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MALI: HISTORY, CULTURES, AND THE ARTS

by Mary Jo Arnoldi



[Editor's Note: Mary Jo Arnoldi is curator for Africa in the Department of Anthropology at the National Museum of Natural History at the Smithsonian Institution. She has been conducting research on arts and performance in Mali since 1978 and has published extensively on puppet masquerade theater. She was the lead curator for *African Voices*, the museum's permanent exhibition of African history and culture. In 2003, Mary Jo Arnoldi, John Franklin from the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage at the Smithsonian, and Samuel Sidibe, the Director of the National Museum in Mali, co-curated the Mali Program at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. This program featured demonstrations of Malian crafts and cuisine, a selection of Malian architectural forms, and lively programs of Malian music representing the diversity of musical traditions in the country.]

Mali is a crossroads for West African peoples. It was the historical center of three ancient empires and today is at the forefront of Africa's modern democracies. It is the largest country in West Africa covering an area of 1.24 million square kilometers (approximately 479,000 square miles). Mali's climatic regions (both Saharan and Sahelian) include the Sahara desert to the north and plateaus, savanna, and flood plains to the south. Fed by two major rivers, the Niger and the Senegal, the country is landlocked and surrounded by seven other countries. Because of its central geographic location in West Africa and its historical dynamism, Mali has played a key political, economic and cultural role in this larger zone for over a millennium. Many of Mali's current ethnic groups extend across its national borders in all directions, tying Malians historically and today to peoples

and communities in the nations that surround her. While taking great pride in their citizenship, Mali's people today also remember and honor their connections to communities in neighboring countries with whom they share a long history, languages, and many cultural traditions.

Mali Today

Mali has a population of over 11 million people, and Bamako, the capital city, is home to about one and a half million of its citizens. Bamanan is the African language spoken by the majority of Malians, along with twelve other national languages including Fula, Sonrai, Dogon, Tamasheq, Senufo, and Bobo among others. Efforts are underway to include the twelve national languages more systematically in school instruction alongside French, the country's official language.

Islam is the predominant religion in the country and between 80 and 90 percent of contemporary Malians are Muslims. Islam has a long history in Mali. Conversion to Islam began in the eighth century with individuals involved in the trans-Saharan trade with north Africa and progressed slowly at first. After Islam was adopted by the rulers of the Empire of Mali in the twelfth to thirteenth century, conversion was rapid in some areas and much slower in others. A large number of communities converted only in the twentieth century. Malian Muslims practice a tolerant Islamic tradition and belong to numerous sects, such as the *qadiri*, *tijani*, and *wabbabites*. They live alongside Christians and people who practice traditional religions (non-Muslims make up between 10 and 20 percent of the population). Most Malians see their country's religious diversity as a form of cultural enrichment.

The Third Republic of Mali is a healthy, secular, multiparty democracy and since 1992 there have been regular multiparty elections. There are more than 50 political parties, and the current head of state, elected in 2002, is Amadou Toumani Touré. Unlike many African countries, Mali supports a free press in Africa, and people can choose from over 30 daily, weekly, and monthly newspapers on a whole range of subjects from current news events to sports and culture. Radio is the dominant medium of communication, with both a state-sponsored station and more than a hundred private stations broadcasting throughout the country. One television station broadcasts to both urban and rural communities in the country. While not everyone has national television, access to it, even in rural areas, is growing. Cell phones and the Internet connect people in all of Mali's major cities.

From Empires to Independence

Excavations in Mali have yielded some of the earliest evidence in sub-Saharan Africa for agriculture and town life. By 250 BC, villagers on the floodplain of the Niger River grew wealthy growing sorghum, millet, and, especially, a native African rice, using local irrigation systems. In the ancient town of Jenne Jené (near modern Djenne), wealthy individuals imported items made of exotic stone, iron, and copper. The first Moroccan raiders in A.D. 734 described Mali as "a land of gold." Three ancient empires, The Ghana Empire (8th to 11th century) centered in Mali, not in the country to the south that today bears this name; the Mali Empire (13th to 15th century); and the Songhai empire (15th to 16th century) constitute a *Golden Age* in Mali. The creation and development of these empires can be largely explained by the fact that they were geographically positioned as intermediaries between the civilizations of North Africa and those to the south. Regular exchanges between north and south led to the growth of prosperous cities in Mali

in the zone called the Sahel located along the southern edge of the Sahara desert. (Sahel means shore in Arabic and refers to the southern edge of the Sahara desert.) The most famous of these commercial cities included Awdaghust, Walata, Timbuktu, and Djenne. These ancient cities played a central role in the exchange of people, goods, and ideas between the north and the south. Drawing from the wealth of both north and south, these cities provided economic stability to the great empires of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai.

As trade developed with North Africa, salt and gold, along with kola nuts, iron, hides, and slaves were traded from Mali in exchange for cloth, paper, dates, high quality ceramics, and horses. Gold and salt were the two most important commodities traded during the *Golden Age*. Salt was mined in the northern desert and traded to the south; gold was mined in the south and traded to North Africa and Europe. The political organization of each of the three empires that ruled over the commercial cities was a relatively centralized monarchy. The government guaranteed order, peace, and security, giving people the opportunity to pursue agriculture, herding, and fishing. The government also encouraged occupational specialization as well as international trade. During this period textile and pottery production, metalsmithing, leatherworking, and architecture flourished in the cities. "In 1067, the Spanish Arab traveller from Grenada, Al Bekri wrote:

When he [the king of Ghana] gives audience to his people...he sits in a pavilion...and on his right hand are the sons of the princes of his empire, splendidly clad and with gold plaited into their hair....The gate of the chamber is guarded by dogs of an excellent breed: ...they wear collars of gold and silver, ornamented with the same metals. The beginning of a royal audience is announced by the beating of a kind of drum which they call *deba*, made of a long



Map of Mali

piece of hollowed wood. At the time of this visit, the king and his court were not Muslims; Muslim traders lived in a separate town next to the Ghana empire's capital of Kounbi Saleh, located in Mauritania near the Malian border. (Abdullah abu-Ubayd al Bekri 1067 *Al.Masalik wa 'l-Mamalik*. Cordoba. Transl. from French edition of 1859, Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, by Basil Davidson in *African Civilization Revisited*. Africa World Press, pp. 86-87.)

By the time of the Mali Empire, the king and his court had converted to Islam. Scholars of law, poetry, astrology, and other fields flourished under his patronage. Indeed a university system developed around the mosques of Timbuktu, Djenne, Jaaba, and Gunjuru, and these centers of learning connected Malians north across the Sahara through Morocco and Algeria to Europe and east to Egypt and the larger Islamic world.

The Empire of Mali was well known in North Africa and in the mid-fourteenth century the Moroccan geographer, Ibn Batuta, traveled to Mali to see it for himself. His written accounts give us a feeling for life at the emperor's court and for daily life within the empire. Today, the echoes of these ancient exchanges can still be found in the customs, arts, music, and architecture in Mali and in North Africa and beyond.

The adoption of Islam in the ancient empires also forged important links eastward to Egypt and beyond. In the 14th century the Malian emperor, Mansa Musa, made the Hadj, the holy pilgrimage to Mecca—required of every Muslim during his or her lifetime if possible—taking with him a large entourage and scores of camels laden with gold. His arrival in Cairo and later Mecca was recorded in chronicles of the day and caused quite a stir as the quantity of gold he brought with him caused the collapse of the Cairo gold market. Muslim scholars and architects accompanied Mansa Musa on his return to Mali, and they took up residence in Timbuktu and other cities. Later at the end of the fifteenth century, the celebrated Songhai emperor, Askia Mohammed, also made a pilgrimage to Mecca, and his journey and the resulting exchanges were also recorded in various chronicles. In one important chronicle the Tariq el Fettach, Timbuktu was described as a city without equal in Black Africa and a city that was especially known for the courtesy and assistance given to students and men



Djinguereber mosque, Timbuktu, Mali. © Eliot Elisofon, 1970. Image no. 16364 NMAfA, SI.

of science. Ancient manuscripts, which are today preserved at Timbuktu's Ahamed Baba Center and in private libraries in the city, serve as eloquent testimony to this ancient city's important place in international commerce and in the history of world scholarship.

Current archeological research has uncovered important evidence of the great artistic achievements in Mali especially in architecture and in terra cotta sculptures during its *Golden Age*. The balance of power was upset in the late sixteenth century when the sultan of Morocco attacked the Songhai Empire that had been weakened by dynastic disputes and a series of natural disasters and droughts. Around the same time the opening of sea trade with the Portuguese on the West African coast also began to undercut the overland trans-Saharan trade routes. There followed more than a century of instability and uncertainty in Mali until in the eighteenth century, a series of smaller kingdoms arose in the region and struggled for dominance in the areas once ruled by the great empires. The most important of these kingdoms were the Bamana kingdoms of Segou and Kaarta in the south central area, and a Fula state to the north. In the mid-nineteenth century the Tukolor Muslim cleric El Hadj Omar Tall conquered both the Bamana kingdoms and the Fulani kingdom and created a new theocratic state. This new state, however, was difficult to manage as the reorganized armies of the Bamana and Fulani continued an active resistance against the Tukolor rulers.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the French colonial troops began moving eastwards from Senegal into Mali. Between 1881 and 1898 the French gradually took over the region despite sustained and powerful resistance by many local rulers. The French seized the natural resources, imposed forced labor, and levied heavy taxes. They introduced Christianity, and they established colonial schools in the French language that trained a new generation of African intellectual elites. By the 1930s these new elites began to organize the political struggle for independence working through voluntary associations and trade unions including the teachers' union. In 1945 political parties emerged and elections were held for delegates to the First Constituent Assembly of the Fourth (French) Republic. In 1958, the colony held a referendum and on September 22, 1960, it formally declared its independence and reclaimed for its own the historic and glorious name of the ancient Empire of Mali.

Cultural Diversity in Mali

Mali is culturally diverse with about fourteen ethnic groups living in the country, each with its own cultural traditions. The Moors (Maurus) and the Tuareg, who are nomadic, live in the desert zone in the north. In this same region there are also settled communities of Sonrai, Fulani (Peul), and Boso (Bozo) living along the northern stretches of the Niger River. In the south central part of the country, the land is more arable, and there are numerous ethnic groups including the Bambara (Bamanan), Somono, Malinke, Soninke, Bwa, Senufo, Minianka, Khassonke and Dogon, among others.



Tuareg men at encampment outside of Timbouctou, Mali. © Eliot Elisonfon, 1959. Image no. 2670 NMAfA, S.I.



Bozo woman with gold jewelry near Mopti, Mali. © Eliot Elisonfon, 1970. Image no. 2584 NMAfA, S.I.

The communities can be divided into three main groups based on their primary occupations of herding, fishing, or farming. Moors, Tuaregs and Fulani are nomadic herders of camels, cattle, sheep and goats. Boso and Somono are fishermen who ply the waters of the Niger and Senegal rivers and their tributaries. The remaining groups are primarily sedentary farmers, who cultivate grains such as millet, corn, and rice, and grow other crops for export such as cotton and peanuts. Although Soninke are farmers, many families have also been skilled merchants throughout the centuries and played a central role in the ancient empires and the trans-Saharan trade.

Many of Mali's ethnic groups share a number of the same features of social organization and the majority of them are Muslim. Among many of Mali's ethnic groups the society is divided into two parts that include the "nobles" or "freemen," who are the majority of families, and the "castes" who are occupational specialists like blacksmiths, leatherworkers, or bards. People generally marry within their larger group; members of the occupational "castes" generally marry within other families in their specific profession. Their specialized knowledge and the important ritual roles they perform within the community are considered to be their birthright. This knowledge and the rights and responsibilities associated with each occupational "caste" are passed down from generation to generation. Bards, or griots, are perhaps the best known of these specialist "castes" and one of the most important in Malian culture. Griots, many of whom are skilled musicians and praise singers, are the repository of political and family histories and

act as the memory in these oral societies. Bards are considered the “masters of speech,” and both men and women bards play a special role in community life. They are intermediaries among noble families, and they help to negotiate political disputes. They also help to arrange marriages and play important roles in key life rituals from baptisms, to marriages, to funerals. Other important specialist “castes” are blacksmiths and leatherworkers who have for centuries provided critical goods and services to Malian communities. Like the griots they have always played important roles in ritual life. Although social stratification has become less pronounced in contemporary Mali, especially in the cities, it does remain one of the characteristics of many of Mali’s ethnic groups.

Arts, Architecture and Music

Despite certain shared forms of social organization and a shared religion, each ethnic group also is unique in numerous aspects of life including language, history, social customs, art and craft traditions, dress, cuisine, and architecture.

The Arts

Malian crafts are one of the most dynamic sectors of the current Malian economy, evidenced in the extraordinary diversity of textiles, wood sculptures, leather goods, and works in silver and gold. Exceptionally fine wood sculptures from among the Bamana, Dogon and Senufo groups are among the art masterpieces exhibited in museums worldwide. Certain of these sculptures, like the Bamana Ciwara headdress used in agricultural festivals, and a variety of Dogon wooden masks used in funeral rites, have taken on new meanings today as they have been embraced as national rather than ethnic symbols.



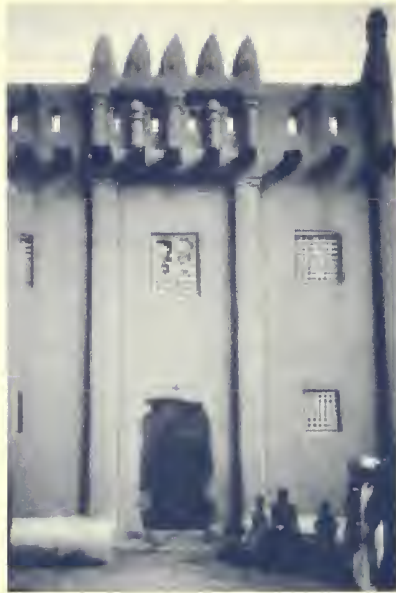
Bamana Ciwara. Wooden antelope headdresses, carved by the Bamana blacksmith, Siriman Fane. Department of Anthropology, NMNH, SI.

Other crafts such as handmade pottery and handwoven textiles, although in decline, do continue to be produced because they are still useful in Malian daily lives. In households around the country, hand-built pots and hand-woven textiles continue to be used alongside factory produced ceramics, plastic and metal cookware, and industrially milled cloth. Mali has a long tradition of handweaving, and archaeologists have found cotton and wool textiles dating back to the first millennium. Fulani, who raise sheep and goats, produce richly patterned wool blankets that families commission for marriages and that become cherished family heirlooms. Bogolanfini, hand painted mud dyed cloth made by Bamana women, has enjoyed a spectacular revival in Mali in the last twenty years. Today, this distinctive textile with its strong graphic appeal is not only worn in rural areas but also by fashionable urbanites throughout Mali. The textile has found a market internationally because of its bold graphics and has been adopted as a symbol of African identity for people of African descent worldwide.

Architecture

Malian architecture also demonstrates a rich variety of forms. It varies according to region, environment, and ethnic group, but broadly speaking, there are three dominant building traditions: adobe (earthen), stone, and nomadic forms. Adobe mud brick architecture is widespread in Mali and throughout the Sahel region. It is both an urban building style and a rural style, and it is used extensively for domestic and religious architecture. For centuries, masons specializing in this type of building have played an important role in the development of this architectural form. The great mosques of Timbuktu and Djenne are two examples of spectacular multi-story mud brick buildings built centuries ago, but surviving today because of regular repair and refacing by the community. The French colonial government adopted the distinctive style of Malian adobe architecture for its official administrative buildings that they built in concrete with stucco facing. Contemporary Malian architects today continue to draw inspiration from this ancient style in the design of commercial buildings, homes, and public monuments.

The Dogon today practice stone architecture and use stone for buildings and for the *toguna* or men’s houses, generally situated in the center of the community. These



Private house in Djenne, Mali. © M. J. Arnoldi, 1997.



City Hall of Segou, formerly a French colonial administration building. © M. J. Arnoldi, 1997.

houses are square structures made with a series of stone or wooden pillars covered by a several-meter-high roof made of wooden tree trunks and layers of millet stalks. This distinctive and imposing structure serves as a meeting place in Dogon villages, playing an important role in the political and social life of these communities.

Nomadic architecture in the north of Mali includes both tent structures (wooden frames covered with tanned animal hides or sturdy cloth), and round houses (curved wooden armatures covered with decorative handwoven straw mats). Both styles are well adapted to the harsh desert environment; both are easily assembled and reassembled as families move during the year seeking new pastures and water for their herds.

Music

Music holds a special place in Malian life, providing the context for people to reflect upon and create their commentary about social and political realities and about their core beliefs and values. Songs touch on all aspects of life from the bard's epics which tell the histories of the great empires, to those that reflect upon core beliefs and values and speak about change in contemporary Malian society. The primary value of a song lies not only in its musical qualities, but in the poetry of its lyrics and the lyrics' messages about issues of everyday life.

Not surprisingly, each ethnic group has contributed in distinctive ways to the musical heritage of the

nation and each group and region is characterized by certain rhythms, instruments, and musical compositions. In the south, the musical traditions of the Malinke, for example, include ensembles of three main instruments: the *jembe* drum; the *kora*, a 21 stringed harp lute; and the *balanin*, a xylophone with fifteen to nineteen wooden bars. All of these instruments are played by men.

In the north of Mali there is a recognizable Arab influence on music. The main instruments for the Sonrai, Tuareg, and Moors are small two headed drums, calabash water drums, the bowed violin, the three stringed harp, and the flute. These instruments can be played alone or in ensembles. The bowed violin and stringed harp can be played by both men and women. The flute and two headed drums are played by men, and the calabash water drums are played by women.

Mali's age old musical traditions have also been the inspiration for its contemporary musicians. Internationally known musicians like Salif Keita and Ali Farka Touré, to name just a few, combine traditional instruments like drums and harp lutes with electric guitars and keyboards. They have reworked traditional instrumentation to create new and exciting sounds. But, like the generations of musicians before them, their songs still speak to important social issues of the day. Today, music is no longer the exclusive preserve of griots; the profession is now open to all those who have talent and drive. Mali is

fast becoming a major center of the international music industry, and music is one of Mali's most important exports. CD's featuring Malian musicians can now be found in stores worldwide, and everyday Malian music is finding new and appreciative audiences.

Mali and the United States

The connections between Mali and the United States have existed for several centuries. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the tragedy of the trans-Atlantic slave trade brought Malians west to the Americas by way of the Middle Passage. These men and women brought with them not only their values and beliefs but their agricultural and technological expertise, especially in rice farming and craft production. They contributed to the fabric of American culture and through their knowledge and labor helped build the American economy. Mali's links to the United States did not end with the abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. In the twentieth century during the two World Wars, Malian soldiers fought alongside the Allied forces in the European and African theatres. Drawing on their experiences, these veterans brought new ideas about liberty and justice back to Mali, and their ideas and experiences contributed to the growing movement for independence from French colonial rule that led to Malian independence in 1960. Mali's commitment to democracy has grown over the last decades, and today Mali stands as an important example of democracy in action for other African nations and the world.

In the last several decades, growing numbers of Malian students (over 500 in the past decade) have come to study in universities throughout the United States, and Americans have gone to study in Mali. These groups have maintained close links to people and institutions in both countries after returning home. Malians have also immigrated to the United States, establishing their families in cities throughout the country and continuing the long tradition of contributing to the cultural and economic vitality of the United States. Like Malians everywhere, Malian-Americans retain the memory of Malian history, and they preserve vital links to families and communities in Mali. They send money home, and they receive visitors from Mali. They celebrate weddings and births, and they mourn the passing of relatives and friends here and in Mali. In this way, new and dynamic connections between Mali and the United States continue to grow.



Bowed guitar (tehardent) player accompanying dance in Timbouctou, Mali.. © Eliot Elisofon, 1959. Image no. 4419. NMAfA.

Today, more and more American school children are learning about Malian culture and Mali's important place in world history. As Malian music grows in popularity worldwide, it is being played on American airwaves, and more and more concert tours are coming to the United States. The internet connects Malians and Americans to one another in new and productive ways, and increasing numbers of Americans are traveling to Mali to learn about Malian history and culture first hand. Mali welcomes all of these new global educational, cultural, and economic exchanges, with the same enthusiasm she has supported such international exchanges for 1500 years or more.



City life, Bamako Wall painting. © M. J. Arnoldi, 1991.

(continued on next page)

A Case Study of Sogo Bò, A Puppet Masquerade Theater

In late September 1978 I arrived in Mali to study puppet masquerades. Malian colleagues at the Ministry of Culture suggested that I base myself in Kirango, a community on the Niger River north of the regional capital of Segou. Kirango enjoyed a certain regional celebrity for its puppet masquerade theatre and happily for this study it had three active troupes. After several days of discussions about the project with local residents, the Bamana quarter graciously agreed to allow me and Lynn Forsdale, a photographer, to live in their community. We lived in the Diarra household from 1978 to 1980.

My study of the Sogo Bò theater is based on my participation in five performance seasons between 1978 and 1995 and on ongoing discussions with men and women in Kirango and in other communities within the Segou region. Some of these discussions transpired informally in the normal course of conversations among friends. Other conversations were more formal and were taped over sixty hours of interviews that were later transcribed and translated by my colleague Sekou Ba Camara. In 1979 and 1980 I videotaped several performances and used these tapes in playback interviews with performers in several communities. These interviews provided me with many valuable insights into the performance process and about the criteria people use to evaluate their arts. A number of the men living in the Diarra household were formerly or are now still active in the theatre, and they graciously shared their insights with me. Throughout my two years of living with the family and again in 1987, 1989, and 1992, people in Kirango entertained with grace my many questions about these masquerade performances.

Puppet masquerade originated in the precolonial era and remains a vital performance tradition today. It draws together a rich body of visual, musical and dance arts in a dynamic event that the community defines as both entertainment and play. But the theater also has a serious side, and people talk about its capacity to reunify the community, to create a context within which traditional social values can be taught, and to provide a time to give thanksgiving for the rains and for the harvest.

The puppets are played by five ethnic groups: the Bamana, Maninka, Maraka, Boso and Somono who live along the Niger River and its tributaries from the

Segou region in Mali, south into northern Guinea. The first three of these groups are farmers and traders, while the Boso and Somono are fishermen.

The Boso are universally acknowledged in this region as "masters of the water," and it is the Boso who are recognized as the first owners of these masquerades. According to a myth of origin for the theater, it was Toboji Centa, a Boso fisherman, who lived for several years among the genies who taught him the secrets of the puppets. When Toboji returned to his village of Gomitogo, he taught the Boso these secrets and gradually the theater spread through the fishermen's riverine networks and later was adopted by farming communities. Although each group sees itself as ethnically distinct from the others, they have coexisted in the region for centuries and today all speak Mande languages and share many social and cultural institutions. One such shared institution is the youth association under whose auspices the puppet theater is performed.

According to oral traditions, in the early days of the theater the puppet masquerades were made mostly of grasses and cloth with only a few examples of wooden sculptures. Toward the end of the 19th century and especially in the first decades of the 20th century, there was an explosion of carved wooden puppets, which have become the signature form in the current theater. The puppet masquerade theater is also unique among the other masquerade genres in this region in the variety of characters that are performed. These include wild animals from the bush and river such as the elephant, lion, hippo and crocodile; mythological and fantastic creatures including a whole variety of bush and water genies; conventional human types representing occupations like farming, fishing, and the musical arts, as well as more contemporary characters like policemen, government officials, and the occasional anthropologist.

The theater is played twice annually and in most areas closely follows the agricultural and fishing cycles of the region. One festival in October marks the beginning of the fonio harvest, the first grain to ripen, and marks a peak in fishing activity. The second festival takes place in late May or June and heralds the coming of the rainy season, signaling the planting season and the rise of the rivers and recommencement of fishing. It is also the traditional New Year.

The carved wooden puppets are rod and string puppets. They include large animal head puppets. The puppet is operated from below by a wooden rod. The head projects from the front of a large costumed construction which represents the body of the animal. The puppeteer is hidden underneath this costumed body. The large puppet heads may also support smaller puppets that are attached to the crown of the larger puppet head. The smaller puppets may or may not be articulated by a series of rods and strings.

The second type of wooden puppet is the small rod and string puppet which is independent of the large animal puppet and appears out of the back of the costumed animal body. Several puppeteers are hidden under the construction and operate the smaller puppets from below. Normally only one or two of these elaborate constructions are played during any one event.

Nearly all the puppets are brightly painted and costumed. The costumes are made from an array of richly colored and textured brocades, woven materials and printed cloths. A visual tension is created through the juxtaposition of patterns and colors, and there is an explosion of yellows, greens, blues, silvers and reds. Metal pieces and mirrors may be added to the puppets that catch the light and produce visual punctuations as the puppet moves through the dance circle.

The puppets are voiceless and do not perform narrative skits, but their performance is accompanied by a chorus of female singers. Each major character has a signature song, and these songs allude to the qualities of the character, the social values of the group or to historical events. The songs are drawn from a rich repertoire of fables, legends, epics and proverbs.

The performances take place on an open area in the village. On the day of the festival, young children are the first to arrive on the scene and they begin to drum, dance and imitate the masquerades. Members of the youth association move through the town or neighborhood blowing whistles to alert people to the upcoming event. Adults dressed in festival finery begin to slowly make their way to the dance area and a circle begins to form. People greet their neighbors and friends, catch up on the local news, and begin to settle in for the performance. Finally the adult male drum team arrives and takes back the drums from the young boys, and this signals the start of the performance. The theater begins with

several hours of dancing which is then followed by the puppet masquerades. From the entrance of the first puppet up to the final character many hours later, the singing and drumming never ceases.

As each puppet masquerade enters the dance area it proceeds around the circle in a manner appropriate to the character. Elephants lumber, antelopes gallop, and wildcats prowl. When the dancer/puppeteer gives the drummers a cue, they break into a brief very fast paced segment, and the puppet masquerade breaks into an energetic dance. Individuals from the audience rush into the circle to praise the masquerade through song and gestures. The dancer/puppeteer then falls back into his original compartment and continues moving around the circle stopping to repeat the energetic display several more times before he exits.

Because there is a common origin for the theater, there are many surface similarities to the performances of the different ethnic groups. However each group distinguishes its theater from the others by a distinctive set of drums and drum rhythms as well as different songs and song styles. The farmers and fishermen also claim ownership over different species of wild animals. Farmers perform the important land animals such as elephants, lions, and bush buffalos, while the fishermen perform the great river beasts, the manatee, the crocodile and the hippo. One important difference between fishermen and farmers is the fishermen's tradition of bringing the masquerades into the village in boats.



"Malikono," a puppet character that celebrates Malian independence from the French. © M. J. Arnoldi., 1980.

Seeing a parade of boats with masquerades, singers, and musicians making its way to the village is indeed a spectacular sight.

Today, puppet masquerade theater must compete with television, movies, and other forms of entertainment. But, even into this new millennium, puppet theater continues to be performed in many communities. It has significant aesthetic appeal, and it is great fun. Excitement builds throughout the evening as the music, song, dance, and performances continue for hours finally ending well after midnight. People prepare for months for the event, and for months afterwards they talk about the performances.

Equally as important as the puppet masquerades' entertainment value is the fact that these performances remain important occasions for the exploration of be-

liefs and values. Older animal characters, like the lion and the elephant, continue to be played today, and people relate the majesty of the lion and the size and steadfastness of the elephant as important qualities for leaders in the community. The community has always embraced new characters and a few that have been created in recent years speak to people's growing concerns about divorce, poverty, and good governance. Like folktales and other theatrical forms, puppet masquerade performances throw community values and everyday social relationships into high relief, and these performances open them up for public scrutiny and discussion.

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