

FESTIMA and the Sacred Mask Traditions: Transforming Intangible Cultural Heritage into Sustainable Tourism in West Africa

KI Léonce

Centre universitaire de Gaoua/Université Nazi Boni (Burkina Faso)

Email: [kileonce\[at\]u-naziboni.bf](mailto:kileonce[at]u-naziboni.bf)

Abstract: *This article examines FESTIMA, the International Festival of Masks and Arts of Dédougou, as a model of sustainable tourism built upon sacred intangible cultural heritage (ICH). Drawing on sixteen editions of the festival, the study explores how ASAMA, the Association for the Safeguarding of Masks, successfully drew on deeply spiritual and esoteric traditions to create viable, community-centered tourism experiences. Employing a qualitative case study approach, the article analyzes the spiritual functions of African masks, FESTIMA's governance and sustainability mechanisms, and the socio-economic impacts on local communities. The findings highlight FESTIMA's role in balancing cultural authenticity with economic opportunity, and safeguarding heritage through participatory governance and intergenerational transmission.*

Keywords: FESTIMA, mask traditions, intangible cultural heritage, heritage tourism, Burkina Faso

1. Introduction

How can sacred traditions be made accessible to outsiders without losing their spiritual essence and cultural authenticity? This challenge is particularly acute in Africa, where mask traditions constitute living spiritual systems rather than mere aesthetic objects. While numerous cultural festivals have emerged across the continent to promote local heritage, most have failed to achieve long-term sustainability, collapsing due to inadequate governance, political interference, or disrespect for sacred protocols.

The International Festival of Masks and Arts of Dédougou (FESTIMA), created in 1996 in Burkina Faso, presents a notable exception. Initiated by students seeking to safeguard traditional mask heritage, FESTIMA has evolved from a modest two-day event with eight mask communities into a major biennial festival spanning eight days with approximately fifty participating communities. Unlike similar initiatives such as FESTIMAB and LUMASSAN, which have disappeared, FESTIMA has survived over two decades, attracting nearly 100,000 tourists per edition before recent health and security crises in the region.

This article aims to analyze FESTIMA as a community-led model for transforming sacred mask traditions into sustainable cultural tourism. The analysis of FESTIMA poses some critical research questions: How has ASAMA, the Association for the Safeguarding of Masks and the promoter of FESTIMA, successfully transformed sacred and esoteric mask traditions into viable tourism products? What organizational strategies enable the festival to maintain cultural authenticity while ensuring economic sustainability? What mechanisms protect spiritual integrity while facilitating public accessibility?

This study contributes to broader discussions on how sacred intangible cultural heritage can be responsibly integrated into tourism frameworks, preserving cultural authenticity while enhancing community well-being. The paper proceeds in 3

main sections, covering methodology, analyses of the spiritual and social functions of African masks, FESTIMA's operational strategies and sustainability mechanisms, before ending with a discussion.

2. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative case study approach to examine FESTIMA as a model of sustainable ICH tourism development. Data collection draws primarily from ASAMA's festival reports, spanning sixteen editions (1997-2024), supplemented by participant observation during festival events and semi-structured interviews with mask practitioners, festival organizers, and local stakeholders. The interpretive framework integrates heritage studies, tourism anthropology and sustainable development literature to contextualize FESTIMA's approach within broader theoretical debates on ICH commodification, decontextualisation and community-based cultural tourism. Triangulation of these multiple data sources strengthens the validity of findings regarding FESTIMA's organizational strategies, economic impacts, and cultural safeguarding outcomes.

3. Results and Analysis

3.1 Understanding the African Mask

In some Western perceptions, the mask is essentially presented as an object with a concealed face. Besides protecting, as the COVID disease has highlighted, the mask has an essentially playful function, as illustrated by carnivals. Worse, the mask is equated with evil, like the criminal who wears a mask to hide his identity. The word therefore has a pejorative, rather derogatory meaning and does not convey any spirituality (Millogo, 2007).

In West Africa, by contrast, the mask is primarily a spiritual reality. It is a genie or a spirit of the ancestors. Masks bear the social function of intercessors between man and God. As

such, the mask is endowed with immense powers that encompass all areas of social and spiritual life (religious, cultural, political, economic, environmental, health, etc.). Mask culture is a central institution in the lives of many African peoples. The African mask exists beyond the true-false duality. It is used to show what is not usually seen, rather than simply to deceive and mislead. Thus, at the same time as it unveils the hidden (the sacred, the divine, the supernatural, the superhuman), it veils the obvious, that is to say, the physical and social identity of the officiant in whom the supernatural or the divine is incarnated.

Contrary to the narrow vision of museums which depict the mask as an object, a sculptural work, the mask in traditional society is a whole that can only be apprehended in its completeness. Not simply an object mutilated in its wearing, the African mask is understood both through the head, as well as through the costume and its accessories. All of these elements allow the spirit to materialize and serve as a messenger of the visible and invisible worlds. As a spirit, usually of the livestock market, the mask in many Burkinabè societies is zoomorphic. It never invites itself into a society, but arrives according to the wishes of the people.

The mask appears in society to remedy a social problem and its order of appearance is aligned with its importance in the village pantheon. Seniority therefore corresponds in many cases with the importance of a mask. It is in this logic that the first mask of the pantheon always officiates as the *mother mask*, that is the oldest mask in the village and the others enjoy progressively lower status.

An origin myth is still the basis of many mask traditions. For example in certain Bwaba villages, leaf masks represent the creation myth (Coquet, 1994: 330-350). For many mask communities, a mask society without an origin myth is not a mask. In Djoula, a local language, it is called *yogoro*, which means fake mask.

In addition to the origin myth, two other elements make up the triptych of the mask: a social function, both asserted and lived, and an uninterrupted transmission system.

The culture of the mask is a living tradition, which induces a liveliness in its practice. It must have a reliable transmission mechanism. Like any intangible heritage, the tradition of mask is based on a mechanism of uninterrupted intergenerational transmission, through religious and recreational practices. Cultic practices occur on an *ad hoc* basis (for example during funerals) or periodically during the social calendar (initiation, social customs, etc.). In this way, the practitioners introduce the next generation to the ritual gestures and esoteric language of mask culture. A Moaga proverb reminds us that "*wang la saogo*", meaning that dance is an important attribute of the mask. Through the playful expressions of mask culture, the whole community, including the uninitiated and the beneficiaries of the tradition, are introduced to the songs and dances of the masks. This kind of informal transmission, whose importance is often under appreciated by communities, remains crucial today given the significant changes occurring in the social functions of the mask.

Social function is the final element of the triptych. The mask is linked to certain events in community life, whether positive or negative, for example, the death of an elderly person who held important positions in the community or was part of the mask society. The over-arching function of African mask culture is to make people happy. Indeed, what we rather trivially call intangible cultural heritage is nothing more than the expression of human adaptation to their environment, both physical and social. In other words, cultural heritage, whether tangible or intangible, is defined firstly by its social utility.

The mask is a social construction designed to encourage and elicit feelings of respect, fear and order and to reinforce social order and structure. The mask is first and foremost a messenger because it mediates between God, ancestors and men. It ensures the link between ancestors and the living during funeral festivals. The mask brings the blessing and protection of the ancestors to the village.

The mask thus represents the culture of clan or ethnic entity. It serves as a temporal milestone as people advance in social rank, communities move, and society evolves, the mask, for its part, remains stable.

The mask performs another function too, as supreme judge. It represents the supreme authority for the resolution of all problems that may arise in the community. It intervenes in all vital decisions. When a mask speaks, no one can contradict it. Its decisions are final.

Mask culture ensures social peace and stability by mobilising social forces. The quantity and quality of rainfall and harvests are within its control. It is the guarantor for the conservation of environmental resources and their sustainable management for the benefit of the entire community. Mask practice settles land disputes and conflicts.

In performing all these functions, the mask is not simply an object, mutilated or dissimulating, but a pillar of society which guarantees peaceful human existence.

3.2 The Use of Masks for Tourism

3.2.1 The diversity and esoteric nature of Mask Traditions

The essential yardstick of the mask is its sacredness, its language being primarily esoteric. The mask is not worn without initiation and/or prior co-optation of the ancestors. Moreover, the rigor in the practice of the mask culture is sometimes so demanding that any mistake can cost the life of the wearer. Given the plurality of mask cultures, however, one must refrain from generalizing. For example, while some masks only appear during the dry season, others will only appear during the rainy season. Some masks are used in daytime and others only at night. A mask can be known in a village to be essentially a mask of rejoicing while in another village, the same mask will be so sacred that a non-initiated person can't see it. Increasing accessibility to mask cultures through tourism thus requires the adequate management of its sacred heritage.

3.2.2 Identification of Stakeholders for tourism planning

Developing a tourism offer associated with mask culture required both an understanding of the issues mentioned

above as well as the identification of the right stakeholders, who would play the central decision-making role. The Association for the Safeguarding of Masks (ASAMA) was thus established and structured mainly around the practitioners of mask cultures who could identify the secular aspects that could be highlighted in popularizing this heritage. ASAMA is not so much an NGO that carries the voice of mask communities, but an umbrella organization of practitioners that acts without intermediaries.

This approach has greatly facilitated the process of using mask culture for tourism in a sustainable and heritage-sensitive way.

Efficient management is based on good governance and the involvement of all stakeholders, including the administrative authorities, whether public or local administration. Thus, ASAMA works in close collaboration with the administration, which makes schools available to the association to accommodate the companies, and the defense and security forces that ensure the safety of festival-goers. ASAMA is, however, politically neutral, not aligned with any specific political party, unlike similar initiatives such as FESTIMAB and LUMASSA. This has protected ASAMA from political volatility in African contexts where diversity of political opinion accompanies social adversity.

3.2.3 Launching a Tourism Initiative

It was decided that the format of the tourism initiative would be a festival, a great cultural gathering expressing the rich diversity of the world's mask traditions. Various steps were taken to ensure the safeguarding of the tradition. In order to avoid decontextualization, the city of Dédougou, known as an area where mask traditions were prevalent, was identified as the city to host the festival.

It was decided that only publicly-accessible masks can participate in the festival. In other words, all sacred masks such as mother masks must not participate. The festival is thus based on the exhibition of profane, or non-sacred, masks. Taking the profane mask out of its pantheon (the collection of spirits or ancestors whom the masks represent) was an important decision, especially since it kept the curious public away from the pantheon, from the den of the mask. To protect the pantheon's status as the emanation of power, ASAMA has ensured that competition between mask societies is prevented. Prizes are therefore never awarded to so-called best mask practitioners. This is in line with the approach taken by the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, in which equality between cultural manifestations is ensured.

The timing of FESTIMA on the last Saturday of February was the outcome of a set of compromises. Dédougou cannot accommodate the masks until the leaf masks have appeared. However, these masks generally appear between the end of January and February 20 and return as early as May. The communities have therefore chosen the end of February to take into account the appearance of leaf masks on the one hand and the rising temperatures of the summer on the other. The hottest months in this area are March, April and May and organizing a festival at this time is a huge test for both practitioners and tourists. FESTIMA was scheduled for every

last Saturday of February in even years as a way of building public loyalty to the event.

The programming of performances took certain prohibitions into account. In Dédougou, fiber masks are essentially diurnal and it is strictly forbidden for them to come into contact with leaf masks. In addition, in the region, fabric masks are essentially nocturnal, so they do not cross paths with daytime masks. Taking into account these imperatives, fiber masks are programmed in the morning, leaf, bark and straw masks in the afternoon and fabric masks at night. This programming is also pragmatic because the morning performance does not damage the fiber masks and gives enough time to for leaf mask communities to pick the raw material.

3.2.4 Linking FESTIMA to Sustainability

In addition to respecting customary practices, FESTIMA fully embraces certain functions of the mask, i.e. to be the guarantor of the social well-being of the communities. The festival has thus combined safeguarding with the development of cultural goods and services related to the mask that generate income. Beginning from two days with eight mask communities, FESTIMA has grown to eight days with about fifty mask communities. With nearly 100,000 tourists per edition, FESTIMA has become a major economic opportunity. With a hotel occupancy rate of 100% from 3 days before the event, FESTIMA allows hoteliers to make most of their annual turnover, boosting the normal hotel occupancy rate of around 20%. The festival orders seccos (palisades made with grasses, grass stems) from local communities to divide the different sites, which represents is a significant source of income for these communities. It is ecologically sustainable because the seccos are made of millet stalks. ASAMA has also integrated a craft fair into the festival which is a further income-generating opportunity.

To ensure the transmission of the mask tradition, each edition of the FESTIMA includes reflection opportunities (colloquia, forums) to discuss how to ensure the viability of the mask. These colloquia and forums are supported by mask exhibitions that promote awareness about mask traditions among visitors. To initiate young people in the tradition of the mask, ASAMA also organizes several activities (drawing competitions, poems, exchanges with practitioners, etc.) for students. These transmission activities are very important to ensure the preservation of the cultic function of the mask as well as its cultural or even playful function.

3.2.5 Developing an Innovative Financing Strategy

Funding for cultural initiatives has always been low. Cultural promoters depend on state subsidies and patrons. Since the end of the 2000s, these subsidies have been considerably reduced in Burkina Faso. Thus, ASAMA started charging a modest fee for access to mask shows and the fair in 2010. By also renting out stands in the fair area, ASAMA is now able to self-finance more than half of the festival's costs.

4. Discussion

FESTIMA has survived for over two decades while similar initiatives like FESTIMAB and LUMASSAN have disappeared. This demonstrates the critical importance of practitioner-centered governance in heritage tourism

development. This insight aligns with existing work emphasizing that successful ICH tourism must prioritize community control (Salazar, 2012). The festival directly confronts Western misconceptions of African masks. While museums reduce masks to aesthetic objects, FESTIMA presents them as complete spiritual entities. By exclusively featuring profane masks while prohibiting sacred mother masks, ASAMA navigates the "authenticity-accessibility paradox" (Cohen, 1988). Rather than creating false fronts, FESTIMA presents genuine but carefully selected aspects of mask traditions by its community.

The festival's economic impact on hotel occupancy, secco production and craft income, exemplifies Throsby's (2001) "cultural capital" in action. Educational programming addresses Bortolotto's (2007) "heritagization" dilemma: maintaining living traditions while ensuring transmission. FESTIMA operationalizes Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's (2004) "cultural sustainability": heritage as ongoing practice rather than frozen preservation.

ASAMA's political neutrality has proven essential for survival in contexts where political diversity creates social adversity (Nurse, 2006). The practitioner-centered model, functioning as "an umbrella organization of practitioners which acts without intermediaries," avoids appropriation risks inherent in external heritage management. Self-financing over half the festival costs through access fees and stand rentals addresses critical vulnerabilities in African cultural sector financing (Klamer, 2011).

However, it is worth considering whether festival participation will gradually shift community perceptions of mask traditions from spiritual entities toward performative commodities. This concerns echo Bendix's (2009) observations about heritage tourism's transformative effects. FESTIMA demonstrates that sacred heritage can enter tourism circuits without complete commodification, though this requires constant vigilance, community control, and acceptance of cultural evolution.

5. Conclusion

Due to the courageous intervention of a group of students in the 1990s, FESTIMA has emerged as one of Africa's biggest cultural events dedicated to the mask. After 16 editions, it has brought masks from Africa (Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Togo) and Europe (Switzerland) to the stage. The festival has not only attracted tourists from all over the world to enjoy its lively character, but it has also led several societies to revitalize their practices with a view to passing them on to future generations. ASAMA has won of two international awards and two national distinctions for its local economic contributions. The FESTIMA model offers valuable lessons for ICH tourism development in Africa and beyond. It demonstrates that the sacred-accessibility paradox can be navigated through careful selection of heritage elements appropriate for public display, genuine community control over decision-making processes, and acceptance that cultural evolution is inherent to living traditions. Future research should examine whether FESTIMA's strategies can be replicated in other cultural contexts and assess the long-term impacts of festival

participation on practitioners' spiritual relationships with mask traditions.

References

- [1] ASAMA, "Rapports Festival International des Masques," 1997-2024.
- [2] R. Bendix, "Heritage between economy and politics: An assessment from the perspective of cultural anthropology," in *Intangible Heritage*, L. Smith and N. Akagawa, Eds. London: Routledge, 2009, pp. 253-269.
- [3] C. Bortolotto, "From objects to processes: UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage," *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, vol. 19, pp. 21-33, 2007.
- [4] E. Cohen, "Authenticity and commoditization in tourism," *Annals of Tourism Research*, vol. 15, no. 3, pp. 371-386, 1988.
- [5] M. Coquet, *Le soleil mangé. Du langage des formes et des matières dans une société sans écriture, les Bwaba du Burkina Faso*, Thèse de doctorat d'ethnologie, EPHE, Paris, 480 p., 1994.
- [6] M. Coulibaly, *Des masques culturels au masque muséifié : leurs usages et représentations à travers l'itinéraire d'un chercheur*. Binche: Musée International du masque, 456 p., 2008.
- [7] A. Fournier and C. Devineau, "Entre ancêtres et génies: l'accroissement des genres dans l'initiation aux Do bwaba et sèmè du Burkina Faso," *L'Homme*, vol. 239-240, 2021. [Online]. Available: <http://journals.openedition.org/lhomme/41100>
- [8] B. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Intangible heritage as metacultural production," *Museum International*, vol. 56, no. 1-2, pp. 52-65, 2004.
- [9] A. Klamer, "Cultural entrepreneurship," *Review of Austrian Economics*, vol. 24, no. 2, pp. 141-156, 2011.
- [10] G. Le Moal, *Masques bobo : vie, formes et couleurs*. Marseille, Tervuren, Paris: Biro/IRD/Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale, 126 p., 2008.
- [11] L. Millogo, "The Language of Burkinabe Masks: An Esoteric Discourse?" *Tydskrif Vir Letterkunde*, vol. 44, no. 1, pp. 154-165, Apr. 2007. DOI: 10.4314/tvl.v44i1.29815
- [12] K. Nurse, "Culture as the fourth pillar of sustainable development," *Small States: Economic Review and Basic Statistics*, vol. 11, pp. 28-40, 2006.
- [13] N. B. Salazar, "Community-based cultural tourism: Issues, threats and opportunities," *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, vol. 20, no. 1, pp. 9-22, 2012.
- [14] R. Silverman, "Seeking a History for a Masquerade: Do Performances of the Bondoukou Region," in *Bedu Is my Lover. Five Stories about Bondoukou and Masquerading*, K. Arnaut and E. Dell, Eds. Brighton: The Green Centre for Non-Western Art at the Royal Pavilion, Art Gallery and Museums, 1996, pp. 15-21.
- [15] D. Throsby, "Economics and culture," Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Author Profile



Ki Léonce holds a PhD, with a dual background in management of tangible and intangible cultural heritage. As a teacher, he initiates students and strengthens the capacities of professionals on the

safeguarding/conservation and enhancement of cultural and natural heritage. As a national and international facilitator of the 2003 Convention, it supports communities in updating inventories and making their intangible cultural heritage viable. Léonce sat in the Evaluation Body from 2019 to 2022 and participated in several reflections as a UNESCO Category VI expert. Since 2016, Léonce has been closely associated with the elaboration of nominations of Burkinabe properties to the World Heritage List. He successfully led the initiative to inscribe the sites of ancient iron metallurgy in Burkina Faso and accompanied the inscription of the Royal Court of Tiébélé. As focal point of the 1972 Convention, in 2019 he led the preparation of the periodic report on the implementation of the 1972 Convention. Since 2022, he has been supporting States Parties in the preparation of state of conservation reports for properties as well as in the elaboration of nominations for properties on the World Heritage List. In addition to capacity building in the preparation of nominations for the World Heritage List. Since 2010, Léonce is an active member of Association for the Safeguarding of Masks (ASAMA). He is the Executive Secretary of ASAMA since 2016. In addition to working to safeguard the rich heritage of masks, he coordinates one of the largest tourist events in Africa on masks: the International Festival of Masks and Arts of Dédougou (FESTIMA) which attracts nearly 75,000 visitors each edition.