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Huskers in Benin: Culture and Agriculture in West Africa

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Cornhusker Economics

Huskers in Benin: Culture and Agriculture in West Africa

Market Report	Year Ago	4 Wks Ago	6/13/14
Livestock and Products,			
Weekly Average			
Nebraska Slaughter Steers, 35-65% Choice, Live Weight.	120.50	147.00	150.00
Nebraska Feeder Steers, Med. & Large Frame, 550-600 lb.	154.00	245.80	261.48
Nebraska Feeder Steers, Med. & Large Frame 750-800 lb.	140.89	186.84	212.23
Choice Boxed Beef, 600-750 lb. Carcass.	201.62	225.34	231.80
Western Corn Belt Base Hog Price Carcass, Negotiated.	101.78	109.64	116.44
Pork Carcass Cutout, 185 lb. Carcass 51-52% Lean.	99.53	112.15	120.77
Slaughter Lambs, Ch. & Pr., Heavy, Wooled, South Dakota, Direct.	120.00	136.00	154.75
National Carcass Lamb Cutout FOB.	282.05	369.40	357.91
Crops,			
Daily Spot Prices			
Wheat, No. 1, H.W. Imperial, bu.	6.83	6.98	6.48
Corn, No. 2, Yellow Nebraska City, bu.	7.05	4.62	4.39
Soybeans, No. 1, Yellow Nebraska City, bu.	15.12	14.65	14.16
Grain Sorghum, No.2, Yellow Dorchester, cwt.	12.05	8.02	7.63
Oats, No. 2, Heavy Minneapolis, Mn, bu.	4.24	3.87	3.82
Feed			
Alfalfa, Large Square Bales, Good to Premium, RFV 160-185 Northeast Nebraska, ton.	*	160.00	194.00
Alfalfa, Large Rounds, Good Platte Valley, ton.	225.00	120.00	*
Grass Hay, Large Rounds, Good Nebraska, ton.	217.50	105.00	100.00
Dried Distillers Grains, 10% Moisture Nebraska Average.	231.00	206.00	165.00
Wet Distillers Grains, 65-70% Moisture Nebraska Average.	91.00	67.50	54.25
* No Market			

On May 13, 2014, nine UNL undergraduate students set off on a three-week study tour in the West African country of Benin. The main objectives of the program were to learn about tropical agriculture and sustainable agricultural development in Africa and to discover the rich history and cultural traditions of Benin. The program was organized by Wes Peterson, agricultural economics professor at UNL (and Peace Corps Volunteer in Benin from 1968-70), with able assistance from Boris Medatinsa, a young Beninese entrepreneur who handled the in-country logistics and helped with the presentation and interpretation of a variety of cultural experiences. The group traveled around the country in two vans staying in modest hotels and eating at local restaurants featuring both African and European-style food.

History and Culture of Benin

Benin has an area similar to that of Ohio with a population of about 10 million. A former French colony, French is the official language while most people speak primarily one or more of 53 African languages and dialects. Religion is extremely important in Benin with most people practicing either Christianity or Islam in combination with traditional religions such as Vodun. Vodun is an animist religion with a rich pantheon of spirits, gods and other divinities and is the origin of new-world voodoo practiced in Haiti and Louisiana.

From the 17th to 19th centuries, there was an important West African kingdom known as Dahomey centered in the city of Abomey. The Dahomey kings were often at war with other West African groups, selling captured prisoners to the Portuguese and other slave traders along the West African coast. Many of the traditions found in the Bahia region of Brazil are identical to practices found today in Benin and Nigeria as that region of Brazil was the destination for many of the people sold into slavery by the kings of Dahomey.

Early in the study tour, we visited Ganvié, a village built on stilts in a shallow lagoon just inland from the coastal



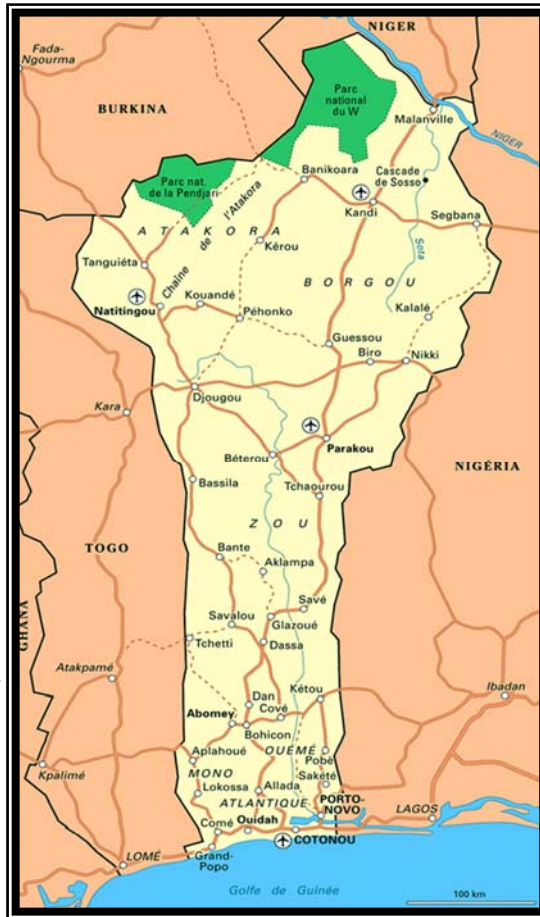
city of Cotonou the largest city in Benin (population about 700,000). Accommodations were a little rustic (no running water and limited electricity), but it was fascinating to see people going about their business paddling around in dug-out canoes. Originally, the people of Ganvié built their houses in the water to escape pursuit by the Dahomey soldiers who were afraid to venture into the lagoon. The group also visited the UNESCO world heritage site of the Palaces of the Kings of Dahomey where we learned more about the kingdom's history. The story of Dahomey was further fleshed out when we visited a former Portuguese fort that is currently a museum located in the coastal city of Ouidah. The history of southern Benin is bound up with Vodun and the slave trade. The students had read some material on Vodun prior to departure and Boris explained the main ideas of this religious world view which is much more than sticking pins into dolls. We visited the Python Temple in Ouidah, an important Vodun religious site, and attended a demonstration of dancing and magic performed by the Zangbeto, spirits from the afterlife that serve as traditional police to make sure peace is maintained in the villages.

Tropical Agriculture and Sustainable Agricultural Development

The first day of the program was spent visiting the laboratories and fields of AfricaRice, an international agricultural research center focusing on rice in Africa, and the Benin branch of the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA). Scientists from both organizations explained their work on rice breeding, biological control of pests, post-harvest technologies, and the economics of agricultural production in Africa. Subsequently the group visited the Songhai Center in Porto Novo, Benin's capital, to learn about the Center's efforts to promote sustainable and integrated agricultural production. Later in the program, the group visited the processing facilities of a producer group working with low-income women to produce plants from which essential oils can be extracted and to gather seeds from the neem tree from which an oil with insecticidal and medicinal uses is obtained. We also toured a cashew processing plant that ships raw cashew nuts to Europe and the United States. Throughout the study tour, we visited local markets to see what kinds of agricultural products are produced and how they are traded. The people of Benin get about 70% of their caloric intake from rice, corn, yams and cassava and we were able to learn how these crops are processed and consumed by Beninese households.

Wildlife, Waterfalls and Contemporary Culture in Benin

One of the highlights of the program was the Pendjari National Park and Biosphere Reserve where we saw lions, ele-



phants, hippopotamuses, buffalo and more. On the edge of the Pendjari Park, a waterfall at Tanougou offered the students a chance to swim in the pool below the falls. They also learned how to make traditional pottery from a master potter in the village of Sé and enjoyed a local band performing in an open-air cabaret in Cotonou named "Yes Papa!"—one of the students actually joined the group on keyboard for a few numbers. At the end of the program, the students met with some Peace Corps Volunteers, purchased souvenirs at the Cotonou craft market and had a swim in the ocean at the Obama Festival Beach International. This type of activity

offers a unique view of how people in other parts of the world live and the students have all indicated that they learned a great deal from the experience. In addition, these students have a much more accurate picture of Africa, both its good aspects and its problems, than the generally negative image of the continent usually portrayed in the US media.

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