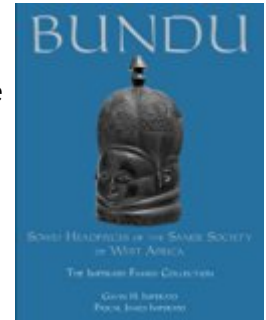


Gavin H. Imperato, Pascal James Imperato. *Bundu: Soweï Headpieces of the Sande Society of West Africa, the Imperato Family Collection.* Bayside: Kilima House Publishers, 2012. Illustrations. 178 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-936658-10-7.



Reviewed by William Hart

Published on H-AfrArts (November, 2012)

Commissioned by Jean M. Borgatti (Clark Univeristy)

Bundu is a handsomely produced book published to coincide with an exhibition of the Imperato Family Collection of Soweï masks in the Art Gallery of Queensborough Community College, the City University of New York. A major part of the book, “Historical Documentation of the Sande Society,” is a historiographical survey of literature on women’s societies of Sierra Leone and Liberia. It is followed by separate chapters: “Sande through the Postmodern Lens” (a critical look at some recent studies of Sande); “Sande in the New Millennium” (on recent developments in the society); an overview of the Sande society, its social role, organization, and masquerades; an analysis of the Sande mask or headpiece and its significant features; and a brief review of masquerades only loosely associated with Sande (those of Humoi, Gongoli, Gbetu, Njagba, and Tasso). The final section, the catalogue proper, has photographs and descriptions of eighty-five Sande masks and nine other Gongoli, Gbetu, and Njagba masks/headpieces in the Imperato Family Collection. The book is lavishly illustrated with historical images

of Sande masks taken from early publications and, from the more recent past, excellent photographs by Chad Finer who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Sierra Leone in the late 1960s.

Although one of the authors encountered Sande firsthand in the course of his medical work in Sierra Leone and Liberia, the book makes no pretense to be original field research into the Sande society and its masquerades. Rather it summarizes the fieldwork of others, notably, Ruth Phillips, Fred Lamp, and Sylvia Boone. Its most original section is its critical survey of the historical literature relating to women’s societies in general in this part of West Africa, and their masquerades in particular. Its other chief value is in bringing together and illustrating an exceptionally large number of Sande masks, collected over forty years by members of the Imperato family.

In their critical analysis of the historical literature, it might have been better if the authors had made clear at the outset that they were reviewing the documentation for Sande-type women’s sodal-

ities in Sierra Leone and Liberia. After all, they clearly mean to include the women's society called Bondo in Temne and Bullom, whose activities precisely match those of Sande among the Mende and Vai. As it is, they make such claims as "the Sande Society has been observed, described, carefully studied, and even ridiculed by Westerners ... over the five hundred years since it was first alluded to by the Portuguese," and Cape Verde trader "[André Alvares d']Almada provided what must be considered the earliest details on the Sande Society," which, if taken literally of the Sande society, are simply untrue (pp. 3, 9). As the authors acknowledge, the name Sandi or Sandy first appeared in Dutch publisher Olfert Dapper's *Naukeurige Beschrijvinge der Afrikaensche Gewesten* (Exact description of Africa) (1668). The name that d'Almada recorded for the girls who were taken into the forest to be prepared for adult life was *mendas*.^[1] Manuel Álvares, the Jesuit missionary who was in Sierra Leone between 1607 and 1616, and whose *Êtiópia Menor e Descrição Géografica da Província da Serra Leoa* (Ethiopia Minor and geographical description of the Province of Sierra Leone) (c. 1615) is a major omission from the Imperatos' literature survey, called them *menas*. These names seem most likely to be cognate with ra-Mena, a Temne society whose role nowadays is restricted to the performance of certain rituals in connection with chiefship, but quite possibly in the sixteenth century had the broader educational role associated with Bondo/Sande.

A different issue is raised by the authors' treatment of their seventeenth-century sources: Dapper and Jean Barbot. Although Dapper never visited Africa, his account of the "Kquojas" or Vai and their men's and women's societies is detailed and well-informed, almost certainly, as historian Paul Hair has argued, obtained from an eyewitness, a Dutch seaman or merchant, resident on the coast around 1640. They rightly quote Dapper's description of the women's Sande society at length, noting that he was the first to record the

name "Sandi" and other indigenous terms. And they are right, too, to say that "this description from three and a half centuries ago is strikingly similar to contemporary ceremonies and practices" (p. 13). But they go sadly astray in regarding merchant and traveler Barbot's book on Africa (*A Description of the Coasts of North and South-Guinea*, published posthumously, in English, in 1732) as corroborating Dapper's account of Sande. Although Barbot did make two voyages to West Africa, in 1678-79 and in 1681-82, and recorded many firsthand observations of his own, his description of the Sande society and its activities is lifted directly from Dapper's 1668 text or its German and French translations. Nor should they give Barbot the credit for being the first to record the word "bondou" in connection with the women's society in Sierra Leone. Barbot did indeed record the word "bondou" but only as the name of a tree.^[2] The earliest definite reference to Bondo is not until 1803 when Thomas Winterbottom described the activities of "an inquisitorial institution called boondoo" among the Temne.^[3]

None of these early descriptions of women's societies in Sierra Leone and Liberia made any reference to the distinctive Sande or Bondo mask. The authors discuss whether this absence of evidence should be taken as evidence of the absence of the mask in earlier centuries. On the whole they think not, arguing that the information about initiation societies picked up by visitors to the coast was haphazard and incomplete, and the activities of such societies were hedged around by secrecy.

They credit Johann Büttikofer, a Swiss geographer who was in Liberia between 1879 and 1887, with being the first to record the use of a mask by the Sande society. During that time, he also acquired a Sande helmet mask, which is illustrated in his 1890 book *Reisebilder aus Liberia* (Travel pictures from Liberia) (1890) and which he subsequently (in 1924) gave to the Historisches Museum in Bern. It is often supposed that this was the

mask that he reported seeing danced at a festival in the Vai town of Tosso, near Robertsport, in November 1881. However, as the Imperatos have noticed, there is nothing that positively identifies the masker in Tosso as a Sande masker, and the acquisition notes on the mask in Bern attribute it not to Tosso, but to the nearby town of Tala. Nevertheless Büttikofer was certainly the first person to describe the Sande mask in detail: as a full helmet mask hollowed out of the wood of the silk-cotton tree; carved to represent the hairstyles of Vai women; stained black; and with a black raffia fringe attached around the rim. What he was *not* was the first person to record the use of masks by the Sande society. Almost forty years earlier, Sigismund Koelle, a German missionary linguist, published *Outlines of a Grammar of the Vei Language, Together with a Vei-English Vocabulary* (1853), which included, “N̄ou, s., a masked woman in the *sande* ceremony, intended to represent a demon or the devil.”[4] And in the mid-1860s, John Meyer Harris, an English businessman operating out of Gallinas on the Sierra Leone-Liberia border, described the costume of the “Boondoo devil” among the Vai as comprising “a mask made of the bark of a tree, and which goes completely over the head and rests on the shoulders.... It has long grass by way of a wig, and a long robe of cloth hangs to it, the feet and legs being also hidden by other cloths pendant from the waist and knees, and over all is a fringe of long grass which completely covers the performer.”[5] Neither Koelle’s book nor Harris’s appear in the book’s literature review or bibliography.

The authors are at their best in discussing the Sande mask given to the American Museum of Natural History by “Prince Momolu Massaquoi” of the Gallinas country. It has been claimed to be the earliest Sande mask in any museum because its date of acquisition is recorded as 1869-90. However, as the Imperatos point out, the museum could not have acquired the mask from Massaquoi before his arrival in the United States to complete his schooling. Here they were not helped by Mas-

saquoi’s most recent biographer, R. J. Smyke (*The First African Diplomat: Momolu Massaquoi 1870-1938* [2005]), who leaves it uncertain whether this was in 1884, 1886, or 1888. It was most probably 1888, in which case the mask could only have been acquired by the museum between 1888 and 1890. A close physical examination of the mask by the authors revealed no signs of use; and they conclude therefore that Massaquoi most likely had it specially carved to present to his hosts in America as an example of Vai culture.

In common with most others who have written about the Sande/Bondo society, they give pride of place to the writings of T. J. Alldridge who described its activities in two books and several articles between 1894 and his death in 1916.[6] Alldridge, who spent years working as a commercial agent on the coast, and who then, as traveling commissioner for the Sherbro district, was charged with persuading the upper Mende chiefs to sign treaties with the government in Freetown that led to the Sierra Leone Protectorate, was extraordinarily influential in shaping people’s perceptions of what he called the “Bundu” society and other aspects of Mende culture. His depictions of precolonial village life gained added authority from being associated with his extensive collections of artifacts, gathered on his travels into the interior, and from being documented by him in a series of photographs. All of this the authors do justice to and more, and yet—at least regarding the Sande mask itself—Alldridge broke no new ground, and was much less specific than Büttikofer. Nor is it true, despite their saying so, that Alldridge was the first to photograph a Sande masker, in “Tunkia country” in 1891 (p. 43). That distinction belonged to his fellow traveling commissioner George Garrett, who photographed “A Bundoo devil and attendants” at Bonthe in 1887. [7]

Their survey of more recent publications on the Sande mask is for the most part painstaking and thorough, but without the critical edge that

Ruth Phillips gives her review of the same material in *Representing Women: Sande Masquerades of the Mende of Sierra Leone* (1995). It is clear—and it is the one departure from the generally neutral, objective tone of their writing—that the authors have little sympathy with the postmodern, feminist strain in some recent discussions of Sande. It spills over into open hostility in their references to its “meandering, rhapsodic, and often unintelligible rhetoric”; its “selective moral indignation and ... inconsistency”; and “meaning and sense ... orphaned amid the shifting sands of the postmodern landscape” (p. 71). And yet, in their appraisal of Phillips’s *Representing Women*, a work whose chapter 1 most obviously fits the description “postmodern” and “feminist,” they seem shy of arguing that it is guilty of any of the above excesses, preferring to emphasize instead that her descriptions on the public aspects of Sande, its masks and masquerades, rituals and ceremonies, remain the most comprehensive.

One of the strengths of the book is the large number of Sande masks illustrated in the catalogue section, exhibiting the diversity of treatment possible within what might seem the relatively restricted limits of the Sande mask format. The authors do a reasonable job of interpreting the symbolic elements of the different masks in terms of the analytical materials discussed in chapter 5, although inevitably over such a large group of masks there is a certain amount of repetitiveness. But I question how useful it is for them to describe individual masks as “very old” or “extremely old” when it is not made clear *what* age is being ascribed to them—fifty years old? seventy-five? more than a hundred?—or what the grounds are for ascribing it to them. One suspects that it is being done on the basis of their appearance alone: from indications of use, the quality of patina, the blurring of carved details, and so on; whereas the only sure way of determining age with any exactness is by reference to already dated works from the same carver or workshop.

Notes

- [1]. André Alvares d’Almada, *Tratado Breve dos Rios de Guiné* (Lisbon: 1946), 73.
- [2]. Jean Barbot, *A Description of the Coasts of North and South-Guinea* (London: 1732), 113.
- [3]. Thomas Winterbottom, *An Account of the Native Africans in the Neighbourhood of Sierra Leone* (London: C. Whittingham, 1803), 1:139.
- [4]. Sigismond W. Koelle, *Outlines of a Grammar of the Vei Language, Together with a Vei-English Vocabulary* (London: 1853), 203.
- [5]. John Meyer Harris, “Some Remarks on the Origins, Manners, Customs, and Superstitions of the Gallinas People of Sierra Leone,” in *Memoirs Read before the Anthropological Society of London* (London: Trubner & Co., 1866), 34.
- [6]. See, for example, T. J. Alldridge, “Wanderings in the Hinterland of Sierra Leone,” *The Geographical Journal* 4, no. 2 (1894): 123-140; and T. J. Alldridge, *The Sherbro and Its Hinterland* (London: 1901).
- [7]. Photograph 69, handwritten caption, CO 1069/88/114, Public Record Office, National Archives, Kew, London, United Kingdom.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-afrarts>

Citation: William Hart. Review of Imperato, Gavin H.; Imperato, Pascal James. *Bundu: Soweï Headpieces of the Sande Society of West Africa, the Imperato Family Collection*. H-AfrArts, H-Net Reviews. November, 2012.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=36454>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.