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in conversation

working with the ancestors. the kabra mask and the “african renaissance” in the afro-surinamese winti religion

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In 1998 Marian Markelo (Nana Efua Mensah)¹ received a message from her ancestors. In their message, the ancestors assigned Markelo, a descendant of enslaved Africans in Suriname and a prominent priestess of the Afro-Surinamese Winti religion in the Netherlands, to “bring back” the sculptural tradition in the practice of Winti. That tradition had been lost during the Middle Passage and slavery, and, the ancestors argued, it was now time to restore this tradition in honor (“in ere herstellen”).

I entered the project in late 2013 when I was asked to act as the project’s “chronicler.” At that point, there was already quite a history to look back upon. Thirteen years after receiving the ancestral message, Markelo had made acquaintance with Boris van Berkum, a Dutch artist based in Rotterdam. Van Berkum had just finished a solo exhibition at Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam. He describes their first meeting at a Winti prey as a “magical moment”, in which Markelo, guided by her African ancestors, chose Van Berkum as a partner in what she calls an “African Renaissance” in the Winti religion.

In 2011 and 2012, Van Berkum made six ceramic sculptures of the Winti mother

goddess Mama Aisa. However, the African-inspired sculptures he initially produced did not stand the test of ritual deployment when Markelo and Van Berkum used them in a Winti prey. The ritual had been prepared well. The event was organized at Van Berkum’s studio on Brienoordeland near Rotterdam, an island in the Maas river which reminded Markelo of the river islands in Suriname; the sculptures had turned out beautifully, and could certainly serve as spiritual objects (indeed, one of the sculptures is now part of Markelo’s private altar). Nonetheless, they were not yet “perfect”: they did not have the spiritual presence Van Berkum had aimed for. During the ritual Van Berkum did, however, have a vision of how the sculptures could be perfected. In his vision he saw people dancing and wearing sculptures on top of their heads. “I thought it would be more powerful if the sculptures were kinetic: moving instead of static. If they could actually dance among people. Perhaps there was still too much of me in them, too much of my own interpretation”, Van Berkum told me.

Their project included not only the reintroduction of sculpture into the Winti religion, but also the safeguarding of African heritage in the Netherlands. In 2013, Van Berkum and Markelo collected more than 12,000 signatures against the commercial sale of the Rotterdam World Museum’s Africa collection.² The project received the name “Ik ben niet te koop” (“I am not for sale”), a creed against slavery in general, and in particular against the “unlawful sale of the Africa collection by World Museum director, Stanley Bremer. A waste of cultural heritage. That collection belongs to the people of Rotterdam, of which 20 per cent have African roots.”

“Then it dawned on me,” Van Berkum explained to me, “we needed to go where the African ancestors live in the Netherlands – in the great African collections of Dutch museums.” At that moment he connected the dots. Safeguarding the African heritage in the Netherlands and reintroducing sculpture into the Winti religion were two sides of the same coin. To achieve both, Van Berkum chose the technology of 3D scanning. This way, the ancestral masks could be conserved as well as brought to life. On 25 May 2013 Markelo and Van Berkum established

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FIG 1
The original Egungun mask - Photo Africa Museum Berg en Dal.

the ABAN Foundation to support the project and realize the acquisition of funds.³

They were welcomed by the Africa Museum in Berg en Dal, where they visited the collection of Yoruba masks in the museum's depot. Guided by the "spiritual character" of the objects, Markelo and Van Berkum selected six Yoruba masks. The valuable wooden masks, had to remain in the museum, but Markelo and Van Berkum were not seeking to acquire one of the original masks. They were looking for a "contemporary" (*eigentijdse*) ancestor mask.

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"Contemporary" here refers to both a particular historical moment, as well as to renewal, and to a particular kind of advanced technology, the 3D scan. They found 3D Match Europe ("make your imagination reality"), a company that normally produces scans for medical purposes. A laser scan of the masks was performed using a portable Artec 3D scanner, a device that dissolves a material object into "point cloud coordinates", a mass of data that digitally defines the shape of the object. The raw data were computer-rendered, and then milled in polyurethane foam.

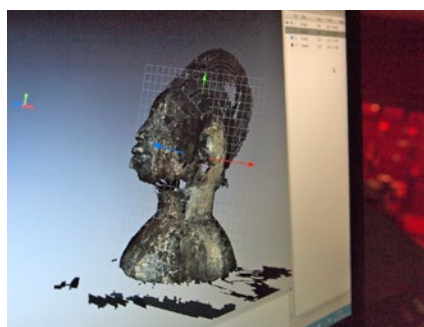


FIG 2
The data is captured and stored in the computer.

Six masks were scanned (Figure 2), and the computer-rendered images of two masks (Figure 3) were used to produce one 1.5-m high dancing mask ("Papa Winti"), one 6-m high sculpture of Mama Aisa ("Mama Aisa XXXL"), and a 66 × 40 × 40 cm Kabra mask, which I will focus on here. This particular mask (9 × 17, 5 × 20.5 cm) originates in the Yoruba region in Nigeria and is a wooden anthropomorphic mask with large, half-moon shaped eyes and an iron earring. It was used by the Egungun (lit. "mask") society, whose main task was to maintain the relationship with the ancestors, asking them for protection against witches. Markelo also valued another dimension: "some of these masks symbolize fertility (*vruchtbaarheid*), and that is central for me." The power of women, she said, was palpable in them.

The Kabra mask (Figure 4) is considerably larger than the wooden original. What remained of that mask was only its shape. The most striking change is the mask's size: "The original model was too small, it would not have produced the kind presence

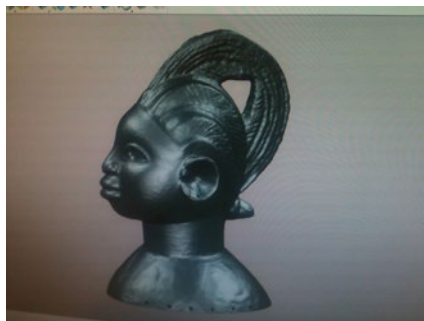


FIG 3
The data is rendered.



FIG 4
The Kabra mask, Boris van Berkum 2013.

(*aanwezigheid*) we were looking for,” Van Berkum explained. “In an African village, you have maybe 30 people, but we were looking for a public of 300 and more. And it also has to do well on television.”

Van Berkum also radically changed the appearance of the mask: instead of the original mask’s wooden color he applied transparent polyurethane varnish, through which the light beige color of the polyurethane foam is visible. On top of the varnish, Van Berkum blew brass powder,⁴ then sanded it off so that only golden-colored dots are visible on the mask’s surface. The mask is dressed in blue-and-white “persie” cloth,⁵ which is glued on top of its head, thus echoing a head-tie. Around the neck, the mask wears a collar of tulle, hiding a wooden structure so it can be worn on top of the head. The dancer wearing it can see through the tulle collar.

One could argue that the production of the mask is an “invention”, since prior to this project, masks did not play a role in Winti practice. It is, to speak with Diana Espirito Santo (Santo and Tassi 2013), a process of “making spirits”, that is, rendering in material form something that is by its nature spiritual. As an invention, something “made” or “fabricated” that has not existed before, the mask needs to persuade, and persuasion

here is a deeply material and embodied process.

The mask as an object is impressive. At Kabra Neti, but also at other performances such as the commemoration of slavery in Amsterdam, the mask appears at pivotal moments. At one Kabra Neti I attended in Rotterdam, it appeared after hours of ritual preparation, including food offerings, pouring libation, dancing, and singing. While the other spirits that are part of this ritual have always had a clear character expressed in relatively fixed and distinguishing style,⁶ the Kabra’s style has not been this clearly defined. The mask is now danced by Vanessa Felter exclusively, and she is beginning to develop a style of dancing that increasingly takes a more distinctive shape.⁷ Many people, in particular those older Afro-Surinamese women who are considered the “culture bearers” (*cultuurdragers*), often express a sense of awe (Meyer 2014) in their encounter with the mask. The mask often evokes an embodied response that involves the entire sensorium: “it gave me goosebumps when I saw it for the first time.” At a Kabra Neti in Rotterdam a blind woman, beautifully dressed in the traditional koto dress, was trembling when she touched and “saw” the mask for the first time.

To Markelo and Van Berkum, however, the mask is not an invention, but part of what they call an “African Renaissance” in the Winti religion that is much broader than the masks alone. The idea of “African Renaissance” taps into narratives that go well beyond the context of Winti religion, and touch upon questions of blackness and citizenship in the Netherlands. The idea that cultural traditions, along with other things such as the right to be human, have been lost during the Middle Passage is a fundamental part of the commemoration of the abolition of slavery that has become a central point of negotiating black citizenship in the Netherlands over the past two decades (Balkenhol 2014). The idea of an “African Renaissance” is therefore immediately recognizable in this broader context.

Indeed, the very material of the mask is a reminder that inventions never take place *ex nihilo*, but build on, transform, or re-arrange existing traditions. To Van Berkum, the Kabra mask is a “co-operation” between the ancestors and himself. “They provide the shape, I provide the finish.” He understands the technology used to create

the mask as a “neutral” process in the sense that the technology, unlike an artist, “has no will of its own.” In other words, the technology of the 3D scan, which is all about precision and exact replication, creates a sense of immediacy that bridges the gap between the artist and the ancestors. The technology thus bridges two gaps at the same time: that between the sacred and the profane, and that between the living and the dead (or the present and the past). To Van Berkum, the technology of the 3D scan, unlike an artist’s sculptural work, is able to retain something of the object that the ancestors actually touched, and thus produces the very presence of the ancestors. Hence the production process chosen by Van Berkum enables him to work on a living object, as opposed to the museum pieces that are, not dead, but finished in the sense that they may no longer be altered, or used in religious rituals. In his view, the computer technology enables him to literally

work together with the ancestors because both Van Berkum and the ancestors work on the “same” object, thus producing a mask that is alive precisely because the ancestors live in the very material shape of the object.

The “African Renaissance” is here achieved in two ways: first, the ancestors are made present in the technologically reproduced shape of the mask, thus allowing the artist to literally “work together” with the ancestors. Second, the scanning process is understood as a “liberation” of the mask from the museum collection. Unlike the original in the museum, this new mask can be part of religious rituals where it “dances among the people.” To Van Berkum and Markelo, this is an “African” use of the mask, as opposed to its more static “European” use in the museum exhibition. In short, the “African Renaissance” in the Winti religion is an embodied practice of material religion.

notes and references

¹ I wish to thank Marian Markelo and Boris van Berkum, who have not only shared with me their intimate knowledge of Winti and the “African Renaissance”, but who have generously read, re-read, and helped improve this text, making it a truly co-operative effort. I take full responsibility for any errors that might remain.

² The management had announced these plans in 2011, arguing the sale was made necessary by budget cuts threatening the existence of the museum as a whole. In 2014 Bremer distanced himself from the idea of putting the entire collection for sale. The most recent plan included the sale of 17,000 out of the total of 200,000 objects. See

³ The foundation is named after the nineteenth century Palace of Culture in the Asante (Ashanti) capital Kumase (Kumasi) in Ghana (cf. Wilks 1975, 200ff.): “The ABAN Foundation is building a shared cultural palace in the midst of our present society” (<http://aban.nl/wp-content/uploads/ProgrammaboekWintiBalMasque.pdf>).

⁴ Brass is an important metal in Winti material culture, and is for instance loved by Mama Aisa.

⁵ A batik cloth with a particular combination of white and (marine) blue colors. It is used for all “African” Winti (as opposed to those Winti who originate elsewhere, for instance the Indian (“Ingi”) Winti).

⁶ For instance, Mama Aisa is typically depicted in white robes, often wearing a brass basket with folded head ties, or a basket with fruit. Her style of dance makes her look almost as if she were drunk, but she is more composed than other spirits.

⁷ Vanessa Felter is part of Untold, a youth organization engaging in art, performance, theater, empowerment, and cultural exchange programs. Untold is actively seeking to recover the “African roots” of young black people in the Netherlands (cf. de Witte 2014).

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