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.

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 in 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 1941 sixty different issues had been produced. The frame and vignette separation allowed for the bi-colour stamps to be printed efficiently.

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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.
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).
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.
This authorisation extended from September to December 1920. The cities of Bohicon, Cotonou, and Porto-Novvo 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).

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

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.
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.

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)