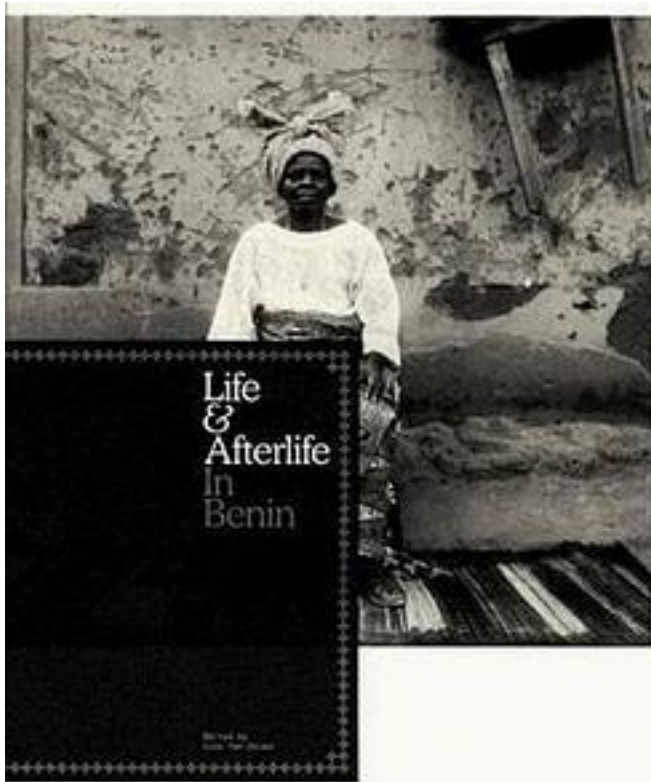


Life & Afterlife in Benin



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Photography plays a role in most of our lives - but rarely in our deaths. If you happened to live in the West African country of Benin * during the 1960s and 1970s, photography was quite literally a matter of life and death. It is a commonly held belief in many non-Western cultures that a person's soul lives on, as if trapped, within the photograph. In Benin, with its rich spiritual traditions of animism (voodoo was born here and is now Benin's official religion) - whereby fetishes or objects are regarded to

embody powerful spirits - the photograph came to play a fascinating role in the rituals of death. This unique collection of portrait photography, painstakingly assembled and conserved by the West African art specialist Alex van Gelder, opens a new chapter in the history of African photography. Most people's knowledge of African photography is limited to the Bamako school of Mali, whose masters Seydou Keita and Malick Sidibe were discovered at the beginning of the 1990s. But where Keita and Sidibe worked predominantly in the town, making images of a young urban population keen to establish the modernity of their lives, here in Benin, the photographers were very often ambulant, travelling by bicycle to far flung places to find their clients, and sometimes developing their exquisitely crafted photographs in makeshift darkrooms constructed in the bush. Marked by dark dramas and deep mysticisms, their portraits record a people caught between a pre-colonial past and a post-colonial future. For many of the people in the photographs it would be their first and last encounter with a photographer. Amongst the weddings and communions, the courting couples and proud parents, lie startling images of revenants and juju men; voodoo priests and priestesses; thieves and assassins; prostitutes and pimps - and most uniquely, an extraordinary sequence of 'apres-mort' or death bed portraits. *The West African country of Dahomey was colonised by the French in 1872, and gained its independence in 1960. Since 1975 it has been officially known as the People's Republic of Benin. It is bordered by Niger, Nigeria, Togo and Upper Volta.

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