

Benin

Response to Information Request Number:	BEN99001.ASM
Date:	28 January 1999
Subject:	Benin: Information on Voodoo practices
From:	INS Resource Information Center
Keywords:	Benin / Animism / Cultural heritage / Customs and traditions / Freedom of religion / Religious holidays / Religious leaders / Religious practices / Traditional authorities

Query:

Are individuals forcibly inducted into Voodoo in Benin?

What are the consequences for an individual who rejects such an induction?

Response:

Benin is considered the cradle of the Voodoo religion, which is practiced in some shape or form by the majority of the population. Voodoo comes from the word in the Fon language for spirit, and focuses on spirits which exist in all things. These spirits can be used for good or bad purposes by the Voodoo priests. Voodoo was declared the national religion of Benin in 1996 by former President Soglo. In 1997, when taking the oath of office, the current president Mathieu Kerekou left out a traditional reference to the Voodoo spirits. His omission caused a public outcry, and the constitutional court of Benin ordered Kerekou to retake the oath. Kerekou retook his presidential oath in front of the constitutional court president and the nation's parliament after the court ruled that the oath was "sacramental and indivisible" (*BBC Focus on Africa* April-June 1996, 44-45; *Deutsche Presse-Agentur* 6 Dec. 1996; *Orlando Sentinel* 23 Aug. 1997; Reuters 6 April 1996).

Adherents to Voodoo are called upon to follow a strict set of rules. A person who breaks the rules of Voodoo annoys the spirits and the person who "breaks their laws might become very ill or even end up dead." Judy Rosenthal, professor of anthropology at the University of Michigan-Flint and author of *Possession, Ecstasy and Law in Ewe Voodoo*, states that while Voodoo practices are normally voluntary, she is familiar with at least one case where children were given to the Voodoo priests in the Tro Kossi sect. She is also familiar with stories of charlatan priests who try to force adults and children to do what the lineage leaders want (Rosenthal 29 Sept. 1998; Rosenthal 1998, 201). One article noted the status of local traditional rulers. The most powerful person in a district is the minister of the local king and is referred to as the "chief de terre." This article indicates that the chief de terre knows the secrets of the fetishes which "gives him power that state administrators might find hard to compete with" (*Deutsche Presse-Agentur* 6 Dec. 1996).

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RIC 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.

References:

BBC Focus on Africa. April-June 1996. "Voodoo Nation."

Deutsche Presse-Agentur. 6 December 1996. "Benin - A Modern State with a Strong Voodoo Tradition." (NEXIS)

Orlando Sentinel. 23 August 1997. "Notebook - Africa's Benin Adopts July Holiday." (NEXIS)

Reuters World Service. 6 April 1996. "Benin President Renews Oath to Include Ancestors." (NEXIS)

Rosenthal, Judy. Professor of Anthropology, University of Michigan-Flint. 29 September 1998. E-mail sent to INS Resource Information Center (RIC), Washington, DC.

Rosenthal, Judy. 1998. *Possession, Ecstasy and Law in Ewe Voodoo*. University Press of Virginia.

Attachments:

Deutsche Presse-Agentur. 6 December 1996. "Benin - A Modern State with a Strong Voodoo Tradition." (NEXIS)

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