

IMAGES DU DAHOMEY

EDMOND FORTIER ET LE COLONIALISME FRANÇAIS DANS LA TERRE DES VODUNS

The photographer Edmond Fortier was born in the Vosges (France) in 1862, but settled in Dakar, in the French West African colony of Senegal in the 1890s. He left a body of 4000 photos, mostly published in the form of picture postcards. The original negatives have not been found as yet, so studying his work entails collecting numerous objects that have been scattered far and wide over more than one hundred years in the form of correspondence and placing them in the correct order.

This book analyses a select number of pictures: photos shot in 1908 and 1909 in what was then the French colony of Dahomey. Fortier was forty-six at the time and already an expert photographer. He had travelled widely throughout West Africa, even visiting the remote city of Timbuktu, on the edge of the Sahara desert in 1906. As an independent professional, publisher and small businessman, he produced his picture postcards in France and sold them in his stationer's shop in Dakar to tourists who came ashore from transatlantic liners stopping over in the port and to Europeans living in Africa. Edmond Fortier made two trips to Dahomey, today's Republic of Benin, in 1908 and 1909. Tagging along with French colonial authorities, he left the capital of Senegal Dakar, where he lived, and started photographing the delegation's encounters with the peoples of Dahomey, including kings and ministers, recording ceremonies, celebrations and scenes from everyday life. All these pictures, which were originally produced simply as postcards, have now become important records of the period, from both the ethnographic and historical point of view, and gathering them all together is thus a thoroughly worthwhile enterprise. Even though Fortier was a foreigner who spent only a few days in Dahomey, his photographs – still relatively neglected by scholars – help broaden our understanding of Benin in the early 20th century. He himself probably often played a part in the situations depicted since, besides being the bearer of the very latest technology for recording and classifying "otherness", he was also an emblematic representative of the colonial overlord. At the same time, whether intentionally or not, his work provided an excellent record of the physical expressions of African culture and religion, thus contributing to the collective memory of this region's inhabitants. As will be seen, thanks to favourable conditions, Fortier was even able to photograph important Voodoo ceremonies. In addition, he also took snapshots of various places in the area, such as Cotonou, Ouidah, Allada, Abomey and Sakété. The daily life of the inhabitants is represented by a series of pictures of the market of Porto-Novo and of boats crossing Lake Nokoué.

Daniela Moreau is a historian. She has been making study trips to Africa since 1995, concentrating mainly on the Sahel and West Africa. She lives and works in São Paulo, Brazil, where she founded the NGO Casa das Áfricas, which she also ran for ten years. She is currently head of the Acervo Áfricaproject, which places at the disposal of research workers a collection of over 1500 examples of the material culture of contemporary Africa. Daniela Moreau began gathering and studying the photographs of Edmond Fortier (Celles-sur-Plaine, 1862 - Dakar, 1928) in 2003. *Fortier, photographe. De Conakry à Tombouctou* is her first book to be translated into French.



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