

Vodoun: Historical and socio-anthropological study of an ancestral heritage in search of affirmation

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ABSTRACT: This article sheds light on the undeniable significance of Vodoun in Benin as a deeply rooted religious and cultural phenomenon. This anthropological religious practice exerts a crucial influence on both individual and collective levels. The examination of Vodoun in Benin reveals its profound integration into local culture, playing a pivotal role in promoting spiritual well-being and constructive collaboration between authorities and guardians of religious tradition. It constitutes an indispensable pillar of socio-cultural identity, contributing to development and the protection of human rights. According to our findings, Vodoun maintains a close connection with power, endowing it with legitimacy in various aspects, and it holds great importance in educational, social, cultural, economic, and political domains. Taking these elements into consideration, it is universally acknowledged as a foundational religion that encourages harmonious coexistence with other beliefs. It occupies a central place in religious and political culture, thus contributing to the country's development. Nevertheless, challenges persist, notably the fight against discrimination and the essential promotion of interreligious tolerance. It is imperative for public authorities to actively collaborate with Vodoun to address development challenges and promote religious tolerance in Benin, thereby preserving the richness of its religious culture.

KEYWORDS: Vodoun, Religion, Culture, Identity, Development, Tolerance.

1 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 Vodoun cultural practices in the Beninese political world during the revolutionary period of the 1980s, thus demonstrating the ubiquity of religion and the necessity of its influence over the domain. In Benin, the importance of religious facts is observed in the field of public administration, communities and state institutions. Vodoun, 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 Vodoun in society remains embryonic or almost absent, although we note its precedence in acts, speeches and political expressions.

An in-depth survey in major cities reveals the relationship between religious belief and power, particularly highlighting the connection between Vodoun and power. This coexistence was fostered by the "democratic renewal" government in the 1990s, 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 intimacy between this cultural banality that constitutes Vodoun, which will bring assurance, security, well-being and the assurance of leading the State, public and private administration., municipal or any other socially constituted group. This pre-eminence of Vodoun would reduce the major act of social change to a couple formed by power and this cultural specificity, which questions us on the question of religious belief in the political sphere of Benin in the era of democracy and ideologization of good practices in political and public governance.

If the study of Vodoun most often involves understanding the deep meanings of the beliefs and practices of Vodoun (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 thinking about the concept of power and authority, and in their exercise, drawing on the sociological, legal and anthropological work of recent decades, we can ask ourselves how Vodoun has played an active role in the definition and deployment, even the development, of public policies? The study aims to show that the link between Vodoun and political power is more complex and less clear-cut than it seems. For example, how do Vodoun customs affect the conduct of public affairs, the management of public resources and the protection of human rights in Beninese society? How have Vodoun practices continued to be used to exercise political power over time?

The research aims to show that the link between Vodoun and political power is more complex and less clear-cut than it seems. For example, how does the practice of Vodoun affect the conduct of public affairs, the management of public resources and the protection of human rights in Beninese society? How have Vodoun practices been and continue to be used in the exercise of political power over time? How do politicians or individuals continue to use this governance model? How is such a taxonomy updated over time? How do men and women, particularly politicians, come to use Vodoun practices in the exercise of their functions?

By what mechanism is Vodoun 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 Vodoun in the Beninese context, constitute so many research questions whose analyzes cannot be reduced to an approach utilitarian Vodoun, nor the dissemination of any religious ideology, but 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, patterns of reasoning and cultural references of action of Vodoun practices in and absorb all the consequences logics of the notion of power as it has been developed since independence in a complementarist sense (Devereux, 1967). In other words, it is a question of understanding public actors (politicians, leaders and civil servants) of society from the double dimension of culture and religion, as levers for apprehension of power, based on their history, their socialization and their contextualization and the spatial experience which makes them actors resolutely straddling tradition and modernity.

The research is descriptive and analytical in nature, combining scientific writing, metanarratives, direct observation and in-depth interviews. It is essentially based on the systemic and multi-scale approach (from the local scale to the institutional scale to analyze the social use of Vodoun in governance processes. Work on scientific production, power and religion, notably Vodoun and power in the Beninese context, allow a critical analysis of writings and literature related to this subject. It is enriched with ethnohistory based on historical data and other information from the works Africanist historians and anthropologists, for example: (Aclinou, 2016), (Ballard, 1998), (Cornevin, 1969), (Gayibor, 2011), (Poda, 2010), (De la Torre, 1991) and so and so, adding our personal experiences, stories with our parents and in the Vodoun initiation convents, but also the traditional national philosophy, whose teachings give us insight into 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 Vodoun social practices, in particular cults, rituals or sacrifices in the political sphere on the relationship between the Beninese and the power, as well as the different strategies of social and cultural appropriation that they developed.

Understanding the phenomenon of use and appropriation of Vodoun in politics facilitates the understanding of the subtleties associated with it relating to specific social and cultural practices which 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 groups, 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 Vodoun practices in political matters, particularly in the conduct of public and private affairs. Other interviews with senior dignitaries and people who do not use these practices helped to understand the sociocultural perception of a living practice in politics in Benin.

We will observe, 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 posture to obtain useful and weak information in this framework 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 as whole people "by slow and continuous direct paths of impregnation" (Laplantine, 2001, p.

17), and by maintaining individualized relationships with the different members of the social group observed. Consequently, we use observation directly to account for the way in which the Beninese use Vodoun, in particular its practices, to achieve their ends in terms of governance or power.

In the same way as Rostaing (2017), we can affirm that the Vodoun field presents specificities which, through its properties, tested the concept of the study, the ethical principles and the attitude of the researcher because of the sacred nature of the subject and its cultural anchoring.

The study was carried out in administrations, institutions, public companies, political groups, but also in private companies rationally selected due to the high observed rate of use of Vodoun practices by managers in Benin. The study involved around a hundred informants and was carried out over a period of six months. The processing of the data was subject to methods and approaches for interpreting texts or religious foundations, in particular semiotics, sociocriticism, historical-critical reading without forgetting psychoanalysis. This theoretical position makes it possible to understand the phenomenon of use of Vodoun practices in the political sphere by reconstituting the motivations of users as the result of an aggregation of individual behaviors (Boudon, 1986).

2 BENINESE VODOUN: FROM THE ORIGIN TO THE PRESENT DAY

2.1 THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL DIMENSION OF VODOUN IN BENIN

In this section, we will delve into the fascinating world of Vodoun in Benin, adopting an anthropological perspective that will allow us to better understand its origins and evolution. Vodoun, rooted in Beninese culture for generations, constitutes a complex belief system rich in deep rituals. We will explore these Vodoun beliefs and practices which have a profound influence on the daily lives of the Beninese. An in-depth analysis from an anthropological perspective allowed us to examine Vodoun as a cultural and symbolic system. We have examined its components in detail, explored its deities, studied its rituals, and explored its role as a tool of cultural expression. This perspective has greatly helped us understand how Vodoun is intrinsically woven into the social and spiritual fabric of Beninese society.

Vodoun draws its roots from the heart of Beninese history, enriched by the complex fusion between the myths and ethnophilosophy of the people who forged the region. It emerges as a response to life's challenges, thus resulting from a deep cultural elaboration. This fusion gave birth to a rich and diverse belief system, integrating elements of spirituality, rituals, and practices inherited from various traditions.

Vodoun, as defined by the Àjá-Fòn and Yoruba-Nagô cultures of Benin, Nigeria and Togo, represents "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, he evokes "the country of invisible forces". According to Roger Brand, vodoun is a traditional religion where the deities 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 emphasizes the direct interaction between man, animal, natural force and vodoun, where these entities offer help or refrain from harm. Kofi Folikpo compares it to an immaterial principle, a spiritual energy participating in the maintenance of cosmic balance in Divine Creation. He thus evokes Vodoun as an invisible but omnipresent reality, contributing to the harmony of the universe. According to Honorat Aguessy, Vodoun designates any power beyond 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 Vodoun, which exerts its influence from beyond to affect the world of the living.

For us, Vodoun, 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. This legacy of ancient civilizations offers answers to humanity's deep questions, influencing daily life while maintaining cosmic balance through its deities, natural forces, and sacred connection. It can be presented as a harmonious fusion between deeply rooted beliefs in Beninese culture and a set of ritual practices that embody these beliefs, thus forming an integrated cultural and spiritual system.

Vodoun, as a belief system, is based on the recognition of a multitude of spirits, ancestors and deities, each with their own characteristics and areas of influence. These deities are worshiped through elaborate rituals that include intoxicating dances, vibrant chants, solemn invocations, and sometimes symbolic offerings. All of these ritual practices form a sort of living pantheon where believers come into contact with the spiritual world. The Vodoun pantheon forms a complex mosaic of deities, each symbolizing particular aspects of the universe and exercising distinct functions within the Vodoun cosmology. Among these prominent deities, we can identify those who stand out for their unique attributes.

Sàkpàtà, the god of the earth, embodies the fertile power of nature. Gu, often referred to as the celestial smith and god of war, is associated with creation and protection. Xěvyósó or Sôgbô, god of thunder, represents justice and equity in the Vodoun universe. Dan, the cosmic serpent, embodies regeneration and rebirth. Tàxàxú, god of waters, is linked to aquatic elements and purification rituals. Agě, god of the bush, animals and birds, symbolizes wild life and protection. Jo, god of the air, controls the vital breath that envelops the universe. Legba, as a messenger of the Vodunns, plays a crucial intermediary role between the deities, other Vodunns and humans.

In addition, Vodoun includes the Toxwyo, clan, collectivist or family deities, who ensure the specific protection of clans, communities, families or individuals. These entities establish a vital link between the world of ancestors and the daily lives of believers, whether as an eponymous ancestor, a sacred object or even an animal or plant divinity.

It is essential to note that this rich and varied Vodoun pantheon implies that each deity contributes to maintaining cosmic balance and regulating different aspects of life within the Àjá-Fòn and Yoruba-Nagô communities. This belief in the deep interconnection between the material and spiritual world is fundamental to the way Vodoun shapes the vision of the cosmos for its followers. It has a significant impact on the daily life of the Beninese, who integrate Vodoun into many aspects of their existence. Vodoun, as an anthropological religious reality, exerts a profound influence on every aspect of daily life in Benin. It is not limited to occasional rituals, but becomes a framework for understanding the world which structures the interactions between individuals and their environment. From the life cycle, from births to marriages, to transitions to the afterlife, Vodoun ceremonies punctuate the key moments of existence, thus reflecting the way in which religious beliefs and practices are intertwined with social life. and cultural. As a source of spiritual guidance, Vodoun also plays a crucial role in individual and collective decision-making, thus demonstrating its ability to influence the choices and actions of Beninese people on a daily basis.

In an anthropological approach, the study of Vodoun as a cultural and symbolic system reveals the deep meaning 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 Vodoun 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 Vodoun, from its historical importance to its contemporary relevance in the lives of the Beninese. It is a living legacy that continues to profoundly influence Beninese society, mainly in the political sphere.

2.2 THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF POWER IN BENIN

Benin, located in West Africa, has gone through phases of political change since gaining independence from France in 1960. It has experienced alternating periods between authoritarian regimes and episodes of democratization. Currently, Benin is a multi-party democratic republic that operates under a presidential system.

This political system is distinguished by a limited-term presidency, a unicameral parliament consisting of a National Assembly, as well as an independent judicial system. Presidential, legislative and municipal elections are regularly organized, reflecting the commitment to democratic principles.

Nonetheless, Benin has also been marked by periods of political unrest, including disputed elections and tensions between different political factions, during which Vodoun has played a vital role in fostering peace and conflict resolution.

Vodoun, deeply rooted in Beninese culture, exerts a significant influence on the country's politics. For example, Vodoun rituals are commonly used by Beninese politicians to consolidate their authority and legitimize their power. These practices aim to solicit the favor of spirits or deities, thus ensuring electoral success. Furthermore, references to Vodoun and its deities are frequent in political rhetoric, allowing political leaders to establish cultural links with the population and strengthen their legitimacy. Vodoun spiritual leaders, such as the Hunnongans, religious dignitaries and crowned spiritual leaders, are often consulted by politicians for spiritual advice and blessings during election campaigns. Their mediation between spirits and humans exerts an influence on certain political decisions. Similarly, Vodoun beliefs may influence voting behavior, with some voters choosing their candidate based on religious affiliations or reputation for Vodoun practices.

Furthermore, Benin's history includes notable examples where Vodoun was integrated into governance, such as the reign of King Béhanzin, who resisted French colonization with the help of Vodoun practices. These historical references continue to influence the perception of power and Vodoun within Beninese society. Thus, the interaction between Vodoun and politics remains a crucial element of Benin's political dynamics, embodying both a source of legitimacy and a deeply rooted cultural heritage that continues to influence political attitudes and behaviors in the country.

2.3 VODOUN AND POWER: AN INTRINSIC RELATIONSHIP

The history of the relationship between Vodoun and power in Benin is anchored in the genesis of great cultural entities and has left an indelible mark throughout the ages. However, it is essential to note that the significant rupture during the revolutionary period was not a simple act of exclusion of religious cultural expression, but rather the culmination of a process of modernization. The recurrent use of Vodunn practices by political figures, senior administration officials, aims at various objectives: strengthening the control of public actions, purifying the community, guarding against harmful forces, or even winning electoral favors and maintaining a political or administrative position. This dynamic perfectly reflects the interaction between the spheres of "values" and the "order of life" highlighted by the sociology of Max Weber, which emphasizes the interaction between the spheres of "values" and the "order of life". life". According to Weber, values, understood as the beliefs and ideals that guide individual and collective behavior, directly influence the organization of society and the institutions that govern daily life. The "order of life", for its part, refers to the set of rules, norms and social structures which govern the interactions and behaviors of individuals within society. Thus, the connection between values and the order of life reveals the way in which the convictions and ideals of the members of a society influence the configuration of their daily life and the institutions which govern it. According to this author, this dynamic between values and the organization of daily life finds a concrete illustration in the complex interaction between Vodoun, governance and culture in Benin.

It is clear, in the light of our observations, that the historical connection between Vodoun and the exercise of power persists undeniably. This close relationship has its origins in the constitution of large cultural entities, particularly at the time of the kingdoms, where the sovereigns elevated Vodoun to the rank of state religion. This testifies to its deep roots in the history and formation of cultural groups, well before the first interactions with the West and its culture.

In light of the testimonies of dignitaries, it appears clearly that the act of elevating Vodoun to the status of state religion profoundly strengthened the link between institutional power and this religious reality. This historic decision laid the foundations for a relationship that continues to this day, making Vodunn rituals, which involve intoxicating dances, bewitching songs, invocations of spirits, and sometimes even sacrifices, an essential pillar of Beninese religious culture and attributing to them a role of great importance in the political context.

In the political arena, Vodunn rituals serve various functions. On the one hand, they serve to legitimize power by allowing political leaders to consolidate their authority by invoking Vodunn spirits. Thus, they give a sacred dimension to their governance, positioning them as spiritual and political leaders. On the other hand, Vodunn rituals have also been used as a means of resistance and protest by groups opposed to the power in place. They thus become instruments of political mobilization and strengthening of protest movements, thus expressing their discontent and their desire for change. A historical example illustrating the significant influence of Vodoun on power in Benin is found in the reign of King Béhanzin (1889-1894) in Dahomey. Under his leadership, Vodoun played a central role in the fierce resistance against French colonization, thus demonstrating the mobilizing power of this religious practice in the political context of the time.

Anthropologist Susan Preston Blier, in her book "African Vodun: Art, Psychology, and Power," examines in depth the role of Vodoun in the construction of national identity and in fierce resistance against the colonial power of the era. Another famous example of Vodoun's influence on power is the Haitian Revolution, where Vodoun was used as a mobilizing force by Haitian slaves to overthrow French colonial power. Anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot, in his book "Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History," explores in detail this interconnection between Vodoun and the struggle for independence.

It is obvious, from our point of view, that the interaction between Vodoun and political power in Benin is a reality deeply rooted in the history and culture of the country. Vodunn spiritual leaders, rituals and historical examples reveal the complexity of this relationship, encompassing both legitimization and contestation of power. Anthropology, in our opinion, could play a central role in understanding these complex dynamics, confirming that Vodoun still maintains a significant influence on the political and social life of Benin.

For the majority of informants, particularly religious dignitaries, Vodoun provides answers to existential questions by providing benchmarks that give meaning to community life, while remaining closely linked to royal power. According to more than 90% of our informants, Vodoun, as a social and cultural practice, greatly influenced the formation, structuring and development of ancient kingdoms and empires, as well as the young independent state of Benin. Although the latter, in the name of secularism, tries to distance himself in public, he nevertheless recognizes its importance. For the supporters of this perspective, who seek to combine historical and comparative perspectives to grasp the complexity of the relationships between Vodoun and power, one cannot exist without the other in the Beninese context, mutually nourishing each other from their influences. respective.

Thus, 95% of our interviewees have a positive view of Vodoun, considering it as a cultural practice contributing to the sustainability of the State. It represents a distinctive characteristic of public intervention inherited from tradition, acting as a vector of progress and guarantor of fundamental rights. Although this point of view does not cover all social perceptions of Vodoun, it highlights the opinion of 15 interviewees who define themselves as modernists. For them, even if they do not see these practices as being useful, they recognize that Vodoun confers legitimacy to power in Benin. Indeed, a leader without Vodoun power is less feared, respected and less considered.

They admit, despite their attachment to foreign religions, that Vodoun has a constitutive scope comparable to an ideological superstructure which maintains close links with power in the Beninese context.

2.4 VODOUN AS A SOURCE OF LEGITIMACY FOR PUBLIC POWER

Vodoun, rooted for generations in Beninese culture, serves as an invaluable source of legitimacy for public authority. It gives a spiritual and historical dimension to this authority, thus strengthening its status within society. For example, Vodoun rituals are regularly incorporated into official ceremonies and inaugurations of leaders, symbolizing the continuity of tradition and the legitimacy of their mandate. Likewise, leaders who show a respectful understanding of Vodoun and its historical teachings are often better perceived by the population, thereby strengthening their power and influence.

The results of our study clearly reveal a discourse of legitimization of power through anchoring in the sacred. A remarkable illustration of this legitimization by Vodoun is found in the government of President Soglo during the 90s. This government stood out by recognizing the role of Vodoun in establishing its authority and justifying the importance given to endogenous cultural practices. Among these practices of political legitimization by Vodoun, our informants highlight the evocation of “ancestral manes”, which refers to endogenous entities.

During his inauguration, each Beninese president pronounces the phrase “Before God, the “manes of our ancestors, of the Nation and before the Beninese people, the sole holder of sovereignty”. This declaration recognizes the place of the sacred in the exercise of power. It is of crucial importance, because President Mathieu Kérékou had seen his swearing-in of April 4, 1996 annulled, precisely because he had failed to mention “the manes of our ancestors”, in accordance with his religious convictions. This passage from the inauguration speech, which precedes the policy of any Beninese head of state, has a constitutive significance by emphasizing the obligation of the first elected official to respect endogenous rites, thus establishing his role as mediator between the divinities, deities or gods, and the population.

Our sources frequently highlight acts of piety, particularly ritual ceremonies, performed by politicians when taking office, on official visits, during sacrifices, or during the organization of cultural, sporting or political events. These practices are also observed when carrying out their duties. According to our sources, many Beninese use Vodoun practices to legitimize their assumption of responsibility, whether at the start of their mandate, during their exercise, or during their appointment to a position or an administrative unit, thus evoking ritual ceremonies which were prescribed to certain Roman magistrates in history. It is striking to note the frequent reference to Vodoun proverbs in oral literature, as well as the support of dignitaries in the exercise of power, whether at a local or national level.

This predominance of the sacred, even of Vodoun, in Beninese society can only raise questions. It is likely that the use of Vodoun is largely explained by the fact that it constitutes not only an essential element of Beninese culture, but also a pillar of the political history of a people deeply attached to their endogenous values., where the invisible and the sacred are integral components of social organization and, by extension, of political power, as our various sources have revealed to us. Thus, it is plausible that aspirants to power return to their respective traditions to legitimize their public action. In any case, the observation of this attachment to Vodoun, made during this study, pushes us to recognize the importance of endogenous religious practices in the processes of legitimization of public power.

2.5 CURRENT CHALLENGES AND ISSUES IN VODOUN

Benin, as the cradle of Vodou, is faced with challenges and issues of great magnitude arising from the coexistence between this ancestral religious tradition and contemporary political power. This complex situation requires an in-depth analysis of religious anthropology to fully understand its impact on Beninese society. At the heart of this issue, we identify a series of major challenges, each requiring careful exploration from the perspective of religious anthropology.

By carefully analyzing this dynamic, the first major challenge that emerges from our observations concerns the obvious tensions between Vodoun and contemporary political power. Certainly, the growing tensions between Vodoun and modern political power occupy a central place within this complex dynamic, generating a climate of distrust and lack of cooperation at the highest level of the state.

On the one hand, Vodoun represents a source of power and leadership in certain regions of the country, where spiritual leaders exercise significant influence on populations and community life. On the other hand, the Beninese government seeks to promote secularism and the rule of law, thus coming into conflict with traditional Vodoun practices.

The government and its representatives or institutions, in many ways perceive Vodoun as a religion or practice that contradicts the beliefs and values of modern political power. The disparities between the belief systems of Vodoun and those of political power, according to politicians, generate ideological tensions, thus influencing development prospects, including in the areas of education, training and science., among others, justifying attempts to regulate it by public authorities.

The State has often been an active actor in the propagation of a campaign of stigmatization and distrust towards Vodoun, by tolerating or even encouraging unfavorable discourse towards it, particularly those conveyed by political-religious figures. At one time, the latter openly demonized this ancestral cultural expression, thus arousing distrust towards its followers. They even called for state intervention to restrict its practice, despite opposition from Vodoun supporters. This complex dynamic has deeply marked the relationship between Vodou and political power in Benin. According to more than 98% of Vodoun religious interviewees, regulatory initiatives from the State, particularly with regard to public ceremonies and divinatory practices, are not well received. They believe that the central government misunderstands their role within society.

From another point of view, it is appropriate to underline the more global struggle which opposes ancestral religions, such as Vodoun, to revealed religions, notably Christianity and Islam. The latter are often seen as rivals, especially since they frequently characterize the ancestral religion as disruptive, hindering the development of the community and the well-being of citizens. These disparities in terms of religious beliefs and practices contribute to creating a complex context, where Vodoun spiritual leaders and their followers view attempts at state regulation as an intrusion into their spiritual domains and a challenge to their autonomy, both both religiously and culturally. It should be noted that traditionalists are demanding recognition of Vodoun in the name of the right to culture, affirming that this ancestral religious practice is a fundamental pillar of their identity and their cultural heritage. They consider that this recognition is essential to preserve the cultural and religious diversity of the country, and to guarantee respect for the rights of each citizen to practice their faith within the framework of established laws and standards.

The second challenge facing the Beninese government lies in the delicate quest for a balance between the promotion of secularism on the one hand, and respect for cultural and religious traditions, including Vodoun, on the other. Although policies have been developed to regulate Vodoun practices, their implementation is complex and sometimes controversial.

It is important to note that on a social level, Beninese society is deeply divided regarding Vodoun. For some, this religious tradition represents a fundamental pillar of cultural stability and a living link with their ancestors. From an anthropological point of view and by virtue of the right to culture, these beliefs and practices are seen as crucial elements in the preservation of identity and cultural heritage. However, other members of society prefer to embrace more contemporary religious practices, thus openly questioning the place and legitimacy of Vodoun. This diversity of beliefs and religious practices underlines the importance of respecting the right to cultural and religious diversity, as defended by international standards and the field of religious anthropology.

The way in which tensions between Vodoun and political power are addressed in Benin is deeply influenced by the cultural and political context, as well as by the nature of the regime in place. Since the post-1990s democratic transition, some governments have chosen to adopt policies of acceptance and recognition of Vodoun as a legitimate religious practice, thereby promoting peaceful coexistence between Vodoun and government authorities. On the other hand, in other cases, a more repressive approach was favored, aiming to reduce the influence of Vodoun or even to marginalize it, as happened during the revolutionary period of 1972-1989.

It is crucial to note that the repression during this period generated enormous social conflicts and flagrant violations of human rights, in particular the systematic persecution of Vodoun followers or supporters, subject to strong stigmatization and discrimination of all kinds. This approach did nothing to improve relations between Vodoun and the political power at that time. According to the testimonies of our informants, the power in place took advantage of this to weaken the influence of Vodoun and thus claim sole and so-called legitimacy in the country.

The outlook for the future depends largely on the approach that governments and societies take to manage these tensions. An anthropological approach proves valuable for understanding the impact of social developments on Vodoun practices and on relations with political power. Anthropology could thus explore how Vodoun beliefs and practices adapt in the face of social and political pressures, as well as the influence of modern political power on the perception of Vodoun and the relationships between its followers and the rest of society. To this end, it could therefore play a crucial role in raising awareness among the public and political decision-makers of the complexities of Vodoun, while encouraging respect for the religious and cultural rights of practitioners. Ultimately, the resolution of tensions between Vodoun and modern political power will depend on the

capacity of societies, particularly political leaders, to promote religious tolerance, to foster intercultural dialogue and to guarantee respect for human rights.

Thus, by addressing these issues in a constructive manner, Benin can progress towards a harmonious coexistence respectful of its religious and cultural diversity thanks to vodoun. This practice is indeed of crucial importance for the human and cultural development of the country, and its appropriate recognition and promotion can contribute to strengthening national identity while promoting the development of its cultural and spiritual wealth.

Regarding the essential issues of Vodoun, it is appropriate to recall the wisdom shared by the Vodoun dignitary, Dah VIDEKON, met in the Bohicon region, during our fieldwork.

"In the depths of Beninese societies, Vodoun, through its rituals, its culture and its sacred practices, embodies a true historical epic, an inestimable source of wisdom and teaching which weaves the fabric of development. It is the vigilant guardian ancient knowledge, an unwavering link with spirituality and an ode to ethnophilosophy. Beyond that, it constitutes the intangible and material jewel of the cultural heritage of the civilizations of Benin."

In light of this wisdom, it is clear that Vodoun in Benin is of profound importance, generating a multitude of issues that affect the educational, political, cultural and economic spheres. On an educational level, its integration into school programs and the promotion of traditional Vodoun education are crucial challenges for preserving ancestral knowledge. On the political level, the official recognition of Vodoun as a legitimate religion and the active participation of its followers in decision-making processes are major issues. On a cultural level, the preservation of the heritage linked to Vodoun and the exploration of its tourist potential are essential elements to preserve Beninese cultural identity. On the economic level, the development of religious tourism and the encouragement of cultural entrepreneurship based on Vodoun offer economic opportunities while promoting this practice. The way in which these issues are addressed will considerably influence the future of vodoun and its coexistence with modern political power.

2.6 VODOUN AND POWER: TWO IDEAL TYPES IN SEARCH OF IMPOSSIBLE AUTONOMY

An overview of the results of our ethnographic materials and our sources reveals that Vodoun is intimately linked to the political history of Benin and its social, economic and cultural organization. Fought during the revolutionary period, brought up to date by the democratic renewal, Vodoun is in the process of being revealed to humanity through the rupture. The paradigms of confrontation, opposition between endogenous religion and modern power tend to disappear, giving way to a cultural specificity whose anthropological dimension is to be valued in the era of globalization. Vodoun draws on power to expand and internationalize, while power relies on Vodoun to attract an increased number of tourists and generate foreign exchange that contributes to the country's growth. A highly unique religion among the religions practiced in Benin, Vodoun attempts to free itself from political power without succeeding and vice versa. The government seeks to mobilize Vodoun with the aim of purifying the country and anticipating potential disasters, events likely to compromise social cohesion, peace and development. This is reflected in particular in the use of endogenous practices such as Tofa, an annual public consultation with considerable political importance, thus becoming a compass for leaders according to their respective political level.

Bringing together the great dignitaries of the Fa or Ifa in the country, this full-scale consultation predicts the major events of the future year and makes sacrifices in the name of the entire nation. Public authorities observe, analyze and act unofficially to satisfy the psychological needs of populations. As our sources point out, power and Vodoun, even crossed by an apparent differentiation and hierarchy, evolve together even if the authorities in the name of secularism are not found during Vodoun rites, sacrifices and ceremonies. And to give strength to religion, the public authorities are trying to think of a new structuring of the Vodoun hierarchy through rights recognized by the constitution, in particular through the recognition of traditional chiefdoms and their processions of endogenous religious practices.

Such an approach to the question of the link between Vodoun and power makes it possible to underline the apparent agreement between two ideal types in an impossible quest for autonomy, fundamentally from the effects drawn from the action of the other on the other for the benefit of the community. We find here, without doubt, a common place, where the *trompe-l'oeil* relationship between "religious" fields and "order of life" is appreciated at its true value, with a desire for emancipation which proves impossible at first glance. with regard to their respective social, economic and cultural issues.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

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 Vodoun. 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 and nuanced complexity concerning the link between power and Vodoun, an intrinsically complex and multidimensional subject in the Beninese context.

In light of our investigations, it is clear that although Benin is a secular state, Vodoun remains a traditional religion deeply rooted in Beninese culture. This faith, mainly practiced by a large majority of the country's population, is based on polytheism and encompasses the veneration of a multitude of gods and spirits. Vodoun plays the role of an essential spiritual pillar within Beninese society, thus reflecting the complexity and depth of religious and cultural life in this country, according to our interviewees.

With an average age of between 40 and 70 years, the spiritual leaders, the "hunnongans", whom we interviewed, and imbued with Vodoun socialization, all converge in their points of view by unanimously affirming that Vodoun is the religion founder of the country, and that it evolves in perfect harmony with other religious beliefs, notably Christianity and Islam. For these spiritual leaders, Vodoun embodies a religion of freedom and religious tolerance, celebrating diversity and respecting varied religious practices. They emphasize that Vodoun not only promotes the coexistence of multiple belief systems, but also encourages the simultaneous practice of different religions. This religious flexibility reflects the inclusive nature of Vodoun, tailored to individual spiritual needs. In short, these "hunnongans" perceive Vodoun as a model of peaceful coexistence and religious open-mindedness, promoting mutual respect for differences and beliefs, in a society where spirituality occupies a central place.

Political leaders and executives, with their experience and erudition, categorically emphasize that Vodoun plays a fundamental role in the religious identity of the country. For them, Vodoun is a unifying force, working to bring together diverse spiritual expressions in a spirit of understanding and mutual respect. Overall, these intellectuals portray Vodoun as an essential pillar of Beninese religious culture, embodying interreligious harmony and tolerance, and thus contributing to maintaining peace and spiritual diversity within society.

From another point of view, the results of our investigations unanimously reveal that both intellectuals, politicians, executives and spiritual leaders are unanimous as to the existence of an intrinsic link between vodou and power in the country. Benign. According to their convergent opinions, this connection transcends the religious and political spheres, being of crucial importance in the sociocultural and political dynamics of the country. This consensus underlines the profound influence of Vodoun on the Beninese political scene, while highlighting the interdependence between these two entities.

With almost unanimous agreement, at 86% for intellectuals, 92% for politicians and executives, and 98% for spiritual leaders and followers, it is clear that Vodoun is widely recognized as a fundamental element contributing to the development of Benin in educational, social, cultural, political and economic facets. The consolidated data from our surveys on the relationship between Vodoun and power in Benin indisputably attest to the positive influence of Vodoun on multiple facets of society. They highlight the relevance of forging real synergies between the political sphere and Vodoun, granting recognition to the central role of this practice in the educational, social, cultural, political and economic development of the Beninese nation.

In the light of our investigations, it is clear, for our part, that Vodoun, far from being an agent of destabilization of power, its ideology or development policies, is of crucial importance in the preservation of the State. and its rich cultural heritage.

Although our survey results highlight the significantly positive impact that Vodoun has on various aspects of Beninese society, persistent issues remain of concern. Discrimination against Vodoun practitioners remains a worrying reality, despite the general acceptance of this religion. Stigma and prejudice persist against its followers, leading to social and economic discrimination that limits their employment and educational opportunities. In order to foster a fair society, it is essential to combat this discrimination and promote religious tolerance at all levels of society. Furthermore, it is imperative to consider the desire to control vodoun by the central power as an obstacle to its development and its impact on the development of the country.

In addition, the non-valuation of Vodoun religious practices and their absence in educational programs hinder the understanding and appreciation of this religion. However, Vodoun occupies a central place in Beninese culture, and its teaching could play a crucial role in preserving ancestral heritage or traditions for future generations. It is therefore imperative to integrate elements related to Vodoun into formal education and to promote awareness of this religious practice. It is also essential to take into account the demonization of Vodoun by other religions and the issue of intolerance that could result from this. Despite its harmonious coexistence with other beliefs, Vodoun is sometimes misunderstood or misinterpreted by certain religious communities. It is therefore imperative to promote interreligious dialogue and mutual understanding to overcome these prejudices and foster peaceful coexistence between different beliefs.

4 CONCLUSION

Throughout this study, it has been demonstrated that Vodoun maintains close ties with politics. Through in-depth historical, sociological, anthropological and philosophical analyses, the results of our investigations highlight the extent of the positive impact that Vodoun has on various aspects of Beninese society, including its influence on the religious sphere, where he maintains significant links.

Establishing itself as a religious anthropological reality deeply rooted within Beninese society, Vodoun exerts an influence of capital importance both on individual development and on collective progress. This manifests itself particularly significantly in the dynamics between the central power and traditional religious leaders. The deep roots of this belief and spiritual practice in the cultural fabric of Benin make it one of the undeniably essential elements in the daily life of the population. It plays a crucial role in promoting the spiritual well-being of the population and facilitating constructive collaboration between government authorities and custodians of religious tradition. Consequently, it represents a fundamental pillar of the socio-cultural identity of the country.

Since the advent of renewed democracy, new dynamics have emerged, marked by collaboration and mutual respect now anchored in governance practices. This strengthened partnership between political power and holders of traditional spiritual knowledge demonstrates a positive evolution towards more inclusive governance attentive to the fundamental cultural and spiritual values of the country.

Also, it should be emphasized that Vodoun in Benin is intimately intertwined with the exercise of power, acting in the name of the deities chosen by citizens within the community and by magistrates. This is tangibly reflected in the evocation of ancestors during presidential inaugurations since 1990. This deep connection between Vodoun and political authority highlights the way in which spirituality and governance combine in society. It reveals that legitimacy and leadership are guided by divine influences, legitimized by the choice of the people and recognized by leaders.

Despite general acceptance of Vodoun as a religion, stigma and prejudice persists against its practitioners, leading to social and economic discrimination, thereby restricting their employment and educational opportunities. In order to promote an equitable society, it is essential to fight against these discriminations, stigmatizations, prejudices and to promote religious tolerance at all levels of society.

In addition, the non-valuation of Vodoun religious practices and their absence in educational programs hinder the understanding and appreciation of this religion. However, Vodoun occupies a central place in Beninese culture, and its teaching could play a crucial role in preserving ancestral heritage or traditions for future generations. It is therefore imperative to integrate elements related to Vodoun into formal education and to promote awareness of this religious practice. It is also essential to take into account the demonization of Vodoun by other religions and the issue of intolerance that could result from this. Despite its harmonious coexistence with other beliefs, Vodoun is sometimes misunderstood or misinterpreted by certain religious communities. It is therefore imperative to promote interreligious dialogue and mutual understanding to overcome these prejudices and foster peaceful coexistence between different beliefs. In this context, it becomes imperative that Vodoun positions itself to meet contemporary challenges in terms of development, protection of individual rights and freedoms, while playing an essential role in cultural promotion in the era of globalization.

Ultimately, Vodoun, as an essential pillar of Beninese culture and spirituality, must actively collaborate with central power to overcome the challenges hindering its full integration and understanding within society. This approach will help preserve this precious cultural heritage while establishing a climate of tolerance, respect and mutual understanding between the various religious beliefs in Benin. Although Vodoun is widely accepted and recognized in Benin, persistent challenges such as discrimination, valorization and integration into government policy require special attention. The creation of a Vodoun museum in Porto-Novo by the Talon regime and the integration of Vodoun into education could greatly contribute to solving these problems while promoting better understanding and increased respect for this traditional religion, as well as by encouraging an environment of tolerance and respect between the various religious beliefs present in Benin.

From this perspective, it is essential that the State avoids seeking to restrict the influence of Vodoun, opting instead for cooperation in policies aimed at the harmonious management of individual diversity. This would strengthen national unity while preserving the richness of Beninese religious culture.

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