CELEBRATION OF AFRICAN PUPPETRY

exhibition at
Center for Puppetry Arts
Atlanta, Georgia
July 30-November 19, 1988
In the past several decades African art has enjoyed increasing popular attention. Most American museums have mounted exhibits of sculpture, furniture, ceremonial costumes and masks. Less well known to museum goers, however, is the African art of puppetry. In order to acquaint the public with this important part of African culture, the Center for Puppetry Arts presents an exhibition of puppets from Africa.

African art is often set into motion by music and dance, and to a larger degree by investing movement into artistic images of all types. These images, when animated, are carried, danced or manipulated by human hands or worn as masks atop the head or on the face; thus they become performing objects or "puppets." The art of puppetry is used in African life to enhance civic and religious activities rather than solely as an entertainment medium. Puppet theatre in some African groups uses the dramatic performances for instruction, in celebration of harvests, initiations or funerals, and as satiric commentaries on topics of concern in the community, individual misbehavior, or personal eccentricities. The figures in this exhibition come mainly from three areas - the Bamana/Bozo/Somono/Malinke of Mali and Guinea; the Ibo, Ogboni and Ibibio of southeastern Nigeria and the Yoruba and Fon of southwestern Nigeria and southeastern Benin.

Among the Bamana and Bozo peoples of Mali and the Ibibio people of Nigeria, young men of the community take charge of puppet performances. The players present performances which express their general values and suggest proper ways to behave in social situations. With the introduction of new images drawn from experiences within a changing world, these puppet presentations also draw attention to innovations in community life. The cast of puppets may illustrate men dressed as European soldiers and bureaucrats, or show bikini-clad 'modern' women.

These characters act alongside figures representing 'water spirits' and women adorned for traditional initiation ceremonies.

In the Malian puppet theatre the characters fall within two clearly defined categories - those which allude to the world of the bush and those representing the world of the village. Today, the troupes generally play both sets of characters in every performance. The majority of puppets are representations of bush animals and celebrate the important role which hunting has played throughout the centuries in this savannah region. Yet besides celebrating hunting these animals also represent people's values, beliefs and concerns about correct moral character and the proper conduct of life in the community. For example, Sigi, the bush buffalo represents the value of tradition and continuity within the community and celebrates the authority and wisdom of the elders. However, Gon, the baboon, speaks to the destructive side of human behavior and stands as a metaphor for greed and gluttony.

The second category of puppets focuses on the community with special emphasis on the critical occupations of farming and fishing. Puppets representing men hoeing fields and women winnowing and pounding grain are common characters. Troupes also perform puppets which represent respected elders, warriors and ideal wives and mothers.

There is also a third more ambiguous category of characters who are seen to mediate between the world of the village and the world of the bush. These puppets represent heroic hunters and warriors who venture into the bush, as well as genies and bush spirits who move between the bush and the village.
In the Malian theatre the puppets appear out of the back of a movable stage which houses the puppeteer. Constructed as a wooden framework covered with cloth, the stage may be decorated with a carved animal head at one end and an appropriate tail at the other. To insure the anonymity of the puppeteers, assistants follow the stage holding mats which hide the performer’s feet.

Another form of “puppet,” not associated with a mobile stage, would be carried on the shoulders of a performer, raising his stature well above the height of members of the audience. Female figures point to the ideal Bamana beauty both moral and physical.

The Bozo, a fishing people of the Niger River, live alongside the agricultural Bamana. In keeping with their water activities, the Bozo stage puppet performances on boats which glide to shore to entertain the waiting audience. Puppets of the Ibibio people of Nigeria are performed by members of the young men’s society (“Ekon”). A stationary stage, formed by a wooden framework covered with cloth, is set up in the central square of the village. The actors stand behind the enclosure, holding puppet figures above their heads by means of handles. Assistants beat the cloth sides of the stage with palm fiber brushes to create vibrations which conceal the movements of the puppeteers. Unlike Bamana and Bozo puppets, Ibibio characters speak carefully prepared lines. Voices of actors, however, are disguised by speaking through reeds. The actors rehearse their parts during a strictly prescribed, seven-year period. Traditionally, as the carved figures appeared on stage, a black rooster, the appropriate sacrifice to the guardian spirit of the society, was lifted to touch the sculptures. It was believed that this gesture confirmed the power of speech to the images. Carefully constructed, brightly painted figures having articulated arms, neck and jaw, represent a set of characters familiar to Ibibio villagers. Skits dealing with family problems and community issues unfold through monologues and dialogues. These skits demonstrate the social tensions and moral dilemmas which are experienced by people living in polygynous, small-scale village societies. In most cases, the audience is expected to draw its own conclusions.

While operating a wooden image, puppeteers can safely risk opinions and display conduct normally forbidden to individuals. In the African setting, puppets operate with guidance from the spiritual realm and thus act or speak with extra-human authority. By dramatic portrayals, they set examples for proper behavior, reinforce accepted customs and tactfully introduce changing values.

*Exhibition curated by Diane Kempler, Center for Puppetry Arts and Mary Jo Arnoldi, Smithsonian Institution. Essay and object texts excerpted from published works by Mary Jo Arnoldi, Henry and Margaret Drewal, M.D.W. Jeffreys, John Messenger and P. Amaury Talbot. Additional Malian material provided by Mary Jo Arnoldi.
1. **Hornbill**  The hornbill is an important waterbird frequently performed in the puppet theatre. The annual arrival of the hornbill announces the coming of the rains which are essential to both the livelihood of farmers and fishermen.

*Mid-20th Century, h. 22 1/2"  Bamana/Bozo People, Mali  Collection of Center for Puppetry Arts  Gift of Nancy Lohman Staub*

2. **Bush Buffalo**  The Bush Buffalo is a majestic beast who is regarded as a metaphor for tradition, the authority of the elders and the continuity of the community. The figure sitting astride its head probably represents a female water spirit, one of the characters who acts as a mediator between the bush and the village.

*Mid-20th Century, H. 24 3/4"  Bamana/Bozo People, Mali  Collection of Toby and Barry Hecht*

3. **Roan Antelope**  The strong sweeping horns of this puppet suggest it represents the roan antelope who symbolizes the elders and the power and respect due to them in the community. The small antelopes on its crown indicate that it is the female of the species. In the performance a male and female roan antelope are generally performed together and speak to the importance of the family and of the continuity of the village through children.

*Mid-20th Century, h. 14"  Bamana/Bozo People, Mali  Collection of Toby and Barry Hecht*

4. **Roan Antelope**  The stylized strong horns of this antelope puppet topped with carvings of its young suggests it represents the female roan antelope. The seated figure on the crown may represent an image of the beautiful women symbolizing the good wife and mother.

*Mid-20th Century, h. 38 1/4"  Bamana/Bozo People, Mali  Lent by Davis Gallery*

5. **Lion**  The lion itself is the most dangerous of the cats and symbolizes power and force. It stands for majesty and political authority whether within the village or in the modern state. In the puppet theatre it is often performed in a skit which celebrates the hunter/hero who tracks down and slays the beast.

*Mid-20th Century, h. 6 1/2"  Bamana/Bozo People, Mali  Lent by Davis Gallery*

6. **Elephant**  Like the lion, this great beast alludes to power and authority. A successful hunter of the elephant is indeed a hero among men.

*Mid-20th Century, h. 22"  Bamana/Bozo People, Mali  Lent by Davis Gallery*
Puppet performance representing fishermen and water spirit, carved by Bafin Kane.
Mali, Spring 1987
Photo: M.J. Arnoldi
7. Antelope  Exactly what animal this puppet represents is unclear as the sculptor has chosen to combine attributes of several different animals within one sculpture. The shape of the head and the horns suggest it is a roan antelope, yet the prominence given to teeth is generally reserved for animals like the lion and the hyena. Small antelopes and hyenas also appear on the horns.

*Mid-20th Century, h. 48*
Bamana/Bozo People, Mali
Lent by Davis Gallery

8. Hornbill  The king of fishing birds, the hornbill has long held an honored position in the theatre. In the early 1960's, many villages adapted the hornbill to represent the character Malikono, the Great Bird of Mali, which celebrated independence from French colonial rule.

*Mid-20th Century, h. 25*
Bamana/Bozo People, Mali
Lent by Davis Gallery

9. Crocodile  A ferocious animal living in the waters of the Niger River, the crocodile is one of the most important animals hunted by the fishermen. It generally appears in performances given by fishermen's troupes and like the lion played in the farmer's theatre it is part of a celebration of the hunter as hero.

*Mid-20th Century, h. 18 1/2*
Bamana/Bozo People, Mali
Lent by Davis Gallery
10. **Water Spirit**

This puppet represents Faro, the water spirit and two of her daughters. Water spirits usually appear to human beings in the form of beautiful women with long flowing hair. They can be both beneficial and harmful to mankind and their performance recalls a range of stories and legends about people's relationships to the world of spirits.

*Mid-20th Century, h. 37½"*
Bamana/Bozo People, Mali
Collection of Toby and Barry Hecht

11. **Water Spirit**

This puppet is a version of Faro, the water spirit, in the form of the beautiful woman. When the puppet is performed she often raises her hands to cover her face. This gesture brings to mind people's belief that to look upon the beautiful face of a water spirit brings certain death to the ordinary mortal.

*Mid-20th Century, h. 37"*
Bamana/Bozo People, Mali
Collection of Richard and Joni Watson

12. **Bush Spirit**

This horned and bearded character probably represents a bush spirit. Like the water spirits they can be both helpful or harmful to the community as they move between the bush and village.

*Mid-20th Century, h. 13"*
Bamana/Bozo People, Mali
Lent by Davis Gallery

13. **The Horseman**

This puppet representing a horse and rider alludes to both power and authority. In the epics the horse and rider was the warrior/hero. The arena of action for the warrior is the bush, but his reputation comes from the celebration of his exploits within the community.

*Mid-20th Century, h. 13½"*
Bamana/Bozo People, Mali
Collection of Jo Ellen and Raoul Bezou

14. **The Hunter**

Like the warrior, the hunter's skill and ability to tame the wilderness makes him an exceptional and extraordinary person in his community. The qualities of bravery, fortitude, and decisiveness which are associated with warriors and hunters are the same qualities which underlie the male ethos in these communities.

*Mid-20th Century, h. 21½"*
Bamana/Bozo People, Mali
Collection of Jan and Robert Katz
14. The Hunter

15. Elder This puppet probably represents an elder because of its carved beard which is associated with great age within these communities. The character alludes to political authority while celebrating elders as steadfast, wise and upright.

Mid-20th Century, h. 32”
Baman/Bozo People, Mali
Lent by Davis Gallery

16. Elder Another version of the elder used in the puppet theatre. The addition of the fez probably indicates that the villagers who performed this puppet were Moslems. This puppet would appear out of the back of a movable stage with a number of other puppets representing the daily life of the community.

Mid-20th Century, h. 30¼”
Baman/Bozo People, Mali
Lent by Davis Gallery

17. Female puppet This female puppet with beautifully coiffed hair probably represents the ideal wife and mother. Young men and women who perform the puppets celebrate not only their own mothers but the potential of the young women in the troupe in their future roles as wives and mothers within the community.

Mid-20th Century, h. 38½”
Baman/Bozo People, Mali
Collection of Center for Puppetry Arts
Gift of Nancy Lohman Staub

18. Farmer This puppet celebrates farming as the occupational specialty of the Bamana and Malinke. The puppet holds a daba, a form of hoe, which is the symbol of farming. This puppet would appear out of the back of the movable stage and when animated reproduces the gestures of hoeing the fields.

Mid-20th Century, h. 39”
Baman/Bozo People, Mali
Collection of Toby and Barry Hecht
18. Farmer

20. Antelope with mother and child figures

19. Horseman This puppet probably represents a Fulani, a member of a neighboring ethnic group. Fulani are semi-nomadic herders. In the nineteenth century the northern Fulani state was constantly at war with the Bamana to the south and this puppet may serve as a reminder of this historical epoch.

Mid-20th Century, h. 33 3/4''
Bamana/Bozo People, Mali
Collection of Center for Puppetry Arts
Gift of Nancy Lohman Staub
20. Antelope with mother and child figures Although this antelope represents a bush animal, the inclusion of the mother and child figures on the horns draws attention to the important role which women play as mothers in these communities. The relationship between mother and child represents the values of amicability, cooperation and the survival of the community.

Mid-20th Century, h. 42" Baman/Bozo People, Mali Lent by Davis Gallery

21. Female puppet This female puppet represents the morally good and physically beautiful ideal of womanhood. This character plays an important role in every village's theatre.

Mid-20th Century, h. 26½" Baman/Bozo People, Mali Collection of Center for Puppetry Arts Gift of Nancy Lohman Staub

22. Beautiful Woman This character known as Yayoroba is the ultimate image of the ideal wife and mother. The puppet is carried on the head of a puppeteer who is hidden underneath an armature which is costumed to represent the body of a woman. Separately carved arms are manipulated by the puppeteer during the performance. When Yayoroba enters the arena she bows modestly to the elders showing respect for their authority and then sways and dances gracefully for the assembled community. The song which is sung for her asks that "God give her long life."

Mid-20th Century, h. 37½" Baman/Bozo People, Mali Collection of Richard and Kathy Buckman

23. Fishermen This puppet celebrates Bozo and Somono peoples as fishermen and boatmen par excellence in the region. When animated the two male figures row the boat carrying a third female puppet as their passenger.

Mid-20th Century, h. 18½" Baman/Bozo People, Mali Collection of Edward and Polly Renwick

24. Horse This puppet probably represents a horse. The horse is an important symbol of political authority. Even today, the headman of a community keeps a horse as a symbol of his legitimacy as a leader in the village.

Mid-20th Century, h. 28" Baman/Bozo People, Mali Collection of Joseph Powell

25. Ram The ram is one of a number of domestic animals which appear in the puppet theatre. For Moslem communities it is a reference to the Biblical story of the sacrifice of Abraham. In a broader interpretation the ram symbolizes tenacity.

Mid-20th Century, h. 8½" Baman/Bozo People, Mali Collection of Toby and Barry Hecht
26. **Standing Female** Puppet representing a female figure. While some Ogoni puppets portray specific individuals, this puppet representing a beautiful young woman falls within a category of conventionalized types used in the theatre. A specific interpretation of her character depends upon knowing the actual skit within which she appeared.

*Mid-20th Century, h. 30½''
Ogoni People, Nigeria
Collection of Toby and Barry Hecht*

27. **Seated Figure** Although it is not clear if this puppet represents a specific individual, seated figures in general usually refer to characters who represent important and respected members of the community.

*Mid-20th Century, h. 14½''
Ogoni People, Nigeria
Collection of Toby and Barry Hecht*

28. **Standing Female** This puppet represents the beautiful young woman. Among the Ibibio young girls were secluded for a period of time prior to marriage and presented at a public ceremony which marked their transition from adolescents to women.

*Mid-20th Century, h. 16½''
Ibibio People, Nigeria
Collection of Toby and Barry Hecht*

29. **Standing Female** This puppet represents a young Ibibio woman just prior to her marriage when she is considered at the zenith of her beauty and desirability. She appears at a public festival wearing brass bracelets and anklets and is elaborately coiffed.

*Mid-20th Century, h. 31½''
Ibibio People, Nigeria
Collection of Center for Puppetry Arts
Gift of Nancy Lohman Staub*
30. Male figure This articulated male figure probably originally held a knife or metal staff in his hand which are potent symbols of male leadership and power within the community.

Mid-20th Century, h. 14 1/4"
Ibibio (?) People, Nigeria
Collection of Center for Puppetry Arts
Gift of Nancy Lohman Staub

31. Stranger This figure is probably a representation of a European. It was used in Ibibio puppet plays which were satirical in nature.

Early 20th Century, h. 27"
Ibibio People, Nigeria
Collection of William Arnett

32. Stranger This type of stranger has exaggerated facial features, possibly indicating that it was a bush spirit or supernatural character. Various types of strangers were used in the satiric Ibibio plays.

Early 20th Century, h. 26"
Ibibio People, Nigeria
Collection of William Arnett

33. Seated Figures These Yoruba seated figures were probably part of a larger articulated structure which was used in either Gelede masquerades or local puppet theatre.

Mid-20th Century, h. 34"
Yoruba People, Nigeria
Collection of Center for Puppetry Arts
Gift of Nancy Lohman Staub
Bafin Kane, a well-known puppet carver, working in his atelier.
Mali, Spring 1987
Photo: M.J. Arnoldi
The Center for Puppetry Arts was founded in 1978 to provide the public with an opportunity to experience all aspects of puppetry. It is the only major art institution in the U.S. devoted entirely to puppetry and each year 250,000 children and adults visit the Center to participate in performances, educational workshops and museum activities. The Museum features one of the largest private collections of puppets from throughout the world and is open daily throughout the year. Visitors may take a Guided Tour as well as see video tapes.

Center for Puppetry Arts  
1404 Spring Street, N.W.  
Phone (404) 873-3391  
24 Hr. Information Line (404) 874-0398  
Vincent Anthony, Executive Director  
Diane Kempler, Museum Director  
Kerry McCarthy, Museum Coordinator

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