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## **The Case of Dr. Maclaud in Coastal Guinea: Re-Assessing Colonial Photography**

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“My goal was...to study the customs of the people who live in these different regions, in a word, to report to the colonial administration, a type of information manual intended to facilitate the execution of our protection in this part of our African domain.”<sup>1</sup>

In 1899, Dr. Charles Maclaud (1866-1933) returned to Paris for the first time in over eight years. The French doctor and colonial administrator had just left Conakry, Guinée française, where he served in a variety of scientific and administrative positions.<sup>2</sup> Between trips to visit family and to restock his medical and scientific supplies, Maclaud gave a speech to the Société de Géographie outlining the nature and progress of his work.<sup>3</sup> As described in the epigraph, Maclaud framed his research as a means of supporting the French colonial project.<sup>4</sup> He argued that the generalization of racial, cultural, and religious diversity would allow for “the greatest expansion of commercial movements” thereby making it easier for French officials to comprehend and navigate Afrique-Occidentale française (AOF).<sup>5</sup>

As a medical doctor, natural scientist, cartographer, and ethnographer, Maclaud sat at the center of many political and epistemological developments in late-nineteenth century France. In the decades following his speech, he published several articles that refined and elaborated upon his earlier arguments. These texts were paired with a large collection of natural specimens, material culture, maps, and photographs that he donated to Parisian museums.<sup>6</sup> Currently the largest collection of Maclaud’s photographs is held in the archives of the Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac.<sup>7</sup> The majority of these images were taken in Guinée française, Guinée

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<sup>1</sup> Maclaud, “La Guinée Française,” 501.

Original French, “Mon but était...d’étudier les mœurs des peuplades qui vivent dans ces différents pays, en un mot, de rapporter à l’administration des colonies, une sorte de manuel de renseignements destinés à faciliter l’exercice de notre protectorat sur cette partie de notre domaine africain.”

<sup>2</sup> Boulvert, “Joseph Edmé Charles Maclaud,” 1.

<sup>3</sup> The speech was given on December 19, 1899, during the general assembly of the Société de Géographie.

<sup>4</sup> In his letters and writings, Maclaud repeatedly used the term “ethnologie” for his non-cartographic research. I therefore use the term “ethnography” to describe his work in communities.

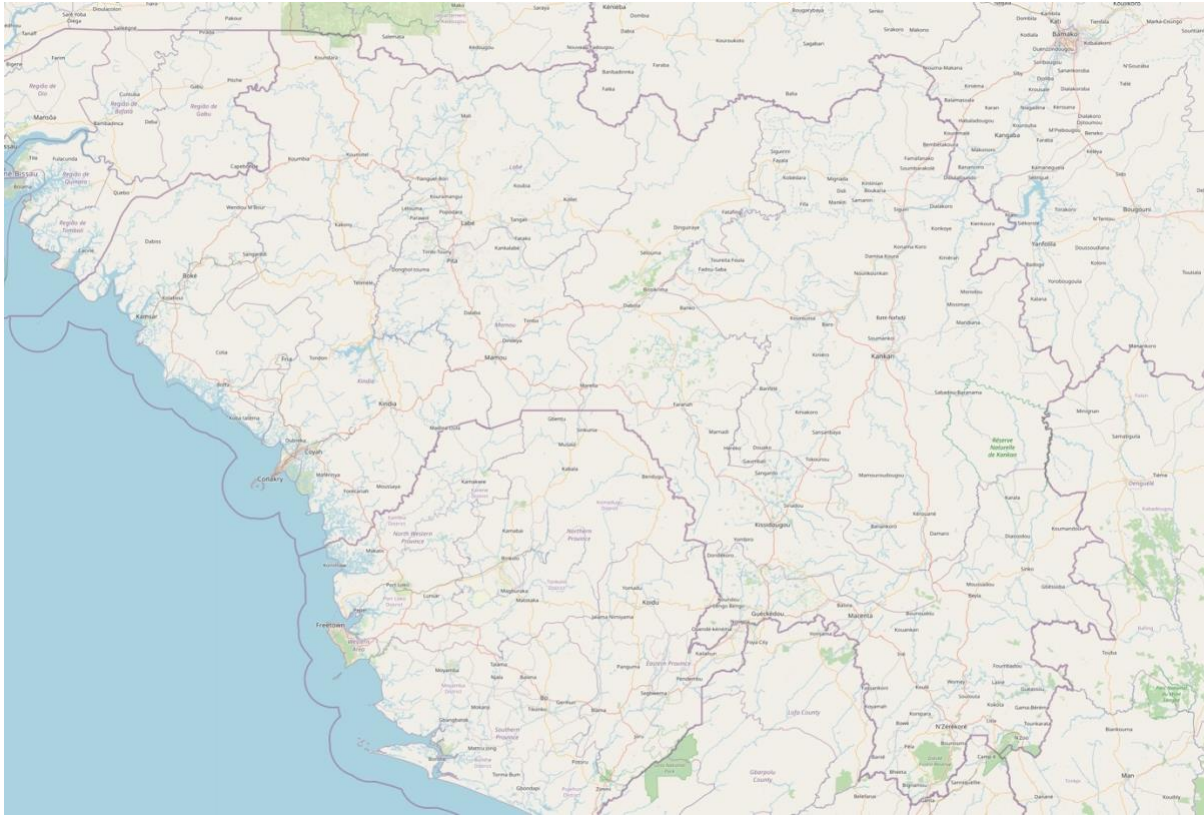
<sup>5</sup> Maclaud, “La Guinée Française,” 501.

Original French, “agrandir le mouvement commercial.”

<sup>6</sup> Maclaud took hundreds of photographs, collected thousands of botanical samples, commissioned dozens of taxidermies, and acquired a vast array of material objects. The flora and fauna specimens were donated to and are still held by the Muséum national d’Histoire naturelle in Paris. The object files include Maclaud’s drawings and could be particularly useful to scholars interested in the intersection of botanical sciences and art.

<sup>7</sup> Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, “Charles Maclaud.”

portugaise, and Sénégal.<sup>8</sup> They encompass a variety of subject-matter, including portraits of Alpha Yaya Diallo, images of Governor Martins of Guinée portugaise, and houses under construction in the Fouta Djallon region (Figure 1).<sup>9</sup>



**Figure 1:** Map of Republic of Guinea (formerly Guinée française). Map credited to © OpenStreetMap contributors,” data and license from OpenStreetMap Foundation and available through the Open Database License. See [opendatacommons.org](https://opendatacommons.org).

Despite its breadth and research potential, the archive has not been extensively studied and extant information on individual photographs and their subject-matter is limited. Within the Maclaud collection, there are twelve photographs that document twenty-nine wood sculptures acquired by the doctor in coastal Guinée française; these objects and their history motivate this brief case study (Figures 2 and 3).<sup>10</sup>

The Maclaud archive can be found by searching “Charles Maclaud” in the Musée du quai Branly. As of 2022, nearly 500 photographs and objects made or collected by Maclaud have been digitized. Many of the photographs were first donated to the Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro. When that museum closed, the photographs moved to the Musée de l’Homme, and, finally, to the Musée du quai Branly.

<sup>8</sup> For clarity, I will use the French names of colonies when referring to locations in the 1890s. When referring to modern nation-states, I will use the country’s contemporary name.

<sup>9</sup> In the Musée du quai Branly, these photographs have minimal to no information associated with them; this both complicates knowledge about the objects and makes it difficult for researchers to find relevant objects in the first place.

<sup>10</sup> I use the word “acquired” throughout, since it is currently unclear how these objects came into Maclaud’s possession. Some of these objects still exist and are held by the Musée du quai Branly. However, since beginning



**Figure 2:** “Nimba du Rio Nunez,” Dr. Charles Maclaud. Taken circa 1899. Silver gelatin, dry glass. Another example of the twelve photographs from the Rio Nuñez corpus. The same D’mba was also photographed in profile view and can be seen in the 1906 Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro exhibition, seen below. Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac. System identifier: 17-556581. Photo courtesy of Art Resource.

this project in 2017, the number of extant objects has increased in tandem with growing digitization work at the museum. I therefore hesitate to offer an exact number of extant works, since this may likely change. It is unclear what happened to the rest of the photographed objects; I have yet to find traces of them in other museum collections.



**Figure 3:** “Bois sculpté du Rio Nunez,” Dr. Charles Maclaud. Taken circa 1899. Silver gelatin, dry glass. One example of the twelve photographs from the Rio Nuñez corpus. These same sculptures were also photographed in a profile view, which shows the play with perspective that is common in coastal Guinean art. Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac. System identifier: 17-556575. Photo courtesy of Art Resource.

In this paper, I consider Maclaud’s role in the discursive construction of a singular coastal Guinean “race” and category of art.

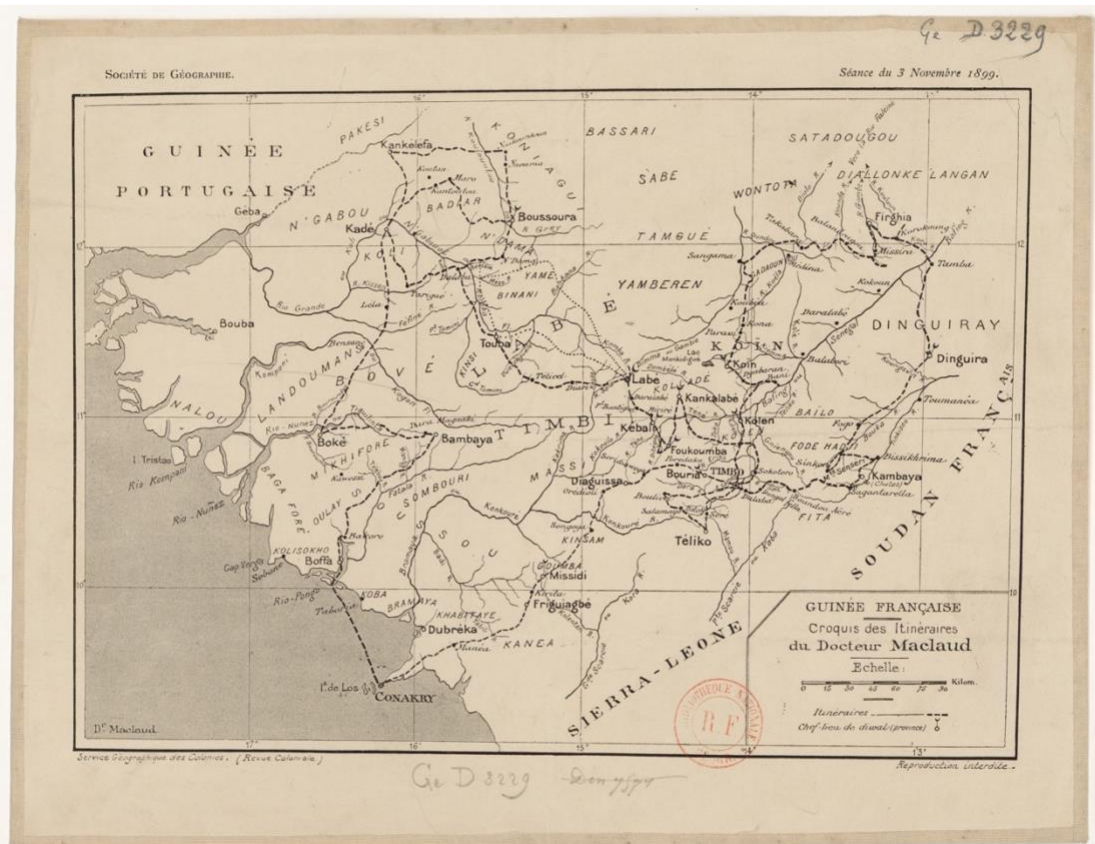
In his work on British colonization of the former Gold Coast, historian Sean Hawkins has argued that cartography and its associated materials formed a “world on paper” that worked in service of the expansion of colonial power structures.<sup>11</sup> Such documents purposefully obfuscated the lived experiences of individuals in West Africa and functioned as “a way of making colonialism real.”<sup>12</sup> Building from Hawkins and this volume’s imperative, I consider Maclaud’s larger corpus as a world on paper that helped cohere French colonial perceptions of art from coastal Guinée française. By bringing together Maclaud’s maps and ethnographic texts, I shed light on the photographed wood carvings themselves as a means of recuperating their histories from the colonial archive. More broadly, I consider how Maclaud’s practice contributed to the formation

<sup>11</sup> Hawkins, *Writing and Colonialism in Northern Ghana*, 4-10.

<sup>12</sup> Hawkins, *Writing and Colonialism in Northern Ghana*, 10.

and imposition of race in the AOF. I ask, what can the Maclaud archive add to African art history and African studies?

Maclaud was first deployed to West Africa in 1891; between then and 1895, he spent a significant amount of time in towns along the Niger River in Soudan français.<sup>13</sup> There, he developed the ethnographic framework that would characterize his later work. In 1895, Maclaud was named as an *adjoint* to the governor of Guinée française and traveled widely in the fairly new colony from 1895 to 1899 (Figure 4).<sup>14</sup>



**Figure 4:** *Guinée française: Croquis des itinéraires du docteur Maclaud*, Dr. Charles Maclaud. 1899. This map shows Maclaud’s route between 1895 and 1899. It served as the base for his 1906 map. Courtesy of the Bibliothèque nationale de France. [ark:/12148/btv1b8442044z/f1](https://nkp.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8442044z/f1).

During his tenure in this position, Maclaud was charged with mapping the coast, mediating political disputes in the Fouta Djallon, and defining borders between colonies. In particular, he helped demarcate the still-extant borders of Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, and Senegal. Although he claimed geographic impartiality in his cartographic process, his writings reveal that many of

<sup>13</sup> Maclaud, *Rapport de mission à le Macadougou*.

<sup>14</sup> Guinée française was established in 1891. Maclaud did return to Guinée française following his trip to Paris in 1899; here I focus on his nineteenth-century travels, since the objects in question were acquired prior to 1899.

his border delineations were based on his ethnographic “division of races” in the region.<sup>15</sup> In his public-facing texts, Maclaud repeatedly argued that his geographic and ethnographic “observations” were more accurate than those put forward by previous administrators due to his scientific methodologies.<sup>16</sup> Simultaneously, he positioned himself as a figure of unique authority by framing himself as one of the first Europeans to visit and document many regions of Guinée française.<sup>17</sup>

Maclaud’s emphasis on order and scientific clarity comes through quite strongly in many of his photographs, particularly the twelve images of wood carvings (Figures 2 and 3).<sup>18</sup> All of the photographs ascribe to a set composition, with little variation between images; each shows a group of wooden sculptures positioned in a neat row and set in front a long, unadorned sheet. Some of the photographs are closely cropped and remove the objects from a clear space, while others were taken at a wider angle that reveals surrounding detritus—stacks of papers, a map of the Gulf of Benin tacked to the wall, and tools strewn about. Although it is unclear where exactly these images were taken, the glimpses of the wider room suggest a dynamic, ever-changing set up. Inscribed on the edge of each negative is a sequential number that begins with “61,” all done in the same, thin hand. This same numbering system is used in other photographs by Maclaud that were taken in coastal Guinée française.<sup>19</sup> Based on their shared compositions, spatial logics, and numbering, the twelve photographs were likely taken together, in the same space, and were intended to be part of a group. The sculptures themselves were clustered together, in some cases, based on related thematic or formal characteristics. For example, one grouping includes only carvings of birds, while another shows objects that are all tall and narrow. This visual system of categorization based on broad, decontextualized similarities that obscure usage, meaning, and intent is heavily reminiscent of Maclaud’s writings and maps (Figures 3 and 4).

In each object file, the photographs are briefly glossed as images of “wood carvings from Rio Nunez.” The place name “Rio Nunez” refers to a river on the northern coast of Guinea, which stretches down to the Atlantic and passes near the city of Boké (Figures 1 and 5).

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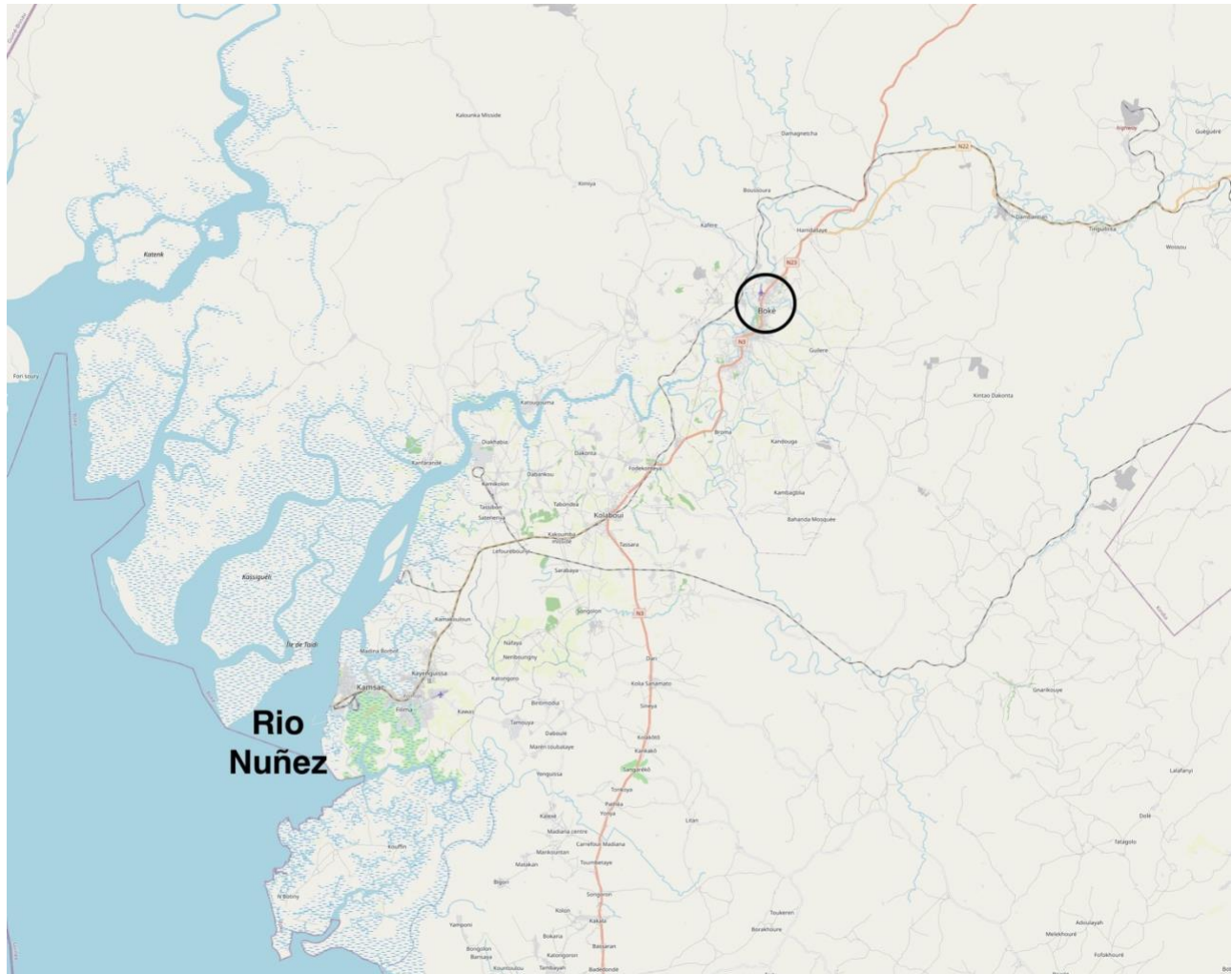
<sup>15</sup> Maclaud, “Étude sur la distribution géographique.” Original French, “des races” and “les tribus.”

<sup>16</sup> Maclaud, “La Guinée Française,” 509-512, and Maclaud, *Mission Maclaud*, 2-7. Original French, “division des races.”

<sup>17</sup> This was not the case and ignored the long history of travel by people of both European and African descent in Guinea, as well as local knowledge and experiences.

<sup>18</sup> See, Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac. “Charles Maclaud, Object Search” for the other photographs.

<sup>19</sup> Only images in the Maclaud corpus that were taken on the coast, prior to 1899 use the “61” numbering.



**Figure 5:** Detail of map of the northwest of the Republic of Guinea (Figure 2), showing the Rio Nuñez and the city of Boké (circled in black). Edits by author. Map credited to © OpenStreetMap contributors,” data and license from OpenStreetMap Foundation and available through the Open Database License. See [opendatacommons.org](https://opendatacommons.org).

The sculptures themselves share formal features and subject matter with wood carvings known to have been produced in coastal Guinea, and a number of iconic object categories are seen in the photographs. Notably, this includes a D’mba (a monumental carving depicting a beautiful mother figure), an a-tshol (a spiritually potent object that offers protection and is used in shrines), and a large, multi-tiered standing drum (see Figures 2 and 3 for examples).<sup>20</sup> Other photographed sculptures depict unique subjects, which include a full-bodied seated figure and a mask of an oversized head wearing a pith helmet.<sup>21</sup> These works, however, still share vivid similarities with known objects from the coast. The most significant of these visual features being a play on perspective, where the frontal and profile views of a work differ dramatically to produce fluid,

<sup>20</sup> Examples of each of these object types can be found in Lamp’s *Art of the Baga*. The a-tshol can be seen on the far right of Figure 3.

<sup>21</sup> Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, “Charles Maclaud.”

alternating visions of a singular object. This was even highlighted by the photographer of the Maclaud corpus, who made images of several object groupings in both frontal and profile views. In one pair of photographs, five objects—three anthropomorphized D'mba-like figures, an a-tshol, and an unidentified object—were arranged in a row and photographed both head-on and from the side. The image in profile highlights the graceful, beak-like form of each figure's head, as well as their ornate coiffures that were created through interlocking, triangular linework. Here, the same objects were photographed frontally, which captures the flattening of the sculptures' bodies created by a shift in perspective (Figure 3). By photographing these objects in such a way, the photographer illustrated two of the viewing possibilities for these pieces, and helped establish a visual trope that would be replicated in future European photographs and displays of coastal Guinean art.

Based on the many shared characteristics between the Maclaud sculptures and pieces from coastal Guinea, it is quite likely that most, if not all, of the sculptures were indeed produced in the Rio Nuñez region. Historically, the northern coast of Guinea and the southern coast of Guinea-Bissau have been described as the home of “Baga” people—a term that Maclaud himself frequently used in his writings.<sup>22</sup> Briefly, the term “Baga” is an ethnonym that was first recorded in a Spanish text from 1573 and then used in Portuguese sources from the 1590s, onwards.<sup>23</sup> The term was commonly used by the French colonial administration and in popular discourse. Art historian Frederick Lamp has recently shown how the term “Baga” is an appellation that obscures the actual complexity of the linguistic, religious, and ethnic make-up of coastal Guinea and Guinea-Bissau.<sup>24</sup> Although “Baga” might be appropriate in some instances, it has often been used by European and American scholars in lieu of more appropriate identity categories. Since I do not know exactly who produced the Maclaud sculptures, I refer to the works as being from coastal Guinea. This takes into consideration the high possibility that the artist(s) did not identify as “Baga.” The term “Baga” and the process of such racial categorization pre-date official French colonization, cartographers like Maclaud cemented this discourse within the metropole.

In his 1899 speech, Maclaud discussed his desire to produce an “information manual” on Guinée française that would benefit future French administrators.<sup>25</sup> This project came to fruition with a 1906 article and accompanying map, which were largely based upon his earlier travels along the coast and in the Fouta Djallon (Figure 6).<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Lamp, *Art of the Baga* and Sarró, *The Politics of Religious Change*.

<sup>23</sup> Hair, “The History of the Baga.”

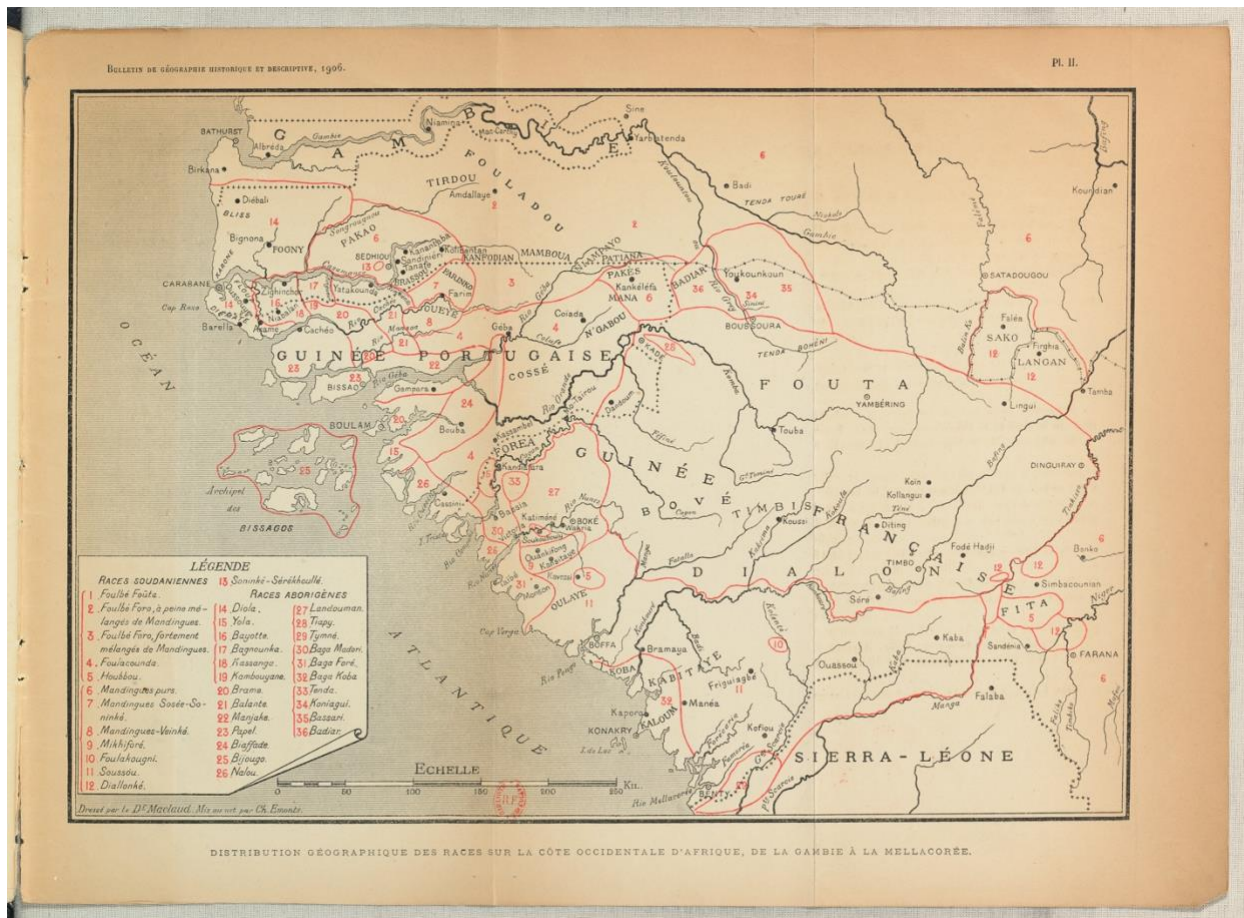
<sup>24</sup> Lamp, “Naming the Baga.”

<sup>25</sup> Maclaud, “La Guinée Française,” 501.

Original French, “manuel de renseignements.”

<sup>26</sup> Maclaud, “Étude sur la distribution géographique.”





**Figure 6:** Map from, “Étude sur la distribution géographique des races sur la côte occidentale d’Afrique, de la Gambie à la Mellacorée,” Dr. Charles Maclaud. 1906. Courtesy of the Bibliothèque nationale de France. [ark:/12148/bpt6k1045139/f5](https://ark:/12148/bpt6k1045139/f5).

This text offers the only known description of Maclaud’s time on the coast, which he describes traveling through soon after first arriving in Guinée française. The article begins with a description of the linguistic, religious, and cultural diversity of Guinée française as “pandemonium,” difficult for the “unprepared” observer to understand.<sup>27</sup> In order to make sense of the region for the French observer, Maclaud argued that all ethnic groups in the colony could be “ordered” into two, distinct “racial categories” that were then divided into inter-related “tribes.”<sup>28</sup> The accompanying map visualized this colonialist approach to both people and space.<sup>29</sup> The bulk of the article focuses on the political and economic relationship between communities and the French. For Maclaud, such economic priorities superseded everything else, and he insisted that essentialized categorization would expand future French political and

<sup>27</sup> Maclaud, “Étude sur la distribution géographique,” 1.

Original French, “le moins bien préparé.” Interestingly, Maclaud writes pandemonium in quotation marks using the English-spelling of the word. The motivations and intent behind this orthography is unclear but could be an interesting point of departure for future research.

<sup>28</sup> Maclaud, “Étude sur la distribution géographique,” 83-85.

<sup>29</sup> Berger, “Landscape Photography” and Mann, “Locating Colonial Histories.”

economic ventures.<sup>30</sup>

In the sections on the coast, Maclaud extended the process of decontextualizing and collapsing communities. He used derogatory and dismissive language that described practices and beliefs as occurring everywhere and being held by everyone.<sup>31</sup> Through this, he framed every community, every person, on the coast as having nearly identical worldviews and beliefs. Even when mentioning differences between communities—often raised by community members themselves—he often quickly questioned the validity of these observations and focused instead on his claims of similarities.<sup>32</sup> Maclaud’s position as an influential cartographer and scientist in the French empire gave quite a reach to his language and claims. His work then was part of the process of French discourse flattening coastal communities into a single “race,” often glossed as “Baga.” This racial construction is seen quite clearly in a 1906 exhibition photograph of the “Africa Room” at the Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro (Figure 7).



**Figure 7:** “Idole de la maternité des Bagas,” unknown photographer. Taken in 1906. Silver gelatin, dry glass. Exhibition view of the Maclaud D’mba in the “Africa Room” at the Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro. Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac. System identifier: 18-545974. Photo courtesy of Art Resource.

<sup>30</sup> Maclaud, “Étude sur la distribution géographique,” 85-120.

The bulk of Maclaud’s text is divided into sections that correspond to a specific ethnic group. Each group is numbered, as seen on the map, and the descriptions of the groups progresses chronologically.

<sup>31</sup> Maclaud, “Étude sur la distribution géographique,” 107-119.

<sup>32</sup> Maclaud, “Étude sur la distribution géographique,” 107-109 and 117-119.

Here, the D'mba from the Maclaud corpus stands prominently on a tall, thick plinth in the center of the photograph, displayed alongside a colossal standing drum adorned with high-relief carvings (Figures 2 and 7). A label affixed to the D'mba's plinth describes the object as a "Baga" piece.<sup>33</sup> Through this display we can see how French popular conceptions of a singular Baga race and art began to cohere. This process of racial formation and decontextualization in turn obfuscated many of the historical and cultural details surrounding the objects themselves.

On their own, Maclaud's texts and maps function in a comparably unclear and paradoxical manner, however, when brought together, they allow for quite specific dating that clarifies the Rio Nuñez sculptures and his larger photographic archive. Maclaud arrived in Guinée française in 1895 and visited Boké and the coast sometime between then and his trip to Paris in 1899 (Figure 4). Based on several letters, we know that he was in the Fouta Djallon between 1897 and late-1898.<sup>34</sup> Since the D'mba in the corpus was displayed at the Trocadéro in 1906, the objects must have arrived in Paris prior to this year (Figure 7). I have found no evidence that Maclaud visited the coast later, between 1899 and 1906.<sup>35</sup> Taken together, this suggests that the wood carvings were likely acquired between 1895 and 1896 and were brought to Paris during his 1899 restocking trip. Only a handful of coastal Guinean sculptures firmly dated from before the 1890s still exist. This puts the Maclaud archive sculptures among some of the oldest, photographed works from the region.

Maclaud's vast world on paper flattened the complexities of coastal Guinea and influenced French imperial conceptions of the region.<sup>36</sup> His works offer a case study of the intersections of ethnographic collecting, cartography, and the construction of race that took place in the late-nineteenth-century French empire—convergences that had tangible, wide-reaching, and long-lasting effects (Figures 4 and 6). Notably, throughout his writings Maclaud repeatedly "insist[ed]" that his particular articulation of race would allow for an easier roll-out of "a tax," on residents of Guinée française.<sup>37</sup> For Maclaud and, by extension the administration of the colony, race was a tool of division that was deployed as a means of economically and culturally draining communities while bolstering French authority. During the first decades of the twentieth century, the colonial government systematically chipped away at the independence of coastal communities, outlawed a variety of cultural and religious activities, and expanded a taxation system comparable to the one proposed by Maclaud.<sup>38</sup>

At the same time, the extraction of both natural resources and wood carvings from coastal

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<sup>33</sup> The label reads, "donated by lieutenant Paul Brocard," and this D'mba has often been attributed to Brocard. However, I believe that this is either a misattribution or is misleading. Maclaud and Brocard knew each other, traveled throughout the AOF, and often worked together from the 1890s to 1914; there are a number of photographs taken by Maclaud of Brocard within the larger Maclaud photographic archive. Since the D'mba here was part of the earlier Maclaud wood carving collection, I believe that the Brocard attribution either was an inaccuracy applied to the D'mba later or Brocard acquired the D'mba and then had Maclaud photograph the sculpture alongside the other carvings. Further archival research is necessary to tease out the strands of this object's history.

<sup>34</sup> Dupuy, *Letter* and Maclaud, *Mission Maclaud*.

<sup>35</sup> Maclaud, "Étude sur la distribution géographique."

<sup>36</sup> Bassett, "Cartography and Empire Building."

<sup>37</sup> Maclaud, "La Guinée Française," 510-511.

Original French, "insisté" and "explique la facilité avec laquelle l'établissement de impôt [sic] a pu se faire au Fouta."

<sup>38</sup> Lamp, *Art of the Baga*, 185-192 and Sarró, *The Politics of Religious Change*.

communities increased markedly. Through the display of the D'mba at the Trocadéro, coastal Guinean art became heavily associated with European modernism (Figure 7). Such objects became quite popular with modern artists, many of whom collected and produced pieces based on coastal Guinean sculptures.<sup>39</sup> Pablo Picasso, in particular, collected coastal Guinean art—like the D'mba now held at the Musée Picasso-Paris—and produced a number of works based on that sculpture's form.<sup>40</sup> Capitalizing on the French art market's voracious desire for these artworks, officials leveraged their political power to take wood carvings and export them to the metropole for their own profit.<sup>41</sup> This created a system in which French discourse collapsed the Guinean coast into a single Baga identity, which, in turn, became heavily associated with D'mba and its associative forms. This incursion was the subject of a number of coastal Guinean wood carvings during the first half of the twentieth century, which condemned French actions through derisive and detailed imagery.<sup>42</sup>

Maclaud's multivalent world on paper speaks to the wide-reaching implications of colonial cartography and ethnography in coastal Guinea. His texts and photographs have largely been overlooked but offer a chilling example of how race was formed and imposed onto the AOF by French colonial administrators. Colonial systems have wielded documents like Maclaud's in order to decontextualize African art. Using the Rio Nuñez sculptures as a case study, I have put forward one example of how the Maclaud corpus might be used to recuperate the historical specificities of photographed objects.

**About the author:** Angie Epifano is a doctoral candidate in the History of Art at Yale University. She works on West African art and architecture from the seventeenth to late-nineteenth centuries. Her dissertation project, "Building the Samorian State: Material Culture, Architecture, and Cityscapes," examines the material and architectural influences of the Samorian State (1875-1898). Her work has been supported by a Fulbright-Hays DDRA, a FLAS Fellowship, a Brazil Initiation Scholarship from the Brazil Studies Association, and a Tinker Field Research Grant. She holds a MPhil in History of Art from Yale and a M.A. in Art History from the University of Chicago.

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<sup>39</sup> Curtis and Sarró, "The 'Nimba' Headdress."

<sup>40</sup> Guinean Artist, "Masque d'épaule Nimba."

<sup>41</sup> Sarró, *The Politics of Religious Change*.

<sup>42</sup> Guinean Artist. "Masque cimier."

A notable example includes an a-bämp mask (the bird) from circa 1930, which includes a vignette of a man dressed in European colonial clothing who greedily reaches for a miniature D'mba and ignores the scene around him.

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