

Go Up Into the Gaps: Play and Native American Religions – 2

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This discussion of Schiller's understanding of play has, of course, been taken with the expectation that it will provide insight into Native American masking, masked dancing, Native American religions generally and dancing. Let's now see.

If anything distinguishes a mask as an object it is that it is a rigid sculpted face. It is like a face in form only—it has facial features, but it has no facial sensuality. Notably most masks are self-consciously false; that is, mask makers appear to take every opportunity to avoid making a mask that might be mistaken for a living face.

But a mask without a masker, the one who bears the mask, is inanimate, a piece of sculpture, an unused prop. Such objects are often used as wall decorations. Masking, as a ritual and cultural activity, is always the conjunction of the two—the mask and the masker. I would want to argue that at the most basic definitional level the concept "mask" requires the conjunction of these two elements. Even the English word "mask" holds this structurality. The word mask may as a verb mean "to mask," yet it may also be a noun referring to the physical object. There is a double nature necessary to the very idea "mask." It is not a doubling that is eventually resolved, but is ever at play.

This simple observation of the double nature of masking when conjoined with the theory of play we have developed, based on Schiller, immediately begins to suggest interpretive possibilities.

A mask as an object, rigid and fixed, and artificial in form, presents the eternal and universal idea of a given figure, the figure the mask presents. Apart from the masked presentation this figure has no physical, no sensuous nature, but rather pure form, idea, or concept. Hence the masking presents rather than represents. The masker, apart from a mask, is a living breathing sentient being. As a human being, he or she, in Schiller's terms, realizes him or herself in the interplay of sensuous and formal impulses. Yet, as masker, the formal drive of the masker is made subsidiary to the sensuous self. By donning a mask one gives up the form that identifies the human individual. The formal character of the masker is coincident with the being presented in the mask. Masking does however heighten some aspects of human sensuality. Behind the mask a human masker is, in one sense, reduced in the direction of his pure sensuality. The mask at once limits and controls the sensual perceptual faculties that distinguish the nature of the masker as a human being. The masker's vision is impaired, as are his or her senses of hearing, touch, as are his or her abilities to communicate through speech and facial expression. But as the masker's sensual faculties are impaired he or she provides a sensuality, a living existence, to an otherwise lifeless form, the mask. This sensual element tempers the pure formality and changlessness apparent in the mask by bringing it into concrete actions in a specific time and place. Both mask and masker must exist. Each must exert its nature upon the other. Masking then brings to the pure form of deity, spirit, or concept sentient, sensual, and physical existence, while at the same

time stripping the human masker of his or her own formal self only to engage him or her with another form.

The mask and the actions of masking are a field of play. The gap between the entity presented through masking and the human being underlying the presentation is a field of play, a field in which the figure presented comes into physical being, a field in which humans come to know through experience, from the inside out, the spirits and deities on whom their lives and world depend. In this play between the two, something emerges, comes to life, that is much greater than either one separately or even by the simple addition of the two.¹

Schiller wrote that perfection is achieved through a reciprocal action between the two drives, reciprocal action of such a kind that the one both gives rise to, and sets limits to, the activity of the other, and in which each in itself achieves its highest manifestation precisely by reason of the other being active. If a spirit, a deity, a mythic figure is formalized in a mask, the represented entity becomes manifest, comes to life, through the interplay with the sentient human masker. Any human may contemplate and study the forms of the spirits, gods, and mythic figures—forms often homologous with the very order of the universe—but in the activity of masking a human being actually manifests these figures, stands inside of them, giving them sensual existence. The masker fills up and comes to know the form represented by the mask, a feeling experiential kind of knowing.

Masking is a remarkable example of what Schiller recognized as the experience of play. He called it "living form," a term that would serve well as a synonym for masking. And to continue to follow Schiller, it was "living form" that he used as the basis for his understanding of "Beauty." It is the working in concert of the sensual and formal drives that gives rise to the play drive and hence to beauty. This conjunction is also necessary in masking. If the masker does not know the figure whose face he or she is bearing; if the masker refuses to yield his or her personal identity to play the mask (though this is unbelievably difficult to do); the masking is likely to appear false, awkward, anomalous—the sensual aspect of the masking prevails over the formal. If the mask as a form, as an ideal, so overwhelms the masker as to render him or her lifeless, unable to act, stricken under the weight of the idea that must be made manifest, the masking fails; it is but a tableau. Here the formal aspect of the masking prevails over the sensual. It is only in the oscillation, the vitalizing reciprocal engagement of the mask and masker, the formal and the sensuous, that masking achieves "living form," that masking becomes beautiful, manifests beauty.

Entrainment is perhaps another way to describe this working together that yields living form. When two people walk together, in a short time they will begin to match strides. When a number of people are hammering together, they will fall into a hammered rhythm.² This is entrainment and it occurs with masking as well. Once in costume, masked, and in the masking events, the masker's actions are entrained with the character of the masked entity, as it is understood by the whole masking community.

¹ For a larger and more profound consideration of the gap of play see my discussion of "pure depth" and "self-othering" in *Body, Brain, Movement* 2009 www.Sam-Gill.com Lecture 11: "Emotion, Depth, and Flesh—Part I: Dancing as Pure Depth" and "Dancing as Making" 2009 www.Sam-Gill.com.

² I experienced this entrainment personally when I visited a black smithy in Bamako Mali.

When entrainment occurs in masking, the entity presented by the masking comes to life and the maskers achieve experiential knowledge of this entity. This is "living form;" this is beauty.

Isn't this a wonderful understanding of masking? With this understanding of masking let's head back to Zuni at the time of Shalako. Late that December afternoon crowds gathered along the Zuni River at a place where a bridge had been constructed of mud and stone. In time a procession of masked figures, called the Council of the Gods, crossed the bridge and entered the village. Leading the group was a young figure carrying a fire brand, Shulaawisi, the fire god. His mask and body were painted black with blotches of light colored dots all over. Next came Sayatasha and Hututu, the Rain Gods of the North and South. Two yucca-carrying whippers, Salimopiya, came last. The group proceeded to six locations in Zuni Village where holes had been dug, representing the six directions. At each hole the group deposited prayer plumes and sprinkled corn meal. These rites blessed the village, bringing it into correspondence with the order of the whole world into correspondence with myth and history. The procession ended at one of the Shalako houses prepared for this event. Here Sayatasha faced Hututu and called "Hu-u-u." Hututu responded "Hu-tu-tu, Hu-tu-tu." Then the group entered the house.

Later that evening I stood, ankle deep in cold mud, for hours outside this house enthralled by what I was seeing and hearing. Inside this Shalako house was a long rectangular room. On one end was an altar and a place designated for singers and drummers. Many Zuni people had gathered in the large open portion of the room sitting on chairs and benches. A dance corridor remained open along one long interior side of the room. It was along this dance corridor sitting on benches that the Council of the Gods took its position.

With their masks propped atop their heads, now strangely human, members of the Council began to chant in unison. This rhythmic flow of speech continued hour after hour throughout the evening. Not only was this most wonderful, but amazingly the Council shared the house with a pair of Shalako dancers who were performing their own, yet different, chant. Two groups, occupying the same space, chanting different words, hour upon hour. The overlapping sounds, in a language I did not understand, were enchanting. I couldn't seem to stop watching and listening.

Near midnight, the chanting complete, all took a break from the ritual intensity to eat and to rest. Finally the dancing began featuring the wonderful swooping dances of the Shalako. The Koyemshi, a troupe of mud-head clowns, performed their buffoonery in another house.

The complexity of Shalako is daunting and so much is transparent to this single all night performance. Shalako is actually a many day performance culminating nearly a year of extensive preparation. The members of the Council of the Gods spend much of their time for a year enacting the responsibilities of their offices. Shalako requires the building, or at least the refurbishing, of six to eight dwellings in which to house the event. And Shalako is but one of many Zuni masking rituals performed throughout the year.

Confining our attention to but one figure, Sayatasha, we may begin to appreciate more deeply the play of masking. Around the time of the winter solstice, shortly after Shalako is performed, the members of

the Council of the Gods who will serve the following year are chosen. After these men are chosen they make offerings to the ancestors at the river, a first performance of the ritual acts they will conduct daily until they perform Shalako almost a year later. Every night they meet to discuss aspects of Shalako and late at night they learn the prayers they will recite during Shalako. Every morning they arise before dawn and prepare to offer prayer meal to the rising sun. Each month at the time of the full moon they offer prayersticks to shrines and at the new moon they travel many miles to plant prayersticks at springs in the mountains south of Zuni.

The Zuni man who will portray Sayatasha, the leader of the Council, is called by the title Sayatasha Mosona and in all that he does during this year he must act in an exemplary manner. He must work hard physically, socially, mentally, and religiously. He is responsible for the Zuni religious calendar, reckoned primarily by the position of the moon. Sayatasha Mosona must notify all parties at the appropriate time to prepare for ceremonial occasions. This man must even walk like Sayatasha, a gait that is ponderous, with exaggerated strides. Sayatasha walks slowly poising each foot in the air momentarily before bringing it heavily to the ground. Like the Rain Priest he will portray, this Zuni man is sought out for counsel and pointed to as an exemplar of Zuni life ways.

The Sayatasha mask and costume are elaborate. To examine the appearance of Sayatasha reveals the many attributes of Zuni culture and religion that are brought into play in his masking. Sayatasha is both Rain Priest of the North and Bow Priest. He is the Chief of the Kachina Village which lays beneath a lake two days walk to the west of Zuni, the home of Kachinas and the home of the dead. This remarkable figure, who appears but one time each year at Zuni on this Shalako night, is thus associated with both agriculture and hunting, with both life and death, with both the human Zuni world and the world of kachinas and the dead. The mask and costume reflect the conjunction and interplay of these associations.

The mask is bell jar shaped. Atop the head are downy feathers, bluejay feathers, and feathers of summer birds all fastened to a prayerstick attached to the head, a designation of a Rain Priest. Sayatasha means "Long Horn," a name he is sometimes called when Zunis use English. This designation refers to his distinguishing feature of a single long horn extending outward from the right side of his head. This horn is for long life. A large flat "ear" extends outward from the head on the left. The right eye is a short slit, short according to Zuni reckoning for witches that their lives be short; the left eye corresponds with a long line that extends outward into the "ear," long so that the lives of good people will be long. Black goat hair hangs from the horn and over the forehead. A white cotton thread hangs down behind. The elkskin collar is stuffed with wool.

Sayatasha wears a white cotton shirt cut full over which he wears an embroidered white blanket fastened on the right side. He wears a white cotton dance kilt with a blue band, an embroidered sash, a red women's belt, fringed white buckskin leggings, and blue dance moccasins. The cotton dance kilt and shirt and the dance moccasins are those of a Rain Priest and are associated with bringing rain. He carries a fawn-skin quiver over his right shoulder. He wears many necklaces and bracelets. In his right hand he carries a deer scapulae rattle and in his left a bow and arrow and many prayersticks. The quiver, bow and arrows, prayersticks, and rattle identify Sayatasha as a hunter and warrior.

Though this is but a superficial consideration of a single figure in the complex Shalako rituals placed loosely in his cultural and religious contexts, it is clear that Sayatasha is not merely a man wearing a mask and costume. Sayatasha is a field of play, a field in which a particular Zuni man has practiced and played almost constantly for a year. It is the contrasting and even contradictory aspects which, when brought together in this masking, initiate a play that has the potential to produce a living form, to be experienced as beauty.

Sayatasha is at once Sayatasha and Sayatasha Mosona: spirit and human, eternal and mortal, form and sense, of the domain of the dead and of the living. Sayatasha is at once Rain Priest and Bow Priest; at once hunter and warrior; bringer of rain and long life, controller of weather, while at the same time killer of witches, protector, deer hunter, and killer of enemies.

Indwelling Sayatasha's form is for a Zuni man an entry into Zuni philosophy and belief, but it is also to bear the responsibility and to be the vehicle for transforming these formal aspects of Zuni religious life into the experience and history of the Zuni people. Masking Sayatasha is, through play, to bring into concert many pairs of mutually exclusive attributes that constitute Zuni reality. The play does not resolve these attributes into unity; the play demonstrates that Zuni religious culture is given vitality in the interaction among these forever opposing and contrasting values and attributes.

Other masking examples will be useful, but first I want to comment on how I see this notion of play as characterizing much of Native American religious experience. To focus on the play of Native American religious action is to articulate the dynamics of what Jonathan Z. Smith meant when he said, "it is precisely the juxtaposition, the incongruity between the expectation and the actuality that serves as a vehicle for religious experience."³ When we think of religions, especially Native American religions, we tend to think of principles like balance, harmony, centeredness, piety, respect for the earth, kinship with the animals and plants. What we often fail to realize is that such a religion would scarcely be either alive or real. What we fail to see is that religion generally, and most certainly Native American religions, is a process of manipulation and negotiation and application. It is a process of play in which the many formal dimensions of tradition are strapped on like masks and made to dance and have presence in an ever changing and always demanding world. It is interplay in this gap that gives life to any religious tradition and it is the extraordinary playfulness of Native American religions that makes them exemplary among religions.

I am not speaking simply of using police cars as escorts for the Zuni Shalako. While I'd argue that Zuni Shalako is constantly a process of application, Native American masking events illustrate this playful dynamics.

³Jonathan Z. Smith, "Map is Not Territory," in *Map is Not Territory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).