Marie Laveau’s Gumbo Ya-Ya: The Catholic Voodoo Queen and the Demonization of New Orleans Voodoo

Samantha Mast

Chapman University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/vocesnovae

Recommended Citation

Available at: https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/vocesnovae/vol9/iss1/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Chapman University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Voces Novae by an authorized editor of Chapman University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact laughtin@chapman.edu.
Marie Laveau’s Gumbo Ya-Ya: The Catholic Voodoo Queen and the Demonization of New Orleans Voodoo.¹

Samantha Mast

Reflecting on his memory of the legendary New Orleans Voodoo Queen, former slave Harrison Camille said, “Marie Laveau? My god, yes I knew that woman. She’s got the devil in her…She a devil herself.”² The gumbo ya-ya, or gossip, surrounding the notorious Marie Laveau during her reign as Voodoo Queen from roughly 1820 to the 1870s made this Creole woman out to be the most powerful woman in the greater New Orleans community. Nearly every newspaper in print at the time accused her and the followers of the Voodoo religion of summoning power through devil-worship and black magic, despite a clear lack of evidence to support their claims. While the term Voodoo literally means “serving the spirits,” there were some who viewed it as an African cult of devil worship that emerged in the Americas.³ The intensity of Voodoo in New Orleans during the mid 19th century was perceived as a major threat to the Catholic Church that had been established since the Ursuline nuns brought religious instruction to the city in 1727.⁴ In reality, the Voodoo religion emerged as the first clear mix of both African and Catholic elements

¹ The term ‘Gumbo Ya-Ya’ is a Cajun phrase that was coined by Lyle Saxon, Edward Ereyer, and Robert Tallant in their 1945 book Gumbo Ya-Ya: A Collection of Louisiana Folk Tales. Although the phrase has been used for many years prior to this book, this book is the first to put the phrase in writing and give a definition to it. According to the authors, Gumbo Ya-Ya means “everybody talks at once.” This phrase can also reference gossip, or what the town is talking about in the Louisiana Bayou area. The latter definition is being used for the title of this thesis.
² Harrison Camille, WPA-FWP/NSU;WPA-LWP/BR. Clayton 1990:40.
in North America. Many members of this mixed religious tradition, including the Voodoo Queen herself, attended the Catholic mass in Louisiana on a regular basis while also faithfully appealing to the Voodoo spirits. As both a devoted Catholic and a Voodoo practitioner, Marie Laveau appeared a blasphemous contradiction, one which thoroughly bewildered and enraged the New Orleans community. As a result, her practice of magic and deviant use of Catholic saints and symbols led to the denunciation of this Afro-Catholic religion as well as the fear and fascination that encompassed Marie Laveau herself.

Scholars have previously provided biographical accounts of Marie Laveau’s life and religious practices, however details regarding the relationship between Laveau’s Catholic introduction to the Voodoo religion and the negative effect it had on the perceptions of the latter religion have only been discussed superficially. In her book, *Voodoo Queen: The Spirited Lives of Marie Laveau*, Martha Ward examined the details of Marie Laveau’s life in New Orleans, as well as that of her daughter with the same name, and how together they made up the legend of Marie Laveau, the Voodoo Queen. The book separated which acts were carried out by Marie the First, and those that instead represented the work of Marie the Second. Despite Ward’s extensive research, she ultimately attributed Voodoo and the two Maries to the expansion of Creole power and slave relations under the white establishment, barely scratching the surface of the relationship between Catholicism and Voodoo. Similarly, Carolyn Long analyzed Marie’s past according to the many myths that surrounded her and the magic of Voodoo in her book *A New Orleans Voudou Priestess: The Legend and Reality of Marie Laveau*. Long aimed to inform the reader of Marie’s significantly less enchanting life rather than fuel the more outrageous legends that still persist about her. This does not take away from Laveau’s influence and the status she held, but rather relates the story of a powerful young Creole woman who was intensely
connected to the spiritual community. Although this text was incredibly valuable on a biographical level, it is limited once more in the details on the way in which Marie impacted the relationship between Catholicism and Voodoo.

The history of Voodoo in the Americas began with the slave trade and the subsequent emergence of African culture in the area. African slaves that arrived in Haiti were forced to adopt Catholicism, the religion of their masters, but covertly remained loyal to their African roots. Slaves disguised their lwas, or spirits from the African Vodun religion, as Catholic saints and incorporated other Catholic imagery into their religion in order to appease their new masters. This meant that while they outwardly accepted Catholicism and its traditions, they simultaneously kept the religion of their ancestors alive with private ceremonies and practices. Syncretism developed into the Hatian Voudou religion, which was the predecessor of New Orleans Voodoo and the beginning of Catholic and African religious relations. The New Orleans Voodoo narrative developed similar practices, deities, and roles in the community as the influx of Haitian slaves and refugees arrived in the city in 1809. Like the Haitians before them, people of color in New Orleans, particularly slaves, were bound to their master’s religions. Even though Catholicism prevailed, Voodoo was never out of the picture.

From the outset, Voodoo in New Orleans was treated as a second-class religion due to the threat it posed to the Catholic realm. Authorities in the Crescent City “considered this ‘savage’ African practice to be an offense against Christian morality” in other words—“a horrifying brew of sorcery, devil worship, interracial fraternization, and sexual license.” This fear manifested from the Haitian Revolution during 1791 to 1804, where slaves violently rebelled after the Bois

---

Caiman Voudou ceremony. This combination of ritual ceremony and slave meeting began the Haitian Revolution and convinced Catholics that Voodoo, and anyone involved in its practice, was a source of the overall violence. Herard Dumesle, a Haitian writer, poet, and senator documented the prayer of the Voudou priest from the ceremony where he urged slaves to “Throw away the image of the God of the whites who thirsts for our tears,” and instead look to the Voodoo gods which “order[ed] [them] to vengeance.” Those who heard these words mistook them to be a violent threat directed toward Catholicism and God, when in truth it was more of a prayer meant to help the slaves overcome their hardships and fight for their freedom. The Haitian Voudou religion was seen as a symbol of the rage and power of the African slaves over their white Catholic masters. Consequently, New Orleans leaders were terrified of the acceptance Voodoo was receiving within the Creole and black communities. The growing number of people of color in the city only served to enhance this issue, as New Orleans leaders feared that a similar uprising might occur in their French colony.

The race categories in the city of New Orleans were distinctive, as many cultures seemed to blend within the area, which fostered a unique outlook on race and ethnicity. As New Orleans grew into a bustling city, its racial diversity grew as well. From the late 18th century, “the total number of blacks had risen to equal that of the white, and within the Delta, outside of New Orleans, they must have preponderated.” During the lifetime of Marie Laveau, there were intricate distinctions between each race. For example, those referred to as black or negro had full


9 Dumesle, *Voyage dans le Nord d’Haiti, ou, Revelation des lieux et des monuments historiques*.

African descent and were presumably enslaved, those who were free black or free negro had unmixed African blood, but was not a slave. And a free person of color was mixed race and had their freedom. These individuals were further sorted into free mulattos, free quadroons, and various other distinctions dependent on how mixed one’s blood was. The more complex an individual’s racial heritage was, the less rights they were given. The most important of these groups concerning the Voodoo religion, were the Creoles. This group in Louisiana referred to anyone, regardless of race, who was born in Louisiana instead of Europe or Africa. They spoke French, were Roman Catholic, and were established in the area before the Americans purchased the land. Others described Creoles as “a graceful, well-knit race, in full keeping with the freedom of their surroundings [but also] they are said to have been coarse, boastful, vain, and expended the best of their energies in trivial pleasures.” Marie Laveau was the epitome of the New Orleans Creole, and like others in her racial class, often observed a more privileged status than those born outside of the French colony.

Anyone with African descent outside of Louisiana had a much different life, with far fewer rights, which made a free person of color or Creole within the state something of an advantage. According to the genealogical research done by Carolyn Morrow Long, Marie Laveau’s ancestry was extremely diverse. Having descended “from French colonists, from Africans who had the misfortune to be slaves, and from racially mixed free people of color,” Marie Laveau was as diverse as the city she lived in. A crucial detail about Marie and her

ancestors was that those in the New Orleans area were all raised Catholic, similar to most other Creoles.\textsuperscript{15} Although the majority of people within the city, no matter their race, were raised Catholic, Creoles perceived the religion as a part of their persona. Meaning that when Marie chose to practice Voodoo alongside her family’s traditional religion, she in part gave up some of her social status as a Creole by associating herself with what had been a designated slave religion.

Religious instruction from the Ursuline nuns was the primary, if not the only formal education system for girls in the greater New Orleans area since the nun’s arrival in 1727. Marie Madeleine Hachard, one of the twelve nuns that first arrived in New Orleans, greeted the city with excitement, but quickly recognized that the people in this area, particularly the women, were in desperate need of faith. She wrote:

> The women here are extremely ignorant as to the means of securing their salvation, but they are very expert in the art of displaying their beauty. . .In the end, the devil has a great empire here, but this does not take away from us the hope of destroying him with God’s love. There is an infinity of examples to make his strength show through our weakness. The more powerful the enemy is, the more we are encouraged to fight him.\textsuperscript{16}

According to Hachard, New Orleans had been infected with the devil’s presence since its inception, and it was the Ursuline’s job to teach these young women how to cast the devil out through practice of the Catholic faith. Their convent served as a basic religious education for all girls, and through this institution the nuns created a community where girls of all races and social classes in New Orleans had Catholic role models that they could learn and receive support

\textsuperscript{15} Long, Carolyn Morrow. \textit{A New Orleans Voudou Priestess: The Legend and Reality of Marie Laveau.}, 11.

\textsuperscript{16} Hachard, Marie Madeleine. \textit{Marie Madeleine Hachard to her father Jacques Hachard, April 24, 1728.} Letter. From \textit{Voices From an Early American Convent: Marie Madeleine Hachard and the Ursulines, 1727-1760.}
from. It was the nun’s greatest “hope that [their] establishment will be for the glory of God, and that, in time, it will produce great good for the salvation of souls. This [was their] principal aim.” Hachard was hopeful that future nuns of the Ursuline convent could help “teach and convert these poor savages” in the New Orleans area. She was confident that it was possible to accomplish such a feat as “the Lord is pleased to let the strength of his arm strike through His weakest subjects.”

The religious transition, particularly the transition from African religions to Catholicism, was simple enough for those who were encouraged to take up the latter. Africans entering the French colony as slaves were routinely exposed to the new religion and often, they found many elements to which they could relate. The supreme being common to most indigenous African belief systems was analogous to God the Father, and the deities and ancestors who serve as intermediaries between men and the supreme being became identified with Mary the Blessed Mother and the legion of saints.

Even the Catholic rituals, sounds, and sacred objects found their counterparts in the African religion and though it was not entirely accepted; a balance was struck between the two religions. As generations passed, Catholicism was widely embraced, particularly by the free people of color and Creole classes. After the Americans immigrated into Louisiana in the late 1700s, Catholic acceptance by free people of color skyrocketed as the group was deprived of their semi-privileged status. Those who owned slaves were now under the laws of the South, which meant

18 Hachard, Marie Madeleine. *Marie Madeleine Hachard to her father Jacques Hachard, October 27, 1727*. Letter. From *Voices From an Early American Convent: Marie Madeleine Hachard and the Ursulines, 1727-1760*, 72.
harsher slave restrictions and more limited freedoms, particularly in the realm of religion. But as quickly as many individuals gave in to Catholicism under these new regulations, there still remained a large population of those who embraced Voodoo as a way to fight for their rights.22

Archival evidence from the records of the St.Louis Cathedral confirm that Marie Laveau’s grandmother was a practicing Catholic, so it is likely that she was taught under the Ursulines.23 If the birth and baptismal record of Marie Laveau given by Long in her text is correct, then Laveau too was born into her grandmother’s religion; having been baptized at the St.Louis Cathedral on September 16, 1801.24 Growing up a free woman of color, Marie was no stranger to the range of spiritualism in her city, but continued to be raised traditionally Catholic by the ladies of the Ursuline Convent. These women greatly influenced Marie’s religious life and taught her Christian theology, including traditional prayers, hymns, and symbols that she would later incorporate into her Voodoo practices.25 Like other New Orleans inhabitants, Marie Laveau had heard the Ursulines message since birth and was instructed with their spiritual lessons and practices. Laveau grew her relationship with God through the Convent, and maintained that relationship throughout her life at the St.Louis Cathedral.

In her years at the Church, Marie and her fellow Catholics were guided into having certain beliefs about how to live one’s life. The Ursuline nuns instructed Laveau in spiritual education, however it was not meant to spark serious interest in spirits outside the Catholic realm.26 Laveau aimed to spread the message of spiritual healing and religious devotion, and

22 Bibbs, Susheel. Heritage of Power: Marie LaVeaux to Mary Ellen Pleasant, 42.
growing up as a Creole in New Orleans, she had many interactions with those who practiced
Voodoo. It appeared that Laveau gravitated towards the spiritual religion as a way to further her
devotional practices. Joining the ranks of Voodoo practitioners was not an easy task, as
members, especially priestesses, were chosen and challenged by the spirits to prove their strength
and worthiness.27 Those who wished to pursue priesthood had their wits tested further and
needed to begin an apprenticeship with someone higher up in the religion. For Marie, she would
study under priestess Sanité Dede, her predecessor as Voodoo Queen.28

This apprenticeship revealed the details of specific rituals, including spiritual
possession, which would be vital to her ascension into the religion during a formal initiation
ceremony. The only evidence of this ceremony from the time of Marie Laveau’s initiation was
from a white slave owner who witnessed the ceremony as one of his own slaves was initiated.
Though this account remains problematic due to the demonic rumors spread about the religion
at the time, as well as the ignorance of those outside it, this man’s story provides possible
information on an otherwise unknown event. The night of the initiation occurred in the backyard
of priestess Sanité Dede’s home and was filled with African drums and singing.29 Music played
and people danced while they waited for the spirits to arrive. When the spirits entered the
ceremony and “a long, deep howl of exultation broke from every part of the shed. Pandemonium
was unloosed.”30 A spirit took possession of Dede and “under the passion of the hour, the women
tore off their garments, and entirely nude, went on dancing—no, not dancing, but wriggling like
snakes.”31 It is unknown whether Marie was in this ceremony, however this description provides

31 J.W. Buel, *Metropolitan Live Unveiled*. 
a reference point for what an initiation ceremony may have looked like from an outsider’s perspective. After her own initiation, Marie Laveau continued to practice and eventually took the role of Voodoo Queen after Sanité’s passing.

With Laveau’s status as Voodoo Queen, her reputation quickly came under fire, and rumors began to spread regarding her new position of power. Allegations of witchcraft were the most prominent, with many saying that Laveau was using Voodoo to enhance her “supposed supernatural powers.”32 This was in direct contradiction to the basic tenets of the Catholic religion, which claimed that one of the worst acts someone could commit was to perform witchcraft or sorcery, as it was a mark of devil worship. In the book of Revelations, it specifically states “those who practice witchcraft, idol worshippers, and all liars–their fate is in the fiery lake of burning sulfur.”33 It was thought “that the Voudou propriate[sic] the Evil spirit, satisfied that if they can do so, they will prosper by receiving his Satanic assistance.”34 And this is exactly what the people of New Orleans claimed to witness with the success of a Voodoo incantation, although most instances were likely just coincidence. Some would say that in their incantations Laveau and other Voodoo hags, ugly as sin, [would] mutter a jargon as unintelligible as a mixture of Chinese, Tahitian and Senegambian words. Water, as it is supposed, all powerful to injure, is distributed, so that it may be thrown in front of the door or upon the wall of some house against whose inmates a Voudou may entertain a prejudice. Of course, their spies keep watch upon family affairs, and if a death happens or a difficulty, it is immediately reported that the charm had operated. To the superstitious, it is conclusive evidence of the witchcraft power of the queen sorceress.35

33 Revelations 21:8
35 “Voudoo in New Orleans in Louisiana in 1860.”
Laveau cast a powerful shadow in New Orleans, and though death, sickness, and other ailments or even good fortune may have come after one of these incantations, witchcraft rumors were a far more intriguing story for people to believe than dull coincidence. Although the term witchcraft circulated around New Orleans in relation to Voodoo, it was clear that there were different levels of evil within the practice of witchcraft.

For example, Voodoo was not considered a traditional witchcraft since “the negro witches have little in common with the witch of our story-books; they never ride broomsticks, or resort to the thousand and one petty arts of the Saxon or Celtic witch.” Nonetheless Voodoo was deemed a “far deeper and deadlier sorcery– a power which the negro firmly believes can waste the marrow in the victim’s bones, dry the blood in his veins, and, sapping his life slowly and surely, bring him at last, a skeleton, to his grave.” This definition was given to the Voodoo practitioners because many graves in New Orleans were marked with possible Voodoo-related deaths. These markings were typically an inscription on the grave that said “Died of obi,” an African term for the magic of Voodoo. There are also numerous accounts of citizens allegedly being cursed by Voodoo spells or charms, although there is little evidence to show for it. Many of these reports describe people who found a certain item, which could have been anything, and imagined it to be a Voodoo charm and the source of their ailment. After finding such an item, all their bad luck, sickness, or any other curse was instantly cured. For instance, in one case “a nervous gentleman who had a contraband servant girl, was horrified…to discover a ball composed of hair, coagulated blood, toe-nails and snail shells, sewed up in his coat pocket.

37 Handy, "Witchcraft Among the Negroes."
38 Handy, "Witchcraft Among the Negroes."
39 Handy, "Witchcraft Among the Negroes."
He ripped out the infernal contrivance, discharged the girl, broke the spell, and now sleeps soundly.”

Cases like these were the most common, however there were other stories of a more positive nature when individuals would take objects from a Voodoo priest or priestess and keep them with them for personal use like good luck, fertility, and happiness. This was a much more truthful reason behind the charm, however the horrifying rumors of curses and death charms were what constantly spread around the New Orleans community.

These stories terrified the people of the city and made them extremely paranoid and overly cautious around any person of color known to practice the religion. Meaning that when Voodoo practitioners gathered together, those outside the religion thought they had “assembled to renew their incantations and weave their spells of magic.”

The supposed purpose of these spells was “to free their favorites from harm, and bring it upon their enemies.” Those who practice Voodoo were believed to be so swept up in the religion that they “firmly believe[d] the power of the sorceress invincible, and rely implicitly upon the charms.” In turn the general public was convinced that once a Voodoo Priest or Priestess chose to target a person, for whatever reason, “no human power can save him—he believes that he must die, and die he will; a whole college of physicians could not save him.” The only way to reverse this was to visit another practitioner who would prescribe advice, herbs or natural medicine of some sort, or provide an object that would ward off evil spirits.

Although the prescription of various objects, herbs, and spell-like incantations for Voodoo clients were common practice, it was actually rooted in prayer and medicine rather than

40 “Voudouism in Indianapolis.” The Opelousas Courier, March 31, 1866.
41 “The Rites of Voudou” The Daily Crescent, July 31, 1850.
42 “Voudoo in New Orleans in Louisiana in 1860.”
43 “Voudoo in New Orleans in Louisiana in 1860.”
44 Handy, "Witchcraft Among the Negroes."
witchcraft. Women of color who were involved in Voodoo had access to a variety of plants and medicinal potions that they employed for their ceremonies, but also for healing purposes. It was known throughout the New Orleans area that if an individual were suffering from any sort of ailment, a Voodoo priestess would likely have something to help either ease their symptoms or cure the issue altogether. These women

    Possess a marvelous knowledge of the nature and properties of every plant indigenous to the South. They have an herb for every ache or pain, and frequently prepare little bags filled with dried roots or leaves to be worn around the neck as a charm against disease or the ‘evil eye.’

These bags, usually referred to as gris-gris bags, were used for both healing sickness and providing extra spiritual help for specific Voodoo clients in their endeavors. These charms were used to manifest the intention of the client and boost their chance of achieving their goals. To those who understood the proper use of these herb bags, they were harmless and meant to help. But in the case of those who believed that Voodoo was a form of witchcraft they were under the impression that “one of these charms cursed with the horrid anathemas they put upon it, and given to an enemy will entail upon all the ills of life, and on the contrary, if given an embiem[sic] of good and guarded with religious zeal will be an infallible auxiliary to protect and save.” Essentially meaning that whatever will the priestess had for the person, whether it be good or bad, the magic would do its job. Most priestesses, including Laveau, gave gris-gris during their sessions to help fulfill some sort of personal ambition, however they were also a key part of the healing process. They were often prescribed to sick individuals and the various natural elements inside them were uniquely crafted to help restore a person to full health. This did not indicate that there were not individuals who proceeded to take advantage of the mystical healing

46 Handy, "Witchcraft Among the Negroes."
elements of Voodoo. This was evident in the fact that it was common for some ‘Voodoo practitioners’ to claim they had magical healing powers which gave them the ability to cure all sorts of ailments with their magic and charms which included items such as “a rabbit foot, a coon foot, a load stone, a bottle of catfish gills and snake teeth.” The bizarre nature of these charms was often the focus of media coverage, while the natural healing knowledge and strength of women of color were relatively ignored, especially if the woman was known to practice Voodoo.

Many individuals had qualms about visiting a priestess to obtain these homemade remedies, which prompted local pharmacies to stock many of the same herbs and potions the women did. The owner of the pharmacy bought these products from Voodoo priestesses and other women of color, and stored them out of sight. Customers who wished to purchase these items could discreetly order them from a list of correlating numbers so they would not have to say the name of the product out loud. This was done to protect the customer’s reputation, as buying Voodoo items lessened one’s social status within the community. Even if the priestess was regarded as highly knowledgeable, many New Orleans citizens preferred to visit the pharmacy for their transactions in the event that someone in the community was watching.

Marie Laveau was known to have been a talented healer, as her skill and compassion was epitomized by the way she helped nurse those with yellow fever back to health. A large amount of the creole population was immune to the disease after its first epidemic swept through the area in 1817, and as a result many of the Creole women went on to help those who had since immigrated to the city and were affected by the disease. Laveau’s obituary even remarks of her incredible success as a nurse, saying that there are

48 “State Items” *New Iberia Enterprise*, March 14, 1885.
49 “Voodoo Potions.”
Wonderful stories being told of her exploits at the sick bed. In yellow fever and cholera epidemics she was always called upon to nurse the sick, and always responded promptly. Her skill and knowledge earned her the friendship and approbation of those sufficiently cultivated.50

Her great curative ability made Laveau and these other women of color heroes for a brief period of time in their community. Recipients of her healing powers were indebted to Laveau and the other women, and paid no mind as to what had healed them. These women were so good at their health care that gossip spread about their healing powers were also rooted in magic. One journalist declared “the skill of [the creole] women in natural medicine is extraordinary. I tried to induce one to give me a recipe. She refused. It was her secret…Is it any wonder many of these excellent nurses are suspected of being able to use their knowledge for deadly and secret purposes.”51 Some even argued that Voodoo women had insane cures for diseases that made little sense to outsiders. Rumors spread about these peculiar treatments, for example that “chills and fevers are cured [sic] by blowing into the mouth of a live frog, or walking backward to a tree in a graveyard, and tying a string around the trunk.”52 Other strange cures called for “toe-nails, hair from the human head, blood from the tip of a black cat’s tail…[and] wood that has been charred by lightening.”53 Those who did not trust Laveau argued that she took part in these odd remedies and “attributed her success to unnatural means, and held her in constant dread.”54
However her patients were able to recognize that her healing skill was nothing more than the work of a kind woman with an exceptional knowledge of medicine and nature.

Outside of healing, people believed that Voodoo practitioners used herbs, potions, and

50 “Death of Marie Laveau–A Woman with a Wonderful History, Almost a Century Old, Carried to the Tomb Yesterday Evening.” The Times-Picayune, 17 June, 1881.
51 Buel, J.W. Metropolitan Life Unveiled, 535.
52 Handy, "Witchcraft Among the Negroes."
53 Handy, "Witchcraft Among the Negroes."
54 “Death of Marie Laveau–A Woman with a Wonderful History, Almost a Century Old, Carried to the Tomb Yesterday Evening”
so-called magical objects to draw people in to their Voodoo work. Whether Laveau’s client had asked her to curse someone or protect themselves, these items proved useful in her services. Some did not believe in her power, and thought she was a fraud, not a sorceress. Author Henry C. Castellanos claimed she “pretended to cure many ailments,” but he did not deny that there was a large demand for her services. \(^{55}\) It appeared Laveau was consistently busy with her work in producing these charms and medicines as “her apartments were often thronged with visitors from every class and section in search of aid.”\(^ {56}\) It was said that “her presence is all that is most majestic…[and she has] an easy and honeyed word” one that could supposedly charm anyone into hiring her for help.\(^ {57}\) Her popularity amongst the people of New Orleans was surely in part due to her investment in the Catholic community, however as a participant in the Voodoo community she was not always respected by everyone in the church. Voodoo practitioners were considered both practicing witches and idol worshippers according to traditional Catholic doctrine, as the Voodoo lwas, the term for Voodoo spirits, were considered false Gods. Catholics considered magic in addition to those who practiced it to be open to the devil and his powers and therefore “detestable to the Lord;” yet another reason people feared Voodoo participants in New Orleans.\(^ {58}\) In Catholicism there are only two sources of power: God and Satan. If one searches for power outside of the church, one will find it only from the devil.

Marie was a curious case because she remained adamant about her place among the worshippers in the St. Louis Cathedral while she continued her practice of Voodoo. No matter how many hours she spent in the church, the fact that she practiced another form of religious

\(^{55}\) Castellano, *New Orleans As It Was: Episodes of Louisiana Life*, 98.

\(^{56}\) Castellano, *New Orleans As It Was: Episodes of Louisiana Life*, 98.

\(^{57}\) “Voudou” *The Weekly Thibodaux Sentinel and Journal of the 8th Senatorial District*, October 20, 1883. Translated from French.

\(^{58}\) Deuteronomy 18:12
expression convinced many church-goers in the community that she was a heathen who delved illicitly into the world of the supernatural. It did not help that the newspapers constantly referred to her as the leader of the Voodoo community, and rarely made note of her pious work at St. Louis Cathedral.\(^5\) Others in the city, especially white men argued that she was a fraudulent and blasphemous Catholic.\(^6\) No matter the gossip about her status as a Catholic, she was not deterred from participating in the Voodoo religion. Even those who did not actively practice Voodoo themselves still acknowledged Marie’s powers and often went to her in times of trouble for the things that they believed God could not fix. Mimi Delavigne, a neighbor of Laveau’s, said that as a girl she would watch Marie’s house and that, although sometimes in disguise, “the women of the elite of New Orleans, did not hesitate to go consult Marie Laveau, who would give them powders to use on their husbands, and bones and skeletons, to put in their pockets.”\(^6\) There was a public fascination that surrounded Laveau and her mystical Voodoo powers, but because she also attended church, it made her more approachable. It seemed that if the New Orleans community were to contact anyone for their Voodoo needs they would go to someone with whom they were already familiar and knew through their own religious community.

The more power Laveau gained in her reputation as Voodoo queen, the more eccentric the rumors were about her and her powers. Everyone in the city knew of Laveau and recognized, at least on a basic level, the effect she had on the New Orleans community. She represented two very important sectors of the city: Catholicism and Voodoo, and had strong contacts with


officials in both communities. There were also numerous events that Laveau was suspected of being involved in that helped create her mysterious, all-powerful persona. The first event was a defining moment in her role as Voodoo Queen, as a competing woman attempted to seize control of the Voodoo community through the use of a wooden doll. This was supposedly the only time where Laveau’s authority was threatened.62 The trouble began when Rosalie, a Creole woman in of New Orleans, came into possession of a large African doll that was intricately decorated with paints and expensive ribbons63. The doll was believed to be a source of powerful magic, which led many Voodoo worshippers to view Rosalie as a leader. To gain control of the situation, Laveau stole the doll from Rosalie’s house. Charges were brought against Laveau, however she presented her case with such eloquence that she was deemed the rightful owner of the doll.64 Though this tale appears to be an exaggeration of a simple court case during which “Marie Laveau…appeared, before Reporter Seuzeneau and charged Watchman Abréo of the Third Municipality Guards with having by fraud come into possession of a statue of a virgin worth fifty dollars,” it nonetheless brought an element of dominance and skill to Laveau’s legend at the time.65

This fabricated event was a response to the theft of one of Laveau’s Virgin Mary statues. However false the story was, its message carried to the people of New Orleans was spread throughout the population. Resulting in the belief among Voodoo worshippers and Catholics alike that Laveau had the power to change the opinion of others, even if the evidence was rightly

stacked against her. The story of the doll was also important as it essentially told others that although the law might try to catch her and knock her down, she would find a way to keep going. This gave the people of New Orleans a deeper understanding of exactly how much power Marie Laveau had. It made people wonder if she was worth attacking, as she was so powerful in the community that even the police could not bring her to justice for a crime she had openly committed.

Yet another legendary event involving Laveau that further fueled the rumors about her extensive power over the law, this was the supposedly dubious means by which she had acquired her house on St. Ann street. Although the property had been passed down through her family since the time the lot was purchased by her grandmother, gossip spread that it was given in payment for her impeccable work as Voodoo Queen. The story went that a desperate father came to Laveau and asked her to call the Voodoo spirits to help his son who had the evidence stacked against him in an upcoming criminal trial. Laveau accepted the man’s offer and

When the day set for the trial came round…the wily ‘voodoo,’ after placing three Guinea peppers in her mouth, entered Saint Louis Cathedral, knelt at the altar rail, and was seen to remain in this posture for some time. Leaving the church, she gained admittance to the Cabildo [where the trial was held]…and depositing the three peppers under the judge’s bench, lingered to await developments.

The son of Laveau’s client was found innocent by the judge, and the father believed that Marie Laveau and her Voodoo charms were the reason why the trial ended in his desired outcome. Again, although completely fabricated, this story had a considerable impact on the way Laveau was viewed in New Orleans. This story is of particular importance, as it depicts Laveau’s careful

---


use of both of her religious personalities. The power that Laveau supposedly used with the
Guinea peppers is no doubt Voodoo in nature, however instead of procuring the spiritual energy
from her home, where most of her Voodoo work took place, she draws it from her place of
Catholic worship, the St.Louis Cathedral. It gave the impression that God was aware of the
Voodoo religion that Laveau practiced, and accepted it to the point of allowing it in His church
and granting Laveau her prayers for the trial. It also set the narrative for Laveau’s skills as a
master manipulator of the courts, which made the people of New Orleans see her as a force to be
both feared and respected. This story marked a new wave of curiosity about the Voodoo Queen
and it portrayed her as the ultimate source of power in the city. If the courts themselves could not
defy her power, than anyone who went to her for help would have success in their endeavors.

There was enormous respect for Laveau, and although she had already demonstrated her love for
the Church and her unrivaled Voodoo work, this myth about her seemed to solidify the extent of
her influence and power.

The third and final story about Laveau was just as essential in strengthening the people’s
belief in her power and dominance within New Orleans. On a sunny July day in New Orleans in
1852 two murderers, Jean Adams and Anthony Delille, was set to hang publicly outside the
Parish prison. As most summer days in the city, the weather was hot and the sun shined over the
enormous crowd that always gathered for public executions. In the crowd was Marie Laveau,
who had supposedly made her hatred of public death known to the community. As the prisoners
stepped up to the ropes and had them tightened around their necks one report claimed that “a
sheet of lightening—a sheet so blinding, so dazzling, so stunning as to partake of the unnatural—
illuminated the scene and rent the skies in twain. Nothing so weirdly, so terrifically grand, so
indicative of the power of an offended Deity has ever before been heard.” The Picayune reporter also experienced the same storm and remarked that “the rain came down as if the floodgates of heaven were opened to deluge this world again,” and that despite this ungodly weather “the multitude in the street still stood their ground.” The storm was so incredibly powerful that it forced the two murderers to fall from the gallows, snapping the ropes off their necks as they hit the cement. After the criminals dropped, the storm cleared just as fast as it had come, as if its only purpose was to save the men. With this in mind the crowd was anxious and some “honestly believed that it was unlawful to hang them a second time.” Laveau had wished to stop the public executions, and it was believed that she had brought in the storm as a force of nature to do her bidding. It appeared that “this horrid execution shocked the conscience of the community by reason of its demoralizing effects. The Legislature was appealed to for a change in the law, and public hanging became henceforth a thing of the past.” People said that it was Laveau’s wish to end public executions because of the humiliation and shame it brought to the criminals, it was not necessarily her intention to bring an end to capital punishment itself. The storm, the community believed, was Laveau’s way of demonstrating to the people that even if they were not persuaded by her words or actions, there were other forces in the world that she can control to get them to change their opinions. In fact, Louisiana was the first state to outlaw executions for public spectacle and amusement, and many believed Marie Laveau to be the reason why.

Though this event undoubtedly has some exaggerated aspects to it, the hanging of these two men did occur during Laveau’s reign and as reported, a strong storm came through the area

---

68 Castellano, Henry C. *New Orleans As It Was: Episodes of Louisiana Life*, 108.
69 *Picayune*, July 3, 1852.
71 Castellano, Henry C. *New Orleans As It Was: Episodes of Louisiana Life*, 109.
72 Castellano, Henry C. *New Orleans As It Was: Episodes of Louisiana Life*, 110.
during the execution. There are no verifiable accounts of Laveau attending the event, but it could be assumed, due to the popularity of public executions in New Orleans at the time, that she may have made an appearance, or at least knew that the hangings were to take place that day. The story also states that the people of New Orleans were unwilling to hang the two men again, however prison records state that they were hung once more; whether they were hung for the second time in public or behind prison walls remains unclear.\footnote{Ward, Martha. \textit{Voodoo Queen: The Spirited Lives of Marie Laveau}. 125.} And while it is true that Louisiana became one of the first states to ban public executions as a form of entertainment, it did not outlaw the practice completely. The importance of this narrative is not the banning of executions, despite that being the ultimate impact of Laveau’s storm, it is about Laveau’s presence and influence over things should have rightly remained out of her control. While the storm took place through the description of newspaper accounts, there was no evidence that Laveau had any involvement in its appearance and potentially was not even present when the event took place. This fable was created by the people of the New Orleans community who had such overwhelming respect for and fear of Laveau that it made them believe she could exercise control over the forces of nature. Extreme power is a scary thing, but it is also something to be praised and recognized. Laveau was admired by the community for her capability to perform the impossible through her presumed magical powers that any and all events deemed important or were believed to be orchestrated by her. With this myth, based on actual events that occurred during Laveau’s time, it is clear that the city of New Orleans had the utmost respect for Laveau, even if part of it came out of a place of fear.

Not all of Laveau’s respect and authority came from the belief that her Voodoo powers
were incredibly powerful. The trust and respect in Laveau also came from the close relationship she had with Cathedral rector, Pere Antoine, of the St. Louis Cathedral. Also known by his Spanish name Fray Antonio de Sedella, Pere Antoine first arrived in Louisiana as the head of the Spanish Inquisition, and later took a leadership position at the Cathedral. Unlike other Spanish leaders at this time, he did not devote his time to persecuting women or heretics, but rather focused on spreading more acceptance of the church and improving attendance during holy days. His methods were unorthodox, and other clergy who knew him called him “the scourge of the church” due to his willingness to give everyone an equal chance at salvation. These unorthodox methods began with his friendship with Marie Laveau, and the supposed deal they made together. Pere Antoine hoped to forge an agreement with Laveau that would benefit both Catholicism and Voodoo. Laveau promised that she would usher the community to St. Louis Cathedral on important Catholic holidays and feast days, and in exchange Pere Antoine would allow Voodoo to coexist as peacefully as possible. The rector gained popularity amongst the New Orleans community for his kindness. Pere Antoine also negotiated that Laveau assist with issues that the church did not want to get involved with including out-of-wedlock childbirth and interracial marriages. Pere Antoine was involved in these events, due to his kind and accepting nature, however the church itself wished to remain separate.

Using his position as rector, as well as his network of spiritual contacts, Pere Antoine would attempt to influence the court cases of women of color and their children. These trials would often times involve the women and children’s freedom, and Pere Antoine would act as an ally that they would not have had on their own. No doubt it was Laveau who led Pere Antoine

---

to these cases of injustice, as women, but specifically women of color, in New Orleans repeatedly reported their troubles to her. Along with fighting for the freedom of people of color, he consistently manipulated the law to give rights to individuals who did not have them. He was one of the few clergymen who fought against the strict racial rules of Louisiana, and was known to perform marriage ceremonies for interracial couples, including Marie Laveau and her second husband Christophe Glapion.\(^{80}\) He did so by creating marriage documents, and leaving them out of the official records of the cathedral. Because of Pere Antoine, Marie Laveau was entitled to her husband’s estate after his passing, which ensured her Voodoo practice to continue on.

Pere Antoine’s relationship with Laveau was close to the point that Philomene, Laveau’s daughter, stated that her mother “knew Father Antoine better than any living in those days.”\(^{81}\) The relationship between Antoine and Laveau was so close that it led others in the community, particular other church leaders, to believe that Pere Antoine was leading the Catholic church astray. Some argued that under his leadership the city of New Orleans was the “new Babylon” or the “sewer of all vice and refuge of all that is worst on Earth” especially as he was notably close with the worst heretic of them all, Marie Laveau.\(^{82}\) These people believed Pere Antoine to be overly lenient with his practices, and felt that church leaders should strictly enforce all laws, especially if they pertained to those in the Bible would condemn to squalor and disgrace. While other pastors complained about performing baptisms, funerals, and marriages for people like prostitutes, concubines, Freemasons and the like, Pere Antoine gladly accepted these challenges.\(^{83}\) The angry Priests gossiped constantly and argued that because of his willingness to

\(^{79}\) Schafer, Judith K. *Open and Notorious Concubinage: The Emancipation of Slave Mistresses by Will and Supreme Court in Antebellum Louisiana*, Louisiana History, 1987, 28.

\(^{80}\) Ward, *Voodoo Queen: The Spirited Lives of Marie Laveau*, 47.

\(^{81}\) “Death of Marie Laveau–A Woman with a Wondeful History, Almost a Century Old, Carried to the Tomb Yesterday Evening.”

accept these types of people, he must be a Freemason or another type of heathen. This again was
due to Pere Antoine’s willingness to allow anyone to be a part of the Catholic religion.

Despite the lack of appreciation from other clergymen in New Orleans, Pere Antoine’s
death caused enormous grief throughout the city. Those whom he had treated well throughout his
life, namely women of color and social outcasts, gave him the utmost respect, and ordered that
respect to be carried out upon his death. One such group, the Freemasons, reminded their
members “that Father Antoine never refused to accompany to their last abode the mortal remains
of our brethren and that gratitude now requires that we should in turn accompany him with
respect and veneration he so well deserved.”84 The Louisiana Courier articles on Pere Antoine
were printed for three days after his death. Likewise, the days of January 20, 21, and 23 of 1829
in New Orleans were spent mourning the loss of the beloved man. Laveau grieved enormously
for him, as he was one of the few who attempted to understand the Voodoo religion and its
message of love and justice. All businesses in the area remained closed, flags on public buildings
were flown at half-mast to celebrate his life, and everyone in the city, including government
officials went to view the body of their priest.85 Journalists wrote that people of all social classes
and racial groups paid their respects to the priest, as his love knew no such boundaries. He spent
the entirety of his life helping anyone he could, even if it meant breaking the laws to do so. His
death left a vacancy for Laveau to fill, and many women of color looked directly to her for
religious and political advice that Pere Antoine may have offered were he still living.

Pere Antoine’s kindness was not lost on the New Orleans community. People
recognized the good he did, and his obituary praised the various selfless acts he performed for

84 Louisiana Courier, January 20, 1829.
85 Louisiana Courier, January 20, 1829.
the women, fever victims, and the enslaved. After his death, his will divided his few possessions between his godchildren, no matter their freedom status. His importance particularly in the Creole and African communities was deeply rooted in his support of equality and desire to break down racial boundaries. The cathedral rector’s memory was cherished in New Orleans so much so that individuals referred to him as a saint. The man and his patron saint, St.Anthony, slowly merged into one spiritual entity. Pere Antoine’s actions during his life mirrored those of St.Anthony as he constantly fought the battles for the poor and the oppressed. Many Africans who were taken to Louisiana had a prayer called *Salve Antoniana* which calls on St.Anthony to have Mercy. This prayer is still repeated by the people of New Orleans today in times of trouble, reinforcing the lasting impact the memory of Pere Antoine and his patron saint had in the city.

Laveau was deeply moved by her friend’s passing, and chose to continue Pere Antoine’s legacy of helping those who needed it. In his honor she incorporated St.Anthony into her work as a Voodoo priestess, and regularly told clients to make offers to him to answer their pleas. In the case of one woman who lost her French Market business, Laveau told her to offer scented oils to the saint

So that the spirits of contention and strife will leave and only good spirits of friendship and help will remain within your storehouse. In the front door you will put the picture of St. Anthony so that faith will enter, and on the back door you will put the picture of St. Anthony so that faith will not depart. Herein fail not, my daughter, to do faithfully each of these things so that prosperity will again smile on you.

---

Not only did she encourage those in need to look to St. Anthony, she also expanded her kindness to support the communities that Pere Antoine had left behind in the wake of his death.

Although a great deal of gossip surrounded Pere Antoine, his love and respect for all individuals is what won him the affection and respect of the New Orleans community. It was this openness and willingness to fight for others that convinced many that he was a viable church leader and others that he was a heretic himself. This, and his friendship with Laveau opened up a more positive dialogue between Voodoo and Catholicism. He accepted that Voodoo was an equally valid form of worship within the city of New Orleans and he and Marie worked together to lessen the stigma around those who practiced it. He also recognized that many of the symbols in this religion had a place within Catholicism, and that Voodoo beliefs were not completely unlike his own. Something he came to realize was that Voodoo in fact, has a strong connection to Catholic doctrine involving the Virgin Mary. Other female biblical figures had a place in both religions too; Laveau also recognized this connection, and Pere Antoine allowed the two to be woven together hoping that it would help more people get involved in their religion.  

Although Pere Antoine was a respected clergyman, his acceptance of Marie and her other religion was in conflict with the view of most church-goers. By appearing to cede control of sacred Catholic rituals and symbols to a woman, Pere Antoine challenged the traditional patriarchal views of most of those both in New Orleans specifically and the Roman Catholic Church more generally.  

Certainly, with this power came increased respect from those within the Voodoo community. As Marie introduced more Catholic doctrines and symbols into this religion it formed what is now known as Louisiana Voodoo.

---

91 Maranise, "Investigating the Syncretism of Catholicism and Voodoo in New Orleans."
One reason why Voodoo became so popular during Laveau’s reign as Voodoo Queen, especially with those who were not black or Creole, was her wide circle of friends and associates. Her friendship with Pere Antoine secured her respect from many Catholics. Even though she headed the Voodoo religion, she was still a daily attendant of mass at the St.Louis Cathedral and an active participant in the church. She also garnered the respect of her customers as a hairdresser. Hairdressing was among the most popular careers for Creole women during Marie Laveau’s lifetime. She capitalized on her job to gain information about her clients, which she then used effectively to expand her influence. For example, if she found out a man was cheating on his wife she might tell him that his wife knew of the affair, or she could use her power to save the marriage. Marie might also convince the wife that if she wished her husband to fall ill, she could make that happen as well. Both parties would use Laveau’s supposed powers for their own ends, even though they had been tricked into it. This description of her modus operandi assumes that Laveau was a manipulative woman, which some sources portray her as being. However, other sources, however portrayed her as a woman who would help any and all people who sought her out as long as the cause was just.

As Marie’s increased syncretism of the two religions resulted in less definite boundaries between them, friends and acquaintances of hers also began to accept the mix of symbols and rituals from both Catholicism and classic African Vodun. But while the Creole and black communities grew more accepting of Voodoo’s new additions, the strictly Catholic community became more wary. The way the Louisiana Voodoo religion worked was through connection to spirits and their force in the world. Those who practiced Voodoo ultimately believed that

although there may be one Supreme Being, there is a hierarchy of Iwas or spirits that fall beneath him. This Supreme Being is generally “viewed under the same conceptions in which Christians or Jews view him,” and these spirits were intermediaries between the higher being and humanity. Those who practiced Louisiana Voodoo “tend to view God has having taken a very passive role in the lives of human beings, choosing to relegate his power and responsibility instead to spirits.” In many ways these spirits were the means of communication to express practitioners woes. Laveau used her knowledge of Catholicism and its popularity within New Orleans to expand the reach of Voodoo. Although the tradition of borrowing deities and terms from the Catholic tradition was not originally her own, Laveau strengthened the bond between the two and in doing so she broadened the scope of the Voodoo traditions, language and iconography and helped those who practiced Voodoo survive in a predominantly Catholic society. An example of this can be seen through the relationship between Catholic saints and Voodoo spirits.

Much like the Catholic saints, the Iwas are a means for worshippers to seek guidance on various issues and ask for assistance. Many saints have their accompanying Iwas within the Voodoo religion, each representing a particular aspect of life, however in a divergence from Catholicism, Iwas require more than just prayer for their cooperation. And as this was predominantly a religion whose members were people of color and slaves, there were a lot more people in need of spiritual guidance compared to the largely white Catholic community. People

97 Gandolfo, Jerry. “Catholic-Voodoo Relations in New Orleans.”
of color were extremely familiar with Catholic symbolism, however it was likely that some form of ancestral religion was passed down through families that resembled Voodoo spirits. These spirits could therefore take on a new life and meaning through their subsequent Catholic pairings. This melding of the Catholic and Voodoo religions, which Laveau helped to solidify, could only amplify the worshippers trust and understanding that these spirits and saints had for their believers as they were already a familiar religious source. The use of the saints in Louisiana Voodoo was a way to extend religious expression, as these figures were a natural way for people of color in New Orleans to relate their familial traditions with the more popular Catholicism with a practice that granted them more religious freedom than the latter alone. Marie’s interpretation of saints centered on the Virgin Mary, as she was a crucial female figure who represented strength, grace, and compassion in both religions.

The Voodoo religion has always been favorable to feminine authority, and Mary is the most holy woman in Catholic theology. Because of this she was a natural addition to the saints Marie incorporated into her religion as Mary represented the strongest positive affirmation of womanhood and authority, particularly in New Orleans. As a strong female leader herself, Marie strongly related to the Virgin Mary and recognized her importance. In Voodoo Mary is closely associated with the lwa Erzulie, who is described as being very powerful and was the personification of love and beauty. She was often represented in the form of Our Lady of Sorrows. Despite showing Mary the utmost respect and importance in the Voodoo faith, some

in the community believed that Laveau turned the traditional respect of the Virgin Mary into sacrilege.\(^{105}\) Each lwa in the New Orleans Voodoo tradition have their Catholic counterparts, and play extremely similar roles in both religions. One example is the lwa Papa Legba who is represented in New Orleans Voodoo as St.Peter. In both Haitian and Louisiana Voodoo, Papa Legba is the gatekeeper of the spirit world and his duty is to be the guardian of the cross roads between life and death.\(^{106}\) He bears clear resemblance to St.Peter because in the bible “St.Peter was given the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven and opens the gates of Heaven to allow the souls of the righteous to approach the throne of the Blessed Trinity.”\(^{107}\) Other saints, like St. Patrick, represented by the creation and wisdom lwa, Damballah, were included in the pantheon of Voodoo spirits. Practitioners set up altars to the lwas to which they wish to pray to. These alters were unique to the desired lwas, and could have a number of different items offered up depending on who the spirit was and what was being asked of them.\(^{108}\) A Voodoo practitioner would dedicate an altar to their spirit of choice “on which are displayed statues and pictures of their corresponding saints, sacred stones, and offerings of flowers, fruit, cooked foods, liquor, candles, tobacco products, perfume, and other symbolic objects.”\(^{109}\) For example on St.Patrick’s or Damballah’s altar, snakes were a common theme that was represented. In fact this particular lwa is known to take the form of a serpent. This association with snakes stems from St.Patrick’s origins in Catholicism as the person who drove the snakes out of Ireland and who could thus chase away other evils.\(^{110}\) In Voodoo, “altars are places where the living and the dead, the human


\(^{106}\) Maranise, "Investigating the Syncretism of Catholicism and Voodoo in New Orleans," 8.

\(^{107}\) Maranise, "Investigating the Syncretism of Catholicism and Voodoo in New Orleans," 8.


and the divine, meet. Altars are places where healing happens.\textsuperscript{111} And through these altars, healing and prayers could be answered with much concentration. When wishing for change in some way, the items on the altar played a pivotal role. The worshipper, if they expected to see results, needed to

\begin{quote}
Call one of the spirits for help in performing a treatment. And if charms are expected to work over time, they also must be periodically ‘heated up’ by being focused on and prayed over. Often a candle is lighted by the charm or ‘point’ as part of this process.\textsuperscript{112}
\end{quote}

Although there were elements of Catholicism in Voodoo before Marie’s time, it was her strong relationship with both religions that helped to strengthen and solidify these connections.

Yet another aspect of Catholicism that became present in Louisiana Voodoo is the transformation of the profane to the sacred. Although represented in the two religions through very different practices, the concept is exceedingly similar in meaning. For Catholicism, the most crucial example of this was the celebration of the Holy Eucharist. In Catholic service, the Holy Eucharist is where a priest performs prayers and rites which served to elevate the bread and wine from the profane into the sacred. Those in the Catholic faith believe that after the ritual the bread and wine have been transformed into the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Laveau would have been extremely familiar with the Eucharist ritual through her experience at St. Louis Cathedral, and would have understood the holy metaphor it represented in the Catholic faith. This metaphor and the transformation of elements from profane to sacred is represented in Voodoo through spiritual possession. Though very different in the way the sacred and the

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{112} Brown, “Altars Happen.”
\end{flushleft}
profane are represented, the actions and beliefs are comparable. During Voodoo rituals, a priestess may call to a spirit and ask them to reveal themselves to those in attendance. Once a lwa is present, it would latch itself to the priestess and suddenly the profane was now sacred.113 In these ceremonies “the profane person becomes sacred when they become possessed by the Voodoo spirit.”114 Although the term ‘possession’ carries a negative connotation in the Catholic realm, in Voodoo possession is good-natured. During these possessions the spirits were invited to “act out their carnal desires through the human host by means of eating, drinking, smoking, dancing, singing, and sexual gratification.”115 Laveau was known to go into spirit possessions, although there are no direct stories about specific events involving her when this aspect of the religion occurred. This possession was an important psychological aspect of the Voodoo tradition and was hailed as “a quintessential spiritual achievement in the believer’s religious life.”116 Unlike Catholicism where possession is viewed as a horrific event, Voodoo welcomes and appreciates that a spirit can occupy the body. This aspect of Voodoo may have been difficult for Catholics to look past as again it was a sign of evil in their own religion. It is also fairly possible that attendees of Voodoo ceremonies that witnessed these spiritual possession rituals would misunderstand the meaning and proclaim them as the devil’s work.

The most highly anticipated events for those both a part of and outside of the Voodoo community were the weekly Sunday dances in Congo Square and the celebration of St.John’s Eve. Rumors about the gathering of Voodoo practitioners constantly spread, a common one

113 Maranise, ”Investigating the Syncretism of Catholicism and Voodoo in New Orleans,” 10.
114 Gandolfo, Jerry. “Catholic-Voodoo Relations in New Orleans.”
being that each Voodoo ceremony required “the snake, a sacrifice, and the drinking of blood.”

This gossip originated from the idea that slaves and people of color were attempting to gain power through these ceremonies. These rumors achieved particular notoriety after the aggressive slave rebellion in Haiti, spurred out of control and led to outrageous tales of murder and black magic. In these hyperbolic stories, a traditional ceremony would begin with the Voodoo Queen making her way to a crowd where she would

stand on a box containing the serpent and would transmit the power to all others present by joining hands. In the midst of the gathering there would be set a boiling cauldron into which were thrown chickens, frogs, cats, snails and always a snake. All these were offerings brought by various attendants. At some point…everyone present would come forth to dance and drink from the cauldron…Completely possessed by the power the dancers would pair off in lustful abandon and the ritual would end in orgiastic fashion.

This example is typical of one of the more sensationalized stories. These stories focused around ceremonies that they believed to be made up of horrific displays of sacrifice and some form of snake or devil worship that would put the crowd into a bewitched trance. Often times demonic possession would take hold of the Voodoo leader, and the whole event would end with those involved stripping off their clothing, dancing rhythmically, and proceeding to indulge their sexual appetite.

A number of personal accounts argued that the sexual energy of the Voodoo crowd was overwhelming and abhorrent, and treated it as something that was done to please Satan. The accounts were always similar to one another in their descriptions of the crowd, and particularly the women. One man who encountered one of the ceremonies stated, that he witnessed “a thousand ebony forms, remarkable for nudeness, circled around us in mystic, mysterious

\[117\] Brouillette, Alison. "Black Magic, New Orleans Style."
\[118\] Brouillette, Alison. "Black Magic, New Orleans Style."
gyrations.” One journalist describes a specific ceremony where music played and people began to dance for the devil, later remarking that “one of the women…was so earnest in her efforts to conciliate his satanic majesty that she ‘almost foamed at the mouth.’” After this incident, “the song was…drowned by ‘terrible shouts.’ It ceased at last, and then ‘suddenly, awfully, mysteriously, there arose a shriek, as it were out of the darkness, and the worshipers, with one accord, rushed from the house and threw themselves into the dark waters of the lake.” Another article recounted this rhythmic dancing and claimed “a charmed circle is formed, and the dance is continued until some of the dancers fall down foaming at the mouth.” It was almost as if this dancing caused the women to go into a crazed trance, and at a high rate given the number of times these Voodoo women were mentioned to be ‘foaming at the mouth.’ Some accounts report a darker version of this aspect of the dance, including one man’s version wherein the Voodoo women “have cast aside all their clothing and morality, and are so inflamed, so aroused by the dance that they gnash their teeth, foam at the mouth and tear and rend each other with their teeth.” It was this barbaric imagery that cast Voodoo as a demonic, savage religion. These depictions created an image of ritualistic and outrageous gathering of individuals who seemed unable to control their urges of any nature.

Another common aspect of these stories is their inclusion of mystical elements and fabricated tales of sorcery. A great number of newspaper accounts mentioned various mystical objects, animals, and the like making their way into these ceremonies. Some accounts claimed

---

121 “Voudou Worship”
122 “Voudoo in New Orleans in Louisiana in 1860.”
123 “Voudou Nonsense—a Plain, Unvarnished Account of the Lake Shore Revels—Full Particulars of the Hell-Broth and Orgies—a Played-Out Hoax.”
that during these religious ceremonies the Voodoo worshippers would prepare “under the
direction of the Queen, her special hell-broth; we saw the infant piccaninny, the toad, the viper,
and the cat that form such essential features in the religious soup.”124 This hell-broth, thought to
be an evil potion by those viewing these spectacles, would boil in a cauldron “where their
charms are prepared.”125 These charms were produced by taking some part of an animal and
chanting and dancing around it to achieve the spell. There was one instance where a man saw the
Voodoo participants at their location where they “danced and chanted around a caged serpent,
and boiled the claws of birds, the scales of fish, the fangs of snakes and other things for
charms.”126 As previously mentioned, witchcraft rumors were abundant in the New Orleans area
and those who supposedly witnessed the creation of these charms were the same people who
propagated the gossip. Still, this obsession with Voodoo’s practicing dark magic was apparently
an easier story to believe than a religious sect using objects for various holy rituals.

Many of these stories have the Voodoo practitioners flailing about in Satan-worshipping
fits or lustful dances; but there are also accounts of both human and animal sacrifice, and its
necessity within the religion. Because of these widely published accounts, those outside of the
religion in New Orleans believed the horrific tales of Voodoo rituals that involved sacrifice.

One article in The Times Picayune mentioned a meeting of Voodoo elders and briefly described
that in “secret conclaves they have practiced the horrible rite of human sacrifice. Whether or not
it is true, no one knows, but there is little doubt they indulge in incantations [sic] that would
make the blood curdle with horror.”127 Even worse were the outrageous tales of human sacrifice
and cannibalism. One journalist offered background on these sacrifices and explained that

124 “Voudou Nonsense—a Plain, Unvarnished Account of the Lake Shore Revels—Full
Particulars of the Hell-Broth and Orgies—a Played-Out Hoax.”
125 “Fetish Rites – Voudous on the Rampage.”
126 “Voudouism.” The Richland Beacon, March 6, 1880.
127 “Fetish Rites – Voudous on the Rampage.”
Children are brought in; their throats are cut by the priest; their blood is handed round and drunk warm, and their bodies are then cut up and eaten. Before the sacrifice takes place the priest orders as many children as he requires. They must be of pure African descent and not over ten years of age. These children are invariable forthcoming, either by voluntarily given up or obtained by being stolen by women who make a profession of it.\textsuperscript{128}

He went on to argue that the mothers of these children were so bewitched by the devil that they constantly volunteered their children to be sacrificed next and that “in order to be initiated into ‘Voudou’ it is necessary to have killed some human being; a child is preferred.”\textsuperscript{129} Others argued that the practice of human sacrifice was “in former days…imperatively demanded, but how this was now supplied by a black tomcat.”\textsuperscript{130} These articles are most peculiar, and have no proof to validate their claims. Although it is likely some animals were slaughtered for certain religious holidays and celebrations, it was not likely for it to be in honor of Satan or a step in creating a potion for magical use. Despite the incredible detail on what are no doubt exaggerations of true events, most of these accounts often ignore the religious aspect of Voodoo, and instead favored the idea that these ceremonies were merely rebellious gatherings to ask the devil for his help in an uprising or exacting vengeance on their enemies.

These exaggerated accounts human sacrifice and cannibalism, paired with the orgiastic essence and imagined bewitching and mystical elements of these events developed a bizarre narrative concerning Voodoo gatherings. People would become spellbound watching these events unfold and would be so transfixed by the events that transpired primarily because they

\textsuperscript{128} “Voudou Horrors–Cannibalism Openly Practised in the Island of Hayti by Serpent-Worshippers.–The Appalling Testimony on This Point of an English Traveler of Rank and Intelligence.” The Weekly Miner, September 6, 1881.

\textsuperscript{129} “Voudou Horrors–Cannibalism Openly Practised in the Island of Hayti by Serpent-Worshippers.–The Appalling Testimony on This Point of an English Traveler of Rank and Intelligence.”

\textsuperscript{130} “Voudou Nonsense—a Plain, Unvarnished Account of the Lake Shore Revels—Full Particulars of the Hell-Broth and Orgies—a Played-Out Hoax.”
were completely unlike traditional Catholic ceremonies. As everything else from Africa at the
time, the African features of this religion labeled the beliefs as savage, uncouth, and appalling.
Even when the descriptions speak of nothing more than free people of color and slaves gathering
for a meal with singing and dancing, the writer would suggest that there had to have been some
other meaning behind the event. Often the intention would be summarized as “some believer
either desired to avert calmity[sic] from himself, or inflict an injury on an enemy.”¹³¹ It would
not have mattered how innocent or mundane these ceremonies truly were, as the events would
have been twisted to fit this stereotype either way to satisfy those who looked down upon it. This
fabrication of truth about the Voodoo practitioners as a sensual and rambunctious crowd led the
city to take action and limited the interaction of these worshippers to their holy days and slaves
were only allowed to meet on Sundays.¹³²

Congo Square was “the resort for those African blacks whose Sunday dances at one time
attracted much attention.”¹³³ The dances were a way for the Voodoo practitioners and people of
color to explore their African roots in an entertaining and religious way. This was also the only
time and place that the Mayor allowed slaves in the city to participate in public activities.¹³⁴ This
was because under the Mayor’s law, Sunday was the only day that slaves could engage in
personal activities such as dancing, “and solely in such open or public places as appointed by the
Mayor.”¹³⁵ When Laveau became the Voodoo Queen, she incorporated Catholic elements into

¹³² Police Code, or Collection of the Ordinances of Police Made by the City Council of New
Orleans, March 14, 1808.
¹³³ “Voudoo in New Orleans in Louisiana in 1860.”
¹³⁴ Police Code, or Collection of the Ordinances of Police Made by the City Council of New
Orleans, March 14, 1808.
¹³⁵ Police Code, or Collection of the Ordinances of Police Made by the City Council of New
Orleans, March 14, 1808.
the dances and rituals like the use of saint imagery, crosses, and other symbols of the faith. One
dance, known as The Calinda, was the best known and frequently preformed at these Sunday
meetings. This dance was known to be extremely provocative with outrageous body movements
and rhythmic drumming, and was likely the inspiration for the sensational stories of naked
dancing women in the New Orleans newspapers. An African banjo was typically played to
accompany this dance, though screams and singing often drowned out the instruments.136 This
was the dance most prominently associated with Laveau and the sensationalized tales of Congo
Square. A visitor once remarked that “Nothing is more dreaded that to see the negroes assemble
together on Sundays, since, under the pretense of Calinda or the dance, they sometimes get
together to the number of three or four hundred…It is in those tumultuous meetings, that they
sell what they have stolen to one another and commit many crimes. Likewise they plot
rebellions.”137 The Calinda was also used as a method to talk about the latest gossip in the town
through song. As news was brought to the Sunday dances new verses would be created for the
dance. For example there was a rumor that went around about a Creole maid who stole some
possessions from her employer, the Calinda did a verse on the matter and it went “I am a Creole
maid, more beautiful than my mistress. I have stolen pretty things from Madame’s armoire.”138
The same chorus “Danse Calinda, Danse Calinda Boudoum, Boudoum,”139 always followed
these verses. When Marie herself danced, she would do so with her pet snake, Le Grand Zombi.
Many claimed to have seen this snake with Laveau during ceremonies when they encountered

136 Ward, Martha. Voodoo Queen: The Spirited Lives of Marie Laveau. University of
Mississippi, 2004, 6.
Press, 1975, 270.
139 Cable, George Washington, The Dance in Place Congo and Creole Slave Songs, 3rd ed. New
her elsewhere. One woman remembered a visit to Laveau’s house on St. Ann street where “she had a snake called Zombi the Snake God, and this god [could] bring sickness or health, good or bad fortune, and love or death.”

Others claimed that the great serpent was another part of the Laveau legend.

Although Voodoo borrowed many things from Catholicism, Christian attitudes toward snakes was not one of them. Snakes, a symbol of Damballah, represented creation and the connection between man and nature. Whereas in Catholicism, snakes symbolize an interaction with and the personification of craftiness and evil, originating from the story of Adam and Eve in the book of *Genesis*. One journalist described serpent use in Voodoo as a way of worshipping Satan. But to Voodoodevotees “the serpent is the great Voudoo; it was held as sacred, and was kept by the queen, or high priestess of the sect.”

The serpent god provided all knowledge, power, and magic. Snakes were a large part of the Voodoo religion, or at least they were thought to be by outsiders. To them it appeared that anyone who was part of the Voodoo religion had a way of controlling snakes. One family outside the city called for a Voodoo doctor, or male leader in the religion, to take care of their snake problem and “He touched a match to [the snakes] and uttered some gibberish, while the ‘snakes’ were rapidly extending themselves. This was satisfactory proof of his knowledge and power.” However many argued that the snakes were strictly for ritual use. Depending on who took part in the ceremony “the snake is by some supposed to represent the spirit of Evil, by others the rejuvenating Nature of Eternity, as it sheds its skin, and also a symbol of the endlessness of the next world.”

---


represented as its first definition within the Voodoo faith, as a connection between man and
nature. Voodoo ceremonies relied on nature, so it would not have been uncommon for snakes to
be present during these sacred events.

The use of snakes was part of the St. John’s Eve festivities as well, where Le Grand
Zombi would accompany Laveau in her dances. For Catholics St. John’s Eve was a night when
“all the terrible and malignant evil which Satan himself seemed to propogate,” St. John’s Eve
was an important night of celebratory worship in the Voodoo religion. The evening, two days
before the summer solstice, is in worship of St. John the Baptist and was held on Lake
Pontchartrain. It is unknown when exactly this Roman Catholic holiday was adopted by the
Voodoo religion, although it was likely under the reign of Laveau along with her adoption of
other Catholic themes. All the New Orleans Voodoo practitioners, as well as journalists and
anyone else who was curious, gathered to watch or participate in the ceremony. According to the
Commercial Bulletin, St. John’s Eve “is the time devoted by the voodoo worshipers to the
celebration of their most sacred and therefore most revolting rites. Midnight dances, bathing and
eating, together with other less innocent pleasures, make the early summer a time of unrestrained
orgies for the blacks.” A reporter who witnessed one St. John’s eve ceremony wrote of the
ritual objects and prayers he saw:

Side by side in the room of the Voudou Queen, upon the same table as the serpent was
the cross of the crucified Savior, the image of Virgin Mary, and various symbols of saints
and angels. In the midst of the wildest orgies, the Voodoos would suddenly fall upon
their knees, begin the recital of the ‘Apostles Creed’ and ‘Hail Mary’...never was
religion and idolatory so curiously blended.

144 “Voudoo in New Orleans in Louisiana in 1860.”
But much to the chagrin of the reporters and visitors, the actual festivities were far less spectacular. The night of ceremony consisted of a feast in celebration of St. John accompanied by traditional Voodoo rituals, dancing, and singing.

It was common for Catholics to misunderstand some of the spiritual aspects of Voodoo, for instance the serpent, as malignant appropriation from their faith. This led to an increasing disdain for these ceremonies and the religion itself, as Catholics believed that practitioners of Voodoo were misusing their symbols and saints for their own heretical gain. Yet curiosity grew about this event because the mix of so-called Satan serpent worship, magic, and even nudity, that was blatantly displayed. Although the members of the Creole and black communities represented the majority of the participants in these events, white members of New Orleans society were also involved. White participants were a distinct minority, though they had the most to lose in participating in this so-called slave religion. *The Daily True Delta* described these individuals as “usually the most ignorant and superstitious of our population.”\(^{148}\) This sector of the white population no doubt used to be Catholics, or like Laveau continued to practice Catholicism along with Voodoo. Describing the absurdity of these white people, one journalist said that their “Christian education should rise up like an injured ghost before their eyes.”\(^{149}\) There was an effort made by police and members of the community to constrain these white Voodoo participants, however it “failed to crush out their heathenish proceedings.”\(^{150}\) People tolerated the fact that whites practiced this ‘savage’ religion, but it was deemed that these individuals simply did not know better or were ignorant of their ways. Some thought that those who practiced the Voodoo religion did not completely understand Catholicism and what it meant to be a true Catholic.

---


\(^{149}\) “Voudoo in New Orleans in Louisiana in 1860.”

\(^{150}\) “Voudoo in New Orleans in Louisiana in 1860.”
Catholic, and were therefore more easily swayed into worshipping the idols and believing in the magic of Voodoo.

It was those devout Catholics who later remembered the sensual, satanic acts of Laveau’s Voodoo days once she announced that she had left that religion. These individuals continued to criticize Laveau for her past ‘satanic’ actions even after she decided to devote the rest of her days to being a good Catholic. Anita Fonvergne, someone who remembered Marie in her old age, wrote that “she gave up [Voodoo] before she died and went to the church…but I think anybody that does [Voodoo] works for the devil and I don’t see how they can be a good Christian.”151

Towards the end of her life, Marie abdicated her title of Voodoo Queen and devoted all her efforts towards supporting the St.Louis Cathedral and doing good deeds. Despite being charitable for her entire life through her work with the sick and others in need, this marked a change in Laveau’s legend as she no longer held a position in the Voodoo faith. At any point in her life, it was known that “those in trouble had but to come to her and she would make their cause her own after undergoing great sacrifices in order to assist them.”152 Laveau had always been a kind woman who fought for those who had no voice, namely other women and people of color. In the past she used her Voodoo work as a way to help individuals, but at the end of her life her aide was through less mystical means. This meant praying for those in need, doing charity work, and other volunteering throughout the city. Although she had always been an extremely pious women, Laveau’s later years were spent for the most part at the St.Louis Cathedral where she “took delight in strengthening the allegiance of souls to the church.”153 This was especially true

---

151 *Life History; Memories of Marie Laveau*. Anita Fonvergne interviewed by Breaux. April 17, 1939, transcript.
152 “Death of Marie Laveau–A Woman with a Wonderful History, Almost a Century Old, Carried to the Tomb Yesterday Evening.”
153 “Death of Marie Laveau–A Woman with a Wonderful History, Almost a Century Old, Carried to the Tomb Yesterday Evening.”

Published by Chapman University Digital Commons, 2018
for those who she believed to be in desperate need of religious conversion.

In her Voodoo days, Laveau would come to the aide of those who were wrongfully accused of crimes. Though some stories such as the Guinea pepper tale argued that she fought for guilty individuals, there was no evidence of this. It is more likely that she offered her guidance to those in the courts who could afford the fee for her Voodoo practice, but also to those who appealed to her emotions. After her retirement from Voodoo, she transitioned from assisting those who needed help in the courts to helping those who were already criminals by giving them Catholic guidance. She spent a lot of her time at the parish prison where she became the informal spiritual advisor for those incarcerated there, particularly inmates on death row. The *Daily Picayune* is one of the only newspapers to mention her dedication to the prison stating that “for more than twenty years…whenever a human being has suffered the final penalty in the Parish Prison, an old colored woman has come to his cell and prepared an altar for him. This woman is Marie Lavan [sic], better known as the Priestess of the Voudous.”154 She would build Catholic altars there, prayed with prisoners, and on occasion would make them their last meals. When possible, “Marie would labor incessantly to obtain [the prisoner’s] pardon, or at least a commutation of sentence, and she generally succeeded.”155 Even without the power of Voodoo spirits behind her, Laveau still had considerable sway within the community. For prisoners who had no hope of their sentences being commuted, “She would sit with the condemned in their last moments and endeavor to turn their last thoughts to Jesus.”156

---

155 “Death of Marie Laveau—A Woman with a Wondeful History, Almost a Century Old, Carried to the Tomb Yesterday Evening.”
156 “Death of Marie Laveau—A Woman with a Wondeful History, Almost a Century Old, Carried to the Tomb Yesterday Evening.”
order, comforted their sorrows, listened to their confessions, and ultimately bore witness to their death. Her Catholic ways were demonstrated completely during her time spent at the prison, and those who were open to accepting this new Laveau offered her redemption from her Voodoo ways. One journalist took notice of her changed ways and wrote “Marie Laveau devoted herself entirely…to the criminals in the condemned cells at the Parish Prison…This phase of her activity was wholly Catholic, into which she permitted no trace of Voodooism to creep.”157 There are no accounts that speak of Laveau practicing Voodoo in her final years, although the media still referred to her as the Voodoo Queen until her death. Laveau’s obituary described her efforts perfectly when it said “all in all Marie Laveau was a most wonderful woman. Doing good for the sake of doing good alone, she obtained no reward, oft times meeting with prejudice[sic] and loathing…she always had the cause of the people at heart, and was with them in all things.”158 Despite many rumors, Laveau seemed to have a soft spot for individuals who could not help themselves. During both her experience as Voodoo Queen and her time as a pious Catholic, there was evidence that Laveau often selflessly worked for the betterment of these individuals.

Many persisted in the belief that Laveau lived on for another few decades, refusing to accept that she had passed, but newspaper records place her death in June of 1881. Some argued that her daughter, also named Marie Laveau, took over as Voodoo Queen and came to possess even worse of a reputation than that of her mother. Others believed that Laveau did not pass away until she was nearly 150 years old, likely confusing her daughter with the original Marie. Even after Marie effectively left the Voodoo community and her rumors about her began to dissipate, the Catholic elements she had instilled in the faith were used by her successors, and

158 “Death of Marie Laveau–A Woman with a Wonderful History, Almost a Century Old, Carried to the Tomb Yesterday Evening.”
are a large element in the Voodoo religion today. The people of New Orleans remained critical of Laveau’s practice of both Catholicism and Voodoo, and continued to associate her with myths of sorcery and magical power. Though she successfully merged the two religions into a harmonious faith, many whites considered the Voodoo that she created to be a source of black magic and devil worship. The gossip that surrounded Laveau until her death in the 1870s portrayed her as someone who was both loved and feared by many. New Orleans residents of all religions and racial backgrounds were known to take advantage of her knowledge and power over the Voodoo spirits. Although many Catholics put their trust in her, others were infuriated that Laveau was seemingly being rewarded for a life of heresy. Laveau’s power and strength within both communities caused the Voodoo religion to be met with much curiosity, but also disdain. This was mostly due to the fact that the Catholic symbols and saints used by Voodoo practitioners were at times in conflict with Catholic orthodoxy. Though Catholic elements were being used in a different, yet similarly positive way, those who did not understand the traditions and symbolism of the Voodoo religion could easily misinterpret its message as evil.