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Article

# Matter in Motion: A Dogon *Kanaga* Mask

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**Abstract:** Dogon masks have been famous for a long time—and none more so than the *kanaga* mask, the so-called croix de Lorraine. A host of interpretations of this particular mask circulate in the literature, ranging from moderately exotic to extremely exotic. This contribution will focus on one particular mask situated within the whole mask troupe, and it will do so in the ritual setting to which it belongs: a second funeral, long after the burial. A description of this ritual shows how the mask troupe forms the constantly moving focus in a captivating ritual serving as second funeral. Thus, the mask rites bridge major divides in Dogon culture, between male and female, between man and nature, and between this world and the supernatural one. They are able to do so because they themselves are in constant motion, between bush and village and between sky and earth. Masks are matter in motion and symbols in context. Within imagistic religions such as the Dogon one, these integrative functions form a major focus of Dogon masks rituals—and hence, to some extent, of African mask rituals in general. In the Dogon case, the ritual creates a virtual reality through a highly embodied performance by the participants themselves. Then, the final question can be broached, that of interpretation. What, in the end, do these masquerades signify? And our *kanaga* mask, what does it stand for?

**Keywords:** mask; Dogon; funeral; performance; symbol; embodiment

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## 1. The Glory of Masks

The 16 May 1989 is full of high expectations in the village and feverish activity in Amani, for this is the day when the masks perform not just for the village but for the ‘strangers’ as well, meaning visitors from neighbouring villages.<sup>1</sup> At the various dancing places throughout the village, groups of masks, each from its own ward, perform for their own appreciative neighbours and family members. Domo Pujugo, one of the youngsters of Amani, carefully prepared his *kanaga* mask long before the start of the dances a week ago, and he is proud now to show off with all the other dancers wearing this particular mask, and exerts himself as the antelope that this particular mask represents (see Figure 1, below). After this local performance the spectators move with masks and drummers to the houses where people have died in the previous years, because after all is danced and done, the masks are to honour the departed and provide their means to become ancestors. Everywhere the dancers are eagerly welcomed and, after the dance, hosted with large quantities of millet beer.

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<sup>1</sup> The data for this article come from personal fieldwork of the author in the Dogon area, starting in 1979 and lasting till 2016, a total of two years of field experience. The particular ritual described happened in 1989, and the author was involved in the proceedings as one of the visitors from the neighbouring village of Tireli. As the mother of his host was born in Amani, his adopted family had a front seat in this particular *dama*.



**Figure 1.** The mask of Domo Pujugo.

In the meantime, the visitors from the other villages arrive, first at the compounds of their friends or distant relatives, and are also received with ample beer. Their presence in the village and their assistance at the upcoming afternoon, which forms a crucial part of the whole mask festival, is absolutely essential; they have to ‘shield’ the masks when they emerge from the plains. In particular, the ones whose mothers came from Amani are in front, because as ‘sisters’ sons’ of the village, they are in the perfect relationship to give ritual assistance at the high times of *dama*—the word for the mask festival in fact means ‘taboo’.

The remainder of the morning is spent in what is, for the boys, one of the highpoints, a series of performances that together form a sort of dancing contest. The boys form groups, usually per ward, and go on to the other village squares for the remainder of the morning. There, they dance, as they have done in the past week; and when the drums grow silent at noon, the various crowds disperse, having come to some consensus as to who is the best dancer of the village. As this is Dogon, there is no prize and no proclamation, just the recognition of being the most agile dancer—which will undoubtedly help the winner later with the many admiring girls.

This particular day in the long sequence of the *dama* festival is called *manugo sugo*, ‘descent<sup>2</sup> from the plains’, and is one of the absolute highlights of the whole month of rituals. In the early afternoon, the old men gather on the square, discuss the proceedings of the day, and move down to the village rim, taking the drums with them. They seem nervous now, wary of any infractions on the liturgy,

<sup>2</sup> The floor of the scree, where the dance is held, is the lowest point in the landscape.

when they mark out the dancing ground at the foot of the scree. The *yasigine*, women who accompany the masks, come down also—aided by some co-wives who help them carry pots of beer—and install their brew at the rim of the grounds, sporting their long calabash spoons that define them as ‘sisters of the masks’. They form the exception to the rule: masks are for men, and are taboo for women; these particular women, however, have been initiated into the masks, either by choice (and investment) or by birth.

Around three in the afternoon, the initiates come down, emerging from all over the village. Yelling, the masks shout ‘hé hé hé’, and run down the slope as ‘naked masks’ without any head covering. As such, they are all dressed more or less the same, as without headpieces, it is difficult to distinguish between types of masks. Without giving bystanders a glance, they pass the people at the grounds and run full speed into the dunes, halting just over the first one. Three elders, one with a drum, follow them into the bush, as they have to head the procession later on. The other men set out the perimeter of the dancing ground by walking in a single file along the rim, forcing the spectators aside. By now, quite a crowd has assembled. Women keep their distance and just watch from the houses near the grounds, but from this elevated position, they have a splendid view of the proceedings. The men, who are initiated and do not have anything to fear from the masks anyway, come closer and circle the grounds, while young boys climb the trees lining the spot.

The sun is lower at 16:30, when the sound of drumming comes from the dunes. The elders at the rim make a last nervous round to make sure the dancing ground is spotless and free of people (i.e., of young boys) and then join the crowd, who all look toward the dunes. From afar, a long, dark line of masks slowly nears the village, following an S-shaped route that gradually brings them to the dancing ground. At some distance, they gather the headpieces they had left at the start of the dunes and don them. Those with plaited tops place them at the back of their heads and remain ‘naked’ for a while longer, meaning they show their faces. For those with heavy wooden headpieces, like the *kanaga*, this is not an option and they don them completely. The ‘foreigners’ now join them, men from Yaye in the east and those from Tireli on the western side, and walk along with them, while praising the masks in the ritual mask language, *sigi so*, see below Figure 2, for the western side.



**Figure 2.** Men from Tireli accompanying the *kanaga* section of the Amani masks, 1989. Note the ‘naked’ masks in front.

The rationale for this arrangement is indeed protection: the two neighbouring villages shield the masks from the envious glares of villages farther away and less friendly; well, the shielding, evidently, is ritual.

The three elders in front with the drums show the whole column the way and move aside when they reach the main dancing ground at the foot of the cliff, where all dancers adjust their headpieces. There is tension in the air, for this is the time for the large dance, the time for a great performance with everybody watching. It is still a time of taboo (*dama*); indeed, it is the peak of the collective taboo, and the elders in charge stay on high alert.

The dancing ground has been marked off near a cone-shaped altar, with the mask pole, the *dani*, erected next to it. This is the ritual centre, and the masks will dance toward it with the drummers positioned next to it. The elders keep patrolling the grounds, chasing away anyone who does not belong here, such as women or small boys; but no woman dares to come near anyway, for they are genuinely frightened now—just some daring young boys who want to show off, dash over the grounds, barely keeping out of reach of the sticks of the elders.

This is the first time that all of the masks show up in one dance. As usual, the *emna tiû* (tree masks) lead the way, and with eight of them, it is a small walking thicket of trees—a dancing forest, in fact. The five-metre-high headpieces are difficult to manoeuvre, and any dancer who can pull this off is highly regarded indeed, so they all sway their contraption up and down, in front and behind, and swing the ‘trees’ around, with the audience at a respectful and wise distance. Sitting on a house near the grounds, the *emna tingetange* tie on their stilts and come in next. They always have to perform early in the programme, as fatigue would make their dance dangerous. They represent water birds, and their dance on stilts shows this: stepping daintily along the crowd, (see Figure 3, below) even standing on one leg and tapping the two stilts together, a feat highly appreciated by the onlookers. If one falters, all men rush to the rescue to catch the dancer; it sometimes happens, but rarely.

The large group of *kanaga* masks then makes its appearance, and only now does one see how popular this mask is. There are more than twenty of them. They have already made quite an impression in earlier appearances, but now they dominate the general dance: dancing, prancing, and sweeping their ‘horns’ through the dust. The old men are everywhere, beating the earth with their sticks while shouting at full force in *sigi so*: ‘Dance, dance well, be strong. If a woman shows up, beat her!’ This mask, topped with a *Croix de Lorraine*, features on all the tourist brochures and formerly on Mali’s banknotes, and it has become the icon of Dogon masquerades. It is popular among the Dogon youth—who are free to choose their own main mask—as it is quite a showy one, while still being rather easy to dance in, compared with the first two at least. The *kanaga* line up and, following their specific drum rhythm, cavort on the stage of the *tei*, shaking their torsos, jumping and twirling. After some contortions, they bend over and swing the horns of their headpieces over the ground, stirring up dust, see Figure 4, below. While the drums go full throttle, the old men keep shouting in *sigi so* that they have to dance well. They perform in small lines of about four dancers, meaning that each of them has enough stage time to wipe the dust off the dancing floor and show his prowess at this dance; they can prove themselves real *sagatara*, strong young men, which is why this mask is so popular.

Then it is time for the other types of masks, in no particular order. Three young dancers in *goû* (hares) masks appear, and the drums switch to a slower beat to accompany this more youthful performance. One of the elders from the audience joins in with a spear and acts as the hunter, spotting the three hares and dancing after them. The three masks look around, see the hunter, and flee to the rim of the *tei*, continuously watching for other dangers as well. Thus, an amusing hunting scene is played out, and the agile hares just manage to escape the wily hunter. Young initiates are expected to dance a hare, an amusing piece of theatre that is appreciated by the admiring crowd. The hunter may well be represented by a mask also, *emna dananu*, a fierce-looking human, a real man of the bush—but this time, no such mask appears and one elder happily joins in this play of the masks.

The hares have hardly left before a gazelle mask, *emna wiru*, bursts onto the scene at great speed, his long horns pointing backwards, running fast to the rapid beat of the drums. His is not a play of hide

and seek, but a demonstration of speed and agility, fleet-footed and fast. He is usually alone; this is a mask that demands a good runner to dance with it. Other masks follow, depending on the composition of this ward's troupe—in this case, it is an *emna jojongunu*, a healer's mask. Slowly walking with his headpiece crowned with four human figures, the mask does not really dance but slowly perambulates among the audience. From time to time, he halts, kneels down, takes some medicine stuff from his pouch, and hands it to an onlooker, who is then expected to thank him and give some money. This is a doctor making his rounds, a role for an older dancer in fact, less forceful and vigorous, but demanding good judgement and some theatrical skills.

Some masks embody the gentle jokes of the Dogon to pull on their former masters, like the Fulbe and the white man, the *anjara*. The Fulbe man is pictured on a hobby horse and never manages to stay on top of it, continuously stumbling and falling, while his wife is always scooping up cattle dung; they are hardly the severe slave raiders they used to be in the nineteenth century. The white man's mask, *emna anjara*, is also suited for an older man, in European trousers just strolling around with his huge red, bearded head and long flowing hair. His 'dance' resembles the one of the healer: he walks around, writes out notes, and then collects some coins—the colonial officer raking in taxes. Two recent versions are even more to the point. In one, the mask sports a wooden camera and bends over backwards to take a beautiful shot, shoving other masks aside to get a perfect angle for his photo: the tourist. The most pleasant variant, however, just sits on a stool, with two Dogon on the floor next to him, and brandishes a notebook while asking the most stupid questions imaginable: the anthropologist! In fact, the last *emna anjara* I collected was made in my own likeness, (see Figure 5, below) and my host Dogolu smilingly acknowledged: 'That one is you!'



Figure 3. *Tingetange* performing.



**Figure 4.** *Kanaga* dancing, Tireli 2008.



**Figure 5.** This is, thus, more or less the author.

The other masks take their turn performing, coming on stage in small groups by genre: the bull, two gazelles, two hyenas, a monkey, the marabout, the healer, the *waru* antelopes, the *sadimbe*, mother of the masks, and one pupil mask, *beje*—they are all there to be admired for their performance. As they perform in smaller groups, the other masks join the spectators and sit down on the stones that line the dancing place, so the masks dance for both the regular audience and their own colleagues.

The dance routines vary, up to a point. Three dance routines are performed by all masks; when they show up as one whole troupe, as they will do at the end of the dance and during the next day, they all perform this set of routines. Additionally, each mask has its own dance, its proper steps

and drum rhythm, often mimicking the movement of the animals or people it represents: the bird picking the earth, the hyena jumping to look at its prey, the antelopes fleet footed. Some basic steps appear in all of them, as each dance is a variation of a general theme. The drums lead and follow the dances; they introduce the three general ones and then follow closely the movements of the individual masks, underscoring the specific steps and movements that mark the identity of the *emma* in question.

The liminality of the performance becomes evident when small accidents happen. One of the trees breaks, a fairly common problem with these long contraptions of light, soft wood. Immediately, all the men in the audience start yelling and the elders swarm onto the dancing ground, running toward the mask in question and dancing around it, effectively shielding the damaged mask from the eyes of the audience—in particular, of course, from women. Surrounding the mask, they carefully lead it to the entrance of the dancing grounds and whisk it away to change into a new headpiece. It will be repaired later. When the *kanaga* wipe the soil, one of them may break off a ‘horn’, and they are treated the same way: masks have to be perfect. Carefully, the elders take away the broken parts, as no part of a mask may remain at the dancing place. As dancing is fierce and quite competitive during the peak of the *dama*, such mishaps are to be expected. Yet, when a whole mask stumbles, perhaps inevitable given the athletic prowess needed for a good performance, the reaction is one of mild amusement, and the dancer simply has to regain his feet on his own.

After the first round of dancing, the drums stop, and the masks crouch in a large circle around the mask altar, where Yedyè—the village speaker—addresses them, (see Figure 6) lauding their performance and exhorting them to keep up the good work: ‘God bless you, keep up the good work. This is not a thing of ourselves; it is a thing of old, a thing found. You have danced well, this which we could not do. You are the force in the village that can dance.’<sup>3</sup> May God bless you, give you many children.’ At intervals during his long speech (with as many repetitions as it should have), the dancers stand up, wave their horsetail, and shout the mask cry, ‘hé hé hé.’ The whole address is in *sigi so*, the mask language of the Dogon.



**Figure 6.** Yedyè, the ritual speaker, addressing the masks of Amani. The *dani* is on the left, the altar is in the centre behind the elder in black. The mask headpieces are shoved back.

<sup>3</sup> Such an expression of dependence of the old on the young inside rituals is quite standard in Dogon communal rituals.

For about two hours, the masks dance constantly, in groups or individually. In the end, when dusk is gathering, they end the masquerade in a final show in which all of them participate. Now, the long line of masks performs as one, dancing one round; and finally, when nearing the entrance, each mask type runs into the village—the last ones, the hares, leaving the dancing ground empty in the falling dark. As a final farewell to this great day, the four *yasigine* form a group and slowly dance along the whole perimeter of the grounds, with their calabash spoons in one hand and with the other hand trailing their steps with their long *soû duro*, the fly whisks made of horse tails, the same many masks use. Thus, they symbolically erase their own tracks, as well as those of the masks—an act called *jaramu* (purification) by the Dogon—thus lifting the taboo from the dancing ground.

## 2. Apparitions from the Bush

A *dama* is a spectacle one never forgets, and 16 May 1989 is just one day out of a whole month of rituals. However, it is the most important one, this large-scale arrival of the masks at the scree-side. For what did we just witness, other than a captivating spectacle?

Religious studies, the craft that investigates some of mankind's deepest expressions of 'otherness', is based on observations such as we just have described, but observations that are always encompassed in interpretative frameworks (Grimes 2014; Bell 1997; Steward and Strathern 2014). To observe is to interpret, especially when it concerns 'things', such as these masks who are in fact strange objects. Coming from a western culture that is extremely 'thingy', and where each individual lives in an environment saturated with objects, we have a definite classification of 'things'. The bulk of our western objects are functional—or have been functional in the past, as a walk on one's attic might attest—and may carry remembrances or other associations, but are not highly symbolic in themselves. On the other hand, we do have symbols, but in our culture, these are a separate class of objects, which have changed their utility function into a purely symbolic one, such as the cross, a candle, or a flag. Evans-Pritchard once remarked about the Nuer of Sudan, that all their 'things' could bear a considerable symbolic load simply because there were so few of them, such as their spears (Evans-Pritchard 1956, p. 233); in this materially austere pastoral culture, each of the few objects in their possession formed the nexus of a relational and symbolic network, which obfuscated the distinction between a symbolic object and an everyday thing. When we are confronted with 'things in rituals', our first level of interpretation is that these are 'symbolic things', symbols, so doused with meaning beyond any functionality. With masks, that seems a foregone conclusion, for they are, indeed, special things, made for the occasion—even for one particular *dama*—and are used only in ritual, kept away from prying eyes beyond liminal times. So our first analytic question is to the meaning of the masks, expecting a symbolic signification of 'things in action'. Symbols are objects that do not refer to themselves but are 'thrown together'—the literary meaning of the word: form and meaning are not intrinsically connected (Grimes 2014, p. 344). Usually, they are polysemic and multivocal, signifying a host of meanings at the same time; in Ndembu culture Turner's example of the *mudyi* tree, with its white effusion, is paradigmatic (Steward and Strathern 2014, p. 54; Bell 1997, p. 40).

So for our interpretation, a preliminary question should be whether these masks are symbols. Are they? The inherent 'strangeness' of the masks presents a challenge for our analytic acumen, an offer we cannot refuse; these are obvious pathways of interpretation for western observers, and both lead to over-interpretation. Studies of individual masks routinely assume specific significations attributed by the 'West': masks are thought to represent ancestors, deities, and spirits, or more exotic, cosmos or creation. A different tack of western interpretation is that they are 'art', another category of objects without function in our culture; in essence, this definition frees the analyst from attributing any meaning at all, because 'art' exists for and in itself. These are stereotypical European interpretations, which do not fit very well with emic insights gleaned from the field. It is impossible to make a general case for African cultures, but at least in the Dogon example, the idea that masks refer to deities, ancestors, or creation is not correct (Van Beek 1991b). Also, though Dogon do express aesthetic

appreciation quite easily, their language does not have a word that corresponds with the western notion of 'art'. Given these differences, what would be a more fitting interpretation of masks?

So let us see what these masks mean for the Dogon themselves. First of all, what we call masks and the Dogon call *imina* or *emna*, are not just the things the boys wear on their heads, but the whole apparition, the dancer clothed in his costume, topped with the carved headpiece and with the paraphernalia in hand, such as the horsetails. The African equation runs as follows: mask = costume + headpiece + paraphernalia. It is this whole, undivided, and complete being that the Dogon call a mask—in fact, this is similar to all African masking groups—and we follow them in this. The costume, with its red and black fibres and the long blue trousers, defines the whole as a mask; and the headpiece stipulates what specific kind of mask is meant. This is by no means peculiar to the Dogon *emna*, but holds for the great bulk of African masks. For the Dogon themselves masks, are, first and for all, masks, *emna*, a class of beings in their own right.

These masks, therefore, are not so much symbols as apparitions, a presence instead of a representation; they signify themselves as a category: a mask is a mask is a mask. To some extent, they have an iconic side. For a large part, the masks portray animals from the bush, wild animals, very seldom domestic ones—such as antelopes, water birds, hares, monkeys, and gazelles, and sometimes also crocodiles, buffaloes, leopards, and hyenas. Another section concerns humans, because we see in the masks healers, Fulbe, hunters, shamans, and the odd European. There is no association with deities or ancestors, and only an indirect one with spirits from the bush. The latter is much stronger in masquerades in other parts of Africa, but is hidden in the Dogon *dama*. Portrayal, though, does not imply representations, the masks 'are' not animals, they rather portray the idea of the animal in question; if Africans want to portray an animal as such, they are perfectly capable of doing so in quite direct and recognizable ways.

If the performing masks mainly refer to themselves, any search for a more encompassing meaning has to be at a higher echelon, of the mask ritual as a whole. Ritual objects attain their meaning not from what they are, but what they do inside ritual. However, as Harvey Whitehouse's modes of religiosity theory indicates (Whitehouse 2004), this is a highly imagistic ritual inside a religion dominated by imagistic processes. Whitehouse's main distinction is between high frequency rituals with limited emotional investment but subject to elaborate systematic exegesis, on the one hand, the doctrinal religiosity, and on the other, an infrequent ritual with a large visual appeal that bears little explanation—the imagistic religiosity. For the latter, there is no authoritative exegesis, no authority to 'explain' things, and the main challenge is to participate—and participate correctly—instead of a deep understanding; this is exactly what is found for the participants in the Dogon masquerade, and most exegesis is spontaneous, on the spot. But whatever its association with death, for the young boys who are dancing, the *dama* is a feast, and feasts need no explanation.

Yet, the liturgy does give some pointers for an overall interpretation. The name of the day we witnessed is *manugo sugo*: descent from the plains. The core of the *dama*, the whole complex mask ritual, is in the arrivals in the village: from the four directions the masks enter the village, from each direction on a consecutive day, and the last the one we just saw, from the plains. On the previous days, they came from the mountainside and alongside the cliff from the north-eastern side. At the end of the *dama*, the masks leave again, toward the south-west. Even if it is organised by one village only, the ritual links a string of villages along the cliff. So the first interpretation is that the masks represent the bush coming into the village. African thought attributes specific powers to the bush, as well as the Dogon. From the bush stems wisdom, power, and fertility to be used inside the human village, and the animals from the bush represent that power and wisdom. Masks are—and here, the Dogon are typical—'things from the bush'. Masks are often associated with bush spirits, though not so much in Dogon; but then again, the implication is 'bush' first and spirit later. Myths of mask origin routinely stress the provenance from the bush.

This distinction between bush and village is surprisingly stable in African masking in general, whatever the specific ecological conditions of the various groups, from Senegal's coast to the eastern

border of Congo, and from the Dogon here in Mali to the Zambian Ndembu, the nature of their 'bush' varies greatly, but the dichotomy remains the same. It is an opposition that is 'good to think', in Levi-Straussian terms.

So in the ritual, the masks cross the border between bush and village, a crucial opposition in their worldview; they are not imitations of animals but 'fusions of worlds', a mix of the human and the animal world, the village plus the bush. The masks share human and animal characteristics, they are 'therio-anthropic' (Fardon 1990, 2007). They bridge these two separate realms not by being there, but by movement, by journeying between the two worlds. The main thing a mask does is 'to appear', as when we saw them come from the bush; the village waits motionless for a moving mask, walking, dancing, or running at full speed. A mask is only a proper *emna* when it appears, when it dances, when it performs, and when it leaves again into the bush shouting its characteristic cries. A headpiece in a museum may look good, but it is not a real mask—for two reasons; the first is the lack of costume, and the second is the fact that it just hangs on its spot without any movement. To analyse such a static mask is the same as analysing a ballet by focusing on a description of the ballerina's shoes.

Masks do not just walk, travel, and run; they mainly dance, they perform—the second aspect of movement, and the most spectacular one. Each mask in Dogon shares with all masks three standard dances with their respective drum rhythms, while each individual mask also has its own proper dance and drum rhythm. These dances often mimic the animal, like the high-stepping water birds, the shy hiding of the hares, and the light-footed running of the gazelles. When they rest, the masks sit at the rim of the square, watching their colleague-dancers perform, and then they are audience, not masks, as they do not move.

The second major border is between the genders, and here, the opposition-cum-mediation is more complex. It begins with the myth. As among many African groups, in the Dogon myth of the mask arrival, it is a woman who found the masks first—which originated among bush animals, in particular, among red ants according to the Dogon—and who danced with it, later to be appropriated by the men. This reflects a dominant aspect of masks: they are heavily gendered. Masks accentuate the line between the genders; all African masks do. The public secret, kept 'hidden' from the women, is that there are men inside these weird apparitions. Of course, the emphasis here is on 'public', as each woman knows this perfectly well, and they usually are well aware of who is dancing what mask. Nevertheless, these *emna* do form a threat for the women, especially for their fertility, and they avoid any direct contact or close encounter. The reason is in the symbolic logic of the mask rituals.

A major interpretation of the whole liturgy of the Dogon *dama* states that this whole complex ritual, with the masks at its very core, is a ritual way for the men to generate life out of death (Van Beek 1991a). This is not too farfetched in a second funeral, wherein the dead have to become ancestors. For instance, babies born after the *dama* are deemed to represent of the deceased and carry their name; the circle of life is short among the Dogon, and it is the masks that close that circle. So the *dama* 'produces' life, because through their masks, the men appropriate the powers of life. Another clue for this interpretation resides in the feminization of several masks. In Figure 2 the stilt dancers, who represent wading water birds, sport 'breasts' made of baobab fruit halves—as is clearly shown on the close-up photo below of Figure 7—while quite a few masks show a hairdo that is definitely feminine, or wear feminine jewels. Also, the Dogon think that after the *dama*, many children will be born. So in the *dama*, the masked men have ritually appropriated the sources of life, and thus during this short liminal moment fertility, is transferred from the wombs of the women into the dance of the masks.

Now, fertility is not always the issue in African masks, but the Dogon masquerade operates in a different ritual environment from usual. Most mask rituals elsewhere are about the initiation of boys, but the *dama* functions as the second funeral in the first place. Almost immediately after death, the corpse is buried in one of the caves that dot the cliff side. Depending on the person who died, the first funeral can then be held either straight away or within a year; this is the so-called *yu yana*, a major complex of rituals lasting five days and nights. This first funeral does feature some masks as one of its many components, but in these rites, other elements—such as guns—dominate, not masks. However,

in the second funeral, the *dama*, masks are everywhere and the link between death and fertility comes into full focus (Van Beek 2006).



**Figure 7.** A stilt mask, having a smoke while resting.

So the opposition man–woman runs deep and incorporates the border between death and fertility, a very fundamental one, and masks cross that border running at full speed. But here, the virtual reality of the ritual and the mundane reality of biology contradict each other. Evidently, the ritual self-sufficiency in male fertility is a chimera, just recognizable as a symbolic undercurrent in liminal times, while the women are perfectly aware that they are the ones who actually create the new generations. The wishful fertility of the men stands perpendicular to the real fertility of those excluded from the masking. As these two fertilities are at odds with each other, masks are indeed dangerous for female fertility, and that concern of the women makes perfect symbolic sense; the power that arrives from the bush is inimical to the actual source of procreation. The ‘sisters of the mask’, the *yasigine*, provide an ironic subtext—because even as masks, men have to drink and eat; and their very definition of masculinity, and surely of masking masculinity, fully prohibits them from doing these mundane tasks themselves. Masks may help men to gain procreative ascendancy, but that fleeting moment of male glory lasts for just one month, once every twelve years—and then only by force of that essential outsider: the mask.

### 3. Materiality, Performance, and Embodiment

Thus far, we have looked at the overall interpretation of the *dama* complex, featuring bush, death, and fertility, but for the individual performant, this elevated and, inevitably, constructed view need not be relevant at all. For the observer, this is a spectacle with symbolic associations and interpretative clues; for the dancer, the performer, or even the audience, this need not be the case. The young

men dancing with the masks are ‘inside’ the ritual in a completely different way. They have to change into the mask, they are the ones who dance in the thick costumes with heavy headpieces, in the blistering heat of the afternoon, staying alert during the performance in order not to trip, as they see very little of their surroundings when dancing. Ritual is always embodied, but these performances take embodiment to a next level. As part of the *dama*, the young men change into masks, and thus we did not speak of dancers or ‘maskers’ as sometimes is done in art circles, but simply of masks, *emna*. What appears are ‘masks’, not persons. The very material exigencies of the costumes and headpieces, the driving rhythm of the drums, the constant exhortations of the elders in the ritual language, the yelling colleague-masks, and the high ululations of the admiring women and girls all come together in a new embodied persona for the performer. His very exertions identify him with the ritual setting, aided by the long preparations, and his extensive practicing of the dancing skills that have led to this moment. Thus, the ‘culturally in-skilled embodied schemas’ (Vásquez 2011, p. 318, Steward and Strathern 2014, p. 119) converge in a crowning moment of glory.

Performance theory gives an additional angle into the masquerade, as two joined elements are added, aesthetics and judgment. In many ritual contexts, masks may aim at shocking or frightening their audience, but in this part of the *dama*, the mask performance is to be admired, liked, and emulated. A mask means a correct, convincing mask, and dancing means dancing well, just as the whole collective performance has to go well; Steward and Strathern call this ‘felicitous performativity’ (Steward and Strathern 2014, p. 93). Ritual performance is judged. The village aims at a ‘good *dama*’, the individual performer tries to stand out in his performance, in the gentle competition that is part of the masquerade and is one of its motivational engines.

From this vantage point of performative embodiment, we now go back to Domo Pujugo; he has danced well between all the other *kanaga*, just as he has danced other mask types too, as most youngsters have done. However, we also mentioned that he wrote his name on his mask top, as did several of his age mates that year in Amani—either their name or the year. A second example is the following (Figure 8):



**Figure 8.** Another *kanaga* of 1989. Note the year on the base of the headpiece.

The boys saw this as enhancing their performance, their personal standing out. Schooling in this part of the Dogon area came rather late; in neighbouring Tireli, the first school was founded in the 1970s, and some years later in Amani. So the boys of 1989 were among the first initiated who were schooled, and they were proud of it—hence the writing of their names. I bought this particular mask from Domo himself at the end of the *dama*. Masks are used only once for real *dama*, and after that may be sold; some ritual objects have to be fresh and new, not old. At that moment, I thought the writing on masks would be a new trend, which in itself is a normal feature of masquerades because they change constantly, with small adaptations to new circumstances.<sup>4</sup> But the elders of Amani were not so pleased, because they immediately realized that not just boys could read and write, but girls as well, if not now, then in the immediate future. There were probably already young women among the public who could read who were ‘inside’ that *kanaga*; the public secret was out, for these women were now forced to ‘really know’ and could no longer profess ignorance; and surely they would talk about it, the one thing a public secret aims to avoid. Not just dances have to be performed, but public secrets demand performance as well, by all parties.

So after the *dama*, the old men came together and issued a ruling that henceforth no one should write his name or anything else on the mask; there was to be just the mask and no text, and this was to be the case not only for the *kanaga*—which is well suited for writing—but for all headpieces. And, indeed, this rule was followed in the later masquerades, as well as in other villages, which do not at all fall under any jurisdiction of these particular elders. For instance, in 2008 in Tireli, with many more schooled participants and a huge outpouring of *kanaga* masks, no writing appeared on any mask.

After all, the mask we started out with, the one of Domo Pujugo, has become quite unique—in fact, it is a time piece, as it highlights a point in Dogon history where basic schooling had just started and, for a short moment, could be used as a distinction. Only at this time could the schoolboys think they were the only ones who could read and write and could stand out as such. They thought they had found another way for the gentle competition that runs inside the masking festival, a notion that could not have surfaced earlier. In itself, such a change fits well into the open system that masks are in Dogon culture; masks show trends and fashions.

However, this novelty turned out to be a contradiction in itself, as they wrote their own name on the mask, and the year—1989. Through their writing, the ritual object became part of another world, not of the virtual reality of a funeral (Kapferer 2004, p. 46; Van Beek 2008), but of the real one of the school and daily life. By the simple act of writing, the mask was ‘deliminalized’. A *kanaga* with a name on it is not a mask but a personal billboard, endangering the construction of meaning of the whole masquerade. The mask elders of Amani were thus completely justified, and their reaction shows their very awareness of the essence of the mask festival, of the borders that should not be crossed, and of the paradoxes involved in masking. Their well-reasoned rejection of this novelty showed how much they were aware of the basic tenets of the mask ritual, how much they were intent on patrolling the borders of the virtual reality, by safeguarding these moving objects as the *raison d’être* of the complex ritual.

Embodiment and performance presuppose materiality (Vásquez 2011), as especially in imagistic religions, the material expressions are absolutely essential for any productive interpretation. Dogon religion is very much a ‘religion of things’, just like many indigenous African religions with their roots in imagistic processes; things ranging from guns to broken pottery, and from hoe handles to stools. But few rituals are as ‘thingy’ as a masquerade, those apparitions coming from the bush into the village, in a wonderful show that is a delight for the eyes while threatening for the women.

However, these mask-things generate one more reflection: they are not just a prime support for our interpretation, but they also challenge our notion of a ‘thing’, of an object. Ingold (2011), in his ecological approach, challenges the dichotomy between nature and culture, matter and mind, and he does find the *dama* at his side. The first photograph shows the headpiece of Domo’s mask, very much

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<sup>4</sup> For an analysis how mask dances intertwine with village dynamics, see (Van Beek 2012).

an object and very much what we in the global North would call a mask; this is what we find in a museum—or now in my collection. But for the Dogon, this may be an object, a thing in itself; but it is not a mask, not a proper *emna*—and as such, it is not ‘a ritual object’ at all. The ritual entity, the one that moves and acts, is the material object plus the costumed dancer, and none of these elements can stand on its own. It is the combination of man, object, and act that is the real ritual agent; so the material side of religion is another fusion of worlds, those of matter and of man, inanimate and animate. Materiality is a precondition for an embodied performance, and as such can bridge the divide between the world in which we live and the ‘other side’, the final border crossing.

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