

VODUN DAYS

THE ABCS OF THE VODUN DAYS

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OUIDAH, BENIN

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GOUVERNEMENT
DE LA RÉPUBLIQUE
DU BÉNIN

The ABCs of the Vodun Days

A.

Aïzan of the Zobè Market:

Aïzan represents the "Energy" of markets and trade. Located at the entrance of the Zobè Market, its role is to protect against impoverishment and make the market prosperous and flourishing. It is the starting point of the procession that leads to the beach.

Auction Square:

The Auction Square is a public space where many cultural and religious activities take place during Vodun Days in Ouidah. Historically, it was a place where public auctions were held for the sale of slaves destined for the Americas.

B.

Baobab (Kpasatin):

The Baobab, also known as Kpasatin in Vodun religion, is a sacred tree in Benin. This majestic tree, appreciated both for its strength and its spiritual symbolism, plays an important role in Vodun.

Bocio:

A sacred ritual object, often a sculpture, used in various Vodun rituals. The Bocio are revered and nourished during religious ceremonies.

C.

Vodun Ceremonial:

The Vodun Ceremonial involves a set of codified and sacred rituals. These rituals include symbolic actions, prayers, songs, dances, and sometimes specific offerings. Each element of the ceremonial has a particular meaning and contributes to establishing a connection between participants and the Vodun.

Vodun Convent:

The Vodun convent is a religious institution where Vodunsi (followers of Vodun) lead a communal religious life. The unique feature of the Vodun convent is that it combines living spaces with educational institutions. Indeed, the Vodun convent has areas dedicated to training novices (Hunkpokpo). The teachings provided here are based on the philosophy of

Vodun faith, which advocates balance and harmony between all creatures of the Supreme Being (Mahu in Fon/Olodumare in Yoruba).

Cowries:

Cowries are used as divination tools by Vodun priests and priestesses. They are cast, arranged, and interpreted in various ways to obtain spiritual guidance on questions, future events, or aspects of daily life. In addition to their ritual use, cowries are also used as adornments in the making of jewelry and costumes worn during Vodun ceremonies.

D.

The Dahomey:

Founded in the 17th century, the Kingdom of Danxome is an ancient kingdom located in what is now Benin. This political entity played a major role in the transatlantic slave trade, with the port of Ouidah as a central hub. The kingdom was ruled by a succession of kings, some of whom were known for their territorial expansion and military prowess. The Vodun religion thrived within the kingdom, becoming a fundamental element of Dahomey's culture and identity.

Dan:

"Dan," in the languages of the Gbe dialect continuum, means "serpent." In the Vodun pantheon, certain species of snakes are revered, such as the royal python – an early expression of respect for rare species. Dan is the symbol of one of the elements of Nature, representing Vodun, in this case, Air. This cardinal Vodun, like Xevioso (Cosmic Fire), Sakpata (Earth), and Tɔ̀xɔ̀su (Water), connects Earth and Sky and is endowed with specific attributes dedicated to happiness, wealth, and prosperity. The faithful initiated to this Vodun are among the largest groups in the pantheon.

Diasporas:

In the context of Vodun, the diasporas refer to the dispersion of Vodun religious, cultural, and spiritual practices worldwide, primarily due to the slave trade. This phenomenon has led to a variety of syncretic traditions where Vodun merged with other beliefs, influencing cultures in the Americas, notably through practices like Santería in Cuba, Vodou in Haiti, and Candomblé in Brazil.

The Door of No Return:

The Door of No Return is a monument located in Ouidah, Benin. This structure is historically associated with the transatlantic slave trade that took place from the 15th to the 19th century. The arch, covered in concrete and bronze, presents striking visual representations of this painful period. Both sides of the arch are adorned with images depicting enslaved men and women.

Drums (or Tam-tams):

Drums are at the heart of Vodun music. They are played rhythmically and powerfully to call the spirits and maintain spiritual energy during rituals.

E.

Egungun:

The term 'Egún' is in K'áǎrò (Yoruba) and means 'bone, skeleton,' that is, 'the one who is dead and returns.' 'Egúngún' is therefore the duplication of 'Egún.' Egúngún is primarily an institution in certain Áǎ-Tádó families where, upon the transition of an individual who has led a good life, the family members decide to immortalize them. It is a beatification that both succeeds and institutes ancestral worship, as is customary in Gbe families, and the cult of ancestors. Essentially, the Egúngún cult and the cult of ancestors are the same religious reality in Áǎ-Tádó, a practice that continually teaches us that the first religion of humanity is undoubtedly ancestor worship, which is not without evoking the scene of the weighing of the heart in the Egyptian conception of the immortality of the deceased.

However, there is a difference not only in substance but especially in form between the Egúngún cult and the cult of ancestors in the Gbe dialect continuum. While both cults represent the spiritual return of the dead among the living, Egúngún is not only a physical return, meaning a materialization of the deceased's spirit, which is why it is masked, but more importantly, this mask leads to both veneration and a spectacle. (For more details, refer to the book *Le Fá, la Gnose Àǎ et la Mécanique quantique* by Professor Mahougnon KAKPO).

F.

Fá:

Just like Gèlèdǎ, UNESCO proclaimed Fá (Ifá) in 2005 as 'Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity' and inscribed it as such in 2008. Fá is a message from Olódùmarè or Mahu (the Supreme God according to the Yoruba name and in the Gbè dialect continuum). It represents Universal Wisdom, Knowledge on all matters, and Encyclopedic Knowledge. However, this encyclopedic knowledge can only be accessed by the sole òrúnmìlà (Sovereign Spiritual Power governing divination) because it has "witnessed the destiny" of everything that exists. Thus, òrúnmìlà is an intermediary, the only medium capable of ascending to Ifá to find, like in a vast library, the answers to human concerns.

But for òrúnmìlà to be called upon to access Ifá, the Bòkòńó or Babalawo must handle the sacred nuts, archetypes of òrúnmìlà, or the òkpèlè, the divination chain made of rope or metal.

In other words, the ultimate God, to whom it is difficult for humans to address directly, has granted one of His attributes, His Wisdom or His Word, to òrúnmìlà, who is the only one able to access it. Here, divine Wisdom or the Word of Olódùmarè is what is called Ifá or Fá. It is to òrúnmìlà that the Babalawo or Bòkòńò turn when they themselves are asked by the clients to

obtain the response from Olódùmarè through the intermediary of Ifá. This is why Fá, according to one of its multiple functions, is used as a system of divination.

As such, it is a set of signs called Fádù (divisions of Fá), graphically expressed as two sets of parallel and vertical lines transcribed and readable from right to left and top to bottom on four columns, which the Bòkónó interprets through the intermediary of òkpèlè (or Ákplè).

The Fá alphabet consists of 16 letters, with the duplication of the same letter creating a sign: this is the Fádù, which is a division of Fá. There are 16 cardinal Fádù from which 240 others derive, making the total 256 Fádù, each producing an infinite number of words in the languages (Fágbèsisa, Fágìlèta, and Fáhàn) that make them up. It is this Fádù, which should not be confused with the zodiac sign, that carries all the information of the ontological metaphysics of the individual, which the latter will discover in the forest of Fá after a meticulously conducted initiation according to a relentless ritual led by eminent Bòkónò or Babalawo. The cardinal Fádù are called "Meji" (two in Yoruba) and consist of a duplication of the same letter. They are divided into males and females and admit indicative and esoteric figurations. (For more details, refer to the book *Le Fá, la Gnose Àjé et la Mécanique quantique* by Professor Mahougnon KAKPO).

The Sacred Forest of Kpassè:

The Kpassè temple is an important Vodun worship site in Ouidah. It is dedicated to Kpassè, the eponymous ancestor of the Xwéla and former king of Savi. The tree in which he incarnated is a Vodun associated with prosperity, health, and protection. The site is located in Ouidah, in the Tové neighborhood. It is a semi-dense forest that houses approximately thirty-six (36) species across twenty (20) families. Some of these species have medicinal properties. It is also home to Baobabs and a large Iroko tree, symbolizing the reincarnation of King Kpassè, who mysteriously disappeared according to legend. Since 1993, the site has become an internationally recognized tourist destination.

The Forts of Ouidah:

Three historical forts were erected in Ouidah during the transatlantic slave trade period: the Portuguese, English, and French forts. These structures were meant to facilitate diplomatic and commercial relations with the local authorities. After the abolition of the slave trade in the early 19th century, these forts were gradually abandoned, leaving behind remnants of their past. The English fort, notably, was only partially visible by the end of the 19th century, while the French fort was dismantled in 1911 by order of the French governor of Dahomey. Only the Portuguese fort remained, albeit in a dilapidated state, and Portugal continued to exercise its sovereignty over it with the tacit consent of the French colonial authorities. This Portuguese sovereignty lasted until 1961, when the fort was occupied without opposition by the forces of the Republic of Dahomey.

G.

Gèlèdǣ:

The word "Gèlèdǎ" comes from the Yoruba "gèlè" = "headgear, adornment" and "ǎ" = "to arrive." It can thus be translated as "the adorned head arrives." Proclaimed in 2001, Gèlèdǎ was only inscribed by UNESCO in 2008 on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Two essential characteristics are associated with the Gèlèdǎ mask: "the playful nature of the performance and its therapeutic effects, supported by the power of Iyá." The Gèlèdǎ mask has established the K'áǎrò society as a society of Gèlèdǎ. The Gèlèdǎ mask, although there are some in a single structure, is often made up of a mask representing a Yoruba woman's head, identifiable by its authentic ethnic features. This primary mask is generally topped with a superstructure representing a particular spectacle. (For more details, see the book *Le Fá, la Gnose Àjé et la Mécanique quantique* by Professor Mahougnon KAKPO).

Gong Geminé:

The Gong Geminé holds significant ritual value. It consists of two large bells of different sizes (one large with a smaller one welded to it) made of forged iron, united by a curved metallic handle, often reinforced and embellished, serving as a grip. It is carried with the bells facing either up or down, and struck with a wooden or iron stick depending on the sound to be produced. There are also versions with a single bell. The bells are used to mark the tempo, rhythm dances, or announce information related to Vodun Temples.

I.

Iroko:

The Iroko, a sacred tree, is the only Vodun tree in the Aja-Tado and, as such, receives dedicated rituals. It is involved in rituals related to sterility, health, and protection. (For more details, refer to the book *L'Iroko: The Tree of Life in Vodun Mysticism* by Professor Mahougnon KAKPO).

Isope Africain (Desretin ou Hunma):

This liturgical plant is frequently used in purification rituals and as a medicinal plant.

K.

Kapok (Huntin):

Another sacred tree that plays an important role in Vodun rituals. Various parts of the tree, such as the bark and roots, are used for medicinal purposes to treat ailments like fever and infections.

L.

Leǎbà:

Leḡbà is a central Vodun in the Vodun pantheon. He is the messenger of human and other Vodun's messages to the Supreme Being. Representing order and chaos, the meeting point of all opposites, he is the guardian of thresholds (home, city, market, other Vodun Temples, etc.). Thus, he symbolizes masculinity, as well as the connection between the tangible and the spiritual.

M.

Mami Wata:

In Vodun religion, Mami Wata is an oceanic Vodun. She mainly governs the energies of prosperity and fertility. Devotees honor her in hopes of receiving blessings for health, wealth, and fertility. Devotees of Mami Wata participate in dedicated rituals, often involving offerings, dances, and specific ceremonies to honor and communicate with this Vodun.

Maracas (Hoquets or Castanets):

Dried gourds filled with seeds or surrounded by seeds mounted in netting, maracas are percussion instruments played to accompany drums. They are also used to invoke the Vodun.

Maro Square:

Maro Square is a public space where many cultural and religious activities will take place during Vodun Days. It is the designated area for hosting the Egungun. It is a gathering place for celebrations, dances, artistic performances, and Vodun rituals. It is at the heart of the festivities.

The Zoungbodji Memorial:

The Zoungbodji Memorial, erected in Ouidah along the Slave Route, is a poignant tribute to the victims of the horrific period of slavery. It is located at the site of the mass grave, where weakened slaves, the sick, women, children, and sometimes even the living, were abandoned without burial. This monument stands as a symbol of memory and commemoration. The centerpiece of this work is a towering vertical stele, 6 meters by 4, with a striking symbolic style. It represents slaves in various situations, capturing the horror of their fate with emotional depth. The creator of this work skillfully uses color symbolism: brown evokes the bodies, black represents the chains, and blood-red marks the human tragedy.

The International Vodun Museum:

Covering 15,516m², the International Vodun Museum in Porto-Novo is much more than a simple exhibition space. It is a living encyclopedia of religions that will provide visitors with the intellectual and visual tools to understand the foundations of Vodun religion. The goal will be to make Vodun accessible, positioning it as a fully-fledged spirituality within the concert of religions and other forms of spiritualities that have governed the history of creation.

O.

Orisha:

"Orisha" is the generic name for Vodun in Yoruba. These are spiritual entities revered in religious traditions of Yoruba origin, such as Vodun in Benin and other forms of spirituality in West Africa and the African diaspora, notably Santería in Cuba and the United States and Candomblé in Brazil.

Ouidah:

The historic city of Ouidah, located in Benin, embodies a rich artistic, cultural, and spiritual heritage rooted in Vodun tradition. It plays a central role as a symbolic site for the transatlantic slave trade, with memorial sites such as the Door of No Return, the Slave Route, the Zoungbodji Memorial, the Sacred Forest of Kpassè, the Python Temple, the Basilica, the Auction Square, and the Door of No Return... Ouidah stands out for its architecture and picturesque streets, offering visitors an authentic immersion into the contemporary life of the city. Ouidah is recognized for its major role in preserving Vodun traditions through rituals held at the main squares of the city. It is the city selected by the Government of Benin to host the Vodun Days festivities.

P.

Vodun Priests and Priestesses:

Vodun priests and priestesses occupy crucial roles within the Vodun religion in Benin. They are considered the guardians of spiritual traditions, sacred knowledge, and rituals passed down from generation to generation, playing a central role in communication with the Vodun and maintaining balance between the material and spiritual worlds.

Python:

DANGBOE OR THE TɔXWIYɔ OF THE XWEḍANU.

The term "Xweḍanu" is formed from "Xweḍa," meaning the "Xwela" or "Pédah" ethnic group in the French version, and "nu" meaning "originating from." Therefore, "Xweḍanu" means "originating from Xweḍa; one who belongs to the Xweḍa ethnicity," and thus "Xweḍa Dangboe" translates to "Dangboe of the Xweḍanu," meaning "Dangboe venerated by the Xweḍa people." The term "Dangboe" itself, notably in the Xwela language, is formed by the morphemes "dan" meaning "serpent" and "gboe," which refers to something "great, ancient, worthy of respect and reverence." Dangboe, the royal python, a constrictor and non-venomous snake, is considered the Tɔxwiɔ of the Xweḍanu. It is revered by members of this southern Benin ethnic group, who, like one of the species of this sacred snake, bear ten vertical scars on their faces: two on the forehead, two on each temple, and two on each cheek. These

scars are visible marks of identification for the Xwedanu. In terms of energies or elements, Dangboe falls under the line of the air element: Dan.

Although historically the Tɔxwiɔ (eponymous ancestor, founder of the clan or ethnicity) of only the Xwedanu, almost all ethnic groups in the Aja-Tado cultural area revere this sacred serpent, not necessarily as Tɔxwiɔ, but rather as Vodun. Thus, like the Xwedanu, all members of the community respect the prohibitions against the destruction and consumption of this sacred snake. Similarly, when a member of the community accidentally kills – during agricultural work, while traveling on the road... – or discovers the dead Dangboe, wherever it may be, they have the duty to bury it while ensuring they capture its spirit by touching the grave with a stone, which they bring to the priests of the Dangboe cult, called Dangbenɔ (Priests of Dangboe). This stone is deposited by the priests, after a specific ritual consecrating the return of the spirit (Yɛ) of the eponymous ancestor (Tɔxwiɔ) into the ethnic aggregate, in the hut designated for this purpose. Then, the person who brought the stone, symbolizing the spirit of the eponymous ancestor, is subjected to a ritual purification bath to cleanse them of the Yɛ (DNA) of the sacred snake. A canary containing certain plants with similar goals is handed to them, and they continue the purification bath for seven days, at the end of which they must return the empty canary to the priests for the necessary action. Failing to submit to these rituals exposes the person who killed or discovered the dead sacred snake to the same consequences as if it were murder or sacrilege. These consequences can lead to the death of the sacrilege.

There are at least seven species of Xwedɔ Dangboe, each with its own characteristics:

1. **Kpohun:** This python has marks resembling scars on the face – on the forehead, each temple, and each cheek. It is large and short (about 15 to 20 cm long and similarly in diameter). It jumps, unlike other species, and develops a powerful energy of invincibility. Considered the mother of pythons, it is the founding species of the Xwedɔ ethnic group.
2. **Drɛ:** The most well-known species of python, Drɛ has fresh skin dominated by a shiny black color. It is large, 15 to 25 cm in diameter, and can reach up to 2 meters in length. It is considered the father of pythons.
3. **Likpo:** The specificity of this python with a very short tail is its stiffness, which often prevents it from shedding.
4. **Xwesi:** This python, with a long tail, is exceptionally aquatic and sometimes feeds on small fish.
5. **Gbeji:** The green color dominating the skin of this medium-sized python seems to make it destined for the bush, where it feels most comfortable.
6. **Ava:** In addition to sharing the same characteristics as Kpohun, this python can climb trees and stay suspended without eating for several weeks.
7. **Le:** This is the most domesticated of the pythons. Very beautiful due to its bright blue skin, this slender and flexible python loves cool places in the house, especially under jars of fresh water. (For more details, refer to the book *Le Fá: Le flambeau des Mystères. Une phénoménologie de l'ontologie* by Professor Mahougnon KAKPO).

R.

Rituals:

Rituals in Vodun religion are sacred and structured ceremonies designed to honor, invoke, or communicate with the Vodun. These rituals are deeply rooted in an understanding of the connection between the material and spiritual worlds.

The Slave Route:

The Slave Route, extending over 3.5 kilometers, is a historical and commemorative path that traces the painful journey captives made to the slave ships in Ouidah, Benin. Established in 1992, this memorial path starts at the Auction Square, where slaves were once sold, before leaving the city center. Further along, a statue symbolizes the Tree of Forgetfulness, around which slaves were forced to walk repeatedly, losing their identity. The journey continues through the village of Zoungbodji, where captives were confined in the Zomayi hut, a poignant reminder of the inhumane conditions they endured. The final stop on this route is symbolized by the Door of No Return, reflecting the forced departure of slaves toward an unknown destiny on the slave ships.

The Vodun Convent Route:

The Vodun Convent Route aims to identify, document, restore, and connect Vodun Temples. It serves as a tourist immersion itinerary into the fundamental values of Vodun religion. Five cities have been carefully selected for a pilot phase: Ouidah, Adjara, Abomey, Kétou, and Grand-Popo. Each of these cities embodies the history of Vodun and offers a unique opportunity to delve into the rich pantheon of this spiritual tradition.

S.

Sakpata:

In Vodun religion, Sakpata is a Vodun associated with diseases and healing. It represents the Earth element and is revered for its protective powers against epidemics. Some rituals and ceremonies related to Vodun Sakpata involve activities performed directly on the ground, highlighting its connection to the energies of the Earth.

T.

Vodun Temple:

A Vodun Temple is a sacred ritual space dedicated to venerating the Vodun and practicing Vodun religion. These temples are sacred spaces where devotees gather to honor the Vodun, perform rituals, and participate in spiritual ceremonies.

The Python Temple:

This temple is one of the most iconic sites in Ouidah and is dedicated to the worship of the sacred python, an important Vodun. The pythons live freely within the temple and are considered divine messengers. Visitors and Vodun devotees come here to venerate the pythons. The Python Temple symbolizes the connection between Vodun religion and nature.

The Sakpata Temple:

The Sakpata Temple, located in Zoungbodji, as part of the Vodun Convent Route project, represents a significant manifestation of the preservation and promotion of Vodun heritage. The Sakpata Temple offers a dedicated space for rituals honoring the Vodun Sakpata, associated with Earth energy, revered for its ability to provide prosperity and protect against epidemics.

The Temporary Mami Dan Temple:

The Temporary Mami Dan Temple is a sacred site in Ouidah, erected specifically to celebrate and honor Vodun Mami Wata through rituals during the Vodun Days, which will take place on January 9, 10, and 11, 2025 in the historic city.

The Tree of Forgetfulness:

After their sale at the Auction Square, slaves were forced to walk around the Tree of Forgetfulness, performing this ritual nine times for men and seven times for women. This process was designed to symbolically erase all traces of their identity and belonging, highlighting the dehumanization and systematic dispossession of the captives. The Tree of Forgetfulness in Ouidah remains a poignant symbol of the suffering endured by those dragged into the abyss of the transatlantic slave trade.

V.

Vodun:

Vodun religion is characterized by its commitment to the balance between the visible and invisible worlds, as well as the various aspects of life, including nature and culture. Deeply rooted in the traditions of the Aja-Tado peoples, encompassing the Gbe and K'aaro dialect continuum, Vodun represents the generic term for the vibrational energies created by Mahu (Olodumare or Ọlórún in Yoruba), which means: Nu e ma hugan: "that which no one can surpass, the Unsurpassable, the Supreme." These energies have the power to guide human beings in their existential questions.

There are several types of Vodun in the pantheon: the cardinal Vodun (Hunsuzɛn), those based on the elements of Nature (Earth: Sakpata; Fire: Xɛvioso; Water: Tɔxɔsu; Air: Dan), masked Vodun (Egungun, Zangbetɔ, Gɛlɛdɛ...), unmasked Vodun, and Ta Vodun (those carried on the head or shoulders)...

Vodunsi:

The term "vodunsi" refers to a devotee of Vodun. It is a person who, initiated into Vodun, actively practices this religion. Their role is fundamental in preserving the practices and knowledge related to Vodun, thus contributing to the transmission of this centuries-old tradition within the community.

Vodun Days Village:

Throughout the event, the Vodun Days Village will offer visitors an immersive space filled with captivating activities and workshops. Various food stalls will offer a variety of local and international dishes, giving visitors the opportunity to savor a diverse range of flavors. Modern sanitary facilities have been set up to ensure the comfort of the public.

X.

Xevioso:

In Vodun religion, Xevioso represents the Cosmic Fire element, associated with lightning and justice. Frequently called upon to establish balance and reveal truth, Xevioso embodies the force of nature while symbolizing the principles of justice that guide devotees in their quest for spiritual harmony.

Y.

Yoruba:

The Yoruba are an ethnic group from West Africa, primarily concentrated in Nigeria, Benin, and Togo, and their language belongs to the Niger-Congo language family. The term is also associated with a rich cultural, religious, and artistic tradition that has heavily influenced Vodun and other spiritual practices within the African diaspora.


Z.

Zangbetɔ:

Originating from Goun, the term Zangbetɔ comes from "zan" meaning "night" and "gbétɔ" meaning "night guardian." It is an initiatory order whose daytime appearance is a straw mask. At night, the Zangbetɔ becomes an invisible guardian who patrols the streets of neighborhoods, acting as a deterrent to wrongdoers. This guardian function helps instill a sense of security within the community.

The Zomayi Hut:

The Zomayi Hut is a crucial stop on "The Slave Route" in Ouidah, Benin. The term "Zomayi" means "where the light does not venture." This memorial stop referred to a large sealed hut



where slaves were confined upon their arrival at Zoungbodji. They only left when it was time to board the slave ships waiting near the beach. The Zomayi Hut symbolizes this dark chapter in the history of the slave trade, reminding us of the oppressive conditions to which captives were subjected before being forcibly sent to an unknown fate.

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