



Agarikon mask
(*Laricifomes officinalis*)
used in rituals associated
with the “fungus dance” and also
during an eclipse of the moon or
sun by the Bella Coola (21 x 20 cm).
Collected before 1924 by H. I. Smith
from a village near the Dean River,
British Columbia, Canada. Mask, Canadian
Museum of History, VII-D-460, S91-2931.

Extraordinary
FUNGAL MASKS
used by the
Indigenous People of
NORTH AMERICA
and ASIA

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Forest fungi have been used in many different ways but one of the most unusual is their historic use as masks during rituals by the Indigenous People of North America and Asia.

Searching for examples of forest fungi used by the Indigenous People of North America in natural history museums, I encountered a century old mask that I identified as being carved out of Agarikon, the

fruiting body of *Laricifomes officinalis* (previously called *Fomitopsis officinalis*). It was an exciting find that helps to extend our knowledge of how Native Americans used medicinal fungi like Agarikon. The mask was discovered while looking for additional examples of carved Agarikon. Ever since I first found the 19th century carvings in the American Museum of Natural History in New York and published an article on how shaman used the fungus to make important ritual objects that were believed to possess special supernatural powers (Blanchette et al., 1992), I have been on the lookout for more. It has always intrigued me that these objects, used in rituals to cure the sick, were made from a fungus that has medicinal properties. Native Americans knew the medicinal value of Agarikon at a time when the world was just beginning to understand the biology of some human diseases. As we now know, this fungus does have a variety of beneficial

medicinal properties and research is underway to elucidate more of them (Hwang et al., 2012; Rogers, 2012). The carved mask made from Agarikon is yet another fine example of Native American shamanic art. It was believed to have mysterious unearthly powers and its perceived supernatural attributes were used to influence the beliefs and practices of the community.

The mask was collected by Harlan Ingersoll Smith sometime before 1924. He was head of the archeology division for the Geological Survey of Canada which later evolved into the Canadian Museum of Civilization and then the Canadian Museum of History. In 1920, he began several years of ethnographic work in the Bella Coola Valley of British Columbia and it was during this time he likely acquired the mask for the museum (Smith, 1927). Collection notes indicate it is “mask, of fungus from the Bella Coola Indian Village, west side of Dean River, British Columbia.” Studies by Thomas F. McIlwraith, who spent 11 months living with the Bella Coola in the early 1920s to learn more about their ceremonies and culture, revealed practices that included secret societies (McIlwraith, 1948). One of these was the *kusiut* society (etymologically this means “The Supernatural” or “The Learned” Society) that had a ritual ceremony called the “fungus dance.” These ceremonies were not revealed to the increasing numbers of new Americans that were trying to stifle their old practices and do away with traditional beliefs. Apparently, McIlwraith gained acceptance of the Bella Coola by learning their native language and living with them for long periods. Although he gained a great deal of information and published a large treatise on the Bella Coola, the shaman was very secretive about some practices. The fungus dance was one of these and he comments in his book that he may not have all the information on the proper ritual. It was an elaborate ritual that utilized polypores in a supernatural display of power. As McIlwraith reported, they obtained “a fungus of the common semi-circular shelf variety with a clear white surface unspoiled by decay. On this he paints a face ... and fastens beneath a miniature body of dyed cedar bark with grotesque legs ...” (McIlwraith, 1948). This fungus is then used in a display of



Fungus mask from Asia discovered many years ago by mycologists Doug McNew and Tom Harrington in an Ames, Iowa antique store.

supernatural strength. Unknowing to the participants, a cord is attached to the fungus that drops unseen beneath the floor boards with someone under the floor holding on. As the dance continues and participants try to lift the fungus, a power struggle ensues. The fungus McIlwraith described appears more likely to be a *Ganoderma applanatum* than *Laricifomes officinalis*. The fungus mask collected by Smith has brief collection notes to suggest it was used during the test of supernatural strength during the fungus dance but it had to have been used differently than the one described by McIlwraith. The back of the Agarikon mask is hollowed out to fit a face and it appears to have side

holes, now broken, that would allow it to be secured onto the face as a mask is designed to do. McIlwraith also indicates in his book that the fungus dance was used at a ritual for the eclipse of the sun or moon. It seems, as McIlwraith suggested, that not all is known about this important ritual. There is a strong likelihood that the Agarikon mask could have been worn by the shaman during the fungus dance and at the rituals during an eclipse. Since Agarikon was so well known for its supernatural power, as we know from the many spirit figures and grave guardians that Native American's of the Pacific coast made from it (Blanchette et al., 1992), this mask seems ideally suited for

shamanic rituals requiring supernatural intervention which would be needed for an event such as an eclipse.

Many years ago when I was visiting Iowa State University in Ames to give a seminar, I was alerted by mycologists Tom Harrington and Doug McNew that they had seen a strange mask in a local antique shop. We visited the shop to find an unusual polypore fruiting body that had been made into a mask. This very old mask was from Asia but had no additional information known about it. A price tag of \$16,000 clearly labelled this as something the owner treasured and did not want to sell. Over the years I had often thought about this curious Asian mask. The store closed a few years later and I have no idea what has become of this object. Was this just an oddity or did people in Asia use polypore masks for rituals and for other cultural purposes? This question was answered when I found more fungal masks from the Himalayan region of Nepal in ethnological collections.

Much like the indigenous people from the Pacific coast of North America, indigenous ethnic groups from Nepal and surrounding countries commonly use masks in rituals to interact with the scared. Usually these masks were made from wood to represent a god or deity but some rituals required fungal masks. One area where fungal masks were used is the Middle Hills region of the Nepal Himalayas. Several old masks from Nepal have been attributed to the Rai indigenous people. The masks were assumed to be used for specific rituals to cure the sick and prevent problems. After their ritual use, they are reported to be placed in the rafters of village huts as house protecting masks to ward off evil spirits, sickness and bad luck (Murray, 1995). Over time, the polypore masks would get a blacken patina from the smoke of fires that exited the top of the hut. Collectors of ethnographic materials were keen to explore this region as one of the last remaining places to find examples of such unusual cultural properties and these old masks and other ritual objects were greatly sought after. One collector of masks that I corresponded with indicated that the tree fungus mask was among the most powerful of all masks he owned. Often masks were made from perennial polypores with



A polypore mask attributed to the Rai people of Nepal. This is a carved *Ganoderma* with a section from another fruiting body attached for the nose (24 x 21 cm).

morphological characteristics selected to fit the shape, size and sometimes peculiarity needed for a shamanic mask. The old polypore masks are wonderful artworks but more importantly they represent an important heritage of past cultural practices. As would be expected with rare ethnographic objects that have remarkable history, they can fetch enormously high prices when sold. Over the years that I have been trying to obtain information about these primitive masks, I have found several examples and have been able to sample many of them for analyses to identify what species of polypores were used. Although samples were obtained from many old masks for sequencing, most of these did not yield intact DNA that could be sequenced. The age, smoked

nature of the sporophore context and poor storage conditions of the past were apparently not conducive to good DNA preservation. However, morphological inspection showed many different taxa were used including *Ganoderma lucidum* (in the broad sense) and other *Ganoderma* species, *Fomitopsis pinicola* and even a remarkably huge *Fomes fomentarius*. We know that *Ganoderma* had a long history of being used for traditional medicine in Asia but many of the other polypore taxa like *Ganoderma appplanatum*, some *Phellinus* species and *Fomes / Fomitopsis* all are currently being used in Asian traditional medicine.

As demand and a high value of these old masks were realized in Nepal, replicas started to be made and a new industry has started. It is now possible

to see all sorts of fungal masks, some made to look old, being sold in Nepal markets. A photo showing a few of these was recently published in the book, *Mushrooms of Nepal* by M. K. Adhikari. These newly made polypore masks are not finely crafted works of art but do provide a representation of the old indigenous practices. Undoubtedly, there are some authentic old ones still being used in remote villages and prominently displayed in houses as guardians against evil and bad tidings. An in-depth ethnological study of historic uses of the polypore masks is much needed to better understand their past cultural significance.

The uses of polypores by Indigenous People from opposite sides of the world, in North America and Asia,



A large *Ganoderma* mask from the Middle Hills Region of Nepal (40 x 28 cm). Masks were used in rituals and placed up in the rafters of huts for protection. Smoke from fires caused a beautiful dark patina on surfaces.



A mask made from an unusually large *Fomes fomentarius* (24 x 22 cm) from Nepal. Eyes and mouth are cut out with section from another fruiting body used for the nose.



A mask from Nepal made from *Fomitopsis pinicola* (29 x 17 cm). This mask maintains much of the reddish coloration in outermost annual layer that is characteristic of *F. pinicola*.

have interesting similarities. They both used fungi that have medicinal properties to make the masks and their shamanic uses helped to connect the natural world with the supernatural. The fungal masks are some of the most extraordinary examples of historic ethnological uses of fungi by Indigenous People that we have and represent an unusual application that elevated these tree fungi into symbols of spiritual power.

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