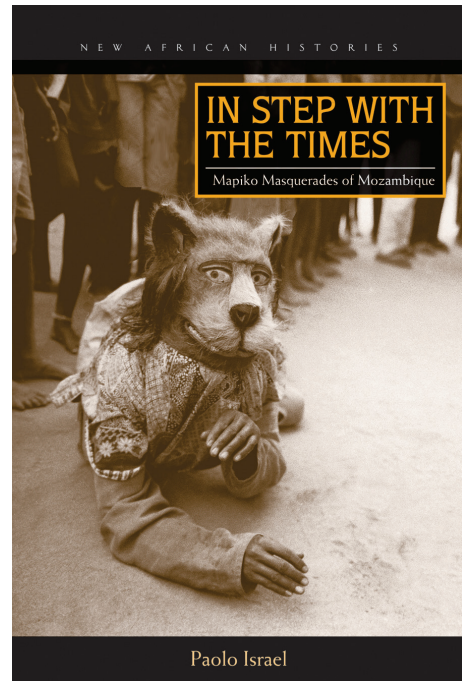


Review - In Step With The Times

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Paolo Israel, *In Step with the Times: Mapiko masquerades of Mozambique*, Ohio University Press, Athens, Ohio, 2014. ISBN 978-0-82142-088-1

OVERVIEW

Mapiko are Makonde masquerades performed at puberty rituals and funeral ceremonies although now there are contemporary variations with altered forms performed in public places (out of the villages) on national holidays while some groups participate in competitions. Mapiko, then and now, involve many interdependent (some might argue inseparable) art forms – music, dance, song, mask, performer, costume, place and audience. Paolo Israel's *In Step with the Times* (2014) is concerned with the changes during the 1920-2010 period, although the emphasis is more recent, relating to his fieldwork. The author has been researching mapiko for 11 years, three of which he was based in Muidumbe on the Makonde Plateau in the north of Mozambique, the heartland of the performance art form. To get to grips with the changes he observed, studied, experienced and heard, Israel provides wide-ranging explanations about his processes, concerns and thinking in the 'Introduction – Rhythms of Change.' He opens with the story of an old man, initially anonymous but later identified, recalling makers and 'ancestral masks being ceaselessly reinvented.'¹ The last two words become an insistent refrain in the book.

1. Paolo Israel, *In Step with the Times: Mapiko masquerades of Mozambique*, Ohio University Press, Athens, Ohio, 2014, p 1.

Israel examines the previous research of Jorge and Margot Dias, the first official ethnographers appointed by the Portuguese authorities in 1957. He raises the colonial which they represent with its lingering modes of dialogue and dialectics. To provide a way through to understanding change in mapiko and its results Israel uses two approaches – performativity and historicity. He writes:

Extending the metaphor of theater to objects previously understood as magico-religious was the most effective strategy to unmake the legacy of colonial primitivism. Rituals, dances and masquerades were shown to be sophisticated expressive idioms, arenas for power and identity negotiations, institutions that mold gendered and cultured subjectivities, and sites of knowledge production.²

The performativity approach was introduced to African dance in 1975 by Terence Ranger who worked from and, in turn, influenced research and methodologies on popular culture. Later research published by Zoe Strothers in *Inventing Masks Agency and History in the Art of the Central Pende* (1998) is directly related to Israel's project and provides a useful precedent because she names makers and deals with invention. However, Israel finds her book limited as it still operates within an ethnic frame and is short on historicity. Recognising these deficiencies, he takes a corrective measure, attending to the history of Mozambique. It is of note that historical events are not literally enacted in mapiko masquerades but brought into play and heard in the words of the songs.

Israel seeks a theory which will begin to explain the internal processes of change in masquerades and finds this in Gregory Bateson's schismogenesis which introduces 'ritual rivalry' as a central concept with a push in the direction of the competitive. 'Ritual rivalry,' argues Israel, has existed 'since time immemorial,'³ meaning as long as the collective memory of the people interviewed could remember.

Given the complexity of mapiko, a single analytic mode would be inadequate. Therefore, Israel's methodology involves what he calls a 'virtuous circle'⁴ moving between 'the aesthetic analyses of specific genres, the ethnography of ritual performance and oral history.'⁵ He talks about the process of changes and the problems he encountered while writing. Micro-history, or the atomistic, detailed study of the particular, presented its own problems as did the multiplicity with which he was working.

Israel takes us on journeys through the Makonde plateau and elsewhere in Mozambique. He follows individual carvers and performers of whom he has heard. With the author, we discover if these artists are still alive and experience the reconstruction of older narratives. Makers and performers are named, biographies recorded and accounts assessed. Israel writes with an ear to the local and includes translations or counterparts in Makonde without becoming sentimental or nostalgic. He tracks, in detail, the changes in the masquerades, in their totality and in their

2. Ibid. p 4.

3. Ibid. pp 6-7.

4. Ibid. p 12.

5. Ibid.

parts. He uses the personal pronoun and inserts subjective observations to provide the reader with glimpses into the country and performance experiences, all the while remaining acutely aware of the limitations of the written in attempting to describe such phenomenologies.

The stubborn question then is what does one do in a static, silent text to represent the sounds of spoken and sung words, drumming and clanging metal, bells on costumes, the moving body and the participative audience? In his writing and layout, Israel does several things to make visible – allusively not literally – levels of action. He explores a method invented by Jacques Revel, which is like the ‘play of scales,’ to accommodate different ideas, imbrications: ‘[M]icro historians rely on sudden shifts of scale and perspective with this method.’⁶ Therefore, ‘[t]he micro can be juxtaposed to the macro, aesthetics read against a background of social change, without subsuming the one into the other.’⁷ In practice, writing up the complexity, detail and overlays of the history he uncovers, Israel places the content into sections and numbers each sequentially, common practice among micro historians. Words of songs are separated from the general text, spaced like the lines of a poem with adjacent translations in English and located in spaces where they act as both song and historical reference. It is in the words of the songs that history is told. He includes black and white photographs, unfortunately not the best quality. Separate from the text, Israel has set up webpages with his video recording of performances so readers can see in colour and hear mapiko.

A PARTIAL VIEW: MASKS

Part Two, ‘Cosmopolitanism,’ opens with ‘Meat is Meat: Modernism in the aftermath of slavery,’ a pivotal chapter as it deals with what modernism means on the Makonde Plateau and how it has played out. Before Portuguese colonization, mapiko was organised along established lineages but during and after colonisation the lineage structures were ‘loosened’ and performers and carvers were selected for their abilities. It is selection which ‘made possible the emergence of new sophisticated forms of masquerading.’⁸ The ‘emphasis on invention and novelty’⁹ Israel suggests were much like what was happening in Europe with Picasso and Braque at the same time. While I can see where Israel is coming from, it remains a problematic assumption. In order to come to grips with modernism in Africa, a different kind of analysis is required, one which takes into account consciousness about art in a Western sense. Yet, out of this, Israel raises an important question: In a country like Mozambique, where there are few written sources, ‘[h]ow is one to historicise this cultural break?’¹⁰ Other sources are available. For instance, the masks collected earlier by Europeans. These are the ‘documents’ that need to be ‘read’ and for this, Israel uses stylistic analysis, the art historians’ tool. It is one of the few places in the book where the mask is used to reconstruct history and the ‘readings’ show a break around ca. 1930s

6. Ibid. p 14.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid. p 58.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

marked by what he terms ‘geometric abstraction.’¹¹ Israel is at pains to point out the dangers of seeing masks in isolation and metonymically: ‘[P]erformance itself cannot be inferred from the analysis of masks. More than its form, what gives meaning to the mask is the dance that brings it to life and the songs that anchor it to historical actuality.’¹² Yet, as separate, independent objects, Makonde helmet masks have fascinated and continue to interest collectors of African art, though to Israel this is a colonial hangover linked to notions of ‘primitiveness.’

The final break with colonialism occurs during the revolution and is examined in customary detail in the chapter “Ten Years of War: Shaping the People.” It is a crucial period not only for the country but especially for the Makonde who were close to the Tanzanian border. Young men were recruited by Frelimo and the Makonde were among the first communities to undergo social reorganisation and cultural interventions framed within ‘revolutionary nationalism.’ Israel looks at the ways in which mapiko was adapted changed and reinvented.¹³ Portraits appear as masks of guerilla fighters in their berets, peasants and politicians, such as the one reproduced in the book of Samora Machel atop a full ‘traditional’ costume.¹⁴ The realism is a shift and interesting in terms of the direct impact of politics on art.

The last section, ‘After Socialism (1992-2009),’ coincides with the end of the civil war in 1992 and the ballot box in 1994. During this period, additions were made to the masquerade iconography, such as new masks of wild animals. These and other invented forms incorporated ready-made, machine made, mass produced, up cycled materials. For Israel, the period is ‘marked by exhilaration, anxiety and nostalgia and by the rediscovery of carnivalesque ambivalence...’¹⁵ These masks of wild animals show something of the last words and play with notions of realism down to including real animal hair. They were originally documented in 1997 in the village of Matambane in the district of Muidimbe. They are worth a mention not only because they are extraordinary but also because one photograph by Sergio Santimano from 1997 was selected for the prime position on the cover of the book. The costumes no longer evoke older forms and performers are dressed in worn Western clothing. From here, the mask spread but was initially dismissed by officialdom as ‘new,’ although Israel finds a source in the large-eared *nejjale*.¹⁶

Other inventions include modern imported ideas, such as the soccer game played by 22 fully dressed mapiko or the sorcerer who replaced the cross on his forehead with a Nike sign. These lead Israel to conclude: ‘Consumerism, not religion, was now the strongest arcane power from which a sorcerer might want to draw.’¹⁷ Changes that could be accounted for by the imposition of

11. Ibid. p 59.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid. pp 146-160.

14. Ibid. p 166, Figure 12.

15. Ibid. p 207.

16. Ibid. pp 214-215. Meaning “don’t go astray” and used to remind people to go to meetings and not wander off.

17. Ibid. p 250.

LAST VIEWS

In the end, we have a historical, richly complex, academic narrative covering 90 years where history has been reinstated and which provides insights into change and how local conditions and circumstances affect mapiko and its constituent parts. Israel makes it abundantly clear that ‘the aesthetic practice of Mapiko would be opaque without the work of historical reconstruction.’¹⁸ The narrative is also about the people’s collective memory, recorded at a moment which reveals how much is remembered, how memory is important to them as individuals and how it has shaped their sense of collective belonging.

By working with performativity and historicity, Israel demonstrates that mapiko reacts, responds and embraces contemporary events. It is a substantial and convincing text. However, despite the fact that the author constantly refers and relates to other groups along the east coast working in masquerades, I am not sure if he manages successfully to escape the ethnic frame, a problem he identifies in the work of Strothers. It is arguable that ethnic identity is integral to mapiko and is linked inextricably to history and to a particular locatedness.

An intense, close-up and detailed study of a particular form in a particular context in a particular place can have a wider reach and application. The book not only gives us a closer examination of mapiko in practice and reinvention but the methodology can add layers to the study of masquerades and to thinking about appropriate modes of analysis in African art. From here on, any study of Mozambican masks or masquerades will need to take account of this book. Historian, performer or musician with an interest in Mozambique will get something out of this book. I end with a quote from an insider, as it encapsulates the complexities of working across cultures. When Israel and his guide and research companion, Atanasio Cosme Nhussi, who claimed to be the best dancer in the country, first saw the animal masks their response was surprise and Nhussi commented ‘They call it traditional, but this is our contemporary.’¹⁹

18. *Ibid.* p 258.

19. *Ibid.* p 211.