

It's good to be the King (in Bénin)





Benin has over 100 kings, remnants from a time before it was a country. These rulers no longer exercise any political power but they nonetheless have great influence among the people. For a long time, they resisted to the colonial power, so they still have maintained a level of prestige. Politicians shower them in gifts in the hopes of winning over their support.



The Kings of Benin receive as much as money from the state as the Church. Some have become tourist attractions. The King of Abomey for example requires that tourists pay 250 euros to take a picture of him and his wives in his palace. Some kings are approached by businessmen to gain support for big ventures.



Toffa II, the king of Porto-Novo, rides through the streets in his royal coach. Women always flock around Benin's kings. In the 17th century, the Dahomey kingdom (largest of Benin's former kingdoms) had a battalion in the army composed of Amazonian women.



Like slaves did in times past, men carry their king's coach. Prisoners of war between the kingdoms were traded to European merchants in exchange for weaponry. Many of these slaves ended up in the New World (especially Brazil and Haiti). Many identical voodoo ceremonies take place on both continents.



Kings from Nigeria used to visit Beninese kings. Colonial powers created the borders but the inter-clan relations span across these invisible lines. These men are messengers of the Nigerian King Yaffin. They are forbidden from showing their faces so they must wear these outfits. They use their sticks to clear their way. The locals aren't allowed to speak to them or see them dressing. They kicked my guide's butt when they saw him!



Enclosed in haystack costumes, the Zangbetos are strong spirits who spin and tumble before an audience of awestruck bystanders. Zangbetos are the voodoo guardians of the night. They also serve as the king's protectors as well, responsible for his safety while he sleeps. Legend has it that there are no humans under the costume. When the king goes out in public, the Zangbetos escort him. They also collect money from villagers in exchange for the promise of protection and blessings.



Dada Adidékon Vognon is a famous voodoo doctor of King of Mahi Assanté. He wears a hat embroidered with the name of his king. The kings always have an entourage: women, voodoo priests to protect them from bad luck and their enemies, and traditional doctors. Dada Vognon is said to cure all types of ailments for the king and his wives, from vaginal discharges and sperm fortification to cancer and AIDS. Even the president of Benin has men like this in his cabinet.

The pearls in front of his face serve to protect him from evil spirits.



Kings can be spotted by the umbrella that one of their servants carries over their head. They always have this umbrella above them, even when they are indoors!

The umbrella is complete with symbols of that particular king. They also carry a scepter, an important sign of power. It is in fact more than a symbol, it is the King himself! Long ago, people had the same respect for the scepter as they did for the king. When the king wants to send a message to someone, a messenger takes the scepter and relays the dispatch. The scepter speaks for the King...



Only the Kings and their family can have an umbrella. It is always turned clockwise to symbolize the longevity of the king. If it is turned counter-clockwise, then the umbrella bearer is regarded as an enemy and put to death. The queen is always by the king's side. In pre-colonial times, she would have to follow him in death so his highness would not have to forget carnal pleasures in the world of the dead.



Tosoh Gbaguidi XIII, the former king of the Beninese town of Savalou, passed away last year. During his reign, in 2008, he named Mouammar Kadhafi the King of all Kings in Africa. Gbaguidi even converted to Islam to please him. He became close with the Libyan dictator who in turn gave a lot of money to him! The result of these donations is a giant palace and lot of public projects including schools and hospitals. The goal was to create the United States of Africa.



The voodoo convent in Savalou's royal palace was built with Khadafi's financial support. Voodoo priestesses live within. Kadhafi gave around 1 billion CFA to Savalou.

PALAIS ROYAL DE SAVALOU
AU NOM DES MANES
DE NOS ANCETRES



A sign at the entrance of the royal palace forbids people from wearing hats or riding motorcycles within its walls.



The palace is composed of little houses and voodoo temples, each with unique symbols and drawings on the walls. They also keep the new king hidden from sight for eight days before he makes his public appearance as ruler.



A decoration on the palace walls.



Locals love to visit the palace and take photos in front of the different symbols and statues as they still have great respect for their king. People often color coordinate their outfits during festive times (as pictured on the right).



Dada Hpiessolin Palace was named after Hpiessolin, a King of Savalou. The entrance is like the open mouth of a leopard, a symbol of power. Hpiessolin was a professor. Many kings have a side job as they are not rich enough to survive solely off their pseudo-rule.



The Kings all have their own personal cars and custom license plates. The King's wealth is reflected in the model of the car.



A king from around Ouidah.



Gbèmédô Tognon Zounon is known as the “king of the night” because it is said that he becomes invisible when the sun goes down. In voodoo, there is a great distinction between day and night. In the temples, there are white statues and black statues - no grey statues.



Fashion is key as this Nigerian king proves. As there are so many kings, a unique outfit can increase popularity and make them stand out from the crowd during celebrations.



Gbaguidi Ahotondji Sèvègni is the current King of Savalou. His throne is a Scandinavian egg chair, a remnant from the former French colonial governor's house. He is constantly surrounded by guards. Before I could take a picture, I had to kowtow before him as a sign of respect and submission.



Prince Zomahoun, is the youngest son of the 23rd king of Dassa. That king was said to have died at 115 years old after a 35 year reign.

After growing tired of his horses constantly dying, the king commissioned a Portuguese merchant to bring him a wooden horse to ride on when he was in public. In 1903, he received this horse on wheels which was pulled by very strong men. It brought him great prestige. The Prince refused to sell the horse despite lucrative offers from museums and collectors from around the world.

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