



Offerings and inscriptions left at the tomb of Marie Laveau, a legendary New Orleans voodoo practitioner

Voodoo: An “Underground Religious Tradition” Nationwide

By DAVID McCORMICK
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NEW ORLEANS – The St. Louis Cemetery is the oldest of New Orleans’ famed “cities of the dead.” Its stately mausoleums at the edge of the French Quarter have housed the remains of the city’s first families since 1789, and are a favorite attraction for tourists.

Just a few steps inside its wrought-iron gate is one tomb that attracts more than sightseers. More than 100 years after her death, the legendary voodoo queen Marie Laveau is still drawing worshippers.

A recent visit found the base of her tomb lined with offerings: a sprig of jasmine, some wine and a coconut – all symbolic of voodoo ritual. Above her marble headstone was scrawled a freshly chalked epitaph, “We still believe.”

Voodoo has cast a powerful spell since the ancient African religion was introduced here with the slave trade. What is less understood is the extent to which it persists in modern America. Throughout the South and in any major city with large concentrations of blacks and Hispanics, its spell continues.

“It is an underground religious tradition,” said Bill Ferris, a sociologist at the University of Mississippi. “It endures on a widespread basis all over the nation.”

The Rev. Dr. Lady Bishop has practiced voodoo in New Orleans, Atlanta, Cleveland and Detroit. “I have people come to see me from all walks of life,” she said. “I see doctors and lawyers, black people and white people.”

Bishop was a convent school student before taking up voodoo. She’s part of a new generation of converts who want to strip away its veil of mystery, so that it might be more widely accepted as a respectable faith.

They’ve had a certain amount of success. Scholars understand that voodoo is simply the New World version of vodun, the traditional religion of West Africa. In America, slave owners tried to forbid it, but succeeded only in driving it into secrecy. It flourished openly in Haiti and other Latin countries, often in a form known as Santeria that adopts many of the saints and other elements of Catholicism.

The most disturbing popular image of voodoo – the creation of zombies – was explained in a recent book by Harvard University botanist Wade Davis. He identified powerful toxins taken from puffer fish and other creatures that can induce a trancelike state in humans. According to Davis, the Haitians traditionally administered these drugs to people found guilty of wrongdoing, believing that the trance would relieve them of evil spirits.

This increased cultural understanding is gradually overcoming the fear associated with voodoo. In Florida, for example, the state health department has enlisted voodoo practitioners to teach safe-sex practices among Haitian farmworkers suffering the nation’s highest incidence of AIDS.

In New York, a committee of Roman Catholic priests who studied the persistence of folk religion among Hispanics refused to condemn those who combined Catholicism with certain voodoo-like practices. The committee’s report in 1983 said an estimated 70,000 New Yorkers were customers at botanicas, the shops that sell the herbs, oils and candles used in voodoo and Santeria. About 40,000 had visited spiritual mediums, the committee reported, and 25,000 believed in the power of food or animal sacrifices.

Such tolerance is still the exception, however. In most places, voodoo is still seen as a threat. In the Miami suburb of Hialeah, officials were alarmed last year when a Santeria priest bought a building and tried to open the faith’s first public church. City Council members said they were afraid it would lead to the theft and slaughter of people’s

pets. The priest insisted that only chickens, pigs and goats would be sacrificed, but the council blocked him with a building-code violation.

A living tradition in New Orleans

Apparently the only U.S. city to take voodoo for granted is New Orleans, where it has persisted openly for more than 300 years. Several thousand people are believed to practice it regularly, enough to support several botanicas and at least a dozen practitioners. And like the rest of the city's colorful history, it is among the tourist attractions. Guide books savor the story of Marie Laveau, a 19th century hairdresser whose voodoo practice was sought by the leading citizens of her day. Several stores in the French Quarter offer voodoo paraphernalia, including the Voodoo Museum, where visitors can buy "mojo bags" filled with herbs like Devil's Shoestring and High John the Conqueror that promise to cure everything from bad luck to impotence.

"This stuff fascinates me," said a man waiting outside the museum for an appointment with a psychic reader. A lawyer from Chicago who wanted to be identified only as Scott, he said he believes voodoo is as valid as any other faith.

"It's all the same spirituality," he said. "Only the medium is different. Some use tarot cards, some use voodoo dolls, some just meditate."

"It's a lot like psychology," the woman with him added.

On the other side of town, in a neighborhood few tourists would ever visit, the Rev. Dr. Bishop frowned at such comparisons.

"A lot of people just play with voodoo," she said sternly. "This is not a game. It's something I do for real."

She sat in a rundown motel room in front of an elaborate altar lit with candles and burning oils, a line of salt poured on the floor to protect her from evil spirits. On the table beside her was a jar of preservative containing the head of a rooster, a gift from the Haitian priest who had taught her. The priest had spoken seven words to the rooster, she said, and then the bird had fallen dead. She said she herself had been trained to prepare zombies, and death candles that could kill you.

Bishop said she uses voodoo only for good, however, and that most of the people she treats are basically suffering from stress. She usually prescribes them some herbs and salts to be placed into a hot bath, where the patient is to relax and read the Psalms. More serious ailments are treated with mojo bags and lots of fasting and praying.

"Voodoo is simply dealing with the spirits and the saints," she said. "I have no powers. All powers belong to God."

Anywhere from 50 to 100 people seek her advice each week, she said, in return for a “minimum donation” that she doesn’t reveal to reporters. “There’s a lot of money in this work,” she said.

The nearby F&F Botanica is where Bishop sends customers to buy the herbs and oils she prescribes. Located on Broad Street near the city jail, the botanica looks like an old country store that has been overstocked for some exotic combination of Easter and Halloween. Ceramic statues of saints stare down from their shelves at counters filled with pincushion voodoo dolls. An entire wall is covered with vials of oils, bins of dried roots and remedies like Lucky Black Cat Bone Bath. Two more walls are stacked floor to ceiling with thousands of prayer candles.

The black candles marked with skulls and crossbones needed no explanation. The others are dyed in a rainbow of colors and labeled with their purposes: Drive Away Evil. Fast Luck. Come to Me. Stay Away.

The candles were selling for \$18.50 each. One customer stocked up on a dozen. Her companion settled on just one, a “Seven Blessings” special promising health, wisdom, luck, love, wealth, power and long life.

The two women were Cajuns visiting from central Louisiana, who said their faith was Catholic, not voodoo.

“All I do is burn candles and pray – just like in church,” one said. “I’ve been doing that since I was a kid.”

Does it work?

“If you believe in anything strong enough, it’ll work,” she said. “It’s all in your mind, really.”

A session with a santero

Behind the botanica is a tiny house that has been converted into a chapel where customers can burn their candles and pay for other rites. The “santero” who presides over these rituals is a small, frail-looking Cuban named Jesus who specializes in psychic readings. For \$20, he will explore a customer’s issues for 30 minutes and then prescribe an appropriate potion, purchasable at the botanica next door.

He speaks only Spanish, and says he can neither read nor write. His interpreter is a young woman named Juanita, who had come to him several months earlier for help in winning back her husband after he had left her and their young daughter. She said Jesus had cast no spells, but advised her instead that her mate had been no good for her.

“He said I needed to learn to depend on myself,” she said. “To be more independent.”

But was this voodoo or just commonsense psychology?

She turned and asked him that. He nodded as he replied, and gestured toward the candles on his altar.

“He says the mind and the spirit, they’re all the same,” she translated. “All of this, the altar and everything, are just symbols to people understand it.”

The santero sat back in his chair and smiled, the candles shining in his dark eyes.