

That old black magic

Mary Hampshire delves into the shadowy world of the New Orleans' Voodoo Museum

Summer 1999

The Big Issue In The North

Madame Cocoa answers the telephone in her 1850s-style Voodoo parlour to perform a ritual to her caller. The Voodoo high priestess is an eighth generation psychic of Creole descent (African, French and native American). Her services include readings, spells and spiritual cleansings.

Cross bones line her consultation room, tucked behind a French Quarter courtyard at New Orleans' Historic Voodoo Museum. Candles, religious figurines, holy water and a skull, donning a garland of flowers, clutter an altar. Marie Laveau, New Orleans' famous 19th century Voodoo queen, peers from a portrait over the fireplace. Incense permeates the heat. And jars of juniper berry, patchouli, nutmeg and yarrow, to make gris gris (good luck) bags, cram the shelves.

Voodoo was transplanted by West African slaves during the 17th century. Demonised by some Hollywood blockbusters, Voodoo has fuelled both intrigue and fear. It is still practised by a wide cross section of New Orleans' population - around 15% - today. Madame Cocoa's telephone client is a woman from Bermuda wanting psychic help to secure a loan. "Gandea", says Madame Cocoa, puffing on a fat cigar. "That's your mantra. Write it later in red ink. I'm going to do a ritual chant. I'll salute the four corners and the altar. Keep the forces in your mind."

Madame Cocoa exhales smoke over a candle, then shakes the maraccas and her deep voice booms to call on the spirits. Her eyes roll to the ceiling as she outstretches her arms over the altar. She rings a bell and pounds a drum. "Take witness to this. Let this tiny nucleus grow into blossom. Let red, blue, indigo, all the colours of the rainbow ... be lifted up for this woman right now." She chants to invoke another spirit. "Ah yea, yea Marie Laveau. Ay yea yea Marie Laveau." Washing her hands in oil she then spits rum over candle flames. The flames hiss as she sings again, and into the receiver so her caller clearly hears the last notes.

"Voodoo," explains Madame Cocoa after the 15-minute ritual, "is about accessing the universal energy field to get favours, to affect something. We do this by communicating with various spirits. We ask them to remove negativity. But we tell people they better be careful. What they ask for they'll get. This lady wanted more attention from her boyfriend. That worked. Now she wants help attracting a loan. Love and money matters are the main reasons why people seek Voodoo practitioners."

Voodoo derives from the word 'Voudon', which means God creator or spirit, and originates from West Africa and Haiti. "Human sacrifices, vampires, dripping

blood and devil worship all make spooky novels and movies," claims the museum leaflet. "Yet none of these originated or belong to Voodoo. Voodoo encourages its participants to better understand ... life ..." Today New Orleans' Voodoo is a melt of ancient African rituals and spells, American shamanism, European superstition and magic, aspects of Catholicism, and New Age ideas.

"Voodoo is eclectic. It is not a religion of book or place but has evolved and been passed on orally," explains Mary Milan, a tour guide. "It has been misrepresented because people fear what they do not understand." Followers believe spirits rule over matters of love, health, happiness, and work. Rituals and spells are aimed at gaining favour from these spirits, which are ultimately governed by one almighty force - "whether you call that God, Allah or Buddha", says Mary.

Locals have mixed views. The Archdiocese of New Orleans does not recognise it. But Voodoo is tolerated in New Orleans. Last year, for example, a ritual was held to ward off crime and hurricanes. Explains historian Alecia Long, from Louisiana State Museum: "Voodoo practitioners are respected here. Voodoo is a viable business and local people are open to it. Some take it seriously. Others resort to it casually, if nothing else is working for them."

But Father Jerome LeDoux, of St Augustine Roman Catholic Church, says: "Voodoo is not compatible with Catholicism because several gods are invoked. In Catholicism, there is just the one God. There's also a lot of superstition which is not rational, for example, imbuing inanimate objects such as potions, wood, stone, liquid or powder with some kind of power." He adds: "Voodoo is not intrinsically negative. But there are some people who use it for negative ends. To my understanding, a curse only works if the person who is crossed allows it to. It's a mental thing. Having a negative attitude out of fear can make you more prone to accidents." Despite his reservations, Father LeDoux points out there is no animosity. "We might not approve but we don't condemn."

Historically, Voodoo offered protection and hope during enslavement for those working on the Louisiana plantations. It was practised behind a smokescreen of mandatory Catholic worship insisted by the ruling French elite who settled in Louisiana in 1682. In 'Voodoo Past and Present' (The Centre For Louisiana Studies, 1990), Ron Bodin notes: "Voodoo represented one of the few ways for blacks to gain economic and personal power in a racist and chauvinist world. A number thus started the business of Voodoo in Louisiana." It flourished during the lifetime of Marie Laveau, the city's most influential practitioner from 1794 until 1881. A Creole, she prepared spells for all walks of New Orleans life and helped people in court cases. She popularised snake dances to seal rituals.

Charles Gandolfo, 60, set up The New Orleans Historic Voodoo Museum in 1972 to raise awareness on the subject attracting around 30 visitors a day. Now the figure is upto 180. "As a kid," continues Gandolfo, who advised on The House on Royal, The Big Easy, Bayou Rouge and Eve's Bayou, "I was fascinated by it. I'd watched my friend's mother, who was a Voodoo Queen, make gris gris bags. My mother always spoke about it and I met women who

had been ordained as priestesses. The French Quarter is very liberal, so it made sense to open here."

He conducts rituals to help people gain love, promotions, jobs and business deals. He admits: "Voodoo can be evil. A woman used a Voodoo doll to harm her boss. A few days later he had a heart attack. He survived and agreed to give her a good reference. But," he adds, "there's evil in Christianity. What can be more negative than the devil? If people ask me to help with revenge, I refuse. There are myths like Voodoo involving baby sacrifices, which happened in primitive times but certainly not now. Although at some ceremonies there are still chicken sacrifices."

He has had some strange requests. "A man wanted to die being eaten alive by women," he chuckles. "He looks at women's stomachs and wishes he was in them. I thought he was a prankster but he phoned so many times, I told him: 'I don't do that kind of ritual'. Another guy wanted me to win the lottery. The spirits don't get involved in gambling."

Inside the museum, a ground-floor building with wooden shutters, on Domaine Street, Voodoo dolls, gris gris bags, spells, candles, and incense as well as cleansing baths, psychic readings, house cleansings (clearing negative energy in buildings) are on sale. On a tour, Mary leads a group into The Occult room. It is filled with masks, bones, statues, musical instruments played in rituals, as well as a horned statue representing Papa Lamau, a gatekeeper to the spirit world who is adorned with mardi gras beads and surrounded by offerings of money.

At first sight, the exhibits look alarming; the kind of things you associate with death. But, explains Mary, a Voodoo doll is a meditation device. Pins are inserted into the head to influence one's own or others thoughts, and into the heart to affect that area. Those who use it negatively are ostracised," says Mary. Similarly, cross bones do not symbolise the macabre but are a good luck sign of safety. The group brushes past hallway portraits of Marie Laveau, to The Altar Room. An altar is covered with statues of saints, photographs of visitors blessed by the spirits, figurines and a bible open on Isaiah sits the foot of it.

In the corner, a pale Burmese python, 12ft long, and named Zombie, after Marie Laveau's own, dozes in a red flood lit cabinet. He is used in snake dancing rituals today. The fascination with ancestors is amplified by the way New Orleans' buries its dead. Early settlers found bodies would float to the ground because the city is at, and below, sea level. Its cemeteries are elaborate above ground tombs shared by several families to 100s of people.

Leading the group to the city's oldest, St Louis number one, Basin Street, established in 1789, Mary explains: "When there's no room left for the next person, the previous coffin is thrown onto a dumpster and those person's bones are brushed to the back of the chamber." The group stops at Marie Laveau's tomb which has red crosses chalked all over it. If you turn around, knock on the slab three times and mark a cross on her tomb her spirit is said to grant you any

favour. Sceptics could argue that even spells with no evil intent, are unethical - interfering in theory with others' free will. Replies Charles Gandolfo: "I see myself as an attorney putting someone's case to the spirits. They judge whether it's okay to help."

Visitors' reactions vary. Linda Johnston, 51, a psychiatric nurse from upstate Louisiana says: "I was curious. My grandmother believed in it. It seems to be a lot of superstition and a little scary." Linda Monroe, 45, an air hostess, from North Carolina, visiting New Orleans for her wedding anniversary, is more sanguine: "It's another method of accessing a God. Spells are like prayer, trying to influence others. I may not want a fundamentalist Christian to pray for my conversion either."