



ANTHROPOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

Video Transcript

Masking and unmasking

GEORGE-PAUL MEIU: For anthropologists, masks are no ordinary objects. They are the means by which people move between the visible and the invisible, between the ordinary and the extraordinary – and in the process, they make worlds.

In other words, when people put on masks – when they act upon the world with or through them, they are starting a process of transforming something in themselves and in their society, be that a status, a season, a sentiment, or a situation.

Masks can limit certain outcomes – people use them to scare off unwanted spirits or negative forces, for example. But masks can also open up new possibilities and invite positive spirits, life force, abundance, and wellbeing. They can question or reinforce authority, they can support or disrupt economic transactions. Throughout these roles, masks are a way for people to express, shape, and respond to the things that matter most in their society.

Masks have long captured the interest of anthropologists. Anthropologists have studied masks as they appear in rituals and ceremonies. This could be so-called "rites of passage" – that is, rites associated with major life changes such as birth, coming of age, marriage, and death. Masks are also part of "rites of propitiation" – in other words, rites associated with growth and prosperity in farming and herding.

Beyond rituals, anthropologists have also looked at how masked performances relate to political power and the state, especially in places shaped by colonialism, socialism, or global capitalism. People across the world have used masked performances to respond to or reflect on shifting political realities. And masks themselves, as objects, have moved across borders as part of transnational networks. They can become indigenous artworks or religious items that are bought, sold, or adapted to different cultural settings.

AI face-recognition technology is on the rise, promoting the idea that our deepest, most unchangeable identities can be read directly from our faces. This development raises new and important questions about what it means to wear a mask in today's world. From world-famous carnivals like the one in Rio de Janeiro to political protesters or guerrilla fighters across the globe, people continue to use masks in powerful ways.



A mask can be seen like an extra face – one that can help us protect our identity, but also express something that might be hard to show otherwise. It can help us "save face", both literally and figuratively.

How do anthropologists study masks and masked performances? They often begin by looking at what we call "mimesis" – which basically means imitation. In other words, they ask: what is the mask or the performance trying to imitate, represent, or call attention to? Is the masked performance directly or indirectly pointing to certain social dynamics or spiritual entities? And what does this act of mimesis mean in the context in which it is happening?

By asking these questions, anthropologists show that masks are more than just decorations. They're powerful tools for expressing identity, belief, and change. Whether used in ritual, protest, celebration, or performance, masks can generate meanings while also appearing to hide something behind their surface. Studying them helps reveal how people across cultural and historical contexts use performance to make sense of the world in which they live.