

# VOODOO AND HIV/AIDS

## Using "Voodoo" to Cast Away HIV/AIDS in Benin

Usually seen as a harmful atheist practice, Voodoo can help prevent HIV/AIDS. The experience is being conducted currently in Benin, West Africa, under the multi Country HIV-AIDS project (MAP)



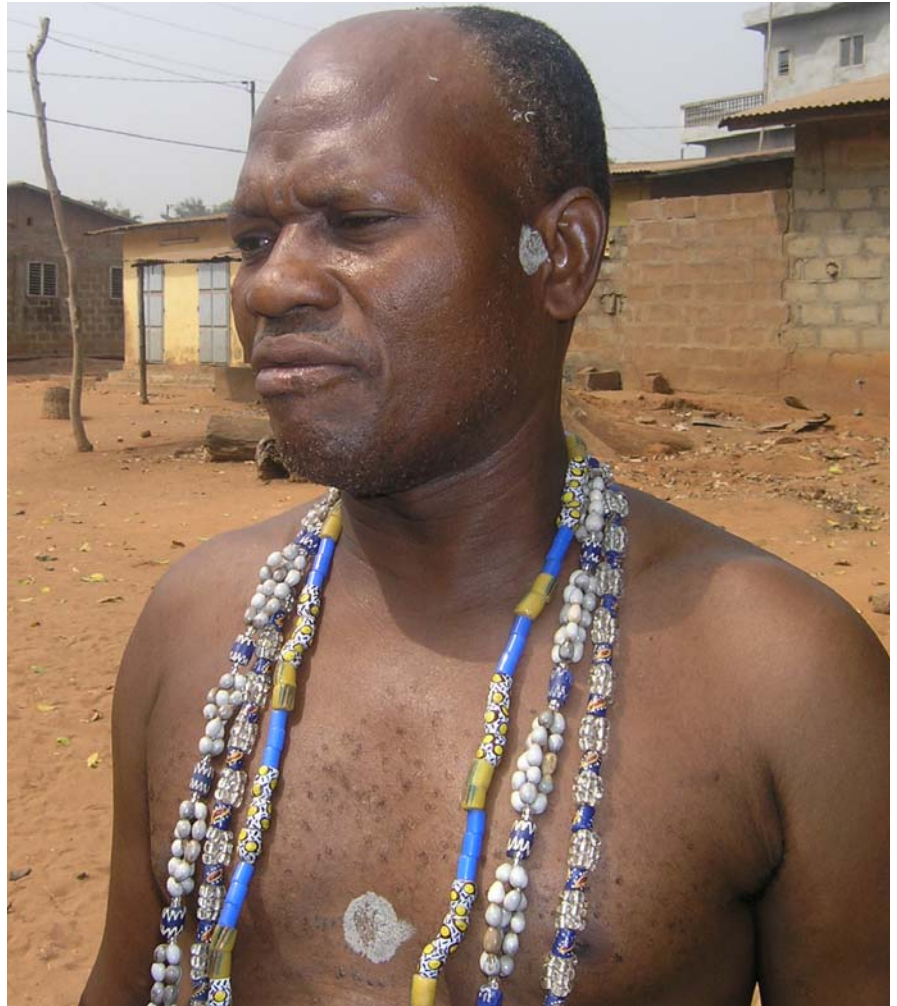
The Voodoo cult is a closed and unknown circle with its own customs. The cult has a wide range of members who are called "adepts". These members present an opportunity for a robust prevention campaign against HIV/AIDS.

Benin has made great strides in fighting HIV/AIDS and like other countries in the sub-

region, the Government of Benin is the recipient of US\$23 million credit under the multi-country HIV/AIDS project to fight

HIV/AIDS. With a 1.9% prevalence rate, Benin is one of the rare countries in West Africa where the infection rate is still quite low. Despite this low prevalence at the national level, there are regions in the country where the prevalence is over 6.% (DHS II, 2001). There are also alarming tendencies for the prevalence rate to be high in some traditional groups such as commercial

sex workers, long distance truck drivers, and the youth. Other groups, such as traditional cult groups have practices which pose greater risks for members to be infected. Such groups like the Voodoo cults have rituals which would favor the transmission of the virus. According to an article from the Afrocentric experience, Voodoo is a derivative of one of the world's most ancient religion and has been around Africa, in West Africa in particular since the beginning of human civilization. Some scholars believe that Voodoo is more than 10 000 years old. The religion is characterized by the worship of several gods and spirits whereby the python figures heavily in the Voodoo faith (The Afrocentric Experience, Origins of Voodoo, Swagga). Music and dances are key elements of the voodoo ceremonies and rituals which involve scarification using a single blade to cut several people and animals. This happens by slitting the throat and drinking the blood of a person or an animal. It is believed that the blood will throw a person into trance and



**A Voodoo priest committed to single blade use**

cause him/her to initiate an orgy. (Members of the cult may engage in sexual intercourse with several people). Because of the extent and the popularity of the voodoo cult and the high

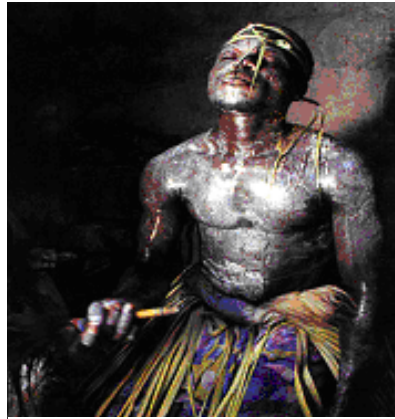
risk behavior which prevails in some of the voodoo convents, the multisectoral AIDS project tried and succeeded in penetrating this cult and began HIV/AIDS prevention activities

### **8,000 condoms have been distributed by the priestesses.**

- This approach has greatly helped the civil society's response to HIV/AIDS in the sense that it enabled the project in the following areas :
- All the 77 communes of Benin have been benefiting from the project.
- Community-based action plans have been developed, funded and implemented in more than 2,424 villages.
- More than 100,000 voluntary testings have been carried out.
- 6,268 community-based condoms stands have been set up
- Community-based action plans have been developed, funded and implemented in more than 2,424 villages.
- 722 people living with HIV/AIDS and 323 people living with chronic deases are being cared for free of charge
- 88,444 women and 164,897 men have received training.
- And most importantly, the MAP Project has been able to distribute 1,851,419 condoms.



the project first engaged the leaders of the cult and they in turn began discussing with their constituency who then began "preaching" safer behavior in grassroots communities. Over 1500 people were sensitized in less than three months since the beginning of the project and 700 community workers received training on HIV/AIDS prevention methods. What began as an isolated innovative approach soon began snowballing and other cults also began carrying out HIV/AIDS prevention activities. **"MAP GOOD FOR US":** One of those innovators is the NGO Farraj, situated just outside Cotonou. As one of its leaders put it: "This MAP Project is good for us men and women. It helps us better orga-



**Voodoo ritual and trance**

nize our lives," says Kpadonogan Dossou Barthelemy Hounongan Medji Kinvo, a traditional healer and one of the top men working to put the anti-HIV/AIDS message across in the Akassato village. Kpadounougan adds that over the last two years, he and his

teammates have been able to sensitize at least 2,000 Voodoo followers about the danger of multiple scarification with a single blade. "Our main target audience are young men and women aged between 20-25", he indicates. People are urged to have protected sex through the use of condoms, or be faithful to their partners, Kpadonougan explains.

The Voodoo priests usually go from one neighborhood to another, targeting around 300 people at once. They educate their audience on the risks that prostitution and casual sex entail. They go as far as donating their blood for free and anonymous testing. "So far, 160 of us have donated blood for testing. The results of the tests are



**Leaders of the Voodoo temple in Akassato oversee a sensitization campaign**





**Dancing is very much part of Voodoo rituals**

shared with donors on a confidential basis", Kpadonougan explains. "This Project has proved very effective, we've received money that has been used to stage sensitization campaigns, offer sacrifices to our gods, and distribute 1,000 condoms", Kpadonougan concludes.

Priestesses have also been enlisted in the fight against HIV/AIDS in Benin, as evidenced in this statement by Yotcha Obalonile Houeke Honou of the fetish temple in Akassato: "We Voodoo priestesses have been working with the MAP Project people for two years now, and we've been telling our followers not to use the same blade for two different people when performing our rituals".

She proudly adds: "We've also given up the sacred knives, and we are advising our folks to use condoms whenever they want to have sex".

**LESSONS FROM THE INITIATIVE :** As the multi-sectoral HIV/AIDS project strengthens its collaboration with other partners and stakeholders, reaching out to grassroots communities such as religious groups and closed "societies" provides the necessary avenues to reach vulnerable groups and intensifies the civil society's prevention methods of dealing with HIV/AIDS. Furthermore, combining scientific methods (increasing access to Antiretroviral drugs, or ARVs) with more traditional methods

(adapting safer sexual behavior) has proven, in this context, to be quite effective. Tackling the issue of HIV/AIDS in Benin through this initiative has not only demystified the "evilness" of the voodoo practice but also opened channels for more in-depth and informed discussions about HIV/AIDS in remote communities and in urban areas.

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