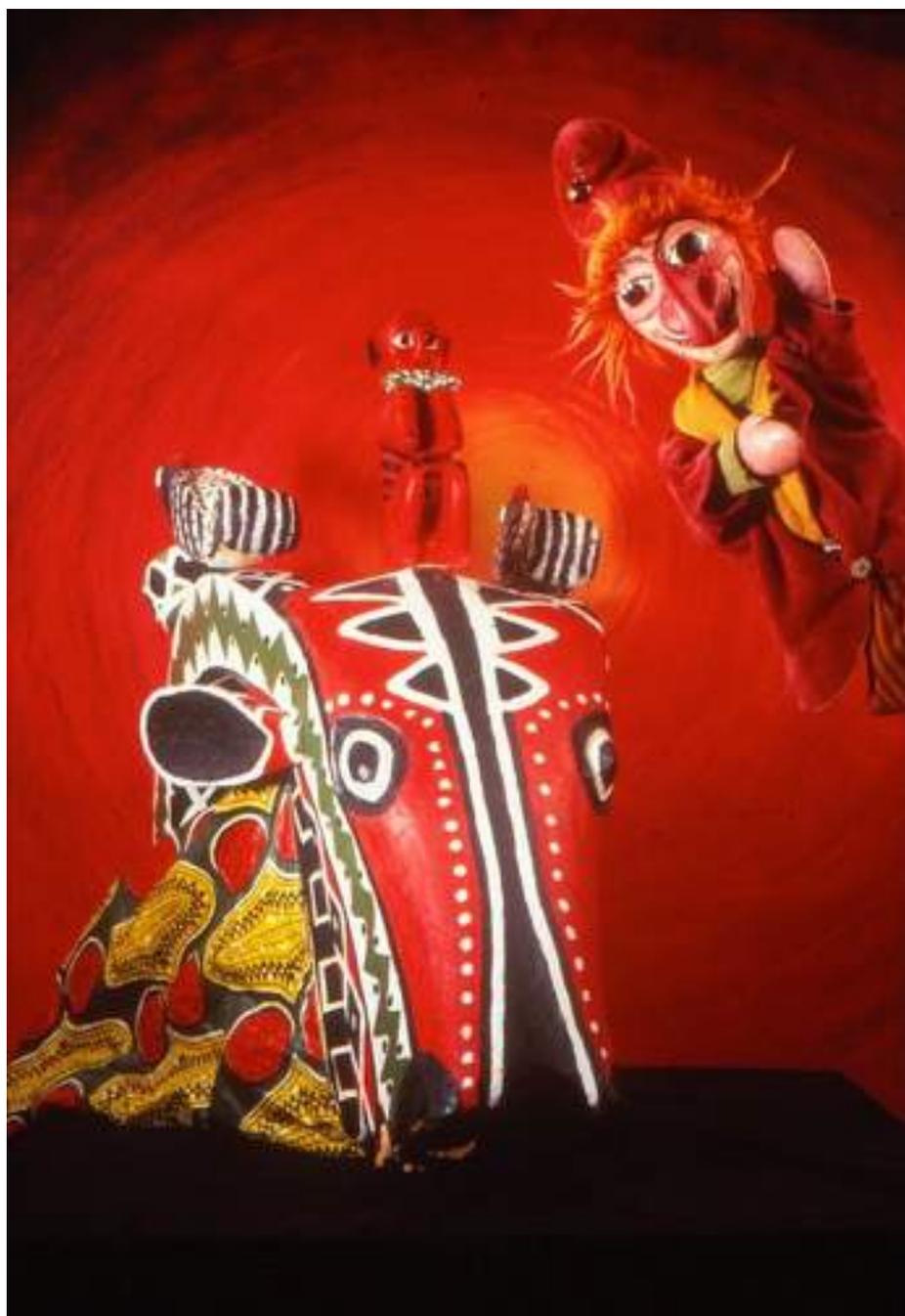


DISTANT FRIENDS OF JAN KLAASSEN. PUPPETRY IN AFRICA AND ASIA



Communicating through puppets:
an exhibition on non-western puppetry

by Elisabeth den Otter

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About the author:

Elisabeth den Otter (1941) studied Cultural Anthropology in Leiden (1972-1979), and was curator of the Department of Ethnomusicology of the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam (1988-2003).

She curated the exhibition 'Distant Friends of Jan Klaassen. Puppetry from Africa and Asia' which was shown in the Tropenmuseum/Royal Tropical Institute, Amsterdam, from December 1995 till September 1996. (Jan Klaassen is the Dutch equivalent of the British Punch.) She is also the author of the accompanying book 'Verre Vrienden van Jan Klaassen: poppenspel in Afrika en Azië' (Amsterdam: KIT Publications).

Of course, this was a group effort, with people from various departments of the museum involved; the set was designed by Jaap de Groot.

Cover photo: original design for poster Tropenmuseum.

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(unless otherwise mentioned)

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Since the exhibition did not travel anywhere, and the book was in Dutch, I decided to write this publication in English, using the research I had done and many photographs, in order to give more information. I also added (parts of) articles that I published on my website after 1996, which are based on fieldwork in Burma and Mali as well as visiting a big puppet festival in New Delhi. Also on my website is a large article on Brazilian puppetry, which is not included in this publication.

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INTRODUCTION

Puppetry is amusement for children, or so many people -in western cultures- think. But even there the fights of Punch with the powers-that-be, including his wife, have a deeper meaning. Through puppetry, the 'man in the street' can express his feelings and criticism in a relatively safe way. In many non-western countries puppetry has various functions: apart from amusement, it serves to convey messages about what is good and what is bad, about how to behave, and also to comment on actualities. Puppets are instruments by which exciting stories are told. Through them, deep feelings can be expressed, often in a symbolic way. They also serve to confirm and transmit cultural identity. Moreover, puppetry is used to inform people on topics such as the prevention of diseases like aids.

The aim of this exhibition was: to show the beauty and diversity of puppetry in Asia and Africa; to create a greater awareness of puppetry as a fully-fledged form of theatre, for grown-ups and children alike; and to provide an insight into the fact that in many cultures puppetry is a living phenomenon that adjusts itself to changing times.

The exhibition was an excellent way of introducing the Dutch people to the world views of other cultures.

A TRIP AROUND THE WORLD

The visitor to the exhibition was introduced to hundreds of puppets from The Netherlands, Turkey, Egypt, India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, China, and Japan, as well as Togo and Mali. The puppets were presented as much as possible in their context: sets of puppets and/or masks that tell a story were exhibited in the original setting, together with the accompanying musical instruments.

The exhibition was largely based on the collection of the Tropenmuseum. To fill in the gaps, sets of puppets were borrowed from other museums and private collectors. For example, the string puppets from Burma were lent by a private collector (and were bought by the Tropenmuseum later on), and the accompanying orchestra by the Berlin Museum für Völkerkunde. The Musée de l'Homme in Paris lent extraordinary and ancient shadow figures from Thailand and Malaysia, which were collected in the 1930s by the French scholar Jeanne Cuisinier. Christine Hemmet, curator of the Continental Southeast-Asia Department of the Musée de l'Homme, wrote 'Nang talung, the shadow theatre of South Thailand', which was published as Bulletin 342 of the Royal Tropical Institute.

The museum's collection was enriched by purchases from Sri Lanka, Burma, Vietnam, Mali and Togo, which form a wonderful supplement to the existing collection. I travelled to some of those countries and met the puppeteers, who assisted me in every way so that the puppets, backdrops and musical instruments could be shown in the exhibition, including photographs and video-fragments. The Malian puppets, masks and musical instruments were made especially for the Tropenmuseum, as a sign of the friendship and respect built up during various visits and a European tour of the puppeteers. Since they had been to the Tropenmuseum and knew its style, the choice of characters was made together with them. Then, they were crafted by the village-

sculptor. Later that year, they 'danced' during the annual masquerade, before departing for their new home. A video documentary was made by a Malinese team, and fragments were seen next to the objects in the exhibition, so that the public could see them in motion. Truly a good example of international cooperation!

VISIBLE SOUL: FROM MAN'S LIKENESS TO THEATRE PUPPET

For as long as there have been people, man has been making dolls, as toys for children and as statuettes that promote fertility or serve as protection. Images of himself, of his children, of the dead, and of the gods. Ancestor statues pay homage to the dead and serve as a resting place for their souls as well as mediators between mankind and the gods.

It's a small step to bring these images to life; to manipulate them and to make them perform as actors in folk legends or religious narratives. In this way, peoples' own history and culture are brought to life. In scenery, with voices and music. A puppet is an inanimate figure made to move by human effort before an audience. Puppetry in a larger sense includes all objects that are animated by man. Puppets (and masks) come to life through the hands and minds of the puppeteers.

Puppets come in many shapes and varieties; some a little primitive, others breathtakingly beautiful. There are shadow figures, glove puppets, rod puppets, and string puppets. Each type has its specific possibilities of manipulation and expression. Shadow figures may be seen as shadows, in front of the screen, or in back of the screen, so that the public can see the puppeteer manipulate his puppets. Hand puppets usually 'rough it up', whereas string puppets move elegantly.



Often masked dancers portray the same characters as the puppets - but not at the same time - such as the main figures of the Ramayana as rod puppets and masked dancers in Thailand.



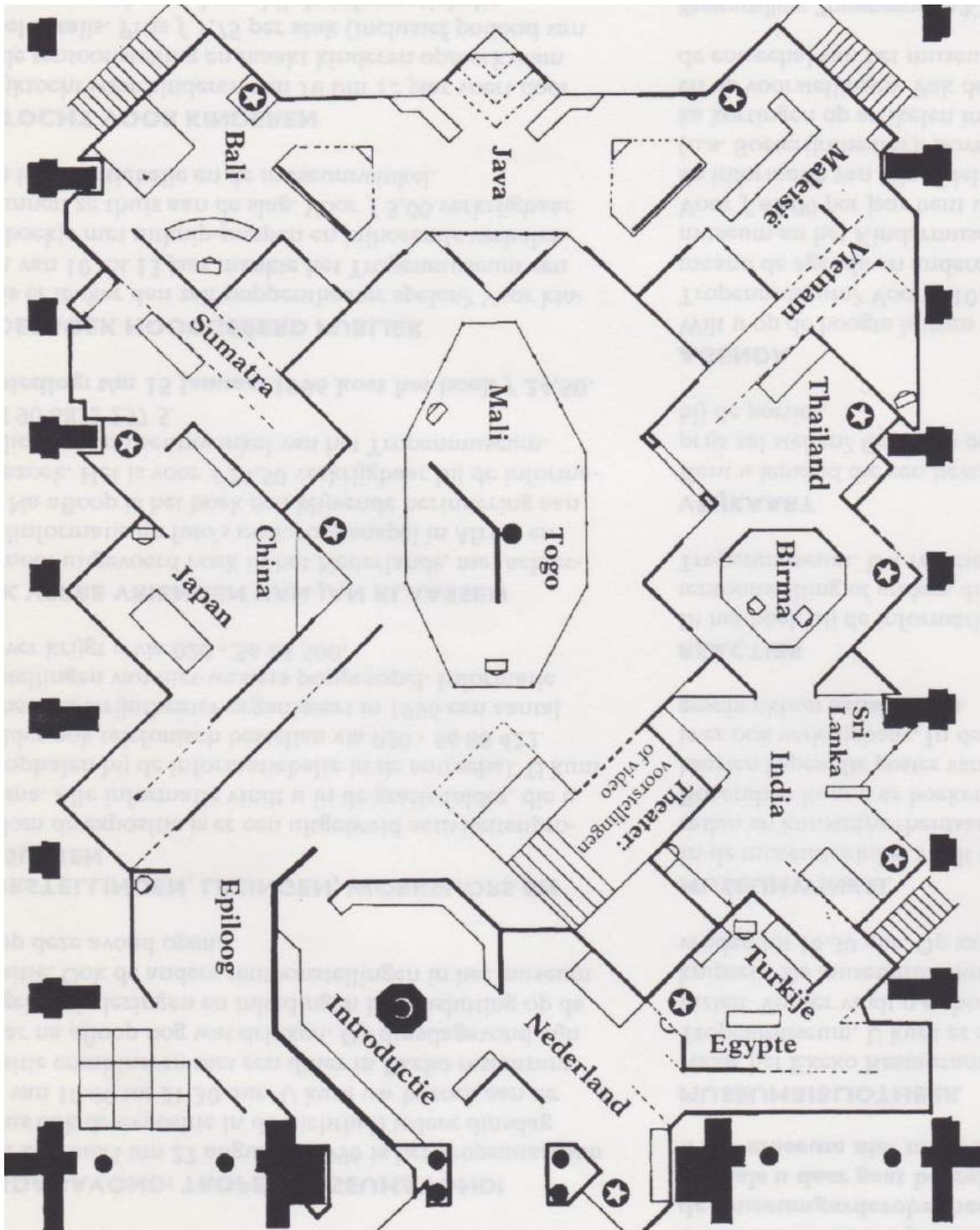
Puppet theatre generally forms part of a larger festival, and may take place during the day or at night. Some of the groups travel, especially in the dry season, and are therefore quite small as far as the number of puppeteers, puppets and musicians are concerned. Other groups are part of a specific village-association in which many people, puppets and masks participate. Performances usually take place outdoors: in the village square or some other public space. The puppeteer is hidden behind a curtain or underneath a cloth or a covered structure. Since puppets cannot talk, the puppeteer speaks their lines, at times using a voice-distorting device which he has in his mouth ('swazzle'). In other cases special songs are sung to accompany the puppets.

Puppets represent persons (actual or from the past), and mythological or symbolical characters. They often tell a story: this may relate to concrete happenings, but can also reflect an abstract philosophy. Puppets have the most unbelievable adventures, and can say things a human being cannot say. They show a character, and at the same time represent an entire community. Their performance is often funny and meant to make people laugh. The puppeteer who lets puppets tell their stories literally remains 'behind the scenes'.

In the developed countries people are informed by means of newspapers, radio, television and film (and nowadays internet) of what is going on in the world. In less-developed countries, where large groups of people cannot read and often do not dispose of modern means of communication, puppetry still has an important communicative function. It is a pre-eminent medium to transfer knowledge, norms and values, to provide criticism, and to reinforce social ties. And, of course, puppetry is often very amusing. It is a mirror of society, and the stereotypes used can be recognized by everyone. Ordinary people get to speak up, in their daily struggle to survive; they comment on abuses that occur in society. Kings and gods give us an example of how to behave. Through puppetry emotions can be expressed, and a need for beauty fulfilled. But it can also be modernized, when actual problems are dealt with, such as agricultural techniques, birth control, and illnesses. Then it is an excellent way of transferring difficult messages.

THE EXHIBITION

The exhibition showed: shadow figures from Turkey, India, Thailand, Indonesia, and China; glove puppets from the Netherlands, Egypt, India, China and Japan; rod or stick puppets from Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Mali; and string puppets from Sri Lanka, India, Burma, and Togo.





EUROPE AND MIDDLE EAST

In Europe and the Middle-East puppetry is popular amusement: it is comical and critical, without being too moralistic. It is a mirror of society and the stereotypes used can be recognized by everyone.

Puppetry offers a relatively safe outlet for opinions and feelings of the 'man in the street', who has few opportunities to express criticism, expose undemocratic actions of leaders, or complain about the differences between poor and rich in society.

The Netherlands

Janus Cabalt was a famous puppeteer. He was born in 1869 in Amsterdam, into a family of Italian immigrants. He gave performances for more than forty years and made his hand puppets and puppet booths himself. He also wrote his own scripts, which can still be heard today on Amsterdam's Dam Square.



The exhibition: The Netherlands



Jan Klaassen and Katrijn on Dam Square

Egypt

The puppeteer performs with twelve glove puppets. He can work two puppets at a time. He uses a swazzle (voice distorter) to give the various characters their own individual way of speaking. He makes up the stories and jokes himself, adjusting them to suit the audience. He makes his own puppets and also the backdrop, which is embroidered with the words: "In the name of God, the righteous and merciful one. I am dependent upon God." This is his license to explore the boundaries of permissibility.

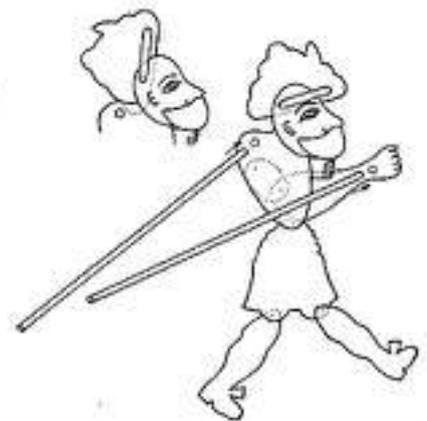


The exhibition: Egypt

Turkey

The best-known puppet theatre in the Middle-East is the Karagöz theatre. This age-old shadow play originated in Egypt and became popular in Turkey, Greece and Syria.

Turkish puppetry is performed with small shadow figures of about 30 cm high, made from semi-transparent parchment. First a piece of hide is soaked and scraped clean with a piece of glass until it is almost transparent. After that the different parts of a figure are drawn with the help of a template. The outlines are reinforced by cut-out lines and punched holes, by means of a special knife. Finally they are painted with many colors, and attached to each other with strings. In the upper body, usually at the point where head and rump come together, a hole is made in which a stick is fitted. (Islam does not permit the representation of humans, but it is tolerated when the image is not realistic. Because of the hole in the neck of the puppet, through which the stick passes in order to move the puppet, it is seen as non-realistic.) The screen is thin and the light behind it so bright that the colors are visible.



The making of Karagöz (drawing: Hetty Paërl)

Karagöz ('Blackeye') is a popular hero of gypsy descent; he has a black beard and under his turban his head is bald. One of his

arms is longer than the other, so that he can hit people with it. He is a free spirit and always in need of money. He often overestimates his abilities and gets into trouble. He gets away with bruises and a black eye, no money earned, but an experience gained. Karagöz and his mate Hacivat are beloved because of their jokes, their fast actions and the way in which they involve the public in their play. Their relationship is one of continuous misunderstandings. The women in the plays are wives, daughters, lovers, or courtesans. They can be talkative, bickering, gossiping, seductive or capricious. Their clothing differs: the wife and daughter of Karagöz are covered from head to toe, other women are dressed elegantly, and some look quite frivolous, with bared breasts. Usually the women are involved in plots and cause scandals in the neighborhood.

The puppeteer draws on a number of stock stories, based on islamic legends and folk tales. The emphasis is placed on the characters and habits of the various ethnic groups in Turkish society: Jews, Kurds, Armenians, Arabs, ladies of differing morals. Their character, voice and behavior are stereotyped by the puppeteer, in order to lampoon them.



SOUTH- AND SOUTHEAST-ASIA

South- and Southeast-Asia have many types of puppetry. The stories that are told with them are about the opposition between good and evil, and about universal principles of good behavior and the prohibitions and rules related to them. Important lessons can be learned: how do I behave as an individual towards other individuals, which rules should I abide by? Often the stories are centered around royal families and gods, and have a historical or mythical character.

The favorite stories come from the Mahabharata and Ramayana epics, about the battle between good and evil.

The main character from the Ramayana is Rama, a beloved prince who goes into exile with his wife Sita, after his throne has been usurped. Sita is bewitched and kidnapped by Ravana, the ten-headed ruler of Ceylon (Sri Lanka). Sugriva, the monkey-king, offers his help to Rama, but waits too long. In the meantime his son, general Hanuman, builds a bridge to Ceylon, saves Sita and beats the witches and demons of Ravana.

Whereas in the Ramayana the emphasis is on perfection (Rama is the perfect nobleman, the ideal of the wise ruler, and Sita the ideal woman), the Mahabharata deals with imperfection, human failure and human powerlessness.

This epic recounts the story of the battle between the five Pandawa's and the one hundred Korawa's. They are cousins and grow up together. The Pandawa's are attended by their faithful servants: Semar, Nalagareng, Petruk, Cepot and Togog. The god Krishna is the ally of the Pandawa's. As the years pass, discord arises. The eldest Korawa, Suykadana, lures Yudistira into a game of dice in which the latter loses everything: his land, his possessions and Draupadi, the wife of the Pandawa's. The Pandawa's go into exile for thirteen years. After their return a

violent battle takes place between the Pandawa's and the Korawa's in which many meet their deaths.

Other stories, like the tales of Damar Wulan (Prince Moonbeam) and Panji, are about the trials and tribulations of kings and gods against the evils of the world. But most of the time all's well that ends well...

India

Glove puppets from Kerala



Drawing: Hetty Paërl

In the federal state of Kerala, the traditional glove puppet theatre ('pavakathakali') has almost died out. The Natana Kairali company is reviving it. The performances, which usually take place in the courtyard of a house, last several hours and sometimes a whole night. At the beginning of a performance, a copper oil-lamp is lit. Standing in front of this lamp, the performers sing songs of praise to the gods. After the show, the performers are given money and gifts as payment.

The puppets are between 30 and 60 centimeters high. The head and arms are carved out of wood; the head is manipulated by the index finger and the arms are moved by the thumb and the middle finger. The puppeteers have adapted stories of the 'kathakali' theatre: the conventions of kathakali character types in respect to costumes, headgear, make-up and color are followed in pavakathakali. They represent beings from the upper realms of the gods, the middle world of people and the under world of the demons. A green face indicates a god, king or hero, whereas a red face indicates a villain. Women and wise men have orangey-yellow faces. The hands of the puppets are arranged in a basic 'mudra'. (hand positions used to express feelings and thoughts). This also enables puppets to hold such objects as a club or a lotus flower.



Puppets of the Natana Kairali company

The play 'Dakshayagam' is from the Mahabharata: Daksha, the stepfather of Sati (wife of the god Shiva), insults Shiva by not inviting him for an important ceremony. Sati goes, in order to try and reconcile her stepfather and her husband, but is received with anger by her stepfather who insults her husband. Sati immolates herself. In great fury, Shiva comes to the ceremony transformed into the demon Virabhadra. He cuts off Daksha's head and throws it into the sacrificial fire, but revives him and fixes a goat's head on his body. Daksha begs Shiva's pardon.



The play 'Dakshayagam'

(I made a video recording of this play during the National Festival of Puppet Theatre, at the Sangeet Natak Akademi in New Delhi (see my website, under Video gallery).

String puppets from Orissa

String puppetry is called 'sakhinata'. The small puppets have three strings which are attached to a small wooden rod: one for the head and two for the hands. Puppetry is a speciality of the Kela; this ethnic group is also known for its diviners, snake charmers and magicians. They work in small family groups; a narrator/singer who accompanies himself rhythmically on small cymbals, a drummer and two puppeteers who operate the string puppets.



Krishna and Radha

The shows are performed on a simple bamboo stage. The puppeteers operate their puppets from behind a curtain. Lighting is provided by oil- lamps. The performances usually take place during festivities or on market days, and are played in the evenings in the open air. After the performance, the group collects money from the audience.

The play is based on the epic 'Mathura-Mangal', in which the young Krishna is the main character: the tricks he plays as a child, his flute playing and flirting with the milkmaids and Radha as a young man, and his battles with the demons his mean uncle sent to him.

Shadow figures from Andhra Pradesh

In the federal state of Andhra Pradesh, puppet theatre ('tholubommalata') is performed using large brightly colored shadow figures. The puppeteers speak, sing and dance for the characters they manipulate standing up. They are accompanied by a harmonium, drum and cymbals. Their ankle-belled feet stamp on two wooden planks, one on top of the other, to keep rhythm or for sound effects. The stage is made with transparent cloth tied to poles on three sides. Lighting is provided by oil lamps or an electric lightbulb. The audience sits in front of the screen and sees the figures in shadow form. The performances take place in the open air, usually as part of a religious festival, and last six to eight hours. Before a show starts, prayers and invocations are offered to Ganesha, the elephant headed god who brings good luck. During the performance, members of the audience often walk around and take a peek behind the scenes.

The story is from the Ramayana, and comic relief with local gossip and caustic comments on the contemporary situation is provided by clowns. The combination of color, sound and movement is magic.



Arjuna



The exhibition: Andhra Pradesh

String puppets from Rajasthan

String puppetry is called 'kathputli' in Rajasthan. The puppeteers are 'bhats', a wandering community; they believe in a divine origin of their art, claiming to be the chief performers during the reign of the legendary king Vikramaditya, whose life and achievements they extoll.

The heads of the puppets are carved from mango wood, their large stylized eyes are painted white or yellow. They are up to 60 cm tall, costumed in the Rajasthani style, with bodies made of cloth and stuffed rags.



The scenery for the string puppet theatre consists of a curtain which serves as a backdrop. In front of this hangs a narrower, arched curtain arranged which represents the palace. The puppets are operated between the backdrop and the front curtain. Lighting is provided by oil lamps. The puppeteers use a swazzle (voice distorter), to give the puppets a sharp, hissing tone of voice. The performances take place during festivities. The performers can improvise to their hearts' content, and play along with the situation of the moment. The women in the group 'translate' the words of the puppeteer, sing and play the drum.

With the exception of the snake-charmer and the female dancers, they are operated with one single string. One end of the string is attached to the puppet's head, the other end to its middle. The rest of the string is looped around the puppeteer's fingers. Puppets who have to move a lot, like the dancers and the drummer, have extra strings on their hands. The number of generations that a string puppet has been in use can be seen by the number of skirts which the puppet wears, one over another; when the puppet gets a new skirt, the old one is retained underneath it.



The stories mostly revolve around the exploits of local heroes. Amar Singh Rathore, the ruler in the seventeenth century, was a great patron whose heroic deeds and death are sung and enacted. He appears at the court of emperor Akbar, along with other Hindu 'rajās'. Tricks and turns are performed for their royal amusement by a magician, an acrobat, a horse rider, a snake charmer, etc.

In March 2003 the Sangeet Natak Akademi in New Delhi organized a large puppet festival, together with the India International Centre and the Indian Council for Cultural Relations. 35 Groups performed, of which 18 traditional groups from different states: Karnataka (4), West Bengal (3), Andhra Pradesh / Kerala / Orissa / Tamil Nadu (2 each), and Rajasthan / Maharashtra / Assam (1 each). For twelve nights different groups performed, usually accompanied by live music. 9 Short excerpts can be seen on my website, under Video gallery:

- glove puppets, Kerala
- glove puppets, West-Bengal
- shadow figures, Kerala
- rod & string puppets, Karnataka
- rod & string puppets, Tamil Nadu
- rod puppets, Orissa
- shadow figures, Orissa
- shadow figures, Tamil Nadu
- string puppets, Andhra Pradesh

(For a larger article, see my website.)

Sri Lanka

The origin of the puppetry of Sri Lanka ('rukada') lies in India, but the play also has European traits, possibly due to performances of an English clown family on Sri Lanka in the 19th century.

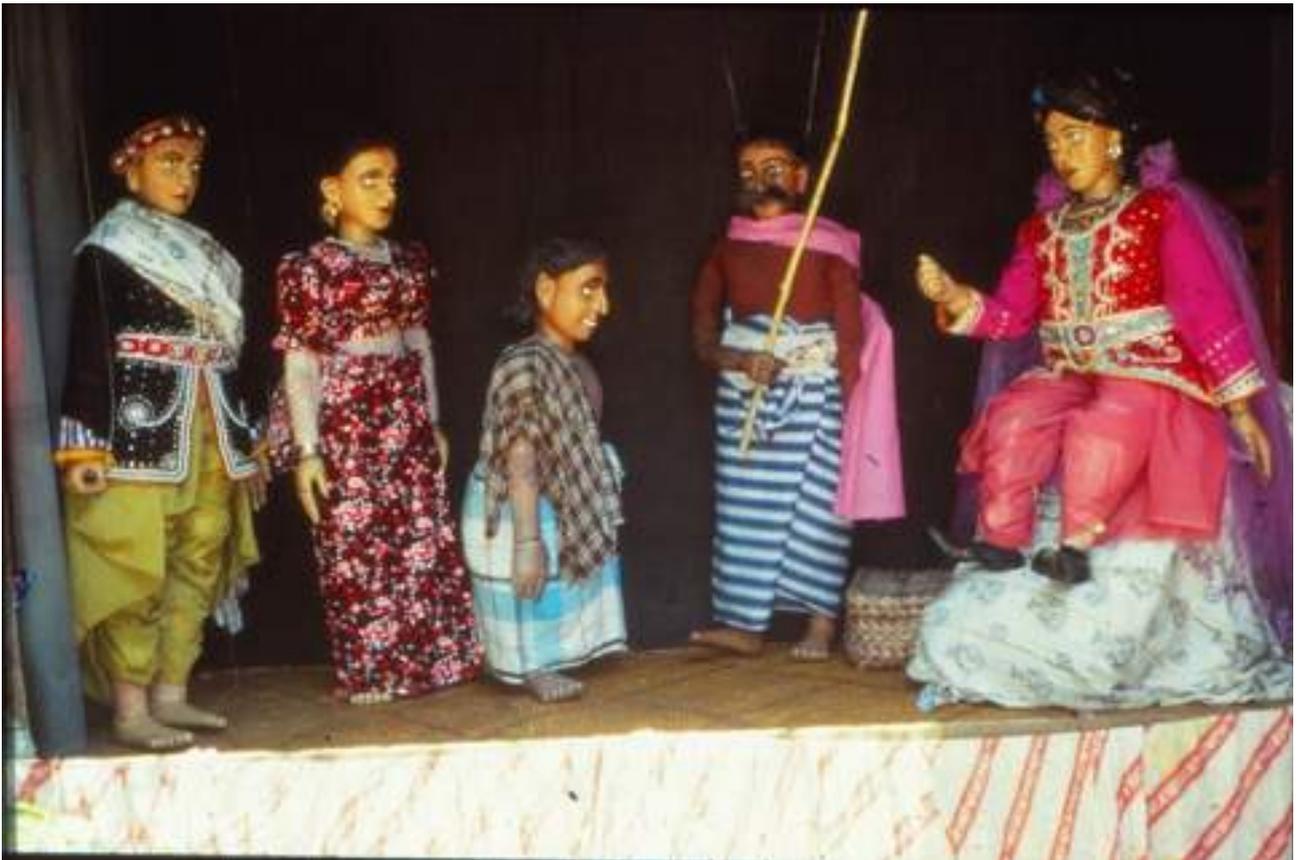
The large string puppets from Sri Lanka are worked by four strings attached to a rod: two strings control the hands, while two supporting strings are attached to the puppet's neck. The puppeteer holds the rod up horizontally in one hand, while his other hand operates the puppet's arms. The body is moved by dragging the puppet across the stage. The clowns, which dance and perform acrobatic stunts, are operated with six strings and have a more complete perch (cross-piece).

The puppeteers make their own puppets. They declaim the texts, accompanied by musicians playing harmonium and drums. The front curtain bears a depiction of Saraswati, the goddess of music. Without her there can be no performance.



The clown ('konangi') performs first, followed by the play, a 'jataka' about an episode from the life of the Buddha. The story of Kalagole (the fat lump), is told in Jataka no. 546: Kalagole goes on a journey with his wife Diktala. Dikpitia, the fisherman, abducts Diktala. Wise Mahosadha (who will later become the Buddha) resolves the dispute.

(This set of 8 puppets was purchased for the exhibition from the Jayanthi Puppet Association, in 1995.)



The story of Kalagole

SOUTHEAST-ASIA

Burma

Traditional Burmese puppet theatre ('yoke thay') dates from the 15th century. In the 19th century it reached the peak of its popularity, but after that other types of -lighter- entertainment became more popular. The name 'ah myint thabin' (high performance) refers to the fact that the puppets perform on a raised platform, contrary to human dancers who perform on ground level ('ah naint thabin'). The puppeteers stand on a platform behind a handrail; their lower bodies are hidden by a painted backdrop in front of which the puppets perform, and their upper bodies are hidden by a curtain. When not in use, the puppets hang behind them. The performances usually last all night.

A company consists of puppeteers, singers and musicians. Singers sit next to the puppet players and sing or declaim the texts of the more complicated characters, like the Prince and the Princess. They have to be able to sing in different styles, deliver the dialogues smoothly and draw on a broad knowledge of poetry and literature.

Generally, a puppet is made up of seventeen to nineteen pieces: the head and neck piece, the body in two pieces, a pair of arms in six pieces and a pair of legs in eight pieces. They are joined together by means of strings. The height of a puppet is determined by its head, and the head circumference by a hand-span (a measure between thumb and tip of the middle finger, which is roughly equivalent to nine inches). The formula is: a hand span plus four fingers' breadth is the circumference of the head; the head length from top to chin is the standard unit; seven and a half times of this is the height of the puppet from top to toe; and half of the height is the arm length from the shoulder to the tip of

the middle finger. Nowadays, the puppets measure between 45-70 cm. An interesting detail is that the sexual organs are carved as well, even though they cannot be seen. The head, hands and feet of the puppets representing humans are carved and painted, after which the body parts are tied together. Then the strings are attached to the cross piece. Finally, the puppet is dressed in the clothes and given the attributes that correspond to its character. The characters can be humans, animals, or mythical beings.





A set of puppets consists of at least 28 puppets. There are pieces of scenery on the stage, such as a throne. Painted backdrops represent the scene of the action: a forest or a palace. Each puppet has its own particular way of dancing, with accompanying music and song. (It is said that live dancers have copied their movements from the puppets.) The wood has to be resistant, easy to carve and light. The type 'Gmelina arborea' (yamanay) is often used. Most puppets have eleven strings. Five of these strings attach the head, the shoulders and the rump to the H-shaped wooden cross piece. The upper arms, thighs and hands are operated with the six remaining strings which hang loose and are draped over the cross piece.



Zawgyi, the magician (drawing: Hetty Paërl)

A puppet show begins with the appearance of Thagyar Min, the King of the Spirits ('Nats'), and the Medium ('Natkadaw') who pays tribute to the Buddha and the nats. Then a number of characters come on stage representing the Creation of the World ('Himavunta'): the White Horse, the Monkey and the two Ogres, Zawgyi the magician, and Garuda, the mythical sun eagle who fights with Naga, the mythical snake. After the chaos of the Creation, order is represented by the Foundation of the Kingdom, with characters like the king and his wife, the prince and the princess, the ministers, the royal astrologer, pages and clowns. The Prince (Mintha) is the leading character of most classical plays, together with the Princess. He is gorgeously dressed; he wears a pair of half-length trousers underneath his sarong, so that he can perform acrobatic feats. Around his head he wears a head wrap (gaung baung). His -human- hair is done in a neat top-knot.

In tragic scenes, the hair is let loose, to depict sorrow so deep that the sufferer has no desire to comb his hair. The Princess (Minthamee) is the romantic heroine. Her hair is done in a top-knot, with a fluffy tress hanging loose on the right side, flowers cascading along its length. The princess embodies the Burmese ideal beauty, so her face is always beautifully sculpted and painted. Her jacket is the most opulent, heavily embroidered, and she wears a lot of jewelry.

In every Burmese drama, a compulsory scene is the dance duet. The prince dances beautifully, to impress his love. The duet is the finale of the puppet show, and the favorite item of the public.

(for a larger article, see my website)



Thagyar Min and Natkadaw



Prince & Princess

In the second part of the performance, a 'Jataka' is enacted: one of the moralistic stories about the (547) past lives of the Buddha. These stories feature kings, princes and princesses, hermits and wise men who undergo all kinds of adventures. A happy end is mandatory: virtue is rewarded and evil is punished. Each jataka symbolizes a specific virtue such as honesty, wisdom, love of a son for his parents, etc.

Jataka no. 519 tells the story of King Brahmatta whose beloved son Sothisena is afflicted with leprosy. The king decides to send him away. Sambula, Sothisena's beautiful and virtuous wife, joins him in his exile in the forest, to take care of him. While gathering wild fruit, she meets with an ogre who falls in love with her and tries to seduce her. She is rescued by Thagyar Min, the King of the Spirits, who chases the ogre away. When Sambula returns to the prince, he refuses to believe her story. She is very sad, because she loves him dearly and would never betray him. Finally, when he

admits that she speaks the truth, he is cured. The prince and the princess return to the court, where they live happily ever after.



The King, the Prince and his Ministers



Thagyar Min saves the Princess from the Ogres

Thailand

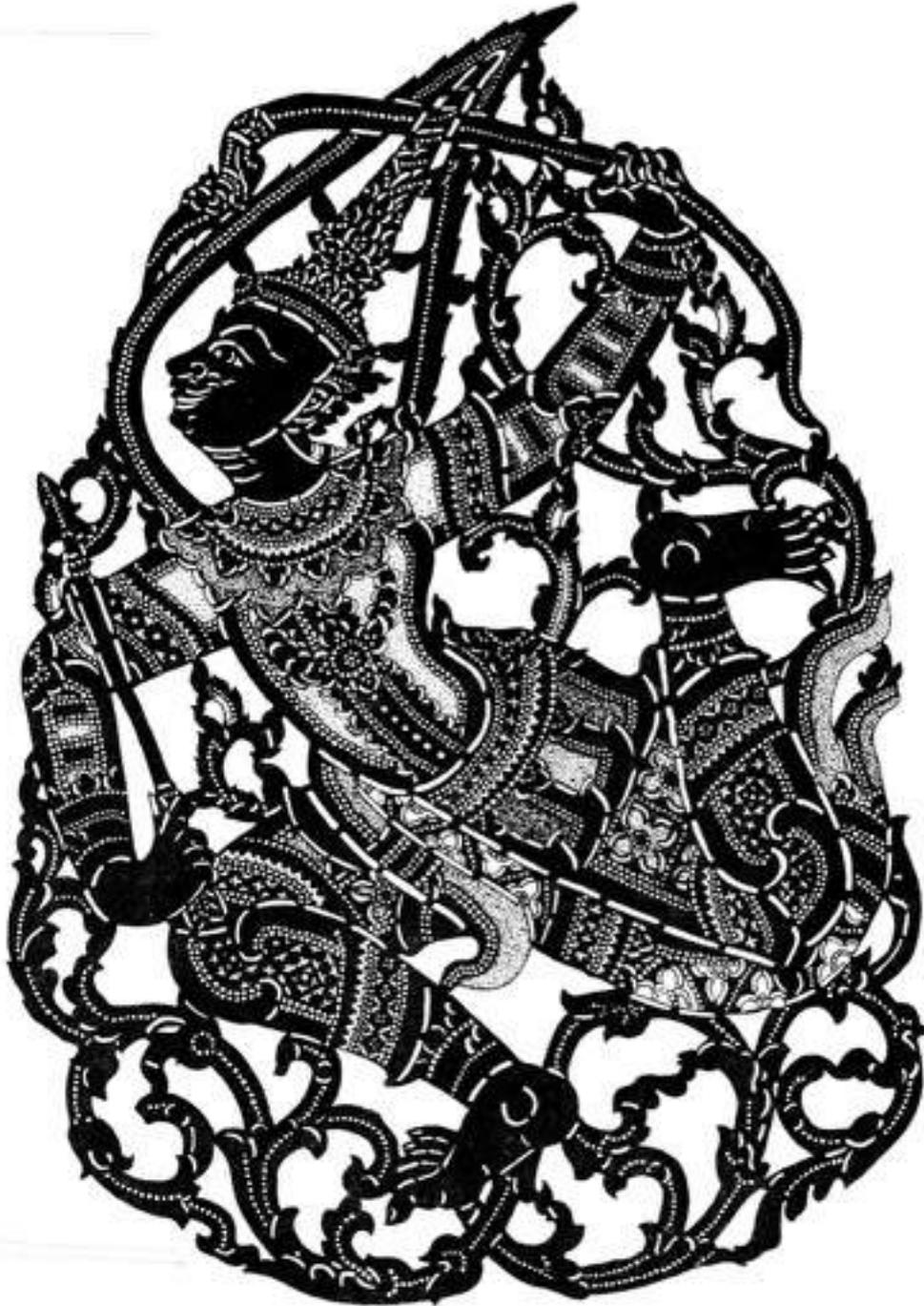
The puppeteers use both small and large shadow figures. The smaller shadow figures do not represent individuals, but rather categories of beings: gods, kings, demons, hermits, spirits and clowns. They are made by a specialist, using cowhide or buffalo hide. A puppeteer owns 200 to 300 puppets.

The shadow figures can be divided into traditional and modern shadow figures. The traditional figures always look the same and the characters are standard. The gods are usually depicted jumping - after all, they can travel through the air; the kings are depicted standing, in traditional clothing, bow in hand and with tiaras on their heads; the demons are terrifying, leaping giants with round eyes and huge teeth; the hermits are black and carry a fan and a walking stick; the spirits are skeletons, more comical than malicious; the clowns are black, ugly and misshapen.



Demon and goddess

characters are often depicted as individual figures sitting, walking, fighting etc. The larger figures may include Rama in his chariot, couples such as combatants or lovers, or even complete scenes. The manipulator acts merely as a dancer, supporting the large leather figure with two rods in his hands. Sitting and sometimes standing among the orchestra are two narrators, who recite and sing the text enacted by the silhouettes on the screen.



The small (50 cm high) three-dimensional rod puppets ('hun krabog') have no movable arms or legs. Their hands, manipulated by bamboo rods, protrude from the costume of the puppet, which also forms the puppet's body.

They provide the model for a form of theatre which is performed by masked dancers, a cross between ballet and pantomime. Each posture and each movement of the arms and hands are part of a 'language', which expresses something: an object, an event or a feeling. The texts are not spoken by the dancers - their faces are hidden behind masks - but by actors. The material for the puppets is either wood or lacquered papier-mâché, which is the material for the masks as well.

King Rama, his faithful wife Sita, the ten-headed demon Totsakan and the monkey Hanuman who frees Sita from the clutches of the demon... these are the main characters of the Ramayana ('Ramakien') epic.



*The exhibition: puppets, dance costume and musical instruments
(loan from Musée de l'Homme, Paris)*

Vietnam

These water puppets (‘*mua roi nuoc*’ - puppets that dance on water) are quite unique; they have actively been revived since the 1980s. They originate in village ponds the north of Vietnam, but nowadays commercial performances are staged daily in several theaters in Hanoi and Saigon.

The puppets stand on a pedestal, situated beneath the surface of the water, to maintain their balance. They are waterproofed with resin and a coat of paint. The puppets are manipulated from a distance, with the use of long rods and strings. Operated by invisible hands, they glide across the surface of the water in the village pond. The puppeteers, originally ordinary villagers, manipulate 30- to 40-centimeter-high puppets while standing in water. They are hidden by a bamboo curtain hung to shield the puppeteers from the audience.



*The exhibition: Vietnam
(drawing: Hetty Paërl)*

Vietnamese water puppet theatre has no dramatic plot. The repertoire consists of short scenes depicting daily life in the village: fishing, tending ducks, a fox hunting ducks, cultivating the rice fields, sport and games. Other scenes feature historical folk heroes, frolicking mythical creatures (the unicorn, the phoenix, the dragon and the tortoise) and dancing fairies. A program consists of around ten scenes. Teu, the master of ceremonies, links the scenes together and provides commentary.



The fairies (photo John Kleinen)

Malaysia

'Wayang djawa' is an old type of shadow figure theater that originates from Java, but looks coarser than Javanese shadow figures. Around 1930 Jeanne Cuisinier collected a unique set of wayang djawa figures; she wrote a book about it: 'Le théâtre d'ombres à Kelantan' (1957). With these figures the story of Panji (Inu, Prince of Kuripan) and his beloved Candra Kirana was told.



*Screen with wayang djawa shadow figures
(loan Musée de l'Homme, Paris)*



Princess

Wayang djawa has been replaced by 'wayang gedek' (or 'wayang siam', which resembles the shadow figures of Thailand, as the name indicates). Contrary to the other Malaysian types, these shadow figures are not shown 'en profile' but 'en face'. They are rather small (30-60 cm high), but they are quite refined.

The leather silhouette figures are painted with transparent ink. In a similar way as in Thai shadow theatre puppets, so too in 'wayang siam' the puppets have either one or two moving hands. Their

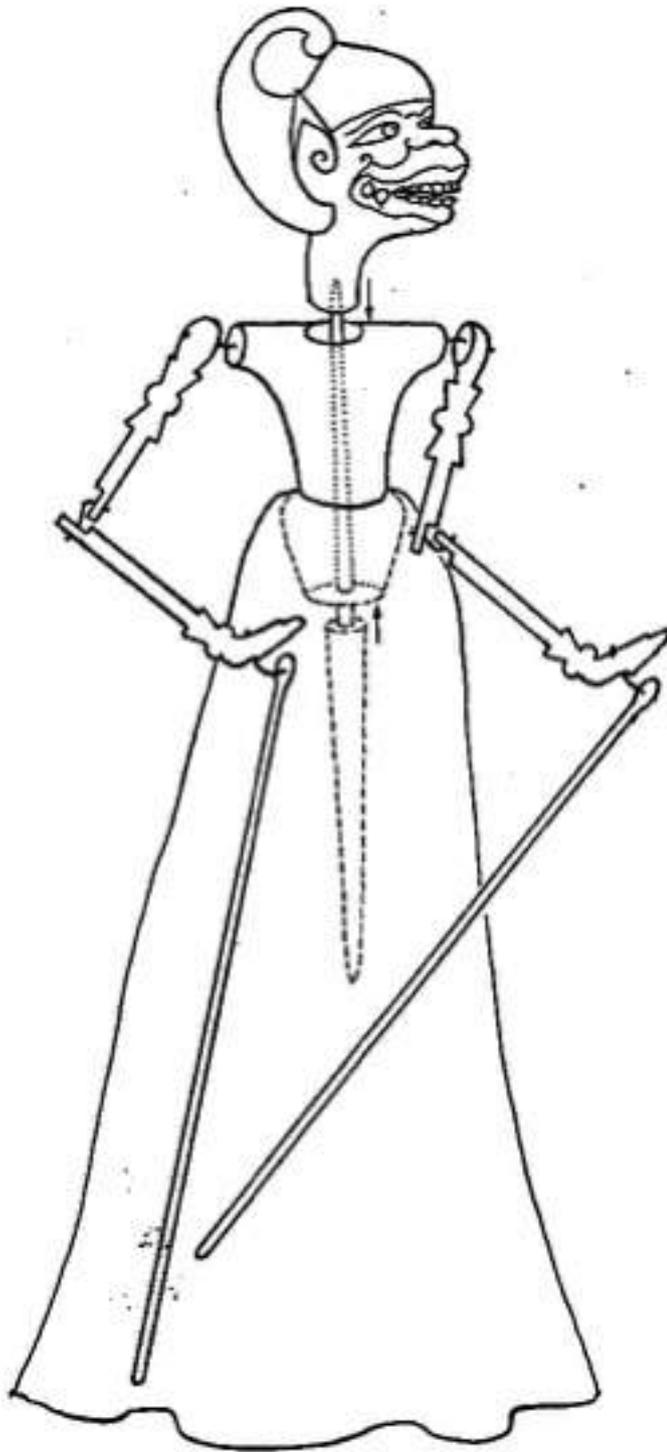
exquisite design follows exact rules and models. Details are made clear by punching holes in leather.



The basic story is the 'Ramayana', although among its main characters local comic or demonic characters also appear.

Indonesia

The three-dimensional wooden rod puppets from Java are called 'wayang golek'.



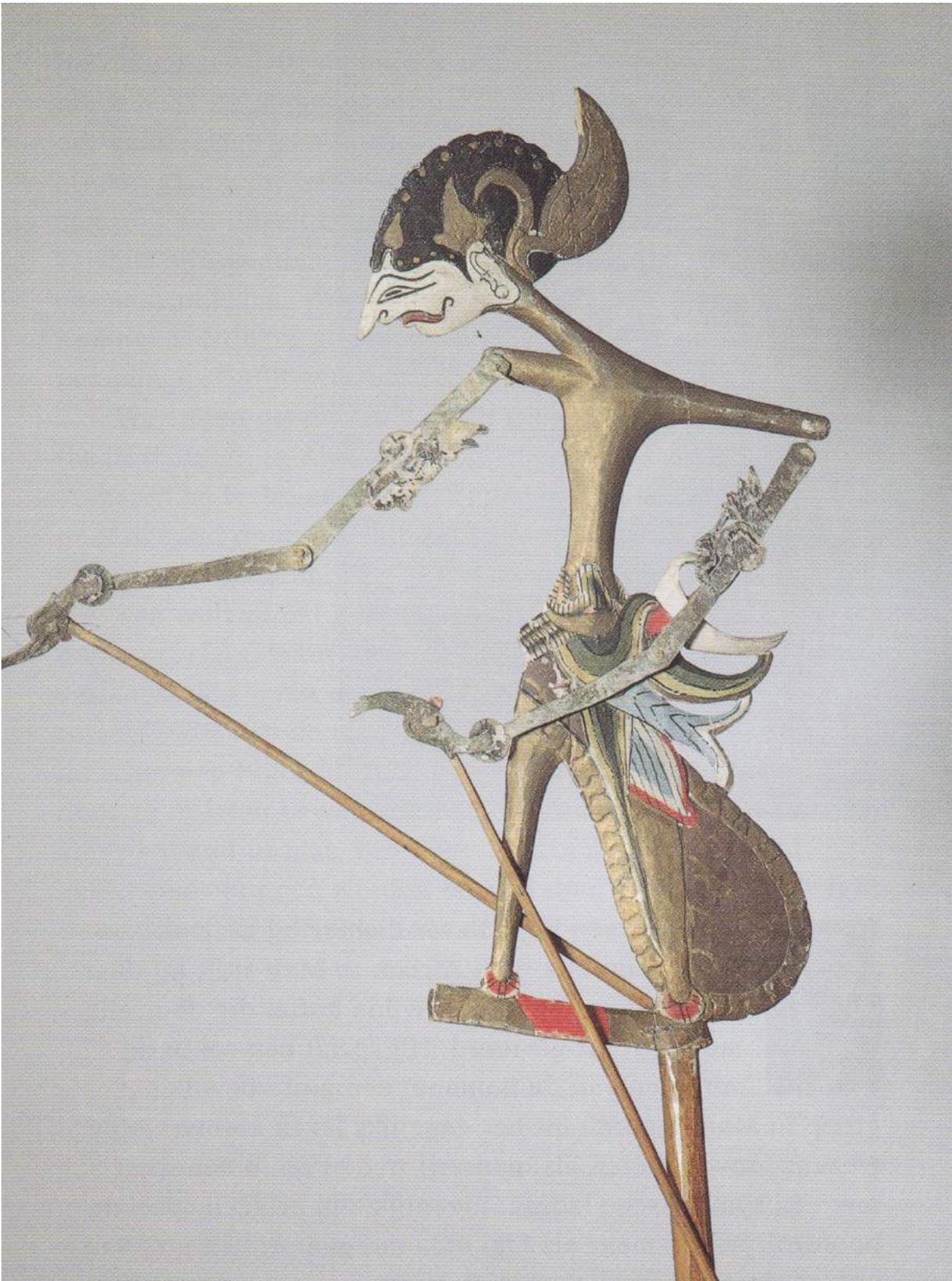
*Hanuman, the Monkey King from the Ramayana
Drawing: Hetty Paërl*



The Mahabharata epic recounts the story of the battle between the five Pandawa's and the one hundred Korawa's. They are cousins and grow up together. Karna is actually a Pandawa, but does not know this and fights on the side of the Korawa's. The Pandawa's are attended by their faithful servants: Semar, Nalagareng, Petruk, Cepot and Togog. The god Krishna, whose sister is married to Arjuna, is the ally of the Pandawa's. As the years pass, discord arises. The eldest Korawa, Suykadana, lures Yudistira into a game of dice in which the latter loses everything: his land, his possessions and Draupadi, the wife of the Pandawa's. The Pandawa's go into exile for thirteen years. After their return a violent battle takes place between the Pandawa's and the Korawa's in which many meet their deaths.

In the exhibition, 18 puppets sewn onto a large screen told the story about the Pandawa's and their cousins, the Korawa's, as told in the Mahabharata.





In Java in times past performances were given using flat wooden puppets: 'wayang kelitik'. They have a wooden body; only the arms are made of leather. These rod puppets are now seldom seen on stage.

With these thin wooden rod puppets the story of Damar Wulan (Prince Moonbeam) is told. In the exhibition, 22 puppets sewn onto a large cloth told this story.



When king Brawidjaya dies, the people of Majapahit are deeply grieved. The king leaves only one daughter, Kencana. After the death of the king, the prime minister, the father of Damar Wulan, retires to a monastery. Soon after this his wife bears him a son, Damar Wulan, also known as 'Prince Moonbeam'. The new prime minister is Damar Wulan's uncle Logender who sees his nephew as a threat to his own two sons. He appoints Damar Wulan as stable-boy; he now has to cut grass each day for his uncle's horses. The daughter of the prime minister, Anjasmara, hears that the stable-boy is extremely attractive and goes to visit him. She falls in love with him at first sight... Her brothers are most displeased by this and have Damar Wulan and Anjasmara imprisoned. One day Kencana hears that a neighboring king, Menak Jingga, wants to marry her. But she detests this hideous brute! She announces that she will marry the man who brings her the head of Menak Jingga.

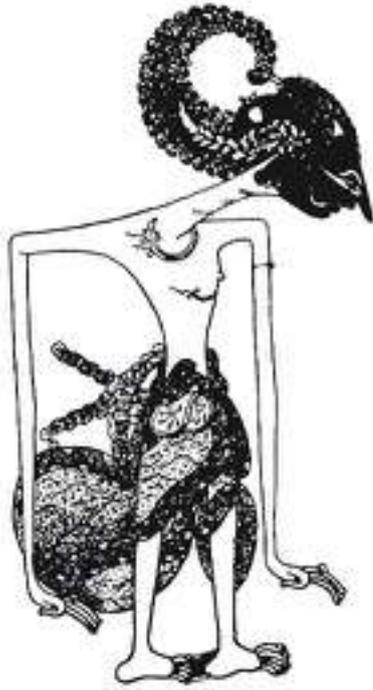
She asks her counselors to tell her who can defeat him. They reply: Damar Wulan is the only one who can do it. They release Damar Wulan from his imprisonment and order him to kill Menak Jingga. Damar Wulan sets off, together with his faithful servants. In his first fight with Menak Jingga, Damar Wulan is seriously wounded. Two princesses tend his wounds and tell him where he can find the secret weapon with which he can kill Menak Jingga. Together with his servants and the two princesses, Damar Wulan journeys home, bearing the severed head of Menak Jingga. But his two nephews lure him into an ambush, kill him and make off with the head of Menak Jingga. A hermit brings Damar Wulan back to life. When he reaches Kencana's palace, he tells her the whole story. He defeats both his nephews in a violent fight. Damar Wulan marries Kencana, Anjasmara becomes his second wife and the two princesses his concubines. The story of Damar Wulan ends with his coronation as king of Majapahit.

Flat leather puppets (wayang = shadow/kulit = leather) are shown behind a transparent screen, which is lit by an (oil) lamp. They are about 50 centimeters high and manipulated from below with sticks that are tied to the hands.

The Balinese and Javanese leather puppets are skillfully cut and incised, and they share common aesthetic principles: the puppet's face and feet are shown in profile while the torso is presented frontally. The arms, articulated at the shoulder and the elbow, are the only jointed parts.

The characters may be recognized by the color of their face, the shape of their nose and eyes, their hairdo, the clothes that they wear, as well as the jewelry and other attributes. The Pandava Arjuna has a bent head, dark face, straight nose, and small almond-shaped eyes. His hair is curled upwards. He is dressed soberly and wears no jewelry on his upper arms or wrists.

Krishna is a reincarnation of the god Vishnu and has the same traits as Arjuna. His head is upright, and his whole body is black. He is richly dressed, wears a crown and wings on his back. Gatotkaca, the son of the Pandava Bhima, is ill-tempered, which shows in his big round eyes, nose, moustache and beard. He is richly dressed and wears wings on his back.



The puppeteer ('dalang') manipulates the puppets and acts as a narrator. The puppeteer plays all the roles and provides each character with an individual voice and way of moving. He must have command of a wide range of vocal expression and the movement patterns of various puppets, in addition to being responsible for the sacrifices and rituals connected with the performances.

Wayang kulit can be performed both in the daytime and at night. The night performances are literally a theatre of shadows, as the dalang moves the puppets behind a screen that is lit. No screen is used in the daytime form ('wayang lemah'). It is actually only intended for the gods. The trunk of a banana tree serves as a stand for the characters, that tell stories such as 'Sudamala'.

This episode of the Mahabharata epic is about a battle between the Pandawa's and the Korawa's. Shiva has put a curse on the goddess Durga. From now on she must dwell on earth as a demon. Only after twelve years have passed will she be released by Sadewa, the youngest of the Pandawa's. At the same time, two other heavenly beings are dwelling on earth, two giants. They have joined the army of the Korawa's. This strikes fear into the Pandawa's. Their mother, Kunti, turns to Durga and asks her to summon the frightful giants back to heaven. In exchange, Durga demands Sadewa as a sacrifice, but Kunti refuses to sacrifice her son. In rage, Durga causes one of her female devils to enter into Kunti. When Sadewa refuses to co-operate in freeing Durga, the possessed Kunti flies into a fury. Sadewa is plagued by ghosts. His faithful servant becomes afraid of him. Then Sadewa relents and Durga regains her divine form. Finally, with Durga's help, Sadewa defeats both the giants, who, released from their curse, return to the heavenly realm.



Wayang lemah (photo: Hedi Hinzler)

The Batak people, in the north of Sumatra, have an unusual form of puppet theatre. The funerary puppets ('si gale gale') are almost life-size wooden images of people. They are made in the likeness of a dead person, and wear the deceased's clothing and jewelry. The si gale gale is the place where the soul of the deceased can reside during the funeral. The member of the family who operates the puppet has the task of reconciling the dead person to his childless lot. A dead person is believed to be unhappy without descendants, and this can bring bad luck to the next of kin. The hands, arms and legs of the si gale gale are manipulated with ropes. Sometimes a wet sponge is placed behind the eyes of the puppet, so that it can be made to cry. The funerary puppet can both give and receive gifts with its right hand. The next of kin conduct a performance with a si gale gale when someone has died without leaving any children. Accompanied by song and a demonstrative show of grief, the puppet performs a dance to the sound of an orchestra.



Si gale gale puppet (photos: collection Tropenmuseum)

EAST-ASIA

In East-Asia, especially China and Japan, the beauty and elegance of the puppets stand out. They are made and clothed in a refined and tasteful way, but also the artistic and professional manner in which the puppeteer manipulates the puppets, gives them a voice and a character, adds to this effect. The theatrical and musical settings possess a particular aesthetics.

In China puppetry may be found in all shapes: shadow figures, glove puppets, stick puppets, and string puppets. Apparently puppetry is a precursor of performances by actors, but many people see it as a popular version of the Chinese opera. They have a lot in common, as far as stories told, characters, and appearance. Some of the Chinese puppets have a ritual function.

China

Shadow theatre is one of the most popular forms of puppet theatre. The leather shadow figures are small, finely tooled and colored. They are operated with the use of three sticks: one on the neck and one on each hand. All the limbs can move independently. The legs and thighs are usually made of thicker leather than the body and arms. The head is attached separately, so that a torso can be used for a variety of characters. The execution of the puppet's faces (which are usually shown in profile) is normally most delicate. They follow the conventions of opera make-up. Thus the faces of beautiful ladies and handsome scholars are usually cut so that only a narrow outline of the face is left from the leather to reflect the shape of their faces on the screen.

Besides recognizing their facial features, the audience is also able to identify the characters by their clothing. Emperors and senior officials wear tunics decorated with dragons and phoenixes. The clothing of Taoist priests bears a diagram of the Eight Trigrams,

the symbol of knowledge of the yin-yang opposition. High-ranking generals have four banners on their backs. Common people are simply dressed, while clowns are dressed as servants.



A complete orchestra accompanies the performance. The master-drummer sets the pace. The music 'describes' the characters. Fierce percussion music heightens the dramatic moments; sweet melodies emphasize the tender moments.

Japan

Along with 'noh' and 'kabuki' theatre, 'bunraku' is one of the classic Japanese theatre forms. Bunraku, or 'ningyo joruri', as it was originally called, is a form of puppet theatre created during the early Edo period (1603–1868). It is without doubt the most refined and spectacular tradition of puppetry in the whole world. Its puppets, approximately one meter high, are manipulated by black-robed puppeteers on a wide stage, while narrators chant the story in a highly expressive manner, to the accompaniment of a 'shamisen' (a plucked string instrument).



(Collection Otto van der Mieden)

The most dominant part of a puppet is, of course, its head. The size of the head varies according to the type of character. A powerful warlord has a bigger head than, for example, a humble villager. The puppets' complexions also vary according to the character from brownish to pure white. Some heads represent stock types, such as a beautiful maiden, a young boy, a villager, a townsman etc., while some heads are reserved for particular roles. In the case of some characters, the puppet's head is changed during the play in order to show, for example, the character's aging. The puppet heads are attached to a rod with which the main puppeteers operate them. In the case of a puppet that has movable parts in its face (mouth and eyes), strings are added to the rod with which they can be manipulated. The puppets are simply outlined by means of costuming; they do not have arms. Only a string attaches the wooden hands and the forearms to the shoulder board. Both hands are connected to rods with which they are operated. Only male puppets have feet, similarly attached to the body. In the case of the female puppets, the impression of the feet movements is created by manipulating the hems of their kimonos. The puppets may handle various props, such as a sword, a fan etc.

Several puppeteers are often visible to the audience. They are dressed in black robes and most of them wear black hoods, which cover their faces from the spectators. For first-timers, the puppeteers dominate the stage for a while but soon the attention inevitably turns to the puppets and their surprisingly human-like actions, emotions, and even breathing. Minor characters, which have no movable fingers or facial features, are usually operated by only a single puppeteer. The more complicated puppets of the main characters are, however, usually operated by three puppeteers. The coordination of these three puppeteers is of the utmost importance, as it makes it possible to create the illusion of life in the inanimate puppets. The puppeteers are divided into three ranks: the chief puppeteer, who operates the head and right hand, the puppeteer, who operates the left hand, and the leg handler. It is said that ten years of training is needed before a

puppeteer is able to operate the doll's legs properly and another ten years before he is able to manipulate the left hand. Ten more years of training finally enables a manipulator to reach the rank of chief puppeteer. Of course, none of these puppeteers is a soloist. The illusion of a living puppet depends on the perfect coordination of the teamwork of these three puppeteers.

The stories are either taken from the story collections depicting the bloody wars of Japan's feudal period, or they focus on the fates of townspeople in the Edo period. The plays include heartbreaking tragedies and represent Japanese dramatic literature of the highest order; they deal with the loves, longings, and tragedies of ordinary people. The theme of suicide became extremely popular, describing the exploits of individuals who were unable to solve conflicts otherwise than by killing themselves.



AFRICA

African puppets are relatively unknown in Europe. From various sources (literature, conversations with experts, and fieldwork) I have gathered that traditional puppet theatre exists in Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon, 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 glove puppets; there are no shadow figures. 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. Even when the context is secular, there is an other-worldly feeling.

Puppetry in Africa is different from that of Europe and Asia, in a number of ways: no moralizing stories are told, and usually short sketches are performed in which characters from daily life or mythical beings (humans and animals) are shown.

Puppets are sacred and mysterious, a double of man, created to project his being, but also a double of society. Their performances are often funny and 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 and his European cousins Pulcinella, Polichinelle, and others. 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. Two drums accompany the performance. 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, soldiers, Frenchmen, and even an Indian and a Chinese. These puppets are used during the 'kyebe-kyebe' ritual of the Kuyu. Another form of, very small-scale, puppetry is what I call 'big-toe-theatre', also called 'mini-puppets'. They consist of two small puppets on strings, usually a male and a female, facing each other and often depicting love-making. The strings are attached to the big toes of the puppeteer who manipulates the puppets by beating his hands on his thighs. Originally they were used for divination, but now it is generally child play. They are to be found in West and Central Africa.

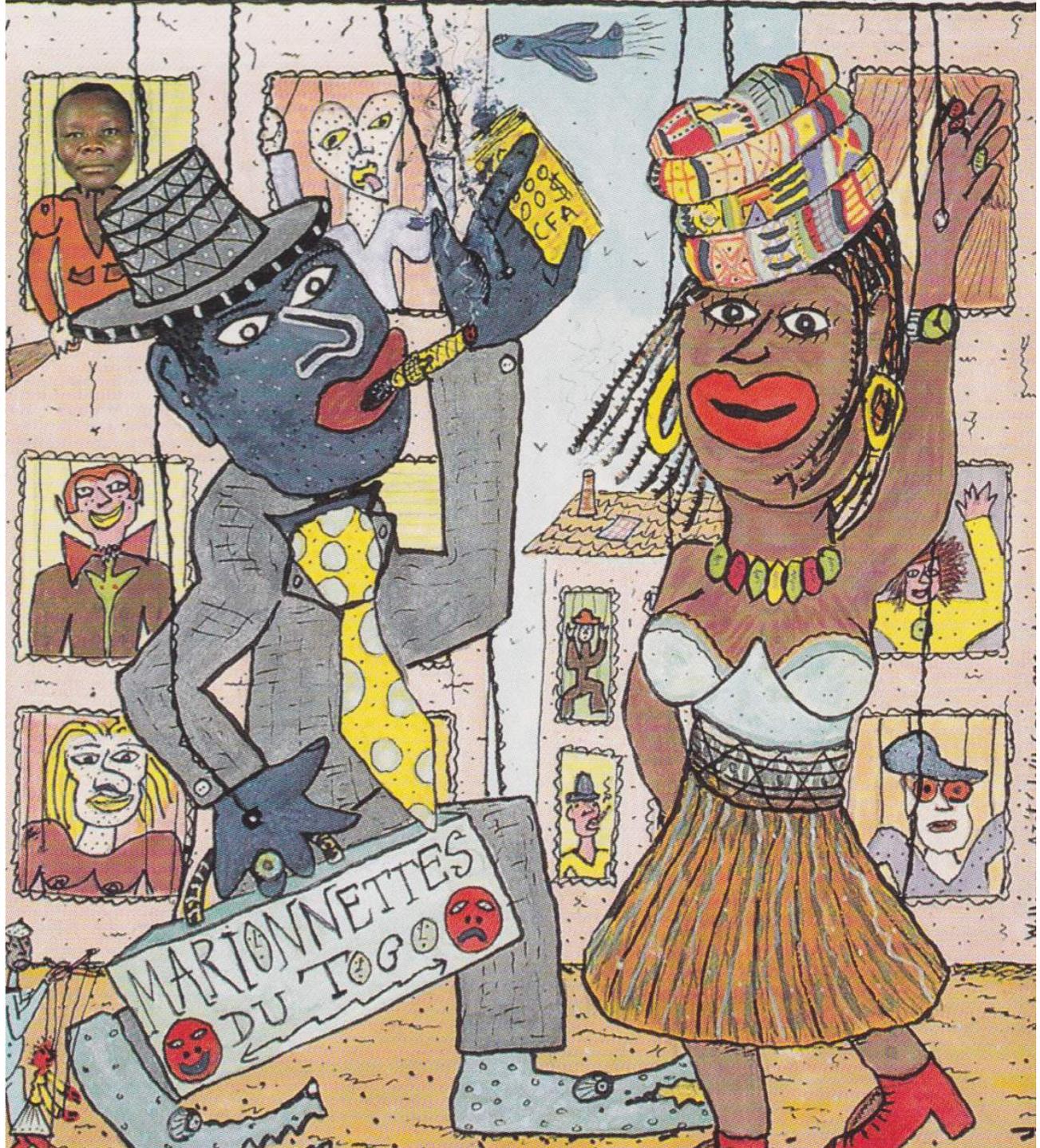
For the exhibition, puppets were acquired from Togo and Mali.

Togo

The Togolese puppet-player Danaye (his name means: "Do not compare yourself with others") learned to play the puppets in Europe, but his inspiration comes from his own background; he tries in his own way to combine the European and the African puppet-play. The characters are therefore rather diverging: from catholic priests, to European development workers, to African people and ghosts. Because of the difficult political and economical situation in Togo it is not easy for him. One of the sayings he often uses is: "If all goes well, the government is honored, but if things go wrong, I get blamed!" The puppets are sacred, in the eyes of Danaye, because they resemble the figures which represent the ghosts of the ancestors ('tchitchilik'). In both cases sacred wood is used. Ghosts also appear in his plays. He puts it like this: "We are connected to God with invisible threads", and: "We all are somebody's puppet."

COMPAGNIE DANAYE

THÉÂTRE DE MARIONNETTES



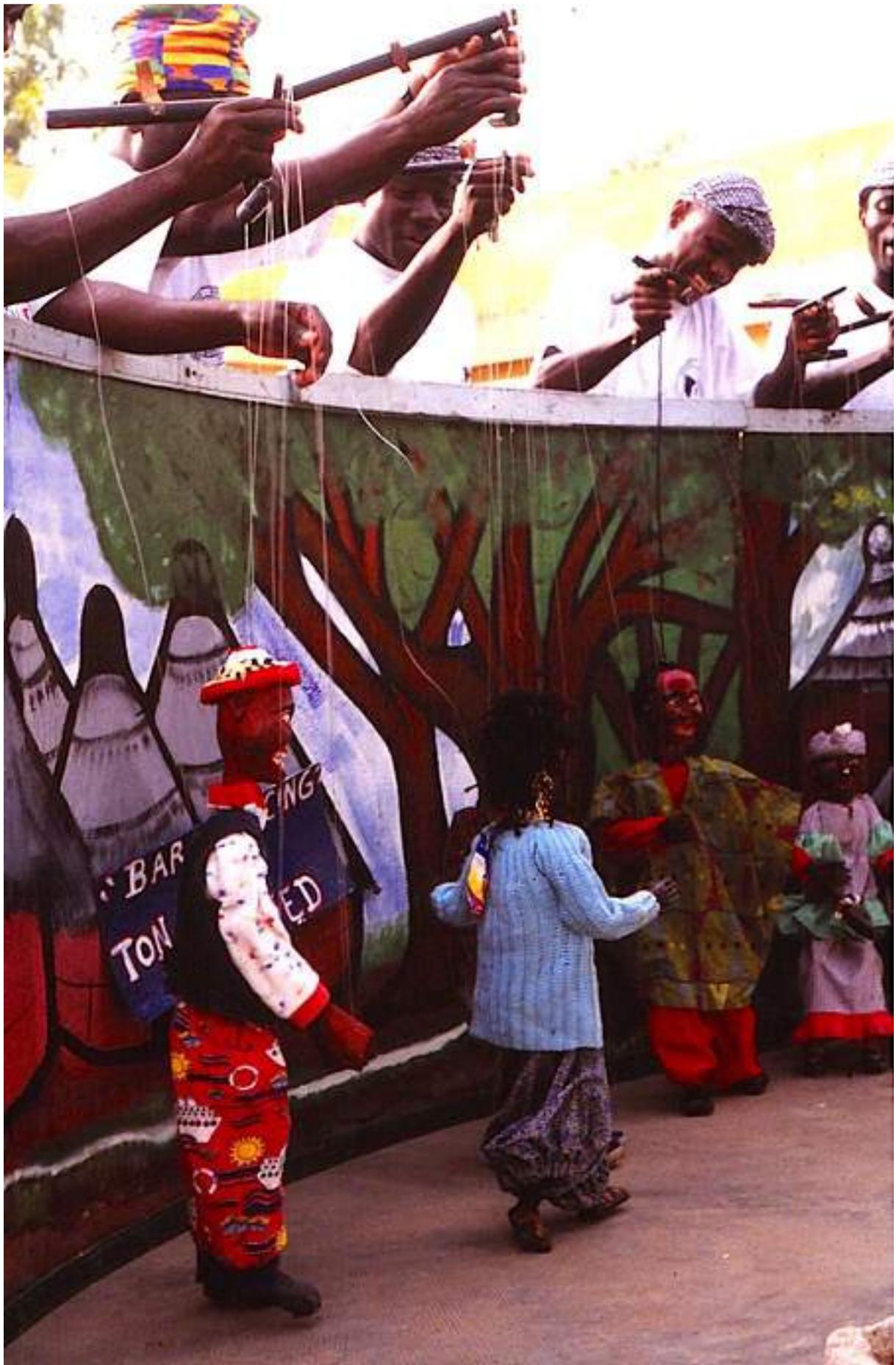
The string puppets are made by Danaye and his group, just like the musical-instruments and the backdrops. Practically all of the members of the group play musical instruments: before the play, to accompany singing, or as sound effects. All members of the group sing, and the language is adapted to the region where they are performing. During certain scenes songs about aids by famous singers such as Franco (from Zaire) are played by means of a cassette recorder.

Danaye and his group use puppet theatre to recount old traditional stories, but they also level criticism at current affairs and give information about illnesses such as aids. With string puppets, in six short scenes, it is explained how the illness is contracted and what the consequences are, often in a funny and penetrating way. In December 1993, I went to Dapaong in the north of Togo with the Compagnie, where this play was performed on December 1 (Aids Day).

"Aids! If only I'd known!"

God first created the Whatsit and later Thingy and his two helpers. He sent them to earth, where they lived together as friends. When it started to rain, Whatsit offered herself as a sheltering place for Thingy. That happened time and time again. This resulted in more and more Whatsits and Thingies, but also more diseases, such as aids.

The professor explains the meaning of aids, what the causes are and how it is transmitted. The disease is incurable. You can only prevent it by having safe sex (using a condom) and by not sleeping around. Some members of the group are shocked to hear this, whilst others don't believe the professor. They go merrily on their way and meet their lovers at the 'My foot, your foot' bar. They make jokes about aids and say that it is an invention of the white man to frighten them and to put a stop to their love-making.. It's not until one member of the group dies and a couple of others become seropositive that the truth about aids finally dawns on them. "No glove, no love!"







The exhibition: Togo

Mali

(From 1988 till today I have been doing research in Mali, more especially in the village of Kirango, 45 km from the town of Ségou. For more information, see my website.)

During the masquerades of the Bamanan agriculturalists of villages in the area of Ségou, large puppets in the shape of mythical animals are made to dance by puppeteers that are hidden inside. Some of the animals carry small rod puppets on their back, which 'dance' as well. They alternate with masked dancers, equally representing mythical animals and symbolic persons. No difference is made between puppets and masks; both are called 'mask', and serve the same purpose: to represent mythical and symbolic beings through concealed human beings.

The masquerade generally takes place on three consecutive afternoons and two nights. The organization is in the hands of the youth association.

The puppets represent (mythical) animals. The body of the animal is quite large: a frame measuring around 2 metres long and 1,5 meters high. It is covered with cloth, in order to conceal the 2-3 puppeteers inside who manipulate the rod puppets. The head of the animal is a large rod puppet. Smaller rod puppets 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 and domesticated animals. Each animal dances according to his character. At times, it stops, to give the smaller rod puppets on its back a chance to go through their motions: the women pound, the musicians play and the dancer twirls around.



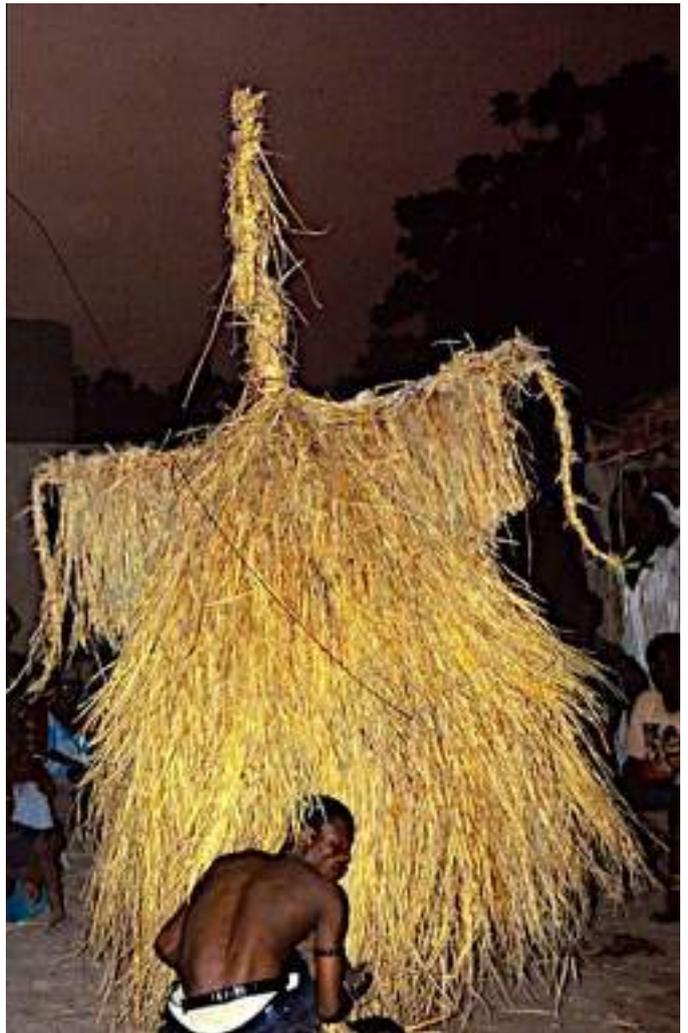
Sigi, the Bush Buffalo (drawing: Hetty Paërl)



Antelope 'Cew ye kelen ye'



Making of Cew ye kelen ye

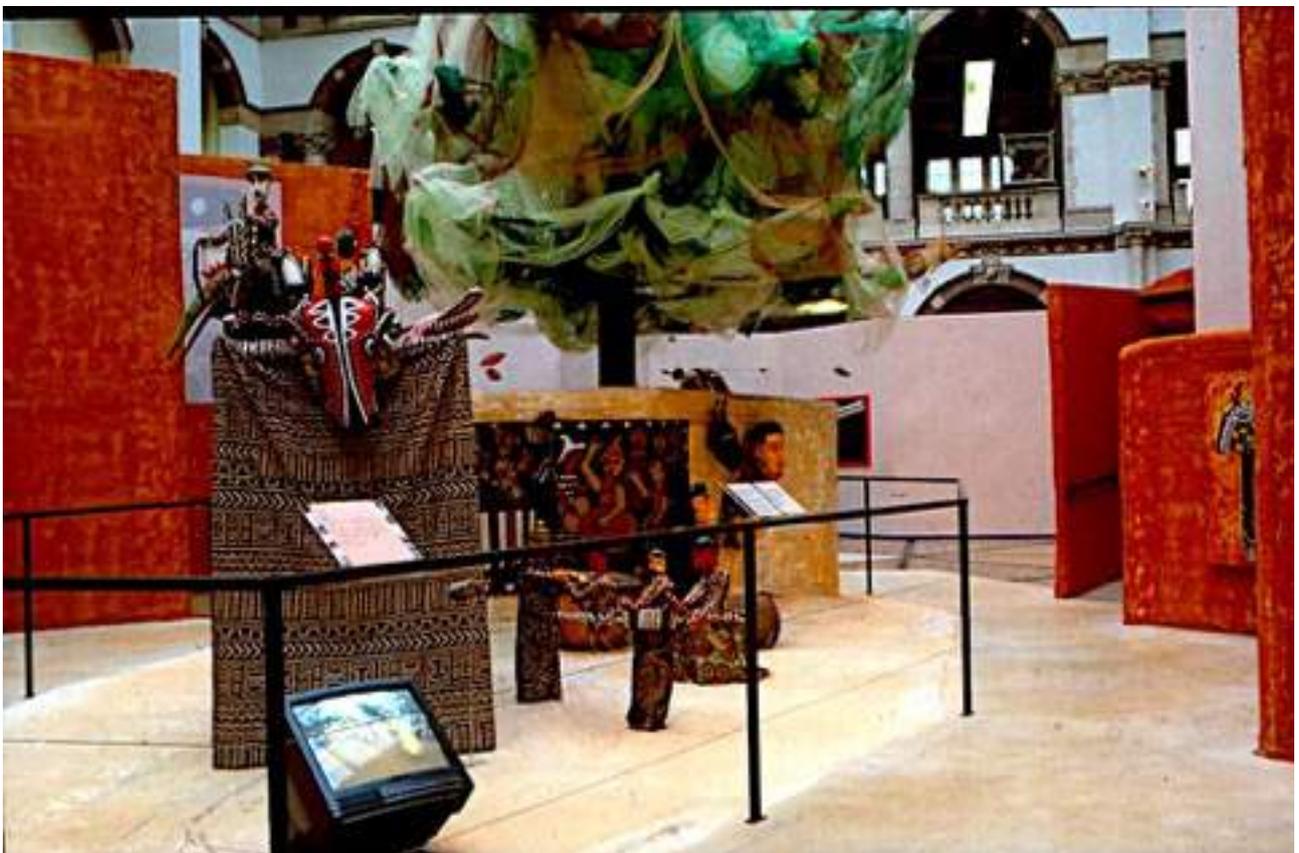


The well-liked Kònò, the holy bird that announces the rains, prances around the plaza in a very elegant way, flapping his wings. He does not carry small puppets on his back.

Bilanjan, a puppet entirely made of straw, and who only may be seen at night, is a bush-spirit.

Since the puppeteers and the masked dancers cannot see their way, they need someone to guide them. This is done by a man shaking a hand-bell and giving them verbal instructions as well.

Puppets and masks may be seen as two sides of one coin: manipulated by man, they are located in the magic field between illusion and reality, connecting the invisible world of the supernatural and the visible world of the human. Within the framework of the masquerade the people celebrate their origins and their relation to the animals of the land and the water.



The exhibition: Mali

The Bozo fishermen also have masquerades. Their puppets have the shape of various types of fish, a hippopotamus, a crocodile, etc. These puppets, aquatic animals that have no legs -except for the hippo- are manipulated by a puppeteer who crawls around on his belly to move them. Therefore, they are not rod puppets, but 'body puppets' as it were. They are also accompanied by a guide with a hand-bell and musicians playing drums. Their day puppets are much like those of the Bamanan, such as a bird or an antelope. The puppets and masks are paraded on boats that drift by on the Niger river, close to the beach. The musicians, singers and an occasional dancer are seated in boats as well. An amazing sight!





Dog-Fish, Hippopotamus, Crocodile

DISTANT FRIENDS: GODS, KINGS AND POPULAR HEROES

Practically each set of puppets has its main character(s). In the Netherlands this is the rogue Jan Klaassen, in Turkey and Egypt his 'cousin' Karagöz. Krishna and Rama are role models in India, whereas the Buddha fills this role in Sri Lanka and Burma. Prince Panji is the hero of the Malaysian shadow figures, and the divine servant Semar is loved in Java for his jokes. The Vietnamese Teu is master of ceremonies during the performance; he often talks too much. Sigi, the lone buffalo from Mali, represents power and the strength of tradition.

All of these characters, each in his own way, reflect human characteristics, whether they are popular heroes, gods, demons, kings, clowns or mythical animals. Through their outfit, their facial make-up or their mask, and through their behavior, the audience immediately recognizes whom it is dealing with.

Jan Klaassen

Jan Klaassen - with his characteristic hunchback, big red nose, and red cap - is a street urchin, who tries to survive as best he can. He is an optimist who is not afraid to fight his enemies: the landlord, the policeman, the devil, and death. He is married to Katrijn, who drinks too much and swears a lot. They get into fights daily, for instance, over the baby which Jan Klaassen flings against the wall of the puppet booth. "You ugly brute," shouts Katrijn, when he does this. "D'you still love me?" asks Jan Klaassen. "I love you as much as I love moldy doughnuts!" answers Katrijn.



Drawing: Hetty Paërl

Karagöz

Karagöz ('Blackeye') is a popular hero of gypsy descent; he has a black beard and under his turban his head is bald. One of his arms is longer than the other, so that he can hit people with it. He is a free spirit and always in need of money. He often overestimates his abilities and gets into trouble. He gets away with bruises and a black eye; no money earned, but an experience gained.



Drawing: Hetty Paërl

Krishna

One of the most beloved characters in India is Krishna. He is the eighth incarnation of Vishnu, and leads the life of a human being: he is born, marries, and dies. Thus people can identify with him. As a child he steals butter, is corrected by his mother, herds cows on bare feet, and dances with cowgirls. When he grows up, we see him as the Great Lover, with Radha and the cowgirls who are all in love with him. This may also be seen as the relation between the human soul and the divine, the one between God and his followers. The music that he plays on his flute is just as enchanting as he is. He is the Dark Master, or the Blue God (blue is the color of the infinite, of space). He is many in one: a hero, a teacher, a king, and the most beloved god in the pantheon of Hindu gods.

Krishna plays an important role in the Mahabharata, where he is a mediator between the Pandava's and the Kaurava's. He is equally respected by both parties, who realize more or less that he is God on earth, not one of the many gods but the Supreme Being. In his earthly appearance he is a cousin, special friend and counselor of the Pandava's.

In the Kerala hand puppets his face is green, his eyes are accented in black, and his mouth in red. On his forehead he wears the holy sign of Vishnu. He wears a 'beard' of paper around his chin, and a golden crown on his head.



Drawing: Hetty Paërl

Rama

Rama is one of the main characters of the Ramakien, the Thai version of the Ramayana epos. His face is green, the color that is reserved for gods, heroes and kings.

Rama is the seventh incarnation of Shiva and the perfect human being: level-headed, a good son, brother, and husband. After being dethroned, he goes into exile with his wife Sita. Totsakan, the ten-headed demon of Ceylon (Sri Lanka) kidnaps Sita. Hanuman, the king of the monkeys, builds a bridge to Ceylon, saves Sita, and defeats the witches and demons of Totsakan.



Drawing: Hetty Paërl

Ravana

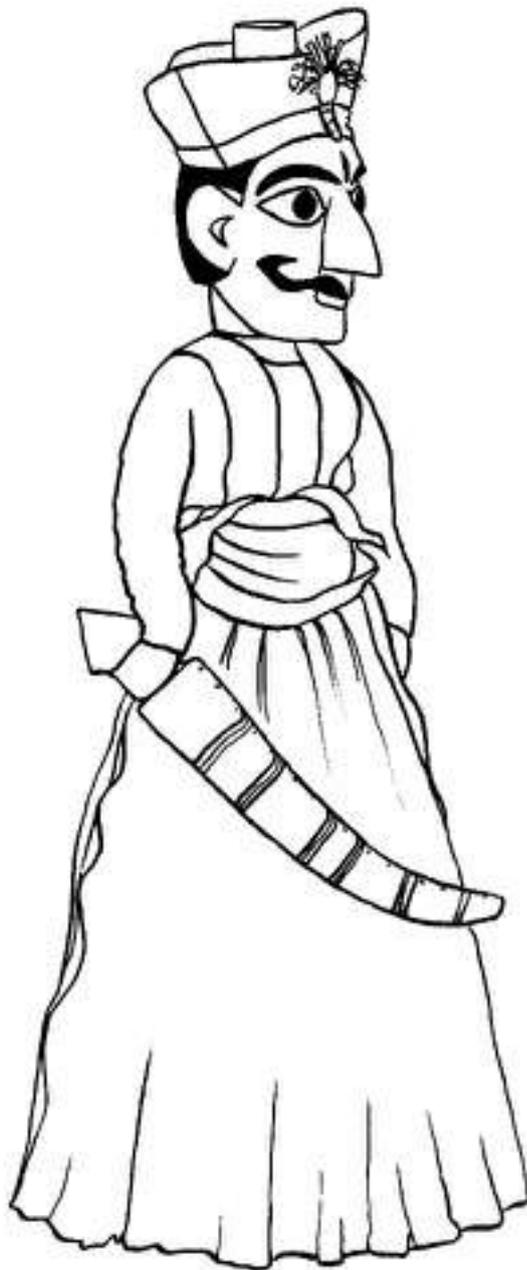
Ravana, the ten-headed demon, plays an important role in the Ramayana epos. He kidnaps Sita, king Rama's wife, who is freed by Hanuman, the general of the monkey army.



Drawing: Hetty Paërl

Amar Singh Rathore

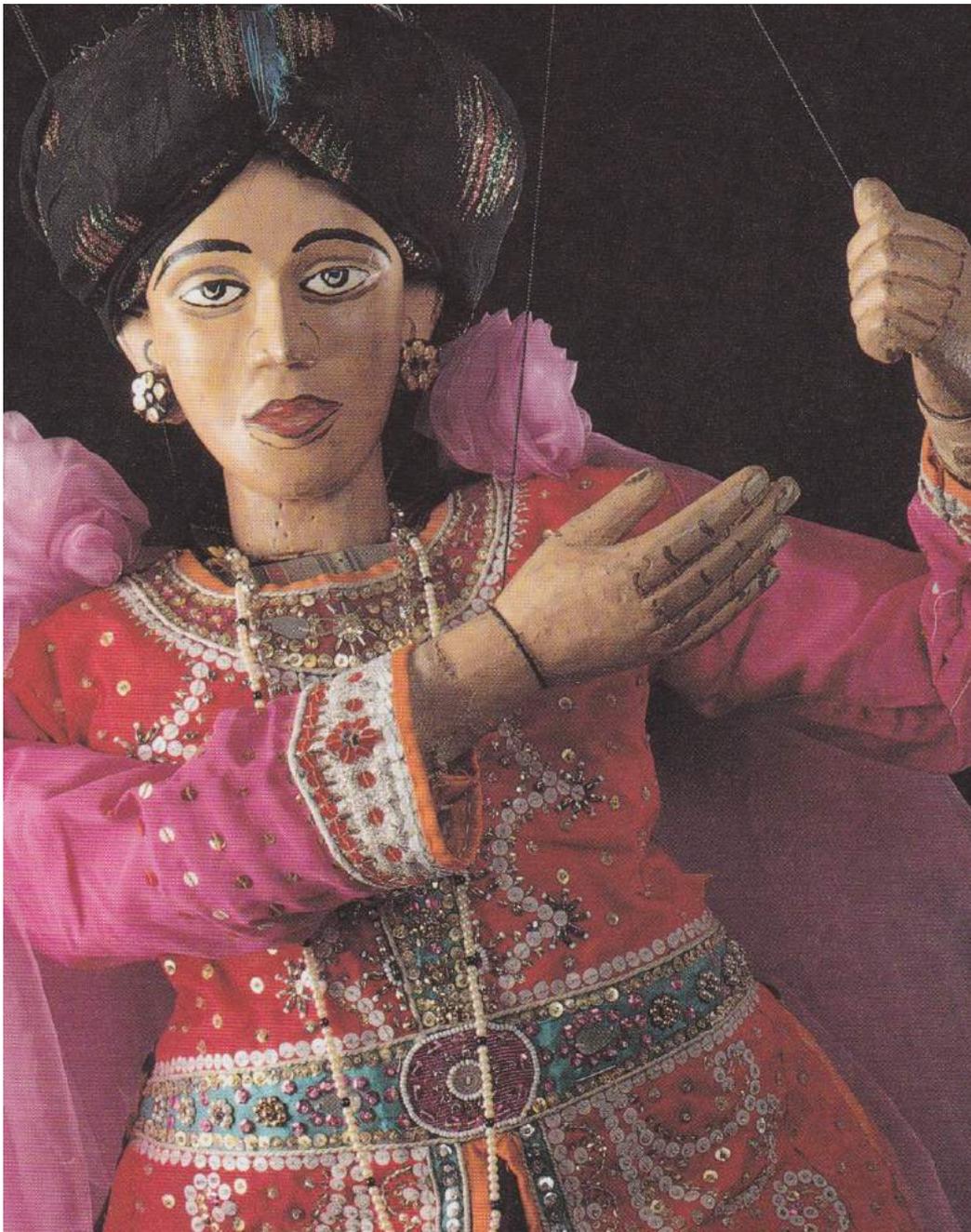
The main character of the string puppet theatre of Rajasthan is the warrior-king Amar Singh Rathore. When he finds himself in exile in Agra, Amar Singh is summoned by the grand vizier to the court of the emperor. There he is submitted to a series of public humiliations. Singh loses his temper and stabs the grand vizier to death. A fierce fight ensues between Singh and his followers and the emperor's nobles. Singh emerges victorious.



Drawing: Hetty Paërl

Mahoshada

Mahoshada is the main character from one of the 'jataka's' that are performed by puppeteers on Sri Lanka. The stories about the lives and reincarnations of the Buddha end with a moral. In jataka number 546 the Buddha is only seven years old and his name is Mahoshada. As young as he is, he impresses by his wisdom and becomes counselor to the king. But first he is put to the test and has to solve nineteen riddles.



Zawgyi

In the Burmese play the Magician (Zawgyi) roams through forests and over mountains, capering and singing as he goes, in search of medicinal plants and the fruits of the wishing tree, which he magically transforms into beautiful girls. On his wanderings he sings about the beauty of nature, as he searches constantly for the philosopher's stone. One touch of his magic wand and the stone will change everything into gold. He is dressed in red, wearing a long and flaring robe trimmed with gold, a red cap on his head, red slippers and trousers under a tucked-up sarong. With a red staff he grinds medicine, or prods at certain fruits to turn them into nymphs of pleasure. He can fly through air and bore through earth. This puppet has the least number of strings, but his dance steps and acrobatic leaps are fast and complicated. He enters and exits from above the handrail. Any puppeteer who handles this puppet well is regarded as a master of the art.



Panji (Inu, Prince of Kuripan)

Panji is a character from the Malaysian shadow figure theatre, 'wayang djawa', an old form of puppetry which originated in Java.

This story starts with Arjuna, Panji's father, who descends to earth in the form of a lotus flower in order to solve problems there. On Java four brothers rule over the kingdoms of Kuripan, Daha, Gegelang and Singasari. They produce sons and daughters at the same time. In Kuripan Prince Inu Karpati is born, and in Daha, princess Candra Kirana. On reaching adulthood, they become engaged. This is celebrated with a great feast. But the revelers forget to honor the gods and the god Batara Kala puts a sharp stop to the festivities. The lovers are separated from each other. Smitten with grief, Prince Inu Karpati decides to become a wanderer, along with his servant Semar and his other companions. A hermit tells him that his beloved Candra Kirana is still alive. Both lovers change appearances and names several times, so that they do not recognize each other. After many hardships and ordeals, they end up in the kingdom of Gegelang. There, with the help of Semar and the goddess Durga, they finally get married. Then Arjuna returns to heaven.



Drawing: Hetty Paërl

Teu

Imagine a pond in a village in North-Vietnam. It is crowded and music and song are heard. On one side of the pond stands a temple-like structure, the front of which is covered with a cloth or bamboo slats. Behind it vague silhouettes can be seen of the puppeteers who stand up till their middle in the water.

The first puppet to appear is Teu, a small man with a round belly and a smile on his face. He is the master of ceremony, the joker, without whom the play cannot begin. Dressed in a small jacket and a loincloth, he connects the scenes of the performance. He runs the show, comments on daily events and gives wise advice. He sings: “One bathes in the pond of his village. Whether the water is clear or troubled, it is always better to bathe there.”



Drawing: Hetty Paërl

King Monkey (Sun Wu-k'ung)

He lives in heaven and has one desire: he wants to belong. But the other kings find him too wild, too arrogant. He is immortal and a master of magic, and fights great battles with the heavenly armies. Finally he is imprisoned under the Mountain of the Five Elements by the Buddha himself. He is freed by the monk Hsuan-Tsang.

‘The Journey to the West’ is a well-known old Chinese story. It contains more than a hundred stories, satires, fairy tales and allegories. Like the epics from South- and Southeast-Asia it is performed in episodes, by puppets as well as humans (opera). In this story the monk Hsuan-tsang travels to India, together with King Monkey, Little Boar and Sandy. The Chinese emperor sends them there to find the Sacred Books and bring them back to China. The journey is full of dangers, especially when they come to the desolate land of the Skeleton Ghost. The Skeleton Ghost wants to eat the monk, because: ‘this holy man is so good and clever, whoever eats his flesh will live forever.’



Sigi

In Malian puppetry, animals of the savannah are represented in the form of antelopes, buffaloes, birds and domesticated animals. The bush buffalo, Sigi, symbolizes strength and the power of tradition. His head is a large rod puppet, attached to a 'body' in the form of a cage covered with cloth. On his back, he carries small rod puppets: women pounding millet, a crocodile, a mother-with-child, musicians, a female dancer, and others. Each animal dances according to his character, and Sigi's dance is slow and stately. At times, the animal stops, to give the smaller rod puppets on its back a chance to go through their motions: the women pound, the farmer hoes, the musicians play and the dancer twirls around.

The song accompanying him runs as follows: "Beautiful wild animal, beloved by all, you are on the other side of the river and without a boat we cannot get to you." (Since he is a mythical animal, a magical boat would be needed to reach him.)



Drawing: Hetty Paërl

Faaro

Faaro, the water-god, is a mythical character that appears during the Malian masquerade in the form of a small rod puppet, on the back of a large 'animal' puppet. Her head and upper body are attached to a rod (making it a 'marotte') and the arms are manipulated by means of strings. She has protruding breasts, long disheveled black hair (from being in the water) and eyes of glass, and dances exuberantly. The people that live along the shores of the Niger-river venerate Faaro, who plays an important role in the creation-myth of the Bamanan.



Drawing: Hetty Paërl

Clowns

Especially the servants and the clowns are appreciated, because they make jokes about actual events and explain what their eloquent masters (kings or gods) are up to. They may be compared to the traditional jokers that can be found in many cultures: unclean beings for whom no prohibitions exist and who can sojourn in the proximity of death and the gods.

Clowns are often deformed: they are hunchbacked, have pockmarked features or faces which are disfigured by skin-diseases such as yaws.



Drawing: Hetty Paërl

Konangi is the clown from Sri Lanka. He wears multicolored clothes, decorated with pompons, and a hat which resembles a fool's cap. He dances and performs acrobatic stunts.

Semar is the most active of the Javanese 'wayang kulit', a flat leather shadow figure. This fat, small and misshapen servant of royals such as Arjuna, was once a god, but due to an offense he was punished with a grotesque appearance. Because he is a speaking character, his mouth can move.



Drawing: Hetty Paërl

Between scenes he pops up in old and new stories. With good advice he helps his master in precarious situations, cheering him up with jokes; he is a guardian angel and a source of truth and wisdom. As a godly clown he can say what he wants. "Thus I serve wisdom, for where the distinguished seriousness of the master fails, the foolishness of the servant does good work. And where men do not understand wisdom, foolishness does a beter job." He is always accompanied by his sons Nalagareng, Bagong en Petruk.



The Thai clowns are totally different from the traditional Thai shadow figures: they are black, and have moveable mouths, arms (and sometimes their private parts). They are holy characters that are honored by everyone, and surrounded with special rituals. A puppeteer will never give away or sell a clown. Every clown has a different name and a specific character, and they are the popular heroes par excellence. Theng, the tall and skinny jester has a forefinger in the shape of a penis.



In Burmese puppetry, two jesters (Thancho and Thanpyet) are dressed identically in checked sarongs tucked up and short jackets open at the front, with large gold anklets and bracelets. They wear charms around their necks, which are made of sacred threads woven thick, with a silver amulet wrapped across the middle. These are not dancing roles; they are companions to the Prince. The jesters have sharp wit and dexterity with puns, criticize people and comment on actual events.



Puppetry reinforces cultural identity, because it reminds people of what is seen as worthy and important in their society. Together they experience their culture. Together with the participation of the public, this is 'total theatre', during which a number of expressive forms of communication, such as spoken language, music and song, (masked) dance, and costumes may be combined.

We are no other than a moving row
Of magic shadow-shapes that come and go
Round with the sun-illuminated lantern held
In midnight by the master of the show

'Rubayat', by Omar Khayyam

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