

The bijago people

a culture in harmony with nature



CBD-Habitat



European Union



A Lush and Generous World

The Bissagos or Bijagos archipelago consists of twenty main islands and dozens of smaller ones. It forms part of Guinea-Bissau and is located in the Atlantic Ocean off the African coast. Only twenty of the islands are inhabited all year round.

The archipelago was formed out of the ancient Geba river delta and possesses a vast diversity of environments, all of them bursting with life: mangrove swamps, palm groves, forests, rainforest remnants, wooded savannah woodlands, beaches and lagoons. Declared a Biosphere Reserve by UNESCO in 1996 and a Ramsar Site in 2014, the islands are renowned for their natural richness.

The earliest written references to the Bijagos islands date back to 1456, when the first European explorers portrayed them as a seafaring people, fierce and warlike, immersed in both the slave trade and piracy. In 1535, they defeated a Portuguese bid to conquer the islands. Not until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were they finally colonised by them after a strong resistance from the population.

The Bijagos live in a lush, fertile and rich natural environment. They rely on a subsistence economy which is based on personal consumption; taking from nature what they will consume each day. They grow rice, pulses, cashews and vegetables; they own farms with chickens and pigs, they fish and take full advantage of all parts of the palm tree.

The hippopotamus (*Hippopotamus amphibius*) lives in marine waters of the Bijagos for much of the year, is also a part of the spiritual world of this people.



The Bijago archipelago is one of the most important points in the Atlantic Ocean for sea turtle nesting by the green turtle species (*Chelonia mydas*).



Toba aquarium

The African manatee (*Trichechus senegalensis*), one of the least known mammals in the world, is considered sacred by the Bijago people.





Islands, Forests and Sacred Animals

The archipelago is inhabited by about 33,000 people. Its excellent state of preservation is largely due to the faith and animistic traditions of this people, which inspire them to live harmoniously with nature. Because of their beliefs, Bijagos have their own natural reserves, forests and islands that are untouchable for being sacred, where farming, hunting, and even burying the dead is forbidden. Among their symbolic animals are manatees and turtles, along with sharks, rays, hammerhead sharks and sawfish, creatures that are respected and revered.

Their proficiency in the utilisation of resources has enabled them to live without endangering the world in which they have coexisted over generations. For this reason, since the very establishment of the Biosphere Reserve, the Bijago people have played an instrumental role in bolstering the reserve.



A Society Run by Women

The Bijagos are a people who dwell in small villages, or *tabancas*, formed by houses of mud and straw. In this society, the women choose their husbands and have the final say in divorces; they are the owners of the homes they live in and which they themselves construct; they run the family and organise labour; they are also in charge of relations with the spirit world. While differences exist from one island to the next, in general they manage the economy and the social wellbeing.

The Bijago people celebrate the birth of a female as especially momentous. Every woman, for her ability to become a mother, is afforded the highest respect and prestige. They are also the intermediaries between the living and the spirits.

At ceremonies, they are in charge of running everything: they cook using large pots, play music, dance and serve wine to the men, who merely stand witness to the events that transpire.

The girls choose their husbands by placing a large plate of food at the house of their choice. If the young man is willing to accept her proposal, he eats the food. After doing so, the future husband goes to live with the girl in the hut which she will raise, and the couple is then married... until she drags her husband's belongings out the front door, thus indicating she does not wish to live with him any longer.



Bijago women take up the housework, processing palm oil, cultivating small gardens and rice cultivation in so-called *bolanhas* (land flooded after the rains), shellfish harvesting, cutting straw to cover the houses, making the traditional Bijago skirt; they also look after the village temple and educate their children.

Meanwhile, men are charged with the *ankunó* or jungle, where they collect the sap and fruit of the palm trees, fish in the sea and clean and burn the fields for the planting of rice (grown after temporary flooding from rains), known by the name *mpam mpam*.



Of the Bijago women, the figure who looms above all others is Queen Pampa Kanyimpa, known as Okinka Pampa, for successfully protecting Orango Grande against Portuguese conquest and negotiating peace with them.



Rites Governing Everyday Life

The simplicity of Bijago material living conditions is in sharp contrast to the complexity of their beliefs. They move in a heavily sacralised universe, wrapped in mysterious and secret knowledge that surrounds their understanding of the world.

There are numerous rituals and ceremonies that govern the day-to-day lives of the Bijagos, including one linked to the onset of the growing season and another of calling to the spirits for permission to build a house. These ceremonies are different from island to island.

The two sources from which power derives among the Bijagos are, firstly, clans, whose lines of succession occur from the maternal side; and secondly, the system of stages of spiritual development.

From these maternal clans derives the choice of *oroñô* or chief of the *tabanca*, and the *okinka* (the priestess) of great power and prestige, in charge of worshipping the deities and elders. Both are regulated, controlled and advised by a council of elders.

As to the system of stages of spiritual development, there exist eight levels for men and six for women. Young people transition into adult social life by means of an initiation ceremony of great importance, called *fanado* or *manrase*, performed separately for men and women; these rites require extensive preparation and on some islands male circumcision is an associated aspect. In the ritual of *fanado*, the initiate must spend as long as six months alone in the sacred forest.





The distribution of resources dominates this society; its religious system (*kusina*) requires that young people going to perform their *manrase* should present gifts of goods and food to the elders, in exchange for which they share their knowledge and acknowledge their degree of maturity and spiritual development (*pagamento di garandessa*).

The Bijagos are a peaceful and hospitable people. Their economy is based on the redistribution of resources and collective land ownership, which ensures equality. Prestige is set aside for those who "give the most," not who "have the most."

Gods, Spirits and Human Beings

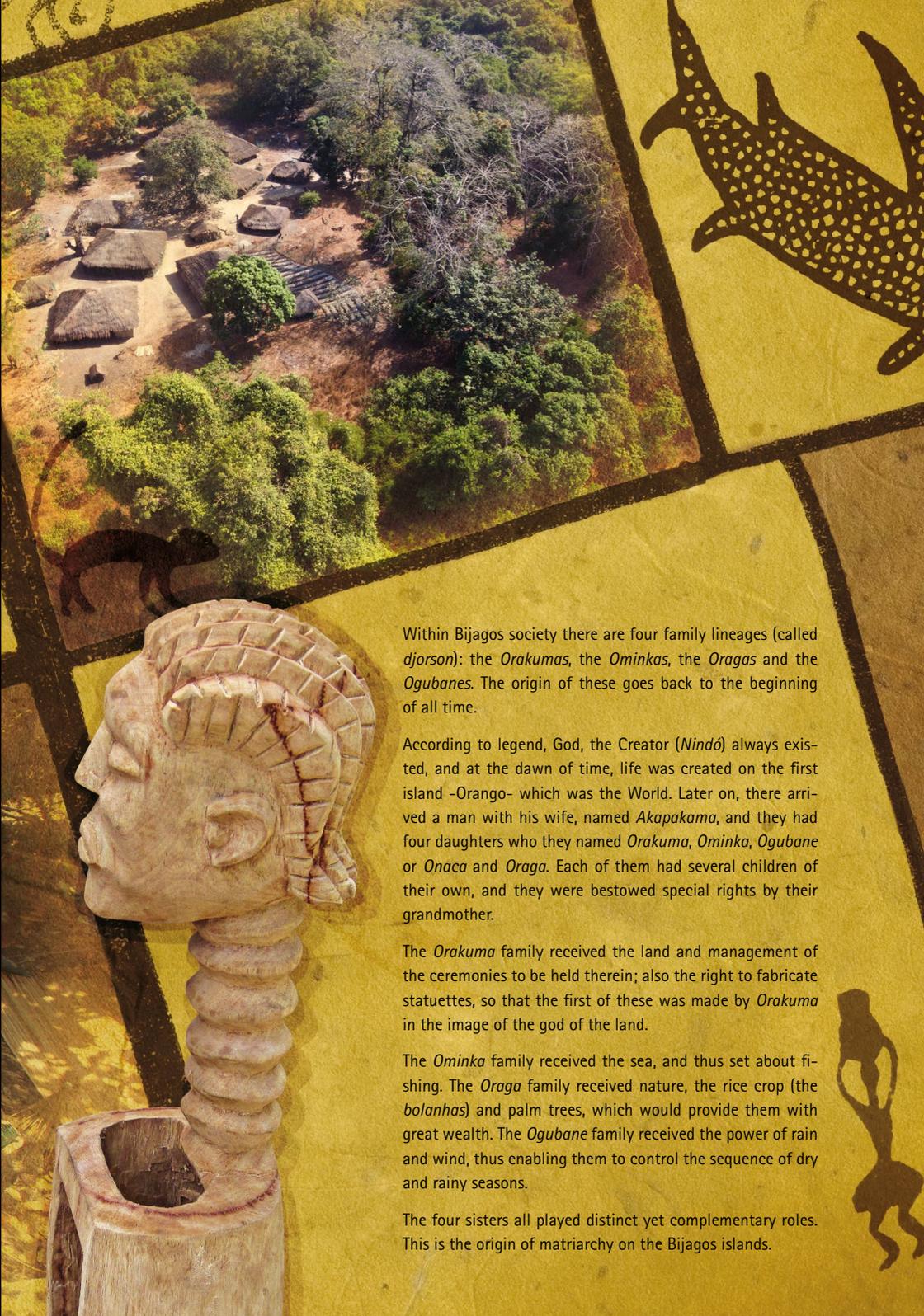
The Bijagos worship *Coramindé* (*Eramindé*, in singular), the spirits that govern existence and the underworld. Their belief is based on a life force that is present in all beings, and the interrelationship between the world of the living and of the dead.

They also believe in the existence of multiple gods that can interact with people. Chief among their gods is *Nindo*, the supreme god, who created *Obide*, the first man, and *Okanto*, the first woman.

They are firm believers in reincarnation. Death is but a short sleep which lasts until the deceased can again be reincarnated as a child. To find out in whom a dead person has been reincarnated, one must seek out the priest, *Oroñô*, or priestess, *Okinka*. The soul (*orebok*) of deceased persons can only be reincarnated if a statue has been carved to preserve his or her memory.

The *baloba* (temple or shrine) is the resting place of the spirits. This is a house that is usually found at the *tabanca's* centre, where the transportable shrines of the ancestors, called *iranes*, are kept along with other sacred objects.





Within Bijagos society there are four family lineages (called *djorson*): the *Orakumas*, the *Ominkas*, the *Oragas* and the *Ogubanes*. The origin of these goes back to the beginning of all time.

According to legend, God, the Creator (*Nindó*) always existed, and at the dawn of time, life was created on the first island –Orango– which was the World. Later on, there arrived a man with his wife, named *Akapakama*, and they had four daughters who they named *Orakuma*, *Ominka*, *Ogubane* or *Onaca* and *Oraga*. Each of them had several children of their own, and they were bestowed special rights by their grandmother.

The *Orakuma* family received the land and management of the ceremonies to be held therein; also the right to fabricate statuettes, so that the first of these was made by *Orakuma* in the image of the god of the land.

The *Ominka* family received the sea, and thus set about fishing. The *Oraga* family received nature, the rice crop (the *bolanhas*) and palm trees, which would provide them with great wealth. The *Ogubane* family received the power of rain and wind, thus enabling them to control the sequence of dry and rainy seasons.

The four sisters all played distinct yet complementary roles. This is the origin of matriarchy on the Bijagos islands.



Bijago art, heavily influenced by the spiritual world, has a unique aesthetic that differs from other African tribal art. Its most noteworthy pieces include the *iranes*, which can be realistic or abstract, and zoomorphic masks used for initiation or coming of age rituals. These represent cows, sharks, stingrays and so forth.

They also produce a variety of traditional decorative artefacts for the *fanado* ceremonies (wooden masks, spears, shields, helmets, bracelets and dolls), and everyday items for farming and fishing in addition to other items for personal use (stools, baskets, etc.).

Today, most huts do not display great artistic talent, although in the past their walls would be painted in bright colours with traditional symbols and motifs, and the doors emblazoned with human or animal figures.





Supported by:

Executed by:



European Union



This booklet has been produced within the framework of the "Reinforcement of natural, historic and cultural tourism as a growing economic activity for development in Guinea Bissau" project, of which one of the main objectives is to improve the Bijago people's living conditions through sustainable ecotourism activities. Bijagos culture is so rich that it is difficult to explain the dimensions of it. This booklet has been specifically designed to transmit the most relevant and unique aspects of their culture to eco-tourists.

This publication has been produced with the assistance of the European Union. The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of Fundación CBD-Habitat and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Union.