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# MASKS AND THE SEMIOTICS OF IDENTITY

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Anthropological approaches to masks and masking typically consider the meaning and symbolism of masks, and the social functions of masking ritual. This article considers *how* masks are able to perform such work, through a semiotic perspective that treats masks as icons and indexes of identity. Such a framework also broadens the category of 'mask' to include other signalling systems which may be called upon by the semiotics of identity in any particular culture, expanding the traditional and stereotypical conception of the mask. The relationship between masking and identity, and variability in the form of masks, are illustrated through ethnographic examples from the Kwakiutl of the northwest coast of North America, and the Kulina Indians of western Brazil.

Masks are among the most exotic and spectacular of the plastic arts, yet their widespread use through history and in a wide variety of geographical settings has lent the concept of the mask a level of familiarity which is shared by few other body techniques. With our own long history of masks, we in the West believe that we understand masks and masking. As Guidieri noted, 'I do not know what a mask is. I do know that this ignorance is shared by others. Like others too, I know masks by the hundreds' (quoted in Pernet 1992: 160). Indeed, Western peoples, at least, seem immediately to grasp the form and function of masks wherever they encounter them, while they do not understand, or may be repelled by, the inscription of social status on the body through various forms of mutilation, decoration or somatization. Despite their essential familiarity, however, masks remain something of an enigma. Anthropologists and art historians have focused considerable attention on the general question of what masks 'do', and the significance of what masks do in particular contexts, but have not considered precisely *how* masks perform or achieve these functions: how masks 'work.'

In this article I take up this question of how masks work, and in particular of how form and function, so to speak, become linked in the mask. I discuss briefly some of the recent ethnographic and theoretical work on masking, and suggest that while the category 'mask' may serve as a more or less adequate concept in art or in the museum, it excludes a wide range of masking techniques on the basis of arbitrary plastic criteria. I propose that we treat the objects conventionally called 'masks' as only one of a variety of semiotic systems that are related through their conventional use in disguising, transforming or displaying identity, and that masks therefore 'work' by coordinating the iconicity

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and indexicality of signs of identity, as identity is understood in any particular cultural context. I describe two ethnographic cases in some detail in order to illustrate how attention to the motivation of these signs can provide insight into both the forms of the mask and forms of identity.

The perspective I pursue here is a semiotic one; I consider masking to be an aspect of the semiotics of identity, that is, one of a variety of means for signalling identity, or changes in identity. The semiotic framework, inspired by C.S. Peirce, here directs attention to the ways in which signs are motivated, to the ways in which masks, in this case, take up the conventional means through which identity is displayed or hidden. The value of a semiotic perspective for the analysis of masking is that it considers how masks achieve their signalling functions beyond the simplistic assumption that the mask and its meaning have a purely arbitrary relation. My argument is that identity is displayed, revealed or hidden in any culture through conventional means, and that masks work by taking up these conventional means, iconically or indexically. In semiotic terms, an icon is a variety of sign that bears a resemblance to its object; a diagram, for example, is an icon of that which the diagram represents. An index is a variety of sign that refers to its object, in Peirce's terms, 'by virtue of being really affected by that object' (Peirce 1931: 248); a thermometer, for example, is an index because *how* it displays is affected by *what* it displays.<sup>1</sup> Masks, as I will argue in these specific cultural contexts, are iconic inasmuch as they resemble, and are also indexical, inasmuch as they draw upon dimensions or extensions of their objects to signal their representation.

It may also be useful to add an introductory word about the notion of 'identity' which I use here. As Harris has recently noted (1989), there is considerable confusion of terms such as 'person', 'self' and 'individual' in the anthropological literature. She suggests that the term 'person' or 'personhood' be restricted to those whose conduct is construed as action, that is, that persons are agents of meaningful action (1989: 602); my use of the term 'identity' in this article follows from this proposal, and refers to the particular kinds of persons posited by any society, rather than the unique 'personality' or 'individuality' that some societies may attribute to individual persons, though clearly some societies may use masks to display this individual identity as well (e.g. Horton 1963: 108). As Fortes has noted (1973), personhood need not be attributed exclusively to human beings, but also may be predicated of other animals or supernatural beings. My interest here is in the conventional signs through which members of any particular culture signal that they are persons and possess 'identity,' of whatever form that may take.

### *The mask*

The general relationship between masks and this sense of identity or personhood has long been recognized; the mask is normally considered a technique for transforming identity, either through the modification of the representation of identity, or through the temporary – and representational – extinction of identity. Nonetheless, 'theories' of masking seem rather impoverished. Tooker, for example, defined masking as the 'ritual transformation of the human actor into a being of another order,' but acknowledged that this view offered only a limited stereotype (1983). Pernet, in an exhaustive study of masking in a wide

variety of cultures (1992), arrives at largely negative conclusions: masks do not always represent spirits; masks do not always lend themselves to psychoanalytic interpretations; masks are not invariably thought to produce an 'actual transformation' in the wearer; and so on. As there is no necessary connexion between the physical object 'mask' or the social act of 'masking' and any particular use made of these, Pernet's energies seem peculiarly useful only within the history of religions framework he adopts. On the other hand, Urban and Hendricks have outlined several functions of masks: representational, emotive, indexical, and disguise (1983: 181). Their semiotic perspective, I should note, focuses on the functions of masks rather than on the means by which such functions are performed. Thus, they consider how masks represent, iconically or indexically, the beings being displayed, rather than considering how the identity of the mask wearer can be transformed into that of the beings being displayed (e.g. 1983: 197); masks are not merely pictures of other beings, but are more fundamentally considered to be ways in which the identity of those beings is attributed to or predicated of the mask-wearer as well.

Tonkin's general theoretical treatment of masks and masking (1979) poses the conceptual problem in terms similar to those which I use here. She considers the '*principle*' of masking, how masks '*work*' (1979: 240). Yet Tonkin's analysis in the end seems less than entirely successful. She concludes: 'We can see *what* Masks do and why they are particularly capable of doing it. The data show that Masking, acting through its own paradoxes, is a richly concentrated means of articulating Power' (1979: 245-6; emphasis in original). She offers an account of the nature of such power and its articulation in Masking (her capitalization refers to actions sharing properties of representation, rather than the simple semantic content of a particular 'mask'), but her account of how Masking works ultimately appeals to psychological and cognitive processes.<sup>2</sup> And when she suggests that 'how the masks work, namely, as social phenomena, operators in communicative events' (1979: 240), one must interpret this as the work masks do, rather than how they do it.<sup>3</sup>

While studies of the meaning and social significance of masks often accompany analyses of ritual or art (e.g. Crumrine & Halpin 1983; Gell 1975; Napier 1986; Markman & Markman 1989), the explanations of how masking takes place seem curiously underdetermined. Thus, when Gill says that 'by donning the kachina mask, a Hopi gives life and action to the mask, thus making the kachina essence present in material form... By wearing the kachina mask, the Hopi manifests the sacred. He becomes the sacred Kachina, yet continues to be himself' (1976: 55), he seems to say very little that is not available directly from Hopi exegesis. In other words, the question of how masks achieve the effects attributed to them has rarely been answered, and the answers provided so far do not seem especially productive. The problem is not trivial; masking, as Tonkin argued, may involve the manipulation of considerable 'power' (1979), and consequently the way this effect is accomplished is surely of interest. Answers to the question tend to fall into two major categories. The first treats masks as symbolic forms, and finds their meaning, exegetically or interpretively, in social structural paradoxes (e.g. Crocker 1977) or in the myths through which such paradoxes are transformed and resolved, as in Lévi-Straussian structuralism (Lévi-Strauss 1982). This approach fails to satisfy, simply because it begs the

initial question; whether or not this approach convinces us that the ritual transformation of identity resolves or reproduces social issues, it fails to account for the effectiveness of masks in producing such outcomes. The psychoanalytic variant of this approach suffers from the same limitation. Ottenberg's suggestion that features of Afikpo masking ritual 'allow the performance to publicly, in symbolic form, deal with commonly held repressed materials which themselves characteristically refer to early life' (Ottenberg 1983: 225) at best commits the familiar psychoanalytic confusion of cause with effect and means with ends. The second type of approach may appear bizarre to a social anthropological audience. Webber *et al.* (1983), among others, have focused on the narrowly psychological effects of the mask, in an effort to relate the use of masks to personality integration, for example through hypothesized links between unconscious mental processes and neural and cortical structures. If the first approach ignores the question of how masks work, this second takes it up with a vengeance, but in so doing it ignores the cultural and social contexts in which masks function.

Moreover, this latter view is based on the assumption that masks produce their effects on persons by operating on the face. Tonkin, for example, calls the face 'the personality's most immediate *mis en scène*' (1979: 241), just as, for Lévi-Strauss, the significance of the mask, as of facial decoration, lies in the fact that the face is 'the three dimensional surface par excellence' (1963: 262; cf. Mair 1975). Although this emphasis on the face hints at a more productive view of masks as iconic, rather than symbolic, it introduces assumptions about both the face and the mask that I will challenge here. In the meantime, we may note that other techniques than masks and other sites than faces are used to transform identity and personhood, or to signal such transformations. The range of body techniques and the variety of mask styles and uses is too great to privilege the simple stereotype.

Again, the alternative proposal I want to pursue here is the suggestion that masks 'work' by operating upon the particular ways in which identity, or personhood, is expressed in any culture. The mask works by concealing or modifying those signs of identity which conventionally display the actor, and by presenting new values that, again conventionally, represent the transformed person or an entirely new identity. Although every culture may recognize numerous media through which identity may be presented, masks achieve their special effect by modifying those limited number of conventionalized signs of identity.

A simple example of this kind of conventionalization can be drawn from Western culture. We are, at least according to Goffman (1959), continually engaged in the process of impression management, the maintenance of an identity and its presentation through a complex coordination of multiple signs, from speech style (and content) and dress, to the objects with which we surround ourselves. Yet, during those ritual occasions when we are called upon to wear a mask, we are able to signal that the disguise of our identities is taking place through the use of a simple, small eye-covering mask of the sort familiar at traditional masked balls. Note that this minimal mask *signals* the disguise of identity; in reality it may fail to conceal the identity of the wearer, but its success depends upon the familiar kind of suspension of disbelief through which the

'theatre effect' is achieved. One can specify even further that this theatre effect is achieved to the extent that the mask, however minimal, modifies the conventional signs that signal changes in identity. In this example, the use and specific form of the mask derives from the significance of the eyes in Western culture as the conventionalized sign *par excellence* of identity. As Seeger noted in his study of Suyá facial decoration (1975), Westerners say, for example, that the eyes are the window on the soul, that seeing is believing; look someone in the eyes to gauge their honesty or true worth. In such cultures 'seeing' is equated with 'understanding.' The minimal Western mask works, not by concealing the face, but by concealing the eyes.<sup>4</sup> We might note that in Western cultures it is typically a costume that displays transformed identity, not the mask (or the face?).

Gell's analysis of masks in the Umeda *ida* ritual offers an illustration of this relationship between masks and persons. Gell proposes that the elaborate masks used in this ritual cycle are, in essence, analogues of the means – such as hair styles – through which social status is expressed in everyday life.

In a sense, all the masks do is take up and elaborate certain expressive 'means' which are implicit in everyday usage – the same is true, for instance, of the expressive use of treatments of the penis in ritual ... where, once again, the usages of everyday life are taken up and modified in various ways in order to make symbolic statements (1975: 301-2).

Indeed, although the masked figures nominally represent a wide variety of animals,

Mask styles take their point of departure, not from the fish, cassowaries, termites, or whatever entity they are overtly intended to represent, but rather from the human head itself: the mask is not an image of nature, but an elaboration of man (1975: 301).

Umeda masks, and their associated body paintings, are thus effective as signs of transformed identity precisely because they replace the conventional signs through which identity is displayed among Umeda.

I will pursue these points with more extended ethnographic examples: the Kwakiutl Indians of the northwest coast of British Columbia, and the Kulina Indians of western Brazil. I have chosen these cases for several reasons. First, Northwest Coast art, and in particular masks, are spectacular in design and decoration. Masks were a constant feature of Kwakiutl ritual, and I will suggest that the masking principle permeated other aspects of Kwakiutl culture as well. Moreover, Boas has left a large corpus of ethnography to cannibalize, enough to produce relatively satisfying secondary analyses.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, my already long section on the Kwakiutl could have been extended considerably. I also draw on two important secondary analyses of Boas's work, by Goldman (1975) and Walens (1981; 1983). Second, the Kulina example offers a case of a complex masking tradition, combining several styles of masks, all of which nonetheless conform to the essential semiotic principles that underlie Kwakiutl masking, and which draw upon the indexical potential of these various media of identity display.

### *The Kwakiutl: identity and iconicity*

Kwakiutl<sup>6</sup> social organization appears to have alternated between two forms, the first comprising summer villages composed of descent groups called *numayma* (or *numema*), the second comprising winter villages composed of Dancing Societies whose membership cut across the *numayms*. I consider these in turn.

The *numayma* was a condensed form of descent group, the core of which was of a fixed size, limited by a set of names (originally of ancestral beings) of which it was composed (Boas 1966: 50). Commoners were not full members, inasmuch as they had no rights or duties in the quintessential corporate activities of the group, especially potlatches. The names, or titles, were accompanied by what Boas called 'crests,' apparently on analogy with heraldry. In fact, crests generally were masks carved of wood. These masks, and the names associated with them, were imbued with the mystical nature of the founding ancestors of the *numayma*, the souls of these animal founders, as Goldman put it (1975: 241, n.7). Quite simply, the process of transmitting these names and masks imbued the new possessor with the spiritual identity or *begwanemgemtl* of the ancestor.<sup>7</sup> Thus, any contemporary *numayma* was in essence a living and exact representation or incarnation of the original, ancestral *numayma*. As such, the term 'descent group' may not be the appropriate one, for the rights and duties, jural and moral imperatives of membership in the *numayma* derived neither from the parents nor from a descent tie to an ancestor, but rather from the incorporation of the ancestors' identities into the constituent members of the *numayma* through possession of the names and associated masks of those ancestors.<sup>8</sup>

Kwakiutl myth neatly expresses both how these names came into existence, and how their associated masks 'work.' In myth, the original animal ancestors shed their skins and emerged as human beings. The skins became the masks later associated with the name of the ancestor. Each works, so to speak, by hiding the human person in the skin, or mask, transforming the wearer into the ancestor. This signalling technique was replicated in at least two other ways. First, many Kwakiutl masks open to reveal a second mask underneath. The person was, in effect, a series of layers, the outermost of which was displayed but which could be shed to reveal another identity-layer underneath (cf. Postal 1965). The outer layer displayed one's public identity, the public 'person', while the innermost core was one's 'soul' or spiritual identity. The mask associated with one's name displayed a form of one's identity. Second, Kwakiutl potlatches involved the transfer of wealth when names were given from parent to child. The basic standard of wealth was what Boas called 'blankets', but which were traditionally animal skins. These animal skins were thus 'masks', the outer layer masks of various animals. They complemented the ranked name 'mask' by establishing a relation of species to individual (or type to token); the animal ancestor of the *numayma* and his animal descendants whose skins were given away, and the animal ancestor of the *numayma* and his human descendants who received his *begwanemgemtl* or spiritual identity. Thus, the original ancestor created two kinds of mask: the first was the name-mask which humans wore. Men were brought into relation with animals in this way; humans exchanged animal skins, and when human animal hunters died, their 'souls' were incorporated into living animals. It is worth noting, parenthetically, that Locher, in his early study (1932), placed the two-headed *sisiulth* snake at the centre of Kwakiutl religion. Snakes are possessors of particular mystical power for Kwakiutl, since they combine characteristics which play upon the themes of identity that inform masking. For example, snakes swallow food whole and alive. Rather than putting on the skin-mask of deceased animals, the snake surrounds a living animal with its own skin. The snake, in effect, wears its inner layer on the

outside, and appears to incorporate other animals into its 'soul', its most interior being. Moreover, a snake sheds its skin, but emerges untransformed, a kind of living mask that remains unchanged while the beings within it change.

There is one additional interesting feature of *numayma* masks that should be mentioned: as far as I am able to determine from the literature, they were not actually worn. They were an external receptacle for the ancestral spirit, a material icon of the ancestor's identity. It is the iconic relationship between the receptacle form and the form of the body-enclosing-a-spirit and its transforming property that was critical, not the specific use of the object. Some of the objects that accompanied names were not stereotypical masks at all – thus Boas's more inclusive term 'crests' or *kis'u* – but nonetheless relied upon the same semiotic logic to achieve their effect, drawing upon the iconicity of receptacles in the display of identity. Indeed, the receptacle form might be said to comprise the primary semiotic field for personhood among the Kwakiutl, the material forms of which were manipulated to fashion masks, boxes and clothing, as well as human persons themselves. Walens uses the images of the box to offer the rather structuralist suggestion that 'boxness forms the metaphorical basis in Kwakiutl philosophy for ideas of kinship and separateness, space and time, cooperation and competition, secularity and sacredness, self and other, life and death, and innumerable other dialectic oppositions ... Even the human body is a kind of box' (1981: 46).

A number of mythological creatures assisted *numayma* ancestors, and often this relationship was the source of masks, names and other gifts to those ancestors. Hataqa, for example, a daughter of Raven, was abandoned by her *numayma* for a breach of social etiquette. She made a fish basket and later discovered in it a son of Qomoqoa, protector of seals. She married this son, and he became an ancestor of the *numayma*. In this myth, as in others, the ancestor emerged from a vessel or receptacle, the fish basket.

One creature in particular appears to have been among the ancestral helpers of all *numayma*. This is the *dzonokwa* (also *tsonoqua*), the 'wild woman of the woods', a tribe of wild creatures which are usually represented as women. In a long series of myths common to virtually all *numayma*, a *dzonokwa* assists, and even marries, the *numayma* ancestor, who receives from the wild woman such gifts as a self-paddling canoe, the water of life which can revive the dead, and the death-bringer, often a stick which can be pointed at a victim with fatal effect. The *dzonokwa* was a special source of the ultimate power of chiefs, the control of life and death. It appears that there was a male *dzonokwa* as well; he was the younger brother of the 'winter ceremony' cannibal, Man Eater. Thus, the mythic roles of the Man Eater cannibal and his younger brother *dzonokwa* were replicated in the positions of the avatars of the two creatures in contemporary *numayma*: younger brothers were said to be the warriors for their chiefly older brothers, and thus the chief was warrior for his 'older brother' Man Eater. This same chief would become possessed by the cannibal during the winter ceremony.

The *dzonokwa* are quite distinctive, with large, protruding features, especially the lips, pushed out as if making their characteristic 'oooh' call. Many Kwakiutl masks are differentiated by their mouths. For Kwakiutl, it was the mouth that gave access to the soul and which served as the link between the exterior



identity and the interior soul. Kwakiutl masks were thus often designed to signal the fundamental differences at the core of souls, even when public identity was similar. Although Kwakiutl masks were often accompanied by highly elaborated costumes (cf. Gunther 1971: 333), one can speculate, on analogy with the Western minimal mask, that the comparable conventionalized icon of identity would focus on the mouth. While there are no specific data addressing this question, a couple of hints are offered. First, the interface between the human world and that of mystical spirit beings was called the Mouth of Heaven. Second, Boas mentioned the use of cedar bark around the mouth in ritual; he was unable to conceive of this as a mask, of course, but the use of cedar bark to signify ritual transformation is well-known among the Kwakiutl. Finally, masks worn over the head signalled a temporary transformation in the public identity of the wearer. Masks worn over the chest or stomach signalled a more fundamental transformation in the identity of the wearer, and worked by transforming the spirit identity (cf. Walens 1981: 131); these masks produced what Boas called 'possession' (Boas 1955: 222), and I discuss below how possession differs semiotically from masking. Here I should stress simply that, rather than contradicting my point about the conventionality of the mouth for Kwakiutl ritual transformation of identity, the case of chest or stomach masks underscores the fact that the mouth functioned as a conventional locus of transformation, while the chest and stomach functioned as a locus of identity display, much as a mask may hide one's real identity while a costume serves to display a new identity.

Kwakiutl society itself underwent a transformation in the winter, a sacred time when summer villages divided into Dancing Societies whose membership cut across *numayms*. Of special interest for the semiotics of masking are the possession rituals of cannibal spirits that took place in winter villages.

Members of the Seal Dancing Societies wore masks associated with names which could be inherited across *numayma*, and like *numayma* names these names comprised a fixed set of titles or statuses that functioned as transformable identities in ritual. Indeed, the masks worn by Seals in winter rituals caused spirit possession that only members of the Sparrow Dancing Society were able to cure. In the summer, *numayma* members acquired the identities of *numayma* ancestors through masks; in the winter, Seal Dancing Society members acquired the identities of harmful spirits: War, the cannibal *hamat'sa*, Fools and dangerous animals.

Dancing Society masks 'worked' in a semiotic sense in the same manner as all Kwakiutl masks, by serving as the outer layer that signalled the identity of the spirit, and simultaneously signalled the incorporation of the spirit into the mask-receptacle wearer. The masks of the *numayma* ancestors were not always highly elaborated, artistically or functionally. The masks of the winter ritual spirits, however, were often very complex masks representing a high level of technical craft and artistic skill.

Possession by the *hamat'sa* cannibal spirit was the most dramatic form of winter ritual masking, and provides a kind of token for the entire type of masking ritual. The person who was to become possessed went into the woods, where he was possessed by the spirits whose mask he owned. Those remaining in the village danced to attract the possessed person back, though the *hamat'sas*,

the highest-ranked cannibal spirits, were said to remain in the woods for several months. Ultimately they returned to the village, shouting 'eat, eat, eat,' running in a frenzy through the village, chasing and biting people before they could be calmed and finally released from their possession.<sup>9</sup>

Kwakiutl ethnohistory posits that actual cannibalism occurred in the ritual, before the imposition of Western restrictions. The form of this cannibalism was neatly consistent with the semiotics of identity and masking that organized masking in other Kwakiutl domains. The 'healers' – the *heliga* – prepared a corpse of a dead relative of a *hamat'sa* cannibal by soaking it in salt water. Twigs were pushed under the skin of the corpse to scrape away the decaying flesh, leaving only the skin. The *kingalalala*, 'procurer of dead bodies for the *hamat'sa*', brought the body to a ceremonial house where the *hamat'sa* himself smoked the skin over a fire. All the *hamat'sas* shared the 'body' in a collective feast, after which they retired to a beach where they were washed with salt water. This salt water bath, finally, cured their possession.

The masks of winter ritual possession preserve the semiotic strategies of *numayma* masks, but with interesting inversions. For example, the *hamat'sa* cannibals did not simply wish to eat humans, but to incorporate their identities. But the *hamat'sas* were dangerous because they mistakenly inverted the process by which this incorporation of identities took place; rather than wearing the skin of the deceased – as in other masks, skins, 'blankets', and so on – the *hamat'sas* ate the skin, much as the mystically dangerous *sisiulth* snake envelops its victim rather than enveloping itself with the skin of the victim. 'Taming' the *hamat'sa* reverted to the proper form of masking: the naked *hamat'sa* was covered with the skins of animals that pacified him, and was finally tamed by salt water baths which washed away any remaining external sources of possession. Finally, one might note that the form of Kwakiutl art known as 'split representation' of the face, found frequently on masks and other receptacles, offers another convenient example of the masking principle. The split representation style on two-dimensional objects consists of the depiction of the face (or even of the whole animal) as though the top and back of the head or body had been split, and the face had been laid flat onto a surface, quite unlike a full-face portrait. The style was said by Lévi-Strauss to express 'a deeper and more fundamental splitting, namely that between the dumb biological individual and the social person whom he must embody' (1963: 259). The argument I have been pursuing here suggests that Lévi-Strauss's emphasis on the distinction between the 'biological individual' and the social person was less incorrect than tangential to the masking function, and that such a representational style may be understood in terms of a simpler set of semiotic principles. For the Kwakiutl, split representation may be viewed as the imposition on a receptacle or container of the whole animal or creature depicted, as though the artist had stretched the skin of the animal over the object (cf. Boas 1955: 250 sqq.). The style of representation is thus a variation on Kwakiutl semiotics of identity; through this style the identification of the animal and the object become complete, almost as though the object was wearing the mask, or was possessed by, the animal.

I have said little in regard to what Kwakiutl masks signify, or to what the meaning of masks might be. This is not due to any semantic insufficiency in Kwakiutl masks – on the contrary, Boas noted several times that every feature of

a Kwakiutl mask had some meaning (1897; 1955; cf. Walens 1981: 134; Jonaitis 1991). Rather, my intention has been to suggest that, whatever Kwakiutl masks mean in any particular case, this semantic effect is achieved by manipulating the semiotic media that conventionally display identity. In this instance, the semiotic field is the receptacle form, and the basic distinction between the two physical forms of masks – the face mask and the chest mask – replicates the indexical properties of ‘outside’ versus ‘inside’ or container/contained possessed by the receptacle form. The conclusion that Kwakiutl masks work by being receptacles, despite its apparent simplicity, suggests how one might make sense of a wider variety of techniques for transforming identity – from baths to blankets – and conversely how a wide variety of receptacles – from boxes to bodies – acquire the potential to function as masks.

### *The Kulina: identity and indexicality*

The second example which I discuss is from my own fieldwork with a group of Kulina Indians in western Amazonia. They provide a revealing contrast to the Kwakiutl in several respects, not the least of which is that they do not use masks in the sense of physical objects that cover the face or head. Nonetheless, they perform masking rituals of a particularly powerful sort, and I use their example to argue, again, that the form taken by masks is motivated, so to speak, by their particular semiotics of identity.

The Kulina are an Arawak language speaking group totalling roughly 3000 individuals living in villages along the rivers of the Purus-Jurua region of western Brazilian Amazonia, primarily in the states of Acre and Amazonas. Several hundred Kulina live in Peru, along the Upper Purus River near the border with Brazil. My research has been conducted with the Kulina on the Upper Purus River in Brazil, primarily in the village called Maronaua, near what is now the up-river boundary of the Area Indígena Alto Purus. My comments here are based on research conducted during 1981-82.

I noted earlier that in many Western cultures, the eyes, and sight, are the focal and conventional media of identity, and that minimal masks in Western culture consequently take the form of a simple eye covering. For the Kulina, the comparable focal media of identity are oral and aural: speaking and hearing, the verbal in the fullest sense. For example, Kulina gauge the maturation of infants and children by their developing verbal facility, and also by their ability to understand the warnings, requests and commands of parents. Not surprisingly, for Kulina the verb ‘to hear’ (*mittade*) also carries the sense of ‘to understand’: *omittani* means ‘I hear’ as well as ‘I understand’. Verbal facility is also an index of social competence for Kulina, who attribute different levels of social status or power to formalized speech styles, and different levels of illocutionary force to those formalized speech styles.<sup>10</sup> For example, only adult men are adept at the stylized speech used in important public meetings, the style called ‘plaza speech’ among other Amazonian groups (e.g. Seeger 1981: 85; Urban 1991: 125 sqq.). Headmen among the Kulina acquire their position through their ability to order others through this specially forceful speech, a type that compels action, while Kulina adolescents, however fluid their speech may be in informal settings, become tongue-tied and stumbling when called upon to speak in formal public settings.

Kulina masking, in the minimal sense, therefore draws upon the iconic and especially the indexical potential of these verbal media. First, masking rituals are performed at night, when visual cues to identity are extinguished or are irrelevant. The major masking ritual is the *tokorime*, the curing ritual during which shamans take on the identities of various spirit animals who are said to enter the village to cure a sick person. During the *tokorime*, shamans usually adopt palm frond costumes that cover their bodies from head to foot, but these are unnecessary, and shamans often perform curing rituals without them; their function is to hide or disguise rather than to reveal, and the disguising function is not necessary to achieve the theatre effect of the ritual. Rather, the minimal mask adopted by shamans is *song*, the special songs of the spirit animals represented. These songs present both the sounds and imagery that characterize the animal. During the ritual, shamans emerge from the forest, singing in the voice of the spirit they represent; village members hear the shamans singing as they dance into the village, and shout out the name of the animal spirit, or jokingly make the sounds characteristic of the animal, the grunting of peccaries or the call of a particular bird (see Pollock 1992). The effect is entirely aural, a rich complex of songs and sounds in which style and imagery combine to signal the transformation of shamans into spirits, and in which the transformed identity of the shamans is expressed. My point is not merely that songs represent these spirits by being like the conventional sounds of particular spirits or by singing a description of actions or qualities which an audience recognizes as the actions or qualities of particular spirits; masks, as I said earlier, are not simply kinds of pictures, even aural pictures. Rather, my point is that because verbal performance is the primary conventional medium for indexing identity among Kulina, verbal performance is also, in semiotic terms, the appropriate channel for the indexing of transformed identity.

The curing ritual is the most elaborate context in which songs signal the kind of transformed identity that masking achieves. Music in general is a special variety of speech for Kulina, an aural medium not different from normal speech in kind, only in quality. As such, music alone can comprise a medium for a comparable sort of presentation of identity, for example by adolescent boys, who play small flutes 'to make themselves beautiful' to adolescent girls; at the same time, it appears that the continuous playing in public is also a sign, an index, of the liminal nature of adolescence among the Kulina. The *ayahuasca* ritual has a comparable quality for the Kulina. Participants gather at night to consume a hallucinogenic brew, which releases the individual spirit, the *kurime*, to fly up into the sky and commune with other spirits. The process is signalled entirely through song, first as one's own *kurime* sings, and later as other spirits sing. This chorus is striking, as each *kurime*, and each spirit, is indexed by different songs that participants in the ritual all sing simultaneously, in a stylized, high-pitched register.

While the Kulina, in common with other lowland Amazonian groups, use facial and body decorative techniques to display social status as well as liminality (cf. Turner 1993; Seeger 1975), speech and hearing are the critical conventional media for the acquisition and display of identity, and thus of masking. If Kulina do not use the traditional kind of masks familiar from museum displays, it is because they do not conventionally regard the face as a privileged site upon

which identity is inscribed.<sup>11</sup> Like the Kwakiutl, Kulina regard the body's surface as a whole as a site for the transformation of identity. Moving from the minimal form masks take in song, to the more elaborated forms of identity transformation comparable to costuming, Kulina believe smells to have special transformative properties, in particular, those smells that derive from plants found in the wild. During daytime rituals, Kulina adorn themselves with plants, especially with leaves, not for the visual effect but for the olfactory effect. Good smells transform wild and dangerous men into tame and sociable village members. The best smells are said to make men sexually attractive, and a wife may object when her husband places a sprig of a particularly powerful plant under his belt before leaving the village, suspecting him of seeking out an adulterous affair. Corpses, too, are rubbed with 'good' smelling leaves or other substances, to help render the deceased less dangerous to the remaining relatives. The worst smells have the opposite effect, turning sociable people into dangerous animals, in the worst cases poisoning them. Indeed, the logic of Kulina illness and curing also calls upon the transformative power of smells, both the disgusting smells that may cause illness and the good-smelling leaves that are placed on an infected area to cure it.

I will not pursue this Kulina example further. The point it illustrates should be apparent, that just as the expression of identity calls upon certain culturally ordered semiotic media, so too the masking of identity, whether in its disguise or substitution, can only take place through those same semiotic media. The mask, in this sense, is no more (and no less) enigmatic than conventional, everyday representations of identity.

I have stressed at several points the convention in masking as a semiotic process, and it should be emphasized that by this term I am not referring to the Saussurean notion of an arbitrary or conventional relationship between masks as signifiers and the signified meaning which they may be held to convey. On the contrary, one of the important insights of Peirce's general theory of signs is that, from within the perspective of any culture (or language), many, perhaps most, signs are of a sort that appear to bear a non-arbitrary relation to that to which they refer. Thus, icons and indexes are motivated as signs precisely by the special kinds of similarity which they hold to that which they signify. The common thermometer is a sign of temperature – an index – in regard to the cultural-linguistic view that temperature rises and falls. Rising and falling may be arbitrary ways of conceiving changes in temperature – 'density' might come closer to a Brownian motion theory of heat – but given the cultural metaphor, the use of rising and falling levels of mercury to represent temperature is not at all arbitrary.

Rather, what I mean by conventionality in the use of masks is the common ethnographic claim that impersonations require a wilful suspension of disbelief among performers and audience, and that some conventional sign(s) must be available to alert performers and audience that impersonation is taking place. Masking is, from this perspective and not surprisingly, an aspect of the theatre effect through which audiences and performers temporarily collude in the pretence that on-stage events and characters are not unreal. Wagner makes much of this fact in his study of Daribi religion: "The impersonation of divine or ghostly beings through a "transformation" constitutes the central feature of many religious

systems ... For all the sanctity of such impersonations, and for all the stress that is laid on their metaphoric "validity", they must, nevertheless, remain impersonations' (Wagner 1972: 172). Ortiz, in his study of rituals of personhood among the Tewa, for example, notes that immediately after the 'Finishing' ritual undergone by boys, the new initiates are taken to an inner room of the kiva, where the masked gods of the ritual reveal themselves to be relatives and neighbours (1969: 42-3). In this regard, at least, masking might be distinguished from possession.

Spirit possession and masking represent different points along a continuum of techniques of identity display and transformation, but have in common that they both rely for their effectiveness upon semiotic processes that reveal not only what is displayed, but also that display is taking place. A thorough discussion of possession is beyond the rather modest scope of this article, but it is worth commenting briefly upon some of the semiotic similarities and differences between possession and masking, particularly as forms of both Kwakiutl and Kulina masking may appear to resemble possession more than masking in the strict sense of traditional taxonomies.

If the mask is an icon of identity, and an index of the identity transformation taking place, it is also a sign of the conventionality of the transformation, in the sense mentioned above: a sign of a sign, or of signalling. Possession, on the other hand, requires for its performance that the metadiscursive message be precisely the opposite, that possession be real in a sense that masking need not be. Any conventionality in the performance of possession potentially detracts from its power. Lévi-Strauss took up a variation on this problem in his classic article on Quesalid, the Kwakiutl shaman who was unable to suspend his own disbelief in the literal reality of his magic, and was thus crippled as a shaman (1963: 175-8). The semiosis of possession, then, demands the use of media that are especially compelling, though the achievement of verisimilitude in performance may, paradoxically, be more effective through the mundane and ordinary semiotic media of identity display than through the more extraordinary semiotic media of masking. Thus, the metacommunicative intent of such practices as stabbing oneself with a kris while possessed, or walking over hot coals, is likely to be that of announcing, indeed fairly insisting upon, the reality of the experience, while the use of masks points to exactly the opposite. Note, for example, the comment by the Leacocks that the use of masks was strictly forbidden in the Brazilian Umbanda possession rituals they studied (1972), as if the use of masks would imply a kind of conventionality inconsistent with the veracity necessary for the possession experience to be authentic.

Possession, like masking, has been examined extensively from various traditional anthropological perspectives, including its social functions for the possessed (Harris 1957; Lewis 1971), the psychological nature of the experience (Bourguignon 1973; 1975), and its psychological functions (e.g. Lewis 1971: 178-205; Obeyesekere 1977). As in the case of masking, little attention has been paid to the manner in which possession achieves the effect of signalling that so profound a transformation of identity is taking, or has taken, place. Perhaps the nearest to such a treatment of possession is the discussion of trance that often accompanies analyses of the phenomenon. Bourguignon, for example, notes that 'possession trance is behaviour, culturally patterned, occurring within acceptable

cultural limits' (1975: 46), developing according to predictable patterns as individuals learn to trance. As such, trance offers itself as a convenient sign, a semiotic display that is compelling in ways that masking might not be. This seems particularly true when one considers how shallow trance can be. Kulina shamans, for example, go into trance during a curing ritual, assisted by the use of tobacco snuff. Yet in the midst of their entranced spirit possession, singing in the high, nasal register of the *tokorime* spirits, they can occasionally be overheard directing an irritated comment *sotto voce* at a sniffing dog or a child who has wandered too close. Here, perhaps, the process of entry into trance must be read as a semiotic performance that offers a kind of index of the transformation taking place.

### Conclusion

The assumption that the mask has some special ability to effect this transformation in identity apart from its semiotic potential, a hypothetical property of masks and masking that must be accounted for in the extraordinary terms of social paradox, personality integration, or neural networks, rests upon a prior or implicit assumption that identity is somehow given, inhering in individual actors, fixed, invariant, and which normal modes of identity-presentation simply display but do not create. In this regard, the first problem of the mask is the problem of identity in general, in its social and cultural construction, attribution, display and transformation: the process of continuous meaning construction that Peirce called 'semiosis.'

The problem of the mask, I have suggested, is that masks are not simply pictures, and their effects are not the effects of pictures. While anthropologists, archaeologists and art historians have devoted considerable attention to the representational meaning of masks (e.g. Markman & Markman 1989), or to the social functions of masking, such analyses focus only on the representational functions masks may perform, in common with a wide variety of other representational media, from art to body decoration. I hope that I have suggested here that masks are interesting precisely because they are more than merely representational media. Masks are not simply pictures of the spirits, animals or other beings they represent (when, indeed, they do represent); masks are also and simultaneously icons and indexes of identity, and it is this conjunction of semiotic functions and fields that give the mask its particular form in any society and its particular fascination for anthropology.

### NOTES

This article grew out of a paper presented to the seminar 'Ritual and Personhood' convened by Grace Harris at the University of Rochester in 1978; I am grateful to Professor Harris for advice and assistance in the conception of this article, and want to stress that she is not responsible for the excessive length of its gestation. A more recent draft was read at anthropology departmental colloquia at Boston University in 1988, at which Robert Hefner and Jane Guyer made very useful suggestions, and at Bryn Mawr College in 1995. I am grateful to Dr Hastings Donnan and Aaron Glass for advice helpful in the preparation of the final draft.

<sup>1</sup> Peirce's analysis of sign-types is complex, and any elaboration would take me far beyond the limits of this article. Convenient, anthropologically relevant summaries of Peirce's classification of signs may be found in Daniel (1984) and Rochberg-Halton (1986).

<sup>2</sup> I should also note that Tonkin proposes a 'semiotic' account of the Mask (1979: 241), which, derived from Saussure, is perhaps better termed 'semiological.' For an explication of differences between Saussure's semiology and Peirce's semiotics see Sheriff (1989).

<sup>3</sup> Compare Wagner's comment about impersonation of divine beings: 'The "meaning" created by this kind of metaphor is not simply another element in a communicative sequence; rather it becomes the communication itself, and human beings are the vessels of its innovative power' (1972: 172).

<sup>4</sup> A particularly good illustration of this point comes from the 1950s American television 'western': 'The Lone Ranger'. The Lone Ranger hero disguises his identity with a small mask that barely covers his eyes; when the show's bad-guys wanted to rob a bank or terrorize a poor widow, they disguised their identities with bandannas that covered all of the face except the eyes. Clearly the hero's mask is designed less to disguise than to signal that disguising is taking place, a semiotic process that is effective only to the extent that it indexes the culturally conventional sign of identity: the eyes.

<sup>5</sup> I draw freely from several key works by Boas (1897; 1910; 1921; 1925; 1930; 1955; 1966) in developing this perspective on Kwakiutl.

<sup>6</sup> Recent work on the Kwakiutl has emphasized that the proper term for this group is Kwak-waka'wakw. The term Kwakiutl is a simplified form of the name of only one of a number of sub-groups, the Kwag'yulth. In retaining the term 'Kwakiutl' in this article I appeal to convention, which may be more recognizable to a general anthropological audience, rather than to the contemporary politics of identity.

<sup>7</sup> Goldman notes that the literal translation of this term is 'person mask' (1975: 63).

<sup>8</sup> As Walens notes, the *numayma* has been difficult to understand within the framework of traditional theories of kinship, descent, or corporate group structure (1981: 47).

<sup>9</sup> See Glass (1994) for an extended discussion of the history and significance of the *hamat'sa* in Kwakiutl society.

<sup>10</sup> I call attention to the indexicality of speech styles among the Kulina; Urban has illustrated how such styles may also function through properties of iconicity (Urban 1991).

<sup>11</sup> While I was in the field in 1981, I shaved off my full beard; no one in the village seemed to notice, except for my wife, whose shock and dismay at the first-ever sight of my naked face was in marked contrast to the utter lack of Kulina response. One hesitates to assign too much significance to such experiences, but I have wondered if the Kulina semiotics of identity draw attention away from the face, and thus attach little significance to changes in (or on) it.

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## Masques et sémiotique de l'identité

### *Résumé*

L'anthropologie a approché le masque et le fait de se masquer comme un phénomène comprenant, d'une part, la signification symbolique du masque, et, d'autre part, la fonction sociale du masquage rituel. Cet article, en adoptant une perspective sémiotique permettant de traiter le masque à la fois comme un icône et comme un index de l'identité, considère la façon dont le masque accomplit sa tâche. Un tel cadre permet également d'étendre la catégorie 'masque' à d'autres systèmes signalétiques mis au service de la sémiotique de l'identité dans n'importe quelle culture. La conception traditionnelle et stéréotypée du masque en est donc élargie. On illustre la relation entre masque et identité, et la diversité des formes de masques, à partir d'exemples pris chez les Kwakiutl de la côte nord-ouest en Amérique du Nord, et chez les Indiens Kulina du Brésil occidental.

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