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North American Masks

by *Claude Levi-Strauss*

In North America, we shall only deal with three areas where masks are found: the east, in the Iroquois culture; the northwest seaside of the Pacific Ocean (Alaska and British Columbia); and finally, the southwest of the United States (New Mexico and Arizona), including Pueblo, Navaho, and Apache Indians.

There are two types of Iroquois masks: those of sculpted, painted wood, often provided with hair, and those made of plaited corn straw. Each type is divided into a number of sub-groups which correspond to classes of mythical beings or divinities. Though different in style, these masks indicate the same inspiration. They have massive features, are heavily sculpted and their expressions are vehement, often caricatures. Their facial asymmetries recall Eskimo masks, particularly those from Greenland, where similar naturalism and distortions can be found.

The most famous Iroquois masks are those used by medicine-men belonging to what American ethnologists call "falseface societies." They reproduce the features of a mythical being who created all diseases, but who eventually promised to heal them after his defeat by the Demiurge creator. During their fight, the evil being was knocked against a mountain, leaving him forever disfigured.

There are many other types of masks: "maternity masks," "counselor masks," "beggar masks," "tempest masks," and "scalp masks." Their use was prescribed according to type: birth, tribal quarrel, farcical feasts, bad weather, return from war. The plaited straw masks were hung on a house's door to protect it while a celebration occurred inside. They represented supernatural beings with ties to the earth who taught men the arts of hunting and agriculture.

The Iroquois also made small masks, a few centimeters long, which although less known, seem to have played the role of talisman. In exceptional cases, the Iroquois

sculpted a mask directly on a tree's trunk, and cut it off when finished, during an extremely complicated ritual.

The sacred masks were treated like the divinities themselves. Before they were put on, they were consecrated by cleansing and purification, and had to be regularly "fed." An ill-treated mask was said to "sweat," and required a suitable expiation consisting of prayers and offerings. A mask might also be "poisoned" by the person who wore it if he happened to be drunk or angry. If this happened, the mask was isolated for a time, then eventually scraped and re-painted when the evil influences had disappeared.

Of all the regions of Northern America, in the northwestern coast the plastic arts are the most highly developed. Proof of this development are their tall sculpted totemic poles, and their wooden masks, sculpted and painted, trimmed with leather or fur, and set with mother of pearl and animals' teeth. They often represented several characters or different aspects of the same divinity, and were sometimes animated by straps and strings. As a result, they could produce sensational effects in celebrations. The head of the mythical raven could be opened in two or four parts, revealing a human face which had been hidden from the spectators; cannibalistic birds could clap their beaks; the Spirit of Sleep could alternately open and close his eyelids, and roll his eyes while moving his jaws; and birds perched on an immobile head could beat their wings. A bladder filled with blood, surreptitiously burst, allowed the sorcerer-conjurer to simulate the public severing of a slave's head.



This Kwakiutl mask represents the sun or moon. Hinged triangular pieces close over the face. At one moment in the dance, the music stops and the dancer opens the mask by pulling on strings to reveal the human aspect of the mythical personage.

These masks were worn during profane feasts and religious celebrations. During the former, nobles often wore masks representing either the gods from which their line of descendants originated, or their illustrious ancestors, or masks of clowns, heralds, messengers or orators.

The winter ritual provided the main opportunity for exhibiting masks among the coast peoples (Tlingit, Tsimshian, Haida, Bella Coola, Nootka, and the various Salish groups). The masks were worn for half-religious, half-theatrical rituals, especially for the non-initiated's benefit. One might say the object of these seances was really to terrorize them, with several murders if necessary. Beings from the supernatural world invaded the villages. In Kwakiutl culture, they captured several noble adolescents, and led them into the forest. The boys returned in a frenetic condition, changed into cannibals greedy for human flesh. The officiating priests tried to capture them, to tame them and reintegrate them into the social order, where they were admitted to the secret societies of the "seals," guardians of the winter ritual.

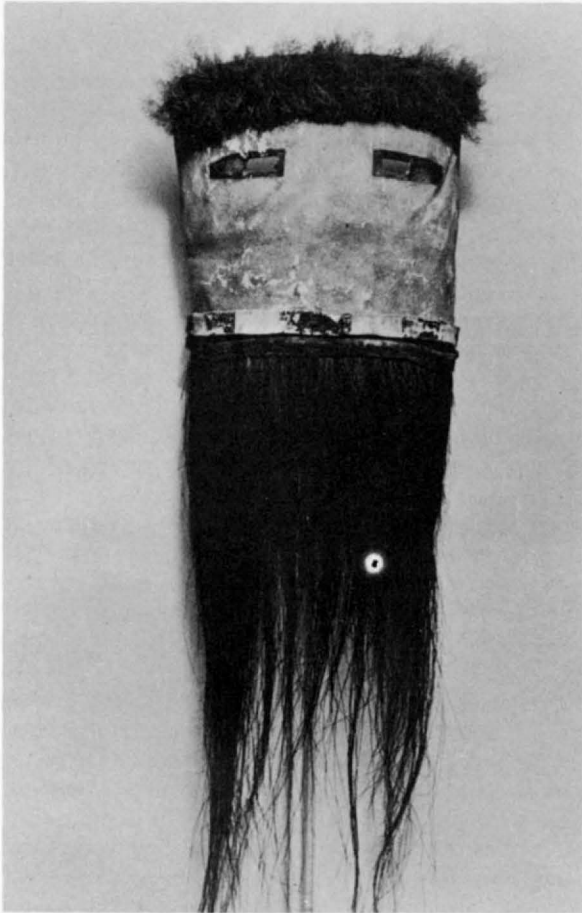
The Kwakiutl divinities, half-human, half-animal, and always fantastic, have names which are particularly difficult to spell: the cannibalistic gods Baxbakualanuxsiwae, Qoaqoaxulanuxsiwae, Hamshamtse; the bird Nanaqauail; the ogress (or ogre) Tsonoqoa; lakim, the sea-monster; Sisiul, the two-headed serpent; and also, under alternately human or animal shapes, the Raven, the Eagle, the Falcon, the Grampus, the Stag, and the Bear.

Less dramatic, but just as important, were the mask celebrations of the southwestern tribes: the various Pueblo groups (Hopi, Zuni, Tewa, Keres) and their neighbors the Navaho and Apache. There, the masks have a totally different look. The Apache and Navaho masks for the masculine divinities were made of supple skin; the feminine divinities were represented by rigid masks. The Pueblo masks were made of a cylinder or cone of rigid leather, fastened with wooden "ears" and a protuberant "mouth" made of leather, wood, or the end of a squash. The masks were painted, decorated with feathers, and provided with a thick collar of fur, cloth, feathers, leaves or moss.

Some masks represent gods; others are symbols of priests and dignities. The most numerous represent the Katshina (Hopi) and Koko (Zuni), the deified ancestors, or the divine associates of these ancestors. For half of the year, they visit the village, dance for the spectators' pleasure and play the role of benevolent fairies distributing gifts, or of bogey-men ready to punish the bad behavior of the non-initiated children.

Repertoires of such masks have been published, but they are all incomplete. However, there are more than a hundred identified types. As the various peoples imitate each other, and as new masks are created and older ones disappear, it is practically impossible to have a definite idea of this complex pantheon. These masks are humorous because of their beauty and the liveliness of their colors. Yet the ingenuous and good-natured aspect of the Pueblo masks must not hide the deep religiosity surrounding them.

The raw material for each type of mask is prescribed: buck, elk, bison leather, or calabash. The priest-craftsmen cover them with all kinds of previously masticated alimentary seeds to give them life. The Zuni addresses the mask as follows: "I have made you with alimentary seeds, and I have given you life. Bring us the benediction of your spiritual power, and when the day of dancing comes, provide us with rain, as long as you live. I made you into a person." The mask then receives its symbolic ornament (tadpoles to conjure up spring rains; dragonflies for summer rains; frogs for those of fall; butterflies to urge dancing; corn to stimulate harvests; clouds; stars; rainbows; and the Milky Way), exclusively with pigments attributed to each divinity and each symbol: ground copper ore, haematite, colored clay, and, according to a fixed symbolism for black, coal, soot, burnt corn, and crushed black stone. The varnishes are extracted from various resins, egg whites or pollen thickened with plant saps. Each time the mask is worn, it is cleaned,



Hopi Indian mask of dyed leather and hair.

scratched, and painted again. The remainders are exposed on an altar. In effect, the painting and ornamentation "gives life" to the mask.

Masks are transmitted from one generation to the other, or buried with their owner. Between the dance celebrations, they are kept in earthenware jars and "fed" daily with offerings. Without this care, the mask would take revenge and devour the corn reserves or leave the attics to the rodents. While "feeding" the mask, the wife or daughter of the owner offers it a prayer: "My father, there you are, motionless. Eat! Allow us to follow our way to the end. Our father, see to it that it is long and we can reach its term." In wearing the mask, the represented divinity is assumed by the owner. Retreats, prayers, fasts, continence, and the soul's purity prepare him to take this role. An impure dancer brings a death threat upon himself. Masks to which one was not respectful would stick to the dancer's face, strangling and suffocating him at the same time, and all offended masks could take revenge by provoking illness and misfortune.

Given these conditions, the scarcity of Pueblo masks in museums or private collections should not be astonishing. Their owner rarely has the right or impiety to part with them. Instead, they can be studied from the puppets—or rather, clay figures—representing the Katshina, who distribute them to children before leaving the village, during the annual farewell celebration called Niman by the Hopi. Among the Zuni, these clay figures are articulated and dressed with rags. Among the Hopi, they are entirely painted and made of one piece.

Throughout the southwest, colors, including those on masks, are associated with spatial directions. The most frequently used system among the Pueblo is the following: yellow/north; blue/west; red/south; white/east; multi-colored/zenith; and black/nadir. The Navaho, who immigrated from the north centuries ago, borrowed this type of classification from the Pueblo, and made it considerably more complicated. The attributions change according to the method of reading the cardinal points. Hence, south is consistently blue, and west yellow, whereas east alternates between white and black, and north between black and pink.

Navaho masks—at least those of masculine divinities—are made of supple skin or material, and resemble cowls with holes in them: triangular for the eyes, rectangular for the mouth, or sometimes, uniformly round. Masked characters embody gods, or *ye-i*, among which the most important ones are the Speaking-God, the Calling-God, the Male-God, the Female-God, the Shooting-God, the Destructive-God, and the Red-God. Despite the names of the first two, they are supposed to be mute, except when singing certain sacred songs. If the masked person spoke “in the mask,” he would be blinded, or would fall ill and die. Through breathing and incantation, these gods provoke meteorological phenomena corresponding to the spatial directions of which they are guardians. Each mask is also characterized by a certain way of “calling” associated with one of the cardinal points: *wu-u-u-hu* (east), *hawo hawo* (west), *wu-u-wu* (south), and *lo-lo-looo* (north). However, these are only “calls,” or “voices,” according to indigenous terminology, not a “language.”

When the *ye-i* left man in mythical times, they made an impression of their faces in stones and other precious substances (mother of pearl, jet, turquoise, etc.), and ordered man to reproduce each impression in the form of masks. Masks are painted on the model of these original jewels. The skins must come from animals killed without wounds, and according to its sex, are assigned to the front or the back of each type of mask.

Culturally and linguistically, the Apaches are related to the Navaho, and their masks have the same cowl shape. The Apache masks are topped with a wooden structure which the natives call “horns.” The masked dancers represent, without embodying them, the mountains’ spirits, guardians of the tribal territory, protectors of men and healers of their illnesses.
