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Sòmònò Puppet Masquerades in Kirango, Mali

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Text by MARY JO ARNOLDI



In January 1986 Susan Vogel photographed the puppet masquerade festival organized by Sòmònò fishermen in Kirango, Mali. This community of more than six thousand residents is situated on the right bank of the Niger River about thirty kilometers north of Segou. It has three *kamaian ton*, or youth associations, which are organized by ethnic quarter: that of the Sòmònò, the Boso (Bozo), and the Bamana. Each of the associations has performed its own puppet masquerades every year for more than a century.

Since independence in 1960, Kirango and neighboring villages have gained renown throughout Mali for these performances. Troupes have been invited to participate in national festivals, and in 1992 the area played host to FESMAMA, the Biennial Festival of Masks and Marionettes, sponsored by the Ministry of Culture.

Vogel's photographs capture the procession of masquerades on the Niger River. Early in the afternoon, as the sun played across the the water, women and children gathered on the shore. Sòmònò fishing boats with painted prows glided into view carrying their cargo of masquerades, singers, and drummers. As the boats moved past the village, the drummers and singers broke into song and the masquerades danced, moving forward and backward, side to side, and up and down. A spectacular sight, this river procession is one of the signature features of fishermen's puppet masquerade festivals in the region. It serves as the teaser to the main event: the all-night masquerade performance held in the public square in the Sòmònò quarter.

The 1986 Sòmònò parade echoed a similar event recorded more than a century ago by Paul Soleillet, a French geographer, as he traveled up the Niger. One late afternoon in December, he happened upon a masquerade procession near a village just south of Segou city. His description appears in his

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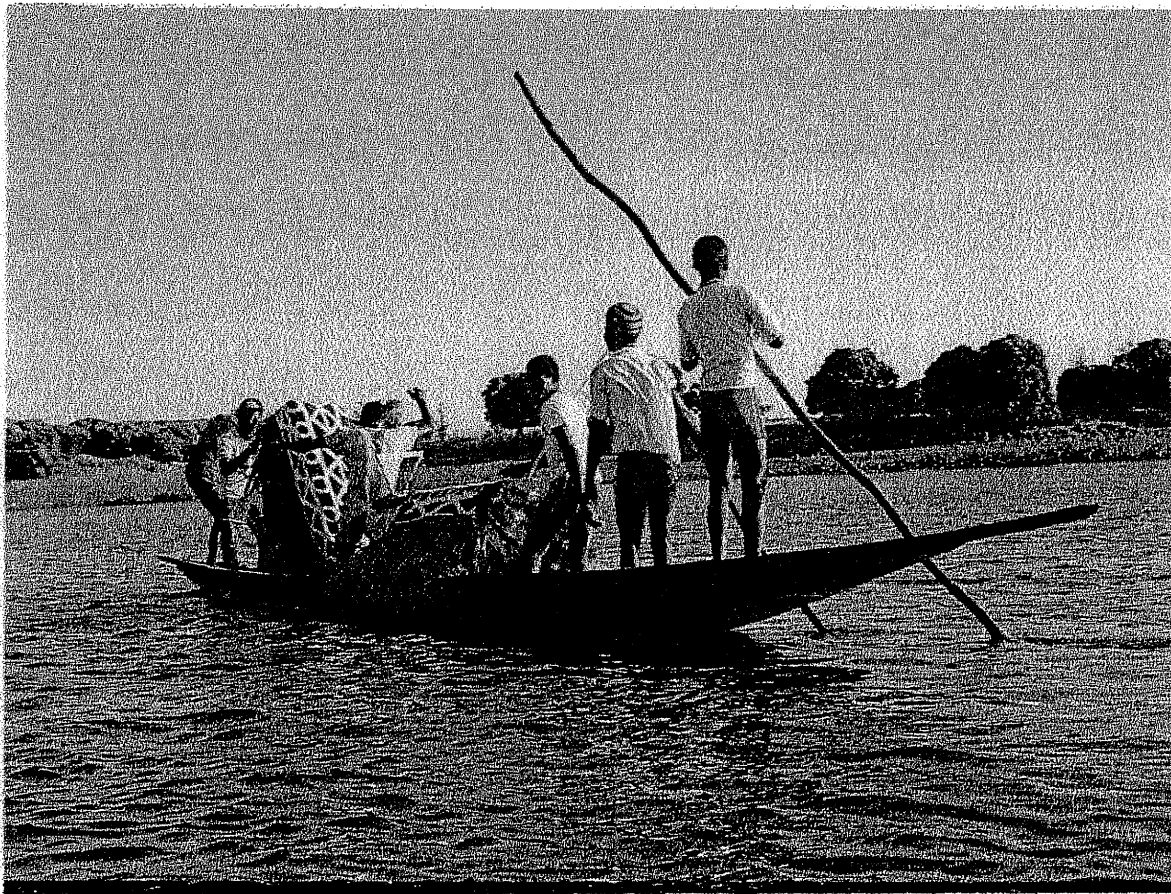
Top: Women and children from the village of Kirango gather on the right bank of the Niger River in anticipation of the annual procession of Sòmòndò fishermen's puppet masquerades, performed by the youth association, Kirango, Mali, January 1986.

Bottom: A fishing boat, its prow painted with bold geometric designs, carries the young women's chorus, which gives voice to the men's masquerades. In the puppet masquerade theater, each character has its own signature song.

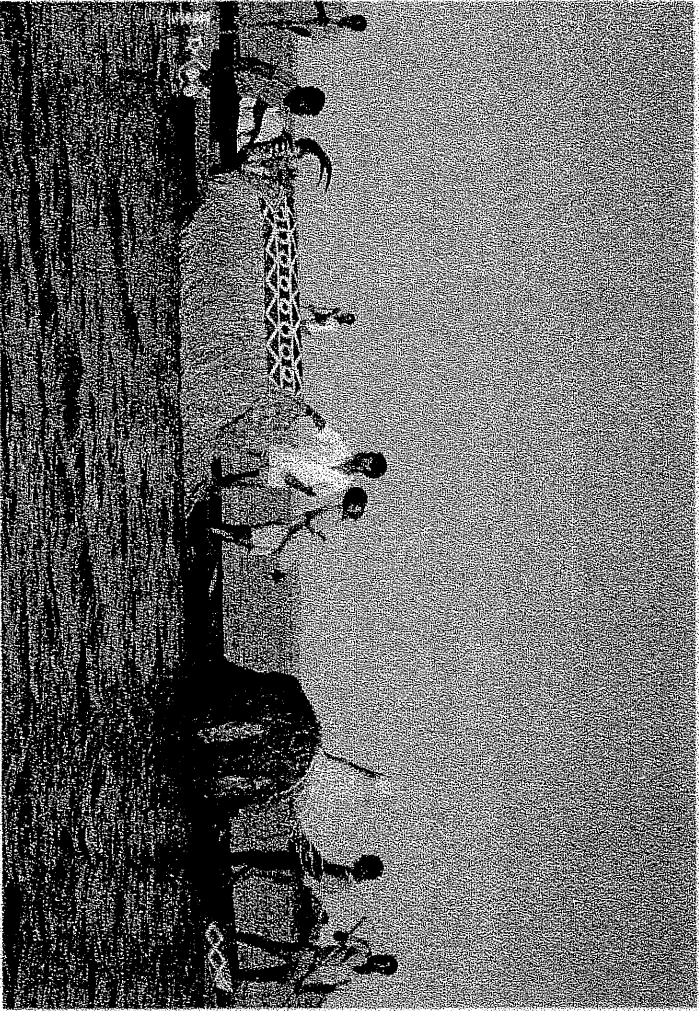
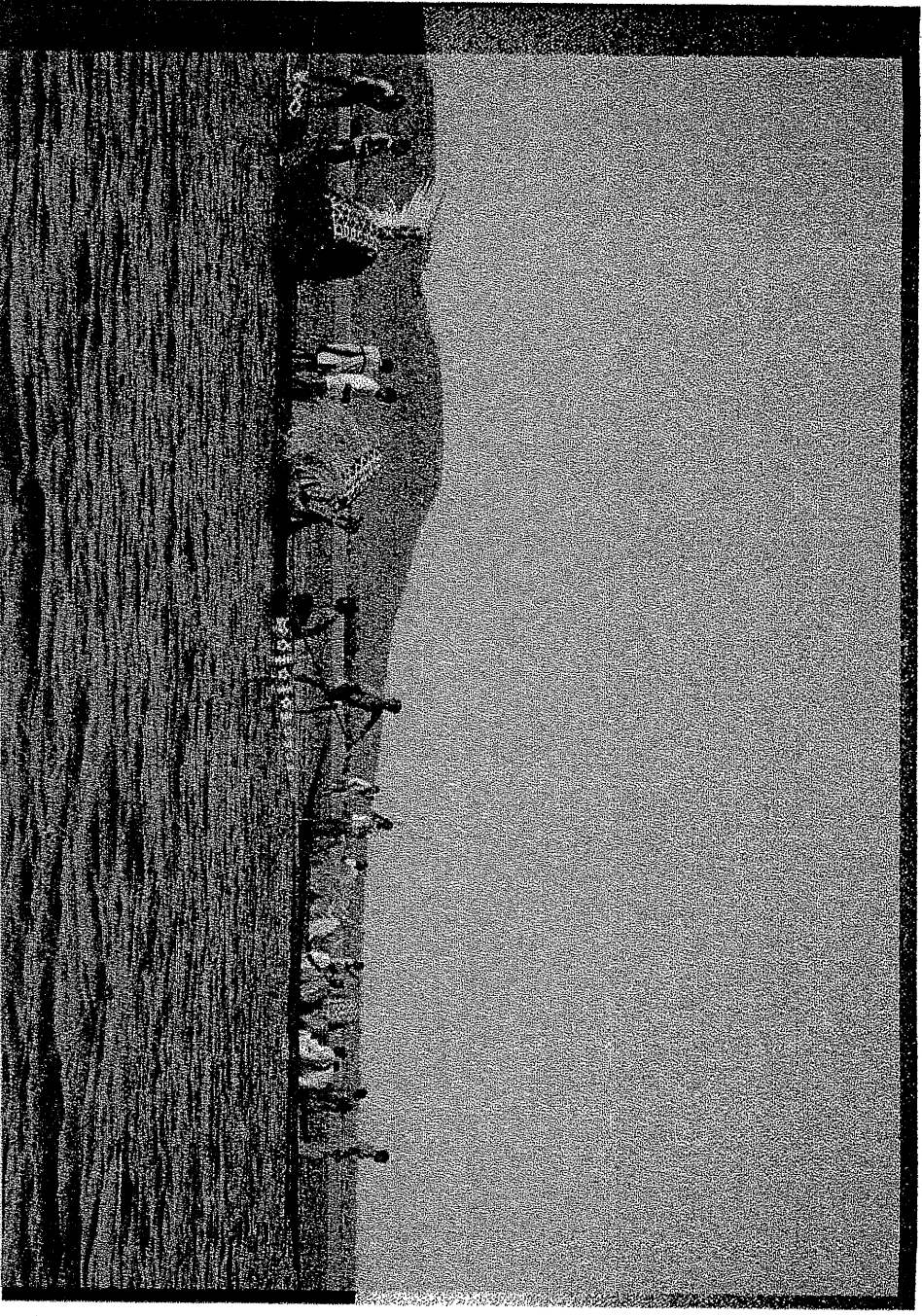
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Top: A second boat ferries the drummers onto the river. The drummers play a critical role in the performance, energizing the masquerade dance.

Bottom: Two boats in the procession carry masquerades. This one holds two types of wildcats, *jarawara* and *waraba coco*.



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journal (*Voyages et decouvertes de Paul Soleillet* [Paris, 1886], p. 170):

...and I stopped there....Why...to see Guignol! A square tent of white and blue striped fabric is installed in a boat with two paddlers, an ostrich head fixed upon a long neck extends from the front...then two marionettes appear suddenly out of the middle of the tent, one clothed in red, the other in blue, and they abandon themselves to some grotesque pantomimes. The drums, placed in a second boat, accompany the spectacle with deafening music.

Soleillet's entry continues with an account of how the bird masquerade was brought to shore and paraded into a large clearing in the village, where it was performed, along with a host of other masquerade characters, far into the night.

The masquerade's history extends into time and space, from the precolonial era to the present day and from within the Segou region along the Niger River south into adjacent areas in Mali and Guinea. Everyone in the Segou region acknowledges the fishermen as the originators. One legend describes how Toboï Centa, a Boso fisherman, was traveling in the bush when he encountered a genie, who taught him the masquerade. Toboï took the performance to his village near Djenné; it was then adopted by other fishing villages along the river, and, by the late nineteenth century, by local farmers. While it was the fishermen who originated the masquerade, it is the Bamana blacksmiths, *numu*, who are credited with creating most of the wooden masks and rod puppets that became popular in the early twentieth century (Mary Jo Arnoldi, *Playing with Time: Art and Performance in Central Mali* [Bloomington, 1995]).

Until the late 1950s all three troupes in Kirango performed their masquerades at the beginning of the dry season in October, which coincides with the harvest and hunting seasons for both fishermen and farmers. The oldest and most important masquerade characters are powerful bush animals, including elephants, lions, hyenas, hippos, manatees, antelopes, and a variety of wildcats. The timing of the youth association theater at the onset of the hunting season and its original bush-animal repertory suggest a strong historical relationship with the hunters' associations. In both associations, hunters are praised as heroic men. While the fishermen and farmers continue to each have distinctive song and drumming styles, today they share many of the same bush-animal masquerade characters.

In and around Kirango the fishermen call their masquerade *do bó* (*gundo bó*), "the secrets come forth." The farmers call their theater *sogo bó*, "the bush animals come forth." Kirango Sômonô elders remembered that as young men they used to prepare the masquerades outside the village in an uninhabited area on the left

Opposite page:

Top: As the boats position themselves in the center of the river the masquerades start to dance. All of those in this river parade are *binsogo*, or grass masquerades, the oldest types in the theater. They have always been performed in the nighttime segment of the festival. Up until the late nineteenth century and early decades of the twentieth century, most of the masquerades, in both fishermen's and farmers' performances, were composed entirely of skirting made of river grasses; there was no carved puppet head manipulated from within by a dancer-puppeteer, as there is in these contemporary versions.

Bottom: *Daje*, the roan antelope masquerade, crouches in the boat, steadied by its attendants. *Daje's* rod puppet head is a carved wooden sculpture whose graceful horns arch across its back. At right is *Jawawara*, the wildcat, one of the most important characters in the Sômonô repertory. It begins swaying from side to side, lifting its head high in the air and shaking it with a flourish.

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The *Jawawara* masquerade completes a half-turn within the boat—no mean feat—and raises its head triumphantly.



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Not to be outdone, the two wildcat masquerades in the other boat, *jarawara* and *waraba caco*, begin their own energetic dance.

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Top: Like the other masquerades, this *jarawara* has a wooden frame onto which grass skirting is sewn. Its cloth costume, with bold geometric designs echoing those on the boats' prows, energize the character. The lur-covered head is made from a flat wooden-rod puppet that extends from the front of the character's body. During its performance, the dancer-puppeteer, hidden underneath the costumed frame, manipulates the head, moving it forward and backward, up and down, and side to side, to bring the character to life.

Bottom: As the afternoon wanes, the fishermen bring the boats to shore. They will offload the masquerades and parade them into the clearing in the Sômonô quarter for the main event that will continue throughout the night.

bank of the Niger, bringing them into the village by boat on the day of the event. The river procession legitimized young men's ownership of the masquerades and their rights to its secrets. It also heralded the arrival of powerful wild animals into the community and alluded to the theater's origins with the bush genies. Today the Sômonô troupe prepares the masquerades in compounds in their quarter, but secrecy still surrounds the process, and young men take care to deny access to women, children, and rivals from other troupes in Kirango and villages nearby. Despite changes in current practices, it is noteworthy that even in the late twentieth century the Sômonô troupe chose to retain the procession of masquerades on the Niger. The procession is an important ethnic marker that celebrates the history of the people of this quarter as boatmen and fishermen who have plied the river for centuries.

One of the most important animal characters to appear in fishermen's theaters is *jarawara*, a wildcat. Two *jarawara* masquerades were included in the 1986 Sômonô procession documented by Vogel. In most villages in this area, a male and a female version of many of the bush-animal characters appear together. Two other masquerades chosen in 1986 to announce the Sômonô event were the roan antelope, *daje*, and another wildcat, probably *waraba caco* (see Arnoldi

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1995: ills. 1.19, 3.19, 3.21, 4.2). All three of these characters appear regularly in both fishermen's and farmers' theaters in Kirango.

Jarawara may well be a descendant of a character that used to be performed in the men's initiation association called Jara.

Somonò and Boso elders in fishing villages near Kirango compared their Jara association to the Bamana men's initiation association, Komo. They recalled that the Jara ceremonies always took place in the bush, and attendance was limited to initiated fishermen. While former Jara members spoke of other masquerades being performed during their ceremonies, they placed the greatest emphasis on *jarawara*. For them the wildcat's cry was its most powerful force. That cry was produced by a specialized musical instrument, whose deep, resonant sound is considered the *gundo*, or secret, of the association (Arnoldi 1995:60, 69). Most young people in Kirango today have no memory of the Jara association, but the appearance of the *jarawara* masquerades in the annual Somonò theater may indeed create a special resonance for older fishermen who still attend its public performance.

