

*Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, Fall 2002  
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## **Perceptions of New Orleans Voodoo: Sin, Fraud, Entertainment, and Religion**

New Orleans is an anomaly in the politically, socially, and religiously conservative Anglo-Protestant American South. Visitors to the city are beguiled by visions of Mardi Gras, Bourbon Street, and Voodoo, embodying the hedonism and indulgence that is equated with sin and a spiritual dark side that is perceived as evil. Since the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, New Orleans--and Voodoo in particular--has been viewed with both fascination and disapproval by the majority of Americans. Attitudes toward New Orleans Voodoo have run the gamut of abhorrence, fear, condemnation, cynicism, derision, exploitation, tolerance, and interest.

This article will explore how commonly held perceptions of New Orleans Voodoo have changed over time. Throughout the nineteenth century, Voodoo was considered by the dominant American culture to be sinful and threatening, and strong repressive measures were taken by the authorities. From the turn of the twentieth century until about the 1960s, the practice was simply seen as fraudulent, and new ordinances reflect this change of opinion. By the latter half of the twentieth century, concerns with both sin and fraud had diminished, and Voodoo was looked upon as entertainment--a tourist commodity and potential gold-mine for commercial exploitation. Finally, at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, there has been a new awareness of Voodoo as a legitimate religion. It should be emphasized, however, that this is not a strictly chronological narrative. As we will see in the pages that follow, at any given time since New Orleans became an American city, including the present, all of these attitudes have been, and still are, held by some segment of the population.

Louisiana differed markedly from the English colonies--later the American states. The territory was settled by the French in 1699, and the first slaves were imported from Africa in 1719. Although transferred to the Spanish in 1763 and governed by Spain until 1803, the colony remained French and African in culture. The Africans brought with them religious and magical practices that, combined with the folk Catholicism of the colonists, were to become New Orleans Voodoo. I have used *Voodoo* to distinguish the New Orleans practice

from the Haitian religion, usually spelled *Vodou*. While Voodoo and other African religious practices were not officially sanctioned in colonial Louisiana, the French and Spanish governments were fairly tolerant, and worshipers were seldom interfered with. In the few instances in which traditional African religion and magic are mentioned at all in histories and official documents, the emphasis is on the possible threat to white authority, not on the inherent sinfulness of these practices. There are no records of persecution or "anti-superstition campaigns" being waged against African beliefs by the Roman Catholic church in Louisiana.<sup>1</sup>

### **Voodoo as Sin**

The Louisiana Purchase of 1803, by which Louisiana became part of the United States, was the beginning of a struggle between Anglo-Protestant standards of behavior and what was perceived as the immorality of Latin-Catholic New Orleans. The newly-arrived Americans viewed Catholicism as idolatry, looked upon the white Creoles as frivolous, lazy, uneducated, and lacking in business sense, and were particularly unsettled by the laxness of Louisiana slavery, the degree of racial mixing, and the number and independence of the free people of color. Voodoo was considered to be pure evil, the most repulsive form of African savagery. The Americans saw slavery and servitude as a permanent condition, appropriate to an inferior race. In order to justify holding other human beings as chattel--and later as underpaid menials and second-class citizens--it became necessary to demonize, ridicule, or trivialize their religion and culture, and to teach the subjugated people to scorn their own traditions and value those of the ruling class.

American fear and abhorrence of Voodoo increased with reports of the successful slave revolt in the French colony of Saint-Domingue (1791-1804), which ended with the creation of the black republic of Haiti. Legend has it that the rebels fought with such courage and ferocity because they believed their Vodou deities made them invulnerable. Many refugees forced out by the revolution made their way to New Orleans. Over two-thirds of the new arrivals were Africans or people of African descent. These Haitians, both slave and free, brought their magical and religious beliefs with them, reinforcing the existing New Orleans Voodoo community.<sup>2</sup>

Haitian Vodou derives from the religion of the Fon and Yoruba of West Africa and the Kongo people of Central Africa, to which has been added a generous amount of folk Catholicism. Vodou recognizes a supreme being who is comparable to the Christian God the

Father, and a pantheon of lesser deities called *lwa*. The *lwa* mediate between human beings and God, and are usually paired with one or more of the Roman Catholic saints. Within the Vodou temple are altars dedicated to the *lwa*, on which are displayed images of their corresponding saints, and offerings of flowers, fruit, cooked foods, liquor, candles, and other symbolic objects. The *lwa* communicate with the faithful through spirit possession, during which the deity "mounts" the body of a worshiper and speaks to the congregation through the possessed devotee. The goal of all Vodou worship is a balanced life characterized by harmony with the human community, the natural environment, the *lwa*, and the ancestral spirits.<sup>3</sup>

In the first decades of the nineteenth century, New Orleans Voodoo undoubtedly followed the Haitian model, and devotees served the *lwa* as they had in Haiti. Voodoo emerged as an organized religion with a pantheon of deities and a structured theology, and powerful priests and priestesses--the most famous of whom was Marie Laveau--served a racially mixed community of believers throughout the nineteenth century. Most of what we know about early nineteenth-century New Orleans Voodoo comes from sensationalistic newspaper reports of the time. The white citizens of Louisiana were well aware of the role of Vodou in the Haitian Revolution. Attempted slave insurrections in Louisiana and elsewhere in the South, plus agitation by northern abolitionists, made authorities nervous about any mixed gathering of slaves, free people of color, and whites. Voodoo seemed like a particularly dangerous activity. Not only was it a potential breeding ground for rebellion, it was perceived as a horrifying brew of sorcery, devil worship, interracial fraternization, and sexual license. Although the practice of Voodoo was never actually outlawed, police regularly raided Voodoo services and arrested the participants for "unlawful assembly." The growing influence of the religion began to engender newspaper articles denouncing Voodoo. The first such account, published in the *Louisiana Gazette* of Aug. 16, 1820, reported the arrest of several persons of color and one white man on a charge of holding illegal nighttime meetings for "occult practices and the idolatrous worship of an African deity called *Vaudoo*."<sup>4</sup>

Since the French colonial period, slaves had congregated on Sundays in an area behind the city, known as Congo Square, to socialize, sell their produce and crafts, and for dancing, drumming, and chanting after the manner of their African nations. This, to the Americans, was a hotbed of Voodoo. In 1822 John Paxton, newly arrived from Philadelphia, wrote disapprovingly, "[Congo Square] is the place where the...negroes dance, carouse, and debauch on the Sabbath, to the great injury of the rising generation." He urged city

authorities to abolish the practice or to at least move it to “some place more distant from the houses, where the evil would be measurably remedied.” At the same time, however, these African cultural displays attracted many white onlookers--native New Orleanians, newly-arrived Americans, and foreign visitors--who evidently found them more entertaining than sinful.<sup>5</sup>

As the nineteenth century progressed, American authorities increasingly tightened the restrictions on people of African descent. An article in the New Orleans *Daily Picayune* of July 31, 1850 exemplifies growing their fears, combining the threat of a slave rebellion with an abhorrence of Voodoo:

Notwithstanding the severity of the enactments against the unlawful assembling of slaves, this kind of meeting appears to be rapidly on the increase.... Carried on in secret, they bring the slaves into contact with disorderly free negroes and mischievous whites, and the effect cannot be otherwise than to promote discontent, inflame passions, teach them vicious practices, and indispose them to the performance of their duty to their masters.... The public may have learned from the [recent] Voudou disclosures what takes place at such meetings--the mystic ceremonies, wild orgies, dancing, singing, etc.... The police should have their attention continually alive to the importance of breaking up such unlawful practices.<sup>6</sup>

On July 12, 1859, the Voodoo priestess Marie Laveau was called before the court for keeping a “noisy and disorderly house.” According to the New Orleans *Daily Crescent*:

Marie Clarisse Laveau, f.w.c. , the notorious hag who reigns over the ignorant and superstitious as the Queen of the Voudous, was complained of by her neighbor...[who] charged that Marie and her wenches were continuously disturbing his peace and that of the neighborhood with their...infernial singing and yelling. The police say...the noise was the...hellish observance of the mysterious rites of Voudou. This is one of the worst forms of African paganism, and is believed in and practiced by large numbers of negroes in this city, and by some white people. A description of the orgies would never do to put in respectable print. Her majesty, Queen Marie, was duly sent after.<sup>7</sup>

Persecution of the Voodoo community worsened after the Civil War. Following the abolition of slavery, the regulation against “unlawful assembly” of slaves and free persons could no longer be used as an excuse for breaking up ceremonies and arresting participants. Newly instituted ordinances against disorderly conduct, exposing the unclothed body, and loitering in public places accomplished the same purpose, as attested by dozens of newspaper articles from the 1860s through the turn of the century.<sup>8</sup> During Reconstruction, white Creoles joined the Americans in a frenzy of Negrophobia brought about by resistance to racial equality and a horror of being governed by blacks. Voodoo was used to reinforce arguments of the ignorance and barbarism of people of African descent and to justify legalized separation of the races.<sup>9</sup>

By the 1890s, with segregation firmly in place, the mainstream press delighted in mocking anything of African origin. One of the most egregious examples of this genre comes from the New Orleans *Times-Democrat* of June 24, 1896, in which a St. John's Eve Voodoo ceremony is described under the title “Dance of the Voodoos--Outlandish Celebration of St. John's Eve--A Living Cat Eaten by the Voodoo King--Unparalleled Scenes of Savagery in the Pontchartrain Swamps.” After detailing preparations for the ceremony, including the boiling of a black cat, the reporter launched into a stereotypical description of the Voodoo debauch:

The Voodoos had worked themselves to such a frenzy that they began tearing off their clothes...until finally...nearly a half hundred impassioned black savages danced as naked as islanders to the beating of ox skulls and tom-toms, the weird crooning of the hags, and the sharp ejaculations of bucks and wenches. At the height of the revel the King kicked out the fire, and in the light of the embers upset the cauldron on the ground, and grasping the cat in his fingers, began thrusting the awful mess into his mouth, the others following his example. The dance was now nothing but the lewdest and most outrageous orgy.<sup>10</sup>

Just as voyeuristic outsiders were attracted to the Congo Square dances, they flocked to the shores of Lake Pontchartrain hoping to witness--and be titillated and entertained by--the illegal and “sinful” St. John's Eve Voodoo celebrations. In fact blacks themselves were

beginning to exploit the commercial potential of Voodoo by staging bogus ceremonies for which they charged admission.<sup>11</sup>

It was only in the late 1930s-early 1940s that any serious attempt was made to document nineteenth-century Voodoo. Under the auspices of the Depression-era Works Project Administration, the fieldworkers of the Louisiana Writers' Project (LWP) interviewed approximately seventy elderly black New Orleanians who remembered Voodoo as it existed in the 1870s-90s. There were no living witnesses to earlier rites and practices. The narratives collected by the LWP present New Orleans Voodoo as a diluted version of Haitian Vodou tending more toward folk Catholicism. The names of the lwa had almost disappeared, and it was the saints who were called upon to solve everyday problems and aid in magical works.

The Louisiana Writers' Project interviews focus on informants' recollections of the most famous of the nineteenth-century priestesses, Marie Laveau. Many remembered the elaborate altars in her cottage on St. Ann Street, the weekly services held there and at the homes of other members of her congregation, and the grand St. John's Eve celebrations on the shores of Lake Pontchartrain. Marie Dédé, who as a girl had played with Marie Laveau's grandchildren, recalled the interior of the St. Ann Street cottage: "She had all kinds of saints' pictures and flowers on the altar. In the front room by the door she had a big St. Anthony...and she would turn him upside down on his head in her yard when she had "work" to perform." Charles Raphael, a member of Marie Laveau's congregation, also described the altars. The "St. Marron" referred to here was the patron of runaway slaves--the name comes from the Spanish word *cimarrón*: "In the front room she had an altar for...good luck charms, money-making charms, husband-holding charms. On this altar she had a statue of St. Peter and St. Marron, a colored saint. In the back, Marie had an altar for bad work. On it she prepared charms to kill, to drive away, to break up love affairs, and to spread confusion. It was surmounted by statues of a bear, a lion, a tiger, and a wolf." Such descriptions resemble the altars seen in Haitian Vodou temples. Laveau disciples Charles Raphael, Raymond Rivaros, and Oscar Felix spoke of her weekly services. These were sometimes called *parterres*, referring to the custom of "spreading a feast for the spirits on a white tablecloth" laid out on the ground or the floor, a ritual also found in Haitian Vodou. The cloth was covered with offerings, usually rice and peas, fresh fruits and vegetables, and candles of various symbolic colors. Music was provided by a chorus of singers and an old man who played the accordion. The meetings ended with a communal feast.

A St. John's Eve celebration was described by Oscar Felix, who, as a young man had been one of the singers at Marie Laveau's ceremonies. Compare his narrative to the lurid newspaper account quoted above.

There was an altar on the ground with a big cross in the back, and pictures of St. Peter...and St. John.... When they were ready to open the meeting, everybody would kneel before the altar and rap on the ground three times...for faith, hope, and charity, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. After that we would sing... [It] was just like a Mass in a regular church. When this part of the ceremony was over they would do the “creole dance.” The men...would put metal rings on their knees that would jingle and rattle... [After the dance] everybody would bow down and say the “Our Father.” Of course we all would stay afterwards, to eat and drink and have a good time.<sup>12</sup>

It is evident from the Louisiana Writers' Project interviews that some white people accepted Voodoo as a legitimate religion. Many of these narratives stress the interracial makeup of Marie Laveau's congregation and clientele, saying that attendance at her meetings was often “more white than colored” and that she made her fortune by serving the “rich white folks.”<sup>13</sup> Journalistic reports of the day dwell with obvious relish on the number of “respectable” white participants rounded up during police raids on Voodoo ceremonies.<sup>14</sup>

By the turn of the twentieth century, all of the powerful and charismatic priests and priestesses were dead, and no new leaders arose to replace them. Voodoo, as an organized religion, had been thoroughly suppressed by the legal system, public opinion, and the Christian church. Educators and ministers in the black community taught their constituents to be ashamed of their Voodoo beliefs, and those who aspired to the middle class vehemently denied any association with the practice. The newly arrived Protestant “American Negroes” and black native New Orleanians who had converted to Protestantism equated Voodoo with devil worship and renounced it altogether. Others turned to the black Spiritual churches, a blend of Roman Catholicism, Spiritualism, and Pentecostalism that retains elements of Voodoo.<sup>15</sup>

## Voodoo as Fraud

As the religious element of Voodoo became submerged, preserved only in marginal sects like the Spiritual churches, its magical component evolved into the practice known as *hoodoo*.

While Voodoo was concerned with maintaining the spiritual well-being of worshipers who served the African deities and the ancestors, hoodoo is directed toward controlling or influencing events and people, offering health, luck, love, money, employment, protection, justice, and revenge. Hoodoo “workers” or “doctors” operate strictly one on one, performing rituals and formulating charms, known in Louisiana as *gris-gris*. New Orleans hoodoo resembles African-based magical practices found elsewhere in the American South, but it exhibits a decidedly Roman Catholic influence, incorporating the use of altars, candles, incense, oils, holy water, and images of the saints.<sup>16</sup>

During the early decades of the twentieth century, many black hoodoo doctors and “spiritual advisors” worked out of their homes or a small office or shop, selling herbs and homemade gris-gris and the powders, baths, washes, oils, perfumes, incense, and candles known as “spiritual products.” Despite white scorn and disapproval of all things African, some New Orleans whites also became hoodoo entrepreneurs and profited from the beliefs of their black customers. Some of these merchants, black and white, were themselves believers in the efficacy of their wares, and some were charlatans.<sup>17</sup>

Local, state, and federal authorities attempted to put a stop to this commerce, which was seen as fraudulent. In the nineteenth century, Voodoo had been perceived by the Anglo-Protestant newcomers to New Orleans as a threat to morality and public safety. By the turn of the twentieth century, whites felt firmly in control, and rather than perceiving people of African descent as sinful and dangerous, they viewed them as ignorant, superstitious, and childlike. A paternalistic ruling class sought to protect “darkies” against exploitation by members of their own race or by unscrupulous whites. New Orleans instituted statutes against healing, fortune-telling, and obtaining money under false pretenses; a permit was required to operate any sort of business. Newly passed state laws made it a crime to practice medicine without a license. Federal mail fraud laws were invoked against those who conducted hoodoo commerce by mail; conviction of mail fraud carried a penitentiary sentence.<sup>18</sup> These regulations were used to prosecute, fine, and jail many black hoodoo workers. From the early 1900s through the 1940s, dozens of articles regarding arrests for hoodoo-related fraud appeared in New Orleans newspapers. The tone of these articles was



derisive; quotations from the accused were rendered in exaggerated dialect and the name and address of the defendant were always published.<sup>19</sup>

Several black New Orleanians were convicted of mail fraud and sentenced to the federal penitentiary. The most publicized of these cases was that of Rockford Lewis, who sold sachet bags, lucky beans, medals, and “Save Your Life Rheumatic Oil” through the mail. In 1934 he was investigated for mail fraud by the U.S. Post Office. Lewis was accused of mailing “letters and circulars” claiming that he “fully understood the complaints and desires of those who corresponded with him, and that he could cure their ills and grant their desires for a specified fee.” Rockford Lewis spent two years in the federal penitentiary.<sup>20</sup>

Many of the white hoodoo merchants were legitimate pharmacists who began formulating and selling spiritual products in response to the demands of their black customers, and until a few decades ago there flourished in New Orleans a type of business popularly known as the “hoodoo drugstore.” Customers asked for magical powders, waters, and oils, and pharmacists, seeing that there was money to be made, formulated harmless concoctions of powdered chalk, boric acid, alcohol, water, or oil, to which coloring and scent had been added. These were sold as Love Powder (to attract the object of one's desire), Hot Foot Powder (to make an adversary leave town), War Water (to cause dissension in the home of an enemy), John the Conqueror Bath-and-Floor Wash (to give strength and protection to the body and home of the user), Lucky Dog Oil (for success in gambling), or Oil of Bend-Over (to bend another person to one's will). Incense and candles were also sold for magical purposes.

The merchants of hoodoo flourished on South Rampart Street, a vibrant black business district above the French Quarter. The most famous of these was the Cracker Jack Drug Store, located at 435 South Rampart. The Cracker Jack was owned by “Doctor” George A. Thomas, a white pharmacist who opened an ordinary drugstore in 1897 and eventually became a hoodoo entrepreneur. An article by Edward Clayton, “The Truth About Voodoo,” appeared in the April, 1951 issue of *Ebony* magazine. Under the subtitle “Despite claims that cult is dead, Voodoo practices still flourish as lucrative racket in New Orleans,” Clayton expressed the view that Voodoo (by now actually hoodoo) was a fraudulent exploitation of African American superstitions. The article describes the Cracker Jack as “a rather forlorn and dismal looking place that has done a lucrative business dispensing such wares for more than two generations.” The accompanying illustration shows an unimpressive two-story building with nothing to indicate that it was New Orleans' leading

purveyor of hoodoo supplies. A small sign simply says “Cracker Jack,” and advertisements for Ex-Lax, Hadacol, Stanback, and Gillette can be seen in the display windows. The caption below reads, “Oldtimers say owners once displayed roots, herbs, and other items so prominently and had such brisk trade, that police were dispatched for probe.”<sup>21</sup>

### **Voodoo as Entertainment**

New Orleans Voodoo has often been sensationalized by journalists and fiction writers. In the nineteenth century Voodoo was portrayed as evil, frightening, and grossly sexual. While these earlier works were intended as cautionary tales, the productions of twentieth-century writers were meant to entertain--and to make money for their authors. Voodoo was perceived as irresistibly scary and enticingly erotic, as exemplified in Lyle Saxon's *Fabulous New Orleans* (1928), Robert Tallant's *Voodoo in New Orleans* (1946), and Raymond Martinez's *Mysterious Marie Laveau Voodoo Queen* (1956). These books have remained enormously popular and are still in print. Tallant's *Voodoo in New Orleans*, a racist and sensationalistic adaptation of interviews and other materials compiled by the Louisiana Writers' Project, is still considered by many to be the preeminent source on New Orleans Voodoo. In the same genre, the nineteenth-century priestess Marie Laveau has been the subject of three novels: Tallant's *The Voodoo Queen* (1956); a novel by Francine Prose, simply titled *Marie Laveau* (1977); and Jewell Parker Rhodes' *Voodoo Dreams, A Novel of Marie Laveau* (1993). After the excesses of *Voodoo in New Orleans*, Tallant's *Voodoo Queen* is surprisingly tame; Prose's *Marie Laveau* is pure fantasy; and Rhodes' *Voodoo Dreams*--oozing with sex and violence--is the most exploitative and the least historically accurate.<sup>22</sup> The 1987 movie *Angel Heart*, also graphically sexual and violent, links New Orleans Voodoo with Satanism.

Beginning in the 1960s and continuing until the present, New Orleans Voodoo has become both entertainment and tourist attraction. Most of the new Voodoo entrepreneurs are white, cashing in on the desire of outsiders to experience what they consider exotic, titillatingly sinful, or comical. French Quarter shops, mail order catalogs, and Web pages market hokey charms, Voodoo dolls made in China, alligator teeth and claws, “blessed” chicken feet, “Marie Laveau's Magic Mojo Beans,” and plastic “New Orleans Voodoo cockroaches,” as well as the traditional candles, oils, powders, baths, incense, and herbs. Several companies offer walking tours of Voodoo sites that combine some historical fact with a generous helping of fiction, and, for an additional fee, tourists may witness a staged Voodoo ceremony. Tour brochures picked up in the French Quarter advertise “Magic Marie

Laveau Voodoo Tour,” “Nighttime Haunted Voodoo and Ghost Swamp Adventure,” and “City of the Dead and Voodoo History Tour.” The Louisiana Catalog markets Marie Laveau Executive Voodoo Kits--including an item called “Other Attorney Be Stupid”--as humorous gifts.<sup>23</sup>

The Web site of New Orleans-based Voodoo Authentica announces that the company “provides authentic ritual entertainment, a complete line of Voodoo dolls and crafts, spiritual work and consultations by experienced practitioners, and much more!” Voodoo Authentica's “convention and special event planning services” offers “on-site party theming, entertaining Voodoo ritual shows, psychic readers, and convention amenities including Voodoo dolls and gris-gris bags--handmade in New Orleans and blessed by authentic practitioners--created with custom labels showcasing your company's name and logo.” Voodoo Authentica is also the organizer of Voodooofest, an event held on Halloween day in Congo Square, featuring food, music, handmade Voodoo dolls, potions, gris-gris, spiritual consultations, and an “authentic ancestral Voodoo ritual and snake dance at dusk.”<sup>24</sup>

Until a few years ago, visitors to the French Quarter would have encountered the self-styled Voodoo doctor known as Chicken Man--so nicknamed because his “act” once included biting the heads off live chickens. Arrayed in a costume of bones, teeth, and feathers, Chicken Man charged tourists to pose for photographs, provide lottery numbers, and formulate gris-gris. When Chicken Man died in December, 1998, a French Quarter nightclub owner paid for a Voodoo jazz funeral that combined entrepreneurial showmanship with authentic practice. The service was conducted by two of New Orleans' best-known Voodoo priestesses, Ava Kay Jones and Miriam Chamani. Chicken Man's ashes were placed in a horse-drawn hearse and given a traditional brass band parade through the French Quarter.<sup>25</sup>

Voodoo has been exploited by promoters of the New Orleans Saints, a football team notorious for its bad luck. Legend has it that construction of the New Orleans Superdome displaced an early cemetery, hence the inability of the Saints to win a home game. A fifteen-foot “voodoo doll” was once hung outside the Superdome and then buried at a secret site in an unsuccessful attempt to break the Saints' string of losses. In 2001, aided by a pre-game ceremony by Voodoo Priestess Ava Kay Jones to rid the playing field of evil spirits, the Saints miraculously defeated the St. Louis Rams in the Super Bowl, engendering an jubilant article in the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* announcing that “The Curse is Lifted.” A minister from a suburban Protestant church felt compelled to respond with a letter to the editor,

stating that “As a devout Christian, I am deeply offended about the decision to have a voodoo priestess, snake and all, do a ritual. Many Christians don't find voodoo to be fun or harmless. Please, let's not repeat this act that is offensive to a significant population of fans.”<sup>26</sup>

### **Voodoo as Religion**

Far removed from the French Quarter tourist scene, the convention hall, and the Superdome, one indeed finds authentic African-based religious and magical practices--some survivals from an earlier time, some recent imports, and some revivals. In outlying neighborhoods, purveyors of herbs and spiritual products cater to a mostly African American and Latino clientele of Spiritual church members, hoodoo practitioners, followers of Santería, Voodoo devotees, or some combination of these belief systems. There has been an upsurge of interest in Voodoo among well-educated black and white Americans. This must be viewed as a “Voodoo revival,” not a continuation of the religion as it was practiced in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Traditional New Orleans Voodoo was virtually dead by the early twentieth century, preserved only in remnants that survive in the black Spiritual churches and in the hoodoo still practiced by some older black New Orleanians. The religion as it exists today more closely resembles Haitian Vodou or Cuban Santería than the New Orleans Voodoo described by community elders interviewed by the Louisiana Writers' Project in the late 1930s-early 1940s. Contemporary priestesses--and a few priests--serve a middle-class, multi-racial community of believers who are serious students of Voodoo. All of these individuals, in various ways, serve sincere believers and attempt to inform the public about the Voodoo religion through workshops, Web sites, and newsletters.

Priestess Miriam Williams Chamani, an African American woman originally from Mississippi, was a bishop of the Angel Angel [*sic*] All Nations Spiritual Church in Chicago before coming to New Orleans to establish the Voodoo Spiritual Temple on the edge of the French Quarter across from Congo Square. The Voodoo Spiritual Temple houses a small retail shop, an inner sanctum for consultations, and a shrine room filled with altars dedicated to the saints and the deities of Vodou and Santería. Ceremonies are held in the back courtyard.

Sallie Ann Glassman, a Jewish woman from Maine whose training is in studio art, along with her partner Shane Norris, a former engineer, operate the shop Island of Salvation

in the racially mixed Bywater neighborhood. Glassman and Norris were both initiated into Vodou in Haiti. Authentic Vodou services are held at their nearby home or outdoors in the surrounding streets.

Ava Kay Jones comes from a family of traditional Roman Catholic Louisiana Creoles of color. Her mother and grandmother are both said to have had spiritual powers. She holds a bachelor's degree in French and Spanish and a law degree from Loyola University. She became a Vodou initiate in Haiti and was later initiated in the United States in Orisha-Vodu, the African American variant of Santería. Jones, possibly the best-known of New Orleans' Voodoo priestesses, is also the least accessible. She works from her home--the address is not even listed in the telephone directory--and one must schedule appointments well in advance.<sup>27</sup>

Understanding and acceptance to Voodoo has also been fostered by public institutions. In 1996 the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival spotlighted the crafts, music, and religion of Haiti. Ava Kay Jones appears every year at the Jazz and Heritage Festival, where she speaks with visitors, sells gris-gris bags, and dispels misconceptions about Voodoo. In 1998 the "Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou" exhibition (organized by the Fowler Museum of Cultural History at UCLA) opened at the New Orleans Museum of Art, contributing to public understanding of the connection between Haitian Vodou and New Orleans Voodoo.

## **Conclusion**

Perceptions of New Orleans Voodoo have indeed changed since Louisiana was purchased by the United States in 1803. The newly arrived Anglo-Protestant Americans--so different in religion, language, culture, and their concept of slavery and race relations from the Latin-Catholic, French-speaking Creoles with their racially permeable social structure--considered Voodoo a threat to morality and safety. The suppression of this African-based religion was synonymous with the subjugation of people of color. By the turn of the twentieth century, white Americans were feeling more comfortable in their situation. They had established their own churches, neighborhoods, and businesses; English was the dominant language; and Jim Crow apartheid was the law. Voodoo was no longer seen as frightening, it was simply the foolish superstition of ignorant black people who needed the protection of anti-fraud laws. By mid-century, perceptions shifted again, and Voodoo, no longer considered fraudulent, was perceived as a source of amusement and tourist revenue. The Civil Rights Movement

changed race relations forever. Although racism still existed, segregation and discrimination were illegal, and attitudes gradually caught up with the new reality. Multiculturalism and tolerance of difference were the norm. Whites began to find Voodoo attractive, and blacks no longer considered their African heritage a shameful thing. Voodoo was accepted as a legitimate religion.

This in no way implies that these views were, or are, held by everybody--that, until the late twentieth century, all white people denigrated Voodoo and all black people were devotees, and that the entire population now embraces the Voodoo religion. The situation is much more complex. In the nineteenth century, when Voodoo was viewed by many as sinful and dangerous, many whites sought the counsel of Marie Laveau and other priests and priestesses and participated in their religious services. White thrill-seekers, both locals and visitors, flocked to the shores of Lake Pontchartrain on the night of June twenty-third to witness the Voodoo celebration of St. John's Eve. Black entrepreneurs cashed in on the curiosity of outsiders and staged phony ceremonies for which they charged admission. Later in the twentieth century, even as white authorities passed anti-fraud laws against Voodoo (or hoodoo), white merchants actively engaged in the sale of charms and spiritual products. Nor was it only whites who considered the practice fraudulent. In 1951, *Ebony*, a magazine produced by African Americans for black readers, characterized Voodoo as a "racket." Some African Americans in the Bywater neighborhood are uncomfortable with the outdoor ceremonies performed by Sallie Ann Glassman and Shane Norris, equating Voodoo with devil worship and black magic. The minister who objected to the Voodoo ceremony at the 2001 Super Bowl obviously considered it not entertaining but sinful.

Present-day New Orleans priests and priestesses are indisputably genuine in their devotion to Voodoo. They are also compelled to make a living, and here the line between Voodoo as entertainment and Voodoo as religion becomes blurred. The convention events orchestrated by Voodoo Authentica offer employment opportunities at functions attended by non-believers. VoodooFest attracts a mixture of tourists, casual onlookers, and members of the local Voodoo community. Priestess Miriam's Voodoo Spiritual Temple welcomes outsiders and is regularly visited by tour groups. Sallie Ann Glassman prepares the altar for the public St. John's Eve ceremony held at a midtown hotel and advertized to tourists via the World Wide Web. One is likely to encounter a television film crew at Priestess Miriam's temple or at Glassman's Island of Salvation. Ava Kay Jones leads a dance company, Voodoo Macumba, and performs at a variety of venues; appearances must be booked through an

agent. She was recently featured in a documentary video, “New Orleans Voodoo from the Inside.”

Although there is now greater acceptance of Voodoo as a legitimate religion and practitioners are no longer prosecuted for infraction of various city ordinances, there are many, both black and white, natives and tourists, who still fear, scoff at, or exploit Voodoo.

## NOTES

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1. For examples of the perceived threat of Voodoo to white colonial authorities, see Antoine Simon Le Page de Pratz, *Histoire de la Louisiane* (1758, English translation London: Beckett, 1774, 387), and Laura Porteous, “The Gri-Gri Case: A Criminal Trial in Louisiana During the Spanish Regime, 1773,” *The Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 17 (1934), 48-63.)

2. For more on the Saint-Domingue refugees, see Gabriel Debien and René Le Gardeur, “The Saint-Domingue Refugees in Louisiana,” in Carl Brasseaux and Glenn Conrad, eds., *Road to Louisiana: The Saint-Domingue Refugees 1792-1809* (1992), 176-88; for influence on New Orleans Voodoo, see Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, “The Formation of Afro-Creole Culture” in Hirsch and Logsdon, *Creole New Orleans*, 85-87.

3. The literature on Haitian Vodou is vast, but a good understanding may be gained from Alfred Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*, and Donald Cosentino, ed., *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, (Los Angeles: University of California Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1995).

4. “Idolatry and Quackery” *Louisiana Gazette*, Aug. 16, 1820, p. 2, c. 3. Numerous other Voodoo-related arrests were documented by fieldworkers of the Louisiana Writers' Project, who located every available newspaper article on the subject. See Marcus Christian, “History of the Negro in Louisiana/Voodooism and Mumbo-Jumbo,” 11-13, Louisiana Writers' Project, Archives and Manuscripts Division, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans; and Catherine Dillon, “The Law's Long Arm/The Suppression of Voodoo” (unpublished manuscript, Louisiana Writers' Project (henceforth LWP), folder 118d, Federal Writers' Collection, Northwestern State University, Natchitoches, Louisiana, Watson Memorial Library, Cammie G. Henry Research Center).

5. John Paxton, introduction to the *New Orleans Directory and Register* (1822), 40-41. For more on Congo Square, see David Estes, “Traditional Dances and Processions of Blacks in New Orleans as Witnessed by Antebellum Travelers,” *Louisiana Folklore Miscellany* 6, no. 3 (1990), 1-13; Jerah Johnson, “New Orleans's Congo Square: An Urban Setting for Early Afro-American Culture Formation,” *Louisiana History* 32, no. 2 (Spring 1991), 140-147.

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6. "Unlawful Assemblies," New Orleans *Daily Picayune*, July 31, 1850, p. 2, c. 2.
  7. "Recorder Long's Court," New Orleans *Daily Crescent*, July 12, 1859, p. 1, c. 7. The initials f.w.c. stand for free woman of color; persons of this status were required to be so designated.
  8. City ordinances used to justify such arrests were #3046 passed May 7, 1879 and #7085 passed May 17, 1881, cited in Dillon, "Voodoo/The Law's Long Arm," 29-30. LWP workers collected approximately seventy newspaper articles about Voodoo-related arrests between 1860 and 1900, and I have found additional articles.
  9. Blake Touchstone, "Voodoo in New Orleans" (*Louisiana History* 13, 1972), 371-386; Joseph G. Tregle, Jr., "Creoles and Americans," in Hirsch and Logsdon, *Creole New Orleans*, 131-185.
  10. "Dance of the Voodoos," New Orleans *Times-Democrat*, June 24, p. 2, c. 6-7.
  11. Touchstone, "Voodoo in New Orleans," 180.
  12. Marie Dédé, interview by Robert McKinney, n.d.; Charles Raphael, interview by Hazel Breaux, n.d.; Raymond Rivaros, interview by Hazel Breaux and Jacques Villere, n.d.; Oscar Felix, interview by Edmund Burke, March 14, 1940, LWP folder 25.
  13. Raphael/Breaux interview; Rivaros/Breaux-Villere interview; Theresa Kavanaugh, interview by Zoe Posey, n.d.; Dédé/McKinney interview; Mary Richard, interview by Zoe Posey, April 25, 1941; Washington/McKinney interview; interview by Robert McKinney, n.d.; Eugene Fritz, interview by Robert McKinney, n.d.; Harrison Camille, interview by Maude Wallace, January 9, 1940, LWP folder 25; Louie Hopkins, interview by Maude Wallace and Henriette Michinard, March 4, 1940, LWP folder 43.
  14. See, for example, *Louisiana Gazette*, August 16, 1820, p. 2, c. 3; *Weekly Delta* July 8, 1850, p. 4, c. 1; *Daily Picayune*, December 5, 1869, p. 11, c. 5; *Daily Picayune*, June 24, 1873, p. 4, c. 2; *Daily States* May 29, 1889, p. 2, c. 2; Lafcadio Hearn, "The Last of the Voudous," *Harper's Weekly Magazine* (November 7, 1885); Charles Dudley Warner, "A Voodoo Dance," *Harper's Weekly Magazine* (June 25, 1887).
  15. For more on the Spiritual churches, see Hans A. Baer, *The Black Spiritual Movement: A Religious Response to Racism* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984), 18-22, 111, 127-133; Michael P. Smith, *Spirit World: Photographs and Journal* (Gretna, La.: Pelican Publishing Co., 1984); Claude Jacobs, "Spirit Guides and Possession in the New Orleans Black Spiritual Churches," *Journal of American Folklore* 403 (Jan.-March, 1989), 46; Claude Jacobs and Andrew Kaslow, *The Spiritual Churches of New Orleans* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991); David Estes, "Ritual Validations of Clergywomen's Authority in the African American Spiritual Churches of New Orleans," in Catherine Wessinger, ed., *Women's Leadership in Marginal Religions: Explorations Outside the Mainstream* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 149-171; Jason Berry, *The Spirit of Black Hawk: A Mystery of Africans and Indians* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995).



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16. For more on New Orleans Voodoo and hoodoo, see Carolyn Morrow Long, *Spiritual Merchants: Religion, Magic, and Commerce* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001), chapters 3 and 4.

17. Louisiana Writers' Project fieldworkers interviewed a number of New Orleans spiritual entrepreneurs of the late 1930s-early 1940s, noting attitudes toward their customers. See John Hall, John Hall Novelty Shop, interview by Hazel Breaux and Robert McKinney, April 13, 1937; John C. Coleman, Ideal Drugstore, interview by Hazel Breaux and Robert McKinney, April 7, 1937; Louis's Novelty Shop, interview by Hazel Breaux and Robert McKinney, n.d., LWP folder 44. Also see Thomas Ewing Dabney, (interview with John Bonne, Terminal Pharmacy) "Witchcraft Medicine," *The American Pharmacist* (Sept. 1931), 22-24, 78, 80, 82. Also see Long, *Spiritual Merchants*, chapter 6.

18. Mail Fraud Act, Lisa Martin, staff attorney for the U.S. Postal Service, Enforcement Division of the General Counsel's Office, telephone interview February 9, 1998; Medical Practice Act, Delmar Rorison, Executive Director, Louisiana Board of Medical Examiners, telephone interview October 7, 1998. New Orleans ordinances against fortune-telling and obtaining money under false pretenses are cited in Dillon, "Voodoo/The Law's Long Arm," 40, 42, 52 (Council Series #13,347, passed May 12, 1897; #3107, passed Feb. 2, 1916; #7876, passed May 14, 1924).

19. Marcus Christian and Catherine Dillon document forty newspaper articles about hoodoo-related arrests between 1901 and 1939.

20. Transcript of Rockford Lewis mail-fraud trial, United States District Court, Nov. 23, 1933-Feb. 16, 1934, LWP folder 374; "Voodoo Charm Doctor Makes Court Defense," *New Orleans Item*, Feb. 6, 1934, p. 1, col. 1. The Rockford Lewis case and other mail-fraud prosecutions are covered in Long, *Spiritual Merchants*, 129-39.

21. Edward T. Clayton, "The Truth About Voodoo," *Ebony* (April 1951), 54-61. For more on the Cracker Jack and other hoodoo drugstores, see Long, *Spiritual Merchants*, 143-50.

22. Lyle Saxon, *Fabulous New Orleans* (1928, reprint Gretna, La.: Pelican Publishing Co., 1988); Raymond Martinez, *Mysterious Marie Laveau Voodoo Queen, and Folktales Along the Mississippi* (New Orleans: Hope Publications, 1956); Robert Tallant, *The Voodoo Queen* (1956, reprint Gretna, La.: Pelican Publishing Co., 1983); Francine Prose, *Marie Laveau* (1977, New York: Berkley Publishing Corp.); Jewell Parker Rhodes, *Voodoo Dreams: A Novel of Marie Laveau* (1995, New York: Picador).

23. Brochures from Magic Walking Tours, Haunted History Tours, and Phantom Haunts; "voodoo kits" from Louisiana Catalog, 1999.

24. Voodoo Authentica, [www.voodoooshop.com](http://www.voodoooshop.com).

25. Leslie Williams, "Chicken Man To Get Voodoo Burial," *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, January 25, 1999, B1 and 2.

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26. "Deep Voodoo," *Washington Post*, Sports Section, September 23, 1996; Mary Foster, "Saints Continue Miracle Season," [www.sportserver.com](http://www.sportserver.com); Dave Goldberg, "Unpredictable Season," [www.usatoday.com/sports](http://www.usatoday.com/sports); "Offended by Voodoo at Game," *Times-Picayune*, Your Opinions, January 4, 2001.

27. Miriam Williams Chamani, Sallie Ann Glassman and Shane Norris, and Ava Kay Jones, interviews by the author between 1996 and 2001.