# African Masks in Performance

A public lecture by Thomas Riccio
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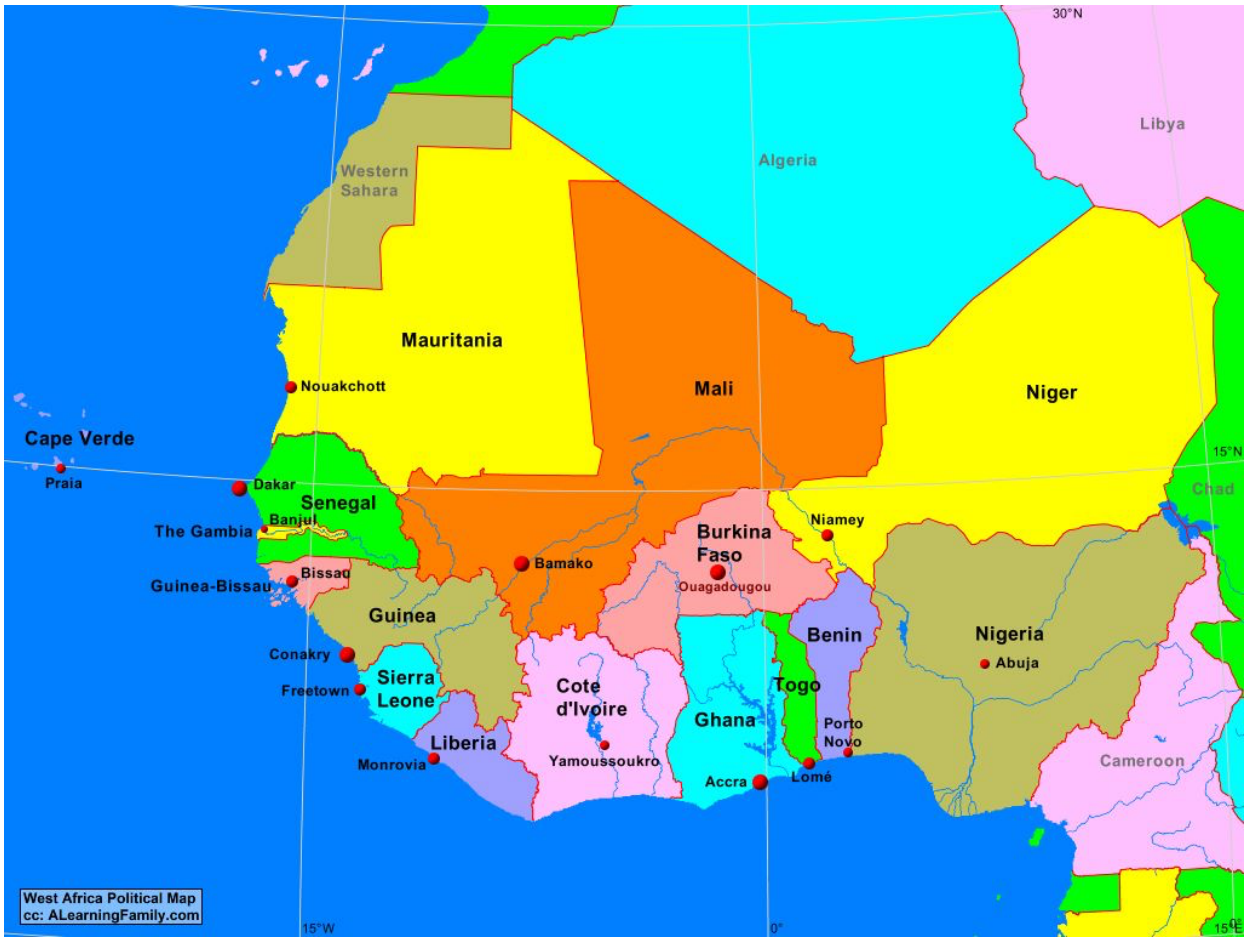
What I'd like to do, because of our short time together today, is to begin by painting a picture of the ritual worldview. The idea is to put everything we see here in some context and reveal how Westerners who are socialized and educated in the West can better decipher how, why, and what we see when we look at an African mask.

We'll start there and then examine specific masks and their performance. Every mask in this room, with a few notable exceptions, was made to be performed. Those few that were not, were totemic. In a way, you can say that all African masks, whether made for the performance or positioned in a community, are totemic. Meaning they embody mythic-ritual significance.

I will also show some of my research and performance in Africa that applied masks. I will include some ritual documentation of a dear friend of mine, Micke Renlund, a Finnish theatre researcher and practitioner.

To begin, I just want to show on the map some of the areas we'll reference and where I've worked to give the talk some geographical reference.


In East Africa: Tanzania, Kenya, Zambia, and last fall, in Ethiopia. In South Africa. In West Africa, Burkina Faso.




The masks in the museum collection are from throughout Africa, most notably West Africa and the Congo region.

During traditional times in Africa, such a talk of knowledge sharing like this, we would most likely sit under a mango tree or another large and expansive tree indigenous to that region. It would be old. Maybe an ancient tree, its roots deep and spreading. Most likely, a tree planted or magically found, appearing generations ago, a tree folded into myth and endowed with social and cultural significance. A tree that has witnessed the passing seasons and generations of humans and non-humans. One that had withstood and flourished during good times and bad, enduring and proud. Offering protection and comfort of shade, carrying fruit, becoming a community reference, a gathering point, a symbol of the wise and reassuring observer. Such a tree was a living, participating elder wise and present. Such trees are found and have a similar significance for indigenous cultures worldwide. Some of these trees have been transfigured—think of the symbolic potency of the Christian cross. Such is the power of an ancient tree. Such symbols

connect material Earth and the ethereal heavens, the present with the past and future. The shamans of so many cultures, I'm thinking specifically now of how the Magar of western Nepal climbs such sacred trees during their initiation.

If this were a traditional African village rather than a windowless museum gallery with artificial light and temperature control, we would be in direct contact with a living and breathing elder. In nature, gatherings beneath the tree, our biology in touch with the multiple and changing dialogues of a place, were for storytelling, community discussions, transitions, and celebrations. It was also a place of ritual—where a ritual would begin, take place, or mark a conclusion. Respect for the tree and, in turn, respect for life-giving nature, an animist, cosmocentric way of being in the world, was encoded in these actions.

I just outlined a significant cultural shift for us to consider what we in the West consider an inanimate object, something that does not speak as humans speak as an elder, as part of the context in which these masks exist.

Let me talk a little about the ritual worldview. In this worldview, we see here.

Africa is not one monolithic culture but rather a diversity of complex cultures, each uniquely fashioned by its relationship to its environment, which begot its mythology, culture, society, and beliefs. I'm speaking in generalized terms and will endeavor to give examples to highlight specific variations, most of which are based on my experience throughout Africa and other parts of the indigenous world. Indigenous worldviews, though each is unique, share commonalities and offer a generalized understanding, if not a template, that evolved from and with a specific place.

What you see the e are masks, manifestations specific to that place, and they react in the form of dances. The mask and its performance are an externalization of one place's thoughts, feelings, mythology, values, and spirituality. The structure of the chanting, the rhythm and tones of the language spoken, the gestural language, the meaning, and vocabulary are all specific to a place. And, by performing, they're essentially entering a dialogue, becoming a deeper part of their place. You see variations of each expression

because some evolved from mountainous environments, others from forest areas, some reflect savannas, a river, and on. Each is an embodiment and expression—an enactment, celebration, and remediation of their place. There are commonalities as to how and why indigenous performance is created, a generalized template if you will, and we'll work to define that.

The larger community of place includes humans and non-human entities that are constituent parts making the greater whole. It is a world where everything is animated. The Alaska Native people I worked with have a word called *Inua*, the spirit that resides in all things. Everything is alive with the energy and spirit of nature. This chair has a spirit. The glasses on my face have spirit. My jack t has a spirit. Everything is alive with spirit—an animistic way of being in and with the world.

The prevailing Western worldview demarcates what's alive, animated, inanimate, and without life. A local landscape constitutes diverse plants, myriad animals, birds, mammals, fish, reptiles, insects, plants, trees, and the sky. Everything is an orchestration of an animated place. Performance is a way to participate and regale in that symphony and, if it is out of tune, to make it sing its perfection.

This is our starting point.

The winds that are particular to that place, to weather the patterns that inform the weather, and the types of wind that come through the local geography, are foundational rhythms, tonality, and the lyrics that tell and inspire the performance. When you live intimately with a place, it speaks. Nature, unfiltered and unmediated by the noise of the modern world, speaks loudly. It is felt internally and interrogatively in the bodies and biology, shaping thoughts and ways of seeing and being.

The forest, the rivers, the caves, and the mountains all lend a specific character to the place as a language but also an expression.

To see these dance expressions here, you see a human expression and dialogue with their place. They're processing through their bodies—objects, gestures, etc., drawn from their environment to commune with their place.

Engaging, reaffirming, and remediating place. It is like getting together with lifelong friends for dinner. It is a way of connecting, sharing, and celebrating who you are and what you are. Your past and present, as to gain reassurance, a sense of self, and the collective to which you belong. Sharing strengths, values, failings, and regrets as you move through life's journey,

It is participation in real-time. They're remediating, celebrating, reaffirming, and remediating place if there are difficulties, things out of balance within that place, that performance balances it.

Every adult in the community is engaged in listening and attuning to other presences that surround and influence daily life. These spaces are alive. To walk on the land is to walk in a narrative alive with spirit.

Everything has a spirit—a tree and fish have a spirit. A river has a spirit. And, of course, you'll see within this exhibit, you'll see river spirits represented.

The animated Earth is an ongoing, ever-changing performance. We, humans, are not the only ones that perform and participate. Our anthropocentric, arrogant, and egocentric perspective is the default setting of Western culture and the consumer-driven, resource-depleting, and environmentally degrading consumer-driven, resource-depleting. We think we are the only ones that see, listen, and participate in place. The trees also see us, the birds see us, and the river also sees us. The world is a porous membrane, interactive, co-inhabited, and co-creative.

Living on planet Earth is a cosmocentric or place-centric reality. It's interactive. It's not anthropocentric or human-centric. That is a delusion and a forfeiture of our participation—the place of our planet.

This is a short discussion about many big concepts. I struggle to keep our conversation precise and practical.

We became anthropocentric, and conversation became displaced.

I've been here seven years. No one in this room is of this place of us are indigenous to this land. Most are recent, others have been here three generations, and maybe five generations at the most. We are a mobile migratory people. A homeless, placeless people. Consequently, we evolved an anthropocentric way of being. We are removed from the world because we removed ourselves. The only constant
is our self-hood, our selfishness. That is how we have organized modern industrial-technological society and culture and how we have organized our worldview.

There are still societies and cultures of place that have been cosmocentric or place-centric for centuries if not thousands of years. They are vanishing, and with them, the wisdom of being of and with place evaporates.

I have worked with the !Xuu and Khwe Bushmen in the Kalahari and the Inupiat of northern Alaska. They've been on their land, who knows, 40000 or 5000 years. And when you develop that way of being with the world, you hear and are part of that part of the world in a sensual, biophysical, psychophysical way. Every aspect of their cultures, from birth to death, ritual, song, dance, thinking, and seeing, even the cadence and syntax of their language structures and partakes in an interaction.

Can we return to an older, cosmocentric, place-centric narrative? A profoundly different perspective from our own, yet one our ancestors knew and of which we are descendants.

As we became migratory, we became anthropocentric. We did so to assert control over our environment and, by so doing, offer stability in food production which provided security and evolved social and cultural systems coherent to settlements, bringing crafts, specializations, trade, expansion, cities, empires, and nations. This was necessary, inevitable, and a success that brought us to this moment. Now we are at the end of that historical cycle and face another evolution requiring another way of thinking and being. Not a nostalgic return to a past imagined, but rather a reconsideration of all that the past offers in the service of a sustainable future.

The ritual you see here is talking to their spirits. The performers declare, 'I am in human form now, but it is transitory.' By putting a mask on, you become the spirit. You cross the boundary, losing yourself to become something greater than yourself.

When I put the mask on and dance, I'm awakening—the boundaries between humans, non-humans, and greater than humans open, porous. The rhythm of drumming, the bodily vibration produced by song and chant, hand and body clapping, the pounding of feet, and the synchronization and union of sounds, rhythm, and movement are passageways and synaptic firings of the greater body of being.

When the performance ends the ritual, the communion ends, and participants return to their form and way of being. Much like that dinner party with lifelong friends—each return to their lives and responsibilities, each doing their part to sustain their place. Each carries with them a shared piece of a whole.

The ritual performance is a vector, a way of transcribing yourself into another and awakening spiritual forms that don't usually have a voice.

The tree has a voice. The river has a voice. The sky has a voice. All have a voice, whether spoken, sung, drummed, or danced. It now has a voice and participates. And then it returns to its natural form.

The human body is not just a mechanical object. In this reality, it becomes a magical entity.

Why are we gathered here today? It is magic cultivated and inherited from ancestors—those that preceded and still live amongst us. Think about all our spiritual predecessors. For some reason, we are gathered in Dallas, Texas. We gathered at noon on 15 September 2010 and are here for some reason. This moment, this gathering, is magical. We are trained to think and perceive causally that life is a sequence, a logical progression.

We don't look at it in terms of our spirits telling, guiding us to be here. I need to say what I'm saying right now; my journey brought me here and now to say what I am saying to you.

Nothing is by chance. Chance is how the spirits speak. If I'm walking down the street and suddenly think of someone, that person, in this worldview, is thinking of me. If I'm thinking of something, questioning whether I should do this or should I do that, and suddenly, a bird goes by, and it's flying in my direction. That is a confirmation of my thought. Life, thought, and feeling are porous. It's not something that is confined. The world around us is interactive, continually speaking. What we call space, empty, null, void, is complete and is the membrane of the world, past, present, and future, live in the world, in the space we think is empty. It is full.

The world is alive with spirits. We bring them there. When we perform, we call upon the spirits that inhabit our planet, calling them forth and bringing them together for a framed event. If something is out of balance, if there is a disruption, something disruptive,

societally, or culturally, a new influence exists in the group. A place for it must be found. It must be identified, welcomed, incorporated, and, if necessary, remediated.

Remediation can happen only after manifesting that object, that idea. Once displayed, it is dealt with, and its foundational balance and rhythm are restored. This is the function of ritual—to reiterate, retrace, and restore the balance of a place.

We are conflict-oriented and not balance oriented. We focus on the conflict when we go to a play, a film, or watch something on television. We identify a protagonist-antagonist and follow the pursuit and method of restoring balance. This is a profound difference.

A performance performs a worldview. The form and structure are a reiteration, a retracing, if you will, of a worldview. The characters interact not only with one another but with the structural patterns of the culture. Contemporary and social issues are remediated, but what is implicitly at play is the reaffirmation of a worldview. The protagonist may be dealing with divorce or AIDS or some other pressing contemporary concern as they reaffirm and celebrate a way of being in the world.

It is the same with African masked performances. The performance co-occurs in the present and past, material and spiritual, and personal and cultural realms. The narrative design and logic performed are that of the community. Part of what a performance does is diagram a worldview.

Within this framework, a value system is asserted. The performance is a microcosm of a shared worldview. Whether it's an initiation, a funeral, or any communal imbalances—a sickness, social challenge, an oil spill,  lack of game, or fruitful harvest—it is understood and remediated in a pre-existing cosmological structure. This is not to say that performances are fixed. They adapt and dynamically change in response to the world. A ritual or performance that is frozen is dying.

Performance in any cultural context retraces reaffirms and maintains a group’s reality, and the community must witness it. Performance, and African ritual mask performance, are a technology by which humans connect and communicate with a larger reality. It is a

means by which to understand sensorially, intimately, and with immediacy. It is how culture becomes encoded in our minds and body. Our cultural ordering system is imprinted whenever you see a play, television series, or film.

If you see something in a disruptive play or don't understand the logic, you say, 'What is this about?' It's no longer confirming. It's disrupting your ordering system expectation.

The critical thing to remember is that the drumming, dancing, gestures, vocalizations, and regalia are sensorial. The narrative is emotive rather than logical and causal. They are performed outdoors under the sun, the moon, and the sky, accompanied by the wind, earth, and the feel and smells of nature. These are not human-made architectural spaces. If we were in Africa now, we would sit in a circle—the circle of the community, life, and the cosmos. A circle has no beginning or end and completely encircles human and non-human beings.

Humans are transitory. We are just passing through. We are like the weather, season, night and day, the cycles of flora and fauna, and the movement of the cosmos.

What do you have when you go to the theater in the West? An elevated stage. The audience sits dormant in the dark, watching the illuminated mind elevated on a stage—a metaphor for our worldview—a mind-body split. You implicitly assert that we are bodily removed and disassociated from the illuminated mind. This symbolizes the anthropocentric—the human-centric—way of being in the world.

Performance and art articulate how we see the world and find our place within the world. There are very few indoor theaters in Africa, and those that exist in Africa are built by former colonizers. And except for South Africa, many have fallen into disuse. Why?  Because they were for the colonizer and had nothing to do with those who lived there.

Demarcating and describing drumming in many traditions and languages is difficult without describing dance. They're usually the same in many traditions. For many indigenous groups, the word for dance is also the word for prayer. Both are energies, spirits, and animated, non-human beings. We are rooted in and securely borne by contact with diverse non-human beings surrounding us. These non-human shapes direct us, and we continuously interchange with them.

Let’s talk a little about repetitive actions. Why is there so much repetition in the performance of indigenous people?

I have brought friends to various rituals in the past. And for the first 20 minutes or so, they're enthralled and enthusiastic. The movement, rhythms, regalia, the air is charged with energy. Then, after twenty minutes, they ask me what happens next.  I tell them this might go on for hours. Repetition deepens the moment and the self and connects to one’s place, spirits, and ancestors. It has a trance-like effect. We in the West anticipate progression—forward movement. We want something to occur, to progress, and to build. We have a linear progression expectation reflecting our culture's migratory pattern. We moved through time and space searching, struggling, conquering, and colonizing other places—indigenous traditions did not. They did not need to move, and they were home already. Their performance is about connecting with place bodily and sensorily.

In concentric-indigenous-place based cultures, repetition is not about progression through time and space. The repetition is about digging in and getting deeper. The metaphor to look at and examine is less progression through time and space, like a line. Still, a concentric circle opening, the deepening of the body and repetition of the body base, and the repetition of the singing and drumming moves and opens to a deeper level of reality. Indigenous people do not need to go anywhere. They are there already. The repetition is a deepening rather than a progression, which you see here.

A trance or semi-trance state is induced, heightening the experience. The performers and community alike enter a trance——the boundaries between the material and spiritual begin to evaporate and interplay. Those wearing animal or spirit masks, like the Chewa of eastern Zambia, are taken to another reality by performers who are archetypal specialists.

The mask performers are spiritualists. When putting on and performing a masked character, they become mediums for the spirits, their performance conduit to the community's spirit realm that holds and gives meaning to the culture and society of the group. And there are specialists, those unique people, variously called shamans, sangomas, and badai, who converse with the spirits and ancestors. Healers are called to serve as bridges, adept navigators of the spirit world in the service of the community.

These specialists can enter a trance state and move into a greater reality. The movement of the spine activates the spinal fluids as you see Machai, a !Xuu Bushman healer, doing here.

For the dancer performer, using their body to communicate with their place, the rhythmic pounding moving through and awakening the body. It is a way of triggering a trance-like state, alerting the earth they are connecting, entraining with the earth's rhythm, enabling another, expanding, and inducing another state of being. Similar poundings and rhythmic connections with the planet during rituals exist in cultures worldwide, including the Ngoni and Zulu of Africa, the Inupiat and Yup'ik of Alaska, and Korea, among many others.

I worked with the Lozi people in southern Zambia. They have a word for an island where the ancestors exist. It is an island floating above the Earth. The island is called *Litooma*. And when they perform, the island is summoned to Earth, and the ancestors join and perform with them. Litooma returns to the sky when the performance is concluded. The human and spirit worlds again separated. Ritual, like life, is all about boundaries and passages.

Everything on earth is always moving. Ritual performance enables them to move together momentarily. It is a moment that restores and gives hope, meaning, and identity.

**Question:** How are shamans chosen? Or is it generational?

**Riccio:** It is both. The spirits speak, and the person must respond. Some have an inclination. They are called and drawn to it. It's a calling with responsibility. Many resist it because what it entails is onerous. Others are called because it is their inheritance. These are the generational shamans. It may be because the spirits are familiar and comfortable with the family line. The hereditary lines are often more powerful because of the generational transfer of knowledge and the passing on of helping spirits.

The wounded healer is taught by their unique life experience. It is like spiritual genetics; the spirits live with the family. In comparison, others are called for their special abilities, sensitivity, or because of what they have been through—for instance, a life trauma that opens them to becoming a healer.

What you'll often find in Africa is there is no formal training. Traditionally they learned in their village. However, with urbanization, there is a degrading of the tradition, the loss or corruption of meaning, and a co-mingling of ethnic traditions. The tradition becomes slowly drained of its meaning and context, the dances and ritual anesthetized. It becomes a memory, much like my ancestors, Italian American. I've been to Italy, I speak a little Italian, but I'm not Italian. Those traditions have evaporated and melded with my American identity.

What happened to Rwanda and Congo in the nineties are examples of significant cultural disruptions and displacement. Similarly, in Africa, the same occurs. It is about economics,  politics, tribalism, climate refugees, etc.

The ba Kuba of the Congo does not exist anymore. It is nostalgic, historical, and hollowed out. You would be very hard-pressed to see much of this being practiced today.

Traditional and ritual objects are made for tourists. They are distressed to look more authentic. They are made for tourists—the incomplete understanding of what once was. A newer commercial tradition has emerged. This is occurring throughout Africa, prompted by the rise of a cash economy, modernization, the difficulty of eking out a sustainable life in the environmentally stressed area, and along with the strain of politics, corruption, war, and conflict, to name only a few of a complexity of issues.

In Burkina Faso, members from five different ethnic groups came together to create a mask performance in an urban setting. They were dramatic dances. All were culled from several dance traditions that reflect the varied ethnic backgrounds of the dance troupe, then woven together into an after-dinner show. You'd think it was a traditional mask

performance if you didn't know better. It was a performance for tourist consumption commissioned by the local Hilton Hotel.

This is increasingly the case throughout Africa. Much of what you see here is from traditions quickly vanishing. With cell phones or travel, with the Internet and social media, traditional knowledge is evaporating at an accelerated rate. I have interviewed elders, who have told me that young people educated in English and Western ways are not interested in what the elders say and offer. They'll laugh at the elders. "Why are you interested in the old ways?" And so, the oral and performance traditions fade.

Most elders do not read or write. What they know is not being written down. When an elder dies, a library burns and the Earth loses more of its wisdom. That which took several generations, if not hundreds or a thousand years of evolution—essentially place-based ecology expressed in performance form—is lost and not recoverable at a time when we as a species can listen and learn from it.

At the same time, we're losing ancient indigenous knowledge not found in books. It would be impossible to write this down. No one can transcribe what happens in the context of this event. It is experiential. Anthropologists and ethnographers make attempts, but they are, for the most part, continue the anthropocentric.

A ritual must constantly evolve, continuously adjusting to serve current circumstances and needs. It is like the world, an organism. If it does not grow, it ossifies, fading into irrelevance.

I realize this is a dire portrait.

There are also significant signs of encouragement. In the 1970s and 1980s, you'd be hard-pressed to find books in bookstores engaged in such concerns. Now they are more readily available. We're looking at accessing information from other cultures to a greater degree because our culture realizes there may be some things we missed or need to reinvigorate specific ideas. I see this as part of a cultural and ritual progression.

We look at ritual artifacts, and museums put them on display, but we don't understand their context, their function, and how they lived and served their community of place. The ritual is but a window, the context; its totality is the embrace, the lived offering that teaches and gives meaning to life. But we must learn how to perceive them on their terms and not our own. What we have has been given generously. Our only obligation is to pass it on to others, for it is not ours to keep.

Part of my work as a performance ethnographer is recording, publishing, and sharing, as I am doing here. All you own is what you can give.

In a sense, we're kind of going full circle. The West is now aware of the need to understand there's a wholeness to our place in environmental sensibility that our survival depends on. We need to recognize what animals need. We need to acknowledge what trees need and what the river needs. They're speaking to us, and we are starting to hear their voices. There is increasing awareness. Books are being written, gestures and expressions are being created, whether musical or technological, etc., and we are again beginning a dialogue of mutual respect with non-human beings and our mutually shared fates. A new sort of indigenous consciousness is in the making as we globalize. We are all becoming earthlings.

**Question:** I want to ask whether a performer requests a mask to be made or if it is explicitly made for the performance.

**Riccio:** It depends on the culture. Some are made specifically to serve a need or a ritual event, while a vision or dream inspires others. If I am a dancer and you're a mask maker, I'd say, make this because I had a dream or because I or a spirit told me this. I worked with a traditional dancer in Zambia, and we incorporated traditional mask dance within our secular performance in which he danced a traditional dance. I would never talk to him directly when we wore a mask. He would put on and take the mask off in private. And only after the performance would I give him notes, saying things like, "Could you ask Kasinga to move farther down when he enters?" And he responds, "I will tell him."

His mask was a traditional Chewa mask, part of the *Gulu wamKulu* mask tradition. I'll show a little bit of their work. The Chewa have an exciting tradition. It's a matriarchal tradition. Theirs was a secret society that socially equalized the power of women had socially and the matrilineal line of inheritance and tribal order. And consequently, as a social power balance, the men would hold and convey the tradition via a mask, which meant myth and ritual performance.

What happens within that setting is it's a male-dominated dance society? When you become initiated in the Gulu wamKulu as a young boy, you begin a journey through the stages of life and ultimately are taught the knowledge of the masks as you age, progressing through life. Each mask teaches what is significant for that part of your life cycle.

Each mask teaches one's role, obligations, and responsibility. Each would embody, psychophysically and sensorially, the archetypal journey of a Chewa man and be adjusted to the body as it ages. The mask holds an age-specific, culturally responsive story. The mask and dance bundle and embody a moment on the journey through the life cycle in service and continuance of the community.

Masks hold stories and power and teach. We endow objects. Who here does not have a photo of a relative, an ancestor, have a little altar maybe on a mantelpiece or a bureau or someplace in your house that in a sense what you're doing is you remember you have a ritual altarpiece or where a piece of jewelry from a relative that's gone, or someone gave you it's endowed. You endow fragments in the same way. These pieces are endowed with the memory not only of something personal but also something cultural. That's something that is passed on and bundled with meaning. Often these objects, a graduation photo and the like, are archetypal. It holds both personal and collective meaning.

**Question:** You have often spoken about performance going into a more profound or larger reality. Are the performances only about reconnecting to the people what they already know about their human nature? And if you, as a European, could share one of these performances with dancing and drumming, maybe you can even enter this space

or state of being, like violence, angst, fear, and all these moments celebrated by the performance. What you are talking about is very interesting and affects things like medicine. I suppose this is more a comment than a question.

**Riccio:** What does a national anthem do for us? In a minor way, it unifies us and identifies who we are. Or the happy birthday song. We recall specific forms of our collective identity. It's always interesting for me. If we were to start to sing here, we might be able to sing three songs together collectively. We don't share a lot culturally. We share very little performance.

Regarding dances, we would probably dance a little bit of the waltz, maybe a little tango, all fragments. None of us know everything—none of us. We are a society of fragments, migrants, and individuals and share a community of ideas and not a community of place.

Once, working in South Africa with a group of white actors and Zulu actors doing a theater workshop. The Zulu actors were intimidated. The whites were Western-trained in Stanislavski and acting, and the Zulus had no formal training.  So, as an exercise, I deliberately as them to return the next day with three performative examples of their tradition. Whatever they thought that to be.

The next day, the European actors performed Shakespeare's monologues and showed their acting, musical theatre, and dance skills.

The Zulu actors thought they had misunderstood the assignment. I said, ‘Just do what you believe your tradition is.’

The Zulus were timid. Then one woman came out. She started dancing. Next thing you know, a Zulu drummer came out. He started drumming. An hour and a half later, they were still dancing and drumming. And they haven't repeated themselves.

The same I have seen when I've worked in Korea and when I've worked in Sakha, Siberia, or anywhere in Africa. They share a deep and rich language. We of the West

share books, and political and cultural values exist between us. They share and connect through a biophysical movement and way of being in a world. When they perform with each other now, they connect to ancestral, spiritual, and animal others. That's how and why dance and performance are understood as a prayer.

I was with the Hopi years ago, and I saw this mass performance, and I thought I knew some friends of mine briefed me. And then I saw this character with kinky hair and dark features.
I thought, "What is that?" And my friend goes, "It's Jesse Jackson."

They had created a masked character and made a dance for Jesse Jackson, who had visited that area three months before. And what they did is they essentially created a Jesse Jackson mask and interpolated him into their cultural framework. His presence had impacted him, and now he was part of them.

Similarly, in Africa, you'll see a mask of John the Baptist, Christ, or the Apostle Peter; you'll see these masks and dances from their perspective. When they present their ritual, they show the aliveness of their context. Then when something new and significant enters their cosmological sphere, they fold it in.

Mask performances are basically to balance, incorporate, celebrate, and reaffirm. You can speculate that if humans did not leave the Garden of Eden, the creation myth, there would be no need for Christ or Mass or any type of services because there'd be no need for it. In a sense, our rituals are reckoning and retelling, reaffirming, and celebrating a creation myth that occurred much earlier.

Outside Ouagadougou in a neighborhood. The masks are all papier mâché. And the compound was sponsored by Rastafarians who are creating a dance troupe using traditional mass performances for tourists, an excellent example of a modern reworking and manifestation of it. The performance was ersatz, derived from many and varied traditions. This is a group that is comprised of five or six different ethnic groups. Their wearing the paint on their legs and arms shows they are spirit and human. It's like a skeletal representation. They're in-between spaces.

But rather than having a ritual objective, it is now representational. It moves from ritual to presentational. And consequently, you start to see how it becomes more presentational rather than communal. It has jumped contexts.

Five years ago in Nairobi, Kenya. What they're doing now is papier mâché created masks. And this is in a park just north of downtown Nairobi, where it's for AIDS awareness. They're applying these are not traditional masks but extrapolated from traditions and mixed in with Hansen like Muppets. It was part of an AIDS awareness project, and distributing condoms and how to use them was part of the project.

The masks, foreign and without tribal or ethnic identity, were neutral. If I'm from one tribe and you're of another tribe, and I'm giving condoms, you're less likely to accept them. The thinking is, "Well, you don't want us to have babies because you're trying to control us."

The mask puppets are larger than life and designed for presentation in large outdoor spaces. Explicitly made to grab attention, gather audiences, and communicate.

Uhuru Park was notorious for its AIDS orphans in 2002. There were probably 200 to 300 children living in the park. They are there because their parents died of AIDS, and they are orphaned and abandoned, the sons and daughters of prostitutes who were the victims of AIDS.

Many of these children in the park don't live beyond 17 or 18. Their eyes are glazed and yellowed, and they're essentially surviving because the hunger is great and because of the pain because they've lost their parents when they were three or four years old, five years old, some of these children were born in the park. They essentially sustained themselves by stealing and drugging themselves with upholstery glue. Often, you would see them snorting upholstery glue from plastic juice bottles.

I was in Nairobi, conducting workshops and part of a program on how to deal with working with AIDS and how to sustain and continue that work. When you see death and such dire human conditions almost daily, how do you maintain yourself physically and psychologically to continue and work through it? Some of my work includes drama therapy. I was there conducting group therapy-styled workshops for performers that worked extensively with AIDS patients and awareness programs.

This is a performance I devised in Zambia, located here on our map.


The performance was called Imipashi, which means the spirits in Bemba, the national language of Zambia. There are 73 ethnic groups in Zambia.

Some of Africa's struggles with ethnic fighting of it, but not all, were precipitated by colonial trauma. I was commissioned by the Zambian government, with funding from the Finnish Volunteer Service and the Swedes, to bring together the best traditional performers and community performers to create a performance demonstrating that Zambia is one people, a nation with shared origins, values, interests, and concerns. This performance was made after nine weeks of workshops and rehearsals.

Our project had performers from different ethnic and tribal groups and toured the nation. It was the first time audiences had seen the performances of different ethnic groups perform together on stage and perhaps seen the dances of other ethnic groups performed on  Zambian Nation Television. Our performance was the first time they had experienced the dances of Zambia's rich cultural diversity performed live and collectively. To see traditional enemies, dancing together was a meaningful psychological, cultural, and political gesture. We performed throughout the country, always outdoors, in fields, usually near markets, to an average audience of 2000 people gathered in a circle.

The project began with two weeks of performance training and skills exchange, which included mask workshops. We invited traditional and European mask makers who introduced papier mâché masks. Why? Because in Africa, deforestation is a significant issue.

This performer is dancing a Chewa dance. This man here with his little police-like hat and a stick. He's maintaining order and ensuring the children are seated in the front. And what's happening here is gathering the audience Pied Piper-like, bringing them back to our performance area.

This performer's father was a traditional healer. He is putting down cornmeal to create a circle, something we learned was necessary. Otherwise, the tendency was for people to press and shove into the circle. Once the cornmeal was down, a traditional signifier of space, the playing area was identified and secured. We worked in vast outdoor spaces, and the best way to communicate effectively, broadly, and gesturally was by referencing a traditionally established language.

This contemporary reworking of a widely understood mask performance tradition of creating a sacred or ritual space. I would like you to remember today's talk in similar terms.

We gathered, creating a momentary communally shared space—a unique gathering brought together by our ancestors. Chance is how the spirits speak, and they have spoken.

Thank you.