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Responses to Information Requests

Responses to Information Requests (RIR) respond to focused Requests for Information that are submitted to the Research Directorate in the course of the refugee protection determination process. The database contains a seven-year archive of English and French RIRs. Earlier RIRs may be found on the UNHCR's [Refworld](#) website. Please note that some RIRs have attachments which are not electronically accessible. To obtain a PDF copy of an RIR attachment, please email the [Knowledge and Information Management Unit](#).

16 October 2013

BEN104597.FE

Benin: The practice of Voodoo, especially the selection and role of priestesses; treatment of women who refuse to agree to become priestesses; state protection (2012-October 2013)
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. General Information on Voodoo in Benin

In Benin, Voodoo [also called Vodoun (TDH 26 June 2012) and Vodun (Consultant 27 Sept. 2013)] is a religion that is recognized by the state (BBC 18 Nov. 2011; Slate Afrique 6 Mar. 2011).

According to some sources, Voodoo is mainly practiced in the southern part of the country (Anthropologist 20 Sept. 2013; Director 20 Sept. 2013). In 20 September 2013 correspondence sent to the Research Directorate, an anthropologist from the University of Arizona who has lived and worked in several communities in Benin where Voodoo has a significant presence stated that Voodoo is also practiced in the northern part of the country, but it is practiced differently and less prominently, for historical reasons. He explained that, in the north, religious life is instead "centered on Islam" (Anthropologist 20 Sept. 2013). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints.

According to several sources, the practice of Voodoo in Benin varies depending on the region and ethnic group (Director 20 Sept. 2013; Professor 19 Sept. 2013; Visiting Associate Professor 30 Sept. 2013; Associate Professor 25 Sept. 2013) as well as the priest who practices it (ibid.). According to two university professors, the practice of Voodoo varies [translation] "tremendously" in Benin (ibid.; Anthropologist 20 Sept. 2013). In 19 September 2013 correspondence sent to the Research Directorate, a professor of African and African American studies at Harvard University stated that differences in Voodoo practice in Benin can also be seen within the same city. Similarly, in 27 September 2013 correspondence sent to the Research Directorate, a consultant in cultural and tourism development who works near Abomey, in Benin, and is also a graduate of socio-anthropology (Consultant 2 Oct. 2013), explained that, in Beninese Voodoo, [translation] "the actions and ways of worship are different based on the endogenous cultural attitudes of an ethnicity, cultural area, region and language." He added that other factors, such as the socio-political and economic environments may also [translation] "influence the behaviours of the cultural and religious actors" (ibid. 27 Sept. 2013). The anthropologist stated that the "[p]ractices [of Voodoo in Benin] are locally constructed according to local needs and demands" and it is, therefore, difficult to draw general conclusions (20 Sept. 2013).

Sources state that Voodoo is not based on texts or documentation (Associate Professor 25 Sept. 2013; Anthropologist 20 Sept. 2013). The anthropologist also explained that the practice of Voodoo is not based on official rituals (ibid.).

2. Organization of the Religion

The consultant in cultural and tourism development explained that Voodoo practitioners gather together and organize themselves into an [translation] "initiatory community," which involves:

- Voodoo practitioners
- the *Vodunsi*, also called the [translation] "initiates" (Anthropologist 27 Sept. 2013)
- the religious leader
- the assistants or collaborators (Consultant 27 Sept. 2013).

The consultant explained that practitioners are [translation] "at the bottom of the ladder" (ibid.). Then, those of them who go through initiation, which involves a [translation] "symbolic death" and a "resurrection ritual," may become Vodunsi (ibid.). A Vodunsi is a person who dedicates their life to a god (ibid.). The leader of the religion is responsible for coordinating the [translation] "sanctuary," instructing the initiates and presiding over the ceremonies and rituals (ibid.). The assistants or collaborators help the leader of the religion in these duties (ibid.). According to the consultant, there are at least four types of assistants:

- the *hunso* carries out the animal sacrifices and supervises the believers who are responsible for cleansing the sanctuary. The *hunso* replaces the leader of the religion when they are absent;
- the *kpodo*, or *agbajigan* is responsible for the security of the temple and is the spokesperson for the practitioners;
- the *hunsunugan* must be a man, and is responsible for [translation] "controlling the behaviour of the male practitioners," especially those who are entering a trance;
- the *hungnonnugan* is the female equivalent of the *hunsunugan* (ibid.).

The consultant in cultural and tourism development explained that, in Beninese Voodoo, [translation] "the status acquired based on position determines the notoriety and authority of each member of the group" (27 Sept. 2013).

3. Selection of Future Initiates, Priestesses and Cult Leaders

In general, the consultant in cultural and tourism development explained that people who have come to take part in the Voodoo initiation ritual (future initiates) do so for various reasons (Consultant 27 Sept. 2013). He stated that it [translation] "is often a family tradition, sometimes a personal desire" (ibid.). According to him, [translation] "sometimes a *Vodun* [god] chooses an individual by communicating with them through a wish at birth, through dreams or even through illnesses" (ibid.). Age or sex has no influence on the decision to be initiated (ibid.).

The consultant stated that the choice of priests and priestesses is made based on the same reasons as for future initiates (ibid.). The professor of African and African American studies at Harvard University stated that priestesses may be chosen from within the families of practitioners (Professor 19 Sept. 2013). The visiting associate professor explained that many years of training are necessary for an initiate to become a priestess and that candidates must show that they have the qualities required to be chosen (30 Sept. 2013). He added that the priestess selection process is sometimes done through divination, sometimes through the parents and sometimes through the person themselves (30 Sept. 2013).

In 30 September 2013 correspondence sent to the Research Directorate, a visiting associate professor in Anthropology at North Dakota State University who just completed his doctorate thesis on Voodoo, stated that there is no specific age for becoming a priestess. He added that the girls who have been initiated (at between 8 and 12 years of age) are brought to become priestesses later (for some of them, in their early twenties, while in some groups, only post-menopausal women may become priestesses) (Visiting Associate Professor 30 Sept. 2013).

The consultant stated that the leader of the religion is selected from the ranks [translation] "by a designation that is purely by lineage and confirmed by consultation of Fa [a process of divination]" (Professor 30 Sept. 2013)]" (27 Sept. 2013).

4. Refusing the Title of Priestess

Several sources point out that a woman may refuse to become a priestess (Visiting Associate Professor 30 Sept. 2013; Director 20 Sept. 2013). However, during a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, the Director of the Laboratory of Anthropology of Contemporary Worlds (Laboratoire d'anthropologie des mondes contemporains) at the Université libre de Bruxelles stated that it may be [translation] "difficult" to do that and that this decision may create "disagreements" within the family (ibid.). Similarly, the Professor of African and African American studies stated that, in some situations, a young woman may be pressured by her family to become a priestess (Professor 30 Sept. 2013). She explained that "honouring the Vodun is also part of retaining connections with the ancestors," given that, according to beliefs, upon their death, these individuals can "impact family life for positive and potentially negative ends" (ibid.). Thus, members of the

extended family can exert "considerable pressure" to push a member to fill this role (ibid.). The Professor stated that the consequences of refusing the title of priestess can even go as far as "ostracism" (19 Sept. 2013). However, in 25 September 2013 correspondence to the Research Directorate, an associate professor in anthropology at Agnes Scott College in Georgia, whose research concerns Benin, Voodoo and Christianity in Africa, explained that "some families forbid their children from being initiated, while others believe strongly in their duty to the Vodun spirits, and so will comply with a Vodun leader's demands."

The anthropologist is of the opinion that, in general, in Beninese Voodoo,

[t]here exists sensationalised perceptions of Vodun, such as of stories of practicing "forced initiations", but this is a result of a protective strategy by Vodun practitioners for keeping ritual elements secret (20 Sept. 2013).

Corroborating information or information on violence against women so that they become a priestess could not be found by the Research Directorate within the time constraints; however, the following information could be useful.

An article published on 25 June 2013 by *La Nouvelle Tribune*, a Beninese daily newspaper whose offices are located in Cotonou (n.d.), states that two young men from Abomey, [translation] "designated at random (by the leaders of Sakpata Voodoo) to participate in the annual ritual ceremonies of initiation in the 'Sakpata' Voodoo temple", refused to be initiated because this designation was "against their beliefs and convictions." The article states that they then fled the village of Abomey to [translation] "seek refuge in Lokossa" with the help of their parents (*La Nouvelle Tribune* 25 June 2013). The article also states that they were forced to flee again because the [translation] "guardians and leaders of the 'Sakpata' Voodoo were able to find them" (ibid.). Further information on this incident could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints.

According to the data of a study conducted by the National Association for the Defence and Renewal of Traditional Religion (Association nationale pour la défense et le renouveau du culte traditionnel, ANDRCT), which was supported by UNICEF, the majority of the children who frequent the 72 traditional Voodoo convents that initiate children and who were involved in this study were admitted into it against their will for a period of six months to three years (Ouvertures 11 Nov. 2011; UN 12 Oct. 2011). In addition, it states that the decision regarding this admission was made by the parents of the children concerned (ibid.; Ouvertures 11 Nov. 2011). These children were mostly school-age (THD 26 June 2012; UN 12 Oct. 2011). Access to healthcare was reduced to a visit by an [translation] "officer of health initiated in the rituals" of the convent (Ouvertures 11 Nov. 2011; THD 26 June 2012). According to an article from the United Nations Media Centre, the ANDRCT study involved 157 convents that were in the communes of Allada, Tori, Kpomassè, Toffo and Zè (2011).

5. State Protection

According to sources, there is no specific legislation on the practice of Voodoo in Benin (Post-doctoral Anthropologist 19 Sept. 2013; Director 20 Sept. 2013). The Director of the laboratory of anthropology also stated that customary law has no legal status in Benin (ibid.).

Sources state that the constitution [Article 23 (Benin 1990)] and other laws protect freedom of religion in Benin, but sources do not mention which ones (Consultant 27 Sept. 2013; US 2012). The 2011 Report on International Religious Freedom in Benin, published by the United States Department of State states that,

[US English version]

Government officials accord respect to prominent leaders of all religious groups by attending induction ceremonies, funerals, and other religious celebrations. Police provide security for any religious event upon request (ibid.).

Further information on state protection could not be found by the Research Directorate within the time constraints.

For information on Sakpata Voodoo, consult the Response to Information Request BEN104596.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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Visiting Associate Professor of Anthropology, North Dakota State University, Fargo, North Dakota. 30 September 2013. Correspondence sent to the Research Directorate.

Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: Attempts to contact an official of the Association des ombudsmans médiateurs de la Francophonie and an associate professor from the Department of Sociology and Anthropology of Muhlenberg College were unsuccessful. The following people and officials of the following organizations were unable to provide information for this Response: Association des femmes juristes; Association femmes solidaires du Bénin; doctoral candidate, University of Ottawa; associate professor, Université Laval; Ligue pour la défense des droits de l'homme au Bénin; associate anthropologist, Centre d'études africaines de Paris; social space anthropologist, École des hautes études en sciences sociales; doctoral fellow, École des hautes études en sciences sociales; course instructor, Anthropology Department, Southern Methodist University.

Internet sites, including: Africa Presse; Afrik.com; Afrique Express; AllAfrica; Amnesty International; Benin – official government portal, Ministry of Health; bladi.net; Djakpata; ecoi.net; United States – Embassy of the

United States in Cotonou; Événement Précis; Factiva; Fédération internationale des ligues des droits de l'homme; Freedom House; *The Guardian*; *The Huffington Post*; Human Rights First; Human Rights Watch; Ireland – Refugee Documentation Centre; *Jeune Afrique*; *Journal de la Société des africanistes*; Koaci.com; *Libération*; *Mouvements*; National Geographic; Netherlands African Studies Association; *The New York Times*; Radio France internationale; Radio Nederland Wereldomroep; Royal African Society; United Nations – Refworld, ReliefWeb, Integrated Regional Information Networks; *Wanderlust*.

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