

The Magic and Mystery of Masks

By

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Abstract

Masks have fascinated human beings from times immemorial. Perhaps this is because it is our face that gives us our identity as a person. But when we wear a mask, we can completely transform our personalities into something totally different.

Keywords

Masks, Mask Making, Cultural Traditions, Rituals and Festivals, Folk Dances

The Magic and Mystery of Masks

A mask can conceal, highlight, and change the image of its wearer. This is the reason why masks have been so popular, and have played such an important role in human society, both as an interesting tool for entertainment, as well as a powerful one in conducting different rituals and religions.

Masks are made of many different materials, and their shape, and size varies from one geographical region to another. Some masks may cover only the face or eyes; others may conceal the entire head or the head and shoulders. During the Renaissance in Europe, 'half masks,' covering only the eyes and face were used in the theatre. These masks are the ancestors of the modern 'domino' mask that covers only the eyes. The 'totem pole' masks made by the Papuans of New Guinea, are more than 6 metres (20 feet high)! The creators of these masks believe that they have the power to frighten away evil spirits and protect their community.

Wood, papier-mâché, bone, and the bark of trees, leather, terracotta, cloth and cane are commonly used to make masks. In the New Hebrides, masks used in dances are built on a

foundation of coconut shells and are coloured red, white and black. In Japan, the most well-known use of masks is in the religious 'Noh' plays. These gorgeous masks are carefully crafted from gilded and lacquered plaster. In Central Mexico, masks are made with wood, but lined with shells or turquoise. The Iroquois, an ancient tribe of Indians in North America, used masks or 'false-faces' extensively in their culture. The masks were used to cure diseases both of the body, and mind of their people. The false-face masks however, had to be carved from the wood of a living tree, and the Iroquois men ritually asked permission from the tree, before starting the carving, and appeased the tree by offering tobacco to it! The Cherokee Indian tribe of North America held the 'Booger Dance', associated with ghosts during the winter. These Booger masks were affiliated with ghosts and spirits, and the Cherokees believed that this masked dance, performed during the winter months ensured that the ghosts would not spoil the next season's growing crop and vegetation!

Africa has a rich tradition of mask making, and African masks differ from one tribe to the other. Large, elaborate African masks may weigh as much as forty kilos each, while some of the lighter ones are meant for one use only. African masks are made from materials associated with nature and the jungle, the lakes and rivers, and are decorated with beads and stones. Some are also made of ebony. These masks are a channel of communication with native gods and spirits, and are believed to possess special magic powers, as their creators summon spirits to dwell within them. They may take the form of either human or animal heads, sometimes with fantastic, exaggerated features. Masks are used in Africa in rituals to treat diseases, protect the tribe from danger, and also to scare away evil spirits and to help preserve the power of tribe leaders. In Nigeria, the wooden Yoruba mask of an Egungun face is still made for ceremonial festivities celebrating the remembrance of ancestors, and to seek their blessings for the living. The word 'egungun' can be translated as 'Powers concealed'. Dancers, who wear these elaborate masks, believe that they transform them into something ethereal and otherworldly, as they evoke the spirits of the dead. African masks are also used to call for rain, for a good harvest, or to celebrate auspicious events in the village. Old masks that span several generations are valued possessions and are cherished. Mask preparation in Africa doesn't occur often. It is governed by strict rules, and usually only wise elders make masks. In Africa, maskers usually perform in groups, and there is a hierarchy of masks, which perform. The lower ranking masks dance to entertain the general public, and the important masks are only used on important occasions when elders and leaders are present.



Image 1: Totem

The Eskimos have a wonderful tradition of mask dancing. The Yupik Eskimos, living along the Bering coast of Alaska, performed their masked dances long before they came into contact with other cultures that arrived to explore their homeland. They called their masked dances 'Agayullyararput' which translated, means, 'our way of making prayer'. The masks that these simple people made and wore as they danced, recreated their world and their beliefs. The Yupiks believed that the souls and spirits of all the animals and birds they hunted for their survival had to be honoured and respected, and their mask dancing was one such way.



Image 2: Yupik Mask



Image 3: Dance Mask, Alaska

In Sri Lanka brightly painted devil masks are used in folk dances, and some masks are worn to protect the wearer against, or to cure measles and cholera. China too has a long tradition of using masks in their dramas. All Chinese masks had headdresses to tell the viewers what kind of person the character was. Curiously, very elaborate headdresses above the mask meant that the character was a villain! Red and purple masks and headdresses meant that the character being played was just and noble. Black masks signified rough and bold people, and a white mask signified a powerful villain!



Image 4: Tovil Mask, Sri Lanka

The North American Indian tribes used their warrior masks in a practical way. When two warriors met for combat, their masks concealed any emotions of anxiety or grief. No fighter

allowed his opponent to see the fear mirrored on his face! Similarly, in religious ceremonies, the chief orator wore a mask that hid his face and allowed him to speak freely without fear or embarrassment!

Death masks accompanied Egyptian mummies to their tombs. The Egyptians believed that these masks protected the deceased from evil spirits, and guided the dead person's spirit to his new home in the afterlife. Some masks that have been found in Egyptian tombs have been magnificent works of art, with gold inlaid and gem encrusted details. Perhaps the glittering mask of the boy king Tutankhamun, who lived centuries ago, is the most famous of these.

India has an outstanding tradition of mask making, and masks in our country are unique and truly beautiful. The Chhau dance form of Bihar is a popular folk dance, full of energy and spontaneity. The dance is so called because the 'chhau' or mask is an essential feature of this dance. Chhau dances depict nature and the animal world. Famous dances include the serpent dance, the ocean dance and the harvest dance. One of the most interesting folk dances of Kerala, called the 'Padayani' involves dancers who wear huge 'kolams' or masks. These enormous masks, which have many projections, and elaborate headgear, are painted on the stalks and spreading leaves of palms. In the 'Theyyam', another folk dance of Kerala, performers wear masks and elaborate headdresses made of cloth that may be up to forty feet high! Koodiattam is another masked dance of Kerala, and it is performed in a specially erected hall called 'Koothambalam'. The world-famous Kathakali dance of Kerala, which is thought to have evolved from the art of 'Koodiattam', also involves masked dancers, dancing to puranic themes wearing colourful masks and huge head dresses.



Image 5: Koodiyattam

In Orissa, chapters from the Ramayana are enacted in the 'Sahi Jatra' theatre. Actors wear elaborate masks, and headgear made from sponge and wood. But in this form of theatre, there is no dialogue – only actions by the masked players. In the town of Varnasi, masks are made from brass, and portray Hanuman, the monkey God, and Durga. In the northeastern state of Tripura, beautiful masks are carved from bamboo. In Arunacahal Pradesh, a group of tribal dancers perform plays based on stories from the life of Buddha. The dancers wear masks of animals and demons, and perform mostly in the Buddhist monasteries during religious festivals. In the monasteries in the western Himalayas, dancers wear masks carved from a single piece of wood, with slits for the eyes. In many towns in India, garishly painted masks depicting ugly demons with protruding tongues are hung outside homes and buildings, to ward off the 'evil eye' of passersby!

In the United States, there are festivals where masks are widely worn and are an important part of the celebrations, e.g. the Mardi Gras Festival and Halloween. In India too, during Navarathri celebrations, masks of the demon king Ravana are popular. Masks have been popular through the ages, and will endure as long as man's curiosity and love of mystery does. For what better and quicker way is there to become someone else for a short while, than to slip on a mask?

About the Author

Ms. Santhini Govindan is a widely published, award-winning author of children's literature in English. She has written more than fifty books for children, and has received fellowships from the Government of India for research projects connected to Children's Literature.

