

“Firespitter” Mask (kponyugo) Senufo people, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, or Burkina Faso
20th century
carved wood with pigments
Honolulu Museum of Art Lending Collection, gift of Jack Hinkle, 2007 (Lending 14229)

Senufo refers to the people who speak a group of nearly three dozen interrelated languages in the region that spans the present day national boundaries of Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, and Burkina Faso. Among Senufo ritual forms are helmet masks with ferocious composite imagery referencing powerful animals—crocodiles, warthogs, and antelopes which would have been worn with fullbody outfits of raffia and cloth concealing the performers. The mask was danced by members of the men's Poro society, which maintains religious and historical traditions, and it appeared at night during funerals and on other occasions to aid in social control and scaring away evil spirits. Performers created sparks that would appear to emanate from the mask's mouth, hence the term “firespitter.” At the top of the mask chameleons, valued for their ability to change skin color, hold a small bowl for potent magical substances. The bird represents a hornbill, the mythological founder of the Senufo people and symbolic of life force and fertility. In recent times carvers would produce masks both for use in the community and for sale/trade to others. This mask, although it conforms to the traditional stylistic and iconographic characteristics for such works, does not seem to have been ritually used and was created for sale/trade.

