

On the Concept of Prototype in Songye Masquerades

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In 1986 I published a book on Songye masks and figure sculpture based on fieldwork conducted in the Lomami region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Hersak 2007). That publication is the product of a particular interdisciplinary way of seeing and thinking about African art history prevalent in the 1970s and '80s in anglophone scholarship. It encapsulates a slice of time and academic gymnastics that are also proper to a particular personal experience.

In this paper I intend to revisit Songye masquerades (Fig. 1), from another time zone and from the wider angle of what is currently referred to as “expressive culture.” While I have previously concentrated on both field and museum contexts, there is no doubt that I see masking now as an even broader, more dynamic, fluid phenomenon in time and space that cannot be reduced to selective or singular image/performance study. It is a cultural expression that also begs to be viewed from the perspective of multiple sense-scapes and expressive forms in addition to the visual—the auditory or olfactory, for example. Moreover, we sometimes forget that the visual, material object is not necessarily of prime significance in many cultures; it is not considered in isolation, as Zöe Strother has clearly shown with the case of Pende masking, where “the invention of a new mask centers on its dance” (1998:42). As she points out, to Westerners it is difficult to conceive that the sculptor is the “last stop” in the creative process (*ibid.*, p. 30). Hence, static analysis of collectable objects remains the focus of “collection and exhibition” histories which nourish the desired view of the private sector and formal institutional doctrines. The latter is also a traditional Western art historical approach based on a selective construct of the “art” category, privileging so-called high art and discriminating against lowly crafts and, of course, anything coming close to tourist production.

Although it is not my intent to tackle all these issues in this paper, I do wish to venture beyond at least some of the previously safe academic havens and look at Songye masking then and now in various spatio-temporal representations. The particular emphasis on the concept of the “prototype,” inspired by a conference on the topic held at the Université Libre de Bruxelles in October 2010, provides interesting food for thought and challenging new angles of exploration.¹ In taking this road, I am therefore obliged to ask different questions than those that have preoccupied me before and to accept the risk of healthy theoretical uncertainty. Such a path does not promise to be a straight one, but it can liberate and sharpen our visions, leading to potentially more sensitive and reflective interpretations.

As a point of departure, I will begin simply and less tortuously by reviewing the familiar frames of the ethnographic context. The Songye masquerading practices that I had the opportunity to witness and document in the late 1970s were those of Eastern Songye (Fig. 2). It would appear that the origins of this tradition emerged in an area of admixture between Songye and Luba peoples and diffused throughout both culture areas and beyond, adapting to different needs and expressions as is the case with other masking societies (see Hersak 1993). In reality there is therefore not a singular Songye tradition; it is a dynamic, ephemeral phenomenon with variants that have come and gone and may never be known. But as Alfred Gell noted in relation to Marquesan art, “... despite [a] geographical scattering and contextual transformation [the] art retains an inner integrity of its own, as a macroscopic whole rather than as an aggregate of fragments” (1998:221).

At the time of my fieldwork in DRC, folkloric masking practices had begun to make their appearance but it was the so-called traditional context of masquerades that was of particular academic interest, one in which ritual rather than theatricality was



1 *Bwadi bwa kifwebe* ensemble in Luama village, Munga chiefdom, Eastern Songye. Elder's mask Lobo (right) and youth's mask Nkwali (left) with drummers and singers.

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the primary focus, as well as the sacred rather than the secular, and mask types bore some relationship to those coveted in private and public collections abroad. Such a context had practically disappeared throughout much of Songye country except in the eastern sector. There, an elective political system still existed, more flexible than the highly hierarchical model in the central part of the country (i.e. Kalebwe), in which candidates for the position of supreme chief were elected for a term of three to five years. This rather more democratic political structure was quite unusual in Central Africa, as the historian Jan Vansina has pointed out (1990:182), but it also led to heavy-handed competition and strife. The masking society, known as *bwadi bwa kifwebe*, was therefore used as a potent regulatory mechanism to resolve or eradicate social tensions and retain allegiance to the political élite in power.

How did this masking society exercise such effective control? It relied on initiatory procedures, strategies of secrecy, and practices of witchcraft and sorcery. Maskers were the anonymous agents of magic, of *buchi* or witchcraft, believed to be an inherent and inherited ambivalent power in mind and body, potentially

activated by mere thought. Far more dangerous was *masende*, an acquired and learned magical practice accessible to all through initiation (forced or voluntary) and activated through material substances and techniques that engaged evil spirits of the dead.² In the masking arena that I was able to observe, two dimensions came into play: gender and status (see Hersak 1990). There were male and female masks and different hierarchies of power. Male masks were distinguished by their tri-colored striations, especially the presence of red pigmentation and the height of their crests (Fig. 3). The most prominent crest was proper of the elder's mask (Fig. 4), a grade marking superior achievement in magical manipulation and experience, especially in *masende* (sorcery), and the lesser ones constituted the suite of youth masks, all with variable powers. In contrast, the female mask (Fig. 5) was distinguished mainly by its predominantly white coloration, significantly more contained features, and the absence of the vertical nose-forehead extension seen on male masks. Female masks were said to possess *buchi* and *masende* but were essentially associated with the rather more ambivalent magic of *buchi*, which could be malevolent and action-orientated or just a sort of extra-sensory power that allowed contact with all dimensions of the invisible, including more benevolent ancestral spirits.

From a public perspective of exposure, the iconography of the masks' features and the gender/power paradigm could be deciphered at a basic level by any non-initiate, but this was all the



more crystallized through performance, or what Liza Bakewell would call “image acts,” “activities of image instances” that have an effect on us (1998:22, 30). This idea of visual power, its impact and instrumentality, echoes Gell’s reference to the “enchantment” of artistic experience and of “spells” being cast upon us (1999:163); it recalls and is probably based on Walter Benjamin’s “aura” (2009:438–39) and reverberates in the “image mysteries” referred to by David Freedberg (2005:17). With Songye appearances in the public sphere, the agency and aura of male/female maskers clearly emerged through their action. This confirms that what objects or art experiences “do” is undoubtedly more important than what they “are,” a message that many have been pointing out for some time (McLeod 1976, MacGaffey 1993, Gell 1998:68, Roberts and Roberts 2007:15). So, in this context, male masks undertook mainly policing roles and, in keeping with their mission, they asserted their power by demonstrating wild, erratic behavior, running frantically through the expanse of the village, and demonstrating apparently superhuman, miraculous tricks. Their movements could be described as angular, rapid, and exaggerated, somewhat like the general aesthetic of male masks with their overwhelming geometric rendering. In contrast, female masks, with their contained features, engaged in dance with fluid, slower, more rounded movements, often with emphasis on footwork, and confined to stage-sized village areas. In such performances male masks generated threatening, though generative, magical forces akin to disorder and change, whereas female masks maintained a sort of social equilibrium, evoking

2 Songye country. Based on Olga Boone’s 1961 map with indications of western and eastern areas of research. Note that “Songye” on the map refers to the people who identified specifically with that name during the time of my research. They are referred to as Eastern Songye in the text to avoid confusion with the ethnic designation for the overall region.

REDRAWN BY QUENTIN ROMBAUX OF THE CARTOGRAPHY SUPPORT PROJECT, GEOGRAPHY DEPARTMENT AT THE UNIVERSITÉ LIBRE DE BRUXELLES, 2011. © DUNJA HERSAK.

the goodwill of ancestral spirits through their dance idiom and thereby assuring communal continuity.

Within this scenario, the white female mask seems to have functioned as a basic model or prototype (Fig. 6). I was told that in most *bwadi* groups one female mask was essential although numerous male types were possible of varying power grades. Many people also claimed that the female mask was the first to be carved in a new *bwadi* group in adherence to a prescribed morphological typology. Its general features were replicated through time and space as if such connections were an indispensable aspect of *bwadi* identity and membership. In turn, the form and stylistic permutations of male masks seem to have evolved from that basic female model and, as we can see from available examples in public and private collections, they developed into dynamic variations attesting to the needs, expressions, and imaginations of local carvers. The diversity of these male masks is a striking display of sculptural inventiveness, so much so that it is impossible to determine their provenance, hierarchical status, or group affiliation without precise field data. In total contrast to this variability, the white



3 Bwadi bwa kifwebe ensemble from Kikomo village, Kiloshi chiefdom, Eastern Songye. Elder's mask (left), two youths' masks, drummers and singers.

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female mask's replication resulted in it becoming a well-known visual icon, interpreted in a generic way and appended to numerous other object types, and in particular on shields (see Hersak 1995). As a powerful sign, its notoriety extended regionally way beyond Songye or Luba territory (Fig. 7).

Having dealt with what the masks “do,” it becomes obvious to ask “how” and “why” did this white mask type come to be a prime model as opposed to male types, and of what is it a prototype? I would agree with Gell, who held that “[n]ot all indexes (or art works) have prototypes or ‘represent’ anything distinct from themselves” (1998:26). But what is the specificity in question here and how did it come to occupy such iconic stature? Hans Belting tells us that it is “the making of images that establishes their place in human thinking” (2005:45). That may be so, but in this context it is only partially true, for many Songye claim that a mask is just a piece of wood even once carved into a representational object. It must be empowered by the wearer; it must be distanced from the maker and transformed from material object into a “persona” with voice, move-

ment, and a new presence. Such new presence clearly requires “the denial of human agency” as in many masking contexts, but the metaphysical transformation of the performer/wearer is rather more complex than some have outlined (see Picton 2002:10). The wearer of a *kifwebe* mask is a witch or sorcerer, as noted earlier. He has already been transformed either at birth or in early childhood through biological procedures (that is, mother's milk); alternatively, his humanness has been modified through a much more radical and violent adult experience of initiatory procedures. With separation from the familiar milieu through ritual, followed by the liminal or threshold phase of existence and reintegration into society, he emerges as a new subject endowed with the habitus of *masende* practices and commitment to its doxa, to a commonality of purpose and vision (Mitchell 2006:387).

Through initiation into *masende* sorcery, individuality has been effaced and reconfigured; it is a means of adopting a psychological mask—an invisible but affective mask. It is this state of “otherness” of the wearer that empowers the material object of the *kifwebe*. And in so doing, a second transformation occurs. The invisible is made visible, given embodiment and a new identity. The witch or sorcerer acquires representation, a face, a body, and sensorial animation. Belting and others have discussed this process of imaging and “the simultaneity as well as opposition between absence and presence,” particularly conspicuous in the case of a mask (2005:46, 47), in this case a Songye mask which



4 Mask of elder, Ndale; village Kikomo, Kiloshi chiefdom, Eastern Songye.

PHOTO: © DUNJA HERSAK, 1978

5 Female mask Kalyanga from village Ngoma, Munga chiefdom, Eastern Songye.

PHOTO: © DUNJA HERSAK, 1978



brings into being the new presence of a *kifwebe* persona as a supernatural, socially alien creature of the wild. The mask wearer is now referred to by the name *ngulungu*, a Kisongye term meaning bushbuck, but as Allen Roberts rightly observes, this simply accentuates a new and probably anomalous “state of being” as there is no resemblance between the animal and the mask (1995:92). For some, such transformation may be questionable or subject to modification. To followers of local African religions as well as to Christian believers, for example, the invisible is as real as the visible; there is no transition, the invisible is simply made apparent (Miles 1998:168). Strother conceptualizes this by saying that the mask creates a liminal space between the living and the dead or, I would say, a blending between the living of both spheres of existence.

The initiatory procedure I have referred to is, however, not the only requirement for those seeking entry into the masking society. All candidates of *bwadi bwa kifwebe* must also undergo initiation proper to that association, hence *masende* members are exposed to a second ordeal which reconfigures their social roles and psychological makeup even further. As with most closed associations, during this procedure they learn a secret code which serves as a subsequent means of membership identification. What is interesting here is that this code consists of a verbal image of a *kifwebe* creature. All parts of the mask and costume down to the smallest details are identified in an esoteric language, and each term is also linked to some metaphoric, mnemonic phrase. Although I have not been made privy to this knowledge in its entirety, I was able to discover some of the content which unveiled a vast spectrum



6 Female mask (left) with youth's mask and *musenge*, guide of the masks. Ngoma village, Munga chiefdom, Eastern Songye.

PHOTO: © DUNJA HERSAK, 1978

7 Chief from Ubundu with his ceremonial shield crowned by a white *kifwebe* mask. Lengola area to the far north of the Songye.

PUBLISHED BY GASTON-DENYS PÉRIER, 1924.

of references to different aspects of nature, culture, and cosmology. For the purposes of this discussion, the sense of it all is not of vital significance; suffice it to say that such terminology is the currency of secrecy intended to separate nonmembers from members through strategies of concealment and revelation (see Nooter 1993). Yet there is something here that is intriguing and pertinent to this paper; it is the fact that there is a single verbal image and, while it is based on a generalized concept of the *kifwebe* creature, the focus is unquestionably on the characteristics of a powerful male mask with its tricolored stripes and pronounced facial features (see Hersak 2007:60). Having in the past labored on the interpretation of meaning and symbolism of this code in keeping with scholarly pursuits of that time, such work has overshadowed the most obvious question: why is a male model significant to this verbal image and why particularly in the secret, initiatory domain? Phrased as such, it follows that one also needs to examine why the female remains a purely visual, material, and conspicuously public image in Eastern Songye masquerade traditions.

To address these questions, or at least to propose some hypotheses, literature concerning the significance of initiation is useful. Jon Mitchell, in surveying this topic (particularly in relation to performance), notes that more recent studies have focused not on transition from one social category to another as dealt with by Van Gennep in his classic 1909 model in *The Rites of Passage* (Van Gennep 1960), but “on the transformation of the person in and through initiation” (Mitchell 2006:387). What emerges from the varied anthropological and sociological paths of Victor Turner, Pierre Bourdieu, and Maurice Block, among others, is an emphasis on the affective-experiential aspect of transformation. Mitchell refers in particular to terror, brutality, and fear as central phenomena of initiation, such as in societies of Papua New Guinea. Quoting Whitehouse, he states that vivid recollections of such ritual experiences create salient memories or “flashbulb memories” that seem to strengthen with time and “serve as a means of ordering subsequent reflections about that transformation” (*ibid.*, p. 389).





8 Close-up of a youth's mask from Kikome village, Kiloshi chiefdom, Eastern Songye.

PHOTO: © DUNJA HERSAK, 1978

9 Male *ndoshi* mask. Kalebwe (my attribution) but Eastern Songye provenance. Collected prior to 1928 in the area of Katombe, Kabalo territory (Luba/ Songye region). This is the photograph that I used during my field research and is the one example of a museum piece that was recognized by everyone throughout the region of research and unanimously referred to as an *ndoshi* or witch. Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, EO. 0.0.30500.

PHOTO: © RMCA, TERVUREN

With Songye masks, it would seem that the verbal code of the male elder is a mnemonic based on the sedimentation of those fear-inducing experiences. The importance of this code is more referential than symbolic. Mention of sorcerers, transformation, and multiple animal species that are powerful and dangerous, from elephants to bees to the pugnacious Burchell's zebra, are clearly imbedded in that code, which includes reference to the striations and projections of the male masker. The visual representation echoes this collage, imaging a bizarre entity, truly liminal in Van Gennep's and Turner's terms, that is not human, animal, or spirit, but is suggestive of a novel hybridity (Turner 1967:93). Voluminous exaggerations (Fig. 8 and cover) of certain facial features emphasize acute sensory perception as that of sorcerers who see, smell, and feel more like certain animals than ordinary people. The mask's bulging eyes, for example, are referred to as the "swellings of sorcerers," the exaggerated mouth is said to be "the beak of a bird" or "the flame of a sorcerer," the



nose is "the hole (opening) of a furnace," and the facial design is said to be "a thing rolled out in a different manner," possibly something transformed and powerful like the stripes of the zebra. As Allen Roberts points out (in dealing with the *kifwebe* amongst other examples), people *need* the strange; they need to create monsters as they must face fear, the fear of death "... and so Fear itself is given the face of creatures no one has ever seen or experienced, except well beyond the pale ..." (1995:91). With reference to masks, Roberts further notes the "peculiar interrelation of reality and image" to confront paradox (*ibid.*) Freedberg summarizes this same phenomenon by saying: "the mask is the image and the image is the mask" (2005:18).

With white female masks, the case is different from that of males. Female masks are not the images of deep-rooted psychological dramas. Rather, their aesthetic mirrors containment, calm, and the "metaphoric rubric of coolness" referred to long ago by Robert Farris Thompson in discussion of other African sculptural expressions (1974:43). Female masks are conceived and reproduced in schematic form as the emblems of power associated with the masking society and as such, they are easily transferable from one object type to another, as seen in some shields and stools. They are what Malcolm McLeod would have



called “statement art” that is, “images which exist in their final intended form and, by themselves, communicate their meaning; [they] ... are primarily associated with the glorification or reinforcement of existing systems of authority ...” (1976:99).³ As these images are not annexed to a verbal code, they exist independently and can therefore “migrate,” to use a concept proposed by Belting (2005:51). Playing upon their emblematic status, such representations are “concerned with copying or reiterating an existing order” and are formal, fixed, and timeless, as McLeod holds (*ibid.*, pp. 101–102); it is precisely the latter word, “timelessness,” that explains their morphological homogeneity. Inspired by McLeod’s analysis, I see that the aesthetic repertoire of male masks is inevitably “richer” because they depend on a wider range of codes ... and they can therefore provide complex metaphorical structures which are particularly useful in situations of [social] readjustment (such as initiations or installation rites) ...” (*ibid.* p. 102). With all of this I would venture to say that the white female mask was probably the initial model to be created by emergent regulatory societies of the *bwadi bwa kifwebe*, “the precursory work” (Gell 1998:234) from which other variables developed with changing sociopolitical circumstances, intensified *masende* practice and *bwadi* control, and regional spread and adaptation.

To put this hypothesis to the test, we might look briefly at other contexts and temporalities of these masquerades such as those in the central part of Songye country among the Kalebwe and Chofwe and contemporary examples that I have obtained data of recently. Here the task becomes much more complicated, as there are tangled up synchronic and diachronic dimensions punctuated with discontinuities in practice and in our documentation. This is where an orderly academic construction faces the chaos of overlap, concurrent and opposing phenomena, and potential contradiction. Briefly, my understanding of masquerades in the central Songye region is based upon the study of very patchy sources and some discussions in situ. The fact is that I never saw masks of any kind in performance there in the late 1970s. In the past, maskers clearly exercised a regulatory function as reported by Rev. W.F.P. Burton in 1928⁴ and in 1959/60 by Alan Merriam, who conducted research farther to the northwest among Bala people (1978:no. 4, 94; also see map, Fig. 2). These reports are, however, mere fragments of largely unknown contexts. What is clear is that central groups, unlike Eastern Songye, were more exposed to the watchful eyes of missionaries and other expatriates in the pre- and post-independence periods, and they had already experienced the collapse of their centralized political system in the 1920s. The changing character of the polity probably brought about a progressive redefinition of masking practices. As the regulatory function of the *kifwebe* society became obsolete, it was replaced by folkloric purposes and contexts in which social concerns such as identity and the need for community harmony were essential motivations.



10 *Ndoshi* style mask. Kalebwe, Ebombo chiefdom (my attribution).

PHOTO: KAREL PLASMANS, 1960S; © DUNJA HERSAK

11 *Ndoshi* style maskers. Kalebwe, Ebombo chiefdom (my attribution).

PHOTO: KAREL PLASMANS, 1960S; © DUNJA HERSAK



that had an impact on popular mask production in the central Songye region and even on subsequent masking developments among Eastern Songye. According to my field research on well-known masks from the Tervuren museum, such innovation probably dates to the late 1920s and originated in a borderland between eastern and western Songye, with the Kalebwe chiefdom of Ebombo playing the most significant intermediary role in the assimilation of varied compositional elements (see Hersak 2007:93–100; also map, Fig. 2). A single museum example was recognized by all Songye I spoke to (which was not the case with many other masks) and, most interestingly, everyone referred to it as *ndoshi*, meaning “witch” (Fig. 9). While I have been puzzled by the use of this term for a mask considered particularly powerful, I now believe that that designation was symptomatic of the changing, veiled or, more likely, different politico-economic contexts in that region. Although male mask images began to stabilize in form, the highly exaggerated facial configuration with grooved striations (quite in contrast to the aesthetic of the female) entered the sphere of replication and eventually serial workshop production, perhaps resounding those residual or “flashbulb memories” of past initiatory experiences (Fig. 10). More probably it was the widespread notoriety of that male image, associated with a persona of extraordinary power, that was selectively fixed in time and rendered iconic (Fig. 11).

I am not suggesting here that the creative impulse was in any way arrested; on the contrary, what I see is simply different modes and emphases of expression relevant to post-independence circumstances. Among examples from the 1960s and ‘70s collected and photographed in the field by Karel Plasmans, a Bel-

A theatrical genre of masking seems to have created a new interactive space for celebration, social cohesion, and mediation.

The secularization process, much more complicated than I can deal with here, seems to have led to greater standardization of mask forms. Also, both male and female characters acquired comparable representational emphasis and visibility in performance. This may account for the fact that a male prototype seems to have emerged, paralleling the status of the female,

12 *Ndoshi* style masks with highly exaggerated features and the unusual appearance of blue pigmentation for the striations. Kalebwe, Ebombo chiefdom, Mulenda.

PHOTO: KAREL PLASMANS, 1960S; © DUNJA HERSAK

13 Masker with blue, orange, and white facial striations and a costume made of burlap. Kalebwe, Ebombo chiefdom, Kalongo.

PHOTO: KAREL PLASMANS, 1960S; © DUNJA HERSAK



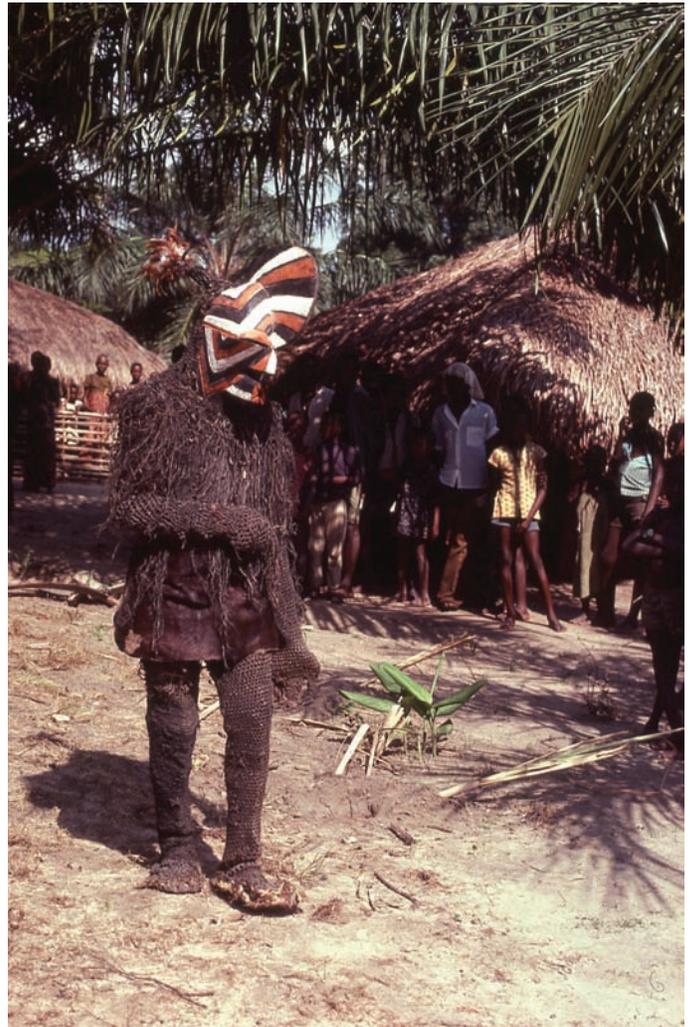
14 Masker appearing in the village of Ilunga Ngulu, Kiloshi Chiefdom, Eastern Songye. Note the red, white, and black striations and the "traditional" plaiting of the costume.

PHOTO: © DUNJA HERSAK, 1978

gian agronomist, there are audacious examples displaying different surface patterns with the introduction of vibrant tones of blue or orange color, for example (Fig. 12). Moreover, costumes are constructed of basic sackcloth rather than the raffia plaiting of earlier times (Fig. 13). Some art historians and probably many collectors and dealers may dismiss these *bifwebe* as inauthentic and aesthetically inferior. In fact, such pieces are not a conspicuous feature of important collections, public or private, and I am sure their life histories have fallen prey to purist attitudes of outsiders. While there are certainly works poor in quality, formal experimentation and changing conventions should not be dismissed so easily in response to the demands of the international art market. Rather than condemning such phenomena categorically as "degradation," it is more insightful to consider these changes as innovation brought about by significant sociocultural and historical processes (see Geary and Xatart 2007).⁵ The use of industrial pigments and burlap rather than hand-made raffia plaiting may have been viewed as features of modernity at that point in time, appropriate for this new genre of public performers, rather than as signs of impoverishment. Significant and corresponding changes in performance style were certainly also occurring with dance and music providing the prime motor force of spatial and human transformation (see Strother 1998).⁶

After the 1960s, when Karel Plasmans amassed the majority of his extensive holdings, the Institut des Musées du Congo (formerly IMNZ) in Kinshasa and Lubumbashi also followed with major collecting expeditions in the 1970s. As a result of these ventures, the Songye undoubtedly became aware of national and outside interests in their material culture but also, in the process of commercial negotiations, received feedback about desirable aesthetic criteria. I would hazard to say that such interactions with market forces contributed to subsequent modifications. The blue, green, or orange colors disappeared and costumes were again fabricated in the so-called traditional manner (Fig. 14). Were these Western demands or a result of Mobutu's pervasive ideology of "authenticité"?⁷ How should one evaluate this course of development? Should it be considered as regression or cultural renewal? The perspectives on this issue are multiple and depend on who is doing the viewing and how we wish to engage in seeing. Moreover, responses to larger world contexts are inevitable as are borrowings from the West and responses to it.

In 2010 I had the opportunity to see film footage taken by Patric Claes of recent *kifwebe* maskers among Eastern Songye, where I conducted research thirty years ago, which provides clear evidence of the popularization of these practices and further highlights changes in the folk context.⁸ One example from the village of Katea shows a white female mask and a male with an oversized crest, both based on prototypical models, sharing the small, stage-like space and dancing side by side or in tandem (Fig. 15). The wild, threatening, non-dance improvisations are gone and both maskers concentrate on foot and hip move-



ments characteristic of previous female *bifwebe* dances. Women are welcome spectators rather than ostracized as noninitiates, and they encourage the performers, conspicuously entering center stage. Similarly, *musenge*, the guide of the *bifwebe*, participates in the dance repertoire rather than simply clearing the path of undesirably noninitiates, and all performers align themselves frontally, facing the camera. In examining two other film sequences from the same area, I suddenly had the impression of seeing salient aspects of the familiar rearranged and wondered to what extent my research and publications had also contributed to these manifestations. In the village of Pofu, the three main characters appeared (female, youth, elder) but gender and hierarchical power distinctions seemed blurred and redefined, and regional morphological and stylistic features were recombined (Fig. 16). For example, the elder's mask, recognized essentially by its aggrandizement, was devoid of the key signaling element, namely the crest, and the surface was covered with thin, grooved, linear striations typical of the Kalebwe tradition rather than the wide, tricolored stripes found in the eastern area. In the film from Mukulungu village, both genders of maskers not only flailed sticks but acquired insignia of office; a female *kifwebe* held a fly whisk like a dignitary while the male masker danced with an axe, both of these being traditional markers of political and spe-



15 Maskers performing in Katea village, Kiloshi chiefdom, Eastern Songye. Female masker on left, male to the right.

STILL FROM FILM TAKEN BY PATRIC CLAES, 2010

16 Three maskers performing in Pofu village, Munga chiefdom, Eastern Songye. Female masker on the left, elder to the right and another male in the background.

STILL FROM FILM TAKEN BY PATRIC CLAES, 2010

17 Female masker (right) and male (left) performing in Mukulungu village, Mumbo chiefdom, Eastern Songye.

STILL FROM FILM TAKEN BY PATRIC CLAES, 2010

cial status, but in the human domain (Fig. 17). Interestingly, the handle of one of these axes was surmounted by a carved head, like the well-known examples among neighboring Luba. Instrumentation clearly remained crucial to these performances and although slit drums were still present, even if some were scaled down in size from earlier ones as in one example, they began to be replaced by round drums; a horn blower was also introduced in one dance as well as a percussionist tapping on metal rods. As Peter van Dommelen points out, hybridization, or the “mixing” of material and visual culture as can be seen elsewhere, is hardly random but quite structured (2006:118–19). In this case, recognizable and stereotypical elements, some of which are the extension of prototypes, provide anchorage that allows innovations and inventions to take root and acquire meaning.

These masks are, in fact, icons of a valued and perhaps imagined past set into action through a new genre of theatrical representation, in most cases orchestrated and performed by a young generation rather than the elders, as Paul Lane (1988), Zöe Strother (1998), Rosita Henry (2000), and others have shown in work conducted elsewhere. They are performances during which individual role playing, and especially visibility, is sought, and contemporaneity is applauded in an alternative “space of performative encounter” (Henry et al. 2000:254). As Henry explains (in relation to Aboriginal tourist dances), “far from being commodified, inauthentic representations, ... such performances provide an opportunity for ... people to bring an embodied memory of the past into the present” (ibid., p. 258). This is indeed so with current Songye masquerades, which celebrate another time through the staging of selective recall. With lyrics that refer to epics of a single Songye people, there is an ethnic and political recasting that clearly aims at international visibility and recognition. But there are also the basic elements of play and make-believe, with people seemingly simulating fear of the *bifwebe*. In so doing, a union is created between performers and audience, as a vivid, lived presence which, as Schieffelin states, “alter[s] moods, social relations, bodily dispositions and states of mind” (quoted by Mitchell 2006:384) transforming everyday village space into a place of joy and well-being.

In conclusion, I am reminded of Gell again, who might have said that all these spatially separated micro-histories of masquerades are a part of a “set”; they are “distributed” in time and space, and each contributes to the whole through varying aspects of prototypicality (1998:221). In the introduction to the most recent publication on the topic of prototypes, Graeme Were states quite simply that in “... Gell’s anthropological theory of art ... all artefacts appear to be prototypes: there exists no conventional origin or end point” (2010:270). Each creation or performance draws from the past and into the future, each is an original and a derivation, and each is somehow imperfect. It is this very aspect of imperfection that endows it with the “capacity to generate variation” (ibid., pp. 267–68; Buchli 2010:275). But through variation there are also “movements of thoughts” incarnated in the visible (Were 2010:267), allowing for all manner of expression as in recent *kifwebe* performances.

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Notes

I would like to thank Graeme Were for his comments on this paper and also Allen Roberts for his insightful editorial work. I assume full responsibility, however, for the content of this article.

1 The conference, entitled Image et prototype, at which I presented this paper was held at ULB October 7–9, 2010, and organized by the research unit Image et Culture Visuelle.

2 The distinction between *buchi*, an inherent, ambivalent power, and *masende*, a learned magical operation, is broadly based on the well-known Zande model proposed by Evans-Pritchard, who used the two existing English terms to designate “witchcraft” for the former and “sorcery” for the latter (1937:387). This is, however, not applicable in a general way. Peter Geschiere, for example, working among the Maka of eastern Cameroon, contests this bipartite scheme as being heavily moralist and rigid, opposing practices of evil and good from a Western perspective. He refers to a single notion known as *djambe*, which he defines as an ambiguous, inherent force which translates easily into the single French word *sorcellerie* (sorcery) (1995:20–21). The problem here is not one of conflicting or flawed interpretation or even differences in terminology. Varying contexts and belief systems exist. Among Vili and Yombe peoples of Congo Brazzaville, where I conducted extensive fieldwork in the 1990s, ideas about sorcery correspond more closely to those dealt with by Geschiere rather than to my findings among the Songye and apply to an innate, ambivalent power that can be used for both malevolent and positive purposes (Hersak 2001:627–28).

3 I have used Malcolm McLeod’s distinction between “process” and “statement” art previously and for different purposes (Hersak 2010:39, 40). While it has allowed me to think about various aspects relating to the production, use, and conceptualization of Songye magical figures and masks, one does have to bear in mind that it is a theory and, as such, rigid due to its schematization and a part of a particular period of scholarly exploration. Most African art is obviously a part of ongoing processes, whether secular or ritual, but there are nonetheless significant distinctions that McLeod’s framework highlights.

4 Catalogue files in the Ethnography Department of the Royal Museum for Central Africa, file no. 30617.

5 In their study of the Geneviève Macmillan collection of African and Oceanic art, Geary and Xatart provide interesting examples of changing conventions and meanings of objects during the second half of the 20th century which defy static Western categorizations and stereotypes.

6 Strother’s discussion of the invention of the masker Gindongo (Gi) Tshi is a poignant example of the prime importance of dance and music in the realization of the character and his subsequent success (1998:267–81).

7 The ideology of *authenticité* was a political movement introduced by Mobutu Sese Seko in the 1970s. In reaction to colonialism and Western influence, Mobutu sought a return to one’s origins, hence, for example, personal and place names were changed to African ones and the dress code required was, paradoxically, a Mao-style suit for men and wrap-around tie-dyed ensembles for women. Also, the production of so-called traditional art styles was encouraged and their repatriation from the West was demanded.

8 I must thank Patric Claes for showing me some of the films he took of recent *kifwebe* performances among Eastern Songye and sharing his experiences with me during a stay in Brussels in June 2010. I am also most grateful to Woods Davy for drawing my attention to this material and kindly providing me with stills for this paper.

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