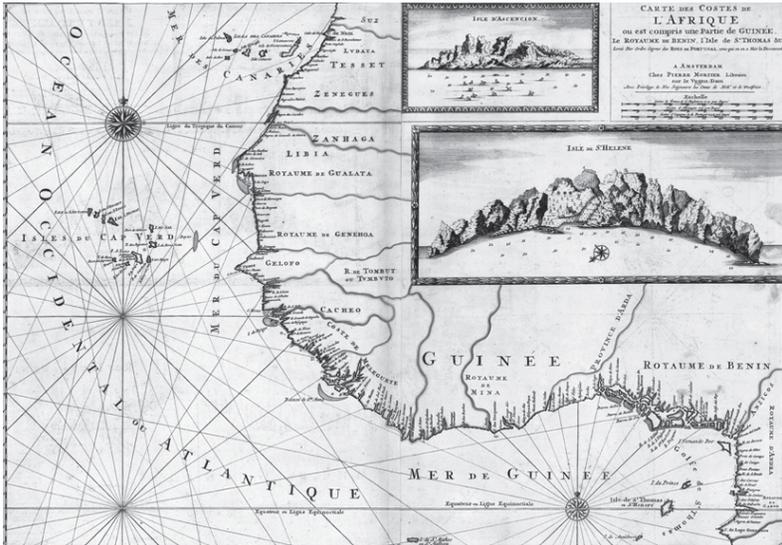


A WEST AFRICAN VIEW OF BIG HISTORY

Vital Sounouvou

‘The stars are the souls of the ancestors’, my aunts used to tell me. Growing up in West Africa, I saw that theories about the universe are related to our traditional religion of Vodoun. In my home country of Benin, there are twelve million people who speak over fifty indigenous languages. This diversity is interesting, as I noticed how each culture had different ideas of history and I learned to appreciate different perceptions of our universe.

The Hwla in Benin believe humans came to Earth through ‘a son of the sun’, while the Dogon in Mali believe they came from the stars. Such a diversity of views does not, however, guarantee the truth of our origins. Where do we come from? Why do we speak the language we speak? Why do we build houses the way we do? How did our ancestors implement laws about the ways we deal with our planet? Answering these questions preoccupied me during my youth, and motivated many of the choices I made about my life.



Map 1: A map of the region of Benin. Pierre Mortier, Carte des costes de L'Afrique où est compris une partie de Guinee, le Royaume de Benin, l'Isle de St. Thomas &c., Amsterdam, c 1700.

Benin lies on a large bay of the Atlantic Ocean, where Africa curves westward from the Niger delta. It is a rich area, with villages on stilts, lush lowlands like the Oueme valley in the south, and hills and mountains in the north. I grew up in the south, in the capital of Porto-Novo, a city with old Brazilian architecture inherited from the time of slavery (c.1600–1889). Every weekend, local parties, called ‘Agô’, take place—a tradition that makes the city very festive. Our people are descendants of one of the most powerful civilizations in West Africa that founded the Kingdom of Danhomè. We speak the Goun language in my family. However, having two parents who were English teachers, I also learned English. In primary school, which began at age three, I studied French, which is the official state language and dates from the time of colonization in 1892 by the French. Benin became an independent republic in 1960.

My parents founded a primary school, which was one of the best in Porto-Novo. School enhanced my curiosity and determination. I was the kind of child who was always asking questions, which sometimes exasperated my teachers. At the age of six, I was diagnosed with a necrosis of my left femoral bone. I did not have the chance to play a lot,

so this obliged me to spend most of my time with books. It was the best opportunity of my life and it taught me how to concentrate.

Wheelchair-bound and unable to play outside, I also watched movies like *Star Trek*, which strengthened my passion for exploration of the vast universe. I wanted to know more and more every day, convinced that one day I would find a way, not only to learn more about the universe but also to contribute to human understanding and its exploration. In this way, an unfortunate illness combined with global media inspired me in my search for a scientific meaning in life.

‘How were all these beautiful trees and flower created?’ ‘Are there other living species beyond Earth?’ Regis, my five-year-old brother asked these questions when we discussed the solar system. As a science-oriented person, these were complicated questions. I had no concrete answers for him. I could not teach him all the religious and ethnic theories that I was not convinced of myself. So, I promised to always give him the right information. I needed to know, to discover, but also to be sure about what I was learning.

After graduating from high school at age sixteen, I decided to pursue my quest to understand the meaning of life. I was convinced that I would one day find the right information and share it with other young people in Africa who were asking themselves similar questions. As a freshman telecommunications major at the polytechnic university in nearby Cotonou, I learned the art of creating automated systems in a digital electronics lab. While my classmates tinkered with radios, I began work on a multifunctional robot. Given the lack of nanotechnology devices, my professors suggested I make a virtual integrated system using simulation software and a proto-board. But I could not stop there. At home in my bedroom, I built a functional robotic arm. One thing led to another, and my idea to develop a flying humanoid robot was born.

I called these robots, *Hontons*, meaning ‘friend’ in Goun, my native language. They were modelled after the human form but were only a tenth of the size. I conceptualized them to respond to humanity’s challenges. Designed to assist in food production, educate people in impoverished rural areas and save lives in catastrophes, *Hontons* could also disseminate information and market products. They could minimize the need to put humans in life-threatening positions by

accessing conflict zones to deliver humanitarian aid or work in mines and factories. I envisioned new types of e-work emerging as people directed *Hontons* and discovered new uses for them.



Plate 1: Vital Sounouvou in his robotics laboratory, Porto-Novo, Benin, 2008. Photograph by Regis Sounouvou.

My development of the *Honton* concept was an outgrowth of conditions that I had seen in my home country, as well as around the world. Like many nations, Benin is a non-egalitarian state. Most of its infrastructure lies in the south, where there is ocean access, and this has resulted in isolation for other parts of the country. Most work in Benin is still done by hand, and the distribution system is ill-adapted for linkage into modern world systems. Agriculture is primitive and insufficient to feed our population. There is a great need for modern education, and students need to receive good advice and be encouraged to seek their dreams.

In this robotics work, I had a vision and a life project, but realized that a lack of resources was going to be a serious obstacle. Nonetheless, I had a strong belief that the visionary development needed to make my project and those of other people succeed could make a deep impact on young African scholars and on the future of our continent. To make such projects a reality, an entire network and infrastructure needed to be conceptualized. I was invited to present my vision at the Global Future

2045 Congress in Moscow in February 2010. When I met members of the International Big History Association (IBHA), I found some answers to the all my questions of a lifetime, but more importantly I found a group of colleagues who shared my vision. The link was quickly made in my mind: I had to do my best to bring Big History to Africa.



Plate 2: Vital Sounouvou at the first Global Futures 2045 Congress, Moscow, Russian Federation, February 2012.

Each culture that existed in the past left a contribution to the big story of Earth, along with our cultures existing today. It is important that each nation, heir to a large part of the history of the world, contributes to the establishment of a more shared global history. Our generation has the responsibility in this era, to reconstruct the puzzle of our common past, which has led to our current world. Once this is done, we will then be able to together define our common future.

Vital Sounouvou is an inventor and businessman from Benin. He envisions the future of Africa as a place of innovation and technology, a place holding an instrumental position in the global economy. He is committed to promoting his inventions, as well as the technological and entrepreneurial innovations of his peers. At the age of sixteen, he founded World Teen, an association for the cultivation of talent among young West Africans that came to number over 300 members. As

a telecommunications major, at the Haute Ecole de Commerce et de Management in Porto-Novo (Benin), Vital began his study of automated systems and digital electronics. He then went on to study computer sciences and network engineering, earning his license professionnelle from the Université du Littoral-Cote d'Opale. Vital focuses his energy on his bionics research, as well as his business interests. He is founder of Eworbiz and Afriwall, two firms engaged in online and international trade, as well as an ambassador and the Benin National Coordinator for the Global Youth Innovation Network. He has been invited to speak at numerous international conferences for the promotion of African innovation and youth entrepreneurship, such as the Global Future 2045 congress in Moscow in 2012. He presently seeks to situate his ideals and activities within the larger Big History framework. Vital's e-mail is <vitalsounouvou2025@gmail.com>.