Maison Gbegbe

Gbegbe-topia

An Art-Based Community and Spiritual Center



Archive Books

Maison Gbegbe

Gbe-gbe-topia

An Art-Based Community
and Spiritual Center



→ Georgette Singbe hands UCTT members Mamissi Nicoue Da Povi and bokono Anani Gangalizo a Mami Wata as part of a 2020 restitution ceremony at Villa Karo, Grand-Popo, Benin.



↑ Ritual at the start of a ceremony by Mami Hounan Nicoue Da Povi in Agouegan.

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UCTT members Messanh Amedegnato and Amoni Nicoue with the new Maison Gbegbe logo, in front of the gathering- and project space before the painting workshop in 2022.

Foreword

This manifesto is largely inspired by Felwine Sarr's *Afrotopia*[1]—and the proposal captured in its title—in terms of both structure and literary style. Comprised of twelve chapters, the Senegalese writer's book spans a range of fields and epistemologies from economics to philosophy, science and technology to urban planning, sociology, and so on. The eloquently written and richly layered volume calls for new models and topoi for the African continent; it invokes a number of thinkers and authors while simultaneously undertaking a "decolonization of knowledge." The main, formal difference between this manifesto and the aforementioned book is the former's inclusion of visual testimony in addition to written text: Gbegbetopia is illustrated with images, photographs, sketches, artistic contributions, multimedia links, and symbols that both speak and enable a more complete picture of Maison Gbegbe. On the substance, we aspire to answer Sarr's call to unsettle pre-existing mental frameworks and ways of thinking, to question dominant epistemologies, and propose a scenario closer to "mutations" in the conservation, preservation, presentation, and transmission of cultural assets (tangible and intangible) both within and beyond local communities.

Maison Gbegbe, for its own part, is a regional, interreligious cultural center founded in 2020 and created in collaboration between members of the Union des Cultes Traditionnels du Togo (UCTT), L'Africaine d'Architecture, and art&dialogue e.V.[2] In 2021, the group formed a pre-configuration committee consisting of Rossila Goussanou, Anani Sanouvi, and Nadja Ofuatey-Alazard, with Ohiniko Mawussé Toffa joining the team for a time as well. The project began as research into how art and its international network could be used to thoroughly rethink, study, and create alternative prospects for the conventional concept of the "museum." It also sought to reconsider how cultural spaces could truly serve and support communities in preserving spiritual, traditional, and cultural values. Maison Gbegbe envisages a space where African religions and knowledge systems can be studied, shared, updated, and preserved, and where alternative relationships between "objects," "subjects," and "knowledges"[3] can be considered and enacted. It also aims to be a framework where, in the words of Cameroonian historian Achille Mbembe, "an ethics for a common custodianship of the Earth"[4] might be practiced. Maison Gbegbe should operate as a set of embodied spatial memories created and preserved through shared experiences and interactions within the space. Its ambition is to act as a frame of reference for all living

bodies involved in and connected to the project, as a space in which they can continually shape and reshape their identities and experiences.

What follows is a manifesto meant to lay the foundations for the near and distant future of Maison Gbegbe. It aims to serve as a rudder for current and future partners in this complex and engaging project, which has been underway for several years now. Taken together, these texts are intended to favor confidence not only with the individuals, organizations, and foundations that have invested in this project, but also with future users and "inhabitants" of the house. The publication on the whole is meant to reflect current ambitions and to articulate a variety of reflections from an interdisciplinary, international collective. Its objective is to shake up various elements and ideas in an effort to rethink the fundamentals, to question invariables, to combine insights and above all inscribe them in time. It is also about setting a high bar while also allowing ourselves a chance to attain this goal. To be both ambitious and realistic—that is, non-utopian—at the same time.

These texts are only proposals, of course. Far be it from us to impose a new epistemic framework, to constrain or confine the future of Maison Gbegbe to a written publication. Nevertheless, Sename Koffi Agbodjinou's proposal to write a "manifesto" for Maison Gbegbe was quickly adopted before we gradually considered taking it a step further: Couldn't the compilation itself, the grouping of these various contributions and the mode of their publication, mutate as well? Could the future of this publication involve adaptation and circulation via another, infra-verbal idiom—a performance, for example, a dance, a play, visual discussion and debate in the form of drawings, a slide show, etc.? In the spirit of Maison Gbegbe itself—a project that resists fixture within contemporary museum structures—could it not embody an alternative to the book, a format read and deposited in a library?

With these considerations in mind, it was decided that we would publish it as an open access document[5] in accordance with the CARE Principles for Indigenous Data Governance.[6] The result reflects the relationships and conversations between artists, thinkers, and keepers of traditional knowledge who invoked, questioned, experienced, shared, discussed, and spent time together.

Organizational team
Messanh Amedegnato
Sename Koffi Agbodjinou
Mathilde ter Heijne

Maison Gbegbe pre-configuration committee
Rossila Goussanou
Nadja Ofuatey-Alazard
Anani Sanouvi



1 Felwine Sarr, *Afrotopia*, trans. Drew S. Burk and Sarah Jones-Boardman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019).

2 With the support of Canton Chief Gê Fio Foli Kponve Alofa. Funded by the Visual Arts Project Fund of the Goethe-Institut; Mondriaan Foundation, Amsterdam; Dekoloniale e.V. and the University of the Arts, Berlin.

3 See also Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, "Those Who Are Dead Are Not Ever Gone, On the Maintenance of Supremacy, The Ethnological Museum and The Intricacies of The Humboldt Forum," first published in *South as a State of Mind*, summer/fall (2018).

4 Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

5 The ongoing push for open data and open science does not fully align with the rights and interests of Indigenous Peoples. To foster ethical partnerships between the partners and traditional knowledge keepers, it is crucial to acknowledge their intellectual and cultural property rights, and respect their preferences for data sharing. To that end, the CARE principles for Indigenous Data Governance have been developed as a set of guidelines to ensure that data collection, management, and use involving Indigenous peoples is carried out in an ethical, respectful, and beneficial manner for Indigenous communities.

6 These principles are: Consent Obtaining informed consent from Indigenous peoples for the collection, management, and use of their data, including obtaining consent from appropriate community leaders and ensuring individuals understand the purpose and potential uses of their data. Accountability Holding individuals and organizations accountable for their actions related to Indigenous data, including ensuring data is collected, managed, and used in accordance with the CARE framework. Respect Treating Indigenous peoples and their data with respect, including ensuring data is collected and used in ways that are sensitive to the cultural and spiritual significance of the information. Excellence Ensuring that data collection, management, and use is conducted to the highest standards of quality and rigor, including ensuring data is accurate, complete, and reliable. See Carroll, S.R., Herczog, E., Hudson, M. et al., "The CARE Principles for Indigenous Data Governance," *Data Science Journal*, 19(1): 43. DOI: http://doi.org/10.5334/dsj-2020-043

→ Transmission mast of Radio Télévision Delta Santé (RTDS) in Aného.

PART 1: INTRODUCTION



→ Hounougbo Amedegnato, members of the UCTT,
and Mathilde ter Heijne at the radio broadcast station in 2022.

Here, We Talk About The Tradition

Transcript of a Live Radio Broadcast on the Occasion of Gbegbe Days

Messanh Amedegnato and UCTT members



Radio Delta Santé, Aného, Togo
May 5, 2022

00:00:00,000 **00:00:40,051**

TONY BLAISE, MODERATOR Hello lady and gentlemen, you are welcome! Mr. Messanh Amedegnato, you are President of the Union des Cultes Traditionnels du Togo. What should we call you, what is your official designation in the tradition, and who are you here with?

MESSANH AMEDEGNATO Hello Tony, I am a hounougbo bahounsou,[1] I am here with Mathilde, an artist and professor from Germany; with Follykoué Agbonon from Sigbehoé, a Zangbeto[2] hounan;[3] and Ignace Adjovi from Agokpamé, who is a Sakpatè[4] hounan.

00:00:40,185 **00:01:35,574**

TONY BLAISE Welcome! We know only that the UCTT is an association. Can you explain to us what it is about?

MESSANH AMEDEGNATO Yes, it happened that we, some hounans from the area of the villages of Agouegan, were reflecting on our traditional knowledge, because we hounans are often misunderstood by people. How can we ensure that our society does not lose this wealth of knowledge, and how can we be sure that our descendants also benefit from it? We—that is, myself, Mr. Follykoué, Mr. Ignace, and also Hounan Gangalizo—first met in Agokpamé on September 6, 2016. It was then that I proposed the project of working together on these issues, and we all agreed to join the adventure. We founded the association the Union des Cultes Traditionels du Togo in collaboration with Mr. [Gê Fio Foli Kponve] Alofa, our canton chief.

00:01:40,079 **00:04:25,632**

TONY BLAISE And what is the purpose of your association?

MESSANH AMEDEGNATO The objective is precisely as I mentioned before. There are plenty of hounans who honor our tradition—not only in Agouegan, but across the whole coastal area... Beninese and others. The question is how can we revalue our tradition and raise its profile both nationally and internationally. Is there a way to create archives, to organize seminars, to teach our children this knowledge? I live part-time in Berlin, which is where I met Mathilde, who teaches there. She is a professor at an art university. She was enthusiastic about this project and accompanied me to Agouegan. She also expressed a desire to fight alongside us, to join us in finding out what needs to be done to spread our knowledge, counter prejudices, and bring it to a wider public. She came to Agouegan and Aného a couple of times. Then, after a back-and-forth of ideas, we put forward the idea of building a cultural center. This center—the first Vodou cultural center to be built in the history of Togo—would also be a place to hold our seminars.

We signed a contract with another friend of ours, Mr. Kwassi Akpladokou [Managing Director of Villa Karo, a Finnish cultural center in Grand-Popo, Benin], that they return a ~~figurine~~ related to Mami Wata to us. Part of that contract involved its re-activation, and realizing some sort of space for it, which we called a cultural center. The real building would be planned later, with a major international architect.

The work we've done so far deserves to be presented to the people. We organized this event we call the pre-configuration mission, and we wanted to come on the radio to invite all those who are interested in the tradition to come to Agouegan. We have also involved our authorities, so they support us and see what we are doing. The office of the Minister of Culture has promised its full support for our event. The various chiefs of our localities have agreed to give us their support. Mr. [Maitre Alexis] Aquereburu, the mayor of Aného, supported us when there was no decentralization of state services. He is so happy for us. He wishes us and our project the best of luck. The mayor of the municipality of Lacs 2, Mr. Benoît [Messan Amavi], has also given the project his approval. He is very happy to support us.

00:04:27,007 **00:04:32,197**

TONY BLAISE Why do you call this cultural center "Maison Gbegbe"?

MESSANH AMEDEGNATO Because a center always has a name. We thought about it for a long time, Mathilde and I. Agbegbe means you can follow someone, but you can never know everything about what they are doing. Colonizers could never and can never know everything about us, everything we know. That is the truth and how our culture survived. You will never find the roots of a gbegbe plant—you can only ever see part of it.

00:05:05,813 **00:05:51,043**

TONY BLAISE What will the center be exactly, and where will it be located?

MESSANH AMEDEGNATO It is to be built in the district of Agouegan. The temporary building is directly near the entrance to Agouegan on the right side, just before you reach the home of Mr. Alofa, our canton chief.

TONY BLAISE And what do we find there?

MESSANH AMEDEGNATO The center will be home to many things and activities. We are also thinking of making it a kind of museum, and a place to house other religious and cultural assets that we hope to receive. We have already had the one Mami Wata returned to us. There will be, and need to be, activities around the cultural assets and ceremonial attributes that left us during the colonization period. We're also hosting a workshop with the universities with whom we already have ties—German universities in particular. These international students, who are arriving tomorrow, are interested in our knowledge.

00:05:51,043 **00:07:53,536**

TONY BLAISE Did you say the students are arriving tomorrow?

MESSANH AMEDEGNATO Yes. It's people from a university in Berlin. Students from the University of Lomé are also arriving between the 4th and the 8th of this month.

TONY BLAISE Let me slow you down a bit. So the events are happening between the 4th and the 8th of this month. What will you be doing exactly?

MESSANH AMEDEGNATO I will first pay my respects to all hounans throughout the Togolese territory and also to the political and customary authorities, as well as to Maman Adolé Anyonmissi Houinssi Goeh-Akue, President of La foi Africaine, who takes care of the pan-African side of our culture. She is a tremendous source of support. On the 4th we welcome our customary chiefs, CVDs,[5] and others. There will also be the opening of Gbegbe Days and the inauguration of the premises. Then we have pre-configuration conversations from the 5th onward. We're going to show the rest of the world what's happening here in Agouegan. We invite all hounans around the world to come to or be in union of spirit with us. Everything will be filmed and shown later. We have various workshops and conferences between Thursday and Saturday, when we present the architecture. Our architect is arriving on Friday.

00:07:53,536 **00:07:55,901**

TONY BLAISE And the architect is from Togo as well?

MESSANH AMEDEGNATO Yes, he is an international architect. It took some time to find him, but we eventually did with the help of Mathilde.

00:08:28,242 **00:08:31,557**

TONY BLAISE I am proud to know that this event will be held in the Lacs 2 municipality. Brother Follykoué, I will be asking you a question soon, but first a question for Mathilde. Mathilde, you agreed to support the center and have invested some money in it. Is that right?

00:09:06,475 **00:14:22,685**

MATHILDE TER HEIJNE Hello, first of all, thank you very much for having me. My name is Mathilde ter Heijne. To clarify, it isn't that I am investing in or raising money for the cultural center in particular. I first met Hounougbo Amedegnato in 2012, and was with him in Agouegan when he was inaugurated as hounougbo in 2014. We have been working together on various different projects for the past ten years now, always on a non-commercial basis. The Maison Gbegbe project is one result of our collaboration.

TONY BLAISE I understand you helped the association find a good architect. Will we be able to meet him in Agouegan over the coming days?

MATHILDE TER HEIJNE Yes, he will be there. His name is Mr. Sename Koffi Agdodjinou, he is an architect and anthropologist who lives and works in Lomé. He initiated a community project called WoɛLab, for example, where he works with young people to recycle plastic and use 3D printing. He received a fellowship from the university where I teach, which is how I heard about him. I asked him if we could maybe meet, and so I got to know him and saw that he has very good ideas. After speaking with Hounougbo Bahounsou Amedegnato, I asked if he wanted to be involved in the Maison Gbegbe project, and—as he is Togolese—if he wanted to visit Agouegan and meet the UCTT members and chief Alofa. He is the one who suggested a pre-configuration mission with a special committee.

TONY BLAISE So now you are here in Togo, and you invited your students from the university to join you. It must be difficult to bring a group of students to Togo to do work. What are they going to do?

MATHILDE TER HEIJNE The students are between 25 and 40 years old. It is a mixed group of art students from my university, the University of the Arts, but also ones from the Technical University in Berlin. They seem excited to be part of the process. The hope is that they will be able to observe and experience an exchange of ideas about other formats for "the museum," or think about what other things a museum could be. As emerging artists, some of their main questions revolve around issues of what art is, where is it shown, but also, what craftsmanship is. But what happens when ~~objects~~ turn out to be much more than just objects, when they also link to sacred knowledge or deities? Should such sacred, ceremonial, or personal belongings be part of a museum or exhibition context? Or should the space that houses them have a different purpose, should it be called something else? I see these students as people who will bring new ideas to the project because they think differently than we do, as we are older... I also view them as potential future partners.

00:14:22,685 **00:14:27,779**

TONY BLAISE I have heard it is going to be an international center?

MATHILDE TER HEIJNE Yes. Personally, I think it should serve first and foremost as a place for members of the UCTT to meet, and as a community center for the people of the villages of Agouegan. Of course, I also hope it will be a place for sharing and preserving traditional knowledge. And if and when assets of cultural heritage are restituted, it can be a place to keep and show them in a way appropriate to them. I could also imagine it as a place for sharing information about traditional cosmologies and knowledges, maybe even with people outside of Togo—people from the African diaspora, for example, who are interested in reconnecting to their roots. Sharing information, this kind of exchange might be a necessary step toward raising awareness about Vodou and its way of life, both nationally (among the young people here) and internationally. Togo's coastal region and its people have a lot of knowledge-sharing potential—I think it would be great if people outside of Togo knew more about it and were more influenced by your understanding of humans and nature, the cosmos, and ways of being in the world.

00:14:27,843 **00:18:04,474**

MESSANH AMEDEGNATO A big thank you to Mathilde for wanting to invest in this project exploring our colonial history, one that also endeavors to see ~~things~~ from our cultural heritage that were taken returned. Many of them are from various villages in Togo. Once they are back in the country, we have to have a place to safeguard them because they are sensitive. Imagine a restituted asset from the city of Tsévié, for example. It would first have to be kept in a safe place and inventoried before it is ultimately returned to its original owners. And if some of those people say no, we don't want it back, then it is our duty to keep it at Maison Gbegbe, to make it accessible to those who want to visit it.

TONY BLAISE Once again, we are speaking with Hounougbo Bahounsou Amedegnato, President of UCTT of Togo. Thank you very much for coming, Hounougbo Bahounsou Amedegnato. I wish you and your project all the best. At this point, I would like to hear from Hounan Ignace Adjovi, from Agopkamé. Tell us how things are going.

00:18:04,474 **00:19:05,983**

IGNACE ADJOVI Thanks to the efforts of everyone involved, things are progressing well. You don't build a village in a day, it's step by step. But I do realize we've made good progress on our project overall. We will continue to work to perfect things, but we are adults, so we know what we are doing.

It is important to always do things according to what ethnicity you come from. Those who make a mistake don't receive a blessing and neither do their children. We are talking about ancestral tradition. If you are real hounan or bokono,[6] you can become active in the UCTT after a test. Those who commit to practicing with integrity and being fair individuals are accepted in the group. Fighting alongside them, you really realize that you are in a group of righteous people.

↗ Radio Télévision Delta Sante (RTDS) is a radio and television broadcaster located on Avenue de la libération in Aného.



00:19:05,983 **00:19:10,196**

TONY BLAISE Togbe[7] Follykoué, you are from Sigbehoé, a village in the Lacs 1 municipality. Welcome. Do introduce yourself, tell us what it is you have to say, and please explain to the many students who are arriving what it is you do! [Laughs]

FOLLYKOUÉ AGBONON I am very happy that our brother brought us this association project. It is an association with a universal vision. It is for everyone.

00:21:09,456 **00:22:14,578**

FOLLYKOUÉ AGBONON This cultural center has always been international in scope. Agouegan is on the border to Benin, so we have also been working with our friends from there, particularly those in Cotonou. Some will be coming to see us on the occasion of this festival. I don't have a great deal to say here, I would just like to state that the UCTT invites everyone, especially hounans, to join us. Together we are a force, and we will support this project together.

00:22:14,578 00:22:17,334

TONY BLAISE Eva Akoesson, is there anything you'd like to add?

EVA AKOESSON You know that at this radio station, we talk about the tradition. A big thank you to our friends!

MESSANH AMEDEGNATO I know many people will be arriving soon to attend this event. I have been sleep-deprived for some time now, simply because my heart is full of joy. Although I am feverishly organizing the events ahead, I am also full of happiness because I see that there are many people behind me, that I have a great deal of support. I have realized this project is a welcome one.

1 High-ranking person in a group of traditional knowledge keepers.
2 Zangbeto are the traditional Vodou guardians of the night. Known as the "Night-watchmen" among the Ogu (or Egun) people of Benin, Togo, and Nigeria, they serve as a traditional form of crime control.
3 *hounan* is Ewe for traditional knowledge keeper and healer.
4 Sakpatè is a deity of the earth and of smallpox and eruptive diseases in general. Although much feared, Sakpatè is one of the most popular figures in the Vodou pantheon.
5 Committee for Village Development.
6 *bokono* is Ewe for an Afá diviner.
7 Ewe for "Mister."

Maison Gbegbe—Architectural Perspectives

for a Neo-Vernacular Center for the Arts and Research on Traditional Religions

Sename Koffi Agbodjinou



↖ UCTT members and inhabitants of Agouegan take part in construction work for the Maison Gbegbe temporary gathering space.

↓ Map of the village of Agouegan. Frank Amegninou and Messanh Amedegnato look for the plot of land donated to the UCTT by Canton Chief Gê Fio Foli Kponve Alofa.



Plans for Maison Gbegbe envision a cultural center dedicated to the sharing and preservation of local, traditional knowledge. Fundamental aspects of display, presentation, education, community, ecology, and so on are to be radically reimagined through a decolonial lens, so that it becomes no less than a disruptive model for what a museum in Africa could and should be. Unique in its scope and aspirations, Maison Gbegbe is a project with almost limitless potential for productive experimentation. Its ambitions are simultaneously scholarly and aesthetic, international, diasporic, and ultra-local. Prefigured in tradition yet open to everyone, Maison Gbegbe speaks of kinship among living things on various scales, of the unity of the spectrum and balance. Its future construction and function advance notions of sustainability, responsibility, equality, balance, democracy, solidarity, inclusion, and cohesion as inextricable crucial concepts. The proposed neo-vernacular[1] structure fuses principles of Afá divination[2] with cosmo architecture and the eight (8) fundamental, ancient African principles of spatial organization. It envisages an open, inclusive laboratory that also protects what is sacred—resolutely fertile ground for a new relationship to African heritage.

Maison Gbegbe's role as a space to hold both the returning ~~objects~~ and the many narratives connected to them, its envisioned use for all manner of dialogue—from sacred and secret rituals to performance-based experiments, community and educational projects—called for a bold solution. The project's design, planning, and realization demanded a rigorous thought technology that could serve as a guideline. It was found in the principles of Afá divination, a geomantic system concerned with the mathematic principles of existence. It is these principles that give this architectural project its coherence.

The "design" of this architectural project has a pedagogical horizon. It borrows its vocabulary from Black African architecture. The aim is literally to "lift the veil" on the constitutive elements of what an African ontology might look like—to show how such an ontology could provide a valid response to contemporary issues of living together. In this regard, it is part of an effort to produce an episteme, that is, something from which one may extract elements for a form of knowledge. Rather than model the idea of "responsible living," the architecture here conceptualizes it, subsumes it directly into its form. Plans for Maison Gbegbe invoke the golden spiral[3] to visualize the balance of forces suggested by Afá divination. L'Africaine d'architecture projects often employ this iconic element, most often as a means of

proposing an ethics of COSMO ARCHITECTURE, which is to say an architecture that adheres to the GRID in 8 ("Grille en 8"). This is a tool that makes explicit the eight (8) principles of spatial organization at the heart of ancient African dwelling and village design, namely 1) the FIGURE OF GESTATION, 2) ANTHROPOMORPHISM, 3) DIFFERENTIALITY, 4) GYRATION, 5) FRACTALS, 6) PANOPTICON, 7) TOTALITY / COSMO ARCHITECTURE, 8) UNITY.

The consistency of these principles, but also their ease of combination, amount to an ethnomathematics of architecture. They also correspond directly with some of the most important contemporary imperatives: FIGURE OF GESTATION = sustainability; ANTHROPOMORPHISM = responsibility; DIFFERENTIALITY = equality; GYRATION = balance; FRACTALS = democracy; PANOPTICON = solidarity; TOTALITY / COSMO ARCHITECTURE = inclusion; UNITY = cohesion.



↑ Terracotta, a good material for keeping heat out, seemed a natural choice for Maison Gbegbe's building envelope. The material is highly porous, which allows it to absorb moisture and regulate temperatures. Quintessence of earth, water, air, and fire, it is also a durable material, providing lasting protection from the elements. It naturally produces ions that repel grime and requires minimal maintenance.

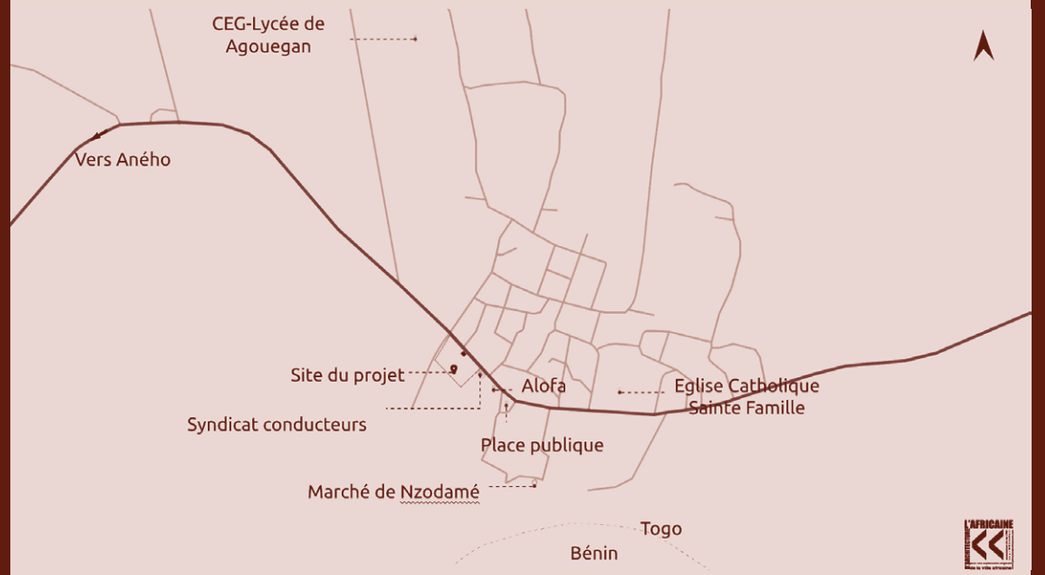
From the outset, Maison Gbegbe was conceived as a complex bundle of relations and responsibilities that are often navigated by means of ritual. As such, Maison Gbegbe also embodies the ambitions of COSMO ARCHITECTURE: a new contract of kinship, one that proceeds from an anthropocentrism that is not split away from the totality. Woven into and with the setting into which it is built, it is a place of congregation, gathering and convening—a place for all living beings to shelter and dwell. It also broaches the idea of a solidarity beyond generations, proposing that actions taken today must also leave room for the future... In a sense it invites a different kind of thinking about "dwelling" as a way of being in the world that goes far beyond structure or housing, and also manifests in functional logic and the prefiguring conditions of its construction. Like all instances of COSMO ARCHITECTURE, Maison Gbegbe aspires to be a "World"[4]—a World that embodies an ethics and politics of inclusivity, both in its building and in the kind of dwelling it prescribes.

"earth," "water," "air," "fire"

There is a saying in African societies that a house belongs "to those we have not yet met," and what better definition of sustainability? The design for Maison Gbegbe adheres to this approach and overall ecological concept as part of a broader intergenerational contract, one that ensures that the actions we take today do not compromise the future. It also seeks to identify and embody key aspects of traditional architecture with the potential to reframe contemporary discourse around communality, kinship, and the habitability of our planet. One influence is the comingling presence of cardinal elements (earth, water, air, and fire) in the Afá framework, which considers them apart but not as opposites or entirely separate from one another: instead they are linked, mutually connected, intertwined.

Similarly conceived in terms of links and interconnections, Maison Gbegbe's neo-vernacular design aims to reduce environmental impact through the use of traditional, local, carbon-neutral materials, as well as improved efficiency and moderation in the use of resources. At the same time, it has to be effective and comfortable for those both inside and outside its walls—all while responding to multiple, changing, sometimes contradictory modes of use. These modes include, but are not exclusive to, its use as a workplace for





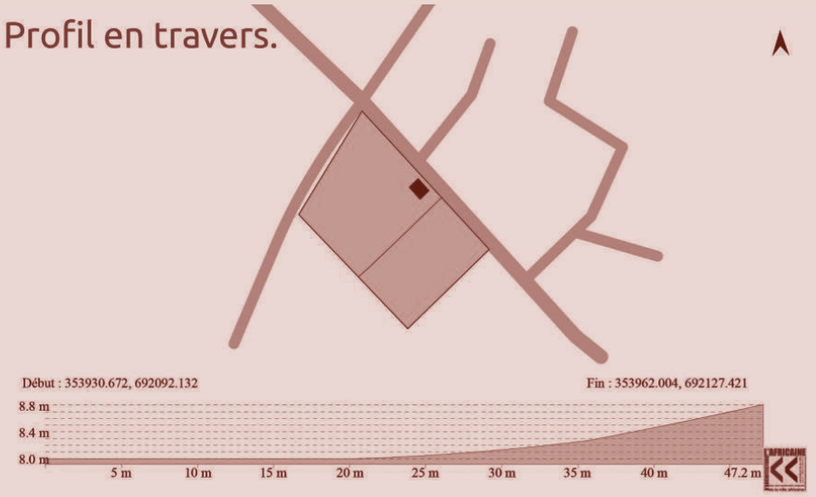


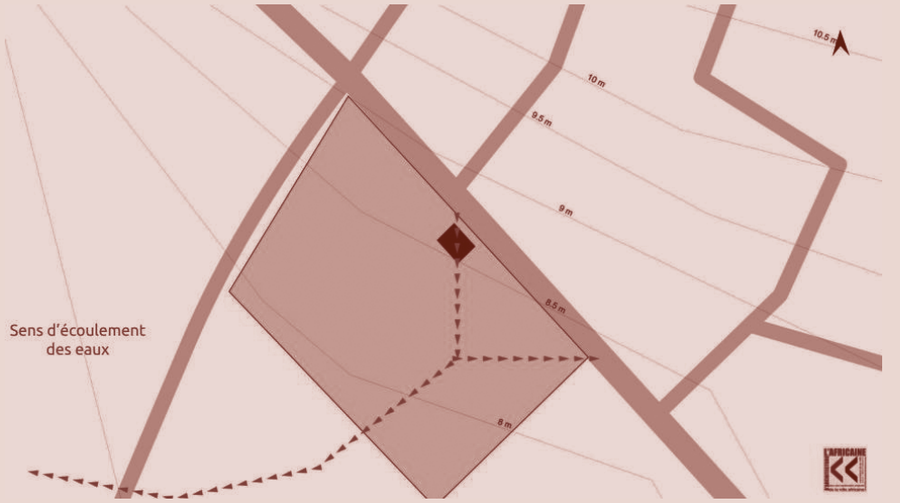


← Donated to the UCTT, Maison Gbegbe's designated plot of land is located by a road near the entrance to the village. Its extreme differences in level proved a challenge for the temporary space construction.

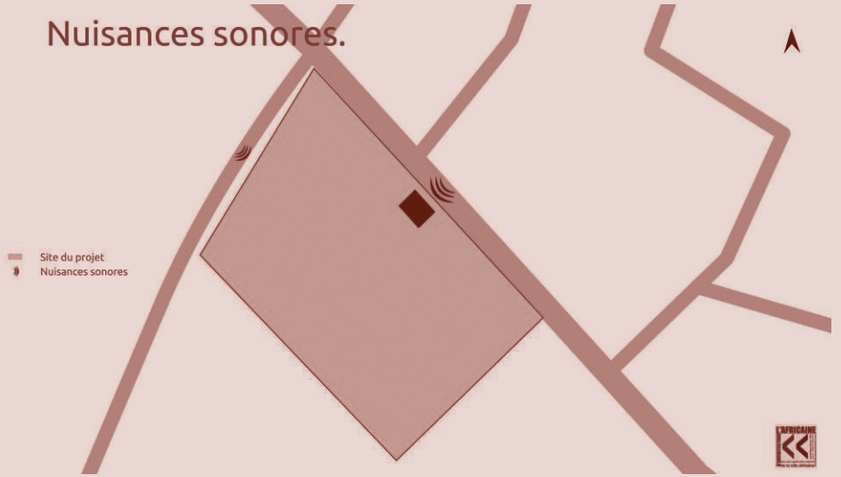
↑ The plot faces the road. A first, recent structure was built in front of the plot. It reflects the local architectural codes, namely concrete (for the walls) and sheet metal (for the roof). This kind of building culture is viewed critically today. Concrete is a resource-intensive material that does not regulate temperature or absorb humidity very well.

Profil en travers.

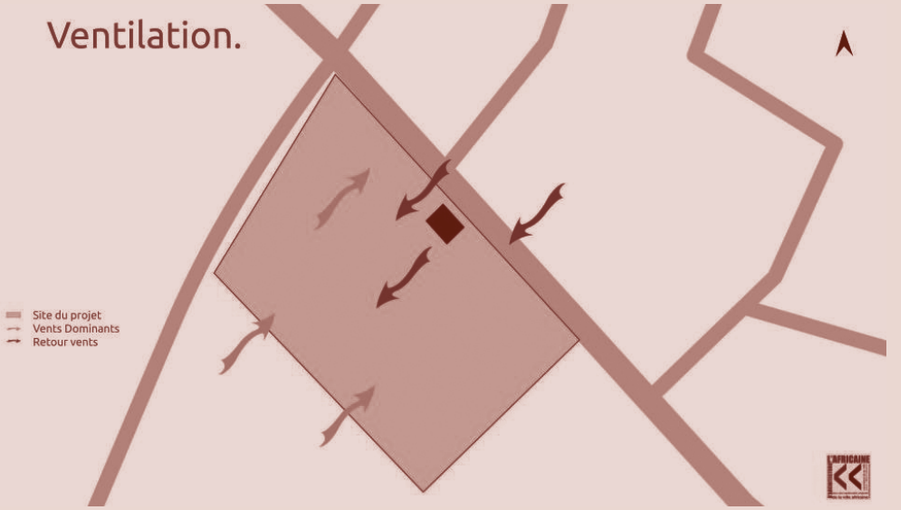




Nuisances sonores.



Ventilation.



↖ The weather in Agoègan is typically hot and humid. Temperatures in the summer can reach highs of 90°F (32°C) and lows of 70°F (21°C). The rainy season lasts from April to July, with an average of 5–6 inches of precipitation per month. In the winter months, temperatures drop to highs of 75°F (24°C) and lows of 55°F (13°C), with very little precipitation.



↑ Every effort must be made to preserve trees and plants on the site and to revitalize green areas. Although currently badly damaged on account of slash-and-burn practices, we do find vegetation on the plot, including many palm trees. We can intuitively deduce that species indigenous to the site are similar to those we find in surrounding areas. The design for Maison Gbegbe also envisages a “garden” element for planting trees and medicinal/sacred plants. One could imagine an area for keeping certain animals as well.

8 PRINCIPLES OF SPATIAL ORGANIZATION

1 FIGURE OF GESTATION
The permanence in African architecture of symbols, of coupling, parturient, fetal, etc.

2 ANTHROPOMORPHISM
The house and the space have systematic figures and attributes of a human, an "anatomy of architecture"!

3 DIFFERENTIALITY
The space is sexed or gendered, worked from male / female tension... never neutral, divided, hierarchized or stratified. This friction produces rhythm, beauty by contrast ... puts architecture in motion.

4 GYRATION
Organization is rotating. Volutes, concentrism, turns: This is a movement which makes rise; also does the house aspire to ...

5 FRACTALS
Infinite repetition of everything in the detail ... The calabash is the village bound on itself "n" times. The deployment is "logical," consistent ... care to spare all parties at each change of scale. The house is the teenager of the calabash whose village is the figure of old.

6 PANOPTICON
All points of view converge in the African space. The house is the place where everything is said. Everything is under the gaze of everyone.

7 TOTALITY / COSMO ARCHITECTURE
The place is complete. Nothing is missing. Desire for finitude. Ambition to summarize the world. Full companionship where plants, animals, minerals, sky, earth, air, water ... Order / Complementarity / Completeness /

8 UNITY
"Everything is one!" Principle of inextricability of principles. Cohesion where we do not distinguish ...

hounans (traditional knowledge-keepers) connected to Sakpatà, the vodou linked to the earth; Mami Wata, a spirit of the water; Dan, the serpent deity and mediator; Hébiesso, deity of thunder and lightning; and Edan, associated with air.

As noted, its structure must serve simultaneously as an open community center, performance space, educational apparatus, traditional religious architecture, and site for sacred (often secret) rituals. Not least, and more specifically, it needs to be able to house and display ~~objects~~ that have been returned to the community, which requires an effective building envelope and design that can keep heat and moisture out. Maison Gbegbe will need to self-shade in summer and other seasons, insulate itself from noise, and use low-technology ecological strategies for dealing with heat, humidity, and rain.

For all these reasons, and because we thought it important that the engram[5] of Afá ethics take shape more directly in the building itself (almost literally and thus materially), terracotta (quintessence of the four elements combined) was chosen as the primary unit of construction. The idea is to supplement the terracotta with laterite, a soil and a rock type that is rich in iron and aluminum. Sourced locally, dug directly from the earth, laterite is a proven stabilizer. It both contains and sublimates the spirit of the location. However, while a reduced ecological footprint is certainly a factor in this choice of material, it is by no means the only one.

From the outset, Maison Gbegbe was designed to explore richness of Africa's ancient curved lines and the animistic massiveness of our old earthen constructions, a rich heritage from which standardized, rationalist architecture has cut us off. Now that contemporary architectural use of open-source plans, CNC machines, DIY drones, and the 3D printing of buildings has freed us from the pseudo-neutrality and aridity of the international style, it can and should exercise a certain freedom of form. Maison Gbegbe's form and material seize on this window of emancipation; the aim is to decolonize and reassert African earthen architecture as the epitome of intimacy and unity. (One can also observe how this same type of earth—notwithstanding its perception as heavy and massive—was very notably made light and airy when infused with Muslim mysticism, for example. African mosque architecture is characterized by a strong desire for height.)

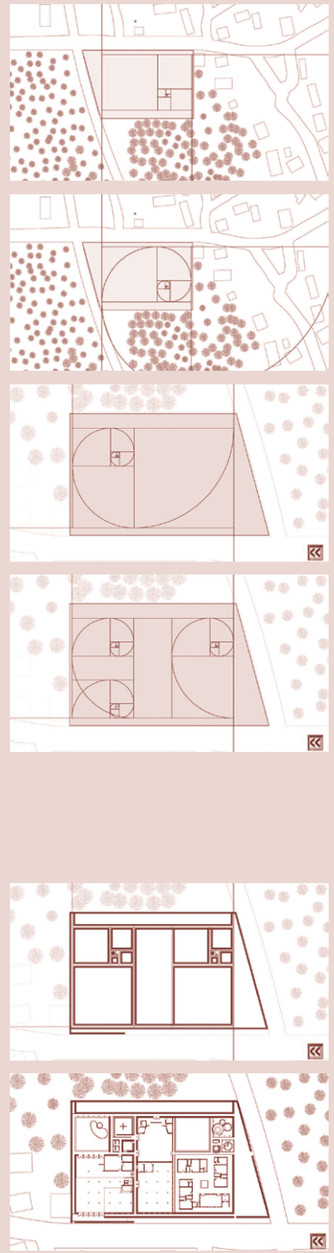
Markedly, the earth also conceals: it obscures things behind walls and in the ground, which can also, in some cases, constitute an advantage.

Maison Gbegbe's namesake is the gbegbe, a drought-resistant shrub and medicinal plant that—as Messanh Amedegnato is fond of pointing out—hides a vast network of roots deep in the earth. Trying to find them all is useless and as a result, it can never be killed or uprooted. It will always survive. Our project similarly presumes the existence of a dissimulated, or hidden element, specifically as it relates to traditional knowledge. But rather than conceiving of it entirely as a separate thing that is secret, kept from its surroundings, it subsumes that hidden knowledge directly into the architecture itself.

Open center for everyone / closed protector of the sacred

It is on this point, hiddenness, that we find a central contradiction in Maison Gbegbe, or rather its key challenge: This is a project helmed by a union of hounans (traditional knowledge-keepers), a kind of syndicate of traditional religious practitioners whose power derives from a certain secrecy. Although they certainly want to create a center to pass on information, and give insight into their knowledge framework, their skills and abilities are not for public consumption; they are not supposed to be seen by everyone. The hounons have to come to terms with this contradiction, as does L'Africaine d'architecture in its design for the project. After all, a public cultural center and a sacred space are generally not the same thing. Visitors of any religion might come for spiritual reasons, or not; they could also come simply to do research, for a workshop, or to visit an ~~object~~ on display. Moreover, traditional healing, communal ceremonies and rituals should be accessible to anyone who seeks them out, regardless of their religious beliefs.

The golden spiral also works toward resolving this conundrum: The outer "curves" are a welcoming gesture. Wide-open, full of air, with broad visibility (PANOPTICON), they envisage a democratic space for gathering and entering—quite literally a place for everyone to come in. They describe an explicitly public, experimental space; this is where the wide range of local and international visitors will come to cook and share food, to hold workshops, and conduct research. There is space for a small library, an exhibition venue, and other areas. One could also consider attaching a small hostel or some other kind of short-term housing for those who wish to delve deeper into certain



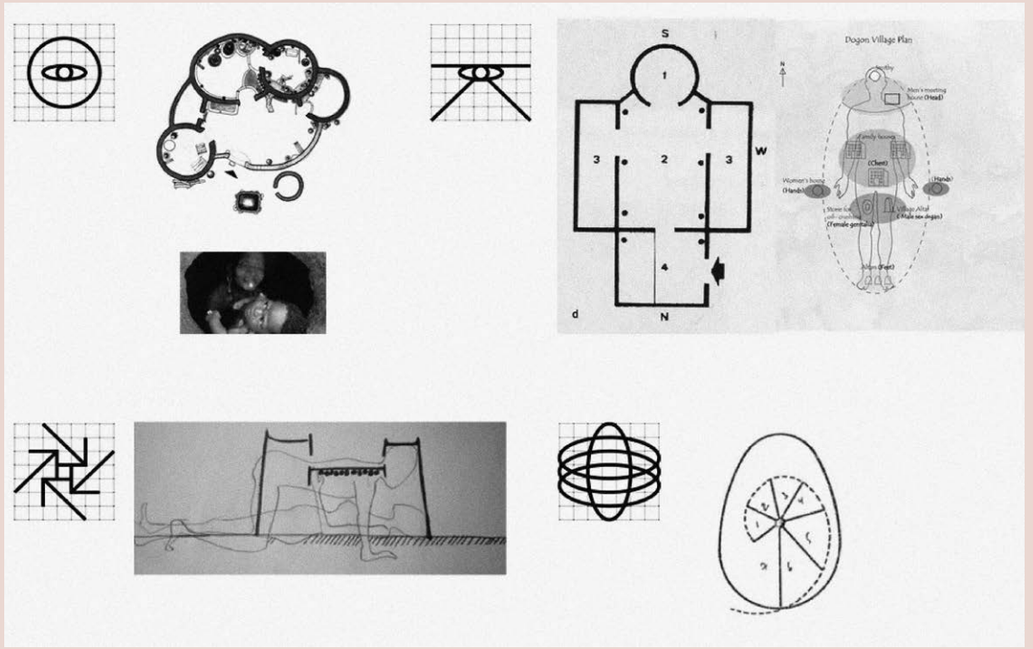
← The balance between concealing and revealing also echoes in the overall golden spiral structure, which is wide, welcoming, and more inclusive at the outside before spiraling toward a protected, sacred center.

aspects of traditional knowledge, or for longer artistic research stays. (This communal dimension of architecture is its first guarantee of sustainability.) It is a place where all perspectives come together, where everything is said. Everyone is under the gaze of everyone.

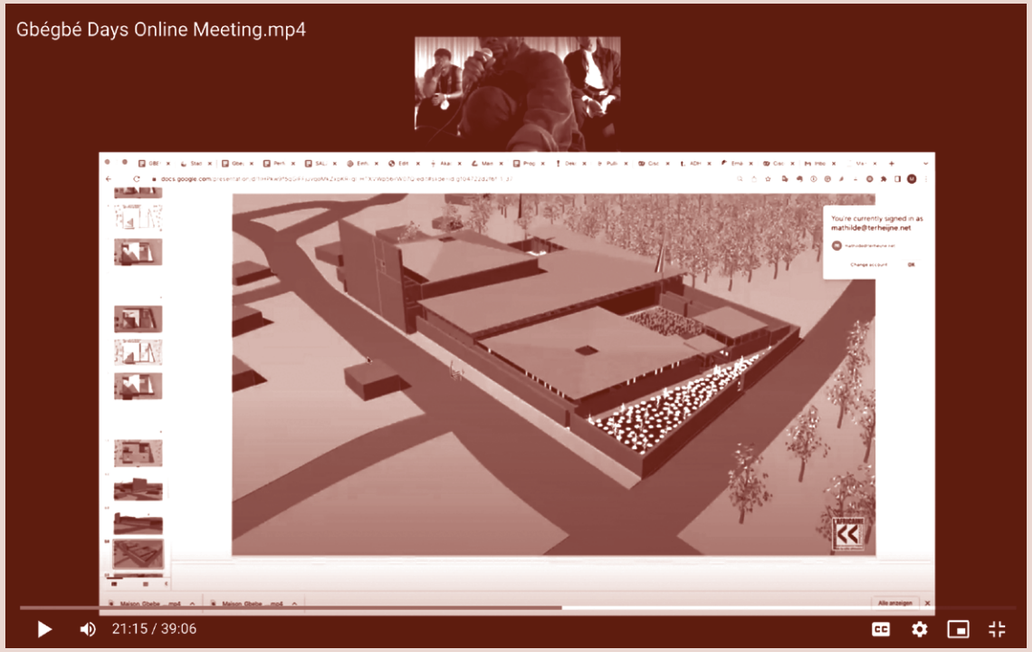
Marked by an ethics of inclusiveness and redistribution, the spiral form also embraces African knowledge systems in its use of recursion, repetition, infiniteness, and scaling as related to learning, not to mention social connections as a powerful (and ultimately the first!) technology. Like L'Africaine d'architecture's WɔɛLab,[6] another knowledge-sharing project, the design for Maison Gbegbe is to some degree inspired by the way the initiation enclosure works. The enclosure had a structuring role in African social organization; it was a moment of "seclusion" that made it possible to create links, to transmit knowledge to young people of the same age group, and to guide them on the path to realizing their potential. Designated spaces in Maison Gbegbe follow a similar logic.

The further one moves into the spiral, the more specialized these spaces become: It is here, in this close-to-center section, that we find important offices and private meeting areas for Afá readings and personal consultations with knowledge keepers. An area for ceremonies and rituals, also a space for purification. (Not all knowledge can or should be shared.) Deeper in the interior, where the spiral creates smaller spaces, are more rooms that are restricted to all but the initiated. After that come those accessible to only one or two designated knowledge keepers. This is where sacred ~~objects~~ that should not be seen by the general public will be placed.

The curve, the golden spiral, puts Maison Gbegbe in motion, allowing the structure to grow (rise) in an organic way. Referring back to the (8) principles of spatial organization: 1) the FIGURE OF GESTATION, 2) ANTHROPOMORPHISM, 3) DIFFERENTIALITY, 4) GYRATION, 5) FRACTALS, 6) PANOPTICON, 7) TOTALITY / COSMO ARCHITECTURE 8) UNITY, we find once again that these concepts are intimately linked, serve as supports and means for one other, complement one other. The "desire for TOTALITY" expresses traditional African architecture's obsession with wanting to sum up the world. Here, as in the traditional African dwelling or "home," we also find anthropomorphism—the African house always has a human figure—and GESTATION (constant motifs of creation) in references to procreation, mating, birth (the curled-up fetus; a woman's womb also corresponds to the golden spiral when she is at her most fertile).



↑ The GRID in 8 (“Grille en 8”) Sename Koffi Agbodjinou and Manuel Bueger, 2018, ZKM, Digital Imaginaries.



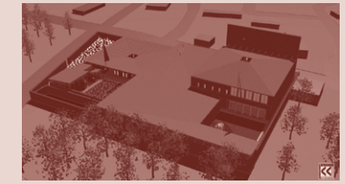
↑ Online presentation of architectural plans as part of Gbegbe Days in Berlin.

As total architecture has a human figure and soul, it tends to indicate the status of man in the universe. Woman is the highest human being in that she holds the secret of life. The self-generating, geometric algorithm reflects a self-generating concept of society as well. It works with a male/female tension, without allowing it to become neutral, divided, hierarchized, or stratified. This rigorously ordered skein of principles and concepts can be called an "algorithm." They function as the guarantor of the DNA of the African habitat beyond the explosion of its forms, as a "cultural unity" of "Black" Africa.

↓ The Turtle of the Yellow Sea (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IcZL3ATJ9gk).









↑ Renderings of architectural plans.

1 Vernacular architecture uses locally-available materials, resources, and traditions to address local construction and design needs. It tends to evolve over time and to reflect the environmental, cultural and historical context in which it exists. Neo-vernacular architecture fuses aspects of vernacular architecture with modern technology and requirements, including climatic considerations, local vernacular principles, modern construction techniques, and cultural heritage.

2 Afá (or Fa) divination, practiced throughout West Africa, is a complex interpretive framework that assigns each individual a life sign (kpoli) from a total of 256 possibilities. Each sign is associated with a range of plants and animals, stories and songs, dietary taboos, Vodous; each has its own dangers and strengths. Events, projects, activities, and relationships all have their own Afá signs; everything in the universe is connected to Afá texts and themes. The Afá geomantic system has also been described as relatively autonomous and inclusive: Because there are Christians who consult Afá, one might say it exists independently of Vodou worship. Anyone can go to a diviner, regardless of their religion.

3 The golden spiral is a logarithmic spiral that grows by a factor of the golden ratio (φ). It gets wider (further from its origin) by a factor of φ for every quarter turn it makes. Long believed to have originated in Ancient Greece, recent scholarship has shown that the golden ratio, rectangle, and spiral were central to African art and architecture long before they were articulated in the West, from Ghana's Kente cloth to architecture in Cameroon. Evidence from empirical measurements does not support the theory of the golden ratio's origin in Ancient Greece, as no Greek sources use the phrase "golden rectangle" or suggest its use in design. It is now believed that the thirteenth-century mathematician Leonardo Fibonacci, who studied in North Africa, is responsible for bringing the golden ratio back to Europe. See Audrey G. Bennett, "The African Roots of Swiss Design," *The Conversation*, March 22, 2021: https://theconversation.com/the-african-roots-ofswiss-design-154892. See also Ron Eglash, *African Fractals: Modern Computing and Indigenous Design* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999).

4 *World* in this sense refers to the Heideggerian ontical concept, which signifies the totality of things that can be present at hand within the world. It also functions as an ontological term used to signify the Being of those things just mentioned. "World" can also mean any realm that encompasses a multiplicity of entities: when one speaks of the "world" of a mathematician, for example, the "world" signifies the realm of possible objects of mathematics. Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heideggerian_terminology

5 An engram is a unit of cognitive information imprinted in a physical substance, theorized to be the means by which memories are stored as biophysical or biochemical changes in the brain or other biological tissue, in response to external stimuli. Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Engram

6 WɔɛLab, also spelled WoeLab, refers to a concept Sename Koffi Agbodjinou developed in 2012 as part of HubCité, a proposed alternative to Western smart cities. WɔɛLabs assist in realizing ultra-local urban projects. Each space serves a given area and supplies, on site, the resources that city-dwellers need to develop solutions that respond to their actual needs, including waste collection, energy, and 3D printing. The WɔɛLab community is a young, innovative community committed to making LowHighTech knowledge accessible to all. It offers mutual, voluntary assistance and gives free technical support to artisans in the neighborhood. Inspired by traditional societies and structures, it works through peer-to-peer exchanges at the village level. The overall project proposes a city that is horizontal and distributed: a city designed for and by residents, who are free to use the new technologies as they see fit.

Maison Gbegbe—La mer ne tarit jamais

Mathilde ter Heijne with Messanh Amedegnato



→ Drawing by Michel Adewola, made in 2018 in the context of a workshop within the framework of a festival and the laying of the foundation stone. The workshop was organized by UCTT and art&dialogue e.V.


TOGBE SANOUGAH
Dit SEA NEVER DRY
"LA MER NE TARIT JAMAIS"



↖ Wall painting adorning the outside wall of the family compound belonging to Daga Dansou Sanougah, the oldest bokono in the UCTT.

← One example of this Dutch gin is Royal Stork Gin, a schnapps product produced by J.H. Henkes, a Dutch gin distillery located on the Voorhaven in Delftshaven, Rotterdam, and established in 1824. For a long time, it produced spirits only for export.

In my family, there is a strong sense of continuity and community through the tradition of drinking jenever. My godfather, who lives in an old canal house in Amsterdam, has a daily ritual of sharing a small glass of the juniper-flavored liquor with friends and family before dinner. The spirit[1] is deeply rooted in the social culture of the Netherlands, where it is often consumed at gatherings, before or after meals, and in pubs. To my surprise, I found that jenever, also known as Dutch gin, enjoys a similar popularity in the coastal region of Togo, where it is likewise marketed as part of ancient, local customs. I first visited the country in 2013. As someone from a Christian background, I was fascinated to see gin being poured on the ground in a ritual of gratitude addressed to one's ancestors, life forces, and the divine.[2] This ritual pouring, the act of libation, is something I had never experienced before. I was also unaware that the high-proof beverage—a major export for the Netherlands[3] in the eighteenth century and even more so in the late nineteenth century, when the use of square-shaped green bottles[4] allowed for easier shipping and better brand identification—likely first found its way to West Africa in the late eighteenth century, when it played a role in the broader "spirits" trade. As exchange between European companies and West African merchants quickened into the transatlantic trade of human beings, Dutch gin became part of the package of goods offered in exchange for Africans forced to toil overseas.[5] Dutch gin was re-imported from decolonization (when foreign spirits were banned outright) to the late 1980s. Although shipped in much smaller quantities than before, ceremonies and rituals continue to incorporate libations of J.H. Henkes gin to this day. Discovering these "hidden truths" for myself helped me understand that objects can hold vastly different meanings and many more types of relations than meet the eye—especially to those who are not attuned them.

The "interweaving" of culture, layered realities, and shifts in meaning can be observed in many more objects than just the Dutch gin bottle. ~~Ethnological artifacts~~ arrived in Europe through various means, often after having been illegally confiscated, taken without permission or by force, or as a result of religious conversions at mission outposts. As a consequence, I associate them with missionary work, colonial wars, and conflicts, not to mention unfair power dynamics. Over time, these ~~objects~~ were integrated into the complex networks and hierarchies of large ethnological museums in the West.[6] Stripped of their original

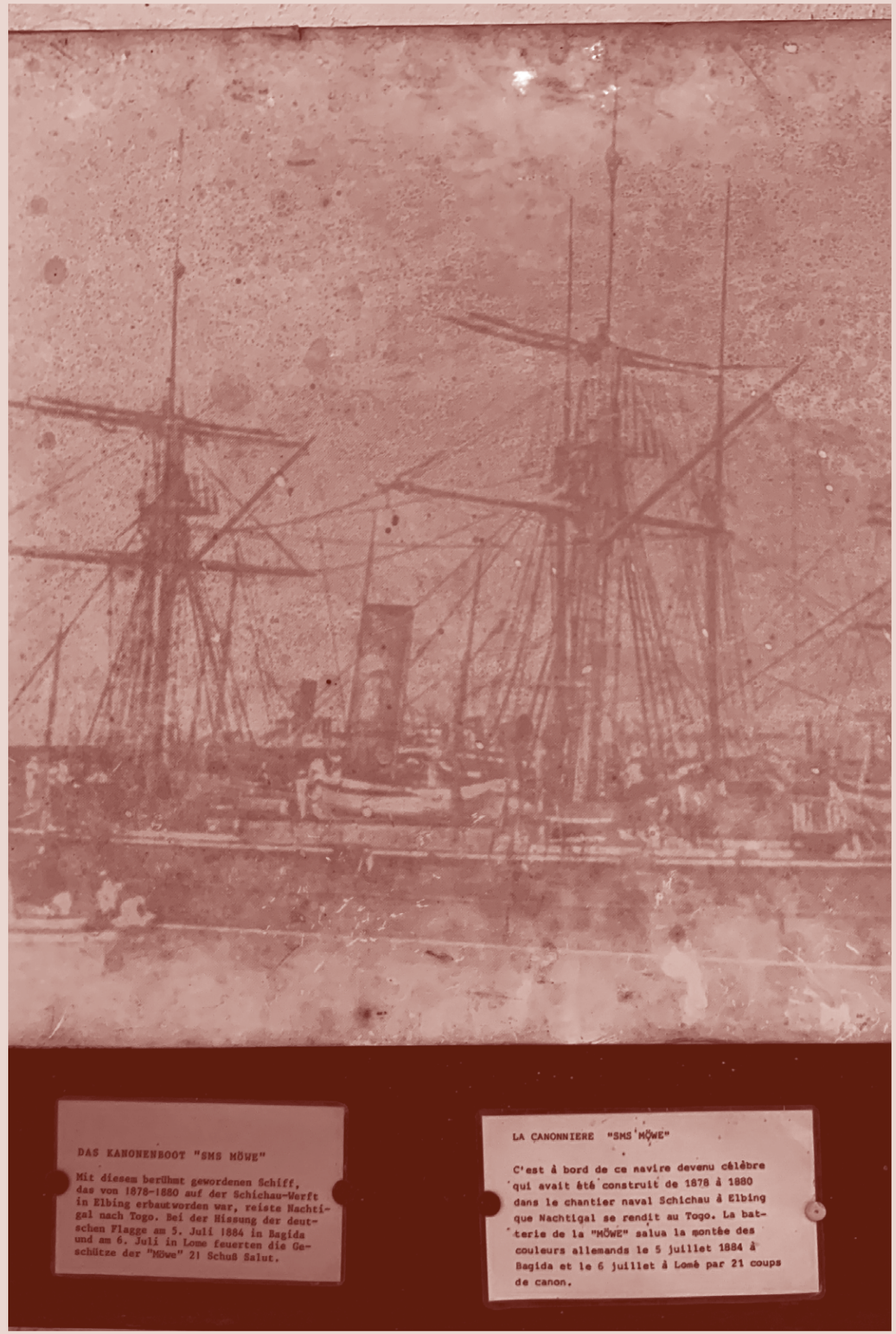
context and history, culturally appropriated, and judged only by their external characteristics, they have been categorized, interpreted, and displayed in sterile glass vitrines—handled and regarded by those who remain oblivious to their true nature and value. With this in mind, the editors of this publication have decided to cross out terms such as ~~objects~~, ~~artifacts~~, ~~sculptures~~, etc. where they refer to "sensitive," "religious," or "sacred" ~~objects~~, cultural ~~artifacts~~ and the like, as all of these words share a fundamental problem: the emphasis on their thingness and materiality, a concept completely at odds with how these assets are understood by those in their contexts of origin. Moreover, the word "~~objects~~" is problematic insofar that it is commonly used in Western cultures to refer to something grammatically subordinate to a subject. In an echo of Aimé Césaire's reference to the "thingification" of colonization—the process by which colonizing powers treated the colonized as mere objects to be used and exploited for their own gain, rather than recognizing them as human beings[7]—such terminology flattens and undermines what are in some cases venerated deities with agency of their own. In the case of divine powers or spiritual beings residing in culturally sensitive ~~objects~~, referring to these as mere "~~things~~," even in a neutral sense, could be considered disrespectful and inaccurate, if not outright offensive.

These and other entrenched ways of thinking have kept many European nations, including Germany, from confronting their colonial legacies. Only recently has the latter begun to acknowledge its colonial history to a wider public, after it was long overshadowed by a larger social reckoning with the country's Nazi past. In 2021, the German parliament officially recognized as genocide the crimes committed by its colonial troops against the Herero and Nama people in what is now Namibia[8] after five years of negotiations and public debate about recognizing the needs of victims of the German colonial regime. By contrast, Germany's colonial history in Togo, once considered a "model colony," is rarely discussed, raising questions about the accuracy of perceptions of a non-violent colonial experience.

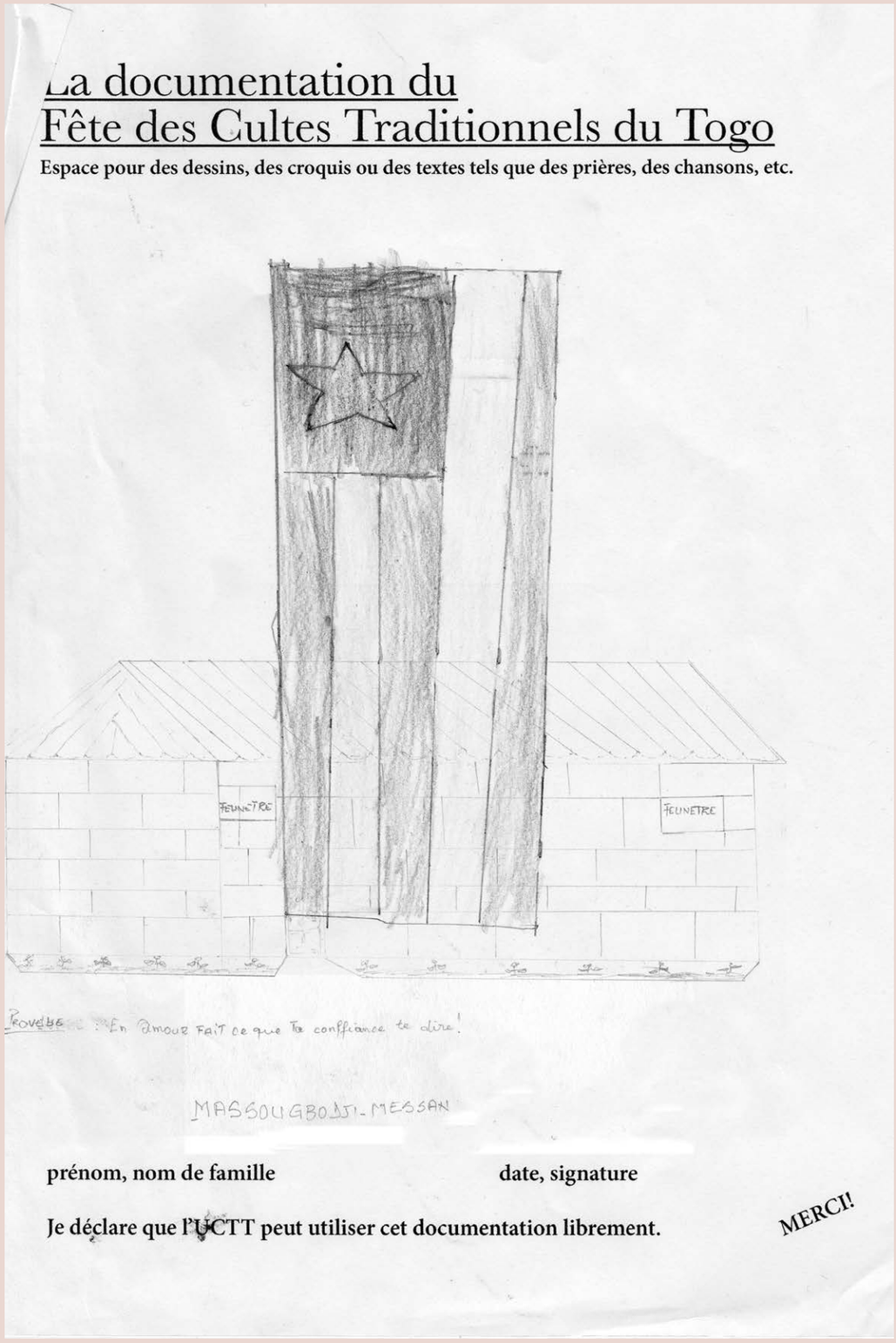
That outward appearances can be deceiving is something I have often observed in Togo, though it manifests in different ways. One can adhere to Christian beliefs and simultaneously be an adept of certain Vodou powers; spirits from the two systems are known to overlap.



↑ Calender published by the Goethe Institut featuring places of Germany's colonial past in Togo, without mentioning the negative impact of colonial rule.



→ Exhibit and display at the Musée Régional d'Aného showing an uncritical and one-sided representation of a historical event in the region.



← Drawing by Messan Massougbodji on a worksheet distributed as part of a workshop held during a festival in Agouegan in 2017. The festival and workshop were co-organized by UCTT and art&dialogue e.V.

Understanding this correlation is crucial to grasping the meaning of "interreligious" as it relates to the Maison Gbegbe project. As a cultural center for Vodou practices, it should be accessible to people of all religious affiliations. We use the word Vodou (capitalized) to refer to the traditional knowledge system, and vodou (lowercase) to refer to divine entities. Although traditional knowledge keepers in Togo are often called "priests" and "priestesses," we have avoided using the words in this context so as not to confuse our readers.

Since my first visit, I have had many opportunities to visit Togo and to learn from traditional knowledge keepers such as Hounougbo Bahounsou[9] Amedegnato—an opportunity for which I am incredibly grateful. It has been my privilege to meet and to learn from members of this community, gaining insight into the traditional knowledge and divination work of the Union des Cultes Traditionnels du Togo (UCTT).[10] As a white[11] Dutch visual artist and professor at the University of the Arts in Berlin, born in France, my work as a video and performance artist has been fueled by an interest in speculative, intersectional feminism and in looking through the unseen or intangible. This has led me to question how I might encounter or understand Ewe cosmology and what modes of artistic research exist outside the realm of tangible knowledge. I was also interested in how I was perceived and what I represented to people in Togo, and whether it was possible to transcend these perceptions. Involved in the return of a Mami Wata ~~figure~~ and in the development of Maison Gbegbe, I have worked to bring people together and create financial opportunities for the community through a collaborative and participatory art project that takes a grassroots approach, sparking discussion within Agouegan and the UCTT. The journey to where we are now has been challenging and I am aware that I have made mistakes along the way.[12] It hasn't always been easy to overcome the many constraints that we, people from different backgrounds, have faced in this project, including language barriers, financial challenges, disciplinary differences, geographical distances, and limited time together. Another challenge was finding a consensus on which to base our decision-making.

Despite these challenges, many positive things happened that kept us motivated and working together. For me, for example, being immersed in the practices of the UCTT and its members has had a profound impact. Hébiesso[13] helped me to be more honest

and to always speak the truth, Legba[14] taught me the importance of protecting myself. With guidance from Afá and the bokono, we used dance, rhythms, songs, invocations, and prayers to engage in essential and clarifying dialogues with humans, non-humans, and cosmic beings alike. Hounougbo Messanh Amedegnato and I worked closely together throughout this process. We also discussed and collaborated on the texts and images that went into this publication: a volume sketching the development of Maison Gbegbe.

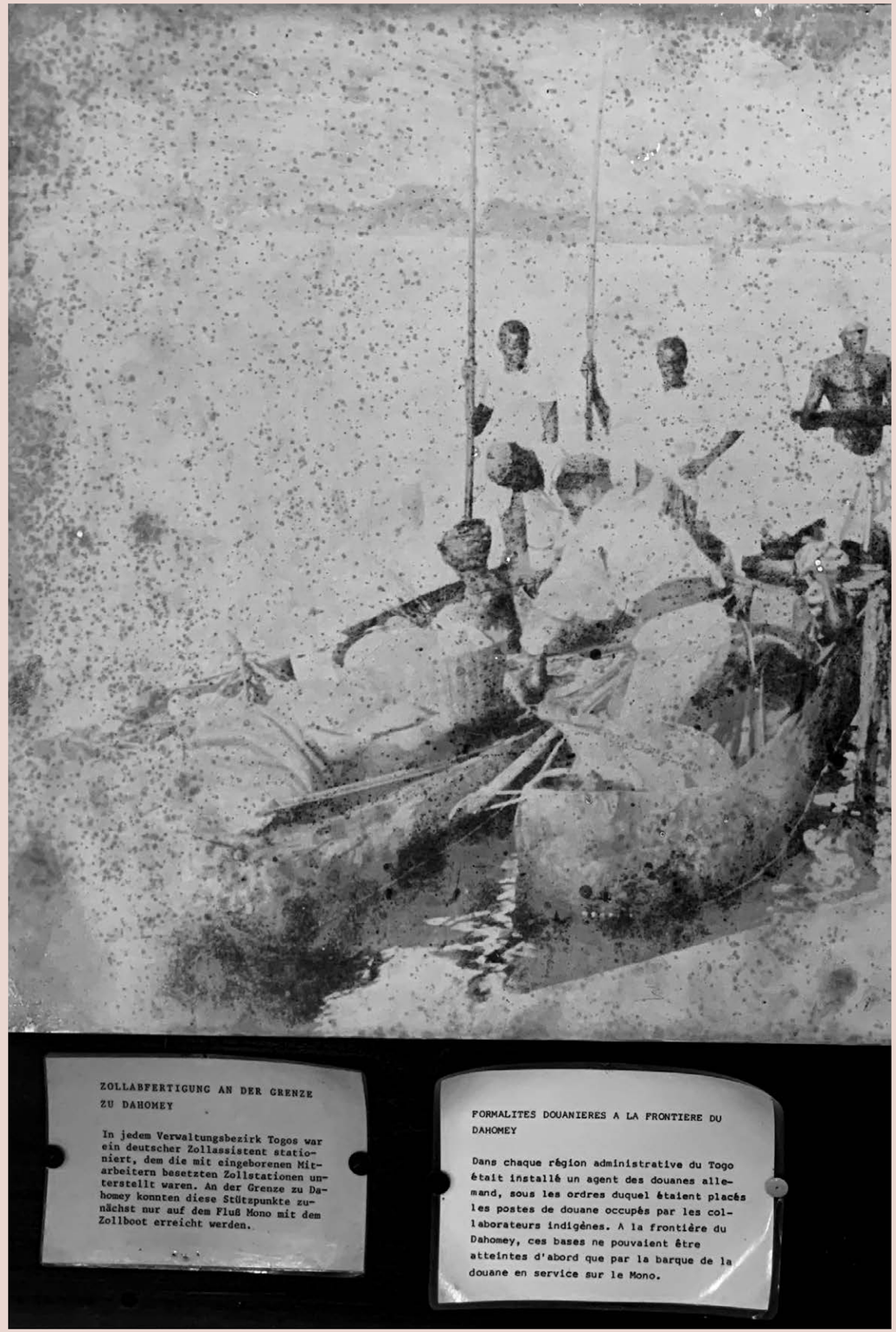


↑ Afá oracle. A UCTT bokono shows one of his divining instruments.

The village of Agouegan and the Aného region

Located in southeastern Togo on the border with Benin, Aného (formerly known as Petit-Popo) is a town where the Mono River flows into the Gulf of Guinea. Founded in the late seventeenth century by Ane people fleeing Ashanti attacks in Elmina (now Accra, Ghana), Aného first developed as a trading center where Danish and Dutch merchant companies (West India Company, WIC) were active from 1660. Between 1731 and 1760, Aného was the WIC's westernmost port on the West African coast. From the early eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century, Agbodrafo, or Safe Harbor (from the Portuguese *Porto Seguro*), also served as a port from which enslaved Africans were shipped abroad (Triangle Trade). The Tchamba market, located at the headwaters of the Mono River to the north, was a holding center where people for sale were held, a central market where Hausa and Bariba horsemen, Tchaoud-jo, and Tyokossi warriors brought people captured during their raids. Caravans transported their captives along the Mono River to the coast and to Agoué, a village near Agbodrafo in present-day Benin, where powerful Afro-Brazilian families continued this trade until the late nineteenth century. Today, on the other side of the Mono River (in Togo), the village of Agouegan hosts a large Monday market where people from Nigeria, Benin, Ghana, and all over Togo come to trade. Not far from this market is the land where Maison Gbegbe will be built.

Aného was the capital of the German colony of Togoland from 1885 to 1887, and the capital of the French colonial administration from 1914 to 1920. On September 5, 1884, Imperial Consul



→ Exhibit and display at the Musée Régional d'Aného. Customs clearance at the border to Dahomey, a German customs assistant was stationed in every administrative district of Togo. At first, these points could only be reached by customs boat on the Mono River.





↑ Musée Régional d'Aného is located on the site of the former colonial administration and in the private home of German colonial administrator Jesko von Puttkammer

Heinrich Randad and local chief Mensah signed a treaty annexing the area to the German Empire as colonial property, although the legal validity of the treaty has been the subject of some scrutiny. With the treaty, the episode of human trafficking ended and a new area of exploitation began. Recently, the Musée Régional d'Aného was inaugurated in Zébé on the grounds of what was once the residence of the German colonial military chief Jesko von Puttkamer. This museum, which has received funding from Germany, exhibits archives and artifacts related to the history of Aného. Museums are not neutral, however, and preserving and exhibiting art and artifacts is only one aspect of their mission. The Musée Régional d'Aného presents local history and culture from a narrow perspective, without actively engaging with the local community or critically examining the colonial and pre-colonial periods.

Maison Gbegbe as a cultural space and community-driven project

For too long, museums and official memory cultures have been rigid and functioned as fortresses, creating, defining, defending, and preserving one-sided histories. To imagine Maison Gbegbe is to imagine a broader spectrum of possibilities for a non-profit cultural space that embraces a diverse range of possibilities and allows for the encounter of different sensibilities, faces, voices, spiritual energies, and visions. It is a space for exchange, reconciliation, and the sharing of many stories: stories of the present, stories that have yet to be heard, stories that are often told, as well as stories about European missionary societies, the transatlantic slave trade, and European (more specifically, German) colonial rule on the west coast of Africa. It is a space made to challenge and counter racist stereotypes associated with traditional African belief systems, moving away from a fixed space as an arena for events.

Collaborative and participatory artistic methods have the potential to create new structures, spaces, and references that challenge the status quo. The spiritual practice of traditional West African culture, which involves a collaborative and participatory approach to art and the constant renegotiation of relationships between people and their environment, is in line with contemporary European art forms that similarly reevaluate identity, possibilities,



→ Exhition view at the Musée Régional d'Aného.



← Stamp on a contract for the return of Mami Wata, Villa Karo, Grand-Popo, Benin, 2020.

https://uctt-togo.org/

task distribution, and roles through performative and collective participatory projects.

Inspired by intersectional feminist theory[15], which recognizes individuals as having multiple identities and affiliations, we seek alternative methods of sharing space and resources that avoid domination, control, and erasure. Our aim is to reclaim and repair, overlap and elaborate. Maison Gbegbe asks how to approach the politics of ownership and appropriation. Does appropriation reinforce or challenge power dynamics? Since every quotation and documentary record is an act of appropriation and colonization, the challenge is to appropriate without exploiting. In that sense, the project could also be described in terms of what writer and scholar Saidiya Hartman called "critical fabulation": the creation of a recombinant narrative that blends incomparable stories from the present, past, and future. Although Hartman developed the concept for the study of the legacy of slavery, it also applies to the fragmented and ambivalent realities and histories of African sculpture migration in colonial and postcolonial contexts. Participants in Maison Gbegbe activities will be exposed to traditional Vodou culture while also striving to create new elements that shed light on alternative perspectives or imagined narratives. Critical fabulation is a mode of representation that approaches its subject indirectly while sidestepping claims of certainty or mastery.

Union des Cultes Traditionnels du Togo

The Union des Cultes Traditionnels du Togo (UCTT) was founded in 2014 by a group of about thirty-five traditional knowledge holders, diviners, and healers from the Togolese-Beninese border region. Based in Agouegan and led by its president, Hounougbo Bahounsou Amedegnato, the organization of elders aims to create transparent structures within the diverse practices of traditional cosmology in order to provide people seeking help from healers and spiritual workers with a trusted point of contact and referral to the appropriate elder. Lack of education and lost knowledge of cultural heritage are often the result of colonial exploitation and failing governmental structures. Vulnerable groups such as women, youth, and the sick are particularly at risk of exploitation



← Mami Wata at Villa Karo's Petit Musée, Grand-Popo, Benin.

by corrupt healers or fraudsters. With this in mind, the UCTT aims to preserve and pass on traditions and spiritual knowledge, and to strengthen local traditional communities through its organization. With a wide range of expertise among its members, the UCTT can serve as a custodian or community to be contacted when Togolese cultural ~~objects~~, especially those of spiritual significance, are being considered for return from Western ethnographic collections. It also welcomes visits from people of African descent who are interested in reconnecting with their roots.

Restitution, return, and the pre-configuration mission

The initial spark for Maison Gbegbe came in 2018, when Finnish journalist and writer Matti-Juhani Karila decided to return his entire collection of Mami Wata[16] ~~objects~~ to its context of origin and transferred it to the Villa Karo museum in Grand-Popo, Benin. The permanent exhibition "Mami Wata's Return" opened in March 2019 at Villa Karo's Petit Musée.[17] The following year, a Mami Wata was given over to the UCTT for reactivation and sacred safekeeping. It was in this context that the idea of Maison Gbegbe was born. Afá was consulted to determine if and how the project should proceed. Shortly thereafter, with help from Canton Chief Gê Fio Foli Kponve Alofa, the district of Agouegan granted the UCTT two plots of land for the organization's headquarters and to build a public venue where stories could be told and (sacred) West African ~~objects~~ could be received.

Engaging directly with the Agouegan community has been an essential part of the collaboration between art&dialogue e.V. and the UCTT from the start. Both associations (the former based in Berlin, the latter locally) have worked hard to understand the needs of those who live there in terms of their living and working situations, as well as their priorities and hopes for the cultural center. As early as 2016, our participatory work process has included activities as diverse as festival planning, conducting interviews, hosting workshops, organizing a football tournament, and facilitating discussions.

It is exciting to see the progress made so far, including the construction of a meeting house for the UCTT and a showroom to

↓ Petit Musée in Grand-Popo.



display the architectural plans of Africaine d'Architecture. Architect Sename Koffi Aboudjinou, founder and initiator of the WɔɛLab Community in Lomé (a DIY critical maker lab specializing in scaling and replicating advanced technologies using local resources) joined the project in 2020. He also expanded its scope with his suggestion that we start a pre-configuration mission for the center.

Pre-configuration mission

The Maison Gbegbe pre-configuration mission, titled "Maison Gbegbe—Exchanges and Invisible Entanglements," started in December 2021 with a series of workshops, lectures, and discussions at the University of the Arts (UdK). In May 2022, a study trip to Togo was organized in collaboration with Berlin Open Lab, a transdisciplinary research center supported by the UdK and the Technical University Berlin, with several members of the pre-configuration team making the trip to Agouegan. During this period, the UCTT, L'Africaine d'architecture, and art&dialogue e.V. also collaborated to realize Gbegbe Days: a four-day festival that included ceremonies, workshops, discussions, a concert, and a conference. The project was presented at the Dekoloniale Festival, Berlin, in September 2022 with guests from Lomé, and at a second round of workshops, lectures, and discussions at the Berlin Open Lab and the UdK College of Fine Arts.

This publication summarizes the findings of the pre-configuration team (Rossila Goussanou, Nadja Ofuatey-Alazard, and Anani Sanouvi), who were tasked with researching the necessary requirements for the project. It offers guidelines for the development of Maison Gbegbe. It also reflects the interactions and discussions of artists, thinkers, and traditional knowledge keepers who came together to investigate, question, share, and experience various aspects of the project.

Is it possible to research something with which we are so deeply intertwined? Can we shift the flows of money, knowledge, capital, and interests in and with this project? Cultural diversity should exist in both a reciprocal, mutually beneficial relationship and a perpetual tension as we pursue understanding and shared values through open intercultural and interreligious dialogue. Sustained, collaborative processes should aim to counter stereotypes



↑ In front of the temporary gathering space; Gregor Kasper and Musquiqui Chiying chat with students during their painting workshop at Gbegbe Days.



↑ Opening reception for Gbegbe Days inside the temporary building.



↑ Children and young people of Agouegan at a 2017 drawing workshop organized by the UCTT in collaboration with art&dialogue e.V.; Amy Patton holding a questionnaire.

and prejudices, while also promoting trust among project participants at the national or international level. It will be interesting to see how this project evolves and impacts the community and the broader region.

1 Here the word *spirit* is used to refer to strong distilled alcoholic beverages such as brandy, whiskey, gin, or rum, but also to spirit in the sense of a "general mood or intent." *Spirit* also derives from the Latin word for "breath."

2 This practice, which builds on an earlier use of palm wine and water as sacred fluids that facilitated communion between the living and the ancestors, bridges the gap between the physical and spiritual worlds. See Emmanuel Akyeampong, *Drink, Power, and Cultural Change: A Social History of Alcohol in Ghana, c. 1800 to Recent Times (Social History of Africa)* (London: Heinemann, 1996), 21.

3 Dmitri Van Den Bersselaar, *The King of Drinks: Schnapps Gin from Modernity to Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 51–52.

4 As Van Den Bersselaar points out, square face bottles could be packed in wooden crates, allowing for easier transport. They were also more easily recognizable as containing gin of a specific origin and brand, which enabled more modern marketing with trademarks (ibid., 52). The status of such identifiers also played a role in West Africa, where royal or court protocol was often incomplete without liquor. One always went to see a king or chief with a drink in hand, preferably a bottle of European schnapps. See Akyeampong, *Drink, Power, and Cultural Change*.

5 The main alcoholic incentive for eighteenth-century human trafficking was cheap rum. Shipped in vast quantities to Africa in exchange for captives, the liquor—distilled with waste products from the cane sugar industry—was an important gift item and form of payment in intra-African trade.

6 Members of societies represented in ethnological museums often criticize museum processes for what they perceive to be a lack of respect for their values and way of life, and have often pointed to an aesthetic incompatibility between their own cultures and the stated mission of such museums. Although museum professionals have sought to address this systemic problem, the involvement of such institutions in colonial acts of violence and the attitudes at the core of their founding history cannot be erased or downplayed.

7 Aimé Cesaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press), 42.

8 The genocide in Namibia was a massacre of the Herero and Nama tribes in German South West Africa (modern-day Namibia) that took place between 1904 and 1907. The German colonial authorities, who were administering the territory at the time, launched a brutal crackdown against the Herero after they staged a revolt against colonial rule. The German military subjected the Herero to forced labor, concentration camps, and systematic extermination, leading to the deaths of an estimated 24,000 to 100,000 Hereros and 10,000 Nama. The event is considered one of the earliest examples of twentieth-century genocide and is recognized as such by the government of Namibia. In May 2021, the German government agreed to pay €1.1 billion over thirty years to fund projects in communities that were impacted by the genocide.

→ Workshop led by Amy Patton, Mathilde ter Heijne and others in 2017: “What would you like to see realized in Agouegan?” Drawing by Folly Follygan.



9 *hounan* is Ewe for traditional knowledge keeper and/or traditional healer, a *hounougbo bahounsou* is a high-ranking person in a group of traditional knowledge keepers and diviners.

10 Afá divination is a geomantic system used to promote mental, physical, and spiritual health and well-being. It consists of 256 signs that appear when sacred palm nuts are manipulated or cast during a divination session. Diviners (called *bokono* in Ewe) interpret these signs to give guidance on a specific question or issue, or to allow those who consult it to realign with their destiny.

11 Navigating the complexities of postcolonial discourse can be challenging, particularly when it comes to determining one’s own position in certain projects. As Ruth Frankenberg explains, whiteness can be understood as a foundation of systemic advantage and racial privilege, a perspective from which individuals of white identity view themselves and others, and a set of cultural norms that are often unacknowledged and denied. See Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

12 This also certainly owes to my upbringing in a culture that promotes the Othering of certain groups—a culture that turns a blind eye to certain aspects of its own history and grants privileges to the lucky few.

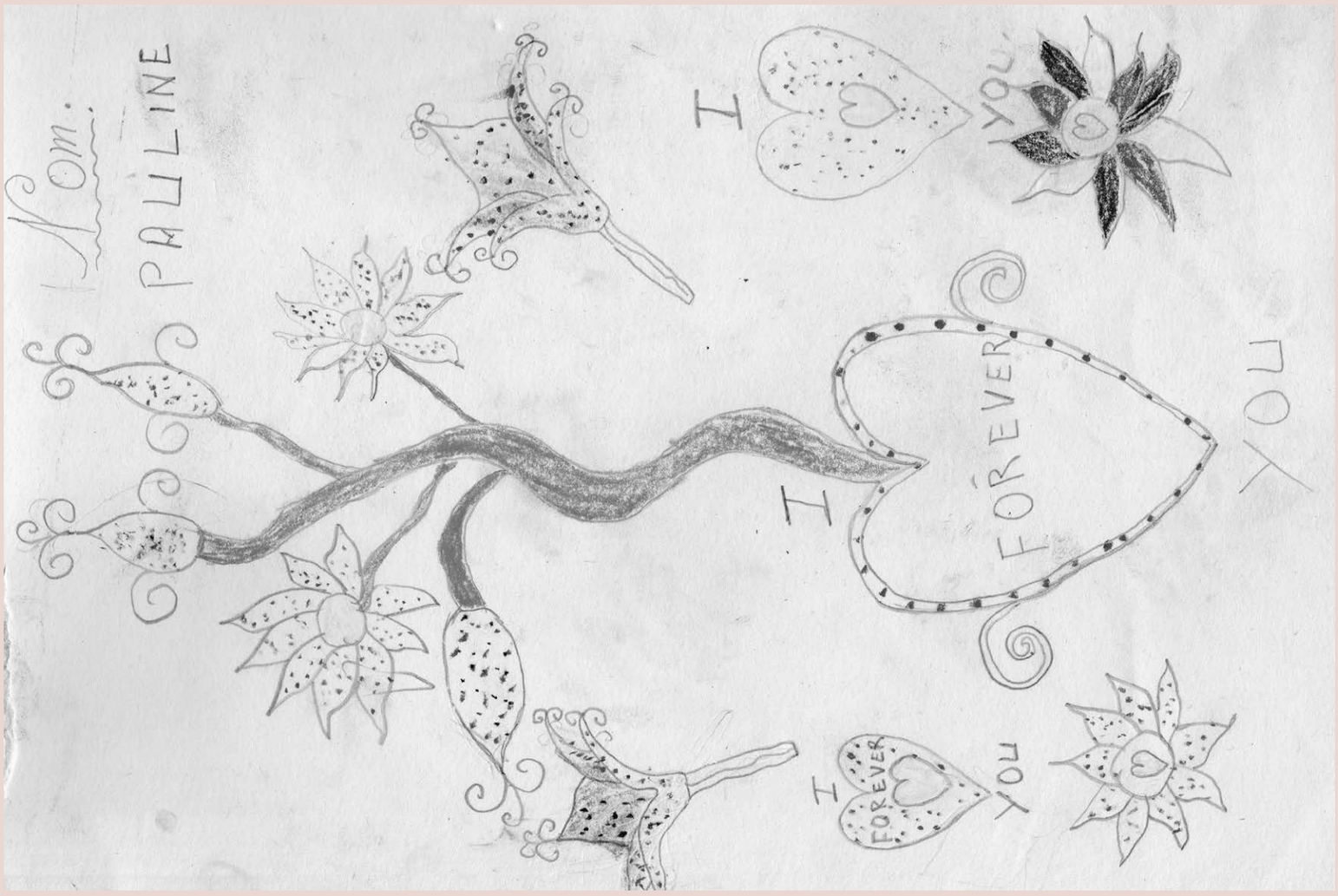
13 Hébiesso is associated with thunder, lightning, and rain. Often invoked for protection, guidance, and justice, he is believed to have the power to strike down those who lie, either with a bolt of lightning or by causing their words to backfire.

14 Legba is a messenger between the gods and humanity. He is often depicted as a trickster and is associated with the crossroads. Legba is a powerful guardian spirit.

15 An intersectional approach shows the way that people’s social identities can overlap, creating compounding experiences of discrimination. The theory of those systems became known as intersectionality, a term popularized by law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw, through her 1991 article “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99.

16 Mami Wata is a water spirit whose manifestations are usually female but sometimes also male. Venerated in West, South and Central Africa, as well as in the African diaspora (i.e. in the Caribbean), they are very “cosmopolitan.” Reminiscent of ship bows, mermaids, Catholic saints, and Hindu goddesses, they are associated, among other things, with financial success, good fortune, health, and fertility.

17 Mami Wata exhibtion at Petit Musée in Grand Popo. For more on this and the circumstances of the return, see Kaija Kaitavuori, “Museum Magic: From Cult ~~Object~~ to Museum Object… and Back,” in this volume, 155.





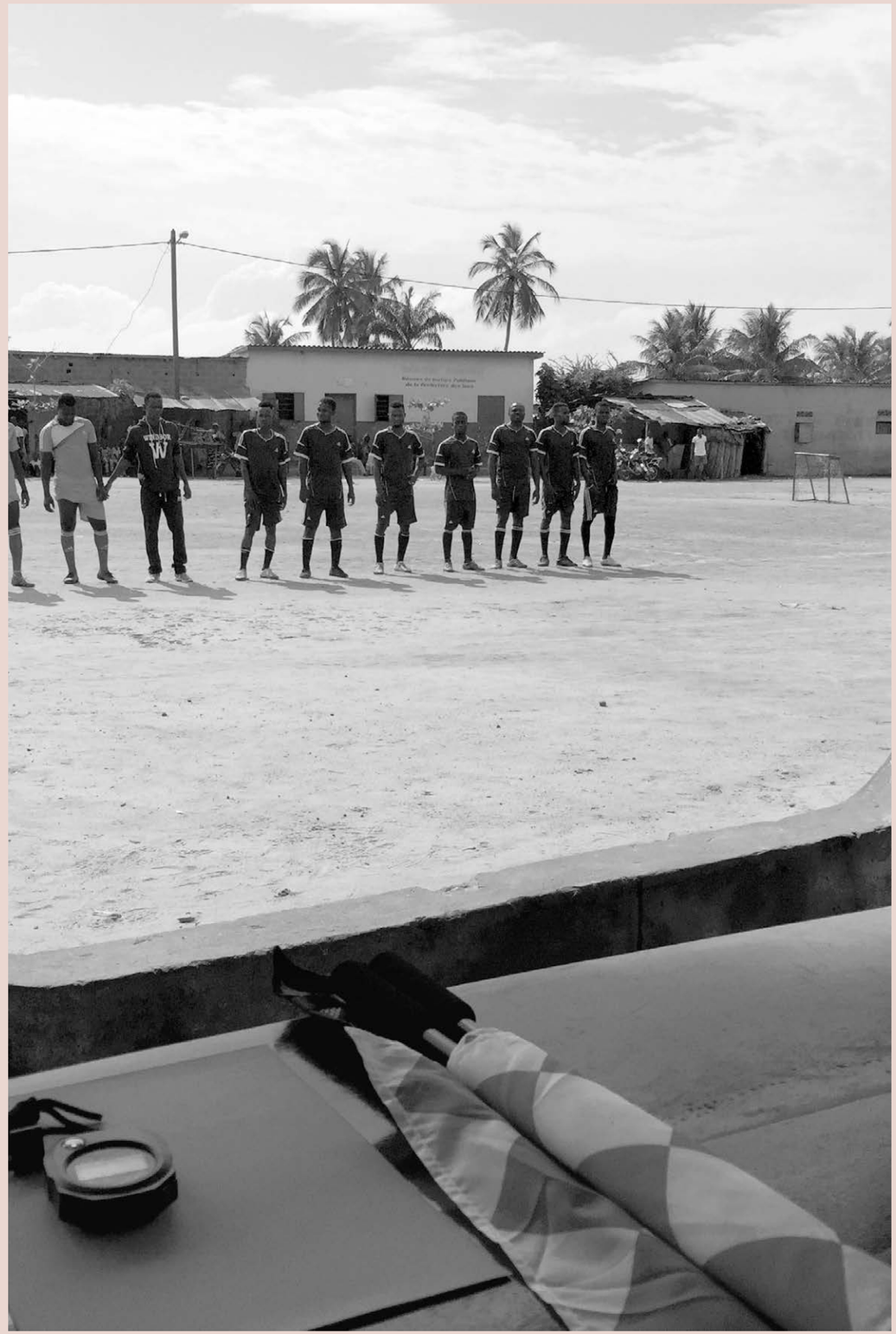
je me nome KLOUSSE Anani charles c'est moi qui avait d'Ecrit la fête sur quelque ligne il faut Nous aider à forme une equipe à AGOUEGAN et aider moi même pour Evolues dans le gardinage et m'aider a acheter le Gen Merci je vous salues je suis à AGOU AGOUEGAN

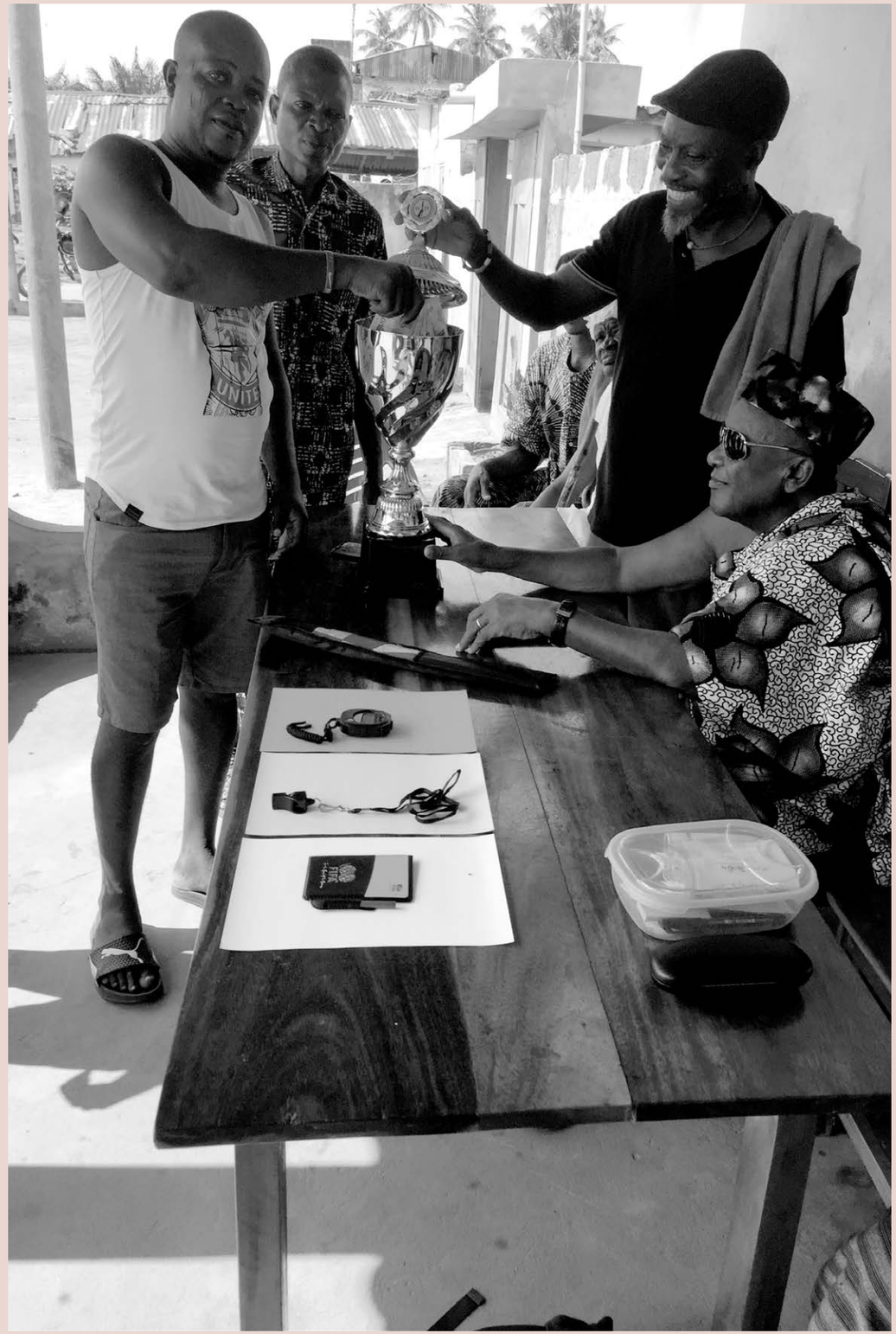


→ Residents and students of the Lycée d'Agouégan attend the laying of the foundation stone for the temporary building and project space of Maison Gbegbe, 2020. On the left, Ms. Hodehouenou Amedegnato.









↑ Final match of the 2018 soccer tournament between teams from the various settlements that make up Agouegan. The tournament was organized by the UCTT and art&dialogue e.V. with support from Canton Chief Gê Fio Foli Kponve Alofa.





← Guests arrive for the Gbegbe Days opening reception at the temporary building constructed for Maison Gbegbe.

↑ Discussion on restitution as part of Gbegbe Days, with bokonon Gangalizo, hounougbo Amedegato; members of the pre-configuration committee; University of the Arts professors Michelle Christensen, Mathilde ter Heijne, and Florian Conradi; translators Joulienne Houssou and Patrick Ayele-Yawou, and Nadou Lawson Hellu of the commune Lacs 1.



↑ Discussion with UCTT members and Nadja Afouetey-Alazard from the Maison Gbegbe pre-configuration committee, as well as Sename Koffi Agbodjinou of L'Africaine d'architecture.

→ Concert by Elom 20ce and his band in the village square in Agouegan as part of Gbegbe Days.





← End of the day. Evaluation near the market stalls on the banks of the Mono River during Gbegbe Days.

Hopes, Wishes, and Expectations

Discussion among members of the UCTT and their invited guests



← Gbegbe vines and Vodou seem conceptually synonymous: obscure, flexible, far-reaching, resilient, continually exploring and branching in new directions, adapting to whatever crosses their paths, and ultimately surviving. Gilles Deleuze und Félix Guattari's notion of the "rhizome" bears a direct connection to this the West African proverb "The gbegbe rootdigger does not understand the gbegbe." Rhizomatic trajectories may be "broken, shattered at a given spot, but will start up again on one of (their) old lines, or on new lines. [And] these lines always tie back to one another" and continue to survive. Any point of a rhizome may be connected to any other point in the system, much like the Vodou deity's interconnectivity among the living, the dead, and the spirits. In its ongoing, outward-reaching hoizontality, a rhizome resists structures of domination much as the Vodou system has withstood and survived centuries of transatlantic human trade, colonization, and ongoing missionary work on both sides of the Atlantic. (*Vodun in Coastal Bénin*, Dana Rush, 2013)

Hopes, Wishes, and Expectations

A workshop with members of the Union des Cultes Traditionnels du Togo (UCTT) and their invited guests, organized by Messanh Amedegnato and Mathilde ter Heijne, was held on June 18, 2021 at the construction site for the UCTT's temporary assembly space in Agouegan.

All were invited to join in discussions about the cultural center, members' position on the restitution and return of cultural ~~objects~~ from European collections, and to brainstorm about possible procedures or trajectories in case of further restitutions to the UCTT. The following text was distilled from various contributions and arguments heard that day.

Attendees introduced themselves as follows:

THANG Femi,
Hébiesso hounan

AKLOBESSI Tchikpo,
Hébiesso hounan

GBEDESSI Sossa,
Hébiesso hounan

SESSOU Goudjinou,
Hébiesso and Sakpatà hounan

DRAVIE Anyron Sassou,
Mami hounan, clairvoyant, and geomantics expert

KOULETTE Agbéwouanou,
bokono from Zalivé, Togo

KOUVONOU Kouassu,
Hébiesso o hounan from Agbanakè, Togo

ADZIGONOU Adétudzi,
hounan from Agokpamé, Togo

AMEDEGNATO Viwo,
Hébiesso hounan, lives in Agouegan

DA POVI Nicoue Houedossi,
Mami hounan

AMEDEGNATO Zinsou,
invited guest, twin, scholar, and history professor
with a focus on geography and an interest in traditional culture

DA SILVEIRA Adjété,
UCTT member, adviser and adept of Hébiesso

ARNEWOU Sofo Koko,
Gorovodou Blékété hounan

JOHNSON Jean,
UCTT member, Etron Kpeto-Deka hounan

ELAVAGNON Folikoue,
UCTT member, Zangbeto hounan

AMEDEGNATO Dossa,
UCTT member, administrative clerk for Togolese phosphate
company, responsible for Zangbeto in Agouegan

TER HEIJNE Mathilde,
artist, lives in Berlin, Germany

GHEORGHIU Alexander,
cameraman, lives in Berlin, Germany

AMEDEGNATO Messanh,
UCTT founder and president, hounougbo bahounsou
and bokono, lives in Germany and in Togo, responsible
for Hébiesso in Agouegan

What do you expect of a cultural center in Agouegan? What is your vision? Who should maintain the building and who should manage it?

FEMI THANG The cultural center Mathilde is organizing is a good thing. Again, our thanks. We like it a lot. It will advance our partnership. The [temporary] building we are sitting in now, she helped it to be built. But the building is not a cultural center yet. There is still a lot to be done. This building would be fine as an office, but it isn't a cultural center. There's still no floor... We cannot leave it like that. It needs to be finished. It also needs electricity and running water. These things are necessary. If we can make it bigger, we should. A cultural center needs a room for activities and leisure, a room for information, a room for training, a conference room, toilets, a stage for performances. That is what makes a cultural center.

SOSSA GBEDESSI Our idea is that once the center is built, it can be used to train young women to work in various fields. Or they can generally be taught something there. As for maintenance: We have many families, we will do upkeep on the center ourselves and can cook here as well.

Could it be that the returned ceremonial and spiritual ~~objects~~ still contain certain powers, even after they were exhibited in Europe? If so, what should be done upon their return? Would it be possible to produce a (non-sacred) reproduction of such an ~~object~~—one that could then be sent back to the previous (European) owner for exhibition?

AGBÉWOUANOU KOULETTE To make a vodou copy is not a good thing.

KOUASSU KOUVONOU Well, let's talk about the forgery of vodous. To copy vodou is not good, we won't accept that. If you want to build a vodou, you have to approach the owner. This person will give you the permission or the power. But if you see a vodou somewhere and you want to make a fake from it, then that is absolutely no good, and that has no value. That is theft. Such things do not happen in our group and should never happen.

↓ From left to right: Nicoue Houedossi Da Povi, Viwo Amedegnato Adétudzi Adzigonou, Kouassu Kouvonou and Agbéwouanou Koulette.





↓ From left to right: Anyron Sassou Dravie, Femi Thang, Sossa Gbedessi, Jean Baptiste Kpade, and Jean Johnson.





↓ From left to right: Zinsou Amedegnato, Adjété Da Silveira, Sofo Koko Arnewou, Dossa Amedegnato, Messanh Amedegnato.





If you want to cure a disease and you can't do it alone, then you can ask your colleagues for help. If you deceive your clientele, acting as if you have the solution to everything, that is not good. The same goes for faking a vodou. We don't do that kind of thing. The statues you see in the market are not vodous. They just look like vodou. That's different, that's like decoration. That is not real vodou. They might look similar, but only a human can give you the power to make a vodou active. If you distort it and try to use it, it is worth nothing. Such statues do not embody power, as ours do. Only the person who built it, only that person can give you the power. There are many different powers. If a ~~statue~~ is vodou, it can have different powers. Others don't know them and can't direct them properly. That is also true of Afá and the bokono. If you are not a bokono, and you want to be taught Afá, there is no point.

NICOUE HOUEDOSSI DA POVI No, I would not know how to give power to this sculpture here [points to a reproduction of the Mami Wata ~~figure~~ returned by a private collector] so that it becomes a vodou. There are very particular grasses and plants you have use to build a vodou. There are different ones for each vodou. You have to plant them. The leaf of it goes into the ground, with the image of the vodou. Do you understand? But, if the wrong person does it, it won't work. This here [the reproduction] is a toy, isn't it, ladies and gentlemen? It's like a doll for children. It hasn't been washed with the right weed yet. It has no power. That means it is not yet a vodou. That is not good. Honestly, I can't give this sculpture power for someone else to take it.

When people in Europe talk about restituting or returning ~~objects~~ from this specific area, the coast of Aného... Would you, as UCTT members, be interested to getting these vodous back? If so, under which conditions?

ZINSOU AMEDEGNATO Culture belongs to humanity. And when you talk about culture, it varies from one group to another. You have your heritage and I have mine. I mentioned earlier that I am a twin. This fact means something different in our two cultures, it is not comparable. I know my traditional culture well, that is not the problem. But cultures are developing fast these days. There are many cultures.

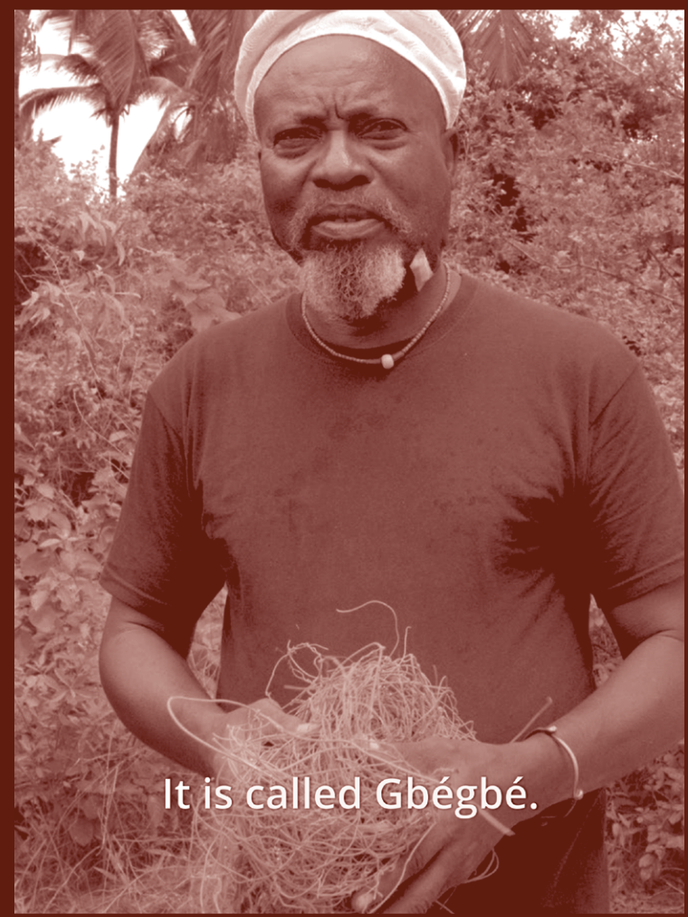
That's why there are different vodou. Everything depends on the words people put into these cult ~~objects~~. The ancestors have given their different vodou certain, specific powers. Because some of these vodou were transported across the sea, in the time when some ancestors were exploited as slaves, many vodou from Benin or Nigeria can be found in countries such as Haiti, for example, on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. But each group of people continues to develop its own culture. In the case of vodou, this is not a contradiction, but a complement. If these vodou from Europe are given back by the white people in Europe, then we will see, for example, from the signatures where they were taken from. There are even some ancient ritual stools that were stolen or sold by some of our ancestors.

MESSANH AMEDEGNATO During the colonial period, some of our ancestors were deported by force. A lot of what we owned was also taken away. Nowadays, people are deciding to give us back what was taken from us. In any museum in Germany, or in Paris, you see documentation showing the origin of the vodou: this vodou was taken from this country, from Togo, Benin, Calavi, and so on. You can see, for example, that this vodou is from the Yoruba tribe. At the moment, we have different vodou groups represented in the UCTT. There are Kpetonou-vodou, Hébiesso-vodou, Dan-vodou, Yoruba-vodou. My brother, who is sitting over there, can speak about the vodou he works with. I can ask him to tell me more about it. But I can't say anything about it myself, because we belong to different ethnic groups. As to the vodou returning from Europe: We will host them and welcome them into our community. But when a vodou lands with us, we must first find out its origin, who it belongs to. And then find out what we need to do.

DOSSA AMEDEGNATO In the time of slavery, Europe took Africa's capable people. The Europeans knew what was good. They could see which vodou were strong at the time. Just as the kings in Benin and the surrounding area could see that. You see? They robbed Africa of its valuable men and a lot of other valuables. Now they've decided to give back stolen goods. We can be happy about that. We are really glad about it. The UCTT was founded to make sure these vodou could be brought back to their proper places. Every vodou has its own heritage. You see? When they come back, the museums in question here need to make sure that the necessary ritual measures can be taken here, that those that are active are neutralized. Wouldn't you agree?

We can't just take the vodou back like that. Also, the UCTT doesn't have the money to return those vodou to their original states, okay? So this action will need outside funding. Apart from that, suppose a vodou ends up with us, but originally comes from the north of Togo. How do we get it there? When vodou come back, they have to come with the funds to rehabilitate and return the vodou, and in a way that meets our standards. Our project can do a lot. Africa's spirituality will stay alive. If there is a second phase—to follow up on the idea of making a non-active copy that then goes back to Europe to take the place of the original—then that is another phase. And we need to further discuss if that is even a good idea in the first place.

PART 2: PRE-CONFIGURATION



→ Hounougbo Amedegnato holding part of a gbegbe plant.

Maison Gbegbe: For a House to Be a Home

Restituting Cultural Assets, Restoring Ancient Knowledge

Rossila Goussanou



→ Blèkété dancer.

Conceiving Maison Gbegbe

The Maison Gbegbe project in Aného, Togo, launched in 2020. This quickly led to questions about what this place could—or should—be. After all, Maison Gbegbe raises a number of issues with regard to its museography and scenographic design, cultural- and scholarly programming, its administration and financial management. The following focuses primarily on the first two aspects, with the goal of contributing to a reflection on what is expected of new museum practices appropriate to the cultural, technical, and societal specificities of Togo, and how these should function. To this end, our research has focused on the writings of thinkers who, from within Africa, invite epistemological redefinitions and a re-evaluation of overlooked practices, with the aim of gaining a deeper understanding of the current reappraisal of African heritage. This text is permeated throughout by debates about the collection, museum exhibition, and return of non-Western cultural ~~artifacts~~, as well as criticisms of concepts, terms, and taxonomies that have long influenced the interpretation and preservation of material and immaterial traces of the past.[1] The discussions around them intersect with broader, but inextricably linked questions related to concepts of art, heritage, historiography, and even science. We felt it important to touch on some of these critiques before developing a proposal for one of Maison Gbegbe's possible futures.

Rethinking the museum, questioning the meaning of objects

If the primary aim of the museum, as we know it today, is to acquire, conserve, and exhibit a society's tangible heritage,[2] then its organization and foundations are rooted in the cultural institutions of the Renaissance (fourteenth and fifteenth centuries) and in the European "cabinets of curiosities."[3] The latter displayed a wide range of collections, from archeological objects to contemporary paintings, selected according to the aesthetic and scientific standards of the time. These museums were institutionalized in the nineteenth century, when they assumed an important place in public life. The collections of the first national and regional museums in the West served to demonstrate the power and greatness of the ruling class and had a strong identity dimension.

↓ Public Blèkété ceremony for Etron-Kpeto, Deka, and, Ewe, with hounan of Etron-Kpeto, drummers, and guests in Agouegan, 2014.



By the mid-nineteenth century, colonization had greatly impacted the history of museums, altering both the collections themselves and the way in which they were exhibited to the public. Although the capture of tangible heritage (and its display on the captor's territory) remained commonplace for wars and territorial conquests up to the twentieth century, the material plunder of colonized territories is striking. It has been asserted that more than 90% of Africa's material cultural assets are currently held outside the continent in the world's major museums.[4] As the Senegalese writer and economist Felwine Sarr and the French art historian Bénédicte Savoy, who were commissioned in 2018 by the French government to report on the material and legal conditions for the repatriation of assets to the African continent,[5] repeatedly point out, this plundering of art was carried out over a long period of time, starting with the various wars of conquest on the African continent (nineteenth century). In fact, the expeditions and military raids were as much a territorial endeavor as they were a mission to pillage and appropriate cultural assets: the plundered objects were already filling the first French museums, which were then in full expansion mode. This theft and subsequent incorporation of material heritage from Africa into museum collections continued throughout the colonial period. Sarr and Savoy give several examples demonstrating how, as they put it, "the acquisition of cultural objects and resources and their transfer to the capitals of Europe were in fact at the heart of—and not at the margins—of the colonial enterprise."[6] European museums became sites for representing the supposed "superiority" of a (local or national) society, thereby marking a hierarchy of cultures and artistic productions. It is along these lines that the French anthropologist Benoît de L'Estoile describes two types of museums: "museums of self" and "museums of the Others." The first are places where various objects from one's own surroundings are displayed near one's location, for the benefit of the local community. They generate a "sense of self" through their own representation of their history and identity. "Museums of the Others," are by contrast "much stranger," says de l'Estoile. They do not refer to an "Us" but define it rather in opposition to other societies, whose morality and identity are then degraded. The latter exhibit the cultural assets of Other communities, ~~objects~~ "acquired by those who had gone 'to the Others' for various reasons: military expeditions, missions, trade, exploration, administration, travel."[7] A look at the provenance and museography of objects in European collections reveals both the role of museums and their violent, symbolic dimension.

Questions ~~objects~~ pose for the Museum

The "social and cultural biography" of looted objects, a concept popularized by Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff[8] to refer to the social trajectory and the transfer of value of ~~artifacts~~, tells us that on entering the museum, the nature of these assets, their regime of visibility and functional and symbolic environment were modified; this is particularly true of certain potent ~~objects~~ that are normally kept out of sight and "exhibited" only during public ceremonies.

Patrick Effiboley reminds us that relations with the object were not the same in pre-colonial Africa, particularly in Benin, when he notes that "there was a commemorative time-space, the so-called Xuetanu or annual rites, where such objects were sacrificed to the delight of the king's subjects and any foreign visitors who passed through the region."[9] Heritage capture interferes with conserving, preserving, transmitting, and presenting systems that are typically applied to local cultural and community assets. Traditional spaces tasked with the preservation of material heritage were managed by different structures within communities: within families, but also in spaces with restricted access such as royal palaces, religious temples, or Sacred Forests.

The contexts in which ~~objects~~ are produced and received, along with their aesthetics, symbolism, and intentionality, contribute to their "agency," as Alfred Gell[10] described their ability to affect reality and interact socially in a particular setting. Jean-Paul Colleyn describes them as "strong ~~objects~~" imbued with magico-religious power;[11] an understanding of cultural ~~objects~~ that is shared today. Philippe Descola's study on "the double life of images"[12] interrogates the "agency" of certain ~~objects~~. Drawing on the example of Yup'ik masks from Alaska, which are worn and activated during dance performances, or wooden ~~sculptures~~ placed in "power chambers" among the Lobi (Burkina Faso), the anthropologist shows that such ~~objects~~ are endowed with a significance and power that enable them to establish a relationship between visible and invisible worlds.

When ~~objects~~ of this kind become part of collections and museums, they are re-semantized. Maureen Murphy shows how such ~~artifacts~~, originally ~~objects~~ of power, are transformed into spoils of war and later into anthropological objects and works of art.[13] In this way, they participate in becoming what Souleymane

Bachir Diagne calls "mutant ~~objects~~" on account of their ability "to question the very separation of outside and inside, living and inert."[14]

Re-moving African museums

The colonial enterprise consolidated the ideological dimension of museums in the twentieth century, in Europe but also in the countries under colonial rule. Consequently, in Togo, as in the entire African continent, there are numerous museums from this historical period. In the wake of colonization, African countries (and, more generally, formerly colonized countries) inherited these "museums of the Others"[15] and are now faced with transforming them into "museums of the self."

Much thought has been given (in international organizations such as UNESCO, in African universities, but also in local curator circles) to questioning the social role, specific scientific content, and local function that these museum institutions should fulfill in Africa.

> How can we rethink the museum in the light of Africa's cultural, social, ecological, and historical realities?

In 1991, ICOM created AFRICOM, a branch of its organization specifically dedicated to studying the development of colonial and post-colonial museums in Africa.[16] The School of African Heritage, founded in 1998 by Alain Godonou, actively participates in this debate. Nevertheless, the weakness of national cultural policies, the difficulty of emancipating from Eurocentric epistemologies, national disinterest, and the economic investment required to transform these museums have so far prevented their "rehabilitation." The architectural, museographic, and scenographic grammar that these newer museum spaces would have to adopt is just beginning to take shape. Many of the museum institutions that have emerged on the African continent since independence have modeled their structure on that of Western museums.[17] However, a few alternatives have been proposed elsewhere: Aïssata Ongoïba launched the "Culture Bank" system in Mali in 1997. Valuable tangible assets are "lent" to these "culture banks" in exchange for microcredits. The "lenders" retain ownership of their property and

can reclaim it for ceremonies. The cultural property remains "active" within its community. The goal is multi-faceted: to prevent locals from selling their tangible assets and to address the illegal art trade and the disappearance of valuable heritage, or its deterioration due to lack of knowledge about conservation and upkeep. Locals are offered training. In this way, the banks are able to ensure the preservation and dissemination of tangible heritage. Creating this type of space also means renewing the way local communities look at "museums."[18] There are now four culture banks in Mali, and two more have opened in Togo and Benin. In Cameroon, an association called *La Route des Chefferies* has created a network of fourteen *cases patrimoniales,* or small chieftaincy museums. This program aims to respect a museum ethic that is closer to local realities. The cases patrimoniales respond to an aesthetic, valorize the cultural heritage of the community in which they are integrated. The *La Route des Chefferies* program was founded on an ethical charter signed by some fifty chiefs expressing their interest in the protection and enhancement of their heritage; nevertheless, the implementation and operation of cases patrimoniales continue to face criticism on certain points.[19] In 2016, curator Nana Ofariatta Ayim designed a kiosk-like "Mobile Museum" in Ghana.[20] This space questioned the monolithic and static structure of the museum by being itinerant in the area. The idea was to collect contemporary cultural heritage made and chosen by Ghanaian communities, thereby re-actualizing the local cultural identity.

These observations and experiments invite further reflection on the use and understanding of the terms "objects," "works," "restitution," and also "cultural assets," much along the lines of the work undertaken by Barbara Cassin and Danièle Wozny.[21] A study conducted in collaboration with a multidisciplinary team of African (Herman Batibo, Hamady Bocoum, Moulaye Coulibaly, Fary Silate Ka, Soumana Kane, Sozinho Matsinhe) and European (Vincent Négri, Margaret Rigaud, Nathan Schlanger) experts finds them examining the current meaning of the terms "heritage" and "museum" in Africa through their meaning and transcription in the Fulani and Bambara languages (spoken in West Africa), but also Swahili, Sukuma, and Tsonga (in East Africa). These are two terms whose definitions have been proposed and ratified by international organizations (UNESCO and ICOM), thus establishing criteria and modalities for the attribution of a "universal value" to certain cultural assets. However, the study shows wide disparities in their understanding depending on the place.

Moreover, the equivalences or denotations do not have the same meaning in the local languages. Swahili, for example, does not distinguish between tangible and intangible heritage. More generally, these "discrepancies" testify to the different relationships societies have with their territories, memories, and history. They also speak to the cultural specificities of these widely used concepts.

Restituting ~~objects~~

Since the early 2000s, the questions animating experts as to the use and usefulness of the institution of the museum, especially in Africa, have only grown. The "museum world" is in a "crisis" that challenges it to rethink its institutional practices. The redesign of the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium, illustrates the many problems associated with redefining concepts of art, culture, and museum aesthetics in light of postcolonial thinking. One symptom of this crisis is the International Council of Museums (ICOM)'s revision of its definition of the museum in July 2019: "Museums are democratizing, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold ~~artefacts~~ and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people."[22]

Further fueling the museum crisis are the dynamics of restitution of cultural ~~objects~~ looted during European colonization, which received an important new impetus with the return of twenty-six sculptures and ~~objects~~ by France to the government of Benin in 2017. Groups and public figures advocated for years for the return of collections to their countries of origin. Senegal, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Ghana, the Republic of Congo, and Egypt have all expressed a desire for the return of certain tangible assets. Until 2017, with the exception of bones, the refusals were almost categorical. For good reason, government demands for the restitution of such assets mark a significant and historic change in the history of the circulation of cultural heritage: they reopen the bowels of the French colonial past, revisit events that dispossessed populations materially and ideally of their memory, and redress the imbalance of heritage annexation and artistic spoliation on a continental scale.

As Sarr and Savoy put it:

> The questions that emerge from thinking about restitutions are thus far from being limited to only the juridical aspects and to questions of legitimate ownership. The implications tied to the method of restitution are also of a political and symbolic order, if not also of a philosophical and relational order. Restitutions open up a profound reflection on history, memories, and the colonial past, concerning the history as well as the formation and development of Western museum collections. But just as importantly the question of restitution also bears on the question of the different interpretations or conceptions of cultural heritage, of the museum, and their various modalities of the presentation of objects as well as their circulation and, in the end, the nature and quality of relations between people and nations.[23]

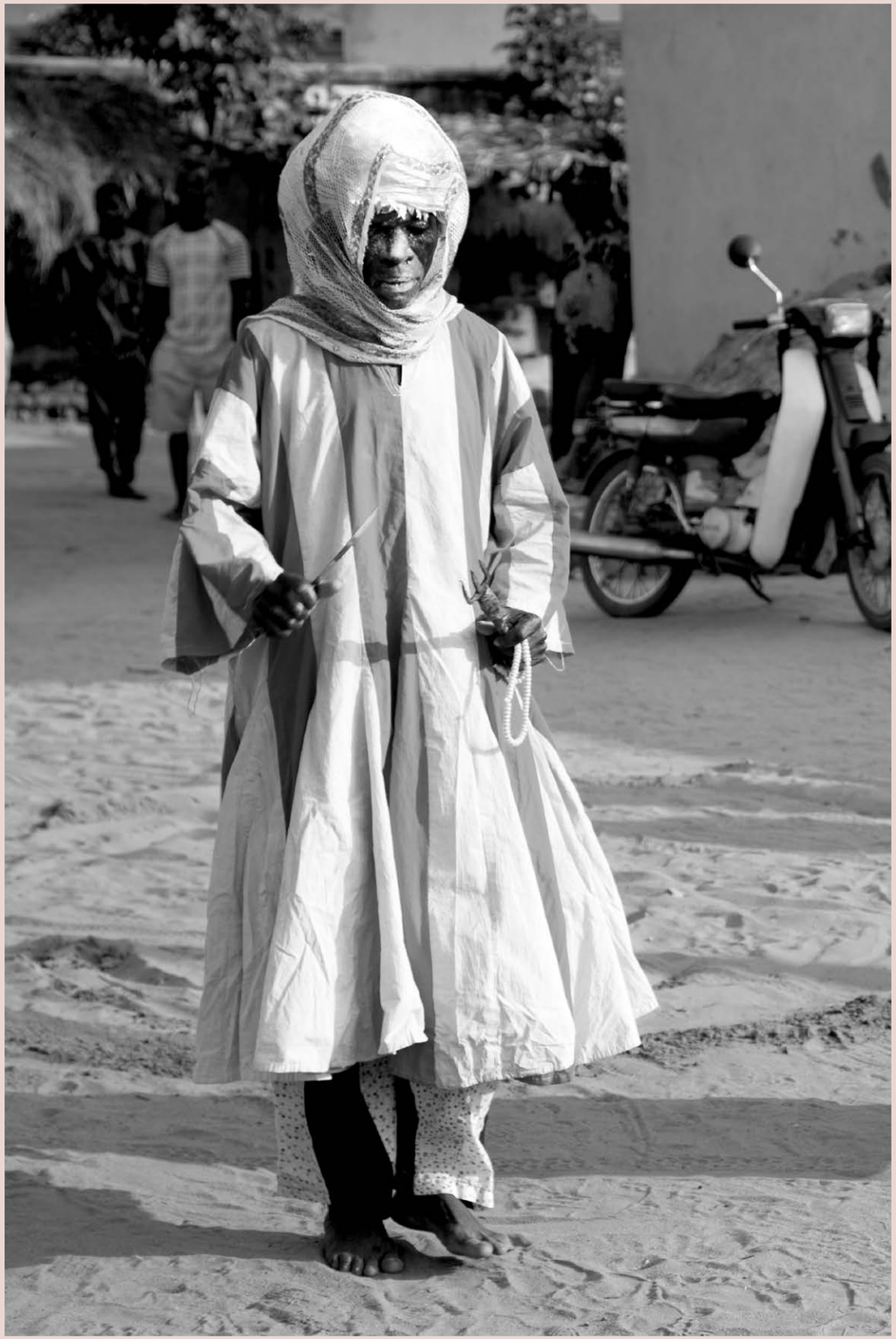
The restitution of cultural ~~goods~~ would enable a "repair of the past" and serve to rebalance the world's cultural geography.

The questions raised in this essay come from working sessions with members of Maison Gbegbe's pre-configuration committee, but also from the broader debate.

Restoring associated knowledge

How can Maison Gbegbe evoke and exhibit these ~~objects~~, thus building new collective imaginations? How can we propose a place of conservation, exhibition, and transmission that distances itself from the pitfalls of Western museum models? What new relationships to ~~objects~~, to tangible and intangible heritage, and to exhibition cultures could this ambitious project outline?

A first step toward envisioning this new "museum manifesto" would be to re-read the collections with an eye to the complex reality of



← One of two Blèketè dancers at the ceremony.

these cultural ~~objects~~ and their various uses. This essay argues first and foremost for a restitution of these assets, but also and above all for a revaluation of the knowledge they embody.

As previously noted, the ~~objects~~ that have been placed on display in museums have undergone a semantic transformation. Whether in Western or non-Western museums, whether in ethnographic, natural history, or art museums, the explanations and museographic approaches to the vast majority of ~~artifacts~~ on display do not allow visitors to more fully understand their complex uses and status.[24] Moreover, museums have a tendency to "thing-ify," to transform ~~objects~~ that had previously existed as part of a larger system of multiple entities, thereby limiting their interpretation and, in so doing, marginalizing the underlying worldviews by associating them with "archaic," "exotic," and "empirical" knowledge or perspectives. They were integrated into hierarchical systems that distinguish between living and non-living, that classify knowledge, that taxonomize insight, often joining that hierarchy at the very bottom.[25] For instance, at the Museum of Natural History in Toulouse, the Oceanic collection, which includes ~~artifacts~~ produced by contemporary societies, was displayed in sections dedicated to prehistory until 1950. Thus plunged into a historical context shaped by the theory of evolution and the classification of human species into "races," the curators viewed these ~~objects~~ as technically more closely related to those used in prehistoric times.[26] In general, these ~~artifacts~~ are primarily presented as cultural assets of recognized aesthetic, technical, and heritage value, while the ecological, chemical, mathematical, magical, and other forms of knowledge associated with them are often overlooked or ignored.

However, all material culture serves as a repository of the knowledge accumulated by the societies that create it. ~~Artifacts~~ actively participate in the dissemination of knowledge, which is often referred to as "popular knowledge" as opposed to scholarly or academic knowledge. The history of these collections goes hand in hand with an unequal and biased system of knowledge production.[27] What follows are three examples of objects that have been displayed in museum exhibitions, yet their ability to educate, the knowledge they possess, and their epistemological value have been neglected or underestimated.

The first pertains to those ~~objects~~ that are now widely acknowledged as being closely tied to the field of mathematics. The weaving techniques used to produce Kente cloth from Ghana or the Fulani textiles of Mali draw on a principle of fractals—that is, the

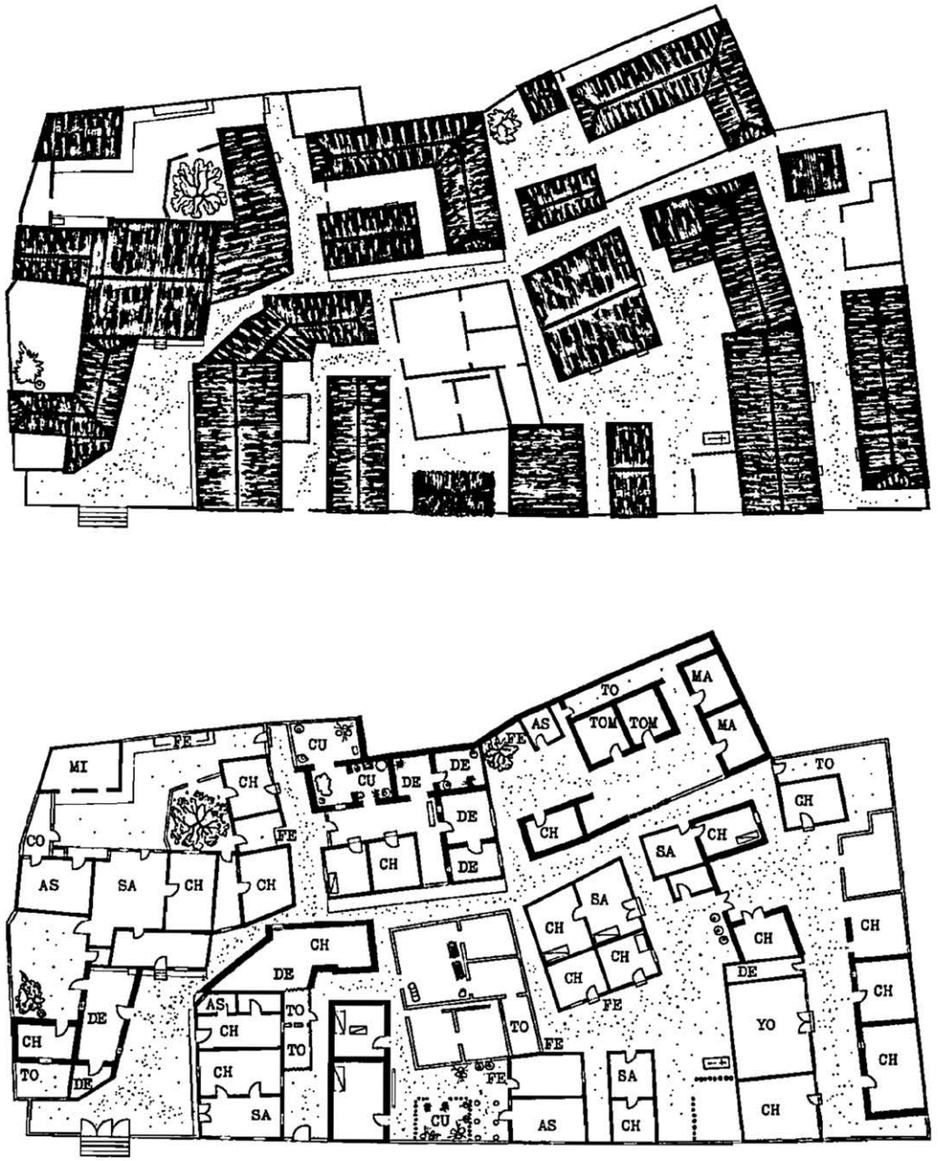
replication of a geometric figure on a smaller and smaller scale—that Franco-American mathematician Benoît Mandelbrot is commonly, and inaccurately, credited with discovering in 1974.[28] In a similar vein, the game of *awalé*, also known as *mancala*—a two-player game involving pebbles or seeds on a pitted, generally wooden board—serves as a playful introduction to fundamental concepts such as counting, probability, and strategic anticipation. Although these examples may appear elementary, they serve to challenge traditional notions of discovery, invention, and authorship, as well as many practices and breakthroughs are the result of collective processes and knowledge sharing. Tegan Bristow highlights the need to tap back into this resource. The artist's research project on vernacular algorithms finds her delving into the historical significance and future potential of African knowledge in the realm of technology, computing, and digital technology. Her website lists the objectives of her project as: "decolonise the notion that technical knowledges are only Western; understand the fascinating relationship between technical and cultural knowledges in Africa; bring this knowledge into contemporary African computing and digital practices and thereby an intergenerational link in maths and culture in Africa; build confidence in young African learners on the relevance of their cultures in a technology orientated society."[29]

A second example involves a look at the botanical knowledge inherent to a number of these collected ~~objects~~. Through chemical analysis of the dyes used in Yoruba art ~~objects~~ originating from Benin-Nigeria, researcher Louis Fagbohoun was able to demonstrate that the coloring of these tangible cultural assets (statuettes, masks, and textiles) draws on a precise understanding of techniques and specific codes.[30] Production of these ~~objects~~ calls for advanced techniques for extracting, separating, fractionating, and identifying dye compounds, which are both efficient and reduce the amount of solvent, energy, and samples required. This knowledge is gaining renewed attention, particularly in industries such as cosmetics, pharmaceuticals, and agri-food, as they seek to meet the consumer demand for natural, non-petrochemical products.

A third example points not only the demonstration of knowledge, but also to the valorization of non-Western cosmogonies, particularly those related to notions of aliveness. In Togo, for instance, human relationships with the environment and the unseen are connected to Vodou beliefs and often associated with animism, which is the attribution of a "soul" or similar interiority to non-human

entities such as animals, plants, and ~~objects~~. Anthropologist Philippe Descola prefers the term "analogism"[31] when describing these epistemological operations in West African societies. Analogism is the understanding that humans and non-humans have distinct physical forms and existences, and that they possess different interiorities. These beliefs are associated with various practices such as the creation of sacred spaces (forests, mangroves, lakes, etc.) for rejuvenation; the implementation of totemic practices (totemic animals or plants) leading to dietary restrictions; the establishment of initiation rites for training in pharmacopoeia; and the organization of society with foresters-hunters (the only individuals authorized to kill animals); among others. This perception of aliveness promotes environmental and ecological knowledge acquisition, pharmacopoeia, and the regeneration of the environment, thereby promoting the regeneration of human societies as well. These concepts and knowledge are embodied in intangible (song, tale, myth, dance, knowledge, etc.) and tangible heritage (masks, statuettes, artifacts, plants, etc.) alike. When objects of this kind, i.e., those embodying environmental knowledge for the communities that created them, were brought into museums, they were often displayed within a figurative and representational logic. This was frequently done in a way that highlighted the pronounced Western distinction between nature and culture (with taxidermized animals, for example), or that marginalized the knowledge they contain. This comes despite the fact that collecting these objects often went hand in hand with efforts to acquire naturalist[32] knowledge and that the objects themselves have been used to reinforce ecological insights, for example in France.[33] In the face of the climate crisis and with the goal of creating new practices, political actors, organizations, activists, and citizens are trying to develop new ways of interacting with the world or to revive earlier understandings of life and aliveness. Alessandre Pignocchi[34] describes how residents of the ZAD de Notre-Dame-des-Landes in Loire-Atlantique, France, are implementing new practices that challenge the conventional "nature–culture" divide.

These perceptions of the ~~object~~ are embedded in "traditions" that are themselves continually evolving and transforming. Nevertheless, they serve as a reminder that while many ~~objects~~ in museums hold a wealth of knowledge, current museography and scenography practices struggle to showcase that aspect. Bearing this in mind, any repatriation of these ~~objects~~ to their countries of origin must also be accompanied by a recognition of the knowledge that they embody.



La «concession mère)) d'un ancien lignage dans le quartier Sogbadji ; aux pièces d'habitation (CH chambre, SA salon, CU cuisine, Ta toilette, MA magasin) s'ajoutent les espaces religieux (AS pièce aux Assins, TOM tombe, FE fétiche-vodoun)

← Image from: Alain Sinou, *Le comptoir de Ouidah, une ville africaine singulière* (Paris, Karthala, 1995).

This raises the question of what it means to "re-connect objects." Such an Indigenous valorization of material culture would give insight into a different history of science and technology[35] by reaffirming the place of African knowledge. Its valorization and transmission in museums imply a shaking free of the distinctions separating science, art, or ethnography to prioritize an inter- or transdisciplinary approach instead—if such "disciplines" are to be retained in the first place. The return of material cultural heritage would go hand in hand with the crucial work of mediation, a necessary factor in knowledge propagation and the reviving of ancient techniques and epistemologies.

The West African family compound as organizing principle

How can Maison Gbegbe reintegrate the propaedeutic, pedagogical, and epistemological dimension of objects? Which museographical, spatial, and conceptual logics would allow Maison Gbegbe to effectively convey knowledge through ~~objects~~?

Adhering to a "classic" museum typology—i.e., a closed space with limited opening hours; focusing primarily on visual displays while minimizing the use of other senses (although they are also vectors for understanding objects); emphasizing physical presentation (base, display case, lighting, placement, etc.); mediation via wall labels or guided (therefore restricted) tours—hardly seem like an option. The strong intention of this text is to take inspiration from the function and layout of family compounds in Benin and Togo, with the aim of overcoming these challenges and improving the overall effectiveness of Maison Gbegbe.

The family compound is a large, multi-purpose dwelling where multiple members of the same family reside, and which includes a variety of rooms for different uses. There are both "enclosed" spaces, such as bedrooms, storage areas, and places of worship, as well as "open" spaces such as plots of land, also graves and occasionally spaces for keeping animals (chickens, goats). The domestic areas co-mingle with spaces used for funerary, sacred, or ceremonial purposes. There is, for example, a room dedicated to *assins*,[36] where eulogies are delivered

at funerals. Some rooms have small coffins containing items such as nails, hair, and teeth buried under the floor. Things happen both above and below ground. The different uses of these rooms result in different temporalities of use. Some spaces are used daily while others are only "activated" during specific family ceremonies. This configuration served necessarily as a means of preserving collective or family memory, and maintaining Indigenous knowledge and practices:

> In the Vodou space, when men first set up their homes, they ask the gods for permission, set them up first and make sacrifices to them. This is how the link between man and land is created, a connection that will sustain both him and his descendants and keep him when he disappears. Before retiring, he will entrust it to his progeny with the understanding that [they] will enlarge it or, in the worst case, to give up nothing of the territory that has been entrusted to [them]. This mode of transmission leads to a "fetishization" of this space, now a family stronghold that will expand and become a family collectivity, and which is identified with a space that is called a "concession" (family compound) in the Vodou cultural area of Adja-Tado and even beyond in sub-Saharan Africa. Thus the concession becomes a territory bearing the name of the first ancestor, established as a god, who was buried there long before others. This land remains uncorruptible for all eternity.[37]

There are many ways of inhabiting a family compound: one can be called to it, connected to it, have grown up there. It is a spatial organization that is closely linked to intricate local kinship systems (particularly due to the practice of polygamy) and rooted in the concept of an extended family. It becomes an intergenerational place. Although the spatial organization of families has been changing since the 1980s (children leaving, breaking away from the nuclear family model, emancipation) the connection to family compounds remains.

From an architectural standpoint, family compounds were traditionally constructed with earth and straw roofs covering the necessary spaces. In recent years, families who have renovated or expanded these motherhouses have incorporated such materials as cinder block, tile, and sheet metal. Initially, the built spaces were only on one level, resulting

in a looser, more fragmented layout. While most family compounds are delimited by a fence (high enough to prevent outsiders from looking in), boundaries between the home and the village community space remain permeable and not clearly defined, if not non-existent.[38] This appropriation of the site stems from a particular way of occupying public space.

> Our interest lies precisely in the collective, transmissive, multidimensional dimension of the "large family home" in combination with intersections of private and public space. What is the significance of using the traditional family compound as an inspiration for re-imagining the museum? How could West African ways of living come to embody the Togolese "Museum of the Future"?

This idea is not driven by a desire to "reintroduce" the ~~objects~~ on display into a "more local" or "more Indigenous" space that would conform to an exogenous public's fantasies of a "typical" setting—as is often done in dioramas or, more problematically, in the kind of universal exhibitions and human zoos found in Europe until the 1990s. On the contrary, it reflects a need to consider the relationship between the ~~object~~ and its settings, and what the new insights into violence or the aporias of museography engender. It also aims to contribute museographic and scenographic approaches that are sensitive to changes in the preservation, transmission, and presentation of local cultural and community assets. The model of the family compound—which is also sometimes used to conserve symbolic objects and ~~objects~~ of power—thus becomes part of a deliberation on other potentials for knowledge circulation and the epistemologies these ~~objects~~ embody. It demonstrates a will to "reconnect '~~objects~~'"[39] if not to their places of origin, then at least to the life principles they stand for.

It is thus a matter of drawing on the family home model with an eye to three key aspects: its spatial organization, its materiality, and its operations (i.e. its potential for transmission and varied "programming").

As for the spatial organization, it seems relevant to take inspiration from the diffracted architecture of the "motherhouses," which are characterized by alternating closed and open spaces. Some of the enclosed spaces could thus serve the more conventional



← Etron-Kpeto attributes shown in the public ceremony, here in the context of the temple of Togbe Gli in Alogavi, close to Lomé.

function of an exhibition space. They would meet the conservation and security standards necessary to protect cultural assets that institutions concerned with the return of works often require. The scenography and museography of these depository spaces have yet to be fully worked out. Some rooms could house objects, but in a less uniform way: awale, loincloths, locks—all objects that can be found in the museum as well as in any urban market. They could be "presented" or simply "present" at the heart of the Maison, giving the public the opportunity to touch, smell or experience them in a more hands-on way.

Other spaces could take on the usual components of a compound, i.e., to offer bedrooms, a kitchen and dining area, spaces for studying, "palaver" spaces, but also spaces for sacred ceremonies and notably vodou. With the compound as a model, these spaces can be both indoor and outdoor; they can also incorporate considerations about what is forbidden or taboo into their design.

We can imagine Maison Gbegbe housing "inhabitants" for a day or a week; offering guided tours; organizing ceremonies (as several of the ~~objects~~ that will be returned will be ~~objects~~ of worship); reconnecting the ~~objects~~, if not with their original link, then with the life principles they represent; proposing workshops that would make it possible to retrace the history of these ~~objects~~ and tap into their embodied knowledges and memory; proposing spaces that enable re-learning of the knowledge associated with these ~~objects~~; making the ~~objects~~ "speak."

As for the materiality of the family compound, it is primarily a matter of employing the ancient construction methods and materials that were traditionally used—and that have proven to be both thermally and ecologically efficient. This would also enable a form of "decolonization of architecture." In the "absence" of certain skills and know-how—an effect stemming from the long history of globalization (and colonization)—and due to their present place in the history of science and technology, the majority of major public works projects in West Africa are currently entrusted to European companies, both in the design and construction phases. Under the pretext of a lack of technical skills and economic robustness, national African companies are often sidelined in the awarding of public contracts. The building- and aesthetic culture is also often negated in the process. Even as European architects expand their geographic reach, the philosophical emphases and cultural anchors of their practices remain tied to Western references. Moreover, the standards that

projects in countries receiving external funding must meet are based on the bioclimatic, environmental, and social conditions of so-called "Northern" countries. Concrete, a material with low insulating capacity, is a building standard incompatible with local resources and materials (raw earth, straw, or wood) and climatic constraints. These architectural considerations could also be applied to the ecology of construction in general. The provision of sand and water, used mainly for concrete but also for wood, follows extraction methods that lead to the destruction of living organisms, the overexploitation of exhaustible resources, and the destabilization of ecosystems. These cultural, programmatic, normative, and technical hegemonies are a detriment to contemporary African architecture. Maison Gbegbe must defend an architecture that is in harmony with local economic, ecological, cultural, and social realities—a dynamic that recently gained attention through the aspirations of African architects including Mariam Kamara, Danièle Diwouta-Kotto, Sylvain Djaché, Yewande Omotosu, Elsie Owusu, and Francis Kéré, who was recently awarded the Pritzker Architecture Prize. Sename Koffi Agbodjinou, the architect entrusted with the design of Maison Gbegbe, contributes likewise to the valorization of vernacular building knowledge. In the interest of building a more environmentally friendly construction, one could also imagine not cutting down a single tree on the allotted land.

Its operation and management would be a matter of taking up the everyday and intergenerational dimension of the family compound, from the construction phase to the way in which it is run. Both the architectural design and the construction of the project would be carried out in a process of ongoing discussion and debate with local communities. The construction and its methods would involve the participation of local knowledge keepers. Finally, rather than entrust its management to an outside organization, could we not dissolve the usual structures (director, curator, guide, etc.) in favor of a management committee that more accurately reflects the family logic? Could we not envisage an "employment contract" that goes beyond the status of director/curator/conservationist/museum educator/janitor/gardener, etc., creating more hybrid positions than a form of settled presence of stakeholders in the museum? The concept involves welcoming a diverse public during the day, but also in the evening or even at night, thereby enabling more "extended" transmission and lengthier dialogue. Might we also imagine that the person in charge of the outdoor areas is the same person that greets and educates visitors? Could it be that

the visitors themselves are the cooks, gardeners, or museum educators at Maison Gbegbe? Can we imagine Maison Gbegbe shifting the usual behaviors and roles to propose new experiences and engagement on the part of stakeholders? The point, then, is to propose a collaboration, one that includes both the local population and those visitors who are usually called "the public."

And so the point is to inhabit the museum, literally and figuratively. To inhabit its structure, day-to-day and within its walls. To spend time there, and in doing so facilitate the learning that this specific understanding of aliveness entails.

It is not a matter of planning a complete program, but of envisaging a place that offers the possibility of self-transmutation, of becoming something other than its intended purpose, of keeping options open and developing new activities in the course of its evolution. The framework is flexible, the possibilities endless.

Moreover, in parallel, it is necessary to think about the possibility of opening Maison Gbegbe and its ~~objects~~ to other territories, other users, other publics. Especially since Agouegan is located in a border zone, a space of friction. The village borders Benin—and is thus not far from Nigeria—and is just a few meters from the very touristy town of Grand-Popo. It is also only a few kilometers from Lomé and Ghana. How can we imagine bringing this house to other publics, other communities? Could it be a mobile space—in the form of a suitcase, perhaps? A dugout canoe? This latter option could be interesting, especially considering the southern Togolese mastery of both boat construction and maritime navigation and considering Maison Gbegbe's proximity to the Mono River. Or should this itinerant version be a bus or a car, spaces also transformed and revived by Togolese mechanics, able to cross several national borders in a single day? Following on from Nana Ofariatta Ayim's Mobile Museum, it could bring a different kind of visibility to Maison Gbegbe's ~~objects~~ and stakeholders, as well as a chance to consider the real circulation of knowledge and assets across the African continent. The Maison could become both a place and a "more-than-place." For if the ~~objects~~ are to remain in a museum—one of the conditions for their restitution—then it is the museum that must be moved. This mobility also responds to a concern about the future, or at least registers the alarm bells that have been ringing for some time now.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released its second report on March 2, 2022. Although populations'

↓ Zangbetos arriving in Agouegan before a ceremony via the Mono River, 2014.


PETIT MARTEAU





↖ Zangbeto in Agouegan on the banks of the Mono River.

← Zangbeto in front of the convent in Agouegan.

resiliency and ability to adapt are real, considering a mobile version of the Maison Gbegbe may be a way to anticipate a possible displacement of the museum and its objects. The museum is often perceived as an unassailable and unchanging fortress, the first and last place for the preservation and conservation of ~~cultural objects~~. Yet they are not immune to disasters, both climatic and geopolitical. The 2012 smuggling of the Timbuktu manuscripts to safety after an Islamist insurgency—not to mention the 2018 fire that devastated collections at the National Museum of Brazil in Rio de Janeiro—remind us that museums are vulnerable places. To think of a compact and mobile version of Maison Gbegbe is to combine questions of circulation with those of preservation and the anticipation of dangerous scenarios.

Mutating the museum

Could it be that we need to kill the museum,[40] mutate it in such a way that it finds a radical new manifestation on the African continent? It should be a place that goes beyond the object to practices; beyond monstration and contemplation to transmission; beyond exhibition to experimentation; a place that transforms the aesthetic approach into a technical one. The model of the house—as opposed to that of the Museum—would allow us to move away from a logic of hierarchizing cultures, domesticating ~~objects~~, and mummifying values and practices; instead we can conceive the uses and roles of ~~objects~~ in terms of a network, in terms of relationships as opposed to fragmentation and extraction.

1 Part of this essay derives from doctoral research work conducted between 2015 and 2020. See Rossila Goussanou, "Monumentaliser les mémoires de la traite atlantique et de l'esclavage négrier. Généalogie et mutations de la Route de l'Esclave de Ouidah, mise en écho avec le Mémorial de l'abolition de l'esclavage de Nantes," PhD diss. (University of Nantes, 2020).

2 In 2007, the ICOM defined the museum as "a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment." ICOM would later revise this definition in response to the controversy around museums, as we discuss later in this essay. For more on this, see the International Council of Museums, "Museum Definition: A Fact Sheet," July 2020: https://icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/10-07-29_ fact-sheet-museum-definitie_ENG. pdf

3 Krzysztof Pomian, *Le musée, une histoire mondiale, Vol. 1, Du trésor au musée* (Paris: Gallimard, 2020).

4 See Alain Godonou's address at the "UNESCO forum on Memory and Universality," February 5, 2007, in: *Witnesses to History: A Compendium of Documents and Writings on the Return of Cultural Objects*, ed. Lyndel V. Prott (Paris: UNESCO, 2009).
5 Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, "The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics," English translation of the November 2018 report available online: https://www. about-africa.de/ images/sonstiges/2018/sarr_savoy_en.pdf
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid., 14.
8 See Arjun Appadurai ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), in particular the chapter Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography Of Things: Commoditization As Process," 64–94. These concepts have been used in the last thirty years to displace and diminish, often tracing the displacement of objects rather than their power relations.
9 Emery Patrick Effiboley, "Les musées africains de la fin du XIXe siècle à nos jours : des apparats de la modernité occidentale," *Afrika Zamani* 22–23 (2015): 19–40.
10 Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).
11 Jean-Paul Colleyn, "Images, signes, fétiches. À propos de l'art bamana (Mali)," *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 195 (2009): 33–746.
12 Philippe Descola, "La double vie des images," in Emmanuel Alloa, *Penser l'image II. Anthropologies du visuel* (Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2015), 131–45.
13 Maureen Murphy, "Du champ de bataille au musée : les tribulations d'une sculpture fon," *in Histoire de l'art et anthropologie* (Paris: INHA/musée du quai Branly, 2009), https://doi.org/10.4000/ actesbranly.213
14 Souleymane Bachir Diagne, "Museotopia. Réflexions sur l'avenir des musées en Afrique" lecture at the Collège de France, June 2019.
15 Benoît de L'Estoile, *Le Goût des autres : de l'exposition coloniale aux arts premiers* (Paris: Flammarion, 2010).
16 ICOM Conference, "Quels musées pour l'Afrique ? Patrimoine en devenir," 1991.
17 See the dossier "Réinventer le musées," *Africultures* 70 (2007).
18 Suzon Filleaudeau, "Réinterroger la place de l'institution muséale en Afrique : le cas du Cameroun et du réseau de la Route des Chefferies," Master's thesis (Université Bordeaux Montaigne, 2017).
19 Alexandra Galitzine-Loumpet, "e-matériel. De la virtualisation du patrimoine au musée-signe : exemples du Cameroun et du Gabon," *Ethnologies* 35 (2013): 77–100.
20 Christine Ajudua, "Ghanaian Curator Nana Oforiatta Ayim on Why the Future of the Museum Must Exist Beyond Art's Traditional Boundaries," *Artnet*, July 27, 2022, https://news.artnet.com/ art-world/nana-oforiatta-ayim-interview-2148667
21 Danièle Wozny and Barbara Cassin, eds., *Les intraduisibles du patrimoine en Afrique subsaharienne* (Paris: Demopolis, 2016).
22 ICOM's role is to provide guidance and recommendations to museum professionals. The definition continues with: "Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing."
23 Sarr and Savoy, "The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage."
24 Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019).
25 See in particular Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide* and his notion of the "ecology of knowledges."
26 Sylviane Bonvin Pochstein, Magali Dufau, and Lành Granier, "Repenser les collections océaniennes du muséum de Toulouse : entre histoire et nouvelle éthique," *Journal de la Société des Océanistes* 152 (2021): https://doi. org/10.4000/jso.12875
27 See, among others, the writings of Yaovi Akakpo and Bruno Latour.
28 For more on this, see Dirk Huylebrouck, *Afrique et Mathématiques* (Guadeloupe: Anyjart Edition, 2019) and Ron Eglash, *African Fractals: Modern Computing and Indigenous Design* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999).
29 Tegan Bristow, "A School for Vernacular Algorithms," http:// teganbristow co.za/?portfolio=a-school-for-vernacular-algorithms
30 Louis Fagbohoun, "Étude chimique de colorants naturels et matériaux résineux traditionnels au Bénin dans le domaine artisanal. Chimie organique" (Université d'Avignon, 2014).
31 Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).
32 Julien Bondaz, "L'ethnographie parasitée ? Anthropologie et entomologie en Afrique de l'Ouest (1928–1960)," *L'Homme. Revue française d'anthropologie* 206 (June 2013): 121–50.
33 Guillaume Lachenal, "L'invention africaine de l'écologie française. Histoire de la station de Lamto (Côte d'Ivoire), 1942– 1976," *La revue pour l'histoire du CNRS* 13 (November 2005).
34 Alessandro Pignocchi, *La recomposition des Mondes* (Paris: Seuil, 2019).
35 Dominique Pestre, ed., *Histoire des sciences et des savoirs* (Paris: Seuil, 2015).
36 A type of representation of the dead, features an iron rod topped by a metal disc, typical of fon funerary altars.
37 Paul Lando, "Espaces et sociétés en milieu vodou: aménagements et territoires de conflit," (Brest, Université de Bretagne Occidentale, 2013), 15.
38 Guy-Herman Padenou, *Monique Pastor-Barrué, Architecture, société et paysage Bétammaribé au Togo: contribution à l'anthropologie de l'habitat* (Toulouse: Presses universitaires du Mirail, 2006).
39 This discussion is continued in the research project "Re-connecting 'Objects': Epistemic Plurality and Transformative Practices in and beyond Museums," a project coordinated by Bénédicte Savoy and in which I also participate. See https://reconnecting.art
40 ICOM Conference, "What museums for Africa?" 1991. The President of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) and Malian Alpha Oumar Konaré asked how we might "kill the Western model of museum in Africa so that new modes of conservation and promotion of heritage can flourish."

Interdependent Triangular Creative Practice & Scene

As Part of a Pre-Configuration Mission for Maison Gbegbe

Anani Sanouvi in conversation with Mathilde ter Heijne



← Sketch by Anani Sanouvi illustrating the relationship between GODO FE, AGAMA FO, and E'TOME.

MATHILDE TER HEIJNE Anani, you trained as a contemporary dancer and your practice is shaped by queer strategies as well. My impression is that you are shifting away from logo-centricity and linear thinking, towards a more experience-oriented practice inspired by ancestral knowledge systems. Could you tell us something about your proposal for Maison Gbegbe?

ANANI SANOUVI Yes. But first, we[1] would like to start by expressing our gratitude for all the ancestors that came before us and those that sustain us now, including nature with all her daughters and sons, our mother Adogli Abouyavi and our father Alokpah Sanouvi Akoetey. To answer your question, the interdependent program we propose is meant to contribute intellectually, spiritually, and artistically to an updated concept of a "museum" for Africans, including our diasporic fellows, and above all for the local people. As a movement practitioner from the Ewe ethnic group, we have chosen to focus on three dispositifs or interfaces of contemporary creative practice: interaction, education, and performativity. All three have to do with negotiation—with dialogue, reflection, and protection in the mediation between local, ancestral knowledges and those from the West, and within Maison Gbegbe as an interconnected program. The core of INTERDEPENDENT TRIANGULAR CREATIVE PRACTICE & SCENE is connected to Ewe animist ontology. It is about tapping into fluid, ancient, uncrystallized intelligence—and using it in new ways to promote a radical sovereignty of African artistic creation.

MATHILDE TER HEIJNE I am very interested in the way you seem to break open, re-locate, and re-name aspects of Ewe cosmology and ontology—one could say you translate them into a kind of contemporary body-work. Could you say more about your interest in the artistic process? I have heard you refer to it as "performance-practice-as-research."

ANANI SANOUVI We know that creative processes are not impartial, but shaped by policies that reflect specific ways of thinking and being in the world. Our research, like our artistic processes and creations, is part of a search for understanding, recognition, and appreciation for decolonial ways of thinking about art, time, knowledge, perception, being, rhythm, dance, space, image, and sound. We believe the path to subverting conventional creative processes

leads first through the internal experience of these other realities, through different encounters with these elements. Nigerian writer and playwright Esiaba Irobi has pointed to the importance of dance on the African continent and in many parts of the diaspora, to how it is conceived as a kind of synesthetic instruction, being the main means of codifying perceptions of our inner and outer world. Our work experiments with and researches pre-colonial principles and their potential for disseminating, re-framing, and re-animating contemporary creative output. It explores what Nigerian playwright and writer Wole Soyinka has called "a non-doctrinal mold of constant perception." The work emerges in a process of continuous inter-communication with other voices and fields of knowledge.

MATHILDE TER HEIJNE You proposed INTERDEPENDENT TRIANGULAR CREATIVE PRACTICE & SCENE as a "community art program" for Maison Gbegbe. You mentioned that it is also based on Ewe animist ontology and sensibilities...

ANANI SANOUVI Right. In doing so, it pursues two questions: First, how is the political experienced at the level of the senses, and second, how does it relate to de-alphabetization and re-alphabetization, to the chewing[2] process of decolonializing choreography and dramaturgy in the expanded field? The Ewe language, for example, is beautifully sophisticated and complex, with a flexibility and fluidity that makes it very useful for negotiating. As a language, Ewe is never fixed. It's the sound of it, the tone, that conveys meaning, not the words themselves. It is fluid, it does not have the attitude of the straight line.

MATHILDE TER HEIJNE You have described your concept of GODO FE as "a place to meet," can you tell me more about that aspect?

ANANI SANOUVI GODO FE is an intimate and/or public gathering—it is a merging, meeting, dwelling point for AGAMA FO and E'TOME practices and outcomes, a place where questions can be shared for the purpose of finding solutions or more questions to chew ... with other institutions, structures, etc. It is a mediated performative action that consists in being willing to deeply meet to remember and acknowledge the then and now (past and present), and to move forward, towards something else. GODO FE facilitates collaboration between the agents of Maison Gbegbe and our guests,

which can include VIPs, like the local chief or the heads and staff of various institutions, a CEO of a big company, or the president of the Goethe-Institut, for example... Considering our many differences and very different levels of urgency, fields of expertise, countries, life principles, and philosophies, etc., it is a chance to be together differently, to celebrate confluent and convergent diversities.

MATHILDE TER HEIJNE So the action in GODO FE has to do with deep perception as communication...

ANANI SANOUVI Within the GODO FE we ask HOW TO NOT KNOW? before we proceed with finding out HOW TO KNOW? The action, which I will describe later, is about getting rid of this kind of thinking [makes box gesture with their hands] and opening ourselves to different, non-straight-line ways of perceiving our relationships to one another and to the Earth. It should also build a physically close relationship between all participants and the topic to be engaged with. The hope is that in giving space to the mind and body, in giving our minds and bodies this opportunity, we can share and perceive information from one another in a more profound, sensorial, subtle way. Participants in GODO FE might speak different languages, Ewe, Fon, Mina, French, German, English, etc... we could also invent our own language. What is important is that physically and perceptually, in our bodies, we maintain a subtle, flirtatious, diplomatic, move-attitude, moving CURVEWARD towards the locals, the international authorities, institutional representatives, etc.—to those both inside and outside the GODO FE.

MATHILDE TER HEIJNE Tell me about AGAMA FO...

ANANI SANOUVI I describe AGAMA FO as a feminine, fluid creative force. Highly sensorial, this method is tied to the question-concept HOW TO KNOW? It proposes a visceral, physically and mentally intense experience within the animist sensibility, a trans-sensorial means of opening other doors and accessing hidden knowledge. We created AGAMA FO ("the legs/steps of the chameleon") as a way of finding out HOW TO KNOW, how to do, how to subvert nonsense matter and turn it into sense-making matter—while also turning rational matter, or that which initially makes sense, into something irrational, blurry, or fuzzy. As a research practice, AGAMA FO is the process of studying,

GODO FE **(the place to meet)**

GODO FE is a co-labor-active practice, an attempt to merge our different approaches, personalities, costumes, rituals, traditions. It is a call/invitation to walk without fear, to take a step forward by walking backward, bare feet on the floor, to encounter one other from behind, to meet and move-away, meet and move-away from each other over and over. Its purpose is to strengthen us as a team of people willing to make things better. As a movement practitioners, I believe we need this kind of "intimate encounter"—to feel, to see one other, to smell and hear one another's bodies—to find out what the hell Maison Gbegbe could be in our various different skins/flesh, guts, brains.

As soon as we start the gathering, the task will be to imagine that we are entering a not-knowing zone, a threshold. We suggest surrendering for 30, 60, 120 minutes (TBC) to the question we are engaging with—HOW TO NOT KNOW?—before proceeding to HOW TO KNOW?

We will first need to prepare a mode of communication (codes, traces, pre-prepared signals) that can be used to guide ourselves without words. It will be used to facilitate communication first between one another (agents of Maison Gbegbe) and eventually with our guests (company executives, VIPs, heads and staff of cultural institutions, the local chief). This will be used to indicate where to go, when to change speed, when to change direction, when to stop, when to sit down, when to rest, etc. (like wolf communication).

The aim of the action—the act of walking—is to build a close relationship between us, the locals, and anyone participating. It invites our guests to engage physically themselves: to be symbolically, physically, spiritually involved in the political walk toward reparation.

The pleasure of walking with us physically in GODO FE has to do with performing a simple action that brings us—many different entities—together in movement. While "we" (the core team + invisible forces) are obviously the ones conducting or guiding the walk, we do not have one leader but many leaders. Everyone is invited to walk at their own speed and as much as their biomechanics allow. What matters is that we keep walking, listening, reading, thinking together. We can stop sometimes to breathe or rest, walk very slow, very fast, change directions, stand, drink water, drink wine, drink beer... whatever we need to keep going. The point is to give TIME to each other so that we can be friends, to get FAMILIAR with one other's vibrations, rhythms, and pace. We might try matching the rhythm of each other's steps as a playful moment.

We might reach a collective *consentement* (consensus) and we might not, but we will certainly feel a bit different after the experience—after passing through the threshold—than we did before we entered it.

training, creating, and performing bodies-territories of resistance and resilience. These are bodies that listen through our pores, through our backs, hair, bare feet, through the meat that is attached to our bones and linked to our central and peripheral nervous systems. It involves a study of the mindsets of our ancestors, but it also updates those mindsets, ontologies, and technicities to meet contemporary needs.

MATHILDE TER HEIJNE I'd like to return for a moment to something you said earlier about GODO FE, and a kind of engagement that should happen in that particular gathering space. You described a "subtle, flirtatious, diplomatic move-attitude, moving CURVEWARD...." What does it mean to be flirtatious in this context?

ANANI SANOUVI It means entering into what I have called the "FLIRTING" STATE—a curved timeline for engaging in any type of relationship. It is an attitude meant to shape our thinking and to ensure that our physical movement is always CURVEWORD, which is to say forward, towards something else. By "curve" we are referring to the curve as a continuation of time or of a movement, to the continuous flow that allows another energy to enter the body. It can also mean openness to being led... to being pulled to one side or another as you move forward, so you are no longer moving in a straight line. The curve is a technology of the threshold, a technology used to leave chronological time and enter what we refer to as multi-dimensional time—a present time that looks like a sovereign time we "own."

MATHILDE TER HEIJNE The third part of your proposal for Maison Gbegbe is E'TOME, a method you have also called *dans le mortier* or "in the mortar" in English. Could you speak a bit about that?

ANANI SANOUVI E'TOME is a nomadic, contemporary "theater concept" for producing, living, and sharing the outcome of practices/research-as-performances cooked using the AGAMA FO method. As a biodynamic, anti-colonial movement, as a circular scene-dispositif-threshold, its purpose is to mitigate the extreme damage of colonialism, to actualize and translate ancient knowledge and update it for life in the present. E'TOME is an ongoing, curved, concave abstract-cosmic surface—a curved line that bends time. It is a non-doctrinal, constantly-moving performance-space-state; a mode of constant attentiveness/perception for close encounters within invisible, visible poly-rhythmic,

"FLIRTING" STATE

as political statement, as a willing state of/for constant vulnerability-perceptivity-openness, negotiations, desire-to-sense-in-order-to-meet-and-interact/engage-in-inner-talk-conversations, a bio-dynamic threshold for learning in real time with our senses.

Guidance / rules ⚠ :
Pre-preparation might be needed

Go for a walk outside

→ Enter the "flirting" state, always walking CURVEWARD to meet 7 different trees, 7 stones, rocks, or waves.
→ Introduce yourself (giving your FULL name) to the tree every time you meet a new one.

On the way back

→ Fill your walk and your body with the "FLIRTING" sensation you sensed/had with the trees, stones, winds, waves.
→ If you sense the "FLIRTING" STATE is present, greet everyone on the street with a flirtatious smile.
→ Once you have successfully shared the "FLIRTING."

STATE energy with 7 people, stop.
→ Or continue to share with 14, 16, 25 more people, as many as you like in your building, at the bar, at the supermarket, and so on!

poly-centric, poly-decentric vibrations/pulses/movement/steps; a real-time-witnessing-and-translating action for the viewer or audience or participant. The artists involved will come with their own ATATI (as it is known in Ewe, also known as a *pilon* in French or "pestle" in English): a traditional wooden stick that is used, metaphorically, to rhythmically grind/smash raw foods in a hollowed-out tree trunk (E'TO = *mortier* or "mortar" in English), the ordinary "blender" used in most kitchens in Africa. To say that the gathered artists, or regular people or locals, etc. bring their own ATATI is to say they bring their PERFORMANCE-PRACTICE-AS-RESEARCH (as already developed using the AGAMA FO method and process) and use it to smash and blend classical, traditional, Euro-American-male colonial legacies and residues. Then they present a "synthesis of their works in progress" instead. The outcome will hopefully be progressive concepts and knowledge drawn from an animist perspective and ingredients.



→ *Hó* (Wealth). Sculpture and photo: Anani Sanouvi.

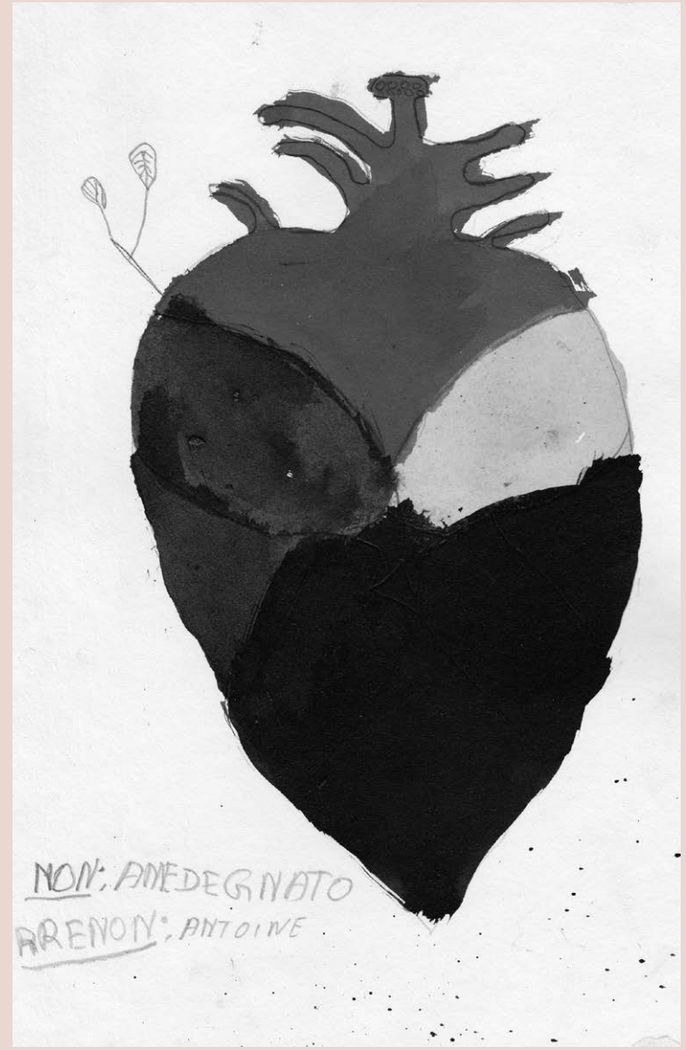


1 Anani Sanouvi self-identifies with the pronouns they/them. They refer to themselves in the singular as "we" to acknowledge their forebears.

2 Chewing refers to the process of "breaking down" a homogenous set of ideas before spitting it out or "funneling" it into different outcomes.

Notes & Reflections on the Maison Gbegbe Project

Nadja Ofuatey-Alazard in conversation with Rossila Goussanou and Anani Sanouvi



→ Drawing by Antoine Amedegnato from the workshop in 2017.

ROSSILA GOUSSANOU and ANANI SANOUVI Nadja, who do you think should lead the Maison Gbegbe project in its conception and design phase, and in what way?

NADJA OFUATEY-ALAZARD Given that this is a transnational project that will be realized in Togo, a former German colony, as part of a cooperation between three different non-profit organizations (one of them based in Germany, the other two in Togo), I think the first task is to ensure that a democratic, transparent structure is established between the three project partners. Secondly, I would say the main seat of control (in terms of shared control) should be in Togo, since Maison Gbegbe ultimately revolves around African cultural heritage. It also deals with questions of a possible restitution of sacred ~~objects~~ that were obtained or stolen in the context of colonial history. So we have to adopt a power-sharing and responsibility-sharing structure that reflects this. The project involves three partners at this point: art&dialogue e.V., a Berlin-based non-profit represented by Mathilde ter Heijne; L'Africaine d'architecture, a Togolese non-profit led by Sename Koffi Agbodjinou; and the locally-based Union des Cultes Traditionnels du Togo (UCTT), an association of traditional knowledge keepers led by Messanh Amedegnato. So the central task will be to devise and also find a sound basis for this cooperation. We need to legitimize that union while also ensuring maximum transparency and power-sharing. As I said, our Togolese partners should have the most influence on the project's development.

Do you have any recommendations for how local communities fit into the Maison Gbegbe governance structure? What is their influence, how can they be represented?

The project structure should reflect what has already been set up now, in the pre-production phase: There has to be a provision that allows for other entities or stakeholders to join the board of directors down the line. Once Maison Gbegbe is realized as a physical space, we are sure to find others—a leader or other representatives of local communities, for example—that should have a say in how it is set up, or whatever it will be turn out to be.

Speaking of that aspect... what do you see as the role of Maison Gbegbe, and whose task is it to define that role? What place should the activities around Vodou have in terms of its overall function?

I was born and raised in Germany, where I am still based, so I do not think it is my place to determine either the mission of Maison Gbegbe or its function. That would be very problematic. So what I'm about to say is purely from my own perspective. I think it's going to be a complex project. It is a process. Its vision and mission are going to be dynamic and complex and require input from various stakeholders. That said—and again, this is just my opinion—I think the number one objective should obviously be the preservation of African cultural heritage. That's not to say only heritage as represented by the ~~objects~~ that need to be returned or restituted (in this case mostly sacred ~~objects~~ related to the Vodou belief system), or the traditional belief systems themselves; it also refers to immaterial cultural heritage and knowledge. Christianity and its missionaries, as we know, really gave traditional knowledge a bad reputation. So I imagine Maison Gbegbe could also become a place for interreligious dialogue, for example. In any case, I believe it should be a both a site for preserving traditional knowledge and a place for thinking ahead to the future. Another aspect is the preservation of the healing practices, for instance, both physical and psychological, that form an integral part of traditional spiritual practice. I imagine Maison Gbegbe could also serve as a knowledge archive for these traditional knowledge systems, these African cosmologies as healing practices...

What other significance could Maison Gbegbe hold for local communities? Could you speak a bit more about their stake in the project?

For one thing, I think it is really important to have sites in the former German colonies where regular people can convene and not only discuss issues related to the histories or consequences of European colonialism, but also play a certain role in regional exchanges. It definitively should be a place that facilitates a kind of polylogue about various issues and topics that matter to Africans. A key aspect is the discourse around conservation—I already mentioned restitution—and then obviously culture and performance, both traditional and especially in terms of its contemporary and constantly-evolving function. But I think you, Anani [Sanouvi], have much more to say about that.

Can you explain what you mean by conservation, or give an example?

Basically I'm referring to nature and nature conservation, the harmonious coexistence of humanity and the natural environment—which, as I understand it, is also an intrinsic part of the traditional local religions. When I had the privilege of visiting Agouegan, the envisioned site of Maison Gbegbe, I couldn't help but notice a lot of plastic garbage on the ground, etc.—something that I think runs counter to the deep-rooted philosophies of that religion. So I could also imagine Maison Gbegbe as a place for discussing and implementing nature conservation and recycling practices, for example. Maison Gbegbe might support local communities as they engage in these discourses and implement new strategies; maybe one could set up something like a recycling initiative that could inspire artisan craft projects and related business models. I think it might be a good option for the future.

Let's quickly circle back to the topic of restitution. How do you think Maison Gbegbe should proceed in that regard?

Restitution is obviously an integral part of Maison Gbegbe as well, part of its envisioned make-up. If and when these ~~objects~~ return—one of many potential contradictions of this project, something that we also have to welcome—we'll find the complexities, complications, and discrepancies are already written into Maison Gbegbe. One consideration is that these ~~objects~~ were charged, in a sense, with spiritual power. When they were taken away, they might simply have been replaced by new ~~objects~~. But if these ~~objects~~ are now being returned, if the aim is to reintegrate them into active spiritual practice, does that mean they would have to be recharged or maybe de-charged? I might be wrong, of course. You, Rossila [Goussanou], would know much better than I do if and whether anything would have to be done.

A second potential factor is that the ~~objects~~ may not have been intended for public display in the first place. And if Maison Gbegbe is meant to serve as a new type of museum, a kind of living museum, one would still have to negotiate what is to be done with them. Should they be preserved in line with European museum practices, for example? What would the future of these ~~objects~~ look like, what is their space and place in the local communities? Are they just cultural ~~artifacts~~ now, do they still have something like a spiritual or religious weight?

With that in mind, where does Maison Gbegbe go from here in terms of its structure?

Well, I think we've touched on everything already because again, I mean, I have to sort of reiterate the point that I was raised in a European setting, although obviously viewing colonial history from a very critical perspective. Nevertheless, once I find myself on the ground in Togo, I also have to humble myself and understand that I'm just as much a learning body and presence there as the next person. So when I talk about nature conservation, for example, I don't want to come across as lecturing or pointing a finger. Admittedly, I have a very particular, strong position on plastic and the destruction of our environment, but I don't want to come across as judgmental or completely Eurocentric. I also know that in a way, in terms of what the Western mainstream media conveys around Africans and nature conservation, the face of nature conservation in Africa is essentially white. If you look at images circulating in the media, the people they show engaging in that type of conservation are white people and only white people... which is obviously not the case in reality.

Africans have both a traditional way of cohabiting with their environment and a very contemporary discourse on this...

Right. That was actually one of the questions I had when we were at the workshop with traditional knowledge keepers in Agouegan—I wanted to know the role of women in the traditional religions and their perspective on nature conservation and plastic. I could also see there is a really strong interest from the side of the local communities. They seemed very interested in engaging and participating in the conceptual processes... which brings me back to your original question about the next structuring phases of Maison Gbegbe. I think participatory workshops and formats are really, really crucial. I could really see something like WɔɛLab[1], Sename's community-based incubation hub, as a good potential starting point for thinking about these kinds of participatory measures, realizing and supporting them. Local communities and all the partners involved need to sit together, talk, and hash things out.

And it's important that Maison Gbegbe's structure and activities facilitate that...

Exactly. That's also our role as the pre-configuration committee. We're there to engage and learn and also share our opinions, but always from a positioned sort of perspective, I guess. That's why this back-and-forth, committee members in Europe traveling to Togo and other stakeholders from Togo also traveling in the other direction, would really be important. We want to make sure that it isn't just those of us from the Global North going there to visit people and bring our knowledges, opinions, and sensibilities to them—we also need stay put, to have our partners join us where we live. They need to bring their knowledges, opinions, and sensibilities our way as well. So at some point it would be nice if we could get together in Portugal or in France or in Berlin, and then convene in Lomé or Agouegan or maybe also in Dakar, where a project similar to Maison Gbebgbe is being developed. All this is to say that exchange, but also the flexibility and agility to move around, will be really essential in terms of developing the project.

You've emphasized the importance of discussing these issues from various positions and vantage points. Do you think talking about them in different localities could be important as well?

I do. We're currently lobbying for a memory-cultural center in Berlin—a kind of hub around questions of German colonialism and its contemporary consequences. My idea is to not only bring forth something like Maison Gbegbe in Berlin—where we stand to benefit the most—but to conceive it from the start in conjunction with other sites and centers. And I could really imagine Maison Gbegbe being part of that network, not only in terms of sharing ideas, but also very practically in terms of bringing human beings themselves back and forth along these axes of exchange. Of course it would be great to see centers like it in the other former German colonies as well, but ultimately not only there. After all, the entire African continent and large swathes of the Global South are grappling with similar questions and issues. Maison Gbegbe could be part of this global phenomenon.

What kinds of funding would you consider?

Obviously, we're in the early stages, still in the sort of pre-production planning phase, so I think the first step would be to find development-budget type resources. These could come from

foundations or cultural institutions, etc. It's unfortunate that TURN, a project funding initiative from the German Federal Cultural Foundation, is not active anymore. It would obviously have been perfect because it was all about supporting collaboration between German cultural practitioners and African partners, but that is no longer an option. So right now Maison Gbegbe collaborators are researching other potential sources of development funds, which would have to be followed by production funding to support the realization and upkeep of Maison Gbegbe once it is established. I really strongly see it as the German government's responsibility to supply these funds, possibly through its so-called Agency for International Museum Cooperation,[2] which is still being developed as we speak. Incidentally, one of the outlined objectives of that museum agency—which has been in planning for some time now—is to support the building of museums, to fund the establishment of new museums on the African continent. So that might be a good option. But we all need to sort of delve into our networks and use our research abilities to come up with ideas. As I said, we are still at the very beginning...

Assuming the funding comes through, how do you view Maison Gbegbe in terms of its architectural intentions? How might this place be structured in the physical sense, as a physical space?

Obviously, we are already privy to the magnificent architectural plans that Sename drew up. And I understand these are not set in stone but are still open and malleable. That said, I think everything we've already touched on in the course of this conversation, in terms of governance but also programming, how it should encourage participation, these ideas about nature, culture, conservation, sustainability: all of it, in my opinion, should be reflected both in its architectural expression and in terms of how it will blend into its surroundings. My sense is that it should represent the local communities. It should instill a sense of belonging and pride in African architectural traditions, which are also part of African cultural heritage. That way, the colonial project would not only be represented in terms of political and economic structures, but also through epistemic systems and related structures of feeling. It would find reflection in the physical spheres of city planning and architecture—both of which really affect people. It's important to look at it holistically. So yes, I'm really excited about that aspect of Maison Gbegbe as well. I think I'm going to learn a lot of new things in the process.



↑ A traditionally built house from all-natural materials as an example of vernacular architecture.

1 WɔɛLab, also spelled WoeLab, refers to a concept Sename Koffi Agbodjinou developed in 2012 as part of HubCité, a proposed alternative to Western smart cities. WɔɛLabs assist in realizing ultra-local urban projects. Each space serves a given area and supplies, on site, the resources that city-dwellers need to develop solutions that respond to their actual needs, including waste collection, energy, and 3D printing. WɔɛLab is a young, innovative community committed to making low-high-tech knowledge accessible to all. It offers mutual, voluntary assistance and gives free technical support to artisans in the neighborhood. Inspired by traditional societies and structures, it works through peer-to-peer exchanges at the village level. The overall project proposes a city that is horizontal and distributed—a city designed for and by residents, who are free to use the new technologies as they see fit.

2 The German Federal Foreign Office announced plans to develop an Agency for International Museum Cooperation in 2019. The stated aims of this agency are to foster mutual exchange and cooperation between museums in Germany and other (predominantly African) countries, and to expand the scope of international partnerships.

→ Hounougbo Amedegnato, members of the UCTT, and Mathilde ter Heijne at the radio broadcast station in 2022.

PART 3: FURTHER CONTEXT

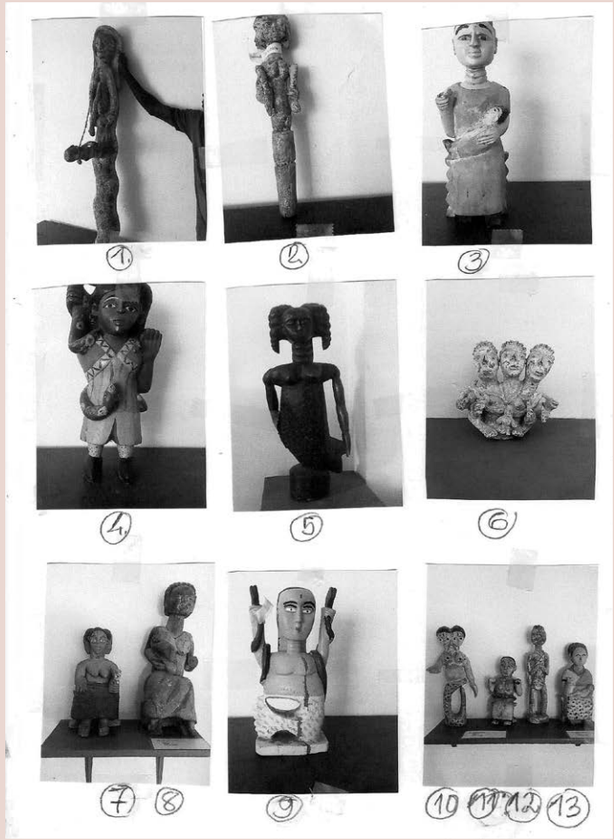


Museum Magic: From Cult ~~Object~~ to Museum Object... and Back

Kaija Kaitavuori



→ Mami Hounan Nicoue Da Povi holding Mami Wata at Villa Karo, Grand-Popo, Benin.



← Part of a selection of Mami Watas collected by Matti-Juhani Karila, reserved for possible restitution.

Villa Karo is a Finnish–Beninese cultural center located in Grand-Popo, Benin. Artist and researcher residencies are a central part of its activities. Every year, around forty fellows from Finland travel there. In the fall of 2018, the travelers' suitcases carried not only their personal belongings, but also wooden ~~sculptures~~. The process was part of a mission to return Mami Wata figures related to the Vodou belief system, during which around seventy objects were transferred from Finland back to Benin.

Over the years, Finnish writer and journalist Matti-Juhani Karila had acquired a collection of over one hundred Mami Wata ~~sculptures~~. Most were purchased from markets and traveling dealers in Togo and Benin between 2000 and 2018. Mami Wata is a water spirit with many manifestations. Parts of Karila's collection have been on display in Finland at the Amos Anderson Art Museum from 2011 to 2012 and at the Helinä Rautavaara Ethnographic Museum from 2015 to 2016.

In 2018, Karila decided to return the collection to its area of origin, and transferred it to the Villa Karo museum in Grand-Popo. As it would have been too expensive to transport the entire collection at once, the Mami Wata were slipped into the bags of those traveling to the residency. Thirty or so ~~pieces~~ from the collection were already waiting in storage in Grand-Popo. The transport of ~~objects~~ was coordinated by Villa Karo's office in Helsinki. In March 2019, the exhibition "Mami Wata's Return" opened at Villa Karo's Petit Musée.

Preparations for the exhibition project coincided with a broader debate on the return of objects held in Western museums, which gained momentum thanks to a report and a concrete proposal for repatriation.[1] The press release for the Mami Wata exhibition at Villa Karo referred to the promise made by French President Emmanuel Macron to return Beninese ~~artifacts~~ taken during the colonial period from museums in Paris to their place of origin in Benin. The return of Mami Wata was thus already a step ahead of the French process. This is of course simpler for a private collector than it is for a museum institution, which is bound by many rules and conventions.

The life cycle of ~~objects~~ in the collection follows the fate of many others that have ended up in museums and have been removed from the circulation of use and exchange. They are materially well looked after, but lose their former function and significance.

After arriving in the northern hemisphere, the Mami Wata brought by a Finnish collector took on new characteristics and meanings.

Karila's interest in Mami figures was sparked by their naïve-looking formal language. As a lover of naïve art, he initially interpreted them in terms of his own art tradition. "I bought a naïve statue," he says of his first acquisition.[2] In Finland, the objects ended up in an art museum, that is, in the context of art ~~objects~~, where they represented Beninese-Togolese art or craft.[3] A critic in a Finnish newspaper commended the exhibition by pointing out that predecessors of these ~~sculptures~~ "permanently changed the course of modern art a hundred years ago."[4] The ~~objects~~' second appearance at a cultural history museum placed them in an ethnographic context. Their significance as former ritual ~~objects~~ superseded their significance as art objects, and alongside the other exhibits they took on the informative and pedagogical role of explaining the practice of the Vodou belief system to a (mainly) Western audience.[5] In its new environment, and having been given new tasks, Mami Wata no longer functioned as part of a cult; it did not listen to the requests made to it and had no power to help. As a Beninese Mami Wata hounan explains, when the Mami Wata is put on display, its spirit flees and it cannot function.[6] As tourism has increased, tourist versions of Vodou objects are also being made; these are directly put up for sale and have not been used for ritual purposes. Karila says he is aware that not all the ~~items~~ in his collection are "authentic" in that sense. However, this does not matter to him, as what is more important is his own preference and relationship with each ~~object~~, as well as the encounters that accompanied its acquisition.[7] The question of authenticity is also multi-dimensional and contextual. The meaning of authenticity varies between an art museum and a museum of cultural history, where it also depends on the context and the story within which the ~~objects~~ are placed.

Repatriation or restitution

The return of Karila's Mami Wata collection is a concrete repatriation as the ~~objects~~ traveled back to the African continent and were displayed amid the community from whose culture they originated.[8] Although the museum is owned by Villa Karo, a Finnish foundation, museum activities in Grand-Popo are largely the responsibility of local staff. However, the return of the ~~objects~~ is partial in that they are still housed in the museum, where their lives continue as museum objects. In the course of the process, the idea arose as to whether it might also



↑ Houedossi Nicoue Da Povi, Mami hounan, signing the restitution contract in Grand-Popo, Benin.

be possible to reverse the process of museumization and reassign an object from the museum sphere back to practices associated with the Vodou cosmology. Could the return constitute both a repatriation and a kind of restitution: a return to both its place of origin and its original role in the Vodou spiritual framework?[9] Could the "return of Mami Wata" also mean a return to significance in the Vodou belief system?

In the fall of 2018, artist Mathilde ter Heijne began a conversation about the possibility of returning one of the Mami Wata to its traditional use and reactivating its spiritual powers. The first step was to find a suitable ~~object~~ in the collection to activate. Ter Heijne is an ally of the Union des Cultes Traditionnelles du Togo (UCTT), a community of Vodou hounans, researchers, and supporters. Led by traditional knowledge keeper Messanh Amedegnato, founder and president of the UCTT, the community of hounans selected the most suitable ~~object~~ from a list of possible candidates preselected by the collector. The negotiation was a complex process. A balance had to be struck between different interests and motives: for the collector, the ~~objects~~ were important for different reasons than the significance they held for the hounans. For example, the first acquisition in the collection was one that Karila was unwilling to part with. According to the hounans, only some of the ~~objects~~ were suitable for reactivation, and some of the ~~figures~~ were more interesting to them than others which were already in circulation. The process brought together different ideas of gift, return, and ownership. When a suitable ~~object~~ that could be activated was found, the hounans consulted the Afá, which provided instructions on how and when to perform the reactivation ceremony. The process is being observed and documented by Ter Heijne as part of an investigation into how artistic research and visualization strategies can be productive in this context.

The Mami Wata was handed over to the community in January 2020, and the activation ceremony was scheduled to take place in April. However, travel bans due to the coronavirus prevented the gathering and the event was postponed.

~~OBJECTS~~ and museum objects

The museum has its own set of rules governing both visitor behavior and the handling of objects. Museum behavior includes calmly moving from one exhibit to another, looking at things and talking quietly.

Similarly, the treatment and display of objects is strictly regulated. The museum classifies, inventories, documents, conserves, and records information on various forms and databases. Once an object becomes part of the museum's collection, it can only be touched with white gloves and is kept in a special place and under strictly controlled conditions. It is also referred to by different names in different contexts. The Mami Wata we are looking at has been at times a fetish and a spirit, at times a museum or ethnographic object, at times a sculpture, a ~~statue~~, or a work of art.

As it moved from one cultural sphere and belief system to another, the Mami Wata changed from a cult ~~object~~ to either a work of art or an ethnographic type specimen—and possibly back to a cult ~~object~~. Physically, it does not change much, but as part of different groups of people and communities, it takes on a different power and provokes different reactions and actions. This, if anything, is "magic." Karila observes this when he says of the Amos Anderson Art Museum exhibition: "In Finland, I saw them transformed into art [...]. In a new environment, they took on a new meaning, took on a new life. The transformation of everyday objects into works of art was magic."[10]

As Westerners, we tend to see the ways of others as strange belief systems and magic, and it our own actions as rational. By distancing ourselves from our actions, we can see that our way of organizing our relationship with objects is likewise a kind of museum magic and our behavior around them is ritualized. The fact that an object requires a certain kind of approach and respect, shown by gestures, restraint, and special dress, for example, is common to various belief systems, as is the fact that only initiated persons are entitled to handle such ~~objects~~. The other thing that museum magic and other kinds of magic have in common is that the specific nature of the objects is not visible to the naked eye: an outsider to the system cannot tell from the object itself whether it is a utilitarian, cult, or museum object. The meaning of an object is socially constructed. Community members share an idea of what kind of object it is and how it should be treated. By looking at how an object influences people's behavior, even an outsider can deduce something about the nature of it.

Of particular interest are situations where two different systems meet and come into contact with each other. Such was the case when Mami Wata moved from the care of Villa Karo into the arms of the Vodou hounan, literally from hand to hand. The hands of the donor, a person trained in Western museum procedures, were covered



→ President of the UCTT Hounougbo Amedegnato on the beach holding Mami Wata at Grand-Popo after the restitution ceremony.



with white gloves; the receiving hands were bare. According to museum rules, objects may not be touched with bare hands; the Vodou ~~objects~~, instead, are touched and anointed with various substances, which does not diminish their value—quite the contrary. On the other hand, when the Vodou knowledge keeper received the ~~object~~, she immediately wrapped it in cloth; according to Vodou rules, Mami Wata cannot be exposed.

When displayed, the Mami Wata loses its power from a Vodou perspective. Western museum practice, on the other hand, recreates the object in a way that would not be possible in the community of origin. Here, it becomes a reference pointing elsewhere: it tells of the Vodou belief system and the visual culture associated with it. In its original context, the Mami Wata is not a representation of the eponymous deity, as it is in the museum, but the deity itself.[11] As a museum object, the divinity is replaced with a different power, which also makes people approach it and treat it with special respect. It becomes "untouchable" in a different way.

None of these special powers are visible to the eye. For example, a conservator struggles to handle such ~~objects~~ because no visual clue necessarily reveals the sacredness of them. The conservation professionals have tried to find a single definition of a sacred ~~object~~, but the task is impossible.[12] Contemporary art, on the other hand, constantly struggles with a situation where a large part of the community does not recognize and acknowledge contemporary art, but questions the artistic status of objects that appear ordinary. Only those who share this "belief" recognize their significance. When the sacredness, artistry, or status as cultural heritage are not reflected in the properties of an object, it must be communicated and shared in some other way. The fact that community members "naturally" seem to know an object as sacred or art obscures the work that has been and is being done to create and maintain the specialness. To become a member of an artistic or religious community is the result of upbringing and a process of growing up.

New museum: to have your cake and eat it, too

The encounter of systems produces practical rubs. There is a growing debate in the museum field about how to involve the communities concerned when their cultural heritage is on ~~display~~. It forces curators to think about the criteria for evaluating sacred ~~objects~~ and what

← Mami Wata placed in a sacred space at the temple of Hounougbo Amedegnato. Her final placement should be at Maison Gbegbe.

can be done with them.[13] The dilemma for the curator is to balance the different dimensions of professional ethics when there seems to be a conflict of needs: on the one hand, the obligation to preserve the ~~objects~~ and, on the other, the obligation to respect the worldview of their original owners. The conservator must take into account not only the technical condition of the ~~object~~ and its care, but also its cultural meaning and use: how people understand the ~~object~~ is as important as its physical form. The conservation and handling of ~~objects~~ that are perceived as sacred may be subject to restrictions on who may handle them or in which direction they should be facing, and in what proximity they may or may not be kept.

Furthermore, not all cultures necessarily have the same attitude toward the preservation of material heritage as museum cultures. In the case of sacred and religious ~~objects~~, there may be a firm belief that ~~objects~~ should not be preserved forever but should enter the natural cycle of material instead.[14] Western society, on the other hand, is prepared to invest large amounts of resources in halting the processes of material decay in order to preserve museum objects.[15] There are different interpretations of what the sacred or special nature of ~~objects~~ requires.

Could parallel belief systems live and operate together within the same institution? In response, a new concept of the museum, the "post-museum," has been proposed. As opposed to modern museum, it is also being defined by actors from what used to be called "source communities."[16] The post-museum will incorporate many voices and perspectives to produce dynamic events and exhibitions. Rather a process than a venue, it can take on different architectural forms, and its program centers around the concerns of communities.

The museum institution always serves the cultural and political agenda of society, and as long as the museum has spread as such from the West to the rest of the world, it has maintained a colonial attitude and separation between "us" and "them." To change, it would have to accept thinking from different epistemologies as part of its functioning. The post-museum needs to redefine the rules of knowledge production and the use of objects. In the words of museum researcher and art educator Moira Simpson, "If a museum is to be effective in preserving cultural material and knowledge, it must operate within the cultural and epistemological framework of those whom it is intended to benefit."[17] A museum can learn from other communities about other ways of structuring the world.

Simpson distinguishes between different types of post-museum, specifically those with an emphasis on research and knowledge production (interpretative center), and those focused on the preservation of objects (keeping place).[18] Post-museums emphasize the use of collections rather than collecting and preservation per se, and are also characterized by the preservation of intangible heritage. In practice, it can function as a sort of "user museum," wherein the rights to use the collections are shared. This has actually been put into practice in a few cases.[19] One of these is Maison Gbegbe, a cultural center that is being conceived as a new home for the returned Mami Wata once she is returned to her community. It will also house other ~~objects~~ returned from European museums and will be run by Vodou hounans. A post-museum may also contain material and spaces that are restricted to certain members of the community and others that are open to all. Such an arrangement could allow Mami Wata to be part of several belief systems at the same time.

1 Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, "The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics," English translation of November 2018 report available online: https://www. about-africa.de/images/sonstig- es/2018/sarr_savoy_en.pdf
2 Matti-Juhani Karila, "Mami Wata," in the accompanying brochure for the 2019 exhibition "Mami Wata's Return," Villa Karo, Benin.
3 Amos Anderson Art Museum, "Mami Wata and God's Bits of Wood," December 2, 2011–January 31, 2012.
4 The critic is obviously referring to the African objects that Pablo Picasso and other modernist artists saw in Paris in the early twentieth century. Timo Valjakka, *Helsingin Sanomat*, December 2, 2011.
5 Helinä Rautavaara Ethnographic Museum, October 7, 2015–January 31, 2016.
6 Jègnonssi Adogbagbe, "Interview chez la pretresse," accompanying brochure for the 2019 exhibition "Mami Wata's Return," Villa Karo, Benin.
7 Matti-Juhani Karila, "A Hundred Mami Watas," *Villa Karo Journal* (2011): 27–28.
8 Repatriation is the act or process of restoring or returning someone or something to the country of origin, allegiance, or citizenship. *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/repatriation
9 Restitution is an act of restoring something to its original state or returning something to its rightful owner. *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/restitution
10 Karila, "Mami Wata."
11 Ronald L. Grimes, "Sacred Objects in Museum Spaces," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 21, no. 4 (19).
12 Michelle Maunder, "Conservation of Sacred Objects" in *Godly Things: Museums, Objects, and Religion*, ed. Crispin Paine, 197–209 (London: Leicester University Press, 2000).

13 John Reeve, "A Question of Faith: The Museum as a Spiritual or Secular Place," in *Museums, Equality and Social Justice*, eds. Richard Sandell and Eithne Nightingale (London: Routledge, 2012), 125–41.
14 Maunder, "Conservation of Sacred Objects."
15 Fernando Dominguez Rubio has compared the technical maintenance of the modern museum's collections to intensive care and the energy consumption equal to a large hospital. See Fernando Dominguez Rubio, *Still Life: Ecologies of the Modern Imagination at the Art Museum* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).
16 Moira G. Simpson, "Charting the Boundaries," in Museum Revolutions: How Museums Change and are Changed, ed. Simon Knell, Suzanne MacLeod, Sheila Watson (London: Routledge, 2006), 235–49. Simpson draws on Eilean Hooper-Greenhill's definition of the "post-museum" as explained in Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 2000). See also "ecomuseum."
17 Ibid., 237.
18 Ibid., 238–39.
19 As an example, the Yale Peabody Museum in New Haven returned ritual objects from its collection to the Hoopa Valley community museum. The community members have the right to take objects from the collection for rituals. Ivan Gaskell, "Sacred to Profane and Back Again," in *Art and Its Publics: Museum Studies at the Millennium (New Interventions in Art History)*, Andrew McClellan, ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 149–64. Simpson describes a similar arrangement at an Australian indigenous community's museum. Simpson, "Charting the Boundaries," 241–42.

Digital Autonomous Organization and Sokpé*

* In pre-colonial times, inhabitants of the area that now constitutes parts of the states of Togo and Ghana used round quartz discs 3 to 10 cm in diameter with a hole in the center as a means of payment. These discs were called *sokpé* (also thunderstones) in African mythology, because they were said to have fallen from heaven during thunderstorms.

Augusto Gerardi Rousset in conversation with Sename Koffi Agbodjinou and Mathilde ter Heijne



→ Large collection of looted ~~items~~ from all over the world.

→ Unable to find a solution to repair the colonial wound.

SENAME KOFFI AGBODJINOU Augusto, how did you go about developing your DAO project in the framework of the Maison Gbegbe pre-configuration mission, could you speak a bit about the process?



AUGUSTO GERARDI ROUSSET It started in the winter of 2021, when I took part in "Maison Gbegbe—Exchanges and Invisible Entanglements," a three day-seminar held at the University of the Arts (UdK) in Berlin. The seminar focused on examining and discussing the ongoing perpetuation of colonial ideas in institutions such as ethnographic museums, universities, and private collections, with a particular emphasis on ~~artifacts~~ obtained from the area now known as Togo. I was intrigued by the questions that arose during the seminar, such as: How can we overcome the bureaucratic and legal barriers that some institutions have put in place to protect their collections and knowledge production methodology (which has had a devastating impact on much of the world)? And, how can we establish a fair and equal dialogue with institutions whose foundations are rooted in colonial practices? After several discussions, I had an idea: What if we created virtual copies of these ~~objects~~ and gave the ownership to their original creators? Traditional knowledge keepers and the communities connected to them still bear the scars of colonialism. As such, they are subject to an unequal power dynamic with institutions that are far away, inaccessible, and disconnected from their needs.



MATHILDE TER HEIJNE By a digital copy, you mean a version of it that exists as an NFT or non-fungible token. "Non-fungible" more or less means that it's unique and can't be replaced with something else...





AUGUSTO GERARDI ROUSSET Right. For example, a bitcoin is fungible—exchange one for another bitcoin, and you'll have exactly the same thing. This digital copy, by contrast, cannot be replicated or exchanged for something else of equal value. If you traded it for a different object or NFT, you'd have something completely different. When I say the ownership of these assets would be divided among their original owners, I am referring to the creation of digital copies using NFT cryptographic technology and smart contracts. The technology around it can sound complicated, but it basically involves embedding a digital image with a smart contract into the blockchain, resulting in a one-of-a-kind copy whose ownership is linked to a cryptocurrency wallet.

Blockchains are essentially a way to store data without having to trust any one organization, company, or entity to keep things secure.

SENAME KOFFI AGBODJINOU Can you explain the smart contract in simple terms, for those who might not be familiar? Also, how did your idea evolve from there?

AUGUSTO GERARDI ROUSSET A smart contract is basically a self-executing agreement between parties, with the terms of the agreement directly written into lines of code. The code and the agreements contained within it are stored and replicated on a blockchain network. Once the conditions specified in the contract are met, the contract executes automatically, without the need for intermediaries or manual intervention. A smart contract is basically a digital agreement that automatically enforces itself, enabling secure and transparent transactions. I discussed my initial idea with David Barreto, an engineer and blockchain technology enthusiast. He proposed the creation of something much more interesting: a DAO, or digital autonomous organization, which would facilitate the democratic and collective building of digital copies. Ownership would be distributed among all DAO participants. A DAO operates without any central authority and is instead governed by its members. They make decisions using a consensus mechanism, like voting. In a DAO, ownership and decision-making power is spread among all the members, making the sharing of resources more horizontal and transparent within the virtual organization.



↑ Using NFT Tokens to authenticate assets that belong to a colonial institution. The Council is formed by the group of activists, institutions, and NGOs that are actively rewriting the decolonial history of Togo.

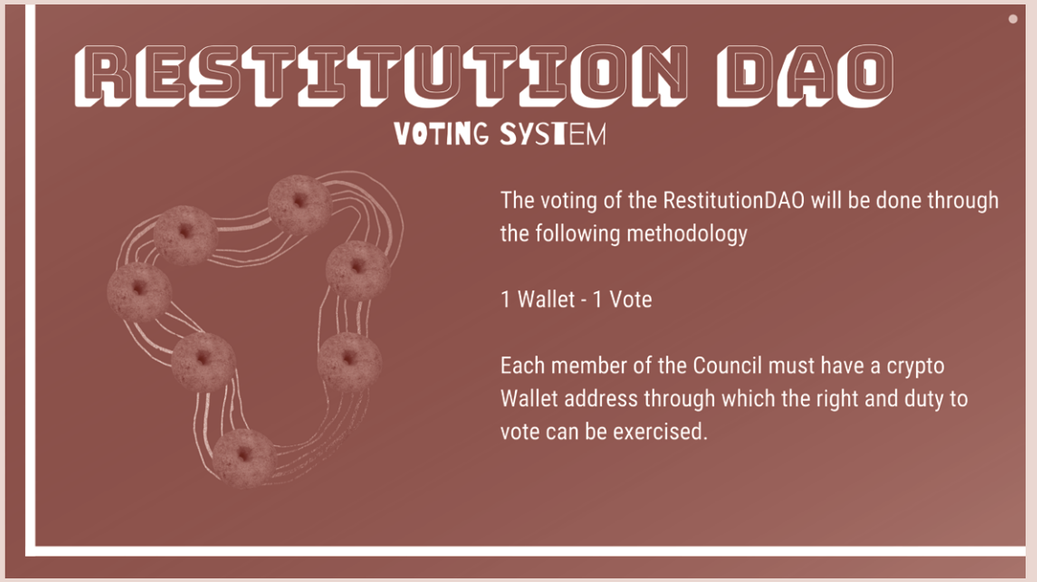
Developing this idea required us to tackle two challenges. The first was the technical challenge of creating a collective where members of the DAO could democratically propose the creation of digital copies. Once the digital copy was created, its value should belong to all DAO members, and if it was collectively decided to sell the copy, the value of the exchange should be managed by all members collectively. The second challenge was figuring out who could be part of the DAO and how to engage communities, traditional knowledge keepers, and stakeholders in the restitution and reparation debate to build a space for dialogue and decision-making within the DAO. After a lot of discussions and some sleepless nights, the idea finally started to take shape, and the first Restitution DAO diagram was born. The participants would be called the Council (DZI) and would be composed of traditional knowledge keepers and communities,

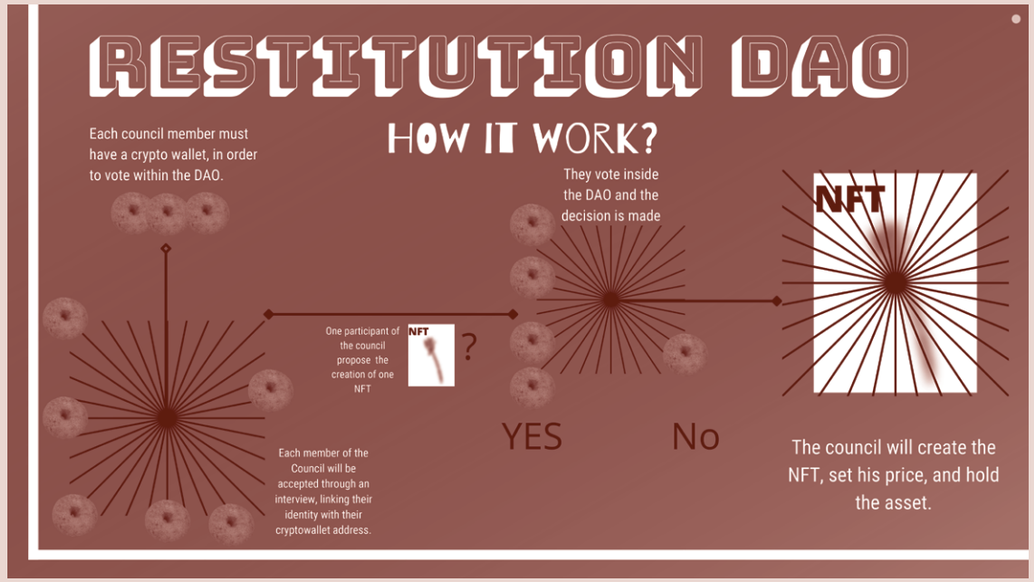
along with Togolese researchers. This Council would be the only ones who could decide on the creation of digital copies and the management of resources within the DAO. The management of these digital copies and any assets generated from their exchange would be handled by the DZI through a voting system.

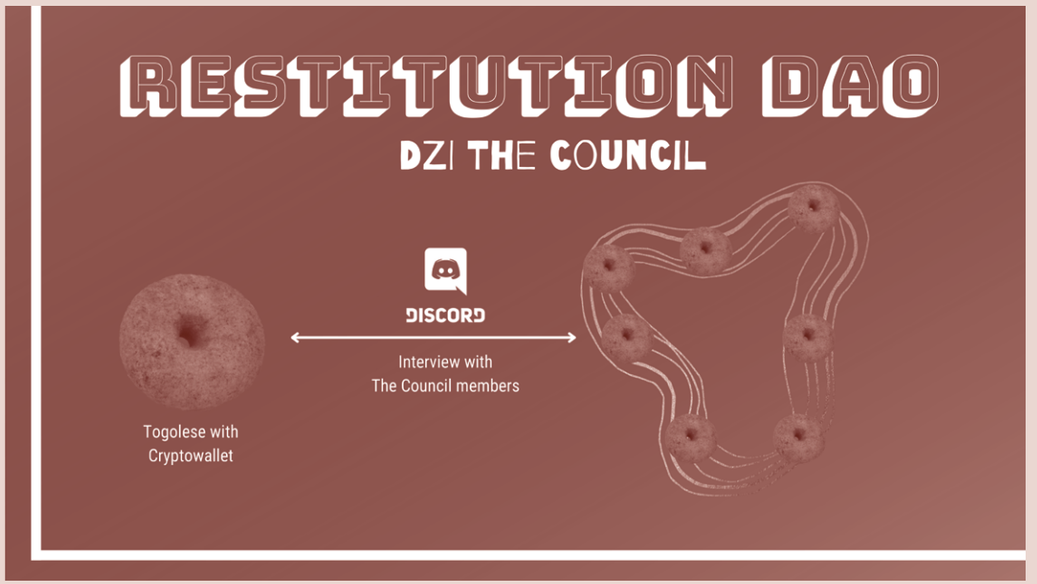
MATHILDE TER HEIJNE So, if I understand you correctly, the idea behind you and your partner's work with NFTs was to move away from the commodity-driven worldview normally associated with these digital assets, and towards a more experience-driven one. The creation and sale of NFTs would involve the community holding traditional knowledge of an ~~object~~ or ~~objects~~ in an (ethnological) museum collection, making it a participatory process. The NFT would symbolize a collective experience and build a sense of community, while also adding cultural and authenticity value. A DAO is a way of working together in a community, and in this case, the NFT would serve as a membership tool for the creation of a DAO. I see that the authenticity value would be a representation of the materiality of cultural heritage. There's the authentic material experience on one hand and the representational digital imagery on the other, which is symbolic but also illusionary. What's the difference between the real ~~object~~ and its experience versus its digital or virtual versions? Does engagement, or the involvement of such stakeholders, bridge the gap between the two? How did you address this contradiction to make sure that cultural heritage wouldn't be trivialized, or give the illusion of participation where there was none?

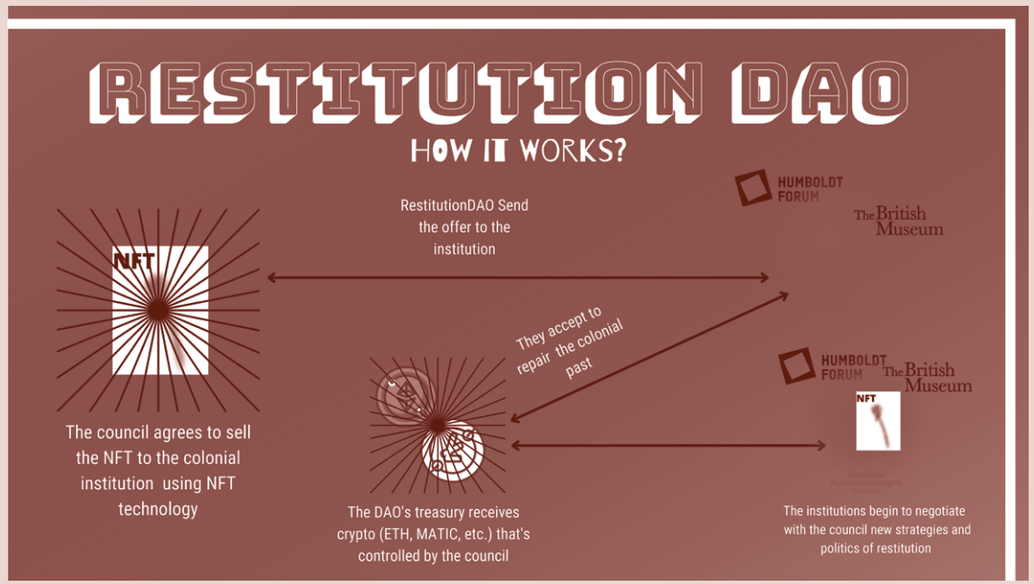
AUGUSTO GERARDI ROUSSET The Restitution DAO was established within the broader context of Maison Gbegbe's pre-configuration mission, which included a trip to Togo with students from Berlin and Togo, as well as other professionals such as researchers, traditional knowledge keepers, and activists working on restitution and healing the colonial wound. During the trip, the idea of Restitution DAO was presented, and Sename [Koffi Agbodjinou] suggested a collaboration with HubCity, a center for technology and citizenship policy development in Lomé, Togo. HubCity was also interested in being part of the DAO and could provide the technological platform for the development and implementation of the Restitution DAO as a local partner. It would allow for the testing of the Restitution DAO system in a smaller community, enabling us to better understand its

↓ Slide from the project presentation at Gbegbe Days in Agouegan in 2022. Restitution DAO allows contributors to organize, manage, and distribute responsibilities using a democratic voting system for decision-making.









challenges and successes. This is how the HubCity DAO came to consist of myself, David Barreto, Sename Koffi Agbodjinou, Julian Carbonelle, and Yawo E. Afande. The idea was to create a $HUB token, which is a type of token used in decentralized finance (DeFi) on blockchain networks. Such tokens typically serve as the backbone or central component of a decentralized finance ecosystem. They allow for the seamless transfer of value, governance rights, and access to various DeFi services. Through this governance token, collaborators in the HubCity DAO could participate in decision-making for HubCity, decide on future projects to be developed, and manage the use of capital. This was to be achieved through a quadratic voting system, ensuring equity among $HUB owners and preventing monopolies within the voting process.

SENAME KOFFI AGBODJINOU Right. I'd also like to quickly draw attention to some currents in Africa with which there could be interesting synergies: The first is the Open Restitution Africa[1], an African-led initiative in the emerging field of what is now called digital heritage.[2] Their objective is to collect data and develop Afrocentric knowledge on Western collections in order to inform debates on the issue of restitutions. The network is led by two women, Chao Tayiana Maina and Molemo Moiloa. Molemo Moiloa is a South African curator who contributes to the important MuseumFutures Africa project[3] (which is supported by the Goethe-Institut) and Chao Tayiana Maina, a Kenyan digital heritage specialist, is a founder of the non-profit African Digital Heritage[4] and a founding member of the Network for Digital Humanities in Africa. Based in Nairobi, African Digital Heritage carries out the important work of digitization of data, technological innovations applied to heritage, and research. It is undeniably a key African player on these issues, having already carried out many high-quality projects. The Network for Digital Humanities in Africa[5] is a network of African laboratories in full development on key skills for the future development of digital technology in Africa and it introduces computational methods into the study of the humanities. They are based on the collection, processing, validation, and preservation of cultural data and multiply the forms of access to culture through text, fixed and animated images, data-visualization, cartography, 3D... They promote interdisciplinary collaborations and are thought to be at the center of institutions such as libraries, museums, archives, places of memory, universities... They both create information and facilitate access to it, basically sitting at the heart of

the challenges of producing new forms of African knowledge and knowledge about Africa.

MATHILDE TER HEIJNE How does the DAO project relate to Maison Gbegbe as an alternative to the Western concept of museums? The question is whether the use of NFTs will actually facilitate the aim of a new, open museum. In that sense, what impact do you hope your project will have? Should Maison Gbegbe and HubCity establish their own metaverse with flat power structures and limited access to knowledge? Or is the process of digitalization simply an extension of existing models and systems, providing a false sense of change?

AUGUSTO GERARDI ROUSSET Part of "Maison Gbegbe—Exchanges and invisible Entanglements" involved a collaboration with students at a Togolese university. It was in discussions with one of those students, Adja Ablavi, that we recognized a potential change to Restitution DAO, an adjustment to how it might operate. Some of the ~~objects~~ created within a spiritual or sacred context and housed in various museum collections—they also appear in online image archives—do not specify the ~~objects~~' place of origin or only provide a physical description of it as opposed to its authentic name or any in-depth information. This led to the insight that the Restitution DAO could serve as a platform for revisiting and updating archives. With the support of researchers and traditional knowledge keepers, an NFT with the true name of the ~~artifact~~ could be created. This authentic name and information would remain undisclosed until the institution that took or holds the ~~object~~ acquires the NFT.

MATHILDE TER HEIJNE I wonder if Ewe people in Togo, particularly traditional knowledge practitioners and those in this particular belief system, see value in these kinds of online facsimiles of cultural assets. Is the idea of correcting false information about these treasures enough? How could traditional knowledge contribute to the understanding of these assets without revealing their secrets? There's also the issue of environmental impact. NFT artworks have become very popular in certain collector circles, but they have also generated a lot of controversy for their huge carbon footprint, for instance. How do you aim to mitigate that?

AUGUSTO GERARDI ROUSSET Right. So, to address your first question, there have been a lot of interesting discussions with members of the UCTT, for example.[6] Taking those into consideration, my impression is that even if there is strong resistance to the idea of making *physical* copies of these ~~objects~~, and although many in this community may not necessarily see value in the NFT itself, they do see inherent value in what it represents overall. What we are proposing here is a system that at the very least promotes dialogue about the return of extremely spiritually valuable assets—dialogue that advances African interests *as they define* them and would enable African-led projects to enter into this discussion on their own terms, with their own currency. Without dialogue, there is virtually no chance of getting these ~~objects~~ back. My sense is that anything that facilitates Africa's economic and cultural sovereignty, that helps this kind of rebalancing, is worth doing. It is also an opportunity to gain financial resources that can be reinvested in projects of importance to the community. I would also mention that the central advantage of the Restitution DAO lies in its creation of two separate spaces for dialogue: The first is dedicated to discussions within the DZI. It facilitates ongoing review and an exchange of ideas between its members, which can serve as a source of internal knowledge. The second is for negotiations and discussions between the DZI and the colonial institutions that have taken possession of these ~~objects~~. Our hope is that a DAO or legal entity with the ability to harness technology—thereby enhancing communication, fostering relationships, and shifting mindsets in the process—would allow for less limited discourse around these issues. It could open doors for a dialogue that exists apart from nationalistic ideologies, political parties, or legal institutions.

As for the carbon footprint, this is of course a huge consideration. It's true that minting and transferring NFTs can be extremely energy intensive, but it doesn't have to be. Without going too deep into the technical aspects, NFTs created exclusively using what's called proof-of-stake mechanisms for blockchains (as opposed to proof-of-work) tend to be more eco-friendly, since they consume less energy overall. Our NFTs would be minted exclusively on proof-of-stake blockchains. We're also looking into developing assets that can help mitigate the impact of emissions on the environment. We could also imagine fine-tuning our approach to incorporate investments in renewable energy, energy conservation initiatives, and cutting-edge sustainable technology that will help decrease pollution levels in the atmosphere.

I think it's important to note that the currency system we've sketched here is also just the beginning of a larger dialogue. Our concept will continue to evolve as we learn more about the currency, what kinds of NFTs should be produced, and how these can best reflect the particular needs of this community. I think it's all about African innovation and finding new, fresh approaches to issues of restitution, rebalancing, healing the colonial wound, and understanding the postcolonial policies of the present.

1 The Open Restitution Project is "an Africa-led project seeking to open up access to information on the restitution of African material culture and human ancestors, to empower all stakeholders involved to make knowledge-based decisions." Open Restitution Africa, "About the Project," https://openrestitution.africa

2 UNESCO defines digital heritage as "made up of computer-based materials of enduring value that should be kept for future generations. Digital heritage emanates from different communities, industries, sectors and regions. Not all digital materials are of enduring value, but those that are require active preservation approaches if continuity of digital heritage is to be maintained." UNESCO, "Concept of Digital Heritage," https://en.unesco.org/ themes/information-preservation/digital-heritage/concept-digital-heritage

3 MuseumFutures Africa is "a pan-African, people-centered cultural project that works with museums across the continent to test, explore and study potentials for new formats of African museology." MuseumFutures Africa, https://museum-futures.com

4 African Digital Heritage is "a non-profit organization working at the intersection of culture and technology to promote holistic digital practice within African cultural heritage." African Digital Heritage, "About Us," https://africandigitalheritage. org/aboutus/

5 The Network for Digital Humanities in Africa "was born out of the workshop Digital Humanities: the perspective of Africa, a satellite event of DH2019. The workshop (funded by the Lorentz Center, CLARIN ERIC and other sponsors) took place from 1-5 July 2019, in the week before DH2019. The event aimed at the articulation of developments in the field of digital humanities (DH) in Africa. The workshop participants and facilitators went to host a special booth on Digital Humanities in Africa, presented papers, and participated actively during the ADHO 2019 conference in Utrecht." Network for Digital Humanities in Africa, "Who Are We?" https://dhafrica.blog

6 See "Hopes, Wishes, and Expectations: Discussion Among Members of the UCTT and Their Invited Guests" in this volume, 83.



↗ At a 2021 workshop organized by art&dialogue e.V. and the UCTT, hounans spoke about the practice of forging and selling Ewe cultural capital, which they condemn. Copies of Ewe cultural assets purchased by Franz, Duke of Bavaria, for his collection of African ceramics were used as a starting point for the discussion. Mami Wata hounans discussed the fact that the originals were not made to be seen by a wider public, how to communicate with the new owner, whether restitution is an option, and if so, how to demand it.



Painting Maison Gbegbe

Musquiqui Chihying and Gregor Kasper



→ As part of envisioning the future of Maison Gbegbe, young people from Agouegan transformed the raw concrete exterior of Maison Gbegbe into a vibrant canvas. Roots of the gbegbe plant and the snakes of Vodou serve as symbolic references in a painted network of colorful lines. Preparations for the painting of the white Maison Gbegbe were a collaboration between students from the University of Lomé and the University of the Arts in Berlin. Led by artists Gregor Kaspar, Musquiqui Chihying and Gregor Kasper, the workshop took place between May 5 and 7, 2022 where it was held as part of Gbegbe Days in Agouegan. It was realized within the framework of the project "Maison Gbegbe—Exchanges and Invisible Entanglements."





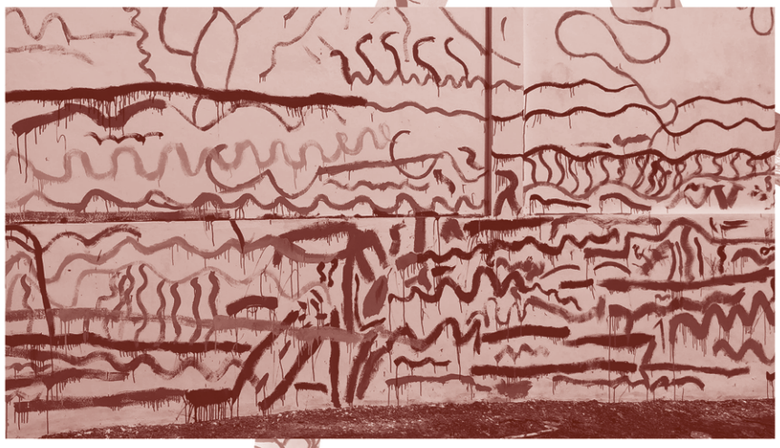




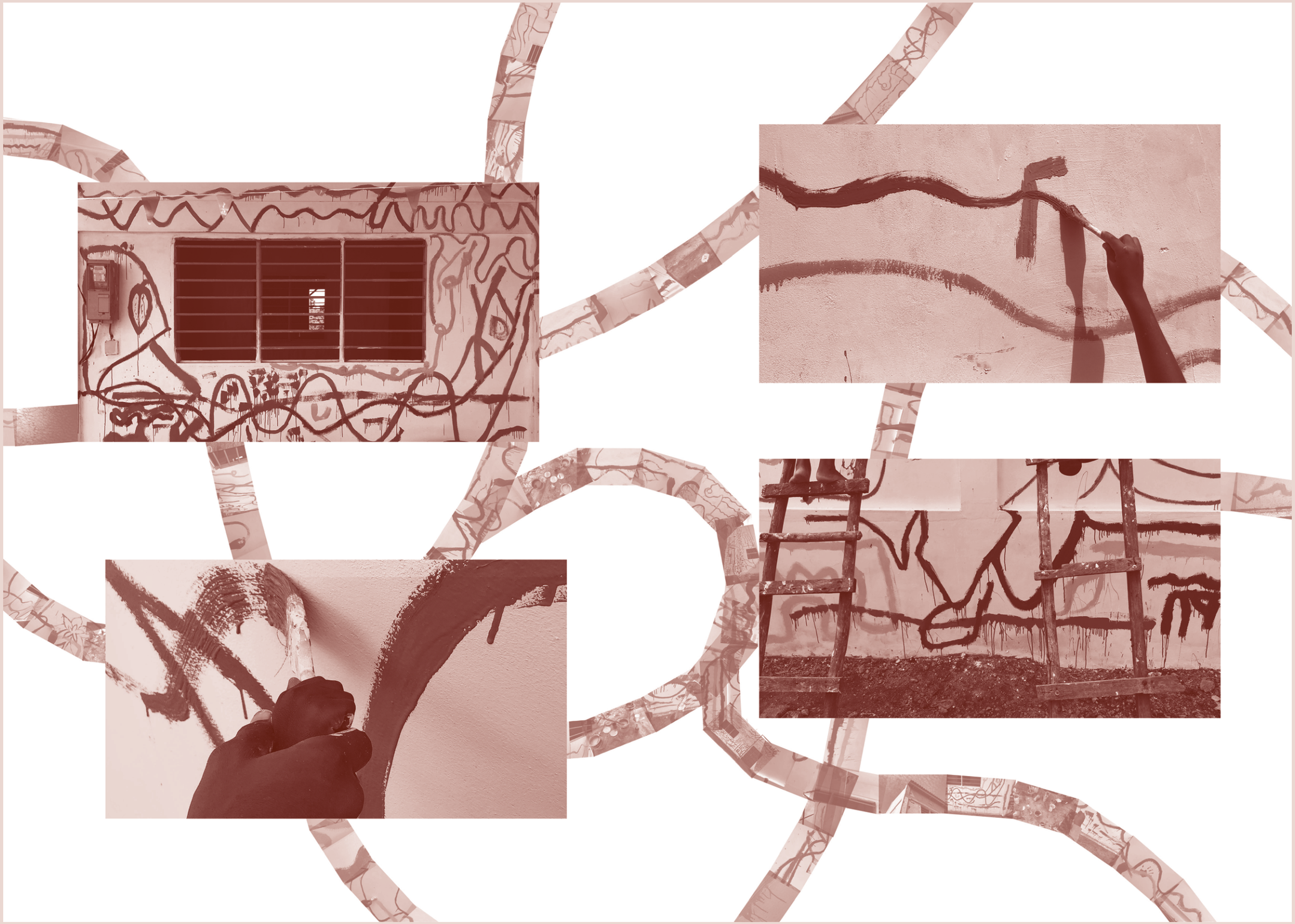





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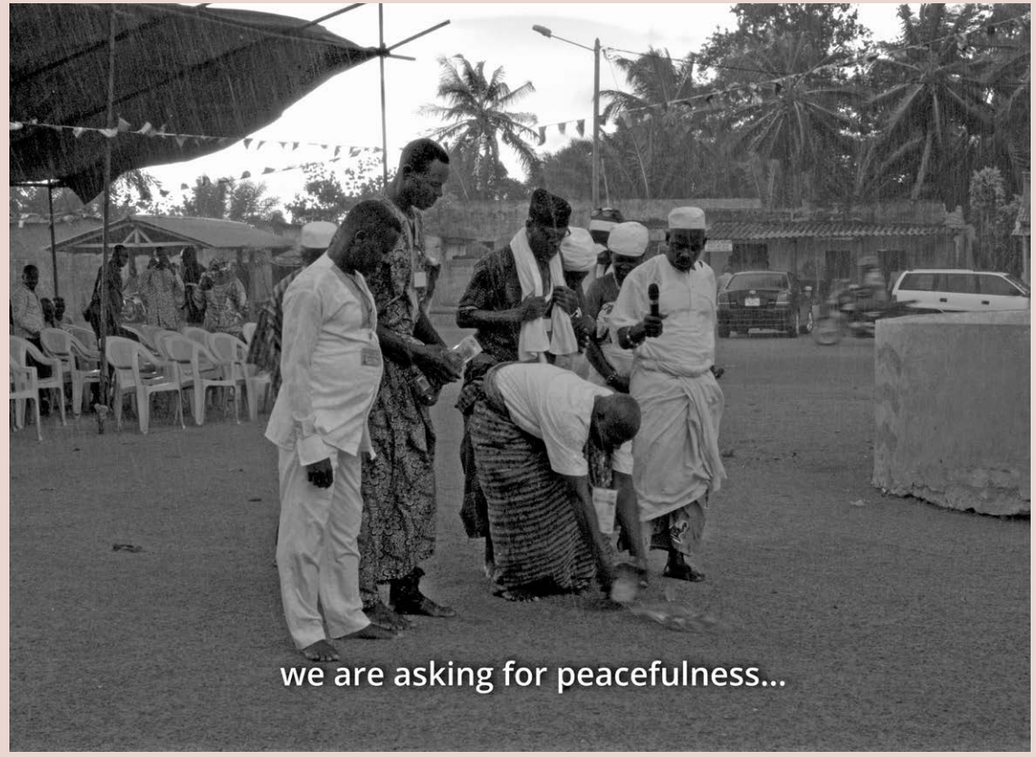


↑ Workshop by dancers Chis Nons and IVALMOK, Gbegbe Days, 2022.

↑ As part of the two-day painting workshop, all participants were encouraged to download a stop-motion video app to create a collaborative video. Composition by the artists.

Artists in Dialogue

Amy Patton in conversation with Mathilde ter Heijne



→ Bokonon Anani Gangalizo, shown with other members of the UCTT, invokes local spirits and those of the four elements at a public opening ceremony for Gbegbe Days in Agouegan, 2022.

↓ Pre-configuration committee member Anani Sanouvi introducing his thoughts on Maison Gbegbe as it relates to African cosmologies at an online conference during Gbegbe Days.



AMY PATTON You and I are both artists and have collaborated in various scenarios and configurations, most recently in the context of art&dialogue. Reading through this publication and familiarizing myself with the goals of Maison Gbegbe, I was struck by the group's decision to approach the issue of restitution with a participatory art-based research model rather than, say, more conventional activism or even just a collection of essays. Could you comment on that choice? The reason I'm asking is that, so far, it seems the most effective work in this area has been at the academic or political level—with governments commissioning reports from scholars and then acting based on those findings (Bénédicte Savoy and Felwine Sarr's 2020 report being the most prominent example). What distinguishes this project from some of the participatory art projects we've looked at in the past? What is the main benefit of performance or participatory art in this context, why take this approach?

MATHILDE TER HEIJNE I think one main difference between this project and others I've been involved with is the extreme intercultural aspect here—this idea of creating a kind of contact zone in Togo and the high level of translation that entails, both linguistic and cultural. Maison Gbegbe is, of course, closely tied to the idea of restitution and the return of sacred ~~objects~~, but for me, it's also very much a knowledge-sharing project. The goal is to create a kind of home, as Rossila [Goussanou] put it: a space for everyone, a cultural space where anyone can come to access certain types of knowledge, including spiritual knowledge. Of course that also means sensitizing ourselves to the types of knowledge that the traditional knowledge keepers say they want to share as opposed to what necessarily has to be kept secret, for example. It means feeling out what kinds of relationships are even possible between these different knowledge systems. Everyone involved has different ways of activating certain discourses and making them a reality...

AMY PATTON And by "reality," you of course mean many different realities...

MATHILDE TER HEIJNE Absolutely. The group of people we've met and are working with on this project is very diverse. It's also very dynamic, I would say. It consists of people from many different backgrounds, with a wide range of expertise, responding to very

different cosmologies... Everyone involved also has their own way of working and their own priorities in terms of what they want to see as an outcome. Some of us have Afrodiasporic or African backgrounds, I'm of course a white European, there are also Africans who have studied or currently live in Europe, people from other continents, traditional knowledge keepers, those with a more Western, academic frame of reference, etc... As a result, we've spent a lot of time reflecting on our respective positions in the project, thinking about who we are, what we want, and how we might work together. It's also about trying to identify where the incompatibilities and contradictions are, and exploring how we can complement each other in terms of what we bring to the collaboration.

AMY PATTON So basically you have this very diverse group of people coming together to work on a project that they care about, but then they realize that they also talk and think in very different ways. And yet they want to work together, or they have to work together. That seems like an interesting starting point. I appreciate how the project seems to accept the coexistence of multiple meanings. That it emphasizes a kind of multiplicity of meaning-making over making authoritative claims...

MATHILDE TER HEIJNE Yes. My impression—going back to something you mentioned before—is that traditional scientific or academic work, as you say, is not really collaborative in that sense. Or even if the research process is participatory or collaborative, the final product is always a book or a text in a journal: a text-privileging format that adheres to certain academic or scientific rules that are actually very, very rigid and hierarchical. Discourse circulated in that way reaches a very select audience. There's not much room for the spirituality of the author in that context, much less for sensory or embodied knowledge. I think this format we've chosen for Maison Gbegbe offers more space for all of that—not that it is easy to work with all these moving parts! (Laughs) I, all of us, struggled a lot with the process. We struggled to articulate our goals for the project and to articulate our concerns to others in the group and to everyone else involved. I think it's important to talk about these kinds of difficulties, to be transparent about them. I'd also say this model that we have chosen, a kind of heterotopic model, is super time and resource intensive. It takes years, maybe even decades of work. It requires a lot of mutual support, but also support from people outside the project, from government officials, from funders, and so on. It's a hard process and a slow one.

Maybe slower than writing a report, for example. But it can also produce different, in my opinion very valuable and interesting results!

AMY PATTON There's also the personal aspect, I suppose, or the interpersonal aspect? You mentioned earlier that people in the project have different priorities. There are different temperaments and personalities involved. We've talked about this before, I think, in conversations about feminism and group dynamics, the fact that in any group situation or collaboration you can have certain individuals who, consciously or unconsciously, will sideline others in the group, make their work invisible...

MATHILDE TER HEIJNE Of course, well, that's always something you have to watch out for. I don't even think people always do it consciously, sometimes it's just force of habit. I also think it's something that happens regardless of cultural background, in basically any collaborative context. The question is, how do you deal with it? How do you deal with the problems that come from, for example, expectations being too high or judgments being made too quickly? How do you deal with triggering information? There are a lot of ethical considerations in a project like this, and all kinds of conflicts come up. I think the most important thing is to keep the group engaged. People have to stay willing to work things out on the ground.

AMY PATTON I suppose what I'm really asking is, how do you make sure that you're not reproducing the same kinds of colonial structures that you're trying to disrupt?

MATHILDE TER HEIJNE That's an important question and basically what's on our minds every day, which is why it's so difficult. Of course, we can all have a tendency to reproduce these systems without even being aware of it. All of us have decided that it's really important to be open, to keep the dialogue open, and to basically address issues and concerns as they come up. We try to be hypervigilant and also actively solicit the opinions of hypervigilant people around us, we've done workshops and listening sessions that have lasted for hours on end. We've also really prioritized local concerns, so that it's the stakeholders in Agouegan who have veto power over everything we do. We know that we're working within an unequal power dynamic that we have to be aware of,

and I mean all the time. So it's risky in that way. By that I mean there is always a risk that you might get hurt in the process or that you might inadvertently hurt others...

AMY PATTON Risky but also rewarding...

MATHILDE TER HEIJNE Yes. And in this case, the reward is the process itself. The process and access to this traditional knowledge to the extent that its keepers will allow it to be translated. That seems essential. We, that is, humans in general, cannot afford to lose this knowledge of the cosmos. Nor can we assume that we will ever be able to truly grasp it, and certainly we will never have any kind of ownership over it, now or in the future. That's also a reality we have to honor, a force we have to embrace, work with, make room for. We must also find ways to make it work for us. We've had to practice resilience, patience with each other, and forgiveness, because of course there were many misunderstandings. Of course, I work to create opportunities for change, but it's often frustrating because you can't change the world all at once, and sometimes you just have to sit with your discomfort in the face of unequal opportunities and structures. I'm sure everyone in the project has thought about quitting at some point, and some have. I feel fortunate that there were those who told me not to drop out when I might have—who wanted me to continue...

AMY PATTON Speaking of dropping out, I think maybe one advantage of this model is that people can have different levels of commitment. People can leave the project at any point or drop out and come back a year later, they can help organize or share something they want to share. Maybe they just attend one workshop where they share their ideas.

MATHILDE TER HEIJNE There are different levels of involvement that meet different needs.

AMY PATTON Right. I think that also helps to make sure that there are a lot of different perspectives coming in. But what makes it worthwhile, would you say? I understand that this is a slow kind of project. A hard kind of project. It involves a lot of complicated intercultural translation and cooperation, ethical considerations, economic and emotional costs on all sides. So where does the will to do it come from? What's the motivation?

MATHILDE TER HEIJNE Curiosity? I think for me the motivation is basically that: curiosity. I'm interested in open-ended outcomes; I'm interested in seeing and learning something new. Going back to something we touched on before, the difference between a more text-based, scholarly approach and an art-based, participatory approach... I think a lot of artists, maybe a lot of people in general, are interested in the materiality of things and matter pulled from unknown sources, as I call it. There is an interest in movement, sound, form, and, on the other hand, everything that can be translated into that. As an artist, I go into a project wanting to transform, but also be transformed myself. There's a desire to engage with things that cannot be expressed in words. Artistic production is something that involves your entire body and mind, your entire physical, emotional or spiritual makeup. It also engages a different kind of audience.

AMY PATTON I suppose traditional academia is more positivistic in that sense, or at least there are echoes of that. It's about proving a thesis, lining up the sources and the facts to make your point. I think participatory arts-based methods have the potential to challenge certain mindsets and conventions. They can act as a kind of disruptor, causing people to re-evaluate what constitutes research...

MATHILDE TER HEIJNE Sure. And I mean, of course, there is a lot of fascinating and important work being done in academic circles as well, especially when it comes to sort of unpacking colonial violence and trying to do something about it, trying to change museum structures, returning cultural and sacred ~~objects~~ to their original context, and so on. But I don't think you can necessarily talk about a flat hierarchy when it comes to these kinds of authored texts. This format also has a history, and colonial violence is part of it; a lot of scholarship from past centuries to the present has been very effective in normativizing the valuation and devaluation of groups of people based on very unequal power relations. As we know, this also comes up in groups doing participatory arts-based research. But maybe, in this case, the participants shape the outcome together in a really tangible way. They co-create this space or contact zone through a long process of trial and error. A lot of work goes into leveling these kinds of hierarchies.

AMY PATTON I suppose, again, that's where translation enters into it. In terms of the trial-and-error process...

MATHILDE TER HEIJNE Or rather, the need for translation. As I said in the beginning, there are several kinds of translation going on at the same time. One is that we all speak different languages. But there's also the translation that comes from being open to a different cosmology, a different system of thought, or a different way of being in the universe. Everyone is learning from each other all the time, and of course translating for others on the outside as well. There's also the aspect of translating between very different priorities and ways of thinking about time and the future. UCTT members, for example, have an impulse to conserve—to preserve the ancient technologies and knowledge of the past. They also want it to be passed on to future generations, but without compromising its mystery or power. Their source is the spirit world and what it dictates, and they are the main translators in this case. As I said before, they also decide what is possible to translate at all. Perhaps the most difficult kind of translation, at least for me, is the translation of the spiritual realm. I can't say that I always know how to translate my own experiences, which don't seem to fit and could easily fall into cultural appropriation. But does that mean I shouldn't share my experiences at all, that I should pretend they don't exist? That doesn't seem very ingenuous either. What is the difference between an artist and a spiritual worker, and where do I cross the line?

AMY PATTON So would you describe yourself as more of a translator here? Or how would you define your role? Are you there more as an organizer, or...

MATHILDE TER HEIJNE I've been told that I'm a driver of the project, that I keep things going organizationally and in terms of sort of wrangling resources. I certainly helped shape it, I influenced its design. But I don't feel the need to control the outcome. I kind of let the project run its course. Another big difference between this project and some of the others I have worked on is that this is not my artwork! I wanted to mention that before and really want to emphasize that. It's more about giving space to others, allowing the other participants to pursue their own interests and agendas while working together towards a common goal. We co-determine that goal. I see myself as a kind of motor for the project, but not, as I said, the person who steers it. I'm not an omnipotent being who knows everything. I'm someone who has the ability to organize resources, financial resources in some cases, but also artistic resources, and I can help bring people together. I'm also a person who has a lot of experience with collaborations, and I've learned a lot about them the hard way. That knowledge is also a resource I can offer, something I can add to the pile. Others have their own knowledge and resources that they bring into it. I think the process here has a lot to do with being expansive and interactive, staying flexible and open.

AMY PATTON In art&dialogue we've spoken a lot about the question of what dialogue is, and how the development and acceptance of very different ways of being in dialogue could be used to make new kinds of decisions that could help redistribute power and lead to positive change. Would you say Maison Gbegbe is an embodiment of that approach?

MATHILDE TER HEIJNE Sure! Of course it's all still in progress and there have been stumbles along the way, but that's where the impulse comes from. Dialogue with other people, with other frames of reference and ways of thinking, other cosmologies, ontologies, and epistemologies—also with spirits.

AMY PATTON Experimenting and reviewing, process over product... Also against this idea that there is a knowable "truth."

MATHILDE TER HEIJNE Exactly.


LA FOI AFRICAINE

↑ Residents of Agouegan, UCTT members, and high-level political and cultural officials during a participatory dance at the public opening ceremony for Gbegbe Days in Agouegan, 2022. Dancers and drummers actively transform static public space into a substance that contains and releases energy.

BIOGRAPHIES

ANANI DODJI SANOUVI (TG/POR) Anani works as a transmedia artist, host-sentinel of visible and invisible movements, rhythms, and interactions between non-humans and humans alike. Trained as a choreographer, dancer and teacher, they were born in Togo, grew up in Gabon, lived in Senegal, Belgium, and the Netherlands, and currently reside in Portugal and Brazil. Sanouvi's work has received numerous awards including those from UNESCO, Central Africa; the Sacatar Foundation; the Rolex Mentor and Protégé Prize; and the Erika Ferreira Prize for Creation and Development in Niterói, Rio de Janeiro-Brazil. They have presented their work in theaters, festivals, museums, and cultural centers around the world. Sanouvi has collaborated with contemporaries including Peter Sellars and Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, and worked with conductor Gustavo Dudamel, music director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic at the Walt Disney Concert Hall. They recently gave a lecture, exhibition, and hands-on workshop at the Berlin Open Lab related to their life project MULTI-TRANSLATION. They are currently pursuing an MFA in Dance at the University of the Arts (UArts) in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

NADJA OFUATEY-ALAZARD (DE) holds a degree in journalism. She is a cultural activist, curator, production manager, journalist, presenter, and filmmaker. Recent projects include the event and film series *ReMIX. Africa in Translation* (2016/17) and the book publication *Narrating African FutureS: In(ter)ventions and Agencies in African and African Diasporic Fiction* (co-edited with Susan Arndt, Taylor & Francis, 2018). She co-directed the annual BIGSAS Festival of African and African-Diasporic Literatures at the University of Bayreuth from 2011 to 2017. In 2017 she became project manager and co-director/artistic director at Each One Teach One (EOTO) e.V. in Berlin, where she organizes AFROLUTION, an annual literature and art festival. She also curates In[ter]ventions, or discursive and performative formats, for Dekoloniale Memory Culture in the City, a five-year collaborative project started in 2020.

ROSSILA GOUSSANOU (FR) is an architect and a doctor of anthropology. Her research focuses on the renewal of the reading grids of heritage sites such as museums and places of memory, particularly from a non-Western perspective. In February 2022, Rossila started a postdoctoral fellowship at the Musée Théodore Monod in Dakar within the framework of "Re-connecting 'Objects': Epistemic Plurality and Transformative Practices In and Beyond Museums," an international research project coordinated by Bénédicte Savoy. In parallel, Rossila has been involved in several projects related to the valorization of African cultures, including exhibitions. She co-curated "Afrocity, Urbanités enchantées" at ENSA Nantes (France, 2021) and conducted a pre-figuration study for "Sur la Route des Chefferies du Cameroun," an exhibition at the Musée du Quai Branly (France, 2022). She has been a visiting professor at the École Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture de Nantes since 2016 and at the École Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture de Maurice since 2021.

MESSANH AMEDEGNATO (TG/DE) was chosen as a child to succeed his father as a keeper of traditional knowledge and diviner in Togo. In 1996, he moved to Germany where he worked for many years as a hotel manager. In 2014, he was ordained Hounougbo Bahousou Amedegnato in Agouegan, Togo. He is the president of the Union des Cultes Traditionels du Togo (UCTT), an organization of elders and healers that he founded in 2015. Since then, he travels frequently between Togo and Germany. The UCTT is based in Agouegan, located in the eastern part of the former Kingdom of Guin (Glidj). The Canton of Agouegan, consisting of seven villages, is currently headed by Canton Chief Gê Fio Foli Kponve Alofa. He has been a member of art&dialogue in Berlin since 2016.

SENAME KOFFI AGBODJINOU (TG/FR) is an author, tech activist and award-winning entrepreneur. With a background in industrial design, architecture and anthropology, he now curates exhibitions and gives lectures and workshops worldwide. He serves as a juror for various art projects, foundations, and corporate boards. He is a co-founder of L'Africaine d'architecture, a collaborative platform for experimentation and research on African architecture and urbanism, and of HubCity/WoeLabs, a network of Togolese technology hubs aimed at promoting equity in the face of the digital revolution. Sename works with concepts that incorporate indigenous elements into modern design, which he then implements as an inventor, designer, and entrepreneur at the level of products, buildings, and urban planning. His work develops alternative visions around issues of holistic architecture, primitive computationalities, democracy in technology, and urban sustainability. His work has been recognized by the African Innovation Summit (2014), the Global Fab Award (2014), the Ashoka Foundation (Fellow since 2017), and the African Leadership Award (2018), among others.

MATHILDE TER HEIJNE (FR/DE) is a Dutch artist and professor of performance and time-based media at the University of the Arts in Berlin. Ter Heijne's often collaborative and participatory projects and works explore the intersections between archaeology, anthropology, sociology, and philosophy, and are motivated by intersectional feminist theory. Her projects and works have been shown in numerous solo and group exhibitions in museums, galleries, video festivals and non-profit spaces, including MoMA PS1, New York; Singapore Art Museum; Hamburger Bahnhof—Nationalgalerie der Gegenwart, Berlin; Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Zurich; Berlinische Galerie, Berlin; Kunsthalle Nürnberg; Museum für Neue Kunst, Freiburg; LagosPhoto; and the Shanghai Biennale, as well as ethnological museums such as the GRASSI Museum für Völkerkunde in Leipzig, the Humboldt Lab at the Ethnological Museum Dahlem in Berlin, and the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam. She is a founding member of art&dialogue and has been working with the Union des Cultes Traditionnels du Togo (UCTT) since its inception in 2015.

KAIJA KAITAVUORI (FI) is a Finnish art historian and museum educator. She has held senior positions at the Finnish National Gallery and for many years was head of education at the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma. Kaitavuori holds a Doctor of Philosophy from the Courtauld Institute, London. Her dissertation, supervised by Julian Stallabrass (Courtauld) and Natalie Heinich (CNRS, Paris), examined participation in contemporary art. Based on her dissertation, Kaitavuori published *The Participator in Contemporary Art: Social Relationships and Artistic Practice* (Bloomsbury, 2018). In the book she develops a four-group typology of participation that distinguishes different forms of engagement in contemporary art. Kaitavuori has researched and written extensively on contemporary art practices, the social context of art, museums and their audiences, and the role of art institutions as public spaces. She is currently a lecturer at the Academy of Fine Arts in Helsinki, where she teaches graduate students in the university's exhibition studies program.

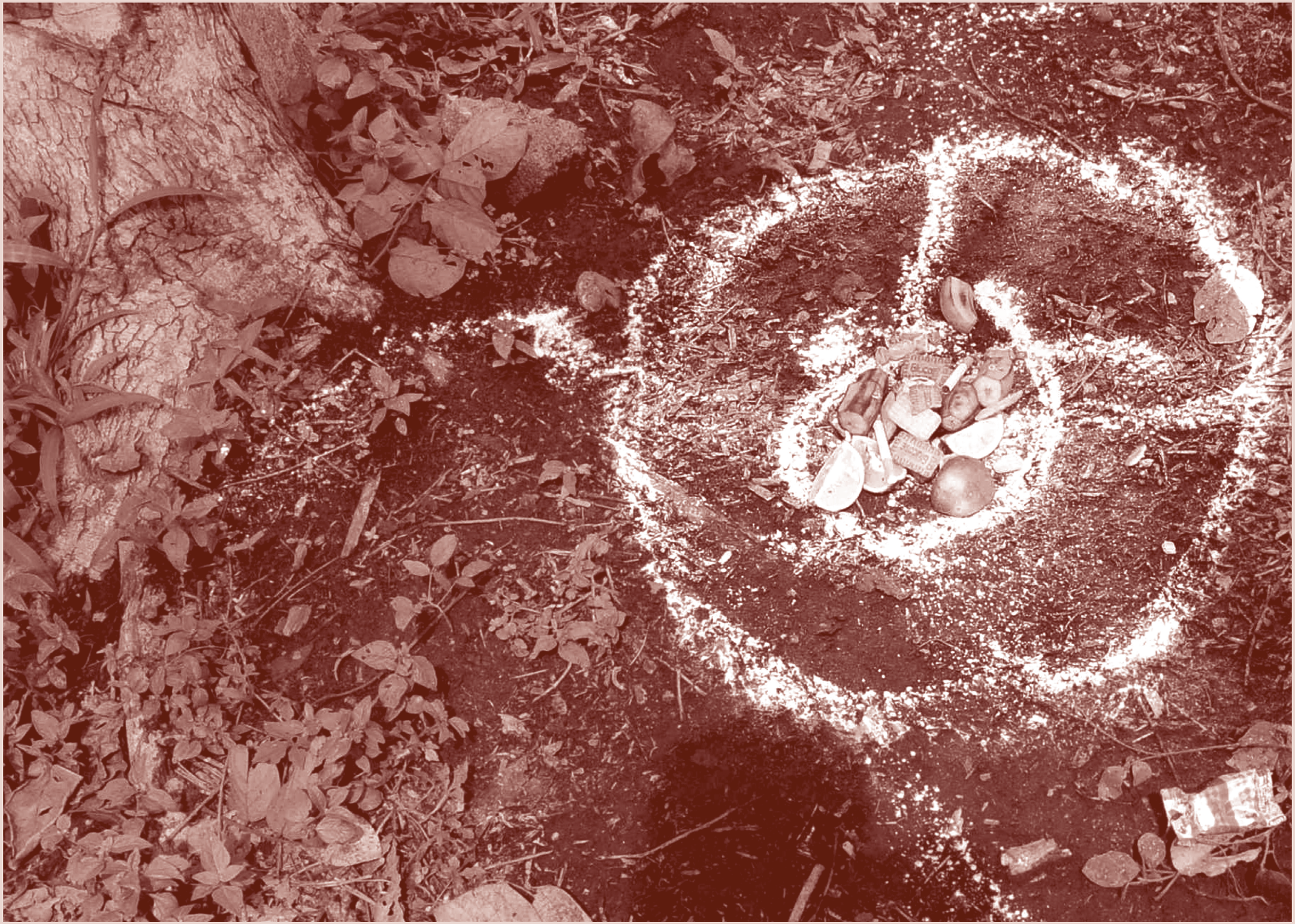
AUGUSTO GERARDI ROUSSET (VE/DE) is an artist and researcher investigating the relationship between art, life, politics and digital media. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Media and Sound Engineering and has worked on a number of projects related to video art and digital media. These include the digitization of the Sala Mendoza, one of Venezuela's largest video archives, and a text for the Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros on the multimedia event Imagen de Caracas. Gerardi has also lectured on topics such as net.art in Venezuela and its political dimension, and the history of the relationship between art and computers in Venezuela. His work has been exhibited internationally, including in New York, Paris, Berlin, and Caracas. In addition to his artistic work, Gerardi has collaborated with the European Union and the British Council Venezuela on a project called *Busca Tu Espacio* (Find Your Space), which aims to reduce violence among young people. Gerardi has also created live cinema sessions with Nicolás Gerardi to revive forgotten films. These live cinema sessions have been included in the program of several international festivals and programs, including Japan Week at the Japanese Embassy and the Hallyu Festival at the Korean Embassy in Caracas.

MUSQUIQUI CHIHYING (TW/DE) is a filmmaker and visual artist based in Taipei and Berlin. His work explores cultural and social identities constructed through the flow and circulation of audiovisual elements in physical and virtual space-time. Specializing in the use of multimedia such as film and sound, he investigates the human condition and the environmental system in the age of global capitalization, and is committed to exploring and researching issues of subjectivity in contemporary social culture in the Global South. His work has been shown at various international institutions and film festivals, including the 72nd Berlinale International Film Festival (2022), Art Sonje Center in Seoul (2021), Centre Pompidou in Paris (2020), International Film Festival Rotterdam (2020), Taipei Biennal 2016, and the 10th Shanghai Biennale (2014). He was shortlisted for the 2019 Berlin Art Prize and named the winner of the 2019 Loop Barcelona Video Art Production Award, given by the Han Nefkens Foundation in collaboration with the Fundació Joan Miró. He is a member of the Taiwanese art group Fuxinghen Studio and founder of the Research Lab of Image and Sound.

GREGOR KASPER (DE) was born in East Germany and grew up during the post-communist transformation processes after the Cold War. Using a variety of media including film and video, sound and installation, often in collaborative and participatory constellations, his artistic practice focuses on the construction and mediation of history and memory, exploring the interrelationships between personal approaches and social counter/hegemonic narratives and power relations. His work has been presented internationally in exhibitions, screenings and film festivals, including the Berlinale International Film Festival (Forum Expanded); Centre Pompidou, Paris; SAVVY Contemporary, Berlin; RAVI Biennale, Yaoundé; Times Art Center, Berlin; Goethe-Institut, Beijing / Yaoundé / Windhoek; Ostrale Biennale, Dresden; Museum of Contemporary Art, Taipei; Akademisches Kunstmuseum, Bonn; Image Forum Festival, Tokyo; iRep Film Festival, Lagos; and Woelabs, Lomé. He currently resides in Berlin, Germany.

AMY PATTON (US/DE) is an American artist, filmmaker, editor, and translator. She has edited dozens of publications on art theory, art history, urban studies, literature, and philosophy, and published over twenty book translations, including an acclaimed translation of Peter Sloterdijk's *Terror from the Air*. Her films and artworks have been featured in solo and group exhibitions at film festivals, museums, and art institutions in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere. Originally from Austin, Texas, Amy holds degrees in Art History and New Media Art from the University of Texas at Austin and a degree in Experimental Media Design from the University of the Arts in Berlin. She is a founding member of art&dialogue with Mathilde ter Heijne.

→ Ritual during a Mami Wata ceremony in Agouegan.





↑ Monday market on the banks of the river in Agouegan.

Imprint

Gbegbetopia—*Maison Gbegbe: An Art-Based Community and Spiritual Center*

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Maison Gbegbe is a cultural center in Togo that aims to bring together different cultures, traditions, religions, and knowledge systems, and to create a space for exchange, reconciliation, and critical thinking. The project is a collaborative effort involving members of the Union des Cultes Traditionnels du Togo (UCTT) in Agouegan, L'Africaine d'Architecture, art&dialogue e.V., and a pre-configuration committee. Maison Gbegbe uses artistic research as a collaborative process to address ecological and social crises and to shift paradigms in the way people engage with knowledge and knowledge transfer. The project proposes to sensitize international audiences to other knowledge systems beyond Western epistemology, and to provide opportunities for locals and others to reconnect with and rediscover traditional African cosmologies along the Togolese coast. Maison Gbegbe is intended to serve as a space for exchange and dialogue with the goal of preserving and transmitting traditional and spiritual knowledge. It hopes to provide a place for returned and restituted West African cultural and spiritual assets to be reintegrated into an appropriate context. This publication provides an overview of the process of and motivations behind its creation.

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