

## INTRODUCTION

The use of the mask in various forms of symbolic activity, religious or dramatic, is found in many parts of the world and has long been familiar to students of the American Indian as an element in the ceremonies of certain tribes. What is not so well known, however, is that masks play a part in the life of so many groups throughout eastern North America. From the Eskimo along the eastern coast of Labrador to the Cherokee of the mountains of North Carolina, the masking complex appears in a variety of symbolic contexts. To examine this phenomenon and its significance in the cultures where it occurs is the purpose of this study. What beings do these masks represent? What myths and traditions do they reflect? What power do they confer on the wearer? What effect do they produce on the beholder? Finally, what do they reveal of the history and cultural interconnections of peoples now scattered and already forgetful of their past? The evidence at hand — the masks themselves and the activities involving them, the records of the past and the memory of the people — allows of only tentative conclusions; but the inferences it is possible to make from the data warrant the attempt.<sup>1</sup>

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