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FACULTY OF DESIGN

DEPARTMENT OF TEXTILES

FUNCTIONS, USE AND SYMBOL OF THE MASKS WORN BY WOMEN OF THE SANDE SOCIETY

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GUINEA
GUINEA
Kabala
Kambia
Makeni
Magburaka
Freetown
Lumley
Moyamba
Taiama
Njala
Bumpe
Bo
Kailahun
Bunumbu
Kenema
Telu
Atlantic Ocean
Bonthe
Sewa R.
LIBERIA
MENDELAND
SOUTHERN AND EASTERN
PROVINCES IN SIERRA LEONE
West Africa
Senegal
Gambia
Guinea-Bissau
Guinea
Mali
Burkina-Faso
Sierra Leone
Liberia
Ivory Coast
Ghana
Togo
Benin
Nigeria
MENDELAND
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FOREWORD

When I first started to write this thesis, I was very interested in the role of women in West African society. My particular area of interest was the superstitions and rituals surrounding women in the craft area.

On researching this topic I found that there was very little written information on this in Ireland. I wrote to E Tonkin, Professor of Social Anthropology in Queen's University, Belfast who has a research interest in West Africa and it was she who first introduced me to the Sande society and the masks which play such an important role in it. On further research I found that Ann Burke, a tutor of Printed textiles in this college, had one of these masks, which I was able to examine. As my country of research is West Africa and I did not have the opportunity to visit it for information, much of my research has come from books, especially Sylvia Boone's book on the ideals of feminine Beauty in Mende Art, Radiance from the Waters published in 1986.

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

In my thesis I will discuss the use of Masks in the West African cultural system and their importance to the women of the Sande society. This society is a concept, an organisation, a body of knowledge for its fellowship of women. It is sacred and its communion is secret (2, p. 153). It is the only known instance in West Africa where women customarily wear masks (2, p. 13). The Sande society is made up of women from many ethnic groups in West Africa. I feel to study and understand the Sande and Sowo (the classical mask of the Sande society). It would make it clearer to take one single culture, the Mende and explain how they live their lives through the Sande society. Each element assembled to the make up of Sowo had its own references in Mende thought and conduct. As Sandes symbol Sowo is presented to the public as a fully costumed being; the basic costume is composed of a black wooden sculpted helmet mask called Sowo-Wui, combined with a black raffia and cloth costume the Sowoi-malomei (5, p. 130). Sowo has remained for generations a focus of Mende life because of its beauty and lofty meanings.

Before I discuss the Sande society and Sowo in depth I would first like to discuss why masks have been worn and their importance in a range of other ethnic cultures. Masks have been made for many reasons throughout life; they can be seen as religious objects, images to be worshipped and they have been made to decorate sacred places, in homage or sometimes out of

Fig. 2

Female mask from a death ritual

fear. But mostly masks have been made to change an image and for the wearer to assume a different personality.

In Roman times the Latin word 'persono' (personality) was the name for the mask worn by characters in a play (6, p. 1). People have made and worn masks in order to change their own appearance and personality for many centuries and for many different reasons. Masks have been made and worn in order to disguise and frighten. They have been used in sad and unpleasant occasions such as at funerals or when warriors wore them on raiding parties (fig. 2). Today they may have a new unpleasant form such as the stocking masks of contemporary terrorism. Masks have also been made for happy occasions such as carnivals and parties.

Originally, every mask was made with some significance: the mask itself or the person wearing it represented some mysterious power or spirit. In some parts of the world such as Ceylon masks still retain their deep and often complex meaning (fig. 3). It seems that only within the Eastern Indian cultures such as Ceylon and Tibet masks are still used in a way that may seem strange to us: Ceylonese masks represent sickness and it is thought that once the sickness is made visible in the form of masks, it can then be cured (2, p. 7) (fig. 4). The American continent also has many masks. The Eskimo and the Indians of the Northwest made masks of very high quality (fig. 5). These masks often take the form of an animal or sometimes may represent a totemic ancestor (12, p. 7). In the ancient civilizations of Mexico and Peru, death-masks were fastened to the mummies of the dead

Fig. 3

Demon mask with eye in centre of forehead, Ceylon

Fig. 4

Demon sickness mask from Ceylon

Fig. 5

Mask from North West Coast of America

or sometimes the gods were depicted as masked figures (fig. 6). In Melanesia the art of mask making is highly developed, its variety and artistic values having close ties with the cultural life of the people. Australia has no actual masks, but the highly effective way of painting the body which is practised by the Aborigines is itself a form of masking (fig. 7).

Another important type of mask is the theatre mask; this type of mask is found in classical European theatre and also in Indonesia and Japan. Japanese masks have a time-honoured tradition. They have survived to the present day as theatrical masks in tradition Japanese theatre and are highly sophisticated works of art (12, p. 214) (fig. 8). Europe has known a vast variety of masks throughout the ages. Modern forms may range from the beauty mask to the gas mask. The carnival mask is still used at many European festivals.

The African continent is one of the areas of the world where the true meaning of the mask is most clearly apparent, for they still play a vital role in community life. Here masks are an integral part of culture and tradition. The mask allows the wearer to have a completely new and different personality. Concealed by a mask the wearer is able to transform him or her self into a cultural hero of long ago. At all rituals we find ancestors are connected with masks and in fact it is the mask that helps create the form of the ancestor. There is no longer any individual involvement once the mask is put on. It is thought that some of these masks have supernatural powers alive within them, so they are kept

Fig. 6

Human skull, decorated with turquoise, Aztec, Mexico

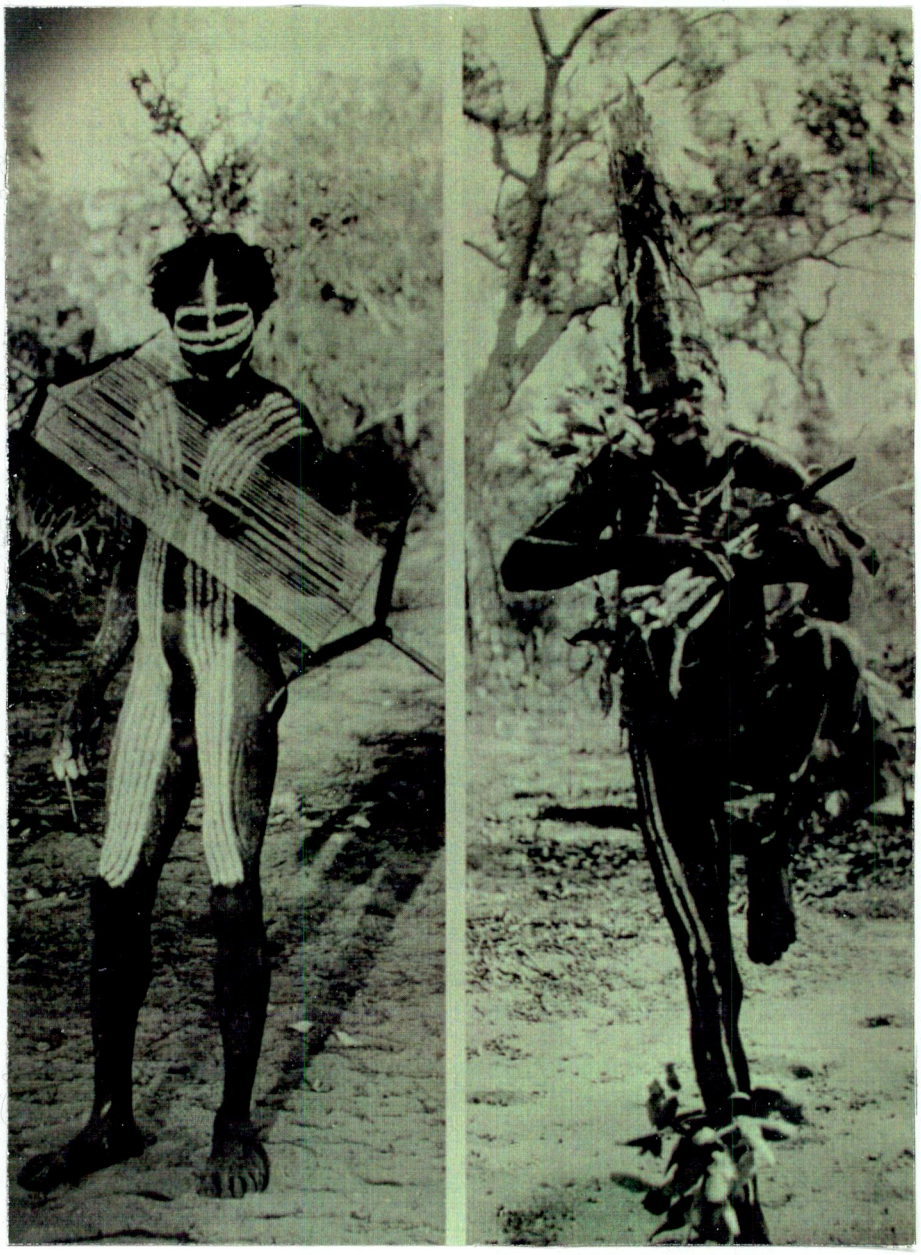

Fig. 7

Painted and therefore masked dancers, representing various spirits, North Western Australia

Fig. 8

The mountain-god dance, Somakush, performed at the Imperial Palace, Tokyo

away from women and children for whom they spell death (the masks of the Sande society are an exception here) (15, p. 70). When the mask is made great care is taken not to anger to ancestor whom it represents.

There is an extraordinary variety of sculptural masks in Africa because of the way the people imagine the supernatural creature and spirit which is revealed to them through the mask. These may be taken from many forms: that of the human face and animals or of fantastic and fabulous creatures. Many masks are seen to represent spirits from another world (the world of the dead) and are therefore abstract and surreal (15, p. 70) (fig. 9). Some have a horrific appearance, while others can be friendly or mysterious. It is clear that most masks represent heroes and spirits from African culture and depict events of primeval times relived again in rituals and masquerades.

In West Africa alone all sorts of figures are described as masks. Some of them are completely covered but wear no mask at all, while others have masks but not on their faces. Besides the masks which represent a face or head there are masks composed of a whole figure (such as body painting). There are miniature masks which may be carried around as pocket versions of the larger ones or there are portrait masks of the living and the dead (fig.10).

Fig. 9

Abstract mask of the Bateke, Congo

Fig. 10

Example of miniature mask

CHAPTER ONE: MASKS OF WEST AFRICA

The masks which are most familiar to us are, without doubt those from Africa. The products of African art, and these include masks, have influenced us since explorers first returned with them to Europe and since Picasso first used their forms in his paintings. The forms of African art which appear to be essentially determined by the masks are only found in a strip of land stretching across the centre of the continent from West to East. In the rest of Africa, to the North and South, Negro art is absent, and the rock painting of nomads and hunters represents a totally different type of art form than that of the settled agricultural Negro population of the West and Central Africa (12, p. 9). African mask art has two important centres, namely the West African coastal region and the Congo river region: because of my interest in Sande, I would like to discuss the masks of the West African region.

There are several mask making centres in West Africa. One such centre is the Ivory Coast, where the Baule tribe are particularly renowned as sculptors, and another is Liberia in particular the regions of the Dan Tribe. In these regions alone there are many different types of masks and mask rituals. I would like to give an outline as to the main features of masks in West Africa.

Masks may appear for many different occasions: they are seen at great festivals such as those of the new year and harvest, or they may also be found at cult or society festivals. If masks are involved with a certain

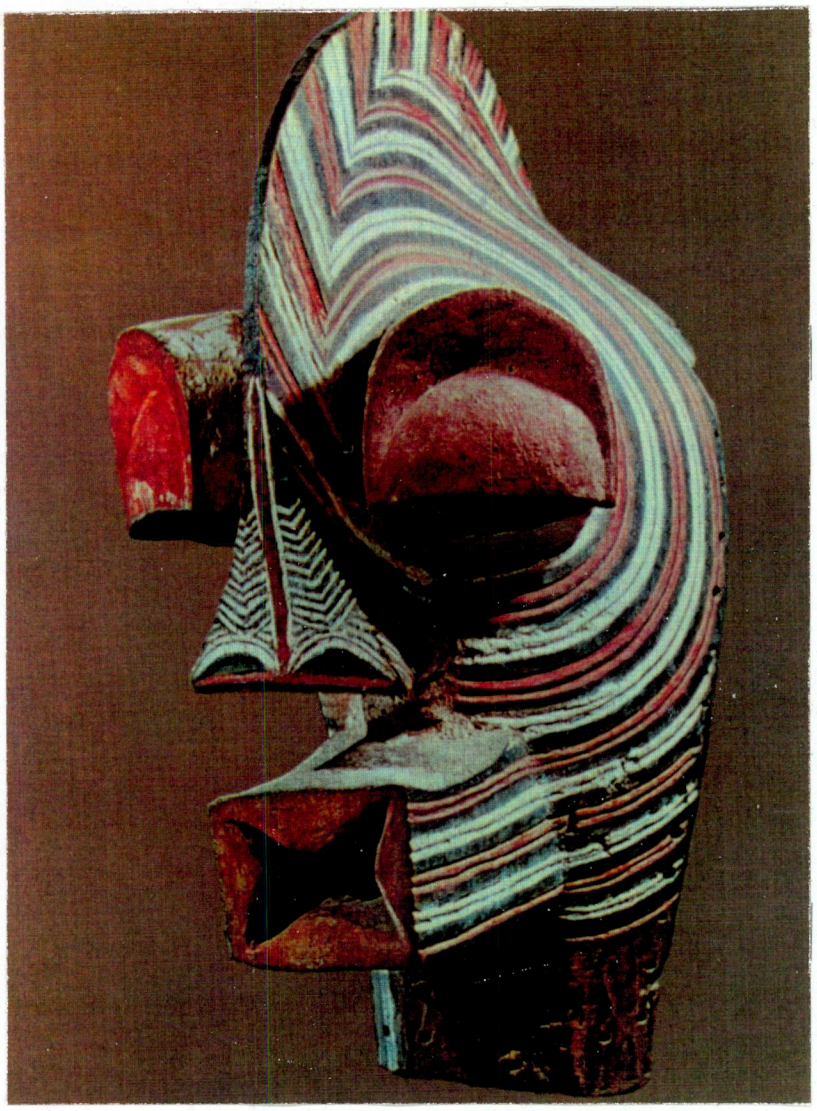

Fig. 11

Initiation mask, representing the spirit of the dead

cult they will be an important part of it (although they may be owned by a village with no cult) and they can be composed of both spirit and human members. In West Africa male groups of these societies may have all male members but initiate women who have seen masks or may have senior female masks as mothers of the novices. Female groups (Sande) are all female and have a wider distribution than their counterpart (Poro) male societies (14, p. 10). Masks are generally said to be forbidden to women's sight, but the only woman allowed to use masks are those who are members of female mask societies, also a powerful woman member of a cult can become a cult mother (14, p. 11). Women can sometimes own masks but most masks of women are carried by men except in women's societies.

In Elizabeth Tonkins paper on Masking and Masquerading with examples from West Africa she finds that masks play an important role in the exorcism of illness and in increasing female fertility. A barren woman may be initiated to bring fertility; however the wrongful sighting by a woman of a masked figure in the forest may bring ritual barrenness or ritual circumcision.

Masks may be worn at funerals when the spirits of ancestors are called upon to take the spirit of the dead person (fig. 11). Masks are always seen as occasions, ranging from closed ceremonies, which may be secret judgment sessions, including punishment of offenders and witchfinding, to open ceremonies which would be festival masquerades. Night occasions tend to be closed while day tend to be open. For cults, closed appearances tend to be in the bush while open ones are in

Fig. 12

Mask used in rain making ceremonies

villages (14, p. 9).

Masks rarely appear singly, although a Great Mask may appear alone, they are often accompanied by unmasked attendants who may carry sticks or whips. At some masquerades they may be seen in sets, where there is a Great Mask with two or three minor ones accompanying it or they may appear as a family (15, p. 7). More important masks have names: they may have an individual owner who has inherited it (this person may not necessarily be a carrier). Masks and costumes are usually kept in a special house.

In masquerades, most masks include a covering costume often made up of a mop of raffia fibres or leaves. Cloth and hides are also used and this detail may be complex, with mirrors and whips often added. These costumes may be hung on or over the carrier who has to be skilled and strong to support it. There may be rules for dressing the mask. Inside the carrier may be naked to enable the ancestor or spirit to take full position of the carrier (carriers often become possessed). The mask may speak in a squeaky or growl voice Eg. bull-roarer, whilst and often speaks in a secret or animal language which has to be interpreted (9, p. 3). They are usually larger than life and may whirl, jump or rush at a crowd. Many of the masquerades where masks are used are for hunting, war making or rain making ceremonies (fig. 12).

The meaning and purpose of masks in West Africa may in many cases be seen in every day life - young boys often make play masks and sometimes appear in processions. They may also be figures of fun, satires or grotesque.

Many masks may be seen as spirits of the forest and may represent animals of the bush or water e.g. antelope, crocodile or snake. Some masks may also represent emotions, qualities and power.

Masks play an important role in initiations (fig. 13). The bush school is arranged for those who are to be initiated. From the forest appear masked figures, who collect boys and take them to the boundary fence of the school; here they must live and work learning to hunt and know the secret of the mask. At the camp a sequence of sacrifices or circumcisions occur during the time of change from boy to man (fig. 14). It is the masked figures who bring the initiates food or the initiates themselves may have to go into the forest wearing masks to collect it themselves. When the initiates return they first do so for brief stages. Here a mask of uniform design can be worn by initiands, who assume the character of a newborn baby. Conducted by masks, they may be themselves first veiled, then they grow into their new status with superiority to women (14, p. 11).

MASKS AS TRANSFORMERS

Many collectors would see masks as artefacts rather than as vehicles for the process of transformation (that which is thought to transform the wearer from the person he/she is to the spirit or ancestor of the mask) which is in fact what they are used for in African societies. In Sidney Kasfir's book on West African Masks and Cultural Systems he finds that most societies have

Fig. 13

Initiation mask

Fig. 14

Circumcision mask

ways through which transformation is effected. Even more common than masking is spirit possession, perhaps the most widespread way of transformation on the African continent. There are also a number of other types of masks such as acoustic masks, night masks and body painting (fig. 15).

In each of the above cases the 'mask' no longer exists in the traditional sense of facial covering which hides the identity of its wearer, but as something which nevertheless covers and transforms. In the case of the acoustic mask of the Sapo in Liberia, its presence is closely guarded and made known publicity only by its characteristic sounds (9, p. 5). These masks are often more powerful than visual masks and may represent a more ancient type of mask culture. The night masks cover is darkness itself. Body painting transforms a person through the break up of the body image and its replacement by something more spiritual. Many real masks are imitations of body painting which adds to the element of concealment while still maintaining the spirit state (fig. 16).

Body painting represents a different type of transformation because unlike masks which conceal the identity of the wearer, it does not give the notion of secrecy. For this reason it is used often for womens coming-of-age ceremonies, acting as an aesthetic and ritual separator without upsetting the usually male privilege of transformation from visible person to invisible spirit person (9, p. 5). It is also used during initiations in the Sande societies of womens masking, the young girls bodies are covered with a white

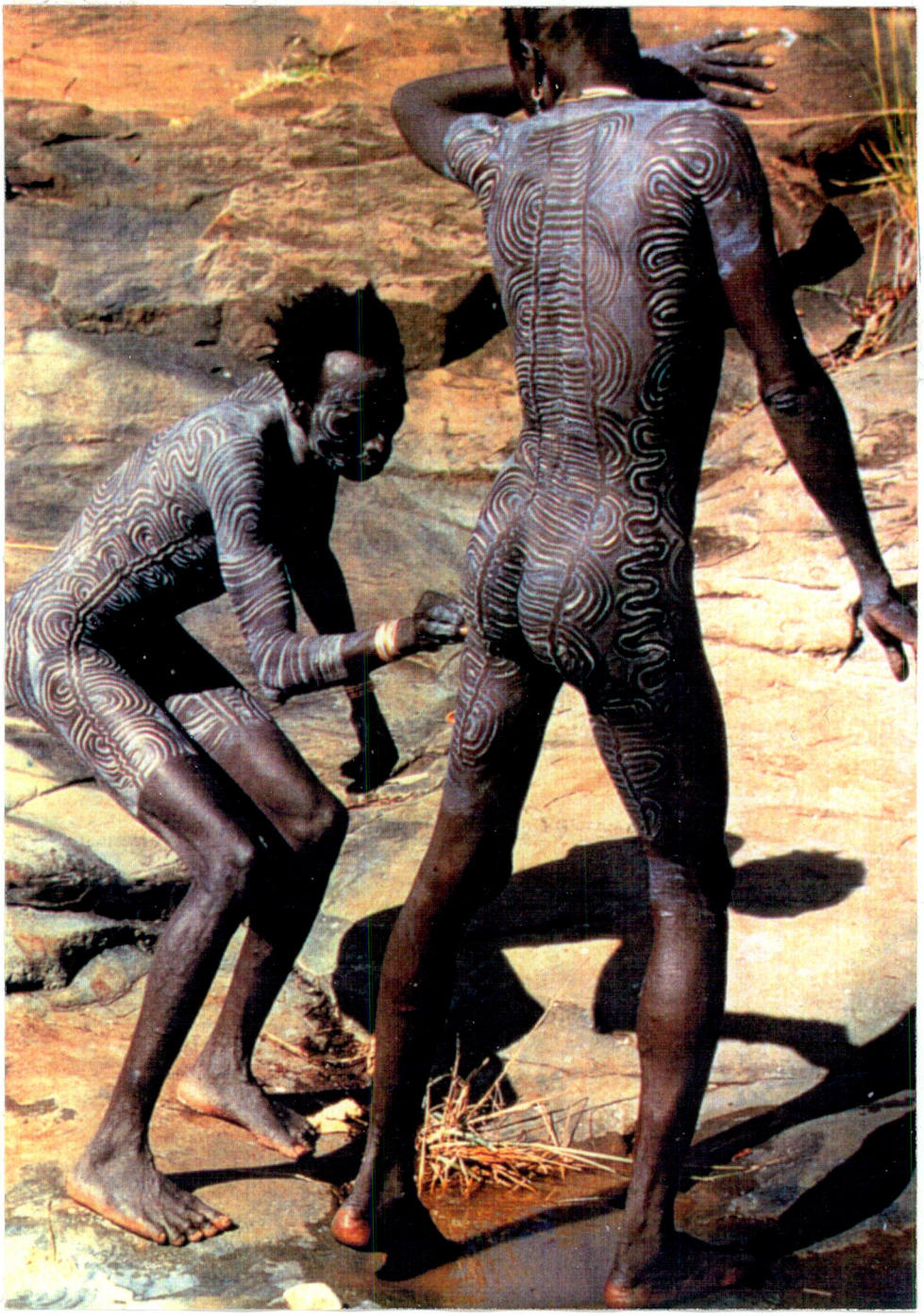

Fig. 15

A form of African body painting

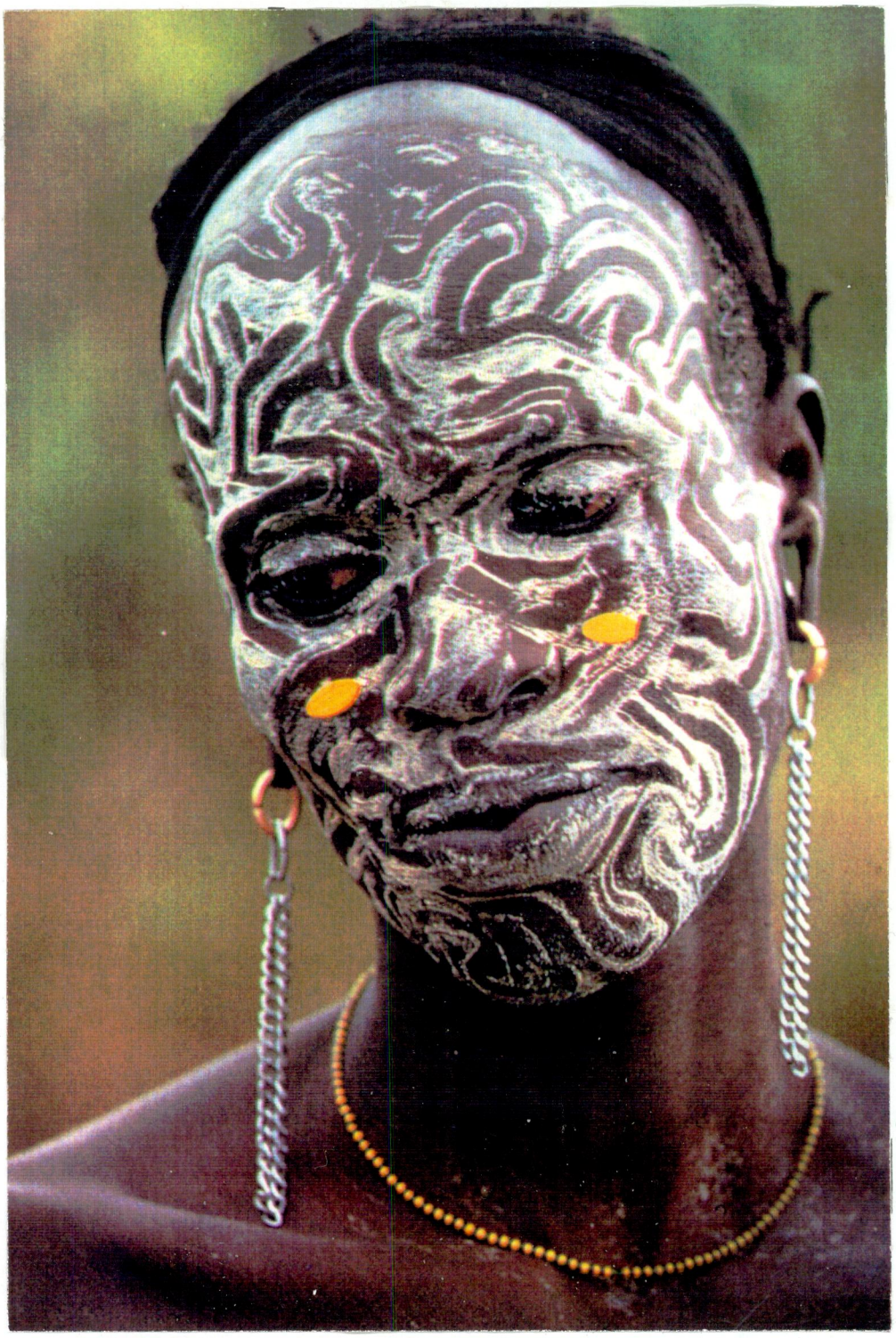

Fig. 16

Painted face, a form of masking

clay. This clay is called Hojo (14, p. 18). Body painting also occurs during spirit possession or mourning (fig. 17).

So we can see that the large amount of forms which can be called masks are simple part of the many ways in which spiritual transformation can take place. Once we no longer see masks as three dimensional objects, it becomes possible to view masking as a transformational process which when enacted as a ritual becomes a spiritual order and when enacted as a play becomes a social order.

MASKING AS A CULTURAL SYSTEM

In all West African societies where masking is ancient, it may be understood as a system of many parts. In West Africa it is not the belief in masks themselves that makes them complex but the part they play in the culture of the society, consisting of the living, the ancestors (the dead) and those spirits of the wild whom most Africans feel inhabit the surroundings. These lather may be bush or water spirits, depending on the region, or even invisible spirits of the air. These 'air spirits' may have formerly been human spirits, who were born or died abnormally, from leprosy, smallpox, lightening or any cause which prevented their proper burial and so their spirit is left to roam about the bush. What these have in common is a shared community, the ancestors and the spirits of the surrounding natural environment,

> In much of West Africa masks are mirrors of a small-scale cultural system. They accurately reflect in

Fig. 17

Young girls painted in white clay, Hojo, this shows they are initiates

> a performance frame the system of relationship that belongs in the 'real world' outside the frame. If myth is a mode which validates cosmology by grounding it in society, the mask system can be understood as it obverse a model which validates the social order by grounding it in the cosmic order (9, p. 6)

For many peoples of West Africa, one of these being the Dan People of Liberia, masks in the past played a part in the actual governance of the community. Masked figures carried out real political roles from the judgment of criminals to the settlement of land disputes (8, p. 2) (fig. 18).

Masks are sometimes used to signify ritual separation during the initiation ceremonial. The Sande or masked figures who enter the village are replacements for the invisible initiates who are now concealed in the forests, these spirits (invisible) inhabit the forest while the young women go about their jobs in the village. But during their initiation it is the spirits who become visible (as masked figures) and the initiates invisible (because they are now taken to the forest to be prepared for initiation). The emergence of the spirit from the forest shows its transformation from a dangerous and powerful being to a harmless masked figure controlled by human beings (9, p. 7).

In his book Sidney Kasfir finds that because females are almost always excluded from masking, it may seem that masking is only for the male portion of the social structure. But the fact that women are excluded is important to the masquerade as the power of illusion and secrecy depends upon women playing the role of

Fig. 18

Mask used to govern a community

non-initiates. This is true for most peoples in West Africa including the (Poro) male masking society but not for the Sande society. For the Poro/Sande societies of Liberia and Sierra Leone the presence of women's masking societies along side men's does not alter this system. It is merely that males are excluded from female masking, which creates a more balanced masking system than can be found in most other areas.

Elizabeth Tontin finds that the position of women cannot be derived from Mask evidence alone any more than the position of men. Masks are more a focus for pondering on the reasons for sexual division and sometimes for acting to bound or neutralise the power of women which these thoughts have discovered. The whole justification for masks in some myths is to replace female superiority by male domination. In ritual, people are disengaged from everyday roles and the self-conscious acting of ritual behaviour allows people to bring into focus an abstract image of their social thinking and to tolerate the contradictions with in it. Masks events are long complex events which are rich in symbolism, but they allow different responses from men and women.

CHAPTER TWO: INTRODUCTION TO THE SANDE SOCIETY

> Sande is most important for a study of women and art in contemporary West Africa because it is the only known instance in Africa in which women customarily wear masks. (2, p. 13)

A knowledge of Sande is important I think to masking because it brings into focus the female presence in this art. Sande is a women's society formed for many generations by women of a number of peoples in West Africa. It not only regulates women's day-to-day activities but it also controls all female artistic expression. It would be difficult to talk about the Sande societies representative object which is the Sowo mask without first dealing with some of Sande organizations and social functions (fig. 19).

Sande is international in West Africa, as women from Guinea, Sierra Leona, Liberia and as far east as the borders of the Ivory Coast may become members. Almost every woman of the Menda, Susu, Vai, Temne, Sherbro, Gola, Bassa and Kpelle peoples has been initiated into this society and looks to it for guidance and benefits from its laws. The present membership of Sande is estimated at more than a million and a half and this is still growing; for example, the Bassa women of Central Liberia accepted Sande quite recently, or an individual woman may join as a convert (2, p. 14).

To help understand this society I would like to focus on one group of women the Mende. The fundamental aesthetic criterion of Mende culture is feminine beauty,

Fig. 19

Sande initiation mask

these ideals are both guarded and transmitted by the Sande society. The Mende are an ethnic group of about one million people who are mainly agriculturalists, living in the southern and eastern parts of Sierra Leona and on the West Atlantic Coast of Africa (2, p. 6).

The Sande society is the ruling governing institution in a females life and because of this every Mende women would become a member. The women treasure it, preserve its virtues and pass it on to the next generations. In return Sande (as in the society) is their guardian, their spokesperson, battling to give women power, health, love, fertility and self expression.

By the offices they hold in the Sande society, women have the opportunity to acquire political experience and exercise authority. A female politician can always be seen to have a potentially strong power base because of her membership of Sande. Because of Sande's size it has the power to unite many ethnic groups in an area that is distinguished by large movements of population, political dislocations and now modernizations. Rather than lessening in importance under such economic and social development, Sande still remains vital and attractive. The leaders of Sande who care called Sowei are seen as models to other women of the community because of their high social values.

Sande is also seen as a religion among its members, it inspires high aspirations and also has the power to make life good. It is concerned with defining what it is to be human and ways of promoting love, justice and harmony. Sande has a strong spiritual influence over

both women and men, because according to Mende tradition, the root to fertile productivity and wealth is female. Sowei, the high leaders of Sande, are thought to have access to spirit ancestors and the forces of nature, giving them the power of crucial knowledge to the development, happiness and success of individuals in the community.

The Sande school is the most influential institution within the society. It is a traditional equivalent of a Western Finishing School, it is one of initiation where young girls are trained to enhance their potential as wives, mothers and fully fledged members of the community. The girls are also taught grace and elegance, beauty and pleasing deportment of mind and body. The school may also teach music, singing, dancing and other life-enriching arts (2, p. 17) (fig. 20).

Sowo is the society's classic mask; it has a central role in Sande ceremonial and ritual activities. The fully robed mask-in-motion is the spirit of Sande, the materialization of the society's precepts and ideals. Sowei the Sande leader and Sowo the Sande mask are complementary to and reflective of each other. The majesty and power of the mask gives Sowei her authority and confidence. As the mask is the visual representation of every Mende womans aspirations and ideals for womanhood, so to does Sowei strive to make an example of the highest of feminine virtues.

Sowo is not the only mask of the Sande society, there is also Gonde. The reason for this is that Mende women feel that two masks have to be created to fully

Fig. 20

The teaching of a Sande dance to new initiates

express the realities of the social setting out of which the Sande mask emerges (2, p. 39). There is a classic image for Mende womanhood, beauty, elegance, seriousness and grandeur all of these are what Sowo represents, whereas Gonde is the other opposite, coarse, unkempt and grotesque. Piles of junk and scrapes are used to make it costume.

Sowo is the superior mask while Mende women have created Gonde, with its comic appearance, to mock Sowo's perfection. The two masks together are contrasting yet complementary, for the women of the society they say that it (the society) is made up of the outstanding and the ridiculous. Sowei, the head of the Sande society, is of high disciplines and noble behaviour, she is serious and she represents woman in her best social sense just like her masked image Sowo. Gonde, on the other hand, represents the women of the village who are untidy and ragged and correspond with those women who do not want to be well groomed or who do not want the responsibilities of community life. Here it is important to remember that the fundamental concern of Mende women is feminine beauty. Gonde the mask is an object of fun just like her real life counterpart. Eventhough Gonde is a figure of fun, in a sadder sense she is also a figure of failure, because she represents the women of the village who have failed within their community and are now outcasts.

A proverb tells the story of Gonde

> Ngi pimbili gas, ngi pambala gas, ngi tea fee, ngi njea fee, ngi gbahanga - I have danced round and round, I have leapt into the air, I have sunk onto the ground (but now)

> I give up. I have done my best but have failed. I have tried everything, but have failed (2, p. 40)

Here the Gonde seems to be saying that before she became what she is, she tried to change her ways and be accepted but failed.

Sowei and Gonde, represent the two poles of human experiences and they both live together in the sacred initiation grove - the world that Sande makes.

There are two histories of the Sande society, one factual, one mythical. According to Anthony Forge in Primitive Art and Society (5, ch. 8) the break up of the Mali empire occasioned the Mani migrations to the Guinea Coast, then into the hinterlands of what is now Sierra Leone and Liberia under the leadership of the warrior queen Mansarico. There is strong evidence that the Mani women brought with them developed powers of rulership based on the knowledge of their state, herbal medicine, agriculture and fine arts. The basis of Mani female education and organization seems to have been that of initiation societies. As the fusing of the Mani invaders with the people of the area gave rise to the Mende ethnic, group, so too did the Mani womens 'club' lead directly to todays Sande.

According to the myth, the Sande society was an inspiration from the spirit world presented in a dream to one woman who had the conviction to weld her community women into strong sisterhood. The myth gives Sande its supernatural base and allies it with powers, forces, ideals and concepts. Thus, through earthly and spiritual

CHAPTER THREE: THE MAKING OF THE MASK

Sowo has been the focus of Mende life for generations because of its beauty and nobility. Any significance the mask may have has been given to it by the desires of the Mende, after all the mask is mere wood and fibre fashioned by ordinary human beings.

The Sowo mask in its full custom is only seen at rituals four or five times a year, the rest of the time it is kept hidden from sight (fig. 21). The Sowo head, Sowo-wui is a wooden helmet-like design which completely covers the wearers head and rests on her shoulders. Even though the Sowo-wui may appear heavy and bulky, it is made from a lightweight wood and is easy to wear. The head part of the mask is carved to resemble the female face, it is them coloured black and the smooth areas of the face and neck are highly polished.

There are three major divisions in the Sowo-wui, and these features are common to all masks, the neck, the face and the coiffure. The neck forms the base of the mask and the lower part of the frame where the face rests. The neck is composed of three or four solids which resemble rolls of flesh carved into the wood, these encircle the head and rise three or four inches up the back, at the front of the mask they slope into a narrow space where they fit into a round point under the chin. To enable the mask head to stand firmly upright on the shoulders it is evenly finished at the bottom with a flat edge (2, p. 157).

Fig. 21

Example of Sande society mask in full costume

The face of Sowo-wui is seen to be divided into two parts the area from the centre of the ears at the sides to the centre of the eyes on the face and the points from the tip of the chin to the top of the forehead. The top half of the face is taken up with the large forehead (a bit of the eyes and eyebrows may occupy a small part of this area). The eyes which are slitted, as if almost closed, are an important feature to the Mende and these dominate the bottom half of the mask; below them carved into a small space are the nose, mouth and chin resting on the neck rings (fig. 22).

The coiffure is the largest detailed portion of the mask and it is also the most richly decorated. Starting at the hairline just above the forehead, it covers the whole head and meets the neck rings at the back. There are two important parts of the coiffure the hair itself and the symbolic additions. The hairdo of Sowo-wui is always very elaborate, with braiding and plaiting to resemble that of the hair of Mende women. The additions to the hair may be of several types, there may be representations of birds and snakes, or crown shapes and crests, there may even be forms of horns, pots, shells and beads.

Sowo-wui must always be a pleasure to look at, for it to be accepted by the Sande society it must always be beautiful to the Sande eye, so for the sculptor the creation of the top of the mask always requires his skill and imagination.

The Sowo head must always be recognizable as that, if it is not complete and correct in all parts, it

Fig. 22

Side view of Sande initiation mask

is not seen as a complete mask, and so would not be able to preform within the society. It would be seen as a piece of sculpture alright, but not as a Sowo-wui. A mask that fails to meet exact standards is rejected outright.

The Sowo-wui is always used in dance ceremonials, no matter how beautiful a mask that cannot be used in a dance is useless. Such a mask is thought to be live a pretty woman who is barren, empty beauty. For a mask to be correct it must be comfortable to wear, it should be light in weight and smoothly finished on the inside, it should be quick to slip on and be seen to cover the dancer's head completely.

Once carved the mask is then coloured black. The sculptor paints on a black dye until the hue has soaked deep into the wood. Palm oil or shoe polish is then rubbed on to the mask to give the surface a sleek look. One reason for the mask being coloured black is to keep it looking clean; light-hued woods tend to oxidize and discolour giving a dirty appearance ; also light coloured wood when mottled has a disease, which gives the mask a bad appearance. The mask may also be coloured black because it is considered a woman and Mende women are often associated with the colour black. The work of preparing meals is seen as black e.g. working around the soot-tinted hearth stones, charcoal and black iron pots. The hands of Mende women dyers are often stained black because of their continued use of indigo pigment. For these women this indicates enterprise and prosperity. A deep black colour is rare and exciting in Mende culture, the deeper black the skin the more beautiful; because of

this masks cannot be beautiful without being black (2, p. 236).

It is important that the surface of the mask be smooth without any rough areas. To prevent traces of knife marks on the wooded areas of the forehead and the curves of the neck, the mask has to be sanded. The reason wood is used in the carving of the mask is first, it must be light and easy to wear, also wood is a media which can easily be fashioned and carved and also because, to the Mende, wood is seen as a living thing capable of the warmth that makes the mask appealing. To them wood is a 'leaf' as a person too is a 'leaf'. According to Mende thought we are all the stuff of green, growing plants.

> Wood is a living thing for the African and for this reason forgiveness is asked from the spirit of the tree before it is cut down (10, p. 117).

It is important that each part of the mask be clearly defined and readable, for this reason, when carving the features must be clearly cut. If the mask is blurred or muddled it is unacceptable; one must be able to see everything easily.

Mende seem to recognize two types of Sowo-wui heads one which is the classical form, complete and correct, whose origins are divine and is only used by the highest level of the Sande society. The other is an ornamental mask carved on commission and used by specialist dancers. This mask is the Sowo-dancers own property and the design is her private choice. The first is of supernatural origin and it represents the sacred spirit of the Sande society. The difference in these

masks is the coiffure, all other features remain the same but like the human face, there are never two the masks alike. The coiffure of the dancers mask has a variety of hairstyles and adornments where as the classical mask has only a simple hairstyle with a white cloth tied around the mask (fig. 23).

So in any Mende community there are two classes of masks; a large group belonging to individual specialist dancers (these are owned privately), and a select few that are the use of Sowai and the Sande shrine (fig. 24).

Here I would like to examine the Sowo-wui in regards to physical aspects as the head and face seem to be richly interlocked with meanings from Mende social and religious thoughts. Ann Burke a tutor of Printed textiles has an initiation mask which I was able to examine and in her book Radiance from the Water Sylvia Boone has made some very interesting and relevant observations on this.

In the Mende farming communities where food may be scarce for a few months of the year, only the well off have enough to eat. It is thought that people with pronounced neckrings (as seen on the neck of Sowo-wui) are well fed and live in a comfortable situation.

These large rings of flesh circling the neck of the Sowo-wui are a compulsory form on the mask, without these the mask would not be thought of a Sowo-wui. These rings of flesh circle the head fully and may be many shapes and sizes. They are thought to be exaggeration of the actual creases found on the necks of some Africans. They are hardly visible to most outsiders but are very important to the Mende, as they regard these rings as a

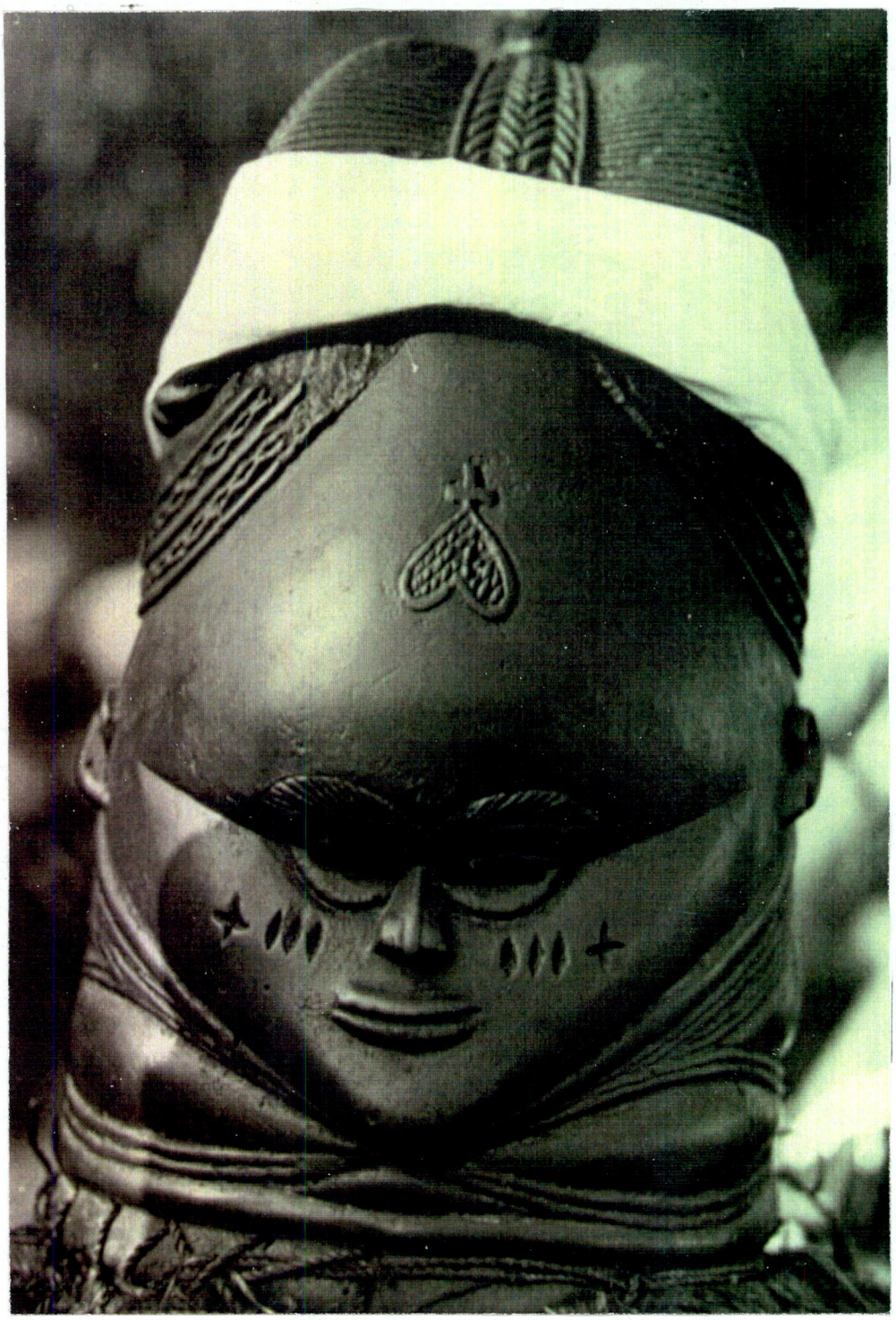

Fig. 23

Classical mask of the Sande society

Fig. 24

Side view of the same mask in costume

sign of a beautiful neck.

Many adults would try and form these rings themselves because they are thought to be sexually attractive to both men and women, and suggest wealth and high status.

The mouth of Sowo-wui is always small, pursued and is never opened, it should always be closed and solemn, never angry or laughing. The reason for this is that the Mende feel alot of human suffering comes from loose malicious talk, they feel that lies and slander can cause havoc among small and close-knit communities.

Sowo is thought to be a woman of prestige and for this reason only opens her mouth in the proper place. Her mouth is seen as that of a goddess and part of her importance is shown through her silence, she looks and listens but she does not speak. It is thought that important persons and supernatural beings should never speak or be spoken to, so Sowo never talks to her people without her attendant, Klei who talks on her behalf.

The nose on Sowo-wui is delicate and sharp, like the mouth it is small and nonfunctional. It is there for facial reality and orientation, it is never large. The Mende consider smell as the lowest of the senses and because women are considered more sensitive to the environment they are thought to have a keener sense of smell than men.

In contrast to the nose and mouth, the ears are important to the Mende, they are thought to be very sensitive and considered instruments of learning. The Mende feel that we see with our ears, they are seen as

organs for seeing the invisible and for seeing in the dark (2, p. 176). For this reason great emphasis is given to the ears on the Sowo-wui, they are well shaped but not natural in size and shape, they stand alone in the area between the front and back of the mask, they are always clearly in view and are never covered or over decorated (fig. 25).

The ears are another sign of Sowo's power and judgement. She may never be influenced, swayed or bribed, as she is able to shut her ears to all talk.

The eyes of the Sowo-wui are always heavy-lidded, downcast with mere slits for the openings. The eyes may be slitted to conceal the identity of the masked dancer or this may be to prevent any person from looking directly into the eyes of Sowo. To the Mende, slitted eyes are seen as alluring and flirtatious and for this reason they would consider them as important element of the body and an important form of physical beauty. Eyes are the most useful human resource, as it is thought that ordinary people have two eyes, one pair but those with supernatural powers have two pairs, one for seeing the ordinary world while the other is for seeing the spiritual world (fig. 26).

Sowei, as head of Sande, has the power of double vision, when Sowei wears Sowo-wui she sees with her human eyes while the power of the mask enables her to see inside the spirit world.

By its mass and volume the forehead seems to be an outstanding feature of the mask. The smooth texture on the forehead of Sowo-wui shows freedom from work in the

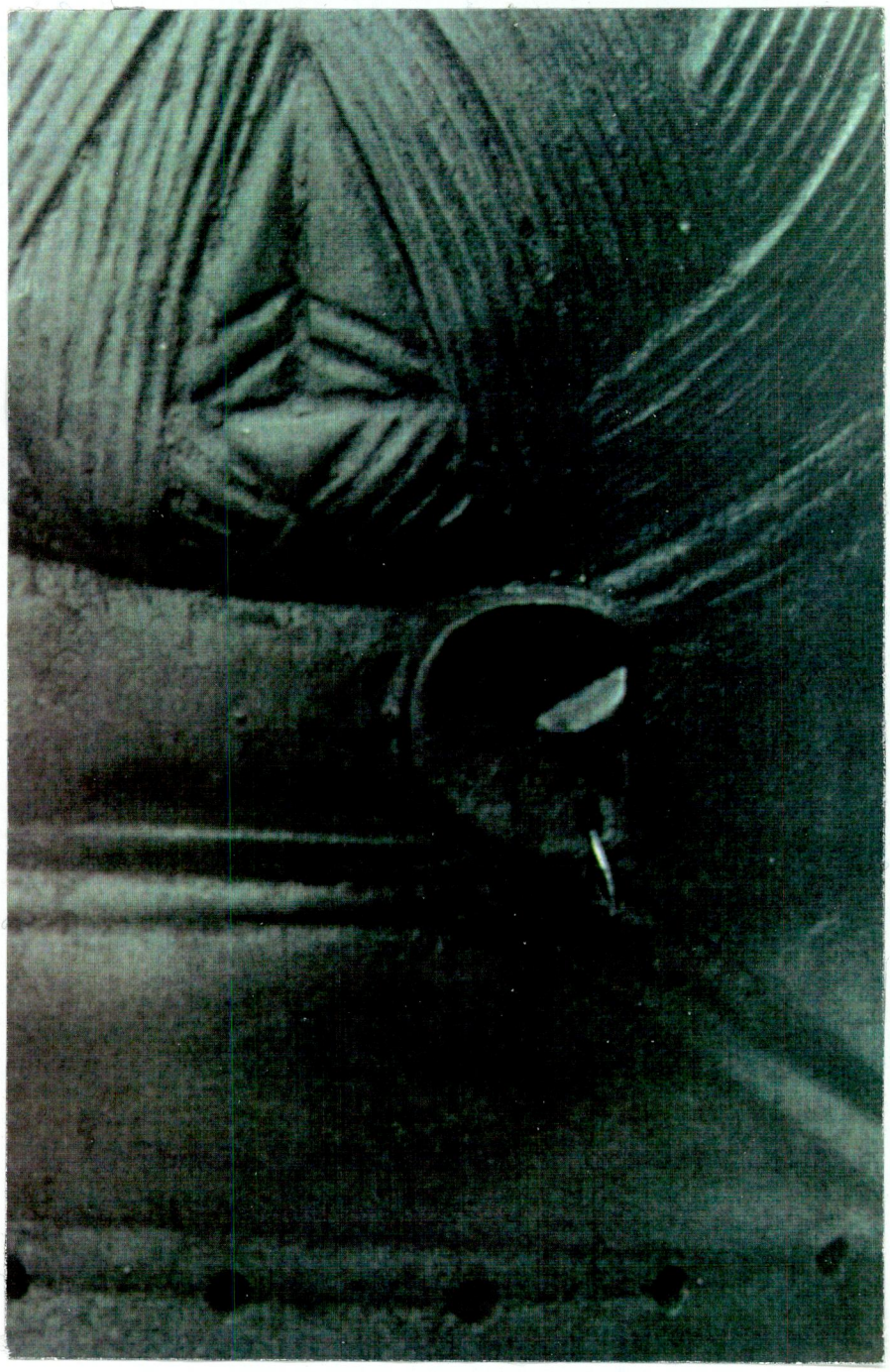

Fig. 25

Close-up of ear on the Sowo-wui

Fig. 26

A Sowo-wui with no opening in the eye spots,

this guarantees secrecy

sun, which thickens and toughens the skin. A forehead without wrinkles shows youthfulness and beauty. A person with a large forehead is considered strong and sound of character, ready to meet the society's challenge, such a forehead on a child predicts a future of fame and richness.

For Mende women to offer to plait another woman's hair is a way of offering to be her friend, because one woman must be willing to plait the hair and the other must trust her enough to let her do it.

Hair is very important for the Mende, it must be always well groomed, clean, oiled and plaited. It is thought to have dirty hair is a sign of insanity, any woman under stress shows her illness by no longer caring for her hair. Mende culture finds it immoral to leave hair unarranged or loose except in bereavement. For this reason the coiffure of the Sowo-wui must always look elegant (fig. 27).

The top of every mask is carved to represent braided hair, eventhough Sowo-wui's hair may resemble that of Mende women the hair of the mask is always much more decorative.

Adorned masks are carved for women who dance publicly in the Sowo costume. These women are experts in dancing and have a special place in the society. The carving of an adornment on the mask helps reflect the dancers individuality, personality and helps enhance the fame of the dancer. The dancer feels that supernatural assistance is given to her through a dream, this invisible force must be symbolized by a visible form. Most of these

Fig. 27

A Sowo-wui with elaborate hair style

forms are placed on or around the coiffure and may represent animals, cooking pots, shells or beads, charms or crests and crowns. To the Mende all these items carry a mystic aura and can function on a magical plane.

The two animals that are most often carved on the masks of the Mende are snakes and birds. They may often appear together or separately, the snake coiled or winding and the bird standing facing straight ahead. The reason these appear often is that they represent the elements: earth, water and air, the snake functions between earth and water while the bird functions between earth and air. In their movements between water, earth and air, these animals may be seen as intermediaries between the divinities and man (fig. 28).

In the Sande society these creatures are special to the powers of initiated women. Birds are seen as friends, they are bright and cheerful, they are thought to help in child bearing where as snakes are seen as dark creatures, enemies who may bring sudden death. Birds and snakes seen together on a Sowo-wui, may suggest conflict and strife, as when these meet they always fight for territory or life (fig. 29).

The Mende believe that there is a special connection between women and snakes. Women are thought to dream of snakes and in doing so they become pregnant. One of the main concerns of the Sande society is conception and birth, so the association with the snake is very important to them. The python is the snake of the society, it like other snakes regenerates by casting off its skin. This skin is collected by the society and is

Fig. 28

Image of bird on a Sowo-wui

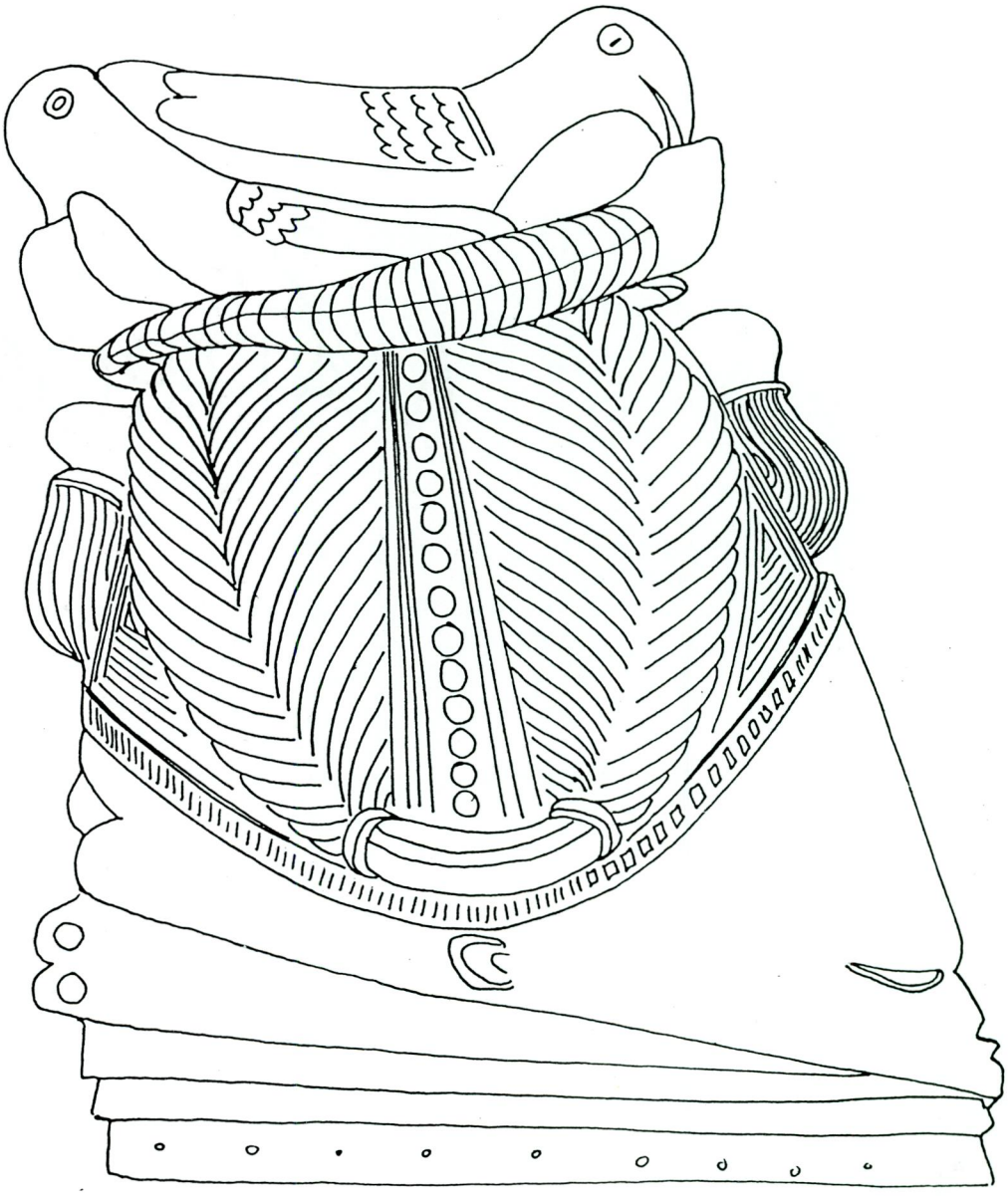

Fig. 29

MASK WITH BIRD AND SNAKE IN CONFLICT

maintained as one of the primary powers of life, it is regarded as a secret Sande object (fig. 30).

Birds are fascinating to the Mende, as they find definite similarities between them (birds) and humans. They see birds like humans because they walk on two legs, use their wings/arms for work and eat cereals and greens. The Mende believe that birds can see everything everywhere, even into the hearts of humans, they are regarded as natures oracles.

The chicken which lives a domestic life in all Mende communities is the most important bird of all, as they are thought to see into the future and survey the passage of time (the rooster marks the beginning of the Mende day, in the evening when chickens come to roost, this tells the time of day for relaxation) (fig. 31).

In the Sande society birds are thought to be involved with successful child-bearing within the society there is a group known as the 'bird-society'. Sande elders organize young initiates to join, once they are members they pledge to cherish birds and keep the 'bird laws' in return they are assured of fertility. Within the 'bird-society' there is a special unit which is devoted to prenatal instruction and care. The eating of bird flesh or eggs is strictly forbidden during pregnancy except in Sande ritual. The hen is seen by pregnant girls as a guide and model, no amount of coaxing will drive a brooding hen off her eggs, so too should a mother mind her baby. In the basic responsibilities of child-bearing and child-minding, the Sande society sees birds as being important in the instruction of initiates, there is

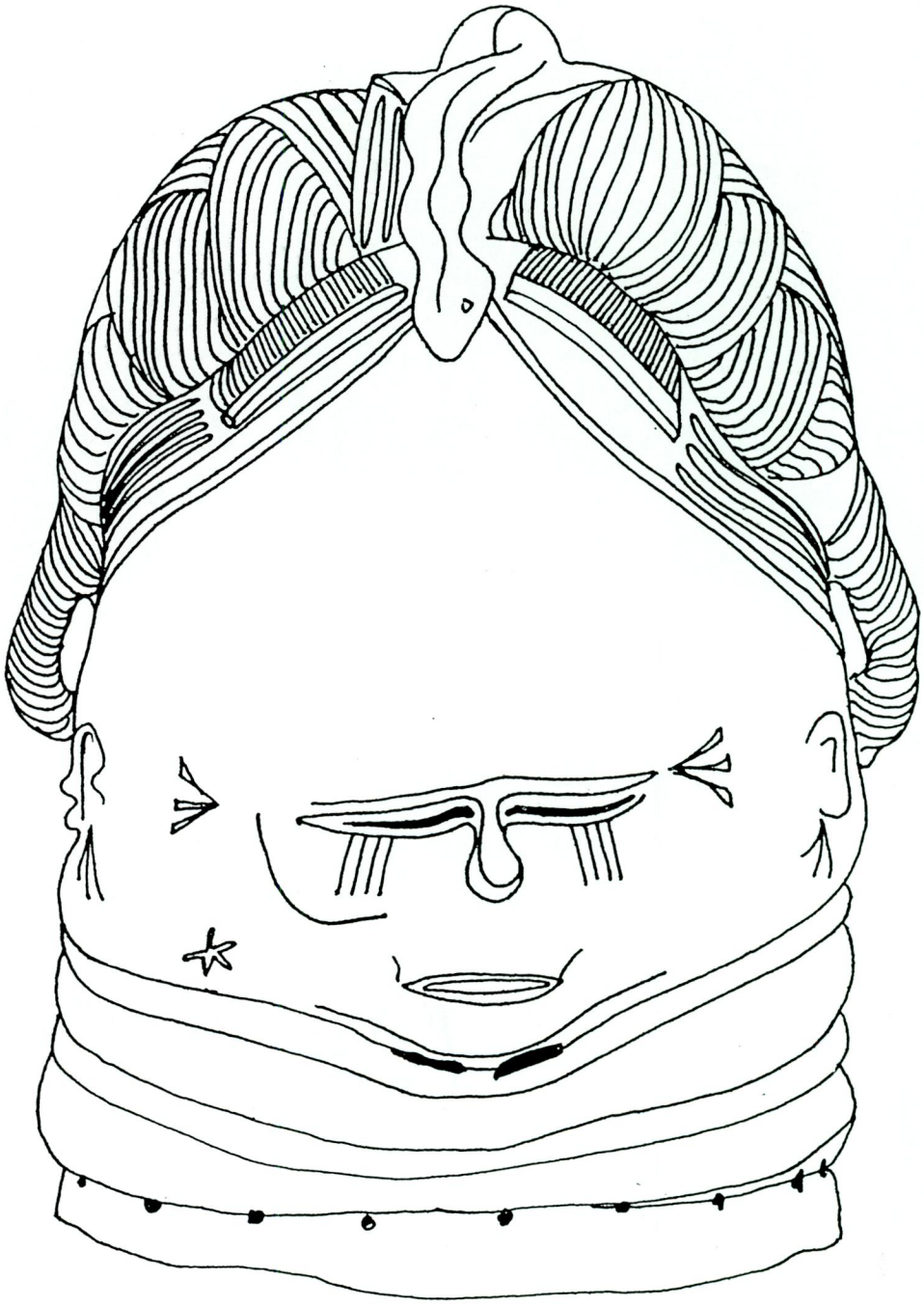

Fig. 30

IMAGE WITH SNAKE FACING STRAIGHT AHEAD

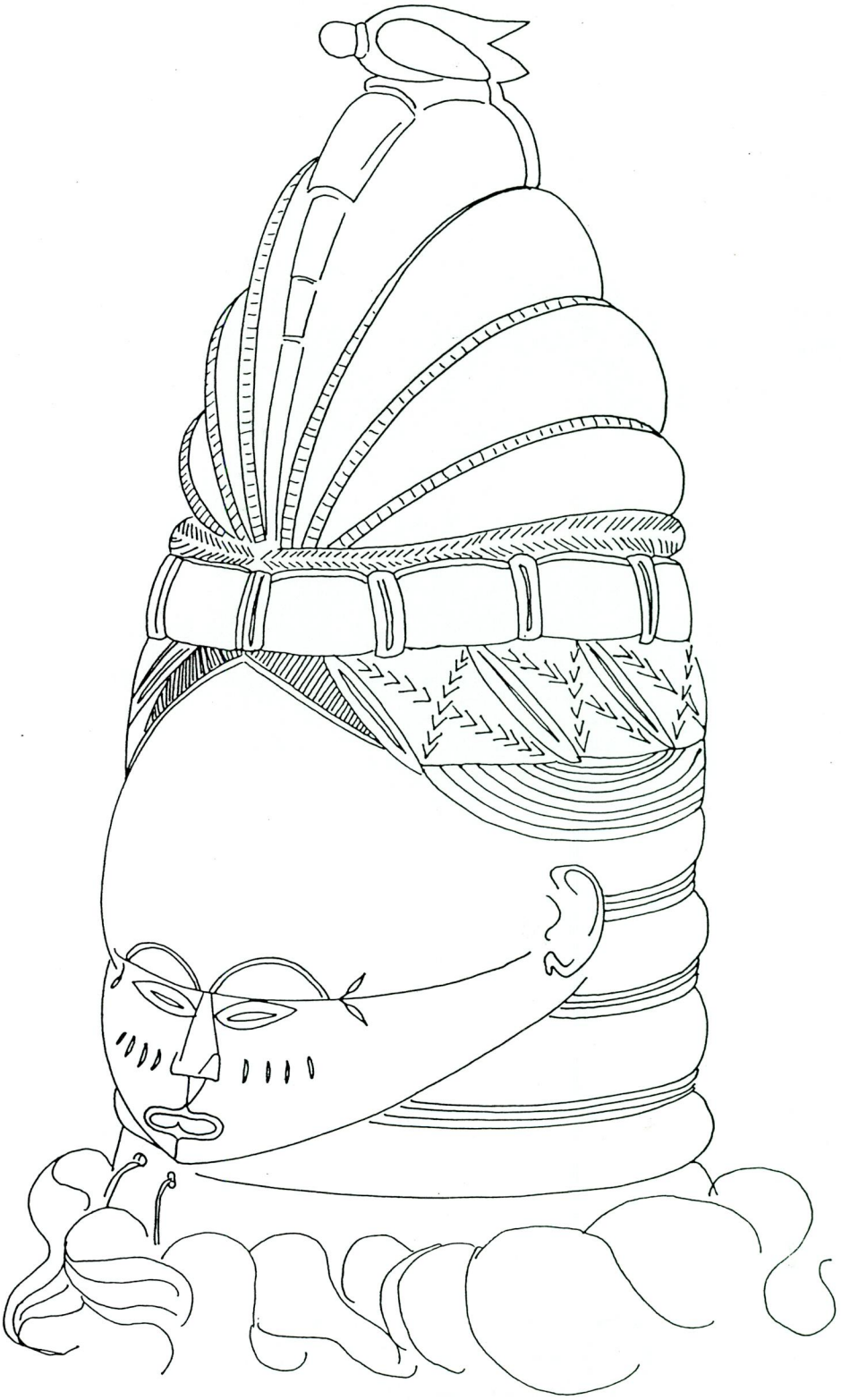

Fig. 31

SOWO-WUI WITH BIRD IMAGE ON COIFFURE

nothing more important than this to the Mende.

Only a select number of animals appear on the coiffure of Sowo. Animals such as pigs, sheep and goats etc. are considered common and lack spiritual dimension. Occasionally a fish, crocodile, toad or rodent will appear on a mask (fig. 32).

A three-legged iron cooking pot often appears on the crown of Sande masks. The three stones of the cooking area sums up the Mende family home, the iron cooking pot can be a symbol of the warmth and security at this centre of family life. Within the community every woman has her own cooking pot and to the Mende, her ability to prepare food, along with child-bearing are the womans responsibilities in life. For the herbalist and sorcerer, the cooking pot is also seen as standard equipment (fig. 33).

A traditional form of money in West Africa has always been the cowrie shell. It is still used as a medium of exchange today, for the Mende, not only is it seen as a form of monetary value but it is also has a variety of spiritual meanings. They see the cowrie shell as a form of coinage for the supernatural plane, the only currency which the ancestors recognise and accept. It is thought to be passed down from God and the ancestors and because of this it is thought to be an 'ancient thing'.

The cowrie shell is white, smooth and cool to touch, the Sande society recognise this as being very beautiful and feel the shell has a lot of symbolic properties. A Sande initiate wears cowrie beads as a choker around her neck to show that she is an initiate,

Fig. 32

EXAMPLE OF SOWO-WUI WITH CROCODILE

Fig. 33

MASK WITH ELABORATE COIFFURE

the cowrie is the emblem of the initiate-in-training. The cowrie appears on the crowning section of certain Sowo-wui, it is very symbolic to the mask and shows its importance in Sande art (fig. 34).

The shape and appearance of the cowrie relate to women and to motherhood. The underside of the shell is said to represent the opening of the vulva, and the top side is said to have the roundness of a pregnant belly. When the Mende are speaking of the human body, the word Kpoyo refers to the front of a pregnant woman, Kpoya is also the word for cowrie shell (2, p. 221).

The packets which are sometimes seen on the Sowo-wui often refers to a charm or talisman made by a Muslim diviner. Inside the charm there is a piece of paper on which a verse from the Koran is written in Arabic script, this is said to be the heart of the charm. The paper on which the verse is written is then folded, wrapped in plastic and tied with black or white thread. So that it may be worn the paper can be put in a leather packet, rolled in a leaf or put into the tip of a horn. The talismans that are seen on the Sowo-wui refer to the habit of wearing charms on the head so their power can be absorbed into the mind.

Most charms are made for ordinary people who may feel the need for protection, or who are anxious or who may feel threatened in their surroundings. People may ask for many different types of cures, they may seek bountiful crops, cure for illness or success in courtship (fig. 35).

The crowns which are frequently seen on the top

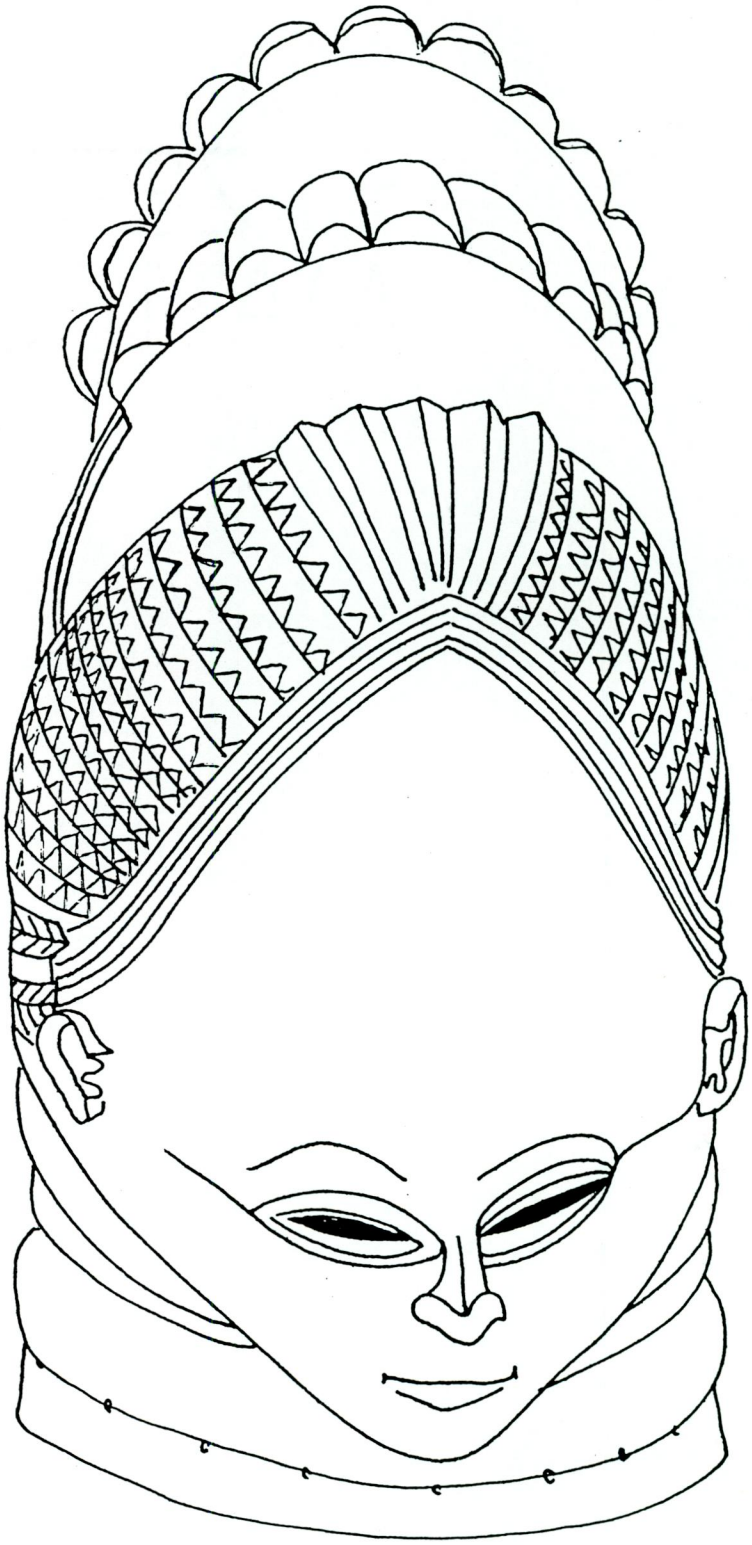

Fig. 34

IMAGE OF A SOWO-WUI MASK

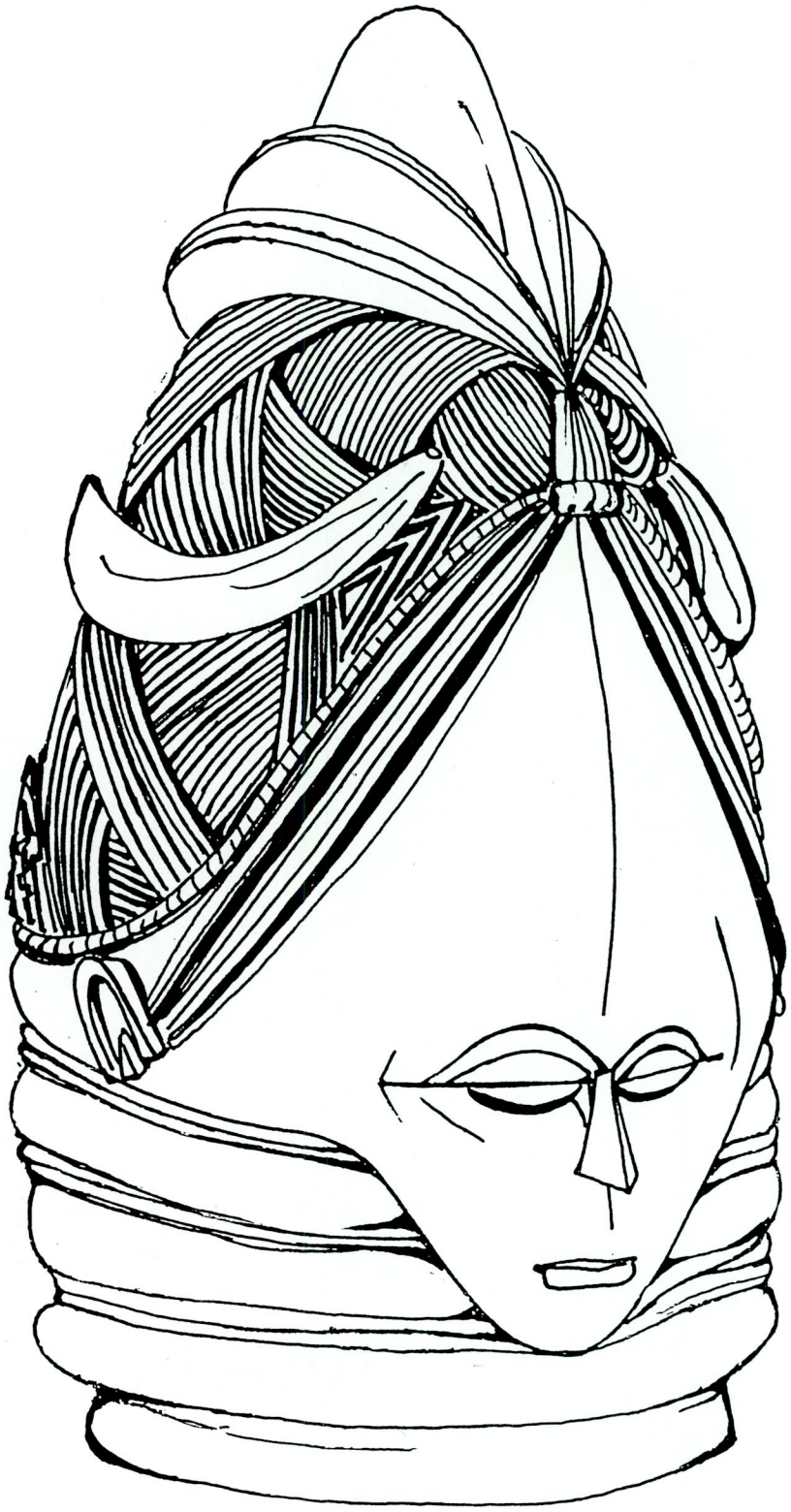

Fig. 35

EXAMPLE OF SOWO-WUI WITH HORNS ON THE COIFFURE

Fig. 36

An elaborate crown on the head of the Sowo-wui

CONCLUSION

In writing this thesis my aims were to introduce masks of the West African cultural system and their importance to the Sande society. In discussing the masks of this society I feel I have learned a lot from their culture and the way they look at life. When I first started to write about masks, I did not realise how complex the masking system was in West Africa. On studying this, I have developed a strong interest in this area, Africa is also the source of inspiration for my practical work and I feel from my study of the Sande society I have developed a more sensitive approach to it.

In West Africa many peoples see masking as a way of keeping close links with their ancestors, they see it as a way of transformation and members of cults and societies see masking as a way of showing their power over ordinary people. For these reasons masking is a sacred ritual whose members are often limited and restricted. This is why I found the masking of the Sande so interesting and important. The Sande society is unique because it is the only known instance in West Africa where women wear masks; this not only shows that masking in West Africa is not solely male dominated but that through it women have achieved an important and powerful role in their community. The Sande society has helped Mende women to express themselves both spiritually and artistically.

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