

Voodoo rite draws Haitian faithful praying for comfort

Thousands of Haitians have flocked to a hilltop voodoo festival, offering a special prayer to the spirits to find them new homes and ease their plight six months after a massive quake.

Dressed in white, they clambered up the hill to bathe in a waterfall and take part in an annual ritual which has drawn the faithful for almost 200 years to the town of Saut d'Eau in the central Haitian plateau.

On this spot in 1847, the Catholic saint Our Lady of Mount Carmel is believed to have appeared in a nearby palm tree.

Fearing the vision could trigger a flood of religious zeal, a Catholic priest cut down the tree. But he was too late, and ever since sometimes as many as 20,000 people have made the annual pilgrimage here.

Voodoo remains an official state religion, and it is estimated more than half of Haiti's population practices at least elements of it, but it is often followed alongside Catholicism, in rare mixing of the faiths.

This year fewer people than usual turned out for the two-week long festival, which culminated on Friday. For many Haitians, devastated by the January 12 earthquake, the trek from the capital Port-au-Prince was beyond their means.

But those who came had fervent prayers for the voodoo spirit Erzulie -- the spirit of the waterfalls and the voodoo equivalent of the Virgin Mary -- to find them a new home.

It was the first large gathering since the earthquake that killed over 250,000 and left some 1.5 million homeless.

"Many people are coming for the first time because of the earthquake," said Paul-Erick Mereilier, who lost his home and a brother and has been unemployed since graduating high school.

Mereilier, 23, from Tabarre, on the capital's outskirts, rode for over three hours in a crowded truck and spent the night sleeping on its hardwood benches.

The crowds sacrifice animals, usually chickens and goats, and smear their white clothes in the blood, chanting and dancing, often sending themselves into a trance.

Others bathe in the waters of the waterfall, hoping their wishes will be granted.

Shaking in the cold water, Mereilier said he always believed in voodoo, but had never thought of coming here before.

"I came to look for possibilities, I would like to ask the spirits for a chance," he said.

Nearby, a young girl in a bright swimsuit shook in a trance, and as relatives kept her from hitting her head on the rocks, other bathers came to touch her and whisper requests in her ears, believing her to be possessed by the spirit Erzulie.

All around, hundreds of men and women of all ages bathed with soap and mint leaves, some naked, others fully clothed. Some chanted verses from the Bible, while young men sipped rum and children played in the water.

Under a tree by the waterfall, Andre Chevry, a thin 50 year-old dressed in the red and blue colors of voodoo priests, welcomed worshippers to light candles and practiced mystical rituals for a fee.

"People come here to find satisfaction and solutions to their problems," said Chevry, sipping clear liquor and warning listeners that it was God who had brought about the earthquake.

"Everyone finds what they are looking for," he said, but when asked whether the ritual would suffice to solve Haiti's problems, he answered, "I can't guarantee anything."

Roland Wilfred lost his house and garage in the earthquake and sent his wife and three children to live with relatives in the south of the country, while he scrapes by in Port-au-Prince.

"I'm strong like a rock, I work hard, but since the earthquake everything has been bad, I don't feel right anymore," the 39 year-old mechanic said.

While he says he believes Haiti needs more than just spirits, he has been coming to the pilgrimage since he was a child.

"When I come here I feel like everything is going to be all right," he said, before slipping into the water. "But I really need a house."

Haiti is struggling to cope with the aftermath of the earthquake. But for many, the pilgrimage is part of the healing process.

"People feel happy here, after so much stress they finally have a place where to put their problems," said Ruth Paul, a 40 year-old mother who stopped to cool down by a stream during the hike up to the waterfall.

Paul said she had not lost her faith and came to ask that her two sons do well in school and that her destroyed business -- a wedding gowns rental -- picks up again.

"It's like when you have a problem and you go to a friend. Even though your friend can't help you 100 percent, you feel comfort anyway," she said. "It's better than keeping it all to yourself."