

The importance of the mask carver in Orixá ritual

The carvers of African masks for Orixá rituals such as masks for Ogun occupy a respected and honoured position in many African communities. Alongside this carvers traditionally occupy a revered position within the ritual masquerades.

A carver is first initiated in an Orixá ritual. After this ritual the carver is believed to have special powers. So, when a carver makes a mask, it is believed that he brings into the mask the special powers belonging to the Orixá, for example Ogun's power. When the mask is finished it is not just a piece of wood any longer – it is a mask with the power of the Orixá.

If a carver makes a mask of Ogun, then the mask itself contains the aggressive spirit, power and personal attributes of Ogun.

Traditionally the carver takes fresh, green or soft wood that can be worked easily. The main tool the African mask carver uses is the adze, an axe like tool with an arched blade. He masters this tool to a high standard to make fine as well as bold features within the wooden mask.

Typically masks from West Africa have slanted, or almond-shaped eyes, a robust face and jaw, small mouth and sometimes teeth are shown and look saw-like.