The Sacred Mask[1]

by

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This essay has also appeared in the book Foundations of Oriental Art & Symbolism *(World Wisdom, 2009), from which the version below is taken. The book also contains many useful illustrations, which may be of interest to readers.*

The mask is one of the most widespread and doubtless one of the most ancient modes of sacred art. It is to be found as much in the most elaborated of civilizations, such as those of India and Japan, as among the so-called primitive peoples. The only exception is that of the civilization attached to Semitic monotheism.[2] Indeed, the tenacity of their survival in the face of all modern thought proves indirectly their sacred origin.

For Christianity, as for Judaism and Islam, the ritual use of the mask can only be a form of idolatry. But in fact the mask is linked not with idolatry but with polytheism, if one understands by this term not paganism, but a spiritual vision of the world that spontaneously personifies cosmic functions without ignoring the single and infinite nature of Supreme Reality.

This vision implies a conception of the "person" that is somewhat different from that familiar to us from monotheism. It derives from the expression *persona* itself. We know that in the ancient theater, derived from the sacred theater of the Mysteries, this word designated both the mask and the role.[3] Now the mask necessarily expresses not an individuality—whose representation scarcely requires a mask—but a type, and hence a timeless reality, cosmic or

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[1] Editor's Note: From *Mirror of the Intellect: Essays on Traditional Science and Sacred Art*, chapter 14.

[2] Although in fact the mask has been preserved in the folklore of Christian peoples as well as among certain Muslim peoples, especially among the Muslims of Java and Black Africa. The mask is also to be found among the Berbers of North Africa, where it has a carnivalesque character. The grotesque mask—of an "apotropeic" character and used above all in the solsticial masquerades—as well as the fairy mask, and even the heroic mask, are to be found among the Germanic peoples. The heroic mask also features in Spanish folklore.

[3] *Persona* has been derived from *personare*, "to sound through"—the mask being literally the mouthpiece of the cosmic Essence that is manifested through it—but according to Littré this etymology is doubtful for phonetic reasons. Even so it retains a certain value from the point of view of significant coincidences—which are by no means accidents—in the sense of the Hindu *nirukta*.

divine. The "person" is thus identified with the function, and this in turn is one of the multiple masks of the Divinity, whose infinite nature remains impersonal.

There is a hierarchy of functions and thus of divine "persons"; but their very multiplicity means that no single one of them can be regarded as the unique and total mask of the infinite Divinity. The Divinity can clothe itself in one mask or another in order to reveal itself more directly to the worshipper; or alternatively the latter can choose one particular mask as his support and way of worship; he will always end by finding in it every celestial dignity, for each of the universal qualities essentially contains the others. This explains the apparently fluctuating character of the ancient pantheons.[4]

The essence of the universal qualities is one; this is what monotheism seeks to affirm when it proclaims the unicity of the divine "person". It is as if it made use of the idea of the person—the only idea that a polytheism that has become forgetful of the Absolute can still grasp—in order to affirm the unity of the Essence. On the other hand, monotheism had to make a distinction between the person and his various functions and qualities, a distinction that is indeed evident since it is similar to that which exists between the human subject and his faculties. Nonetheless it remains true that the personal divinity is always conceived by means of one or other of His qualities, which on the plane of manifestation are distinguishable and even sometimes mutually exclusive. They can never all reveal themselves at the same time, and where they coincide—in the undifferentiated plenitude of their common essence—one can no longer truly speak of a person, since this essence is beyond all distinctiveness, and thereby beyond the person. But the distinction between the personal God and the impersonal Essence pertains to the domain of esoterism, and thus rejoins the metaphysics that underlies traditional polytheism.[5] Be all that as it may, by denying the multiplicity of persons, monotheism also had to reject the ritual use of the mask.

But to return to the sacred mask as such: it is above all the means of a theophany; the individuality of its wearer is not simply effaced by the symbol assumed, it merges into it to the extent that it becomes the instrument of a superhuman "presence". For the ritual use of the mask goes far beyond mere figuration: it is as if the mask, in veiling the face or the outward ego of its wearer, at the same time unveiled a possibility latent within him. Man really becomes the symbol that he has put on, which presupposes both a certain plasticity of soul and a spiritual influence actualized by the form of the mask. In addition, a sacred mask is generally regarded as a real

[4] We have in mind the fact that a subordinate god can sometimes "usurp" the highest role.

[5] In Muslim esoterism, for example, the multiple gods of the polytheists are often compared to divine names; paganism, or polytheism in the restrictive sense of the term, thus corresponds to a confusion between the "name" and the "named".

being; it is treated as if it were alive, and it is not put on until certain rites of purification have been performed.[6]

Moreover, man spontaneously identifies himself with the role that he plays, one that has been imposed on him by his origin, his destiny, and his social ambience. This role is a mask—most often a false mask in a world as artificial as our own, and in any case one that limits rather than liberates. The sacred mask, on the contrary, along with all that its wearing implies as regards gestures and words, suddenly offers one's "self-consciousness" a much vaster mold and thereby the possibility of realizing the "liquidity" of this consciousness and its capacity to espouse all forms without being any one of them.

Here we should make an observation: by "mask" we mean above all an artificial face that covers the face of its wearer. But in many cases—for example in the Chinese theater or among the North American Indians—a simple painting of the face has the same function and the same efficacy. Usually the mask is complemented by the dressing or ornamentation of the whole body. Furthermore, the ritual usage of the mask is mostly accompanied by sacred dancing, whose symbolic gestures and rhythm have the same purpose as the mask, namely the actualizing of a superhuman presence.

The sacred mask does not always suggest an angelic or divine presence: it can also be the support of an "asuric" or demonic presence, without this necessarily implying any deviation; for this presence, malefic in itself, can be tamed by a higher influence and captured with a view to expiation, as in certain lamaist rites. Also worthy of mention, as a well-known example, is the combat between the Barong and the sorceress Rangda in the sacred theater of Bali: the Barong, who has the form of a fantastic lion, and is commonly considered as the protective genius of the village, is in reality the solar lion, symbol of divine light, as is expressed by his golden ornaments; he has to confront the sorceress Rangda, personification of tenebrous forces. Both of these masks are supports for subtle influences that are communicated to all who participate in the drama; between the two a real combat develops. At a given moment, young men in a trance throw themselves upon the sorceress Rangda in order to stab her; but the magical power of the mask forces them to turn their *kris* [daggers] on themselves; finally the Barong repulses the sorceress Rangda. In reality she is a form of the goddess Kali, of the divine power envisaged in its destructive and transforming function, and it is by virtue of this implicitly divine nature of the mask that its wearer can assume it with impunity.

The grotesque mask exists at many different levels. It generally possesses an "apotropeic" power, for, in unveiling the true nature of certain evil influences, it puts them to flight. The mask "objectivizes" tendencies or forces whose danger is increased to the extent that they remain vague and unconscious; it reveals to them their own ugly and despicable face in order to disarm

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[6] The same is true for the making of masks among most of the African peoples: the sculptor of a sacred mask has to undergo a certain ascetic discipline. See Jean-Louis Bédouin, *Les Masques* (Paris: Les Presses Universitaires, 1961).

them.[7] Its effect is thus psychological, but it goes far beyond the plane of ordinary psychology, since the very form of the mask and its quasi-magical efficacy depend on a science of the cosmic tendencies.

The "apotropeic" mask has often been transposed to the sculptural decoration of temples. When its grotesque and terrifying character is conceived as an aspect of the divine destructive power, it is in its turn a divine mask. The Gorgoneion of archaic Greek temples must no doubt be interpreted in this way, and this is also the meaning of the *Kāla mukha*, the composite mask that adorns the topmost point of the niches in Hindu architecture.[8]

The sacred mask necessarily borrows its forms from nature, but it is never "naturalistic", since its purpose is to suggest a timeless cosmic type. It achieves this purpose either by emphasizing certain essential features or by combining different but analogous forms of nature, for example human and animal forms, or animal and geometrical forms. Its formal language is much less often addressed to the emotive sensibility than one might be tempted to think: the ritual masks of the Eskimos, for example, or of the Indians of the north-west coast of America, or of certain African tribes, are intelligible only to those who are familiar with all their symbolic references. The same can be said about the masks of the Hindu sacred theater: the mask of Krishna, as it is represented in southern India, is like an assemblage of metaphors.

As regards masks of animal form, the following may be said: the animal is in itself a mask of God; what looks at us from its face is less the individual than the genius of the species, the cosmic type, which corresponds to a divine function. One might also say that in the animal the different powers or elements of nature assume the form of a mask: water is "personified" in the fish, the air in the bird; in the buffalo or bison the earth manifests its generous and fertile aspect, and in the bear it shows its darker face. Now these powers of nature are divine functions.

Nevertheless, dances with masks of animal forms can have a practical purpose, namely that of conciliating the genius of the species hunted. This is a magical action, but one that can well be integrated with a spiritual vision of things. Since subtle links between man and his natural ambience exist, one can make use of them just as one makes use of physical conditions. What is important from the spiritual point of view is an awareness of the real hierarchy of things. Certainly the ritual use of the mask can degenerate into magic pure and simple, but this happens much less frequently than is generally assumed.

Likewise the anthropomorphic masks of "ancestors" do not merely evoke an individual; they represent the cosmic type or function of which the ancestor was the human manifestation: in the case of peoples where the spiritual filiation coincides in practice with an ancestral descendence,

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[7] The healing masks of the Iroquois—called "false faces"—are a well known and very typical example of the function in question; strangely enough, they recall certain popular masks of the Alpine countries.

[8] See A. K. Coomaraswamy, "*Svayamātrinnā: Janua Coeli*", in *Coomaraswamy, Vol. 1, Selected Papers: Traditional Art and Symbolism*, edited by Roger Lipsey, and also my book *Sacred Art in East and West*.

the ancestor who is at the origin of this descendence necessarily assumes the role of solar hero, half-human, half-divine.

In a certain sense, the sun is the divine mask *par excellence*. For it is like a mask in front of the divine light, which would blind and consume earthly beings if it were unveiled. Now the lion is a solar animal, and the mask in the form of a lion's head is the image of the sun. This same mask is also to be found on fountains, and the jet of water that gushes from it symbolizes the life that comes from the sun.

Typical stylization of the human face is also to be found in the masks of *Nō*, the ritual theater of Japan, where the intention is both psychological and spiritual. Each type of mask manifests a certain tendency of the soul; it lays this tendency bare, showing what is either fatal or generous within it. Thus the play of the masks is the play of the *gunas*, the cosmic tendencies, within the soul.

In *Nō*, the differentiation of types is obtained by extremely subtle methods; the more the expression of a mask is latent and immobile, the more it is living in its play: each gesture of the actor will make it speak; each movement, causing the light to glide over its features, will reveal a new aspect of the mask; it is like a sudden vision of a depth or of an abyss of the soul.