

TAPESTRY FROM BENIN WITH COATS OF ARMS

- *translated into English from Danish by Kristian Katholm Olsen*
- *notes by Jørgen Olsen*

Genvej til Udvikling buys and sends forward tapestry of cotton with the coats of arms, which originally were used by the kings, who in the years from 1600 to 1900 ruled the area, which today is known as The Republic of Benin.

[http://gtu.dk/applikation BENIN.jpg](http://gtu.dk/applikation_BENIN.jpg)

We buy the tapestry together with some other commodities of cotton and brass from Association des Femmes Amies, the Friendship Union of Women, AFA, which is closer described at <http://www.emmaus-international.org/en/who-are-we/emmaus-around-the-world/africa/benin/a-f-a.html>

Margrethe Pallesen, ethnographer and gardener, who lived from 1956 until 2004, visited Benin in 1993, and was the first, who introduced the coat of arms - tapestries to GtU. Margrethe has written the following pages with a historic account, a directory of the kings and every single coat of arms as well as concluding remarks about Benin of 1994.

TAPESTRY FROM BENIN

DAHOMÉY – AN AFRICAN KINGDOM

In the country, which today goes by the name of Benin there once were a king of the Fon people, who was called Gangnihessou. When he died the realm was split between his two sons. One of them got the coast area. The other one, whose name was Dakodonou, got the inner parts of the country.

Dakodonou would strengthen his kingdom and decided to conquer Abomey, which was ruled by King Da. Before he went to war he swore that he would kill King Da by tearing open his stomach. When this was fulfilled he buried King Da and built his new palace on the grave. He called it Danhomé (Dahomey), which means "the house that is built on Da's stomach". This is thought to have happened in 1625. Dahomey also became the new name for the whole kingdom.

In the following centuries the kingdom grew because of new conquests. At their deaths every king was followed by one of his sons or brothers. When a king seized power he built his own home beside his predecessor and a personal throne chair was made for him, as well as his own garb and parasol, decorated with his personal coat of arms which was appliquéd by fabrics in strong colours.

The coats of arms had a special symbolic meaning that could be linked to a personal motto or an important episode in the king's life. Every coat of arms had a main element but more elements could be added if something important happened during the reign of the king.

Dahomey's list of kings with coat of arms looks like this:

Gangnihessou 1600-1620

(The bird of prey and the drum)

The bird of prey has power over all of nature. When he flies by, the little birds hide. The people must be gathered when they hear the sound of the drum.

Dakodonou 1620-1645

(Indigo jar and "tinderbox")

Dakodonou's mother-in-law was after his life, but he beat her to it. She was decapitated and put in a jar for indigo dyeing. It was during his rule that they acquired flint to make fire.

Houegbadja 1645-1685

(The fish and the trap)

Houegbadja had an uncle who set up a trap for him, but he was warned by a friend. As a symbol he consequently chose a fish, which was too smart to fall into the trap.

Akaba 1685-1708

(The chameleon and the wild boar)

The chameleon walks slowly but always into the shadow of the trees. Consequently, he gets old and get to be a king. The wild boar never sees vertically up towards the sun, so he is a king who would never talk directly to his enemies.

Agadja 1708-1732

(The ship and the tree)

Agadja captured the first ship which came to Ouidah. No man can make fire in a fireplace, only a tree with its branches.

Tegbessou 1732-1774

(The dressed buffalo)

It is difficult to undress a buffalo with clothes on. I'm on the throne. You cannot dethrone me.

Kpengla 1774-1789

(The bird)

The stone in the water never fears the cold.

Aganglo 1789-1797

The lightning bolt strikes down on the palm tree but never on the pineapple plant.

Guezo 1818-1858

(The horned buffalo)

I am the king of the hunters. The bird Gue's¹ tail is red and can never burn the savanna. The big and strong buffalo goes through town without meeting obstacles.

Glele 1858-1889

(The lion)

I have been letting my teeth and claws grow. If the enemies that my father had forced back show up again, I shall strangle them as the lion throws itself over its prey in the forest. You cannot lift a cultivated field.

Behanzin 1889-1894

(The shark and the egg)

The angry shark stirs up the sea.

The Universe takes the egg which is desired by the Earth.

I am king over all of the blacks.

Agoli-Agba 1894-1900

(The foot, the silicate rock, the bow and the broom)

Danhomé has stumbled but has not fallen.

The Dahomey kings became rich and powerful, especially during Guezo's and Glele's time, when the slave trade and the export of palm oil were well under way. They ruled with the assistance of qualified advisors, among others a "Megan" (Prime Minister), a "Meu" (Minister of Taxation) and a "Tokpo" (Minister of Agriculture), who made sure that taxes were collected of everything that was produced. To prevent rebellion, they had a well-organized intelligence agency with spies and secret police everywhere.

They also had a strong army and lead a great number of wars against the neighbouring nations, fx by the help of "amazons", the infamous women warriors. The war prisoners were sold as slaves in Ouidah by the Slave Coast, where Denmark among others had a fort. Slave trade was for many years the most important source of income for the kingdom.

The political life was closely knit together with a religious and magical cult called "vodun". In all important decisions the divine forces were consulted and a multitude of sacrifices were made. This cult followed the slaves to America and what we know as voodoo² in Haiti is a local branch of the vodun cult. Dahomey is also known as "the cradle of the voodoo".

In the last century when the Europeans sought to colonize the whole of Africa the Dahomey realm fought for its autonomy and for many years there was a war going on between Dahomey and the colonial ruler of France. But in 1894 France finally succeeded in conquering the whole of the country. King Behanzin refused to surrender. He was taken prisoner and sent into exile on

¹ Gue must be a concrete bird – the name is not to be found as a name of a species of bird.

² Can also be spelt voodoo.

Martinique. On the other hand, he is nowadays a national hero in Benin and there is a big statue of him in Abomey.

The last king is Behanzin's little brother Agoli-Agbo, who was also army chief under Behanzin. It was his lot to surrender to the French and he is as a result regarded as a sort of traitor. But he is excused with the argument that he was only realistic.

The predominance of France was too great and he thought that they had to stop the bloodshed. Maybe he meant that the defeat were just temporary, when he took the motto: "Danhomé has stumbled but has not fallen."

TAPESTRY FROM ABOMEY

The Dahomey kingdom never re-emerged. Instead, 66 years as French colony followed until the country became independent in 1960. The palace of the king in Abomey is nowadays a historical museum, where you can see all the throne chairs and the parasols of the kings, god statues, jewellery etc. But the Fon people remember their ancestors and their history, and the coats of arms of the kings, the brilliantly coloured appliqués are now a part of traditional folk art.

It is these "coats of arms" we rediscover on the tapestry from Abomey. A cooperative of craft people in Abomey, called Cooperative d'Art Contemporain³, uses the motifs on their brilliantly coloured tapestry. Here you can rediscover King Agadja's ship, King Kpengla's bird and King Glele's lion. Are you very observant you would notice that one king is censored, that is King Adandozan, who ruled from 1797 to 1818. None of the kings were pure angels, I suppose, but Adandozan were especially horrible. It is told that he and one of his courtmen one day went for a walk and saw a pregnant woman pass by. Then, they betted about if she would give birth to a boy or a girl. To get an answer to the bet they immediately took the woman and slit her belly open and looked for it. After that they let the bodies lie and continued their walk. A scoundrel like that you do not want to remember.

In connection with "Images of Africa"⁴ we have got a small number of tapestries to Denmark. They come from a small cooperative in Abomey which started in 1992. The cooperative has when it is most successful 24 members, 15 women and 9 men. They have sold some of their products to Niger and Togo, but is the first time that they export to Europe. If they get access they will build a gallery with contemporary art from Benin. They also want to set up a canteen and a clinic in a connection to the workshop.

The tapestries are thoroughly a local product. The cotton is reaped in the northern Benin and the fabric is weaved in the Mono province. The cooperative colours their fabric themselves. The tapestries are carefully sewed and hand-embroidered. A sewing machine has only been used for mounting. They are very decorative and will bring happiness everywhere they are put up. At the same time, they give us a little insight in a piece of Africa's history, which we normally do not hear so much about.

³ Cooperative of Modern Art.

⁴ A festival held during a few years in the nineties in Denmark.

BENIN TODAY

Benin – which before 1975 was called Dahomey – is a former French colony in West Africa. The country is 2 ½ times as big as Denmark and has 5,4 million inhabitants⁵. Benin contains several different ethnic groups and 14 different languages are spoken.

In Benin the majority – about two thirds – profess to traditional African religions and the Vodun cult still flourishes. The last third is made up of part Christians part muslims. The country became independent in 1960, but democracy never worked. Instead Benin became a military dictatorship, from 1972 under the leadership of major Kérékou.

However, in 1990, a fortunate change of political system happened, even under relatively peaceful circumstances. Benin got a democratic constitution and free election were held. Today there is freedom of speech and human rights are to a large extent respected.

To support this fragile democratic process Benin has become a program country for Danish development collaboration.⁶ The country has a great need of assistance because it is one of the poorest countries of the world. The conditions of health and nutrition are bad, there is a high children mortality, a lot of illiterates and high unemployment.

But culturally and humanly Benin has a lot to offer. Fx the famous singer Angélique Kidjo comes from the Fon people in Benin and everywhere in the country a lot interesting art and handicraft products are created.

When you buy a tapestry from Abomey you support some craft people, who in their work seek to bridge past and present. You give a helping hand to a poor country, who now hopefully is on a path to a better future.

Margrethe Pallesen

⁵ The population has more than doubled since the article was written.

⁶ Which lasted from 1992 to 2014.