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## Goethe wears a mask against COVID-19

*INAYAT ALI*

Did Johann Wolfgang von Goethe—the eminent German intellectual of the modern era—wear a mask in his lifetime?

Although the question is interesting, the answer is unknown. Nonetheless, during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, Goethe is wearing a mask—on his statue on Vienna’s renowned Ringstrasse (Ring Street), near to Austria’s National Opera House. Masks are certainly symbolic, and symbols are pregnant with multiple meanings, literal as well as metaphorical.

Masks and masking have long been the subjects of anthropological research and analysis due to their significant role in human activities. All masks have symbolic significance, whether they represent the ancestors of tribal societies, are worn during carnivals and festivals, on the streets, or in healthcare settings.

Masks can serve both symbolic and instrumental functions. When a tribal horticulturalist from the Amazon region wears an “ancestor mask” during a religious ceremony, he believes that he is embodying the spirit of that ancestor and speaking with his voice. When performers wear masks during Carnival, they are allowing themselves to temporarily become someone else—someone free of the usual social constraints who can dance, drink, and party to abandon. When a thief wears a mask, he is both trying to disguise his identity and symbolically identifying him/herself as a thief—as someone others should avoid. When health professionals wear a mask, they are both protecting themselves and others from contagion and identifying themselves as health professionals.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been accompanied by worldwide mask wearing at a level never previously seen as people comply with governmental orders and/or voluntarily comply with the social obligation to protect against the virus. Analogous to other cities, in the Austrian capital of Vienna, mask-wearing emerged and rapidly escalated in March 2020 as the pandemic spread. Austria went into lockdown, and in addition to masks, measures like physical distancing, sanitizing/washing hands, and avoiding gatherings were implemented. After the front doors of buses closed, repetitive announcements were made, such as “Dear passengers! Please cover your mouth and nose to protect other passengers and our employees” or “Dear passengers! Please cover your mouth and nose at the U-Bahn (metro) stations and when in public transport.” To travel, wearing a mask emerged as an essential phenomenon: a “traveling passport,” locally and globally.

Masks suddenly appeared everywhere. In cars, masks could be seen hanging on the rear-view mirrors or placed on dashboards. In the photos below, you can see masks adjoining the Christian Cross and the symbol for *Allah*, juxtaposing the symbolic significance of religion with the instrumental mask, juxtaposed as a conjoint prayer for safety and protection from the disease.

Masks not only appeared on faces of people or in private vehicles; discarded ones began littering roads and streets. Gradually, the number of masks increased in the surroundings.

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Furthermore, in April 2020, new shops selling masks began to pop up. For example, two shops emerged on Vienna's famous shopping streets: one in Mariahilferstrasse (Mariahilfer Street) and another in Kärntnerstrasse (Kartner Street). This latter one used to be a marijuana shop—now it sells a variety of masks.

There were different masks for kids, adults, men, and women. They varied widely in size, colors and motifs. Gradually, fashion and style began to enter the arena of the COVID-19 mask. New patterns and motifs appeared as designers got increasingly creative. Why wear an ordinary medical mask when you can wear something much cooler?

Besides the opening of stalls and shops by small vendors selling masks to shoppers, well-known designers have jumped in, to take advantage of the "disaster economy." A Luis Vuitton mask was highly circulated on various social media platforms: it costs around 11,00 €.

At the beginning of the pandemic, it seemed annoying and irritating to wear a mask. Nevertheless, over time, in Vienna masks have become habitual. Nowadays, everyone carries a mask while going outside, either wearing it, holding it their hand, or tying it around a wrist to put on when needed. Without wearing a mask, it is not permitted to travel in public transport or enter a shop. Mask use in public transport is not strictly monitored, but it is in every shop. Those who have no mask are not allowed to enter until they purchase a cheap one (around 70 cents to one Euro). In this way, people seek to protect both themselves and each other from contagion, while making that more fun by purchasing designer masks to add an aesthetic dimension to a practical tool.

I imagine that, given current circumstances, were Goethe still alive, he would have worn a mask voluntarily—to do his part to mitigate the *Sturm und Drang* of this contemporary pandemic. Or would he have made a Faustian bargain, and refuse to wear a mask, assuming Mephistopheles would protect him?

In conclusion, I suggest that social scientists can employ several approaches to study masks: we can "follow" these masks (Marcus 1995), or conduct a "cultural biography" (Gosden and Marshall 1999) of masks for understanding complex mechanisms where economic factors, socio-cultural patterns, symbolic meanings, and political determinants intersect. These approaches would highlight the processes and disposition of production, distribution, and use of masks.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Inayat Ali (inayat\_qau@yahoo.com) is a PhD researcher in medical anthropology at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Vienna, Austria. His research primarily focuses on measles and vaccination in Sindh Province, Pakistan. ORCID ID: /0000-0003-1659-8492.

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