

Voodoo practitioners gather in Haiti for one of year's biggest pilgrimages

By Paisley Dodds
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

SOUVENANCE, Haiti — Haitians celebrated one of the year's most important Voodoo pilgrimages on Sunday, an event marked by drumming, sacrifices — discussion of whether Haiti's new government can heal a country still reeling from a bloody rebellion.

Carrying a heavy political significance this year, the pilgrimage drew hundreds to Souvenance, a village 90 miles north of Port-au-Prince, where followers made animal sacrifices to the West African warrior spirit Ogoun and danced to dizzying drum beats.

Founded by former slaves from the kingdom of Dahomey — now Benin — this dusty village fringed by cactus trees hosts the ceremony each year during the Rara carnival, when bands of costumed drummers and dancers roam the countryside.

Wrapped in white satin scarves, initiates chant and dance throughout the night to beckon spirits as onlook-

ers gather. Rum, cane liquor and herbs are offered to appease a pantheon of spirits.

On Sunday, the faithful sacrificed goats and held them overhead, the goats' blood dripping onto their heads and staining their white clothes.

Voodoo is one of Haiti's three constitutionally recognized religions, along with Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. Under President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the government sanctioned Voodoo marriages, baptisms and other rites. Two-thirds of Haiti's 8 million people are said to practice Voodoo, which worships one creator and many spirits, or loas.

"Voodoo is all about unity," said George Fernand, 63, a Voodoo houngan, or priest. "We're hoping the new government will help bring us unity."

Some of the rebels who staged the revolt that ousted Aristide on Feb. 29 held Voodoo ceremonies at the launch of their insurgency.

An offering to the Voodoo god of war burned in

Gonaives, the site of Haiti's declaration of independence from France 200 years ago and where the latest revolt began.

Initiates gyrated in front of Wilfred Ferdinand, a rebel leader known as "Little Wil," and a houngan gave him a special blessing.

'What A Time' is so-so

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It's not that I don't like the CD. I do. But there isn't much that sticks to memory. I like all of the songs — all of which sound appropriate for church — but something's missing. Nothing stands out.

Kevin Bond wrote "What A Time," which comes the closest to being something memorable. The choir arrangement is nice and tight and has a lot of lift. It's not quite churchy, but close.

"Glory To His Name" is churchy. The title is a bit cliché, but the song has a lot of life. "Sweet Jesus" is slower and more melodic and sets the mood for worship. And "Stand" delivers the CD's most powerful message, not to mention a very expressive performance by Joyce Quiller.

The rest of the songs are just so-so, despite brave efforts by most the soloists. Some of the songs come off as rudimentary and stiff.

There's not enough freedom or expression.

I'd really like to hear this choir sing with a bit more spunk. The harmony is great and the voices are pretty good. But the performances come off as ho-hum, probably because of the less than stellar songs.

Still, this CD is worth a listen, if for nothing else but the title song. This is the group's second CD and I'm sure a third is on the way. I just hope there's more fire than smoke this time.

Ratings

Classic; ☆☆☆☆

Excellent; ☆☆☆☆

Good ☆☆☆

Fair ☆☆☆

Why? ☆

No stars — A mess

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