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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

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The vibrant culture of the Jola people of Senegal's Casamance region is epitomized by the colorful rituals of the male initiation ceremony, which occurs once in a generation. In *The Wild Bull and the Sacred Forest: Form, Meaning, and Change in Senegambian Initiation Masks*, Dr. Peter Mark makes an in-depth examination of the masks worn by a select few initiates in this ritual, which illuminates Jola culture and its underlying religious and social structures. Based on research gathered from numerous field trips to West Africa and unpublished archival materials, Dr. Mark presents a subtle interpretation of horned masquerades, their complex symbolism, and the metaphysical concepts to which they allude. In tracing the cultural interaction and changing identity of the people of the Casamance, he convincingly demonstrates a new and dynamic approach to the study of art and ethnic identity, which is viewed as a continuous process rather than a fixed entity. Integrating art historical and anthropological methods, *The Wild Bull and the Sacred Forest* provides a detailed and innovative view of a Senegalese culture as it has evolved over two centuries.

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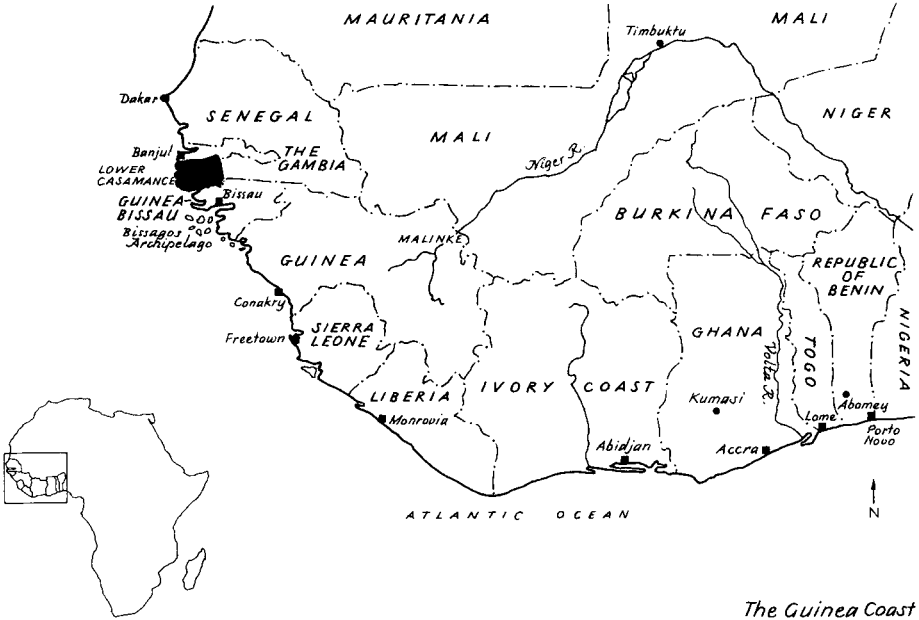
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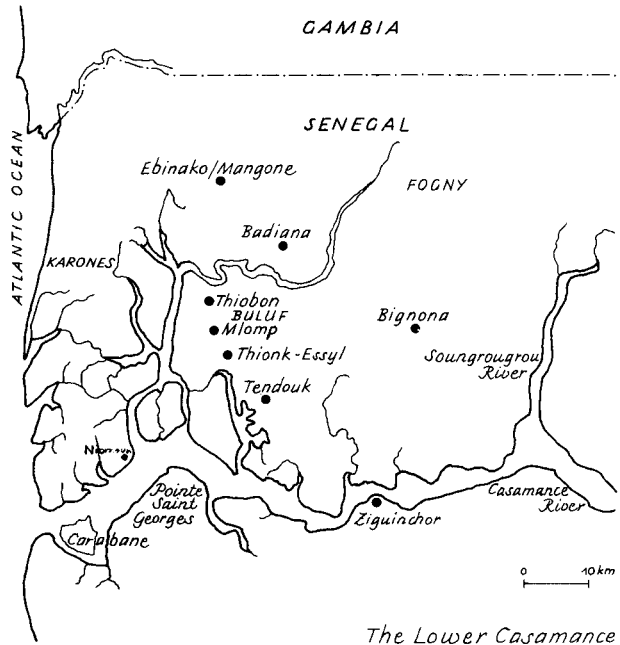
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The Guinea Coast



The Lower Casamance

The Guinea Coast and the Lower Casamance.

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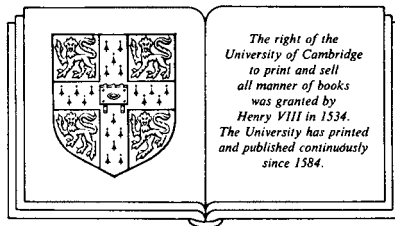
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THE WILD BULL AND THE SACRED FOREST

*Form, Meaning, and Change in
Senegambian Initiation Masks*

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For
Clark Maines

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Foreword

In 1949 I first visited Jola country in the Lower Casamance (Senegal). I found myself irresistably attracted and fascinated by this population of skillful rice farmers, living in beautiful villages in the forests, animated by a keen sense of liberty and of communal ties, and expressing a complex metaphysical system. And so I devoted ten years of my life – and some thousands of pages – to these people. In the course of this research, I met a young anthropologist from the United States, Peter Mark, with whom I quickly became friends and whose remarkable studies I have followed closely. Now I have the pleasure and the honor to write a foreword to this essay on the Jola and their masks, and I am all the more happy to do so because I enjoyed it greatly for the precision of his descriptions, which are always accurate and lively, for the analytical insight, and for the empathy that he evinces for the group he has studied.

To be a Jola is to be initiated in the *bukut* (initiation and rite of passage). It is also to enter into the family; that is to say, it is to possess common ancestors, even if the historical memory of these farmers does not reach very far back in time. After all, do they not say, with a touch of ethnocentrism, that they are “the visible living beings” – which could well be the meaning of the word Jola – as opposed to the “invisible beings,” who are the ancestors? One cannot speak of the Jola except in the plural: On the left bank of the Casamance River, there are the Flup, the Diamat, the Bayot, the Her, and the Dyiwat; on the right bank, the Fogny, the Blis, the Karones, the Kombo, the Narang, and the Kadiamoutay. Each has appreciable sociocultural and linguistic differences, as well as obvious antagonisms. But all of them, conscious of belonging to a common group, know how to close ranks and present a unified front to foreign aggressors. Whence the difficult and moot question: Are the Jola an ethnic group in the process of creation or dissolution? One thing, however, is certain: History demonstrates that this is a changing ethnic group, as Peter Mark shows with great lucidity and talent. Although they do not truly have a cult of the past – as I have demonstrated together with the American ethnolinguist David Sapir – the Jola have not been able to avoid assimilative contacts with the Bainunk (Bagnun), as well as long or sporadic encounters with the Manjak (the source, perhaps, of their veneration for Alinsitoë, the rebel priestess), with

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the Balantes, and, above all, with the Mandinka. The contact with this last group has been especially intense since the arrival of the French: Peter Mark, for example, does not reject the hypothesis of a common Jola–Mandinka ancestral origin. The result has been a syncretism, one not comprised of an accumulation of borrowings, but an original and specific civilization. The Jola “jola-izes” that which he takes from another, even if, in this dialectic, he occasionally loses something of himself – for example, the abandonment of masks in certain regions and the progressive disappearance of indigenous altars (*boekin*). This dynamic, as Peter Mark knows so well, is made clear by both oral literature and archival sources. All the same, our author has chosen to privilege a particular indicator: the masks, including the *ejumba*, associated with the Bagnun, and the *kebul*, in connection with the Mandinka. Here, perhaps, is the crux of this brilliant essay. The mask incorporates bovine horns: The bull in particular symbolizes the initiate (and also death, in the *nyukul* or funeral rites); it also expresses life, strength, and fertility. The mask is frequently ornamented with red seeds because this color evokes both fire and heat – the “king,” or *øeyi*, dresses in red, associated with the fire of the forge – and because red serves to combat the maleficent actions of sorcerers (*kussay*). One *kebul* mask in the Musée de l’Homme, dating from the eighteenth century, was richly decorated with red seeds (of which today only one survives) and was covered with pieces of paper on which were written Arabic letters (verses of the Koran?). This mask, however, was made a century before the conversion of the Jola to the religion of Mohammed. Other masks are decorated with Islamic talismans; in fact, Koranic amulets had been sold among the Jola for a long time. The assimilation of Arabic writing into the decorative program of the masks emphasizes the way in which a civilization of writing has enriched the traditional symbols without effacing them. This illustrates the accuracy of René Bravmann’s observation that “African esthetic sensibility merges everywhere with the literacy and graphic potential of Islam.” Nor is it uncommon today to see Muslims who continue to offer black bulls in sacrifice during the initiation, and then to preserve the skulls, which they decorate in a manner somewhat similar to traditional masks.

In brief, this is a brilliant essay that Peter Mark has given us. Focused on the study of horned initiation masks and on the ritual symbolism of which they remain the focus, the author’s resolutely comparative and diachronic analysis goes beyond the Jola case. This study illustrates, in a magisterial fashion, the process of continuous re-creation that is intrinsic to sub-Saharan cultures. It may serve as a model for understanding the way in which the process of Islamization has occurred, both elsewhere in Africa and in an earlier historical period.

Thank you, Peter Mark, for this most delightful offering and this wonderful research tool.

LOUIS-VINCENT THOMAS

*Professor at the Sorbonne**Doyen honoraire*

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Acknowledgments

This study represents a continuation of long-term research into the culture and history of the Casamance region of southwestern Senegal and the adjacent areas of the Gambia and Guinea-Bissau. The topic has been the focus of my scholarly attention for nearly twenty years; I have published a book and numerous articles on Casamance history, religion, and art. One might say that I have written more about the Jola¹ people than most reasonable people should care to know. Like any extended intellectual project, this prolonged study has enabled me not only to gather new information, but to rethink old material in the light of more recent information. Readers of my earlier book will recognize that, in some places, I have mined old sources to provide background for new historical interpretations. In addition, earlier versions of Chapters 4 and 5 originally appeared in *The Art Bulletin* and *Art Journal*, respectively. I have enlarged and refined the earlier articles, but the central theses remain essentially intact.

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Note

1. I have chosen to adopt the spelling “Jola” rather than “Diola,” which is the French phonetic spelling. “Jóola” is the preferred term among ethnologists, as it conveys the fact that the “o” is both long and tense. However, for those readers who are neither ethnologists nor linguists, “Jóola” might too readily be confused with Juula (Dyula).