

Leonce Raphael Agbodjelou

interview by Charles Gore

translation from the French by Chloe Evans

Leonce Raphael Agbodjelou is one of the most dynamic and creative contemporary photographers to be found in the Republic of Benin in West Africa. He was born in 1965 at Porto Novo, the coastal capital of the country near to the border with Nigeria. He acquired much of his initial mastery of photographic skills and knowledge from his father, who was the influential photographer Joseph Moise Agbodjelou (1912–2000). His father had joined the French army in 1935 and learnt his photographic skills in Perpignan in southwestern France. On his return to Dahomey (renamed the Republic of Benin in 1973) after World War II, he worked as a forest ranger but also as an itinerant photographer. In 1960 he opened his France Photo studio in Porto Novo, so named in memory of his service in the France. He worked full time until his retirement in 1994, and was president of the Association of the Photographers of Benin. It is from this background that Leonce Agbodjelou developed his life-long passion for photography from an early age. In the evenings as a child, Leonce watched his father develop and print black and white film and, when older, accompanied him on assignments as an assistant. However, since taking up photography professionally, Leonce has developed his own personal aesthetic, using a range of camera formats from 35 mm Single Reflexes to 6x9 medium format film to digital, that accord with his vision for a particular image (or series of images). He references but also transforms local trajectories of photography through his creative sensibilities within contemporary conceptual framings. In 2009, Leonce founded the first school of photography in the country to pass on his vision and expertise to another generation of Benin photographers. He has recently been elected president of the Photographer's Association of Porto-Novo in recognition of his services to the art of

photography, following in his father's footsteps.

In 1893 the Lagosian photographer Neils Walwin Holm, in the journal *The Practical Photographer* ("Photography in Lagos," 4 [44]:211) stated that

Photography is a noble profession to pursue, and if legislated for and protected will bid fair to cope with any profession under the sun for livelihood; and I hope at heart that the time will come when examinations will be held, and diplomas awarded to successful candidates to pursue the noble calling.

Charles Gore and Chloe Evans interviewed the eminent Porto Novo photographer Leonce Agbodjelou to find out his reflections on photography in the twenty-first century as a means of comparison.

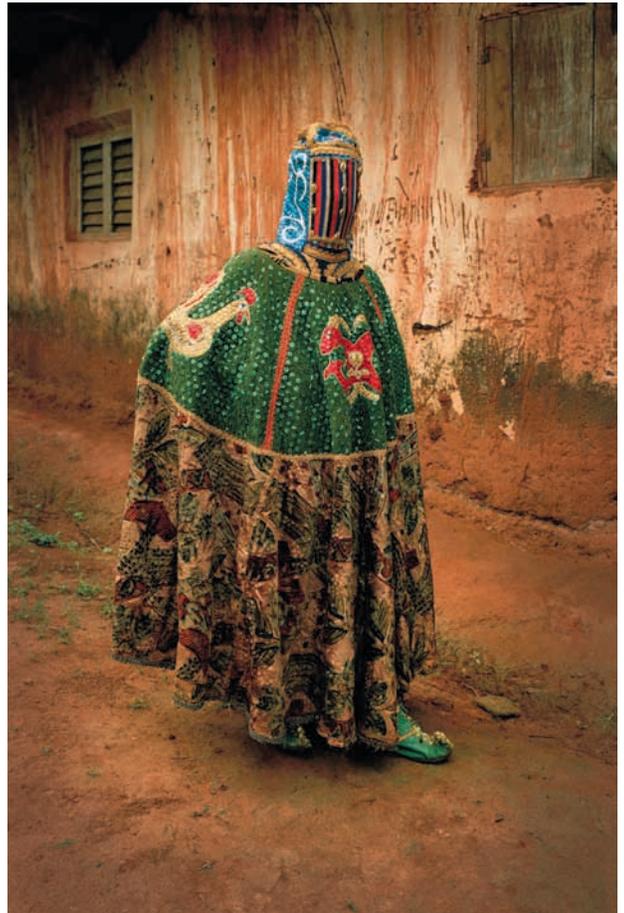
Charles Gore: What are your earliest memories of photography?

Leonce Agbodjelou: The thing that has been the most influential in my life as a photographer is a very old practice that my now-deceased father taught me: print by frame press. This has disappeared but I have kept the equipment, which allows the making of a photograph without an enlarger.

CG: Did you learn photography from your father? And did it follow an apprenticeship system or was it different to this?

LA: Yes, I learnt about photography through an apprenticeship with my father which focused on the practical as much as the theory. It was a classical nontraditional apprenticeship.

CG: Are any of your brothers or sisters photographers?



Leonce Raphael Agbodjelou
 Untitled, from *Egungun* series (2011)

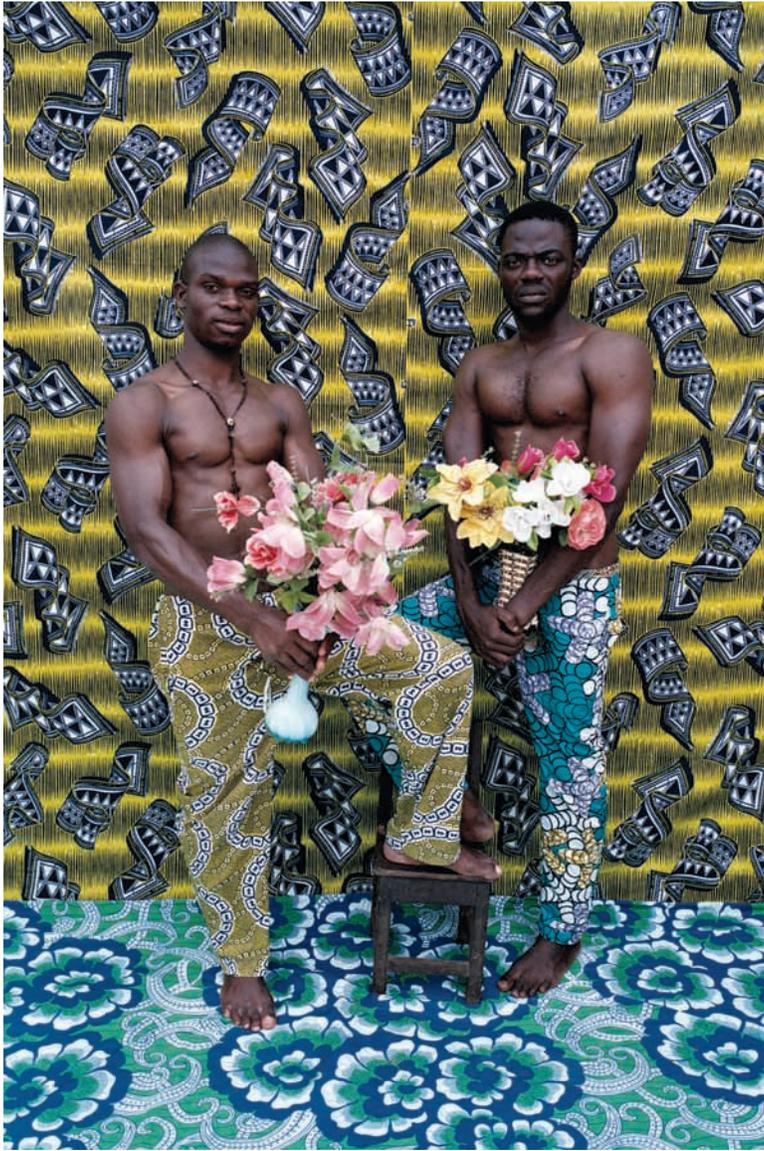
LA: Yes, I have brothers that are photographers but not sisters that are photographers.

CG: Why are there so few women photographers?

LA: There are not many female photographers because of the way it is practiced here. It is difficult for a married woman to have this kind of job as sometimes you have to be out at night, working.

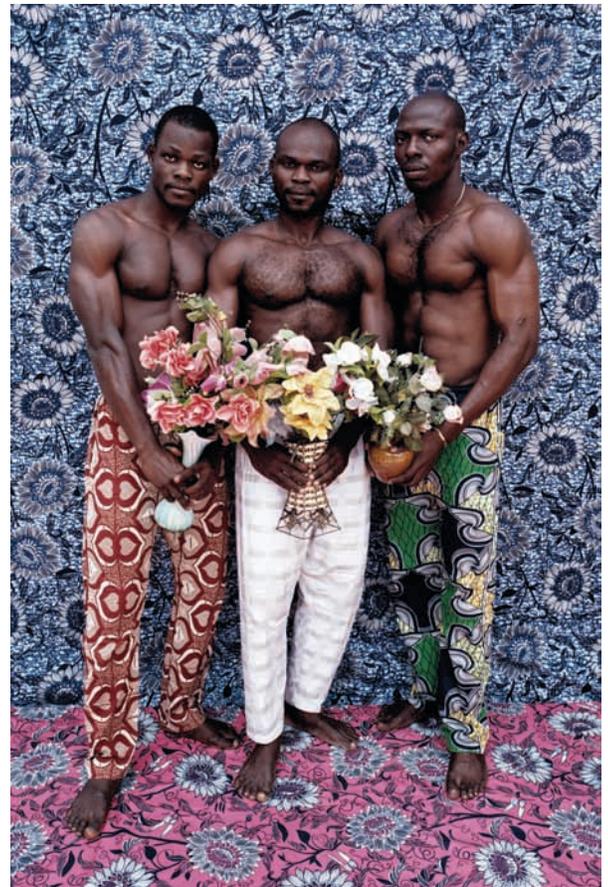
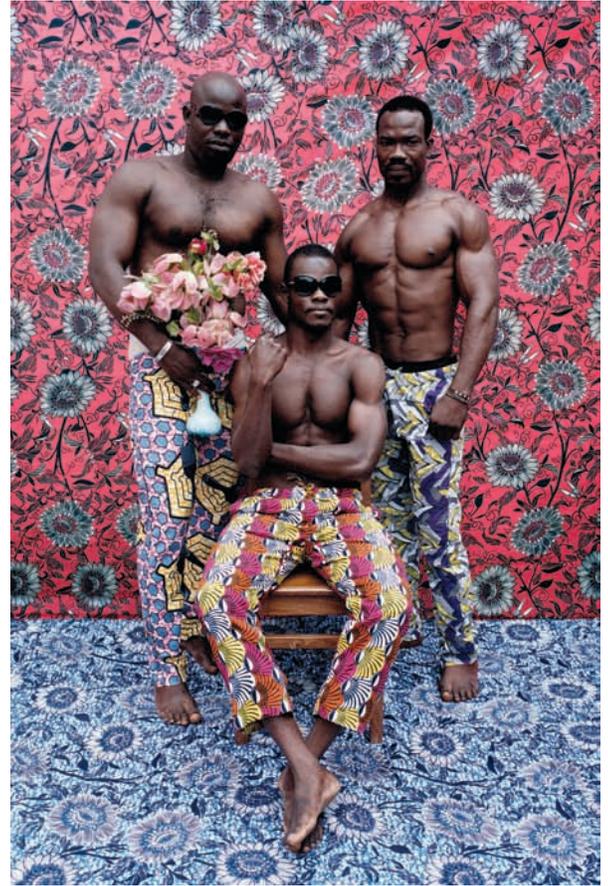
CG: How do you see your own photography having developed from when you were a young man starting out to the present day? What kind of changes have there been?





(opposite page) Leonce Raphael Agbodjelou
 Untitled, from *Demoiselles de Porto Novo* series (2012)

(this page) Leonce Raphael Agbodjelou
 Untitled, from *Dahomey to Benin* series (2010)



LA: I have seen a big development in photography. Before I was an events photographer, and today I am an exhibited photographer: this has provided a number of interrelational openings as well as economic ones. This has allowed me to become more informed in regard to technological evolution and allows me to always refresh my knowledge

CG: What are the differences between color and black and white photography?

LA: The difference is that color photography shows the real tones in different areas but it demands much more care/attention than it does with black and white photography to create these variations of colors.



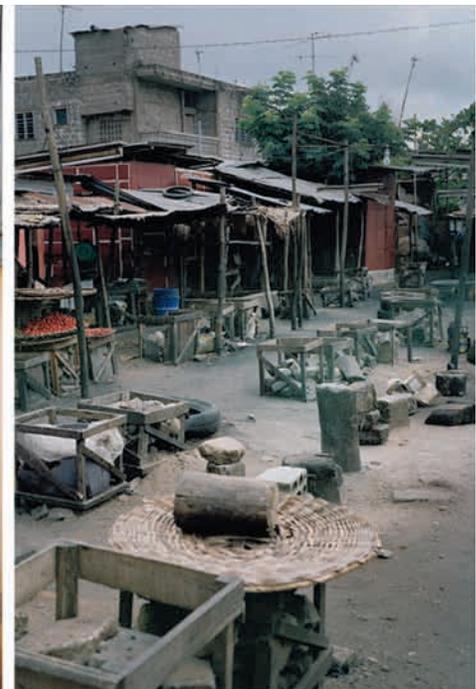
CG: What are your favorite kinds of images?

LA: My favorite pictures are the ones that translate culture, tradition; in one word—the cultural identity.

CG: How do you find and compose the images that you capture on film?

LA: It happens that I think about a story. Then I start thinking about its realization, the character, how it is dressed, the setting, and then at the end I create my artwork.

(this page and opposite) Leonce Raphael Agbodjelou
Untitled triptyches, from *Code Noir* series (2014)



CG: Do you develop images and themes first in your photography or do you consider the customer/patron first in the making of an image?

LA: I develop my ideas alone and I create them. But sometimes I am asked to do some projects.

CG: How are you different to other photographers in Porto Novo?

LA: You can summarize the differences in several points: We do not do the same type of apprenticeship; we do not use the same material; we do not have the same vision of photography concerning its importance, the innovations, its opening on the world.

CG: How far do you travel to photograph?

LA: I travel very far in my work, I even take great risks by traveling on water, by taking photographs on water, by going to try to convince people [to let me take photos] where they live.

CG: What is the best image you have ever taken and why?

LA: My best photograph is *les demoiselles de Porto-novo* because it represents the portrait of women with faces covered with masks and showing their breast.

CG: You have set up a training school for photographers in Porto Novo. Can you tell me about it?

LA: My school is useful for the government in Benin as it supports them in their apprenticeship in the dual type. The apprentices do one day a week's training for thirty-two weeks a year. This is to teach them the universal norms of photography and eventually the theory linked to practice. After three years they

do a national examination "CPQ" (certificate of professional qualification).

Such training takes place because of the insufficiency of traditional apprenticeships by patrons of photography and [the insufficiency of] just observing the practice. Indeed the majority of apprenticeships that the old artisan masters had in technical photography is now seen as incomplete because it was based on observation and imitation and did not always link theory and practical. These skills were transferred by masters [of photography] to apprentices by having their actions just copied.

So the students at the school will receive a complete training with more structure to give them a good technical level as well as professional practice. This allows them to develop their technical capability, in order to be contenders on the job market.

Also, such a formation will help the apprentices to develop their communication in French and reinforces their knowledge of the moral and social dimensions. Elsewhere, they have reinforced their capacity in maths, working French, and ICT.

Le Centre de Formation professionnelle France Photo-Vidéo (CFPPFV) also looks after the improvement of the artisan masters in seventy-seven communes of Benin on request of the associations.

CG: What future projects in photography would you like to do?

LA: As a project, I can envisage strengthening my apprenticeship center by adding a very modern photographic laboratory.

CG:What do you see as the future of photography?

LA: Photography is still a sector which is under exploited even though it is full of promise. History will therefore not happen without photography. Photography is a must in all domains, like culture, medicine, education.

