



ANTHROPOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

Podcast Transcript

Travelling Artefacts: Egúngún Yoruba mask

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ZAINABU JALLO: Anna Schmid, what is the relationship between the elaborate craftsmanship of a Yoruba ceremonial mask originating from West Africa and the path it has taken to arrive at the Museum der Kulturen in Basel?

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ANNA SCHMID: When I first started looking at the Egúngún mask, I was impressed by the variety and abundance of materials used. Velvet, cotton, wool, animal skin, cowrie shells, glass beads, and thousands of sequins, to name just a few. The sequins are attached with tiny little beads. All of this creates a sea of colors that reflects the light and changes with the sunlight. And all of this means an enormous amount of work. So first of all, I see a wonderful creation that has come a long way, and with it a lot of work, effort, and the values associated with it.

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Secondly, I doubt that we will ever truly understand the meaning behind the mask and the changes it has undergone with each performance, or perhaps still undergoes, even in the Museum. But we get a rough idea. I believe that its diaspora begins with not understanding, with no longer being able to participate in a performance. It is not just about displacement, but rather about being seen, understood, and challenging action.

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Thirdly, we must consider that this artifact may have been made for sale. Perhaps it was never intended to appear in a performance, but would that really affect its journey and what happens to the object along the way?



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Then the object itself is in the diaspora. Can it unfold its effect here? No, for that it needs movement, dance, and performance, and that's not possible in the Museum.

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In the exhibition on Migration in 2017, we displayed a group of statues that spoke to the audience. The most important question was why objects are welcomed as migrants, but people are often rejected. In their speech, the objects referred to themselves as migrants. And I quote:

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"We are migrants from all corners of the world. We served our cultures in different capacities. We were cherished, even venerated. We had a good life until we became migrants. Our histories are as varied as we are. Collected in the name of science, chosen, because we were beautiful, sold for a bit of luxury, discarded, because we had grown old."

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All of this could also apply to the Egúngún mask. The mask would be a little bit of everything, definitely a feast for the eyes, testimony to a living culture, and thus an attempt to understand it, but with the awareness that we can only partially decipher it. If it is made for trade, it could be a source of livelihood for the seller, or a new mask should be made and the price for the old one could be used to buy the materials for the new.

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In short, we are far from knowing the whole story behind the mask. We imagine many things, and every twist and turn along the way could add further meanings to them, even if it's not used as a mask to dance and perform with at Yoruba rituals.