

# ANIMATED PROPS PUPPET: AN EFFECTIVE MEDIUM FOR SENSITIZATION AND EDUCATION FOR PARTICIPATORY COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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## Abstract

Traditionally, the adopted forms of organizing open theatre forums aimed at behavioural change within a given community as a result of identified social issues have been hitherto promoted through the use of model art forms like theatre for development for development which is aimed at behavioural change and among others. Animated Puppetry appears to be a new form of artistic art form impression larger than life. Puppetry as a creative art form have differing conventions such as varying size with different constructional materials. This paper discusses the design exploratory process and impact and the use of the new medium in addressing critical social issues in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It also suggests a complimentary feature of an integrated approach which highlights a unique application and principle of Animated Puppetry Theatre with a fusion of costume design as an efficient structure for community mobilization and conscientization for socio-economic development. This paper further explores and gives a voice to inanimate objects to express concerns in relation to human activities such as sanitation, education and health among others by looking at puppetry design formulation and manipulations.

**Keywords:** Animated, props, puppetry, entertainment, education, sensitisation, conscientization, development

## Introduction

According to Currell (1997) puppetry is one of the earliest and triumphant art forms of the performing arts which stands to be an ancient art, originated about 3000 years ago and throughout the ages it has held an important place in traditional entertainment (Pandey, 2017). Besides, it has promoted traditional entertainment and have been used in religious context as part of ritual drama throughout the African continent. To an extent puppetry theatre has become a popular form of entertainment and of late an educational model for the village people and the urban dwellers. Meanwhile, its fulfilment is different in every country throughout the ages and adds continuous educational values to the enlistment of civilisation (Hagher, 2004). Furtherance to Hagher's submission, from

different parts of the world, each country has its own identity where variations of style and theme are reflected in them such that the stylized vocabulary of puppetry show carries local myths and legends, usually with the message of social awareness, moral values, historical and traditional subjects.

More importantly, puppets express emotions and feelings without words and the identities of the puppeteers are somehow most often completely protected by their “hidden identities plus the

extraordinary freedom of expression that live actors do not enjoy to quote (Dagan, 1990). More so, it is presumed to be the theatre of metamorphosis and transformation. This art is all about sound, movement and light. That is the magic of puppet theatre: actions are a hundred times more effective than words. As some may say, *action speaks louder than words* which appears to be a truism.

Also, the art form seems to be the least expensive source of entertainment which employs almost all creative expressions: drama, dance, music, literature, painting and “decor which becomes the engaging actions exposing the conflicts within social structure” (Hagher, 2004, p.12).

Puppets are movable figures representing a human being, an animal or an object which is moved either by the hand, string, rod or wire. According to Currell (1976, p.7) “the origin of puppetry remains a subject of dispute.” However, Dagan (1990) contends that to date, no early documentation on puppetry as a form of art has been written by Africans as a documentary evidence of the genesis of puppetry in Africa even though puppetry theatre was practiced by then.

Pandey (2017, p.355) affirms that in India the history of puppetry possibly dates back to 4000 years ago. As such, the Sanskrit plays according to Currell (1976), the lead performer was called “sutradhara” which meant the holder of strings. Similarly, in Greek marionettes and glove puppets emerged as early as 800BC. Meanwhile, the Greek words “neorospastos/neuron” in direct translation means, “cord/string”, and “koree” referred to either “a long sleeve that covers the hand” or a “small statue.”

Comparatively, (Hagher, 2004) believe that African puppets are regarded as entertainers and are most often used in the religious context as an integral part of ritual drama. Furtherance to his contribution, puppets may also be used educationally and as a form of entertainment based on a country’s need. In such case, the use of puppets in some sub-Saharan countries is normally related to transmission and persistence of social structures (Kruger, 2010). Importantly, puppets in their renditions project moral values and promotes social cohesion in the attempt to draw attention to social issues in a community or society. Surprisingly, Dagan (1990) stressed that enough evidence on early documentation on puppetry as an art form in Africa by an African has not been adequately documented even though it existed for a while. Considerably, this art in Africa was officially documented when it was formally discovered by the Europeans.

Puppetry in South Africa is part of the country’s colonial heritage. The indigenous peoples of South Africa, unlike many pre-colonial communities elsewhere in northern, western and central Africa according to Dagan (1990) had no puppet tradition apart from toe puppets in the Karoo, a region whose inhabitants at first had very little contact with the settlers in and around the Cape. Hence, during colonisation the art of puppetry in Africa was already being enacted in various forms. In fact, where there are human theatre experiences there are bound to be puppetry theatre. It has been observed that in the documentation of the Europeans record on African puppetry that puppets and mask were integral parts of the traditional theatrical practices of the African societies. Evidentially, this art form is used to preserve the heroes from the past to the present and are showcased in the form of models [wood and clay carvings] (Dagan, 1990).

Increasingly, during the twentieth century, this system of presentation became popular as a form of entertainment for both young and old and has gained exposure and leverage in theatrical performances, at international festivals and on the television shows as a social commentator. For that matter, this theatrical presentation embraces all levels of education, age, status, gender, religion and culture (AREPP, 2004).

## Types of Puppets

Puppets are fashioned in different forms, the most familiar ones are the marionettes, muppets, mascots, glove and hand puppets (Speaight, 1967). Generally, puppets are a general term used for all types of figures manipulated from above by the use of strings as seen in Figure 1, manipulated by a person’s hands or legs. Glove puppets shown in Figure 2 enables the puppeteer to wear the puppet on his hand and manipulates the puppet to

bring the character to life. However, confusion often arises when reference is made to muppets and mascot as similar but distinct puppets.

**Figure 1: Stringed puppet**



**Figure 2: Glove puppet**



In view of that, Badenhorst clarifies the difference between muppet and mascot. In his explanation, muppets are constructed using soft materials like foam. In construction they are often covered in either a smooth material or a rough textured material depending on the type of character one decides to portray. They often have a wide moveable mouth manipulated by the puppeteer's left and right hands which makes the puppet a peculiar one as seen in Figure 3



**Figure 3: Muppet**

With regard to a mascot as clarified in Figure 4 which is a body puppet, is manipulated by the human body (Badenhorst, 2008). Hence, the difference between these two are the muppet being manipulated by the human hand as the mascot operated by the puppeteer who then becomes the human body.

One of the expert puppet constructors, Herodotus stressed that first, wire-controlled figures as in Figure 5 were employed in fertility rights, and later used for entertainment (Barasch, 2004).



**Figure 4: Mascot**

In later centuries, the name for these figures came to be known as derived from the old French word marionette, a diminutive of marion from the Virgin Mary (“Marionette,” 2004). Just like the conventional drama plots, most puppet shows also involve storytelling with thematic plots well contrived to present and deal with societal issues or to present comic reliefs. Hence for that matter, puppets have been used to communicate the ideas and needs of human societies.

To an extent some historians Latshaw, (2000) and Lisa, (2002) argue that puppetry pre-date actors in theatre. This is to say that around 2000BC, history revealed that string-operated figures of wood performed the action of kneading bread and it’s believed that puppets possessed the five senses. For that matter puppets were used by then as domestic utility elements to assist with domestic chores and other activities rather than for entertainment.

#### **Development of Puppetry in Africa**

According to history, it appears puppetry tradition of Ancient Egypt may have been inherited by sub-Saharan Africa. In most rural African countries, they adhere to traditions as an affirmation of cultural identity and these are enacted through traditional festivals which act as a way to affirm the cultural practices of a community. The primary function of these festivities is to bind the group together, to celebrate and to affirm their identity and reunion through cultural practices that can include rituals and rites. In these performances the puppet and/or mask act as a social intervention. Normally in the presence of the whole community, the cultural affirmation is actualised by the use of objects such as puppets and masks, and they become visual metaphors. Also, it seems some traditionalist in Africa still utilise puppets and mask in ritual drama, as well as in their healing ceremonies and for some economic purposes (Kruger, 2010). Wilson (1998), has it that since theatre is centred on human beings, it is not surprising that the impulse towards theatre is universal and for that matter significant in the development of a nation just like puppet theatre which employs similar configurations or approach. This impulse towards theatre has been apparent wherever human society has developed in Europe, Asia and throughout Africa. Virtually, every culture recorded in history or studied by anthropologists, find rituals, religious ceremonies, and celebrations that include elements of theatre as a performative art. One critical aspect of theatre is a presentation by performers in front of an audience. For instance, a ceremony or ritual conducted by religious leaders before members of a community. Meanwhile, this act could be played by puppets as symbolic activities. A second aspect is costumes such as those worn by priests or tribal chiefs, which also applies to some puppets which form a symbol

to identify the roles played by the wearer. In this case preferably each puppet is to be costumed to identified role played or character being impersonated.

In recent times, puppetry lives on as a popular theatre form in most villages in the rural and urban areas in most West African countries, often within a ceremonial context dynamically linked to ranges of folk forms involving dance and storytelling. Expressively, theatre has become a prominent platform in the extensive struggle to

address social problems in Africa. Additionally, as part of the recent traditional forms of dramatic expression, puppets are also being advocated for in the sensitisation programmes.

Particularly, in Ghana some traditional herbalist vendors use puppets as side attractions to market their product which serves as a local advertising strategy to attract prospective clients to their sales. Furthermore, in some part of Africa, cultural values and ideas are still disseminated by the use of puppets as a strong medium for social behavioural change. This mode of dissemination is less expensive and effective as compared to the use of conventional performers to achieve a desired communication intent. Presently, some directors in the show biz feature different type of puppets in music videos to cut down cost of production.

### **Animated Property Puppet**

The four major types of puppets presentation most people identify with are: gloves, rod marionette puppets and mascot. However, the authors and designers have introduced an additional form [Animated Property Puppet] which adds to the list of current theatrical puppets to aid in puppet shows for the development of puppetry in Africa and the world at large; for pedagogical instructions, dissemination and sensitization of communities in development projects. This new form could be life-sized or of a small size. It takes its inspiration from the mascot concept which is manipulated by the hand of the puppeteer in the mouth of the puppet. Meanwhile, the movement of the mouth of the puppet synchronises with the voice of the user or a pre-recorded dialogue of the puppeteer.

### **Object Symbolism and Form**

The concept of the Animated Property Puppet (APP) aims at giving a voice to in-animate objects like bottle, bin, litter and container among others as mediums to address the human challenges and conflicts based on social issues. There again, the idea explores the use of these objects as symbolic characters of unique expression as educational facilities. The concept makes us [human beings] delve into ourselves and to have a better understand of nature and what we create as human beings in order to enhance our relationship with everything around us with expressive moments.

APP representation is a large-sized three-dimensional figure which is constructed in human form but a representation of the object concerned. Additionally, the object assumes a human form having legs and hands as extensions of its body. Meanwhile, emphasis is placed on the quality of movement executed by the user, body language and the dramatic prominence given to the poetic dimension of the performance. To a large extent the visual engagement is paramount to the total picture of the directorial concept (Lang, Jianping and Feng, 2013). In corroboration, Wilson (1998) stresses that in some performative acts, performers are called on to play other nonhuman roles other than conventional theatrical roles. In the medieval morality play *Everyman*, characters represent ideas or concepts, such as Fellowship, Good Deeds, Worldly Possession and Beauty. These dramatic characters are the exception rather than the rule however. For instance, the Animated Property Puppet could be a bottle, tin, garbage, litter, filth among others. The puppet under review is designed specifically to assume the characteristics of a particular object in terms of form, shape colour and texture. The whole idea is fashioned along the concept of constructing costume property or the mascot dummy. In order to position the puppet within the human perspective and to create a three-dimensional communicational tool application, body parts like legs, hands and other external features are attached to the puppet to assume the human behavioural characteristics which are connected to the user puppeteer. Puppetry presentation is believed to be a product of imagination that can illusively command the attention and emotions of the audience when well executed. The effect of the three-dimensional puppetry presentation in focus uniquely underpins the appropriateness of the facility as an efficient communicational tool.

Psychologically, puppets assume the mood of the user or applicator as a base in the transmission of emotions. They attract, maintain and nurture the emotions of the audience during a show. Interestingly, the

in-animated property puppet in a production scenario can have a direct interactive session with the audience as far as physical contact and emotional responses are concerned during a production. However, theatre is a make belief that abstracts or mirrors life and reflects societal needs. This style of presentation basically draws the issues very close to the audience to portraying the reality of life. Meanwhile, the facility is designed to have fun and to sustain the eye of the viewer during which process the audience would have

appreciated the issue at stake with reference to the theme or message. This would have incubated the challenge or social issue and then drawn an appreciable conclusion to the unfolding event in focus. The facility can very much transform an audience into a participant because of its engaging relationship with the audience or viewer.

## Design and Aesthetics

In a theatrical presentation, it is imperative as designers to share information and communicate both the verbal language and the visual impression to an audience or viewers in order to achieve the overall artistic purpose. These two expressions combine to bring out meanings and interpretation to any communicational intent. Per the specifications of the model, the designed facility is simple, recognisable and easy to manipulate.

The design concept is based on the three-dimensional formulation with the human characteristics as part of the guiding principles. In view of the constructional method, the original object as in Figure 6 becomes the design and constructional point of reference. Figure 7 is the side view of the manipulator's guide and Figure 8 is the completed version of the animated property costume.

## Materials and Tools

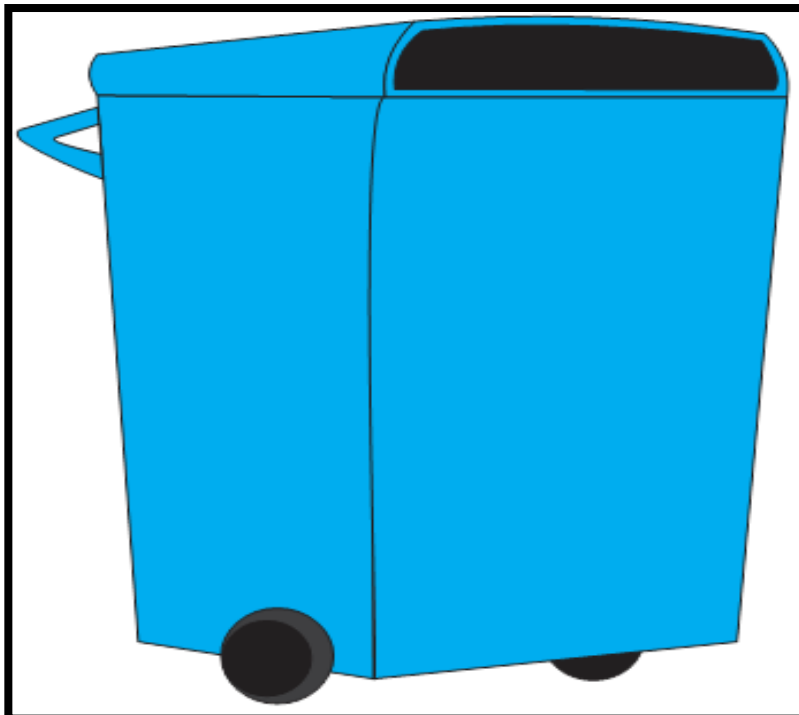
### 1. Materials

Latex foam, strawboard, formica glue, PVA white glue, acrylic paints of specified colour, scrim and water.

### 2. Tools

Pair of scissors, cutter, colour mixing containers, pencil, sketch pad and paint brushes

**Figure 5: Original object**



Source: Authors rendering, 2020

Figure 5 becomes the reference point of the design and construction of the animated property costume, in terms of colour, form, size and texture. For precision in terms of formulation, it is important to pick measurements from the

reference object in relation to the size of the puppeteer in order for the puppeteer to adequately fit into the property for convenient manipulation. Figure 6 shows how to operate the puppet and its various parts in the profile view. As part of its features, there are openings for both vision and ventilation which are covered in light scrim circular pieces of fabric. Additionally, the right hand is used to manipulate the mouth of the puppet while the left hand is used to hold the puppet object in place for stability and firmness.

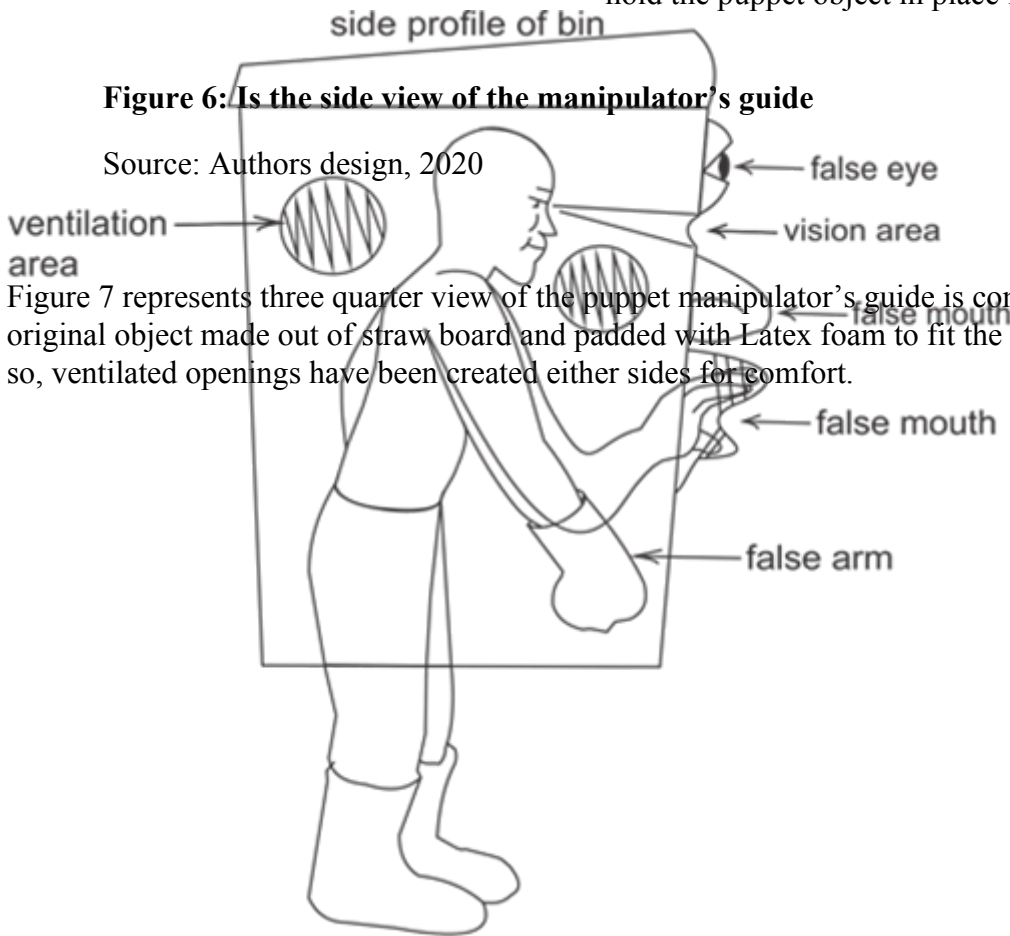


Figure 6: Is the side view of the manipulator's guide

Source: Authors design, 2020

Figure 7 represents three quarter view of the puppet manipulator's guide is completed in a replicated design of the original object made out of straw board and padded with Latex foam to fit the wearer, whether body or hand, more so, ventilated openings have been created either sides for comfort.

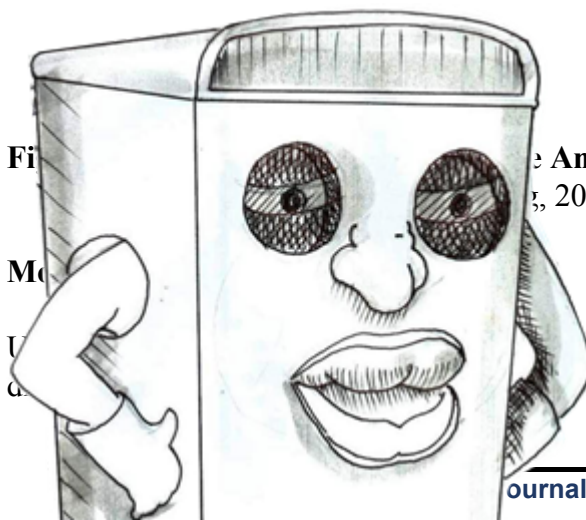


Figure 7: Three quarter view of the puppet manipulator's guide is completed in a replicated design of the original object made out of straw board and padded with Latex foam to fit the wearer, whether body or hand, more so, ventilated openings have been created either sides for comfort.

Source: Authors design, 2020

gloves and the rod puppets, the animated property puppet under its stature and has a gross influence on the whole production as far as



presentation and visibility is concerned. The puppet behaves like a human being because of its carefully selected human characteristic features coupled with the application style that involves the user in various ways.

Additionally, the mode of dialogue is designed as a pre-recorded audio voice production synchronized with the movement of the puppet's lips and other body parts creating an illusion of realism.

This technique is less intimidating and stressful since the puppet is designed to holistically contain the user; both non professionals and professional actors. The fun and quality of the facility primarily is that the user need not learn lines [dialogues] for the production and is hidden in the puppet to avoid intimidation and embarrassment during presentation to a live audience. Users do not need to be professional actors or to have a good voice. More so, the presentation could be done in any language as far as delivery is concerned. The only task one needs to consider apart from the construction of the puppet is to record the various dialogues of the actors. Another great advantage of the use of this medium is its visibility states with regards the viewing public. As a matter of fact, its enormous size simply augments the viewing possible at every angle in a particular point in time. Interestingly, puppets are like electrical wire, carry and transmitting feelings. They are agents of nature and are, literally and figuratively, a "size" that children can relate to. They feel good in the hand of a confident user; and appear fun and appealing in the eye of the beholder. While tapes, film, and television can hold the viewing attention of adults or children at varying levels of involvement, the puppet at work can reach within and transform a "viewer" into a participant. It can do such things because the puppet requires the involvement of the user in a variety of ways. Perhaps the most dynamic example of that involvement is illustrated by the simple fact that puppets as learning tools must move.

In view of this, the crafted facility has basic operational features, less complicated and light weight to enhance mobility of the user. Additionally, the puppet could be worn over the body, held in one hand and manipulated with the other hand. The whole concept behind the formulation is to impersonate the human form, giving life to inanimate object to play out human roles in the form of education. Psychologically, the manipulation of the puppet assumes the characteristics of the human personae as indicated by Lisa, (2000) and has to be ordered in adaptation to the environment.

## Conclusion

Puppetry as promoted by Currell (1997) is one of the ancient art forms which originated about 3000 years ago. It has been an artistic form of presentation by the earliest people thereby holding an important place in traditional entertainment, education and have been

used as part of ritual drama throughout certain parts of the African continent (Pandey, 2017). Meanwhile, its style of presentation and fulfilment differs from country to country with unique form of identities and themes. These are usually all geared towards messages of social awareness, moral values, historical and traditional subjects.

With regards to documentation, Dagan (1990) affirms that enough evidence on early documentation on puppetry as an art form in Africa by an African has not been well document even though it dates back then. To this end, it was the Europeans that officially documented the art when it was discovered by them.

In terms of presentation, puppeteers most often enjoy the opportunities of hidden identity in the presentation of their craft and this is a privilege this art enjoys, much more the extraordinary freedom of expression that live actors do not enjoy (Dagan, 1990). Puppetry does not really depend on the brilliant acting technique of the manipulator but the skill acquired to operate the puppet facility. However, this art is all about sound, movement and light. Also, the art form seems to be the least expensive source of entertainment which employs almost all creative expressions of the performative and visual art.

The four major types of puppets most people identify with are: gloves, rod marionette puppets and mascot. However, the authors and designers have introduced an additional form [Animated Property Puppet] which adds to the list of current theatrical puppets.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, children and adult have developed the taste for cartoons and animations which were probably drawn from the puppetry concepts. This idea has even transcended into the corporate world by animating products and graphic on television commercials to increase leverage and exposure. Indeed, as part of this exploration, the intent is to popularize the African folk tales through the animated property puppets in order to impart children and adults with African cultural values and to promote, project and preserve the African heritage

beyond the African continent. I hope this drive will create the awareness, credence and needed attention for the appreciation of African art forms. More so, the Ghanaian market could take advantage and explore the increasing level of technological advancement and talents within.

### Recommendation

The animated property puppet is an effective model medium for social education that can be replicated and applied in various communities in Ghana and in other countries. Its appropriateness is awesome and less stressful. It is a project that could be adopted by both adults and children with regards entertainment and education.

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