Sesay, Apprentices: Bobo "Borbor" Newland and Mohamed "Mello" Leigh, Face Mask Carvers: Sheku Kante and Morlai Thullah Makeni, *Fairy Ensemble for the Jollay Society*, 2022, (Detail) Commissioned by the Fitchburg Art Museum, purchased with Funds by Dr. Mustafa Fofana and Dr. Barbara A. Beall, 2021.101 (L); Amanda M. Maples, PhD, for the New Orleans Museum of Art, 2024.75 (R) Photo by Sesthasek Boonchai.

## Woman Tote Man (Woman carries Man)

Ordehlay Masquerade ensemble references a phrase common in Sierra Leone. Brightly painted wooden figures representing a man sitting on the shoulders of a woman suggest that nothing can be achieved without the support of women and extolling a need for cooperation, collaboration, and balance. Ordehlay "Devils" are constructed with a mixture of fancy and fierce components including wooden combs, gourds, animal skins (and even taxidermy heads), cowrie shells, and lavish cloths, beads, and sequins. The body demonstrates Fofanah's influential style of a carefully compartmentalized superstructure with curving elements, circular mirrors and embellishments, and decorative openwork technique.

## Jollay Society "Fairy Ensemble"

The Jollay Society was imported to Sierra Leone from Ghana in the 1960s and 1970s to celebrate peace and bring people together for common goals. Jollay masquerades are joyful, fancy, and include a storytelling aspect. Fairy Jollay

Masquerades are often performed along with "Oli Papa," which represents an old man and together they mock and taunt each other. Sheku Fofanah describes the performance as a "fun [play] about an old papa coming around" to criticize "young girls...and how much money they spend."

Jollay aesthetics coalesce in brightly colored fabric superstructures carved or stuffed representations of women and mythical characters. The bodies are decadently layered with sequined textiles, white laces, and rainbow tassels that glint and flash in the light. In the Fairy Ensemble at right, the femininity of the character is accentuated with her gloved hands, full lips, and heavy eyelids. To indicate her alluring foreign origins, she is painted with light skin tone and her forehead bears an Indian bindi. Fairy Masquerades emerges at celebratory occasions and reflects ideals of unity, love, and camaraderie.



Sheku "Goldenfinger" Fofanah, Makeni, Sierra Leone, April 30, 2022. Photo: Amanda M. Maples.



Sheku "Goldenfinger" Fofanah, "Fairy" Masquerade Ensemble, 2022. Collection of the Fitchburg Art Museum. Photo by Sesthasek Boonchai.



## CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

New African Masquerade provides opportunities for students to learn how artists work together to create artworks with significant cultural meaning, while also incorporating their own artistic style to innovate within their community's practice. The following activities can be added to your curriculum to encourage students to make connections to West African masquerades and performance art practices. Themes of collaboration, mobility, economic exchange, and innovation are experienced through African masquerade.

### ACTIVITY 1: Art in Motion

Masquerade is meant to be experienced in motion, as a performance, rather than in a static display. This activity encourages students to reflect on how their experience of an object affects their interpretation of it.

#### Look + Compare

Ask students to compare a still image of an African mask on view in a museum (such as on page 16) with a video of a masquerade performance (seen in the link on page 7). Create a list of adjectives to describe each experience.

- What do you notice about the still picture of the mask?
- What do you notice about the masquerade performance?
- How does your perception of the mask change?

#### Make a Ribbon Wand

**MATERIALS:** 12" dowel rods, various ribbons, beads, hot glue (or rubber bands), markers, index cards.

- Select 4 - 6 strands of ribbon cut to about 12" long.
- Decorate the ends of ribbons with plastic beads, tying knots between beads.
- Tie the ribbons together and attach to the end of a dowel rod using glue or a rubber band.
- Decorate the dowel rod with markers or ribbons.

#### Write TWO descriptions of the Ribbon Wand

- Lay the wand down so that it does not move. Describe it in three sentences.
- Hold the wand and twirl it around. Describe the wand and how it felt to engage with the object.

#### Reflect

Ask students to reflect on how this activity might relate to masquerade. Did they get the full effect of the object as it lay still? What did the performative aspect add to their experience?

### ACTIVITY 2: Symbolic Resist Painting

In the image on page 8, Chief Bassey Nsa is wearing an *ukara* cloth, a textile with Nsibidi symbols, traditionally associated with the Ekpe society in Nigeria. These symbols are added to the cloth using indigo dye and a resist method. In this activity, students will design their own symbols and use a resist method to imprint them on paper.

**Materials:** Paper, pencil, crayons, 8" x 10" watercolor paper, watercolor paint, paint brush

#### Connect

Look at the Idem Ikwo masquerade and discuss the symbol in the raffia. These designs are meant to communicate messages of power and wisdom, as they are worn by Ekpe society members. Ask students to brainstorm symbols that they recognize in their lives.

#### Design

On a sheet of paper, students will list concepts and adjectives that describe their personality, then create a symbol for each concept.

#### Paint

Fold a sheet of watercolor paper to create 16 squares (fold in half, then in half again horizontally, then open the paper and fold in half, then in half again vertically). Ask students to create a pattern by drawing their unique symbols in the squares using crayon (wax). Next, students will use watercolor paint to paint over the entire sheet of paper. The symbols drawn in crayon will resist the paint.

#### Textile Options

- Students can use glue to draw their symbols on a piece of natural material cloth such as muslin, then dye the cloth using fabric dye (this replicates the resist method of batik).
- Students can more closely replicate the *ukara* cloth method by using a binding technique to tie or stitch the cloth before dyeing.

#### Reflect

With a partner, students will describe their symbol and discuss their choices for design.



## ACTIVITY 3: Personal Masquerade

### A mask-making project developed with artist Hervé Youmbi

Innovative masquerade artists in West Africa draw upon the history of the genre and react to contemporary events to present their audiences with something new. Students will research existing forms and put their own personal spin on a chosen masquerade genre inspired by the hybrid masks of Hervé Youmbi.

**Materials:** Images of masquerade from exhibition and catalogue, computer, paper, markers, scissors, cut cardboard, poster board, paint, fabric, glue, decorative paper, raffia, pipe cleaners

### Connect

Begin by looking at masquerades from this exhibition. Ask students:

- What do you notice about these masquerades?
- Who might make or wear these masks?
- What are some groups that you belong to?
- What things do you wear or do to indicate your membership in these groups?

### Research

Create three groups and assign each group to research and present information on one masquerade genre such as that found in the Ku'ngang or Tso societies of Cameroon or the *Kimi* genre of Burkina Faso. Students can use computers or printed information. After about 15 minutes, the group should select one person to present their research to the class to include:

- Where is this masquerade performed?
- On what occasions is it performed?
- Who participates in its creation and performance?
- What visual references can we find?

### Plan + Design

Each student will select one of the presented masquerade genres as the basis of their design. On a full sheet of paper, draw an outline of the general shape of the masquerade head. Each student will create a list of information about themselves such as hobbies, interests, groups or clubs. Taking inspiration from the African masquerades, students will incorporate their personal interests into the design in representational or abstract style.

### Build

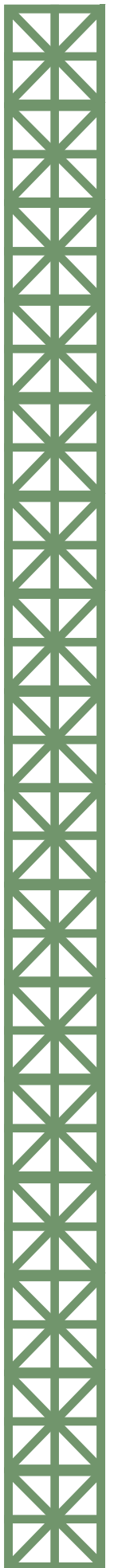
Students will create a 3D mask based on their sketched design using cardboard as a basis. The teacher will demonstrate cardboard construction techniques such as hinge, score, and flange and review safety instructions for hot glue and scissor usage. Ask students to use the provided materials to create a wearable mask.

### Perform

Students will work with a partner to create a movement to go along with their finished mask and perform for the class.

### Reflect

- How did it feel to make your mask?
- How did it feel to perform your mask?
- What did you wonder about other students' masks?





# CURRICULUM STANDARDS

The following curriculum standards can be addressed by activities and discussions related to *New African Masquerade: Artistic Innovations and Collaborations*.

## Louisiana Student Standards for Social Studies

### Grade 5

- 5.2 Use a variety of primary and secondary sources to:
  - a. Analyze social studies content.
  - b. Explain claims and evidence.
  - c. Compare and contrast multiple sources.
- 5.3 Explain connections between ideas, events, and developments in world history.
- 5.11 Describe the geographic, political, economic, and cultural structures of Medieval West African Kingdoms.
  - a. Identify and locate the geographic features of West Africa, including the Atlantic Ocean, Niger River, Djenne, the Sahara, Gulf of Guinea, and Timbuktu

## World History

- WH.6 Evaluate the influence of science, technology, innovations, and explain how these developments have altered societies in the world from 1300 to 2010.
- WH.7 Analyze causes and effects of events and developments in world history from 1300 to 2010, including fourteenth-century trade networks of Africa and Eurasia, Renaissance and Enlightenment in Europe, political revolutions, industrialization, imperialism, global conflicts of the twentieth century, decolonization, and globalization.
- WH.18 Describe how global, national, and regional economic policies affect individual life decisions over time.
- WH.25 Explain the relationship between the physical environment and culture on local, national, and global scales.
- WH.26 Analyze the causes and effects of the movement of people, culture, religion, goods, diseases, and technologies through established systems of connection.
- WH.29 Analyze how advancements in communication, technology, and trade have affected global interactions from 1300 to 2010.

## World Geography

- WG.1 Describe economic, social, cultural, political, and physical characteristics of countries, nations, and world regions.
- WG.3 Connect past events, people, and ideas to the present to draw conclusions and explain current implications.
- WG.7 Analyze how governments and political boundaries affect people and places.
- WG.8 Analyze how people have modified or adapted to the environment locally, nationally, regionally, and globally.

## National Core Arts Anchor Standards

### CREATING

**Anchor Standard #1** Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.

### RESPONDING

**Anchor Standard #7** Perceive and analyze artistic work.

**Anchor Standard #8** Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

### CONNECTING:

**Anchor Standard #1** Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.

**Anchor Standard #11** Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding.

## Bamileke Peoples, Elephant Society Mask

These masquerades are worn and performed by members of the Kuosi Society of the Bamileke People of Cameroon's Grasslands. Although once made up of warriors in support of the fon (king), today's members are bound by the duty of upholding cultural traditions and societal order. Among the Bamileke, the elephant is venerated as a symbol of power, resilience, and wisdom. Leopards are also revered among the Bamileke, and the repeated triangular patterning may represent a simplified version of the animal's spots. The beadwork and textiles are prestigious and luxurious, denoting affluence and power.



Bamileke Elephant Mask from NOMA's collection

## COMMUNITY + COLLECTION CONNECTIONS

Masquerade in West Africa is both performative and collaborative. Explore the collection of the New Orleans Museum of Art to see more visual examples of masking ensembles in contemporary art. Look for examples of African masks in NOMA's third floor African Art Gallery.



### Chief Dow Edwards "Shango" Spyboy Suit, 2018

Like most members of the Black Masking/Mardi Gras Indian tribes of New Orleans, Chief Dow Edwards of the Mohawk Hunters makes a new suit every year. Working in the pictographic style of New Orleans' Uptown groups, Edwards selects a theme derived from the historic relationship that Native American tribes had with escaped slaves and from the symbols that are sacred to the tribes such as thunderbirds, buffalos, eagles, and wolves. His 2018 "Shango" Spyboy Suit celebrates African culture and art. Edwards learned to cut patterns and sew from his mother, a school teacher and seamstress and he learned how to work with leather from his father. He learned beading skills from Mohawk Hunter Chief Tyrone Casby. Edwards is a lawyer in New Orleans, a former college and NFL football player, and serves on the board of directors for the Boys and Girls Club of Southeast Louisiana, but he exclaims that being a Mardi Gras Indian is his most rewarding accomplishment. "I don't know how to explain it. Me inside the suit is different than me outside the suit."

Big Chief Dow M. Edwards, "Shango" Spyboy suit, 2018, Glass seed beads, Swarovski Crystal, cowrie shells, red coral gems, ostrich wing plumes, strung turkey flats and goose coquille feathers, suede leather and African crocodile backstraps, Museum purchase, Mervin and Maxine Mock Morais Fund/Partial gift of Dow M. Edwards, 2024.5.a-k

### Photo of Darryl Montana by Eric Waters

In this photograph by New Orleans photographer Eric Waters, Darryl Montana, Big Chief of the Yellow Pocahontas Black Masking Indians is wearing his 2008 "Circle Dance" suit and holding a staff designed by New Orleans artist John Scott. Scott, a renowned artist and professor of art at Xavier University, had passed away the previous year, and Montana paid tribute to him by incorporating themes and colors from Scott's work into his 2008 suit.

Darryl Montana, *Circle Dance Lavender Suit* (Triceratops Staff Sculpted by John T. Scott), 2008, printed circa 2015. Photo by Eric Waters, Museum purchase, Tina Freeman Fund, 2022.48



### Nick Cave's Soundsuit MBG #10829

Contemporary American artist Nick Cave grew up in Columbia, MO and studied visual and performing arts at the Kansas City Arts Institute. He met famed dance director Alvin Ailey in 1979 while working in the fashion industry in New York, and trained with his dance company. Cave made his first *Soundsuit* out of twigs in 1992 as a response to the beating of Rodney King by the Los Angeles Police. He has since made over 500 of these sculptural, wearable costumes out of materials including sisal, dyed human hair, beads, plastic buttons, wire, feathers, sequins, crocheted doilies, children's toys, and flea-market knickknacks. The sound refers to the audible qualities of the full-body costumes — they swish, chime, rattle, ring, or make other noises as they are worn for performances. African masquerade as well as New Orleans traditions have influenced his work, "I'm looking at rituals and ceremonies: Mardi Gras Indian clothing, West African pieces, Carnival in Trinidad."

Nick Cave (American, b. 1959), *Soundsuit MBG #10829*, 2011, Mixed Media, Collection of Sydney and Walda Besthoff, 2019.42.2.a,b





## MAKING CONNECTIONS QUESTIONS

What groups or clubs do you belong to? Are there special things that you do or wear to show that you belong to that group?

When have you participated in masquerade-like performances?

What are some ways that you might participate?

How does it feel to watch a performance compared to being in the performance?

What role do audience members play in a performance?

What are some examples of public ceremonies where you live?

What private ceremonies or traditions do you take part in?

What are some other masking/performing traditions throughout the world?

How are masks used in storytelling?

How does your family remember your ancestors?

## GLOSSARY

**Afia Awan:** A masquerade style performed among the Efik culture of Nigeria for entertainment purposes including weddings and festivals.

**Breezeblock:** concrete blocks made with an open pattern that allows fresh air to 'breeze' or flow into interior spaces while providing inhabitants a degree of privacy.

**Chest mane:** Large, decorative aspect of masquerade body.

**Commission:** to request the creation of a work of art, such as a business transaction between a patron and an artist or their representative.

**Compromise Kimi:** The Compromise Kimi is David Sanou's innovation. It combines the abstract headpiece of a Kimi with some of the human features of the Photo masquerade genre. Toning down the conspicuous naturalism of photo masquerades, it relies less on a person's likeness and more on emblems that refer to their life in order to honor them.

**Devil:** a general term used in Sierra Leone that loosely refers to all masquerade ensembles.

**Diaspora:** a group of people spread from an original location to areas.

**Fieldwork:** practical work done by a researcher in a natural location through direct interaction with people.

**Jollay:** In Sierra Leone, a friendly, entertainment-based society that encourages love, unity, and good times; masquerades are usually performed at weddings and other celebratory occasions.

**Kimi:** A masquerade genre in Burkina Faso that includes a carved wooden headpiece with a tall superstructure and a fibrous body. It is performed during annual funeral celebrations to honor ancestors.

**Kotu:** the 'artist' or 'designer' of Ordehlay and Hunting society masquerades in Sierra Leone.

**Libation:** a drink poured out as an offering to a deity or ancestor.

**Nsibidi:** an ancient system of writing developed by the Ekpe secret society. It is an ideographic script whose symbols refer to abstract concepts, actions or things.

**Ordehlay:** an entertainment-based mutual aid club based/originally invented in Freetown, Sierra Leone, but that has spread regionally and internationally. It comes out at holidays, particularly Christmas, New Year's, Easter, and Independence Day. Each neighborhood as well as several towns and cities outside of Freetown have a resident Ordehlay club, as well as an associated Jollay, Hunting, and Ojeh society.

**Photo Masquerade:** A genre invented by André Sanou in 1996. "Photo" masquerades naturalistically represent the faces of identifiable human beings. Their bodies, however, share the same material, technique, shape and dynamism as *Kimis*. Naturalistically depicting a human in masquerade is so controversial that organizers have banned it in some districts of Bobo-Dioulasso.

**Raffia:** a natural fiber extracted from palm frond.

**Superstructure:** the extended structural elements of the head or body of the masquerade.

**Ukara cloth:** an indigo-dyed textile adorned with nsibidi symbols using a resist method used by members of the Ekpe secret society in the Cross River area of Southeastern Nigeria, West Africa.

## SUGGESTED RESOURCES

### ONLINE

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Locator\\_maps\\_of\\_countries\\_of\\_Africa](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Locator_maps_of_countries_of_Africa)

<https://exploringafrica.matrix.msu.edu/>

<http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/aoi/home.html>

[www.noma.org](http://www.noma.org)

<https://noma.org/exhibitions/new-african-masquerades/>

<https://noma.org/object-lesson-soundsuits-by-nick-cave/>

[https://www.nola.com/entertainment\\_life/arts/indian-suit-scepter-and-photo-layers-of-art-in-new-orleans/article\\_b8b63c28-bda1-11ee-a5d6-2bf450f5a26f.html](https://www.nola.com/entertainment_life/arts/indian-suit-scepter-and-photo-layers-of-art-in-new-orleans/article_b8b63c28-bda1-11ee-a5d6-2bf450f5a26f.html)

<https://smarthistory.org/elephant-mask-kuosi-society-bamileke-peoples-cameroon/>

### BOOKS + JOURNALS

#### Exhibition Catalogue

Maples, Amanda M., Jordan A. Fenton and Lisa Homann, Editors, *New African Masquerades: Artistic Innovations and Collaborations*, Yale University Press: April 1, 2025

#### For further research

Celestin, Karen with illustrations by Eric Waters, *Freedom's Dance: Social Aid Pleasure Clubs in New Orleans*, Baton Rouge, LA: LSU Press, 2018

Fagaly, William A., editor, *Ancestors of Congo Square: African Art in the New Orleans Museum of Art*, New York: Scala, 2011

Fenton, Jordan A. *Masquerade and Money in Urban Nigeria: The Case of Calabar*. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2022

Homann, Lisa. "Incremental Shifts: The Contemporariness of Masquerade," *African Arts* 53:4 (Winter 2020) 48 - 55.

Maples, Amanda M. "Urban Roots and Rural Routes: Migrating Masquerades of Freetown and Beyond," *Critical Interventions* 12:3, 2018, 75–93.

### STUDENT SELECTIONS

- *The Heart Never Forgets* by Ana Ot (Author), Hayden Goodman (Illustrator), Atheneum Books for Young Readers (April 16, 2024), ISBN-10:1665913053
- *Chicken in the Kitchen* by Nnedi Okorafor (Author), Mehrdokht Amini (Illustrator), Lantana Publishing (September 1, 2017), ISBN-10:1911373153
- *The Fortune-Tellers* by Lloyd Alexander (Author), Trina Schart Hyman (Illustrator), Picture Puffin Books (October 1, 1997), ISBN-10:0140562338



# MASQUERADE ARTISTS IN WEST AFRICA



*New African Masquerades: Artistic Innovations and Collaborations* explores the vitality of masquerade arts in West Africa today. The exhibition features the stories of four distinguished masquerade artists: Hervé Youmbi (Cameroon), Chief Ekpenyong Bassey Nsa (Nigeria), David Sanou (Burkina Faso), and Sheku "Goldenfinger" Fofanah (Sierra Leone).