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Patrick R. McNaughton. *A Bird Dance Near Saturday City: Sidi Ballo and the Art of West African Masquerade.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008. Illustrations. xvii + 300 pp. $65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-35148-7; $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-21984-8.

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Art Has a Human Face: A Star Masquerader's Performance in Mali

In 1978, when doing research for what became his book on Mande blacksmiths (*The Mande Blacksmiths: Knowledge, Power, and Art in West Africa* [1988]), Patrick R. McNaughton witnessed a masquerade animated by Sidi Ballo, which made a great impression on him. In 1998, he went back, saw another performance by Sidi, and wrote this vivid and eloquent book describing Sidi's bird dance and the effect it had on the public and other performers.

The book starts with a description of the performance structure: the drummers, the singers and their songs, the dancers, and Sidi's bird masquerade. Next, McNaughton delineates the character and Sidi's personal history, as well as the importance of the roles played by individuals. A discussion of Mande form and aesthetics follows these descriptions, while the final chapter deals with the masquerade's identity as a bird. The bibliography is impressive.

In 1978, Sidi performed in the village of Dogoduman, at the occasion of a masquerade festival organized by the youth association of the village (*ton*). Since he is an itinerant performer, the association invited him and his apprentice and paid for his services. His masquerade was that of a bird (*Kono*), possibly representing a vulture, a bird full of *nyama*, the energy associated with blacksmiths and hunters. He made his masquerade himself. Its body consisted of printed factory cloth over a conical scaffolding of flexible wooden hoops, covered with vulture feathers and bands of ribbon. Hidden within this structure, he manipulated a carved bird's head mounted on a pole concealed within a cloth sleeve (called *marotte* in puppeteers' terms). The bird "talked" through a voice disguiser (*swizzle*), and his beak opened and closed, making a clapping sound. The masquerade behaved like a real bird at times, but also performed almost supernatural feats. Sidi performed a number of times during the evening, alternating with masked dancers, and accompanied by female singers and drummers. There were two masked Ntomo dancers and a masquerade representing Sigi, the bush buffalo. Since there were relatively few masks, it is obvious that the masquerade was organized around Sidi. He is also a blacksmith, member of a group with which McNaughton is very familiar. He built his masquerade, using his skills as a blacksmith and designer. Then he created its performance character with patterns of motion and gesture, and infused the performance with tension, drama, and excitement through his daring and often dangerous feats. He is an outstanding performer, who attributes his success to the beauty of his masquerade costume, the quality of his dancing, and the fortification provided by his particular array of power devices.

A festival like the one described in this book can be seen as a means of communication, verbal as well as nonverbal. Important cultural information is passed on, and the message is wrapped in symbolic forms of image and sound: drumming, song and dance, masks, and puppets. This type of total theater brings people together, giving them a chance to celebrate their identity as a community.

The songs and their analysis are wonderful. I have been transcribing and translating songs for some time now, and have been struggling with the deeper meanings of Bamana. McNaughton was lucky to have such Malian experts as Kalilou Tera and Kassim Kone to assist him in this task. I found the aesthetic profile particularly interesting. Important Mande concepts, like *jeya* (clarity), *jago* (embellishment), *nyi* (goodness), *di* (tastiness), *nyama* (energy), *yeremine* (restraint), *dibi* (obscurity), *badenya* (mother-childness), and *fadenya* (father-childness), are related to various aspects of the performance.

In ethnography, studies of individuals making choices and assembling strategies of action are rare in comparison to studies that seek general principles, describe broad processes, or develop theories about larger groups at work. McNaughton pays special attention to the personality of the individual performer. One of my professors at Leiden University, Adriaan A. Gerbrands, studied such a talented individual during his fieldwork in New Guinea where he focused on an Asmat carver called Matjemos, and filmed him making a drum (*Matjemos, A Wood Carver from Amanankai* [1963]).

I have studied Malian masquerade festivals, mostly in the village of Kirango, as has Mary Jo Arnoldi (*Playing with Time: Art and Performance in Central Mali* [1995]). Between 1979 and 2009, at different times, we have witnessed masquerades of the Bamana farmers and Bozo/Somono fishermen in this village on the banks of the Niger river, thirty-five kilometers northeast from Ségou. A number of similarities and differences may be noted between these masquerades and the festival documented in Dogoduman by McNaughton. In Kirango, both the Bamana and the Bozo/Somono have a bird in their repertoire, and in both cases they are among the oldest and most valued masquerades. Almost all masquerades belong to the *ton* or youth association, and they include no paid performers from other villages. The masquerade festival of the Bamana, usually celebrated in June, lasts three days and two nights, and has a much larger number of masquerades than Dogoduman. Moreover, the masquerades, called *sogow* (animals), are shaped differently, are manipulated by up to three men in some cases, and do not "speak" by means of a voice disguiser.

I have a few minor criticisms, concerning the title of the book, the lack of complementary media, and the descriptions of musical instruments. Using Saturday City, the English translation of the name of Sidi's hometown Sibiridugu, makes for a catchy title, but it does not make for clarity regarding the specific location of the event. Also, this type of masquerade is typical of the Bamana of Mali, and placing it in the larger region of West Africa does not seem correct. Another criticism concerns the lack of media to complement McNaughton's vivid descriptions of Sidi and his masquerade in action. Among the technical possibilities nowadays are films on DVD, and relevant parts could be included in a Web site, in order to provide a "moving" image and give others a chance to see it for themselves. The last remark is about the description of musical instruments: the half-calabashes that have cowrie shells attached to the outside and are thrown in the air are not "drums" but rattles, in ethnomusicological terminology. Also, the lead female singer carries a calabash rattle in her left hand, probably to underline the rhythm of her singing, but McNaughton does not mention that component of the masquerade.

Moreover, the title seems a bit grandiose for the content of the book, since McNaughton does not place this performance within the larger context of West African masquerade. Both times that McNaughton saw the masquerade were serendipitous. They were not part of organized research, with the goal to describe and analyze the various aspects of the masquerade festival. Therefore, the book feels a bit contrived, almost an "afterthought." Still, by fitting the events he witnessed into a theoretical framework of individual performers and the aesthetic milieu of the Mande, McNaughton's study permits a more nuanced understanding of masquerades in this area.

He has written a book well worth reading about a galvanizing masquerade event; its star performer; the ideas and other people with whom he created the event; and the ramifications for the study of individuality, aesthetics, and the making of meaning and value. I, for one, will take its precepts–Mande concepts as expressed in the performing arts and the importance of individuals as "motors" of a culture–as a guide in future research.

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