



At play in the cradle of voodoo

Annual festival in West Africa celebrates ancestors with sacrifices, color and dancing.

BY KARLA HELD
SPECIAL TO THE EXPRESS-NEWS

OUIDAH, Benin, West Africa — “Mmmm — interesting,” I thought when a fellow traveler informed me of the annual Vodou Festival last January in Benin in West Africa. After revisiting people and places in Senegal, where I had served as a Peace Corps volunteer 10 years prior, I had my 90-day tourist visa in hand and my Dakar-Cotonou plane ticket booked. My voodoo adventure (the locals prefer the term *vodoun*) had just begun.



Eventually I found myself at the home of the chief of the Ganbada Sect in Ouidah. I'm led to a corner of the compound that serves as the temple.

Gin is poured on the fetishes, or objects with magical powers, while prayers are recited in the local language of Fon. Next comes chicken blood from chicken “sacrificed” seconds ago. Seeing my reaction, my new-found friend Andoch explains to me, through translation from the chief, that offerings are useful through their metaphysical properties to protect man in the world of the gods. Sacrifice is the fundamental condition to live in harmony with the voodoo deities. I'm soon told to take a bite of bitter cola nuts before passing them around to the other members of the covenant. Finally it's time for a bit of “Fa,” or divination. I am told there is a snake in my ancestor's path guarding over me, and that my road is wide open. Not a bad start.

Although the practice of animism and *vodoun* date back hundreds of years when Benin was part of the kingdom of Dahomey, editor and folklorist Donald Cosentino suggested that the word

vodoun first appeared in print during 1658 after the Portuguese established trading posts throughout the kingdom. Although *vodoun* was temporarily banned when Mathieu Kerekou led the country through a Marxist regime, the French recommended that Kerekou make constitutional changes. In 1989 a new constitution was drafted, and Marxism was renounced and democracy restored. *Vodoun* was made an official religion in 1996.

Ouidah is a center of the *Vodoun* religion in Benin, and perhaps the world. In 1992 Ouidah held the first international festival, and by last year was drawing upward of 10,000 people, with visitors from Australia, Europe, the U.S., Haiti, and Brazil returning each year to attend the festival. The annual Festival of Vodoun on Jan. 10 has been declared a national holiday within the Republic of Benin. The festival is celebrated throughout the country.

It's a feast of color and dancing, a celebration of ancestors who are considered intermediaries to the spiritual worlds. A popular joke says that in Benin you will find that among the population there are 30 percent Christians, 20 percent Muslims and 100 percent *Vodoun*. So, for those looking for a truly unique way to spend the new year, few things are as strangely fascinating as the voodoo festival in Benin.

Karla Held has spent the better part of the last decade working and living abroad. Her experiences in West Africa included living in a hut for two years while serving in the Peace Corps in a Pulaar village in southern Senegal and more recently shooting for EPA (European PhotoPress Agency).



ABOVE: Hounnon Zanzanzinho, chief of the Ganbada sect of voodoo in Ouidah, sacrifices powder. INSET: Bones of various animals that were sacrificed for the voodoo festival are displayed.



ABOVE: Money is placed on a young woman's forehead to signify prosperity for the initiate.

RIGHT: A 'revenant' gives a benediction to Andoch Adjovi during the festival. A revenant is a representation of a family member who has died.



TOP, FROM LEFT: Items in a bowl mark a divination session, known as 'Fa' in the Fon language of Benin; Vodouns, or the 'followers' or 'wives' of voodoo, dance to the rhythm of the drummers; females prepare to kill a live chicken with their teeth as part of an initiation ceremony; A Benin girl observes the festival.

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