

Shifting Imageries

Memory, Projectivity and the Experience of Violence in Northern Côte d'Ivoire

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INTRODUCTION

Rebel domination is often thought of as arbitrary and based on an excessive use of violence, not leaving much space for anything beyond the immediate necessities of survival. However, rebels almost always engage in some sort of governance. The provision of public goods grants them a legitimacy that may secure their domination without resorting to the expensive and often ineffective use of violence as their only basic legitimacy.¹ Besides such considerations of a better cost-benefit ratio, rebel governance may also try to establish some kind of cultural affiliation between rebels and civilians. At times, rebels implement cultural policies and fund cultural institutions – refuting common presumptions that military insurgents are not investing in anything except power. They also invest in culture, in particular when they can make use of historical memory to build a closer identification between them and the population under their domination.

1 The concept of basic legitimacy is adopted from von Trotha (1995, 2000), who builds on Popitz (1992).

The city of Korhogo in northern Côte d'Ivoire may serve as an example. Military insurgents captured it on 19 September 2002.² Since then, the city has been under their domination. In 2005, the newly appointed rebel commander of the city decided to (re-)build a cultural centre – to the surprise of many who had known him only as an arrogant, demanding, if not brutal man. The centre opened in February 2006 after the artists of the city had embellished it with murals that covered the inside as well as the outside walls. They were largely free to paint whatever they thought best. The outcome was a remarkable series of murals that, although painted by fifteen different artists, testified to how the urban population imagined the past, their present situation and a better world yet to come. They turned the popular imagination of the past and the future into a visible imagery that all urban dwellers could appreciate. Many of the murals were cast in conventional genres, but there were paintings that did not fit to any of the existing modes of representation. In 2009, the entire centre was re-painted. The artists gave up some of their old paintings and to some extent developed a new repertoire and a new genre that allowed them to engage in the political articulation of public interests towards both the rebel command and the residing president in the southern half of the country.

This article will explore how the tension between the experience of past violence and the imagination of a better future informed the formation of a new genre in painting and the image of the past. It asks how the iteration of existing genres and their creative transformation in the image programme of the cultural centre generated a cultural space that allowed the artists to address new social and political issues. It concludes with an analysis of the relationship between the visual imagery and the popular imagination, claiming that there is no memory of the past without the projective power of the imagination of a social and political alternative to the present social order.

2 On the Ivoirian crisis in general cf. Poamé (2007), who also provides a chronology of the major events.

KEY CONCEPTS: PICTURE, IMAGE, IMAGERY AND IMAGINATION

Before unfolding the history of the cultural centre in Korhogo, I need to clarify my understanding of the key concepts used in this contribution. My basic heuristic instrument is a distinction between material pictures and mental images, building on William Mitchell's ›picture theory‹ (Mitchell 1995). *Pictures*, however, are not merely the material side of mental images. There is a constant tension between the two. The materiality of pictures and their perceptual character endows them with a sort of inner logic that may become visible as ›style‹ and, with regard to content, as ›genre‹. Style and genre both address similarities between pictures. These similarities, however, may also shape the spectator's understanding of how a particular picture should look. As normative expectations, they become part of the image that the spectator has in mind when perceiving a picture.

Usually, *images* are not stable mental representations of something out there – although they are sometimes perceived as such. Images bring a possible future state of the lifeworld to mind.³ They do not merely recall a sensory perception; images always have a projective element. However, images retain the form of sensory experience; they have a quasi-perceptual character. Because of this quality, images can be very persuasive, at times even seductive. Unsurprisingly, the power of images is a well-established trope in art history, though less so in the social sciences.⁴ They may acquire a certain stability because human actors make use of them – implicitly or explicitly – in social life to communicate with others. A constant reversal of shared images would render regular communication almost impossible. As social beings, we rely on shared images of how the shared lifeworld appears to us as members of society. However, images are also subject to the mental activity of those who ›see‹ them. Because an image does not exist as

3 An appropriate phenomenological term for this capacity is *Appräsentation* in German, usually translated as ›appresentation‹ in English. The term was introduced by Edmund Husserl in his *Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität* and later elaborated by Alfred Schütz (1966). From a sociological and anthropological perspective, cf. also Soeffner (2004).

4 An outstanding, seminal work was Freedberg (1989). A more recent influential publication is Mitchell (2005).

a material object, it can be modified and transformed at will. Images grow out of subjectivity and intersubjectivity. I will call this continual process *imagination*. This process has two aspects, one individual, the other thoroughly social. Artists, for instance, may focus on their individual subjectivity to generate images and pictures that mirror their own projectivity, their ›visions‹ which then turn into pictures and artworks. Imagination, however, also emerges from intersubjectivity, the encounters with others. It often embraces large parts of a society – and it can move entire societies. A utopia, for example, is perhaps best understood as a persuasive alternative image to an unsatisfying social order.

In general, an image does not exist in isolation. It competes with other images, or more precisely, the process of imagination breeds more than one image. Due to the power of images, the process of imagination has a political dimension. It is not separated from other political processes, though its precise relationship to other discursive formations requires further theoretical clarification. To address the multifaceted societal formation of images, I will use the term *imagery*. Imageries consist of images that occupy a particular place in the social world. Imageries are not closed systems; they are embedded in ongoing processes of social, political and cultural articulation. It does not come as a surprise that a cultural centre, and in particular one that was founded by a rebel movement, engages in the formation of an imagery that addresses the past, the present and the future.

KORHOGO AS THE HEART OF SENUFOLAND

Korhogo was a fast-growing city until the military insurgency of 2002. Because of the division of the country, it was cut off from the southern parts of Côte d'Ivoire and from Abidjan with its harbour. Though the rural hinterland still viewed Korhogo as the dominant market place in the region, attracting traders from all over West Africa, the city's population actually stagnated since the outbreak of the violence.⁵ This was less due to the fact of the local population fleeing than it was to the city's loss of significance

5 There are no reliable figures. The present population is estimated at 170,000 to 212,000 inhabitants (cf. http://www.populationdata.net/index2.php?option=pays&pid=51&nom=cote_d_ivoire. Accessed 26 May 2011).

as a hub for the national government of Côte d'Ivoire. Too many well-paid civil servants and their families left Korhogo when the state administration ceased to function. The loss of their buying power was a severe blow to the city's economy until it was replaced by other businesses, for instance the trade in inexpensive motorcycles from China.⁶

Until the turn of the century, however, Korhogo was much more than a provincial town with a few offices and a market. It was perceived as the cultural stronghold of the Senufo, by far the biggest ethnic group in northern Côte d'Ivoire. The mayor of the city was always a direct descendant of Péléforo Gbon Coulibaly, one of the most powerful intermediary rulers of the French colonial empire and himself a Senufo. The French made him the *chef suprême Sénoufo*, a position that did not exist in pre-colonial times. It was intended to provide some cultural legitimacy to the intermediary of the white colonial administration. *Le vieux Gbon* (Gbon the Old), as he was called locally, dominated urban and regional politics to a degree that left little space for the ambitions of others. Cooperating closely with the French administration, his entire family became very wealthy and many Coulibalys held influential positions in various parts of the administration. When it became apparent that the French would give up their colony, Gbon forged an alliance with the coming strong man of Côte d'Ivoire, Félix Houphouët-Boigny. He became a member of the Parti Démocratique de Côte d'Ivoire – Rassemblement Démocratique Africain (PDCI-RDA), which later became the single party of post-colonial Côte d'Ivoire until 1990. His successors engaged in political careers on that ticket and were repeatedly elected as members of parliament or ministers in PDCI governments.

The Coulibalys claimed that they represented the entire North with the Senufo as the rightful first settlers of the area. Though Gbon the Old had converted to Islam as a child when he was brought up at the Muslim court of Kéné Dougou in Sikasso, today a provincial town in Mali, he was always tolerant toward local religious beliefs – like the majority of the Muslim

6 The trade in motorcycles was perhaps the most visible aspect of the economic transformation. Many other commodities were imported from China, India and other Asian countries through the ports of Guinea, Ghana and Togo and sold to residents of other neighbouring countries. As there were no customs fees, the North attracted many traders who profited from the low prices in that stateless area.

traders who, for centuries, had respected the rites and ceremonies of the peasant Senufo. Indeed, many Muslims were initiated into the local secret society, although they did not accept the same duties as the Senufo. The Coulibalys were able to sustain an image of their family as the chief, even ›royal‹ dynasty representing the entire North, deeply enrooted in local Senufo culture as well as in Islam as the genuine religion of the North. There was no contradiction between the two. The many Muslims of foreign origin, living as traders, carriers or for some other business in Korhogo, also accepted both claims (Launay 1992). They confirmed the Coulibalys' status as Muslims and integrated them in their communities while they in turn were integrated into the far-flung patrimonial network that the Coulibalys maintained with the various groups living in the city and in the wider area.⁷

This cultural unity was, however, largely a construction. It was staged at ritual and ceremonial events, for instance at funerals in the area that once had belonged to the dominion of the colonial ›supreme chief‹, i.e. where he was authorised to act on behalf of the French administration. If an elder died in a village, the Coulibalys sent delegates to participate in the mourning rites and to distribute small amounts of money and a few condolence gifts among the family of the deceased (Förster 1995). Such acts renewed the patrimonial ties that were threatened by the death of the elder. But they also re-produced the image of the Coulibalys as both conscious of what was cast in French terms as ›tradition‹, and as pious believers of the one true religion.

KATANA – THE OLD FESTIVALS

In 1983 and again in 1992, the mayors and dignitaries of the family decided to organise a festival that would bring the entire population of the region together in Korhogo as the capital of the Senufo. The mayor Lanciné Gon Coulibaly, who was later dismissed for tax fraud, held the first festival

7 While the local religious scholarly families, the *mory*, had to observe all of the rules and regulations of Islam, the other groups were not expected to do the same. The only group that questioned the ›good faith‹ of the local political elite were the few reformists such as the Wahhabis (Launay 1992: 121-125).

(Coulibaly 2004: 330-332), introducing the name *Katana*, which means ›good thing‹ in the language of the Senufo.⁸ It had many faces, being a feast for the urban population of Korhogo and at the same time a highly political event that aimed at making claims at the national and even at the international level.

For the ordinary population, it was a kind of trade fair accompanied by a lot of entertainment. There were stalls of companies presenting their products such as agricultural engines, TV and stereo equipment, and household appliances. Besides the officially invited companies, there were countless stalls held by small business people, trying to sell bits and pieces of whatever they had to offer. Musicians from the region performed more or less spontaneously wherever they could find an audience. The mayor himself addressed the national and international levels. He had invited foreign embassies and ambassadors to attend the festival, which took place at the end of January when the Harmattan, a seasonal dry and dusty trade wind, was slowly coming to an end. Each nation was offered a special day and invited to celebrate the festival with contributions from their own country. Besides France as the former colonial master still keeping a close watch over his former child, the mayor asked Canada, Belgium, Japan and neighbouring Guinea to send delegations and to participate in the performances of the day. The choice was built at least partially on his existing social networks.

This first festival served as model for the second in 1992. Again, it was scheduled for the end of the Harmattan season, now in mid-February, and again it had a commercial side. This time, however, the cultural aims were much more prominent. The former two-storeyed house of Péléforo Gbon Coulibaly – his ›palace‹ in popular opinion – was refurbished and transformed into a museum. It was integrated into a programme that aimed at endowing the major provincial cities of Côte d’Ivoire with museums where the cultural heritage of the region would be preserved and displayed to tourists and the local audience. In addition, the museum was included in the West African Museums Programme funded by the International African Institute (Savané 1994). The building in Korhogo was no longer inhabited since the death of the patriarch in 1962 – or more precisely, it was occupied by homeless people and lunatics. The choice of Coulibaly’s former resi-

8 The term has a subtle connotation in Senari, the vernacular language, as it may also mean ›sweet thing‹ or ›joyful thing‹.

dence was nonetheless a direct reference to the former glory of his kingdom. When the national minister of communication and culture at the time, Henriette Diabaté, decided to incorporate the dilapidated building in her programme of Musées Régionaux, it was clear that its renovation would be a tribute to the mayor and his family, too.

The mayor, again Lanciné Gon Coulibaly, tried to profit as much as he could from the external funding and opened the museum together with the minister. In addition, three days later, while the festival was still going on, he received the official visit of Henri Konan Bédié, then president of the national assembly and promising successor to the senescent residing president of the nation. Together they visited the workshops of local craftsmen in the entrance courtyard of the museum. It was an occasion to renew the alliance between the two families, the Coulibalys and the Houphouëts, as the two pillars of PDCI power after independence.

Foreign embassies were once more invited to contribute to the event. Their participation was, however, not as prominent as in 1983. The most spectacular contribution came from another neighbouring country, Mali. As Guinea had done almost ten years earlier, they sent their National Ballet. The site where the Mali ballet performed was an unroofed but walled multi-purpose courtyard known locally as *Centre de la Jeunesse* (Youth Centre).⁹ When the National Ballet of Mali performed, the courtyard was filled with plastic chairs and the platform was used as a stage. While the mayor, the minister and their special guests from abroad were sitting in the first rows, the Korhogo youth in the back preferred to dance to the rhythms of the Malian sounds. However, the director of the ballet, who had accompanied his troupe to Korhogo, made it clear that this was an official event and that there was no space for any political subversion in the programme. There were good reasons to warn the younger spectators dancing behind the official guests.

In 1992, the university crisis in Côte d'Ivoire had already gone into its third year, leaving many students without any chance to complete their studies as the national university in Abidjan declared one *année blanche*

9 Youth in Ivoirian French does not necessarily mean that a person is young in physical age. It rather suggests that the person has not lived up to his or her social ambitions. An unmarried man who does not have a family is still considered young even at the age of forty or over.

after the other.¹⁰ Bands such as Les Parents du Campus or Sur-Choc had created a novel musical style, the Zouglou.¹¹ The term was borrowed from the local Baule and tellingly meant ›mixture‹ or ›trash‹. Unlike former Ivoirian music, it depicted the suffering of the students, their difficulties in making a living in the midst of underfunded institutions and harassment by state authorities. One of their battle cries made it crystal clear what they were aiming at: »Ceux-là, Houphouët ne pourra pas les commander!« (»Houphouët will not be able to boss these guys around!«).¹² The unruly texts were not sung in the ›good‹ French that was a marker of bourgeois identity in the postcolony; they were sung in the street slang spoken by Ivoirian youth. For the first time in history, they were proud of deviating from the dominant French culture that had informed the post-colonial identities since independence (cf. Touré 1981). Zouglou was also a dance that developed its own movements called *coupé décalé* (cut and shift). It soon spread over most of West and Central Africa and was also appropriated by the African Diaspora in Paris. When the director of the Malian ballet moved on stage, one of his first words was that he would never wrench his arms and legs as the ›Zouglouists‹ would do. He raised laughter at the rear of the courtyard. In 1992 the Malian ballet was already engaging in an invisible competition with the urban youth that had started to articulate its own history of the post-colonial nation state – one that was far less positive than the official story.

FROM KATANA TO WOMIENGNON

In 2002 the civil war brought all remaining activities in the youth courtyard to an end. The iron entrance gate had disappeared and the walls were partially demolished. The debris filled the yard together with shrubs and gar-

10 Literally ›white year‹, it meant that no courses were offered. Officially, the university never closed completely and continued to organise exams – which the students regularly failed because there was no teaching.

11 Other bands were Magic System, Les Garagistes, Mercenaires, Yode et Siro and Espoir 2000. For a general overview cf. Konaté (2002).

12 Unfortunately, the rhythm of the French slang does not translate into English. The sentence sounds almost like a song and invites the listeners to join in.

bage from the surrounding houses. However, the avenue in which it was located never lost its representative role in the city. In 1964, on the occasion of the fourth anniversary of independence, it was one of the first streets to receive a bitumen surface. The former French offices became the new prefecture, but the avenue remained the central axis of the city.

Rebel governance in Korhogo was heavily influenced by one powerful man, the *comzone* Fofié Kouakou Martin. In 2005 he was appointed commander of Zone 10 – hence the short form *comzone*.¹³ Unlike most of his peers, he had a long-term political agenda, which was not solely aimed at maintaining the dominant position that he had acquired through the disorder of the first year after the beginning of the insurgency on 19 September 2002. Being in charge of the second-largest city under rebel control was more than a challenge; it was also a chance to show that the rebellion could do more than the former state administration.¹⁴ Fofié developed a programme to rebuild the city.¹⁵

His plans to renovate the city went beyond the economic agenda and included popular as well as cultural goals. There were public gardens, a space already covered by acacia trees but abandoned for decades, where he established a bar and a restaurant, and himself planted a tree. Musicians and actors were invited to perform under the soft shade of the acacias. He also organised feasts for the children of Korhogo and their mothers. His most visible achievement in the field of culture was, however, the reconstruction of the cultural centre where the dances of the last Katana were once performed. It was more than a mere renovation as Fofié decided to construct a new, entirely roofed tribune on one side of the courtyard and to enlarge the existing small rooms on the other. The construction material

13 Fofié was in charge of security in Korhogo between 2002 and 2005. The territory under rebel domination was, until summer 2010, divided into ten administrative zones. Cf. Heitz (2009) on another mode of rebel domination in the West of Côte d'Ivoire.

14 Sapéro, personal communication, 5 February 2009. Sapéro was heading the group of artists that negotiated with Fofié on the renovation of the cultural centre. According to him, Fofié stated repeatedly that he wanted to show that the rebels were performing better than the former ›functionaries‹ of the state.

15 Cf. <http://www.fansara110.com>. Accessed 19 May 2011. The site displays visual and verbal documentation of Fofié's works and his biography.

was officially ›donated‹ by the big merchants and businessmen of Korhogo. In actual fact, however, the material was requisitioned from them, often under dubious circumstances. Whoever wanted to do business in Korhogo at the time had to contribute – and if the person did not do so voluntarily, Fofié could become quite unpleasant.

The new centre to some extent built on the old one, but it was also a break with the past. Fofié gave it a new name, Womiengnon. The term was borrowed from Senari, the language of the Senufo. Literally translated, it means ›good for us all‹ or ›beautiful for us all‹.¹⁶ The rebels preferred a more figurative translation and understood it as *le bien commun* (the common good).¹⁷ The opening of the new centre on 18 February 2006 was a public event.¹⁸ After an inaugural speech, the *comzone* took his guests around to have a look at the centre and in particular its walls. All of them displayed murals commissioned from artists in Korhogo that were, as Fofié claimed, related to the history of the North, the Senufo and the City of Poro, as Korhogo was often called because of the Senufos' famous secret society.¹⁹

2006 – THE FIRST IMAGE PROGRAMME

The murals had all been painted in the two or three weeks that preceded the opening of the new cultural centre. The rebel leader contacted Issa Koné, an artist whose works he had already collected earlier and with whom his administration cooperated from time to time. Issa Koné is better known as

16 Senari does not distinguish between ›good‹ and ›beautiful‹. The modern autonomy of the arts and aesthetic experience does not exist in their culture (cf. Förster 1997).

17 Cf. http://www.fansara110.com/l_inauguration_du_centre_culturel_915.htm. Accessed 25 May 2011.

18 The opening ceremony is still documented on the website of the former rebel leader, cf. http://www.fansara110.com/l_inauguration_du_centre_culturel_857.htm. Accessed 26 May 2011.

19 Sapéro, personal communication, 10 January 2010.

Sapéro de Farafina,²⁰ his stage name. He has a weekly radio programme and an occasional TV show on the local, private SRTV station. He also spells his name as Sap-Héro (the hero of Sap), referring to SAPE, the Société des Ambianceurs et Personnes Élégantes in Brazzaville (Martin 1995). To Sapéro, the movement represents a truly African way of being modern, and it has created a contemporary African culture.²¹ His own way of dressing, however, does not fit to SAPE: He has long dreadlocks and often wears the very wide ›traditional‹ trousers or the short, brown shirts of the peasants with pockets on all sides. Sapéro was and still is an eye-catcher in Korhogo. Because of his radio show and his unusual appearance, he is known all over the city.

Sapéro calls his studio ›Safarim Maison‹²² and sees it as a centre for the promotion of all crafts and arts in the North. He regularly invites other artists to come to his place and reflect about the (few) possibilities to launch new projects, to attract clients, to win new patrons and to advertise their activities in the city and beyond. In order to obtain the status of an NGO, Safarim Maison has a written programme that defines its purpose as an association of artists fostering development, including capacity building, efficient training, etc. The reference to development discourse was a means to get access to possible funders.

Sapéro received the commission to cover the walls of the cultural centre with murals less than four weeks before the inauguration. Partly because he would not be able to do all the paintings himself, but also because he saw an opportunity to advance his plans for the association of Korhogo's artists, he invited all of the artists of the city to join and do the murals together. Some who happened to be in Abidjan were even sent messages to come back and participate in the joint effort. In all, fifteen painters and five sculptors participated.

The choice of the subject was largely up to the artists themselves. However, Fofié had told Sapéro that he wanted them ›to respect‹ the purpose of the place, i.e. culture. Besides, he said, he would like to see something

20 Farafina means ›land of the blacks‹ or, freely translated ›black Africa‹ in Dyula, a dialect of Manding serving as a market language in Korhogo.

21 All personal information on Sapéro and his studio was collected in January and February 2009, and in January, February and August 2010.

22 Safarim stands for Sap-Héro Farafina Images.

about the new Korhogo, the new era that had begun with the rebellion of 2002. The rebel leader did not intervene directly in the execution of the paintings. He inspected the progress of the work regularly but, with exceptions, kept silent on what the painters were depicting.

The walls were covered with murals on both sides. As the structure was on Main Street, it was a prominent place in the city and no artist refused to join the project. The most visible panels were to the right and left of the entrance. The first panel left of the entrance showed a typical scene from Senufo culture. It displayed a *kpoye* group, an ensemble of three xylophone players with two drummers. The drummer carrying the lead instrument was dancing as the players usually do when they praise somebody. Every village and even every quarter of bigger villages and towns has such an ensemble of musicians that perform whenever there is an event that is related to the identity of the village. The *kpoye* bands articulate belonging and simultaneously generate social space – the social space of a settlement in its unity. They are seen by many as a primordial expression of Senufo culture.

Other panels also displayed scenes from Senufo culture and rural life, which was widely understood as the source of all Senufo culture. There were scenes depicting circular huts with thatched roofs. Masked and unmasked dancers were performing in front. These pictures were obviously borrowed from a genre in easel painting on canvas, »the village in the times of old«. ²³ As a narrative genre, it was embedded in a discursive formation about the past and the present, answering widespread expectations about ancestral life: In the old days, elders were still respected, and life was based on the values of mutual understanding and reciprocity; it stood in stark contrast to the selfishness that now penetrated all spheres of contemporary urban life. It was this selfish attitude that had, as many people claimed, brought Côte d'Ivoire to the brink of the present economic, social and above all political disaster. Depicting idyllic scenes of village life was a political statement – and not a retreat from the public sphere, as a Western spectator might have suspected.

As a visual genre, the landscapes and scenes from rural life shared some characteristics: They displayed crafts and well-known masks and dances, in particular those that had once been performed for tourists. Though tourism had already ceased to exist before the outbreak of the civil war in 2002, it

23 I adopt the term from Fabian (1996: 17, 193-211).

had left its traces in the collective visual memory. For instance, the holy dance of the *boloi* and the *wābele* masks were depicted as performances in a village setting. The masks are actually not a central element of Senufo culture and do not belong to the Poro society, which is the most important institution of the segmental social order. They exist only in a comparatively small part of Senufoland where they hunt witches. Indeed, they are more a sign of how the villagers tried to cope with the malcontents of modernity than a living testimony to the peaceful ›times of old‹. The imagery of tourism also shaped the pictorial style. The masks were displayed in the foreground and from an angle that allowed the spectator to see all of the iconographic details. To a certain degree, they reproduced the way the masks were depicted in coffee-table books and on posters for the tourist market. In the local setting, the masks perform only late in the day and at night, and the spectators cannot see much more than a fuzzy shape moving through the village. Similar paintings and their reproductions were often displayed in places accessible to many, for instance in restaurants, big hotels, pharmacies and sometimes offices. There was a shared visual awareness of how such paintings should look, and the murals in the centre were no exception. Knowledgeable visitors who passed while the painters were still working on their respective panels brought their opinion on the scenes into play. They also pointed at features which they would have associated with an ancestral lifestyle. The main and much more precise criticism came, however, from the other artists working on their panels close by. Sapéro remembers animated debates about how to depict a particular figure and how to design a panel so that it would fulfil the purpose of the centre at large. There was a certain tension between their own knowledge of the genre and their anticipation of what the centre was meant for. Because there were no clear instructions by the rebel leader, they chose a combination of different genre paintings.

Pictures of sportsmen and women formed a second genre. Unlike the first, however, it was not appreciated by tourists or other outsiders, such as expatriates working for development agencies or international NGOs.²⁴ Football, handball and other games were most prominent. Wrestling and the martial arts came next as they were very popular in the city which accom-

24 They were once an important clientele for the artists living in Korhogo but had also left in 2002.

modated five big clubs promoting these sports. Like the ancestral genre, the sports genre also had its roots in urban visual culture. Unlike the former, however, it was seldom reproduced on canvas. Rather, such paintings were displayed in public places such as schoolyards and the municipal baths²⁵ as well as in private sports clubs. The artists reproduced pictures of that genre because they assumed that the centre would primarily house sports events after its completion.

PICTURING THE EXPERIENCE OF THE PAST

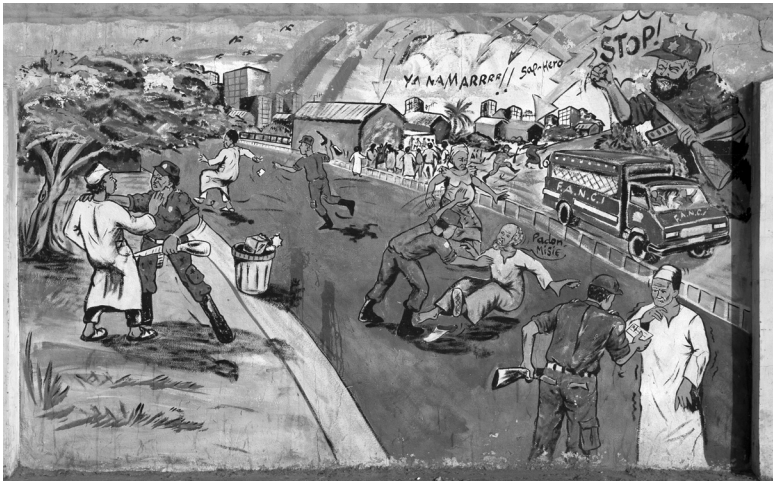
Though the two genres were not known by name to the ordinary urban populace, most visitors to the centre and also the passersby were familiar with what the pictures showed and related them to their experience of urban visual culture. However, several artists produced paintings that did not fit one of the conventional genres. Sapéro, the most courageous among them, painted the most prominent panel inside the court, right opposite the entrance and the tribune of honour. All visitors entering the centre would first look at this mural before becoming aware of the others to the left and right.

The mural showed a cityscape with a broad street in the foreground and a skyline of modern houses in the background (fig. 1). On the right side of the road stands a troop carrier marked FANCI. The acronym stands for Forces Armées Nationales de Côte d'Ivoire, the former national army of the first republic and the Gbagbo government. It clearly identifies the soldiers on the street as representatives of the oppressive regimes of the 1990s and the years before the 2002 insurgency. Three scenes are depicted in the street, all three showing interactions between national soldiers and local people. Both are easy to recognise; the soldiers wear uniforms while the others are dressed in *boubous*, the long caftans that Muslims usually wear in northern Côte d'Ivoire, or in ordinary clothes. The first scene on the left of the panel depicts a soldier with a gun grappling a young man on the shoulder while the terrified man tries to hold the soldier off by pushing him back with his hand. The second scene in the background of the tableau shows a fleeing man in a light yellow *boubou* being

25 In 2006, the municipal baths were dysfunctional and had been closed for many years. For the artists, who were all in their twenties and early thirties, the municipal baths were not much more than a story from a distant past.

pursued by a soldier, again with a gun in his hand. The fleeing man drops a tiny card behind his back; the small rectangle in the upper left corner identifies it as a national identity card. The third scene is more brutal than the others and catches the attention of the spectators depicted in the middle of the entire tableau. It shows a soldier battering a man and a woman. The man is old, with white hair and a white beard. While falling backwards on the ground, losing one of his sandals, he is still trying to apologise by saying »padon misié« [sic] (»excuse me, sir«). The two words are written in Ivoirian French, showing that the old man does not have a formal education. With his left hand, the same soldier is battering a pregnant woman who appears to be passing by behind the two. The soldier's hand is touching the woman's belly while her face is contorted with pain. Like the old man, she is dressed in ordinary clothes; a wrap-around skirt and a simple yellow blouse.

Fig. 1: *Identity crisis*. Mural by Sapéro, wall paint, 2006.



Photograph taken by the author.

The fourth and last scene in the foreground to the right depicts a soldier with a machine gun who is inspecting an identity card which he holds in his right hand. The passport photo is clearly visible. The owner of the card is another old man wearing a white *boubou*. He is also terrified and, with a gesture of despair, lifts his right hand to his chin, still looking at the soldier in front of him.

In the background of the four scenes and close to the houses stands a crowd of people, apparently not daring to approach. Above the city in the background, a white thundercloud hovers and lightning descends on the houses. Larger than life, another soldier appears in the upper right corner of the tableau, shaking his fist and shouting »Stop!«. He wears a cap with a star – an emblem that identifies him as a rebel soldier. The man has a long black beard and can be identified as Fofié Koakou Martin, the chief rebel of Korhogo. In his left hand, he holds a Kalashnikov. To the left of the »Stop!«, one reads »ya na marrrr!!« – the sound of a firing gun. The picture is a plain and unequivocal image of what fuelled the rebellion of 2002: the constant harassment of the ordinary populace in the North by arrogant and brutal men in uniforms from the South. It is an image of the collective experience of being second-class citizens. As such, the tableau is not a depiction of an actual event, but casts the collective experience into a visible picture.

Sapéro signed the panel in the middle, right behind the sound of the machine gun. He selected the panel, and it was also he who decided on the subject of the tableau. However, while he was still working on the picture, the rebel commander showed up to supervise the progress of the artists working in the centre. Sapéro did not notice his arrival and kept on painting until another artist standing next to him gave him a sign. When turning around, Sapéro noticed that Fofié was attentively observing what he was doing. He had not said a word until Sapéro became aware of him, but now he asked, »Who is the man in the back?« Sapéro, who had not asked for permission to portray the rebel commander, was scared because Fofié was known for his arbitrary and rude way of dealing with people who did not do what he wanted them to do. Sapéro told me later that he believed that he saw Fofié frowning but »there was nothing«. He answered: »This is a man who wants to re-build the city.« Fofié told him to continue and to come when the centre would be opened.²⁶

This was not the only panel with political content. The head of Ernesto Che Guevara filled the panel to the left. It adopted the usual style of Che Guevara portraits: plain black and white surfaces that reduced the facial features to a few essential traits.²⁷ Like the insurgents in northern Côte d'Ivoire, he waves a cap

26 Sapéro, personal communication, 2 February 2009.

27 Like most of the posthumous portraits, it was based on the iconic photo taken by Alberto Korda on 5 March 1960.

with a star on the front. When talking to the artists of *Safarim Maison*, I was told, »this was a man who fought for the poor – in some other part of Africa«. ²⁸ The name of Che Guevara was unknown, and when I mentioned the name and that he was a Latin American revolutionary who had mainly fought in Cuba, they said that it did not change anything as long as he was fighting for the rights of the suppressed. His iconic portrait stood for the will to give a voice to those who suffered from an unjust regime.

Fig. 2: French officers and Senegalese Rifles arresting villagers. Mural by SAM, wall paint, 2006.



Photograph taken by the author.

Closer to their own past were two other panels. The first showed a scene from colonial life (fig. 2): two French officers and six *Tirailleurs Sénégalais*, the African auxiliary troops of the colonial army, arresting three men in a rural village. ²⁹ The style is much more naturalistic than in the other paintings. According to Sapéro, it was inspired by pictures in schoolbooks on the country's his-

²⁸ Group discussion on the occasion of a guided visit to the centre on 14 January 2009.

²⁹ Despite the name, the Senegalese Rifles were not only recruited in Senegal. They came from all parts of Africa under French domination (cf. Michel 2003).

tory.³⁰ The tableau shows the French officers dressed in blue uniforms and the African soldiers in dark green with white caps. The French officers are trying to separate the captured men from their wives and families, and the African auxiliaries assist them and push the captives on a truck. Remarkably, one of the two French officers is supported by an African soldier who presses his hands on the officer's back to withstand the pressure of the captives. The French colonial army did not allow such an act; no African soldier was allowed to touch his superior in such a way.

Fig. 3: The Tower of Babel. Mural by Sapéro, wall paint, 2006.



Photograph taken by the author.

30 As the artist was not living in Korhogo, I was unable to inquire directly but had to rely on what I was told by the members of Safarim Maison.

Another panel is dedicated to the more recent, post-colonial history of Côte d'Ivoire. It shows a meeting hall with well-dressed men sitting on the right and a tall person in a black suit on the left (fig. 3). In the middle is a table with a kind of bowl on it showing the national emblem of Côte d'Ivoire, the contour of the country and two Ivory tusks. In the background, a painting on the wall depicts a crowd of people around a pyramid. It is subtitled »Tour de Babel« with the name of the artist in the upper right corner. The man standing on the left is easily recognisable as Félix Houphouët-Boigny, the founding father of the nation. He carries medals on his chest and raises his left hand. Sapéro explained that the men sitting on the right are talking to each other but not listening – everybody is talking a different language. The first president, this picture suggests, did not found a nation but only confusion. He constructed a Tower of Babel that was bound to crumble, Sapéro added. Such a statement against the founding father was exceptional – even under rebel domination. The reputation of the ›old man‹, as he was usually called by ordinary people, was sacrosanct, and even after his death in 1993, many politicians still legitimated their own ambitions by claiming that they would just do what the ›old man‹ would have done. The tableau was also a statement about the continuity of political attitudes. It suggested that many politicians who were arguing with each other at the time when the picture was painted still did not want to listen. This meaning was, however, not immediately obvious to the spectators, as Sapéro admitted. Some just saw the former president and assumed that the painting was honouring him – a fact that would affect the later destiny of the painting.

IMAGERIES OF A BETTER FUTURE

A third group of panels addressed the future of Korhogo as a modern and ›developed‹ city. On the outside wall of the centre, the rebel commander was depicted with a hammer and a chisel working hard rocks (fig. 4). Behind him on the left, a few thatched houses were visible, indicating that he worked for a Senufo village »community«. On the other side stood a basket with utensils and a small figure on a pedestal. It resembled the wooden Senufo statues, although it was somewhat distorted. However, the figure clearly looked toward Fofié working on the »foundations« of a new Senufo village, as the artists explained.

Another mural, again by Sapéro and also on the exterior wall, showed Independence Square, not far away from the cultural centre. Every person living in Korhogo knew the square as a place where important ceremonies were held since the days of colonial domination, with the prefecture on one side and the town hall on the other. Both buildings were now part of the administration put in place by the insurgents, and the former prefect's office had been turned into an office for the rebel commander. In the middle of the square was a small traffic island with a high flagpole. The French had hoisted their Tricolore here, and after 1960, the post-colonial administration had done the same with their own tri-colored flag. In an attempt to show that times were changing, the *comzone* had invited the visual artists and architects to submit plans ›to develop‹ the city. The competition had two aims: One was to refurbish the buildings around the square and other prestigious places in town; the other was to endow Korhogo with monuments in honour of the rebellion. Unfortunately, the funding for the second part was insufficient, and apart from a monument for the unknown rebel soldier, most of the monuments remained unfinished. Some pedestals and bases for future monuments were constructed, but then the rebels ran out of money.

Fig. 4: The rebel commander re-building Korhogo. Mural by Sapéro, wall paint, 2006.



Photograph taken by the author.

Sapéro had submitted plans for a monument too. He had presented drawings and a small model to Fofié, but this did not lead anywhere. Now, on the exterior wall of the cultural centre, he painted his vision of how Independence Square should look in the future. In the middle, he painted his monument, on the left, the building of the prefecture and on the right, the town hall. The square itself was a fine black tarmac. Sapéro also included elements that had been put into place already or that were planned for the immediate future, namely walls to separate the two buildings from the square. The monument in the middle looked like his model, but Sapéro had added two elements: The date of the military insurgency, 19 September, figured prominently on the cube above the pole that would support the monument and a man was climbing the pole above the cube. The figure was disproportionately small and was only dressed in a waistcloth. The artist commented on this detail only very briefly, stating that the man represented the old way of living while he was already in a new environment.

Fig. 5: La renaissance. Mural by Kassem, wall paint, 2006.



Photograph taken by the author.

Other murals addressing contemporary life and the future depicted men sitting in offices equipped with various business devices, in particular computers, phones and mobile phones. There were also a few paintings com-

menting on the present situation of the country. A mural by Kassem showed Côte d'Ivoire as an egg with ivory tusks on either side. Elephants were sitting on them, blowing their trunks (fig. 5). A hand arose out of the egg, and the picture was subtitled »La renaissance«. Other murals showed the contours of Côte d'Ivoire with a bleeding heart, or the country carried by a sweating elephant. Another painting was titled »L'afrique se meurt« (»Africa commits suicide«). The seemingly more critical attitude of the artist, who signed the mural as Coolless, was not well received by the public. It was the only mural that was obviously damaged deliberately.³¹

THE RENEWAL OF 2009

Since the paints used in 2006 were not of the best quality, the murals of the centre were badly affected by weather and, to a lesser degree, also by visitors who did not pay attention and touched them when walking past the walls. When the rainy season of 2009 ended, the rebel leader urged the artists to re-paint the entire centre. After some discussions about the materials, Sapéro was asked to bring the artists together. As an intermediary between the rebel command and the artists, he could decide who would participate and who would not. Some of the artists who had participated in 2006 were no longer in town; others refused to join the group this time because they were not promised a payment. The group was significantly smaller than three years earlier.

The social and political setting had also changed. Fofié Kouakou was still commander of Zone 10, but he was now in charge of organising the transition from rebel governance to state-run public services. The rebel command very reluctantly engaged in this process, suspecting that this transition was meant to give the Gbagbo regime better chances in the upcoming elections. Still in mid-2010, when the ten zones of rebel administration were officially dismantled, Fofié controlled most of the public services provided in and around Korhogo. His space of manoeuvring, however, was much more restricted by written and unwritten agreements with other stakeholders. In the second half of 2009, a strong majority believed that the time

31 At the time of my documentation in January 2009, the picture had almost vanished, but the title was still visible.

of rebel governance would soon come to an end. Another widely shared conviction was that the country, at long last, needed some kind of reconciliation.

The genres of 2006 were maintained, but the content had shifted. The most stable genre was that of the ›old Senufo culture‹. The existing murals showing masks and dances were renewed or, more often, replaced by new paintings on the same topics. The xylophone players were now praising an old man sitting in front of them, the *boloi* dancers now performed in front of a long row of thatched houses, while another mask replaced the *wābele* performance. Yet there were differences in how such images were framed.

A bucolic landscape, a sunset over the sea with trees in the foreground and birds in the sky, caused a debate among the artists. The painters, Florent and Alf Décor, were accused of plagiarism and it was argued their painting did not mirror what was really at stake in Korhogo at the time. The two unconnected allegations came from an artist who had specialised in landscape painting. Landscapes, however, were an unspecific genre and closely related to ›the village in the times of old‹. Many artists in Korhogo produced such paintings, and in the end, Sapéro as the intermediary patron decided that the allegation was invalid. The mural remained in place. More interesting was the artists' reaction to the second allegation. They claimed that the idyllic landscape, which did not show any traces of human beings, was actually a statement on what had been lost in the present and that the painting suggested that there had once been a better world.³² At times visual references to ›the times of old‹ were combined with new, contemporary elements. *Kora* harps were displayed in front of multi-storey buildings and electric guitars in ›traditional‹ village environments. The sports genre did not change much either. The wrestlers were still there, but now they had an audience. The Kung Fu fighters did not change either, except for the colours, which became brighter. Footballers still played ball, and the athletes were running and jumping as they did back in 2006.

What really changed were the murals about history and the present political situation. Many of them disappeared. President Houphouët-Boigny constructing the Tower of Babel was replaced by an old man playing the *kora*. The colonial scene was also covered by another painting, this time a

32 Unfortunately, I was unable to inquire among possible visitors to the centre as to whether they interpreted the landscape painting in that sense.

sports event. Much more interesting, however, was the fate of the big mural facing the entrance where Sapéro had depicted the roots of the Ivoirian conflict (fig. 1). He went over it and gave it a completely new meaning. He kept a few figures and scenes from the old mural but replaced other scenes (fig. 6). The entire tableau is now divided into two parts. The right half of the mural still displays the grey background of the former tarmac street and the light, nearly white colour of the clouds above. It also continues to depict the scene of the national soldier checking the identity card of the terrified old man in the lower right corner. The artist went over the old man's face and painted it more realistically, but also added another soldier standing behind the old man and grabbing him by the throat. In his other hand, the soldier holds a gun and shoots into the air. The other scene of a soldier beating an old man and a pregnant woman has also changed. The soldier now holds a pistol in his right hand, targeting the heart of an old man dressed in a blue *boubou* in front of him. Sketches of other scenes of violence are depicted behind the two soldiers on a light background. Two tusks and the shade of a third surround the light space in the middle above the scenery. Between the tusks, Sapéro wrote in big letters »Hier!« (»Yesterday!«).

Fig. 6: *Transitions de l'histoire*. Mural by Sapéro, wall paint, 2006-2009.



Photograph taken by the author.

The left side of the tableau is completely different. It is titled »Pour 2Main« (»for 2morrow«) on the upper margin of the wall. The violence is over. Instead, Sapéro painted two scenes of compassion, each of which involves a soldier. One is a member of the rebel army, marked by the letters FAFN (Forces Armées des Forces Nouvelles) on his cap. The other soldier belongs to the troops loyal to the Gbagbo regime, FANCI. Both are helping civilians. The FAFN soldier supports an old man with a stick who apparently cannot walk anymore. The FANCI soldier arrests a young man who has stolen the bag of a young woman standing behind the soldier. The thief raises his arms while the soldier threatens him with a gun. In the background, other people are reacting joyously, also raising their arms and shouting. Some parts of the former cityscape with high-rise buildings are still visible, but the sky has turned into a dark grey. The face of the rebel commander is no longer visible. The message of the renewed painting is clear. After a time of violence and civil war, everybody is longing for a better, more peaceful future that brings the people of Côte d'Ivoire together. What has been painted here is an image of a possible future. It does not yet exist – but there is a chance to attain this state of a just and non-violent social order. Though still wishful thinking at the time, the imagery of that social order has had an impact on the imagination of others, the visitors of the centre. The visitors who had a closer look at the murals almost always stopped in front of this particular one, sometimes commenting on it.³³ Some voiced doubts: »Will that ever happen?« Others saw it as a normative statement: »Yes, it should be like this.« Still others complained about the lack of social cohesion in the recent history of their country. Later, Sapéro told me that it was because of such comments that he became interested in the question of social cohesion. He put it on the agenda of his Safarim Maison.

The cohesion of the postcolony was an issue that figured prominently in what emerged as a new genre, the murals addressing the present state of Côte d'Ivoire. In a literal sense, it was depicted in a tableau showing an old woman spinning and weaving a long narrow strip of fabric. It was meant to show how one common thread should run through the society, uniting all

33 This statement is not based on my own observation. I was told so by the apprentices of Safarim Maison who had helped Sapéro during his work on the tableau (personal communication, 12 January 2010).

the people. Another tableau showed how three men sewed the three coloured bands of the Ivoirian flag together while an elephant watched over them. The most impressive mural was, at least for the members of Safarim Maison, a broad panel that showed two rows of people holding a giant egg in their midst. SAM, the artist, explained that the egg stood for Côte d'Ivoire – simultaneously precious and fragile. Only when everybody joined, and only when the people became aware of the enormous task ahead of them, would the egg survive.

Fig. 7: The future of the city. Mural by Samson, wall paint, 2009.



Photograph taken by the author.

Not all artists subscribed to these positive imaginings of the future. There were darker, sinister views, too. A tableau by Samson depicted a cityscape late in the day (fig. 7). The houses are high-rise as in the other pictures, but here the focus is on three young men in the foreground. All three are dressed in local varieties of hip-hop fashion. The young man on the right is a muscled singer, holding a microphone in his hand. The man in the middle wears a jacket with a hood that partially covers his head. »Dony's LX« is

written across his belly, the name of a Parisian rapper.³⁴ On the left, a young man rides on a skateboard, also hiding his head under a hood. The atmosphere is quite sombre as all three are painted in dark shades of grey. When I visited the centre together with the artists of Safarim Maison, they did not want to comment on the painting. Only Chigata said that the mural was about the future of Korhogo as a modern city.

SHIFTING IMAGERIES

Comparing the murals of 2006 and 2009 raises some basic questions about their character as pictures, as popular imagery and as imagination of an alternative social order. Before addressing these questions, however, a word must be said about their status as artworks. The majority of the painters saw themselves as artists, not as mere craftsmen. All of them were running workshops that also executed purely decorative works. Many of them made a living as painters of signboards and other advertisements.³⁵ Nonetheless, most of them aimed at more, complaining that there were just no connoisseurs and art collectors in Korhogo – with the notable exception of the rebel commander. They said that doing the murals in the centre might help them to attract new customers and perhaps a patron from the international art-world. On one panel close to the entrance, they all painted their stage names followed by their mobile phone numbers for visitors who would want to come to their studios. The ›real‹ artworks were those painted on canvas in their studios – not the big murals. It did not matter much to them whether they would last five or ten years as everybody knew that they had to be renewed regularly. Nobody saw a need to preserve the initial paintings of 2006.³⁶ What seemed to be a disregard for their former artwork, however, opened a space for a review of what they had done three years

34 His stage name is actually Dony S. He is the founder of the Rap Contenders. Cf. <http://www.rap-contenders.com/dony-s> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aSCSIGblD5Y>. Accessed 31 May 2011.

35 Some mainly painted words in big letters on cars, lorries and public buildings. The other painters did not consider them to be artists.

36 Almost nobody understood my surprise when I saw the repainted centre in January 2010.

earlier – and it allowed them to follow the popular imagination. The process of imagination became visible only through the shifting imagery, the painted and re-painted pictures on the walls of the cultural centre.

A closer look at the murals reveals not only a shift in the imagery; it also points to a few highly persuasive images. In 2006, these were, first of all, the images of the past. The brutality of French colonial domination is a conventional pattern of thought, promoted by schoolbooks and in many other media. What was new was the critique of Houphouët-Boigny, the once sacrosanct *père de la nation*. The respective picture on the wall imbued the past with a new meaning and it related the other murals to a new image of the past. The fact that this chapter of Ivoirian history was no longer cast into a fixed image meant that other chapters could be more ambiguous, too. The prominent tableau, showing national soldiers harassing ordinary people and the rebel leader ending this outright discrimination, had no dislocating effect. It was approved by the commander himself and promoted an image that the rebellion was keen to foster among the general populace: the insurgency as a legitimate act against oppression. The tableau did not raise any debate about its content. It was seen as an accurate picture of the injustice that everyone had experienced in the old regime under Gbagbo.³⁷

The imagery of 2009 had changed, however. What was an outright statement about the political legitimacy of the rebellion became a statement about a possible future state of society: rebels and national soldiers working hand in hand – an image that was hard to believe in at the time. It had simply not happened until then – regardless of all of the attempts by the United Nations and other international actors to bring the two militaries together. The spontaneous comments I witnessed at the centre were telling: Many people doubted that such cooperation would ever become reality. On the one hand, the spectators judged the situation very appropriately as »pas encore mûre« (»not ready yet«). On the other hand, the image of an alternative social order was not rejected. Nobody said that they did not want a peaceful society to emerge. The projective element in the image became a

37 When I used photos of this painting at a conference on the experience of the past at the Goethe Institute in Abidjan in February 2009, many listeners in the audience jumped up and exclaimed that the picture showed how they had suffered under the old regime. It demonstrated how powerful images are.

problematic but attractive element of the picture on the wall. Between 2006 and 2009, the popular imagination had worked on the political imageries. The images that were then transformed into pictures had increasingly turned into normative statements on how the social world should be. They articulated societal aims – aims that were perhaps still unrealistic, but that increasingly informed the political agenda.

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