H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Z.S Strother. *Inventing Masks: Agency and History in the Art of the Central Pende.* Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998. XXVII + 348 pp. $70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-77732-0.

Reviewed by Stephen Belcher (Department of Comparative Literature, Penn State University)

Published on H-AfrLitCine (November, 1999)

Zoe Strother's Inventing Masks

An early guitar piece by Francis Bebey, "Concert pour un vieux masque," tells of a mask taken from Africa and eventually placed by itself in a museum. Torn from its human milieu and unable to stand the cold solitude, the mask breaks. A good deal of writing and exhibiting of African art in the past thirty years has been devoted to remedying the underlying problem of this musical parable: the need to restore the human context in which African art is born and flourishes, and without which it loses so much of its meaning. *Inventing Masks*, Zoe Strother's study of Pende masquerading in the central Congo (former Zaire), sets itself in this line of work; Strother's purpose is essentially to put Pende masks back on to the dancers, so to speak, and to see the art form as a whole. The mask, exhibited in the museum, is for the non-Pende the visible tip of the iceberg; the book is intended to define the hidden contours and underpinnings of this metonymic object. The thesis of the book is perhaps epitomized in the quote from the sculptor Gitshiola Leon: "You can't just invent a mask… You need a dance" (p. 22).

The book is divided into two parts. The first (six chapters) describes the elements that go into creating a mask (and its dance) and offers some suggestions for appreciation of the shapes of masks; the second (two chapters) offers an attempt at a pre-colonial and colonial history of masquerading. The book is also profusely illustrated with over 100 black and white photographs and eight in color.

The first chapter describes the Pende and the social world of the mask-dancing tradition, stressing perhaps more the psychological and affective aspects (rivalries of uncles and nephews, fears of sorcery) rather than the performative. The brief history of the Pende is amplified, with more lurid detail on the colonial period, in the second part of the book. The second chapter leads to the concept of the mask as a whole mask and costume, music, song, dance-steps, character and offers some specific examples to demonstrate the process. The third chapter presents the costume and its most important elements (e.g. the foot-rattles), with suggestions on the components and characteristics of the dance steps. The fourth chapter is devoted to the men who make masks, focussing on the exceptional village of Nyoka-Munene where Strother found a community of seven sculptors and information on their predecessors (she starts with Maluba, fl. 1870-1935).

The fifth and sixth chapters are devoted to the appreciation of the masks in local terms; chapter five discusses theories of physiognomy in the most general sense before turning to specifically Pende appreciation of different facial features: forehead, eyes, mouth, nose, eyebrows; chapter six offers a focussed discussion of variants of a specific mask type (or, as she would term it, a mask genre).

The second section, aimed at an art-history of Pende masquerades, does not seem quite so successful or effective as the first. The first of the two chapters aims at identifying changes in style by discussing pairs of masks from the central and the eastern Pende on the presumption of a long separation of the two groups and consequent independent development of original basic types; this object-centered discussion, reminiscent of a catalogue rather than a narrative history, is not particularly accessible. The last chapter, 'Masks in the colonial period,' raises enough questions about continuity in masking styles (given the emphasis on animal-masks in the period 1930-50) to make one wonder about the whole enterprise. The credible connection of the colonial context with the masking themes also suggests that this level of presentation should have come much earlier in the book, or perhaps that two books should have been written.

The book has great strengths. Strother has worked very closely with the Pende, and is honest enough to show us some of the misperceptions she brought to her fieldwork; she has clearly learned a great deal and articulately expresses her understanding of the Pende appreciation of their masks. Her book represents a very significant advance on the work of Leon de Sousberghe whose *L'art Pende* (1959) has been hitherto the standard treatment; her discussion of the different mask types (in chapter seven and in the appendix) will probably set the benchmark.

At the same time, the book leaves some gaps and raises some questions. *Inventing Masks* is the first monograph in English on Pende masks and thus of necessity has a certain introductory function. This is not a distinction to which the author has aspired; in fact, the book addresses itself to problems essentially internal to the discipline of art history such as the possibility of invention in a 'traditional' society. Nevertheless, the book is likely to become the primary source to which many American (at least) readers will turn for information.

>From this perspective, a signal absence in the book is extended description of the performative aspects of mask-dancing: occasions, sponsorship, participants, sequences, audience reaction (and intervention?) and the like. It appears that in the region where Strothers worked the masks were largely secular, having lost an earlier ritual function; the early ritual function was loosely associated with the building of community spirit, and served as a meeting place of the spirits of the dead with the living; there are tantalizing references to masks used in women's rituals, and to masks owned by chiefs; but there is no attempt to integrate the perspective of what one might call the ethnography of performance with the book's discussion of mask genres. This does not mean that she should have adopted some different theoretical perspective, merely that some essential information is lacking, although the discussion of chapter eight demonstrates how vital the social context is and how closely the masks may reflect it. It seems unlikely that a proper history of the masking genres could be given without attention to the changing occasions of the performance and the popular understanding of those occasions. The discussion given in chapter one conveys perhaps more of the emotional atmosphere of a performance rather than some of these basic and practical questions.

The absence of this sort of information means that the masks under discussion are not fully restored to their human context. Our picture of the masks and their accoutrements is far more complete, and our understanding of what we might call the backstage elements is far clearer (this at least one would expect from a student of Robert Farris Thompson). These are masks in motion. But in the final analysis, the focus of the book remains tilted towards questions of surface and line and texture, and there is still much to be said about the place of masquerades in Pende life. That statement requires the corollary: Strother's demonstrable knowledge of the subject leaves little doubt that she could provide this additional information, and one hopes that at a later date she will.

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-afrlitcine

Citation: Stephen Belcher. Review of Strother, Z.S, *Inventing Masks: Agency and History in the Art of the Central Pende*. H-AfrLitCine, H-Net Reviews. November, 1999.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3576

Copyright © 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.