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978-0-521-18087-0 - The Wild Bull and the Sacred Forest: Form, Meaning, and Change in Senegambian Initiation Masks

Peter Mark

Excerpt

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: Method and Subject

Among the peoples of the northern Upper Guinea Coast, from Guinea-Bissau through the Casamance in southern Senegal to the lower Gambia, a distinctive masquerade marks the men's initiation ceremonies. Young men among the Jola and Bainunk peoples¹ of the Casamance and the Balanta people of Guinea-Bissau dance at the end of their *rites de passage*, wearing masks made of woven fiber and crowned by cattle horns. Similar horned masks made of fiber were formerly also worn by the Mandinka people² of the Gambia; the neighboring Bijogo people, to the south, wear carved wooden headdresses that are also topped by horns.

These masks have never been studied in depth; they are, however, important cultural documents. Art historically, the fiber masks are significant, for they represent the northern limit of West Atlantic masking traditions. These works are also important because for two centuries the region where they are found has been a zone of interaction between Muslim traders and warriors and non-Muslim local populations. During the last century, Islam has spread through the northern half of this region as far south as the Casamance River. The recent history of the Gambia-Casamance region offers a case study of the interaction of Islam and local religion, as well as an illustration of the influence of Islam on local masking traditions.

The peoples who inhabit the coastal region from the Gambia south to the Cacheu River in Guinea-Bissau have a variety of social organizations, ranging from the stateless and decentralized Jola groups to the Mandinka, western outriders of the great Mande civilization, with its centralized states and stratified social structure. For centuries, however, these groups have had extensive contact with one another. This contact has led to the sharing of social institutions. Although the horned masks and their associated symbolism are not the only cultural traits that link these groups, the use of common imagery in initiation ritual graphically illustrates the strength of the cultural ties between Mandinka, Jola, Bagnun (Bainunk), and Balanta.

The sources for a cultural and artistic history of the northern Upper Guinea Coast are rich and varied. Much of the region was in contact with Portuguese and Luso-African traders as early as the sixteenth century and, by the late

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seventeenth century, French and English merchants also frequented the coast. Some of these travelers left written accounts that, along with early-nineteenth-century records of French and British traders and government officials, provide important information about precolonial society in southern Senegambia.

As early as the 1850s, several horned masks entered European collections. These and later pieces are preserved in museums in Europe and the United States. Together, the masks and the written sources provide documentation that, along with oral narratives preserved in the Casamance, facilitates the study of the horned masks and their ritual significance, with a chronological depth that is extraordinary for so ephemeral an art form.

Several fundamental questions arise in the course of this historical study. First and foremost, why horns? Animal horns – usually cattle horns – have played an important role in initiation rituals among both the Mandinka and the ancestors of the Jola since the seventeenth century. Cattle horns are also ritually important to the Balanta, the Manjak, the Bagnun, and the Bijogo peoples. What is the significance of cattle in local societies that causes the animals to figure so prominently in men's initiation rituals throughout the region?

The imagery of crucial ritual symbols is not arbitrarily selected. A culture's central metaphors reflect fundamental concepts and social practices in that society. To understand ritual symbols in the fullness and complexity of their meaning is to know the culture. So it is with the social and ritual significance of cattle in Senegambian cultures. Ultimately, the horned masks appear almost as a metaphor for Casamance society itself. The dominant cattle symbolism refers to seminal spiritual concepts that involve ideas about sacrifice and about relationships with the invisible world. The bovine motif also reflects the pivotal social and economic roles that cattle have long played in the Casamance. The masks and their symbolism can serve as a lens through which Casamance society and its cultural norms are ever more clearly defined.

The chronological depth that can be achieved in the study of these fiber masks occasions additional questions: How has stylistic change occurred in the masks and in associated rituals? By what process or processes were new materials from Muslim or even European cultures incorporated into the masks? How were these new elements assimilated into the existing vocabulary of symbolic forms? Did the frequent interaction among the different local cultures affect the masks and the initiation ritual itself? Finally, in view of the extensive interaction among these peoples, what role do initiation and initiation masks play in the definition and redefinition of cultural identity?

The study of African artistic expression is necessarily interdisciplinary. African cultures simply do not lend themselves to analysis by the discrete categories of Western academic discourse. To impose an intellectual framework that derives from academic disciplines would be to present a distorted and at best fragmentary view of African culture and art. In order to study the masking traditions of the Gambia–Cacheu region, it is necessary to study the history,

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the social and economic institutions, the religion, and, indeed, the culture of the region as that culture has changed over time.

A particular challenge, then, for a study such as this is presented by the need to integrate several disciplines and the methods peculiar to each of them. For although this monograph is conceived primarily as art history, it is above all an interdisciplinary study. An interdisciplinary approach to Senegambian culture affords the most detailed view of local cultures, while also permitting a more comprehensive perspective on the horned masks than could be achieved with a more narrowly conceived art historical approach.

To the Jola people, the horned masks would have no reason for existing independently of the men's initiation. The masks' ritual significance and symbolic meaning derive from the initiation (*bukut*) and from the broader cultural context in which the initiation is situated. Therefore, the present study begins with extended descriptions of Casamance society and, more precisely, of the *bukut* initiation. This organization results in a shift of methodological focus, following the introductory chapters, away from cultural anthropology to art history. Once the discussion focuses on the horned masquerade, the reader will have the advantage of reasonable familiarity with the cultural and ritual context in which the masks appear.

The Jola themselves would assert that the horned masks constitute a relatively minor part of the initiation. To the outside observer, however, the masks afford access to local culture. In other words the masks, together with their ritual function and symbolism, provide a cognitive key to Casamance culture and thought.

This study not only follows a range of methodological approaches, it also draws on a wide variety of sources. These sources include oral history, archival records, published narratives, photographs, actual initiation ceremonies, and, of course, the horned masks themselves. During seven visits to the Gambia–Casamance–Bissau region, ranging in duration from a month to a year, much time was devoted to the collection of oral history. Oral history, among Casamance peoples, generally consists of informal narratives that are passed down within extended families or among village elders. Only the Mandinka have *griots*, or professional historian/praise singers, who recount formal or codified oral traditions.

The informal oral narratives provide a Casamance perspective on local history. Among the Jola, such narratives provide considerable historical detail for the period since the mid-nineteenth century and offer an outline of significant events, such as migrations, as far back as the seventeenth century. Where events described in oral narratives also figure in nineteenth-century archival records, there is frequently a significant correlation; the written and oral sources, then, offer mutual corroboration.

Bukut initiation figures prominently in Jola narratives. It is possible, on the basis of these accounts, to trace the spread of the initiation and to describe the major ritual changes that the ceremony has undergone during the past 150

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years. Among the northern Jola – those living between the Casamance River and the Gambia – horned masks play a significant role in the initiation, and oral narratives about the *bukut* provide a general chronology for the appearance of the masks.

Oral narratives are also a source of information about the metaphors and ritual symbols that have long been associated with the initiation. As an integral part of the ceremonies, the masks share this language of ritual symbolism. The oral history of *bukut*, therefore, serves as a key for interpreting the symbolism of the initiation masks.

Oral history, with its local perspective, serves to counterbalance the Eurocentric bias that characterizes colonial and postcolonial written accounts of West African society. The oldest written records consist of European travelers' narratives from the fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries. The early writers are all concerned primarily with commerce. Their writings tend, therefore, to provide detailed information about the local economies and some useful information about political organization, but relatively little material on local religion and culture. References to local ritual, including masquerades, are rare and are generally tinged with disparaging attitudes toward African religion and ritual.

A few of the travel narratives were published with illustrations. Pre-nineteenth-century sources include only one representation of a horned mask. It is not certain that this illustration (Figure 1), in Froger's 1698 account, was drawn from life, although the form suggests that it was. By contrast, after the mid-nineteenth century, images of Casamance masks are more common and tend to be highly accurate.

The earliest detailed ethnographic descriptions of cultures from the Casamance and Guinea-Bissau date from the mid-nineteenth century. The accounts of Bertrand-Bocandé (1849) and, later, Lasnet (1900) give highly detailed information on local rituals. Interpreted cautiously, these sources provide information that complements oral sources of cultural history. Important ethnographic information is also found in the official correspondence of local colonial administrators, whose reports and letters are often interspersed with accounts of local customs, as well as descriptions of clothing and bodily adornment. These unpublished records are preserved in the colonial archives in Dakar and Banjul.

Archival sources also include photographic records of Casamance and Bissau cultures. The earliest photographs of the Casamance were taken by a French expedition under the command of Brosselard-Faidherbe in 1889–90. Although no rituals are portrayed, some of these glass plate photos record local architecture, and others show close-ups of individuals, their jewelry, and their headdresses. With the development of lighter and more portable photographic equipment at the beginning of the present century, it became possible to record rituals. Field photos from the first three decades of the century provide crucial documentation of initiations and horned masquerades among the Jola, Balanta, and Bijogo.

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Figure 1. Gambian initiation mask, late seventeenth century (Froger 1698).

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Early photographs are especially useful because they often provide the only documentation of the precise way in which initiation masks were worn and danced two or more generations ago. Furthermore, these images, together with the photographic record published by Bernatzik in the 1930s,³ are sometimes the only evidence that makes it possible to associate particular masking styles with specific peoples or geographic regions.

Oral history, published and unpublished written records, engravings of Senegambian life, and historical photographs of local rituals all provide invaluable information about society, culture, and masquerades. However, the horned masks themselves are, of course, of fundamental importance for a study of the objects, their form, and their symbolism.

The Corpus of Casamance Horned Masks

The horned headdresses of the Casamance include both horned caps called *usikoi*, which do not cover the face of the wearer (Figure 2), and horned masks that cover the entire head and incorporate a representation of the face. The masks are of two types: *ejumba* and *kebul*. This study focuses primarily on the masks.

Although they are made of perishable materials, a surprising number of horned masks from the Casamance and the Lower Gambia have been preserved in museums and in private collections. This study is based on a total of forty-four different pieces. Of these objects, two are known only through photographs that were made of collections that have since been dispersed. Two other pieces, photographed and published at the end of the nineteenth century, were destroyed during World War II. Three masks were documented in Senegal, in the northern Casamance; at least one of these has since fallen prey to termites and humidity.

It is ironic but hardly surprising that these important artifacts of Senegambian material culture have a much longer life expectancy in foreign museums than in their communities of origin. Several of the pieces preserved in European and American collections are quite old. The presence in France of one mask has been firmly dated to the eighteenth century. Twelve other works have been dated to the nineteenth century. In each instance, the date has been reliably established by museum acquisition records. Among the remaining pieces, five have been assigned to the late nineteenth or early twentieth century on the basis of museum records corroborated by stylistic similarities to other firmly dated masks.

Significantly, then, nearly half of the existing Casamance and Gambian horned masks are from the period before World War I. Furthermore, all but one of the eighteen oldest masks belong to the same stylistic group: the *ejumba* masks. Thus it is possible not only to establish the historical continuity of this type of horned mask over nearly 150 years, but also to distinguish, at an early date, subtle stylistic variations among different *ejumba* masks.

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Figure 2. *Usikoi* from Badiana, 1989.

The forty-three known horned masks fall into two clearly differentiated stylistic groups. Within each of the two styles, however, there is a remarkable consistency of form. By far the larger group, thirty-seven works, consists of the cylindrical helmet masks (Figure 3) that are called *ejumba* by the northern Jola inhabitants of Thionk-Essyl, the largest community in the northwestern Casamance. *Ejumba* is the term used for these masks in the present study. The remaining pieces constitute a horizontal variant, which often has a generally trapezoidal profile, known to the northern Jola as *kebul*.

The Ejumba Style

The *ejumba* masks are woven out of thin strips of palm frond, cut lengthwise with a knife to about $\frac{1}{4}$ inch width. The woven fiber forms a core, much like a tall, inverted basket. Placed over the head, this helmet reaches to the shoul-

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ders. The cylindrical core, rising to a rounded or slightly peaked cone, gives the *ejumba* its distinctive form (Figure 4).

The *ejumba* is surmounted by a pair of animal horns. These are almost always cattle horns, although three of the nineteenth-century masks are topped by antelope horns. The horns give the masks their impressive half-animal, half-human form. Cattle horns are considered by the Jola to be the defining characteristic of the *ejumba*. It is the horns that connect these masks to the tradition of cattle-horned initiation masks that stretches from the Gambia south through the Bissagos Islands. In the Casamance, the horns are fundamental to the masks' ritual function and to their symbolic meaning.

The "face" of the *ejumba* is dominated by a pair of projecting tubular eyes. The dancer could look out through these hollow cylinders, made of woven palm fiber. In several of the older masks, the eye tubes are wrapped with thin strips of cattle skin. The placement of the eyes shows significant variation, with striking results for the appearance of the face. Generally, the tubes are located at the mid-point on the vertical axis of the mask. This placement imparts both vertical and horizontal symmetry to the composition. On a few pieces, however, the eyes are placed below the midline; this location serves to enlarge and emphasize the forehead. There also exists a single example that has two pairs of eyes, one located directly above the other.

The crown of the head has a conical shape and, in several masks, this form is mirrored by a downward-pointing, triangular chin. The chin is essentially a triangular extension of the basketry core, and it may be either rounded or pointed at the apex. Viewed from the front, the masks with a pointed chin create a visual tour de force in which the face appears to be framed by two counterposed triangles (see Figure 3).

With only a few exceptions, the *ejumba* are divided vertically by a central ridge that runs from the chin to the top of the head and down to the nape of the neck. This central ridge divides the mask into symmetrical halves, and it is usually covered by a raffia fringe. The symmetry calls attention to and amplifies the geometric balance that characterizes both the basketry core of the *ejumba* and the extensive surface decoration.

Several of the masks have lost their fringe. In four pieces, the median ridge is covered not by a fringe, but by a line of small packets, each composed of two strips of palm leaves interfolded at right angles. These packets call to mind gris-gris, or medicinal charms of both indigenous and Islamic manufacture.

A second and much longer fringe hangs from the bottom edge of the *ejumba*. This fringe, which hides the identity of the dancer who wears the mask, may be as much as two or three feet long. The long fibers are made from tree bark that is soaked for several days in salt water to make it supple and flexible. In a few of the smallest masks, which may have been worn by children, the bark is replaced by a short fringe of dried grass.

The woven frame of the *ejumba*, along with the horns and the eye tubes, are the elements that are common to all of the masks. The medium limits the

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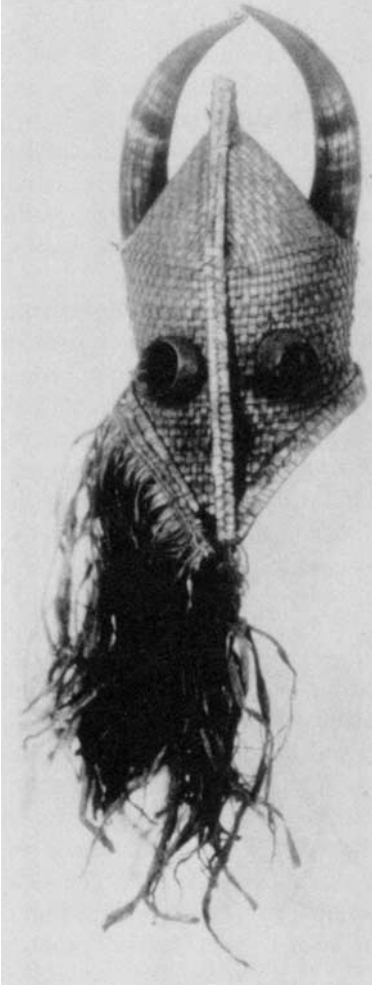


Figure 3 (left). *Ejumba* mask acquired before 1879 by the Museum für Völkerkunde, Vienna.



Figure 4 (right). *Ejumba* mask in the collection of the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, Leiden (the Netherlands), 1886.

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formal possibilities available to the individuals who weave the masks. Indeed, the greatest latitude for variation exists in the decoration of the basketry core. Most, and originally perhaps all, of the *ejumba* were abundantly embellished with various combinations of red and black *Abrus* seeds, white cowries and other kinds of shells, strips of palm leaf cut into diagonal or serrated patterns, and numerous other materials of local and foreign manufacture. This adornment was attached to the basketry by means of a thin layer of organic material that informants identified as a variety of latex. Like the woven core of the mask, these decorative materials were all arranged with an eye to maintaining bilateral symmetry.

The substances that covered the horned masks were not simply adornment, and they were not selected haphazardly. Rather, the materials were chosen for their symbolic meaning or because they were seen as the embodiment of power or wealth. The decoration of the *ejumba* is pregnant with metaphorical references that were intended for both the individual initiates and the community at large. These metaphors, of course, can be interpreted only within the context of Casamance history and of local values and concepts. To understand the symbolism of the masks is, in a sense, to understand the initiation ritual and the culture to which both masks and initiation belong.

The Kebul Style

Seven of the forty-three masks form a second group, a style sufficiently distinct that it cannot be considered a variant of the *ejumba*. These masks are found in the northwestern Casamance (Fogny) and in adjacent southwestern Gambia. That these masks do indeed constitute a separate type is confirmed by the fact that the Jola of Fogny have a separate name for them: *kebul* (pl. *ubul*).⁴

The *ubul* masks are trapezoidal or wedge-shaped (Figures 5, 6). While the *ejumba* are primarily vertical in form, the *ubul* are more horizontal. The long side is formed by the base of the mask, corresponding to the chin and neckline. The shorter side is formed by the crown of the head, which is either pointed or forms a short, flat line parallel to the base. The face has the form of a long diagonal line that descends unbroken from the forehead, to intersect the base at the prominent, forward-jutting chin. Unlike the *ejumba*, the *kebul* does not have protuberant eyes. The dancers look through holes that are cut into the fiber. The downward-slanting wedge of the face is counterbalanced by the upward swoop of the cattle horns that are affixed to either side, near the top of the head.

Compared to the *ejumba*, the *kebul* is woven of much broader strips of fan palm leaves (Fr.: *ronier*), up to an inch wide. Where the tight weave of the *ejumba* follows the vertical axis of the mask, the core of the *kebul* is woven on the bias. That is, the weaving is turned at about a 45° angle to the vertical axis of the mask. Viewed from the side, the core of the *kebul* therefore presents the impression of diamond patterns. These diamonds are joined together in diagonal rows that echo the slanting profile of the face.