

# Dahomey

The photographer's work record

*I first became intrigued with (even aware of) Dahomey when I saw a photograph of gun-carrying Amazon Fon women who were active militia there in the late 1800s. After Vogue's editors decided that a trip to West Africa would be of interest, Mary Henry began our research; we soon discovered anthropological studies that indicated that it was from Dahomey that Haiti was first populated with slaves. There was evidence that the source of voodoo was traceable to the coast towns of that country.*

*I was excited at the prospect of a Dahomey trip, but it was clear that in the native villages it was going to be nearly impossible to find buildings in which to set up daylight studios. It was at this point that I considered for the first time a practical way of constructing a portable studio—demountable, sufficiently simple to be put up quickly by unskilled labor, a building sufficiently tough to be able to withstand wind, burning sun, and possible rain, and light enough to be transported by air.*

*Once the requirements were clear, we found several aluminum modular systems of pipes and chose one that did the job for us. A tent-maker built the skin for our aluminum skeleton, with a system of guy ropes for fixing it against the wind, and he made us a white plastic over-sheet as a parasol. Two windows were installed opposite the open side to release any dangerous air pressure that might build up in a*

*storm. The construction made, we set up the tent-studio inside our New York studio, recording each step in a series of photographs and putting the pictures in a notebook we would take with us. There were several dry runs to work out the bugs and to gain speed in handling. The whole contruction was carefully planned to pack into several pieces that could be carried on top of a jeep or small truck.*

*Dahomey is a thin pie-slice of a country that has people of many cultures—village people, nomads, herders, artisans, all people of beauty and dignity. We wandered from one end of the country to the other, setting up our photographic camp in villages, fields, and market-places, among the Fulanis, Peuhls, and Pilapilas. Probably our richest strike was in the village of Ganvié, a lagoon town built on stilts in the water, not very far from the capital city of Cotonou. The young people there have a tender beauty and purity that is a treasure. I was happy to be able to preserve something of them, if only in a photographic record. We approached the village in dugout canoes the day before our planned work there. The young girls were mermaids swimming around our boats, more at home in the water than we were on top of it. They were charming and seductive, laughing and teasing us. We chose a tent site not far from their market on a floating island. The water was just below the top skin of earth and reeds; if we drove our stakes too deep, we would lose them.*