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From rumba to voodoo, subtext abounds on pope's Africa trip

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NCR Today

ROME -- Pope Benedict XVI leaves tomorrow morning for the West African nation of Benin, and for anyone seeking an off-beat lens through which to see the journey, there's almost an embarrassment of riches.

From witchcraft to voodoo, from funky rumba music to politically incorrect comic books, subtext abounds -- and that's even without any new papal commentary on condoms, which was the sideshow that dominated Benedict's last outing to Africa in 2009. (On that occasion, Benedict ignited a global cause célèbre by suggesting that condoms actually make the HIV/AIDS crisis worse.)

Officially, Benedict is making this weekend excursion to Benin for three reasons. First, he'll release his conclusions from a 2009 Vatican synod on Africa, representing a sort of papal game plan for the faith in the region of its most explosive growth. Second, he'll mark the 150th anniversary of the arrival in Benin of a pair of priests from the Society for Africa Missions, launching the evangelization of West Africa. Third, he'll pray at the tomb of his close friend, the late Cardinal Bernardin Gantin of Benin, whose resignation as dean of the College of Cardinals in 2002 helped clear the way for Benedict's election as pope.

That formal agenda, however, barely scratches the surface.

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The exotic subject of witchcraft, for instance, surfaced in Benedict's last address to a group of African bishops ahead of his trip. Speaking to bishops from Angola and Sao Tome in Rome for their ad limina visit on Oct. 31, Benedict lamented that "the hearts of the baptized" in Africa "are torn between

Christianity and traditional African religions. In particular, the pope pointed to the marginalization and even murder of children and elderly people, condemned by the false dictates of witchcraft.

According to a recent UNICEF report, tens of thousands of children are tortured and killed each year across Africa in rituals linked to the practice of witchcraft, often as a means of trying to appease spirits in the context of some personal or social calamity. Benedict called for a joint effort among the church, governments and civil society to achieve definitive eradication of this scourge.

On that point, Benedict was echoing the 2009 Synod of Bishops for Africa, which denounced witchcraft as a social drama. It's reasonable to expect that witchcraft and tribal religious practices will feature again in the concluding document from the synod, to be released on Saturday.

Speaking of traditional African religion, Benin also presents Benedict XVI with an opportunity to get a taste of Africa's most famed religious export.

The *Vodun* faith better known in the West as voodoo originated in this part of Africa, with some experts seeing Benin as a primary crucible. In Benin today, an estimated 18 percent of the population, which translates into 1.6 million people, are practitioners of voodoo, making it the third largest religious group in the country after Catholics and Muslims. Many of those Catholics and Muslims hold on to a sizeable share of beliefs and customs which have their origin in voodoo.

Around the edges of the Benin trip, more local color abounds.

For instance, three popular African singers have released a CD in collaboration with Vatican Radio to mark the trip and to celebrate the growth of Catholicism in Africa. The most famous member of the trio is a Congolese rumba musician named Papa Wemba, who says he underwent a spiritual conversion in 2003 while serving a prison sentence for smuggling Congolese nationals into France by claiming they were members of his road crew.

In light of the CD release, Benedict XVI won't be the only pope to claim a moment in the sun this weekend in Benin.

(Rumba, by the way, is a heavily rhythmic brand of music usually associated with Cuba, inspired by the African slaves who developed it in the 19th century. The fact that a rumba musician is collaborating with the Vatican is itself a sign of changing times, since once upon a time, rumba was banned by ecclesiastical authorities in Cuba and elsewhere on the grounds that it was lewd and promoted promiscuity.)

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As Benedict XVI departs, one other Vatican story involving Africa is making the rounds. Just last week, *L'Osservatore Romano*, the daily Vatican newspaper, blasted a U.K. ban on a comic book called "Tintin in the Congo" as politically correct lunacy in the shadow of Big Ben.

Originally serialized in Belgium in the 1930s, "Tintin in the Congo" recounts the adventures of a young reporter named Tintin and his dog Snowy. Stephen Spielberg is bringing out a 3D movie based on the comic in December.

In some parts of the world, including the U.K., the comic has long been controversial for its depictions of African natives, which express many of the racist stereotypes of an earlier era. *L'Osservatore* acknowledged as much, but insisted that Tintin challenges the arrogance of the powerful [and] the

venality of the colonizers, and that he protects the weak and the oppressed.

The fictional character is a hero of Catholicism, the Vatican daily insisted, and a guardian angel of Christian values which the West constantly disowns or mocks.

Whether Pope Benedict himself will make reference to Tintin during his Africa swing remains to be seen, but that's already a fairly strong Vatican endorsement.

Despite the potential for interesting subtext, most observers expect that Benedict's trip to Benin may not galvanize much media interest – a fact that some papal loyalists obviously find irritating.

Dino Boffo, director of the Tv2000 media service of the Italian bishops, opined this week that in the absence of polemical stumbling blocks like condoms, the trip will most likely play to general indifference, even though, in Boffo's judgment, it's an event of great importance on the international chessboard.

Boffo blamed a disproportionate interest in vulgar news, calling it a close relative of lazy and provincial snobbery. In effect, Boffo suggested, the trip's low profile is a reflection of the West's basic indifference to Africa and its struggles.

The poor are always inconvenient, Boffo wrote, and if they're not taken up as the point of reference for historical and political judgments, they'll always remain an unacceptable intrusion in our view of the world.

For that reason, Boffo wrote, with obvious irony, it's best to not even look at them. The pope will do it by himself.

Boffo, by the way, has some experience with a preoccupation with vulgar news. In 2009, he was at the center of an Italian soap opera, with leaked police documents that later turned out to be fake splashed across the front pages of Italian papers, suggesting that Boffo had harassed a woman because he wanted to carry on a homosexual affair with her fiancé. At the time, Boffo was the editor of the official newspaper of the Italian bishops, and was forced to resign.

As the story metastasized, media outlets speculated that the Vatican was behind the attack on Boffo, unhappy because his newspaper had carried critical commentary on the personal morality of then-Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. Though the Vatican eventually denied those claims, the affair has nevertheless become an object lesson for Italians about how the media can be manipulated to destroy a reputation – so much so that a new verb, to Boffo someone, has become a sort of Italian shorthand for character assassination.

In light of that background, Boffo's frustration at media interest in Benedict's Nov. 18-20 trip to Benin takes on a clearly personal hue.

NCR senior correspondent is traveling with the pope in Benin. Below are a list of stories he has filed so far. Watch the NCR website for updates throughout the weekend.

- **Benedict's Africa plan: Stay spiritual, and stay Catholic**, Saturday, November 19, 2001
- **On AIDS, Benedict avoids the 'C' word**, Saturday, November 19, 2001
- **In voodoo capital, Benedict blasts 'occultism and evil spirits'**, Saturday, November 19, 2001
- **From a Eurocentric pope, a remarkably African message**, Saturday, November 19, 2001
- **The political nerve of Catholicism in Africa**, Friday, November 18, 2001

- **Don't surrender to laws of market, pope says**, Friday, November 18, 2001
 - **Memo to bishops: Think globally on religious freedom**, Friday, November 18, 2001
 - **Transcript from Papal Plane**, Friday, November 18, 2001
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