

# Basic Detail Report

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## Kòmò society helmet mask (Warakun)

### Medium

Wood, feathers, quills, antelope horn, pig hairs, animal fur, and encrustation

### Description

Wood; crocodile head form with feathers, quills, horns and encrustation. The Kòmò society is a civic organization of men whose members come from different clans and different occupations. This secret society is the most popular of all Bamana power associations. Members gain both philosophical and practical knowledge about their community and participate in both fighting crime and settling judicial cases. People swear oaths to the Kòmò and fear personal disaster if they transgress. A high-ranking Kòmò member dances the Warakun mask and communicates to others in a loud bellowing voice distorted with a kazoo-like voice disguiser. A fellow Kòmò society member, known as the "Mouth of the Beast," serves as a bard who translates the strange words and sounds into songs. Only initiated male members of a community may view the Warakun; women are required to remain behind closed doors when the mask is performed. The Warakun combines elements of the bush or wilderness: birds (feathers), mammals (horns, hair, and quills), and reptiles (the crocodile form). Alternatively, the form has been described as being that of a hyena, a scavenger active at night. Regularly scheduled Kòmò society meetings provide opportunities for members to increase the power of a Warakun. Sacrificial materials are poured over the headdress, resulting in a thick patina over time. The powerful mask allows society members to harness nyama, the energy that activates the universe. The formidable Kòmò mask is danced at night, preferably by firelight. A voluminous masquerade costume concealing powerful amulets and covered by the feathers of predator birds, such as vultures, complements the Warakun mask. The acrobatic dancer increases its dramatic impact when he changes his form; he contorts his body and pushes the mask on a stick high in the air. The Bamana, an ethnolinguistic group of the upper Niger region of Mali, cannot easily be distinguished from their neighbors such as the Mande or Fula who have adopted Bamana language and culture. Formerly called "Bambara," a pejorative name assigned to Bamana people by outside informants, the Bamana distinguish themselves from their neighbors in religious terms. Bamana people observe the religious practices of their ancestors; they have not converted to Islam. Suggested reading: Jean-Paul Colleyn, ed., *Bamana: The Art of Existence in Mali*. New York: Museum for African Art, 2001.

### Dimensions

Height: 23 inches (58.4 cm)