

GCUC 4. Africa display – Faces of Africa? Captions

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1. 60/1948/94

Helmet mask (Ẹpa)

Taken from a shrine in 1899

Yoruba, Eruku, Yagba state, SW Nigeria

Ẹpa is the name given to a specific system of religious worship that honours ancestors and the important roles peoples have in the community. The role of women in creating life is also acknowledged here. Worship includes masquerade, and for the dancer who wears such a mask Ẹpa headdresses can weigh as much as 30 kilograms.

2. Af1943,02.14

Helmet mask (Sowei)

Early 20th century

Mende, Sierra Leone

Masks carved with crowns are associated with chiefly authority. This example is wearing a European-style crown and a state umbrella. European-style crowns are thought to have been inspired by the crowns given to paramount chiefs by Queen Victoria at the time of the establishment of the Protectorate in 1896.

On loan from the British Museum.

3. 26/1959/4

Headdress (Egúngún)

Early 20th century

Yoruba, Abeokuta, Egba state, SW Nigeria

Egúngún means 'powers concealed'. As part of a costume, the egúngún headdress is danced primarily at an annual or biennial festival called Odun Egúngún. This festival honours the ancestors. Although carved for performance, this headdress was likely acquired soon after manufacture. The face is gender neutral, however, there are two different carved hair styles that represent both men and women.

4. 118/1993

Helmet mask (Mukenga)

Late 20th century

Kuba, Democratic Republic of Congo

Donated in 1993, this raffia fringed mask was made for the tourist market. In Kuba tradition this mask type was danced in the funeral ceremonies of high ranking men. Its elephant form came to symbolise leadership as a result of the wealth acquired by rulers through the trade in precious goods.

5. Af1925.1009.2

Headdress (Chi wara)

Late 19th century

Bamana, SW Mali

Acquiring the knowledge of ancestral traditions required all males to pass initiation rituals through secret societies. Chi wara is the society concerned with cultivation. In rituals, antelope headdresses are worn by members in male-female pairs to ensure success in farming.

On loan from the British Museum.

6. 66/1938/9

Headdress (Ogboni)

Acquired 1894 – 1900

Yoruba, SW Nigeria

Associated with the Ogboni (or Oṣugbo) society, a council of wise elders who are responsible for the selection of kings. They also provide judgement on serious crimes. They believe their power flows from the earth. The motifs on this headdress are connected to Onilẹ, a lesser deity of the earth, and symbolise being imbued with her spirit.

7. 9/1889/47

Face mask

Acquired by Dennett before 1889

Kongo peoples, Loango coastal region of Central Africa

A ritual mask highlighted in cosmologically significant colours. Black relates to the world of the living, white is concerned with the world of the dead or the ancestors, and red is the colour of transition. This mask would have been worn by one who had the power to negotiate the invisible powers of these worlds. The skin attached to the mask is that of a civet cat, a semiaquatic animal.

8. 88/1928/58 & 59

Helmet crest masks (Gẹlẹde)

Bought by F.P. Pinkett 1895 - 1911

Yoruba (Anago), Republic of Benin

Between March and May each year, masks are danced in pairs by men during the Gẹlẹde masquerade to promote social harmony and well-being in the community. This mask is carved in the form of a woman with a cloth gèlè, or head wrap. Forward facing gèlè are for young women whose futures are ahead of them.

9. 88/1928/57

Helmet crest mask (Gẹlẹde)

Bought by F.P. Pinkett 1895 - 1911

Yoruba (Awori), possibly Ota, SW Nigeria

Gẹlẹde masquerade is an afternoon visual feast that appeases the power of àjẹ or 'the mothers'. This mask depicts a male-looking face with an elaborate hairstyle. The mask shows no sign of use. Pinkett probably acquired his masks from the market or the carver's workshop.

10. 24/1919/1

Crest mask (Ekpo)

Made before 1919

Ibibio, Cross River region, SE Nigeria

Ekpo is an ancestor spirit society. This mask is likely to represent the idiok ekpo, a dangerous, wandering ghost with horns. Ekpo ceremonies are also accompanied by drumming and music. Ibibio religion pays tribute to the ancestors, failing to do so will result in the wrath of the Ekpo society.

11. 58/1958/2

Face mask

Acquired before 1958

Possibly Dan Guere, Côte d'Ivoire

This face mask is covered with white pigment, likely kaolin, which might represent a connection to the ancestral world. This mask does not appear to have been used, and was likely made for the tourist market.

12. 88/1928/67

Helmet crest mask (Màgbó)

Bought by F.P. Pinkett 1895 - 1911

Yoruba, Itu Meko, Ikorodu, SW Nigeria

Carved for the Màgbó festival of the Oro society, it is performed by men to honour Olókun, the goddess of the sea. This mask includes a superstructure composed of a horseman and four male figures, likely Muslims. Horse riders are generally symbols of authority, status and power. This high quality example has been attributed to master carver Onabanjo (1880 – 1910) of the Itu Meko quarter of the town.

13. 78/1950

Wall mounted mask

Made before 1950

Nigeria

Certain masks in Southeast Nigeria are created to look frightening, either to represent illness, deformity or to capture the essence of a person whose evil deeds in life have caused them to become ghosts. This mask could be an apprentice carver's attempt to reproduce a traditional mask for sale.

14. 37/1998

Face mask (Ekpo)

Late 20th century

Annang, Ibesiko, SE Nigeria

Ekpo characters were meant to inspire fear and respect. The circlet depicted on this mask shows that the ancestor represented was a member of the prestigious diviner's society called idiong. Members of the men's ekpo society perform masquerades at funerals and at an annual festival.

15. 369/1977/3

Wall plaque

Bequeathed in 1977

Nigeria

This example of tourist art was never designed to be worn but to be hung on a wall. It presents an image that lacks any specific identity. This item reflects an appeal to European aesthetic values and tells us more about the commercial nature of tourist art than it does about an interest in African cultures.

16. 100/2000/29

Helmet crest mask (Gẹlẹde)

Bought by Michael Barbour 1969

Yoruba, Ibadan, SW Nigeria

Mask with facial marks outlined in blue, probably painted with a Reckitt's Blue tablet.

This mask would have been worn by a male dancer for daytime performances staged in villages and towns. Unusually for a mask of this date, it has an export permit, issued by the Nigerian Department of Antiquities in February 1969.

17. 88/1928/53 & 62

Helmet crest masks (Gẹlẹde)

Bought by F.P. Pinkett 1895 - 1911

Yoruba (Egba), SW Nigeria

The crested hair styles identify these masks as portrayals of young married women, one has a lip plug which suggests maturity. Gẹlẹde honours mothers, female ancestors, and pays homage to elderly women and their powers to protect fertility and ensure the community's well-being.

E13 – nganga related items

18. 9/1889/106

Double bell (kunda)

Acquired by Dennett 1879 - 1889

Kongo peoples, Loango coastal region of Central Africa

The kunda was used by an nganga to pay homage to, or to call upon the spirits of the dead in acts of divination or to hunt down witches. The bell's double shape refers to the function of sound in mediating between the worlds of the living and the dead.

19. 9/1889/58

Knife

Acquired by Dennett 1879 - 1889

Kongo peoples, Loango coastal region of Central Africa

A tool used by an nganga to identify a guilty individual.

20. 9/1889/62

Power figure (Nkisi N'Kondi)

Acquired by Dennett 1879 - 1889

Kongo peoples, Loango coastal region of Central Africa

This deconsecrated nkisi was charged with the hunting and the persecution of wrongdoers. This figure played an important role in maintaining social order in Kongo societies.

21. 9/1889/56

Power figure (nkisi)

Acquired by Dennett 1879 - 1889

Kongo peoples, Loango coastal region of Central Africa

Charged with marine shells and other medicines (bilongo), this nkisi is connected to water spirits. This vessel was believed to capture the invisible forces from the land of the dead.

22. 9/1889/52

Harp

Acquired by Dennett 1879 - 1889

Kongo peoples, Loango coastal region of Central Africa

This instrument may not have been actually played by an nganga but instead was made for sale. Music was an essential component of ceremony.

23. 9/1889/46

Face mask

Acquired by Dennett 1879 - 1889

Kongo peoples, Loango coastal region of Central Africa

Mask of a type worn by an nganga for ceremony. It could represent an ancestor. During his performance, the nganga would go into a possession trance and communicate with the spirit world.

24. 9/1889/68

Lidded box

Acquired by Dennett 1879 - 1889

Kongo peoples, Loango coastal region of Central Africa

A container for kaolin or chalk. Kaolin would have belonged to an nganga for his ritual face paint. White mamoni lines around his eyes helped him to see the hidden sources of illness and evil.

25. 9/1889/61

Power figure (nkisi)

Acquired by Dennett 1879 - 1889

Kongo peoples, Loango coastal region of Central Africa

The dog was a protector of the home and a hunter of witches. It also existed in both the world of the living and the dead.

26. 9/1889/109

Ordeal bark (nkasa)

Acquired by Dennett 1879 - 1889

Kongo peoples, Loango coastal region of Central Africa

Likely a sample of the poisonous *Erythrophleum guineensis* tree. The nganga would test a person accused of witchcraft by consuming this bark. Those not affected by the bark's effects were shown to be guilty.