



1a-d • Chamba masquerade – Mapeo 31 July 1977. The *nam gbalang* masquerade of the Yangur patriline joins a performance of *bəntəng*, the clan's most important *jup* or cult, staged to mark the 'return' home of an elderly clanswoman dying among her in-laws. Her 'relic' returns in the calabash shaded by the clan's war shield. The bearer, one of the woman's sons, wears leaves – traditional women's attire – over his dancing skirt, and has a hoe, symbolising her farming for her affines, over his shoulder. He is preceded by the double hand-gong belonging to the cult and masquerade
Photograph: Richard Fardon

1 | Introduction | Posing the problem – fusion masquerades and the materialisation of thought style



Comparison, materiality, method

Comparison involves judgements about similarities and differences between whatever is to be compared (in the coming case, masks). But, for this to be possible, we need to have decided how the similarities and differences that are to matter to comparison will themselves be recognised. Hereabouts an interesting complication sets in: what if the process of comparing leads us to revise our criteria of comparison? And does so recursively? To put it another way, is it the case that comparative contexts, and the criteria of difference that make them the same or distinct, change together? If the criteria of comparison are, in some degree, products of the practice of comparing, then comparison must be open-ended and endlessly revisable. Philosophically this is a defensible position; but entirely open-ended speculations committed to paper would make wearying and eventually unproductive reading. Practically, then, how does one compare without the comforts of easy closure or self-evident criteria of difference? The transparency of comparative practices requires at least some recognition of their starting points (whence their interested, initial criteria of difference), and some discussion of why they go on as they do. The next few paragraphs are a gesture in this direction before taking the plunge into the details of masks at the eastern end of the West African Middle Belt.

I saw my first Chamba masquerade soon after arriving as a first-time, ethnographer in mid-1970s Nigeria. I did not yet understand Chamba Daka language, or have a clear sense of the lie of Chamaland; but the first African masquerade I had seen – as it were – in the flesh, struck me as a wonderfully bizarre thing. During the couple of years of my initial research, I saw the masquerade perform repeatedly in the Chamba communities where I stayed longest (**Figure 1**), and often enough elsewhere to be sure it was widely shared by Chamba. Yet my analysis of its significance remained poorly developed. It was not until researches among Chamba Leko