

An examination of the history and use of masks and why the Zapatistas cover their faces

Levels: 9-12

Subjects: Arts, history, social studies, ELL/ESL

Objectives: This lesson aims to answer the question "Why do the Zapatistas cover their faces?" It will do so by looking at the history of masks, their significance, their functions, and their role in modern popular culture. It will focus on the special meaning and significance of the *paliacate* and the ski-mask for Zapatistas. It will address:

- a) the historical origins of masks
- b) ritual and practical functions of masks
- c) masks in Mexican culture
- d) masks in modern popular culture
- e) the significance of the mask for Zapatistas

Learners will examine:

- a) their personal experience of and feelings about masks
- b) why people wear masks
- c) how they feel about the Zapatistas use of masks
- d) how they would represent their school with a mask

Learners will be able to answer the following questions:

- a) When did masks originate?
- b) How were they used historically?
- c) How were they used historically in Mexico?
- d) What do they represent in modern popular culture?
- e) What do they represent for the Zapatistas?
- f) What is the greater political significance of the mask today?

What's behind the mask?

One of the most common questions people ask when they first see photos of Zapatistas is why they cover their faces. There are a number of reasons why they do this, but before we begin to answer this question, we are going to take a look at the history of the mask in general.

Although the origin of the word 'mask' is uncertain, it seems likely that it comes from the Spanish *más que la cara* (more than the face), which gives us the shortened word *mascara*. The oldest masks that have been discovered are about 10,000 years old and masks are found all over the world, so there is nothing new or unusual about wearing masks.



Masks representing Tragedy and Comedy

Since ancient times, masks have been used for both ritual and practical purposes, including religious ceremonies, theatre, protection and disguise. Masks showed the religious or social importance of a person in society and were commonly used by shamans and chieftains. The ancient Greeks used masks in theatre to represent different characters and

also during festivities to hide the identity of the participants. This tradition continues to the present in the Carnival of Venice, Mardi Gras and Halloween, where the masks make all of the participants equal as well as giving anonymity. The Greek masks representing Tragedy and Comedy are also still used to this day to represent acting.



Mayan people celebrating Carnival

There is evidence of masks in Latin America from more than 3,000 years ago, and here again masks were used for political, religious and entertainment purposes. After the arrival of Europeans, many traditional masks were used to celebrate Christian festivals and these traditions have continued to the present, especially in Mexico with the Day of the Dead and Carnival. Mexico maintains a strong tradition of making masks and masks are typically worn by wrestlers for one of the most popular sports in the country. One famous wrestler, *El Santo*, continued

to wear his mask long after his professional career had ended, only revealing his face in old age, and was actually buried wearing his mask!



'El Santo'

Given this long and ancient history of the mask, why does it come as such a surprise that the Zapatistas cover their faces? Probably because masks are often associated with the 'bad guys'. The ski-mask or balaclava is generally used by the bank robber or the terrorist. But it's not only the 'bad guys' who wear masks. If we think of most modern superheroes like Batman, Spiderman or Captain America, they all wear masks too. What's more, while the bad guys are wearing masks to hide their identity, these good guys are wearing masks to *show* their identity.



Batman and Robin

So why do the Zapatistas cover their faces? They tell us that before they covered their faces, people hardly noticed them, but when they made themselves public in 1994 with their *paliacates* and ski-masks, everybody paid attention to them. Finally they were immediately recognizable and now they wear that mask as part of their identity. It is a statement that they are no ordinary indigenous peoples, but are proud to be part of the Zapatista movement. Around the world, and even within Mexico, few people can name more than a couple of the indigenous peoples that exist, but millions know who the Zapatistas are. 'Covering their faces in order to be seen' seems to have been a success.



Zapatistas in 'paliacates'

Mayan tradition and the Zapatistas give great importance to the collective as opposed to the individual, so while our superheroes are proclaiming their personal identity and power, the Zapatistas are identifying themselves as part of a larger collective from which their

power derives when they cover their faces.

Of course, the Zapatistas don't wear masks all the time but they do when they are being photographed, and they do this to protect themselves. They live in a conflict zone where their communities are often attacked and revealing their personal identities could put their lives in danger. What they do not do is wear their masks in a threatening way, and a smile is usually visible behind the *paliacate*.



Guy Fawkes Mask

In summary, we can say that, apart from protection, the Zapatistas cover their faces in order to be recognized, and they use their masks as a symbol of resistance and also of collective identity and strength. They use them to distinguish themselves from other indigenous and political movements. While many political groups depend on the handsome face of their leader or candidate, the Zapatistas use the mask to display an egalitarian anonymity within their movement. This is an idea which has spread around the world, far beyond the borders of Chiapas, with the Occupy and Anonymous movements, who commonly wear the Guy Fawkes mask for the same reasons.

Things to think and talk about...

- a) Have you ever worn a mask? When and why? How did you feel when you wore it? How do you feel when you see other people wearing masks?
- b) Is there a tradition of masks where you live? What do you know about this tradition?
- c) List as many jobs as you think of where people wear masks? Why do they wear them?
- d) What do you feel about the Zapatistas wearing masks? Do you think it's a good or a bad idea?
- e) If you had to design a mask to represent your school, what would it look like?



Afro-Cuban Masks