



*French officers and African auxiliary forces arrest ordinary villagers. Mural by Sap-Hero, Korhogo 2006.*

Contribution to the Companion to the Modern Art of Africa, (eds.) Gitti Salami / Monica Visona

## **Katana**

### **A Cultural Centre under Rebel Domination in Korhogo, Northern Côte d'Ivoire**

Since 2002, when an insurgency split Côte d'Ivoire into two halves, the North and the West of the West-African country is held by a rebel movement. In 2006, Fofié Kouakou, the chief commander of the rebels in Korhogo, the largest city in the North, started a development program that, for the very first time under rebel domination, aimed at endowing the city with a new cultural centre and an architecture and culture competition in which all artists of Korhogo were invited to participate. Under his patronage, an already existing centre of the former state ministry for sports and culture was rebuilt and equipped with a new roof, a tribune, computers and other business machines.

The artists of the city were asked to submit proposals for monuments and other public artworks that would show “the new Korhogo”, i.e. the city of the future. In addition, they were commissioned to paint the walls of the cultural centre. What arose out of this commission was a visual program about the past and the present state of the country. The

main motifs were the formation of the nation during the colonial period and in particular how nationhood had changed since independence in 1960. Some paintings explicitly addressed the politics of belonging which had fuelled the identity crisis that, around the turn of the century, became one of the driving forces of the civil war. They also showed how the chief rebel wanted to end the harassment of the northern minorities and build a new nation.

In 2009, after the signature of the Ouagadougou peace treaty, the rebel leader, who was then sought for war crimes by the UN peace keeping forces, invited the artists again, now to repaint the walls of the cultural centre. Many of the artists painted over the old murals, incorporating some motifs into the new paintings or adding new elements to the already existing images. State and rebel forces were no longer depicted as enemies or competitors but as cooperating for a better future of all citizens.

This paper analyses the pictorial program of the cultural centre and relates it to the transformation of nationhood and citizenship under rebel domination. It also asks why a rebel leader who is sought for war atrocities by an international arrest warrant engages in the construction of a cultural centre and how the political agenda of the rebellion has shaped the art works in and around the centre. I argue that the pictorial program is but partially bound to the political aims of the rebels; it is more indebted to the expectations of the public who wants the rebel movement and the state to cooperate for a better future of one undivided nation. At a more theoretical level, I argue that the distinction of state versus non-state does no longer play a decisive role in the popular imagination of the people in this part of the country.

*Keywords: Nationhood, public art, popular imagination, rebel domination, Côte d'Ivoire.*

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