

# EXPRESSIONS OF **WORSHIP**

A PHOTO SERIES



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From July 2018 to June 2019, I captured the passionate worship of believers in evangelical churches across southern Côte d'Ivoire. The country encompasses over 60 ethnic groups each with their own language and traditions. The largest group in the country is the Akan, subgroup Baoulé. This is the group I interacted with the most as I documented Ivorian culture.

Every ethnic group, for centuries, has practiced animism by worshipping ancestral spirits before introduction to Christianity and Islam, among other belief systems. A majority of the population across West Africa still worships this way, following the example set by their tribesmen centuries before them.

Many, whether living in villages or in major cities like Yamoussoukro and Abidjan, utilize fetishes and witch doctors to ensure health, favor and blessing upon their livelihoods — usually in agriculture. Some of the population who have converted to Christianity and other religions have a hard time letting go of this ancestral worship, though their new doctrines do not condone it; animistic traditions have become embedded into the society.

Even so, evangelical worship has grown throughout the country in the past century, especially through Pentecostal denominations like the Assemblies of God.

Some of the rawest photos are produced when the subjects are fully and wholly vulnerable — a worship setting is perfect for this, as you'll see throughout the series.

Below are photos I've captured and edited. After my time in the Ivory Coast, I hope to contribute these images to further work on the history of the church in West Africa.

—Sarah



## Colorful worship in Koumassi, Abidjan



African fabric expresses one's individuality, heritage and is used as a symbol of celebration. Believers celebrate their faith by showing off handmade dresses and dress shirts from their favorite seamstresses in the city. For those who can't afford this, a simple head wrap does the trick.





## Finding joy in Yopougon, Abidjan



Yopougon is a neighborhood of Abidjan which holds over 1 million people but does not have the infrastructure or space for the masses. Over 45% of Côte d'Ivoire's population lives in abject poverty, and Yopougon's residents contribute to this statistic. A lack of governmental support, a lack of education and poor healthcare amounts to humans living stacked together like sardines in a can.

**But in these conditions, joy is found.**

Above: As worship continues on for several hours, a woman from the Beté tribe comes to the front playing a traditional recorder to imitate bird calls.



## A united community in Katadji



A Bible institute is located in Katadji, Côte d'Ivoire, so many of Katadji's residents have grown up around Christianity. While not all accept the message, believers worship freely together each week.

Above: A worship leader belts out a tune and the choir behind her joins in.

Right: Both women and men lead worship, but when congregations get fired up, women will come to the front to dance.





## Digging up our roots in Duékoué

The first African church envisioned and built by my grandparents was Duékoué's Assembly of God in 1972. My father and his family lived out of a van in the church's courtyard when he was a child as this building went up. I was fortunate enough to hear him preach under this roof in the spring of 2019. A few of the original members attended that Sunday and said they remember him running around the village years ago...



This region was one of the hardest hit during the Second Ivorian Civil War in 2010. The people are still recovering from the violence.





## From war to worship in [Niambly](#)





The same Sunday we visited Duékoué we drove a few miles down the road to the village Niambly. Several from this village died during the 2010-2011 conflict. As rebels moved in, innocent residents of Niambly (including children) fled by foot to escape stray bullets and rampant cases of rape, which also affected thousands during the first civil war at the turn of the century.

Organizations like UNICEF took in the injured in nearby Duékoué, but you'll notice these photos mainly feature women. After the war, hundreds were widowed across the country and still today villagers do not have much protection from crime.

Many who survived have returned to Niambly and Christians worship in this tabernacle. The crowd is small, but they can be heard across the village crying out in their native tongue during worship time.





## Circle dancing tradition in Tiasallé



In every Ivorian church — from the congregations who meet outside under a grass “apatam,” to those in mud tabernacles and others who can afford a building — believers slowly dance in a circle formation near the altar.

Out of joy, celebration and relief to be in the presence of other believers, the circle takes on a life of its own. Soon, more join in and the circle continues for hours, if not for a pastor to jump up and call it a day.



## Children's worship in Bessikoi



Bessikoi is a broken neighborhood of Abidjan, full of open sewage, unfinished homes and gang members. Poor families have flocked to sections of Abidjan like Bessikoi for cheap places to live, but the conditions are unsafe for all involved.

In a small storefront deep into Bessikoi is Temple Bethel where children's programs are held several times a week so the children can have a reprieve.



## A new church in Kiriao



A worship team from nearby Facobly celebrated with residents of village Kiriao in January 2019 as a Texan mission team constructed a new tabernacle church in Kiriao.

Kiriao is a village of the We people. The week before the team constructed a new church, a foreigner came in and, after brandishing a machete, killed a member of the village. The We people rose up in anger and killed the foreigner, the chief said. This is a step back for the region, as this incident has highlighted and encouraged disunity.

The tabernacle team checked with the chief first before starting construction and were welcomed into the village with open arms.







## “Dieu va le faire” for [Adjamé](#), Abidjan



“Dieu va le faire.”

A phrase heard often in Assemblies of God churches in Côte d'Ivoire, this means “God will do it.”

This is something a Christian, traveling vocalist told me after church in Adjamé in November of 2018. She is the woman pictured above.

She's from the Guere tribe of the West. Full of energy and fire, she raised the congregation to their feet as she sang in her traditional language and in French. She was sweet at first, but when she got on the stage, she started yelling out to Jesus in her native tongue of Guere, and the crowd followed.

By the end of her performance she was dripping profusely with sweat and shaking. But individuals from the neighborhood flocked into the sanctuary to see her, and all over the building men and women were jumping on their feet in excitement.