

The 'Palm-Climber' issue of Dahomey

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Further to the article written by Mick Bister on the Joseph de la Nézière issues of French West Africa, (Journal N° 286, April 2018), American member Jere Dutt shares with us major items from his specialist collection of the Dahomey 'Palm-Climber' issue.

A brief look through most collections will reveal many of the colourful and well engraved stamps of the French colonies. These were most assuredly a staple of the packets purchased by youngsters and beginners from mail order or over the counter at the local five and dime since the 1940s and containing beautiful bi-colours from faraway places such as Madagascar, New Caledonia, French India and Martinique, most of them mint. It seemed for a bit that these great stamps were slid to the less than cool side of stamp collecting for a while, destined to live at the Kids' Corner at the local stamp show. However, as some of these stamps are reaching 100 years old and some attention is being paid to them it is becoming apparent that many of the designs carried a heavy load of the actual mail being moved in, out and around these countries.



Figure 1

Left: Framed original artwork by Joseph de la Nézière (source unknown) and (right) same art work as illustrated in *Le Collectionneur de Timbres-Poste*, Arthur Maury, 1909 p145. Note the cloudless background to the palm-climber.

The 'Palm-Climber' from Dahomey is one of these designs. While being interesting, printed in many different colour combinations, and having a long print life it was actually a workhorse for moving the mail. Designed by Joseph de la Nézière and engraved by Abel Mignon the design was first issued in 1913 and last issued in 1941. The *maquettes* painted by Nézière were commissioned in 1908, finished, approved by the administration, and a preview published by Arthur Maury in 1909 (figure 1).

The task of engraving then was handed over to Mignon. For several reasons associated with the French printing bureau and the multitude of pictorial issues being developed, there were many delays in production. The engravings and then printing of the first Dahomey stamps took four years. As with most engraving there were many essays prior to the final proofs. The preliminary engravings in bronze (figure 2) appear with a clear cloud above the climber. However, in the subsequent engravings on wood a bird type figure had been placed in the cloud area (figure 3). The *épreuve de décomposition* signed by Mignon and the final proof show the cloud area shaded in to blend with the rest of the sky (figures 4 and 5).

When first issued in October of 1913, there were sixteen denominations printed via typography. With typography the raised portion of the design plate carries the ink to the paper. While a less expensive way to print, it unfortunately does not allow for extremely fine detailing. Many of the engraving details get a bit lost with a smudgy feel. By the last release in 1941¹ sixty different issues had been produced. The frame and vignette separation allowed for the bi-colour stamps to be printed efficiently.

¹ These are the four values of the *Secours National* charity overprints



Figure 2

Preliminary intaglio die proof engraved on bronze with enlarged detail below showing 'cloud' in sky above the palm-climber



Figure 3

First state die proof engraved on wood (left) with enlarged detail above showing design with 'bird' in sky above the palm-climber.

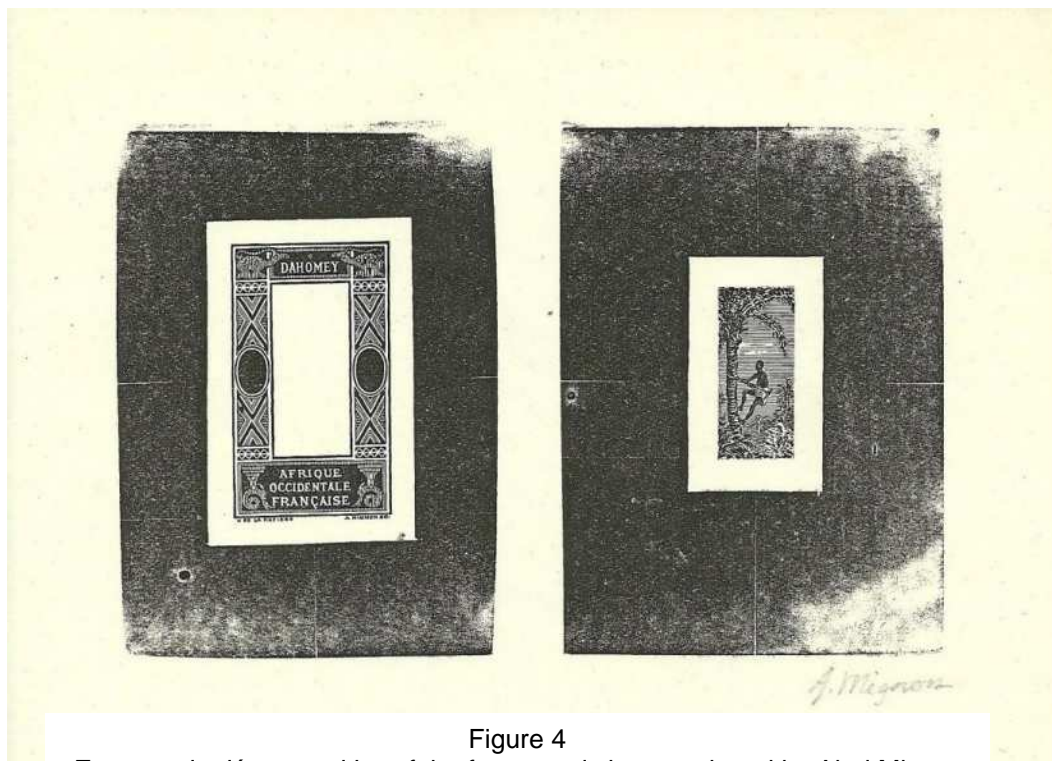


Figure 4

Epreuve de décomposition of the frame and vignette signed by Abel Mignon

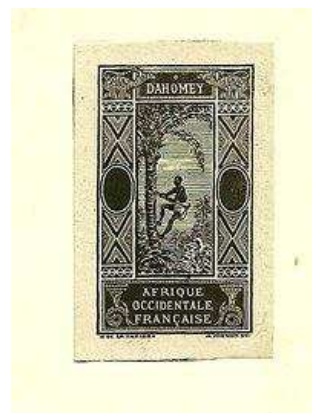


Figure 5

Final proof combining the elements of figure 4. with enlarged detail showing that the 'cloud' has been modified further and is hence less intrusive.





Figure 6
Imperforate 35c blue-green
and yellow green issued
14 May 1938



Figure 7
1c violet and black of 1913
with displaced vignette



Figure 8
20f on 5f vermillion and
green issued 7 February
1927 with displaced vignette



Figure 9
UPU specimens of the 1 January 1922 issue supplied to the Mauritania
post office for reference purposes. **Unique item.**

With the typography process there are some inconsistencies in the printing but there have yet to be identified any major subtypes. However, there were several denominations that were released imperforate (figure 6). Also, due to the split frame and vignette there were several issued with misalignment errors (figure 7 and figure 8). Of course as with all new issues a specimen had to be sent to all UPU countries to have on file to confirm correct and legitimate postal usage. (figure 9).

Dahomey was a developing colony located on the Slave Coast. It was not the hub of activity that Senegal was at the time; however, it did have plentiful resources and continued to play an important role in the region throughout the duration of the palm-climber issue. There is too much in that time line to cover here but several items and dates support the conclusion that these stamps did real postal service for a wide variety of purposes for a long period of time. It was put into use quickly in the colony. The issue can be encountered franked along with stamps from the previous series as in this cover sent to Germany (figure 10)



Figure 10
 4c and 50c palm-climber issued in October 1913 with two 5c overprints on the Navigation & Commerce issue mailed to Germany from Porto Novo on 29 January 1914. Assuming the franking represents the second step (20-40 grams) foreign registered letter rate of 1 May 1910 (40c + 25c = 65c) the item is underfranked by 1 centime yet untaxed.

In late 1920 the supply of the 1913 25c ultramarine and deep blue Dahomey palm-climber ran out in several cities. The shortage was created as a result of the domestic letter rate increase to 25 centimes on 4 January 1920. The domestic rate applied to internal mail as well as mail to France. The postal authorities approved the bi-secting of the 1913 50 centime chocolate and brown stamp (figure 11) to fill the need until a new supply of 25c stamps could be provided.



Figure 11
 50c bisected diagonally to pay the 25c internal letter rate introduced 1 April 1920 on cover to Bohicon cancelled Porto-Novo, 21 October 1920

This authorisation extended from September to December 1920. The cities of Bohicon, Cotonou, and Porto-Novo were authorised to use the bisect method. The precise usage was not clear to users, however. Officially the 50c stamp should have been bisected horizontally or vertically. However, postally used examples are known with incorrect cutting as well examples of incorrect stamps being bisected with mixed usage (figure 12).



Figure 12
15c and 20c bisected diagonally to pay the 25c franco-colonial letter rate on cover to Dijon, cancelled Bohicon, 24 December 1920

As no special airmail stamps had been issued, the higher values of the palm-climber handled airmail duties as well (figure 13).

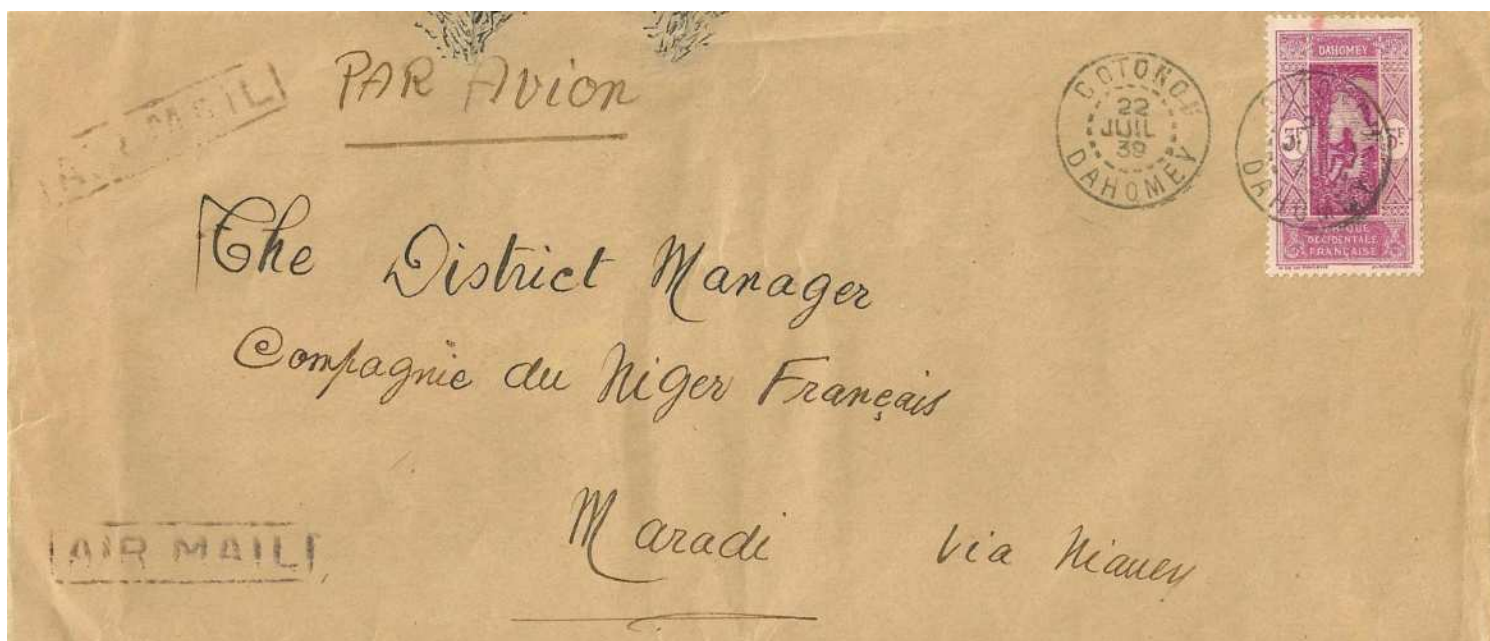


Figure 13

3f stamp issued on 5 May 1930 on airmail letter from Cotonou to Maradi in Niger cancelled 22 July 1939. The internal AOF rate for the letter up to 20 grams was 90c (w.e.f. 1 January 1939) and the airmail fee was 1f per 5 grams (w.e.f. 14 May 1937), total 1f90. The letter is therefore overfranked by 10c



Figure 14

5 franc issue of 1913 on airmail cover to Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, cancelled Cotonou 3 March 1942. In France the letter rate had been increased from 1f to 1f50 on 1 March (just four days before the posting of this letter) but here it appears that the 1f rate is still valid. With the airmail fee of 4f for up to 10 grams the franking of 5 francs is correct.

None of the issues was ever demonetised so there were legitimate usages of the earliest stamps many years later. A cover from 1942 shows the 5 franc stamp of 1913 correctly used (figure 14). The high values were all printed and sent to the colonies but the rates were rather above the need. As time passed and rates increased, their usage was now more practical. So, some of these saw more usage well after, rather than near, their issue date.



Figure 15
First Issue of October 1916
overprinted *TOGO Occupation
franco-anglaise*



Figure 16
Second issue of July 1921
printed in new colours
overprinted *TOGO*



Figure 17
Stamp prepared in colours for
second issue but with missing
overprint

In the aftermath of WWI, France occupied and administered a portion of the neighbouring country of Togo. The first series of stamps were an overprint on the regular palm-climber issues of Dahomey (figure 15). For the second series the palm-climber design was issued in a totally different colour scheme and with a different overprint (figure 16). The fact that the Togo stamps were printed in unique colour schemes allows this stamp

(figure 17) to be identified as a missing overprint rather than a standard Dahomey issue. Following a series of overprint design essays (figure 18) the overprinted values were issued between 1922 and 1925 (figure 19). These stamps of Togo of course also saw real postal usage (figure 20).



Figure 18
Vingt-cinq centimes
overprint essays on 5f
issue. Each essay is
mounted on cream card.

Figure 19
Adopted 25c
overprint on 5f
issued on 15 June
1924



Figure 20
Registered letter franked 1f to Lagos, Nigeria cancelled Atakpamé 7 June 1917. Postage for a foreign letter up to 80 grams was 70c plus registration fee of 25c hence the cover is overfranked by 5c.

Towards the end of the design's life it was pressed into service as a revenue. In 1939 many of the stamps were overprinted *Timbre/Fiscal* (figure 21) and in 1946 any remaining stock of the revenues were to be destroyed.





Figure 21

The number of Revenue overprints issued varied from three figures (only 873 for the 45c on 80c value) to five figures (52,000 for the 4f on 35c value)

A well designed and executed stamp, the palm-climber is simply a solid, much used, definitive not just a pretty packet filler. While, yes, they were somewhat cheaply produced compared to other printing methods of the time they were pleasing to the eye, did the job, and also promoted our wonderful hobby at the same time.

Author's Note: I am developing an Earliest known and Latest known use census of these issues. I would greatly appreciate hearing from anyone else interested in the palm-climber design. If you have any studies or original information I would love to correspond. Any dates close to issue or very late after issue that you are in possession or aware of please let me know. I can be reached at 330-338-7639 or jere@duttenterprises.com.