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Responses to Information Requests

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11 October 2013

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Benin: Conflicts between Vodun practitioners and Christians; information on the group known as "Sakpata," as well as their initiation practices, including state protection for those who refuse to participate (2012-October 2013)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Relationship Between Vodun and Christianity in Benin

1.1 Prevalence of Vodun

Vodun [or Voudon] is the name through which Voodoo is known in Benin (Associate Professor 25 Sept. 2013; US 20 May 2013, 1; *The Huffington Post* 11 Jan. 2013). Vodun has been officially recognized as a religion in the country since 1996 (*The New York Times* 3 Feb. 2012; UN 9 Jan. 2009). Sources report that, according to the most recent census held in 2002, 17 percent of the population identified themselves as adherents of Vodun (US 20 May 2013, 1; *Libération* 6 Jan. 2012).

Sources indicate that Vodun has a greater presence in the South of Benin (Visiting Assistant Professor 30 Sept. 2013; Postdoctoral Fellow in Anthropology 19 Sept. 2013). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, an anthropologist who has lived and worked in several communities in Benin stated that the practice of Vodun is less prominent in the north of the country, where religious life is centered on Islam (20 Sept. 2013).

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a postdoctoral fellow in Anthropology at the University of Copenhagen, whose research partially focuses on religion in Benin, including Christianity and Vodun, stated that ethnic groups in the south who practice Vodun notably include the Fon, Yoruba, Mina/Adja, Goun, Toffin, Nagot and associated groups (Postdoctoral Fellow 19 Sept. 2013).

Several sources offered caution regarding generalization about Vodun practices, as these practices vary throughout the country, by region and by ethnic groups (Associate Professor 25 Sept. 2013; Anthropologist 19 Sept. 2013; Professor of African and African-American Studies 19 Sept. 2013). Sources indicated that practices could also vary within the same locality (Anthropologist 19 Sept. 2013; Professor of African and African-American Studies 19 Sept. 2013). In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, a visiting assistant professor at North Dakota State University, who has done field research on Vodun in Benin, went further, stating that while there might be some common elements depending on the region, "Vodun practices can vary from locality to locality, family to family, house to house, and even person to person" (Visiting Assistant Professor 30 Sept. 2013). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, an associate professor of anthropology at Agnes Scott College, whose research focus includes Benin and Vodun as well as Christianity in Africa, explained that

[w]hile there are indeed initiation procedures that will be similar across different parts of Benin, and there are associations of Vodun priests that share information and ritual procedures, Vodun is not an orthodox religion

with texts or documentation or liturgy. Therefore, there is bound to be plenty of variation between regions, ethnic groups, and individual priests. (Associate Professor 25 Sept. 2013)

In addition, an article by the UN Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN) indicates that it is difficult to obtain information about Vodun initiation practices (UN 9 Jan. 2009). The article states that "Voodoo rituals have long been inaccessible to anyone except disciples and priests," noting that initiates do not discuss their initiations (ibid.). The Anthropologist stated that there are no official, transparent processes regarding Vodun practices and that they are not overtly discussed (Anthropologist 27 Sept. 2013b). He explained that because of its secretive nature, "stories" circulate about Vodun, noting that some of these stories are the result of the "demonization" of Vodun by Christians (ibid.). He noted that while some stories may or may not be true, even Vodun practitioners will circulate and believe these stories (ibid.).

The Associate Professor likewise stated that

[t]here are stories that circulate about people (especially children and young women) undergoing involuntary initiation or even physical and sexual abuse at the hands of the Vodun leaders, though I cannot confirm the veracity or prevalence because, like much of the information associated with Vodun, these details would be known only by those group members who were present. (25 Sept. 2013)

1.2 Prevalence of Christianity

Sources reports that according to the 2002 census, 27 percent of the population of Benin identifies as Catholic (US 20 May 2013, 1; *Libération* 6 Jan. 2012). As well, the CIA *World Factbook* states that the census identified approximately 10.4 percent of the population as Protestant (more specifically, 5 percent identified as Celestial Christians, 3.2 percent as Methodists, and 2.2 percent as other Protestants), and 5.3 percent of the population as "other" Christians (US 22 Aug. 2013). The US Department of State's *2012 International Religious Freedom Report* specifies that groups forming less than five percent of the population include Methodists, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, Rosicrucians, Bahais, Baptists, Pentecostals and the Unification Church (US 20 May 2013, 1). The *2012 International Religious Freedom Report* states that Christians are more concentrated in the southern areas of the country (ibid.). The Anthropologist stated that there are "many areas in the south that have been taken over by Pentecostal and Charismatic forms of Christianity" (27 Sept. 2013b). The Associate Professor added that "nearly all of Benin's political leaders, and the elite class in general, are Christian. Christian television programming dominates the airwaves, and the Christian holidays are the most frequent national holidays" (25 Sept. 2013).

1.3 Relationship Between Vodun and Christianity

Multiple sources indicate that Vodun is also practiced among the Beninese population who identify as Christian or Muslim (Visiting Assistant Professor 30 Sept. 2013; US 20 May 2013, 1; *Libération* 6 Jan. 2012). The French daily newspaper *Libération* notes that Vodun is considered to be part of the cultural heritage of all Beninese (ibid.). *Jeune Afrique*, a weekly news magazine focused on Africa, reports that Beninese president Boni Yayi, an evangelical Christian who frequently invokes God in his speeches, nonetheless sent emissaries to the main Vodun deities when he gained power in 2006 (10 July 2012).

Depending on the source, Vodun is said to be practiced by 40 percent (BBC 29 Nov. 2012), "more than half" (UN 9 Jan. 2009), or two thirds of Beninese people (*The Guardian* 30 Mar. 2008; *The Economist* 26 Jan. 2006). The *New York Times* explains that 20 percent of Beninese "practices pure Vodun, while another 40 percent embraces a form that incorporates Christian iconography" (3 Feb. 2012).

Sources also indicate that there is an annual public holiday celebrating Vodun (*The Huffington Post* 11 Jan. 2013; BBC 18 Nov. 2011). In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, a visiting assistant professor of anthropology explained that the National Vodun Day has essentially the same status as Christmas, with banks and schools closed for the day (30 Sept. 2013). Sources also indicate that Vodun has economic importance in the country due to its impact on tourism (Anthropologist 20 Sept. 2013; Professor of African and African-American Studies 19 Sept. 2013). The BBC notes that there is a national museum dedicated to Vodun (18 Nov. 2011).

1.4 Conflicts Between Vodun Practitioners and Christians

According to the *2012 International Religious Freedom Report*,

[t]here were reports of occasional conflict requiring police intervention between Voodoo practitioners and Christians over Voodoo initiation practices. In general these were peacefully resolved with assistance from local authorities. (US 20 May 2013, 2)

The Postdoctoral Fellow likewise stated that there were [translation] "infrequent" local conflicts between Vodun practitioners and Christian groups, particularly with evangelical Christians (19 Sept. 2013). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, the Professor of African and African-American Studies at Harvard University stated that the existence of conflicts can depend on the Christian groups involved, particularly in the case of Pentecostals (19 Sept. 2013).

However, several sources also stated that the conflicts between Christians and Vodun practitioners were not violent in nature (Visiting Assistant Professor 30 Sept. 2013; Director 20 Sept. 2013; Professor of African and African-American Studies 19 Sept. 2013). Rather, the Associate Professor and the Anthropologist described the conflicts as "ideological" (Associate Professor 25 Sept. 2013; Anthropologist 20 Sept. 2013). The Associate Professor also described these conflicts as "mostly emanating from the Christian side" (Associate Professor 25 Sept. 2013). Two sources declared that Vodun has historically been "demonized" by Christians in Benin (*ibid.*; Anthropologist 20 Sept. 2013). In particular, the Anthropologist stated that there is a rise of Pentecostalism and other Christian Charismatic churches in Benin, with Pentecostals speaking out against Vodun, which has led to "highly sensationalised claims regarding Vodun," such as "constructed narratives of being persecuted or of forced conversions" (Anthropologist 20 Sept. 2013). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response. However, the Anthropologist explained that unlike Christianity, Vodun does not seek "exclusivity" from its practitioners (*ibid.*).

According to the Visiting Assistant Professor, conflicts are not very "pronounced," but rather at the level of "schoolyard quarrels," constituting of incidents such as back and forth verbal mocking (30 Sept. 2013). The *New York Times* quotes the supreme spiritual chief of Vodun in Benin as saying that "Christians and [V]odun believers have reached a *détente*" in the country (3 Feb. 2012).

However, some sources noted that there could be cases of non-practitioners feeling threatened by Vodun practices (Anthropologist 20 Sept. 2013; Postdoctoral Fellow 19 Sept. 2013). Two sources stated that some people may be afraid of [translation] "occult attacks" (Director 20 Sept. 2013; Postdoctoral Fellow 19 Sept. 2013).

The same two sources stated that some conflicts may be linked to family pressures (*ibid.*; Director 20 Sept. 2013). They also stated that some people may move away from their home villages and establish themselves in other regions or cities due to these conflicts (*ibid.*; Postdoctoral Fellow 19 Sept. 2013). The Associate Professor stated that "[s]ome 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" (25 Sept. 2013).

However, the Anthropologist stated that religious pluralism in a family was more common, where "a husband might follow Islam, a wife may be a born-again Christian and other or all family members may take part in Vodun practices" (20 Sept. 2013).

2. Information on Sakpata Vodun

2.1 General Information

Sources state that Sakpata is a major deity in Vodun (Visiting Assistant Professor 30 Sept. 2013; *Martine's Travel Guide to Benin* n.d). The Visiting Assistant Professor stated that Sakpata is central to the "Cosmos" in the Vodun religion and that he is widely worshiped (30 Sept. 2013). Sakpata is considered to be the "god of smallpox" in particular (*ibid.*; Anthropologist 20 Sept. 2013; *Martine's Travel Guide to Benin* n.d.). According to the Visiting Assistant Professor, Sakpata is also linked to diseases in general, particularly incurable diseases such as HIV/AIDS (*ibid.*; BBC 29 Nov. 2012). Sakpata is also identified as a "god of the earth" or soil (BBC 29 Nov. 2012; *Martine's Travel Guide to Benin* n.d.).

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, the Anthropologist provided the following details about Sakpata initiates:

Sakpatasi [Sakpata initiates] are most visible in public rituals and dances where they are possessed by the deity, and it is through them that the deity makes his desires known to the population. Initiation means access to secret knowledge about how to interact with the deity and this knowledge is considerable: elaborate dances, chants in highly stylized language or even an entirely different language - in many places Sakpata actually speaks a different dialect. Mastery of this knowledge at higher levels means advancement within the hierarchy of the convent; women (or men) who advance within this system often gain considerable prestige and social capital. (Anthropologist 27 Sept. 2013a)

2.2 Initiation Practices

Sources indicate that Sakpata Vodun initiation practices vary (Professor of African and African-American Studies 19 Sept. 2013; Anthropologist 20 Sept. 2013). The Anthropologist states that it is not possible to draw inferences from one group to another due to these differences (ibid.).

The Anthropologist explained that, traditionally you had to "die" to become initiated into Sakpata and be "reanimated" after three days; this rite was practiced as late as the 1960s but has reportedly changed significantly since then (ibid.).

Some sources indicate that initiations may involve scarification (Visiting Assistant Professor 30 Sept. 2013; Director 20 Sept. 2013). However, the Visiting Assistant Professor stated that initiation into Sakpata Vodun is "very negotiable," meaning that scarification is up to the individual (30 Sept. 2013).

Two sources stated that they were not aware of individuals being forced to undergo Vodun initiation rites (Visiting Assistant Professor 30 Sept. 2013; Professor of African and African-American Studies 19 Sept. 2013). In contrast, the Professor of African and African-American Studies stated that those who refuse could be pressured by threats of "retribution from the ancestors (impacting health, fertility, women, etc.)" (ibid.).

However, the Anthropologist stated:

Most initiates to Sakpata that I know were adults (or at least teens) when they joined; I know several that felt called to join when younger but their parents wanted them to wait. Although I do know of some children who are vodunsi [Vodun initiates], it is not that common, and all the ones I know chose to join of their own volition and generally without any pressure from their families. (27 Sept. 2013a)

Two sources stated that individuals may face pressure from family to undergo initiations (Director 20 Sept. 2013; Professor of African and African-American Studies 19 Sept. 2013). Two sources also noted that minors can be "forced" to undergo initiations by their parents, in the sense that all parents make decisions on behalf of their children that they feel will be beneficial to them, such as making them go to school or to church (ibid; Visiting Assistant Professor 30 Sept. 2013).

In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, the Director of the Laboratory of Anthropology of Contemporary Worlds (Laboratoire d'anthropologie des mondes contemporains) of the Université Libre de Bruxelles expressed the opinion that the growth of Catholics and other Christian populations in recent years indicates that it is possible to refuse to undergo Vodun initiations and to convert to Christianity (Director 20 Sept. 2013). Freedom House states that "Benin reportedly has the world's fastest growing Roman Catholic population" (Freedom House 2013). The Anthropologist likewise stated that southern areas of the country, which have an increasing presence of Pentecostal and other Charismatic Christians, "are seeing [V]odunsi membership drop precipitously" (Anthropologist 27 Sept. 2013b). He added that it appeared that there was "no adverse consequences for those who refuse initiation" (ibid.). Corroboration of this statement could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

However, *La Nouvelle Tribune*, a Beninese daily newspaper, reports that two cousins from the city of Abomey have been on the run since December 2012 after an attempt to force them to be initiated into Sakpata Vodun (*La Nouvelle Tribune* 25 June 2013). According to the newspaper article, the two were reportedly among a group of twenty young people from Abomey who were randomly chosen to take part in annual initiation ceremonies and to dedicate their lives to Sakpata, but instead, the two fled with the help of their parents (ibid.). The newspaper article further reports that, as of June 2013, religious leaders were pursuing them from town to town to force them to undergo the initiations (ibid.). Corroborating information on these events could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

3. State Protection Available to Those Who Refuse to Participate in Vodun Practices

Sources indicate that freedom of religion is part of the country's laws and constitution (*La Nouvelle Tribune* 25 June 2013; Consultant 27 Sept. 2013; US 20 May 2013, 1-2). Sources also state that the government is active in promoting religious freedom (ibid.; Freedom House 2013).

The Associate Professor stated that

Benin is a country of law, with police and a judicial system that protects all people from sexual or physical abuse. That said, Vodun still holds sway in certain communities, and Vodun leaders are accorded respect and authority in their rituals. So this does provide an opportunity for abuse, and it may be with the complicity of the presumed victim's family or other community members. (Associate Professor 25 Sept. 2013)

The Associate Professor added that "[w]ithout witnesses or a victim willing to speak up (or because of police corruption), criminal behaviours might go unpunished" (ibid). The Visiting Assistant Professor stated that Benin had good police and court systems, but that they were limited in rural areas (30 Sept. 2013). In contrast, the Anthropologist stated that enforcement of laws in Benin is not effective (20 Sept. 2013).

Some sources indicated that they were not aware of recourse or protection available to persons who did not want to participate in Vodun initiation practices (Professor of African and African-American Studies 19 Sept. 2013; Postdoctoral Fellow 19 Sept. 2013). According to two sources, individuals who do not wish to participate in Vodun practices may turn to other religious groups, such as Christian churches (Professor of African and African-American Studies 19 Sept. 2013; Postdoctoral Fellow 19 Sept. 2013).

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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Additional Sources Consulted

Oral Sources: The following individuals could not provide information for this Response: associate professor, Laval University; anthropologist, Centre d'études africaines de Paris; anthropologist of social space at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales; PhD candidate, École des hautes-études en sciences sociales; lecturer, Southern Methodist University. Attempts to contact the following individuals and organizations were unsuccessful: associate professor, Muhlhenberg College; Ligue pour la défense des droits de l'homme au Bénin; Association des Ombudsman Médiateurs de la Francophonie; Association des femmes juristes; Association Femmes Solidaires du Bénin; doctoral student, University of Ottawa.

Internet sites, including: Africa Presse; Afrik.com; Afrique Express; AllAfrika; Amnesty International; Bénin – Portail officiel du gouvernement; bladi.net; Djakpata; ecoi.net; L'Événement Précis; Factiva; Human Rights First; Human Rights Watch; International Federation for Human Rights; Ireland – Refugee Documentation Centre; *Journal de la Société des africanistes*; Koaci.com; *Mouvements*; *National Geographic*; Netherlands African Studies Association; Radio France internationale; Radio Nederland Wereldomroep; Royal African Society; United Nations – Refworld, ReliefWeb; United States – Embassy in Cotonou; *Wanderlust*.

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