

Weigh In

Weighing the facts about Benin

1.

Benin was once a major hub of the Atlantic slave trade. In this system, neighbours often sold neighbours into captivity, creating deep, lasting trauma. The effects of these experiences continue to shape the region today.

2.

The village of Ganvié (home to 25,000 inhabitants) sits on Lake Nokoué in Benin. Often called the “Venice of Africa,” it is a stilt-built community that believes water offers both protection and provision.

3.

Benin is the birthplace of Vodún (pronounced “voh-doon”), the country’s national religion. This belief system, which teaches that people can communicate with spirits and ancestors, shapes daily life through rituals, music and dance. Haitian Vodoun originates from this tradition, while the term “voodoo” is a common but inaccurate English rendering.

4.

Benin has a very young population, with over 65 percent under 25, yet long-term illnesses still cause about 39 percent of deaths, often linked to lifestyle and limited healthcare access.



Corresponding Question Points:

1. Benin’s history is preserved through stories, proverbs and even silence marked by lingering shame. Why is slavery publicly memorialized, yet often taught with great caution or reluctance?
2. Research the Fon and Tofinu tribes and consider how Benin’s history of the slave trade influenced the founding of Ganvié. How was this community shaped by the belief that living on water offered protection from capture? What does Ganvié reveal about the power of belief in determining where – and how – people live?
3. Because Vodún is a deeply communal faith, rituals such as sacrifices, festivals and funerals require full community participation. Christians who refuse to participate are often viewed as disrespectful or as betraying their ancestry. What social and economic pressures might Christians face in this context?
4. Health is often influenced not only by biology, but also by everyday choices shaped by culture, environment and social expectations. If God’s boundaries are intended to lead to life and vitality, why does choosing to follow them often result in ridicule or social backlash?

One Way

Vodún: Humans are Spirit

The core belief of *Vodún* is that **everything is Spirit**. Humans are understood as spiritual beings that inhabit the visible world, while the unseen realm is dominated by various spirits, including those of the deceased.

The purpose of *Vodún* is to restore and maintain balance, health, protection and favour in human life by serving God and the spirits. This is expressed through prayer and specific ritual practices.

Vodún Worship

These acts of *Vodún* worship are understood in transactional terms. The relationship operates much like an exchange. Protection from illness, danger or misfortune is sought, and rituals and prayers are offered in return.

This dynamic can be compared to a scale used in ancient trade: what is desired is placed on one side, and what is offered in exchange is placed on the other. The goal is balance.

It is believed that these forms of worship, the “currency” of the transaction, will *buy* well-being and protection in daily life.

Sources:

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<https://www.laurewanders.com/ganvie-lake-village-benin/>

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Religious Comparison: Compare & Contrast What the Bible Says

Christianity: Humans are Matter Given Life by God's Breath

“Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.”

~ Genesis 2:7 NIVUK

This verse is foundational for a Biblical understanding of what it means to be human. From this portion of Scripture, we see that **humans are formed from physical matter** (dust) and then given life by God's breath. The account in Genesis reveals that our physical bodies are not accidental. It was God's intention that we are called to live faithfully in and through our bodies.

Throughout Scripture, we read that God's image is displayed and reproduced by living, embodied human beings, not ghostly spirits. Physicality is part of what God calls “very good” (Genesis 1:31). God's ultimate plan of salvation is to restore health, protection and favour to humankind, which includes redeemed bodies: *“[Christ] will transform our lowly body to be like His glorious body...”* (Philippians 3:21 ESV).

Christian Worship

The primary aim of Christian worship is to glorify God and respond to His grace. While Christians *do* pray for protection and provision, these requests flow from a deeper purpose: loving, obeying and trusting God. Well-being is part of God's plan to rescue and restore people; it is not something we earn by making transactional deals.