

The Ideal Beauty of the Punu Okuyi

Falling in love with the white masks from Gabon

By Dinesh Sathisan

I vividly remember 23 June 2006, the first day the musée du quai Branly (MQB) opened to the public. I was on vacation in Paris and queued for three hours. While I was captivated by many of the African masks, there was one that especially caught my attention. She was attractive with an oval face, beautifully coiffed hair, luscious full lips, globular protruding forehead and arched eyebrows over half-closed eyes. My love for the *Okuyi* masks of the Punu people of Gabon, Central Africa began right there.

The *Okuyi* (also known as *Makuyi*) represents an idealised female face. Most *Okuyi* have nine (sometimes 12) scale-like cicatrices or scarification patterns on the forehead and the temples arranged in a diamond shape. The cicatrix is believed to have a sexual connotation and is sometimes believed to be a reference to a female ancestor. (Marc Leo Felix, an authority on BaKongo art, has mentioned that masks without the diamond-shaped cicatrix on the forehead may represent male faces.)

The female gender of the *Okuyi* is reinforced by its coiffure, with hair crowned high on the head and arranged in two braids at the sides. Such coiffure is similar to the hairstyle used by the Punu women in this region in the early 20th century. Sources indicate that the women first coated their hair with palm oil to make it more manageable before styling. The process of arranging and styling could take several days and the women often helped each other. Once complete, the hairstyle could last two to three months. The *Okuyi* face is painted white with kaolin – an association with healing, the afterlife and the spirits of the dead. The white also alludes to anti-witchcraft functions.

The Punu tribe is also referred to as *punyi*, which means both 'brave warriors' and 'highwaymen' in the native language. The *Okuyi*, which originated in the Punu/Lumbo region of southwest Gabon, is a variant of the 'white masks of Ogowe' found throughout western and central Gabon. Once used as part of funeral ceremony rituals, the *Okuyi* is

now largely used for entertainment performances.

Male dancers wear the *Okuyi*, stand on stilts and perform acrobatic feats in a dance called the *Mukudj*. The most beautiful *Okuyi* mask was used repeatedly by the dancers in their performances. French-American traveller and anthropologist Paul du Chaillu first saw an *Okuyi* in the Punu village of Mokaba in 1865. He noted that the Punu people "drank as much as they pleased...beating a drum and shouting through the night" in their entertainment. He also noted that during this dance, a masquerader wore a "white mask with thick lips". The French colonists were fond of the *Okuyi* masks and later started collecting them. (Gabon was a colony of France until 1960.) Matisse and Picasso both had *Okuyi* masks in their collections. (See Peter Stepan, *Picasso's Collection of African and Oceanic Art: Master of Metamorphosis*, for a picture of Picasso's Paris apartment where an *Okuyi* hangs on the wall.)

Ever since my first sighting of an *Okuyi* at the MQB, I have wanted one in my own collection and so I spent the next couple of years hunting for a suitable mask. Not every *Okuyi* is the same and several did not call out to me. I gave up looking. Finally, on another visit to Paris in 2009, a friend introduced me to a dealer of African arts who had one of the most beautiful *Okuyi* I had ever seen. I cared neither about her provenance nor her age. She wasn't inexpensive either, but I bought her. I couldn't help it; she was beautiful and I wasn't prepared for someone else to snatch her away from me.

Editor's note: See Punu Okuyi as well as evidence of Pablo Picasso's love for African art at the special exhibition Congo River: Arts of Central Africa, showing at the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) until 10 April.

Dinesh Sathisan joined Museum Volunteers in 2005 and guides at the ACM and the Peranakan Museum. He is currently in Paris searching for another Punu mask to be part of his *Okuyi* harem.

Punu Okuyi mask; photo by the author

