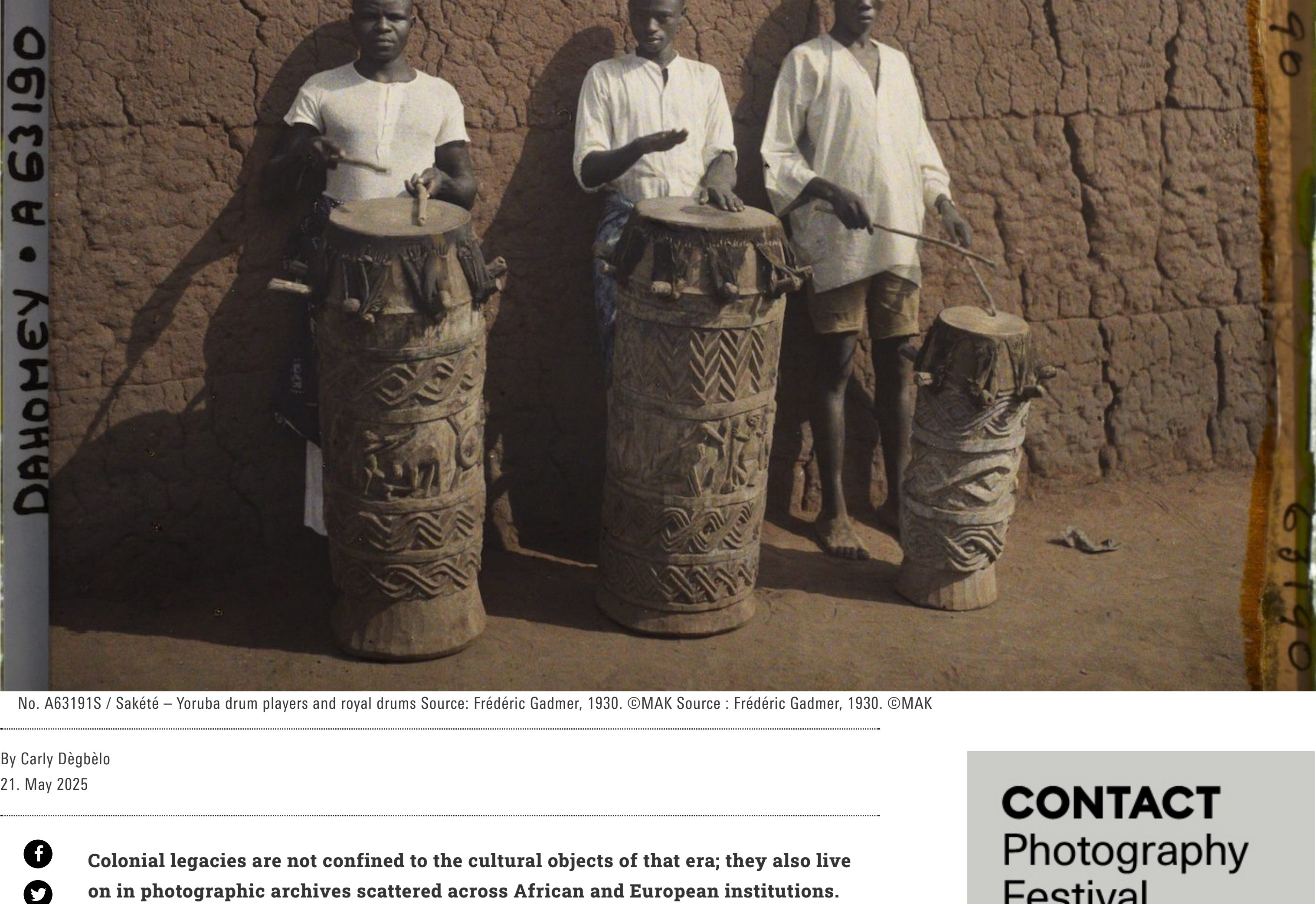


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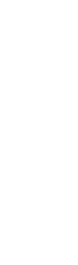
Identifying the Traces of the Unknown

Uncovering lost identities in colonial photographs, Carly Dègbèlo's research brings the silent faces of Dahomey's past back into historical focus.



No. A631915 / Sakété – Yoruba drum players and royal drums Source: Frédéric Gadmer, 1930. ©MAK Source : Frédéric Gadmer, 1930. ©MAK

By Carly Dègbèlo
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Colonial legacies are not confined to the cultural objects of that era; they also live on in photographic archives scattered across African and European institutions. Far from being mere static images, these photographs bear witness to a specific time, a practice, to a heritage both lost and yet to be reassembled. Fascinated by Taina Tervonen's (2022) work *Le sabre d'Oumar Tall, les otages, contre-histoire d'un butin colonial* (Oumar Tall's Sword, the Hostages, a Counter-History of a Colonial Booty), I began an investigation into the identities of those individuals captured in the photographic collections from Dahomey (present-day Benin). The images in question were taken by photographer Frédéric Gadmer, working under the commission and direction of French missionary Francis Aupiais, and funded entirely by the banker Albert Kahn.

The photographic campaign in Dahomey took place over six months in 1930, producing remarkable results: 72,000 autochromes, 180,000 meters of cinematic film, and 4,000 black-and-white stereoscopic images. Most of the autochromes depicted elements of Dahomey's culture, religious practices, or landscapes. Albert Kahn's ambition was to "capture once and for all the aspects, practices, and modes of human activity whose inevitable disappearance is a matter of time" (translated from the French, Musée départemental Albert Kahn « MAK », Un projet ouvert sur le monde, 2022, p. 35). Photography was seen as a way to archive the planet's natural and cultural traces before they vanished due to war, disaster, or neglect. This global vision was part of what came to be known as "salvage anthropology"—an approach from which Father Aupiais, the initiator and director of the 1930 Dahomey mission, distanced himself. Rather than focusing solely on documentation for preservation's sake, Aupiais aimed to support Reconnaissance Africaine, a scientific journal he founded to promote the first Dahomean writers, who contributed articles on African culture. The broader goal was to "dispel the misconception that elevates to absolute superiority the difference between the so-called 'civilized' state and the so-called 'primitive' state in service of the former" (Reconnaissance Africaine, No. 1, August 15, 1925). It is important to remember that at the time, Western conceptions of Black people were often limited, reductive and derogatory. The Black individual was regarded as an enigma, to be deciphered only through certain branches of the human sciences. This unfamiliar figure—the Dahomean—became more familiar to the European world through the 1930 autochrome photographs. Yet, the mission leaders paid scant attention to documenting the actual identities of those represented in the images. While a few rare photographs include names, most remain anonymous, identified only by profession or the action depicted. The artworks exhibited in traveling exhibitions in 1927 throughout much of Europe (see photo 2) had already served to draw attention to the culture of the Dahomey kingdoms. Whereas one mystery was unveiled, another one still remains today: the identities of the people photographed.



Father Francis Aupiais, third from the left, in front of his exhibition in Paris (1927). Source: Paul Hazoumé Photographic Archives

The photographic campaign was not limited to capturing the landscapes, customs, traditions, and social life of Dahomey. It also sought to document the population in its physical, social, and cultural diversity. The individuals photographed—whether alone or in groups, in motion or at rest—were not sufficiently documented by the campaign's organizers. The absence of names, the vagueness regarding their origins, and the incomplete recording of their roles are critical gaps I have identified in this humanitarian endeavor, which, in my view, remains unfinished. Today, the Musée Albert Kahn, the custodian of this collection, has undertaken several research missions in Benin to compare the historical images with present-day realities. Although these efforts have yielded valuable insights, the identification of the photographed individuals remains largely unresolved. Among all these portraits, I focus in this article on three specific cases to illustrate my research methods.

The Wealthy Farmer of Gbèdèjèhoun



No. A633105 / Gbèdèjèhoun / wealthy farmer posing in front of his home. Source: Frédéric Gadmer, 1930. ©MAK

This photograph, titled *Wealthy Farmer Posing in Front of His House* (photo 3), is accompanied by a vague caption that highlights only the architecture of the time and the subject's material wealth. The individual's identity is left unacknowledged. The campaign's goal was not to highlight individual identities but rather to depict the general condition of the population. Were subjects asked for their consent to be photographed or informed about how the images would later be used? Were they made to sign image release forms? Certainly not. The authority of Father Aupiais, along with the social influence of his associates—King Zounon Médjè (guardian of Porto-Novo's traditions) and Mr. Paul Hazoumé (a writer, member of the French West African intellectual elite, and later a presidential candidate)—appeared sufficient to persuade people to be photographed without formal consent.

But who was this "wealthy farmer"? I conducted an investigation in Gbèdèjèhoun, where the photograph was taken, to determine whether the building still existed. Remarkably, after 94 years, the building has withstood the passage of time and remains Standing. Thanks to the photograph, we were able to trace the farmer's descendants, a prominent local figure in his time. One of his grandsons, Silvere Gayet, recognized his grandfather's face and, after comparing additional family photographs, confirmed the man in the autochrome was indeed Laurent Gayet. He had made his fortune in palm oil production, hence the grandeur of his Afro-Brazilian style house.

Family Portrait



No. A63654 / Abomey – Family Portrait (Cyrille Agbo). Source: Frédéric Gadmer, 1930. ©MAK

The second case concerns the Agbo family (photo 4). It is a family portrait showing two parents and two children standing in front of a shrub next to a house. The two clues available to me were the location (Abomey) and the name of one of the parents (Cyrille Agbo). With this limited information, I travelled to Abomey to attempt to trace the family and identify the other individuals in the photo by name. My research led me to the Agbo family ; however, tracing the lineage back to Cyrille proved challenging. At the time, I could not access the birth and baptismal registers from 1930. Time constraints and the limited availability of local authorities were major obstacles. I hope to continue this research in the future. With access to these two registers, it is likely that I will be able to identify Cyrille Agbo's parents, his spouse, and perhaps even his children—who were sometimes recorded in church documents by Catholic missionaries. Far from being mere baptismal records, these documents serve as invaluable administrative archives and were among the first tools for identifying individuals during the colonial period in Dahomey. Nevertheless, whatever information they may reveal, they cannot tell us more than what we already observe in the photograph.

Group of Young Girls



No. A63294 / Porto-Novo – Group of Young Girls. Source: Frédéric Gadmer, 1930. ©MAK

The final photograph remains an enigma, continually revealing new mysteries. It features nine girls of varying heights and ages. Clearly, they are posing for the camera—perhaps in their everyday clothing, or perhaps dressed for the occasion. All we know is that the photo was taken in Porto-Novo. No further details are provided – no specific location, no surnames, no given names. Only faces remain, each expressing a unique emotion: serenity, joy, perplexity, and resilience. Yet, beyond these expressions, we know nothing about these young girls. In my efforts to identify them, I enlarged the photograph and displayed it on banners in various public locations in Porto-Novo – churches, schools, restaurants, public squares – hoping that someone might recognize a face among this group of girls from 1930. Currently, there is no digital database of historical photographs from that period to assist in facial recognition. Perhaps now is the time to consider creating one, based on the colonial-era photographic archives. For the moment, we are left with these candid faces, eternally preserved on glass plates, patiently waiting to be named.

The question of provenance does not concern only the physical objects taken during the colonial period. It also concerns, in another way, the individuals who were photographed during that same era, whose identifying information has vanished along with their subjects and the European creators of the images. This is what Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, in their restitution report, describe as the missing links—the vital connections needed to trace the lives of the unknown.

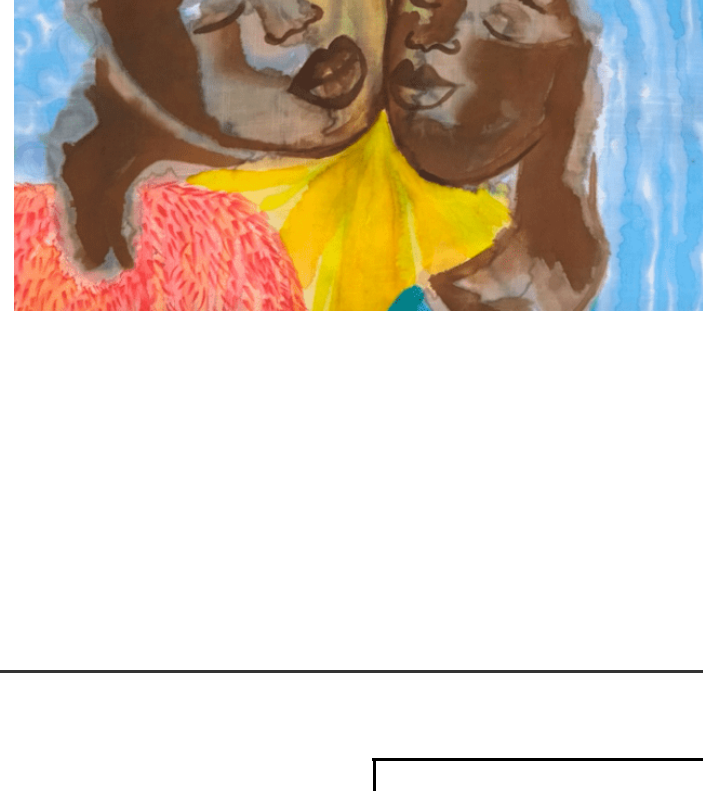
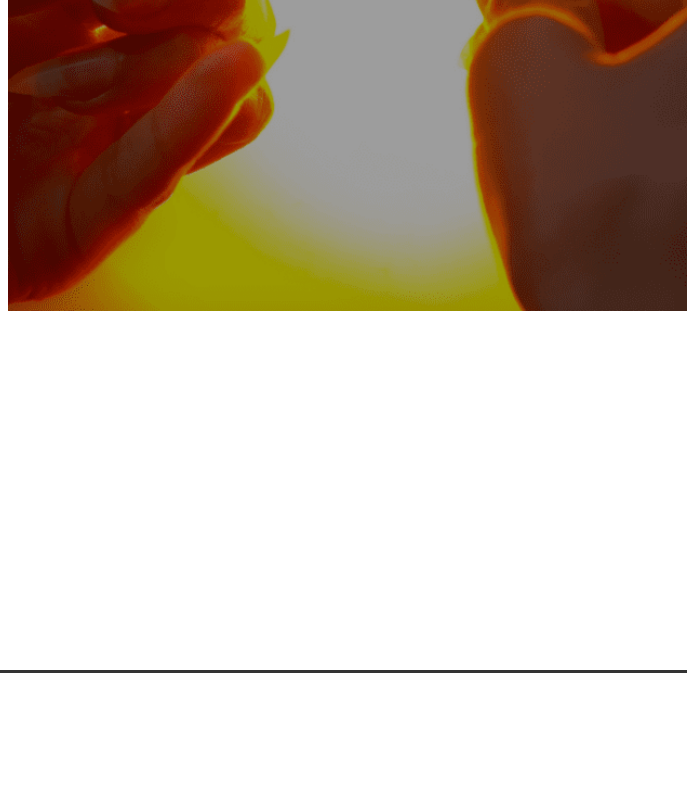
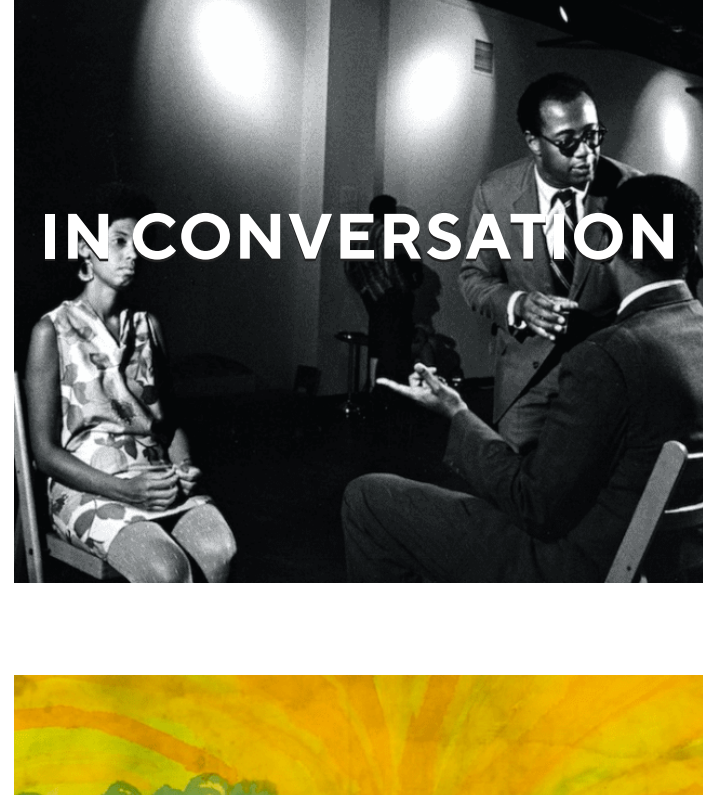
This text was created as part of the collaboration between C& Magazine and the Académie des Traces.

Carly Dègbèlo is a Catholic priest and a conservator of religious heritage in Porto-Novo. He is currently pursuing a PhD in heritage studies at the University of Cergy Paris, focusing on missionary heritage from the colonial period. His goal is to contribute to the creation of a local museum that is both decolonized – rooted in African culture – and open to international cooperation.

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