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by

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**Sacred Devotion or Shameless Promotion?
Modern Voodoo in New Orleans**

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Report

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Abstract

Sacred Devotion or Shameless Promotion? Voodoo in New Orleans Today

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Voodoo has become a marketing tool for New Orleans. The city is inundated with Voodoo shops and curios and businesses and sports teams that incorporate Voodoo in their names. Visitors to New Orleans believe having a reading with a Voodoo practitioner is an authentic experience of an important aspect of the city's culture and history.

Today, while Voodoo is still all over New Orleans, it faces many challenges. Most of the cultural understandings about Voodoo are incorrect. People forget that Voodoo is an actual religion. They often see it as a sinister system of spells and magic used for nefarious purposes, which relies on the aid of evil spirits. The truth is, Voodoo is an old religion, still practiced today that includes, but doesn't consist wholly, of esoteric elements. Practitioners don't seek to do harm, but to help. Most Voodoo rituals held in New Orleans today are performed in order to petition the spirits to protect the city from social and environmental forces that threaten it.

There's also an ongoing debate about what "authentic" Voodoo consists of. Some believe that Voodoo is ancestral, that it's in your blood and you can't convert to it. Therefore, they believe, white practitioners are misguided at best and con-artists at worst.

Others maintain that Voodoo is fluid, evolving religion and it can be whatever a person wants it to be. They believe that anyone who is sincere can connect with the spirits and seek their help.

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Sacred Devotion or Shameless Promotion? Modern Voodoo in New Orleans

Because it's only a few days after the summer solstice, the longest day of the year, there's still plenty of daylight remaining on June 23. On the Magnolia Footbridge over Bayou St. John in New Orleans, stands a group of people dressed in white with white scarves wrapped around their heads. Most of the men wear white shirts with khakis or jeans, while the women wear white skirts or dresses.

Everyone is either barefoot or in flip-flops. Their attire is simple and doesn't date the ceremony; everyone present would fit in just as much in the sixties as they do now. In fact, the assembly almost seems more like it belongs in the past, as nearly all of those present are white, in the ethnically diverse New Orleans. The only affectations that set the scene in the present day are the small, high-tech cameras held by many of those present.

They're all gathered around an altar. It's covered with a blue cloth, on top of which sits a picture of Marie Laveau, arguably the most famous figure in the city's history. Around the picture are piles of blue and white flowers, ribbons in all colors and homemade Cajun and Creole dishes—all offerings to Laveau brought by the worshippers in attendance. Candles, also blue and white, surround the altar, even though the midsummer evening sun renders their light unnecessary, for the moment at least. Below the bridge sits a boat filled with additional offerings for the legendary Voodoo Queen.

The original purpose of the St. John's Eve ceremony was to honor St. John the Baptist. Marie Laveau popularized the event, held every year on June 23, the evening before the Catholic feast day celebrating the birth of John the Baptist. When Laveau presided over the ceremony, it was held on the shores of the Bayou. Since her death, the purpose of the ceremony has evolved, and now she's the one that's honored.

Lead by Sallie Ann Glassman, currently the public face of Voodoo in New Orleans, the assembled crowd begins to sing in Creole as a few among their number keep time with drums and maracas. Even someone who doesn't know any of the Creole language they're sung in can understand the emotions behind the songs. Some are joyful, songs of thanksgiving. Others are slower, more mournful with a meditative feel; the reverence behind them is obvious.

A few songs in, Glassman kneels, a bowl of cornmeal in one hand, the other deftly sprinkling it into an intricate pattern on the wooden bridge. The precision and speed with which she works demonstrate Glassman's expertise as both an artist and a Mambo, or Voodoo priestess. When she's finished, the completed pattern is Marie Laveau's veve, or symbol. Glassman and the others hope that displaying Laveau's veve will draw her spirit to them.

Once the veve is complete, Glassman and a couple of helpers begin mixing a concoction in a large bowl. She adds water, flower petals, Florida Water (a cologne of sorts that's a staple in Voodoo rituals), champagne and bits of fruit.

The end product is a thick yellowish liquid with colorful chunks. It's the last thing you'd want in your hair, but that's exactly what it's meant for. It will be used for the highlight of the ceremony: the head washing.

The attendees take turns kneeling in front of the veve. They remove their headscarves and Glassman scoops some of the mixture into her hands, and sprinkles it over their head. Then they put their scarves back on, not removing them or washing their hair until the next morning. The head washing is a baptism of sorts, meant to cleanse anyone who receives it of negative energy.

Once the last of the faithful stands and reapplies their headscarf, night has fallen over the Bayou, and the St. John's Eve ritual draws to a close.

While the St. John's Eve ceremony is the most public, large-scale demonstration of Voodoo's continued presence in New Orleans, there are signs of its influence and practice everyday, everywhere, if you know where to look. Some of these signs are in your face, begging for your attention, while others are subtler and easily missed.

New Orleans has a long history as a city that embraces and even celebrates the esoteric. Beliefs and practices that would be greeted with skepticism at best, and hostility at worse, in other cities find a comfortable home in New Orleans. And it has been that way for decades.

The Crescent City—so named because of its location on a bend in the Mississippi River—has been a destination for so-called “spiritual tourism” ever since the 1800s, when people around the world began hearing dramatic stories about the presence of Voodoo in the city.

For years, the city has been associated with Voodoo—in songs, in movies, in books. And it has been whispered about, commercialized, flaunted and sensationalized to almost inordinate degrees—there are still plenty of Voodoo themed bars, restaurants, tours and kitschy shops sprinkled in the city. “Voodoo isn’t a community here; the whole city’s Voodoo,” says Jerry Gandolfo, who has operated the New Orleans Historic Voodoo Museum in the French Quarter for over 40 years.

Today, it can be hard to say what Voodoo is, and what it is not; who practices just for profit and who does so out of genuine devotion; who wants to make money and who wants to make a difference. And these things aren’t always mutually exclusive. Because Voodoo doesn’t have a foundational scripture outlining doctrine and practice, it can take many forms.

It has transformed from a religion practiced clandestinely by those on the margins of society who wanted to protect their heritage, to a spectacle, to a brand-- and today, it exists in all of these forms at once. No one knows how many people practice “real” Voodoo—and there are constant arguments over what exactly is authentic, and what’s just a show for tourists. One thing that’s

undeniable is the word “Voodoo” is all over the city—on bars, on t-shirts, on restaurants.

Voodoo has transformed from an under-the-radar religion that popped up in the 1800s to a living, often commercialized manifestation of New Orleans’s history. Today, Voodoo is often seen as a “must do” event when a tourist alights in New Orleans—an invitation to participate in an “authentic” New Orleans experience, a chance to dip a toe in the mystical realm before taking a riverboat cruise or a plantation tour.

But Voodoo is, for many, still a vital religion—and not a historical relic of the city’s notorious past. Voodoo is still alive in 2013 New Orleans.

In 1947, Tennessee Williams introduced the prolific Blanche Dubois in one of his most enduring plays, *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Blanche, a fading Southern belle, arrives in New Orleans after losing her teaching job and stays with her sister and brother-in-law in the Fauburg Marigny neighborhood. Today, the neighborhood and those around it are a lot like Blanche herself—you can see how beautiful, elegant and vibrant they used to be, but the encroaching decay can’t be quite hidden.

Some of this decay is just the natural effect of time. Houses that were once the color of daffodils, violets and forget-me-nots are now washed out and faded. Others have been painstakingly maintained, while still others have been given over completely not just to the effects of time, but also of Hurricane Katrina. There are still homes that stand abandoned, their wood rotting and the lots being reclaimed by the vegetation that was cleared when the city was developed centuries ago.

St. Claude Avenue, one of the main streets that bisect this section of the Upper Ninth Ward, is lined primarily with commercial buildings. Most of these buildings are constructed from brick, or white, gray or light blue wood. Many of them are covered with graffiti. All of them are old.

In an aging neighborhood that's still trying to pull itself together after Katrina, the Island of Salvation Botanica and the adjacent New Orleans Healing Center stand out among the mostly colorless commercial buildings around them like the first buds of spring peeking out through the melting snow and dry, dead grass. The Healing Center, painted a bright tangerine, projects an aura of hope and calm. The botanica is a serene turquoise. It brings to mind the pristine waters of the South Pacific, making the mermaid painted on the door particularly fitting. It's impossible to miss their bright facades, even from blocks away. Both the Healing Center and the botanica are nearly brand new. They were opened in 2011—they were the first new businesses to open in the neighborhood after the hurricane.

Glassman has owned, operated and offered her services as a Voodoo priestess from the Botanica since 1995 and was instrumental in bringing the Healing Center into being. Using the five principles of sustainable development articulated by the United Nations as a guide, the New Orleans Healing Center is composed of several local businesses—including the Island of Salvation Botanica—that work together to help provide healing, development and recovery to the community on all levels. Glassman, a well-known figure in the New Orleans spiritual community, works to address the spiritual aspect of healing.

“We picked a really challenging location because we didn’t just want to build a spa uptown where privileged people could go and we didn’t want to build a retreat in the country where people would go and have some epiphany and come back to their real life and lose it all,” says Glassman, 58. “So we wanted this to be healing in an urban setting and we wanted to make sure it related to peoples’ real lives and the third goal was to create economic revitalization.”

Glassman doesn’t fit the typical picture of the secretive, malevolent Voodoo practitioner that shows up in scary movies. Instead of conspiring in the shadows, many of her rituals are open to the public. She wasn’t apprenticed by a witch doctor or priestess on the bayou from a young age, but rather comes from Jewish stock in Maine and came to New Orleans in the 70s. But much about the reality of Voodoo doesn’t align with the long-held stereotypes about it.

“Just about all of the imaginings about what Voodoo is are pretty inaccurate,” says Glassman, the most visible, but perhaps also the most controversial, face of Voodoo in New Orleans today. Glassman is white, and some Voodoo devotees suggest she and other practitioners in—but not from—the city are “occultists” who dabble in several forms of spiritualism from Kabala to Wicca as well as Voodoo, rather than true masters of the old religion that seemed centered in the black and Creole populations in the city.

“It’s ancestral, which means—and I can honestly say this—everybody I’ve known in 40 years that was authentic, every single one of them was black,” says Gandolfo.

He believes, however sincere their devotion and intentions may be, that practitioners who are white or not native to New Orleans are misguided at best and con artists at worst.

Glassman and others say they practice Voodoo for the same reasons people practice any other form of faith—to find peace, comfort, significance and connection to something bigger than themselves, and to be part of a community. Though popular culture presents a contrary picture, Glassman and others say they don’t serve evil spirits or cast dark spells for personal gain.

Some practitioners still blend voodoo with Christian spiritualism or other Afro-Caribbean religions. Others practice it alongside neo-pagan or New Age religions.

One practitioner's personal definition of Voodoo can share just as many differences as similarities with another's.

“Voodoo is so accepting. You can be any other religion and still practice Voodoo, Voodoo doesn't care. It evolves with each person, that's why it's so wonderful,” says Ren, who works at Voodoo Authentica, a shop and cultural center in the French Quarter. “For me, Voodoo is one of the most ancient religions that is kept modern by its ability to change.”

Likewise, the line between profit and practice can be easily blurred. There are eight stores devoted exclusively to Voodoo, with dozens more that tend to include all manner of occult activities. While some stores may present an authentic picture of Voodoo, rather than a stylized, Hollywood version, they can help maintain the commercialized brand of Voodoo.

Reverend Zombie's Voodoo Shop is serious enough about Voodoo to forbid customers from touching the altars (to touch another person's offering is considered disrespectful to the person who left it and the spirit it was left for) but it also serves as the home base for The Haunted New Orleans Voodoo Tour, one of the city's many tours that feature Voodoo. Trip Advisor reviews say the tour is more kitschy than educational. One reviewer wrote, after her tour, “I found out later that one story in particular had been embellished a great deal but was nevertheless entertained.”

The History of Voodoo and Roots of Misunderstanding

“I think that people tend to think of Voodoo as just magic, and they don’t think of it as being a religion. But it really is, in the historical sense especially; it was a religion and has its own view, its own ceremonies. That’s something that people have generally lost sight of, they’ve forgotten about it in the last hundred years or so.”

-Jeff Anderson, University of Louisiana Monroe

Many of Voodoo’s core beliefs are rooted in West African religious practices. These religions were animistic, expressing a belief in one Supreme Being who created the world and everything in it, but doesn’t interact with it directly anymore. Instead, this creator delegates the duties of overseeing the day-to-day business of the world and answering the petitions of the people in it to a number of spirits—called Loa—and to the ancestors of the living. Africans who practiced these religions would petition the aid of the spirits through ceremonies and charms.

The people, taken to the Caribbean and the Americas as slaves brought these beliefs and traditions with them—and then saw the traditions blended with elements of Western religion. The unique colonial situation of Louisiana and New Orleans in particular, allowed these beliefs to survive when they were stamped out elsewhere.

All of the imperial powers had legal codes outlining the rules pertaining to slaves and “free people of color” living in their colonies. The British had the most

restrictive code while the Spanish had the most liberal. New Orleans was under Spanish and French colonial rule before the United States and France finalized the Louisiana Purchase in 1803.

The Spanish and French slave codes in place in New Orleans during the early part of its colonial history allowed slaves to buy their freedom. The First New Orleans Voodoo Queen Sanite De De, is said to have bought her freedom with money she earned from performing Voodoo readings and rituals.

The code also allowed slaves and free blacks to assemble on Sunday in designated parts of the city. They would gather in an open area known as Congo Square—to perform ritual drumming, singing and dancing. Separated from the French Quarter by Rampart Street, the square is adjacent to the Treme neighborhood, which was the main neighborhood where the largest portion of the city's free black population lived.

Now, the park is usually quiet on most days. Unless you're looking for it, it's easily missed when driving down Rampart Street, with the exception of the large arch bearing the name. The park's mellow, serene atmosphere stands in stark contrast to the busy nearby streets. It makes it hard to imagine those Sundays a century and a half ago, when this peaceful space would echo with shouts, songs and drums. The square, now open and airy, was once packed with people both participating in the ceremonies and watching them with a mixture of fascination, condescension and possibly even apprehension.

“There was never any question whether there would be a dance on Sunday, because there had been a dance on Sunday in New Orleans as far back as anyone could remember. To this day, Sunday is the day for black street music in New Orleans, because it always has been,” writes Ned Sublette in *The World that Made New Orleans*.

These gatherings may have appeared to be exotic cultural celebrations to outsiders, but were often acts of worship for the participants and those in the know.

Sundays in Congo Square kept Voodoo alive and well in colonial New Orleans. The arrival in of Haitians fleeing revolutionary violence in their home country in the last decade of the eighteenth century increased the number of Voodoo adherents in New Orleans. The Haitians had already developed their own form of Voodoo that differed somewhat from the African religions it descended from, and they brought it with them and practiced it in New Orleans.

Haitian Voodoo and New Orleans Voodoo still share many similarities, but there are differences between the two as well. The differences consist primarily in names and terminology, though historically the Louisiana and Haitian Voodoo ceremonies were most likely different prior to the arrival of Haitians in Louisiana. However, scholars can't be sure, because most of the accounts that exist today of New Orleans Voodoo ceremonies in the 18th and 19th centuries are

by outsiders to Voodoo, rather than actual believers. Their accounts are likely to be biased and suffer from a lack of understanding of what they were watching.

In the 19th century, Louisiana was the only state in the American South with a Catholic majority, due to the lingering influence of the original French colonists. The strong presence of Catholicism in New Orleans allowed slaves to practice their religion without punishment or persecution. Loa were easily repackaged as saints. Each was assigned a corresponding saint and worshipped and petitioned using the saint's name.

“It’s okay if they go around calling these different African deities by saint names, as long as they’re doing that, the Catholic slave masters in the area are okay with it,” explains Jeffrey Anderson, a professor of history at the University of Louisiana Monroe, who is researching a book about Voodoo.

In New Orleans, the Catholic Church doesn’t have a formal conflict with Voodoo, there aren’t efforts to stem or suppress the practice in the city “The two go hand in glove with each other here in New Orleans,” says Gandolfo.

The cooperative relationship between the two religions began with the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. After the United States gained control of Louisiana, it swiftly began implementing reforms to assimilate the French territory. It tried to ban Mardi Gras and force the French-speaking settlers to adopt the English

language. But the diverse Creole population in the state worked together for a common cause—preserving the culture and traditions.

The personal friendship between Marie Laveau and Pere Antone, a New Orleans priest who was her contemporary, further solidified the relationship between Catholicism and Voodoo in New Orleans. When Laveau, a devout Catholic who was said to have attended mass every day, faced persecution for her work as a Voodoo Queen, Pere Antone offered her protection.

Today, according to Gandolfo, most Voodoo adherents are also practicing Catholics. The Church, rather than urging its members to abandon Voodoo, seems to embrace the connection. Our Lady of Guadalupe, located across the street from St. Louis Cemetery #1, where Laveau is buried, displays the statue of St. Expedite, who has no Catholic equivalent. “He’s not a recognized Catholic saint, he’s strictly a Voodoo saint, and they know it, but they still keep him there because he’s so popular,” says Gandolfo.

On a global scale, Voodoo has received recognition from the Vatican. In 1967, Pope Paul VI issued the *Africae Terrarum*, which officially recognized African traditional religions, including Voodoo, as a legitimate spirituality. In both 1983 and 1994, Pope John Paul II attended Voodoo ceremonies in Togo and Benin in West Africa. Perhaps the tolerance and respect he showed Voodoo was a factor in the decision to name a street in New Orleans for him.

Until recently, Haitian Voodoo practitioners didn't enjoy the same support as their counterparts in New Orleans, despite the Vatican's support of their beliefs. Glassman experienced this firsthand, when she was there going through her initiation into Voodoo in the 1990s, under priests Edgar Jean-Louis and Silva Joseph. In Port-au-Prince, practitioners could be arrested for holding ceremonies in public. In 2003, Haiti finally recognized Voodoo as an official religion with equal status with Catholicism. Prior to this, Voodoo baptisms and marriages weren't recognized by the government.

From the beginning, Voodoo was regarded with fear and suspicion. White colonists approached Voodoo from their own Judeo-Christian worldview and saw many of the elements they were unfamiliar with and didn't understand as dark and evil. "Anything that you don't understand, you fear, and anything you fear, well obviously it has to be bad or negative or evil," says Krysten Barnes, a practitioner at Voodoo Authentica.

For example, snake reverence is common in the African religions traditions that influenced Voodoo. These religions saw snakes as able to travel between the temporal and spiritual planes, because snakes can move horizontally across the ground, but also vertically up and down trees. Some of the spirits honored in Voodoo are represented as serpents. From a Judeo-Christian perspective, snake veneration is easily misunderstood as devil worship, as the devil took the form of a snake to successfully tempt Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. "You had this big culture shock and I think the only way the Americans could interpret it was

through their own frame of reference and decided it was blasphemous, obscene,” says Gandolfo.

The idea of ritual possession is another highly misunderstood element of Voodoo. In Western thought, possession is a negative thing, when a typically malevolent spirit attaches itself like a parasite to a human for an indefinite period of time, draining the host of their awareness and agency. In Voodoo, possession only lasts the length of a ceremony, is sought after and is considered a great honor. The act of possession allows practitioners to honor the spirit while it temporarily shares the body of one of their fellows.

It’s not only the idea of possession that could cause people uneasiness, says Barnes, but also the spectacle of possession if you don’t have a good understanding of the religion or the specific Loa that’s supposed to be doing the possessing. She offers Erzulie Dantor—often called Mama Danto in New Orleans—as an example.

Danto is the patron saint of abused women and children, gays and lesbians and women in business. She’s said to be a strong and assertive spirit who, when she was living, was accused of being a spy during the Haitian Revolution and had her tongue cut out so she couldn’t reveal any secrets. As a result, if Danto possesses anyone during a ritual, the possessed is reported to vomit blood, which is a gruesome sight even for those who expect it.

From the outside looking in, a ritual that calls down a spirit who causes a person to vomit blood would easily appear sinister, something Barnes says she completely understands. But this expression isn't meant to torment the possessed, but to communicate something very important, says Barnes.

"It's her showing there's nothing you can do to deter me. There's nothing you can do to stop me. There's nothing you can do to prevent me from protecting my children."

Sensationalism and Commercialism

"Hollywood has really vilified it so much. Conflict makes good TV, drama makes good TV. So the truth oftentimes, they think won't make good TV. But a lot of times, especially what I've found with this practice is the truth can make some pretty good drama if they wanted to present the truth."

-Krysten Barnes, Voodoo Authentica

Throughout his long career studying Voodoo, Gandolfo has served as a consultant on several films that depict Voodoo. Gandolfo and the Museum are trusted as reliable and accurate sources of information about Voodoo, free of sensationalism and hype. After he answers questions from producers, screenwriters and directors, he often hears the same thing: that they appreciate his help, but they can't use his information. There's a formula, a certain way Voodoo should appear that audiences simply expect, and they don't plan to deviate from it.

Recently, he spoke to a Chicago television producer who said she did actually intend to give audiences the truth about Voodoo. Exactly how much the truth would be blended with theatricality and creative editing is questionable, since the producer is trying to create a reality TV show about Voodoo Queens.

Reality TV is just the latest form of entertainment attempting to capitalize on Voodoo. From the blues to zombies, Voodoo is all over popular culture, even if we don't always notice it.

Jazz and blues music both have their roots in Voodoo. Ceremonies in Voodoo are highly musical. The music was meant to move people into dancing, because dancing is what invites spiritual possession. As an old religion handed down orally, Voodoo is pre-literate, even pre-language, explains Gandolfo. Dancing and music were universal ways of communicating with the spirits that transcend language or literacy. "Voodoo's called a dancing religion and that's why specifically jazz comes from Voodoo. Jazz has a tendency to take control of you and make you move, and that's the nature of the Voodoo ceremony," says Gandolfo.

Famous jazz and bluesmen frequently acknowledge Voodoo in their lyrics. In "I've Got My Mojo Working," Muddy Waters sings about going to Louisiana to get a mojo hand so that he'll have better luck with women. Mojo hand is another term for a gris-gris bag, a magical item that can bring luck, love, money, protection or healing that is commonly stocked in Voodoo shops.

Malcolm John Rebennack Jr., who performs under the stage name Dr. John, has built a stage persona around Voodoo. Dr. John's lyrics heavily reference Voodoo. His first album *Gris-Gris Gumbo Ya-Ya*, which *Rolling Stone* included on its list of the top 500 albums of all time, pays homage to Voodoo on nearly every track. For example, the album's titular song includes the lines, "They call me the Gris-Gris man/ Got many clients/ Come from miles around/ Running down my prescription. "

Dr. John has released dozens of albums since the 1960s, though none could match the popularity of his first one. Though he may not be well-known to younger audiences today, his music still influences other artists. At the 2013 Grammy Awards, he performed with the Black Keys while wearing an elaborate feathered headdress, introducing himself—and his Voodoo persona—to a new audience.

Not all pop cultural references to Voodoo are as overt as Dr. John's.

Zombies are in right now. From the TV series *The Walking Dead* to recent movies such as *Warm Bodies* and *Zombieland*, Hollywood is fascinated with the undead.

The contemporary zombie is actually a warped version of a Voodoo concept. In Voodoo, a zombie is one who has been revived from the dead by the magic of a

powerful bokor—a sorcerer of sorts—who can control it. Contemporary research into the idea and reports of Voodoo zombies concludes that the people who are allegedly undead are just proof of the power of suggestion over the human mind. There are also theories that chemicals and pharmaceuticals that could be easily used in a ritual to induce a zombie-like state.

Over time the zombie myth has moved away from its Voodoo origins, and zombies are depicted as being created through some sort of viral epidemic. However, the first ever zombie movie, *White Zombie*, released in 1932 retains the connection between zombies and Voodoo. The film stars Bela Lugosi as Murder Legendre, a Voodoo doctor and plantation owner living in Haiti, who staffs his sugar cane mill with zombies. Legendre creates these zombies by a combination of a potion and a magical ritual.

1988's *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, a horror film by Wes Craven based on a book of the same name by Wade Davis, also retains the connection between Voodoo and zombies. The book was a work of nonfiction, written after Davis traveled to Haiti to investigate zombies. Davis determined that two different chemicals could be used to create a zombie-like state. He maintained that this chemical combination could make the person to whom it was administered feel like they have died and then reawakened. The effects of the drugs and the power of suggestion would make people believe they were zombies and act accordingly. Davis's study was mostly dismissed by other academics.

Voodoo plays a large part in the *Child's Play* films, which are responsible for causing many kids who grew up in the 80s and 90s to believe that dolls or figures they happen to see in the dark are either moving or looking at them. Chucky, the murderous doll that serves as the antagonist in the series, is created when a dying serial killer transfers his soul into a nearby doll.

More recently, Voodoo was depicted as a form of dark magic in Disney's *The Princess and the Frog*. The titular frog is transformed from a prince by a Voodoo witch doctor. The witch doctor frequently consults with dark spirits and promises them that if they help him achieve his goal of becoming essentially city boss of New Orleans, he will give the spirits the souls of the city's inhabitants as payment for their assistance. Though the movie does also feature a good Voodoo priestess who helps the princess and the frog resolve their situation, much of the film's presentation of Voodoo is negative.

Stories like this help create and perpetuate the notion that Voodoo and its practitioners are malevolent, dark and evil who cause harm to others simply because they can. However, rather than scaring people away from Voodoo, lurid, sensationalized depictions of it have always aroused more curiosity than fear.

The ceremonies in Congo Square and the annual, public St. John's Eve rituals eventually drew the attention of people outside of Voodoo who would come to observe the ceremonies. Over time, word of these rituals spread, and what actually took place was exaggerated in the telling. By the end of the nineteenth

century, people began to travel from beyond Louisiana to witness the rituals for themselves.

“By the time you start to get to the 20th century, people are recognizing that there’s money to be made in this. People associate it with New Orleans, people will come to see it,” says Anderson.

In New Orleans, cemeteries are often called “cities of the dead.” Because the city sits slightly below sea level, it has a high water table. Early settlers of New Orleans quickly learned that when the city floods, as it frequently does, coffins buried underground are pushed up through the surface as the water table rises even higher. Though coffins and dead bodies bobbing to the surface certainly wouldn’t have hurt the city’s reputation as a haven for the macabre, it was decided that the bodies would be housed in mausoleums and above-ground tombs.

So instead of rows and rows of similar-looking headstones, New Orleans cemeteries are populated with hundreds, in some cases thousands of stone tombs, most of which are about the size of a backyard shed. Between the rows of tombs are sidewalks. Some tombs are encircled with wrought iron gates. Taken together the tombs, sidewalks and gates give cemeteries the appearance of a city of sorts.

Like the city at large, these cities of the dead juxtapose the old and the new, the majestic and the ordinary. Some structures are centuries old, their dates and names almost erased by time. Others were built more recently. They are free of cracks and still a crisp, clean white. While some are simple, others are ornate.

In St. Louis Cemetery #1, one tomb, belonging to the Glapion family, receives more visitors than any other. Though none of the visitors have any personal connection with the tomb's occupants—who died over a century ago—many of them leave tokens at its base. They take pictures of it, some people even pick up bits of rock to scratch x's into the tomb. This tomb is not only one of the most visited spots in the cemetery, but in the city itself. It's the centerpiece of several tours.

The tomb houses the remains of Marie Laveau. She is buried with her partner, Charles Glapion and his family.

Laveau is credited with first bringing the commercial, showy aspect to Voodoo. She developed such a powerful reputation that people came from out of town to seek her assistance. She also presided over public rituals. Laveau, among others, saw these ceremonies as a way to supplement their income and began charging tourists who attended. "It was just the kind of thing white people came to watch as entertainment. It meant something to the people practicing it, but there was sometimes money exchanged," says Anderson.

Even today, Marie Laveau still draws tourists to New Orleans. Popular mythology says that if you draw three x's on her grave, her spirit will grant you a wish.

However, many serious voodoo practitioners consider this to be disrespectful and view such actions as a desecration to a grave. Legend goes that Marie's pet snake, Le Grand Zombi, who is buried with her, will haunt anyone who disturbs the tomb.

The landscape of Voodoo in New Orleans is vastly different today than in Laveau's life. Before she helped establish the religion as a tourist draw, it would have been impossible to find a shop in the main business districts of the city dedicated exclusively to Voodoo services and merchandise.

Drug stores and pharmacies are the forerunners of the Voodoo shops found today in New Orleans, says Anderson. Store patrons would come into stores and request oils or roots that they need to perform at-home Voodoo rituals. Sensing an opportunity to generate more business, the owners obliged and expanded their stocks to fulfill these requests. Frequently, especially in drug stores that served both white and black clientele, these items were sold discreetly. The police were on the lookout for charlatans selling products promising spectacular results that were actually worthless concoctions meant to swindle overly trusting customers out of their money.

However, during the Jim Crow era in the South, police were less concerned about whether black customers were being cheated—be it by black or white storeowners—than white ones. The famous but now defunct Cracker Jack Drug Store, which was located on Rampart Street, carried but didn't openly display products used in Voodoo spells and rituals, instead showing them only to customers who specifically requested such products.

Marie Laveau's House of Voodoo, located on Bourbon Street, used to be a drugstore. It began carrying supplies for Voodoo rituals and eventually, the owner decided to focus entirely on Voodoo. "That was kind of a development that ended up going from somebody doing it because people wanted the product, to someone using Voodoo to market it to a tourist group," says Anderson.

The majority of New Orleans's Voodoo shops are now located in the French Quarter. While many of these shops do serve a loyal customer base, curious customers constitute a portion of their business. Though the owners and employees of the shops say they are practitioners rather than showmen, Barnes believes that some shops are geared toward tourists and their preconceived notions about Voodoo.

General souvenir shops on nearly every street in the French Quarter integrate Voodoo into their products. Voodoo Blues sells made in China Voodoo dolls among shot glasses with pictures of Mardis Gras masks, magnets and shirts

emblazoned with tacky phrases such as “I got Bourbon-faced on Shit Street.” They sell “Voodoo kits” for the office, love and golf, among others.

Even businesses that have nothing to do with Voodoo incorporate it into their name: there’s a convenience store on Canal Street called Voodoo Mart, and even a Voodoo Tattoo.

“That’s the nature of it. It sells. There’s a Voodoo football team in the arena league, there’s Voodoo BBQ, there’s I don’t know how many Voodoo bars, there’s Voodoo Gift Shops, Voodoo this or Voodoo that,” says Gandolfo. “It’s certainly become a very commercial catchphrase, and so a lot of people come here and they plug into that and take advantage of it.”

Glassman believes that Voodoo has become almost a branding tool for New Orleans. She sees it as a double-edged sword. “I think that it demeans the religion, I think that it’s disrespectful to the history of it,” she says. “I feel that it’s my job or duty to really honor or respect that tradition and people suffered for it... and so the least I can do is not quite engage in the marketing of the tourist version.”

On the other hand, Glassman adds, because Voodoo is a brand for the city, it’s not persecuted. Practitioners can openly perform rituals and ceremonies without fear of arrest or violent reaction, in spite of the misconceptions about what they’re actually doing.

Gandolfo argues that authentic Voodoo cannot be found in the French Quarter. If a person openly advertises their services as a Voodoo practitioner, he says, they're not genuine, even if they may be sincere. "The more public a person is, the less likely they are to be authentic and the more authentic you are, the less likely you are to be public."

Authentic practitioners keep to themselves, he explains, because when word spreads about their abilities, they're overrun with requests for assistance. People will show up at their homes, in the middle of the night, seeking help. They aim to keep their status private, so in order to find them, you have to know someone they know. It's almost like a referral system.

Gandolfo has developed a three-part test over the decades he's spent studying Voodoo to determine if a practitioner is authentic. First, Voodoo isn't something you can choose, or be initiated into: you don't choose it, it chooses you. Second, true practitioners won't profit from their services. They consider their gifts more of a burden and an obligation than an opportunity. Finally, they suffer for what they do. "Whatever they do, it upsets the course of nature. Therefore, they have to pay for it, either by getting sick or through bad luck," says Gandolfo.

A New Orleans Voodoo practitioner and friend of Gandolfo who goes by the name Gris-Gris girl, was hospitalized last October for two weeks. Gandolfo spoke with her after she was discharged, and she told him that doctors couldn't come to a

specific conclusion about what was wrong with her. He believes that she was simply worn out from trying to do too much, trying to help too many people.

Voodoo in Practice

“There’s an understanding, a basic premise in Voodoo that there’s an invisible world that’s more beautiful and more sacred and more full of life and power and that the visible world and the invisible world interact and influence one another. When the invisible world is influencing the visible world, we think of it as magic, but in Voodoo, it’s seen as absolutely natural, and it’s spirit interacting with us. It’s the recognition that spirit exists, even though you can’t see it.”

-Sallie Ann Glassman, Island of Salvation Botanica

Though outsiders, when they think of Voodoo as a religion at all, may see it as a pagan religion with a pantheon of gods and goddesses, Voodoo actually only recognizes one God. Known as Bondye in Creole and Bon Dieu in French, this God created the world and then stepped back and delegated the managing of its daily affairs over to the Loa.

The Loa intercede in human affairs when they’re properly called upon by the faithful. The Loa were once human and lived extraordinary lives or were credited with accomplishing miracles and now work to help the currently living. “They’re not quite human, they were once human and they’ve gone through death and so they’re in a slightly elevated level. But because they’re not gods, they’re not

worshipped—they're honored and they're respected and they're served. I think people have very little understanding of that," says Glassman.

Because of the influence of Catholicism, some Catholic saints, like St. Peter became analogues for Loa, while others, like St. Jude and Our Lady of Prompt Succor, were adopted as Loa in their own right.

Similar to Catholic saints or the deities in Roman and Greek religions, each Loa has a particular area in which they exercise power. For example, Erzulie Freda is said to help people with matters of the heart, and also represents fresh water. Oshun is considered the Loa who inspires creativity and innovation.

Worship takes place through ceremonies and rituals. Any ritual starts by acknowledging and honoring a Loa known as Papa Legba. Analogous with St. Peter, Legba is considered the gatekeeper of the spiritual realm in Voodoo. Legba must be given his due before worshippers can make contact with any of the other Loa. The Loa are honored through drumming, singing, chanting and dancing.

Glassman has lead a ceremony every week since 1980 from her home for her Voodoo Society, La Source Ancienne. The society is open to serious new members, but aims to stay small so the worship experience will be more personal and intimate. Glassman, a Mambo—or priestess—who was formally initiated into Voodoo in Haiti, also presides over several annual public rituals. In addition to the St. John's Eve ritual, she holds a Day of the Dead ceremony on Halloween and a ceremony to protect the city from hurricanes each July.

Because each Loa has a distinct personality and history, they are honored and petitioned differently. Each has their own particular affinities and preferences, from the colors they favor to the offerings they like to receive. For example, La Siren is the Loa of self-awareness, personal reflection and healing. Because she's a mermaid, anything associated with the sea is sacred to her. She's been credited with bringing coffee to the New World, and she's said to appreciate an exotic blend.

The objective of a ritual is to call down a Loa to possess a member of the group performing the ritual. Possession allows participants to honor and petition that Loa, as well as potentially receive messages from them. "The central action of a Voodoo ceremony is that you want these spirits to come from the invisible and possess people to temporarily use a person's body and mouth and mind and eyes and hands to communicate with us," says Glassman.

Possession is said to be beneficial to the Loa as well. Since the Loa aren't human anymore, they can't actually enjoy the food and drink offerings brought to them. However, when they possess one of the faithful, they're able to eat, drink and dance again, if only for a little while.

Outside the ceremonies, people can seek the help of the Loa by leaving offerings and requests on altars dedicated to them. Individuals can set up an altar of their own in their home, or they can visit one of the city's several working altars, many

of which are found in French Quarter Voodoo shops. Voodoo Authentica and Reverend Zombie's Voodoo Shop each have several working altars dedicated to different Loa. Erzulie's also in the French Quarter, has a large central altar dedicated to Erzulie Freda, the Loa of love.

Altars typically consist of an image of the Loa they're dedicated to—often a statue or picture of the Catholic saint they correspond with—surrounded by offerings left by the faithful. These offerings can either represent something that's significant to the Loa it's offered to or the person leaving it. For example, the altar to Erzulie in the shop that bears her name is covered with traditionally “girly” items that Erzulie is said to like—champagne, lipstick, perfume and even maxi pads.

“In Voodoo, there is no something for nothing. However, having said that, it doesn't mean you have to leave a diamond. It's about sincerity,” says Barnes. Voodoo dolls are a frequent sight on altars. Though the popular culture image of a Voodoo doll involves someone sinisterly, maniacally skewering the doll with pins while the person supposedly linked to the doll contorts in pain elsewhere, the actual function of Voodoo dolls is quite different. Dolls are generally used as a physical representative of a Loa or a saint and placed on altars or displayed in a person's home as an homage to that Loa.

While magic and charms are only a part of Voodoo, they're perhaps the most recognizable and well-known aspect of the religion. The magical side of Voodoo is

meant to help practitioners focus their worship, to serve as tangible manifestations of their devotion. “We’re physical creatures, we like to see what we want and what better way to see it than having it right there in front of us,” says Ren.

Voodoo shops are lined with items to help their clientele perform spell work at home. Spells are relatively straightforward and can be done by anyone with the proper knowledge and supplies. Candles are a common element to many Voodoo spells. They come in all colors and sizes that correspond to the type of spell being performed. For example, a green candle could be used for a spell intended to bring money or luck, while a red candle would be used to bring love. The candles are often anointed with oils to make the spell more effective. Like candles, there are endless varieties of oils, each one corresponding to a particular type of spell.

For those who don’t have the time or the knowledge to do their own spell work, Voodoo stores sell premade gris-gris bags. These bags contain a specific combination of roots and oils intended to help the bag’s owner achieve a specific outcome such as health, luck, protection, money or love. They’re meant to be worn or carried at all times in order to be effective and are said to lose their power if anyone other than the person who owns the bag touches it.

Though Voodoo could theoretically be used to cause harm or suffering or for other selfish purposes, says Barnes, it rarely is. She says that Voodoo Authentica gets calls occasionally from women seeking revenge on ex-husband. However, the

store's staff never provides advice or services intended to harm anyone. Instead, they suggest that the client perform a spell that would cause the person they dislike to "find their happiness far away."

According to Gandolfo, about "90 percent" of the spell work Voodoo practitioners do is related to love, luck, power and dominion (which relates more to competition in sports, politics and the workplace than nefarious plots for world domination), healing and undoing spells a person may have had placed on them.

All of the shops specifically dedicated to Voodoo in New Orleans offer palm and tarot readings. According to Barnes, these readings allow people to view their lives from a different vantage point, reflect on them and then make any changes they feel necessary to either ensure or avoid the outcomes the readings predict.

For some people, readings are simply a fun diversion and aren't taken seriously. Others, however, can find the experience deeply moving.

Reverend Zombie's Voodoo Shop is an interesting blend of tourism and authenticity. Visitors to the store are immediately greeted by a working altar, covered with signs warning the overly curious not to touch the altar or any of the items on it, because to do so is a gesture of disrespect. However, the store is also the starting and finishing point of the Haunted New Orleans Voodoo Tour, which has been described as a bit sensationalized and showy on those Trip Advisor Reviews.

However much the store may give into the commercial impulse, it's well known for its palm and tarot readers, and claims to frequently host one of the most experienced readers in the city. On a Sunday in March, the shop is filled with Spring Breakers carrying tall frozen drinks, taking full advantage of the city's lack of open container restrictions. Three twenty-something women discuss one of their readings with a store employee. One of the women is nervous to step through the beaded curtain along the store's back wall that separates the reading area from the rest of the store, so clients can have their readings with some semblance of privacy. She's nervous because her friend's reading was so accurate.

The employee questions the woman who received this reading, asking if she learned anything interesting. "She told me that I was going to meet someone again that I've met before," said the young woman. She pauses to collect herself; the excitement and awe in her voice are obvious. "And we're getting married this year."

Barnes says that in the time she's been practicing Voodoo, she's seen many prayers answered and requests granted. Her apartment was destroyed during Katrina and she left New Orleans. She returned last year and had difficulty finding a new place to live. A fellow Voodoo practitioner advised her to make a very specific list of what she wanted in a home and present her requests to Yimaya, the Loa of the home and family. In the end, Barnes came up with a list of

35 different things she wanted in an apartment. She says the apartment she found, that she now lives in, met all but five of her requirements.

Brandi Kelly, the owner of Voodoo Authentica, has pictures all over her office of babies that were born after clients that were having trouble conceiving sought help from Yimaya.

Voodoo Today

It's something that's constantly growing and evolving, because without growth and change there's death.

-Krysten Barnes

Voodoo tries to remain modern and relevant—and be taken seriously-- in an increasingly skeptical, secular society while at the same time staying true to its roots and heritage. It isn't always easy, but practitioners are finding a way.

Erzulie's recently released a Voodoo app for smart phones. There are both free and paid versions of the app available, with the paid version—it costs \$3.99—being more comprehensive and in-depth. The app gives users a run down of the history of Voodoo, both in Haiti and New Orleans and a crash course on beliefs and practices. It has what are essentially profile pages on some of the Loa, which include their personal attributes and history as well as their preferred offerings, colors and associated Catholic saints. Perhaps the app's most interesting aspect is the spell guide, which includes the necessary supplies and instructions for a

variety of luck, love, money and uncrossing—that is, spells that undo any magic that has been used against a person by someone else—spells.

Technology is being increasingly used to educate people about Voodoo. Tucked away among the cat videos on You Tube, you can find thousands of videos of Voodoo rituals, and even some how-tos. A practitioner named Taliesin McKnight has posted dozens of videos teaching people how to perform rituals to Papa Legba and how to contact their ancestors among others. In his Southern drawl, McKnight leads viewers through the necessary prayers and recitations so they can follow along at home.

Some practitioners use these instructional videos as a way to promote their business. A series of videos posted by a practitioner named Diana, who blogs about Voodoo and sells ritual supplies through her online store, La Sirena Botanica, includes not only ritual instructions, but also plugs for the website.

With supplies for and instruction in Voodoo now available online and in the palm of your hand, would-be devotees are now able to practice outside of New Orleans and the smaller Voodoo communities in New York City, Boston, Chicago and Miami.

However, as Voodoo becomes more accessible to people outside New Orleans and other cities that have a longstanding Voodoo presence, it gives rise to a debate

about what can and can't be considered authentic Voodoo practices, and who has the right to call themselves a practitioner.

Some, like Gandolfo, believe that Voodoo is an ancestral religion, that it's handed down in families and the skills of a practitioner can't be learned. This camp believes that you're either born with the ability to communicate with and influence the spirits, or you aren't.

Others, like Glassman see Voodoo as a calling, something a person can be introduced to later in life and choose to pursue. "I saw the world as not very solid, and it was made up with energy and that all this stuff was just the surface of everything. So when I went to Haiti and discovered a whole country full of people that saw the world that way, it was really refreshing for me."

Still others, like Barnes, fall somewhere in the middle. Though she was raised in Savannah, Barnes says New Orleans has always been home in her heart, because her mother is Creole and was born and raised in New Orleans and many of her relatives still live there. "I definitely have always had a very strong connection here, just spiritually and emotionally to the city," she says.

Though she's the daughter and granddaughter of Baptist ministers and was raised Catholic, Barnes was drawn to the esoteric from an early age. Before she began practicing Voodoo, she practiced a variety of esoteric religions, including

Wicca. She eventually found a connection with Voodoo and became a practitioner because she feels it's a way she can help others.

Further complicating the question is the fact that Voodoo as a religion has been, in part, absorbed by spiritual churches. "If you look at spiritual churches in New Orleans, a lot of them have a really, really strong element of voodoo in them," says Anderson.

Spiritualist Churches merge Christian theology with New Age thought, with an emphasis on spirit guides and mediums. Leafy Anderson, a spiritualist and medium who relocated to New Orleans from Wisconsin, founded the first Spiritualist Church in New Orleans, the Eternal Life Spiritualist Church, in 1913. Anderson claimed the nineteenth-century Sauk Indian Chief, Black Hawk, as one of her spirit guides. When New Orleans police named Anderson a con artist and tried to shut down her church, legend says that Black Hawk helped her win her court case to keep her church's doors open. Black Hawk is still a central, revered figure in spiritual churches across the United States today.

Outside of the Spiritual Churches, Voodoo today blends several spiritual practices, and practitioners often pick and choose elements from different religions—a practitioner might, for example, incorporate both Haitian and New Orleans Voodoo, Cuban Santeria and even Buddhist meditation in their worship.

Jeffrey Anderson says many of today's Voodoo practitioners, particularly the white ones, are former neopagans who grew disillusioned with those religions and turned to Voodoo, which they view as a more traditional, historically rooted religion. Barnes at one time practiced Wicca. She and others like her already come to Voodoo with a spiritual thirst and an open mind about religion. They seek spiritual fulfillment, but don't find it in the more mainstream religions. "A lot of people turn to it when they're at a dark place in their life and they can't find any other religion because so many of them have so many restrictions—you can't be gay, you can't be a woman," says Ren <last name>.

Because Voodoo has such tremendous significance to its followers, it's not surprising that there's an ongoing effort to rehabilitate its image. Practitioners are eager to explain their religion to people who come into the stores and to help clear up widely held and deeply rooted misconceptions about who they are, what they stand for and what they do. However, some practitioners who are interested in giving Voodoo an image makeover still play up the spookier aspects of the religion, ultimately to make sure they can still make a living.

"A lot of times they're not only practitioners, but they make their money by practicing," says Jeffrey Anderson. So they have a vested interest both in making it more acceptable and getting people into their offices or buying books or whatever."

The Voodoo community in New Orleans has managed to endure, despite not only misunderstanding and fear created by pop culture stereotypes, but also very real danger in the form of Hurricane Katrina.

Like Barnes, many people who fled the city as a result of Katrina stayed gone for years or never returned at all. Also like Barnes, some of these people were Voodoo practitioners. Glassman says that though when they relocated, they brought a bit of their religion with them, it's difficult for them to practice in their new cities because there's not a strong enough community of believers there, and Voodoo is a religion that's practiced in community.

Glassman optimistically says that although Katrina wrecked damage upon New Orleans that still hasn't been completely undone—and some of it may never be completely—it was a strengthening experience. She credits Voodoo for helping herself and many others to endure such a tremendous tragedy and loss.

“The one thing we were all aware of was that we were alive, we knew that we hadn't been killed by the storm,” she says. “We managed to come back, we managed to build something out of it, and I think having Voodoo in our backbone had something to do with that.”

Appendix: Multimedia

My story also contained a video concerning common misconceptions about
Voodoo entitled Voodoo: Fact and Fiction

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