History Without A Past



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"Magic and mystery, heroic longings, the fore-shadowings of music, sculpture and logic seek form and expression in noble play. We have to conclude, therefore, that civilization is, in its earliest phases, played. It does not come *from* play like a babe detaching itself from the womb: it arises *in* and *as* play, and never leaves it."

Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 1950

Play is a serious business, ironically enough. It lies at the foundation of civilization and yet society suffers from 'play erosion'. This is the conclusion reached by the Situationists who, in the 1960s, rolled out a strategy aimed at overturning society. As a group of intellectuals and artists, they wanted to ignite an aestheticpolitical revolution and endeavoured to elevate everyday life into art. Driven by a fundamental critique of the consumer society, the Situationists sought mechanisms by which to radically transform structured everyday life and reintroduce it as a form of play. Their theories were substantiated with manifestos, pamphlets, slogans and public actions. But above all else. they created 'situations' as a way of upending the rational culture of the working man, thereby making way for the playful self. 'Free time' has to be won in order to prevent it from being overpowered by capitalism, the latter of which reduces us to passive and dutiful consumers. The Situationists propagated the revolution and it should come as no surprise that their ideas contributed to the uprisings of May 1968.

The group's approach and its resonance with contemporary society have inspired Vincent Meessen and Samson Kambalu to bring their work together in *History Without A Past*. The seed for this collaborative undertaking

was planted — unconsciously — during the Venice Biennale of 2015, in which both artists presented works inspired by the Situationist International. Meessen showed the video installation *One.Two.Three* in the Belgian Pavilion in the Giardini. Kambalu's work *Sanguinetti Breakout Area* was included in the main exhibition, *All the World's Futures*, curated by Okwui Enwezor. *History Without A Past* builds on this common experience. Meessen and Kambalu interact in a playful yet strategic manner. Their shared fascination for the revolutionary and subversive ideals of the Situationist International unfolds in radically different ways, however.

Samson Kambalu (°1975, Nchalo, Malawi — lives and works in Oxford) is a researcher, author, filmmaker and above all a visual artist. His films and installations reveal a profound interest in the mixing and blurring of different cultures and histories. His practice is rooted in everyday life and counteracts every capitalist (and art market-oriented) system. He self-lessly shares the films or images he creates online, thereby making them freely accessible to everyone. Kambalu draws inspiration from Malawi, where there is a strong Nyau culture that focuses on 'giving'. "As soon as our basic needs are met and there is 'time' to spare, those

hours should be wasted in the most glorious way imaginable: through creativity and play. Loosing time is a form of 'giving' and, at its best, also creates intimacy. Unlike commodities, which only create distance between people." In his analysis of Nyau culture, Kambalu sees parallels with the way in which the international Situationists battled cold capitalism and promoted the potlatch, or generous donation.

Vincent Meessen (°1971, Baltimore U.S.A. — lives and works in Brussels) goes in search of forgotten or repressed incidents from our collective colonial past. He tries to feed our Eurocentric view of history with new and multiple insights. His multidisciplinary installations and videos focus on the less visible figures who often get buried in historiography, which is typically organised around the so-called 'key players'. This creates new perspectives and challenges our assumptions about the past.

History Without A Past presents the stories that emerge from the margins. History is written by victors, not by those on the periphery, according to Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), the German-Jewish Marxist cultural philosopher who in 1939, just before his death, wrote a thesis entitled On the Concept of History. In this text,

he argues that the philosophy of history is not only a scientific task but an ethical and universal duty. Benjamin speaks up for the oppressed, the figures in the margins who are just as much a part of that past. It is all a question of how you look at things, but that perspective needs to be rescued from oblivion. History is a construction, a hotchpotch of selection and interpretation. It is not a continuum of consecutive events. The position of the person making the construction — the historian — is as important as the events themselves. The past is not something we can leave behind. Its interpretation, however, is a task that lies before us.

In History Without A Past, Samson Kambalu and Vincent Meessen resurrect a number of histories that are usually told in isolation. They have brought these narratives together in this exhibition and invite us to wander through the history of Belgium, Congo, Great Britain, France, Malawi, Senegal and the United States. Along the way, we make the acquaintance of a number of fascinating figures whose significance — in the light of eternity — is determined by the dialogue they enter into with each other and also with us, the viewers.

Sanguinetti Breakout Area Samson Kambalu, 2015-2020

"Why Situationism? Why the Sanguinetti Breakout Area? For the sake of giving." These are the opening lines of a letter that Samson Kambalu wrote in his defence during a court case triggered by his installation Sanguinetti Breakout Area, which the artist exhibited in Venice in 2015. The installation includes the archive of Gianfranco Sanguinetti, one of the key figures of the Situationist International. Sanguinetti sold his archive to Yale University in 2014, an act that completely violates the Situationist philosophy. The vast repository contains hundreds of letters, photographs, manuscripts, pamphlets and periodicals. Kambalu photographed this archive sheet by sheet and collated the thousands of images, drawings and letters into one large volume, the Sanguinetti Theses. By exhibiting this work in Venice, Kambalu 'donated' the archive back to Italy, the country in which the Situationist International was born in 1957. The members of the group coined the term 'détournement' as a way to describe the 'hijacking' of a situation. And this is exactly what Kambalu did with the archive. Sanguinetti was furious and accused Kambalu of copyright infringement. It is important to state

that (the elimination of) copyright was one of the conditions that the Situationists, Sanguinetti included, devised as a way of advocating 'détournement'. The legal proceedings were settled in Kambalu's favour.

In the letter, Samson Kambalu discusses the Nyau culture in which he was raised and that subsequently inspired him to make the connection with Situationist ideas. It is a fascinating comparison that sheds new light on the role of 'play' within the Chewa community in Malawi and, by extension, a great many other African societies. Contrary to a market-oriented

Samson Kambalu, Sanguinetti Breakout area, 2016



capitalist culture — 'time is money' — surplus resources are shared. When someone makes money, it is distributed. If there is any spare time, it is spent on 'pointless' activities such as initiations, funerals and art. Altruistic donation is not self-evident. When we acquire something, we usually feel obliged to give something back. The Nyau culture solves this through masks and play. Ritual dances are performed, which are also called 'Gule Wamkulu' or the 'Great Game'. This cult, which has UNESCO World Heritage status, acts as a playmaker. With the pulling out of the masks, all thoughts of personal property are eliminated. Dancing and sharing are all that remains, without any further consideration. Samson Kambalu sees this as opening up an important role for himself, as a contemporary artist. He appropriates the role of the African mask and gives a new space to the game, thereby creating relationships and links between people and their histories.

Game of War Samson Kambalu, 2015

"I am a strategist, not a philosopher," Guy Debord (1931-1994) once said. In 1987, this pivotal figure of the Situationist International published the book *Jeu de la guerre* [A Game of War], in which he revealed his fascination with warfare and love of strategy. It also includes a boardgame of Debord's own invention, which is similar to chess. It invites two players to take turns moving their troops across the board and beat one another.

Samson Kambalu takes the total number of pawns needed to play the game and enlarges them into seating elements or plinths, rectangles and squares, which he arranges in the space like a game of Stratego.

Samson Kambalu, *Game of War*, 2015



Quinconce Vincent Meessen, 2018

Quinconce (2018) is a collection of five silk-screen prints. Together, they comprise a single artwork and contextualise the story of Omar Blondin Diop in Senegal, Paris and London. Red is the colour of the Mao bible — 'The Little Red Book' — and also serves here as the background hue of the prints.

We see Omar reading the twelfth and last issue of the Situationiste Internationale (1969). It is an image that continues to symbolise the resistance movement in contemporary Senegal. Omar nonchalantly holds a cigarette in his right hand. In another image, we see the same hands, only now splayed across a pair of white buttocks. This is a still from the film Soul in a White Room (1968) by Simon Hartog, in which Omar features. We also see a headless mannequin. The Senegalese artist Issa Samb (1945-2017) used this in a number of performances as a reference to the controversy surrounding the death of Omar, his friend. Meessen also includes a street scene in Dakar, with an overpainted billboard to the left. Beyond the commercial, it looks more like an abstract painting. We also see an archival image of the reception given to the French

President, Georges Pompidou, on his official state visit to Senegal in 1971. He greets the crowd alongside the Senegalese President, Léopold Sédar Senghor.

Vincent Meessen, Quinconce, 2018









Quelle que soit la longueur de la nuit... le soleil finit toujours par se lever Vincent Meessen, 2020

The opening scene of *Quelle qui soit la longueur de la nuit...* [However Long the Night...] shows a cemetery in Dakar. We see three people gathered around the grave of Omar Blondin Diop (1946–1973), a Senegalese Marxist-Leninist revolutionary who died in captivity in 1973. He continues to be revered as a figurehead of the resistance movement. Vincent Meessen is fascinated by the portrait of a young Diop reading the journal produced by the international Situationists.

As a student in Paris during the 1960s, Omar participated in the protests of May 1968. He met Jean-Luc Godard who cast him — as himself — in *La Chinoise* [*The Chinese*] (1967). In 1969 Omar returned to Senegal and actively opposed President Léopold Sédar Senghor's neo-colonial policies. He was captured by the Senegalese government in 1972. On 10 May 1973, he was found dead in his cell. The official report lists the cause of death as suicide, but this is still contested by his family and supporters. *Quelle qui soit la longueur de la nuit...*

however long the night, the dawn will break. The truth about Omar's death will eventually come to light.

Quelle qui soit la longueur de la nuit... is set in contemporary times but is based on an earlier film. Although it resembles a documentary, it does not belong to this genre. It is more of an essay. Vincent Meessen alternates fragments from La Chinoise with historical images of Georges Pompidou's visit to Senegal in 1971, or the Chinese vice-president visiting the country in 2017 to cement economic ties. We hear testimonies from Omar's family and certain characters are used, in the style of Godard, to complete the circle from the past to the present. With this film, Meessen endeavours to sketch a richly nuanced impression of Omar

Vincent Meessen, Quelle que soit la longeur de la nuit..., 2020



while simultaneously reinterpreting and actualising Godard's mythical film within the contemporary Chinese-African context.

Meessen created a first version of this film, entitled *Juste un Mouvement*, in 2018. "A film in the making", as Godard himself liked to call this approach, which he also used in *La Chinoise*. It means that the creative process is part of the film, "un film en train de se faire". In the process of creating a final feature film, *Quelle que soit la longueur de la nuit...* is the second stage of Meessen's journey.

Les Cinq Politiques Vincent Meessen, 2018

A small sheet of A4 paper is pinned to the wall with thumbtacks. It is a list of instructions for the smoothing running of a location shoot and was written by director Jean-Luc Godard during the making of *La Chinoise* (1967). One of the guidelines is to bring slippers to the set. Also included are Mao Tsedong's instructions to the Chinese Liberation Army.

The three most important disciplinary rules are:

- 1. Prompt obedience to orders,
- 2. No confiscation of people's property,
- 3. Prompt delivery directly to authorities of all items confiscated from the enemy.

The eight recommendations are:

- 1. Be polite when speaking,
- 2. Be honest when buying and selling,
- 3. Return all borrowed articles,
- 4. Pay compensation for everything damaged,
- 5. Do not hit or swear at others,
- 6. Do not damage crops,
- 7. Do not harass women,
- 8. Do not mistreat prisoners.

Vincent Meessen has written an addendum, inspired by how Omar Blondin Diop ought to have been treated during his imprisonment. Omar, a militant Maoist, was one of the actors in the film, designated here by Godard as 'Camarade X':

The prisoners must not be hurt or killed, The prisoners must not be beaten or injured, treated badly or insulted,

The prisoners' private property may not be confiscated,

Sick or injured prisoners should receive medical treatment,

The prisoners must be freed.

Film: "LA CHINOISE"

SERVICE DU VENDREDI 24 MARS 1967

17ème jour de tournage - Horaire 13 Lieu de tournage : Appartement Chinoise - 15 rue de Miromesnil, Paris 8)

Rendez-vous : sur place

ANJ. 45-08

Anne Wiazemsky Juliet Berto Juliet de Bruijn Omar Diop	ROLES		
		COSTUMES	PRET A
	Véronique Yvonne Guillaume Henri Kirilov Camarade X	prévu u u u	98

TRANSPORTS : J.C. Sussfeld prendra Anne Wiazemsky chez elle à 2 45

MACHINISTES (ELECTRICIENS (sur place à CH

ATTENTION : Tout le monde doit venir sur le décor muni d'une paire de pantoufles.

Les trois grandes règles de discipline sont les suivantes : 1) Obdissez aux ordres dens tous les actes. 2) Ne prenen pas aux misses une seule aiguille, un seul bout de fil. 3) Remettez tout butin aux autorités.

Les huit recommendations sont les suivantes

1) Parlet poliment, 2) Payez honnêtement ce que vous achetez. 3) Rendez tout ce que vous empruntez. 4) Payez ou remplacez tout ce que vous evez endommegé. 5) Ne frappez pas et n'injuriez pes les gans. 6) Ne causez pas de dommages aux récoltes. 7) Ne prenez pas de libertés avec les femmes. 8) Ne maltraitez pas jes

Institutions de Haut-Commandement de l'Arines papa-laire de Libbration de Chine (10 Octobre 1997)

ADDENDUM

IRS 5 PONTIQUES PEUR UN TRATTEMENT CITMENT DES PRISONNITRS SONT LOS SUIVANTOS!

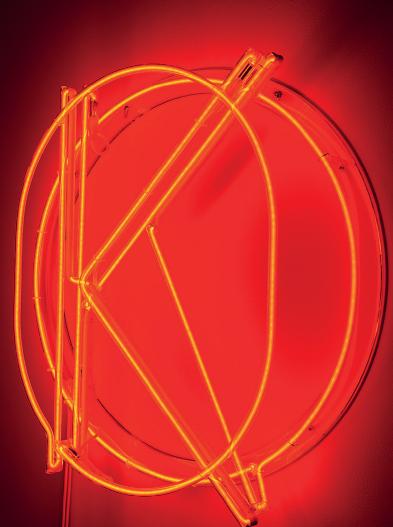
- 1. NE PAS THER ON BLESSER LET PRICONNERS,
- 2. WE PAS FRAPPER, NE PAS INJURIER, NE PAS MALTRANTER ON NE PAS INSNUTER, LES PRISONNIERS,
- 3. WE PAS CONFIGUREX LES BIENS PRINGS DES PRISONNIERS.
- 4. TO NIVER UN TRANTEMENT MEDICAL MIX PRISONNIERS MALADES ET BUSSET
- 5. LIBERER LET FRISONNIERS.

ChaosmosVincent Meessen, 2018

Chaosmos is a neon installation inspired by OK Jazz, the house orchestra at Kinshasa's legendary colonial-era jazz club, *Un Deux Trois* [*One Two Three*]. In 1956, the band released an album entitled *On Entre OK On Sort KO*, which remains a rumba classic to this day. The title of the work is a contraction of chaos and cosmos, two opposing forces combined: order versus disorder, law versus freedom.

The design of the letters was not chosen lightly. Typographer Pierre Huyghebaert and Vincent Meessen developed this typeface in 2012. 'Belgicka' is an open source meta-font that anyone can use and manipulate. The power of the letters are thus undermined and remain in a constant state of flux, opening up a wealth of new and varied possibilities. The ever changing status of the font ensures that endless fresh connections can be made, thereby allowing history to be told anew and from different perspectives.

Vincent Meessen, Chaosmos, 2018



One.Two.Three Vincent Meessen, 2015

One. Two. Three is a video installation about an unpublished protest song by the Congolese student Joseph Mbelolo ya Mpiku in May 1968. Meessen found the lyrics in the archive of Raoul Vaneigem, one of the key figures of the Situationist International. The artist has reinterpreted the song in collaboration with a number of young Congolese musicians. He performs it within the context of the legendary Kinshasa iazz club *Un Deux Trois*, where Franco Luambo and his orchestra OK Jazz were once the resident musicians. We see three large projection screens, each of which follows one of the three musicians in their search for the essence of the music within the labyrinthine interior of the jazz club. While Mbelolo's protest song is reactivated, the film also captures street protests in Kinshasa, which take place just outside the nightclub walls. Present-day Kinshasa, which is heavily militarised, displaces history and forces us to look at the past and present in one cycle. Past and present obscure one another. Meessen not only brings the song to life in this film but, in so doing, touches upon the intellectual cross-pollination between Europe and Africa. The story of the Situationist International is

anything but a homogeneous European one. It was nourished by contributions from, amongst others, African scholars, activists and artists.

This video installation was first shown at the Venice Biennale in 2015, as the centrepiece of the group exhibition *Personne et les autres* [*No-one and the Others*] in the Belgian pavilion. This building, which was commissioned by King Leopold II, was the very first national pavilion to be sited in the Venice Giardini. It opened in 1907. Meessen was invited by the French community to represent Belgium at the exhibition in 2015.

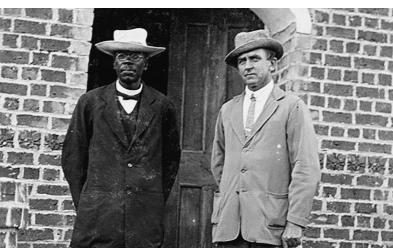
Vincent Meessen, One.Two. Three, 2015



Chilembwe Hat Room Samson Kambalu, 2020

The enlarged photo in the exhibition space shows John Chilembwe (1870–1915) standing next to the missionary John Chorley in the doorway of a church in Nyasaland, now present-day Malawi. Chilembwe is wearing a light-coloured hat and poses alongside the white missionary as his equal, which contravened the social norms of the day. John Chilembwe was a Baptist pastor and teacher from the British protectorate. He was one of the first in his country to rebel against colonialism. His attempt to overthrow the ruling powers ended in failure, however. The uprising was defeated and Chilembwe was

Samson Kambalu, *Chilembwe Hat Room*, 2020



killed. He continues to be revered as a hero of the independence movement. The country was granted its autonomy in 1964. Hastings Kamuzu Banda (1898–1997) played a crucial role in this transition. In 1960, he founded the Malawi Congress Party and won the election as its political leader. Banda recuperated Chilembwe's iconic status as a hero and used it to rally the population. After Malawi's independence, he appointed himself president and abolished all remaining political parties. He became a dictator and controlled the country for thirty years.

Samson Kambalu has created *Chilembwe Hat Room* for the exhibition. He invites the visitor to don a hat just like Chilembwe. The visitor sees a coat rack with several hats and a mirror. The text on the wall is by the artist. Kambalu makes the connection between Banda's totalitarian regime in Malawi and Aristotle's description of this type of 'rule' over a country as tyranny. The artist grew up in a land that suffered under Banda's dictatorship. Samson Kambalu also studied at the famous Kamuzu Academy, a school founded by Banda in 1981. This was where a select group of students received a classical education, taught by the best European professors.

The Last Judgement Samson Kambalu, 2000-2020

"A football plastered with the pages of the Bible for exercising and exorcising! Step one: take a football, PVA glue and loosened Holy Bible pages. Step two: plaster the Bible pages on to the ball, one by one, until completely covered. Step three: allow the Holy Ball to dry before any exercises and exorcisms. [...] The day when all Holy Books of the world shall be made into Holy Balls exercising and exorcising people into everlasting happiness."

Samson Kambalu, *The Jive Talker or, How to Get a British Passport*, 2008

Samson Kambalu, The Last Judgement, 2015



Samson Kambalu calls *The Last Judgement* his first conceptual artwork. The artist was raised as a Catholic and felt the time was right for an evaluation. The work embodies the rediscovery of our inner playfulness, with the Nietzschean proclamation that God is dead. Visitors can play football with the *Holy Balls* in the exhibition. Through play and enchantment, Kambalu encourages us to live in the moment. Nothing is sacred to the artist, for the simple reason that there is always more than one way to understand the world.

Nyau CinemaSamson Kambalu, z.d.

YouTube, Instagram and Facebook are places where people come together virtually to 'kill time'. When Samson Kambalu posts photos or films online, he generously donates the work he has created to the viewer. This approach is completely at odds with all art market principles.

The artist makes his Nyau films while in transit. He typically assumes the role of protagonist and we see him performing various

acts. Seizing the initiative, Kambalu approaches strangers in the street and asks them to film him. He records the fleeting everyday moments that happen to catch his eye. Kambalu focuses on film material that any other director would leave on the cutting room floor as 'surplus'. His films are made in black and white or sepia and emanate romance and slapstick humour in the style of Buster Keaton. The 'dandyesque flâneur' in Samson Kambalu comes to the fore. The international Situationists described 'getting lost' in the city as the pinnacle, the highest achievable good.

Samson Kambalu, *Nyau Cinema*, z.d.



Samson Kambalu has imposed a number of 'Nyau rules' on himself. There are ten in total, but number four is omitted. Thanks to the missing rule, all other stipulations can be contravened.

Keyala Real SoldiersSamson Kambalu, 2019-2020

Scattered around the exhibition area, soldiers keep watch. Sometimes in full battledress, sometimes just as portraits on the wall. These are inexpensive cardboard figures, whose packaging is also displayed. Samson Kambalu finds the troops in archives dedicated to East African soldiers who, as cheap labour, were part of the King's African Rifles (K.A.R.) and fought under

Samson Kambalu, Keyala Real Soldiers, 2019-2020



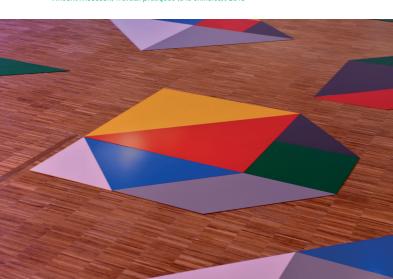
the British Empire in both world wars. The attire brings out their inner dandy. These kinds of uniforms are still used in traditional dances. The contemporary versions by the Beni, Mganda or Malipenga are an amalgam of traditional African rituals and Western military parades. Kambalu is particularly interested in this syncretic obfuscation of different cultures.

Travaux pratiques (à la chinoise) Vincent Meessen, 2018

This work refers to an ancient Chinese game, the tangram or 'qi qiao' in Chinese. It became extremely popular in Europe during the course of the nineteenth century. Tangram is a patience game, composed of seven geometric elements: five triangles of three different sizes, a square and a parallelogram that, when assembled in a certain way, form a large square. An endless series of geometric figures can be created from the seven puzzle pieces. With *Travaux Pratiques* (à la Chinoise) Vincent Meessen creates a

heavier version made of metal that resembles a floor sculpture. Despite their weight and size, the abstract compositions stimulate playfulness and the imagination.

Vincent Meessen, Travaux pratiques (à la chinoise), 2018



Flag Factory Samson Kambalu, 2020

Flag Factory comprises a selection of forty-eight flags designed by Samson Kambalu. They are inspired by the idea of what a flag — as a representation of a country or region — can mean, albeit with a dash of imagination.

With a simple application on his smartphone, Kambalu creates new flags for an imaginary world. The flags arise at the tipping point between the past — the old world — and the present.

The artist 'shuffles' and shifts colour planes from existing national flags until abstract,

Samson Kambalu, Beni Flag — blue inoperative, yellow potentia, 2019



unrecognisable images emerge. As a child, Kambalu collected the cards that were distributed with Dandy Bubble Gum, which also depicted international flags — "Chew the gum and learn the capital cities of the world" - a collection that guaranteed an endless game of chewing, exchanging, giving away and winning back. In the exhibition, Kambalu presents only a fraction of what he shares with the online community through Instagram. The actual production behind Kambalu's *Flag Factory* is much larger, as befits a real 'factory'. The title therefore exposes the contradiction between this generous Situationist creation and the utilitarian economic model that lies behind it. A small selection of the flags from this series have been produced in fabric and hung in the space. What's a nation without a flag, right?

Mboya series Samson Kambalu, 2016

Mboya series is a sequence of photographic compilations in which Kambalu combines an archive image of the Kenyan politician Tom Mboya (1930–1969) with a photograph of

Samson Kambalu, *Mboya series*, 2016



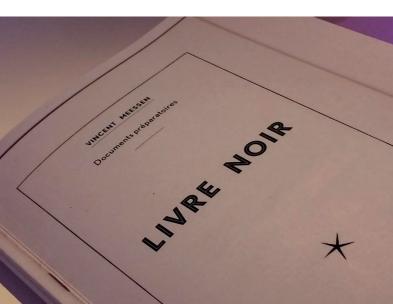
Barack Obama as president of the United States of America. Both men are known as successful, charismatic personalities.

Thanks to Mboya, Barack Obama's father received a scholarship to study at the University of Hawaii. Mboya devised the programme to offer talented Kenyan students a grant to study in the U.S., a plan that was also financially supported by John F. Kennedy. Barack Obama Sr. met and married an American woman with whom he had a son. The rest is history.

Livre Noir Vincent Meessen, 2018

In 1973, after Omar Blondin Diop's suspicious death in captivity, the Republic of Senegal —by order of President Senghor himself — published *Le Livre Blanc* [*The White Book*]. It confirmed Diop's alleged suicide. This publication was deemed essential to quelling the furore surrounding his death, as the public was more convinced than ever that Omar's demise was anything but suicide.

Vincent Meessen, Livre Noir, 2018



In 2018, forty-five years after Omar's death, Vincent Meessen released *Livre Noir*, which fully corresponds to its white counterpart. The black book contains diplomatic papers from the French Embassy in Dakar. These documents reveal Senghor's control of the opposition parties. The book, which bears witness to the strict surveillance of anti-Senghor militants, includes reports of student protests in May 1968 in Dakar, left-wing pamphlets etc... The black book contains archival material that may serve a future purpose in highlighting the grey (concealed) history surrounding Omar's death and the roles played by both Senegal and France.

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Vincent Meessen

Samson Kambalu







