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Rogue Masks: Visualizing Multidisciplinary Studies

Amanda M. Maples

In April 2022 Sheku “Goldenfinger” Fofanah, an exceedingly talented artist largely unrecognized outside Sierra Leone, created one Ordehlay (fig. 1) and two Fairy masquerade ensembles (fig. 2) for a major international traveling exhibition currently titled *New Masks Now: Artists Innovating Masquerade in Contemporary West Africa*. Emerging from previous dissertation research, the planning of this exhibition project, and my training in visual studies, this essay explores Fofanah’s vibrant, multi-cultural urban masquerades as a parallel of my own scholarly journey toward the discipline of visual studies, and the necessity of resisting overdetermined paths and dichotomous categorizations to approach, research, understand, and present/contextualize African masquerade arts. Like my own pedagogical journey, Ordehlay is not linear, nor does it stay in any one lane. Such a rogue mask calls for a rogue discipline.

Accordingly, my journey to visual studies was a meandering one. I suspect that not many of us who end up choosing this field start off in high school or college thinking “visual studies, that’s for me!” I was raised in a rural North Carolina town with less-than-stellar educational opportunities, so when I arrived at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, I did not even know what anthropology was, nor that my journey would eventually take me through it, toward visual anthropology, and eventually to visual studies. I certainly did not expect to end up working in Africa, or with urban cultural phenomena like masquerades. One constant in my career, however, has been a fascination with the tangible, intangible, and narrative qualities of objects and their connection with lived human



Figure 1 The completed Ordeblay masquerade “devil” by Sheku “Goldenfinger” Fofanah, photographed at the artist’s home in Freetown, June 9, 2022. Titled Woman Tote Man, it visually and verbally implies that men can do nothing without the support of women. Courtesy of the artist.

experience—their humanity.¹ I still distinctly remember the moment I physically connected with an artifact on an archaeological dig in South Africa that had not been touched by human hands for thousands of years. It electrified my imagination, and it is no wonder that I ended up following a career in museums (by way of visual studies).

When I teach, interview, lecture, or pontificate about my career or academic path, particularly as a curator of global African arts, I note that my degree is not in art history, and I did not arrive at this point through conventional, linear training. I like this. I grew up fascinated with punk rock and DIY aesthetics, and I did not mind taking risks and making mistakes, so long as I found meaning in the work that I did. This can be especially comforting to students, who sometimes overthink their next move.



Figure 2 Sheku “Goldenfinger” Fofanah with one of the completed “Fairy” masquerade ensembles (Jollay Society), photographed at the artist’s home in Freetown, May 7, 2022. The ensemble was designed by Fofanah with Abdulai “Dezo” Sesay, who did most of the tailoring. Sheku Kanteh and Morlai Thullah, both of Makeni, carved the facemasks for both Fairies, but they were painted by Fofanah and his assistants in Freetown. Courtesy of the author.

A visual studies background is also extremely useful in curatorial work, which for me is a process in which I invite myself (as conduit), stakeholders, and visitors to examine and contribute to the dialogic nature of artworks, contextualizing them for critical analysis in museum spaces. Creative juxtapositions of objects across invented boundaries of time, geography, and genre can help visitors to not just appreciate complex object histories but recognize their entanglements as necessary and endemic—and hopefully, compelling.

Additionally, we (as a collective humanity) find ourselves two and a half years into a pandemic characterized by global protests agitating to dislodge persistent systemic racism and the legacies of colonialist and imperialist histories. Movements like Black Lives Matters and Rhodes Must Fall have prompted museums to examine their own role in such histories, resulting in a moment of urgent transformation. This transitional moment means a positionality like mine—as a white female curator trained in African visual arts—is being seriously questioned and critically examined,² and it is moments like these where visual studies reminds us that

there are no single stories. Stories matter, and so does how they are told and who tells them.

Ordehlay Masquerades—a Categorical Challenge

My personal trajectory also means that once I got a handle on the African art “canon”—or what Western collectors, curators, and markets imagine it to be—I immediately gravitated to the kinds of arts that resisted categorization. Ordehlay masquerades, invented in the diasporic urban center of Freetown, Sierra Leone, became the subject of my focus from about 2009 until today. Its multicultural, multireligious, multiethnic hybridity extends not only to its membership but to its masquerade and performance, manifesting in processions of brightly colored, frenetic “devils” bursting with wooden combs, gourds, animal skins and heads, cowrie shells, and lavish cloths and beads (figs. 3, 4, and 6). Ordehlay masquerades (and their societies) are hyperlocal yet transnational organizations originally formed to counter generational/hierarchical authority while gaining the stability that mutual aid societies can offer for less-rooted communities (young people) living (or struggling) in the fractured socioeconomic terrain of city life. The foundational history and polychromatic nature of Ordehlay challenges assumptions that masquerade exists only in small, rural African communities, or that it migrated into the city as primarily state-sponsored or folkloric performances that elevate nationalisms and package cultures. Their positionality on a spectrum of masquerades that interconnect and range from primarily entertainment-based societies like Jollay and Ordehlay to the most protected of secret societies, like Poro or Sande, challenges a persistent “one tribe—one style” paradigm—wherein culture and ethnicity are bundled into neat, discrete packages and styles—on multiple levels.³ By exploring their specific historical contexts and the visuality of these vivid, kinetic masquerades beyond the confines of art historical, anthropological, or even visual studies canons, my research contributes to deconstructing tenacious and durable binaries: traditional versus contemporary, tradition and modernity, Africa versus the West, local and global, and urban versus rural. Such binaries illustrate that colonialism—and its abiding dance partner, the Museum—still cast shadows, first as a proof and extension of empire and then throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century as a contributor to an essentialized perspective of culture, art, and canon. Urban masquerade phenomena like Ordehlay ultimately agitate the “center” implied by oppositional constructs and seek to disrupt and decenter—what some might call “decolonization” or decoloniality.



Figure 3 A typical Ordehlay procession at the midway point of the parade route in the neighborhood of Mountain Cut, Freetown, Boxing Day, December 26, 2017. One of the roughly sixteen to twenty devils that comes out during each day is visible at the front of the procession. Courtesy of the author.

A Note on African Arts, Ordehlay, and Visual Studies

Research in the arts of Africa takes an interdisciplinary approach; it is not squarely anthropological or “ethnographic,” nor is it singularly art historical. Similarly, Ordehlay masquerades are neither contemporary nor traditional, per se, neither ethnographic nor canonical. Examples can be found in art galleries and museums in the “global North”⁴ as well as in Sierra Leone, and they also populate a select number of private and smaller museum collections in Los Angeles, Minneapolis, and New York. Ordehlay mask forms do therefore sell on the market, albeit at a low price and only within a limited set of interested collectors. As such, Ordehlay must be considered outside these confining notions of art and anthropology. This is where visual studies, my disciplinary foundation, proves to be a valuable tool. Ordehlay is a hybrid, multicultural, and mutable artform performed by marginalized communities that are negotiating tenuous conditions and identities. Research of this vibrant masquerade, an anticanonical African art, necessitates the more free-form interdisciplinarity of visual studies. Again—a rogue mask calls for a rogue discipline.

As a relatively new field, at least when I began studying it in 2012, visual studies is a somewhat ephemeral and transitory, perhaps even slippery, discipline. Its evaluative approach to any given visuality, or vision itself, is a key component, along with its use of various disciplinary criterion and its focus on tension or rupture. It follows, then, that visual culture has been accused of being “too hybrid” and “too multicultural,” among other things, but this is precisely what is needed for an “acculturated” artform such as Ordehlay.⁵ This perceived weakness is actually its strength. Aren’t the contested spaces, perhaps even the ones between disciplines, the most interesting, the most telling?

Growing scholarship in arts that integrate or reinvent “traditional” forms, such as that of urban masquerading, is indicative of a recent and progressive shift in the field that is removing the static boundaries between traditional and contemporary, and revealing more fluent and unfixed notions of the arts. These concerns also characterize visual studies. Fracturing, displacing, and reinscribing constructed categories of art and culture is the future perfect of not only African arts scholarship but the social sciences and humanities as well. It is imperative that scholars study urban creative outputs like masquerade—as we should study less visible communities and their arts—in order to understand multicultural iterations of arts and “traditions” as well as stay relevant to public and scholarly communities in Africa and abroad. It is essential that rooted generalizations of an imagined, mythical Africa (bundled into words like *tradition*) are dislodged and shifted in order to make room for a broader understanding of the arts of Africa as local and specifically meaningful iterations endemic to global experience and dialogically engaged with temporality. Ordehlay challenges, intervenes, and decomposes essentialist notions that to a certain extent still prevail in art history and in museum spaces. Adding to a growing chorus of voices, Ordehlay and visual studies are paving the way to a more supple and nimble vision of African art as a field, and to an understanding of ideas like “tradition” from African perspectives.

New Masks Now: Applying Visual Studies Methodology to a Major Exhibition Project

The above is a modified excerpt from my 2018 dissertation, “Mobilizing Masquerades: Urban Cultural Arts in Sierra Leone and Beyond,” that has since led to the planning of a major traveling exhibition and publication project currently titled *New Masks Now: Artists Innovating Masquerade in Contemporary West Africa*. This NEH-funded exhibition is organized by the North Carolina Museum of Art, in partnership with colleagues and institutions in Senegal, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone.



Figure 4 Cutting Grass, Ordeblay devil by Oju Feraf Ordeblay Society artists, parading in Freetown on Boxing Day, December 26, 2017. Courtesy of the author.

Opening in 2025, it will travel to various institutions in the United States and Canada, as well as Senegal, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, and potentially Burkina Faso, until about 2027. Though I am directing the project, I am joined by colleagues Lisa Homann, Jordan Fenton, and Hervé Youmbi (fig. 5). As we argue, masquerade has long stood as the iconic “African” performance genre, yet the artists who create masquerades are often unacknowledged and underrepresented in exhibitions and publications. *New Masks Now* will showcase the artworks and prioritize the voices of individual creators to offer a fresh take on the vitality of masquerade arts, making clear that creativity in African masking is fundamentally contemporary. To accomplish this, the exhibition features four artists: Chief Ekpenyong Bassey Nsa (Nigeria), David Sanou (Burkina Faso), Sheku “Goldenfinger” Fofanah (Sierra Leone), and Hervé Youmbi (Cameroon), privileging their voices, motivations, artistic choices; the economic networks with which they engage; and how each responsively adapts their respective genres locally and globally.

The project arose from a recognition that contemporary masquerade artists are excluded from the African and broader art historical “canons”—broadly defined as artworks and artists considered fundamental to the field. By featuring acclaimed, living masquerade artists, we critically examine the ways in which African masquerade is innately connected to the global art market. Another major goal of *New Masks Now* is to present fresh and transparent methodologies for documenting, commissioning, and conducting fieldwork, and to suggest more ethical collecting and research models for humanities scholars working with underrepresented groups, bringing to the fore pertinent issues relating to collecting, ownership, and the ethics of working with living artists. All contributors critically examine the processes and implications of commissioning works of arts from living (often marginalized) artists, focusing on the agency of creative individuals and fostering transparency in museum and curatorial practice.

New Masks Now will feature thirteen full masquerade ensembles, ten of which have been newly commissioned and visually documented for the project—a tactic heretofore unprecedented in museum presentations. Rigorous documentation will reveal the precise tactics each of us took in our research collaborations, and the companion publication will provide summaries and recommendations from this work, building and contributing to new ethical models for future scholarship. Local and interdisciplinary programming tailored by venue will present unique opportunities for connecting to regional diasporic communities, global artists, and issues pertinent to our lived global realities.

Mobilizing Masquerades: Sheku “Goldenfinger” Fofanah

As I have argued elsewhere, for over two decades scholars have turned their attention to visual or painterly contemporary urban expressions while largely overlooking masquerade arts of African cities, which have been approached as importations from rural contexts or as state-sponsored festivals.⁶ As such, there have been very few documented urban masquerading traditions in Africa and little discussion of their performance, save a few noted contributions.⁷ Ordehlay cultural societies of Freetown provide a compelling example of urban-invented arts and their spread to towns in the outlying rural areas of Sierra Leone, as well as abroad. This is counterintuitive to the typical spread of masquerades, which, according to scholars, spread from the rural into the urban zones. Further, while urban-based artists and members are interacting with communities upline—a term that substitutes for “provincial” or anywhere outside the capital city—they are also interacting with international branches of the societies. Both interactions are strengthened by the



Figure 5 Artist Hervé Youmbi with his Rhino Mask installation. Courtesy of Axis Gallery.

collapse of time and space characteristic of the techno-global landscape of contemporary Africa.

For one chapter of the exhibition, I am collaborating with Sheku “Goldenfinger” Fofanah, an artist I have admired since we first began working together in 2016. While he is less known outside Sierra Leone and The Gambia, he is regarded highly for his skills as a designer, and particularly for his Ordehlay masquerades. Fofanah and his apprentices designed and built the three aforementioned masquerade ensembles for *New Masks Now*: one Ordehlay and two Fairy ensembles. Fabric-based Fairy masquerades are flirty female characters of the Jollay Society, which like Ordehlay is an entertainment genre performed at holidays, celebrations, and on Independence Day. One of the Fairies was left “clean”—unperformed and unspoiled per the artists’ wishes—and traveled directly to its new home at the Fitchburg Art Museum in Massachusetts, where it will await travel as part of *New Masks Now*. The second Fairy was created as a “twin,” with the (artist and curatorial) intent that it remain in Sierra Leone to perform with 360-degree video documentation during Christmas celebrations in December 2022. Afterward, and in consultation with the Ministry of Tourism and Cultural Affairs, it will be donated to the Sierra Leone National Museum, along with copies of all associated footage. Our curatorial and creative team advocates that such



Figure 6 An Ordeblay devil with society members clearing space for it to perform in Freetown, Boxing Day, December 26, 2016. Courtesy of the author.

commissioning practices should not be solely extractive but give back to the communities with which they are collaborating. Such decisions are informed by visual studies and decoloniality.

Featuring these newly commissioned masquerades, this section of *New Masks Now* documents Fofanah's influence on artistic creativity in Sierra Leone and traces the movement of these masking genres, and his masks specifically, from their original site of production and performance in Freetown to new performative arenas in outlying Sierra Leonean towns and global diasporic locales. We ask, why are masquerades becoming geographically mobile, and how are they being mobilized in their new localities? As Fofanah and I have seen firsthand, artists and members of international branches utilize messaging platforms to purchase, monitor, track, sell, and inspire masquerades, making them not only social applications but business tools. Through their migrations, articulations, and aesthetic shifts, Fofanah's artworks illustrate that masquerades move not just in performative contexts but as part of larger urbanization and techno-globalization processes, thereby



Figure 7 Tetina Cultural (Ordeblay) Society with their Woman Tote Man devil, Mountain Cnt, Freetown, December 26, 2016. Courtesy of the author.

challenging conventional notions of “urban” and “rural,” as well as “home” and “diaspora.” The very nature of rural and urban, city and village, home and diaspora as binary humanities terms must then be examined and tweaked, allowing for a more fluid understanding of them in an African context and providing audiences opportunities to connect to material culture at a deeper level.

While Fofanah’s works instantiate the complex relationships that have developed and that exist between city-based masquerade artists and their rural and international clientele, a complementary ensemble created by the Tetina Cultural Ordehlay Society of Freetown (fig. 7) provides a concrete example of a masquerade’s mobility across international borders. Titled *Woman Tote Man*, it was first performed at Christmas processions in Freetown in 2016, and then again on May 6, 2018, in Los Angeles, where its body was altered to suit its new sociotemporal

home. Traveling again, it now resides in yet another culturally constructed space: the museum collection (Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art).

Together with the Tetina example and intimate real-time presentations, Fofanah's masquerades illustrate mobility in more ways than one and remind us of the mutability of terminology, discipline, and methodology and the porosity of ideas and borders. Collaborating directly with the artist, his community, and the local ministry and museum at multiple levels to dictate the multifaceted trajectories and lives of the masquerade ensembles sets new ethical precedents and foundational methodologies. Such approaches are necessary to de- and reconstruct notions of "tradition," agitate and reset traditional museum practices/boundaries, and truly appreciate masquerade arts as fundamentally relevant, exciting, and contemporary—approaches very much informed by visual studies.

Note: This essay is a unique opportunity to discuss my personal relationship with visual studies as a discipline, as a training and research methodology, and certainly as a career philosophy. It doesn't come up much in casual conversation, and rarely does one get to write at length about such personal and scholarly trajectories. I am grateful to *Refract* for allowing me this opportunity to reflect.

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Notes

¹ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

² This is of course not new, but the level of scrutiny has grown regarding the power of curatorial roles, particularly for Africanists and following the popular success of movies like *Black Panther* and the highly visible media coverage of Benin Kingdom arts.

³ Sidney Littlefield Kasfir, "African Art and Authenticity: A Text with a Shadow," *African Arts* 25, no. 2 (1984): 50–53, 96–97, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3337059>.

⁴ Yale University Art Gallery, the Brooklyn Museum, the Fowler Museum at UCLA, the Welt Museum in Vienna, and the Smithsonian Institution. I recognize that "global North" is half of another enduring binary. I use it here for ease of geographic designation.

⁵ James Elkins, *Visual Studies: A Skeptical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 23, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203700587>; W. J. T. Mitchell, "Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture," *Journal of Visual Culture* 1, no. 2 (2002): 162, <https://doi.org/10.1177/147041290200100202>.

⁶ Amanda M. Maples, "Mobilizing Masquerades: Urban Cultural Arts in Sierra Leone and Beyond" (PhD diss., University of California, Santa Cruz, 2018); Maples, "Unravelling Political and Historical Threads: Youth and Masquerade Mobility in Freetown," *Social Dynamics: A Journal of African Studies* 44, no. 3 (2018): 487–509, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02533952.2018.1509552>; Maples, "Urban Roots and Rural Routes: Migrating Masquerades of Freetown and Beyond," *Critical Interventions* 12, no. 3 (2018): 275–93, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19301944.2018.1532377>; Sidney Littlefield Kasfir, *Contemporary African Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999); Susan Vogel, *Africa Explores: Twentieth Century African Art* (New York: Center for African Art, 1994).

⁷ Jordan A. Fenton, "Masking and Money in a Nigerian Metropolis: The Economics of Performance in Calabar," *Critical Interventions* 10, no. 2 (2016): 172–92, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19301944.2016.1205364>; Jordan A. Fenton, *Masquerade and Money in Urban Nigeria: The Case of Calabar* (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2022); Benjamin Hufbauer and Bess Reed, "Adamma: A Contemporary Igbo Maiden Spirit," *African Arts* 36, no. 3 (2003): 56–95, <https://doi.org/10.1162/afar.2003.36.3.56>; John W. Nunley, *Moving with the Face of the Devil: Art and Politics in Urban West Africa* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1987).