



Benin – Researched and compiled by the Refugee Documentation Centre of Ireland on 10 September 2012

How widespread is Voodoo in Benin?

The 2012 *US Department of State* report on religious freedom in Benin, in “Section I. Religious Demography”, states:

“According to the 2002 census (the most recent official population survey), the population is 27 percent Roman Catholic, 24 percent Muslim, 17 percent Voudon (Voodoo), 6 percent other indigenous religious groups, and 5 percent Celestial Christian. Groups that constitute less than 5 percent each include Methodists, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, Rosicrucians, Baha'is, Baptists, Pentecostals, and those who follow the Unification Church and Eckankar. Seven percent claim no religious affiliation. Many individuals who identify themselves as Christian or Muslim also practice Voodoo or other traditional religions.” (US Department of State (30 July 2012) *2011 Report on International Religious Freedom – Benin*)

A *BBC News* report states:

“Voodoo is completely normal in Benin. People across West Africa, especially Togo, Ghana and Nigeria hold similar beliefs but in Benin it is recognised as an official religion, followed by some 40% of the population. Voodoo Day is a public holiday and there is a national Voodoo museum. It has none of the negative connotations it has in the West and many of those who are officially Christian or Muslim also incorporate some Voodoo elements into their beliefs, especially in times of crisis. But Voodoo is more than a belief system, it is a complete way of life, including culture, philosophy, language, art, dance, music and medicine.” (BBC News (18 November 2011) *The reality of Voodoo in Benin*)

A *Time Out* article states:

“Voodoo is a living, breathing part of everyday life for almost all Beninese people. Most, including voodoo priests, also believe in one or another form of European Christianity brought over by the French, British and Portuguese, who established the slave industry here in the eighteenth century. So you often see an immaculate, colonial-era, white-washed church located directly across the road from a snake temple, and voodoo practitioners heading to mass on a Sunday morning. Voodoo priests perform a kind of counselling service to people. They even have their powers rated by flags raised outside their residences. The more colours on their flag, the more powerful they are. My chicken sacrifice came at the hands of a priest with five colours on his flag - a Premier League front-runner in these parts. People seek help with work-related problems (or more commonly, a lack of work) and relationship issues, or come to ask their spiritual guide to get physical with a sworn enemy.” (Time Out (12 February 2009) *Travel - Benin - Do you do voodoo?*)

A *New York Times* article states:

“Vodun practitioners worship a pantheon of gods and lesser deities that inhabit objects ranging from stones to waterfalls. They believe that the spirits of their ancestors dwell among them, and they employ talismans, or ‘fetishes’ like dried animal parts, for spiritual and physical rejuvenation as well as for protection against spells cast by malevolent sorcerers. ‘Le vodun is Africa. It is the faith of our ancestors,’ I was told by Dagbo Hounon Houna II, the spiritual chief of vodun in Benin, where 20 percent of the population, or a million people, practice pure vodun and another 40 percent embrace a form that incorporates Christian iconography.” (New York Times (3 February 2012) *On the Vodun Trail in Benin*)

A *Deutsche Presse-Agentur* article states:

“The voodoo practiced in Caribbean countries such as Haiti was born in Ouidah, a dust-coloured town of 80,000 people, and brought across the Atlantic by the slaves who were forced through the Door of No Return. About 60 per cent of Benin’s 9 million people practice voodoo, often alongside Christianity or Islam. The government of Benin officially declared voodooism a major religion in 1996. Since then, its birthplace Ouidah has taken on greater significance. ‘It (the legitimization of voodooism) helped people see that it is a real religion, not some kind of strange black magic,’ said Jean Napele, a voodoo practitioner in Ouidah. ‘We don’t stick pins in dolls or try to harm people,’ he said. ‘Voodoo is about connecting with the earth. In this sense, you can perhaps compare it to the beliefs of the aborigines in Australia,’ he told dpa. Rocks, animals and trees take on special significance under voodooism. According to one tale, in Ouidah’s sacred Kpasse forest stands a tree believed to once have been an ancient king. Aware that plans were underway to behead him, King Kpasse supposedly ran into the forest and transformed himself into a tree that would stand the test of time. Voodoo does not incorporate belief in heaven or hell, but its many gods often have a combination of positive and negative attributes that must be balanced.” (Deutsche Presse-Agentur (19 November 2011) *Voodooism and Christianity sit side by side in Benin*)

A *Radio Netherlands Worldwide* report, in a paragraph headed “Two religions”, states:

“Despite performing the voodoo ritual, Elise still goes to church the following Sunday. ‘I am a devoted catholic Christian; I was baptised and confirmed in this faith’, she says. Like Elise, many Beninese people follow both voodoo and another so-called ‘imported’ religion. ‘Christianity and Islam were imposed upon us by the colonial powers. This does not mean we should give up the beliefs of our ancestors’, reasons Eugène De Souza, who is also a Catholic Christian and a voodoo follower. In Benin, voodoo temples are often attached to churches and mosques. In the city of Ouidah, for instance, the first basilica ever built in the country and in West Africa is just opposite the voodoo Temple of Pythons. ‘Here, people go to the mass in the morning and to the Temple of Pythons in the evening’, explains Marc Adjovi, one of the Chief’s sons.” (Radio Netherlands Worldwide (17 January 2012) *Benin: National Voodoo Holiday in Benin*)

A report from the *Terre des hommes* foundation refers to the initiation of voodoo adherents as follows:

“The Vodoun cult, more commonly called Vaudou or Voodoo, initiates its followers in traditional convents from a very young age. This confinement raises a series of problems relating to child rights. A study carried out by the Ministry for the Family, supported by UNICEF, pointed out various practices that are contrary to respect for the rights of the child. In fact, the youngsters, predominantly of school age, usually enter a convent, against their will, for six months to three years. This period of initiation is a real obstacle to the schooling of a child.” (Terre des hommes (26 June 2012) *Benin: The Supreme Head of the Voodoos at Tdh*)

See also article from *The Observer* which states:

“In the tiny West African country of Benin, voodoo has been practised for 10,000 years, but efforts to preserve its ancient oral traditions are exacting a harsh toll on its faithful, splitting families and pushing people deeper into poverty. Benin is unique in recognising voodoo as an official religion, followed by two-thirds of its 7.6 million people. It involves a pantheon of gods and spirits whose intercession is sought through animal blood sacrifice. But to survive, voodoo needs a new generation to pass on sacred mysteries, so thousands of children are initiated by its priests every year. But the price of the ceremonies can be unbearable and some parents are selling their children to repay voodoo debts.” (The Observer (30 March 2008) *Children in voodoo's power*)

This article also states:

“Thomas Azanaai, author of a report into the convent system, estimates that there are thousands of such convents. While at Do Pa Tohizanli this girl is 'dead' and has no name. Once initiated, she will be reborn and renamed once. Her mother, Adonosi Kpamegan, watches nervously. She cannot approach her daughter, who ends her song and prostrates herself before the high priest. It is forbidden for parents to have any communication with their children while they undergo initiation, a process, the priest says, that could take three months, but often lasts more than three years.” (ibid)

A *Sunderland Echo* article refers to claims made by an asylum seeker from Benin as follows:

“Reine Dohami says she is the target of a terrifying voodoo practice. She says her cousin has already disappeared - like many children in her home country of Benin, in West Africa. What's become of them no one knows. What Reine says is a certainty is she faces a forced marriage, circumcision and her body will be cut and scarred with a knife if she has to return home. The person behind this unimaginable ordeal? Her own father. You couldn't make it up, or could you? The Home Office thinks so. Reine has had her application to stay in Britain rejected. The Government doesn't believe her life is at risk if she returns. I first met Reine earlier this summer in the house in Roker where she lives along with others seeking asylum. She seemed introverted, uncertain. She told her extraordinary story in a deadpan way with just occasional tears. A medical report from a paediatrician confirms she has been raped. Reine says she was attacked by the man her father intended to force her to marry.

Terrified of what was to happen, Reine told me that aged 15 she'd been smuggled out of Benin by a good Samaritan at her church who then abandoned her in London." (Sunderland Echo (5 September 2005) *Teen Faces Voodoo Torture*)

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research and Information Unit within time constraints. This response is not and does not purport to be conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please read in full all documents referred to.

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