

The Hooper Stone Temne Mask

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The Hooper-Stone Temne *ka-Bemba* Initiation Mask

This monumental Temne initiation mask (Figure 1) belonged to James Hooper and Allan Stone and thus was owned by two visionary and very distinguished collectors of tribal art. Depicted in Steven Phelps' "Art and Artefacts" and in William Hart's article about the corpus of the Temne masks in the journal "African Arts", as well as being on view in various pictures of Allan Stone's apartment, the Hooper-Stone Temne mask stands out as a masterpiece in the small corpus of comparable masks, whose place of origin and usage was unknown for a long time. Not until the end of the 1980s when the research of William Hart brought various facts to light was it possible to attribute this type of mask to a specific ethnic group. However, to garner a complete understanding of the significance of this mask, it is crucial not only to understand the role of this mask in its historical context and to attribute this mask to the corpus of the Temne *ka-Bemba* initiation masks, but also to appreciate the mask as an autonomous and important work of art in and of itself, detached from its social, spiritual, and intellectual context.



1. *Ka-Bemba* initiation mask, Temne, Sierra Leone, wood, metal, raphia, H. 51 cm
Provenance: James Hooper, Merton Simpson, Allan Stone

The Initiation Rites of the Temne

Nowadays the Temne, who migrated in the early 16th century to their present settlement area, are the largest ethnic group of Sierra Leone and the northern neighbors of the Mende. Within the Temne villages, the initiation proceedings – called *rabai* – during which young men between the ages of 6 and 22 are circumcised and prepared for manhood, occur annually. The young men who are still uncircumcised are separated from the rest of the village and live for a period of time in a clearing in the forest, outside of the village where unauthorized persons are not permitted entry. This clearing is directionally aligned with the origin of the ancestors and can thus be understood as a spiritual and secure place. During this time the young men are in a transitional state between childhood and adulthood. The circumcision is only a small part of this transitional process, where focus lies mainly on conveying values like discipline and preparing the young men for their life as adults. Thus, when the *rabai* initiation rites ends, the participating young men are symbolically reborn as adult men and become full-

fledged, adult members of society.ⁱ During these initiation rites, the presence of the *ka-Bemba* mask is of utmost significance.

The *ka-Bemba* Initiation Mask

The spirit-being, who is embodied by the *ka-Bemba* mask and denoted by Frederick Lamp as a “spiritual midwife” because it is constantly present at the initiation proceedings and thus accompanies the young men during their transition into adulthood, plays an important role during the traditional *rabai* initiation rites. However, since 1916, the literature does not mention the appearance of the *ka-Bemba* mask during the *rabai* initiation proceedings anymore.ⁱⁱ Thus one can only assume that in the early 20th century a nowadays unknown incident led the Temne to abandon their use of this type of mask during the *rabai* initiation rites. Presumably this is the reason why the connection between the *rabai* initiation rites and this specific type of mask was forgotten for such a long time. Thence, masks of this type often have been wrongly attributed to the Bamana or the Bassa peoples.

It was not until the end of the 1980s that the research of William Hart brought new information to light. His research was based on masks whose origin from Sierra Leone was well documented. Based on stylistic criteria, he was able to attribute other masks to the Temne and thus define a corpus of comparable masks. For example, the Temne mask, which was acquired as a donation by the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago in 1929, was collected prior to 1901 in Sierra Leone (Figure 2).ⁱⁱⁱ William Hart identified this specific type of mask as a *ka-Bemba* initiation mask because of stylistic characteristics, which it shares with other *ka-Bemba* masks, like the distinctive area of the forehead and the nose, the horns and the raphia. *Ka-Bemba* means grandfather, suggesting that these masks amongst others can be interpreted as ancestors. William Hart presumes that in this context the horns of the masks are to be understood in connection with the origin of the spirit-being from the forest and the afterlife. William Hart supposes further that the brass-strips of the masks flashed in the sunlight and thus led, in contrast to the dark wood, to a dappled surface, which is characteristic of *Bemba* masks.^{iv}



2. *Ka-Bemba* initiation mask, Temne, Sierra Leone, wood, metal, raphia
Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago

The Hooper-Stone Temne Mask

The Hooper-Stone Temne mask was first depicted in 1976 in Steven Phelps' classic book about the collection of his grandfather James Hooper. There, Steven Phelps described the Temne mask in the following way:

“The large horned mask (1782, pl. 221) is of undetermined origin but is a powerful creation, probably from the Toma-Malinke area of interior Guinea or southern Mali.”

James Hooper (1897-1971) was after William Oldman, Harry Beasley, and Alfred Fuller presumably the last British private collector who could assemble a collection of such vast extent, diversity, and quality. Further he was the founder of the “Totems Museum” in Sussex, which existed only for a short time but is nevertheless legendary to the present day. After his death, the collection was sold, divided into several parts. Hence the Hooper-Stone Temne mask was bought at the Christie's auction “African Art from the James Hooper Collection” on July 14, 1976 by the well-known art dealer Merton Simpson (1928-2013). Later the mask entered the collection of Allan Stone (1932-2006), who was a close friend of Merton Simpson. Allan Stone was not only an important New York gallery owner, but also a collector, who built an exceptional collection in terms of both the number and quality of the artworks. As can be seen in Figure 3, the *ka-Bemba* Temne mask was given a well visible place in his apartment. Therefore the Hooper-Stone Temne mask was owned by James Hooper and Allan Stone, two distinguished collectors of tribal art, who both followed their very own special vision and whose collections are considered to be inimitable to the present day. As is apparent from the upper quotation from Steven Phelps, James Hooper never knew about the place of origin and the intended use of the *ka-Bemba* initiation mask. Only after 1987, when the research of William Hart was published, was the Hooper-Stone Temne mask – as the only mask, which was not part of a museum collection – identified as part of the corpus of the Temne *ka-Bemba* masks. In 2007 the Hooper-Stone Temne mask was sold anew on the first Allan Stone auction at Christie's “Selections from the Allan Stone Collection”.



3. Allan Stone in his apartment with the Hooper-Stone *ka-Bemba* mask

The Representation of the Grandfather *ka-Bemba*



The Hooper-Stone Temne mask captivates the viewer at first sight with its monumental volume. But only the interaction of the details makes this mask the masterpiece of the corpus. On the one hand, as an initiation mask, the Hooper-Stone *ka-Bemba* mask is powerful and full of movement. This was achieved by the artist through the slight asymmetry and inclination of the face and the unique fitting of the brass-strips, where the crowns point partially upwards and downwards. On the other hand, the mask is shaped in such a way that leads to a complete ensemble, thus the mask appears highly harmonious. This harmony is achieved through the consistent readopting of related forms, for instance the semicircle as the form of the eyes, the mouth and the horns. Moreover, when viewed from the side, the voluminous arch of the forehead, as well as the concavity of the cheeks becomes visible. Thus here again the duality of movement – for example through the rhythmical curve of the horns – and harmony – for example through the readopting of the form of the back of the head in the horns and ears – is visible (Figure 4). Hence the Hooper-Stone Temne mask embodies the contrast between the fierce-and-moving and the calm-and-harmonious in a perfect way.

The corpus of comparable Temne masks, which all have been collected before the Second World War, is as previously mentioned very small. In his article of 1987 William Hart presented a corpus of four comparable masks. Besides the Hooper-Stone Temne mask and the above-mentioned mask in the Field Museum in Chicago, there is a mask in the British Museum in London and another in the Museum für Völkerkunde in Munich. Figure 5 (on the next page) depicts the mask from the British Museum, which was collected before 1911 in Sierra Leone. This mask is, most notably in relation to the treatment of the horns, which tend backwards on both masks, the nose with the pricked nostrils and the brass-stripe fringe of the eyes, the most similar mask compared to the Hooper-Stone *ka-Bemba* mask. However, the *ka-Bemba* mask in the British Museum has, compared to the Hooper-Stone mask and the other masks presented by William Hart, only a few and in the quality of the execution inferior brass-stripe adornments.



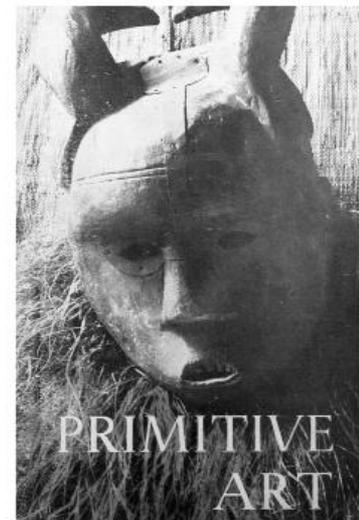
5. *Ka-Bemba* initiation mask, Temne, Sierra Leone, wood, metal, raphia, H. 52 cm British Museum, London



6. *Ka-Bemba* initiation mask, Temne, Sierra Leone, wood, metal, raphia Museum für Völkerkunde, Munich

The above-mentioned *ka-Bemba* mask in the Field Museum in Chicago (Figure. 2) is, in contrast to the Hooper-Stone mask and the mask of the British Museum, a full-helmet mask. The difference to the Hooper-Stone Temne mask is not only that, but also lies in the fitting of the brass stripes, the curve of the horns, as well as the absence of the fringe of the eyes and the slightly different proportions. The last mask that William Hart included in this corpus, is the one in the Völkerkundemuseum in Munich, which is also a full-helmet mask (Figure 6). Hart assumes that the same carver made this mask and the one in the Field Museum in Chicago. Of the four mentioned masks, the Munich *ka-Bemba* mask differs the most from the Hooper-Stone mask. This is due to the horns, which are curved upwards and not backwards, the bulge-like low ridge from the ears to the mouth, and the cross-shaped brass-stripe attachment on the forehead.

A fifth Temne mask, which was not mentioned by William Hart and whose present whereabouts is unknown, was depicted on the cover of a 1945 exhibition catalogue of the Berkeley Galleries,^{vi} where this mask was still attributed to the Bundu society of Sierra Leone (Figure. 7).^{vii} The Berkeley Galleries, founded in 1941 by William Ohly, was an important gallery for tribal art, as well as a favored meeting place for collectors. In one respect the Ohly Temne mask differs considerably from the above-mentioned *ka-Bemba* masks given the lack of brass-stripes, the presence of scarification marks on the forehead and the open mouth, which has teeth. Nevertheless the mask can clearly be added to the corpus. The 48cm size of the mask, the raphia, the backward curved horns, the form of the face including the nose and the brass-stripe framing of the eyes are distinct indications that it is a Temne *ka-Bemba* initiation mask. Moreover, when compared to the Hooper-Stone Temne mask it becomes clear that despite the obvious differences just noted and the rather round shape of the Ohly mask, it is indeed a comparable mask and can thus be added to the corpus of known Temne *ka-Bemba* masks.



7. *Ka-Bemba* initiation mask, Temne, Sierra Leone, wood, metal, raphia, H. 48cm Berkeley Galleries, 1945

Protection and Authority

Nowadays there are still open questions concerning the Temne *ka-Bemba* masks. Thanks to the research of William Hart, these masks can be attributed to the Temne and the purpose of these masks seems also to be explained convincingly. In addition, the Ohly Temne mask, which was already identified in 1945 as being from Sierra Leone and came like most of the other Temne masks to England, confirms his research anew. However, why this type of mask is so rare and was no longer used after the early 20th century remains uncertain. The assumption that an external event led to the non-usage of this type of mask seems likely. Another interesting open question remains concerning the artist of these masks. Although the corpus is very small and all masks display similar characteristics, one cannot assume that all these masks were created by a single artist. Differences in the execution, as well as in the quality of these masks suggest that several artists created these *ka-Bemba* initiation masks.

The Hooper-Stone *ka-Bemba* mask is, besides the Ohly mask whose current whereabouts is unknown, the only known Temne mask still in private hands. It has, in comparison to the other known four masks, a unique rhythm and is without any doubt a masterpiece that was created by a significant artist. As the embodiment of the grandfather *ka-Bemba*, i.e. the afterlife situated ancestor, the mask exudes a vast presence not only through its monumental volume, its expressive but closed mouth and its backwards curved horns, but also in particular through its gentle and harmonious expression. Thus the *ka-Bemba* mask embodies an ancestor as a person to be respected, who continuously accompanies the young men during the initiation, where these initiates develop from their status as children to their symbolical rebirth as men, a time considered to be dangerous, especially because the wounds from the circumcision could be deadly. Thus the spirit-being, which the *ka-Bemba* mask embodied, served a dual role, protecting the initiate from infectious disease, whose cause was believed to be evil witches, as well as providing educational authority. The Hooper-Stone *ka-Bemba* initiation mask fulfills this duality in such a way that also decontextualized as a pristine work of art, nothing of its original quality is lost. On the contrary, when detached from its historical context, the mask persists as a masterpiece.

ⁱ F. Lamp, *Frogs into Princes: The Temne Rabai Initiation*, *African Arts*, January 1978, Volume XI, Nummer 2, p. 38-49

ⁱⁱ F. Lamp, *Frogs into Princes: The Temne Rabai Initiation*, *African Arts*, Januar 1978, Volume XI, Nummer 2, p. 42

ⁱⁱⁱ W. A. Hart, *Masks with Metal Strip Ornament from Sierra Leone*, *African Arts*, May 1987, Volume XX, Nummer 3, p. 70

^{iv} W. A. Hart, *Masks with Metal-Strip Ornament from Sierra Leone*, *African Arts*, May 1987, Volume XX, Nummer 3, p. 73

^v S. Phelps, *Art and Artefacts*, 1976, London, . 372

^{vi} *Exhibition of the Art of the Primitive Peoples at the Berkeley Galleries, June to July 1945*, William F. C. Ohly

^{vii} The same mask can further be seen of a picture of the Berkeley Galleries from 1945, depicted in: *Provenance: Twelve Collectors of Ethnographic Art in England 1760-1990*, 2006, p. 107

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