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Thousands Attend Voodoo Festival

By **VIRGILE AHISSOU**

OUIDAH, Benin — To the din of gongs and tambourines, thousands of voodoo believers from around the world joined a festive gathering here Friday, and urged an end to the violence afflicting several African nations.

After a **ritual sacrifice of goats and chickens**, voodoo chief Daagbo Hounon Houna led an incantation “for peace in Ivory Coast and the other African countries in crisis.”

Houna was surrounded by other voodoo leaders as part of Benin’s National Voodoo Day, which drew about **12,000 people**, including some from the United States.

At least **60 percent of 6.3 million people of the West African nation of Benin practice voodoo** — a tradition that holds, in part, that life derives from the natural forces of earth, water, fire and air.

Countless Africans shipped into slavery from this lagoon-lined strip of the south Atlantic — then called the Slave Coast — took the legacy of voodoo with them to the Caribbean, American South, and elsewhere.

Today, **scores of Americans and Haitians return every year to attend** the Jan. 10 festival, launched here first in 1995.

“It’s the second time that I’ve come to Benin for the festival,” explained Elizabeth McKint, a doctor from Omaha, Neb.

“I think I’ll soon become a voodoo initiate. It’s a tradition that I find more and more appealing,” McKint said.

Peace was uppermost in many visitors’ minds as a nearly four-month spate of fighting continues in Ivory Coast.

A failed September coup attempt turned rebellion has killed hundreds, driven thousands from their homes and split West Africa’s economic powerhouse into insurgent- and government-held enclaves.

For others, Benin’s voodoo festival is an excuse to dabble in the occult.

"It's moving to live voodoo ceremonies in their original fashion," said Kristina Gabrieli, a Portugese national living in Brazil.

"It's more real than the movies or television."