

I GAVE UP EVERYTHING TO BECOME A DOCTOR IN EQUATORIAL AFRICA

A fascination since childhood

As a child, Albert Schweitzer was captivated by a statue of an African man on the Admiral Bruat Fountain in Colmar, an image that awakened in him the desire to relieve the suffering of others.

It was this work by Bartholdi that inspired me to take on the task I decided to dedicate myself to at the age of thirty.

A. Schweitzer,
Memoirs of Childhood and Youth, 1927



Figure de l'Afrique at the Bruat Fountain, inaugurated in 1864, Champ de Mars, Colmar by Auguste Bartholdi (1834–1904)

The call to serve

In 1904, Albert Schweitzer, director of the Protestant seminary in Strasbourg and a respected intellectual and musician searching for a “purely human service,” came across an appeal from the Société des Missions Évangéliques de Paris to support its mission in the Congo.

I am happy. It is done. [...] How could I keep living here whilst feeling the duty to go there? I'll go, but what will become of me? How will I die? What suffering lies ahead?

A. Schweitzer, in a letter to Hélène, 9 July 1905



Albert and Hélène Schweitzer

A purely human commitment

To answer the call and meet the needs of the Congo mission, Albert Schweitzer studied medicine in Strasbourg before embarking for the Moyen-Ogooué region and the mission in Lambaréné.

I was a professor at the University of Strasbourg, an organist, and a writer. I gave up everything to become a doctor in Equatorial Africa.

A. Schweitzer,
On the Edge of the Primeval Forest, 1923

A Message from the Mayor

This exhibition invites you to explore the human and medical journey of the physician, philosopher, and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Albert Schweitzer. He decided to settle in Lambaréné, Gabon, where he founded a hospital for local communities.

As he came to know life in Africa first-hand, Schweitzer didn't just impose European models ; he responded to the realities around him. He developed a form of medicine suited to its surrounding, based on listening, respect and understanding of others.

At the heart of the exhibition, Schweitzer's hospital emerges as a place of care and trust, reflecting his ethic of “reverence for life,” his context-sensitive architectural choices, and the indispensable involvement of local communities.

Rather than a simple tribute, the exhibition opens a reflection on cultural exchange and the necessity of grounding knowledge in its context.

Continue your visit “in the footsteps of the Nobel Peace Prize winner” and discover how Albert Schweitzer's work and ideas still resonate today. They are an invitation for us to take action for a fairer and more compassionate world.

Martine Schwartz
Mayor of Kaysersberg Vignoble

Acknowledgements

L'Association Française des Amis d'Albert Schweitzer, represented by Damien Mougin, President

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Damien Mougin

FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF AFRICA

Understanding the region before setting out

At the beginning of the 20th century, before setting out for the Moyen-Ogooué region, Albert Schweitzer learnt about it from information available in Europe. Knowledge of the region was still limited. It rested mainly on two types of sources.



Map of the French colony of Gabon-Congo, 1894

Accounts of 19th-century explorers

The writings of Savorgnan de Brazza, du Chaillu, and other explorers, together with reports from soldiers and traders, offered Albert Schweitzer valuable geographic, demographic and ethnological insights.



Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza's first expedition, Lambaréné, 1874

Schweitzer also drew on accounts from the earliest missionaries, giving him a glimpse of medical practice in the Ogooué Valley.

Robert Nassau (1835-1921)



A Pennsylvania-born physician and pastor with the American Presbyterian missions, who arrived in Africa in 1861 and founded the Kongwe mission station in Lambaréné (Andendé) in 1876.

He embraced local culture and pursued interests in ethnology, history, and botany, leaving a substantial body of writing on the Ogooué Valley and Gabon.

He devoted 45 years of his life to Africa and corresponded with Albert Schweitzer on several occasions.

Valentine Lantz (1873-1906)



The Lantz couple: Valentine, a teacher, and Edouard, a pastor, arrived at the Talagouga mission, upstream from Lambaréné, in June 1899.

After losing her baby at just a few weeks old and then her husband, Valentine returned to Europe to train as a nurse and midwife.

She returned to Talagouga, resumed teaching, and founded a dispensary. Moved by her kindness, the villagers nicknamed her "the one who always smiles."

She died in 1906, leaving a lasting memory of dedication and respect.

Maurice Robert (1876-1913)



As the Paris Mission Society looked for a successor to Edouard Lantz, Maurice Robert, who had begun medical studies, agreed in 1902 to go to Gabon with his wife, Philippine de Montmollin. There he established the mission station's first infirmary.

In 1911, he resigned from the Mission Society to found an egalitarian agricultural community, based on the principle of "absolute equality among all members: man or woman, white or black, Catholic, Protestant or 'pagans'." This bold step left a lasting impression before his death in 1913.

FROM COMMITMENT TO ACTION : THE FIRST CHALLENGES

The hospital takes shape

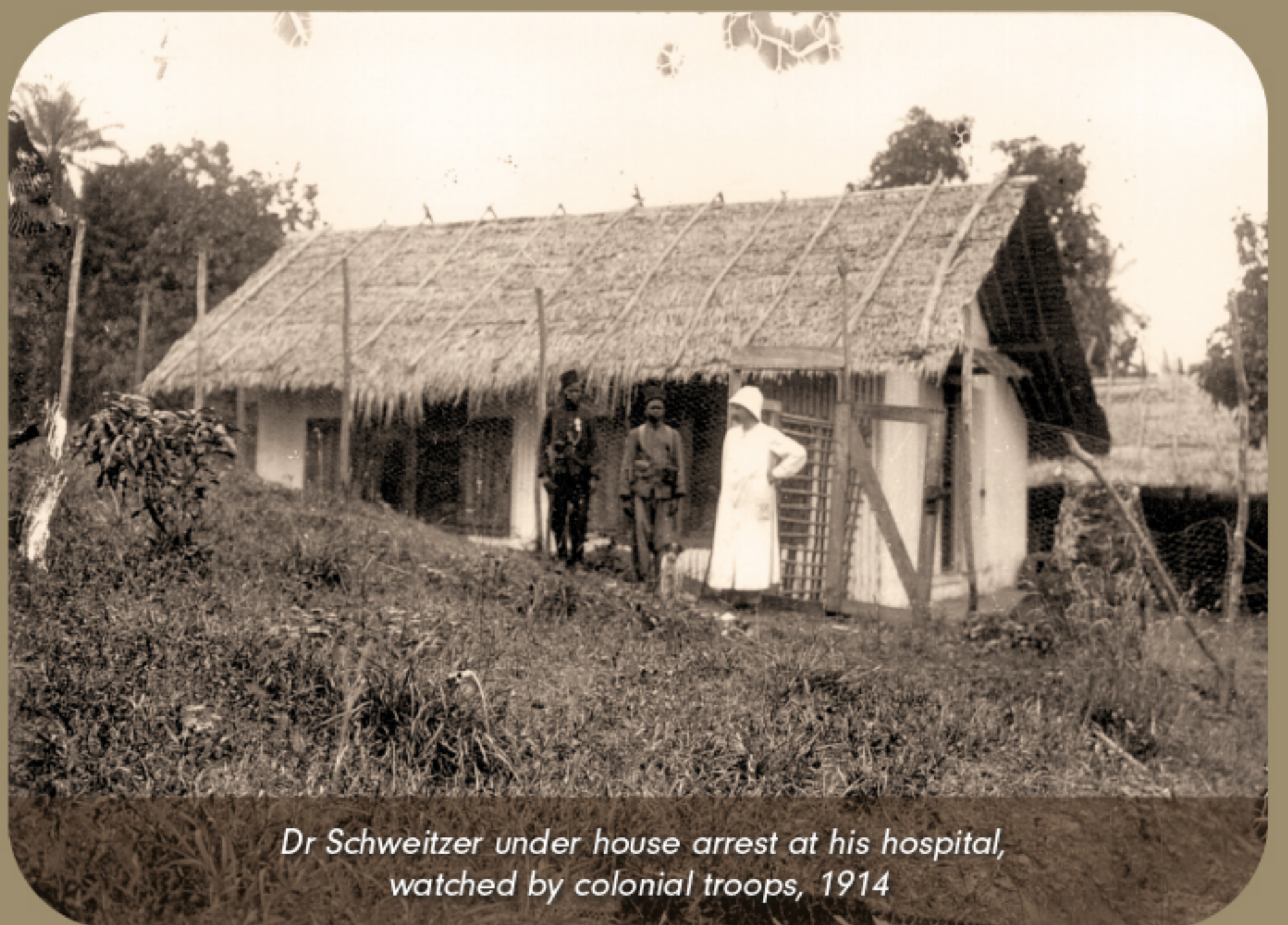
No sooner had they arrived at the Andendé mission in April 1913 than an influx of patients required Albert and Hélène Schweitzer to get to work immediately. Since the dispensary they had been promised did not exist, the doctor refurbished Maurice Robert's old dispensary, which had also been used as a chicken coop.



View of Andendé, c. 1910

Schweitzer and the First World War

As German nationals living in a French colony after the annexation of Alsace in 1871, Albert and Hélène Schweitzer were placed under house arrest in Lambaréné. In 1917, they were expelled and held as civilian internees, first at Garaison and later at Saint-Rémy-de-Provence. They returned to Alsace in 1918.



Dr Schweitzer under house arrest at his hospital, watched by colonial troops, 1914



Albert Schweitzer checking the roof of a new hospital hut, 1924

After the war : rebuilding from scratch

When Albert Schweitzer returned to Lambaréné in 1924 without his wife, only a few ruins remained of the first hospital, built from wood, bamboo, and palm leaves. He immediately set about building a second hospital.

An uneasy balance between medical and missionary work

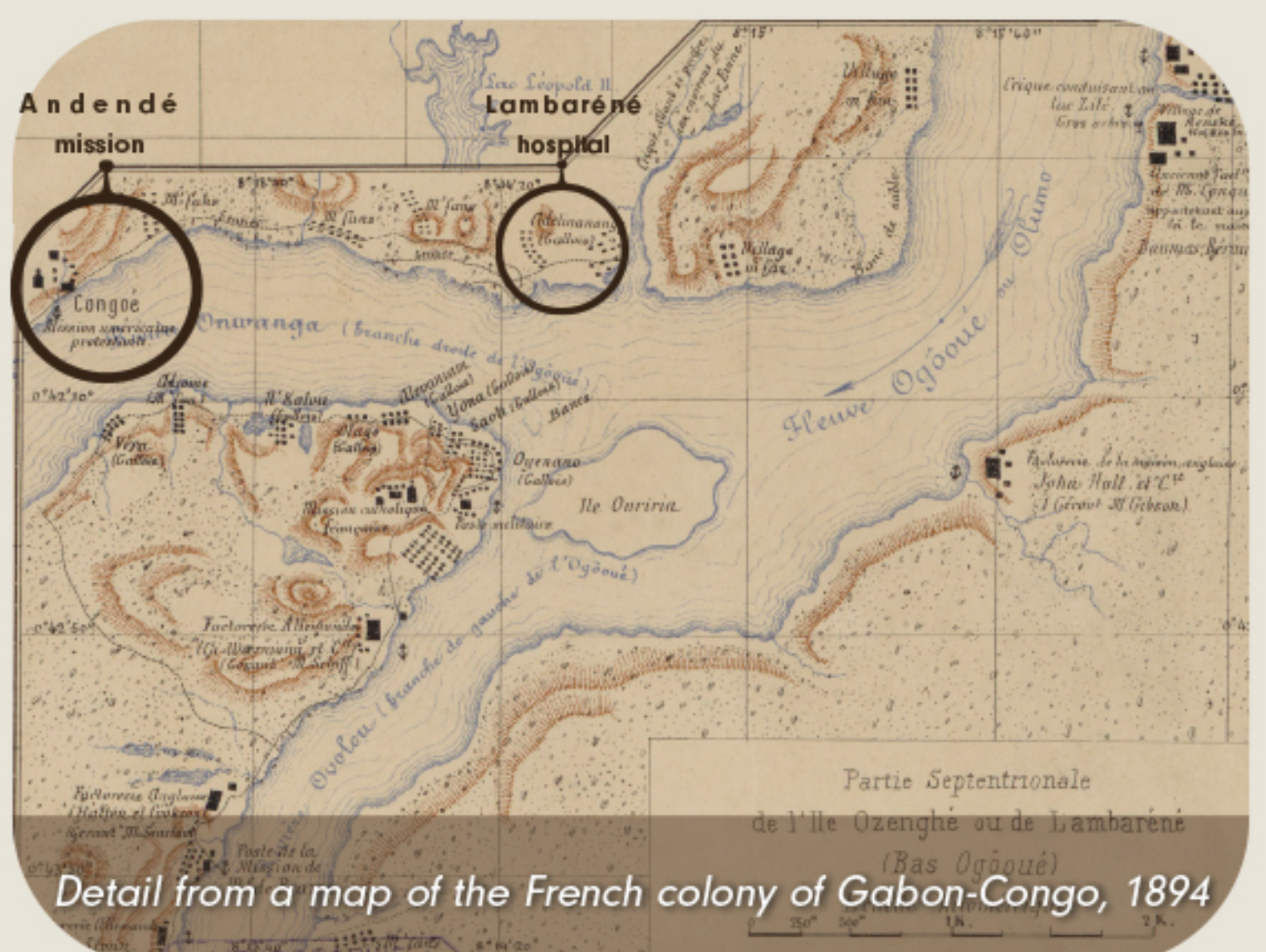
As his medical work expanded, bringing with it a constant stream of patients, many with contagious diseases, it became increasingly difficult to share the site with the mission, which welcomed many children in its schools and boarding facilities. Schweitzer began to look for a new location.

Lambaréné: a third hospital

Schweitzer selected an undeveloped plot on the same bank of the Ogooué River, three kilometres upstream from the mission. It was the site of a former village, once the base camp for Savorgnan de Brazza. Between 1925 and January 1927, he planned and built a hospital designed to offer patients the best possible conditions.



Moving to the new hospital site, 1926



Detail from a map of the French colony of Gabon-Congo, 1894

ADAPTING, NOT REPLICATING

A pioneering concept

Albert Schweitzer rejected the European hospital layouts used at the time and drew on his experience from 1913 to 1925 to develop a hospital layout of his own.

This new architecture responded to local climatic and social realities, placing the patient at the heart of the layout to improve the effectiveness of treatment.

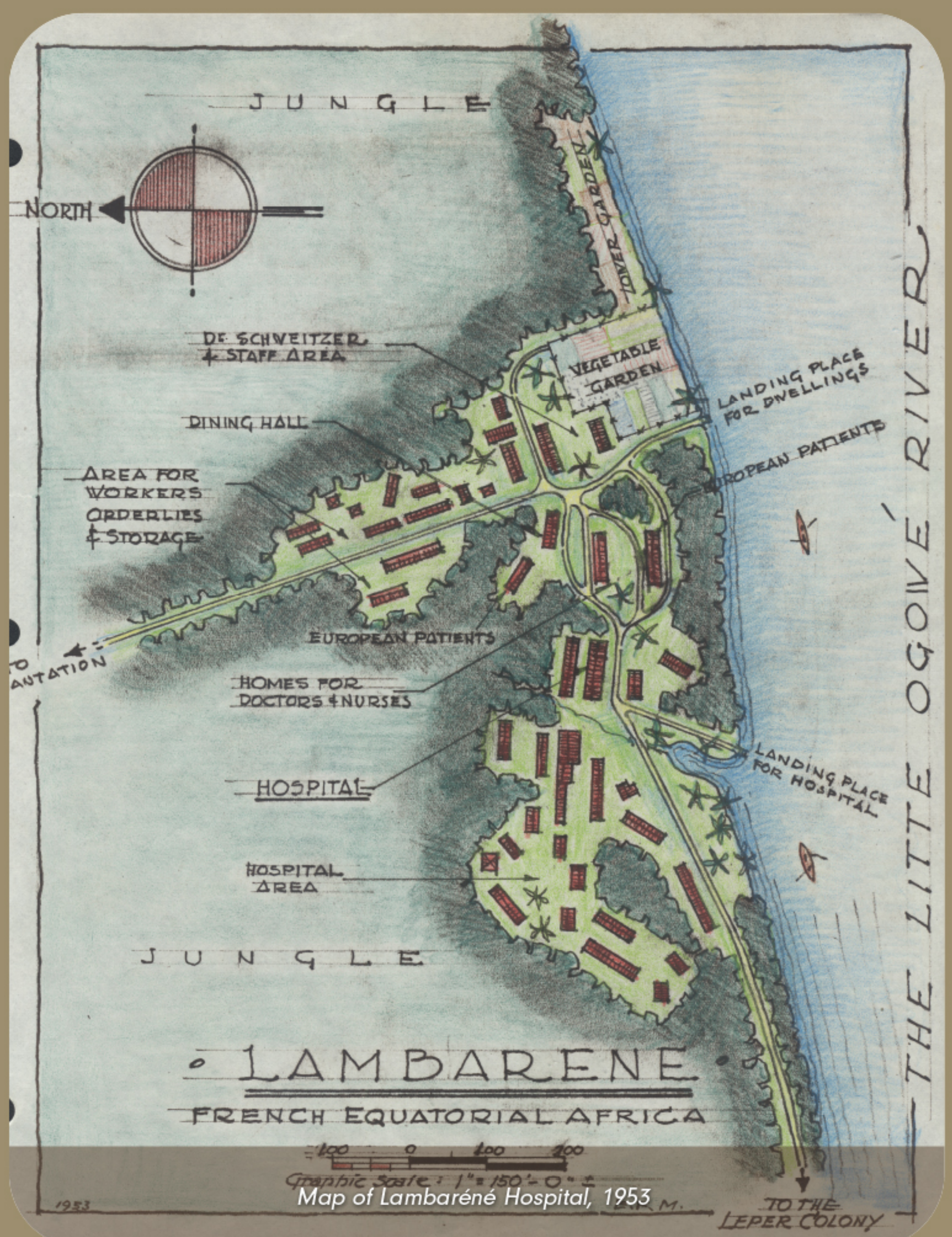


A hospital village

Patients were housed not by diagnosis, but by community of origin.

Albert Schweitzer respected the identities, customs, and traditions of each ethnic group.

Patients were admitted with their families, who took part in daily care, such as washing, meals, night watch, etc., and helped with the daily upkeep of the hospital (gardens, maintenance, etc.). This created a harmonious atmosphere that encouraged acceptance of care and supported a faster recovery.



There are different tribes here, and different languages. So the patient is told, "Go where people speak your language." A group of people from the same community can then be found, and they will help if needed, whereas strangers from a different community would not.

A. Schweitzer, RTF : Cinq colonnes à la une, 1961

ADAPTING TO LOCAL CONDITIONS

A pragmatic approach

Albert Schweitzer built his hospital by drawing on local resources instead of importing materials, reducing both costs and delays.

By favouring wood, which was readily available and easy to work with, he drew on local building traditions, materials and techniques, combining them with his own expertise to create buildings that were practical, durable and in harmony with the climate and landscape.



Construction of the post-operative hut ("Bouka" hut), 1925-1926



Preparing the stilts for a hospital hut, 1925-1926

Reverence for life, put into practice

Albert Schweitzer's ethic of reverence for life was reflected in the ecological principles he applied to the hospital's water supply and the design and management of its gardens and orchards. One of his aims was to pass on these environmentally friendly practices to patients and their families.

Water : a precious resource

By collecting rainwater at the Commandant Salé fountain and using a well, inspired by those found in the castles of Alsace, Albert Schweitzer secured a reliable water supply, which was vital for treatment and daily life at the hospital.



Lambaréné well, 1950s



Commandant Salé fountain, 1950s

The terraces of the gardens in Lambaréné

Rejecting slash-and-burn cultivation, the gardens were designed along the lines of the vineyard terraces of Alsace. This design retains soil and water, makes the best use of space, and makes upkeep easier. These gardens helped reduced the hospital's reliance on outside food supplies.



Terraced hospital gardens, 1940s

COMMUNITY MEDICINE

Providing care within the community

Albert Schweitzer did not simply replicate the European medical model. He responded to the real needs of Gabonese people and promoted a form of care that involved them directly. By moving away from the centralised, hierarchical approach of colonial medicine, he created a hospital deeply rooted in its community and able to endure over time.



Gabonese nurses, 1930

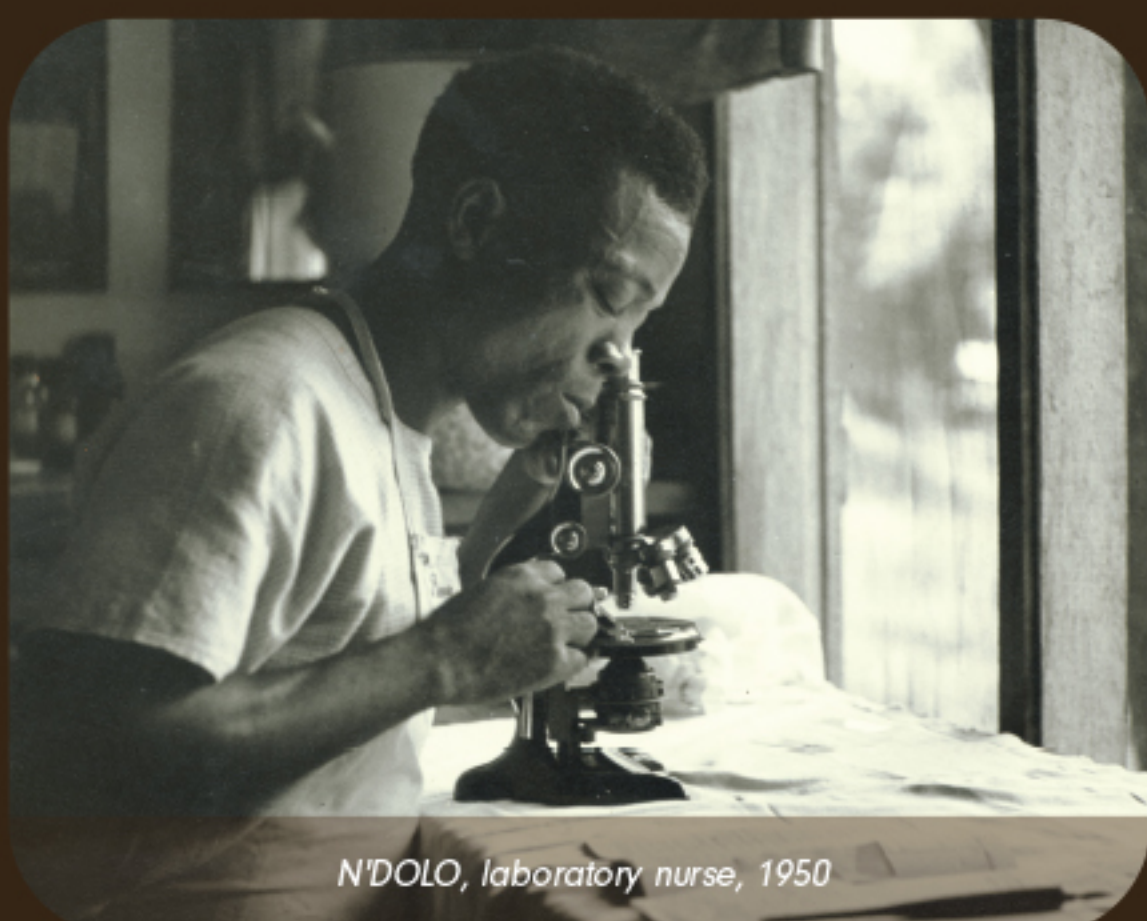


Hospital staff, 1940

Training for the long term

Albert Schweitzer established an organisation in which Gabonese staff were trained to provide care. This apprenticeship-based, on-the-job approach to learning helped, from the 1930s onwards, to develop a Gabonese workforce of nurses and care assistants.

In doing so, the hospital gained autonomy and a qualified local workforce.



N'DOLO, laboratory nurse, 1950

Putting patients at the centre of care

At Lambaréné, Albert Schweitzer developed a patient-centred approach to hospital care. Rather than treating patients simply as passive recipients, he involved them actively in their own recovery. Respecting patients' customs and having their families nearby helped to promote not only their physical recovery but also their psychological well-being.



A patient's family in Lambaréné, 1950s

THE BIRTH OF HUMANITARIAN MEDICINE

Healthcare for all

The hospital was designed as a place of care open to all. Albert Schweitzer believed that medical care should be accessible without requiring payment, in contrast to the administrative model in place.

This reflects his conviction that everyone has a duty towards the most vulnerable, a duty he hoped all humanity would embrace.



A patient's family arriving at the hospital, 1960s

Working within financial constraints

With no public funding, Albert Schweitzer personally set out to raise the funds for his work. He gave organ recitals, lectures and wrote books. He sought the support of patrons and built a worldwide network of associations that provided the funds needed to sustain his work in Lambaréné.



Schweitzer outside the church in Kayserberg, 1950s



Schweitzer playing the organ



Schweitzer outside the Protestant church in Kayserberg, 1950s

International recognition and the hospital's development

Over the years, Schweitzer attracted growing attention and support. His Nobel Peace Prize in 1952 further raised his profile. Increased donations made it possible to expand the facilities and treat more patients. Schweitzer used these funds to upgrade medical equipment and tackle epidemics such as leprosy, notably through the creation of the Village Lumière.



The "Village Lumière", 1960s

A LASTING LEGACY

A supranational organisation

In 1924, when he returned to Lambaréné, Albert Schweitzer was joined by Dr Nessmann, the nurse Mathilde Kottmann and the teacher Emma Haussknecht. Together they formed the first links in a chain of human solidarity.

Men and women from all nations joined Albert Schweitzer, giving the project a supranational, multicultural character and ensuring a steady flow of up-to-date expertise.



From top to bottom and left to right :
Mathilde Kottmann and Dr Schweitzer, Emmy Martin,
Victor Nessmann and Marc Lauterburg

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I want our children and grandchildren never to forget this project. It's important that they can see it and touch it, that they know what a man from Europe chose to build for us in our country.

Léon M'ba, 1st President of the Gabonese Republic (1961–1967)

Great Doctor, you have not left us. You never will ! Your memory and the spirit you breathed into us will remain timeless, and your life's work of human solidarity will continue, I am sure, in the Gabon of tomorrow.

Omar Bongo Ondimba, President of the Gabonese Republic (1967–2009)

A lasting legacy

113 years on, the dispensary Albert founded has become a modern hospital, while remaining faithful to the principle of 'Reverence for Life'.

Founded in 1974 and recognised by Gabon as being of national interest, the Fondation Internationale de l'Hôpital du Docteur Albert Schweitzer de Lambaréné continues his work and preserves his legacy thanks to the support of an international network. In addition, a research centre set up by the hospital is carrying out work to combat pandemics affecting the African continent.

***“I am life that wants to live,
in the midst of life that wants to live.”***

Albert Schweitzer



The day after Dr. Schweitzer's funeral, September 1965