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Olivia Keefer
Miami University - Oxford

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Vohou-Vohou: A Search for Post-Colonial Cultural Identity in Cote d'Ivoire

Olivia Keefer

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“Vohou is neither a style, nor a school; it is a spirit” (Magnin and Soullillou 1996, 129). Kra Nguessan, one of the founding members, is known for saying those words on behalf of the Vohou-Vohou movement. This essay works to identify the formation of this spirit and, in turn, their post-colonial cultural identity. There were around 30 artists that identified as Vohou-Vohou. Due to time constraints, I limit discussion to only a few in the framework of the entire movement. These artists include Youssouf Bath, Théodore Koudougnon, and Kra Nguessan. This will only be a sliver of what the group has to offer, but it will support the larger idea behind their motivations. The Vohou-Vohou movement in Abidjan, Cote d’Ivoire began in the 1970s; a decade after gaining independence from France. The spirit of the movement was driven by the search for cultural identity through a rejection of the artists’ traditional stylistic education. In this paper I demonstrate how the rejection of their stylistic education allowed for the artists to express a new African identity, a spirit, forming from a synthesis between their “colonial pilgrimage” and their Ivorian heritage.

The education of artists in Cote d’Ivoire started at L’Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Abidjan, founded during the 1960s by Albert Botbol on a mission from UNESCO (Gaudibert 1991, 16-21). The school mirrored the French art school system and standards, and after their time studying in Abidjan, the students would study at L’Ecole des Beaux-Arts in France (Konaté 2013, 371-388). This formal education model was not unlike the institutions in surrounding countries (Okeke-Agulu 2015, 7). The “colonial pilgrimage” to the West for education influenced their technique and provided the artists with the necessary connections to the West to infiltrate the art world.

During their time in Paris, Jacques Yankel instructed the main figures that created the Vohou-Vohou movement and encouraged them to unite as a group. Yankel's support and influence for the Vohou-Vohou artists lasted beyond their time in Paris. Through Yankel's advice, they stayed as a group upon returning to Cote d'Ivoire (Konaté 2013, 371-388). Rather than working as individuals, working as a group strengthened the movement and provided a platform of popularity, ultimately allowing artists to gain recognition for their individual contributions.

Along with Yankel, Serges Hélénon, a teacher in Abidjan, was also a major influence. Hélénon's involvement with the Negre-Caraibe movement in Abidjan, formed from the reaction to foreign invasion, and the concept of Négritude influenced the ideas and motivations of Vohou-Vohou artists (Boisdur de Toffol 2002, 240-41, Konaté 2013, 371-388). Turning "negre" into a positive term was a way for the artists of the movement to represent their cultural roots and pride. Negre-Caraibe and Négritude infiltrated into the artistic culture and influenced artists' search for cultural heritage and representation. For the Vohou-Vohou artists, engaging with the idea of Négritude contributed to their choice of medium.

The materials Vohou-Vohou artists used represented their culture and country. The reason for their choice of medium is debated, but what they used is not. The artists were known for using local materials, dirt, and other earthen substances (Konaté 2013, 371-388). They anticipated the viewer to be shocked by the materials and color directly (Magnin and Soullillou 1996, 129). Using local materials intrinsically connected the art to the region making the choice of material essential to the movement's creation of national spirit and cultural

identity. This approach to their materials emphasized the rejection of the traditional Western painting methods.

Vohou-Vohou artists do not take claim to originating the use of local materials; Kra Nguessan recalls the origin of the utilization of local materials to Hélénon, who encouraged students to use anything they found in the halls of the school to make art (Konaté 2013, 371-388). Youssouf Bath, a Vohou-Vohou artist, attributes it to Hélénon as well, but he also added dimension. Bath claims that the utilization of these materials was due to economic hardship and a lack of funds for art supplies (Konaté 2013, 371-388). However, contrary to this opinion, the economy had been successful until a recession in the beginning of the 1980s (Warner 1991, 3-35). There is another layer to the story. Yao Célesti, a director for L'Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Abidjan, claims they had plenty of funding and materials coming in from France, but he encouraged the students to farther their research with local materials (Konaté 2013, 371-388). No matter why the students utilized the local land and materials, it defined their art and led to the name of the movement.

To make sense of the interest in using earthen materials, the movements' namesake merits discussion. The word vohou is from the local Guro language (Konaté 2013, 371-388). The word connects to the local people and dialogue on a deeper level by the definition in Malinke, a local language. The Malinke translation for Vohou-Vohou is gnaman-gnaman, signifying dirt, trash, or garbage (Konaté 2013, 371-388). The connection produced between the local dialect and the materials reinforces an intimate correlation between the region and the artists.

The use of materials contributed to the success of the movement, but without Youssouf Bath, Kra Nguessan, or Théodore Koudougnon the Vohou-Vohou movement would have been

short lived and unsuccessful. These artists were the driving force behind the spirit and encouragement for the development. These artists were also arguably among the best skilled as well. While each took a different approach to their work and medium, they all emphasized abstraction and a deeper connection to their materials.

Youssouf Bath, unlike some of his contemporaries, used only art materials that could be provided from the earth (Konaté 2013, 371-388). Bath was imaginary in his work, often depicting thoughts trapped in his head. An art critic and professor of Abidjan said, “He seems to be devoured by the demons which inhabit him: internal machines, tortured bodies and expressions... a torture which tortures us,” (Gaudibert 1991, 16-21). Bath was incredibly invested in his work, both emotionally and with his technique.

While *Woman with a Headload* (Fig. 1) was produced in 2011, it does not take away from the essence of Vohou-Vohou. The coloration is muted, directly referencing the earthen materials. The composition consists of geometric and abstracted forms. Bath’s work was known for combining figuration and abstraction (Gaudibert 1991, 16-21). His colors become richer and intensified through the use of dirt and plant juices (Konaté 2013, 371-388). Compositionally, the images recall classical African statuary, which Bath adhered to and studied (Konaté 2013, 371-388). While studying classic African statuary, Bath was able to reconnect this cultural past with his present art, which was his ultimate goal.

Each Vohou-Vohou artist had a different approach, process, and motivation. This included medium considerations. Unlike Bath, Théodore Koudougnon used Western tubes of paint (Konaté 2013, 371-388). While they followed the same underlying motivation, their individual motivations were different. Koudougnon showed great talent among his

contemporaries, and he thought he could communicate what he wanted even through the use of Western materials. Koudougnon stated, "I work, spreading my mixture, like a builder using his trowel: the brush doesn't count," (Gaudibert 1991, 16-21). He did not reject the use of Western materials, but rather used them in complex mixtures to strengthen the composition and intimacy of his representations. The strength of his concocted medium can be seen in the bold coloration (Fig. 2), especially when compared to Bath's. Koudougnon's content is further abstracted as well. With Bath's work, a viewer interprets the hints of figural representation, Koudougnon, on the other hand, is strictly using shapes and color to create an almost non-objective. Koudougnon utilized traditional motifs such as the triangle. Each of the three black areas have triangles incorporated into the composition. Koudougnon fully identified with his work, and he was constantly searching for fluid reality (Gaudibert 1991, 16-21).

Kra Nguessan's work and intentions are known for being an honest representation of life through matter (Gaudibert 1991, 16-21). His materials were comparable to Bath's manipulations. Nguessan took his materials from the earth; he stated: "brown or ochre laterite, sand...different soils are the foundation of my work," (Gaudibert 1991, 16-21). Nguessan's untitled work (Fig. 3) is abstracted in a similar manner to Koudougnon's. Nguessan took great interest in signs and letters (Gaudibert 1991, 16-21). The elements are evident in his painting which consists of traditional motifs such as the triangle and circle. These signs communicated ideas to the Ivoirian viewer and situated their modernism in connection to the cultural past. Nguessan emphasized assemblage in his work (Martin 2005, 29-39). The pigmentation is rich, and the black coloration framing edges increases the vibrancy of the red, blue, and yellow. The

rich red would have been created using the laterite, and the brown pigments would have come from the varying soils and sand.

In the post-colonial world Cote d'Ivoire faced political issues in the 1970s and throughout the rest of the century. Houphouet-Boigny, Cote d'Ivoire's political leader, faced party disarray (Warner 1991, 3-35). By the early 1970s the political party lacked democratic procedures, creating an economically privileged and corrupt political class (Warner 1991, 3-35). There were protests carried out by the academic community, both students and teachers; there were protests and strikes from the public sector of employees, and there was an increasing crime rate (Warner 1991, 3-35). By 1984, the political atmosphere was poor despite an increase in harvest and crop prices, and the region was overcast with economic and political uncertainty and instability (Warner 1991, 3-35). The people in Cote d'Ivoire were searching for a deeper cultural identity in a post-colonial world, and the political conditions of the country worsened the situation.

Taken collectively, Bath, Koudougnon, and Nguessan used their art as a reaction against these events and colonization. They all experienced the invasions, migrations, and economic changes ushered in by colonialism (Visonà 2014, 217-231). They were using their canvas to relate the present circumstances to their past (Picton 2002, 329-333). Through the classification of vohou as a spirit rather than a school or style rejected the Western style of L'Ecole des Beaux Arts, it separated themselves from the political and economic influences, and allowed Ivoirians to create identity in a post-colonial world. The artists let these ideas cultivate, and when they returned from Yankel's studio they officially started the movement in 1983 (Konaté 2013, 371-388).

The first exhibition was in 1985 in Abidjan at the Centre Culturel Français (Konaté 2013, 371-388). The movement gained recognition in Paris and throughout Europe as well, being exhibited at the Musée des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie (Konaté 2013, 371-388). Through these exhibitions, the artists were able to enter the art world. However, this infiltration could only occur through their Western connections, such as Yankel, that created the Vohou-Vohou spirit, leading to their cultural expressions.

Upon returning, the artists were able to construct an amalgamated culture synthesizing their strong technique formed through L'Ecole des Beaux-Arts with their cultural spirit; an amalgamated culture that could only be produced through a paradoxical connection to the West. Nationalism ideas and ideals were not absent from the colonized world. The "colonial pilgrimage" through their educational experience allowed the artists to engage in deeper nationalist ideas forming a new nationalism that inherently involved Western and colonial subjectivity (Okeke-Agulu 2015, 9).

"Vohou is neither a style, nor a school; it is a spirit." The spirit could only come to fruition in the post-colonial cultural circumstances. The spirit of the Vohou-Vohou allowed the artists to remove themselves from the margins of the art world. By rejecting Western practices and materials while still receiving their education through L'Ecole des Beaux-Arts the Vohou-Vohou artists were able to perfect their skills and utilize Western economic strength. The movement's cultural synthesis allowed them to paradoxically accept the recognition and economic gain the Western art world provided. The spirit of the Vohou-Vohou movement created a multidimensional cultural existence. This existence does not beckon to their

ancestors, nor does it beckon to the West, rather the spirit generated a new culture that reflected the status of the post-colonial world.



Figure 1
Youssouf Bath. *La Porteuse (Woman with a Headload)*, 2011. Mixed media



Figure 2
Théodore Koudougnon. *Untitled*. Mixed media, 60 × 58 cm.



Figure 3
Kra Nguessan. 1990

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