LES HISTOIRES DU PEUPLE TOGO ET DU RAIL

BOOKLET
PHOTO EXHIBITION

PAKHUIS DE ZWIJGER

30/06 - 21/07
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IN CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER,
STARTING FROM THE ENTRANCE

IMPACT JOURNEY
PHOTOGRAPHER STEYN HOOGAKKER
Aisha lives close to Kpalime and sells water(sachets) for a living. As the margins are very small, she has to work hard to have some net-income at the end of the day. With the small amount of money she earns she supports her family and likes to continue her education one day. Her family is originally from the North of Togo and is a devoted muslim.

Six weeks later Stan and Steyn met her again in Kpalime. She had a big smile on her face and told them she was looking frequently to her photo, the polaroid.

Pure water is the common name for the little plastic sachets of drinking water that can be found in every corner in Togo. 500 ml. of water packaged neatly in a plastic sleeve. Unfortunately sachets are one of the biggest contributors to the plastic waste pollution - not only in Togo, but in many parts of (West) Africa.

Stan Reveil is his artist name, while his native name is Dodji Ametepe Besse, having spent most of his years in Kpalime, Togo. He studied at the Lome University, where he graduated in international relations, with a focus on African politics and history. Currently, he is an activist and founder of Culture Together.

His ambition is to share, learn and protect their culture from destruction. Stan repeatedly used the phrase: “my love is my religion.”

He thinks that: “everyone on this earth must have everything to be happy but depending on the mind, thus how we think and make our life. The life is so easy but the human make the life so difficult”

During the project one of his first question was “if human being wants to be near the nature and protect its cultural roots, or follow the road of technology and destroy the nature?”

Since his childhood Stan has felt a great urge to protect his continent and their ancestor religion, which is voodoo. He thinks that the people whom have lost their roots, will lose their future generations. Stan has occasional meetings with ‘kings’ / ‘chefs’ from other villages for a discussion and to gain a better understanding of his own cultural roots.
As an activist he constantly questions the status quo: “why do we still have to learn during in our early school times the history and geography cartography of our metropole [France]? We easily forget about our problems and do not think about ourselves, our culture.”

Stan made the application for the Dutch visa and supported his friend in the photography exhibition - Togo rail. Stan thinks this project is a great occasion to show his culture and country to the world and in particular to the people in the Netherlands.

In this particular photo Stan is swimming in the water and contemplates on the majestic beauty of nature. “He likes to swim as a fish.” Many people like to come here to change their mind and be near and want to be part of the nature: “we don’t have many things but we are near the nature and we are happy. This is African power.”

“The surroundings of Kpalime are lush and green with a mountain range and the occasional waterfall. Together with my brother we are in this very place to contemplate and ask nature to have a safe and healthy journey.”

James from Ghana, far right, and Ayao Wuilifun, second from the right.

“We shot an antelope this morning. After some rest we are currently heading our way to find another. There is a lot of game in this forest, we are very lucky today.”

As they were in a hurry to catch another antelope they didn’t have the time to talk: “we are lucky today, so we should ‘exploit’ these very moments to a maximum. I hope to see you one day again to continue this conversation…”

Due to one of the highest deforestation rates in the world, with estimations varying between 4.5 and 6 percent annually, the use and ‘production’ of non-timber forest products have severely decreased.

A high deforestation rate and steep growing demand for meat consumption is a poisonous cocktail contributing to future food insecurities.

‘THE HUNTING PARTY’
JAMES, AYAO AND FRIENDS
Lome, 2015: Steyn had just developed the photos for most of the people he photographed and was looking for Nadjombe. On arrival of that same spot, he asked around for Nadjombe, showing his photo. People loved the idea and Japh in particular.

Japh told him he was working on a different location in Lome. Japh offered him a ride on his bike to for a visit - Nadjombe was overwhelmed with emotions when handing over his image.

The two days after Japh helped Steyn to search for most of the people. The majority they could find.

This particular photo was taken two years ago in Hanoukopé at the beginning of the railroad in Togo, just like the two photos on the right.

In January Steyn found Japh again, but now on Facebook. A part of their conversation that day:

“All my respect and consideration, my brother. You know, it’s now that I remember you… it’s really a story. It really pleases me that you have a plan for Togo… I would definitely like to contribute to the success of your project… 1luv”

Just before his arrival in Togo, Japh wrote again:

“Hello my brother, how are you? I think you’re in full preparation to join us [in Togo]. I will invite you with open arms. Jah bless brother.”

Unfortunately they weren’t able to meet-up. At the moment Steyn arrived in Kpalime Japh was in Lome, when Steyn arrived in Lome Japh was in Kpalime. And on arrival in Kpalime he was in Lome again, waiting for his [awesome] minivan, the ‘Jah Kingdom’ to be fixed..”

Japh is a rastaman ‘pur sang’. The Psalms gave the Rastas the trademark name “Jah” for their hero and deity, Ras Tafari, better known as Emperor Haile Selassie I from Ethiopia. The title Jah is found once in the Psalms as an abbreviation for Jahweh.
‘LA COMMENCE’

JULIANNE CHRISTINE AND DAUGHTER PASCALINE

According to Julianne, the photos they Stan and Steyn took this day are “a great remembrance to our meeting.”, at the start of ‘Le Rail’ in Lome. She still has the pictures of two years ago and occasionally looks at them.

Julianne sells charcoal along the rail and works all day round. “Sometimes life is hard, especially when I don’t sell anything during the day, I have to ask other people around for some food. Many persons in this area need help.” Julianne works hard to find food for both of the children.

She migrated from Benin at an early age to live with her uncle to have a better future. She has been living ever since in Hanoukopé. Julianne has two marks in her face, that resembles her cultural roots, from Benin.

She remembered the day she followed Steyn, asking for the photos of her daughter. It was not a big surprise for her that he came back with the pictures, as he had promised to come back and provide her with some of the photos.

LAURENT DEGAN, 50

Laurent has a special way of greeting his friends - he gives a big-up with his right high, supporting his right elbow with his left hand.

Just try it!

He was overwhelmed to see Steyn again after two years and takes good care of the old photos. He kept on laughing and told them it was a very surreal moment – completely likewise!

Laurent is a painter, an artist living in Hanoukope, Lome. He is ‘into’ rastafarism and calls himself a rastaman and a warrior: “etre un guerrier, c’est guarentir un avenir meilleur. Being a warrior is a security for a better future.”

He has thirteen children. When they asked him why he had ‘chosen’ for thirteen children he replied with a smile: “I have many children, because I’d like to birth a village!”

Laurent kept on joking: “maybe you didn’t know but I’m the president of Togo. Next time you come visit me I will show you show the doc.”
Stan and Steyn met Justin and Albertine during their holiday period. Although Justin ‘only’ had his Geography exam, two months later, he was already preparing at the school. “I am very motivated.”

Justin is in the last class of primary school and his favourite subject is mathematics, “but I like most of my classes.” They asked him whether he liked his teacher, “sometimes the professor beats us when we do something wrong.”

Justin is doing a good job in school, he had a general average score of 144 / 180, which brings him the second place in his class.

What about your parents? “My mother is a vendor in the market.”

His sister is Albertine, whom is in the Fourth class of primary school. Albertine has a score of 74 and also takes the second place in her class.

In chalk one can read that “about 70 percent of the total African workforce, is active in the agricultural sector. The yields are relatively low and consist primarily of cereals (maize, rice, sorghum and millet) tubers (cassava, yam, taro, sweet potato) vegetables (beans, peas) and fruits.”

Both are very eager to learn and both acknowledge there are very motivated to study hard for a better future. The polaroids that were handed over were their first photos. Both were mesmerized..

Ps: Justin’s Geography studybook can be found somewhere in this exhibition space.
Sena is a fighter, a warrior. The thing he enjoys most in life is sports. He is a boxer and boxes for the Togolese national team. Sena had won all of his boxing matches so far, so we asked his secret:

"Je n'échoue jamais au combat, parce que je garde la tête haut."
"I never fail in battle, because I keep my head high."

Sena’s father is Kofi, a hardworking and respected man in their neighborhood. Sena’s dream is to become an international famous boxer, just like his example Mike Tyson.

Komi is a mechanic and according to the people around, a real handyman! He is relatively young, but he is full of stories. One was about the name of his village, Kévé.

“The name originated from a guy traveling from Notsé (Central Togo) to Kévé. This same guy was carrying a bag with all of his belongings. But then he lost his bag and had to return all the way. As he went back, he was lucky enough to find it. In his opinion this was destined.

He wanted to establish a village in exact the same spot, but he hadn’t got a name for that same place. Until he looked at his bag, which was tagged with the brand Kévé. And so it happened.”
Aicha was giggling as she told them she didn’t want to reveal her age. No worries they thought, that is to be respected.

So they asked about what she enjoyed in life: “I love the nature and the citylife of Lome.” Furthermore, Aicha is very happy to work in a laboratory in Lome.

At first she didn’t want any photo to be taken, but after offering, to also provide her with a picture, she was more than happy.

The pose on the photo was exactly the way they met her, walking by... no pose, whatsoever, just like any other of the photos taken.

The Germans built the largest part of the railroad in the beginning of the 20st century, until WW I, when the French and British armies defeated the German colonizers and took over. The railroad played a key-role in the relatively easy defeat of the “German army” – Hundreds of Togolese forced by a minority of German officers.

In 1914 German Togo was split into French Togo, where the other ‘half’ merged with Gold Coast (British) - Ghana nowadays.

Throughout Togo you can find smaller and larger trainstations, with the occasional train wagons for passenger- and goods transportation. Until the 1990s, there were lots of societies related to ‘Le Rail Togp’. From cotton to cement.

Lots of people shared their stories about the history of the railroad: from forced labor during the German occupation (and questionable French behaviour), to stories of connectedness, pride and flourishing of the local economies.

Specific stories on the history of the railroad will be shared throughout social media.
Akouvi Awidong, 28

Akouvi (Wednesday born in Ewe) has three children. The first one was born when she was sixteen years old. She sells oranges and rice and she loves doing business, to work as a seller and secretary in the local hospital.

Akouvi regularly visits the hairstylist. This new hair style will take up to three hours, with three people’s work and will cost her about 3,000 CFA (4.50 euro).

Koudo Agbessi, 20

Koudo is an electrician in Notsé. “My father taught me this job when I was about twelve years old.”

“At this moment the life is not treating me so well, but when there is time of ‘les fetes’, parties [such as: new year’s, Christmas and church parties] I have many customers and my income increases significantly. Everyone waits for their repairs to the very last moment.”

(Electronic) Repairshops can be found throughout Togo, as reparations are more common than in the Global North and lots of second- and third hand electronics are shipped to this part of the world.
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