

Objects in Focus

The British
Museum



Spirits of the Wild

Exploring the World of Animal Worship

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Free

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Room 3

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Sculpture by Sylvester Mubayi and
Bhuta Mask depicting Panjuri

Spirits of the Wild

Exploring the World of Animal Worship

The worshiping of animals has been an ancient practice which evolved with human civilization. The animals are worshiped in various forms such as totems, spirits, as vehicles of the principle deities and as incarnations of gods and goddesses. Such traditions tell us about humans and nature, as well as the relationship between the two worlds.

This exhibition brings together two diverse forms of animal worship from Tulu (India) and Shona (Zimbabwe) cultures. The mask of *Panjurli* from the Tulu region explores the destructive nature of wild animals and how they came to be appeased in order to be controlled. When nomadic people became agriculturalists and settled into habitations and colonies around their agricultural fields, their main concern was guarding crops from wild animals, such as boars. They were unable to tame them or predict their attacks in the beginning.

Tsuro is on the other hand not worshipped directly but is the spirit animal of the *Mugombi* clan, the *Nhire* people who mostly live in the north of Zimbabwe. Thus the *Mugombi* clan is the custodian of the rabbit and mediates the mystic world through the spirit animal. *Tsuro*, for Zimbabweans, represents the traditional modes of perceiving the landscape and managing the land. He signifies a fusion of language, religion and education and a world of benevolent and malevolent spirits which is symbolic of the terrible punishments the dead can inflict if the moral values of the community are not upheld.

Bhuta Mask of Boar Spirit Panjurli

Cast brass

19th Century

Tulu Nadu, Karnataka, India

Brooke Sewell Permanent Fund

1995,1004.1

Panjurli's name is derived from the Tulu word for piglet. The mask captures the ferociousness of the wild boar. In the Kola ceremony wearing of the mask marks the complete manifestation of the spirit. The masks are kept and worshipped in small shrines dedicated to the spirits. This kind of masks are also made of areca nut bark and wood. The gaps provided at nostrils and mouth facilitates view for the impersonator.

