

# Tradition and Creation

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## Abstract:

Is there any antagonism between tradition and modernity or, on the contrary, are we are faced with a scale of nuances whose extremities would be tradition and modernity? The 19th century saw the term “modernity” take on another meaning, to be closer to the meaning we use here, adding to the “modern” (current) sense a dimension of “rupture.” We have chosen an example from the field of artistic creation to test these allegations. To do this, we will review the work of the Benin artist from Abomey, Cyprien Tokoudagba, who has created both monumental work and small figurines, as well as bas-relief sculptures. We propose a brief analysis of whether this artist can be placed at either end of this scale. To what extent are his works modern, to what extent are they traditional? What is his visual contribution to the debate?

## I. Between tradition and modernity?

The opposition of tradition and modernity may seem artificial as the reduction of these two concepts to this opposition may obscure their definition. It is therefore essential to try to define, if only briefly, what is meant by “tradition” and “modernity.”

On one hand, *tradition* could constitute, at a given time, a set of practices that respond more or less correctly to the questions that society has faced in the past, that is to say a movement of perpetuating unchanged heritage at least in the minds of those who update its practices. On the other hand, *modernity* could be the addition of new practices, representing new visions of the world in more or less total rupture with the immobilism of *tradition*.

The strict opposition between these two terms seems somewhat unrealistic. In fact, nothing much in society can function by totally erasing the past, even during radical revolutions. The past reappears continuously in various aspects, and changes cannot pretend to implement or create an absolute redefinition of the cultural environment through rupture. New perspectives are the result of chosen, revised or reviewed solutions, examined in a new light, from the inventory of opportunities provided by tradition.

H. de Dijn (de Dijn, H., 2004) who refuses to “transform the key terms of the original question - modernity and tradition - into an antithetical pair,” therefore concludes that it is necessary to navigate on a “fragile cultural and conceptual in-between.” One cannot therefore be satisfied with the first documented tautological definition of modernity “character of what is modern” (Chateaubriand, *Mém.*, 1849-1850, vol. 4, p. 183) unless one precisely tries to understand what modernity may have to do with tradition. This would be the particularity of Modernity as an interpretation of a moment of thought and artistic practice emerging in the second half of the 19th century and that would end at the close of the 20th century with Post-Modernity.

When in *The Painter of Modern Life* (Baudelaire, [1863]1869), Baudelaire writes, “By “modernity” I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art, he opposes the fugitive (modernity) to what subsists (tradition). But when he completes his definition by adding “whose other half is the eternal and immutable. Every old master has had his own modernity,” and he expresses the idea that modernity does not imply an adversarial relationship with tradition but a shift that brings it movement and of which he highlights the fragile and derisory character: “This transitory, fugitive element, whose metamorphoses are so rapid...”

Somehow, this conception of modernity originated in Europe as an awareness and willingness to introduce a shift with what could be the content of tradition in creation, is perhaps one aspect of the general movement of European thought which is summed up rather well by Walter Benjamin (Benjamin, [1928]1988, p. 168) when he speaks of “most European of all commodities, the more or less pointed irony with which the life of each individual seeks to evolve separately from whatever community that person has been set down in...” Modernity in art would then be the integration of an explicit unapologetic shift, with its own tradition, a shift on the contents transmitted and/or the practice of the artist in a constant process of questioning the meaning and status of creation.

What gives *Luncheon on the Grass* by Edouard Manet (1862-1863) its modernity is its discrepancy both by the mode of representation and the social acceptance of the subject, with the *Pastoral Concert* attributed at different times to either Giorgione or Titian, while the modernity of *The Young Ladies of Avignon*, (1907) lies in the idea of borrowing a method of representation to portray the volumes differently but using a traditional subject. Finally, the modernity (now a tradition) of Marcel Duchamp's statement when exhibiting a urinal (1917) is the concrete expression of a reflection on the status of the artist and the definition of the art work.

The role of the last two artists is recalled here because, although in a different way, they are renowned either for their work or for their approach, for having radically introduced modernity in art in the early 20th century.

Each work of art could therefore present two aspects of the relationship between tradition and modernity in a broad sense, whether a quiet evolution through fusion or, on the contrary, a violent and antagonistic clash. It could be closer to one of these two terms or show a fragile balance between the two by using its approach to question the relationship between the two. From the range limited to these two terms emerges a huge variety of nuances that differ not through brutal opposition but through a dynamic.

## 2. The place of Africa regarding this issue

The contacts between Europe and Africa led initially to assimilate the production of artefacts whose creation methods are not only enslaved to their functions, to "artistic creation" (as attested by the emergence of museums dedicated to (so-called) primitive arts and not to tribal arts. Secondly, African artists have naturally become integrated into the generic typologies then available, ranging from that of the artist, to that of the modest manufacturer of supposedly folk objects for tourists. But internalizing the status of the artist cannot fail to question the creators willing, driven or obliged to express themselves from or within their cultural context.

Africa, contrary to the idea one has of it or rather the idea that has long prevailed in the West, cannot be reduced to an immobile society without history, completely petrified in "tradition," by opposition to our continent that would, in turn, have the monopoly of "modernity." Africa would then be perceived as rigid and incapable of reflexive awareness of its development, in opposition to a creative and innovative West.

However, this now challenged idea (in an often rather superficial way in the name of moral principles disregarding the complexity of the relationship to the "other") nevertheless remains as an "outlier" of a tradition built on a lack of openness and understanding of other societies.

Is the artist, in this domain as in any other, the vector of a world caught between two conflicting terms, *Tradition* and *Modernity* in a different context and perhaps with different solutions? This is what we will try to demonstrate using this example from Benin.

### 3. Tradition and/or modernity, an African artist: Tokoudagba

Cyprien Tokoudagba, who died in May 2012 at the age of 72, was a renowned artist from Benin who repeatedly achieved international recognition. The Musée africain in Lyon paid tribute to his work by organizing an exhibition in 2013.

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Fig. 1: Exhibition poster, Atelier Tokoudagba, Musée Africain, Lyon, 2013.

Tokoudagba was from Abomey where his family settled several generations ago. Capital of the ancient kingdom of Dahomey until it was conquered by the French in November 1892, Abomey is now a quiet town but is still considered the original cultural and religious centre of the Fon, the majority population in Southern Benin.

Those in power before the 20th century claimed to belong to the royal family of Tado, an ancient kingdom today located in Togo. A place they had to flee due to succession disputes before settling on the Abomey plateau in the early 17th century. Being part of the original fugitives therefore guaranteed proximity to power.

Traditionally, identity, as often, is built from genealogy. Cyprien Tokoudagba therefore stated that: “The grandfather of his grandfather came from Mono to Togo at Adja-Tado. He was a mighty warrior. King Houegbadja asked him to come to Abomey to be its Prime Minister,” he added that “His great-grandfather Adedji had been Prime Minister to Gezo” (1818-1858). His grandfather was Prime Minister to Glélé (1858-1889) and to Béhanzin (1889-1894), the last king before the conquest gave the family the name of Tokoudagba which means “my ears are there to listen to the king.” [1] King Houegbadja (circa. 1645-1685) considered the founder of the kingdom is an historical reference. The three following kings reigned during the period that was considered as the golden age of Dahomey, before colonization. This is meant to highlight the fact that Tokoudagba was socially situated in the close circle of the former ruling family, and to somehow legitimize his story and give grounds to the authority of the message he communicated in and through his work.

Cyprien Tokoudagba elaborated on the family from which he came: a family of artists. His father was a sculptor of calabashes, a traditional craft, and his uncle, a potter. He “created saints for the Church”... “Saint-Anthonys, Saint-Theresas and Saint-Marys” [2]... Tokoudagba, working with his uncle was taught painting, sculpture and earth modelling. Thus he fitted in well with the historical status of the ancient Dahomey society: the artist belonged to a traditional social class and family, he served his apprenticeship in the workshop of his relatives who were at the service of kingly power.

However as a consequence of a “modernity” to which Africa was subjected, in contradiction with a status determined by the tradition still existing in social representations, which allowed him for example to work during the 1980s at the Historical Museum in Abomey, Tokoudagba became the night watchman. This job allowed him to receive a regular income, although low, and to devote himself to his creative work during his free time, freeing him up from some material concerns. Therefore, although being an artist in the noble sense that his culture gives to this status, he was obliged to work in the margins that the economic situation of his country

left to artists. The social conditions specific to Africa determine here, through the status of the artist and the expectations towards art, the relationship to tradition and modernity.

Edna Bay, a historian at *Emory University*, USA, paid tribute to the work of Cyprien Tokoudagba by publishing an article on him in 1975 in the American magazine *African Arts* (Bay, Edna G. 1975). She placed the artist and his work in their historical, cultural and economic context and then highlighted the originality of Tokoudagba's work, while fearing that he succumbed to certain repetitiveness. But if the work of Cyprien Tokoudagba seemed to have stagnated for some time, this is probably because local clients wanted works that resembled what he usually did.

If in 1975, Edna Bay emphasized the fact that he was a solitary worker, his creative practice remained partly traditional insofar as he was the head of a workshop. In 1989, at *Djimé*, he created bas-reliefs with his young son who was his assistant. In his studio, with his family, notably his wife, who was from a family of artists/craftsmen, and their daughter who modelled small figurines in earth before painting them.

However with the status of a *fon* artist, which gave him a de facto dual legitimacy, that of his origin through the maintenance of traditional hierarchies and his artistic production that gave him a growing reputation, he had the desire and the courage to evolve technically and visually and did not limit himself to the part of his work that was successful and confined him to the status of local artist/craftsman (since, in *fon*, the same term refers to both artist and craftsman, a dichotomy that has not been perceived in the same way in the modern West since the Renaissance). He was probably aware of the possibility of change and perhaps felt a compelling need to change his creative practice by subverting it from within.

#### 4. Modernity in the continuation of tradition

In Abomey, buildings traditionally display two types of visual expression: painted bas-reliefs sculpted in the walls, sculptures in low relief and in the round, and paintings applied directly on the walls (Biton, Marlène: 2000). For these two types of decoration, the colours are applied in large flat blocks. The content of the paintings generally refers to the *vodoun* religion or to cosmogony. However, the bas-reliefs have one specificity: the representation of scenes whose function is to illustrate, remember and support the power in place.

As he was a master of worship, a *vodounon*, Cyprien Tokoudagba was holder of esoteric knowledge, which clearly reflected in his personal work and in his renovations. Responsible for a religion, that of a *Tohossou*, (*vodoun* of royal children related to water deities), he certainly had to train by painting his own buildings, before pushing his art further.

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Fig. 2: Cyprien and Tessi Tokoudagba, in front of their temple dedicated to a *Tohossou*, Abomey, December 1989 (Photo Marlène Biton).

Having then turned from painting to modelling, he transposed the diversified figurative possibilities that offered the bas-relief representations of the royal buildings and of which he possessed the visual vocabulary, onto the walls of religious buildings. These could then benefit from a greater diversity of representation than what was assigned to them in the past. Therefore, one can say that Tokoudagba made richer and more attractive the ornamentation of religious buildings, which had been until then traditionally limited in terms of vocabulary and formal representation.

As Edna Bay pointed out, the originality of Cyprien Tokoudagba consisted of two strengths: the first was the use of techniques linked *a priori* to Europe, such as shadow and modelling. Thus, thanks to these foreign contributions, he introduced some depth into the rendering of the subject. The second point involved the introduction of human figures in the murals. Traditionally, one could already find these figures in Abomey, in the bas-reliefs of royal palaces, but they had little individualized characteristics that could have identified people outside their immediate context, only a few elements such as decor, incisions, clothing, etc. indicated their origin, people or situation. Tokoudagba set about taking them out of this context to transpose them onto the walls of temples, which was already an innovation in itself, this displacement perhaps even meant breaking from a major traditional constraint. He also introduced a certain attention to detail in clothing, hairstyles and jewellery.

One just needs to look at a photograph of a vodoun priestess and a representation of the same subject by Tokoudagba to realize the accuracy of his work (Bay, Edna, 1975: 29). Nothing is missing, not one rank of pearls in the bracelets, not their colour, or the *mantelets* adorning the wrists, the number of pleats in the belt, the types of fabrics, the white shirt covering the chest, the printed colour fabric (*wax*) covering the lower body or the position of the hands, nor the colours or the type of materials used (see photo).

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Fig 3: Temple dedicated to a *Tohossou* decorated by C. Tokoudagba, Abomey, 1995 (Photo Marlène Biton).

This is after all a just reward for it may be supposed that the decoration of princely or royal buildings were inspired centuries ago by those temples, which certainly were then the only places and buildings with such ornamentation. Tokoudagba followed the opposite path and offered to temples a new visual inventory and a renewed style of representation. He enriched these religious buildings with precisely drawn characters, a rendering close to portraits, made in such a personal way, with large flat colours but also such a unique nuanced modelling that his work can be recognized at first glance.

His first major work focused particularly on convents dedicated to vodoun *Sakpata* (a Mother deity linked to the Earth), and later on princely private buildings.

Bringing to bear his experience, he then concerned himself with the traditional repertoire of *fonart*, restoring the bas-reliefs of political office buildings and those of the Historical Museum in Abomey. Likewise, outside of the historic site, in the private quarters of King *Glélé*, Tokoudagba created new reliefs inspired by traditional Abomean vocabulary and iconography.

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Fig. 4: Tokoudagba working on a bas-relief, in the private quarters of King Glélè, Abomey, 1989 (Photo Marlène Biton).

The Historical Museum at Abomey includes royal buildings within the same site. Historically, the bas-reliefs located on the outer walls of palaces were familiar and visible to all, while those decorating the walls inside the courtyards were destined to be seen during major ceremonies to which thousands of people were invited. The entire historic site has been and still is subject to refurbishment, reconditioning of its various buildings or to various more or less complete renovation or restoration works and even identical reconstructions. Cyprien Tokoudagba meanwhile undertook the renovation and restoration of sculptures and bas-reliefs of the tomb and bas-reliefs in the palace of Gèzo (1818-1858) and that of his son Glélé (1858-1889).

For this work, his approach, in addition to safeguarding the bas-reliefs subject to the test of time and the volatile climate, was not based on a restoration from objective data available to the artist. After his intervention, the works could indeed seem very colourful compared to the photographs in the book by Waterlot (Waterlot, G.-E.: 1926) who had documented 36 works in 1911. In fact, from the internalization of the knowledge related to the nature of the site and his familiarity with it, Tokoudagba respected the spirit of the bas-reliefs rather than respecting their materiality to the letter. If mural art relates to heritage by nature and if the bas-reliefs are inscribed on the walls of royal buildings, temples or the homes of artists and craftsmen, their restoration is not only meant for preservation or conservation, but as a kind of continuous updating.

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Fig. 5 : Tomb of king Gèzo, Historical Museum, Abomey, Benin, 1989 (Photo Marlène Biton).

Here we are in an adversarial system between tradition and modernity, in this way of envisaging restoration, somehow different from the system that is being updated in Europe and in which the concern for the original authenticity tends to eliminate the addition of the historical continuity of the relationship with the monuments of the past that one is trying to bring to their original situation by freezing them in an untimely signification resulting only from erudition. For this African artist, it was necessary to reclaim tradition by pursuing it, his modernity indeed consisted of updating a tradition.

His participation in an international exhibition, *Les Magiciens de la terre*, which was held in Paris in 1989 at the Pompidou Centre and the Grande Halle de la Villette, somehow sealed his reputation, which was marked by numerous exhibitions outside of Benin (London, Bonn, Stuttgart, Groningen, Copenhagen, Mexico, the Canary Islands), although it underlined the specificity of his work by pigeon-holing him in an ambiguous category of contemporary artists operating away from the traditional channels of "contemporary art." For this exhibition, he made a series of monumental sculptures dedicated to vodoun and in particular to the society of Zangbeto-Legbas (Magiciens, 1989, p. 242-243), a policing body, one of whose functions was to preserve security of people at night.

These sculptures were similar in all respects to those that he had carried out and located in different parts of Abomey (see Fig. 6).

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Fig. 6: *Public Zangbeto-Legba, Abomey, 1989 (Photo Marlène Biton).*

Tokoudagba would go on to develop his work in several directions, always focusing, both in his themes and means of expression, on a reinvention of the traditional cultural background and of the expertise acquired through the renewal of these two components. Somehow, this was the manifestation of a desire to situate himself at odds with any attempt of repetition or “revival” of tradition, therefore an insertion into a form of modernity specific to his culture.

By the 1980s, Tokoudagba decided, in addition to continuing to produce religious paintings and large scale sculptures, perhaps in response to a certain type of demand, that of visitors and tourists, to make small and relatively light pieces from clay. He exhibited a large number of these statuettes at the French Embassy in Cotonou and permanently in his workshop in Abomey.

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Fig. 7: *Some statuettes by Tokoudagba, French Embassy, Cotonou, December 1989 (Photo Marlène Biton).*

These statuettes offered scenes of everyday life, genre scenes or prestigious scenes of the past or related to masters of worship, the *vodounsi*. Like his paintings, these small sculptures were full of details as well as very bright colours.

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Fig. 8: *Cyprien Tokoudagba, at home in front of the statuettes, Abomey, Benin, 1997 (Photo Marlène Biton).*

Again, this series was not an original creation because these types of small clay figurines, from fifteen and thirty-five centimetres high, were already documented in the early 20th century. The best known are those of Yesufu Asogba, an artist from Porto-Novo. They represent characters from everyday life, diviners in consultation, masters of justice, messengers and tradesmen, with various themes and traditional subjects. Tokoudagba had certainly not seen them first hand as they are almost all in museum collections in Paris, Musée du quai Branly, or the Musée Africain in Lyon, Notre-Dame des Apôtres and at the Musée ethnographique in Geneva (Brand, Roger, 1971: 186-191). It is likely that this tradition had persisted and that he was aware of it. Anyway, Cyprien Tokoudagba embraced this tradition and renewed it firstly with the colours he used, and then with the forms and additional details.

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Fig. 9: *Cyprien Tokoudagba, in his studio, Abomey, December 1989 (Photo Marlène Biton).*

Many of them represent shamans, kings or individuals vested with some sort of authority. However, once again, he introduced new aspects to them.

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*Fig. 10: Traditional characters (from left to right) king or prince, Nessouhoue charm, Sakpata charm (private collection, photo Marlène Biton).*

In fact, he changed the thematic by using certain attitudes from other influences and in particular from Guéléédé. This form of land worshipping originally from Kétou, ancient royal city of yorouba, has two aspects, a nocturnal one, closed and religious, and another, open and public. In the latter, public masks demonstrate a willingness to redress grievances but also the standardization of customs (Drewall, Henry: 1990). Thus, the defects, unusual characteristics and behaviour of individuals are denounced, usually with humour, irony or even excess. These traditional objects therefore take on a whole new meaning if only because Tokoudagba modified the contents of the subjects represented, which questions, in a more radical manner, the meaning of this type of creation.

Tokoudagba seems to reintroduce in his statuettes the moral denunciation and social satire of the Guéléédé, which is probably the reason for its ban by French authorities. For example, he presents as if in opposition to the traditional theme, young women dressed in European clothing, sitting cross-legged or wearing outrageous make up, red nail varnish on their hands and feet and red lipstick on their lips.

These figurines therefore allowed him to circulate, based on traditional elements, objects embedded with a kind of satire, inspired by his immediate environment.

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*Fig. 11: A young modern woman (private collection, photo Marlène Biton).*

With the same aim to renew and revive a practice inspired by a certain tradition, the artist conducted research into metal work. His new concern was to combine lightness to large scale works. He wanted to make less heavy monumental pieces, covered with glue and sawdust (perhaps influenced by the work of Ousmane Sow) to easily export them but also showing his commitment to the techniques used by other African artists he met while travelling abroad.

This is why Cyprien Tokoudagba perfectly illustrates the two terms that we were trying to oppose in the introduction to this article: *Tradition and Modernity*, in his way of using traditional materials, on traditional media, with traditional forms, while altering these forms and changing the attribution of some of them to certain places. The traditional aspects of his work take the form of a pre-established inventory and its "modernity" lies in unexpected forms, breaking from classifications, sclerosis, assignations and prohibitions, while introducing social criticism. He somehow placed himself in the particular context of his culture and society, and in a certain practice of modernity.

Thus, within a specifically African context, Cyprien Tokoudagba has consciously assumed a certain practice of Modernity comparable to the trend that appeared in Europe at the dawn of the 20th century. He was not only “modern” in being the architect of the evolution of a traditional form of expression, he rather updated a form of African modernity by questioning and challenging, through his work, some of the purposes and functions of traditional art. But he was not an artist strictly limited to what is called “European modernity” since his modernity is expressed in relation to the traditions of his own culture. For this artist, modernity therefore lies in the fact that he changed traditional practices by revisiting them on several levels, both formal and social. As the sudden changes in the historical conditions of Dahomey and Benin society prohibited smooth evolution, the continuation of these practices condemned them to impoverishment through the making of copies. This artist represents an entry point into a general process of modernity that would however retain the creative possibilities specific to a society that has long had a different history from that of the West, in a contemporary dialogue with its tradition.

## 5. Conclusion

In building opportunities for a shift, the establishment of a critical distance, but without rupture, by creating art from traditional but updated practices, Tokoudagba laid the foundations of a form of modernity parallel to the one that Western artists continue to question, but without borrowing from its vocabulary.

He may therefore have defined the possibilities of a specific creative development for societies whose history are not merged with that of the West, thus escaping the dilemma that limits non-European artists to repetitive globalization, between folklore and assimilation.

## 6. Footnotes:

[1] Personal communication (1989, 95 and 2007).

[2] Idem

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