Marketing Vodun. Cultural Tourism and Dreams of Success in Contemporary Benin

Commercialisation du vaudou. Tourisme culturel et rêves de réussite dans le Bénin contemporain

Jung Ran Forte

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/etudesafriaines/18767>

DOI: 10.4000/etudesafriaines.18767

ISSN: 1777-5353

Publisher

Éditions de l'EHESS

Printed version

Date of publication: 20 June 2009

Number of pages: 429-451

ISBN: 978-2-7132-2207-8

ISSN: 0008-0055

Electronic reference

Jung Ran Forte, "Marketing Vodun. Cultural Tourism and Dreams of Success in Contemporary Benin", *Cahiers d'études africaines* [Online], 193-194 | 2009, Online since 25 June 2009, connection on 21 April 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesafriaines/18767> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesafriaines.18767>

Jung Ran Forte

Marketing Vodun

Cultural Tourism and Dreams of Success in Contemporary Benin*

There is a sandy road that links the town of Ouidah¹ to the Atlantic Ocean's shore, passing through the small village of Zoungboji and the lagoon preceding the sea. In the early 1990s, that path was named "The Slave Route" in the memory of slaves that walked along it to be embarked there on vessels, bringing them to the New World. Artworks², located along the road, were commissioned to commemorate slaves' journeys and to narrate their stories: the place where captives were detained, the auction area, and the mass grave's location (Law 2004; Rush 2001). UNESCO erected a monument, "The Door of No Return", at the very final point of departure, in front of the sea. Since then, many tourists have re-enacted those fictional although tremendously real passages, walking all along the four kilometres-distance.

---

* I wish to thank all the members of the Programme for the Study of Humanities in Africa (PSHA) hosted by the Centre for Humanities Research, University of the Western Cape, South Africa, who nourished my work over two years, and the CODESRIA Advanced Research Fellowship that allowed me to extend my research in Benin. I am particularly grateful to Jonathan Friedman, Nina Sylvanus, Jill Weintraub and Paolo Israel.

1. "Ouidah is situated in the coastal area (in the Department of Atlantique) of the modern Republic of Benin (formerly the French colony of Dahomey) in West Africa. In origin, it is an indigenous African town, which had existed long before the French colonial occupation in 1892. In the pre-colonial period, it had belonged successively to two African states, first the kingdom of Hueda (whence the name 'Ouidah') and from 1727 that of Dahomey, from which the French colony took its name [...]. Today, Ouidah has a population of around 25,000 [...]. In the pre-colonial period, however, Ouidah was the principal commercial centre in the region and the second town of the Dahomey kingdom [...]. In particular, it served as a major outlet for the Atlantic slave trade. [...] Ouidah was a leading slaving port for almost two centuries, from the 1670s to the 1860s" (LAW 2004: 1-2).
2. The Beninese contemporary artists whose work was exhibited in the context of *Ouidah 92*, when the artworks were commissioned, were Cyprien Tokoudagba, Calixte and Theodore Dakpogan, Simonet Biokou, Dominique Kouas, Romuald Hazoumé, and Yves Apollinaire Pédé. The contributions of African diaspora artists were commissioned to Édouard Duval-Carrié (Haïti), José Claudio (Brazil), and Manuel Mendive (Cuba) (RUSH 2001).

By the turn of the new millennium, the traffic along the road has increased as two new hotels, Le Jardin du Brésil and La Casa del Papa, have been constructed in proximity of the shores. As well, at the circle heading to the beach, where in the late 1990s there was a shelter selling a few items and warm soft drinks and beers, a new *buvette* and a small boutique of local crafts have been opened. Despite such new developments, the sandy road shows signs of decline: monuments are covered with dust, damaged and neglected, while the vegetation is growing over, hiding them from sight.

Over a decade, from its very beginning in the early 1990s to present times, Beninese tourism has experienced many transformations, moving from an initial stage in which it was associated with governmental policies and international agencies' programmes involved in cultural projects and the preservation of the national heritage, to contemporary ones where private ventures, whether luxury hotels or small, modest and domestic commerce, dominate the landscape of the tourism economy. It is indeed toward those pioneering "paths of entrepreneurship", which have emerged in the mid-1990s at the margin of institutional programmes—while deeply and ambiguously embedded in those same national policies—and have today become prominent templates for economic, "successful" actions in Beninese tourism, that I would like to draw attention. My aim is twofold: on the one hand I wish to explore practices of cultural tourism, especially looking at the ways in which tourist commodities are created and sold. On the other hand, in so doing, my attempt is to illustrate how tourism matters to local everyday existence not only in economic terms, by allocating incomes and providing livelihoods, but especially in contouring cultural productions.

Drawing linkages between the historical developments of the Beninese tourism industry and intimate, fictional and orchestrated (Bourdieu 1994) biographies of two women, I explore how practices and discourses of cultural tourism are crafted and negotiated in the contemporary Republic of Benin, choosing as a pivotal site of study encounters between local people and foreign travellers. Life stories are multi-layered and polyvocal, as composed by a plurality of narrations, equally objectivation and reconstruction of the lived experience (Ricœur 1990) and emotional memories, speaking both on the social order and the unconscious, encompassing the self and the other, although bringing the subject into existence. By putting those narratives into play, I wish to shed light on the interactive ways in which cultural commodities are created and complicate further the relationship between "hosts" and "guests", blurring boundaries between touristic worlds and local everyday life.

As result of the early 1990s cultural policies, Vodun³ religion is today considered as one of the major assets of the country's "cultural richness".

---

3. The term Vodun is polysemic as it simultaneously indicates a set of cults dedicated to different divinities belonging to the same pantheon and supernatural beings—gods, spirits, natural forces and ancestors in both embodied, fetish and immaterial forms. The specificity of Vodun worship resides in gods' feeding

Vodun's presence is particularly crucial in the town of Ouidah, which, while economically marginal, is considered as one of the more important spiritual and "traditional" locations. The inclusion of Vodun cults into Beninese tourism markets constitutes an interesting example for understanding how an everyday religious practice is transformed into a commodity (marketed and exported), and conversely, how tourism crucially determines conditions of religious reproduction. As the two women's life stories demonstrate, situations in which Vodun practices are sold to tourists are twofold, as they refer both to the ways in which commodities are created and to processes through which rituals are invented and innovated. "Sacred commodities", even if intended for international tourist markets, transcend the restricted circles of religious practice that produce them, entering wider religious arenas, redefining constantly the meanings of "tradition" and "authenticity".

Encounters between local people and tourists provide rich material for understanding how representations of "Africaness" and commodities are crafted, performed and negotiated in these dialogical processes. It is indeed in these spaces that governmental policies, imperatives from global markets, institutions, international agencies, tourists and local people come into "friction: the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference" (Tsing 2005: 4), leading to "new arrangements of culture and power" (*ibid.*: 5)⁴.

---

sacrificial rites, in possessions and in its organisation based on esoteric knowledge, priesthood hierarchies and initiation admission. The relevance of the Vodun religion must be understood in light of the crucial and complex role it played in the history of the country, particularly during the pre-colonial period in which the political kingdom's structure was deeply intertwined with the cults' system, often defined as a sort of state-religion (MAUPOIL 1981). Through the Atlantic slave trade, these cults reached the New World, originating a wide set of ritual practices often labelled as Afro-American religions (MATORY 2005; SUTHERLAND 1999, 2002). I will employ the spelling Vodun following the local use, which is generally associated to French spelling. Vodun divinity names are both used to indicate a god and an initiated worshipper (as the embodiment of the divine essence). Therefore, in this paper I will differentiate applying capital letters to refer to the former and small capitals to refer the latter. Likewise, I employ Vodun to indicate this religious system as a whole and vodun as a synonym of god. As well, there is no use of plurals, which must be deducted by the context. Vodun divinities are gendered; while certain gods have a distinct gender, in most cases, each of them has both a female and male manifestations and devotees.

4. The data presented in this article was collected during 12 months of fieldwork in Benin, which I conducted for my doctoral dissertation from 2001 to 2004. More recent data has been collected in March and April 2008. The reconstruction of Martine de Souza's and Mahinou's life stories were made through several interviews with a different range of people from the town of Ouidah. I visited many times the temple of Hunnongan Guendéhou in Cotonou and I closely followed the activities of the Mami Wata convent of Amegansi Adjibassi at each field trip, over four years. I also participated in two three-week tourist trips organised by Mahinou and his cousin (who asked to be anonymous), in 1999 and 2002 and I researched Mahinou religious activities during the twelve-month period of my fieldwork.

Auspicious Economic Conjunctions and Glimpses of the Future

Tourist guides and operators are crucial figures located at the intersection between global flows and local life. Tourist guides, as legitimate experts and cultural mediators, stand as the point of entry into a given culture they are supposed to represent at its best for a foreign audience. From the tourists' point of view, they embody cultural meanings and practices, the very essence of a place and a population (Salazar 2005). The work of the tourist guide indeed discloses processes through which locations are commodified⁵, cultures are "exoticised" and "aestheticised", and histories are remodelled and turn into coherent narrations (*ibid.*).

In April 2008, during my short-term fieldwork trip, more than six years after our first encounter, I saw Martine de Souza again. Four years have passed since my last visit to the country, but Martine's warm and welcoming smile had not changed at all. She seemed very proud of her carrier's achievements, pleased of being able to combine her personal interests and the earning of an honest living, and eager to work on her new projects. And then we started talking again about her job, her successes and failures, her uneasy choices, the past and the future, and being the most prominent (female) Beninese tourist guide. On the 8th of March 2008, Martine was awarded the *Trophée Amazone* (the Amazon Trophy)⁶ as an acknowledgement of her commitment to the development of the country demonstrated over more than ten years with her work in tourism, cultural exchange and dialogue, and her involvement in information and awareness campaigns on child trafficking⁷.

5. By using the term "commodification", I refer to processes through which culture, conceived as a product and a thing, "is culture disembodied from experience. It is culture neutralized and turned into objects of consumption" (FRIEDMAN 1994: vi). Such dynamics implies a particular reflection upon a given culture, as well as the individuation of a certain set of elements supposed to characterise it distinctively. It is in some way a move that describes both a de-familiarising gaze from the everyday and the known and a formalising process of construction of meanings.
6. The *Trophée Amazone*—so called in reference to the famous female military army of the kings of Dahomey, the Amazons—which celebrated its 5th edition on the 8th of March 2008, is annually organised by the NGO Jpg-Benin (*Jeunesse-perspective-groupement*) in order to acknowledge those leading, Beninese women who exceptionally revealed themselves in their different domains of action during the year. Along with Martine de Souza, the singers Edia Sophie and Sèna Joy have equally been awarded during the celebration at the CNCB (Conseil national des chargeurs du Bénin). (*Le Matinal*, 10 mars 2008; <http://www.fraternite-info.com/article.php3?id_article=872>).
7. From 1998 to 2001 Martine has worked with the World Bank as a local assistant in a project on poverty and the exploitation and trafficking of children in rural areas. A few years after that experience, she enquired about films that were produced during that project and stored in the World Bank's offices in Cotonou. She decided to create a NGO and with the collaboration of UNICEF and Terre des Hommes (TDHIF) she travelled from village to village to show the documen-

"I would say that I've been a tourist guide all my life. As far as I recall, I started touring people around Ouidah when I was a teenager and I was attending secondary school. It was 1983. My father was a history teacher and was used to tell me the story of our town and family. Far before *Ouidah* 1992, my father had already told me about the story of the Slave Route. Once, friends were visiting him, and he asked me to take the guests for a walk in town. We went together to the Python Temple, the museum and I told them the history of our family⁸. I enjoyed that task. Sometimes, I had to tour Anglophone friends of my father, and this is how English language aroused my interest."

While Martine de Souza is today considered one of most known and proficient tourist guides of the town of Ouidah and of Benin in general, her career had started accidentally, as she had never attended specific job trainings and she does not hold certifications in tourism management. The creation of her professionalism has been nourished by encounters, curiosity, entrepreneurship, personal social skills and creativity. Yet, today Martine is an expert and qualified tourist guide, largely appreciated by the tourists she works with, and whose knowledge of Benin and West Africa goes beyond touristic worlds. She is a public, intellectual figure that acquired such fame by participating in cultural projects in partnership with the Beninese cultural department and international TV productions⁹. Gifted in languages, Martine speaks fluent French and English, which is very rare in this Francophone area, but also several local languages—Mina, Ewe, Fongbe—which makes her a perfect translator for tourists, journalists, photographers and scholars. She holds a degree in history and English literature from the University of Ghana, and she has also published a booklet collecting Beninese short legends, historical anecdotes and popular proverbs which is sold at the historical museum of Ouidah (de Souza 2000)¹⁰.

At the beginning of the 1990s, Martine accidentally met an African American woman, Sharon¹¹, who had come to Benin to find her roots and to start a spiritual journey. Because at that time she was the only English-speaker in Ouidah, Martine was "hired" as a translator. She followed

---

taries in order to "awaken" the conscience of poor, rural people and explain how child trafficking operated.

8. Martine is one of the numerous descendants of the Brazilian Francisco Félix Chacha de Souza, well-known slave trader who settled in Benin in the 1820s. The de Souza compound hosts a family museum dedicated to the memory of the ancestor. The Slave Route and the Python Temple, *Dangbé*, are among the most important tourist attractions of the town of Ouidah.
9. Such as *African Wonders* directed by Professor Henry Luis Gates Jr. and produced in 1999 by PBS, in which Martine tours Professor Gates around the town of Ouidah, but also National Geographic, BC "Time Watch", NBC, etc.
10. Personal website: <<http://www.beninguide.com>>.
11. Sharon Caulder wrote a published, autobiographical novel, "Mark of Voodoo: Awakening to My African Spiritual Heritage", that collects memories from her travels to Benin, with particular regard to her spiritual journey. However, Martine disagreed with most of the contents of the book, and it is that dissent between the two that led to the end of their relationship.

Sharon during her first journey, managing with kindness and generosity the foreigner's everyday life and helping her to communicate with people. At the beginning Martine was not officially paid for her services but rather she received gifts, meals and occasional loans. Over time, Martine and Sharon became more than friends. As Sharon was particularly attracted by Vodun and was willing to undertake several initiations, she planned quite a few trips to Benin over several years, and each time Martine followed and assisted her. At the time of Sharon's first voyage, Martine was Catholic and timorous about inner Vodun cults' circles. But spending time with a foreigner and particularly following her steps in Vodun worlds, she realised for the first time the importance and value of these religious practices.

The Republic of Benin experienced the launching of the tourist industry in a period of political change at the same time as the encounter between the two women. Indeed Sharon was one of the few tourists that had chosen such an unusual destination. The severe economic crisis of the late 1980s forced the Marxist-Leninist regime¹² to adhere to structural adjustment programmes (Vittin 1991; Igue & Soule 1992; Banégas 1995; Mayrargue 1995; Gazibo 2005) while the democratic transition was underway¹³. The political stability of the country was indeed supposed to facilitate the restructuring of the economy and the beginning of development and financial programmes (Gazibo 2005). The project of establishing a flourishing tourism industry was at stake, as it would allow the growth of a stagnant national economy¹⁴. According to scholars (Banégas 2003; Mayrargue 1997), this critical

12. Independence (1960) was followed by a period of political instability. In 1972 with a military *coup d'État*, Mathieu Kérékou obtained power and few years later, in 1975 the country became the Popular Republic of Benin in order to emphasise the government adhesion to Marxism-Leninism that would last until the end of the 1980s.
13. The state legitimacy was undermined by the economic crisis, ultimately linked to the general world economic crises of the mid 1980s and particularly to changes in the oil market, and the consequent Nigerian recession (VITTIN 1991).
14. Since independence in 1960, the Beninese economy was built on a system of importations and re-exportations on a regional basis. In such context, the role played by the state was decisive in enforcing strategies facilitating the transfer of goods—*État entrepôt* (IGUE & SOULE 1992). Indirectly taking advantage of its geographical location, Benin has built its economy on the transit and provision of natural resources of neighbour states, carrying out a policy of liberal trade, fiscal tax reductions, and a decrease in customs duties, allowing the weakening of national borders (*ibid.*). As result of such policies, the Beninese economy was heavily dependent on neighbouring states because it was based on trade revenues. Likewise, the permeability of national borders, and dependency on foreign imports, especially from Nigeria, has eased the flourishing informal economy, predominantly on the trade field (BAKO ARIFARI 2001). Even though this economic system experienced a severe crisis in the 1980s, it still persists today. The intense activity of the port of Cotonou, which is the most important in the region, and the Sémé-Kraké's border between Benin and Nigeria are certainly proof of such economic strategies. At the beginning of the new millennium, approximately 75% of the whole national budget came from fiscal incomes, of which 45% originated from customs duties (*ibid.*).

period from 1990 to 1995 can be analysed as being traversed by a double intertwined movement: the “re-traditionalisation” of the public sphere and the organisation of “traditional” agents according to modern patterns. Customary jurisdictions—whether monarchic, traditional or religious—were restored and refashioned as new crucial political agents and lobbying groups, while a national cultural identity progressively emerged, anchored on local traditions. At the same time, under the government’s influence, “traditional” agents reorganised themselves following institutionalised forms, such as the Council of Kings or the National Community of Beninese Vodun Cults (CNCVB), in order to achieve acknowledgment, unity, funds and a growing influence over political affairs (*ibid.*).

Martine admits that meeting Sharon was a turning point in her life. Accompanying her throughout her travels in Benin has been an informal, albeit professional apprenticeship thanks to which Martine has learned to be a tourist guide in a time in which the Beninese tourism industry was beginning to develop. Sharing everyday life with a stranger changed her gaze on her own culture, habits, values and history, and particularly on Vodun. As I mentioned before, she was raised in a Catholic family and thus it is through Sharon that she re-discovered these local, traditional religious practices. During one of our conversations, she explained to me:

“Vodun is my tradition, my culture. Vodun can truly help people, no matter where they come from. But I also respect different beliefs. This is why Vodun interests me and this is the Vodun I want to show to tourists.”

Martine’s statement on Vodun religion refers to a particular set of meanings defining Vodun religion that emerged and consolidated in the early 1990s. The cultural policies carried by the first democratic government in those years played a foundational role in the re-appropriation of Vodun practice by local people as a refashioned folklore, a national tradition and culture, a World Religion¹⁵. Several projects of patrimonialisation were set up in partnership with international agencies, mainly in the historical centres of Abomey, Ouidah and Porto Novo¹⁶. Likewise, Benin participated in

15. A priest elite rose under governmental influence, attempting to modify certain cult features considered antiquated and to shape an official, but unique image capable of withstanding comparisons with other World Religions (MAYRARGUE 1997). The path toward the “modernisation” of Vodun cults was an answer to different requests: the governmental need of an institutionally unique referent structure for the entire Vodun community (*ibid.*), the growing transnational project of a World Religion constitution (CLARKE 2007), grouping all the different branches of Afro-American religions, but also the local determination to reform Vodun in order to guarantee its existence.
16. The objectives of such projects, mainly carried out by PREMA of ICROM, in collaboration with different European Cooperation departments and agencies, universities and institutions were: to arrange historical sites, to safeguard immaterial heritage, to retain colonial ethnographic museums of Abomey and Porto-Novo, to set up a historical museum of Ouidah and to preserve and maintain royal palaces in Abomey and Porto Novo.

international programmes, such as UNESCO's World Heritage and "The Slave Route." Aspiring to the valorisation of national, historical, and material and intangible cultural heritage, these actions also served touristic proposals by creating what today are considered major tourist sites¹⁷. Also because of flourishing cultural activities (Tall 1995a)¹⁸, this period could be analysed as a crucial step in crafting a national memory, the "assembling" of a national heritage that revised history and shaped a particular gaze on the reconstruction of a pre-colonial past and the transatlantic trade, the forging of a specific cultural identity and the marketing of cultural meanings (Morales & Mysyk 2004). These dynamics question how cultural identity and memory are constructed in light of present political agendas (Friedman 1992; Sutherland 1999, 2002; De Jorio 2006) and how tourism shapes cultural productions and the manufacturing of national heritages (Hasty 2002; Day 2004).

Taking advantage of the governmental interest in cultural matters of those years, Martine made contacts with Ouidah's history museum that was refashioned at the beginning of the 1990s, and she started to work there as a tourist guide. From those moving years, she learned to tell to a foreigner audience the story of the town of Ouidah, its involvement in the Atlantic slave trade during the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, the ancestral tradition of Vodun cults. Her first steps in the tourism industry demonstrate how at the beginning of the 1990s, the lack of institutions regulating and organising the market allowed officially unskilled subjects to enter the system. Cultural and social capitals are employed as job skills to spend in the market and, in turn, be re-invested toward the creation of new lucrative professions.

Informal Tourist Economy: The Crafting of Vodun Commodities

Heritage projects which opened at the beginning of the 1990s have lasted for a decade, and today a few of their objectives are taken over by the direction of the EPA (École du patrimoine africain), an academic institution created in 1998 and involved in a regional programme of action intended for the preservation and maintenance of historical heritage. By the new millennium, the state's priorities in tourism matters moved away from cultural issues toward more pragmatic domains: the diversification of tourist

17. Ouidah's "Slave Route", Abomey's and Porto-Novo's Royal Palaces and Historical museums, alongside the lacustrine villages of Ganvié and Aguégoué and the National Park of Pendjari are considered as the key tourist locations.

18. The International Festival of Vodun Cultures and Arts *Ouidah 92*; the Regional *Gani* Festival, Nikki (North of Benin); the Biennale of Popular and Religious Dances, Abomey; The *Guèlèdè* Masks' Festival, Porto Novo; The *Yéké Yéké* Regional Festival, Mono (TALL 1995a).

attractions¹⁹, the creation of new tourist sites, as well as the building of infrastructure, an area which is still precarious and lacking. Likewise, in those years, the need to organise and regulate this economic sector emerged as a priority. The creation of regional agencies, the stipulation of new partnerships, the improvement of job training and the promotion and organisation of conferences and meetings were ventured as major requirements.

Nevertheless, projects take time to transform into reality and in the meanwhile the country has experienced a significant influx of tourists. Yet, this economic sector has continued to grow over the last ten years, depending mostly on personal entrepreneurship and creativity. Because of the absence of a national institution regulating the access to the market and the lack of professional training, tourism can be defined today as a “wild market”, mostly characterised by configurations of informal and semi-formal economy. The permeability of these spaces, in which different economic trajectories intersect, allows direct access to individual actors without any institutional mediation. Communities and individuals promote themselves spontaneously as tourist guides and operators, designing their own jobs, disclosing a space in which anyone can be a potential “cultural specialist” and “cultural translator”. Small budgets enable people to reach cultural and tourist circuits, supposed to grant them with transitory profits and, possibly, with long-term investments. This is why, in a landscape deprived of possible lucrative scenarios, even minor tourist activities become sources of livelihoods that open up new possibilities and promises.

As a result of the cultural policies of the early 1990s, today the distinctiveness of the Beninese tourist industry resides in its supply of Vodun religious experiences. Benin is widely known as the “cradle of Vodun”, and has established itself as a “root” within diasporic geographies²⁰. Following formal, as in the case of events such as *Ouidah 92*²¹ or the annual Vodun

-
19. The programme of the Beninese government (<www.gouv.bj>, “Programme de développement économique”, Governmental report 2001-2006, December 2006) focuses on: the promotion of ecotourism in the National Pendjari Park; the development of “business tourism” (le tourisme de congrès et le tourisme d'affaires) in urban centres; the promotion of seaside and resort locations; the arrangement of the Fishing Route (Route de Pêches)—connecting Ouidah to Cotonou—for tourists (to improve economic and social, durable development); the safeguard of intangible heritage linked to the Guèlèdè marks recently listed as World Heritage by the UNESCO (creation of a research centre for the documentation, information, the training and performing arts).
  20. Benin, as well as Nigeria and South Togo, is indeed considered to be a “sacred centre and origin place of diaspora culture” (SUTHERLAND 1999: 202). On diasporic geographies see also CLARKE (2004, 2007), MATORY (2005).
  21. The international festival, *Ouidah 92: retrouvailles Amérique-Afrique* organised in 1993 celebrated Vodun “cultures” and arts in their national and transnational dimensions. Vodun was presented to the world as a cultural heritage, a national treasure and a source of artistic inspiration. Even if the festival engaged few Beninese towns, the choice for the official event’s location was again the small town of Ouidah, through which, in pre-colonial times, the slaves passed through

Festivity²², and informal paths, such as the one of Martine de Souza, Vodun commodities have entered touristic and cultural markets: it is indeed not only possible to “see” Vodun (as embodied in folklore, art, history and performances) but also to experience it directly. Convents²³, temples and shrines open their gates and welcome foreign travellers. Vodun people respond to tourists by providing a wide variety of experiences that engage travellers directly, inviting them to enter their everyday life. Ritual practices and ceremonies are adapted, shortened and invented in order to fit to tourists’ needs. Today, a whole niche of the tourism industry relates to the trade of religious services. Offering glimpses of “traditional” Africa, the participation in Vodun rituals and ceremonies allows tourists to satisfy their cultural curiosity, make contact with local people and share significant moments with them, experiencing “authenticity” (Craik 1997).

Martine was one of the first tourist operators that ventured the inclusion of “religious,” or rather “spiritual,” experiences into tour programmes. Taking inspiration from the encounter with Sharon, Martine does not offer impersonal leisure activities, but rather special and intimate journeys. Indeed, she engages in making the trip an emotionally intense and life-changing adventure. When she works, she also becomes an empathetic friend, a good listener and a dynamic and tireless “translator” of Beninese culture.

“A tourist guide must be humble and welcoming. I’m like a sort of psychologist. Because of my experience in tourism, after five minutes of chat, I’m instantly able to grasp how tourists are and what they need. A tourist guide should be able to understand tourists, satisfy them, and follow their moods. With experience, I learned how to interact with them, to handle with patience their temper, to appease them and control their whims. I want to show them a beautiful image of my country; I’m a sort of ambassador of my country. The thing that I love most of my job is that I can meet people from all over the world: it’s like travelling everyday, without moving!”

---

before leaving their homeland. Following a developmentalist perspective, *Ouidah 92* was supposed to crucially contribute to the promotion of tourism and cultural industries (TALL 1995a; RUSH 2001). Moreover, the Atlantic trade was officially celebrated one year later with the UNESCO transnational project “The Slave Route”.

22. Being a national holiday, a local community spiritual appointment and an internationally popular tourist attraction, the Vodun Festivity—celebrated every year on the 10th of January—defines a particular space in which political, economic, religious and cultural interests are performed, debated and negotiated in their local and global dimensions. Recently invented in 1996, and motivated by a political rationale, this celebration is supposed to enact an ancestral religion and to be illustrative of the “authentic Beninese tradition”, while at the same time it constitutes a political arena in which the Vodun community negotiates and renovates its political role within civil society (SUTHERLAND 1999, 2002; MAYRARGUE 1997).
23. The term “Convent” is currently used as the French translation of the Fongbe word *hunkpamè* or *vodunkpamè*, which indicate the Vodun enclosure in which temples are located. Initiations take place in that sacred space, the access to which is restricted.

To make the trip a unique encounter she carefully organises meetings with local priests, providing a full range of spiritual experiences, such as divination sessions, collective basic rituals to propitiate the journey, initiations and personal spiritual paths. And it is clear that today there is no tourist who goes to Benin and does not want to “see” Vodun. Her professional accomplishments and popularity in international tourist markets depends heavily on her human skills. As she told me, from Sharon’s experiences she learned that the main focus of a trip is not the programme itself—what makes the voyage successful is the ability of the guide to connect with tourists and understand their needs. This is why the spiritual experiences she provides are tailored to each person.

“When I work with a group I try to understand what kind of commitment toward Vodun people wish, and therefore I plan only specific rituals in collaboration with priestesses and priests, who of course profit from these situations, but as I have known them for a long time I can testify to their honesty. To meet Vodun can be shocking for foreigners. For instance, I know that not all the people can stand an animal sacrifice, the sight of blood; they think it’s cruel. So, I try to avoid awkward situations. And then, there are people who do not believe and others who do. There are people who are ignorant about Vodun and Benin and others who are not. You might need years and years to understand what Vodun is. So I prefer to carefully organise and plan everything.”

For these reasons, while Martine’s Vodun networks are large and extend all over the country, she prefers to work in partnership with two temples in order to provide religious, or rather spiritual, services to travellers. In Cotonou she operates with *Hounnongan* Joseph Agbégbé Guendéhou, registered phytotherapist and healer, vice-president of the National Beninese Congregation of vodun *Thron Kpéto Déka Alafia* (CO.NA.Vauth), vice-president of the Beninese National Community of Vodun Cults (CNCVB), and founder of the Vodun Thron Church and the community *Force Tranquille*. With him, she organises prayers to the vodun Thron²⁴ and, if tourists demonstrate a bigger interest towards religious issues, they also organise initiations or healing rituals to solve personal problems. As well, Hounnongan Guendéhou and his assistants are available for *Fa* divination sessions. In Ouidah she brings tourists to the well-known Mami Wata²⁵ priestess, Amegansi Adjobassi.

24. The vodun Thron Kpéto Déka Alafia, and its associate cult Thron II, dates from colonial times and for that reason, and also for their syncretic character that mixes trances with elements from Muslim and Christian traditions, they were labelled as “new cults” (TALL 1995b). Originally, their diffusion along the Bight of Benin from Ghana to Nigeria is associated with witchcraft hunting (APTER 1993; ROSENTHAL 1998). Today the anti-witchcraft feature is still crucial as these cults offer protection and wealth to their worshipper.

25. The spread of Mami Wata cults in West and Central Africa dates from the colonial times at the beginning of the 20th century (DREWAL 1988), however linkages are traced back to the 15th century with the arrival of the first Portuguese ships. Mami Wata’s appearance as a mermaid is both related to the diffusion of a German chromolithograph of an Indian snake charmer (*ibid.*) and to indigenous

With the participation of the full religious community, they organise a prayer for the Ocean goddess: a basket with Mami Wata's favourite offerings is prepared and brought to the beach at night, and successively delivered to the sea's waters. Martine is also the "inventor" of the Beninese version of the "Root Divination"²⁶, which allows African American travelers to discover their African origins by means of naming the divinity to which they are dedicated and might address their devotion. With the help of a few diviners, the *bokono*, she organises an evening ceremony at the sacred forest of Ouidah. As she told me, all the participants stand in a circle, while one by one they go in front of the priest that casting the divination sacred "tools", delivers the answer.

Diverse informal tourist operators have explored similar paths, sometimes with more or less successful outcomes. However, the extraordinariness and uniqueness of Martine's career resides in her ability to transform situations, such as the occasional encounter with Sharon, into a valued profession capable of lasting. I met Mahinou²⁷ for the first time in 1999 in Ouidah while I was participating in the activities of an organised trip to Benin with a small group of European tourists. While Mahinou never thought about herself as a tourist guide or operator, accidentally she found herself working for tourists. Her inexperience did not prevent her from

---

traditions of aquatic spirit worshipping. However, in Benin, Mami Wata is often referred as the *Mina* version of the vodun *Dan Aido Wedo*, and is fully integrated within the larger Vodun pantheon. As metaphor of African modernity's contradictions (BASTIAN 1997; JEWSEWICKI 2003), the persona of Mami Wata has also inspired a flourishing popular art production throughout the continent. The presence of Indian elements in Mami Wata's iconography (SALMONS 1977; RUSH 1999; DREWAL 1988, 1996) and religious practice reformulates the question of the hybridity and provenance of this spirit, as well as the way in which people appropriate foreigner elements in the construction of their worlds.

26. The Martine's "Root Divination" provides consists of a shorter and basic version of a normal *Fa* divination session that is particularly requested by African Americans willing to discover their African roots. The name of the ritual is clearly imported by US tourists, however the content is grounded in Vodun local knowledge. This kind of ceremony refers also to naming ceremonies that are performed for African American tourists in different West African locations (EBRON 2002; CLARKE 2004, 2006). In the US American, Yoruba revivalist context, Root Divination refers to "divinatory rites with which priests in their community consult the oracle to determine the nature of their African roots [...], the generality of ancestry" (CLARKE 2004: xvii).
27. *Mahinou* is one of the sacred names that qualifies an initiate of the vodun *Dan Aido Wedo*, the rainbow snake who bestows prosperity and wealth. It is attributed to a person dedicated to this divinity during the initiation rituals, and thus it indicates a specific embodied manifestation of this god, as well as a hierarchical positioning of the devotee in reference to the whole cult's group and the religious society at large. By denoting the ranking of an individual in the community, this name is associated to a set of relationships (of dependency and alliance) that, in the form of rules and duties, determines the individual and social identity of a person and therefore his or her space of action within the community.

starting, at least for a while, a flourishing business. However, doing business with tourists is not easy and conceals its “dangers”.

Mahinou became involved in cultural tourism projects in the mid 1990s, a few years before I met her²⁸. Her cousin, who emigrated to France in the early 1980s, embarked on a project of cultural tourism despite his unfamiliarity with tourism businesses. He told me that he was motivated by the desire to help people from his native town and by the same token, to share his roots and the richness of his culture with Westerners. By engaging local people in the organisation of the trip he wished to bring money to the town, supporting friends in their own projects while providing travellers with authentic experiences of Beninese life and promoting dialogue and understanding between people from different countries and cultures²⁹. For several years, from the mid-1990s to the beginning of 2000s, each January, for the duration of three weeks, the town of Ouidah hosted small groups of European tourists, providing frugal, but charming, accommodation, spicy homemade meals in local *maquis*, French-speaking tourist guides, chauffeurs of wrecked but still running cars offered for adventurous drives on sandy roads, young music and dance performers to entertain guests all through the warm evenings and, at last but not least, authentic Vodun ceremonies to satisfy cultural curiosity, sense of mystery and exotic fascinations.

Because most of the travellers were indeed amateur dancers interested in discovering “authentic” African traditional dances, the major focuses were ceremonies and ritual practices. The trip offered a large variety of Vodun “activities” or “excursions”: performances of *Egungun* masks from *Nago-Yoruba* tradition³⁰; annual public celebrations in convents, private intimate prayers in family-owned temples; divination session; set of individual-based rituals which were suggested to the participants according to their needs and willingness to engage with Vodun; participation to the Vodun Festivity; and visits to local dignitaries, kings and queens. The participation in local ceremonies was conceived as a special and privileged way to discover

-
28. Mahinou is today in her late thirties. She lives with her elderly mother as she is not married and does not have children. She was initiated when she was a teenager, because she was “chosen” (or rather destined) to take on family religious duties. For several years, she was secluded in a convent in order to accomplish her initiation rituals. Like most initiates—the *vodunsi*, literally the “wife of the vodun”: term which is applied regardless of the gender of the worshipper (on “wives” of the gods and the trope of “mounting” see MATORY 1993, 1994)—, especially from rural areas, Mahinou did not attend secondary school and she speaks poor French. Her revenues come from religious services and small commerce.
  29. In 2002, excluding the plane fare, the cost of the trip of three weeks was about 500 €, including accommodation, meals, daily dance classes, transports and the participation to ceremonies.
  30. Ancestor masks from the *Yoruba* tradition, the *Egungun* cult, related to a male secret initiation-based society, are widespread in the area of Ouidah and Porto-Novo.

Benin. To see and take part in Vodun rituals was therefore a way to fully understand traditional dances and music in their original contexts. Performances were also supposed to engage with tourists directly and actively, not only as spectators but also as effective members of the community. The closeness with local people, also facilitated by sharing ritual experiences, and the possibility of establishing long-lasting friendships were at the core of this project.

Tourists' Money, Social Mobility and the Dangers of not Sharing

Proficient tourist guides such as Martine de Souza have learned through practice that Vodun spiritual attractions must be prepared carefully and in detail. To work with priests and priestess, eager to deal with naïve and demanding tourists wanting to experience authentic traditional "Africa", is indeed tricky. This is why Martine has chosen to provide her clients with only tourist-tailored rituals, created *ad hoc*, rather than letting inexperienced visitors to fully enter Vodun community life. To bring foreign people into inner circuits of religious practice, as well as to encourage their participation in the community life of cult groups or of villages and towns is difficult and requires management and relational skills. As Martine told me, it has been quite difficult for her to be a tourist guide. Being a woman with a successful career it has not always been easy.

"I have often been accused of being a prostitute because I was working and traveling alone with foreigners. People think that if you are going around with men in the same car, you might be unfaithful. Ouidah is indeed a small town and people spread gossip. But I resisted that blackmail and my husband, my sisters and my mother, who helped me take care of the children while I was working, did the same. But it's difficult to work in places like Ouidah where people badmouth you. And this is why today I prefer to stay in Cotonou."

At the same time, people from the temples she collaborates with deeply esteem her work and her kindness. They know that when Martine can she will bring tourists and thus financially help them. They trust Martine also because of her religious commitment, the intimate bond she has with these communities. Working with them has been an occasion of personal growth. Quite recently she has also started her spiritual journey. In 2007, a British television arrived in Benin to produce a documentary on Mami Wata. Martine was hired as local assistant but especially as the main character of film. Thanks to the financial support of the filmmaker who was willing to document a story of an initiation to the goddess of the Ocean, she finally had the money to initiate herself under the guidance of Amegansi Adjobassi. Likewise, accompanying tourists to visit Hounnongan Guendéhou has been a revelation. Soon she will be crowned as Thron's priestess and therefore, as she said, would be able to give testimony to tourists of what

Vodun is through her lived experience. Once again, widespread rumours about Hounnongan Guendéhou being a deceitful trickster who concocts rituals for money, do not trouble her.

Because tourists are generally equated with money, and considering the precarious living of most cult groups, Vodun people are very interested in foreigners and particularly in the profit they implicitly offer to local people. Nevertheless, in Vodun worlds, doing business with tourists (*i.e.* providing religious services) is marked quite ambiguously. For a religious community, to be involved in the tourism industry implies access to financial resources. Increased availability of funds is associated with notions of prestige and power, but at the same time, financial gain suggests the lack of authenticity and the loss of tradition. Priests and Priestesses working with tourists are often labelled as crooks and charlatans, attracted by easy money and disrespectful of the teachings of forefathers. Money is at the centre of local conflicts and quarrels that arise in response to tourist flows. Personal aspirations and everyday basic needs clash with tourist demands for authentic Vodun, conflicting with local social dynamics and thereby redistributing possibilities.

In 1996, the first trip Mahinou and her cousin organised was scheduled in correlation with a big religious event of the town of Ouidah. During that year, the convent to which Mahinou belonged was hosting a large ceremony that engaged the whole community. This yearly occurrence marks the moment in which divinities visit human worlds, possessing their initiates. It is a time for animal slaughtering and public rejoicing, dances and blessings. During ten days, initiates are possessed by the gods and, while secrecy conceals part of their activities, once a day they parade in public spaces in the town, giving advice to family members and amusing crowds of people, entertaining them with dances, music, jokes and spectacular and acrobatic performances. These ceremonies are very expensive and each member of the religious community and their families must participate with financial contributions in order to buy animals for sacrifices, food for the possessed initiates, sacred items, new dresses for gods inhabiting human bodies, and to pay musicians and the duties to the convent which takes charge of the complex logistics of the event.

That year Mahinou's cousin suggested a deal. He asked the *hungan* (the master of secrets) for permission to allow tourists to dance with the possessed *vodunsi*, offering money in exchange. To dance in public performances with possessed initiates was a very unusual request as generally no one is supposed to do so. Dancing with gods is considered dangerous, and the highly choreographed dances—which are learned by the initiates during their initiatory reclusion in the convent and which are considered sacred knowledge—are not immediately accessible to people, least of all to European amateur dancers. Nevertheless, tourists had the occasion to dance publicly with the gods. For them, it was a very special, unique and authentic experience of transcendence and immanence, a glimpse of the

spiritual and human nature of dance. Most of the people of Ouidah criticised this experiment. To see tourists disguised as *vodunsi*—wearing traditional *pagnes* and the marks of the gods—dancing the gods' dances barefoot in the town's streets was understood as a betrayal of tradition. Priests, priestess and initiates involved in this project evaluated the experience in positive terms. They were proud to notice how people from far-away countries were genuinely interested in their practices, willing to adapt and share their everyday life. According to them, critiques and rumours expressed the jealousy of local people who could not take advantage of the situation and therefore were expressing their resentfulness. Yet, while the touristic project continued, the experiment of allowing Westerners to dance with the gods was never repeated. Between Mahinou's cousin and the convent's authorities, an agreement was made. For the time being, tourists would be allowed to dance but only after the end of the public performance of the *vodunsi*.

In 1998, thanks to the financial help of her cousin, Mahinou decided to build a new compound outside the town and leave the old family house that was almost in ruins. But she also had made another plan. Confident of her financial power generously granted by this family member and his cultural tourism project, she suggested relocating the annual ceremony of the convent to which she belonged to her new compound. This move was supposed to bring her gratitude and respect from the religious community and to add value and power to her status. For several years, Mahinou hosted the ceremony in her house. However, after a while discontent arose within the convent's community. Because Mahinou was thinking that her hospitality, and especially her funds availability, meant more freedom in decision-making and she was feeling everyday less willing to share her money with the demanding convent, restlessness spread throughout the religious community and her mind. Priests and priestesses described her behaviour as arrogant and disrespectful of hierarchies. Evaluating the situation, Mahinou, with the practical spirit and impetuosity that characterise her, opted for a temporary resolution of the problem. She created new ties and affiliations with other convents in order to find *vodunsi* willing to participate and perform at the ceremonies she was still organising for European tourists and in honour of her own Vodun.

The loneliness and the exclusion from the convent's affairs did not upset Mahinou, who was determined to see her own project succeed. Realistically she understood she would never have the moral and technical support of her community that had been like a family to her. The kind of ceremonies that she was planning to organise for herself and for European tourists are highly complex and require a great number of people. The involvement of the whole community is not only motivated by the large amount of practical work, but also by the group's hierarchical structure, which is based on the unequal distribution of esoteric knowledge. Thus, the organisation of such rituals cannot be completed by a simple initiate without the help and

guidance of priests and priestesses. In 2001, lacking the help and support she needed, she realised that the only solution was to become a priestess. In that way, she thought she would have the authority to lead her own convent, initiate *vodunsi* and above all, to organise ceremonies by herself. Once more, the availability of funds provided by her cousin allowed her to obtain what she wanted. In autumn 2001, she was crowned as priestess by a priest who, according to rumours, did not have the authority to initiate her to the priesthood, because he was chief of another divinity. Most of Ouidah's people decided against participating in the celebrations and when the newly crowned priestess paraded along the streets of the town in order to receive greetings from other cult groups, her ancient convent closed the compound gate as a sign of disagreement.

The following year, in 2002, Mahinou, who had become a *Nah*³¹, a priestess, once again organised the ceremonies for the *yovo*, the "whites". After more than five years, once again tourists were allowed to dance with possessed initiates. Rituals were criticised by Ouidah's people who condemned them as lacking, disordered, disrespectful and deceiving. Mahinou was labelled as an illegitimate priestess, a charlatan, but at the time of the trip, as she was doing plenty of activity with tourists, she did not care. After the travellers left, Mahinou felt alone. Her cousin was not planning another trip for the next year, as he was busy with his own work, and most of all, he felt that the project was drawing to an end³². Mahinou collapsed and fell sick. The severe disease was aggravating day by day and she could not find a way to treat it. She was sure that the illness was a witchcraft attack coming from jealous people. However, rumours on the street differed, suggesting that her disease was a message of Mahinou's Vodun, *Dan Akpahesou*, who was manifesting his discontent toward her behaviour and her deeds. She had been attracted by the lure of easy money and she had disdained her own spiritual family. Gods were not pleased by such conduct. Money is such an ephemeral thing. Indeed, despite the fact that many people from the town had benefited from this tourism venture, "eating" their part of wealth, at the end Mahinou, or rather *Nah*, was left alone.

-
31. *Nah* is the title that is given to a priestess. It signifies the highest rank in the hierarchy that composes a cult's group. A priestess, as well as a priest, has the power and the knowledge to initiate an individual, *i.e.* to transform a person into a *vodunsi*. A *Nah*, which represents the female principle of the cosmological order, is the counterpart of a *hounon*, the male cult chief (also named *Dah*), and together they organise community religious life. In large convents—considering the latter as a religious community unit—there are more than a *Nah*, as the title not only indicates the priestess at the top of the hierarchy, which of course has more power than the other ones, but also allocates a status that is achieved by elder female initiates as a sign of recognition of the amount of sacred knowledge and ritual mastery that are acquired through experience, over time.
32. For the next year, in January 2009, after seven years, a new trip has been scheduled and advertised. The cost of the two week-stay of 995 € is comprehensive of transports (excluding air fare), accommodation, meals, day-trips, and dance and music classes.

Conclusion or How to Establish Oneself in the Wild Market

To establish oneself in the market is not an easy task. It requires flexibility and intuition. Martine de Souza has indeed well understood that being able to transform one's business is the best way to secure it. Today, she offers all-inclusive trips in West Africa; she is involved in programmes of "humanitarian tourism" on child trafficking with North American undergraduate students; US scholars still continue to solicit her help as research assistant; Martine is also requested as a tourist guide for local and regional tourism in Benin; and lately she has been involved in the creation of the Association of Professional Guides of Ouidah (AGAPO) in partnership with the town council. "It is important to look at things that are not yet in the tourism market, and then develop your offer", Martine said to me. Indeed, encouraged by the new presence of tourists from Martinique, she is planning to open a Martiniquais restaurant. As she is bored of touring people to the same places, she is conducting personal research to discover new tourist sites: a new circuit in the Dassa's region; the "true" slave route, *i.e.* the road that goes from Abomey to Ouidah; the crucial locations between Abomey and Porto-Novo, in which the struggle of King Behanzin against French colonial rule took place. But as she vigorously attested, whatever might happen, one has to hold on to her/his working ethic: "Popularity means to do things in the best way as possible, with the conscience that we are working for people and not for money."

In this article I have investigated the landscape of contemporary Beninese tourism, capturing the ways in which cultures and identities are commodified and lived experiences are turned into objects of trade. Following the paths through which Vodun "sacred" commodities have entered tourist and cultural markets becoming objects of economic transaction, I have suggested that in order to fully understand such processes it is necessary to look at the social dynamics in which these cultural productions are inscribed and at the linkages existing between tourist commodities and the politics and strategies that surround and reproduce them.

Martine de Souza's and Mahinou's "careers" present exceptional and innovative features as they both started working with travellers when the tourism industry was taking its first steps. It was a moment in which major heritage projects were launched and cultural events were organised throughout the country. In those years of cultural effervescence, these women had the clairvoyance to anticipate a trend which would become a large part of the tourist market: the one of "sacred commodities". Their imagination, creativity and resourcefulness have led them to the crafting of religious services for tourists that previously did not exist. Facing foreigners and their needs, they have challenged social institutions and religious hierarchies, opening new paths of development for the Vodun community at large. Encounters between "hosts" and "guests"—both as methodological and theoretical standpoints—allow tourism to intersect with trajectories of cultural

production, enabling us to look at the ways in which representations are constructed at the crossroads of local life and tourist flows. It is in these spaces of contact between locals and tourists that new practices and meanings emerge, where personal interests and motivations, community life and tourist aspiration, governmental policy and development strategies merge.

The question of “authenticity” and “tradition” must be addressed, as it comes into view as a crucial issue, linking local life and tourist worlds. Vodun commodities are supposed to be imbued with tradition, an essence and a specificity that make them authentic. In this context, notions of tradition re-actualise the “metaphysic of difference”—the imaginary of Africa and Africans as different from the West because they are anchored in tradition and customs (Mbembe 2000, 2001). However, authenticity that derives from tradition and that marks “natives” and commodities in such distinctive ways does not appear to be secure and stable, but rather it is haunted by “modernity”, and negotiated (validated) through dialogue. Thus, these “practices of authenticity” indicate ways through which authenticity operates by actualising dynamics of inclusion/exclusion. If tradition, as history, refers to the ways in which people construct meaningful worlds, then its crafting stands as an act of self-definition, an appropriation of life and empowerment (Friedman 1992). Legitimizing degrees of “Africaness”, pointing at impostors and traitors of tradition, and validating touristic experiences as well as the “trueness” of rituals and celebrations, the negotiation of authenticity distributes possibilities and opens up futures.

Centre for Humanities Research, University of the Western Cape, Cape Town, South Africa.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

APTER, A.

1992 *Black Critics and Kings: The Hermeneutics of Power in Yoruba Society* (Chicago: Chicago University Press).

1993 “Attinga Revisited: Yoruba Witchcraft and the Cocoa Economy, 1950-1951”, in J. COMAROFF & J. COMAROFF (eds.), *Modernity and Its Malcontent. Ritual and Power in Postcolonial Africa* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press): 111-128.

BAKO ARIFARI, N.

2001 “La corruption au port de Cotonou: douaniers et intermédiaires”, *Politique africaine* 83: 38-58.

BANÉGAS, R.

1995 "Mobilisations sociales et opposition sous Kérékou", *Politique africaine* 59: 25-44.

2003 *La démocratie à pas de caméléon. Transition et imaginaires politiques au Bénin* (Paris: Karthala).

BASTIAN, M.

1997 "Married in the Water: Spirit Kin and Other Afflictions of Modernity in Southeaster Nigeria", *Journal of Religion in Africa* 27 (2): 116-134.

BOURDIEU, P.

1994 *Raison pratique. Sur la théorie de l'action* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil).

CLARKE, K.

2004 *Mapping Yoruba Networks: Power and Agency in the Making of Transnational Communities* (Durham-London: Duke University Press).

2006 "Mapping Transnationality: Roots Tourism and the Institutionalization of Ethnic Heritage", in K. CLARKE & D. THOMAS (eds.), *Globalization and Race. Transformation in the Cultural Production of Blackness* (Durham-London: Duke University Press): 133-153.

2007 "Transnational Yoruba Revivalism and the Diasporic Politics of Heritage", *American Ethnologist* 34 (4): 721-734.

CRAIK, J.

1997 "The Culture of Tourism", in C. ROJEK & J. URRY (eds.), *Touring Cultures. Transformations of Travel and Theory* (London-New York: Routledge): 113-136.

DAY, L.

2004 "What's Tourism Got to Do With It? The Yaa Asantewa Legacy and Development in Asanteman", *Africa Today* 51 (1): 99-113.

DE JORIO, R.

2006 "Introduction to Special Issue: Memory and the Formation of Political Identities in West Africa", *Africa Today* 52 (4): v-ix.

DREWAL, H. J.

1988 "Mermaids, Mirrors and Snake Charmers: Igbo Mami Wata Shriners", *African Arts* 21 (2): 38-45.

1996 "Mami Wata Shrines: Exotica and the Construction of Self", in C. GEARY, M. J. ARNOLDI & K. HARDIN (eds.), *African Material Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press): 308-333.

EBRON, P.

2002 *Performing Africa* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).

FRIEDMAN, J.

1992 "The Past in the Future: History and the Politics of Identity", *American Anthropologist* 94 (4): 837-859.

1994 *Cultural Identity and Global Process* (London: Sage).

GAZIBO, M.

- 2005 "Foreign Aid and Democratization: Benin and Niger Compared", *African Studies Review* 48 (3): 67-87.

HASTY, J.

- 2002 "Rites of Passage, Routes of Redemption: Emancipation Tourism and the Wealth of Culture", *Africa Today* 49 (3): 47-76.

IGUE, J. O. & SOULE, B. G.

- 1992 *L'État entrepôt au Bénin: commerce informel ou solution à la crise?* (Paris: Karthala "Économie et développement").

JEWSIEWICKI, B.

- 2003 *Mami Wata. La peinture urbaine au Congo* (Paris: Gallimard).

JOURNAL FRATERNITÉ

- 2008 "De braves béninoises couronnées", 10 mars 2008.
<www.fraternite-info.com>.

JOURNAL LE MATINAL

- 2008 "L'Ong 'Jpg-Bénin' honore les femmes...", 10 mars 2008.

LAW, R.

- 2004 *Ouidah. The Social History of a West African Slaving "Port" 1727-1892* (Athens-Oxford: Ohio University Press).

MATORY, L. J.

- 1993 "Government by Seduction: History and the Tropes of 'Mounting' in Oyo-Yoruba Religion", in J. COMAROFF & J. COMAROFF (eds.), *op. cit.*: 58-85.
1994 *Sex and the Empire that Is No More. Gender and the Politics of Metaphor in Oyo Yoruba Religion* (Minneapolis-London: University of Minnesota Press).
2005 *Black Atlantic Religion. Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé* (Princeton-Oxford: Princeton University Press).

MAUPOIL, B.

- 1981 [1943] *La Géomancie à l'ancienne Côte des Esclaves* (Paris: Institut d'ethnologie, Musée de l'homme).

MAYRARGUE, C.

- 1995 "Le religieux et les législatives de mars 1995 au Bénin", *Politique africaine* 58: 157-162.
1997 "Démocratisation politique et revitalisation religieuse. L'exemple du culte vodun au Bénin", in F. CONSTANTIN & C. COULON (dir.), *Religion et transition démocratique en Afrique* (Paris: Karthala): 135-161.

MBEMBE, A.

- 2000 "À propos des écritures africaines de soi", *Politique africaine* 77: 16-43.
2001 *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley-Los Angeles-London: University of California Press).

MORALES, C. & MYSYK, A.

2004 "Cultural Tourism, the State and Day of the Death", *Annals of Tourism Research* 31(4): 879-898.

RICŒUR, P.

1990 *Soi-même comme un autre* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil).

ROSENTHAL, J.

1998 *Possession, Ecstasy and Law in Ewe Voodoo* (Charlottesville-London: University Press of Virginia).

RUSH, D.

1999 "Eternal Potential Chromolithographs in Vodunland", *African Arts* 32 (4): 60-96.

2001 "Contemporary Vodun Arts of Ouidah, Benin", *African Arts* 34 (4): 32-95.

SALAZAR, N. B.

2005 "Tourism and Globalization. 'Local' Tour Guiding", *Annals of Tourism Research* 32 (3): 628-646.

SALMONS, J.

1977 "Mami Wata", *African Arts* 10 (3): 8-15.

DE SOUZA, M.

2000 *Regard sur Ouidah (A Bit of History)* (Cotonou: B.3.P).

SUTHERLAND, P.

1999 "In the Memory of the Slaves: An African View of the Diaspora in the Americas", in R. J. MUTEBA (ed.), *Representations of Blackness and the Performance of Identities* (Westport: Bergin & Garvey): 195-211.

2002 "Ancestral Slaves and Diasporic Tourists: Retelling History by Revisiting Movement in a Counternationalist Vodun Festival from Benin", in T. FALOLA & C. JENNINGS (eds.), *Africanizing Knowledge. African Studies Across the Disciplines* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers): 65-85.

TALL, E. K.

1995a "De la démocratie et des cultes voduns au Bénin", *Cahiers d'Études africaines* XXXV (1), 137: 195-208.

1995b "Dynamique des cultes voduns et du Christianisme céleste au Sud-Bénin", *Cahiers des sciences humaines* 31(4): 797-823.

TSING, A. L.

2005 *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connections* (Princeton-Oxford: Princeton University Press).

VITTIN, T. E.

1991 "Bénin du 'système Kérékou' au renouveau démocratique", in J.-F. MÉDARD (dir.), *États d'Afrique noire. Formations, mécanismes et crise* (Paris: Karthala): 93-115.

ABSTRACT

Since the 1990s the Republic of Benin, following a path similar to other West African countries, has established itself as a destination for cultural tourism, in which history, ethnic traditions, ancestral values and indigenous knowledge figure as main attractions. The study of recent developments of the Beninese tourism industry sheds light on the ways in which meanings and commodities are produced in encounters between “hosts” and “guests”. Reconstructing the polyvocal biographical narratives of two women engaged in tourism activities—a tourist guide and a Vodun priestess—I analyse local responses to tourists’ flows while addressing questions of cultural consumption and the harshness of global markets. In order to understand how representations of “Africaness” and “tradition” are produced and negotiated and how cultures are commodified and transformed into artefacts of economic transactions, this paper draws attention to the dynamics through which Vodun cults have been re-fashioned as a national cultural heritage and a sites of the Atlantic Slave Trade memory, becoming the main cultural assets of the country for international audiences. By blurring boundaries between tourist worlds and everyday life, combining national policies and intimate stories, I look at the ways in which local agents perform and resignify their culture and experience encounters with “others”, while exploring paths of “entrepreneurship” and success.

RÉSUMÉ

Commercialisation du vaudou. Tourisme culturel et rêves de réussite dans le Bénin contemporain. — Depuis les années 1990, tout en suivant un chemin similaire à ceux d’autres pays de l’Afrique de l’Ouest, la République du Bénin s’est lancée dans le domaine du tourisme culturel dans lequel l’histoire, les traditions ethniques, les valeurs ancestrales et les connaissances indigènes apparaissent comme des attractions principales. L’étude des développements récents de l’industrie touristique béninoise illustre les façons par lesquelles les significations et les biens marchands sont produits dans les espaces de rencontre entre les touristes et les « hôtes ». Par la reconstruction des récits biographiques polyvocaux de deux femmes engagées dans le tourisme — un guide touristique et une prêtresse vodun —, j’analyse les réponses locales aux flux touristiques, tout en questionnant l’enchevêtrement des marchés globaux et des circuits de consommation culturelle. Dans cet article, l’appréhension de la production de l’« Africanité » et de la « tradition », ainsi que l’objectification de la culture en biens marchands sont éclaircies par l’examen des dynamiques qui ont transformé les cultes vaudou en héritage culturel national, mémoire de l’esclavage et, par la suite, en attraction touristique. En brouillant la distinction entre mondes touristiques et vie quotidienne, et en juxtaposant les politiques étatiques aux récits de vie, cet article rend compte du point de vue des agents locaux, des façons par lesquelles ils performant et perçoivent leur culture dans la rencontre avec les « autres », en devenant « entrepreneurs » et en aspirant au succès.

Keywords/Mots-clés: Benin, biographical narratives, cultural artefacts, cultural tourism, encounters, marketing vodun, sacred commodities, Vodun religion/Bénin, récits biographiques, biens marchands sacrés, objet culturel, tourisme culturel, rencontres, commercialisation du vaudou, religion vaudou.