

Black Magic, New Orleans Style

by Alison Brouillette

In recent years, the old Creole city of New Orleans has become more American than ever. Perhaps in recognition of this, and fearing complete homogenization with the rest of the nation, there are some things the city tenaciously holds as its own. Cuisine, music, lifestyle, and even its own beer; most of these enjoy the same popularity today which has been theirs traditionally. Some New Orleans institutions, however, have been forgotten. As its rich history will reveal New Orleans harbored its own brand of the occult. Voodoo, the African practice of worshipping the devil in the form of a snake called Zombi, was a volatile force throughout most of the city's history. Such a thing is hard to imagine in this advanced and sophisticated age of ours, but there is no doubt among those in obscure circles who still practice Voodoo and others who have been brought up under its influences.

For almost two centuries in Louisiana the lives of many Negroes and some whites were influenced by the activities of the Voodoo cults. <1> The arrival of slaves from the West Indies in New Orleans in the late-eighteenth century was the beginning of voodoo in Louisiana. These were snake-worshipping Negroes who had been captured during the raids on the African coast. The word "voodoo" is a derivative of their god's name, "Vodu." By the last decade of the century, the religion had degenerated into numerous small sects and the word had been corrupted to "hoodoo." <2>

Although voodoo had existed in Louisiana since the arrival of the first slaves in the early 1700s, it first appeared in colonial annals in 1773 in a strange litigation known as the "Gris-Gris" Case. <3> The word "gris-gris" refers to the placement of an evil spell upon someone through-charms and incantations. For the matter to be thus entitled suggests that this must have been a familiar term in colonial Louisiana. The matter involved a Guinean slave named Carlos, owned by a planter on the German coast, who was tried along with two other slaves for plotting to kill their overseer. Carlos was accused of having concocted the gris-gris to effect this. The mixture in question had been discovered and reported by another slave and was believed to be the cause of an illness which had afflicted the overseer for some months. Specialists examining the gris-gris concluded that, although nauseating, it was doubtful that it was life-threatening and the charges against the three were dropped.

In 1782 Louisiana's governor, Galvez, prohibited the importation of Negroes from Martinique, explaining that ". . . these Negroes are too much given to voodooism and make the lives of citizens unsafe." <4> This ban was lifted in 1803. Planters fleeing the revolution in (he West Indies began arriving a few years later, bringing with them considerable numbers of West Indian Negroes. Until the arrival of these Santa Domingo Negroes, New Orleans had hardly seen a voodoo ceremony. Their practice of voodooism was virtually unchanged from that of their African ancestors. Because of their masters' fondness for the area, they settled in and around the city, greatly facilitating the organization of ceremonies.

French and Spanish rulers had presented strict guidelines to ensure against the assembly of blacks for any reason. With the signing of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 and the establishment of American authority, the white attitude toward blacks became less severe. This growing liberality created a climate in which voodoo flourished and the sect gained a significant number of converts. An abandoned brickyard on Dumaine Street is purported to have been the first voodoo gathering place, from which the worshippers were soon driven by the police. <5> They moved further from the city and began the notorious celebrations along Bayou St. John and the shores of Lake Pontchartrain.

There are many versions of the voodoo ceremony, usually varying from region to region, but essential to each was the snake, a sacrifice, and the drinking of blood. In *Voodoo in New Orleans*, perhaps the most comprehensive book dealing with this subject, Robert Tallant describes the various ways the "power" was generated within Louisiana ceremonies. <6> The queen would sometimes stand on a box containing the serpent and would transmit the power to all others present by joining hands. Other times the power might be transmitted through the king, who would shake (lie box. The bells fastened to the box would produce a tinkling sound, bewitching the whole congregation. In the midst of the gathering there would be set a boiling cauldron into which were thrown chickens, frogs, cats, snails and always a snake. All these were offerings brought by various attendants. At some point, perhaps after the retirement of a male dancer representing "Le Grand Zombi," or the "Great Zombi," <7> everyone present would come forth to dance and drink from the cauldron or the evening's supply of "tafia," a raw alcoholic beverage. Completely possessed by the power the dancers would pair off in lustful abandon and the ritual would end in orgiastic fashion.

There was a growing concern among whites that such meetings were to effect black magic against them, if not to plot an eventual revolution. For this reason the city issued a municipal ordinance in 1817 which forbade the gathering of slaves for dancing or any other purpose except on Sundays and then only in places designated by the mayor. <8> Congo Square, located on North Rampart Street in the heart of the city (presently the site of the Municipal Auditorium) was one such designated area. Here were held the "legitimate" voodoo dances, the ones which were frequently and indulgently observed by white society. The more authentic voodoo rites were still conducted in secret along the shores of Lake Pontchartrain and Bayou St. John. The erotic dances typical of these ceremonies were replaced at Congo Square by the more innocuous Calinda or Bamboula. <9> The voodoo queen, the most elaborate and uninhibited figurehead of these proceedings, was invariably a free woman of color. An active participant, she alone could display a veritable wantonness as she was subject to none of the restrictions then applicable to slaves. The dancing was supposed to end at dusk, but seldom did. At nine o'clock a cannon in the center of the Square was fired and any Negro found on the streets after that hour without his master or a permit was thrown into prison. <10> Eventually, the Congo Square dances were banned because of their overt sensuality which was offensive to some whites. Unless they had followed the group out to the lakefront some St. John's Eve, however, they didn't know what they were missing.

Despite the cultists' efforts at secrecy, many whites were drawn to the voodoo sect. This had been true almost since its arrival in the city. Tallant reports in his book that by 1846 nearly a third of the sect's membership was white. <11> The cultists of New Orleans had caught the interest of their white neighbors and by the early 1870s it was not uncommon for the aristocratic Creoles to form search parties desiring to witness the St. John Eve celebrations. Roads leading to Lake Pontchartrain and along the bayou were frequently lined with carriages.

The interest of white New Orleanians was sometimes jestful, sometimes serious. It was not uncommon for a young girl to pursue the heart of some gallant, or for a jealous wife to seek vengeance on her husband's mistress. At any rate, the white female's interest in the sect was far more acute than the white male's, unless he was drawn by the prospect of finding a good looking quadroon girl.

Marie Laveau, the legendary yellow woman, was a subject of wonder and terror for many generations, and remains to this day the embodiment of all that is New Orleans voodoo. Known to most during the period of the 1820s to the 1880s as the Widow Paris, Laveau dominated the voodoo world. Molding it to her advantage, she created the perfect panorama in which she could shine. The Marie Laveau story is a complex legend, almost as encompassing a subject as the religion of which she was the hallmark.

"In her youth, she was a woman of fine physique," writes Henri Castellanos in *New Orleans As It Was*. <12> It is not clear whether he is here referring to Marie, the mother or Marie, the daughter; there were two Marie Laveaus. This establishment of the role as a family dynasty was probably an attempt to propagate a legend of immortality.

Archives at the St. Louis Cathedral reveal that Marie Laveau was married to Jacques Paris in 1819 by Pere Antoine. <13> Paris disappeared shortly after the wedding and Marie began calling herself the Widow Paris. There is no verification of his death, however, until some five years following his marriage to Marie. <14>

There is little evidence to suggest that Marie was interested in voodoo at this time; she was employed as a hairdresser, a common occupation for a free woman of color. The voodoo cult lacked organization and none of the reigning queens had proven to be a unifying force. By her intelligence and shrewdness Marie recognized the opportunity which had presented itself. By the 1830s she had assumed her historic role, due in large part to the application of her business and showmanship talents. She was the first to establish black magic as a saleable commodity.

She retained the mysticism and sensuality of the cult as well as the spectacle. There were still the snake, the black cat, the rooster, the blood-drinking and the sex, <15> yet she established her own brand of voodoo which would remain forever part and parcel of that practiced in New Orleans by lacing it with Roman Catholic influences, introducing statues of saints, prayer, and holy water into the ceremonies. This was an interesting transition for a sect which had its origins in devil worship. Marie denied such a

connection, insisting her followers were devoted Christians. In Castellanos' words, "To idolatry, she added blasphemy." <16>

To the St. John's Eve affairs held at the lake or along the bayou she would invite numerous guests, perhaps in an attempt to prove she had nothing to hide. These included the police, the press and any interested party willing to donate a small admission fee. There were, of course, other secretive meetings open only to the serious Zombi worshippers. Here was most likely revealed that facet of the Laveau character which she would have hidden from the public, but of which there remains much conjecture.

Marie's most legendary work was perpetrated from her modest but famous cottage on St. Ann Street. Acquired about 1830, records specify that this was payment for the working of some gris-gris which prevented the son of a wealthy and prominent family from going to jail for a crime which he appeared quite likely to have committed. <17>

One of the dualities of the Laveau character is a "wicked witch/angel of mercy" contrast. Her association with voodoo gained her the reputation of an evil old conjuring woman, while others were impressed by her works of kindness. In the 1850s she began to visit prisoners on a regular basis, and she had also nursed victims of an earlier yellow fever epidemic. <18>

A further duality of character lies in the fact that there were indeed two Marie Laveaus. As previously noted, the Widow Paris had a daughter by one Christophe Glapion, with whom she had many children. This second Marie was born on February 2, 1827, <19> and many people have confused the two. The actual date the daughter assumed the role held by the mother is not known, as the transition seems to have been a gradual one. One might infer that such a change began around the 1850s because of references to Marie Laveau's youth and beauty at a time when the widow would have been in the autumn of her years.

This second Marie was more widely feared than the first. While much of her reputation was based on her mother's exploits, her personality still appears to have been more severe, according to Robert Tallant. <20> None of the warmheartedness demonstrated by the elder Marie, who visited prisoners and nursed the sick, seems to have been passed on to her daughter. Like her mother, she was a shrewd businesswoman and maintained a lucrative practice, although she would not usually charge a client more than he could afford to pay. She distributed business cards on which were printed her name, address, and profession, not as voodooienne, but as "healer." <21>

Curiously, there is no further mention of the second Marie in any legal document following her mother's death. It must incidentally be mentioned that the Widow Paris underwent a startling conversion prior to her death in 1881. She returned to Catholicism, rejecting Zombi and all his associations and denying any involvement with the cult. The circumstances surrounding her daughter's fade from public view are largely speculative. The generally accepted theory is that another daughter of the Widow, one Madame

Legendre. <22> So abhorred the family association with voodooism that she booted her sister into the street, the quicker to set about removing the taint from the family tree.

Expulsion from St. Ann Street spelled trouble for the younger Marie Laveau. It proved debilitating to her career, as the cottage had so long been a veritable voodoo store, almost as legendary as the Laveaus themselves. No one knew where to find the voodoo queen; if they went to the cottage, her sister would shut the door in their faces. From the 1880s reports begin to grow fewer and farther between until Marie Laveau finally faded into history. Authorities do not agree on the date or circumstances surrounding her death as no records of the kind exist. <23> From the glory of her early years she drifted into obscurity. But long after her death she is still remembered and often with keen interest. To her people and to most New Orleanians, besides being the Voodoo Queen, she was the very identity of the cult in New Orleans.

Improbable as it is today that anyone would find such a thing in the newspapers, there were often small paragraphs in the early 20th century newspapers which confirm that voodoo had not disappeared with Marie Laveau. Such accounts were sparse during the World War I because of the more critical issues to be reported. But in years following the war, reports of charms, curses and an occasional murder associated with the cult found its way into the news. The latter usually caused quite a stir.

Patients claiming to have been victims of gris-gris were not uncommon at Charity Hospital during the 1940s. These often had combative gris-gris of their own to work against that which they believed had been used on them. Many carried it with them even as they were put to bed. Among such paraphernalia found by hospital employees would be metal pieces shaped like devils' souls; metal pieces with "luck" signs upon them; plain metal pieces, coins, colored and knotted strings; straps with fish scales; bags filled with mystic stones and teeth; bones and mosquito bar rings. <24>

Although rumors abound much to the contrary, it is unlikely that the celebrations along Lake Pontchartrain and Bayou St. John continued more than a few years after the demise of the Widow Paris. Nearly all such ceremonies have since been conducted indoors; either in homes, churches, or temples disguised as housing for more orthodox religions. Twentieth-century voodoo consists primarily of the use of gris-gris, placing and lifting curses and homeopathic magic. <25> Gone are the orgiastic rituals of old.

A white child growing up in New Orleans may have seen members of the Negro "spiritualist" churches with no idea of what they are but these are the modern manifestations of the voodoo cult as it popularly exists. These congregations are primarily black but include some poorer whites. The spiritualist church is usually a hodgepodge of many faiths, organized by a male or female leader, a "Mother" or "Father." They use the statues, candles, and incense of Roman Catholicism; they sing Protestant hymns accompanied by the clapping of hands and the stamping of feet. <26> Most of these churches can boast a statue of the Indian chief Black Hawk, a popular voodoo saint. There is usually a dealership of gris-gris associated with each.

For some reason voodoo has always inspired more fear than Anglo-Saxon black magic. As Robert Tallant expresses it, "Voodoo is of another race, dark and strange and complex even to those who practice it." <27> Much of the cult's impetus, however, is simply the power of suggestion. Half the potency of the gris-gris lies in the fear that it will be used against you. There are several ways in which Orleanians have traditionally warded off gris-gris. The old habit of scrubbing the front steps with brick dust is most common. To hang a horseshoe over the door is another; Roman Catholics often tack holy pictures above their doors. The most earnest in their efforts to ward off an evil spell, of course, will invariably seek the nearest voodoo dealer, from whom he will purchase a counter gris-gris charm or amulet. This he will wear either on his person or keep in his home.

Even if it has not always been so, mention of voodoo in the age in which we live will probably inspire more amusement than foreboding. It would be erroneous to assume it is a forgotten practice. Voodoo persists as a living force in Haiti where one may still witness the same practices which arrived here almost two centuries ago with the Santo Domingo blacks. But voodoo in America, at least in New Orleans, has all but disappeared.

Notes

1 Harry Hansen, *Louisiana, A Guide to the State* (New York, 1971), p. 91.

2 Joy J. Jackson, *New Orleans in the Gilded Age: Politics and Urban Progress, 1880-1896* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana Press, 1969), p. 256.

3 Edna B. Frieberg, *Bayou St. John in Colonial Louisiana, 1699-1803* (New Orleans: Harvey Press, 1980), p. 201.

4 Lyle Saxon, *Fabulous New Orleans* (New Orleans: Robert L. Crager & Company, 1950). p. 237.

5 Robert Tallant, *Voodoo in New Orleans*. (New York: Collier Books, 1974), p. 22.

6 *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 23.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 28.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 29.

10 Hansen, p. 91.

11 Tallant, p. 26.

12 Quoted in Saxon, p. 243.

13 Ibid., p. 243.

14 Tallant, p. 22.

15 Ibid., p. 65.

16 Saxon, p. 243.

17 Ibid., p. 244.

18 Tallant, p. 78.

19 Saxon, p. 243.

20 Tallant, p. 103.

21 Ibid., p. 103.

22 Ibid., p. 126.

23 Ibid., p. 126.

24 Ibid., p. 130.

25 Ibid., p. 168.

26 Hansen, p. 92.

27 Tallant, p. 203.

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