



175. Bundu mask. Sande Society, Mende peoples (West African forests of Sierra Leone and Liberia). 19th to 20th century C.E. Wood, cloth, and fiber.

G14, 1075

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http://www.philamuseum.org/micro_sites/exhibitions/africanart/flash/sierra.swf

Beauty Stripped of Human Flaws: Sowei Masks My earliest memory of Sowei was when I was about four years old. It would come out during the harvest season, when people had harvested rice and cocoa. It was a time of plentiful and it was a time to celebrate. They would then have an initiation for girls into womanhood. The Sowei masked devil would come out and people would dance and celebrate. A lot of women have the belief that this wonderful, beautiful Sowei mask completely represents womanhood. Women who were infertile would run over and try to touch the raffia, the masked devil itself, so they can get pregnant. Women who were pregnant and wanted their children to have rings around their neck [a sign of beauty in Sowei culture] would actually try to get a raffia off of the mask and tie it around their waist so their children were born with rings around their neck. The Sowei initiation brought life to the compound. There's a lot of love for the Sowei because it's like a symbol of womanhood and sisterhood. Hannah Foday

<http://www.brynmawr.edu/collections/Exhibitions/exh-mende.shtml>

The Sande Society mask, or sowo-wui, is worn by Mende women of Sierra Leone, and has the distinction of being one of the few ritual masks worn by African women.

The Sande, or Bundu, Society is a fellowship of women who are responsible for preparing young Mende girls for adulthood, and for their roles as wives, mothers and female community members. At the girls' initiation, which is still practiced into the twentieth century, a society member appears in full costume as Sowo, the water spirit of the Sande Society, and walks with the grace and elegance expected of Mende women. The costumed woman wears a black gown of raffia fibers that conceals her body, and the mask rests over her head on her shoulders. This dark mask "exalts the far-famed beauty of Mende women," (1) and represents the sculpted head of Sowo.

The mask itself is a conical helmet that rests on top of the raffia costume, and is described by observers as "truly a glamorous being...the mask joins the community together in the experience of its beauty and allure." (2) The artist, carefully chosen by the Society, carves the face with the attention a woman would give her own appearance. The mask's appearance exemplifies Mende women's physical and moral beauty and cannot fall short of the Mende ideal. The artist coats the mask with palm oil, which gives it the black, lustrous shine - the color of the spirit of the waters. A sleek, luminous surface is achieved and the mask takes on a glow, which seems to come from the inner light of life.



The ideal Mende mask has clearly defined features created by delicate, dainty carving. The neck with its rings of flesh, the face, and the coiffure make up the three divisions of the mask. These must be in perfect symmetry, with the coiffure as the largest and most elaborate part of the mask. The features of the face are held to a standard, while distinctions occur among the coiffures.

Coiffures: The hair styles of the Mende masks are quite varied, and some are ornately decorated. A thick head of hair is admired, and these are designed into coiffures that indicate elegance, wealth, and femininity. The beautiful styles are very complicated and very neat to convey conscientious grooming and good behavior, while adornments to the coiffures exhibit individuality. The perfect style of Sowo's hair indicates her supernatural status, and contrasts with the wildness of the raffia costume. A perfect coiffure connects the mask to the divine world.

Neck Rings: The neck rings at the base of the mask are an exaggeration of actual neck creases. Mende people consider a beautiful neck to be one with rings: they are a sign of beauty because they suggest wealth, high status, and are sexually attractive. The rings indicate prosperity and wholesome living, and are given by God to show his affection for a fortunate few. As well, the rings indicate a relationship with the divine: the Sowo itself is a deity from the waters, and the neck rings represent the concentric waves which are formed on still water by Sowo's head breaking through the surface. The spirit comes from the water, and what the human eye sees on the necks of women "is human in form, but divine in essence," as portrayed in the mask. (3)

Facial Features: The neck rings cradle a small face whose features are situated at its bottom half. The face itself is carved in a compact space which is dominated by the eyes. Each feature is specially carved to convey Mende ideals of beauty and female behavior.

The Brow: The most outstanding feature of the masks face is the brow. This exaggerated brow symbolizes poise and success. The brow shines and is never covered by hair, which indicates happiness and self-confidence.

The Mouth: The small pursed mouth of the Sande Society mask indicates composure, and forbids flirtation or smiling. The Sowo's mouth is sealed so no female secrets are revealed. The Mende society discourages spiteful talk which can cause suffering, thus silence becomes an indication of composure and sound judgment. The mask shows the ideal mouth: an image of perfect silence.

The Nose: Sowo's' nose is delicate and sharp, and small like the mouth. The Mende people loathe bad smells, and women are considered to have a stronger sense of smell than men. Despite this quality, the nose of the sowo-wui is discreet, never large or suggestive of her strong sense of smell.

The Eyes: The eye is the supreme element of the body, and the most interesting component of the head because it is considered a human's most beautiful physical trait. The Mende believe that eyes are goodness, and reveal a person's genuine feelings. The eyes on the mask are heavily lidded, downcast, and barely open. The slit eyes have many meanings: they conceal the identity of the masked Society member, and make it impossible for the woman to communicate with others using her eyes. As Sowo is too exalted to look in the eye, her lowered lids prevent anyone from looking into her eyes. The eyes also give an air of calmness and gentleness, characteristics which are attractive to Mende people. The dreamy look given the mask is very sexual to Mende men, but such a look also reassures a husband that his wife is not trying to make eye contact with other men.



Scarification: The small marks found beneath the eyes on a Sande Society mask may be identity marks formally used by the Mende. These are rarely, if ever, found on modern Mende people.

CREDITS: All the Sande Society helmet masks on display are part of the generous gift of African and Pacific Art from Mace Neufeld and Helen Katz Neufeld '53.

Endnotes:

1) African Art, Michel Leiris, Jacqueline Delange, Golden Press NY 1968

2) Radiance from the Waters, Sylvia Ardyn Boone, Yale University Press, 1986.

3) Radiance from the Waters, Sylvia Ardyn Boone, Yale University Press, 1986.

This exhibit and its accompanying text was prepared by Catherine Foster '99. All photographs of helmet masks from the College's Collections are the work of Molly Greenfield'01.

<http://www.learner.org/courses/globalart/work/71/index.html>

Among the Mende people in Sierra Leone, the Sande (or Bondo) society has traditionally overseen the transition of girls from childhood into adulthood.

Girls would be taken into the forest and taught the secret knowledge of women. When they had completed this initiation, they were returned to the community and presented in a ritual masquerade as mature women ready for marriage.

This helmet-like mask, along with a full-body costume made from the raffia palm, would be worn during both secret initiation rituals and the final presentation ceremony by the *sowei*, or Sande leader, usually a talented performer and high-ranking official in the society. In most African cultures, all masks, including those representing female characters, are danced by men. The *sowei* mask is unique because it is danced by a woman. The mask and its wearer offered a model of ideal behavior for new members to emulate and a demonstration of female virtues and wisdom to the larger community.

In dancing the mask, the *sowei* channeled the spirits of female ancestors, becoming an embodiment of mystical power, called *angafa*. The mask reflects this transformation as well as other values of the society, including wisdom and beauty. The concentric rings around the neck of the mask, for instance, represent ripples of water, alluding to the rise of the female spirit out of the watery realm that is its dwelling place. At the same time, these can be interpreted as rings of fat, signs of fertility and maturity. Likewise, the lustrous black surface of the mask simultaneously refers to the rich mud at the bottom of the river and the ideal complexion of healthy and beautiful skin. Other aspects of the mask refer to the secrecy associated with the Sande rite of passage and with woman in general. These include the downcast eyes suggestive of inner spiritual concentration and, in the case of this particular mask, a tortoise placed above the elaborate coiffure.



Expert Perspective: Mary Nooter Roberts, Professor of Culture and Performance, University of California, Los Angeles

Among Mende peoples of Sierra Leone in West Africa, there's an entire association dedicated to women's initiation rites, specifically the initiation rites of very young women—girls undergoing puberty, who are secluded from society for a period of time, during which they are instructed by elder women who are members of an association called Sande whose role is specifically to guard and transmit the knowledge pertaining to women's worlds. At various points during this initiation rite, masquerades were staged that would announce the completion of certain stages of learning. And what is so remarkable about Mende masks is that they are one of the very rare examples where masks are commissioned and danced, performed, by women. This is a very rare occurrence in Africa, where masks are usually performed by men.

We in the West call them masks, but when you see the mask enter the arena and perform this very remarkable dance that can have both very calm and measured movements and also very frenetic and lively acrobatic movements as well, this is a recognition that the spirit has come to visit and that the spirit is present. But the mask is all about announcing the sort of acquisition of knowledge, and the mask itself can embody that knowledge through its iconography.

In the Mende masks, there's a lot of emphasis on a beautiful broad forehead and then a very compressed face with downcast eyes—eyes that reflect composure and that reflect the kinds of learning and instruction that the woman has acquired through the course of initiation rites. And you'll notice often that there are rings around the neck. A woman with lines around her neck is considered to be extremely beautiful. That is very true among Mende, but there's also the suggestion that because the spirits reside within the deep dark pools and lakes, that when a spirit emerges and pokes her head through the water, it creates concentric circles on the surface of the water. And these rings are a reflection of the emergence of the spirit.

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-africa/new-topic-2014-08-07T19:20:54.093Z/a/sowei-mask-sierra-leone>

Sowei mask, Sierra Leone, Sande society

Sowei masks—unique to the region around Sierra Leone—are worn by senior members of the all-female Sande Society during rite-of-passage ceremonies that signify a girl's transition to adulthood. They are carved expressions of local ideals of feminine beauty, health and serenity that vary widely in their detail.



Masquerade performances play an important symbolic role in the Sande Society. The mask is worn by the *ndoli jowei* ("the soweï who dances") along with a black raffia and textile costume which completely conceals her identity. Traditionally, the *ndoli jowei* appears at specific stages of the period of transition at events that are accompanied by music, dancing and singing. She is regarded as both a physical manifestation of the spirit of the Sande Society and an embodiment of its powerful medicines.

Colonized and colonizer

The mask featured in this display was collected in 1886 by Thomas Joshua Alldridge for the Colonial and Indian Exhibition in London, where it represented the exotic "otherness" of African culture and belief systems. Although this mask bears much of the customary iconography seen on other soweï masks: blackened surface, small facial features, prominent forehead and elaborate hairstyle it has an extraordinary feature in the form of a Western-style top hat. At the time this mask was collected at the end of the nineteenth century imported items of Western clothing were used by members of the Sierra Leonean elite as symbols of status and power. At the same time Europeans eagerly collected African masks and displayed them in museums as examples of exotic "otherness." This two-way interpretation of a single object questions the impact of the cultural contact between colonized and colonizer.

The following excerpts were compiled by Douglas Darracott, Plano West Senior High School, Plano, TX

Female mask of the Mende (Sierra Leone), wood

1. "The **Mende** and neighboring peoples of Sierra Leone and Liberia are unique in Africa in that women actually wear masks and costumes that conceal them totally from the audience in attendance on the occasion of their performance. The **Sande society** of the Mende is the women's counterpart to the men's **Poro Society**. Both societies are associated with the initiation, education, and acculturation of female and male youth, respectively, into productive adulthood. Women leaders who dance these masks serve as priestesses and judges during the three years the women's society controls the ritual calendar (alternating with the men's society in this role). Women maskers, also initiators, teachers, and mentors, help girl novices with their transformations into educated and marriageable women. Masked spirits and their symbolic attributes play a major role in girls' initiations among the Mende and in several neighboring peoples" (Kleiner, Mamiya, and Tansey 995).

2. "The male Poro society uses masked costumes called Gbini and Gboi in their society rites, associating these masqueraders with powerful bush spirits and the color white in the domain of male chiefly powers. The Sande society associates their Sowie masks with water spirits and the color black, which the society, in turn, connects with human skin color and the civilized world. The women wear these helmet masks on top of their heads as headdresses, with black raffia and cloth costumes to hide the wearers' identity during public performances. Elaborate coiffures, shiny black color, dainty triangular-shaped faces with slit eyes, rolls around the neck, and actual and carved versions of amulets and various emblems on the top commonly characterize Sowie masks. These symbolize the adult women's roles as wives, mothers, providers for the family, and keepers of medicines for use within the Sande society and the society at large" (995). "Sande society patrons commission the masks from male carvers, with the carver and patron determining the type of mask needed for a particular society purpose. The Mende often keep, repair, and reuse masks for many decades, thereby preserving them as models for subsequent generations of carvers" (995). "With a glistening black surface evoking ancestral spirits newly emergent from their underwater homes (also symbolized by the turtle on top) this mask and its parts refer to ideals of female beauty, morality, and behavior. A high broad forehead signifies wisdom and success. Intricately woven or plaited hair is the essence of harmony and order found in ideal households, also symbolized by mats and textiles. A small closed mouth and downcast eyes indicate the silent, serious demeanor expected of recent initiates" (993-994).

3. "Within Mende and Sherbro culture, helmet masks are carved with symbolic features intended to endow the wearer with spiritual power. Senior members of two distinct initiation societies, Sande and Humui, may have worn this work in performances. Sande is a powerful pan-ethnic women's association responsible for the education and moral development of young girls. Helmet masks of this kind represent its guardian spirit and allude to an idealized female beauty. Historically, the Sande initiation process took months to complete, yet today sessions are coordinated with the calendars of secondary schools and may be completed during vacations and holidays. Such masks are worn by initiated Sande women at performances that celebrate the completion of the young initiates' training period. The masks are finely carved to convey admired feminine features: an elaborate coiffure, a smooth, broad forehead, narrowly slit eyes, a small, composed mouth, and a sensuously ringed neck. This composition of forms and symmetry creates a serene facial expression that implies self-control" (Clarke 83). "The mask's glossy black patina evokes the beauty of clean, healthy, oiled skin. It may also refer to the blackness of the river bottom, where the Sande spirit is believed to reside. In this interpretation, the ringed neck may refer to the circular ripples of water that are formed as the Sande spirit emerges from her watery realm. In Humui, a medicine society for men and women, this type of helmet mask has been used to address curative needs, especially mental illness. The four projecting animal-horn amulets that rise from the perimeter may be a reference to the animal horns filled with protective medicinal ingredients worn by Humui members" (83).

4. "The women's society known as Bondo or Sande is found among West Atlantic-speaking peoples (including the Gola and Temme), Mende-speaking peoples (including the Mende, Vai, and Kpelle) and the Kru-speaking Bassa. Sande or Bondo officials take female children into a shelter in the forest, where the girls learn the secrets of womanhood, and undergo a clitoridectomy. When the initiates have completed their training, they are presented to the community as fully mature women. In all of these groups, carved wooden headdresses are danced by leaders of the women's association to make manifest the spirits who guide them. A masked spirit (ngafa among the Mende) is seen as one embodiment of the mystical power (sometimes translated as 'medicine') of Sande/Bondo. Although each masquerader has her own individual name and identity, generic terms can also be used, including zogbe (among the Gola), and soweï or ndoli joweï, 'the Sande leader' or 'the expert leader who dances' (in Mende communities). These general references stress the masquerader's role as a lead dancer and as a high-ranking official of Sande/Bondo" (Visona 180-181). "In a photograph taken during a Bondo ceremony of the Temne people, an important masquerader (here known as nŏwŏ) is surrounded by her attendants. Every aspect of the masquerade is linked to the character of her spirit, and to the roles and values of the Bondo association. The white scarf tied to the central projection at the top of the helmet-like head of the nŏwŏ shows her solidarity with the initiates, who are covered in white pigment during their initiation as a demonstration of their liminal, otherworldly status. The concentric bands at the base of the mask are compared by the Temne to the ridges ringing the hard black chrysalis of a species of moth. Since the nŏwŏ is responsible for the transformation of children into fully feminine, sexually mature women, it is the equivalent of a chrysalis which protects the metamorphosis of a winged creature" (181).

5. "Among many Mende groups, the encircling ridges are also references to the origin of the mask. When a particularly wise and respected Sande official is renowned for her abilities as a dancer and choreographer, she dreams of plunging into a pool or river, the dwelling place of female spirits. As the leader emerges from this watery realm, she brings with her the conical head of the Sande spirit. The ripples formed on the water as she surfaces appear as concentric rings around the base of the mask" (181). "Other features also refer to the miraculous creation of the mask. The Sande official falls unkempt into the water, but emerges with beautiful clothing and elaborately braided hair. The coiffure of the wooden headdress is therefore complex and crisply carved. Girls who appeared to their communities at the conclusion of Sande and Bondo initiations once wore similarly elegant hairstyles" (181). "The surface of the mask is a glossy black, the color of the mud on the river bottom (as is the costume of thick strands of raffia palm fiber). Black is also the color of clean, oiled, healthy, and beautiful human skin, and initiates are praised for their glossy complexions when they exhibit their virtuosity as dancers during the concluding ceremonies" (181). "The delicacy and the reserved expression of the face of the nŏwŏ (mirrored in the demeanor of the attendants) are the result of the training the girls receive during Bondo and Sande. The initiates learn wisdom, beauty, grace, and self-control, all of which they will need within the multigenerational, polygamous households of their future husbands. The antithesis of these values is demonstrated by the masked and unmasked clowns who accompany the nŏwŏ, soweï, or ndoli joweï. A clown (known among the Mende as gonde) wears an ugly and disfigured version of the leadership masks, or a beautiful mask which has become old and damaged; it dances in an uncouth, clumsy manner" (181). "A small, sculpted version of the lovely head of a Bondo or Sande masquerader appears on staffs and other objects used by officials of the association, reminding observers of the spiritual source of the women's authority. Freestanding figures may also be stored with the masks and other materials which act as a group's spiritual power ('medicine')" (181). "However, some masks and images have been used by the religious associations of the Mende and their neighbors which are open to both men and women" (181).

6. "In many areas, Sande associations alternate their training sessions with those of the men's association, known as Poro. During the period set aside for Poro, a soweï or ndoli joweï may only appear for the funeral of an important Sande official, or when men break the sacred laws of the association and must be judged and punished. Poro masquerades are only performed during Sande training periods if the same conditions apply. Poro circumcises young boys and initiates them into adulthood, just as Sande excises young girls and prepares them for their sexual maturity. Yet Poro leaders in Sierra Leone and Liberia often do not wear wooden masks, and in some cases do not even wear concealing costumes; the presence of the fearsome invisible spirit, the Great Thing, of Poro is thus made known through its voice alone" (182). The women's Sande society traditionally initiated Mende girls into womanhood by preparing them for marriage and family life and participation in religious rituals and teaching them the songs and dances they would have to perform. Similar to the boys' coming-of-age rites and ordeals, girls were excised. When they were deemed to be ready, the high-ranking teacher and leader (ndoli joweï) of the Sande society introduced them to the community as adult women. On this occasion, each ndoli joweï wore a voluminous raffia fiber costume and a wooden helmet mask that embodied soweï, the female water spirit which is the guardian deity of the Sande society. The masquerade presented 'the idealized image of female perfection and power and also personifies the corporate interest and prestige of the female portion of the Mende community' "(Walker 130).

7. "Usually, African women do not wear masks. Men wear the masks and men carve them. The Mende model of women wearing masks is a rare exception that is shared with peoples in southern Sierra Leone and western Liberia who are bound by the multiethnic men's Poro association of which Sande (also known as Bundu) is the counterpart" (130). "Wherever they are found, Sande society masks are always in the form of a helmet that fits closely over the wearer's head, and they depict a female wearing an elaborate hairstyle. The slits cut through the downcast eyes in a diamond-shaped face allow visibility. The eyes may also be placed along the edge of the mask. The small mouth can be closed or slightly open. The wide rings around the neck and holes along the edge are for attaching the raffia costume. Each of these elements is significant. The elaborate hairstyle, for example, is carefully detailed and reflects current fashion. Downcast eyes are associated with modesty and the nonhuman essence of the spirit that inhabits the mask. The wide rings on the neck are usually interpreted as rings of fat and signify fertility. Another interpretation is that the rings are the 'recognition of the natural and desirable pattern of biological growth in adolescent girls in preparation for childbearing that entails the increase in body fat- a pattern that is also well documented in Western medicine.' The mouth is closed or slightly open to signify silence and inner spiritual concentration. The lustrous black pigment or paint staining the mask is a reference to the river-dwelling spirit that inhabits the mask. Black, in the Mende language, means 'wet' or 'wetness' " (130).

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