



doi: <https://doi.org/10.20546/ijcrar.2024.1212.006>

Vòdú and Power in Benin: A Spiritual Force at the Heart of Politics and National Identity

Hospice Bienvenu Hounyoton¹, Ahouandjinou Raymond-Bernard², Ahonnon Adolphe³ and Angèle Bénédicte Odoubourou⁴

¹*Anthropologist, Associate Lecturer-Researcher at National Institute of Youth, Physical Education and Sport, Research Unit in Sociology of Organizations, Management and Engineering of Sports and at Catholic University of Lyon-France,*

²*Socio-Anthropologist, Lecturer of CAMES Universities at National Institute of Youth, Physical Education and Sport, Center for Studies and Research in Education and Social Interventions for Development*

³*Educational psychologist, Lecturer of CAMES Universities at National Institute of Youth, Physical Education and Sport, Social Psychology and Animation Research Unit*

⁴*Socio-Anthropologist*

**Corresponding author*

Abstract

This article examines the complex relationship between Vòdú and political power in Benin, given the importance of Vòdú in Beninese culture and its historical role in legitimizing power. The aim of this study is to demonstrate that this relationship is more nuanced, by exploring how Vòdú influences governance, human rights and social cohesion. The method combines a critical analysis of existing literature, ethnohistorical data, in-depth interviews with religious dignitaries, politicians and executives, and direct observation of Vòdú practices. The results reveal that Vòdú is used to legitimize power, notably through the integration of rituals into official ceremonies and the evocation of ancestors during presidential investitures, but also as a tool of resistance. The conclusion underlines the enduring influence of Vòdú on political and social life in Benin, while calling for religious tolerance and respect for the cultural rights of practitioners. Vòdú, a cultural and spiritual force intrinsically linked to power in Benin, requires further exploration to understand its evolution, its adaptation to contemporary issues and its role in promoting religious tolerance and inclusive development.

Article Info

Received: 15 October 2024

Accepted: 24 November 2024

Available Online: 20 December 2024

Keywords

Vòdú, Political power, Legitimacy, Development, Religious tolerance.

Introduction

Without a doubt, the question of religious belief is today a major issue for understanding the constitutions of the nation-states of black Africa (Bayart, 2018), in particular their vision of governance and progress. In Benin, the question of religious belief has been on the agenda since the emergence of Vòdú cultural practices in the Beninese political world during the revolutionary period of the

1980s, thus demonstrating the ubiquity of religion and the need for its influence on the domain. In Benin, the importance of religious facts can be observed in the field of public administration, communities and state institutions. Vòdú, particularly in Benin, supports or is directly associated with activism in the public sphere, legitimizing power and serving as a tool for the emancipation of classes or political groups. In Benin, reflection on the role of Vòdú in society remains

embryonic or almost absent, even if we note, however, its precedence in political acts, speeches and expressions. An in-depth survey conducted in large cities reveals the relationship between religious belief and power, particularly highlighting the connection between Vòdú and power. This coexistence was favored by the government of "democratic renewal" in the 90s, which found strong support among religious dignitaries and traditional figures. They were recognized as essential mediators between the State and grassroots communities, playing a crucial role in communication between public authorities and citizens. Beninese public life offers a unique message of the intimacy between this cultural banality that constitutes Vòdú, which will bring assurance, security, well-being and the assurance of leading the State, public, private, communal administration or any other socially constituted group. This preeminence of Vòdú would reduce the major act of social change to a couple formed by power and this cultural specificity, which questions us on the issue of religious belief in the political sphere of Benin in the era of democracy and the ideologization of good practices of political and public governance. If the study of Vòdú most often involves understanding the deep meanings of the beliefs and practices of Vòdú (Rousse-Grosseau, 1992), the customs, beliefs and institutions of primitive peoples (Comby, 1993), their imaginations and representations (Hounyoton, 2017), its artistic side (Hainard & Mathez, 2007), and its political and religious aspects are rarely shown in their conduct of public affairs. Recognizing religion and currents of thought in the reflection on the concept of power and authority, and in their exercise, drawing on sociological, legal and anthropological work of recent decades, one can ask how Vòdú has played an active role in the definition and deployment, or even the development, of public policies. The research aims to show that the link between Vòdú and political power is more complex and less clear-cut than it seems. For example, how does the practice of Vòdú affect the conduct of public affairs, the management of public resources and the protection of human rights in Beninese society? How have Vòdú practices been, continue to be used in the exercise of political power over time? How do politicians or individuals continue to use this model of governance? How is such a taxonomy updated over time? How do men and women, especially politicians, come to use Vòdú practices in the exercise of their functions? From what mechanism is Vòdú considered as a means of exercising cultural power? In this context, how do people perceive the words and actions of government authorities? All of these questions (non-exhaustive),

which must obviously be related to the social attributes and the endogenous anchoring of Vòdú in the Beninese context, constitute as many research questions whose analyses cannot be reduced to a utilitarian approach to Vòdú, nor to the diffusion of any religious ideology, but to the search for efficiency in public actions.

If we want to take them into account, we must be attentive to the tendency, over time, to draw on various philosophical sources, reasoning schemes and cultural references for the action of Vòdú practices and absorb all the logical consequences of the notion of power as it has been developed since independence in a complementarist sense (Devereux, 1972). In other words, it is a question of understanding the public actors (politicians, leaders and civil servants) of society from the dual dimension of culture and religion, as levers for understanding power, from their history, their socialization and their contextualization and the spatial experience that makes them actors resolutely straddling tradition and modernity. The research, descriptive and analytical in nature, combines scientific writing, metanarratives, direct observation and in-depth interviews, while relying on a systemic and multi-scale approach to analyze the social use of Vòdú in governance processes, ranging from the local to the institutional scale. The work on scientific production, power and religion, including Vòdú and power in the Beninese context, allows for a critical analysis of the writings and literature related to this subject. It has been enriched by ethnohistory based on historical data and other information from the work of historians and Africanist anthropologists, for example: (Aclinou, 2016; Ballard, 1998; Cornevin, 1969; Gayibor, 2011; Poda, 2010; De la Torre, 1991), adding our personal experiences, stories with our parents and in the Vòdú initiation convents, but also traditional national philosophy, whose teachings give us an overview of the different writings. In-depth personal interviews made it possible to understand the legitimacy of the link between religion and politics in a Beninese context characterized by difficulties in collecting information and complex themes. Through these interviews, it is possible to understand the influence of Vòdú social practices, including cults, rituals or sacrifices in the political sphere on the relationship between the Beninese and power, as well as the different strategies of social and cultural appropriation that they have developed. Understanding the phenomenon of use and appropriation of Vòdú in politics facilitates the understanding of the subtleties associated with it relating to specific social and cultural practices that permeate moral and political institutions, customary rules as well as everyday gestures (calendars,

festivals, initiations, ceremonies, political or cultural events, etc.). Individual interviews were also conducted with members of political parties, ministerial offices, administrative officials at all levels, but also agents in order to understand the extent of this phenomenon and to learn about the reasons justifying such recourse to Vòdú practices in political matters, including the conduct of public and private affairs. Other interviews with high dignitaries and people who do not use these practices helped to understand the sociocultural perception of a practice that is alive and well in politics in Benin. It will be observed, particularly in institutional, religious and political circles, that telling the truth encounters obstacles due to social, moral and political constraints and issues. In this case, the ideal position to obtain useful and weak information in this context is that of the anthropologist who tries to approach by looking at the groups that we are trying to approach as a whole not as individuals but as whole people "by slow and continuous direct ways of impregnation" (Laplantine, 2001), and by maintaining individualized relationships with the different members of the observed social group. Consequently, we use direct observation to report on how the Beninese use Vòdú, particularly its practices to achieve their ends in terms of governance or power. In the same way as Rostaing (2017), we can affirm that the field of Vòdú presents specificities which, due to its properties, have put to the test the concept of the study, the ethical principles and the attitude of the researcher due to the sacred character of the subject and its cultural anchoring.

The study was conducted in administrations, institutions, public companies, political formations, but also in private companies rationally selected because of the high rate observed of recourse to Vòdú practices by managers in Benin. The study mobilized a hundred informants and was conducted over a period of six months. The data processing was subjected to the methods and approaches of interpretation of religious texts or foundations, in particular semiotics, sociocriticism, historical-critical reading without forgetting psychoanalysis. This theoretical position makes it possible to understand the phenomenon of use of Vòdú practices in the political sphere by reconstructing the motivations of users as the result of an aggregation of individual behaviors (Boudon, 1986). After contextualizing the importance of Vòdú in Beninese society and its historical role, this article proposes to explore this relationship through two major axes: the first axis examines how Vòdú, as a deeply rooted belief system, legitimizes political power through the integration of Vòdú rituals in official ceremonies and

the influence on electoral behaviors, while the second axis addresses contemporary tensions between the promotion of secularism by the State and the respect of Vòdú traditions, as well as the issues of recognition and valorization of Vòdú in educational programs, while questioning its ability to adapt to current challenges while preserving its social and cultural role.

Anthropological dimension of Vòdú in Benin

Vòdú is a complex and dynamic belief system that has deeply marked Beninese culture. This anthropological study allows us to better understand its origins, practices and role in society.

Origins and evolution of Vòdú

Vòdú has its roots in the heart of Beninese history, enriched by the complex fusion between the myths and ethnophilosophy of the peoples who forged the region. It emerges as a response to the challenges of life, thus resulting from a profound cultural elaboration. This fusion has given rise to a rich and diverse system of beliefs, integrating elements of spirituality, rituals, and practices inherited from various traditions. Vòdú, as defined by the Àjá-Fòn and Yoruba-Nagô cultures of Benin, Nigeria and Togo, represents the "invisible spirits or forces". Etymologically, it is formed from the terms "vò" meaning the unknown and the invisible, and "dú" designating a country, a world or a universe. Thus, it evokes "the country of invisible forces". According to Roger Brand (1998), Vòdú is a traditional religion where the divinities are deified powers, composed largely of a force of nature and a human being who has been able to integrate this force for his own good and that of his lineage. This definition underlines the direct interaction between man, animal, natural force and Vòdú, where these entities offer their help or refrain from harm. Kofi Folikpo (2012) compares it to an immaterial principle, a spiritual energy participating in maintaining the cosmic balance in Divine Creation. He thus evokes Vòdú as an invisible but omnipresent reality, contributing to the harmony of the universe. According to Aguessy (1972), Vòdú designates any power surpassing human understanding and acting at the level of the invisible, whose actions are revealed to the visible world. This definition emphasizes the transcendent and mysterious dimension of Vòdú, which exerts its influence from beyond to affect the world of the living.

For our part, Vòdú, rooted in West African cultures, constitutes a system of beliefs where invisible forces,

divine powers and spiritual energies interact in a mysterious and transcendent universe. Vòdú thus represents a living heritage that testifies to the cultural richness of Benin and the strength of a spirituality capable of transcending borders and evolving with the times. This heritage of ancient civilizations, by offering answers to the profound questions of humanity, manifests itself as a harmonious fusion between beliefs deeply rooted in Beninese culture and ritual practices that embody these convictions, thus maintaining cosmic balance through its divinities and natural forces. The evolution of Vòdú, this spiritual force originating from the ancient kingdom of Dahomey (now Benin), is the result of a rich interaction between various cultures and traditions. Emerging in the 17th century, Vòdú is mainly the result of the fusion of the Yoruba, Fòn and Ewe cults, consolidated by the creation of the Fòn kingdom of Abomey. Under the reigns of Kings Agadja and Tegbessou, Vòdú expanded through military conquests that integrated divinities from other conquered peoples into its pantheon, such as the divinities Sàkpàtà, originally from Dassa, and Gu from Doumé in Nago country, etc.

Each new conquest enriched Vòdú with varied practices and beliefs, making this religion polymorphic and adaptable. External influences, particularly those of European and North African cultures, also played a role in its formation, integrating Christian and Muslim elements from its beginnings. Over the centuries, Vòdú continued to evolve, especially through the diaspora caused by the slave trade.

African slaves brought their beliefs to the Americas, mainly to the Caribbean and the Antilles, not forgetting the United States of America and Brazil, where Vòdú underwent a double syncretism: with other African traditions and with the dominant Christian religions. In Haiti, for example, it took a distinct form while maintaining its spiritual essence. This phenomenon of migration and adaptation allowed Vòdú to become deeply rooted in the societies where it was established, becoming an essential cultural element for the Beninese and Haitian communities. Today, Vòdú is recognized not only as a religious practice but also as a foundation of the cultural identity of these peoples.

Vodú Beliefs and Practices

The fundamental beliefs of Vodú in Benin are based on the veneration of a multitude of spirits, ancestors and divinities or deities, or even spiritual entities that interact

with the world of the living. According to Aguessy (1985), this endogenous African religion establishes a sacred link between humans and invisible forces, thus allowing followers to maintain cosmic balance. Ritual practices associated with Vodú, such as dances, songs, invocations and offerings, play a central role in the spiritual life of the Beninese. Ceremonies, often led by priests called vòdúnons or hùnnongans, are moments of communion where devotees, participants, come together to honor the divinities and ask for their protection. TingbéAzalou (1988) emphasizes that these rituals are not only expressions of faith but also cultural celebrations that strengthen social cohesion. Hounyoton (2017) adds that these practices are deeply integrated into daily life, influencing the way Beninese perceive their existence and their place in the universe. Thus, Vòdú transcends the framework of a simple religion by shaping a vision of the world where each daily act is part of a vast spiritual network made up of divinities venerated through elaborate rituals, including intoxicating dances, vibrant songs, solemn invocations and sometimes symbolic offerings. All of these ritual practices form a kind of living pantheon where believers come into contact with the spiritual world.

The Vòdú pantheon

The Vòdú pantheon consists of a complex mosaic of deities, each symbolizing particular aspects of the universe and performing distinct functions within Vòdú cosmology. Prominent among the figures are Sàkpàtà, the god of the earth, who embodies the fertile power of nature, while Gu, the celestial smith and god of war, is associated with creation and protection. Xèvyósó or Sògbô, the god of thunder, represents justice and fairness, while Dan, the cosmic serpent, embodies regeneration. Tòxòxú, the god of water, is linked to purification rituals, and Agě symbolizes wildlife. Jo, the god of air, controls the breath of life, while Lègba plays a crucial role as an intermediary between the deities and humans. In addition, the Toxwyo ensure the protection of clans and families by establishing a vital link between ancestors and the living. This rich and varied pantheon helps maintain cosmic balance and regulates various aspects of life within the Àjá-Fòn and Yoruba-Nagô communities. Vòdú beliefs profoundly influence the worldview of the Beninese, integrating Vòdú into their daily lives through rituals that punctuate key moments in their existence while guiding their individual and collective choices. Thus, the divinities of the Vòdú pantheon contribute to maintaining cosmic balance and regulating various aspects of life by embodying natural

forces and establishing kinship relationships with humans, as underlined by the principle of interconnection between the visible and invisible worlds. For example, Sàkpàtà, the god of the earth, ensures fertility, while Xèvyósó, the god of thunder, ensures justice by punishing transgressions of social conventions. Rituals, which include offerings and invocations, allow followers, devotees, and sympathizers to seek the protection and harmony of these deities, thus creating a framework where Vòdú beliefs directly influence the behaviors and choices of individuals in their daily lives. In an anthropological approach, the study of Vòdú as a cultural and symbolic system reveals the profound significance of this religious reality in Beninese culture. Our research has highlighted the complexity of the rituals, symbols, and practices that underlie this religion, as well as their fundamental role in the construction of identity and social dynamics within Beninese communities. This analysis highlights how Vòdú transcends its religious dimension to become a system of values and cultural references essential for communities. By combining these different elements, we obtain a complete and nuanced vision of Vòdú, from its historical importance to its contemporary relevance in the lives of the Beninese. It is a living heritage that continues to profoundly influence Beninese society, mainly in the political sphere. d) Vòdú as a cultural and symbolic system Vòdú, as a cultural and symbolic system, constitutes an essential foundation of values and cultural references for Beninese communities.

According to Aguessy (1985), Vòdú is not only a religion, but a framework of life that regulates individual and collective behaviors through principles of respect, solidarity and discipline. Vodú rituals, integrated into daily life, strengthen community ties and transmit ancestral knowledge, thus contributing to the sustainability of Beninese cultural identity. Hounyoton (2017) emphasizes that this spirituality is closely linked to social dynamics, where each ceremony and each invocation contributes to group cohesion and the transmission of values from one generation to the next. Father Barthélémy Adoukonou (1989) reinforces this vision by affirming that Vodú is a vector of humanism that promotes tolerance and mutual respect within communities, thus making it possible to navigate between ancestral traditions and modernity.

Beyond its religious dimension, Vòdú transcends its religious practices to become a constitutive element of Beninese identity. The "Vòdún Days", for example, illustrate how this tradition is celebrated as a living

cultural heritage, attracting not only Beninese but also tourists eager to discover this spiritual wealth. The Beninese government is actively engaged in promoting Vòdú through initiatives aimed at educating the public on its positive values and strengthening intercultural dialogue. Thus, Vòdú asserts itself not only as a religious practice but also as a vector of humanism and tolerance, integrating spiritual beliefs into contemporary social dynamics.

Vòdú and power: an intrinsic relationship

Vòdú, as a pillar of Beninese cultural identity, plays a central role in the legitimization of political power. This symbiotic relationship, marked by tensions and cooperations, profoundly shapes the country's political landscape.

Anthropological exploration of power in Benin

Benin, located in West Africa, has gone through significant phases of political change since its independence from France on August 1, 1960. Initially known as Dahomey, the country experienced a decade of instability marked by coups d'état and frequent regime changes. The military takeover by Commander Mathieu Kérékou in 1972 marked the beginning of a revolutionary period, when the country was renamed the People's Republic of Benin in 1975 and adopted a Marxist-Leninist regime. This regime lasted until the National Sovereign Conference of 1990, which paved the way for a democratic transition. This conference, which brought together delegates from all components of Beninese society, led to the adoption of a new constitution in 1990, establishing a multi-party democratic system with regular elections and an institutional framework guaranteeing civil rights. Since then, Benin has established itself as a model of democracy in Africa, although it has also faced challenges such as contested elections and political tensions in 2019 and political crises in recent years. Currently, under the presidency of Patrice Talon, elected in 2016, the country operates under a presidential system with a unicameral parliament. However, criticism is emerging regarding an increased concentration of executive power and an increasing restriction of political and civic space. In this context, Vòdú plays a key role in influencing political and social dynamics. Indeed, Vòdú rituals are often used by politicians to legitimize their power and establish cultural ties with the population. Vodun spiritual leaders are consulted for advice during electoral campaigns, illustrating how this religious

tradition is integrated into the political fabric of the country. The interaction between Vodun and politics thus remains a crucial component of Beninese political dynamics, reflecting both a deeply rooted cultural heritage and a source of legitimacy for political leaders. The influence of Vodun on Beninese politics is evident, as it plays a crucial role in legitimizing power and influencing electoral behavior. The vast majority of Beninese politicians, according to our ethnographic materials, often use Vodun rituals to reinforce their authority and solicit the favor of the deities, which allows them to present themselves as spiritual leaders in addition to their political roles.

According to Dah Kpogbédji of Wogo in Mougnon, religious and traditional elites have been able to assert themselves on the public stage, organizing themselves into lobbies to influence public policies and mobilize voters, particularly during election periods. Vodun spiritual leaders, such as the Hùnnongans, are often consulted by candidates to receive blessings and advice, thus reinforcing the link between spirituality and politics. This instrumentalization of Vodun by politicians illustrates how traditional beliefs are used to establish legitimacy with voters, who may choose their candidates based on their religious affiliations or their reputation for Vodun practices. Furthermore, Vòdú also influences citizens' voting behavior.

Studies show that some voters are more likely to support candidates who display a strong connection to Vòdú or who actively participate in its rituals. This dynamic is accentuated by a political context where clientelism plays an important role, allowing candidates to leverage cultural beliefs and values to gain popular support. Thus, the interaction between Vòdú and politics in Benin is not limited to a simple symbolic relationship; it constitutes a fundamental element of how power is perceived and exercised in the country. By integrating this spiritual dimension into their political strategy, Beninese political leaders not only strengthen their legitimacy but also their ability to mobilize and influence voting behavior among the population. The interaction between Vòdú and political power in Benin is illustrated by prominent historical examples, including the reign of King Béhanzin, who resisted French colonization by integrating Vòdún practices into his governance. Béhanzin, crowned king in 1890, used Vòdún rituals to mobilize his people and strengthen his legitimacy in the face of colonial forces. He called upon spirits and deities to ensure the protection of his kingdom, while cultivating an image of a strong and determined ruler. In his letters

to the French administration (1890), he spoke not only of the sovereignty of his kingdom but also of the need to maintain the spiritual traditions that united his people. Other historical figures, such as King Agadja, also integrated Vòdú into their political strategies, using rituals to cement their power and strengthen their position in the face of internal and external threats. This tradition of using Vòdú to legitimize power continues today, with politicians often consulting Vòdú spiritual leaders for blessings and advice during election campaigns. Thus, the legacy of Béhanzin and other Dahomey kings continues to influence perceptions of power within Beninese society, highlighting how Vòdú remains a crucial element in contemporary political dynamics, embodying a source of legitimacy and a deeply rooted cultural heritage. This echoes the way in which contemporary political leaders in Benin continue to use Vòdú to connect with the population and legitimize their authority, as these historical references, notably those of Kings Béhanzin and Agadja, who respectively used Vòdú practices to resist colonization and extend the kingdom's influence, still influence the perception of power within Beninese society, thus illustrating how Vòdú is a vector of political legitimacy. The history of the relationship between Vòdú and power in Benin is deeply rooted in the genesis of major cultural entities, marked by an indelible imprint across the ages. However, the significant rupture during the revolutionary period was not simply an act of exclusion of a religious cultural expression, but rather the culmination of a process of modernization. Political figures and senior civil servants regularly use Vodun practices to strengthen control over public actions, purify the community, protect themselves against harmful forces, and gain electoral favor. This dynamic illustrates the interaction between "values" and the "order of life," as Max Weber emphasized in his 1922 book *Economy and Society*, where he explores how cultural values influence social structures and individual behaviors. Thus, the historical connection between Vodun and the exercise of power persists undeniably, having been erected as a state religion by the sovereigns of the kingdoms, which reinforced the link between institutional power and religious reality. Today, Vodun rituals, involving dances, songs, and invocations, remain an essential pillar of Beninese religious culture and play a crucial role in the political context, both to legitimize power and to express protest.

Anthropologist Susan Preston Blier (1995), in her book *African Vodun: Art, Psychology, and Power*, examines in depth the role of Vodun in the construction of national

identity and in the fierce resistance against colonial rule at the time. Another famous example of Vodun's influence on power is the Haitian Revolution, where Vodun was used as a mobilizing force by Haitian slaves to overthrow French colonial rule. Anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995), in his book *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, explores in detail this interconnection between Vodun and the struggle for independence. The interaction between Vodun and political power in Benin is a reality deeply rooted in the country's history and culture. Vodun spiritual leaders, rituals, and historical events illustrate the complexity of this relationship, which encompasses both the legitimation and contestation of power. Anthropology could play a central role in the analysis of these complex dynamics, by highlighting the persistent influence of Vòdú on Beninese political and social life. Indeed, Vòdú is not limited to a simple religious practice; it constitutes a vector of identity and resistance, shaping social and political interactions within contemporary Beninese society.

For the majority of informants, particularly religious dignitaries, Vòdú answers existential questions by providing reference points that give meaning to community life, while being closely linked to royal power. More than 90% of our informants affirm that Vòdú, as a social and cultural practice, greatly influenced the formation and development of the ancient kingdoms and the young independent state of Benin. Although the latter tries to distance itself from Vòdú in the name of secularism, it nevertheless recognizes its importance. For those who cross historical and comparative perspectives, it is obvious that Vòdú and power feed off each other in the Beninese context. Thus, 95% of those interviewed have a positive view of Vòdú, considering it as a cultural practice essential to the sustainability of the state. Although 15 interviewees who define themselves as modernists do not see these practices as useful, they admit that Vòdú confers legitimacy to power, stating that a leader without Vòdú power is less feared and respected, thus recognizing its constitutive role comparable to an ideological superstructure that maintains close ties with power in Benin.

Vòdú as a source of legitimacy of public power

Vòdú, deeply rooted in Beninese culture, constitutes an essential source of legitimacy for public authority, conferring a spiritual and historical dimension to the latter. Vòdú rituals are regularly integrated into official ceremonies and installations of leaders, symbolizing the

continuity of traditions and reinforcing the legitimacy of their mandate. For example, during their inauguration, each Beninese president pronounces the phrase "Before God, the spirits of our ancestors, of the Nation and before the Beninese people, the sole holders of sovereignty," thus emphasizing the importance of the sacred in the exercise of power. This practice was highlighted during the inauguration of Mathieu Kérékou in 1996, whose oath of office was annulled for omitting this reference to the ancestors. Vodun spiritual leaders also play a crucial role in political life, acting as advisors and mediators between leaders and spirits. Their influence is manifest in political decisions and electoral strategies, as politicians often seek their blessing to strengthen their authority. Furthermore, our study reveals that 95% of interviewees consider Vodun as a vector of legitimacy that contributes to the sustainability of the state, thus illustrating its central role in the structuring of power. In this context, Vòdú is not limited to a simple religious practice; it asserts itself as a fundamental pillar of national identity and an instrument of political legitimation in Benin.

Current challenges and issues of Vòdú

Vòdú in Benin, deeply rooted in the national culture, is facing complex challenges related to its coexistence with modern political power. Tensions between this ancestral religious tradition and the authorities are exacerbated by ideological divergences, power issues and attempts at state regulation. Stigmatization and mistrust of Vòdú, often encouraged by certain political actors, create a climate of hostility, while competition with revealed religions reinforces these tensions. Nevertheless, Vòdú is perceived by a significant part of society as a pillar of cultural identity, giving rise to divergent opinions. To overcome these challenges, it is essential to promote constructive dialogue between state authorities, Vòdú practitioners and other social actors.

An inclusive approach that respects cultural diversity can facilitate the peaceful coexistence of different beliefs. The integration of Vòdú into public policies, while respecting the principles of secularism, could enhance this ancestral practice and strengthen national identity. Furthermore, public education and awareness-raising on the importance of intangible cultural heritage are crucial to combat prejudices and promote a better understanding of Vòdú.

In this regard, the wisdom of the Vodun dignitary Dah VIDEKON resonates: "In the depths of Beninese

societies, Vodun, through its rituals, culture and sacred practices, embodies a true historical epic, an invaluable source of wisdom and teaching that weaves the fabric of development." This perspective underlines the importance of Vodun in the educational, political, cultural and economic spheres. Its integration into school curricula is essential to preserve ancestral knowledge, while its official recognition as a legitimate religion and the active participation of its followers in decision-making processes are major issues. In addition, the preservation of Vodun heritage and the exploration of its tourism potential are crucial to maintain Beninese cultural identity. Finally, the development of religious tourism and the encouragement of cultural entrepreneurship based on Vodun offer significant economic opportunities. How these issues are addressed will greatly influence the future of Vòdú and its coexistence with modern political power.

The future prospects of Vòdú in Benin depend largely on the approaches adopted by the public authorities and society to manage tensions with modern political power, with anthropology proving essential to understand how Vòdú beliefs and practices adapt to contemporary social and political pressures, while educating the public and decision-makers about the complexities of Vòdú. By exploring the impact of social developments on these practices, anthropology can shed light on the influence of modern political power on the perception of Vòdú and the relations between its adherents and society. The resolution of tensions between Vòdú and political power will depend on the commitment to promote religious tolerance, intercultural dialogue and respect for human rights. By addressing these issues constructively, Benin can move towards harmonious coexistence that respects its religious and cultural diversity. Vòdú is crucial to the human and cultural development of the country; its appropriate recognition and valorization can strengthen the national identity while promoting the blossoming of its cultural and spiritual wealth.

Vòdú and power: two ideal types in search of an impossible autonomy

Vòdú and power in Benin represent two ideal types in search of an autonomy that is often difficult to achieve, illustrating a complex relationship of interaction and mutual influence. Historically linked to the social, political and cultural organization of the country, Vòdú was fought during the revolutionary period, but experienced a revival with democratization, seeking to free itself from power while being used by the latter to

strengthen its authority. Indeed, Vòdú expands and internationalizes thanks to its interaction with power, which, for its part, mobilizes Vòdú to purify the nation and anticipate potential crises threatening social cohesion. A key example of this interaction is the annual Tofa consultation, which brings together dignitaries of the fa or Ifa to predict major events for the coming year and make sacrifices on behalf of the nation. This practice has considerable political importance, acting as a guide for leaders. Although modern power seeks to maintain a certain distance due to principles of secularism, it tacitly recognizes the importance of Vòdú in social and political life. However, this relationship is marked by persistent tensions. The political power, while relying on Vòdú for its own ends, also attempts to regulate its practices, which leads to conflicts with Vòdú spiritual leaders and their disciples. The latter often see attempts at regulation as an intrusion into their sphere of religious and cultural autonomy. Despite these challenges, Vòdú remains a fundamental pillar of Beninese cultural identity, and its official recognition as a legitimate religion is crucial to ensuring religious diversity in the country.

Through this complex dynamic, it becomes evident that Vòdú and power cannot truly free themselves from each other; they evolve together in a framework where each benefit from the other for the good of the community. In other words, exploring the link between Vòdú and power highlights the apparent agreement between two ideal types in search of an often-illusory autonomy, each influenced by the actions of the other for the benefit of the community. This complex relationship reveals a dynamic where the "religious" and "life order" fields intersect, illustrating a desire for emancipation that remains difficult to achieve given their respective social, economic and cultural stakes. Vòdú, while seeking to free itself from political power, is intrinsically linked to it, because it is mobilized to strengthen social cohesion and anticipate potential crises. At the same time, the government uses Vòdú to legitimize its authority and respond to the psychological needs of the population. Thus, this interaction highlights not only the contemporary challenges that Vòdú faces, but also its essential role in the preservation of Beninese cultural identity and in the social and economic development of the country. Ultimately, resolving the tensions between these two entities will depend on the ability of political leaders to promote religious tolerance and foster respectful intercultural dialogue. By addressing these issues constructively, Benin can move towards a harmonious coexistence that values its cultural and spiritual wealth while strengthening its national identity.

Results and Discussion

The results of our study reveal a complex and nuanced picture of the place of Vòdú in Beninese society, where ancestral beliefs, political issues and modern aspirations are intertwined. Indeed, the conclusions arising from our field investigations as well as the ethnographic data that we have carefully collected highlight the profound richness and complexity of this anthropological reality in Benin, which constitutes Vòdú. They also reveal the diversity of opinions, influenced by individual experiences, cultural filters and personal motivations. All of these elements contribute to sketching a landscape of interpretations of fascinating complexity and nuance regarding the link between power and Vòdú, an inherently complex and multidimensional subject in the Beninese context.

Perceptions of Vòdú

The results of our surveys conducted among various groups in Beninese society, including spiritual leaders, intellectuals, politicians and executives, highlight a nuanced and varied perception of Vòdú. A strong consensus emerges on the positive role of Vòdú in the development of the country, with remarkable agreement rates: 86% of intellectuals, 92% of politicians and executives, and 98% of spiritual leaders and followers affirm that Vòdú contributes significantly to the educational, social, cultural, political and economic progress of Benin. However, there are still differences in how this religion is integrated into the public sphere and perceived by different layers of society. While many recognize Vòdú as a fundamental pillar of Beninese cultural identity, others associate it with archaic practices, thus demonstrating a diversity of opinions influenced by individual experiences and cultural filters.

Vòdú and the development of Benin

The impact of Vòdú on the development of Benin is undeniable. As a spiritual and cultural force, Vòdú plays a crucial role in social cohesion and strengthening national identity. Data collected during surveys show that Vòdú is perceived not only as a religious tradition, but also as an essential driver for collective progress. It contributes to educational development by encouraging the integration of its teachings into school curricula, thus promoting the transmission of ancestral knowledge. Socially and culturally, it encourages interreligious tolerance and peaceful coexistence between different beliefs. Politically, Vòdú is recognized as a key element that can strengthen civic engagement and community

participation. Economically, its tourism potential represents a significant opportunity to generate income while promoting this ancestral practice.

Persistent challenges and recommendations

Despite these positive contributions, several challenges persist regarding the practice of Vòdú in Benin. Discrimination against practitioners and stigmatization remain major obstacles to its development. In addition, attempts by the central government to control Vòdú hinder its positive influence on the country's development. To overcome these challenges, it is essential to promote a better integration of Vòdú into Beninese society. This includes integrating Vòdú into educational programs to raise awareness among younger generations of its cultural and historical importance. Promoting interfaith dialogue can also help reduce prejudices and foster better understanding between different faiths. Finally, it is crucial to officially recognize Vòdú as a legitimate religion to guarantee practitioners their cultural and religious rights.

In terms of discussion, the results of our study reveal that Vòdú, far from being a marginal force, is deeply rooted in the social and political fabric of Benin, playing a vital role as a source of social cohesion and mutual respect among diverse spiritual expressions. Spiritual leaders, such as the "hunnongans," agree that Vòdú constitutes the founding religion of the country, coexisting harmoniously with other faiths such as Christianity and Islam. They describe Vòdú as a religion of freedom and tolerance, celebrating diversity and encouraging peaceful coexistence. At the same time, political leaders recognize its crucial role in the national religious identity, acting as a unifying force that fosters understanding among different spiritual traditions.

However, despite this positive influence, challenges persist, including discrimination against Vòdú practitioners and attempts at control by the central government. These obstacles hinder the flourishing of Vòdú and its contribution to the country's development. The results also highlight the importance of integrating Vòdú into educational programs to raise awareness among younger generations about its cultural heritage. In addition, promoting interfaith dialogue is essential to reduce prejudices and foster better understanding between different faiths. The wisdom shared by Dah VIDEKON illustrates this reality well: "In the depths of Beninese societies, Vòdú, through its rituals, culture and sacred practices, embodies a true historical epic, an

inestimable source of wisdom and teaching that weaves the fabric of development. It is the vigilant guardian of ancient knowledge, an unbreakable link with spirituality and an ode to ethnophilosophy. Beyond that, it constitutes the immaterial and material jewel of the cultural heritage of the civilizations of Benin".

This statement underlines not only the historical importance of Vòdú but also its potential as a driver of national development. Ultimately, for Vòdú to fully play its role in promoting peace and diversity within Beninese society, it is imperative to adopt an inclusive approach that values its contribution to social and economic progress while respecting the cultural and religious rights of practitioners.

The data highlight the growing recognition of Vòdú as a key driver of national development, positioning it not only as a fundamental cultural element, but also as a lever for collective progress. However, despite this positive influence, Vòdú faces challenges such as discrimination of its practitioners and attempts at control by the central government, which hinder its development and its impact on the country's development.

Spiritual leaders, the "hunnongans", affirm that Vòdú is the founding religion of Benin, coexisting harmoniously with other faiths such as Christianity and Islam, and describe this tradition as a religion of freedom and tolerance that celebrates diversity. At the same time, political leaders recognize the crucial role of Vòdú in the national religious identity, acting as a unifying force promoting mutual understanding. However, challenges persist, including the stigmatization and devaluation of Vòdún practices in education.

To overcome these obstacles, it is imperative to integrate Vòdú into educational programs and promote interreligious dialogue in order to foster better understanding and ensure harmonious coexistence within Beninese society. The study highlights the importance of overcoming prejudices and recognizing the cultural value of Vòdú, advocating for an inclusive approach that values its contribution to the social and economic progress of Benin, while concluding that Vòdú is proving to be a fundamental pillar of Beninese cultural identity, capable of playing a significant role in promoting peace and diversity within society.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Vòdú, far from being a marginal force, is deeply rooted in the social and

political fabric of Benin. Its influence extends to various aspects of society, shaping cultural identity and contributing to the country's development. As an anthropological reality, Vòdú promotes social cohesion by uniting different spiritual expressions within a framework of mutual respect. The interactions between the central government and traditional religious leaders illustrate how this belief plays a vital role in the spiritual well-being of the population and facilitates constructive collaboration between government authorities and the guardians of tradition. Since the advent of democracy, a dynamic of mutual respect has emerged, strengthening the links between political power and the holders of spiritual knowledge. However, despite its central role, Vòdú faces significant challenges, including discrimination against its practitioners and the lack of recognition of its practices in education. To foster an equitable society, it is crucial to combat these prejudices and integrate Vòdú into educational programs to enrich cultural understanding. The demonization of Vòdú by other religions also highlights the need for interreligious dialogue to overcome misunderstandings. Ultimately, Vòdú must position itself as a key player in contemporary issues related to the inclusive development of Benin. This collaborative approach between Vòdú and the State could not only preserve this precious cultural heritage, but also promote a society based on tolerance, mutual respect, and a deep understanding of different religious beliefs. An anthropological perspective on this relationship could enrich future research by highlighting how this spiritual force can contribute to sustainable and harmonious development within Beninese society.

References

- Aguessy, H. (1972). *Les religions africaines comme source de valeurs de civilisation*, Présence Africaine.
- Aguessy, H. (1985). *African Religion and the Balance of Power, in Colloquium on the Survival of African Religious Traditions in the Caribbean and Latin America*, San Luis de Maranhão, Conference 801/13.
- Azalou, T. (1988). Rite of Dation of the Initial Birth Name among the Adja-Fon of Benin. *Carrefour de la Recherche*, 10(3), 29-41.
- Ballard, M. (1998). *Dahomey 1930: Catholic Mission and Vodun Cult. The Work of Francis Aupiais (1877-1945)*, Missionary and Ethnographer, Perpignan University Press.
- Blier, S. P. (1995). *African Vodun: Art, Psychology, and Power*, University of Chicago Press.

- Boudon, R. (1986). *Ideology or the Origin of Received Ideas*, Fayard.
- Comby, J. (1993). *Primitive Societies*, Éditions L'Harmattan.
- Devereux, G. (1972). *Complementary Ethnopsychology analysis*, Flammarion.
- Folikpo, K. K. (2012). *African Endogenous Architecture*, Academia.edu.
- Hainard, J. & Mathez, P. (2007). *The Art of Vodou*, Éditions d'Art.
- Hounyoton, H., & Hounghinin, R. A. (2017). Imaginaries and Representations of Vodun, *Revue Échanges*, Lomé-Togo.
- Laplantine, F. (2001). *Anthropology and its Objects*, Presses Universitaires de France.
- Rostaing, J. (2017). *Vodú and Governance in West Africa*, Éditions Karthala.
- Trouillot, M.-R. (1995). *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, Beacon Press.

How to cite this article:

Hospice Bienvenu Hounyoton, Ahouandjinou Raymond-Bernard, Ahonnon Adolphe and Angèle Bénédicte Odoubourou. 2024. *Vòdú and Power in Benin: A Spiritual Force at the Heart of Politics and National Identity*. *Int.J.Curr.Res.Aca.Rev.* 12(12), 42-52. doi: <https://doi.org/10.20546/ijcrar.2024.1212.006>