Dancing a New Face
Contemporary Sala Mpusu Masquerades

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The Sala Mpusu are a people who have repeatedly reinvented themselves during the twentieth century. The last of the peoples in the Congo to be conquered by the Belgians, the Sala Mpusu had succeeded in keeping outsiders away by combining outstanding fighting skill with a reputation of being savage "cannibals." This carefully developed reputation backfired in the second half of the twentieth century, acting as a barrier to the aspirations of ambitious Sala Mpusu who attempted to break into social, political, and economic positions in a wider arena than the small Sala Mpusu area itself.

The Sala Mpusu reputation, made concrete by their men's society and their masquerades, served to protect their independence for perhaps as long as 200 years. For centuries, art played a part in protecting the Sala Mpusu from outside incursions and helped to preserve cultural, political, and economic institutions. Toward the end of the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, the Sala Mpusu and their neighbors met outside forces that they could not overcome.

Before Belgian conquest, individual and group independence had been a hallmark of the Sala Mpusu society. Each man strove to achieve prominence by generating personal wealth and reputation through membership in a men's society, community leadership, and clan affiliation. Group independence proved more of a challenge since the Sala Mpusu area was rich in both natural resources, such as large iron deposits and fertile agricultural areas, and human resources, including a sophisticated blacksmithing tradition. The combination of these natural and human resources attracted the attention of neighboring peoples such as the Lunda, to the south, who strove to absorb this area into their own domain. The men's society, therefore, also served as a militia to fight off forceful attacks from the outside. The Sala Mpusu's cultivation of a reputation as fierce, cannibalistic warriors aided their bid to retain independence by keeping their enemies off balance. Any potential interloper would think twice before putting himself at risk of being eaten and thus not receiving proper funeral rites.

Early accounts report that masqueraders participated in generating this reputation by joining battles and terrorizing encroaching communities by night. Not only did militia groups use masquerades in fighting, organized masquerades also played an integral role in marking individual Sala Mpusu men's positions in society and in generating personal wealth. Each man had to both perform certain feats and pay expensive fees to the men who already had the right to perform a specific masquerade. Once a man had bought the right to a mask, other men would have to pay him for that privilege.

The Sala Mpusu applied the same techniques of image management to their encounters with Europeans that they had already used successfully with their neighbors. Taking advantage of the Belgians' own stereotypes about Africans, Sala Mpusu men regaled many early missionaries and colonial officials with tales of human feasts, complete with large iron pots, and claimed that Belgians listed as missing had been served up as appetizers. The Belgians, in one of their few colonial retreats, withdrew. They assigned one officer to the area who, for over twenty years, concentrated all his efforts on subduing the Sala Mpusu. They finally surrendered in the mid-1930s, making this area the last in the Congo to be occupied by the Belgians.

The Sala Mpusu, in spite of this subjugation to colonial forces, retained their ideals of individual initiative and wealth, although concepts of what constituted wealth changed. Rather than control of iron, blacksmiths, and oil palm groves, men now computed their wealth in bicycles, fired-brick houses, and wax-dyed cloth. As the focus of

economic possibilities moved from the men's society to the new regional marketplaces, the Sala Mpasu turned to agriculture and regional trade. Their savage reputation, however, became an impediment to personal economic advancement and to the economic stability and growth of the entire area. For example, although in the late 1980s the Sala Mpasu spent their own money to repair their ferries and worked independently to fix the roads, most people were still afraid to go into the area to trade or attend weekly markets. It was said that people who went into the area never returned. The Sala Mpasu who went to the city to seek his fortune was shunned as a backward, dangerous cannibal. To avoid this fate, he would claim a different ethnicity.

Faced with such dilemmas, the Sala Mpasu took active steps to rehabilitate their image. For instance, through iconoclastic purges in 1962 and 1988, Sala Mpasu men publicly broadcast an end to the men's society and its associated masquerading. Instead, Sala Mpasu masquerade in the late 1980s and early 1990s cultivated a connection with le Scouts, a nationally recognized and government-sponsored organization similar to the Boy Scouts. In September, 1989, I was present when the village of Sambuyi publicly celebrated the return of newly circumcised and initiated "Scouts" with masquerade performance. Privately, the men involved with the camp stressed to me that this represented a re-formation of the men's society.

I was unaware of the upcoming events at Sambuyi until the day before, when a man approached me at a Saturday market and told me that if I was interested in masquerades, I should be at Sambuyi at noon the next day. I arrived just as the church service was letting out and all the people moved from the church to the performance area
masqueraders occasionally stopped in their performance to pose for my camera (Fig. 1). As the boys approached and the masqueraders disappeared, the women behind me informed me that these were Scouts returning from training camps. During the next week I was able to interview the men involved in the camp and tried to unravel the layers of meaning behind this event.

In the 1989 initiation, the boys were first circumcised at a public health clinic, and then the initiated men removed to a secluded camp away from town where they learned the esoteric and practical knowledge necessary for manhood and for membership in the society. Before the newly initiated boys returned to the village, five masks danced in the center of the village next to a Protestant church (Figs. 3–5). As in the past, Sala Mpasu men still paid those who already had the rights for permission to wear the masks.

In preparation for the performance, a dance area was marked off with white flour. Both men and women strictly observed this restricted area, crowding to the edge but not going over the line. Each masquerade performed in turn with little interaction with the audience. Most simply ran around the edge of the dance arena (Figs. 3 and 5), occasionally stopping to have their picture taken (Fig. 1). Mukungu-a-nkili
twirled blindly, occasionally stepping over the white line with a resulting scattering of the audience (Fig. 4). Mukungu-a-nkili was one of the more prestigious masks and was therefore one of the final masks to perform. After the final masquerader was in the dance arena, the gathered community spotted the boys approaching and attention shifted from the arena to the road.

The boys returned to the village in military formation. Once they arrived in the village, they performed maneuvers and danced with staffs. These staffs were appropriate for Scouts but also could be interpreted as covert references to the swords and guns previously carried by the men’s society militia. Each newly initiated boy continued to dance until his mother turned over the required amount of money and he was released to return to his family.

This 1989 performance demonstrates the Sala Mpasu’s continued reinvention and manipulation of their own identity and reputation, remaking the feared men’s society into widely accepted Scouts. It also shows that while the Sala Mpasu’s reputation and outside identity may be stage-managed—both now and in the past—the underlying values of the society have not changed. Prestige is still evaluated by individually gained wealth, however that may be socially defined at the moment, and expressed in control of masquerades.

Opposite page: 7. A Sala Mpasu man and his wives exhibit their stock of masks for sale. This commercial endeavor demonstrates a new wealth associated with masquerades, an art and tourist market for both old and new masks. The movement of these objects to the art market was facilitated by a network of stores run by the Catholic Church. Mazala II, 1989.

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Top: 8. While in the past masquerades were seen only by Sala Mpasu men initiated into the men’s society, innovative entrepreneurs have created new masquerades that perform for parties and church events such as wedding and baptisms. These masquerades are centered on entertainment and profit. Kapende II, 1989.

Bottom: 9. A Sala Mpasu man holding a naundambwa mask. Reportedly no longer performed, this mask honored women and was danced by a man at women’s initiations. Mazala II, 1989.
pictures, and even loaded words, it conveys its message far and wide” (Homer 1953:13).

Reference cited


ADEXEDE: Notes, from page 72

[This article was accepted for publication in December 2003.]

1. I am grateful to Dr. Ato Quayson for insisting that I seriously examine postage stamps, as they should have none bearing religious claims. My thanks also go to Professor Merrick Perroneck for his ideas and, more importantly, for finding those rare stamps showing clerics from clerics all over the world. I would like to thank Prof. John Fox for his comments and suggestions. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the conference on “Christianity in Africa: Culture, Conversion, Development.” Accra, Ghana, January 2003. I would also like to thank Simeon Okieh, Obadiah Morah (preacher and designer for Ghana Postal Company) and Peter Taggart (a philatelist, Ghana Postal Company) for their invaluable insight and assistance.

2. It was an agreed upon by Universal Postal Union convention that England would supply the British Empire to use the word of the queen to represent the country on its postage stamps. The first British colonial stamp was issued in 1847 on Mauritius Island but the first stamp on the continent of Africa was the stamp of Cape of Good Hope in 1853. Earlier, in 1855, a stamp was issued in the Upper Volta with the text "Moss Railway," but in 1898, a set of three stamps was issued depicting Germaine Chief Institute, Mame Naba, Mouss Empereur, and Princess Conseil Emperatrice (Burkina Faso Scott 541-3).

3. It is ironic, however, to remark that over 99% of those postindependence leaders who put their images on postage stamps were either overlooked in military coups or were forced to give up power.

4. Many opponents of Sekou Touré appeal his claims to Sankara's progress. The Kaka's (1987) research has proven that he was indeed a great-grandchild of Sankara. It was the same oracle that allegedly predicted Sekou's victory over the situation.

5. In 1988, as a detailed debate on the European opium of Sankara Touré; however, one should be cognizant of the fact that European colonizers demonstrated against African leader that resisted their conquest.

6. Hadji Omar was one of the first European to demand the right to redress the French along the coast. Although he was unable to defeat the French, he signed a treaty with them, which left him free to attack other nomad Muslim states.

7. The giant statue of Bataclan was started in North Korea. It was inaugurated on April 15, 1989 and the anti-imperialist symbol, given by Kim Il-Sung, is the foot of the statue, placed mainly for local pride, reads “Je n'accepterai jamais de jouir aucun autre homme en dehors du conseil de mes dieux.”

8. Thanks to Chantal Delembre for the information on the legend of Queen Aba Poku. For the historical reference, see Bedaux 1992.

9. Note that the Baule, Abren, and Agni belong to the Akan language group.

10. Did M. Yves Belanger appoint him to the position of his ancestor? This is pure conjecture because I have not come across any document that justifies this assertion but since he is from the north, I would not be surprised if he was an ancestor of the king of Kwatara. Obaatar was a descendant of King Sekou Ouattara (note that the spelling alternates between English and French). It is also possible that a certain segment of the indigenous population claims that Obaatar is from Burkina Faso whereas his supporters think otherwise. If he is related to King Sekou Ouattara, whose kingdom shrank both countries, then he might as well claim the national identity of both countries.

13. Mr. B. B. Morah, who has been designing Ghana stamps for almost four decades, designed this stamp and those of the Asante's silver jubilee. He is indeed a great artist, one of the best in Ghana yet to be recognized.

14. Current political developments in Ghana only reinforce this assertion. King Tackie Tawiah now has a giant statue in central Accra and a major overpass named after him.

References cited


CAMEROUN: Notes, from page 79

1. Currently, the country's name is the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

2. Debate continues about the difference between Sala Mpanu reputation and reality. No physical evidence proves that the Sala Mpanu were indeed cannibals. One school of thought contends that the Sala Mpanu were eaten in ritual and that no one really existed. Other scholars hesitate to discuss issues like cannibalism that seem to designate African peoples who were already stigmatized through the colonialism. At time separates us from the early twentieth century, we never really knew the reality of the situation, but an understanding of the events in this area cannot avoid the discussion of cannibalism.

3. Prestige of masquerades is reflected in the cost to the performer.

References cited


KERRHAM: Notes, from page 83

I would like to thank Fr. Thomas O'Malley for sharing his family with me to attend the “beating of the drum” ceremony (Mbono-Kiluli). I also thank Geoffrey Phil and Robin Phil for helping me to understand the history and for generously discussing both their own work and the work of Fr. Thomas O'Malley with me. I would like to thank the following for their help:

1. Exhibition brochure for "Mbono-Kiluli.


3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.
