

THE SOGO BÓ THEATRE OF MALI

THEMES

AFRICAN AND JAPANESE PUPPETS ROOM

An encounter with the Sogo bó: A complete theatrical performance

Sogo bó, from *sogo*: Animal, meaning “the animal comes forth”. It refers to the mask and puppet theatre that plays a key role in the culture of two peoples closely linked in central Mali: The Bozos – the fishermen, and the Bamana – the farmers.

These plays are a blend of numerous forms of theatrical expression: Dancing, singing, music, puppets and masquerades (masked dances). In addition to performances governed by the farming season for the Bamanas, and the fishing season for the Bozos, puppet shows are put on to mark important community events: Marriages, circumcision ceremonies which take place every ten years and funeral rituals, etc.

All the villagers, regardless of age or gender, can attend the shows, which take place on the village square and sometimes on the river in the case of the Bozo community.

Once upon a time there were puppets

The myth surrounding the creation of the puppets is handed down by way of tradition, from one generation to the next: One day, Toboji Centa, a Bozo fisherman, was abducted by the genies of the bush. One of them introduced him to the art of puppetry. On returning to his village located on the banks of the River Niger, Toboji Centa passed on his new-found knowledge to his community and taught blacksmiths and sculptors how to make puppets.

The history of Sogo bó dates back to the 14th c.: Ibn Battûta (1305-1377), a traveller from Tangiers who stayed at the Court of the Mali Empire in 1355, witnessed Sogo bó theatre, which he described as follows:

“... A pleasant approach whereby poets recite their lines disguised as birds inside a costume of feathers topped by a wooden head with a red beak”¹.

Who is hiding behind the puppets?

In some traditional African societies, puppetry is reserved for certain age brackets: In the case of the Bozos and the Bamanas, it is performed specifically by youth groups known as *ton*, which bring together young men of the same age bracket at puberty. Away from the village, the young people learn from their elders how to identify and manipulate each puppet. They are also taught about the history of puppetry and the symbolic values, songs and rhythms associated with it. The women do not handle the puppets but play an active role in the performance by singing.

The *ton* steer the cultural principles of the community as well as rules governing lifestyle at a level where solidarity is of paramount importance.

Man and animals

Items of the Bozo and Bamana theatres depict a crowd of figures based on both traditional animal-related beliefs and modern society:

- The zoomorphic or animal puppets illustrate the symbolic relevance given to animals in the African imagination. Thus in the Bozo fishing communities, the river animals are ever-present: hippopotamus, crocodile, etc.
- The anthropomorphic or human puppets represent all the social ranks within the community, from the village chief to the farmer and settler via mythical figures such as Faro, the goddess of water or even Yayoroba, the incarnation of the feminine spiritual and physical ideal.

The puppetry techniques used also vary considerably:

- Castle set puppets (**Castle set antelope, Inv. 81.4.1**),
- Zoomorphic string puppets manipulated from the base,
- Costume puppets: Large sized puppets comprising an animal or human head, with jointed arms attached to a frame that is mounted on the head of a dancer-puppeteer,
- Jointed and non-jointed puppets, etc.

1: Ibn Battûta, *Travels in Asia and Africa*, 1325-1354

Between tradition and modernity

In the Mali image, the puppet theatre allows genuine freedom of expression, fluctuating between tradition and modernity. It is constantly enriched with new characters and topics reflecting the modernisation of Mali society.

Puppets can relieve tension and are used to voice criticisms and suggestions that cannot be expressed outside the theatre. Some groups/associations use puppets to convey messages about Aids prevention or to highlight other social - and health - related issues.

The materials used to produce the puppets bear witness to the creativity of this form of theatre: Tubes or spools for the joints, decorations made from the silver paper found in cigarette packets for the elements of the night sky, etc.

A far cry from the ideas of static, preservative, African art, these elements bear witness to the vitality of an artistic and social practice that knows how to perpetuate itself without disowning its roots.



The cavalier, photo, Guignol Ségou on the Niger, H. Labouret, early 20th c., Inv. 52.49.3

"Around a quarter past three in the afternoon, I pass by the Bambara village of Mognogo... and I stop in my tracks. Why? You'll never guess! To watch Guignol! A square tent made from a striped white and blue fabric is set up on a canoe, the head of a long-necked ostrich puppet appears on a pole and two puppets emerge from the centre of the tent".

Paul Soleillet *Les voyages et découvertes [...] dans le Sahara et dans le Soudan*, Paris, M. Dreyfous, 1881.

Items in the Gadagne collection

Merenkun, Inv. 81.4.1

This feminine figure with two faces is part of a large, non-animated puppet. The pole serving as the animal's neck is inserted into a larger head, which constitutes the main part and which, in turn, is topped with several small heads (see b) diagram). The entire puppet is staked into the ground during performances.

This *Merenkun* symbolises the presence of ancestors, safeguarding tradition and providing a link between the divinities and mankind. The combination of heads of different sizes symbolises the family in its broadest sense, the community and, by extension, forges the link between past, present and future generations!



a) *Merenkun*, part of a large non-animated puppet, Mali, 20th c., Inv. 84.1.2
b) Diagram of a *Merenkun*, a large non-animated puppet

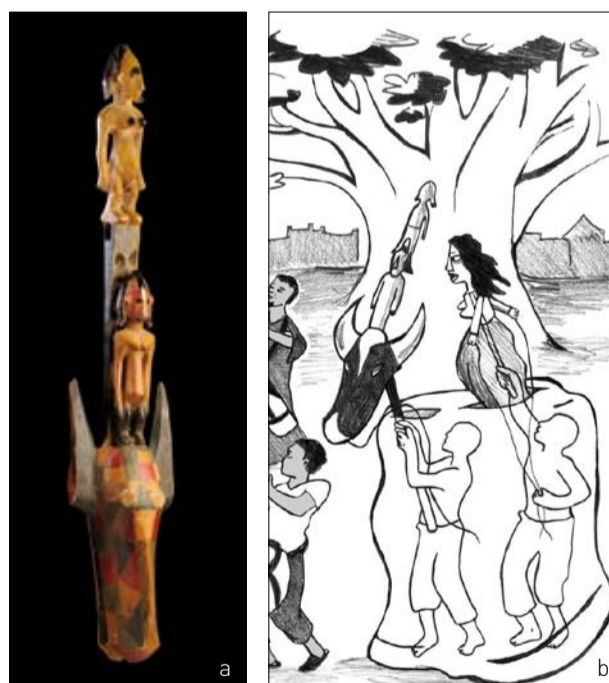
Antelope, castle set puppets, Inv. 84.1.1

The antelope is Mali's symbol of identity - a sign of courage and prosperity. It is an element of a Bamana's castle - set puppet, surmounted by two characters with a human appearance (see b) diagram).

The antelope's head, which, in this case, is non-jointed, is supported by a rod that must be fixed in the structure of the castle set where the animal's body is portrayed.

This type of castle set, which always comprises an animal's head, is made from a bamboo cage covered with fabric. There is a slit at the top to allow the puppeteers concealed inside to handle the small string - or rod - operated puppets.

The castle set puppet is a puppet in its own right: Portable, it can easily be moved around the stage.



a) *Antelope*, part of a puppet castle, Bamana, Mali, 20th c., Inv. 41.8.1
b) Diagram of a puppet castle