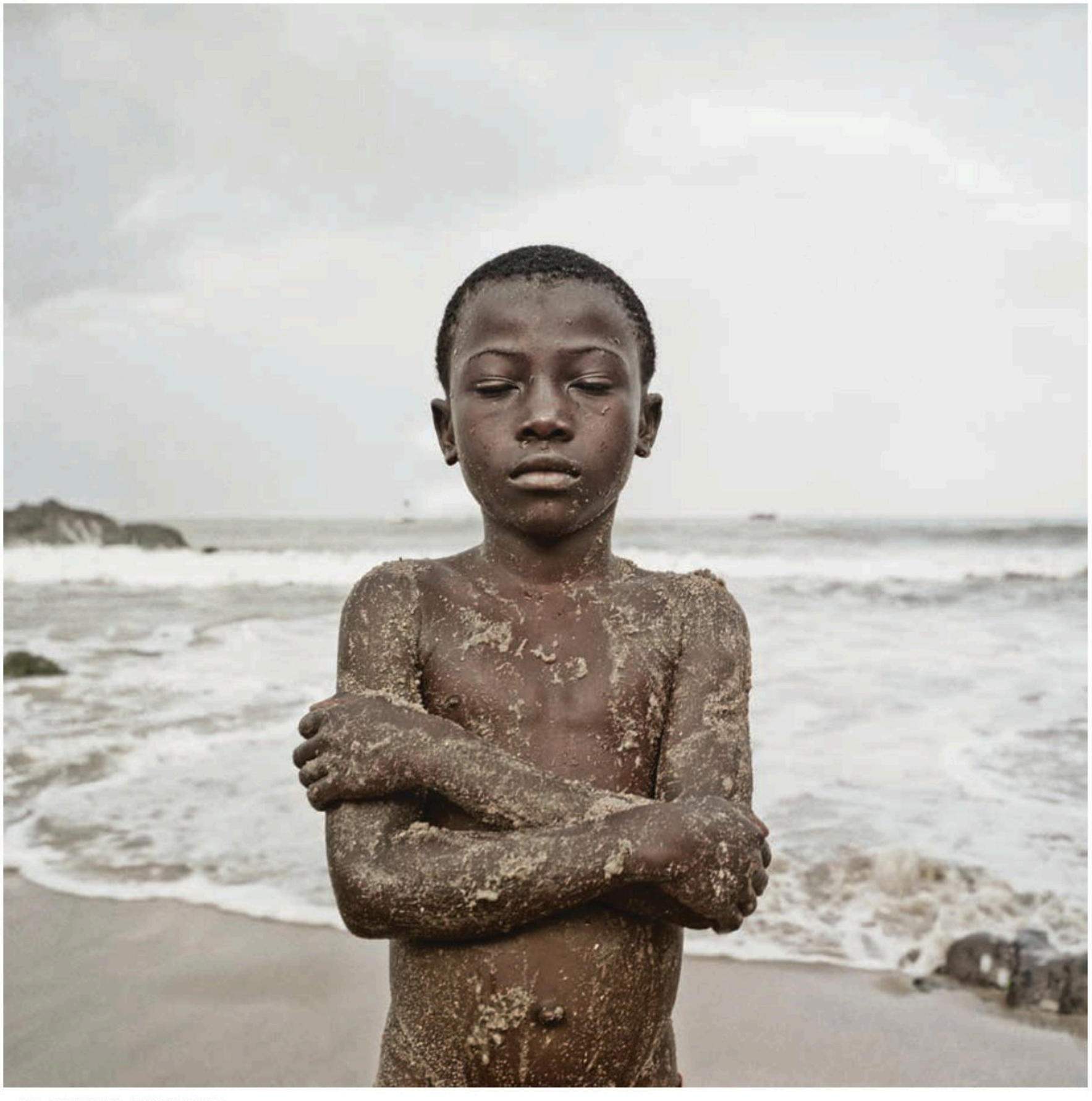
THE WATER BEHIND US

IN THE ROUGH SEAS OFF WEST AFRICA, **FISHING** ISN'T JUST FOR THE BRAVE— IT'S A **TRADITION** THAT SHAPES COASTAL COMMUNITIES AND THEIR **RESPECT FOR NATURE.**

ESSAY BY **NII AYIKWEI PARKES**
PHOTOGRAPHS BY **DENIS DAILLEUX**



Along this coast of ours, nothing is strange.

If you wake early enough to meet the canoes as they come in—in Port Bouet, Côte d'Ivoire; in Ngleshi, Ghana; in Old Jeswang, the Gambia; in Grand-Popo, Benin; in Apam, Ghana—you will hear fishermen speaking Fante, Ga, Ewe, all languages of Ghana.

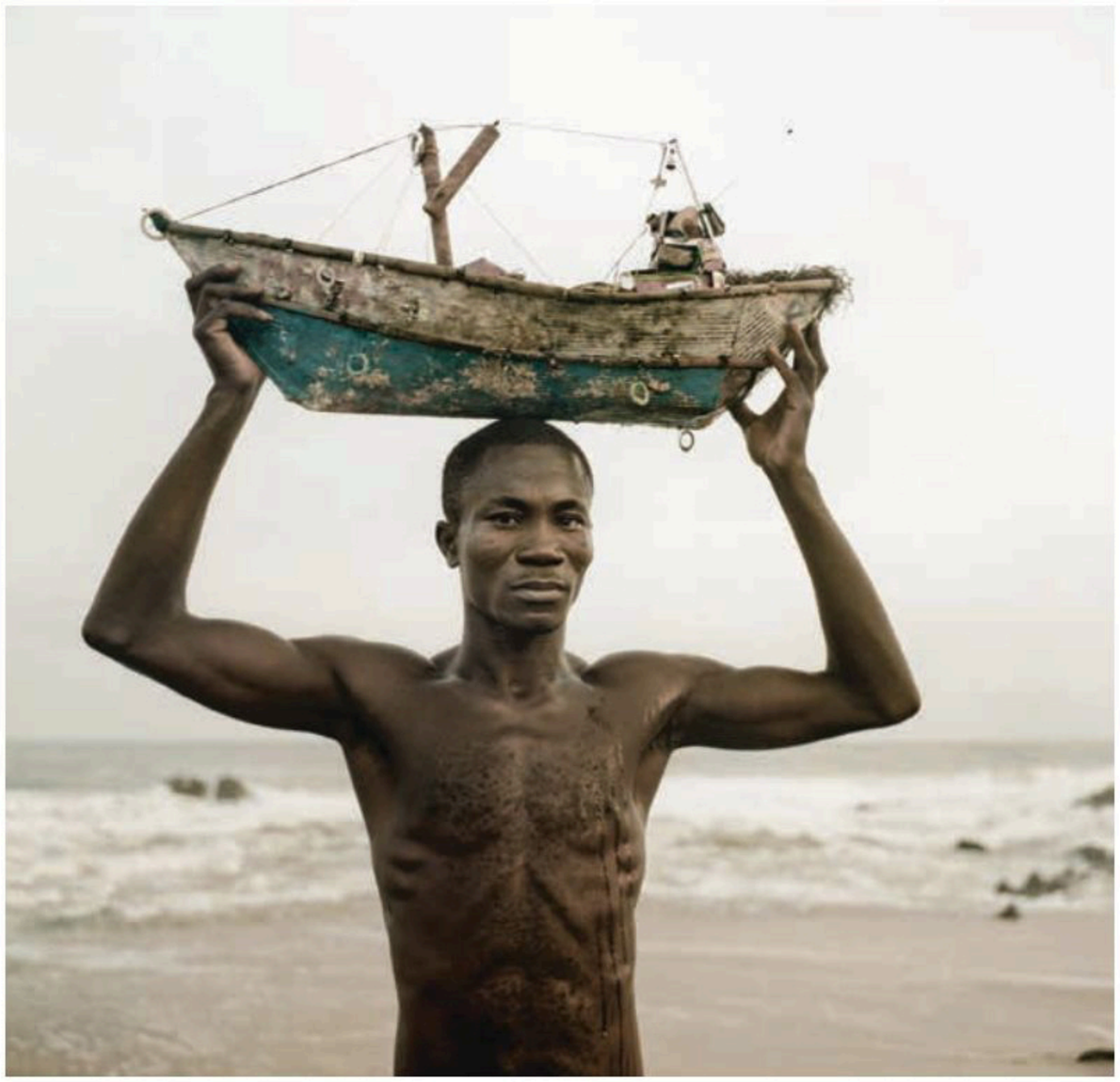
As the men separate into identifiable bodies in the emerging sun, pulling in the nets, their chants get louder: *"Ee ba ei, ee ba ke loo*—It is coming, it is laden with fish." Each net comes in heavy with what the deep has to offer in the clutches of its mesh. The fish flop, flail, and trampoline on the sand, catching the sun's light as quick hands sort them into wide metal basins.

The catch is never the same. Yes, there are the easily recognized commercial varieties: snapper, grouper, tuna, mackerel, *kpanla* (a variety of hake). But invariably there are the coveted: crayfish, eels, rays, and species of odd shapes and sizes, boned and boneless, some with features that would excite fantasy and horror writers in the manner

Nana Adomo, covered in sand, pauses while she plays on the beach in Mumford, a traditional fishing town on Ghana's coast along the Atlantic Ocean's Gulf of Guinea. The government is modernizing the local port, adding roads and a marketplace, net-mending hall, ice depot, gas station, and day care center.

PREVIOUS PHOTO

Fishermen prepare their boats in a small harbor in Jamestown, a district of the country's capital, Accra. Many people in the area fish, but this crew lives at a port about 60 miles away. They came to Jamestown to sell their catch and then stay the night.



ABOVE
Prince Kafuta poses on a beach in Mumford with a toy boat modeled after the town's fishing boats. The sea is a key part of Ghanaian identity. Along West Africa's coast, most fishermen are from Ghana.

RIGHT
Two children at play take a moment to observe their surroundings and peer up at a fish sculpture in the square on Sekondi-Takoradi's beachfront. The monument to fishing is adorned with the red, yellow, and green from the Ghanaian flag's stripes, as well as its black star.

Tuesdays or in freshwater on Thursdays. It is taboo, and thus a weekly break allows water spirits to replenish the fish—a conservation-minded act rooted in culture and tradition.

More tangibly, the idea of conservation guides the range of skills acquired by Ghanaian fishing communities. A large number of fishermen are part-time farmers, returning to the land once or twice annually when fish stocks are less plentiful.

The remainder mimic the migration patterns of the primary species consumed where they live, or go to areas where alternate fish can be found. Ladyfish, for example, which is taken in Senegal and the Gambia, can replace bonefish, a delicacy in the central region of Ghana.

It is also the flux of available fish that has fueled the mastery of fish brining and smoking along the coast. Good stocks of smoked fish ensure that the staple protein of coastal diets is readily available regardless of the season.

The reality of the occasional man lost at sea and the unpredictability of the catch mean that fishing families ultimately latch their dreams to the twists of fate.

Fishermen deliver their silvered bounty to the women of their towns; the women sell it and perform magic with the proceeds: trading, farming, and educating children who run along the shore, making up games while the men are away riding waves.

Even when the men don't return, they leave something behind.

My cousin who shared my name, Ayikwei, was one of the unreturned. In 1992, when I was making my first journey to live outside the capital, Accra, in Tolon, nearly 400 miles away in northern Ghana, he said something to me that I carry always: You have no cause to be nervous. We are Ga; with the water behind us, we have nothing to fear.

Now, wherever I travel, in the midst of the strange, I close my eyes and listen for water. □

Writer, poet, and performance artist **Nii Ayikwei Parkes'**s books include *Tail of the Blue Bird*. This is his first story for *National Geographic*. French photographer **Denis Dailleux,** of Agence VU, is based in Paris and Cairo. In his work, he has explored Ghanaians' relationship with the sea.

The Ga, the people I belong to, have no fear of the unknown. 'May strangers find home with us' is a foundational philosophy of our culture.

that open-sea *Phronima* creatures apparently inspired the film *Alien*. But there will be no screaming here—there will be spices to render all species delicious.

The Ga, the people I belong to, have no fear of the unknown. The saying *"Ablekuma aba kuma wo*—May strangers find home with us"—is one of the foundational philosophies of our culture; it is why my European surname, Parkes, imported with a Sierra Leonean grandfather of Jamaican heritage, is considered a Ga name. It is an attitude echoed among most of the coastal peoples of West Africa: They travel without hesitation, they embrace travelers; like the waves that wash their feet, they come and go.

But in fishing families, Ghanaians are unique. In 1963, the now defunct magazine *West Africa* called Ghanaians "pan-African fishermen" because of the number of countries—from Nigeria to Senegal—where Fante, Ewe, and Ga fishermen applied their expertise.

Raised by some of the roughest seas along the coastline, fishermen from the Fante-speaking western and central regions of Ghana became not only the strongest sea swimmers in the world (16th- and 17th-century European travelers including Jean Barbot and Pieter van den Broecke were awed by West African swimming skills) but also expert canoers.

Even among the Ga, the most revered fishermen, the *woleiatse,* often are from the Abese-Fante *akutso* (network of families), a group of Fante naturalized as Ga people. This easy shift in identity from Fante to Ga is rooted in shared values that are tied to a quest to preserve their livelihoods. Neither group fishes at sea on

TOP LEFT

Gina Asante, a street vendor in Winneba, another historic fishing port in central Ghana, carries a cage of chickens to be sold. Agriculture accounts for perhaps 50 percent of Ghana's workforce.

TOP RIGHT

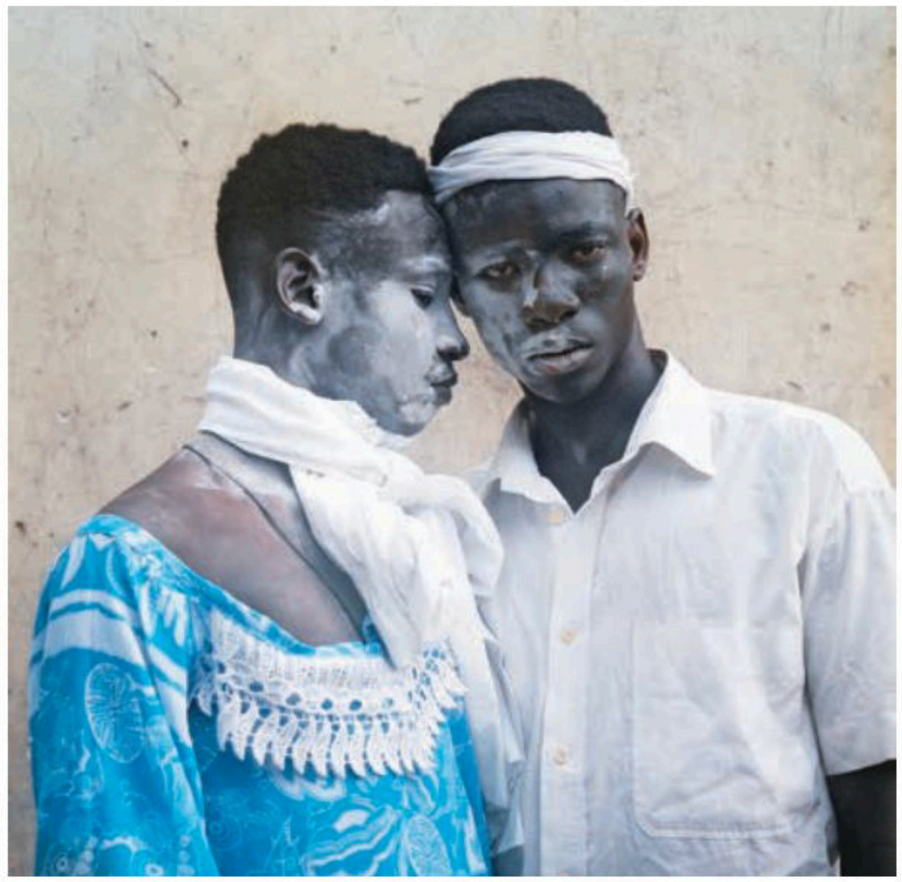
Friends Kodjo Essel and Kofi Ayikpah attend the popular Aboakyere festival in Winneba. The festival, originating from an ancient rite of sacrifices offered to the tribal god Otu, occurs annually on the first Saturday in May and features activities such as antelope hunts and celebrations. The powder on the festival-goers' faces is decorative. Historically in Ghana, white clay or powder has been used as a sign of victory over evil.

BOTTOM LEFT

Children who have decorated themselves with talcum powder stop for a photo while playing in a house under construction by the sea in Apam, a fishing port. They make up games to entertain themselves while men fish and women sell the catch.

BOTTOM RIGHT

Nyamo Adomako, a young fisherman living in Jamestown, plays soccer with friends when he is not out at sea.



NGM MAPS

NEXT PHOTO

Children chase each other on the beach in Apam. Formerly a major harbor, the port now is focused on fishing. Communities in Ghana take a break from fishing at sea and in freshwater one day a week, which enhances conservation.