



Chokwe Mask

Mask of the Chokwe People (Angola, Zambia & Congo)

The *Chokwe* people of Angola and western Zambia and the Congo create and perform many masked characters. These masked characters represent the spirits of deceased ancestors who have returned to the world of the living to guide, assist, protect, and even educate members of the community.

According to Chokwe belief, ancestral spirits play the crucial role of providing for living descendants and protecting the tribe from intruders or evil (*wanga*), supernatural elements.

The *mukanda* masks play a role in male initiation. The *mukanda* is an initiatory institution through which religion, art, and social organisation are transmitted from one generation to the next. *Mukanda* training lasts from one to two years. Boys between the ages of about eight and twelve are secluded in a camp in the wilderness, away from the village. There they are circumcised and spend several months in a special lodge where they are instructed in their anticipated roles as men. As part of their instruction, the boys are taught the history and traditions of the group and the secrets associated with the wearing and making of masks.

In the past some masks played important roles in religious beliefs and institutional practices whilst many other Chokwe masks have come to be used mainly for entertainment. Masked actors travel from village to village, living on gifts received at performances. Most Chokwe masks are carved from wood. The most popular and best-known entertainment masks are *chihongo*, spirit of wealth, and *pwo*, his consort.

The Chokwe and related peoples have been greatly affected by modern conflicts. Despite this they continue to pursue their own traditional way of life. In militarised areas in Angola and Congo, as well as in Zambian refugee camps, they practice initiation, divination, and healing rites. Some Chokwe chiefs have been displaced by war, and their authority has been challenged by modern governments' political goals. Nevertheless, Chokwe chiefs continue to represent traditional and sacred authority.

