



"Rhythm to be heard and seen: a Bamana masquerade in Mali"

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Published in "Rhythm, a dance in time", Elisabeth den Otter (ed.), Amsterdam:KIT Publishers, 2001 (p.137-148), on the occasion of the exhibition "Ritme, dans van de tijd" in the Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam, which took place December 1999-January 2001.

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An annual masquerade

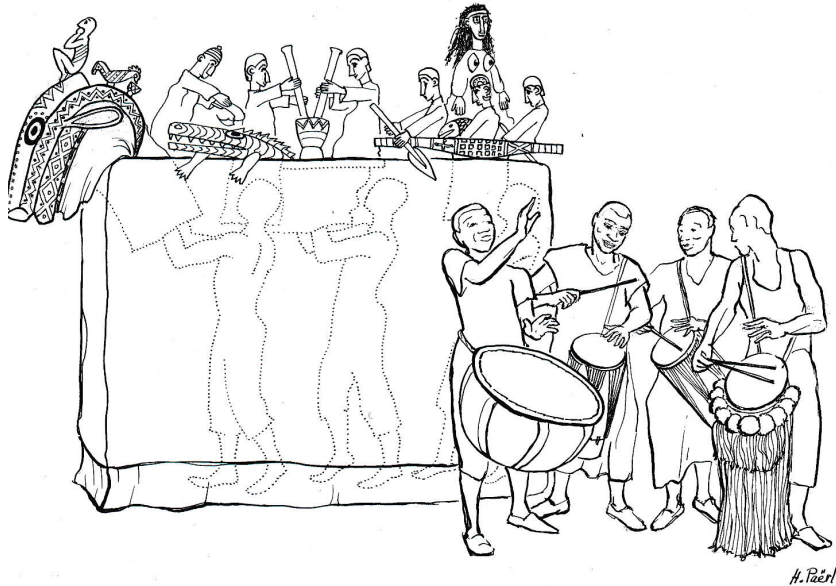
It is a scorching afternoon in June on the banks of the River Niger in Mali: The youth association of the village of Kirango is celebrating its annual masquerade, with circle dances, masks, and large puppets in the shape of mythical animals. Songs tell of their beauty and power, accompanied by drums, gourd rattles and clappers. Exciting stories are told through the masquerade. These are a means of expressing deep feelings, often symbolically. They also serve to confirm cultural identity. Society presents itself during the masquerade: 'This is how we are and what we think about life.'

Kirango (in the Markala *arrondissement*) is a village with over six thousand inhabitants, located on the bank of the Niger about 40 kilometres north-east of the city of Ségou. Just before the arrival of the rains, in the beginning of June, the Bamana youth association (*ton*) celebrates its annual masquerade, a public event performed on the village plaza. The masquerade generally takes place on three consecutive afternoons and two nights.

Rhythm is an all-pervading aspect of the masquerade and is experienced in a number of ways: the seasonal rhythm of the annual celebration; the audible rhythm of the drums, gourd rattles, clappers and clapping hands, the dance steps, the shouts of joy. And the visible rhythm of the dance movements executed by the dancers, the masks, the puppets, and the patterns on textiles. During the masquerade, emotions are expressed through rhythm.

Of dancing masks and men

Rhythm is a way to structure time and space. The annual cycle of the people of Kirango is marked by a number of events, among which the Islamic month of *Ramadan* and the secular masquerade. Apart from this seasonal rhythm, there is also the rhythm of the music, dance and masks, which we perceive through our ears, eyes, and our body in general.



Men manipulating Sigi, accompanied by drummers. Drawing: Hetty Paërl.

During the masquerade large puppets in the shape of mythical animals (*sogow*, literally 'meat') are made to dance by puppeteers hidden inside them. The body of the animal is quite large: a frame measuring around two metres long and one-and-a-half metres high, covered with cloth. The head of the animal is a large rod puppet. Smaller rod puppets (*maanin*, literally 'little people') are sometimes carried on the back of the animal or attached to its horns. The *dramatis personae* are humans, spirits and mythical animals, metaphors for the full range of human virtues and vices. Animals of the savannah are represented in the form of antelopes, buffaloes, birds, hyena's, etc. Domesticated animals such as cows, horses, sheep make an appearance as well. While the large puppets generally represent mythical animals or bush spirits, the small puppets carried on their backs depict scenes from daily life: women pounding millet, a hunter, a young bride with her dowry, a mother with her child, a modern women smoking a cigarette, a European, etc. They alternate with masked dancers who also represent mythical animals and symbolic persons. These hidden dancers express the character represented by the puppet or mask through their movements. For instance, Sigi, the bush buffalo, dances in a slow and stately way; Kònò, the bird that is the

harbinger of the rains, prances around elegantly, flapping its wings; and Warabachacho, the wild beast of the savannah, stomps around, hurling itself at the audience at times. Like these large puppets, the masks also have their own rhythm: Ngofariman, the evil chimpanzee, is a provocative character who dances around kicking up a sand-storm and approaches women in a lewd way. Taasidònin (literally 'reflect a little') is a voluptuous sexy woman who dances teasingly. Towards the end of the accompanying song, the rhythm accelerates and young men in the audience enter the arena to dance a few steps or to leap out of pure physical outlet for their enthusiasm.

There are visible dancers as well: the guide who accompanies a *sogo* or a mask, and dances with it, often in unison, and members of the youth association who perform circle dances and have leaping contests. Members of the public may also dance behind a puppet or mask to show their respect or admiration. (No differentiation is made between puppets and masks: they are both termed 'mask' since they resemble each other in many ways and serve the same purpose of representing mythical and symbolic beings through the concealed humans. 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 music is performed mainly on rhythm instruments: drums and small percussion instruments. Three types of drums are used: a large wooden kettledrum *chun*, which is beaten with both hands, and various cylindrical drums: the single skinned wooden *bòngolo*, beaten with thin sticks, and the double skinned wooden *nganga*, beaten with a thick stick. The female chorus keeps time with wooden clappers (*tegere*) and calabash rattles. The characters are announced by a man playing an antelope-horn (*buru*), and accompanied by a man playing a hand-bell (*daro*) to guide them. There are from one to ten songs for each character from which three to four are chosen for each performance. Some songs may be used for various characters. In all there are more than 200 songs. The songs refer either to particular qualities of the characters, making reference to a particular narrative legend, or they serve as metaphors for various forms of human behaviour. The songs are intended to flatter the character, to heighten its prestige, and to move the dancer to action.

Apart from dance forms directly related to the performances of the puppets and the masks, members of the youth association perform circle dances in which both men and women participate. The women form an inner circle and the men an outer circle. The oldest age group is at the beginning of the row, the youngest at the end. They can be identified by the colours of their clothes. The first dance they perform is called

kòmofoli, which is originally an initiation dance. (*Kòmo* is one of the six initiation societies of the Bamana, *fòli* means ‘music’ or ‘to play the drum’). The men and women dance in line: a few steps, followed by a small jump and a half-turn, and so on. The arms sway loosely, following the movements of the body. Each dancer gives his or her own personal input to this elegant dance which looks deceptively easy. At times, onlookers will raise a dancer’s arm or tie a scarf around his or her waist as a sign of appreciation. The *kòmofòli* is danced each time a new team of drummers takes over, which may be as often as three times per event. During the *bònjàlan*, pairs of young men make high leaps into the air and somersaults, showing off their agility and strength. Dance plays an important role during the masquerade. Puppets, masks and people dance, each in their own way and for their own purpose. The dances of the puppets and masks (by hidden dancers) serve to express their characters, whereas the dances of the visible people are outlets for the expression of feelings of togetherness and joy. Or, as Gilbert Rouget puts it: ‘To dance is to write music in space.’¹ A large puppet, Sigi, and a mask, N’Domo, will be described in more detail below.

Sigi, the bush buffalo

The bush buffalo, Sigi, symbolizes strength and the power of tradition. On his back, he carries small rod puppets representing women pounding millet, a crocodile, a mother-with-child, musicians, a man on horseback, and such like. Sigi’s dance is slow and stately. At times, the ‘animal’ stops, to give the puppets on its back a chance to perform: the women pound, the farmer hoes, and the musicians play a real tune on their mini-drum and mini-xylophone. Thus one puppet combines dance rhythms, the rhythm of work, musical rhythm, and a rhythmic *bogolan* (mud-cloth) pattern on the cloth on his back.

Sigi is usually accompanied by the best drum players of the youth association. When his dance comes to a climax, the soloist approaches him, followed by the other drummers, and plays as best as he can. The lead singers and the choir of women and girls sing his song, which says: ‘Beautiful wild animal, beloved by all, you are on the other side of the river and without a boat; we cannot get to you. Let’s go, Sigi, let’s go, because Sigi is in the hands of the strong men.’ According to the people of Kirango, the boat would have to be a mythical one, the devil’s horse, because the devil is stronger than man and can get to Sigi because he loves him more than people do.

Koronto, Sigi, dänkelen
Koronto, Sigi, bè cèlu bolow
Den ye, Sigi dänkelen ye jònni den ye

N'a ko ma diya i ye
Sigi ye ba ko, Sigi dänkelen ye ba kò

Kurun tè

Sigi, solitary wild animal
You are in the hands of men
Sigi, solitary wild animal, whose
child are you?
If his action is not good for you
Sigi, solitary wild animal, you
are on the other side of the river
We do not have a boat

[Click here to listen to Sigi](#)

Since the puppeteers cannot see their way, they need someone to guide them. This is done by a man shaking a hand-bell and also giving them verbal instructions. When the performance reaches a crescendo and the puppet dances as best he can, the musicians get closer and play more intensely while the guide dances around it, leaping high into the air. The puppet, its guide, and the musicians unite in a single rhythm. Sigi is covered with a cotton cloth with a machine-printed *bogolan* design. Since the feet of the puppeteers should not be visible, the cloth is constantly arranged by men who walk alongside the *sogo* as it performs.



Sigi and his guides, during the masquerade. Photo: Elisabeth den Otter.

The N'domo mask

The N'domo mask belongs to the young people and therefore is accompanied only by the youngest boys and girls. The N'domo is the first of the initiation societies of the Bamana, and only uncircumcised children are members. (The others are, successively: Kòmo, Nama, Kònò, Ciwara and Korè.) These societies are considered ways of discovering knowledge relative to humankind or its destiny. The N'Domo society addresses itself to the pre-social humankind, to the individual who is going to integrate into the community.

N'domo masks are made of wood, have two to eight horns, and are often decorated with cowrie shells and red seeds. They display a human face with a long and straight nose, usually with a small mouth. The masks are considered male (three or six horns), female (four or eight horns), or androgynous (two, five or seven horns). The cowrie shells symbolize the human skeleton and evoke the multitude of human beings of which the N'domo member is the prototype, whereas the seeds represent growth and vitality. The N'domo mask is intended to be used in dance, with the dancer being entirely covered in clothing so that no part of his body is displayed. One of the characteristics of N'domo masks is that they do not speak or sing, since speech is considered dangerous by the Bamana. The prominent nose depicts the importance of the ability to 'smell' the value

of a person or object as well as means of communicating with them. It represents the communal nature of human beings.²

The N'Domo mask displayed during the Kirango masquerade has six horns with a female statue at its centre, and it is decorated with cowrie shells. Six horns refer to knowledge and teaching; and also represent the six senses of humankind by which we know the world about us.³ The dancer is draped in cloth dyed in the reddish brown *bogolan* colour. He holds the nose of the mask, a characteristic trait, and holds a small stick in his hand, the emblem of the mask. He is attached by a piece of string to his guide, and accompanied by the youngest age groups. They go around the village saluting important people like the village chief. The drummers that accompany them also belong to the youngest age group; this way they learn how to play the drums.

N'domo mask with guide.
Photo: Elisabeth den Otter.





Young drummers.
Photo: Elisabeth
den Otter.

The children sing the following song:

N'domo tigi tè kulètè

Sa ye nanalen fa kolon kòrò

The owner of the N'domo is not a fetish

The snake has killed the swallow near
the mortar

[Click here to listen to Ndomo](#)

From audible and visible rhythm in space and time – music and dance – we
move on to visual rhythm in two-dimensional space of patterns on textile.

***Bogolan*: visualised speech**

Mali is famous for its traditional *bogolan*, or mud-cloth. It is used by women as wrappers and by men as shirts and pants. They are usually made to order. Hand woven cotton strips are sewn together and dyed with natural dyes made from roots, leaves and bark of the *n'galama* tree (the yellow-brown base) and a mix of ferruginous mud, blood, or millet (the design). The result is a black cloth with yellowish designs, which may be bleached out afterwards. In this 'negative' technique the designs are formed by the untouched areas of cotton that remain after the mud dye is painted onto the cloth. The small, symbol-like marks act as building blocks for complex patterns, and are repeated over a large surface. Most of the designs are abstract or semi abstract representations of commonly known objects (drums, cushions), animals (grasshoppers) and of the human form.

The Bamana hunters, who are famed for their hunting skills and feared for their magic powers, wear reddish-brown outfits that are dyed by the *bogolan* method. Sometimes black mud-decorations are added. The second male age group of the youth association wears hunter outfits during the masquerade, as does the masked N'Domo dancer.

Lately, *bogolan* has become quite popular. It has become a medium for contemporary artists who sell their work in art galleries, and designers' clothes in Africa and Europe are made from it. Tourists buy *bogolans* with figurative designs: village scenes, Dogon dancers, and other 'traditional' motifs. A poor man's version of *bogolan* printed cotton is produced by the national Comatex textile factory.

Brett-Smith considers *bogolans* as visualised speech, a secret 'document' only to be 'read' by the initiated. The regular geometric patterns are broken by intentional 'faults' and irregularities, which serve to conceal knowledge from all but the initiated. Direct talk is frowned on in Bamanan culture with metaphorical and ambiguous utterances being preferred. The mouth is considered dangerous and contaminating as the origin of speech. This explains the marked preference for small and inconspicuous mouths in Bamana human sculpture (see the N'Domo mask). Specialized speech, used by the 'masters of words' is reflected in *bogolan* composition: with crisp designs being intentionally slurred over by the artist with 'errors; the soiled nature of certain ritual cloths; the elliptical and allusive names of the designs and their even more elusive meanings; the ubiquitous deviations from a set pattern; and the 'nonsense syllables', 'clutter' or 'pauses' amid the repeated shapes.⁴



Bogolan. (Royal Tropical Institute collection)

The individual patterns of the *bogolan* are less regular, constituting visual accents or breaks in continuity. The decoration taken as a whole still displays regularity: it consists of three panels (from left to right: vertical-horizontal-vertical). The horizontal panel shows a rather regular alternation of wider and narrower bands. The main pattern consists of a double zigzag line, which is filled in with dots, circles, and crosses. Some of the patterns of the horizontal panel are repeated in the left vertical band, at a 90 degree angle. The right vertical band, as well as the upper horizontal band, do not have elaborate designs, probably because they do not show when the skirt is wrapped around. The whole makes a very rhythmic composition!

Perfect symmetry, such as may be seen in Indonesian textiles (see article by I. van Hout), is absent in *bogolans*. This may be due to the intentional 'faults' mentioned by Brett-Smith, in order to keep knowledge from the uninitiated, or to a greater freedom on the part of the makers of *bogolans*. Gombrich, in a chapter entitled 'The Perception of order'; talks about 'restlessness' and 'repose' in patterns.⁵ Using his terms, the more regular pattern would correspond with 'repose', whereas the more irregular pattern might be called 'restless symmetry', or 'imperfect symmetry'.

Social rhythm

Another type of rhythm may be experienced during the masquerade, a more abstract, social one: the dualistic opposition between the elder and the younger people of the association. For a few days, the social order is reversed.

According to the people of Kirango the purpose of the festival is to re-establish a sense of unity and to draw people back into the village in order to celebrate its identity as a community. However, there is also the possibility of contradictions inherent in social experience being brought to the fore. These concepts are analysed by Arnoldi using the terms *badenya* (mother-child-ness) and *fadenya* (father-child-ness).⁶ *Badenya* stands for unity and solidarity, *fadenya* for individuality and competition. All the members of the association are *badenya*, thereby suppressing the rivalry among peers and emphasising the rivalry between consecutive generations. During the festival, *badenya* is expressed during the circle dances and when older puppets are shown, such as Yayoruba (the Beautiful Woman) and Denbatigi (Mother-and-child). Songs referring to mutual understanding and love are sung, saying that children of the same mother, friends, family and the wives of one man should love each other, for: 'You do not know life. If one of you dies the others will know life.' *Fadenya* comes to the fore during the acrobatic competitions and when new puppets are paraded. For the duration of the festival the usual social relationships are reversed. Young people become the actors while the elders are the onlookers: the *fadenya* challenge of youth to the elders.

Conclusion

For the people of Kirango, the masquerade offers an opportunity to be together with relatives and friends and to express and reinforce their cultural identity through music, song and dance. Much better than the spoken word, they convey and reinforce emotions and create a special atmosphere. Whether one is a musician, a singer, a dancer, a puppeteer or part of the participating public, playing an active part in such an event is an emotional happening. Historical events, moral precepts, and other important aspects of culture are communicated to the members of Bamanan society through the youth association, the masquerade, the initiation societies, and the mud cloths. And rhythm, in its many forms, is the common denominator.

Notes

- ¹ Rouget, 1980, p. 179.
² Zahan, 1960, p. 85-87.
³ Zahan, 1960, p.85.
⁴ Brett-Smith, 1984, p. 127, 137, 139.
⁵ Gombrich, 1979, p. 120.
⁶ Arnoldi, 1995, p. 156-157.

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