

# Benin and British Heritage:

A Learning and Engagement  
Project



2014 - 2016

# Rituals & Traditions in Benin & Britain

## Masks – their purpose and importance

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# Why do people wear and use masks?

- To celebrate
- To transform
- To conceal
- To scare
- To shock
- To disguise

Have you ever worn a mask? On what occasions and why?

# African Masks



# Symbols and meanings

The antelope is a symbol of cultivation and success in agriculture.

Although worn by men, Bamana masks have genders.

The number of spikes or horns on a mask indicates if it is masculine (3, 6 or 9 spikes), feminine (4 or 8) or cross-gender (2, 5 or 7).



Carved wooden mask  
Bamana people, Mali,  
West Africa  
Early 20<sup>th</sup> century



Carved wooden headdress  
Decorated with seeds  
Afo people, Northern  
Nigeria  
20<sup>th</sup> century

A chameleon rests on a cockerel's comb. The chameleon is an important symbol, which can mean many things.

The chameleon can bring long life or death, abundance or infertility, depending on its colour.

The cockerel is a messenger of God and symbolises fertility.

# Masquerade

A masquerade is any occasion where masks are worn. Masquerade ceremonies protect and give good fortune to communities, commemorate ancestors and bring prosperity.

Task:

What are the similarities between these masks in their form and material?

What are the differences? How might they be worn?





# Materials

Examine these 2 masks from different regions of Africa.

Identify all the different materials they are made from.

What different processes have been used to create these masks?

How would it feel to wear each of these masks? Imagine the weight and sound.



The 2 masks are made of a variety of materials, including seeds, vegetable fibres, skins and wood.



What effect using natural materials have on the texture and the colour?

Mask (kifwebe) Songye people, Democratic Republic of Congo  
19<sup>th</sup> Century

Masks of vegetable fibre, hair and red abrus seeds  
Angas people, Northern Nigeria  
Mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century



# Masks for display

Read the captions.

What suggests that these masks were not made to be worn?

Who do you think they depict/meant to be?

Man or women?

High or low status?

Why do you think this?

So how do you think they might have been used?



Helmet mask for the  
Ododua ritual  
Made of brass  
Edo peoples, Benin,  
Nigeria  
18<sup>th</sup> Century  
Height 33cm



Ivory mask  
Edo peoples, Benin,  
Nigeria  
16<sup>th</sup> Century  
Height 24cm

# European Masks



# Venetian Masks

The carnival of Venice is an annual festival, held in Venice, Italy. The Carnival ends with the Christian celebration of Lent, forty days before Easter on Shrove Tuesday (Fat Tuesday or Mardi Gras), the day before Ash Wednesday. The festival is famed for its elaborate masks.

Masks have always been an important feature of the Venetian carnival. Traditionally people were allowed to wear them between the festival of Santo Stefano (St. Stephen's Day, December 26) and the start of the carnival season at midnight of Shrove Tuesday. As masks were also allowed on Ascension and from October 5 to Christmas, people could spend a large portion of the year in disguise. Mask makers (mascherari) enjoyed a special position in society, with their own laws and their own guild.

Venetian masks can be made of leather, porcelain or using the original glass technique. The original masks were rather simple in design, decoration, and often had a symbolic and practical function. Nowadays, most of them are made with the application of gesso and gold leaf and are all hand-painted using natural feathers and gems to decorate.





# Questions to consider when looking at masks.....

- How old do you think it is?
- What does it appear to be made from?
- How do you think it was made?
- How do you think it was used? What was it for?
- Who or what sort of person do you think may have used it?
- What does it tell you about the culture it comes from?