

THE LEGEND OF BITON AND FAARO: A REINTERPRETATION OF A CREATION MYTH FROM THE EPIC OF BAMANA SEGU PERFORMED WITH PUPPETS AND MASKS IN MALI

Elisabeth den Otter
Tropenmuseum Amsterdam

ABSTRACT: This contribution calls attention to Malian masquerades that reinterpret narrative material drawn from the epic of Bamana Segu through puppets and masks. After providing a general overview of African puppetry, the essay zooms in specifically on the Malian village of Kirango, located on the bank of the Niger River about 35 kilometers northeast of the city of Ségou. The inhabitants of this village (Bamana farmers and Bozo fishermen) celebrate masquerades in which puppets and masks are made to dance by puppeteers whose performance is accompanied by drummers and singers. In this context, no difference is made between puppets and masks: both are called *sogo* ('animal'), because many of them represent animals such as the hippopotamus, the crocodile, various types of fish (Bozo), antelopes and the buffalo (Bamana). The essay then introduces two characters from the epic of Bamana Segu, Faaro (water spirit and creator god) and Biton (Mamari Coulibaly, a historical Bamana king who, according to a widespread legend, acquired power with the help of Faaro); and it goes on to discuss Faaro's role in Bozo and Bamana masquerades and explain how a 2009 Bozo performance recreated the legend of Faaro and Biton. The final sections of the essay reflect on the masquerades' significance with respect to collective memory and cultural identity as well as their possible evolution in the future.

KEY-WORDS: Mali, Kirango, Bozo, Bamana, masquerades, puppets, masks, epic of Bamana Segu, Biton, Faaro

RIASSUNTO: Questo contributo richiama l'attenzione sulle maschere maliane che reinterpretano materiale narrativo tratto dall'epopea di Bamana Segu attraverso burattini e maschere. Dopo aver fornito una panoramica generale del teatro di figura africano, il saggio si sofferma specificamente sul villaggio maliano di Kirango, situato sulla riva del fiume Niger, circa 35 km a nord-est della città di Ségou. Gli abitanti di questo villaggio (contadini Bamana e pescatori Bozo) celebrano delle

mascherate nelle quali pupazzi e maschere vengono fatti ballare da burattinai la cui performance è accompagnata da suonatori di tamburi e cantanti. In questo contesto, non si fa differenza tra pupazzi e maschere: entrambi sono chiamati sogo ('animale'), perché molti di essi rappresentano animali come l'ippopotamo, il coccodrillo, vari tipi di pesce (nel caso dei Bozo), le antilopi e il bufalo (nel caso dei Bamana). Il saggio presenta poi due personaggi dell'epopea di Bamana Segu, Faaro (spirito dell'acqua e dio creatore) e Biton (Mamari Coulibaly, storico re Bamana che, secondo una diffusa leggenda, prese il potere con l'aiuto di Faaro); e prosegue discutendo il ruolo di Faaro nelle mascherate dei Bozo e dei Bamana e spiegando come una performance realizzata dai Bozo nel 2009 ha ricreato la leggenda di Faaro e Biton. Le sezioni finali del saggio riflettono sull'importanza delle mascherate in relazione alla memoria collettiva e all'identità culturale, nonché sulla loro possibile evoluzione futura.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Mali, Kirango, Bozo, Bamana, mascherata, marionette, maschere, epopea di Bamana Segu, Biton, Faaro

1. THE MYSTERY OF AFRICAN PUPPETS

African puppets are relatively unknown in Europe. From various sources (literature, conversations with experts, and fieldwork),¹ I have gathered that traditional puppet theatre exists in Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Cameroun, Gabon, and Congo. Modern types of puppetry may be found in Togo, Nigeria, Zaïre, Burundi, and South Africa. Most of the puppets are rod, string, or hand puppets; there are no shadow figures, except in Egypt. They may be articulated or non-articulated, as is the case with (small) statues and *marottes* (a head mounted on a stick, representing human types, known in Europe as a "fool's bauble").

The ritual origin of African puppets is obvious: small statues were and are used in ancestor worship and by initiation societies. Puppets are a double of man, created to project his being, but also a double of society. Their performances are often funny and

¹ For literature that provides an overview of puppet theater in Africa, see especially DARKOWSKA-NIDZGORSKA - NIDZGORSKI 1998.

destined to make people laugh. Sexuality, a source of social tension, and its corollary, fertility, are favorite themes in this type of popular entertainment.

Some types of African puppetry are small-scale and satiric, a bit like the English Punch. This is the case in southern Niger, where the Hausa puppeteer, hidden under his long gown, plays small scenes with two unarticulated puppets representing characteristic types such as the man who beguiles women with his sexual parts, the marabout (Islamic priest) seducing a young girl, the dancing cousins, and so on. His text, spoken through a voice-distorting device, is “translated” by his helpers. In the Congo, the puppets have the shape of a bauble, a head on a stick. The puppeteer is covered entirely by a cloth, from which only the puppet sticks out. Traditional as well as modern characters are represented: village heads, civil servants, and soldiers.

Masquerades are an interpretation of a world in evolution; the tradition is maintained, but new elements are added. For example, some puppets are ancient, like the Bird, but new puppets are shown, such as the Shrimp which was ‘invented’ by a fisherman who worked in Senegal. When a masquerade is organized, people watch out for new characters and comment on them.

2. BOZO AND BAMANA PUPPETS AND MASKS

In Kirango, a village located on the banks of the Niger River, about 35 km northeast of the city of Ségou (Mali), the inhabitants (Bamana farmers and Bozo fishermen) celebrate their masquerades.² During the masquerades, both groups show large rod puppets that are made to dance by puppeteers hidden inside them. The puppets of the Bamana are made of wood, whereas those of the Bozo consist of a bamboo frame covered with cloth (or plastic) and are manipulated by a man crawling on all fours; one might call it a “body puppet”. Both groups have masks in their repertoire, such as Yayoroba, the Ideal Woman (Bamana), and the water spirit Faaro (Bozo), whose wooden mask was made by a Bamana carver.

² For background information regarding puppet theater in Mali, see ARNOLDI 1995.

No difference is made between puppets and masks; both are called *sogo* ('animal'), since many of them represent animals. They resemble each other in many ways and serve the same purpose: to represent mythical and symbolic beings through concealed human beings. They can be viewed as two sides of the same coin, since both are a means to establish contact between the invisible world of the supernatural and the visible human world.

The characters are humans, spirits, and (mythical) animals. They are accompanied by drummers and singers; the songs describe the power of some animals (e.g., the Buffalo and Crocodile), the beauty of others (e.g., the Dog-Fish), and specific character traits (e.g., Gonfarinman, the Mean Chimpanzee). They alternate with masked dancers, who likewise represent mythical animals and symbolic figures. The songs that accompany the animals do not tell stories, but speak of values that are important to the Bamana and the Bozo. They praise the ancestors, fishermen, farmers, and hunters; they speak about the mythical powers of certain animals and also warn against bad behavior. An example of this is the song for the Dog-Fish:

Mirror of gold
Dog-fish is like a mirror
A mirror of gold
Have you not heard the words of the indiscrete person?
Have you not heard the words of the person who speaks badly about others?
Trying to separate the children of the same mother?

An interesting category is that of the "strong" animals; they are difficult to capture. The Bozo and the Bamana share a number of characters, but it is the powerful aquatic animals associated with Bozo hunting and powerful land-based animals associated with Bamana hunting that serve to distinguish one group's repertoire from the other's. Some animals – like the buffalo, some antelopes (Bamana), and the cow (Bozo) – can transform themselves into human beings. The Bozo perform important aquatic animals like the dog-fish, the crocodile, the hippopotamus and the manatee. Some of the animals of the Bamana carry small rod puppets on their back, which show scenes of daily life. Sigi, the male bush buffalo, symbolizes the strength and power of tradition. On his back, he carries



Fig. 1. Sigi, the Bush Buffalo, with small rod-puppets on his back. Drawing by Hetty Paërl. Source: den Otter 1995: 97.

small rod puppets representing women pounding millet, a farmer, fishermen in a boat, the water spirit Faaro, and a crocodile. He is accompanied by men playing drums [Figure 1].

A number of oppositions may be noted in relation to the puppetry. As mentioned above, modern Bozo characters represent aquatic animals, whereas the animals of the Bamana are land-based. There are great differences between day puppets and puppets that are shown at night. The Bozo day puppets are paraded on boats and in the water, whereas the Bamana puppets are only shown on land. The differentiation between domestic and wild is also quite present, as is the difference between real-life animals and mythical animals.

The Bozo fishermen consider themselves descendants of Faaro, the water spirit and creator god. Every year sacrifices are made to Faaro; the men receive Faaro's council, and sometimes they go into the water to follow him into his domain. Offerings are made of a white cock, white porridge, and other white objects. This coincides with the "installing of the staff" (*mettre le bâton*) in the river, to mark the part of the river where the fishermen cannot fish for a certain period. Faaro's den is said to be in Saman, west of

Ségou. The song goes as follows: «I'm going to visit Faaro's den in Saman / So that Faaro of Saman gives me his blessing».

In the legend of Biton and Faaro, the oppositions (Bozo/Bamana and Water/Land) are “neutralized” by the fact that Faaro plays a role in Bozo as well as Bamana masquerades. There is, in fact, a mutual dependency between the Bamana and the Bozo. Although they live in separate quarters, the Bozo near the river and the Bamana more inland, both fish and agricultural produce are sold at the market. During the Bamana masquerade, the Bozo fishermen do guest appearances with their puppets in the shape of various types of fish, a hippopotamus, and other characters. And vice versa: the Bamana give a short performance during the masquerades of the Bozo. This is a sign of friendly relationships.

3. FAARO AND THE CREATION OF THE WORLD

The Bamana have developed a cosmology in order to explain the creation of the world. Yo, the primordial spirit, produced the twenty-two fundamental elements of the creation. He first made Pemba appear, who gave form to the earth, then Faaro, who helped Pemba to construct the sky. On his path, Faaro determined the four cardinal points, in the form of water (seas, rivers, lakes) filling the void. Finally, Téliko, the spirit of the air, came into the world. Then, the first lives appeared on earth and Faaro gave birth to twins.³ Pemba created animals and plants, as well as his wife. After that, Musokoronin (“The Little Old Lady”) appeared; she planted Pemba in the earth so that he became Balansan, the first tree.⁴ In this form, he imposed his domination over the human beings born from Faaro. Pemba wanted the love of other women, but Musokoronin did not want to share him and ceased to participate in the work of the creation. Faaro and Pemba traced Musokoronin, in order to take from her the knowledge that she had received from her creator. They found her,

³ The scorpions, Bunteninw, always appear in pairs because they represent twins. The song goes as follows: «Bama is right / Kasafune and Wasafune are right / He who is born after the twins is right». Bama is the first woman to give birth to twins.

⁴ Ségou is called the City of Balansans.

but she refused to submit. Thereupon, Pemba cursed her, and she became mad. Pemba abused his power, which Faaro found unjust, and a battle took place that Faaro won. Faaro became the new master of the world and he reorganized it the way he wanted. Pemba's malediction was the origin of death, illness, and hate on earth.⁵

4. THE LEGEND OF BITON AND FAARO

This story forms part of an epic poem – a long narrative poem celebrating heroic deeds and events significant to a culture or nation – about the history of the Bamana kingdom of Ségou.⁶ The legend tells how a young Bamana king, Mamari Coulibaly (Biton), who reigned in the early eighteenth century, acquired power with the help of Faaro. It is widely known by people living along the Niger river, including those who live in the capital Bamako, and told by the bards (*griots*) of Ségou.

Biton's mother cultivated bitter tomatoes (*ngoyo*) on the edge of the Niger river. Every morning she discovered that some tomatoes had disappeared. One night, Biton decided to stay in the field to see what was happening. After a few hours, he saw a silhouette taking the best-looking tomatoes from the garden, but he was too slow to catch it. The next night he watched from the riverbank, to see whether the thief came by boat, but he saw nothing. The following morning, however, more tomatoes were missing. He stayed one more night watching the garden, sitting on the edge of the river. Then he saw the most beautiful creature on earth coming out of the water. The thief was not a human being, but a water spirit with light skin and long brown hair. It was the daughter of Faaro, water spirit and creator of the world. She came out of the water every night to steal tomatoes for her parents. Biton said to her, «So it's you who steals the beautiful tomatoes that my mother cultivates along the river», upon which she replied, «Yes, I'm sorry, but my parents are hungry. Come with me and they will compensate you».

⁵ For a fuller account of the myth, see DIETERLEN 1957.

⁶ For an English translation of a version of the epic by a hereditary professional bard recorded in 1976, see *A State of Intrigue* [Conrad - Diakité]. Excerpts of this translation are included in *Oral Epics from Africa* [Johnson - Hale - Becher].

This is how Biton discovered Faaro's kingdom. When they descended into the water, Faaro's daughter told Biton to ask two things from her parents. From her mother he should ask to pour a drop of milk from her breast into his ear. This way, Biton could hear everything that was said around him. From Faaro, he should ask a handful of millet-seeds (*fonio*), which he should sow in a large field and leave to the birds. As a result, he would reign over the territories where these birds left their droppings. And so Biton became the ruler of a large territory.

Faaro appears in masquerades, Bamana as well as Bozo, in the shape of a mermaid, with a woman's upper body. This character is related to Mamy Wata, a water spirit venerated in Africa and the African diaspora in the Americas. It is believed that all of ancient Africa possessed a multitude of water spirit traditions before the first contact with Europeans. Most of these were regarded as female. Dual natures of good and evil were not uncommon, reflecting the fact that water is an important means of providing communication, food, drink, trade, and transportation, but it can drown people, flood fields or villages, and provide passage to intruders. Traditions on both sides of the Atlantic tell of the spirit abducting her followers or random people whilst they are swimming or boating. She brings them to her paradisiacal realm, which may be underwater, in the spirit world, or both.

There may be a relation with the West African manatee as well; «Mami Wata» is a common name for this animal in the region. In fact, the Bozo have a pair of them (Ma) in their masquerade repertoire. The Bamana have a small version (*maanin*, 'Little Person') carved in wood. The color yellow represents the clear skin which is a symbol of beauty for women. Her glass eyes symbolise her mythical character. Her long, disheveled hair is explained by her living in the water [Figure 2]. The Bozo have a



Fig. 2. Faaro, a small rod puppet of the Bamana. Photo: Elisabeth den Otter.

larger version that appears in water during the day and on land during the night [Figure 3].

During the Festival on the Niger in Ségou in 2009, the Bozo of the Jaka-quarter of Kirango recreated this legend: Faaro (mask) swam in the river and a man represented Biton, with a basket of tomatoes [Figures 4 and 5]. It was the first time I saw such a sketch performed: from individual characters



Fig. 3. Faaro, at night. Kirango, 2008. Photo: Elisabeth den Otter

that tell no stories, to a narrative inspired by a legend. It may be that the performers are more ambitious here than elsewhere because they have been participating in the Festival since February of 2005 and are exposed to (foreign) visitors.



Fig. 4. Faaro with guide. Festival on the Niger, Ségou, 2009. Photo: Elisabeth den Otter.



Fig. 5. Biton offering tomatoes to Faaro. Festival on the Niger, Ségou, 2009. Photo: Elisabeth den Otter.

5. COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

The relation of the actual (non-ritual) masquerade to the old initiation societies of the Bamana (Ntomo, Kòmò, Nama, Kònò, Ciwara, Kòrè) is apparent during the masquerades: we see that the Ntomo and Ciwara societies appear in the form of masks, the Kòmò society in the form of row dances, and the Nama society in the form of a puppet made of straw. Faaro, the water deity, is represented by a small rod puppet. These survivals may be seen as a “collective memory” of animistic rituals now forbidden by Islam.

Through the masquerades, verbal as well as non-verbal communication takes place. Important cultural information is passed on during this “total theatre”, from performers to public. The message is “wrapped” in music, song, dance, costumes, masks, and puppets: symbolic forms of image and sound. Within the framework of the masquerade,

the people of Kirango celebrate their origins and their relation to the animals of the land and the water. It expresses the values of their society and transmits them to the next generation.⁷

6. THE FUTURE

Even though in Kirango annual village-based festivals associated with ritual events like circumcision remain the primary contexts for the masquerades, the process of “folklorizing” these performances was already well underway in the larger region during the colonial period. Because of factors such as modern education, urbanisation, migration, the influence of Islam, and lack of (financial) means, many villages no longer perform their masquerades. But there are also more recent influences, such as tourism, that contribute to changes in the masquerade. For example, in order to attract attention and increase their visibility, puppets and masks have recently been made larger and more colorful than before.⁸ Visitors take photographs and videos, and sometimes a television crew is present. And what will be the future of the masquerades: will they disappear, change into “folklore” which has little relation to village life, or adapt to modern times?

⁷ For more on festivals with masks in Kirango, see DEN OTTER - KÉÏTA 2002. For more on the society of the Bozo, see DEN OTTER 2013.

⁸ For a recent example, see a video of the event titled *Masques et danses des maîtres du fleuve: marionnettes Bozo du Mali*, performed by a group of Bozo from Kirango. The performance includes the appearance of Faaro (minutes 35:00–38:15) followed by various aquatic animals.

REFERENCES

PRIMARY SOURCES

- A State of Intrigue* [Conrad - Diakité] = *A State of Intrigue: The Epic of Bamana Segu according to Tayiru Banbera*, ed. by David C. Conrad - Soumaila Diakité, Oxford, Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 1990.
- Oral Epics from Africa* [Johnson - Hale - Belcher] = *Oral Epics from Africa: Vibrant Voices from a Vast Continent*, ed. by John William Johnson - Thomas A. Hale - Stephen Belcher, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1997.
- Masques et danses des maîtres du fleuve: marionnettes Bozo du Mali* = *Masques et danses des maîtres du fleuve: marionnettes Bozo du Mali*, interpreted by Bozo da Kirango, comment by Elisabeth den Otter, Musée du quai Branly, Jacques Chirac, Paris, 11 July 2021 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kKwB8Css1wA>>.

SECONDARY SOURCES

- ARNOLDI 1995 = Mary Jo Arnoldi, *Playing with Time: Art and Performance in Central Mali*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1995.
- DARKOWSKA-NIDZGORSKA - NIDZGORSKI 1998 = Olenka Darkowska-Nidzgorska - Denis Nidzgorski, *Marionnettes et masques au cœur du théâtre africain*, Saint-Maur, Sépia, 1998.
- DEN OTTER 1995 = Elisabeth den Otter, *Verre vrienden van Jan Klaassen. Poppenspel in Afrika en Azië*, Amsterdam, Koninklijk Instituut voor de Tropen - Royal Tropical Institute, 1995.
- DEN OTTER 2013 = Elisabeth den Otter, *Peuple de l'eau: Le Bozos du Mali*, Lyon, Médiris, 2013 <http://www.elisabethdenotter.nl/site1/Homepage_of_Elisabeth_den_Otter/Publications_files/cahier_bozo_siaap_2013.pdf>.

The Legend of Biton and Faaro

- DEN OTTER - KÉÏTA 2002 = Elisabeth Den Otter - Mamadou Kéïta, *Sogo bo. La fête des masques Bamanan*, Bamako, Imprim Color, 2002 <http://www.elisabethdenotter.nl/site1/Homepage_of_Elisabeth_den_Otter/Sogobo_Archive_org.html>.
- DIETERLEN 1957 = Germaine Dieterlen, *The Mande Creation Myth*, in «Africa», XXVII, 2 (1957), 124-138.