International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR)
E-ISSN: 2582-2160 ● Website: www.ijfmr.com ● Email: editor@ijfmr.com

The Anthropological Theatre of Eugenio Barba and Its Role in Rooting the Ritualistic Mask of East Asian Cultures in Contemporary Theatre Practice

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Abstract:
Ritual and symbolic practices form the backbone of cultural expression in many East Asian societies, with the mask serving as a sacred object and a medium of transformation and social memory. This article explores how the ritualistic function of the mask is recontextualized within contemporary performance through the lens of Eugenio Barba's anthropological theatre. Drawing on fieldwork observations, comparative analysis, and theoretical insights from performance studies and anthropology, the article investigates how Barba appropriates and reinterprets East Asian ritual masks, particularly from traditions such as Noh, Kathakali, and Balinese theatre, to craft a transcultural and embodied theatrical language. This study argues that Barba's theatre bridges ritual and performance, fostering a hybrid performative space where traditional symbolism is reactivated as a living, dynamic grammar of presence. This article contributes to ongoing debates about the ethics, aesthetics, and politics of cultural borrowing in global theatre practice, by foregrounding the intersection of ritual, embodiment, and intercultural dramaturgy.

Keywords: Anthropological Theatre, Ritual Mask, Eugenio Barba, East Asia, Intercultural Performance.

Introduction:

In many Asian cultures, the mask transcends its physical function as a facial covering to become a medium for articulating metaphysical presence, spiritual authority, and mythological memory. Far from being a mere decorative object, the mask is embedded in ritual structures and cosmological systems that shape both collective identity and the dramaturgy of belief. Across East Asia, from Japanese Noh and Chinese opera to Balinese and Korean ritual dances, the mask serves as a conduit between the human and the sacred, mediating invisible realms and channeling ancestral or divine forces through embodied performance.

Anthropologically, the mask has been interpreted as an origin object, what Bédouin called "one of the secrets that constitute the beginning in human societies" [1, 2], not only for its aesthetic craftsmanship but for its symbolic and apotropaic functions. Within this ritual framework, masks embody mythic narratives, social values, and cosmological knowledge, serving simultaneously as protection, transformation, and invocation. Traditions often ascribe supernatural origins to masks, locating their creation outside the realm of natural causality and grounding them instead in mythic or divine events.

This article interrogates the shifting ontological status of the ritual mask when recontextualized within contemporary theatrical frameworks. Drawing on the work of Eugenio Barba and the Odin Teatret, it explores how the ritualistic and symbolic force of the East Asian mask has been absorbed, translated, and reactivated in intercultural performance. Barba's anthropological theatre offers a unique site of inquiry, wherein ritual aesthetics are reframed as embodied methodologies for actor training and theatrical presence.

The central question guiding this study is: *How does anthropological theatre negotiate the movement of the mask from doctrinal ritual to performative practice?* In other words, what happens when the sacred is staged ; when ritual masks are re-performed outside their traditional ontologies and redeployed as aesthetic and dramaturgical tools in contemporary theatre? This inquiry will examine how Barba's theatrical work contributes to "rooting" the ritualistic power of the Asian mask by reproducing its cultural context, and by abstracting its performative grammar into a transcultural methodology of embodied expression.

Theoretical Framework: Ritual, Mask, and Anthropological Performance

The intersection of ritual and theatricality is deeply rooted in the anthropological dimensions of performance. In many early societies, ritual was a codified form of performative expression through which the community could embody cosmological narratives and confront the mysteries of life and death. As Beeman suggests, ritual is a liminal process through which society negotiates transformation and meaning. Within this liminality, the mask emerges as a key artifact—a material object imbued with symbolic force and used to mediate between the visible and the invisible, the human and the divine [3].

Across diverse civilizations, the mask carries a dual significance: it is both a protective device and a metaphysical medium. For Bédouin, masks in primitive societies are "one of the secrets that constitute the beginning of human sociality," linked to a sense of magical immunity and collective security [2]. In this context, the mask is a charged emblem of myth, transformation, and symbolic embodiment. It participates in a performative logic that fuses gesture, belief, and representation.

In East Asian traditions, the mask holds an elevated status that transcends entertainment or costume. Rooted in ritual and myth, the mask is deployed in ceremonies that reaffirm ancestral memory, cosmic balance, and metaphysical values [4]. From the Noh theatre of Japan to masked dances in Korea and Chinese folk rituals, these performative traditions emphasize the mask's capacity to actualize mythic time, to animate gods, spirits, or ancestral forces, and to construct theatricalized sacred space. As such, the mask serves as a method of memory-making, an active participant in a living, enacted cosmology.

This symbolic and embodied tradition of the mask resonates profoundly with the theoretical premises of anthropological theatre, a practice that interrogates the epistemic and expressive potential of intercultural performance. Eugenio Barba, a central figure in this field, conceptualizes theatre as a space of encounter between technical precision and ritual intensity. His *Theatre Anthropology*, developed through decades of work with Odin Teatret and cross-cultural performers, posits that performative efficiency is anchored in pre-expressive principles, rooted in traditional, often ritualistic, bodily knowledge [5]. Within this framework, the ritual mask becomes an active agent of transformation and a site of intercultural resonance. By foregrounding the mask in performance, anthropological theatre reactivates its symbolic charge, navigating between the spiritual, the aesthetic, and the political [6]. This allows the actor to access technical virtuosity and a deeper, encoded language of presence, an embodied archaeology of movement, posture, and intention. The anthropological lens thus allows us to examine how inherited forms, such as

the East Asian ritual mask, can be re-inscribed within contemporary performance without reducing their cultural specificity or sacred function.

Methodology and Context

This study employs a qualitative, anthropologically informed approach, combining ethnographic observation, comparative analysis, and theoretical inquiry. It examines the ritualistic and symbolic functions of East Asian masks and their reinterpretation in Eugenio Barba's anthropological theatre.

Ethnographic and Archival Observation: Primary sources include documented performances, archival footage, and fieldwork notes on Japanese Noh and Kabuki, Balinese Topeng and Barong dances, and Chinese Nuo rituals [4, 6, 7]. These materials illuminate the social, spiritual, and performative roles of masks, as well as the embodied techniques and ritual structures that shape traditional performance.

Comparative and Intercultural Analysis: By juxtaposing these ritual practices with Barba's adaptations in the Odin Teatret, the study traces processes of translation, embodiment, and hybridization [8-10]. It identifies continuities and transformations in symbolic meaning, spatial-temporal dynamics, and ritualized presence, highlighting how sacred elements are recontextualized within transcultural theatrical frameworks.

Theoretical and Critical Engagement: Analysis draws on performance studies, Theatre Anthropology [5] and anthropological theories of ritual and liminality [3, 6, 11]. Postcolonial and intercultural perspectives are employed to interrogate the ethics of cultural borrowing, the politics of power and representation, and the potential tensions between authenticity and aestheticization. Phenomenological approaches to embodiment further guide the study, emphasizing the actor's trained body as a mediator of ritual knowledge and intercultural meaning.

Results :

1. **Ritual and Anthropological Dimensions of Mask Usage in East Asia (Indonesia, China, and Japan)**

Mask traditions in East Asia constitute a pivotal site for examining the intersections of ritual performance, cosmology, and identity formation within local communities. In Indonesia, China, and Japan, masks function as symbolic technologies that mediate between material and spiritual realms, generating complex ontological and social systems [6]. As Victor Turner reminds us, ritual instruments such as masks operate within the threshold of *liminality*, enabling transitions between states of being and producing forms of *communitas* that transcend conventional social divisions [8].

These masks are embedded in ritual frameworks that reenact mythological narratives and also embody the presence of supernatural forces governing both social and cosmic order. As Lewis observes, the attribution of "supernatural powers" to ritual objects arises from gaps in empirical explanation, thereby preserving their sacred and enigmatic status within indigenous knowledge systems. In this sense, masks epitomize what Marcel Mauss termed a *total social fact*-phenomena simultaneously engaged in religion, aesthetics, politics, and the collective dimension of social life [12].

In Bali, masks are deeply interwoven with religious and spiritual practices. They feature prominently in sacred dances, temple festivals, and traditional performances such as *Barong*, *Topeng*, and *Jempo*, which remain central to Balinese Hindu cosmology [13]. These performances combine artistic expression with ritual enactment, through which the performer undergoes an ontological transformation. Following Merleau-Ponty and Csordas, one may argue that the mask reorganizes perception and embodiment: when

a dancer dons the Barong mask, the body becomes less an individual possession than a vessel for divine or mythic presence [14].

Jempo, among the oldest Balinese theatrical forms, narrates the adventures of Prince Panji, integrating literary heritage into ritual structures. *Topeng* combines dance and music within contexts such as funerals, affirming the ritual interplay of death, renewal, and humor [15]. The sacred and the comic coexist in *Topeng*, exemplifying Lévi-Strauss's claim that ritual reconciles opposites: chaos and order, death and regeneration. Similarly, *Barong* rituals dramatize cosmic dualities through masks evoking mythic beings like Rangda, continually renewing and reaffirming cosmic balance. "Humor and clowning are not just secular entertainment. In Bali, the holy and slapstick comingle in improvised forms such as topeng" [16]. Thus, Topeng is an essential part of the rituals that aim to celebrate cultural heritage and spirituality in Indonesian communities, especially in Bali, where these rituals are considered of fundamental value and constitute a core element of their daily lives and religious beliefs. As for the Barong rituals, they are a religious and cultural dance with profound spiritual dimensions performed using masks. These masks represent mythical and supernatural beings that embody the struggle between good and evil, aiming to protect and purify the community from evil spirits. "The character is performed by two men in a single costume, one at the front who operates the mask, which has an articulated jaw so that it can make a kind of chattering noise, and one at the back. The drama also includes the figure of Rangda, and replica masks representing this unearthly being are always popular" [15]. These rituals are considered an essential part of religious celebrations and popular customs in Bali.

Chinese *Nuo* traditions, with roots stretching back to prehistoric times, highlight the enduring role of masks as ritual technologies for purification and exorcism. In this context, masks function as "cultural texts" that render cosmological structures intelligible through embodied performance. In *Nanfeng Nuo*, masks are accompanied by dense soundscapes, drums and chants, that intensify their symbolic efficacy as mediators between human communities and spiritual forces. Their role is not merely aesthetic but ontological: masks materialize cosmic order by embodying ancestral or divine presence [17].

The etymology of *Nuo*, literally "to drive away demons" [18], reveals its core anthropological function. These masks are active participants that influence actions, meanings, and relationships within the system they belong to, according to Bruno Latour's theory of Actor-Network Theory (ANT): entities endowed with agency within ritual systems [19, 20]. At the same time, they preserve markers of cultural identity while embodying processes of purification and blessing [21]. As such, *Nuo* masks exemplify Mauss's notion of the total social fact, where the sacred converges with educational, aesthetic, and communal dimensions of life.

Japanese mask traditions represent a distinctive convergence of ritual continuity, aesthetic refinement, and cultural memory. Their design, from the disciplined symmetry of lines, to chromatic harmony, to subtle shaping of facial features, functions as a semiotic vehicle constructing character and generating emotional resonance in performance [22]. *Kagura* rituals, rooted in Shinto sacrificial worship, continue to stage divine narratives, reinforcing the integrative role of masks in sacred theatre [23]. Traditions such as *Gigaku* and *Sarugaku* further reveal layers of cultural exchange and historical evolution in ritual performance[3, 7, 24].

In *Noh* theatre, masks serve as co-performers that transform the stage into a dynamic hermeneutical horizon. Their expressive ambiguity, as [25] emphasize, emerges through interaction with light, spatial movement, and audience perception. Here Gadamer's conception of tradition as a hermeneutical process is especially apt: the *Noh* mask continually reinterprets cultural memory, producing shifting meanings

with each performance. In contrast, *Kabuki* employs painted masks and elaborate wigs that externalize psychological states through visual symbolism, while preserving a lineage of sacrality shaped by Shinto and Buddhist influences. In both cases, the mask destabilizes the Western assumption of the face as a fixed signifier, foregrounding instead fluidity, ambiguity, and contextual meaning [22].

Taken together, these traditions indicate that ritual masks in East Asia operate as aesthetic and philosophical artifacts. They disclose worlds in a Heideggerian sense, opening a horizon in which being is reshaped through ritual embodiment. They instantiate the phenomenological insight that presence is constituted through embodied perception. At the same time, they confirm Lévi-Strauss's structuralist thesis that masks mediate and reconcile oppositions within social life, while performing Turner's anthropological function of maintaining communal and cosmic balance [26, 27].

Accordingly, East Asian mask traditions exemplify what Victor Turner describes as the *liminal threshold*: an intermediary space that enables transitions between the sacred and the profane and facilitates collective reconstitution of social and cosmic order. In Balinese *Barong* and *Topeng* rituals the mask inscribes an ontological transformation: the performer's body becomes the locus of divine or ancestral presence, a point emphasized by Merleau-Ponty's account of embodied perception and by Csordas's work on embodiment [14]. The comic elements that interweave with sacred action are enact the structural reconciliation of opposites, order and chaos, sacred and profane, death and regeneration, that Lévi-Strauss theorized.

Similarly, Chinese *Nuo* masks function as ritual technologies of exorcism and purification, preserving what Marcel Mauss characterized as a *total social fact* in which religion, aesthetics, and communal governance converge. Japanese *Noh* masks, by contrast, articulate Gadamer's insight into tradition as a living hermeneutical process: their expressive ambiguity unfolds only in relation to changing light, spatial movement, and audience interpretation, rendering the mask less a fixed object and more a dynamic horizon of meaning [28].

In all these instances, the mask functions as a philosophical object that opens an ontological space where being is reconfigured and cultural cosmologies are materialized through performance. East Asian mask traditions constitute a critical locus for understanding the interplay between ritual performance, cosmology, and identity formation within these societies. Across Indonesia, China, and Japan, masks are far more than theatrical artifacts; they operate as potent symbolic media, mediating between the material and spiritual worlds, and articulating complex ontologies and social orders [6].

Masks	Cultural Origin	Ritual / Spiritual Function	Performance / Theatrical Function	Ontological / Embodied Impact	Symbolic / Cosmological Meaning	Humor / Comic Aspect	Interaction with Body
Barong	Bali, Indonesia	Sacred dance in temple festivals; protect and purify community	Dance with two performers; dramatizes mythic struggle between good and evil	Performer embodies divine presence; body becomes vessel for mythic force	Represents cosmic dualities (good vs. evil)	Limited; mostly serious, but occasionally comic through improvisation	Ontological transformation; embodiment of mythic beings

Topeng	Bali, Indonesia	Funerals, temple rituals; affirm ritual cycles of death and renewal	Combines dance, music, narrative; tells stories like Prince Panji	Performer undergoes ontological shift; mediates sacred narratives	Reconciles opposites (sacred/profane, chaos/order, death/regeneration)	Integral comic elements; humor intertwined with sacred action	Body as intermediary; performs ritual reconciliation of opposites
Jempo	Bali, Indonesia	Oldest Balinese theatre form; narrates Prince Panji stories	Dance-theatre integrating literary heritage and ritual	Embodiment of heroic/cultural archetypes	Links literary and ritual traditions	Not emphasized	Performer mediates between narrative and ritual embodiment
Nuo	China	Purification and exorcism; drive away demons	Dense soundscapes (drums, chants) accompany masks	Masks act as agents (actants) within ritual systems	Embodies ancestral/divine presence; maintains cosmic order	Rare; focus on spiritual efficacy	Masks materialize spiritual order; body enacts cosmological mediation
Kagura Gigaku Sarugaku	Japan	Shinto sacrificial rituals; staging divine narratives	Stylized dance-theatre; emphasizes symmetry, chromatic harmony, facial expression	Performer channels divine presence	Reinforces continuity of cultural memory	Not central	Body mediates between ritual and aesthetic expression
Noh	Japan	Hermeneutical enactment of cultural memory; sacred theatre	Mask transforms stage; subtle facial expressions, light and movement interplay	Ambiguous expression; performer's presence unfolds dynamically	Tradition as living interpretive process; cultural memory reinterpreted	Rare; solemn performance	Body and mask interact dynamically with space, light, audience perception
Kabuki (painted	Japan	Externalize psychological states;	Visual symbolism, exaggerated gestures	Masks / wigs depict internal states; less	Cultural memory & Shinto/Bud	Sometimes comic in stylized forms	Body exaggerates psychological

masks wigs)		maintain sacrality		ontological than Noh	dhist sacrality		/ symbolic meaning

Table1 :Asian Masks and Their Multifaceted Functions in Ritual, Performance, and Embodied Experience

These masks are embedded in ritual frameworks that serve to reenact mythic narratives and also to materialize the presence of supernatural agencies that shape communal and cosmic order. As [29] underscores, the attribution of "supernatural forces" to objects such as masks arises precisely from the lacunae in empirical explanation, thus preserving their sacred and numinous status within indigenous epistemologies [12].

In Indonesia, Bali masks are closely linked to religious and spiritual practices. Most of the masks on the island of Bali are used in sacred dances, temple ceremonies, and traditional performances, such as the Barong, Topeng, and Jempo dances, which are an essential part of Balinese Hindu culture. Bali masks are connected to spiritual and artistic traditions, evoking gods, spirits, and mythical figures [30].

Jempo is a traditional performance that portrays the adventures of Prince Panji, and it is one of the oldest forms of theater that showcases the classics of Balinese literary culture. Topeng, on the other hand, is a type of dramatic performance combining dance and music. "Topeng performances are associated with many religious ceremonies in Bali. Performances may accompany rituals relating to cremation, for example" [15].

These dances are often part of religious rituals or traditional celebrations that express ancient stories and epics in ways that blend the ceremonial with the comedic. Their popularity declined after 1908, following the fall of the great kingdoms during the Dutch occupation. Jempo performances were originally held during cremations or as offerings to the gods in temples, but since then, these performances have become rare and can now only be found in a few villages. "Humor and clowning are not just secular entertainment. In Bali, the holy and slapstick comingle in improvised forms such as topeng" [16].

Topeng is considered part of the rituals aimed at celebrating cultural heritage and spirituality in Indonesian communities, especially in Bali, where these rituals are valued and considered integral to their daily lives and religious beliefs. The Barong rituals are a religious and cultural dance with deep spiritual dimensions performed using masks. These masks symbolize mythical, otherworldly creatures that embody the struggle between good and evil, and they aim to protect and purify the community from evil spirits. "The character is performed by two men in a single costume, one at the front who operates the mask, which has an articulated jaw so that it can make a kind of chattering noise, and one at the back. The drama also includes the figure of Rangda, and replica masks representing this unearthly being are always popular" [15]. These rituals are considered an essential part of religious celebrations and popular customs in Bali.

Chinese Nuo rituals, whose origins can be traced to prehistoric and even Neolithic antecedents, constitute one of the most enduring performative systems in which masks operate as theatrical accessories and ritual technologies of exorcism and collective purification. Far from being reduced to aesthetic display, Nuo retains its cosmological function by mobilizing the sonic intensity of percussion and the symbolic efficacy of masks as mediators between human communities and the spiritual world. As recent studies of *Nanfeng Nuo* attest, these masks transcend their status as local agrarian artifacts, embodying a heritage that continues to exert pedagogical and cultural significance in contemporary society, particularly through

efforts to preserve them via renewed cultural education and the reinforcement of identity markers. Moreover, research on the Tai ethnic groups underscores the persistence of an archetypal festival pattern , structured around myth, performance, and ritual, that illuminates the universal role of masks in processes of purification and blessing [21].

The semantic root of *Nuo*, "to exorcise demons", reveals the functional axis of these performances within Chinese cosmological and ritual frameworks. Masks here are actants within a broader system of spiritual governance and communal well-being [17].

Japanese mask traditions exemplify a distinctive confluence of ritual continuity, artistic refinement, and cultural memory. The aesthetic principles guiding mask design—line alignment, chromatic harmony, and facial element configuration, function as semiotic vectors that construct character and emotional resonance in performance [22].

Kagura rites, rooted in Shinto sacrificial worship, persist as performative enactments of divine narratives, underscoring the integrative role of masks in religious theater [9]. Similarly, the *Gigaku* and *Sarugaku* traditions reveal historical layers of cultural syncretism, reflecting cross-regional influences and evolving ritual functions [3, 7, 24].

The canonical theatrical forms of *Noh* and *Kabuki* embody this synthesis of ritual and performative artistry[31]. In Noh theatre, masks function as active collaborators with the actor, their nuanced expressions contingent on spatial relations, light, and audience interpretation, thus engaging spectators in dynamic semiotic processes [25]. The mask's materiality and manipulation produce a performative ambiguity that challenges Western notions of fixed facial expression, instead emphasizing fluidity and contextual meaning.

Kabuki, by contrast, employs painted facial masks and elaborate wigs that externalize character psychology through visual symbolism, maintaining a lineage of sacredness imbued by Shinto and Buddhist influences. These practices demonstrate a conscious preservation and refinement of ritualistic performance modes rather than innovation for novelty's sake [22].

2. Anthropology of the Theatrical Mask: A Critical and Holistic Inquiry

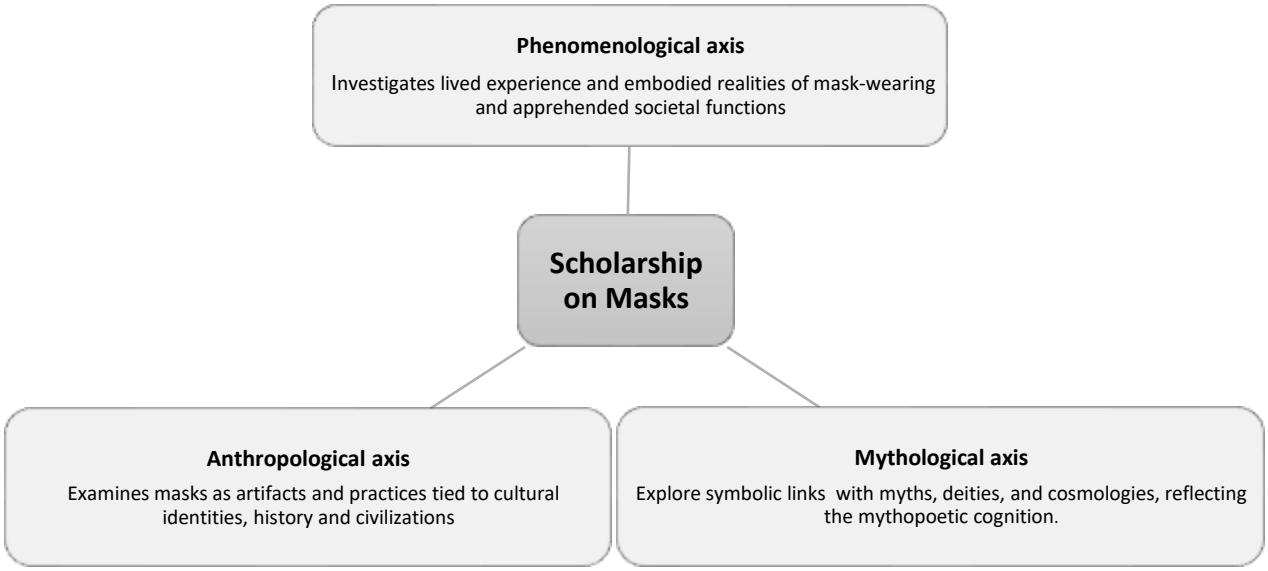
Anthropology, broadly defined as the comprehensive study of humanity in all its biological, cultural, and historical dimensions, provides a vital framework for understanding the theatrical mask as a profound cultural and symbolic phenomenon. It investigates the origins and evolution of human species and societies , and also the complex matrices of belief, ritual, and identity through which humans engage the world and themselves [8, 15].

At its core, the relationship between humans and nature has historically been mediated through utilitarian and symbolic exchanges. The invention of the mask, in this regard, emerges as an aesthetic and functional tool ; a conduit through which individuals negotiate identity, power, and sensory experience. Masks facilitate a transformative process that enables actors to transcend fixed subjectivities, assuming multiple personae across social and ritual contexts. As Brockett posits, "Masks enable actors to shift identity while playing multiple roles," underscoring the mask's capacity to enact fluidity of self and other [32].

The embodied interaction between the wearer and the mask is foundational to unlocking corporeal potentialities and reconfiguring bodily limits. Such engagement situates the mask within an intricate web of anthropological and mythological references, shaping its performative functions, symbolic meanings, and didactic roles within cultures. David Roy emphasizes anthropology's role in contextualizing masks and drama as social instruments with wider educational and cultural benefits, rooted in historically situated worldviews [33].

Cultural Anthropology—with its focus on the social and symbolic dimensions of human life, enables an exploration of masks as carriers of cultural memory, mediators of the sacred, and vehicles for metaphysical inquiry. The mask's deployment within religious ritual, spiritual practice, and symbolic systems positions it at the intersection of doctrinal authority and popular tradition, imbuing it with layers of meaning that transcend mere theatricality [11].

The scholarship on masks generally organizes itself around three interrelated axes: Phenomenological axis investigates the lived experience and embodied realities of mask-wearing as pathways to apprehending deeper truths and societal functions of masks. Anthropological axis Examines masks as artifacts and practices embedded in cultural identities, historical lineages, and civilizational narratives. Mythological axis Focuses on the symbolic resonances of masks with myths, deities, and cosmologies, reflecting the mythopoetic dimensions of human cognition.



Dimensions of Mask Studies

Masks are intrinsically tied to ritualistic contexts, deriving their meaning and potency from religious ceremonies, communal rites, and vernacular traditions that shape human interaction with the sacred. Within theatrical art, these ritualistic dimensions are actively recontextualized, as theatre functions as both a site of memory and a space of reactivation. The actor's relationship with the mask becomes an exploration of embodied knowledge, where the self is dismantled and reconstructed through symbolic performativity [8].

From an anthropological standpoint, the mask is a total social fact (in the sense of Marcel Mauss), embedded within networks of belief, transmission, and identity construction. Its presence on the theatrical stage today a translation of that function into new modes of expression that continue to carry its symbolic charge. As [34] assert, "masks have an audience, whether in entertainment or ritual. The difference between these two can cross boundaries." This porous boundary challenges the dichotomy between sacred and profane, ritual and performance, repositioning the mask as a dynamic site of cultural negotiation.

Furthermore, the mask serves as a threshold between visibility and invisibility, material and metaphysical, human and divine. It embodies the capacity of theatre to make the invisible perceptible and to externalize internal states of being. Masks have endured across human societies due to their ability to serve

simultaneously as instruments of celebration and tools of cosmological mediation. Thus, the mask is not merely worn; it is inhabited, it becomes an agent of transformation.

The anthropology of the mask, then, is an evolving and reflexive inquiry into how cultures externalize interiority, encode myth, and articulate identity through form and performance. Jhon Emigh underscores this by stating, “if we can gain access to its truths, the mask may well be a powerful tool in reclaiming not only our theatre, but our lives” [35]. The mask transcends its materiality to act as a semiotic reservoir, encapsulating historical memory, social critique, and imaginative potential.

In contemporary anthropological theatre, especially in the praxis of Eugenio Barba and the Odin Teatret, the mask becomes both a pedagogical tool and an epistemological device. It invites us to reconsider embodiment, presence, and intercultural transmission as living processes that question modernity’s assumptions about identity, authorship, and representation. As Barba argue, masks, in their multiple forms, allow the performer “to act in a manner that frees them from the constraints and limits placed upon the individual by societal norms” [5].

Ultimately, the mask operates as both medium and message—performing and signifying simultaneously. It reveals, it connects, and it generates an anthropology rooted in theatre and articulated through it [11].

3. The Concept of Anthropological Theatre : Eugenio Barba from Doctrinal Icon to Anthropological Convergence

Eugenio Barba stands as a seminal figure in the field of theatre anthropology, an interdisciplinary mode of inquiry that investigates the intersection of cultural, physiological, and performative elements within theatrical practice. Theatre anthropology, as conceptualized by Barba, seeks to explore the pre-expressive substratum of performance—those gestural and kinetic traces that precede, and in many ways condition, formal theatrical representation [36]. Barba's objective is to return to the corporeal foundations of acting, stripped from socially encoded behaviors and immersed in ritualistic and transcultural energies.

“Theatre Anthropology seeks out what are considered common, fundamental principles that underpin a variety of performance practices” [37]. This approach privileges the performer’s embodied knowledge as the locus of intercultural dialogue, wherein the body itself becomes a repository of accumulated traditions, rituals, and instinctive expressions. In Barba’s words, "Where can the performer find out how to construct the material bases of their art? This is the question which theatre anthropology attempts to answer" [5].



Embodiment and Mediation in the Theatrical Process of Barba's Theatre

The discipline thus revolves around the actor's ability to transcend everyday behavior—what Barba terms "enculturated" movements—and inhabit what he identifies as the "extra-daily," a term that designates a shift in bodily comportment from the mundane to the heightened, aesthetic, and sacred. These extra-daily principles, often refined through rigorous training, allow for a transformation of the performer's presence into a "scenic bios," a term Barba uses to describe the aura or vitality that captivates spectators even before the transmission of a theatrical message[38].

Crucially, Barba defines theatre anthropology as "the study of the performer's pre-expressive scenic behavior that lies at the base of different genres, roles, and styles"[5]. It is within this framework that theatre anthropology becomes an epistemological tool for uncovering the shared patterns of movement, balance, and energy across cultural boundaries. The anthropological actor, in this sense, becomes both an archive and an agent—embodying traditions and renewing them through performance.

This conceptualization rests on a dialectical movement between cultural specificity and trans-cultural resonance. As Moraru suggests, "Theatrical anthropology deals with the similar principles that meet beyond language, traditions, different countries and principles specific to each individual performer"[39]. In this regard, Barba's work resonates with a post-structuralist sensibility, one that questions essentialist identities while seeking material, embodied forms of knowledge rooted in cross-cultural repetition and difference.

The performer is thereby reconfigured as a cultural bricoleur, assembling techniques from disparate traditions—particularly those of non-Western cultures such as Nô, Kabuki, and Kathakali—into a cohesive performative language. Barba advocates a rigorous, respectful integration of techniques that enable the performer to attain a state of heightened presence[39]. The goal is transformation ; a departure from codified behaviors toward an organic, visceral, and spiritually charged body, rather than mere mimicry. This is why Barba asserts: "Performers who work within a network of confided roles have a greater freedom than those who are prisoners of arbitrariness and an absence of roles"[5].

The spiritual dimension of this work is not to be overlooked. For Barba, theatre anthropology is a philosophical stance, a return to the sacred origins of performance embedded in myth and ritual. This is particularly evident in his articulation of the "Third Theatre," which designates spaces and practices that resist institutionalization and seek alternative, often intercultural, routes to artistic truth. As Barba notes, "Non-Western theatrical forms, in particular the role assigned to physical presence, dance and song—in other words, the whole sensual and emotional side of theatre—provide essential stimulation and are an important source of inspiration for the Third Theatre."[38].

The actor's training within this framework becomes a form of anthropological excavation—an unearthing of latent energies, inherited gestures, and archaic rhythms buried beneath the surface of everyday social performance. The transition from the pre-expressive to the expressive, and eventually to the post-expressive, marks a dynamic process through which the actor reclaims agency over their bodily and cultural identity. Barba draws from Nô theatre to demonstrate how "the two contrasts [of artifice and authenticity] combine harmoniously resulting in the sensation of truth"[39].

In synthesizing physical training with cultural memory, theatre anthropology cultivates a new grammar of performance, one that resists homogenization and embraces hybridity. It is this philosophical and methodological richness that positions Barba's work as central to the broader anthropological inquiry into the embodied practices of human culture[36].

Eugenio Barba's theatrical practice offers a pioneering framework for recontextualizing the mask as a per-

formative archive that mediates between cultural memory and embodied knowledge. Within Odin Teatret's experiments, particularly in *Ego Faust[40]* and *Ur-Hamlet[41]*, the mask becomes a site of anthropological intensification. Barba's approach foregrounds a ritualistic use of the mask grounded in both performative efficacy and intercultural resonance. His work situates the actor's body within a transcultural matrix where gestural precision, voice modulation, and the mask intersect to articulate a non-verbal grammar of sacred embodiment[39].

Barba's pre-expressive training paradigms emphasize energy centers and ritual repetition, practices informed by his field research among traditional performers in Bali, India, and Japan. These exercises aim at an activation of what he terms "pre-expressivity"—a state prior to culturally coded expression. Here, the mask serves to externalize an internal energy shaped by ritual history. As Barba asserts, the actor's training must be rooted in "anthropological constants", which include the symbolic potency of objects like masks and their ability to trigger deep mnemonic processes[38].

Performance	**Type of Mask**	**Cultural Origin**	**Ritual Function**	**Performative Function**	**Effect on the Performer**	**Cultural Hybridity**	**Interactive Function between Body and Mask**
Ego Faust	Noh	Japan	Ritual	Highlight spiritual state	Enhance bodily awareness	Integration of Japanese and Western traditions	Interaction between masked facial expression and precise bodily movement
Ego Faust	Barong	Bali	Ritual	Represent cosmic energies	Ontological transformation of performer	Blending Balinese and European elements	Harmony of bodily movements with ritual symbolism of the mask
Ur-Hamlet	Skull Masks	Europe	Symbolic	Enhance mystery/fear	Expand character identity	Mixing Western myths with Asian performance traditions	Performer's body responds to symbolism to evoke psychological and emotional resonance

Ur-Hamlet	Kathakali	India	Ritual	Symbolic expression	Integration of voice and movement	Fusion of Indian and European elements	Use of musical gestures and vocal expression in combination with the mask

Table2 :Embodied Transformations: Masks and Their Functions in the Intercultural Theatre of Eugenio Barba

In *Ego Faust*, Barba constructs a dramaturgy of fragmentation and hybridity. He deliberately assembles a multiplicity of masks—Noh, Balinese Topeng, Barong, skull masks—culled from a range of sacred and secular traditions. Each mask functions as an energetic node, infusing the scene with ritual valence. The Faust narrative, itself a parable of the metaphysical quest and demonic temptation, becomes a vehicle for exploring intercultural confrontation and ontological ambiguity. Through this layering, Barba engages what Victor Turner would call "liminality": the threshold between worlds where the self is unmade and remade.[42].

The performative structure of *Ego Faust* mirrors Barba's interest in theatrical anthropology. The masks are here living agents—each bearing the cognitive trace of its cultural lineage. The plurality of masks enacts a kind of epistemological polyphony, a theatre of "difference within coexistence," challenging the homogeneity of Western theatrical form. Such an approach resonates with Dwight Conquergood's concept of "dialogical performance," where intercultural practices become sites for ethical exchange rather than appropriation [43].

In *Ur-Hamlet*, Barba abandons Shakespearean psychological depth in favor of Saxo Grammaticus's raw, mythic source. His reimagining of Hamlet becomes an intercultural rite invoking twenty-one national traditions, from Yoruban chants to Balinese trance movements. The performance is enacted in a circular outdoor space—a symbolic return to primal theatrical configurations—surrounded by grass, firelight, and masks that blur the boundaries between performer and spirit. In this open arena, reminiscent of Dionysian or shamanic spaces, the audience is immersed in a shared rite of passage.

The Hamlet figure is re-inscribed as a demonic, incomprehensible being, evoking both fear and ancestral reverence. The mask here serves a dual function: it deconstructs Western individualism and invokes a collective ancestral memory. Rather than portraying a singular tragic self, Barba's Hamlet becomes a receptacle of multiple identities—a ritual subject formed through intercultural synthesis [38].

Discussion:

Barba's spatial logic is deeply anthropological. He resists the fourth wall and frontal gaze of Western proscenium theatre, opting instead for the circular, immersive, and participatory. In doing so, he returns performance to its premodern, communal origins. This shift in spatial dramaturgy reinforces the transformative potential of the mask, which, in these settings, activates what Erika Fischer-Lichte describes as the "autopoietic feedback loop" between actor and spectator[10].

Crucially, Barba's work does not flatten cultural differences under a universalist banner. Instead, he stages difference as a productive tension—an aesthetic of coexistence that values the specificity of each mask tradition. His intercultural theatre aligns with Arjun Appadurai's (1996) vision of the global cultural economy as a complex, disjunctive order where cultural flows are negotiated rather than homogenized [12].

Barba does not require his actors to transcend their traditions; he welcomes their embodied heritage—their rituals, songs, gestures, and iconographies—into the performance[38]. This orientation reframes the actor as a cultural transmitter. In this way, the mask-body becomes an epistemic archive, storing and transmitting intangible heritage through presence and action.

Barba's theatrical anthropology repositions the mask as both object and agent—a threshold form that enacts cultural translation, ritual renewal, and cultural hybridity. His theatre performs ritual as theatre, creating a hybrid space where diverse cultural influences intersect and interact. The mask becomes the generative principle of performance, a vessel of memory, identity, and transformation, mediating between inherited traditions and contemporary reinterpretations, and enabling a dialogic negotiation across cultures.

Cultural hybridity is defined by Barba's Work as a process that dissolves rigid boundaries between cultures, challenging the notion of cultural purity or closed, essentialist identities. The mixing and hybridization of cultures presuppose resistance to ideas of cultural purity and unified "authentic" cultures, destabilizing the traditional concept of culture that confines identity within predetermined racial or ethnic limits by imposing clear boundaries around each culture. This definition generates a profound awareness of the constructed and composite nature of all social arrangements and cultural forms, making it no longer possible to speak of a "pure" or original culture, but rather of an intersecting space in which reference frameworks overlap and affiliations intertwine. In this sense, postmodern thought exposes the ideological foundation of purity and cultural essence, demonstrating that every identity is constructed through continuous interaction, cross-fertilization, and negotiation with the Other, thereby revealing the mutable character of cultures [8].

Within this framework, cultural hybridity is vividly enacted in the work of Eugenio Barba. Through his anthropological theatre, Barba actively negotiates between diverse cultural traditions—particularly Asian ritual forms such as Noh, Kathakali, and Balinese performance—while incorporating European theatrical conventions. His performances exemplify hybridity by creating a dialogic space where inherited practices are transformed through interaction with other cultural modalities, generating new aesthetic and ritual meanings [3].

In contrast to theories of "cultural convergence," which often overlook the role of local reception and the significance of transcultural or "third" cultures, Barba's theatre demonstrates that hybridity flourishes within contexts of intercultural encounters, everyday pluralism, and performative negotiation.Cultural intermingling in this sense moves in multiple directions instead of following a single linear path. In Barba's work, the interaction of techniques, gestures, and symbolic systems shows how the movement of forms and ideas can create a dynamic and evolving theatrical language—one that speaks to global audiences while staying connected to local depth. In this way, Barba renders cultural hybridity a tangible practice and situates it as a central principle for understanding contemporary global performance.

Thus, Barba's theatre constructs a complex bridge between ritual and performance, transforming into a hybrid space where traditional symbols intersect with contemporary presence, reconfigured within a new performative context that activates the latent energies of ritual signs. From this perspective, the article

seeks to enrich current debates on the ethics, aesthetics, and politics of cultural borrowing in global theatre practices by foregrounding a threefold intersection: ritual as a framework of meaning, the body as a medium of embodiment, and intercultural dramaturgy as a site of negotiation between identity and difference.

Conclusion

The ritual mask in Eastern theater occupies a profound ontological and symbolic position, rooted in centuries of inherited traditions and sacred rites. Its anthropological deployment functions as a repository of cultural memory, a multilayered palimpsest encompassing religious, mythological, and folk practices. Its significance lies in its capacity to embody and transmit collective values, ancestral wisdom, and the encoded rituals of identity and transformation. In this way, the mask enables the performer to become a mediator capable of invoking spiritual channels and animating mythic consciousness through embodied action.

Through his development of anthropological theater, Eugenio Barba sought to rearticulate this performative significance of the mask, revealing the essential cultural truths inscribed within the actor's body. In this vision, the mask acts as a source of kinetic and symbolic energy, allowing the performer to access layers of expression that transcend individual psychology. Accordingly, Barba's practice emphasizes the reactivation of ritual memory and the embodiment of cultural hybridity within theatrical performance.

This approach reflects a broader anthropological understanding of performance as a site of cultural transmission, transformation, and resistance, where the mask in Barba's theater functions as a cultural condenser—fusing myth, ritual, aesthetics, and corporeality into a single performative act. It represents a return to theater's archaic role as a hybrid cultural rite, a space in which identity is collectively negotiated.

In conclusion, the anthropological mask in Barba's theater embodies the core principles underpinning cultural continuity and intercultural dialogue. Barba's work demonstrates how the ritual mask can become a catalyst for rethinking the relationship between body, memory, and cultural identity. In this way, Barba does not merely borrow from ritual traditions; he reanimates them, creating a theater that is both deeply rooted and radically open to the polyphonic voices of global performance traditions.

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