

*Il est rare que l'on s'efforce de présenter la sculpture africaine telle que ses créateurs la voient et la ressentent. L'auteur a participé lui-même à la danse masquée des Bété de la Côte d'Ivoire. Il nous décrit le rôle du masque dans la vie de la communauté villageoise, l'organisation et l'entraînement des danseurs, enfin l'expérience physique et émotive de la danse à l'intérieur même du masque.*

*Pour les Bété ce masque de danse est le médiateur essentiel de l'activité sociale et religieuse de la communauté et le centre de la tradition. Cette fonction permet de replacer cette danse dans l'ensemble plus général de la sculpture africaine traditionnelle.*

## Bété Masked Dance

### *A View from Within*

ARMISTEAD P. ROOD

Throughout Africa, masked dancing is much more than a simple performing art. Much as "to go to church" implies, for an American, something far broader than simply visiting a specific sort of building, "to dance the mask" conjures up in the African mind an activity which is loaded with social, religious, and psychological implications. Moreover, the African concept of "the mask" itself connotes far more than just a face-covering, for it includes both the entire costume and the man inside, as well as the specific music, motions, and functions associated with it.

The complex nature of African masked dance makes an accurate description and analysis by foreign observers quite difficult. To take an extreme example, it will be obvious that the mask we see on display in the sterile environment of a museum is only slightly related to that same mask in its original context. Indeed, even with intimate field experience, it may be impossible for the non-African observer to grasp the full import of African artistic traditions.

Nonetheless, it is important that we attempt, insofar as is possible, to understand how African art is viewed by its creators, and it is in this spirit that the following account is presented.

The Bété are an agricultural people, occupying the area around the commercial centers of Daloa, Gagnoa, and Soubré, in the forested southwest quadrant of the Ivory Coast. Their principal occupation is the raising of rice, bananas, and yams, the staples of their diet, and coffee and cocoa, which are grown for export on small, private plantations. Like most of the peoples of West Africa, however, the Bété devote considerable time and energy to the maintenance of a sophisticated artistic tradition.



**M**y introduction to Bété masked dance began during my second evening in Zahia, a small village located some twelve miles to the northwest of Daloa. I had just returned from a refreshing cold bucket bath and was settling down to compose a long-neglected letter home when the drums began. One at first, joined in a few moments by lighter, tighter beats. The persistent counter-rhythms captured my attention, and I could not refuse the invitation of my Ivorian counterparts, Madji and Zézé, to go and investigate their source.

The drummers were warming up at one end of an open courtyard which lay next to the dirt road to Daloa. By the time we had arrived, most of the 250 villagers had assembled, forming an oblong circle around the courtyard. A lantern had been placed on the ground in front of the musicians, and it was sending waves of light dancing across the red ground to break along the encircling wall of gaily colored cloths worn by the villagers. A group of notables arrived, each carrying his low, round-backed stool over one shoulder. They took their places in the circle, next to the orchestra, and invited us to join them.







THE ORCHESTRA IS COMPOSED OF FOUR DRUMMERS AND A CHORUS OF SINGERS, SOME OF WHOM ARE SEEN HERE AND ABOVE PLAYING DRUMS, BEADED CALABASHES, AND A METAL BELL-SHAPED CLACKER.

Sitting in the glow of that lantern, surrounded by the laughter of children and the warm greetings of the old men, I felt suddenly far removed from the toils of African life. The night blended the forest with the earth and sky, isolating the cluster of mud-on-bamboo houses into a friendly concentration of light and sound in which house-keeping, farming, marketing, and latrine-digging seemed to have no place.

A group of boys ranging in age from about eight to fourteen emerged from a nearby house. They wore loose-fitting loincloths and followed an older man who carried a pole of about five feet in length with an angled crook at one end. Making their way into the circle, they grouped themselves at the end opposite the orchestra. The boys' mentor then placed the pole over his shoulder, allowing the trailing end to be grasped by one of the boys, and, thus linked, they danced slowly around the circle, greeting the notables as they passed.

When they reached the orchestra, the dance master silenced the drums and spoke briefly with the musicians, instructing them to begin a new song. Immediately, the drums struck up an intensified rhythm, joined this time by two men shaking beaded calabashes and a chorus of four singers. The boy released the pole and began dancing, cautiously at first but increasing in tempo with the chant. His body moved easily above a pair of feet which furiously beat out a practiced step on the ground. After several minutes in which the boy moved around the circle, exercising a series of jumps and pirouettes, he climaxed his performance with a great leap in front of the musicians, and, as one, the whole ensemble stopped amid the hearty cheers of the spectators.

Another boy was then led to the top of the circle where, another chant having been signalled, he demonstrated his own virtuosity at the dance. Likewise, each of the

boys performed his interpretation and was applauded according to his demonstrated skill. After each of the boys had danced, the best were called back for encores, responding enthusiastically, singly or in pairs, for their delighted parents.

My own enthusiasm did not go unnoticed, and as the dances became more informal and improvised, I was asked by the boys' leader if I would not like to join them. My reservations were overcome by assurances that it was perfectly proper for an uninitiate like myself to learn with the boys and that, in fact, I would honor (and humor) them by trying. I accepted and was escorted to the fitting house by a group of older men who saw to it that I was properly attired in a loincloth and who applied a medicinal substance to my ankles and feet, "to guide them." Clutching the pole's crook, I then followed the dance master back to the circle, imitating as nearly as I could his step and motions.

A chant was called, and I danced before a cheering, laughing crowd, feeling only the driving rhythm of the music and the hard ground beneath my feet. My efforts were roundly applauded, but when I awoke the next day the blisters on my feet and the painful stiffness in my legs told me how much I had yet to learn. Indeed, my innocent view of the dance as an exotic form of social amusement was severely modified in the following months, for I discovered underneath the patina of gaiety and excitement an activity which is undertaken only in great seriousness.

The Bété live in an area of the world which is characterized by poor soil and a debilitating climate. Industrial development is only beginning, and disease and an inhospitable tropical forest still flourish largely unchecked. Consequently, the primary concern of the Bété is one of simple survival, and all organized activity must be geared to seeking an accommodation with the elements of an essentially hostile environment.

Much like the members of industrialized western societies, who exhibit a healthy concern over both their material and psychological insecurities, the Bété must cope with the difficulties posed by both their natural and supra-natural environments. The elements of nature are subdued and turned to the use of the Bété through hunting and agriculture, and likewise, the forces of the supra-natural are brought under control by the social and religious activities of the community. Among the Bété, the traditional focus and primary instrument of these socio-religious activities is the dance mask.

In the region around Daloa, Bété masks are generally classified into three functional categories. At the head is the extraordinarily impressive Great Mask, which is rarely used today. It is the repository of the accumulated spiritual forces of the village, protecting the community in times of trouble and serving as an intermediary between earth and *Kuduo*, the City of the Dead. No village will possess more than one of these formidable objects, and many have none at all. Where it can still be found, it is closely guarded and its use is carefully controlled by an old woman of the



IN THE COURSE OF HIS DANCE, THE MASK WILL PAUSE TO GREET THE NOTABLES OF THE VILLAGE. ONE OF WHOM IS SEEN SEATED UPON THE TRADITIONAL LOW, ROUND-BACKED STOOL.



BÉTÉ MASKS ARE OFTEN CALLED UPON TO OFFICIATE AT THE FUNERALS OF IMPORTANT MEN. AFTER THE INTERMENT THE MASK WILL ENCOURAGE THE WIDOWS TO PUBLICLY OVERCOME THEIR GRIEF BY DANCING WITH IT BEFORE THE ASSEMBLED VILLAGERS.

village, without whose authority it may not be disturbed.

The middle category of masks is the one usually employed by the village dancers, appearing at local festivals and fulfilling most of the functions assigned to Bété masks. Its disposition and use is less rigidly controlled, and in many villages a number of these masks may be found consecrated for concurrent use. Unlike the Great Mask, these "middle" masks are not limited to a rigidly prescribed form, thus accounting for a great deal of diversity within the group.

The third category, that of the "small" masks, is produced rather routinely and is used by the young boys for practice while they are still in training.

Participation in the activities of a village dance group is normally limited to male members of single extended family. Training for adult membership in the performing group begins at an early age and continues through adolescence, although there appear to be no rigidly defined age groupings, and initiation ceremonies are relatively informal. Nonetheless, the young trainees must study their individual roles for many years and demonstrate considerable mastery of the drum, dance, or song before they can be graduated to full membership in the group.

This pattern, however, may vary widely from region to region, and indeed, it is nearly impossible to define a norm for the entire tribe.<sup>1</sup> On one hand, Bété artistic traditions are broadly unified and connected with those of the entire region, while on the other they reflect much local diversity even between neighboring villages.

Vandenhouste and others have treated Bété art as part of the so-called Guéré-Wobé mode of the Dan-Guéré (Dan-N'gere) style complex, and the stylistic inter-relationship

of Bété, Guéré, and Wobé masks is unquestionable. Indeed, Bété masks perform many of the functions documented for their Guéré counterparts: cleansing the village of alien forces; officiating at funerals; levying social criticism; greeting dignitaries; and, historically at least, presiding over important trials, preparing the men for the hunt, and leading the people to war.

However, in marked contrast with the masks of most peoples in the Dan-Guéré style complex, Bété masks do not function in the context of a secret tribal society of the *poro* type. Like the Dan (Yacouba) themselves, for whom Himmelheber categorically denies the existence of such secret associations, the Bété exhibit but muted traces, at best, of the supra-tribal *poro* cults which have been documented as dominating political and ritual life in the forests to the west.

While Bété religious and artistic traditions are closely, if imperfectly, allied with those of their Kru neighbors, they also reflect a strong influence from the Mande and Akan peoples who border the Bété on the north and east. Those few masterpieces of Bété figure sculpture which have been documented by Holas demonstrate a much closer affinity with Guro and Baulé figures than with those of the Guéré and Dan; and Paulme has described Bété divination in the region around Daloa as relying heavily on the Baulé pantheon. Old Bété songs are accompanied by Akan-styled drumming, and masks derived from the Guéré model are freely embellished with Senufo bells and cloths.

In a broad sense, then, Bété art bridges the gap between the supra-tribal secret societies of Liberia and the Akan kingship traditions emanating from Ghana. It is developed and formalized, however, at the local level, in an atmos-



phere characterized by a strong creative individualism. Working within the boundaries established by cultural conventions governing dealings with the supernatural, and by norms of good taste, Bété carvers, musicians, and dancers are encouraged to improvise and experiment with their media. A carver of superior skill will often be commissioned to prepare masks for nearby villages, and it is not uncommon for the best dancemask ensemble in a given area to travel twenty-five miles to preside over the last rites of an important chief.

Growing European influences have resulted in the degeneration of much of the artistic production of the Bété, but in many individual villages much time is still devoted to the maintenance of a highly developed masking tradition. One such village has specialized in training sacrificial white chickens to perch quietly atop a mask throughout a violent dance. Another village in which a tradition of accomplished artists runs deep is Zahia.

**M**y initial success in adapting to the elementary steps of Bété dance led the leaders of the Zahia dance group to suggest that I continue my initiation in the hope that I might eventually be able to dance with a mask. To this end it was necessary that a new middle category mask of the type designed for festivals be created and specially consecrated to my use in the village. A piece of wood was selected and, in the course of several weeks, cut, dried, and worked into shape. After the mask had been painted and decorated with fur and a straw beard, a headdress was constructed. A cap of reeds was woven to which was attached a colorful crown of toucan feathers, the whole secured by a band of blue cloth, red thread, white shells, and a bit of fur. The mask and headdress were ready long before I was, and they went through a six-month period of regular use in the village before I could wear them.

The day selected for my masked dance was a Sunday, fully a year after my first taste of Bété dancing. While performances of young trainees, such as that described above, might take place at night, the presentation of the mask itself is a day-long affair during which all other major activities are suspended. I arrived at Zahia at the appointed hour accompanied by two American friends who were required to dance with me. The mask embodies powerful forces which, when misused, can turn against the masquerader, and for this reason the dancer must be escorted through his paces by his closest relatives, men he can trust to protect him from ill-wishers in the crowd and from the invisible forces with which he is in contact.

The morning was spent in preparation for the moment when it would be deemed most auspicious to begin the dance. In the fitting house members of the dance group prepared the medicines and accessories to be used in conjunction with the performance, while the musicians stood guard outside, whittling new drumsticks and tightening the heads of their tom-toms. The mask's raffia skirt, a woven affair about three feet wide and measuring over thirty feet in length, was detached from under the protecting eaves of the house, and two of the dancers rolled it into a thick cylindrical tube with a central opening the size of a man's torso. It was then bound at the top by a cord of palm material, and two narrow cloth shoulder straps were inserted under the binding and adjusted to the proper length.

Inside the house the mask itself was brought out and its assembly was begun. A woven, blue and white cloth was carefully stitched around the entire posterior edge of the mask, forming a hood which would completely cover the head, shoulders, and upper arms of the wearer. When this phase of the operation was completed, the musicians took their leave, adjourning to the open area by the road where they began warming up, calling with their drums



A RAFFIA SKIRT, MEASURING AS LONG AS THIRTY FEET WHEN UNROLLED, IS WORN BY THE MASKED DANCER.



THE POSTERIOR EDGES OF THE MASK ARE PERFORATED WITH SMALL HOLES FOR THE ATTACHMENT OF THE CLOTH HOOD.



THE HOOD IS SEWN TO THE BACK OF THE MASK WITH A THREAD MADE FROM THE VEINS OF PALM LEAVES.



A GROUP OF ACRBATIC DANCERS, CARRYING THE CEREMONIAL PROPS OF THE MASK, ASSIST THE MASKED DANCER AND HELP PROTECT HIM FROM ALIEN FORCES.

those who might have wandered out of the village and entertaining the early arrivals. In the house, the dancers and their assistants gathered for the final ritual dressing of the mask.

The mask, part man, part ethereal being, must be able to dance for hours under the tropical sun, and consequently, a series of dancers must enter into the mask, providing what locomotive power they can. While within the mask, a man who has taken the proper precautions will be safe from the forces of the world which he has entered, but once divested of his powers-in-mask the dancer is no longer protected, and for this reason the identity of each man who wears the mask must be completely hidden from all but the initiated. Thus, while the musicians distract the attention of the spirit world, the dancer is dressed in the security of a closed house, completely surrounded by his male friends (women, it is said, can't hold their tongues), and these elaborate precautions are repeated every time a new dancer dons the costume.

The ritual preparations of the mask need not concern us here; and indeed it would be presumptuous of me to attempt a discussion of them, for my understanding is incomplete, and the confidences entrusted with me are safe.

After the first dancer had been designated and ritually prepared for the costuming, his dancing assistants left the house to join the orchestra, fitted out in short grass skirts, their faces painted in comical or grotesque patterns, and carrying with them wooden swords, cowtail flywhisks, and other props associated with the mask's power. The

first masked dancer then slipped on a pair of high stockings from which the feet had been removed and secured them about his ankles with a pair of straw rattles. He next donned a loose shirt fitted with oversized sleeves which were stitched shut beyond the hands to insure that no part of his body would be exposed. The huge raffia skirt was turned over in the middle of the floor, and the dancer leaned into it, arms outstretched, lifting it over his head and allowing it to slip down under his armpits, where it was held by the two straps over his shoulders. He then sat crosslegged on the floor, and the headpiece itself was put in place.

Griaule has documented the ritual significance of the mysterious iron hooks found embedded in the foreheads of Dogon masks, and it would seem plausible that similarly placed devices on the masks of other peoples would have served like purposes. However, in the case of the Bété these hooks serve, as far as can be determined, only a utilitarian function. After the mask and its attached hood have been placed over the head of the dancer, the head-dress is placed over the mask's top hook and tied to the mask by means of a cloth strap which extends from either side of the cap to another hook under the jaw of the mask. The mask ensemble is thus secured in such a way that it can be slid up and back on top of the head, allowing the dancer a breath of fresh air while avoiding the complete removal of the mask.

When the first dancer had been fitted with the mask, he stood and was inspected. After a few minor adjustments of the costume, he was given a ceremonial flywhisk and led off to join the others. I awaited my turn in the house,

and in about twenty minutes the first masker returned and disrobed, indicating that my turn had come.

With the help of my two American friends, I slipped on the shirt, now sopping wet from the exertions of my predecessor. I had not anticipated the thirty-pound weight of the raffia skirt and was surprised when the two straps, now wound into hard cords, bit into my shoulders. In place of the more traditional stockings, a warm mixture of black mud and medicine was smeared onto the exposed portions of my legs, from the knees down. The mask itself was far from comfortable, pressing its horizontal edges into my chin and forehead, and the hard, rough rim of the headdress dug into my scalp as it was secured.

Once inside the mask, I realized how far removed I was from the reassuring landmarks I know were about me. Bête masks are characterized by gross, tubular eyes which seem, to the outside observer, to protrude from some indefinable plane in the depth of the head. They are deceptive, though, for the only real holes in the face of the mask are either groups of tiny pinpricks or a pair of somewhat larger apertures which are only slightly correlated with the position of the wearer's own eyes. While this aspect of the mask was clearly designed to help protect my anonymity, I was disturbed to note that I could catch only glimpses of light through the holes, and these with only one eye at a time and off to a sharp angle from the direction in which I was facing.

I was reassured, however, by an increased aural sensitivity which wrapped around me the comforting sounds of my friends as they busied themselves with the final arrangement of my exterior, and I soon found myself adjusting adequately to a world of darkness. As my

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THE HOOKS PLACED ON TOP OF MANY BÊTE MASKS SERVE AS A POINT OF ATTACHMENT FOR THE HEADDRESS.



THE COLORFUL HEADDRESS IS PLACED ON TOP OF THE HEAD, OVER THE HOOD, AND HOOKED TO THE TOP OF THE MASK.



THE HEAD ENSEMBLE IS SECURED BY CLOTH STRIPS WHICH PASS FROM THE SIDES OF THE HEADDRESS UNDER THE LOWER JAW OF THE MASK.



# Bété Masked Dance

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physical sensitivity to light dropped from my consciousness, a new, almost psychedelic sensitivity occupied the visual centers of my brain, associated somehow with the hot and heavy atmosphere that was building up around my encased head. I was glad to be permitted to stand and stretch for the last inspection before venturing out to face the music.

My white "brothers," dressed only in skirts and protective armbands, proceeded directly to the circle of villagers where they caused a great commotion, allowing me to slip unnoticed out of the house and into the village, away from the crowd. The bright light outdoors sent a shower of sparkles into my dark world, but I was soon able to maneuver the mask into a position whereby I could get a general, albeit monocular impression of the terrain immediately in front of my feet.

I was led, at the end of the crooked pole, over a circuitous route through the village, while along the road my brothers were spreading false alarms about the direction of my imminent arrival. As I adjusted to my new body, confidence returned, and I gave way completely to my role. Sensing that I had overcome my last bit of reluctance, my leader, with a few parting words of advice, set me free.

I became a free-floating spirit, bold as the lion, ephemeral as a will-o'-wisp. Appearing to the crowd from around an unexpected corner, I menaced, then vanished into the maze of houses only to reappear somewhere down the line. If a group of children left the crowd to approach me, I could disperse them with a rustle of my skirt, a shake of the head, and a sudden lunge in their direction.

Selecting a narrow alleyway between two of the houses backing the circle, I made my final approach, moving quickly forward, pausing to catch the rhythm of the

drums, then advancing again. My dancing assistants cleared a path through the crowd, and with a last rush we burst through to the center.

My dance can have lasted no more than five minutes, but it seemed much longer, hours in which I lived as a whirling dervish, driven by the drums and the electric excitement generated by the crowd. For those few moments I felt as if I could master any task, ignore any burden. I was unfettered by the concerns of the natural world, and I felt myself in nervous harmony with the spiritual regions of my unconscious.

At the end I nearly collapsed, dragged down to earth by the oppressive weight of the skirt, suffocating in the sheath about my head, so exhausted physically that I could barely stand. My friends helped me back to the fitting house where, discarding my costume, I resumed my accustomed form.

It is no accident that dancing the mask is a technically exacting and arduous affair, requiring a long and difficult period of training before it can be attempted. The social function of the mask is so important that the preservation of the tradition may be entrusted only to those who, in the process of developing their abilities, have demonstrated that they will respond seriously and effectively. For the Bété mask is neither an amusing toy nor the product of superstitious mumbo jumbo. It is, rather, the focus of an organized effort by the community to preserve its sound mental health, providing the Bété with a momentary reprieve from the hardships imposed by their physical environment, and serving to unify and concretize social values. Through the mask and its dancer, who embodies the collective spirit of the village, the Bété succeed in maintaining a faith in their ability to survive and master the hostile forces which surround them. ■

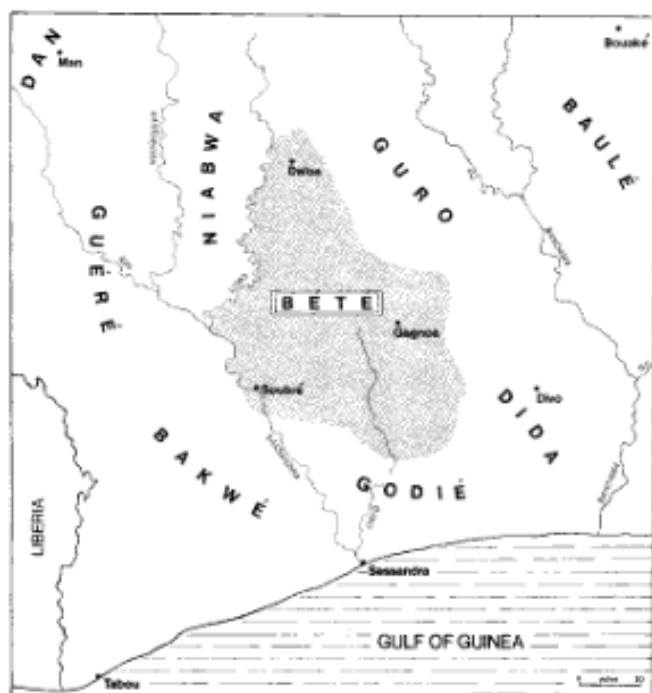
Despite their local isolation and the difficulty of travel imposed by the forest, the Bété, who number somewhat more than 200,000, claim for themselves a unique tribal identity based upon a common language and heritage. But it is difficult to relate this notion of a unified tribe to a characteristic political, sociological, religious, or artistic tradition which both unites the Bété as a group and distinguishes them significantly from their Guinea Coast neighbors.

Linguistically, the Bété are divided into three subgroups, each of which exhibits a characteristic dialect associated with one of the major towns. On a broader level, however, the Bété are linked intimately with the Niabwa, Guéré (N'Gere), Bakwé, Godié, and Dida, their neighbors to the west and south. Delafosse describes the languages of these peoples as Kru dialects, and Greenberg has classified all of them under the names "Bété" and "Bakwé."

While the Bété have been grouped together both tribally and regionally for purposes of administrative convenience, the largest effective political unit in the traditional sphere was a relatively small collection of villages which were bound together by a common ancestry and a single local chief. Even today the villages around Daloa are grouped into a number of minor, geneologically related tribes with which the Ivorian government must deal individually.

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PEOPLES OF THE SOUTHWEST IVORY COAST