



CHRIS BOOT - PRESS INFORMATION:

MASKE by Phyllis Galembo

Introduction by Chika Okeke-Agulu

An album featuring Phyllis Galembo's thrilling photographs of masquerade and carnival characters, from Zambia, Nigeria, Benin, Sierra Leone, Burkina Faso, Ghana and Haiti



Retail price: £ 30 / \$45
ISBN: 978-1-905712-17-5
Trim size: 215mm x 235 mm (8.5 x 9.5 inches), upright
Extent: 192 pp
Photographs: 107
Binding: Hardback
cover: Akata Masquerade, Eshinjok Village, Nigeria 2004

Phyllis Galembo's interest in the masquerade traditions of Africa and its diaspora began twenty five years ago, with her first visit to Nigeria. Since then, she has travelled widely in west and central Africa, and regularly to Haiti, making portraits that document and describe the transformative power of the mask. Her subjects are participants in masquerade events, both traditional African ceremonies and contemporary fancy dress and carnival, all of whom use costume, body paint and masks to create mythic characters – sometimes entertaining and humorous, often dark and frightening, and always powerful and thrilling. Titled

after the Haitian Kreyòl word for mask, *Maske* is the first comprehensive collection of these portraits.

The book features 107 photographs, organised into chapters by country, each introduced with an essay by Galembo including background details to the traditions featured along with details of her personal journey. The book is introduced by Chika Okeke-Agulu, himself a participant in masquerade events during his childhood in Nigeria, who asks questions about the survival and evolution of masquerade traditions in the 21st century. Designed as an object to treasure, the book is a serious contribution to studies of African art, an essay about the transformative power of dress, and a work of vivid artistic imagination.

Phyllis Galembo began photographing the characters and costumes of African masquerade in Nigeria in 1985, developing her theme throughout Africa and the Caribbean over the following 25 years since including with a Fulbright scholarship. Her previous books include *Divine Inspiration from Benin to Bahia* (1993), *Vodou: Visions and Voices of Haiti* (1998) and *Dressed for Thrills, 100 Years of Halloween Costumes and Masquerade* (2003). She has been exhibited throughout the world, including in solo shows at the International Center of Photography, New York, and the Smithsonian, Washington DC. Galembo is represented by Steven Kasher Gallery, New York, and is Professor of Photography at the State University of New York. She lives in New York City.

Chika Okeke-Agulu earned a Ph.D. in Art History from Emory University, Atlanta. He currently teaches Art History at Princeton University, and has written extensively on contemporary Nigerian art. He has worked on a curator of exhibitions at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, the first Johannesburg Biennale in 1995 and was an academic consultant for the *Dokumenta 11* in Kassel. He was associate curator of *The Short Century: Colonialism and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945-1994*, shown first in 2002 at the Museum Villa Stuck, Munich, and later in Berlin, Chicago, and in New York.



Jollay Masquerade, House Cultural Group,
Freetown, Sierra Leone 2009



Yaie Masquerade, Bansie Village, Burkina Faso, 2006



Ewokom Masquerade, Eshinjok Village, Nigeria 2004

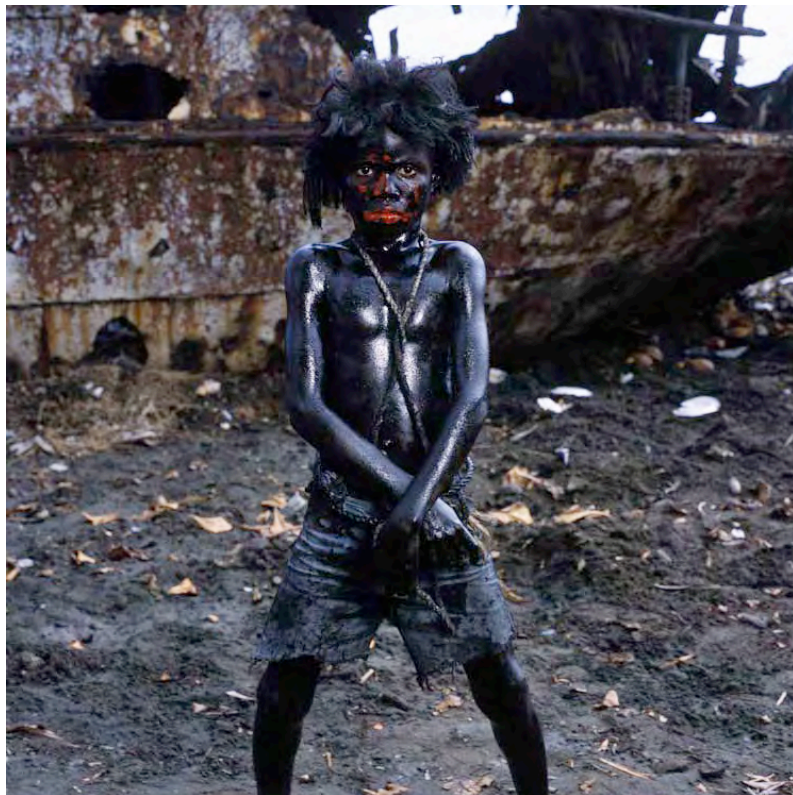
From Chika Okeke-Agulu's introduction:

"Masking is one of the most complex and secretive, yet profoundly important, phenomena in Africa. Western anthropologists were attracted to it during the early 20th century for what it revealed about the social structures, political practices and ritual systems of colonized peoples, while artists and art historians tended to focus on the aesthetics. Since that time, systematic study of masking from broad disciplinary perspectives has yielded much about its religious, political and social functions, but has also enabled us to examine the many dimensions of masking as artistic and theatrical complexes.

"The masks themselves have often been seen as embodied spirits and ancestral beings who return to the world of the living at specific occasions. They are part of a cosmological complex within which life exists as a continuous cycle, perpetually mediated by the action of deities, nature spirits, ancestors and other human beings. Masking entails the donning of the physical mask/costume by (mostly) men, which equally implies the ritual transformation of carrier and mask into an ancestral or metaphysical being. When fully activated, masks become "spirits made tangible", as Herbert Cole has argued in his book *I Am Not Myself: The Art of African Masquerade*."

From Robert Farris Thompson, Col. John Trumbull Professor, History of Art, Yale University

"Africa is a world of blazing signs and Phyllis Galembo knows how to capture all of them in personal technicolor. When images are dark and deliberately morally intimidating, as in an upper Cross River skin-head janus headdress, she knows how to accentuate with appropriate economy. When two men roar with coded signs of the leopard spirit, every color, every ideograph, whams into her camera. You could write a book about the world of Phyllis Galembo, a woman who knows how to pack respect, vision, and, above all, beauty in her lens. I am proud to observe her fearless peregrinations across the face of Mother Africa."



Boy at Beach, Jacmel, Haiti 2004

From Ann Doran review of exhibition at Sepia International, Time Out New York, July 2005:

"Her lush color portraits convey the mystery and range of their rituals, while documenting the pomp and glamour of their costumes, altars and religious objects.

"More recent photographs focus on the transformation of people, rather than of their environments. Masquerade dancers from Cross River, Nigeria, are covered from head to toe in striped and patchwork costumes, with unearthly faces perched on top of their heads, Carnival performers from Jacmel, Haiti-- like the rakish Chief of the Devil Band, wielding an ax while wearing a black hat, red scarf and gold lamé skirt-- become creatures of fantasy."

"Galembo's primary interest is the wearer's belief in the power of ritual costume to alter their everyday reality: The Cross River masqueraders become the revived spirits of dead ancestors while Haiti's disenfranchised poor, hidden under face paint and papier-mâché masks, become empowered political satirists.

"As her latest photographs make clear, Galembo wants views to see and appreciate who her subjects are, but more than that, who they believe themselves to be."

From Roberta Smith review of exhibition at Sepia International, New York Times, July 15, 2005:

"Her images are both portraits and documents, but their combination of dignity, conviction and formal power - especially their vibrant colors and often extraordinary altars - gives them a votive aspect similar to European paintings of saints or kings.

From David Byrne's Online Journal (<http://davidbyrne.com/journal>), May 6, 2005:

"Wow. I was knocked out.... these are astounding."

"Most of all, the work is, in my opinion, not romantic — some of the stuff is hard, emotional, serious as death and as a result the beauty has depth." "I've seen Phyllis work (in Brazil) and she affects a slightly ditzy casual demeanor — that disguises the fact that she knows exactly what she wants and how to get it."

"Besides, these subjects are in costume. They have intentionally transformed themselves into something exotic, charged, even frightening. Here is combined a long deep legacy of dress-up for masquerade, for carnival, for possession by the Gods combined with personal creativity and ingenuity. These are not people in their ordinary dress — they are intentionally fantastic, shocking, wild."