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Benin Voodoo Festival Ends

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OUIDAH, Benin -- The drumming was like a heart beating as West African women wearing cowrie shells and beads writhed before a carved fetish. A knife-wielding dancer with a chalk-whitened face performed intricate steps to honor the python spirit.

The 10-day Benin Voodoo Festival ended Wednesday with a final celebration of ancestor and spirit worship. American visitors of African descent were on hand at this former slave port in Benin to discover their ancestors' practices. Amid the singing, drumming and praying, many also contemplated roots ripped asunder.

"Did my great-grandmother stand on this beach? Am I from here?" asked 23-year-old Alise Williams, a student at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

"There are some things that are similar to back home, like the rhythms of dancing and the catching of the holy ghost in the Pentecostal churches," said Williams.

But it seems plenty never made the journey to America.

"There is so much of our history that is lost," Williams said, as a crowd of women wearing red feathers passed by, singing in a language Williams didn't understand to a god she didn't know.

Festival organizers hope more tourists will visit the annual festival, and find links between the contemporary cultures of West Africa and the Americas, the Caribbean and Europe, now filled with many people of African descent.

Practiced in the Caribbean, Brazil, and some Creole communities in the United States as well as on the white sands of West Africa, Voodoo's spread is inextricably linked to Benin's status as a slave hub.

Memorials of slavery are everywhere, from the beach side Point of No Return arch that shows manacled Africans walking toward the horizon, to the Tree of Forgetfulness that captured slaves were marched around three times in the belief it would break their spirits.



A voodoo dancer possessed by voodoo goes into a trance in Ouidah, Benin Republic, Wednesday, Jan. 10, 2007. The 10-day Benin Voodoo Festival wrapped up Wednesday with a final celebration of ancestor and spirit worship. (AP Photo/George Osodi)

But they took their spirits with them to the sugar and cotton plantations of the New World. While indigenous religions are practiced in many parts of West Africa, often interspersed with Christian and Muslim practices, Benin and parts of neighboring Nigeria have particularly strong Voodoo communities.

Many of Benin's 8 million citizens practice Voodoo, which even a strict Marxist-Leninist dictatorship was unable to stamp out.

Former military ruler Mathieu Kerekou banned Voodoo during the 1970s. His successor repealed the ban. When Kerekou was re-elected to office in a democratic transfer of power, Beninese refused to recognize his authority until he relented and took an oath of office that specifically referred to ancestral spirits.

While still deeply impoverished, Benin is now a thriving democracy, and Voodoo is recognized as an official religion.

No records are kept of foreign Voodoo Festival visitors, and it still looks to be mostly a local affair. But guides such as Martine de Souza, a priestess and former curator of the local museum, say that more foreigners have been attending in recent years.

"We want to make our religion known abroad," de Souza said. "Many people do not appreciate our tradition, which is of tolerance and making peace, not harming anyone."

Roberto Strongman, a professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara, said the festival may benefit from a recent upsurge of interest in Voodoo. He flipped through a book on Santeria, the Caribbean version of Voodoo.

"Look at this bibliography - book after book, all published after 1996," he said.

Strongman says Voodoo's oral tradition gives it a flexibility to adapt to modern needs and an inclusiveness. "This religion admits the possibility of multiple selves within one person," he said.

On Wednesday, devotees broke bottles on their heads and sliced themselves with knives, offering their own blood to the gods amid thousands of dancers and worshippers. Bottles of spirits and the blood of a slaughtered goat were offered to metal fetishes that included an image of a giant snake.

At the palace of Voodoo leader Daagbo Hanoun, male dancers wore women's clothes and gaudy earrings while a crowd of women performed a fertility dance, with one leader brandishing a carved phallus.

To the uninitiated, the dances can seem amusing or frightening, such as when a man stamps a series of steps around the drummers, the lifeless body of a kid goat in his arms. The animal's blood is daubed on doorways for protection, or offered as a sacrifice to spirits.

Although animal sacrifices are an intrinsic element of ceremonies, devotees stress that the aim is to celebrate life, not death. They point out that sacrificed animals are used for feasts in the community when the rituals are finished.

Toni Pressley-Scott, a 38-year-old New Yorker who has lived in Benin for nearly a year with her teenage son, doesn't see sacrifice, but a celebration existence.

"It's not about cruelty, it's about the sacredness of life," she said.