

# How Painted Backdrops link Photographic studios: A case from Cameroon

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## Abstract

The model of intellectual genealogy formed by relationships between masters and apprenticeships is used to help understand patterns of connection among studio photographers in Cameroon from the 1970s and 1980s. Chains of apprenticeships between photographers existed parallel to those between painters and their apprentices. Painted backdrops were moved between studios and gifts of backdrops marked the end of an apprenticeship as a new studio was established. The networks thus established bridged the anglophone and francophone divide as conventionally seen between the Ouest/West Region and the North-West Region. Photography as a form of modernity defied boundaries. Photographers and painters with the painted backdrops that connected them formed networks relatively little affected by political divisions.

**Keywords:** Cameroon; history of photography; painted backdrops; intellectual genealogy

## Biographical notes

Valentine Nyamndon earned a PhD in visual culture from the Photographic History Research Centre (PHRC) of De Montfort University in 2023. A former lecturer at the Catholic University of Cameroon, Bamenda, he has a background in Anthropology, Sociology, and philosophy and is an active member of the Pan Africa Anthropology Association (PAAA). He started as a part-time lecturer in the Photographic History Research group at De Montfort University in 2023.

David Zeitlyn is professor of social anthropology at University of Oxford and *conseil technique* to the chief of Somié in Cameroun. He is an initiated *ngam dù* spider diviner. He has been working with Mambila in Cameroon since 1985. Recent publications include *An Anthropological Toolkit: Sixty Useful Concepts*. (2022) and *Mambila Divination: Framing Questions, Constructing Answers* (2020). In 2021 with Erica Jones he co-curated an exhibition at Fowler Museum, UCLA featuring the work of three Cameroonian photographers. *Photo Cameroon: Studio Portraiture 1970-1990s*.  
<https://www.fowler.ucla.edu/exhibitions/photo-cameroon/>

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## Abstract

The model of intellectual genealogy formed by relationships between masters and apprenticeships is used to help understand patterns of connection among studio photographers in Cameroon from the 1970s and 1980s. Chains of apprenticeships between photographers existed parallel to those between painters and their apprentices. Painted backdrops were moved between studios and gifts of backdrops marked the end of an apprenticeship as a new studio was established. The networks thus established bridged the anglophone and francophone divide as conventionally seen between the Ouest/West Region and the North-West Region. Photography as a form of modernity defied boundaries. Photographers and painters with the painted backdrops that connected them formed networks relatively little affected by political divisions.

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The idea that relationships between teachers and students (particularly doctoral supervisors and research students) resembles that between parents and children is well established and this leads naturally to the concept of an intellectual lineage or genealogy (see Russell and Sugimoto 2009, Sugimoto, et al. 2014, Hook and Zeitlyn 2019 or for an instance within art history DeMayo 2012). The model of parental relationships can be applied more widely, to a variety of different sort of teachers and pupils. In other words, there is a quasi-genealogical relationship between apprentices and their masters. One can trace a family tree, a genealogical network between a master, their apprentices, and subsequent generations such as the apprentices of the apprentices and so on.<sup>1</sup>

Here we consider the instance of apprentices and their masters (usually male). This has emerged from ongoing research in Cameroon on the wider topic of the history of studio photography (Zeitlyn 2019) as well as a more focused piece of research on painted backdrops used in studios (Nyamndon 2023). We have been led to a consideration of the separate intellectual genealogies between photographers and their apprentices and those between painters along with their own apprentices. These genealogies cross and become intertwined as painted backdrops circulate, linking photo studios in parallel to the ways that they are linked by apprenticeship genealogies. More than that, in cases we have documented, the gift of a backdrop has been used to mark an apprentice leaving his master to set up their own photographic studio.

In this paper we concentrate on the 1970s and 1980s in Cameroon we consider some studio photographers and the painters who produced the painted backdrops that were used in photographic studios. We explore how these different intellectual genealogies, separable in principle, were intertwined on the ground and how the circulation of painted backdrops acted to connect different parts of the genealogy of studio photographers. This took place across the boundaries between anglophone and francophone areas that now (2024) loom so large. Photography and backdrop painting as exemplars of modernity seem not to have been much

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<sup>1</sup> Argenti (2002) considers the parallel case of wood carvers in Oku (Northwest Province). He points out that as well as the network of apprentices and masters there were many self-taught young carvers who were *not* formally apprenticed and were distanced thereby from the Palace, the seat of traditional power and authority. The key difference between his material and ours is that in Oku the carvings produced by masters and their apprentices were part of the complex connecting traditional authority and the symbolism of traditional religion. Contrastingly, photography deals with the symbolism of modernity. On Argenti's account (2002: 520) the young carvers of Oku were also acting as brokers with modernity, introducing new tropes and reinterpreting old ones in their light.

affected by the languages in which it was expressed! In the quasi-genealogical diagram that summarizes the data presented in this paper (Figure 8) we have added a broken line to represent the boundary between the anglophone Northwest region and francophone Ouest Region. However, positioning the line and people relative to it was extremely difficult. Before we can consider the wider issues raised by our case study we first provide some necessary historical context.

### **Context 1. History of administrative structures in Cameroon (French and British spheres)**

Although most of the period of this study is after the formal independence of Cameroon the consequences of the preceding colonial regimes had (and still has) an important bearing on economic and social relationships in the areas we are considering. As a consequence, a short introduction to the complexities of Cameroonian history is needed. After the first World war the former German colony, Kamerun was administered by France (c. 80% of the territory) and Britain (c. 20% of the territory) first under the League of Nations Mandates then, after the Second World War, with the United Nations Trusteeships. The result was a country with two official administrative languages and two different administrative colonial traditions.

The photographers and painters we consider here worked on either side of the former boundary between British and French administered areas, a division which continues into the present as the boundary between what was Anglophone Southern Cameroon<sup>2</sup> (now South-West and North-West Regions) with the Francophone rest of Cameroon (Littoral and Ouest<sup>3</sup> Regions respectively). Our study has concentrated on the Ouest and North-West Regions.

The importance of the differences can be exaggerated. Some of the people we have studied moved between Anglophone and Francophone areas. However, those divisions form an important part of the historical context for the development of photographic studios within our time period. A further important historical note is that the *Union des Populations du Cameroun* (UPC) uprising in the Bamiléké areas (mainly in the Ouest Region) which started before Independence continued until the early 1970s. This drove some Francophones from what was then the Ouest Province of Cameroun to become refugees in Anglophone Southern Cameroon (which at the same time also received internally displaced refugees from the Biafran war in Nigeria (to its west). After the British Cameroons plebiscite in 1961 when Southern Cameroons chose to join Cameroun rather than Nigeria it also accommodated those from Southern Cameroons who had to return from Nigeria).<sup>4</sup>

A photographic coda to this is that although British Southern Cameroons was administered from Nigeria until October 1, 1961, from 1950 and continuing until 1965, there were instances of photographic exchanges between the Federal Information Service in Lagos, Nigeria, and the Commissioner of the Southern Cameroons in Buea.<sup>5</sup> As many photographers have told us Nigerian photographic supplies (film, papers and chemicals) were widely used in Cameroon before and after independence.

The circulation of the images that the studio photographers produced and of studio backdrops

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<sup>2</sup> In 1961 Northern Cameroons, the other half of Cameroon under the British UN trusteeship, joined Nigeria. This makes what is a border between administrative units in the south as mentioned here, and international border in the north, outside our study area.

<sup>3</sup> Note that to reduce confusion between the names of administrative areas we use the French spelling for the Ouest Region. Readers should also note that the official name for the large scale administrative units in Cameroon is Region (until 2008 these were called Provinces).

<sup>4</sup> Walter Nkwi discusses the material cultural associations of this (2016 & 2017). After the 1961 plebiscite British Northern Cameroon joined Nigeria.

<sup>5</sup> The official Photo Archives in Buea have been studied by Schneider (2018a) and Nsah (2017).

complicates and, in fact, challenges any simple mapping of cultural identity and difference onto crude divisions such as Anglophone vs Francophone. A host of evidence attests that this area has been multicultural, multilingual and multiethnic for much longer than the relatively brief period of colonisation.<sup>6</sup>

## **Context 2 Photography in Cameroon**

The history of photography in Cameroon has been studied by Geary (1988, 2004), Nsah (2017), Schneider (2010, 2015, 2018b, 2023) and Zeitlyn (2015, 2019) among others. René Egloff's (2013) sadly unpublished thesis (also we note untranslated into a Cameroonian language) on the studio photographers of Bamenda has been a key reference for us. Itinerant photographers travelling along the West African Coast first introduced photography to the coastal cities in the second half of the Nineteenth century which led to a few studios being established before the century's end, at least one of which was by a Cameroonian photographer. After the first world war photography spread slowly to the large towns but only really took off once photo ID cards became compulsory in the 1950s.

As already noted the start of the UPC insurrection in the late 1950s occurred in the run up to Independence. Among many other things, it provided an impetus for the introduction of compulsory ID Cards containing ID photos.<sup>7</sup> This was a very important spur for the development of studio photography in Cameroon and all studio photographers benefited from it. A further elaboration of the bureaucracy of control was that in the areas where the insurrection was concentrated (particularly the then Ouest Province, officially called Ouest Region since 2008) an additional temporary document, also with an id-style photograph, was required in order to travel within the country, a '*laissez-passer*'. To travel repeatedly many *laissez-passers* and therefore many photographs were needed, a boon for the photographers.

After independence and the end of the UPC insurrection in 1972 although *laissez-passers* were no longer needed, ID Cards continued to be required, as well as other administrative documents most of which had to have passport-sized photographs attached. This meant that studios flourished until the arrival of colour photography and self-contained photo processing labs to print from colour films, as well as autofocus cameras. In the 1980s these eroded the profit margins of studios. The introduction of ID card machines that included a camera in the late 1980s effectively ended the 'golden age' of the studios.

The relatively small literature on the Cameroon visual landscape focuses on photographic studios with emphasis on the many faces of studio photographers, the rise and fall in the statistics of commercial photographers, the professional legacy of studio photographers and the decaying states of their archives (Zeitlyn 2008, 2009, 2019; McKeown 2007, 2010; Schneider 2010, 2018a and b, 28-40; Egloff, 2013). This work discusses among other things, the salience of photographic studio, changing business practices, and the desirability of studio interiors created by the use of props and backdrops. Some of the scholarly contributions paid special attention to photographers and studios in Mbouda and Batcham (Tatsitsa, 2015) in the Ouest Region. However, these publications give little information on how materials (such as backdrops) circulated between studios becoming thereby an object of socio-cultural connection between the photographers and painters.

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<sup>6</sup> See Njeuma (ed.) (1989) for a summary of relatively recent Cameroonian history, and de Saulieu et al. 2021 for an account of the intertwined linguistic, archaeological and genetic histories of the wider area.

<sup>7</sup> The key date is 24th September 1953 (Order 599 of 24 Sep 1953, JOCF 53 p.1688), when an ID Card with compulsory photograph became required for residents in urban centres in French Cameroon. This order was imposed over the entire area under French administration in the years 1954-7. ID photos had to have a plain background. But the need for them in effect kept the price of photographs low and this enabled many clients to get both ID photos and recreational photos with painted backdrops when they visited a studio.

### **Backdrops: an introduction**

Photographers have used painted backdrops since almost the earliest photographic studios. We are distinguishing between photographic backgrounds, backdrops and painted backdrops. All backdrops are backgrounds but not all backgrounds are backdrops. Backgrounds may be arrangements of studio props, buildings, vegetation or fences as well as murals painted on walls. The simplest backdrop is a piece of plain cloth placed behind a sitter (common for ID photos). Patterned cloth is also often used as a backdrop in recreational images (these have been particularly celebrated in the work of Seidou Keïta (especially from the 1950s) but comparable examples can be found in our area of study, for example in the work of Jacques Toussele in the 1970s and 1980s). Our concern in this paper are what we are calling ‘painted backdrops’. Those painted on canvas or plywood are moveable, but they may also be unmoveable fixtures: murals painted on studio walls<sup>8</sup>. Painted backdrops show scenes, although sometimes they are painted to resemble patterned cloth. In a more or less formalised and self-conscious way, they all dissemble. The idea is to enable the sitter to appear as if they are in a drawing room, or standing in a forest or on board a boat. These have given rise to novelty cut-outs and to elaborate arrangements where the sitters may be seated as if piloting a aircraft or in a boat.<sup>9</sup> However, there is little attempt at a *trompe l'oeuille*: the images are artefactual, and clearly reference their own artificiality.

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<sup>8</sup> The studio with these usually had curtains so a plain background could be established for ID photos.

<sup>9</sup> Chéroux (2005) discusses the fairground versions in mid C20th France.



Figure 1 Backdrop by Yanky. Reconstructed from many images in the Jacques Toussele archive. Painted c. 1980



Fig 1a Yanky signature

Early photography along the West African coast used painted backdrops imported from commercial suppliers in Europe and North America (e.g. painted backdrop featuring classical columns) but quickly local artists saw the opportunity and started supplying their own backdrops to the photographers who became established in Africa in the second half of the Nineteenth century. Some tropes were widespread, used by different painters. We discuss some Cameroonian variants below.

In photographic studies there is a small literature on backdrops. The journal *Afterimage* had a special issue in 1997 (vol 24 issue 5), which includes Arjun Appadurai's much cited article "The Colonial backdrop." In this he makes the point that the use of backdrop breaks some of the indexicality of the images – it is not obviously taken in place X. A studio portrait of

someone standing in front of the Taj Mahal could have been taken anywhere. It is actually of someone standing in front of a *backdrop* of the Taj Mahal. As such it is robbed of its evidential value and stands as an (admittedly small) challenge to colonial rule.<sup>10</sup> Soon after this, George C. Berticevitch's collection of backdrops from fifteen countries round the world was exhibited in California, as discussed by Pritikin (1998).

Those working on American Civil War photography have used backdrops to identify photographs from the same studio (Anon 2003, Mohanty et. al. 2023). This can be helpful as some early *Carte de Visite* prints from that period do not have the names of the studios on them (as later became the norm). For those researchers finding the studio can be a first step in identifying the person depicted.

Erica Nimis in her study of diaspora Yoruba photographers devotes a few pages to backdrops (2005: 169-172). She notes a systematic difference between coastal and inland studios and their backdrops. Inland, and the edge of the Sahel there is relative sparsity with fewer backdrops and those there are less elaborate. Along the coast the studios have a wider range of more elaborate backdrops. This is exemplified by the work of the Ghanaian Steven Abiodu Thomas who was both photographer and backdrop painter. As documented by Wendl (2001: 91) he corresponded with the UK backdrop manufacturer Pemberton brothers in the 1930s and later painted backdrops himself, not only for use in his own studio but also for sale to other photographers.

### **Our study**

This study uses photographic backdrops found in the Northwest, Ouest and Southwest Regions of Cameroon to widen the intellectual genealogy that connects different photographic studios. We consider the histories of a few photographic studios and the parallel histories of some painters and their own studios. These parallel histories are connected through the use and distribution of photographic backdrops. We also briefly consider the socio-cultural meaning of the studio backdrops in the Cameroon visual scene.

During research carried out in 2017 and 2018 in the Northwest, Southwest, and Ouest Regions purposive sampling was used to select participants with photo albums or other photo collections born after 1920 and before independence in 1960 1950. Some followup interviews were conducted in 2022. Those interviewed included elders; retired and active studio photographers, archivists, and curators. Among the elders were civil servants, retired civil servants and traditional notables, as well as those who, when young, had worked on plantations on the coast. During the interviews we documented their photo albums or collections, and undertook photo elicitation exercises concentrating on the black and white photos with backdrops. Elicitation interviews were conducted with 54 people about their albums in three regions, each lasting between 45 minutes and 90 minutes

Other interviews were conducted with painters and photographers, identified through snowball sampling. We also conducted structured and unstructured interviews about other peoples' choices in the use of photographic backdrops in the images they commissioned. About 80 people aged 25-70 were interviewed (including teachers, traders, nurses, and students). Some of these were face - to- face, others were conducted using phone, whatsapp and email.

Backdrops were identified during interviews with studio photographers, the personal archives of many individuals (c. one hundred, as just described), as well as from research undertaken in some public archives and museums. Overall, the material collected enabled us to examine the circulation of backdrops between photographic studios. This took place in the

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<sup>10</sup> Photographs with backdrops are at the opaque end of 'the zones of visibility and opacity' that Hayes and Minkley identify in their collection 'Photography and Visibility in African History' ( 2019:1).

context of a larger and usually unregarded circulation: photographs moved as people moved between places and also moved between people (for example, as gifts between friends). Personal albums crystalize such movements which happened for many reasons including visiting friends or family members during holidays, longer stays for education and for work.

Our initial sources for backdrops were surviving photo studios. Many photo studios could once be found in the economic heart of Bamenda city in the 1960s and 1970s (the boom years that followed independence). Just off Commercial Avenue are Independence Street and Treasury Street (now known as Old Treasury Street). At their crossing was Gay Photo Studio that started there in 1960s and still occupies the same building. Other photo studios originally in the same immediate area were Saloon De Young and Hilford Photo which closed when their owners returned to Nigeria.

According to Paul Mubang, a retired studio photographer, in the 1970s the area had at least nine photo studios but in 2018 only two (Mirac and Gay) were still active. Walking down the street, we found an old painted sign for a photo studio, placed awkwardly against a wall alongside an enlarged sign board for building materials and groceries. It is of note that some these businesses are owned by the same person who once ran a studio. As the market changed, they had shifted from photography to, in one case, selling building materials. As Figure 3 illustrates another photographer branched out to run a 'call box' phone business in parallel with his photography. In other cases, landlords have renovated the buildings that once hosted photo studios.

Our research has had to contend with demography – many of the photographers and painters who trained in the 1960s are no longer with us. As well as that, recent political instability has meant that some photographers with Nigerian roots who had photographic studios in Cameroon in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s have returned to Nigeria. To some extent there is more of a market today for painters than for photographers, even that is greatly diminished by cheap printed posters as alternatives to painted backdrops and computer-generated graphics instead of painted business signs.

### **A photographic dynasty: Tokontio Abraham**

Tokontio Abraham (Abraham Photo) started his photographic studio in the 1960s. Tokontio's photo studio was located at Nkwen Quarter about six kilometres away from Old Treasury Street where photo studios were concentrated. Our information about him was obtained from one of his apprentices, Djeuti Boniface since he had died around 2009. According to Djeuti, he himself with Tokontio, and Jacques Toussele all came from the same village of Bammesingue in the Ouest Region of Cameroon which bound them together in various ways. Tokontio Abraham escaped the UPC uprising which started in 1955 to open his photographic studio in Bamenda in the North-West Region. Djeuti Boniface became his apprentice in Bamenda, and also there Jacques Toussele stayed around 1960 when the security situation in Mbouda where Toussele was otherwise based became too difficult to work. See Figure 8 below for a visualisation of these relationships.



**Figure 2** Portrait of Jacques Toussele in Bamenda in 1965 with Abraham's stamp on back  
(**Figure 2a**)

One of Tokontio's daughters was interested in photography and worked as a photo-journalist. In 2019 Djeuti told us that she was then working with one of the media houses in Yaoundé, the political capital of Cameroon.

Tokontio Abraham had three apprentices, Djeuti Boniface (from Bammesingue, Ouest Region), Dzoutoua Timolion (from Babadjou, Ouest Region) and Tata (from Nso, North-West Region). We could not track down Dzoutoua and Tata, but we found Djeuti Boniface still active as a photographer in 2019 working in a studio in an old shipping container in Bamenda city. We note that Tokontio straddles the Francophone / Anglophone divide. He was from the Francophone zone but worked in a major Anglophone city and had apprentices who were from both Francophone and Anglophone areas.



**Figure 3** Djéuti Boniface by his shipping container, Ntamulung Bamenda-Cameroon. Photo

by V. Nyamndon 2019.

Djeuti Boniface (of Young Abraham Photo Studio) was born in 1952 in Bammesingue village, then under French administration. Although he grew up in the village, Djeuti and his siblings were relocated for a short period of time by their parents to Bali Gham a village in the North-West Region relatively unaffected by the UPC uprising. (This helped him to learn Pidgin English, a lingua franca extensively used in Anglophone Cameroon and neighbouring Regions). Djeuti Boniface then attended a francophone primary school in Mbouda (the main town near Bammesingue) until 1967. That year he graduated with six of his half-siblings from different mothers since his father had six wives. According to Djeuti, post-primary education for siblings from a polygamous background was a game of chance. Unlike the examples from Ivory Coast and Niger documented by Erica Nimis (2013:132), where only those who had failed in education embarked on apprenticeships in photography, in Cameroon it was considered a noble profession. After his graduation from primary school he spent a year at home. Then Tokontio Abraham was asked by Djeuti's father to choose a child out of the five boys and a girl who had graduated from school the previous year for an apprenticeship in his studio in Bamenda. The six children were asked to line up for Abraham to make his choice, and 'luck shone' on Djeuti Boniface for he was selected.

He started his photography apprenticeship on December 31, 1968 at the Photo Abraham studio at Nkwen-Bamenda. He completed his apprenticeship in 1972, having put in four years in order to have a reduced fee (twenty thousand francs CFA).<sup>11</sup> According to Djeuti, he had mastered the profession after barely a year of his apprenticeship but could not become independent since he had to work the other years in lieu of some of his apprenticeship fees. These were paid in two instalments: first, fifteen thousand CFA and then five thousand CFA.

Although, Djeuti spent more years on his apprenticeship than absolutely required, it gave him a solid background that enabled him to manage four studios in different Regions (Provinces) of Cameroon. Djeuti's four studios, were managed by him and his apprentices. Djeuti Boniface continued to run his original studio in Small Mankon, Bamenda, while Notio David ran the studio at Sonac Street in Bamenda. Nkonlac Boniface ran another studio in Mbouda, Ouest Region and Djeuti's brother, Tamen Michael, was hired to run the '*Carefour bon fils*' studio in Douala, Littoral Region. Djeuti still regrets that he involved his family in the running of his photo studio business because he says his brother squandered the income generated from the Douala studio so that he couldn't continue paying rent for it and had to close it. Although it should be noted that this studio lasted for longer than the others! We suspect the distance of Douala from Bamenda meant it harder (and more costly) for Djeuti to visit often to supervise the management of the studio.

Tokontio invited painters from the Ouest Region to paint backdrops for his Bamenda studio. Other paintings in his studio were done by painters who were based in Bamenda and elsewhere in the North-West Region. He used painted backdrops showing columns, patterned cloth, the Wouri bridge in Douala (a symbol of modernity), highways, and mountain chains. The gift of a backdrop was made from master to apprentice as the apprentice set up his own studio, serving as a mark of trust, hard work, and support. Djeuti Boniface was given a painted backdrop (featuring a column) by his master Tokontio Abraham when he was permitted to open his first independent studio at Small Mankon Bamenda. Although the

<sup>11</sup> This is the same pattern described by Stephen Sprague for apprenticeship among Yoruba photographers which generally lasted for three years but the fee would be reduced if they served longer (1978: 9-10, 135). Nimis (2005 p164, 2013:133) says the average payment in the 1970s was 50,000 (talking about photographers in Niger). Both note that fees were sometimes reduced or waived, a pattern that is also reported among Nigerian motor mechanic apprentices at the same time in what Sara Berry calls an 'expansionist strategy' since the apprentice master wins their free labour (1985: 136-137).

information about Tokontio Abraham is limited it is indicative of the master/apprentice genealogy presented in this paper.

### Djeuti's four studios

As mentioned Djeuti had four photo studios at the following places:

Small Mankon opened in 1972 and closed in 1988.

Sonac Street opened in 1976 and closed in 1990

Mbouda Studio opened between 1979/1980 and closed in 1994

Douala (*Carefour bon fils*) opened 1983 and closed in 1999.

Table 1: studios and their stamps

| Studio                                                                      | Stamp                                                                               |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Studio 1: Bamenda (Small Mankon)<br>North-West Region                       |    |
| Studio 1 Alternative stamp: Bamenda (-<br>Small Mankon) (North-West Region) |   |
| Studio 2: Bamenda (SONAC Street)<br>North-West Region                       |  |

|                                                               |                                                                                    |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Studio 3: Mbouda (Opposite AGIP Petrol station) Ouest Region. |  |
| Studio 4: Douala (Carefour Bon Fils) Littoral Region          |  |

Djeuti's four studios present further evidence on the commissioning of backdrops, and how they are exchanged, and circulated. His four studios (in three different Regions) suggest a broad base of connections between photographers and backdrop painters. For example, Djeuti said he commissioned the first dual carriageway or motorway backdrop in 1979 as a development from the single-lane road backdrop he had had painted in 1975.

Table 2: The circulation of backdrops between Djeuti's four studios in Cameroon. Source: V. Nyamndon 2019.

| Backdrops                | Studios                     |                      |          |               |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------|----------|---------------|
|                          | Bamenda1<br>Small<br>Mankon | Bamenda2<br>Sonac St | Mbouda   | Douala        |
| single lane road         | X (1975)                    | X                    |          |               |
| double lane road         | X (1979)                    | X                    | X (1980) |               |
| column                   | X (1972)                    | X                    | X        | X (1983)      |
| waterfall                | X                           | X                    |          |               |
| Spiral column            | X                           | X                    | X (1980) |               |
| Airports/aircraft        | X                           | X                    | X        | X (from here) |
| Painted blue/white cloth | X                           | X                    | X        |               |
| Seascapes                | X                           | X                    | X        | X             |

Tokontio and Djeuti are unusual for crossing the lines between French and British spheres of influence. Djeuti's case contrasts with that of Tchoffo Pascal, the most successful apprentice of Toussele Jacques. Although Tchoffo came from Mbouda (very close to the border with the Anglophone North West Region) he never opened a studio in the North-West (Bamenda is close to Mbouda). but concentrated his activities in the francophone areas, opening studios and colour processing laboratories not only in Mbouda and Bafoussam but also, much further away, in Nkongsamba and Douala, all major towns in the francophone area.

### **Painterly Dynasties: biographic sketches**

Here we will explore the work and biography of six painters who provided backdrops for photographers in West and North-West Cameroon in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. That we have been able to discover so little about them is itself significant. For a long time, all we knew were professional nicknames, and in many other cases that is all we still know.

Photographic backdrop artists in Cameroon made important contributions to the business of studio photographers. According to Djeuti Boniface, backdrop painters realised his wishes (that reflected those of his sitters) in the backdrop paintings he commissioned. The backdrops represented objects, landscapes, buildings, and other structures. They were painted in varying dimensions for different costs<sup>12</sup> on canvas, pieces of plywood or, in some cases, on the walls of photographic studios. The photographers wanted backdrops that would attract clients. Studios in the Northwest and West Regions often had several backgrounds at any one time so sitters could choose which backdrop they wanted to be used. Discussions between sitters and photographers also indirectly contributed to the commissioning of new backgrounds. Conversation about the sitters' desires led to later commissions for new backdrops. New backdrops were also commissioned from time to time to entice regular clients to make new images. It seems that Djeuti renewed his backdrop every 4 or 5 years, and would move them between his different studios so creating novelty for the clients local to each studio. Backdrop artists in Cameroon played an important role in the photographic industry. Despite this we do not know how many there have been, where they were based, let alone, in most instances, their names.

Nyamndon's field work on backdrops in the Grassfields and Coastal regions of Cameroon has collected data from photographic studios, photo collections and albums. He has also considered photographic materials using painted backdrops now in archives and museums. Based on interviews with studio photographers who provided names of popular artists active in the Cameroonian photographic industry he has documented some two hundred backdrops from 1955-1980 (grouped in three periods: 1955-1960, 1961-1970, 1971-1980). The names provided, as well as artist's signatures on print backdrops were used to collate a fuller list.

Many of these artists put signatures on painted backdrops (e.g., *Yanky*, *Lucky Sparrow*, *Waffi*, and *Le Décor*) which was some assistance in tracking them down. We did document an instance where the photographer Djeuti Boniface had obliterated the signature on the 'dual carriageway backdrop' an innovation he had commissioned so competitors from rival studios could not find the painter to commission similar scenes.<sup>13</sup>

In the following we discuss six backdrop painters Graphic Art Studios (Fon Mathias and Neba Vincent), Yanky, Sparrow, Ndzoti, and Waffi Arts. We discuss painterly genealogies (apprentices and their masters). Following this we list the types of backdrops they painted.

### **Yanky Arts (Achi Jofred Tapong) and Rocky Arts**

The research was made difficult by the absence of Yanky's contemporaries. This was because of the return to Nigeria of artists like Rocky Art, who had been his apprentice master. Achi Jofred Tapong (Yanky) was born in 1948 at Nku- Mbome in Mbengwi (his parents were from Mbengwi, a few miles from the city of Bamenda). After a lot of work to track him down Nyamndon was able to interview him by phone in 2021 and then meet him in person in 2022 for a follow up interview in Cameroon. Achi had attended primary school in Mbengwi and completed the standard six in 1964. He had a zeal for painting ever since he was a young boy.

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<sup>12</sup> A single backdrop on the standard-sized piece of a plywood (2.44 m x 1.22 m) cost about seven thousand francs CFA in c. 1970.

<sup>13</sup> In this case Djeuti's backdrop painter was Neba Vincent.

His apprentice master, Rocky Arts was a Nigerian who had fled the Biafra war and settled in Bamenda becoming prominent in backdrop paintings by c. 1969.<sup>14</sup> Rocky's art studio was at Old Church Junction, Bamenda where under the terms of his apprenticeship he taught Yanky house painting and car spraying. Backdrop painting was not included in this, so he taught himself to paint them, inspired by what he saw his master doing. Rocky Art later returned to Nigeria where he later died. The dynasty continued since he then taught Fon Mathias, Neba Vincent's elder brother and apprentice-master, from Graphic Art (Studio I).

A few months after his graduation in 1970, he opened his first studio in Bamenda at 'Las Vegas' near the main Total petrol station behind Commercial Avenue. There he worked in as a general painter, doing more car spraying than painting backdrops. In 1979 he moved his studio to Ringway where he remained until he retired in 2005.

Initially, he didn't devote much time to backdrop painting but the few backdrops he painted were in high demand from photographers in the Ouest and Littoral regions of Cameroon. Some photographers from Douala came to Bamenda to buy his painted backdrops. In Bamenda he recalled painting for Gay, Mirac and Hilford photographic studios, but most of his work for clients outside Bamenda were in Mbouda in the Ouest Region although he also painted some for studios in Mbengwi, his natal village.

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<sup>14</sup> Besides being an artist in the 1970s Rocky led the Igbo choir group at the Big Mankon Cathedral in Bamenda.

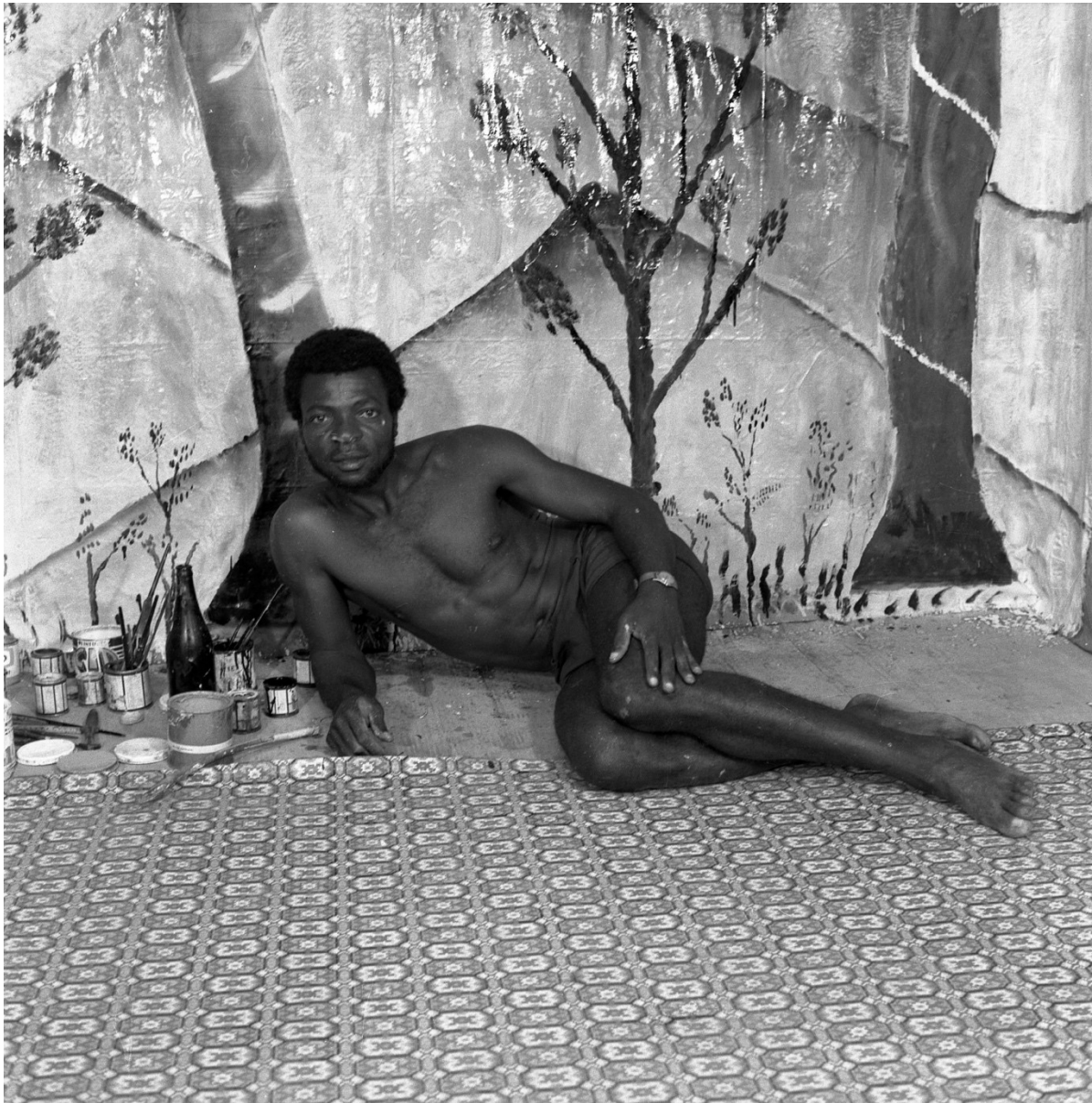


Figure 4 Jacques Toussele photo of Yanky at work c. 1975 (EAP054\_1\_110\_51)

He recognized himself in the photo of himself at work from the Jacques Toussele Studio in Mbouda (Figure 4) but no longer remembered the name of the photographer nor the studio (Photo Jacques). The Jacques Toussele archive also has another photograph of him Figure 5. The only thing he remembered was that he had been invited by the 'Mbouda Man' to paint on the wall of his photographic studio in 1971 or 1972. Another similar backdrop features in a few images in the Jacques Toussele archive although in nothing like the number of other backdrops used by Toussele. It is signed "Yanky Arts Mankon Bamenda". It has been reconstructed from the archive images as seen in Figure 1.



Figure 5 Jacques Toussele photo of Yanky c. 1975 (EAP054\_1\_6\_25).

### **Two Brothers: Fon Mathias (Graphic Art studio I) & Neba Vincent (Young Graphic Art studio II)**

As we have said, Fon Mathias, (Graphic Art Studio I) was taught by Yanky. Fon Mathias then taught his younger brother Neba Vincent (Young Graphic Art Studio II). This pair of full brothers are from Mankon village. When Fon Mathias retired in 1982 Neba Vincent took over the Graphic Art Studio and renamed it. However, the studio location did not change. It has been on Independence Street opposite the Bamenda Municipal Stadium since the 1970s. Among the backdrops Fon and Neba painted the most popular designs were highways and mountain scenes.

### **Emmanuel ‘Lucky Sparrow’ Arts**

Emmanuel ‘Lucky Sparrow’ was originally from Batcham, Ouest Region. He was married with two wives and died c. 2010 (we have not been able to establish an exact date or year of death). At one point he ran a studio in Mbouda on the main highway to Bafoussam. His studio in Mbouda was adjacent to the then Rozi Cinema (near to where Jacques Toussele’s final studio was located). When he left this studio, it was taken over by the photographer ‘Photo Jazz’ and later became a baker’s shop. His later studio in Bamenda was located at the Old Town neighbourhood near the present central police station.

In the North-West Region, Sparrow painted backdrops featuring the Wouri bridge in Douala, mountain chains, columns and seashore scenes, as can be seen in photos taken by Djeuti (Saloon de Young Abraham). Other examples of his work (showing the Wouri bridge), were found in the G.B Photo Studio in Bali, the Awa and Son Photo Studio in Bamenda and in Photo Jacques’ studio in Mbouda. Because he once had a studio in Mbouda the photographer Jacques Toussele remembered him and was able to identify him in some of his own photos.



Figure 6 Jacques Toussele photo of Emmanuel Lucky Sparrow and his then girlfriend. Early 1970s. (EAP054\_1\_138\_227)

#### **Ndzoti Ernest** *Le Décor*

For the past 30 years Ndzoti has been one of the prominent backdrop painters in the Mbouda part of the Ouest Region. In 2019 he was living in Toumaka, a village on the main Bamenda-Mbouda road where he still owned an art studio. Examples of his painted backdrops were on the walls of photo studio Delmas in Bamessingue and at the entrance of 'Hotel la Difference' in Mbouda (owned by the photographer Tchoffo Pascal, an apprentice of Toussele). His paintings were signed 'LE DECOR' giving this artistic nickname, contact number and residence as seen in Fig. 7 on the wall of Tchoffo's hotel in Mbouda.



Figure 7 Painted mural by Ndzoti 'Le décor' at the Hotel la Difference in Mbouda in late 2013. Photo: DZ 2013\_Nov\_897

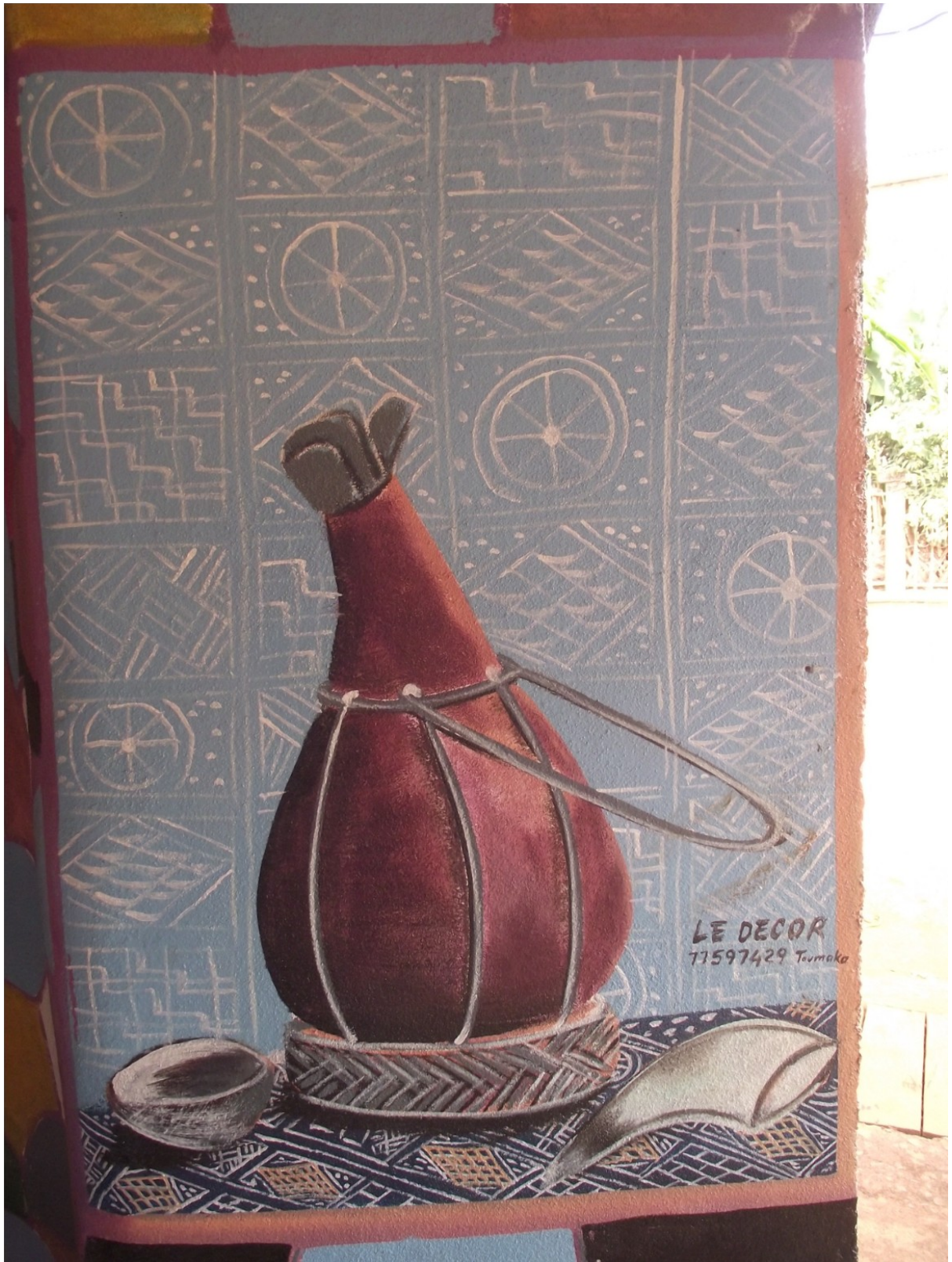


Figure 7a Ndzoti's signature and phone number on a different painted mural at the Hotel la Difference in Mbouda in late 2013. Photo: DZ 2013\_Nov\_899

After starting but not completing a university degree, Ndzoti worked as a designer with Messa Press the publisher of the bilingual daily newspaper *The Cameroon Tribune*. This led to his interest in painting. He was twice selected by the Minister of Culture to attend international arts exhibitions (in Gabon and Ivory Coast). Over the years one of his main interests has been in landscape painting. He was the main supplier of backdrops to Tchoffo Pascal as well as to other studio photographers in Douala and Yaoundé. For Pascal and his apprentice Photo Saint Delmas (Telkam Delmas Joel) in Bamessingue he also painted wall murals<sup>15</sup> and backdrops that depict the high prestige blue and white cloth used throughout the wider grassfields (see e.g. Feldman-Savelsberg 2005). This cloth was used often in the background of photos shot outside studios (and sometimes also used in some studio scenes, brought in specially by the clients). These painted blue and white cloth backdrops distinguish his contributions from those painted by Waffi Arts who we discuss next.

### **Waffo Jean-Pierre (Waffi Arts)**

Waffo Jean-Pierre lived in Bafoussam the capital of the Ouest Region. He was self-taught, having been inspired by dreams to start drawing while in primary school. He was originally a sign painter (who also made decorative paintings) starting his business in 1999. He started painting landscape scenes for backdrops around 2010. Comparing himself with those in the anglophone regions who, he said were more focussed on rubber stamp production, and painting pattern cloth backdrops, Waffo considered painting as his profession and vocation. He declared:

I do mostly landscape painting and my backdrops reflect natural space in different environments. I was not taught painting by anyone, though I am developing it through exchanges and interaction with other painters. The skills I have acquired up to now I may say come from God. My paintings include some of the backdrops at Pascal Tchoffo's photo studio and on the walls of his hotel. Others are by my colleague Ndzoti Ernest. Waffo interviewed in Mbouda. 14/8/2019.

His painted backdrops are in studios in Bafoussam, nearby in Bamessingue and Mbouda as well as also much further away in Douala and Yaoundé.

### **Tropes in backdrop styles**

There are some designs that recur in many different backdrops by different painters. Many of these shared tropes refer to symbols of modernity<sup>16</sup>, others to forms of nostalgia (as may be experienced by migrant workers). Others are hard to classify: for example, the persistence of columns as a motif seems more of a survival from early nineteenth century studios in Europe than anything else (via backdrops imported from Europe). They are, however, also found in the facades of houses constructed by the rich as forms of conspicuous consumption (these also reference neo-Classical European building styles) which means a column in a backdrop can be seen as an allusion to extravagant displays of wealth. Seascapes combine nostalgia

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<sup>15</sup> In another case of painting of high status imagery on walls, Richard Fardon (2005) discusses tiger imagery on the walls of Grassfield palaces, especially that of Bali-Nyonga. The murals, featuring lions, tigers and elephants, were used as backgrounds for photos especially those taken during the Lela festival. The Bali Nyonga murals were painted by David Louis Musi in the 1990s. He was described as 'a schoolteacher and the town's leading electric guitarist as well as an artist and carver' (Fardon 2005: 82).

<sup>16</sup> See Zeitlyn (2024) for discussion of the complexity of modernity in the context of the struggle for Independence.

with elements of modernity. Among the common tropes we find the subjects listed in Table 3.

Table 3 Backdrop Tropes

| Title                                         | Notes                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|-----------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Wouri bridge                                  | This bridge in Douala was opened in 1953 (then on the outskirts of the city, now quite central) and became a symbol of modernity. Many photos of it were published in newspapers and as postcards. It was used as a backdrop by many photographers.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| Highways (single and double lane)             | Roads and multi-lane highways are also symbols of modernity.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Airlines/ Aircraft/ Airports                  | Another well-established trope of modernity. These backdrops showed airports, generic aircraft or planes with airline names e.g. <i>Air Afrique</i> or <i>Cameroon Airlines</i> .                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| Paintings of patterned cloth                  | Painted versions of high-status locally produced blue and white prestige cloth, indexing royalty and chiefship and inherited traditional roles.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Columns                                       | Columns have been a staple of studio backdrops in Europe, America and West Africa since the 19 <sup>th</sup> century. An early example is the backdrop in a photo taken (c 1874) in Douala (Littoral Region) (published in Zeitlyn 2019: 313). There were many variations, including twisted or fluted columns, those with curtains and with decorated bases. See discussion in Nyamndon (2024).                                                                                                                                                               |
| Seascapes: beaches/ boats. Canoes and fishing | Beaches and seashores are places where many different types of people meet, including youths, students and tourists. Examples include the black sand beach in Limbe and the ‘Coconut Island’ area also in Limbe where tourists and elites spent their leisure time. The seashore features in many painted backdrops from the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Allusion is also made to the canoe racing that forms an important part of the culture and tradition of the Sawa people in the Littoral Region as exhibited during the annual ‘Ngondo’ festival in Douala. |
| Waterfalls                                    | There are several well known waterfalls in Cameroon including the Mifi falls in the Ouest Region and the Menchum falls in the Northwest Region.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Hills/Mountains                               | Mountains are characteristic features in the Grassfields region. Mount Cameroon is an active volcano in the Coastal region and also features on some backdrops, as a symbol of the coastal area in the South-West.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |

### Intertwined dynasties: the movement of backdrops

The following table summarizes the way in which the different painters and photographers that we have mentioned are connected by different types of backdrop. A graphic representation is given in Figure 8 which shows how photographic and painterly intellectual genealogies are intermeshed.

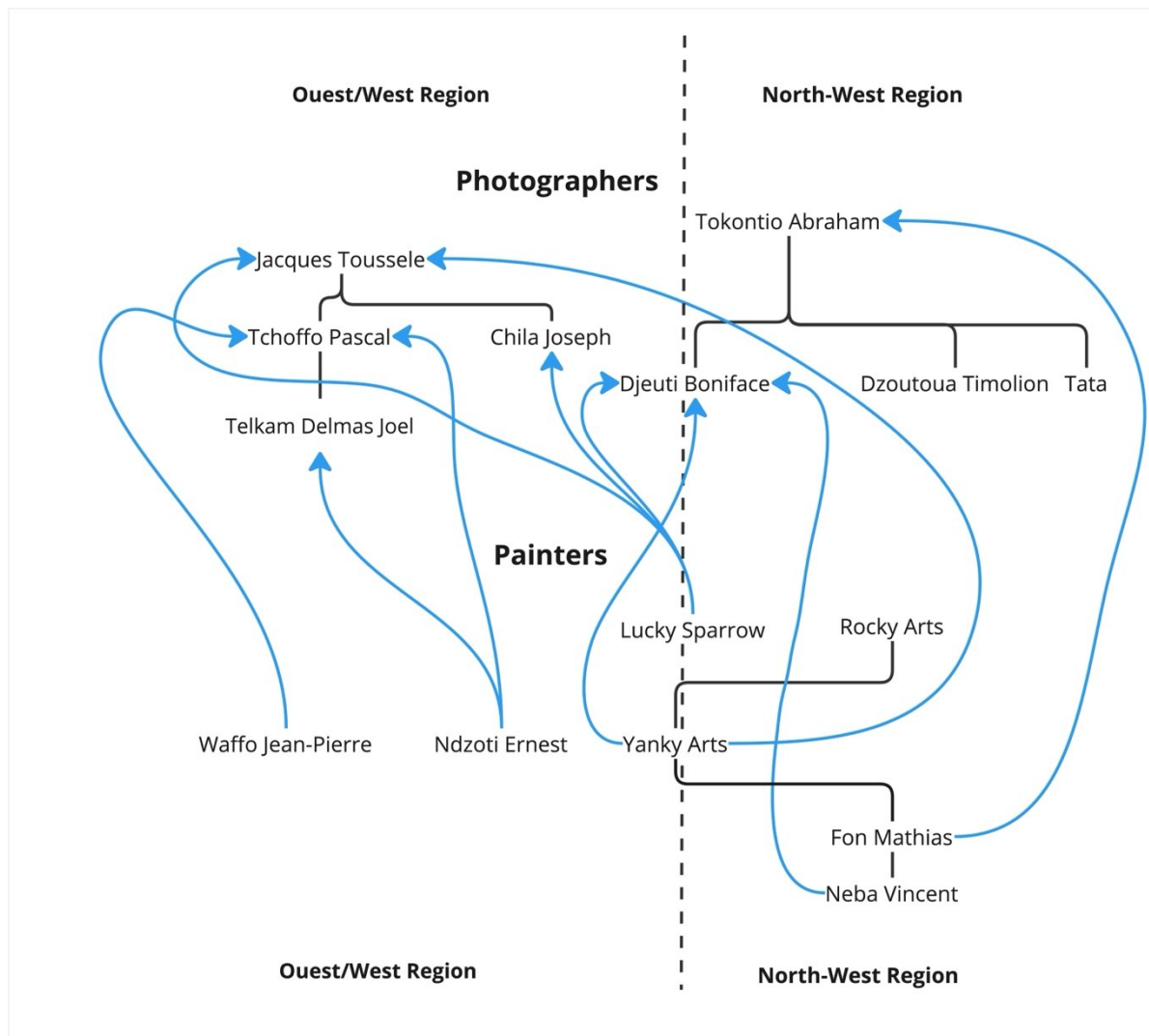
**Table 4 Who Painted Whose Backdrops?**

| Title                          | Painter                                             | Photographers                     |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Wouri bridge                   | Lucky Sparrow                                       | Tokontio, Toussele                |
| Roads (Single and double lane) | Graphic Art studios, Rocky                          | Djeuti, Tokontio                  |
| Paintings of patterned cloth   | Le Décor                                            | Djeuti, Tokontio,                 |
| Columns                        | Lucky Sparrow                                       | Djeuti, Tokontio, Toussele        |
| Seascapes                      | Le Décor, Lucky Sparrow, Waffi, Yanky               | Delmas, Djeuti, Tchoffo, Toussele |
| Waterfalls                     | Le Décor, Waffi                                     | Tchoffo, Delmas                   |
| Hills/Mountains                | Graphic Art studios, Le Décor, Lucky Sparrow, Waffi | Djeuti, Tokontio, Toussele        |

The peaks of photographic production usually during prominent religious public holidays such as Christmas, New Year, and Easter. Photos were also often taken on the Cameroonian public holidays such as the National Day on the 20<sup>th</sup> of May and Youth Day on 11<sup>th</sup> of February. In anticipation of such holidays Djeuti would move backdrops between studios so repeated photos taken at the same event on different years had different backgrounds. It should also be noted that because of his family connections he visited Mbouda frequently, and took the opportunity to move backdrops between the Mbouda studio and the Bamenda studios. His supervisory visits to the Douala studio (which were less frequent than to Mbouda) also enabled the movement of backdrops.

The following diagram summarizes the discussion presented in the text above in a somewhat more genealogical style. As mentioned in the introduction it also shows the spatial distribution between the Northwest and Ouest regions.

Figure 8:



An intellectual genealogy of photographers and backdrop painters  
 Blue arrows show backdrops from a painter being used by the specified photographer.  
 Black lines join masters and apprentices

## Conclusions

The commercial world of studio photography during its golden era in Cameroon (post-Independence) was complex and involved many actors. This included those supplying the film, printing paper and chemicals, and those supplying the accoutrements of the studios. Not only the painted backdrops we have been considering here but also the studio props that were very widely used (which must be considered elsewhere). In this paper we have looked at how painted backdrops served to connect studios along and across the lines of photographic apprenticeships, while noting the parallel sets of apprenticeships linking painters.

A key finding is that photography and painting did not respect spheres of colonial influence. Photography has always been international. It started in the area in the nineteenth century moving along the West African coast on steamships, connecting, for example, Senegal, Ghana and Fernando Po (now Bokito). As our material demonstrates photographers such as Tokontio and then his apprentice Djeuti crossed the lines between French and British spheres of influence, as did painters such as Yanky and Lucky Sparrow. Photography in Cameroon stands as a counterexample to narratives of clashing Francophone vs Anglophone mentalities. Rather the international ecumene of photography expressed the very idea of modernity

(alternating or combining with nostalgia), often made visible in the backdrops that moved between studios.

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