

LOUISIANA VODOO

November 4, 2012

A woman in south Louisiana sweeps her yard to clear it of debris and bad spirits. A priest blesses a family's house. Red dust is scattered on the doorstep to keep out evil. A Catholic crosses himself and prays to a God-figure hanging above, surrounded by Angels, or disembodied spirits. Each practitioner has icons and rituals he uses to keep him safe. In both, there is one God but many spiritual intercessors. The Voodoo practitioner uses candles, herbs, stones, and other earthly things to promote healing and invoke protection, and so does the Catholic use many similar earthly items to connect with God.

There are many similarities between Voodoo and Christianity. In fact, Voodoo in the United States has been combined with Catholicism and other religious traditions to create a hybrid. I recently visited New Orleans, LA, and while there came into contact with a couple of Voodoo practitioners. This sparked a curiosity in me and an awareness I had not had before, and I think many others are still in the dark about this ancient practice. Today, I will help us examine that practice more closely and attempt to remove the shroud of misunderstanding that surrounds Voodoo.

Voodoo is known as Voudou or Vodun, and its sister practice, Hoodoo, is known also as "Conjure." The reason for this is that there is an aspect of spells and rites that are used to bring about change in one's circumstance, using help from the spirits, or Loa. The term Voodoo itself means spirit. Not only do we invoke the spirits for help, but the spirits are believed to dwell within us, especially certain individuals, who often become Voodoo priests or priestesses. There are currently 60 - 80 million practitioners of Voodoo in the world today, depending on your source.

The ancient African religion of [Vodoun](#) is an established religion with its ancient roots in West Africa. Its modern form is practiced across West Africa in the countries now known as [Benin](#), [Togo](#), and [Burkina Faso](#), among others. In [Haiti](#), [Cuba](#), and other [Caribbean islands](#), the worship of the Vodoun gods (called [lwa or loas](#)) is practiced in a [syncretic](#) form that has been greatly modified by contact with [Catholicism](#). The [Voodoo](#) of Haiti and [Louisiana Voodoo](#) are better known to many English speakers; similar practices among Spanish speakers in Cuba are called [Santería](#).

The spells of the Voodoo tradition come from Hoodoo, which is considered a healing art. Hoodoo and Voodoo are often mistaken for one another. Some believe that the terms may have a common [etymology](#). Simply put, Voodoo is a religion, whereas Hoodoo is a group of magical practices. Like Voodoo, Hoodoo shows obvious and evident links to the practices and beliefs of African folk [ritual](#) culture, having origins in West and Central Africa.

The goal of Hoodoo is to allow people access to [supernatural](#) forces to improve their daily lives by gaining power in many areas of life, including luck, money, love, [divination](#), [revenge](#), [health](#), employment, and [necromancy](#). As in many other folk religious, magical, and medical practices, extensive use is made of [herbs](#), [minerals](#), parts of animals' bodies, an individual's possessions, and bodily fluids, especially [menstrual blood](#), [urine](#) and [semen](#). Contact with ancestors or other spirits of the dead is an important practice within the conjure tradition, and the recitation of [Psalms](#) from the [Bible](#) is also considered magically effective in hoodoo. Due to hoodoo's great emphasis on an individual's magical power, its basic principles of working are generally felt to be easily adapted for use based on one's desires, inclination and habits.

Home-made potions and charms form the basis of much old-time rural hoodoo, but there are also many successful commercial companies selling various hoodoo components to urban and rural practitioners. These are generally called spiritual supplies, and they include herbs, roots, minerals, [candles](#), [incense](#), oils, floor washes, sachet powders, bath crystals, and colognes. Many [patent medicines](#), [cosmetics](#), and household cleaning supplies have been also aimed at hoodoo practitioners and have found dual usage as conventional and spiritual remedies; examples include [Four Thieves Vinegar](#),^[13] [Florida Water](#),^[14] and Red Devil Lye (wikipedia).

The Voodoos believe in the existence of one supreme God, a very abstract, omnipotent yet unknowable force. Below this almighty God, Spirits or Loa rule over the world's affairs in matter of family, love, happiness, justice, health, wealth, work, the harvest or the hunt etc. Offerings are made to the appropriate Loa to ensure success in those areas. Each Loa has its preferred fruits or vegetables, color, number, day of the week, etc. The Loa also manifest through elements of nature such as the wind and rain, lightning and thunder, the river, the ocean, springs and lakes, the sky, the sun, certain animals, trees and stones. Furthermore every element of nature, animal, tree, plant, fruit or vegetable is sacred to a certain Loa or Orisha (neworleansvoodoocrossroads.com).

Coming from a primitive society, Voodoo practitioners recognize the connection between the living and the dead, the continuity of existence. Ancestor worship is part of a person's identity. They see the spirit in everything, even rocks. For the West African, life is directed by fate, and everything is in balance. For every good there is evil, similar to the concept of yin and yang. The West African was not separated from nature like we are but connected to its every fluctuation, and not relying on scientific inquiry, naturally blamed unseen forces for the good and bad things that made up existence (Haskins, *Voodoo & Hoodoo*, 1990).

Ancestors are consulted for guidance and protection. A rich and deep body of mythology and tales exists attesting to the amazing memory and poetic ability of the "Griots" who passed it orally from elder to youth and so on throughout the ages. It is truly a remarkable body of spirituality and a code by which African life was ruled. A very complex system of divination also exists known as "Ifa". It is said that the word Loa or Lwa itself derives from the French "Loi" (Law).

Wikipedia tells us that Voodoo was brought to the [French colony Louisiana](#) from Africa and from the Haitian exiles after the [Haitian revolution](#). From 1719 to 1731, the majority of African captives came directly from what is now [Benin](#), West Africa, bringing with them their cultural practices, languages, 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.^[1]

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. According to a census of 1731-1732, the ratio of African slaves to European settlers was over two to one.^[1] The ownership of slaves was concentrated into the hands of only a few of the white settlers, facilitating the preservation of African culture.^[1] Unlike other areas of active slave trade, there was little separation in Louisiana between families, culture, and languages.^[1] The Embargo Act of 1808 ended all slave imports to Louisiana.^[2] 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.^[1] The high mortality of the slave trade brought its survivors together with a sense of solidarity. 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."^[1] As a result African culture and spirituality did not die out, but rather thrived in French Creole culture.

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.^[5] Other Catholic practices adopted into Louisiana Voodoo include reciting the [Hail Mary](#) and the [Lord's Prayer](#).^[4]

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.^[1] 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 [Jehova](#), the [Christian God](#), and [Jesus Christ](#). This openness of African belief allowed for the adoption of Catholic practices into Louisiana Voodoo.^[1]

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 "Africanizing Louisiana Creole culture."^[1]

This is why I had you bring pictures of your ancestors and dead things today. Voodoo respects the spirits of the dead, and uses the bodies of the dead to remind them of the fact that life once resided there. This reinforces the connection between body and spirit and reminds us that we all originate from the same material, we all contain spirit, and those spirits live on once our bodies are no longer needed.

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.

- *A lock of a girl's hair brings good luck.*
- *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.* ^[6]

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](#) (Warning: due to the toxicity of Jimson Weed, it is not advised for unskilled practitioners to create) with [sulfur](#) and honey. The mixture was placed in a glass, which was rubbed against a black cat, and then the mixture was slowly sipped[\[6\]](#) (Wikipedia).

Beyond the era of ancient dolls, Voodoo dolls as we know them today are created for many purposes. In New Orleans, which can be considered the contemporary hub of Voodoo dolls in America, they are created as gris-gris (pronounced *gree gree*), a form of talismanic magick. The word *gris* means *grey*, denoting that which lies between black and white. Gris-gris is both a noun and a verb, referring to a ritually prepared object such as a doll or a small cloth bag filled with magickal ingredients, as well as the act of working the gris-gris (i.e. spell or charm). In New Orleans, there are four main categories of gris-gris: love, power and domination, luck and finance, and uncrossing. These four categories are among the most commonly requested gris-gris associated with Voodoo dolls (Planetvoodoo.com):

Love and Romance: by far the most common form of gris-gris. These are objects and acts to attract a lover, keep a lover, force a breakup between others and similar such acts of the heart.

Power and Domination: used to gain an advantage over a competitor. It is popular with politicians and athletes, but its primary adherents are attorneys who fear the capriciousness of judges and juries.

Luck and Finance: may be used in very general ways but is most closely associated with gamblers. It is also used by persons looking for work or trying to get a raise.

Uncrossing: the act of undoing something else which has been done. Most frequently it is used to undo a hex, or gris-gris, someone else has targeted toward you. This may also be associated with healing (Voodooomuseum.com).

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[\[9\]](#)(Wikipedia).

Rituals have an important place in Voodoo. The priesthood of voodoo is held by both men and women. There are stages of initiation into its priestly duties. Their functions are primarily: healing, rituals, religious ceremonies to call or pacify the spirits, holding initiations for new priests or priestesses, telling fortunes, reading dreams, casting spells, invoking protections, and creating potions for various purposes. These potions are for anything from love spells to death spells; all for a hefty fee of course.

Key items are used in the many rituals of voodoo. The priest's geographical area of influence is called the parish. An eclectic array of items covers the altar in the temple or hounfort; a peristyle is a roofed or open space where the public voodoo ceremonies take place. The items on the altar would be used in its rituals and include objects that have symbolic meaning: candles, food, money, amulets, ritual necklaces, ceremonial rattles, pictures of Catholic saints, bottles of rum, bells, flags, drums, sacred stones, and knives (allabouttheoccult.org).

The website of the Voodoo Museum of New Orleans states that Voodoo is basically a three tiered spiritual system based on God, spirits and ancestors. A single omnipotent God and creator is very much a part of Voodoo, but God is mostly detached from every day life. Rather, a host of spirits, voodoo, interact with humans in all matters of fate and fortune. Finally, deceased ancestors remain a force in contemporary life, becoming de facto spirits (voodooomuseum.com). Animal sacrifice is used to

feed and beckon the spirits. Sometimes the dead can possess the bodies of the living, and through this possession can communicate prophecies, advice, or warnings.

When thinking of Voodoo, many in the west think of Zombies. According to the tenets of [Vodou](#), a dead person can be revived by a [bokor](#), or sorcerer. Zombies remain under the control of the bokor since they have no will of their own. "Zombi" is also another name of the Vodou snake [lwa Damballah Wedo](#), of [Niger–Congo](#) origin; it is akin to the [Kikongo](#) word *nzambi*, which means "god". There also exists within the [West African Vodun](#) tradition the zombi astral, which is a part of the human [soul](#) that is captured by a bokor and used to enhance the bokor's power. The zombi astral is typically kept inside a bottle which the bokor can sell to clients for luck, healing or business success. It is believed that after a time God will take the soul back and so the zombi is a temporary spiritual entity. [\[4\]](#) It is also said in vodou legend, that feeding a zombie salt will make it return to the grave.

There seems to be a movement now that combines Voodoo with other spiritual traditions, using the term Crossroads to signify the intersection of these beliefs and practices, which have as their common denominator the development and support of our spirit. Feng Shui is the Chinese study of the way to orient one's physical space in such a way that is most beneficial. This was originally applied to the orientation of buildings but is now used as a way to clear our personal space of clutter and disorganization as a means to clear our minds and spirits in the process. And some practitioners also use Reiki concepts in their healing. Reiki uses palm healing as a transfer of energy, and Voodoo also does palm work when invoking the spirits for physical well-being of an ill person. Voodoo practitioners will often do a "reading" which will tell a person what herbs, candles, or stones they need to draw the best energy to them for the purposes they seek.

There may be some connection between Voodoo and Jazz in New Orleans. The Voodoo Museum tells this story:

When Louis Armstrong was a kid in New Orleans he tried to get into the notorious "red light" district called Storyville to listen to the musicians. Storyville was a legally protected prostitution district in New Orleans that operated between 1898 and 1917. It was in the parlors of the bordellos and saloons that jazz was first played as a performing art. In the most famous house, Lulu White's Mahogany Hall on Basin Street, Jelly Roll Morton, self proclaimed "inventor" of jazz, first preformed his original jazz compositions like "Tiger Rag" and "Wolverine Blues." Louis Armstrong wasn't born until 1904 and, understandably, the district did not like having children about. However, if sex was the business of Storyville and jazz its anthem, Voodoo was its religion. Many Voodoo and Hoodoo Queens plied their gris-gris in the district; everything from powders to attract more lovers to sealing potions that would close a prostitute up so she couldn't do business. Armstrong was quick to identify the affinities of the district and use it to gain entrance. Rubbing two red bricks together he would manufacture a bucket of red brick dust. In New Orleans Voodoo one must always be on guard against gris-gris. Unlike the movies, a real gris-gris is always hidden from its target in order to disarm their taking any defensive measures. Knowing this, the astute New Orleanian always takes defensive measures. The classic uncrossing method being to scrub one's door step with red brick dust every morning before exiting the house. When Armstrong appeared in the district with his bucket of red brick dust, he was granted a dispensation for his minor status because of the importance of, and demands for, his Voodoo product. In time, the district got used to seeing him until he came invisible to the discerning eye. When that happened, by his own admission, instead of leaving at dusk as he was supposed to, he would secret himself in yards and allies and wait until nightfall when he could listen to, and learn, jazz.

Jelly Roll Morton, the “inventor” of jazz told his life story to the famous musical folklorist Alan Lomax. In the book that followed, “Mr. Jelly Roll” he attributes the key influence in his development to Voodoo, or Hoodoo and especially his godmother, the Voodoo Queen, Eulalie Hécaud. In the Storyville demimonde he tells about the gangster Aaron Harris who could always get out of trouble because he had a “voodoo woman.” In fact, throughout his life, he cites Voodoo as the ultimate arbitrator. Even his death, he understood was related to Voodoo and the passing of his godmother.

Sweet Emma Barrett was maybe the earliest female jazz musician. She is remembered, and immortalized, at Preservation Hall where she played piano as, “the Garter Gal.” Both a protégé and contemporary of the likes of Jelly Roll Morton, Oscar “Papa” Celestin and others, she wrote, played and sang jazz songs. Also, like them, her original work was very bawdy. She was called the “Garter Girl” because of a small thong of jungle bells she wore one ankle and that she would stomp in accompaniment to her piano playing. The band of small bells on one’s ankle is, in fact, a classic Voodoo rhythmic call used to attract Legba, the main Voodoo spirit into a ritual

(voodoomuseum.com).

Many [blues musicians](#) have referred to hoodoo in their songs. Popular examples include "Louisiana Hoodoo Blues" by [Ma Rainey](#), "Hoodoo Lady Blues" by [Arthur Crudup](#), and "Hoodoo Man Blues" by [Junior Wells](#). In addition to the expected terms "hoodoo" and "mojo", other conjure words in blues songs include "[jinx](#)", "[goofer dust](#)", "nation sack", "[black cat bone](#)", "John de conkerroo" ([John the Conqueror root](#)), "graveyard dirt", and "black spider dumplings."

The [Bo Diddley](#) song "[Who Do You Love](#)" contains an extensive series of puns about a man hoodooing his lover. He also recorded an album titled *Got My Own Bag of Tricks* (1972), a reference to a [mojo hand](#) or trick bag. In [Chuck Berry](#)'s song "Thirty Days" he threatens an ex-lover, telling her that he "...talked to the gypsy woman on the telephone [...] she gonna send out a world wide hoodoo...". [Woody Guthrie](#) wrote the lyrics for "Hoodoo Voodoo", a song later performed by Wilco and Billy Bragg. The song "[Born on the Bayou](#)" by [Creedence Clearwater Revival](#) has the line "Chasing down a hoodoo there...". [Ike & Tina Turner](#)'s 1963 album *It's Gonna Work out Fine* featured a song titled "Mojo Queen", with definite references to [mojo](#), the magic charms used by hoodoo practitioners.