Of the three plague pandemics that shook the world over the last two millennia, only the last one, starting at the very end of the 19th century, is well documented in sub-Saharan Africa. The two earlier pandemics, respectively known as the Plague of Justinian (6th-8th c.) and the Medieval Plague or Black Death (14th-18th c.), are almost entirely absent from the historiography of Africa. Plague, in its various forms, is a disease that spread mainly through human agency, through the movement of goods and people. Is it possible that sub-Saharan Africa was so disconnected from the rest of the world during these periods that its people were spared from such an otherwise global calamity? Or did the killer disease escape the attention of historians, prisoners of mainstream African historiographical tropes? Documentary, archaeological as well as environmental and genetic evidence suggest we might have missed a major page of global history. This is exciting as it coincides with an epistemological revolution in the fields of History of Medicine, Global Health and Infectious diseases.

Professor Gérard Chouin received his PhD from Syracuse University in 2009. He has served as a lecturer at the University of Ghana, and at the University of Cape Coast, Director of the French Institute for Research in Africa (IFRA-Nigeria) at the University of Ibadan, and is currently Assistant Professor of History at the College of William and Mary. His research interests include pre-Atlantic and early modern Atlantic West African sacred landscapes, earthworks, trade, sociopolitical systems, urbanization, social collapse, diseases, food, plants and cuisines; and West African politics.