Facing Value

Radical perspectives from the arts

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The persistence of games is remarkable. Empires and institutions may disappear, but games survive with the same rules and sometimes even the same paraphernalia. The chief reason is that they are not important and possess the permanence of the insignificant. Heretofore lies a major mystery. For in order to benefit from this kind of fluid and yet obstinate continuity, they must be like the leaves on the trees which survive from one season to the next and remain identical. Games must be ever similar to animal skins, the design on butterfly wings, and the spiral curves of shell fish which are transmitted unchanged from generation to generation. However, games do not have this hereditary sameness. They are innumerable and changeable. They are clad in thousands of unequally distributed shapes, just as vegetable species are, but infinitely more adaptable, spreading and acclimating themselves with disconcerting ease. Their diffusion does not remain determinate for very long. It is noteworthy that playing with dolls and flying kites, decidedly Occidental, were unknown in Europe until the eighteenth century. Other games have been prevalent all over the world in one form or another since ancient times. They provide proof of the constancy of human nature on certain levels. If their origins could only occasionally be pinpointed, their unlimited diffusion could not be denied. They are all-persuasive. The impressive universality of rules, principles, apparatus, and capabilities must be admitted.

1. THE INTERDEPENDENCE OF GAMES AND CULTURE

Stability and universality are complementary. They seem all the more significant since games are largely dependent upon the cultures in which they are practiced. They affect their preferences, prolong their customs, and reflect their beliefs. In antiquity, hopscotch was a labyrinth in which one pushed a stone—i.e. the soul—toward the exit. With Christianity, the design became elongated and simplified, reproducing the layout of a basilica. The problem in moving the stone became to help the soul attain heaven, paradise, halo, or glory, coinciding with the high altar of the church, and schematically represented on the ground by a series of rectangles. In India, chess was played with four kings. The game spread to medieval Europe. Under the dual influence of the cults of the Virgin and of courtly love, one of the kings was changed to a queen or lady which became the most powerful piece, while the king was limited to the quasipassive role of figurehead in the game. However, it is important that these vicissitudes have not affected the essential continuity of the games of hopscotch or chess.

One can even go further and posit in addition a truly reciprocal relationship between a society and the games it likes to play. There is indeed an increasing affinity between their rules and the common characteristics and deficiencies of the members of the groups. These preferred and widely diffused games reflect, on the one hand,
the tendencies, tastes, and ways of thought that are prevalent, while, at the same time, in educating and training the players in these very virtues or eccentricities, they subtly confirm them in their habits and preferences. Thus, a game that is esteemed by a people may at the same time be utilized to define the society’s moral or intellectual character, provide proof of its precise meaning, and contribute to its popular acceptance by accentuating the relevant qualities.

It is not absurd to try diagnosing a civilization in terms of the games that are especially popular there. In fact, if games are cultural factors and images, it follows that to a certain degree a civilization and its content may be characterized by its games. They necessarily reflect its culture pattern and provide useful indications as to the preferences, weakness, and strength of a given society at a particular stage of its evolution. Perhaps for an infinite intelligence, for the demon imagined by Maxwell, Sparta’s destiny could be read in the military rigor of the games in the palaestra, that of Athens in the aphorisms of the sophists, that of Rome in the combats of the gladiators, and the decadence of Byzantium in the conflicts in the hippodrome. Games lead to habits and create reflexes. They cause certain kinds of reactions to be anticipated, and as a consequence the opposite reactions come to be regarded as brutal, snide, subservive, or disloyal. The contrast with games preferred by neighboring peoples does not provide the surest method of determining the origins of psychological incompatibility, but it can provide impressive illustrations, after the fact.

To take an example, it is not without significance that the Anglo-Saxon sport, par excellence, is golf, a game in which a player at any time has the opportunity to cheat at will, but in which the game loses all interest from that point on. It should not be surprising that this may be correlated with the attitude of the taxpayer to the treasury and the citizen to the state.

No less instructive an illustration is provided by the Argentine card game of truco in which the whole emphasis is upon guile and even trickery, but trickery that is codified, regulated and obligatory. In this game, related to poker and manilla, it is essential for each player to let his partner know the cards in his hand, without his opponents learning them. The cards are symbolized by various facial expressions. Appropriate pouts, grimaces, and winks, always identical, correspond to different high cards. These signals, part of the rules of the game, must be meaningful to one’s partner, without enlightening one’s adversary. The good player rapidly and discreetly profits from the least inattention of his opponents. An imperceptible sign alerts his partner. Various card combinations are named after flowers. Skill is required to communicate them to the partner’s mind without pronouncing them, merely suggesting them in so farfetched a manner that only one’s partner can understand the message. Such rare components in a game so prevalent as to be almost a national pastime may excite, sustain, or reflect habits of mind that help give ordinary life, and possibly public affairs too, their basic character—the recourse to ingenious allusions, a sharpened sense of solidarity among colleagues, a tendency toward deception, half in jest and half serious, admitted and welcomed as such for purposes of revenge, and finally a fluency in which it is difficult to find the key word, so that a corresponding aptitude must be acquired.

Together with music, calligraphy, and painting, the Chinese place the games of checkers and chess among the five arts that a scholar must practice. They feel that both these games train the mind to find pleasure in multiple responses, combinations, and surprises that continuously give rise to new situations. Aggressiveness is thus inhibited while the mind finds tranquility, harmony, and joy in contemplating the possibilities. This is without doubt a civilized trait.

However, it is clear that such diagnoses are infinitely precarious. Those that seem most obvious must be qualified drastically because of other facts. It is also generally the case that the multiplicity and variety of games simultaneously in favor in a particular culture is very significant. And finally, games happen to provide a nonmaterial reward, the pleasant and imaginative result of the illicit tendency disapproved and condemned by law and public opinion. By contrast to wear marionettes, fairlike and graceful, guignols usually reincarnate (as already observed by Him) ugly and cynical types, inclined to be grotesque and immoral, if not even sacrilegious. The traditional story of Punch and Judy is an example. Punch kills his wife and child, refuses aims to a beggar whom he gives a beating, commits all manner of crimes, kills death and the devil, and for a finale, hangs the executioner who has come to punish him on his own gallows. It would surely be a mistake to view this systematic caricature as an ideal reflection of the British audience that applauds these exploits. It does not approve them at all, but its boisterous pleasure provides a catharsis. To acclaim the wicked and triumphant puppet is cheap compensation for the thousands of moral constraints and taboos imposed upon the audience in real life.

Whether an expression or a contradiction of social values, games seem necessarily related to the patterns and functions of different cultures. The relationship is rough or exact, precise or diffuse, but nevertheless inevitable. It now seems proper to conceive of a broader, and seemingly more rash, but perhaps less aleatory enterprise than a mere search for random correlations. It may be presumed that the principles which regulate games and permit them to be classified must make their influence felt outside of the domain of play, defined as separate, regulated, and imaginary.

The taste for competition, the pursuit of chance, the pleasure of simulation, and the attraction of vertigo certainly seem to be the principal effects of games, but their influence infallibly penetrates all of social life. Just as games are universal, but are not played the same way or to the same extent everywhere—in one place baseball is played more and chess in another—it is appropriate to inquire whether the principles of play (agon, alea, mimicry, ilinx), outside of games, are not also inequally diffused through different societies. In this way, the alleged differences may result in important contrasts in the collective and institutional behavior of peoples.

I do not mean to insinuate in any way that cultures are like games and therefore also governed by agon, alea, mimicry, and ilinx. On the contrary, I maintain that the domain of play after all constitutes a kind of islet, artificially dedicated to calculated competition, limited risks, inconsequential make-believe, and meaningless panic. However, I also suspect that the principles of play, persistent and widespread mainstreams of human activity, so much so that they seem constant and universal, must markedly influence different types.
of society. I even suspect that they may in their turn be so classified, inasmuch as social norms may almost exclusively favor one of these at the expense of another. Must anything further be added? The question is not one of discovering that every society has members who are ambitious, fatalistic, simulate others, or are enfrenzied, and that each society offers unequal chances of success or satisfaction to these types. This is already known. The question is to determine the role played by competition, chance, mimicry, or hysteria in various societies.

It is obvious how extremely ambitious a project it is that aims at nothing less than trying to define basic social mechanisms and their most diffuse and vague premises. These basic aspects are essentially of so insidious a nature that to describe their influence would not add materially to the precise depiction of social structures. At best a new set of labels or general concepts is provided. In addition, if the adopted nomenclature is recognized as corresponding to major contrasts, it tends by that very fact to set up for the classifying of societies a dichotomy as radical—for example—as that which separates cryptozoic from phanerogamous plants and vertebrate from invertebrate animals.

In societies conventionally called primitive as against those described as complex or advanced, there are obvious contrasts that in the latter are not exhausted by the evolution of science, technology, industry, the role of administration, jurisprudence, or archives, theoretical and applied mathematics, the myriad consequences of urbanization and imperialism, and many others with consequences no less formidable or revocable. It is plausible to believe that between these two kinds of society there is a fundamental antagonism of another order, which may be at the root of all the others, recapitulating, supporting, and explaining them.

I shall describe this antagonism in the following manner: Some primitive societies, which I prefer to call 'Dionysian,' be they Australian, American, or African, are societies ruled equally by masks and possession, i.e. by *mimicry* and *ilix*. Conversely, the Incas, Assyrians, Chinese, or Romans are orderly societies with offices, careers, codes, and ready-reckoners, with fixed and hierarchical privileges in which *agon* and *alea*, i.e. merit and hereditary, seem to be the chief complementary elements of the game of living. In contrast to the primitive societies, these are 'rational.' In the first type there are simulation and vertigo or pantomime and ecstasy which assure the intensity and, as a consequence, the cohesion of social life. In the second type, the social nexus consists of compromise, of an implied reckoning between hereditary, which is a kind of chance, and capacity, which presupposes evaluation and competition.

2. MASK AND TRANCE

One of the principal ethnographic mysteries is conceded to lie in the general use of masks in primitive society. An extreme and even a religious importance is attached everywhere to these instruments for metamorphosis. They emerge in festivals—an interregnum of vertigo, effervescence, and fluidity in which everything that symbolizes order in the universe is temporarily abolished so that it can later re-emerge. Masks, always fabricated secretly and destroyed or hidden after use, transform the officiants into gods, spirits, animal ancestors, and all types of terrifying and creative supernatural powers. On the occasion of unrestrained excitement or riot, which is popular and valued for its excesses, the use of masks is supposed to reinvigorate, renew, and recharge both nature and society. The eruption of phantoms and strange powers terrifies and captivates the individual. He temporarily reincarnates, mimics, and identifies with these frightful powers and soon, maddened and delirious, really believes that he is the god as whom he disguised himself, cleverly or crudely, in the beginning. The situation has now become reversed. It is he who inspires fear through his possessing this terrible and inhuman power. It was sufficient for him merely to put on the mask that he himself made, to don the costume that he sewed, in order to resemble the revered and feared being and to produce a weird drone with the aid of a secret weapon, the bull-roarer, of which he alone has known the existence, character, operation, and function, ever since his initiation. He only learns that it is inoffensive, familiar, and all-too-human when he has it in his hands and his furor uses it to frighten others. After the delirium and frenzy have subsided, the performer lapses to a state of dullness and exhaustion that leaves him only a confused, blurred memory of what has transpired.

The whole group is involved in these great seizures and sacred convulsions. At the time of the festival, dancing ritual and pantomime are only preliminary. This prelude incites an increasing excitement. Vertigo then takes the place of simulation. As the Cabala warns, one becomes a ghost in playing a ghost.

Under pain of death, children and women must not assist in the fabrication of masks, ritual disguises, and various devices whose purpose is to frighten. They do not know that it is only a masquerade or make-believe that their parents are simulating. They conform because they are required to by society and, as do the performers themselves, because they believe that the actors have become transformed, possessed, and prey to the powers animating them. In order to yield themselves to spirits that exist only in their minds and to suddenly experience the brutal transport, the performers must evoke and excite them, must push their selves to the final debacle that permits the rare intrusion. To this end they employ thousands of artifacts, any one of which may be suspect—fasting, drugs, hypnosis, monotonous or strident music, clatter, paroxysms of noise and movement, intoxication, shouting, and spasms.

The festival—the destruction of wealth accumulated over a long period, disorder transformed into order, all norms inverted by the contagious presence of masks—is climaxed by shared vertigo. It seems to be the ultimate basis for a society not too stable in other respects. It reinforces a fragile coherence, dull and not too significant, which would be difficult to maintain without this periodic explosion which draws together and integrates persons absorbed at all other times in domestic preoccupations and exclusively private concerns. These daily preoccupations have hardly any repercussions upon a rudimentary association in which the division of labor is very slight, and as a consequence each family is expected to provide for its own subsistence. Masks are the true social bond.

The invasion of ghosts, the trances and frenzies they cause, the intoxication of fear or inspiring of fear, even if they reach their peak in the festival, are not absent from ordinary life. Political or religious institutions are frequently based upon the
a costume weighing more than thirty pounds because of the iron ornaments sewed into it, he leaps into the air to show that he is flying very high. He yells that he can see a large part of the earth. He narrates and re-enacts the adventures he experienced in the other world. He goes through the motions of his struggle with the evil spirits. Underground, in the realm of darkness, he is so cold that he shivers and quakes. He asks his mother's spirit for a blanket. An assistant throws him one. Some other spectators strike sparks from flint, which serve as stars to guide the magic voyage through the darkness of the nether regions.

Such cooperation between the shaman and his audience takes place constantly. However, it is not unique to shamanism. It also found in voodoo and in nearly all seances of an ecstatic character. In fact it is a necessity, for the audience must be protected against the inevitable violence of his mania, the effects of his awkwardness, and his unconscious fury, and lastly must help him to play his role correctly. Among the Vedda of Ceylon there is a type of shamanism that is very significant in this respect. The shaman, who is always on the threshold of unconsciousness, feels dizzy and nauseous. The ground seems to slip from under his feet. The officiant remains in a state of extreme receptivity. This leads him to enact almost automatically and certainly without careful forethought the traditional parts of the dance in their conventionally correct order. Further, the assistant, who follows every movement of the dancer, prepared to catch him when he falls, may also greatly assist by conscious or unconscious suggestion in the correct performance of these complicated possession dances.28

All is acting. All is also vertigo, ecstasy, trance, convulsions, and, for the officiant, loss of consciousness and finally amnesia, for it is proper that he be unaware of what has happened to him or what he has screamed in the course of his seizure. In Siberia, the usual aim of a seance is to cure illness. The shaman seeks the soul of the patient, missed, stolen, or being kept by a demon. He narrates and plays the critical episodes in the rewinning of the vital principle ravished by its demon possessor. He finally recovers it in triumph. Another technique consists of drawing the evil out of the patient's body by suction. The shaman approaches and in a state of trance applies his lips to the spot that the spirits indicate is the focus of infection. He then extracts it, suddenly producing a pebble, worm, insect, feather, or piece of white or black thread which he shows around, curses, chases away with kicks, or buries in a hole. It so happens that the audience is well aware that the shaman, prior to the cure, is careful to hide in his mouth the object which he is later to exhibit, after pretending to have drawn it out of his patient's body. However they accept it, saying that these objects merely serve as a trap or help to catch the poison. It is possible or even probable that the magician shares this belief.

In any case, gullibility and simulation seem to be strangely united. Eskimo shamans have themselves bound with thongs so that they will only move in spirit, without their bodies being carried into the air and disappearing irretrievably. Do they themselves believe it, or is this merely an ingenious strategem for making others believe? After their magical flights, they unbend themselves instantaneously and uninjured, just as mysteriously
as the Davenport brothers from their casket. This is confirmed by as careful an ethnographer as Franz Boas. Bogoras, too, has made recordings of the 'disembodied voices' of the Chukchee shamans who suddenly are silent, while inhumane voices are heard that seem to rise from all corners of the tent, from the depths of the earth, or from very far away. At the same time, various types of levitation are produced and there is a shower of stones and bits of wood.

These ventriloquist-like and magical effects are not rare in a domain in which there is exhibited at the same time a marked tendency toward parapsychology and alleged miracles, such as immunity to fire [by clinging burning coals in the mouth or grasping red-hot irons], climbing barefoot a ladder that has knives for rungs; producing stab-wounds that do not bleed or that heal immediately. This is frequently not too different from simple prestidigitation.

It does not matter, for what is essential is not to separate the variable part that is premeditated make-believe from that which is genuine trance-state, but rather to verify the exact and almost inevitable combinations of vertigo and mimicry, ecstasy and simulation. This association is in no way exclusive to shamanism. It is also found, for example, in the phenomena of possession, originating in Africa and spreading to Brazil and the Antilles, known as voodoo. There, too, the beat of drums and the contagion of movement is utilized to stimulate ecstasy. Coma and spasm signify the departure of the soul. Changes of face and voice, sweat, loss of equilibrium, tics, fainting, and quasi-rigorous mortis precede real or feigned amnesia.

However, no matter how violent the attack, all of it takes place according to a precise liturgy and in conformity with a traditional mythology. The seizure is like a play, with the possessed in costume. They have the attributes of the gods that inhabit them and imitate typical divine behavior. One woman who represents the peasant deity, wears a straw hat and a moneybag and smokes a short pipe. Another, impersonating the god of the sea, Agwe, brandishes an oar. A person possessed by Damballah, the snake god, writhe on the ground like a reptile. This is a general rule also confirmed among other peoples. One of the better proofs is provided by the commentaries and photographs of Tremearne for the Bori cult in Moslem Africa, which spread from Lybia to Nigeria, is half African and half Islamic, and in nearly all ways resembles voodoo, if not in theory at least in practice. The spirit Malam al Hadji is a wandering holy man. The one possessed by him pretends to be old and trembling. He gesticulates as if he were counting beads with his right hand. He holds and reads an imaginary book. He is stooped, dyspeptic, and has a slight cough. clad in white, he assists at marriages. When possessed by Makada, the actor is naked and performs wearing only a monkey skin smeared with filth. He hops about and simulates sexual intercourse. To free him from the clutches of the god, an onion or tomato must be placed in his mouth. Nana Ayesha Karama causes the evil eye and smallpox. Her impersonator wears red and white garb. Two handkerchiefs are tied together round her head. She claps her hands, runs hither and yon, sits on the ground, scratches herself, holds her head in her hands, cries if not given sugar, dances a kind of round, sneezes, and disappears.

In Africa as in the Antilles the audience assists and encourages the subject and passes him the traditional paraphernalia of the divinity he is impersonating, while the actor creates his role out of his knowledge of the characteristics and life of his subject and his recollections of the seances at which he has in the past assisted. His delirium hardly permits any inventiveness or initiative. He behaves as expected and as he knows he must behave. Alfred Métraux, analyzing the course and nature of the voodooistic fit, has demonstrated how the subject's conscious desire to undergo it, an appropriate technique for stimulating it, and a liturgical pattern in its unfolding are necessary. The role of suggestion and even simulation is certain. However, most of the time they themselves seem to be the results of the impatience of the one desiring to be possessed and therefore a means of hastening the onset of the seizure. Suggestion and simulation increase one's susceptibility and stimulate the trance. The loss of consciousness, exaltation, and oblivion that they cause are favorable to the true trance, i.e. possession by the god. The resemblance to children's mimicry is so obvious that the writer does not hesitate to conclude [p. 33]: 'In observing certain cases of possession, one is tempted to compare them to a child who imagines he is an Indian, for example, or an animal, and who strengthens the illusion by means of a piece of clothing or some other object.' The difference is that in this case mimicry is not a game. It ends in vertigo, becomes part of the religious order, and fulfills a social function.

One keeps returning to the general problem posed by the wearing of masks. It is also associated with the experiences of possession and of communion with ancestors, spirits, and gods. The wearer is temporarily exalted and made to believe that he is undergoing some decisive transformation. In any case, the unleashing of instincts and of overwhelmingly fearful and invincible forces is encouraged. No doubt the wearer of the mask is not deceived at the beginning, but he rapidly yields to the intoxication that seizes him. His mind enthralled, he becomes completely abandoned to the disorder excited in him by his own mimicry. Georges Buraud writes: 'The individual no longer knows himself. A monstrous shriek rises out of his throat, a cry of beast or god, a superhuman noise, a pure emanation of the force of combat, the passion of...'
procreation, the unlimited magic powers by which he believes himself to be, and is momentarily possessed. And to evoke the ardent climax of the masking in the brief African dawn, there is the hypnotic beat of the tomtom, then the mad leaping of ghosts with gigantic strides as, mounted on stilts, they race above the tall grass, in a terrifying uprooting of strange noises—hisses, rattles, and the whirring of bull-roarers. It is not merely vertigo, born of blind, uninhibited, and purposeless sharing of cosmic powers or of a dazzling epiphany of bestial divinities soon to return to the shadow world. It is also a simple intoxication with the permeation of terror and anxiety. Above all, these apparitions from the beyond are the forerunner of government. The mask has now become institutionalized. Among the Dogon, for example, a culture that continuously resorts to masks, it has been observed how all of the public life of the group is impregnated with them. It is at the initiation rites of the male societies with their special masks that the basis for collective life and the crucial beginnings of political power may be found. The mask is an instrument of secret societies. While disguising the identity of their members, it serves to inspire terror in the laity.

Initiation, the passage rite of puberty, frequently consists of revealing the purely human nature of the mask wearers to the novices. From this viewpoint, initiation is an athenic, agnostic, or negative teaching. It exposes a deception and makes one a party to it. Until then, adolescents were terrorized by masked apparitions. One of them pursued the novices with whirls. Excited by the performer, they caught, mastered, and disarmed him, tore off his costume, and removed his mask, recognizing a tribal elder. Henceforth, they belong to the other camp. They inspire fear. Clad in white and masked in their turn, reincarnating the spirits of the dead, they frighten the uninitiated, maltreat and rob those whom they cannot or deem to deserve such treatment. They often say, constituted as semisecret societies or even undergo a second initiation so that they may be granted membership. Like the first initiation, it is accompanied by physical abuse, painful ordeals, and sometimes even by real or feigned cataclysms that simulate death and resurrection. Also, just as at the first ceremony, the initiates learn that the supposed spirits are only men in disguise and that their cavernous voices come out of particularly powerful bull-roarers. And finally, just like the original initiation, it gives them the privilege of playing all kinds of tricks upon the uninitiated. Every secret society possesses its distinctive fetish and protective mask. Each member of an inferior fraternity believes that the guardian-mask of the superior society is a supernatural being, while knowing full well the nature of his own. Among the Bechuana, a bond of this type is called mopato, or mysterious, after the name of the initiation hut. It refers to the turbulence of youth, liberated from popular beliefs and commonly shared fears. The threatening and brutal actions of the initiates serve to reinforce the superstitious terror of their victims. In this way, the vertiginous combination of simulation and trance is sometimes deliberately transformed into a mixture of deceit and intimidation. It is at this point that a particular kind of political power emerges. These associations have varied goals. As may be the case, they specialize in the celebration of a magic rite, dance, or mystery, but they are charged with the repression of adultery, larceny, black magic, and poisoning. In Sierra Leone, there is a warrior society, with local branches, which pronounces and executes judgment. It organizes punitive expeditions against rebellious villages. It intervenes to keep the peace and prevent feuds. Among the Bambara, the komo, "who knows all and punishes all," a kind of African equivalent to the Ku Klux Klan, is the cause of an incessant reign of terror. The masked bands thus keep order in society in a way in which vertigo and simulation or their close derivatives, terrifying mimicry and superstitious fear, again emerge, not as fortuitous elements in primitive culture, but as truly basic factors. It should be understood that mask and panic are present in association, inextricably interwoven and occupying a central place, whether in the social paroxysms called festivals, in magico-religious practices, or in the as yet crude form of a political system, even though they do not fulfill a major function in these three domains simultaneously.

May be it asserted that the transition to civilization as such implies the gradual elimination of the primacy of ilinx and mimicry in combination, and the substitution and predominance of the agonal-pairing of competition and chance? Whether it be cause or effect, each time that an advanced culture succeeds in
they afford men the same eternal satisfactions, but in sublimated form, serving merely as an escape from boredom or work and entailing neither madness nor delirium.

Roger Caillois (1913-1978) was a French intellectual whose wide-ranging work brought together literary criticism, sociology, and philosophy by focusing on such diverse subjects as games, play as well as the sacred. His collection of stones is world-renowned and has been shown in many exhibitions, such as the Venice Biennale 2013.

We have kept the original note numbers of this text.

Uta Eisenreich, Spot The Difference I, from A Not B: Photographs by Uta Eisenreich, 2010

Uta Eisenreich, Time After Sometimes, 2012

Emerging from the chaotic original, a palpable repression of the powers of vertigo and simulation is verified. They lose their traditional dominance, are pushed to the periphery of public life, reduced to roles that become more and more modern and intermittent, if not clandestine and guilty, or are relegated to the limited and regulated domain of games and fiction where

A Way Out, the elders. The Kumang (analogous to the Bambara Kono), now in decline, has perpetuated curious, legendary rites, celebrated every seven years. Only the elders who had attained the highest grade in the society were admitted, and the place where the ceremony took place was forbidden to women, boys, and even young men. The elders allowed to participate in the ceremony had to supply, in addition to beer, a black bull for the sacrifice. The animal was slaughtered, dressed, and suspended from the trunk of a palm tree. The celebrants also had to provide themselves with a ceremonial costume comprising a headdress, trousers, and yellow blouse. The convocation took place at the behest of the president of the secret society, and his announcement caused great excitement throughout the territory. The participants assembled in a clearing of the forest, the members seating themselves around the president (mare) who himself sat on a black sheepskin which covered a human skin. Each participant remembered to bring poison and magical drugs (Kort among the Bambara). The first seven days were occupied with sacrifices, banquets, and conferences. It is likely that the discussions that took place at this time were mainly intended to reach agreement on the subject of which persons were to be made to vanish. At the end of seven days the important part of the secret ritual began. It was celebrated at the foot of a sacred tree, supposed to be the 'mother of Kumang,' and the wood of which is used to make masks for the Kumang. At the foot of the tree a hole was dug and a masked man in a feathered headdress crouched inside it, impersonating the secret society's god.

Toward the end of the afternoon on the appointed day, while his colleagues remained seated in the circle with faces averted, he started to emerge. The rest of the group provided background for the promotion with a chant that was taken up by the masked man with responses by the members of the fraternity. The masked man began to dance, at first slowly, then gradually moving faster. Leaving the hole, he danced around the circle of participants whose backs were turned to him. They accompanied the maniacal creature's dance by clapping their hands. Whoever turned toward him would be struck dead. Moreover, as the mask loomed larger and the dancing continued into the night, death struck at the general population. The dance went on for the next three days, during which the masked dancer oracularly answered such questions as were put to him. The answers were valid for seven years until the next ceremony took place. After this three-day period was over, he told the fortune of the president of the secret society, foretelling whether or not he would participate in the following festival. If the answer was negative, he had to die soon, i.e. at least during the intervening seven-year period, and immediate provision was made for his replacement. In various ways many victims perish during this time, among the general population as well as in the circle of elders.

