PUPPETS FROM MALI

TOPIC, TOLOSA PUPPETS INTERNATIONAL CENTER
(www.topictolosa.com/en)
THE MODERN PUPPET IN MALI

“When the vulture surrenders to the horse feast, he does so to get ready for his future”, as he is far ahead of hunger. This enigmatic language of puppets teaches Bambara youngsters to persevere both each year on the refurbishment of new fields, and in the conservation of tradition. The education of the youth is now one of the subjects that worry the Bambara people the most.

The council of elders also struggles to provide young people with the most favourable conditions possible for their physical, intellectual, and moral development through the practice of the puppetry arts in its diverse forms. In Mali, the modern puppet theatre is heir of ancient customs. In its substance, it expresses the continuity of traditional values, while in its shapes it is open towards the contemporary world: it is witness to the vitality and prosperity of an artistic output in constant transformation. Nowadays, times are unsettled and the situation is not the same any more: poverty, Bambara youngsters drifting from the land, schools, and the terrible influence of the Islamic fundamentalism have deeply modified the structures of the traditional puppet society.

Therefore, it is not about initiation rites any more. Puppet performances nowadays, or modern puppet performances, are different from the ones that remain in the villages and are linked to agricultural rites.

Modern puppet in Mali, while living a transition, is also living a segmentation.

Transition in so far as it is shifting from the outside to the inside of the rural areas, from villages to cities. During its transition from outdoor theatre to indoor theatre, the art of puppetry is adapting to new themes: tales, raising awareness, social problems in Africa... as contemporary puppeteers adapt, too. Finally, we have turned a hidden knowledge into an occupation. New companies emerge and adjust the puppet to new creations. It is exciting to conceive a new story that will help to the development of the puppetry art, to its sculptural shape and its display.

Beyond puppet building as an answer to the need for creation, puppets are now built in the villages of Mali in order to earn a living. Currently, almost all modern puppets in Mali are commercial, as it is a country where artists seldom benefit from financial aids.

Therefore, what we understand by modern puppet becomes an income source and a means for survival.
Nonetheless, and as a conclusion, the cultural activities allow the farmer community group to gather and share cheerful moments of understanding. The “modern” puppetry art at Mali, under its different shapes, contributes then to the integration of each of these individuals into the traditional social system. Puppet is and will remain the umbilical cord of the cultural heritage of Mali, as it assembles all forms of art: music, singing, dancing, sculpture, painting, writing, and fire.

Bamako, November 4 2009
Yaya Coulibay, puppeteer
Artistic director of the SOGOLON group
This exhibition gathers around 60 puppets and masks from Mali, all belonging to the Tolosa Puppets International Center, TOPIC. It was with this exhibition that the centre opened in 2009, thanks to intervention of Javier Giráldez, president of the African-Spanish Foundation for Artistic and Cultural Exchange (HAIAC by its Spanish initials).

In this display it is possible to admire the rod puppets the Bambara usually handle themselves inside their theatre booths or castelet; some of them satirical; some others, on the other hand, meaningful characters inside their culture, as the Meren, Gatigui, etc.

Usually showcased fixed on the castelet's structure, this selection also has a large puppet variety, or scenes with them, either with movement or without it. The represented scenes tend to be diverse, and what is shown ranges from different animals natural to Mali (rams, goats, fish, birds...) to the most elaborated scenes of the everyday life (row boats with men fishing, men riding horses, more contemporary scenes...).
Other traditional puppets from the Bambara are also the giant or habitable puppets. Here it will be possible to see some pieces of these two kinds of puppets: bird puppets and yayoroba (female characters), as well as other male characters.
Other impressive pieces are the theatre booth heads or *castelets* in the shape, normally, of the head of an animal: buffaloes, goats, cows, rams, etc. As a rule, the *castelets* do not actually come in the shape of a theatre booth as we are accustomed to seeing in Europe, but they represent a big animal: inside of them, on their back, there's a hole from which to act. This exhibition, as a whole, has three big *castelets*.

The crests are also a characteristic feature of the Bambara. To be carried on their heads, and almost always representing the antelope, they constitute one more example of habitable puppets.

And last, the exhibition also has some N'Tomo masks and other kinds of masks typical from the area and the Bambara.
TECHNICAL DETAILS

- **Room**: This exhibition is designed for a undivided, multi-purpose and versatile space of approximately 200 m². Nonetheless, the puppet selection and display can be adapted to smaller areas. The room should measure no less than 3 m in height.

- **Needed material:**

  **Electricity**: At least, three power points (220 V; 25000 W).

  **Lightning**: 80 spotlights. Nevertheless, lightning can also be accommodated to the means and capacity of the different spaces.

  **Sound**: At least one audio broadcasting system for the screening of an audiovisual product, as well as a DVD player and a projector or, if not possible, a computer and a screen to play said audiovisual product.

  **Personnel**: It takes at least two people to load and unload the pieces, as well as a light technician to correctly set the illumination once everything is in place. In addition, a maintenance technician familiar with the room to come every now and then would be desirable in order to solve the questions that might arise during the set-up. Finally, presence of staff during the display is essential.

  **Time**: The set-up takes 5 days, and 2 more days for it to be dismantled. During these days it might be necessary to extend the opening hours of the room for the process to be carried out adequately.

In addition to the exhibition itself, TOPIC can offer parallel activities such as a Mali puppet show or a lecture on the puppets of the Bambara community. These activities would have to be budgeted separately.
For any questions, please do not hesitate to contact with:

IDOYA OTEGUI MARTÍNEZ
TOPIC, Tolosa Puppets International Center Director
Plaza Euskal Herria 1
20400 Tolosa
(+34) 943 650414
iotegui@cittolosa.com