

*THE FOUNDATION
NOTEBOOKS*

THE FANTASY FACTORY

A PERSPECTIVE ON THE OUIDAH MUSEUM COLLECTION



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A History graduate (1997) with an Archaeology Masters (2000) from the National University of Benin, Didier Houénoudé worked at the École du Patrimoine Africain (School of African Heritage) on the “Rehabilitation Study of the Historical Heritage of the City of Porto-Novo” (2001-2003). He was then admitted to the “Identität und Differenz. Geschlechterkonstruktion und Interkulturalität (18. - 21. Jahrhundert)” Doctoral College, at the University of Trier, in Germany, where he completed a PhD thesis under the direction of Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff (*Entre stéréotypes et affirmation identitaire : quatre artistes africains d’Afrique occidentale*, 2007).

As an art historian and research professor at the University of Abomey Calavi (Republic of Benin), his field of interest includes identity issues in contemporary African art, heritage issues, and the performing arts scene, urban planning and the development of African cities. He was the Head of the Directorate for Culture and Heritage of the Capital of Benin, Porto-Novo, and he was Technical Advisor for Culture for the Minister of Culture, Literacy, Crafts and tourism (2013-2014).

Didier Houénoudé is currently Deputy Head of the Department of History and Archaeology, in charge of studies and research at the Faculté des Lettres, Arts et Sciences Humaines (Letters, Arts and Humanities) of the University of Abomey-Calavi.

PREFACE

The Ouidah Museum was born from the desire to share with the public at large, the collection created over the years of existence of the Fondation Zinsou.

This collection is constantly enriched, with a passion and desire to contribute to the preservation of contemporary works on the African continent. Each acquisition is a choice made with the family in mind, free from any fixed “acquisition policy”. Whether coincidence or as an unconscious taste, many works in the collection are “populated” with hybrid creatures; a common thread that can be seen by the keen viewer throughout the collection. Using various mediums and created by various artists, these works may share a questioning as to what we are ourselves. We presented this corpus to the eye of art historian Didier Houénou, whose research area particularly focuses on identity issues within contemporary art. Through this fantasy factory he gives us a subjective view of the collection of Ouidah Museum. And invites us all to make inquiries on our own .

THE FANTASY FACTORY

A PERSPECTIVE ON THE OUIDAH MUSEUM COLLECTION

The 21st century was foretold as an era of profound change, of transformations so radical and so violent as to disrupt humanity itself. For the most optimistic Man would rival the gods, whilst for the more pessimistic, He would cause his own annihilation. Either way both parties predicted the demise of *Homo sapiens sapiens* or inferred his transformation into a creature more suited to the coming changes. This is the very law of evolution. But more than anything the 21st century questions us about the place of humans in the evolution of society. Our world has never seemed so close to that described by HG Wells in *The Island of Doctor Moreau*¹. If such proximity is made possible, it is due to the fact that contemporary society blurs the forms of representations of ourselves and others. Humanity, understood as human nature (the essence of Man) is not where we expect it to be. It seems to have distilled in the various hybrid forms that fill the contemporary space.

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1. A science fiction novel written by Herbert George Wells and published in 1896. The book tells the story of Edward Prendick, the sole survivor of the sinking of the *Lady Vain*, who finds himself stranded on an island on which Doctor Moreau and his assistant Montgomery engage in experiments on animals to make monsters out of them, hybrid beings gifted with speech. The adventure ends dramatically for Dr Moreau and his assistant. Prendick, once again the only human survivor on the island, is traumatized when he returns to England after what seems, after all, to have been a questioning of identity.

Hybridism is at the heart of contemporary society. It is in fact its main dynamic force. The hybrid is a result of cross-fertilization between two elements of a different nature. Contemporary art echoes this hybridization, which takes place in an ever more complex world. The contemporary world is one large fantasy factory, a universe where anything and everything is possible. And artists are the demiurges of this new world.

The creatures found in contemporary creation are protean and seem straight out of the myths and legends that have shaped the world. According to tradition in southern Benin the artist draws his sublime inspiration from the blessing of *Aziza*, the civilizing spirit and creative inspiration. This mysterious being, represented by Cyprien Tokoudagba as a human body with a leafy treetop for a head, belongs to the invisible world.

The artist who received the blessing of *Aziza* then had the ability to understand both the visible world and the invisible world, as well as the ability to move from one world to the other without being affected. He now seems able to break down the border separating the two universes, giving rise in our world to clashes between humans and creatures from another age. Such intrusions by the supernatural world into ours cannot leave our world unscathed. They allow the reappearance of this disturbing part of ourselves, reflected in bodily metamorphosis. The animal in us, that our humanity was at pains to suppress, seems released from its prison.

Thus the human condition cannot escape the animal within each of us. It is part of our identity. Bodo addresses the “human animality” that individuals possess deep within themselves. In his painting *Sape*, he depicts a couple of beings with bird beaks taking a romantic stroll through the streets of an ultra-modern city. The man, or at least the figure which appears to be the male of these hybrid creatures, is dressed in the style of a

youth: tee shirt, jacket and jeans. His partner is wearing a short skirt and a top made from tree leaves. Should we interpret this as a reference to the lush, green, plant-covered world inhabited by many African populations as the antechamber to the supernatural world from which this hybrid couple could have emerged? No aggression seems to emanate from these two creatures, and no sign of fear on the part of the humans walking around, who seem more surprised by the appearance of these giant creatures apparently out for a stroll.

In contrast, the mask by Lassissi Dossou entitled *Woman with two faces* suggests a person with a troubled and mixed personality, along the lines of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde². The crested mask shows a female face bearing scarification marks on both cheeks and on her forehead. On the rear of the head is another face, this one a birds', with a large beak. The scarification and style of the mask suggest that it is a part of the Yoruba-Nago cultural heritage and was used in the practice of Guelede. The Guelede is a secret society originating, for the most part, from the Kétou region³. The prime function of the practice of Guelede is to appease the wrath of mothers and honour the primordial mother in order to restore social harmony. To a lesser degree, the Guelede also expresses the guilty conscience of men with regards to women.

According to Yoruba beliefs, women possess an ambivalent power that is neither positive nor negative, but that may turn one way or the other by choice of its wielder, in this case the women of Yoruba country. This power is called the *ase*, a vital energy that resides in every being. The *ase*

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2. Stevenson, Robert Louis. *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. The book published in 1886 under the title *Strange case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* tackles the theme of split personality disorder.

3. Kétou is a city located in south eastern Benin, in the Plateau Department. Its inhabitants are mostly from the Yoruba-Nago cultural area, with elements of Holli, Mahi and Fon population.

could become exceptionally powerful in some women and pose a threat to social harmony. Such women would be deemed witches, whose actions could endanger the balance of society and traditional institutions. The primary function of Guelede is to channel the terrible power of the “mothers”. Lassissi Dossou’s mask represents the ambivalent power of women, and the avian appearance of the mask probably refers to the negative aspect of that power. Indeed, in many African societies some birds are considered as one of the preferred form taken by witches, especially when they travel at night. In some respects, the bird symbolizes knowledge and power, especially that of the psyche. This was certainly Kifouli Dossou’s intention with the figure of the thinker placed atop the superstructure of his Epa mask. The figure is surrounded by hybrid characters and two skeletons that seem to protect it, while a bird perches on its head.

The nocturnal bird-sorcerer and the bird resting on the thinker’s head are strangely reminiscent of the bird of Minerva, which only takes flight as night falls. Creatures born of hybridization appear as the dynamic reflection of events during the negotiation between what is inside and what is outside the boundaries of identity.

This part of us seems to become bestial when we fail to achieve the perfect symbiosis of the two identities - human and animal. Do Seni Awa Camara’s characters show us our failure ? Our inability to achieve that final symbiosis? At that moment our quest for identity becomes a nightmare. The key to success in the search for self, the realization of our being, is to be found in the animal within. It is the guardian of the temple that we must face, and to whom we must identify ourselves, in order to pass the ultimate test, that of humanity. When Soly Cissé fills his paintings with animals or chimaeras, he is working in a field of knowledge, which has been ploughed extensively since antiquity: the animal in Man. But why

animals? Is their meaning allegorical, or symbolic?

The animal, writes Dominique Lestel, “haunts the human, and to separate Man from the animal does not make much sense”⁴. So it is that philosophical or spiritual questions arise when exploring the relationship between Man and the animal. Part of the human construct relies on the animal element we carry within us. Lestel proposes to transcend such human / animal contradictions when he writes in the closing lines of his conclusion: “The human being is nothing outside the context of the animal, upon which it has gradually built an ecological, spiritual, legal and emotional niche.”⁵

The profound and ambiguous relationship between humans and animals was already apparent in mythological texts. The Greek gods were able to take the forms of the animals of their choice to deceive their opponents, elude them or to make amorous conquests. Some gods, such as Dionysus and Pan, were identified as having animal attributes. In ancient Egypt, gods were almost exclusively hybrid entities, half-human, half-animal, and sometimes depicted fully in their animal form: Horus, the falcon-headed god; Thoth, the ibis or baboon; Sobek, the crocodile; Hathor, the cow; Bastet, the cat; Anubis, the jackal; Apophis, the snake, etc... The identification of hybrid or anthropomorphic gods, with whims identical to those of mortals, with animality and nature, eventually convinced men of their own animal heritage and their dual human-and-animal nature. Darwinism and the theory of evolution reinforce the natural affiliation between animal and Man. And, even if the Missing Link has yet to reveal itself, our animal origins seem fully established even with respect to the dogma of

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4. Lestel, Dominique. *L'animalité, essai sur le statut de l'humain*. Paris : Hatier, 1998. P. 79.

5. *Ibid.* P. 80.

Creation. Some biblical texts based on the ancient texts of the Jewish Kabbalah describe the cherubim, one of the highest choirs of angels, as fantastical beings with both animal and human traits, with wings covered in many eyes; sometimes bipedal, sometimes quadrupedal. One of the most common representations of the cherub is the one best known as the Great Sphinx of Giza⁶; that is to say, a (winged) lion with a man's head. It is in this form that the cherubim were depicted on the famous Ark of the Covenant, which they were tasked to protect. This is not, however, their only representation. Ezekiel, in fact, describes them as humanoid beings, walking on two legs with bovine feet, four wings, four human arms and, most notably, four faces: a man, a bull, a lion and an eagle. They are also glowing, luminescent and wield flaming swords.

The myths that underlie the origin of the world, its essence and meaning, are embodied in many African cultures by the elements of nature: Water, Earth, Air, and Fire; by totemic animals embodying the primordial being; or by ancestral figures, either heroic or legendary. Agassou, the mythical ancestor of the royal dynasty of Abomey is invoked as the fruit of the union between a male panther and princess Aligbonon of Tado. This fantastic being, deified by his descendants, symbolizes the conquering character of the Danxomean dynasty. He is joined in the voodoo pantheon by supernatural creatures, such as Mami Wata, who embodies the intersection of three worlds: animal, human and spiritual. It is certainly this triplicity that Tokoudagba seeks to address in his painting *Mamiwata, génie de la mer* (*Mamiwata, spirit of the sea*) in which this three-headed figure is holding a serpent at each end, with one foot on the reptile's body. Other representa-

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6. Khafra was a pharaoh of the Fourth Dynasty of the ancient Egyptian empire best known for building the second Pyramid of Giza and the Sphinx, a monument depicting a chimaera with the body of a lion and the head of a man. The face of the Sphinx was carved in the image of Khafra's.

tions of the goddess of the seas show a mermaid - with a woman's body and fish's tail in place of feet.

However, even if it seems conceivable to mortals that gods or other divine creatures can easily transform themselves into different animals or other "monstrosities", this is not the case for men, for whom it is no easy thing to control the animality within. This legacy can act as a curse, pushing its bearer to the boundaries of monstrosity. Creatures such as the Minotaur remind us of the failure to reconcile Man and the beast within. And yet, the magical realm of the animal world holds a real fascination for humans, who believe this is where the answers to their many questions lie. The rites of passage of certain societies, such as shamanism for instance, offer ways to survey a controlled animal world, without major risks.

If Soly Cissé, Barthélémy Toguo and Dominique Zinkpè tackle zoomorphism, it is also in order to highlight our own shortcomings which, in their opinion, are not human in the least. The relationship between Man and animals, which they are trying to emphasize, holds something mysterious and disturbing within. Human bestiality is manifested in Man's death wish and his instinct for sex and devastation, untamed by culture. To have buried this animality so deep within him, it necessary follows that man must have a huge and terrifying fear of it. Françoise Armengaud⁷ partly lifts the veil on this terror when she writes:

"When you think about it, it is within himself that Man finds his worst animal [...]. Animality is the depth of man, dizzying, a disturbing and familiar strangeness: the archaic and ancestral, even regressive, element and thus all-consuming, hidden and enigmatic. In every sense it is what

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 7. Armengaud Françoise. "Animalité et humanité", in *Encyclopædia Universalis*, Supplément II, Les Enjeux. Paris : Encyclopædia Universalis, 1985. P. 15.

haunts humanity.”

But it is fear combined with a strange - to say the least - fascination. It brings us back to the mythical origin of what we were, at a time when we could turn ourselves into animals. This animality is also vested with primordial energy and a primitive bestiality - a dark core to worry and haunt the civilized man.

This fascination can also be explained by the fact that the animal is both our opposite and our alter ego. Indeed, many African cultures of the Gulf of Guinea - Ashanti, Ewe, Fon, Yoruba... - describe the existence of an animal alter ego. In these cultures, the relationship between Man and the animal is not only symbolic, but also vital. For, when the animal is killed, his human alter ego dies too. The Danxomean monarchs recognized this animal part within them and fully accepted it. They also took a name that referenced their animal nature - bestial and dangerous - and were depicted by artists on bas-reliefs in this form. Thus, in the works of Cyprien Tokoudagba, King Guezo is represented by his animal double - the mighty buffalo ‘that devastates the savannah’ - while his son Glèlè is the lion ‘whose roar inspires fear in other creatures’. The buffalo, whose clothes would be hard to take from him, is the representation of King Tégbèssou, and the young man-shark with his long teeth is Kondo, the future King Béhanzin. The definition of our humanity is based on this ‘Other’ that is the animal - both foil and mirror. It is from this reflected image that we draw and affirm our identity. But the human condition is always endangered by the animal in us all, which threatens to rise up at any moment. Indeed, according to Edgar Morin⁸, the Homo sapiens sapiens that we have become - through biological evolution, technological mastery and

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8. Morin, Edgar. *Das Rätsel des Humanen*. München, Zürich : R. Piper und Co. Verlag. 1974.

dominion over the natural world - still carries his animal past with him in the way he is: in our moments of pleasure, the ways we love, our territoriality, and our aggression. The strategies that we develop to adapt to the world that surrounds us, to create the space we need to live, and to obtain the objects of our desires, are linked to this animal part within us.

The conquest of our humanity over our animal nature is not yet fully realized. The animal still persists within us, and remains a reality from which we cannot escape. We are, in a way, a conflict zone – where battle is waged between our human side and our animal side, which still hopes to gain the upper hand one day. One is the reverse of the other, a toxic duo of the kind depicted by Norman Catherine in his painting *Toxic duet*. The toxicity of our animal/human ambivalence seems to present a poisonous aspect, but to whom is it a threat? Man's position is that of a being caught between the abyss of his animal nature and the summit of his humanity. Our animality, however, shows us our own self in a subversive manner. For, in the animal there is a depth that reveals the monster lurking in each of us - the monster which characterizes the most dark, brutal part of animality: our bestiality.

Beyond the opposition between humanity and animality looms the conflict between culture and nature. The state of nature would be that from which we emerged to ultimately reach a state of culture. But Man, in reaching the stage of culture, has suppressed his natural dimension, or somehow distorted it according to Jean-Jacques Rousseau. However, as Rousseau shows in his *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men*⁹, Man would, in this way, have managed to rid himself of animal determinism. This is a major feature, which animals cannot escape: they are

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 9. Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité entre les hommes*. Paris : Le Livre de Poche, 1992.

bound to accomplish that for which they were created. Cartesian philosophers, meanwhile, emphasize that man is imbued with spiritual qualities and awareness that animals lack. The soul is one of the qualities inherent to human nature, while its absence from animal nature makes animals mere mechanical beings, incapable of feeling any emotion. In a word, bodies without souls. Yet, for Dominique Zinkpè, the soul is a hybrid creature - half-human, half-animal.

But, as Cartesian thinkers consider soul and body as radically different in nature, they also see humans and animals as entirely separate entities. Jean de La Fontaine¹⁰ rejects this theory and posits that animals are gifted, like Man, with sensitive imaginations and a bodily soul. But this superiority of Man over all creation, outlined by René Descartes in his *Discourse on Method*¹¹, through his injunction to impose himself as the master and possessor of nature, is supported by Rousseau, who sees the stupidity of animals as the factor that sets them entirely apart from humanity. And yet, Rousseau seems to recognize that the human superiority over the lower species is mainly moral. However, for La Fontaine this superiority does not always conform to morality, for the presumption and vanity of Man leads him to imagine himself as God's equal.

The opposition between animality and humanity actually serves as a backdrop to the existential problem of the definition of Man himself. Sigmund Freud outlined the extent to which the subconscious drives of man can be linked to the animal world. Which is to say that the inner conflict within a man in search of his inner being can be solved only if the animal part of him is known and accepted.

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10. Cf. La Fontaine, Jean (de). *Discours à Madame de la Sablière*.

11. Descartes, René. *Discours de la méthode*. Paris : Editions sociales, 1974.

Through the bodily metamorphosis and general intertwining of the creatures that haunt Dominique Zinkpè's work, we can infer a questioning of identity. For George Lilanga it is an identity rooted in the myths of the Makonde culture, to which he was both heir and custodian. His hybrid characters are caricatures of our hectic world. It is, however, a less terrifying, less mysterious world, than the *Lost World* of Soly Cissé. According to Dominique Stella, "Soly Cissé shows us a dream world, both contemporary and bright, but also dark and disturbing, impregnated with an animistic tradition closely linked to the mysteries of human and animal life, brightened by the hope of a world to come, which he would hope to be better, but preoccupied by the doubt of a problematic contemporaneity."¹²

This lost world of Soly Cissé's dreams is certainly that of the Golden Age, as described in many currents of African mythology, where gods, men and animals lived together in harmony. This first age was followed by two others, in which humans and animals lost their immortality. Indeed, it is during these differentiation phases that death first appeared in the world and men and animals moved away from God. As part of this separation, men and animals retained certain qualities of that original unity, but lost an essential divine quality – immortality.

This is certainly the ultimate goal of the hybridization of forms, genres and species undertaken by contemporary artists. It does not represent the fall of Man down the evolutionary ladder. It is a transitional process, the "*in-between space*" described by Homi Bhabha¹³, which places a "shape-shifting" Man at the gates of deification. The Man of the present and future is a mutant who, on the way to deification, would again wish to lay claim

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 12. Stella, Dominique. Soly Cissé. *Chaleur d'été*. Paris : Forma, 2011. P. 8.

13. According to Homi Bhabha, the spaces in-between refer to intermediate areas of cultural creation that express the unfinished and transitory nature of identity. Cf

to immortality. However, Frédéric Bruly Bouabré reminds us that in the desire for eternity, men may pay the highest price. Thus, in *The Legend of Békora*, a series of twelve small drawings, he tells the tale of Bekora, a hunter on a quest to achieve immortality. The man achieved his goal, but was turned into stone, the artist concluding with the prophetic sentence “He who seeks immortality becomes “a pebble” !!!”. In this case, the transformation is absolutely irreversible.



Photo : Jean-Dominique Burton

TOKOUDAGBA Cyprien, *Aziza*, 2005
Acrylique sur toile / Acrylic on canvas
203 x 102 cm
©Tokoudagba Cyprien



Photo : Jean-Dominique Burton

BODO Pierre, *Sape*, 2006
Acrylique sur toile / Acrylic on canvas
99 x 119 cm
©Bodo Pierre / Courtesy Bodo Amani



Photo : Jean-Dominique Burton

DOSSOU Lassissi, *La femme aux deux visages*, 2010
Bois, pigments naturels, acrylique / Wood, natural pigments, acrylic
26 x 19 x 59 cm
©Dossou Lassissi



Photo : Jean-Dominique Burton

DOSSOU Kifouli, masque Épa, 2010
Bois / Wood
178 x 42 x 42 cm
◀ ©Dossou Kifouli
Vue d'ensemble / General view
Vue de détail / Detailed view



Photo : Jean-Dominique Burton



Photo : Jean-Dominique Burton

CAMARA Seni Awa, *Sans titre*, 2008
Terre cuite / Terra cotta
104 x 32 x 31 cm
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Photo : Jean-Dominique Burton

▲ CAMARA Seni Awa, *Enoukouren*, 2007
Terre cuite / Terra cotta
107 x 34 x 20 cm
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Photo : Jean-Dominique Burton



▲ CISSÉ Soly, *Carnaval mutant*, 2011
Acrylique sur toile / Acrylic on canvas
150 x 150 cm
©Cissé Soly

ZINKPÈ, *L'âme*, 2011
Pigments et pastel gras sur toile /
Pigments and Oilbar on canvas
180 x 150 cm
▶ ©Zinkpè



Photo : Jean-Dominique Burton

▲ CATHERINE Norman, *Toxic Duet*, 2001
Pastels gras sur papier / Oilbar on Paper
175 x 120 cm
©Catherine Norman

Photo : Jean-Dominique Burton





- ▲ LILANGA George, *Sans titre*, 2002
Acrylique sur toile / Acrylic on canvas
122 x 174 cm
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- ▲ CISSÉ Soly, *Monde perdu 5*, série *Monde perdu*, 2004
Fusain sur papier/ Charcoal on paper
38,5 x 54 cm
©Cissé Soly

BRULY BOUABRÉ Frédéric, série *La légende de Bêkora / La légende de Bêkora series*
 Crayon à papier, pastel et encre sur carton / Pencil, pastel and ink on cardboard
 20 x 15 cm
 ©Tous droits réservés / All rights reserved



Photo : Jean-Dominique Burton

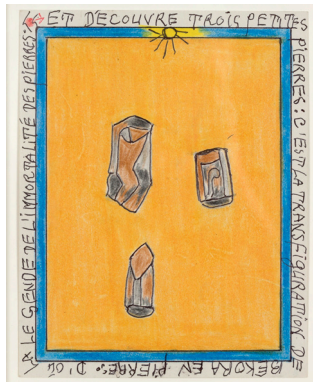
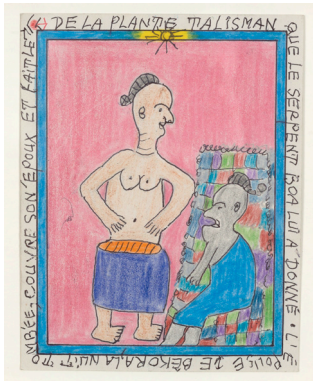


Photo : Jean-Dominique Burton