

## African Mask with Cleft Lip and Palate

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An African mask depicting cleft lip and palate is described. This artifact has been used for entertainment by Fon tribe of Dohomey (Benin) in West Africa. The function and style of the mask is discussed.

African art differs as widely as the landscapes of the continent, its people and cultures. Historically the artifacts are as varied as those of Asia or Europe. But "black African art" has been traditionally represented mainly by statues and masks of West African regions, from Senegal south to the Kalahari desert. Except for the Nok terracotta statues and heads from Nigeria dated from 360 BC, and the magnificent Igbo Ukwu bronzes dated from about 800 AD, not much expressive art has been recovered prior to the 10th century which has been called the Prehistoric Iron Age of the region (Eyo and Willet, 1980, McIntosh, 1981).

Masks and statues made of wood deteriorate rapidly in the near equatorial region, being subject to humidity and insects. Thus, most characteristic art objects do not usually survive more than several decades. The oldest ones are estimated to be two hundred years old, at the most. Of over 1000 tribes of Africa about 100 produce masks, which play important roles in their cultural and spiritual traditions.

Masks express traditional qualities depicted by several motifs which have become conventionalized and are understood by a number of tribes: high domed forehead signifying wisdom, white pigmentation for the spirits of the dead and ghosts, etc. (Lenzinger, 1979).

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Geometrical abstraction is commonly and consciously used by African carvers to intensify natural features and create entirely new forms as unreal as possible (Lenzinger, 1979, Bleakley, 1978). Another style of carving, however, more realistic and organic, appeals to the viewer's emotions. A mask of this type is depicted in Figure 1. This carving is on display in the Historical Museum of Senegal in Dakar. It was made by a carver from the Fon tribe of Dahomey (Benin). It undoubtedly represents an adult with an unrepaired unilateral cleft lip and palate. This mask is identified as "used for public amusement".

The village art of the Fon people is known mostly for their delightful primitivism. Their nail fetishes, wooden human figures with imbedded metal nails have naively austere, simplified appearances. Some are dipped in mud bath to increase the frightening effect. The cleft lip mask shown in Fig. 1, with its realism and naturalistic style, depicting the facial malformation with elaborate precision, is rather uncommon for the Fon tribe carvings. However, one should be cautious when contemplating the meaning of the cleft mask removed from its original circumstances and isolated. As McLeod (1980) and others pointed out, some masks were intended for use on a single occasion only and later had no further significance. Some were used only to amuse by a caricature of a local person.

Of particular interest is the fact that a mask representing a congenital malformation would evoke "public amusement". It is well known that cleft lip and/or palate occur with markedly different prevalence



FIGURE 1. Wooden mask of Fon tribe of Dahomey (Benin) in West Africa with cleft lip and palate. This mask has been used for public amusement.

among human races. In negroid people, the incidence is the lowest. In the USA the frequency varies from 1:1370 to 1:15607 in black newborns while in Africa the following data have been published: 1:4252 of 8,505 newborns in Lusaka, Zambia (Sukhami et al., 1977, Khan and Ivanov 1977), 1:1333 of unknown number of newborns in Kampala, Uganda (Robinson, 1970), 1:1055 of 4,220 newborns in Ibadan, Nigeria (Gupta, 1969) and 1:2500 of 16,720 newborns in Lagos, Nigeria (Oluwasanmi, 1970). In adult African populations the prevalence of clefting is much lower, considering neonatal mortality which reaches 50% in some regions, and the custom of some groups of disposing of a malformed newborn. Thus, to observe an adult survivor of unrepaired clefting is a most unusual

sight, certainly involving curiosity and even amusement.

It should be stressed that the African carver of the mask is fully cognisant and immersed in the customs and images of his society. The African artist is never in opposition to his peer group since the forms he uses reflect those considered to be the most traditionally perfect and desirable (Bleakley, 1978). Careful guard is kept to ensure that the traditional values of the tribe are preserved for the welfare of the group.

One would expect that this attitude to facial clefts as demonstrated by the Fon cleft-mask is not without exceptions. Indeed it has been observed that Inuit (Eskimo) children born with a cleft would be nursed and taken care of. Later in life the child would be valued according to his or her abilities regardless of the deformation (Cervenka, 1974). Aisa Tuluguaq, Eskimo, described her uncle Ayagutak: "Part of his upper lip was split open, with the bone showing (he was born that way)" . . . "When he smoked, the corners of his upper lip were very beautiful to look at indeed. These two pretty points of his upper lip had very good muscles. When he smoked, it was only with a pipe, and when he was smoking, you would watch him all the time. This didn't seem strange, for some people are born handicapped" . . . "He used to look after me, and I'm thankful about that. Still using my same old neckpiece, I am still just myself" (Cervenka, 1974).

European cubists and expressionists of the early 20th century were influenced by West African masks because of their powerful beauty, conscious abstraction and departure from naturalistic images. The Fon cleft-mask in this sense does not belong to this category.

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