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Likishi Dance Costume and Accessories (Mwana Pwo), unknown Luvale artist

Arnold Lehman: All of the masks that you see in this gallery would have originally been accompanied by a costume. In this display case is a rare example of a fully costumed mask that is still intact. For the Chokwe and Luvale people of Zambia and Angola, this dance costume, called *mwana pwo*, represents the ideal of a beautiful woman. At the top is a fiber headdress covered with resin to resemble an elaborate hairstyle. The mask itself is made of wood, with the eyes closed as if in death. To the Luvale people, it represents a young woman who died at an early age. A netted costume made of palm fiber and wood covers the dancer's body. Seedpod rattles adorn the ankles.

The *mwana pwo* depicts an archetypal female ancestor who watches over the fertility of future generations. However, it is always worn by young men, often during their initiation into men's societies. New York University professor Deborah Willis finds the blurring of gender thought-provoking.

Deborah Willis: Assumptions about female sexuality are referenced in the materials used to create this costume. Seedpods, fiber, and organic materials. What is not articulated in the historical interpretation is the notion of cross-dressing, as well as defining the behavior of identity. The piece is lyrical; it informs us of the female beauty, the breasts, the legs, the shape. African women's gendered roles are performed through the male dancer.

Arnold Lehman: It has long been common in Africa to represent female spirits with male dancers—much as early Shakespearean theater, and Japanese Kabuki theater, featured male actors playing female roles. Masks of this type are still used today throughout Africa.

For more information about these objects, be sure to visit www.brooklynmuseum.org