

Elephant Mask: The Masquerade and Its Power
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African art addresses a range of themes and functions in various mediums. Two themes demonstrated throughout African art are performance as art and power and authority. One work of art depicting these themes is the Kuosi society Elephant Mask, or *mbap mteng*, from the Bamileke peoples of Cameroon. This mask, made some time between 1920 and 1930, consists of palm-leaf fiber textile, cotton textile, glass beads, and palm-leaf ribs.¹ The Elephant Mask illustrates how the themes of power and authority and performance as art played an important role in keeping societal beliefs intact.

The Elephant Mask appears in the *tso*, or elephant dance, of the Kuosi society. The masquerade is performed at ritual occasions, major festivals and funerals.² The complete masquerade costume includes the mask itself, a large red feathered headdress, and sometimes a leopard skin. The Kuosi society was formerly a warrior society where warriors were the performers behind the mask.³ Today, the Kuosi society consists of wealthy titled men.⁴ The *tso* is often performed in front of a royal court.⁵ The Bamileke king, known as the *fon*, observes the masquerade, but may participate as a masked dancer. Integrating geometric designs formed by the placement of the beads, the mask resembles the face of an elephant, with the hanging flaps representing the trunks. The elephant dance creates movement through the mask's "ears," which flap as the dance is performed. In the society, the elephant masks symbolize spirits personified as composite beings, which reveal both human and animal features. The mask demonstrates these attributes through the elephant-like ears and human mouth. During the masquerade, the dancers allow the spirits to inhabit them and illustrate positive characteristics of the humans and animals. While the mask demonstrates performance as art, it heavily embodies the theme of power and authority.

The Elephant Mask represents the power and authority of the Kuosi society in multiple ways. During the time the Elephant Mask was created, beads were used for currency in Cameroon. The use of these beads in decoration symbolized the great wealth of the Bamileke peoples, further reinforcing their power and authority over conquered enemies. The beads often form abstract patterns illustrating royal animals to reveal the *fon's* great power. Another decorative feature characterizing the wealth and power of the Kuosi is the use of red feathers from the Gray parrot that compose the elaborate headdress of the costume. Because these birds have few tail feathers, much time was spent collecting them, revealing how valuable the mask was to the society. The Gray parrot is considered extremely intelligent and symbolic of leadership. The form of the mask is an elephant's face, symbolizing the political power of the kingdom because the elephant is seen as a royal animal.⁶ The elephant displays intelligence, prestige and strength, showing the great leadership of the king.⁷ One primary purpose of the mask in its masquerading form is to support political authority.⁸ The Elephant Mask demonstrates the power, authority, and great wealth of the Kuosi both as an object and in its masquerading form.

Performance as art and power and authority are two themes that the Elephant Mask symbolizes. Each aspect of the mask, including its function and its materials, allows it to address these motifs. Overall, the Elephant Mask represents the characteristics and values of the Bamileke peoples of Cameroon.

¹ Roslyn Adele Walker, *The Arts of Africa at the Dallas Museum of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 70.

² Ibid.

³ Monica Blackburn Visoná, *A History of Art in Africa* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 351.

⁴ Christraud Geary, *Elephant: The Animal and Its Ivory in African Culture* (Los Angeles: Fowler Museum of Cultural History, University of Los Angeles, 1992), 246.

⁵ "Kuosi Society Elephant Mask," Brooklyn Museum, accessed November 11, 2015, https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/4852/Kuosi_Society_Elephant_Mask.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Jean-Paul Notue, *Africa: Arts and Cultures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 113.

⁸ "Kuosi Society Elephant Mask."