

## MASKED MEN DANCING AND THE LORDSHIP OVER LAND: a review essay

*by*

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MAKISI NYAU MAPIKO: MASKENTRADITIONEN IN BANTU-SPRACHIGEN AFRIKA, by Gerhard Kubik, München: Trickster Verlag, 1993.

Not every scientist has enough insight, or perhaps courage, to own up to the extent to which his observations and experiments, his interpretations and theories, have been tempered by personal feelings and the chance effects of experience. Perhaps, for all the emergence of jargons which suggest that it doesn't matter much provided that it is acknowledged, too much emphasis does tend generally to be placed on objectivity, as if complete objectivity in fieldwork were ever possible. It is probably more honest, and affords the outsider a better opportunity for extrinsic assessment, for a scientist to admit, as Kubik does towards the beginning of this book, that his subjective experiences have had not only an enduring influence on his scientific career by effects which he recognises to have resulted in distinct personality changes. And it is precisely (though not exclusively) these, of course, which the initiation procedures characteristic of the matrilineal belt of south-central Africa are designed to induce.

What Kubik underwent in Angola in 1965 (described in his doctoral dissertation of 1971), and later as observer, initiator and participant in Zambia, Mozambique and Malawi, have not only equipped him to describe such ceremonies more authentically, probably, than anyone else who has ever studied them, but also placed certain constraints on what may be included in his descriptions. These are almost certainly less important in the case of Kubik than they might be were he a less thorough and honest worker. They enjoin upon him a careful assessment of the particulars he may vouchsafe, but, as an initiate, he is left with the discretion to explain the background and objectives of what has become a central part of his life. They also oblige him not to falsify, and to mention that he is excluding matter where such exclusion is morally necessary.

The popular imagination is often greatly excited by the idea of 'secret societies', and when these are confined to one or the other sex it may become positively lubricious. Secret associations of all kinds may exist, but to generalise about them in any such way is an over-simplification, and one fostered rather than explained by the recent growth of gender-based studies. In Africa secret associations are usually (though not invariably) male, not through any overt sexual discrimination but on account of the recognition that, on the whole, society works best with certain tasks and responsibilities divided between the sexes. It is one of Kubik's major accomplishments to have shown that however remote the concepts on which the formation of these societies or groups is based, they are, within their own environment, as ordinary as, for instance, the liturgical calendar is in ours: that is,

they partake of mystery, they bring about occasions of celebration, they nourish tradition, and they are not subversive. He has been able to show all this through his talent to be at the same time an observer and a part of what he is observing.

It is a pity, therefore, that he seems to think it incumbent on him to discuss at some length (p.20 *et seq*) the distinction between the emic and the etic, which his own situation and attitude admirably transcend. It is a distinction which has its uses, especially where researchers are themselves so culture-bound as to find it hard to make the imaginative leap between the two categories. His intimate familiarity with the ways in which the languages used in the cults which embody these groups impose attitudes and behaviours equips him a good deal better than many of his colleagues, including myself, to make the transition conveniently. The question is one which Kubik and I discussed repeatedly during the early stages of his career; we came to conclusions which roughly approximated to a preference for opportunistic, even anarchic, alternation between the standpoints; and although he does appear to feel it necessary these days to pay lip-service to these presently modish constructs, on the evidence of this book he still adheres to what we thought then. Considering the path his career has taken since, one would imagine him compelled to.

This is at once apparent in his wide-ranging discussion of the semantics of the concept 'mask' (pp.21-37). The Western idea of a mask is a narrow one, and gives only a thin and inadequate idea of what those artefacts mean to Africans who fashion and use them. Western observers try all too often to accommodate their own sometimes wildly inadequate interpretations of what they observe in an African masked performance to what they think they ought to expect. They see theatre where no entertainment is envisioned (p.34), and against the evidence of their own eyes project onto *rites de passage* sequences and meanings according to generalities, even banalities, which they themselves find facilely comprehensible and even consoling (p.24). A mask is there not just to hide, but to reveal; what concealment there is about it has none of the playfulness or self-interested deceit (p.62) that characterise it in our own traditions. Admittedly there is an element of performance art, and some observers have seized on this as crucial when it is not; but the masked man does not simply act, but may be held to become, whatever it is that his mask stands for (p.76).

There are, incidentally, radical distinctions between the significance of the masks sometimes used in female initiation and those which appear when boys are being inducted into manhood, though the two may overlap where the same participant is required for both. The extent of the overlap varies from one tradition to another, but in all it appears that however far exclusion of the opposite sex may be taken there is generally a required intervention which negates this. And above all it is in the rites of men that masks are most richly used. Masked men dancing in central Africa no more represent simple theatre than they do *un Ballo in Maschera*; they are expressing something far more intrinsic to society. From one angle, and that not the least important, they are setting forth the condition of men in a matrilineal world (p.146); dancing in disguise but revelatorily, and the power the masks give them, the communion with the numinous (pp.71-3), the right and duty to lead their successors into a condition which will govern the afterlife, underline their own willingness to concede to the women the lordship of the land while retaining hegemony over non-

terrestrial communication.

Of course, this is too simple and crude an exposition of what Kubik is saying. In his earlier, more general but less comprehensive discussions of central African transitions from immaturity into maturity in both men and women, he has given interpretations which are at once wider and more easily accessible to the less discriminating reader. Now, after publishing a considerable volume of material, a substantial part of it concerned with the masks, much of it taking African *rites de passage* out of the realm of the special and placing them firmly in the context of everyday life, he is giving us what may well turn out to be the crowning opus of his career. In it he recapitulates and expands many of the ideas contained in his earlier work, and elaborates them into a tight and eminently satisfying synthesis. This is a book in which he is able to go into details not only about history as myth and tradition, music and the way it interplays with motion, the sound and semantics of language, symbols and the materials used for their representation, the psychology of concealment and revelation, the structure of power in the villages of the matrilineal belt and the fashions in which the expansion of communications is exploding or amplifying life there, but also incidentally to build up a picture of societies in which change has always been present and in which the natural world is controlled by the ways in which it is subsumed into the processes of human maturation.

The book falls into two halves, the first concerned principally with the above aspects of the theory of masking and the second with the three very specific regions where the author has had close first-hand association with societies in which masking plays an important part. He is careful in his very first chapter to place ethnic and linguistic bounds on the subjects of his discussion; bounds which, in the course of the book, he is compelled now and then to transgress. The subject of masks is one which can be illustrated so variously from a variety of cultures that some reference to places and peoples with which he has had only restricted contact, or where masking occurs without being an integral part of the society, are necessary. For instance, he feels obliged (p.39-55) to give quite detailed descriptions of the masked games of children, of a secret society of the Pygmies in which the principal member is hidden in long tresses of raffia, and of a recently introduced masked ritual of girls, on the north-western Bantu borderland; and there is an amusing account (p.58) of the attempt of a schoolteacher in Kenya (presumably some gormless expatriate) to introduce among his pupils masked ceremonies (on the football field!) in which the masks appeared to have been copied from pictures of Melanesians.

The second chapter deals with the limitations to the concept 'masking' and the prerequisites of research into it, and emphasises the emic/etic distinction and the author's ways of coping with it. The third gives a broad account of the history and distribution of a variety of masking traditions in Bantu-speaking Africa, stressing its intimate association with matrilineal succession and uxori-local marriage. In the fourth chapter the author discusses the psychology of masking, and the meaning and sociocultural context of the masks during their outward manifestation. This combines an examination of myths of origin and the linkage of masks with the transcendental, with a scrutiny of the modes by which entry may be gained into a masked group; there are analyses of function, of historicity and of the psychosocial motivations

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underlying the myths and their expression. Here Kubik is on ground which is at once the most dubious and the most characteristic in the whole book: not that it is all typical of him to speculate pointlessly, but in this context his personal approach seems to diverge most widely from cold probability and his interpretations to deviate unnecessarily into Freudian channels.

He emphasises the terror element of the myths, not only towards onlookers but in the fearsomeness of the duties and promises enjoined upon initiands, and quite rightly questions the extent to which they have evolved from actual events. He seems less convinced than he might be of the moral content of these, of the possibility that real-life happenings may have been seized on, as they so often are in every society, and elevated into myths by means of which proper behaviour rather than an elevation of emotional excitement is conveyed to onlookers or participants. Of the three myths retailed on pp.65-7 he gives not the obvious interpretations, for the role of genital mutilation in a transition rite (with its strange subsidiary banality of placing cleanliness next to godliness), for respect for authority, and for the proper allocation of social duties between the sexes, but instead sets out all three in terms of conflict, even sexual conflict, and its resolution, which could easily be a secondary rather than a primary consequence.

It is often tempting to portray the nature of myth simply psychologically; the shortcomings of such an approach are very well illustrated in Michael Young's masterly *Magicians of Manumanuha*, in which the analysis of the optative identities of Melanesian participants in recapitulations of myths can be shown to function essentially not just as stabilisers of society but in keeping open the paths of reinterpretation and thus potentiating social change. The fact that the myths Kubik relates have become the fabric of the maintenance of masking as the instruments of male association can be of significance only as long as they operate as such; the facility with which the *akulavye* dance has established itself among Mpy.mō maidens (pp.48-50) may suggest some impermanence. Masked dancing in Africa is always part of the present, though links with the past are always sought in order to validate it. The participants in the male rituals accept that they are of hallowed antiquity, a fact which they cannot verify; but this does not detract from their contemporaneity.

Where Kubik's approach to myth comes into closer accord with that of Young is in his analysis of what the rituals actually accomplish. In the assumption of new characters among the repertoire of masks change is seen as essential while at the same time pattern remains constant or alters at a different, slower rate. Membership of an association of the masked signals a change in the relationship of the individual to society, and one which can change as society changes, as well as not just the willingness but the capability to share in corporate though circumscribed powers. The description of such patterns and performances as indicative of the existence of a cult is repudiated, as it is by Young, though Kubik is far from rejecting the idea of a religious component. The masks function as emotionally charged symbols, reminders of responsibilities towards the objects which they represent and towards the ancestors and other eminent forerunners who sanction their activities and mediate with the transcendental. It is in this way that the dances of masked men become preeminently the vehicles for *rites de passage*, which signal the acceptance of the initiand by his



predecessors; so also do they stand out as the obvious path of those transactions with the dead which make up the immediate and repetitive funeral rites.

Kubik is empowered as few if any other writers are to describe the experience of being initiated. He does this with tact and discretion, which he maintains by distancing himself to some extent from what he himself underwent and giving a necessarily slightly flat self-consciously 'etic' account, sequential and interspersed with critical comments on the interpretations devised by such widely respected authorities as Levy-Bruhl and C.G.Jung. This is one of the least interesting parts of the book, largely because at this stage his criticisms, telling as they are, have already become self-evident, and the material does not come over as anything new but rather as something which could have been deduced from what had been related earlier. Nor is there any reason for the author to justify himself as he does; his research methods he has already shown to be, if not impeccable (they are sometimes self-obscuring), at least the most practical in the circumstance and those most nearly productive of a comprehensive interpretation.

He follows this up with a short chapter on masks and their relationship with music and representative art. He points out that one phase of masked ceremonial is public, another private. The domain which is not openly shown is known only to initiates of the group, while to external observers the outer manifestations are necessarily everything, and may readily enough have superimposed upon them the inessential boundaries between music, dance and drama; may, indeed, be assessed aesthetically as a synthesis, or in their individual divisions, in complete disregard of the real whole of which they are part. Such categorisations are often amplified by the lack of correspondence between terms used in the language of the researcher and that into which they get translated; there are, for instance, no clear-set terms in Lucazi corresponding to the forms rendered as 'music' in Indo-European languages. This reviewer has recently castigated a worker at a European university for imposing on recorded African story-telling at which she appeared never to have been present a form of deconstruction which restricted analysis to special aspects only and which in the context of the whole performance would have been meaningless. As Kubik points out here, this is something towards which non-African researchers in this field have long tended, and which sometimes they succeed in imposing upon over-awed followers who derive from African traditions themselves. Representation of particulars, and distinction and contrast among them, is one function of masked dances; but it no more constitutes or prefigures theatre than the sounds which accompany them are ballet suites. It will, and has influenced African theatre in so far as it has, under western prompting, emerged in the region; but the innate meaning of masked dancing is far more basic.

After setting the ground, Kubik goes on to meticulous ethnographic descriptions of the ceremonies he has already treated in detailed theory; and outstanding as these are, there can be no doubt that they operate most significantly to highlight the fundamental analyses in the antecedent chapters. Ethnographies do not easily submit themselves to critical examination except in the context of their appraisals and interpretations. Here, the *matériel* can be summarised very easily: there are accounts of the ethnological settings and the social environment in each case, the physical

background of mask construction and maintenance and the provisions made for their conservation, often, as in Malaŵi, either in unknown hideaways or in edifices made frighteningly taboo to non-initiates, and descriptions of the outward course of a masked performance. There are accounts of the additional impedimenta, such as the drums. The contrasts and overlap between male and female initiations are examined in the context of the gender allocation of responsibilities. These all contribute towards the eventual assessment in the final chapter of the similarities in outward and inward substance which exist among the traditions.

These are first placed specifically in their settings. The second half of the book is given over in detail to accounts of the three ritual traditions mentioned in the title: *makisi* of eastern Angola and western Zambia among the Cokwe, Luvale and the broad spectrum of speakers of the Ngangela languages, the *nyau* of the Maravi-speakers of Malaŵi, Mozambique and Zambia, and the *mapiko* of speakers of the Makua-related languages in the lower Ruvuma valley of Mozambique and Tanzania, and their Lomwe offshoots in Malaŵi. In all of these Kubik is a full initiate, having participated in both in his own entry into the ceremonies and in the indoctrination, preparation and reception of later initiands. His extensive first-hand knowledge not only of these but of the slightly aberrant *jando* and *inyago* of the mainly Muslim Yao, which he has filmed and of which has given an impressive description elsewhere, means that he can characteristically waver once more and to the enlightenment of the reader between the etic and the emic aspects of each.

It cannot be denied that for all their overall similarities there are significant differences among the traditions. Perhaps the most conspicuous to an outsider is the requirement for genital mutilation by some ceremonies and its exclusion from others; though, as Kubik has stressed elsewhere, and as other western initiands into other non-western rituals have sometimes over-emphasised, it is probably by learning to endure pain and terror that the child emerges into adulthood. To this extent it is at least possible that some of the trappings of the masked performances serve by distraction to minimise the impact of physical and mental torture, and by relief anneal the initiand more surely to the principles with which he is being inculcated. The three words of the book's title, too, inhabit each a different semantic domain, though they come together very happily to underline the fashion in which what is almost certainly a single inherited strand has braided itself out among its successors. The term *makisi* (sing. *likisi*) applies to the participants in the dances, and by extension to the masks they wear. *Nyau*, to which Kubik and his brother-in-law and close collaborator Moya Aliya Malamusi in 1987 devoted an entire short book, refers to the ceremonies themselves and the groups which perform them; it is sometimes not given this name but with lowered voice referred to respectfully as *gule wamkulu*, the great game. A costume, with its associated type of mask, is less equivocally represented by the word *mapiko* (sing. *lipiko*), which may, as in the Angolan example, be extended to individual performers. On p.173 there is an extremely interesting table comparing the categories of ceremony, which not only demonstrates the symbolic and even linguistic similarities but for almost the first time anywhere demonstrates the common significance of fire in the three traditions.

In every case, too, there is some link with the female initiation schools, least

strong in *nyau*, and with a term cognate with *mwali*, an essentially female referent and the title given in Maravi history to the leading women of the realm, the rain-bringer and apportioner of land who complemented the judicial, funerary and military functions of the male *karonga*. Further investigations in adjoining parts to those where the researches took place might reveal more both about the gender significance of the ceremonies and about the response of the women to them. In the context of female initiation, it is interesting to note that Kubik reports artificial elongation in some instances of the labia minora. This is found also among the patrilineal Shona-speakers of Zimbabwe; it has been suggested that it may be carried out in emulation of the tablier, the elongation which occurs naturally in a great many Khoisan-descended South African women. There does not appear, however, to be any readily discernible Khoisan element in the masked dances.

Kubik, the marginal man whom chance and choice have placed in so exceptionally favourable a vantage point between cultures, has been able not only to interpret and re-interpret the structure and function of these important aspects of central African societies, but has given an authoritative account of the forces underlying their emergence and persistence. This is a very important book which, for all the meagre proportion of it devoted to the musical side of the ceremonies, needs to be taken with especial seriousness by ethnomusicologists. It underlines most eloquently that for them musicology is not enough; an *aperçu* which might well be extended in our own developed world to the whole question of the status and significance of the arts in society.

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