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Wild, wacky and sometimes serious: The surreal outfits of African masquerading

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You probably didn't realize that when you were a kid dressing up to traipse around your neighborhood looking for free candy on Halloween that you were participating in a profound ritualistic tradition that is multiple centuries old. But you were. People have been dressing up for multitudinous reasons for many, many years, sometimes for entertainment and sometimes for very serious, even religious reasons. There are a host of traditions that involve putting on costumes throughout the world, from lion and dragon dances in Asia, Carnivale in Brazil and the vibrant and colorful masquerade traditions in Africa.

Photographer Phyllis Galembo visited Nigeria in 1985 where she first encountered African masquerade traditions. She became fascinated and, for the next nearly three decades, has been documenting those traditions in Africa and its diaspora. Galembo's resulting book, 'Maske,' was first published in 2010 but has since been updated and republished this year (Aperture, 2016). The book collects 106 images, sometimes entertaining, sometimes frightening, exploring the masquerades.

Historian and curator Chika Okeke-Agula, who participated in masquerades when he was a child growing up in Nigeria, introduces the book, explaining the significance of the traditions documented within:

"The masks themselves have often been seen as embodied spirits and ancestral beings who return to the world of the living at specific occasions. They are part of a cosmological complex within which life exists as a continuous cycle, perpetually mediated by the action of deities, nature spirits, ancestors and other human beings. Masking entails the donning of the physical mask/costume by (mostly) men, which equally implies the ritual transformation of carrier and mask into an ancestral or metaphysical being. When fully activated, masks become "spirits made tangible", as Herbert Cole has argued in his book "I Am Not Myself: The Art of African Masquerade."