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ISINYAGO and MIDIMU

Masked Dancers of Tanzania and Mozambique

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This article sets out to discuss masks and masked dancers, to explore their meaning and significance to the people who use them. The area of my research covers the present administrative region of Mtwara in southeast Tanzania, from the Lukuledi river in the north to the Ruvuma river on the Mozambique border in the south, the Tunduru district, and includes the adjacent part of Mozambique. The discussion applies to many tribes occupying this zone but my experience is drawn from the Makua and Yao, and both the Tanzanian and Mozambican Makonde. The Mozambican Makonde were referred to as Mavia, Mawia, Maviha, etc. in old literature found in Tanzania. The old names were used by Tanzanians against the wishes of the Mozambican Makonde themselves. They call themselves Makonde and all known Portuguese records refer to them thus. The Tanzanian Makonde live mainly in the districts of Newala and Mtwara and parts of Lindi.

Historically all the tribes in this zone originate in the south and central western part of Mozambique, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Their movement into the present area of settlement was in a series of waves extending probably from well over 300 years ago to the present. In some cases a group pushed another or overtook it. The movement still continues, though to an insignificant degree.

This zone has a rainfall averaging between 30 and 40 inches per year, falling between November and May. On the Makonde Plateau, and along the Indian Ocean coast, the natural vegetation is tropical and subtropical forest. The rest of the zone is wooded grassland characterized by granitic rock outcrop hills on a gently rolling plain. The inhabitants are primarily agricultural grain cultivators, growing maize, millet, legumes, cashewnuts, and a variety of seasonal crops. Some of them raise a few goats and sheep, and fowl are not uncommon. In remote areas of the Ruvuma basin, fishing and hunting still form an important part of the people's occupation.

In such an environment, the year is markedly divided into two equal seasons — wet and dry. During the wet season people are busy in the fields and can spare very little or no time at all for non-agricultural activities. But the

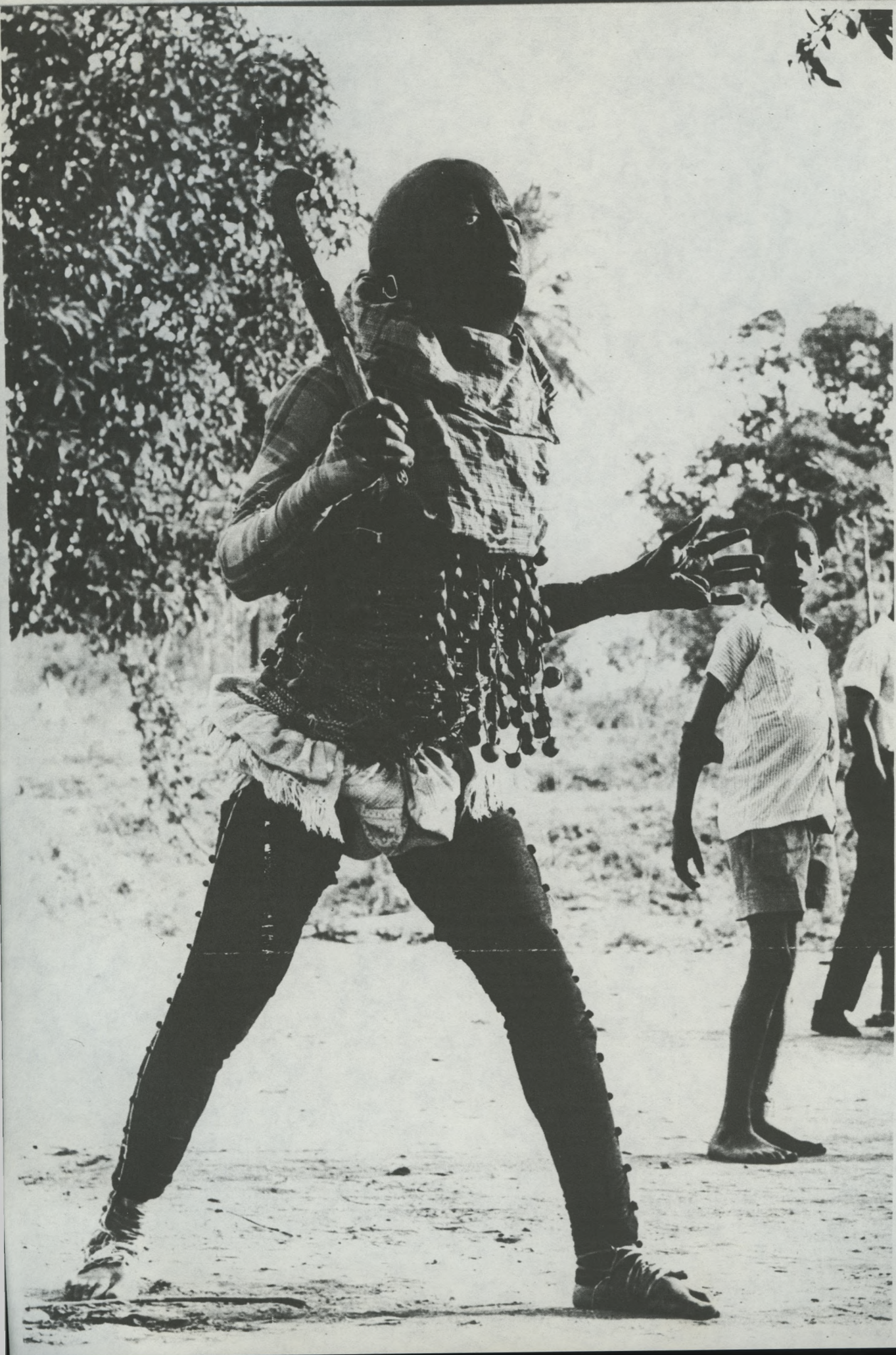
dry season (June to October), offers them ample time for extra activities: rituals and ceremonies, dances and feasts, and various works of art and crafts. It is only during this season that one may see masks and masked dancers performing.

I define a mask as any covering or disguise worn with the intention of transforming the wearer, making him a spirit of whatever being he is representing or symbolizing, rather than just a face cover or disguise used in ordinary modern dances or drama, or a curio. There are two major groups of masks in the area in question. The face covers which are common in central and West Africa and other parts of the world, should be called by their proper name; *midimu* (plural) and *n'dimu* (singular). The second type are the body covers which seem to be exclusive to this part of Africa. These are called *Isinyago* (Makua) and *Inyago* (Yao).

Isinyago, the masked dancers and the dance, are common among the Yao and Makua. No trace of such masks has been found among the Makonde so far. *Isinyago* means something near to "mysterious animals," spirits of animals, beasts caught from the bush. The dance takes place on a dark night between quarter and half moon. The idea is to conceal from the women and the uninitiated boys and girls the details of the structure of the animal, but at the same time to let them see and recognize the general form of the beast. *Isinyago* are animals made of elaborate bamboo work thatched with grass and covered with rags. Inside this structure hide human dancers who give the beast the power to dance. Small beasts whose size cannot allow a man to go into them are operated like puppets.

Most of the beasts depicted are known animals: the elephant, the pig, the monkey, etc. But there are two which do not directly represent any known animal. These are *Kipalamoto* or *Chipalamoto* (Makua) and *Nteepana* (Yao). *Chipalamoto* crudely means "fire carrier." In reality he is a brave young man on whose body are cleverly tied numerous glowing bark strings. In the dark these form a mass of fire. The dance consists of moving about and round and round the dancing ring, causing the fire to

MOZAMBICAN MAKONDE HELMET MASKED DANCER





MOZAMBICAN MAKONDE HELMET MASKED DANCER

glow brightly. *Chipalamoto* does not dance for a long time; the reason is obvious. This is the most dangerous of all the *Isinyago* but it is also the most thrilling and exciting, and the performer is always greeted with applause by the audience. Perhaps *Chipalamoto* is a man-beast.

Nteepana is supposed to be a mysterious tall creature, probably a kind of evil spirit. It is made of a series of many bamboo coils expertly joined together, one on top of the other, in such a way that they can be made to expand and contract. The outside is covered with rags. The dancer takes his place inside the monster to manipulate the coils rhythmically, causing them to stretch high and contract low and to swing from side to side as desired. The whole structure looks like a huge caterpillar that is struggling to climb into the air on a windy day.

The influence of modernization has attracted the makers of *Isinyago* to include in their shows bicycles, motorcars, aeroplanes, etc. as well as colonial agents like the district commissioner and the tax clerk. But even these are all invariably classified as beasts, that is *Isinyago*!

The preparations for *Isinyago* begin some days before the actual day of performance. The animals are made in the bush preferably in an area where there is plenty of bamboo and grass.

When the makers are satisfied with their work, they prepare a square near the village or homestead where the performance will take place. This square is joined to the actual village square by a clean stump-free "road." This is important. Dancing during a dark night and dressed in

their masks, the dancers cannot see their way. Their path must be clear to avoid calamities.

When night falls *Isinyago* are moved onto this temporary square and from there they go one at a time to the dancing square to perform. After the dance all the animals return to *udambue*, their original hiding place in the bush. They can be used again in the few days that follow, depending on how strongly they were built; then they are destroyed, normally by fire, to prevent inquisitive women and uninitiated children from tracing the hideout and discovering the truth.

Each beast is sponsored by an individual who is the principal artist in its design and director of its construction. An individual can sponsor as many beasts as he chooses, depending on the time and assistance he has in making them. These beasts are normally more than life size in structure; they demand considerable time and labour to accomplish.

Before *Isinyago* comes into the dancing ring to perform, the sponsor, if he is not himself inside the beast, will introduce his animal very elaborately. If he is inside the beast, somebody else will do it on his behalf. Silence is called for by repeatedly shouting: *Machete! Machete! Machete! Macheteeee!* (*Machete* seems to be a corrupted form of *Veechete?* [Yao] meaning: Do I speak?). The audience responds: *Eeeee!* and settles back to listen. After a well calculated pause, the announcer continues, pausing systematically for the audience to register with: *Eeeee!* This is what he says:

Chinyamaacho, kutalika kuchityosile!

The beast that came from far away!

Chityosile Kumagumuchila!

It came from Magumuchila!

Ni chijeesileee, Namaunyajo galava!

And it has walked a long way, then it crossed Namauya!

Chituumbi chi Che Sokolecho ndaa!

(And) up Sokole's hill!

N'nakalalamo seleleleee!

(Then) descended into Nakalala!

Katuumbiko ndaa!

(And) up the small hill!

Namiungojo galava!

(And) down across the Namiungo!

Kiva Akambwiliko ndaa!

(And) went up to Kambwili's homestead!

Chinyamaacho chaacheni?

Whose beast is it?

Che Marko Meza!

Mr. Marko Meza! (shout the sponsors).

The announcer has explained poetically how the beast was obtained. He tells of how the beast has travelled up hills and down valleys to make the process of getting it sound very difficult. He mentions as the actual source of the beast a complicated place like Magumuchila, which is believed by the people of this particular area to be a home of spirits. This enhances the fact that the beast is a real spirit. He deliberately mentions the sponsor's homestead and his name to elevate him before the audience—he is adult enough to be able even to manage spirit beasts single-handed. Young men take this opportunity to impress the girls and win their love.

Once the name of the beast's sponsor is announced, there is general applause from the audience, a welcoming

tumult, women and girls ululate; the particular song for that beast begins and the drummers catch up. The beast, intoxicated with the rhythm of its song, enters the ring dancing. The songs mention their respective animals and say how good or bad they are to society. The gigantic *nteezana* is accused of being a men-eater; the tax-collector is asked not to register the young men as taxpayers because they are still in school; the district commissioner is asked to explain why he is fond of eggs yet he does not keep his own fowls; the pig is noted for stealing cassava from the people's fields, etc.

The rhythm is controlled by five drummers, one rattle player and two pairs of principal singers. The sponsors of the beasts and the audience join in in the chorus and the handclap to add to the rhythm. The *Isinyago* moves from one part of the dancing circle to another, round and round the middle, forwards and backwards. The audience is charged with the responsibility to shout at it whenever it comes near them. Immediately the *Isinyago* hears the shouts from the audience, it retreats. Apparently, this is because the dancer or dancers cannot see how near they are to the audience and if left unwarned, can very easily walk into the audience revealing the real *Isinyago*! The audience's noise also prevents it from hearing the grass noise from the dancing beast.

With the second group of masks, *midimu*, four types can be distinguished on the basis of sculpture of the face covers and the costume. There is the facial type covering just the face or part of it; the helmet type covering the

entire head; and two (now rare) types: the bed-dolls and the female mask. This classification is of course arbitrary. The bed-dolls, facial, and female masks are used among all these tribes except the Mozambican Makonde who exclusively use the helmet type.

The bed-dolls are about a meter and a half in height. They are a naked pair of figural sculptures representing man and wife. The two figures are fixed on a bed which is covered with cloth. Under the bed lies a man who manipulates them in time to the rhythm. The climax of their performance is to demonstrate the act of coitus. Their proper name is *midimu cho vankorini* (Makua), bed masks.

The female mask combines the facial cover with a bust and abdominal covering that depicts a young pregnant woman. This *n'dimu* is called *Amwalindembo*, young pregnant woman. Her dance is generally sluggish and she is accompanied by a male masked dancer. Her performance demonstrates the agonies of pregnancy and she displays the belly prominently.

The Mozambican Makonde, called *n'dimu* or *lipiku*, are perhaps the most particular or conservative as to costume and form of dance. The helmet mask is worn at an angle, slanting backwards to allow air circulation through the neck end of the mask, the mouth, eyes and of course the nostrils. The dancer performs for almost half a day and precautions against suffocation are important. He wears a tightly fitting costume of long trousers and long sleeved shirt. Over this he wears a net-like tunic made from strings, and small bells over the tunic. His helmet mask





TANZANIAN MAKONDE N'DIMU. NKAADYA, WITH UNCOVERED MOUTH

has cloth stitched to its bottom which is left to fall loosely over the shoulders.

Among the Tanzanian Makonde facial masks are common. They can be divided into two categories: the stilt and non-stilt. The stilt masked dancers, *midimu ya muha*, have become more than a Makonde tribal identity in East Africa. They share some characteristics with their counterparts, the Mozambican Makonde, in costume and dance form. The facial cover, which is normally smaller than the face, is worn on the forehead. The cloth to which it is attached covers the rest of the wearer's head and neck. The wearer breathes and looks freely through the cloth. He dresses in a shirt or a shirt-like cloth with his arms normally covered with rags, and a loin cloth which is crudely turned into a trousers-like thing extending below the stilt-leg joints.

The non-stilt *midimu* among the Tanzanian Makonde show no trace of uniformity in costume. This may be because they are all representational and each costume depicts a particular person or animal. There is, for example, the *Lingoti*, which appears to depict an old man. He wears rags in the form of a robe onto which hang small bells and rattles made from mango cores and snail shells.

His facial cover has grey all over it—the head, beard, and moustache. He normally carries a walking stick and a tobacco animal-skin pouch typical of old folks. *Nkaadya* personifies a gluttonous man. The face cover is without a chin to give him freedom to eat during performance. The rest of the body does not have any particular form of dress.

A typical non-stilt *n'dimu* from the Makua or Yao tribe wears his face cover straight on the face. It is made to measure and therefore covers the rest of the head as far down as the neck. Most of the back part of the head is covered by a reed hat decorated with large feathers. The body can be covered by a shirt or similar cloth cover as far as the hands. On his legs are either rattles called *maseve* (Makua and Yao) or small bells. Traditionally the dancer was supposed to be completely sealed off by his costume to avoid public recognition of his person.

Further, these *midimu* can carry something in their hands—a fly-whisk, a spear, club, a bow and arrows, an axe, etc. These may act as extended arms to accentuate the effect of the movements in the dance; they may be visual aids used for direct dramatization, or just symbols to enhance the personality represented by the dancer.

Isinyago, the bed-doll masks, the female masked dancer, *Lingoti*, and *Nkaadya* are typical cases of representational dances where the dance, music, costume, and sculpture are all directly or otherwise designed to portray the respective characters personified. The female and bed-doll masked dancers may also be classified as specialized actors. Their performances show certain aspects of community life but do not necessarily represent any one particular person. The Tanzanian Makonde stilt masked dancer and the common Makua and Yao masked dancer are primarily actors specializing in demonstrating a variety of aspects of community life. Their shows usually dramatize life in a subsistence economy: the hazards of honey collection, hunting, clearing a new farm, the cunningness of doctoring, courting a girl, witchcraft and cowardice, the impudence of the unfaithful wife and husband, etc. The dancer does not need to change costume, he only adds the necessary visual aids. Each demonstration is a scene in the entire drama; it carries its own song and rhythm.

The Mozambican Makonde masked dancer is a typical case of high class dramatization, though movements in the dances of different songs hardly vary. In fact there is a temptation to make a sweeping observation that *mapiku*, the *lipiku* dance, is unvaried throughout and is therefore a performance of a particular image dance. This tendency towards sameness in the dance is found in all performances, at all times and in all sections of the tribe. This makes the *lipiku* unique among the *midimu*. The uniformity of the movement, costume, music and similar aspects of the dance is in a way conservatism but it gives it some sort of ethnic identity. Nevertheless, close observation of the dance movement and the music reveals that there are variations in both movement and rhythm. The whole dance is so highly sophisticated in its own terms and the dramatization is so abstract that it takes an initiate to be able to follow and appreciate it. There is an assertion among some writers on Makonde sculpture, especially the masks, that some of the masks are caricatures of Cauca

soid and Mongoloid peoples. Tradition has it that the sculptural part of the Mozambican Makonde mask was destroyed every three years for fear that cracks and general wear and tear would expose the wood origin to the public. The wood out of which masks were carved was very light and soft—assuming the present type of wood was used in the past. Such wood could not, under traditional conditions, keep for centuries. There is therefore no way to compare the pre and post Euro-Asiatic contact works, in order to establish beyond doubt that what is called caricature today is not in fact part of the original style, a natural artistic development. Anyway, art, like the culture of which it is a part, changes with the mode of life and social values, and the coming of foreigners certainly had influence on Makonde art. What is suggested is that this influence was sculptural, i.e., it affected only the face cover. Even if this is true, the sculptural part alone does not make a mask (in the true sense of the word) Caucasoid or Mongoloid. It needs something more than that — the incorporation of the costume, the music, the dance and the function. To the best of my knowledge these other parts of the mask have remained Makonde and for that matter Negroid!

There is one area of study which could throw some light on the ethno-history of the area if pursued. This is the linguistic aspect of the songs of these dances. Whereas the dancers of both *isinyago* and *midimu* are from all tribes, and organization of sponsoring groups is on a tribal basis, the former tend to be predominantly Yao and the latter

have a strong Makonde influence. All the *isinyago* songs are in Yao and all the *midimu* songs are in Makonde irrespective of who organizes them. I have not studied the songs and for that reason I am reluctant to suggest that these linguistic influences indicate origin of the masks and their dances in the two tribes.

Masked dancing is a communal concern. Several households and whole villages band together to sponsor one or even several masks. Each masked dancer is flanked by the sponsors who sing and drum for him. Usually there are five drummers each controlling a drum and two pairs of singers. The rest of the crowd including women and uninitiated boys and girls from the group's villages form the chorus. They also top up the rhythm by clapping their hands.

In all cases tradition emphasized the secrecy of the masked dancer. In fact it is recorded that long long ago women and uninitiated boys and girls were not allowed into the inner circle during performance. This was to keep them from coming near the dancer lest they detect the human inside. When the days for performances approached, the dancer would tell his relatives that he was going on a long journey and he would not be back until after the initiation rites were through. He would give reasonable excuses supported by the elders of society. Then he would stay at the boys' initiation camp for training or just to keep himself away from society. He would return home several days after the performances were over. This strengthened the belief that masked dancers



were real spirits. The sponsors would talk of going to a distant ancestor's grave to catch the spirit. Today, however, masked dancing has been commercialized in certain quarters and has become part of regular entertainment due to changes in the people's way of life.

Having examined the masks and masked dancers in detail, it is imperative to look at their meaning and significance in the context of the societies of the area under review, in order to arrive at some conclusions.

Midimu dances take place during the rites of boys and girls coming out from their respective initiation camps. The initiations take place during a dry season when there has been a good crop, enough children of the right age to be initiated, and freedom from epidemics and calamities in the chiefdom. The boys' initiation includes circumcision and a seclusion period during which they stay in a camp, *Nmera* (Makua), for from several months to some years. The girls are also secluded and stay in a camp, *Chiputu* (Makua), for up to six months. Their initiation involves the manipulation of parts of the labia minora to draw them out. In both cases it was the formal precondition for their admission into society as adults. Boys and girls would come out of initiation camps on the same day. For three consecutive days there would be joy, feasting and dancing. The dominant dance is *Midimu*, the Spirit dance of the masked dancers.

Dancing begins late in the morning at the central dancing square at the chief's place. This is where the new members of society assemble after leaving their respective camps. They are dressed in new clothes and enjoy the greatest attention. When the chief or the clan leader responsible for the initiations completes the necessary traditional activities with the initiates, he hands them back to their parents and allows each parent to take the children home. At this stage the *midimu* sponsors disperse into their respective groups to follow the new members of society. They make systematic rounds to every home where there is an initiate and dance there for some time before moving to another. By evening they retire to their homes. During the two days that follow either they repeat performances at the same homes or go to new places. The members of the family that has initiated a boy or girl give gifts to the dancers: foodstuffs, fowls and in certain cases money. These articles are shared among the members of the team. After the prescribed three days of ritual and celebrations *midimu* disappear only to reappear during another initiation season which could be in three or more years time.

It is obvious that *midimu* are essentially pieces of art: part and parcel of the initiation rituals of transition for boys and girls; a tool for the demonstration of the social importance which society attaches to the changes of status among its members; the justification of the rigorous activities they underwent in camp; a social get-together to rejoice with the initiating parents; a theatrical entertainment and a form of social organization.

They are pieces of art in that the bamboo and grass structures forming the beasts in *isinyago*, the carved doll, the face or abdomen cover, the dance, the music and the costume, are but reproductions of artists' perceptions of the costumes, values, ideas and beliefs of their society. Sculpture, choreography, costume design, music composition, etc. are all forms of creativity. They are art. What is more the atmosphere in which *midimu* appear—dancing

to the accompaniment of singing, drumming and hand clapping spiced by ululation, is typical traditional theatre.

Midimu in their strict traditional context perform only at these occasions. The smooth working of any social system depends on each member of society knowing and accepting his respective role and position in it. The form in which *midimu* appear is mystical. But at the same time they reveal that initiated men have power to control these mysteries. *Midimu* in this case are visual aids to teach society the proper place of men and women, the uninitiated and the initiated. Adult men have fellowship with mysterious beings, spirits; women and the uninitiated do not. It gives courage to the new male initiate and causes girls, women and the uninitiated to realize how much they do not know, how much they lack power, how much men surpass them — it helps them to accept their position in society. For that reason, *midimu* contribute towards character building, consciousness of position and the duties and responsibilities such positions carry. They are a means of teaching good citizenship and intensifying the bonds of social organization.

Most of traditional teaching is not accompanied by empirical reasoning to support it or justify its claims in society. Normally it is wrapped in taboos or justified by some authority simply saying such things have been in practice for generations. No justification can be offered, for example, for boys to be circumcised apart from it being a practice of generations. But it seems to me that the bringing in of *midimu* on the last three days of initiation is a kind of invitation to the various spirits to witness this important occasion. It is this fellowship with the spirits that tends to bear open witness to the significance of the institution of initiation. Its acceptance by the spirits creates an atmosphere of genuineness, cements its secrets and elevates its importance and essentiality.

And *midimu* bring out the religious part of the ritual. In the institution of initiation, the fellowship with creatures of the other world, the after death world. The initiates are made aware that the dead ancestors, too, care for their general development, that they are concerned over their affairs. This is why they come all the way from the dead to rejoice on the occasion of the initiates' return from the camp where they successfully underwent training that will enable them to fit into society. The spirits are not very far from the earth, they can come and share world activities with the quick, they are within reach. Indeed there is a perpetual solidarity between the quick and the dead.

That *midimu* is also a form of entertainment is evident. It is the assembling of people to join in a joyful theatrical performance. In fact it is a typical open air traditional theatre in which the performers keep the audience engaged in the actual creation of entertainment for all.

Midimu constitute a social activity that calls for all members of the family and neighbours to participate and contribute. They give gifts to dancers and take part in the ceremonies to assure the success of this homecoming ceremony of the new initiates. *Midimu* forge a social gathering to help one family to succeed in one of the essential duties to society: to admit the new generation into membership of adulthood, that they may perpetuate the social norms and values which are part and parcel of their society, handed down the generations in this manner from time immemorial.