

The Symbol as Cultural Identity as well as Individual:

Wooden Mask in *The Road* by Wole Soyinka

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Abstract

The paper of Yoruba mask is a presentation of African Aesthetics and cultural. Culture has been viewed in several ways by different authors. Culture has to do with art, dressing, balled, values while some conceive culture as all encompassing phenomenon with a group of people. This study try to establish the significance and role of symbol in culture. Symbol is one of part of culture in the form of arts, rituals, myth, Language. The carved masks has several functions, personal or communal, and satirical. These masks also have dual role of disguise transforming. The paper argues that symbol, ritual, myth can be consider as a language or identity of a particular society or clan because of their nature.

Key words: Symbol, Myth, Mask, Culture

Introduction

Masks have the ability to conceal, change, or transform the 'person' behind the image into something or someone else. This metaphoric 'else,' this 'as if' quality of masks makes

them both playful and powerful, and relates them to ritual, religion, and myth. Masks allow us to pretend, and much more. Ulrich, George. "Masks". *LORE* 39.3. 1989.

Masks have been designed in innumerable varieties, from the simplest of crude "fake faces" held by a handle to complete head coverings with ingenious movable parts and hidden faces, all of which have a symbolic connection with total imagery, believes and communicably.

Mask, generally noted as anthropomorphic that with human features and those with animal characteristics as theriomorphic, is a replication of natural features or closely follows the lineaments of reality and abstraction that usually represent supernatural beings, ancestors, and farfetched or imagined figures and can also be portraits (Jarrod L. Whitaker, 2000). But, the change in identity of the wearer for that of the mask is vital, for if the spirit represented does not reside in the image of the mask, the ritual petitions, supplications, and offerings made to it would be ineffectual and meaningless (W. Anthony Sheppard, 2001).

In short, the localization of a particular spirit or thought or representation in a specific mask must be considered a highly significant reason for its existence and it shows the color of the society. As Eldred Jones (1973) intimates, the spirits together symbolize the total environment, all its resources and all its potentialities that incorporates philosophical ideas of rituals and rites of passage between the dead, the unborn, and the living, coexist, as in a cultural time-warp, with sophisticated literary drama lead to find the identity of the clan.

Conceptualizing Identity Theory

Social identity theory does feature the socio-cognitive processes of self-categorization and depersonalization as reflected appraisals (McCall and Simmons 1978), role taking (Stryker 1980), the definition of the situation (McCall and Simmons 1978; Stryker

1980), and self-verification and dissonance reduction (Burke 1991a). Jenkins argues when it is said 'social identity', the expression refers to

... the ways in which individuals and collectivities are distinguished in their social relations with other individuals and collectivities. It is the systematic establishment and signification, between individuals, between collectivities, and between individuals and collectivities, of relationships of similarity and difference. (p 18-29)

To have a conceptualizing, with that of Goffman's who was arguing that individuals present an image of themselves to others, who are free to accept or reject that image, which might be simplified to denote a series of masks put on for different audiences than we can draw the ultimate conclusion that if identity is a necessary prerequisite for social life, the reverse is also true. Individual identity – embodied in selfhood – is not meaningful in isolation from the social world of other people.

Masks of Deification

The Yoruba mask, that mentioned in *'The Road'*, is not only to create a link between existences, in addition to cult or sacred masks that perform different functions; as a multifaceted symbol as L. Marfurt (1968) argues the mask has the dual effect of disguising or transforming the wearer and the ambivalence of serving good and evil ends moreover, the paganism and bestiality are in the subject of the masks, which ultimately symbolizes the human society beyond the creation, not in the craftsmanship of the mask. In addition to this theological aspect, the philosophical aspect is supported through portraying that the ancestors are worshipped through the egungun masked figures as a proof that the present generations of the Living do not stand alone, and any individual ever is abandoned entirely to the limits of his own powers, for the dead ancestors continue to watch over and guide their descendants.

As Margaret Laurence points out that with the traditional Yoruba egungun, the state of possession can take place only with the proper ritual, at the time of the festival, and with the accompaniment of the drums which speak the key phrases and establish the pattern and place of the entire procedure. If Lindfors' definition is anything to go by, the search may be viewed as a quest for the meaning of existence; or since it is a quest for the essence of death, it may be considered an attempt to seek immortality through the conquest of death itself and is to be believed that the key to immortality lies in the mystery of death, which is a monopoly of the gods and to understand the ultimate secrets of physical dissolution and the return to primal energy which underlies all existence. According to Gerald Moore (1971), the practices in the play indicate that every stage in the gradual withdrawal of the dead man's presence and spirit from the intimacy of the household to After-life is clearly marked by a dramatic masked ritual that ensures continuous communion between the living and the ancestors.

Symbolism in *The Road*

Normally, any symbolic representation consists in a relation between three elements: concept in mind, sense image, and object or event in the external world. A symbol, then, is a very special category of sign intriguing, thought-provoking, stirring emotions, opaque, and ambiguous. It is conventional in the sense that its meaning is rooted in tradition, agreed upon in numerous cultural texts, and is interpreted according to culturally established meaning. However, the rules of interpretations of symbols are different from those, which regulate our use of signs. Symbols are not only arbitrary signs, but also components of the traditions, ideas, and events, which they represent. Cultural tradition and social processes determine the meaning of symbols and often lead to differences in conventions between social groups belonging to the same cultural area.

The consensus does not of course exist only with the words and their symbolic representations, - there are also some other symbols in every aspect which serve as native symbols such as the rituals and even masks as in *The Road*, which would like to be discussed as symbols making up a nation evoking the same feeling and thus being a common signifier. As Scheffler argues,

... we live in a world of symbols as well as other things, and our commerce with them is itself continually mediated by symbols. As it matures, our thought increasingly grows in its capacity to wield appropriate symbols in reflecting, acting, reasoning, and making.

Conclusion

To back our argument for the dual role of symbols we would like to refer to Norbert Elias. Elias argues in his book *The Symbol Theory* that “languages, thoughts, memories and all the other aspects of knowledge complexes are both social and individual at the same time.” A symbol represents something, which essentially cannot otherwise be represented within complicated and subtle aesthetic and religious experience, as well as in feelings and thoughts, which we experience when other high values are involved, for instance, those connected with love, family, group identity, moral issues, and the like, ideas and emotions cannot usually be fully described in non-symbolic discourse.

Abner Cohen, who is particularly concerned with the symbolism of power, not surprisingly included this aspect in this definition of symbol: he writes that symbols are objects, acts, concepts, or linguistic formations that stand ambiguously for a multiplicity of disparate meanings, evoke sentiments and emotions and impel men to action. In such a view, symbols are not only means of communication for ideas but also important factors in social action. Therefore, symbols are not merely symbolic, in the sense of being the opposite of real

life. They are real life and they may become vital aspects of social process. To combine these two ideologies, language as a symbol and acts communication purpose as well as transferring and maintaining the existence of knowledge and heritage of the clan through various kinds of symbols and rituals that can be treated as the language of the clan or symbol of the clan because of their nature.

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