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Performing opacity
Initiation and ritual interactions across the ages among the Bassari of Guinea

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The article aims to show how ritual efficacy may rely on an intentionally produced, constitutive uncertainty. Drawing on the Bassari male initiation ritual, I argue that the central feature of initiation is not so much the achievement of an ontological transformation, than it is the creation of an unsettling context in which the uninitiated cannot but recognize the complex character of the initiates' identity. I describe two different devices whereby this is accomplished. The first relies on the donning of masks which enable initiated men to exhibit themselves in an opaque body associated with a highly predictable agency. The second is their presence as ritual tricksters characterized by an unproblematic body and disturbingly erratic behavior. In both cases, ordinary interactive scripts are perturbed. Initiation thus provides initiates with the means of mastering techniques that allow them to appear simultaneously as themselves and as not themselves. In doing so, they convey to the uninitiated the very idea of transformation itself.

Keywords: Republic of Guinea, Bassari, initiation, ritual efficacy, masks, interactions

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Almost all ethnographers who have worked in the Upper Guinea Coast region of West Africa are indebted to Simmel's seminal work on secrecy (Simmel 1950). The German sociologist was the first to have grasped the interactive dimension of secrecy—"a form of reciprocal action"—as pertaining to a general sociological scheme, independent from the variability of its content. It is this idea of the secret as a mode of relationship rather than a content, and not the use Simmel made of Africanist material, that researchers of the region met with enthusiasm. [1]

1. If we restrict ourselves to the literature of this region, which more or less covers the area of the *poro* male initiation institution, see notably Bellman (1984) and Murphy (1980) for the Kpelle, Ferme (2001) for the Mende, Højbjerg (2007) for the Loma. In extending to societies that are culturally close but geographically distant, see also Sarró (2009) and Berliner (2005) for the Baga, as well as Zempléni (1993, 1996) for the Senufo Nafara.

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Accordingly, his theory on secrecy, while not having been profoundly revised, has been subjected to adjustments made possible through more reliable empirical data. Indeed, his understanding of African secret societies involving masked, theoretically anonymous figures, seems today somewhat outdated. As he saw it, because such masks were the exclusive property of a secret male group, their main function was to implement a radicalization of the differences between men and women by dissimulating from the latter the hidden truth that these "horrible apparitions were not ghosts but their own husbands" (Simmel 1950: 364). If a woman inadvertently pierced the men's secret, Simmel concluded, secrecy was broken and the secret society would be transformed into a "harmless mummery" (ibid.). Simmel, somewhat contradicting himself in considering the content of the secret essential, exploited the literature at hand but in doing so went awry. As evinced by numerous examples,[2] women are invariably aware of the human origin of the masked figures. This knowledge, however, does not jeopardize the effectiveness of the initiation ritual during which the "secret of the masks" is revealed, nor does it affect the actual existence of the secret group, as Simmel suggested.

The same applies for the initiation practices of the Bassari I will discuss.[3] Not only are women aware of the human presence behind the masks animated by the initiates, but in most cases they know exactly who the initiates are. Far from being a rare occurrence or the result of a failed hoax, the acknowledgement of a human presence in the initiatory simulations is essential to the effectiveness of Bassari masked performances. I argue that the ambivalence surrounding masked performances offers the means of proving the initiation's effectiveness to give rise to complex identities. In line with the general theme of this volume, this paper shows that uncertainty might be intentionally produced—that it can be a ritual technique carefully designed for specific purposes. Indeed, the key feature of initiation is not so much of achieving an ontological transformation; rather it is to create a disturbing context from which the noninitiated cannot but recognize initiates' identity in a complex way—that is, neither as an ordinary human nor as a true spirit. Although it is an uchronic speculation, I would be tempted to contend that if Simmel had had Bassari ethnographic material at hand rather than that of the Poro societies, he may not have been misled by the discourse of initiated men. He would have recognized the masks for what they are, that is, a ritual technology

2. See notably Zempléni (1996: 36) and Bellman (1984: 144).

3. The Bassari, who call themselves *Be-liyan* (lit. "Those of the laterite"), belong to the *Tenda* linguistic group that also includes the Bedik, the Coniagui, the Badyaranké, and the Boïn. Traditionally, the Bassari are hunter-gatherers who practiced a complementary agriculture that has become the predominant subsistence activity today. They number about 15,000 and share with the seminomadic Peul pastoral tribes a hilly region on both sides of the border between Senegal and Guinea. Since 2006, I have spent some twenty months in Guinea, staying in a group of villages called *Bokoré* (lit. "Those of *Koré*," after the name for male initiation) that comprises one of five predominately endogamous groups with a close linguistics and ritual proximity. Bassari ethnography started in Guinea with Delacour (1912, 1913) and continued under Sékou Touré's political regime in Senegal (*Bane* group) and gave rise to numerous publications since the early 1960s, principally by Monique Gessain (1971, 2006) and Marie-Paul Ferry (1991).

intended to produce "snares of thought"[4] (Smith 1979, 1984) whose simulated nature, which fools nobody, is a constitutive aspect.

By some cruel irony, the scenario envisaged by Simmel on women discovering the human presence behind the masks was, as it were, tested historically in Guinea. From the mid-1960s, the Sékou Touré regime originated a vast iconoclastic movement that affected all regions of Guinea. This "demystification" campaign aimed at reforming mentalities to create "new men" in accordance with the Maoist ideology that inspired the charismatic leader. One of its chosen targets was, of course, the initiation practices (Rivière 1969). Among the brutalities pursued by the party's militia, one consisted in publicly unmasking initiated men in front of women and children. The intention was to quash initiatory secrets by revealing the human identities behind the masks. Following this public unmasking, the ritual artifacts were generally destroyed. At first sight, this iconoclast policy seems to have been a success since the repressive measures of the new State led, in most cases, to the complete disappearance of the institutions responsible for the transmission of these rituals. In other cases, the initiations resumed toward the end of the regime in 1984, after a more or less heeded prohibition. The Baga societies of the coastal Guinea illustrate the first situation. For them, the devastating effect of Sekou Touré's iconoclastic agenda was even more effective as it achieved what successive waves of Peul Islamization had begun in this region from the early twentieth century. Yet, the dissolution of Baga initiations did not induce all the expected results. Hence, it did not cause a cessation of the distinction between elders and youths, which remains built on the model of an initiatory relationship despite the absence of a ritual devised to institute it (Berliner 2005, 2008), and even contributed to a certain extent to the present-day religious dynamism of the region (Sarró 2009).

Certain societies of the Upper-Guinea forest region, in contrast, fall into the second category. Recent ethnographical studies conducted in this area bear witness to the importance of the strategies of resistance deployed by the populations to understand their singularity within the contemporary Guinean State (McGovern 2004); most of all, they demonstrate the astonishing robustness of the ideas conveyed by these rituals in spite of their prohibition (Højbjerg 2002, 2007). Without minimizing the impact of iconoclast policies in the North of the country where the Bassari live, my ethnographic data do not attest to an experience as tragic as that met with in other regions during this dark period. Certainly, the party's militia were involved in all sorts of exactions[5] and attempted relentlessly to prevent the organization of initiation ceremonies. Masked men were captured, unmasked before women, and beaten; drinking millet beer was prohibited. Nevertheless, these authoritarian measures failed, and it was only at the peak of the

4. As a reminder, if the expression "snares of thought" has been widely diffused in anthropological texts (Boyer 1988; Gell 1999; Fausto 2011), it was initially intended to account for the ritual simulations of the Bedik, the Bassari's nearby neighbors. Reverting to Smith's argument, I use the term to convey the idea of ritual efficacy as an interactional process rather than the cognitive operation an artifact brings about.

5. In the early 1960s it was still common for men to wear only a penile sheath and to braid their hair as women did. Captured men suffered the following punishment: they were forced to have their heads shaved and were made to eat their penile sheath.

"Cultural Revolution," toward the late 1960s, when some men were compelled to flee over the Senegalese border to be initiated. With this exception, and at the cost of strategies of dissimulation that inevitably complicated the ritual's organization, all men were initiated in Guinea without interruption.[6] Without really discussing the manifold reasons that may explain the stability of the Bassari's initiatory institution, I provide arguments that partly account for the failure of the iconoclastic movement. As shall become apparent, unmasking men before women was in itself hardly sufficient to bring about the dismantling of the initiation ritual.[7] Actually, when the iconoclast militia took away the masks to reveal their human identity to the women, they had little chance of destroying the foundations of the initiatory institution: their attempts were basically just a clumsy and brutal way to test that which the ritual had already anticipated. Unmasking people, and beating them up with sticks is already what the initiatory ritual was about in the first place.

Bassari initiation differs little from the general pattern underlying any number of male initiations elsewhere in the world: having reached age fifteen, young boys are separated from their families, symbolically killed and reborn through the intervention of an initiatory entity whose material existence depends on a simulation by the initiators. This initiatory entity, called *endaw,* often exists solely as an acoustic manifestation (a powerful, guttural sound uttered by an initiate), or when it is made visible to the noninitiated, as a formless, leafy mass hiding the men that animate it. *Endaw* is thought of as a chameleon whose sculpted representation is often placed on the rooftop of the men's house. Although Bassari initiation is a classical case of compulsory, collective initiation giving access to adulthood status,[8] it is made more complex by the fact that there is more than one adult age. The young boys' rite of passage through the initiatory institution marks the entrance to the first grade of a system that divides adulthood into a series of distinct stages, each one lasting six years. Depending on the village, these age sets pass through three to seven age grades. The minimal number of three is not accidental. It corresponds to the age sets belonging to the first three grades that actively

6. According to Bassari men, concealing the secret phases of the ritual from prying outsiders was no problem. What became more problematic was the preparation and consumption of millet beer that remains, still today, the main reason for a gathering of people who live dispersed during the greater part of the year. The women had to prepare the beer in different locations where it remained. The ritual attendants would drink the beer when passing by each of these sites, one after the other. If a government official presented himself, he was shown only one of the storage locations so that only a small portion of the production brewed was destroyed.

7. In this respect, other case studies in Guinea have proven similar. Sarró (2009) has clearly demonstrated that the simple fact of removing the masks in front of women could not explain the end of Baga initiations. As for the Loma, the coercive measures conducted against initiation practices resulted paradoxically in reinforcing the institution (Højbjerg 2007). For historical conditions that may provoke the collapse of a men's cult, see also Tuzin's classical study of the "death of the Tambaran" among the Arapesh-Ilahita (Tuzin 1997).

8. In other words, this is a case of what is usually called a "tribal" initiation, as opposed to the elective initiation of religious specialists or the voluntary initiations into secret societies, which are both generally optative and individual. See Zempléni (2000) and Bonhomme (2010) for a review of the limits of these ideal-types.

participate in the initiation ritual by providing three types of initiators, each having a different ceremonial role.

The criterion that distinguishes between these three classes of initiators is related to collective violence they may, or may not, use against the novices. The primary consequence of the multiplication of ages is thus a multiplication of the initiators' positions. The second consequence, which results directly from the first, is a diversification of the interactive patterns that define the initiates' public behavior toward the uninitiated. Far from producing ordinary men, initiation allegedly gives birth to men whose identity is profoundly changed for having undergone the ritual. However, attesting to the reality of this transformation raises the problem of making its effects tangible to those who, precisely because they are not initiated (young boys) or not initiable (women), are kept away from the secret workings intended to guarantee its effectiveness. There are, of course, a number of ways of demonstrating the transformation wrought by initiation to the uninitiated, such as by marking the body durably through tattooing or scarification, by giving the initiates a new name, and so forth. Bassari initiation leaves no durable trace on the initiate's body. The beatings the novices endure in the initiation camp leave transient marks that soon disappear. Circumcision, performed some years before initiation, is barely ritualized and does not entail any particular change of status. The only manifest aspect of the definitive property of initiatory transformation would be the initiate's change of name. As children, young boys are given a first name that indicates their birth order among siblings born of the same mother: all the firstborn sons of a woman are called *tiara*, secondborn *tama*, and so forth. Having being initiated, young men bear a new name they usually choose themselves, which, unlike the generic childhood name, is strictly individual because of the extremely unlikely possibility of homonymy.[9] Once initiated, men only respond to this name and it is forbidden to call them by their childhood name or to even address them by a kinship term. This rule, however, does not last; after some months, the parents or the neighbors who had known the initiate as a child frequently revert to either a term of kinship or to the childhood name.

In fact, if corporal markings or the acquisition of a new name, however significant, are not decisive in representing the initiatory transformation, it is because the break brought about by the ritual does not consist in the initiates being instilled with an essence that differentiates them from the uninitiated in a permanent and durable way. Rather, it consists in the initiates' ability to incarnate periodically and momentarily the two principal categories of initiatory entities: masks on the one hand, and the *koré* on the other. The masks appear on various occasions; they are men whose identity is hidden under a costume of leaves and vegetable fibers. The *koré* are men with bared faces who assume the identity and kinship relations of another man. They behave contrarily to normal etiquette since they speak an obscure language, exhibit a repugnant gluttony, and act like bogeymen toward children. Men tell the uninitiated that the masks are *biyil* spirits, a generic term referring to invisible entities from bush spirits to ghosts. The *koré*,

9. These names are verb phrases that either take the form of an imperative plural (Ketalin: "arrange yourselves in a group") or a negative passive (Gaxwondemi: "nobody belongs to us anymore"; Gaungwandemi: "nobody has patience with us"). See Ferry (1977).

in contrast, are presented as humans whose strange behavior derives from the fact that they are temporarily inhabited by the eponymous initiatory principle, the *koré.* The French-speaking Bassari call these men with altered personalities "odd fellows" (*types contraires*) or sometimes "demented opposites" (*fous contraires*). The presence of uninitiated persons conditions the very existence of these two types of initiatory incarnations: when initiated men are among themselves without women or children, neither masks nor *koré* are present. The reason for these strange apparitions is to stir trouble during interaction in order to capture the attention of the uninitiated by suggesting the existence of a world that only initiates can find intelligible.

Like the initiators' different roles, masks and *koré* are present in the first three age grades. This theoretically implies six different types of situation. We shall see that the appearance and behavior that these simulated entities adopt in public before the uninitiated confirm the distinction made between initiators during the secret phases of the ritual according to whether they use violence or not. First, I discuss the male initiation cycle by briefly describing the main sequences of initiation from the novices' point of view. Then, I examine how the men, once initiated, participate in their juniors' subsequent initiations differently according to the age position they occupy. Finally, I describe the different public behavior, both of the mask and the *koré*, which the initiators' different positions induce. If for each age grade, masks and *koré* enact and display complex identities that evoke the very idea of initiatory transformation, they differ in how they do so. More broadly, the issue underlying this article concerns the effectiveness of the initiation ritual and my intention is to provide descriptive elements indicating how the Bassari respond to a classic paradox of initiation already broached by Michael Houseman (1984): on the one hand, from an empirical standpoint, the newly initiated men are well and truly the same persons as the novices they had been before the ritual; on the other, the ritual is held to transform the initiates in such a radical way that they can no longer be identified with the novices they once were.

The sons of the chameleon

Initiatory proceedings alternate between public and secret phases during which the novices undergo physical and moral harassments. The ritual ceremony is mainly organized around two violent sequences that open and close a revelatory episode. The first is a semipublic fight between the novices and aggressive masks. In a location near the village, from a distance where women and children can only glimpse what is happening, each novice braves two masks in turn, spurred on by his initiatory godfather.[10] The novices can hit the masks with a wooden saber and defend themselves by using a bow as a shield, whereas the masks have whips made of flexible wood in one hand to wound the novice and carry a long stick for protection in the other hand. The fight stops when one of the opponents touches

10. The initiatory godfather is a stand-in father chosen among the classificatory agnatic brothers of the novice's father, while the masks are always chosen among the elder uterine brothers. I only mention in passing that one of the kinship-related concerns of the ritual is to redefine the novice's network of relations by positioning agnates as protectors and uterine kin as aggressors which, in a matrilineal society, is an inversion of everyday norms.

the ground or if the violent blows reach their target. The candidates must demonstrate their courage by forcing the mask to draw back. Although the script is somewhat settled because the mask has instructions to retreat, the outcome of the fight remains unpredictable: the mask may fall over prompting laughs and applause from the male spectators who side with the novices in an ostentatious manner, or on the contrary, the mask may show its skill in outsmarting the attacks of a blundering novice and punish him with several whiplashes, drawing blood.

Having fought against the masks, the novices triumphantly reenter the village where the noninitiates celebrate their courage. That same evening, they are taken some kilometers away from the village, to a camp that the noninitiated are strictly forbidden to approach. There, in a theatrical manner, is "revealed" to the novices what they already know but is now officially sanctioned: the masked men attack them for the last time and drop their masks at the very last moment, thus revealing their human origin. The novices are then led to an altar that the elders say is the tomb of a novice who died because he had spoken to women. There, they vow never to reveal the men's secrets while ingesting a "special" beer made of bits and pieces of dried, ground chameleon. Apart from the masks' humanity, the secret of initiation thus resides in the new meaning taken on by the connection between the chameleon and the initiatory entity *endaw*: the initiatory chameleon is not the greedy entity told about to children, but a substance that the novices ingest. The consummation of initiatory beer, replete with highly evocative symbolism (the choice of a chameleon, an animal characterized by its ability to transform itself, seems hardly fortuitous), is not accompanied by an explanation of any sort, apart from the warning to keep it an absolute secret and with instructions about the way the novices should now behave: they are forbidden to speak to women and to acknowledge their parents in addressing them by their name. They must also be aggressive and attack the noninitiates, particularly young boys, with sticks and stones.

The second violent sequence now begins. Over a few days, the novices spend their daylight hours in caves nearby the initiation camp where the initiators make them line up and beat them periodically with their bare hands or with the bark of trees fashioned into whips. Each novice receives exactly the same number of strokes as all of his peers. The purpose of these beatings is quite clear: it is to annihilate any kind of resistance in order to impose on them a state of undeniable passivity and of collective nondifferentiation. Men will recollect their memories of this event by saying: "You're nothing. You don't even have a name." Each evening the novices are taken secretly to the village to spend the night at the men's house. A large fire is lit, which the initiators stoke with branches of dried millet in order to create billows of suffocating smoke. This "limbo of statuslessness" (Turner 1977: 97) made of daily beatings and suffocating nights can last between two to three days.

Houseman's distinction (1993, 2002) between two types of secrecy ("avowed" and "concealed"), which he associates with two modes of inflicted violence ("heroic" and "persecutory" respectively), casts light on the difference between these two violent sequences. The first one, that is, the struggle with the mask, is clearly a case of avowed secrecy: the women are kept away from the actual scene of the fight while being informed of their exclusion.[11] It is associated with a mode of

11. Moreover, they participate actively through their lamentations heard by the novices from a distance and by showering praises on the candidates when they return.

heroic violence in which the aggression that the novice suffers and inflicts is a prestigious one. The second sequence, that of harassments in the initiation camp, consists in a case of persecutory violence taking place within the context of a concealed secret: the novices are submitted to unspeakable torment of which in theory the uninitiated should not even imagine the existence.

At the end of their seclusion, the new initiates are publicly presented with the new name they have chosen for themselves. Being amnesic, they have to relearn the name of each woman and each child among which are evidently their parents and neighbors whom they know all too well. The ritual ends at this moment. Nevertheless, initiation is considered truly complete when nearly a year is up, at the end of a period that the Bassari designate by the specific term *atyuwin*—which is the conjugated form of the verb "to defecate," and could be translated by "let them suffer the crap out of them." In the months following the ritual, the young initiates remain under the iron rule of their elders who catch them out for each offense, whether real or invented, to inflict new punishments upon them. In the eyes of women and children, the new initiates seem endowed with a new identity that is a negation not only of their original condition but also of what the ritual is expected to produce. Mute and aggressive, they represent the opposite of normal sociability: they are neither the young boys they were before the ritual, nor the responsible adults they are supposed to have become. As the months slip by, their aggressiveness diminishes and they progressively recuperate the attributes of humanity the ritual had deprived them of. After a few weeks they begin to speak again, after a few months they relearn agricultural work; finally, they acknowledge their parents and call them by name. The mask-making is the only truly original knowledge initiation transmits to the initiates, the apprenticeship of which takes up most of their time in the bush. The end of this long, liminal period concurs with the time when they accede to the first age grade and are thereby considered to have become a true age set.

Each age set is formed of several initiatory promotions that are incorporated to make up a single group whose progress through the age grade system does not depend upon initiation itself. All of the age sets thus shift together by one grade or degree at the end of a six-year period regardless of when initiations take place.[12] Each age set climbs to reach the position that the superior age set had previously occupied. At the end of their initiation, young boys are thus integrated into the first age grade. When the six-year period is up, they automatically pass to the second grade with the other initiates that have become part of their age set. Six years later, they accede to the third grade, and so on, until they leave the system. In the region where I worked, a man leaves the system upon reaching the sixth grade, toward the age of fifty. He is then *a-xark,* which means "old." However, ritual responsibilities lessen from the fourth grade onward (when men are getting on to thirty), that is, when they enter that part of the age grade system that is no longer automatically linked to initiation. The name of the fourth grade men, *okwətek,* which literally signifies "the finished," illustrates this state quite well. The next grade, *opidor,* could be translated as "those who slouch" and the sixth, *opešbinyan*, which a

12. Initiation schedule may depend on demographic or economic factors: e.g., Are there enough boys of an age to be initiated? Has last year's harvest of millet been sufficient so that the boys' fathers can produce enough beer?

circumlocution would give something like "those who plait mats with their bums on the ground," but could more simply be called "those who sprawl." In contrast, the first three grades designated by the terms *lug, falug*, and *odyar* cannot be translated. While attributed with no semantic range, their sociological significance, however, is completely transparent. These terms designate the three age sets of young men who live in the communal houses of the village center with girls belonging to corresponding age grades and who participate directly in the organization of the initiation ritual. In such an organization, elders only supervise from a distance an initiation that is essentially performed by youths, for youths. Although elders may be present at certain stages of the ritual, they are quick to hold the lower age grades responsible in case something goes wrong or things get out of hand.

The ritual role of the first age grade is relatively limited. It is essentially reduced to helping those of more advanced age grades in the organization of the ceremony. They do play an active part in the "secretion" (Zempléni 1996) of the ritual: they are the ones who whirl the bullroarers at night, and who simulate the initiatory entity *endaw* by collectively covering themselves with a heap of leaves. Their attitude toward the novices being initiated is as kindly as an initiator's could be. Their function is above all to help and encourage them: they are the ones who accompany the novices to the communal house every evening after the beatings, supporting them when the novices pretend they cannot walk by themselves. Some of them may also be quite pleased to see the novices bewildered, just as they themselves were some months or some years earlier. What is certain is that these young initiators do not take part in the violent ragging inside the initiation camp because the novices will ultimately become part of their age set. This attitude is coherent with the idea that members of the same age set are supposed to be joined in a relationship of interdependent camaraderie.

The members of the second age grade are the ones who exert violence on the novices. The aggressive initiation masks are first and foremost chosen from this group whose members are also those who undertake the brutal bullying in the initiation camp. In a society that credits resistance to pain and scorns inflicting it, the violent role these initiators assume is disparaged. They thus frequently earn the nickname "dogs." The older men deem this violence a necessary evil that cannot be curbed because the initiators of the second grade are only returning what they themselves had suffered.

Men of the third age grade know the ritual best for having participated in it up to ten times. Their responsibility is to make sure everything goes smoothly. They are the ones who act as mediators between those belonging to the youngest age grades and the elders whose instructions they pass. Their position as "initiators of initiators," that is, those having inflicted violence on those inflicting violence, enable them to restrain the initiators' excesses of brutality. Reciprocally, the novices see them as those who made suffer those who now make themselves suffer and with whom, once the initiation is over, they enter into a joking relationship.

In this way, three different types of initiators supervise the novices: those of the first grade advise them, those of the second grade intimidate and brutalize them, and those of the third grade protect them. Each man experiences initiation first as a novice, then successively in each of these positions, taking on "kind" role twice (first and third grades) and "nasty" role once (second grade). The result is a stable system of relationships where the connections between consecutive age sets are

expressed in hierarchical terms, as if one had engendered the other—they answer to the designations father and son—and where the alternate classes are assimilated—they address each other with the single kin-term "grandparents/grandchildren"—and linked by a relationship of mutual connivance.

For the moment, I have only mentioned the relationships between men, which are established for the most part within the initiation ritual itself. I will now discuss the external aspect of initiation by describing how these three classes of initiators behave in public toward the uninitiated. The ritual enables the display of complex identities under two different forms—masks and *koré*—at each age. I shall begin with the masks.

Singing masks and initiatory masks

The two main masks to be found in Guinea are masks made of leaves falling under two generic types called *lukwuta* and *lɛnɛr*. Their costume, their voice, and comportment are quite different from one another, and generally speaking, the properties that distinguish them are stable throughout the entire region with only a few stylistic differences between villages. Within the same village, these masks are absolutely identical and only the physical traits of their wearers allows for any distinction between them. All initiates acquire the ordinary "savoir faire" of making masks. Although some are certainly more skillful than others, the actual technique is not the work of specialists. As artifacts, the masks have no value and only those parts that take time to prepare, such as the hood, are hidden from the uninitiated in the roof of the communal house; the other parts of the mask are usually abandoned on the site of the performance.

The *lukwuta* mask is considered to be the elder brother of the *lɛnɛr* mask. As such, they may be identified using common human names: *tiara* the first son, and *tama* the second. *Lukwata*, the elder brother, has two avatars. The one is an aggressive figure that women and children may not approach on any account. This is the mask that confronts the novices during the initiation fight and also is chosen for certain exceptional coercive measures (see figure 1).[13] *Lukwuta* also appears in a "pacific" version, with a slightly different costume, whose main activity is to sing and dance with women (see figure 2). Children can easily approach him. The younger brother, *lɛnɛr*, is a mask without a violent avatar that likewise sings and dances with women (see figure 3). These two types of masks share the annual ceremonial cycle more or less equally without ever meeting up. *Lukwuta* is usually taken out in the dry season, and exceptionally at certain annual female dances during the rainy season.

13. For example, some years ago, the Bassari decided to prohibit the Coniagui women, neighbors to the Bassari, to sell hard liquor. The men charged some aggressive masks to chase them away.

Figure 1. Aggressive *lukwuta* masks before their fight with the novices.

Figure 2. Women with *lukwuta* masks.

Figure 3. Young initiate and *lenɛr* mask.

Lenɛr appears with the early rainfalls and disappears soon after harvest. It accompanies the boys and girls of the first age sets during all agricultural work. The festivities called "the farewell" (*ofelar*) mark its disappearance, which precedes by a few days the departure of young people on their seasonal migrations toward the towns in Senegal and Guinea. Not being human, the masks do not belong to an age set. Yet, the men who animate them do. Hence, it comes as little surprise that the initiates of the first grade are associated with the young *lenɛr* mask, whereas the violent initiators of the second grade animate the aggressive version of *lukwuta*, and the men of the third grade its pacific avatar. In this way, the initiators' ritual behavior reciprocates the type of interaction between masks and noninitiates: the initiators who are secretly violent are also violent in public, but hidden beneath a mask.

Although these frequently encountered masks are familiar to all, they remain strange entities and their apparition always creates a surprise. Even when expected, their irruption is always eventful. Their composite nature partly explains the arresting effect they have on the uninitiated. For one thing, their appearance is an assemblage of fibers, leaves, animal hair, and bared parts of the human body. Although the man covered in the costume lends an anthropomorphic shape to the entity, the face is fundamentally inhuman, being both anonymous and emotionless.[14]

14. The young *lenɛr* mask is more minimalist. He does not wear a hood and hides his face with either a veil or a fly swatter.

Made up of elements associated with both hunting and the bush, but also with the world of humans (some of their ornaments are also those of men who dance with uncovered faces), the mask does not represent any known entity of this world. It is not like an animal, nor like a human. The costume's hybrid character makes it highly productive symbolically, allowing for potentially rich inferences, but where it is impossible to determine exactly what they refer to. It is a "signifier without [a] univocal signified" (Moisseeff 1994: 30) comparable in this respect to many cult objects. It resembles nothing and represents nothing but itself. This may not be entirely true as men, when talking to women and, above all, to children, refer to the masks as *biyil,* that is, invisible spirits made visible. Yet, it should be noted that the simple fact of stating that the mask has as its referent an entity whose constitutent property is invisibility—the most indeterminate form possible—indicates in itself the absence of a prototype.

The *biyil* exist independently of their simulation by the initiates in the form of masks. *Biyil*, or rather *a-yil* in the singular, is a generic term for the invisible entities that share the same territory as the Bassari. Like the masks, the *biyil* are particularly fond of cool and humid places like wooded groves, streams, caves, or even the bottom of termites' nests. There is no consensus about what the *biyil* actually are and opinions vary according to the context and from one individual to the next. They can intervene in everyday human activity as bush spirits who lead a hunter astray, as vindictive ancestors who decimate a descendant's livestock, or as ghosts encountered under strange circumstances. Nevertheless, such happenings are accidental for, theoretically, humans and *biyil* are supposed to live in separate worlds and remain invisible to one another. While living in the same space, the *biyil*'s perspective of the world is inversed: what is mist for humans is the *biyil*'s bush fire, what is night for humans is their day, millet beer is their water, and so on. These worlds in the negative would normally be impervious to each other, but certain *biyil* strive to cheat humans and are cheated in turn by some men and women who have the innate capacity of "seeing at night" (*awediax*). The initiates draw their inspiration from this sphere of symbolic knowledge—where there are important individual differences yet a certain general coherence—in order to make the masks look like radical figures of otherness (they come from a world in the negative), bearing a profoundly indeterminate ontological status (are they ghosts, bush spirits, ancestors, or specters?) and whose visible presence evokes the idea of a mutual trickery.

The mask wearer lends his body to animate the artifact and is hidden by it in return. He gives it a distinctive movement that distorts his own and personifies the character he embodies: masks do not run, they jump, they do not walk, they dance, and so forth. The wearer also lends a specific voice: the *lenɛr* mask has a hoarse, throaty voice, whereas the *lukwuta* mask utters gurgling sounds that the Bassari call "water in the voice." In both cases, it is a vocal technique that is relatively difficult to control, these modified voices not being obtained by the use of any additional instrument. From a strictly acoustic point of view, this vocal technique produces a sound that, in itself, is a good illustration of the mask's ambivalent nature, the ethno-musicologists who have studied it having qualified it as diphonic.

The masks' anonymizing technique lies in the elaboration of a complex corporality, both from the point of view of the artifact making up the external envelope and from that of the wearer's physical prowess. The resulting entity is a

somewhat complex body, which is reducible neither to its external envelope nor to the human who animates it. Thus, the identity that emerges from this "recursive interlocking" (Fausto 2011) is named for what it is: each mask wearer has a personal mask name, which is neither the mask's generic name (*lukwuta* or *lɛnɛn*) nor that which he is known by as an unmasked man. The names of masks, like the names of initiated men, are constructed from verbal syntagmes, but using a simpler linguistic form: *watəne* ("let's see"), *d'atəne* ("let's fall!"), *korəne* ("provided we can!"). Somebody recounting the ceremony to people who did not attend can easily name the masks involved without revealing their human name: "What was the ceremony like?"—"A great success. The beer was plentiful and *watəne* sang all night."

Masks, in spite of their inordinate temperament, are predictable. Interactions with them are always stipulated and extremely simple, like their psychology. When women are present, the manner of talking and acting with them is strictly regulated. Men only speak to them for simple reasons, with simple words. The masks would never understand irony as they are totally lacking in humor. Like foreigners who are slightly simple-minded and only understand the Bassari language in its most rudimentary form, it is with a simple vocabulary, using a respectful, somewhat paternalistic tone, that they are asked to do simple things: to retire to a hut in order to eat or drink, to go back to the dance area. For women, the interactive possibilities are even more limited, indeed reduced to a single alternative: flee or dance, depending if the mask is an aggressive avatar or not. This severe limitation on the freedom of action also applies to the complementary behavior adopted by the masks themselves: they can strike out or they can dance and sing.

The highly constrained nature of the pragmatic framework within which the masks express themselves and the "formalized" actions (cf. Bloch 1974) that this framework allows, seems to leave no room for personal creativity. Yet, in spite of the underlying interactive rigidity, the masks' performances give rise to a competitive context whereby each mask wearer vies with the others. This is particularly visible in the dance sequences of the first grade initiates. Their dance pace is steady and the men animating the masks need stamina in the course of these trying physical ordeals. Yet, still more, it is their voice that attracts all the attention. What counts is not only the intrinsic quality of the voice, whose volume is fairly moderate, but above all the musicality with which the singer varies the melody; the aesthetic ideal being to swallow words, to blend in resonant material to the point of making the semantic aspect of the intoned chant barely recognizable.

This male competition is addressed to and brought about by women, and more particularly the young women of the mask wearers' age grade and of the grade just above, with whom the men live in the communal houses, and with whom they maintain a relationship of formal friendship and of potential affinity. These women fuel the rivalry making judgments in the course of the dance, and by making the dancers carry on until exhaustion. If the hidden identity of the masked men may fool the younger children, the women always know exactly who they are. Their evaluation of the performances is crucial and partly determines the young men's reputation and the success of their love life. For them, the masks have nothing strange about them except perhaps their appearance, and are only inhibiting in the way they are expected to behave toward them in public. Indeed, they know them intimately. The relationship between women and masks, established during the

years of their youth through connivance and seduction, evolves throughout their lives. Even when women are no longer of an age to be dance-partners, they speak to the masks as they would to former lovers, actually with much more liberty than young women can. The paragon of this relationship is the association of elderly women and masks to protect an infant born after several miscarriages. The only notable rupture in the complicity that unites the masks and women takes place when the violent initiators of the second age grade don aggressive masks.

The masks' main targets are children; they are the ones most affected by the cognitive snare of identity that the masks present. The precocity with which young boys imitate masks is remarkable. In fact, as soon as they begin to walk, they are encouraged to do so by their elder brothers who fashion miniature mask attributes for them, and by the women who, when the child first tries a dance step, answer by clapping their hands in a rhythm characteristic of the masked dance (see figure 4 and figure 5). With the same enthusiasm the elders show for encouraging the young boys, they taunt the little girls who are tempted by the same mimetic game. The aggressive masks are no less fascinating for the young children. Every day, they are referred to as bogeymen that will take the children away if they are naughty. Adults may even enjoy superimposing the two types of masks and stimulate, with apparent benevolence, the children's imitation of masked dancers, while making a thinly disguised allusion to the brutalities the aggressive masks will inflict on them and of which they are still unaware.

Figure 4. Uninitiated boy dressing up a kid as a mask.

By displaying opaque identities based on the elaboration of a complex body and on a simplified psychology generating highly formalized interactions, the masked men establish a relationship with women that is either expressed as a connivance with a hint of seduction, or becomes one of hostility and avoidance. They likewise trick children by exercising on them a fascination mixed with anxiety. Let us turn to the second strange initiatory figure, the *koré*, the procedure used to blur their identity and the type of relationship this creates with the uninitiated.

Figure 5: Uninitiated boy imitating a mask

To make the women smile and the children cry

Unlike the masks, the humanity of the *koré* is unambiguous. Even from a linguistic perspective, the masks and the *koré* belong to different nominal classes: the masks fall within the class of borrowed words, whereas the *koré* belong to the same nominal class as that of humans (Gessain 1971: 159; Ferry 1991: 357). Nothing actually distinguishes them from ordinary men in their appearance, except for a band of white palm fiber tied around their arm or head for the men of the first age grade, and a skirt of red fiber for those of the third grade. The distinction is a bit more complex for the second grade men—I will return to this later—but it is made of the same vegetable fibers also used for the making of masks. The transformation of a man into a *koré* (or a *koré* into a man) is instantaneous and does not require a backstage, unlike the masks. It may take place in public, in front of the women and children: all that is needed is to attach the vegetable fiber to become a *koré*, and to untie it to become human again. Men usually indicate their changed state by emitting a powerful, shrill cry, which they repeat periodically as a reminder of their condition.

The state of being a *koré* is described as a temporary modification of the mind, which the Bassari call *ondèn*, a term that may be translated in other contexts as temperament or character. The *ondèn* is located in the head: *Ondèn-oŋ gər gaf ex* ("the mind is in the head"). The *koré* are humans with an initiatory temperament.[15]

15. To alleviate the terminology of this article, I employ a simplified acceptation of the term *koré* as do the French-speaking Bassari and the ethnographers of the region. In fact, *koré* corresponds to several related terms. In the Bassari language, *koré* designates

The capacity of becoming a *koré* is activated at the end of the year-long liminal period of initiation, when young initiates enter the first age set. They can take on the identity of a *koré* at any time but it is mainly during the initiation period, at the end of the dry season, when they appear. They also turn up after the harvest for the departure festivities of the *lenɛr* mask and for the collective work organized once a year at the chief's home. This last event, which is more frequent in Senegal than in Guinea, is most likely related to presence of chiefdoms in these two regions. Yet, their favored context of appearance remains that of initiation, when the village, deserted for the rest of the year, reaches a maximal concentration of people.

A convenient way to describe their behavior is to label them a ritual buffoon or ritual clown. Yet, these terms do not really do justice to what is involved. Certainly, the *koré* behave in an extravagant manner intended to raise laughs, but this is not all. They are also profoundly disturbing apparitions. For children, the *koré* are without a doubt much more terrifying than masks. In describing them as "odd fellows" (*types-contraires*), the French-speaking Bassari indicate most appropriately that the *koré* render perceptible a figure of inversion and do not simply embody a burlesque personage. Their behavior reverses the most elementary of social conventions. Whereas the ordinary etiquette makes it shameful to ask somebody for food, the *koré* go begging from hut to hut, apparently without any embarrassment. Whereas one should eat moderately and in the presence of persons of the same sex, the *koré* sit down among women, or in the middle of a walkway on the ground, and greedily guzzle the most unlikely combinations of food gleaned from here and there. They usually keep this repugnant mixture of foodstuffs in the palm of their hands for hours on end, thus adding to their interlocutors' disgust. In addition to their shameless gluttony, they talk in a barely comprehensible language. This particular idiom, although very close to ordinary language in its syntax, phonology, and grammar, is made almost unintelligible by the combination of two modifiers. First, the consonants are permuted. The linguist Marie-Paule Ferry (1981) has illustrated this with an example taken from the French where *langue secrète* ("secret language") becomes *ganle técresse* ("tecres ganluage"). The second modifier consists of using antonyms as frequently as possible: when the *koré* say "night," one should understand "day," etcetera. By skillfully combining these two principles, the language becomes incomprehensible. It was just too difficult for me to follow, but the elder men assured me that they did not understand everything either, or sometimes did after a lapse of time.

The young men of the first age grade excel in these language games and all aspire to utter endless tirades as quickly as possible. When their interlocutor is not perturbed enough to their taste, they may pull faces, get just a little too close for comfort, and stare fixedly. All this is flexible and depends on individual creativity and competence, some being naturally more talented than others. One would think this language is incomprehensible for women, but it is nothing of the sort. In fact, in everyone's opinion, it is the young girls of the corresponding age grades who understand it best. Although they are not allowed to speak the language, they know it very well for having attended regular practice sessions every evening in the communal houses. This cryptic language, rather than excluding the young girls,

initiation, *o-koré* the initiatory principle that modifies *ondèn*, and *a-xoré* (sing.) or *bə-xoré* (plur.), the men whose mind has been modified by initiation.

offers a means of establishing a relationship with the initiates at the expense of the elderly who have lost its practice or do not understand its present-day version, and the children for whom its comprehension is completely out of reach.

Although making use of different procedures, this mode of relationship is almost identical to that which links masks, women, and children, though in the latter case, the complicity with the women and the terrified fascination of the children occurs separately. With the *koré*, these two relationships are articulated simultaneously, within the same sequence. The typical behavior of the third grade *koré* illustrates this feature even more saliently. The cruel game they enact, and from which they derive a certain pleasure, consists in approaching a woman who carries a little boy in her arms and, like the younger *koré*, in engaging in a disturbing interaction with her. Just as the *koré* captures the woman's attention and makes her smile, he brutally snatches the child from her arms. This is a set script and women know very well what to make of it. Some anticipate it with bemused sincerity, others with a slightly embarrassed protective compassion. The *koré* takes a few steps with the terrified child who immediately howls with fright, and after a few seconds, the abductor gives the child back to the woman. She, who could be his mother or grandmother, takes him in her arms and consoles him. To accentuate the effect of horror, some *koré* walk around with animal pelts, usually some small game killed at hunting, which they stuff crudely and hold in their arms like pets. Sometimes, they only need to point the dead animal in the child's direction to make him howl.

This behavior is absolutely unthinkable for men who are in majority fathers and, moreover, affectionate ones, in a matrilineal society where men leave women the responsibility of authority over children. Yet it is justified by the fact that the *koré* are not really themselves, but someone else. Each man possesses a *koré* name belonging to a living alter ego, usually a man of a higher age set. In this way, he does not act in his own name but in that of the alter ego whose identity he has temporarily taken on, acquiring at the same time the latter's kinfolk as his own. The *koré* take advantage of this identity substitution by presenting themselves to the wife of their alter ego as a husband would. They then have the liberty, in tacit consent with her, to parody a demanding and dissatisfied husband.

In short, the *koré*'s range of action is open and depends on their personal creativity. The stable characteristics of their behavior are the use of a modified language, the substitution of identity, and the establishment of a dysphoric interactional climate that produces embarrassment and turmoil. Although they employ means different from those of the masks, their objective of tricking the children in complicity with the women is altogether comparable. The young *koré* of the first grade rival each other in linguistic virtuosity in front of dumbfounded children and young girls who refrain from speaking a language they understand perfectly well, whereas the thirty-year-old *koré* of the third grade do their utmost to make older women smile in order to make them participate in a mock kidnapping.

In many respects, the *koré* can be seen as antimasks. Whereas the opacity of the mask's identity relies upon the elaboration of a complex "external" envelope, together with a rudimentary and highly predictable intentionality, that of the *koré* makes use of its symmetrical opposite: their unproblematic bodies contain unpredictable personalities. The connection between masks and *koré* is brought into clearer focus when analyzed in light of a final scenario I have not yet described, that which corresponds to the behavior of the *koré* of the second grade initiates.

The dance of odd fellows

During initiation, the *koré* behavior of violent initiators is a dance. Its analysis deserves a separate article, but I shall only examine one aspect relevant for the present argument: the way it contrasts with other dances. One and only one dance is associated with each male age grade; it belongs to the age grade's corresponding age set whose members perform it each year in the course of the age grade's six-year cycle. When men change age grade, they yield their dance to the next age set and receive that of the preceding age set. The *koré* dance belongs to the men of the second age grade. Similar in many respects to the other men's dances of which I have given a more detailed description elsewhere (Gabail 2011), it is based on the same aesthetic principles of homokinesis and gestural unison (Beaudet 2001): all the dancers execute the same step at the same time according to an arrangement that tends to draw the eye not so much to the dancers' bodies, but to the swaying movement of their ornaments (see figure 6). Two ornaments are characteristic features of this particular dance. The first is a skirt of black fibers that the dancers wear around their waists; it is this artifact that indicates their condition of *koré*. The second is a big scraper held in the hand. During the dance, men animate these two specific ornaments in a way so as to produce a visual effect (the fringe of the skirt sways with the cadence of the steps) combined with an auditory effect (the rumbling of the scraper beats out the rhythm). The combination of these two expressive traits is the dance's signature. Other men's dances employ the same procedure, but with different ornaments, the movement of a feathered crest associated with the sounds of a metal bell, for example. The first difference that stands out in the *koré* dance is the absence of women. Men's dances are always executed together with the members of two female age sets: the one that includes women who are the men's formal friends and who belong to the same age set as the men, and the other, of a higher age grade whose members are their potential wives.[16] Moreover, the ornaments worn by the women in these other men's dances accentuate the conventional relationships between the male and female dancers: they dance with a stick offered by their formal friend and display on their back a decorated baby carrier that evokes an affinal relationship. In excluding women and their ornaments from their dance, the *koré* dancers present themselves as a self-centered male group. Although they do not flaunt the negation of women as brutally as the aggressive masks, they certainly show an underlying hostility toward them. Accordingly, women keep aloof from the performance. They neither approach the aggressive masks who fight with the novices, nor the *koré* who dance without them. The second notable difference is the status of two emblematic ornaments used in this dance. Unlike the plumed crests and the iron bells of the ordinary male dances that are kept at the owner's home, the fiber skirts and the scrapers, like the masks' costumes, belong collectively to the age set and are kept

16. Here, the expression "men's dance" refers to the male quality that the Bassari accord to these performances even though these dances involve performers of both sex. In a symmetrical way, "women's dances," which involve women dancing with masked men, are qualified as female. The actual presence of members of both sexes in these dances is systematically neutralized by attributing an order of precedence to one sex or the other, this being often expressed in economic terms (the men or women provide the beer). This is expressed choreographically by the necessary participation of the male or female age set considered to own the dance in question.

out of sight in the roof of the communal house. In other words, these artifacts belong to the same category as the masks themselves. This comparison between the *koré*'s ornaments and the masks' costumes thus adds a dimension to the opposition that has already been mentioned: the *koré* are not only antimasks, they are masks with bared faces.

Figure 6. Dance of the initiators of the second grade.

The raffia fiber the *koré* of other age grades tie around their arm or head indicates this status even more subtly. These are not actual parts of the masks' costumes; they are ties used to affix part of the mask costume to the mask wearer's body. Literally, they are mask straps. "To attach" (*a-xap*) is the expression used to designate the act of fixing the costume to the wearer. The same term is used to describe the act of tying on the raffia fibers that precipitates the transformation into a *koré*.[17] These ties, moreover, are attached to the same body part that is used to attach the mask's costume, so that when men transform into *koré*, they actually attach an absent costume. This observation connects the general assumption that masks are *biyil* spirits with the "contrary" behavior of the *koré*. Indeed, the *koré*'s behavior reflects the world envisaged from the inverted perspective of the *biyil* precisely because *koré* are masks without a costume, that is to say unmasked *biyil*. Yet, as opposed to real *biyil*, who remain invisible to humans or only appear to them in unforeseen circumstances, nobody is fooled by the simulated character of

17. The verb "to attach" is specific to the idea "to put on a mask." These terms are different to those used for "to attach" in the sense "to tie" a bundle of sticks together (*a-lan*) or "to attach" to tie up an animal (*a-yeb*).

the masks and the *koré*. These are snares of thought and recognized as such. What is beneath the initiator's mask is neither an ordinary man, nor a true *biyil*. It is a complex figure of a particular type: an invisible spirit rendered visible through human simulation, in other words, an initiate.

When men appear in public, having assumed the form of a mask or *koré*, they never cease to be themselves. They mobilize techniques that alter their identity without annihilating it. In wearing the mask's costume, they display the presence of the *biyil* outwardly; in attaching the raffia ties they evoke the *koré*'s presence inwardly. Yet, identifying the *koré* as the unseen aspect of the mask is of little help in defining what a *biyil* really is, or what a *koré* is either. In both cases, they are entities whose status remains profoundly indeterminate. The initiates' complex identities derive precisely from this ambiguity. The invisibility of the true *biyils* and the blurred identity of the *koré* index this complexity. The paradox mentioned at the start of this article remains therefore unresolved and is actually largely exploited: initiation provides initiates with the means of mastering a technique enabling them to appear simultaneously as themselves and as not themselves, such that it becomes impossible to decide if that which separates initiates from noninitiates is a difference of nature or not. Indeed, the purpose of the initiation ritual is less to transform people (e.g., turn boys into men), than it is to provide the means whereby initiates are able to convey to the uninitiated the very idea of transformation itself. Therein lies what men can do and boys cannot. There is no more subtle—yet explicit—way of capturing this idea than choosing the chameleon as the ritual's apical symbol.

Conclusion

As a consequence, it matters less to know precisely what these entities simulated by the initiates are—I would even argue that it matters not to know exactly what they are—than to know how to interact with them. In that regard, women may be said to know as much as men do, these initiatory entities being tailor-made for them. It is at this level that I am tempted to locate the grounds of the initiation ritual's distinctive efficacy: the interactions these complex entities bring about and the stable patterns of relationships they establish with the uninitiated. Envisaged from the standpoint of these repeated interactions, initiation largely overflows, both upstream and downstream, the strict period of the ritual's organization. More than the initiators' bullying, it is the interaction that the already-initiated men have with the children who are not yet initiated and with the women who never will be, which provides the ritual with the conditions for its effectiveness and its replication. One would hardly exaggerate in considering that when the ritual itself takes place, everything is already more or less played out, the basis of the ritual's efficiency being established well before the masks' secret is officially revealed to the novices. Likewise, the ritual's irreducible features, its violence and its esoteric dimensions, do not really make sense until long afterward, when the novices themselves become initiators. In such a context, initiation can hardly be contained within the temporality of the ceremony's organization alone. It is a general logic of relationships between genders and ages, which everybody experiences according to their own sex and age, and which leaves its imprint in all sorts of contexts. These can be the highly formalized setting of the ritual itself, but also the more humdrum

appearance of the masks and *koré* during collective festivities, and even the more intrusive daily interactions with young children.

Reaching beyond the limits of the initiation ceremonies themselves has allowed me to show that techniques giving rise to dysphoric interactions between the initiates and the uninitiated act to signify the initiatory transformation itself. It is necessary, however, to distinguish between two very different ways of unsettling initiated/uninitiated relations. The one relies on the donning of masks which enable initiated men to exhibit themselves in a complex, opaque body; this leads the uninitiated to question the very nature of the entity they are facing (*what* am I interacting with?). The other is centered on the enigmatic figure of the *koré*, which stands in sharp contrast to the masked dancers: under an unproblematic exterior, their faces revealed, these unnerving pranksters act and speak in an obscure, completely unpredictable way, thus prompting the uninitiated to wonder *who* exactly they are interacting with. Dysphoria, in each case, relies on a different device: whereas the masks are characterized by an excess of predictability, the *koré* are distinguished by their complete lack thereof. Thus, while interacting with masks follows strict rules and entails an oversimplified communicative common ground, it is downright impossible to adjust to interactions with the *koré*. One can only be the assenting victim of their constant improvisations, with no hope of finding any common basis of everyday communication. In both cases, ordinary interactive scripts are perturbed, providing young boys and women with a direct experience of the initiatory transformation achieved by men.

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Les masques des initiateurs : interactions initiatiques au fil des âges chez les Bassari de Guinée

Résumé : L'article cherche à montrer comment une incertitude constitutive et intentionnellement produite peut être à l'origine de l'efficacité rituelle. En décrivant le rituel initiatique masculin des Bassari, j'argumente que le propos central de l'initiation consiste moins en une transformation ontologique qu'en la création d'un contexte à partir duquel les non-initiés sont amenés à reconnaître l'identité des initiés d'une manière inédite et complexe. Deux techniques sont décrites pour parvenir à cette fin : la première est celle du port des masques, qui permet aux initiés de se présenter sous la forme d'un corps opaque associé à une intentionnalité simplifiée et prévisible ; la seconde est celle du clown rituel, dont le corps non problématique est au contraire couplé à une intentionnalité insaisissable. Dans les deux cas, le script des interactions ordinaires se trouve profondément modifié. L'initiation fournit donc aux initiés la maitrise d'une technique qui leur permet d'apparaître comme étant simultanément eux-mêmes et pas eux-mêmes, imposant ainsi publiquement aux non-initiés l'idée même de transformation.

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