

# VÔDOUN IN SUBSAHARAN AFRICA

## Ghana, Togo, BENIN, Nigeria (*cities Ifé and Benin City*)

### 1 Introduction

The Vôdoun was born from the meeting of the traditional cults of the Yoruba gods and the Fon and Ewé divinities, during the foundation and then the expansion of the Fon kingdom of Abomey in the 17th and 18th centuries. (Actual **Benin** ex **Dahomey**)

The Vôdoun is the cultural foundation of the populations in southern States of Benin Bight (Benin, Togo, Ghana, Nigeria...). ...).



**Etymology** : In Fon language Vôdoun means “what cannot be elucidated”

The Vôdoun designates all divinities or invisible forces of which men try to reconcile the power or the benevolence. It is the affirmation of a supernatural world, but also the set of procedures allowing to enter into relationship with it. The Vôdoun corresponds to the Yoruba cult of the Orishas.

According to Philippe Charlier (2), it constitutes an “anthropology of nature” linking the divinities, the dead, the living as well as the objects which are supposed to be provided with an energy because **nothing is inert** in opposition to the western dichotomy between culture and nature.

Vôdoun can be described as a culture, a heritage, a philosophy, an art, **dances**, a language, a medicine, a style of music, justice, power, oral tradition and rites.

According to Jean-Jacques Mandel (3) "To activate a Vôdoun , consultation with a diviner is necessary because it is the divinatory word that guides the consultant in his quest. The diviner, regardless of the oracular technique used, indicates to his client the ingredients necessary for propitiatory rites intended to appease the anger of a god or an ancestor.

In case of a misfortune caused by a human being, it is frequent that the diviner who is very often also a healer, besides the usual offerings and sacrifices intended to grant himself the solicitude of the most suitable divinity to solve the consultant's problem, undertakes to create an object to wear on oneself, to store with the family divinities. The size, shape and content of the artifact depend on its intended use. "

European colonialism combined with its Christian missionary dimension, as well as some totalitarian regimes in West Africa, attempted to suppress Vòdoun as well as other traditional religions. However, because the Vòdoun divinities are born into every clan, tribe and nation, and their clergy are essential to the maintenance of moral, social and political order and the ancestral foundation of the village, these efforts were unsuccessful. .

## 2 Spiritual Hierarchy of the Vòdoun

### Foreword

***The term "Vòdoun" designates the religion, as well as the divinities***

The hierarchy of divinities is pyramidal:

On the top , there is a unique God (**MAWU LISSA** are *God's female and male aspects*) inaccessible, uncreated , creator of all **Vòdoun** ..

-Under **MAWU LISSA** there are about 300 **Vòdoun**

-Under **each Vòdoun** there are priests and initiated persons (on various degrees) who are consecrated to the divinity

**FA** precedes the ceremonies; it is a complex art of divination and geomancy exercised by the diviner **bokonon**

Follows a list of some **Vòdoun**

**LISSA** : « incarnation » of supreme God .His symbol is *chameleon*



**LEGBA** : spirit of passage and transmission who opens the gates to supernatural world



**GOU** : spirit of war and black-smiths



**SAKPATA** : spirit of earth and life , illness and healing  
(symbol : *inverted metal cone*)



**DAMBALLA** : spirit of knowledge symbolised by *rainbow snake* or Aïdo Houèdo = **Ouroboros** (who bites its queue)

**HEVIOSO** : spirit of thunderstorm and lightning that he uses to bring justice  
(symbol : *ax or lightning* )



**MAMI WATA** : mother goddess of the water ; symbolises nurturing sea or disastrous ocean

**DAN** : snake having been present when the world was created and supporting the universe  
(symbol : *iron snake*)



**AGASSOU** : spirit descending from the panther who keeps the ancient traditions of Dahomey

**AIZAN** : protector of the markets



**KOKOU** : Initially a spirit of war and cruelty , it evolved as protecting spirit

**GBELOKO** : Vôdoun solicited for peace, protection and happiness  
(symbol *Lokoti* , the iroko tree)



**TOHOSSOU** : related to children prematurely dead



**HOUELI** spirit guardian of the (foundations of ) the house; also bed of a river



### **3 Elements and notions of the Vòdoun religion (in alphabetical order)**

**Convent** (temple Vòdoun) : dedicated to a specific Vòdoun. It consists of 3 spaces frequented by the believers according to their degree of initiation. Outside the temple a square is dedicated to public ceremonies.

**Defunct:** Spirit survives after death and can be in contact with the living, advise, warn or judge them. A spirit of a defunct is considered wiser than the elders still alive. Some Vòdoun are the spirits of legendary ancestors. So, communication with defuncts is possible.

**Fetish :** Objet dedicated to a Vòdoun and possessed by an initiated person ; the fetish must be consecrated by prayers and the blood of a sacrificed animal. The power of the energy conveyed depends on the fetish and the owner must have the appropriate degree of initiation to manage it, otherwise he runs risks.

There are many fetishes in the temples. A fetish may be de-consecrated; in that case it becomes a simple object which can be sold in specialised shops.

**Sacred Forest :** a part of a forest forbidden to non initiated and including a sacred source.

**Grigri, Amulets and Necklaces:** Those « magic objects » are normally used to protect the owner, but can also be used against his enemies. Initiates can be recognized by the necklaces they wear.

**Initiation :** Rites and trials (normally secret) allowing a believer to deepen his spirituality. They include a symbolic death followed by a re-birth.

**Sorcerers :** In principle, the Vòdoun religion is not related to traditional witchcraft practiced by **bochios** and used defensively or offensively with good or evil intentions.

#### **Possession :**

During ceremonies, when the Vòdoun - invited by ritual actions (prayers, sacrifices, etc.) - appear, they can “ride” a participant (initiate, faithful or simply curious) and make him perform an ecstatic dance in order to communicate messages. When the Vòdoun abandons the person he has ridden, that person returns to a normal state, remembers nothing and feels good.

**Purification :** gestures or rites aiming to avoid and/or clean harmful energies which result after healing actions and are accumulated for a time in a certain place.

**Reverting (egungun) and ghosts :** In certain occasions, the spirits of defuncts leave their convents and - dressed with rich and heavy costumes – come and **dance** near the living. They reveal informations. It is dangerous to touch them, particularly for the non initiates. People owe them a great respect.

*Ghosts* correspond to cases of brutal death without the complete funeral ceremonies. They wander waiting to be led to the world beyond.

*Zombies correspond to simulated dead under the influence of a maleficent sorcerer; they are present in Haitian but not in the African Vòdoun.*

**Sacrifices :** as in most ancient religions, animal sacrifices are common. Their blood is offered to divinities or sprayed to participants ; their flesh is cooked and consumed by the believers.

**Symbols et sacred numbers** : Vôdoun is extremely rich in symbols , colors associated to divinities and some important numbers :

**16** : represents the 16 sacred walnuts of FA (the divinatory art)

**21** : the layman overshadowed by the divinity has 21 days to be reborn in a new life

**41** : powerful symbolic number concerning the process of reincarnation of divinities in natural objects like trees , rivers ....

*(this since a sacred tree, felled by lightning during a thunderstorm ,has recovered after 41 days)*

**256** : kpolis = gods =  $16 \times 16 = 256$  combinations which identify the particular characteristics of a man or a woman.

**Syncretism** : The Vôdoun believers are open to the other religions ; many beninese Christians are also Vôdoun practicing as they believe that « two protections are stronger than one »

#### **4 Evolution of Vôdoun to Americas**

The slave trade transferred Vôdoun together with other west and central African spiritualities (from Mali, Senegal, Kongo.....) on the other side of the Atlantic. Those spiritualities mixed together as well as with Catholicism and resulted to strongly syncretised religions

**Vaudou** : Haïti and Louisiane (Vaudou has become the profound spirituality of Haïti)

**Santeria** : Cuba

**Quemboa** : french Antilles

**Candonblé** : Brazil

**Macomba** : Brazil

The Haitian Vaudou and the other above mentioned spiritualities of the Americas will be examined in a future seminar. The Arcana website offers a good introduction (4)

#### **5 References (in french)**

1 WIKIPEDIA :<https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vaudou>

2 CHARLIER Philippe : Vaudou. L'homme, la nature et les dieux (Bénin)  
Editions Terre Humaine, Plon

*You can view a 14 min interview of the author*

<https://www.france24.com/fr/%C3%A9missions/invit%C3%A9-du-jour/20210113-philippe-charlier-le-Vôdoun-est-tout-sauf-une-sorcellerie>

3 MANDEL Jean-Jacques : Voyage en Vodouland ou le chemin de Duchamp à Lacan

[https://detoursdesmondes.typepad.com/dtours\\_des\\_mondes/2014/05/jean-jacques-mandel-objets-Vôdoun-.html](https://detoursdesmondes.typepad.com/dtours_des_mondes/2014/05/jean-jacques-mandel-objets-Vôdoun-.html)

4 ARCANA Le Vaudou, religion ou sorcellerie

<http://arcanatv.fr/le-Vôdoun-religion-ou-sorcellerie>