Nyanga Circumcision Masks and Costumes

Nyanga plastic art is as yet an unknown entity in the many textbooks on African sculpture; it is almost completely absent from the great private and museum collections. An analysis of this art is important for the simple fact that the Nyanga belong to that large group of forest-dwelling, not widely known Bantu-speaking peoples (e.g., Komo, Pere, Lengola, Mbole, Yela, Mitoko), who live between the well-known artistic regions of the Lega-Bembe in the south, and the Bwa-Mangbetu-Zande in the northeast of the Zaire Republic. They are surrounded by a number of Bantu-speaking groups of different origins and culture: offshoots of the Nande (Kongo) in the northeast, of the Komo and Pere in the north and west, of the Lega, Kanu, Konjo and Tembo in the southwest, of the Hunde in the south and east. Remote common origins with some segments of these groups, and prolonged extensive contacts and cultural exchanges with other segments, result in many cultural similarities and overlappings in this area. Overall Pygmy influences are also strongly present throughout the region, but few Pygmies survive as autonomous groups.

Primarily trappers, hunters, food-gatherers and banana-growers in outlook, the Nyanga live in small scattered villages and hamlets. These villages are each inhabited by a number of segments of different descent-groups. These center around a patrilineal core but constantly incorporate the descendants of unmarried spirit-married female members of the group. The segments of different kinship origin cluster more or less temporarily together in the villages around a core landowning and founding group, in virtue of cognatic, remote agnatic, and political and affinal ties. Several such villages and their dependent hamlets are organized into small kingdoms, headed by kings who are recruited in royal descent groups and who have all the attributes of divine kings. Several such autonomous kingdoms may entertain close spiritual and other bonds because of the common traceable kinship origins of their kings. Segments of common kinship origin are invariably scattered through several kingdoms, thus enhancing the ties that interconnect the subjects of different kingdoms. The Nyanga society is characterized by ancestral cult practices at various levels (the ancestors of the kings, of the village, of the descent group and its segments, of the individual person) and have numerous cults centered around a small pantheon of divinities that is headed by the God of Fire (Nyamuraiti). In addition to the extremely important circumcision rites, which are universally practiced by all Nyanga, there are numerous voluntary associations (Mumbira, Mpandi, Mbutu, etc.) and corporations (e.g., Elephant Hunters).

Circumcision rites for young men (mukumo) are celebrated by all Nyanga, intermittently, at irregular intervals, and at unspecified periods of the year. The celebration of these rites is conditioned by several factors. They may be organized as a sequel to the enthronement rites of a new king, as the result of misfortune affecting the well-being of the people as a whole (famine), or they may be imposed by oracles consulted by the circumcisors in order to cope with death and disease bestowed upon them and their kin by their ancestors due to neglect of appropriate sacrifices. The ultimate authorization to hold the initiations resides in each kingdom with the king and his council. In Nyanga society, there are a limited number of villages that have the right to inaugurate the first circumcision. In some instances there is one such village per kingdom; in other cases there is one such village for several kingdoms whose chiefs are interrelated. Following is a complex example of the latter kind.

The first circumcision takes place in the village Busumbura of the Bana...
bitondo, who are of remote Komo origin. The Bamamukiti of the village of Rimangi take one of their young men to Busumbura to be circumcised in that lodge, then return with him to their own village to proceed with the circumcision of their other boys and to erect their own lodge. The people of the village of Rimbungu take one of their young men to Rimangi, then return with him to their own group. In this instance, there is a fixed sequence whereby six more villages depend on each other for initiating their own rites. Several such closed cycles co-exist in Nyangaland, and function parallel to each other. Each group that has the initial right of circumcision (kitumbo) is said to be a grass roots village through which the circumcision rites entered a particular portion of Nyangaland. This system has significant integrative functions that cut across autonomous descent groups, villages, and kingdoms. It derives from the fact that the Nyanga think that their particular circumcision rites were introduced via groups in direct contact with the Lega or the Komo. The general opinion among the Nyanga and many Lega groups is that the ultimate origins of their particular circumcision rites are among the Komo. All young men are eligible for circumcision, except for the king and king-elect designate who are circumcised only in exceptional circumstances among some Nyanga kingdoms. Women who come in contact with the initiates in the forest are symbolically circumcised. Young men are circumcised when they fall in the age categories of baqu, adolescents, and misike, young men—somewhat between the ages of fourteen and twenty, or older. There are cases where men have not been circumcised until after marriage. The Nyanga state explicitly that age and size are not the decisive criteria, but rather the "wisdom of the father" who must know the readiness, the degree of intelligence, the character, the caliber, and the maturity of his son so that he may successfully go through the trials and pains of the circumcision.

The actual duration of the circumcision rites is somewhat longer than three months. Some of this time is taken up by preparations (mock circumcision from which the young men to be circumcised are excluded, selection of office holders, selection of sites and building of lodge and other facilities, accumulation of food supplies) and by the final rites in the villages. But fully three months are taken up by life in seclusion away from the villages. The actual circumcision, first of mubanjá, the first of a particular village to be circumcised, and a few days later of the other young men of that village, takes place in a clearing of the forest, called mpuko, which is in easy distance from the village. Immediately following the operation, the initiates are led, one at a time, to the site of seclusion (mpunjá), close to the mpuko in a level spot near a river or brook. Each village and each hamlet has the right to prepare such a site, even if it has only one or two initiates. The seclusion site is fenced in with two entrances and two trails, right and left, leading to it. It includes the house of the Father-of-the-initiates (shëba-tendë) and the long house of the initiates (batende). The site is symbolically divided into two halves by a partial, very low fence, called the "mound of Kabiri". After two months, when the young men are completely healed and after they have undergone a number of rituals and performed some tasks, they move to a new site in the neighborhood which is also called munjá and which is built in the same way as the first site. The ceremonies connected with the return to the village take several days and are divided into two stages: temporary returns and the permanent reintegration. The early routine in the lodge is restricted to intensive care of the wounds, morning and evening ablutions in the river, feeding (the initiates are fed by their tutors; they cannot touch the food or the plates with their hands), learning of principles of conduct, observation of many prescriptions, story-telling and recitation of proverbs, riddles, etc. This early routine is interrupted only by some special ceremonies. As time goes by, the young men get heavily involved in forest activities, primarily trapping, and gathering and preparing of raphia and bark.

During the entire period of seclusion, the young men are not supposed to be seen or heard by women and uncircumcised men. In their forest activities, they must stay out of sight, and for this purpose they and their tutors use signaling sticks (biririo) to alert people about their presence and to communicate. Food is brought in several times a day by the tutors (bikundi) of the initiates. There is also visiting by the fathers of the initiates and by other circumcised relatives.

For our purposes, it is important to realize that there are many phases in the initiation process, and that various social personalities are involved in the circumcision rites. Among these phases it is relevant to single out the mock circumcision, the circumcision of the first initiate, the circumcision of the other initiates, and in both cases, the return of the circumcisor to the village, the forest activities of the initiates, their temporary and then their final return to the village. On these different occasions, masks, hoods and/or special costumes are worn by different participants in the rites.

Among the diverse categories of social personalities involved with the rites, the following must be identified: 1. The circumcisor (kitumbo). He leads the young men from the village into the forest and performs the actual operation. This is an inherited position and only few groups or villages in each kingdom have their own kitumbo. As the closed cycle of initiation sequences, mentioned above, proceeds, the circumcisors available in the different villages that fall within the cycle travel.
together from village to village with the first initiate of that village to perform the other operations. Thus, whereas at the beginning of the cycle only one circumcisor may be performing, there are several circumcisors together in the last village of the cycle (Fig. 10). Among circumcisors of one cycle, there prevails a fairly loosely structured hierarchy which is based on their seniority in the office and on the relative position of their group in the sequence of the cycle.

2. The Father-of-the-initiates (Shébatende). (Fig. 8). This is not an inherited position. Usually a group will select a person who has already served in this role. If such a person is not available, the option is for one "who is outstanding because of his intelligence". The Father-of-the-initiates is the true guardian of the lodge. He is the first to arrive there, before the actual circumcision takes place, and the last to leave, when he burns the lodge at the end of the rites. During the entire period, he cannot return to the village or have contact with women. He is the supreme authority of the lodge, who directs and organizes all activities.

3. Ihipa is the aide of the Father-of-the-initiates. This is not an inherited position, but one which must be filled by a man of poise and intelligence. He must return to the village late every night, and come back to the lodge very early every morning. He closes and opens the gates to the lodge, and cooperates with the Father-of-the-initiates in the organization of all other activities.

4. Tutors (bikuni), are circumcised relatives of the initiates who assist the three previously mentioned office-holders during the actual operations (Fig. 5). Their main tasks are to fetch food in the village, feed the initiates, take the washed dishes back to the village, help the initiates with their two daily ablutions, accompany them in their forest expeditions, and advise them. They also wield the power to flog the initiates should they disobey orders (e.g. refusal to bathe).

5. The first initiate (mubánjá) of a village can be a person so designated by the king among his dependents, or the son of a circumcisor, or any other young man proposed as such by his father and accepted by the group. Mubánjá is the first of the initiates of a particular group to be circumcised, a few days before the others undergo the operation. Because of the cyclic nature of the rites, he is circumcised at the circumcision site of that village on which his own group depends for the organization of its own rites.

6. The initiates (batende) comprise a varying, but generally small, number of young men who are circumcised and initiated together in one village or hamlet. The initiates are subject to many prescriptions; they must stay out of sight of the non-circumcised, and in general, not refuse anything that is asked by the tutors and the other office-holders. The initiate finds himself in the lodge as if "he had been thrown by his father in the midst of thorns," hated by his father, beaten by "an astoundingly heavy rain," and "held by the teeth of the leopard." On the other hand, those who are in charge of the rites care very much about his prompt and complete recovery. Most of the greetings aim at wishing him this recovery and a safe return (buahoro). Death of an initiate in the lodge is a major disaster which involves painstaking procedures.

7. Nyabatende is the mother of the initiate. She cooks daily for her son and remits the food to the tutors. She cannot see or speak with her son until the reintegration rites are over.

8. The group of musicians and singers, all of them circumcised men, includes the drummers, the singers who also shake calabash rattles (Fig. 12), the expert percussionists (bakubite bě nukumo) (Fig. 11) who play the seven to eight percussion and signaling sticks, the singer on the kazoo-like reed, and the person who handles the bull-roarer.

A considerable number of material objects are used in the course of the rites. Some of these, such as wooden and woven plates, drums, anklet bells,
of a shiny and flat, well-covered ovoidal piece of way or karénga wood, which is fixed to a carrying rope for swirling. This also is a most sacred instrument which cannot be seen by the non-initiates.

Nkúrónýó, Mokentsere and Biríó, are different names for sticks of about four feet in length which are beaten with a small stick (kisándí) as signaling devices by the Father-of-the-initiates, the tutors, and the initiates themselves. For example, the initiates are awakened every morning by means of the mukentsere stick. The initiates themselves beat the biríó when they travel in the forest, to inform the office-holders about their movements and to warn the non-initiates to stay out of sight. The tutors converse, at a distance, on the nkúrónýó sticks with the mothers of the initiates.

2. Fiber and leaf costumes, masks and hoods are worn by different office-holders, by the initiates themselves, and by the villagers. They will be studied in the next section.

3. Other objects, the most important of which are:

- The circumcision tools, including a small blunt copper knife, a small sharp knife for the actual operation (kabasí) and a karóo-like reed (kabírí). They are kept in the hide of a potto (kimpumbí) on the chest of the circumcisor. The potto symbolizes the great diviner and medicine man.

- The adz (mabasi), eventually adorned with feathers and white dots, is held by the circumcisor in the right hand.

- The nkóma ya bukikiti, a small stick which is topped by feathers from the neck of a sacrificed chicken and held by the circumcisor or his aide.

- The nkóma ya kábirí stick, which is made of light parasol wood with burnt designs and held by the initiates.

In addition to these objects, other items of great significance in the rites are usuá-leaves used as dressings, mosses to collect the blood, bunches of soil symbolizing packages of meat, ishórós-snares, pieces of dry firewood, ripped dry banana leaves, biréréré and miobórotú leaves.

Different types of masks, hoods and costumes are worn at different stages of the circumcision rite by different persons directly or indirectly involved.

Nyanga circumcisors wear a standardized costume and mask which covers the entire body (Figs. 6, 7, 9, 10). The costume of raphia fibers consists of different sections, each of them made of strands of raphia hanging like large collarettes from a string. The general name for these is mimpuí. There are eight of them, fixed around the body by means of the strings in the following sequence of dressing: one around the waist, one around the chest, two slung across the chest so as to also cover the shoulders and upper arms, two around the neck, two around the chest, one around the legs. Around each forearm the circumcisor wears two large tufts of raphia (ndorera) fixed around plaited armllets. Underneath this costume, he wears a loin-

Continued on page 86