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## Playing with Time - Art and Performance in Mali

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better-known artists, [and] there is a world of gray in between, a space in which talented 'craftsmen' produce work apparently indistinguishable from the established artists who have...themselves turned to mass producing highly commercialized works of art. [A]ll these sculptors have refined their techniques to a point where they are able to consistently produce aesthetically pleasing and highly marketable forms." Much of the stone sculpture on exhibition appears to fall into the gray zone Zilberg describes.

For McEwen, a doctrine he termed "Permanence of Culture" accounted for a "Shona" renaissance of their ancient tradition of stone. He viewed the new works as imbued with symbolism similar to the old but now enshrined in modernist forms so compelling that they would "revive modern art itself." This fanciful blend of ethnographic analogy and modernist heroics still bedevils the reception of Zimbabwean sculpture, as Zilberg points out.

The other essays in Volume II generally skirt critical issues of patronage, promotion, and quality, ignore related scholarship, and seem tentative. McLoughlin's essay on Zimbabwean painting, for example, which juxtaposes the attitudes of black and white artists and writers with both landscape and the city, ignores the ideological loading of colonial and postcolonial attitudes toward Zimbabwean landscape. This allows the many nineteenth-century images by Thomas Baines in the exhibition to escape critique. His essay also fails to point out that attitudes toward the land remain the most contentious issue in Zimbabwe, where President Mugabe is expropriating white-owned farms to fulfill the promise of the war of liberation to redistribute the land. Van den Audenaerde remarks in his preface that Zimbabwe "has remained to this day a rather mysterious country" for most Europeans, evoking visions of stone ruins, of "the legendary kingdoms of Monomotapa and Lobengula," of wildlife and the Victoria Falls, and, for some, of the bitter civil war that only ended with independence in 1980. Neither McLoughlin's essay nor the project as a whole does enough to deconstruct the colonial legacy and Western myths about Zimbabwe. Nor do they admit the blood and guts of the war or the current conflicts.

Instead, it is the Shona snuff containers made from bullets and the sword in the form of an AK47 rifle in Dewey's essay that provide the requisite perspective of a country deeply scored by historical tragedies, in the face of which many of its people have mobilized their traditions in resolute resistance and clung to the sense that they are surrounded by the spirits of their ancestors. (Others, black and white, have become appallingly corrupt by any measure.) And the volumes' only antidote to the romantic deification of "Nature" is Peta Jones's incidental description of an aging Tonga carver of curio elephants planning a special trip to see his first real elephant! Since there were evidently no limits on the inclusivity of the project's second part, it could well have included some recent Zimbabwean photography for greater perspective—perhaps the well-known photograph of a guerrilla shaking the hand of a little boy in a tat-

tered sweater who gazes up at his liberator in awe, or an image of drunken whites on an idyllic game-viewing cruise on "Lake" Kariba, attended by uniformed Tonga servants whose people were forced out of the Zambezi Valley by the rising waters that created this vast dam.

Volume II includes three essays that seem misplaced. The first is "Contemporary Art in Zimbabwe," by Paul Wade, which provides a personal view rather than the comprehensive overview that this volume needed. The second is a scientific analysis of the petrography of the rocks used in Zimbabwean sculpture, by George Stoops. The third (Neo Matome and Stephen Williams) argues that a Zimbabwean institution should be established as the arts center for the subcontinent—which seems wasteful since South Africa already has several excellent institutions that could play host. This catalogue space would have been better spent on letting sculptors speak for themselves, and having Wade discuss his nine years as head of the sculpture workshop at the National Gallery—this would have provided useful historical material.

Despite such problems, Volume II presents much new material to link Zimbabwe to broader debates on contemporary art. A key issue appears to be the degree to which both black and white Zimbabwean artists articulate their identity through the lens of modernism. Certainly, plenty of scope remains to sharpen and refine the scholarship and research on stone sculpture, and Bourgois seems likely to contribute to this subject as his doctoral research on the topic proceeds.

Despite its lack of professionalism, the combined catalogue succeeds in its aim of being widely representative, and it promises to be a valuable resource for the teaching and appreciation of more than two millennia of Zimbabwean art. Overall, this highly ambitious project is indeed, as Van den Audenaerde remarks, a "landmark for the promotion of Zimbabwean culture," and Els De Palmaer and other staff members are to be congratulated for the feat of coordinating it. Institutions devoted to "traditional" African art would do well, however, to take note of some of the pitfalls evidenced here of venturing into contemporary art without the necessary curatorial expertise and perspective. □



### PLAYING WITH TIME Art and Performance in Central Mali

Mary Jo Arnoldi

*Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1995. 134 pp., 92 b/w & 20 color photos, map, 2 tables. \$29.95 hardcover.*

Reviewed by Stephen Wooten

In the pages of *Playing with Time*, Mary Jo Arnoldi provides a wealth of ethnographic data on a fascinating genre of expressive culture from the Mande region of West Africa, a clear sense of the riches to be gained by undertaking

nuanced field studies of art forms, and an engaging theoretical perspective on issues of agency and dynamism in sociocultural systems. According to the author, "...Segou's youth puppet masquerade is a specialized and highly valued genre of *kuma* (Bamana language; speech); more than a narrative constructed only from words, it is a dialogue that arises through the interrelationship of sculpture, song, drumming, and dance. While the tenor of these masquerades is playful, the topics are profoundly serious" (p. 186). Like the domain she has chosen to explore, Arnoldi's contribution is simultaneously playful and profoundly serious: her narrative is unpretentious and spirited; her analysis, intellectually rigorous and stimulating.

In the preface Arnoldi explains that her experience studying a set of "disembodied" sculptural forms in a museum setting led her to conduct intensive field research in a multiethnic setting on the right bank of the Niger River in central Mali. Since 1978 she has documented how members of youth associations (*kamalen tonw*) in the Segou region vivify a spectacular array of wooden heads (*yirikunw*) within a performance genre known as puppet theater. (Among Bamana farmers it is typically called *Sogo bô*, literally, "the animal comes forth"; among Boso and Sòmônô fisherpeople it is typically referred to as *Do bô*, "the secret comes forth.") In fact, Arnoldi's decision to present her findings using the central themes of play and time stems from insights that puppet theater participants and audience members provided in their commentaries on and interpretations of this creative performance tradition. This decision reveals the author's profound engagement with local concepts and discourse.

Chapter one plunges the reader directly into the flow of a particular festival Arnoldi observed in the Bamana quarter of the village of Kirango during June of 1979. Through vivid ethnographic description, the actors, forms, and scenes of the world of the puppet theater swiftly come into focus. We gain a sense of the hard work that goes into staging a successful performance, the nature of the roles of the key participants (the young men who are the dancers/performers and musicians, the young women who form the chorus, and diverse members of the audience), the cast of puppet characters, and the internal organization of this spectacular event. By immersing the reader in the flow of a specific performance at the outset of her narrative, Arnoldi effectively underscores one of her main theoretical points: analysis of expressive culture should focus on historically and spatially situated actors and action.

Issues of definition and historical conceptualization of puppet masquerades lie at the center of chapter two. Arnoldi argues that previous studies of expressive culture in this area of West Africa have promoted a flawed understanding of the genre as a secular spectacle derived from the disintegration of sacred or religious manifestations. She suggests that local definitions and historical developments reveal a more dynamic situation of coexistence and complementarity between "powerful" and "playful"

performance traditions. People in the Segou region define puppet theater as *nyènañè*—entertainment or amusement. Arnoldi discusses how this conceptualization contrasts with local definitions of men's association masquerades that involve the manipulation of power objects (*boliw*). While strict dichotomies may be drawn by outside observers, they are not necessarily part of the local practice. People invest and reinvest sculptural forms with meaning in specific contexts and time periods. "Whether a sculpture or a masquerade is a power object or a plaything requires knowing who owns and controls the masquerade, as well as discovering its particular performance history within specific communities" (p. 24).

Using historical sources and informants' accounts, Arnoldi then examines the development of the puppet theater tradition in the Segou region. She suggests that the genre originated in the precolonial era within the Boso/Sòmònò community and spread to the Bamana in the mid- to late nineteenth century. Three groups of people have been the main catalysts in its expansion and development: blacksmiths, young men, and young women. As the actual creators of the sculptural forms used in the masquerades, blacksmiths have played an important role in the distribution and character of the genre. Young men traveling within the region, sometimes as migrant laborers, have picked up ideas and concepts for characters from their neighbors, and newly wed young women have arrived in their husbands' villages with new masquerade songs. Arnoldi also shows how various ethnic groups (Bamana, Boso, Sòmònò, Maraka) in the region have borrowed, shared, and innovated theater forms and content over this period. She provides a particularly rich portrait of the Bamana theater tradition over a hundred years, and presents extremely important data (summarized effectively in a table) on its changing repertoire. Her discussion in this chapter stimulates an appreciation for the complexity and dynamic nature of the puppet genre. As she notes, Bamana people in the region "have never considered the masquerade theatre to be a closed or finished form" (p. 41).

The third chapter delves more deeply into issues of origin, borrowing, and innovation as well as local classification of the expressive forms involved in puppet theater. Arnoldi argues that while theater groups may borrow specific sculptural forms from other performance genres (e.g., from men's power association contexts), or masquerade characters and songs from other villages or peoples, the result is a unique regional tradition with local variants (summarized in another important table). She observes that "certain structural principles and key cultural values" (p. 101) apparent in the puppet theater tradition seem to resonate throughout the Mande arts. In their evaluation of this and other performance genres, local people draw on the same concepts, such as *nyama* (power), *cogo* (manner, way, style), *nyi* (goodness), *di* (sweetness), *jayan* (structure, form), and *jako* (embellishment). In the following chapter Arnoldi suggests that the assessment and management of performances through these aesthetic concepts represents "an indige-

nous theory of performance" (p. 121). While this discussion of the local aesthetic landscape is stimulating and provocative, it does not benefit from the same level of substantive support offered in the author's treatment of other dimensions of the puppet tradition.

The temporal aspect of the puppet theater genre comes to the fore in the second half of the book. In chapter four, after explaining the important link between theater performances and seasonal transitions, Arnoldi examines issues of timing and training in the process of "becoming a performer" in youth masquerades. She argues convincingly that in learning about theater, children and young people comprehend important cultural values and social responsibilities—a theme treated more fully in the following chapter. Next we gain a palpable sense of the timing and tempo of performance events through Arnoldi's subtle description of the actions of the puppeteers, of the dancers, singers, and drummers, and of the audience members at festivals held in Kirango. For example, the author shows how character changes, shifts in the order of appearance, and even performers' personal efforts affect and are affected by the audience. Here we begin to appreciate the importance of both a group and an individual dynamic in this creative process.

In chapter five Arnoldi uses concrete examples set in time and space to demonstrate how members of the region's ethnic groups use puppet theater and youth masquerades to "explore, construct and intensify" their identity and their relations with others. Bamana, Boso, Sòmònò, and Maraka performers choose characters, dances, songs, and drum rhythms that communicate their ideas about their group's status, identity, and history in the Segou area. For example, some Boso groups perform the Wagadu Sa (Snake of Wagadu) and thereby assert ancestral connections to the precolonial state of Ghana, while Bamana troupes sometimes use Ntomo and Ciwara sculptural forms, which are linked to their men's power associations, to highlight their version of *Bamanaya* (Bamananess). However, in general, troupes throughout the region borrow liberally from a rich collection of shared symbols in order to create their own unique local styles. Arnoldi sees an opening up of history in this dynamic process—a historical license of sorts. There is no master historical narrative to script the present, and there is no master narrative to influence the future. Instead, actors at a specific intersection of time and space draw on the past in order to construct and market ethnic identities in the present.

Of course, identity is not only a thing of the past. In chapter six Arnoldi argues that the puppet theater provides a space in which youthful performers articulate and negotiate identity in the contemporary sense: in the existing social world. Touching on issues of age, status, and gender, this chapter contains some of the book's most engaging discussions. We gain tremendous insight into the ways in which performers and audience members alike negotiate the dominant moral and social axes. For example, Arnoldi explores how the concept of *malo* (social constraint) informs the conduct of men and women, young and old, nobles and

professional specialists in the realm of theatrical expression. She shows how young men in the theater seek to balance rivalrous achievements (*fadenya*) with collective security (*badenya*); how young people use the medium to challenge the power of elders, presenting themselves as heroes or heroines (*nganaw*); and how male and female participants construct gender ideologies and shape gender relations through the puppet theater's characters, dances, drum beats, and songs.

*Playing with Time* is a detailed and insightful portrait of puppet theater and youth performances in central Mali. Arnoldi supports her compelling central proposition—that "while the tenor of the masquerades is playful, the topics are profoundly serious"—with concrete data, and offers an analysis that enriches our understanding of the importance of flexibility, innovation, and negotiation in the realm of expressive culture.

There are several related issues, however, that deserve further investigation. For example, additional information on the economic aspects of the theater could help us to appreciate more fully the articulation between this performance genre and broad patterns of socioeconomic change in the region. Indeed, an analysis of this tradition as a strategic attempt by young income-earners to assert themselves more forcefully into the local domains of power and authority might well offer important insights. Another complementary research trajectory would involve a closer analysis of the nature of contemporary relationships between the puppet tradition and the affairs of men (*cèko*). Arnoldi points out that elder men do not typically attend or participate in the youth masquerade contexts. How do these important figures view the theater? Are the elders maintaining their own associations? Or are duties and obligations (e.g., social, spiritual, political) that were once within their purview shifting into the hands of the energetic and very public puppeteers? The author's apt observation that openness and dynamism are central features in the realm of expressive culture should encourage us to look for similar and interrelated processes in these areas as well. As she notes, the basic elements of a local aesthetic are likely to appear in many domains of everyday life (p. 101).

In her introduction Arnoldi acknowledges an intellectual debt to recent scholarship in the fields of anthropology, art history, and performance studies. With this contribution she has certainly balanced the ledger or, as the Bamana say, "severed the rope." Specialists on the Mande-speaking peoples of West Africa will find new and exciting primary material in its pages, students of African expressive culture will benefit from the deft analysis of the intersection of form and action in a specific ethno-historical context, and armchair commentators on the philosophical dimensions of performance can celebrate the successful ground-truthing of their "good thoughts." More important, perhaps, Arnoldi has rendered the *kuma* (speech) of the people of Kirango and neighboring communities with honesty and humility. Her words serve them well. □