

Porto-Novo, City-Theater of African Masks

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Since 2023, every year on the day after the national holiday, Porto-Novo transforms into a city-theater of African masks. The August 2–3, 2025 edition once again immersed the “city of three names” in an atmosphere where the sacred entered into dialogue with art, at the heart of *Vodoun in Benin*.

Located thirty kilometers from Cotonou and one hundred and twenty from Lagos, Porto-Novo becomes an essential stopover each August. On Saturday, August 2, the entire city throbbed to the rhythm of drums and bells, animated by parades in which divinities, through spectacular staging, transformed the ritual into a collective celebration. One element is immediately striking: the predominance of the color red, a symbol of power and vitality, which accompanied the processions. The climax of the event lies in the grand parade in the city of Aïnonvi, which brings together several hundred divinities.

This 2025 edition brought to light women for their central role in Vodun rites, expressed through their songs, gestures, and knowledge. Children, bearers of spiritual heritage, were also honored, underscoring the importance of intergenerational transmission.

A Mosaic of Traditions and Symbols

The procession transformed the settings, rooting the cults in the nurturing earth. Purification basins and dunes served as symbolic spaces for deities from various regions of Benin and West Africa, captivating the audience without compromising the sacred dimension of the practices.

The **N'navi** masks of Nigeria, embodying forest spirits, protective forces, authority, and social cohesion, stood alongside the **Gounouko**, an imposing mask of Nago and Yoruba tradition, revealed through the voice and song of its priestess. The **Guèlèdè**, inscribed on UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list since 2008, brought their energy and poetry to life through the sound of the *gangan*. The **Zaouli** of Côte d'Ivoire, also recognized by UNESCO, remains unique for its rapid dances and refined aesthetics, symbolizing beauty and community cohesion.

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The [Zangbéto](#), Porto-Novo's "guardians of the night," were present as well, offering impressive demonstrations. The parade also welcomed the [Egungun](#), magnificently adorned ancestors, whose dances and songs reminded that "the dead are not dead."

Between Art, Science, and Spirituality

The Festival of Masks is not merely a spectacle; it is also a space for reflection and the transmission of knowledge. This is why an international symposium was held on August 2, 2025, at the School of African Heritage, on the theme: "*Ifa, an Introduction to an Epistemology*." Researchers and practitioners from Benin and the subregion discussed the scientific relevance of endogenous knowledge and examined questions of practice, ethics, and the universality of Ifa.

Professor [Mahougnon Kakpo](#), president of the Vodun Rites Committee of Benin, reminded participants that "Ifa is not a superstition, but a universal wisdom." In the same vein, Nigerian professor Kayode Eseuola emphasized the links that Ifa masks establish between heaven and earth in West Africa. According to [Jean-Michel Abimbola](#), Benin's Minister of Tourism, Culture, and the Arts, "Ifa is much more than a spiritual heritage. It is a full-fledged epistemology, grounded in observation, symbolism, oral narrative, and analogical logic."

At the conclusion of these discussions, the forthcoming opening of the [Maison Ifa](#) in Porto-Novo was announced, an interpretation center designed to strengthen dialogue among researchers, practitioners, artists, and citizens. Meanwhile, the city of Ouidah is preparing to host the [Vodun Days](#) in January 2026, another major occasion celebrating Africa's spiritual and cultural heritage.