



Benin Photography Tour Report 2021

30 January 2021

by Inger Vandyke

COTONOU

Lying at the heart of Benin's economy, the bustling sea port of Cotonou sits on an isthmus between the Atlantic Ocean and the calmer waters of Lake Nokue. We arrived in the city in time for our mandatory Covid19 testing, which was very straightforward and well organised, as we disembarked from the aircraft. Benin's Covid protocols are very well arranged and easy to navigate. PCR tests are required for arriving and departing international visitors, without exception.

Travelling in West Africa during January, when the annual Voodoo festival is celebrated across Benin, means you are nearly always travelling with the Harmattan wind. This famous wind that blows from November through to around February shrouds countries like Benin in an early morning fog that doesn't really start to fade until around 0830 each day. What the country lacks in sunrise photographs due to the Harmattan, it certainly makes up for with the golden glow of magical sunsets across the sea or mountains.

Francophone West Africa has very good food as a whole so on our first night of the trip we indulged in some local fresh fish washed down with a cold local beer at a beachside restaurant on the outskirts of the city.

VOODOO FESTIVAL

Unlike the popular impression of Voodoo that people outside of Africa have, African voodoo is a force only for good. To its 30 million or so followers Voodoo is the owner of the sea and each year, thousands of Voodoo adherents gather in the Beninese cities of Ouidah and

Grand Popo to attend the annual Voodoo Festival with its many ceremonies and special audiences with King Agassa, the highest figure of Voodoo worship in the world.

We drove out towards the border of Benin and Togo in order to try and catch some of the smaller and more intimate ceremonies that occur in the lead up to the festival. Luckily we saw an initiation of three young girls taking place, each dressed in their dresses of red, black and white as these are the three colours of Voodoo, representing heat, night and light. Of these, white is the highest spiritual colour and it is why many Voodoo priests, priestesses, princesses and adepts all wear it, as it brings them closer to their chosen Voodoo divinity.

Voodoo is everywhere in Benin. It is the driver of life in nearly every aspect of Beninese life. It is not only adhered to by people of all faiths (Christianity and Islam both have adopted aspects of Voodoo in their religion so Voodoo is widely accepted by Christians and Muslims), it is represented in the “Legbas” or spirit houses that guard homes and villages, in the street art of Benin and the way people dress. After a while, when you come to understand the prominence of Voodoo in Benin, you notice it everywhere.

VOODOO CEREMONIES

In the build up to the annual festival of Voodoo, we were blessed to attend several ceremonies including an initiation of young girls which took place in two phases, the first of which involved three little girls being dressed up, blessed and taken to a forest shrine to procure the spirits of voodoo and then later that day, a vibrant celebration of their initiation took place involving athletic dancers, drumming and singing.

Other ceremonies we visited during the lead up to the festival and during it included a very unusual celebration of Zandro, a dance of Egungun, the incredible Zangbetos and also several ceremonies in honour of Benin’s high number of twins.

We also chanced upon a roadside dance ceremony of Atchahoun women who had gathered to procure the voodoo spirits of happiness.

In the east of Benin, close to the border of Nigeria we spent an afternoon at a traditional Guelede ceremony to honour the feminine divinity of Voodoo.

Zangbeto

Of all the ceremonies celebrated at the Voodoo Festival, the Zangbetos are probably the wildest, most difficult to understand celebrations to witness. As the original ‘guardians of the night’ twirling Zangbetos are let loose at dusk to twirl and spin around, patrolling society and keeping evil out of communities. They first have to be honoured with sacrifices to voodoo deities and then ‘fed’ but after that they are escorted out from their holding buildings to twirl quickly around the people assembled to watch. To the best we could see there are no people under a Zangbeto. Instead ‘spirit people’ live under each including moving voodoo figures, dolls and even small twirling Zangbetos. At the first of three Zangbeto ceremonies we saw on this trip, a large Zangbeto was flipped over to release a small Zangbeto that twirled off on its own. It was quickly pursued by larger Zangbetos, one of which ran into us while we were taking photos.

We never quite worked Zangbetos out so we resigned ourselves to just accepting the magic before our eyes. On quieter moments you could even listen to Zangbetos ‘talking’. All of them had a voice the same as a muffled foghorn. It was fascinating!

In the end Zangbetos became a true favourite of us during the trip and when we were offered to attend other Zangbeto ceremonies we happily accepted and attended three in the end.

Egungun

Another fantastic ceremony that originates in the Yoruba people of Nigeria, Egungun is a masked dance that ensures ancestral spirits are anchored to the living. Usually dressed in rich, colourful robes adorned with sequins and cowrie shells, vibrant Egunguns are procured out by energetic drumming and women singing to honour the ancestors of Egungun dancers. When they arrive, each is accompanied by a guardian wielding a large stick to stop the Egungun from touching you. If they do so accidentally it is feared you might momentarily die.

We joined a crowd of local people to witness Egungun and it was amusing to watch the dancers lure crowds of very curious children out to watch them, until one dancer burst off to chase the hoards of kids who ran screaming into the alleyways to escape them.

Guelede

Celebrating the feminine divinity of Voodoo, the Guelede is another masked dance that originates in Nigeria. We spent half a day with a local Guelede chief attending a ceremonial dance of masks in eastern Benin. This was a fantastic afternoon of drumming, singing and vibrant dancers wearing bells on their ankles to run around crowds of people performing the masquerade. It was held in a community of Mahè people who were very warm, friendly and inviting.

Zandro

One of the most well known and little experienced of the Voodoo ceremonies, we were lucky enough to find a group of women dancing the Zandro. Usually performed at night, Zandro is the dance used to open the prayers and songs that are sung for the Voodoo spirits announcing the celebration of animal offerings the following day. Another vibrant dance, we spent a couple of hours photographing groups of women performing this very athletic dance, often with their babies still slung on their backs.

The Culture of Twins in Benin

The Fon people of Benin, Togo and Nigeria have some of the highest rates of twin births on earth. It is thought to be a product of their diet which consists mostly of yams but regardless of the cause, both living and deceased twins are revered by the adherents of Voodoo as protectors of the living and the dead.

If the tragedy of twins dying at birth occurs, it is customary to create small dolls in honour of the deceased twins. These are then cared for as if they were living beings. They are washed and fed daily. They have their own seats and beds to rest in. If you are travelling in Benin, it is quite possible to see ceremonies to twins in many places and we were lucky enough to visit one offering to twin spirits presided over by a High Priestess of Twins named Adoua where food was prepared for twin dolls and given to a special shrine in her village devoted to twins.

At another ceremony of twins we watched newly created twin dolls being prepared for their first ever 'bath' in the sea. They were wrapped up between a pineapple cut in half (for sweetness) and then wound with white cloth and string. This was to honour Mamiwata, the voodoo goddess of the sea, and to create a secure environment for the twins so they wouldn't feel scared on their first seawater bath.

Fetish Market

At the core of many voodoo beliefs are specific fetishes. A crude term that stems from the times of Portuguese colonialism, fetishes are the spiritual offerings to voodoo gods to procure certain things or acts of goodwill. Certainly not for the faint hearted, a visit to a Beninese fetish market or shrine involves seeing a lot of captive wildlife and strange sculpted or carved figurines all there to honour the spirits.

King Adanyroh Guèdèhounguè Agassa

The highest figure in the world of Voodoo is the warm and effervescent King Agassa, who is revered by over 30 million voodoo followers worldwide. We were blessed to have a private ceremony with the king during our trip, something that isn't easily planned in advance and which happened spontaneously. King Agassa was the first of two Beninese kings we met during the trip and, although it was very difficult to get anywhere near him due to his crowds of adoring fans, it was wonderful to see a royal figure so connected to the people he rules and be so present for them. We arrived to a small and personal ceremony being held by King Agassa whereby new local Voodoo Kings were being initiated as leaders of Voodoo. Joining them were a number of priests, priestesses and adepts who kindly let us take photos before the ceremony ended.

THE PALACES OF THE DAHOMEY KINGDOM IN ABOMEY

While we were travelling in western Benin, we enjoyed a few hours exploring the ancient palaces of the Dahomey Kingdom which was one of the most powerful kingdoms in Africa. Known largely for their participation in the West African slave trade and for their murderous Amazon women, the twelve palaces of the Kingdom are a fascinating insight into the history of Benin. Right now only two of the twelve palaces are still regularly used and they can be visited but photography inside the palace grounds is prohibited so this was more of a learning experience rather than one of photography. It was still fascinating to see and currently Benin is negotiating with France to return some ancient bronze artefacts that were stolen during the French colonial era and the palaces of Dahomey is where they will be located when they are returned.

OUIDAH

The former slaving port of Ouidah is possibly one of the most confronting places to visit and learn about slavery in Africa. A town that is characterised by former colonial buildings that stem from mostly the Portuguese, with some Afro-Brazilian influences, Ouidah is filled with monuments to the slave trade and rightly so. We spent some time exploring the streets of Ouidah photographing several monuments, its colourful buildings and we travelled the road to the "Gate of No Return" on the coast of Ouidah. Historians estimate that over the course of two centuries, Ouidah alone exported more than one million Africans before closing its trade in the 1860s. Only one other port in Africa (Luanda, in Angola) transported a greater volume of slaves.

Statues of Voodoo deities are everywhere and one of the most profound of these is a pelican carrying a bill full of fish. When slavery first began in Benin, the local people likened slavers to pelicans carrying fish way out to sea, never to be seen again.

The culture of Benin in other parts of the world mostly emanates from this time.

In fact it was very interesting to learn how closely connected Benin is to Cuba in its culture. Not only is the version of Cuban Voodoo a direct offshoot from Beninese Voodoo, but if you walk the streets of Ouidah and sit down, close your eyes and listen to the music being played in homes, you could easily confuse yourself for sitting on any street corner of Havana.

The Python Temple

One of the more curious things to see in Ouidah is the famous Temple of Pythons. Snakes are revered as bearers of good fortune in Voodoo and they are depicted in Beninese street art all across the country. The centre of serpent worship in all of Benin is the fascinating Temple of Pythons in Ouidah.

Over centuries generations of the same family have looked after over fifty pythons who spend most of their daylight hours lounging in the cool comfort of the temple. By night, however, they are let out to wander the streets of Ganvie to visit people. If one happens to visit you, this is deemed to be extremely lucky and you must keep the python with you until the morning when you are allowed to take it back.

It is very bad luck if a python is killed on the road or if you kill a python yourself.

This act in Ouidah is so widely accepted that the Christian cathedral across the road from the Temple of Pythons considers it a true honour if they are visited by one of the temple's resident snakes!

The Sanctuary of Twins

It isn't always open to outsiders but we were lucky enough to visit the famous Sanctuary of Twins in Ouidah and view the most holy shrine of twins in all of Benin. Sadly it was largely devoid of people but visiting this monument really made us understand just how prominent twins are in Beninese culture.

GANVIE

The incredible stilted village of Ganvie in Benin is often called the Venice of West Africa. During the slaving period, the King of the Tofinu people escaped slave traders by leading his people out onto Lake Nokue to form a 'floating' village of stilted houses that could only be accessed by canoe. Fast forward to today and Ganvie is home to around 80,000 or so Tofinu people, many of whom still bear the

trademark tattooing of their culture. Every day people and even young children expertly paddle their way around Ganvie to harvest fish, trade in town and collect fresh water. We stayed at a simple Gites in the middle of the community which was located on Ganvie's main canal. From there it was fantastic to watch the main traffic of people visiting a water supply point directly across from where we sat.

Although the residents of Ganvie were a bit shy with photos, if you waited and you were discreet it was possible to photograph some lovely scenes of the village and if you flew a drone it was even more fascinating and, oddly, more accepted.

Ganvie was great to explore by canoe but perhaps even better to explore by drone with its myriad of canals, fish farms, pirogues, floating markets and stilted homes.

HOLI PEOPLE

Leaving Ganvie we headed east towards the border of Benin and Nigeria. Our first stop was to meet the Holi people. A sub-culture of Yoruba people whose origins lay in nearby Nigeria, the Holi people practice spectacular facial and body scarification even today.

The elders of their community used to engage in beautiful body tattooing however this practice was stopped by both Christian missionaries and a revolutionary president who was elected in Benin in 1972. These days, the spectacular tattoos are held by several elderly women whose jolly pride in their beautiful bodies we found infectious!

Facial scarification however, is still very common in Holi people, who use scars to connect individuals to both their families and their ancestors.

We spent half a day exploring a local market and several villages of Holi people on foot with expert local guides.

BENIN'S FRESHWATER FISHING COMMUNITIES

Near to the border of Benin and Nigeria lie several of Benin's large freshwater ecosystems which are home to more water nomads living in the same way as the residents of Ganvie, surviving from local fishing and harvesting of water vegetation. We went exploring some of these and they turned out to be truly extraordinary. As places that see very little tourism it was fascinating to learn how people in these island villages caught freshwater eels and fish like Tilapia to smoke, dry, cook and sell fresh to the mainland. Getting to them requires taking a seat in busy, large commuter dugouts that ply narrow waterways between the mainland and the rivers and lakes. Visiting them was a true adventure and turned out to be wonderful for both land and drone photography.

We spent half a day exploring the narrow alleyways of fishing villages where people repaired nets, smoked fish and children played around free range livestock and mud buildings. These villages were so very charismatic and friendly to explore on foot and by canoe.

FULANI PEOPLE

As one of the largest ethnic groups in all of Africa, the Fulani people of Benin can be loosely categorised into two different groups – those who have settled permanently in the country and those who are temporarily living in Benin as part of their nomadic life.

Visually very different from other Beninese people, Fulanis are known for their beautiful facial tattooing and domed, igloo style huts.

We visited two communities of Fulani people, both settled and nomadic, for photography and enjoyed meeting both to learn about their lives in Benin. It was perhaps a little more difficult to take photos of nomadic Fulani people at home but the settled people were both lovely to meet and photograph in their pretty, immaculate villages as we travelled north into the country.

BATONU HORSEMEN

In the northern Beninese city of Parakou lives a very special group of men who are renowned for their vibrant and athletic horse races and dances. These are the Batonu horsemen who gather once a year to celebrate their rich tradition of horsemanship in an annual festival called Gaani.

We were lucky enough to meet a group of Batonu horsemen on our trip, most of whom were likely descendants of the Wasangari people in the Kingdom of Nikki, Nigeria. Their brightly decorated and well trained horses were a thrill to not just us, but to the residents of Parakou who gathered to watch two energetic events where horses raced in the dust, reared up on their hind legs and danced around with the skill of their riders.

DASSA

As a stopover on our journey north, we spent an afternoon exploring the granite hills and outcrops around the city of Dassa learning about the Oyu people and their former kingdom. We had seen some good aerial images of mass grinding stones in these hills so it was interesting to locate some of these by drone but aside from a few curiosities Dassa wasn't altogether a great spot for photography. It was, however, a lovely city in the mountains to break up a long journey north.

DANKOLI FETISH

A short drive from Dassa is the famous Dankoli Fetish, one of the most prominent shrines in Voodoo religion.

Situated in a forest glad not far from the main road, the Dankoli fetish is said to be so powerful that the voodoo followers who come here can communicate directly with the gods without the help of the initiated of the voodoo religion. Here the adepts can carry out the rituals themselves and make their requests and prayers to the divinities.

TANEKA

Living in two small communities at the foothills of the Atacora mountains in northern Benin, the Taneka people originally hail from Burkina Faso which lies to the north of Benin.

Numbering only around 260 residents, the Taneka have eight spiritual chiefs, each of whom are charged with special healing powers, for example, one might practice medicine and another might address agricultural problems. Uniting all of these spiritual chiefs is the beautiful long pipes that are smoked by each to procure the spirits. These pipes are also seen as a symbol of power in the Taneka.

We were lucky enough to meet King Tinagasawa, the highest figure of Taneka life, during our visit. After learning how to greet him properly we were honoured to learn about his role in the community as the high court and also the history of Taneka people directly from him.

OTAMARI

Exploring the remote regions of Benin's Atacora mountains in the north, we spent a few days visiting the incredible Otamari (Somba) people of northern Benin and Togo.

Living with a high respect for nature and inside their organic, fortress-like homes that are World Heritage listed, visiting the Otamari is a highlight of any trip to Benin and Togo. In the Benin side, we stopped to photograph several 'Tatas', or traditional Otamari houses, learning about the different styles of architecture and decoration in each.

Following a loose rule of animals and water on the ground floor, kitchen in the middle floor and then sleeping and granaries on the top floor, traditional tatas could be completely sealed off at the ground level to protect its residents from invaders. With only access to and from the roof, tata occupants could survive for months with no need to move anywhere. During our visit we were extremely lucky to catch a ceremony of Otamari Fetish Chiefs who had gathered to start an initiation process for young Otamari men. It was the highlight of many fantastic visits to Otamari communities, which often involved walking through pretty fields dotted with wild cashew trees and large solitary Baobabs.

PORTO NOVO

After a long drive south towards Cotonou at the end of our trip we stopped off in the colourful city of Porto Novo to do some street photography around its famous mosque.

At times this beautiful colourful building has been used both as a cathedral and a mosque, although today it serves as the main mosque of the city.

Reminiscent of the Portuguese colonial era, the beautiful crumbling facades of the mosque are characteristic of coloured cobblestone streets that line the areas around it, making for beautiful street photos. We even tried some fantastic street food including “bate” or Beninese fried bread filled with cheese. It was a great stop off before returning to Cotonou to have our Covid tests to fly home.

BENIN'S COASTAL FISHING VILLAGES

While we waited for the results of our PCR tests to come through we spent the last few days in Benin exploring the coastal fishing villages between Cotonou and the border of Benin and Togo, near Grand Popo.

These colourful communities of people are under great threat from development as Benin opens up its tourism sector to Chinese investors willing to build beach resorts along the coast. Water pipes and road building supplies are already there to prepare for this development and it is such a shame as the charisma of Benin's coast will disappear if these fishing villages are destroyed.

Lined with tall coconut palms dotted with communities of people living in thatched huts, the coastal fishing villages of Benin are a great place to watch lines of fishermen bringing in their catch by rope as they haul it up the beach. Colourful pirogues lie ready and waiting to take the nets out to sea each night.

Mornings are filled with people mending nets, offloading catches and preparing for another night of fishing. Afternoons are when the fish markets are in full bustle and the boats are in preparation for going to sea.

These villages are ideal places to see how Beninese women make mats from water reeds and to watch the daily movements of life on the coast. They are also the best places to enjoy fresh seafood on the beach, washed down with a few cold Beninoise (the local beer of Benin).

After returning to Cotonou and collecting our negative Covid tests, we had a short time to do some last minute shopping in the city before our tour ended with the flight to Addis in the early afternoon.



A Zangbeto twirls towards a guard at dusk (image by Inger Vandyke)



A Voodoo spirit bottle is held to give offerings to the Zangbeto divinity (image by Inger Vandyke)



Portrait of a Voodoo princess (image by Inger Vandyke)



Voodoo adepts at the palace of King Agassa in Abomey (image by Inger Vandyke)



A Voodoo princess trance dances during the ceremony to initiate young girls (image by Inger Vandyke)



A beautiful Otamari house, or Tata (image by Inger Vandyke)



A pretty selection of bracelets worn by a Voodoo priestess (image by Inger Vandyke)



Portrait of King Agassa, the highest figure of 30 million followers of Voodoo in Africa (image by Inger Vandyke)



One of the many smaller kings of Voodoo in Benin (image by Inger Vandyke)



Beninese women take their fish home for dinner (image by Inger Vandyke)



Tourist souvenirs of Voodoo dolls play into the myth that African voodoo uses these for black magic (image by Inger Vandyke)



A Voodoo 'spirit person' the lives beneath a Zangbeto (image by Inger Vandyke)



Voodoo princesses take a break from dancing at an initiation ceremony (image by Inger Vandyke)



The caretaker of Zangbetos (image by Inger Vandyke)



Each time Zangbetos are released to twirl into the night they are led by a guard into the streets (image by Inger Vandyke)



A Voodoo princess sprays white powder on her face to prepare for a dance. White is the highest colour of Voodoo spirituality and represents light (image by Inger Vandyke)



Portrait of Vittore, one of the Fetish Chiefs in the Otamari people of northern Benin (image by Inger Vandyke)



Portrait of a Beninese woman dancing Zandro, the ceremony to celebrate the offering of animals to the Voodoo spirits (image by Inger Vandyke)



The waterways of Ganvie in Lake Nokwe are filled with pretty water hyacinth flowers (image by Inger Vandyke)



Vittore, an Otamari Fetish Chief, inside a traditional Tata, or Otamari (Somba) houses (image by Inger Vandyke)



Portrait of Vittore, a highly decorated Otamari Fetish Chief in northern Benin (image by Inger Vandyke)



A decorated bottle to offer alcohol to the Voodoo spirits (image by Inger Vandyke)



Each Otamari granary is split into four to store different items and all of them have a woven 'cap' to protect the contents from rain (image by Inger Vandyke)



Looking from the inside of an Otamari tata (house) towards the sleeping area and granaries on the roof (image by Inger Vandyke)



The fan used by King Tanigasawa of the Taneka people (image by Inger Vandyke)



Freshly caught Tilapia on the lakes stretching the border of Benin and Nigeria (image by Inger Vandyke)



A young Tofinu boy queues to buy fresh water in Ganvie, the Venice of West Africa (image by Inger Vandyke)



Tofinu children are expert canoe captains! (image by Inger Vandyke)



Tofinu children grow up surrounded by the waters of Lake Nokwe in Benin (image by Inger Vandyke)



Tofinu girl paddling her canoe in the canals of Ganvie (image by Inger Vandyke)



A Tofinu woman paddles her canoe to buy fresh water at sunset in Ganvie (image by Inger Vandyke)



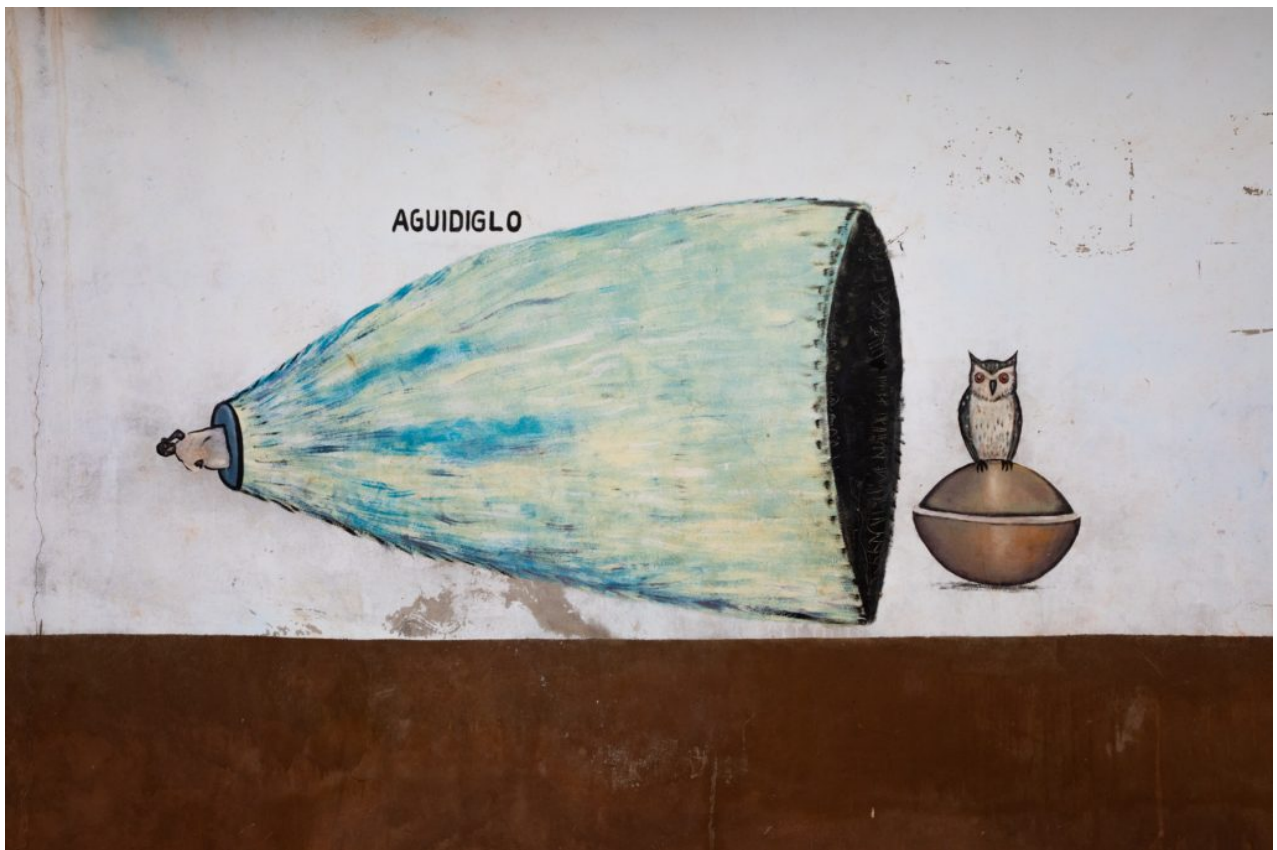
Twins who have died at birth are honoured by dolls created for them and that are carried about by their parents for as long as their parents live (image by Inger Vandyke)



Benin, Togo and Nigeria have some of the highest rates of twin births in the world. Living twins are seen as protectors of society in all three countries (image by Inger Vandyke)



Linear decoration of an Otamari tata. This design is even replicated in the facial scarification of Otamari people in northern Benin and Togo (image by Inger Vandyke)



Street art depicting a twirling owl underneath a Zangbeto (image by Inger Vandyke)



During the era of slavery the Beninese depicted slavers as pelicans taking their fish out to sea and never to be seen again (image by Inger Vandyke)



A Rock Dove perches on the roof of an Otamari tata (image by Inger Vandyke)



The colourful mosque/cathedral of Porto Novo is wonderful for street photography (image by Inger Vandyke)



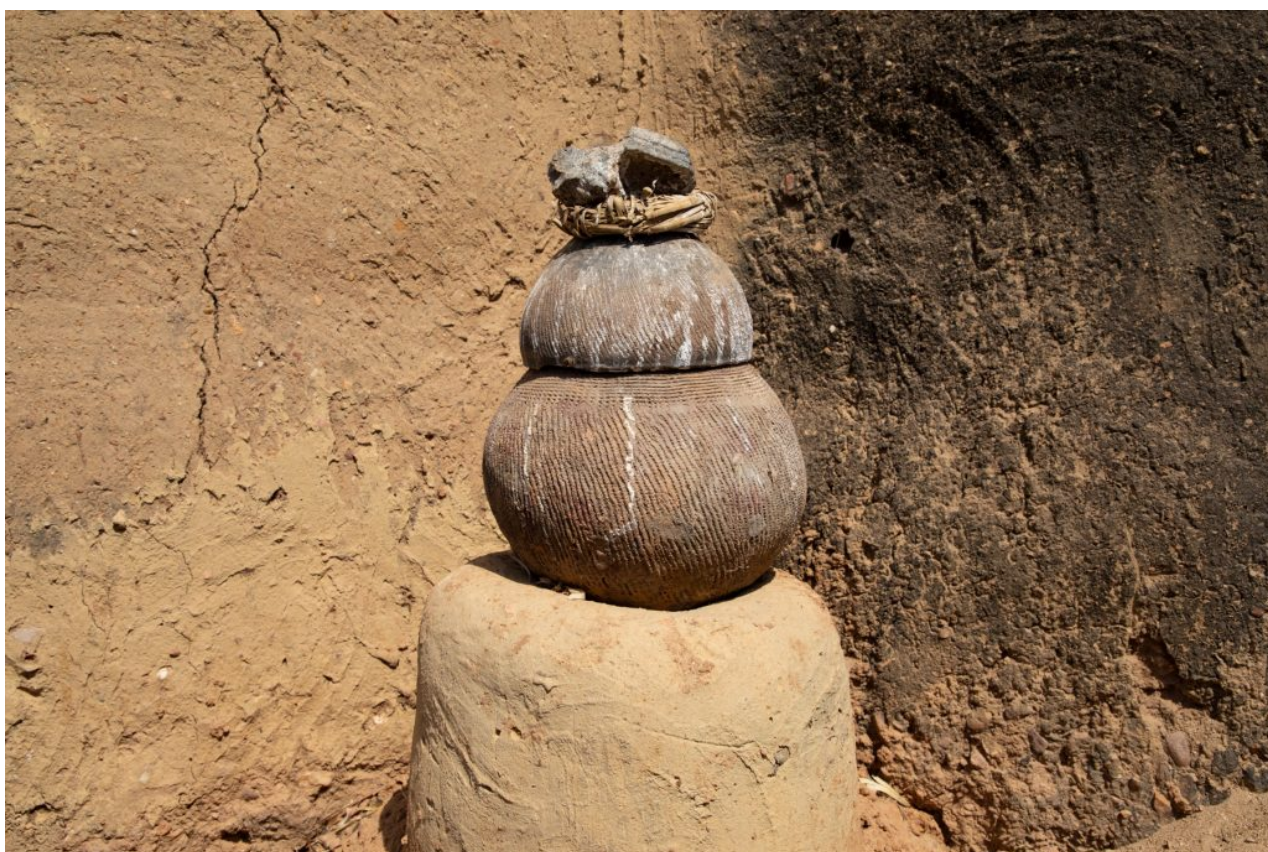
Brightly decorated pirogues ply their way across all of Benin's coastal waters and inland lakes (image by Inger Vandyke)



Marguerite holds the seeds of an oil palm used to procure a bright red oil that is used as an offering in Voodoo (image by Inger Vandyke)



Street art in Ouidah often depicts symbols that are reminiscent of the cities slaving history (image by Inger Vandyke)



Almost all villages and houses in Benin have a "legba", or Voodoo shrine, built in front of them for luck. This is an Otamari legba (image by Inger Vandyke)



Pretty Otamari tatas adorn the landscapes of the rugged Atacora mountains in northern Benin (image by Inger Vandyke)



Homely and inviting, an Otamari village is nestled in a grove of mango and papaya trees (image by Inger Vandyke)



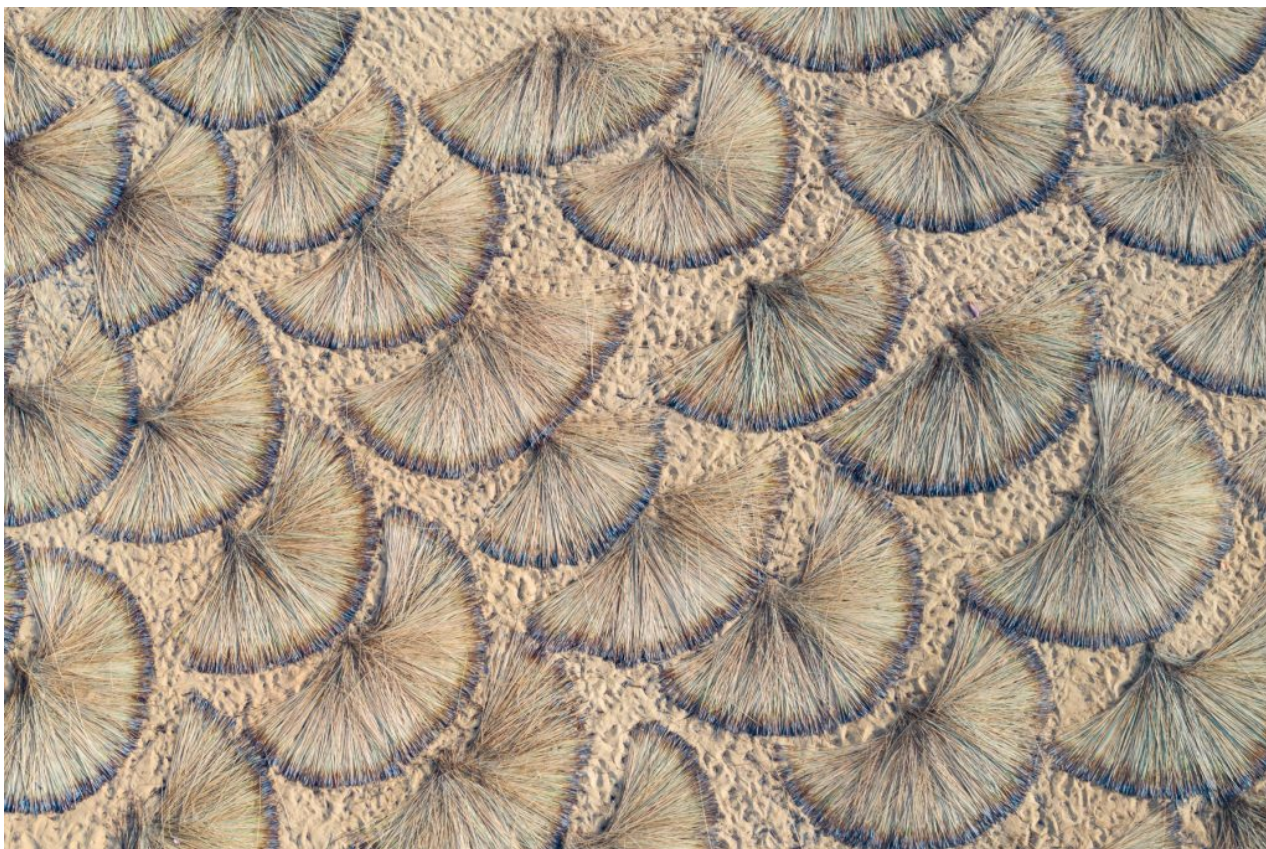
Marc. He is the youngest of many generations of python handlers in the famous Temple of Pythons in Ouidah (image by Inger Vandyke)



Portrait of Margarita emerging from her beautiful Otamari tata in northern Benin (image by Inger Vandyke)



Portrait of Mahe elder, Margeurite, at her home in eastern Benin (image by Inger Vandyke)



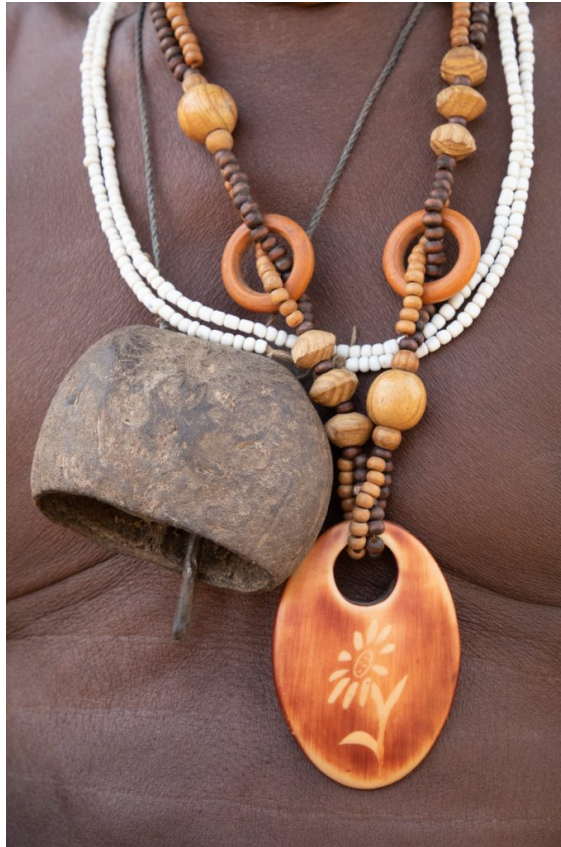
Beninese women lay water grasses out to dry before they make matting from them near Grand Popo in western Benin (image by Inger Vandyke)



Portrait of Odu, a heavily scarred Holi man in Benin (image by Inger Vandyke)



An old pirogue sits beneath the towering coconut palms that line the coast of Benin (image by Inger Vandyke)



A bell amulet and jewellery of an Otamari fetish chief (image by Inger Vandyke)



A dagger hangs in a sheath from the neck of an Otamari Fetish Chief (image by Inger Vandyke)



A kitchen shelf inside an Otamari tata (image by Inger Vandyke)



Every tata is different but they all loosely follow the same interior design structures with organic shaped exteriors (image by Inger Vandyke)



Drone's eye view of a newly constructed Otamari tata in northern Benin. The tatas are world heritage listed for their unique architecture (image by Inger Vandyke)



Portrait of Houèboussi, a Fon dancer dressed in white to celebrate the initiation of three small girls in a remote village near the border of Benin and Togo (image by Inger Vandyke)



Voodoo queens at a private ceremony with King Agassa. Both were given the same name of "Lissassi" when they became queens of Voodoo (image by Inger Vandyke)



Holi women still adorn themselves with elaborate and beautiful scarification (image by Inger Vandyke)



Portrait of Laurent, an Otamari fetish chief (image by Inger Vandyke)



Portrait of a beautiful Holi woman in Benin (image by Inger Vandyke)



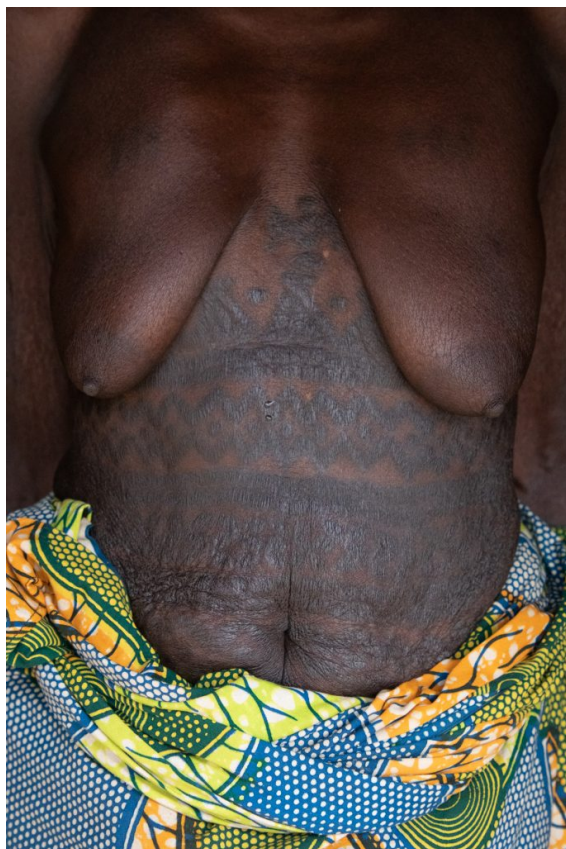
Kwagu, another Otamari fetish chief, shows his bow and arrow inside one of the Otamari tatas (image by Inger Vandyke)



Holi villages are homely and inviting. They are also labyrinthine so you need a good guide if you don't want to get lost! (image by Inger Vandyke)



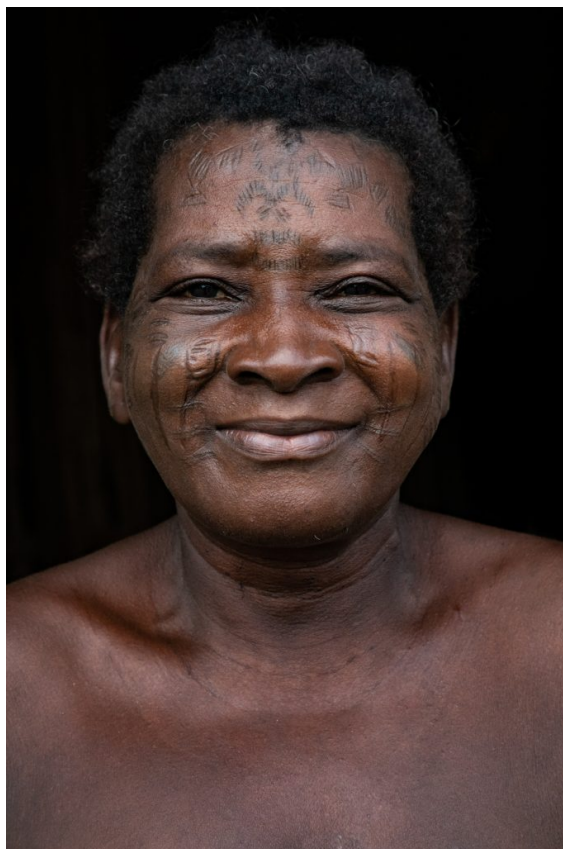
Koku scarification in Benin (image by Inger Vandyke)



The ancient tradition of bodily tattoos in Holi women was stopped by the Beninese government and Christian missionaries in the 1970s. Now only a handful of older Holi women have tattooing on their bodies (image by Inger Vandyke)



King Tanigasawa of the Taneka people in northern Benin (image by Inger Vandyke)



Scarification is still widely practiced in Holi people (image by Inger Vandyke)



Portrait of a little Sahouie girl named Juliette carrying a doll of her deceased twin sister, Juliana (image by Inger Vandyke)



Bells adorn the legs of a Guelede dancer in eastern Benin (image by Inger Vandyke)



The beautiful Otamari scarification on the face of Jerome, a young Otamari initiate (image by Inger Vandyke)



A masked Guelede dancer prepares to celebrate the feminine divinity of Voodoo (image by Inger Vandyke)



Across Africa albinism is dealt with by different people in different ways. In Benin albino children are quite widely accepted and they happily play with others without an issue. Portrait of Isaac (image by Inger Vandyke)



Guelede masks are carved in a quirky array of designs, this one celebrating Benin's famous twins (image by Inger Vandyke)



Inchi, an elderly Otamari woman and owner of a beautiful Tata (image by Inger Vandyke)



A wildly gyrating Guelede dancer at a ceremony (image by Inger Vandyke)



Portrait of Idriss, one of the Batonu horsemen in Parakou (image by Inger Vandyke)



A Guelede mask dancer pretends to pass out in front of onlookers in eastern Benin (image by Inger Vandyke)



Idriss races his horse in a cloud of dust in Parakou (image by Inger Vandyke)



A fisherman holds up two of his caught Tilapia near the border of Benin and Nigeria (image by Inger Vandyke)



A Guelede masked dancer is blessed by onlookers at a ceremony (image by Inger Vandyke)



A typical fisherman's house exterior with drying nets and shutter windows (image by Inger Vandyke)



Man selling traditional Gobi hats in front of the mosque at Porto Novo. Gobis are worn by Beninese men to symbolise if they are married or single (image by Inger Vandyke)



One of the isolated fishing islands near the border of Nigeria and Benin (image by Inger Vandyke)



Drone view of the Gate of No Return in Ouidah (image by Inger Vandyke)



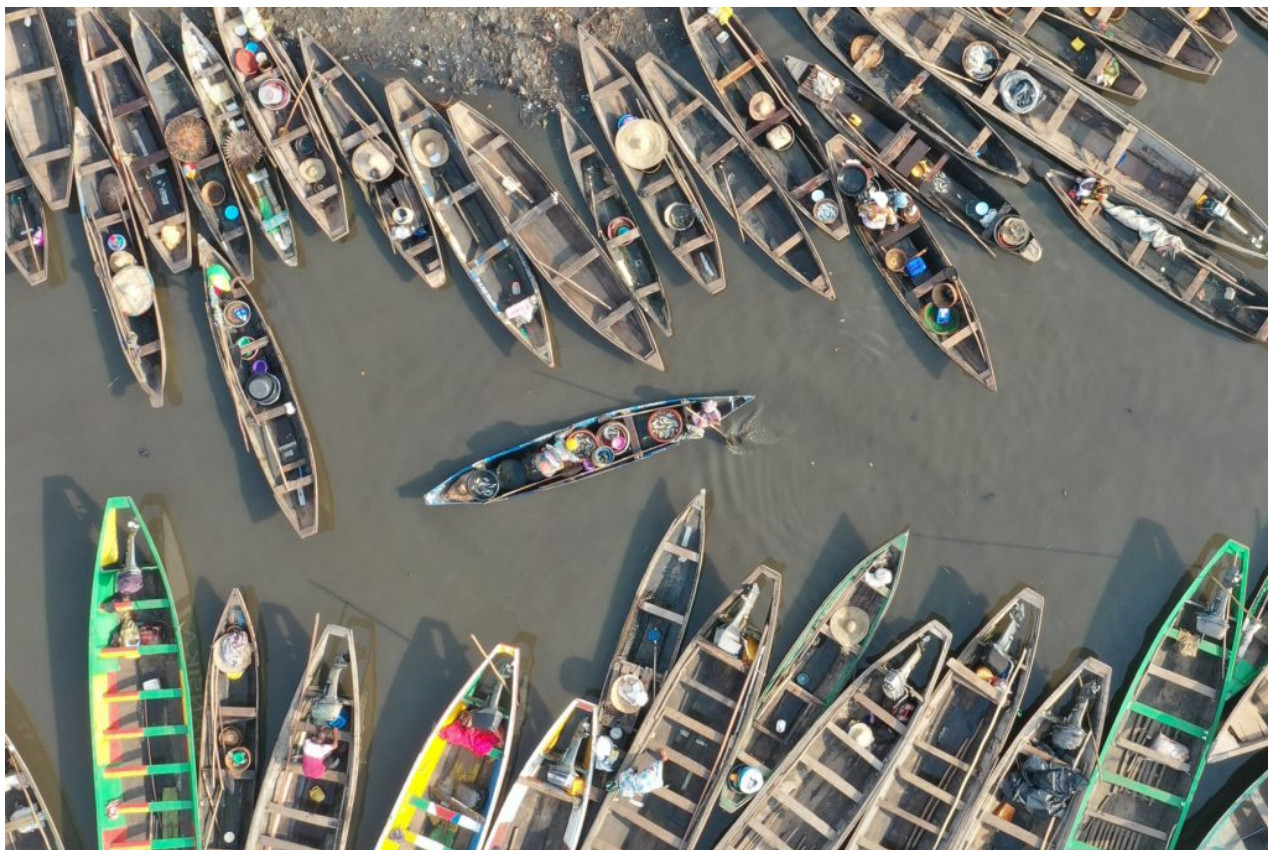
Fresh fish from the sea (image by Inger Vandyke)



The sun rises over Ganvie, the Venice of West Africa, on Lake Nokwe, Benin (image by Inger Vandyke)



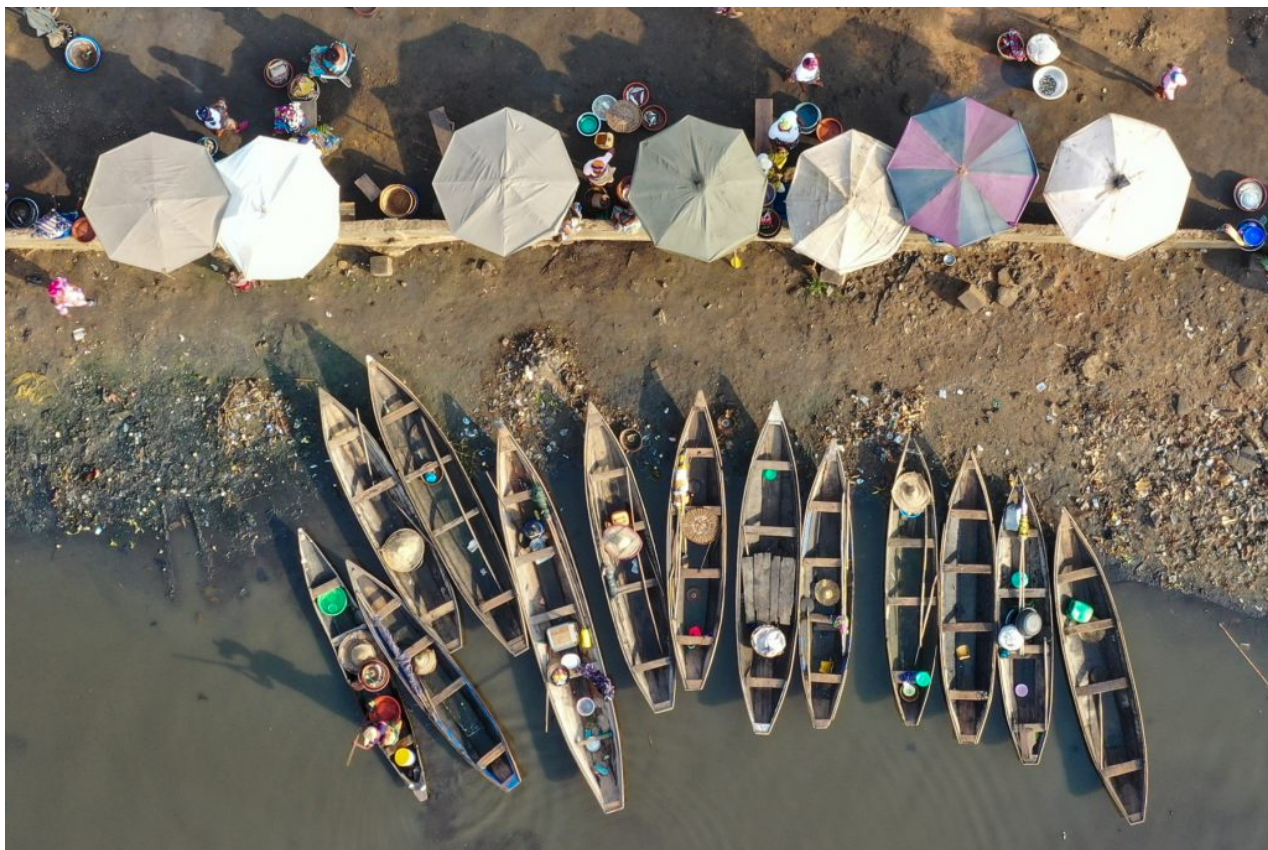
Fish for dinner on the coast of Benin (image by Inger Vandyke)



Colourful pirogues dock in Cotonou after Tofinu fishermen bring fish to the local market (image by Inger Vandyke)



A young Beninese boy shows off his catch of small fish (image by Inger Vandyke)



Docked pirogues by the side of the fish market in Cotonou (image by Inger Vandyke)



Portrait of Fati, a traditional nomadic Fulani woman with her beautiful facial tattoos (image by Inger Vandyke)



A busy morning in the beautiful fish farming area of Lake Nokwe (image by Inger Vandyke)



Egungun dancers in Abomey (image by Inger Vandyke)



Pretty villages of settled Fulani people in Benin. They are very clean and very well organised. To reach them you walk through groves of wild cashew trees (image by Inger Vandyke)



Local women sing to appease the ancestors of Egungun dancers in their village (image by Inger Vandyke)



Portrait of a nomadic Fulani man in remote Benin (image by Inger Vandyke)



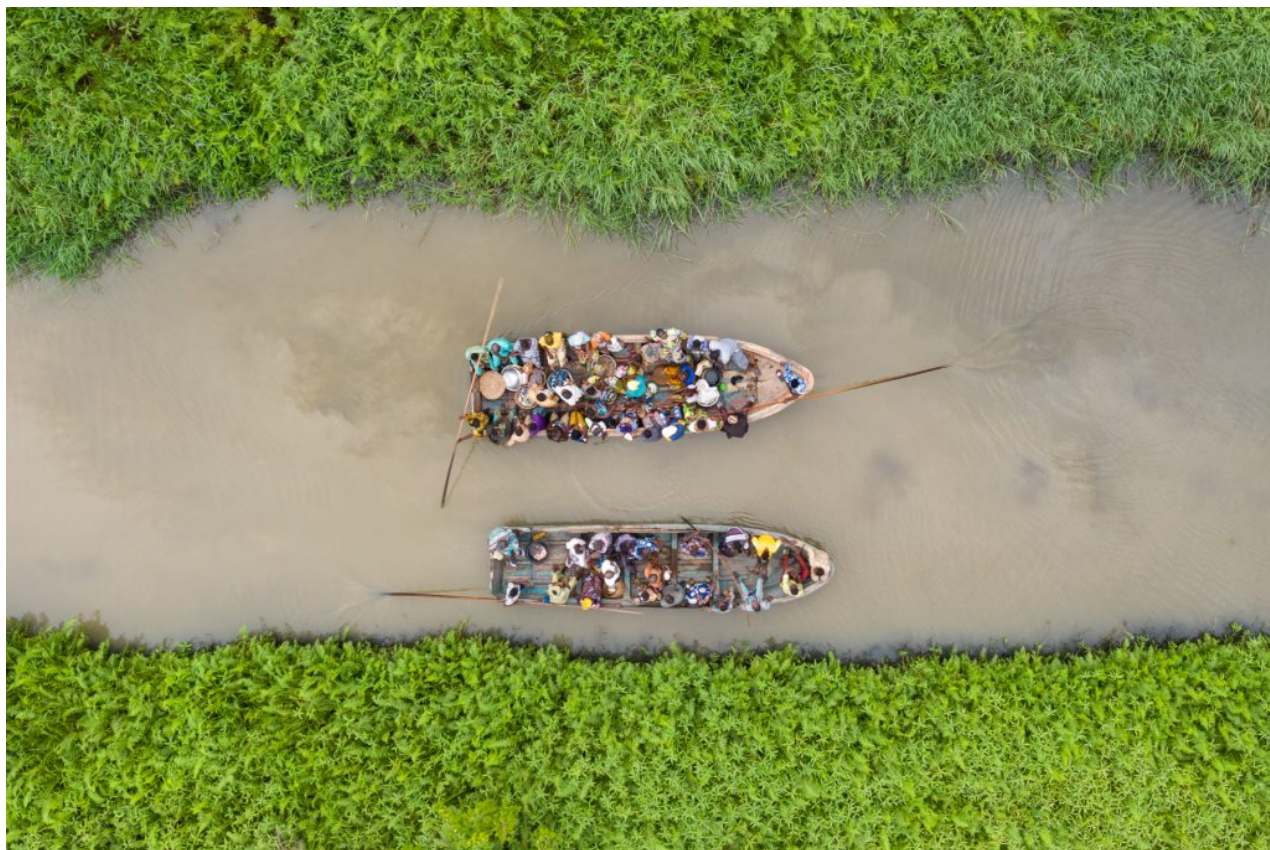
Originally from the Yoruba culture of Nigeria, the dresses of Egungun masked dancers are richly embroidered with sequins and cowrie shells (image by Inger Vandyke)



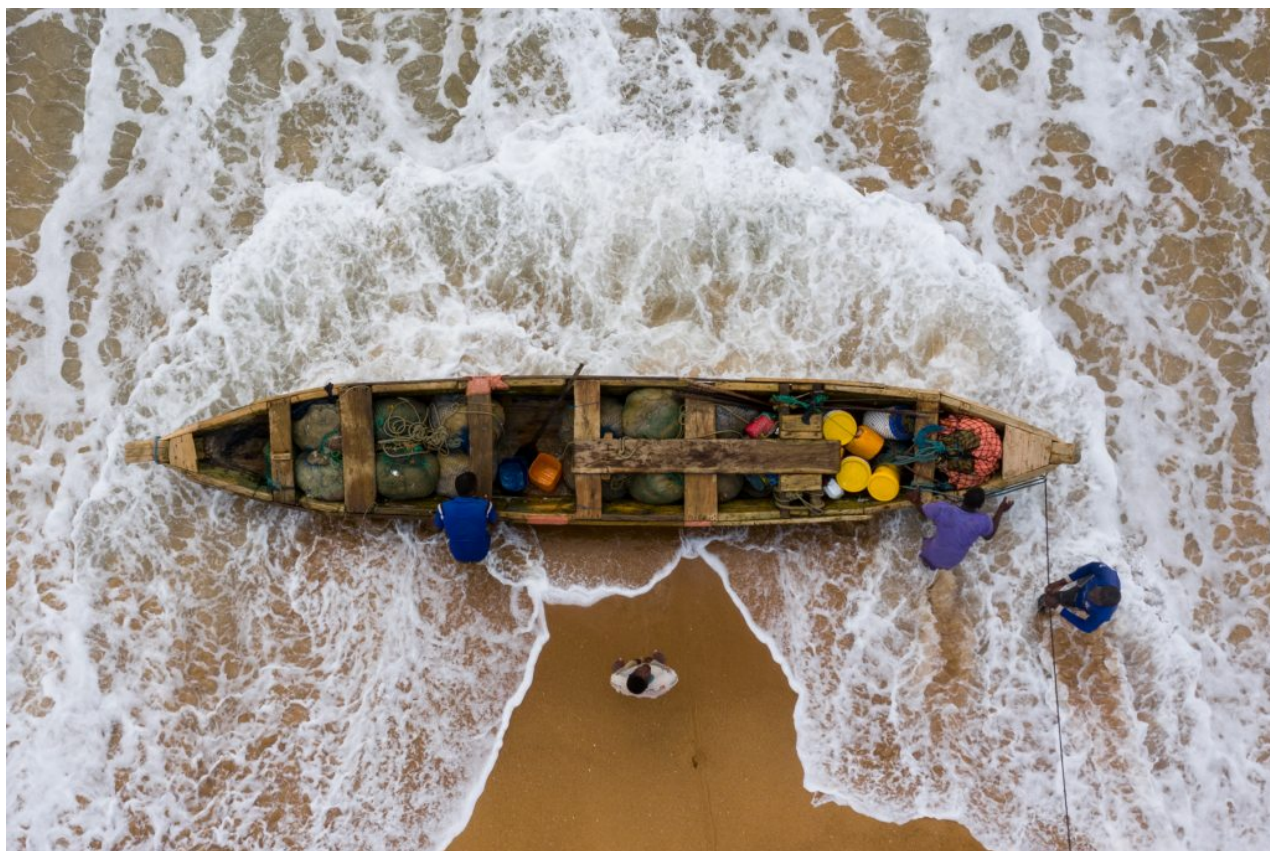
A beautiful Fulani girl selling produce on the roadside of northern Benin (image by Inger Vandyke)



Each Egunun must be guarded by a human. If they accidentally touch a spectator of the dance then the touched person may momentarily die (image by Inger Vandyke)



Getting to Benin's remote freshwater fishing villages requires you to take 'commuter pirogues' with the locals through some very narrow waterways (image by Inger Vandyke)



The captain of a Beninese fishing pirogue supervises his incoming catch. Pirogues have to be landed quickly in high surf conditions on the coast of Benin (image by Inger Vandyke)



Beninese women sit watching twirling Zangbetos at a ceremony (image by Inger Vandyke)



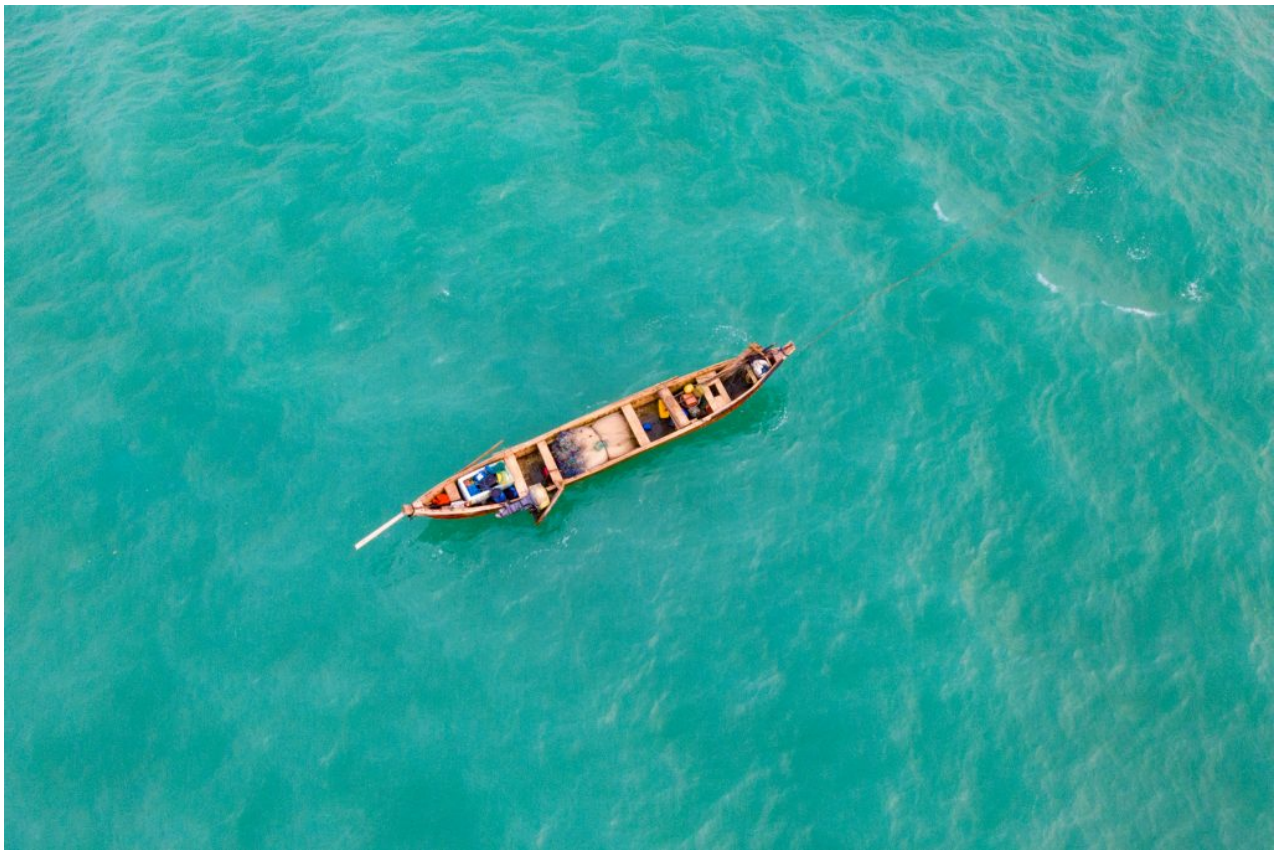
Portrait of Bruno, a voodoo chief, holding a cow's horn that is used as a judicial tool in voodoo religion (image by Inger Vandyke)



A young child uses a fishing crate to slide down a concrete ramp in one of Benin's coastal fishing villages (image by Inger Vandyke)



Benin's coastal fishing villages are filled with charm and charisma (image by Inger Vandyke)



A beautiful pirogue anchored up off the coast of Grand Popo, Benin (image by Inger Vandyke)



Living on borrowed time, the pretty coastal fishing villages of Benin risk being lost to modern development (image by Inger Vandyke)



Cowrie jewellery adorns a voodoo follower after she emerges from a forest initiation rite (image by Inger Vandyke)



Egun guns are at once a source of curiosity and terror (image by Inger Vandyke)



Egunguns frighten a young man who leaps into the entrance of his home to escape (image by Inger Vandyke)



Motion blur of Egungun in Abomey (image by Inger Vandyke)



Portrait of an Atchehoun dancer we met on the roadside in Benin (image by Inger Vandyke)



Street art depicts a woman wearing black, one of the key colours in Voodoo and representative of the night (image by Inger Vandyke)



Ancient twin dolls are held by their elderly father during a visit to a Zandro celebration (image by Inger Vandyke)



A Batonu horseman prepares to ride his horse into the sunset (image by Inger Vandyke)



Portrait of Alloya. She is one of the last elderly women with extensive, traditional Holi tattoos (image by Inger Vandyke)



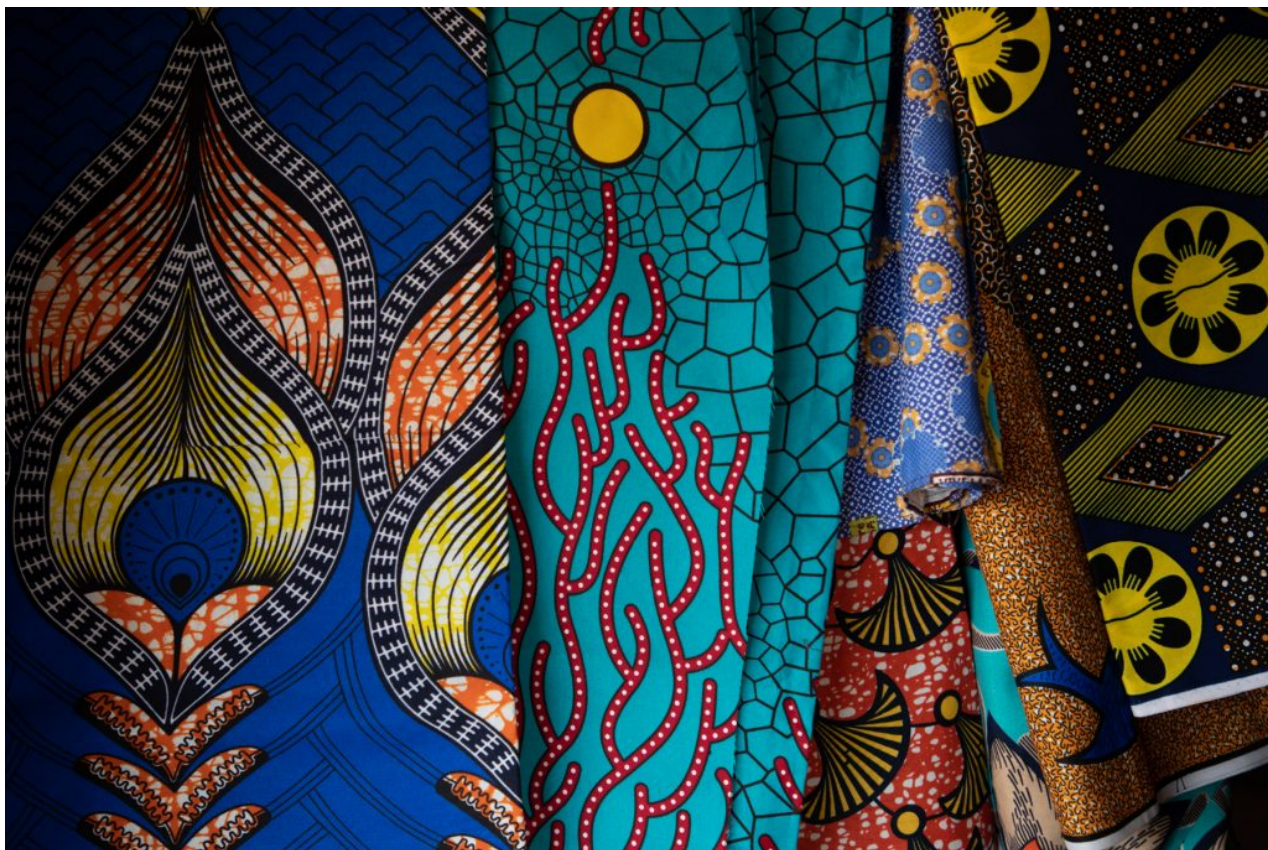
The leader of a Batonu troupe orders his horsemen to start a ceremony (image by Inger Vandyke)



Ajani teaching his daughter how to mend nets in a remote fishing village near the border of Nigeria and Benin (image by Inger Vandyke)



Portrait of a Batonu horseman (image by Inger Vandyke)



Colourful African fabrics adorn people and buildings all over West Africa (image by Inger Vandyke)



Lively and athletic Batonu horsemen ride their steeds in the streets of Parakou (image by Inger Vandyke)



Portrait of Adoua, the high priestess of twins (image by Inger Vandyke)



Detail of a decorated Batonu horse (image by Inger Vandyke)



Caring for Batonu horses is a task of great pride. Each one is treated like a god (image by Inger Vandyke)



Detail of a decorated Batonu horse (image by Inger Vandyke)



Beautiful bridle of a Batonu horse (image by Inger Vandyke)



Portrait of Bassila, a beautiful Holi girl, with her facial scarification (image by Inger Vandyke)



Bassila (image by Inger Vandyke)