

The Face of the Pwo

by

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The Mask

The mask of the *Pwo* is a distinctive female image danced in Angola, Zambia, Malawi, and in the southern region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. A sensitive and serene countenance, the *Pwo* mask is generally identified in texts as representing an ancestor or a young woman, but who is the *Pwo* and what does she mean to the people? Why do people dance in her honor?

The importance of this mask to the Chokwe and the complex of related people groups who have been celebrating the *Pwo* for many decades (if not centuries) is well established. These cultures continue, even in our computerized age, to evoke their ancestors for support in many undertakings. *Pwo* masks are ubiquitous throughout the region. *Pwo* spirits - through the form of masked dancers - transmit wisdom and affirm traditional codes. Their ancestral presence preserves a sense of continuity and produces security in the midst of changing times.

Learning about the *Pwo* enables us to better understand the beliefs and traditions of the millions of people who comprise the Chokwe complex. Furthermore, this information may encourage us to reflect upon the dominant female images in our own culture and the purposes they serve in defining who we are and what we value.

In Western societies for hundreds of years, the adoration of the Virgin Mary - the Madonna - was the most powerful female image, and her qualities of grace, patience, modesty, obedience and long-suffering were emulated by believers. In a similar way, the face of the *Pwo* has been the dominant matrilineal image for the Chokwe and its related peoples. The *Pwo* is an essential part of widely held legendary, religious, and social beliefs.

Legendary Beliefs

A common legend shared by the people groups that dance the *Pwo* concerns that of Lweji, the first female chief of the Lunda people (Jordan 2000:90). Lweji was an heiress to the land around Lunda. Her brother's ancestors settled on the opposite side of the Luena River. Lweji married Tshibinda Ilunga, the "Great Hunter," who brought civilization to the people. According to research by Manuel Jordan, some *Pwo* masks represent female chiefs or primordial ancestors of a royal lineage. As part of the primal royal couple, Lweji can be the *Pwo* - a model of social accomplishment and power for women.

Religious Beliefs

The Chokwe petition their creator god Kalunga, nature spirits, and ancestral spirits (*muhamba*) to intercede on their behalf. While the creator god is felt to be remote, nature spirits and ancestors can be reached through invocations and rituals to assist regarding temporary matters, such as fertility, disease, and draught. Conversely, neglecting the spirits is believed to cause misfortune. Sorcerers are also believed to have the power to influence malevolent forces to bring on illness, drought, or infertility. To determine action, individuals may consult diviners (*nganga*) who toss small objects in a basket in a divination practice. The *Pwo*, in particular, has mastery over sorcerers and teaches the youth how to be protected from evil or *wanga*.

Chokwe, Lunda, Luvale/Lwena, Luchazi, Mbunda, and other related peoples have over one hundred types of masked characters called *makishi*. These represent the deceased ancestors who dwell in the spirit realm, some of whom can be called upon to guide, protect, and teach the community. *Makishi* can indwell the bodies of masked dancers. They may be called upon at initiation ceremonies or to sanction the confirmation of a leader; they may be called upon to judge a dispute or to escort the soul of a deceased into the netherworld.

Social Beliefs

One of the most important *makishi* called upon by the men's and women's societies at initiation rituals is *Pwo* (or *Pwevo* in the eastern areas). She represents the ideal woman who has completely fulfilled the purpose of her existence (Cameron 1998). However, she may also appear as *mwana pwo* or a young woman who has completed her initiation into society and is ready for motherhood. *Pwo* expresses the qualities and characteristics most admired in women. Danced with graceful movements, ritualized gestures, and gentle manners, *Pwo* models cherished cultural values.

Representing female ancestors in various clans, *Pwo* is usually said to be elderly, her eyes nearly closed to suggest that she is a deceased person. The Chokwe believe that the departed can play a vital role in assisting their living descendants, if they are properly honored and acknowledged. As a spirit being or *makishi*, *Pwo* inhabits both the natural and spiritual realms, moving between both to instruct, guide, and mediate among the living. According to the *Musee d'ethnographie de Neuchatel* (2001), *Pwo* is a *muhamba*, serving as an intermediary between people and the creator god. Her teaching ensures the continuity of core beliefs and traditions. She also possesses generative power - the ability to foster prosperity to a village and fertility to young women.

Pwo is created and performed by males, but danced before the elders and the entire village. *Pwo* is often accompanied by the primal male ancestor, Cihongo. The initiation instruction of young men and women is called *mukanda*, which is held in a secluded area and hosted by a particular family. In *mukanda*, *Pwo* appears to transmit to male and

female youth the history, beliefs, and social organization of the culture. *Mukanda* may last from one to two years and includes circumcision for the boys. In the male *Mugonge* society, boys are taught the secrets of wearing and creating masks. Instructors prepare the young for the challenges of life and offer advice necessary for the survival of the next generation.

Pwo can also be understood as a spirit of maternal deliverance, appearing at birthing rituals. At *mukanda* camp, *Pwo* directs the symbolic rebirth of the initiates which results in a new mature identity (Cameron 77). The *mukanda* masking rituals of the *Pwo* are central to the successful transmission of the principles of the Chokwe and related groups. At the conclusion of *mukanda*, *Pwo* goes to the village to complete the initiation rituals. She offers gifts and presents the successful initiates who now possess the knowledge to enter adult life (Jordan 69). *Pwo* recounts stories of the achievements of the initiates much to the pride of their mothers. She also commends the mothers for having raised good children and sings with the community. The return of *Pwo* marks a turning point in the life of a mother and her son. Now they will not speak together and will sit separately. From this point on, to ask a son to perform a woman's task would be inappropriate. *Pwo makishi* has now delivered the males, reborn as adults, into the world.

Pwo also embodies idealized female aspirations, what young women should strive to become. Female initiation is called *mwali*, run by the women's *Ukule* society, and is held to develop in girls gender-specific skills (Jordan 93). *Pwo*, in her beauty, morality, and leadership, becomes a role model and teacher for young girls. Maturity is imitative, not self-directed, achieved through the personal acquisition of the traditional virtues of womanhood.

In addition, *Pwo* deals with political realities affecting the villages. In recent decades, many conflicts have afflicted the Chokwe complex. Mineral wealth, including gold, diamonds, and oil has been the source of war. Long conflicts have caused social upheaval and refugees. Despite the displacement of people and changes in governments, the leaders have used the *Pwo* to maintain the mythical, religious and social beliefs.

Characteristics of the *Pwo* Masks

The masquerades of the *Pwo* integrate music, dance, costume, and art. The masks are attached to a tightly knitted costume that completely hides the identity of the male dancer. Women's skirts, false breasts, scarves and attachments complete the outfit. *Pwo* can also be assertive giving instructions to drummers or orchestrating specific songs (Jordan 68). *Pwo* directs using gestures or implements such as a flywhisk.

Pwo is always danced by men, who skillfully impersonate the movements of women. The dances are "short steps with sensuous movements" (Jordan 1998:68). *Pwo* may enact sexual behavior, stressing fertility. She may even be danced on stilts to emphasize her "supernatural attributes as an ancestral spirit" (Jordan 1998:68). Women may dance with *Pwo*, and a poor *Pwo* dancer will be criticized and driven away. A talented dancer will be highly appreciated and develop a notable reputation. The vigorous *Pwo* masquerades reflect the dynamic renewing vitality of the culture.

Manuel Jordan, who has extensively studied the Chokwe complex, calls *Pwo* masks “formally rich and semantically complex art forms” (1998:8). Carved in a stylized realism, *Pwo* masks have a recognizable form, although many variables are possible. The Chokwe aesthetic or the style north of the Muzamba River (Bastin 1982:246), results in a balanced and well-proportioned face that is visually striking. In some examples the features are quite severe, possibly indicating an older woman. The shape of the face may be rounded or elongated. Masks must be carved according to traditional norms, reflecting the local collective ideal of the ancestral spirits (*Musee d’ethnographie de Neuchatel* 2001).

Elisabeth L. Cameron notes that while women, metaphorically, create the socialization process to produce ideal women, male carvers “physically portray the visible aspects of the ideal woman in freestanding sculpture...on stools, chairs, combs, staffs, and other objects” (*Chokwe!* 79). However, women inform the carving process by selecting and emphasizing the qualities that they themselves admire. This process, integrating art into the foundations of society, is not static but dynamic; hence, the styles of masks naturally change over time.

In examining hundreds of masks produced over different periods and in various regions, certain distinctive elements are notable. Beginning with a study of the nose, one will find that the carving styles express particular forms. Most will have a narrow bridge and diminutive nostrils while others are more simplistically triangular. Still others are more naturalistically expressed. Many have a slit down the bridge called *kangango*, representing a mouse with a stripe on its back (Bayly Art Museum).

The eyes are always slits set in almond-shaped ovals, within a concave socket. Suggesting the serenity of the spirits of the deceased, the eyes seem to be closed. All masks include the characteristic *masoji* or tears, streaming below the eyes (Jordan “Revisiting the *Pwo*”). The tears represent the sorrow felt by the mothers as their sons depart from them through initiation into adulthood.

Ears are always small in proportion to the rest of the face. They are usually a series of widening concentric hemispheres, delicately carved. From a hole on the bottom lobe, earrings and coins are frequently suspended.

Finely detailed cicatrix marks or ideographs are on the face. The marks can be cut away, incised, or encrusted in relief. Such facial scars, according to Bastin, are “ritual recognition marks” (1982:70). Elaborate scarification suggests a senior woman who has undergone many levels of rank in the woman’s society. Bastin notes that ideograms or *sona* on the masks are a form of writing that recall animals, fables, or spiritual principles. These markings make the mask a text to be read and understood (Bastin in *Chokwe!* 17). On some masks, one finds a circular tattoo, called a *cijingo*, representing a spiral brass

bracelet (Smithsonian). Cameron points out that scarification is considered “arousing to the touch of both genders” (79).

Bodily scarification continues today, especially outside of urban areas, where it is looked down upon as something from the past. In the villages girls can choose not to be scarified, but many do, selecting locations on the body that can be hidden by clothing. Facial scarification has become much less common. Cameron states that such marks are not symbols but mnemonic devices to recall certain concepts or to indicate membership in certain societies.

Often, the mask has what appears to be a carved headband with a pattern of cross-hatching upon which the fiber coiffure is attached. In actuality, the headband represents a pattern of hair-braiding, dating back centuries. Early photos establish the presence of such braiding on women.

The most characteristic mark on all Chokwe Pwo masks is a cross motif on the forehead, called *ching-lyengelye*. The prevalent interpretation is that the cross originated from the Portuguese Cross of the Order of Christ, brought by missionaries hundreds of years ago. During the 17th century, Capuchin monks distributed medals with a cross throughout Chokwe territory (Smithsonian). Also on the forehead and reaching the temples are “knitted eyebrows” or *mitelumuna*. These are reported to be “an allusion to discontentedness or arrogance” (Smithsonian).

The mouth is of elliptical shape, slightly open, often with small, finely filed teeth – a sign of beauty. The lips protrude but are usually flattened, although more wide and naturalistic examples can be found.

Netting frequently remains attached to the perimeter holes from the original costume showing intricate weaving patterns. Some costumes include wooden breasts. Attached to the mask is an elaborately woven fiber coiffure, varying with the period and age of the mask. For example, packed red clay was preferred before the 1950s, while more recent examples have raffia woven into complex patterns. The traditional fiber coiffure coated with red earth was called *tota* (Smithsonian). The woven fibers reflect the care taken in preparing the Pwo, paralleling the attention given to grooming by females. Such a coiffure indicates that the female ancestor has had status in the community. Jordan notes that honored female ancestors may be addressed by their actual names (1998).

Additional attachments may include metal tacks, feathers, shells, beads, buttons, snakeskin, and other ornaments, all intended to add beauty and honor to the female ancestral being represented (Jordan). Hair in the form of fur may be replaced over time. The most elaborate coiffures represent female chiefs.

The mask’s surface usually is a reddish-brown, derived from oil and clay. Eye sockets and teeth may be covered with kaolin. Brows may have a darker pigment. The surface acquires a deep patina from handling and usage.

The Lwena, Luvale, and Luchazi in eastern Angola, western and northwestern Zambia use similarly functioning masks that are called Pwevo. Their aesthetic (the southern style as identified by Bastin) differs from that of the Chokwe in its less prominent eyes and mouth. The masks of these cultures have similar styles, making precise identification difficult. Most masks have a reddish surface, suggesting a vital, spiritual presence. Lwena masks can sometimes be identified by their round, refined faces that tend to be naturalistic. They also have full circular coiffures carved onto the mask. Luchazi masks tend to be flatter with more of an angular convergence of the cheeks to the chin.

Masks are commissioned from carvers in local workshops. In the past, a natural diffusion of regional styles occurred through shared territories and initiation camps. With the publication of “classic” Pwo masks, certain styles have come to be preferred by Western collectors. Pwo masks are now carved outside of their native area, such as in Ghana, by workshops catering to the export market. This has lessened the quality of available masks and has influenced the devolution of the traditional aesthetics.

As in other areas of Africa, masks traditionally were kept in the rafters of the homes and often passed through generations. The mask itself is a mnemonic device that reminds people of what is important in their heritage (Roberts 7).

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