

Marie Jeanne Adams, ed. *Ethnologische Zeitschrift Zürich*, 1, 1980 (special issue). Bern: Verlag Peter Lang for the Völkerkundemuseums der Universität Zürich. 167 pp., ill. sFr 40.

Reviewed by Simon Ottenberg
University of Washington

This collection of thirteen papers in English on male and female masking and secret societies in Liberia and Sierra Leone was presented at the Peabody Museum of Ethnology at Harvard University in April 1978, and edited by Marie Jeanne Adams of that university. The articles, by anthropologists, art historians, sociologists, and a historian, are generally based on field research carried out in the 1970s. This region of Africa is unusual in having women's masquerades and secret societies as well as those for males. The area traditionally consisted of small chiefdoms in which men and the male secret societies have played the dominant political roles. Many of the masquerades of the secret societies for each sex are public and to a large extent acquire meaning through performance in front of members of the other sex. Warren d'Azevedo's paper on these societies among the Gola also stresses the alternating ritual roles that members of each sex play through time in their societies and masquerades.

Despite the quite varied writings presented in this journal, it is clear that the use of masquerades in cross-sex visual communication is important in the cultures of this region and that what is being communicated includes, no matter what else, various senses and meanings of secrecy, gender distinctiveness, and political and mystical power. The costumes, dances, and music, it is also evident, differ radically for each sex in a given culture, further emphasizing the idea of gender identification and cross-sex communication. Again, as Ruth Philips, an art historian, shows for the Mende people of Sierra Leone, there is a very explicit iconography pertaining to the masks and costumes, often badly interpreted by Western writers working outside the cultural context. And clearly, as Carol McCormack shows for the Sherbro of the same country, there is also a richer and deeper level of symbolism to these moving objects, which act as visual metaphors of humans, gods, ancestors, animals, and spirits. From these articles one can see that the visual aspects of the masqueraders are more important than any verbalization or sounds that they may produce (some give out none), a situation that could be interestingly compared to mime with musical

accompaniment, with the added quality that the maskers represent secret knowledge, societies, and spirits. While cross-sex communication is restricted through these masking mechanisms, it is paradoxically greatly emphasized and enhanced in the process.

The secret societies and their masqueraders serve a variety of purposes: settling serious legal cases and disputes, representing myths of culture, acting as curing agents, expressing in highly visible form the spiritual world, and symbolizing gender and the transition from childhood to adulthood, as well as being entertaining. Not only is there a rich variety of functions but also a variety of performances and types of performers in each of the cultures discussed in this work, so that we are dealing with many styles of nonverbal communications. The articles suggest a people skilled in performance-oriented impression management of a nonverbal kind. As Beryl Bellman, the sociologist, points out for the Kpelle of Liberia, they are masters of the management of illusion, and as many of the papers suggest, masking as communication is not restricted to a few skilled performers of one sex but many persons of both gender: this form of largely nonverbal communication is experienced by many adults in a particular culture.

It is not, paradoxically, that these Africans are thus unskilled in verbal communication. On the contrary, like others from this continent, they are magnificent users of proverb, metaphor and metonym, and the double and triple meaning (the latter an analog of their music's multiple rhythms). But it is as if they have added to this rich verbalization a major and *conscious* nonverbal pattern. Why this is so is not clearly explained, although William Siegmann's paper attempts an understanding based on social organization and political grounds. Why women should communicate here through the use of masquerades but not elsewhere in Africa is also a question of importance but not one discussed in these papers.

Other writers cover a variety of topics: stratification and politics (Caroline Bledsoe), structural analysis of secret societies (M. C. Jedrej), and more ethnographically oriented articles by several others. While the work as a whole does not focus on nonverbal communication, it raises tantalizing suggestions; the collection of articles serves as a useful entrée to this topic in Sierra Leone and Liberia.