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Confronting Contemporary Artistic Experience in Republic of Benin: The Case of "Eclosion Urbaine" and Magou Amédée (1990–2017)

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The establishment of colonial metropolises in Africa was an important step in strengthening the conceptualization of urban and rural space. Some precolonial cities became cosmopolitan by undergoing remarkable transformations, often due to the spatial reorganization of colonial administrations whose quarters were swiftly urbanized, while other parts of the same city may continue to present as more rural in character. These specific circumstances of urbanization held serious consequences for the lives of everyday people, but also for artistic production and reception. The two case studies considered here prove useful in understanding such a process. The first is the experience of Magou Amédée in his long quest to connect rural regions to contemporary art production. The second is devoted to Eclosion Urbaine's original experience in Porto-Novo, which demonstrates how interactions between urban contemporary artists and rural social practices can still be successfully achieved within an exclusively urban context.

Introduction

The current understanding of rural and urban areas in Africa date back to the creation of colonial metropolises on the continent. They had then taken the form of cities divided in two, where there were parallel but segmented forms of existence between colonizers and local people. Urbanization did not spread evenly across the city's outline.[1] From the time of independence movements of the 1960s, the question of urbanization has taken on particular significance in Africa, aggravating prior problems that were already poorly managed since the colonial period and generating new relationships that are of interest for post-colonial studies.

Today, the relationship between urban and rural areas is not one of racial or territorial segregation, but the nature of its expression seems to be the same because here also, forces of domination have pushed local peoples into marginalized spaces. In fact, the concept of an "authentic Africa[2]" inherited from the colonial period—one that suggests *true* African culture is to be found in villages or rural areas only—seems to be a hard nut to crack and, therefore, continues to govern this new relationship between urban and rural peoples. With regard to the arts, urban artists with exposure to international and local multicultural environments that have instigated profound identity crises may prolong this situation. They will therefore develop different connections to rural spaces, which will change according to the changing times and, above all, different generations.

In the Republic of Benin, the process of urbanization does not escape such a history, and, although precolonial by some aspects, it also goes back to the colonial period, in the need for the colonizer to set up infrastructures of governance and, above all, control over conquered territories. As everywhere else on the continent, colonizers participated in the profound reordering of the original spatial organization, which continues to impact urban cities today; this has contributed to a general upheaval in the mode of functioning and modes of thought related to

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the issue of urbanization (Auge, 2010). It is from this period that the paradigm of the urban and the non-urban originated conceptually, whose overlaps we still do not know very well, apart from the awareness of the cultural diversity in cities, whose origin was in the method of cultural domination of the continent, subject to assimilationist policies in Francophone countries and to the "indirect rule" of those that are Anglophone (Bidimadu, 2007).

This leads us to some questions. Has there been a real break between cities and villages since the creation of colonial cities? Does the status of the former colonial city, dominated essentially by a hybrid culture and its own strategies of cultural mediation, oblige contemporary artists to retreat to rural areas to find innovative ways for their work or creating new aesthetic? How does this recourse to rural zones allow current art practice to escape exclusively urban contexts and globalizing trends in cultural expression?

Here I will consider various moments of artists' recourse to this so-called rural space. Two cases will be examined, one of Magou from 1990s and the other of "Eclosion Urbaine" from 2017. Thus this study will cover the period between 1990 and 2017. On the one hand, 1990, the year of the Conférence National des Forces Vives, was an important moment in Benin's history with regard to democratic engagement and, consequently, cultural development; the era itself was of great influence to Magou's art practices. On the other hand, the first edition of "Eclosion Urbaine," an artistic and urbanization initiative, was in 2015 and the last in 2017. It will be useful also to consider this last edition in order to question the influence that exhibiting artwork in rural areas and addressing rural audiences may have on an artist's practice. Does it change their view of their artistic practice or contribute to its continual revision? How have they used these experiences to position themselves within a globalized context? (Bauman, 2002) It is then not an issue of returning to the debates on the perception of African artistic expressions in the West (Förster, 1996), but of opening up a field of reflection on the direct communication between urban artists and rural space. Using this as a point of departure, I suggest that artists from different generations in Benin have employed different mechanisms to maintain links with rural areas.

The methodology adopted in studying this complex subject was systematic and also interdisciplinary, especially given that the questions of interest come from a space at the heart of communication between two worlds: the urban and the rural, the artists and those who purchase their works, and artists and those of us who research them. Highlighting the interactions of my field work and secondary research have helped to validate my hypothesis and my end results. It is useful here to recall the importance of active observation as d'Arripe (2009) pointed out: "Because social norms, cultures and identities are built in action and during interactions." This empiric tool, well known by anthropologists, is required here for me as an art historian to discern how artists deal with urban and rural areas. Likewise, the methodological tools used by historians to unearth the precise circumstances and facts, the careful consideration by urbanists of the stages of urbanization, and theories of postcolonial studies are essential to analyzing various aspects of the phenomenon at hand. However, there is a leading methodological focus, as the scope of my study does not concern the entire African continent, and even less so its "ethnoscapes" (Appadurai, 2001). It is instead concentrated on Benin, where singular artistic

experiences are taking place, the exploration of variables beyond which the space of this article does not permit.

I will first provide a brief analysis on the context of artistic practices in Benin. Second, I will assess the experiences of Magou Amédée by exploring his connection to rural areas over various periods of time. Finally, the third section will bring us to one of the artist collectives of the "Eclosion Urbaine," located in a rural part of Porto-Novo.

Colonial Cities and the Contemporary Artistic Situation in Benin

The prolific character of contemporary artistic production in Benin is in stark contrast with its peculiar situation in an almost forgotten country, in the sense of its never having established schools or training workshops for artists as in the major art centers of the Poto-Poto school in Congo, Oshogbo school in Nigeria, or "École de Dakar" in Senegal. The reasons for such circumstances are certain to have originated in the long artistic tradition established in the royal court of Danxomè (Akinjogbin, 1967; Dunglas, 1967). Indeed, during the precolonial period, an entire system built around led to the emergence of the production of important wood, iron, and silver sculptural production, which reflects artistic imagination and innovation—for example, in the god *Gou* now displayed in the Louvre. However, this phenomenon of not established schools or training workshops for artists (royal patronage) leads to many questions, above all, to determine whether it has spared the country from the identity crisis and cultural disturbances that many other African countries have been subjected to. To approach this question, I will examine the notion of culture, but also the concept of cultural identity.

In a previous study,[3] I drew on different definitions of culture to begin investigating the meaning of cultural identity and its influence on the reception of African contemporary art throughout the world. Here, I am modifying this approach by introducing a new variable, one that instead attempts to echo this notion of culture within the processes of globalization unfolding in Africa. To analyze what cultural identity means within a context of strong identity instability (Bhabha, 2007), we must evaluate its relationship to globalization and its involvement in his evolution of aesthetic practices. And in addition to reflecting on the work and experience of specific artists, we must also consider case studies of Beninese cities such as Porto-Novo and Cotonou. As a result of their history—indeed, their colonial past—such cities cannot escape the phenomenon of globalization. In other words, we must study the effects of new dynamics introduced in recent years by both centrifugal and centripetal forces of globalization as emphasized by Appadurai (2001): "Their combined influence on the work of the imagination as a constitutive characteristic of modern subjectivity" (p. 27).

The manifestation of globalization is as old as the first attempts of humans to discover the world beyond their immediate environment and to trade with other peoples—for example, the slave trade starting in the 13th century between Europe and Africa. The historicity of this phenomenon led Brunel (2007) to emphasize the declaration made by Polybius in the second century BC: "Before, the events that took place in the world were not related to each other. Since then, they are all dependent on each other." But in its modern form, globalization goes back to

the 1980s. This period is marked by the rise of liberal doctrines, the means of communication, the Internet, media growth, and, above all, non-governmental organizations.[4] According to Brunel (2007), it "designates a new phase in the global integration of economic, financial, ecological and cultural phenomena." This global integration of which she spoke has in its ambition the standardization of cultures or, at the least, their strong hybridization. This led Cohen (2007, p. 1) to write:

> It is tempting to interpret globalization as the continuation, by other means, of the westernization of the world. Whether the focus is on economic or cultural domination, West, now directed by the United States, seems to be completing the work begun five hundred years ago by the world's colonization.

In these circumstances, how do we understand the notion of cultural identity? Is its standardization possible? In *The Bases of Cultural Anthropology*,[5] Herkovits (1950) provided a definition of culture that comes close to reconciling the concepts of "civilization" and "Kultur," and reconciliation between the European schools that defined them differently.[6] Following Durkheim's (Mauss & Durkheim, 1969) definition of culture allows us to understand the element of historical dynamism; this suggests the notion of culture/civilization as a dynamic principle, not enclosed within a space/time, but rather one that may radiate beyond its place of formation within the constraints of places that receive or adopt it (Bourdieu, 1979; Compagnon, 2001). As a result, it may well correspond to the concept of globalization, a direct heir of colonization. The implication here would thus be that in the colonizers' urbanization of Africa, characteristics of their own culture extended to the cultures they encountered, transforming into a new one. This stage of globalization promoted the emergence of new cultural identities, unavoidably hybrid and greatly influenced by the process of urbanization (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1988, p. 52). Gordon-Childe (1950) in *The Urban Revolution* argued for the correlation between urban development and "civilization" since prehistoric times, demonstrating how the term *civilization* has always been attached to cities. He stated: "Civilization cannot be defined in quite such simple terms. Etymologically the word is connected with 'city'" (p. 3). However, these cities, centers of paradoxical urbanization and development in terms of social adaptation and the multiplicity of encounters, are sources of structural imbalances and psychological disturbances, which is especially the case in Africa (Beauchemin & Bocquier, 2004).

This difficulty faced by humankind, and even more by artists, is still relevant today. From the new cultural formations created by the colonial metropolises, we can better envision cities as melting pots, favorable to artistic production developed with increasing connection to rural spaces in an increasingly globalized context. I will now present two concrete examples of colonial cities, which from the beginning of their creation have cradled hybridity[7] of culture and identity. I will also analyze how these concepts remain at the heart of the issue of the problematic relationship cities and rural areas. These are Porto-Novo and Cotonou.

Porto-Novo and Cotonou's Connection with Rural Areas Experiences

In his volume published in 1962, Verhaegen demonstrated the interest of researchers in the

issue of urbanization in Africa south of Sahara by listing more than 2,544 relevant books and articles.[8] He referred to three groups of cities whose morphological determination was related to their main activities—namely ports, railways, and mining/industrial. Porto-Novo was categorized as belonging to the first group, with its essential function being that of port activity. This, in fact, constituted an oversight, because even if the precolonial city had port access for traffic of various kinds, it was no longer the case from the time of colonization onward. However, the city was an important railway stop between Pobè, where palm oil was produced, and Cotonou. Since colonial times, Cotonou's urban identity has been defined by its role as a port, rail, and industrial city. I will now explore the consequences of the two cities' modernization on aesthetic practices.

Porto-Novo is at its foundation a cosmopolitan city, as described by Pineau-Jamous (1986).[9] This is why it has three names.[10] Through its port activities related to slavery, and by nature of its role as a transit city for Oyo's Kingdom, its open character was established. In 1882, Porto-Novo's king signed protectorates with the French, and it became the capital of the new conquered territory in 1892 after the fall of Abomey. Porto-Novo would already be populated by about 15,000 inhabitants by the late 19th century (Person, 1975), and it would remain densely populated, which is still the case today.[11] Thus, Porto-Novo has all the characteristics of a city where new forms emerge. However, colonial administration undertook the process of urbanization to set up its structures of government,[12] which created a partition of the city between functional and housing districts for the colonizers and local peoples' territory. Non-urbanized segments developed at a slower pace than the rest of the city and remained precolonial in their internal organization and, by contemporary standards, appear as rural pockets within the city. This was the case in most colonies, the origin of which Coquery-Vidrovitch (1988, p. 66) has described:

> The use of traditional African habitat techniques in the city was obviously a widespread fact since, precisely, these allowed the authorities to avoid intervening in this domain; [...] It is this precolonial urban nucleus that has been used, which is more reason to avoid intervention, in the name of respect for customs.

This is exactly the case of Porto-Novo, where a pocket of rurality remained due to limited urbanization. From independence in 1960, the status of political capital has remained relatively unchanged. However, urbanization has barely evolved (Messiah & Tribillon, 1988), and there is no official cultural or artistic mediation strategies since there existed only one cultural center, the French one, which was closed when the Marxist-Leninist government decided to turn it into a youth center. This is not to say that the city stayed closed in on itself, despite its inhabitants being very devoted to their original culture. As pointed out by Mouelle (1972, p. 150): "In fact, there is naivety for a people to think that because it has always been in a certain way, this way is good forever. It's an attitude that turns one's back to the ideal of creativity." So, on the contrary, the city is dynamic and has continued to receive French aid workers who have maintained a level of artistic creation since establishing a small local art market.[13] The broad range of artists who work with diverse influences and come from different backgrounds

help prove this consistent openness. This leads me to ask the crucial question, the same one that Bidimadu (2007, p. 164) asked: "How to ask the question of cultural diversity at a time of cultural globalization?" How can the multiplicity of presence be ensured, and what kind of mediation does it require? Does the city make a difference compared to its peripheral regions? (Ngango, 1976) What relationships do artists have and continue to maintain with these regions? The attachment to a specific culture and practices, which can now be called residual in a global context, is partly favored by the lack of urbanization that still makes these places almost "rural" within the city. These rural pockets located right in the city center, and the relationship between artists and urban peripheries, will constitute the subject of my study here—as is my study of Cotonou to follow.

The history of Cotonou's establishment is atypical in comparison to the more traditional cities in the rest of the country. Toward the end of the slave trade, the kings of Danxomè began seeking another form of traffic and commerce they could control to ensure their continued domination over their neighbors. This unfortunately aroused much envy, even from European powers, including France (Garcia, 1976), who, by means of persuasion and cunning, took over Cotonou in what was to provoke a diplomatic crisis.[14] According to Verhaegen (1962), Cotonou would correspond to all described morphology, as it is an important port city, the terminus of the railway system, and the headquarters of important industrial activity. This open characteristics of the city made immediately resurfaces all ugliest feature of the new cities. Thus since the city was not linked to a particular political entity, the interests of the heterogeneous population were divergent. The cultural base is therefore one to which each of these different populations contributes on a smaller scale, i.e., the "ethnoscape" that Appadurai (2001) spoke of at the macro level. It is then easy to see here that, with the colonial administration and this mosaic of cultures, what emerged was a particular culture/civilization whose dependence on its place of origin is uncertain. Additionally, after independence, each diplomatic representation of the former colonizers established its cultural center in any given African country. The French cultural center in Benin is a meeting place for students, professors, writers, and artists, and, above all, a place for the promotion and diffusion of their works. There are also other cultural centers or smaller institutions made by the United States, China, Russia, and other countries. Obviously, this type of mediation is problematic and has a serious impact on the evolution of artistic production (Tchibozo, 2013a), and it is thus useful to ask how artists react to such a situation within a context of unstable identity.

The history of constitution and the acquiring of status by these two cities generated some challenges with regard to artistic production. Urbanization, despite its different manifestations in these two different contexts, had a profound influence on how artists generated hybrid cultural identities (Tchibozo, 2015a). All the artists of whom I speak here know the city of Porto-Novo very well, including its rural pockets. That means that here we have two contact zones, one with the urban and the other with the rural, and that they, as artists, can swing between them. What influence could it have on them since their childhood? This could be, in fact, the first level of subtle identity disturbance that manifested before that of globalization. Thus, is their motivation to build connections to rural areas a way to resolve the issue of cultural identity in a

global context? It will also be useful here to identify moments in which artists are influenced in their practice. This study will take into account the progress in each of these artist's practice in relation to their contact with rural regions.

Amédée Magou and His Connections with Rural Spaces

More than 30 years ago, the artist Amédée Magou had neither organized nor participated in exhibitions in cities. For many people, Magou is a mysterious artist, one who is not inclined to open doors to show his work. In fact, Magou has a social and artistic approach that few people can fully understand working in a mode of logic once well described by Van Khe (1973, p. 9), who stated: "The colonized peoples seek to imitate those who dominated them, persuaded of the superiority of the cultures of those who defeated them by the superiority of their techniques. They eventually confuse progress, modernization, with Westernization." The challenge here is to avoid falling into the trap of doing a biography of the artist in the classic sense. Magou is self-taught, curious, and open to all forms of experience that can enable him to improve his artistic practice. Though his preferred medium is painting, he also believes that it has not allowed him to fully explore his African roots, and, with this in mind, he began an undertaking of major works over 20 years ago that have still yet to be completed. It is a set of sculptures with masks that he produces and then gives up to the elements of nature, weather, and the sea, before resuming work on them himself. These sculptures will be assembled together and incorporated into a large-scale installation with a fishing net that extends over hundreds of meters. The approach is patient and does not correspond to the time of the one who wants to live more quickly of his art and, above all, to radiate. This being said, Magou also knows how to work the local and international art market in his own way and can thus continue to work. So how may I best explain his approach?

Figure 1. Magou, 1989, exhibition of "Liberty" at Grand-Popo. © Magou Amedée. Reproduced by permission of Magou.

What is important to note here is his unique approach in presenting his work in rural areas. As a first step in 1989, a year of great protests against the Marxist government, the artist went to the small country town of Grand-Popo to exhibit his work "Liberty" (Figure 1).

The work, as it appears here, intends to present the real situation faced by the country and its people at this specific moment in time. It is easy to note how it symbolizes one structure, the country, but in a very bad state as the links that hold different items have begun to come apart.

There is also in the center of the main structure a kind of ladder that becomes narrower and narrower, suggesting there is no chance for everyone to come to the top of the social order. It helps indicate how over time people have become less able to connect and understand each other, leading to the protests and turmoil. The work's title is as problematic as for the reality it represents. However, why display it in the rural area instead of in a great city, at the center of the protests? Many interpretations are possible. The first is that Magou, as an artist who was not officially recognized, remained discreet throughout the era of Marxist rule to avoid repression. He resisted and never sold his work to the government as did many other artists. So instead he displayed this work outside of big cities so as not to attract attention and, thus, repression. The second possibility is that he hoped to raise awareness among people who are supposed to not understand what happened in great cities. As he depicted liberty here, people could understand why their children cannot have prosperity with this government, and when protests reach the village, it could have massive support. However, what is central is this first level of exchange with the rural area. That shows the will to take these people as witness of what happened. That is a political dimension of his work.

Two years later, in 1991, the artist took the opportunity of a festival organized by his friend Koffi Koko, a well-known dancer, to again exhibit some of his works in another small country town named Possotomè. Though the issue addressed in the works was also freedom, the aim here was different than the first time. Likewise, the circumstances of their exhibition also differed since here, in addition to villagers, there were also tourists, whose reactions may have proved more difficult to read. The pieces, made of jute, reflect the new direction taken in his work during this time. There were many pieces but documentation only exists for some of them (Figure 2).

The circumstance that led him in this new direction would take too long to describe, but it is useful to point out that it all started with the famous "Conference Nationale des Forces Vives de la Nation" in February 1990. At this particular moment, the artist recalled, his teenage cousin caught and killed a cat in bag of jute. The original work from this series was intended to abstractly free the cat and, by extension, the people. This gave the impression of an explosion of freedom.

After this conference, the new democratic government understood the importance of cultural development. It initiated large-scale cultural projects that raised artists' awareness of their own culture and provided opportunities to produce work on topics related to traditional religions. Magou did not participate in these projects, but I cannot imagine him staying unaware of what was happening. And that is why this period presents a key moment in his artistic growth (Tchibozo, 2013a). The artist moved from his Cotonou gallery at Avenue Steinmetz to a small country town, Allada, about 50 kilometers away. In this rather unusual environment, far from the known cultural centers, he brought along some young artists as well, because: "I saw that the level of those who arrive on this scene was dramatically low and I wanted to do an experiment[15]" But why choose to organize a training workshop in this still highly rural area whose main activity is agriculture, the production of pineapple? Did Magou want to play the role of the Western art patron of 1960s, for example, Ulli Beier in Nigeria? Was it a will to drag young people closer to some of the

Figure 2. Magou, 1991, exhibition at Possotome of jute work. © Magou Amedée. Reproduced by permission of Magou.

Figure 3. Magou, 1993, exhibition and performance of costumes at Avakpa. © Magou Amedée. Reproduced by permission of Magou.

realities that only a non-cosmopolitan environment could offer them? Was it that he felt he had to form a new generation of artists, open to the world but also to their origins?

In any case, and with great disappointment, this initiative came to an abrupt end, and Magou came back to Cotonou. But he thus changed the paradigm by choosing to address his works directly to the rural audience. In 1993 at Avakpa, a village close to Allada, he organized a workshop of his new works. Beside the exhibition of artworks, there was also a dance performance with dresses evoking Gèlèdè (Tchibozo, 2011, 2013b)[16] (Figure 3).

This was a new concept of art practice he developed while sourcing textiles from many parts of Africa to conceive costumes. Previously, he invented the knot work he wisely presented here along with the costumes' performance (Figure 4).

There was a great artistic moment in a rural zone, I think, when he associated what African craftsmen realized and how he transformed them

Figure 4. Magou, 1993, exhibition of knot work during costumes' performance at Avakpa. © Magou Amedée. Reproduced by permission of Magou.

and what he created with the same textile. Another technique used here is Photoshop to create a mask on the faces of two persons who worked formerly with him.

In 2007, he went back to Avakpa to exhibit the costumes on the red walls for two days, but there was no performance (Figure 5). Strangely, Magou told me during a conversation in 2013, it attracted many people and triggered unexpected comments in the village. People remembered the performance and now compared it with a particular situation in ceremonies at sacred places. They even identified forms that they related to a particular person. At the end, it aroused a joyful atmosphere, laughter, and an incessant parade in front of the works during this impromptu workshop in the village (Figure 6).

In fact, the comments took him to unsuspected shores to which he was far from thinking while he was performing these pieces. This suggested the idea of turning a film on this particular workshop to save a moment of exchange with illiterate people who would have been estimated unable to understand works produced in an urban context. A memorable experience has he confessed. The works had taken other dimensions on these walls and referred me to a deeper reflection. Here I can notice the influence this milieu has been able to exert on him.

It is still difficult for me to identify the origin of this idea of presenting works to rural

Figure 5. Magou, 2007, exhibition of costumes at Avakpa. © Magou Amedée. Reproduced by permission of Magou.

people in spite of the many moments of exchange that we had on the issue. What seems to me obvious is the need for him to feel in his practices that he is close to what he wants to do. In 2006, he admitted: "When I carve a work, I feel what genius they have deployed, I feel how far our ancestors have gone to leave us what we see today. I perceive contact with the earth. They deserve our homage!" So, apparently, there is this need to confronting its creation to cultural reality without associating it with the common sense of seeking authenticity in rural areas. His work is upstream to the exercise and is therefore not directly influenced. In 2016, Magou stated: "I do not have to claim and justify what I am in any way whatsoever. Neither in my daily life, nor in my works. It is a game to which I could not engage in and, it is absurd to spend energy for it."[17]

Probably, these comments and reactions inspired him later, as I pointed out above. The result was just as impressive, and we had planned a third experience in which I should personally participate to see directly the reactions of the population in order to have a firsthand experience and clearer idea of the process. For now, this is a project that still needs to gather the various means for its execution.

Figure 6. Magou, 2007, exhibition of costumes at Avakpa. Note how people, old, young, and children, are around the piece, and how the oldest are very interrogative about it, which looks like Jesus on the cross or a traditional curtain. © Magou Amedée. Reproduced by permission of Magou.

The main lesson to be learned from these experiences is the change of practices by the artist, who, from all that has been experienced, tried to put in motion the comments and reactions of the people about his works. The realization of a film is in progress, and Magou became a computer enthusiast. He is creating currently a virtual museum of all his production from the beginning up to now, which could be transported around the world via the Internet or in situ projections.

Contemporary Artists and Pockets of Rurality in Porto-Novo

To understand contemporary artists' connection to rural areas in Porto-Novo, it is useful to consider the long history of the formation of this city, the result of the consecutive installation of various populations in precolonial times, and its new status due to the colonial administration. This set is at the basis of the complexity of the contemporary city (Tchibozo, 2016g, p. 99).

Urbanization has been the least of colonizers' worries as a ruse "to respect the customs" (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1988, p. 66), and these pockets of rurality have survived to the time until the independence, and even until very recently.

"Eclosion Urbaine" (Tchibozo, 2016g) is urbanization and artistic initiative in the context of another important moment in Benin. It characterizes the change in the governance marked by decentralization. Locals authorities' enterprises are encouraged, an they can undertake decentralized collaboration. This allowed this project that gave artists the opportunity to express their creativity in relation to the rural practices, except that here we are downtown. It is, however, useful to questioning the degree of the links that these artists maintain with the rural spaces in their art practices that enabled them to participate in this experience since it is itself original.[18] It will not be easy to solve this issue as we have to deal with a heterogeneous group of artists whose interests are not necessarily the same, but who have a common denominator: they all live in Porto-Novo or in its periphery. That means at one time or to another, they have had to do with these places, or at least they know them well. The well-known notable among of them are Theodore Dakpogan, Simplice Ahouansou, Kiffouly, Gérard Bassalé, and Houédanou Zount. They are the regulars who have long established links with rural areas particularly, the outlying villages of Porto Novo and some as Theodore Dakpogan, blacksmith at the birth in the quarter, aptly named "Goukomè[19]" in the city, is inspired by the god "Gou" and claims it, but now lives in the village Adjara.

Thus, what the artists have to do is to reveal from their imaginary, places named "Vodun Honto." These places, a real socialization space as they remain rural, received Vodun Cults' followers who performed in public to the rhythm of drums and songs, normally during solemn ceremonies. This urbanization initiative took into account all these specificities. There were some individual works during these workshops, but most of them are collective pieces. The artists were therefore invited to perform works in several hands, certainly to justify the fact that they are all well impregnated of this culture. Three important places of this district with its hundred years' old houses were impacted by these artists' interventions. It is about "Azalou Comè," "Djihoué Comè," and "Yɔhó Dikouin" but also the walls of the houses along all the paved street. The works at this level give, for some, the impression of missed graffiti, but others take on fairly well-known themes of contemporary art in Benin as about the adulterated fuel that is found in painting and in installation (Figure 7).

They should also be inspired by sacred objects to create a new one. This is the case of the "Asso" object, which is very seldom displayed to the uninitiated, but that the artists have remarkably achieved on the wall for all (Figure 8).

There are many kinds of this object as it is use in daily worship to invoke spirit with particular cadence and in convent, this one is artwork. Another sacred object realized by the artist Simplice Ahouansou is the "Assen." Normally, it stays in the special place in the family home named Yɔhó, where people worship to celebrate ancestors. Here, Ahouansou transfigured it in an artwork. For him, the spiral in white symbolizes the spirit of a dead person that climbs up to the sky and from there could protect the rest of the family as the summit of the piece is as an umbrella. It is absolutely different

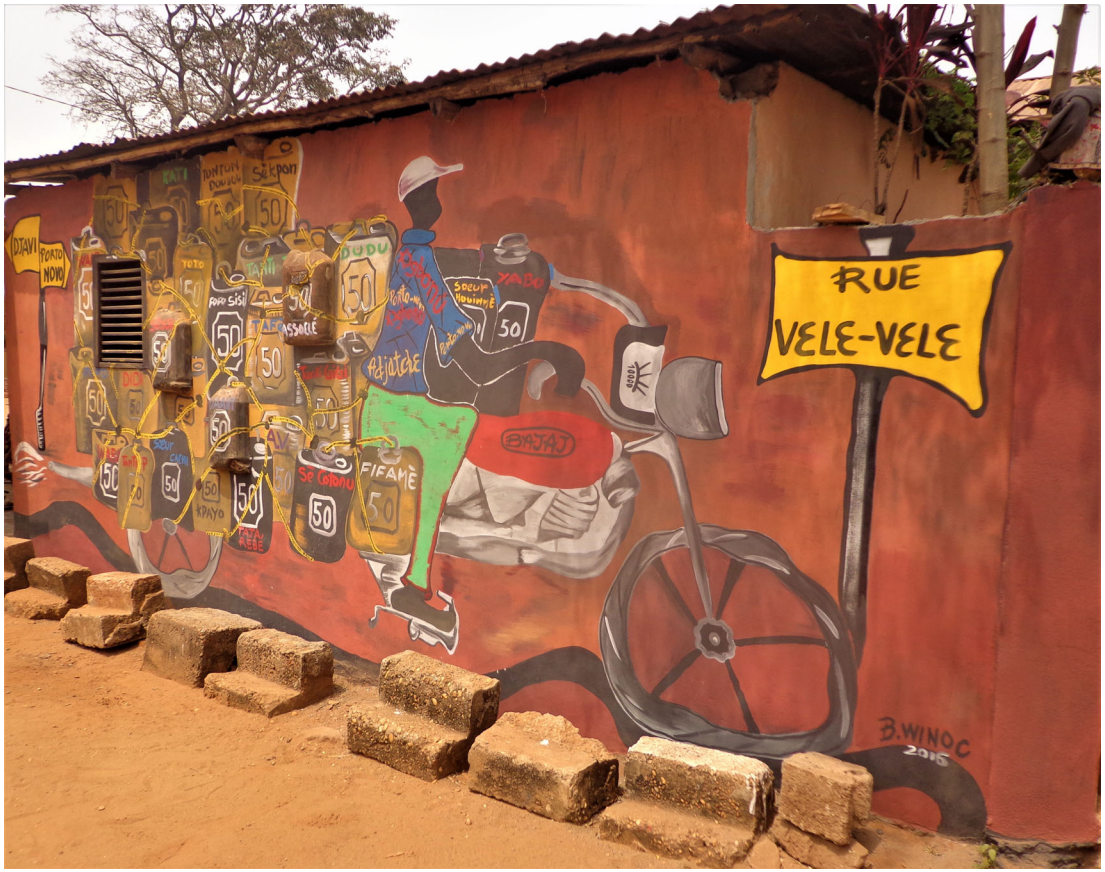

Figure 7. Winoc, 2016, traffic of adulterated fuel, mural painting. Photo: © Romuald Tchibozo.

from a normal "Assen." I let intentionally the shadows to show the holes on the top of the piece, which is not usual on the traditional "Assen" (Figure 9). It will be difficult to describe Ahouansou's linkage to rural areas as I did for Magou because the only experience he has is within the one of "Eclosion Urbaine." Fortunately, he participates in the three editions, and I can appreciate the evolution of his work in connection to these areas. In the first edition, he executed a piece that materially has nothing to do with the traditional practices as it is a replica piece of the one he did in France for the cooperation. Of course, it is not exactly the same, but the subject is the same. However, my interpretation is other as I related it to the symbol of the balance of power and the one of peace despite the difference of culture, origin, and religion practices of people in the city (Tchibozo, 2016g). For this edition, he is truly close to the theme of the place "Yɔhó Dikouin," whose practices are to pay homage to people who passed way. He uses a contemporary art argument to achieve the piece as I described above.

However, there are not only artists who performed in these places but also local people whose

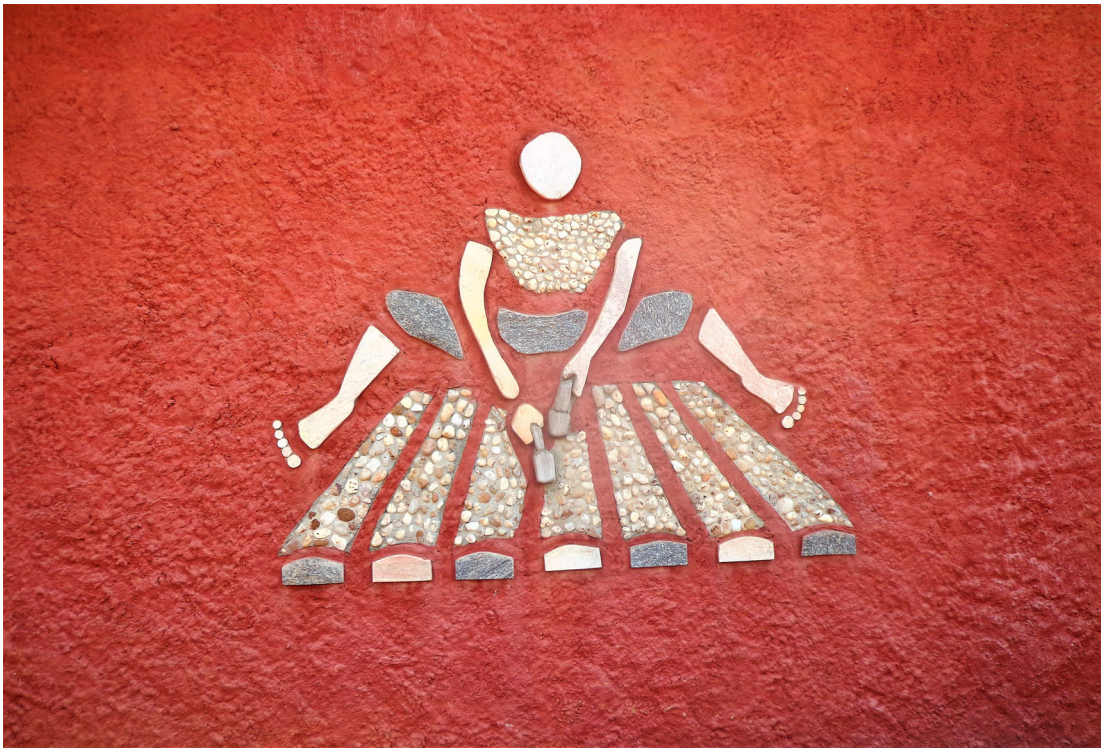

Figure 8. Collective work, 2016, "Asso," mural sculpture, a very rare piece now visible to all. Photo: © Romuald Tchibozo.

secret spaces are now well known to everyone. To preserve certain fear of their realities, they try to adopt a new solution. They use the modern or contemporary art language, certainly not imagining that was one of it and without saying that it is artwork. It is only my reading, but that is evident. Moreover, that could make one think of the Ready-made of Duchamp even if the contexts are not same. In the secret place of "Zangbeto" now clearly visible to everybody, they put two television sets superimposed one on the other as an installation (Figure 10).

The symbolism of television sets, which allow one to see far away, is requested here to show that they control all that could happen there and warned people who have to pay attention. This interaction between these people and urban art is the manifestation of the creation of new identity—I would say, a hybridization.

In conclusion, I will confront the two experiments in order to achieve an analysis that will make us understand, or at least allow us to evaluate the stakes of their implementation.

Magou's experience that I analyzed above is different from that of Porto-Novo on several points, but there are essentially three that have interested me here. The first is that it is individual and therefore is the resulting fruit of the artist's free will to live it for many reasons. It should be noted that Magou has a fairly open mind, and his private life, which I will not mention, is proof of that. So he does not do

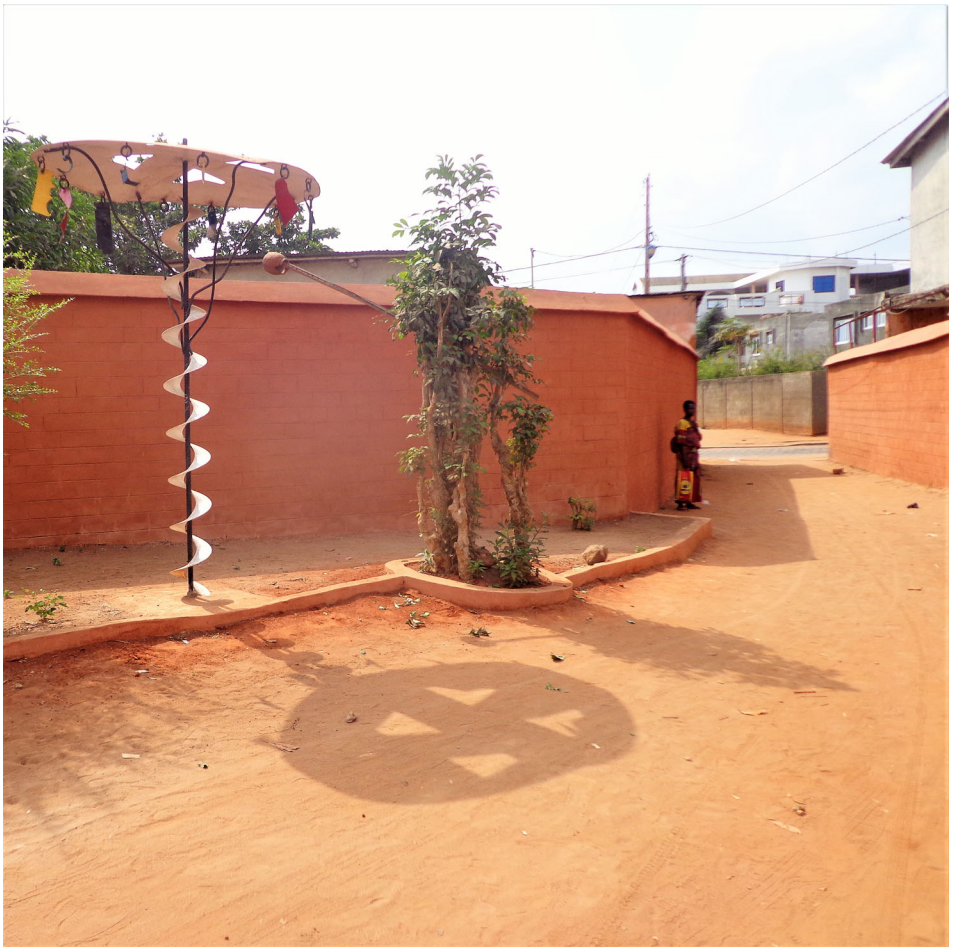

Figure 9. Ahouansou, 2017, "Assen." Photo: © Romuald Tchibozo.

something in the sense of being closed to anything that is foreign and new. He is in a process that could be identified with this will or this need to make accepted his work to the Beninese and not to feel that it is exclusively outward-oriented and accountable to the cultural mediation prescribed since colonization. It also proceeds from personal search, to find itself in harmony with his culture despite the identity disturbance. It is therefore very delicate, and it can be interpreted as Zra Deli (2008, p. 55) stated: "this African who has been able to open up to the new values while remaining himself without assimilation and without being assimilated. It is this type that Africa needs." While in the case of Porto-Novo, the experience is collective, it is not a voluntary and individual approach of the artists, although personally they do, but they are brought into a project certainly steered by an African center, but financed and thought in the framework of cooperation. This can be reminiscent of what L'Heureux (2009, p. 46) wrote when speaking

Figure 10. Place of "Zangbeto," 2016, installation of television sets by local people. Strategy to control what would happen. Photo: © Romuald Tchibozo.

about Senegalese experience: "In concrete terms, the Senegalese arts were going to borrow European materials, techniques and media to illustrate the themes and content that were resolutely African."

The second point is related to the places where the experiments took place. While Magou, resident of Cotonou, an eminently colonial city with all the consequences of its existence and all the mediation equipment, came out to go to a small country town, rather rural if we stick to its main activity, which is agriculture, the artists of "Eclosion Urbaine" remained in the city where a pocket of rurality withstood the time. He brings his production in situ to show directly the villagers and take seriously their attitudes in front of the works. The artists of Porto-Novo, however, perform works for the townspeople, but also for tourists who will be passing through the city. The inhabitants of these districts are their first observers, but they have been confronted with urban realities for quite some time. Better, these artists would not know their reactions, would not be able to analyze them, and are not even sure how many or who saw and appreciate their works. As I mentioned above, we can notice some evolution in pieces' execution Ahouansou Simplice. Over Eclosion Urbaine's editions, he comes closer to the idea to confront his creativity in these spaces. That is why there is a difference between his first piece and the last one in terms of subject.

The third important point is the permanence of the approach. Magou has decided to make it constant, and a third edition is planned, as I mentioned above. While in Porto-Novo, the approach seems ad hoc, and its continuity does not depend on the artists but on the proponents of the project and the political and economic conditions. Of course, a second edition took place in 2016 and the third in 2017, but are they the same artists who were in demand? If that is not the case, how can this legitimize their first participation? It is easy to see that communication seems more direct between Magou and the rural environment than between "Eclosion Urbaine" artists and their observers. Finally, one can risk the crucial question: Is this a generational problem?

Notes

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Color versions of one or more of the figures in the article can be found online at www.tandfonline.com/rcin.

* Most of the quotations in the text are translated by the author.

1 Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch (1988), "Villes coloniales et histoire des Africains," in *Vingtième Siècle, revue d'histoire*, n°20, octobre-décembre 1988. pp. 49–73.

2 Ibid., p. 63.

3 Romuald Tchibozo, 2015a, "L'art africain face au défi de la mondialisation," in Mouckaga, Dianzinga, and Owaye J-F. (dir.), *Ethnies, Nations, Développement en Afrique*, Actes du colloque de Brazzaville (Congo), du 26 au 28 mai 2014, Paris, L'Harmattan, pp. 629–652.

4 The existence of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) is the post-colonial strategy to impose the right of interference to weaker states since this is coupled with humanitarian assistance always to the most fragile.

5 Herkovits (1950) said: "Culture is an attribute of all human beings regardless of where they live and how they live … There is no example of a society without a philosophy of life, without notions of the origin and functioning of the universe and without theories on how to manipulate the supernatural to achieve some things." *The Bases of Cultural Anthropology*, a digital version produced by J. M. Tremblay, professor of sociology at the Cegep of Chicoutimi, p. 10.

6 Antoine Compagnon, 2001, "La culture, langue commune de l'Europe?" in *Qu'est-ce que la culture?* sous la direction d'Yves Michaud, Odile Jacob, p. 231.

7 Hybridity here is not directly relating to the artwork in a contemporary context with the art of installation as developed by Molinet (2006)—that is another issue. H. K. Bhabha (1994, p. 185) stated: "The effect of the colonial power is felt as the production of hybridization rather than the noisy command of the colonial authority or the silent repression of the indigenous traditions."

Therefore, it will be taking here as a result of the process of exchange between at least two cultures, the one of local people and the other of colonizers, which in a global context generated some specific behaviors at the origin of artwork production.

[8] Since then, many other studies were conducted about urbanization in Africa, those of Beauchemin and Philippe Bocquier in 2004, of Toyin Falola and Steven J. Salm in 2012, and of Brigit Obrist, Veit Arlt, Elisio Macamo, etc.

[9] See for that M.-J. Pineau-Jamous, 1986. "Porto-Novo: royauté, localité et parenté," *Cahiers d'études africaines*, vol. 26, N°104, pp. 547–576. A. Akinjogbin, 1967. *Dahomey and Its Neighbours 1708–1818*, Cambridge; Y. Person, 1975. "Chronologie du royaume gun de Hogbonu," *Cahiers d'études africaines*, vol. 15, n° 58, pp. 217–238; E. Dunglas, 1967. "Origine du royaume de Porto-Novo," *Etudes Dahoméennes*, 9–10, pp. 29–62.

[10] The Yoruba who would be the first to arrive called it Ajachè, the Alladahonnou, Xogbonou and the contact with the Europeans, in particular the Portuguese, has spawned Porto-Novo.

[11] Results of the general census of the population in 2013 at the National Institute of Statistics and Economy (INSAE).

[12] Romuald Tchibozo, 2016g, "L'art contemporain, révélateur de la complexité culturelle de Porto-Novo," *Les cahiers du CELTHO*, N° 002 (2), December 2016, pp. 97–119.

[13] It is useful to note here that the first generation of artists in Porto-Novo are already very active. There is the case of Lishu, Kouas, and Gratien Zossou.

[14] ANSOM Sénégal IV 124b Lettre de Glèlê au gouverneur du Sénégal, Clément Thomas pour le Président Carnot 12 mai 1889 cité par Messanvi Garcia Luc, 1976, "Archives et tradition orale. À propos d'une enquête sur la politique du royaume de Danhomé à la fin du 19e siècle," *Cahiers d'études africaines*. Vol. 16, N°61–62, Histoire africaine: constatations, contestations, pp. 189–206.

[15] Interview with Magou in October 2006.

[16] Gèlèdè is a cultural performance of Yoruba's people established in Nigeria, Benin, Togo, and elsewhere in Africa. This display proceeds by a performance characterized by the mask sculpture whose shape varies according to the themes of each period (Tchibozo Romuald, 2011 & 2013b).

[17] Interview with Magou on May 10, 2017 at Cotonou.

[18] It is important to underline here that there is already such an experience of working with the artist group on specific issues, in Ouidah, concerning slavery memory through the slave route and its heritage as part of an international project. But here it is peculiar because artists are oriented toward normally non-urban practices, and this is new.

[19] *Goukomè* literally mean the land of Gou, but this implies here, the district of Gou because the ancestors, priests of Gou who arrived, were settled in this part of the city not to be far from the royal palace as its protects the kingdom. It is also famous in Danxomè, and one of the well-known artworks of this kingdom is the representation of Gou now exhibited in the Louvre.

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