

**TRADITIONAL ART, MODERN AFRICAN ART AND  
AFRICAN MASKS:  
AN EXPRESSION OF GLOBAL SEARCH FOR THE ABSOLUTE**

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**Abstract**

*There is an apparent difference in the objective of creating artistic work. Artistic works, in general, are admired for their aesthetic values and their capacity to make human beings think. Gradually, people began to appreciate them because of the historical and lived experiences of people which they communicate. However, the African art called mask is unique in its capacity to elicit in human beings the desire for the Supreme Being. It expresses the spiritual consciousness, tradition and faith of a cultural group. The apparent difference in both forms of art is not only in the objective of producing them but particularly in the process of artistic creation and the lived experiences expressed through art. It is for this reason that I have chosen to examine Traditional art, modern art and African mask: An expression of the Global Search for the Absolute. My effort will consist in analyzing the meaning of the various forms of art mentioned and how they are connected to the spiritual experiences of the human person. I shall examine the impact of the displacement of African masks from their natural environment on the religious life of Africans.*

**Keywords:** African art, African mask, African museum, Modern art, Traditional art

**Introduction**

Art, understood as all the artistic works of a country or an era, is essentially symbolic, that is, representative. It constitutes, in a particular way, mediation between the visible and the invisible. On the one hand, in Europe, art covers the so-called "fine arts" such as sculpture, architecture, graphic arts, music, dance, poetry and literature. We can add moving images (cinema, television), digital art, and live performance (theatre, mime).

On the other hand, in Africa, the mask is a typical object that best symbolizes African art. The African mask or traditional mask is an artistic creation based on a carved wooden object. Given its symbolism, we propose to talk about the African mask based on the thinking of Theodore Mudiji Malamba Gilombe. He particularly highlights the link between the mask and religion. Mudiji shows how certain African masks are associated with initiation ceremonies, birth and death rites. It is in this precise context that African masks reveal themselves as a medium through which man advances towards the divine.

Moreover, while “the modern African’s view of the traditional mask is gradually fading away” (Mudiji, 1983, 25), Mudiji revalues it as a path leading to the Absolute. Through this article, I want to bring out his perception of the vocation of every work of art. My contribution is centred on the capacity of African masks to open the human person to the Absolute. This is a process that engages artists (creators of the masks) and readers (admirers of the masks). Mudiji’s works and religious vocation testify to his mission to open people to God. Do African masks have the capacity to elicit religious experience?

I think that African art and African masks provoke some religious feelings when there is contact with a subject. It is a feeling that develops as an attachment to God, returning to the source of life. The first part of this presentation will be devoted to a review of traditional and modern art through the thought of Mudiji. The second part will consist of an elucidation of African masks. The importance of the environment concerning African masks will be indicated. The third part will finally take into account the production of African masks. The meaning of rituals in the production of African masks will be explored.

## **Review of Traditional and modern art in T. Mudiji**

### **Traditional African art**

Traditional African art is often referred to as primitive art during the 19th and 20th centuries. During this period, the word “primitive” projected a pejorative idea like being underdeveloped and poor, non-Western and pre-historic (Myers, 2005, 268). Contrary to the negative connotation of this term, I propose the true sense of the Latin *primitivus* (Senghor, 1967, 7). That is to say, being the first, the oldest, and it is connected to nature. Traditional African art is also the favoured place where emotion and religious feelings are poured out, the desire to be with the gods or God. Sometimes it is called negro art, “exotic”, “magical”, and “ethnological” (Bonte, 1991, 81), in the sense that it is

created by black people without aesthetic concerns. Traditional art is also called tribal art because almost every social group has its art. Contrary to this way of perceiving traditional art, I believe that the beauty of Negro art should be sought in the experience and faith of black people.

Traditional art is sacred in that it is meant to support religious beliefs and practices (Mudiji, 2002, 55). There are different types of traditional African art and different creators of traditional art with one motive: to draw the human spirit step by step to the contemplation of God. Often, African traditional art is a visible response to the search for an eternal Being with power over man. It is the visible presence of divinity among men and testifies to a heightened sense of man's transcendence towards God. The religious process that accompanies the making of traditional art makes it sacred; the creator is often an artist-magician, and its use in worship gives it its sacred character. Traditional art could also be accepted as a visible symbol of fertility, protection, progress and success. This conviction is based on the fact that Traditional African Religions are strongly linked to African art.

It is important to note that while those who are not initiated perceive traditional arts as mere objects, those who possess obscure knowledge related to the objects of art are conscious of the fact that they are not ordinary objects without meaning. Traditional art has the merit of being neither plaything nor purely aesthetic: but of the signifier (Senghor, 1967, 8). In other words, traditional African art reveals that statues are signs of Ancestors and genius. Certain sculpted figures indicate fertility, invisible forces, divinity and life. Although the statuettes are material objects, it "consists here in positioning the spiritual quest in inverse relation to the material monumentality" (Mudiji, 2004, 131). The observer of a work of art must look beyond the materiality; he must investigate beyond the form that appears to grasp the meaning and value represented. Traditional African art opens man to consider carefully realities not signified by a work of art. This application of the spirit exerts a force on man, plunging him into a supernatural world while remaining motionless.

### **Spiritual Setbacks and their causes**

Traditional African art and masks have experienced historical crises. That is to say, attacks and events that have mainly affected the faith of black people and the meaning and significance of religious practice. One such interruption concerns the labelling of African worship as idolatry. While this way of thinking has led to the destruction of certain

objects of art in traditional shrines (Odokuma and Aganbi, 2013, 58), I believe that the demolition of those shrines constitutes a spiritual break with the ancestors and the deity.

On the one hand, Odokuma and Aganbi (2013, 58) argue that art objects are displaced from their natural environment through trafficking. The forceful removal of the African traditional arts from their home turns them to be mere objects to be admired, mostly in European museums where they are to be watched without touching or personal religious/historical connection to them. On the other hand, Ukim (2020, 55) holds that some African masks were plundered by the colonialists because of their value as rare objects or souvenirs. Irrespective of the means through which they were taken away from their original owners, I think that the act of dislodging certain works of art and masks from the milieu and those who are connected to them would have caused a vacuum in the spiritual life of Africans who related to the divine through masks.

As soon as the African mask is removed from its environment, it loses its spiritual value and falls into the category of plastic art and becomes a selected object reduced to a face for decoration hanging on the wall, placed in a display case or simply on the shelves of museums. Due to the lack of aesthetics in comparison to the modern mask, African masks can lose their value. This constitutes an uprooting that deprives them of the true meaning and significance of existence. This suggests why Mudiji (1983, 36) proposed that a complete reconstruction of their form, style, morphology and typology of parts and whole would be necessary for the mask to authentically manifest intelligibility and constitute a symbolic field of indigenous and human existence.

Contrary to Ukim's (2020, 55) point of view, namely that the Christian missionaries burnt African masks because they considered them a fetish, I would like to point out that it is the difference in the spiritual outlook of the objects between traditional Africans and the missionaries that destroyed African masks.

These and many other historical events have influenced the transition to an idea of modern art and aesthetic art. This shift gradually resulted in the fading away of the importance placed on the mystical and religious experiences associated with art. What do we mean by modern art? To what extent has it helped man to have a taste for the transcendental?

### **Modern African art**

Modern arts are usually defined by their formal perfection and sophistication, their beauty and aesthetics and the fact that they involve the application of modern technique by an artist (Stefanescu, 2019, 260). This description of modern art is directly connected with the West, and it would seem that modern African art does not exist. However, modern and contemporary African art exists; it is very young and very little known (Gaudibert, 1992, 43). It has been inspired by several African traditions and by current events. But the difficulty of defining contemporary African art is due to “the tension between, on the one hand, the temptation of an indigenist reading carried by a paternalism of bad temper, and, on the other hand, the radically anti-colonial attitude tending to refuse on principle everything that could echo the dominant discourses during the colonial period” (Le Lay, 2016, 100). In other words, what we call modern African art developed after the colonial period. The artworks will try to project the faith, tradition, experience and hope of Africans through paintings that have certain European characteristics. The artists of this period are known individually and analyzed with a critical and rational mindset.

What defines modern African art precisely is the influence on Negro art. The creators of modern African art have integrated the specific ideas and values of traditional art to show the openness of the human spirit to other realities. This has led to reflections that bring about important changes in the way artistic objects are perceived. Modern African art describes the historical antecedents, current socio-political experiences and the future of the African people. Modern African art has been inspired by traditional religious experiences in connection with the creation of traditional art to penetrate the hidden truth.

In the same perspective, African traditional art has influenced modern European art. The latter is created no longer as a mere aesthetic object but with “full spiritual meaning” “of this dialogue between the dead and the living” (Mudiji, 1983, 30). This means that in addition to the aesthetic aspects, modern European artists integrate the historical side and the human experience. Pablo Picasso was inspired by African masks in the construction of his artistic imagination. By drawing his inspiration from ancient myths, this artist realized that the mask was the mental, artistic process for representing the world around him (Hourde, 2017, 5). From then on, Picasso leads the spectators of his works to an ambition to speculate on the relationship between the real and the Ultimate Being. The viewers are led to understand that Being exists in itself, independently of us, through imaginary invention.

Reflection on a work of art suggests the existence of a perfect subject, which is higher in the scale of values.

It is necessary to note that modern art develops in the context of writing and is centred on an author. However, this gives rise to a possibility of documentary investigation on two levels: The first concerns the artist and the second concerns the work of art. With regards to the artist, this will focus on: the author, the influences received, the salient moments in his or her development, the school, the cultural concerns and those of the time. And concerning the work he created, information will be sought at two points: the first will be the formal description, such as the subject, the technique and the material used, the dimensions, and the year of creation. We will look for the elements used to express the meaning, the significance and the feelings. The second is the interpretation or hermeneutics of the work concerning the existential situation and functionality (Mudiji, 2004, 134). What is Mudiji's understanding of African masks?

### **The notion of the African mask in Mudiji**

The African mask is a wooden art object of different sizes, colours, etc. However, other elements such as metal, clothes and colour can be added to its creation. The objects used in making the African mask vary from one culture to another. While the Ibibio "employed nondurable materials for their art" (Ime Ukim, 2020, 55), the Benin and Igbo people of Nigeria employ more durable materials like Bronze.

Considering the materials used in making masks in Africa, Mudiji describes it as a work of art that serves to open man up to the Absolute. According to him, the African mask is "a transitional operator that allows us to mediate at any moment the irreducible worlds of appearance and to travel without hindrance from one world to another" (Mudiji, 2002, 66). On this matter, Rood's opinion differs from that of Mudiji. He does not consider the work of art as a "transitional operator". Using the mask of the Bété people in Côte d'Ivoire as an example, he thinks that the mask is a repository of all the spiritual forces of the village (Rood, 1969, 39). In other words, each mask is imbued with a particular spiritual force and plays a particular function in the life of the villagers. A mask, which is rarely used, could play a protective role of all kinds. Through its different functions, it is possible to explain that the African mask is sacred.

The consideration of the African mask as sacred is a sign of the search for God. The search for God guides the traditional African man in the use of the mask to represent his creator. This is evident in the various works by Botembe (2001). The Africans find in the mask a device to reach their creator. They are convinced that the mask is a material work of art that inspires them to think about their divine origin, their ancestors, their religious life, worship and prayer. According to Luitfruid Marfurt, "African masks, on the whole, have a clear inclination towards the sacred: they want to connect with the invisible and sacred world beyond" (1968, 56). It is how people connect to a 'world in depth', a world where personal and collective divinity dwells. This is why black Africans have a great deal of reverence for masks, regardless of their origin.

Conversely, religions which favour "transcendental meditation" would not consider the mask as the medium of ascension to the Absolute. They would rather promote visualization, concentration, mystical contemplation, meditation and ascetic practices as a means of establishing a connection to the divine (Ezekwugo, 1992, 62-63).

The mask is an object of shore-up divinity. Lema Gwete relates the case of two in the Teke culture of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Ntswu is defined as the spirit of an ancestor whose abode is a statuette and a wooden box (1995, 68). This means that the mask as an object is the domicile of the divine and its means of manifestation to human beings. It must be emphasized that the wood only becomes a dwelling place of the godly through a ritual, prayer, invocation/incantation of the spirits that are added before, during and after it is carved into a mask. The African mask is a receptacle for the deities. It is a chosen, preferred and consecrated place to summon living beings to a special encounter with God. It is an encounter that renews human life, and the fruit is manifested in the spirituality and pious acts of man. The religious character of African masks arouses in man the desire to get closer to God and to possess certain traits of him. The sacredness of the African mask animates man to holiness.

From the above, the African mask has a material and an immaterial part. The first part is physical, and the second is spiritual (the notion of sacredness). This makes it possible to speak of two worlds of the African mask, namely: a surface world and a world in depth (Mudiji, 1983, 28). These two worlds explain our way of understanding realities. There is the form and the life it embodies. The form is the surface world, and life is the-deep-world. One is visible, and the other is hidden. The

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surface world shows an identifiable art object in terms of its quality, size, weight, length, colour, place or culture of origin. The deep world is about the meaning, significance, value and importance of a work of art. On the one hand, the surface world attracts man by its form and on the other hand, man strives to penetrate its interior. Together, the two worlds allow the African man to access a spiritual reality, to pass from a physical level to an inner one, opening to the supernatural.

The strong representation of divinity through masks gives rise to the statement: "The mask is connatural to being" (Mudiji, 1983, 26). It is a Being that inspires man and draws him into the spiritual-extra-terrestrial life. Hegel explains how this process takes place. According to Hegel, the first manifestations of the Absolute are the phenomena of nature, which man presents as natural objects. Man reproduces himself in a mask at the moment when he begins to conceive an Absolute in the form of exteriority in himself and to realise by himself. There are two moments in which this reproduction takes place. The first is when man assumes the same characteristic as nature. He becomes an object of nature which has the quality of admiration. The second begins when a man breaks with nature, "removes himself from the purely practical desires that kept him in touch with it, overcomes nature and his particular existence, to seek only in things their universal, permanent side, their in-itself" (Hegel, 1979, 24).

The foregoing allows us to talk about the environment of conservation and the use of African masks. On this subject, Mudiji explains that the African mask can be understood in the African museum (1983, 31). The latter is an ideal space or environment in which the African mask is found. It is in its natural space, in the place of conception or configuration and in the specific but complex location that the explicit or tacit meaning is determined. The African mask is preserved in a traditional rural environment that allows the participation of everyone in a common history and gives the right to communicate with the mask that bears the lived experience and beliefs of everyone. As for its use, the natural condition facilitates an ascendance to the beyond. In this sphere, we can establish the important link between the mask, the people and their faith.

Moreover, Mudiji (2004, 135) thinks that there are two ways of looking at artistic activity today. Some artists opt for pure modernity, and others opt for creativity that enhances the traditional experience by enriching it with modern contributions. The proponents of pure



modernity art focus on aesthetics and its impact on the mind, emotion and feeling. While the proponents of creativity that value a traditional experience focus on the deep experience of a group, a community, or a clan. It is more collective than individual. The understanding of a work of art depends on the method of reading applied.

### **The reading of art**

A work of art is comparable to a printed text through which an author conveys a truth, knowledge, meaning and significance of reality. Thus, reading a work of art consists in understanding clearly what the artist has printed on an object: painting, sculpture, drawing, etc. It is also an exercise that allows man to enter deeply into what the artist wants to state, its content or meaning.

The effort to understand a work of art (traditional or modern) depends on several factors. The most important for us is the subject's contact with the object and the subject's initiation. Firstly, the relationship of a subject with an object is important. It requires special observation of the subject on the object and communication between the two. Once the relationship is established, the subject and object become the speaker and interlocutor, respectively. The exchange is not verbal but rather non-verbal. The latter forces the subject to decode the message sent by the interlocutor without using speech. The sending of messages (coded) requires decoding before the information (response) is understood. Everything happens at the metaphysical level. That is, thought, spirit or beyond nature. The man rises to read and apprehend the true meaning of the thing.

Secondly, the initiation of the subject is necessary to decipher an object of art. This implies a reception of the hidden knowledge. The initiated manage to read the message transmitted by a work of art. The uninitiated, on the other hand, have to rely on others for the meaning of things. Apart from the uninitiated, Mudiji mentions a certain category of people who are deprived of the cultural right to read, understand and appropriate messages conveyed through artistic work. They are denied the spiritual fulfilment of cultural and artistic goods. They are illiterate people cut off from the source of light and initiated persons who have an interest in updating their knowledge (Mudiji, 2004, 130-131). This rupture is because their heritage has been uprooted, displaced and transferred to the West; this prevents any tendency of man to cling to the divine.

The reading of art requires its methods to open man to the values hidden and transmitted by a work. The reading is done according to whether it is a work of traditional or modern art, and the reader is called upon to take this parameter into account. In this sense, Mudiji presents two types of reading of works of art: one will have before his works of art from the traditional framework where a) functionality and orality are very important, and the other will have before he works governed by the modern context where the b) written word and the search for beauty for its own sake constitute an indispensable reference (Mudiji, 2004, 131). Each reader adopts an attitude and a method to penetrate an unknown or lesser-known world; he or she obtains an insight into something unclear. In addition to this, reading a work of art leads to the development of feelings that often result in acts of a pious character. Our preoccupation is this: what materials are used to create the African mask? What are the rituals that accompany African mask making and the meaning of production?

#### **Future Development: Mask production and the trend towards the absolute**

The creation of African masks corresponds to a deeper need for man to go beyond the limits that nature imposes on him and offers him the possibility of becoming a god (Marfurt, 1968, 54-55). Perhaps Marfurt is exaggerating when he states the possibility of becoming a god, but I believe that imaginations or thoughts of the intentions of the world accompany the production of African masks. By doing so, man intends to open himself to the Absolute, elaborate his spiritual life, and participate in the life of the supernatural. This is why the choice of the place of production, the elements of make-up, and the artist-magicians are important moments in the creation of African masks.

The first consideration in the artistic creation of African masks is that the process takes place in sacred places (isolated huts, forges outside the village, hidden altars) and has a mysterious character. The place is important so that the mask that comes from it would draw people together to God. I think that human beings manage to grasp the sacred through a symbolic or mediated way of an object coming from a place dedicated to God. The idea that the mask is produced in a holy place modifies the behaviour of human beings by bowing the bust and bending the knees. The contrast would be the studio, workshop or any room where artworks are produced. The environment neither elicits nor provokes the idea of the existence of a Supreme Being. Both artists and

lectors should consider this perspective in the production and reading of works of art.

The second interest in the production of African masks concerns the ritual and the artist. Sometimes the artist has to make ritual sacrifices before, during and after. It is a question of presenting a gift to a deity by the immolation of a victim. It is an activity performed to infuse the mask with mysteriousness and strength (Sylla, 1989, 142). Thus, there are sessions of prayers, songs and incantations of ancestral spirits. The artist of the African mask is gifted with the magical-spiritual power to infuse the mask with supernatural power. The experience of the sacred is always through the perception of such a specially-made mask. Whereas modern artists are only interested in inserting elements to engage the human person in mental reflection on history, events or even aesthetic values of the object of art. The artist realizes his goal through the use of computers, software and modern technology.

The third point worthy of consideration is the make-up of African masks. This relates to the outfit or the basting of the body, the various coverings made of more or less elaborate materials (Mudiji, 1983, 26). The make-up brings out the set of spiritual power, the image of the sacred and connects the people to their ancestors (Carlson, 2019, 47). The make-up is symbolic and requires the search for mystical meaning. What the artist uses to dress the African mask addresses the spectators in a way that the mask “speaks through silence and says the ineffable, it communicates what words cannot or dare not pronounce: it shows and makes manifest by means of covering” (Mudiji, 1983, 26). The artist enters the culture to bring out the meanings of the materials to be used, such as the choice of colour but also the vertical, horizontal, leaning, and curved position of the masks, which reveals the existential situation of the man.

The fourth thing that should not be overlooked in the production of African masks is the existential situation of the people. In a world where it seems that the material and the secular are taking over and the spirit, ethical and spiritual values are disappearing, the creators of masks bring mysterious elements into their production. Indeed, this leads the human being to “participate in an elaborate mythical vision mediated by the morphological and stylistic elements of the masks” (Mudiji, 1983, 30). It is in this way that human beings can transcend from the “surface world” to the “deep world”, from the physical world to the spiritual world, from the world of things to the world of the Absolute.

The processes that accompany the creation of African masks can be summarized as 'ritual sculpture'. In other words, ritual is part of the production of African masks. This gives the masks a religious character and the power to take human beings to God. The Osaka World Exhibition in 1970 testifies to the fact that the production of African masks has a strong tendency to lead people to the Absolute. The site of the presentation of African masks and sacred effigies was named "Forest of Gods".

### **Conclusion**

Art is an intermediary between man and God. The mask is a typical object that best symbolizes African art. Traditional art is sacred and is a visible response to the search for an eternal Being. Mudiji perceives all works of art as having the capacity to open up to the Absolute, but this is based on epistemological principles. Modern art developed in the context of writing and centred on an author is intended to create the same effect of opening the human mind to contemplate realities beyond the physical world.

The historical crises experienced by traditional African art have inspired both African modern art and European modern art to orient their artistic work towards deep lived experiences, sometimes intrinsically religious. On the one hand, modern African art integrates the specific ideas and values of traditional art to show the openness of the human spirit to other realities. On the other hand, it has influenced modern European art. The latter is no longer created as a mere aesthetic object but according to the "full spiritual meaning".

Reading a work of art is an activity that consists in understanding what the artist has imprinted on an object, or an exercise that allows man to enter deeply into the spiritual world, values and meaning conveyed by the artist. This presupposes contact with the object of art or initiation of the subject. The reader is transformed within his being. This circumstance claims to lead the human person to a state of being more human.

On the whole, African masks have a clear inclination towards the sacred. The African mask can be understood in the natural space or an ideal environment where it is conceived or configured. The creation of African masks corresponds to a deeper need for man to go beyond the limits that nature imposes on him and offers him the possibility of

opening up to the Absolute, elaborating his spiritual life, and participating in the life of the beyond. The production of the mask reveals the important link between the people and their faith.

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