

## Idealized Perfection and Comical Damage: West African Helmet Masks and Responses to Active Matter

Kristin Otto



**Fig. 1** Vai *zogbe* mask, unknown maker, and donated by Prince Momolu Massaquoi in the late nineteenth century. 17/160, American Museum of Natural History, Division of Anthropology, New York City. Photo: Kristin Otto, courtesy the American Museum of Natural History.



**Fig. 2** Mende *gonde* mask, unknown maker, in a private collection, New York City. Photo: Kristin Otto, courtesy the owner.

Although united by the stylistic similarities of helmet style, diamond-shaped face, small features, and coiffure, when viewed side by side these two masks seem to be polar opposites of an aesthetic spectrum (figs. 1 and 2). The visual and material opposition is intentional. The masks are key elements of two distinct masquerade figures performed by Indigenous women's societies in the modern-day West African countries of Sierra Leone and Liberia. The masks—and the performative traditions that they originate from—also materialize moments in ongoing processes of care, repair, and conservation. This continuum of care extends from the Indigenous cultural and ecological contexts of creation and performance to the two New York City collections within which they now reside.

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When encountering material culture in the controlled spaces of Western collections, visualizing active matter and the broad relational connections created through it can be challenging. Recent studies of repair and material culture demonstrate how tracing repair materials and techniques reveals human responses to, and relationships with, objects.<sup>1</sup> In the case of objects originating from dynamic contexts of Indigenous use and performance that are now found in Western collections and institutions, studying repair provides a means of reaching beyond the immediate experience to trace the assemblages of materials, actions, people, and ideas in conversation with each other over time.

Researching the practices of repairing masks such as these as they circulate across cultural, geographic, and linguistic boundaries has helped me to regularly encounter movement and change in seemingly static spaces.<sup>2</sup> The unique place of these masks in cultural traditions defined by the manifestation of beautiful spirits produces a spectrum of idealized perfection and comical damage. Care and repair mediate between these two oppositions. Given their current places far away from performative contexts, the two masks shown here also demonstrate how attention to repair helps document active matter in seemingly static spaces.

### **Maintaining Idealized Perfection**

The evenly black surface and overall sense of stability of the mask in the collection of the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) are intentional choices to convey idealized, sacred perfection (see fig. 1). A Vai artist carved the mask now in the AMNH collection as a representation of the powerful spirit (or medicine) of an Indigenous women's association (known variously as *Sande*, *Bundu*, or *Bondo*). The slight irregularities beneath the painted surface, along with the chipped-away interior walls, reveal the repeated strokes of the carver's knife and adze when he shaped the mask into its present form.

Masks such as this one—characterized by the helmet style, black surface, anthropomorphic face, ringed neck, and stylized coiffure—are key elements of a much larger performative ensemble. The spiritual presence manifested through performance embodies cultural ideals of beauty, perfection, and power beyond the human realm.<sup>3</sup> These spirits are broadly known in Indigenous languages as *zoba*, *zogbé*, *nòwo*, and *sowej*, but would be more specifically referred to by the personalized names bestowed upon the mask and dancer.<sup>4</sup>

However, given the circumstances of collection and creation, this mask likely never bore a personalized name. According to AMNH collections records, Prince Momolu Massaquoi—a leader of the Vai people—gifted the mask to the museum at some point in the late nineteenth century. Massaquoi spent time in America for his education from the mid-1880s to early 1890s, during which he supported himself through lecture tours and the sale of Indigenous artifacts shipped to him from his mother in Liberia.<sup>5</sup> Although the specific circumstances of Massaquoi's gift are unclear, he likely presented the recently carved (and never performed) mask to the museum as a representation of Vai culture during his travels in America.<sup>6</sup>

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**Fig. 3** Detail of a filled crack repair. 17/160, American Museum of Natural History, Division of Anthropology, New York City. Photo: Kristin Otto, courtesy the American Museum of Natural History.

At first glance, the mask may look like a rather poor example of active matter. It never danced through the streets of a Vai village, and it seemed to quickly enter a museum collection where long-term stability is paramount. However, close attention to material details reveals active matter and processes of repair. A filled crack on the side of the central ridge of the coiffure disrupts the evenly pigmented surface (fig. 3). Repairs to masks used in performances must maintain the idealized perfection of the spirit, and consequently must be relatively unobtrusive to the casually viewing eye. Given the limited overall evidence of wear, the crack and subsequent repair to this mask likely occurred not in relationship to performance, but rather as moisture left the wood as the mask was carved or when it left the tropical environment of West Africa. However, the aesthetic ideals of beauty and the role of the mask as a representation of Vai culture abroad remain. The repair responds to the agency of the material, and brings the mask in line with the constructed goals of idealized perfection.

### **Comical Damage**

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A quick comparison of the mask in a private collection with the mask in the AMNH collection shows basic similarities of form. However, rather than the stability conveyed by Massaquoi's mask, this mask embodies instability through the visible markings of contrast, change, damage, and the active deterioration of materials (see fig. 2). Circular daubs of black and red paint alternate across the surface of the forehead. Progressive damage from insects, water, and/or human hands created pits, holes, and channels across much of the exterior surface. The crown of the head shows two strangely flat surfaces, likely once the bases of a more elaborate coiffure superstructure that was perhaps deliberately sawn away. At even the slightest touch, the dried raffia (palm fiber) loosely hanging in thin strips from the edge of the mask rustles, which causes a few fragments to dislodge and float to the floor.

The colors and material changes present on the private collection's mask are intentional sources of contrast, producing a comical image of damage. Among the Mende people (and certain other Indigenous communities) living in southern and eastern Sierra Leone, women perform damaged and colorful masks such as this one as a counterpoint to the aesthetics of beauty and perfection embodied in the main society spirit (shown in the AMNH example of a soweï mask). The contrasting performer—known in Mende as the *gonde*—is a comical figure that provides entertainment for viewers through transgressive actions and damaged aesthetic.<sup>7</sup> The *gonde* reinforces the powerful identity of soweï through a “beauty and the beast” style of relational opposition.

Creating such a damaged aesthetic requires purposeful negotiation of active matter. When a mask intended to represent beauty and spiritual perfection experiences too much damage, it can no longer be performed and manifest the spirit. Owners and community authorities may choose to repurpose the damaged mask as a *gonde*.<sup>8</sup> If the aesthetic of one mask relies upon powerful beauty and idealized perfection, transformation into the anti-aesthetic involves embracing and accentuating damage. Colorful pigment clashes with the overall dark surface, while holes and missing sculptural elements reinforce both the comical nature of the masquerade figure and the spiritual perfection of its companion performer.

In contrast to the AMNH mask, the mask in the private collection is more obviously composed of active matter at first glance. Damage and ongoing deterioration remind the viewer of the vulnerability of material. Evidence of small previous repairs, including a metal staple holding a crack together and re-carved costume holes, show efforts to maintain stability. However, the intensified damage of the mask challenges the perceptions of repair and conservation and purely corrective process of returning to stability. At some point during the life of this mask and others like it, community-based care becomes less about correcting obvious threats to perfection, and more about embracing active matter and allowing it to take control of the mask.

### **The In-Between**

The soweï and *gonde* masks represent two moments within spectrums of human relationships to material and constructed aesthetic ideals. One mask is defined by the maintenance of

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superhuman perfection, the other mask by the acceptance and accentuation of deterioration. In-between the two lies an ongoing process of material negotiation and repair. Many masks regularly used in performances and now in collections show evidence of repeated, layered repairs that negotiate the spectrum between idealized perfection and comical damage.<sup>9</sup> Active matter and the human responses to it prove essential for maintaining (or transforming) the performative identities associated with these masks.

The two masks shown here are not unique among the much broader assemblage—or “object diaspora”—of such masks now found around the world.<sup>10</sup> Material-based research with masks in diverse types of collections shows that the majority have been repaired at least once, if not multiple times throughout their lives as objects.<sup>11</sup> The Indigenous contexts of creation and performance informed by ideas of idealized perfection and comical damage provide the beginnings of the repairs and interventions discussed here. These processes of care continue as the masks circulate through Western collections and institutions, albeit with different motivations and techniques. New contexts of repair—such as restorations performed in elite art markets or conservation treatments in Western museum collections—broaden the types of repair. Attention to repair helps trace movement and interaction, articulating the ongoing processes of creation along with the assemblages of people, materials, and ideas discussed more broadly in the anthropology of repair. Furthermore, case studies of these two masks remind us that close attention to material changes and subsequent human responses can reveal the relational connections of active matter even in seemingly static spaces.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see Joshua A. Bell et al., “The Materiality of Cell Phone Repair: Re-Making Commodities in Washington, DC,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 91, no. 2 (2018): 603–33; Jérôme Denis and David Pontille, “Material Ordering and the Care of Things,” *Science, Technology, and Human Values* 40, no. 3 (2015): 338–67; and Ignaz Strebel, Alain Bovet, and Philippe Sormani, eds., *Repair Work Ethnographies: Revisiting Breakdown, Relocating Materiality* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Kristin Otto, “Creating the Soweï: Repairing and Interpreting Soweï Masks in Global Assemblages” (PhD diss., Indiana University, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Ruth B. Phillips, *Representing Woman: Sande Masquerades of the Mende of Sierra Leone* (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1995), 77.

<sup>4</sup> See Warren L. d’Azevedo, “Mask Makers and Myth in Western Liberia,” in *Primitive Art and Society*, ed. Anthony Forge (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), 126–50; and Phillips, *Representing Woman*, 97.

<sup>5</sup> Raymond J. Smyke, *The First African Diplomat: Momolu Massaquoi (1870–1938)* (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris Corporation, 2004), 62.

<sup>6</sup> Gavin H. Imperato and Pascal James Imperato, *Bundu: Soweï Headpieces of the Sande Society of West Africa, the Imperato Family Collection* (Bayside and Manhasset, New York: Queensborough Community College Art Gallery and Kilima House Publishers, 2012), 34.

<sup>7</sup> Phillips, *Representing Woman*, 67.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*; Sylvia Ardyn Boone, *Radiance from the Waters: Ideals of Feminine Beauty in Mende Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 39–40.

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<sup>9</sup> Otto, "Creating the *Sowei*," 124.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Basu, "Object Diasporas, Resourcing Communities: Sierra Leonean Collections in the Global Museumscape," *Museum Anthropology* 34, no. 1 (2011): 28–42.

<sup>11</sup> Otto, "Creating the *Sowei*," 15.