WORLD PUPPETRY DAY 2026

Celebration of the Light of Life / The Dream of the Hyena

Dear compatriots, puppeteers of UNIMA, inhabitants of the Earth:

The Bamanan of Mali, like other peoples of the world, conceive creation as a continuous process, in which things emerge successively from the voice of the Creator God, in whirlwinds and spiral words.

The spirit of the first volcano cast down upon the earth “Meren,” the first Divinity, a puppet entrusted with governing this still chaotic world.

This first puppet, in the form of a woman, gave birth to plants, animals, and human beings (Jiriw, Sogow ani maaniw).

Reviving our past and presenting the puppet — a fundamental element of the world’s cultural heritage — is not merely a scientific task; it is also a proof of intelligence and self-respect.

The theme is not new, yet it remains relevant.

In this gesture, in this kind of theatre where everyone plays a double role, even a man of excellent social standing cannot escape the moral consequences of the puppet’s act.

Puppet performance constitutes a revealing testimony of the spirit of an era: the people are the true hero of this theatre, with their joy of living and their simple happiness.

The original beauty of the puppet, its theatre, its rich and varied music, its songs and dances — reflections of an authentic civilization and ancestral belief — form an immense source of inspiration for theatre artists and, in particular, for young people committed to the process of a universal culture.

The education of youth is a constant concern of the Mandé people and of the rest of the world. Therefore, the council of elders strives to offer young people the most favorable conditions for their full physical, intellectual, and moral development through the practice of the art of puppetry in all its expressive diversity.

Never in our past has the society of adults and elders allowed youth to act at will without guidance. Adults must not abandon young people to themselves.

The wise person must also be a perfect example in the eyes of youth.

To make people laugh while correcting customs. The puppet that moves in the moonlight, inside or outside the booth, is like a caravan: it is a people.

That people is mine; it is that people whom I inhabit.

“When the vulture goes to the horse fair, it is to prepare its future,” for it anticipates hunger. This enigmatic language of the Bamanan puppet of Mali teaches youth always to keep in mind the organization of the land, the annual creation of new fields, and the preservation of tradition.

To celebrate World Puppetry Day is to celebrate the light of life.

Thus, at the heart of the most significant cultural institutions in the world stand the puppets — UNIMA. Primarily religious in nature, they are placed at the center of life in terms of artistic, political, and social relations.

We obey the spirits of the puppets when they address us. The puppet is like the sun: that sun must kindle within us the warmth of love and understanding. That is UNIMA, like the love of an eternal sun.

UNIMA is a commitment to life. It is a high-level political and cultural institution that the peoples of the world must never do without. Instruments of awareness, solidarity, and communication, puppets, in their present evolution, deserve special attention in their conception, realization, and worldwide dissemination.

The puppet is a mirror of our cultural identity, a springboard for the flourishing of our art and culture, an irreplaceable framework for the affirmation of our creative genius. Therefore, the art of puppetry must be socialized.

The legendary beauty of the puppet awakens admiration in all. Puppets have been and will continue to be a practice of the people of the world since the dawn of time. To define is, indeed, to draw limits. The puppet rejects limits: it invades everything, extends everywhere; it is the most sovereign expression of the soul of the people.

Formerly, they were used to educate peoples through storytelling and to entertain through representations of small human or animal figures, with or without strings, manipulated by people.

When does the history of puppets in Mali begin? It is difficult to answer this question. For many historians, it would begin between the 9th and 12th centuries… (to be continued).

The puppet theatre of Mali occupies an exceptional place in the history of African puppetry. Discovered in 1878 by Paul Soleillet, it was the first among African puppet theatres to become known outside Africa.

At the crossroads of African arts, the puppet in Mali is a great pirogue that, with or without sail, needs only the rocking of the waves to set off.

Rivalry between communities is resolved through alliance by means of the art of puppetry, which has succeeded in consolidating and transforming conflicts into pacts. UNIMA, or the puppet, is undoubtedly the dream of the hyena (a totemic animal).

The story of the hyena, symbol of strength and momentum, leads us to its dream: a dream of the future, a dream in which the human being is wise and lives in permanent synergy with body and spirit; a dream of communion and sharing; a dream in which the hyena faces different situations to build its tomorrow — and, if possible, a better tomorrow.

I inherited my genies from my father, who in turn received them from his. My father wished me to embody the image of the house of the Bamanan world and its tradition.

What is happening to me is wonderful: I give my father new ideas.

Dear compatriot puppeteers of the world: the puppet is the instrument that transmits the voice of the ancestors. Its reach makes it the instrument par excellence of command and power of leaders, depending, of course, on the region where one finds oneself.

Traditional within modernity, my main objective is to make traditional puppets and ancestral practices at risk of disappearance known throughout the world — from sculpture to manipulation techniques. Also to promote traditional theatre from Africa and the entire world, with its particular style of masks and puppets based on music, dance, and song.

For the children of Mali, of Africa, and of the whole world, in the hope that they may come to love this vast social memory that constitutes our universal cultural heritage.

I continue to fight so that the traditional art of puppetry may be fully recognized for its originality, its traditions, and its richness.

Finally, I wish to express my deepest gratitude to the members of UNIMA and to all those who trust in the art of puppetry and in the puppeteers of the world. I also thank the UNIMA World Congress 2025 for the services rendered, which cannot be measured.

Thank you for the extraordinary collaborations and the skills that have been of great benefit to all.
May BA FARO (Goddess of Water) be my country, until my country can truly be mine.
Happy and prosperous Year 2026
Ten cola nuts for You – Ten kola nuts for you!
Long live UNIMA! Long live World Puppetry Day 2026!
Long live Charleville-Mézières!
Bamako, December 10, 2025
Yaya COULIBALY
President of the Sogolon Company
Knight of the National Order of Mali