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In voodoo capital, Benedict blasts 'occultism and evil spirits'

John L. Allen Jr. | Nov. 19, 2011 NCR Today

Ouidah, Benin

In a West African city widely regarded as the spiritual capital of voodoo, Benedict XVI today urged Catholics to resist a ?syncretism which deceives? and to uphold a Christian faith that ?liberates from occultism? and ?vanquishes evil spirits.?

The pope was speaking this morning to an audience of priests, seminarians, religious and laity gathered in the St. Gall Seminary in Ouidah, on day two of the pontiff?s Nov. 18-20 trip to Benin.

Located on Benin?s Atlantic coast, Ouidah is a onetime major slave port that today has a population of roughly 80,000. Benin is historically the cradle of the *Vodun* faith in West Africa, better known in the West as ?voodoo,? and Ouidah is more or less its Vatican, hosting an annual international conference on Vodun. The city also boasts a famous voodoo python temple.

Though *Vodun* takes a wide variety of forms in different parts of the world, it?s a highly syncretistic movement that draws on traditional African tribal worship and magic, sometimes blending it with elements of Christianity, especially Catholicism. Practitioners generally recognize a single deity assisted by helpers known as *Orishas*. (That, by the way, is the name of the restaurant at the hotel in Cotonou where reporters covering the papal trip are lodged.)

In Benin today, an estimated 18 percent of the population, which translates into 1.6 million people, are practitioners of voodoo, making it the third largest religious group in the country after Catholics and Muslims ? and many of those Catholics and Muslims hold on to a sizeable share of beliefs and customs which have their origin in voodoo. January 10 is marked in Benin as "Vodun Day."

Worldwide, estimates for the total number of voodoo practitioners range from 30 to 60 million.

One theme running throughout Benedict?s commentary on this trip, his second journey to Africa as pope, has been the importance of avoiding a form of ?inculturation? which would amount to baptizing indigenous beliefs and customs contrary to Christian orthodoxy. The pope is expected to return to that theme later today when he releases a document summarizing the conclusions of a 2009 Synod of Bishops for Africa in Rome.

?The love for the God who reveals himself and for his word, the love for the sacraments and the church, are an efficacious antidote against a syncretism which deceives,? the pope said this morning in Ouidah.

?This love favors the correct integration of the authentic values of cultures into the Christian faith,? he said. ?It liberates from occultism and vanquishes evil spirits, for it is moved by the power of the Holy Spirit.?

When John Paul II visited Benin in 1993, his trip coincided with a major national celebration of the country's voodoo heritage titled "Ouidah 92." The pope met a voodoo high priest, with a picture of that encounter

splashed across the front page of *L'Osservatore Romano*, the daily Vatican newspaper.

That encounter has long been controversial in more traditional Catholic circles, who regarded it as tantamount to a papal endorsement of heterodox worship. On this trip, Benedict has expressed admiration for elements of traditional African religion, but has also been careful to condemn "syncretism" and to condemn what he sees as its negative elements.

Prior to the speech, Benedict made a private visit to the chapel of the Seminary of St. Gall, where he prayed before the tomb of the late Cardinal Bernardin Gantin, a close friend who served as prefect of the Congregation for Bishops at the same time the future pope was the Vatican?s top doctrinal official.

Gantin, considered a ?father of the nation? in Benin, died in 2008 as the highest-ranking black African prelate in the history of the Catholic church. Today, the international airport in the national capital of Cotonou bears his name.

It was Gantin?s resignation as dean of the College of Cardinals which cleared the way for then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger to take over that role, a move which many observers believe indirectly led to his election as Pope Benedict XVI in 2005.

NCR senior correspondent is traveling with the pope in Benin. Below are a list of stories he has filed so far. Watch the NCR website for updates throughout the weekend.

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