

# Louisiana Voodoo

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**Louisiana Voodoo**, also known as **New Orleans Voodoo**, describes a set of underground religious practices which originated from the traditions of the African diaspora. It is a cultural form of the Afro-American religions which developed within the French, Spanish, and Creole speaking African American population of the U.S. state of Louisiana. It is one of many incarnations of African-based religions rooted in West African Dahomeyan Vodun. They became syncretized with the Catholicism and Francophone culture of south Louisiana as a result of the slave trade. Louisiana Voodoo is often confused with—but is not completely separable from—Haitian Vodou and southern Hoodoo. It differs from Vodou in its emphasis upon Gris-gris, voodoo queens, use of Hoodoo occult paraphernalia, and Li Grand Zombi (snake deity). It was through Louisiana Voodoo that such terms as gris-gris (a Wolof term) and voodoo dolls were introduced into the American lexicon.

## History

### African Influences

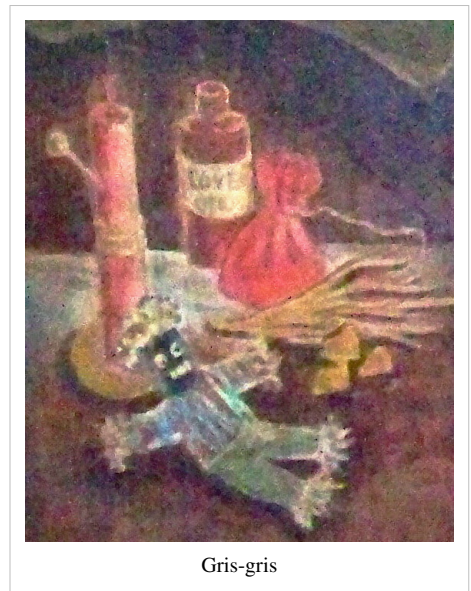
Voodoo was brought to the French colony Louisiana through the slave trade. From 1719 to 1731, the majority of African slaves came directly from what is now Benin, West Africa, bringing with them their cultural practices, language, and religious beliefs rooted in spirit and ancestor worship. Their knowledge of herbs, poisons, and the ritual creation of charms and amulets, intended to protect oneself or harm others, became key elements of Louisiana Voodoo.<sup>[1]</sup>

The slave community quickly acquired a strong presence in Louisiana. The colony was not a stable society when slaves arrived, which allowed African culture to maintain a prominent position in the slave community. (160) According to a census of 1731-1732, the ratio of African slaves to European settlers was over two to one.<sup>[1]</sup> The ownership of slaves was concentrated into the hands of only a few of the white settlers, facilitating the preservation of African culture.<sup>[1]</sup>

Unlike other areas of active slave trade, there was little separation in Louisiana between families, culture, and languages.<sup>[1]</sup> The Embargo Act of 1808 ended all slave imports to Louisiana.<sup>[2]</sup> Authorities promoted the growth of the slave population by prohibiting by law the separation of families. Parents were sold together with their children under fourteen years of age.<sup>[1]</sup> The high mortality of the slave trade brought its survivors together with a sense of solidarity.(160) The absence of fragmentation in the slave community, along with the kinship system produced by the bond created by the difficulties of slavery, resulted in a “coherent, functional, well integrated, autonomous, and self confident slave community.”<sup>[1]</sup> ) As a result African culture and spirituality did not die out, but rather thrived in French Creole culture.

The practice of making and wearing charms and amulets for protection, healing, or the harm of others was a key aspect to early Louisiana Voodoo.<sup>[1]</sup> The *ouanga*, a charm used to poison an enemy, contained the poisonous roots of the figure maudit tree, brought from Africa and preserved in the West Indies. The ground up root was combined with other elements such as bones, nails, roots, holy water, holy candles, holy incense, holy bread, or crucifixes. The administrator of the ritual frequently evoked protection from Allah, the Christian God, and Jesus Christ. This openness of African belief allowed for the adoption of Catholic practices into Louisiana Voodoo.<sup>[1]</sup>

Another component of Louisiana Voodoo brought from Africa was the worship of ancestors and the subsequent emphasis on respect for elders. For this reason, the rate of survival among elderly slaves was high, further



Gris-gris

“Africanizing Louisiana Creole culture.”<sup>[1]</sup>

## Catholic influence

The slave trade also brought the belief in spirits which is central to Louisiana Voodoo. The spirits presided over every day matters of life, such as family, love, and justice. Originally, these spirits were called by their African names, but once French Creole replaced native African languages, their original names were no longer used. The spirits then adopted the names of Catholic Saints. Each spirit was paired with a Saint in charge of similar spheres of life.<sup>[2]</sup> The adoption of Catholic practices to the voodoo faith soon became an integral part of what is known today as New Orleans voodoo. Catholic traditions, such as prayers including the Hail Mary and the Lord’s Prayer, baptism, and the sign of the cross were incorporated into voodoo practices.<sup>[3]</sup>

## Voodoo Queens

During the nineteenth century, Voodoo queens became central figures to Voodoo in the United States. Voodoo queens presided over ceremonial meetings and ritual dances. They also earned an income by administrating charms, amulets, and magical powders guaranteed to cure ailments, grant desires, and confound or destroy one’s enemies.<sup>[4]</sup>

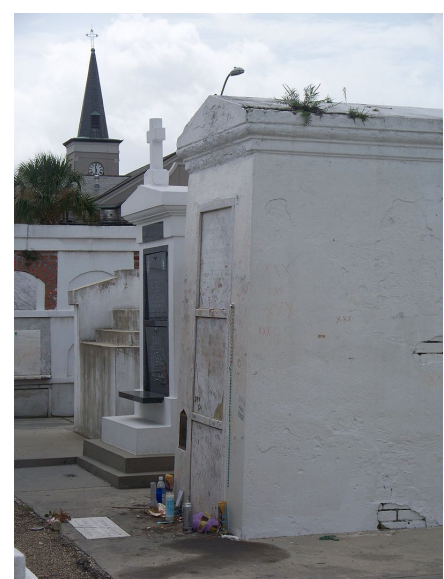
Most noted for her achievements as voodoo Queen of New Orleans in the 1830’s was Marie Laveau. Once the news of her powers spread, she successfully overthrew the other voodoo queens of New Orleans. She acted as an oracle, conducted private rituals behind her cottage on St. Ann Street of the New Orleans French Quarter, performed exorcisms, and offered sacrifices to spirits. Also a devout Catholic, Marie encouraged her followers to attend Catholic Mass. The influence of her Catholic beliefs further facilitated the adoption of Catholic practices into the Voodoo belief system.<sup>[5]</sup> Today, she is remembered for her skill and compassion for the less fortunate, and her spirit is considered one of the central figures of Louisiana Voodoo.<sup>[2]</sup>

Today, thousands visit the tomb of Marie Laveau to ask favors. Across the street from the cemetery, offerings of pound cake are left to the statue of Saint Expedite; these offerings are believed to expedite the favors asked of Marie Laveau. Saint Expedite represents the spirit standing between life and death. The chapel where the statue stands was once used only for holding funerals.<sup>[2]</sup>

Marie Laveau continues to be a central figure of Louisiana Voodoo and of New Orleans culture. Gamblers shout her name when throwing dice, and multiple tales of sightings of the Voodoo queen have been told. Her grave has more visitors than the grave of Elvis Presley. Although she is not yet officially considered a saint, there is a strong movement to have her canonized.<sup>[2]</sup>



Marie Laveau



Tomb of Marie Laveau

## Commercialization

During the 1930's, true Voodoo went underground when New Orleans became a tourist destination. Voodoo acquired an exotic, Hollywood image in the 1932 film *White Zombie*. The misconception developed that the principal elements of Voodoo are hexing and sticking pins into dolls. Visiting tourists asked favors of voodoo practitioners, who made it a point never to refuse one who asked for help. Exhausted by fame, voodoo became an underground religion. At this time, those in search of a fortune took up the "business of superstitions," charging money, as true voodoo followers never did, for fake potions powders, and Gris-gris.

## Beliefs and Practices

Louisiana Voodoo is a conglomeration of beliefs that has evolved over time and continues to adapt to its surroundings. As it has been a religion conserved by oral tradition, has no sacred book or canon and is followed by many, the beliefs of Louisiana Voodoo vary somewhat from person to person. Louisiana Voodoo combines elements of European and African beliefs, and Roman Catholicism. It is a dynamic religion that has both adapted to and shaped New Orleans culture.

The word voodoo comes from the word *vudu*, the Dahomean "spirit", an invisible mysterious force that can intervene in human affairs."<sup>[5]</sup> The worship of spirits remains a vital part of the practices of voodoo in Louisiana. Followers of Louisiana voodoo believe in one God and multiple lesser but powerful spirits which preside over daily matters of life, such as the family, the sky, and judgment.<sup>[5]</sup>



Li Grand Zombi

The core beliefs of Louisiana Voodoo include the recognition of one God who does not interfere in people's daily lives and spirits that preside over daily life. Spiritual forces, which can be kind or mischievous, shape daily life through and intercede in the lives of their followers. Connection with these spirits can be achieved through dance, music, singing, and the use of snakes, which represent Legba, Voodoo's "main spirit conduit to all others."<sup>[2]</sup> Unlike the Judeo-Christian image, the Voodoo serpent represents "healing knowledge and the connection between Heaven and Earth."<sup>[2]</sup> Deceased ancestors can also intercede in the lives of Voodoo followers.<sup>[2]</sup>

The main focus of Louisiana Voodoo today is to serve others and influence the outcome of life events through the connection with nature, spirits, and ancestors. True rituals are held "behind closed doors" as a showy ritual would be considered disrespectful to the spirits. Voodoo methods include readings, spiritual baths, specially devised diets, prayer, and personal ceremony. Voodoo is often used to cure anxiety, addictions, depression, loneliness, and other ailments. It seeks to help the hungry, the poor, and the sick as Marie Laveau once did.<sup>[2]</sup>

## Louisiana Voodoo and Christianity

As a result of the fusion of Francophone culture and voodoo in Louisiana, many Voodoo spirits became associated with the Christian saints that presided over the same domain. Although Voodoo and Catholic practices are radically different, both saints and spirits act as mediators with the Virgin Mary and Legba presiding over specific activities. Early followers of Voodoo in the United States adopted the image of the Catholic Saints to their spirits.<sup>[3]</sup> St. Peter corresponded to Papa Limba, also referred to as Laba. Papa Limba refers to the Dahomean spirit *Legba*, the guardian of crossroads, gates, and entrances to villages. As St. Peter is known as the guardian of Heaven and is frequently depicted holding the keys to Heaven, his image was combined with that of Papa Limba. Some also associated Papa Limba with the devil. A popular song in Louisiana referring to St. Peter strongly coincides with a Haitian Voodoo song to Papa Legba:

*St. Peter, St Peter, open the door,  
I'm callin' you, come to me!  
St. Peter, St Peter, open the door,  
Papa Legba, open the gate for me, Ago-e  
Ativon Legba, open the gate for me;  
The gate for me, papa, so that I may enter the temple  
On my way back, I shall thank you for this favor* <sup>[3]</sup>

The serpent is the central figure of New Orleans Voodoo. Known as Li Grand Zombi, the serpent also became associated with Saint Patrick. Traditionally, St. Patrick expelled all snakes from Ireland, and is frequently depicted standing on or brandishing his staff at a snake. During a Voodoo ritual, the Voodoo queen focuses on the snake as she acts as diviner or prophet for the rest of the members of the rite. <sup>[3]</sup>

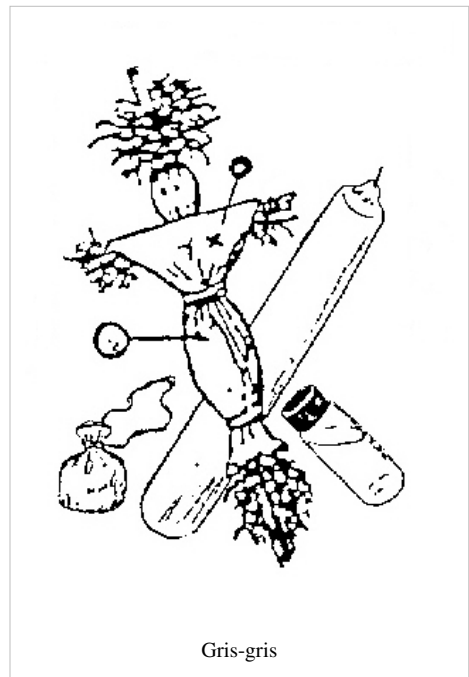
Other Catholic practices adopted into Louisiana Voodoo include reciting the Hail Mary and the Lord's Prayer. <sup>[5]</sup>

A common misconception of Louisiana Voodoo is that its relationship to the Catholic Church is one of opposition. The similarities between Voodoo and Catholicism are what kept African beliefs from dying out as they did in other areas of the world. Historically, there has been little hostility between followers of Catholicism and Voodoo in New Orleans. Although Voodoo later experienced opposition from Protestant churches, its relationship to the Catholic Church has always been amicable. Today, most followers of Voodoo also practice Catholicism and see no conflict between the two religions. <sup>[2]</sup>

## Voodoo superstitions and spells

Many superstitions also related to the practice of Hoodoo developed within the Voodoo tradition in Louisiana. While these superstitions are not central to the Voodoo faith, their appearance is partly a result of Voodoo tradition in New Orleans and have since influenced it significantly.

- *If you lay a broom across the doorway at night, a witch can't come in and hurt you.*
- *Having a woman visit you the first thing on Monday mornings is bad luck for the rest of the week.*
- *Don't borrow or lend salt because that is bad luck.*
- *If you sweep trash out of the house after dark you will sweep away your luck.*
- *Don't shake a tablecloth outside after dark or someone in your family will die.*
- *To stop a Voodoo spell being placed upon you, acquire some bristles from a pig cooked at a Voodoo ritual, tie the bristles into a bundle and carry them on you at all times.*
- *If a woman sprinkles some salt from her house to yours, it will give you bad luck until you clean the salt away and put pepper over your door sill.*
- *If a woman wants her husband to stay away from other woman, she can do so by putting a little of her blood in his coffee, and he will never quit her.*
- *If a woman's husband dies and you don't want her to marry again, cut all of her husband's shoes all in little pieces, just as soon as he is dead, and she will never marry again.*
- *You can give someone a headache by taking and turning their picture upside down.*



- *You can harm a person in whatever way you want to by getting a lock of his hair and burning some and throwing the rest away.*
- *You can make a farmer's well go dry by putting some soda in the well for one week, each day; then drawing a bucket of water out and throwing it in the river to make the well go dry.* <sup>[6]</sup>

In Voodoo spells, the "cure-all" was very popular among followers. The cure-all was a Voodoo spell that could solve all problems. There were different recipes in Voodoo spells for cure-all; one recipe was to mix jimson weed with sulphur and honey. The mixture was placed in a glass, which was rubbed against a black cat, and then the mixture was slowly sipped. <sup>[6]</sup>

The Voodoo doll is a form of gris-gris, and an example of sympathetic magic. Contrary to popular belief, Voodoo dolls are usually used to bless instead of curse. The purpose of sticking pins in the doll is not to cause pain in the person the doll is associated with, but rather to pin a picture of a person or a name to the doll, which traditionally represents a spirit. The gris-gris is then performed from one of four categories: love; power and domination; luck and finance; and uncrossing. <sup>[7]</sup>

### Voodoo and Spiritualism

The hallmark of the New Orleans Spiritual Churches is the honoring of the Native American spirit named Black Hawk, who lived in Illinois and Wisconsin, not in Africa, or Haiti. <sup>[8]</sup> Furthermore, the names of some individual churches in the denomination—such as Divine Israel—bring to mind typical Black Baptist church names more than Catholic ones.

The New Orleans Spiritual religion is a blend of Spiritualism, Voodoo, Catholicism, and Pentecostalism; the Voodoo-influenced "Spiritual Churches" that survive in New Orleans are the result of a mingling of these and other spiritual practices. It is unique among African-American "Spiritual" religions in its use of "Spirit Guides" in worship services and in the forms of ritual possession that its adherents practice. <sup>[9]</sup>

### Voodoo Today

Today, Voodoo is a major tourist attraction to the city of New Orleans. Shops selling charms, gris-gris, candles, and powders cater to both tourists and practitioners. <sup>[10]</sup> The New Orleans Historic Voodoo Museum houses numerous artifacts and provides daily tours of the museum, the St. Louis Cemetery, and the New Orleans French Quarter. <sup>[11]</sup> The museum also provides spiritual services including matrimony blessings, marriage ceremonies, consultations, and other rituals.



New Orleans Historic Voodoo Museum

## References

- [1] Hall, Gwendolyn Midlo (1995). *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century*. Louisiana State University Press. pp. 58.
- [2] Ravitz, Jessica. *Unveiling New Orleans Voodoo*. The Salt Lake Tribune.
- [3] Jacobs, Claude F., and Andrew J. Kaslow (2001). *The Spiritual Churches of New Orleans: Origins, Beliefs, and Rituals of an African-American Religion*. University of Tennessee Press.
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- [6] Alvarado, Denise (2008). *Voodoo Hoodoo Lore* (<http://www.mysticvoodoo.com/hoodoo-voodoo-lore.htm>). The Mystic Voodoo. .
- [7] Gandolfo, Jerry (2008). *Personal Correspondence*.
- [8] *The Spirit of Blackhawk: a Mystery of Africans and Indians*. University Press of Mississippi. 1995.
- [9] Jacobs, Andrew J. (1991). *The Spiritual Churches of New Orleans: Origins, Beliefs, and Rituals of an African-American Religion*. The University of Tennessee Press. ISBN 1-57233-148-8.
- [10] NPR - *Katrina Disperses New Orleans' Voodoo Community* (<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4967315>)
- [11] - *New Orleans Historic Voodoo Museum* (<http://voodooomuseum.com/tours.htm>)

## External links

- New Orleans Voodoo Crossroads (<http://www.neworleansvoodoocrossroads.com/>)
- New Orleans Historic Voodoo Museum (<http://www.voodooomuseum.com/>)
- Articles about Voodoo (<http://www.mysticvoodoo.com/articles.htm>)

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