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The mythical hero and his mask
abstract

The mask as a form of expression for something that should not be revealed suddenly but gradually through time, and in a specific context – for example, in a ritual – is to be found in many ethnographic cultures where a mind image may be assigned to a given form of expression (the mask) which can take the feature of a schematic and abstract figure. But the subtle play of sending what is being seen or heard toward something else through an abstract and not always openly naturalistic, distorted representation (the mask) is usually denied to an ethnographic culture supposedly foreign to these expression subtleties, which are therefore solely associated with learned cultures, having inherited enlightened rationalism: therefore, the only mask that should belong to an 'ethnographically classic' culture, which ignores writing, should be one that terrorizes and frightens, rather like a sort of sorcerer's fetish, a sort of abnormal growth in a sickly soul and in a warped mind. In essence, the mask of primitive cultures seems to have been mostly assigned a frightening function: however, it is this function representing-expressing the unsaid of the human soul, lost in its perverse desires, that pertains to some expressions of Western culture, mostly in the 20th and 21st centuries, but here we would make a foray into psychoanalysis and the interpretation of dreams.

Thus, in these short remarks, I would like to weaken the notion of the mask as a means of expression designed and made by ethnographic cultures to strike terror, through the mentioning of the refined play carried out by a limited number of 'image creators', in one of the many islands of the Pacific, when making recourse to a mask made in three colours (white, red and black) distributed according to a strictly-defined color order on a two-dimensional wooden surface in order to assign an 'outside' face to a mythical hero – a face that at the same time should remain hidden, secret to the majority of villagers that can only guess and infer it. The colour mask somewhat hides a graphic texture etched in the wooden surface hinting at the face and body of a mythical hero with wholly abstract signs. What is then the meaning of the mask?