Phyllis Galembo's fascination with costume began as a child, when she would go trick-or-treating near her home in Long Island, New York, often alone, dressed in a variety of ensembles made by her mother. 'I still remember the bric-a-brac that she used to fashion my outfits,' Galembo says. 'This is where my lifelong obsession began. I collected Hallowe'en costumes for over 15 years.'

After studying photography and printmaking at the University of Wisconsin, in the 1970s she began photographing subjects wearing festival costumes. 'I have a lot of pictures of my friends as upside-down Easter baskets,' she says. Then, in 1985, she travelled to Nigeria to photograph priests and priestesses with their traditional costumes and ceremonial objects. 'I was fascinated by the idea of ritual clothes that had spiritual, transforming power. I followed the story to Haiti, where the priests and priestesses of voodoo are believed to transform via their clothing into magical beings. Once I discovered the Jacmel Kanaval [Haiti's pre-Lenten festival], I felt I had found my métier in the masquerade.'

Masquerading has a long history in Africa. Long before the Europeans arrived the tradition criss-crossed the continent, giving birth to endless variations. Galembo, now a professor of fine art at Albany University in New York, has spent more than 20 years capturing the masquerade's myriad forms, following festivals and carnivals across Nigeria, Benin, Ghana, Sierra Leone and Burkina Faso, and chronicling their re-emergence in places such as Haiti as a result of the African diaspora.

As alien as her images seem, Galembo—who describes her interest as 'both artistic and anthropological'—says that they are only a more strident embodiment of rituals that feature heavily in the West. They are celebrations to give thanks for spring, fertility and prosperity; to banish the threatening forces of the winter; to poke fun at authority figures—they are their Hallowe'en, their harvest festival, their Notting Hill, Rio and Venice carnivals.

In Ghana the tradition began as a party. From the late 19th century Europeans living in the port of Winneba would celebrate New Year by donning masks and dancing at the town's bars. In the early 1920s two local men, Abraham and Yamoah, angry at not being invited, created a rival masquerade of their own. They called themselves the Nobles, and made comical costumes that satirised religious figures and local bureaucrats. Such was their success that rival groups

**HIDDEN MEANING**

The photographer Phyllis Galembo combines art and anthropology in her celebration of masquerading rituals in Africa and the Caribbean

**Costume-makers plunder material from tar to lizard excrement, sugar syrup, coal dust, leaves, cowry shells, roots, sisal, gourds and shredded plastic**
formed, some boasting hundreds of members. By
the 1950s Ghana's masquerade had become a
national, annual competition. For a week from
Boxing Day clusters of outlandish figures march
through the streets all over the country, in
costumes that have taken up to a year to create.

African masking generally invokes deities, nature
spirits and ancestors. In north-west Zambia, once
year the elders select boys aged between seven
and 13 to participate in initiation ceremonies
known as Mukanda. Over several months in an
isolated bush camp the boys learn about their roles
as husbands and fathers. When Mukanda is com-
plete the village celebrates the boys' transformation
by calling on ancestral characters known as
Likishi. In masks made from beeswax slathered
over twigs and cardboard, and body costumes
woven from sisal, the Likishi masqueraders per-
form a frenetic dance to entertain and scare the
audience. There are more than a hundred different
characters, with new ones added all the time. Some
of them reflect the modern world, such as Honda,
Helicopter and Airplane.

Galembó's images all follow a similar pattern.
She never uses a studio, but seeks out bare walls of
houses and clearings in the woods, against which
she photographs her subjects, usually full-length.
She lights each scene meticulously, setting up her
equipment at dawn, then waiting for the masquer-
aders to arrive. 'Often we would work the day after
our first meeting with the local chief, which was usually sweetened with gifts of cash and gin,' she says. 'Masqueraders would then show up in twos or threes, followed by children and onlookers. Once a whole troupe arrived by motorcycle.'

Galenbo's photographs celebrate, above all, the creativity and ingenuity of the costume-makers, whose skills are passed down through many generations. They plunder material from tar to lizard excrement, sugar syrup, coal dust, leaves, cowry

‘Often we would work the day after our first meeting with the local chief, which was usually sweetened with gifts of cash and gin'
shells, roots, sisal, gourds and shredded plastic to achieve their effects. Some, particularly in Haiti, use grisly pigments to colour their skin from top to toe, adding real animal skins and even stuffed heads to complete their look.

Galenbo’s images have now been collected into a book, Maske, introduced by Chika Okeke-Agulu, an assistant professor of art at Princeton University and a native of Umoojia in eastern Nigeria, where some of Galenbo’s photographs were taken. Masking, he points out, is in decline, suffering from the political, religious and cultural pressures on traditional modes of life. ‘What is remarkable is that it has not declined more,’ he writes. ‘And yet it makes one wonder – with great regret – what knowledge of masking in Africa is now forever lost.’

Lucy Davies
‘Maske’ by Phyllis Galenbo (Chris Boot, £30) is available for £26 plus £1.25 p&p from Telegraph Books (0844-871 1515; books.telegraph.co.uk)


Bottom Fancy Dress and Rasta, Nobles Masquerade Group, Winneba, Ghana, 2009; Agbo Mej (Two Rams Never Drink at the Same Time from One Pot), Egungun Masquerade, Bohicon, Benin, 2006