

The Dance of the Dogon Masks

Walter E.A. van Beek
Department of Cultural Anthropology
Utrecht University
Netherlands

Most tourists who come to see "pays Dogon" get a glimpse of mask dancing. In the months of December and January, masks perform in several villages for assorted groups of tourists. All of them, some time or other, are offered masks as a souvenir, usually with the whispered admonition that it is "very old, antique" and that they have to tell nobody of this offer. And then, they see only the head piece. Though often fascinated, the tourist gets only a fragment, an intimation of the full tradition¹. In order to capture something of this tradition, first the definition of a mask has to be established. In the North we tend to call a headpiece a "mask". For a Dogon an *èmna*, a mask² is a total being, clothed in a black indigo traditional trousers and a cowri shell shirt, with indeed a headpiece to cover his face, but first and for all wearing the red or black fibers around the waist, the wrists and the ankles. That is what constitutes a mask: the fibers (see van Beek 1991a). And then, that *èmna*, mask, should move, perform, dance. So, what few of the tourists have seen is a real **Dogon** mask, one fully decked out, dancing, being adhorted by the old men and part and parcel of the *dama* ceremonies, the large festival that concludes the protracted mourning period and makes the deceased into potential ancestors³.

A Dogon mask festival runs for almost a month: three weeks of preparation, mask making, plaiting and decoration of mask shirts, and practicing the dancing routines. The boys and young men practice the dances during the first three weeks at every sunset, as "black masks" i.e. half-clothed masks. Strictly taboo for women, even for men from other villages, these practicing days are considered crucial; a bad performance is worse than no performance. Pride for the Dogon is in dancing well.

In the last week before the scenes described below, the "masks" enter the village, at least four times: always they come in from the outside and they perform as visitors in the village. We shall enter the proceedings at the second "arrival", the second great day of the festival, a day full with dancing masks (see van Beek 1991a):

Just before sunrise all boys and young men that dance with the masks for the first time, the new initiates gather at the foot of the cliff to hear the oldest man of the village pronounce his blessings over them. Crouching under the overhang of a huge boulder, clothed only in white Dogon shorts, they intersperse his long well wishings and admonitions in *sigi so*, the ritual language, with occasional mask cries, the high pitched "hé, hé, hé" which is the only sound masks may produce. When the old man is finished, they eat and dress for dancing, with long indigo trousers, necklaces and other jewelry, cotton bands for tying the mask, and the tobacco tainted cap they wear under the head piece; in their hands they carry swords or horse-tails. The rest of the morning is spent in what the dancers themselves consider one of the high points, a dancing contest without the head pieces. Guided by the elders they circle the largest *tei* (public square) of the village three times, then crouch in a large circle. An elder then gives a long public praise, with wise admonitions and frequent of modesty ("pardon, pardon, you are the ones who do the work"). At frequent intervals, the young men rise up, shout their mask cry, waive their horse-tails and settle down again. Afterwards, in the various dancing grounds of the wards, the rest

of the morning is used to decide who is the best dancer, the young men taking turns in the various routines, to the delight of the male villagers, who gather to watch and comment. At noon the drums fall silent, the dancers drink their beer and the crowd disperses, with a general consensus as to who is the top dancer of the village this time.

Mask dances are of two kinds. Three dancing routines are "general dances", performed by each and every mask. Characteristic are the arm movements: the dancers reaches out aside or in front, and rotates his hands to show off the fibers at his wrists. The main variation is in leg movement: jumping, sliding sideways with the left or right leg, or jumping high and kicking out the leg in the jump. The other genre of dances are the individual mask performances. As most masks represent animals from the bush (van Beek & Banga 1992), the movement of a typical animal mask imitates the movement of the animal. For example, the *kanaga*⁴, the stork mask, imitates the typical head movement of any large bird, jutting the head far right and far left, to see what is in front of it. Typical of this - very popular - mask is the imitation of a stork bending over and touching the ground with its long beak: the mask rotates its head backwards and bends over, touching the ground with the tip of its long "croix de Lorraine". The stilt masks imitate the jagged walk of the long-legged waterbird its name, *tingetange*, refers to⁵. Fierce and agile is the antelope's mask, *waru*, chasing people, jumping up. Hyena's sneak around the dancing ground, the small rabbit masks (small boys, usually) crouch in a corner of the grounds, hiding for the prowling hunter, another mask.

The mimics of the masks are variations on the theme of the general dances, interspersing the arm and leg movements of those dances with the characteristics of the animal.

Back to our example. This first of the main dancing days is called *manugosugo*, descent from the plains (i.e. the dunes, slightly higher than the village), and is definitely one of the highlights of the festival. Beer and water have been brought to the dunes, where in the early afternoon the men join their younger brothers who have guarded their masks and belongings.

In the neighbouring villages to the North and the South (Dogon villages are built in a string alongside the Bandiagara escarpment), people prepare themselves for their part in the proceedings; women finish beer brewing, men don their finest clothes, and late in the afternoon they set out towards the masks dance. In our village the women disperse into the village to present the beer to their own and their husbands' friends, while the men fan into the dunes, where the dancers are busy clothing themselves. The scree already is in the shade of the cliff, when from the village on the scree the first drums start calling the masks. First the dancers for the stilt masks, *tingetange*, start moving, walking at ease towards the dancing place at the foot of the scree, with the mask at the back of their head, their face "naked", while a young brother ambles alongside them carrying their stilts. Accompanied by drums the main body of masks then sets out, in one group. Their northern flank is shielded by the men from the northern neighbour, while at their southern side the men from the other neighbouring village form an accompanying file. The rationale of this arrangement is indeed protection: both neighbouring villages shield the masks from envying stares of villages farther away; in this way, informants state, no foreigners can assess the strength of the village⁶. The whole troupe of masks, two *bèdyè* (pupil masks), four "girls", two *modibo* (marabout masks), five "trees" and twenty-two *kanaga* (storks) move as a body; nobody may interrupt their procession, nor cross their lines. Only the mercurial antelope-mask, *waru*, walks outside the group, chasing away outsiders. The masks now are all fully "clothed", i.e. the adornment complete and their headpieces in

place. This is the last and the greatest arrival of the masks, and it is done in style. No discussions about the exact trail, nor about priorities, everything has been settled in the days before. Led by the elders, flanked by the neighbours and admired by the visitors from other villages, a group of forty-four masks dances its way into the *tei*. There, with the players of drums and bells that have accompanied them on their walk, they all gather around the mask-altar that has been raised at the dancing site at the start of the festival, and the *dani*, the ringed pole standing next to it.

Music is work for the elders. Drums, of course, form the main accompaniment for the dance, but the real lead instrument is the *gangana*, the large iron bell that is the most revered ritual instrument in the Dogon culture. The drums are lineage property, each lineage guarding its own proper drum in one of the caves of the scree. During the preparations for the *dama*, these drums all have been rehailed, with a new skin, as part of this ritual for the dead. Only one type of drum is used here, the *boy na*. Other types for other dances, like the *gomboy* for the festive dances of the young boys and girls, and the *barubo*, the calabash drum, to accompany the old people on their long, interminable songs of the first burial (Abspoel 1984). The *gangana*, however, is rare; in fact one *gangana*, kept by the master of ceremonies of the village half, is the "real one". The master of the word, the ritual speaker of the village, sets the rhythm for the drums to follow. The shrill, high pitch of the bell, struck with a full iron stick, easily carries over the muffled sound of the drums. A small bell, *sèmènè*, is for everybody to play.

The stilts are the first to perform, nine of them. Like a flock of gigantic waterbirds - which they in fact do represent - they come stepping from the low building where they tied on their stilts, rattling their boxes, waiving their wands. Since they will perform several times today, after dancing they rest against a tree near the grounds, watching the next section dance. The *kanaga* then dominate the dance by sheer numbers as well as by the athletic performance, as all of them have to perform. All *kanaga* approach the dancing group together, a long row of wooden crosses dancing more or less in unison, the other masks behind them. First, all masks dance together first, circling the spot three times, all joining in the same dance routines. Then the masks perform individually, the *kanaga* first. Dancing with three or four masks at a time, each *kanaga* goes through a vigorous choreography, in which he skuttles his head, draws back and then circles his cross to the right, touching the ground with its tip. Shouts of encouragement accompany this exercise, the spectators praising the good performers, boos and laughter following the poor ones. The long line of *kanaga* takes quite a time, as each mask tries to remain on stage as long as possible. Some have to be shoved off by an elder to make place for the next one.

Then the other masks get their share of public attention. The spectacular *tiû*, four to five meters long, move in together, like a walking thicket of trees. Like the other ones, this heavy mask, representing a tree as well as a clan house, rests on the dancer's head, tied to his waist with strips of cloth through the mesh of cords at the backside of the headpiece; in order to manoeuvre the dancer grips on a bite inside the wooden head piece with his teeth. It takes good teeth as well as a strong neck to dance this mask, as the huge contraption has to make vigorous movements. Some of the mask reach high into the baobab as they jump high, flinging out his legs in a mighty display. The masks sway forward until the huge mask touch the ground before them, then slowly lean back. His mask describe an arc through the air and come to rest on the ground behind them. Lifting the head once more, they start to spin, rotating faster and faster, urged on by the deafening noise of drums, bells, and shouting spectators (cf. Pern, Alexander & van Beek, 1983). Swaying the "tree" to and fro, each time touching ground, and whirling it around

horizontally, the dancer shows himself a real *sagatara*, strong young man, eliciting shouts of praise from the onstanders, who keep a safe distance. One of the performers fails in raising his mask from the ground again and is booed away, while the spectators chatter about who he is, and why he lacks strength.

The other masks follow, when the trees are finished, in no particular order, but the older men before the younger ones. This village has quite a few *modibo* masks, a relatively new type representing Moslim teachers ("marabout") with their long coloured hairs on plaited hoods as the main characteristic. Next one is a *sadimbe*, a mask with a female statue, fully adorned as sister of the masks, representing the first woman who found the masks (van Beek 1992). Behind it, a mask of a "door" (*èmna tâ*), representing the Dogon granary doors makes its appearance, which is in fact for most if not all people quite new; this is a totally new type of mask, never seen before. Later, the mask of a sheep, also new, will dance. The masks representing girls then follow with their dance, accompanied by the two *waru* buffalo, masks. This latter type representing an Oryx gazella (*Oryx dammah*, or *O. gazella*)⁷, is by far the most active mask. Its task is to keep order in the proceedings, moving the spectators from the dancing ground, chasing women, girls and small boys from the premises. The *waru* is the real performer among the masks, danced by the most imaginative of the dancers, interacting constantly with the crowd. Moving between masks and audience, he may greet oncoming strangers by running up to them testing out their knowledge of *sigi so* mask greetings. A good *waru* mask is essential for a good show. He may sometimes be assisted, even replaced, by a monkey mask. But here at Amani, no monkey mask is present, and the burden falls on two *waru* who dance quite well, despite the scorching heat of the late May afternoon.

Some other masks are present too, not as popular as the former ones, but interesting all the same. One is the *odyogoro*, the goiter, wearing a carved head piece with a huge protuberance under its chin. Goiters are common and such a mask draws gusts of laughter from the crowd, as it prances around, hacking away with an adze in mid-air, unable to bend down to the ground. More laughs are drawn by the *pulo* mask, representing a Fulani, with his horse. Several types of this mask are possible, the one here is a quite simple plaited hood, type *bèdyè*, while the focus is on the stick horse he almost manages to fall off while dancing.

The one *waru* is very busy, roaming the perimeter of the dance to keep non-initiates at a distance, women and children. A throng of male spectators circles the ground, about half of them people from other villages. This is the time the village is judged as a whole for its mask performance. The *dama* is "complete" now, fully clothed and adorned, fully danced. From far away, on the rooftops in the village, the women and girls follow the performance. Small boys creep through the ranks of the adult spectators, to be chased away by the very active *waru*. The elders continually shout adhortations in *sigi so*, beating their sticks on the ground to stimulate and honor the dancing.

The next morning, the day of *yenu kèjè*, (meeting the foreigners), is a major continuation of yesterday, and features the truly public dances. From the early morning on, the masks will dance, at the various *tei* of the village, the dancing squares on the scree. There is no need for another entrance into the village, as they have finally arrived yesterday. Throughout the day masks will visit the compounds of the men who died since the last *dama*, greet the dead by dancing on their roofs; afterwards the dancers are honored with huge quantities of beer. Then they dress again, unite in groups of six to a dozen, and perform at the *tei*. Towards the afternoon, when all the dead have been greeted, the masks converge upon the central *tei*, where the whole village as well as numerous guests wait their

arrival. Accompanied by drums and bells, group after group performs, the same dances as always. Towards 5 p.m. many of the guests from the other villages gather at the compounds of their hosts, especially those whose mothers came from one of the neighbouring villages. For the guests this finishes the proceedings of the day, but for the people most closely involved in the *dama* one important ritual awaits, to tell a fond farewell to the deceased since the last *dama*, and the second funeral as such is over.

A tradition very much alive, the dance of the Dogon masks. Tourist performances feature the latter part of the *yènu kèjè*, the most public part anyway. Usually the performances are well done, especially in the scree villages where the splendid theatrical setting, with the village and the scree towering behind the dancing grounds, add to the occasion. Tourist performances have the advantage not only of gaining an extra buck, they also give the opportunity for practice, both for the old men with their *sigi so* adhortations, for the volunteer musicians and for the dancers themselves.

A tradition alive implies a tradition changing. In the description above, some new masks have been described, like the modibo, but also the "door" and the "sheep". New masks have been entering the *dama*, as a comparison with the older descriptions (Griaule 1939 e.g) easily shows. Some masks have disappeared, like the elephant mask, more have joined the troupe. The clearest example of the latter is the mask of the white man, *anyara*, which is new in itself but has already undergone quite some changes:

The white man's mask is clothed in a pantalon and shirt, the head covered by a huge wooden mask, painted a fiery red, with long wavy hair, a wild flowing beard and a hooked nose. In Griaule's days a colonial officer was imitated, writing small money notes for the audience, and saluting when he receives his 'taxes'. In our postcolonial days the tourist is imitated; the same mask operates with an wooden 'camera', forcing his way through the crowds in order to get a good shot. Especially interesting is the Sanga variation (Griaule 1938: 583): here the white person sits on a chair, with two Dogon sitting on the floor; waving a notebook the 'anyara' demands the silliest questions: the mask of the anthropologist!

Ridicule is an essential part of the performance. Especially the non-animal masks, often make fun of the "other", be it Fulani, Samo, Modibo, or white person. The Fulani man falls from his wooden hobby horse, the Fulani woman spends her time scavenging for cow dung (de Bruijn, van Dijk & van Beek 1997) and the Samo warrior fails to hit anyone.

One of the main strengths of this Dogon tradition, by and large, is its character as a "total theater": it has appeal for everyone, it gives all categories in the village their proper place, gives the young men a chance to show off individually for an audience of appreciating women, offers the older men a spurious - and temporal - mastership over their women, but first and foremost is a marvelous spectacle of dress, music and dancing. That is what life really is about.

Literature

Abspoel, P

1984 *Chansons pour les Masques Dogon*. Utrecht, ICAU.

Beudoin, Gérard

1984 *Les Dogons du Mali*. Paris, Armand Colin

W.E.A. van Beek

1988 Functions of Sculpture in Dogon Religion, *African Arts*, augustus, XXI, 4, 58-

- 66.
- 1991a Enter the Bush: a Dogon Mask Festival, in: S. Vogel (ed.), *Africa Explores; 20th Century African Art*, New York & Prestal Munich: Center for African Art, pp. 56-73.
- 1991b Dogon Restudied: A Field Evaluation of the Work of Marcel Griaule, *Current Anthropology* 32 (2), pp. 139-167.
- 1992 Becoming Human in Dogon Mali, in: Göran Aijmer (ed.), *Coming into Existence*. Göteborg-Sweden, pp. 47-69.
- 1998 Dogon Children and Their Masks, in: *Children's Masquerades in Africa*, S. Ottenberg (ed.) In press.
- van Beek, W.E.A. & P. Banga
1992 The Dogon and Their Trees, in: D. Parkin & E. Croll (eds.), *Bush Base Forest Farm*. London: Routledge, pp. 57-75.
- de Bruijn, M, J.H. van Dijk & W.E.A. van Beek
1997 Antagonisme et solidarité: les relations entre Peuls et Dogons du Mali central, in Bruijn, M. de & H. van Dijk *Peuls et Mandigues; dialectique des constructions identitaires*. Paris, Karthala/ASC, 243-266.
- Bouju, J.
1984 *Graine de l'homme, enfant du mil*. Paris: Société d'Ethnographie.
- Calame-Griaule, G.
1968 *Dictionnaire Dogon (dialect Toro): Langue et civilisation*. Paris: Klincksick.
- Dieterlen, G.
1941 *Les âmes des Dogon*. Travaux et mémoires de l'institut d'ethnologie, no. 40. Paris: Université de Paris.
- 1982 *Le titre d'honneur des Arou (Dogon-Mali)*. Paris: Musée de l'Homme, Société des Africanistes.
- 1989 Masks and Mythology among the Dogon, in: *African Arts*, XXIII, 3, 1989; 34-43.
- Dieterlen, G. & J. Rouche
1971 Les fête soixantennaires chez les Dogon. *Africa*, XLI, pp. 1-11.
- Griaule, M.
1938 *Masques Dogons*. Travaux et Mémoires de l'Institut d'Ethnologie, no. 33. Paris: Institut d'Ethnologie, Université de Paris.
- 1948 *Dieu d'eau: Entretiens avec Ogotemmêli*. Paris: Editions du Chêne.
- 1954 The Dogon, in: *African Worlds*, D. Forde (ed.), pp. 83-110. London/New York/ Toronto.
- Griaule, M. & G. Dieterlen
1965 *Le renard pâle. Tome I: Le mythe cosmogonique. Fasc. 1: La création du monde*. Travaux et mémoires de l'Institut d'Ethnologie. Paris (Dogon).
- Kervran, M.
1982 *Dictionnaire Dogon. Donno So. Région de Bandiagara*. Ed. Paroisse Catholique, Bandiagara, Mali.
- Letzens, Dirk
1971 *Mystagogie et mystification: Evaluation de l'oeuvre de Marcel Griaule*. Bujumbara, Burundi: Presses Lavigerie.
- Pern, S., B. Alexander & W.E.A. van Beek
1983 *Masked Dancers of West Africa: the Dogon*, Time/Life, Amsterdam.
- Paulme, D.
1940 *Organisation Sociale des Dogon*, PUF, Paris.

Notes

1. Research on the Dogon started in 1978, and has been carried out with a one year stay in 1979-80, and return visits almost each year, financed by various sources, i.a. the Foundation WOTRO, Utrecht University, sports sponsoring, Time-Life, Channel Four, Dutch Cooperation funds and others.
2. The dominant type of mask, known by tourists and musea, is called *èmna*. However, older types do exist as well, like the leaves-masks (van Beek 1998). However, the *èmna* mask has replaced those types as the central focus of ritual.
3. Some masks also dance at the first funerals, especially of old men, and masks perform in other ceremonies, like the *puro* as well (van Beek & Banga 1992).
4. The cosmological interpretation in the later work of Griaule (1948 and 1965, is incorrect. No Dogon recognizes this interpretation, outside the circle of Griaule's informants, and - of course - those tourist guides who cite his work. For a critique of Griaule's work, see van Beek 1991b, Lettens 1971. Good descriptions of village life in Dogon country can be found in Griaule 1938, Dieterlen 1941, 1982, Paulme 1940, Bouju 1983, Pern, Alexander & van Beek 1983. Many other summaries of Dogon life have fallen victim to the lure of the "mythologisation" of Giraule" like Beaudouin 1984).
5. See Kervran 1982, Calame-Griaule 1968.
6. The same reasoning should explain why in some villages the masks dance a serpentine trail, so an enemy cannot count them.
7. The horse- and sable antelope designated in the literature (Dieterlen 1989, Griaule 1938), i.e. *Hippotiagus equinus* or *niger*, is identified by my informants with the Dogon name *kaî*.